



# PULLELA GOPI CHAND

THE WORLD BENEATH HIS FEAT

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Foreword by **Saina Nehwal**

This is the gritty story of badminton star Pullela Gopi Chand, who brought laurels to India by winning the coveted All England Championships 2001. The player for whom losing was not an option, who went against all rules and conventions. The champion who achieved the unthinkable by being awarded the Arjuna Award, the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna and the Dronacharya Award in quick succession. Yet, seven years ago, a grievous injury at the 1994 National Games in Pune indicated that his career was over even before it had taken off, that he may never step onto a court again. Some of his peers also predicted the end of his playing days, and made fun of him for even trying to play after that. But Gopi Chand conquered all his demons, and went on to become not only a badminton champion, but an exemplary coach as well.

This book, the authorised biography of Pullela Gopi Chand, is about his rise from humble beginnings to become a star on Indian badminton's horizon, as well as his endeavours to produce more sports icons like him through his one-of-a-kind badminton academy. It is also about Gopi, the man behind the champion, who never let go of his values and integrity, however high he rose.



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*the world beneath his feat*



Sanjay Sharma  
and  
Shachi S. Sharma

*Foreword by*  
Saina Nehwal



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*To my late father Ram Sharan Sharma. I have not known a more courageous, hardworking and optimistic person than him.*

*To my mother Rani Sharma, who gave me life.*

*To my wife Deepti, who gave meaning to my life.*

*To my two lovely daughters Medini and Shachi – they are the treasures of my life*

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## FOREWORD

I have known Gopi sir ever since I started my coaching under him. He is a unique personality, totally dedicated to badminton, and all he thinks of is how his students and Indian badminton can get better. It is his dream that one day our players will defeat the very best in the world and bring laurels to the country. I have personally learnt so many things from him, and my constant interaction with him has made me evolve into a better person and more mature player.

His life in the game has not been an easy one. Beset with many serious injuries and surgeries from the tender age of nineteen years, he not only overcame all these obstacles, but went on to win the greatest championships of all – the 2001 All England singles crown. Gopi sir has given a new meaning to the famous adage – ‘When the going gets tough, the tough get going.’

I am indeed very happy that his biography is being published. This remarkable story will teach all of us the one main thing in life – don’t ever quit from the task at hand. Don’t stop dreaming. If you have the confidence in yourself and discipline, no goal is impossible to achieve. Pullela Gopi Chand had a dream and he went on to achieve it. This is a story for all of us, not just the badminton fraternity. It is a story of human triumph against major odds.

Gopi sir is a major icon of young India. If the youth can emulate even a fraction of what he achieved, of what he is in real life, we will become a better people.

15 June 2011  
Hyderabad

Saina Nehwal



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We must also mention Gopi's close friends Manoj Kumar, Vijay Raghvan and Azam Hussein who willingly gave us lots of time. Prabhakar deserves special mention, as he helped in many ways to give shape to this book. Special thanks to our old friend Leroy D'Sa, who was present during Gopi's All England triumph and who made it sound so dramatic with his keen views and sharp observations. Arif bhai, who coached Gopi for a long time and gave much time to us, Ganguly Prasad who coached Gopi at SAI and brought out for us the incredible hard work Gopi put in under him.

Not to forget badminton queen Saina Nehwal, who not only told us about the great qualities of Gopi as a coach, but was extremely willing to give us a foreword.

And of course Gopi himself, reticent, quiet and introverted most of the time, difficult to track down, but once you sat in front of him with a microphone, he would speak so eloquently about the many myths and facts about himself and the game in general. It was frustrating at times as phone calls and mails went unanswered, but then one had to be patient as he would

always be busy on the badminton courts of his academy, teaching Sainas of today and the future.

We must say here that writing a biography on a non-cricketing person in the country may be easy, but getting it published in this cricket-crazy country is a nightmare. That is where Kapish Mehra of Rupa Publications stepped in to guide us first-time authors. He was patient, illuminating and mentored us in the right direction. In Amrita Mukerji we had a helpful editor. She corrected all the mistakes we made, making the book so much more readable. Our thanks also go to Vijay and Farida Mohan Raj, old friends in Hyderabad, for their never-say-die attitude and help in every way and Neelam Saran Gour, a formidable writer in her own right, who encouraged us from the beginning, sharing her experiences with us as an author.

Finally, we would like to thank Clayton Murzello of *Mid Day* for showing us the right direction from the start. Most importantly, thanks to Gopi Chand's fans, and well-wishers, including one special young lady and her family, who have requested anonymity, without whom this biography would not have seen the light of day.

## PROLOGUE

**A**s the shuttle sailed out of the court for the last time in the men's singles finals during the 2001 All England Championships at the National Indoor Arena in Birmingham, there was a stunned, pin-drop silence in the majestic stadium. But then, as the Indian ace Pullela Gopi Chand raised his fists high and looked towards heaven, thanking the Almighty for finally realising his childhood dream of winning the All England singles title – a dream, incidentally, that shuttlers all over the world cherish from the day they hold a racket – that silence slowly shattered. Applause rose to a crescendo and reverberated around the stadium, packed with Indian supporters acknowledging and embracing the tall, dark player as the new champion of the world.

While the Indian camp, led by coaches Leroy D'Sa and Ganguly Prasad, rushed to the court to envelope Gopi Chand in an embrace as joyous and delirious as it was contagious, the Chinese camp was quiet, subdued, resigned to a defeat they had never expected, least of all from an Indian player. Chief Chinese coach Li Yongbo, a former world and Olympic champion, tried to be brave when he congratulated Gopi Chand, but the look of disbelief never left his face, even when he exited the stadium after the prize presentation ceremony. The Indian had not only defeated Chinese star Chen Hong, then World Number Three and clear favourite for the title in two straight games, but had also accounted for the reigning Olympic champion Ji Xinpeng in an outrageously one-sided encounter in the pre-quarters, which he dominated and won in a mere thirty-two minutes with scores of 15-3/15-9.

Pullela Gopi Chand had, in a way, emulated the greatest living badminton player, Rudy Hartono of Indonesia, who had won eight All England titles in nine finals. Rudy, on his debut in 1968, had won the championships without dropping a single game. In 2001, the hard-hitting Indian too won the title without losing a single game. The only time he was really tested was in the semi-finals, when the then World Number One Peter Gade of Denmark extended Gopi Chand in both the games, only to lose out 14-17/15-17 in a

heart-pounding clash, which had both players stalking each other like gladiators for a full seventy-two minutes of no-holds-barred confrontation.

Gopi, as he is fondly known, had also mirrored the legendary Prakash Padukone, the only other Indian to win the All England singles title, way back in 1980. He was also only the third Indian after Prakash Nath in 1949 and Padukone in 1980 to have played in an All England final.

The well-built Gopi – who all his playing life had been a glutton for hard work and discipline – had also become, like Prakash Padukone, one of the very few world-class players to shatter the myth of Chinese supremacy and Indonesian dominance. Not only in this game but from early 1995 till March 2001, when he had defeated the likes of Dong Jiong, Li Lin Wen and Luo Yigang and Lin Dan of China. He had also vanquished 1992 Olympic champion from Indonesia Alan Budikusuma in the first round of the 1995 All England singles title, and the sensational Taufik Hidayat in the semi-finals of the Ipoh Masters in Malaysia, 1999. Another Indonesian ace, former world champion Joko Suprianto, had also found Gopi a formidable opponent.

In fact, from 1995 onwards till the historic win on 10 March 2001 at the All England, there was not a single top ten ranked player in the world who had not bitten the dust at Gopi's balletic feet. For a nation starved of real sports heroes, Pullela Gopi Chand was the one astounding ray of hope for snatching glory at world level. Indian sports lovers had followed his magical story of ups and downs over the years and had remained glued to the live coverage of his semis and finals matches at the All England. This was not just his victory, but in a way a victory for the entire country. It was a story anchored in real human drama, because most sports fans who followed his story knew that Gopi Chand's career had almost finished even before it took off. After a terrifying and freakish knee-shattering injury suffered in the Pune National Games of January 1994, everyone had written off the twenty-year-old who had just made it to the national team.

The subsequent surgery and seven months' rehab, which saw him slowly limping into a walk aided by crutches, had his friends and family in tears. There seemed to be no hope and no future for this once ferocious and aggressive shuttler, for whom badminton was the only reason worth living for. All those dreams of donning the India colours and holding the All England trophy had been shattered by that one clash against Markose Bristow and P. Jessel Ismail of Kerala in the finals of the men's doubles at the National Games with his partner Vijay Raghvan.

Would the sacrifices of his entire family, especially of his mother, who used to walk four to five kilometres in the burning summer Hyderabad sun, just to save ₹ 1 bus fare, to buy a shuttle for him to play with, a mother who had given up socialising and not watched a movie in thirteen years so that the money saved could again be spent on his kit or on better food for him, be in vain? Or those of his younger sister Hima Bindu, who was denied the beautiful clothes that she wanted, or his father P. Subhash Chandra Bose, who would make do with just four shirts a year, so that the money could be used to fulfil the never-ending demands of the game? Would Gopi never play again, as everyone, including his near and dear ones, feared?

The only person who was optimistic throughout these dark days, apart from Gopi, was the doctor who had performed the surgery on him. Dr Ashok Rajgopal was confident that Gopi would play again one day. The only hitch was, when would that day come? Throughout this turmoil, Gopi fought the demons of negativity and pessimism through his sheer self-belief and courage.

As he was to say later,

I had nothing else to live for. Badminton was the only thing I knew. The only thing that brought me joy and the only thing that I was good at. I knew that I had the guts in me to go for glory and beyond. Though the international titles and acclaims were still too distant, my immediate goal was to win the National singles title. And I was not going to have this injury, this surgery and this lay-off keep me away from achieving my dream. I knew I was going to play again and be the champion I was destined to be.

Gopi's story is a tale of raw courage and fortitude, of deep determination and the will to fight against all odds. A story that will inspire generations of Indians to come. A classic story of a boy and a family which struggled to make ends meet but then went on to conquer the world. The story of a family which ensured that in spite of huge sacrifices, they never lost sight of their goal. The story of a boy from a humble background who never hesitated for even a second when he gave away his entire prize money from National title victories to Gujarat earthquake victims or to the Kargil martyrs' fund, even though that money would have gone a long way in alleviating some of the suffering his family had gone through.

This, then, is Gopi's story.

# 1

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## EYE OPENERS



**T**he first rays of the sun illuminated the small, sleepy and dusty town of Chirala at 5 a.m. This town that would buzz with life two hours later appeared barren at this time. The town square, street shopping arcade, *subzi mandi*, the well beyond the fields, the post office, all remained abandoned and lifeless. Yet, while the rest of the town was asleep, one family was anxiously awake. Alert, and praying for the well-being of their daughter, who happened to be in room no. 7 of the government hospital.

Eighteen-year-old Subbaravamma lay exhausted on the hospital bed. The sunrise across the window shone on her tired face. The perspiration marks on the pink hospital gown made her four-feet-something frame appear even thinner than it was. Worn out, she just wanted to sleep, yet a wide smile lit her eager visage. With her nervous husband, P. Subhash Chandra Bose, who had supported her in every way since the past three years, nearby, Subbaravamma experienced this heart-wrenching bliss for the second time in her life. The first moment had come when she had given birth to her elder son – Raja Shekhar. This time, the green cot beside her bed was occupied by yet another small entrant into the family, wailing away to glory. God's serene creation wrapped in a plain white cloth, opening his big, curious eyes to the gigantic world out there. This happy family scene on 16 November 1973 went down in the record books as the birthday of Subhash Chandra and Subbaravamma's second son, Pullela Gopi Chand.

According to the age-old tradition in that part of India, the birth of a child was considered to be auspicious if it took place at the mother's pre-marital

home. Hence, the birth of Gopi and his elder brother took place in Chirala, from where the maternal side of the family hailed. Also, since Gopi's father, who was a field officer with the Indian Overseas Bank, had lost his parents very early, Gopi's infancy and early upbringing centred around his maternal grandparents, with his nanaji playing the lead role in nurturing the child. This time around, Nanaji, who was a post-master at the local post office, left no stone unturned to celebrate the birth of his second grandson – the blue-eyed boy of the family. The house was cleaned and sanitised, and decorated with palm leaves and diyas in all the corners. The living room was occupied by a pandal of gods and goddesses with a *yagna* in the centre. The family sat around the holy fire as the local pandit chanted mantras during the naming ceremony. The wide-eyed infant Gopi Chand quietly looked on from his mother's arms. His wide eyes moved left to right as his gaze caught that of his sweet, short and grey-haired nanaji, his father and his mischievous yet studious elder brother.

Right from infancy, Gopi was fascinated by the things around him and would happily entertain himself. This was quite a peculiar sight, for most families are used to the constant wailing of troublesome toddlers. As his mother recalls, 'He was quiet most of the time, and hardly ever created problems for us by crying too much.' At that time, everyone thought that this curious and eager child would grow up to be quiet and studious. But as they say, God has His unique ways and no one can guess what goes on in His mind.

Contrary to the beliefs of his family, the reticent Gopi grew up to be quite mischevious. When Gopi Chand was barely two years old, his father was transferred to Rayagada, Orissa, as the agricultural officer in his bank. Till date, Gopi remembers the small brick house with a garden which he then called home. To make sure that Subbaravamma got some rest from the kids in the afternoons, Gopi was enrolled in a local Christian Missionary school named St. Joseph's. More than studies, what fascinated Gopi was the huge playing ground in the centre, with the pale yellow school buildings surrounding it on all sides. Since Raja Shekhar was in lower KG, the class for the youngest students, Gopi too went to the same. Mischevious as Gopi was, he was to be seen outdoors on the playing ground more than in the classroom. Even when in class, he would spend his time taking chocolates from his teacher's pocket. Recalls Subbaravamma,

To keep Gopi quiet and interested in the class, some teachers used to bring chocolates, which they used to keep in their pockets to give to him from time to time. Gopi thought that taking the chocolates was his right, but Raja Shekhar, too, wanted the same. But while Gopi got away with putting his hand in the teacher's pocket and taking the chocolates as he was the youngest boy in school, Raja Shekhar, who tried to do the same, was punished. Gopi fleetingly remembers his brother being made to stand in the sun, as punishment for taking chocolates – punished for a crime that Gopi used to commit. It was funny in a way, because once Gopi realised that Raja would be put to task if he tried to get the chocolates, Gopi would goad him to do so, especially because he wanted him to be punished – sibling rivalry at its best!

Raja would retaliate by trying to drench him with water and Holi colours, something that Gopi was afraid of. Orissa has a tradition of enjoying Holi to the fullest with a riot of colours, *pichkaris* and balloons, whereas in Andhra Pradesh, where Gopi came from, the tradition of playing with colours was not prevalent. So when all the boys and girls would come to drench Gopi in Holi colours, Raja would also join the gang. Gopi would be terrified of the whole atmosphere and would lock himself up in the house to ensure that no one drenched him. This was probably the first time when he understood what fear was! Fear that soon translated into disappointment.

The memories of Rayagada remain firmly etched in the usually forgetful Gopi's mind to this day. But not because of the huge ground or the red-brick house or the terrifying Holi. At the tender age of two, Gopi learnt what distress was, how it felt to be called a failure. Though he knew that all work and no play would make him a dull boy, now was the time to learn that all play and no work would also make him a loser. He still remembers the day the teacher announced that he had failed his lower KG exams, whereas his elder brother had topped the class. Although he was too young to comprehend what was going on around him, the disappointment showed on his parents' faces, and he understood that he had let them down. From then on, losing was never an option for Gopi. Even when it came to studies, he made sure that he would pass, even if just on the borderline. But it was for his parents to realise that as life would move on, Raja would be the one to bear the responsibility of being the top ranker in the family. Gopi, on the other hand, was a happy-go-lucky, naughty kid, who just about passed his exams,



and was happier outdoors.

This was Gopi, at the age of three, an adventurous boy who would play all kinds of games, sometimes seven stones, sometimes *gilli danda*. One day he would run as fast as he could across the massive fields and other days, he would climb up and down the gigantic trees. At times, this kid, who was still trying to find his feet in the world, would happily play cricket all day long. He loved all sports, but hated to lose in any match or game. A carefree attitude and idyllic lifestyle during his early upbringing deeply embedded the sporting spirit in him. His competitiveness and ability to play long hours in the sun caught his parents' eye.

The family saw in him what other onlookers didn't – his passion for sports! While everybody thought Gopi to be troublesome, his father always believed in him. He used to say that the boy was a born winner, who would achieve huge success in whatever he does and bring the family name and fame. Maybe Subhash realised that his younger son was a mad sports enthusiast and would go all out when it came to sports. Says the soft-spoken and mild-mannered dad, 'It was just a feeling which I got from the way he behaved whenever he played any sport as a child. He never ever wanted to lose and was very patient on any playing field. I also felt that he was naturally gifted and that one day he will be a champion in whatever discipline he chose.' After observing Gopi from close quarters, his father realised that he would one day excel in the sports arena.

The same realisation dawned upon Gopi himself, when it was time for the family to move to the big city of Chennai after he celebrated his third birthday. He joined the Jawahar Vidyalaya in kindergarten, then the KK Nagar Public School in class one, and stayed in this school for three years.

Gopi recalls that in Chennai, for the first time, he realised that he was good at sports and that any sport came naturally to him. In Orissa, he was just a precocious three-year-old, doing things that came naturally to him, running around and being outdoors as much as possible. But in Chennai, he realised that the hand-eye and leg-eye coordination, so very important in contact sports, seemed to be really primed in him. Perhaps this was the time when his father too realised Gopi's potential.

In Chennai, when he started going to school, his mother's discipline ensured that some part of the day had to be kept aside to study. But still, he kept up his association with sports and games, although he was too young to comprehend what being a professional sportsperson meant. As far as Gopi

was concerned, it was still fun and games.

‘I had to keep him interested in studies too, as this was important, but all Gopi wanted the moment he came back from school was to throw his bag aside, grab something to eat and rush out for games with his *mohalla* friends, who meant the world to him,’ says Subbaravamma. At that time, it was cricket that really interested him, along with some football and volleyball. But when the neighbourhood friends and his gang got bored of cricket, they quickly moved on to another sport.

Gopi was really fortunate that there were two grounds very close to where the family resided. Perfect places to burn the high energy levels he and his friends had. ‘Gopi was always moving on from one game to another. In between, he would rush into the house only if he got hurt or was hungry, otherwise once he dumped his bag after coming back from school, it was only in either of the grounds that you could find him,’ said Subbaravamma. In fact, according to Gopi, going home in the evening was not voluntary. His mother had to come out and shout at the brothers to get back.

Gopi, again to his chagrin, used to be the youngest boy out on the field, and most of the time, the others would use him for fielding or just running after the ball. Some of the boys were almost eight-nine years old while Gopi was around five. So, while Raja was a comfort to have around, Gopi would many times find himself isolated as the elder brother also caved in due to peer pressure.

That meant that the mother, looking out from the balcony, had to shout at the boys to allow Gopi to bat and bowl. The local boys were too terrified of ‘Aunty’ to oppose her. So sometimes, Gopi was allowed to bat. Subbaravamma also threatened that unless Gopi was given equal participation, she would not allow either of her kids to join in the games. In that sense, Subbaravamma, though she remained in the background, always stood by Gopi through thick and thin, and even through all the troubles and turmoil that Gopi faced in his career later on.

Another aspect of being the youngest and the most mischievous was his injuries, a trait seen till the very end of his playing career. Early on, the injuries happened because in his enthusiasm to stop the cricket ball, Gopi would be diving and falling all over the place.

Gopi recalls one freakish injury that he brought upon himself by just trying to show off in front of his gang of local cricketers.

I used to bet that I could cross the road in front of one of the grounds with my eyes closed. I still have a mark above my right eye when I collided with a bicycle. I got injured just once, but I must have won that bet at least twenty times. I got, I remember, one toffee every time I crossed without stopping. But this injury meant five stitches, and had it been two millimetres below, the break handle of the cycle would have poked my eye. I remember the huge commotion that ensued after my mother came to know what I had been up to.

Subbaravamma recalls Gopi's friends rushing to her shouting, 'Gopiamma, Gopiamma, Gopi is seriously injured, lying on the road.'

I rushed down, thinking something major may have happened. But looking at him, I realised it was not so serious, but Gopi, instead of being upset at being caught for doing something stupid, actually wanted to take the rider to the police station. He was around five years old at that time. While the person with whom he had collided was a teacher and wanted to take Gopi to the local doctor, which I also thought was the correct thing to do, Gopi kept on shouting to go to the police. Somehow, he quietened down and the situation was diffused. And as soon as we came back after the stitches, he was ready to play cricket.

Gopi, by that time, had so many cuts and bruises on his small frame that the pain from the stitches was soon forgotten and remained just an irritant for a couple of days.

In Chennai, Gopi passed his classes without much fuss. Since Raja was usually among the top four students of the class, Gopi's father did not put any pressure on Gopi to bury his head in books. Studying just enough to pass the subjects was accepted as far as he was concerned. So he played and ran around the whole day. In a way, the time he spent in Chennai really made him strong physically. He remained fit and built up his stamina without realising it. The spate of injuries, though minor in nature, ensured he became immune to pain in a way, and when he started playing badminton seriously, little niggles and sprains here and there were studiously ignored. Chennai, however, never saw him play badminton, except for the outdoor-garden variety which almost every kid indulges in at some point.

The other thing that contributed to his long-term growth was the discipline his mother maintained in the house. Whatever happened throughout the day,

she strictly kept 9 p.m. as bedtime and 5.30 a.m. as the time to wake up. This was non-negotiable, and no exceptions were made. Even today, Subbaravamma says proudly that Gopi maintains this habit, which is why he is present in his academy at 6 a.m. every morning, personally overseeing his students' morning training schedules. This is also one major reason why his students are physically fit and are winning national titles in all age group events.

'It was never instilled in us as a way of discipline by my parents. Actually, by the time we came home, we were so tired that all we wanted was to eat dinner and sleep. This became a habit, which helped me all the time. So I would say that my mother started doing things which helped us without our realising that there was a method behind her actions,' says Gopi today.

In a way, all the sports and games he played, the great mix he indulged in, in Chennai, and later on when he moved back to Ongole in Andhra, ensured that all necessary sports movements, motions, reflexes and body coordinations were slowly ingrained in him, becoming a natural part of him. Simple things such as chasing the cricket ball on the ground or in the air not only built up his speed and stamina, but taught him how to cope with the speed of a moving object, a quality which helped him contact the flying shuttle later. Hitting the seven stones (*pithu*) or aiming stones at a particular object far away in toffee bets ensured that his right shoulder, the throwing arm, became strong and helped his aim and accuracy, which developed those lethal and highly accurate smashes he became world-famous for. Football and the *gilli-danda* type of sports helped his reflexes and balance of body, again something to his advantage when he became a professional shuttler.

In fact, as we will see later in this book, Gopi today feels that the last three most crucial points he won in the All England semi-finals against Peter Gade by playing some trick shots were directly related to what he had learnt on the two *maidans* of Chennai.

You always had to improvise, to think on your feet – in a way to be a daredevil in many ways, as we went around playing most games barefoot. You learnt to take chances. I came back on court just some twenty-five days after my last surgery, and could bear pain many times while playing serious matches – these risk-taking abilities came because of all these games I indulged in early [in my life]. Today I think that because these games were not structured, in the sense that there were no coaches to tell us

what to do and how to go about playing, helped me a lot, as I developed what I call the ‘onfield intelligence’ which later translated to on-court instant intelligence. It helped me, both physically and mentally.

The sojourn to Chennai will not be complete without mentioning one more angle – Rajnikanth. Gopi was almost fluent in Tamil, and though the family hardly ever saw movies, he had seen a movie called *Billa* featuring the stylish movie icon Rajnikanth, who had taken South India, especially Tamil Nadu, by storm. So impressed and taken in by the Rajni aura was young Gopi that he impersonated the star to a tee, right down to his on-screen mannerisms, like throwing toffees/chocolates in the air and catching them (as Rajni did with cigarettes) or copying Rajni’s clothes. ‘I used to be really enamoured by Rajnikanth’s screen image. At that age, I felt what he did on screen was true and used to be his huge fan. We obviously had no entertainment at that time. Only *Chitrahaar* was shown on the old black-and-white TV. We did not have a TV but couple of neighbours did, and as soon as a Rajni song came on I used to be called in to watch, and later on I would entertain everyone around with my Rajni impersonations.’ His mother recalls that during that time – a phase which lasted for a year or so – eating, drinking and even walking was done Rajni style, as far as Gopi was concerned. Gopi also only talked in Tamil.

Gopi was also extremely enamoured by Prasad uncle’s moustache. ‘Muchad uncle’ or Mr Prasad, who had welcomed the family at the train station when they landed in Chennai, was a neighbour. Gopi was promised by his parents that he would also be able to grow a moustache like Prasad if he slept in a separate bed, not between his parents. So each night, Gopi’s bed was religiously made away from the parents’ twin bed, but after two hours or so, he, like any other child of his age, would creep right back in to sleep between the parents.

Prasad was like a family member when Subhash and family were in Chennai, and used to visit the family every evening. He was especially close to Subbaravamma and treated her like a sister. He was, therefore, called Prasad *mama* (maternal uncle) by the kids. Recalls Prasad,

The father of the family, Subhash, was a very upright and honest bank officer. From the beginning, I could see that while Raja was meant to be the studious one, Gopi was given all sorts of liberties to carry on playing. My nephews were in the same class in the same school where I had helped

Raja and Gopi enrol. I used to call Raja the ‘professor’ since he was so brilliant and hardworking in studies. If the Maths teacher gave him one problem to solve as homework, he would insist on at least four sums to take home. Gopi was the opposite, he simply did not want be near any books.

Gopi, in fact, once asked Prasad *mama*, ‘Who invented this education and studies? Why do we have to waste so many hours in school when we can be out playing games?’

Gopi used to be a sight after school. Prasad recalls how every evening, when he would drop in to enquire about the ‘casualty of the day’, without fail, Gopi would come back with a bleeding nose and one more new bruise, either on his knees, ankle or elbows. Somehow, he would also graze his cheeks, and the family often wondered how Gopi could get hurt every day. But that was Gopi, the ‘Mr Casualty’ of the family as Prasad had nicknamed him.

Prasad is amazed till today at how Subhash always banked on a child between the ages of four and seven to bring name, fame and wealth to the family. It was really uncanny, but somehow, the prophecy came true. The burly neighbour asked Subhash many times, last time being as recently as when Gopi won the Dronacharya Award in 2009 for excellence in coaching, why the father felt Gopi was the one who would uplift the family status. Every time Subhash said, ‘I do not know. It was just my feeling that the second child will be the one to make us famous worldwide.’ The father had immense faith that the second son would always look after the parents in every way, even though Raja was way ahead in academics.

Prasad insists that right from that early age, Gopi showed a lot of guts. He was not inhibited by anything on the playing field, being game for everything as far as sports was concerned. For Gopi, time on the ground was a far better option than going anywhere near his books. Raja was different in this respect. He was shy while Gopi was full of energy and curiosity to try anything not related to studies.

Prasad also talks about two other traits that we see in Gopi time and again. He would listen to everyone but do things his own way. That was the rebel in him. Once he decided that a particular task or a problem was to be solved in a particular manner, he would only do it that way, although he would take inputs from others.

The other thing was what Prasad calls pampering by the mother, but in a positive way. Gopi was very close to his mother. She would scold him and discipline him but never in any harsh manner. Gopi instinctively knew when enough was enough. His mother gave him latitude and freedom in many things, but once she raised her voice, Gopi knew it was time to get back home, or do his studies or whatever she told him. This relationship with his mother has been seen throughout his life. She was the one who knit the family together and decided what sacrifices were to be made collectively, and for which child.

Gopi's love for Tamil continued for quite some time, and even though his mother tongue was Telugu, he was not comfortable with it for long. In fact, when he went back to Andhra, Telugu was compulsory in his school, and he had a hard time learning the language.

Gopi's father was transferred back to Ongole in Andhra by the time Gopi had passed class three and his schooling for the next three years continued at Ongole.

Gopi's reluctance to study continued at Ongole too, and a few times, he was punished severely when he failed to do the homework given by the school teachers. Gopi was almost seven-and-a-half years old when he joined the new school. He was reluctant to allow his mother to come to school with him. Subbaravamma, a petite woman, looked very young, and was only twenty-five at the time. Gopi would see all the other mothers coming to school, who looked a lot older. He introduced his mother as his sister and actually asked her not to come to his school, as this embarrassed him no end.

Subbaravamma also recalls that Gopi was very fond of sweets, and anyone bringing sweets to their home would be his best friend till the sweets lasted. But then he used up so much energy throughout the day that even a kilogramme of sweets was not enough to restore all the calories that he lost running around.

Gopi, recalling those fun days at Chennai, says: 'I remember that mother used to keep our school bags full and ready all the time, but the moment we came home, the bag was thrown on the nearest cot, a bite of food was grabbed and off we were to the playing fields.'

The boys were called in as it got dark and then it was time to go to bed. 'They were in bed by 9 p.m. mostly. That was the discipline I learnt from my father. Up at about 5.30 in the morning. This habit still continues today as far as our house is concerned. Gopi is always awake by 5.30, come what may,'

says the proud mother. For Gopi, this was just the way it was. He never thought of it as a disciplined way of life – this was the way he was taught to live. In any case, the boys used to exhaust themselves during the day, so by 9 p.m., they were ready to sleep.

If Gopi had to study, he was woken up at 4 a.m. There was no other way, says his father Subhash. ‘Though I did not put much pressure on him, he still had to do some homework. In the evenings, it was impossible. So early in the morning was the only way out.’

During exam time, the future champion had to study. But while Raja accomplished a lot in two hours of studying, getting close to ninety per cent marks, Gopi was happy with seventy per cent, with the same amount of effort. Gopi used to tell his mother, ‘Amma, I cannot get ninety-five per cent and Raja will never get seventy per cent. So don’t force me to be different. Whatever I do, I will not get more than what I am getting now.’

Gopi was good at English, Social Studies, Hindi and Biology. He was not comfortable with Telugu and Physics, and Maths was brutal as far as he was concerned. But Gopi also feels that since he got so involved in sports from class six onwards, he was unable to pay enough attention to studies. He could not pick up the basics in Maths and Physics, as he could focus on his studies only for that one hour in the morning. He even had to go for tuitions sometimes, but here too, the aim was to ensure that he passed that class. Once he finished his graduation, he never thought of studying further. That was it as far as he was concerned. However, later on in life, Gopi did get deeply interested in reading about spirituality and topics like yoga. But we will come to that later.

Subbaravamma also threw light on another aspect of Gopi’s in Chennai. Gopi used to sleepwalk. She recalls,

Gopi was very keen that he grow a moustache but did not want to sleep alone. But someone told him that to grow one, he should not sleep with the parents. So every night we asked him to sleep in the next room, telling him that he will grow a moustache the next day. But within two hours, he would walk right back to us without realising it. We started tying him to the bed; still this did not work. My parents used to be afraid that something may happen to him as in their house, too, he would walk to the next room in the middle of the night. And of course, we had to go through the ritual of telling him that one more night of sleeping alone will surely make him



grow a moustache. He used to behave like this from the age of three to when he was almost seven years old.

Thankfully, all this stopped by the time the family reached Ongole. This was also the first place where Gopi started taking some interest in badminton – though this was more of a reward for having completed a given duration of his studies.

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### BADMINTON IN HIS BLOOD



Browsing through the Internet, one can see how the game of badminton has evolved. Like all other racket sports, badminton too has a long history. A museum in London had drawings almost 2,000 years old, showing Chinese peasants playing with a shuttle-like object, but hitting it with their feet. There were many other badminton memorabilia at this museum, but unfortunately it got bombed during the Second World War. It will suffice to note here that badminton got its name from the Badminton House in Gloucestershire, England, the home of the Duke of Beaufort, where the sport was first played around the year 1873. The first booklet on badminton, called *Badminton Battledore – A New Game* by Isaac Spratt was published in 1860, but unfortunately no copy has survived.

A predecessor to badminton was a game called *poona*, invented in Poona, India, by British army officers of the East India Company. It is interesting that during the British period in India, many a church hall was also converted into a badminton court and sometimes, since the doors used to open inwards, the lines drawn for the court resembled an hourglass shape. Many of the rules and regulations of the modern game owe their origin to the game played in Poona, or Pune, as it is now called. India, therefore, has a deep association with the sport.

Before *poona*, the sport, called *jeu de volant*, was played in European countries by the aristocracy. Even the children's game battledore and shuttlecock is similar to badminton. In this, two persons played using battledores, essentially rackets with a wooden handle and shaft carved out in

the round shape of a bat, looking like a paddle. Players had to bat the shuttlecock to each other without letting it fall to the ground.

The innocuous-looking shuttle can be a lethal missile if smashed hard. The official record of the speed of the shuttle during a smash is a fantastic 332 kmph or 92.1 metres per second. The record is held by Chinese player Fu Haifeng. But Yonex, the company which manufactures the best badminton rackets in the world, has a Guinness World Record entry of a mind-boggling 421 kmph from the Malaysian men's doubles star Tan Boong Heung, who eclipsed an earlier Guinness entry of 414 kmph by Japanese player Naoki Kawame. Both these smashes came from the new Yonex racket called ArcSaber Z-Slash. It is very clear that the shuttle can move a lot faster than a tennis ball or a squash ball, as these come to the opponent after a bounce, while in badminton the shuttle is not allowed to touch the ground.

The shuttlecock is a high-drag projectile and its shape allows it to be steady while 'flowing' in the air. Regardless of its orientation, the shuttle will fly headfirst towards the opponent and its aerodynamic behaviour has even influenced the design of a spacecraft, SpaceShipOne, allowing it to reach a maximum speed of 3.09 mach or 1054.1 metres per second, according to *The Physics Factbook*, edited by Glenn Elert.<sup>1</sup>

In badminton, the opponent can be smashing from as close as twenty feet away when the shuttle is in the middle court of the other side. This means that a player must not only have superhuman reflexes to get the shuttle on his racket, but also return it to a safer place. All this, when the shuttle is travelling towards him/her at a speed of 350 to 400 kmph, giving the player maybe a 100th of a second's time to react. The game requires extreme athleticism, concentration and animal-like reflexes at the very best of times. No wonder, it is not only the fastest game in the world, but also one that requires extreme dedication from its practitioners.

This was the sport Gopi had chosen for himself.

At the age of seven and a half years, Gopi joined another missionary school, St. Xavier's, in class four, and his good command over the English language, thanks to Chennai, stood him in good stead here. He was his English teacher's favourite. In Ongole, Gopi also started learning the Telugu alphabet. Methods of teaching were different in both places, and he found that the way Maths and Telugu were taught in Ongole was not to his liking. 'That is why I started to lose touch in couple of these subjects,' he says. Even

though the family speaks Telugu at home all the time, till today, Gopi finds it difficult to write in the language, as he had not picked it up early on in his life.

The family stayed in Ongole till he had finished half of class six, that is, for almost two and a half years. It was here that badminton became routine for him, in a way. His father used to go regularly in the evenings to play badminton at the outdoor court of the district collector's bungalow. Gopi, of course, had played a bit of the game behind their apartment in Chennai when he was about five years old. But in Ongole, the brothers used to hit the shuttle two or three times a week.

The school had a huge ground and the family lived opposite the school. It is in a way the story of Gopi's life that wherever the family stayed, even when they moved to Hyderabad from Ongole, the family lived very close to a stadium or a ground, where he took up badminton as the sport of his life. Proximity to grounds and stadiums, in fact, played a crucial role in developing his all-round athletic abilities from a very young age.

Gopi's grandfather was also building a house in Ongole around this time with a bank loan, and his mother was busy with its construction throughout the day. Raja was eight years old while Gopi was about seven, and since the family did not have any servants, it was obvious that all hands of the family would be needed to help in the construction. Gopi, however, used to bring lunch prepared by the grandmother for the other family members on the site and after that, would want to simply rush away. But the grandfather, cunning enough to know what was in his mind, would catch hold of his hand and make him pour water over the cement to cure. Gopi laughs about that phase in his childhood, 'It was fun in a way, but then how many seven-year-olds will be helping in the construction of their family home? Lifting stones, pouring water, clearing sand.... My grandfather knew that I wanted to run away, but escape was not easy and for many days every month, both Raja and I would be working at least for an hour daily on the site.'

Accompanying their father to the collector's bungalow was something they both looked forward to. They would get a chance to hit the shuttle before the elders started their games, and again after the elders' session was over and they were changing their clothes or resting. Gopi's fondness for badminton started at this time. The more shuttle he hit, the more he wanted to hit. The brothers started to tie a net outside their home in Ongole, switch on a light, and play from 4.30 to 5 a.m. before daybreak. Now it is not easy to play

badminton outdoors as the light shuttle, with a weight of just around five ounces, can easily lose its trajectory to the lightest of breezes. It will change its course at the lightest indication of prevailing wind. And since the shuttle has to be contacted in the air, like a volley in tennis, the smallest change in its trajectory means that one's timing of contacting has to be perfected. One has to follow its flight like a hawk and be ready to instantly change the way one hits it, as it can suddenly lose speed, or gain, or befuddle by changing its direction to left or right before one realises what is happening. It requires enormous amounts of focus and concentration. But yes, once you are good at outdoor badminton, playing indoors comes easily, as your confidence level is raised sky high.

Since young Gopi played outdoor badminton from the age of three to almost the age of nine, before the family finally landed in Hyderabad, the one thing that again became a natural part of his enormous repertoire of abilities in the game, was the perfect timing of contacting the shuttle. This was mostly manifested in the way he countered the dribbling shots on the net or in his ability to smash the shuttle from the most awkward angles.

His natural affinity to badminton was also due to the fact that he was genetically inclined towards the game. There was a major connection to badminton within the family. While father Subhash was fond of the game, it was Gopi's maternal aunt, Subbaravamma's younger sister Manchala, who was the star in the family, having represented Andhra at the 1973 Nationals in Patiala, where she lost to the then national badminton queen Ami Ghia. This was the year Gopi was born. Gopi feels that of all the sports he played as a youngster, badminton was perhaps the closest to his heart since it was played by many family members, including his mother, father and aunt. Secondly, it was easy to play at any time of the day, as all you needed was open space, a net, and some light during nighttime.

We all wanted to emulate Aunt Manchala and play for Andhra as soon as possible. I remember this talk at dinnertime when I was in Ongole. And yes, everyday, if I finished the quantum of studies given to me, the reward was to go with my father to the collector's bungalow for what at that time for us was some serious badminton, as they actually played games. Winning, I learnt, was really important – otherwise what was the use of playing games and counting scores? I used to keep a tally of the games my father won or lost.

In fact, Subbaravamma says that everyday the reward had to be earned, and once Gopi started liking the game enough to play it daily, he would see to it that he studied enough to get that chance to go play badminton with his father. Jokes Gopi, 'Even up to my BA exams, if I wanted to play, my father would allow it only if I finished one hour of studies during the day. This was his way of ensuring that at least, I did not fail the class. And mind you, that solitary hour of studies was enough for me to pass. The passing percentage was not that important. Passing was.'

For his father, taking Gopi to the bungalow to play badminton was important. He could sense that the younger son had something special in him. Not that Raja did not show any promise, but it was Gopi who really excited him in the way he played.

I had some idea of the game. My sister-in-law had played at the national level and was very good, and I had seen some good standard of the game by the time Gopi started playing. I gave him lots of latitude as far as studies and discipline were concerned, as I realised in Ongole that he had something special in him which would take him far. Gopi had become one tough kid, had lots of stamina and natural strength. Most importantly, he had developed a very good temperament. In whichever game he played, I could see that he never wanted to lose. For him winning, whether it was in cricket or volleyball or football or any other sport, was becoming the sole purpose of playing. This meant that he would always work hard to excel in whichever game he was going to pick up later in life. At the collector's bungalow, I could see that he was very observant and tried to emulate any good stroke played by players in our group. This showed that Gopi was willing to learn all the time. To me, these were qualities which could take him far.

By November 1983, Subhash Bose had been transferred to Hyderabad. Gopi was ten years old. Since Gopi had left Ongole while he was in the sixth standard, he joined St. Anthony's school in Hyderabad in the same standard. Both brothers had taken the entrance exam for St. Paul's, which was the best school in the vicinity, but while Raja got through, Gopi could not. Raja joined the seventh standard and had to take his board exams the very same year, as was the prevailing practice in Hyderabad at that time.

This move to Hyderabad was the real catalyst that transformed young Gopi's life in a significant way. Till this time, he had not met any coach in

his life, and all games – including badminton – that he had played, were mastered through a self-learning process. A professional life in sports had not occurred to him or to his parents. This realisation was to come in Hyderabad as Gopi slowly progressed in the sport and started winning state-level championships within two years.

As Gopi himself puts it,

We lived just two furlongs away from the Lal Bahadur Shastri Stadium (also called the Fateh Maidan Club locally). This helped us immensely. But mind you, before we entered the stadium for badminton, I had already joined the local gully boys in cricket and had already become notorious for breaking windows here and there. So there were some major complaints from our new neighbours to my parents. And I also had problems playing in the sun as I had started getting sunstrokes often, mostly during summers. Mother then got fed up and one day took us to the stadium where first we wanted to play tennis on the clay courts. But my parents saw so many cars and scooters around the tennis courts and we did not have anything, no vehicle in our house. My father, especially, did not want us boys to have any inferiority complex or feelings while playing tennis. He said, ‘Let’s join badminton as this is more of a lower-middle-class sport and we will know someone there.’

Subbaravamma says that the parents were afraid the boys may get carried away and ask for something that they could not afford. ‘There were hardly any savings for us as we had three children (Gopi, Raja and sister Hima Bindu) in the house who had to study, and my husband was the only earning member. We wanted good education, good food and good upbringing for our three kids, but we just did not have anything extra for any sort of extravaganza. We parents thought, why allow the boys to be in an atmosphere where they may not be happy?’ So badminton it was, and what a choice this proved to be!

She marched the boys into the indoor stadium, next to the tennis courts at Fateh Maidan. She emphasised that when they came to Hyderabad, her husband had just about a thousand rupees in his pocket. ‘We did not know that school education here would be so expensive. Three kids’ admission itself cost us some `3,000 and then books, uniforms, other things – there were many pressures on us. So between husband and wife, it was decided that badminton was better, as there would be people like us playing the game, and

also the boys had already played a bit of the game, while tennis would be totally new.'

Raja and Gopi were obviously not aware of the reasons behind these decisions. What was important for the parents was that the boys take part in some sports, and if there could be formal coaching, that would indeed be welcome. Analyses Subbaravamma:

Both of us loved sports. My husband being the captain of the *kabaddi* team in his university and my sister already being a state player in badminton was something we were all proud of. So we wanted that both boys get into some sort of structured training, utilise their time correctly and not waste away in gully cricket or just being vagabonds. Sports inculcates good discipline in you, this was always the mantra of my husband in and around the house. It was natural that we seek out a good arena for the kids to use their time in.

Gopi also has the same logic when he says,

My father saw that both Raja and I were in any case spending so much time playing all sorts of sports. So why not put us in a formal coaching scheme where the sport was structured to not only teach you the rudiments, but impart knowledge that could lead you to take up the sport seriously enough to dream of playing for your state. This was the main thinking behind us joining the Fateh Maidan badminton coaching scheme.

Not only was the indoor stadium a mere stone's throw away, but luckily for both Gopi and Subbaravamma, a neighbour's son called Vijay Sagar used to go and play at the indoor stadium. This neighbour gave her all the required information which finally helped them to make up their minds to put Raja and Gopi in the same coaching scheme.

Subhash Bose's being elected secretary of Indian Overseas Bank Officers' Association in Hyderabad at the same time meant that he would have no time to cater to the boys' badminton training. It was left to Subbaravamma to do all that what was required to ensure that they were taking keen interest in the game. But what was important was that the parents were predisposed to giving Gopi and Raja the best they could, by providing them with a healthy and sporty environment in every way.

The well built but stocky Subhash could himself have been a top-notch sportsman if he had had the means. *Kabaddi* is a very physical sport, in



which lightning speed and reflexes, strong legs and control over breath, awareness of all opponents' positioning (as attack can come from any flank) are mandatory. The mother's side of the family already had an excellent badminton player, while Subbaravamma herself had played well enough in her school and college. All these qualities were transferred genetically to the boys. Raja was twelve and Gopi a mere eleven years old when they landed at the Fateh Maidan indoor badminton stadium. Physically, they had everything going for them. They were keen, aggressive, strongly built and very eager to excel. For Gopi, this indeed was the dream life he had wanted, albeit unknowingly. He just wanted to prove to his family, especially his mother, who was to play a very important role in his life, that he could be the very best. That hunger was there, noticed by both parents so many times. It was just waiting to be tapped.

As mentioned earlier, while Raja got through St. Paul's, Gopi did not make it and had joined St. Anthony's. One day, both the boys were walking back home after badminton practice when the vice principal of St. Paul's, who was also walking by, noticed Raja and asked him who the other boy was. Raja said that he was his brother, also a badminton player, studying at St. Anthony's. The gentleman asked Raja to bring his parents the next day along with Gopi to meet him at the school.

'I went there and was asked to play badminton in their indoor court, and the vice principal instantly liked my game and told my father I could join the very next day. And we won the inter-school that very year for St. Paul's, much to the delight of the vice principal and other teachers,' remembers Gopi. This was their very first tournament and the first time the boys were in the limelight – something they really enjoyed.

At Fateh Maidan, Hamid Hussein, a tall, well built badminton coach, had already started putting Gopi through an exercise regimen that included a high amount of physical training. Hamid was a certified badminton coach, having trained at the National Institute of Sports in Patiala. A very likeable personality, and very jovial most of the time, Hamid also coached an Indian squad later on in his career, when a national team toured Iran under his guidance.

The coach instantly liked Gopi, because the youngster, unlike other boys of his age, proved to be a passionate hard worker. This paid off in the very first year, when Gopi was selected to play in the Under-12 Nationals at Delhi under the NSTC scheme in 1985. This was the National Talent Search

Contest scheme held under the tutelage of the Ministry of Sports, Government of India. Gopi came thirteenth. He had gone to Delhi ranked as State No. 2, after Azam Hussein, who, incidentally, was coach Hamid Hussein's son and was ranked No. 1 in AP, in the Under-12 age group.

In the next two years' time, Gopi had graduated to the No. 1 spot in the state team in the Under-14 category, and had played in the Carona Cup Under-14 National Championships in his home courts at Fateh Maidan in Hyderabad. In the Under-15 state rankings, Raja was the top state player while Gopi occupied the second spot. In fact, Raja was the state champion and Gopi lost to him in the finals of the Under-15 Championships in 1987. Gopi was being noticed by the senior boys as well as a strong potential candidate, even at that early stage. But all this was possible only because of the hard work put in, not only by Gopi and his brother, but by the parents as well.

Subhash used to take both boys to the stadium at 5.30 a.m. They would do some running and warm-up exercises and wait for the courts to be opened. 'The courts were opened at 6 a.m. sharp and within ten minutes, the seniors would take over. So we just had that five- to ten-minute window in which we both could get to hit some shuttles undisturbed. It was a mad scramble, but it was really worth it. Dad would leave us at 5.30 and after that we were on our own,' reminisces Gopi.

The boys were then joined by other juniors, who all waited aimlessly till the seniors finished. Subbaravamma had always told Gopi to utilise every minute at the stadium. So instead of just hanging around, he would be doing wall practice, skipping or would go off for another round of running. This was noticed by Hamid Hussein, and soon he became the coach's pet.

Says Azam Hussein of those years, 'My father became really fond of Gopi, simply because he saw in him a potential national champion. Every coach wants to be known because of the young players he coaches and my father was no exception. At home, whenever we talked about the future of Andhra badminton, Gopi's name would crop up.'

According to Azam, his father used to say, 'Just watch this boy. He is not afraid of hard work. The more I make him work, the more he enjoys it. How many kids his age are doing the amount of exercise he does? No one – they are all in a hurry to go home. Gopi is the only one who wants to stay in the stadium all the time. Mark my words, one day the country will notice him.'

Gopi and gang got to play around 7.30 a.m. or so, while the seniors rested.

This was for ten minutes or so, and then again they had to wait. School started at 8.30 a.m. and their father used to take them there at 8.15 a.m. The school got over at 3.15 p.m., after which Gopi and Raja both rushed back to the courts. 'I used to be the last in, at 8.30 in the morning, and the first to leave school in my mad rush to play badminton again. And I maintained this till the very last day of my schooling,' says Gopi with a broad smile.

Though Gopi, as per his parents' wishes, still spent that bare minimum time with his books, school for him was just a break between two playing sessions. He always wanted to run out as soon as possible, as his heart and soul resided in the three badminton courts of the Fateh Maidan Club. So there were few teachers who were his favourites, and they included the PT teacher, who was happy that Gopi was winning every conceivable championship for the school.

As Gopi himself puts it,

It used to be very funny at times. I would be punished often for being late or not doing my homework. Punishment usually was standing outside the class. And so many times while I was standing outside the class, there would be an announcement on the public address system that Gopi had won so-and-so event and the whole school would be clapping and applauding while I was still being punished. This was a very regular feature, because every time I would go for a tournament, I would be standing out as I would have come in late. And every time I would go for a tournament, I would win it.

Many of Gopi's teachers, especially of the subjects he struggled with, thought that he was just wasting time, and that badminton would get him nowhere in life. Ironically, once Gopi started winning frequently at the state level, the same teachers became his biggest fans and support system. Gopi still remembers that teachers of the subjects he was good in, such as Social Studies, Biology and English, were supportive of his passion for sports from day one. Some of them are still in touch with him. Gopi is also all praise for the then vice principal of St. Paul's, PK Joseph, who really helped him in every way.

The family, however, still did not put too much pressure on Gopi as far as studies were concerned, even when he entered senior classes nine and ten. According to Gopi, as long as he passed, he was in the comfort zone. But Raja would get into trouble if he did not top the class. Even if he stood

second in the class, there would be pressure on him to do better, but if Gopi secured seventy per cent or so, the parents were happy enough to let him concentrate on sports. More than the mother, Gopi had a strong ally and believer in his father.

Says Subbaravamma, ‘Sometimes I would be upset with Gopi as he could do better in studies. The seventy or seventy-five per cent marks he got in some subjects were without much effort. But my husband would have none of it. He would always tell me not to be upset. From the time Gopi was a mere six months old, his father would always say that this boy will be something in life – not necessarily in sports but whichever field he would choose as his career.’

Gopi’s maternal grandfather also did not show much support for a sports career early on. He also wondered why Gopi was not putting in the relevant hours in his studies, like Raja, and felt that Gopi was wasting time indulging in sports. The grandfather would often tell the parents to drill some sense into Gopi. But when he started winning junior age group tournaments, the grandfather too became a member of the Gopi fan club.

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1 Available online at: <http://hypertextbook.com/facts/>

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## FATEH MAIDAN – THE EARLY SUCCESSES



A badminton court may look small in comparison to a tennis court or even a basketball court, but chasing the shuttle all over the court requires great amounts of speed, stamina and strength. After all, you cannot let the shuttle drop; you have to hit it while it is still airborne. The game, therefore, requires extreme physical stamina. Fresh from Ongole, hardy and strong, Gopi displayed all the qualities needed to score victories in tournaments in events for his age group almost as soon as he joined the Fateh Maidan coaching scheme. His physical prowess ensured that the local Hyderabad lads were found wanting in many departments of the game. Even though his game was not polished enough, and he did not know some of the minor nuances early on, his speed and strength were enough to cow down opposition at will.

