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GoSports Foundation: Going Beyond the Gold

Sanjeev Tripathi and Vijay Krishnamurthy wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Nandan Kamath, the co-founder and managing trustee of GoSports Foundation (GoSports), was stalling in his office. It was a Friday evening in December 2019, just five days before Christmas, and Kamath was in no rush to join the weekend city traffic jammed with everyone keen to leave the city and start the holiday season. Instead, he was reflecting on the past year for GoSports. The organization had grown in size and impact over the past decade, and last year had been especially satisfying with the highlight being the prestigious national award for sports promotion, the *Rashtriya Khel Protsahan Puruskar*, conferred on GoSports by the president of India.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As Kamath continued reflecting, his eye caught a file lying on his desk. The GoSports team was in the middle of its athlete selection process. Kamath picked up the file and flipped through the various profiles of those athletes being considered. For over a decade, GoSports had identified and supported Indian athletes aspiring to participate and succeed at multisport events such as the Olympic Games (Olympics) and Paralympic Games, the Asian Games, and the Commonwealth Games. One criteria item that GoSports used to select the athletes it would sponsor was their potential for qualifying and winning medals. Another consideration was athletes who could inspire an entire generation by their stories of breaking through against all the odds, even if they did not win medals.

Each athlete was a change agent, carrying a purpose and an objective. GoSports had limited funding, and Kamath wondered who the next sponsored athlete would be. He also wondered whether GoSports needed to extend its programs to develop and support coaches and trainers. What was the organization’s immediate next priority?

THE OLYMPIC AND PARALYMPIC MOVEMENT

The Olympics, originally a festive celebration of the Greek god Zeus, became the event as the modern world knew it in 1896.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since then, the Olympics were held every four years, barring the disruptions caused by the two World Wars in 1916, 1940, and 1944 and by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Olympics were considered the world’s largest stage for sports competitions with more than 200 national Olympic committees participating.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Olympic movement’s goal was to create a peaceful and better world by using sport as a medium for educating youth and removing discrimination of any kind. A designated host city organized the Olympics under the auspices of the International Olympic Committee.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Although sport designated for athletes with impairments existed as early as the 1880s, it was not until 1948 that competition existed for those athletes at the Olympic level. It was then that the Paralympic movement began, initiated by a physician who treated spinal injuries. The first competition was in archery for injured war veterans, men and women, in wheelchairs. Those competitions grew and in 1960, they became the Paralympic Games, held in parallel with the Olympics and including athletes from more than 100 countries. A designated host city organized the Paralympic Games under the auspices of the International Paralympic Committee.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Olympic and Paralympic Sports Administration in India

India first participated in the Olympics in 1900, when a single English-Indian athlete holidaying in Paris participated in the Olympics. The country did not send a proper team to the Olympics until 1920 when it was represented by six athletes who failed to win any medals.[[7]](#footnote-7) In 1924, the Indian squad had its first woman member.[[8]](#footnote-8) In 1927, the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) was established by Sir Dorabji Tata and by Dr. A. G. Noehren, the physical education director of YMCA India. The IOA coordinated India’s participation in the Olympics.[[9]](#footnote-9) The next year, in 1928, India won a gold medal for the first time, which occurred in the field hockey event.[[10]](#footnote-10)

By 2012, the size of the Indian contingent at the Olympics had increased to more than 80 team members. At the 2012 Olympics in London, UK, India won six medals—its highest total ever. At the 2016 Olympics, India sent its largest contingent, with 117 athletes representing India in 15 different events.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, the team won only two medals. The team narrowly missed a medal position in several events such as gymnastics, where India performed better than expected, thereby raising hopes for the 2020 Olympics.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The responsibility for selecting the athletes who would represent India at the Olympics rested with the IOA, acting as National Olympic Committee for the country under the direction of the International Olympic Committee. Before India achieved independence in 1947, the IOA was more focused on sending the Indian team to the Olympics, while the respective sports federations remained accountable for training and selecting the athletes. After India’s independence, the responsibility for India’s participation in the Olympics was shared by the IOA, various sports federations, and India’s department of sports, working under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In 1992, M. Mahadeva started an organization for the promotion and development of sports for athletes with physical challenges, named the Physically Handicapped Sports Federation of India. By 1994, the organization was renamed the Paralympic Committee of India (affiliated with the International Paralympic Committee) with objectives to promote sports for athletes with disabilities, identify talent, impart training, and select athletes for national and international competitions.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In 1968, India made its debut at the summer Paralympic Games and competed again in 1972. After a long gap, the country became a regular participant starting with the 1984 Paralympic Games. India had won only one medal in the 1972 Paralympic Games, four medals in 1984, and two medals in 2004. However, an improvement in performance was seen at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio, Brazil, when the country won four medals, including two gold medals. India’s athletes received media attention and recognition for their performance, which raised expectations for the next Paralympic Games in 2020.[[15]](#footnote-15)

