

# Ticking all the boxes

With Mary, Panghal and Simranjit qualifying, India equal biggest-ever Olympic contingent, tying London's tally of eight

NITIN SHARMA  
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 9

INDIA HAS MATCHED its biggest Olympic boxing contingent when MC Mary Kom and Simranjit Singh made it eight pugilists on their way to Tokyo, the same number that went to London 2012.

Mary booked her ticket with a 5:0 win over Irish Magno of the Philippines in the 51Kg category at the Asia-Oceania Olympic Qualifiers in Amman, Jordan on Monday. Simranjit beat Namu Monkhor of Mongolia by the same scoreline in the 60kg category.

Earlier in the day, world number one Amit Panghal had become the sixth Indian boxer to seal the Olympic quota with a split 4:1 decision over Carlo Paalam of the Philippines after five boxers bagged spots on Sunday. Mary will be returning to the Olympics after missing out on a berth in the 2016 Rio Games.

"It's an Incredible feat from Mary Kom. She keeps rewriting history and the fact that she has qualified after missing the 2016 Olympics is really commendable and inspiring for other boxers. She took her time in the opening round but from second round onwards, found her rhythm and landed cleaner punches. She is a legend and we all work hard for her so that she can win her second Olympic medal," said Santiago Nieva, India's high performance director.

Out of the last six Olympics, India did not send more than five boxers in four Games but eight qualified in 2012 when women's boxing was introduced. In Rio 2016, India only had three boxers with Vikas Krishan (75 Kg), Shiva Thapa (56 Kg) and Manoj Kumar (64 Kg) making the cut, but returning empty-handed.

But four men and four women have so far qualified for Tokyo. Manish Kaushik (63 Kg) and Sachin Kumar can still earn spots to take the number into double figures. Kaushik has a box-off bout while Kumar has to go through two to secure an Olympic quota in the next two days.

"Obviously it feels good to see eight boxers qualifying for the Tokyo Olympics so far and there are chances that we can earn two more quota places. We have to be happy about that but we want more. We had more chances here and we have another qualifier coming up in Paris. In this tournament, we have seen many good nations losing early and if we keep that in mind, having 8-9 quota places from here is a big thing for us," Nieva said. "Also considering the number of Indian boxers at the Rio Olympics, it's a huge improvement for us. We want to make it the biggest team ever going to the Olympics and the focus will be on converting these quota places into medals."

**Tough bout for Panghal**  
On a day when two-time World Youth champion Sakshi Chaudhary and World Championship bronze medalist Manish Kaushik lost their bouts, Panghal booked a place in his first Olympics in the men's 52 Kg category.

At the World Championships in Russia last year too, Panghal had scored a 4:1 split verdict against the same opponent to secure his first Worlds medal. There Panghal has stated slowly with Paalam swinging more and making counter-attacks on Amit's ad-



**Second-seeded Mary Kom scored a 5-0 win over Philippines' Irish Magno in her quarterfinal bout, while Amit Panghal edged out familiar foe Carlo Paalam of Philippines in a 4-1 split verdict to book his ticket to Tokyo.**

vances in the opening round. The Haryana boxer had to rely upon his combinations and right punch to make a comeback.

On Monday, Palaam kept coming back after Amit's combination of punches in the opening round and looked the more aggressive boxer in the first minute before Panghal relied on his accuracy and straight punches to take the first round with a split 3:2 verdict. While Panghal did not look very convincing in the second round even if he won the round with a split 4:1 verdict, the Haryana boxer was superior against a tired Palaam in the final round to complete another split 4:1 win and earn his ticket.

"I think Amit had a better performance than his previous bout. Palaam was more difficult to face this time as he started very aggressively. The main challenge for Amit was to maintain his composure against stronger opponents and he landed clear shots when Palaam opened himself up. Amit used his speed and elusiveness despite Palaam com-



ponents. When he scores from outside, he is doing well but he has been aiming too high and does not land punches with his knuckles against slightly taller opponents. We want him to land punches with his knuckles landing on the face or head and with more power. He is also getting a bit tired in the third round and we have to work on this area ahead of the Olympics."

With less than six months to go for the Tokyo Olympics, Nieva believes that Amit has his problems against shorter. "We have to work on his inside game against shorter op-

## Baro Mukhia to Tokyo, Lovlina's long journey

NITIN SHARMA  
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 9

IT WAS several hours after her bout on Sunday when Lovlina Borgohain, 22, realised the significance of her achievement — qualifying for the Olympics. After beating Uzbekistan's Maftunakhon Melieva in the quarterfinals of the women's 69 kg category to earn a ticket for Tokyo, Lovlina was totally exhausted. Later when she reached the hotel, she sat with coaches Raffaele Bergamasco and Sandhya Gurung for a post-mortem of the day's fight and later watch the videos of her next opponent — 2018 World Championship silver medalist and reigning Asian champion Gu Hong of China. And it was finally while talking to her father, that it sunk in and she broke down.

