METRO PLUS

# Let's break

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Shining starsRohan Bopanna, Mahesh Bhupathi and Archana VenkatramanShiv Kumar Pushpakar and special Arrangement

**Will more work at the grass root level help restore the glory that Karnataka enjoyed when it came to tennis?**

Bengaluru, in the past, has produced outstanding talents in the world of tennis. Some of whom have made their State and Nation proud. Top players of National and International calibre, like the Grand Slam Doubles Champions — Mahesh Bhupathi and Rohan Bopanna; Asian Women's Champion Udaya Kumar and Davis Cupper Prahlad Srinath; National-level players such as Archana and Arati Venkatraman and Sheethal Goutham, to name a few — are the proud products of Bengaluru's once thriving tennis culture.

However, in recent years, the talent seems to be dwindling; largely due to the lack of proper support for players at the grassroot-level.

While a few talented junior players like Aayush Bhat, Reshma Maruri and BR Nikshep (former National Under-18 Champion) are gradually climbing the ranks, it remains to be seen how well they will fare when they graduate to the senior level and play tournaments like ITF events.

The city boasts of 30 tennis academies and has one of the best tennis arenas in the country — KSLTA Stadium (Karnataka State Lawn Tennis Association). It was revamped in 2000 when the former Chief Minister, SM Krishna, took charge as the President with CS Sunder Raju as the secretary and helped put KSLTA on the map by hosting big-ticket international championships such as the ATP World doubles Legends Tour, WTA women's events and a string of ITF Future and Challenger events here.

Of late, given the huge costs involved and the trouble in finding the right sponsors, these events have, understandably, dwindled in number. Apart mega tournaments, what is more disconcerting is the lack of quality tournaments for juniors.

Tennis is an individual sport and players needed to be regularly tested in the competition arena for honing their skills. It is understandable that many choose to shift to other training centres in Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, New Delhi and Chennai, where facilities and tournaments are more readily available.

Looking at the scenario, Prahlad Srinath, now a leading coach who runs the SAT Academy, says, "Juniors need a proper support system. Most play at home and there is not enough exposure. Very few go out and play abroad. They need constant supervision to work on their fitness and mental strength as well, besides improving their technical skills. Academies can help them up to a certain level as they are struggling to survive. Moreover, children need to be more serious about making good in the game, which is lacking. KSLTA could do a lot more for grass-root tennis and should have paid professionals to look at ways to take the game forward. We need to have a minimum of 200 players at the competition level, so that at least four or five of them make the grade. There has to be volume to unearth some good talent."

Niranjan Ramesh, a veteran coach, admits that a lot needs to be done at the grass root level in tennis. He also says juniors often struggle to make a proper transition to senior ranks.

Is there a way out of this impasse?

"Definitely," says M Krishna Kumar, the USPTR Master Coach, who heads the Kinesis Academy. "The problem starts with teaching the fundamentals of the game and if that is not done the right way, the player will find it difficult to break through the ranks at the higher levels. Today, the main issue is that anyone can set up a tennis academy in Bengaluru, irrespective of their expertise or qualification. There is no vetting process and the State Association should start by ranking them based on the facilities they offer and the credentials of coaches, who also need to upgrade their knowledge with workshops on a regular basis," adds Krishna.

He also stresses the need for parents to play a more positive role. "They are willing to wait for a decade to see the results when it comes to the education of their children, but when it comes to tennis, they expect instant results! It is not that easy. Such expectation affect coaches, who struggle to retain their students. I feel the coach and the child should be left alone to grow at their own pace," says Krishna.

For a start, the state association should engage with academies in a professional manner and provide the necessary support to groom young talents.

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