

Usha looks back and ahead

A. VINOD

SHE was in the kitchen fully engaged with the preparations for lunch, three days after having announced her retirement from the international scene, when we arrived at the door of 'Ushas' in Payyoli, to keep our appointment. It was indeed a surprise to realise how things had changed in the life of P. T. Usha – arguably the greatest Indian athlete of all-time – in a short span of just 72 hours.

Here she was, attending to domestic chores like a seasoned housewife, though, through the better part of her life Usha had never found time to be at home, pre-occupied as she was with the business of athletics.

The great lady was quite relaxed as she candidly spelt out the circumstances which led to her decision to retire, in this exclusive interview to *The Sportstar*.

Excerpts:

Question: Though it was evident that you were preparing yourself for a life beyond the competitive

world of athletics, what prompted you to make such a sudden announcement?

Answer: No, I don't think that I caught anybody off-guard with my announcement to retire. Simply because I had made it clear that this would be my last season in competitive athletics, at the start of this year itself. However, it is true, that I was still seriously considering the possibility of taking part in both the coming Asian championship and the Sydney Olympics.

But having been unable to recover from the injury to my left knee, which has been bothering me through the last five years, it struck me a few weeks back that I would not be in a position to be fully fit and compete in these two events. I was happy when it was reported that the Asian championship was being postponed to November, as this would have given me sufficient time to get my preparations into full swing.

But when it was finally confirmed that the meet



RAMESH KURUP



Facing page: No. 210 was Usha's number in the Los Angeles Olympics. Above: After quitting athletics Usha is now a full-fledged housewife.

would be held in late August, I had to decide against participating in it and also in the Olympic Games. This also meant that I would have to wait till the 2002 Asian Games (to be held in Pusan, South Korea) to get another opportunity to perform at a major meet. So, naturally, I thought that the time to announce my retirement had finally arrived.

However, I should confess that it did take me a good two weeks to make a final decision. I had made such a decision way back in 1990, soon after the Beijing Asian Games, and so I gave it serious thought to avoid the same mistake. Discussed it with my husband and the rest of the family before concluding that retirement was the best option available to me under the circumstances. As you can see, I am very relaxed now.

● **Announcing your decision to quit competitive athletics, you also mentioned that being away from your son for long spells was one of the reasons which prompted you to seek retirement...**

That again, is true. Actually, I was in a dilemma ever since I took the decision to return to the track in 1993. He was just a year or so old then. And to be away from him for long spells attending National camps and to stay fit for international duty was always quite difficult for me. And when I thought about retirement seriously, it is true that this particular thought was at the back of my mind. I thought it was my duty to be beside him and help him grow into a mature child, after having missed him so much through the last seven years.

● **Again, there is some confusion about your announcement particularly since you mentioned only about retiring from the international scene. Does this mean that you will continue to participate at the National-level?**

It is simply because that I have been concentrating only on the major international events, through the last couple of years. However, I thought that I should retain the option of participating at the National-level, especially after what has happened during the last few weeks. It is just an option and nothing has been decided as yet. But then, let me assure you once again that my decision to quit the international scene is final.

● **Why have you retained the option of participating in the National meets?**

You very well know about my track record over the last two decades. And, if you closely scrutinise my career-graph, it should be evident to you that my progress, in terms of timings, in each of those events in which I excelled later was quite gradual. To me, it was a painstaking process all the while, cutting down the barrier of time to a certain extent, say from 11.8s to 11.7s in the 100m.

But, today, it is all quite different. Now, we have athletes who are bettering their own timings drastically, over a short period of time, even without the advantage of tough competition. This, I feel, is not reasonable by any account. So, as things stand, one has to be careful while participating in the National-

level meets because anyone could be swept off the track or the field by such performances.

In the event, one should also be well prepared to meet such challenges. These indeed are the reasons which made me decide that I should retain the option of participating in the National circuit, especially as I feel that it is my duty to ward off those evil tendencies which have slowly but surely crept into the Indian athletics scene.

