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MHS tennis looking to return to top 5 program

By: **Brooke Cersosimo**, The Daily Republic

There's talk in Sioux Falls that Mitchell has a good tennis team, according to Mitchell native Andy Young.



Young, who is now a priest at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Sioux Falls, said he was shocked when he saw the Kernels were edged by Sioux Falls O'Gorman 5-4 earlier this season. Young added he plays against O'Gorman players during the winter months and follows the Knights' strong program.

"It's encouraging that with a little bit of practice and love for the sport that Mitchell tennis can be good again," said Young, who became the only Mitchell High School boys' tennis player to win a state title at the No. 1 singles position in 1995. "It's great for Mitchell and good for the school. I would love to see another state champion from Mitchell."

In the past 10 seasons, O'Gorman's boys' program has won five team titles and was runner-up five times.

Kernel coach Pat Moller said his team's goal is to finish in the top five at the state tournament, which begins Thursday. The goal is a feat the Kernel boys' team has not accomplished since the mid-1990s.

"If the kids or anybody thinks we're there now and thinks we don't need to work hard and put time in, we aren't ever going to get there," Moller said. "But as we've gone through the season, other teams have grown to realize the potential of this team."

In an April coaches poll, the top five ranked teams were Watertown, O'Gorman, Rapid City Stevens, Sioux Falls Lincoln and Mitchell. Mitchell lost matches 5-4 to the Arrows and Knights and lost 6-3 to Lincoln May 6. The Kernels have not played Stevens this season.

Young was part of the strong 1993, 1994 and 1995 Mitchell teams. "Those were the years where we were among the powerhouses in the state," said former Mitchell coach Gayle Klein, who coached the Kernels for 27 years. "It was a goal we all worked toward, and we were on Cloud Nine to see that they were able to pull that off."

In those three seasons, the Kernels finished among the top five at the state tournament, taking second in 1995. In the 1995 season, the Kernels were runner-up to Sioux Falls Lincoln and the outcome came down to the final match.

“We missed it by eight points,” Klein said. “Lincoln’s number one doubles team was on the court next to ours. They won their match, putting them ahead of us.”

At that time, placings were only given to the top four players at each flight — meaning a player had to make the semifinals to place. In 1995, Young won at Flight 1, Dan Strong was runner-up at Flight 3, Todd Grivna was third at Flight 4 and Ron Loecker, Bruno Costa and Chris Margallo were each knocked out in the quarterfinals at Flights 2, 5 and 6. Mitchell’s doubles teams all placed that year.

“That shows how dominant we were,” Klein said. “People think it’s tough to place at state now with eight places, and back then the kids had to make the semis. You had to bring your best.”

Young said those years are memorable for him.

“I look back at my senior year, riding on the fire truck around Mitchell and being able to say that Mitchell had a good tennis team,” he said. “It was special because we’re typically known for basketball, not tennis.”

Since then, Mitchell just missed the top five in 1996 and 1999 but hasn’t been able to place in the top five as a team. Klein said individuals have been near the top but never an entire team.

“A tennis group that succeeds as a team is one that is primarily made up of tennis players, not one with athletes that decide to play tennis,” she said. “You may have one or two kids like that with a primary sport as something else, but the teams that win have mainly tennis players in the lineup.”

Klein said Mitchell’s team this season has been in the works for years.

“We’ve seen these kids coming up and we’ve known that provided that they stick with it, they would accomplish many goals,” she said.

On Friday, the Kernels finished second in the Eastern South Dakota Conference tournament behind Watertown. Mitchell also had three individual titles at Flight 3 and 5 singles and Flight 3 doubles. The Kernels haven’t won a conference title on the boys’ side since 1995.

But this week, Mitchell begins the state tournament in its quest to make the top five for the first time in 18 years. The tournament begins at 9 a.m. Thursday and is played at McKennan Park and Sioux Falls Washington High School in Sioux Falls and Brandon Valley Middle School in Brandon.