

Heart of a Tiger: A Tennis Double-Double

I saw a poster the other day that caught my eye. It was a tennis-themed poster that included life lessons from a tennis perspective. I smiled as I thought how applicable the tennis quotes were to the practice of leadership. Here are a couple: “Foot faults happen – you get a second chance;” “Commit to follow through;” “No matter how far down you are, there’s always hope for a comeback.” All of these examples offer great advice that is applicable in so many situations.

The poster also prompted me to check in with tennis coach Brian Flax. Coach Flax is in his 27th year as the head tennis coach at FHSU. He ranks as the all-time leader in coaching victories with 205. Brian is currently the longest-tenured head coach at Fort Hays State. We are so grateful for his dedication to our players and to Tiger Tennis.

This season we returned the majority of the roster. Several of our returning players will bring significant experience to the fall 2022 season. Among those returning as sophomores are twin sisters Heidi and Hope Lubbers. Hope is majoring in English, secondary education, while Heidi is preparing for our medical diagnostic imaging program with an emphasis on ultrasound.

Coach Flax shared that Heidi and Hope Lubbers come from a long line of tennis-playing family members. Their grandpa taught them, their sisters, uncles, and their mom the play and love the game. As soon as Heidi and Hope could hold a racquet, they were on the court too. In fact, their grandpa loved tennis so much that he built a court in his backyard. Older twin sisters Nicole and Natalie Lubbers played for the Tigers several years ago. Yup – two sets of twins; a double-double!

Heidi and Hope played for Bishop Carroll High School in Wichita, where they dominated the 5A doubles circuit, placing second at state their senior year. Their most memorable moment was winning the doubles semi-finals in the state tournament in that senior year. That match helped their team achieve enough points to win the state championship title. “I can still remember how proud our family and coach looked when we walked off that court,” shared Hope. I am sure that was the realization of a lot of dreams in a family where the passion for the game spans generations.

From my perspective, I love that this tennis family has such a strong legacy connection to FHSU. In fact, that connection to FHSU became even more apparent when I learned that Heidi and Hope made attending FHSU their first priority-above tennis. I think that is incredible!

“Having come often to visit our sisters here at Hays, Hope and I grew to love the campus,” shared Heidi. “From the homey feel of the town to the beautiful buildings that are all walking distance from the residential halls, this college was always our top choice.”

Heidi and Hope’s aspirations of attending FHSU slipped somewhat when they didn’t receive an offer to play tennis due to the low number of team members graduating, which would have opened spots for the duo. “That hit us hard,” Heidi said. “But after talking it over, we were willing to put down our rackets for good and come just as students, but not student-athletes.”

During the spring of the twin’s freshman year at FHSU, two spots opened on the tennis team. Coach Flax knew exactly who to call.

Heidi said that she and Hope have been grateful for the opportunity the coach gave them to play. Additionally, the twins are glad that the team comprises young players they can work with throughout their undergraduate careers.

“College tennis teams like ours are composed of players who play at different skill levels. This would seem to cause a lot of drama in a competitive sport, but during my time here, there has been no drama or fights over a limited number of starting spots. All the girls respect Coach’s decisions.” Heidi said.

I was curious whether the twins felt they had an advantage when playing doubles. The answer was a definitive “Yes!”

“Heidi and I were meant to be doubles partners,” Hope shared.” As fraternal twins, our older sisters, Nicole and Natalie, never really got along on the court, so it was a no-brainer that they would not be doubles partners. Heidi and I, however, are identical twins, and we think that helps us work very well together,”

The twins point out that they have a connection most of their teammates don’t have. They continue to support and coach each other without judgment or holding back.

Hope and Heidi also mentioned how tennis has helped them grow in other ways. From Hope’s perspective, being a part of the FHSU tennis team has allowed her to take on roles she wouldn’t have had outside of the sport. She steps in to play leader when the team captain or the coaches need her.

“Most of the time, I work hard to support the other girls, whether before, during, or after a tough match, or simply during a time of struggle in their personal lives, Hope said. “Everyone on the team must be flexible and be ready to take on different roles when necessary. Only when all the roles are filled can a team succeed and each player become a champion.”

Heidi also shared thoughts on being a champion: As a sophomore, she has seen how important it is to be a team leader to the freshman because they are aware of upperclassmen’s attitudes on and off the court.

“In order to be a champion, you should want your teammates to be champions before yourself. If I am not at the top of the lineup, and I am not performing my best, as long as the rest of the team is ready to step in and perform, everyone can be a champion.” Heidi said.

From Coach Flax’s perspective, Heidi and Hope are a dream to coach, and they are among the best overall teammates he has worked with in his 27 years of coaching. He believes they are excellent ambassadors for the sport and constantly remind him of the essential intersection between athletics and leadership.

Diving back into tennis-inspired life lessons, it is said that every set in tennis begins with “Love,” and each point offers a new opportunity to win. Tiger Tennis is definitely a winner thanks to the community of care modeled by the coaching staff and embraced by the Lubbers sisters and their Tiger Tennis teammates.

If you would like to support the Tiger Tennis program, please consider two new sponsorship options. The first is a court sponsorship. For a \$500 donation, you can have the name of your choice posted on a sign on one or more of the six tennis courts where the Tigers compete. If you wish to make a financial donation of any kind to support Tiger Tennis, the name of your

choice will be placed on a new “Tiger Advantage Backers” sign at the tennis complex. Learn more and make your donations on the [Support Tiger Tennis web page](#) hosted by the FHSU Foundation.