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Sports

Vikings' Tandem Hopes To Lead Squad To Playoff Prosperity This Season

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Emerald's Jack West, left, and Alex Biffle are the Vikings' top two returners from last year's Region 3-AA championship squad. (Staff photo by Kevin Fiorenzo)

In the midst of a disappointing loss in the second round of the Class AA state tournament to Chris Church Episcopal School's boys tennis team, two Emerald players served as the lone bright spots for the Vikings. Alex Biffle and Jack West, two new Emerald players last season, provided the only points for the Vikings in that match by winning easily in straight sets. A year later, the duo are still expected to be at the top of Emerald's lineup.

With last year's No. 1 Pres Payne having graduated, West and Biffle will occupy the top two spots in Emerald's lineup in the hopes of improving on the past few seasons' disappointing finishes. The Vikings have fallen in the second round of the state finals the last two years after reaching the Upper State finals in 2006. "We got kind of a bad draw

last year," West said. "We got stuck with a tough one with Christ Church, who obviously went to the state championship match. We're hoping to do better this year. We'll see."

Biffle and West arrived last year and brought with them a wealth of experience. Biffle had previously played at Cambridge Academy and was a standout there. West, a junior, was one of Emerald's top players during his seventh and eighth grade years, but he spent his freshman year training at the Smith Stearns Tennis Academy on Hilton Head Island before returning to Greenwood. Both are also highly-ranked USTA junior players and regularly compete in tournaments around the state. West is ranked 13th in South Carolina in the 18-and-under classification, while Biffle is 25th.

While Biffle acknowledges the competition the Vikings usually face during the regular season isn't on par with what they see in junior events, West is quick to add they can't sleepwalk through matches. "We still have to show up and play. It's not like we can just roll over and play people," West said. "There's a lot of schools where certain kids are good, like at Greenwood and Lexington, if we were to play them."

Emerald coach Susan Timmerman has made a point of scheduling matches that will offer an appropriate challenge for her top players. "It was definitely an adjustment for them because most of the kids who play high school tennis are not tournament players," Timmerman said. "We really have some pretty decent competition because we play T.L. Hanna and Clinton. "Usually with a high school team it's your top three or two, even one, who are tournament players. The caliber of play in tournaments is higher."

With the opportunity to face stronger competition solely in junior events, it was still important to Biffle and West to play high school tennis for the camaraderie of being on a team and setting themselves up to play in college. Biffle, a senior, has already decided on Division III Oglethorpe once he graduates and West would like to play eventually at either Wofford or College of Charleston.

Being a part of a team is something Biffle and West have enjoyed. "It's fun having people cheering you on," West said. "You're not by yourself like in tournaments where you have maybe three people show up to watch you play instead of having the whole team behind you. It's kind of a cool experience."

Along with taking the Vikings' top two singles spots, Biffle and West will also serve as Emerald's No. 1 doubles team after playing together. The pair has different strengths which allow them to complement each other. "I'm better at the baseline, so I'll usually set up Jack for poach shots," Biffle said.

Timmerman fully expects the pair to be just as good in doubles as they are in singles. "They played some together last year and did very well. I'm really excited about them being a strong No. 1 doubles team," Timmerman said. "They've also played against each other for several years, so they know each other's strengths and weaknesses."