

Indian badminton scaling new heights with Saina

Indian badminton has been in the news since Saina Nehwal became the first shuttler to figure in an Olympic Games quarterfinal. Saina followed it up with good performances in the international circuit and the 18-year-old from [Hyderabad](#) was suitably rewarded as she cracked the top-10 of the world ranking in women's singles this week.

It is a huge achievement for someone who started her international career just two seasons back. She began with a bang, winning the Philippines Open in 2006, and has been since scaling one height after another.

She very nearly won a medal at Beijing in August. None, not even Saina herself, has been able to figure out why, after leading 11-3 at the change-over in the third game against Maria Kristin Yulianti, she failed to advance to the semi-final and a place on the Olympic podium.

But the girl quickly put Beijing behind her, and in mid-September won the Chinese Taipei Grand Prix.

As if she was determined to make amends for her Olympic heartbreak, Saina then made it to the semi-final of China Masters Super series and quarterfinal of Hong Kong Super Series.

It was not only Saina climbing the heights in Indian badminton. This was the time for glad tidings for the sport. Six Indian players are now in the top-100 in the men's singles, five of them in top-50.

Chetan Anand (15), Arvind Bhat (33), Anup Sridhar (42), Parupalli Kashyap (48), Anand Pawar (49) and Ajay Jayaram (81) have all posted some inspiring victories this year.

In late September Anand, coming back from a three-month lay-off because of a knee injury, landed the Czech crown and followed it up with a victory in the Bitburger Open grand prix crown at Saarbrucken, Germany.

Saarbrucken has been special for Indian badminton. Never before had Indians figured in three finals on a single night of a grand prix tournament. Anand's opponent in the men's singles final was Arvind Bhat. V. Diju and Jwala Gutta won the mixed doubles final. If only Aditi Mutatkar had kept her nerve, the women's singles title also would have come India's way.

Anand next raised hopes of winning the Dutch Open, but went down to Indonesian Kurniawan in the final. Moving to the Denmark Super Series championship at Aarhus, he beat world No.5 Sony Dwi Kuncoro for a place in the quarter-finals.

Meanwhile, Anand's wife Jwala made further contribution to the family's showcase of trophies by winning the mixed doubles in Bulgarian open with V. Diju as partner. Aditi lost in the semi-finals of Bulgarian Open and Dutch Open.

But in the euphoria all this has generated in Indian badminton circles, it should not be forgotten a lot more has to be done before the country can come on a par with powerhouses like China, Indonesia or Malaysia.

Physical fitness is the key. Without vastly improved fitness standards it would be difficult to bridge the gap. Skill alone is not enough. If only we could match the eastern players in fitness the story would have different even in the days of the Dinesh Khannas, Trilok Nath Seths, Nandu Natekars, Syed Modis and their likes, and later even when Prakash Padukone and Gopi Chand dominated the scene. For all their touch artistry, they could not quite match the speed of movement and jump smashes of the Rudy Hartonos and Liem Swie Kings of Indonesia, seeing whom train was a breath-taking sight.

The exploits of Saina and Anand no doubt will lead to improved standards, and the closer the competition on the domestic circuit, the better it will be for the game.

Nothing like it if there were a few more women players good enough to give a competition to Saina. The fight that the unheard of 15-year-old Sikki Reddy put up before going down in the Commonwealth Youth Games final in Pune is a warning that Saina better be prepared for competition at home.

To produce more quality players, the game has to spread through more academies and coaching centres on the lines of the ones in [Bangalore](#) and Hyderabad. In the days when the string grand prix prize money tournaments had not been heard of Indian badminton managed to create domestic interest by inviting over world class players, particularly from the Far Eastern countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Few will remember that Wong Peng Soon, the Chinese Malaysian All England champion known as the badminton wizard in his day, served as the chief coach at the National Institute of Sports, Patiala, in the early years of its existence. Those were times when badminton tournaments were played on hard cemented courts. But India still managed to produce quality players to form a reasonably strong Thomas Cup team.

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