Gopi first entered what were called the Stanislaus & Montford games, which were primarily inter-school championships. Then there were exhibition society championships, the Rashid Memorial and a few Hyderabad open tournaments, where the standard, according to Gopi, was quite good. His peers were more experienced at the sport, as Andhra Pradesh has always had a good standard of play at all junior age group levels, thanks to some good coaches around, like Mohammad Arif, Nani Prasad and Hamid Hussein.

There were three main schools involved in the fight for the inter-school championships: St. Paul's, Little Flower and All Saints, with the first being represented by Raja and Gopi. Little Flower had Sreeshain and Vidyadhar

while All Saints had Azam Hussein and Mohammad Ali. The championships took place at the Fateh Maidan courts in the Lal Bahadur Shastri Stadium, which used to be packed. Gopi remembers that the matches would be played in the centre court while students of the schools, brought in busloads, crowded every nook and corner of the hall. Students from classes eight, nine and ten were allowed to come, and each and every student of St. Paul's, at least, used to be present. The atmosphere was electrifying, and Gopi feels he has never tasted that sort of applause anywhere else. When they would win the team title, the school used to announce a holiday the next day. So, much prestige was at stake.

In terms of prizes, these local events did not give much, perhaps a shawl, a playing kit, sports shoes and similar rewards, as the Badminton Association of India used to frown on giving cash as prize. But for Gopi and his ilk, prizes were not important, playing and competing were the main things. Winning was the only thought on Gopi's mind when he stepped on the courts. Of course, the icing on the cake was if his photograph appeared in the local newspaper the next morning. This was especially significant for Gopi, as it drew away the ire of his schoolteachers for missing classes and made him a hero of sorts amongst his classmates. This, says Gopi, was a huge motivation.

Subbaravamma emphasises that prizes were never in Gopi's mind when he started winning such events within six months of joining the coaching scheme. For Gopi, the thrill of playing matches in front of so many people was like a stimulant. He was a changed boy when playing. But what worried her most during those years of early successes was his demand of at least one shuttle everyday, which cost a princely sum of ₹ 6 per piece then.

The coaching scheme provided courts and some amount of guidance in physical training. But all equipment, including shuttles for the junior players, had to be provided by the parents. The trick here was to gather the old, broken shuttles of the session of the previous evening and 'try surgery' on them, so as to make them playable for a few minutes.

There was another reason for wanting new shuttles, according to Gopi's mother, 'I used to tell Gopi and Raja to somehow play with senior players like Manoj Kumar, Vijay Raghvan or Pravin Kumar (who were already recognised at the national Under-22 level and were yet to play for India).'

The boy, of course, was in awe of these senior players and could not gather the courage to ask them to play with him. His excuse to his mother was that

without a shuttle, there was no way the senior boys would even look at him. They were ‘international’ players, he used to insist, who would not bother to play with him.

‘Give me a shuttle and then I can ask them. Maybe they will oblige,’ he used to say. With some difficulty, after cutting corners here and there, Subbaravamma would get one new shuttle every two or three days. She used to continuously ask whether he had been able to play with the seniors and if so, what was the outcome. Today, she says she asks Gopi whether he played games at his academy with any of the junior players, and what was the outcome. ‘She keeps me on my toes all the time,’ says Gopi of his mother.

Of course, while playing with a new shuttle that the family bought for him, he did not attempt any smashes. He would tell his mother, ‘Am I mad to smash a six-rupee shuttle? It will break so fast and then I will be left without anything to play with.’

Under the coaching scheme, held under the direction of the Sports Authority of Andhra Pradesh(SAAP)and controlled by them, ten barrels or boxes of shuttles were given for an entire month. So one had to be in the good books of coach Hamid Hussein, please him with hard work or some victory at some tournament, to get that one extra shuttle. He used to call the juniors *chuha* (rat), and when happy he would say, ‘Come on, *chuha*, here, take this shuttle and be happy.’ Most of the times, the junior boys had to scrounge around for a shuttle good enough to practise with. In fact, this problem of not being able to afford good shuttles plagued Gopi right through his junior days, that is, till he played in the Under-19.

At Fateh Maidan, Gopi’s senior friend Gowri Nath used to play doubles, so Gopi would wait for a chance to play doubles with him and two others. That way, at least he would get a game with a decent shuttle. Even though the parents were extremely supportive, Gopi admits that there were severe financial constraints as, a line had to be drawn when expenses exceeded a given family budget.

You know, it costs a lot for a boy to play serious sports. I mean, I had to have a good diet, my racket strings broke often and it cost money to repair them, new shoes were required practically every forty-five days or so, as I used to wear them out. My mother would stick a tape around the soles of the shoes, so that the wear and tear was prevented for some time. We went out to a restaurant only twice in around six years that I played as a junior in

Hyderabad. I remember the name [of the restaurant] also – Palace Heights. In Ongole, I think I went to eat out with my parents only once. The family did not see a movie for almost fifteen years. Whatever was available in terms of finance was spent on my badminton. There were huge sacrifices made by my family. They did not have any social life, as that cost money. The one person who suffered most in all this was my sister Hima Bindu, as she never got anything. In a way, she was neglected, as whatever the family could afford was spent on our badminton. And the only mantra in the house was, if any money was saved it would not be touched but spent on my game sometime or the other.

Gopi then adds, tongue-in-cheek, ‘Nowdays, I have to go with my wife Lakshmi when she wants to see a movie. I try to avoid but then finally have to capitulate to keep her happy.’

For Subbaravamma, one memorable night was when Raja won the Under-15 State Championships and Gopi won the Under-14. Though the family normally never went out to celebrate, they decided to celebrate this in a big way, and some sixty to seventy guests were called for a party at their house. That was a grand affair, every moment enjoyed by the parents, flushed with joy at the achievements of both the sons on the same day.

So there were no movies, no outings, no restaurants, no untoward or ostentatious shopping and hardly any social life to speak of. Says Subbaravamma,

We got separated from all our friends and relatives. We couldn’t invite them home, so we did not go to meet them either. We simply got cut off – as all our time was spent with the kids, their studies and badminton. In a way, we wanted it this way, as by the twentieth of every month, our monthly budget used to be exhausted. Both Gopi and Raja were playing, and studying in a top school. I had to buy almost two [pairs of] badminton shoes every month, spend money on repairing racket strings, even buy shuttles sometimes if we could afford to be extravagant.

One reason why the sister could not be put in badminton coaching was because the family had only one bicycle, which Raja used to ride with Gopi sitting behind. There was no space for Hima Bindu. Of course, with both boys playing, there were also no resources left to ensure that she, too, got into the sport.



Sacrifices apart, both the boys were having a great time at the Fateh Maidan courts. They were doing very well in local championships and carving out a name for themselves. Subhash's prophecy was seemingly ringing true as far as Gopi was concerned. In a national camp organised by the Badminton Association of India (BAI) in 1985 for senior players, which included many of the national squad players such as the late Syed Modi, the seniors used to spar with the juniors, warming them up before they moved on to serious practice. No less a person than Leroy D'Sa, the legendary doubles genius of Indian badminton, told Gopi's father that the boy had huge potential and that the father should ensure that Gopi continued playing badminton.

For Gopi, these were times of sheer ecstasy, watching such stalwarts in action. The only topic at home used to be how these players played. This is what he dreamt to become – another Syed Modi or another Leroy D'Sa. Gopi became truly passionate about the sport after he went to Delhi for the NSTC Under-12 Nationals in 1985. Cricket, and every other game, was now forgotten. By the time he actually saw the senior players in action at the Hyderabad game, he had made up his mind. 'I knew what I wanted to be. I just wanted and dreamt of playing for India one day, to be the national champ. I had full support from my parents, who had sacrificed so much, and I knew, this is what they also wanted. When I saw Modi and others play, I knew by instinct that one day, soon, I would also play like them,' says Gopi, thinking back on those years.

Till the outing at Delhi, Gopi did not even know who the legendary Prakash Padukone was. His immediate concern then was how to defeat Azam Hussein. For him, Manoj and Pravin Kumar came closest to God. After all, they were 'international'. 'For me, that was what life was about. It ended at defeating Azam, and if I could practise with Manoj and Pravin, even for five minutes a day – well, what better thing could one ask for?'

The Doordarshan channel, at the time, showed a clip of the inauguration of the 1985 Under-12 Nationals, where Gopi featured for a fleeting second, breaking balloons. Although Subbaravamma was ecstatic at seeing Gopi on national television, and thought that this was an omen for better things to come, Gopi had a different take. 'I had come in thirteenth at that Nationals [tournament], but I saw most of the other boys and realised that with a little more hard work and practice, I could get the better of them.'

For his parents, the decision that Gopi would be the sports star of the

family came during this tournament and at the 13-16 age group State Championships held at Vijayawada in 1986, where Gopi won the Under-14 and was the runner-up in the singles, losing to brother Raja in the Under-15. By the next year, that is, by the time he was fifteen years old, Gopi had won the Under-18 state title. He was now the best badminton player in the junior age group in Andhra Pradesh.

Subbaravamma tells a story about the Junior State Championships where Gopi won the title defeating a senior player like Vijay Raghvan, showcasing his true potential for the first time.

My husband went to drop him at the Hyderabad station for the journey to Vijayawada. He met coach Hamid Hussein on the platform and asked him how was Gopi doing and how would he fare. Hamid said that he expected Gopi to reach maximum up to the second round, as he was going to face the big boys. My husband told Gopi about this as the train was leaving. And I still remember Gopi saying, ‘Don’t worry, I am going to win this title’. He was very confident and that made me very happy.

Gopi was only slightly aware at the time of the huge sacrifices being made by every member of the family just so that he could play. He was in a world of his own.

Of course, my mom thought that at least I could get a job when I turned eighteen and finished my BA. That is, if I continued playing well enough, even at the state level. I was, of course, too young to think of such things. A career in sports was not something that I thought of then. I just wanted to step onto a badminton court and play. For me, every living moment was just badminton and nothing else. I dreamt of nothing else. Just how to play better and better – that was the only thought I had every waking hour of the day. I could not think beyond badminton, as my world view was limited to it. I knew that my sister, my parents, even Raja, were sacrificing in so many ways for me. I remember my mother walking upto five kilometres in the blazing afternoon sun, just so that she could save that bus fare and buy me a shuttle or get my racket strung. The only holiday the family ever had was a trip to Kashmir in 1985 on the Bharat Darshan leave allowance my father got. No more holidays after that. There were no outings, no movies, no parties, no discos, as we could not afford them. And in a way, this was good, as I had no distractions to speak of. Sometimes, as they say,

ignorance is bliss. For me, ignorance of what the outside world was all about acted in my favour.

Gopi was getting noticed, and was also getting publicity. Every time he saw a picture of himself in the sports pages, it spurred him on more and more to excel in his chosen sport. Till the age of fifteen, for Gopi, school was just a break between training sessions, which, as the years advanced, became more and more hectic.

Gopi remembers the train trip to Delhi for the NSTC Under-12 Nationals. His mother gave him around thirty-eight rupees for the trip. Raja also got a pocket allowance and even Azam Hussein brought some money, but both Raja and Azam had exhausted the money by the time Nagpur came and had started eyeing what Gopi had. But Gopi was judicious in spending. The one thing he now remembers buying was a present for his mother and a doll worth ₹5 for Hima Bindu – a present to show his gratitude towards both the ladies in the house who were being deprived of so many things for his badminton.

Fateh Maidan, of course, was the centre of his universe till he was eighteen years old. It was the temple which gave him the knowledge he was seeking. And in coach Hamid Hussein, he found a strong, large-hearted personality whom he could look up to. Gopi calls him *dildar*. Till that time, only Fateh Maidan offered some sort of structured coaching, in the sense that someone supervised the playing sessions. Sometimes, shuttles were also provided, if Hamid was happy with him. Hamid would say, '*Chal chuha aaj tu achcha khela. Main khush hoon. Le, ye naya shuttle le le.*' (Come on you rat, you did well today. I am happy – here, take this new shuttle). More importantly, a group of players senior and much better than Gopi practised there, from whom Gopi could learn a lot, just by observing them. Like Manoj and Pravin Kumar, both of whom were playing for India by the time Gopi crossed eighteen years of age.

Hamid's overpowering personality ensured that all the youngsters were really scared of him. He could inculcate a sense of discipline amongst the rowdy teenagers. Even his mere presence ensured that everyone was engrossed in the game and no time was wasted. Though Hamid was not a former national player, or even someone with extensive knowledge of the game, he could at least make sure that the boys held the racket correctly, learnt the rudiments and got enough physical training to get the requisite

stamina to play well in tournaments. In India, this was the best thing that could happen at that time. There was hardly any other place where youngsters could cohabit with senior players and learn from sheer observation. The BAI was notorious for not implementing good coaching schemes. Hyderabad was one of the few places where a semblance of coaching was going on, thanks to the initiatives undertaken by SAAP.

Hamid Hussein played a big part in Gopi's life at that early stage and Gopi has very fond memories of his first coach.

I remember one thing very clearly about Hamid sir. He had gone to Iran as the national team coach where he saw these jump smashes by the Chinese players, who were not the best players in their country, but still they were fitter and faster when compared to the Indian team. So, when he came back, he put two boxes on the other side of the net, near the baseline, and told me '*Chuha*, you jump and hit, if you can do it, you will become a champion like the Chinese'. He asked everyone, but somehow only I was jumping and hitting and he was very happy. If I did hit the targets, then I got an extra shuttle to practise with. That was the bribe. If I hit three out of four targets in say, twenty smashes, there would be a Cassata ice cream for me. If he was really happy, there was a bowl of soup at lunch. This was the only coaching we had. But then, the ambience was really good. My life revolved around Fateh Maidan. It was my second home as I spent almost six to seven hours everyday there in two sessions.

On court, Gopi may not have got as much practice as he desired, but he compensated by doing sprints, stair-climbing and skipping, and at home, he remembers both himself and Raja hitting hundreds of smashes with the squash racket he had. Says Subbaravamma, 'There was not a wall in my house that was not defaced. Gopi was really mad about this smashes thing, and sometimes I did worry as to why he was doing so much. Many a time, they would not even stop to eat, and I had to feed them sambhar-rice with a spoon while both Gopi and Raja went on hitting smashes with that squash racket. And they were relentless in this, going on for hours and hours.' This wall practice came naturally to Gopi, and it was something he did a lot even when he was recuperating from his first operation in Delhi. We will come to this later on, but suffice it to say for now that there are many advantages of doing wall practice, especially with a squash racket, which is much heavier than a badminton racket. This meant that his shoulders slowly but surely

became stronger without him noticing. That is why his smashes were probably the hardest in the world and led to the famous All England victory in 2001.

Wall practice also helped improve the timing of contacting the shuttle, something of crucial importance in badminton. The shuttle would not always come back in the direction that one anticipated, as against a return from an opponent from the other side of the net. This meant that his reflexes improved constantly as he got used to the uneven bounce of the shuttle. Since his focus was on hitting as many shuttles as he could, his concentration improved, and since he was standing just five to six feet away from the wall, his speed of contacting the shuttle also improved. Constantly hitting the shuttle as hard as he could had other benefits as well. It really strengthened the forearm and wrist of the playing hand. Gopi was doing wall practice when he was just thirteen or fourteen years old. He had never ever seen any video of the Korean or Chinese style of training and therefore, did not know that a huge amount of wall practice was a staple part of their training regimen.

Says Manoj Kumar, one of the ‘international’ players from the Fateh Maidan scheme, who had watched Gopi with some interest right from the days the youngster started making waves at state level, ‘It was amazing to see that level of commitment in someone so young. While all the others would just be sitting around and waiting for their turn to play, this fellow, I remember, could not sit idle. He had to be doing something, and the one thing I remember is that he kept on hitting those old shuttles on the wall with great speed, till the shuttles were blown to smithereens.’ Manoj had realised quite early on that this was one junior who was going to challenge the seniors very soon.

Although Gopi had been granted a lot of freedom as far as studies were concerned, exams still had to be negotiated. His father had made it very clear that failing in any class would not be tolerated. For Raja, even coming second was not an option, but for Gopi, seeing an average score on his report card was more than enough. Final exams, especially in classes nine and ten, had to be faced. This meant much more time for studies and almost no badminton for a few weeks. Attendance in school was a problem, due to the many tournaments that he took part in. He, therefore, had to make up for all the classes missed as well.

But if necessity is the mother of invention, then in Gopi’s case,

improvisation was the mantra that ensured not only a fine touch with the game without going to Fateh Maidan, but coming back a stronger and more confident player once the exams were over. This technique of improvisation was what kept him ahead of all the other players.

Gopi says:

During our final exams, we did not get time to play or to go to Fateh Maidan. So what I did was simple. I used to go and run for ten minutes really hard, straight from home, and come back again in ten minutes. This was as fast as I could go. I would then study for forty minutes or so, and then again go for the same run. This went on for at least five to six hours and meant that I did at least twenty to twenty-four ten-minute runs. Next day, there would be fast skipping in the same pattern. While I was doing this, something struck me. A thought came to my mind, I don't know how or why. I thought, instead of playing strokes, I should reach the shuttle so high and fast on the net when a drop shot was coming from the other side, that I would simply give no chance to my opponent to recover and play the return. I implemented this when I started playing again after my exams and this was something I could do in the very best of matches.

Right through these periods, my studies were in between two ten-minute sessions of fast runs or skipping, or ten-minute sessions of wall practice with the squash racket. You know, you do not need much space to do all this at home. Just some six to seven feet of clear space from any wall is enough for the best sessions of wall practice or skipping. We would make a dark line on the wall to represent a net and just go on hitting the shuttle as ferociously as possible.

In fact, he wonders why today children give up sports totally months before their exams. Though he was happy with seventy per cent marks, Raja, who used to top the class, also played almost as much as him, and was always very fit and a good badminton player to boot. Gopi feels that children who do some sort of training or sports even during exams will be much better students, with better overall personality development.

The improvisations he mastered were unique in every way. They ensured that he never lost touch with the game, even when he did not enter a court for weeks, and he would come back strongly within a day or two to start playing as well, if not better, than before leaving for exams.

Even though Fateh Maidan offered some sort of structured coaching, real

coaching was almost non-existent, apart from the jump smashes which Hamid sir had imported from Iran. The kids had only one thing in mind – to play as many games as they could. There were no special drills or stroke practice, no fine-tuning, no tactics or strategies to learn and unravel. Just games, and as much as they could grab.

There was one senior player, however, who helped the kids. Zahoor Hussein, a former national junior champion, also a relative of Hamid Hussein, was a fine stroke player and a great competitor of his time. He represented Andhra Pradesh with distinction during his time at the all-India level. Zahoor took a keen interest in these boys, and every morning, he would give about fifteen minutes or so to make them understand how to play different strokes. That, according to Gopi, was very beneficial. Zahoor would stand in one place and make these boys run all over the court, scampering around to retrieve the shuttles hit by him. These drills were really tiring, as Zahoor was quite a deceptive player and no one could tell where the shuttle would land next.

If the courts were full with other senior players, Gopi would simply go out, do his runs or skip or do wall practice till he found an empty court to play his games. So apart from Zahoor's tough drills, the only things happening were games and more games. Those were happy times for Gopi. Whenever schools closed, during summer holidays, Diwali and Holi breaks, he would hang around the court till 11 a.m. or noon playing badminton. He would then go home and come back as soon as he could, to play more games and obviously for more training.

Formal training and understanding of what stroke practice was all about came much later for Gopi, almost around 1989-1990. Fateh Maidan till then was really haphazard, with the boys basically left to fend for themselves. Gopi, however, understood that in badminton, there was an amalgam of both art and science. While a mid-court return should be smashed, as the textbooks and common sense said, a player could also fool you with a disguised drop shot and get a point. He realised early in life that what mattered was quick thinking and fitness. So, even though his game was not polished enough under Hamid Hussein, Gopi was on his way to becoming a formidable player for two main reasons. One, that he stepped on the court to win and his mind was tuned to nothing else. Two, to back up this notion, he was prepared to go to any length as far as training was concerned. As he maintains, 'Any amount of running or skipping or wall practice was not going to harm you. It would

pay you back one day.'

So even though the courts opened at 5.45 a.m., he would reach the venue at 5 a.m. with his father, who accompanied him as there were lots of dogs in the vicinity and it used to be pitch dark at that time. In fact, he almost got bitten by a bunch of dogs on two occasions. Early morning training comprised sand running, stair-climbing and as many sprints as he could run. Sprinting, that is, running a fifty metres' dash or hundred meters' dash, was the staple diet for this budding champion. All this was learnt more through intuition and understanding, than conferring with senior players or coach Hamid Hussein. Gopi realised that if he was fast on the court and had enough stamina and strength, he could take on any opponent. So by the time the stadium opened, he was already warmed up with a good forty-five minutes of hard training.

The result was that he was the runner-up in the Under-12 State Championships within a year of joining Fateh Maidan, after which he went on a spree, winning the Under-14, Under-15 and Under18 Championships each and every year that he participated. As far as local and state level events were concerned, Gopi was truly unbeatable. Not only did he reign supreme in his age group, but in higher age groups too, he was extremely strong. For example, he won the Under-18 state title when he was just sixteen years old.

But for all this, Gopi was not able to make a name at the national level just then. He was fit, strong and experienced by the time he was fifteen, and was selected to represent Andhra Pradesh in the Under-18 National Championships while still a sub-junior, showing his clout as a player in his home state. But at the national level things were not that simple, as Gopi would find out, much to his chagrin.

He was also a victim of local politics, and one incident which remains etched in his mind till today is when, to his horror, he found out that in the 1990 Senior Nationals held in Hyderabad, his name as the local wild card entry was missing, even though he was the top junior. That entry was given to Azam Hussein, for reasons not difficult to fathom. The Nationals was won by Kerala southpaw George Thomas, whose namesake from England actually donated the Thomas Cup, the trophy for international badminton team championships (similar to the Davis Cup for international tennis) way back in 1951. Gopi was devastated at this step taken by the Andhra Pradesh Badminton Association and vowed that more hard work and better performance at national level would ensure that he did not suffer such ignominy again.



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## BREAKING A JINX AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL



‘I was not getting any national results at all during these years,’ reminisces Gopi. ‘I would win the state championships and would go out [to national events] and lose. For example, when I went for the Sub-Junior Nationals at Chennai, I lost in the early rounds to a player named Patnaik from Orissa. Now this state was, and is even today, not really known for its badminton prowess. When I went on the court, I was playing with heavy feet. Just could not move and my heart was beating fast. I did not know what happened at that time.’

Same was the case at the Calcutta Nationals. He won the first round. He did not know when and where the second-round match would take place, as the team manager and coach did not tell him. He got stuck at Salt Lake Stadium while the match was at Khudiram Bose Stadium. Gopi could not find transport to cover the distance and the result was that he had to give a walkover. Normally, Gopi does not display much emotion. But when it comes to losing a match or even conceding, like he did at Kolkata, there is no stopping the tears that come down in torrents.

We will see this side of Gopi many times in this story, whenever he loses a match he thought he should have won. His national teammate Manjusha Kanwar and close friend Asawari Pathwardhan have witnessed Gopi crying like a child after losing close matches many times. ‘After all, what was I going to tell my parents? How could I tell them that I had been stupid and did not do the basic homework of finding out the time and venue of my next match? Even if my team officials did not tell me, I also had some

responsibility. It was a colossal mistake. It was my future that was at stake,' rues Gopi.

Then came the Udaipur Junior Nationals in 1990, where for the first time, he got some results. He defeated the favourite for the title, Bhavin Gala of Maharashtra, but lost to Sushant Saxena of Uttar Pradesh in the quarters. Bhavin was a strong player with hard smashes and fast movements, who had earlier won the Under-14 Nationals at Hyderabad. Gopi now had something to smile about, but with no national titles under his belt, he was still miserable.

Gopi tried to analyse these defeats and came to a conclusion much later on. He realised that it was not due to lack of hard work. He had a medical problem, sinusitis, which got really aggravated in coastal regions or near sea-coasts. He used to get headaches and severe colds, and would also feel very sick whenever he went to coastal areas, due to humidity. Conditions were not very good wherever these junior age group Nationals were held. Incidentally, during those years, there were only two or three all-India level events, including the National Championships. The association was notorious in these matters. Not much has changed even now; most of the time the junior events are held in pathetic conditions.

So Gopi used to get very few chances to showcase his game and he was unable to do well, mainly due to his sinusitis. Since the Junior Nationals happened in Kolkata and Sub-Junior Nationals at Chennai, Gopi, at that time, was unaware of his medical condition. He thought that the problem lay within him. He felt tense and thought he was putting a lot of pressure on himself. At the Imphal Nationals, which was not on the coast, he played well enough to take twelve points in one game against a much more senior player, Nitin Gandhi. At the time, Gopi was still a sub-junior, that is, in the Under-15 age group, and was playing against someone from the Under-18 age group. He felt good physically and played well enough to get noticed.

These losses at the national level were not doing any good to his psyche. For a player as hardworking and as confident as him, the losses hit hard enough to pose major problems in other areas. He failed an entrance exam for engineering when he was seventeen years old, as he just could not concentrate on anything, let alone studies. This aggravated his domestic problems and consensus in the house was that if he did not do well in the coming Nationals later that year, he would have to discontinue playing and get into some engineering college in Bellary where a seat could be purchased,

and get on with life. Badminton would then remain just a dream. In fact, it was decided that if he failed in his last Junior Nationals, the family would sell some of their assets and he would be shunted out to do engineering.

Today, when he looks back, Gopi feels that the problem was not mental. He was in great shape at the local events in Hyderabad, where most of the badminton in Andhra Pradesh was centred. It was the physical aspect that was creating problems.

The travelling, the dust, the humidity were taking their toll. You know, I cannot stand a [ceiling] fan at all, and I did not know that at that time. The Junior Nationals' lodgings were obviously not luxurious. We used to stay in dormitories, sleep under fans at full blast. Every morning, I would get up with a headache and I would associate this with tension or mental pressure. I would go on the court feeling lethargic, lazy. When I was in Hyderabad, I never got these problems. It took me much later to realise the causes of the problem. I had now joined B.Com [Bachelor's in Commerce] and was given this one year to do well at national level, otherwise I was told I will be packed off to Bellary. This was my last year in juniors.

But then Gopi got really lucky. His father had been requesting state officials, especially Ahmed Hussein, elder brother of Hamid Hussein, to somehow ensure Gopi's presence in at least one national training camp. Ahmed Hussein was one of the three most important figures in the BAI, the other two being Fazil Ahmed and Sri Ram Chaddha. Fazil Ahmed was the president, while the latter held the secretary's post. Ahmed Hussein was the treasurer. These three ruled Indian badminton for at least three decades. So if Ahmed Hussein wanted Gopi's name included in the list of trainees at a national camp, it would be easily done. Thus, before playing his last Junior Nationals, Gopi got a call to attend his first national camp at Delhi, under a Chinese coach, Xiao Ming. Thanks to this camp, Gopi's badminton fortunes suddenly zoomed.

China, at that time, and even today, rules world badminton. Any coach being contracted from China had to be much better than the Indian coaches. In any case, the national coaches of that time were there merely as a formality, most of them not even being former national or international players. All they needed was a certificate from the then National Institute of Sports at Patiala to start coaching. I (Sanjay Sharma) have also attended many national camps as part of the Indian team and can certify that these

camps did not help much. Many a career was derailed and many a dream shattered at these camps, where the coaches simply did not know their jobs. That Prakash Padukone and the late Syed Modi could become world-beaters in spite of the crass system was a tribute to their exceptional talent and determined focus. Gopi was, therefore, singularly lucky that he got his first national training camp under a Chinese coach, certified by the Chinese Badminton Association.

The camp was held in 1991 and immediately after that, Gopi got a call to play in the India-Malaysia test series in Hyderabad. He defeated seasoned players such as Sushant Saxena and Srikant Bakshi, and lost in the selection matches only to Dipankar Bhattacharya and Rajeev Bagga. Gopi came in fourth in these trials, and being a junior playing in the senior national team for the very first time, this augured very well indeed. Three players were to be selected to play the singles matches, with one player to be given a wild card entry to play the fourth singles match. Gopi captured that spot as a local player. The other two test matches were to be played at Chennai and Guwahati. Officially, this was Gopi's first international match in India. He was over the moon.

Gopi won that match in Hyderabad, and this victory, at least for the time being, cemented the fact that he could have a career as a badminton player and indeed be a professional, as far as his family was concerned. This 'international exposure' was followed by his victory at the 1991 Junior Nationals. Subbaravamma then went on an overdrive, sending job applications for Gopi all over the country, and finally he joined the Tata group's firm in Jamshedpur.

'We were still not certain where this journey of mine was going, till that one victory over the Malaysian player in the test match and my triumph at the Junior Nationals. This made my parents and me realise that at least I could get a job and continue with my game. This was important to me as a huge burden was lifted from my shoulders,' adds Gopi. The job was a priority till that time, as the future was very uncertain.

Ironically, Gopi won the Junior Nationals at Goa, which again is on the coast. But he says that by that time he had an idea as to why coastal regions were not agreeing with his system. Therefore, he had worked out a remedy to defy this sinusitis problem. In the Goan climate, which is not really cold, Gopi started wearing sweaters. He did not care whether the temperature was thirty degrees or forty degrees. He had also learnt to remain secluded from

others, as he did not want to waste time doing anything outside the stadium. Once the match was over, he would immediately go back to his dorm and rest, but without switching on the fan. And he maintained this kind of focus right through this tournament. This paid rich dividends, as he walked away with the crown without losing a single game. Problem solving through self-analysis was something Gopi soon became adept at.

In Gopi's words, the first time he started doing things to suit him and his style of play was on the third court of Fateh Maidan, against a player called Srinivas Reddy.

We were playing a match of some sort and at that time obviously there was no badminton on TV, nor could we take the help of video recording for better understanding of the game. I remember thinking that though I could not be the fastest person in the world in terms of sprinting, but on court, as a badminton player, I could try to be the fastest mover. The thought came to me that if there is a drop shot from the opponent, why should I take it late and play a stroke, why not attack the shuttle so early that he has no chance of taking my return? I trained that way and actually executed this plan from that match onwards. I did not want to hear from coaches, 'Take the shuttle below the net and play some defensive shots'. That was the time when everyone talked of strokes, better footwork and good deep tosses to baseline. But no one talked of jump smashes from baseline and then fast movement to the net, to dribble or outright tap the shuttle, to either get an easy opening or even an outright point. I tried this, and I trained for this outright attacking style. People called me stupid at that time, questioned me as to how this could be done. They told me that we cannot play like Chinese or Indonesians. And always I used to think, why not? Why can't I jump smash and dribble like them?

Gopi remembers himself always training differently. Again, as he emphasises, this was not to rebel or question anyone's methods. This was what he thought suited him and his playing style better. This self-training started very early on, when he was around thirteen or fourteen years old and was doing his own version of staircase runs or sprint runs on sand, double skips or even weight training at Fateh Maidan. He adapted himself and all his training came out of his mind.

In fact, much later in his life, when he was preparing for the 2001 All England Championships, he lived the life of a hermit at the Sports Authority

of India (SAI) centre at Bangalore and did things that no normal badminton player of his standing would do. Close friend and national squad teammate Vijaydeep Singh, who won many National men's doubles titles in a glittering career, recalls the six months that he spent with Gopi at the SAI, helping him train for badminton's ultimate prize.

We both shared a room for a few days and I would see Gopi's single-minded dedication to his training and his incredible focus for the task at hand. He was deep into meditation at that time, having passed many courses of the Art of Living yoga regime. He had designed his own training methods with help of coach Ganguly Prasad. This meant lots of heavy weights combined with speed training. Many days, I saw him doing these heavy squats, and then immediately, he was on the running track doing many 400-metre runs, with a break of just a minute or so in between. Some days I would count at least forty speed runs of 100 metres. We would do lots of stroke practice. Along with me, there was a friend of his from Hyderabad called Sudhir. [Sudhir later became a Telugu film star]. Gopi would keep both of us on court for two to three hours at a stretch. And this was after doing his gym and/or track workouts.

But when he came back to the room, there would be his yoga and breathing exercises, and sometimes at the oddest of times. One day, I got the fright of my life when I saw someone in the middle of the night doing breathing exercises, standing up, making strange noises. I could not sleep for long afterwards. And he would not allow any fan to be used. He was helped immensely by the SAI Executive Director MP Ganesh in his quest to train the way he wanted. But when Ganesh suggested that he would supply a TV for the room, Gopi refused as he did not want any distractions at all. That was the day I shifted to another room, as I wanted to watch TV and sleep under a fan. I had to relax a bit after doing all that hard work with Gopi right through the day. He could stay like a hermit, but no one else could live the way he did.

Vijaydeep Singh, the men's doubles coach with the Commonwealth Games 2010 national squad, adds that even the timings of the training used to be decided by Gopi. Normally, one trains in the morning and practises in the afternoon. Gopi would switch timings at any time of the day, saying that since matches could be played any time between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m., he must adapt his body to be able to perform at peak fitness at any given time. The

one thing Gopi was clear about was that if the Chinese and the Indonesians had to be defeated, it would not be by stroke play or the touch game. He always told Vijay and Sudhir that he would beat them by sheer power and speed of movement. That is, take the battle to them, rather than trying to contain them. In Gopi's case, to paraphrase Mao's famous saying, power flowed through the strings of his racket. As he puts it now, 'I wanted to put these top Chinese, Indonesian, Malaysian and other players on their defence and outrun them on the court. In short, make them play a game they were not prepared for. I therefore had to think of my own strategies, as no coach in India had that calibre or vision to help me.'

In the quarter-finals of the Goa Junior Nationals, he defeated his close friend and Andhra teammate, Prabhakar, in the semi-finals he defeated Vikram Singh of Rajasthan; and in the finals, he hammered Anil Mohan of Delhi. One problem could have been Bhavin Gala of Maharashtra, but he lost in the semis on the other side of the draw.

Gopi's close friend Prabhakar, who lost to him in the quarters, has a great anecdote to share about this Nationals. Says Prabhakar that such was the discipline and aggression radiated by Gopi in Goa that he was a sight to behold.

It was as if he was a man possessed. I teased him before the start of the Nationals and challenged him to win the title. He told me that in any match, if any player made more than fifteen points in both games combined, he would buy me a fruit juice. Under that combined score, obviously I was to buy him one. He accepted this, and my God, what a tournament he had. Simply unbelievable. Even today, I have goosebumps when I think of those seven days in Panjim. Everyone was crushed. I was no mean player. I had won the Junior National doubles the year before, and again I had won the doubles title at Goa, but in the quarters of the singles event, he simply brushed me aside. The finals, too, was finished so fast that Gopi's sheer speed and power left everyone gasping for breath. Mind you, I lost some fourteen juices to him. Leave alone fifteen points, no one could cross ten points combined against him throughout the championships.

It was as if Gopi was signalling to the authorities of Indian badminton to take serious notice of him. He showed very clearly that he was head and shoulders above all the other players in his age group, and that he was meant for something better.

Says his senior at Hyderabad, Manoj Kumar:

The one reason why he was good as a junior was because he trained much more than others of his age. But more importantly, by the time Gopi was just past seventeen, he had already started knocking off some senior nationally ranked players. No one could take him lightly, and that included members of the senior national squad. Mentally, he was very strong, and when he took the court against senior players, he came in to prove a point. Not to cave in and simply throw in the towel. He would lose, yes, but never without a fight. For him, tomorrow was another day. Yesterday's loss was done and over. He would analyse his performance very closely. That is why his transition from junior to senior was very smooth and without any problems. That is the most crucial phase in any junior player's life. For Gopi, that phase did not exist. Because he was winning against some big names while still being a teenager, he never felt that he was moving into the 'open', or the senior events. The transition was simply automatic and without any problems whatsoever.

The one thing that helped Gopi in this national championship and also at state level was his great focus, and the fact that he used to stay aloof most of the time. No parties, no alcohol or discotheques, no going out, no wasting time during the tournaments. Subbaravamma says with pride:

Till today, I can tell you very happily that Gopi has not even tasted alcohol. Never. My husband is a strict disciplinarian and he also has never done these things. Gopi has taken after him. We kept our house like that. Do good things and keep away from all these social evils. I can tell you proudly that Gopi has led the same life for the past thirty-eight years, and my husband for the past forty-two years. There has never been any time that we lost our way or there was any breach in our discipline.

Gopi also thinks that being just one year junior to Raja helped him stay focussed. The immediately senior batch in state badminton was Raja's batch. Gopi did not develop any sort of friendship with the others and therefore, had no group of teammates, and Raja, till the Imphal Nationals, used to hang around and in a way protect Gopi from wasting away his time. Another factor was that by the time Gopi was seventeen years old, he was reaching the finals of most of the tournaments he played in. This meant he was busy planning, strategising and resting between matches. There was no time, therefore, to be



led astray by anyone. He was busy doing the things that he wanted. This obviously continued till he was about to retire from the game in 2003. So there was no time left for parties or socialising for Gopi. He liked it this way, because his focus was inbuilt, directed towards his training till the last day.

The three Junior Nationals that Gopi played were Kolkata, Udaipur and Goa. In the Imphal Nationals, he played in the Under-18 age group while he was Under-15 – or a sub-junior as the Under-15s are called in the game. Imphal was also Raja's last Nationals as he gave up the game to finish class twelve and then got selected for IIT Madras.

Prabhakar says that Gopi was already into meditation since he saw him doing some yoga at the Goa Nationals. Gopi insists that he is not very religious but is a spiritual person. 'I am not religious, in the sense that I do not like to go to temples and pray, even today. But yes, I am spiritual.' Gopi defines his spirituality as just acceptance. It is not about asking for things but accepting what is given and being thankful for what one has.

I did not seek things even as a youngster. I was happy with what I had. I did not like to hurt anyone. I love all living things and believe in truth. I did start meditation early on, but it took a serious meaning in my life much later on. When I was in Goa, meditation was simply to relax myself and focus all my energies at the task on hand. That task was to win the title. And since I was mostly keeping to myself, a habit which has been noticed by many even later on in my life, meditation became a tool for me to do something useful with the time at hand. It helped greatly.

How did Gopi react to failure before he won the Juniors title? How did the parents take in the defeats? And were there any discussions between Gopi and his parents on this subject? What spurred him on, after not doing well in three Nationals prior to Goa? Gopi feels that for sometime, things were tense for him in that brief two to three years' period. The parents simply wanted him to do well enough to get a job, or some sort of scholarship from NIS. But Gopi also says that what spurred him on was the fact that he knew he had it in him to do well against all the players he was losing to.

I could see myself winning. I knew all matches that I had lost were achievable. I realised that the gap between me and the opponents who defeated me was not much. I knew how close I was, and also that once I had a clearer picture of things I needed to do, I was like a maniac. I would

go to the stadium at least half an hour ahead of anyone else. I would be constantly in fear of the guy I was going to play. I would train and warm up much in advance. I was constantly in fear that perhaps my opponent was training more than me, or maybe he was doing something extra and much more different from what I was doing. If I had lost to a player in some tournament, I would spy on his training to see what more he was doing. In a way, I was paranoid. And if I saw him doing something different I had to try out that routine immediately. I would not wait for next morning to try it out. I just wanted to be ahead of everyone else.

Even during those dark days, Gopi did not feel depressed. It did not occur to him to leave badminton or do something rash, even though he was emotionally involved with the game. He rightly says that he did not have anything else to do. Badminton was his life. He simply lived for the day, rather than the future. He was thinking only of now, of today and not really planning or visualising what was to happen months or even weeks down the line. The parents accepted what he was and let him be. Yes, they were concerned, but discussions with him were limited to what should be done as far as the game was concerned, rather than having negative thoughts. The good thing about them, feels Gopi, was the fact that even if they did have some apprehensions about his future in that period, they kept it to themselves. This encouraged Gopi to keep on living his dream.

As a buildup to the Goa Nationals, Gopi also got immense help from another area. Mohammad Arif, a former Andhra state player and a trained certified coach from the then NIS, was transferred to Hyderabad. Arif was to play a major role in Gopi's life. A brilliant coach and a sharp reader of the game, Arif bhai, as he was affectionately called by all and sundry, was a soft-spoken genius who was not much used by the officials, as the powers that be did not want anyone to steal their thunder. Not that the officials were doing anything good, but their motto was simple: why create a centre where excellence could be pursued? They wanted yes men, sycophants, not men of purpose. Arif preferred staying in hibernation to bowing down before the officials, although he would bow down to the game and even to players if he saw any potential in them.

Arif, now retired from service, but still coaching at a ripe old age at the Fateh Maidan courts, is given to Urdu poetry (*shayari*) at the drop of a hat, and is a literary man, who was instrumental in shaping one of Indian sports'

finest stars in Gopi Chand. Though Arif bhai lives and breathes badminton 24/7, he himself has forgotten how many national champions he has produced in his career. But a conservative estimate, and a head count by his fans, estimate a number of around seventy-five to eighty and still counting. Such has been his command over the game and its nuances, as far as coaching is concerned.

Gopi admits that other than Hamid Hussein and Arif, there were no other coaches at Fateh Maidan who were of any help. Hamid, not being a former player of any substance, was limited in his deliverables as a coach. For some time, there was a coach called Atul Joshi, who used to play singles and doubles with the boys. He was useful in a way, but by way of structured coaching, there was nothing.

Arif sir came in towards late 1989, and with him came some definite coaching structure. I could get up to five shuttles a day. This was heaven for shuttle-starved young players like me. Since SAI had tied up with SAAP, there was some money issued and we could have non-veg food. It was a hostel-like atmosphere and though I used to stay at home, which was very close, I would have dinner with the other boys three-four times a week. More importantly for me, I could sense that this was the type of coaching atmosphere that could help me, since senior players like Manoj, Pravin, Sreeshain, Vinay Babu and a few others were also part of this scheme. There actually was a hostel for some of the players near Hussain Sagar Lake, but I never stayed in the hostel.

For Gopi, this was something that he had dreamt of for many years. He could play as many singles and doubles games as he wanted, his stroke play was being sharpened under Arif's sharp eye and there was camaraderie in training. He also thrived through competing with the seniors. There was a structured system now. For example, weight training took place thrice a week and long-distance running on a given day every week. Skipping, sand running, and of course, Gopi's favourite, stair-climbing were all part of the official training system laid down by Arif.

Of course Gopi, being what he was, would ensure that he trained twice as much as everyone else. He was restless inside and had to finish the day dead tired, otherwise he would not be happy.

Of course I would sneak in early and do more training than the others, or

try to do more double skips. When Sir said twenty double skips ten times, I would do at least twenty-five. When he said squats with, say, fifty pounds, I had to show off with sixty pounds. That was just the way I was. I was not going to change. Or rather, I did not want to change. I was not being rebellious, I was just being myself.

The two years from 1989 to 1991 were very helpful, concedes Gopi. As mentioned above, firstly, adequate shuttles were provided. Secondly, the standard of games and general practice was high. Third, Arif was always around, not missing any sessions, to instil that sense of discipline and purpose in his wards. He ensured regularity of training.

Those years really primed me up for better things. And also made that transition from junior to senior age group easier for me. In fact, during this time, I also won my first national level junior age group event in Delhi, which Surjit Singh had organised at the Indira Gandhi Stadium. This was in 1990, and I beat Anil Mohan in the finals. This was just after the 1990 Senior Nationals at Hyderabad, where I was hoping to get the wild card entry, but local politics came in the way even though I was the top junior in AP. I cried a lot at being denied what I thought was my right, but it did not help at all.

Victory at Delhi also got Gopi that national camp under the Chinese coach, which again helped him a lot. Apart from the fact that Xiao Ming took a great liking for this industrious shuttler with a never-say-die attitude, Gopi was also able to cross swords with all the top junior players in the country. Except for the top-most senior squad players, all other national level Under-20 age group players were in the camp. A huge number of shuttles were allotted, food was good and training was rigorous. All factors that made Gopi thrive and yearn for more. Says Gopi, 'The Chinese coach liked me and made me do extra training. I would even say that he was extra harsh with me, but in a friendly way. He told me that he could see me as a potential Indian senior champion and always goaded me to force myself to my limits.'

But all this became possible only because of the way Arif had trained Gopi in those two years. The Fateh Maidan coaching under Arif ensured that when he went to Delhi to play in the All India Junior Championships, he was in perfect shape, having trained hard and played lots of singles with senior players such as Pravin, Manoj and Sreeshain, who were in the senior Indian

squad.

Gopi is extremely grateful to Arif:

Sir shaped me up in lots of ways. He gave me lots of confidence and even when I did not do well at the national level, he would always encourage me. For him, a defeat or a loss was something that you did not let bother you or hurt you for long. It was something to be analysed and dissected and learnt from. He would always say that next time you meet the same player, you must be better equipped. Defeat should not bother you, but lack of preparation should. Badminton was something to be enjoyed and matches were where you showed your class and superiority. But if you did not do your homework, how would you pass the exam, he would say.'

There is no doubt that in all probability, the biggest contribution anyone made to Gopi's life as far as badminton was concerned was Mohammad Arif, who coached Gopi till he shifted to Bangalore to train under Prakash Padukone, the legendary Indian badminton star.

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## MAKING WAVES



**P**rakash Padukone was the one constant idol as far as Indian badminton players were concerned from 1971 onwards, when he won the National Junior and Senior singles title at the Madras Nationals, almost till the late 1990s, when players such as Rajeev Bagga, Dipankar Bhattacharya and Aparna Popat held sway over the game.

Padukone was the giant of Indian badminton, hailed amongst the top five sportspersons the country has produced since Independence by *India Today* magazine in 2009. A handsome player, with looks that could shame even the most well-known celluloid stars, Padukone had single-handedly catapulted Indian badminton from obscure sports pages to the front pages of national newspapers, through his daring exploits in global badminton. From 1978, when he won the Commonwealth gold medal, to 1980, when he won India's first All England crown at the fabled Wembley Arena in London, Padukone kept badminton in the limelight. He also won the World Cup in 1980, the Danish and Swedish Opens and other international titles, including the Indian Masters in 1981, in a long, glittering career.

Indian badminton, in fact, statistically speaking, must have produced probably the largest number of top ranked players in the world as compared to other disciplines, especially other racket sports. Badminton was an extremely popular sport in India and also one where Indians habitually did well. This can also be gauged by the fact that in the early two editions of the Thomas Cup, India reached the finals of the challenge round, losing once to Denmark and once to USA. Both these countries then challenged Malaysia for the world team title. This was in the 1952-53 and 1955-56 editions of the

cup.

Before Prakash Padukone, there was the fabled Nandu Natekar, who won the Kings Cup Championships in Bangkok on two occasions. Though he was unable to travel widely to exhibit his talent as players of today do, he still managed to get a high rank of World Number 4. He also reached the quarter-finals of the only All England he was able to play.

Before Natekar, there was Prakash Nath, who lost to Sweden's Conny Jespen in the 1948 All England finals. Later on, we had Dinesh Khanna, who won the inaugural Asian Badminton Championships in 1965 at Lucknow, and also played in a semi-final of the All England Championships.

The year 1980 saw a new star emerge in the form of Syed Modi, who eclipsed Padukone at the 1980 National Championships, and then overnight became the new superstar of Indian sports when he won the 1982 Commonwealth Games singles gold. Modi was, unfortunately, brutally murdered in Lucknow in 1988, when he was coming out of a practice session in his home stadium.

All these players were obviously never seen in action by Gopi. Prakash had retired from international competition in 1988 and, in fact, last played in the country in 1986. Gopi, at that time, was only thirteen years old and had just started playing at Fateh Maidan. He had seen Modi only once, at a training camp in Hyderabad, but since juniors rarely mixed with seniors, he did not even attempt to talk to the great man. In any case, by the time Gopi reached fifteen years of age, Modi was already dead and Prakash had totally retired from the scene. He, therefore, did not have any top player to emulate or someone to call his idol.

As Gopi himself puts it:

Prakash sir was somewhere there on the horizon for me. We knew the name and were told he had won the All England Championships. But the championship was too distant for me. I was happy winning my State Juniors Championships and my idols were local heroes, who were to me the real superstars. Players like Manoj and Pravin inspired that awe in me. But my problem at that time was how to somehow practise with these players, as I was stuck for shuttles which I could not afford; and two, they were so senior to me and their names were in newspapers everyday, and therefore, till I grew a little older, I did not have the guts to approach them. I spent many a sleepless night thinking about these problems.

The closest I came to be close to Prakash sir in those days was at the Puma Carona Under-14 National Championships, when I asked him to sign an autograph and pose for a photo. That is one prized possession I still have with me and it is placed on a shelf in my house with trophies. But he was too senior and too big a name to be a role model for me. For most of us and my seniors in Hyderabad, he was like the God of badminton and everyone spoke in hushed tones about him. But I knew of All England as just another championship. I think it was only in 1986 or 1987 when I came to the Under-14 Nationals, I realised that All England is the world's most prized and premier badminton championship. The way people talked about it, I could sense it was something big. But for me, priorities at that time were different. As I said, getting close to Manoj and Pravin and getting that next new shuttle was more important.

The fairy tale for Gopi was winning the National Juniors in 1991. Till that time his horizon was very restricted and confined. The dream was not beyond. When his mother applied for jobs as soon as he won the National Juniors, he was happy as he thought he could now continue playing badminton eternally. He did not have to go to Bellary to the paid engineering college. The crisis was over. So the thought to emulate Prakash or anyone else never came in his mind. Thoughts of a career in badminton also came in later when he started playing at senior level in national events.

Much later, Gopi came to respect Dipankar Bhattacharya of Assam, who subsequently won the National Senior singles title.

I have had no idols as such. While I never saw Prakash sir or Modi play, people like Partho Ganguli, Leroy D'Sa, Vikram Singh, Uday Pawar, and you [Sanjay Sharma] who played for India with distinction till the 1990s, also retired by the time I reached senior levels. Unlike before, when the Senior and Junior Nationals were held together, we never had the chance to mingle with the seniors. Their camps were held away and all the senior tournaments were also held without any junior being around. I, therefore, never had a chance to see all of you in action.

Dipankar, says Gopi, was very hardworking, something he could relate to. George Thomas was another gritty player whom Gopi saw at close quarters. George had won the Hyderabad Senior National title in 1990, when Gopi had been denied the wild card entry. These two played the type of game that Gopi



wanted to. While the strongly built Dipankar had a big smash and good speed around the court, the stocky George Thomas, a left-hander from Kerala, used to bulldoze his opponents with sheer power and nifty net play, hassling them into making mistakes. More importantly, according to Gopi, it was their never-say-die attitude and great fighting spirit on the court that he really found worth following. In that sense, they inspired him to at least emulate them and try to reach the heights they had attained.

I did not hear or see as much of Prakash sir, at the time when I was trying to make my name in the game, to actually try emulating him or idolising him. His generation was never around when we came up. So the transfer of knowledge never happened. In fact, by the time my generation actually started attending senior camps, even Manoj and Pravin had stopped. So during my transitional years, it was the hard work of Dipankar and the gritty presence of George which was inspiring. The work ethics these two put in influenced me quite a bit.

The other person who influenced Gopi to a large extent and from whom Gopi learnt the importance of discipline and hard training was his coach Mohammad Arif. In fact, he was the one person whom Gopi idolised to some extent, apart from Dipankar Bhattacharya and George Thomas, for the simple reason that Arif really worked hard on Gopi's game during his most impressionable phase, travelled with him all over the badminton world and was, in a way, a surrogate fatherly figure with whom the shuttler could bond and share a close rapport.

Arif bhai first saw Gopi as a thirteen-year-old at the Fateh Maidan courts, in December 1986, when Gopi had just started learning the nuances of the game. Here is Arif bhai's version of his first glimpse of Gopi and his views on why the lean teenager was different from all the other youngsters assembled at the coaching going on under Hamid Hussein.

The first time I saw him, he was like any other child of his age, except that he looked physically stronger and fitter than the others. In those years, I was working with SAI and was tasked with conducting summer coaching camps at various places, apart from regular coaching of juniors round the year, wherever my office sent me. Hyderabad, being my hometown, was obviously one place I used to visit often. I saw Gopi under Hamid Hussein for a few weeks and was amazed to see that very soon he had started

outshining other boys simply because he was interested in working harder and extra than his friends.

