



Nathan Ponwith Advances to Edwardsville Futures Singles Final With Three-Set Win Over Alex Lebedev

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EDWARDSVILLE – Nathan Ponwith, who plays for Arizona State University in Tempe, advanced to the singles final of the \$25,000 Edwardsville Futures presented by The EGHM Foundation tennis championships with a hard-fought 7-6 (10-8 in the tiebreak), 3-6, 7-5 win over Alex Lebedev of Island Park, N.Y., in the first semifinal played Saturday at the Edwardsville Tennis Center.

Ponwith was able to keep his cool in a tight, see-saw match that lasted nearly three hours, seeing many momentum switches and getting a service break in the final game to win and advance.

“I think it was just staying calm in each game,” Ponwith said in a post-match interview. “We both had a lot of chances in the third set, and it really could have gone either way. It was just a few points here and there in the end. And I think the key for me was to just to stay calm and stay aggressive and go for my shots.”

In the end, Ponwith was able to convert his chances, which helped decide the outcome.

“It was really tight,” Ponwith said. “It just came down to a few points at the end of the first set. I mean, the first set could have gone either way. He had a set point, I had a few set points that he saved, and we had some really long rallies. And at the end of the third,

I knew it was just about trying to wait for an opportunity, where maybe, he made a few errors, and I could step up and take a few from him. So, that was really what it was.”

Ponwith felt that the key point of the match was the first point of what turned out to be the final game of the match, where he won the point and was able to use the momentum to take the game, the set and the match.

“I’d say the key point in the third set was that first point of the 6-5 game,” Ponwith said. “Whenever you can win the first point, and he’s serving to stay in the match, that’s always a big one.”

Lebedev gave much credit to Ponwith for his efforts throughout the match, which was a very entertaining one indeed.

“Nathan never goes away,” Lebedev said with a laugh. “If you look at his record, every match is three sets, and he really digs deep into every point, and you really have to stay sharp the entire time. I thought I let up a little bit in the beginning of the first and third set, and it was hard to recover. And just the overall trend of the match, I felt like I was always having to scrape by on my service games, and I thought he was able to play more freely. So I think in the end, that’s what made the difference.”

In the second set, Lebedev was able to dominate the set very well to draw even, taking advantage of a service break to build momentum.

“Yeah, that’s what I wanted to do, that’s how I wanted to play the whole match,” Lebedev said. “Unfortunately, I was only able to find that click in the beginning of the second. But yeah, it was good.”

The deciding set was a great back-and-forth affair, with both players playing very well, with Ponwith getting the break to win the last game and the match.

“He was serving really well in the third,” Lebedev said. “I tried to mix up my return position, I tried to vary what I was doing to try to kind of get my feet into one of his games, but he was holding so easily, and I was 30-all, 30-all, 30-all, 30-all. And in the last game, he got on top of me, and with a couple of good shots. And the whole trend of the third set was in his hands.”

Both Ponwith and Lebedev split the first six games of the opening set, going in tied 3-3, then Ponwith won the next game to go-ahead 4-3. Lebedev was able to retie the set at 4-4, getting in a couple of good shots to take the game, Lebedev hit an amazing return shot in the next game to make it 0-30, getting it just barely in, but Ponwith was able to bounce back to take the game and make the set 5-4 in his favor. The players then traded

games to make it 6-5 for Ponwith before Lebedev came up with a service ace to take the next game, tying the set 6-6 and force a tiebreaker, with the first player to seven points to lead by at least two-point winning the set. In the tiebreak, Ponwith won the first three points to take a 3-0 lead before Lebedev took his first point. Eventually, Ponwith took a 6-3 lead and had set point, but Lebedev was able to score the next three consecutive points with good shotmaking to tie it up at 6-6. Ponwith and Lebedev then traded points to make it 8-8 before an unforced error by Lebedev made it 9-8 for Ponwith, and a shot hit wide by Lebedev gave Ponwith the 10-8 win and the first set 7-6.

Lebedev won the first three games of the second set, including a service break on Ponwith, to take a 3-0 lead, then the two traded wins to make it 5-2 for Lebedev. Ponwith hit a winner on the line with a passing shot, and then another unforced error gave Ponwith the next game to make it 5-3, but at 5-4. Lebedev was able to hold serve to win the game and set 6-4 and force a deciding third set.

Ponwith served first to start the set, and quickly got a service break to go up 2-0, but Lebedev returned the favor in the next game, making it 2-1. Lebedev was able to tie the set at 3-3, and both players held their next serves as Ponwith went ahead 5-4. Some great back-and-forth tennis prevailed, with Lebedev winning the next game to make the final set 5-5, but Ponwith was able to hold serve and make it 6-5. In the final game, Ponwith connected on a long shot to make it 15-40 and match point, where Lebedev hit a shot into the net to give Ponwith the 7-5 win and the match.

Ponwith will play the only remaining seed in the draw, sixth-seeded Petros Chrysochos of Cyprus, in Sunday's final, with Chrysochos winning over Zeke Clark 3-6, 6-4, 6-3. Ponwith is expecting a very good match against a high-quality opponent.

"It's going to be a tough match," Ponwith said. "Both of them are really tough, talented players. So whoever it is, it's going to be a really tough challenge, and I'm going to have to bring my best tennis."

Lebedev, in the meantime, will take away very positive memories of his first big-money Futures event.

"Well, it's my first \$25K semifinal. It was awesome," Lebedev said. "Had to play (qualifying matches), and so it's been a lot of matches for me, but I beat some really good players here. I beat, I think, by ranking, the best win of my life in the Round of 16 against Sekou Bangoura, so that was great. And I just love it here. The tournament's great, and they do a good job."

And Ponwith also gave credit to a 1980s hit by Survivor that was the theme song for the Sylvester Stallone hit movie Rocky III.

“I would just like to give a shoutout to the song ‘Eye of the Tiger,’” Ponwith said with a smile. “That was my walkout song, really put me in a great frame of mind. I came out incredibly sharp, I won the first two games. ‘Eye of the Tiger’ really got me in the zone early in the match.”

[Chris Rhodes also contributed to this story.](#)