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East Valley badminton preview: Top teams have new look in '07

By Cary Tyler
For the Tribune

A season of fresh faces and new challenges highlight the 2007 badminton season. The top three teams from the 2006 5A state championships have new coaches this season: Phoenix Xavier brings in Peggy Arvallo, who won state championships in 2001 and 2002 at Phoenix South Mountain; Mark Hanna takes the reins at Gilbert Mesquite; and longtime assistant Pom Brown takes over at Phoenix Mountain Pointe.

In addition, only one athlete returns from the 2006 final four in singles: Xavier's Vianett Mena, a senior.

"There's quite a few coaching changes, a lot of new people, so it's going to be kind of iffy as to who is the front-runner right now," Hanna said. "All I know is, we will compete. We'll certainly compete."

Mena, who finished second in 2006, said that although her experience and finish last year make her a favorite, there are too many uncertainties heading into this year.

"I just know I have to practice hard and improve my mental game," Mena said. "Having (Arvallo) helps, because she knows how to play at a higher level."

Although badminton teams are facing region changes just like other sports, the impact will be somewhat different. Not all schools field an AIA badminton squad, and there are no divisions in 4A or 5A, thus regional rivalries will be localized.

For example, all of Gilbert's and Chandler's schools (except Chandler Perry, which is in 4A) will be in one region while all the Mesa schools are in their own region.

Although coaches could not reach a consensus, Mountain Pointe has won five of the last nine titles and is always considered a championship threat.

After Mountain Pointe, Xavier, Mesquite, Mesa Westwood, Chandler, Tempe Corona del Sol, Gilbert, and Phoenix Desert Vista all are . Tempe McClintock and Scottsdale Chaparral are East Valley schools considered favorites in 4A. Arvallo is cautious about her team's potential. "It's going to be really tough when you graduate just about your entire varsity team," Arvallo said. "We have a lot of potential, but the sophomores and freshmen will need to get more playing time."

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Vianett Mena: Senior from Phoenix Xavier was second in state in 2006. Sarah Washburn: Senior from Mesa Red Mountain, made final 16 in 2006 5A state tournament. Bri Forster: Sophomore from Scottsdale Horizon, mother Ann Forster was a longtime badminton coach. Angela Vega: Senior from Mesa Westwood is the Warriors' top returner. Elizabeth Hudson: Junior from Scottsdale Chaparral, she finished third as a part of a doubles team in 4A in 2006. Amy Cappuccio: Senior from Chandler, part of 5A state doubles championship team in 2006.

TEAMS TO WATCH

Phoenix Mountain Pointe: Though her team is among many those gutted by graduation, Pom Brown, a longtime assistant for the defending state champs, has been with the team through several state titles. Phoenix Xavier: The Gators would love to make up for last year's upset by Mountain Pointe, but will have to do it with one seasoned veteran and a new coach, a state champ in her own right. Gilbert Mesquite: The rivalry with Gilbert alone will help the team in its rebuilding process. Mesa Red Mountain: Always competitive, and it has a few veterans back that

could allow the Mountain Lions to stake a claim early in the season. Mesa Westwood: The team would argue its rebuilding year was last year, and like the Gilbert schools should have enough rivalry battles to put the Warriors in line for a title. Scottsdale Chaparral: In 4A, the Firebirds were defeated by Phoenix Greenway, breaking a three-year streak, and will be looking to add another banner this year.

KEY DATES

Mesquite Invitational: Sept. 8, the first test to see who's who this season. Dobson Invitational: Oct. 6, two weeks before regional action and a warm-up for state. Regionals: Week of October 15th 4A team state championships: Oct. 20, 23 and 25 at Glendale Independence 5A team state championships: Oct. 20, 22 and 24 at Dobson High School 4A state singles and doubles championships: Oct. 26-27 at Independence 5A state singles and doubles tournament: Oct. 26-27 at Dobson High School

DID YOU KNOW?

- In AIA competition, badminton does not split the 4A or 5A teams into two divisions.
- Only 27 5A teams (19 from the East Valley) compete in badminton and 20 in 4A, compared to 59 5A schools and 65 4A schools in girls volleyball.
- Mountain Pointe has won five 5A state titles in the past nine years. Scottsdale Horizon, Chandler, Phoenix Central and Phoenix Xavier are the other team champions since 1998.