

Tonka wins one for 'Grandpa Dave'

Skippers' mission ends with win over Blake at Baseline

By **JOHN SHERMAN**
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When Minnetonka tennis coach Dave Stearns passed away last December, shock waves went through the Minnetonka girls team.

The beloved Stearns, who coached a grand total of 64 boys and girls seasons with the Skippers, was the only high school coach any of the girls had ever played for, and right away they thought of a proper tribute they could pay to his memory.

"We decided to dedicate this season to Dave," said senior captain Annika Elvestrom.

After the Skippers defeated The Blake School 6-1 in the state Class AA finals Oct. 27 at the University of Minnesota's Baseline Tennis Center, Elvestrom was asked what coach Stearns might think about the championship.

"Dave would probably be speaking Italian, saying something like Mama Mia," Elvestrom said.

"Before the match, Annika told the team, 'Let's



(SUN PHOTO BY JOHN SHERMAN)

Second doubles player Emilija Medzuikaite of the Minnetonka tennis team comes to the net to poach a point as the Skippers roll to a 7-0 state semifinal win over Mounds View Oct. 27 at Baseline Tennis Center.

do it for Dave. He would be so proud," Karina Elvestrom, Annika's sophomore sister said.

Brent Lundell, who replaced Stearns as head coach, was on board all the way with winning one for Dave. He realized from the beginning the sense of loss the entire team felt.

"We were favored to win last year, but there was no State Tournament," Kelsey Phillips of the Skippers said. "We wanted to win it for Dave,

but it took an extra year."

"As the season went on, we talked about Dave more and more," Annika Elvestrom said. "We are going to celebrate with a casual team dinner tonight. With Dave, he probably would have celebrated with desserts."

The Skippers appreciated the way Stearns taught the game of tennis. Many of them also have private coaches, who work with them year-round, but the experience of coming to

high school practices and meets were enhanced by Stearns' sense of humor, slogans and passionate instructions. The girls on the team gave him a nickname that he was quick to embrace - "Grandpa Dave."

"Winning for Dave feels as good as I thought it would," said Karina Elvestrom, the team leader in the sophomore class.

After blitzing Simley and Mounds View 7-0 in the quarterfinal and

semifinal matches, Minnetonka had a tougher test in the finals against The Blake School.

"Blake is probably the toughest team we have played this year, and we knew they would be ready," Annika Elvestrom said, adding, "I didn't get much sleep last night."

Minnetonka won all three doubles matches and three of four singles matches to finish an undefeated season.

Sarah Shahbaz, Min-

netonka's junior captain at first singles, won 6-0, 6-0 over Blake's Bella Suk. Annika Elvestrom added a 6-1, 6-0 victory over Allyson Jay at No. 2 singles.

At third singles, Blake's hard-hitting sophomore Nana Vang took the point from Meghan Jurgens 6-1, 6-0. Kate Feist of Tonka won the fourth singles point 6-1, 6-4 in a well-played match against Blake seventh grader Fatemeh Vang.

Phillips and Karina Elvestrom won at No. 1 doubles 6-1, 6-0 over the Bears' combo of Ellie Nixon and Annabelle Swigert. Maddie Prondzinski and Emilija Medzuikaite gave Minnetonka the second doubles point 6-0, 6-1 over Nina Bush and Lilly Anderson. At third doubles, Alexa Cummings and Arianna Piedrahita played their best match of the tournament season in a 6-0, 6-0 sweep of Blake's Audrey Anderson and Lily Liu.

Before any opponent becomes excited about dethroning Minnetonka next season, it would be wise to check the Skippers' tournament roster. Annika Elvestrom is the only varsity senior, and with nine of their top 10 returning, the Skippers could be setting up for a dynasty.

'Incredible' describes state title for Shahbaz

Skipper junior is state AA singles tennis champ

By **JOHN SHERMAN**
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A Maple High girls tennis fan took one last look at the scoreboard before leaving Baseline Tennis Center Friday afternoon. "Incredible," the fan said.

The word incredible fits perfectly for what Minnetonka junior Sarah Shahbaz accomplished that day. She trailed No. 1 seed Zoe Adkins 5-1 in the first set of their State Class AA singles championship match.

Many players in that



Sarah Shahbaz

situation would be looking ahead, wondering how they would regroup for a second set, and hopefully, even a third set.

But that's not the way Sarah Shahbaz handles her business. She quickly won the next two games to make the score 5-3, and then she tied the score 5-5. Adkins responded with a win in the 11th game, then

Shahbaz slammed the door on her by winning the next two games and the set, 7-6.

The second set was no contest. Shahbaz ran her opponent north and south, then east and west, to win in a shutout 6-0.

After she received her gold medal, Shahbaz talked about her spectacular comeback win.

"I knew I had to stay in the moment and take one point at a time," the Minnetonka tri-captain said. "I love playing against Zoe because she brings something different every time. The entire time we were playing - even when I was down 5-1 - I told myself, 'This is winnable.'"

The match could be divided into two segments. The first part had Adkins

dominating. The second part had Shahbaz winning 11 of 12 games.

"Sarah has the best hands and shot selection I have ever seen from a high school player," Minnetonka head coach Brent Lundell said.

Shahbaz wanted to switch the focus from herself to the Minnetonka team that had won the state title 6-1 over The Blake School Oct. 27.

"We are all happy about this week," she said.

"After coming close to the team championship several times and missing out on state because of COVID last year, the girls finished strong against a very deep, well-coached Blake team," Lundell said.

While Shahbaz won the state singles crown, team-

mate Kelsey Phillips too third place. Phillips played a great match Friday morning when she took Adkins to three sets. Then Phillips cruised to victory in the third-place match.

Undefeated this season, without even losing a set in singles or doubles, Shahbaz is the only Minnetonka girl ever to win a state singles title and a state doubles title. She and Annika Elvestrom won Class AA doubles in 2019.

Minnetonka's other state singles champions were sisters Aria and Bella Lambert. There is one other former Minnetonka player who should be mentioned. Marnie Wheaton never played on the girls team, but did help the Skipper boys to a state team

championship. Wheaton continued her career at the University of Minnesota, where she became the all-time leader in wins and an All-American.

State Doubles

Minnetonka sisters Annika and Karina Elvestrom completed a perfect day for the Skippers on Friday by taking the state Class AA doubles title over the team from Rochester Century.

The Elvestroms lost the first set 6-2 before winning the last two, 6-3, 6-3.

"We had quite a trifecta with the team championship, the singles championship and the doubles championship," said Jim