

Sports

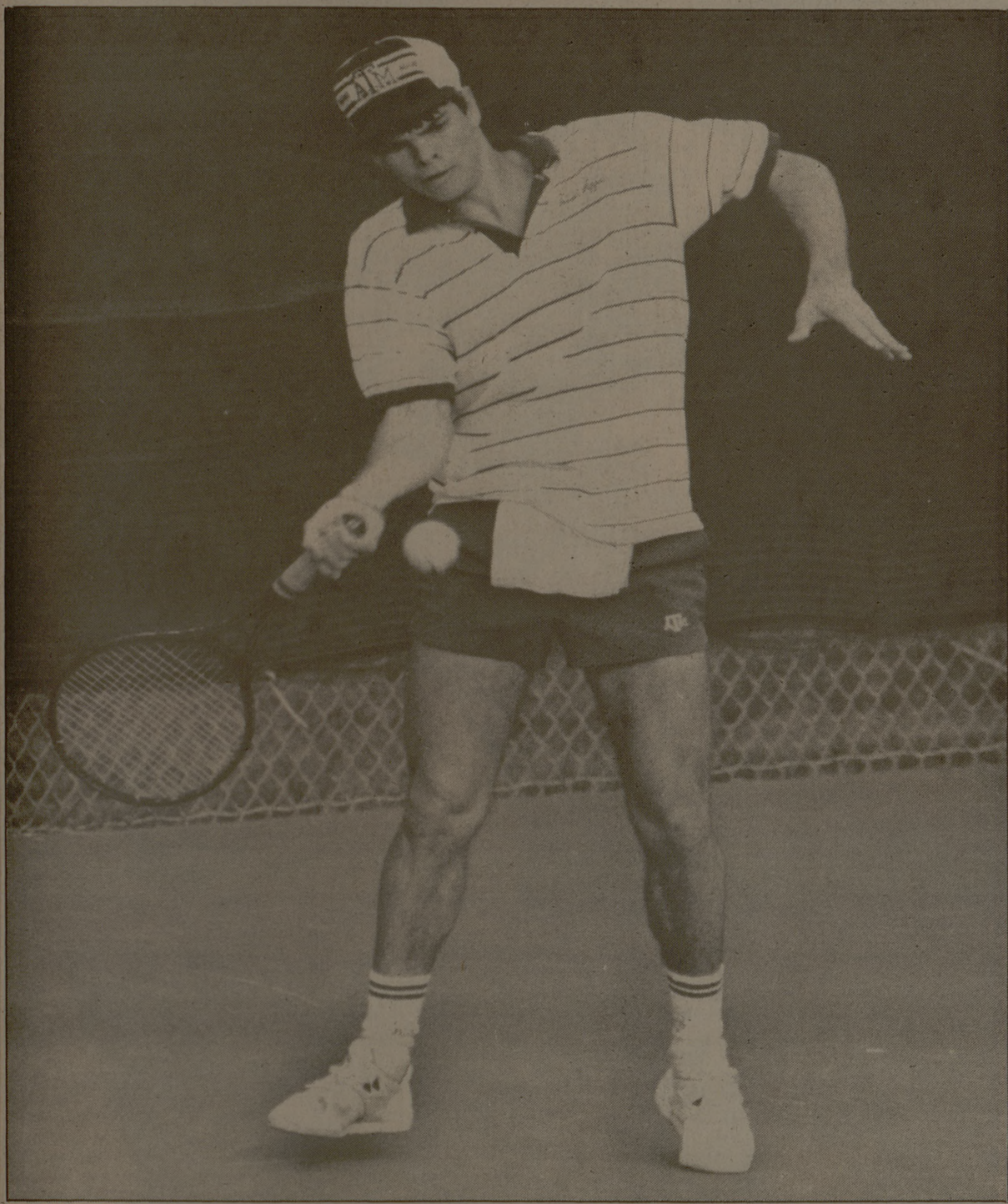


Photo by GREG BAILEY

A&M's Mark Smith stretches back to return a volley during a recent match. Smith and doubles

partner Russ Simmons compete in the ITCA Nationals tourney in Houston beginning today.

