

Biehl & Prior: Beware of Sluggers!

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Lexie Biehl and Brooke Prior blend in with all the other students at Kirkwood Community College, attending classes and working toward a degree like everyone else.

Biehl is about 5-foot-3. Prior stands 5-foot-6.

"Not very big," Prior noted with a smile.

But when the two sophomores step on a softball field, they become giant-sized sluggers for the 10th-ranked Eagles. Biehl leads all junior college players at the Division II level with 22 homers this season. Prior ranks fourth with 18.

As a team, Kirkwood leads the nation with 101 home runs in 46 games. It's one of the big reasons they won the ICCAC Conference title with a 23-1 record and why the 10th-ranked Eagles have an excellent chance of making the national tournament.

Thirteen different players have hit a home run for the Eagles this year. Alicia Crivaro has

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belted 10 homers. Seven other players have socked at least five round-trippers.

There's power everywhere, up and down the lineup and on the bench.

Biehl, who is from Maquoketa, said she's actually 5 feet, 2 1/2 inches tall. So where does all her power come from? She credits the weight room.

"Strong legs. Strong core. I can bench probably 110," she said. "Weightlifting all the time. I just like to lift."

Coach Joe Yegge thinks the weight-lifting program at Kirkwood is one of the secret ingredients of the team's success. Not just this year, but every year.

"We lifted hard again this morning," he said Monday after the Eagles had stomped DMACC to win the conference title. "We were in the weight room at 6:30 this morning, lifting hard.

"We continue to lift hard all through the year. We don't slack off during the season. We don't back off on it at all. We just keep lifting hard."

And they keep pounding the ball.

Yegge is a renowned hitting instructor and has special drills for his players, who treasure the regimen and come back for a refresher course after they graduate.

Quick hands ... Let the ball travel ... Don't lunge ... Discipline in the strike zone ... All of those

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fundamentals make a difference, especially when you have talented players who understand the importance of working hard in the weight room.

Biehl hit nine homers at Marshalltown Community College last season. She transferred to Kirkwood this year after the Marshalltown coach left for another job.

"I came to Yegge," she said. "I knew Kirkwood was nationally ranked all the time and I just wanted to be part of it."

Yegge did not recruit Biehl at Maquoketa High School, but Kirkwood played Marshalltown last year and he checked out her stats in those contests. He was impressed.

"I kind of remembered her," Yegge said. "Did I know she was this good? No. She's unbelievable.

"She's a great kid," he continued. "Doesn't speak. Just comes in and works hard and does the job."

Biehl is delighted with the way things have worked out. "It feels really good," she said. "I never thought I'd do this well."

Biehl began playing softball in T-Ball. Her father, Doug Biehl, played for a state championship baseball team at Maquoketa High School and has worked with Lexie from the start.

"He's been my coach all the way through," she said.

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Kirkwood has three potential All-Americans at the top of its lineup. Chasney Jenkins, who is 60 for 60 in stolen bases this season, is the leadoff hitter with a .546 batting average. She was an All-American last year and has a chance to repeat.

Biehl, who plays right field, bats second with her .478 average, 22 home runs and 69 RBIs. Prior, a shortstop and pitcher, hits third with a .496 average, 18 homers and 69 RBIs.

Then comes more power in the lineup, more lusty batting averages, more eye-popping RBI totals and more victories. Kirkwood is 38-8 overall.

Biehl and Prior are tied for fourth in the nation with their 69 RBIs.

Prior, from Silvis, Ill., had a torn ligament in her rib cage last year and missed more than 20 games. As a result, she hit only four home runs.

"I couldn't throw or anything," she said. "It took me quite a while (to recover)."

Prior is an accomplished shortstop and loves playing the position. She was not a big part of the pitching staff when the season began, but she moved into the rotation when freshmen Allie Mengler (tender shoulder) and Hannah Cole (tender elbow) had to back off.

"We decided to pitch Brooke one game," said Yegge. "After the game, she came in and told us she wanted the ball every game. We knew Brooke would be good."

Freshman Nicky Simpson (15-5, 1.87 ERA) has been pitching the first game of doubleheaders.

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Prior (11-0, 1.83 ERA) takes the ball for Game 2.

"Coming into this year I didn't think I'd pitch as much as I do," Prior said. "But I like the opportunity I have and I enjoy it."

Prior likes to play shortstop in Game 1 before moving into the circle for Game 2 so she can study the hitters. "It kind of helps me, watching the batters the game before. What they like and don't like," she explained.

Prior is a total package for the Eagles. She's hitting .496 with 18 home runs and 69 RBIs, she's got an 11-0 record and 1.83 ERA as a pitcher, and she's a sure fielder.

"I had to get on her one time up in Minnesota about her being a six-tool player," said Yegge. "She can hit, she hits with power, she can run, plays defense, she can throw, she can pitch. She's a six-tool kid."

"I told her that day, 'I'm on you hard because you can be the best player in the country.' I truly believe that. She can do everything we ask."

The school record for most home runs in one season by the entire team is 104, established in 2013. The Eagles are only four home runs away from topping that mark.

Jena Malmen belted 28 homers for Kirkwood in 2011, so Biehl needs seven more home runs to break that record. That might be a lot to ask, but when Biehl gets hot she hits home runs in bunches. Prior does, too.

Maybe they should wear special shirts when they walk around campus:

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