

Sandeep Kirtane and Jahnvi Parekh power their way to glory - 1996

It was a season in which tournaments were hardly held as the major sponsor of the Indian circuit had pulled away. The Shriram Open in which the junior events were given the status of the national championship proved a big hit, offering more than ten lakh rupees in prize money and scholarship.

Except for Leander Paes who won the Olympic bronze in Atlanta, his doubles partner Mahesh Bhupathi and the talented striker Prahlad Srinath everybody else who had a name in Indian tennis was present to ensure a strong tournament.

By winning the men's title against the strong young lad Vikrant Chadha, the short-built but sweet-stroking Sandeep Kirtane emphasised that he was still in contention to get a recall into the Indian Davis Cup squad. In doing so, Sandeep also ensured the domination of Kirtanes in the tournament as his cousin Nitin had won the title in the earlier edition.

The former Asian junior champion, Sandeep had earlier had delightfully hit his way past Davis Cupper Gaurav Natekar. His double-fisted backhands and the flat forehands that often had the opponents rooted to the ground at the baseline were a treat to watch.

The biggest upset was provided by the young Vijay Kannan as he knocked out the top-seeded Asif Ismail 6-3, 6-0 in the first round. Asif had been disillusioned after being dropped from the Davis Cup squad despite him having worked hard to push his ATP rank to the 400s. He lacked the focus to fight it out.

Gaurav and Vikrant Chadha had the consolation of winning the doubles title as a face saving exercise. Vikrant Chadha was a Davis Cup reserve then and believed to have considerable potential. He later joined the hundreds of talented Indian players in the US on a tennis scholarship and thus could not do justice to his potential in the professional circuit.

Jahnvi Parekh was a class act in the women's section, though she was stretched to three sets by Sai Jayalakhmy in the final. She beat Uzma Khan in the semifinals. Jahnvi with sound strokes on either flank won the junior title as well, as she beat Archana Venkataraman.

The top-seeded Rushmi Chakravarthi was unable to live up to her standing, but won the doubles title with Arati Ponnappa. The national hardcourt champion Janaki Krishnamoorthy was also not able to save her reputation in a strong field.

Amod Wakalkar had sweet revenge over Harsh Mankad in the semifinals of the junior event. Harsh had beaten Amod in the National junior grass court final at Patna and subsequently on the hard courts as well in Chennai. Amod, a trainee of Nandan Bal, went on to down Rishi Sridhar in three sets to claim a title that he would cherish for ever. He won the doubles title as well with the stylish left-hander Rohan Saikia.

Ajay Ramaswami and Sheethal Goutham were able to prove that lack of height was not a handicap as they won the national sub-junior titles.

Ajay Kannan did his confidence some good by winning the doubles title with Ajay Ramaswami. Sheethal found stiff resistance from Radhika Tulpule and S. K. Tara but was too good otherwise in winning a doubles as she took the doubles title as well with Sonia Shelar.

The Punwire trainee, Akshay Vishal Rao, and the Pune lass Radhika Tulpule won the under-14 boys and girls titles respectively, with remarkable ease and poise.

The results (finals):

Men: Sandeep Kirtane bt Vikrant Chadha 6-4, 3-6, 6-1; **Doubles:** Gaurav Natekar and Vikrant Chadha bt Amod Wakalkar and S. Narendra Nath 6-0, 7-5.

Women: Jahnvi Parekh bt Sai Jayalakhmy 5-7, 6-2, 6-2; **Doubles:** Rushmi Chakravarthi and Arati Ponnappa bt Sheethal Goutham and Sonia Shelar 6-0, 5-7, 6-2.

Under-18 boys: Amod Wakalkar bt Rishi Sridhar 3-6, 6-4, 6-2; **Doubles:** Amod Wakalkar and Rohan Saikia bt Harsh Mankad and Amandeep Singh 6-4, 6-4.

Under-18 girls: Jahnvi Parekh bt Archana Venkataraman 3-6, 6-0, 6-0; **Doubles:** Archana Venkataraman and Uzma Khan bt Aparna Srinivasan and Nehal Chopra 6-1, 6-1.

Under-16 boys: Ajay Ramaswami bt Avinash Arun 6-3, 6-4; **Doubles:** Ajay Ramaswami and Vijay Kannan bt Manoj Mahadevan and Avinash Arun 6-2, 6-1.

Under-16 girls: Sheethal Goutham bt Karishma Patel 6-2, 6-1; **Doubles:** Sheethal Goutham and Sonia Shelar bt Radhika Tulpule and Pooja Deshmukh 7-6 (6), 6-2.

Under-14 boys: Akshay Vishal Rao bt Mithun Murali 6-3, 6-2; **Doubles:** Mithun Murali and Benjamin Xavier bt Akshay Vishal Rao and Pathanjali Ravishankar 6-4, 6-2.

Under-14 girls: Radhika Tulpule bt Sonal Phadke 6-0, 6-0; **Doubles:** Nona Wagh and Anisha Shelar bt Nikhila Palat and Harsimran Kaur 6-3, 6-4.