

End of the road for Paire and Prajnesh

Marcora stuns No. 1 seed while Kwon knocks out the Indian; Purav-Ramkumar duo beats Paes-Ebden

TATA OPEN
N. SUDARSHAN
PUNE

Tata Open Maharashtra's worst fears came true on Thursday as top seed Benoit Paire, India No.1 Prajnesh Gunneswaran and crowd favourite Leander Paes all crashed out of the tournament.

First Prajnesh was beaten 6-3, 7-6(5) by South Korea's Soonwoo Kwon; then Paire turned in an abject performance to lose to Italian Roberto Marcora 6-4, 6-4 before Paes' defeat in his last appearance in an ATP 250 at home rounded off the evening.

The Indian doubles legend and his partner Aussie Matthew Ebden were thrashed by Purav Raja and Ramkumar Ramanathan 6-2, 6-1.

The Indian pair was ruthless on the night, winning 82% of its service points and not providing a single opportunity to break.

Mystifying surrender
Paire's, on the other hand, was a mystifying surrender. The World No. 19 lost to an opponent ranked a whopping 155 places below him. Marcora broke in the fifth game of the first set to take it 6-4, before breaking at a similar stage in the second to establish a firm grip. Paire got one break back but lost serve immediately to hand the initiative to Marcora. The Italian did go down 15-40 while serving at 5-4, but the result never seemed in doubt.



Powering through: Purav Raja and Ramkumar Ramanathan proved too strong for Leander Paes and Matthew Ebden. ■ R. RAGU

In contrast, Prajnesh showed a lot more fight. He displayed much attacking verve and constantly took up aggressive court positions. But Kwon, the tournament's fourth seed, while being resolute in defence, transitioned seamlessly into attack mode.

On the day, he would hit one winner more than Prajnesh (22 to 21) and commit 12 errors fewer (35 to 47).

After the two traded breaks in the first two games, Prajnesh down a break-point at 2-3, dumped an easy overhead into the net.

He went on to lose the set

6-3. The 30-year-old played a much better second set, staying with his opponent for the first eight games.

Upping the ante
Kwon, however, upped his level in the ninth, earning multiple break points. But Prajnesh proved equal to the task by saving four of them. The match slipped into a tie-break and there the World No. 88 outshone Prajnesh.

At 3-3, the 22-year-old Kwon hit an ace before a wide forehand by Prajnesh left him on the threshold of a win.

Prajnesh netted a back-

hand to give Kwon two match points and the South Korean took it on the second with an easy forehand volley.

"I don't think I played a bad match," said Prajnesh. "I am not much better than him, but at the same time not much worse. So they were really small margins. But these are the kind of matches I should be winning consistently."

The results:
Second round: Soonwoo Kwon (Kor) bt Prajnesh 6-3, 7-6(5); Roberto Marcora (Ita) bt Benoit Paire (Fra) 6-4, 6-4; James Duckworth (Aus) bt Taro Daniel (Jpn) 6-7(4), 7-6(6), 6-3; Egor

Gerasimov (Blr) bt Nikola Milojevic (Srb) 2-6, 6-3, 6-2.
Doubles (quarterfinals): Purav Raja & Ramkumar Ramanathan bt Leander Paes & Matthew Ebden 6-2, 6-1.

Order of Play
Centre Court
■ Jiri Vesely (Cze) vs Ilya Ivashka (Blr)
■ Yuichi Sugita (Jpn) vs Ricardis Berankis (Ltu)
■ Roberto Marcora (Ita) vs James Duckworth (Aus)
■ Soonwoo Kwon (Kor) vs Egor Gerasimov (Blr)

Indians' schedule goes haywire after Coronavirus outbreak

N. SUDARSHAN
PUNE

Following the outbreak of the deadly Coronavirus in China, the schedules of India's top singles players have been badly affected.

In the recent past, Prajnesh Gunneswaran (No. 122), Ramkumar Ramanathan (182) and Sasikumar Mukund (263) have used the rapidly improving East Asian swing of the ATP Challenger circuit in March and April to prop up their rankings.

But with the ATP cancelling all four Challengers in China during March (Qijing, Zhuhai, Shenzhen and Zhangjiagang), the players will now have to look elsewhere. The ATP is yet to make a decision on the tournaments in April, but with apprehensions about travelling very high, the Indians are set to miss the whole swing.

The \$162,480 Anning Challenger scheduled for April has been a happy hunting ground for Prajnesh. He won his maiden Challenger

title in 2018 and reached the final last year.

Ramkumar has played three Chinese Challengers in each of the past two years and reached the final of a \$125,000 Challenger in Chinese Taipei in April 2018. Both Prajnesh and Ramkumar won't be travelling this year.

"I was supposed to play in China, but won't be going there," confirmed Prajnesh. "I'll be playing in Kazakhstan or something. I just have to look at the calendar and go wherever tournaments are available."