For example, when training finished for all the other boys and they used to be tired, this fellow would saunter up to the coach and enquire whether he could run ten more rounds, or do anything extra as he was not tired. A young boy wanting to train more, when others wanted to get away from the stadium, was music to our ears. Normally, youngsters at that age are basically *kaamchors* when it comes to training on the ground. Give them games to play, and they are all very happy. This fellow was the opposite. It was as if he had already realised that one could excel in badminton only with speed and strength. He always wanted to push himself, and this quality of his drew a lot of attention.

Apart from the fact that Gopi drew attention by wanting to train more than others, another aspect that drew Arif's interest was the fact that Gopi wanted to learn the jump smash when he was only around twelve. Remembers Arif clearly, 'Gopi used to pester Hamid on this. I told him that he was too young for the jump smash, that his legs were still not powerful enough. That he would spoil his knees. He did not like this answer and sulked for a few days. It took a lot of explaining from our side that this will take some time as he would first have to build up his legs. Of course, later I did train him for this and he became one of the best exponents in the world of the jump smash. In fact, this stroke of his was much feared all over.'

Arif was clear that this boy had a lot of potential. He had already won the State Sub-Junior title, and by the time Arif actually started coaching Gopi seriously, the player was already fifteen years old and making waves in the Under-18 age group in the state. He continues,

Gopi was very determined, there is no doubt about this. Whenever I asked him to train more, he did so. When I asked him about his studies, school, etc., he would simply tell me that his sole interest is to be a badminton champion. Apart from the time he had to per force spend in school during the school timings, he was always present at the Fateh Maidan courts. He was never tired and always raring to have a go at anything.

At times, Arif, in all his wisdom and experience, did think that Gopi was still not fully fit or strong enough to take on national level players of his age, who were performing better at the all-India stage. Once Gopi, playing a South

Zone Inter-State Championship against a Kerala player, won the first game and then lost the next two, even after a considerable lead. Gopi was devastated and very disappointed. As Arif tells us,

He lost from a winning position. In those days, he did not have a comprehensive game. We were still developing his strokes. And he used to be very rash and aggressive on court – did not have much patience. He was not building up the rallies before finishing them with smashes. When we came back, he told me that he wanted to participate in an India Open Junior tournament in Delhi, and I said to him that he was not fully prepared to take on senior players who were more experienced than him. I wanted to prepare him for the forthcoming National Championships. But when he told me that he will go and win this event, I was flabbergasted at his guts and grit. He spoke with so much confidence and also explained to me why he thought he would win. I was convinced in a way and allowed him to compete. By that time, the date of entry had gone by, and I had to phone the organisers and they favoured me by giving Gopi a last-minute wild card entry. Luckily, Sushil Bhatia, Secretary of Delhi Badminton Association, was in charge of the event and he helped us. Gopi won the title and came back with flying colours. He had kept his promise.

It is this quality of Gopi that Arif really liked. The grit, the guts and supreme confidence in himself showed great promise, as far as Arif was concerned. Like a good sculptor, Arif started moulding Gopi, polishing the sheer aggression Gopi already had, and building the stroke-play that ensured a comprehensive style to fall back upon if smashes and aggression did not help him in a match. Gopi's true game was the smash-dribble variety, as this came naturally to him. Arif, and later on Prakash Padukone, wanted him to get used to controlled aggression, as one never knows what sort of opponents one may come up against. A good defender can by and large blunt a player's aggression with his retrieving and control on the lift and the toss. Dinesh Khanna, the former Asian champion, was one such exponent who was feared all over the world. Called the 'horse' for his tremendous staying power and stamina on court, Dinesh was the nemesis of many an attacking player. Arif realised the problem Gopi may face if he came up against a classic defensive player like Dinesh, and therefore, rightly concentrated on a more comprehensive style of play for him.

'Gopi, from the age of twelve or so when I saw him, had this attitude of

playing aggressively. All players have their own natural way of playing. This was Gopi's way. I did not want to take away anything that came to him naturally. I only wanted to supplement with a fall-back option. I wanted him to be technically and temperamentally sound.' However, training to be a hard hitter meant that more and more shuttles had to be used, and they did not have that many shuttles.

It is far easier to do drop practice, net practice or even full-court stroke practice. But if you want to practise smashes, you need ten-fold shuttles. At the rate Gopi used to smash, he would break one shuttle in less than ten smashes. Where would we get ten shuttles daily for him to practise this sort of badminton? This was one question we had no answers to. We used to pick all the old shuttles from all the courts, sometimes do some surgery and make them flight-worthy and get more smashes from them. But this innovation helped to some extent. At least this was better than nothing, and slowly but surely we inched towards the style of play that came naturally to him, along with some full court strokes we developed.

Arif and Gopi worked really hard during this phase. They used to do a 2,000 drop and net dribble practice. Arif says that his hand used to pain with the amount of work, but Gopi would never give up. The shadow exercises regime was another area where the two worked till exhaustion caught up. Full-court tosses and movement to the centre of the court after every stroke was another form of court movement exercise which was very tiring, but Gopi never complained. 'This was unique in a way. He never used to complain and never said no to any form of on-court or off-court drill. Even if tired, Gopi would just take a minute off, drink some water or perhaps change his shirt, and was back on court in a jiffy. He ensured I gave him my full attention, all the time,' praises Arif.

After winning the All India Open at Delhi, however, Gopi became a victim of the politics which prevailed in the BAI. Says Arif:

I was with SAI and was asked by Mr Puri, who was the national coach, about the list of players who should be called to attend the camp under Xiao Ming. I was asked to help this coach as he did not know any English. He wanted ten players only to be selected and the list given to him did not have Gopi's name, even though he had won the Delhi event. We were both in Delhi at that time staying at the Velodrome near IG stadium. [The

cycling velodrome, built for 1982 Asian games, had some rooms and dorms where national campers and coaches used to stay. The camp under Xiao Ming was also held at the IG stadium, originally built for badminton events during the games – authors] Gopi was on the verge of tears when he came to know about his exclusion. I told him not to worry since this camp was only for a month or so. After all, what can one learn in just a few days? I said we will soon go back to Hyderabad and start training for our preparations for the upcoming National Championships. Yet, we succeeded to have him attend and the BAI agreed after some persuasion.

As soon as the camp started, there was a test match tour by the Malaysian youth team, who were to play matches at Mumbai, Hyderabad and Jaipur. Since Mumbai was allowed to have a local entry, apart from the BAI-selected team, Arif insisted that Gopi be allowed to play in that criterion. Along with Manoj and Pravin Kumar, Gopi became the third Hyderabad player playing against the touring Malaysians. This test match at Hyderabad, in a way, changed the course of Gopi's life. He won both his matches and was then taken to play at the third leg of the tour, which was at Jaipur. The Chinese coach was surprised at Gopi's aggressive style of play and asked Arif where Gopi had been all these days. 'He was not on the list of the ten players given to you and was able to attend your camp as a reserve for a week or so, and then you and the national coach did not select him in the main team to play these Malaysians. Therefore, he is playing as a local wild card entry,' Arif told him.

Gopi then underwent forty-five more days of rigorous training under Xiao Ming at the Patiala and Bangalore SAI campuses.

He showed his grit in his very first foreign exposure, much to the delight of Arif, by qualifying through four tough matches and then losing in the second round of the main draw at Kuala Lumpur during the Malaysian Open, and repeated this performance at the Singapore Open. Apart from Gopi, Dipankar was the only other Indian player to qualify for the main draw.

The Indonesian Open was a different ballgame altogether. The shuttles employed were local Garuda shuttles, whose flight was different from the internationally used Yonex, which Gopi and his teammates had been used to. The conditions were typically Indonesian – hot, humid, with a vociferous crowd which bayed for blood every time a non-Indonesian played against a local. This eastern circuit of three tournaments at Malaysia, Indonesia and

Singapore was Gopi's first trip abroad. Winning the National Junior Championships was good for him, but Arif insists that from early on in his career, Gopi showed great temperament and understanding of the game, even when pitted against foreign players.

Winning at Goa was good for him psychologically, as he had finally cracked the bogey of not winning a Junior National title. But the way he performed at Goa, outclassing every opponent, clearly showed what strong stuff he was made of. The real test is when you face the physically stronger and faster foreigners, and Gopi showed his determination not only at the Hyderabad Junior test against the Malaysians, but more importantly, at the senior tour of Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. When most other senior Indian players failed to qualify for the main draw, Gopi at an age of just eighteen or so, played brilliantly to qualify after tough matches in two of these championships. But I tell you, what really convinced me that he was a true world-beater was when in his first All England, I think in 1993, he not only qualified for the main draw but defeated the very tall and vastly experienced Tomas Johansson of Sweden. This was the last All England Championships played at the Wembley Empire Pool in London.

This was also the first time that Arif saw Gopi play a very intelligent game. He hardly ever played the shuttle high, so as to nullify any effect Johansson could bring in the rallies due to his six-feet-seven-inch frame. It was the classic low serve, quick to the net for openings, and then the big smash with all its variations and clever change of pace, keeping the tall Swede perpetually guessing. In fact, Gopi is praised by all his peers as playing a very well-thought-out game. Says Manjusha Kanwar, a former national champion, also Gopi's teammate at Petroleum Sports Control Board's badminton team, 'One could see his thinking abilities on court very clearly. His determination is one thing, but he utilises his effort to subdue his opponents by enticing them into mistakes, trapping them in so many ways. Yes, he has that slam-bang game which he is famous for, but Gopi is capable of great subtlety if the situation so demands.'

Arif was a strict disciplinarian on the court – always early for training, always at hand to give advice, always ready to help in stroke play. Gopi imbibed this on-court discipline in a big way. 'Arif sir was instrumental in many ways to make me what I am today. His contribution, undoubtedly, is huge. He happened to me at a very right and crucial juncture of my

badminton career.'

However, even though Gopi had made it to the senior national squad as soon as he was out of junior ranks, and indeed was making a name on the world circuit, the Arif-Gopi combination could not crack the Senior National title in that dramatic phase between 1991 to 1994.

For Arif, the main problem was of consistency in Gopi's game in those years.

There were not so many national level championships apart from the Nationals. Just what we called the three major selection events, and during this time, seniors such as Dipankar Bhattacharya, Pravin Kumar, Rajeev Bagga, Sushant Saxena, all older than Gopi, were deeply entrenched at senior ranks. He did have a victory or two here and there, but was not able to win the big title that really mattered to him. I was, however, convinced that it was only a matter of time when everything will come together and will fall into place to ensure he wins the National Championships. We also had a problem with shuttles as the Yonex shuttles were expensive and were being used for all senior major events. At this very crucial juncture, we were able to get a sponsor in one Kailash Charan, a local jeweller who happily agreed to gift twenty tubes of shuttles every month to us. This helped us to polish his game more, and we were again able to train in the proper manner. I knew he would be a world-beater one day. It was not a question of if, but when, and how soon.

The 'how soon', however, took a long time in coming. Gopi actually had to overcome quite a few problems personally. Gopi feels that in 1991, post the Junior Nationals victory, he was a far more stable player with a lot of overall improvement. Arif's coaching was helping out in a big way, but the camp under the Chinese coach had improved Gopi's confidence and overall strength in the game greatly.

This was the first time I could play top calibre players every day. I not only played higher ranked players, but also the most stubborn ones, who were perhaps not very high-ranked nationally, but in practice games, were the perfect foil for my type of style. I realised I was good at certain things, but could improve some other areas of my game. I was stretched to the limit everyday at that camp. This gave me more chances to improve immediately as I could experiment more, if I lost the games or I could play to their

stronger areas and still try to win. I learnt a lot about myself and my game. I was just out of juniors after dominating the Under-18 age group. I was basically much faster than the other juniors, I had swift legs. But I still had some major problems in my game. With Arif sir, we had worked on all-round improvement, but there were still a lot of areas where I had to focus.

Gopi says that at that time, he was afraid to play the deep toss. His style was still very dependant on smashes, half-smashes, fast drop shots and net dribbles. He loathed playing a defensive game, simply because he had no confidence in that type of play. The idea was to finish the rally as early as possible. But smashing the shuttle from out-of-position areas always posed problems. Even the fastest player cannot always cover the diagonal angle of a full court after smashing hard, as one tends to lose some amount of balance. Also, if an opponent, who is good in defence, somehow anticipates the direction of the smash, his net block would hardly give the attacking player a chance to recover fast enough to play a net dribble, as the shuttle has to be contacted very early, almost on the tape of the net. Gopi, with his natural style of attack, had to be extremely accurate in his smashes and fast in recovering after the stroke to be able to move to the net. It was difficult to consistently play this sort of game, match after match. Gopi was still not confident enough to try out styles other than his. This was one negative aspect which had to be overcome. If not totally defensive, he still had to learn to play with a mixture of different styles, and yet somehow retain the aggressive character of his natural leanings.

In December 1991, Gopi had also taken up a job with Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO), part of the Tata group, at Jamshedpur. The journey to and from Jamshedpur, first for the interview, then to actually take up the assignment, took its toll on Gopi mentally. He was not able to practise like he wanted to, and he also fell sick with all the train travelling. The facilities were good enough, the training ground, the gymnasium and the badminton courts were of high standard, but he did not have a strong opponent to spar with most of the time. He was used to lots of stroke practice and smash-net dribble drills. But the environment in Jamshedpur was more like a club, where TISCO employees would gather around in the evenings and be eager to play doubles or show off their game to Gopi. There was no player of high standard who could control the shuttle and put Gopi through his paces. Looking back, Gopi feels that it was perhaps a mistake to take up a job without thinking



everything through in terms of badminton.

He was used to having home-cooked food as per his taste and nutritional requirements, but in Jamshedpur, he had to eat out at different places. Basically, he could not set up a routine for himself like he was used to back home, which would help him on a daily basis. The last straw in this Jamshedpur sojourn, however, came some six months into his service with the company. The train journey from Hyderabad back to Jamshedpur, after the 1992 Asian Championships in China, where he lost in the first round to a local player, saw him typically changing trains at Vijayawada, then again at Kharagpur and then on to Jamshedpur. To add to his plight, he somehow caught chicken pox on the journey, probably from some infected passenger. In the packed second-class coach, when boils started erupting all over his body, he was in trouble. Alone, itching and in utter discomfort in the extremely hot, humid conditions of late April, he almost passed out due to dehydration.

Immediately on arriving at the destination, he phoned his father, who took the next train, in an unreserved compartment, to Jamshedpur, where he nursed Gopi for fifteen days. After this, the fever broke and Gopi started to recover. Though the TISCO staff, according to Gopi, was extremely supportive, particularly Satish Pillai, things were just not happening the way he had envisaged. That six to eight months' ordeal was unproductive, in terms of practice and overall badminton training. Lots of badminton championships taking place in South or North India meant many days of travelling, leading to him losing out on crucial days of training. This was another major factor which weighed heavily on his mind, as he was first and foremost a 'track' player, who spent as many hours on the training track as he did on the badminton court.

Gopi resigned from his job within six months of joining.

I lost a good six to seven months during this time. I was playing at senior level, but could not defeat some of the players, which I should have done. I was not able to reach a comfortable level of fitness which I wanted. And being a hard-hitting, fast-moving player, who relied on raw power and speed rather than defensive game or deceptive stroke-play, lack of fitness on court was like a death knell. I was not happy at all and had to take the decision to leave Jamshedpur.

The year 1991 was, therefore, almost lost to Gopi, as by the time he came

back to Hyderabad after resigning from TISCO, it was already July. But he did play well in the 1991 Nationals held at Chennai, which had Rajeev Bagga as the leading light and hot favourite for the title. In India, as per the traditions of the BAI, the Senior National Championships of the year is held the following year, in January or February. The 1991 edition, therefore, was held in February 1992. Dipankar Bhattacharya and Pravin Kumar were the other two players in the country's top three. Other top players such as Sushant Saxena and Sushanto Bora, and a few former players such as Inderjeet Mukherjee, Madhurja Barua, Vimal Kumar and George Thomas (who had won the 1990 Senior Nationals at Hyderabad) basically formed the core group that Gopi, at the time still not nineteen, was up against. As stated above, though he had won the Junior Nationals a few months before, and had, in practice at least, got the better of some of the top players in the country in the national training camp under Xiao Ming, he was still untested in major tournaments.

Typically, as things stood in Indian badminton, there were not many tournaments at any level. The Senior National Championships, therefore, was the focus of every single shuttler in the country. That year, Gopi, barring whatever practice matches he had played at the national camp, had not had the chance of gauging himself against the others at this level.

But he played well enough in Chennai to reach the quarterfinals, where he lost to Bagga in three games. In Gopi's words, in spite of not really being totally prepared, this was a match he could have won.

I won the first game, playing really fast, catching him time and again on the net with my dribbles. Rajeev is a tall player, with a whiplash backhand, but one area where he was slightly weak was near the net, as he was slow in reaching the bird. Once he was late, I would get good openings near the mid-court area and smash for my points. But in the second and third games, Rajeev controlled well and raced ahead. I was close, but could not defeat him. He played some astonishing backhand shots and his anticipation throughout was unbelievable. Many a time, I thought I had won the rally when I had him pinned on the deep backhand area, but he lifted the shuttle with fantastic timing and strength, sending it to deep baseline on my side. But I thought that I played well and also that I could have played better. When I came out of the court, people were genuine in their praise of the way I had fought tooth and nail, keeping Bagga on court

for more than an hour. I was disappointed, yes, but I analysed the match later, and there was no doubt in my mind that his great backhand and also the parallel game did me in. I thought that hitting shuttles parallel or as we say, bodyline in badminton, would put him on defence, but he was equally good at it and pinned me down many times.

Rajeev Bagga went on to win this National singles title, defeating Dipankar Bhattacharya in the finals. He was unique in every sense. Much after he had retired from competitive badminton, a film called *Iqbal* was released, directed by Nagesh Kukunoor. This film went on to become a runaway box-office hit and garnered a huge amount of critical acclaim for the director and actor Shreyas Talpade, who played the title role. The story revolved around a deaf-mute boy, who overcame all odds to live his dream of playing cricket for India, a story that struck a chord with the masses.

While the film was pure fiction, the premise was true for Rajeev Bagga. Born deaf-mute, this lean, tall fellow, who was a born sportsman, not only went on to represent India for almost ten years in international badminton, but won Senior Nationals singles and doubles titles, apart from being the runner-up at the 1984 Junior Nationals on the same date and year that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated, 31 October. Rumour has it that since anti-Sikh riots were in full swing at Kota, the city in Rajasthan where the Junior Nationals finals rounds were taking place, the chief referee issued instructions that the best of three game match of fifteen points each, as per the old scoring system, be reduced to just one game of twenty-one points on that fateful day.

Rajeev never understood why the matches were cut short and by the time he realised what was happening, the slow starter in him caved in without much of a fight. In fact, he lost all the three finals he was slated to play. Of course, he went on to create history later on by representing India and winning Open Nationals in spite of being audibly and verbally challenged. But the biggest prizes that he won for himself and for India were in the five Deaf Olympics, where he won three gold medals in each one. This mega event, held every four years, saw this amazing champion win the singles, doubles as well as the team championships. He was crowned the 'Deaf Athlete of the Century' by the World Deaf Council in 1998.

Born into a military family, Rajeev's father, Brigadier SR Bagga, a keen sportsman himself, had started off Rajeev with tennis, some golf and squash

as these used to be the main sports played at the bases where he was posted. Rajeev somehow took a liking for squash and with his strength and height, went on to become India Number Three in the Under-15 age group. But with the opponent sometimes playing strokes from behind the other player on court, he could not hear either the movements or the ball being struck. Rajeev's handicap became a major problem, not something that could be easily tackled. On a visit to Mumbai in 1982, he saw badminton being played, tried his hand at it, and immediately liked the sport immensely. It was played indoors and the opponent faced the player. So even though the problem of hearing the shuttle being struck from the opposite side was still paramount, at least he could read the intentions of the player and the direction of the shuttle immediately after it was hit.

The two main qualities Rajeev had were his fantastic backhand and his accurate anticipation. The latter came naturally to him, perhaps making up for the loss of hearing; the former basically because he was used to playing squash with a heavier racket. Therefore, he had developed a lot of strength on his right shoulder, which was his playing arm.

So, though Gopi lost that 1991 Senior Nationals in the quarterfinals to Rajeev Bagga, one fallout of that result was interesting, in the sense that suddenly, Gopi was feared on the national circuit. He had stretched Bagga to three close games at Chennai, but with the deaf-mute player being the top-ranked player in the country at the time, even though Gopi lost, the match result actually went in his favour. Personally, although the Asian Championships was a dud as far as he was concerned, his showing at the eastern circuit, especially at Malaysia and Singapore, had brought him satisfaction and confidence.

After leaving TISCO, Gopi applied for an Air India scholarship and joined the airline as a sports trainee, based in Hyderabad. The familiar surroundings saw him restart his training and practice with more fervour. Of course, coming back to the hometown also meant a reunion with Arif, who was coaching at Fateh Maidan then. So, in a way, it was back to basics for Gopi, who quickly got into the routine set down by Arif and would in fact be upset if he missed any session.

The 1992 Nationals held at Cochin in January 1993 saw Gopi losing to Rajeev Bagga again, in a similar fashion to the previous year, in the quarters. State teammate Vijay Raghvan had reached the semis along with Rajeev, Sushant Saxena and the dark horse in the championships, Bhushan Akut of

Maharashtra, who knocked out a couple of seeded players, including the highly dangerous Dipankar Bhattacharya. One consolation for Gopi was that he reached the doubles finals along with Raghvan, where they lost to Jaseel P. Ismail and George Thomas of Kerala.

Gopi confesses that in the 1992 season he was playing erratically, especially towards the end of the year, as the state team hardly had any shuttles to practise with. SAAP did not have sufficient funds to buy the Yonex shuttles for the state team. Normally, Arif was able to organise enough shuttles but this year, there was a real paucity of funds. So much so that till fifteen days before the Nationals, the senior players were playing lots of football, and on court only the drops/dribble drill, to ensure that whatever shuttles they had did not break early. At least some semblance of badminton was taking place. Gopi's Air India sponsorship did not include shuttles, which at that time cost ₹ 400 per box.

During the last four days before the Nationals, Gopi flew to Mumbai and for the very first time, experienced what life was like in the metropolis and what sort of weird training schedules were followed there. Staying with old friend Sunit Welling, a former sub-junior national champion, Gopi found it difficult to adjust to the sleep patterns and practising patterns, which went on till late in the night. The commute to the club, where Sunit used to practise, took up a lot of time. But though the Welling family was extremely helpful, Gopi just could not adjust properly to the sort of life an average Mumbaikar takes for granted.

In the doubles though, he could use his physical bulk and better firepower to ensure entry into the finals, but due to lack of court practice because of paucity of shuttles, he never reached his peak at Cochin as far as singles was concerned.

Apart from the Nationals, two other Senior Championships organised in November 1992 took place at Goa, where Gopi lost to George Thomas in the semis, and Bangalore, where again he made it to the semis but lost, this time to Sushant Saxena. Gopi was still only nineteen years old. During this time Gopi was also doing well in doubles, partnering Vinod Kumar.

However, it was during a National trial held at Bangalore in mid-1993 that Gopi came into his own. While Bagga was the reigning national champion, Dipankar Bhattacharya was the other most feared player around. Pravin Kumar and George Thomas had shifted totally to doubles. Gopi, in those trials, defeated Dipankar, Sushant Saxena, Srikant Bakshi and all the others

to end up as the top ranked player. The trials were held to select players for the 1993 World Cup, which was being held in New Delhi's Indira Gandhi Stadium, a magnificent venue built for the 1982 Asian Games. Rajeev Bagga had opted to play in the World Games for the Deaf, which conflicted with the dates of the trials made compulsory by the BAI. As a result, the deaf-mute champion, much to his chagrin, found himself out of the national squad for the World Cup.

Gopi lost in his first group match to Malaysian ace Rashid Sidek 9-15/6-15. Sidek that year was World Number Three, but was a household name in world badminton for having navigated his country to an astounding Thomas Cup victory over China, Indonesia and Denmark in a most memorable week in July 1992. He was a real superstar of global badminton.

A freakish pre-summer monsoon shower resulting in leaks from the stadium roof led to Gopi's second group match against Darren Hall of England being washed away, literally. Gopi had been confident of putting up a good show. But it was a sad day for him as his championships dream folded after just one match.

In his first All England Championships, held in March 1993, Gopi again showed glimpses of his underlying genius.

I was playing the first round against this six-feet-seven-inch tall Swede. It was difficult to get the shuttle past him. I had seen him before and went in with the game plan which I thought would unnerve him. Tomas Johansson was quite a force at that time, ranked fifteenth in the world. I just did short serve and dribbled a lot on the net. I just did not want to push the shuttle back. I would stare at his face and dribble the shuttle right under his nose. He was stunned by this daring play I was doing and did not know what to do. I beat him in two straight games. In the second round, I lost to a previous year's All England champion, Liu Jun of China. His pace was simply too much for me and he smashed the shuttle really hard. I struggled all the time and realised that the pace was the real issue. However much I tried, I knew I could not match that pace. He was simply too fast for me. I think I got some nine and six points in the two games. I was not happy about this, but then did not know what else I could do. In a way, I was happy to just be at the All England. I did not know who all the top players were. Winning there was still not a dream. All I knew was to give a hundred per cent when I went on court. In practice or matches – I just used

to give everything I had.

But in that match against Liu Jun, I was so outclassed that once I sat back and analysed the game, I knew if ever I was to defeat these Chinese, I had to be as fast and as strong. The difference in our standards shocked me and opened my eyes to a bitter reality. That was in a way the beginning of my relentless pursuit for speed and power. One good thing that happened after I defeated Johansson was that people and coaches suddenly had lot of confidence in me. But as far as I was concerned, I was still the same.

Around October 1993, there were two senior major events played at Gorakhpur and Chennai, and the Under-22 National Doubles Championships at Hyderabad. Gopi lost in the finals at Gorakhpur to Dipankar Bhattacharya, but defeated him to win the title at Chennai, which incidentally was his first major senior title, almost within two years of winning the national junior. Though he had defeated Dipankar at the selection trials at Bangalore earlier, his victory at the Chennai major senior event was the first time Gopi had defeated Dipankar, who was then ranked number one in the country, in an open event. Even better, Gopi, partnering Vijay Raghvan, won the Under-22 National Doubles title at Hyderabad.

Towards the end of the year, Gopi joined the legendary Prakash Padukone's coaching academy in Bangalore for fifteen days.

Prakash sir helped me understand how to control my wayward strokes and play into the court. There were lots of shuttles to play and his guidance on court was really a great help. We were staying right on top of the three courts at Canara Union, where Prakash sir initially had based his academy.

We had a small room to ourselves and Sir personally coached us and that was extremely helpful, as, though I was very aggressive and fast on court, I still felt that overall control was still missing in my game. He made me do a lot of on-court work and for the first time I got really tired on the court. Before this short sojourn at Bangalore, all my tiredness came only on the running track. We never had so many shuttles and therefore, not so much time was spent on the court. That was one major difference in practising over here with Sir. I felt that my game did get more rounded after playing under him for that very short period of time. At the least, I realised that to be a really good player I should try to excel in every department. I would not say that I had become a complete player, but this training stint helped me become more oriented as far as the game was concerned. I at least knew

in which area I still had hard work to do.

1993, therefore, was a big year for the now twenty-year-old. He was ranked number two in the country in doubles. In singles, he had defeated every top player in the country, including the strongly-built Dipankar Bhattacharya, who was the top ranked singles specialist. Gopi had made an impression on the world scene with his All England performance over Johansson and also at the Malaysian/Singapore events the year before. Therefore, he was looking forward not only to playing the 1993 Nationals in February 1994, but two other extremely important events in the calendar. The 1994 National Games were to be held in Pune in the second week of January, and immediately after that, Gopi was to participate in his first Thomas Cup Asian Zone Team Championships, something that he was really looking forward to. From a boy of eleven when he started playing at Fateh Maidan under Hamid Hussein, to his stint under Prakash Padukone in December 1993, Gopi had come a long way.

All eyes were on Gopi at the start of the new year and he felt good about his game. He was confident about his speed, stamina and prowess on the court. Some mistakes were still being made, but the frequency was much less. 'I was not hitting the shuttle out of court as often as before, the unforced errors were negligible as I went into the National Games. In fact, I was feeling on top of the world, the same feeling I had had when I started my Junior Nationals campaign at Goa in 1990. I somehow knew I would be invincible, unbeatable at Pune.'



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## MIND OVER MATTER



Located south of Mumbai, atop the famous Deccan plateau, lies the city of Pune. With all the elements for a perfect mix of a small and a big town, Pune represents the heart and spirit of a true-blue Maharashtrian. But this time around, the regular hustle-bustle of the city was eclipsed by an epidemic. Sports fever was in the air. From the tiny man who parked his scooter right outside the stall of the famous Joshi Vada Pav, to the young students sipping coffee at the German Bakery, from the *firang* couples at the Osho ashram, to Mr Shinde at the Pune Power Plant, it seemed that the National Games was the most fervent topic of discussion amongst the enthusiastic people. Their Pune had been chosen to host the coveted National Games in January 1994. Resolute rifle shooters, aggressive wrestlers, dogged swimmers, trendy tennis players, and a host of other gritty sportsmen and women from all nooks and corners of India, stepped out on the Pune Central Station, all determined to make a mark for themselves and crush anyone who came in their way to steadfast glory. Little did anyone know that in the crowd emerging from the Hyderabad-Pune Express was one Pullela Gopi Chand, who would go on to almost conquer the city through his well-honed badminton game and take his name to dizzying heights.

Like a true champion, Gopi began his quest at the swanky indoor stadium built exclusively for badminton matches. This year was not going to be easy, as everyone was in their best form. But Gopi was definitely a notch above. Even national champion Manjusha Kanwar was stunned into disbelief when she saw him play. For Gopi, it was a one-sided display of precision

badminton, not seen in the country since the magical days of Prakash Padukone in the early 1970s.

He walked into the singles final round unchallenged. 'Game-Set-Match' became the order of every passing day. He was in such superlative form that many a top player bit the dust at Gopi's nimble feet. The plethora of names included players Sushant Saxena, Srikant Bakshi and Vijay Lancy. Gopi was in a class of his own, playing the best badminton of his life so far. Fifteen days' close supervision by Padukone in Bangalore had done wonders to his confidence. Perhaps the perfect January climate for indoor sport made it easy for his talent to flower. Whatever it was, Gopi surely became the flavour of the season.

The biggest scalp that he collected, with ease, was that of the top-seeded Dipankar Bhattacharya in the semis, hammering the Assamese stalwart into submission 15-6/15-3. This was an unbelievable display of speed and power hitherto unseen from any Indian player. His game was under control, as Gopi reached the net very fast to catch the shuttle early for the dribble, which came very sharply. Also, the alternative stroke in the form of a flat, fast toss from the baseline, was used with good effect. The style was aggressive, with him peppering the opposite court with a deft combination of full smashes, half smashes and fast drops. To change the pace and bring more elasticity to his game, he used an alternative stroke, the flat toss, to great effect. If the shuttle was anywhere close to first baseline, it was a disaster for the opponent. He was moving very fast, not getting tired or breathless even after the longest of rallies.

Remembers Gopi of his march towards the gold medal at the National Games, 'In fact, I was just not tested in singles and I reached the finals without dropping a game.' Manoj Kumar, his senior teammate, says that it was at Pune that Gopi had stamped his authority over all others.

He was simply fantastic. I had played badminton for almost sixteen years already, and for the last six years [at the time] or so, was playing for India. But I had never seen anyone playing the game so dominantly in the country as Gopi. He just smashed every opponent in sight. There was no challenge to him in Pune. In the finals, he was to play my partner and close friend Pravin Kumar, who was much senior to Gopi in Hyderabad, and all of us knew that Pravin did not stand much of a chance, with the way Gopi was going.

Gopi took Pune by storm and he was expected to win a double crown there. After the one-sided blazing entry in the singles final, Gopi and his partner Vijay Raghvan had also entered the doubles semi-final round, paving a path for Gopi to emulate the victories of the legendary Syed Modi, if not Prakash Padukone. With loads of confidence, self-belief and buoyancy, Gopi stepped onto the centre court of the swanky new indoor stadium at Balewadi on the memorable date of 25 January for the doubles semi-final. It was 9 a.m., and the stands were almost full, as the locals wanted to catch a glimpse of the badminton sensation whom everyone was predicting to be the next big sports icon of the game.

On one side were Gopi and his partner Vijay Raghvan, on the other was the crackling Kerala duo of Jaison Xavier and Jaseel Ismail. The game began. With Gopi's aggressive demeanour and Raghvan's intelligent tactics, they won the first game comfortably, but were well matched by their opponents, who won the second. Now it was all up to the third and final game. If they won this game, they would win the match and enter the finals. But God always tests everyone. Success does not come without overcoming hurdles, and little did Gopi realise that catastrophe was just around the corner.

The score was 11-7 in the deciding game. Recalls Raghvan:

It had been a brutal affair but Gopi was enjoying himself. His smashes were really hard and many times we got direct points. But what was really heartening was the way he was controlling the net. It was one movement from him, when he went for an overhead smash, that the clash took place. I was in the left court and wanted to finish off the weak return that had come off my smash, but Gopi happened to be near the net, saw an opportunity himself and went for the kill, running backwards towards the centre of the court when catastrophe struck us. We just did not see each other going for the same shot and collided.

Gopi fell first and Raghvan fell on top of his left knee, crushing it. Gopi did not hear anything break but instantly knew that something had gone horribly wrong, as his leg seemed twisted at an awkward angle. Despite that, he refused to believe that his knee had shattered as the rebel in him surfaced, forcing him to carry on with the match he was so very desperate to win, not knowing that had he carried on, he would have been crippled for life.

Gopi vividly remembers:

I was coming behind from the net as I thought I would take a leap and hit an overhead smash, as the shuttle was close to mid-court. So I jumped and went for it. Vijay also thought that he would go for the same shot and jumped from baseline to leap forward. We crashed and I fell down first and he landed squarely on my knee. His entire weight came down heavily on me and my knee was crushed. I did not hear a sound or anything like that and there was no pain immediately, but I realised something was wrong as when I tried to get up, I crumbled down again. I did not know the extent of the injury and thought that maybe this was a knee sprain, and I could continue playing since this was the third game and we were in lead. I thought we could take it one point at a time and if I could just stay near the net and give support to Vijay, we could win the gold medal for my state.

Team captain Manoj Kumar also said that Gopi being Gopi, did not want this injury to come in the way of his winning the match. He tried to get up twice but fell down. In fact, they did play one point and when the shuttle came near the net and Gopi put weight on that broken knee to go forward to contact the shuttle, he simply crashed down for the last time. Till that time, everyone thought that he would get up and finish the match, because they had seen in the past that Gopi never used to be bothered much by injuries. But at this last fall, all the people, including Gopi himself, were terrified as they heard the noise of something tearing or breaking.

It was the sound of the cartilage snapping. He felt as if his knee and ankle both had somehow detached from his body. He could not feel any sensation in that leg. And then he started to feel the pain.

Many players and officials rushed to the court and tried hauling me up and moving me out of the court. It was then that I felt immense pain. As if thousands of needles were stuck in my leg. It was a numbing feeling. But another part of my brain kept on telling me that I had lost the match and that I had led my team down. I wanted to finish the match, wanted to play the singles finals in the evening. This was the best badminton I had ever played, I had defeated Dipankar so easily in the semi-finals. But I also realised that as far as this tournament was concerned, it was all over. And I felt helpless. And for me, the pain of losing this match was worse than the pain I was having from the injury.

By the time a stretcher was brought to courtside, his knee had started

swelling. As he looks back to this episode in his life, Gopi feels that his stubbornness, in a way, made this problem worse. All his playing life thus far and even later, as seen through this book, Gopi had more or less done things his own way, be it training, style of play or general behaviour on the court. Any other player falling down after such a clash, knowing that the knee was badly hurt, would not have continued playing. But Gopi aggravated the injury further by trying to play, to get those two or three more points for his team. This was the rebel in him.

Gopi hardly ever conformed to rules, as far as badminton was concerned. He would often do things contrary to what the trainer said. If the trainer told him to run ten hundred-metre sprints on the field, but to go slow in the first couple of them till he was fully warmed up, to conserve energy till the last sprint, he would run as fast as possible in the first few sprints, not wanting to conserve any energy. The trainers would tell him that a good finish is always for the best. But Gopi would run the first sprint fastest, the second in the same manner and so on. By the time he came to the last one, he would be dead tired, and as a formality, just canter on to finish it. In doing shadow training, where one went through the motions of actually playing a rally with full court movements, but without a shuttle, Gopi would behave in the exact same manner. Coaches and trainers would shout at him to conserve energy till the last, but he would do it the way he wanted to. Why conserve energy, he would ask them. Gopi would give his best from the start, something he maintained throughout his career. As his fitness improved, he would last out till the very last rally of the third game was fought. But there was no way he was going to start a match slowly and feel his way into it. Gopi believed in going out with all guns blazing.

Once he came back into competitive badminton after this injury sustained in Pune, Gopi again started going all out with his jump smashes. Once more, many people asked him not to be so aggressive and physical on court as his legs were not so strong. But he countered them by saying that this was the only way he could play badminton, or not at all. Win or lose, he was going to play this pattern as he was comfortable with it.

Gopi confesses that, 'This was, in a way, the rebel in me.' And this pattern of thinking lasted all his playing career.

This was a very 'my psyche' kind of thing. In the sense that even at the Padukone Academy, where I joined and trained later on, we had this kind

of conflict. Prakash sir was a kind of perfectionist in every way. And I was after doing my kind of thing, which I thought was correct. And therefore, there was this kind of question as to why you are playing this type of game. I was told to play good length tosses, to build up a rally before going for the kill – you know, the textbook type of things. And I used to say if I could hit flat on the opponent's face and get a point or even smash from the baseline if I saw an opportunity, I would still do it. Why go the long way, when the point could be snatched sooner by being aggressive.

Gopi perpetually had to face this kind of conflict but in the end, he played in the style that came naturally to him, even though at times, it may not have been the correct option. When he was in Germany playing a tough inter-club league, he would follow his club's Chinese coach, but would end up doing more than what was asked of him. Back in Hyderabad, under Arif, when the training started at 6 a.m., Gopi would be on the track at 5.15 or so for those forty extra minutes for endurance, as he thought that his stamina was under question. He would then change and wait for Arif and the other players to troop in and start training all over again.

Gopi somehow thought that he was very different in his approach to sport. His style of game was not contemporary, unlike the soft style favoured by Indian players down the decades. He was more aware of his fears, his weaknesses and his strengths, and dealt with them in his own way. He always thought deeper, contemplating for hours about his game and how to be a better player. His real belief was that at the end of his career, he should have tried everything possible to be a world-beater.

Gopi feels that:

If I do not succeed for some reason, it is my responsibility. I was not ready to put that responsibility on somebody else. I would not like to blame anyone else for my defeats, my losses. They were mine. I was responsible for my mistakes and no one else. My victories also are my own and I tried everything possible in my way to achieve them. So, whenever I have fallen down, I have gotten up and I have come back in my own way. In Pune also, after the fall, when everyone said I should give up, I said no, I will carry on and went on to play the next point, and then fell down again and could hear the snapping sound of my knee. In hindsight, I realise it was a mistake as I injured myself more as I put weight on the shattered knee and it crumpled beneath me.

He was taken to a local hospital where an orthopaedic doctor, Dr Sarangpani, took the first look at his knee which, in his own words, had now swollen like a football. A tape was put around his knee and it was, in a way, well plastered. Dr Sarangpani, strangely, did not take any X-rays and just told Gopi that he had had a bad knee sprain which would be all right in a week or so. Gopi, with a very painful knee and feeling slightly depressed, went back to the hotel the next morning and found out that his state team had already left for Hyderabad.

Thinking that everything would be fine with him, Gopi now decided to go to Delhi, where his father had been posted. Raja was in Chennai at that time, about to leave for the US, and Subhash used to be in and out of Delhi on official business. Subbaravamma's life revolved around Gopi's badminton, as she and her daughter were living in Hyderabad with Gopi. When Gopi had gone to Pune for the National Games, his mother had joined Subhash in Delhi.

In Delhi, a sports injury expert, Dr Ashok Rajgopal, who was an acquaintance of the then chief national coach TPS Puri, was asked to take a look at his injury. In Pune, Gopi hobbled around with help of friends from the Delhi Railways team, which was travelling to Delhi for the inter-railways camp prior to the soon-to-be-held Nationals. He was distressed and a bit depressed as he wanted to win that National Games singles' crown badly. That would have catapulted him to the top spot in national rankings, just prior to the 1994 Nationals, which were to be held in February, just a month or so after the day he sustained this grievous injury. But neither Gopi nor his friends knew the extent of the injury. Gopi believed what the local doctor had told him, 'You will be fine within a week or so. This is just a sprain and some rest will see you back on the court.'

Asawari Patwardhan was a huge help during that phase as she helped pack my bags and helped me to the station, up the stairs, with the help of Ajay Kanwar and other players such as Vijay Lancy, Meena Khade and Vijaydeep Singh. They almost managed to carry me right up to my berth in the Jhelum Express. I had a crutch to lean on by that time and we went to the station in an auto. I remember that journey clearly as I could not bend my leg at all and it was extremely painful keeping my leg straight and the jerks on the road had me gritting my teeth all the way to the station. The couple of pain relievers I had did not help at all. They somehow made me

lie down in my berth and my leg was straight all the time. I remember that all this time during the journey I kept on thinking of my mother and how she would take all this.

Gopi also revealed that from the time he injured himself till the time he reached Delhi, he did not eat anything.

For almost three days, I did not eat anything as I was afraid of going to the toilet. My knee could not bend at all and I also realised that the cubicle in the train is very small and I had no chance of sitting in an Indian or Western style commode. So I just did not eat, lest I feel any pressure. I did manage to urinate at the hospital when I was taken to meet Dr Sarangpani and again at the hotel where I was staying in Pune. But from the time I reached the train and was ensconced in the lower left side berth in the ordinary second class compartment, I just stayed there and did not move at all.

Subbaravamma had heard the live broadcast of the match on DD Radio and knew about Gopi's injury to some extent. But no one knew at the time how bad it really was. Gopi, too, believed that he would be up and running in a week or ten days at the most. Who was he to argue with what the doctor had told him in Pune?

During almost the entire journey to Delhi, my thoughts were on the forthcoming Nationals, which I wanted to win very badly and stamp my name on the trophy, and the Thomas Cup, in which I was very, very keen to represent the country. All the players on the train were sympathetic and like well-wishers, told me I would be fine and will be thrashing them all very soon. There were lots of jokes on this as they tried to help me destress. No one at that time knew the gravity of my injury, and all of us even played selectors and selected the Thomas Cup team in which I was going to be the key member as I had already shown my class in both singles and doubles. They also predicted that no one could stop me from winning the Nationals this time. I felt good listening to all this banter and believed in them. Ajay Kanwar also told me about this doctor, Ashok Rajgopal, and said he was the best and he would help me a lot. Puri had also told my father about him and therefore, even before reaching Delhi, I was really looking forward to meeting him.



Gopi obviously felt some pain during the trip but since the leg was not moved around, he was able to absorb it. In any case, as we have seen, during his childhood in Chennai and other places, outdoor sports ensured that he had minor injuries almost every day and had to take a few stitches frequently. In some ways, Gopi was quite pain-resistant, and therefore, the discomfort in the train did not bother him too much. He clearly thought that this time too, his overall fitness and resistance to injuries would ensure his speedy recovery. Gopi says that he hardly ever cried because of any injury, including this one, the gravity of which would have laid low even the bravest person. 'I have cried many times because of losing matches, cried because of various other things, but never because of any injury.'

Right through this journey to Delhi, Gopi's main concern was how long he would be away from the game. He was, for the very first time in his career so far, actually looking and feeling like a top sportsman. Till that time, it was only Manoj and Pravin Kumar who had made headlines in Hyderabad, by reaching the semis or finals of all-India open events. But after reaching the finals at Gorakhpur, winning the Under-22 National Doubles and then stamping his authority on Dipankar at the Chennai major event, all within three weeks or so, Gopi had managed to arrive on the national scene. He suddenly saw himself competing at that level from Hyderabad. He had somehow emulated his childhood idols. It was a big leap for him to get there. To top it all, at the National Games semi-finals, he had drubbed Dipankar, till that time the undisputed numero uno in the country, in the singles. All the hard work had just started paying off and Gopi was looking keenly towards the future. He knew that he could dominate the national scene for some years to come.

Gopi was extremely happy with the whole scenario. Until then his foreign travel had been quite limited. He was looking forward to playing for the Thomas Cup, the international team event held every two years – the first official team event for him, where he would also don the Indian colours for the first time. He had heard from Manoj and Pravin about their exploits in the previous Thomas Cup in Hong Kong. For Gopi, this was a dream come true.

He spent his time counting the days till he could play again. 'I thought since I fell in the morning, maybe that meant I had one less day to recover. I mean if I had injured myself at night, then that day was gone anyway. You know, these type of childish thoughts kept me busy, and yes, happy to some extent as I sincerely thought and agreed with what [Dr] Sarangpani had said

and what my friends were saying in the train. I could find no reason to disbelieve them as I wanted to agree with them in any case.'

So the group reached Delhi and Gopi was overwhelmed at seeing his mother cry. But he consoled her, saying that he would be up and playing in about a week. Puri was there at the station along with Subbaravamma to take Gopi straight to the medical specialist. But Gopi also suspects that his mother was more upset at seeing him on a crutch than because of the injury itself, as she had seen him injured several times, right from childhood. 'This crutch was another story altogether. Once I was all right, she threw away the crutch, saying it was a bad omen. Everyday she would glare at the crutch as if this was the enemy number one of the family.'

Gopi was busy cracking jokes so that her mood lightened, saying that now he would be like this forever, but the more he tried to humour her, the more she cried.

From the station, Gopi was driven to the flat, as the doctor's appointment was for the evening. Subhash carried him up the stairs with support from Subbaravamma. The building had no elevator. This became a constant scene in that colony right through Gopi's rehab, as he had to be carried up and down by his parents on their shoulders.

This is something I can never ever forget as long as I am alive – the effort they put in to help me physically and emotionally, in the most bleak phase of my life. I was not a small boy and was quite heavy. But they never complained. Between them, they managed to carry me up and down that staircase so many times. My father always had that smile on his face. I am sure in their hearts they may have felt that my career was over, once they knew the extent of the injury. But they never broached the subject with me. It was at that time that I realised that parents can go to any length to support their child. I was blessed in having these two wonderful human beings as my father and mother. If for me the whole episode was a trial by fire, it was no less for them.

The family met Dr Rajgopal the same evening and the first reaction from the doctor, according to Gopi, was the same as that of Dr Sarangpani in Pune. Rajgopal said that it would take about seven to ten days for the patient to be up and about, but he also added that early next morning, there would be a minor surgery of about thirty minutes. Subbaravamma remembers clearly what the doctor said.

He told Gopi, we [they] will do an arthroscopy in the morning and that this was just a minor procedure, and that Gopi will start playing in maximum fifteen days from this small operation. We were very relieved to hear this. When I had seen Gopi at the station, I had been really mortified. I was crushed. He looked so vulnerable and so much in discomfort using that crutch. Of course, he was putting up a brave front for all of us, but I knew instinctively that he was in much pain. I could not stop crying and felt very helpless about the whole thing. But Rajgopal's words gave much comfort to me and my husband.

The family went to the clinic next morning at 6 a.m. Gopi had not been allowed to eat anything till then. 'I remembered and prayed to all the gods I could think of. I just wanted my boy to come back fast from the surgery and start playing as soon as possible. He was so near the goal we had for him. He was just one step away from being called the best player in the country and I did not want that dream shattered for Gopi. We waited outside with fingers crossed.' But the small procedure, much to the fear of Subbaravamma and Subhash, went on for more than two and half hours.

According to Dr Rajgopal, Gopi had an extremely serious career-threatening knee injury. Medically speaking, Gopi had an acute *anterior cruciate* ligament tear with a lateral meniscal tear. He also had a haemarthrosis. The recovery time for this is quite long and involves enormous effort and time from the athlete to ensure adequate rehabilitation and recovery. In short, Gopi's career seemed doomed, whichever way one looked at it. But Rajgopal was a diehard optimist. He dearly wanted Gopi to hit the bird again. But he also had no answer as to when the player would finally walk onto a badminton court again. All he could do initially was to operate, do his job well, and leave everything else to God and Gopi's unnerving determination.

Says Dr Rajgopal, 'I had told Gopi that we could fix the knee. But I warned him, that to get to peak levels of fitness, it would take a lot of effort, patience and time. His body language gave me the confidence to tell him that together we could reach the top.'

Gopi came out of the surgery all groggy and in a sub-conscious state, still under the influence of anaesthesia.

I was half-asleep but remember whispering for quite some time, 'Mamma it hurts, mamma it hurts', and she told me later on that she cried more when

she saw the doctor sweating as he came out of surgery. He waited for me to come out of post-operative anaesthesia and then told me actually what had happened to me. The actual aspect of the injury was explained to me for the very first time. He explained to us in detail the extent of the injury and I understood that the ligament was completely gone, snapped totally, and so was the meniscus, which was torn. Immediately I thought that I will miss the Thomas Cup, but will be able to play the Nationals. I simply did not want to miss both. This was uppermost in my mind.

With more than thirty stitches on the knee, which was still swollen, Gopi, still slurring because of the after-effects of medication, managed to ask the surgeon how many days he would have to rest. Gopi was told that it might take at least fifteen days before he could start walking. In fact, Dr Rajgopal also concurred that while the Thomas Cup was gone, perhaps there was a slim chance to participate in the National Championships.

Gopi feels that Dr Rajgopal was a really intelligent, caring person and a good doctor, and it was sheer fortune that they landed up with him. He confesses that after meeting him for the first time once he reached Delhi, Subhash also took Gopi to Safdarjung Hospital and got a third opinion after meeting Dr Rajgopal. Some people told them that Dr Rajgopal was good, while others opined that he was not the right man for the job. The family was also told that this sort of surgery was not required and would completely ruin Gopi's career. One medical expert warned them that this procedure was dangerous and Gopi would never be able to play after it. He would be limping around all his life if he went ahead with it.

But the family decided once and for all that surgery was the correct thing to do and that they had in Ashok Rajgopal a sincere doctor. It was felt that it was destiny and an act of God that they had come to him. As Gopi says, there was no logical reason to meet him and trust him so much. But somehow he had faith in this doctor and he entrusted his future in his skilful hands.

This faith was reinforced because of one simple gesture of the doctor, which touched the hearts of the parents and Gopi. Dr Rajgopal waived his fees. Subhash had gone to ask the receptionist about the fees for the operation and post-operative care. His wife was with him, and both of them were concerned about the financial aspect, knowing that their resources were meagre. They were told that it would be around ₹15,000, to which Subbaravamma told the receptionist that this was a steep amount for the

family. But she emphasised that they would pay, even though they would have to raise the money by selling some of the family assets. Somehow, Dr Rajgopal heard this conversation and told them not to bother about the fees. But he said he would not let Gopi get away so lightly. He told Gopi, 'You win the All England title for the country and that would be my payment.' Subhash did not know how to react to this kind gesture. 'He was like an angel for us and we came to trust him completely,' says Subhash, as he remembers what happened on that fateful day.

