

Kirkwood 1 step from national tourney

Written by Mike Condon

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They didn't have the "spark" Coach Jill Williams was hopeful of seeing.

But the Kirkwood women's volleyball team had more than enough to move within one step of another berth in the NJCAA Division II national tournament.

The Eagles were able to put together some runs in the middle of all three sets in Tuesday night's Region XI-B semifinal matchup with Marshalltown Community College at Johnson Hall.

All three sets were close until the midway point of each. That's where No. 7 Kirkwood took over in each set and went on to post a 25-16, 25-19, 25-18 win. The victory moves the Eagles (32-7) into a 2 p.m. contest against Southwestern CC of Creston in Fort Dodge for the right to go to the national tournament.

The Spartans (31-9) advanced Tuesday with a straight-set win over Northeast of Nebraska in Creston.

"I was kinda hoping for a little more spark since we were hosting," admitted Williams. "We've had some really great energy playing here in Johnson Hall all season. Tonight, we just seemed to find a way to win in each set."

Marshalltown (22-20) came in playing like a team with nothing to lose. The Tigers pushed the hosts and forced the Eagles into scramble mode on more than one occasion.

"It was just like, 'when was it going to be time for us to go?'," Williams said. "Finding that hot hitter and finding some weaknesses in their defense ended up being the difference."

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That hot hitter was actually two hitters. Sophomore Erin Walker came on strong in the final two games to finish with 12 kills. Freshman Heather Poula also had 12 kills.

"I think in the beginning we were all a little slow," Walker said. "We were really excited that we pushed through in the end and finished strong.

"(The difference) is that we had the fire tonight," continued the Silvis, Ill., native. "We really wanted this game tonight and I think that showed in the end."

A key point in the match was in the second set. The Eagles had fallen behind 9-5, forcing Williams to call a timeout.

After the timeout, the Eagles turned to Walker. After a Tiger hitting error, she pounded home a pair of kills. Poula then put one down to tie the score at 10.

"Once we got to 10-all, it was smooth sailing from there," Williams said.

In the third set, Marshalltown built an 11-9 lead before the Eagles went on a 9-1 run to take control. Fittingly, it was Walker who put the ball down on match point.

"I think Erin really came alive on the outside," Williams said. "Heather (Poula) did an outstanding job putting the ball away and Amber (Timmons) did a great job of distributing the ball."

Timmons, the Eagles' sophomore setter, finished with 38 assists.

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Williams was quick to credit Marshalltown's grit and determination.

"At this point, they are the lower seed and they come in here with the mentality that they had nothing to lose," she said. "It's now or never and honestly our team should have played that way as well because you are in a one and done situation at this point."

Kirkwood will be in another one and done match on Saturday. The Eagles lost the first game to Southwestern in early September before roaring back to win the final three.

"We've been in this position before," Williams said. "We played on the road last year also and we were just at Iowa Central last week so we are familiar with the venue at least. We should feel good about it coming into it. Southwestern gave us a good match here earlier in the season so we know what to expect, a solid championship match."

A win Saturday would send the Eagles back to the national tournament, where they finished ninth in 2012.

"We're really excited," Walker said. "Anything can happen. Every team you see is getting better at this point of the season. I know we're going to go up there and fight hard to win."