9-1-2007

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Southern style: Women's tennis team's recipe for success

As a senior at the University of Tennessee in the early 1980s, Debbie Southern so admired basketball coach Pat Summitt that she decided to try out for the women's basketball team. This even though Southern was attending Tennessee on a tennis scholarship and had every intention of becoming a tennis coach after graduation.

"I was willing to give up my tennis scholarship if I made the team," says Southern, who managed to stay on the roster until the final cut. "I really admired Pat Summitt as a coach, and I wanted to get a closer look at how she developed players. You can learn a lot from a great coach, no matter what the sport."

Southern may not have been able to study under Summitt, now the winningest basketball coach in college history, but it doesn't appear to have undermined her effectiveness as a coach. Since becoming the women's tennis coach at Furman in 1985, Southern, the daughter (Harold Southern '37) and sister (Hal '79) of Furman graduates, has spent the last 22 years establishing a level of excellence that is downright Summitt-like.

Southern's Furman teams have won 329 matches and 15 Southern Conference championships. They have appeared in seven NCAA tournaments and posted a mind-bending 158-11 record in league play. Entering the 2008 season, her teams have won 79 consecutive regular-season conference matches and produced 115 all-conference selections, 99 academic honor roll citations and 72 conference singles and doubles champions.

Southern has been named league Coach of the Year 11 times and Furman's Lyles Alley Coach of the Year on four occasions. In December 2004 she was inducted into the South Carolina Tennis Hall of Fame.

And she has accomplished all this even though Furman's program is not fully funded (she operates with five full scholarships of a possible eight). She has proved to be a masterful recruiter who lands her share of top players and who has managed to create an environment that produces top-flight tennis without a win-at-all-costs mentality.

When Megan Dunigan '02, the most honored women's tennis player in school history, was looking at colleges, she was intrigued by Furman's recruiting display at the Clay Court Nationals in her home state of Tennessee.

"My dad was looking around the various booths, and all the coaches had pictures of their teams playing," says Dunigan, who was Southern Conference Player of the Year four times and was inducted into Furman's Athletic Hall of Fame this fall. "But he told me that Furman's coach had pictures of her players doing everything but playing tennis. After hearing that, I had to go take a look."

Dunigan, a Furman Bisher Scholar at Furman, remembers the spring break trips the team took that included hikes in the Grand Canyon, shows in Las Vegas and snow skiing in Idaho. "What other coach is going to let their team go snow skiing during a tournament trip?" she says.

While Southern wants her players to perform at their best, she also works to make their experience fun.

"You want to push them hard and stretch them, but you don't want to break them, and you have to walk that fine line as a coach," she says.

Dunigan recalls, "She did a great job of dealing with eight or more girls who had vastly different personalities, figuring out how to get the most out of each one of us."

The Lady Paladins return another strong team this year, including reigning conference Player of the Year Laura Gioia '09. And while there is a 79-match winning streak to protect, you won't hear Southern mention it.

"We never talk about the streak," she says. "Our goal is to win the conference championship and make the NCAA tournament, but we never talk about anything else."

At one time, Southern thought about moving up to a "bigger" job. Not anymore. She is satisfied at Furman — and determined to raise the money to endow another tennis scholarship before she leaves, whenever that might be.

"I know I don't have the resources here to win a national championship, and that's OK," she says. "I have an interest in developing student-athletes, and Furman's a great place to do that. I want them to become better players, but I also want to help them be better persons and better team members."

"When the players walk away from the program, I don't want them to remember the wins and losses. I want them to remember the moments they were together as a team."

— Vince Moore