

Yuki now India's best

With first Challenger title, Bhambri moves to a career high 218



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It has been the kind of season Yuki Bhambri knew was always around the corner. He started the year with his first ATP main draw win at the Chennai Open and in the next five months, he had followed up with several quarter-final appearances at the Challenger level that lead to a doubles and a singles title in the last two weeks. Now, his challenger singles title win in Fergana, Uzbekistan on Sunday will make the Delhi teenager India's top-ranked player, albeit at 218 in the new rankings. Though he doesn't want to put a number to his year-end target, his next aim is the Wimbledon qualifiers for which he'll prepare for two weeks in Delhi and then play the Nottingham tournament a week before SW18.

But just for a day after landing from Uzbekistan, it's relaxing time. "The last fortnight went by so quickly. First the doubles title in Busan, which was a change from the routine, and from there we flew to Uzbekistan. I reached at 4am in the morning of the day of my match. The only thought I had was that I need to get some sleep to have a real chance of winning the first round," Yuki says.

Though he says the draw opened up after his potential second round opponent, third seed Izak Van der Merwe lost to a wild card entrant, Yuki had two tough matches in the quarters and semis, and was stretched to three-setters each time. "In the semi-final I came back from a set down to win and that really pepped me up, gave me great motivation before the final and was a good preparation."

Though he had never played his opponent in the final, Israeli Amir Weintraub before, Yuki admired his game and style. "He is one of those rare players on the tour with a single-hand backhand and his style is a delight to watch," he adds. One of the main reasons why Yuki could overcome Weintraub's style was his coach Aditya Sachdeva's court-side analysis. "Even though I hadn't played any of my opponents before, he would watch their matches, break down their game, make a game plan each time and then it was just about executing it on the court. For example, against Weintraub we decided since his backhand is really strong, I will not feed him on that flank and keep him on the move so he can't use it at will."

Another positive out of the week is, he says, that his service is more consistent than before. "I have added pace to it while maintaining the accuracy and this week it got me out of quite a few tough points and gave me some free points as well. I had got out of Busan (singles) early and the daily practice for doubles helped me with my net game, which I plan to implement in singles as well."

Having always fought the increasing murmurs of his performance not matching his potential, several injury-induced breaks and the criticism of a long overdue breakthrough season, Yuki feels he has always shown improvement. "To me it doesn't feel like a whole while ... it's all about the transition ... I haven't done enough yet but game wise every time I was on the courts, I was performing. As long as I keep playing, and stay injury free it makes life a lot easier, that's 50% work done."