

# From Delhi to Tokyo, via Gold Coast

Swimmer Kushagra Rawat has attained the 'B' standard for the Olympics, and promises to go even quicker

SHIVANI NAIK  
MUMBAI, MARCH 16

THERE ARE race rituals that swimmer Kushagra Rawat is getting a hang of. He is not too chatty around the time of a meet and refuses to acknowledge, even with a 'Thanks', when his sister messages an 'All the best' ahead of his competition.

"But I can't really do well unless my elder sister wishes me luck. I don't reply, but I need to see that message. When young, I wanted to be like her and then beat her in the pool. Now she has to wish me, or it doesn't feel right," says the Delhi boy.

His latest outing, at the New South Wales Open Swimming Championship, saw him finish with a bronze medal as well as erase Sajan Prakash's 400m national freestyle mark, clocking 3:52.75. It helped him get to the 'B' standard of Olympic qualification in his pet event, and brought in Part Two of the ritual he's keen to cultivate.

"Sajan sent me a very nice message that read, 'I am so proud of you. Keep doing the good work. Take care of your health now as well.' We are really close friends and he's always been supportive. He's one of India's greatest swimmers for me and my idol. That message meant a lot," Rawat says.

The Olympic 'A' standard is still 6-plus seconds away at 3:46. "The world's Top 16 make the 'A' standard. No one in India has. But many Indian swimmers are inching close," he added. Rawat also cleared the 'B' marks over 800m and 1500m (where he holds the Indian record), but it's the 400 in which he's keen and that took him all the way to Gold Coast, Australia, two months back.

Aided by a Sports Authority of India-Glenmark Programme scholarship, Rawat began training with some of Australia's very best under coach Michael Bohl. It wasn't the ideal lead-up to the 400m race over the weekend though. "Four days before the race, I developed a bad back. Some muscle strain. It was a setback, but once I got into competition mode, I didn't focus on it. It was a good race. My splits were almost evenly paced," he says.

Rawat's earliest memories in swimming are of failure. "First year of Delhi state, I came second last in heats. At the 2015 age-group nationals in 200m Individual Medley, I came last. I medalled in 2017, but was rejected by the SAI academy. I used to get rejected so often that it built up my motivation," he says of a time when he literally splashed around aimlessly at school in St Xavier's, at Talkatora, and then at Jhandewalan before he wound up at Bal Bharti Public School at Sir Gangaram Hospital Marg.

"My sister was my inspiration in swimming. And my parents are my biggest motivation. My dad is with me in Australia and has been looking after my physical training. And he cooks everything for me too — cuts fruit, bread butter, makes my whey protein shake, cooks daal, subji, rice and boiled chicken breast. My family will do anything for me," Rawat says.

The youngster believes he's still some



Kushagra Rawat (left) clocked 3:52.75 at the 2020 NSW Open Swimming Championships, which helped him make the cut.

**The Olympic 'A' standard is at 3:46. The world's Top 16 swimmers make the 'A' standard. No one in India has made the cut. Rawat cleared the 'B' marks over 800m and 1500m (where he holds the Indian record), but it's the 400 in which he's keen and that took him to Gold Coast, Australia, two months back.**

paces off his top game, though he's still conflicted about workouts in the gym and prefers his 45-minute dry-land physical training. "I do just 1-2 sessions a week in the gym. My body tends to get tight if I do lot of weights. It's not good for distance swimming," he believes.

Training in Australia was a sea change after he landed Down Under funded by Glenmark. "Everything in my turns, starts and finish was rejigged. The middle part of races is OK. My improvement has been good — I cut 16 seconds over 1500m. Australian coaches focus on strength in the stroke. There's a lot of analysis through

sports science. All sessions are smarter though fewer than in India," he explains. One crucial element that literally pulled Rawat back was his time under water right after the turns. "I was losing velocity in the kick under water after the turn. I've improved my starts also," Rawat says.

