

Nearad hits for cycle as No. 4 Kirkwood rolls

Written by Jim Ecker
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Taylor Nearad put a big exclamation point on her bid to be named the National Player of the Year Friday.

Kirkwood's talented center-fielder hit for the cycle as the fourth-ranked Eagles ripped Ellsworth, 15-0, in five innings in the opening round of the regional softball tournament at Kirkwood.

Nearad collected a single and a two-run triple in the first inning when Kirkwood batted around and scored nine runs. She lined a two-run homer in the third inning and had an RBI double in the fourth.

The freshman from Solon went 4-for-4, drove in five runs and hit for the cycle with a single, double, triple and home run in just four innings.

Nearad is now hitting .619 with 26 home runs and 115 RBIs in 56 games as she bids for the NJCAA Division II Triple Crown. She also has 133 hits, 102 runs, 27 doubles and 11 triples and ranks No. 1 in the nation in numerous offensive categories.

Few people have seen anything like it.

"I have not, to be honest," said Kirkwood assistant coach Jenny Nelson, who was an All-American for the Eagles during her playing days. "It's pretty special to watch."

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"And knowing how she is as a kid and a person, it makes me that much more proud of her. She's such a great kid and a great teammate."

Nearad has done a lot of hitting during her high school and college days, but does not remember hitting for the cycle before. "I don't think so," she said. "I don't think I have."

Kirkwood (52-4) is scheduled to face Iowa Lakes (25-20) in the semifinals of the NJCAA Division II Region XI-A tournament Saturday at 2 p.m., weather permitting. Ellsworth (6-46) is scheduled to face Southwestern (25-25) in the loser's bracket at noon.

Gabi Carter, Morgan Frost and Teagan Toft also socked home runs for the Eagles Friday. Carter has 21 home runs and 82 RBIs, which puts her among the national leaders.

Maddie Hansen went 3-for-4 with two doubles and three RBIs. Nicky Simpson (26-2) pitched a three-hit shutout with eight strikeouts.

Nearad, who throws and bats left-handed, has struck out only six times in 215 official at-bats this season. She hits the ball squarely nearly all the time, spraying base hits from left field to right-center.

"I watch the spin of the pitches and if it's an up-spin I definitely try to get on top of it," she said. "Otherwise I just do what I normally do and try to hit the middle of the ball and hit it solid."

"I don't really pull the ball that much. I just try to keep my hands inside the ball and work towards the other direction."

Nearad appears to have maintained a calm, level-headed approach to the game, despite her incredible success this year.

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"Honestly, I think what's made her so successful up to this point is her mentality," said Nelson. "She goes up there every day just looking to attack the ball and having fun, looking to be a good teammate and looking to get on base so somebody else can hit her in."

Nearad knows she's having a special season, but hasn't pinched herself yet.

"It's not really sinking in at all," she remarked. "I understand that I'm doing really well. I just go from game to game and don't really focus on what happened in the other games. I just go from game to game and do my job."

Nearad said she has received some mild interest from Iowa State and Western Illinois, but said she plans to return to Kirkwood next season as a sophomore. "I'm staying here for two years," she announced.

That will get a big cheer from Kirkwood and groans from their opponents.

Iowa Lakes defeated Southwestern, 9-2, in the other first-round game. The double-elimination tournament is scheduled to end Sunday, but could be delayed due to rain this weekend.