

Sep. 25 JoJo's/Fish4Scores Athlete of the Week

After joining forces this season, Malpas-Peters duo is looking good

By Rich Fisher

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Sep. 25: They're only sophomores, and they have only played high school tennis together for a little less than a month.

But they sure know how to rise to the occasion on a big stage.

This past week, Steinert High 10th-graders Kristen Malpas and Rachel Peters entered the Mercer County Tennis Tournament as fourth seed. After they were defeated in the first round against Notre Dame, 6-3, 7-5, it looked like they might play another match or two and be on their way.

But the duo toughened, and defeated three straight opponents to win the backdraw portion in the MCT first doubles flight. It capped quite a week for the partners, as they also qualified for the state tournament (along with first singles Gaby Bennett), and helped Steinert qualify for states as a team.

For their efforts, Malpas and Peters are the *JoJo's Tavern/Fish4Scores.com Athlete(s) of the Week* for the week ending Sep. 24.

The back draw portion of the tournament is decided by pro sets, meaning the first team to eight games (provided it's by two games or more), wins.

After beating Hightstown, 8-0, the Spartan duo came up against a formidable West Windsor-Plainsboro South team of Rebecca Hansen-Ivy Kang.

Malpas-Peters went ahead 3-0, fell behind 5-4, then won five of the next seven games to claim a 9-7 tiebreaker victory. After that they dispatched of Nottingham's Michelaine Juillet/Kelly Mercado 8-0.

In case you lost track, that made two of three matches where they did not drop a game.

"We knew we hadn't played bad against Notre Dame," Malpas said. "So we kind of focused our energy and really concentrated (on the back draw). We were disappointed when we had to play South because they were really good, but we pulled it out.

"It was a stressful match with them, but it felt good in the end. We were really proud of ourselves."

Peters and Malpas had never met until they joined the tennis team last year. Peters was fourth singles and would fill in at singles for a starter on occasion, while Malpas played first doubles with a different partner.

"We became pretty good friends on the team, so in the winter we played in some tournaments together as double partners," Malpas said. "We lost pretty bad, but it helped us get used to each other, it got us used to communicating."

When they returned to practice this fall, the two suggested to coach Bob Howland that they could be partners. Howland let them play challenge matches and they emerged with the first doubles spot.

Aside from communicating, the two also mesh as far as where they play on the court.

"I like the deuce (right) side better and she likes the ad (left) side better so that works out really well," Malpas said. "I'm more comfortable getting the forehands and she's more comfortable getting the backhands. And we're both pretty aggressive coming to the net."

And in a short time, they have gotten pretty aggressive in showing they could be a force to reckon with in the coming years.

If they aren't already.