

Amputee athletes rising above all odds to represent India at 2016 Summer Paralympics

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Shalini Saraswathi lost her limbs due to a bacterial infection. She is the toast of Bengaluru after running the TCS 10k marathon.

Sports is a healer for these amputee athletes who overcome hurdles to guard goalposts, swim or run for medals, possibly at the 2016 Summer Paralympics.

BENGALURU: It is half past six in the morning, and the security guard has just opened the gates that lead to the Maria Niketan School in D'Costa Layout. If you head beyond the school grounds, you will come to a small building with a board stating that it is associated with the Jude Felix Hockey Academy. Beyond it is a hockey field. And there is a group of boys in orange jerseys, some with hockey sticks, practising while others sit chatting.

Thirteen-year-old T Samuel, is putting his helmet on. He is already in uniform, wearing padded chest-guards and oversized pads that mark him out as the goalkeeper. The helmet doesn't fit right, so he knocks it into place with a couple of well-placed raps. He uses his left hand -- his right hand ends in a stump just above his wrist. He plays for a while, using his pads and body to defend the goal.

After a while, he returns. He is shy, and a little wary of strangers, but he slowly opens up. "I was six years old when I lost my hand," he says in Tamil. "My aya (grandmother) and my mother never got along. That day, it was Easter and they were fighting again, so I went to the roof. It was raining, and I was playing with a steel tape

measure and I must have touched an electrical cable with it..."



Aiming high: T Samuel, the goalkeeper, had to get over his fear of balls.

Samuel spent six months in hospital. When he was discharged his right hand was amputated. He had to relearn writing with his left. When he tried to return to school to class 2, the authorities asked him to go back to UKG.

Samuel then studied a couple of years at the Association for People with Disability

(APD) in Lingarajapuram. But things were getting tougher at home. His grandparents couldn't afford to take care of him any longer, and they admitted him into St Mary's Orphanage.

"One day, Jude (Felix) sir called those of us who were interested in hockey to the ground. I went too. And as he assigned positions to students, I started thinking that he wouldn't pick me because of my hand. But they picked me. When my turn came, Jude sir looked at me and asked me if I wanted to be the goalkeeper. I said yes," Samuel says. He smiles now, and it's like sunshine.

It still wasn't easy. "I used to be afraid of the ball," he says -- and smiles as he remembers. "I'd try to avoid it. But then Jude sir told me that my chest guard and pads would protect me. Now, I'm not scared at all," he says.

Sport as therapy

The use of sports to help people with disabilities dates back to the second World War, when a German refugee from Nazism, Dr Ludwig Guttman, was attempting to treat patients, mostly injured soldiers, with spinal paralysis, a disability considered "hopeless" till then. Sport played an important part. Guttman hoped to make use of the instincts of his young patients who had led active lives before receiving their disabling injuries.

He started with getting his patients to dress up competitively. The soldiers in Stoke Mandeville Hospital, where Guttman was director, would race each other to get up from their beds, get dressed and into their wheelchairs. From there, they moved to darts, skittles and snooker competitions at local pubs, and then on to more strenuous activities like ball throwing, wheelchair polo and archery.

Since then, a wealth of scientific research has highlighted the importance of sports in treating people with disabilities. Sports leads to increased physical and mental well-being and improves social awareness and self-confidence for those with disabilities.

On the July 29, 1948 -- the opening day of the Olympics in London -- an archery

competition took place on the lawns of Stoke Mandeville against a team from the Star and Garter residential home for war-disabled people in Richmond, Surrey. There were 16 competitors including two women. Guttman predicted that one day it would become the disabled person's equivalent of the Olympics.

Today, the Paralympics are arguably the second biggest sporting event in the world; 4,200 athletes participated in 20 sports in 2012 London Paralympics. This year's Rio Paralympics is expected to be even bigger.

The Paralympians

When Prasanta Karmakar was seven years old, he stuck his hand out of a Kolkata bus window. Another bus, travelling in the opposite direction took his hand off. "Medical science at that time wasn't that advanced, and gangrene was a real fear. So doctors removed my hand. At that time, I wasn't too worried though. I knew hair grew back after you cut it, your nails grew back, so I thought my hand would grow back as well," he says.

