

Inheriting the genes of excellence

by Kamesh Srinivasan

"Can he beat Leander?" That was the question one faced after Mahesh Bhupathi won the National grasscourt title in Chandigarh in 1994.

Well, Mahesh could not beat Leander in any of the three singles meetings in the Challengers, and had to be content beating the ace in an exhibition match. That did not, however, stop Mahesh from becoming the No. 1 doubles player in the world, winning many Grand Slam titles and numerous other titles on the professional tour. He, of course, had his success in singles as well, like helping India win the Davis Cup ties against the Netherlands and Chile, apart from stretching Carlos Moya to five sets on the hallowed turf of Wimbledon. But that paled into insignificance by the magnitude of his doubles achievements.

After a decade, we are hearing the same question once again. Prakash Amritraj has captured everyone's attention by winning a hat-trick of titles in the Satellite circuit. He is athletic, can serve and volley, can also stay back and hit the groundstrokes with punch and precision on either flank and most importantly can get the first serves when facing the break-points.

Being Vijay Amritraj's son, the 19-year-old Prakash has the genes of excellence, not just for tennis but impeccable behaviour, communication and sense of humour as well. He has the intensity of focus to make a mark in the professional world, and the passion to pursue the game till he achieves his potential.

"The driving force in my tennis is certainly my father. Though it many sound like a cliché, he is my hero. If there is one person I aspire to be like on and off the court, it is definitely my father", Prakash says.

Well, you cannot have a better role-model in Indian sports, than Vijay Amritraj.

By winning the Satellite circuit and along with it 36 precious ATP points, on his second appearance in such an event, following an abortive attempt two years ago when he did not win a singles match in two tournaments, Prakash has taken the first big step towards success.

From college tennis in the US, where he was pursuing his education in the University of Southern California till May this year when he quit to become a full-time tennis professional, to playing the Grand Slam event in the US Open, Prakash has already seen it all.

He had won the USTA super national hard court championship last year to win a wild card for the US Open. He faced the then 29th ranked Paradorn Srichaphan of Thailand and lost 1-6, 3-6, 0-6. It was indeed tough for a young man trying to find his way in the competitive world, to face a hard core professional straightaway. But, Prakash was happy about the education he gained.

That defeat also brought the biggest pay cheque for Prakash, as he collected \$11,000 for winning four games in three sets. He quickly understood that when he starts to win matches, he can lead a happy life as a tennis professional.

Prakash also knows that it is not that easy, as he has struggled in the Futures and Challenger tournaments around the world, winning the odd good match, like beating the 133th ranked Michael Russell in Texas last year.

"I look at my progress so far quite positively. I think with my style of game (serve and volleying). It takes a little longer to develop. Most serve and volleyers of today took a little time to develop as well. Rafter, Henman and Max Mirnyi didn't develop until they were into their twenties. I am mainly looking at my improvement rate. As long as that is on the right track. I feel good about reaching my

potential", he says.

When you have a father as sharp as Vijay, you know that you will get all the backing that you deserve. Prakash has been lucky to get a few valuable wild cards into the big events. As a talented player ready to break into the big league, he has been able to capitalise on them to a great extent.

After failing to make a positive impression in his 2-6, 2-6 defeat to Jiri Vanek of the Czech Republic in the Tata Open in Chennai, Prakash showed first clear signs of being ready to play the big guys, when he made it to the third and final qualifying rounds of the \$355,000 Tour events in Scottsdale and San Jose.

"I was trying to make an impression at the Tata Open. It is a very special tournament to me. Being in my father's hometown of Madras, which has served as a home to me as well, and playing in front of so many people that have seen me grow from a baby to a man, and especially playing in front of my grand parents, it was a very special time for me. I wanted to perform well", he says.

Though he had looked to be in prime form during the practice sessions, at least to his uncle Anand Amritraj who was unable to hide his disappointment on 'live' television during Prakash's match, the young man had made a small mistake in preparation, which he realised later.

"The experience itself will serve me well in the future. It will allow me to be that much stronger when I return to the event next year. In this particular case, I feel not practising enough under the conditions I would be playing the match (under the lights) was a mistake", he recalls.