SPORTS IN INDIA

Although India was the second-most populous country in the world[[16]](#footnote-16) and one of the top 10 economies,[[17]](#footnote-17) it ranked extremely low in terms of Olympic medals (see Exhibit 1). After achieving independence in 1947, India was challenged with simply providing the necessities of life to its citizens, most of whom lived in poverty. The nation struggled in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as it worked to achieve self-sufficiency.

Sports were largely ignored by the country’s leaders, with little systematic investment. Despite its vast population, the country could not afford even a basic sports program. Sports were generally considered a pastime for the wealthy. India’s performance at the various Olympics reflected the country’s social, political, and financial conditions. The country’s Olympics achievements were primarily reserved to traditional activities such as field hockey. By the 1980s, with a lack of investment in the country’s sports program, India lost any advantage it had enjoyed in traditional strongholds, earning no medals in the 1984 or 1988 Olympics.[[18]](#footnote-18)

By that time, India had adopted cricket as its main sport, winning the Cricket World Cup in 1983. Although it was not an Olympic sport, cricket gained popularity among Indian fans to become the country’s favourite sport.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, the governing body of cricket had only given full membership to about a dozen countries, which were recognized at the sport’s top level.[[20]](#footnote-20)

From the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles to the 2004 Olympics in Athens, India’s Olympic performance was poor, as reflected by few medals earned. Before each Olympic year, the conversation in India would invariably return to cynical discussions on whether India would again return empty-handed. The media would spotlight various systemic problems, from the poor quality of local municipal playgrounds to the lack of world-class athlete preparation, generally exposing the government’s failure to engage the issue with any seriousness.[[21]](#footnote-21) Cricket enjoyed a massive boom during the 1990s, with few Indian sports fans following any other sport, while India failed to win even one medal in the 1992 or 1996 Olympics.[[22]](#footnote-22)

With economic liberalization in the 1990s, India underwent a period of rapid growth. The country became self-sufficient in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the nation suddenly became aspirational. Sports were also covered on television, raising the attention of Indian people and the government to the need for more investment. Discussions about India’s disappointing sports performance grew louder. With the economy growing at a brisk pace, the private sector was eager to get involved and supplement the government’s support of India’s athletes competing at world events. Organizations such as Mittal Champions Trust were founded with financial backing from corporations to assist athletes with needs such as coaching, travel, and equipment.[[23]](#footnote-23) With several former Olympians and athletes guiding them, the smaller private organizations that directly supported athletes showed professional management value, and better results started to emerge.

ABOUT GoSports

Kamath earned his law degree from the National Law School in Bengaluru. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and a graduate of the Master of Laws program at Harvard Law School. He worked for a US law firm from 2003 to 2006, then returned to India to start LawNK, his own law firm in Bengaluru. LawNK became a leading law firm in sports, media, technology, and intellectual property.

Kamath was an accomplished athlete. He represented India’s Under-16 team and was captain of the Karnataka state team in cricket. He played field hockey and, for a short time, was goalkeeper on a football (soccer) team. He was on track to play cricket professionally until he was accepted to law school. His love for sports led him to merge his two interests and specialize in sports law, which evolved into setting up an organization with friends who shared a passion for improving the state of sports in India. Through GoSports, the group was determined to fight the prevailing cynicism around India’s lack of ability to win at sports. Kamath believed that talent, concerted care, support, and management could channel India’s potential and win medals. The group also believed in the ability of sports to drive economic and social change.

In 2008, GoSports was founded as a non-profit organization to develop India’s athletes in Olympic and Paralympic disciplines through structured athlete support programs. The organization’s trustees included Kamath, Abishek Laxminarayan, and Thomas Ollapally. The board of advisors had been served at different times by various accomplished athletes: Abhinav Bindra, an Olympic gold medallist in sport shooting; Rahul Dravid, former cricketer and captain of the Indian national team; and Pullela Gopichand, coach of India’s national badminton team and winner of the All England Open Badminton Championships. The foundation received grants through organizations’ corporate social responsibility efforts and from individual donors.

