

SPORT

Sanmar and TNTA: 25 and going strong

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CHENNAI APRIL 16, 2017 00:00 IST



Long association: The Sanmar group has been sponsoring the TNTA tennis league from 1991 and group chairman N. Sankar has himself played in the league.

We started with small prize money but it brought in a sense of playing for something: Sankar

Chennai has been fortunate when it comes to the patronage of sports by passionate individuals and business houses — for, they have often looked beyond the commercial value on offer.

While the famed city cricket league is well documented, the tennis structure here is equally impressive.

Every top tennis player in the country has had meaningful stints in the city.

Last year, the Sanmar Group celebrated the golden jubilee of its association with the Jolly Rovers Cricket Club, which competes in the TNCA first division league. And Sanmar has been at the forefront of promoting tennis too.

In 2017, the group will celebrate 25 years of promoting the inter-club city tennis league.

While the league dates back to 1951, Sanmar came on board as sponsor in 1992 when group chairman N. Sankar was at the helm of the Tamil Nadu Tennis Association.

Elaborating on how it started, Sankar explained, “The league was actually pretty well run since the ’50s. So when I was the president, the then secretary V.K. Parthasarathy proposed to liven up the league and I was happy to do it. We started with small prize money but it brought in a sense of playing for something.”

N. Kumar, Sankar’s brother and vice-chairman of the Sanmar group, added: “The idea of the league was to get the clubs to be more active and professional.”

The brothers have themselves played in the league — even before their group came on board as the title sponsor and up until the 2000s. Sankar trained under T.K. Ramanathan, father of Ramanathan Krishnan.

Memorable moments

Recalling memorable moments of his playing days, Sankar spoke about a match in the mid-1980s that he won.

“I was then the TNTA president, captain of the winning MCC-A team and we (Sanmar) were giving away the prizes as a sponsor. In effect, I was giving to myself.”

Kumar, who replaced his brother as TNTA president, was instrumental in bringing the Chennai Open to the city from Delhi in 1997 and started the Tamil Nadu Academy of Tennis Excellence (TATE) to promote up-and-coming players.

“We had good players who were not able to take the next step,” Kumar said. “So we started to collect funds for their coaching requirement and help them travel abroad for tournaments.”

The effect of the programme can be gauged from Tamil Nadu’s track-record of producing top players, including three out of the four that played in the Davis Cup tie against Uzbekistan.

TNTA CEO and coach Hiten Joshi said, “The league has ensured the competitive level is high and also keeps the interest in the sport alive.

“Another advantage of the league is that the association with a club gives players a proper place to train when not playing in tournaments.”

Inter-city league

In 2010, the concept of an inter-city league was launched with clubs from four cities participating. The second edition was held in 2015 and the third edition was held this year as part of the silver jubilee celebrations.

The TNTA league meanwhile has grown from 50 players to about 500 now, spread over six zones with relegation and promotion.

The league also has two veterans’ events (45+ and 60+) and a women’s league, though women can be part of the regular league too.

What started with a prize money of Rs. 40,000 now carries a prize pot of Rs. 3.5 lakh including the K.S. Narayanan Memorial Rolling Trophy for the A zone winner.

Even as its profile has grown with top players like Prajnesh Gunneswaran, Ramkumar Ramanathan and Vishnu Vardhan taking part, Sankar wants to maintain the easy atmosphere of

the league. Its success has been largely down to promoting a sense of camaraderie among the players.

“Chennai is lucky in having some of the best leagues in the country and the tennis league in my view is the best here. It is an amateur league but it promotes a sense of club-manship and we want to keep it this way.”

The idea of the league is to get the clubs to be more active and professional. N. Kumar

SPORT

Jeevan named the best

Sports Reporter

CHENNAI April 17, 2017



Recognition: Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan's mother Kalyani receives the T.K. Ramanathan award from Ramesh Krishnan.M. Karunakaran

Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan was awarded the T.K. Ramanathan annual award for 2016 — a trophy and a cash prize of Rs. 30,000 — at the Tamil Nadu Tennis Association (TNTA) annual day function, held here on Sunday. Jeevan's mother Kalyani Nedunchezhiyan received the award on his behalf.

The prizes for the Sanmar-TNTA Chennai City inter-club tennis league and the Sanmar-TNTA veterans' tennis league were also given away. This year, MCC 'A' had emerged the zone-A champion for the fifth consecutive time in the inter-club league. There was a panel discussion on Chennai's tennis culture and tradition, moderated by eminent sports journalist Partab Ramchand. The panel comprised former tennis players P.S. Seshadri, Ramesh Krishnan, Lakshmi Mahadevan, Anand Amritraj, and N. Sankar, the chairman of the Sanmar group.

Apr 17 2017 : The Times of India (Chennai)

TNTA ANNUAL DAY - An evening to savour: Of maestros, memories and a promising future

Damayanti Dasgupta



Chennai:

It was back to the days of wooden racquets, soft touches and deft volleys on Sunday evening. The occasion was the Tamil Nadu Tennis Association (TNTA) annual day and 25 years of its association with Sanmar group and many of those who made Chennai the tennis capital of India in the last century were there.

