

Gray's repeat title hopes come to heartbreaking end; Blake takes his place for state

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
May 22 2018 3:36 PM





BELLEVILLE – Alex Gray's hopes as repeating as the IHSA Class 2A tennis doubles champion came to a shocking end Saturday evening.

Gray was going to his car when he slipped and fell on his right elbow, breaking a small bone.

The injury was enough to put him in a cast and sling and knocked him out of Monday's play in the IHSA Class 2A Belleville East Sectional tournament and out of this weekend's IHSA Class 2A state tournament in Arlington Heights.

Not only did the injury eliminate him from the tournament, it brought a premature end to his stellar high school tennis career that saw him team with Zach Trimpe last year to claim Edwardsville's first-ever tennis championship.

Gray will be replaced by EHS freshman Ben Blake, who under IHSA rules may take Gray's place with Seth Lipe in the state tournament; Blake did not play in the sectional and was allowed to step in for Gray. Players who did not play in the sectional for a team are allowed to take an injured player's place in the state tournament.

“It couldn't have come at a worse time, for sure,” Gray said of the injury. “It's definitely a big bummer, but I'm just happy with what all I accomplished in my four years at the school; especially this season, it's sad – winning (at) Naper Valley and losing five games in four matches, coming in second at Pitchford (also in the Chicagoland area), beating some really good teams – that's all stuff I can look back on this season.

“Even though I'm not going to state, I can still think about all those good times that we had and all of our good accomplishments.”

The break will take six weeks to heal, Gray said. “I'll have to do a little bit of physical therapy,” Gray said about what will happen after his arm comes out of the cast. “It was just one of those freak accidents,” Gray said of the incident.

“It's unlucky, but the past is in the past; the only thing we can do now is move forward,” said Gray's doubles partner this year, Seth Lipe, of what happened. “Ben and I accept it; we'll fight our hardest at state and I obviously feel horrible for Alex that his career has to end that way; it was a crazy, one-in-a-million type of thing.

“You face adversity and all you can do is try to face it as best as you can.”

“The team feels bad, I feel bad, but I'm definitely excited to go up and play at state, try my best and give it everything I've got,” Blake said of stepping in for Gray and heading to state. “I've played with Seth and he's a great guy; I've learned a lot from Seth and the other guys up at state – it'll be a great experience for me.”

Lipe and Gray started working together for the tournament almost immediately after the incident. “I have never played (with Lipe), but I feel it's going to be really good to play with Seth, especially these high-caliber level of players; I'm going to learn a lot from it,” Blake said.

“We're going to try to get as much time in together as we can, especially being off for a couple of days because of the top six and the guys playing; I definitely need to get bearings, especially with Seth – I feel like we definitely have a chance to win a couple of games at state.”

The state tournament gets under way Thursday, hosted by Arlington Heights Hersey in the Chicago suburbs, and also taking place throughout the Arlington Heights area; the tournament runs through Saturday along with the Class 1A tournament.