

## Weary Eagles salvage split

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kirkwood Coach Joe Yegge had some parting advice for his weary softball players as they left the ballpark Saturday afternoon.

"Get some rest," he told them. "Get some sleep."

Chances are, the Eagles did not need to be convinced after a whirlwind 36-hour trip that took them from Cedar Rapids to Estherville to Sioux City and back to Cedar Rapids for four games against conference opponents on Friday and Saturday.

The seventh-ranked Eagles returned home at 2 a.m. Saturday morning from Sioux City and were not mentally sharp in their doubleheader Saturday afternoon against Iowa Central.

The Tritons snapped Kirkwood's 38-game winning streak against conference opponents in the first game, 5-1, but the Eagles rallied for an 11-6 victory in the nightcap.

The Eagles were supposed to play a doubleheader against Iowa Lakes in Estherville Friday afternoon, but Yegge got a phone call when the bus was 18 miles from Estherville, telling him the field at Iowa Lakes was unplayable and the twinbill had been moved to Sioux City, the nearest available field and two hours away.

"So it took us seven hours to drive from Cedar Rapids to Sioux City," he said.

Kirkwood won both of those games on Friday, but the doubleheader did not end until 9 p.m. and the Eagles had a five-hour trip home from Sioux City.

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As a result, it was no great surprise the Eagles made a few mental mistakes and struggled at times Saturday afternoon. "I kind of knew today wasn't going to be sharp," said Yegge. "I don't think they were mentally here today."

Kirkwood won 32 straight games against ICCAC opponents last year and had a 6-0 mark against conference foes this season heading into Saturday's games, but Iowa Central snapped that streak with its 5-1 victory in the opener.

It got worse when Iowa Central scored five runs in the top of the first inning of the second game with more sloppy play by the Eagles. But Kirkwood bounced back with four runs in the bottom of the first inning, thanks partly to a two-run home run by Xavier grad Jenna Schulte, and pitcher Shy Saladino buckled down in the circle.

"I definitely thought I was in for a little bit of a bumpy road," Saladino said about that five-run outburst by Iowa Central. "But honestly, I knew I had to shut them down after that inning. After that, I knew my teammates would come through."

Kirkwood grabbed a 6-5 lead in the fourth inning on a two-run double by Lexi Quandt, but Illinois Central (19-6, 1-1) tied the game 6-6 in the top of the fifth.

The Eagles (24-5, 7-1) scored five runs in the bottom of the sixth inning to take an 11-6 lead and put the game out of reach. Chasney Jenkins drove in Alicia Crivaro with an RBI double to give Kirkwood a 7-6 lead, then Erin Weno and Schulte followed with RBI doubles to make it 9-6.

Brianna Farley delivered a two-run single as a pinch-hitter to make it 11-6.

Kirkwood started eight freshmen and two sophomores in the second game Saturday and Yegge saluted their mental toughness to rally.

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"They're freshmen, so it's nice to see them battle through," he said. "Thank god our offense came along toward the end. "It's good to see they are plugging away and getting wins in tight games and coming back."

Saladino, a sophomore, raised her record to 11-0 with a 1.00 ERA. She acknowledged the club was a little weary Saturday after Friday's long ordeal, but was not looking for excuses.

"People probably want to blame it on that, but honestly you can't blame it on things. You can't blame it on mental fatigue," she said, noting other teams also have demanding schedules.

"It takes a toll, but hey, we signed up for this. This is what we love," she said. "We know we're expected to do things that other people don't have to do. It's part of it. You have to love it."

The Eagles are not done yet. They host Ellsworth in a league doubleheader Sunday at noon, then play a twinbill at Southwestern Community College on Monday.