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Sports

## Emerald Smokes Southside in Playoff Opener

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Emerald's Claire Gillespie returns a shot Thursday during a 6-4, 6-0 victory over Southside's Peri Hipps in the first round of the Class AA girls tennis playoffs at Greenwood Country Club. (Staff photo by T.M. James)

If her singles match in the first round of the Class AA state playoffs Thursday is any indication, Emerald High School girls tennis player Arielle Barraca has proven she packs a lot of resolve into a relatively small frame. The Vikings sophomore, playing at No. 2 singles, came back from a set and 0-5 down in her match to help lead Emerald to a 5-1 win over Southside at Greenwood Country Club.

Emerald now hosts Gilbert in the second round in a match tentatively slated to be played Tuesday, but Vikings coach Susan Timmerman said it might be moved to Monday. Gilbert won its first round match 7-0 against Eau Claire. Thursday's victory was the Vikings' second straight in the playoffs against Southside. Emerald also beat the Tigers 4-3 in the Upper State finals last season when juniors Sarah Seigler and Claire Gillespie won the clinching match at No. 1 doubles.

The final score Thursday didn't indicate as dramatic a match, but Emerald didn't seal the win until late. With the Vikings up 3-1 after four singles matches, Barraca was still struggling in the middle of her match. She lost the first set 6-3 and then lost the first five games of the second set before mounting a comeback. Barraca, who stands under 5-foot tall, went on to win the next six games and then took the third-set super-tiebreaker, 10-6.

Barraca's come-from-behind win only confirmed Timmerman's confidence in the sophomore's resilience. "She's the queen of tiebreakers," Timmerman said. "She usually doesn't let the pressure get to her. She just got a little aggravated and decided she wasn't going to lose. She didn't want to go home losing."

Once she had taken the momentum and won the second set, Barraca didn't feel much doubt she would win the match. "I think it just helped to stay really calm and I think it frustrated her when I was coming back," Barraca said. "I was already down 0-5, so (in the tiebreaker) I felt like there was nothing to lose."

By the time Barraca won her match, the Vikings had already clinched the victory when Emerald's No. 2 doubles team of Sammie Jo Manning and Julianne Welch won 6-0, 6-1 against the Tigers' Nidhi Arashingurdi and Stephanie Chiu. "Sammie Jo and Julianne were just on fire," Timmerman said. "Sammie Jo, at the net, has just come so far and her and Julianne just complement each other. They're both such hustlers." "They do a very good job of playing well together."

Manning and Welch, who are both in their first year as starters, didn't feel much pressure knowing they could seal the win with their match. "I was just kind of like, 'Well, I think I can do this,' and then Julianne is pretty awesome," Manning said. "I'm really glad she's my partner."

Manning and Welch have height on their side, and that proved to be an asset for the duo at the net, where they dominated Southside. "We're both really tall so that works out for us," Welch said.

Emerald's No. 3-5 players Claire Gillespie, Maggie Elliott and Elizabeth Mulkey all won their matches in straight sets and took the second set of their matches 6-0, while the Vikings' only loss came when No. 1 Sarah Seigler fell to Southside's Xiya Zhu, 6-2, 6-3.

Having struggled against the Tigers in the playoffs last season, Timmerman hopes a commanding victory this year can only boost Emerald throughout the rest of the postseason. "This is great. (Southside) is really good; we just have more depth," Timmerman said. "I think we did a really good job (Thursday)."

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