Closely monitored
The ATP said it was monitoring the situation closely. "We had to cancel / delay the Chinese Challengers in March," said Alison Lee, the ATP's Executive Vice President, International Group. "We have had to adapt, shift a few tournaments so that player flow was not affected. Natural occurrences like this happen and we have to be prepared. But it's mainly China. Although we may look at delaying the April tournaments."

Hard blow
For Sasikumar, in particular, it will be a hard blow, for he played five Challengers in March and April across China and Chinese Taipei, including the two in Shenzhen and Zhangjiagang that have been cancelled.

"I don't have a schedule, where can I plan next?" said a worried Sasikumar. "The tournaments got cancelled last Tuesday. For now the



Sasikumar Mukund. ■ R. RAGU
Ramkumar Ramanathan. ■ R. RAGU
Prajnesh Gunneswaran. ■ R. RAGU

Paes named in team for Croatia tie

DAVIS CUP
KAMESH SRINIVASAN
NEW DELHI

The All India Tennis Association (AITA) has announced a six-member team for the Davis Cup World Group qualifier tie against Croatia to be played on indoor hard court in Zagreb on March 6 and 7.

The team will have Prajnesh Gunneswaran, Sumit Nagal and Ramkumar Ramanathan for singles. There will be three doubles players in Rohan Bopanna, Leander Paes and Divij Sharan.

Rohit Rajpal continues as the captain of the team, even though he was originally supposed to be the skipper only for the tie against Pakistan. Zeeshan Ali will be the coach.

"Once the Davis Cup tie was shifted out of Pakistan and played in Kazakhstan, it was decided that Rohit would be the captain of the



Leander Paes... back in the mix. ■ R. RAGU

team for the year 2020," clarified Akhouri Bishwadeep, CEO, AITA.

The selection committee meeting was held under the chairmanship of Balram Singh on Thursday, and was attended by Rajpal and Ananta Bhambrani.

Zeeshan and Nandan Bal were consulted over phone

before the team was finalised.

What happened?
When asked about the withdrawal of the press release a few minutes after it was sent by the AITA, the CEO clarified that the person who had sent the release thought that there was a mistake.

"The selection committee had also decided that Anand Dubey and Yash Pandey would be the physios for the team. But, it was brought to the attention of the committee that Anand could be busy with the Fed Cup team, if it was held the same week," said Bishwadeep.

Even though a six-member team has been announced, only a five-member team has to be intimated to the IITF. One player would travel as a reserve, and the name would be decided in due course.

Clarity needed
"We could have announced the team later, but some of the players whose availability we had sought, wanted clarity as they needed a three-week period to enter tournaments, if they were not selected for Davis Cup duty. Hence, the team has been announced now," said the CEO.

Manage your expectations: Lee

Target players ranked 10-40, says ATP Executive VP

N. SUDARSHAN
PUNE

In light of the Tata Open Maharashtra not featuring a single top-10 player for the first time since 2003, ATP's executive vice-president Alison Lee said on Thursday it would have been prudent for the organisers to have pursued players ranked 10 to 40.

Pushed back
With the ATP Cup taking the coveted start-of-the-season slot and Doha 250, with its hefty prize purse, running concurrently, Pune had to push its dates by a month.

"This is not necessarily a bad week," Lee said on Thursday. "Montpellier and Cordoba this week have very good player fields. They've been in those weeks for a long time and know they



Alison Lee. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

have to go after players fairly aggressively.

"The tournament director here [Prashant Sutar] acknowledges they didn't know what to really expect. They have seen that they have to go after other top players or rising stars. I think everyone has to manage their expectations," she said.

"Getting top-10 players is very difficult. You look at Roger [Federer], Rafa [Nadal] and Novak [Djokovic]. How many 250s did they play last year? I'm not saying it would be impossible to get a top-10 player, but I think the focus should be on those from 10 to 40," she said.

Changes likely
But she acknowledged that while a comprehensive review has been planned for 2023, there could be changes to the calendar before that.

"The 2021 calendar is already published and Pune will be in the same week. But 2022 is not set and I know Doha is very keen to move out of week one. So while Pune is in this week now, it may not be here forever," she added.

Bangladesh to meet India in final

U-19 WORLD CUP
PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
POTCHEFSTROOM

Bangladesh stormed into its maiden ICC under-19 World Cup final with a comprehensive six-wicket win over New Zealand here on Thursday, setting up a title clash with record four-time champion India on Sunday.

Mahmudul Hasan Joy rose to the occasion with a 100 off 127 balls, helping Bangladesh overcome the 212-run target in 44.1 overs.

After losing the openers cheaply in the chase, Joy paired up with Towhid Hridoy (40) first before teaming up with Shahadat Hossain (40 not out) to share a 101-run stand for the fourth wicket and fashion a re-sounding win.

