

TEEN SPIRIT

A silver medal finish from top Australian boys capped off an invaluable week of world-class competition at the Junior Davis Cup and Fed Cup finals in Barcelona, Spain.

If it was competitive match pressure that young Australian players were most hoping to experience in the junior Davis Cup and Fed Cup finals, then the long trip to Barcelona, Spain, proved more than worthwhile.

Pitted against the world's top juniors on the rich red clay courts of the Real Club de Polo de Barcelona the Australian teams gained valuable insights into the standard that's required to compete at the game's highest level – and in some cases, confirmation that they're the players setting the standard for other international juniors to attain.

That was particularly true for the third-seeded Australian boys' team of Thanasi Kokkinakis (Seacombe Heights, SA), Harry Bouchier (Kingston, Tas.) and Blake Mott (Thirroul, NSW), who outclassed the home favourites of Spain, the highly-fancied Argentines and top seeds America en route to their silver medal finish to Italy.

In a thrilling final, Bouchier got the team off to a flying start when he defeated Filippo Baldi 4-6, 7-6(2), 10-8 in an epic battle that lasted three hours and six minutes.

With fatigue setting in, it wasn't until the 17th game of the super tiebreaker that Bouchier was given the opportunity to

serve for the match at 9-8. The Tasmanian finally secured the match after two match points when Baldi's backhand found the net.

Kokkinakis then faced the tournament's top-ranked player and world No. 4 junior Gianluigi Quinzi. Kokkinakis won the second set before Quinzi outpowered Australia's No. 1 player to defeat him 6-1, 0-6, 6-3.

The title was decided in the final doubles rubber where Baldi and Quinzi eventually prevailed over Bouchier and Kokkinakis 6-0, 3-6, 6-2.

For the junior girls, the pressure was all about defending the junior Fed Cup title that Australia had claimed in 2011. Seeded sixth, the team of Naiktha Bains (Brisbane, Qld), Zoe Hives (Ballarat, Vic.) and Isabelle Wallace (East Bentleigh, Vic.) eventually finished fourth after they went down to third seeds Brazil in the third place play-off.

The team surrendered their chance to retain the girls' title when they lost to the second-seeded Russian team 0-2 in the semis. While Hives continued her good run to defeat Carolina Meligeni Alves 2-6, 6-4, 6-1, before Wallace then gave Beatriz Haddad Maia a mighty run in the second

Zoe Hives thrived in her first European experience.

Harry Bouchier enjoyed success in the team setting.

singles rubber, going down 6-4, 1-6, 8-6.

The tie, like the boys, was decided in the doubles. Bains and Wallace fought hard but the Brazilian pair of Maia and Alves prevailed to win the bronze medal 4-6, 6-3, 6-2.

"The girls gave everything they had this week and they should be proud of finishing fourth," said captain Nicole Pratt.

"They have improved, no question ... Playing on clay requires patience and good decision making and that is an area the girls definitely improved upon.

"You cannot put a value on this experience as they are being exposed to their world peers, the best of the best are here. They have learned many lessons both on and off the court and I hope that they take some of these lessons and execute further success in the future."

Though they were tired after the week, the girls were pleased with what they accomplished. ■



The Australian boys' team, captained by Mark Woodforde.



Nicole Pratt led the Australian girls' team.



Thanasi Kokkinakis pushed the tournament's top-ranked junior.