

## **Nitin Kirtane and Uzma Khan capture the honour - 1998**

It was an experience that prevailed over youth as the 24-year-old Nitin Kirtane subdued the 18-year-old Vijay Kannan in the men's final of the DSCL National tennis championship.

In the absence of other experienced players like Prahlad Srinath, Syed Fazaluddin and Sandeep Kirtane, it was a good chance for the youngsters like Vijay, Harsh Mankad, Vinod Sridhar and Ravi Kirtan Bhat to draw the focus on themselves, but it was the Western Railway employee, Nitin who prevailed with his craft and the strong will.

Nitin won his second national singles title, following the grass court national title that he had won in 1996 in Calcutta. There was a similarity in the manner that he accomplished the two as Nitin did not drop a set on the way to the crown both the times.

The left-hander had made the initial waves as a junior when he reached the Wimbledon boys doubles final along with Mahesh Bhupathi in 1992, a year in which he also made the Asian junior championship singles final in Jaipur. By winning the national title on the hardcourts, Nitin asserted that he was getting ready to take the next step, and possibly represent the country in Davis Cup.

Among others, Asif Ismal and Vishaal Uppal made the semifinals. The talented Uppal was unlucky to twist his ankle midway through the match and limped away without even bothering to ask for medical assistance. Asif was already into coaching and did not push himself much against Nitin in the semifinals.

The 19-year-old Harsh Mankad was going through a lean phase after having broken away from the DHAITA Academy in the Capital. He lost to Asif after calling the shots in the first half of the match.

In the women's event, it was the staunch self-belief of Uzma Khan that prevailed as the Hyderabad lass turned the match around after being down 1-3 in the second set against Sai Jayalakshmy in the final. Uzma had lost the first set, but proved too strong mentally at the crunch. Sai had beaten the 16-year-old Shruti Dhawan in the semifinals for the loss of one game and Sheethal Goutham in the quarterfinals for the loss of three games, and thus was perhaps not adequately prepared to tackle an opponent's of Uzma's calibre.

It was her second national singles title and Uzma was planning to go to the US on a tennis scholarship and possibly sharpen her game so as to bring it on par with her strong will and a tough mental attitude.

In the boys final, Vijayendra Laad beat the 16-year-old local lad Akshay Vishal Rao in three sets, while Uzma Khan was too good to be troubled much by the talented Shruti Dhawan. Uzma was so good that she dropped four games in all in the last three rounds of the girls event.

In the other events, rain played havoc. So, Anant Sitaram of Andhra Pradesh shared the boys under-16 title with Sunil Kumar of Chandigarh. Sonal Phadke of Maharashtra shared the girls under-16 title with Liza Pereira.

Samrita Sekar and Sasha Abraham shared the honour in the girls under-14 event. It was Preeti Rao from Chennai who stopped Sania Mirza of Hyderabad 6-2, 7-5 in the

quarterfinals. Sasha beat another talented girl, Isha Lakhani in three sets in another quarterfinal.

Sania Mirza had the first taste of success at the national level as she in partnership with Sasha shared the doubles title with Priyanka Parekh and Ragini Vimal.

**The results (finals):**

**Men:** Nitin Kirtane bt Vijay Kannan 6-4, 6-3, 6-4; **Doubles:** Mustafa Ghouse and Rishi Sridhar bt Asif Ismail and Vijay Kannan 6-2, 1-6, 6-4.

**Women:** Uzma Khan bt Sai Jayalakshmy 3-6, 6-3, 6-4; **Doubles:** Arati Ponnappa and Rushmi Chakravarthi bt Sai Jayalakshmy and Janaki Krishnamoorthy 5-7, 6-4, 6-3.

**Under-18 boys:** Vijayendra Laad bt Akshay Vishal Rao 6-3, 2-6, 6-3; **Doubles:** Ravikiran Bhat and Avinash Arun bt P. Ravikrishna and Anant Sitaram 6-2, 6-0.

**Under-18 girls:** Uzma Khan bt Shruti Dhawan 6-1, 6-0; **Doubles:** Puja Deshmukh and Karishma Patel bt Kameswari Vadali and Sandhya Kanuri 6-4, 6-2.

**Under-16 boys:** Anant Sitaram and Sunil Kumar joint winners; **Doubles:** Parantap Chaturvedi/Chandrashekar Mohanty and Benjamin Xavier and Sunil Kumar joint winners.

**Under-16 girls:** Sonal Phadke and Liza Pereira joint winners.

**Under-14 boys:** Dhruv Kumar and Nishank Mishra joint winners; **Doubles:** Nikhil Vijay Murali/S. Abhinav and Amanjot Singh/Nishank Mishra joint winners.

**Under-14 girls:** Samrita Shekar and Sasha Abraham joint winners; **Doubles:** Sania Mirza/Sasha Abraham and Priyanka Parekh and Ragini Vimal joint winners.