

Indian origin wrestler in Australian Olympic squad

Sandeep Kumar failed to make it to the Indian wrestling squad despite boasting of an outstanding record. Disillusioned by the state of sports administration in the country, Sandeep chose a foreign land to prove his potential and will proudly walk under an Australian flag in the opening ceremony in Beijing Olympics this August.

Sandeep became the first Indian origin sportsperson to make it to an Australian Olympic squad after his selection was announced earlier this month, according to a report in the Indian Link newspaper here.

'I feel very proud and honoured to represent Australia at the Olympics,' says Kumar, who only migrated here four years ago and will be competing in the 84-kg freestyle wrestling division in Olympics.

Back home, the 25-year-old Kumar, then a constable with Punjab Police had a room partner in Daleep Singh, today famously known as Khali. And unlike millions others who dream of scoring those winning runs in a one-day cricket match for India, both of them trained hard to make a name in the wrestling world.

Kumar and Daleep tasted success in national and international circuit. Daleep today is better known as the fearsome Khali on the American WWE circuit.

The youngest of four children, Kumar's older brother Anil who was also a wrestler, introduced him to the ancient sport at an early age.

Kumar showed potential early in his career, winning numerous wrestling championships. In 1997, as a teenager, he won a gold medal at the Russian championships and is a three-time winner of the Australian Asian Championships. He has also won the Australia Cup, a wrestling competition hosted by the United Wrestling Club.

'In India, we were getting good money for wrestling - we got government jobs as well. That's why I decided to do wrestling,' Kumar, who turned professional at the age of 15, told the paper.

But favouritism amongst Indian selectors meant that despite his achievements, he was not selected to represent India. Kumar's dreams of making a name at the international level went crashing down. He took a bold decision and moved out of the country to prove himself.

'I was a good wrestler in India,' he says. 'But I didn't get the chance to go to other countries and represent India.'

An encounter with Kuldip Bassi, changed Kumar's career - and life - forever.

Whilst training in a Punjab wrestling club four years ago, Bassi, founder and president of the United Wrestling Club (UWC) in Melbourne, handpicked Kumar amongst the hundreds of young Indians in training.

'Technically he was the most talented, and a smart wrestler too,' says Bassi.

'I saw he could do better and I thought that if he came to Australia he would have a good future and would make a good name for himself, the club and the standard of Australian wrestling,' he adds.

Bassi sponsored Kumar to train with the UWC. Alongside his training, Kumar works as a taxi driver, which he will cease as the Olympics draw closer.

Kumar's achievements are now being recognised and last month he was honoured by Victoria's Ramgarhia Sikh Association.

Earlier this month, the Punjabi Council of Australia honoured him for his contribution to wrestling, at a Baisakhi celebration at NSW Parliament.

So is Kumar going for gold?

'I am trying hard, I think I can win a gold medal. For this I am taking my training very seriously,' says Kumar.

Kumar hopes that more youngsters from India will follow his steps in the next Olympics. 'I will be (the only Australian of Indian origin) at the Beijing Olympics, but in the next Olympics, some more boys from our community should participate.'

Kumar has certainly advanced a long way since his days as a Punjab Police constable. Like Khali, Kumar is making his mark in the sporting arena.

'I watch him on television sometimes!' says Kumar about his former mate.

Perhaps when the Olympics roll around in August this year, Khali will be watching Kumar as he battles, or should we say - wrestles - for gold.

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