Gopi stayed in the hospital for three days while he recuperated from the surgery. Keeping Gopi's obvious passion for the sport and the fact that he wanted desperately to get back to competitive badminton in mind, Dr Rajgopal told Gopi that after removing the stitches in ten days or so, he would be able to predict how soon Gopi would start playing. It was when the stitches were removed that the family for the first time saw the actual extent of the problem on hand. It was not the typical Gopi injury of childhood, which took a couple of stitches. Here were more than thirty of them, almost covering the entire knee area. The surgeon told them not to worry and that he would see Gopi again the coming Friday.

This, according to Gopi, became the mantra at the hospital during each visit. 'Come next Friday and then we will see how soon you can start playing,' were Dr Rajgopal's words, week after week.

The doctor started giving Gopi some light training schedules and also some dietary advice. Gopi, still worried about the National Championships, would eat even less than what was prescribed. Boiled chicken, small rotis or *rotlas*, a little bit of dal, with some green vegetables thrown in, without any oil, became his diet.

A little depressed at the time since he was not getting any firm opinion from his doctor as to when he could actually start playing, Gopi fell into a pattern of doing whatever exercises he was told to do and eating as little as possible. Typically, he would do each repetition many more times than what was requested of him. This was also the time when people all around him stayed silent about his future as a badminton player.

In Gopi's own words, this phase lasted for more than three months.

My parents and grandparents were really worried. They did not know what was in store for the future as far as I was concerned. I mean, they would have been happy just to see me walk. That is all they wanted in their hearts.

To see me on the crutch for so many weeks had dampened their hopes. I could see that they had lost all hopes of seeing me play badminton again. No one told me anything and tried to be cheerful around me, but I could sense the unease. The general consensus was that, after such surgery, no one plays again and even close people around me were not immune to believing this.

One reason could be because my legs, which were really big in muscles all over, due to the heavy weight training that I used to do, had really atrophied because of non-activity. There were hardly any muscles left and when my parents or other close people looked at the legs, they instantly believed that even walking was going to be a major problem for me. Yet the family found some humour in this gloomy scenario. Every Friday, when we went to the clinic, the nurse was asked to see if any strand of muscle could now be seen, as if overnight some magic had ensured the arrival of the muscle. Just like we used to see whether my height had increased in the morning, when I was a kid.

But one thing I clearly remember is that even though I was in bed, I was trying some sort of exercise all the time to strengthen my legs and hands. I would do more and more, just anything that came into my mind. And these self-improvised drills were in addition to what I was told to perform. For these three months that I was bed-ridden, I tried to concentrate on just building my strength in whatever way I could. I banished the thought that I could not play again. I believed that I would get better each day and that one day soon, I will reclaim my lost legacy. Badminton was my life and come what may, I was not going to let myself or my parents down. I was looking forward to the day I could move on to the wheelchair so I could be a bit mobile. I read books on yoga and other things and soon positive energy radiated within me.

By the second month or so, Dr Rajgopal had told me to start walking, to start putting on weight on my legs, but the medical experts at home, that is my parents, did not allow me to walk. They wanted to be absolutely sure that nothing should go wrong. They thought that some more days in bed would actually help. So they vetoed the doctor for some time. But those were really drastic times for all of us. My father had to carry me on his shoulders down the stairs, making sure my leg was straight. While coming back to the flat, my mother and father would make me sit on a plastic chair and then together carry me up the stairs. The width of the staircase was not

much and my mother, who is very frail, would graze her elbows, yet this was something that had to be done. They helped with my ablutions since the toilet was Indian style and I could not use that. My mother was in fact my sole companion all the twenty-four hours in those days as my father had to go to work, and she bore the main brunt of my post-surgery phase problems.

I was treated like a total patient by my mother, including the food that was fed by her. Right up to the time when the parents finally relented and agreed with the doctor that I could start walking. This was a little more than three months after the surgery.

I did not make much use of the crutch when I took those tentative first steps, as I used the shoulders of my father for support. Yet, my mother would ensure that nothing slippery was on the way when I walked. She would be ahead, sweeping the floor and also making sure the bathroom was dry when I was finally allowed to use it on my own. Of course, she would allow me to walk only when my father was around. But I used the time when he was in office to do my leg extensions with a one kg Tata Salt packet tied to my leg. These extensions really helped as I could feel the strength coming back. Within a month or so, I was tying two such packets and doing almost two to three hours of these leg extension drills.

There was a small black-and-white television at home, but Gopi was not a TV person, instead using his free time to read up on yoga. His fascination with yoga started at that time. For company, he had all the Delhi badminton and Railways team members trooping into the house frequently. Many a night, Subbaravamma cooked food for as many as fifteen hungry badminton players who would come around to cheer Gopi up.

Subbaravamma recollects those dim days and nights, saying:

It was just three of us in Delhi. Of course, other players came to give Gopi company, but finally we three had to face the world and all of Gopi's problems. I got really close to Gopi during this stay in Delhi and after this episode, when he started playing, I visited all the Nationals that he played in and incidentally won. I do not like [to see] any of these players falling or getting hurt. Once I saw Rajeev Bagga fall down badly and I was in tears. I like to see all these children play but without any injury. But I must confess that Gopi was very positive right through these seven or eight months that he was away from the game. It was he and his doctor who always said that

one day soon Gopi will again rise like a champion. It was a horrendous time for us, but then, God was there to look after Gopi.

Once the walking started, Gopi's strength started coming back. He had not played badminton for weeks, and the healing process was very slow. It took him almost five months to start walking on his own, without any support. Today, with modern medicine, five months may sound too long, but in those years, this was an acceptable amount of time, since Gopi's injury was really bad. Plus, there was also the fact that the family was perhaps over-cautious when it came to his healing. It took that long even though Gopi was building up his knee, doing five times more exercise than what was prescribed to him by experts.

But one thing that Gopi started in Delhi and continued after he returned to Hyderabad was his old way of being in touch with the game. He started wall practice, first from a sitting position and then also standing up, but ensuring that he did not move suddenly as that could again create problems to his left knee. The sweet timing of hitting the shuttle came back gradually and his sense of well-being also increased day by day. The wall practice also ensured that he defaced most of the walls of the Delhi home, but Subbaravamma turned a blind eye to this, as she was glad that Gopi was trying to do something that made him happy, and that this pursuit also kept his thoughts away from the surgery and related issues. Long hours of wall practice slowly got his focus back and also helped in returning the old strength to his playing arm.

The routine was the same every week for him. Every Friday, he would visit the doctor, who would again say that by the coming week he could start playing. He would visit the physiotherapist everyday with Subbaravamma, and diligently do the rehab exercises. Back home, it was more and more of the same drills plus a couple of hours of wall practice thrown in, to complete the day's routine. He had almost forgotten how to play the game as he was not allowed to step on the court, but finally, after more than six months in Delhi, he was allowed to take a train to Hyderabad along with his mother.

Dr Rajgopal had warned that it would take about twelve months before Gopi would heal enough to try hard training again. This figure was on the family's mind constantly and the parents especially wanted that time-frame to be followed in toto. Gopi, however, had always done things his own way. Initially, when he started walking without support, he used to limp. He heard



snide remarks when he went limping to the Fateh Maidan Club, stepping onto the court seven months after the surgery, which had taken place on 28 January 1994. The remarks alluded to his walk, and what he heard angered him more than ever before. He heard, 'How can Gopi play now, look at him, he is now lame and cannot even walk properly,' almost incessantly, which made him even more rebellious. He now had something to prove to the world. He wanted not only to prove these people who called him *langda* (lame) wrong, but also to crush all the cynics and critics who laughed at the idea of him playing badminton again.

After the surgery, he had told his mother that he would overcome all obstacles and problems, and one day, he would be India's No. 1 badminton champ. True to his nature, even when bedridden and all through his rehab time in Delhi, Gopi had worked as much as he could on gaining strength and fitness in whatever way possible. He had been patient, focussed on his well-being, yet with the calm detachment that only he could bring upon his thinking and on his future as a badminton player. Now that he was in Hyderabad and had started going to the stadium, he had to reinvent himself as the dramatic and aggressive player he had been not so very long back, till that fatal fall on 25 January 1994 snapped a winning spree that would have surely catapulted him to the top of Indian badminton.

His parents would have been happy just to see him walk normally and take up a job, since he had also finished his graduation while waiting to start playing again. But Gopi knew no life other than this sport. Moreover, he had been written off by everyone, except Dr Rajgopal, who had told Subbaravamma, 'I have reconstructed his left knee perfectly and it will be better, stronger than the other knee. I have no hesitation in saying that he will regain his strength and old power to reach his destiny. It may take more time and this will test his patience, but he will come back stronger than before'.

For Gopi, who had already defeated the very best India had to offer and had tasted some decent victories at the international level in his very first forays on the world circuit, the time had now come to redeem his pledge to himself. As the Indian badminton world, and especially his coaches and colleagues, waited with baited breath, he started his training in Hyderabad after seven long months. Would Gopi bloom again to be the champion that he once was? Would the people who called him *langda* behind his back and sometimes even to his face, be proved wrong and take back the slur? Had the surgery really been perfect enough for Dr Rajgopal to be paid back his fees in

terms of an All England victory, which the good doctor and Gopi both wanted badly? Everyone waited to see the next scene in this drama which was unfolding slowly but surely, and was yet to take some interesting turns.

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## THE COMEBACK



**T**he training started slowly and gingerly, as local physios and the parents insisted that Gopi take it easy in the beginning. But the knee still hurt Gopi now and then, especially after doing some sprints. If he ever tried to run fast, then usually that very evening or the next morning he would not be able to get up, as the operation area really throbbed with pain. So initial practice was intermittent. This continued for almost fifteen to twenty days. When unable to go to the stadium, Gopi used to damage the walls of his home with his well-practised shots.

At that time a friend of his, Dr Ramesh Chandra, came down from USA for a holiday. He was an orthopaedic surgeon and took a look at Gopi. After hearing about the entire episode and the way Gopi had recovered after the rehab, he was really pleased. He said that the surgery done by Dr Rajgopal was good and the way Gopi had responded to the strengthening programme was amazing. It was he who really explained to Gopi what the injury meant in terms of badminton movements. He said that although the knee had recovered very well, there was every chance that the injury may recur if adequate precautions were not taken.

In Gopi's own words:

Dr Rajgopal was a type of surgeon who was very good and confident but who told me, 'Don't worry about anything. Just leave it to me. If anything goes wrong I am there – so go and start playing' But this friend of mine explained to me further details about all aspects of the injury and how it could ruin my career and what the surgery had done, what the

reconstruction of the knee really meant and now at this stage, when I had just about started playing again after almost eight months, what could be in store for me. He explained to me in a layman's manner how the knee worked while I played. The entire dynamics of the way the knee supported the movements of athletes and ensured that we were able to move in all directions, the jerks, the jumps, and what these movements meant for the knee. In short, I was able to understand how a human knee actually worked in terms of athleticism.

Dr Ramesh Chandra then told Gopi that he should use a derotation knee brace that would help in ensuring that the knee did not rotate while playing, sprinting or doing sundry badminton-specific exercises on court, and that this knee brace should be used at least for a year or so. Raja, who was in the US, was contacted and the brace was bought for \$500 and shipped to Hyderabad. In terms of Indian currency, at that time, the cost of the brace was about ₹ 15,000, a lot of money for the family.

But as Subbaravamma recalls:

For Gopi's badminton, whatever needed to be done had to be done by the family. If I had to sell some jewellery and some money was to be borrowed, so be it. So we bought the knee brace. If the budget in the house had to be tightened more and more, we would do it for the sport. That obviously meant no spending even ₹ 50 for parties or outings. No more new clothes, no travelling by auto. But yes, good nutritional food and whatever was required for Gopi to continue his career in badminton. Raja did his best, but he was getting only a \$1,000 scholarship in those years.

The measurements, however, were sent to Raja, who procured the knee brace and shipped it to Hyderabad. Gopi was clearly the odd man out on courts when, wearing that knee brace, he started training, to the disbelief of the entire Hyderabad badminton community. There was still some pain and it would have been better had he waited some more time to ensure complete healing, but Gopi was clearly getting frustrated. He had to be where the action was. And in his case, the action was at the Lal Bahadur Shastri Stadium badminton courts, at Fateh Maidan. He was in no mood now to waste any more time. He had already lost more than eight months by now and had realised that other players were getting far ahead of him in terms of fitness and experience. In Delhi, even though many of his friends visited him

daily, he had been away from the courts physically. But in Hyderabad, he used to walk down to the stadium for his exercises, and would see his peers training and practising, which would upset him.

Gopi had missed the National Championships and other tournaments, both in Andhra and at the all-India level. Of course, what hurt him the most in this entire episode was that he had missed out on what would have been his first Thomas Cup Championships, where he would have donned the Indian colours officially for the first time. But with training and practice now going on, in spite of some pain that he still experienced now and then, Gopi was ready to play his first event, the South Zone Inter-State at Belgaum, in October 1994 – a full nine months after that fall and the horrendous injury in Pune.

The knee brace helped Gopi gain confidence, but it was uncomfortable. He took a month or so to completely adjust to the restrictive use of the brace. But he had reconciled to the fact that, as per the advice given to him by Dr Ramesh Chandra, he would have to play with the brace at least for a year, by which time he had been told that the knee would again be as strong as it was before the injury.

Gopi was about to be benched for the inter-state event, as the team management felt that he was still not fit enough to play tough matches. But he insisted that he could win his matches for the team and indeed came out with all guns blazing to defeat the likes of Markose Bristow and Ajith Haridas, amongst others, to ensure that Andhra Pradesh qualified for an inter-zonal finals. By end November, Gopi, who was now in hard training for the forthcoming 1996 SAARC Games to be held at Vijayawada, felt himself recovering lost ground as far as fitness levels were concerned. But the taunts calling him lame and saying that he would never fully recover still haunted him, as he could hear these snide remarks now and then while running on the stadium track. He also had a small showdown with a senior coach, who said, 'The team is leaving tomorrow and this fellow is still limping three days before the SAARC Games'. Many people were wondering whether Gopi would play properly. Gopi was extremely hurt and distressed by this and decided to withdraw his name from the team.

He did not go with the team and later, for the first time since returning to Hyderabad, Gopi called up Dr Rajgopal and literally cried over the phone. He said that his career seemed doomed, but the good doctor emphatically told him to ignore what everyone else was saying. Recalls Dr Rajgopal:

I could sense that he was getting frustrated and was on the edge. He was upset at what he was hearing. But I told him that there was nothing wrong with his knee and if it was even a bit painful, he was to take a Brufen tablet. If the pain persisted, [he should] take one more. Gopi told me he felt really fit and could take on any player, including Dipankar if he came to SAARC, and I said, go ahead and give it all your best. He was now in good training for almost two months and was feeling good on the court. He was moving well, he was feeling strong and told me that his confidence level in smashes was very high – so I told him to ignore everything that bothered him and go and play. Be calm and be yourself from now on, is what I told him.

Armed now with new confidence and a green signal from his doctor, Gopi went by bus to Vijayawada and reached the venue of the SAARC Games on the morning of the event. He went on to win the men's singles, in what could really be described as his first official international title. More than anything else, this was a moral victory for him. It banished the ghost of his career-threatening injury and gave a fitting reply to all those who taunted him and ran him down. The SAARC Games, comprising only South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh, are not noted for high level of badminton. Whatever glamour is available, in terms of big names and good standard, comes only from the Indian players. Gopi, therefore, had to compete against the best India could offer, but in the run of things, this was a good outing for him, bringing him back to his old self. He was again in the running to be officially crowned the best Indian badminton player.

Sheer disbelief was the reaction of many who saw Gopi play so well at Vijayawada. Even players such as Manoj and Pravin, whom Gopi had idolised as a young teenager, were amazed at the fact that Gopi was back playing championships, let alone suddenly being good enough to start winning all over again. Though Gopi was a lot younger than these two, and did not belong to the same batch of players that Manoj and Pravin hung around with, sipping tea at the Jannat Café outside the Fateh Maidan Club after the practice session was over, he still felt that instead of being so stunned by his form after the surgery, they and other Indian players and coaches could have been a bit more sympathetic towards him. Gopi, in any case, did not drink tea or coffee, so perhaps that made him seem a bit asocial.

Yet, he had tremendous regard for all those playing for India, especially Manoj and Pravin, who were in every sense for him co-Hyderabadis. By this time, however, Gopi, ever the loner and a person who did not open up easily, realised that this battle had to be fought by him alone. He understood that the only answer he could give to the critics who had ridiculed him, to the co-players and trainees who had taunted him behind his back in hurtful whispers, and to the coaches who had questioned his ability to attain top level fitness all over again, was by letting his racket talk. Success and victory were the only two virtues people bowed down to. His parents were the only emotional anchors he would have. It was he alone who had to endure all the hardships all over again to reclaim his place as the top gun of Indian badminton.

In all this, however, he had one incredible ally in his surgeon Dr Ashok Rajgopal. Gopi defeated Dipankar Bhattacharya in the finals at Vijayawada and a Sri Lankan player in the semi-finals. After the event, he spoke to the surgeon, outlining his fears and his anxieties. True to his nature, Dr Rajgopal told him not to worry about anything at all.

I remember Gopi calling me afterwards and I congratulated him on making such an astonishing comeback. I told him not to worry about any pain or any discomfort he may have in the operated area. I told him that if you smash your knee thirty-two times, I will reconstruct it thirty-two times. He was to train and play all out every time he went on court and let the world know his true potential. I had that faith in him, and his victory at the SAARC Games was reigniting what would be the beginning of a great career for Gopi.

Technically, Gopi had not changed his playing style at all. For example, he was not putting undue pressure on his right knee, to ensure that the left did not see any injury again. In Gopi's own words:

I don't think I changed my way of playing. But yes, I did become a bit more careful. I would ensure the matches would not go beyond what they were meant to go. Rallies would not go beyond what they were supposed to go. If the rally needed to end with a jump smash, I would use it, otherwise no. I would not jump unnecessarily, and that was my way of playing a bit safely as I did not want to take any unnecessary chances. I would be a lot calmer on the court. I used aggression where it was required and did not waste any energy. I also used more half smashes to get openings near

centre court, and yes, used more net area to get my points.

According to former badminton great Leroy D'Sa, Gopi's comeback was nothing short of a miracle. D'Sa throws some light on Gopi's return to Delhi after his injury and subsequent comeback in the game.

You know, Gopi and his father came straight from the station to the Railway stadium, where our Railway camp was going on before that Nationals. All of us were there and since I was not present in Pune when he injured himself, I just did not know the extent of his injury. He was keen to see his friends in our team. I saw that his knee was swollen like a football and knew this was trouble, major trouble for him. But since he had not yet met Dr Rajgopal, the extent of injury was not known, even by him or his family. His mother was, of course, in tears all the time, while his father was trying to put up a brave front. Most astoundingly, Gopi, who was on crutches, was smiling and joking with all present, and was talking about the forthcoming Nationals. Anyway, he went into surgery the next morning and then, as we all know, he was out for almost a year. Now, if you ask me whether we thought he would come back, let me be very clear on this. I knew, given his commitment to the game, he will come back to play tournaments some time or the other, since badminton was his life. But that he will again rise to the gigantic stature in Indian and international badminton was something no one, including me, believed. I thought that maybe, he will play for sometime and then give up. But boy! He shocked all of us with the most stunning and admirable comeback seen after such a ghastly injury. Nothing short of a miracle, if you ask me. He is a fighter to the core, an intelligent player on court, and his controlled aggression while playing has always amazed me. His commitment to fitness was always intense and I knew that at least in that department, he will never leave any stone unturned to ensure his comeback.

The one thing that Gopi kept on doing constantly was strengthening his knee. Manoj vouches for the fact that whenever Gopi had the time, he was doing all sorts of exercises to ensure his legs were getting stronger.

I also had major knee problems and could never recover. In fact, my career came to a stop because of this. Gopi had a much more serious injury, and yet it was just his determination that brought him back. At times, we all thought he was overdoing this strengthening bit, but he used to be like a



man possessed, isolated in his own zeal to work on his formula to make a comeback. As far as his playing style was concerned, he was now saving a bit of energy, but as soon as he saw openings in a rally, he would crush the opponent. He was there to win and was putting his life into the game all over again. In a way, all that weight training he was doing ensured that his smashes became really heavy and his action also became fast while hitting the bird. The fact that within two to three months of his starting training, he was back defeating the likes of Bhattacharya, Bakshi, and others, speaks volumes of his incredible determination and focus.

By this time, the Tata Salt bags had given way to sandbags. Gopi used to carry them to do the knee extension exercises all the time, and would start whenever he had even ten minutes to spare. In buses, trains, anywhere he got a chance, out would come the sandbag, weighing about two kilogrammes, which would be swiftly tied to the left leg, to start the exercise. He did not bother about what people around thought of him. If he was travelling to some destination by train, he would tie the bags even in the middle of the night and calmly go about his routine. Many an old saree of Subbaravamma was torn to get the strips to tie up the bags to the left leg.

The knee usually has two types of movements. It moves up and down and sideways. Gopi's brace had two cups to hold the knee in one place, ensuring that while the movement up and down went on as usual, the sideways movement was restricted. Dr Rajgopal reconfirmed Dr Chandra's statement to Gopi, that he would have to wear this knee brace for at least one year. Gopi had no problems with this, as long as it allowed him to train and play as hard and as much as he wanted. In any case, the strengthening exercise and process was on at every opportunity that came his way. If there was any pain he would gulp down a Brufen tablet. If the knee was sore and a bit swollen after hours of training or playing, then of course, there would be hours of wall practice again. One thing was sure – he was not going to give up and was fully focussed on carving out his own destiny.

Says Subhash, remembering some days that were really bad for Gopi,

I could see tears in his eyes if he missed out on a training or a practice session because the knee was playing up. He would be unusually quiet during these times but we could sense his despair. But he never gave up the fight. His optimism never wavered. And such times of pain or lack of activity for a few hours would soon be an aberration, as he would suddenly

shrug off this state of melancholy, pick up either the sandbags to strengthen his other leg, or simply pick up a racket and rattle off shots on the walls, which in any case, he had blackened all over. His mood would pick up after a strenuous session and he would soon be back to normal. Badminton was his life and he was determined to be back to his winning ways as early as possible.

This rehab period was also the time Gopi got interested in yoga and started a course in the Art of Living. His deep association with his guruji Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and how such discourses helped him in his game, and indeed in his life, are dealt with later in this book.

Under Dr Rajgopal, Gopi did his rehab, as he says, ‘On a Friday-to-Friday basis.’ Another meaning of rehabilitation was demonstrated to him by Dr Ramesh Chandra.

Dr Rajgopal would see me every Friday, tap my knee and say, it looks great. No problems at all. Go and walk now, or go and start jogging. I am there for any problems, so don’t worry at all, and so on. He was cautious but encouraging as well. At the same time, he did not allow me to start training till he was convinced the knee could take the strain. He knew what was good for me, but did not share this sort of information with me. Every Friday, like a routine, I was with him and he would say, you can start jumping and sprinting next Friday. So it went on and on, till finally he gave the green signal. After I put on the knee brace, Dr Ramesh told me exactly what I was to do in terms of exercises, exactly how long I would have to wear the contraption, and exactly how it was helping me in two ways. First, it was ensuring that sideways movement was really restricted and second, it was allowing the healing process to continue, while I could still train hard and play as much or as fast as I could. It is really the combination of these two great doctors that I was lucky to get at the most crucial phase of my life. Without either of them, I do not think I could have played badminton to any level at all.

But even though Gopi had started off on a winning note as far as his comeback was concerned, the eventual journey to reach the number one position in the country was not an easy one. Indeed, there were to be many hiccups on the way, and he was not going to win that one title which had eluded him so far – the Senior National Championships singles crown –

easily.

The annual season of senior championships that year started off with the major events, the first one being held at the Cricket Club of India (CCI), more famous for the magnificent Brabourne Stadium, which was the Mecca of Indian cricket for a long time. Located in south Mumbai, near Churchgate railway station, the club has amongst its members the who's who of the business world and the glitterati of the city. Many of these top-notch people play badminton in the three-court hall tucked away in one corner of the club. Badminton has really been a favourite sport amongst the citizens for decades, and indeed, many still say that in the glorious days of Nandu M. Natekar, the sport paralleled cricket in sheer popularity and charisma. Names such as Henry Ferreira, George Lewis, Natekar, Chandu Deoras, the Ullal brothers – Bala and Anant, amongst a host of others, were legends till the 1960s, while on the distaff side Shobha Moorthy, Ami Ghia-Shah, Maureen Mathias and later on Aparna Popat ensured the sport remained in the headlines. In the old days, one could see lines of people jostling to buy tickets of up to ₹100, just to witness the artistry of Natekar or the sheer elegance of Ami Ghia-Shah. Indeed, it was the magical Nandu Natekar who downed the then Danish All England champion and World Number One, Erland Kops, in a most memorable match in the same hard wooden courts of the CCI.

It was on these hard wooden-floor courts that Gopi came to play the first major championships of the season and was bundled out by the enigmatic Siddharth Jain, a tall, lanky hard-hitter, who used to practice at the famed Padukone Academy in Bangalore. CCI courts were famous in the badminton circle for having really hard flooring and Gopi, with his knee still hurting on and off, found it difficult to recover after a long quarter-final match against Jain. He just could not cope with the fast-moving player, who rattled off point after point with his smashes, which came off weak net returns by Gopi.

The badminton caravan then moved on to the sleepy, spiritual town of Nashik, also famous nationwide for its grapes, pomegranate orchards and salubrious climate. Some two hundred kilometres northeast of Mumbai, the town had just one club with a two-court badminton hall not in the best of conditions. In those days, barring a few courts in Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and perhaps Pune, one could not find ideal playing conditions anywhere. The concerned state associations never really bothered to ensure that the district where the event was being held saw to the playing conditions. Either the flooring was bad, with wooden planks chipping off in places, or the

height was not enough as per international standards, or the walls were too close for comfort, leaving in many cases just a three- or four-foot gap from the lines of the playing arena. Suffice it to say that the safety and well-being of a player was not the uppermost priority for the officials.

The championships in Nashik saw Gopi outmanoeuvred by Srikant Bakshi, the stocky, good-looking shuttler from Delhi, who played for Railways. Bakshi played far too fast for Gopi's liking and caught him with deftly-placed smashes now and then. The crux of the matter was that Gopi was having problems with his left side movements, and any astute, intelligent player would try catching him near the left net area. Suddenly Gopi was losing to these players. Gopi still felt a bit rusty as he had not been able to practise as much as he had wanted to. The constant attack on his left-side net area, with numerous drop shots, meant great strain on the left knee, which caused a lot of pain. It was depressing for him because these were the same players he had defeated easily earlier, and now he was struggling to match their pace. Gopi's nature was such that he just could not accept the defeats. Left to him, he would have started going for the jump smashes, played as fast as possible, but then the chances of the injury recurring were immense and he had to play with a soft approach till he was completely healed.

So, while he was extremely happy that he was playing the sport, as there was no life for him without badminton, at the same time, he was distressed that he was losing out in matches to players whom he clearly did not rank as high as himself, as he had time and again beaten them all over the country before. Happiness at just being part of the tournament circuit again outweighed the losing factor as far as he was concerned; it was just that he was not getting into the playing rhythm he was famous for.

The last tournament of the senior open events is the Senior Nationals. The 1994 Nationals was held in the biting February winter of 1995 at Patiala, the home of the National Institute of Sports (NIS). The NIS, later renamed the Sports Authority of India (SAI), was the home of Indian sports training camps for a long, long time. Generations of Indian sportsmen and sportswomen had, at some time or the other, spent months participating in the long-duration camps at the NIS Patiala, and for many, it used to be their second home for many years. It was mandatory for all national teams to undergo rigorous training in the huge campus of the old Moti Bagh Palace, which was the seat of the Maharajah of Patiala, before the government acquired it. Since the then maharajah wanted a sports setup in his palace, this

became the centre of excellence for all sports. Like all other national squad players, Gopi too had been to Patiala many times.

But this 1994 Nationals is one he would not like to remember at all. Still to get into his rhythm, he struggled to win the first two rounds and then ran into the tall, stylish Rajeev Bagga. A highly intelligent player on court, Rajeev always used his huge reach to catch the shuttle as close to the net as possible, to get his dribbles in play, which of course got him those easy openings to finish off with steep smashes. Rajeev also had very deceptive drop shots, both from forehand and backhand flanks. He had seen Gopi struggling to reach the net from his left side and this area obviously was his main target. He never allowed Gopi to settle down into any sort of rhythm and rattled the Hyderabad player, garnering point after point from that area. This loss at the National Championships hurt Gopi deeply. This was the third time that Gopi had lost to Bagga, the earlier losses coming in the 1991 and 1992 Nationals.

The loss here was more psychological than physical. He could hear comments like – ‘One year is over now [from the time he suffered the injury] and if he still cannot play properly, how is he going to get his career back?’ ‘The limp is still there and the knee brace is hampering the movements,’ and so on. Pessimistic thoughts started to enter his mind – would he have to start all over again? Would he never be able to get strong and fit enough to carve out his dream of winning the Senior National Championships? Was his career now doomed?

Says Gopi of those difficult weeks:

Each loss made me cry at night. My only support were my parents. No one knew what sort of hell I was going through. I had put everything I had in the sport and did not know what else could I do. I thought I was cursed. I was slowly becoming depressive. The nights were the major problem and with my mind in turmoil, I could not sleep properly. In the mornings, however, I would be back into training, trying harder than ever. My mother always cautioned me, saying not to put too much pressure on myself and that the knee still needed time to heal fully. My parents dreaded that I may do something foolish, but I also realised that I was not in the best shape physically yet. Some more weeks were required. I knew my best was still to come and then these thoughts would cheer me up. But these were really trying times for me and my family. Many said that even after surgery people come back in four months or six months. And here is Gopi, more

than a year has passed and he is still struggling. I knew that these were just speculations as no one really knew how my body was behaving after the surgery. Ajay Kanwar was the only player who had come back after a knee surgery and he had taken some three months. Manoj Kumar could never come back after his knee surgery. But then, no one knew the difference between our injuries. Mine was much more severe and was, therefore, taking more time. I understood all this, yet the comments really depressed me and put more pressure on me.

And to further complicate the situation, Gopi was becoming unsure about the pattern of his game style. From being highly aggressive on court with lots of smashes, half smashes, interspersed with fast drop shots, he found himself tossing more and playing defensive, as he thought that rather than going for shots to score points, he would wait for mistakes from the other side of the net and bide his time. This sort of style was anathema as far as his nature was concerned. This was a crucial phase in his career and he was losing confidence, not knowing where his game was going. Struck by so many losses and not winning any championships, especially in the Senior Nationals, he had reached a low mentally. But again, true to his nature, he doggedly continued to train as hard as he could.

A couple of months after the Patiala Nationals was the Petroleum Sports Control Board's annual internal championships in Delhi, generally called the PSCB Championships. This was mandatory for all shuttlers employed by the oil PSUs (public sector units) and by that time, almost ninety per cent of the national team was employed by the oil sector, as this was the only sector offering jobs to players donning Indian colours. Needless to say, every top national player played in the event, including the likes of Dipankar Bhattacharya, Rajeev Bagga and Siddharth Jain – players who had defeated Gopi in recent months. Srikant Bakshi and Sachin Ratti were, perhaps, the only senior and serious opponents to Gopi who were not part of PSCB since they worked for the railways. Gopi put in extra effort in training, trying hard to regain that confidence which seemingly was deserting him. He just wanted to reach the venue of the PSCB Championships in the best shape possible.

It was here that his wins started again. Gopi cleared his side of the draw easily and managed to beat Dipankar Bhattacharya in the finals in an arduous duel, which went full distance in all the three games, the decider being 18-15 in Gopi's favour. This was also the first time that Gopi actually played

defensive and still pulled it off, much to everyone's surprise, including Gopi himself. This was big for him mentally, as he got back on the circuit and earned the respect of his peers again. He lifted the shuttle, tossed it around, blocked the smashes and literally found a new dimension to his game. In a way, he realised that he had the ability to play a comfortable all-round game, and he could confuse any opponent with his dexterity, as he could switch styles with ease whenever he wanted.

This victory was also good since his office people were watching, and all thoughts anyone had about Gopi being out of reckoning as a top Indian player were put to rest. There had been murmurs in his office as well, as there were some officials who were apprehensive about his comeback as a champion shuttler. He had joined the Indian Oil Corporation in September 1993 and had smashed his knee within four months of joining. Being out of the scene for almost a year had sown doubts in many minds. He had used the time to finish his graduation, but with no badminton, and specifically no victories to his credit, he was not helping his image. This victory not only boosted his morale but more importantly, his standing as a top-rated sportsperson amongst the sports officials of the oil sector PSUs which employed the likes of him. It was important for Gopi to have their support.

Says Subhash:

Back then, there was hardly any knowledge available for the kind of surgery Gopi went through. For most people, it was the end of a career. And indeed, hardly anyone with his type of injury, and then the surgery, and then coming back with that knee brace, was seen in world badminton. It was very important for Gopi to do well in this PSCB event for his employers and that too in Delhi, where they also got a good amount of media and newspaper coverage. He showed the country that he was not finished and that he still had it in him to live his dream and ensure that he was counted amongst the best sportspersons of the country. This message clearly went to the playing fraternity and to the doubters all over.

For Subbaravamma, Gopi was a changed person after this big win in Delhi. 'He had a spring in his step. He also suddenly looked more confident about himself. There was a new purpose in his training and playing sessions. I was really happy for him. We were back to discussing badminton at dinner time and all our collective spirits soared as we knew that his determination and never-say-die attitude would surely propel him to winning the elusive

National Championships.’

Gopi also, as mentioned earlier, got extremely interested in yoga and its benefits. In fact, it was the phase immediately after the surgery, when he was bedridden, that his actual romance with yoga started, which helped him immensely throughout his career. This was the time when he got immersed in the Art of Living under the direction of His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Initially, Gopi used to do some stretching exercises to help him in training – a form of progressive meditation called Yoga Nidra. But that was all. After the surgery, he had lots of time on his hands and knew he had to work on his mind to be more grounded in terms of aggression, and all-round emotional control on court. He also realised that this would help him in *Prana*, strengthening his legs, breathing, healing and more. So he started to utilise more and more of his time in reading and in practising the Art of Living, that was introduced to him by a gentleman whom Gopi calls Ravi bhaiya, who is based in Bangalore.

Initiation into the Art of Living course was a great help for Gopi, especially where his sinusitis and asthma were concerned. It also generally changed his perspective on many fronts. He had something else now, something in concrete terms where he could focus his energies beyond his game. Prior to this, if he had any extra time on hand, he would put on his training shoes and go running. Gopi became more philosophical in many ways. He met Sri Sri Ravi Shankar much later and says that he joined in basically to get help in mental calmness, breathing, meditation and focus, which were important to him as a badminton player. He also admits that he did not join in with much expectation. Today, the Art of Living is a major part of Gopi’s being, something that is an extension of him in many ways.

‘My game also matured more in many ways,’ says Gopi. He learnt how to conserve energy, use tosses more often and play more controlled net strokes. In short, yoga helped him play a more enveloping and comprehensive style of badminton. It also made him more relaxed and happier in every way. It helped him present a better personality on court and in experimenting a lot more. Former players have conflicting opinions on this. Manoj Kumar feels that Gopi became more aggressive while playing, as his focus helped him attack more, but Vijay Raghvan, with whom Gopi played doubles at the National Games, says that he thought Gopi played more of a waiting style of game after he got back into the tournament circuit. ‘Prior to this, Gopi would smash anything high, but after going into yoga and after winning the PSCB



and SAARC Games, I felt that he had somehow developed a good defense as well and smashed only when he was sure of a point.' Sudhir also felt that Gopi had started evolving as a more all-round player because of his interest in yoga and meditation.

But post-surgery blues and complications still surfaced now and then. The knee would hurt on and off. A long match or a good hard training session brought on the pain and forced him to limp a bit. The knee brace was still around, sometimes being a hindrance. So, after Gopi had started playing and had started winning once again, he was also, in a way, defying people's perception of him. The remarks could still be heard. Many did not believe that he could actually make a comeback. These early victories were thought to be flukes. Gopi had to stop training sessions when he had knee pains. So while all the others went on training, he fumed inwardly but promised himself he would never give up. 'People, and my critics, felt that I would be finished very soon. After all, how much more torture could I take, and how long could I continue? They felt that my limp would be permanent and that my parents should somehow intervene and make me stop. It was felt that I was defying odds, but I had my career to think of. I had to prove myself in the eyes of these sceptics,' says Gopi.

This fire that burned in him brought him a victory that not only defied all odds but basically paved the way for Gopi, slowly but surely, to walk on the path leading to the realm of legends. Though the much-awaited and cherished Senior Nationals victory was yet to come, the All England Championships of March 1995 signalled that Pullela Gopi Chand would one day conquer the world. The run-up to the All England also showed how badly our national team members were treated. To go to the championships being played at Birmingham, Gopi had to shell out ₹20,000 of his own to meet the expenses. The officials only managed to get a free ticket each from Air India for Gopi and Dipankar, who were, for all intents and purposes, the top two players representing India. They never bothered about the other expenses and forced these two to pay up by whatever means they could. Subbaravamma says:

This was not the first time. Previously also I had to mortgage some of my jewellery to ensure that Gopi wore the colours of India when he went on the south-east Asia tour of 1993. For this 1995 trip too, even though he was now employed by Indian Oil, ₹20,000 was still a steep sum and we had to

borrow the money. The family was not able to save anything, as all of us pitched in for Gopi's badminton expenses. But if having the honour of playing for India meant that one had to borrow or sell family jewellery, then the whole aspect was demeaning.

In those years, the draw of the championships was not disclosed beforehand and the only thing that Gopi knew was that both he and Dipankar had to play the qualifying rounds. On landing at the National Exhibition Centre, home to the All England Championships since 1994, Gopi realised that if he qualified, he would have to play Alan Budikusuma of Indonesia in the first round itself, and that this match was the last match on the first day at 10.10 p.m. official time, since the handsome and well-built Indonesian was second seed in the men's singles' draw.

The championships used to be held at the Empire Pool arena next to the fabled Wembley Stadium in London from 1957 till 1993, which incidentally was Gopi's first foray into the event when he had defeated the tall Swede Tomas Johansson in the first round. In 1994, Gopi could not play due to the injury at Pune. 1995, therefore, saw Gopi playing his second All England Championships.

Budikusuma had won the 1992 Barcelona Olympic gold medal, where he had stunned a field comprising such illustrious names such as Zhao Jianhua and Yang Yang of China, a host of Europeans led by the stylish and formidable Poul-Erik Hoyer Larsen, the Malaysians led by Rashid Sidek, and his own teammates, led by the favourite for the title at Barcelona, Ardy Wiranata, the then World Number One. Budikusuma also won the World Cup at Bali in 1994, among a host of top international honours. Married to the then reigning world badminton queen Susi Susanti, Budikusuma was a consummate artiste of the sport, whose scalp was indeed highly prized. Gopi, hardly a name in international circles then, was, on paper, easy meat for him. But true to his nature, Gopi was least bothered about who he was playing against. In any case, he had other, more important things to contemplate.

In Gopi's own words, the whole trip was a sort of adventure.

First, we had to run around trying to borrow the ₹ 20,000 required for us to fund our trip. We barely managed that. Then, when we landed at that big street next to the venue, we found everything was highly expensive. We were there two days before the start as we wanted to practise in the hall. We stayed in the official hotel for the first night, but at almost \$90 per

night, it was too expensive for us. That amounted to almost ₹3,100 per night, and I had only ₹20,000 for the whole stay, and that meant local transport and food. So next morning, Dipankar and I went walking all over and finally found one bed and breakfast place at about \$40 or so, for a night. We shifted the next day. And typically, we also did not know how to combat the severe cold out there in Birmingham in terms of leg thermals and so on. We had the typical old mufflers and sweaters. from India. Though it took us more than an hour to reach the venue, the fact that we had now saved a fair amount of money on the hotel tariff made us happy. The match had somehow become secondary at that time.

I remember Dipankar, who had also qualified, had an early match and I was there with him, and my match was scheduled some four hours after his. But since our hotel was so far away, there was no way we could go and come back again. The bus fare was also saved if I stayed put in the venue and I did exactly that. My match started thirty minutes behind schedule, at about 10.40 p.m. or so, and I played my heart out. At the same time, however, I also had a major worry at the back of my head. What if the match went on past midnight – how were we to go back to the hotel, as the bus service would close at sharp midnight.

I lost the first game 12-15, won the second game on deuce extension and won the third 15-13, in front of some fifteen to twenty Indonesian supporters who became hoarse shouting for [Budi] Kusuma, but I had realised in the first game itself that he was not liking my attacking game one bit and was fumbling at the net. [Budi] Kusuma also had taken the first game in some twenty-three minutes and though I had fought well, he still looked a bit over-confident, but I did not let go once I had my teeth into the match.

We finished around 12.20 a.m. or so and the ecstasy of winning never entered my bloodstream as we soon found out, much to our dismay, the reason, which was obvious. By the time I stretched and came out, the whole stadium was in darkness – no one was in sight. Only one security guard remained, sitting at the main gate and he was no help at all, except saying that buses are off for the night. He could not call us a taxi either, and in any case, the taxis and cabs were expensive. So in that biting cold, Dipankar and I walked back to our hotel, reaching at about 1.30 a.m. or so. And being a bed and breakfast joint, the owner too had gone to sleep. We

had had nothing to eat after the match and could not buy anything on the way. The owner finally opened the door after some ten minutes of constant knocking and screamed at us for coming so late. I drank some water and had some bread from the kitchen and finally we went off to sleep at around 3 a.m. or so. The gravity of the victory never sunk in at all during the night. It was only the next morning that I finally thought about it and realised that I may have caused one of the biggest upsets by any Indian player ever, and that back home, there may be some rejoicing. And all I wanted to know from my mother next morning was if the match had been written about in the local newspapers. But being so late at night, the story was missed by the Indian press.

In fact, barring Prakash Padukone, there was no one who had defeated a bona-fide World Number Two and reigning Olympic champion before. Gopi must have played an hour and twenty minutes of high-calibre pulsating badminton. But typically for him, as mentioned before, he always did his own thing. In fact, the bigger the name in front of him, the more adventurous and determined Gopi became. He always had something to prove to himself. Gopi had seen Budikusuma before and knew he was good to hit down the line. So the tactic was simple enough – retrieve all he could and then hit down the line on first opportunity. Gopi remained energetic, quick on his feet, with a view to hassle Budikusuma as much as possible. The mix in defensive shots off Budikusuma's smashes is also something he remembers. Playing crosscourt drives on the smashes faltered the Indonesian now and then, as his fast movement to the net came to nought, since the returned stroke was not soft but came at a good enough speed to stop him in his tracks. Gopi did all sorts of unconventional things to ensure the second seed never got into a dominant rhythm. In any case, Gopi had nothing to lose and that, he felt, was a psychological advantage for him.

Gopi had a field day, experimenting with all sort of strokes; and yes, the jump smash was there too. In short, after a long time, Gopi was in his element. 'I played all out, hundred per cent. Maybe he did not think I would win and I thought why not give him a run for his money, grab the chance that was coming my way – after all, I had come all the way and my family had sacrificed so much sending me here, so why not make him sweat for every point. These were my thoughts as I played him point for point, never easing the pressure at any time.'

There was another aspect which worried Gopi more and never allowed him to savour the victory. He used to bring an extra bag to cart away the used shuttles from any international event to Hyderabad for practising, as he could not afford to buy the foreign Yonex shuttles even after getting a job. Shuttles, especially the imported ones, cost a great deal. Since his match against Budikusuma finished so late, he never got the time to go around collecting the old, used shuttles. The customs officials at Hyderabad airport had got used to these old shuttles being brought in, but initially, they used to look at them with suspicion, thinking that Gopi was bringing in such huge quantities for trading. But once things were explained, the officers were quite amused at the whole thing.

The fact that a national player had to bring these old practice shuttles is in itself a sad commentary on the way the national association functioned. Neither the Indian body nor the state associations ever helped up-and-coming players. There were no sponsors, and players like Gopi may have been defeating the likes of Budikusuma, but there was never any help forthcoming in any way. It speaks volumes of the way sport in India was and still is run, but there are no tears shed for our young sportspeople who have to fend for themselves, who sacrifice so much to bring laurels to the country. In return, they do not even get as much as a thank you. These aspects of Gopi's story may shock the reader, but such humiliations of national players in almost every sporting discipline are the rule all over India, not exceptions.

Gopi knew he had scored a big win but hardly had any time to reflect upon it as, still stiff after the long match and the long walk in the cold back to the hotel, with no food at night, he was back on court the next afternoon, playing and defeating Vladislav Druzchenko of Ukraine, a top-thirty-ranked player who was highly experienced. Gopi beat him in two straight games, but then crashed out in the pre-quarter-finals to Liu Yi Gang of China. The one thing Gopi remembers of the match is that he finally made \$1,000 as prize money. The trip was memorable not only for the fact that he defeated Budikusuma, and won \$1,000 in prize money, but also because he sustained another injury at the championships, which was to plague him on and off for sometime.

Not equipped to fight the cold and a long match which finished at 12.20 a.m., Gopi had a tough time. To add to it, a long walk back to his hotel with no food at night, and a rough match again the very next afternoon, without any real time to recover, took a horrendous toll on his physique. His right leg cramped so badly that he tore a muscle, causing severe pain. The injury that

came haunting in 2002 and was called ‘the jumper’s knee syndrome’ was because of his tearing that right leg muscle, about six years ago. The problem occurred after the second match but he took to the court for the third match in spite of it. In Gopi’s own words:

What actually happened was that this muscle, the *quadra sap*, went into a cramp and simultaneously my right hamstring also went into a cramp. Now, there were these physio rooms on the floor above at the All England. My match against Druzchenko was at 11.20 a.m. and the next match was at 4.20 in the evening. The hotel being too far away, it was not possible to go and come back. So I went to one of these rooms, put my legs up, trying to recover, and tried to sleep off the pain, not realising what had actually happened. When I got up and tried standing up, I had severe pain, as both these muscles had gone into a cramp. I was screaming in pain for almost ten minutes and did not know what to do about the cramp. Some Bulgarian players next door finally heard my screams and came running to see what had happened, and then they called the Japanese team physio and he worked on removing the cramp. But, by that time, there was fluid formation in the *quadra sap*. And because of this, what happened is that, over the years, the right knee alienation moved to this side a bit and this caused my knee to function wrongly because it did not get enough support from the *quadra sap*. This was what was also called the ‘wear-and-tear injury’. This is what happened, and I played my third match with a stiff right leg.

Post All England, Gopi and Dipankar went to play the French Open, not fully understanding the pressure he was putting on the right leg as again, there were three qualifying rounds to be played. The French Open was a tier-three event in those days, but popular with Indian teams, as they could explore Paris, and also because usually they got a layover break from the airlines at no added cost. Gopi reached the quarters but had to stay for a few extra days there as he could not leave with the rest of the team. His money was all exhausted. He somehow managed to stay at a Pakistani home, thanks to the then national coach TPS Puri.

Overall, Gopi was happy with what he had achieved at the All England and the French Open. Ironically, he maintains that whenever he paid his own money to play for India, he managed to play well enough to win some prize money to recover whatever was spent by the family. He was reaching the

pre-quarters or quarters wherever he went to play, collecting between \$ 650 to \$ 1,000, depending on the grade of the event.

The left knee still gave him trouble now and then when there was lot of strain, but he had come to live with it. However, his sporting life again took a roller-coaster ride as there were more problems in store for Gopi. He was yet to win the Nationals title which he dearly wanted, and was to lose more time to injuries and further surgeries.

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## AT LAST ...



Gopi had, of course, played his first international match when he was selected to play against the visiting Malaysian team in test matches in India. It was in front of his home crowd at Fateh Maidan in Hyderabad that he rightly debuted on the international stage at the young age of eighteen years. Gopi recalls with a glint in his eyes how the family rushed to the local SS Sports shop, to buy new T-shirts and other clothes for the event. The entire family, including the grandparents, a host of friends and almost all his relatives from the village along with their neighbours, were there in large numbers to cheer the prodigal son – the first one from Ongole to make it so far in sports.

Amidst this ‘sea of *lungis*’, as Gopi puts it, he won his match quite convincingly against the Malaysian player in two straight games. The opponent did not quite understand Gopi’s strokes. Everyone in the stadium was extremely happy with Gopi winning that match. It helped Gopi’s standing amongst the *khandaan* as there were still objections by some of the family regarding him ‘wasting his life’ playing badminton. Relatives used to ask his mother what Gopi was going to gain from playing a sport? Why was she spoiling his future, since he was not studying hard like Raja? Questions like these were not posed directly to Gopi as no one spoke to him on these matters, knowing he was too rigid and was not going to understand their views. The fact that Raja was in IIT Madras and had reached dazzling heights academically also did not help Gopi with regard to his career in badminton.

The ovation that he got at Fateh Maidan suddenly brought about a change



in the attitudes of his grandparents and immediate relatives. They all started rooting for him and now wanted him to go as far as possible in badminton. This acceptance from his family was important to him emotionally. But Gopi, as per his nature, was otherwise detached from all this. Since he knew that badminton was going to be his life, the only thing that mattered to him was whether his mother was happy or not with the way he played the game in his first international and indeed, in all his matches, right through his career. In fact, even after winning the All England title much later, the only thing that satisfied him was when he asked Subbaravamma, 'Are you happy?' and she got really emotional and answered emphatically in the affirmative. That was all Gopi was concerned about.

For Gopi, the immediate family meant the parents. With Subhash not having much time to really look after Gopi's career, it was left to the mother to be the anchor all through his playing life and beyond. As close friend Asawari Patwardhan says,

If there is one person who stood by him all throughout his career, it has to be his mother. He cannot thank her enough. She was the one constant in his life. I remember when I brought Gopi to the Delhi railway station after his injury at Pune, she was inconsolable and highly emotional when she saw Gopi on a crutch. She was so upset and told me that I had lied to her, saying that Gopi was all right and that he only had a slight injury. I had managed to call her from one STD booth on one of the railway stations during the journey. Her entire daily routine revolved around Gopi's badminton. The way she nursed him after his operation in Delhi is something that will be a lesson for me all my life. His return to badminton was hardly on the cards after that injury and after the surgery. Gopi was highly optimistic, in any case, about his return to competitive badminton. But the only other person in the world who shared his optimism totally was his mother. If Gopi became an icon of Indian sports and braved his way into the hearts of badminton lovers, it is thanks to her.

Had Gopi finally arrived as far in badminton after he was selected for his first tour abroad, the south-east circuit? For Gopi, these were questions that needed no answers. What mattered to him from the beginning, as said above, was whether the family was happy with the way he was progressing in the game. Also, whether he himself was happy with the way he trained, played and approached each and every match. Though he would be upset after losing

any match, he always wanted to play badminton his way. That is all.

I should have tried everything and exhausted all my resources playing the way I wanted. That was very important to me. And I never thought on a long-term basis. Short-term goals were important. Winning the All England never entered my mind. Winning the next match was what I looked at all the time. When I was playing [in the] Under-12 and Under-15 age groups, Azam Hussein was my immediate problem. Later on, it was Vijay Raghvan, then Manoj Kumar and Pravin Kumar whom I idolised as a youngster.

Later on, his dream was to defeat Dipankar Bhattacharya, then he wanted the Nationals in seniors, after which Chen Hong of China, then Peter Gade of Denmark became his targets. Thus it went on. He used to think only on a one-to-one basis.

What India would think of him ten years down the line was never ever in his thought-process. What was important to him was to train hard and cover all the deficits seen in himself in the previous match, and overcome the next hurdle. To give a hundred per cent in whatever he did as far as badminton was concerned. His world did not exist beyond his friends and the opponents whom he wanted to thrash in the next championships. There was no planning on long-term basis. It was a really small and closed world he lived in during those formative years.

