

Asif Ismail and Gaurav Natekar share men's trophy, Uzma Khan corners glory - 1997

The organisers had not calculated the fighting prowess of the women correctly. In the event, Uzma Khan and Arati Ponnappa fought so hard in the Shriram Open that there was hardly any time left for playing two sets of men's final between Davis Cuppers Asif Ismail and Gaurav Natekar.

The floodlights were inadequate and the men's title had to be shared. Asif could have sealed it but for floundering at 7-5, 3-0. Gaurav changed the trend to win the next four games when the light had deteriorated considerably.

Referee Dushan Deo physically jumped from the fence on to the court, but could not come up with a solution to continue the match on the morrow as the players had finalized their traveling plans and were unwilling to change it.

Asif had done all the hard work in taming players like Vasudeva Reddy, Vikram Venkataraghavan, Anand Radhakrishnan and Saurav Panja. He had already taken up coaching but was able to prove that he was still good.

Among the youngsters, Harsh Mankad had a good chance to make a mark but after adding a third national junior title to his collection in the first week of the tournament, he had to give a walkover in the quarterfinals of the men's event because of ill-health.

While the national grasscourt champion Nitin Kirtane lost to Saurav Panja in the quarterfinals, his cousin Sandeep Kirtane was unable to defend his title owing to ill-health. Other prominent players like Susheel Narla, Prahlad Srinath and Vikrant Chadha were busy abroad.

In the women's event, the tenacious Uzma Khan beat the cream of talent. She beat the top seed Rushmi Chakravarthi, the talented stroke-player Jahnvi Parekh, the athletic Sai Jayalkshmy and eventually Arati Ponnappa in the final in a pulsating thriller in a third set tie-break.

Well, Uzma had given a glimpse of her potential earlier in March in the Federation Cup, in which she was the only Indian to win matches. She had singles wins against New Zealand and Thailand and with a little more support from team mates Arati Ponnappa and Jahnvi Parekh, Uzma could have helped India stay in the Asia-Oceania group 'I'.

In the junior section, Harsh Mankad showed that he was head and shoulders above the rest. He recovered from being a set down in the final to beat Rishi Sridhar in a pulsating final. Harsh impressed with his smart head a lot more than what he did with his game.

It was his third national singles title and on a third different surface. Harsh had won the titles on grass and clay earlier. He was now winning it on the synthetic surface on which he has been able to hit the ball on the rise. Ravi Kiran Bhat and Sunil Kumar won the national under-16 and under-14 titles to emphasise their talent in competitive fields.

Uzma Khan was too good in winning the under-18 title and Radhika Tulpule made her mark by winning the under-16 honour. Liza Pereira was able to assert herself in the under-14 event, though she had to endure the disappointment of losing the doubles final along with Rani Smita Jain in three sets to Rati Kumar and Lata Ashudani.

The results (finals):

Men: Asif Ismail vs Gaurav Natekar 7-5, 3-4 (abandoned, joint winners); **Doubles:** Gaurav Natekar and Vikram Venkataraghavan bt Asif Ismail and Vasudeva Reddy 6-3, 6-4.

Women: Uzma Khan bt Arati Ponnappa 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (4); **Doubles:** Rushmi Chakravarthi and Arati Ponnappa bt Sai Jayalakshmy and Jahnvi Parekh 2-6, 6-3, 6-1.

Under-18 boys: Harsh Mankad bt Rishi Sridhar 6-7 (8), 6-1, 6-2; **Doubles:** Rohan Saikia and Ajay Ramaswami bt Abhishek Laxminarayan and Ravi Kiran Bhat 6-4, 6-2.

Under-18 girls: Uzma Khan bt Aparna Srinivasan 6-2, 6-4; **Doubles:** Sheethal Goutham and Trishna Williams bt Aparna Srinivasan and Nehal Chopra 6-2, 2-0 (conceded).

Under-16 boys: Ravi Kiran Bhat bt Kamala Kannan 6-2, 6-2; **Doubles:** Ravi Kiran Bhat and Nirmal Shetty bt Kedar Shah and Dipesh Rao 2-6, 7-6 (4), 6-4.

Under-16 girls: Radhika Tulpule bt Sheethal Goutham 6-2, 2-6, 6-3; **Doubles:** Shruti Dhawan and Sheethal Goutham bt Radhika Tulpule and Radhika Mandke 6-4, 7-6 (1).

Under-14 boys: Sunil Kumar bt Pratim Parekh 6-3, 4-6, 6-1; **Doubles:** Chandrashekar Mohanty and Parantap Chaturvedi bt Harshit Sharma and Dhruv Kumar 2-6, 6-0, 6-3.

Under-14 girls: Liza Pereira bt Jitisha Selarka 6-2, 6-2; **Doubles:** Rati Kumar and Lata Ashudhani bt Rani Smita Jain and Liza Pereira 6-7 (1), 6-4, 7-5.