

## A unique feat by an Indian shooter



### **NANDAKUMAR MARAR**

**T**HERE is a feel good factor about Anjali Bhagwat that one can't put a finger to, but can't ignore either. Maybe it is due to inner confidence, ingrained in the psyche after extensive mind training, which forms part of her shooting preparations. Maybe due to the very nature of her sport, where like golf, the battle is more with the self and the elements, the opposition being secondary. Having played and won this game of conquering a questioning mind and steadying nerves countless times before pulling the trigger, the challenges of life may appear manageable.

Shooting is a game of concentration, so it is very important to have full control. A sharp shooter is always very patient and cool-minded but has to keep the killer instinct high, explains one of India's most recognised faces on the international shooting circuit, whose world

number four rating in women's individual air rifle (as per the September 2002 list released by the International Shooting Sport Federation) is an achievement which is yet to register among fellow Indians. The Champion of Champions title won at the Munich World Cup, ahead of world's elite shooters, is unprecedented. She was in fact ranked world number one for three months this year by the world body, a unique feat for any Indian in any sport.

Anjali's stress-free demeanor is the very anti-thesis of the intense, focussed image we have of successful sharp shooters, condemned to spending long hours in pursuit of excellence. The Mumbai marvel too undergoes solitary confinement at the shooting range, smiling her way through six days a week, five hours daily, shutting out comforts of home and companionship of

newly-married life, in between national camps and competitions. To be there on the podium 23 times (my gold medal tally at international level) means more than anything to me. I'm pursuing it for my self-satisfaction, this is my passion. Shooting gives me fulfilment, so I don't expect anything in return, says this 32-year-old Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) Inspector, referring to returns from shooting, in a chat with *The Sportstar*.

Among the 300-plus Indian contingent for the 2002 Asian Games, she is armed with a unique achievement – her silver winning score of 399 at the Munich World Cup women's 10m air rifle competition this August is better than the existing Olympic record (397, South Korea's Kang Cho Hyun at 2000 Sydney Games). The current World number four (Czech Republic's Katernina Kurkova is number one) is aware that standards in women's shooting among Asian nations is so high that a regional event at Busan among Indians, Chinese and Koreans can be compared to a world event. Korea's Seo Sun Hwa owns the 10m world record of 400 (Sydney World Cup), equalled by China's Jing Gao (Shanghai World Cup) later this year. The ISSF top 10 list includes three Chinese (Du Li in second spot, Gao sixth, Zhao eighth) and Korea's Hwa in seventh position.

Anjali is unfazed by expectations, upbeat about performing up to her own expectations. Excerpts from an interview:

**Question:** Anjali Bhagwat has moved beyond just a curiosity value, to a successful sportsperson to be seen with and talked about. Do you feel that Indian society is ready to lower barriers and accept a shooter as daughter/sister/wife into its fold?

**Answer:** It is already happening. Women shooters are winning more medals for India internationally, many of them married with children. Suma Sirur and Deepali Deshpande (both included in Asian Games squad) took their children along when taking part in the Nationals, the little ones looked after by respective mothers-in-law while the mothers were competing. I am married, getting so much support from husband (Mandar Bhagwat) and in-laws in continuing my shooting career that I sometimes feel bad not being around to help them more now.

● **Has your success, the visible recognition and rewards coming your way, made shooting more acceptable for girls/women in your family and friends circle? Do they ask about the possibility of taking up shooting as a hobby now, probably as sport later? What do you tell them in return?**

It is a tradition in India that first the person (athlete) becomes famous, then his/her event gets recognised. I'm happy if I'm the reason for shooting becoming popular. Of course I will give media the credit for spreading awareness, so that news about shooting achievement reaches the common man. Now people are aware of shooting as a professional sport and about the incentives declared by the government.

I get a lot of phone calls asking for information about how to get into shooting. I'm very happy to give them all possible information and try to clear their misunderstanding regarding the expenses involved at the start. You really don't require lot of money once you reach a certain level. Then you need to have good equipment.

● **When a hobby becomes a passion, life as a competitive shooter is a full-time job. From your personal experience, what is needed to encourage more talented young Indian girls to take that risky step?**

Financial security, like a secure job via the sports quota or professional sponsorship. Then comes good infrastructure so that they won't be wasting time doing unwanted things. Guidance of an able professional coach, positive attitude by the government and society. I am fortunate to be with CISF, where I am free to train. After the Commonwealth Games, have also been promised promotion to Assistant Commandant grade, a gazetted officers position, and entitled to a vehicle. I wish the electronic scoring machines we have remain in working condition and accessible for

ATUL KAMBLE



Anjali with sports psychologist B. P. Bam.