The mission of GoSports was “to use sports excellence as a vehicle for social change and a tool to improve the lives of individuals, communities, and the state of our nation.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Besides helping the athletes win Olympic medals, the organization also strove to empower athletes and coaches in their professional sporting journey. GoSports also conducted seminars, workshops, and conclaves on diverse topics such as nutrition, sports science, mental health, and career management.

The GoSports Journey

In 2008, when GoSports was started, it had a simple mission: support a few worthy athletes to qualify for the Olympics and aim for a podium finish. Kamath knew that a grassroots development of sports was the ideal way to develop sports excellence; however, he realized that it would need both time and resources. Identifying athletes who could win medals at the Olympics and supporting them could be a quick way to show that Indians could win medals by having the right support system. Thus, GoSports created a system that supported Indian athletes in order to demonstrate that proper support could help Indians win medals, and inspire positive change.. Kamath believed that building pathways for athletes would make the tougher but more significant battle of competition easier down the road.

Initially, GoSports was only focused on Olympic athletes and sports excellence. In line with this vision, GoSports increased its support to athletes who competed in the Olympics and to differently abled athletes who competed in the Paralympic Games. The organization solicited donations from individuals and organizations to support the athletes’ needs for training, coaching, equipment, medical support, and injury management to excel on the world stage.

Later, Kamath realized that sports could also be used as a vehicle for social change (see Exhibit 2). Besides directly supporting athletes, GoSports started focusing on education and advocacy for various stakeholders in the sports domain.

Activities at GoSports

The activities at GoSports could be divided into four categories: athlete selection, athlete support, athlete management, and fundraising.

Athlete Selection

Athlete selection at GoSports followed a five-step process (see Exhibit 3). The first stage, Stage 1, was outreach. GoSports cast a wide net to identify prospective athletes, inviting applications from young and exciting talent across India. The applications were shared with the public and coaches, sports science experts, sports journalists, and on GoSports’ social media.

In the next two stages, Stages 2 and 3, GoSports worked through the many applications to identify the most promising athletes for the slots available at GoSports. The organization shortlisted candidates on eligibility criteria, comparative performance analysis, and feedback from multiple national level coaches in the two internal stages.

During Stage 4, the shortlisted athletes were invited for a personal interview with a panel. The panel consisted of eminent personalities from the sports domain who understood the struggle to achieve success at the international level. During the interview, the panel sought to understand the athlete’s background, resilience, and drive.

The last step of the process, Stage 5, involved all the applicants who cleared the earlier rounds. In this stage, a member of the GoSports team visited the applicant’s hometown and training base to verify the applicant’s authenticity.

Athlete Support Programs

GoSports supported athletes in various ways under different programs (see Exhibit 4). However, the foundation only supported athletes in individual sports; the ability to intervene and affect outcomes was better in individual sports than in team sports where there were more variables outside the athlete’s control. Moreover, the return on investment, measured as the number of medals earned, was also higher for individual sports. Finally, to effect change in team sports, several athletes needed to be supported—an endeavour best left to sports federations. Hence, by focusing on individual sports, GoSports could concentrate on the greater impact.

The organization had an extensive athlete support program that served the different needs of athletes with and without disabilities at various stages of the athlete’s lifecycles. In the Rahul Dravid Athlete Mentorship Program, Dravid and his team personally mentored elite athletes in their quest for sporting glory. In fiscal year 2019–20, the program supported 25 elite athletes. The Para Champions Program specifically supported para-athletes and raised awareness about competitive para-athletes in an attempt to change societal perceptions about disabilities. The program was currently supporting 45 athletes.

Two programs were meant to develop next-generation talent. The Long-Term Athlete Development Program recognized the length of time it took to succeed as an elite athlete and provided financial aid and support on a long-term basis. That program was supporting 35 athletes. Junior athletes who showed promising talent in one of five sports—tennis, squash, swimming, sailing, and golf—could be launched with support under the Stars of Tomorrow Program. In 2019–20, that program was supporting 11 athletes.

GoSports also provided grants to a few athletes who might not have fallen under any one of the foundation’s structured programs. These athletes had a specific need or strength that GoSports wanted to support.