Improving upon Sajan Prakash's 3:54.93, set at Thiruvananthapuram in 2018 (and leaving behind the 'B' cut of 3:53.58), has been a logical progression of swimming marks improving over a generation.

"Sajan was an idol because of his work ethic. He would push others to do well. When I was with him at the India camp, his discipline between workout sessions was excellent. I need to learn from him," the 20-year-old says.

In fact, it was Sajan who would ignite the fire in Rawat in 2017.

"He told me then that he had started training in a serious way a little late. He told me three years ago that it was the right time for me to start working hard and learn from him. That motivated me a lot," Rawat says.

However, it's been a conflicting season. "The coronavirus situation is worse in Australia than in Delhi. Though there's not been many cases in the Gold Coast, pools are getting shut and meets cancelled," he says from Sydney, uncertain about how

things will pan out in June when he was targeting the Singapore Championship to aim for the 'A' cut. His base in 800/1500 has helped him in endurance work for the 400, complete with a high-elbow technique and all. Guilty of opening very fast earlier and running out of steam, Rawat has cracked the pacing challenge. "1:55 forward, 1:57 on the back. I'm on track," he says.

Funding has been another challenge, and though Glenmark takes care of his expenses, his father has had to dip into savings to be around him.

"Cost of living in Australia is high. A burger costing Rs 100 in India is Rs 250 here," he says of a number-crunching quite apart from slashing seconds.

But things are moving from splash to a wave in Indian swimming. "We are five swimmers close to the 'A' mark. So anytime now," he promises.

"Indian coaches have also improved significantly. Aryan Makhija, Advait Page are doing well in 800-1500 free. We are all good friends outside the pool. Inside the pool, *sabko kaatne ka sochna padta hai* (you have to think of getting ahead of everyone). Everyone is training abroad, and I realise Australia *mein jaan lagaani padegi* (work as hard as you can) in training," he says. Life's looking up, 400m at a time.

## RISK AND REWARD

# Oman trip in times of pandemic pays off for Sharath



Sharath Kamal won the Oman Open — his first international title in a decade.

SHAHID JUDGE  
MUMBAI, MARCH 16

A BIG smile on the face, that's how Achanta Sharath Kamal reacted to his first tour title in 10 years. In the final of the Oman Open, he came up against top seed Marcos Freitas of Portugal, a former world no. 7, but managed to pull off an upset 6-11, 11-8, 12-10, 11-9, 3-11, 17-15 (6-2) win at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

And with all that has been happening in the world and in sport these past few weeks due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, and with his own fears of the risk he took in even travelling to Muscat, the 37-year-old's reaction had a great degree of relief mixed in it.

"After winning, I was smiling so much. Not celebrating vehemently, just smiling a lot. I don't know why, these reactions just happened," Sharath says. "Sometimes I'm very aggressive in my reactions. Probably (during the match) I had things in control, then it went out, then again it was in control. I think all of that mattered a lot. It's an important title. I'm quite happy, especially beating Marcos who has been doing very well in recent times."

Sharath, who has been the flag-bearer for Indian table tennis for a very long time, had become the first from the country to win a tour title when he triumphed in Egypt in 2010.

But on Sunday, in his match against Freitas, the pressure was obviously palpable. So much so that it was getting difficult for the Chennai native to keep his emotions in control.

"At 3-1 ahead, my head was all over the place because it was a big chance of winning the title. It was really hard to control the emotions," he says. "In the sixth game, I started with a 4-0 lead. Things were fine, then suddenly I went down 6-8. I saved five game points, but managed to convert my only match point. It was a mental roller-coaster ride, but I'm really happy I managed to pull it off."

Over the past few days, sporting events all over the world have been affected due to the spread of the coronavirus. Table tennis too faces a break from the tour till the end of April, but there was a possibility that the Oman Open may get cancelled midway, which would have meant the risk Sharath took to travel to the Middle East would have been futile.