Karmakar's story is well known. He won India its first ever Commonwealth medal in swimming in the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi. In the 2010 Asian Para Games in China, he won a silver in 50m freestyle and a bronze in the 200m individual medley. He also won two bronzes in 2014 Incheon Asian Para games in 100 meter breast stroke and 4x100meter freestyle relay events.

"I remember when I went back home (Bally in West Bengal) from the hospital, everyone was crying bitterly. Over time, you get used to it. When I look back I don't feel bitter because I achieved so much in life because of the accident. If I was an able-bodied athlete maybe my motivation levels or achievements would not have been the same," says Karmakar.

In Karmakar's village, almost every house has a pond nearby. Karmakar grew up fishing in these ponds, and as he grew older, in the river. "I used to swim and people suggested I enter a swimming competition for the differently abled in 1996. Initially I

was embarrassed at the thought of getting into a swimsuit. I finally participated, wearing a pair of shorts," he laughs. "I came second. But I was quite upset. I wanted to be first. So I joined a club and began practising," he says.



GRIT & GLORY: Suyash Jadhav, who lost both his hands due to electrocution, trains in Bengaluru for Paralympics.

Karmakar is training Suyash Jadhav, another Paralympian swimmer, at the Basavanagudi Aquatic Center. Jadhav lost both his hands -- another victim of electrocution -- when he was in class 6. "I went to attend a cousin's wedding in Ratnagiri. It was in a school which was under construction. I was playing with an iron rod on the terrace and it came in contact with a live wire. I was in a Mumbai hospital for four months, and they had to amputate it," he says, adding "One hand I knew I would lose, but I was hoping that they could save the other." He shrugs. "I was only eleven or twelve at the time, and the only thing that I wanted was to go home and

meet my friends."

Getting back to normal life wasn't too difficult. "I had learnt swimming in the village, but I was reluctant to try it after the accident. But then, we went to the Trimbakeshwar in Nasik for a puja. And there, at the temple talao (tank), there were many swimming. I wanted to, and my father, a national-level swimmer, encouraged me. And I found that I could swim again," he says.

By 2007, Jadhav was swimming competitively. "My first national medal was special and it was a dream come true for my father. I remember coming home after that win, and the whole village was there to felicitate me. And there were tears in my father's eyes, tears of joy," he says.

Blade Runners

At the 6th CISM Military World Games 2015 held at South Korea, Lance Subedar Anandan Gunasekaran won a gold medal in the 200m race with a record Asian timing of 24.04 seconds. He followed that up with a silver in the 100m event. Anandan, a member of the MEG, was posted to Jammu & Kashmir, along the Line of Control. On the afternoon of June 4, 2008, an undetected landmine blew away a part of his leg. The doctors had to amputate his leg from below the knee.



Lance Subedar Anandan Gunasekaran with his medals

But Anandan never lost hope. Recuperating at the Artificial Limb Centre in Pune, he

happened to watch South African double amputee Oscar Pistorius in action on TV, and was hooked. "He gave me hope. If he could win medals for his country with no legs, why couldn't I with one?"

His comrades at the MEG gifted him a running blade (prosthesis) worth Rs 5 lakh. "Slowly, two crutches became one, then none," he says. Now, Anand hopes for Paralympic glory at Rio.

In 2013, Shalini Saraswathi was on top of the world. "I came back from a holiday from Cambodia, completed a stressful and successful client visit, knew that I was pregnant, knew that I would get promoted," she writes on her blog.

But disaster waited. It started out with a fever, and things spiralled downward from there. Saraswathi found that she had Rickettsial with morts, a rare bacterial infection that affects one in a million. In the end, Saraswathi found herself a quadruple amputee.

It was a devastating time. "I was upset, hurt, angry at everyone who could walk and the constant battle of WHY ME!" she writes. But she found the strength to carry on. "I don't think there is any formula. Everybody goes through a process of grieving, wondering why it happened to me. Somewhere along the line, you just wanted it to be done with and move forward," she says.

She still remembers the night before her amputation. "I went in with purple nail paint. Anyway my limbs were going, I wanted them to go in style," she says.

Last month, after the TCS 10K, Shalini was the toast of Bengaluru, having completed the run in a little over 10 hours. Her next target? The 2020 Paralympics.

