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by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds



A&M netters shooting for NCAA tourney bid

By MARYBETH ROHSNER
Sports Writer

It's high noon on the heat-baked courts of the H.E.B. Tennis Center in Corpus Christi. The opponents are back to back, ready to pace off. They have come a long way, and each man knows the stakes.

They're battling one another to conclude the Southwest Conference tennis season. NCAA tournament bids await the winners. For the losers... well, there's always next year.

A&M coaches David Kent and Jan Baldwin are hopeful. Though the women don't have a chance for a team bid, Nandini Rangarajan may pull off an NCAA tournament invitation in women's singles. The men, now ranked fourth in the conference and tenth in the nation, have a chance of bringing their conference ranking up to second and landing an NCAA team bid.

"It's a real possibility for us to get selected for NCAA," said Kent. "In fact, I'll be disappointed if we don't."

Last year, Grant Connell represented A&M in singles and Greg Hill and Connell teamed up for NCAA doubles competition. If the Aggies rack up enough points at the SWC level, it will be the first time the Aggies won a team bid since Kent came to A&M seven years ago.

The competition will probably be the toughest, too. Of the nation's Top 10 teams, four of them — SMU, Texas, Arkansas and A&M — are in the SWC.

"Texas, Arkansas and us are pretty even," Kent said. "SMU has first place wrapped up."

SMU, now second in the nation, may end up in the country's number one slot after all the ballots are in. In the meantime, A&M is hanging on to their Top 10 position.

"One of our goals this year was to get into the Top 10. I don't see how they could keep us out of the Top 10 now," Kent said. "But it's a lot more fun trying to get in the Top 10 than trying to stay there."

Kent is confident of his netters' abilities under pressure.

"Historically, we've always played well at the conference tournament," Kent said. "We can do it. We've proven that we can play singles all year and now we're beginning to have confidence in our doubles."

Connell, A&M top singles player, will be the only netter entering the tournament undefeated in conference play. He will face the No. 5 player in the nation, John Ross, in both singles and doubles play. Connell defeated Ross earlier in the season, but Kent said Connell will still have to be on his toes.

"It'll be a hard go for Grant," Kent said. "Any one of his opponents could beat him."