New Zealand had recovered to make 211 for eight after being 74 for four at one stage, courtesy an unbeaten 75 off 83 balls from Beckham Wheeler-Greennall.

The scores: New Zealand 211/8 in 50 overs (Beckham Wheeler-Greennall 75, Nicholas Lidstone 44) lost to Bangladesh 215/4 in 44.1 overs (Mahmudul Hasan Joy 100, Shahadat Hossain 40 n.o.).

No impact of T20 loss on ODI unit: Nicholls

Opener lauds Taylor and Latham's role in NZ's highest successful ODI chase

INDIA IN NZ
PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
AUCKLAND

New Zealand batsman Henry Nicholls on Thursday said the One-Day International squad did not carry the baggage of the T20 blanking by India and that reflected in its highest run chase in 50-over cricket.

Riding on Ross Taylor's 21st hundred, the hosts chased down their highest total in ODIs on Wednesday to take a 1-0 lead in the three-match series. The second ODI will be played on Saturday.

No pressure
"We didn't feel it as part of the group coming in. So I wasn't feeling any pressure and there is no need to prove anything. It was a small ground and a big chase, so it was nice we were able to do that," Nicholls said on Thursday.

"It was great, our biggest chase ever in ODI cricket and it was good to be able to contribute in it. In the past, playing India in India, we have had a couple of chases around the 300-mark and others we got close. It was nice to do that again at home,



Game-changers: The experienced Taylor and stand-in skipper Latham, right, gave India a reality check. ■ GETTY IMAGES

and to actually win the game, it was great," he said.

Taylor smacked an unbeaten 109, with Tom Latham knocking 69 off 48 balls. Their stand broke India's bowling strength in the middle overs. Nicholls paid rich tribute to the two senior batsmen.

More than just runs
"Having someone like that at number four, especially with Kane Williamson not being

cholls said.

On Latham's knock, he said: "Tom and I have played together for a long time, so I have certainly seen him play like that before. He is very versatile and adaptive to the game scenario and conditions. The way he started, well it was slow, 2 off 10 balls or something. But he managed to put the pressure back on Kuldeep (Yadav) and their other spinners. Being captain he led from the front and that partnership changed the game for us," he said.

Seddon Park's dimensions came into sharp focus, as a shorter boundary on one side benefitted the chase. The second ODI will be played at Eden Park which has still shorter boundaries.

"The short boundary proved to be really important for us. There was some breeze as well in the evening. So whenever they bowled through the middle, or bowled short, we pushed back with boundaries. Their attacking bowlers couldn't bowl with the bigger boundary and it played into our hands. Ross managed it pretty well and again for Tom to come to the crease, and attack the way he did, it really changed the game.

Raptors storm into semifinals

Leverdez and Sai Praneeth help the team blank Warriors

PBL
V.V. SUBRAHMANYAM
HYDERABAD

The brilliance of Brice Leverdez and captain B. Sai Praneeth helped defending champion Bengaluru Raptors outplay Awadhe Warriors 5-0 and enter the semifinal of the Premier Badminton League at the Gachibowli Indoor Stadium here on Thursday.

Warriors got off to a perfect start with the men's combine of Ko Sung Hyun and Shin Baek Cheol scoring an impressive win over Arun George and Rian Agung Saputro.

Raptors' World No. 39 Brice Leverdez cruised past World No. 64 Ajay Jayaram in the Trump match for the latter. The former overcame a hesitant start - he looked rattled by Jayaram's deceptive shots at the net - to score six points in a row in the first game and wrap it up in quick time.

In the second, Leverdez was more aggressive as he took a comfortable 8-2 lead only to see Jayaram fight back with a solid net game. However, the Raptors shuttler shifted gears and came up with telling smashes to



Trump card: Sai Praneeth cruised past Wong Wing Ki Vincent in straight games. ■ NAGARA GOPAL

win five straight points and seal the contest.

beatable 4-0 lead.

Sai Praneeth's ability to get his smashes right whenever he was under pressure proved decisive in the final analysis.

Raptors joined North-Eastern Warriors, Chennai Superstarz and Pune 7 Aces in the semifinals.

The results: Bengaluru Raptors bt Awadhe Warriors 5-0 (Arun George & Rian Agung Saputro lost to Ko Sung Hyun & Shin Baek Cheol 15-14, 7-15, 11-15; Brice Leverdez bt Ajay Jayaram (T) 15-9, 15-9; Tai Tzu Ying bt Beiwen Zhang 15-12, 15-12; B. Sai Praneeth (T) bt Wong Wing Ki Vincent 15-11, 15-13; Chan Peng Soon & Eom Hye Won bt Ko Sung Hyun & Christinna Pedersen 7-15, 15-12, 15-11).