● **What are those evil tendencies? Is drug abuse, one among them?**

See, let me make it clear here that I have never accused anyone of having performed under the influence of drugs, so far. Neither do I intend to do so in the future. I think people have misunderstood me on this score. I just could not stop laughing the other day when I received a letter from a National camper saying that all the athletes in the camp were quite angry with me for having accused them of being under the influence of drugs. If you look back into those reports quoting me on this subject, I am sure that you will be able to come to the conclusion that I have never made such a statement.

● **But then, why did you write to the Amateur Athletics Federation of India recently that all athletes breaking National records should be tested for drugs before the new records are ratified?**

Well, that is only one of the points which I raised in the letter. Other than that, you should not forget that I also pointed out about procedures like having a functional wind-gauge and electronic timer before any records are ratified. These are standard procedures which today guide even the International Amateur Athletics Federation in accepting a performance and recognising it as a new record. Then, why is it that we should not practice the same in India?

I believe that Indian athletics does stand to gain a lot if the AAFI puts this system into practice. First of all, it would clear all doubts and secondly, it would prove that we are committed to the cause of a drug-free scene. Without a standard procedure being followed, there would always be room for suspicion, especially if National records continue to be broken in the domestic circuit meets where the competition is often limited to only a few select events.

If you look at our National record sheets until a few years ago, almost all our records were created abroad when our athletes faced some stiff competition. But this is not the case now, as you can see almost all our records with the exception of my 400m hurdles, T. C. Yohannan's long jump and Sriram Singh's 800m have been created in places like Nagercoil, Bangalore, Lucknow or Thiruvananthapuram. And these records more often than not had been ratified without the AAFI having followed the procedures laid down for such an exercise by the IAAF. This, I think, was wrong in the first place.

● **But isn't it true that your efforts to cleanse the system have produced just the opposite results, You yourself**



say that most of the athletes are piqued at your observations?

I don't think so. Moreover, if I had failed in seeking the intervention of the AAFI, I would have been only letting myself down, my own sacrifices and the hard work which I had put in before creating all those records. Frankly, I would not have reacted in this manner had the athletes concerned shown a consistent improvement through the last few years. All the records that I owned were the result of a lot of hard work and to see that they were being bettered by athletes who suddenly seemed to have improved by leaps and bounds, did sow in my mind a lot of suspicion. But this does not mean that I am accusing all of them of drug abuse. The timings, recorded, could have been the result of a faulty electronic timer. Or again could have been wind-aided.

● **But records are meant to be broken...**

True, but does that mean that one should keep quiet when one is suspicious about a particular performance? It is a free world and I have the choice to speak the truth. Let the air be cleared, let the cloud of suspicion be removed, I will be the first person to appreciate all these performances. By the way, if all these performances are genuine, we should have our athletes figuring in the finals of many of the events at the coming Olympics. I hope and pray that this comes true in Sydney and they will all prove me wrong. I have never been a selfish person, but it should also be remembered that I have never failed to stand up for the cause of Indian athletics, at any time during my career.

● **All the same, the menace of drugs is nothing new**



FAMESH KURUP

Usha with her mother, son and husband.

to Indian athletics...

No, for sure. But the disturbing trend is that athletes are no longer making any attempt to hide the fact that they are regular in drug intake. It was not the same before. When I entered the field, the use of drugs was hardly known. Then after a few years, there were rumours, before it has reached the current proportions. How else can anybody explain the presence of a large number of used syringes and needles in the bathrooms at the various stadia across the country? It was often difficult to even step into one of these bathrooms. Quite frankly, I was often surprised to see that our athletes have become much bolder through the years.

● **Does this confirm the theory that foreign coaches are behind athletes openly taking to drugs?**

No, I don't want to accuse anybody. But what I would like to tell you is that our athletes themselves should understand the grave side-effects of these drugs. It might help you create a National record or two, but one should understand that there is life beyond the world of competitive athletics and all those gains accrued through the use of drugs can be temporary. I think our athletes should be educated on this count and I can assure you that I will always remain in the forefront in the fight against drug abuse.

