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Wheelchair tennis players to represent GVSU in Alabama

By Jared Greenleaf GVL Senior Reporter
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After facing the University of Arizona in Tucson, Ariz., last year, the Grand Valley State University wheelchair tennis team will set their sites on increased competition, as well as a new location for 2009.

In only their second season as a full club sport, GVSU will compete at the ITA Small College National Championships held in Mobile, Ala.

Among the teams involved will be the University of Arizona, the University of Alabama and the University of Texas at Arlington.

"It's going to be a ton of fun," said GVSU senior Jess Sporte, who is one of only two players on this season's squad. "I'm very excited about getting down there to play against more teams."

Sporte said competing at nationals means a lot to her because she is able to represent GVSU.

"It's great for me because it shows that even if I do have a disability, I can still go out there and represent my school well and be competitive," she said.



The other player on the team is Scott Cole, a GVSU alumnus.

In December of 2004, Cole was diagnosed with Transverse Myelitis, a neurological disorder that paralyzed him from the chest down.

Three years later, Cole took up wheelchair tennis because he had played tennis years before.

"I've been around sports my entire life and tennis was one of my favorites," he said. "So that's why I why I

decided to do it here at Grand Valley."

In preparation for nationals, Sporte and Cole have practiced at the Orchard Hills Athletic Club in Grand Rapids.

As members of the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association, they have competed against the league's older players as well.

Cole said competing with experienced players has helped him improve his game and prepare him for nationals.

"When I play these older players, I know if I play well against them that means I'm getting better," he said.

"Continuing to do well will help me get even better than I am now."

Cole also added playing against Sporte in practices has been a great experience.

"We have a lot of fun," he said. "It's obviously competitive. Neither one wants to lose to each other. The nice thing in practice is we do have other players to play against, so it's not always us two playing."

The players have also been working with head coach John Vandenberg, who is in his first season at GVSU. Vandenberg has coached other wheelchair players throughout the Grand Rapids area for about six years.

Even though he has only worked with them for a short amount of time, Vandenberg said he likes what he seen out of Sporte and Cole early on.

"Both Scott (Cole) and Jess (Sporte) are really hard workers," he said. "They both love to compete at a high level."

As he prepares to compete against the country's top-tier players, Cole said playing the role of the underdog should be an exciting one.

"Hopefully playing against some great competition, I can surprise some people," he said.

GVSU will begin competition on Friday and will finish on Sunday.

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