

# Grandmaster Shyamsundar Mohanraj is on a quiet quest to produce more Indian GMs

Shyamsundar Mohanraj, who runs Chess Thulir in Chennai, is the coach of Srihari LR, who became India's 86th grandmaster last week.

"I was super desperate to start producing grandmasters for the country," declares GM Shyamsundar Mohanraj in a soft, yet determined, voice right after guiding Srihari LR on his quest to become a grandmaster. Last week, the Chennai-based Srihari became India's 86th grandmaster, separated from India's 85th by a gap of just over a year.

"It's been a year since India has had a GM. In India we have too many talented players so it's a pity that we have not had a GM for so long. There are so many guys who are within touching distance of the title," he laments.

The grandmaster title is the one of the hardest-earned ones in the sport of 64 squares. It's a recognition of talent and aptitude but has to be earned by earning three norms at three different tournaments and crossing a rating threshold of 2500.

Srihari's 10-month-long struggle to get the final grandmaster norm reminded Shyamsundar of his own long wait to get past the finish line. The story goes that back in 2012, he had ticked off all three norms, but his coronation as a grandmaster was held up because he was just 0.2 points away from the 2500 rating.

"I know the pain of the players who struggle so hard to become grandmaster. I was 2499.8 at some point and needed just 0.2 points. It took me six months to get that 0.2 rating. There were times when I was going to play in a tournament and had I withdrawn from that, I would have become a GM because the ratings would have been rounded off to 2500 in the next published rating list. But that's not how I wanted to become a grandmaster. Becoming a grandmaster is just one of the things in chess. I knew I would become a GM anyway. But my goal was not just to become a GM. I wanted to become a GM in a proper way," Shyamsundar tells The Indian Express.

He has brought this never-settle quality in his coaching as well and is hoping to influence his wards. When Srihari became a GM last week, in his post on Instagram wishing the teenager, Shyamsundar reminded him that now the time had come to focus on the next goal. As he explains, these days becoming a grandmaster comes with certain perks and financial opportunities that could sidetrack you and make you ease up on the hunger to forge ahead.

He's already mapped out the changes he wants Srihari to bring in his playing style: trying to make him a more universal player, rather than just being a solid player.

"Being solid is good, but it's not enough for anyone to get to the next level," he says about Srihari. "I want to make him a universal player, good at dynamics and positional chess. It's tricky, because I want him to lose his ability to grind out results. I want to fine-tune his way of playing."

The other lesson Shyamsundar, who is an Asian Junior Champion and Commonwealth medalist, learnt from his own career was how to deal with the pressure that comes when you're close to the finish line. He admits that the pressure to get the GM title took a toll on him. He had sponsors promising him to invest in him once he became a GM. But that thought of getting the title quickly weighed heavy on his mind. Eventually, when he reached there six months later than he could have, and looked back, there were no sponsors in sight. Eventually, as a GM, there was a phase where he played with no job and no sponsors backing him. Every game won in a tournament would help plot an assault on a tournament in the future. A loss would pinch the pocket.

Having experienced these pressures first-hand, he made the conscious decision to take a break from his academy Chess Thulir in Chennai and travel to UAE for three tournaments over a 45-day period — Sharjah and Dubai following the Al Ain event — with a merry gang of six players: two GMs (Bharat Subramaniam and Pranav V) and four IMs (Srihari, Muthaiah, Aswath S and Ilamparthi AR.) All four, he stated, were close to becoming GMs with most of them needing one or two norms. They train hard, but also spend plenty of time playing other sports and cooking in each other's company to take the edge of their professional pursuit.

He has gathered a band of talented youngsters who are all on the ascendancy. Aswath S last month won the Grenke Open in Germany despite being seeded 38th after scoring 8/9 and securing his first norm. He also crossed 2500 so he needs just two norms to become GM. Muthaiah AL also has two norms, and needs just 30 rating points and a final GM norm. Ilamparthi has two norms and has crossed 2500 so he's awaiting just one more norm. At the recent event in Al Ain, he took down grandmaster Tabatabaei M Amin, and just when it looked like he could get his final norm too, he faltered.

"Ilamparthi was ill at the end of the tournament so he could not convert winning positions. If he had, India could have had two GMs being confirmed on the same day," says Shyamsundar.

Since the pandemic, the world has looked towards Chennai as the world's fastest churning conveyor belt of grandmasters. From the much-vaunted houses of RB Ramesh, Srinath Narayanan and Vishnu Prasanna have arrived the country's top talent causing seismic tremors in the sport. Gukesh, the youngest world champion in the history of the sport, and Leon Luke Mendonca worked with Vishnu. Ramesh shaped the world-beating sibling duo of Praggnanandhaa and Vaishali besides players like Aravindh Chithambaram and Karthikeyan Murali besides also working with Leon. Srinath moulded players like Arjun Erigaisi and Nihal Sarin.

Now, in the form of Shyamsundar comes another grandmaster from India's in-between generation — the group between Viswanathan Anand and the golden gen of Gukesh-Pragg-Arjun — to step up to create more grandmasters.

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