

EAST VALLEY BADMINTON PREVIEW

Corona's experience, Harris' skill stand out

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When it comes to badminton powers, the faces tend to change more quickly than the jerseys. This year's state badminton scene will feature many of the usual dynasties, minus many of last year's top athletes.

Because most badminton players did not take up the sport until high school and few opportunities exist to play outside of the season, varsity rosters are largely comprised of upperclassmen.

"It usually takes a few years to understand the game, practice at it and get pretty good," Scottsdale Desert Mountain coach Steve Harris said. "Every year is a new year."

That's what makes Tempe Corona del Sol, which returns five of its six varsity players from last year's Class 5A semifinal team, such a notable exception — and one of the top teams in Arizona.

Since most girls start high school as badminton novices, those who play another sport — tennis and softball being the most popular — can often be a step ahead.

"We've got quite a few twosport gals," Scottsdale Chaparral coach Carrie Davis said. "You have a little advantage because they've been in that atmosphere and know the expectations of a coach ... but I've also taken girls that have never even played a sport and they come from nothing to something."

The state's presumptive top player is Scottsdale Desert Mountain junior Emily Harris. A noted tennis player, Harris went 26-4 last year and finished second in 5A singles. Each of her losses came to state champion — and graduated senior — Vianett Mena of Phoenix Xavier.

East Valley schools claimed both team championships last year, as Chaparral won in 4A and Phoenix Mountain Pointe won in 5A. Both are considered strong candidates to win again, as Chaparral has won four titles in the last five years and Mountain Pointe has won six championships in the last 10 years and will be trying for its fourth in a row.

"Of course that's our goal, but there are a number of good teams out there, so it won't be easy," Mountain Pointe coach Pom Brown said.

Did you know?

- One of the state's top underclassmen last year was Veronica Celaya, who finished third in 4A singles as a sophomore for Gilbert Perry. However, Celaya has transferred and now attends Gilbert Williams Field, which as a new school does not currently have a badminton program.

- In Arizona, Classes 1A, 2A and 3A do not participate in badminton.

- Most of the East Valley schools that play badminton compete in 5A. Last year, 13 of the 16 playoff teams in that conference were from the East Valley. Only two of the eight playoff teams in 4A were from the East Valley.

Key dates

Mesquite Invitational, Sept. 6 – The first real test of the season will provide an early pecking order for the area's top teams.

Dobson Invitational, Sept. 20 – This tournament traditionally draws most of the top teams and will have plenty of intriguing matchups.

Regionals, week of Oct. 12 – The lead-in to state tournament action sets the field and provides a final tuneup for singles and doubles teams.

5A team state championship – First round (field of 16) and quarterfinals, Oct. 18; semifinals, Oct. 20; final, Oct. 22.

4A team state championship – First round (field of eight), Nov. 1; semifinals, Nov. 4; final, Nov. 6.

5A singles and doubles state championships – Oct. 24-25 at Mesa Dobson

4A singles and doubles state championships – Nov. 7-8 at Glendale Independence.

Players to watch

Emily Harris, Scottsdale Desert Mountain, Jr. – An accomplished tennis player as well, Harris finished second in 5A singles last year behind since-graduated Vianett Mena of Phoenix Xavier. Liz **Hudson**, Scottsdale Chaparral, Sr. – **Hudson** finished second in 5A doubles last year after finishing third in 2006.

Amy Davis, Tempe Corona del Sol, Sr. – Davis finished second in 5A doubles a season ago. Kathryn Cantrill, Phoenix Mountain Pointe, Sr. – Cantrill and returning teammate Melissa LeBlanc finished second in 5A doubles last year. Olivia Li, Chandler, Sr. – Li finished fourth in 5A doubles last year and moves up a spot to play No. 1 singles as well this year. Rebecca Rubin, Mesa Red Mountain, Sr. – Rubin was the East Valley Region champion last year.

Teams to watch

Tempe Corona del Sol – Not only did the Aztecs finish second in 5A last year, they lost only one senior from last year's varsity.

Phoenix Mountain Pointe – The Pride won their third consecutive 5A title last year, which was also their sixth in 10 years They return three players.

Scottsdale Chaparral – The Firebirds have won four titles in five years, including last year's 4A championship, and have plenty of experienced players.

Scottsdale Desert Mountain – The Wolves fell in the 5A quarterfinals last year but return three players, including their top two.

Phoenix Desert Vista – The Thunder return two players from last season's 5A semifinal team, but with seven seniors have plenty of depth and experience.

Scottsdale Horizon – The Huskies return five players from last year's team and will try to improve upon last year's firstround exit in 5A.



DESERT MOUNTAIN'S EMILY HARRIS