



Dent, Philippoussis delight crowd in wheelchair exhibition

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Taylor Dent almost kick served himself out of the wheelchair, flashed that big smile, then handed the wheelchair over the net to fellow pro Mark Philippoussis after losing the point.

The crowd roared with laughter.

Wheelchair tennis was part of the National City/RX Optical exhibition at Kalamazoo College's Stowe Stadium Friday night, kicking off the USTA Boys' 18-16 National Championships.

The standing-room-only crowd of more than 3,600 was the largest for an exhibition since Andre Agassi and Mats Wilander in 1988.

Dent and Philippoussis were the able-bodied players in the one-up, one-down exhibition with each one paired with a wheelchair athlete.

Then the two pros teamed up to beat the tournament's top 18s seeds, Jesse Levine, of Boca Raton, Fla., and Michael Shabaz, of Vienna, Va., 8-6.

In the third match, Dent defeated Philippoussis, 6-3, head-to-head.

Both pros said the most fun was the wheelchair match.

"It was a whole different experience for me," Dent said. "I get to see Mark every week, but this was a lot of fun."

Dent and Grand Rapids' Dan Bolhouse had a 2-0 lead in the four-game wheelchair match, but Philippoussis and Curt Bender fought back for a 2-2 final.

Dent and Philippoussis each played just one point in the wheelchair, but for the Aussie it was almost like old times.

"I was in a wheelchair for three months, so I actually played in a wheelchair for a few weeks," Philippoussis said. "It definitely brought back memories."

Dent, who won the boys' 16s title in 1996, played in Kalamazoo just two years, in 16s as a 15-year-old and in 18s the next year.

"It's always fun to come back here and relive the memories," he said. "I played a lot of great matches here."

One memory is of Burger King on Stadium Drive.

"This is pretty funny because we were just driving by it today," Dent said. "I went to lunch every day at Burger King the year I won because I was so superstitious."

"I won my first match and I just kept going back to keep the winning tradition. It ended up paying off for me."

As he stood on the media floor of the tower, Dent looked out over the courts.

``I remember playing Bo Hodge on the fourth court over and playing a guy named Jose Lieberman over there. I see every court and there's a memory on it.

``I remember Dad and I getting into an argument on (Court 6). The memories never end."

Dent is currently featured in a television commercial for a financial investment firm with a very young tennis player who ends up beating up on Dent, then running to a van with Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf inside.

``They screened a lot of kids to get somebody that looks how they think Andre would look as a young boy," Dent said. ``I think they did a good job because everybody's asked me if that was really Andre's kid. I thought it was in great fun -- a great laugh and I'd be first in line knocking on the door if they want me to do another one."

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