

Sunil Kumar steals the thunder, Sai Jayalakshmy wins maiden national title - 1999

The 16-year-old Sunil Kumar of Chandigarh, a trainee of coach Kawaljeet Singh in the Punwire scheme, joined the likes of Ramanathan Krishnan, Ramesh Krishnan, Zeeshan Ali and Leander Paes in winning the national men's title at such a young age.

It was a spectacular performance by the boy who had been picked from CLTA's rural scheme a few years ago. A talented southpaw, Sunil impressed with his fluent strokeplay and strong physical fitness that helped him endure 17 matches in just about a week's time as he moved between the synthetic courts and the clay surface for various events. The lad came through six rounds of the qualifying event in the men's section that included a tie-break win over the seasoned Peter Vijaykumar in the 'best of 17 games' format. He beat the former national junior champion Vijayendra Laad, the smooth-stroking S. K. Shivshankar. Sunil played a strong game against the former Davis Cupper Asif Ismail, and the 29-year-old Mumbai lad packed up his bag early in the second set, unable to face the music any further. Asif had managed to win a mere three games till then.

Sunil warded off a stiff challenge from Saurav Panja in the semifinals, and proved too good for Mustafa Ghouse in the final, though he was not able to jump for his serves.

The amicable lad with a ready smile had lost in the third round of the junior event to Mithun Murali. However, Sunil's friend and fellow trainee at the Punwire scheme, Akshay Vishal Rao, captured the junior title. He had lost after having matchpoints against Vijayendra Laad in the final the previous year, and this was a rich compensation for the 17-year-old Delhi boy. Akshay handled the tenacious 15-year-old Parantap Chaturvedi with poise in the final, after the latter had beaten a string of good players including Mithun.

In the women's section, Sai Jayalakshmy, an officer with Indian Oil in Chennai, who had given herself a two-month stint in Europe, beat the challenge against fellow employee, friend and doubles partner, Rushmi Chakravarthi. Sai was nervous in the final, and the memories of losing the final the previous year after leading in the second set on winning the first

against Uzma Khan kept haunting her.

The girls title went to Radhika Tulpule, a talented lass from Pune with sound temperament. She had made the women's quarterfinals in singles apart from making the doubles final.

Meanwhile, it was a dream spell for Chandigarh as Amanjot Singh continued with the fine flow to clinch the boys under-16 title. Coach Kawaljeet Singh was overwhelmed to find three of his wards taking the national title.

Megha Vakharia, a talented striker of the ball from Mumbai won the girls under-16 crown, as she beat Liza Pereira in three sets in the final. On the way, Megha had beaten Sania Mirza 6-4, 6-7 (3), 7-5 in the quarterfinals, after having trailed 1-5 in the decider.

In the girls under-14 event, Sasha Abraham beat the favourite Sania Mirza 6-1, 6-3. The Hyderabad girl Sania had won the under-14 and under-16 titles in the Adidas tournament in the Capital earlier, but was not able to recapture the same form.

Those were early days, and Sania had a sitnging forehand and an unflinching attitude that would stand the test of time.

The results (finals):

Men: Sunil Kumar bt Mustafa Ghouse 7-5, 6-0, 5-7, 6-2; **Doubles:** Vishaal Uppal and Mustafa Ghouse bt Saurav Panja and Nitin Kirtane 7-5, 7-6 (4).

Women: Sai Jayalakshmy bt Rushmi Chakravarthi 6-2, 2-6, 6-3; **Doubles:** Archana Venkataraman and Arthi Venkataraman bt Radhika Tulpule and Janaki Krishnamoorthy 2-6, 7-6 (7), 3-1 (conceded).

Under-18 boys: Akshay Vishal Rao bt Parantap Chaturvedi 6-2, 7-5; **Doubles:** Mithun Murali and N. Mukundan btAbhijit Mazumdar and Kedar Shah 6-2, 7-5.

Under-18 girls: Radhika Tulpule bt Karishma Patel 7-5,6-4; **Doubles:** Harsimran Kaur and

Khushchehr Italia bt Samrita Shekar and T. Yamini 6-4, 2-6, 6-1.

Under-16 boys: Amanjot Singh bt Pratim Parekh 6-3, 7-6 (5); **Doubles:** Amanjot Singh and Saurabh Kohli bt Rohan Gajjar and Harshit Sharma 2-6, 6-3, 6-3.

Under-16 girls: Megha Vakharia bt Liza Pereira 6-3, 4-6, 6-4; **Doubles:** Preeti Rao and Samrita Sekhar bt Liza Pereira and Megha Vakharia 6-3, 1-6, 7- (4).

Under-14 boys: Vikrant Sane bt R. Arun Prakash 7-6 (2), 6-4; **Doubles:** R. Arun Prakash and V. Vignesh bt Wrik Ganguly and Tushar Liberhan 6-3, 6-3.

Under-14 girls: Sasha Abraham bt Sania Mriza 6-1, 6-3; **Doubles:** Ankita Bhambri and Sanaa Bhambri bt Lata Ashudani and Priyanka Parekh 6-3, 7-6 (6).