

Grounded for long, Chopra gets wings

After long injury lay-off, star javelin thrower comes up with a 87.86m effort to qualify for Tokyo Olympics

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ON TUESDAY evening as Neeraj Chopra sent his javelin flying to 87.86m in the ACNW League Meeting in Potchefstroom, South Africa, the Haryana athlete proceeded to point straight to the sky with the right hand, his trademark gesture to signal a perfect throw.

Then he made his way to the other Indian javelin throwers and coach Klaus Bartonitz. The throw was 20cm short of Chopra's best throw of his career so far, a feat which he had achieved at the 2018 Asian Games. But Tuesday's pitch meant that Chopra crossed the World Athletics qualification mark of 85m for the Tokyo Olympics. It was Chopra's first competition outside India since September 2018 when he suffered the elbow injury and underwent the surgery in May 2019. And Chopra's first reaction post qualifying, was to resume training for the bigger test up ahead in August. "Such kind of throws come about because of hours of training," Chopra told *The Indian Express*.

At the McArthur Stadium at Potchefstroom, Chopra started third out of five, and warmed up with a throw of 81.63 m with none of the other competitors crossing the 75m mark. After progressively improving tosses of 82m and 82.57m in his second and third attempt, Chopra cranked it up to 87.86m in his fourth attempt and having secured qualification, did not bother with the last two throws.

Chopra had undergone elbow surgery in Mumbai on May 2, 2019, a day after the qualification process for 2020 Tokyo Olympics began. Five months later, the Athletics Federation of India had announced Chopra's return to competitive mode in the 59th national Open Athletics Championship at Ranchi. But that was not to be as the star javelin thrower withdrew at the last minute. Chopra moved to South Africa along with coach Klaus Bartonitz for his training stint.

With the average wind touching 14 kmph at Potchefstroom, Chopra got his rhythm back. "My thoughts were a bit different here as I was competing after a long gap. I competed here without much pressure. I had set the target to cross the qualifying standard but I wanted to test how it goes for me. It felt good to get that first throw of 81m plus. I had not got the run up correct and the javelin was released from a bit behind. This gave me the confidence to push a little more and try cross the 85m mark. The jerk and follow-through came out well in the fourth throw and I knew the throw was a good one. I could see that it was close to 84-85m as I was some distance away but when the officials announced, it was a good surprise for me and it meant that I had achieved my target," he said in a statement.

Chopra knows that his main challenge will be to maintain this form and aim at improving his personal best of 88.06m, a mark which he reached at the Asian Games in 2018.

"You see in the sport of javelin, it totally depends on the day and competition and not a lot of these things are in your hand. On some days, even a throw of 85m can get a gold while on some even a 87m throw can see you finish outside the top-3 like it happened with me in the Doha Diamond League in 2018. So I don't put any pressure on me to cross any mark. Yes, last year did see athletes not throwing that far as compared to 2016 or 2017 and 2018 but it was the same for everyone. Similarly this is an Olympic year and every athlete will be coming after a proper off-season and looking to peak at the right time. For me, the target has always been to improve my distance since that is under my control," Chopra said.

Prior to leaving for South Africa last November, Chopra had spent time training at Patiala and later IIS, Vijaynagar. It was here he had trained by throwing golf balls to improve his elbow strength and movement. Once the Indian team shifted base to South Africa,



Flinging his javelin to 87.86m in the ACNW League Meeting in Potchefstroom, Neeraj Chopra qualified for the Asian Games.

Chopra's initial focus was to reach the fitness level and then start the "throwing" sessions. The athlete would also practice hurdles running to gain the run-up speed.

"The elbow was stretching completely and even though I was hesitant to make throws with full strength, I would train with golf ball to improve my hand speed. The golf ball is light and fast and regaining the hand speed was my first focus. I had suffered injuries earlier also but never suffered an injury at such a crucial point in my career. I also understood that the extra bone fragments happened due to some mistake and my aim was to spend as much time on the basics as I can," Chopra had said.

