



PREFACE

An idea is like a child.

Like an infant, an idea needs nurturing. It needs hand-holding like a toddler does. And even when grown as an adult, an idea needs able guidance and support.

In 2009, an idea was born, which later grew up as Lakshya, a not-for-profit organization, has been supporting over 100 athletes in 8 disciplines.

It all started when a group of like-minded sports lovers met and discussed ways to contribute towards the progress of Indian sports.

Lakshya began with the dream of supporting athletes in achieving Olympic glory. In their quest to see Indian athletes winning medals at the Olympic Games, Team Lakshya started with identifying talented athletes and nurturing them by providing financial, technical, and moral support to them.

Lakshya is a product of a common vision seen by its members, who come from various walks of life, including sports, business, education, administration and more.

Without their supporters, Lakshya and their quest to make India proud would be incomplete. This coffee table book is a way to express Lakshya's gratitude to their sponsors, for believing in the cause and trusting the abilities of some of the best athletes the world has seen.



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VIDI GUJRATHI







I remember the impact I had on my training after I started getting support from Lakshya. I could hire GM Yevgeniy Vladimirov as my coach, which helped me immensely in coming out of the stagnancy. I became GM soon after I started training under him." "When I was struggling with my game, there was a time I considered leaving chess and focusing on studies. My parents weren't sure if they could support my training financially. So that was a pivotal moment in my career. I was fortunate that I found support in Lakshya around that time and could continue training as they took care of all my worries

RIGHT MOVES

In Vidit Gujrathi's own admission, like most of the inventions in the 21st century, him playing chess too happened accidentally.

But India's one of the youngest Grandmasters has made sure the journey that followed the beginning, was planned well, move by move, step by step.

Born in Nashik, Vidit was only six when he was looking to engage himself with some sport. And as luck would have it, it was chess that grabbed Vidit's attention.

"I had a knack for board games as I used to play Brainvita a lot. My parents wanted to keep me occupied and took me to Nashik Gymkhana to play cricket. But they were afraid of me getting injured. Then I tried table tennis and even badminton, before finally sticking to chess," Vidit says.

"My dad used to play chess and I wanted to beat him, so with that aim, I started taking chess coaching. I was very competitive





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since childhood and I didn't like to lose," the GM recalls.

Chess could be fun, but at the same time, it could rob you of your sleep. It happened with Vidit too.

"From the age of 14 to 18, I sort of got stuck. I was close to becoming a GM, but always missed the norms by a point or half. I stagnated and needed help to come out of it but coaching to become GM is very expensive and not affordable easily," Vidit recalls the days of his struggle.

It was then Vidit found support from Lakshya. The current GM is one of the first athletes supported by Lakshya. "I remember the impact I had on my training after I started getting support from Lakshya. I could hire GM Yevgeniy Vladimirov as my coach, which helped me immensely in coming out of the stagnancy. I became GM soon after I started training under him," he says.

Vidit acknowledges the importance of finding support at the right time in a player's career.

"When I was struggling with my game, there was a time I considered leaving chess and focusing on studies. My parents weren't sure if they could support my training financially. So that was a pivotal moment in my career. I was fortunate that I found support in Lakshya around that time and could continue training as they took care of all my worries," Vidit says.

"I get help for all psychologyrelated needs, diet and physio training other than my chess training. The best part of being associated with Lakshya is their understanding about sports. They know what a player goes through and that is why they never put any pressure on the athletes. They help the players in reaching their goals," Vidit says.

Vidit says his short-term goal is to breach the top-10 ranking. "Right now, I am closer to top-20, I am touching 16, but my goal is to reach within top-10 ranking and stay there for some time. I am seeking stability with rise now," he says.

POOJA RANI







ot many in sports are late bloomers. Pooja Rani is an exception.

The Olympian boxer has a unique story to narrate. The Haryana girl, who had no idea about boxing till the age of 17, was suddenly introduced to the sport and within a year that followed, Pooja was winning medals at various stages.

It all started in 2009 for Pooja, who was a first year BA student, was noticed by her lecturer Mukesh Rani.

