

Tennis casts wide net for talent

International roster proves to be a championship combination

By **JIM KITALONG '00 BS**

Breaking Ferris State's 17-year winning streak, the NMU women's tennis team surpassed even its own expectations and captured the 2001 GLIAC Women's Tennis Championship on Oct. 26-27. The Wildcats defeated Michigan Tech, 9-0; Ferris State, 5-4; and Northwood, 5-4 in the championship match.

What's their recipe for success? A lot of hard work, team unity, and an international roster. Four of the Wildcat's 12 players are European. Vesselina Jeliaskova is from Bulgaria, Sabina van den Bor and Lavinia Janssen are from the Netherlands, and Kristin Koopmann is from Germany.

"All four of them would probably rank as some of the best in the Midwest," said Troy Mattson, NMU women's tennis coach. "Our program has been completely turned around from an average to an elite team, and a lot of that has to do with them."

Jeliaskova, a senior psychology major, grew up in Sofia, Bulgaria. She began playing tennis at age five. "I grew up on the court," she said. "My father was the Bulgarian National Men's Team coach and the Davis Cup captain."

She began her college career at Kansas State University, but after two years transferred to NMU to be closer to family she has in Canada. The natural beauty of Marquette and the Upper Peninsula also appealed to her.

"My favorite thing up here is the lake," she said. "I love it. It makes me feel relaxed. This was actually one of the main reasons I picked Northern. I definitely feel better up here than in Kansas."

Along with earning first-team all-conference honors last season, Jeliaskova had the chance to take on a long-time rival — her childhood friend from Bulgaria who plays for Northwood College. They faced each other last season.

"We had been playing against each other since we were around seven, but I never won," Jeliaskova said with a smile. "Last year I finally beat her."

Jeliaskova's teammate, van den Bor, a freshman communication disorders major, is from Haarlem, Netherlands. Like Jeliaskova, van den Bor started playing tennis at age five. Now seventeen, she is the youngest of the four European athletes. She came to the United States because she wanted to play tennis, but she also wanted to get a college education, and there is no equivalent combination of sport and education in the Netherlands.

"Tennis is my life, but if I played tennis in the Netherlands in combination with college, it would not work," she said. "You can't go to a teacher and say 'I play tennis so I can't be in class.' They don't care if you play tennis."

Van den Bor said she dislikes the food in the United States, but she enjoys the natural scenery in Marquette — especially Presque Isle Park and Sugar Loaf Mountain. She is a bit leery of the approaching winter, however.

"We don't get any snow in Holland — maybe once every five years. People have told me about the snow here, and I'm a little nervous."

Like van den Bor, Janssen is also

from the Netherlands and came to the United States because of the joint opportunities in sports and education. A junior international studies major, Janssen began playing tennis at age 11 and started her college career at Kennesaw State University in Georgia.

While playing tennis at Kennesaw State, she became friends with her teammate, Koopmann. After one year, both girls decided to transfer to NMU.

"I was looking for a better coach and came into contact with Troy Mattson, who is a great, very motivating coach."

Janssen said she doesn't like being so far away from a big city, but she does like the natural beauty of Marquette.

"NMU is located in one of the most beautiful areas in the world," she said.

Although Janssen misses her family and, like the others, has also had trouble adjusting to American food, she has fond memories of the last two years — especially winning this year's GLIAC championship.

"Being the first team to win the tournament after Ferris won it 17 years in a row was incredible. We beat Ferris in a nailbiting game. After being behind 4-0, we won five singles in a row, winning 5-4. Everybody on our team really stepped up that weekend. It was awesome."

Janssen earned second-team all-conference honors last season.

Koopmann, a junior public relations major, is a native of Altenholz, Germany. She began playing tennis at age 10, and she and Janssen are

NMU football coach resigns

Eric Holm announced his resignation as Northern Michigan University's football coach on Dec. 7.

Holm stated his reason for leaving as "philosophical differences of opinion."

Holm had been at the helm of the Wildcat program since 1995 and compiled a 43-31 record. His 1995 and 1996 teams had school-best finishes in the Midwest Intercollegiate Football Conference (MIFC), both tying for third. (NOTE: The MIFC merged with the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference – GLIAC – in 1999.) Holm had winning seasons six of his seven years at NMU. This year, Northern tied for ninth in the GLIAC at 3-7 and was 4-7 overall.

During his NMU tenure, Holm coached 22 players to first-team All-Conference honors, 18 to second-team and another 33 to honorable mention status. As of 2000, he had 40 players named to Academic All-Conference squads. For the winter 2001 semester, 26 NMU football players made the Dean's List, the most in the program's history.

"Through his time here, Eric was passionate about Wildcat football but also about academics, and we appreciated his guidance of the players on the field and in the classroom," said Dan Spielmann, NMU athletic director.

Spielmann stressed the resignation was not related to this past season's won-lost record, nor a single incident, but "is exactly as Eric said, a difference of opinion about how to proceed with NMU football from here."

Holm came to NMU in 1995 from his alma mater, Northeast Missouri State University (now Truman State University), where he had served as head coach since 1990.



Sabina van den Bor, Vesselina Jeliaskova, Kristin Koopmann, and Lavinia Janssen make up the international contingent of NMU's tennis team roster.

currently roommates as well as teammates.

While Koopmann enjoys life in the United States, she finds the lifestyles very different from what she is used to.

"Being in the United States and playing tennis has been an amazing experience. American life is very different, but I've adjusted to it. The team has traveled quite a lot. I would never have seen so much of this country and the people if it weren't for tennis. I'm very happy to be part of this team."

During the season the players don't have much free time. Koopmann's typical weekday consists of morning classes, three hours of evening practice, schoolwork, sleep, and trying to find time to eat in

between. But she said being such a close-knit team lightens the workload.

"We all hang out together, and we're on trips in a tiny van so often that we've become very close. We get along really well. We might argue, but we never fight."

Koopmann earned first-team all-conference honors last season. She also made it to the doubles finals with her partner, Jeliaskova, in the ITA Midwest regionals in Indianapolis.

"Being an international tennis team helps a lot because it brings different people together with a variety of experience," Jeliaskova said. "We all get along really great and I think that's why I'm playing so well right now. The last two years have been the best of my tennis career."