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Lamorinda girls tennis teams show strength on the court

By Jon Kingdon



Photos Gint Federas



With a combined 33-9 record so far this season, the Lamorinda girls tennis teams are positioning themselves for the upcoming postseason tournament. Each of the schools has improved their won-lost record and are doing so with a large number of underclassmen.

When a team has finished the prior year with an 18-2 record, it's not easy to improve on such a performance. Yet Miramonte has found a way so far this year as they have won their first 15 matches. Miramonte coach Michael McCollom speaks of his team in no uncertain terms: "This is the best team I have coached." There are not many teams that could play without their No. 1 player and not miss a beat as Miramonte has done. They march inexorably through their schedule. Sophomore Amber Lee who is nationally ranked has only been available to play for Miramonte in only three matches as she plays in various other tournaments. She won all three matches.

The team is comprised of 10 juniors and seniors and 10 freshmen and sophomores. The sophomores have proven to be the foundation of the team in singles play with a combined 33-7 record by themselves.

Sophomores Macey Dowd and former New Yorker Henrietta Schmuck have stepped up to fill the void at first and second singles with great success. Dowd is 10-1 while Schmuck's record is 10-3. Taking advantage of the team's great depth, Miramonte has used 10 different players in singles play this season.

As effective as the singles play has been for Miramonte, the doubles play has proven even more effective with a combined record of 32-4. McCollom has used 14 different doubles combinations. Leading the doubles teams is the pairing of senior Michelle Tang and junior Peyton Smith who are 11-0 this

year. The teams of senior Maya Harrison and sophomore Marlowe Randolph-Malachowski are 4-0 and junior Anna Hyman and senior Paige Millham have a 4-3 record.

In such a competitive situation with so many players competing for playing time, McCollom has seen no issues with the players: "This is a very deep team. It's the most collegiate team I have ever had. They love each other and like being with each other. With such a young team, there is still room to improve."

Helping McCollom are his senior co-captains, Tang and Millham who he credits with "building the team's esprit de corp."

First year Acalanes head coach Drew Diefenbach has led a big turnaround from last year's 9-8 record to its current record of 14-3. Diefenbach has brought a great deal of personal experience having played for Miramonte High School and Cal Poly SLO, founded Paragon Tennis in Orinda, and having coached professionally at the Olympic Club in San Francisco, so he was familiar with some of his players prior to his arrival.

With a 14-3 record, the Dons are second only to Miramonte in league standings. The singles players have proven to be the dominant group on the team. Sophomore Eliza Bates has an 11-3 record playing No. 1 singles. Says Diefenbach: "Eliza has a powerful serve and forehand. She is very knowledgeable of the game and understands what she needs to do to be a winner."

Another sophomore, Jasmine Toni, has won 15 of her 17 matches, which Diefenbach attributes to her consistency and how well she moves on the court. Diefenbach appreciates what Toni brings to the team besides her play on the court: "Jasmine has also taken on a leadership role though only a sophomore as she is so supportive of her teammates which sets the tone for the rest of the team." Se-

nior Sydney Bell rounds out the top three on the team with an 11-4 record in her matches. Says Diefenbach: "Sydney has played for years. She is able to keep the ball deep and is a real fighter that does not give up."

When you include juniors Zoe Cate (9-1) and Madi Price (9-1) and sophomore Erin Warenski (8-2), the Dons have a combined 59-12 record in singles matches. In fact, says Diefenbach: "All of the girls have improved as the season has progressed."

The doubles teams have not been able to match the success that the singles players have had: 19 different doubles combinations with a 25-16 record in all their matches with seniors Naomi Berkowitz and Anika Mohanty leading the way with a 6-1 record. Diefenbach remains optimistic about this group: "Our doubles teams have really improved. They are really grasping the strategy of the game and how to implement it in their matches."

With his prior experience in coaching, Diefenbach has kept things on an even keel: "I know that all of the girls have different personalities. I am not a yeller. If there are issues, I will talk about them. Still I am a very competitive person. Besides improving all of the girls technically, my goal has been to improve their will to perform well and have the desire to win regardless of the score. I want them to fight on every point."

Despite a 3-10 record last season, with the majority of his single's players either freshmen or sophomores, Campolindo coach Steve Robinson remained optimistic, noting: "The key for 2018 is for the girls to work hard in the offseason." With an improved record of 5-6 at this point in the season, it seems that the Cougars took Robinson's advice to heart.

"This is a good and balanced roster," says coach Sunon Faulkner. "The strength of the team is its depth without any one dominant

player. They work as a team and compete to the end of every match. This is a cohesive group. Everyone puts in the work and we are improved from last year."

Junior Kate Brown has taken on the onus of playing No. 1 singles, says Faulkner: "Kate has really improved her play on the court and in the mental part of the game. She has gotten tougher as we ask her to play the top opponents in all of our matches."

Playing No. 2 singles is junior Celia Campo, whose effort Faulkner appreciates: "Celia is a raw talent. She is still learning the game. She never quits and is a role model for her teammates."

The rest of the singles players are junior Sara Vranesh, sophomore Lauren Brewer and Noel Seo and freshman Claire Ross

Co-captains Maile Nomura and Charmae Wang have been the leaders on the team, according to Faulkner: "They help get the players ready for practice, warming them up. They both provide great spirit, doing things like getting the players to wear war paint the day of matches."

The doubles teams have proven to be the most successful part of the team led by Juliette Barlier and Wang (4-1) and Alex Bonardi and Nomura (4-1). The sister team of junior and freshman Isabelle and Francesca Restrepo also have a winning record (2-1). Faulkner appreciates how well Francesca has handled playing with her sister: "There is a lot of pressure on Francesca to play up to her sister's level. It's a good life lesson for her and they both get along well."

With the Cougars third in the league behind Miramonte and Acalanes, Faulkner sees a positive with her players: "This is a group of good citizens. They are all responsive to each other. They work as a team and compete to the end of every match. I love them all."

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