



BLUE ENTERTAINMENT SPORTS TELEVISION

### **Fifth Third Bank Tennis Championships**

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### **Levy Outlasts Kuznetsov, Takes 2<sup>nd</sup> Lexington Title a Decade Later; Mirza Flips Coin, Shows Fan Club She's Up for a Return to Top 30**

By Jim Durham

Lexington Challenger Media Director

Lexington, KY – The milestone 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the \$100,000 Fifth Third Bank Tennis Championships will be remembered for two champions who have “been there before,” the historic match up of No. 1 and No. 2 seeds in the women’s finals, and the large contingent of Sania Mirza supporters who are natives of India.

That two former Top 30 players would win their respective Lexington Challenger titles is unprecedented here – and quite possibly anywhere else on this USTA Pro Circuit level. The possibility of such an occurrence surely contributed to the crowd of more than 1,400. And, the appreciative patrons saw 30-year-old Harel Levy, who was ranked No. 30 in '01, win a second title 11 years after the first one; and the court magic of winner Mirza, who was No. 27 two years ago and possibly on her way back after losing the best part of '08 to a wrist injury.

According to Brooks Downing, managing director of BEST/Collegiate Division (the Lexington-based agency that owns and runs the event), “This was the largest paid attendance for the Lexington Challenger’s Sunday finals...and we owe that in no small part to Mirza’s talent and celebrity and the passionate fans from her homeland – students from the University of Kentucky and many others from central Kentucky – who came out to cheer her on. We loved that!”

Second-seeded Mirza didn’t disappoint her wonderful, but sometimes over-zealous fans, showing everyone – and most importantly her top-seeded foe, Julie Coin of France – why she was and can still be a Top 30 player. Experience at winning “the big points” came through for her in the first-set tiebreaker after squandering a 5-2 lead and facing 5-all. Coin actually blew a chance to jump on a shallow second serve and plunked it into the bottom of the net; then, Mirza slammed a deep return that Coin miss-hit for a 7-5 breaker.

Coin broke serve early in the second set, but a determined Mirza broke back for 2-2 and then again for 5-3 with an effortless, but athletic slice overhead. On the ropes, Coin rallied from love-30 in the next game to break back, but the eventual victor broker her for a third time in the set for 7-6 (5), 6-4.

On the forehand side, both women were decidedly hitting off the back foot, but Mirza could still suddenly whip the forcing or winning shot that sometimes freezes the opponent. “My biggest strength is that no one can read my forehand...I can hit it anywhere,” she said.

Now at No. 85, but inching her way back up the ladder, Mirza was very complimentary of the Challenger level despite the fact she hadn't had to play down in one since '03. "Everyone here hits the ball and moves well here," she said. "But, winning is about the having the experience and doing it consistently."

Winning for Mirza is also about being able to please her fervent fans while not letting them invade her space. Her ever-present mother Nasima said, after nearly 100 supporters surrounded Sania for autographs, then followed her on her way to a waiting car, "This is nothing...you should see California or New York City where there's a big Indian population."

Judging by the crowd support, one might have thought Mirza played for the Kentucky Wildcats. "It felt like I was playing Fed Cup," said a practically-tearful Coin afterward about her foe's *home-court advantage*. "(The Indians) were cheering my faults and misses."

Still, Coin at No. 62 was grateful to be able to play someone of Mirza's ability and background at the Challenger level. "I felt like we both dropped our level of play after the first set and then she surprised me with the big forehand on crucial points," Coin said.

Both men's finalists displayed the tiredness that they admitted to afterwards, but Levy showed again that he wanted that second Fifth Third trophy more. The 6-4, 4-6, 6-2 win ties him with Paul Goldstein (Lexington titles in '98 and '01).

Levy, who had only one three-setter (Tobias Kamke in the quarters), said, "I had a lack of energy today, but fortunately Alex didn't play well at first."

"But, at my age, eight matches in a week (he and Amir Hadad lost the doubles final) is a great achievement," continued Levy, who won his first Challenger event in three years. "Who'd believe I'd win here in '99 and do it again in '09?!"

Levy, who shot up to No. 30 two years after his first Lexington title, should move up in the rankings from his current 183 with this win. From several conversations this week, he really looks forward to playing for his country against Spain in the Davis Cup in September. Personally, you know he'd like to add to his resume – like he did against the Russian Davis Cuppers, taking down No. 24 Igor Andrejev and No. 35 Igor Kunitsyn.