"I was only thinking about the bout against Melieva and listening to coaches about the next bout. It was only when my father called me and showed my mother and neighbours celebrating that I started crying. Going to the Olympics has been my dream since I started boxing and this win is the first step towards realising my dream," shares an emotional Lovlina while talking with *The Indian Express*.

Growing up in village Baro Mukhia in Golaghat district of Assam, Lovlina would initially practise muay thai at the school ground in nearby Barpathar village. The youngster would accompany her father Tiken Borgohain, who used to first buy tea from gardens and sell it from his shop, to the school to train for the martial art. Her twin sisters — kickboxers Lima and Licha — too would follow them.

It was only the visit of SAI coach Padum Boro at their village in 2012 which saw Lovlina giving trials and getting selected as a trainee at Guwahati. Her selection also meant that she had to leave her village and shift to Guwahati, a city that was 300 kms away from her village. "I did not know anything about boxing except from reading about Mary Kom Didi in local newspapers. I would practise muay thai at my home too and when I was selected as boxing trainee by Boro sir, some of our relatives and neighbors told my parents not to send me to Guwahati to train. But my parents have been supportive to all three of us," recalls Lovlina.

It was at the end of 2016 that Lovlina was inducted into the senior camp in the 75 Kg category on the basis of her youth exploits and it also meant that the youngster trained under coach Sandhya Gurung. While she would make the shift to 69 Kg soon, Gurung saw many shortcomings in Lovlina's game including her fear of hitting the opponent. "A lot of junior and youth boxers face problems in senior category with their basics and it was the same with Lovlina. We worked on things like stepping and standing basics apart from correcting her leg position before any punch. She would cross her legs or would go back before the punch and could only hit 1-2 punches. Apart from the technique, she was also facing a mental block of hitting the



**Lovlina now faces 2018 Worlds silver medalist and reigning Asian champion Gu Hong of China.**

opponent with power," recalls Gurung.

Prior to the Asian Championships in Vietnam, where she bagged the bronze medal, Lovlina also had a chance meeting with coach Poonam Beniwal, wife of 2006 CWG champion Akhil Kumar, at Rohtak. Beniwal told her to use her long reach and suggested her to watch videos of two-time Olympic champion Claressa Shields of USA. "Sandhya mam made me go to the basics and made me learn counter-attacks too. When I came into the national camp, I would hesitate to approach boxers like Mary Kom and Pooja Rani but as I spent time, I would not hesitate asking them for tips. When Poonam mam told me to focus on long distance and suggested me to watch videos of London and Rio Olympics champion Claressa Shields, I would spend hours watching the videos and trying them out in practice," shares Lovlina.

The last two years have seen Lovlina winning two successive bronze medals in world championships in Delhi and Russia in 2018 and 2019 and India's high performance director for women's boxing Raffaele Bergamasco sees a big change in her boxing. "Initially, I spent some time in improving her feet movement and made her realise that she can move her body more to attack from different angles. Her strength has been her stamina gained in the last two years apart from her reaction time in the ring. We have some things in mind to improve in her game before Tokyo and she can win a medal," says the Italian coach.

As for the Borgohain family, it was holi in their village a day before the festival due to the celebrations in the village. "I have always loved watching sport and to see her now in the Olympics is the biggest gift for us and for our village. It was holi for us today after her win and the whole village celebrated her feat. It would be more celebrations when she wins the Olympic medal," says Tiken Borgohain.

### TRACKING THE VIRUS

## Flame, but no fans

The coronavirus pandemic continues to wreak havoc with two more high-profile sporting occasions being impacted on Monday.

#### TORCH LIGHTING

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics torch lighting ceremony in ancient Olympia will be held without spectators. Greece's Olympic Committee said spectators would be excluded from both the dress rehearsal at the ancient site on Wednesday and the widely-broadcast ceremony on Thursday. This is the first time since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics that the ceremony will be held without spectators.

#### TENNIS

The BNP Paribas Open — popularly known as Indian Wells — was scheduled to start qualifying on Monday with the main draw getting underway on Wednesday, but has now been called off. World No.2 Rafael Nadal was already in the Californian desert when news came on Monday that the event had been postponed after a resident of the Coachella Valley tested positive for the coronavirus.

#### RUGBY

The Six Nations rugby match between France and Ireland, due to be played on Saturday at the Stade de France, has been postponed with a new date yet to be announced. Same has been the fate of the Wales vs Scotland game in Cardiff. The England-Italy match had already been postponed.

#### FOOTBALL

The UEFA Champions League Round of 16 second leg encounter between Paris Saint-Germain and Borussia Dortmund will be played behind closed doors at the Parc des Princes on Wednesday night, it was decided on Monday. All French top flight football matches will be played behind closed doors or with a maximum attendance of 1,000 people until April 15. All Romanian league games will be played behind closed doors till further notice, same for all Bulgarian league matches in the next two rounds.

#### BASEBALL

The Japanese professional baseball league season, due to start on March 20, postponed.