Athlete Management, Education, and Support

Once the athlete was on board, GoSports assigned a manager to the respective athlete. The manager’s principal responsibility was to identify the athlete’s performance strengths and weaknesses and fill the gaps where necessary. An elite athlete needed to attend to skill, mental conditioning, nutrition, injury recovery, digital media presence, and more. The athlete manager at GoSports linked the various coaches and stakeholders to ensure that the athlete’s needs were coordinated and fulfilled.

The support structure involved providing sports science expertise and tracking physical, emotional, and mental well-being in addition to providing financial support for equipment, coaching, travel, and tournament expenses (see Exhibit 5). The foundation used an athlete monitoring system database to record all technical parameters (physical and mental) so issues could be addressed promptly. The athletes also went through various training and education programs in addition to those related to their sport, such as anti-doping awareness and communication and life skills, which holistically enabled the athlete’s personal development. The wholesome structure allowed an athlete to progressively improve and succeed.

GoSports Fundraising

When GoSports began soliciting donations, Kamath quickly realized that it was not easy to get funding to support sports and the pursuit of Olympic medals. Both corporations and individuals indicated that there were more critical avenues that needed support, such as food and education. People were also skeptical and cynical about funding sports; they felt that no real sports talent existed in India. There was also a belief that Indian people could do reasonably well in sports that required skill but not in those sports that required strength. Moreover, there was hardly any awareness of disability sports.

Raising funds was a struggle, but GoSports identified individuals and organizations who were keen to support the foundation’s cause. Then, in 2013, the Government of India amended the *Companies Act* to legally mandate corporate social responsibility (CSR). It was a watershed moment for non-profit organizations in general, and thus for GoSports. The amendment required that companies of a certain financial turnover and profitability had to spend 2 per cent of the company’s average net profit for the previous three years on societal development projects. The traditional CSR projects included programs addressing hunger, poverty, and malnutrition; promoting health care, education, and gender equality; empowering women, advancing environmental sustainability, protecting national heritage, supporting art and culture, and providing disaster management.[[25]](#footnote-25) The CSR mandate also included “training to promote rural sports, nationally recognised sports, Paralympic sports and Olympic sports.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

GoSports interacted with potential partner organizations to raise funds through the organizations’ outreach efforts or in response to the growing number of inbound requests. The broader discussion involved identifying the objectives to be achieved, the associated metrics that would define success in the program, and how the funds would be used.

Corporations were motivated to donate to the cause for a variety of reasons. Some saw sport as being able to deliver values that aligned with the corporation’s CSR mandates. Others had leadership teams who loved Indian sport, had played sports seriously, and understood the importance of supporting athletes’ journeys in the broader context. The donors and partners[[27]](#footnote-27) viewed GoSports as a credible, neutral, and independent platform that was well-governed, accountable, and transparent and delivered on the program goals as committed. The secure protocols, reports, and feedback loops helped to highlight the foundation’s transparency. Simultaneously, involving senior industry figures and sports champions in the governance structure gave the foundation credibility.

GoSports realized that partnerships were the most potent when the partners were aligned with the foundation’s mission and vision, especially the belief in the societal value of sports excellence. Although sports was not a top priority for CSR projects and contribution of CSR funds to sports accounted for less than 2 per cent of the total spends on CSR project,[[28]](#footnote-28) GoSports had been able to find like-minded organizations that believed that funding India’s emerging athletes had intrinsic societal value.

Over the years, the foundation had raised over ₹350 million[[29]](#footnote-29) from about 25 corporate donors willing to direct resources to GoSports’ four programs. Fundraising had steadily grown year over year since the CSR mandate was implemented in 2013 with CSR funds forming a major portion of the funds raised by GoSports. The CSR partners included blue chip companies and foundations such as Aditya Birla Finance Limited, Aditya Birla Capital, Sony Pictures Networks India Private Limited, IndusInd Bank Limited, AT&T Communications Incorporated, Bry-Air, Infosys Foundation, Federation of India Fantasy Sports, and Dream Sports Foundation.

Impact

GoSports started in 2008, providing support to five athletes. By 2020, the foundation was supporting 127 athletes (see Exhibits 6 and 7). The supported athletes came from almost every part of the country and represented 22 states and union territories. Of the athletes supported by GoSports, nine represented India at the Olympics across 14 disciplines; 29 represented India at the Asian Games; and 19 participated at the Commonwealth Games (see Exhibit 8).