"She told me that you have good height and reach, why don't you try boxing. I had no clue about boxing but she pushed me to compete in the inter-college tournament. Mukesh mam's husband was a boxing coach Sanjay Sheoran, who trained me. Since then, boxing became my everything," Pooja says.

"Then, I had not thought much about the sport or my future. I just wanted to learn boxing and never thought of becoming a national champion or anything," she says.

Pooja started getting support

Initially, I didn't get much support from my family as they were scared of boxing and thought I would injure myself. My mother told me she was okay with it, but my father didn't agree. He was rather against me taking up boxing





from everyone who saw her box. "Everybody around me used to tell me that I will do well. I started winning district, state and then national medals soon," Pooja says.

However, support at home was hard to come.

"Initially, I didn't get much support from my family as they were scared of boxing and thought I would injure myself. My mother told me she was okay with it, but my father didn't agree. He was rather against me taking up boxing," Pooja recalls.

"Since my father didn't agree, I went to my coach to say I wanted to stop. However, my coach met my father and convinced him. He was finally convinced," Pooja remembers about her father, who was employed with Haryana Police. Despite getting a green signal from her family, the journey was not easy for Pooja. She faced difficulties in getting financial support for travelling, diet, training and physiotherapy sessions.

"I was approached by Lakshya in 2011 and they assured me of all possible support. I still remember that day and wonder how my life would be without the support of Lakshya," Pooja says.

In 2012, Pooja went on to win silver at the Asian Championships and in 2014 Asian Games, she clinched bronze. "I wanted my coach to travel with me at the Asian Games. Lakshya came forward and ensured I had my coach for a big event like the Asiad."

In 2016, Pooja went through a tough phase. "After Diwali in 2016, I



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burnt my hand and couldn't play for six months. It became more frustrating as I got a shoulder injury which troubled me for two years. I went through a lot of physiotherapy sessions and I was fortunate to have Lakshya by my side. Unhone kabhi saath nahi chhoda (They never left me alone)."

In the coming years, Pooja went on winning more medals however, her dream of participating at the Olympics was still unfulfilled.

She finally qualified for the Tokyo Olympics and reached the quarterfinals of her maiden appearance in the biggest sporting event.

Now Pooja is looking to qualify for the Paris Olympics. "I am targeting the 2024 Games and I want to win a medal there," she says. •

PRITHA VARTIKAR







I was not even 12 when Lakshya spotted me and offered their help. I was too young to understand those things then, but when I look back. I feel it changed things for good around me. Lakshya took care of my travelling expenses and even my training, which gave the right boost to my career.



MOVING AHEAD

or young Pritha Vartikar, table tennis was part of her family. She had seen the game even before knowing its name, hence, taking up the sport came naturally to the Pune girl.

At the age of seven, Pritha started playing table tennis after watching her elder sister play.

Initially, she played with her sister and gradually started going to nearby academies with her sister to play under professional guidance.

"I was always attracted towards the sport as I saw my sister play. As a small kid, I used to play at home and never got bored. My sister helped me learn the sport and then I started going to the club with her," she says.

Pritha was a revelation at the district and later state circuit, as she showed a lot of promise even at the U-12 agegroup matches. She soon started winning district U-12 games before dominating the state field.

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"Travelling to play matches is never easy for any player. It is not just costly, but also needs a proper planning and training schedule. While I managed the latter part, finance was yet to be sorted."

And just when Pritha looked for support to improve her game, Lakshya pitched in.

Pritha was one of the first few athletes to join Lakshya's movement of taking Indian sport to newer heights.

"I was not even 12 when Lakshya spotted me and offered their help. I was too young to understand those things then, but when I look back, I feel it changed things for good around me," she says. "Lakshya took care of my travelling expenses and even my training, which gave the right boost to my career."

With support from Lakshya, Pritha started travelling to play more ranking tournaments and climbed the success ladder quickly. "I have been in the top-4 players in the national ranking in every category I have played in," she says.

So far, Pritha has played in five international tournaments along with

winning medals at the national level.

"I feel, players need good training, proper diet, mental fitness and financial help to do well and focus on their game. I have been fortunate to have got all of them through Lakshya. Other than financial help for travelling, I have psychologists, sports nutritionists and coaches who work hard to help me achieve my goals. On my part, I am giving my all to fulfil expectations of everybody around me. I want to win medals for my country and make people who have been with me proud," she says.



