

## 2008-09 Florida Women's Tennis Season Outlook

Head coach Roland Thornqvist and associate head coach Dave Balogh are fastening their teaching hats firmly atop their heads for the 2008-09 dual match season. After the Gators worked through the fall semester seemingly spending more time rehabbing injuries and illnesses than perhaps on the tennis court, the team is ready to roll up its sleeves and return to competition.

The 2008-09 Florida squad will look different than any other Gator team before it. First, only six players comprise the roster; secondly, those six players feature three juniors and three freshmen – one of whom enrolled and joined the team in January.

It's a lean squad in terms of numbers. It's a lean squad in terms of experience.

One week after practice began in January, Thornqvist, who will guide the Gators for the eighth consecutive year, shared his thoughts about the 2008-09 season, the six individuals who will wear the Florida orange & blue and the expectations he has for the upcoming year.



Freshman Joanna Mather capped the fall season winning her singles flight at the SEC Coaches Fall Classic.

**It's January and you're preparing to the start the 2009 season. Do you have a feel for the team yet?**

"The initial reaction Dave and I had after winter break is that all of the players were more active during the winter break than they have been the past few years. From a conditioning standpoint and from a consistency standpoint, in hitting tennis balls, we're farther ahead now than in the years past, which I'm very happy about. As far as our play and performance, it's way too early to tell. Half of our starting line-up hasn't played a dual match for Florida, so we have a lot to learn once the ball's in the air."

**What are the challenges of having so many new players on the team?**

"There's nothing wrong with our talent. We have the talent to be really good and we have the talent to match anyone in the conference, but there's going to be learning going on during the year. You can look at that as challenging. I personally look at that as exciting because I think Dave (Balogh,



Junior Anastasia Revzina posted a team-leading 28-4 singles record last year, including a 20-2 mark in dual match play.

Associate Head Coach), Tony (Giannoni, Volunteer Assistant) and I can really play a part in the development of this year's team. Once you take the (general manager) hat off and put your coaching hat on when the season starts, I think we can play a larger role with this year's team than maybe in some other teams we've had that have been more experienced and have been through the wringer. We have players who played low in the line-up last year who will play at the top of the line-up this year and then we have players who haven't played a match for us. So, there's going to be a lot of learning and the coaching staff can play a large role which is exciting to me."

**What are the specific challenges of only having six players on the roster?**

"You don't have a bench, so motivation on those days when somebody doesn't feel like playing or it's 38-degrees and rainy is going to be different. Usually, the bench is an automatic motivator and we don't have that this year, so we have to work our magic in different ways. There are two sides to that coin though – there's less anxiety in the lockerroom because they all know they're going to play. As coaches, we have to do a good job motivating them at times, but I do think we get the benefit of a more relaxed group and hopefully that will translate into improvement during the week."

**Have any leaders emerged?**

"Anastasia (Revzina) has one of the stronger personalities and she has come off the winter break the best she's ever been. She's probably the one that has a chance to become our strongest leader."

**Do you have any thoughts about doubles pairings?**

"We're going to certainly start with our No. 1 team (Megan Alexander and Marrit Boonstra) from last year; they finished ranked in the top-15 in the country and I don't think they were anywhere near as good as they can be with more playing time together. Both of them are much better at this point than they were at this time last year. Any time you have dominate No. 1 team or a "real" No. 1 – you're going to have a chance (to win the doubles point). I feel that at we are going to have a chance to have a really good doubles line-up. The trick then is to fit the freshmen into the right spots. We have a few ideas, but this year will be no different than any other year. We're going to try different combinations. We've done it every year; it's one of those things that happens and evolves during the season. We have the potential to have a really strong doubles team."

**Where will the strength of the singles line-up lie?**

"At this point, I'd like to say that we're top-heavy because we don't quite know about the bottom end of our line-up. I feel really good about our three juniors. They did a great job last year, they are driven and they want to do well, so it's easy for our freshmen to just follow them. At this point of the year, we know more about the top of our line-up and I feel good about their play. Even though they played lower last year, their games have matured and they've improved to the point where they're going to be really good players at the top of the line-up."

**What were you able to see during the Fall season, in spite of the injuries that kept players out of so many tournaments?**

"Two things that I really appreciated from the Fall, was Marrit's play – she got some national exposure and played the No. 1 player in the country from Northwestern and had match-point on her which is a big step

from her first year. The second bright light in the fall was freshman Joanna Mather. Joanna started slowly and was maybe a little tight in the beginning of the fall, but she ended it on a real high note by winning the SEC Coaches Classic. Those were our bright spots in the fall, but we have a lot of unanswered questions this early in the season and I'm hoping after the month of January we'll know more about exactly where we are and what we have to do to get to be the best team we can be."

**How has Marrit Boonstra improved from last year?**

"Primarily, her backhand. Marrit's backhand has improved immensely and that has allowed us to change her game. We had to slow her play down last year to protect her backhand so she could run around hitting forehands. She's such a good athlete and now with a good backhand, she can actually push up the pace. She's six-foot tall and she's going to be the best mover on the court. It's really changed the way she plays. To play one or two on an SEC contending team, you have to have a complete game in order to win consistently. She's done a good job working on this, her pace of play has improved and judging by her results at the National Indoor Championship, she's certainly ready to lead us up at the top (of the line-up)."

**How has Anastasia Revzina's game changed?**

"Anastasia has improved in a lot of different ways. Her technique improved a lot in the fall, but she competed sparingly because of an illness. She did a great job over the winter break improving and maintaining her fitness at home and that has been one of the things that has held her back in previous January's. This year, she came back much more physically fit and she moves better, so the changes in her game – the ground-stroke improvements that she showed in the fall – you can clearly see because she moves bet-



Junior Marrit Boonstra has made significant improvements and could play at the top of the singles line-up this year.