● **You should have been tested for drugs many times in your career?**

Oh, yes. I have lost count. The last time, I think, it was in Fukuoka where after the 400m relay, I was picked up. However, I could not produce the sample

within the next hour and by then, I had to report for the 1600m relay. A person tailed me right through to the warming-up and to the start and after the race got over, took me straight to the medical room once again. I have kept those records which cleared me, as a souvenir.

● **Did you ever think that the tests were some sort of a punishment?**

Only once. This was during the 1985 World Cup in Canberra where I clocked my life best effort of 51.61s in the 400m. They were honouring all those runners who had finished within the first six places. But sadly, there again, I was unable to produce a sample for the test in time and was thus forced to miss the victory ceremony. It made me very sad.

● **What would you identify as the key factors which helped you emerge as a champion athlete?**

When I started off, neither me nor my family had any inkling about what was in store. But through the years, I think it was my dedication which paid off. I somehow was focussed right through my career about the need to train very hard on a regular basis. I was never the one to shy away from the prescribed quota of drills assigned to me and enjoyed a sort of thrill when I completed the schedule which was often very taxing. However, having said this, I think that it was all pre-destined. I was born with talent and I think my fate was to lead the life of a sports person. I am a firm believer in God.

● **Do you still remember those early days?**

It was while studying in the Thrikottur Upper Primary School that I was spotted by Balakrishnan Master, who was our drill teacher. I think I was in the fourth standard when I took part in a race for the first time. The school champion, then, was one Baby Sarala, who was in the seventh standard. But despite she being so senior, I still beat her quite effortlessly. I was thrilled and could hardly contain my joy.

Then, I became the sub-junior champion in the 1976 Meladi sub-educational district inter-schools championship before being selected to the G. V. Raja Sports School. However, due to some reason, girls were not admitted to the Sports School that year and I was sent to the newly-formed Sports Division attached to the Government Girls High School in Kannur. It was some three months after the academic year had started that the Kannur Sports Division was finally inaugurated. So, we had to attend the inter-schools District championship almost straightaway without any training. But I was still able to come up trumps in both the 100m and 200m in the junior girls' section.

It was the students of St. Theresa's School, trained by Lily Teacher, who had until then dominated the show in Kannur. But that year, we were able to emerge the champions and thus the start itself was quite a memorable one. However, in the State schools meet that was held in Pala, the same year, I was defeated in the heats in both the 100m and 200m. It was one

Sree Latha who won these events then, but I was able to beat her in both the events the next year itself.

● **And since then, there was no question of looking back?**

Yes, that is true. I virtually dominated all the competitions which I took part in since then, including the State and National meets, before I was selected to represent the country in the 18th Pakistan National Games held in March, 1980, in Karachi. Soon thereafter, I was also selected for the Moscow Olympics. This, no doubt, was a big boost as I was to become the youngest Olympian from India.

● **Yet, it was not until late 1983 that you turned to the 400m hurdles?**

It was after the Kuwait Asian T & F meet, where I won the 400m gold, that coach Nambiar encouraged me to take up the 400m hurdles seriously. As a junior, I used to participate in the hurdles but had given it up towards the early 1980s. But what made Nambiar sir think about re-introducing me to hurdling was the fact that he saw a chance of me getting a medal in the Los Angeles Olympics.

● **And you came so near to your goal, despite your limited exposure in that event at the international-level?**

Yes, that's true. If I had had some more exposure, I am sure that I would have won the medal, which I missed so narrowly in Los Angeles.

● **Isn't it a bit ironic that your greatest achievement should also remain your biggest disappointment?**

Yes, but I have to live with it now. I had participated in only two races before we went to the Olympics. Of course, there was this Pre-Olympic meet, but still I did lack in experience, which in the final analysis, cost me the medal. When I look back, I am proud of having been able to finish fourth, but on the other hand, it still hurts me that I failed to finish within the medal bracket.