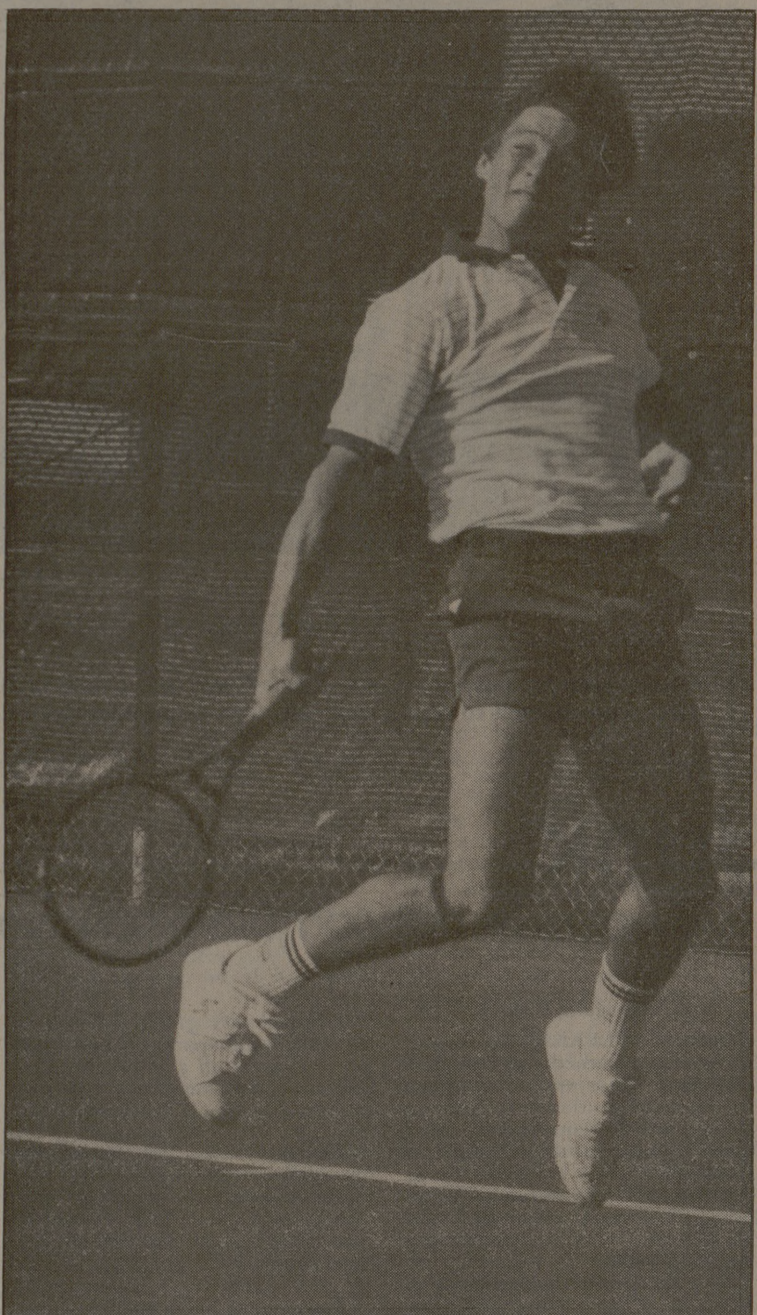


Photo by GREG BAILEY

Texas A&M's Dean Johnson hopes the Ags will be under a little more control during the Southwest Conference Tournament. Johnson and the No. 10 Aggies play Friday through Sunday at the H.E.B. Tennis Center in Corpus Christi.

The women's team, fourth in the SWC, still has the chance to finish second in the conference.

Last weekend's victories over Texas Tech and Houston left the Aggies with winning momentum,

and it may be just enough to keep the team going throughout the tournament.

"If we play with as much intensity as we did with Houston, I'm not worried about the tournament at all," said Baldwin.

Super Cooper

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any other school. This place is great."

Cooper continued winning after moving on to college ball. Her freshman year, she started at third base during the Aggies' march to the 1983 NCAA Championship. Cooper hit .267 and was named to the College World Series All-Tournament team.

In 1984, the Aggies finished second to UCLA in the World Series. The championship game went 13 innings and was lost by the Ags 1-0 on a solo home run. Cooper was named All-American after leading the Ags in hitting with a .316 average.

After sitting out the fall season due to foot surgery, Cooper has her foot on fire. She is hitting .349 with four home runs.

Every time A&M Coach Bob Brock mentions his top players, Cooper is one of the first names spoken. Things like, "The best third baseman in the country," "I can't believe her hitting," and "What more can you say about Cindy Cooper," are superlatives used by Brock when describing Cooper.

Still, the perfectionist Cooper is ever satisfied.

"Defensively, no, I am not satisfied," said Cooper. "I don't know that's wrong. The sharpness, cleanliness with which I field the ball isn't bad. I don't feel smooth on defense

is what I'm trying to say. The ball comes off the bat and I don't move. I will continue to work on that.

"Offensively, I will try to keep where I am, but there's still improvement to be made. I need to work on low outside pitches. I need to keep the same frame of mind though. I feel confident at the plate."

Her hitting improved over last season with the help of two people.

"This girl on my summer team showed me a technique with my hands and my swing," Cooper demonstrated. "I feel like that's helped me hit better. I am keeping my head down and have better wrist snap. I try to finesse the ball out instead of muscle it out. Coach Brock has been helping me with my placement. The two together have improved my hitting tremendously."

Cooper is looking for her second NCAA championship ring this season as the No. 2 ranked Ags (36-8) wind down their season.