A&M duo to confront 'Rocky' tourney start

By KEN SURY
Assistant Sports Editor

They might not look like Sylvester Stallone, even when put together, but last November Texas A&M tennis players Mark Smith and Russ Simmons staged a scene reminiscent of the "Rocky" movies — coming from nowhere to win it all.

The "all," in this case, was the qualifying tournament for this weekend's Intercollegiate Tennis Coaches Association (ITCA) Nationals Tournament, held in Houston today through Sunday.

Smith and Simmons entered last fall's qualifying tourney unseeded and as A&M's No. 3 doubles team behind the No. 1 tandem of Kimmo Alkio and Marcel Vos and the No. 2 duo of Dean Johnson and Dean Goldfine.

But when the tournament was over, Smith and Simmons waded through some of the top doubles teams from Texas and Arkansas to win the regional title.

Among those most surprised by the tandem's victory was A&M Men's Tennis Coach David Kent. Kent said he even considered leaving his No. 3 doubles team at home for the tourney.

"I didn't think a No. 3 team could compete against the caliber of competition in that tournament," Kent said. "I guess that shows how much I know, huh?"

Prompted by Smith's and Simmons' ITCA qualifying tourney win, Kent has moved them from A&M's No. 3 doubles spot to No. 1 for the spring season.

Smith said playing in the No. 1 spot actually makes him feel less pressure than at No. 3.

"If you play No. 3 doubles at a major college, then you're pretty much expected to win all the time," Smith said. "But playing No. 1, it makes me want to go out and hit the ball and just hang in there."

Simmons, a senior from Spring and the Aggies' team captain, said he isn't sure what contributed to their success in the regional tourney.

Rains wash out A&M-UTSA women's tennis matches

The rainy weather here at Texas A&M forced the Aggie women's tennis team to cancel its Wednesday matches with Texas-San Antonio.

The Aggies were able to complete only one set of the No. 1 and No. 2 singles matches before rain showers fell on the Omar Smith Tennis Center about 3 p.m.

A&M Coach Bobby Kleinecke said they considered rescheduling the UTSA matches for next Tuesday, but since the women have matches in Louisiana Friday through Sunday, he said that

might be too many matches for one week.

A&M's No. 2 tandem of Kim Labushagne and Karen Marshall, in the women's division of the ITCA Nationals tournament, will play the Miami duo of Ross Riach and Cindy Richmond today. Riach and Richmond are the No. 3 seeds for the tourney and were ranked the No. 4 doubles team in the country in the preseason Head Intercollegiate Tennis Standings (H.I.T.S.) List.

Aggies Vanne Akagi and Gaye Lynn Gensler, A&M's No. 1 doubles team, are alternates.

"It surprised me a little bit (to win the tourney)," Simmons said. "But when things go well you don't ask, 'Why?' You just go with it."

"We've played good matches before — really good matches — but we have trouble doing it time after time. In that tournament we won five matches in a row and that's what I'm most pleased about."

Smith, a junior from Austin, said he thinks the tandem's improved play began at last year's Southwest Conference Indoor Tournament where they won the No. 3 doubles spot. At last season's Westwood Invitational, he said they played well, but finally lost the semifinal match.

One week later, they won the ITCA regional doubles championship.

"Going into the qualifying tournament we weren't seeded and we played a seed the first round," Smith said. "We played solid that match and we just built on that. All our close matches went three sets, but we came through when we needed to."

In keeping with the "Rocky" image, Smith probably would equate the tandem's playing style to Rocky's boxing philosophy — stay in the

fight, take punishment and then finish off the opponent.

"The way Russ and I play," Smith said, "the longer we hang in there, the better off we are."

Simmons added, "I bet we go to three sets 80 to 90 percent of our matches, and of that we've won about 75 percent."

But they do know the ITCA Nationals are going to test their tennis skills.

"It's 16 of the best doubles teams in the nation," Smith said, "so it's going to be tough."

Simmons agreed, saying, "Sometimes you can play your way into the semifinals by having easy matches at the beginning. But this one will be tough from the very start."

Today, the tandem may discover just how tough a first match can be when they face the tourney's No. 3 seeded duo of Richard Matuszewski and Brandon Walters of Clemson. Matuszewski and Walters are the defending ITCA Nationals doubles champions.

But both are optimistic about their tournament chances and the Aggies' chances as a whole for the upcoming SWC season.

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