Early in his career, Chopra had suffered an elbow injury during the Federation Cup in 2016 before he won the IAAF World U-20 title. Chopra's initial coach Naseem Ahmed, who had trained him at Tau Devi Stadium, Panchkula from 2012 to 2016, often talks with Chopra and the Haryana athlete shared his aim to achieve the right kind of fitness first before starting throwing. "I remember when he suffered the elbow injury in 2016 during the Federation Cup, his first aim was to regain his fitness. He keeps sending me videos of doing hurdles training and he would tell me that he undertook javelin sessions once in a week. It's good that he understands this aspect of the sport and knows that his body has to be fully fit before he starts the rigorous work," shares Ahmed.

Chopra picked up meditation to help him in his rehabilitation and the Chopra family at village Khandra would be initially surprised to see him reading books. "While he would tell us about meditation, it was a surprise for all us to see him meditate when he visited home before going to South Africa. He carried Shiv Khara's book *Jeet Aapki* and often told us that it's all about motivation once he gets fully fit. Even during the rehab, most of us family members talked with him through whatsapp almost daily and shares Chopra's uncle Bhim Chopra.

High class throw at a low-key meet

NIHAL KOSHIE
NEW DELHI JANUARY 29

EVERY WEEK from October to April, the North West University hosts League Meetings for athletes who make Potchefstroom their training base. The university, a breeding ground for South Africa's athletes, attracts talent from around the world; army teams, athletic club members and some of the very best.

They make a beeline to this city, an hour from Johannesburg, as spring makes away for summer while the frigid cold grips training centres in Europe. Javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra was returning to competition at Tuesday's League Meeting after 16 months. He was to test his throwing arm which underwent an elbow surgery in May last year in a field which comprised just three French club-level athletes and a promising junior from India. The video that Chopra tweeted showed fellow competitors cheering him. It gave the impression that Chopra was competing at a club-level meet which didn't have the stamp of approval of World Athletics, the governing body of track and field.

Jean Verster, the secretary of the Athletics Central North West, the province which conducted the League Meeting, however, said despite the depleted field and the hand-written results sheet doing the rounds on social media, the throws were above scrutiny. By evening, Verster released the official results which have been forwarded to the statistician of Athletics South Africa and will be mailed to World Athletics.

"Everything is official. League Meetings are recognized by Athletics South Africa, which is the national federation. We are one of the official provinces of Athletics South Africa. Our stadium is one of the oldest in the country and

"We expected Neeraj to throw something around 83 metres to 84 metres so 87-plus in his first competition is very good. It is also a huge relief for him and now he has the confidence back with six months to go for the Olympics."

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INDIA'S HIGH PERFORMANCE DIRECTOR

it was refurbished recently. Everything is as per international standards with national officials, electronic timing, standardised equipment. Neeraj Chopra's throw will be recognized by the World Athletics," Verster said. World Athletics had this to say in an email: "The results from last year's competition were accepted so we have no reason to think that we will not accept these results."

The low-turn out for the javelin event, Verster explained was because the League Meetings are held every Tuesday from October to April, expect during the holiday break between mid December and January. "One week you may have three to four competitors, while the next week you may have a dozen and the week after that half a dozen. We may not always have the numbers because athletes from around the world pick and choose which League Meeting they have to participate in. That said, every League Meeting is held as per international standards," Verster added.

Competing in such meets makes sense for those undergoing rehabilitation here, like Chopra. The weekly League Meetings give athletes a chance to compete regularly without having to criss-cross a continent or having to go all-out against arch rivals and face scrutiny.

Keeping a close eye on the results was Athletics Federation of India's high perform-

ance director Volker Herrmann. He was part of the think-tank which advised Chopra against rushing back from rehabilitation and participating at the World Championships in September-October.

"We expected Neeraj to throw something around 83 metres to 84 metres so 87-plus in his first competition is very good. It is also a huge relief for him and now he has the confidence back with six months to go for the Olympics," Herrmann said.

The decision to delay his comeback was a wise one, Herrmann believes. "Going to the world championships would have been a huge disruption of his training programme. It is not easy for a young athlete not to compete for 16 months. It was a good decision to give him the necessary time, because with such a talent you should never rush. In October, the coaches, the physio and myself, we discussed and looked at the things he has to improve and came up with a plan. We knew that this will take time, especially if you are trying to enhance technical aspects."

