

Concern over a competitor's injury highlights GCIT-Lenape tennis match



Theresa Strano, a junior tennis player from Gloucester County Institute of Technology, was looking forward to her team's recent match against Lenape in the semifinals of the NJSIAA South Jersey, Group 4 tournament.

A team victory would be a tall order, since Lenape was the top seed and Gloucester Tech was seeded fifth. But regardless of that, Strano - who earlier this season won her second straight Gloucester County individual championship - was eager for her first singles matchup against someone she had never previously faced, senior Rhea Sethi of Lenape.

"Going into the match, I was really excited to be able to play Rhea, because I knew she was a great player and had heard a lot about her," said Theresa, who is also a NJSIAA Student Ambassador.

"Knowing Lenape was the top seed, we went in looking to make some good competition and to play the best we could," she said. "Individually, going into this match I was hoping to get my 50th career win."

On paper, things didn't go so well for Gloucester Tech or Strano. Lenape won the match, 5-0, including



Rhea Sethi

the first singles result. But something much more meaningful took place that afternoon at Arrowhead Tennis Club in Medford.

Strano has had excellent career at Gloucester Tech. She was runner-up at the county singles tournament as a freshman before winning the title as a sophomore and again this fall.

She's achieved that success despite a bothersome back issue. A couple of other injuries made this season a challenge, as well.

"My back has been an on-and-off problem for the past couple of years," Theresa said. "But this season it really took its toll on me. I had a couple of injuries this season, which started at the Gloucester County final on Sept. 18, when I hyperextended my hamstring and had to play with limited movement. I



Theresa Strano



GCIT and Lenape meet before the match

fought my way through and defended my title.”

It got worse for Strano soon after.

“I had a day break before playing Shawnee’s Samantha Tepes on Sept 20th, where I won the first set and then injured my back badly for the first time,” she recalled. “I sat out matches from then until Sept 29th, and it was tight but I could tell it was getting better. On Oct. 8th, I played in the state singles tournament and I aggravated both my leg and my back again, but I was able to play the days leading up to the Lenape match on Oct. 13th.”

Everything seemed good heading into that day and her meeting with Sethi, and the match got off to a solid start.

“The day of the match I was feeling really good, and it was probably the best I had felt in a couple of weeks,” Theresa said. “Rhea and I played a very competitive first set and the games in the second set went back and forth.”

Strano won that first set in a tiebreaker, and the second set was tied when it all happened.

“It was 5-5 in the second set and she hit a ball to the far left side of the court,” Theresa recalled. “I

stretched to hit a running backhand slice, and that’s when my back instantly spasmed.”

The pain she experienced was immediate and intense.

“Looking back, I probably should have retired from the match, but I was looking really forward to the match for a while and wanted to at least finish it out,” she said. “I did have a brace in my bag that I put on for support, and it felt okay at first, but continually got worse. It was difficult to move around the court, and I had to place my shots effectively and play smart, but without being able to move, it made it extremely difficult to consistently win points.”

Sethi won the next two games, and then won the first-to-10 third set to take the match. But much bigger than that, she won Strano’s lasting appreciation for what happened after the injury, which ultimately caused her to miss the remainder of the season.

“She came over the net to see if I was okay,” Theresa said. “Their coaches and trainer immediately came over as well. They were very considerate of the situation. After we finished and I lost the match, we came to the net and gave handshakes, where she also gave me a hug. She showed such great sportsmanship.”

Sethi was immediately concerned when Strano’s injury occurred.

“Our match was very competitive with lots of long rallies and points that kept on extending as we both moved each other around the court,” she said. “While we were in one of those long rallies, I hit a ball to Theresa, and after she hit a backhand, she went down. Clutching herself, she looked to be in immense pain. I quickly rushed over to her and asked her if she was okay. She looked to be in a lot of pain, but she was able to keep fighting and kept the match close even as she battled her back injury during the third set tiebreaker.”

Through that remainder of the match, the uniqueness of the sport showed, as Sethi continued to show concern for her opponent.

“Rhea was incredible right away,” said Gloucester Tech coach Danny Cohen. “Coming over to comfort her and offering to get any medical supplies or paper towels that Theresa might need. She looked genuinely concerned, and I am forever grateful to Rhea for turning an awful situation into one of friendship and grace. Lenape’s assistant coach/trainer was also instrumental in calming Theresa down and encouraging her to get back on the court if she was able.

“Of all the players I’ve ever coached, Theresa is the best combination of skill, toughness and mental acuity,” he said. “And for as good as she is a player, she’s an even better person. She gets a lot of confidence from success in tennis, so taking away her skills drives her crazy. This specific injury kept recurring, so it was especially frustrating because she never knew when the spasms would pop up.”

Lenape coach John Carnevale was also impressed by what he witnessed on the court that day.

“Theresa is an outstanding player and person,” he said. “I truly admire her competitive spirit and her sportsmanship. It was a tough break for her at our semifinal match. She refused to take an injury default and continued to play at a high level. That takes a lot of courage.”

Likewise, he was greatly impressed by the conduct of his player.

“Sportsmanship is something that our team takes seriously,” Carnevale said. “Rhea did not want to win the match via injury default. There was a point late in the match that Rhea won and saw that Theresa was in pain. She asked Theresa if she was okay before starting the next point. Theresa fought until the very end, and then a big hug was exchanged between Rhea and Theresa at the net. Rhea commented on how well Theresa played, and how she felt bad that Theresa wasn’t at 100 percent.

“Sportsmanship is what tennis is all about,” he noted. “Tennis should be a friendly competition. The player on the other side of the court is a fellow competitor and not an enemy. Rhea has had an incredible high school career and has always treated her opponents with respect. And Theresa deserves recognition for

the courage that she displayed this season. I hope that she is at full strength next year.”

Those feelings were echoed by Cohen.

“Over the course of my decade of coaching girls tennis, I’d always chose a 0-20 team with good sportsmanship over a 20-0 team with a group of selfish players,” he said. “Having known John Carnevale for most of those 10 years, I wasn’t surprised when his team showed the compassion and empathy they did. Even though I wasn’t surprised, it’s always amazing to see a sports moment like that.”

Lastly, what happened that day demonstrated the importance of sportsmanship to each athlete.

“By the way they were concerned, it showed their team was able to put competition aside and show compassion to an opponent, because at the end of the day, we are all human beings,” Theresa said. “And that’s what sportsmanship is all about. Supporting one another and showing respect, even if they are the competition.”

“For me, playing with class and acting as a good sport is what matters the most,” Rhea said. “In the end, you are remembered by your actions and behavior on the court. Coach Carnevale has emphasized to our team about being players who treat our opponents with respect. Throughout my tennis career, I have aimed to be a fair and kind person on and off the court. During this match, I acted out of genuine concern for Theresa as she appeared to be in a lot of pain. I know that had this happened on any other court, my teammates would have acted with the same care and concern.”