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**'It has been a real struggle'**

V.V.S.



All for one:National tennis champions J. Vishnuvardhan, Suresh Krishna, Saketh Myneni, coach C. V. Nagaraj and P. C. Vignesh at a training session.— PHOTO: V. V. SUBRAHMANYAM

Three Davis Cuppers and five national champions. Well, that is the remarkable achievement of the School of Power Tennis run by the untiring coach Canjeevaran Venkatrao Nagraj at RRC Grounds in Secunderabad.

And, clearly, 24-year-old Jagadeesan Vishnuvardhan stands tall amongst them by virtue of his consistency.

For the record, Vishnuvardhan (2008), A. S. Suresh Krishna (2010)and Saketh Myneni (2011) were the Senior National Champions while, P. C.Vignesh was the Runner-up in the 2009 edition.

The three Davis Cuppers from this stable were Susheel Narla, Punna Vishal and Vishnuvardhan.

Now, Vishnuvardhan believes that he steps into a difficult and testing crucial phase of transition from the 'fringe player' status to gaining some sort of permanency in the Indian Davis Cup squad.

“For me, it has been a real struggle in life and in sport for the last five years and only since last two years, things have certainly improved for the good,” says the tall Vishnuvardhan, who was one of the reserves of the Indian Davis Cup squad for the recent encounter against Uzbekistan.

“When I started playing tennis, except Wimbledon, I never knew about any other Grand Slams. As I started competing and winning the age group events, I dreamt of playing for India in Davis Cup,” recalls the soft-spoken Vishnu, who lost the match in the reverse singles tie against Japan in Davis Cup last year but won the hearts of many critics with his striking performance on the tennis courts.

By all means Vishnu was one of those players who struggled to find the right platform after winning the National under-18 title. “That was the phase, when those keen to play in men's circuit had very limited opportunities as the focus was more on international events which were beyond our reach invariably,” he recalls.

What are the grey areas of concern now? “Well, when a Rafael Nadal says that he has to keep improving his fitness levels, it reminds of lesser mortals like us about the significance of staying fit over a longer period of time,” says Vishnu with a big smile.

“I am working a lot with Nagraj Sir (coach) on my defence, as I am essentially a very attacking player. Now, I am trying to master the art of controlling the pace of the game by sharpening my defence,” he pointed out.

Vishnu says the feeling of being close to the ambience of a Davis Cup match is in itself a huge experience. “Being in the company of Leander and Mahesh has helped tremendously as you tend to pick up new tricks every time you run into them. They are such great players and very affable,” he explains.

Vishnu rates his winning the National under-16 title in Hyderabad as the decisive moment in his career. He played the event at the insistence of his coach C V Nagraj, as he was not very keen to play the tournament.

“After winning that National title, I realised that I had the potential to dream big in tennis and truly justified that my coach can spot the potential talent and goal which we players tend to miss clearly,” says the articulate tennis star from Hyderabad.

“Playing in the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games mixed doubles with Sania Mirza and winning the silver medal, and winning the bronze medal for men's team event were clearly the high-points of my career,” he looks back with justifiable pride.

“I was nervous definitely then. But, thanks to Sania and the men's team for their support, it turned out to be a very memorable Asian Games for me,” says Vishnu.

“That Asian Games also provided a huge opportunity of meeting one of my favourites - ace cueist and former World Champion Geet Sethi. I have read a lot of his books and what impressed me the most is his simplicity and the way he made someone like me feel so comfortable in the first meeting itself,” says an excited Vishnuvardhan.

“I hate the wrong calls especially in crunch situations as they take the match away from you. And, you just can't do anything about those calls,” he says with a tinge of seriousness to a query.

An executive in the Human Resources Wing of ONGC and a huge fan of the great Pete Sampras, Vishnuvardhan is clearly in the mood to look ahead. “There is no end

to learning. I am aware that this is the most decisive phase of my tennis career and I am willing to go that extra yard in terms of training and make a mark by being more consistent," he says.

"Well, you cannot even think of replacing someone like Mahesh (Bhupathi) and Leander (Paes)," clearly reminding that he has a long way to go.

V.V.S.