

'Nobody can say that I refused national duty'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 6

MAHESH BHUPATHI says he does not mind being fired as the Indian Davis Cup team's captain but what is unacceptable to him is the tennis federation's allegation that he refused national duty. Bhupathi, one of the most successful players in India's tennis history, insisted that he never made himself unavailable for the Pakistan tie, which has now been shifted out of Islamabad by the ITF due to security concerns. The All India Tennis Association (AITA) chose former Davis Cupper Rohit Rajpal as Bhupathi's successor. "I am not going to sit back after winning 12 Grand Slams and playing for country for 25 years to allow someone to say I am fired because I did not show up for national duty," a fuming Bhupathi told PTI in an exclusive interview. "I don't mind being fired. They can say it's time for a new captain. But nobody can say that I refused national duty. I genuinely thought it's unsafe to travel to Pakistan which the ITF has validated. So, they are going to penalise me and players for this, it's not going to work."

Bhupathi, whose tenure as captain began in Bengaluru in April 2017 with a tie against Uzbekistan, said AITA did not have the courtesy to inform him that he won't continue as captain. "I need some form of communication from AITA that I am not the captain anymore. I have not heard anything from them except that since Rohit is fine to travel to Islamabad and I am not, they will take him for this tie. And this was hours before the neutral venue was announced."

However, when contacted, AITA secretary general Hironmoy Chatterjee said he did call Bhupathi to inform him about the change in captaincy. "I personally called him on the evening of November 4 to inform that we have opted for a new captain," Chatterjee claimed. Bhupathi insisted that the commu-



Mahesh Bhupathi had said he thought it was unsafe to travel to Pakistan.

nication to him was that Rajpal was being appointed just for the tie in Islamabad as he was unavailable and it was never conveyed that he was being removed for good.

"I have personally been involved with the sport at a macro level in India. Be it the Mittal Champions Trust or JSW's IIS. I have raised money for Karman Kaur (Thandi), Sumit (Nagal). If these guys (AITA) don't want me, I can disconnect but don't tell the country that I did not show up for national duty. That's unacceptable."

Arguing his case further, Bhupathi said it defies logic that AITA first announced him as captain for the tie against Pakistan, involved him in selection discussions followed by deliberations with the ITF before suddenly announcing his sacking. "The easiest way to fire me was when we lost to Italy (in February this year). They could have said I did not take the team to World Group so they are firing me. Why have they fired me just before the ITF meeting? There is no logic."

India set to pick A-team for Davis Cup

SAHID JUDGE
MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 6

THE ALL India Tennis Association's (AITA) selection committee is expected to name a 'strong' team for the upcoming Davis Cup tie against Pakistan. Following the International Tennis Federation's (ITF) decision to shift the tie to a neutral venue instead of Islamabad, the national federation will now use the larger field of players to select the five-man squad for the two-day event on November 29-30.

Before the ITF's decision had come through, India's top three singles players Prajesh Gunneswaran (ranked 94), Sumit Nagal (129) and Ramkumar Ramanathan (199) had made themselves unavailable for the tie if it was held in Pakistan, along with top two doubles players Rohan Bopanna (39) and Divij Sharan (47). Subsequently, the AITA drew up a list of players who were willing to play the tie across the border — including veteran Leander Paes. However, now that the tie has been shifted outside Pakistan, the selection committee may potentially recall the players who had previously made themselves unavailable.

"We plan to go there with the best team possible," Davis Cup coach Zeeshan Ali told *The Indian Express*. "I've spoken with the captain for this tie Rohit Rajpal, and we decided that no risks should be taken especially if we have a strong set of players available."

For the upcoming tie, the AITA has appointed the selection committee chairman Rajpal as non-playing captain in place of regular skipper Mahesh Bhupathi.

Based on the past few ties the Indian team has competed in, the AITA has largely relied on the world rankings to select the team. Should that same formula be applied, it is likely that Nagal and Ramkumar will get

a call up for the singles and Bopanna for doubles. Since Prajesh and Sharan will remain unavailable for the tie due to personal reasons, based on the rankings, world No.248 Sasikumar Mukund and Paes (ranked 96 in doubles) may get a call-up in singles and doubles respectively.