The best spell was, of course, in the Franklin Templeton Tennis Classic in Arizona in March, when Prakash beat David Macpherson of Australia 4-6, 7-6 (7-5), 6-4 in the first qualifying round, before beating the 100th ranked top seed, Alexander Waske of Germany 6-4, 1-6, 6-4. He lost to Jay Gooding of Australia 4-6, 6-7 (5-7) in the third qualifying round.

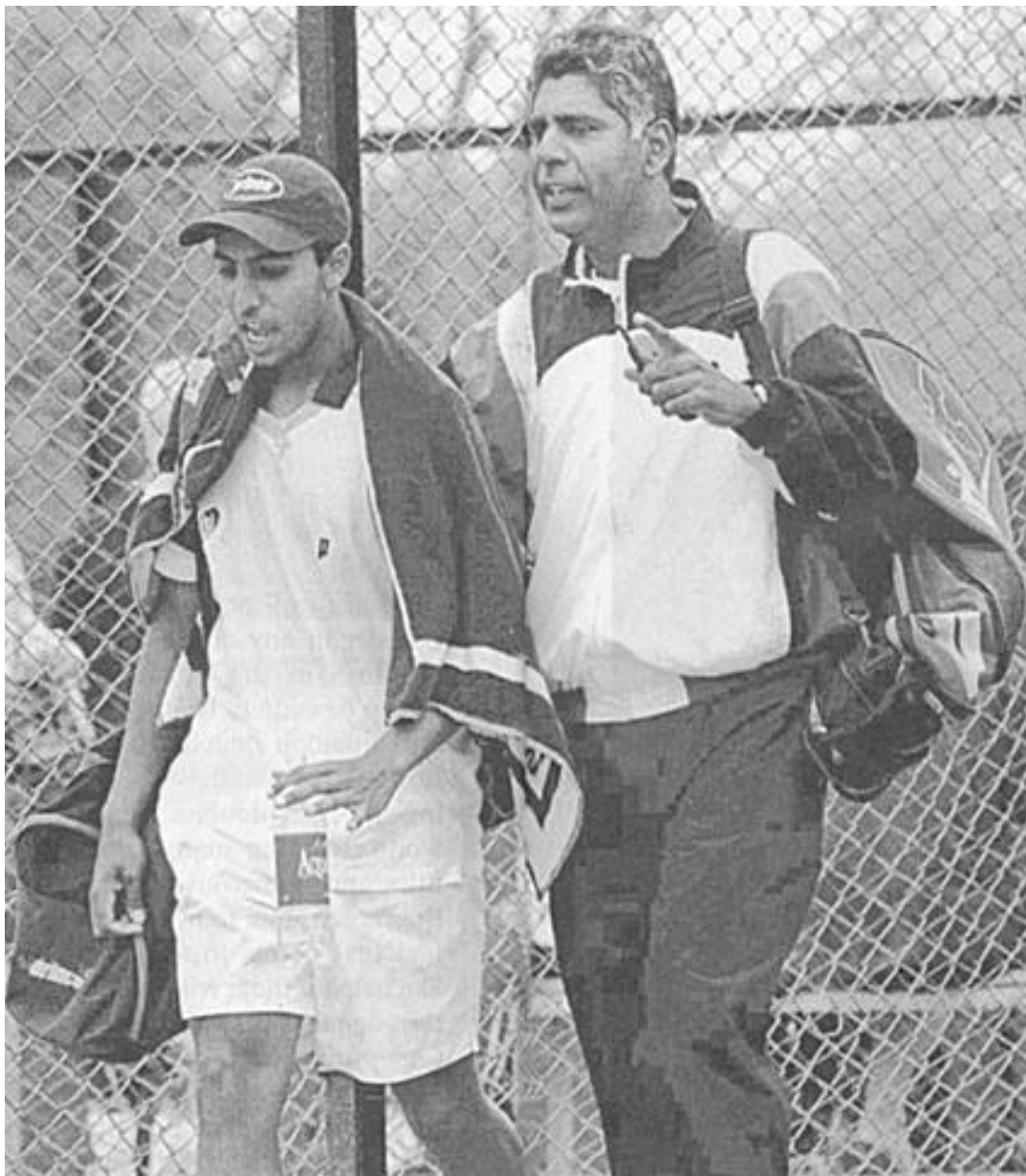
Earlier in February, Prakash had not dropped a set in beating Jean-Julien Roger of Antilles Netherlands and Tomas Panicka of the Czech Republic in the first two qualifying rounds of the Tour event in California. He lost to the 296th ranked Todd Reid of Australia 5-7, 4-6 in the final round.

