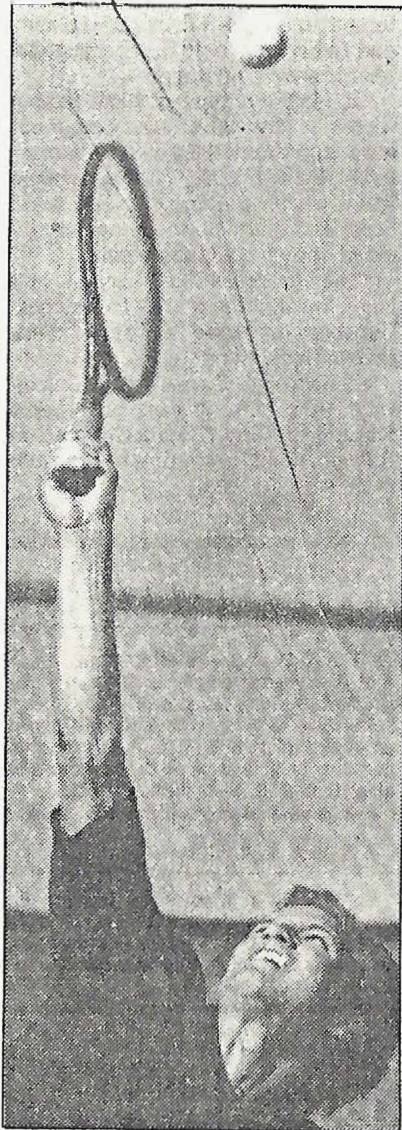


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J. Kyle Keener/Staff

KU's Scott Alexander is striving to control his temper.

One-time tennis brat takes loss without making racket

KU star keeps cool in defeat

By Ron Fredman
A Member of the Sports Staff

The scoreboard made it clear that Jim Carson of Nebraska defeated Scott Alexander of Kansas in Thursday's semifinals of the Big Eight Conference tennis tournament. But the match had no losers.

Not, at least, in the greater scope of things: Alexander kept his cool throughout their No. 5 singles match at Woodside Racquet Club — a complete turnaround from his spoiled-brat antics of the past.

And that, in itself, is worth more than all the successful match points in the world.

"I'm very proud of the way he played," said Andrew Jacobs, a KU sports psychologist who has worked with Alexander and his teammates for about a year. "He was in control; he knew even when things weren't going his way he still had to stay calm.

"There's a difference between losing and being beaten. Scott was beaten this match (6-2, 6-3). He didn't lose. And that's a victory for him."

A very big victory, indeed.

This time last year Alexander was fuming and furious at KU Coach Scott Perelman, who had kicked him off the team for disciplinary reasons just before the conference championships. Perelman said Alexander was an embarrassment to himself and the school.

"He was breaking rackets. He was screaming. He was cussing. He was belittling players. ..."

And in one fell swoop, he was busted from being KU's No. 1 singles player to nothing.

"I was upset," said Alexander, a junior and a 1981 graduate of Center High School. "I was so mad at him. But in retrospect, it was probably the best thing that could have happened. It forced me to face my problem, to realize I needed to change."

Most of the taming was rather gentle: mass doses of positive reinforcement and self-awareness exercises. Alexander remained a wild steed through the summer, but when September rolled around, he began to buckle down.

"It wasn't easy to change," said Alexander, who plays Oklahoma's Warren Diamond at 1 p.m. today for third place. "I used to be like an idiot out there; I had been since junior tennis many years ago. After having a bad habit for so long, it's not easy to all of the sudden act perfect. But I knew I'd better try if coach was going to take me back."

Perelman welcomed him back but didn't promise him anything but a fair shake. That meant Alexander would have to re-earn the No. 1 spot that had been his for two years. As it turned out, he ended up fifth on the six-man roster, a drop in status but a blessing in disguise.

Perelman, Jacobs and Alexander agreed the pressure of playing No. 1 affected Alexander's performance and attitude. He struggled, winning barely half of his matches. And on a team that was struggling, too, it was a pretty heavy load for Alexander to carry.

But at No. 5, the expectations aren't as great and the competition isn't quite as tough. It allowed Alexander to produce at his own pace, to rebuild confidence and gain the understanding that his game needn't resemble an exploding fireworks stand to be successful.

TOURNAMENT NOTES: The No. 1 singles championship, scheduled for 1 p.m. today, pits top-seeded Mike Wolf of KU against second-seeded Peter Mallett of Oklahoma State. In the semifinals, Wolf defeated Fritz Garger of Colorado 6-3, 6-3; and Mallett beat Sam Fotopoulos, a Shawnee Mission East graduate playing for Oklahoma, 6-2, 6-1.