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ASHEBORO - Firsts in high school sports provide memories that last a lifetime. The first victory of a program, the first home contest, the first time a team advances to the state playoffs and the first conference championship are all milestones.

The Southwestern Randolph High School girls tennis team had a milestone this season, earning the school's first-ever regular-season conference championship after going through the Four Rivers Conference unbeaten.

The Cougars finished 8-0 in FRC play and will take a 14-2 record into the second round of the NCHSAA Dual Team Championships on Wednesday after earning a first-round bye. SWR will host second-round action at the Asheboro Tennis Center courts because lighting must be available to host playoff action.

Second-year head coach Courtney Kelly, who led the Cougars to a second-place finish last season, said she was thrilled when learning of the conference crown.

"It was a big surprise to me," said Kelly when told it was the first girls tennis league title in school history. "I was so honored and proud of my girls. I had no idea it was the first in school history. They all improved a ton and they want to win. They want to do well. They take instruction well and take coaching them well. We have a good rapport with each other and that has helped them to win."

Kelly, a 1994 graduate of Asheboro High School who played tennis and softball while at AHS, took the program over when Lori Lagrama stepped down two years ago.

Kelly said coaching high school tennis was something she had always hoped to do and with then-junior daughter Larson on the roster, the opportunity was too good to pass up.

It was a simple philosophy that all the girls adhered to.

"I always tell them to work hard because you never know what can happen in a match, in a game or in a set," Kelly said. "You fight to the end."



*Coach Courtney Kelly. All photos provided by Jamie Kent.*



*Junior Scarlet Kyle.*

And that's what the Cougars did, especially after losing No. 2 singles player Scarlet Kyle to a season-ending injury during the FRC season.

"Wasn't sure how that was going to go," Kelly said. "But the girls rallied together and fought as hard as they could during the conference to keep up the momentum and keep up the pace."

The injury forced most of the girls in singles play to move up a notch and after a few tense moments, the team continued its winning ways.

"When Scarlet got hurt, for the first two practices and even in one of our matches, our morale just dropped," said No. 2 singles player Lexi Owen, a three-year performer who never played tennis before her freshman season. "She was one of our best players and we all love her. Her coming to practice every day, even though she was hurt, and talking with us, really helped. OK, this happened, but now we will play for Scarlet and move on to play with who we had." Larson Kelly has been the team's No. 1 singles player and she has enjoyed a spectacular season. She is 15-1 in singles play heading into action Wednesday and has teamed with a couple of different players to go 13-1 in doubles play.



*Junior Lexi Owen.*



*Senior Larson Kelly.*

"I felt like this year I had to step up as the only senior on the team," Kelly said. "I figured we had a chance this year because I noticed there were a ton of seniors (in the league) last year. We were growing and everyone was going to camps."

With the injury to Kyle, the girls moved up in the singles order. Owen moved to No. 2, Alyssa Hampton was No. 3 and she was followed by Lily Auman, Anna Hamilton and Lilly Stutts. In singles league play, Larson Kelly was 8-0. Owen 6-2, Hampton 6-2, Auman 7-1, Hamilton 6-2 and Stutts 2-2.

All the girls have contributed to the first league championship, which was clinched with a thrilling 5-4 win over North Moore.

"I have a thing with my teammates," said Owen, who was a member of the 2026 softball team that won a state championship. "Are you the bug or the windshield?"

After Owen won a thrilling three-set singles match, she and Kelly teamed for the decisive doubles win.

"One of our friends asked if we were a windshield and I said windshield, we're conference champions," Owen added. "It really truly means so much. We knew going into that last conference match we could be the first conference champion."

With Kelly and assistant coach Jeremy Shelton leading the way, the Cougars showed the fight and adaptability it takes to win.

"I was really pleased," Courtney Kelly said. "I knew everyone was trying their very best. You are going to have peaks and valleys and when you go through the valleys, that's when you really see how people rise to the occasion."

All the way to the top of the FRC standings.