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SAJAN BHANWAL

THE CHANGEMAKER

ndian wrestling has come a long way. But the sport is identified more with freestyle wrestling than the Greco Roman style.

The perception is not completely wrong as till now, India has won all its Olympic wrestling medals from freestyle wrestlers.

Haryana's Sajan Bhanwal want to change that. Passionate about the sport, Sajan, 24, is a rare mix of skill and hard work. Coming from a humble financial background, wrestling happened by chance for Sajan but he took bold calls to follow his calling.

"I went to study in Pratap School (famous for its sports) and fell in love with wrestling. I studied there for one year before leaving studies to focus only on wrestling," Sajan, who started wrestling in 2011, says.

Sajan's family had their heart for wrestling, but financially, it wasn't a cakewalk

"My father has been constantly supporting me. Not even once he said no to anything that I needed for



My father has been constantly supporting me. Not even once he said no to anything that I needed for wrestling. He is a humble farmer. who works on the fields all day and earn a meagre income. But he still made sure to provide me everything that I needed to support my game.







With almost a decade in he has won gold at national junior, and silver at seniors, Sajan has been junior Asian champion, along with winning silver and bronze at the junior World Championships.

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Sajan says his father tool loans for the sport and it had not been easy.

"He never said no to anything, but I know it isn't easy to take loan and repay it by working all day in the field. I will be ever grateful to my family's support," he says.

With almost a decade in wrestling he has won gold at national junior, and silver at seniors, Sajan has been junior Asian champion, along with winning silver and bronze at the junior World Championships.

But despite being one of the best Greco Roman wrestlers of the country, Sajan feels that his style of wrestling is yet to make its mark.

"It is obvious that freestyle wrestlers have won Olympic medals for the country and Greco Roman has not been that successful. But it is growing with time and I am doing my best to win a medal at the 2024 Games. But I also wish that Greco Roman wrestlers too get some support."

"Earlier, Greco Roman wrestlers couldn't win international medals, but this is changing now. We are also winning at international competitions consistently," he says.

Sajan says he considers Lakshya as part of his family.

"When others denied their support to me, Lakshya came forward and backed me. They offered help when I needed it most. Only family does that and for me, Lakshya is not less than my own family," he says.

"I was going through my transition period from junior to senior and I needed support in terms of physical training, mental fitness and nutrients. Lakshya made sure I get everything I needed to overcome the hurdle. I am ready for bigger challenges now," he adds. Sajan is eying to qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympics.



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SIMRANJIT KAUR







ven if Simranjit Kaur was not introduced to boxing, she would still remain a fighter.

The young girl from Chakar village near Ludhiana, Punjab, has faced harsh punches on and off the boxing ring. But every time she dealt a blow, she responded with even harder response.

The 25-year-old boxer, Simranjit's journey from starting boxing to winning a World Championships medal to qualifying for the Tokyo Games has been anything but easy.

Born in a family, where getting daily food was a struggle, taking up a sport was more than a luxury for Simranjit.

Although her father Kamaljit Singh never wanted her to take up boxing due to the financial situation of the family, Simranjit's mother Rajpal Kaur always encouraged her children to take up the sport.

"My elder sister and two younger brothers started boxing and my mother wanted me to take up the sport too. I was reluctant but my mother kept pushing me. I am thankful

Lakshya came as a supporter that I could only dream of. Where I was only looking for a proper diet, they provided me support in every possible way. My physiotherapy, my psychology, my diet, my training schedule, everything was taken care of by Lakshya and the only thing I had to focus on, was my boxing.





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"My father used to work in a garment shop and our financial condition wasn't good. It was obvious that my father could never think of supporting our sport. But my mother still pushed us to do well in the sport," she says.

What started as a reluctant effort in 2010, became a passion soon for young Simranjit. She started winning district and state level boxing meets and soon she became one of the toughest boxers in her category.

However, without proper support, especially a nutritious diet, it was never going to be easy.

"My academy in the village supported me with gloves and

other gears, but a proper diet was a dream. Tab to roti khane ke bhi paise nahi hote the (as then we didn't have money even to have proper meal," she remembers. Things turned for the better from 2016 onwards when Simranjit won bronze at the nationals and was approached by Lakshya.

