



Shawnee Mission East girls tennis returns with nearly all pieces for a 3-peat

By Mac Moore
KSHSAA Covered

Shawnee Mission East girls tennis seems to have the formula necessary for the team to win its third straight Class 6A state title: bring back the state's top-two doubles teams and a three-time state medalist who took seventh in singles last year.

The Lancers seemingly need just one more singles competitor to run it back. To hear Andy Gibbs tell it though, he's not quite sure how his varsity girls tennis roster will shake out this season.

"Nothing is locked down yet," Gibbs said. "A couple of the players I haven't even worked with yet."

Gibbs is not trying to play coy or perform motivational tactics by underselling his treasure trove of talent, led by a two-time state champion doubles team of juniors Bryson Langford and Greta Stechschulte.

Gibbs said it's just that he will not even know until after Labor Day if either of the doubles teams who made it to the state finals in 2020 will remain as teams this year.

Per a KSHSAA rule on competing in outside tournaments, eight of his top players will not be able to join the high school team until they are done competing in USTA Tournaments. Members of that group include incoming freshman players who Gibbs has not even worked with yet.

But he's not complaining about having that many talented players joining a little later in the season.

"It's a challenge to figure out the puzzle, but it's a lot of fun, too," Gibbs said.

Whether they will play singles or doubles, Gibbs will have sophomores Abigail Long and Katie Schmidt returning from a state runner-up finish in doubles. He will also have senior Bridget Epstein. She took fourth in doubles in 2018 and 2019 with two different senior teammates. Instead of looking for a new partner for a third straight year, she took to singles where she qualified for state.



Shawnee Mission East's Greta Stechschulte

Senior Eva Kading, who qualified for state her freshman and sophomore years in singles, will have one last chance to return to state. She took 11th in singles back in 2019.

Gibbs thinks that some of the biggest growth for his team will be less about who can work their way into the team's top six and more about how much his top doubles team are coming into their own as leaders for the Lancers.

"(Langford and Stechschulte) both want so much to be not only good players, but they also want to lead our group," Gibbs said. "They see the importance and the value of being leaders of the high school team."

Gibbs said some players with a similar ability at their age might choose not to play high school tennis, or view themselves as above the team even if they choose to play. He said he hasn't seen that attitude from this nationally-ranked duo.

Before they have even joined the team this year, both players took the initiative of helping their teammates build a tennis float for Lancer Day, a celebration during Shawnee Mission East's first home football game of the season.

"With some of the graduations over the last two seasons, the leadership piece has passed to them and they are embracing it," Gibbs said.

As Shawnee Mission East has loaded up for another couple of years in frontrunner status, the other girls tennis juggernaut in 6A may have entered rebuilding mode.

Shawnee Mission East and Blue Valley North have won a combined 26 state championships since 1985. The Lancers reclaimed control of its state title tug-of-war when they won the championship in 2020, forcing the Mustangs to accept second place a year after both teams shared the 6A crown.

Blue Valley North has shown it can always field a team capable of competing for a state title, but it will be harder with the graduation of 2020 state champion and 2019 state runner-up Callie Flanagan. The Mustangs also lost all four members of its two state-qualifying doubles teams with Divya Gupta, Caroline Thummel, Christine O'Brien and Emerson Mackenzie all graduating.

Still, it may be worth waiting to see how Blue Valley North freshman Shelby Smith will stack up against high school talent before anyone counts out the Mustangs.

Manhattan could be the strongest challenger to Shawnee Mission East. Manhattan will return the state runner-up in singles with Jillian Harkin, who has only lost during the state tournament through two years of high school tennis. Harkin took third place after losing in the semifinals in 2019.



Manhattan's Jillian Harkin

Harkin will lead a team with four of its six state qualifiers returning from 2020. Junior Maura Wiens and senior Hannah Loub are back while senior Ava Bahr will need a new doubles partner after Cooper Lohman graduated, as did singles competitor Kayla Lei.

Hutchinson, Garden City and Washburn Rural will all return multiple state qualifiers as well.

But each of these schools will have a hard time matching up with a stacked Lancers group that will likely have state-caliber players who will not make the cut for state. According to Gibbs, those players might still make the biggest difference.

“People see the results at tournaments, so they see the No. 2 doubles team,” Gibb said. “They don’t see the third doubles team or the fourth doubles team that push the others in practice.”