

Hocker shines as KCC wins regional

Written by Jim Ecker

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Erin Hocker is going home to Montana for the district softball tournament this week and she's taking all of the Kirkwood Eagles with her.

Hocker twirled a pair of shutouts Sunday as the seventh-ranked Eagles blanked NIACC in the championship round of the regional tournament, 5-0 and 8-0 in five innings, at Kirkwood.

Kirkwood (48-14) will face 18th-ranked Dawson Community College (42-3) on Dawson's home field in Glendive, Mont., in the two-team district tournament that starts Wednesday.

Hocker pitched all 12 innings in the two ballgames, tossing a two-hit shutout in the opener and hurling a one-hitter in the second game.

Kirkwood lost to NIACC in the winners bracket final Saturday, so the Eagles needed two victories Sunday to reach the district. They responded like true champions.

After Hocker tossed her two-hitter in the opener, Kirkwood Coach Eric Frese asked his ace right-hander how she felt about pitching the second game against NIACC as well.

"He asked me if I was OK with pitching two games and I said I was," said Hocker. "I was ready to work for my team."

Hocker struck out 12 batters in 12 innings, with only two walks, and was in control all day.

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NIACC hit three home runs against her in its 6-3 victory over the Eagles Saturday, but it was different story Sunday.

"It was a very gutsy performance," said Frese, in his first year at Kirkwood. "They hit her around a little bit yesterday. For her to come back and compete like she did today, I couldn't be more proud of her."

Hocker and catcher Jessi Butler kept the NIACC hitters off-balance in both games. "We kept it outside and kept them off their toes," said Hocker. "We got grounders and my team was backing me up today."

Hocker, a freshman, is from Great Falls, Mont., which she said is about a six-hour drive from where the district tournament will be played this week in Glendive, Mont.

"It's a big state," she said.

Hocker's family has seen her pitch only once this season, but they'll be in Glendive for the district tournament.

"They're planning on it," she said. "They're going to come with my little niece."

Hocker readily agreed to pitch the second game Sunday when Frese popped the question. Bradee Bouman, Iowa's No.2 pitcher, has won 20 games this season and was the winning pitcher in Game 2 last Sunday when Kirkwood swept a doubleheader at NIACC, but Frese wanted his ace in the circle with the season hanging in the balance.

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