

"It is a great honour"

LEANDER PAES made the year one to remember. The Olympic medal that hung close to his heart on that momentous occasion when he shared the podium with two leading tennis stars, Andre Agassi and Sergi Bruguera, was not just a reward for his hunger for success, but was a timely answer to the prayers of a success-starved nation.

Leander's exploits in Atlanta against the odds, in a formidable field, will be etched in memory, for no Indian had won an individual medal in the Olympics for the last 44 years. Incidentally, Japan was the only other Asian country to have won Olympic medals in tennis, two silvers, way back in 1920.

There was a hint of things to come, when Leander reached his first semi-final in an ATP Tour event, the Miller Lite Hall of Fame Championships at Newport, Rhode Island, a couple of weeks before the Olympics. On grass, Leander beat former Wimbledon champion Pat Cash 6-2, 6-2 in the first round and went on to beat the top seeded Byron Black in the quarterfinals. He was downed by Nicolas Pereira in the semifinal, but Leander was to have his revenge at the Olympics.

The reaction to Leander's Olympic achievement in the country was euphoric and presentations were showered on him. However, there was a disappointing twist to his fortunes in the circuit, not just because he suffered from a brief 'burn out' syndrome, but also because he was slapped a 'zero pointer' for missing a Challenger immediately after the Atlanta Games, by the ATP.

Leander pulled out of the tournament in Binghamton in advance quoting a genuine injury, after losing to Agassi in the Olympics. The fact that he managed to play Fernando

Meligeni in the fight for the bronze thereafter was held against him by the ATP Tour, which had different rules to those followed by the International Tennis Federation (ITF). Leander's ranking thus fell dramatically from 126 to 150, putting paid to his aspirations of cracking the top 100. Moreover, he would have to endure the 'zero pointer' as his 14th best result, till next August.

The Olympic hero took the setback in his stride, and wound up the year with a Challenger victory at Mauritius, where, starting as the eighth seed he beat Fabrice Santoro, Jeff Tarango, Jerome Golmard, Mark Petchey and Frederik Fetterlein. Leander also had a good run in the doubles along with Mahesh Bhupathi, winning four tournaments, including the one at Chennai, where he had to be content with the runner-up spot in singles.

On the Grand Slam circuit, the long felt desire to win at least one round was satiated at the U. S. Open where Leander quite expectedly beat Marcos Ondruska of South Africa. He raised hopes further when he was on

song, having the home favourite, Andre Agassi, at his mercy for the better part of two sets, in the second round. But he let the big fish escape his clutches. Earlier, at Wimbledon, Leander, who had qualified as the lucky loser, had his chances against Mark Petchey, but he tended to over-hit; perhaps he was trying too hard. Leander lost a match he could have won.

The year also saw Leander keep the Indian flag flying high in the Davis Cup when, in partnership with Mahesh Bhupathi, he overcame the tough Dutch at Jaipur, to put India in the World Group quarterfinals. The Swedes were too professional to let Leander's magic work later, but India as the underdog did make its mark in no uncertain terms.

The year-end ranking of 128 was the best for Leander in three years, bettering his previous two years' ranking of 132 and 133, though his best has been an impressive 111. However, towards the end of the year Leander was downed by typhoid.

It was 'malignant malaria' that sapped his energy in December last





VINO JOHN

year. And Leander bounced back from the sickbed to have one of his memorable years. This time too, Leander promised that he would open the campaign for 1997 in right earnest once he got rid of the disease.

Leander made light of losing seven kilograms in a fortnight, and summoned enough energy to sit up from his sick bed for this interview to *The Sportstar*. Despite his illness, he spoke with his usual flair. His father Dr. Vece Paes too was helpful.

Leander made one remember his words to *The Sportstar*, immediately after his Olympic triumph.

"It is amazing what can happen with a little bit of hard work and effort. That has been my whole story at the Olympics. It is belief, a little extra belief and a little extra bit of hard work."

Leander the person is even better than Leander the star for the few who have been lucky enough to interact with him. He is a role model who can be comfortably bracketed with Sachin Tendulkar and Viswanathan Anand.

Over to Leander:
Question: Congratulations Leander on a fabulous year and for being selected as *The Sportstar* Sportsperson of the Year. How does it feel?