A panel consisting of greats like Ramesh Krishnan and Anand Amritraj made it all the more interesting. "I come from a family of tennis players and I did not have any other option but to play the game. I was lucky that my grandfather (TK Ramanathan) was there when I was starting out. Since my father (Ramanathan Krishnan) was travelling professionally, my grandfather took it upon himself to teach me the sport. And let me tell you, he was quite a taskmaster. He did not allow me to play any other sport and my interest in football and cricket was soon quashed by him," said the former India No. 1.

But N Sankar, chairman of the Sanmar Group, and also a tennis student of TK Ramanathan, had a different take. "Ramesh's grandfather was a great coach but he was very strict till Ramesh was born. From what I have seen he had mellowed down after that. I remember when he used to coach us, he would even ration the drinking water so that we would get accustomed to playing in tough conditions. I would say he was a tough coach but a benevolent grandfather. I think we are fortunate that Krishnan and Amritraj families are from this city," said N Sankar.

Taking the conversation for ward, PS Sheshadri, who played in the 50s said that even though Kolkata was once the Mecca of tennis in the country , he was happy that the baton was eventually passed on to Chennai.

“Once upon a time it was Kolkata which was of nerve centre of tennis in India and they produced eminent players but gradually Chennai picked up and it gives me immense pleasure to see how much tennis has grown in the city . The Davis Cup team which defeated Australia 3-2 in Sydney to reach the World Group final in 1987 had players from the city like Ramesh and Anand. From there to the latest team where three out of the four players (Ramkumar Ramanathan, Prajnesh Gunneswaran and Sriram Balaji) are from Chennai, shows that there has been an upward rise in the graph.

“ **Fit India stand a chance, says Anand:** Anand, who was India's former non-playing captain, has seen all three from close quarters and he feels India has a good chance in the World Group qualifier against Canada in September. “Milos Raonic, most probably , will not play. But they have the likes of Vasek Pospisil. If India have Saketh Myneni and Yuki Bhambri fit, we can have an interesting game,” Anand said.

Awards galore as guests of honour praise city's tennis culture

ASHOK VENUGOPAL/ENS
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JEEVAN Nedunchezhiyan, who won the doubles title at the Chennai Open in January, was given the prestigious TK Ramanathan award at the annual day and Silver Jubilee function of the Sanmar League and Tamil Nadu Tennis Association here on Sunday. His mother collected the award, which carried a cash purse of ₹30,000, from Ramesh Krishnan. GS Vasavi bagged the Nagamani Mahadevan award and a cash prize of ₹10,000.

The Muthukrishnan memorial

award went to upcoming player VM Sandeep. N Sankar, chairman, Sanmar Group, presented league awards to teams from six zones. MA Alagappan, president of TNTA, lauded Ramkumar Ramanathan for his good show this season, which helped him notch the India No 1 position for the first time, and also praised him for good Davis Cup show.

Prajnesh Gunneswaran and N Sriram Balaji too were complimented. Alagappan thanked all sponsors, and in particular the Sanmar Group that has been supporting tennis for 25 years.

To mark the feat, a discussion

was held where Krishnan, Anand Amritraj, N Sankar, PS Seshadri and Lakshmi Mahadevan spoke on what made Chennai click as a tennis centre.

Moderated by Partab Ramchand, all of them opined that sporting culture and good infrastructure were key reasons.

"No city is better. Chennai is the tennis capital of India, and a good place to grow up," lauded Anand, the former Davis Cup captain. "We had tennis courts at home, which helped us grow as players. Not to forget great coaches like K Rama Rao and Dr Rajan, also TNTA office bearers. There



Players being felicitated at the annual TNTA awards on Sunday | ROMANI AGARWAL

are also a lot of academies and courts for children. Many players from all over the country come here to practice and play. These are some of the reasons for the city being a tennis hub."

Krishnan also opined that the backing of TNTA has helped Chennai be acknowledged as one of the best places to learn the ropes of the game.

Kedar CA win

Half-centuries by Gowtham and Abijith helped Kedar Cricket Academy thump Little Masters Cricket Academy B by of 132 runs in the LMCA T20 trophy.

Brief scores: Little Masters Cricket Academy A 126/4 in 20 ovs (Ashwin 41) bt Abdul Malik Cricket Academy 54/7 in 20 ovs; Kedar Cricket Academy 181/3 in 20 ovs (Gowtham 64 , Abijith 60) bt Little Masters Cricket Academy B 49 in 19 ovs; Madras Gladiator Cricket Academy A 111/5 in 20 ovs bt Evergreen Cricket Academy 90/6 in 20 ovs.

Kedar CA win

Indian Bank got the better of MSU 3-1 in a St Joseph's-CFA Senior Division league match held at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium.

Results: Senior Division: Indian Bank 3-1.
First Division: Central Excise 2-1 YMSC.

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