

6-1-2000

Top Flight

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Recommended Citation

Moore, Vince (2000) "Top Flight," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 2 , Article 32.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol43/iss2/32>

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Furmanathletics

Top Flight

Megan Dunigan makes her mark on tennis court

While there is always a certain amount of guesswork involved in recruiting student-athletes at the college level, there are times when the uncertainty is extremely small. And that was the case two years ago when Furman women's tennis coach Debbie Southern was recruiting Megan Dunigan of Oak Ridge, Tenn.

Dunigan was already mulling scholarship offers from Tennessee, Kentucky and Illinois. She had compiled a perfect 82-0 record during her career at Oak Ridge High School, which had earned her recognition in *Sports Illustrated's* "Faces in the Crowd." And, for good measure, she was a National Merit Scholar and a member of the National Honor Society.

"I knew if she came to Furman she would be one of the best recruits we had ever had," Southern says.

Dunigan did choose Furman over Southeastern Conference powers Tennessee and Kentucky, and she quickly made her mark. She moved into the No. 1 singles spot for the Lady Paladins, posting a 16-10 record and leading Furman to its first appearance in the NCAA tournament. She even became the first women's tennis player in Southern Conference history to be named Freshman of the Year and Player of the Year in the same season.

There was no sophomore slump for Dunigan, either. This past season, she posted a 17-4 overall record, which included a perfect 8-0 conference mark in No. 1 singles, and was named the league's top player for the second consecutive year. It is no coincidence that the Lady Paladins also made the NCAA tournament field once again.

"I knew she could be a special player," Southern says, "but I didn't know she would be as special as she has turned out to be."

On the surface, Dunigan, who is majoring in computer science-mathematics, doesn't have the bearing of a dominant player. She is exceedingly nice, unfailingly polite and doesn't appear to be overly driven. She was a better swimmer than a tennis player at age 12, but when there were no longer enough hours in the day to do both, she chose tennis because it didn't require her to get up at 5 a.m.

When she began to play tournaments at age 13, she found it upsetting to beat her friends. She didn't like beating strangers all that much, either. But in the end, her hatred of losing was more powerful than her sympathetic feelings for a vanquished foe, which helps explain her unblemished high school record.

She is also not one to boast. When you ask Dunigan about her strengths as a tennis player, she will tell you that she really doesn't have any other than her speed. "I run down a lot of shots that my opponents don't want to come back, and it frustrates them," she says. She rates her forehand and backhand as nothing more than "pretty steady," and says she needs to improve her play at the net.

Southern says that Dunigan is being her usual modest self, although the coach agrees with the part about the speed. "She is the quickest athlete that's ever played for me, and she runs down shots that you wouldn't expect her to reach," Southern says. "She moves the ball around well, has a great backhand and hits the ball flat and hard. She is a very offensive-minded player who usually dictates the pace of play."

But Southern also knows that Dunigan can improve. Her four losses this year came to the No. 1 players from Clemson, Georgia, South Carolina and Wake Forest, all of whom were ranked among the top 30 collegiate players in the country. Dunigan led at some point in all the matches, but wasn't able to hang on for a victory.

"I feel like I can play with them," Dunigan said, "but I just haven't been able to close out one of those matches yet. I need to learn how to do that."

She may be closer than she thinks, however. Southern says that Dunigan simply needs to convince herself that she can beat those players, and she will. "That's the one area she has to improve in," Southern says. "She needs to work on her self-confidence and mental toughness in those kinds of matches."

— Vince Moore



Dunigan is the second Lady Paladin to earn a top 100 national ranking.