

No.8 Kirkwood spikers top Southwestern

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kirkwood volleyball team made their fans nervous Wednesday night when they made too many errors and dropped the first game of their ICCAC match against Southwestern Community College at Johnson Hall.

"I think we made ourselves nervous, too," said freshman Heather Poula.

The eighth-ranked Eagles settled down and rallied for a 21-25, 25-22, 25-18, 25-20 victory with a balanced attack to remain undefeated in the conference.

Kirkwood (11-4, 3-0) did not appear to have any superstars, but rather relied on contributions from everyone on the floor.

Erin Walker and Payton Hilton led the Eagles with 14 kills apiece. Poula had 13 kill shots, Alicen Wintermote had eight and Chelsea Gryp contributed five.

"For us to be successful, we're going to have to have balance," said Coach Jill Williams. "We're going to have to have scoring from every attack position. We do have to have all of our hitters swinging hard and keeping the defense off-balance."

Amber Timmins rolled up 47 assists in the four games. And the digs were balanced throughout the squad with Cali Beyer getting 28, Walker 20, Gryp 15, Poula 11 and Timmins nine.

Once the Eagles put the ball in play, Timmins was able to spread her assists to everyone on the club.

"Last year we had one person to go to and finish, but now I trust anyone in the front row to finish and get the job done for us," said Beyer, the energetic 5-foot-6 libero who covered a lot of ground in the backcourt to keep balls alive.

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The Eagles trailed in the second game, 21-19, and were in danger of falling behind 2-0 in the best-of-5 match when they finally started to click. Hilton, Walker and Gryp came up with consecutive kills to give Kirkwood a 23-21 advantage and Poula made it 24-22 with another kill shot. The Eagles won the game when Southwestern (11-5, 1-2) committed a net violation.

Kirkwood had to rally again from a 16-14 deficit in Game 3. The Eagles scored six straight points for a 20-16 edge with Poula, Walker and Timmins having big kills. The Spartans pulled within 22-19, but the Eagles scored the last three points for the victory and 2-1 lead.

The fourth game was not easy, either. The score was tied, 17-17, before the Eagles gradually pulled away and finished the four-set victory.

Kirkwood appeared to have the stronger team in the latter stages of Games 2, 3 and 4.

"They pushed us that whole first game," said Beyer. "We needed to answer back and we definitely did the next three games."

"I thought we were going to be more prepared out of the gate," said Williams. "We got consistent, we put the ball in play. We got them (the Spartans) where we wanted them. We just had to go a little bit harder."

Poula, a 5-foot-11 outside hitter from West Branch, and Hilton, a 5-11 outside hitter/middle blocker from LaPorte City, have cracked the starting lineup as freshmen this year. The other five players who saw action Wednesday are sophomores.

The Eagles have been striving to put a cohesive unit on the court after reaching the national tournament last season.

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"We're a very well-balanced team this year," said Poula. "I feel like our setter can go anywhere she wants."