The team however, will not be formed before November 10.

"Normally the ITF needs teams to announce their squad at least three weeks before the tie. They have allowed us some time because this happens to be an exceptional condition," Ali said. "The Pakistan federation has till the end of this week to announce the new venue. So we will decide the team based on which country and what the surface will be."

PTF appeal ITF decision

The Pakistan Tennis Federation on Wednesday wrote to the ITF on Wednesday appealing the world body's decision to shift the upcoming Group 1 Asia/Oceania tie from Islamabad to a neutral venue.

"We think it's a very unreasonable decision and we have challenged it," PTF president Salim Saifullah Khan told this paper. Khan further condemned the way the Indian federation's hesitance to travel to Islamabad, and their subsequent correspondence with the ITF to push for a neutral venue.

"This was a window of opportunity for the two countries who are having many issues, somehow all these issues are made by politicians. This was a good opportunity to show that we are people of the same subcontinent and we share the same values and we are willing to play together," Khan added. "The Indian team will be going to Nepal, the Pakistan team will be going there too for the South Asian Games (in December). It would have been a good gesture from India. It's unfortunate, that's all I can say."

Shaili Singh, remember the name

Raised by a single mother, record-breaking 15-year-old Jhansi girl is tipped to be the next Anju

NIHAL KOSHIE
NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 6

UNLIKE MOST teenagers, long jumper Shaili Singh, 15, doesn't mind updating her mother with every minute detail of her eventful life. Over the past few months, besides text messages about the exact contents of her meals and her whereabouts, she has been sending pictures of her standing on top of the podium. For Shaili, India's most talented emerging athlete and widely regarded as the next Anju Bobby George, winning gold medals and breaking records has become a routine occurrence.

Last week, Shaili broke the under-16 national record for the second time in a year. Bettering her earlier mark of 5.94m, she jumped 6.15m at the Junior Nationals in Guntur. The distance bettered the under-18 mark too. It wasn't a freak jump for the girl from Jhansi as she had soared over six metres in four different competitions in a month. Apart from winning the gold, there was another reason for celebration — she had qualified for the World Junior Championships in Nairobi, Kenya, next year.

One of the first things Shaili did when she got access to her phone was forward pictures from Guntur. "My mother is very happy that I am making progress. Till date, she has never watched me jump in a competition. Next time if there is a tournament in Uttar Pradesh, she will definitely travel to watch me. So that's the reason I never miss a chance to tell her about my career," Shaili says.

Mother Vinita, a single parent, has for years worked as a tailor to bring up her three children — two girls and a boy. She runs a small unit, the profits from which have gone into the making of the country's big athletics hope. However, with no one from the family into sports, Vinita had her doubts when Shaili wished to pursue long jump with all seriousness. But it was a phone call that change her mind.

Robert Bobby George, Anju's coach-cum-husband, saw a spark in the teenager and was keen to take her under his wings. Vinita, after thinking hard, took a leap of faith. It was an emotional moment when Shaili packed her bags to move to George's training base in Bangalore. That was to be the start of the long-distance relationship between mother and daughter. After days of early anxiety, the mother is now relaxed. "She is not worried about me being away from home and in a different part of the country because she knows I am in safe hands," says Shaili.

George is convinced Shaili is an outstanding talent and goes as far as to say there hasn't been a more promising athlete since Anju, India's only senior world medallist in track and field. He sees a bright future for Shaili, who he had first spotted at the junior nationals two years ago and went about trying to convince her mother he was the right person to mentor her.

"Shaili has got great potential. I see her as being the face of Indian track and field in the next few years. She needs another two to



Shaili Singh is the national record holder in the U-16 category. AP

Honourable mentions

A quick guide to those who impressed at the 35th National Junior Athletic Championships in Guntur.

RITIK MALIK

EVENT: (U-18) 100 metres

The Delhi athlete clocked 10.65 seconds to break the national record of 10.69, which was set by Gurindervir Singh in 2017.

