



Conrad, Graham look to keep Wichita Collegiate rolling

By Scott Paske
KSHSAA Covered

WICHITA – Besides their exceptional tennis talent, Wichita Collegiate seniors Lily Conrad and Ella Graham had a hunch some intangible factors would make their doubles partnership a good fit last season.

“We’ve both gone to this school forever, since we were like 2,” Conrad said. “I know Ella’s always been nice and fun to play with,” she added, before turning to Graham and saying, “It’s just so easy to play with you.”

The results supported that, as Conrad and Graham won 17 of 18 matches during the 2020 season and captured the Class 4A doubles championship. Their four straight-set victories at state helped the Spartans win the team title and extended a streak of state championships at the 4A and 3-2-1A levels that started in 2009.

With junior Emma Mantovani, the 4A singles champion two years ago and runner-up last season, and a competitive group of varsity candidates, Collegiate enters another fall with components to continue the run. The first step is the 16-team Collegiate Tennis Classic on Saturday.

Collegiate coach Dave Hawley paired Conrad, a second-place finisher in 4A doubles as a sophomore with Sallie Lair, and Graham last August. The duo lost to Salina Sacred

Heart's Isabella Matteucci and Katherine Weiss in their first tournament. But they later avenged the defeat to the 3-2-1A runners-up, and also took down 5A champions Emma and Sarah Sinclair of Andover during the regular season.

"Ella had always pretty much been a singles player and Lily did both," Hawley said. "Early on, Lily was the more dominant, aggressive player. But they came together and had some pretty significant wins."

For Graham, playing successful doubles required her to improve her footwork and become more comfortable at the net. Ironically, she found the adjustment took hold in a singles match she lost.

"Doubles is just faster-paced," she said. "When I went back and played singles, I was trying to end the points really fast. I kind of forgot to rally."



Wichita Collegiate's Lily Conrad and Ella Graham

The partnership culminated in a 6-0, 6-4 victory over Circle's Lanna Chase and Kenzi Gillispie at the 4A championship in Topeka. While Hawley noticed some "minor hiccups" from his duo as they got closer to the title, he also saw them make the necessary adjustments.

"I thought it was just natural," Conrad said. "It was just easy for us to get along. We took criticism from each other, but it worked really well."

While Conrad and Graham are in line to repeat as doubles champions, Mantovani will try to reclaim her place atop the state singles perch. She surprised herself, she said, by winning the 4A singles title over Circle's Annabelle Adams two years ago after finishing third in the regional. Last October, Mantovani lost 6-0, 6-0 to Wichita Trinity's Isabella Sebitts in the 4A final after a three-set semifinal victory over Adams.

"The main thing was really the team title," Mantovani said. "I was happy we were able to get those both my freshman and sophomore years. The individual title my freshman year was a bonus. Isabella played great last year and I can't take anything away from her, but I wouldn't be unhappy to get it again."

Collegiate also returns junior Kinsey Nichols, a state doubles qualifier last season. Seniors Marion Gibson and Maddie Kemnitz give the Spartans additional experience, while freshman Laney Conrad, Lily's sister, is a promising newcomer.

"We have several kids who are right at that level," Hawley said. "It will be interesting to see who steps forward."

Buhler, which finished third in 4A last season, must replace last year's fourth-place singles finisher Brittany Teufel. But the Crusaders return junior doubles qualifier Kayla Babcock, who took fourth at state, and senior singles qualifier Kacey Lehl.

A Sebites repeat would put Wichita Trinity back in the race for a team trophy, while Independence, which finished sixth in 2020, returns junior Abby Viele, the eighth-place finisher in singles.