## A strong self-image

**I**N terms of temperament Anjali Bhagwat is steel encased in silk, hiding a tough inner resolve behind a laid-back appearance and instant smile. The Mumbai shooter is no prodigy, exposed to rifles only in college as part of National Cadet Corps training, so her feared mental strength is an acquired skill, made aware by noted sports psychologist B. P. Bam, himself a shooting enthusiast and a career police official. "Bam Sir taught us mental exercises, like circle of excellence, positive self-talks which has helped me a lot. My personality has totally changed, I feel I'm more mature and confident," says the sharp shooter, now a religious follower of his methods.

Anjali explains that mental training helps her handle the pressure prior to a major international and during actual competition. "I do a lot of self-talk, breaking down shooting into different elements, for example my grip, balance, etc and then find out whether any part is not to my satisfaction. In that case, I talk to myself, conveying to my consciousness that I am the best in the competition in that particular element. It works," says one of the pet pupils of Bam, whose work in the mental training aspect has taken him to different parts of India, working with diverse

sports people like former world billiards champion Geet Sethi, cricketer Rahul Dravid and even at the Bangalore-based Prakash Padukone's BPL Badminton Academy.

Anjali understood the value of this little-known avenue after qualifying for the 2000 World Cup finals. "I realised how important it is to handle your mental state, especially during the final rounds. I was an amateur then at the international level and went for the Olympics with little exposure. Then there it was just a game of mental ability, everyone who qualifies is of the same calibre, but to produce it on that day depends upon your mental strength," she observes.

"Shooting is a game of concentration, so it is very important to have full control of your mind. You should remember to be alert enough to perfectly catch the breakpoint and so your reflex action has to be very fast. To co-ordinate all these things, it is necessary to have good confidence level. Only mental training helps you develop all these qualities," said the Mumbai shooter, who does yoga, basically concentrating on nyasa pranayam, shavasan and breathing exercises. "After reaching international standards, when it comes to being there on the podium, you always feel the pressure. Achieving good scores and consistency requires a strong self-image. Positive self-talk is the only solution to it." ■

top shooters. Government support is there, in terms of providing international exposure.

● **Prior to major international events like the Asian Games, Indian sports administrators talk in terms of medals waiting to be won. You have to be more realistic and aim for achieving scores in specific events, looking at the quality of the opposition at Busan. Have you set any personal targets?**

Shooting is a sport where you can't predict anything. All eight finalists are of same level. I think to win a medal requires some luck. I have had good international exposures this year, like World Cups, Commonwealth Games, so I'm confident. But I will be concentrating only on my technique to keep up the consistency of scores.

● **Indian shooters, both men and women, are expected to help swell the Busan medal tally. Do you feel such optimism is far-fetched? Should India avoid getting swept away by the Commonwealth euphoria and look at the season's performances?**

We have performed consistently not only in the Commonwealth Games but on the European circuit and World Cups also. Indian shooting standard is definitely high but at the same time we should not forget about presence of Chinese and Korean teams at Busan who are more experienced than us. In the team events, our third person is little weak and in the individual events, if the finals goes great only then can we think of a medal.

● **The Finland training stint under coach Laszlo Szucsak, along with the Japanese shooters whom he now coaches, followed by the Champion of Champions**

**competition at Munich, puts you in a rare position of getting familiar with the competition at the Asian level in your events. Which shooters do you expect to be in the final stages at Busan and why?**

The Chinese squad surely is very strong, so all three, possibly Gao Jing, Du Li and Zhao Yinghui will be there in the finals. The Korean world record holder Seo Sun Hwa, along with her two good teammates are again tough. But you never know what happens on that particular day. The Koreans will be shooting on their home range.

● **Suma Sirur, your teammate on the Indian squad, is supposed to be the one keeping you on your toes, always at your shoulder (in the women's 10m air rifle). Do you feed off such neck-to-neck competition?**

Yes, of course that compels me to do lot of hard work. We need such tough competitions amongst us which give strong push to improve further. She is strong enough to reach the final stage.

● **Winning the Champion of Champions event in Germany is an Indian first, since entry was restricted to the world's elite shooters taking part in the Worlds. There is an impression that you are India's best emerging out of a wide grassroot base. How far is this fantasy from reality?**

In the World Cup at Shanghai and Atlanta, Suma and Purnima Gavhane also were there in the finals, apart from me. Rajkumari won a silver at the World Championships. All this is evident of Indian shooting talent. So I think at the international level, they definitely are aware of the Indian standard. The difference between me and them is now only a medal. ■