"My family is paranoid. They didn't want me to go, but I thought that the Olympic qualifiers are coming up, so I need some match practice and this is a good chance to improve my ranking. But with all the tension and stress, it was probably better to stay home," he had told *The Indian*

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ACHANTA SHARATH KAMAL

## NUMBER PLATE

**10** This was Sharath Kamal's first win over Portugal's Marcos Freitas on the ITTF tour, having lost to him in German Bundesliga way back in 2010.

Express on Friday.

Another tournament, in Poland, was taking place at the same time as the one in Oman, but was cancelled during the qualification phase because of the pandemic. The same fate was feared for the event in Muscat.

"There was a lot going in the head. We didn't know if this would be completed. We still don't know if this will count for points or not," says the world no 38.

"(It's frustrating), but a lot of countries were not allowed to send a team. The maximum I could do was win the tournament since it had been a long time for me not winning an event."

## Self-quarantine

A week filled with anxiety ended on a high note for the veteran. Still, there are repercussions for making the trip. Upon his return home, Sharath passed all medical checks at the Chennai airport but now has to stay in self-quarantine, as part of the sports ministry's advisory.

He says it will be hard staying away from his children, despite being at home, especially since they are young and keep running to him. But he will have to stay away, from table tennis as well. "The most I can do is go out for early morning runs, around maybe 5 am, because there won't be anyone around that I can come in contact with. Then of course, I will try to take care that I don't touch things to my mouth."

The uncertainty still remains though, about when the next tournament will take place, and if the rankings points won in Oman will count (it can potentially take Sharath up to 33 in the ranking charts). But he can find satisfaction in knowing that he did his due diligence and won.

# Shooters take part in Olympic trials to make up for WC pullout

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 16

IT WAS business as usual for India's top shooters on Monday as they competed in the Olympic team selection trials at a time when a pandemic has brought daily life to a grinding halt around much of the world.

As the world around them battled the COVID-19 affliction, the sound of shots fired from their guns, rifles and their pistols reverberated across the Karni Singh Shooting Range, tucked away in one corner of the national capital.

The likes of Manu Bhaker, Chinki Yadav, Apurvi Chandela, Mehuli Ghosh and Elavenil

Valarivan, among others, participated in the trials for their respective pistol and rifle events.

India had last month pulled out of the Nicosia Shotgun World Cup and later the March 15-26 ISSF World Cup in Delhi was postponed to May — all due to the novel coronavirus outbreak.

"Due to India pulling out of the Nicosia Shotgun World Cup earlier this month and the postponement of the New Delhi combined World Cup due to the global COVID-19 outbreak, final trials are being conducted for those selected in the Indian squads for the above two mentioned World Cups, so that they can register their final remaining scores, before the Olympic team is announced," a release from



the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) said. Monday was the first day of the trials.

Shotgun shooters will have two trials while the rifle and pistol shooters will have one each.

India has so far reported 114 positive

**Manu Bhaker, Chinki Yadav, Apurvi Chandela, Mehuli Ghosh and Elavenil Valarivan, among others, participated in the Olympic trials for their respective pistol and rifle events.**

cases with two deaths. The global death toll has crossed 6,000 and the number of infected is over 160,000.

The disease has led to either cancellation or postponement of all sports events like the world over in the Olympic year.

## [SPORTS BAR]



## Man Utd's Fernandes named Player of Month

Manchester United's January recruit Bruno Fernandes beat the likes of Marcos Alonso and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang to be named the Premier League's player of the month for February after an exceptional first month with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side. Portuguese midfielder Fernandes joined United for an initial fee of €55 million (\$61.44 million) and has thrived as a playmaker in the middle of the park, winning over the fans to also be named the club's player of the month. The 25-year-old has been pulling strings in United's attack to bag two goals — against Watford and Everton — and three assists in the league since his debut last month, helping the club beat top four opponents Chelsea and Manchester City. His instant impact has allowed United to go unbeaten since his debut.

