

Aqeel Khan and Sanaa Bhambri corner glory - 2004

It was an Aqeel Khan show. The 24-year-old Pakistani lad won the men's singles title in the DSCL National tennis championship and literally stole the thunder from the 16-year-old Sanaa Bhambri who won a triple crown including the women's title.

In trying to draw some attention to the tournament invitation was extended to the Pakistani Davis Cupper who grabbed the opportunity to realise his dream.

"This is very special. It is great to win the national championship in India as there are so many good players here", said Aqeel.

He beat the former national champion Vinod Sridhar in four sets in the final. Aqeel had got used to the Indian conditions by competing in the ITF Satellite circuit here and had done very well to finish runner-up, an effort that helped finish in the top-350 of the ATP world ranking list.

Here was incentive for the friendly lad to compete here as he was finding the winning ways.

Obviously, Aqeel was happy to pocket one lakh rupees, the prize purse for the winner. He had also been given air fare and accommodation as a courtesy for accepting the invitation. Aqeel helped bringing out the best from the Indians, as the match featuring him against the young Karan Rastogi in the semifinals was a cracker.

Foreigners had been playing the Indian national championship from the good old days and more recently, Marcus Hilpert of Germany had won the national championship in successive years on grass.

Vinod Sridhar had beaten the former national champion Nitin Kirtane in three sets in the semifinals and was calling the shots in the final as he won the first set and led in the second before a thigh muscle pull put paid to his aspirations. Karan Rastogi had beaten Tushar Liberhan in the quarterfinals in a keen contest between two quality youngsters.

Sanaa Bhambri had been coming up very well. She had reached the semifinals of the French Open

doubles with Sania Mirza in 2003. She emulated another talented player Isha Lakhani in winning a triple crown. Her fighting qualities were evident as Sanaa recovered from being down 0-2 in the decider in beating Sonal Phadke under the floodlights after intermittent showers had upset the programme.

Sanaa had also won the doubles title with Isha. She beat fellow Delhi girl Parul Goswami in the under-18 girls final to emphasise her ability.

Sonal Phadke lost the women's final for the second time. She had done the hard work of beating the gutsy Isha in the semifinals and Parul in a tough three-setter in the quarterfinals.

Vivek Shokeen was a class act in winning the under-18 boys title as he beat another talented boy, Rupesh Roy in three sets.

Vinay Kamineni beat Sriram Balaji in three sets in the under-14 boys final, while the tall Poojashree Venkatesh was able to beat G. S. Janaki Rao with ease in the under-14 girls final. She won a double crown, by capturing the doubles title with Shweta Kumari Solanki.

Experts like former Davis Cup coach Akhtar Ali observed that by improving the foundation with good technique at a young age, Indian youngsters could take the next sure step towards progress.

The results (finals):

Men: Aqeel Khan (Pak) bt Vinod Sridhar 4-6, 7-5, 6-2, 6-1; **Doubles:** Ajay Ramaswami and Vinod Sridhar bt Kamala Kannan and V. M. Ranjeet 6-2, 6-2.

Women: Sanaa Bhambri bt Sonal Phadke 6-3, 3-6, 6-4; **Doubles:** Sanaa Bhambri and Isha Lakhani bt Liza Pereira and Sonal Phadke 7-6 (7), 6-1.

Under-18 boys: Vivek Shokeen bt Rupesh Roy 6-2, 3-6, 6-2; **Doubles:** Anshuman Dutta and Rupesh Roy bt Sumit Prakash Gupta and Tejasvi Rao 2-6, 6-1, 6-4.

Under-18 girls: Sanaa Bhambri bt Parul Goswami 7-5, 6-1; **Doubles:** G. K. Shweta and Preethi

Subramaniam bt Ashmitha Easwaramurthi and Parija Maloo 6-2, 7-6 (3).

Under-14 boys: Vinay Kamineni bt Sriram Balaji 2-6, 6-4, 6-3; **Doubles:** B. Vikram Reddy and Abhijeet Tiwari bt Vijayant Malik and Shiva Sangwan 6-2, 7-6 (4).

Under-14 girls: Poojashree Venkatesh bt G. S. Janaki Rao 6-3, 6-2; **Doubles:** Shweta Kumari Solanki and Poojashree Venkatesh bt Prerna Mythry and Sushruta Reddy 6-2, 6-0.