"We need to add mental preparedness — that's the main thing," Cooper said. "We're so worried about classes and finals. We have to remember that nationals are also important. We may lose some of the ground we've covered and we can't afford to do that."

"The first goal we have is to get to nationals. The ultimate goal is to win it. With the people we have, we won't have much trouble in attacking the

national tournament. The veterans still have that revenge factor from last year's loss."

Next season, Cooper is expecting more — much more from herself and the Ags.

"I can't even hardly think about next year," she said. "If I had to say an outlook for next season, or what I expect, I would say a team that everybody had a lot of fun and to win. Of course, you want your senior year to be the best."

Looking past next season, the physical education major said she would like to coach.

"I will graduate in December of '86, that's with my student teaching," Cooper said. "I would like to coach on the college level. I am also interested in weight training. I hope to pick up hours on a master's degree. Lord knows what will happen from then on."

Cooper said she loves outdoor activities, but because of a limited amount of time, doesn't get to go outside as much as she would like.

"I love to swim, ride bikes, stuff that I never get to do," she said.

"When I came here, I made that decision to sacrifice being in this club, running for that office, being in a sorority or just going out and having fun."

For now, her time is spent hitting RBIs and fielding grounders, and that is exciting.

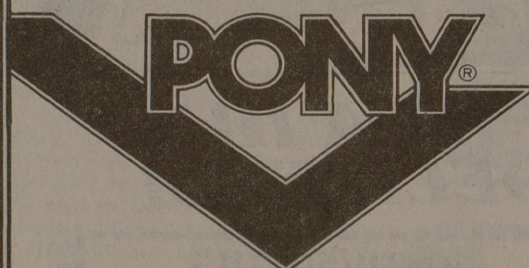


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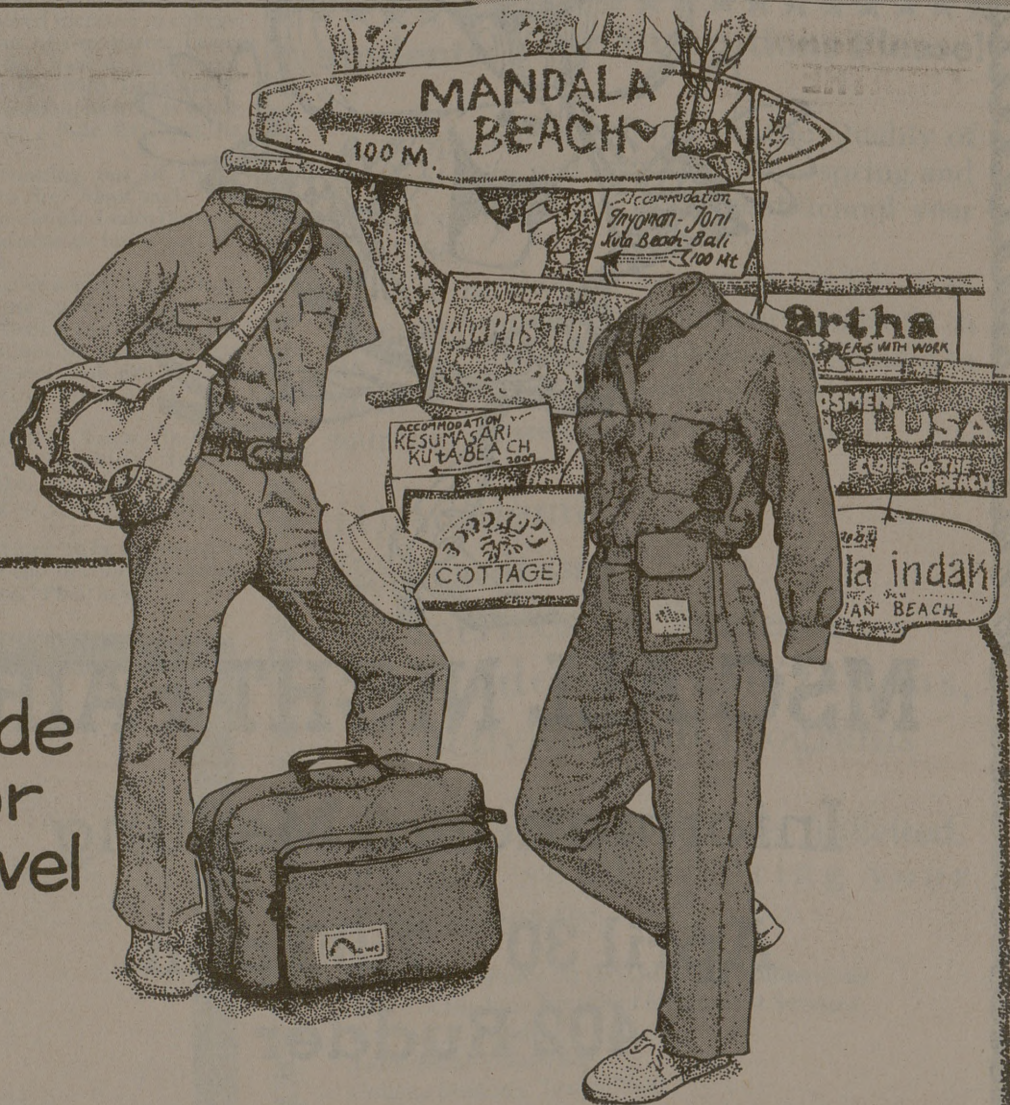
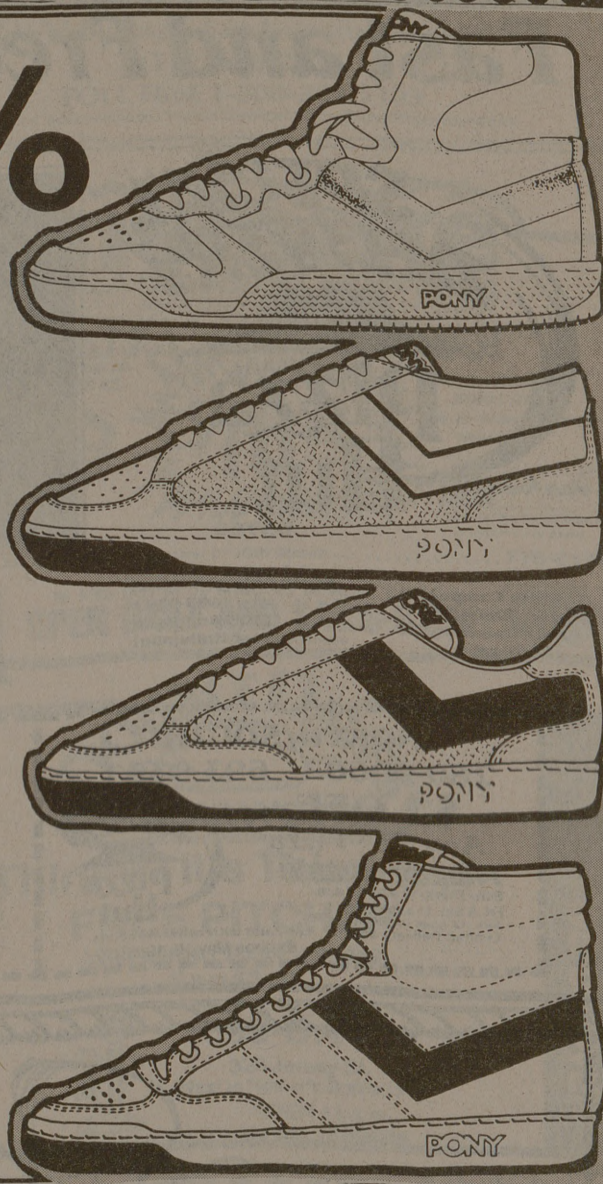
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