



BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Chris Gilles, the former Plymouth Salem stand-out, plays No. 1 singles at the University of Wisconsin.

Growing pains

Life at No. 1 no picnic for Gilles

By Chris McCosky
staff writer

It was as if the ball was coming down in slow motion. Chris Gilles stood poised to kill the return. She had her opponent so far out of position, the point seemed a cinch. Slam! Gilles whacked the tennis ball with a mighty force.

"I don't believe it," Gilles shrieked in a voice that was part whimper and part scream. The shot landed inches outside the line.

Homecomings can be awfully cruel sometimes.

Chris Gilles, the former high school all-star from Plymouth Salem now the No. 1 singles player at the University of Wisconsin, played tennis before the home folks Sunday morning for the first time this year.

A large contingent of family and friends turned out, at 8:30, to see Gilles and Wisconsin take on the University of Michigan in a Big 10 match at the Huron Valley Tennis Club.

Wisconsin won, Gilles lost.

"I WAS really glad everyone came," Gilles said. "I really wanted to see everyone and I'm glad they wanted to see me. But, I was really, really nervous. I'm not blaming the loss on that. I'm blaming me, mentally. Even after I got over being nervous, I didn't pull it out."

U-M's Paula Reichert, of Grosse Pointe, outlasted Gilles in the 2½ hour match, 6-3, 4-6, 7-5. Gilles had led 5-4 in the third set.

It was another in a long series of tough moments for the attractive and personable freshman this season — the type of tough moments that are often referred to as character builders.

"She's playing No. 1 singles and she's taking her lumps," said Wisconsin coach Kelly Ferguson, a two-time NCAA champion. "It's tough playing No. 1 with type of schedule we have. She's had some great wins, but she's also lost matches she should have won."

Wisconsin has played 10 of the nation's top 20 teams already this season. Gilles, after beating Michigan State's Trish Bandenbrink, 6-0, 6-4, Saturday and losing to Reichert Sunday, is 12-8 in singles. Wisconsin is 11-10.

FERGUSON ISN'T too concerned about Gilles' ability in singles.

"She'll be all-Big 10, I'm 80 percent sure of that. And she should go to nationals. The top four singles players from the region qualify for nationals, and Chris is ranked No. 3 right now," Ferguson said.

But there are other areas, Ferguson said, in which Gilles needs plenty of work. Like in doubles play, where Gilles began the season at No. 1,

slipped to No. 2 and now is playing at No. 3.

"She needs to work on her doubles game," Ferguson said. "I hope that's what she concentrates on this summer. We've not been picking up many points in doubles and that's been hurting us this season."

Said Gilles: "No, I don't really like playing doubles. At the beginning, it was real tough on me. Now I'm just going out there to have fun. I'm playing No. 3 now and it's a lot easier. We're winning. We'll have a winning doubles record by the end of the year. Playing No. 3 is fine with me, whatever helps the team win."

FERGUSON LIKES to hear Gilles talk in terms of "the team." The two have locked horns on the issue a couple of times. After a recent loss, Gilles wondered how the loss would affect her chances for the nationals. Ferguson's reply was stern: Don't put your personal accomplishments and goals ahead of the team's.

"That's been hard for me," Gilles said. "I have a problem thinking in terms of the team. If the team won and I lost, I'm not happy and I should be. But, I'm never happy when I lose. Don't get me wrong, I am happy for the team when we win. It's just I take my losses harder than I should. I have to understand that it's more of a team thing."

Pro agent

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"The toughest thing is keeping the players informed. You have to keep them patient because things aren't going to happen overnight. You have to know the value of the player and what the market is. I would not hold someone out of camp if they were vying for a position, because if they're not there, it's hard to establish a market value."

"For someone who has a position locked up, that's a different story because you know their value to the team."

Although Curry deals with familiar faces all the time, the other end of the dealings are somewhat unfamiliar.

"In the course of the day, I'm talking to general managers from different teams about different players from different clubs," he said. "I think I know more voices than I do faces."

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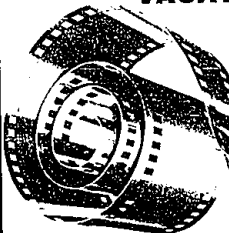
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