

Future of tennis in India is bright: US tennis coach

Overseas coaches coming to India have a tendency to bestow lavish praise on talented youngsters, but American tennis coach Dough MacCurdy really means it when he says the next generation of Indian champions is on its way.

MacCurdy is keen on the country producing future Grand Slam champions. He realises that Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi are in the twilight of their careers, making Sania Mirza the only one with any star value. But the International Tennis Federation (ITF) development officer is confident that the wait won't be long.

MacCurdy, who is here to revamp the Indian tennis set-up, is particularly impressed with junior world no.5 Yuki Bhambri. He feels the Delhi boy is among the top three players in the world today and could attain the heights of Ramesh Krishnan in the world rankings. That's saying a lot because Ramesh had a career-high ranking of 23 in 1985.

'For his age, Yuki has an uncanny anticipation well beyond his years and is a great game player. Most importantly he has the ability to understand the game, which is rare,' said MacCurdy.

MacCurdy also thinks highly of Vivek Shokeen and Divij Sharan, and adds Som Dev Varman - who made his Davis Cup debut against Uzbekistan in February - to that shortlist.

'Shokeen and Sharan, whom I saw in the challengers, are really good players. Som Dev, who beat the no. 1 player John Isner in NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) tennis singles championship last year, has tremendous potential. So tennis buffs have reason to feel highly optimistic about the game's future (in India),' he said.

This is MacCurdy's second stint in the country this year, having previously conducted a coaching workshop at the Chandigarh Lawn Tennis Association (CLTA) tennis stadium Feb 18-25.

A recipient of the International Tennis Hall of Fame Educational Merit Award in 1993 and the ITF Award for Services to the Game in 1998, MacCurdy strongly feels the need for an efficient coaching system to take the game to a higher rung.

'There are some good coaches here, but the number needs to increase. I have been to Tamil Nadu and [Chennai](#) and I feel the state associations are ambitious, but they need to persist with their schemes.

'Also there has to be a good competitive environment which should not be limited to one state. Ideally, there has to be a centrally located place where a pool of players can train and play.

'For example in [Mumbai](#) I have heard they have created a pool of 24 players selected from the state who would be trained free of cost and can also choose the trainers of their choice. More such schemes need to come up,' he said.

According to MacCurdy, Indian tennis associations need to introduce slower courts in place of the hard turfs for the players to develop their game.

'The courts in India are hard and really fast. As a result the balls get smaller on these courts, not giving a player a chance to fully develop his game. In slow courts on the other hand, the balls appear bigger and that allows a player to foster his mental and physical endurance so as to generate his own potential.

'Today there aren't many Americans and Australians among the top-rank players like 30 years ago because at that time the game was more suited for fast hard courts. Today the players who master playing on clay are ruling.'

Though MacCurdy is happy by the progress of men's tennis, he feels that women's tennis in India needs another seven to eight years to come of age.

'I am impressed with the depth in the draw at the national championships, which was much higher than what it used to be 10-15 years ago. However, I noticed that better players like Sunitha Rao and Shikha Oberoi have their base abroad and that's the reason why there is no team of players here to create requisite competitive atmosphere,' he said.

Nonetheless, MacCurdy feels that with Paes and Bhupathi, India has strong prospects of winning a medal at the Olympics.

'Leander and Mahesh might have their differences, but they are professionals. They are strong medal prospects in Beijing.'

MacCurdy feels the transit ratio of top tennis players into professionals should go up and for that the All India Tennis Association (AITA) is doing its bit by hosting enough ITF and WTA tournaments.

'If any country can have 40 weeks of organised competitive tennis like India has it need not worry about its tennis health,' he said.

(Pragya Tiwari can be contacted at pragya.t@ians.in)

Pragya Tiwari (© IANS / India eNews)