

Ashutosh Singh lone Indian to sail through

Wild card entry Ashutosh Singh justified the confidence the organisers reposed in him by pulling off a thrilling three-set victory over temperamental eighth seed Russian Alexandre Kudryavtsev in the first round of the \$50,000 SAIL Open ATP Challenger at the DLTA complex here Monday.

National grass court champion Ashutosh beat the Russian 6-3, 6-7(6), 7-6(6) in a hard-fought encounter that lasted nearly three hours on a day when no other Indian, including Prakash Amritraj, could cross the first hurdle.

Ashutosh matched the Russian stroke for stroke and engaged him in long rallies. His serve was another strong point of his game. In the first set, it was a question of when will he break the Russian's serve since he was able to hold his quite comfortably. The break came in the sixth game and he was through with the set.

The Russian, however, came back strongly in the second set with his powerful forehand to back up his power-packed serve. With both serving well, the set had to go to the tie-break.

Kudryavtsev, who frequently lost his cool in the first set, receiving a warning from the umpire, played the big points well as he saved two match points before closing the set at 8-6 in the tie-break.

In the decider, Ashutosh impressed with his never-say-die spirit as he maintained his aggressive style of play. With neither player being able to break the other's serve, another tie-break ensued. This time Ashutosh withstood the pressure well, cutting down on errors and holding his serve with ease. Eventually, he clinched the set and match after another 8-6 score.

Prakash, playing on the adjacent court, was not inspired by his compatriot's fighting display and went down meekly in straight sets to the seventh-seeded American Brendan Evans 3-6,3-6.

Evans easily passed his opponent whose poor volleying did not help matters. To add to his woes, Amritraj was slow on his feet and much of his charging to the net had little planning by way of proper approach shots.

One break in the first set, in the sixth game, and two in the second, in the third and ninth, was all that Evans needed to win the match.

In the other singles, wild card entry Harsh Mankad failed to capitalise on a good start losing 6-7(5), 4-6 to Frenchman Thomas Oger.

The last Indian on court, qualifier Mustafa Ghouse lost to Yen-hsun Lu, but not before taking the top seed to three sets 6-7 (4), 6-2, 0-6. Ghouse lost the first set in the tie-breaker and won the second easily. By the third set he was left with little fuel in the tank.

Rohan Bopanna pulled out of his singles match against Japanese Go Soeda citing knee injury. Bopanna had already lost his doubles match, partnering Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi, against Prakash and his US-based Indian partner Rajeev Ram.

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