The fourth throw which helped Chopra meet Tokyo Olympics Qualifying Standards stood out for another reason too, Herrmann said. "If you see the video, his speed is higher and the way he is throwing the javelin is smoother now. In the first three throws, I spoke to him and the coaches yesterday after competition, I think he wanted to try too hard and then he felt that was not the way to go and the last one was very smooth. It was a good decision that they decided not to throw any further (after the fourth)."

Herrmann has a word of advice for those expecting the moon from Chopra immediately. "People may think now that he will throw 90 metres very soon. But the first thing for him is to follow the process. Remember he is still very young. Javelin throwers peak at 25, 26."

Coronavirus concern hits global sporting events

REUTERS
PARIS, JANUARY 29

THE LIST of international sporting events affected by a new virus outbreak in China grew on Wednesday with skiing World Cup races in Yanqing cancelled and Olympic women's football in Australia in doubt over concerns about athletes' safety.

Badminton, tennis and basketball were among other sports whose governing bodies were rearranging events, weighing possible changes or monitoring the implications of the outbreak.

Skiing's governing body FIS said in a statement that it took the "difficult decision" along with local organisers to cancel the Feb. 15-16 Alpine Ski World Cup -- the first official test event for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. The outbreak has killed over 130 people with almost 6,000 others affected by the flu-like virus that emerged late last year in Wuhan in the central Hubei province.

"Although the risk level in Yanqing is low, the health and welfare of athletes and all participants must take priority," FIS president Gian Franco Kasper said.

FIS said it will announce the rescheduling of the cancelled races—a downhill and a super-G—at a later date.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Asian Football Confederation said home matches of the four Chinese clubs on the first three match days of the AFC Champions League will be rescheduled and played away by swapping the order with their opponents.

The Chinese Football Association said four players—Wang Shuang, Yao Wei, Lyu Yueyun and Li Mengwen -- would miss next week's Olympic women's qualifying tournament in Sydney after being affected by China's coronavirus control.

China last week withdrew as hosts of the four-nation event, which also features Australia, Taiwan and Thailand, before the AFC moved the matches to Sydney.

However, the event suffered another blow when Australia's soccer federation (FFA) said in a statement it would postpone ticket sales while awaiting advice from the authorities.

The Chinese team, scheduled to play their first match on Feb. 3, were told to remain in their hotel rooms until Feb. 5 after arriving in Brisbane on Wednesday.

The International Tennis Federation has moved the Fed Cup Asia/Oceania Group I event out of Dongguan to Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana) in Kazakhstan The Feb 4-8 event features China, Taiwan, India, Indonesia, South Korea and Uzbekistan with two of the nations making it to the Fed Cup playoffs in April. Badminton's governing body BWF said that it would monitor implications related to the outbreak and that no decision had been made on the Feb. 25-March 1 China Masters in Lingshui.

The International Olympic Committee last week announced Jordan as hosts of the 2020 Olympics boxing qualifiers for Asia and Oceania after an event in China's Wuhan was cancelled. The qualification event will take place in Amman from March 3-11.

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Li stuns world champ Sindhu in PBL

PV Sindhu was stunned by North Eastern Warriors' Michelle Li in straight games as former champions Hyderabad Hunters' made a disappointing start to its home leg of the Premier Badminton League. Sindhu suffered an 8-15 9-15 defeat against world no.10 Candian Li in a lop-sided women's singles contest. Showing quick reflexes and finesse at the net, Li kept the home favourite on the back foot right from the start, building a 9-6 lead. Sindhu tried to go for her smashes while trailing 7-13 but that was only a brief reprieve before the former Commonwealth Games gold medallist wrapped up the first game. Sindhu looked more comfortable in the second game and kept things under control till 5-5. But unforced errors cost Sindhu dearly.

