

3 All-Americans boost Kirkwood softball

Written by Metro Sports Report
Thursday, 16 February 2017 05:52 -



The Kirkwood softball team begins the season Saturday with three All-Americans in its starting lineup, including the 2016 National Player of the Year with Taylor Nearad.

No wonder Coach Joe Yegge is optimistic.

Nearad enjoyed a spectacular year last season when she hit .602 with 30 home runs and 129 RBIs, nearly winning the national Triple Crown.

Maddie Hansen hit .455 with 20 homers and 93 RBIs. Morgan Frost checked in at .498 with 10 homers and 72 RBIs.

The Eagles boast an All-American in center field, an All-American behind the plate and an All-American in left field.

That's a good way to build a lineup.

"We should be able to score as well as anyone in the country," Yegge said this week.

Kirkwood averaged more than 10 runs per game last season with 107 home runs and a team batting average of .431. All that offense helped the Eagles finish 58-6 and place fifth at the national tournament.

Lexi Kinnaird, a star pitcher who went 25-2 with a 1.93 ERA last season, is also back this year to give Kirkwood an ace in the circle.

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The fourth-ranked Eagles begin the new year with four games at the Saint Ambrose tournament this weekend in Davenport, inside the cozy confines of the SAU Dome.

Yegge plans to keep Nearad in the leadoff spot in the batting order this year, even though she led the nation in home runs and RBIs last season.

Why?

"Because she gets on base all the time," he explained.

Nearad, a swift runner, had 34 stolen bases in 36 attempts last season and also excelled in the outfield.

Yegge does not expect Nearad to bat .602 again with 30 homers and 129 RBIs, although it's possible.

"I told her if she can do three-quarters of what she did last year, she'll be an All-American again," said Yegge.

Nearad might not get a lot of good pitches to hit this season after demolishing the opposition last season, but Yegge said she's a patient hitter and will take her walks.

"Go ahead and walk her," he said. "We'll have somebody else drive her in."

The Eagles are battling a few medical problems as the year begins, but Yegge is confident he has the depth to prevail.

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Emilee Meyer, who hit .404 in right field last season, has been lost for the campaign with a torn ACL suffered in the fall.

Miranda Kaste, a promising shortstop who missed the 2016 campaign with a broken leg, is still not fully recovered and had not been cleared to play as of Tuesday morning.

Lexi Ferrari, who hit .398 and drove in 50 runs at second base last year, has been fighting a sore arm. Yegge has been thinking about moving Ferrari to shortstop, especially if Kaste is sidelined, but Ferrari might need to stay at second base if her arm does not bounce back.

Gabi Carter, a Prairie grad, played shortstop last year as a freshman and hit .442 with 20 homers and 93 RBIs, but she left Kirkwood after the 2016 season and is playing at Indiana State.

The Eagles also lost six players to graduation with Teagan Toft (.368), Payton Mercer (.360), Allie Mengler (.435), Katelyn Holub (.307), Mallory Neubauer (.299) and star pitcher Nicky Simpson (28-3, 2.18) finishing their junior college careers.

Yegge brought in another strong freshman class that he's confident will be able to step in and take their place.

DoniRae Mayhew from Bettendorf and Angie McBeain of Prior Lake, Minn., have joined the pitching staff and also will play first base and serve as designated hitters.

Monika Bevans, from Solon, has moved in nicely at third base and could spell Hansen behind the plate if Hansen is ever willing to take a break.

"I'll get an argument from Maddie if I try to take her out of the game," said Yegge, who loves the

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Jefferson grad's attitude.

Yegge said he's also going to let Hansen call her own pitches this season, a departure from normal years and a testament to Hansen's softball IQ and ability to run the pitching staff.

Megan Kublik (Wilton), Chaise Light (Lisbon), Brianna Smith (Essex, Ill.), Audra Dridenstine (West Liberty) and Amanda Pipolo (Prairie) also figure into the mix as freshmen.

Yegge begins his 10th year at Kirkwood with a 433-93 record at the school. He's led the Eagles to the junior college World Series four times, placing seventh in 2011, fifth in 2013, seventh in 2015 and fifth last year.

The Eagles will compete in a major tournament next month in Georgia where they'll face top-ranked LSU Eunice and third-ranked Jones County, among other national powers.

Kirkwood's home opener is scheduled for March 16 against Culver-Stockton.