PARSHANT SINGH KANHAIYA

EVENT: (U-20) Pole Vault

The Haryana lad set a new national mark at 5.05m. It was this year's best jump by an Indian pole vaulter this year following the efforts of Siva Subramaniam (5.16m) and KG Jessan (5.10).

PM THABITHA

EVENT: (U-18) 100M hurdles

The Asian Youth Champion from Tamil Nadu lowered her personal best to

13.70 seconds — a national record in the category — an improvement on her gold-medal winning performance (13.86) in Hong Kong earlier this year.

RACHNA

EVENT: (U-20) 800 metres

Rachna broke Tintu Luka's 11-year-old meet record, with a 2:06.12. Luka set the meet mark at 2:07.48 in Mysore back in 2008. With Luka now retired, Rachna has an opportunity to fill the void.

PARVEJ KHAN

EVENT: (U-16) 800 metres

The Haryana athlete set a time of 1:54.78 improving upon Biren Gogoi's record of 1:55.70 set 28 years ago in Cuttack.

three years to develop into a complete athlete. For her age if you compare her to athletes around the world, she is fantastic," the acclaimed coach says.

Going by the Under-18 rankings, the youngest age-group for which the IAAF ranks performances, the 15-year-old's 6.15m mark

puts her at 19th place in the world. The list is topped by a 6.64 jump by Italy's Larissa Iapichino.

George predicts Shaili being at the same level by the time she turns 18.

He says one of Shaili's advantages is her age. "In technical events, seldom do we iden-

Shooters bag eight medals but miss quota

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
DOHA, NOVEMBER 6

India shooters bagged eight medals on the second day of the Asian Shooting Championship here, but narrowly missed out on at least three possible Tokyo Olympic quota places on Wednesday. India, thus, increased its medals tally to 13 after the five the country's shooters won on Tuesday. India's tally now stood at four gold, three silver and six bronze medals. Kynan Chenai was second in the men's Trap qualification with a solid 122, but in the six-man final, he finished sixth with 13 successful hits out of his first 25-shots. Kuwait, Chinese Taipei and Qatar bagged the three quota places.

The Indian men's Trap team of Kynan, Manavjit Singh Sandhu and Prithviraj won the silver medal with a total score of 357, six

short of Kuwait who won the gold. In the men's 25m Rapid Fire Pistol, Anish Bhanwala finished 11th in qualification with a score of 574. A poor final series put paid to his hopes of bagging one of the four available Tokyo 2020 quotas in the event. In the end, he narrowly missed out on an Olympic quota to a Thai competitor, who finished 10th to pick up the fourth quota place on offer.

The other quotas in the event went to Japan, Korea and Pakistan. China's world champion Lin Junmin won gold in the event. China swept all the individual medals in the event. The Indian trio of Anish, Bhavesh Shekhawat and Adarsh Singh, however, won the team bronze with a combined score of 1716. Korea bagged the silver while China clinched the gold. Indian shooters in the junior section of the same event also emulated their seniors with Ayush Jindal, Ayush Sangwan and Japtyesh Jaspal winning the

team bronze. India picked up two gold, two silver and two bronze medals additionally in the junior men's and women's 50m Rifle Prone competitions.

The junior men's team comprising Niraj Kumar, Abid Ali Khan and Harshrajshinji Gohil logged a total of 1845 to win the gold ahead of China and Korea. Niraj, with his effort of 616.3, also won an individual silver and Abid an individual bronze with a score of 614.4.

The junior women's prone team comprising Nishchal, Bhakti Khamkar and Kinnori Konar also won the team gold with a combined score of 1836.3. Here too, China and Korea won silver and bronze respectively. Nishchal and Bhakti too won an individual silver and bronze by notching up scores of 615.3 and 614.2 respectively.

Yuting Ma and Hao Yu of China won the individual golds in both the junior prone

competitions.

The pair of Anjum Moudgil and Deepak Kumar later crossed the first qualification round of the 10m Air Rifle Mixed Team competition, shooting a total of 626.2. The duo finished sixth out of 36 teams.

In the second qualifying stage, they, however, finished outside the top four pairs out of the eight that reached the gold and bronze medal matches. Anjum and Deepak had to be satisfied with a sixth place finish.

