

We will definitely get more time to prepare now. Since it is more than a year, so I believe we will get a new foreign coach. If Olympics would have happened this year, then we wouldn't have got since for 3-4 months it wouldn't make sense. But now, BAI might get one to help us."

CHIRAG SHETTY,  
BADMINTON DOUBLES PLAYER

India was supposed to start its four-month countdown to the Olympics this moment. But forced into an unprecedented, grim lockdown as the world battles the Covid-19 outbreak, sport is staring at unfathomable despair. Indian athletes though have given the country reasons to rejoice in the past. *The Indian Express* looks back at a bunch of these memories.



## THOSE MONTHS THOSE MINUTES



**JULY 9, 2011**

"Even with a perfect 30, often the best you can do is a tie."

**JULY 10**

"We were the better team and should have won."



# Once upon a time in Turin

Deepika Kumari was 17 and a World junior champion in 2011. Then she jammed with Laishram Bombayla Devi and Chekrovolu Swuro to win India its first big global medal — a silver at the Team Worlds to raise hopes of an Olympic medal in archery.

### TUSHAR BHADURI

"MAIN BOHOT chhoti thi tab (I was very young then)," is Deepika Kumari's constant refrain when asked to jog back her memory to the 2011 World Archery Championships in Turin.

Deepika had been anointed the face of Indian archery since the time she burst onto the scene, and it's easy to forget that she is still just 25. The journey that started in 2009 with the Cadet and then Youth World Championships, and took centerstage at the Commonwealth Games at home a year later, has seen several ups and downs. It was alleged that her early success went to her head and distracted her from the sport, and she was even written off at one point.

But whenever the Tokyo Games are held, Deepika is likely to make her third Olympic trip after she secured a quota berth at the Continental Qualifying Tournament in Bangkok last year, competing as an independent athlete with the Indian archery body suspended owing to administrative turmoil. The bid for a spot in the women's recurve team event is currently at the mercy of the coronavirus pandemic.

### Breaking the psychological barrier

The Turin Worlds in July 2011, where India won the silver medal in the women's team event, was one of the few occasions when the Indians managed to get the better of the pre-eminent force in archery — the mighty Korea. "I was very young at the time (just 17), but remember being very happy

that our good form had continued over a long time. After the double gold at the 2010 Commonwealth Games in October, we had won a bronze at the Guangzhou Asian Games a few weeks later. It was my first World Championship as a senior, so I felt all the more special," recalls Deepika, who was part of the team that repeated the feat four years later in Copenhagen.

### Terrific trio

The team of Deepika, Laishram Bombayla Devi and Chekrovolu Swuro stayed together for a long time. They were the ones to climb the podium in Italy and secure berths for the Olympics. They were considered by many to be contenders for a medal in London as well, but faltered at the big stage.

"We have known each other for a long time and share a good understanding and compatibility. We became friends in 2009 during the pre-CWG camp and stayed together. Bom di (Bombayla) has been there from the start while Chekrovolu has been there off and on," the girl from Jharkhand says.

### Just enjoy

Being in her teens at that stage meant archery for her was all about just aiming at the target and enjoying. "We had our preparatory camp in Kolkata before a selection trial. We enjoyed a lot during the tournament in Italy," is all Deepika remembers.

However, the individual recurve event didn't go to plan. Deepika came ninth in the qualification round, based on which the match-ups for the elimination face-offs are decided. She breezed through the first two rounds, but went down to Poland's Natalia Lesniak in the third by the slenderest of mar-

gins. Her two teammates also exited the competition at the same stage. The Indian male archers didn't provide much to write home about either, losing in the first round of the team event.

### Teamwork pays off

Everything now depended on the recurve team event. Eight Olympic spots were available with 16 teams in fray, meaning winning one round would not only take the team to London but also the three archers into the individual draw for the Games.

A 216-213 win over France booked the Indians' ticket to the Olympics before a 203-197 success over Denmark put them in a semifinal against the mighty Koreans.

"The Koreans are very strong but not unbeatable on any given day. It depends on who shoots with better control and precision. But anything less than 28-29 from three arrows and you don't have a chance against them. Why, sometimes even with a perfect 30 the best you can do is a tie," Deepika feels.

Ki Bo Bae would go on to win the indi-



"We were the better team and should have won. But sometimes you lose focus. On a bad day, the pressure gets to you and you become extremely nervous."

vidual and team gold medals at the London Olympics but on that day in Turin, she along with Jung Dasomi and Han Gyeong-Hee fell short 216-212 to the Indian trio.

### Gold slips through the fingers

India were now in the World Championships final, against the hosts. There had not been an Indian gold medalist at the elite event ever and Deepika, Bombayla and Chekrovolu were considered favourites to break the duck against Italy.

"We were the better team and should have won," the youngest of the three reminisces with some regret. "But sometimes you lose focus. On a bad day, the pressure gets to you and you become nervous. There were a couple of 7s and a 6 that probably changed the course of the final," Deepika says, before adding "but you cannot blame an individual. We win as a team and also lose as a team."

But she recalls that the Indians were ahead for a long time before squandering the advantage. "It felt like the gold medal was about to come around our necks before it was taken away. We were very disappointed."

