

IOA courts controversy over Olympic support staff

The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) hardly had any problem in picking the competitors for the Beijing Olympic Games as most of them qualified on merit, but it is caught in a cleft stick while finalising the backup staff.

The super stars in the contingent want their personal coaches and physios to accompany them but the number of support staff cannot exceed 42 for 13 disciplines. The number is swelling to more than 42 for 57 competitors. The list is only of coaches, physios and masseurs, not managers and the so-called observers.

The controversy arose with the All India Tennis Association (AITA) sending out a list of eight to go with four players -- Leander Paes, Mahesh Bhupathi, Sania Mirza and Sunitha Rao.

Both Leander and Mahesh want their personal coaches Rick Leach and Scott Davidoff as well as separate physios to accompany them and AITA is insisting on its Davis Cup manager S. P. Misra and coach Nandan Bal to go with the squad. Add to the list the name of Sania's mother Naseema Mirza. Of course, Leander's father Vece Paes is going as the contingent's doctor.

AITA has given Leander the choice to choose between his coach Leach and Bal, though the latter is believed to have already been cleared by the IOA.

Besides AITA also wanted to send Misra as manager of the team because of the strained relationship between Leander and Bhupathi. If IOA decides to cut down the number, it is not clear whether Misra will go or Bal, sources said.

In the war of status symbols, a sport like boxing is likely to suffer as Akhil Kumar's physio South African Heath Matthews might be a casualty.

Matthews has been a big help for Akhil while he was recovering from career threatening wrist injury last year.

An enraged Akhil, who is seen as a big medal hope, is insisting on carrying the South African.

'If they can provide seven support staff for four tennis players then why can't they clear one physio to accompany us. We are five boxers and we are hopeful of winning medals.

Matthews has worked on the 54-kg class pugilist who went to Durban for rehabilitation after his wrist surgery. The South African has been with the boxing squad in Patiala.

'In boxing we need a physio because of the susceptibility to injuries. Dinesh had an injury and I too recovered from a wrist injury. Heath has worked with all of us. If he is not send, the contingent will definitely suffer,' Akhil told IANS.

Akhil is also keen on taking his long time coach Jaidev Bisht who was with the boxer for a long time.

The Indian Amateur Boxing Federation (IABF) has okayed Akhil's request and proposed their names as part of the boxing contingent.

Till late Friday evening, the IOA top brass is going over the list to see where to cut the corners. The IOA has stipulated the number of backup staff who can accompany each discipline depending on the number of competitors.

Unless Matthews is cleared, he cannot be part of the official contingent and cannot be at the ringside with Akhil. He cannot be in the Games village with the squad.

Mittal Champions Trust, which had picked up the tabs of the South African to be with the boxers during their training, is willing to bear his expenses in Beijing too, but he cannot be part of the contingent as the IABF has already nominated Cuban coach B.I. Fernandes and national coach G.S. Sandhu as the backup staff.

Matthew can now only go as part of the contingent attached to some other discipline.

Matthews has also worked with Leander, Bhupathi and Sania. He was with Sania for sometime last year after arthroscopy on her knee. But now everyone wants their own favourites to accompany them to Beijing.

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