Junior Megan Alexander has earned All-America honors in singles and doubles during her career.

ter and she feels stronger. She's been very dominate in practice since returning from the winter break, so I'm looking forward to seeing her play in January."

#### What have you seen from Megan Alexander's game on the court?

"Megan also looks more fit than she was in the fall. She certainly hit a lot of balls over the Christmas break. She is a very athletic player, but she's just like everybody else in that she has to be fit to be able to play at her full potential and she's really done a good job getting there. The first week of January she showed a lot of improvement from the fall, so she's moving better, her groundstrokes have improved and the ball rotates better off her racquet. Her strength has always been the things surrounding tennis. She's been really good in the clutch, she's been good at three-setters and when the team really needs her under pressure she's been really good. So, if we can just improve her regular game, those little things will come into play, but at a higher level. I'm certainly keen on seeing her start off this January."

#### What will freshman Joanna Mather bring to the court?

"It took us about a month with Joanna in the fall to really hammer home a certain game style. She's a tremendous athlete, swings at the ball almost like a guy – tremendous racquet speed. We got her to raise her ball, create more rotation and more heavy top-spin on both sides – forehand and backhand. It took a little while for Joanna to feel comfortable with that. She fought herself a little bit in the first couple of tournaments, whereas at the end of the fall, it had really hit home and she looked comfortable doing it at practice. Dave (Balogh, Associate Head Coach) took her to the SEC Coaches Classic and she beat three great players during the

tournament. Seeing her in January during the first week of practice, it looks like she hit a lot of balls on clay during break, which is perfect for us. She's continuing to expand on this game, being very consistent with a high, heavy ball. She's going to be the fastest player on the court almost every time she plays. It's a very simple style of play, but it takes great discipline to do it over time. For a young player, that's very difficult sometimes, but she has great faith in her fitness, so that part is no problem."

#### What have you seen from freshman Barbara Pinterova?

"Barbara was hurt quite a bit in the fall. She has been out of competition for a few years – she didn't even play that much back home before she came here. She has a lot of learning to do as far as playing tournaments and playing matches, but she's a great talent, no question about that. She has great hands, an excellent serve – one of the best serves on the team. There are some things that she does very well that are going to help her immediately. Barbara will be one of the players who we'll work with during the matches quite a bit to get comfortable.



Injuries prevented freshman Barbara Pinterova from playing a lot of matches during the fall, but appears ready entering the dual match season.

She may see some swings up or down in her confidence early (in the season), but at the end of the day, I think she has all of the important things in place to be successful. We're just going to have to take a long-term view to really gauge what she needs to work on exactly, because I do think she'll have some ups and downs early just to get used to playing again."

#### What kind of player is freshman Jessica Alexander, who enrolled and joined the team in January?

"Jessica's got a big, big game. She can serve. She comes in multiple Gold Balls in doubles (national championships) so she's already a very proven doubles player which obviously will help us. Her singles game is underrated. The first thing we need to do with Jessica is make sure she's SEC-fit. She's always been a big ball-striker. Once she has a fitness base, then we can harness her game a little bit and make her not go for broke maybe as much as she did in juniors – make her a little bit more consistent to where she can pick the right ball to be aggressive on. No question, she's going to be very aggressive. She's tall and she hits the ball hard, so we want to move her forward when she plays. There's going to be a lot of little things that we can do with her game. These teaching things are really the fun part of coaching. We might see some ups and downs in her game early, but just like with Barbara, there's a lot to work with there."

#### Will you consider playing sisters Megan and Jessica Alexander together on the doubles court?

"No. Recruiting Jessica and knowing that Megan was here certainly is a great support to each other. But, I really wanted Jessica to come in and have her own identity, have her own friends. We didn't recruit her because she's Megan's sister, we recruited her because we think that Jessica can help us win a national championship. Megan, at this point, has established that she's a No. 1 doubles line-up player and we don't quite know where Jessica is yet. In a short time, some of these questions will be answered."

#### What's the toughest aspect to adapt to for players who enroll in January, like Jessica has?

"Maturity is one thing. What you don't have in the Juniors is the constant SEC grind. Every time you play, you play somebody who is almost as good as you, and that doesn't happen in the Juniors. In Juniors you can have a couple of matches early in the tournament where you're clearly dominant and you can play yawning. That just doesn't happen when you're trying to win an SEC championship. To climb that mountain every time you play is certainly a challenge for

the younger players. That's why you have a tendency to see the younger players run out of gas. We really have to gauge what we do in practice and make sure we're aware that this is a five-month process and make sure we have juice left in the tank in May. I do not think this team will be as good as it can be in the first two months of the season. That's unrealistic of us to think that we're going to come out and play at the absolute top of our game by the end of January. If you think that, then you're going to fail. We'll take a longer term look and make sure we measure improvement and look at the end goal."



Freshman Jessica Alexander, a nationally-renowned Juniors doubles player, enrolled and joined the Gators in January of 2009.

#### How will the Southeastern Conference be different than last year?

"It looks like everybody's stronger. Tennessee is certainly going to be better than they were in the past. South Carolina got some other international players in and they're going to be better. Arkansas may be right up there with Georgia, frankly; they beat them in the NCAA Tournament last year. Auburn has the same team that pushed us last year, so they're going to be very, very good. Ole Miss added two new players that are going to be in the middle of their line-up, maybe at the top of their line-up, so the league has vastly improved. We're going to have our work cut out for us in trying to defend our title. It's going to be fun. That's one thing. I'm actually really excited about seeing if we can make a difference with these youngsters here and get them to play at a high, high level in a couple of months. It takes a lot of managerial skill and certainly a lot of teaching out there, but that's part of why we're doing what we're doing."