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Sports

Emerald's No. 2 Doubles Pair Coming Together At Right Time

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SAMMIE JO MANNING



JULIANNE WELCH

Emerald High School's girls tennis team is in the Class AA Upper State finals for the third consecutive year, and one of the keys to the Vikings' long-term success has been developing new players.

One area where Emerald has been successful is at No. 2 doubles, where the team of sophomore Sammie Jo Manning and junior Julianne Welch have moved seamlessly into starting roles and proven to be a reliable point in each match.

In their first year as starters, Manning and Welch helped the Vikings earn an undefeated Region 1-AA record, and over their first two playoff matches against Southside and Gilbert, they've dropped a combined four games.

"They didn't play much (last season), but they've worked hard to get where they are and to hold their spot," Emerald

coach Susan Timmerman said. "Their challenge matches this year were just excruciating. "Every single spot from No. 2 to 7 split sets, not once but two out of three times. It was really, really close."

With the depth on the Vikings' roster, Timmerman thinks Manning and Welch, who are No. 6 and No. 7 on Emerald's ladder, could both easily be playing singles. "Sammie Jo and Julianne could both be playing No. 4 or 3 (singles) and hold their own on a lot of days," Timmerman said.

Against the Indians on Tuesday, the pair were shaky through the first set, but managed to roll through easily once they began playing more aggressively. "I had to tell Sammie Jo to not be so sweet," Timmerman said. "She was playing some (balls) that were out and you can't give away points like that. "They didn't get a good warmup, they were kind of slow, (but) I think once they got the momentum going and the pace on the ball, they did well."

Manning and Welch are separated by one year, but their strong communication in matches has been crucial to their success. "I think that we verbalize a lot to each other, and we normally agree on pretty much everything," Manning said. "Normally, when you don't agree on something, you don't play as well."

Manning thinks tennis has helped her and Welch develop a bond off the court as well. "We knew each other before, but we didn't like, really, know each other," Manning said. "We're probably going to be doing stuff together after tennis."

Manning and Welch are part of families that have strong tennis players, particularly in doubles. "They're both excellent doubles players," Timmerman said. "They have parents who play doubles, so around the dinner table they hear strategy. "They really do get a lot of coaching from their parents."

At 5-foot-7 and 5-foot-10, respectively, Manning and Welch have height on their side, which contributes to their skill volleying at the net. But they have some differences in their play. "Julianne's a little more aggressive, and she's a little more mature," Timmerman said. "Sammie Jo's really grown a lot and she's pretty consistent. "She went to several tennis camps this past summer and her improvement level is unbelievable, how far she's come. She's a smart player and she's raised her level to where she wants it to be."

