

SVERDLOV'S ROAD TO THE TOP

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Senior Mark Sverdlov always had a growing passion for tennis that he says started in his childhood. As he



DOUBLES TROUBLE. Mark Sverdlov (left) showcases the award he won after finishing as a doubles finalist in a level two national tournament. (Photo submitted by Mark Sverdlov)

continued to practice, his love for the game and overall skill grew, Sverdlov said. "Tennis has basically been my entire life, and I couldn't picture what I would be like without it."

Sverdlov's special talent for the game not only allowed him to emerge victorious in a variety of tournaments growing up, but also to experience success in recent competitions. For the past two years, Sverdlov has competed in the USTA (United States Tennis Association) Boys' nationals in Kalamazoo, Mich. He played for the USTA New England section and finished second for all ages in his section. Sverdlov also played one International Tennis Federation (ITF) qualification tournament and one tournament in the main draw.

Despite the success in his tournament play throughout his career, Sverdlov did not receive a national ranking; instead, the prodigy became a five-star recruit. "I was homeschooled

last year so becoming a five-star meant all the time I put into tennis and fitness was finally paying off," Sverdlov said. "My coaches and I were so happy that my results were becoming visible so quickly, but we knew there was still a lot more work to put in."

Sverdlov's dedication to perfecting his craft eventually gained him enough recognition to earn the ranking of 58th in the country. Though he did view such a ranking as an honor, the tennis star believed he would have received a higher rank had injury not plagued him. "It wasn't a bad ranking to have, but I know I could've done better," Sverdlov said. "I had some injuries that held me back from competing as well as I could've, but I've beaten kids top-20 in the country. When I was ranked 58th, I was playing very well. I just had a few things to touch up on, and I could've had a much higher ranking within months."

KAYLA IN SPORTS: BATTER (NOT) UP!

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Sports may not come to me easily, but "borrowing" things from my younger brother, Dylan, comes like second nature. Dressed in his white stirrups and practice jersey (unknown to him at the time), I attempted to participate in a baseball practice.

Although my brother (partially) joked about disowning me as a sister if I failed miserably, he did teach me a bit on how to properly swing the bat and, at minimum, make contact with the ball. With his vote of confidence and the mini garage lesson, I felt prepared enough for practice the next day.

Leg bouncing up and down while I waited for my turn in the batting cages, I mulled over my brother's advice. When my turn came to hit off the tee, coach Brandon Sedell, head coach of the JV team, lent me a helmet (definitely not a bad idea given my slightly clumsy track record), and one of the players offered me his bat.

Swinging the bat the first few times made me realize why I left my brother to sports. However, 10 swings into my turn, I finally got the hang of it, not only making contact but also actually hitting the ball down the middle.

Feeling a wave of confidence after the tee round in the cages, I readied myself for the next part of batting practice: soft toss. When my turn came up and Coach Sedell pitched the ball softly to me, I am proud to report I made contact with the first five balls, hitting them either down the middle, slightly to the left or to the ground.

After the batting cages, varsity coach Bruce Aven brought me over to the catchers to toss the baseball around. Swapping the helmet for a glove, I practiced "pitching" the ball to catcher Kolbe Aven, a junior. While tossing with the catcher, Coach Aven came up to me and demonstrated the difference between a rising fastball and straight fastball. As much as I would like to report that my pitching improved, in reality, Kolbe had to reach a bit to catch my wild pitches.

The coach now instructed us to receive the ball and throw behind us to second base. Surprisingly, this drill came to me the easiest out of the previous pitchers' drills. With the ball soundly hitting the glove of the person covering second (go me!), my confidence from the first bit of batting practice returned.

Afterwards, I returned to the batting cage and continued to take turns batting. Each turn I got better and better. In the end, batting practice became one of my favorite parts of practice.

Although I certainly don't see myself playing baseball professionally, this experience showed me a different side of the sport.

My time with the baseball team easily became one of my favorite "Kayla in Sports," although my right shoulder and arm were a bit (read: very) sore for three days after.

From this experience, I can confidently say that while I may not be the next Derek Jeter, I at least know how to dress the part.

(Photos/Maia Fernandez Baigun)

(Graphics/Zoe Persaud)