"I feel that was the turning point of not just my career, but of my life. Lakshya came as a supporter that I could only dream of. Where I was only looking for a proper diet, they provided me support in every possible way. My physiotherapy, my psychology, my diet, my training schedule, everything was taken care of by Lakshya and the only thing I had to focus on, was my

boxing," she recalls.

Two years later, in 2018, Simranjit won the biggest medal of her career – a bronze – at the World Championships. "The medal was my biggest achievement then," she says.

On one side 2018 brought the biggest professional achievement for Simranjit, on personal front, it was gloomy. "I lost my father in the same year," she says. After her father's demise, Simranjit became the sole bread earner for her family.

"Since my elder sister got married and two brothers are young and still studying, the responsibility to earn for my family was mine. But now I have found my feet and am confident of training hard along with taking care of my family," she says.

Although Simranjit had participated in the Tokyo Olympics, contracting the Covid-19 virus before the Games derailed her preparation.

"I was happy to qualify as it isn't easy but couldn't give my best. I am now preparing for the 2024 Paris Olympics. The first goal is to qualify and then win a medal in Paris," Simranjit says.

Lakshya has been proudly supporting Simranjit in her quest to achieve excellence. •



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AIMING HIGH!

ursting balloons at local fairs is a common thing among children in India. However, taking a step ahead and making shooting a passion, is not seen every day.

For Pune's rifle shooter Nupur Hagawane, the love for the sport began very early. It started when as a small girl, her father asked her to shoot the balloons at a fair, she not just did well, but also liked the sport of aiming and precision.

"I liked shooting the balloons so much that I asked my father to play more of it. My father had done shooting during his National Cadet Corps days, so he knew about shooting. I started training for shooting when I was 13," Nupur says.

She started with open-site rifle, the basic of rifle shooting at school competitions and gradually started competing in district and statelevel tournaments, followed by the national championships.

support

Nupur's hard-work and dedication paid off as she won gold in the youth





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category of shooting Nationals two years later.

The result helped Nupur make her way to the national youth and junior squad. In 2019, Nupur got her first international break with participation in the Asian Championship held in Doha. She made it memorable by clinching bronze in 10m air rifle youth category.

Although Nupur's family had always been supporting her training, continuing training in a sport like shooting is never easy. "Shooting is an expensive sport and rifle shooting is one of the most expensive categories. I was fortunate to find Lakshya's support as they really helped me to get all upgraded equipment with their financial support," she says.

"Without Lakshya's support, I would have dropped the sport."

The young shooter says getting mental fitness training is also helping her shoot good scores. "Lakshya has helped me by providing nutritionist, physiotherapy and mental training which is the

most important aspect for any shooter," Nupoor says.

The youngster now aims to make her way to the senior squad and eventually realise her ultimate dream. "Every shooter thrives to win international medals for the country. I also want to win many medals for our country. I am now focusing on taking my scores high and make my way to the senior team and qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympics. With the right kind of support, I am sure of reaching my goal," she says. •



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THE AVENGER

They say revenge is best served cold. But for Suhana Saini, the aim of avenging mother's defeat, turned out to be the most satisfactory feeling of her life.

Suhana's parents, Vikas and Bhavna, who used to play table tennis at the national level, had never imagined their daughter would become an international player just by watching them.

"She used to travel with us since she was only three or four-yearold as we played tournaments in different cities. She used to watch us play and observe, but we never thought a kid that young could learn to play just by watching till one day she took the racquet and started playing when she was just four plus," Suhana's father, Vikas recalls.

The sport made a special place in young Suhana's life and soon she started playing with her parents on a regular basis.

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Suhana saw her mother lose to a girl in the semifinals of a Haryana state-level tournament. "She was so hurt after her mother's defeat. After the match, Suhana told her mother that she will avenge her loss one day," the father says.

"Only a year later, Suhana, playing in the Haryana state championship, defeated the same girl and after her win, she told us, 'I have avenged your defeat now'. We were so surprised as we didn't even remember the defeat, but Suhana didn't forget," he remembers.

