

Indian boxers on the threshold of history

Few Indian sportspersons exuded the kind of confidence the Bhiwani boxers exhibited before the Olympics. The exuberant Akhil Kumar, Vijender Kumar, and Jitender Kumar continue to psyche themselves before and after every bout in Beijing with their brave talk, the refrain is they want gold, nothing less. All three of them are a bout away from a medal, unprecedented in Indian sport.

Akhil is the most loquacious of them all and he wants a gold medal dangling down his neck when he returns home. He made no bones about it when he got furious as the Indian Olympic Association dilly-dallied in clearing the South African physio of the boxing squad. He thundered how could a discipline like tennis which had absolutely no chance of winning a medal could get an entourage of seven while the real medal prospects like boxers cannot get a physio of their choice.

Akhil was true to his word in the ring. He was clever enough to protect his lead in his first bout and quick to punch his way to equalize when he was down in the second. On the eve of his quarterfinal bout he was not one bit trepid. He was full of beans when he said: 'I will not be satisfied with nothing less than a gold medal.'

High on confidence after knocking down world Champion Sergey Vodopyanov of Russia, Akhil will have a relatively easy opponent in Veaceslav Gojan of Moldova Monday to enter the medal hunt.

The Haryana boxer gave India a perfect Independence Day gift by scraping past Sergey Friday in the bantamweight (54 kg) pre-quarters.

Back from a corrective wrist surgery carried out only last August - a reason why he missed the December World Championships in Chicago, Akhil has now firmly placed himself a strong contender for the coveted gold medal.

'Despite the injury, I have been able to come here, which means luck is on my side. I also have my physio (Heath Matthews) who helped me get back to this shape,' said Akhil, who made the Olympic berth by beating 2004 Olympic silver medallist Worapoj Petchkoom of Thailand in February at the Asian Boxing qualifiers.

Jitender toyed with his Uzbek rival Tulashboy Doniyorov 13-6 in the flyweight (51kg) category Saturday, and now faces a tough opponent three-time European flyweight champion Georgy Balakshin of Russia in a last eight bout Tuesday. Jitender though is upbeat about his prospects.

'I have lost to him once before, but this time I want to avenge that defeat and I will not let him get away. That time I did not get points but this time it will be different,' said the chirpy Jitender, a 2006 Commonwealth Games bronze medallist.

The last time Jitender clashed with 2004 Olympic quarter-finalist Balakshin was at the quarterfinals of the Chicago World Championships, where the Indian lost after putting up a good fight in the first half

Vijender, who outpunched Wushu-star turned boxer Angkhan Chomphuphuang of Thailand 13-3 in the middleweight (75kg) category pre-quarters, is scheduled to meet a formidable opponent in Ecuadorian Carlos Gongora Wednesday. The Ecuador pugilist finished ninth in the World

Championships while Vijender was 17th.

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