

Did you know - world carom champ is Chennai girl

The world carom champion is a 24-year-old from [Chennai](#) who has been winning global plaudits, but is virtually incognito. Despite her many achievements, Ilavazhagi, the daughter of an auto-rickshaw driver, has not been able to capture media attention.

In an age when old sports have been edged to the backburner by the hype over super-glamorous money spinners like tennis and cricket, whose stars sell for millions, this woman from Chennai is soldiering to keep alive the legacy of a game that binds thousands of Indians across cities and villages.

Ilavazhagi is the world number one in carom but while she grows in international games, her homecoming parties get smaller. Only small local outfits receive her at airports, host her at felicitations and lobby for government jobs for the whizkid to survive in the game.

Ilavazhagi bagged her maiden women's title in the fifth World Carom Championship at Palais Des Festivals, Cannes, Feb 17, defeating P. Nirmala, also from India, 25-11, 25-11 in the finals.

Ilavazhagi, who won the national title recently in Chennai, beat former World Champion Rashmi Kumari in straight games in the semi-finals.

Players from Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, the Maldives, Bhutan, Bangladesh, the US, Britain, South Korea, Japan, Italy, Switzerland and France took part in the championship. Ilavazhagi also won the national women's singles title Feb 7.

Ilavazhagi hails from Vyasarpadi on the outskirts of north Chennai. Her father Irudhayraj and mother Selvi, a homemaker, are proud that their eldest daughter has made it to the international stage, but they are full of doubts about her future.

'What after this?' they wonder. Who will sponsor Ilavazhagi's participation in international tournaments in the future? What kind of career will she eventually be able to chalk out in the coming years? These are questions that haunt them.

Ilavazhagi has been struggling to make both ends meet and was searching for a job the whole of last year even as she continued to play carom.

Returning from France last week, Ilavazhagi was greeted by her father and little sister at the Chennai international airport and a few office-bearers of the Chennai district carom association. She got a bouquet, but she thought that the welcome home was 'just great!'

A few days later, another small meeting sought a government job for her.

'I feel the reception to my success was fantastic. Much better than when I won the Asia Cup, SAARC Cup and even the World Cup', she said.

Ilavazhagi, however, has an unlikely supporter. K. Vijayal, 65, a retired Reserve Bank of India officer, Sunday gave Ilavazhagi a purse of Rs.5,000, which Vijayal said was 'a tiny drop in the ocean of support Ilavazhagi needs'.

She is not only a fan but also a former carom champion who won the national mixed doubles in 1973, partnering S. Dilli.

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