## AFC congratulates FC Goa, Bagan & ATK

The Asian Football Confederation has congratulated FC Goa, Mohun Bagan and ATK for "winning the season titles in India". In a letter to All India Football Federation general secretary Kushal Das, AFC secretary general Dato Windsor John wrote: "On behalf of the Asian Football Confederation, I would like to congratulate FC Goa, Mohun Bagan and ATK for winning the season titles in India!" FC Goa were league toppers in the Indian Super League with 39 points in 18 matches and became the first Indian club to qualify for the AFC Champions League. Mohun Bagan won the I-League after a 1-0 win over Aizawl FC last week, while ATK became ISL champions for a third time.

## Sports administrator Kehar Singh no more

Sports administrator Commander Kehar Singh (rettd), who was associated with Mumbai's football and hockey bodies, died on Monday. He was 89. A senior Western Indian Football Association official said Singh was one of the founding members of the Mumbai District Football Association. Singh was secretary of erstwhile Bombay Hockey Association Limited (BHAL). According to son Ranvir, his father was also the secretary of Indian Navy Sports Control Board. Singh is survived by three sons and two daughters. He will be cremated in Navi Mumbai on Tuesday noon.



Simranjit Kaur secured a spot at the Tokyo Olympics at the boxing qualifiers in Amman, Jordan, earlier this month. PTI

## Tokyo-bound Simranjit gets Rs 5 lakh cash award

Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Monday announced a cash award of Rs 5 lakh for boxer Simranjit Kaur, who recently qualified for the Tokyo Olympics in the 60kg category. A spokesperson of the Chief Minister's office said that Sports Minister Rana Gummit Singh Sodhi, accompanied by Simranjit and her family members, met Amarinder in Chandigarh. The Chief Minister congratulated Simranjit on her feat and wished her the best of luck for the Tokyo Olympics. He hoped that Simranjit would be a role model for other girls to excel in the arena of sports. He also assured that the state government would extend all possible support and cooperation to her in the future too. Sodhi also assured that the Sports Department would provide her a suitable government job as per her eligibility. The 24-year-old Simranjit, who hails from Chakar in Ludhiana district, has secured her Olympic quota on March 9 after advancing to the semifinals of the Asian/Oceania Olympic Qualifiers in Amman, Jordan.

## Ban on FMSCI chief Prithviraj overturned

The Indian Motor Sport Appellate Committee (IMSAC) on Monday overturned a ban imposed on FMSCI president Prithviraj from officiating in national championships, following the death of three trespassing motorists during the Rally of Jodhpur last year. According to a press release issued by the Coimbatore Auto Sports Club, the IMSAC has upheld his appeal, declaring that the ban imposed on Prithviraj was violative of all principles of natural justice. "He was not put on sufficient notice before imposing (such a) major punishment," the release, quoting the order, stated, absolving him of any lapses. The IMSAC noted in its verdict that the process itself was illegal and could not stand any test of reasonable conduct.

## Indian football legend Banerjee 'very critical'

The condition of legendary Indian footballer and two-time Olympian PK Banerjee, who is on life support since March 2, has deteriorated, family sources said on Monday. "He is very critical at the moment," a family source said. Suffering from respiratory problem due to pneumonia and with underlying history of Parkinson's disease, dementia and heart problems, the 83-year-old has been on pace-maker. Banerjee was part of the Indian team that won the gold medal at the 1962 Asian Games in Jakarta.



## Koepka says not joining Premier Golf League

Brooks Koepka has said he has no interest in the Premier Golf League, another setback to a league promising guaranteed money and a team concept. "I am out of the PGL. I'm going with the PGA Tour," Koepka said. "I have a hard time believing golf should be about just 48 players." Later on Sunday, *Golfweek* reported that world No. 2 Jon Rahm said he will not join, meaning the world's top three players are sticking with the PGA Tour. Rory McIlroy, who replaced Koepka at No. 1 in the world, said last month that he was not interested in the new league. He said he valued his freedom to decide when and where to play instead of the proposed schedule of 18 tournaments, not including the Majors. Koepka said he made up his mind after meeting with organisers in Los Angeles a month ago during the Genesis Invitational.