



Wheelchair tennis in spotlight at USTA Nationals

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KALAMAZOO -- Like many of the nearly 3,000 tennis fans who came here to see it Friday night, Dan Bolhouse always wondered what the feared rocket serve of pro player Mark Philippoussis looked like. He just hadn't planned to see it as close as he did.

But not only did Bolhouse see the Philippoussis missile from the wheelchair in which he plays, he and teammate Taylor Dent even broke Philippoussis' opening service game -- and then aced the Australian star on his own serve.

Bolhouse, 32, of Caledonia, and playing partner Curt Bender of Zeeland were invited to help open the 62nd annual USTA Boys National Tournament with an exhibition match against touring pros Philippoussis and Dent. And ranked as the top two wheelchair players in Michigan, Bolhouse and Bender held the entertainment end of match that finished in a 2-2 tie.

"I didn't do it on purpose," is how Bolhouse explained his ace. "I just think it was awesome that these guys would come out and play us -- and even get in a chair themselves to try it."

Playing in a "one-up, one-down" format -- each team consisting of one able-bodied and one wheelchair player -- Bender and Bolhouse had more to prove than just being able to handle the fireworks of Philippoussis, who once held the serving speed record at 145 miles per hour, or the wily net play of Dent, who won this tournament in 1996 as a 15-year-old.

"Hopefully, we're planting a seed and alleviating the stigma that wheelchair tennis players should be in their own division," said Bender, 43, who's used wheelchairs since a 1989 automobile accident. "Other sports are different for wheelchair athletes -- you can't compete on the same level as an able-bodied athlete.

"But wheelchair tennis can be an integrated sport. The court is the same size, the equipment is the same, and you don't need a wheelchair athlete to compete against."

Their two opponents may have wished they could have found some rules to gain an advantage.

"These guys are absolutely amazing," remarked Dent. "With wheelchair tennis you have to deal with a whole different strategy -- it's just awesome what these guys can do."

Philippoussis, who actually spent time playing from a wheelchair following a third surgery, used an overhand return at the net while playing on a wheelchair point to best a helpless Dent.

"It puts a whole new perspective on the game," said Philippoussis. "It's not an easy thing to do."

Playing as a doubles team, Bolhouse and Bender have not only excelled in the wheelchair ranks, they've also competed in open division competitions where, in a tournament last summer, Bender reports with some amusement that they defeated an able-bodied first round team that did not take the defeat to two men in wheelchairs very kindly.

Bender and Bolhouse harbored no illusions on Friday, however, that the two pros had anything to fear.

"Realistically, I'll never be as good as I once was," points out Bolhouse who played the sport at

Forest Hills Northern High School and at Hope College before a snowmobile accident six years ago. "When you break the game down, the mobility and the speed is what makes the game different.

"Even though we get two bounces, the lack of mobility is what drops you down. Skillwise, though, we are very similar to able-bodied players."

Which is exactly why Kalamazoo tournament officials were excited to add Friday's exhibition to this year's tournament.

"Our desire is to present tennis to the masses and the nationals offer a great opportunity to showcase this event," said Tournament Director Timon Corwin. "As a wheelchair sport, tennis is the fastest-growing sport in the nation and we're thrilled to offer this stage for it to gain exposure."

The sport is gaining such momentum that Bender's wife, Lynn, who coaches the Bender-Bolhouse duo as part of a 15-player team, is looking for assistance.

"All of our players keep improving every year, to the point that they need a higher level of coaching than I can provide," said Lynn Bender, a recreational therapist by trade who prepped at Calvin Christian High School and played four years at Grand Valley State University. "But that's what's helping us get the word out, to help our organization grow and to spread it to other areas."

Based on Friday's reception here for Bender and Bolhouse, the word has begun to spread fast.

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