

Nearad bidding for national Triple Crown

Written by Jim Ecker
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Taylor Nearad led the state in RBIs last season when she helped Solon High School win the Class 3A softball title, but now she's bidding for even bigger honors with the Kirkwood Eagles.

Nearad is enjoying a phenomenal season at Kirkwood and is making a strong bid for the national Triple Crown with a .624 batting average, 21 home runs and 94 RBIs in 47 games.

She currently tops all NJCAA Division II players in all three major categories after enjoying another sensational day at the ballpark Sunday when the fourth-ranked Eagles swept a conference doubleheader from Southwestern, 16-8 and 9-1.

Nearad went 7-for-8 in the twin-bill with two doubles, a triple, a home run and seven RBIs from the leadoff spot in the order.

"Honestly in my 20 years of doing this, she might be the best player I've had the opportunity to work with," said Kirkwood Coach Joe Yegge. "Everything she does is effortless.

"And she's the type of kid that she doesn't even care (about her numbers). She probably doesn't even know what she's hitting. She just goes about her business."

Nearad, a fleet center-fielder, hit .538 with 11 homers and 75 RBIs last season as a senior at Solon. College softball is supposed to be harder than high school ball, but not for her.

Nearad is a member of an impressive freshman class at Kirkwood that includes Gabi Carter of Prairie and Maddie Hansen of Cedar Rapids Jefferson, among many other new stars for the Eagles. Carter is hitting .494 with 18 homers and 71 RBIs, while Hansen is batting .455 with 12 homers and 63 RBIs.

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Nearad is naturally happy with the way the season has gone so far, with Kirkwood rolling along at 43-4 overall and 21-1 in the ICCAC conference, but she's maintained a calm demeanor while playing like an All-American.

"I don't really look at stats," she said. "I pay attention to home runs, but that's the only thing, because me and Gabi go back and forth: 'Oh, you hit one, now it's my turn,' or 'I hit one and now it's your turn.'"

Nearad batted second or third in the lineup at Solon, but Yegge likes her in the leadoff spot for the Eagles for a simple reason. "Because she always gets on base," he explained. "We start it off with a base hit or home run."

Kirkwood has a strong lineup from top to bottom with a .444 team batting average and 75 home runs, so there's usually somebody on base when it's Nearad's turn to bat again.

"I never led off before, but he (Yegge) told me at the start of the fall season that I was going to lead off and I was like, 'OK, I'm up for it,'" she remarked. "I like being lead-off, I like starting everything off. Even if I don't get a hit, I know my team is there to back me up."

Nearad also runs well and has stolen 31 bases in 32 tries this season, another attribute for a good lead-off hitter.

"She's what you'd call a five-tool player," said Yegge. "She can run, she can hit, she can hit with power, she can play small ball. She can do just about everything you ask her. And she plays

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great defense.

"There's a mentality to her that makes her good," he said. "She just comes out and plays softball and doesn't worry about other things. When she goes in a slump, she doesn't worry about it. She's done outstanding."

Nearad had an offer last year from Minnesota State-Mankato, an NCAA Division II school, but elected to attend Kirkwood with hopes of gaining a Division I scholarship at some point.

"That's my hope," she said, "but we'll see where it takes me."

Nearad plans to get her degree in elementary education and become a teacher. She'd also like to stay involved with athletics after her playing days are finished.

"I would love to coach," she said. "That would be so much fun, I think."

Nearad went 4-for-5 in the first game Sunday with two doubles and five RBIs. Carter, the cleanup hitter, collected three hits. Hansen, Payton Mercer, Allie Mengler and Emilee Meyer had two hits. Mengler belted a home run and drove in two runs. Lexi Ferrari, Mercer and Meyer also had two RBIs.

Nearad went 3-for-3 with a triple, home run and two RBIs in the second game. Meyer hit a home run and drove in three runs. Hansen and Morgan Frost were 2-for-3 with home runs. Ferrari also had two hits.

Nicky Simpson (21-2, 2.03 ERA) and Lexi Kinnaird (19-2, 2.03 ERA) were the winning pitchers.

Kirkwood has a two-game lead on DMACC in the conference standings with six games left in

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the ICCAC campaign. Southwestern fell to 21-20 overall and 10-12 in the league.