GoSports had been a pioneer in supporting para-athletes. To date, 19 supported athletes represented India at the Paralympic Games with three of them winning medals. Another 48 athletes participated in the Para Asian Games.

THE PATHWAY TO THE FUTURE

The Athletes

Unchanged through the GoSports journey was the foundation’s focus on the athlete as the heart of its work. In an ideal world, GoSports would have liked to help every athlete win a medal on an international stage; however, supporting an athlete for global events like the Olympics needed substantial investment and supporting athletes was not at the top of many CSR agendas. Deciding which athletes to support, therefore, always included the painful decision of having to exclude someone. Usually, even with the five-step selection process, the decision came down to a choice between two or three athletes who were all deserving and had different attributes.

GoSports had one slot left for the current round of support but the folder Kamath held on his desk contained profiles for four athletes, identified simply as Athlete A, Athlete B, Athlete C, and Athlete D.

Athlete A was a male world-class aspirant. The athlete excelled in a sport in which India had already won multiple Olympic medals. He showed strong potential to win a medal at the Olympics, having already won medals globally, continentally, and internationally. He was financially self-sufficient, coming from an upper middle-class family.

Athlete B was a female continental champion and had won a gold medal at the Asian Games in a challenging event. There was a high probability that she would continue to win at the continental level, and she would likely qualify for the Olympics but not earn a medal. This athlete overcome numerous personal challenges to get to where she was—a story often profiled by the media.

Athlete C was a female Paralympic champion. She had already won medals at the Paralympic Games and at continental levels. The athlete had grabbed much attention as a Paralympian and was likely to win more medals at the next Paralympic Games if she retained her form. She was also active on social media, had a large following, and was considered an icon in the disability space.

Athlete D was a male emerging athlete. This athlete was already in the junior circuit’s top ranks in a sport in which India had never sent an athlete to the Olympics. He had been identified by experts as the up-and-coming star in the field.

Coaches and Trainers

GoSports aimed to enable sporting excellence, and Kamath knew that sporting excellence extended well beyond athletes. Solid athletic performance at the international level was not possible without training and support from coaches and support and expertise from support staff. Kamath wondered, again, whether and when GoSports should extend its program to developing coaches and trainers. The coaches primarily came from the Netaji Subha National Institute of Sports: Patiala, the national training institute for coaches. The institute’s graduates had a good understanding of sports, but they had limited experience at the international level. Thus, the pool of local coaches able to support Indian athletes toward the Olympics was relatively small. The other source was foreign coaches, but they came at a high price. A third source of coaches was the pool of former Indian athletes who had taken up coaching after performing commendably at the international level.

As Kamath thought about how to piece a sports performance system together, he felt the time might be ripe to consider supporting coaches and trainers to enable GoSports to further its mission.

Paralympic Games Athletes

GoSports was one of the first private organizations to actively support para-athletes. Historically, Paralympic Games sports were not popular globally and were even less popular in India. Kamath felt a strong need to support Paralympic Games sports and reverse the narrative both in sports and society generally. However, he was torn: there were also few organizations supporting unheralded athletes from low-profile Olympic and other sports. He wanted to balance support to include a variety of sports disciplines and athletes who were worthy and deserving of support.

Currently, GoSports spent about 37.5 per cent of its funds on athletes participating in para events. Kamath knew that with more investment in the athletes, the chances of winning multiple Paralympic Games medals would increase substantially. However, he also knew that every rupee invested in para-athletes would mean one less rupee for athletes in underrepresented sports. He wondered about the right balance.

Kamath glanced at his watch. He had lost track of time and was surprised to realize that it was almost 9 p.m. As he closed the folder and prepared to leave the office, he wondered if the drive home would bring some clarity to his need to decide what GoSports should do next.

Exhibit 1: India’s Performance at the Olympics

Source: “Olympic Games: Medals by Country,” Telerik UI, accessed July 1, 2020, https://demos.telerik.com/aspnet-ajax/sample-applications/olympic-games.

