

Kinnaird, Nearad snap KCC records

Written by Jim Ecker

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Lexi Kinnaird and Taylor Nearad engaged in some good battles against each other at rival high schools in Eastern Iowa, but they're teammates at Kirkwood Community College now and destroying the record book at one of the top softball programs in the country.

Kinnaird snapped the career record for victories and Nearad broke the career mark for home runs Wednesday as the second-ranked Eagles pounded Southwestern, 20-0, in five innings in the opening round of the regional tournament at Kirkwood.

Kinnaird, a right-hander from Clear Creek Amana, raised her record to 51-5 the past two years by tossing three perfect innings. She broke the old school mark of 50 victories set by Amanda Lambrecht in 2010-11.

Nearad, a center fielder from Solon, cracked the 46th home run of her remarkable career, snapping the old mark of 45 homers set by Kayla Tatge in 2012-13.

"It's awesome," Kirkwood Coach Joe Yegge remarked after seeing two career marks fall in the same game.

Kinnaird and Nearad, both sophomores, competed against each other in high school in the Wamac Conference before moving to Kirkwood last season. Kinnaird prefers having Nearad on her side these days.

"She's always been tough to pitch to. In high school and now," said Kinnaird. "She was always someone I dreaded pitching to."

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Nearad was named the National Junior College Player of the Year in 2016 when she slugged 30 homers, drove in 129 runs, hit .602 and led the country in numerous departments.

Her power numbers have dipped this season to 16 homers, but opposing pitchers learned their lesson last year: If you give the slender slugger a good pitch to hit, it's probably going to go over the fence.

"I definitely have to be more patient at the club," said Nearad, who leads the nation in hits, runs and doubles. "I'm getting walked a little bit more, and I'm getting more inside pitches."

Nearad prefers pitches that are away from her body, so she can extend her arms and use her tremendous hand-eye coordination to belt opposite-field rockets to left and left-center. Her record-setting home run came on an inside pitch that she smoked to right-center.

Believe it or not, Nearad was a slap hitter in the eighth grade before switching as a freshman in high school. She'll occasionally slap a pitch to the left side of the infield for Kirkwood, knowing shortstops will have a hard time nailing her at first base.

She was stunned by her power numbers last season and is still trying to absorb all the damage she's done in college.

"I was not expecting it at all when I came in," said Nearad, who will play at Iowa State next season. "I wasn't expecting to hit 30 home runs last year and how many I have this year, but it definitely feels good."

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