Answer: It is a great honour being chosen as *The Sportstar's* Sportsperson of the Year. It is encouraging to know that I have been recognised for all the hard work that I have put in over the year.

Q: What are the impressions you carry about the magazine's support to you, from a fledgling career?

A: It is nice to have been associated so closely with *The Sportstar* and its reporters. I am appreciative of the support and coverage they have given me. My first *Sportstar* cover was one of my goals as a kid in BAT. That issue will always hold a special place in my heart.

Q: How do you sum up the year? With a bit of luck you could have cracked the top 100 in the ATP Tour.

A: The year 1996 has been one of the best years of my career so far. The

Doing India proud. Bronze medallist Leander Paes, alongside winner Andre Agassi, on the podium at Atlanta. And predictably, on his return to India soon after the Olympics, Leander received a hero's welcome.



SHANKER CHAKRAVARTHY

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Leander was featured on *The Sportstar* Cover for the first time on April 14, 1990. "My first *Sportstar* Cover was one of my goals as a kid in BAT. That issue will always hold a special place in my heart," says the tennis star.

Olympics was the highlight, closely followed by reaching the Davis Cup quarterfinals. The year on the circuit has been decent and I would have been in the top 100 now, had it not been for the 'zero pointer' that I received because of the Olympics.

Q: The 'zero pointer', mainly because of the confusion caused by the contrasting rules of ATP and ITF, will be with you for the better part of next year.

A: Absolutely. The 'zero pointer' will be with me as my 14th best result till next August. This was brought about because I had pulled out of a Challenger tournament at Binghamton, upstate New York, following the Olympics because of injury. It was really sad to be penalised even though I tried to help the tournament (by informing in advance). It is difficult to keep track of two sets of rules.

Q: We will remember 1996 forever for your Olympic medal. Where

would you put that achievement?

A: The Olympic medal is one of my most prized possessions and also one of my best achievements. We Indians are brought up to believe that the Olympics is the pinnacle of sporting competition. My father had an Olympic bronze and the previous individual Olympic medal won by an Indian was in 1952. All of this made my achievement special. Besides, it was inspiring to watch the wonderful response of the nation and its sports lovers to my feat.

Q: Has the Olympic achievement helped you enhance your sponsorship support?

A: Yes, considerably, particularly with regard to television advertisements. The Olympic medal has opened up new horizons for me in the advertisement field. Earlier I was not doing many, but now it is worth spending time on doing ads. I don't mind doing a few. My main sponsors, the Steel Authority of India Limited

(SAIL) on the fourth year of contract and Punwire, on the third year, have been solidly behind me, making it that much easier for me on the tour. Mahindra Ford has come into the picture quite prominently now. The ICI India Limited was the first company to back me and they have been with me from 1991. There have also been people like Naresh Kumar and Yogi Durlabji who have been supporting me all along. I am also grateful to Air India, Williams and Magor, Goodricke, Coca-Cola and a number of others for their faith in me.

Q: There was a slump in your form after the Olympics.

A: As I said earlier, the reaction to my achievement was so overwhelming that it was necessary to come back to India after Atlanta. All the felicitations and various functions threw me off track for some time. It was very important for me to regroup and channel all my thoughts and energy back on the Tour.

Q: Your form picked up dramatically in the year-end tournament at Mauritius.

A: After the Asian circuit I took time off to train and get that fire back in me again. When I got to Reunion Island and Mauritius I had got back into my routine. This enabled me to play simple, sharp tennis with high physical fitness.

Q: What was your target for the year?

A: My target for 1996 was to keep India in the World Group in Davis Cup. On the ATP Tour I wanted to improve my singles and doubles ranking and make it to the top 75. As far as the Olympics was concerned, I wanted to perform creditably. Basically, I wanted to stay healthy and injury-free. Coming to my game, I was keen to improve my first serve percentage and my return of serve.

Q: The year also saw you reach your first semifinal in an ATP Tour event. How did it feel then to struggle in the Challengers?

A: The effort that went into the Olympic medal and the excitement thereafter, led to some burn out. Besides, you win some and you lose some.