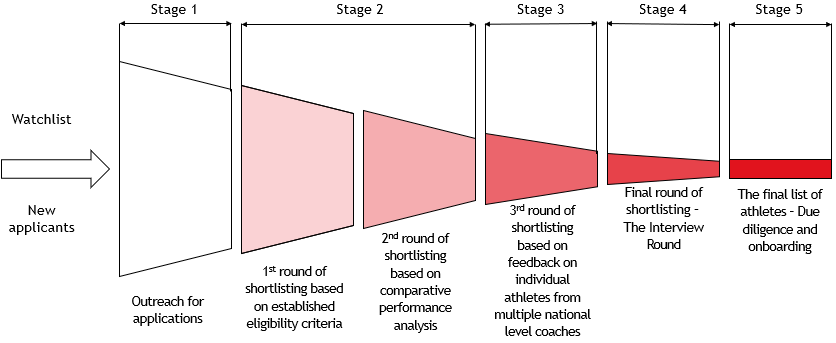
Exhibit 2: GoSports’ Vision and Mission

Vision: We have directed our projects and initiatives towards Enabling Sports Excellence.

Mission: Our mission is to use sports excellence as a vehicle for social change and a tool to improve the lives of individuals, communities, and the state of our nation.

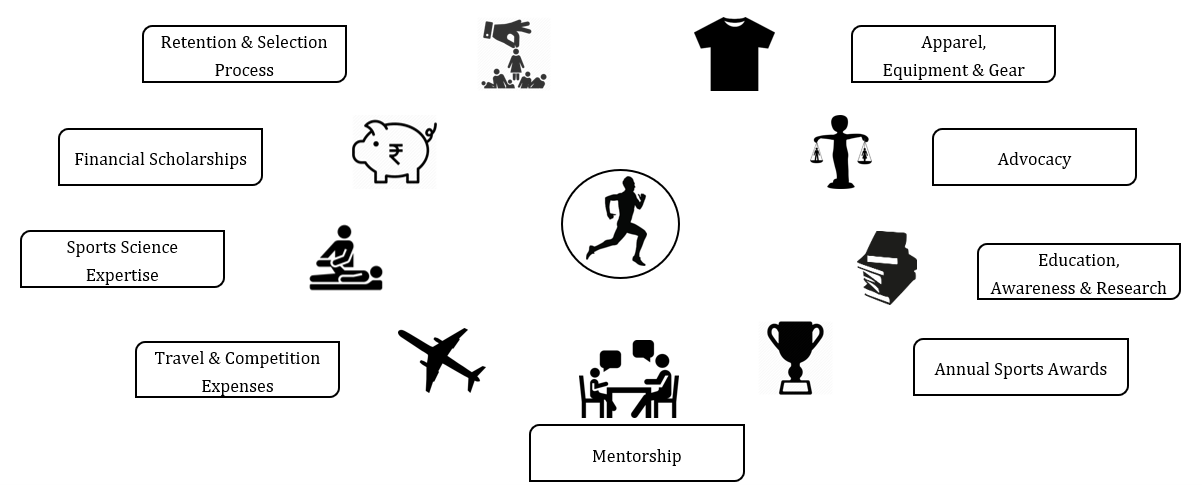
Source: “About Us: Vision and Mission,” GoSports Foundation, accessed February 9, 2021, https://www.gosportsfoundation.in/about-us.

Exhibit 3: GoSports’ Athlete Selection Process



Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 4: GoSports Athlete Support Structure



Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 5: GoSports Funds and Disbursements

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Distribution of funds raised | Distribution of fund disbursals |

Note: Funds raised are typically close to funds disbursed under various heads; CSR = corporate social responsibility

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 6: Number of athletes supported by GoSports

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 7: Athletes supported by GoSports in 2020

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Sport** | **Number of Athletes** |
| Archery | 4 |
| Athletics | 12 |
| Badminton | 17 |
| Canoeing | 1 |
| Fencing | 4 |
| Golf | 3 |
| Gymnastics | 4 |
| Rowing | 1 |
| Sailing | 1 |
| Shooting | 8 |
| Squash | 4 |
| Swimming | 5 |
| Table Tennis | 3 |
| Taekwondo | 3 |
| Tennis | 4 |
| Weightlifting | 6 |
| Para Archery | 3 |
| Para Athletics | 21 |
| Para Badminton | 7 |
| Para Powerlifting | 1 |
| Para Shooting | 5 |
| Para Swimming | 8 |
| Para Taekwondo | 1 |

Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 8: Impact of GoSports

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Number of athletes | 182 |
| Number of states and union territories represented | 24 |
| Number of Olympians | 9 |
| Number of Olympic Games disciplines | 14 |
| Number of Paralympians | 19 |
| Number of Paralympic Games medals | 3 |
| Number of Paralympic Games disciplines | 7 |

Source: Company documents.

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