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Sports

Vikings' Seventh-Grader Works Way Into Team's Starting Lineup

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Emerald's Elizabeth Mulkey is just a seventh-grader, but she's already worked her way into the Vikings' starting lineup. (Staff photo by T.M. James)

By 2013, much will have changed with Emerald High School's girls tennis team, but barring a transfer or disillusionment with tennis, Elizabeth Mulkey could still be around. A seventh-grader at Westview Middle School in her first-year on the team, Mulkey is the Vikings' youngest player but also one of their most important. Having lost two seniors -- Morgan Lee and Sidney Ann Fowler -- from a Class AA state runner-up in 2007, Mulkey has stepped in and filled a crucial role for Emerald at No. 5 singles.

Through seven matches, Mulkey has gone undefeated and has won all but one of her matches in straight sets. The only three-setter came in the Vikings' season opener against Class AAA Clinton. Five of the 14 sets she's won have come without dropping a game.

With the talent Mulkey possesses, Emerald coach Susan Timmerman anticipates her young start to develop into a top player in the future. "She brings an enthusiastic attitude, and she's a little hungrier for the top," Timmerman said. "She won't be (No.) 5 for long. "She's hungry to play No. 1, and she has a desire to play."

Against Abbeville on Tuesday, Mulkey was a virtual backboard in her match, rarely committing unforced errors as she came away with a 6-0, 6-0 win. A day earlier she had defeated the same opponent 6-1, 6-1. "She will run everything down, and she refuses to lose a point on a

mistake," Timmerman said. "She's just very consistent, forehand and backhand. She won't miss a good shot, she'll go after it."

Coming onto a successful team with a roster full of players older than herself, one could forgive Mulkey for being intimidated, but Timmerman doesn't think that fits Mulkey's outgoing personality. "I don't think Elizabeth would be nervous anywhere she is," Timmerman said. "She never meets a stranger. She has a good nature and a good heart.

To hear Mulkey tell it though, she was a little bit overwhelmed, especially during a heated battle between Sammie Jo Manning for the Vikings' fifth singles position. "It was kind of hard. I didn't think I was going to get up into the top five," Mulkey said. "I played Sammie Jo, and she's really good. "It was hard because I won a match, and then she'd win a match and then I had to play her again. But, yeah, it was really nerve-racking."

The transition has also been made easier since Mulkey had played with many of the players on the team at Greenwood Country Club and in junior tournaments. "I knew almost half the team before (this season)," Mulkey said. "I like it. It's been fun, and I haven't lost yet."

Mulkey said she's been trying some new things with her game to continue improving. "Right now, I really like my serve, but I'm working on trying to get a spin serve," Mulkey said. "I do that as my second serve sometimes. "I like my forehand a lot, too. It's working good."

With several years of Mulkey being a part of the team in the future, Timmerman is looking forward to her

development. "She's just a lot in a little itty-bitty package, and she's athletic, so I'm excited about watching her grow up," Timmerman said.

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