Q: The cancellation of the Mumbai Challenger must have upset your plans.

A: Yes, I was looking forward to doing well in Mumbai. On the positive side, the cancellation gave me a week to prepare better for Reunion Island and Mauritius.



Leander and Mahesh Bhupathi celebrate India's upset win over the Netherlands in the Davis Cup. "If we work hard, we have the potential to be one of the leading doubles teams in the world," says Leander.

Q: You have been striking a good doubles partnership with Mahesh. What scope do you see for further improvement, especially in terms of world ranking? You are ranked 36th now.

A: You have just seen the start of our partnership on the Tour. We combine well as a team. I feel if we work hard we have the potential to be one of the leading doubles teams in the world.

Q: Mahesh did not do well in the singles through the year.

A: It has been his first full year on the Tour. It is a tough grind. It will take hard work, experience and lots of patience for him to do better.

Q: How do you look back at the year with regard to the Davis Cup?

A: It has been a great year in Davis Cup. We saw a new found confidence in Mahesh's singles play. The win against The Netherlands was remarkable considering the quality of the opposition. We may have lost to Sweden, but a win on day one, which was feasible, could have changed the final result.

Q: How do you rate our chances against the Czech Republic, in the Davis Cup tie to be played indoors on red clay?

A: It will be an extremely tough tie. We are playing away, on clay, in the cold. It is an away match after a long

time, so we have to come together even more as a team.

Q: It would be the first away tie in nearly four years.

A: Our last away tie was against France in Frejus on clay in 1993. It would seem that we are destined to play away for the next couple of years.

Q: What about your plans to have a touring coach?

A: I do plan to have a touring coach for a scheduled period of the year. I am negotiating with Tony Roche to fill in as many weeks as he can.

Q: How do you intend to approach the year?

A: Initially, I would have to recover my fitness, following this bout of typhoid. Then I expect to hone my tennis skills, and break into the top 90 by mid-year and then target the top 50. I need to do well on the ATP Tour. Besides, it is important that India stays in the World Group. I need to stay healthy and consistently fit through the year.

Q: Unfortunately, for two years in a row, you have now fallen sick at the end of the year. Have you sorted out the reason?

A: Basically, by the end of the year, I am quite tired and fatigued. The stress of the year takes its toll and my immune system gets depressed, making me susceptible to disease. Last

December, it was 'malignant malaria' and this December it is typhoid. One takes precautions, unfortunately they have not been enough.

Q: The Indian Open ATP Tour event has been shifted from New Delhi to Chennai. How do you view playing a big tournament at a place where you grew up, and picked up the nuances of the game?

A: It was great that IMG had brought the McDowell-sponsored ATP Tour event to Delhi in 1996. It gave some of our players an opportunity to play with the best. It is also bound to attract youngsters to the game. The 1997 ATP Tour event sponsored by Gold Flake is scheduled for Chennai in April. Chennai (Madras in my mindset) is special to me. I spent my formative tennis days over there and I am always excited about performing in this great tennis-loving city.

Q: Your brief stint with TV commentary must have been taxing.

A: I like commentating and am very relaxed in front of the Tele camera. But I will only do it during my off weeks. It is very time-consuming and mentally fatiguing.

Q: How do you intend to start the new year?

A: First of all, I am itching to get back to the gym. I have lost seven kilograms and am weak. My main priority would be to get back in shape for the ATP Tour event in Doha in the first week of January. I hope to get a wild card for the Australian Open, which will give me one more week to prepare. Otherwise, I have to try and qualify. I have ruled out my trip to the U. S. for the present. I have to work in Calcutta only.

But I am not rushing out of bed to train, because I don't want to have a relapse. I hear it is bad in the case of typhoid. I am just looking forward to getting rid of this ailment, and getting back to the challenges of the tennis circuit.

Q: Thank you Leander. Wish you the best of everything in 1997. What would you like to tell *The Sportstar* readers?

A: Thanks. I would like the readers to keep enjoying the magazine as much as I do. On my part I will try to bring them good results on the Tour and in the Davis Cup. There are no Olympics and no Asian Games in 1997, so I can concentrate on my tennis and make it another memorable year. Have a great year, all of you! ★

KAMESH SRINIVASAN