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PHOTOS: Women's tennis: Embree wins twice, but Florida falls to Stanford in national championship match

By ANDY JOHNSTON, Special to the Daily News

Posted May 25, 2010 at 9:49 p.m.

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PHOTO BY DAVID MANNING/ATHENS (GA.) BANNER-HERALD

Florida freshman and Lely High grad Lauren Embree, right, and Joanna Mather look up as Stanford wins the championship round of the NCAA women's Division I tennis tournament on Tuesday, May 25, 2010, in Athens, Ga. Stanford won 4-3.

ATHENS, Ga. — **Lauren Embree** could only watch, feeling helpless as her teammate

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PHOTO BY DAVID MANNING/ATHENS (GA.) BANNER-HERALD

Florida freshman and Lely High alum Lauren Embree returns a shot during her match with Stanford's Hilary Barte during the championship round of the NCAA women's Division I tennis tournament on Tuesday, May 25, 2010, in Athens, Ga. Embree won the No. 1 singles match, 6-4, 6-4, but Stanford beat Florida 4-3.

on Court 3 battled for the point that would decide the national championship.

And when it was over, and Stanford was celebrating, Embree and her Florida teammates could only look on, tears in their eyes, pondering how close they were to the title.

Embree's freshman dual-match season ended with a 4-3 loss in the national championship match on Tuesday, but she couldn't help but smile just a little while looking back at her first year at Florida.

"This was totally different than anything I had experienced," said Embree, who is from Marco Island and graduated from Lely High in December 2008. "Even though we came up short today, I couldn't be more proud of my team for putting everything we had into accomplishing everything we did, even though we came up short."

College tennis has been a drastic change for Embree, who had to adjust to the emphasis on the team result and the extensive studying. After a juniors career that

included international travel and playing in major tournaments, including the main draw at the French Open, Embree is enjoying life as a student in Gainesville.

Her success on the court has helped.

She is 32-5 in singles and has qualified for both the singles and, along with partner Anastasia Revzina, the doubles portion of the NCAA championships. She'll play California's Mari Andersson at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday.

Embree is the first freshman in the history of the Southeastern Conference to be named the league's player of the year. On Tuesday, she was selected as the Intercollegiate Tennis Association (ITA) rookie player of the year.

"In the beginning you just have to adjust to playing with the team and being with eight girls every single day," Embree said. "I don't think it's too much different because you're out there working hard and playing tennis every day."

On Tuesday, Embree defeated Stanford's Hilary Barte 6-4, 6-3 to give the Gators a much-needed victory at No. 1 singles. She struggled at times against Barte, but won the final three games of the second set to clinch it.

Embree broke Barte's serve in the final game, gained the advantage as Barte was long, and then won it when Barte was again long on two consecutive points.

That kind of performance has been exactly what Florida coach Roland Thornqvist has

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come to expect from Embree.

"She's been exemplary in everything," he said. "She exceeded my expectations a long time ago. Like I said after the quarters, she's been the hardest worker on this team from Day 1. She's got a tremendous will, a great attitude and always has a smile on her face, except when I beat her in a game of 21. She exemplifies everything we stand for, just terrific in everything."

After defeating Barte, Embree stood on Court 2 to watch teammate Marrit Boonstra's deciding match with Mallory Burdette. Boonstra's last point was wide, giving Burdette a 6-4, 6-7 (4), 7-5 victory and ending the 4 ½ hour team match.

It was Stanford's 16th national title. Florida was going for its fifth and its first since 2003.

"I felt like I was going to throw up out of nerves watching everybody, but I was so excited to be part of the team, part of the Gators," Embree said. "The emotions, the nerves. You're out there fighting for yourself and you want to do what's best for the team. I just had to be out there cheering on the rest of the team."

Embree said she plans to return home in a couple of weeks and "will be around this summer," to train. She wants to play in a few tournaments, maybe even the U.S. Open in September, but hasn't looked too far ahead.

"(I love) being a part of (the college atmosphere) and being a Florida Gator and sharing this tournament with my teammates and coaches," Embree said. "It's really exciting to be a part of this."

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