"She defeated a player almost double her age, when she was not even 10. It was sheer determination that drove her. Even today, she is very focused and wants to achieve her targets, once she sets them," the father says. Suhana soon started winning state-level meets and then graduated to the national level.

"She is a quick learner. She started beating players older than her and won her national titles soon. She is very dedicated towards her sport and this is a quality that makes her different," Vikas Saini says.

Suhana soon started climbing the success ladder. She won the U-17 and U-19 national titles in the same meet, however, it is never easy to participate and win at the international level.

"We come from a humble background and an athlete's life is difficult. It isn't just travelling, but training, coaching and even diet is a big expense," the 16-year-old champion, Suhana, says.

"But I was lucky to have found support in Lakshya. They have been taking care of all my expenses, including travelling. When you have such a brilliant organization having your back, giving your best comes automatically," the young champion says.

Suhana is now focusing on booking her ticket for the 2024 Paris Olympics. "It is my goal to participate and win a medal for my country at the Olympics." •



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RESHMA NANE







Reshma Mane is breaking barriers in more than one way. The Kolhapur wrestler is not only the flagbearer of women wrestling in Maharashtra but is also one of the most promising athletes from the state, with gender no bar.

However, it wasn't a smooth start for the multiple times national medallist and international medal winner Reshma. Though things are changing fast, wrestling, which is considered a men's sport in India, doesn't find too many women wrestlers for various reasons.

When Reshma started training for the sport, it was all but easy for the talented wrestler and her family.

"My father had a juice shop in front of an akhada in Kolhapur. He used to see a lot of wrestlers daily and always dreamt of his kids taking up the sport. My uncle and grandfather used to practice the sport, so it was a family sport for us," Reshma says.

As an 8-year-old, Reshma started with swimming and gymnastics training.



My father had a juice shop in front of an akhada in Kolhapur. He used to see a lot of wrestlers daily and always dreamt of his kids taking up the sport. My uncle and grandfather used to practice the sport, so it was a family sport for us.







The turning point, however, came when the then eight-year-old Suhana saw her mother lose to a girl in the semifinals of a Haryana state-level tournament.

However, she couldn't find the joy that she was seeking from a sport.

Then wrestling happened.

"I come from the land of the great KD Jadhav. Wrestling is in the air of Kolhapur and it was only about time that I was introduced to the sport," Reshma says.

Young Reshma started training and her first big success came very early. She won her first national medal, a bronze in the 44kg of U-16 age group. She was only 11 then.

"Not many girls from my region opt for wrestling. Initially, it wasn't easy, but I was supported by my family. I train with boys as I don't find strong sparring partners," Reshma, who became the first woman wrestler from Maharashtra to play in the Pro Wrestling League, says.

In 2014, Reshma was part of the Youth Olympic Games and then won gold in senior and junior national championships in 2016.

She was also conferred with the prestigious state award, Shiv Chhatrapati award.

However, other than her opponent on the mat, Reshma had to grapple with the financial stress to pursue her dream.

"We are five siblings and it wasn't easy for my parents to support my training," Reshma says.

"I wouldn't have been able to continue playing if it wasn't Lakshya. I feel blessed to have the support of Lakshya, who take care of my diet, training, psychology as well as my travelling. I want to win an Olympic medal for the country and to shoulder a dream like this, any athlete would need strong support, not just financially, but at all levels," she says.

After having won medals at the Commonwealth Championships, Asian wrestling and having represented the country at the U-23 World Championships, Reshma is working hard to win medals at the senior worlds and 2024 Paris Olympics.



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SUN KUMAR







There is a lot that an athlete requires to train. Lakshya ensured they took care of all those things, so that I can train with a free mind. My diet, physiotherapy, training and even travelling is sorted, as Lakshya and their team have been working tirelessly with me. They have aligned their goals with mine, and it gives me a lot of confidence.



THE SHY **FIGHTER**

eave Sunil Kumar on the mat and he will make even his fiercest opponent silent with his moves. But ask the wrestler to tell a few things about him, he will struggle to find words.

That is Sunil Kumar for you, shy, introvert, but strong and determined.

Sunil is India's brightest star in Greco Roman wrestling. But like many other wrestlers, the Dabarpurborn grappler too had his shares of struggles.