The first trip abroad came in 1991, on the circuit that took him to Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, where he gave a good account of himself. There were serious money issues in the family and since he was asked to pay half the cost of the tour, his mother had to mortgage the family jewellery to come up with the amount required. This shows how the game was administered! But apart from this one major glitch, the tour was euphoric in every way. Flying in an aeroplane, getting the chance to see big buildings, lovely shops, clean streets and efficiency hitherto unseen in India. Like a wide-eyed tourist, he absorbed everything and then went on to play as well as he could. He also got his first 'India' T-shirt, with the national flag embossed on the left shoulder. He could go to the local sports shop and buy rackets, which cost a fortune back home – even at customs notified shops – for ₹800 or ₹1,000. This tour and his resulting stamp as an international player was also important as it helped him in getting a job. For Gopi, being selected in that team was very important, as otherwise, he was convinced that the pressure on

him would somehow ensure that he would study engineering rather than gun for glory for himself and the country in world badminton. This tour fixed his career in badminton with a finality that stopped all talk amongst his relatives that he should pursue some other vocation.

This trip also brought to the fore another unique aspect of his personality, one that would be seen at all times in his career. He had a fight with his teammates and coach on tour because they did not believe him when he said that the top Chinese stars could be defeated. The Chinese were the top honchos of the sport since 1982 and still are. Till 1981, they were not part of the International Badminton Federation (now called the Badminton World Federation), since the world body recognised Taiwan, which was unacceptable to China. In 1982, after the world body agreed to call Taiwan Chinese Taipei, China officially joined it. But even when China was not a member, whenever its badminton players played exhibition games, even in the best-known badminton countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia or Singapore, they won the bouts with ease.

But since the Chinese were not members of the International Badminton Federation and therefore were not allowed to compete internationally, the countries that dominated the sport till 1982 were Indonesia, Malaysia and Denmark. But once the Chinese came in, they took over in no uncertain terms. Players such as Han Jian, Chen Changjie, Zhang Ailing, Zhao Jianhua, Li Yongbo, Tian Bingyi, Yang Yang, Li Lingwei, Han Aiping, Chen Hong, Sun Jun and Dong Jiong to present-day stars like Lin Dan, Lu Lan and Wang Xin became household names. Between them, they won every individual title at all levels and all team events with astounding ease. It would suffice to say here that the rest of the world put together could not defeat the Chinese teams, be it men or women. Their domination was complete. Players from other countries had nightmares whenever they saw top Chinese stars in their part of the draw. True, in the men's singles event, players such as Morten Frost, Poul-Erik Hoyer Larsen and Peter Gade of Denmark, Prakash Padukone of India, the Sidek brothers – Rashid, Rasif and Jalani – Foo Kok Keong and currently Lee Chong Wei of Malaysia, and Indonesians Ardy Wiranata, Taufik Hidayat, along with Ick Sugiarto, Alan Budikusuma and Joko Suprianto, had their golden moments in the history of the game, but by and large, it was the fast-moving and hard-hitting Chinese who held sway. Gopi's name was good enough to add to this illustrious list later on. After Padukone, he was the only other Indian player who hammered most of his

Chinese contemporaries through sheer willpower. But that was to come later. In 1991, just after winning the Junior Nationals and playing his first international circuit while still in his teens, he was raw to the ways of the world. But the way he reacted to the top Chinese stars brought derision and laughter from his teammates. They said he was too young and green to be talking such nonsense.

Gopi always had a lot of self-belief. He also very correctly thought, though his coaches and teammates did not agree with him, that through sheer hard work, even the top Chinese, Indonesians, Malaysians and all others could be brought down. In Gopi's own words:

The only reason why Indians could not fight at top world level was because physically our players were just not at par. And our coaches were just not efficient enough, not knowledgeable enough to motivate the players to have that positive thinking. I always questioned this meekness in ourselves. I always thought that every player can be defeated. You must just know how it had to be done. After all, they also ran on two legs and played with a similar racket. Why should I treat them as unique? On that tour, not only did I fight with all of my teammates, I also stopped talking to them for some time. The bigger the name or player in front of me, the more arrogant I became on court. I always had this issue of not allowing my opponent to think that I was an easy player to play against. It could be a world champion against me, but I was determined to go all out against him and try to teach him a lesson. Foolishness, some said, but that was simply being me.

Gopi qualified after four rounds only to lose to a Chinese player in the first round of the Open. Same story in the Singapore Open; but in Indonesia, he lost in the first round of qualifying. Not a bad effort on his very first outing in the harshest circuit in world badminton. More importantly, Gopi came back with the belief intact that he had it in him to rattle the very best in the world. He knew he had to work harder on speed and strength, and one day, in the not-too-distant-future, he would arrive on the world scene.

Ironically enough, Gopi was still naïve in some ways. He had yet to mature enough to start analysing his defeats. For him, till almost 1994, any loss meant that he just had to train harder and practise more. He confesses that he was not that concerned about the theoretical part at the time. Physical fitness was the only mantra in his book. Just go back and run more on the track, be it

sprints for speed or long distance for stamina. And hit more shuttles on court to iron out whatever mistakes he thought he had committed.

Gopi used to maintain a daily diary, in which he wrote what he felt. Badminton was not just a physical sport for him, but also had an emotional effect. He recalls that he used to cry after every defeat.

I do not think that right from the time I was twelve years old, there were any losses when I did not cry. Whenever I lost, I felt very bad, very miserable. I used to be inconsolable. This continued almost till 1996 or so. I would cry, sulk, lock myself in my room for hours, but then come out at night, do some thousand jumps or whatever training I could do at that time. It was a way of punishing myself. But my defeats also ensured that I promised myself I would hammer the guy next time. Invariably, I did just that. I would tell myself that this guy escaped today, but next time was another day and I will wait for that next chance. I would write in my diary how I would extract my revenge. To me, however, fitness was the key that would open all doors. There was a lot of clarity in my approach to training and matches, but not in a very systematic way.

Gopi would write a lot of notes, which helped him plan things better mentally. He wrote down many training schedules in his diary. For example, if he lost because of speed, he would jot down the remedy for it. There would be several quotations from coaches, and people who mattered to him or gave him advice. He would try experimenting in everything, but in his own way. Analysing the factors for defeat came much later.

But according to Prabhakar, his childhood friend, Gopi was very smart in his training methods. He would always question coaches about the on-court drills and wanted to know how a particular drill would help. Prabhakar says that Gopi always wanted to train in a game-like situation. The drill should reflect realistic movements on court. It must also help him improve the particular stroke he would be practising. The weaknesses in his game had to be removed anyhow. 'I have seen Gopi training on defensive play only for one full week, as he could not return Dipankar's smashes in one match,' says Prabhakar. 'And in the very next match, he did not lose even one point while defending. In fact, Gopi mocked the opponent as if to say, "Come, smash all you can, but my defence will not crumble". He was analytical in his own way.' As Arif says, Gopi did not want any flaws in his game. Every training or practice session had to help him get at least one per cent better than the

previous day. That was the key to his success.

Gopi knew how to plan his training very precisely. The correctional part had to happen as early as possible, if not instantly. If he lost in the morning, the evening's training session had to be relevant to the morning's match. This can be seen as a short-term solution but given his nature, it was the best he could do. This related not just to a tournament; Gopi would even take defeats in practice sessions to his heart. As he always maintained, losing was never an option. But more losses were in store for him and it would take him some more time to scale the Everest of Indian badminton – the Senior National Championships.

Gopi cried his heart out after his loss to Rajeev Bagga in the 1994 National Championships during the quarter-finals. Asawari Patwardhan was a witness to this side of Gopi:

He just came into the room and threw himself on the bed and was crying bitterly. This was a Gopi who was just being human. Entire [year of] 1994, he had lost out on due to injury but had made some sort of a comeback with good displays in major senior events at the end of the year. But, somehow, this loss against Rajeev really rattled him, as he had been confident of winning this one. Now he would have to wait one more year before the next Nationals came around.

Dipankar Bhattacharya went on to retain his singles crown that year.

Even though throughout the year 1995 Gopi played extremely well, defeating Budikusuma and Druzchenko at the All England, winning the PSCB, the 1995 SAARC Games and almost all senior events he played in the country, his dream was shattered once again at the National Championships. He was fully prepared, mentally and physically, to take on the very best at the 1995 Nationals in Bharuch, Gujarat. He had come into the championships with some serious victories and memorable matches, wherein he had shown the sterling qualities that would one day catapult him to the top of the badminton world.

But though Gopi reached the finals at Bharuch, a small coastal city famous for farming peanuts exported worldwide, he ran into a highly charged Dipankar Bhattacharya. Gopi was again slightly uncomfortable because of the sinusitis which usually hit him in coastal and dusty regions. Bharuch was both of these.

I did have some breathing problems, but the reason for my loss in the finals was that he simply overpowered me by playing to a correct plan. I just could not get into my rhythm. Dipankar had played me so many times that we knew each other's game inside out. That day, he was far too strong on his smashes, and he had an answer for everything I could throw at him. He played fast, and typically, I was expecting him to get tired, but he never did. He beat me in three games and deserved that victory.

Though he was in a way happy that he, at last, had reached the finals of the Nationals, Gopi was still inconsolable at his loss, but realised he had only himself to blame. To add to his woe, Dipankar went on to win his third straight Nationals title. He had now won the singles title for years 1993, 1994 and 1995. Gopi, who had defeated the strongly-built Assamese player so easily in the semi-finals of that dramatic national games of January 1993 in Pune and who was poised to wear the India Number One rank, could not win the one title he coveted the most – the National Senior singles title. The downslide, of course, began with his injury and subsequent surgery.

It was now 1996 and Gopi had to start the season all over again. But tragedy was waiting round the corner to strike again. In any case, the much-cherished victory at the National Championships would have to wait. Selected to play in the Sudirman Cup and World Championships in Scotland in June that year, Gopi forgot all about the disappointment in Bharuch and trained in earnest for the event. He did not do much at the All England in March, and lost in the quarters of the French Open again. He had had a major surgery in 1994. Time had come for one more trip under Dr Rajgopal's scalpel in Delhi.

Gopi was playing mixed doubles for India at the Sudirman Cup, the mixed team format in the World Team Championships at Glasgow, when he suffered a cartilage tear again in the left leg. It was serious enough, according to the sports medicine in-charge at the event, to warrant an immediate surgery. Gopi took permission and flew directly to Delhi where, luckily, his father was still posted in the bank. He had called Dr Rajgopal from Glasgow and went to meet him the very next morning after arrival in the capital. This time, the surgery took about forty minutes and Gopi stayed in the hospital for just one night. He, however, was mentally prepared this time and knew what needed to be done as far as strengthening of the knee and the whole rehab process was concerned.

Says Dr Rajgopal:

It was not as serious an injury as [the one] in 1994, but yes it was still a surgery requirement which Gopi had to undergo. I had him taken straight into the theatre on his arrival early next morning. He was a model patient – he came prepared, empty stomach and all that. I also advised him on the rehab process as before, but Gopi already had planned out most of it anyway. I told him it would take roughly three months before he came back on court. But he could continue wall practice and other drills as before.

For Gopi himself, this was just an irritant that had to be faced. As he said, he never looked that far ahead in his career, ever. For Gopi, everything was ‘now’, and since the injury had happened, he had to deal with the aftermath as well as he possibly could. He loved the sport and the life it gave him far too much to mull over the negatives. Subbaravamma was distressed again, but she, too, gave him her total support, as always.

Gopi was just a different sort of boy in this respect. He knew that he would be bedridden for at least fifteen days or so, would not be able to train or play for a total of three months as per Dr Rajgopal, and that the muscles will degenerate and will have to be worked up again and all that – but he was simply not bothered. In any case, he was used to injuries from childhood. So he told me not to worry and that he would be back playing matches by October latest. He again lost some three to four months or so in his career, at a very young age. We stayed in Delhi for about a month and then came back to Hyderabad.

Gopi, by now, was practising yoga to a great extent and reading a lot. He had perfect knowledge of what a knee surgery was and how long it would take to recover. In fact, he would tell the doctor how many weeks had passed after surgery and what was the rehab required at the time. The medical experts used to agree with him. He would collect dietary books, and knew exactly what he needed to eat while the rehab and healing was going on. He carried the latest book on the subject with him wherever he went. He had also inculcated the habit of buying books on sports injuries, yoga and positive thinking; anything that he felt would help him in pursuit of his career or would give him a better idea of what his body and mind were going through and how he could better himself in every aspect.



In spite of all this, Gopi was still rusty when he came back to play the senior domestic circuit in September-October 1996. The four months' loss of track training and practising on court, the weakness his convalescence entailed, and the fact that other players such as Dipankar Bhattacharya, Rajeev Bagga, Sushant Saxena, Srikant Bakshi, Siddharth Jain, Nikhil Kanetkar, Sachin Ratti, and the new kid on the block Abhinav Shyam Gupta, were that much ahead of him in terms of fitness and match sharpness, put Gopi at a great disadvantage. Yet, with sheer determination and focus, Gopi got back in form within a month or so, and at a selection trial in Bangalore in late December for the 1997 India Open, Gopi defeated all the players thrown at him. His confidence and zeal for winning was back and he again looked formidable as he finished his last-minute preparation for the 1996 Nationals, which was to take him to the very same place where he had smashed his knee on that fateful morning in January 1994. But not being superstitious, Gopi arrived in Pune with just one thought – to finally win the National Senior singles title which had eluded him so far, the one title without which he knew no one would call him India's Number One. He somehow knew his time had come.

I was really in very good form. Last year, I was close to winning the title at Bharuch, but Dipankar denied me the victory. I had often thought of what went wrong and had my own backup plan now. In between I had again undergone a surgery, but mentally, I was confident that nothing will go wrong this time. My smashes were really good and so was my movement. Though I still used the knee brace, it helped me in my movements and I was comfortable with it.

Subbaravamma also felt that Gopi would win this time.

His body language was different when he left for Pune. I could sense that now he was in a hurry to win the Nationals and move on. Not winning this title was limiting and hampering his journey to go beyond Indian badminton. He was very quiet the last few days when he trained for the Pune Nationals. He was lost in his own thoughts, but somehow, I knew that he was going to do well this time around. He had already made a name for himself in some ways, internationally, but he knew that winning the Nationals at this stage was by far the most important quest for him.

Gopi made mincemeat of every opponent on his way to the finals, including

Bagga, who had been his nemesis for long. In the finals, he settled the score with Dipankar Bhattacharya with a straight games' victory, to finally put his stamp on the Vikas Topiwalla Challenge Cup – the trophy awarded to the men's singles winner at the Nationals. Gopi had come full circle, fulfilled the dream he had cherished ever since he started playing badminton, way back in 1983-1984 at Fateh Maidan in Hyderabad. He had also conquered the ghost of Pune, where he had been laid low by that horrible injury. Most importantly for him, he had silenced all the critics who had questioned his comeback after the surgery, and the ones who had called him *langda* to his face. The ones who had doubted his determination, not seeing the internal rage he had carried all these years. He had reached the pinnacle of domestic badminton simply because of his self-belief.

Subhash opines:

Till he won his first Nationals, my son had trouble sleeping at night. He was restless and was very hurt at the various statements people used to make about him. They doubted his abilities and this is what distressed him most. He was always positive about his game and about the fact that we Indians could take on the very best from China, Indonesia, Denmark, or wherever the top international players came from. But people made fun of him and doubted his statements. This National Games victory in Pune finally put him at ease and finally silenced all the people who treated him unfairly.

Immediately after the Nationals victory, Gopi went one better when he became the first Indian after Prakash Padukone to reach the finals of any international Grand Prix tournament. The late Javed Akhtar, a veteran Mumbai journalist, told me (Sanjay) in 1996:

Unlike many other sportsmen, Gopi was not to lose heart after his two surgeries. Though the amount of time spent on rehab and out of the game would have ensured any other shuttler would put away his rackets, Gopi was ironically more motivated to do better and come back all the time by slowly but surely working on his fitness. It was a tribute to his determination that he finally won the one title he wanted most badly – the Pune National Senior Championships. I cannot think of any other parallel in Indian sports. His has been a story of true courage, something that will not be easy to emulate. And in spite of wearing that brace, Gopi has now

shown his true class, by reaching the finals of the India Open where he lost to Heryanto Arbi, the current World Number Three. Pullela Gopi Chand is going to serve Indian badminton for a long time.

The Indian Open performance at the IG Stadium in New Delhi in February, coming within a month of the 1996 Nationals held in January 1997, really made the Indian media look up to Gopi. Suddenly, in their eyes there was one player who could perhaps be a successor to the legend himself – Prakash Padukone. His injuries were written about, as was his astonishing comeback. Janardhan Dass, the famous badminton journalist and analyst from Hyderabad, who has followed his career closely, wrote in *The New Indian Express* in January 1997:

Gopi comes across as a very humble person, in spite of what all he has achieved. His determination is there for everyone to see. But the way he overcame his major injuries and surgeries which could have so easily ended his career, is an inspiration for everyone. The sacrifices made by the family, specially his mother are also unique in so many senses. By finally winning the national title and after doing so well at the Indian open, Gopi has truly arrived. While he will be the one player all opponents will try to defeat, he will be able to play in a more relaxed manner, now that he is officially crowned as the Indian champion.

1997 saw Gopi getting selected in the national squad for international circuits again where he was able to test some top Chinese players. A good performance by him was on display during the SAS Open in Vienna, where he defeated the then World Number Two and 1996 Olympic champion Poul-Erik Hoyer Larsen of Denmark and Wong Choon Hann, the top-ranked Malaysian in those years, to reach the finals, where he lost to Jeroen van Dijk of Holland. It was a year when he started to build up his international reputation again. He reached the pre-quarters of the All England, and late in the year, when the last World Cup, the Sanyo World Cup, was played, he got the better of Sweden's Tomas Johansson and China's Luo Yigang in his group match, but lost the final match to Joko Suprianto, the world champion from Indonesia. He also won most of the senior major events in the country and was well-primed and at peak fitness to retain the Senior Nationals crown of 1997 at Hyderabad, which he did in style, defeating Srikant Bakshi in the finals. In fact, Gopi went on to win five Nationals singles titles in a row,

including 1998, 1999 and 2000. He defeated Abhinav Shyam Gupta of Allahabad in the finals of 1998 and 1999, and in 2000, beat Siddharth Jain. From mid-1996 till the end of 2001, Pullela Gopi Chand remained unbeaten in India. True, he had close encounters, but he never lost to any Indian player in the time mentioned above. Such was his dominance over the game in the country.

Gopi's third major injury occurred in 1998 at the Bombay Gymkhana courts. By now, he had read and reread so many books and articles on knee injuries that he was half a doctor himself.

There are three courts at the indoor badminton hall of the Bombay Gymkhana, famous not only for hosting India's first ever cricket Test match, but also because it was perhaps the most elite club in the city and had a real sporting culture in every way. Almost all the world champions India has produced in different sports down the decades are invited to become honorary members of this hallowed club. Badminton being a favourite sport amongst the members, many a memorable battle had been fought on its hard wooden surface courts. At times, however, lack of maintenance of the flooring led to accidents.

Gopi hurt the same left knee on the court while playing his semi-final match, when one of the wooden planks got slightly out of position and arrested his movement towards the front of the court. The sudden, hard jerk ensured that the middle meniscus got torn. Gopi went directly to Delhi, back to Dr Rajgopal, the same night. The doctor insisted on getting an MRI scan done though Gopi told him not to worry as it was a middle meniscus tear. But fearing major injury, Dr Rajgopal went ahead with the MRI. Strangely enough, Gopi was right. The report said it was a middle meniscus tear. Dr Rajgopal had a hearty laugh at this. He did an arthroscopy and Gopi again had to wait for a month before he could play again.

So from January 1994 till July 1998, he lost more than twelve months due to injuries, surgeries and rehab, and another few months trying to get back to peak fitness each time. These years were crucial to Gopi, in the sense that he could not have any proper continuity in his fitness levels. The only injury-free window he got in his career, both domestic and international, was for three years, from July 1998 till end-2001. After that, he again suffered an injury, this time on his right leg. Gopi confirms now that looking back on his career and injuries, the injury suffered at the Pune National Games in January 1994 led to these other problems as, somehow, sub-consciously, he was not

using the left leg correctly. In trying to ensure that the left knee did not suffer any more problems, he was either putting pressure in the wrong areas, or putting extra pressure on the right leg. Thus, it is a tribute to his incredible spirit, aggression on court and self-belief that, in spite of being out of competitive badminton for so many months battling one injury after the other, he defeated some of the biggest names in world badminton at that time, from Larsen of Denmark and Yigang of China to Budikusuma of Indonesia and many more. What if he had never had these injuries and surgeries, and no time had been wasted in rehab? What sort of career would he have had, given his dynamic approach to the game and never-say-die attitude? Hypothetical questions, yes. But the mind boggles just at the thought of Gopi having an injury-free career.

As coach Mohammad Arif once told me (Sanjay Sharma) when both of us were taking the senior players camp in Jalandhar in May 2001 for the Seville World Championships:

Anything was possible with Gopi. His single-minded approach to the game, that pursuit of getting better each day, his method of training and his keen eye and selection of strokes made him an extraordinary player. From 1993 till 1998, he had defeated most of the top world players. Yet he was out for almost sixteen to eighteen months due to reasons beyond his control – battling injuries which were career threatening, as Dr Rajgopal always said. If he had had no such problems in his career, I have no hesitation in saying that he would have been the best player India could ever produce and surely one of the best in the world of his era. It was such a tragedy that his career could not bloom up to the potential he had.

But Gopi was raring to go within a couple of months of the arthroscopy and has a very interesting anecdote to tell about the way he came back, to win the very next championships at Bangalore. The anecdote also illustrates a part of his nature that would always fight for what he thought was right.

According to Gopi, there was an Asian Satellite Championships in Chennai, where there was some confusion about his entry. This was also just after a bitter fight between the factions led by the then BAI President Fazil Ahmed and Prakash Padukone, who ultimately was forced to announce his own National Badminton Association, with the support of almost the entire country. However, in a compromise, VK Verma came in as the new president and Padukone was appointed the Executive President of the Badminton

Association.

Clarifies Gopi:

I asked a senior BAI official in charge of entries to issue a statement that my entry had not been sent by the BAI. This official was part of the group which had not supported VK Verma or Fazil Ahmed. I had been in Delhi for the arthroscopy. I was not supposed to play and was actually told to take rest for at least a month. I was just maintaining some stroke play while standing around and not moving at all, so that there was no extra pressure on the legs. I had not been asked about my entry ever and therefore, as far as I was concerned, if at all the BAI had sent my entry on its own prerogative, it was up to them to issue a statement. I was told that my entry had been sent willingly, which was simply not the case. I was disappointed that no statement was coming forward, so that the press and the public would know that I was injured and that I was not shying away from the championships in Chennai.

I finally forced Mr VK Verma, the then BAI president, who saw logic in my appeal, and he issued a clarification stating that I had not sent my entry since I was indeed injured. I just wanted this retraction.

What also flared up the issue was, according to Gopi, a headline in *The Hindu* newspaper which said, 'Gopi found missing'. The report went on to say that he was not at the venue when his name was announced, and that a walkover had been announced against him. The event was sponsored by Gopi's employers Indian Oil Corporation, and he was incensed, thinking that they may take a dim view of him. They also wanted to know what was happening and therefore the retraction he had sought would have helped in clearing his name from very start. When this news report was published, he was in Hyderabad recuperating from the surgery. He was depressed about the whole matter and also felt very letdown, since he thought that this senior official would come out in his favour, as he had been right all along in the whole episode. Furthermore, he had informed the national coach that he was undergoing the arthroscopy, so his participation would simply not be possible.

Within a week of the Asian Satellite event in Chennai, the BPL-Padukone Academy (now Tata Padukone Academy) had its annual major event at the Karnataka Badminton Association's courts, from where Prakash's academy used to operate. This was the most prestigious event in the country after the

Senior Nationals and given Prakash Padukone's towering presence over Indian badminton, and also the fact that this was always a superbly organised championships with high prize money, every top national player looked forward to participating in it.

Gopi, already hurt about what had happened at the Chennai event, decided to play in the BPL Championships within twenty-one days of the arthroscopy, much against the wishes of his doctor. He went to Bangalore with hardly any practice or training. But he took a physio from Hyderabad along, Ramakant, who worked with the local cricket association. Gopi told him to tape the affected knee as hard and tight as he could, so that it did not twist. He just wanted to win this tournament and was not bothered if he got injured again. 'For my peace of mind, it was very important that I stamped my authority on the event,' he says. Typically, he just had to go all out.

Ramakant took every possible care that the knee could withstand all the jerks and hard knocks. He strapped it so hard that Gopi could bend it only a couple of inches, so that it was possible for the knee to cope with all the shocks of typical badminton movements, which are normally hard on the knees. Gopi started playing the championships on the twenty-first day after the surgery and won the event, even without much practice or training. It was sheer willpower and confidence that propelled him to this glory. In any case, he was already the national champion and by sheer game standards, he had gone far ahead of all the competition in India. He wanted to prove a point – that he could come back from problems and still do so well. He wanted to show his mettle in no uncertain terms. The win also showcased his immense determination and focus on the job.

It was in 1996 that Gopi had decided to move to the Prakash Padukone Badminton Academy, sponsored in those days by the local BPL group. The reasons were simple enough. More structured training, more players and no shortage of shuttles. Gopi stayed at Malleswaram during his time at the academy, where Prakash had hired a couple of flats for all the national players who used to train under him. Dipankar Bhattacharya, Siddharth Jain, Vijay Lancy, Nikhil Kanetkar – almost all the senior national team players were there to spar with. Manoj Kumar and Pravin Kumar had already retired from the scene and there was hardly any player who could give Gopi a fight in Hyderabad. BPL was, therefore, a very logical choice for any emerging player of his standard.

Gopi feels that there was some resentment from one of his former coaches

when Gopi told him of his desire to move to Bangalore. But since Gopi had made up his mind to try out the academy, he simply had to go. As stated before, he did not want to ever think that he had missed out on something in his career, which he should have done. Gopi also remembered what some coaches had once said when they saw Gopi limping while Gopi was training for the 1995 SAARC Games, '*Arre ye to langda hai, ab ye kaise khelega?*' (Oh, he is lame now, how will he play?). Gopi had had a small showdown then, and, in fact, did not go with the team to play at SAARC, but went alone by bus the next morning. This incident stuck in Gopi's sub-conscious. All things considered, it was a correct move as far as Gopi was concerned. As Gopi says, he could have stayed on in Hyderabad, as his tiff was not such a big issue, but there was nothing much happening there on the badminton scene by this time. The SAI scheme had stopped, there were no shuttles being distributed, and as previously mentioned, there were no sparring partners of his stature. It was a natural choice for him to move to Bangalore.

'This was not a personality decision, but a calculated one so that I could move on to another level of training. After all, Prakash sir had been an All England champion and a real world-beater. I had already trained once before under him just before the Pune National Games. I knew there was still so much more I could learn under him. He was one major factor in my decision to shift to Bangalore,' analysed Gopi.

Another sportsperson who played alongside Gopi is the legendary Aparna Popat, who, apart from being a record National ladies' singles title holder, was also a silver medallist at both World Junior Championships 1996 and CWG 1998 during her career. She also enjoyed a high world ranking of sixteen in 1999.

Throwing light on various aspects of Gopi's character, she also made some interesting observations about his time at the BPL Academy and at the SAI centre later on, since she played in those places at the same time. 'Gopi was hell-bent on being the very best player in the world. We stayed at apartments hired by the academy in Bangalore and his dedication and discipline were to be seen to be believed, and his hard training methods rubbed off on his peers as they did not want to be left behind,' says Aparna.

Gopi was always innovating – be it physical training with Beedu sir or on-court practice with Prakash sir. He had a great time at the academy and had a great deal of respect for Prakash and Vimal Kumar, who were the main



coaches. But it was more at an inspirational level. He was inspired by Prakash sir, but not in awe of him. He wanted to win the All England badly, as by end of his time at the academy, Gopi was well rooted as the India Number One and hardly had any opposition.

Aparna also reiterates that being naturally very competitive, every single practice game was like a war for Gopi. He simply had to win.

According to Aparna, as so many others have also said, Gopi always trained that much extra; while others stopped after a rigorous workload, he would continue till he was falling down with exhaustion. He had that fire in him all the time. His belief in himself was also something remarkable. One example that she gives is that after he had retired, he came back to play the Syed Modi Memorial at Lucknow in 2004 and defeated the then two top stars Chetan Anand and Abhinav Shyam Gupta, on his way to the title. She also said that his fitness level is such even today, that is in 2011, he defeated India's best youth players at the Petroleum Sports Control Board's annual badminton championships while representing Indian Oil, giving them a lesson in power badminton.

Aparna and Gopi have travelled a lot together, including to the 2000 Olympics and the 2001 All England championships, and she shares some interesting anecdotes about him.

He was so focussed at the Olympics that it was difficult to communicate with him. There was a man-made hill for training at the village, a rather steep hill. And he went climbing it two days before the event started. I told him not to do it, but he was hell bent on doing it, simply because some badminton coach there told him the Chinese or Indonesians also trained that way. He was simply the fittest player at Sydney and when he failed against Hendrawan, his world fell around him. He almost went into depression and was non-communicative for some two months after that defeat. But I think that great results at Asian major events brought his focus back on the game.

Just before the All England in 2001, she felt that he was going to blow away all opposition.

I told Ganguly Prasad that Gopi is going to win, just because he was oozing with confidence. He was destined for that title. That confidence was in his walk, the way he trained, the way he spoke about the players likely

to trouble him. He never said that he may lose to anyone, but simply that so-and-so may take some points from him. I am firm in my belief that even if he had played Taufik Hidayat of Indonesia [the Indonesian legend lost in a round earlier], Gopi would have walked all over him.

The time at SAI also comes in for some scrutiny by Popat.

I feel that it was his great chemistry and later on friendship with Ganguly Prasad, that made the two of them an electrifying combination. Though the facilities were not comparable to the [Padukone] Academy, the sparring players not of very high calibre and the Hova courts also not in great condition, Gopi was still able to extract the best out of the coach and the surroundings. Here, his innovations were never questioned by Ganguly Prasad, and Gopi was left more or less to his own devices as far as methods were concerned.

Aparna too left Prakash's academy and joined the SAI centre, but while Gopi was finishing his stint there. She says that both she and Gopi found Ganguly Prasad a very intelligent trainer, who, though not a player himself, had a great understanding of all nuances of badminton. 'He had very acute observations about the game, and was incredible in enhancing fitness levels. Gopi always told me that Ganguly Prasad had a huge share in his winning the big title.'

Gopi stayed in the BPL-Padukone Academy till almost mid-1999 before he surprised many by moving yet again, this time to the SAI campus at Bangalore University to train and play in the presence of Ganguly Prasad. His stay in BPL, apart from that one incident of the Chennai tournament entry, was smooth and fruitful. His relationship with Prakash Padukone and others was cordial and even when he decided to leave BPL, Prakash took it very well and wished Gopi the very best in his career. Prakash also added that Gopi, still being the reigning national champion and already making a name internationally, was always welcome to come and train under him at any time. Gopi told Prakash that he wanted to do things on his own, wanted to experiment, and he could do all this only if he was left to himself.

Gopi has very high regard for the legend and says that he learnt a lot under Prakash, be it opening up his game more, or even simple court manners. 'In that way, I was lucky, since he took pains to play and train me individually and was always available for advice. I decided to leave BPL simply because I wanted to do things my way and be my own person after so many years of

training and playing under Arif sir and Prakash sir.’

Throwing more light on this decision to leave the Padukone Academy, Gopi told Rakesh Rao of *The Hindu*:

After losing three close matches in the French Open, the World Championships and the Thailand Open, I was not quite happy with the way I was playing. Not playing the end points better. Suddenly I would play new shots and lose close games. Perhaps I was playing much like Prakash sir – toss, half smash and drops. Plain and simple. But I realised it was not my type of game and therefore I was not moving ahead. I knew I was not enjoying myself. I talked this over with Sir and he was very understanding and permitted me to go and do my thing. If my leaving was going to be a mistake I was prepared to take that responsibility. At the academy everything was ready, easy. I did not have to worry about my food, clothes, and so on. Perhaps a bit too comfortable for me. What I needed was to be more attacking and more positive. I wanted to spend more time on the court than off it. And practice the way I envisioned my game was going to be. That helped. So [the] move to SAI under Ganguly gave me a better understanding of myself and my needs as far as my type of game was concerned.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Hindu*, July 1999

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## MORE ON THE INDIAN CIRCUIT, AND INDIAN PLAYERS



Gopi, despite all efforts, could not foster a comfortable relationship with one of the senior coaches at the BPL- Padukone Academy, who was also a former national player. This coach rose to national prominence later on. At the 1994 Patiala Nationals, when Gopi came back after his injury, subsequent rehab and layoff of almost ten months, he lost in the quarters to Rajeev Bagga, as mentioned before. Bagga, by this time, was past his prime and Gopi, even though he was rusty and had that knee brace, had felt that there were good chances of him reaching the semi-finals. But he didn't win.

Gopi remembers that coach coming up to him and saying, 'What man, it has been a year since your injury and you are still not in good form. People recover in three months' time and you have taken so long. Will you ever recover totally and play back again?'

'These were his words and this upset me very much. I always thought my seniors should be more sympathetic and encouraging in my belief of coming back to play. My doctor had told me off and on that it would be almost a year before I could come back into the form I had lost. So I did not understand why this coach, whom I looked up to, said that.' An uneasy relationship at best endured between both of them, as they were merely civil to each other, not getting into each other's space. But Gopi never forgot that barb and it lingered in his heart all the while.

Gopi was aware that within the Padukone Academy, there were elements who did not like his rise in the game. He was looked upon as the outsider,

since he was not part of the academy from the beginning as were the other national players practising there. But Gopi was far too individualistic and self-respecting by nature to bring these concerns to Prakash himself. In fact, as he says later, he strongly felt that a couple of players were being groomed basically to defeat him, thereby usurping the academy's top player's crown from him.

The other incident, of course, was the one mentioned earlier with his senior coaches, who had said '*Ye langda to nahi khel sakta* (This lame fellow cannot play now)', as if suggesting that Gopi was finished as a badminton player. This was told to Pravin Kumar after Gopi had limped off in the middle of track runs during training for the SAARC Games in 1995, when his knee, especially the part where the bone had been taken off during the surgery, pained and he had no choice but to stop.

These points, in fact, helped Gopi evolve into more of a fighter, as he loved the challenge of proving himself against all odds. He loved pushing himself and then seeing the faces of all those who had doubted him. The last time Gopi lost in India was, incredibly, again to Rajeev Bagga in mid-1996, in a tournament at a place called Jagdishpur, near Lucknow, organised by Jagdishpur Paper Mills. The court had cement flooring and Gopi experienced knee pain in spite of wearing the knee brace. He beat Srikant Bakshi in the semis and started off well in the finals against Bagga. Gopi remembers leading 7-4 in the first game, after which the game went neck-to-neck, much to the delight of the packed spectators' stand in the *pandal*-covered court. With the score at 12-10 in Gopi's favour and service in hand, it started raining heavily and the *pandal* fell through on one side, where some spectators were seated on makeshift bamboo benches. Rain fell on the court as well, and Gopi got wet. The cold breeze after the rain ensured that he caught a cold and had fever next morning. But he gamely agreed to continue the abandoned finals the next day, even though he could have refused, as per the rules of the game. The result was that the fever got better of him and in his weakness, he lost that match to Bagga.

Gopi has very high regard for Rajeev Bagga. The strong wristy game of the deaf-mute shuttler kept Gopi on his toes all the time. Throughout Gopi's domestic career, it is Rajeev who has defeated him maximum times, including in three National Championships. It was only fitting that the last time he lost to an Indian would be at the hands of this Mumbai-based shuttler. According to Gopi, apart from having an extremely strong backhand which

ensured Rajeev always got out of trouble whenever the shuttle was deep in the backhand area, it was his deceptive drops shots, mixed with steep wristy half smashes, that caused maximum damage to everyone. Rajeev also had a very sound defense. I have also played doubles with Rajeev in international badminton, including in the Commonwealth Games, Asian Championships and many other events, and can vouch for the fact that he had an extremely effective defensive game and sharp strokes on the net. Gopi also felt that had Rajeev been a bit more hardworking, he would have easily reached the top ten of world-level badminton. If there was a weakness in Rajeev's game, it was that he was found wanting in long rallies as he used to get out of breath. And yes, when he got tired after a long rally, he was slow to react to net shots, taking them late instead of high near the net. This allowed the opponent to come into the picture again. Apart from Dipankar, who was closer to Gopi in age and style of play, and Abhin Shyam Gupta, who came in a little later on the scene, it is Rajeev who receives high praise from Gopi. The biggest compliment Rajeev gets from Gopi is: 'Rajeev made me think on the court. I could not play the same tactics against him all the time. I had to evaluate his strategy each time and then come up with answers. If I did not change the flow of the game, I was a sitting duck for him. He was really good.'

By the time Gopi won his second National title in 1997 at Hyderabad, Dipankar had almost faded out and the likes of Rajeev were playing only doubles. There was a new bunch of players who came in to challenge Gopi and these, as recounted above, were names such as Siddharth Jain, Abhin Shyam Gupta, Srikant Bakshi, Sachin Ratti and Nikhil Kanetkar, who were now mature enough to stake a claim in the national squad. Though he remained the most dominant player in the country, there were times when some of these players stretched him to three games. Of the above-named players, though Gopi was not really afraid to face any of them across the net, the one player he really respected and took very seriously in an encounter, strangely, was Abhin Shyam Gupta. Abhin was, perhaps, the most dangerous player in terms of stamina and a never-say-die attitude on court. He relished playing long, back-breaking rallies, much to the exasperation and frustration of most players.

The rest of them could never dream of defeating Gopi as they had a mental block about him. True, they could trouble him on his bad days, but defeat him, never. But Abhin, on Gopi's bad days, would be able to win, which

Gopi was aware of. Abhin, hailing from Allahabad, was a highly tenacious, totally defensive player, much in the mould of former Asian champion Dinesh Khanna. Unlike Dinesh though, Abhin possessed a smash good enough to elicit for him a point if the shuttle was close to middle court. Neither very tall, nor strongly built, Abhin had a heart strong enough to put a horse to shame. The longer the rally, the more he played in his element. He loved to run down the opponent. His retrieving ability was legendary, both in Indian badminton and abroad. He hardly ever played loose shots, and his concentration for the task at hand was as strong as Gopi's. In one sense, both Abhin and Gopi were similar – they loved challenges and were never in awe of any opponent. Typically, therefore, even though Abhin lost tamely to Gopi many a time, he would come back roaring to life in the very next match, seeking revenge. Gopi knew this, and that is why his respect for Abhin as a stellar competitor was high enough to make him take Abhin seriously every time he faced him across the net.

And yes, Abhin also had a legacy to follow, as Allahabad had a pedigree in badminton that hardly any city in the country could boast off. For many years, Allahabad dominated domestic badminton. Players like TN Seth and Suresh Goel ruled men's singles events with a vice-like grip for decades, and Damayanti Tambe was the prima donna on the distaff side. Players like Sushant Saxena and Sanjay Mehrotra also made a name for themselves before Abhin Shyam Gupta sauntered onto the scene. The late Syed Modi, though belonging to Gorakhpur, played a lot of his early badminton in Allahabad, before winning eight National Senior singles title and the 1982 Commonwealth Games gold medal. The city could similarly also claim the affections of eight-time national champion Meena Shah, and Rafia Latif, who represented India in the Uber Cup. Abhin, therefore, was the product of a proud legacy of the state of Uttar Pradesh and city of Allahabad.

Till Mohammad Arif came in as coach in Hyderabad and turned the city into a powerhouse of badminton, producing one national champion after the other (a great task carried on later by the Gopi Chand Academy), it was Allahabad and the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) that were really the cradle of national champions. No other city or state came close to Allahabad or UP in producing real magicians of the game. Mumbai, or Bombay as it was then called, came a close second, but could not overtake Allahabad, in spite of producing the likes of Nandu Natekar, who was, perhaps, the supreme artist of his generation.

Gopi recounts the reasons why he deeply respected Abhinn:

It was his never-say-die attitude on the court that sometimes unnerved me. I really respected him for that and therefore, whenever I played him, I was cautious from the first point and tried to finish him off as early as possible. Many times I defeated him on very low scores, but then the scores did not tell the story of the long rallies and breathtaking retrieves that he made. I always had to be on top of my game against him. He got the least number of points every time I took him on. With others, I was confident that even if they had some points' lead, I had enough artillery to come back any time and change the course of the game at hand. But not against Abhinn. If he took a lead, he could be very dangerous. He never left the shuttle and the length of his tosses were incredible and used to take a lot of energy out of me, if I got caught in his strokes. I would never take any chances against him. His strength was his attitude. If I beat him a day before 15-1/15-1, he would come back at me the next day with renewed vigour. There was never a dull moment when he was on court. I have seen some of the players from Japan, England and Thailand vomiting on the court after playing a long match against him. But he remained unaffected and never showed any tiredness or frustration whatsoever.

Gopi, in fact, once defeated Abhinn under 5 points in both games of the finals of the Syed Modi Memorial Championships in Lucknow in 2000. But in one of the matches at the time when world badminton was experimenting with the seven-points best of five games system, which would have ideally suited Gopi's smash/ dribble game, Abhinn stretched him to the very limit, bowing out 5-7 in the fifth game. Apart from this one experimental match, such was Gopi's ferocious and calculated play against Abhinn that he never took a game from the Hyderabad player. There was a big gap between the two, no doubt, but Abhinn, for all purposes, was India Number Two to Gopi for almost four long years and was his teammate in many international team championships, where both gave very good accounts of themselves. Abhinn also recollects about Gopi,

Gopi Chand was the master of the attacking game and his strokes were very sharp and effective, very very deceptive, his netplay was excellent, the dribbles over the net used to come very close to the net and it was very difficult to return. His half smash from overhead, especially cross court,



was very effective, [and when] mixed with attacking tosses, were [sic] very difficult to retrieve all those strokes. Gopi had been a very intelligent player on court, and his speed all over the court was excellent. He was my idol when his career was in full swing, and I have learned a lot from him. He came back after his injury, and that has taught me a lot. In my time, whatever international laurels we achieved, Gopi Chand had played a major role in those. Gopi is also a very kind-hearted person. He is the only player of India who had refused a huge amount of money, offered by a cola company, saying that [cola] is injurious to people. He stands by what he thinks and is very humble and disciplined.

Among the other players, Gopi also liked Siddharth Jain, whom he describes as a good, strong player and a nice person. But it was Nikhil Kanetkar who came closest to defeating Gopi in the four years or so of his domination. Here, typically, was another instance where there was palpable uneasiness between Gopi and a senior academy official. Gopi would take any adverse comment by this person seriously enough to be on his guard. After a year or so at the BPL-Padukone Academy, Gopi also started sensing, as mentioned earlier, that some players were being groomed to take him on, with the sole purpose of defeating him. He says,

It was this thing [issue] of their own products [players trained there] against me and some people there felt I was not their original product, as all over the country people knew I had been coached by Arif sir before I came to Bangalore. No problems with Prakash sir, but with a couple of others, this feeling came through to me. And Nikhil was the one player whom people there openly supported and felt could defeat me.

There was a tournament in Cochin, which started on 12 December every year, for which Gopi, who played in the Bundesliga (the German inter-club league at that time) for the Langenfeld Club used to come down by 10 December. In 1998 too, he came down and went straight to play in the event at Cochin, with hardly any rest. Still jetlagged and suffering from travel fatigue, Gopi somehow reached the finals to play against Kanetkar. But the sudden change from the Hova-mat courts and brighter lights of German clubs to the hard courts and different conditions in Cochin took their toll. The faster shuttles of Bundesliga were replaced by the slower shuttles favoured in India. Of course, Germany's freezing cold substituted by the hot, humid conditions

of the tropics took its toll as well. Gopi somehow weathered all these problems and barely managed to defeat Kanetkar in three long games, with the decider going to full stretch at 18-16 after some eighty minutes or so.

Immediately after Cochin, within the very next week, was a senior major championships in Delhi. Gopi sensed that the close match in Cochin had given food for thought to many players, especially Kanetkar, who felt that Gopi was now beatable. Within the BPL–Padukone Academy, there was talk that Gopi's time had come and now he was indeed vulnerable. At times like this, whenever Gopi felt that his authority or class was being questioned, he was up for the challenge. This was a dramatic aspect of his personality. He would crush any opposition to his status of being India Number One. He was ruthless in this aspect – there had to be no challenger to his throne. When Gopi played Kanetkar again in Delhi, he was well-rested from the German trip by then, was able to plan and strategise properly and was out to kill. The result was a real demolition and drubbing of the Pune-born southpaw.

Another instance was against Sachin Ratti, the player from Jalandhar who represented the Railways. In the Delhi Nationals, with both the crowd and the whole Railways team supporting him, which was natural, Sachin Ratti, a pleasing stroke-player with a five-feet-six-inch frame and a cute smile, was also helped by the slow shuttles available for the matches. He sensed that Gopi was faltering and gave his very best in the match, which went full distance. People, in any case, love underdogs and Gopi by this time was the undisputed king of Indian badminton. Apart from a couple of Hyderabad players in the huge Indira Gandhi Stadium, there was only his mother Subbaravamma cheering and screaming out her support. Gopi was mature enough to understand that the crowds wanted someone to defeat him, to see a new champion emerge. This, he felt, was quite natural. Gopi, however, wrapped up the long match, winning the end points easily. But he did not forget the way Sachin had tried to challenge his authority and domination over Indian badminton.

The two met again a couple of months later at the National Games in Imphal. The badminton community assembled there was eager to see the outcome of the second encounter between the two. Gopi played a Maharashtra player, Parag Modi, in the match previous to the one against Ratti and lost the first game, then was down 0-9 in the second game before he clawed his way back into the game and won on an extension. He won the third game as well, without much ado. He was unable to give his best in this

match, which electrified the stadium, as people sensed that the king was finally going to fall. His match against Sachin was in the evening of the same day, some five hours later.

Gopi did not go back to his hotel room to rest, but stayed put in the hall. He did not talk to anyone, just visualised the match and how he would play, react to Sachin's strokes, his match plan, etc. He sat, meditated and mentally prepared himself for the match, and when the match umpire said, 'Love-all, play', Gopi exploded, attacked, and played with such energy that Sachin could not handle him. The first game saw only three changes of services before Gopi smashed his way to a 15-1 win while the second game saw him give away a mere four points. He made sure that everyone understood who was the real boss. Sachin Ratti was a very strong player, but was made to look a pedestrian in front of Gopi's ferocious onslaught. Instances and scores like these, at least once every six months, ensured that Gopi remained the most comprehensive and dominating player on the domestic circuit.

One can only guess what would have happened if Gopi had not sustained that career-threatening injury at the Pune National Games. The then India Number One, Dipankar, had been comprehensively brushed aside in the semi-finals. Indeed, all opposition in Pune and even before had been crushed by Gopi. He had an outstanding chance of not just winning that National Games singles title but also the National Senior Championships that was to follow within a couple of weeks. All parameters and results in those years point to Gopi becoming the top player in the country and winning not only the 1993 Nationals but, in all probability, every Nationals till 2000. People are of the view that Gopi would have, at the very least, equalled Syed Modi's eight continuous National Championships winning spree from 1980 till 1987. He may even have equalled Prakash Padukone's unbeaten and fantastic continuous nine Nationals' winning spree from 1971 to 1979. After all, Gopi's last Nationals win was in 2000, also his last National Championships participation in singles. Gopi was just twenty-eight years old then, with a good three to four years of top-class badminton left in him. Would Gopi have become the best ever Indian player in history, is a question that is tantalising indeed. There is, however, no doubt that he was good enough to win at least eight National titles on a trot. With victories over players like Alan Budikusuma, Tomas Johansson, playing three games with Hariyanto Arbi and many other top world-ranked players by the time he was twenty-two, Gopi had an outstanding chance to reach the top three of the world rankings

early in his career. One also has to take into account here that by the time he was defeating the likes of Budikusuma at the age of twenty-two, he had already lost one year to the injury at Pune. There is no doubt that Gopi was an extraordinary player. Like a true champion guarding his domain, whenever he found someone getting too close for comfort, or some player having thoughts of derailing him from the top, that player had to be taught a lesson. Gopi was clear about this and dramatic in the execution of his match tactics whenever such an occasion demanded him to be ruthless. This was very important to his psyche. He wanted to settle that account as soon as possible. That player had to be shown his place in the hierarchy.

But away from the court and the hurly-burly of the matches, Gopi, given his amicable nature and ever-smiling demeanour, was friendly with everyone. His old friend Vijay Lancy, who was also a tough competitor to Gopi in his own way, says:

He was always very helpful. But he also liked to be on his own as much as possible. Badminton was his life, and every moment he was awake, it had to do something with the game. Food was correct and measured, yoga was there to help him and so were his books on topics that helped him play better.

He was always an early sleeper, so no parties or movies for him. Rarely, and that too forced by some one like Manjusha or Asawari who were his close friends, he would accompany us for a movie or a dinner outside. But whenever you went to him for advice on the game, he was always there to help. And that could be his real close competitors like Abhinn, Dipankar or anyone else. He was a good person to have around.

Gopi felt that players like Nikhil Kanetkar, Siddharth Jain, Vijay Lancy and Sachin Ratti were good, but a bit naïve, in the sense that they would not take advantage if a sudden opportunity came their way, either out of respect, or lack of belief in themselves, or some such reason. Abhinn, however, was very different in this respect, and Gopi knew that offered an inch, Abhinn would probably grab a mile. He was always wary of this player. So his match preparation against Abhinn was always perfect, and execution of the plan was as ruthless as possible.

His personal equations were good with everyone. Nikhil was his room partner on many trips abroad. Nikhil, Vijay, Siddharth and others were all Gopi's competitors, but were at ease with him. Gopi, however, accepts that

he was a very private person and did not mix with people easily. But his friends cut across all states, as he was friendly with players from Punjab, Railways, PSCB, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala apart from his home state of Andhra Pradesh. Players such as Vijaydeep Singh, Ajay Kanwar, Amitabh Goswami, Manjusha Pawangadkar (Kanwar), Jaseel Ismail, Markose Bristow, Vijay Raghvan, Prabhakar, Vijay Lancy, Siddharth Jain as well as all the top female players were all close to him, but there was this line that nobody crossed, a point after which he retreated into his own shell – his very own *lakshman rekha*. He had his own space with his yoga and meditation, which everyone respected.

If there was one player with whom he had a love-hate relationship right through his playing career, or at least until 1997-98, it was Dipankar Bhattacharya. Their on-court battles were intense, with neither of them willing to budge an inch, be it on line calls, change of shuttles, or misleading umpiring decisions. During practice too, the fights continued, basically for psychological domination. With the rest of the players, while Gopi would be very competitive, after the matches, he would share jokes with them, engage in typical changing-room banter, join them for a meal, and so on. Gopi does not remember ever having any personal misunderstanding with any of these players, who shared a big part of his life. But Dipankar always put him on high alert as a player.

One reason for the competition between them was that both were PSCB players. Also, Dipankar being senior and also the national champion before Gopi, it was natural that given Gopi's highly competitive nature, he would have to upstage Dipankar to claim his own place as the top honcho of Indian badminton. Right from his junior days, Gopi had chased Dipankar with the view of defeating him sooner than later, knowing that until he comprehensively defeated Dipankar, he would not be called India Number One. So a fierce sort of rivalry simmered between the two.

