

From Russia with love: Anastasia Goncharova stars for Evanston tennis

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Opponents aren't always foes. Evanston girls tennis player Anastasia Goncharova faced her friend, Palatine's Asuka Kawai, in one of the season's early matches. They battled for three and a half hours.

"Everyone was watching," Goncharova said. "It was very intense."

Goncharova lost the match in three sets, but she said it was a highlight of her season because she found ways to keep grinding. It's not that this high school junior, ranked No. 8 in Chicago in the Girls' 18 singles division by the USTA, is new to the game. She's just new to high school tennis.

In her first year with the Wildkits, Goncharova plays No. 1 singles. The Russian-born player moved to Evanston from Russia six years ago and focused on her game, under the direction of coach Vasiliy Guryanov, at Midtown Athletic Club in Chicago.

It wasn't a matter of if she'd play high school tennis. It was a matter of when. Goncharova and her coach decided this year would be the year, after she spent the past two getting used to her school. Junior year is also when a lot of colleges start recruiting, Goncharova said.

Evanston coach Joyce Anderson contacted Goncharova to see if she'd play before this year, but she said she understood Goncharova's reasons to hold off until now. Having a dominant No. 1 singles player is really special, Anderson said. It instantly adds more depth to the team.

Goncharova is a great model for her teammates, too, Anderson said.

"They're learning how much commitment it takes to get to where she is and how focused she is," Anderson said.

The Wildkits wrapped up the regular season on Friday, Sept. 30. At 11-4 overall and 2-3 in the Central Suburban South, Anderson said it's the best record the Wildkits have had in the seven years she's been with the program.

Goncharova is part of the Evanston team this year, but she doesn't spend all her time at the newly-renovated high school courts. Tuesdays and Thursdays were Evanston matches, and Friday she'd also join the Wildkits for practice. The rest of the week, Goncharova goes to her club for practice. Basically, she still gets her tennis practice in, it's just not as much at the club as it used to be.

As for her play, Goncharova knows her left-handed forehand is important. She creates a different spin on the ball for righties "that they're not used to," she said. She also loves coming into the net for points.

Then there's also her powerful serve and incredible footwork, according to Anderson, to complete her game.

"She's really fast," Anderson said. "She knows how to control that point.

"Tennis is her love and she's passionate about it."

Goncharova has felt some pressure along the way. It's challenging to know she's representing her team, she said. It's tough mentally because in the past, she's just played for herself, she said. With the Evanston team, it's for the school.

There's always an adjustment period, Anderson said, when there's a new team member on board. Goncharova has enjoyed getting to know her teammates and developing those friendships, she said.

"I just wanted them to see me just like one of them, because I am one of them," Goncharova said. "I am one of them, even though they might think I play at a higher level."

Whenever the high school season wraps up for her — and her goal is to compete at state, which runs from Thursday, Oct. 20, to Saturday, Oct. 22 — Goncharova will continue her training at the club and playing in tournaments. She'd also like to play in some professional tournaments, with the ultimate goal of reaching the [U.S. Open](#), one of the sport's four grand slams.

"That would be my dream coming true," Goncharova said.

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