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ITF TENNIS/DELHI LEG

A moment to cherish for Vinod Sridhar

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MANY international tennis tournaments have been held in this country in the last few years, but this one will remain etched in memory for long. It was one tournament in which despair was followed by hope, in good measure, providing a healthy picture of Indian tennis.

SANDEEP SAXENA



Vinod Sridhar exults after winning the title in the Delhi leg. The left-hander ripped apart the challenge of Ajay Ramaswami, who made his maiden singles final in the ITF circuit, in straight sets.

With the likes of Harsh Mankad, Mustafa Ghouse, Sunil Kumar, Vijay Kannan and Nitin Kirtane ousted in the first round, it was a gloomy scenario, a day after Deepavali, in the \$10,000 ITF Futures tennis tournament in Delhi.

For once, the situation looked really bleak even for the most optimistic follower, especially after Rohan Bopanna had pulled out of the tournament with a painful arm. The question that has been doing the rounds for some time - who after Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi - was quite depressing to contemplate.

However, a bunch of other Indian players emerged on the stage, and the National champion Vinod Sridhar marched on to his maiden international title. He emphasised that the international tournaments, held in the last few years, had in fact benefited every Indian player, and given him the confidence to take on tough opposition from abroad.

In a tournament in which the top-seeded Mustafa Ghouse was ranked 500, it was a great effort by the 818 ranked Vinod Sridhar, who beat three better foreign players, Boris Borgula of Slovakia, Pavel Lobanov of Russia and the second-seeded Juraj Hasko of Slovakia in a row, to show that he had gained considerable maturity in handling a strong tournament.

The way the left-handed Vinod ripped apart the challenge of 22-year-old Ajay Ramaswami, whom he had played as far back as the time when the two were

learning their tennis in the National under-14 circuit, in the final, showed that the lad had considerable self-confidence to boast of. "I am very happy. This title is very big for me. I was happy to win the National title a fortnight back, but this title gives me a lot of confidence," said Vinod, a trainee from the Krishnan Centre in Chennai, who works with the Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL).

Vinod had to grapple with a painful knee, a problem that had seen him bow out in the first round the previous week in Chandigarh, but the young man was quite focussed through the Delhi tournament and did not drop a set to anyone except to the hard-stroking Lobanov in the quarterfinals.

Lobanov may not have the ranking of a top class player, but he is someone who can destroy a player with his forceful game. He did that to Sunil Kumar, by demolishing the talented youngster with a 6-1, 6-1 score in the first round. May be Sunil Kumar is in a phase when he is unable to fathom his own methods, apart from being hampered by a bout of ill-health, but that must have scared another left-hander in Vinod.

Yet, Vinod did not show any trace of a negative mind through the tournament, and his attitude came to the fore in the final, when he proved too good for Ajay Ramaswami with his deep-hit shots and consistent serves.

The good thing was that it was not just Vinod who drew the attention, but Ajay Ramaswami as well. The strong young man, who had his education in the U.S., was expected to do well, but has not been able to do justice to his potential. He took things in his hands in this tournament, by getting past the champion of the Chandigarh tournament, Pavel Ivanov of Russia, in a third set tie-break in the pre-quarterfinals. Ajay had to handle only Indian opponents after that, and was quite smart in beating Kedar Tembe and Jaco T. Mathew.

In the final, Ajay was not able to stroke with his usual felicity and surrendered in a flurry of errors, as he kept going for his shots despite the poor percentage of success. He had won the doubles title with Sunil Kumar the previous week, and to make his maiden singles final was a big morale-booster. "I would have loved to win this title, but Vinod played better. I know that I am on the right track," said Ajay, quite pleased with his overall effort.

Jaco T. Mathew, the 18-year-old BAT trainee from Chennai, was another youngster who provided hope for a bright future. The lad came through three rounds of the qualifying event, and won three more rounds in the main draw before running short on strength against Ajay Ramaswami.

The fact that Jaco was able to beat Yew Ming Si in straight sets, after the Malaysian had beaten the top-seeded Mustafa Ghouse in the first round, showed that the Indian players are quite comfortable playing any opponent, and do not worry about their accomplishments and ranking.