"I was happy with the recent wins I have had. But I have been extremely disappointed at the fact that I wasn't able to convert my chances in the last round of qualifiers, making it into the main draw. Playing guys like (Jan Michael) Gambill and (James) Blake, (the two players I would have played had I qualified in those events) are the matches I want. I want the tough competition. But looking back, I think these events have made me a better player, and that is the real positive point that I am focussing on", Prakash says.

Prakash was competing well, but needed to tune his game and approach a lot better to make that breakthrough. You need to be beating the big boys in the main draw to be able to get your hand at all the booty, and to improve your status on the ATP computer.

In Indian Wells, Prakash got to play the qualifying event in the \$2.45 million Tennis Masters Series event. He lost to the 81st ranked eighth seed, Roby Ginepri of the US 3-6, 3-6. Ginepri not only qualified but went on to hand out a 6-0, 6-1 drubbing to the seventh-seeded Marat Safin of Russia in the third round of the main draw. He lost only to the eventual champion Lleyton Hewitt.

For someone ranked in the 700s, Prakash had indeed demonstrated that he has the game to fight the big guys in the big league. It was a matter of completing his tennis education, understanding the nuances the hard way,



Prakash Amritraj with his father, Vijay Amritraj, whom he idolises. — Pic. S. Subramaniam

before having his say on the tennis court. For, you have everything to learn from the defeats, especially when you are young and trying to find your way.

"I always feel that my game is suited towards having really big weeks and some low weeks. I feel that I am an explosive type of player. I may lose matches in some Futures, and I may also qualify and reach the quarters or semis of an ATP event the next week.

I see myself achieving points in some big events and some small events rather than in a large number of small events", observes Prakash.

To come back to the ground level after competing in those big events, made Prakash understand the realities of life. Playing the Satellite circuit in Mumbai, Chandigarh and Delhi against the second string Indian players and a few foreign participants helped Prakash gauge his growth.

The idea was to get a lot of matches in different and difficult conditions, so that he was ready to handle the better players in better conditions.

"My short term goal is to soon be making the main draws of Challenger events. And my career goals are to aim for the top ten, and to bring the Davis Cup and a Wimbledon title to India," he says.

They always tell you to aim high. Really,

you cannot aim any higher in tennis, when you are just about to make the top 450. Prakash has the faith in his tennis and in the tennis education that he has had so far under the tutelage of his doting father.

"Since I started playing tennis, my father has always emphasised on a well rounded game. Play from the back and front of the court. I feel focusing on this has given me a game which I feel I can rely on any aspect. I hope and think this all round game can take me far", he says.

If the immense knowledge and experience of a man as successful as Vijay could be passed on to a young man with all the eagerness to understand and apply the vital points in his career, there is no reason why the youngster cannot make a successful career.

"I think my father has been the greatest gift in my life. He is first a great father, and second he is the best coach I could ask for. I think the fact that we are best friends off the court really translates into on court success.

I am able to listen to him and soak in all his knowledge. I also watch the old tapes of his matches all the time. I am able to understand how to mix the serve and volleying game of the old school with today's powerful ground-stroke game", Prakash adds.

Though he has not talked about it much, there is a general feeling that Prakash's

exploits in the Indian Satellite circuit would fetch him a place in the Indian Davis Cup team soon. For, Harsh Mankad had got into the team even when he had finished second to Danai Udomchoke of Thailand some years ago in a similar Satellite circuit.

As per the communication from the ITF, Prakash became eligible to represent India in Davis Cup from April 1 2003. The powers controlling Indian tennis are waiting for the boy to be ready before being thrown into the deep end. "If I am good enough to be selected, it will be the proudest moment in my life. To represent the country that I have always wanted to play for, ever since I was a child will always be a special feeling", Prakash says.

Prakash Amritraj may never get to play the 30-year-old Leander Paes in a competitive singles match, as the latter has literally stopped playing singles, except for shouldering the load in the Davis Cup. However, there is always a chance for the faithful followers of the game to see the two in action across the net, when they are sparring for Davis Cup.