Sunil's introduction with wrestling happened because of his father's passion for the sport. His father not just loved wrestling but also wanted his son to do something for the country.

"My father always said that making the country proud is the biggest thing one can do. When I was 10, he suggested that I take up wrestling, as that way I would get a chance to play for my country and make India proud by winning international medals," Sunil says.



Sunil's introduction with wrestling happened because of his father's passion for the sport. His father not just loved wrestling but also wanted his son to do something for the country.

Since there was no wrestling centre in his village, Sunil's father got him admitted to a sports school in Sonipat district, where the young boy continued his studies along with playing the sport.

Sunil's father was a man of limited means, but he never hesitated in giving the best to his son and nurturing his dream of becoming a successful wrestler.

Things became difficult when my father passed away in 2010, two years after Sunil started wrestling.

"My elder brother supported my sport by working on the farms. He, like my father, never let me take any pressure, and rather worked tirelessly to get money for my training," Sunil says.

"But when you graduate to a level where diet, training and participation becomes an expensive affair, it is not easy to continue," the wrestler admits.

Sunil says things got better when he found support from Lakshya in 2020.

"There is a lot that an athlete requires to train. Lakshya ensured they took care of all those things, so that I can train with a free mind. My diet, physiotherapy, training and even travelling is sorted, as Lakshya





My father always said that making the country proud is the biggest thing one can do. When I was 10, he suggested that I take up wrestling, as that way I would get a chance to play for my country and make India proud by winning international medals.



and their team have been working tirelessly with me. They have aligned their goals with mine, and it gives me a lot of confidence," he says.

Now hard work on the mat became Sunil's only mission. His dedication paid off as after winning consecutive national titles, Sunil also started winning international medals. In 2021, he ended India's 27-year-old drought by winning gold at the Asian Championships in Greco Roman category.

Now, like every other athlete, Sunil is looking to win a medal at the Olympics. He has set his sights on the 2024 Paris Games.







s a teenager, Sreeja Akula had a difficult choice to make.

The Commonwealth Games gold medallist table tennis player now had to pick between her sport and studies, as she was good at both.

Her getting good results in academics and in sports too, made the decision tricky. She decided to continue her sport and ensured she didn't regret her decision.

"I was good at studies and had 9.5 CGPA in standard 10th and 96% in 12th, so was in a dilemma whether to continue playing or focus on my studies. But I decided to play."

The Hyderabad girl started playing table tennis after watching her father and sister play. She started in 2007 at the age of eight, and within two years, she won her first national bronze.

However, it wasn't easy.

Since her home state doesn't boast of too many table tennis players at the national or international circuit, finding a place to train was difficult for Sreeja.

to a dietician, a psychologist, and trainers. It is more than an athlete can ask for.

Because of

to various

international

tournaments and my international

ranking improved

from 150 to 70

it isn't just the







"I started playing at an academy which had only two tables in a small hall. It was far from my residence and as a child, it was difficult for me to reach the academy before and after my school. There were times when even my coach used to pick and drop me," Sreeja says.

But Sreeja worked hard and focused on her technique. Her game was strong and that made her shine at the state and national level soon.

In the meantime, Sreeja managed to get a job as assistant manager at the Reserve Bank of India, which let her support her game. "Because of the job, I could manage things and my sport but it is never easy to play at the elite level. To improve the international ranking you have to travel a lot and play in foreign countries. It is an expensive affair," she says.

"I have a job, but my salary is enough only for me to keep in the sport."

Sreeja, who was doing well at the national level, needed a push and support, which came her way in 2021, when Lakshya decided to support her.

"Because of Lakshya's support, I started travelling to various





I was good at studies and had 9.5 CGPA in standard 10th and 96% in 12th, so was in a dilemma whether to continue playing or focus on my studies. But I decided to play.

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international tournaments and my international ranking improved from 150 to 70 within a year," she says.

"And it isn't just the travel, I get access to a dietician, a psychologist, and trainers. It is more than an athlete can ask for," she says.

In 2021, Sreeja won gold along with Sharath Kamal at the Commonwealth Games and in 2022, she became national champion in women's singles and doubles categories.

"I am now working to improve my international rankings further and then participate in the 2024 Paris Olympics." •



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