Gopi felt that Dipankar was a bit orthodox and was unable to come to terms with Gopi emerging as his biggest rival. No king wants to be dethroned, and Dipankar was no exception. So while there would be regular fights on court as both would not agree on, for example, the speed of the shuttle, the tension in this case could also be carried on till after the match finished. Despite that, Gopi concedes that he loved the pugnacious Assam player as a person. In fact, he says that in terms of discipline and dedication, training and work ethics, fighting attitude, innovative practice sessions and

aggression on court he learnt a lot from Dipankar. According to Gopi, Dipankar was fantastic in these areas.

We always shared rooms, always had meals together and always fought on the court. It was a funny relationship, but I looked up to him in many ways. In terms of badminton, apart from the coaches with whom I interacted, it was Dipankar from whom I really learnt a lot. Till I came on the scene, he was the undisputed king. He was strong, tenacious and had a great fighting spirit on court, which I tried to imbibe in my personality. But both of us would try to kill each other on court as early as possible. It was this domination thing. At the back of my mind, I had realised that I had to be ruthless in my matches against him. If I could nail him under five in both the games, I would do that. So would he. We never gave a quarter to each other. I would like to remember Dipankar as a friend for life, one whose style of play was something I admired and whose tenacity on court I tried to bring in my own game.

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## the BreakthrouGh



**D**uring the years 1996-2000, Gopi reigned supreme in domestic badminton, but he had also started making a big name for himself worldwide. The sparks were seen early on, for example, when he defeated Alan Budikusuma and Druczhenkho at the 1995 All England. Before that, on his debut at Wembley in March 1993, he had got the better of Tomas Johansson 17-14/15-8. The world badminton circuit had started taking notice of him, but it was during the years without any injuries, from mid-1998 onwards, that he really started consolidating his position in world rankings.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, he beat 1996 Olympic champion Poul-Erik Hoyer Larsen in the SAS Cup at Vienna, and many other top players while playing in Germany Club League.

In 1997, during the World Championships at Glasgow which saw him getting injured again, Gopi had come up to me (Sanjay Sharma) when I was covering the championships for *The Hindu*, *Amar Ujala* and *Mid Day* newspapers, and asked whether he could join the Bundesliga, the tough but lucrative German inter-club league. I had had the fortune of playing for three seasons for VFL Wolfsburg during my time as a player. Luckily, Hans Werner Niesner, the then coach of his club, was the Joint Secretary of the German Badminton Association in 1997, and upon my request, he arranged for Gopi to meet some officials of the German Badminton Association (Deutscher Badminton Verband) in Glasgow itself. Gopi soon joined the Langenfeld club and had a brilliant stint there. It must be remembered that in

1996, he had also defeated the Chinese player Luo Yigang in the Sanyo World Cup. He, therefore, had all the tools to make it big, but injuries and surgeries bogged him down time and again.

But the stint in the fifteen-court Langenfeld club really helped. Right food, right nutrition, a professional physio and a top-grade gym, lots of Yonex shuttles to practise with and the fact that Gopi was able to train under the Chinese coach of the club helped him realise the huge benefits of weight and strength training.

I was fit before but not strong, and this meant that I lost by the time I reached the third or the fourth round of any international event. The Chinese coach made me realise the full and fantastic benefits of muscle-strengthening, and we got into lifting some real heavy weights in the months I used to visit Germany. In many ways, my stint in the club helped me discover more facets of my own personality, and also inculcated in me the belief that I could really match the physically stronger Europeans and the faster Chinese/ Indonesians. I realised that correct weight training was the key to rising higher in world rankings.

Gopi continued the training he had had in Langenfeld throughout the rest of his career, including the two-year phase at SAI Bangalore, where he found a soulmate in Ganguly Prasad, who was also heavily into that type of training.

But it was during the tour of south-east Asia in 1993 that the first inkling came to badminton followers in India that here was a guy who could well be the torchbearer of Indian badminton after Prakash Padukone. The two players differed in style and approach, but both Prakash and Gopi were two highly focussed individuals who aimed for the same goal – to be the best in the world. Both of them also gave enough indications early on in their careers of what was to follow. In the 1978 British Open at Royal Albert Hall, a young Prakash subdued a field that boasted of the very best in the world at that time. This included Flemming Delfs and the late Svend Pri of Denmark amongst others. Svend Pri was a former All England champion and the only one in the world to defeat the greatest of them all – Rudy Hartono of Indonesia – in the tropic heat of his country and in front of Rudy's home crowd during the Thomas Cup finals in 1972 (in the lion's den, so to say). Svend was not a player who accepted defeat easily, that too from a boyish Indian who did not smash hard enough to rattle anyone, and who played merely by controlling the shuttle and spinning it time and again on the net to mesmerise all



opponents. Prakash not only conquered the famous draught in the hall which made the light shuttle do crazy things in the air, but went on to stun the Danish superstar, who then gave that famous quote, 'Prakash is used to play [ing] in jungles of India'. Later that year, Prakash went on to win the fabled gold at the 1978 Commonwealth Games.

By the time Gopi was about twenty, he showed his mindboggling potential in the 1993 Thailand Open, which was part of the China, Hong Kong and Thailand circuit. Gopi was happy since he played doubles with Vinod Kumar and they had tough matches all the way through, including the qualifiers. He lost the China Open in the fourth round of singles qualifying, but he was satisfied with the way he played.

In the Hong Kong Open, he lost the last round of qualifying to Hwang Sung Ho, the Korean Number Two after Park Sung Won, in three games, losing 15-17 in the decider. The match took almost eighty minutes. At both the China and Hong Kong Opens, Gopi says he played at least four matches a day to enter the last rounds of qualifying of singles and doubles. The pace was quite good and though he struggled against local players, and was sore all over each night, at least he was playing with some of the best players in the world.

In the Thailand Open, Gopi qualified in singles and defeated Hwang Sung with a 17-15 scoreline in the deciding game – in almost the same time he took at Hong Kong. Incidentally, Gopi remembers that in both the matches against Hwang, all six games played between the two went the full distance of 17 or 18 points. He reached the pre-quarters to collect his first ever prize money in his international career, which made him really happy, and then ran into the then China and World Number One Sun Jun. Gopi was elated at getting a chance to play the Chinese ace so early in his career.

Sun Jun, of course, had never heard of the maverick Indian. Gopi started off like a bullet, damaging Sun Jun's psyche brutally by snatching the first game, and went on to lead 9-4 in the second, before the stunned Chinese could start his counter-attack. Gopi was in his element. Firstly because he had proven his point to his own teammates and coaches, who used to scoff and deride him whenever he said that the top Chinese and Indonesians, could be defeated. Secondly, because by now, the entire Chinese contingent, headed by the chief coach and players like Dong Jiong, had assembled to support Sun Jun. Playing the biggest match of his young and inexperienced life, Gopi had Sun Jun on the ropes but let the initial advantage fade away as the

Chinese finally got the better of Gopi in a hard fought three-game affair.

Gopi comments on that circuit:

The important thing I learned on this circuit was that I needed better speed, strength and strategy against the top players. But I also knew that I was working in the right direction. Though we did not have good coaching support in India, I had to think and innovate many things myself. I also realised that with some more time, I could imbibe in my game the qualities and confidence needed to face the best badminton players in the world. But the fact that I was fearless, never in awe of big names or high world rankings was something [that was] always going to be in my favour.

Gopi's first such circuit was in 1991, and in 1992, he played only the Asian Championships. So 1993, in many ways, was an eye opener not just for Gopi, but the way Indian badminton looked at him. That same year, he also played in the World Cup at Delhi against Rashid Sidek. 1994, he lost entirely due to the injury and in 1995 he won the SAARC. In 1996, he played few international events and the injury at the World Championships in June 1997 saw him lose some three months or so from competitive badminton. But he recovered fast from this episode.

In 1997, he reached the finals of the India Grand Prix in Delhi in March after defeating the dangerous Korean Kim Hyung Joon in the semi-finals. Joon was ranked World Number Six that year. He, in fact, beat two Koreans and one Japanese player including Joon, to reach the finals. Gopi lost to world champion Heryanto Arbi in the finals, but claimed that he had had a good chance in the finals since he was able to match speed with all the other ranked/seeded opponents till then. By now, he was ranked fifty-four in the world.

That year, he really showed his class and announced to the world that he was back with a bang on the international circuit, showing his grit and determination by defeating Indonesian world champion Joko Suprianto at the Asia Cup in China 15-12/15-9 in a fast-paced, all-out match. Gopi thus avenged his defeat at the hands of Joko, to whom he had lost in the second round at the Lusane World Championships in 1995, with a timid scoreline of 7-15/8-15. He also won the 1997 SAARC Championships at Colombo.

Around the same time, Gopi, who had already defeated some of the best players in the world, but had not won any world circuit titles big or small, finally got his name engraved on a couple of international trophies. At the

Toulouse Open, which was a \$17,000 event, he defeated Henrik Bengtsson of Sweden 15-10/15-2 in the semis and then won a tough three-setter against the higher-ranked Richard Vaughn of Wales 15-13/14-15/15-5. The following week, he won the Scottish Open, getting the better of Siddharth Jain 15-8/15-10. He then returned to India to play at the Asian Satellite event at Hyderabad, which he also won. Gopi moved up a few notches in the world rankings after these victories, which were small in terms of participation from top players, but nonetheless, gave Gopi his first international titles as well as immense satisfaction on jobs well done.

As mentioned earlier, he had won two good group matches in the Sanyo World Cup in Jakarta, 1997, against Luo Yigang of China and Tomas Johansson of Sweden. In the years 1997 and 1998, he also reached the pre-quarters of the All England. 1998 also saw him defeat top German player Oliver Pongratz in the German Open Grand Prix, where Gopi made it to his second GP final, only to lose to the Chinese Xia Xuanze 3-15/15-13/4-15. But he managed to defeat Bonsak Polsanna of Thailand, a top ten ranked player, twice that year. 1998 also saw him getting injured at the Bombay Gymkhana in the domestic circuit event, which resulted in a layoff of almost a month, after which – against medical advice – he went to play the BPL Open at the Padukone Academy, which he won. He recovered towards the end of the year to win his bronze medal in individual events at the Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur, apart from helping India win the silver medal in team championships.

The end of 1998 and early 1999 also saw Gopi lose some close matches against top players. Gopi recounts those days, saying:

I would go out there and not enjoy myself anymore. This was the time at the Prakash Academy when I started to doubt myself. Things were not happening, maybe due to so many injuries or just the way things were. I had my own concepts for training, practice and stroke play, and was not really comfortable doing my own things there after I was losing. Though Prakash sir was very supportive, I decided to move to SAI in Bangalore itself. This actually helped a lot, because there was a lot more effort that was put in training, and also I had lot of time to reflect and think about my game and my future. I had enough space for myself. The calmness at SAI and the fact that it was far away from the city meant that I hardly ever went out. I was able to do things in my style. Players like Vijaydeep and Jaseel

Ismail, being doubles specialists, helped my defensive game. Ganguly Prasad was the coach there and he never interfered in any way. He was really good because he was able to help me in the type of heavyweight training I wanted and also provide me the atmosphere I needed to experiment my practice and training methods. I was basically myself as everything evolved around me. Young sparring partners such as Sudhir [Babu], [BG] Kiran, [D] Guruprasad, helped me all the time with stroke practice. I was coming out of an injury and had already won three Nationals by then, so I was basically not bothered if I won another one or not. My focus was winning at world level. That is all I looked forward to. There was a risk of not achieving anything further with my move to SAI, but I willingly took that risk as I had nothing to lose.

These experiments veered towards the extreme. Manjusha Kanwar, on one of her visits to SAI, told Gopi that she knew a homeopathic expert who said that even walking put pressure on the knees. Taking this observation to heart, Gopi would not even walk much at SAI. In his own words, he would just sleep, apart from whatever time he spent on court or on the training track. 'I was sleeping for almost twelve hours daily at SAI, and I thought I was doing the right thing.' There was no other activity. He had a bare room with no fans, as he hated sleeping under a fan. He slept on the floor as much as he could. Life revolved around badminton. The only digression was when he was literally dragged out on a Saturday evening to a local pub, where he had a soft drink, much to the amusement of the patrons and the pub owner, while the other badminton players and athletes relaxed after a really tough week at SAI with glasses of beer. 'This was the weekly bribe I had to pay for the guys who were giving so much of their time in training me,' recalls Gopi with a smile.

The SAI stint paid off well for Gopi, as towards late 1999 and early 2000, all such experiments started bringing in the results he had waited so long for. Within a year he leapfrogged to World Number Seven, from a lowly rank of forty.

Gopi again started asserting himself in world badminton. If he could raise his world ranking from forty to a high of seven during the last few months, it was largely due to his performances in the South-east where he reached the semi-finals of three of the biggest championships in the world, the Ipoh Masters, the Malaysian Open and the Asian Championships. In between, Gopi

also helped India reach the finals round of the Thomas Cup with a scintillating personal show at the qualifiers in Delhi in January 2000. He remained unbeaten and helped India qualify for the cup final after a huge gap of twelve years. The year also saw Gopi beat the eventual Olympic champion Ji Xinpeng four times in as many meetings. Gopi's consistency earned him a place in the top sixteen, the *crème de la crème*, who get to play in the World GP finals. Gopi was ready to gallop ahead. By now, Gopi had defeated three Olympic champions, namely, Budikusuma, Hoyer Larsen and now Xinpeng.

This was something not many players in any discipline could boast of. In those three tournaments in Asia, Gopi beat huge names. In the Indonesian Open, he beat Roslin Hashim of Malaysia in the quarters, in the Ipoh Masters Gopi stunned the then World Number One Taufik Hidayat, and at the Malaysian Open, Ji Xinpeng became his victim along with Li Xian Cheng. Indonesian player Hendrawan was another top player trounced by Gopi, post the 2000 Olympics. Just to complete the list of top players who bit the dust at his feet, there was also Lin Dan of China, in the Singapore Open of 2002. Gopi hammered this young Chinese 15-6/15-4. 'Super Dan' as he came to be known later, became a true legend of the game, winning the All England, the Thomas Cup and three World Championships from 2004 till 2010.

In an interview for Rediff.com, Gopi spoke about these wins to me (Sanjay Sharma).

Taufik is today what Rudy Hartono used to be in the 1970s. A most complete player and so young – just 20. By this age, he was already All England runner-up twice and had helped Indonesia win the Thomas Cup. I had lost to him twice before but at the senior Asian championships it was close as I led 12-4 against him before I lost. In the Ipoh Masters, I just wanted to play with a plan, and that was not to allow him to get into any rhythm. This is the best performance of my career so far. I managed to win in three games, but it was so tough all through – more of a mind game than anything else. Major Asian championships are as tough as the world championships and I have done well to reach [the] semis in all three within last three weeks. I am not afraid of anyone, any player on the circuit. When I beat Taufik and Xinpeng in these past few days, I knew that though I have not yet won a major world level event, the day is not far away when I will have luck on my side and I will indeed bag a major title. But I used to be really happy at defeating top Chinese players as they were the ones who

ruled the badminton world. I was confident that by now I had all the ingredients needed to land a big one.<sup>1</sup>

Gopi had also started adjusting to new courts and new halls very fast, thanks to the pressure of playing many matches at very different sort of venues in the Bundesliga.

The advantage Gopi had after going to the Langenfeld Club was that he played against the physically stronger Europeans such as Oliver Pongratz from Germany, Hoyer Larsen and Kenneth Johansson from Denmark, Richard Vaughan of Wales, Vladislav Druzchenko of Ukraine and even a Polish player like Przemyslaw Wacha who was ranked in the top fifteen of the world. Apart from these, a lot of second-string Indonesians and Malaysians also played the league. The shuttles were sometimes so slow that it took huge strength just to toss from baseline to baseline. The pace of each and every match played was pretty fast; the smashes took superhuman effort. All this, plus the perfect weight training he was doing, meant that Gopi became extremely strong and fit. By mid-1999, he was ready in every way to take on the very best in the world, and the results started showing.

In Gopi's own words, he now had the game and the fitness to take on the very best.

From the middle of 1999 till the end of 2000, I had defeated almost every top player in the world. My sort of playing style had required a lot of fitness and I now knew what kind of comprehensive training was needed to get there. The only weakness I felt I had was that my defence was still not world class. The top Chinese had the speed and the attack to push me into defensive game very quickly. That was the one thing that bothered me, nothing else. The last time I had played artistically and bit defensively was at a match in NSCI-Mumbai and I had lost in two games to Srikant Bakshi and had decided then and there that I must fall back upon my own all-out attacking way of playing – but yes, I must still have a fallback option, in case this did not work out. I decided that day that if I have to continue playing badminton, it had to be on my own terms. I had to enjoy what I was doing. I believed that my attack would help me win lots of matches and that I should be doing that as often as possible.

In August 2000, Gopi was bestowed the Arjuna Award for outstanding contribution to Indian badminton – the first of the four awards he would win

in his life. He was now entrenched in SAI and played few matches outside, as the tours that year were much less. He simply worked on sharpening his strokes and increasing his fitness. He opted out of the 2000 German League as he knew that something big was going to happen soon. The magic mantra right through his training now was speed, strength and skills on the net. He was also convinced that he must have a really sharp net game so that his attack could come into play if he forced easy lifts from the net.

‘Every day, Gopi would smash and dribble from all angles of the court – the drills could last for a full hour at least,’ remembers good friend Vijaydeep Singh.

He used to break at least fifty to sixty shuttles each day. His concentration was intense and he used to tell us that even if his defence was still not world class, he must have enough speed and smash power that opponents will find difficulty in attacking him. I remember that we used to juggle the sessions, as he disliked any fixed patterns. Sometimes, three of us on the opposite side would smash all over his court to make his defence strong. Other times, he would do almost 100 to 150 jump smashes and dribble drills. The dribble became a passion with him. He told us that this one stroke was the key to be World Number One. On an average day, we would be on court for four hours, that would be followed by weights or sprints and again with some rope skipping in another session, and so on. Gopi would play or train for some six to seven hours every day. He lived like a monk, living and breathing just badminton and nothing else.

That year, Gopi again reached the semis of the Malaysian Open, defeating World Number Three Ong Ewe Hock of Malaysia in quarters, and in the JVC Asia Cup, he got the better of fast rising Chinese star Chen Yu 15-7/16-17/15-8. Gopi was now ranked World Number Seven and knew that he would be known as a legend in the game only if he won a big event. He told *Eenadu*:

I am ranked high now, but this is not important to me. I can always select my tournaments and improve my rankings. What I need is a big title – I really want to land a big one. I am comfortable now against any top player and have reached up to semi-finals consistently. But somehow the major titles have eluded me. I can feel in my bones that something big should happen soon.<sup>2</sup>

Gopi also said that it was clear he was not getting any younger – age was running out on him.

The one big tournament that he was perhaps alluding to was the 2000 Sydney Olympics. By June 2000, Gopi, by now World Number Six, had qualified for his first Olympics at Sydney. He cut down on tournaments, missing the German League as well as other major events to train for the Olympics. He knew he had to get his act together and he had everything he needed to help him towards his goal. At SAI, all facilities were centred around him and he knew the time had come to do or die. He is thankful to players like SDS Krishna, Sudhir Babu, Vijaydeep Singh, Jaseel Ismail, D Guruprasad and BG Kiran, as well as coach Ganguly Prasad, who were all part of Team Gopi. He also acknowledges the role of SAI Executive Director MP Ganesh, who helped him in every way possible and made Gopi's life at SAI not just endurable but enjoyable. This team would do anything to make Gopi happy, to the extent of playing football or cricket just to help him relax from all the hard work he was putting into badminton.

Gopi was still not into food supplements or massages too much in those days, and he had one problem – his body used to get stiff and sore after three or four tough matches. He could not recover as quickly as he wanted to from this; his body was unable to bear the strain. It took him quite some time to figure out the remedy for all these problems.

He is, however, clear about a couple of things.

I felt great about my wins, but it all depended on how fit I was. I knew if I was injury-free and match-fit, I could face these guys in every way. I had to get back and play the same type of game against all such players. In the sense that I had to play a quicker game, play fast, be aggressive all the time. So fitness was the key. And the other aspect was that I had to be injury-free. These were the two main aspects and both depended on each other, rubbing off on each other.

Gopi dearly wanted to be the first Indian shuttler to get a medal at Sydney. After all, he had by now beaten every top player who mattered and, if not gold, was a favourite to win at least the bronze. Strength, speed and lasting power were the qualities formidable champions had in abundance, and Gopi also trained hard keeping these three aspects in mind.

Prakash Padukone spoke to Sutram Suresh from *The Times of India* on the qualification of Gopi and Aparna Popat for the Olympics:



Both Gopi and Aparna have enough match experience and good match temperament. But I would say that Gopi has a better chance of getting a medal. I rate him 6 or 7 on a 1-10 scale. His recent form has been very good – specially at the Malaysian Open where he beat two seeded, good players. That should give him lots of confidence. That should be his plus point too. He should not be overconfident, but the Gopi I know is very level headed that way. However, good sparring partners like the ones enjoyed by Chinese, Koreans, Danes, Indonesians, etc. is something that Gopi lacks. There is no opposition to him here. Just going to Olympics does not mean much to me. We have representation already in previous editions. Only a medal from Olympics can change the face of Indian badminton. And he [Gopi] has the game to upset top players. A medal here is as big as me winning the All England Title.

Placed in the bottom half of the draw, Gopi had termed it as ‘tough but okay’. He had always said that to win any big title, one should be ready to beat the best in the very first round. He said he would focus on one match at a time. Gopi learnt that in round of thirty-two (or the first round) he was to play against his old friend Vladislav Druzchenko of Ukraine. The winner here would be running into the dangerous Indonesian Hendrawan. Gopi had defeated Druzchenko twice before. Should Gopi reach the quarters, he was most likely to run into Danish star and former Olympic champion, thirty-five-year-old Poul-Erik Hoyer Larsen, again a player whom he had defeated in 1997 at the SAS Cup.

But Gopi’s dream of doing well at Sydney was shattered. Let Gopi now take us through his Olympic dream, and share with us what happened in his own words:

I had never prepared for any tournament as I had done for Sydney Olympics as the event was extremely important for me. I wanted to emulate Leander Paes as he was the only Indian in the modern era to have actually won an Olympic medal. I wanted this badly and left no stone unturned in my preparations. And for me, this was something very achievable since I was at a stage where I was really playing well and things were looking good from that perspective. I did not go out anywhere, just stuck to a schedule which was tried and tested. No friends, no meetings with anyone, nothing that could distract me. I was at SAI all the time. Since fitness was the one issue with me, I really worked hard with my team. I

was mentally confident of doing well since barring two or three players, all the others there had been defeated by me sometime or the other. Since mental aspect was also important, I spent hours by myself working on the mind, and in meditation and yoga, ensuring that this also went well.

This meant that I got up every morning at around 4 a.m., spent a couple of hours visualising. Everything looked really perfect and all my planning was going on well. In short, the preparations were really very good – nothing was left to chance. So, by the time I reached Sydney, I was almost at the stage where I thought that I could not lose to anyone. I had the speed, strength and enough lasting power to subdue all opposition. Or at least, that is what I thought.

I played Druzchenko in first round, a big, tall, good rally player, and beat him in three games. I beat him on fitness and I knew that I just would not get tired in the match. I was really sharp and good on court. But when I finished the match and went to my room, I rested for a few hours and got up with my body really stiff and sore. I had no clue why this happened as this match was not supposed to hurt me in anyway. My body was not supposed to hurt so much as I had trained much harder than what this match could do to me. From neck downwards, the whole body was aching, right down to my calves. Even the shins, the hamstrings of both legs were hurting.

I took three massages, took three Brufen painkillers, but the mystery was not solved. The whole thing was strange as I started getting a temperature as well and my body was hurting all over. I had to play Hendrawan, the second seed from Indonesia next, and I lost to him easily, with my body really not responding in whatever I tried, and my heart beating faster than it usually did before any match. His strength was his deceptive stroke play and Indians normally play deception well, just like our batsmen normally do well against spin bowling in cricket. So I lost a match which I thought I should have won. And I sulked for more than a month after this loss, which really shattered me. I was like a zombie for weeks, unable to get out of the depression which had set in. This was the first time I had really wanted something, I had trained hard, visualised and seen it coming and suddenly everything went out of control. I was not even aware why it happened and it was like a puzzle which I could not solve. This was the lowest phase in my life.

One reason that Gopi gave in the interview to Rediff.com on 31 January 2001, was that he did not get enough top-level practice in Sydney, even though both he and Aparna Popat had reached well in time. There was no other Indian male player who could qualify, and other teams were obviously reluctant to play against him in practice, as they had their own team members to play against. He said that he was mentally sharp but things did not work out correctly for him.

Post this loss, Gopi came back to SAI and tried to understand what went wrong. He also felt that even though he could not get a couple of days of hard practice at the venue in Sydney, the hard work he had put into the pre-Olympic training should have seen him through in any case. After a week or so, he started going through the motions of training as domestic tournaments were looming near. But his heart was not in what he was doing and for the first time, he questioned whether the whole thing was going to work this way. Whether what he was doing was correct or not. He questioned his future in the sport. He thought he would never be as upset ever in his life. The body recovered after couple of days, but the mind just could not take the loss. Luckily for him, in the local championships he played, there was still hardly any strong opposition. He won the Nationals of 2000 easily.

Karnam Malleswari won a bronze in weight-lifting at Sydney that year and Hyderabad felicitated the favourite daughter like no one else. Gopi was really happy for her. But he also felt that it was his medal she had won. It took almost two months for him to come out of that self-made stupor.

He just could not figure out what went wrong. He had no clue why it happened, except that he felt physical pain after that first match and did not recover in time for the second. He then tried to find remedies to help his body in case such a thing happened again. He read an article which stated that ice helped if applied soon after the match, to relax the body. He started using and appreciating this therapy, as it worked for him. Icing helped him much more than massages. This ice therapy was to play a crucial role very soon in his life.

Gopi also finally understood why his body had hurt so much. The Sydney Olympics was played on concrete floors, over which the usual rubber mats had been installed. At SAI and elsewhere in India, the time of concrete floors was over long ago. Better infrastructure meant that wooden flooring was used everywhere. Most tournaments in the world also used wooden floors. But at Sydney, the venue was a temporary structure and a new one at that. Australia

had never had any history of badminton and, unlike squash, where wooden flooring was used, the organisers there thought Yonex mats laid over the concrete floor would be enough. In any case, Badminton World Federation (BWF) was yet to come up with rules that made it mandatory for international events be played on wooden flooring. These regulations were put in place later, making wooden flooring mandatory from 2002 onwards. But as far as Gopi was concerned, the jump smashes and fast movements against Druzchenko on the hard concrete floor had already done the damage.

Gopi did not know that Sydney had concrete floors as he simply did not check before coming, presuming that wooden flooring would be used. But now that he knew the remedy, he used ice constantly post matches, even at the 2001 All England, as there too, hard concrete flooring was used at Birmingham, where the matches were played at the National Indoor Arena. Had he known about ice therapy, Gopi feels that his Olympic result could well have been different.

Gopi did not share his thoughts about the Olympic debacle with anyone. He did not want to think so much about the 'visualisation' technique also, which he had earlier read helped a lot. But it also hurt if things went wrong. The entire month or so after the event Gopi spent in sheer distress, weeping at what could have been. He just did not know what was happening.

A month after returning from Sydney, Gopi started playing tournaments again, but basically just went through the motions. He also played a couple of international events, where he reached the semis and slowly started feeling good all over again. Thoughts of winning a big title were now put on the backburner, as Gopi again started taking it one match a time. He just wanted to be his old self again – play the best possible badminton in the style he liked. He won the National Sports Club of India (NSCI) Championships in Mumbai and also the 2000 National Championships at Jaipur, after which he revealed another part of his nature, of the way he thinks and behaves.

Gopi received ₹ 40,000 as prize money for winning his last Nationals and promptly handed over the entire amount to the Gujarat earthquake relief fund. Here was a man, who had himself seen such terrible days, when his mother had had to walk miles in the scorching Hyderabad summer, for whom his mother had to mortgage/sell some of her jewellery so that he could play his first international tour of 1991, the man who used to collect old shuttles from international events simply because he could not afford to buy new ones. Here was a man whose parents did not have the money to pay for his first

knee operation, who had promised to win the All England championships as repayment to his good-hearted surgeon, whose parents had to run helter-skelter to raise a loan of some ₹ 20,000 so that he could participate in the 1995 All England Championships. Yet, Gopi willingly and happily parted with the National Championships sum of ₹ 40,000 without batting an eyelid, so that some amount would reach the ones who had lost their entire life's savings and hopes in that devastating earthquake.

After this charitable deed and with some good outings internationally, Gopi started preparing for the 2001 All England championships at Birmingham. He was twenty-seven years old, without a major world title to his name, yet he was cheerful and amongst the favourites to win, as he had defeated most of the top players in the world. But he did not dwell on such thoughts, as the crushed Olympic dream was still fresh in his mind. As usual, he wanted to take one match at a time and see what happened next. And Team Gopi made sure he was in good physical and mental shape by the time he departed for Birmingham.

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<sup>1</sup> Rediff.com, 31 January 2001

<sup>2</sup> Eenadu, 29 October 2000

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## THE ALL ENGLAND EARLY ROUNDS



The All England Open Badminton Championships, also known as All England, is in all probability the most prestigious badminton tournament in the world. It came into being after the world's first badminton tournament held at Guildford, UK, in 1898, proved to be a success, and is now an annual event. The first championship was held on 4 April 1899 at the headquarters of the London Scottish Regiment Drill Hall, Buckingham Gate, with only three categories (men's doubles, women's doubles and mixed doubles) originally. Both the singles events were added in 1900. The first two tournaments were called 'the Badminton Association Tournaments'. The tournament was halted twice, from 1915 to 1919 due to World War I, and then from 1940 to 1946 during World War II. The tournament was considered the unofficial world championships until 1977, when the International Badminton Federation, (as the world body was called in those years) launched the official World Championships.

The championships changed venue eight times, finally landing at the National Indoor Arena at Birmingham. Its longest stay was at the Wembley Arena in London, where it was staged from 1957 till 1993, the final year incidentally being Gopi's first All England participation. One great nugget that the Internet throws up on the 1900 All England is that the ladies doubles winner Ethel Warneford Thomson was also the Wimbledon tennis champion, according to the National Badminton Museum in London.

The All England had indeed been called the Wimbledon of world badminton, and since the sport's birth in modern times is attributed to have

taken place at Pune, and given the fact that this sport has produced many legends amongst Indian sportsmen, it is obvious that the All England is a revered championship as far as Indian badminton is concerned. In fact, even today in India, the All England epitomises what is best in world badminton and an All England winner or runner-up is given the same applause, honour and accolades as any Olympic or world champion would receive.

It was Prakash Nath who first put India on the All England podium when he reached the 1947 finals, immediately after World War II, only to lose to Sweden's Conny Jepsen. It took almost thirty years before India produced another great champion in Prakash Padukone, who not only reached the finals of the 1980 edition, but actually, much to the collective delight and pride of the country, defeated the great Indonesian Liem Swie King in two straight games 15-3/15-10. Even though the official World Championships had started in 1977, the glory of All England and its reverence all over the world was such that King had to be hidden away on his return to Jakarta and sneaked out from the airport's rear entry as some two thousand badminton fans bayed for his blood, for bringing 'insult and a bad name' to Indonesia, where the sport was a national passion. It has also been recorded that his statue in his hometown, Java – which had been installed after he had reached his first All England finals in 1976 against compatriot Rudy Hartono (probably the best shuttler ever) – was desecrated and damaged by a stone-throwing mob. This fury against King abated only after he defeated Padukone 11-15/15-4/15-6 in the following year's All England finals and brought the trophy back to Indonesia, restoring the national pride.

Gopi had not crossed the pre-quarter-finals at the championships in previous tries, and his best victory there till date was the win over Alan Budikusuma in the first round in 1995. He knew that this was probably his last chance to emulate Padukone, who had become an icon of Indian sports and was feted and applauded by the entire country. But post-Olympics, he had stopped thinking of what his chances were in any championship, and he just wanted to land at Birmingham four to five days in advance, practise hard enough to stay in good shape and then play without any expectations. When the draws came out, Gopi was seeded ninth as he was World Number Nine that month.

For Subbaravamma, the Olympics debacle was a big problem as Gopi was not finding it easy to shrug off his disappointment, and it was important that he went to Birmingham in the right frame of mind.

The Olympics defeat really broke Gopi. I have never ever seen him so miserable, so depressed. The preparation also had taken a lot out of him. I visited SAI once and I could see that he was living like a hermit, like a monk, just immersed in his quest to win an Olympic medal. There was no other life but badminton 24/7. He was in his own world, getting up at 4 a.m. everyday, doing his meditation, visualisation, that he used to do, training and practising hard everyday. He used to see himself on the podium and then everything crumbled for him. People would tell him that the [his] body hurt because he did not train enough but I know that he trained the hardest for Sydney. Every possible exercise, every possible method of training, he must have gone through – but in the aftermath, he was just mentally drained. He would hardly speak to anyone at home, hardly talk to any friends and just wanted to be left alone, by himself. My husband was also worried but I told him to leave Gopi alone. He has to come out of this abyss himself. No one else could help him. He himself would see light one day and would bounce back as a champion. What is one defeat for him, I used to ask myself – I had full faith in the abilities and strength of my son.

Gopi did not do any specific training for the All England, just that regular time he used to put in daily, which in any case was exceedingly tough and disciplined. There was no national team camp as such before the event, except that the selected squad joined Gopi at SAI for a few days to practise and train under the coaches. But Gopi used to spend at least eighty to ninety minutes doing stroke practice, especially the net dribbles and flicks, which, as luck would have it, played a crucial part in the week at Birmingham. This stroke practice took place in the morning as well as in the evening, with the same amount of time spent and the same sort of dedication. Apart from this, he did all the physical exercises needed in training such as weights, endurance, speed runs, and skipping, in his usual disciplined manner.

But while the pre-Olympics time saw him mentally very stiff, in the sense that the picture of himself on the podium overrode everything else in his mind, before the All England he was largely free, with hardly any thought given to the forthcoming championships. He just wanted to do well in his matches, without any pressure or psychological stress, or expectations from any quarters. He made sure that when the journey for the All England title started, he was absolutely relaxed in body and mind. As he said to himself,



‘Now I am as fit as before, I have defeated almost all the best players in the world, and I have the ice therapy to take care of my physical problems – so what can go wrong?’ He told himself to just go and enjoy the experience of playing the 2001 All England Championships.

Gopi had his personal coach Ganguly Prasad – who by now had been allowed by the SAI to accompany him to all tournaments – travelling with him. Gopi also had in his entourage the articulate Leroy D’Sa, who became the national coach after retiring as arguably the best doubles player in the history of Indian badminton. An astute reader of the game from all angles, D’Sa was not only great company to keep Gopi in good spirits all the time, but also came up with some shrewd observations on the opponents at Birmingham for the Indian ace. Amongst the other team players present on the journey was his close friend and confidante, Manjusha Pawangadkar.

Before we go into the journey to Birmingham and the All England matches, it will be interesting to see D’Sa’s take on the short camp and Gopi’s frame of mind before the departure.

I have conducted many national camps with Gopi as one of the players and it was always a pleasure to see what he does. He was one player who would always look forward to a challenge in stroke drills. He liked practising against two players on the other side of the net, what we call two against one. So, with Jaseel Ismail as my partner, I used to tell Gopi that I would catch him in one particular spot and he would accept this, saying, ‘Come on, let’s see what you can do’. He would take us on and it was fantastic for me to bring all my experience and control in hitting the shuttle all over and then suddenly try catching him on the spot where I had agreed with him. And almost eight out of ten times, he would reach and touch the shuttle with the racket. That was the condition – the shuttle should not touch the ground. He was able to put the racket to the shuttle and I was amazed at his determination and his athleticism. And he would do the stroke drills with ten minutes on and one-minute rest afterwards. Gopi insisted on making us run all over and we used to time the ten minutes. This went on for at least seventy to eighty minutes. Just showed his amazing fitness, because anyone who understands top-class badminton will know how much of a super-human effort is required and what is the intensity of movements required in such all-court drills. These are energy-sapping to say the least, and Gopi would take just one minute’s rest after

every ten minutes. And somehow during the rallies or these drills, he would finally force one of us to play a net shot which he would dribble to setup his heavy smashes.

D'Sa says he had an inkling that something major was going to happen in Gopi's career because of a short conversation he had with Datuk Punch Gunalan, former All England champion from Malaysia, at the World Junior Championships at Guangzhou, China, a few months before the All England, when he (D'Sa) had gone there as the coach of the junior national squad. Gunalan was, at the time, the most important official at the International Badminton Federation. Around the same time, the Senior Asian Championships was also going on in some place close by, from where Gunalan had flown in to Guangzhou. During breakfast one day, Gunalan told D'Sa, 'Bad luck buddy, your boy Gopi did very well, but that stupid fellow should have won. I do not know that why he did not think mentally that he could have won. He is going to go places, just has to get some sharpness in his thinking.' Gunalan had witnessed Gopi's match against the magical Taufik Hidayat of Indonesia, the then World Number Two, and the Indian ace had lost from a winning position in the deciding game, after keeping Hidayat on his toes for almost seventy minutes in an extremely fast-paced match, punctuated with some brilliant firepower from Gopi which had the packed stadium in a trance. The fact that Gunalan had told D'Sa that Gopi should have won that match made the Indian coach think hard about Gopi's future prospects. Punch Gunalan, after all, was one of the most brilliant minds in the game and was acknowledged as such by the world badminton fraternity. If Gunalan was convinced that Gopi had some intrinsic quality that could take him places, there had to be something to it.

D'Sa also accompanied Gopi to Europe in late December 2000 and saw Gopi's huge potential firsthand. But Gopi again lost close matches to Peter Gade of Denmark and to Taufik Hidayat so the coach felt that it would take a few more months of rigorous training before Gopi would be ready for the All England, which was in the second week of March 2001. Knowing Gopi well enough, D'Sa was sure that unlike other national players, by the time Gopi got going in that short camp before departing for Birmingham, he would have sat down, opened his diaries, in which, as he confessed earlier in the book, he used to write daily, and done some serious self-evaluation.

I am sure Gopi must have done critical evaluation and found out what areas

needed to be looked at, and that is why at that camp, we worked a lot on the net strokes and on improving his overall speed and manoeuvrability round the court. All ideas of training emanated from him and we helped in every way. Once Gopi knew his liabilities, he also knew what needed to be done to iron out the problems.

Gopi was uncharacteristically silent in those days, according to Manjusha. She also recalls those few magical days at the SAI courts in Bangalore, which went a long way in fortifying all the weaknesses and loopholes Gopi felt were there in his game.

Those ten-minute challenges he had with Leroy or [any] other two players were really something to be seen. He was playing at such speed and smashing the shuttle so hard that it was unbelievable. He was doing rigorous seventy to eighty minutes of intensive badminton in the morning and same [amount of practice] in the evening. He was like a man possessed. He told me about the Olympic debacle and we all wondered what would happen if he did not do well at Birmingham. And there is one more thing which I am sure everyone noticed at the camp. Gopi was giving a hundred per cent in everything he did at SAI. Whether it be the court drills, or the weight training or speed running or stamina-building, he did it to his absolute limit, giving everything he had in every session.

Everyone in the camp, be it D'Sa, Manjusha or any other player or even Ganguly Prasad, was certain of one thing, seeing how Gopi was training and playing. They knew that in every match at Birmingham, Gopi would be hell-bent on winning; he would give his all every time he stepped onto the court. D'Sa was convinced that a more mature Gopi's hundred per cent was now enough to land him the big titles, including the forthcoming All England. So, with these things in mind, and a supremely fit and confident Gopi in tow, the two coaches finally left with the national squad for what was to be the single most important tournament in Gopi's life. A championship win and a walk to the podium here would catapult him into the realm of legends, at least as far as Indian sports was concerned.

The journey to the venue must also be recorded here, as due to some problems by BAI's travel agents, the team missed their booked flight. On their way to the airport in Bangalore from the SAI headquarters at Kengeri, the team got a call saying that the flight had been postponed for some reason

and they were now to fly in another airline the next morning. So, instead of the Bangalore-London-Birmingham flight, Gopi and team flew Bangalore-Mumbai-Dubai-Frankfurt-Birmingham, almost a twenty-four-hour super trip, as Gopi calls it. The squad missed the official transport at the airport as well, as the BAI, in its wisdom, had forgotten to inform the All England organisers about the change in the Indian team's itinerary. They had to find taxis to take them to their official hotel. As Gopi recalls with a laugh, 'Whatever focus we had for the tournament was lost on that journey and we were all dead tired after the twenty hours of flight and just wanted to crash down on the bed and sleep.'

Gopi remembers that his first-round opponent, as far as the draw was concerned, was a Singaporean player called Ronald Susilo. This player was basically from Indonesia, but since he could not find a place in his national squad, he migrated to close-by Singapore and was their first ranked in singles for a couple of years. The squad had two full days of practice time available and made good use of it. The coaches, however, were instructed by Gopi not to talk about the draw to him or even tell him which players were in his half of the draw, as he did not want to think about any player beyond his first match. The Sydney debacle still weighed heavily on his mind.

Before we go into what happened at the All England, let us see what the maestro Prakash Padukone is quoted as saying about the chances of the top two players who were going to Birmingham, Aparna Popat and Pullela Gopi Chand. Prakash opined that it would be tough for both these players in the later rounds at Birmingham even though they had easy opening matches, since the All England championships that year (2001) was loaded with the world's top players. Prakash, who had mentored both Aparna and Gopi for a long time, said in early March 2001, 'Unlike previous occasions when there have been [a] few dropouts, this year's championships has everyone who matters in the game playing here and that is not going to make the passage easy for our players – but I am sure that they will do well nonetheless'.<sup>1</sup>

Prakash added that since both Taufik Hidayat and the current Olympic champion Ji Xinpeng of China were in Gopi's half of the draw, it would be interesting to see what would happen. Since Gopi had defeated both before, his morale and confidence against them would be very high. However, this was the All England and here the pressure was quite different. Gopi had no injuries at the time and was in good form, and therefore, would step out on the court with confidence. Prakash felt that even if Gopi made it to the semi-

finals, it would be an impressive and a great achievement.

Destiny, however, had something else in mind. Gopi, who had crossed the third round of every All England championships he had played before this, was now primed to give the performance of his life. Here are both Gopi and Leroy D'Sa's accounts of the 2001 All England as they strategised and prepared for each match, and the scintillating drama that unfolded at Birmingham:

Gopi's account, first match:

I knew that my first-round opponent was [Ronald] Susilo of Singapore. I had played him before and had found him really tricky and tough to play against. Good strokes, and now, in hindsight, I can say that Susilo as a first-round opponent was a big demoraliser, as he could win points at will. Good smash, tricky and deceptive stroke-play and good all-round court coverage. The match at Birmingham was really fast-paced and the scores really show how close it was. I won in some forty-five minutes 15-11/15-12 and it was a good first-round match that stretched me and made me produce my best. I used the net a lot and saw him fumbling sometimes at my forehand down the flank smashes. I just kept a point or two ahead of him and he was really good as he hardly gave any negative points. He earned every point. He had defeated some top world players and had a good track record against Indians. I decided to attack from the start so as to not allow him any opportunity to dominate. I remember, at the end of the match, I was happy with my movements and also for the fact that even the long rallies did not tire me at any stage. After this match, I asked Prasad sir about my next round opponent, which happened to be Colin Haughton of England, and that is it. I did not see any other matches, except perhaps one match of Manjusha's. That too because I had finished my match and was waiting for her to finish hers, so that we could have some dinner. It was total self-absorption for me as I was interested only in what I was doing. I was totally on my own, immersed in my own thoughts.

Gopi is not a superstitious person, yet during this championship, right from day one, he followed a regular pattern in his day-to-day activities, because as he put it, choices meant confusion. After each match, Gopi and the two coaches would go to a Pakistani restaurant, sit at the same corner table and have the same Indian meal throughout their stay in Birmingham. Gopi had a discman, which played the famous bhajans *Bhaja Govindam* and *Vishnu*

*Sahasranama* by the well-known singer MS Subbulakshmi. This was the only music he listened to during the entire stay. He did not go anywhere else, not even for sightseeing. It was the stadium for matches, the Pakistani restaurant for food, and then his hotel room to rest and sleep. He just wanted familiarity in all the places he frequented and did not want to put any unnecessary pressure on himself. He had a job to do and just wanted to do it, without any distractions or unfamiliar actions.

Leroy D'Sa's account, first match:

We knew that Ronald could trouble Gopi as he was also fast, fit and went for his shots with confidence. I had not seen much of him before, but Gopi had played him earlier and won a three-setter with difficulty. He [Gopi] told me that we had to be careful of Susilo. We did not discuss much before the match as Gopi had his own tactics and was quiet most of the time. He practised hard and was sharp in his strokes. He had his discman on most of the time as he did his visualisation and meditation. He was really relaxed before the match. His approach was basically to keep the shuttle down as much as possible and keep Susilo on his toes. Gopi's fast drop shots mixed with those well-directed smashes kept Susilo confused and got Gopi good openings near the net where he, time and again, dribbled sharply. I do not think he was behind in scores at any time, but yet, the battle went neck-to-neck till Gopi pulled through to finish in both the games, which were quite close for comfort. But I think, in the end, he was pleased with the way he played. He told me that he used just the pace required and could have played a bit faster if needed. Gopi radiated confidence from this match onwards, and both Prasad and I felt that he would do wonders this time. We did not know if he could win the title here, but seeing that he had Taufik and Peter Gade in his half of the draw, we felt that he would really give them a tough fight, especially Peter Gade, to whom he had lost in two easy games both the times the two had met before.

D'Sa gives an interesting insight on why he felt Gopi was the best among the Indian players of his generation, and why he had a better chance to do extremely well internationally, including this All England, than the others. The former doubles great had followed Gopi's career closely and was perhaps the first person to tell Subhash, way back when Gopi had played the Under-14 Nationals at Hyderabad, that his lanky son had a lot of potential

and could go far in badminton if he chose to do so.

According to D'Sa,

Gopi's attitude was very positive all his playing life. And because he was positive and had strong belief in himself, he got good early victories in his career. These opened the chambers of his ambition in the game to reach higher and higher. Of his many peers, Dipankar Bhattacharya, Rajeev Bagga and a couple of others were good, but probably they lacked that realisation that their capacities were capable of reaching higher avenues. Gopi may have had the hidden agenda that he wanted to be the best and in his own way, was making inroads to try to achieve this ambition of his. We never realised in the many camps we saw him that he was gearing towards his life goal, which was to be the best in the game, but what always came across was the fact that he was always ready for challenges in training, was always ready to give his total commitment. He was different from the others, in my view, because his input on court was surely more than the others. Dipankar was a workaholic, no doubt, but probably lacked the burning ambition of Gopi and he also had lots of injuries in his career. I will restrict my comparisons only to Dipankar and Bagga as I feel that they were closest to Gopi in terms of high playing standards. Bagga was very good, but unfortunately, was like the lone ranger, as we did not know whether we understood him or he understood us, because of his hearing impairment. Communication was a problem with him, but his achievements are huge in any case. Another thing that I have always remembered about Gopi was that he hated to lose. Even in practice sessions, any loss to anyone was just not on. He would sulk sometimes, but as he grew older, he did not lose anyway to any Indian player for more than five years. And even internationally, Gopi always knew which match was going to be tough, and which players he would defeat, come what may. At Birmingham once, when we told him his second round was against an English player, he typically said 'Boss, don't worry, this one is as good as in the bag.'

Gopi's account, second match:

My second-round opponent was [Colin] Haughton of England and I was very comfortable in that match. Actually, throughout my career, I have been really hard on the British players and I do not remember losing any matches to them. Richard Vaughan of Wales came close to defeating me on

a couple of occasions. I used to play with some real solid *khunnas* (attitude) against these players. Haughton was no exception as I rushed through the match in thirty minutes 15-7/15-4. The match was important for two reasons. He was England's number one player and by beating him easily and quickly, I was mentally happy and also saved energy for my next match, which was played the same evening. I led from the start and made sure I dominated from the beginning, as I did not want the crowd to get behind him. He basically had no idea what was happening on the court. I was fast and played sharp strokes all through. The crowd at the All England can get really boisterous if they feel one of their players is getting close to knocking out a seeded player from Asia. But since Haughton had no answer to my smash-and-dribble pattern and because I was always five to six points ahead, they had no reason to cheer him. It was a peaceful match.

Leroy D'Sa's account, second match:

Gopi was very clear and confident on this day. He had two matches with a gap of about eight hours in between. We had a good session on the practice courts and he was well pumped up. Before the match, he had, in any case, indicated that he would wrap this up fast. Colin Haughton was simply no match for Gopi. He was in a different zone altogether. Low serves, followed up with some dazzling firepower, ensured that he stayed in front all the time. The smashes were good and crisp, and footwork immaculate. In short, he was hardly tested. We also had good crowd support from the Indian expatriates in Birmingham who had, by now, started coming in a big group to cheer all Indians, but of course, Gopi was a big favourite with them. Gopi finished the match quickly, went and had icing done to relax his muscles and we went to one restaurant, in fact we always went to the same one during our stay there, for a light lunch and afterwards went to the hotel room where he chitchatted with all the teammates who were not playing, relaxed a bit, and then went silent, as he started focussing on the match that was to come that same evening. His yoga was something to be seen to be believed. No one could disturb him during those moments, as he was mentally somewhere else. He was now going to play Ji Xinpeng, the Chinese Olympic gold medallist from Sydney, but a player against whom he was very comfortable. He knew he would have to play fast and decisive to keep Xinpeng guessing all the time. The strategy discussed was just that.



He told us that he knew what needed to be done as he had played him before and felt he would pull through. He was confident and so were we.

After his matches, Gopi had another ritual which he followed faithfully, knowing fully well that he had to keep his body in prime fitness and relaxed frame. He did not want anything to go wrong, have any pains or have a repeat of the Olympics. Here too, the flooring was hard, since the BWF ruling of wooden floors was to be implemented only from the following year, that is 2002. So after every match, he would immediately go to the physiotherapy room, lie flat on his stomach and load himself with ice. The ice was in bags and with the help of towels, these bags were wrapped all across his legs and back, so that they did not fall off. He usually kept the ice on his body for some twenty to twenty-five minutes, to help him out with any niggling problems.

By the time Gopi had finished the first two matches and set up the pre-quarter-final clash with the reigning Olympic champion Ji Xinpeng, he knew that two things were in his favour. He was moving really well and his mind was free. He knew he was very fit, physically where he wanted to be, as he had spent a huge amount of time in training and reaching optimum levels in all aspects. From the end of 1999, he had cut down on tournaments, had not gone for the German club league, playing only the championships necessary to maintain his world ranking and that too, only those where the standard of participation was high, so that he knew where he stood as far as the best world players were concerned. He knew exactly what his problems were, and knew that these problems revolved around a couple of areas of movements on court. These problems were due in part to the various knee operations he had had in the past and also the general problems Indian players faced because of extremely quick non-stop movements while playing at very high levels of the game.

All the Chinese, Indonesians and even Danish players such as Peter Gade, would really make him run around the court very fast and Gopi knew this would pose problems, so he had really worked hard in this area. And he was aware that from the pre-quarter onwards, the pace of matches would be continuously fast, as these top players would push the pace, and to match them, he had to be really focussed. Gopi admits:

If I reacted quickly and still was aggressive, it was going to be effective, and I knew that. And I had weapons these guys were not aware of, and they

also did not know that my fitness was considerably higher at these championships as I had put in long hours on track at SAI before coming here. I had cut down on tournaments simply because I wanted to train harder with the time that became available. I wanted to develop a better punch in my smashes, better control at the net, and had achieved considerable success in all these areas. The long drills on court with the coaches had also improved my mobility and agility on court. I knew if I could match them [the top players] in speed, strength and staying power, I could defeat all of them. I was a positive player, did not give away negative points, and mentally I was free and therefore, without any pressure at the All England. Though I was taking each match as it came, I was playing to win. I would not have been happy if I had reached the semis or the finals and lost again. This was for keeps, and I wanted to finish off each match with a flourish.