Most of us may not be able to appreciate his ability right now, but make no mistake, Prakash Amritraj has the answers to many unanswered questions in Indian tennis.

Courtesy Sportstar

South Africa's record stand against England

By Derek Pringle

Egdbaston is England's most successful Test ground but it was hostile territory for them Thursday as Herschelle Gibbs and Graeme Smith scored 338 for the first wicket, a record South Africa opening stand against England.

Both made centuries, a free-scoring 179 by the frenetic Gibbs in contrast to a more stolid 178 by Smith, 22, the youngest Test captain to score a hundred.

It all added up, with a little help from Gary Kirsten, to a massive 398 for one, a first-day total more typical of Australia's swaggering gunslingers than men, who only a week ago, looked far too shy and retiring to stand up to England's bowling, let alone flay it.

As well as rewriting the record books, the opening stand scored huge psychological points following the side's recent defeats. When confidence returns it does so exponentially and there was a palpable 'Game On' surge in the visitors' body language as the

monolithic stand took shape. By contrast, any momentum Nasser Hussain's team hoped to take into this Test from recent triumphs was stopped in its tracks.

On his first big day back as captain since beating Zimbabwe at Durham on June 8, everything appeared to go wrong for Hussain the moment he lost the toss. But while wayward bowling and a docile pitch allowed South Africa back into the summer, worse could follow should Marcus Trescothick be unable to bat after fracturing the tip of his right index finger.

The left-hander was attempting to catch a Gibbs edge from a Steve Harmison slower ball that did not quite carry to slip. He will not field again in the match but overnight ice treatment may allow him to bat should he decide to bite the bullet. Another day may help him, and if England continue taking wickets at their current rate, he could get another two.

England have endured worse days at home but rarely this late in the season, and

rarely after winning so much earlier in the piece. At one stage it looked as if they would not take a single wicket and there was scarcely an appeal of note before tea. Three catches were floored, two of them caught-and-bowled chances as Gibbs checked a couple of on drives, but none was a cert even for players who practice every day.

The bowlers, two of whom had not spent more than 50 overs in the field for 47 days, came bearing more gifts than the Three Wise Men. As you would expect from decent players, Gibbs and Smith gleefully accepted them and the day contained one six, a towering pull over midwicket by Gibbs off Darren Gough, and 57 fours. In just 10 Test innings together as openers, the pair have twice passed the 300 mark, the only opening batsmen in history to do so.

But it was not just about batsmen feasting on bad bowling and once set Gibbs in particular conjured some magical shots from less friendly balls, until one sweep-slog too many

carried to Mark Butcher on the midwicket fence to give Michael Vaughan the only wicket.

It seems a long time since Gibbs was handed a six-month ban for his part in the Hansie Cronje affair. Some felt he got off lightly, but a last-minute change of mind, after his team-mate Mark Boucher persuaded him to confess all rather than deny it, probably saved his career.

Out of form and low on confidence, Gibbs was virtually strokeless for the first 30 minutes as the bowlers fired wide of off stump. But if not making him play was a minor sin, it got worse when they mixed up their tactics, bowling short at him while over-pitching to Smith. Gibbs's cross-bat shots off the back foot, along with those of Brian Lara and Ricky Ponting, are some of the best in the game and just about every one bore a coconut.

James Anderson, rested in the build-up to this match, had the worst day of his short England career. Not 21 until the end of the

month, his bowling and body language were all over the place once the ball stopped swinging. He will learn to cope, but many would argue the learning process could be hastened if he played more county cricket.

Coach Duncan Fletcher favours rest over rhythm, of which Anderson had none, something 78 runs from 13 overs bore out.

Sensing the young man's distress, Hussain put an arm around him at the close. In a contrast to his almost constant hectoring of his bowlers in the last Ashes tour, Hussain barely interjected yesterday, a curious change considering the amount of dross sent down.

At the other end of the experience scale, Gough tried to do line and length but did not look dangerous. Sideways movement was scarce though Andrew Flintoff caused the odd bit of indifferent bounce, a feature, much to England's concern, that usually increases here as game and pitch wear on.

The Daily Telegraph