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ASHEBORO - Excelling in a varsity sport for four years in high school can certainly keep someone extremely busy. But Southwestern Randolph High School's Allie Popp, a 2024 graduate, not only found the time to excel in tennis in her four-year career, she found the time to do so much more with her school and her community.

And people noticed.

Popp was recently named one of two recipients in the state of North Carolina of the Pat Gainey Student Scholarship. The Pat Gainey Student Scholarships are awarded by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association each year to two seniors with at least a 3.2 GPA, a strong work ethic, a successful high school career and to those who have demonstrated respect for coaches and teammates. The male winner was Ragan Shields of Pamlico.

"I was really honored, I had worked hard," said Popp, who was the No. 1 student in her class academically, finishing with a perfect 4.0 unweighted GPA and a 4.6912 weighted GPA.



NCHSAA Commissioner Que Tucker with Southwestern Randolph graduate Allie Popp at the Association's annual awards day, June 12, 2024. Photo by NCHSAA.

Popp played tennis all four years at SWR and was Academic All-Conference each year. Her senior year, she won the team's Most Valuable Player Award as well as the Piedmont Athletic Conference Player of the Year Award. She was a part of the doubles team that won the conference championship and represented the Cougars in the regional.

"Beyond her athletic accomplishments, Allie's strength of character shines through in every aspect of her life," SWR tennis coach Lori Lagrama said in a release. "She is a natural leader who leads by example, inspiring her teammates with her positive attitude, integrity, and unwavering commitment to excellence."

Her list of accomplishments and community work is as impressive as knowing she is heading to UNC in Chapel Hill in August to major in

neuroscience. Neuroscientists focus on the brain and its impact on behavior and cognitive functions. She has a goal of becoming a neurologist or neurosurgeon.

Among those accomplishments outside of tennis include being named Chief Junior Marshal, winner of the Congress of Future Medical Leaders Award of Excellence, All "A" honor roll, SWR's CTE Presidential Scholar, score of Platinum on WorkKeys Exam Activities and Memberships, BETA Club member, secretary of HOSA (Health Occupations Students of America), National Society of High School Scholars and she traveled to Greece with EF Educational Tours for Students. She also was a member of LIFT (Student Leadership Information for Tomorrow), a seven-month program in which participants complete community service projects and problem-solve with leaders in the community.

There's so much more, including working with middle school students to share information about careers in medicine, being a Donor Ambassador with the American Red Cross, participating in numerous food and supply drives, becoming certified in First Aid, CPR and Stop the Bleed and earning numerous academic certificates for AP honors.

"I like to push myself beyond the normal limits and am excited about the future," Popp stated in her resume.

As far as tennis, Popp qualified for regionals her freshman season, missed a good portion of her sophomore season while battling COVID - but still earned all-league status - and then had a "rough" junior year, despite being named all-league.

"My junior year, everyone expected me to come back from the illness and be better, which is understandable," she said. "But I didn't win as many matches as I thought I should have and I was going through some problems with my confidence."

She got a jolt of confidence in a PAC match against Providence Grove, a match she said she will remember for a long time.

Needing 10 games to win the match, she found herself down 6-2 and struggling. She said a quick meeting with her coach ended up turning things around.

"When you're down by that much, it's easy to accept defeat," Popp said. "It was my junior year and I was already feeling down and she told me, 'You can play, just get out of your own head.' I was like, 'how do I do that?'. But something sparked me in that conversation. I started looking at it point by point and not the big picture. I started doing that and sure enough, very slowly but surely, I won eight games in a row and won 10-6. It really wasn't about the win for me. I finally got out of my own head and realized I could play tennis and play it well. It proved a lot to me."

She used that motivation entering her final season and enjoyed a stellar campaign, being named the top player in the PAC.

"It was really hard," Popp said. "I had a really hard first semester (academically) and I had to sacrifice a lot of sleep. I was coming off that rough junior season and I was determined by senior season I was going to come out better than ever. All the hard work really paid off."

There's no denying that fact.