IWL: Odisha Police beat Bangalore United

Odisha Police opened their account in the ongoing Hero Indian Women's League, beating local favourites Bangalore United FC by a solitary goal in Bengaluru on Wednesday. Jasmani Samad's solitary strike in the 50th minute was enough for the Odisha outfit to garner their first win after they went down to Kenkre FC in their opening round fixture on January 25. Odisha Police will next face red-hot Gokulam Kerala on Saturday. In another game, Sreebhumi FC rode on strikes from Poonam (25th minute) and Ritu Devi (62nd) to beat Bidesh XI Sporting Club 2-0.

FC Goa win, reclaim top spot in ISL

FC Goa edged past a resilient Odisha FC 4-2 to reclaim the top spot in the Indian Super League at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar on Wednesday. A Vinit Rai own goal (21st minute) followed by a Jackichand Singh brace (24th, 27th) set Goa on their way to a big win. But Manuel Onwu (59th, 65th) then struck twice in the second half and nearly brought Odisha back into the game. A late goal from Ferran Corominas (90+1st) settled the result. With 30 points from 15 matches, Goa moved three points clear at the top of the table. Odisha's playoff hopes took a hit as they remain fourth.



Wild card for Ramkumar Ramanathan means India will have three players in singles draw, with Sumit Nagal and Prajnesh Gunneswaran being other two.

Ramkumar gets wild card for Maharashtra Open

Ramkumar Ramanathan was on Wednesday handed a wild card for the men's singles main draw of the Tata Open Maharashtra and the organisers may grant a similar entry to veteran Leander Paes in the men's doubles event. India's top two singles players, Prajnesh Gunneswaran and rising star Sumit Nagal, who claimed fame by taking a set off Roger Federer at the 2019 US Open, have entered the main draw on their own. For 25-year-old Ramkumar, who has slipped to 185 in the ranking ladder, will make his third appearance at India's only ATP 250 event in Pune from February 3. MSLTA President Bharat Oza said they have received requests for wildcards from players who lost early at the Australian Open and they will soon make a call. Surprisingly Rohan Bopanna and Divij Sharan, who won this tournament last year together, are not teaming up this year. Bopanna is also seeking a wild card entry with local lad Arjun Kadhe and so is Purav Raja with Ramkumar. Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan and N Balaji have also sought a wild card entries.

Karnataka, Air India complete QF line-up

Karnataka outplayed Odisha 5-2, while Air India Sports Promotion Board (AISPB) drew 1-1 with Gangpur-Odisha to progress to the quarter-finals of the 10th Hockey India Senior Men National Championship 2020 (A Division) in Jhansi on Wednesday. In the first match of the day, AISPB played out a 1-1 draw with Hockey Gangpur-Odisha to secure a point and advance to the last-eight round by finishing second in Pool D. Later, Hockey Karnataka defeated Hockey Odisha 5-2 to secure the top-spot in Pool D. In the first quarterfinal on Thursday, Services Sports Control Board (SSCB) will take on The Mumbai Hockey Association Ltd.

Dicka scores a hat-trick in Minerva's win

Dipanda Dicka scored a brilliant hat-trick to help Minerva Punjab FC register a 3-2 comeback win over Neroa FC in a Hero I-League match in Ludhiana on Wednesday. Dicka fired home in the 27th, 43rd and 89th minutes after Varun Thokchom (4th) Philip Teteh (20th) handed Neroa a two-goal cushion early in the first half. Punjab, who are now on a nine-game winning streak, have garnered 17 points from 10 matches, and are three points behind league leaders Mohun Bagan, who also have a game in hand. Neroa will remain on eighth place with eight points from nine games.



Bala Devi signs for Scottish club Rangers

Scottish club Rangers FC on Wednesday announced the signing of woman's national team forward Bala Devi, a first in Indian football. Subject to international clearance, the 29-year-old will join the club on an 18-month deal after a successful spell on trial at Rangers in November. This will make Bala the first Indian woman to become a professional footballer anywhere in the world and she also becomes Rangers' first Asian international footballer. Bala is the current top scorer for the Indian national women's team, netting an impressive 52 times in 58 games since 2010, which also makes her the top international goal scorer in the South Asian region. She has also served as national team captain in a distinguished international career, which began when she was called up aged just 15.