

In her four years as head coach of the Xavier Saints girls tennis team, Erin Seely was proud that her teams always posted winning seasons.

She's on the other side of the net this spring, so to speak. But, as a 39-year-old freshman on the Cornell College tennis team, she's no less excited that she's holding her own against women young enough to be her daughter.

Well, she did drop her last singles match a week ago, 6-1, 6-0, against a Luther College coed on a blustery day in Decorah.

"Hey," she said good-naturedly afterward, "at least I didn't get hurt."

Win or lose, Erin brings the same spunk to college competition as she does to coaching. Being a full-time wife, mother of two teenage boys and first-year Cornell student, she gave up the Xavier gig this year but still helps Kennedy girls coach and friend Joe Benedict with his team.

"Erin's always the positive one," says doubles partner Wanda Carter, an 18-year-old freshman from Los Angeles. "She's always picking up the other kids. She acts and looks so young, you forget she could be your coach."

Still, when Erin showed up for the first day of practice for the fall tennis season at Cornell, 20-year-old sophomore Kathleen Ellis of Madison, Wis., thought she was a new assistant for head coach Patrick Coute.

"She's like a big sister to the rest of us," says Kathleen. "She's always bringing us treats and presents. And we look up to her and go to her for advice."

"But she's great to be around, too, a great teammate. She's like, 'Hey, let's go practice, let's go

hit some balls.' Erin's always upbeat."

When Erin enrolled at Cornell, she put on the admissions form that she was a high school coach and was asked if she had an interest in lending a hand with the varsity squad.

"I played a couple of exhibition matches, and I decided I'd rather be playing than helping with coaching," Erin explains. "I was like number nine in singles, but I was perfectly happy. And I got my varsity letter."

Coach Coute, a Canadian who is three years younger than his oldest freshman, says she brings a welcome dimension to his Rams racketeers.

"She adds some maturity to the team. And she is very, very enthusiastic. She really works at her game and has gotten a lot better since the fall. She loves the challenge. And she's fun to be around," he says.

For her part, Erin says sports are in her blood. She's the daughter of Mike Neilly, the now retired longtime local radio sportscaster and microphone sidekick for the legendary Bob Brooks.

"I grew up at Hawkeye Downs and going to football games on Friday nights at Kingston with my dad. And my grandpa Jack was the scorekeeper at Regis for years. I played on teams with the city recreation department," she says.

Later in life, she also served on the Cedar Rapids Recreation Commission for seven years, including a stint as chairman.

Erin played three years on the Jefferson tennis team for Coach Jim Lockett before transferring to LaSalle and graduating in 1990. Back then, Erin put off college to marry and raise a family.

Mom, coach, athlete ... and college freshman

Written by Tom Fruehling

Saturday, 07 May 2011 09:55 - Last Updated Saturday, 07 May 2011 21:42

Husband James Seely works at Intermec Technologies (and as a volunteer firefighter). Their sons are A.J., 17, a junior at Jeff, and Carter, 14, an eighth-grader at Taft.

Erin has been around schools and athletics all of her adult life. For 13 years at Jefferson and one at Taft, she's been a para-professional assistant with special education students.

She served as the assistant girls tennis coach at Jeff for six years before moving up to the head job at Xavier in 2007. She also was a volunteer coach for Jefferson basketball icon Larry Niemeyer, is a timer at Kingston Stadium track meets and for many years has served as a jack-of-all-trades at Jeff basketball and football games.

For her longtime service at the school, she was awarded an honorary diploma.

On the side, Erin also has turned a jewelry-making hobby into a cottage profession (glassdesignsbyerin) and sells her fancy wares at area farmers' markets.

Starting college, she says, was something she's long wanted to do, so Cornell's one-course-at-a-time system fits her family-friendly schedule. She plans to earn a degree in physical education, with a goal of becoming an athletic administrator.

Now that college finals and tennis are wrapped up for the year, she can devote more time to the Kennedy girls. And finding some spare time on her hands, Erin's taken a summer job in the clubhouse and driving the beverage cart at the Wildcat golf course in Shellsburg.

"I'm kind of a flighty person, high-strung and all over the place," says the petite blonde bundle of energy. "But I do like to keep busy."