

Eagles getting healthy, getting excited

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 02 May 2015 20:17 - Last Updated Saturday, 02 May 2015 21:05



The Kirkwood baseball team has dealt with Tommy John surgery, a broken finger, a bad back, a hand injury and assorted other ailments this season.

Now the Eagles are a lot healthier and feeling good about themselves heading into the junior college regional tournament in Waterloo this week.

Kirkwood swept an ICCAC twinbill from Iowa Lakes Saturday, 10-2 and 12-2, at the Kirkwood field and will carry a 32-19 record into the tournament.

The Eagles are seeded No. 4 for the tourney and will face No. 5 seed DMACC (25-28) in the opening round Thursday at 10 a.m. at Riverfront Stadium in Waterloo.

First baseman Austin Saikal and designated hitter Luke Hassman are back in the lineup and swinging hot bats, just at the right time.

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"You put those two guys back in our lineup and we're a different team," Coach Todd Rima said Saturday. "I feel like we're getting a little bit healthy at the right time."

Kirkwood has raised its team batting average to .331 with a string of good hitters that includes Ozzie Adams (.423), Randy Perez (.399), Adam Barbarich (.394), Bryce Grimm (.374), Toran Shahidi (.343), Saikal (.340), Hayden Sloane (.329), Sulliam Rios Reyes (.320), Hassman (.319), Jack Fitzgerald (.296) and others.

Saikal and Rios Reyes have belted seven home runs. Perez has socked five homers and driven in 56 runs in 51 ballgames. Suddenly, the Eagles have a potent lineup that scored 40 runs in four games in the weekend series against Iowa Lakes.

"That's what we envisioned going into it," said Rima. "We're proud of our guys. Nobody's made excuses all year. It's got to be the next man in and they've done a good job. It is good to have them back."

Hassman went 3-for-4 in the second game Saturday and ended the contest with a two-run single in the fifth inning for a 12-2 lead, invoking the 10-run mercy rule.

"It was good to get back out there. It feels good," said Hassman, a 6-foot-5, 255-pound slugger from Southeast Polk who was sidelined for a month with a broken pinkie on his left hand. "I'm glad that I'm healthy going into the post-season."

Fitzgerald drove in five runs for Kirkwood in the second game with a two-run homer, a two-run double and a sacrifice fly. Saikal went 3-for-4 and drove in three runs. Grimm, Perez and Adams had two hits and Grimm drove in two runs.

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Rios Reyes went 2-for-3 with a home run and four RBIs in the first game. Barbarich, Perez and Shahidi had two hits. Fitzgerald drove in three runs, giving him eight RBIs in the twinbill.



Austin Clemens (6-0, 4.73 ERA) pitched well in the first game for the victory.

The Eagles got a boost in the second game when Brock Neuhaus, a transfer from Kansas State who has battled back problems, pitched four strong innings and allowed only one run. Neuhaus struck out five straight batters during one stretch and showed a nasty curveball.

"Having him go out and pitch as well as he did, he's a difference-maker for us," said Rima. "When he's healthy he can be as good as anybody. To see him extend himself today, that's a big plus for us also."

Iowa Central won the conference title with a 22-6 record and has the No. 1 seed for the tournament, followed by NIACC (20-8), Southeastern (19-9), Kirkwood (17-11), DMACC (12-16), Southwestern (9-19), Iowa Lakes (8-20) and Ellsworth (5-23) in the league standings.

Kirkwood was sitting with a 10-10 record in the league two weeks ago, but the Eagles won 7 of their last 8 games to clinch the No. 4 seed for the tournament.

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"It's not your goal going into it to be the No. 4 seed, but I think our big goal was to be playing our best ball at the end of the year. And I really feel we're doing that right now," said Rima.

"I think we're headed in the right direction going into the tournament. I know our guys are excited about it. I like our team against anybody right now.

"Our guys are going to get on the bus thinking we've got as good a shot as anybody," the coach said. "Now it's time to put it together and play well on the field."

The regional tournament is double-elimination.

"I feel like we're peaking right now," said Hassman. "Our bats are coming back to life. We're excited. We're confident and we're ready to go."

Game 1

Iowa Lakes 000 020 0 - 2 6 2
Kirkwood 006 202 x - 10 10 2

W - Clemens (6-0). L - Skantze.

Game 2

Iowa Lakes 010 01 - 2 3 1
Kirkwood 032 07 - 12 16 0

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W - Neuhaus (2-3). L - Cristobal.