

Wounded Eagles fly into regional finals

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Jill Williams is an excellent coach for the Kirkwood women's volleyball team.

She's also a master juggler.

Williams had to juggle her lineup Wednesday night with two key starters sidelined with injuries, but the 13th-ranked Eagles adjusted without a hiccup and whipped NIACC, 25-19, 25-15, 25-11, in the regional semifinals at Johnson Hall.

Kirkwood (25-16) will face Northeast Community College in the regional finals Saturday at noon in Iowa Falls, with the winner advancing to the NJCAA Division II national tournament.

Ady Wintermote, a freshman who leads the Eagles in kills, sprained her left ankle in practice Tuesday and needed crutches to get around the gym Wednesday. And Brianna Eberhardt, another freshman who leads the Eagles in digs, has been sidelined the past 10 days with a concussion suffered at a tournament.

On short notice, Williams moved a few people around and produced another winning combination.

"The thing I'm most proud of, they made adjustments on the fly, from the middle of practice when Ady went down," said Williams. "We talked about several different scenarios and today I said, 'This is what we're going to go with,' and they were like, 'We've got it.'"

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"I talk about this all the time in practice," she said. "I make them run some crazy drills and put them in positions they're not used to just for reasons like this, because you never know when you're going to be out of your position."

Alexa Whipple, who switched to libero when Ebarhardt got hurt, returned to being an outside hitter again. Haley Lyness, who is normally a substitute on defense, entered the rotation at libero. Hannah Promes shifted to a middle-back position. Grace Swenning joined the rotation and took as many serves as possible.

On top of that, several starters had to get accustomed to seeing different teammates in different spots.

"We had to move some people around, but we definitely made adjustments," said freshman Abbi Tunis, who contributed eight kills. "It's definitely a big adjustment for us, but we did well with it."



Margaret Micka, a steady force all season, led Kirkwood with 14 kills. McKenzie Petersen, Whipple and Tunis all had eight kills.

Lauren Keane collected 37 assists in three sets. Lyness had four service aces. Whipple and Lyness had six digs and Micka finished with five. Petersen enjoyed a big night at the net with eight blocks.

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Eberhardt said she's not sure if she'll be cleared to play in the regional finals. Wintermote has two more days to recover and Williams is hopeful the 5-foot-11 hitter will make it back in time.

"Of course I have hope. Absolutely," said Williams. "I believe in everything. I even believe in Santa."

Wintermote was named the ICCAC Player of the Week on Tuesday, then got hurt in practice the same day.

Kirkwood defeated Northeast in the final match of the conference season last week to finish as the undefeated ICCAC champions for the second straight campaign. Now comes the rematch for a trip to nationals.

"I think our kids feel good," said Williams. "Even with this change in our lineup, I feel like we still have a decent matchup (against Northeast). It should be a great match."

Kirkwood won regional titles in 2015 and 2016 and placed seventh in the national tournament both years. Now the Eagles are looking for another regional crown.

"We're definitely going to come out hard and ready to go," Tunis vowed.