● **Don't you think that you could still have made it in the 1988 Seoul Olympics, had you specialised in this event after the LA Olympics?**

Perhaps. But then, I was injured in the run-up to the Seoul Games and could not progress beyond the preliminary heats. Now people would say that I should have concentrated on only one event. But I was always under pressure to take part in all the events in which I had a chance to win. For instance, in the 1986 Asian Games many people came and told me that I should perform well in as many events as possible and try to keep up India's prestige at the continental-level. Then, we also never had the support from the sports medicine branch during those days which would have helped



Usha had a rich haul of gold medals in the Seoul Asiad in 1986.

me identify one event to concentrate.

The main problem which I faced all through my career was in identifying my strongest event, as I was good in all the four events. Even now, I am not sure which among those was my strongest because during my peak, I was able to perform well in all of them. I was always in a dilemma and so too was my coach. When I was young, I once did 5.24m in the long jump in the under-14 section. Perhaps, along with the two sprints, I should have concentrated more in the long jump during that period.

● **What is the secret behind the many successes that you enjoyed at the international-level?**

I was a natural sprinter and I used to make up for my poor start with my basic speed in both the 100m and the 200m. In the case of the 400m, I most often faced rivals who were basically 800m runners. Naturally, this gave me an advantage and I used to gain the lead almost straightaway from the start. Then, I used to float through the first 300m before pushing myself to accelerate through to the finish. In the 400m hurdles,

it was my concentration which proved to be my biggest asset.

● Which among these events was the toughest?

It was the 400m, without a doubt. Because, by the time I came to the finish, I was totally sapped and my muscles used to be very tight. After a good race, it often took me more than an hour at times to recover. And by then, I would have vomited at least twice. I did not face such problems when competing in either the 100m or the 200m. Before these events, I was normally quite relaxed. In the 400m hurdles, I was always bothered about my middle stride, fearing that I would check myself between the hurdles.

● During the first phase of your career, did you ever feel let down?

Soon after the 1988 Olympics, my house was stoned and there were posters all over this place portraying me as an anti-national. It was one of those moments when I felt really being let down as the people suddenly seemed to have forgotten my earlier exploits. However, it calmed off after a while and when I was able to stage a comeback with a good show in the 1989 ATF meet in New Delhi, everyone was happy with my performances.

● Your comeback after retirement was, however, not successful...

Initially it is true that I struggled a bit. But it was just when I was shaping up well and was on the path to attaining peak form, that my left knee got injured. Even then, I think that I did reasonably well. Maybe not to the extent that the others expected of me, but I was still enjoying my training and performances in the various meets, especially in the Fukuoka Asian championship.

● Did you regret at any time for having staged a comeback after your initial retirement?

Compared to the first phase of my career, I had to undergo several insults when I came back. As it was I was feeling a bit annoyed with myself for all those earlier defeats that I suffered. I would go well prepared for the race, but once having reached the starting point, I would just throw it away without concentrating. I would have given it up at that stage but for the support and the motivation provided by my husband. But for him, I would have given it up almost straightaway. Things also started improving when I took to meditation on a daily basis.

It was during my effort to get into the Indian squad for the 1994 Hiroshima Games that I was insulted for the first time, as all the other seven runners withdrew from the 200m final and the powers-that-be turned a deaf ear to my request to arrange for a pacer. Then, during the inaugural ceremony of the 1995 SAF Games in Chennai, I was named captain and given the flag to lead the contingent. Suddenly, before the team was to march into the stadium an official came up to me and took the flag away from me forcibly. I could hardly contain my tears then. Then, it is also common knowledge as to how I was ill-treated at Bangkok dur-

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ing the last Asian Games, where despite having finished fourth in the individual event I was dropped from the relay squad.

Certain comments made by a top AAFI official that I was dropped so as to safeguard the interest of the nation also hurt me very badly. I think that I overcame all these insults due to some inherent strength and with God's blessings. I was sure that the people were aware of my contributions to the country's cause in the international arena and that I did not need anybody's certificate to prove my patriotism.

