



Central Plains, Sacred Heart return strong doubles teams

By Rick Peterson Jr.
KSHSAA Covered

Despite being one of the state's smallest schools with a tennis program, the winning tradition that permeates throughout Central Plains High School can also be found on the hardcourt.

The 1A Oilers have routinely found success in both singles and doubles in Class 3-2-1A competition under longtime coach Gary Bittner, who enters his 39th season coaching in Claflin.

Keeley Hipp and Janae Ryan won back-to-back doubles titles in 2015 and 2016. Current Iowa State women's basketball Emily Ryan was also a star singles player, placing at state four times including runner-up showings in her last three seasons.

On the boys' side, Central Plains won a team tennis title in 2016, and Claflin High School won boys team championships in 2003 and 2007. Last spring, freshman Peyton Ryan went 33-1 and took fifth place at state for the Oilers.

This fall, the Oilers return a contender for a state title in doubles with juniors Brynna Hammeke and Kyla Metro, who placed third in 3-2-1A last year and went 27-5 on the season.



Central Plains' Brynna Hammeke

"A key to success is getting the kids started once they finish first grade and trying to build relationships," Bittner said.

Bittner said Hammeke and Metro are examples of players who took up the sport early. They've won two straight regional titles while amassing a 57-10 record as a doubles team.

"They're competitors," Bittner said. "Brenna, she's a tremendous athlete.

Kyla, I can't tell you how many tennis balls she's hit this summer. They're both very hard workers and love the sport and have dedicated themselves to it."



Central Plains' Kyla Metro

Hammeke helped lead the Oilers a seventh straight basketball state championship last year.

Bittner said the Oilers, regional champs a year ago, have six players out for girls tennis. Lauren Oeser and Ashlyn Armstong will play singles, while Grace Lamatsch and Ryan Metro will be the No. 2 doubles team.

"I think we're hitting pretty well," Bittner said. "We should have a pretty good representation across the board in singles and doubles."

The Oilers will open Aug. 31 in the Ellsworth Invitational.

"It should be a lot of fun to watch the kids play and I'm glad they're taking me along for the ride," Bittner said.

After sharing a Class 3-2-1A team state championship with Kansas City Christian last year, Sacred Heart will have a new-look team, but the cupboard isn't completely bare for the Knights.

Isabella Matteucci and Katie Weiss are back after taking second place in doubles last year, losing a hard-fought, three-setter in the final to Kansas City Christian's Juliet Bartels and Emma Sand.

Matteucci, who will be a senior, and Weiss, a sophomore, posted a 31-5 record last year.

"I think they surprised everybody the first tournament of the year at the Collegiate Classic in Wichita, which tends to draw a really strong field," Sacred Heart coach Tom Perrin said. "And they went into it unseeded and ended up winning that tournament.

"I thought they would be a state qualifying team, but I didn't realize, until they really got out there playing good competition, that they could stack up against some of the best in the state. They had a lot of really good quality wins against teams from both bigger schools and smaller schools."

Perrin said Matteucci and Weiss complement each other well on the court.

"They kind of fill in the gaps with each other," he said. "Isabella is the older, kind of big sister, and Katie is kind of the little sister. Katie's more athletic than Isabella, but Isabella just keeps Katie centered. They're just a nice fit together."

Sacred Heart's Lily Perrin capped her career with a singles state championship last year to help the Knights tie for the team crown with KC Christian, which suffered heavy graduation losses.

Tom Perrin said Matteucci and Weiss will be the only returners from the Knights' top six from last year.

"We've got some new players coming up," Perrin said. "We're inexperienced and we certainly have a ways to go to be quite as good as we were last year, team-wise."

The Knights open at the Wichita Collegiate Classic on Saturday.

“We strive to have a good practice where we improve a little bit every day,” Perrin said. “If you can improve a little bit every day, by the end of the season, you have a chance to feel pretty good about yourself.”

Defending co-champion KC Christian also suffered serious graduation losses including the state championship doubles team of Juliet Bartels and Emma Sands and state singles runner-up Keira Knoflicek.

Ellsworth was a distant third place in last year’s team standings but graduated three of its four doubles qualifying players with only Nicole Haase returning.

Conway Springs does return state placers in singles player Loren May, fifth last year, and doubles sophomore Haylee Osner, who placed ninth as a freshman.