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## Doubling their pleasure

John Roberts  
*Furman University*

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# Furmanathletics

## Doubling their pleasure

*Bentley, Hagood a great team on and off the court*

The first time Furman women's tennis coach Debbie Southern took serious notice of Caroline Bentley and Mary Neill Hagood, the pair had been randomly teamed as doubles partners at a junior tennis tournament in Little Rock, Ark.

With college recruiters looking on, the 16-year-olds captured the doubles championship — and the Bentley and Hagood families (from Huntsville, Ala., and Charleston, S.C., respectively) became fast friends, bonding on the weekend road trip.

To Southern, a veteran of 21 years at Furman, the doubles championship and growing friendship between the families had no impact on her decision to recruit the pair.

"Doubles play at that level is really rough," she says. "The players are not used to playing together. Some of them (like Hagood and Bentley) are paired randomly. You are looking more at individual skills and talent."

After considering the University of North Carolina and the University of Virginia, Hagood was the first to commit to Furman. Bentley soon followed. And over the past four years, the pair's friendship blossomed along with their games.

Last fall, the best friends and roommates entered their senior season with high expectations. Hagood, Furman's No. 1 player, was the returning Southern Conference Player of the Year; Bentley, who played No. 2 and compiled a 20-3 singles record her junior year, was named the outstanding player in the 2004 conference tournament.

And this May, when Hagood and Bentley walked off the court for the last time after an NCAA Tournament loss at Clemson ended their college tennis careers, they left with their heads high, knowing that those expectations had been met.

The pair swept through the 2005 Southern Conference season with undefeated singles records, leading Furman to a 10-0 league record and its sixth conference title in seven years. Bentley collected her second straight tournament outstanding player award, and Hagood again was the league's Player of the Year and was also named Southern Conference Female Athlete of the Year.

In hindsight, though, Hagood and Bentley say they will remember the 2004-05 season for another reason: They were doubles partners. Going against conventional wisdom, Southern nostalgically reunited the teammates and roommates as doubles partners at the Furman Fall Classic last September.

"You normally separate your two best players so that you can get two really good teams," says Southern. "But I ended up just playing them together, and I kept them together."

Hagood and Bentley responded by picking up where they left off in Arkansas. They defeated teams from Clemson and the University of South Carolina — and went on set a Furman record for doubles wins in a season with 22.

Southern says that Hagood's solid groundstrokes and Bentley's hard-charging net play baffled opponents throughout the season. "They complement each other so well," says Southern, the conference's Coach of the Year. "It really helps that they are such close friends. They can be candid and aren't worried about hurting each others' feelings."

Adds Bentley: "Our games clicked. And we made each other better."



Hagood



Bentley



### Mary Neill Hagood

- 16-7 singles record, 22-1 doubles in 2004-05
- Southern Conference Player of the Year (also won in 2004)
- Southern Conference Female Athlete of the Year (2005)
- 2005 Furman Student Athlete Achievement Award (3.78 GPA)

### Caroline Bentley

- 24-1 singles record, 22-1 doubles in 2004-05
- Conference Tourney Outstanding Player (also won in 2004)
- First all-time at Furman in victories (singles and doubles)
- First all-time at Furman in winning percentage (.805)

Although Hagood, a psychology major, and Bentley (communication studies) have completed their court partnership, they have teamed up on another journey: a graduation tour of New Zealand and Australia. They are working odd jobs, sightseeing and generally enjoying down time down under.

The trip, both say, is a final fling before they return home to take full-time jobs or enroll in graduate school. While some separation anxiety is likely, both will take with them memories of a storied senior season.

"We had such a great season. It was amazing living with Caroline and being doubles partners," says Hagood. "We could not have asked for a more special season."

— John Roberts