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Photo by Tracy Dreslinski
 Bloomfield Hills Marian No. 1 singles play Liz Ulrich returns a ball during the April 25 Birmingham Invite, which the Mustangs hosted. The Mustangs are one of six local squads ranked by the Michigan High School Tennis Coaches Association heading into the 2009 season.

Volleying for the top

Birmingham-Bloomfield Eagle tennis squads set for strong seasons

By Sue Teggart
 C & G Sports Writer

There is little doubt that the communities of Beverly Hills, Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills have a habit of producing some of the best tennis teams in the state.

In fact, of the 40 teams ranked by the Michigan High School Tennis Coaches Association, six call those cities home.

Whether the school is large or small, public or private, what they all have in common is the competitive edge that vaults them to elite status.

Highlighting the MHSTeCA's April 6 rankings is Birmingham Marian, which is ranked No. 2 in Division 2, Bloomfield Hills Lahser (No. 3, D-2), Birmingham Seaholm (No. 4, D-2), Beverly Hills Detroit Country Day (No. 2, D-3), Bloomfield Hills Andover (No. 5, D-3) and Bloomfield Hills Cranbrook-Kingswood (No. 6, D-3).

As these local prep squads prepare for the bulk of their schedules, here's a look at what makes tennis in these communities elite.

The perennial player

Marian girls tennis coach Dan Bittner said what makes this area a breeding ground for tennis talent is simple — the resources are available to produce successful athletes.

“Basically, you have a large amount of girls playing year-round due to the abundance of the country clubs and ... having several indoor facilities available for use,” Bittner said. “With that availability, that’s why this area has a turnout of really good talent.”

Aside from the availability of so many top-notch facilities is the popularity of the sport in these communities. Youth lessons often times lead to youth tournaments,

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which in turn teaches kids at a young age how to handle the stress of competitive tennis.

“They get a taste when they are young,” said Birmingham Seaholm coach Keith Bernacki.
“By the time they get to high school, you’re working with high-level tennis players.”

Seaholm and Beverley Hills Groves also have the benefit of having two middle school feeder programs from Derby and Berkshire. The middle school players learn early on what it takes to play at the next level.

“A big part of it is kids wanting to compete,” Bittner added.

Under pressure

Despite being recognized by the MHSTeCA, neither Bittner nor Bernacki were fazed by their preseason ranking or the pressure that accompanies it.

“We’ve discussed (the ranking), but it’s all about the end of the year,” Bittner said.
“It’s an honor to be recognized, but we realize as a team that it really doesn’t mean anything until the end. In the end, you know what you’re really ranked.”

Bernacki said that a ranking is something the team has to earn. With numerous quality opponents to fend off, it will force every player to raise their game.

“You have to prove it on the court, and we haven’t earned that ranking yet,” Bernacki said.

More important than a ranking is the opportunity to play so many great squads in local tournaments and in league play. Seaholm sees the likes of Lahser, Andover, West Bloomfield High (ranked No. 2 in Division 1), Troy High (No. 9, D-1) and Clarkston High (No. 8 in D-1) in league play alone.

“It’s great to play top-level teams because it prepares us for the state tournament,” Bernacki added. “Playing these elite squads teaches and trains our team to play hard at every flight.”

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