Keowee Key pro prevails in injury-plagued final

BY DAVID THACKHAM
FOR THE JOURNAL

SALEM — Oliver Elston tried once, twice, three times to serve to George Esqueda to begin the sixth game of the third set in the Keowee Key Pro Tennis Finals.

At the fourth time of asking, the cramping pains in his right quad became too unbearable for the Greenville native, as he dropped to the ground before being escorted off the court by medical officials.

Esqueda, Keowee's host pro for the tournament, won by default on Sunday after splitting the first two sets and leading 4-1 in the third when Elston retired.

"It's a real shame about Oliver," Esqueda said after the match. "It's never the best to win like that, but he played well."

Both competitors entered Sunday on highs after convincing semifinal wins over Matt McKenzie and Jacob Gregory, respectively, but neither Esqueda nor Elston had a first set to remember.

Elston failed to make a successful serve after his first five attempts, and the Newberry College alum found little solace in his drop shot game, failing to catch Esqueda out on any attempt in the first set.

Elston's early problems were nothing compared to those of his opposite number. Esqueda, who had battled a left wrist injury in the semifinals

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Keowee Key tennis pro George Esqueda hits a backhand during the singles final at the Keowee Key Pro Tennis Invitational on Sunday in Salem.

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Saturday, said he had pain in both wrists since the match began.

Esqueda took two medical timeouts in an attempt to salvage momentum, but could not keep up with Elston's cross-court speed, eventually losing his first set of the tournament, 6-4.

"I just had to play through the pain," Esqueda said. "Oliver played well, but (my) return shots needed to help me out."

The Mexican-born Esqueda quickly responded to level the score. The Keowee pro's line shots dramatically improved in the second set, while impressive serving in the fourth game allowed him to control the tempo.

As Esqueda romped to a 6-0 victory in the second set, Elston began to melt under the night's oppressive heat.

"I had started feeling things in the first set," Elston said. "George played much better in the second, and I just couldn't match it. He really outplayed me out there."

Despite serving up three aces within the space of five minutes, Elston's pain was becoming obvious. After losing the final set's fourth game, the Riverside Tennis Club pro forfeited on the sideline, allowing Esqueda to take the title and prize money.

"I just couldn't really move, and when you can't move, there's nothing you can do against a player like George," Elston said.

Esqueda was even happier with the success of his tournament than the result of his game. More than 693 people turned out to watch the action throughout the three days of festivities, breaking a Keowee Key record for tournament attendance.

"I think it was a great success," Esqueda said. "I want to officially thank all the Keowee Key members that helped organize the tournament, all the sponsors and everyone who came out to watch. The crowd was excellent, and I'm very happy with that."