The second Indian team comprising Apurvi Chandela and Divyansh Singh Panwar finished a disappointing 18th in the same event.

In the women's Trap event, Shreyasi Singh did get into a five-way shoot-off for the sixth and last qualification spot for the finals, but she finished third best to eventually end in the eighth position. Shreyasi shot 114 in her qualification round to be the best Indian on show by a distance.

WIDENING FOOTPRINT

Touching first base: Baseball taking baby steps towards popularity

ALEXIA DIAMOND
NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 6

HIS 5 AM training schedule means Aditya Kathane needs to be an early riser. He then has classes and afternoon practice before reaching home at 6 in the evening. The 15-year-old from Gurgaon isn't complaining since he enjoys being the catcher for his baseball team.

"Baseball is something that's just not a sport for me. It's helped me focus more in life and has created a set pattern which I'm able to follow," Aditya says. Baseball is not a sport many play or even watch in India. But its has a few backers who vouch for its potential.

"Baseball has unlimited scope to be lucrative in India. Our nation is big," according to Harish Kumar, secretary general of the Amateur Baseball Federation of India (ABFI). And some kids are willing to take a chance on that perceived potential.

Aditya says his interest in baseball started with the well-known Japanese cartoon series "Doraemon", and a small informational stall in his school. "Once I played it, I really enjoyed it and made it my main sport," he adds.

Dozens of private and government school kids recently participated in what is widely considered to be India's first baseball tournament at the state level conducted on a proper baseball field in Haryana. From pitching to running to first base, some teams were in street clothes and others in uniforms. Most kids didn't wear a helmet because they had never practised in one.

In the absence of baseball games on television, Aditya, for one, imbibes skills from an altogether different source. "I'd rather watch many videos of the best plays and then learn from that," he says. The youngster watches couple of hours of plays a week and follows a popular American catcher — J. T. Realmuto of the Philadelphia Phillies in Major League Baseball. "Baseball's popularity is actually growing day by day... In other states, even if they know the game, they don't know the plays. They're just playing 'throw and hit the ball'."

Even though not many understand the intricacies of the sport, it can attract an audience. "The district championship in Gurgaon had over 1,000 spectators and since the venue was close to schools, a large number of students came as well," said Raunaq Sahni, founder of Grand Slam Baseball (GSB)



Participants at the state-level baseball tournament which was held in Gurgaon.

who sponsored the tournament. More spectators means more exposure for baseball players, who could be spotted by recruiters for national or foreign teams. Another goal

of ABFI is to improve the quality of the national team.

Sahni claims that 15 of their players made it to the nationals and five of GSB's coaches

From pitching to running to first base, some teams were in street clothes and others in uniforms. Most kids didn't wear a helmet because they had never practised in one.

have played for the national team.

Dream of representing country

Prikshit Yadav, a 16-year-old pitcher from Gurgaon, is Aditya's teammate and says his dream is to represent India in baseball and then join the MLB but to get there comes with work. "As a catcher and him [Yadav] as the pitcher, we have a really good bond regarding how to pitch. We don't even have to talk about it," said Aditya.

GSB, a non-profit organisation, offers baseball training, tournaments and opportunities to private and government students in 17 schools. Three of these schools run off-and-on programmes since the size of their fields is limited and they have to divide the space between other sports.

Sahni said the organisation needs to provide facilities and proper equipment for the players to make sure it's an level playing field between private and government schools. Another objective is to make baseball and its players more popular. GSB promotes its players by putting up billboards outside schools to give the club an identity. "It's just to highlight those players who compete in the state tournament, so that they are kind of perceived as 'heroes'," Sahni says.

Although the concept of school spirit seems a foreign approach to sports in Indian schools, it's a start to get basic interest in baseball. "We have to create a model where our private school players generate the resources... because not only are government schools the backbone of the player base, it's also the backbone of the entire system," he says.

But no sport can flourish without a something more than just enjoyment for its players. Aditya says they receive certificates from the government. "These certificates will help me in college as well. I would like to continue the sport to represent my college too."

(Alexia Diamond is an intern with *The Indian Express*)