

VALLEY / VENTURA COUNTY SPORTS; THE WORLD CAN WAIT; Irvin Puts Pro Tennis Career on Back Burner

[Valley Edition]

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If Marissa Irvin wasn't such a dedicated and involved student at Harvard-Westlake High, her tennis career would probably be skyrocketing about now.

But Irvin, 17, is trying her best to keep her feet on the ground, her head in the books and to enjoy all she can of her final three months of high school.

"There's more important things than tennis," said Irvin, who has signed to play at Stanford.

Don't be misled by Irvin's approach to having a balanced, healthy teenage life in addition to a successful tennis career. She manages quite nicely.

Irvin, ranked No. 5 in the nation among 18-and-under girls, is the top-seeded player in her division in the 30th Easter Bowl Junior National Championships in Palm Springs, beginning today.

It is the fourth consecutive Easter Bowl for Irvin, who lost in the girls' 18 semifinals last year.

Despite Irvin's love of school and all its extracurricular activities, her tennis career hasn't suffered. Since last summer, Irvin reached the round of 16 in the junior division at Wimbledon, played in the Italian Open and the French Open, and won the junior doubles title with Alexandra Stevenson at the U.S. Open in September.

Irvin, who has competed in 10 countries, capped her only high school tennis season by winning the Southern Section singles title in December.

While Irvin's career sits clearly on the professional tour launch pad, she doesn't want to blast off until she finishes high school and at least one year at Stanford.

Brian Teacher, her private coach the past nine months, would love to have Irvin practicing four to five hours a day like other world-class players her age. But he understands the importance of Irvin's schooling.

"She's such a gifted student," Teacher said. "She's so academic and so good at it that she probably wouldn't be as happy if she was just playing tennis.

"Most girls her age would just take the high school equivalency test and play tennis all the time."

After school, Irvin hits the tennis court for a two- to three-hour workouts with Teacher, who has helped his pupil improve her conditioning as well as her serve and ground strokes.

"She's definitely getting better," Teacher said. "It's just getting out there and competing. The more you compete, the more you can fine-tune your game. The more she competes, we can see what weaknesses show up {when she plays} better players."

This week's Easter Bowl provides the perfect opportunity for Irvin, who has decided to skip the Italian Open and the French Open this year to concentrate on her graduation ceremony. Many consider the Easter Bowl the U.S. Open of

junior tennis.

"It's a good tournament for her to play," Teacher said. "It's a national tournament; the top juniors from all over the world will be there and it's almost in her backyard."