#### ATHLETICS

The 18th Federation Cup National Junior Athletics Championships, scheduled to be held from April 6-8 in Bhopal, has been postponed till further notice.

#### WINTER SPORTS

The Italian Winters Sports Federation has announced the suspension of all sporting activity across its disciplines, including skiing, snowboarding and biathlon. The only exceptions are Italian athletes who are already in position for World Cup or Junior World Cup events, or those currently in the running to win a competition or achieve a significant placement.

## 'Fifth slam' — Tennis's biggest casualty

BEN ROTHENBERG AND CHRISTOPHER CLAREY  
MARCH 9

THE BNP Paribas Open in Southern California, one of the world's leading tennis tournaments, will not be held this month because of the spreading coronavirus, making it one of the highest-profile sporting events canceled in the outbreak.

Organisers of the event, in the Riverside County community of Indian Wells, made the decision on the eve of its start on Monday after county officials declared a public health emergency when a case was confirmed in the area.

The tournament had previously announced Thursday that it would take various precautions in light of the virus, including having ball kids wear gloves and telling players not to handle pens or other items to autograph.

The decision came quickly and as a surprise to players, many of whom already were in Indian Wells preparing for the event. Many found out through social media on Sunday evening when the tournament announced the decision. The tournament has never been canceled before. Qualifying matches were due to begin on Monday, with main draw matches beginning Wednesday.

Steve Simon, chief executive of the WTA Tour, said that officials had considered playing the tournament without spectators but ultimately rejected that option. "We were supportive of the concept," Simon said. "But ultimately the tournament didn't feel it was in their best interest."

The two-week tournament, which is a Masters 1000 tournament on the ATP Tour and one of four Premier Mandatory events for the WTA, would have concluded on March 22. A smaller warm-up tournament, the Oracle Challenger Series Indian Wells, concluded Sunday at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden, the same stadium where the BNP Paribas Open is held. The tournament, which has colloquially earned "Fifth Slam" recognition for its large attendance and lucrative prize money, is the largest sporting event in the United States to be canceled over the growing concerns about



**Indian Wells organisers said they were unwilling to take a chance. More than 450,000 fans attended the tournament in 2018 and 2019. AP**

the spread of the disease. Another large international event, the South by Southwest Festival in Austin, was canceled on Friday. Organisers of Indian Wells, as the tournament is better known, said they were unwilling to take a chance on going forward. More than 450,000 attended the tournament in 2018 and in 2019. "There is too great a risk, at this time, to the public health of the Riverside County area in holding a large gathering of this size," said Dr. David Agus, a professor of medicine and biomedical engineering at the University of Southern California, in a statement released by Southern California, in a statement released by Southern California, in a statement released by Southern California.

California has reported 114 cases of the virus, including someone being treated at a hospital in Rancho Mirage in Riverside County. Gov. Gavin Newsom has declared a state of emergency. Tommy Haas, the Indian Wells tournament director, left open the possibility

of playing his tournament at a later date in the crowded tennis calendar.

"We are very disappointed that the tournament will not take place, but the health and safety of the local community, fans, players, volunteers, sponsors, employees, vendors, and everyone involved with the event is of paramount importance," Haas said. "We are prepared to hold the tournament on another date and will explore options."

But finding another two-week window on the overstuffed professional tennis calendar in 2020 will be a challenge. It is unclear, however, whether other upcoming tennis events will still be staged. The Miami Open, scheduled to begin March 23 and similar in prestige to the BNP Paribas Open, has not yet been canceled. The Ultra Music Festival, another major international cultural event scheduled for March in the Miami area, has been called off for 2020.

"The intent is still for Miami to operate," Simon said. "It's obviously two weeks away, but right now our approach is we are planning to operate all of our upcoming events and put

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INDIAN WELLS TOURNAMENT DIRECTOR

every precaution in place. But we will obviously continue to work with the event very closely and will have to monitor all the situations there." The BNP Paribas Open is offering ticket holders refunds or credits toward tickets for the 2021 edition of the tournament. The tennis tours shift to Europe in April for the clay season, which includes the Italian Open in Rome in May, a prestigious tournament in one of the countries most affected by the virus.

No subsequent tournaments at tour level have yet announced cancellations. Several smaller minor tournaments in China had been canceled previously, and a tournament in Bergamo, Italy, canceled its final.

Founded in 1974 and played under various names and in various locations, the BNP Paribas Open has become one of the pillars of the professional tennis tour since its move to Indian Wells in 1987. Larry Ellison, the tech tycoon and co-founder of Oracle, bought the event and the tournament complex, the Indian Wells Tennis Garden, in 2009. Since the purchase, new stadium courts and amenities have been added, and the tournament is regularly voted by the players as the best event in its category.

Although this is the first time the event has been canceled, in 1980 the tournament was not completed because of rain, and the men's singles final was not contested.

Simon said the cancellation this year would be costly. "There will be losses for everybody," he said. "But at this point this isn't about the money per se. It's about what is right, and I think it's a challenging time right now." NYT