

Hammond takes 2nd at state tennis

Written by Tom Fruehling

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IOWA CITY – Katie Hammond said her bum knee didn't bother her.

Moving from the indoor courts at the University of Iowa's tennis center on Thursday into the wind and sun outside the next day wasn't a problem.

Her blonde pony tail didn't get into her eyes and her pink shoe laces didn't come untied.

"I wish I could say I had an excuse," the Cedar Rapids Washington senior said Friday afternoon after her first singles defeat of the season in the championship match of the girls Class 2A high school state tournament.

The fact is, on this day anyway, the tournament's undefeated No. 2 seed was no match for top seed and defending champ Jessica King of Ames, who kept her title with a convincing 6-3, 6-1 victory.

"She's such a great player," said Hammond, who finished third in the state last year and was 22-1 this season. "She just hit so many wonderful winners. I don't think I played poorly at all. But she never missed."

And even though her coaches pointed out she was at times too generous in returning shots that could have been called out, the ever-polite Warrior said that was no factor in the outcome, either.

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"I'd always rather be cautious in making those close line calls," she said. "Besides, Jessica was doing the same thing.

"She tries to hit the line on every one of her shots and usually does. So you have to play everything."

Hammond's day started off fine. The night before, she iced the left knee, which suffered a deep bone bruise on Wednesday in a substate soccer collision. She noticeably limped and grimaced through pain in her two tourney wins Thursday to reach the semifinals on Friday.

"I ate and was in bed early," Hammond said.

She had another 7 a.m. session Friday with physical therapist Susan Donahoe in Cedar Rapids before her morning match and said the swelling from the day before was reduced. "It was still a little sore but the brace on my knee really helps," she said.

Hammond dominates in opening match

She looked no worse for wear in the day's opener against unseeded 15-year-old freshman Liera Bender of Johnston, who had dominated the meet's third seed on Thursday. In a match that lasted less than hour, Hammond simply overwhelmed her nerve-stricken opponent 6-1, 6-0.

"It was a mixture of things," Bender said. "I was definitely nervous, and Katie played really well. But it was the worst day of tennis I've ever played."

A tournament darling because of aggressiveness and sharp line-dive shots, Bender hit too many into the net and double-faulted far too often.

"It was a good win," Hammond said. "There weren't many long points, and I didn't have to move too much."

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But King, who also came in undefeated with a 24-0 mark (89-2 for her four-year career), was a different story entirely. The University of Northern Iowa-bound tennis recruit came out smoking.

A battle in the championship round

King's power game was on full display, and her deft touch left Hammond lurching for liners on either corner of the backcourt. King seldom double-faulted and hardly ever hit into the net.

"She's just incredible," said Washington Coach Dan Reyner. "Katie battled her and played a good match, but it wasn't enough."

Far too often, Hammond was tapping her racket with her palm as a complimentary gesture for a King zinger she couldn't reach. And the girl from Ames managed to return everything her foe threw at her.

"Katie makes you work for your points," the two-time title holder said following the match. "She's a really good player. But I was able to play my game and work the whole court pretty well."

Hammond did break King's serve to start the second set for a 1-0 lead, but she seemed to tire while dropping the next six games. At the finish, she was mobbed by her Warrior teammates, who all return to Iowa City on Saturday morning for the four-school Class 2A state team tournament.

"It really felt good that my teammates were here supporting me," said Hammond, who plans to study physical therapy and exercise physiology at Marquette University and perhaps play soccer or tennis.

"I'm disappointed, but I really don't feel too bad. I don't think I lost the match, but rather that she just beat me."