In fact, Jaco came through a third set tie-break against another qualifier Andrea Agazzi of Italy in the first round to show that he had it in him to march far. He beat the seasoned Rishi Sridhar with a nice mix of passing shots and lobs in the quarterfinals, to show his tactical strength. There is no doubt that

youngsters such as Jaco will go a long way in strengthening Indian tennis in the years to come.

The National champion Manoj Mahadevan did well to make the quarterfinals, and stretched Hasko in the second set tie-break before making his bow. However, the best was in seeing Vinod Sridhar tackle Hasko and tame him in straight sets. After that meticulous display in the semifinals, it was obvious that Vinod had gained a stranglehold over the trophy.

Kamala Kannan was another player who showed that he was fast gaining confidence to complement his strong game, as he teased Hasko in a long-drawn three setter. The Chennai lad had lost another three-setter to Hasko the previous week, but this time he fought on equal terms till the end before going down 3-6, 7-6 (7-5), 4-6.

Kedar Tembe notched up two good wins as he beat Nitin Kirtane and Vishaal Uppal, two different types of players, in the first two rounds before being blown off by Ajay Ramaswami.

Overall, it was a great sight to watch six Indians in the quarterfinals, after the big shots had bit the dust early. In a draw in which there were 11 foreigners, it was a healthy sign to see an all-Indian final.

The Indian domination was complete, as the doubles final was also an all-Indian affair. The top-seeded Vijay Kannan and Vishaal Uppal, who had to beat a strong challenge from Mohammed Yasser Arafat and Amod Wakalkar in three sets in the semifinals, wafted through in the final for the loss of six games against the five-time National champions Nitin Kirtane and Saurav Panja.

It was the fifth Futures doubles title for Vijay, who had won three others with Rohan Bopanna and one with Mustafa Ghouse. Vijay is another lad who should be making waves in singles soon, if he can add a little more muscle to his strokes.

The gains may not be much when you look at \$1300 and \$900 for the singles winner and runner-up, but the ATP points of 12 and 8 are indeed big. It is with such small collections that the Indian second string players have to nurse their big dreams. In fact, the third string is trying to overtake the second string. That should mean a strong race. Indian tennis can only get better in such a scenario. It may be a long exercise, but it is indeed fascinating to note the signs of growth.

The results:

Singles final: Vinod Sridhar bt Ajay Ramaswami 6-2, 6-4; Semifinals: Ajay Ramaswami bt Jaco T. Mathew 6-2, 6-3; Vinod Sridhar bt Juraj Hasko 6-4, 6-3; Quarterfinals: Jaco T. Mathew bt Rishi Sridhar 7-6 (7-5), 6-3; Ajay Ramaswami bt Kedar Tembe 6-3, 6-4; Vinod Sridhar bt Pavel Lobanov (Rus) 6-4, 2-6, 6-1; Juraj Hasko bt Manoj Mahadevan 6-4, 7-6 (8-6).

Doubles final: Vijay Kannan and Vishaal Uppal bt Nitin Kirtane and Saurav

Panja 6-2, 6-4; Semifinals: Vijay Kannan and Vishaal Uppal bt Mohammed Yasser Arafat and Amod Wakalkar 4-6, 6-4, 6-2; Nitin Kirtane and Saurav Panja bt Anton Kokurin (Uzb) and Pavel Lobanov (Rus) 6-1, 6-4; Quarterfinals: Vijay Kannan and Vishaal Uppal bt Rohan Gajjar and Manoj Mahadevan 6-3, 7-6 (7-2); Mohammed Yasser Arafat and Amod Wakalkar bt Kamala Kannan and Rishi Sridhar 4-6, 7-6 (7-2), 7-6 (7-3); Nitin Kirtane and Saurav Panja bt Ajay Ramaswami and Sunil Kumar 6-4, 6-4; Anton Kokurin and Pavel Lobanov bt Pavel Ivanov and Evgueni Smirnov (Rus) 6-2, 6-7 (5-7), 7-5.

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