

Fifth Third Bank Tennis Championships

No. 2 Odesnik Wins Over Lexington Fans by Topping No. 1 Ward; Hard-Charging Scholl Blasts Fink, Wins 1st \$50K, Takes Two Titles

By Jim Durham, Lexington Challenger Media Director

Lexington, KY (July 24) – Second-seeded Wayne Odesnik showed many flashes Sunday of why he was ranked No. 77 in the world two years ago, clamping down on top-seeded James Ward 7-5, 6-4 for the 17th annual Lexington Challenger men’s title.

And, unseeded Chichi Scholl – still with a bounce to her step on another day when the heat index was over 100 degrees – captured her first \$50K Challenger with a sizzling 6-1, 6-1 unhinging of qualifier Amanda Fink. And, **that** after winning the doubles the night before with Tammy Hendler. (The only other player to take both titles the same year at the Fifth Third Bank Tennis Championships is Florencia Labat in ’99).

In the first Lexington men’s final to pit the top seeds, play from both much of the time is what fans would expect to see at the Western Southern Open, the ATP World Tour event in Cincinnati – instead of the University of Kentucky’s Hilary J. Boone Tennis Center.

But, Odesnik was the man on a mission – trying to get back under that 200-ranking mark (he’s No. 206 currently) and then take aim at the sub-100 territory again. “I hope I’m on the way back...I’m trying. Starting with Futures (this year) and no ranking – from nothing to 160 is an exceptional run for me,” said Odesnik, referring to his expected new ranking Monday.

Ward had two break points at 4-4 in the first set, and three more (love-40) at 5-5, but couldn’t cash in. But, when Odesnik had Ward on three break points (love-40) at 5-6, he seized set point with a sharply flicked, high over-the-shoulder backhand.

“I was more solid on the big points...(in fact) in the big moments, I served well all week,” Odesnik said. A disappointed Ward, who had beaten Odesnik earlier this year, allowed, “This was still a positive week for me...a good first week in the States.”

Indeed, after looking like a man with a plane to catch while spotting Odesnik a 5-0 lead in the second set, Ward rediscovered his pride and ran off four straight games. But, the eventual winner again claimed a couple of those “big points” to close out this USTA Pro Circuit event.

Just as big for him, he said this week, was winning back the respect of tennis fans and fellow players that he lost in 2010 when he was charged with possession of HGH when entering Australia and then banned briefly from the tour. BIG for him has been the support of “my team” – including coaches Guillermo Canas, a former Davis Cupper for Argentina, and Juan Pablo Sangali (Canas Tennis Academy in Key Biscayne, FL) and sports psychologist John Murray.

Can he return to the Top 100 and climb back into the 70s or higher? “I’m not focusing on ranking...but on enjoying tennis.”

Ward (at No. 202) also appears to be a man who won’t be kept “down on the farm.” The British Davis Cupper said he’s striving for that next level, “working on things...because sometimes you have to take a step backward to go forward.”

And, yet Ward would not admit to any real holes in his game. “If there was one thing I was bad at,” he said, “I’d think Wawrinka (currently No. 16 in the world) and Querrey (now no. 50) would have picked up on it.”

In the women’s final, Californian Amanda Fink – the first qualifier here to rattle off the seven victories needed to reach Championship Sunday Presented by Michelob Ultra – appeared like the heat finally caught up with her. After the Scholl-shellacking, the former Southern Cal star had to be treated with ice towels courtside.

Scholl said she was wary of Fink’s counter-punching style and sweeping lefty serve, so she tried and succeeded at being aggressive. “I really went for my returns,” said the German-born Floridian.

Indeed, Fink only held serve once in each set and looked for the first time all week slow afoot. Scholl empathized with her good friend, saying “you have to remember – Amanda had to play three more rounds in this heat. But, I’m really fit and I’ve been working hard.”

Fink said, “this was a frustrating end to my great week, but it’s a big improvement over the past couple of months.” She signed up for the Western Southern at King’s

Island (OH) in mid-August, but thinks she still won't qualify as the draw is smaller than the U.S. Open.

Scholl said to reach the next level she needs to move forward more, improve her second serve and move better to her backhand. And, she does think she will get into the U.S. Open qualies (her goal for this summer) – so do Ward and Odesnik.

Where to NEXT, oh, fabulous “Fifth Third” foursome?

Odesnik is headed for the qualies of the ATP in Washington, D.C. And, he and Ward both will play the Binghamton (NY) Challenger. Scholl, Fink and Ward are in the Vancouver Challenger starting Aug. 1.

QUOTABLE: Amanda Fink, the first woman to go through the Lexington Challenger qualies and reach the main draw final. “I’m happy to be that statistic...since I’m a stat in a positive way.”