Ganguly Prasad, who helped Gopi considerably in attaining high levels of fitness at the SAI, also felt that only a win in one of the big championships would satisfy Team Gopi. He had been travelling with the ace player for almost two years and knew exactly what was going on in his mind. As he says:

Gopi was well aware that he had already reached the semis of some very big tournaments and had defeated almost all the top-class players at one point or the other. He also knew that no one remembered the losers at the semis or even the finals, except for statisticians. Gopi was well aware that people do not recognise you unless you win a big event. We were almost there; all that was required extra [sic] was for everything to fall in place. Our focus, therefore, was always to try winning the titles. If not this All England, then some other equal level championships like the World Championships or the World Cup.

Gopi, as mentioned earlier, had never been overawed by big names or famous players, right from the start of his career. So, although he respected the likes of Peter Gade, Chen Hong and Taufik Hidayat, he knew that he was as good as they were on a given day. They also respected him in return and held him in high esteem. I (Sanjay Sharma) had once interviewed the then chief Chinese coach, Li Yongbo, just before the Sydney Olympics and this is what he had to say: ‘We are well aware of Pullela Gopi Chand. He is good and fast

and his ideal temperament also helps him a lot. On court, he looks as docile as Prakash Padukone used to look, but on court, he is much feared. We Chinese respect him and know he is capable of big wins and never take him lightly. He has all the virtues needed in a champion.’<sup>2</sup>

With everything now going well for him, all factors falling into place, the ice therapy doing its bit, the mind free but eager to take on the world, a relaxed Gopi was now ready to face the 2000 Sydney Olympics champion Ji Xinpeng in the next round, the pre-quarter-finals. In his many All England appearances, Gopi had never been able to cross this round. But this time, Gopi was confident of a victory as all indicators showed him to be in the best possible shape.

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<sup>1</sup> *Deccan Chronicle*, 2 March 2001

<sup>2</sup> *Mid Day*, 16 March 2000

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## THE COUNTDOWN BEGINS



The pre-quarter-finals against Ji Xinpeng was an anticlimax of sorts. The entire Chinese squad was around the stands cheering on their latest superstar who had, after all, won the gold at Sydney. They expected him to make mincemeat of Gopi. But not only did Gopi have altogether different ideas on how the match would go, he also had a major history backing him to annihilate Xinpeng. The two had played four times prior to this and Gopi had won all four, with only the first one, in the 1995 China Open, going to three games, which he also won 6-15/15-6/15-13. After that, in the Swiss Open (1997), the German Open (1999) and the Malaysian Open (2000), Gopi did not lose even one game. All three encounters were won in two straight games, with Xinpeng not even crossing nine points in the second game. Still, this was the All England, and for whatever it was worth, Xinpeng had to be respected as an Olympic gold medallist. At least, that is what chief coach Li Yongbo and his squad thought.

Gopi's account, third match:

I had a beef to settle with him [Xinpeng]. I had lost the Olympics and he had won there. So I knew I had to show him and the others that Sydney was an aberration and that I was back to my good form and winning ways. That account had to be settled. And of all the Chinese players I had played against, I was most comfortable against him as he just could not read my strokes. So in a way, I was lucky that I was meeting him in round three at the All England. The coaches would scream at him every time he lost to me and lecture him for hours. So I was confident when I stepped onto the

court, and gave him a glare and started off really fast. He was still considered a difficult customer and it was expected to be a tough match. But I think that a combination of my speed, aggression and the fact that past history weighed heavily on his mind, saw him just crumble down. I also did not expect to win the first game 15-3. The second went to 15-9 and the match took about thirty-two minutes. I also slowed down a bit, but he was never in the match at all. I was happy that this also finished fast and my strokes were going sharply. My smashes got me some easy points. After the match, I got the good news that Taufik Hidayat, runner-up during the previous two years and probably the most dangerous player on the world circuit, had lost to a largely unknown Danish player, Anders Boesen, and I was to play him [Boesen] next. I had just about managed to defeat Taufik in our last encounter, but he was someone to be avoided in a tournament. In my opinion, and I still maintain it, Taufik Hidayat is a real badminton genius. And I was, in a way, relieved I was not playing him. This was a lucky break for me. I did my icing, had dinner at the same Pakistani place and went to bed early. The only person I spoke a bit to was Manjusha and she told me that I must make the most of this situation.

Leroy D'Sa's account, third match:

I realised that Gopi was playing a very high-level game against Xinpeng. He was so comfortable, making the Chinese look like a *bachcha* [kid, amateur] and it really made me wonder how this fellow [Xinpeng] had won the Olympics. I mean, you have to have some calibre to win an Olympic gold. But the way Gopi toyed with him was simply amazing. By the time we sat down and could really understand what was going on, Gopi had already won the first game 15-3. The Chinese bench was looking stunned. Here was their big star, and he was looking pathetic on court. Gopi was wrong-footing him at almost every stroke. It was comical too, as whenever Xinpeng was caught and gave an easy reply, Gopi thundered in with a killer smash and then gave the Chinese that glare, that 'evileye', just to emphasise who was the boss on court.

The second game was a bit better but the bodyline drive shots and then sudden foray to the net had Xinpeng bewildered. He was always behind in the scores and never looked to be good enough to put up any semblance of a fight. Gopi was far too comfortable and far too much in command to be bothered.

*The Times of India*, 10 March 2001, said in its match report that this was the most major upset in the championships yet, and by moving into the quarter-finals, Gopi had defeated three Olympic champions, the other two being Alan Budikusuma and Poul-Erik Hoyer Larsen. The report also stated that all the other Indian players, including Aparna Popat, Siddharth Jain, Abhinav Shyam Gupta and our doubles pairs, among whom were Jaseel Ismail and Vincent Lobo, and Vijaydeep Singh and Ajay Kanwar, had made first-round exits. 'Gopi never looked perturbed against the third seeded Chinese throughout the match. Ji XinPeng [sic] found the relaxed, flowing style of Gopi Chand, full of easy movements and cumulative pressure, too much to cope with. The Indian also kept the shuttle low as often as possible to nullify the Chinese player's dangerous smashes.'<sup>1</sup>

The only moments when the Sydney hero got into it were early in the second game, when he worked hard to dictate the pace of the game. But Gopi's temperament was excellent and he calmly found ways to move his celebrated opponent around. From 11-7 he played three superb points which broke the back of Xinpeng's resistance, the last one being a low serve followed by a sudden thrust to the body which produced a winner.

Prakash Padukone was also quoted in *The Times of India* on the same day where he said,

Reaching the quarter-final is a very creditable performance. His win over the Olympic champ is not surprising, but the manner in which he played was really convincing. Gopi has a good chance of going all the way, but he should take one match at a time. He must remember that the job is not done yet – but I think he is ready for it.

Gopi should have played the charming and magical Taufik Hidayat in the quarter-finals, but for the upset by Boesen. Leroy D'Sa adds,

I had also kept an eye on the far court where Anders Boesen was taking on Hidayat, the great Indonesian who was the runner-up here on two previous occasions. And seeing Boesen getting the better of Hidayat, I said to myself that this was a damn good thing for us. Maybe this will be the lucky break we were going to get because, if Hidayat actually lost, Gopi would have to play a far easier opponent. Not that Gopi wasn't ready for Hidayat, but in top sports, you must grab any and every opportunity that comes your way. In fact, towards the end of Gopi's match, when I knew he was

winning it anyway, I went to cheer on Boesen and joined the Danish supporters. Mind you, I had no love for that Dane, but if Gopi's chances became better, I would applaud the Dane till the cows came home. Most badminton followers had given low percentage chances for Gopi to beat Taufik Hidayat. So if he faced Boesen next, so much the better for all of us. And the Indonesian lost. It was great fun, because the next-round match was now against the Dane and I was sure – so was Prasad – that Gopi would send this fellow back to Denmark.

Gopi at this stage, as he admits, was still not thinking about how far he would go. Manjusha had told him after the victory against Xinpeng that he was really playing well and now, since he would not be playing Taufik Hidayat, his chances of at least reaching the semis were considerably improved. He went through his usual routine, slept well, and was ready for the quarter-final showdown with Boesen.

Gopi's account, fourth match (the quarter-finals):

I had played lots of matches against Danish players before and barring Peter Gade, I was not much bothered by anyone else. True, I had lost some matches to other Danish players also, but given my state of preparedness and sharpness on court, I was confident that I would win this match. The Danes play a typical game, are good all-rounders, but have their own vulnerabilities. They can be hassled into mistakes if you play the bird where they do not expect it. My game plan was crystal-clear and I was going to stick to my comfort level and play within my zone, which was now on a higher plane than before, and I was sure Boesen did not know what levels of fitness and speed I was now capable of. Short fellow, but since he had cleared my draw by defeating Taufik, he had to be treated with respect. I was cautious, but since I had never played him before, I did not know what to expect. But one thing I did considerably well was to push him first towards baseline with some fast, flat tosses or quick flicks from the net, catching the shuttle early near the tape. Once I had displaced him from the centre position, I could bring in sharp half-smashes. This I did quite often, and got some good points. By now, I was really playing well and though the match went on for forty-seven minutes, I was not under pressure anytime with the 15-11/15-7 score-line in my favour. In fact, in hindsight, when I think about this All England campaign, I feel that I played my best game against Anders Boesen, simply because I treated him

as a very dangerous opponent and since I had not played him before, I did not want to be surprised at any stage. I dominated and kept the pressure right through.

Leroy D'Sa's account, fourth match:

Gopi asked me after the match against Xinpeng how he was doing so far and I told him, 'Gopi, whatever you are doing is great, fantastic. Just keep up the momentum'. We did not want to interfere in his preparations in any way. We had a conversation with Gopi after he had a knock on the practice courts before playing Boesen. He told us that though he had not played him before, he had a game plan in his mind. And he also said that since he was really feeling good, moving well and stroking to perfection, he would attack early and keep up the aggressive play. I also felt that his jump smashes, which were really steep, would be useful against Boesen. And from the start, Gopi dominated, never allowing the Dane to get into any rhythm. Boesen was always chasing the shuttle and was forced to give openings near mid-court from where – boom-boom – the smashes would come with dazzling accuracy. The match was played at a great speed and Gopi was able to sustain that right through. In fact, his fitness was seen to be at optimum levels. Barring some moments early on in the first game, where the score went neck-to-neck, till about 8-8, Gopi was never in trouble. At that high level of play, Gopi looked very convincing indeed.

One of the persons watching that match was the renowned Dane Morten Frost, a former four-time All England champion and a real superstar of world badminton in his time. He was on the Danish bench, giving moral support to his team. He told D'Sa after the match that Peter Gade would have his hands full the next day in the semi-finals.

I do not think it will be as easy as we are thinking. Gopi Chand is playing with supreme confidence and I only hope that Peter has got his thinking hat [on] all the time, because your player is looking in great shape. It will be an interesting match, I feel, and being a Dane, I obviously want Peter to get the title. But then you never know ...

History, of course, tells us that the small snowbound Scandinavian countries have, despite a total population less than half of Mumbai's, produced an extraordinary array of All England champions down the decades. From



Conny Jepsen of Sweden in 1949, when the All England went truly global after the Second World War, there have been a number of Danish and Swedish players who have been real world-beaters. More so the Danes, led by names such as Finn Kobberø, Hammergard Hansen, Ulla Strand, Erland Kops, Lene Køppen, Kirsten Larsen, Flemming Delfs, Svend Pri, Morten Frost, Camilla Martin, Tine Rasmussen and so many others right till the present day, who escape my memory, each and every one of them is a special badminton player, who put their stamp on world badminton in some way or the other. It will take lots of space to really work out how this small country has managed to produce so many champions, when in comparison, India, with its huge population, adequate badminton infrastructure by the time Gopi had started playing seriously, and strong legacy which is, in fact, older than that of Denmark, (for example, champions like Prakash Nath, and the squad which reached the challenge round finals of the inaugural Thomas Cup in 1952-53), could not. In all the years India participated in the championships, we only had a lone Prakash Padukone to be proud of as an All England champion, in 1980.

Peter Gade was only following his Danish legacy, and had every reason to bulldoze his way to ultimate stardom as he had a pedigree to live up to. He had not yet won the All England Championships, but had won almost everything else in the game. Peter was top-seeded in the 2001 All England, had smashed Gopi to smithereens in their last two meetings and had overcome an impossible looking 1-11 deficit in the first game of his pre-quarter-final match to blow away Indonesia's Rony Augustinus 17-14/15-10 in a classic and typical Gade performance. Peter not only had history on his side, as apart from Padukone no other Indian had really been comfortable against the top Danes, but he also had that fire, speed and control to overcome all the other players including Gopi, the finesse and the overall superiority, and the sharp badminton intellect reminiscent of Morten Frost and Flemming Delfs. He was the winner in everyone's eyes when he walked onto the court to have a face-off with Pullela Gopi Chand in the semi-finals at Birmingham.

The Indian camp, too, was sceptical, but Gopi had other thoughts. As he says, it was true that Peter was the favourite and also that, in their last two encounters, Gopi was made to exit the stadium really fast, but he was a reborn player after the Sydney Olympics – extremely fit, aggressive and probably more fired up to snatch the trophy than anyone else. Peter and the

other top players had at least won some important title or the other, but Gopi had won none and he knew that this could well be his last chance. So with all this baggage, Gopi walked onto the court, confident that he had all the sharpness, the passion, the firepower in his armoury, and a few surprises up his sleeve, to take on the one player who stood between him and his destiny.

Gopi's account, fifth match, (the semi-finals):

I knew what I was up against. He was one of the best, no doubt, and he had not allowed me to get anywhere close to him in our last two meetings. I had lost to him 2-15/5-15 in the Danish Open in 1997 and 8-15/5-15 in the Swiss Open in 1998. So there was hardly any comparison, and I would not blame anyone who thought that this match would not go in any different manner. But that was then and this was now. I was in the semis, the best I had done so far in my career at the championships. I had not lost a single game yet, had not even been extended and was playing well enough, and with great confidence. I knew that Peter had to be kept under pressure all the time. I was wary of his experience, his counter-attack and his nonchalance. He showed that carefree attitude while on court, but beneath that exterior, he was tough, like steel. He meant business all the time and was as desperate as me to land the title.

I decided to attack from the word go. I knew I had to keep attacking. Though I had lost to him before, I used to be really cocky after the matches and never showed him that he was better in any way. I would never accept that he was better in any way. I knew that if I played at his speed and kept the shuttle low, I stood a good chance. He was the top seed and therefore, I knew the pressure would be on him. Plus, the fact I had lost to him tamely before would also be in my favour as he would feel that he could brush me aside as earlier. He did not know the levels of my fitness and speed now. There was a psychological aspect to our matches. In our last two meetings, even though the scores suggest that I lost badly, the thing was that there were long rallies which he eventually won. He would then stare at me from the net as if suggesting that I could not take another long rally. This mental aggression was no problem for me as I also used the same things [tactics] in my own way.

So this time, it was important that whenever the rallies went longer, I should finish them with a smash, look him in the eye, glare at him, reverse the psychological impact and then get ready for the next rally even before

him. In fact, I was instantly ready to serve, while he took his time to settle down. This was just to prove to him that this time I was not down on fitness or speed, and that I was ready to take him on in whatever he would throw at me. You know competitive sport is fitness and focus, yes, but there is also an element of drama and psychology, since mental strength also comes into play. You cannot allow the opponent to have the feeling that he could walk all over you, even though he may be leading in a game. If you show weakness, then it is all over.

So my pre-match decision and tactics were that since this game would be fought mentally as well as on the court, I will not allow him to cow me down in any way. That he should not get any feeling of superiority. I knew that if I could put enough pressure, this guy would crack. I knew instinctively that this could well be the most important match of my career and I prepared meticulously for it.

If I knew a player had a weakness, I was good enough to exploit it. It could be strange weaknesses, like the one I noticed in Peter Gade. If you lifted the bird just near his backhand area high, a 'floater' between the net and the mid-court, and forced him to take overhead shot, he had problems. Almost like a centre-line shot, and I don't know why, a lollipop shot, normally an easy putaway for all others, was a problem for Peter Gade. I tried catching him there and I went in fast and furious in the game from the start. Played really well, raced to an 8-1 and 11-4 lead, and even led 13-6 at one stage in the first game, with some fast stroke-play, and my net dribbles were also coming off like a dream, getting me huge openings. We had some long rallies which I dominated. But then suddenly, he started getting back. I feel today that there was some lapse of concentration on my part, perhaps because my body hurt a bit, as I should not have allowed him to come close at least after such a huge lead.

But I lost some points as he managed to put me on defence, with low serves and fast counters. I was just not getting a chance to come back in as he reeled off some very impressive points, and suddenly it was 13-13 as he caught up. Then I also felt body stiffness as, in spite of all the icing I was doing, the concrete floor had got to me, though not as much as in Sydney. I was on three Brufens a day, something I had hardly ever done before. Yet, losing 7 points in a row and allowing him to equalise at 13 was just not on. I asked for a straight game, which meant that the first choice was to finish the game at 15 itself. I snatched a service back and actually moved to 14-

13, which meant I had a service at game point, but he played a brilliant counter-dribble, catching the shuttle on top of the tape, and I had no choice but to go for a lift which went straight in the net. It was now 14-14, and my choice now was to ask for a three-point extension, which meant [that] the game was now to be played till 17 points. Peter had shown some wonderful anticipation towards the end of this game. I threw my racket on the ground and threw a tantrum, acted a little upset at myself.

Now there were two things going on in my mind. First, that my body was getting sore, especially my thighs, and therefore, I was inclined not to go for really long rallies as I did not want to experiment at this stage. And secondly, I realised I was getting very predictable for Peter, as he was reading my strokes well since I was basically playing the shuttle down as much as possible and attacking too much. The situation was really tense and the packed stadium was now enjoying every bit of this battle between us. I thought that now was the time to perhaps do something unpredictable, play that floater near the net and see if he slips and gives away a point. On his serve at 14, after pushing him around a bit, I caught a drop high, and then flicked in towards his backhand area, the trajectory being a little high to entice him to go for a backhand smash. He fell for it and made a simple error, which got the service back to me. I now thought that maybe I should put him into attack, as my attacking shots he was taking easily and predictably. But luckily, without doing much, I reeled off the next three points in a flourish to bag the first game.

This gave me an immediate boost as I had never won a game off him so far. I was on a psychological high now; I knew what it should take to win the second game. During the changeover, I knew exactly how to behave, and cocky as ever, I took my position to serve even before he had finished towelling himself. Though my body was sore and I did not want to get trapped in longer than necessary rallies, I did not want him to think that I had any weakness. In fact, I wanted to start off from a position of strength, playing as fast and aggressive as I had at the start of the first game.

So I went into the second game telling myself that I will give my hundred per cent and will attack as ferociously as I could. It was low serves, fast counters and smashes all the way. Peter did not know what had hit him. Within a few minutes, and with just two changes of serves, I was again on 11-4, a huge lead from every perspective. And again, the same thing went wrong for me. By the time I realised I was becoming too

predictable by attacking too much, he started suddenly playing with great anticipation, blunted my attack and caught me unawares many times to come as close as 8-11. Two good high serves and some defensive play saw me jump to 13-8, which again he closed to 11-13 with brilliantly controlled play. I got a lucky net cord on a fast dribble, and went on to match point 14-11. At this stage, I became a bit nervous – here I was, on match point to enter the finals of the biggest and best badminton tournament in the universe, and I lost one silly point on judgement, the shuttle falling inside. My heart was now in my mouth, as he served out two points to bring the equaliser on 14. The stadium was silent, as if stunned, but keenly watching everything going on.

I now had the service back at 14-14 and was almost in distress mode, my heart pounding really hard. The rallies were long and the pace was taking its toll on me because I was doing all the attack, all the hard work. Before the serve, I went out to towel myself, and to take a five-second breather to rethink my tactics. Badminton, at this level, is almost like a game of chess. One must know the opponent's moves in advance and it is as much mental sparring as the physical side of the game.

Now I had noticed for long, that after every point, Peter changed the shuttle, does not matter if the shuttle was good or bad, he would keep on asking for a change after each rally. Normally players do not object, even if it becomes irritating. And many times, it is just psychological warfare on court. So at this time, I thought I will turn the tables and I will ask for a change every time a rally finished, just to keep him off balance a bit. So every time he got a point, I also went to the umpire, asking for the shuttle to be changed. I did that from when he was 8-13 down and was threatening to come closer. So this was also the mental sparring that was going on. But then I also lost 3 match-points as he closed in and forced deuce at 14. The game was again set for 17 points and the situation was tense for both of us. He actually went ahead 15-14 as a long rally again saw me getting an opening on the overhead side, but I fluffed it and sent the shuttle out.

Now with the serve in his hand at 15-14, I knew that something drastic had to be done. I realised I had to be street-smart, just like I used to be as a kid, playing those rural type of games which had taught me to think on my feet. He was anticipating everything and in fact, both of us knew what the other was going to do. I was also aware of the fact that a win here would do great things for my career and more importantly, my psyche. This match

had to be won, whatever it may take. This was going to be the defining moment of my life.

So I asked myself – what do I do now? What are the strokes I have not played in the match so far? Can I surprise him with something totally new? I realised that the cross-court half smash from forehand I had not played at all. So if I get a chance I am going to do that. He served low and I pushed the shuttle over his forehand area, he dropped and I forced a lift from the net and *phatak*, I hit that half smash cross-court from my forehand. He was not expecting this at all and I got my service back. I now had the serve again and I thought about the last point when I had served at match-point, 14-13, and he had rushed my service. So I thought hard on what was to be done. I needed to get ahead desperately. I did not want to rush again, so I changed to a short-angled flick serve, not very deep, but going into his body. This surprised him and he, with a double action, lifted the shuttle which I smashed hard, got an easy return on the net to dribble, which was really sharp and I moved on to 15-15.

So I said, ‘Wow, this is good’. But now what do I do? I was thinking furiously, as I wanted to surprise him again, yet not give him too much time to settle down and anticipate what I would do next. I decided to do the same serve again, but I also correctly thought that this time he will try to keep the attack himself and therefore, will play his return on the net, thereby forcing me to lift. I had no option but to outthink him. So I decided to take a chance. This time it was a really short serve and I did not move from my position, just stood my ground with my racket held at shoulder-level to smash if he decided to go for a drive shot down the flank. I deduced correctly and he played on the net and I was there in a flash, flicking the shuttle deep for an easy put-away return which I smashed, to now move on to 16-15. Serving at match-point again. Some cushion, some comfort, but I did not want to break the momentum, I did not want to delay the match, which was now moving in my way.

Again the same question came in my subconscious, what do I do now? How do I wrap up this match and emulate Prakash Nath, Prakash Padukone, by reaching the finals of the All England Championships? My heart was going boom-boom, bang-bang and I was trembling with anticipation of so many things. I had done two short serves and I said, ‘No, this time, he will be ready for this. Why not surprise him by taking the attack to him – something he would least expect.’ In any case, he was

ready to rush my slow, low serves. So I just held my action, counted to three, and flicked the shuttle deep over his forehand, inviting him to either go for a smash or a fast drop, as I knew he would not toss as that would give me the attack. He smashed, which I correctly anticipated, and I blocked his smash near the net, he dribbled, and I counter-dribbled sharply and sweetly, and he put the shuttle in the net. He could not believe it and neither could the crowd. It took everyone a couple of seconds or so to realise that he had lost. I had conquered Peter Gade, who was the top seed and the then World Number One ranked player. And more joyously for me and my team, I was in the finals of the 2001 All England championships. I had not yet lost a game. All my hard work had paid off, but I was not complacent as one more match was left, and I was more worried about rushing to the physio and doing my ice therapy. I wanted to be as sharp as possible for the finals.

Leroy D'Sa's account, fifth match:

We all thought that this was it. Gopi has reached the end of the campaign at Birmingham. He played great so far, but now this tall figure of Danish superstar Peter Gade was looming on the horizon and since in the past two matches Gopi had been hammered, this perhaps could be slightly better, but no chance of a win here. You know, everyone at that time, including the topmost Asian stars, used to respect Peter Gade, calling him 'great' all the time. We were going for press interviews, the drug tests and all that. He [Gopi] asked me when we were at practice courts before the match, 'Boss, what should I be doing now?' And I said to Gopi, whatever you are doing is great. Just play freely and I know you will put in your best in any case. So whatever the result, we will be satisfied. I mean, how and what advice does anyone give to a person playing an All England semi-final, someone who had not yet lost a game and someone who made mincemeat of the reigning Olympic champion? You do not give advice to someone like him, you just say best of luck and that is it.

But Gopi is quite an introvert and I knew that he knew that if Peter had to be defeated then that has to happen now. This is the stage and this is the moment. This tournament is the best there is and the impact of beating Peter here would be talked about for years to come. Gopi knew this deep down his heart. I must say that in the first game, Peter was not his usual self. I don't think he expected Gopi to be so fast and so controlled and so

aggressive. It was also a case of overconfidence. When Gopi showed that he had the answer to everything Peter threw at him, the Dane started fumbling. And Gopi, seeing him make mistakes, and knowing he had nothing to lose, raised the level of his game to such a height, that Peter, after the initial setback, was not able to get into a rhythm. Every time Gopi got the shuttle near the net, Peter was unsure of where the shuttle was going and because of this, for subsequent strokes, he was always one step late. Gopi was very decisive and deceptive near the net. So suddenly, in the middle of the rallies, Peter looked mediocre and Gopi was able to penetrate his court at will. Gopi's domination at the net was awesome.

This was a play, a strategy, which I thought no other Indian could ever do. Only Prakash Padukone was the master in this area and it was his forte. Prakash was known all over for his mastery on the net. It was a real pleasure to see Gopi perform like that on the net that day. He reeled off point after point, really rattling Peter Gade's confidence. In fact, at one stage, Gopi led 13-6. The *modus operandi* was to catch the net, which is what Prakash used to do, but the way Gopi did it was his own style. Whereas for Prakash, the net strokes were a ploy to get control of a rally from the net, Gopi used the dribble to get mid-court returns, so he could bring his firepower into play immediately. He had a beautiful lunge movement to catch the shuttle high on the tape at its optimum height, to bring that lovely slicing action that spun the shuttle very nicely.

Peter could come back in the first game because Gopi slowed down a bit, perhaps thinking the game was as good as over. By the time Peter was able to get close, Gopi was moving ahead at game-point. Then he rattled off three points in a row to win the first game.

In the second [game] too, initially it started at equal scores till 4-4, but Gopi surged ahead to 11-4 and then to 13-8. We were all thrilled as our boy was playing wonderfully well. But then Peter started to play catch-up again. There was a time when Peter took a 15-14 lead, but those last three points were a treat to watch. His [Gopi's] concentration, his focus and his steely nerves were something to be marvelled at. In fact, I have never seen Gopi nervous at any time. Mind you, the situation at 15-15 was so tense, we were all chewing our nails. I am sure Gopi's heart must have been palpitating really fast, but he never showed any tension. His face was a mask, no one could read anything there at all. He looked coolness personified –perhaps all the yoga he did was responsible for calming his



nerves when the entire stadium was sitting on the edge of their seats.

His aggression was, in my opinion, one of his strong points. His whole demeanour while playing, from the body language to the way he looked Peter in the eye, was aggression all the way. There are a lot of things looks can do. Gopi raised this psychological warfare to his advantage. No one could put Gopi down on the court. Not Peter, not Boesen, not Xinpeng. They never frightened him in anyway.

Another factor, apart from the dribble/smash focus that he gave to his match, was the fact that even though the smashes were not super hard or fast, they were well-directed and he had a great mix of smashes, half smashes, cut drops, etc., where he changed direction at the last moments, keeping Peter and others guessing all the time. He had strokes at his disposal which he used judiciously against Peter Gade. So he was perhaps not the hardest hitter in the world, but he used the openings to hit well-directed or deceptive smashes to snatch the points. This win over Peter Gade was perhaps one of the biggest upsets in the history of the game in a long time, considering that their last two matches did not see Gopi reach double figures in the four games they played.

We hugged him after the match and immediately rushed him off to get the ice therapy he was so fond of.

Gopi had kept himself aloof from everyone at home too. He had decided not to call even his mother during the entire week at Birmingham, and was not aware, therefore, that his entry into the semi-finals of the All England had made headlines in India and that the BAI had announced a ₹ 1 lakh award for him, ₹ 2 lakh in case he won the finals.

*The Times of India* wrote in its match report of 10 March 2001 that Gopi Chand continued his dream run at Birmingham, defeating World Number One Peter Gade 17-14/17-15 in seventy-two minutes. However, there was one glaring mistake in the report, where it was said that Gopi was only the second Indian to reach the finals after Padukone. They did not mention that Prakash Nath had lost the 1949 finals to Conny Jepsen of Sweden.

The report, however, said that while Gopi rushed to comfortable leads early in both games, a few unforced errors at crucial stages allowed Peter Gade to catch up. Gopi, however, kept his nerves in the tense moments to bring to an end the thirty-match-winning streak of the Dane. After conceding a one-point lead at 14-15 in the second game, Gopi placed a lovely drop shot,

followed by a smash to equalise, and then deceived the Dane with two controlled serves, one short and one a sudden flick serve, to clinch the match. The games were identical in some ways, but finally, Gopi's control prevailed and took him to the finals.

Team Gopi left the stadium early after the ice therapy and did not know the outcome of the second semi-finals, where Chen Hong of China was facing Muhammad Roslin Hashim of Malaysia. Gopi went to his favourite restaurant, had his daily favourite meal, sitting in his favourite chair at his favourite table, listened to MS Subbulakshmi crooning his favourite bhajans, lay down in the bathtub for some time, chatted with Manjusha and the two coaches, and tried to sleep. But sleep did not come easily as his sore body did not allow him much rest. The hard courts were not sparing him.

Leroy D'Sa wanted to go to the practice court early the next morning, to give Gopi a warm-up knock as per the usual routine, and was waiting for the lift to go down. But the lift was taking some time to come up to his floor. Suddenly, the lift door opened and he saw two huge polythene bags full of ice cubes being dragged out by two hotel janitors. Leroy was curious as to who needed so much ice. He asked them who this ice was for, as he thought that perhaps Ganguly Prasad had asked for some extra ice for the Indian ace. The janitors told D'Sa that this was being taken to a room belonging to the Chinese contingent for a player who was very stiff. This seemed strange to the Indian coach, as it was around 6.30 a.m. He wondered why a Chinese player wanted an ice bath so early.

A piqued and curious D'Sa ran down to the reception and enquired who had asked for the ice. He came to know that the room the ice was sent to belonged to Chen Hong, the finalist whom Gopi was to play in the evening. Armed with this information, D'Sa tried to find out why the ice was needed, that too in such huge quantity. His curiosity rewarded him with the information that Chen Hong had been dragged into three long games by the Malaysian Muhammad Roslin Hashim, lasting almost eighty minutes. Chen was stiff and sore after that marathon match and had scraped through with deep brutality. A long and hard-fought singles game in badminton is a killer, and Chen was sure to face the after-effects for some time to come. Leroy did not mention this to Gopi, as he did not want his player to be complacent, but the news raised his hopes. He felt that Providence was also supporting Gopi, and that with Taufik Hidayat out, Gopi defeating Peter Gade and now Chen Hong stiff and sore after the semi-finals, Gopi was going to have an

outstanding chance of engraving his name on the most cherished trophy in world badminton. D'Sa, with his vast experience, knew that Chen Hong's situation was bad and that Gopi would have the upper hand in the finals. The dice was set, and the entire country, rooting for Gopi, waited with bated breath.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times of India*, 10 March 2001

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## THE END OF AGONY, THE BEGINNING OF STARDOM



Gopi came to know about Chen Hong's semis' win once he entered the practice courts, but he did not react – whatever he felt or believed was not visible to anyone. He kept silent and went about his practice session which lasted almost an hour. A local Indian coach in the UK, Thomas John, originally from Kerala, turned out to be a huge help to Team Gopi as he arranged for the squad to see a video recording of Chen Hong's match against Hashim. Gopi saw the video, had a few questions for all those present, then went back to his room. Says Manjusha, 'I think after seeing the video he had already made up his strategy and knew exactly what was needed to be done by him. He did not discuss [the match] with anyone, kept to himself, but he did know the importance of this match.' According to her, Gopi knew that this event was going to be watched by millions at home and abroad. He knew that destiny was not to be denied as long as he could help it. This match would decide whether he walked in the realm of legends or just faded away into obscurity, remembered as just one of the great Indian athletes, but never as an iconic, legendary sportsperson of a proud country, a status he was just one match and one victory away from achieving.

The Chinese camp, meanwhile, was very happy that Gopi, not Peter Gade, was playing Chen Hong. They all looked confident, from chief coach Li Yongbo downwards, that their player, even with the physical problems he had, would win hands down. They were respectful, even wary of Gopi, but then for them the Indian was no Peter Gade or Taufik Hidayat. From the

other side of the draw, if not any other Chinese, then Gopi was the best player to face across the net. Though Gopi had always played well against the Chinese, he had had no experience of playing a big ticket final. And this was the biggest there was in the game. D'Sa had closely monitored their movements and their practice sessions along with Ganguly and felt that the Chinese were happy, even cocky about their chances. 'Chen Hong will prevail, though the match could be tricky,' were the thoughts in the Chinese camp. The 'Great Wall' of China was, after all, too massive to be conquered.

So the stage was set and the final countdown was about to begin in the packed stadium in Birmingham for the All England finals of 2001. Would Gopi finally realise his dream of winning a major world event final? More importantly, would he be able to repay the good Dr Rajgopal, who, seven years ago, had operated on his shattered knee free of cost, made him capable of reaching this dizzying height, and in return, demanded only one thing – an All England title?

Gopi had played Chen Hong twice before and they were one victory apiece, on a head-to-head comparison. In the 1998 Dutch Open, Gopi had beaten Chen 4-15/15-11/15-9. In the second match too, he was very close to winning, but fumbled from match point 14-12 in the second game to allow Chen to score a win 15-5/15-17/11-15. Gopi knew his style of play and was well aware of all the pitfalls. So, from the very beginning at Birmingham, he was really focussed and determined to win this final match. He did not want to lose after having worked so hard not just throughout that week, but also for the last three to four weeks. He owed it to his family and his many supporters to see this through. Chen Hong was also a big name, maybe not as big as Peter Gade. But although Gopi respected them as good players, he did not idolise them, otherwise there would have been a mental block in defeating them.

Like all other top Chinese shuttlers, Chen Hong would hit hard, play fast and could continue the pace for long time. He was also supremely fit, but Gopi knew that he would be overconfident. Their team knew that Gopi had not won any major title in his career and this was the one weakness they wanted to exploit. Perhaps he would be too nervous at this huge stage. But he had worked out the tactics in his mind on how to tackle Chen, and did some deep breathing exercises before stepping onto the court. Like Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*, Gopi had his eye trained on only one person – Chen Hong. Everything else remained in the background. It was just him and the Chinese

player. Nothing else mattered. There was no going back now. The world was watching and he was here to do his best for his country, his family and for himself. This was going to be his answer to all those who had doubted him, had ridiculed him and called him names.

Gopi's account, final match:

I had met Roslin Hashim in the hotel lobby after my morning practice session and he told me about his match. He told me that Chen Hong was really stretched and that he must be really stiff and dehydrated with all the effort put in last night. I was happy to hear this news and after seeing the video, my strategy was made and I knew what was to be done. In any case, I was more comfortable against the Chinese as they could not read my strokes and I could catch them on the wrong foot easily. And if I could match their pace, I always stood a better chance.

The icing had helped somewhat, but my body still hurt in places. I had not slept well, but it was more because of the pain rather than any anxiety for the finals showdown next evening. I was sore and so I spent most of the night listening to music or reading something. I have this habit of sleeping on the floor as my back hurts after sleeping on a soft surface. I had not spoken to my parents for a week and I was not taking any phone calls. I had no clue of what was happening in the world as I was concerned only with my matches so far. Manjusha was perhaps the only person I spoke to from the squad, apart from the two coaches. But the time had come to ignore everything and focus on the job at hand.

Knowing his long arduous match against Hashim in the semis last night, I knew that somewhere down the line, Chen Hong would get tired and have 'heavy feet' and wouldn't be able to move around properly due to weariness. So my plan was to keep the pace high and keep the rallies going from the start – push as much as possible. I was a bit jittery at the start, but my confidence grew after a couple of points. So, even though at times I could have tried to finish, I still found it better to move him around. I also used lots of deception as this can kill any player – it is difficult to get back into a rally after being wrong-footed. I got off to a 2-0 lead, but he smashed well to get back at me and lead 3-2. He then again accelerated the pace and went on to 7-3. But since the rallies were long and fast, I knew I just had to keep up with him as he will start showing signs of tiredness. It was a brutal pace at which we were playing. At this stage, my net play brought me back

into the game as I rattled off three points in a row. At 7-7 there were three or four side-overs of services, but later, he went ahead now with four quick points to lead 11-7.

At this stage, I told myself to keep on pushing the rallies as much as possible, because whoever leaves and wants to take shortcuts is going to lose. Here again, the net dribble and smashes came into focus for me and brought me back at 9-11 as Chen netted his returns. This was a very crucial phase in the first game for me. This was going to be the do-or-die stage for me, as I could not allow him to get onto 13, as then he would have psychological advantage. My body was in bad shape but my mind was strong. There were really fierce rallies with many service changes [from my side] but he was still able to move onto 12-10. I had to control, ensure the shuttle was in play all the while, and act mentally strong. Li Yongbo and company were going hoarse with their cheering and shouting as they knew the first game was very crucial for both of us. Whoever won this game would automatically have a huge advantage in the second.

At this point, I did something totally unexpected as far as Chen Hong was concerned. Uncharacteristically, I slowed down the pace and went in for some high, deep tosses to force him to play from very end of the baseline and then move him to the net with sharp drop shots. In his rush to finish the game early and also to preserve energy for the second, he not only fell into a trap by smashing from baseline in my hands, but was unable to last out the rallies. I got five points in a row to win this very important first game, and he looked dejected and unnerved. The Chinese camp was silent for once. They had not expected this first game reverse. My body was still hurting, but the adrenalin ensured that all worries and pains were on the backburner. I was now on a roll. I knew exactly what was to be done in the second game.

I got a bit lucky at the start as he misjudged two early serves and they landed deep on the baseline to give me a 2-0 lead. Again, two long rallies saw me move on to 4-0, before he got his act together to come fighting back and lead 5-4. But I was confident that he was going to crack soon, as he was catching the shuttle late on the net and this showed me that he was getting sluggish, tired and losing his focus a bit. I think there were some four or five service changes at 5-5 and that is when his resistance was broken. In all these service changes, somehow, I kept the shuttle in play and the rallies going. The pressure was clearly on him and he was getting

slower and slower. My smashes were finding their mark and I was off to a 10-5 lead with good and controlled net play.

Chen Hong now knew that nothing was working for him, so he also tried to slow down the pace, tried flick shots from the net, but this clearly played in my hand as I was able to read the flicks, block them, get his return on the net from a dribble and then finish off with jump smashes. I could see his body language was now negative, especially when I moved on to 13-6 before moving on to championship point. My heart was again in my mouth, booming louder than ever. I did not want to make any mistakes now or want the game to go the way [with] Peter Gade [who] had come back in the semis. This was the moment of my life – I was at the precipice of achieving a great victory. I just took a deep breath, served and waited for his return, which somehow I thought would be a flick on my forehand side. Luck favoured me again, after this great fight between us, I had to win an easy point. I saw his return easily, anticipated the speed of the bird and just blocked it, heaved a sigh of relief as the shuttle caught the tape, just rolled over, leaving Chen Hong standing helpless. I had won, and this all that mattered. I had not won any major title so far in my career, but what a feeling it was when I won that last point, raised my hands to the Almighty and thanked him for whatever I had been given, bestowed with. The Chinese bench was very quiet, the crowd roaring and the Indian squad over the moon.

I then rushed to phone my mother to ask her how I had done. But the phone was constantly engaged as she must have received hundreds of calls. Finally, sometime after dinner, I was able to talk for a few minutes with the family that had assembled at our Hyderabad house, watching my finals on TV. It must have been 4 or 5 a.m. in India. And I asked my mother to call Dr Rajgopal and thank him for all his help. I had finally repaid a huge debt to a man who had done so much for me. I was now in all finality the new All England champion, and will be remembered as one all my remaining life.

Leroy D'Sa, final match:

Gopi knew instinctively what was to be done. It is always better for a player to have his own strategy rather than the coach, at this level of play, trying to force issues. Gopi was always different that way. Always a thinking player, he was confident in his abilities to understand the



opponents, their style of play, their physical strength and mentality.

For us, everything went as usual from the morning. Had breakfast, did our practice knock, relaxed in the room and reached the stadium in time to again have a short knock before the match. The Chinese bench at the start of the game looked happy and at ease. They were relieved to have Gopi on the other side. But the way Gopi started off unnerved them a bit, I guess. Gopi always looked threatening, always aggressive. Even though at times he was behind in scores, he never looked defeated at any stage. The first game was crucial and when he moved on to game-point, we were relieved, since by now, he had a vice-like grip on the proceedings, and Chen Hong was clearly struggling to play at the scorching hot pace Gopi had unleashed. He won the first game and I looked at Li Yongbo, who looked really agitated.

I had a ritual at Birmingham. Throughout [the match] when Gopi won the first game, I used to walk to the main entrance of the arena, would wait for the claps of the spectators to tell me that the second game had started and would walk back to my seat. Maybe this was superstition, but I thought this was a lucky charm for us. This time too, I stood up and glanced at the Chinese bench, and Yongbo looked at me with a snicker on his face, as if telling me that this time it won't work. But we in the Indian camp were now convinced that after the tough first game, Gopi will not have any problems. His back and legs were hurting, which he told us at changeover, but he said that he will not allow this to come in his way to go all out in the second game.

After he moved away from 5-5 in second, the smiles of the Chinese contingent started to fade away. They were now anxious. Gopi never asked for any advice as he knew what he had to do. We were just supporting staff for him and were happy that way. From 5-9 or so in the second game, Chen Hong was finding it difficult to lunge forward for Gopi's drop shots, and that signalled to me the end of his resistance.

And the one major thing that I noticed was that in most rallies, even in the previous matches, whether he won or lost them, Gopi dictated the pace and proceedings. Chen Hong could have won the first game had he pushed Gopi more, but in the second, once Gopi neared the finish line, he had no hopes. His [Gopi's] face was another thing. The mask was there. Never showed any anxiety or the pain he must have been feeling. The demeanour was positive throughout. Only he knows how he endured that body pain all

the time. The world may have believed that Chen Hong from China would win this match. But not Gopi. He knew that there could be only one winner and that was him. This was clear from his body language and facial expressions.

Actually from 12-6 onwards, Gopi was in a different class. The Chinese bench also realised that it was all over. The remaining points were just a formality waiting to be finished. And there was stunning [sic] silence for a few seconds when Gopi won the final point – the championships point. We all rushed to embrace him, while Chen Hong looked extremely dejected and Li Yongbo and other coaching staff simply walked away, still not believing that Gopi had come, seen and conquered not just the seemingly impregnable China wall, but everything that the badminton world could throw at him. He seized every single opportunity that came his way at Birmingham, and without dropping a single game, crowned himself king at the All England of 2001.

And if I have to analyse how Gopi treated this All England, I can say only one thing.

Gopi came here not just to be a participant. He came here to win. Somehow, he knew that he stood a great chance after his good performances in east Asia before these championships. I have observed Gopi in the many training camps I attended with him. He is the only player who comes to my mind who was never satisfied at the way he was playing or training. He always said that there are many areas of improvement and he also knew in his mind what he wanted, and how to go about it. Otherwise, for example, he would never have left the Padukone Academy. He left because he realised that the type of training he wanted, he will be able to get at SAI, where the coach was not answerable to anyone but himself. Players today want the coaches to do everything for them, even think for them. That is wrong, and Gopi proved it all the time. I will even say that Gopi won the All England all by himself. We just went along for the ride.

Gopi felt that the Chinese were obviously not too happy with the result, but deep down, they must have known that this was a possibility. After all, Gopi had defeated their top players, including Sun Jun, Ji Xinpeng, Dong Jiong, Lin Dan and so many others, many times in the past. Yet the defeat took its time to sink in for Yongbo and company. Gopi's immediate thought, after all

the applause had died down, was that at last, the rest would allow his body to recover. His tryst with destiny had tilted in his favour, as he had willed it. The sacrifices of his parents, sister and brother had not gone in vain. He had overcome amazing odds to finally write his name in golden letters amongst the pantheon of badminton greats in the world. He was finally relieved that this was all over.

Typically, he was now more concerned about how he would fare in the next tournament, as now the expectations from his fans in India would be sky-high and he did not want to disappoint them. He did not want this to be a fluke victory in the eyes of everyone, more so in his own eyes. While he loved the feeling of becoming an All England champion, he did not dwell on it. The adrenalin rush was over, and the happiness was perhaps to be savoured later, when he reached home. Since he was not scheduled to play the French Open, where the Indian squad was going next, all he wanted to do was to throw a party for his teammates. The whole squad was treated to a much-awaited and memorable dinner by Gopi at the nearby Bombay Palace restaurant.

His first media statement from Birmingham was that his victory was a dream come true, for which he had worked long and hard. He was quoted as saying:

This is what all badminton players dream about, to stand here where I am standing today, with the most cherished trophy in the world in my hands. I put in long years to iron out the chinks in my armour. At this level you cannot afford to have any weaknesses in your game. Your opponents put your game under the scanner and there is no way you can hide the weaknesses. I owe [the title] to all the coaches who shaped me, my friends in SAI who unselfishly sparred me for months at a time, Dr Rajgopal who structured my knee and gave me hope all the time and most importantly my parents and family who indulged in my ambitions with everything they had.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Rajgopal was as humble as ever. Mumbai's *Mid Day* newspaper quoted him as saying,

The credit of winning this huge title should go entirely to Gopi Chand. If not handled properly and on time, the injury he suffered at Pune National Games in January 1994, was potentially career threatening in a big way.

Several athletes undergo this surgery, very few make it to the top. Not everyone is Pullela Gopi Chand. His resilience, positive attitude and strength of character saw him through those tumultuous months. It is an arduous rehabilitation protocol. Injuries take time to heal. The issue was to sit out those eight to nine months which was disturbing to a keen athlete like Gopi. He was already threatening to be officially India number one at [the] age of 18. His morale was low as he wanted to get into thick of things as soon as he could. So we basically treated him at various levels.<sup>2</sup>

The good doctor continued, saying that Gopi was operated upon in 1994 for a highly complex ligament injury in his left knee, in 1996 for a torn cartilage and again in 1997-98 for the same injury, and all operations were conducted at his clinic in New Delhi. The first injury was a serious problem. The injury Gopi had had destabilises the knee and requires ligament reconstruction. That is why the rehab took a good nine months. The doctor added that Gopi could come back on court and reach such heights after so many injuries only because he was mentally strong, and, more importantly, because he believed in himself.

At this stage, it will also be interesting to know what two of Gopi's strongest opponents have to say about him.

Former Olympic and world champion Taufik Hidayat of Indonesia recollects:

I remember I had to play Gopi in his time, and I remember he was one of the few players who could get a title at the All England. He would play the game technically and intelligently, unlike the Chinese players, who are very aggressive and physical. I remember the All England of 2001. I was supposed to be the favorite to win that year and I lost in the earlier rounds, which came as a blow.

Taufik, who lost to Gopi in the Ipoh Masters in 2000, also feels that Gopi has a very different character from most other top players.

I don't know why he couldn't play for a long time. Lee Chong Wei, Lin Dan and I are also very different from each other. Lin Dan and I have won all the championships but Lee, on the other hand, can win any super series. But when it comes to All England, the World Championships, the Asian Games, he hasn't won any. Gopi is like him. He is good player who won the All England, but couldn't win any Olympic and the World

Championships. But that didn't make him any less [a champion]. He is a good player, a good person and a good friend and I hope many good players like him do come up in the near future from India.

Gopi's opponent from the All England, Peter Hoeg Gade, remembers:

If we take the All England of 2001 into consideration, I was a big favourite to win that year. I was playing really well and moving extremely well. Also against Gopi, I never really had any problems playing him before. Even during that semi-final match, I was playing extremely well, and suddenly I don't know what happened. In an instant, Gopi started taking control of that match and started doing some different things that I could anticipate and didn't expect of him. That probably built the possibility of him defeating me. And even in the final, he played extremely well and he deserved to win.

Peter also elucidates on what sets Gopi apart from the rest of the players – his self-confidence and extreme mental strength. Even if he lost to any big player earlier, he has the confidence and belief that he could defeat that player later. That is a very important aspect of Gopi's character.

Peter also explains,

Generally, players from India would be very patient on court, and would move the shuttle very patiently around the court. But Gopi was different from them. He was one of the few Indian players who made a mark and he had a mixed game of attack and correct technique. That has brought about a change in India. Many Indian players are now attacking well. Gopi is also the national coach of Team India and he has a lot of experience that helps all the new players. And his competitive spirit and like he believed for [about] himself, he also always believes that his players have a chance. I don't know much about him as a person, and we have always had mutual respect for each other. And we have had a very respectful approach towards each other on court and off the court. On court, he appeared very angry like most Indian players. He always wanted to win and that's a competitive sign. I like that. I don't know him personally and I'm not aware of his injuries. It's a tough, game and at the top level, you are always going to have many injuries. But you've got to keep pushing yourself all the time to a higher standard. The more fit you are, the harder you can practise. But there is no doubt in my mind that Gopi Chand was a terrific

player of his generation, who defeated all top players in the world during his time.

After his win at Birmingham, Gopi was inundated with congratulatory calls, the most important ones being from the prime minister's and sports minister's offices in Delhi. The then Chief Minister (CM) of Andhra Pradesh, N. Chandrababu Naidu, also called, as did many other VIPs. He had, after all, won the biggest title in global badminton. From being just one of the better sportspersons of India, Gopi had suddenly become the most sought-after celebrity. Prakash Padukone, who had won the same trophy twenty-one years ago, said in the *Deccan Herald* of Bangalore,

This is a red letter day for Indian Badminton. It is a fully deserved victory. Gopi had an overall tactical game. He was very good at the net. He had a better match than me in 1980. He attacked when required and was totally in command. His main strength is good deception, control and net play. He used all these qualities in every match at the championships – this victory has brightened things and it will surely do a world of good for Indian badminton to have a world recognised superstar, amongst our players.<sup>3</sup>

In our country, despite the size and population, true world-beaters can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The youth of India now had someone to look up to, someone who had overcome incredible odds to crown himself king. Gopi, with his all-round aggression, had also proved that Indians, if they put their minds to it, could indeed have the killer instinct required to reach the summit of the cut-throat world of international sports. In the international badminton arena, dominated by the Chinese, the Indonesians, the Malaysians and the odd Dane, he had taken the battle to them on his own terms, and bested each and every one of the so-called superstars.

The Indian high commissioner's office sent a letter inviting Gopi to go to Delhi for a personal felicitation by the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, on behalf of the government and the country. However, at the last moment, the prime minister had to back out due to some emergency, and Gopi was felicitated by the petroleum and sports ministers before he flew on to Hyderabad.

Gopi made headlines all over the country. The sports pages were inundated with reports on his match, point for point. The front pages carried his photographs from Birmingham, clutching the trophy. After a wait of twenty-

one year, Gopi Chand had singlehandedly catapulted badminton from obscure sports pages to screaming headlines on the main pages of all leading national and vernacular publications.