Kuznetsov took down third-seeded Kevin Anderson of South Africa in the first round, but his two wins in qualies (he had a bye), but all his matches were straight sets until the final. But still, seven matches in nine days was draining he said. He will certainly improve on his No. 248 ranking, but a second Challenger title (he won Winnetka, IL) in three weeks would have been better.

"I had a chance in the third set, but didn't take it," said Kuznetsov, who at 22 can aspire to surpass his 158-ranking from two years ago in April.



### **Where Next?**

Both women's finalists are headed for Stanford, CA and the \$700,000 Bank of the West Classic where they may see one or both of the Williams sisters across the net. Fifth Third winner Mirza will play doubles only and "relax" some before heading the next week for the Vancouver Challenger. Runner-up Coin actually got in the main draw of singles and doubles!

Levy will head for Canada and the Granby Challenger. But, you know he must have one eye on Rafael Nadal and the Israeli's semifinal Davis Cup tie against Spain, Sept. 18-20. Kuznetsov is heading home to Tampa for week before joining a lot of these Lexington Challenger competitors at Vancouver.

### **More Mirza You Say?!!!**

In spite of what you read on the Internet, Sania said that her fiancé (yes, look it up, her engagement July 10 to Mohammed Sohrab Mirza was quite an event in Hyderabad, south central India) is not a "childhood friend" – that they started dating when she was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

I had to ask about the same last name – Mirza – and thank goodness she chuckled. "Oh, no...we're not related," she said. "It's not even that common a name...and his grandfather came from Iran."

If you watched Mirza closely, you noticed that she'd look up at her mother every time she flubbed a shot or an opponent would surprise her with a winner. You couldn't miss her mother, Nasima, close by and wearing a different, lovely traditional Indian dress each day. "It's great to have her along because tournaments get awfully long and lonely," Sania said. "She takes care of me mentally and emotionally."

### **More Levy You Say?!!!**

In case you didn't know, two-time Fifth Third winner Harel Levy considers Lexington his second home...and you can credit host Diane Atchison (and her husband John) for their hospitality, and housing the Israeli players and others, for 13 years. Levy, who has played here four times now, said, "Diane's like my mom here." Then, with a huge smile, "I just tell her what to do."

#### **About BEST**

BEST is a unified full-service sports and entertainment company. Current clients include Super Bowl MVP Santonio Holmes, Reggie Bush, DeAngelo Hall and 2009 NFL Draft first round picks Aaron Maybin and Percy Harvin.; NBA All-Stars Shawn Marion and Rasheed Wallace, as well as 2009 NBA Lottery picks Ricky Rubio and Earl Clark; ATP #1 ranked doubles team Bob and Mike Bryan, WTA #8 ranked player Victoria Azarenka and WTA #9 ranked player Caroline Wozniacki. Media & Event properties include the US Open Tennis Championship, the French Open Tennis Championship, the Legg Mason Tennis Classic, numerous US-based ATP tournaments, Rock 'n Racquets, the Boston Marathon, the Superstars Competition, Ice Wars, the World Cup of Softball, The Hartford Hall of Fame Showcase, the Men's and Women's Fifth Third Bank Tennis Championships and experiential grassroots properties Hoop It Up, Kick It and Let It Fly. [www.experienceBEST.com](http://www.experienceBEST.com)

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With prize money ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000, the USTA Pro Circuit is the pathway to the US Open and tour-level competition for aspiring tennis players, and a frequent battleground for established professionals. Last year, more than 1,000 men and women from more than 70 countries competed on the USTA Pro Circuit for valuable ATP and Sony Ericsson WTA Tour ranking points. The USTA Pro Circuit is world-class tennis administered on the local level and played on local tennis courts as part of the fabric of communities nationwide-an opportunity for current and new fans to experience the excitement and intensity of the professional game in their neighborhood.

Since 1979, 15 USTA Pro Circuit alums (including five Americans) achieved the No. 1 world singles ranking. Maria Sharapova, Andy Roddick, Lindsay Davenport, Jelena Jankovic, Pete Sampras, Justine Henin, Jim Courier and Andre Agassi are among the game's top stars who began their career on the USTA Pro Circuit. The past few years have featured breakout performances by USTA Pro Circuit players. In 2007, John Isner, Ahsha Rolle and Donald Young all reached the third round of the US Open.