

No. 6 Eagles roll into national tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 01 May 2015 21:04 - Last Updated Friday, 01 May 2015 22:49



The Kirkwood softball team is so good and so talented that Natalie Clark, an All-American for the Eagles last year, is only a part-time starter this season.

That's one of the many reasons the sixth-ranked Eagles are heading to the NJCAA Division II national tournament after destroying North Platte (Neb.) in the district tournament Friday at Kirkwood, 8-0 and 18-1, in two lopsided contests.

Kirkwood (45-8) advances to the 16-team national meet in Clinton, Miss., from May 13-16.

Clark has graciously accepted her role as a super-sub this season, an important intangible for a club that oozes talent.

"She's done great," said Coach Joe Yegge. "She knows she's struggled a little bit offensively, and that's why she's come out of the lineup with the way we've been hitting.

"She's been fine with it. She comes in and she plays solid defense right away. I take my hat off to her. She's been rock-solid here."

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Clark, a sophomore from Des Moines, keeps smiling and helps the Eagles any way she can. She plays shortstop when Brooke Prior pitches and plays multiple positions in the field.

Last year, Prior was hurt much of the season so Clark played shortstop and was named a second team All-American. This year, Prior has been healthy and probably will be named an All-American herself.

"My role has been really interesting this year," said Clark. "I've played first, short, left and right. So I'm there wherever they need me.

"It's different," she admitted, "but I'm just contributing to the team any way I can. Every year can't be your best year."

Clark is hitting .294 with eight home runs. She'd love to be in the starting lineup on a full-time basis, but knows it's important to keep a positive attitude.



"That's really important," she said. "Because if the freshmen see my doing it (being unhappy), then they're going to do it. And I don't want them to see that.

"We have such a great team and everyone has each other's back. We're all positive about it, so I haven't gotten down about it."

Kirkwood has many stars on the club, but Yegge said the team MVPs are probably all the girls

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on the bench who encourage the starters and produce when given a chance.

"We've preached about playing for each other, be happy for each other," he said. "This is one true team. Everybody loves each other and they don't care what their role is."

Alcia Crivaro smashed two solo home runs for Kirkwood in the 8-0 victory in the opener, giving her 14 homers for the season. Jasmine Ragusi socked her 10th homer.

Nicky Simpson (19-5) tossed a no-hitter in the first game with five strikeouts and one walk. North Platte (20-28) got the ball out of the infield only once the entire game.

The first game Friday was semi-competitive, but the second game quickly got out of hand. Kirkwood grabbed an 11-0 lead after three innings and was stealing bases at will.

The Eagles swiped 13 bags in the first three innings and the North Platte catcher finally gave up and simply tossed the ball back to her pitcher as Kirkwood kept moving along.

Yegge stopped the running game at that point and cleared his bench, but there is no mercy rule in a championship game and they had to play all seven innings.

Clark hit a two-run homer in the second game and Chasney Jenkins smacked a three-run shot, her 10th homer of the campaign. Jenkins stole six bases in the two games, making her 72 for 72 this year.

Kirkwood has been a dominant ballclub the past few weeks and faced very little competition in the regional and district tournaments.

"Our girls were focused in the last couple of weeks," said Yegge. "Offensively we've been really

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dialed in, so it's been good.

"Everybody is doing their part and taking care of what they've needed to do. It's been a team effort."

It's been a long time since anyone has challenged the Eagles, but Yegge does not think his club has gotten soft with all the easy games heading into the national tournament in Mississippi.

"We'll have tight games down there, but I'm not worried about it," he said. "This team is so loose and they know what's at stake.

"I get more nervous than they do," he said. "If they show up with an attitude, on any given day they can beat anybody."

Yegge will be taking Kirkwood to the national tournament for the third time in his eight years as head coach.

"I am really excited," said Clark. "It's what I've been looking forward to all year. I think it's going to be more competitive there, but I think we have a really good shot at winning nationals."