

Edwardsville Futures alumni meet in Australian Open quarterfinals

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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MELBOURNE, Australia – The idea behind the USTA Pro Circuit Futures tournaments is to give aspiring professional tennis players the opportunity to develop their games and serve as a proving ground for up-and-coming players hoping to reach the top level of the game, including the ATP World Tour and the Grand Slam events.

The Edwardsville Futures tournament held each summer has certainly seen its share of players who have gone on to success over the years.

Tuesday night Edwardsville time (Wednesday afternoon Melbourne time) certainly was a crowning achievement in the tournament's history as 2012 doubles finalist Heyon Chung of South Korea took on 2016 singles champion Tennys Sandgren of Gallatin, Tenn., in the quarterfinals of the Kia Australian Open at Rod Laver Arena, the main court of the Melbourne Park tennis complex that hosts the year's first Grand Slam tournament.

Chung eliminated Sandgren, the last American player in the men's or women's singles draws, 6-4, 7-6 (7-5), 6-3 to become the first Korean player to ever reach a Grand Slam semifinal; he'll next take on world No. 2 player Roger Federer of Switzerland, who defeated Tomas Berdych of the Czech Republic 7-6 (7-1), 6-3, 6-4 Friday Melbourne time (Thursday Edwardsville time); the start time has not yet been set.

“It was really tough because we played at 1 o'clock,” Chung said in a post-match press conference. “We know how to play each other; we played last week in (an Australian Open tune-up tournament) in Auckland (New Zealand); I'm just trying to keep focused on the court and enjoy – that's the key for today.”

“It was amazing,” Sandgren said in his post-match press conference. “This is the second time I've played him in two weeks; it's such a fun challenge because he does so many cool things with how he moves and how he returns and how he plays with his forehand. It was kind of like an extremely difficult puzzle to figure out, and I wasn't able to figure it out, but I enjoyed trying.”

That a pair of alumni from the Edwardsville Futures reached the quarterfinal of a Grand Slam means much to Futures tournament director and Edwardsville High tennis coach Dave Lipe. “It's really a big deal that Tennys Sandgren has reached the quarters; it's the story for American men's tennis,” Lipe said. “Mr. Chung is a 2012 doubles finalist, so there's two guys out there who have traveled through Edwardsville and spent a lot of time here and they know our families and they know Edwardsville.

“They've been to EHS and I think that's cool. I think our sponsors, our fans, our staff all feel a tremendous sense of pride in this. We've been saying every time we talk to sponsors and fans, we're always promoting the fact that these are tomorrow's stars of the ATP Tour; these are the guys who are going to be featured in Grand Slam events. This is vindication of that – this is proof, a perfect example, and as a tournament, we're very, very elated at their success.”

Should Chung wind up winning the Open, it would be icing on the cake, Lipe feels. “If hope like heck one of these two guys wins the tournament,” Lipe said. “That would be phenomenal and (Chung) is only 21 years old; Tennys is in his prime – I think he's 26, so these are two guys – they're not done with this tournament and one of them is going

to be in the semis. The fact that one of them is going to be in the semis, we're guaranteed a semifinalist of a Grand Slam event. That's something we should not take for granted.

“We hope that brings out even more fans and sponsors next year. You always want to see your past competitors go on to do big things; this has almost been a surreal experience for these guys and for our tournament.”

The 2018 Edwardsville Futures tournament presented by the EGHM Foundation is scheduled for the week of Aug. 6. The Australian Open men's final is set for 2:30 a.m. Edwardsville time (7:30 p.m. Melbourne time) Sunday and will be televised on ESPN.