Apart from Natalia Valeeva, who finished above Deepika in the qualification round, the other two Italians — Jessica Tomasi and Guendalina Sartori — weren't formidable names. Ask about the home advantage, and Deepika is reluctant to give too much weightage to that factor. "The home crowd definitely helps — we all know how it worked to our advantage at the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games — but it all comes down to how you handle the situation.

"However, after the initial disappointment, we were happy to have won a medal and qualify for the Olympics. We were welcomed with

much fanfare on our return to India," she says. Meanwhile, India is still waiting for its first World Championship gold. The men's recurve team lost to China in the 2019 final in the Netherlands.

### Team bonding

Ask her about the success of the Indian trio and Deepika points to the camaraderie. "If you have good co-ordination and trust in each other, that's half the battle won. Sometimes, one of the archers is down on confidence. It is then up to the other two to motivate her and give her confidence."

It's all about handling the given situation, she feels. "Everyone gets nervous. It's how you react to it that matters. That's where bonding and teamwork comes into play. You need to know how your teammate will react to a particular situation. It's up to the archers to support each other because during a match, the coach takes a backseat."

Another vital aspect of team archery is the sequence of shooters — who will go first, second and last.

"It's decided by the archers themselves, based on their comfort levels. Generally, the most confident one at that time goes first. If she is able to give the team a good start, it takes a lot of pressure off the other two. The second archer is the one who generally takes a bit longer than the others, implying that the third one has to then cover up. It's crucial because the three arrows have to be shot within two minutes," Deepika says.

"We generally decide the sequence at the selection trials after the team is decided. During my career, I have gone both first and last."

### BRIEFLY

#### Ecclestone wants F1 championship cancelled

BERNIE ECCLESTONE said this season's Formula One championship should be cancelled because it appears unlikely that enough races can be completed for it to be valid due to the coronavirus crisis. "We should stop the championship this year and start again next year, hopefully, because I can't see it's going to be possible to get the right amount of races in that count for a championship," he told *BBC Radio*.

#### Walker faces probe for flouting lockdown

KYLE WALKER is facing disciplinary action from Manchester City despite apologising after breaching coronavirus lockdown conditions even though he advised people to stay at home. It was reported that Walker held a party at home last week, breaking the government's rules on social distancing. "I understand my position as a professional footballer brings the responsibility of being a role model," Walker said.

#### India submits bid to host AFC Asian Cup

INDIA HAS submitted its bid documents for hosting the AFC Asian Cup in 2027, a top official of the national federation confirmed on Sunday. If India wins the bid, it will be the first time the country will host the continental showpiece event. "We have already submitted our expression of interest to the AFC (Asian Football Confederation). That is what's required as of now," AIFF General Secretary Kushal Das told *PTI*.

#### East Bengal signs winger Omid Singh

EAST BENGAL on Sunday signed Indian-origin Iranian midfielder Omid Singh for a two-year deal. "Omid has signed with us for two years. He will join us once the next season starts," East Bengal top official Debabrata Sarkar said here. The 29-year-old left-winger, who originally hails from Punjab and holds an Indian passport, currently plies his trade for Naft Masjed Soleyman FC in the Persian Gulf Pro League. **AGENCIES**

## Premier League players reject 30% salary cut

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
LONDON, APRIL 5

THE ENGLISH Premier League players rejected a move Sunday by clubs to cut their wages by 30% during the coronavirus pandemic, escalating a bitter public row as their union claimed the government would lose out on more than 200 million pounds (around \$245 million) in tax.

"This would be detrimental to our NHS (National Health Service) and other government-funded services," the Professional Footballers' Association said in a statement.

Taking on the Premier League as a whole, the PFA said the 20 million pounds being given to the NHS by the world's richest football competition was "welcome, but we believe it could be far bigger."

The union's strident stance came after further talks Saturday involving clubs and the league as Liverpool became the latest Premier League side defying political anger by using a government bailout scheme to furlough some non-playing staff.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock had told players at clubs furloughing staff to take a pay cut. Sports minister Nigel Huddleston reminded the Premier League to ensure it



The Premier League said the season will return when conditions are deemed 'safe'.

"helps the national effort."

Liverpool, which leads the league by 25 points, followed fellow 2019 Champions League finalist Tottenham, Bournemouth, Newcastle and Norwich in furloughing staff.

Under a job retention scheme imple-

mented to help businesses survive the national lockdown, staff can be put on furlough and receive 80% of their salaries from the government, up to a maximum of \$3,000 a month.

Liverpool said it would top up salaries to

#### Rooney says handling of pay row 'a disgrace'

London: Former England captain Wayne Rooney said the public pressure being exerted on elite footballers to take pay cuts in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic is a "disgrace", according to a report in the *Sunday Times*. "How the past few days have played out is a disgrace," Rooney wrote. "First the health secretary... said Premier League players should take a pay cut. Was he desperate to divert attention from his government's handling of this pandemic?," he said. "It feels as if it's to shame the players — to force them into a corner where they have to pick up the bill for lost revenue. Whatever way you look at it, we're easy targets," he added. **REUTERS**

ensure staff still received the full amount but that still means using public funds to pay some staff.

Former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher called that a "poor" move, saying "respect and goodwill is lost" by the club.