

## Focus on Olympics, not differences, Paes tells Bhupathi

India's Davis Cup captain Leander Paes Thursday poured his heart out, saying that he was hurt by his one-time buddy Mahesh Bhupathi's virtual refusal to play with him the doubles at the Beijing Olympics.

In a no-holds-barred chat with the media on the sidelines of a promotional event, Paes appealed to Bhupathi that the two should keep aside their differences, real or imaginary, and come together in quest for an Olympic medal.

Paes, singles bronze medallist at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, said the two were the best bet at Beijing Games August 8-24.

An emotionally charged Paes sounded more pained at the way Bhupathi has gone about the whole business of teaming up with him and also not willing to discuss the problems with him directly.

Asked what prevented him from taking the initiative and talking to Bhupathi, Paes said he was after all human and he too naturally had ego after playing for the country for 20 years. 'After all the things said and written about me, how could I have called him? I am not a robot to go about doing things unmindful of what's happening around me.'

Paes conceded that he was convinced about the way he handled certain things and so is Mahesh, perhaps. But if he has a problem with him, he should call him and not go about writing letters to the All-India Tennis Association (AITA).

Paes was referring to Bhupathi's letter to the AITA and the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) in which he had cited the lack of communication between the two and not enough time to prepare for the Olympics as the reasons for backing out. He instead suggested that Rohan Bopanna should partner him at Beijing.

Paes said Bhupathi should have communicated with him directly if he had any ideas as to how the two should prepare for the Olympics. 'Till today Mahesh has not communicated with me, I get to hear everything from the e-mails of his to the AITA,' said Paes.

He also said he had earlier tried communicating with Bhupathi, but didn't get any response. 'Communication is a two-way process, but here it is just one way,' said Paes.

Asked if Bhupathi, currently world ranked 11th in doubles, was waiting to move into the top ten so that he could nominate a player of his choice and prevent him from participating in his fifth Olympics, Paes said: 'I don't want to comment on this. We all have seen Rohan's performance in the last couple of weeks and his fitness. Even when he (Rohan) is in the best of his fitness, we all are intelligent to know who is better.'

What Paes didn't say is that even if Bhupathi has to suggest any name it has to be routed through the Indian Olympic Association which has already sent the names of Paes and Bhupathi as India's entry.

Paes reiterated that despite the differences, Mahesh and he are still a potent force on the court as

they have performed extremely well for the country in the Asian Games and the Davis Cup despite not playing together on the ATP Tour.

'We have always done well playing for the country. We also can't forget that we played together for eight years and were the world No.1,' said Paes.

Paes went on to add that the lack of practice together shouldn't be a problem for either of them because by playing on the ATP Tour their game got sharpened.

'In the 2000 Olympics we came together two months before the competition and were very close to winning a medal. It was the same at the 2006 Doha Asian Games, where we clinched the gold. Also, of course, the the Davis Cup matches,' Paes said.

The AITA has planned to hold a two-week training camp for the Olympics and the Davis Cup World Group Play-off against Romania after Wimbledon. But Bhupathi feels that they need to play more ATP tournaments in the run-up to the Olympics.

Paes, however, feels that the camp would do a world of good for them not only for the Olympics but also for the Davis Cup.

'It was a well thought out plan by the AITA to couple Davis Cup preparation with Olympic training. It will be a nice training ground for the youngsters,' he said.

The Davis Cup captain said that it was high time the players went with a clean mind and a definite purpose to both Beijing as well for the Davis Cup tie.

'At the end of the day we will be hurting ourselves by deflecting our focus from the goal, thus putting additional pressure to get a medal. There is no team better than Leander and Bhupathi to get an Olympic medal,' he signed off.

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