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Double titles for Jaco, Isha

CHENNAI, AUG. 18. Anybody who had anything to do with the MCC-IOB National junior (under 18) hardcourt tennis championship this week believed that Somdev Verman, on a nine-match unbeaten streak, was virtually unbeatable.

And, for a brief while at the MCC courts on Saturday, that belief worked its sinuous way into Jaco T. Mathew's mind. Leading his BAT stablemate Verman 6-2, 3-0 in the boys final on the climactic evening, Mathew perhaps started think that he had a rather more formidable job on his hands than he actually did.

Through a morale-shattering phase of nervous error- prone tennis, Mathew appeared on his way out before he shed the jitters like a sorry skin to post what could well be a career turning 6-2, 6-7 (7/4), 6-2 victory for the National title.

It was a wonderful climax to a lovely day's tennis at the home of the junior National championship as, earlier in the afternoon, Isha Lakhani of Maharashtra quelled a mid-match fightback by Ankita Bhambri of Delhi for a 6-3, 3-6, 6-2 victory in the girls final.

At the end of the day, it was a perfect double for both players as they had partnered their singles opponents in the morning to win the doubles titles.

Mathew and Verman, coached by Ilyas Hussain and Ramalinga Reddy at the Britannia Amritraj Trust, know each other's game very well and the older player (Mathew is 17 and Verman is 16) has more often than not prevailed in match situations. But given Verman's form this fortnight, it appeared that he might at last get one back.

No matter that, it was Mathew who came out firing today, hitting superb forehand winners to all corners and using his double handed backhand as a useful back-up. Once he broke to 4-2 in the first set, Mathew was on song. He won seven games in a row to 3-0 in the second set.

The critical game was the seventh where a double fault and two nervous groundstroke errors from Mathew saw him lose serve. Yet, when Verman failed to serve out the set twice, in the 10th and 12th games, it appeared that Mathew did have a chance to close it out in two straight sets.

But Verman opened up a 5-1 lead in the tiebreak and never looked back.

In the event, the way Mathew started in the decider was at once surprising and marvellous. He turned wonderfully aggressive all over again to open up a 2-0 lead. And when serious questions were asked of him in the fourth game on serve - he was down 0-40 - Mathew had all the answers. From there it was a question of time.

The left handed Isha was much the more aggressive player in the women's final. She broke Ankita twice to win three games in a row from 3-3 to take the first set and hit some superb winners on both flanks even in the second

where the pattern was quite similar with Ankita winning three in a row from 3-3.

In the decider, Isha raced to a 5-0 lead, saw Ankita claw back to 2-5 and then closed out the match on serve setting up matchpoint with one of the finest shots of a match, a crosscourt backhand winner.

In the morning, Isha and Ankita beat Nandita Chandrasekar and Preeti Rao 6-3, 7-5 in the girls doubles final while Jaco T. Mathew and Somdev Verman beat R. Arun Prakash and Vikram Aditya Menon 6-3, 1-6, 6-2 in the boys doubles final.

Mr. R. Natarajan, Executive Director, IOB, gave away the prizes.

The results: all finals: Boys singles: Jaco T.Mathew bt Somdev Verman 6-2, 6-7(4), 6-2; Doubles: Jaco Mathew and Somdev Verman bt R.Arun Prakash and Vikram Aditya Menon 6-3, 1-6, 6-2.

Girls singles: Isha Lakhani bt Ankita Bhambri 6-3, 3-6, 6-2; Doubles: Isha Lakhani and Ankita Bhambri bt Nandita Chandrasekar and Preeti Rao 6-3, 7-5.

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