● **How would you sum up the present-day Indian athletics scene?**

When one compares it with the past, I think there is a vast difference. There are good training facilities at almost all places, especially in Patiala and Bangalore, the living conditions are far better than they used to be, the prize-money is good, though it could be improved, there are enough meets for an athlete to gain exposure and more importantly we have at least started to reap the benefits of the research in the various branches of sports medicine.

I am sad that things have deteriorated in Kerala, which, despite having produced so many international athletes of calibre, still is not able to put in place the required training facilities. I think the same holds true in the case of the athletes as well, as they seem to lack in determination to remain dedicated to the sport.

● **You were a part of what was called the golden triumvirate in the mid-1980s. How would you comment on the performances of M. D. Valsamma and Shiny Wilson, the other two in this unique group?**

Both Valsamma and Shiny were immensely talented and honestly, I feel that they did their best for the country. We shared a common spirit along with Vandana Rao when it came to the running of the relays. We always took it seriously and were able to come up with certain good results. Personally, I was always a bit reserved when compared to both Valsamma and Shiny. Still, we continue to be good friends.

● **Can you throw more light into your relationship with Lydia de Vega, whom you described as your greatest rival?**

She was of course my greatest rival. But off the track we were good friends. Sadly, there has not been much correspondence between us for some years now. Had we been competing against each other now, I am sure that we would have been in touch through e-mail on a regular basis. I still remember the 100m final of the Seoul Asian Games which I lost to her and gaining my revenge in the 200m a few days later. She gave me such a hot chase in the 200m final that I had to stretch myself before emerging the winner.

● **What about your coach, O. M. Nambiar?**

I don't think I have enough words to thank him. His most notable characteristic was his commitment. He never used to be partial in those early days and

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Usha's archrival in the international sphere was Filipino Lydia de Vega (left).

used to work hard to see that each one of us, who were under his charge, attained perfection. But after he became my personal coach, he was very much concerned about my career and used to see to it that I remained focussed in my training by taking care of all those things which otherwise would have disturbed my concentration.

Questions have often been asked to me ever since I came back as to why I was not working with Nambiar sir any longer. In fact, I had stayed with him for a week and when I understood that I was proving to be an hindrance in his efforts to bring up younger athletes, I decided to go it alone. However, I think I had his blessings all the time.

● **There should have been a lot of other persons who would have lent their support for your success?**

Of course, there are a lot of people who stood with me through thick and thin. First of all, I think my parents played a big role along with my two uncles, who were instrumental in my taking up athletics quite seriously. Then, I would never be able to forget Balakrishnan Master, who was the first person to identify the talent in me. Likewise, I am also indebted to Dr. Abdul Azeez who treated me during the crisis in 1988 and helped me stage a comeback in 1989, and to Chandran Kurikkal, who treated me after I injured my knee in 1995.



Then again, the support from the media, the Union and State Governments, my employers and a lot of people across the country, who never hesitated in encouraging me. The media would have criticised me at times, but I never took it in the wrong spirit. And last but not the least, my husband and son, who stood with me through the second part of my career. Without their support, I would never have been able to stage a comeback.

● **What about the Academy you are planning?**

It is still at the drawing board stage. There are a plenty of loose-ends to be tied up. We have been allotted 30 acres of land and Rs. 15 lakhs by the Kerala Government and are right now waiting to complete the registration formalities to take over the land. The total project is expected to cost Rs. 22 crores. However, once the land is made available, work on the project would start in right earnest and sponsors and the Union Government will come forward to help me realise this goal of producing at least one Olympic champion in the future.

What we are planning is to acquire the best of facilities required for top-class training. I hope everything will go as planned in the months to come. The academy should become operational at least by the middle of next year.

● **What is your advice to the younger generation of athletes?**

I think that dedication, determination and a lot of self-discipline would help any athlete to come up in his chosen event. They should have patience and should take defeats in their stride before achieving their goals. They should never lose sight of their primary aim. ■

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