*The Times of India* started its report of 13 March 2001 with a three-year-old quote from Gopi, then continued:

Winning the All England is difficult, but not impossible, since all it requires is to defeat just three or four good players, with better rankings. The 27 year old from Ongole in Prakasam district of AP, in his 6th appearance at All England, proved it right by winning the All England, making it a memorable day for India. With Gopi creating a red-letter day in Indian sports, Prakash Padukone finally has some company. Gopi had earlier emulated his mentor, Prakash, by leading India to the Thomas Cup final rounds last year with perfectly balanced and dominating performances. The only title that differentiated Gopi from Prakash was the 1980 title won [by] the Bangalore based legend. Today Gopi has closed down that gap. But his work is not yet over and Gopi Chand, of all [people], will know that. Coming up is the world grand prix finals at Brunei and the world championships in May in Spain.

The *Hyderabad Express*<sup>4</sup> said that Gopi had come a long way from the time he went to play badminton as an eleven-year-old with his elder brother Raja Shekhar to the Lal Bahadur indoor stadium in Hyderabad. But it was a stroke of luck for the game of badminton that Gopi chose to play it. Had he chosen another field, India would have been deprived of a champion.

Press Trust of India (PTI) said in its report of 12 March 2001:

The 27 year old Indian ace, who had ousted world number one Peter Gade of Denmark in the semi-finals on Saturday, was in command throughout the finals match and displayed excellent net play, brilliant drop shots, to clinch the affair in less than an hour. Gopi Chand's brilliance at the net which saw him defeat Olympic champion Ji Xin Peng and Gade earlier, was in evidence once again as he deflated the power play of the Chinese star with the expertise of a touch artiste.

PTI continued to state that Gopi Chand had obviously relied a lot on his net expertise and must have worked really hard in that area. And that is precisely what Gopi had done throughout the short camp the team had had at SAI prior to their departure for Birmingham. He had known that given the equal

standards between all the competitors in all the other departments like speed, stamina, endurance and strength, the one quality that would give him an edge over the other top players would be his ability to control and dominate the net area with confident and deceptive strokes.

The then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee also congratulated Gopi in the ongoing Parliament session. 'The whole country was eager for some time, to hear some good news from [the] world of sports. Now we have the wonderful news of Gopi Chand winning the All England. It is a proud moment for us. I congratulate him on behalf of the whole country. I am sure he will bring more laurels for India.'

The then Sports Minister Uma Bharti lauded Gopi's efforts. She said, 'It is a great day for Indian sports. After a long time, a world-beater has emerged and it was a fully deserving victory. I am confident Gopi Chand will continue in [the] same manner to bring more world titles for India.'

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister (2001) Chandrababu Naidu was gushing with pride when he announced a reward of ₹ 25 lakh for Gopi, the same day he won the All England. Naidu told PTI, 'The state of Andhra is extremely proud at Gopi Chand's memorable win. We will also give him a house site of his choice and set up a badminton academy for him to coach future world champions. The state assembly will also adopt a resolution congratulating the ace shuttler from our state who has made India proud.'<sup>5</sup>

Subbaravamma was ecstatic when she told the *Indian Express*, 'I knew my son will become great one day and am thankful to God for having made this possible for Gopi at the age of 27 itself.'<sup>6</sup> She confessed that bringing up three children, two of whom played badminton and constantly needed shuttles, shoes and rackets, was not easy at all, but now it was all worth it. She told the journalist that when she was young, she used to watch a lot of films. But with Gopi seriously getting into badminton, she started looking at things from a different perspective. If she could save a movie ticket's worth of money, it could buy a shuttle for Gopi. So she completely stopped watching movies and had not been to a theatre for the last fifteen years. But she had no regrets at all, as Gopi's win at All England made up for all the sacrifices the family had to make.

However, Gopi's father Subhash was more forthright when he told the same paper,

He would have won the title much earlier had he got better guidance. I am



not finding fault with our present system but when you see what the Chinese and European players get in terms of infrastructure, international championships exposure, playing equipments, etc, at an early age amongst other things, I realise my son got pittance. I hope our officials wake up now for future generation of players as they deserve better than what is being dished out.

However, what really brought lumps to the throats and tears to the eyes of many Indians was an emotional Hima Bindu, Gopi's sister, remembering what the family went through so many years ago. She was quoted in the *Sunday Express* of 18 March 2001 as saying, 'Ever since Gopi started playing, everything in the house was time-tuned to him and his practice session. We stopped going to movies, and in case he had a broken racket, it meant we would not be having new clothes for months.' She said that the parents had no social life, as that would have cost money, and she did not remember when her mother last went out to meet her friends or took the family out to eat. Gopi also got away with all his tantrums. But looking back, it was all fun and she enjoyed the attention she got as Gopi's sister. The only topic discussed in the house was badminton – morning, afternoon or night. But she also confessed that Gopi was always a doting brother. In the little time he could spend with Hima Bindu, he did everything to show her how much she mattered to him. Wherever he went, he never ever forgot to bring back a gift for her. Big or small, expensive or not, it did not matter, since he never returned empty-handed. She says,

He has matured a lot. Ever since he got into the Art of Living, he has matured as a person. Listening to him [talking] on spiritual matters, one is bound to be mesmerised. He has become quiet and introspective. However, one incident I can never forget is the one that took place during my marriage. All throughout, he kept on telling my mother-in-law and my husband to take good care of me. I never knew he could show his concern so overtly. I am proud to say that Gopi is a champion in everything, from being a nice humble person, to an outstanding badminton player who overcame so many personal problems to win the All England.

Perhaps the greatest tribute that came Gopi's way was by his onetime idol and former Olympian Dipankar Bhattacharya, who was effusive in his praise for Gopi's dedication:

I feel honoured that I belonged to a time when Gopi was honing his skills to become what he is today. I was witness to a major part of the making of a legend. In fact, we were the staunchest of rivals at one point of time and I was always alert about what he was doing in terms of perfecting his skills. His focus, his discipline and dedication towards the game were unparalleled during his time. When he fell down at the Pune Nationals, I knew that the injury was so severe that it would take years to heal. Moreover, there were instances when such an injury has caused some of my close colleagues to bid goodbye to the game.

I remember having paid a visit to his place in Delhi just after the surgery. Dr Rajgopal had really done a wonderful job. He was sitting on one side of the bed and as we entered, he greeted us with a smile and asked us how we were and what was going on in the circuit. A television was placed just opposite him and some small dumbbells and weight plates were placed by his side. As per the doctor's advice, he was slowly strengthening the muscles by doing the lightest of weight training on the bed itself. He wouldn't wait until he was completely healed because by that time his other muscles would have been weakened. That was the kind of fire he had within him. Gopi's comeback wouldn't have been possible without the total support of all his family members especially his mother. As a team man, he was a great motivator. In the team events that we played in, he would always be there by the side of the court, cheering up and giving advice to his fellow team members. At times, he used to be very vocal if any injustice was done by the referees or the opponents to his team. He is a patriot and his team, his people come ahead of everything else. Winning the All England, the greatest of all tournaments, after such a severe injury, is probably a unique occurrence in the history of badminton itself. It was truly unbelievable. It only inspires us and the next generation to take an example to never say die.

While the country was going ballistic in its praise for the champion, Gopi, who had withdrawn from the French Open, was making arrangements to fly back to India, with Delhi being the first stop on the invitation of the government. He was slated to meet the prime minister and other dignitaries. He knew the country would be happy and proud with his stupendous show during the entire week at the All England, but he simply had no idea what was in store for him when he landed on the home soil. Winning that last point

against Chen Hong in the final match had emphatically changed his life and future. Gopi had caught the imagination of a country, hungry to feast on a true world champion. His had been a story of raw courage, determination, self-belief and fortitude, in which he never ever gave up his pursuit of excellence or his focus, in spite of huge obstacles in front of him. His return brought him adulations from a grateful India, and glory beyond dreams.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Hindu*, 12 March 2001

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Arun Janardhan, 13 March 2001

<sup>3</sup> 13 March 2001

<sup>4</sup> 13 March 2001

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<sup>6</sup> 13 March 2001

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## THE RETURN OF A CHAMPION



**A**fter Gopi's plane touched down at the Delhi airport, from immigration and customs itself, he was surrounded by hundreds of fans. The festive scene outside the Indira Gandhi International Airport reminded one of a coronation ceremony. For Indian sports, it was a landmark day. Pullela Gopi Chand had just returned with the All England title. The beating of drums and the sound of trumpets rent the air. It was like Holi – everyone was overjoyed to welcome the champion himself.

Wrote famous badminton journalist Saji Chacko in the *Hindustan Times* of 13 March 2001:

There were thousands of fans waiting for Gopi, but anarchy and chaos seemed to reign once the champion landed. Cameraman virtually fell on each other and a near stampede ensued. The champion beloved by all, was virtually 'gheraoed' and was forced into a corner. All frantic appeals by Badminton Association officials, not to surround Gopi fell on deaf ears. Even his mother and sister were not spared the jostles. However Gopi showed great temperament and composure all through the ordeal.

Gopi's first words after he was allowed to speak were, 'I was confident of winning the title. Going into the final, I knew I was going to win.' He was inundated with warm wishes and spontaneous messages of joy and happiness from thousands of people who met him during his stay in Delhi. Rewards of all kinds, as mentioned earlier, started pouring in. While the Andhra Pradesh Government had already announced a ₹25 lakh reward, the Government of

India bestowed ₹ 10 lakh, and the governments of Maharashtra and Haryana as well as the Tata Sports Foundation ₹ 5 lakh each. The Government of Karnataka, besides a cash prize, also rewarded Gopi with a site for building a house in Bangalore. Air India decided to provide him ten air tickets free of cost and the BAI, as promised, pitched in with ₹ 2 lakh.

Being the sort of person he is, Gopi did not miss his morning jog and training, even hours after landing, as reported Rakesh Rao in *The Hindu*<sup>1</sup>. Gopi also remembered to give special thanks to two people who had helped him immensely. He told *The Hindu* that former hockey international player and Executive Director of SAI, Bangalore, MP Ganesh, had been a huge help. Ganesh had always been very encouraging, and while Gopi was preparing for Birmingham, he had offered him every possible assistance. Gopi also singled out the soft-spoken and quiet Ganguly Prasad, under whom he had trained and practised at SAI for almost thirty months before realising his dream.

I have moved from a world ranking of thirty-five to five because of the hard work, commitment and support I had from Prasad sir. We have been working together for the past couple of years. It has been [a blend of] my ideas and his training methods. We get along pretty well as a combination. If I make a mistake, he knows it and makes me work harder. His work ethics are almost like mine. He really pushes me hard all the time and expects me to finish the full quantum of training and practice schedules for the day, without exceptions.

If Delhi was chaotic but memorable, the reception Gopi received on landing in Hyderabad was unbelievable. There was such outpouring of emotions that Gopi was overwhelmed. The person behind the fairy-tale reception was Mr LV Subrahmanyam, an IAS officer with the state government, who, at that time, was the Vice Chairman and Managing Director of the Sports Authority of Andhra Pradesh (SAAP). LV, as he is affectionately known, not only did yeoman service to sports in Andhra during his tenure, but also played a significant part in helping Gopi set up the Gopi Chand Badminton Academy, which, by all counts, is probably the best private badminton coaching setup in the world. A badminton fanatic who plays whenever time permits him, LV claims that if he was not in the civil services, he would have been a sportsman of some magnitude as he was crazy about all sorts of sports.

LV first met Gopi in 1999, when he went to a felicitation function for Gopi at a local club. Gopi, already a national champion four times over, who was there with his mother, was given a kit bag at the ceremony. LV liked Gopi's humility and simplicity. When LV met the ace again, he had assumed charge of the SAAP as the managing director and was tasked with organising the National Games in Hyderabad by the then Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu. The CM was not much of a sports buff and admitted so, but told LV to ensure that the sports infrastructure was world-class, for which LV was given a maximum limit of eighteen months. LV went about chasing this mandate meticulously, the first step being meeting Gopi again and then through him, the sports icon Prakash Padukone himself.

Through these two, LV came to understand what was needed to go about making good, sustainable, practical and lasting infrastructure. He did not want to repeat the mistakes made by the organisers of the Bangalore and Pune National Games, where the stadia were rotting because of neglect and sheer callousness. He even went to the extent of refusing to visit Sydney to observe the preparations for the Sydney Olympics, as he did not want to be part of the official junket which normally go for such observations on taxpayers' money, but come back empty-handed more often than not. The result was seen later on, as by sheer force of will and determination, LV was instrumental in changing the face of sports stadia and infrastructure in Hyderabad and other districts. He also helped sportspersons in many other ways during his tenure in the SAAP.

The Sydney Olympics saw the entire Indian contingent return home empty-handed, barring the lone bronze won by Karnam Malleswari of Andhra Pradesh. And a proud and happy LV and his team at SAAP decided that she should be given a most memorable reception and felicitation when she landed in the city. A massive rally was organised at the Lal Bahadur Shastri Stadium and everyone from the governor and the chief minister to the leader of the opposition, the speaker of the house, ministers and leading celebrities thronged the venue, swelling with pride at the huge achievement of a local sports icon. By this time, LV's predecessor in the secretariat, and former Sports Minister Tammineni Sitaram had already drafted out a logical and sustaining sports policy for the state, which included a feature dealing with incentives to be handed out by the state government to sportspersons from Andhra who did well at events like the Olympics, the Asiad, the Commonwealth Games and World Championships. The policy mentioned

nothing about other major championships but prudently left enough at the discretion of the Managing Director of the SAAP, to advise the CM on how to go about rewarding athletes who did well at other events besides those mentioned.

LV convinced the CM that though Malleswari had won ‘just’ a bronze medal, as some people were highlighting, she nonetheless had to be treated like royalty, since this was the first such medal won by an Indian woman, and in any case the first Olympic medal won by a citizen of Andhra Pradesh. Says LV, ‘I told the CM that future generations of our budding sportspeople may look upon how we act and what we give her, and then decide to do better and win more laurels for the Telugu people. Today it is a bronze medal, tomorrow, with good incentives, we may have silver and even gold medallists from our state.’

LV wanted the spirit of competition to be paramount in the sports system. The Andhra Pradesh CM agreed and Malleswari’s felicitation in December 2000 was a spectacular event. The following year saw another highlight as far as LV was concerned, as Gopi won the All England title in March. In LV’s mind, the All England was no less than the Olympics, being the most famous, historical and revered badminton title in the world, and Gopi, therefore, deserved at least the same tributes from the government as Karnam Malleswari had got. LV’s motto during his tenure in SAAP was simple – performers from the state would not go unnoticed. He did not leave any stone unturned to ensure that Gopi was received and honoured the way he deserved. But even he was surprised at the love and warmth shown by the thousands who came to applaud Gopi.

With huge advertisements all over the newspapers, some sponsored by public and private enterprises, innumerable banners with Gopi’s photographs on way from the airport to the LB Stadium where Gopi was going for the reception thrown by a proud CM, thousands of school children en route waving flags and placards, it was a time that Gopi remembers vividly even today. *The Times of India* headlined its report with, ‘Gopi overwhelmed by warmth’ while the *Indian Express* screamed, ‘City drops net of adulation around smashing success.’<sup>1</sup>

But a gesture, as reported by one newspaper, which brought tears to the eyes of many present was when Gopi, Hyderabad’s man of the moment, bent down to touch his mother’s feet as soon as he landed on home turf. Said a proud Subbaravamma, eyes brimming with tears of joy, ‘*Chala бага adinavu*

*naina.*' (You played very well my son.) It was a fleeting moment of personal emotion amidst the crush of admirers which had enveloped him at the Begumpet airport. After that, Gopi belonged to the people.

The warmth and affection of complete strangers seemingly surprised and overwhelmed Gopi, who fought back tears. Red roses, garlands of chrysanthemum were being thrown all over as crowds kept on shouting – 'Well played Gopi', 'Gopi Chand *zindabad*', 'Congratulations Gopi', and so on. He was then led to an open-top jeep, which followed five pilot motorcycles for the ride, first to Raj Bhavan, then to the LB Stadium where the felicitation was to take place. 'I knew there would be a reception for me, but this is absolutely overwhelming in every way,' said an emotional Gopi to *The Times of India*<sup>2</sup>. His eyes widened with disbelief as he saw little kids inspired enough to line the streets and wave at him for winning the All England. His entire family, led by ecstatic grandparents G Veeraiah and G Adilakshmi, were present to hug him, and so were distant relatives and throngs of friends and state players. The then Governor of Andhra Pradesh, C Rangarajan, and First Lady Haripriya were generous in their praise for Gopi. 'Welcome my boy. We are proud of you, Pullela Gopi Chand, and you have done the state a great honour,' said the governor, as he presented Gopi with a shawl, a bouquet and a citation. Coach M Arif told the waiting press, 'Gopi had all the makings of a champion. Back in 1987, when he was just about 15 years old, I had told his parents he will make it really big one day.'<sup>2</sup> CM Chandrababu Naidu lavishly praised Gopi, saying 'Gopi Chand has made all of us really proud with what he has achieved. His determination and dedication are something to be emulated by all of us. My government will give him all [the] facilities to ensure he stays on top. We will start by handing over a cheque of ₹25 lakh immediately as our spontaneous token of affection and reward for his huge victory.' Naidu further added that it was Gopi's self-confidence that took him to such heights.

'He had told me he will come back winning the title and he has done just that. Gopi's performance should be a reminder to one and all in Indian sports that they are no way lacking in skill and technique. If we are committed and sincere like Gopi, we can all do as well.' Naidu also recalled the injury Gopi suffered during the 1994 National Games at Pune. In his speech at the LB Stadium, the then CM said, 'Not many will have the moral courage to overcome such a major handicap. Gopi's fightback and achievements after that are a lesson for all in different walks of life.'



At a crowded press conference after the felicitation, Gopi said something typical of him.

I have no regrets for [the] lack of certain facilities and advantages while playing international matches. Over the years I have come to accept what I have, and never complain. Perhaps this was my strength. But a physiotherapist travelling with our badminton squad would have made [a] big difference. Other things we all manage as Indians. There is no coach to videotape and analyse the opponents' game and styles, no psychologist to keep the players' physical and mental frames intact. We have no help in these areas but as Indians, I and my team manage all by ourselves. But for future players, help in these areas by BAI or Ministry of Sports will go a long way in raising our standards.<sup>3</sup>

Gopi also thanked members of Parliament and members of the Andhra Pradesh legislature for passing unanimous resolutions hailing his success.

For LV, the reception and felicitation went as planned. But there was a real surprise waiting for Gopi when the CM gave him some documents announcing that as per state sports policy, he was also being awarded a plot of land where he was to build a house. While Gopi was stunned, not at the fact that the papers were given to him, as this had also been done for Karnam Malleswari, but at the speed with which all the papers were readied, LV knew how all this had come about as he had played an important part in the process.

Gopi had brought us glory. I had cancelled an important dinner I had to attend and chewed out my nails with tension as I stayed glued to the TV watching the semi-finals against Peter Gade and finals against Chen Hong. I took a vow that if he wins, I will walk up the Tirumala Mountain and pay respects to Lord Tirupati and shave my head. After Gopi won, we all went there at the opportune moment, and he too accompanied us, along with some fifteen other friends who had all taken the vow. I told myself that he must get whatever he deserves and that too as quickly as possible. Many times, top sportsmen were promised so many things which never materialised. This was not going to happen under my watch.

LV convinced the CM and Sports Minister Sitaram, also a very keen sportsman, that All England was as important as the Olympics and if Gopi won, he should get all the incentives mentioned in the State Sports Policy of

2000. The CM saw merit in LV's argument and agreed that Gopi be treated at par with an Olympic champion.

The Collector of Hyderabad is the designated official who has the power to allot land, once it is passed by the CM from his discretionary quota. LV and the then Collector Rajeshwar Tewari were totally supportive and agreed that the player in question must get the allotted land as early as possible, otherwise red tape would ensure that all was forgotten. The government moved astonishingly fast on this land award. While he was in Delhi, his father was taken around by LV and he zeroed in on a 500 sq. ft yard plot in Jubilee Hills, an elite Hyderabad suburb. The documents were readied, alienation of the land done, the sketch drawn, government orders passed on the same, and on the day after he was felicitated at the LB Stadium, Gopi was called by the CM to his residence and handed over the ownership documents of the plot. Like in so many other cases, LV ensured that the respect of the new All England champion was kept intact and he was not forced to run from pillar to post to claim what was his right. The fast-tracking of the announced rewards for Gopi made the sports fraternity really happy and gave new generations of athletes from the state something to look forward to. Thanks to this action taken by LV and the supporting team, SAAP was inundated with applications by current and former top sportspersons and many of them were helped by Gopi's experience.

Gopi, by now, had been rewarded very handsomely indeed by a proud Andhra Pradesh and a grateful India, for bringing the country into headlines around the world, thanks to his All England title. With the Government of Karnataka also pitching in with cash and land awards, the press announced that the champion was richer by some ₹ 50 lakh in cash incentives and land worth more than ₹ 20 lakh. The then Karnataka Chief Minister SM Krishna, a keen tennis player who had also announced a reward, was overjoyed at Gopi's victory. 'Gopi was coached by our former champion Prakash Padukone, and he also played at SAI here in Bangalore under coach Ganguly Prasad. On behalf of the people of the state and the government I congratulate Gopi for emulating Padukone and the state is happy to announce that both Gopi Chand and Ganguly Prasad will be awarded with a plot of land.'<sup>4</sup> At Bangalore too, there was a tumultuous welcome for Gopi, with an open jeep, pilot motorbikes, and thousands congratulating him all the way from the airport to the state secretariat. His adopted home of the last six years

had welcomed him back with open arms.

The generosity of the Government of Andhra Pradesh continued and Gopi, who had wanted to start a coaching academy, was allotted a five-acre plot of land in Gachibowli, which is the heart of Hyderabad's IT district. This must have been the first time in the history of world badminton that an individual player was shown such generosity. Most academies in the world are either owned by the state or owned/run by national sports federations. In Gopi's case, the then Andhra Pradesh CM, who was highly inclined towards sports, was true to his word, and wanting a world-class facility in Hyderabad, signed off this huge piece of land to Gopi in his last cabinet meeting before he called the state elections. This was the state government's way of showing respect for this great player. Of course, the CM and his cabinet had another motive, to ensure that future world-class players come out of this academy and bring many more laurels to the state of Andhra Pradesh. In this, they were right because Gopi, who retired from international badminton in 2003, started off a new career in coaching and within five to six years of sheer hard work, again put India back on the map of world badminton, producing mindboggling numbers of top class talent, including the fantastic Saina Nehwal. But that will be seen in detail in the next chapter.

In his own words, LV tells us why the academy land also was given in the fastest possible time.

I came to know from Gopi that some other countries were interested in signing him as [their] national coach, as soon as he retired from competitive badminton. These countries even offered him citizenship and what they called 'a better future'. I talked with some of my colleagues and also the sports minister, and I explained that if we have someone of Gopi's calibre why we should not use his services in our state? The civil society must understand this and help him out in every way. Gopi grew up in our neighbourhood and went on to win the All England. Surely he will manage to coach many other players in same way. After all, he was a self-made player who knows what it takes to reach that height. He was as normal as any one of us. He performed through sheer hard work and industry. Initially, we thought that Gopi can run and manage the National Games Stadium here in Gachibowli and start his academy here. IMG [International Management Group] which was a world-famous sports organisation, too showed great interest in setting up sports academies here. The CM was

happy and I told him that if IMG is given permission, then the future of our young sportspersons will be safe. IMG would also bring international events to Andhra and that will help us. In fact, the WTA [Women's Tennis Association], which Sania Mirza won, was brought by IMG to Hyderabad. I was of the opinion that home support to our players will also enhance their competitiveness and who knows – so many could then go on to become Gopis, Sanias or [VVS] Laxmans. So, such type[s] of activities are important if state wants to encourage sports. But somehow, the case with IMG did not work out to our satisfaction.

So we thought again to get Gopi his academy, and here the then Collector Mr Ranga Reddy played a crucial part, along with hosts of Gopi's admirers in the civil service and the society at large.

There is also another facet of Gopi's personality that brought us closer. He may have become a celebrity but remained humble. There was integrity behind his personality. Normally, this is not associated with celebrities in any walks of life, especially sportspersons, as they show some flashy brilliance and then become too big for their boots. They get swept off [their feet] with their victories and then do not remember what they owe to the civil society. The average citizen does not see a sense of belonging in this performer and he gets alienated from the society. But Gopi had that clear and transparent streak in him, as he believed he must do something in return to society for all the help he had been given in his career. Then there was this example when he turned down the cola advertisement which would have netted him lakhs of rupees, simply because he did not think that colas are any good for health. So many other celebrities endorsed alcohol or cigarettes in those days without batting an eyelid. But here was a person, who did not want to harm the society in any way. Gopi did not believe in contradictory images in any way.

Gopi's firm entrenchment in philosophy and spirituality also found many admirers. His belief that there is a superhuman force driving all of us to achieve our goals in life, but that everyone must be answerable to the Almighty and do things that benefit all, made LV admire Gopi even more. LV realised that Gopi would pursue excellence in not just badminton as far as his would-be students were concerned, but would look at the bigger aspect of better personality development for them. LV believed that under Gopi, a great mix of values would be imparted and real quality time would be spent

on the youngsters who came to learn the sport.

LV took formal permission from the government to be part of the trust that eventually set up the academy. The government provided continuous support while the only stipulation from the collectors' order was that activities conducted there should be sports-related in nature – the usual stipulation a government makes while donating land for such activities.

The land was formally handed over to Gopi almost three years after he won the All England and almost two years after LV had demitted the SAAP office. Ravi Ramchandra, who was the Joint Collector at the time of handing over, and another officer, BR Meena, helped tremendously in choosing the piece of land. The CM was, of course, highly supportive throughout.

The trust that was set up with LV as one of the trustees then sat down to seriously think out the plans, drawings, scope and architecture, of the academy. Badminton facilities were to be started as soon as possible. It was a slow but steady progress. Gopi had wanted to establish a totally self-contained badminton training and coaching centre in Hyderabad for a long time. In his entire playing career, he got immense help from his family, which made several sacrifices and did not let Gopi suffer in any way. But being a sports player in India has its own problems. Nothing could be found in a convenient place. He had to run around to get shuttles, go to different places for weight training, there were no food facilities in training centres, physios or any medical and dietary help was difficult to find under one roof. Gopi, during his travels, had seen and admired many training centres where everything was available in one place and he did not have to venture out of the building for anything.

He also noticed one more important thing. In every international centre that he visited and practised in, he realised that even though he was given importance, he was at best a sparring partner to the local player. The players of that country or the training centre were more important in every way. No time was spent on improving Gopi's game. He was used to ensure that the local player got better. The local coach usually left Gopi to his devices and in the bargain, if Gopi could improve his strokes, strength or speed, fine, otherwise all he would get was thanks for coming and playing with the players of these centres. One of the notions also prevailing at that time in India was that to become world class, you have to go out and train in foreign countries under famous coaches. But in most countries such as China, Denmark and Korea foreign players are simply not allowed to train with the

national squad as the camps are pretty much private. Even European countries, which are supposedly so open, do not encourage foreign players to train with their elite sportspersons. So Gopi always wondered why India does not have a system like abroad, where every facility needed is available under one roof and where we could produce our own world-beaters.

Gopi had wanted to coach for a long time. In fact, as far back as the 1998 Asian Games at Bangkok, he was clear about this. He told Aparna Popat that as soon as he retired, he would go into coaching. Says Aparna:

At Asian Games itself he told me that he would set up his own academy, with all facilities required. His vision was a world-class training centre, which he has now made almost single-handedly. It is an incredible place. Many people felt that he retired early and that he still had some good badminton left in him. I also felt that maybe, had he played some six to eight months more, he would surely have achieved a top two world rank. But now in hindsight I have no hesitation in saying that he made the correct decision. Our players are doing so well now and it is because he still is young enough to play with them everyday on the court. I think it was a wise decision. He knew precisely what he wanted.

Gopi had taken to coaching as early as 2003, almost on his return from the tour of Malaysia and Indonesia, where he had reached the quarter-final. I was the coach of the Indian team on that tour and could see Gopi struggling with his fitness. In the World Championships in May 2001 at Seville, Spain, Gopi lost in the quarters to China's Chen Hong. I (Sanjay Sharma) was a coach on that tour as well, and can vouch for the fact that the sole of Gopi's right foot was badly blistered and he was in pain right through. He played some other events domestically but did not play in any more Senior National Championships, except for one last appearance in mixed doubles with Manjusha in the 2003 Nationals. He was still feared on the international circuit, but old injuries came back to haunt him. He did not win any more titles and by the end of 2003, decided to retire from competitive badminton. The wear and tear had taken its toll, and the body was not responding as he wanted it to. Instinctively, Gopi realised that it was time to call it quits. But since he was still just about thirty years old, and was keen to continue being associated with the sport which had been his life for so long, Gopi felt that he still had lots to contribute to Indian badminton and would do so as a coach.

So, even though his playing career had almost ended, Gopi had some good

news on other fronts. In August 2001, the Ministry of Sports at the centre announced that he was to be honoured with India's highest honour in the field of sports. He was bestowed the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award by the president on 29 September 2001. Then, since he had promised his mother that he would get married soon, Gopi proposed to fellow state player, former Olympian and the then national singles and doubles champion PV Lakshmi, whom he had been courting for sometime. The dramatic moment came at the Syed Modi Memorial Championships in December 2000. Lakshmi happily accepted the proposal. Little did she know that Gopi would create history by winning the All England within a few months. The golden couple of Indian badminton got married in 2002. Gopi was also promoted as the youngest ever senior manager by a very grateful and happy IOC.

It was in the end of 2002 itself that he showed his inclination towards coaching and started off with a few kids at the LB Stadium where the Fateh Maidan Club was situated – his old practice haunt where he had learnt the rudiments of the game. He was then called to conduct special camps at a few clubs in Hyderabad, including the Jubilee Hills Club, and by 2004, when a substantial number of kids had joined him, he wanted them to practise at a place where they could get the same facilities and high standard of coaching as are available abroad. In the then CM Chandrababu Naidu and LV, Gopi found two individuals who understood his need to establish a world-class academy, and the land at Gachibowli was given to him before the area became so upscale, with IT industries sprouting all over. Despite the help given by the CM and LV, it was still a long haul for a very patient Gopi to see the file finally being signed. His numerous trips to various departments paid off by the end of 2003, when he was finally handed over the papers certifying that he now had possession of the land, under lease for a period of forty-five years.

With the possession papers of the land now in hand, the next obvious step was to find money to build the academy. But Gopi realised that building an entire academy would be no cakewalk. It would take a lot of finance and labour to give his students an all-in-one badminton centre. The only name that came to his mind for help was his distant cousin, the pharmaceutical king Nimmagada Prasad, more famous as Matrix Prasad. A relative and friend of Gopi's family for thirty years at that time, Matrix Prasad is well-known as probably the fastest wealth creator in the Indian pharmaceutical industry. A capitalist by profession and a socialist by practice, Nimmagada Prasad was

the latest billionaire from India at that time, after having successfully sold Matrix Labs for a whopping \$1 billion, (₹ 4,700 crore) to Mylan Labs of the US, the world's third largest pharmaceutical major. He had acquired Matrix for a mere \$1 million (₹ 4.7 crore) some six years before as a sick unit and turned it around in a most emphatic and brilliant manner.

Remembers Prasad:

I heard Gopi's name in the family during my college days, about his badminton, but never followed him. Later, when he won the All England, I heard more about him, but we never met as I used to stay in Delhi and we never had an interaction until the time I moved to Hyderabad. Then I did meet him a couple of times and he came across as a very humble and simple person. After that, I started gaining more knowledge on him. I learnt about his games, read up on his game, and the first impression I had of him after getting to know about him was that of a fighter. Apparently, he had had an injury and he really came out of it to win the All England. But when I would meet him, he would come across as humble and simple and quiet.

It was around that time that Gopi's close friend V Chamundeshwar Nath (aka Chamundi), the then Secretary of the Cricket Association of Hyderabad, told Prasad that Gopi was looking for some sponsors in order to build his academy. By then, Prasad was aware that the state government had actually given Gopi a piece of land in Gachibowli. Chamundeshwar set up a meeting and Gopi met Prasad over breakfast, where, after a couple of questions, he verbally committed to help Gopi out with his finances as Gopi was struggling to find sponsors.

Prasad says:

I told him 'I will give you two'. And I guess he misunderstood the numerics. Then I told him I'll give you two crores. Gopi was elated. I don't think he was expecting that. And I must also thank Chamundi for instilling my confidence in Gopi because I did not want to put in my money in something that would never come up. Apart from that, by the time I met him for academy purposes, my impression of Gopi was quite positive. So, it was basically a combination of my instincts about Gopi, his persona, a bit of introduction from Chamundi that made me invest in his academy. Anything less than this amount would have been of help, but it wouldn't really have lent the support that the academy deserved.



Despite offering such a huge amount, the far-sighted Prasad foresaw that Gopi would not be able to gather more money for building the entire academy. Although he had taken the names of a few other people who were willing to help him out, Prasad thought that he wouldn't be able to gather the finance required to build the mega-structure he had in mind. His trust began to distantly monitor the progress of the project, not only for themselves but also for Gopi's benefit, as he didn't want Gopi's name to be tarnished.

The flow of funds was restricted, and soon, Gopi realised that getting more money would be a monumental task. There was no model available for loans for sports academies and banks, therefore, were reluctant. Commercially, a centre for excellence was simply not viable. To top it all, Gopi would simply not allow liquor, gambling, bars or normal restaurants inside his academy. He did not want the centre to be mistaken for a club or a gymkhana. This had to be a place where only pure sporting activities took place. So there was difficulty in raising the rest of the amount needed. The money awarded to Gopi through tournaments had been put in fixed deposits by his father and on maturity, some fifty lakh rupees that he got from them also went into the construction. Gopi spoke to and requested many people to come forward and donate, but they only promised to look into it and then never got in touch with him.

Just as he was getting desperate, Mallikarjuna Reddy of Arch Pharmalabs Ltd, a big badminton fan and follower, whom Gopi had met during the Singapore Open, agreed to donate ₹ 50 lakh. Some good samaritans came up on their own and donated amounts from ₹ 1 to ₹ 10 lakh. Still, the accumulated amount was not enough, and the project was getting delayed. Gopi's brother Raja Shekhar then joined in to donate some more money and finally, with nothing else coming in and still short of three crores, the family took the ultimate step of mortgaging the house they had built on Jubilee Hills to finish this project.

On 1 January that year, Matrix Prasad met V Chamundeshwar Nath once again at a party and he wasn't surprised to hear that the academy was in need of funds once again. This time around, they were looking for a loan.

So I started giving out loans to them. Gopi came to me and showed me the architectural blueprint. He gave me his suggestions and I gave him mine and in this manner, I became involved in the process of the academy. And by involvement, I do not mean interference. After sometime, I realised that

Gopi would never be able to repay the amount to me. And one day I told him, 'Look, let me convert this whole thing into some sort of grant rather than a loan'. Gopi agreed and we converted the entire amount into a grant given by the Nimmagada Foundation.

Gopi and family were ecstatic, and with this seed money, the work started. Subhash and Subbaravamma worked endlessly to save money on contractors and in other areas. Sometimes Subhash worked up to twenty-four hours at a stretch, sleeping on site at nights. Matrix Prasad's mega grant translated into a proud building that stands on a hilltop, with eight wooden courts, a huge swimming pool, air-conditioned rooms, a running track around lush green lawns, dormitories for outstation players, a state-of-the-art gymnasium and health club, a cafeteria which provides the proper food for players, a table tennis hall, a sports shop, parking for at least a hundred cars, amongst many other things. As far as private academies are concerned, there is nothing like this in badminton anywhere in the world. The academy was ready, as far as badminton facilities were concerned, by June 2008. A player who came up from humble beginnings became the proud owner of something unique, exclusive, and in realty terms, costing more than eighty crore rupees in market value at last count. And he did it all by himself. His achievements, his personality, integrity, honesty, values of life, self-discipline and dedication, all combined to make his dream come true.

Recollects Prasad:

When I came to know that someone from my family was playing badminton at such a high level, I was happy. When I came to know of his All England winning campaign, I was happy that an Indian had won a title of huge prestige. But when I started interacting with Gopi, I was very happy to see somebody envision an academy like this and to give his knowledge back to the other players. This rarely happens here. And when I saw the entire academy after it was built, I, too, was elated. Being a lover of sports, I was thrilled to see how it was built and how well he is putting his time and energy into correctly training the players. I hear that he is dedicated to teaching since five o' clock in the morning and he stays there until eight in the night. I was very happy to see him win the Dronacharya Award because he truly deserves it. I also know how Gopi loves to do social work and how deeply he is involved in it. I am thrilled to see the happiness on his face and on people's faces when we attend social

functions. In all ways, my respect for him only keeps growing.

Even members of the trust do not see any reason for interfering in any aspect of the academy as Gopi's hard work, determination and the dedication of his family doesn't let them see any grey areas in its functioning. And Saina's brilliance and rise in her rankings to number two in the world is simply a testimony of Gopi's brilliance, intensity and passion when it comes to coaching.

Gopi feels that he made inroads in the profession because he was transparent and honest in whatever he said and felt.

I think your actions are what the kids judge you by. That is very important, along with the knowledge that you are able to communicate to them. The way of communication to the kids of all age groups is of great significance. So, although I might not talk too much, I feel that I articulate well enough for the kids and senior players to understand what I want them to know or follow. One has to go down to the level of the players, to their ages and make them understand, and that is the key to good coaching in my opinion. And I think that they understand that I really want them to improve and that I feel for them. This belief somehow translates into action. They understand that I want them to be a notch better than they were in the last session.

Gopi's innate honesty in all his dealings, his transparency in all that he does and his genuine belief that all players under him must be given the best possible education in all aspects of badminton, so that one day they eclipse whatever he had achieved as a player, is something that rubs off positively on all who come to learn from him. It is these qualities and the almost blind faith that his students have in him, a responsibility that he takes with utmost seriousness, that propelled Gopi to embark on a mission where he was going to do his very best to ensure that more and more world-class shuttlers emerge from India. And now, with the world's best badminton academy behind him, Gopi was set to lead India to the exclusive world of badminton superpowers. Coaching was going to be his new calling.

<sup>2</sup> 16 March 2001

<sup>3</sup> *The Times of India*, 16 March 2001

<sup>4</sup> *The Indian Express*, 22 March 2001

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## DRONACHARYA'S BRIGADE



It was the extreme summer heat of Delhi and from day one, Gopi had rashes and boils all over his body. The senior national squad was training in a national camp before going out on a tour. Normally, all players want to avoid playing with any discomfort or injuries, they try to skip sessions and take rest. But not Gopi. He is wired differently. For almost a week, he played without a shirt, with the salty sweat trickling down all the time, and that must have hurt him badly. He never slowed down and played three sessions everyday. No expression on his face. His sheer willpower was there for all to see. He did not skip even one session. Whenever he was on court, he played to win, and gave his hundred per cent all the time, even in that painful situation. To us, it seemed that somehow he is immune to pain. He wanted to play his best on that tour abroad and was not going to let anything in his way as far as training and practice were concerned.

Thus reminiscences Asawari Patwardhan, Gopi's peer in his playing days, highlighting that one quality that always stood out in Gopi – his dedication and belief in what he was doing. Once Gopi wants to do something, achieve something, he goes all out in his pursuit for it, come hell or high water. He makes sure he understands what is needed to achieve his goal and then goes on working towards it, in his own well-thought-out way. It illustrates the virtue that is the basic essence of the man, and has helped him emerge as an outstanding coach.

All the players who joined his academy have seen his work ethics firsthand. He is not an armchair coach who just gives instructions and then

expects the players to do all the hard work. He is present at the academy from 4.30 a.m. and helps train players till almost 6 p.m. He will not have the players, many of them young kids, do things he feels will not be beneficial for them. This aspect of his mental makeup and personality was brought out by that famous incident when he refused to endorse a famous cola; something people of this country still remember today. Gopi will never do unto others what he would not do unto himself.

Gopi used to go to his village for holidays sometimes with his parents, where there were juice stalls selling fruit juices, sugarcane juice and even *nimbu pani* (lemon juice) at the village square, where everyone would gather for the local *gupshup* (gossip) after a hard day's work in the fields. By the late 1990s, wherever he went, he could see soft drinks replacing these natural fruit juices. He found this surprising and also annoying. To illustrate this in another way Gopi explains:

It's like everyone wants to buy poodles, German Shepherds, beagles, and foreign dogs and it has become a fad of sorts. But nobody is interested in buying or keeping a dog of Indian origin as their pet. When I came back after the All England victory and made my own bungalow, I thought I could now realise my dream of keeping a pet dog. But whichever pet shop I went to, I couldn't find a Rampur hound or a Kanni or an Alangu [mastiff] breed. People don't realise how tortured a German Shepherd must feel in the Indian summers. It's a dog that hasn't been made for such weather, whereas our Indian dogs are very good at being able to combat our weather. In the last eight years that I have had this dog, I have never taken him to a vet except for the biannual vaccination. Once there was a cobra in the compound and this dog fought it, keeping the reptile at bay for almost half an hour. As a nation, why are we going away from using and adhering to our traditions? Why blindly follow what the MNCs are pouring into India to make money?

Similarly, there are many types of herbs and practices of Ayurveda and their significance is being lost. We as Indians should not forget our roots. It is less known to people, that even foreign cows like Jersey cows are actually crossbreeds and not producing milk or ghee that is actually pure in Indian terms. So the nutritive value that you could get from an Indian cow is half of what you could from the famous Jersey cows of Europe. Like everything, it is sad to see that animals of Indian origin have lost their

significance, thanks to the advertising and marketing tactics by Western companies, who have successfully captured the Indian market because they can pool off loads of money, and sell a cola product for ten and fifteen rupees, while on the other hand, a *nimbu paani* seller on the road, who sells a *nimbu paani* for maybe two or three rupees, doesn't have the capacity to spend money and tell his customers about the importance and nutrition he provides. Such things really can hamper our rural, and indeed, our national economy.

Even scientific research proves that *nimbu paani*, coconut water and vegetable juices are very good and nutritive for our body. Today, even celebrities endorse traditional food or the staple diet of a particular region should be consumed for better health. For example, sambhar, *rasam*, rice, curd and coconut are some of the things that are included in the diet of South Indians. But somewhere, due to the advent of colas, breads, foreign potato chips and ice creams, the significance of traditional food was being lost. Gopi, being a total *swadeshi* at heart, a boy who had been brought up on fresh homemade food, was appalled to see the changing conditions in his environment, to see the kind of money that was being spent by middle-class Indians on things that were harmful to their systems. In particular, there was one incident which influenced him enough to do something about what was happening, and explains his refusal to be associated with artificial drinks.

Remembers Gopi:

There used to be a maidservant working at our place and her husband was ill. She borrowed some money from my mother to buy medicines for her husband. After a few days, she still looked worried. I enquired about her husband and she told me he was better but still not fully fit. I asked her what medicine she gave him with the money she had borrowed from my mother. And she replied that he had been given a bottle of a local cola to drink. I was really upset and asked her why she bought a cola drink instead of medicine. And my illiterate maid replied that she thought her husband will become active like the star who comes in the ad and tells people to drink the cola.

Gopi was rather distressed at the deluge of advertisements in the media and the fact that it affected even these poor people. His maid had spent some ten rupees, almost one-third of her daily wages at that time, on a cola, thinking it

to be a health drink, which was indeed alarming for him. She obviously did not know how harmful soft drinks were as she was illiterate. At the grassroot level, such advertisements are blindly believed by poor people who cannot understand that companies and media are just glorifying what needs to be sold. What was more alarming was that even educated people felt (and still feel) that there was only some caffeine, sugar and water in these cold drinks, nothing else. It can refresh you for some time as the caffeine and sugar combination can give you a high.

But as Gopi puts it:

People do not know what are the ingredients in the so-called formula used in these colas. It's very harmful for the body. They see ten sportstars or ten filmstars drinking and enjoying life in these ads and they believe in them blindly. These ads have a major impact on the lives of these poor people. Imagine spending almost one-third of your daily wage on such drinks. So not endorsing the cola was a personal decision. I must say here that even my mother told me to do the ad, saying that we could donate the money to charity. But I was firm in this as at the end of the day, I did not want to be responsible for even one child drinking these soft drinks. I could not have taken the money and kept quiet about it.

In keeping with his style, it was a quiet refusal and there was no fuss about the matter. The matter would have remained under wraps forever and no one would have known about his kissing a lucrative contract goodbye but for Telugu filmstar Amala Akkineni. She went public with Gopi's 'principled stand' when he joined her in February 2002 to support the cause of animal support group Blue Cross. At that function, when asked why he said no to the cola, Gopi simply said that he never ever drinks fizzy drinks and does not want any child to drink them as they are unhealthy. He said that post All England, he had appointed a manager to look after his career and he had made it clear to this manager that he will not endorse anything he believes is unhealthy, including alcohol, cigarettes and aerated drinks. It does not matter if he loses money in the bargain. Even in his academy, the food served for the athletes who train there includes freshly-made healthy food like rice, chapattis, dal, milk, fruits and juices Gopi has even found a new formula and come up with his own recipe for healthy wheat and oatmeal bread. No packaged food or colas are served there.

It is qualities like these that make Gopi a hit with his students. He makes



them understand what is good for them, the value of hard work, and the advantages of leading a disciplined and focussed life. Since he has gone through the rigours of the sport himself, the students find it easy to believe in him and know he will not lead them astray. He makes them do the kind of training he had undergone, with the same tenacity and efficiency. And he is on court hour after hour, talking, explaining and leading by example.

From 2003 to 2005, two events greatly impacted his life. Gopi was already coaching at the Gachibowli Stadium with some forty kids, when a thirteen-year-old short, chubby girl called Saina Nehwal joined him. This girl turned out to be extremely hardworking, imbibed the same work ethics from Gopi, was determined and focussed, never liked to lose to anyone and had that fire in her belly to do whatever it takes to get better and better as a player. The Gopi-Saina combination was going to rock the world soon. Then on 26 January 2005, the Central Government announced that Gopi was to be awarded the Padma Shri, which was conferred on him on 29 March 2005 by the then President of India APJ Abdul Kalam.

Though Gopi slowly evolved his own style of coaching, there is no doubt that he learnt and absorbed a lot from the various coaches he had played under. And he happily gives them their due. Gopi has fond memories of his first coach, the late Hamid Hussein, whom he describes as really lion-hearted. Hamid may not have been much of a coach in the real sense, but he was the first person who instilled in Gopi a sense of discipline. And yes, the notion of the jump smash also came from Hamid, who had first seen this stroke being used during his trip to Iran. Gopi favoured the jump smash throughout his career and this was one major stroke in his arsenal. A big man with a big heart, he made Gopi's day when he treated him to an ice cream or a soup once Gopi hit the targets placed on court during those jump smash sessions. Gopi feels that his initial interest in badminton came from and was sustained due to his closeness to Hamid Hussein. He feels that he also learnt from Hamid that you have to be mentally and, if possible, emotionally close to the children who come to learn from you.

Introduction to formal training came when Mohammad Arif came on the scene as part of the SAI. The Deputy Director of SAI at that time was one RK Naidu, and though court practice and track training was at LB Stadium for weights, the group used to go to another place near Hussain Sagar Lake.

Under Arif, there were a good number of shuttles to practise with, something Gopi has also ensured in his academy. He realised as a child that

without a good quantity of shuttles at your disposal, it is not possible to become even a mediocre player. From Arif, who coached Gopi till almost 1996 before he moved out to Bangalore, Gopi also learnt that immense dedication and hard work were prerequisites to even think of reaching any heights in this sport. Arif was more of a fitness person who made Gopi undergo lots of drills and also ensured that his confidence levels were high. The short stint under Wong Xiao Ming, the Chinese coach Gopi trained under in 1991, also strengthened his belief that strength and fitness were the keys to being the national champion, which at that time was his sole goal. The two hundred push-ups, four-hundred-metre sprints with timings were things he had never heard of earlier and when Xiao Ming forced Gopi and others to undergo this brutal training, he realised, for the first time, what it takes to be a champion.

These are areas for which he has experts at his academy making sure that kids as young as six to seven years old start a strong regimen so that they grow up to be fit and strong shuttlers. From Xiao Ming and Arif, Gopi learnt real badminton-oriented training schedules, which stayed with him, improved versions of which are now used by him. Xiao Ming was a tough taskmaster but loved Gopi. Gopi feels that in his career, it was this unassuming Chinese coach who was in India only for about a year, who played the most important role and made Gopi dream big.

Next place in his life is held by the legendary Prakash Padukone, soft-spoken and a gentleman to the core, under whom he had a short two-week stint before the 1994 National Games, and later almost three years' training when he joined the Padukone Academy in Bangalore. Gopi says his respect for the man was immense and is thankful he was allowed to do physical training at the academy to his liking. Gopi, in that academy, did the individual programmes that he had started at the Langenfeld Club in Germany. Under Prakash, Gopi also started to learn a more comprehensive sort of badminton, better stroke control and that sharpness at the nets is extremely important. Prakash was renowned worldwide for his clever net play and Gopi used the same tactics in winning the All England in 2001. At Gachibowli, the one stroke that he wants all his students to master is the net dribble, which he feels is very important to get openings for the smashes.

But Prakash did not indulge in much frivolous talk, and Gopi himself being an introvert, there was not much personal interaction between the two. Prakash, still supremely fit in those days, played a lot of doubles, partnering

Gopi against Indian squad pairs, and this helped Gopi develop his all-round capability. The constant net drops and dribble drills sharpened his net game to a great extent. The other really important thing he learnt from the maestro was how to approach a match in terms of mental preparation. This again is something Gopi lays emphasis on when he talks to Saina Nehwal and other national players.

In his visits to Germany for the Bundesliga, Gopi did some heavy weight training under the Chinese coach at the club and realised that this was one area which he was lacking in. Gopi today feels that if you have to counter the best in the world, body strength plays as crucial a part as endurance and speed. This is also a mandatory part of the training schedule provided by his academy. Gopi cannot forget the love and affection he got from the Joppien family in Langenfeld, and tries to provide to his wards at the academy a sense of belonging like he was given in those lonely months in Germany.

His last coach was Ganguly Prasad at the SAI centre in Bangalore, who was more like a friend. The sole focus for Prasad at SAI was Gopi, and a deep personal rapport was built between the two. Gopi feels that like Prasad, a coach must develop a really close relationship with a player under him, knowing every need of the player in question. Though Prasad also laid down strong emphasis on training, his one specialisation and knowledge was in strength training, and the two ensured that by the time the 2001 All England came, Gopi was the strongest player around in terms of physical strength. Gopi was lifting weights at SAI that would put professional weightlifters to shame.

At SAI, everything was available, if not under one roof, then at least in one small area. Track, weight centre, practice courts, physiotherapists – every single facility required for a soon-to-be All England champion were there. Something that stayed at the back of his mind when he decided to start his own academy. Gopi also accepts that the first seed for this thought was sown at SAI.

So by the time he started his new career as a coach, Gopi had imbibed the knowledge and feel for coaching from many people. With his own experiences and his own way of looking at an aggressive style of playing, and strong emphasis on fitness and skill, Gopi soon revolutionised Indian badminton. In 2006, the BAI appointed him as the national coach for a four-year period, which was renewed to another term in 2010. The national squad came under him first at Gachibowli and then, from 2008 onwards, the entire

training moved to his academy once the badminton facilities were ready. The mandate given to him was simple – ‘We want medals at the Commonwealth Games (CWG) to be staged in Delhi in October 2010.’ Gopi was given enough freedom and went about training and coaching the junior and senior squads with the foresight and dedication he was famous for.

The results started flowing in. Indian badminton had never seen anything like it. Juniors went on a rampage and India had winners in the Asian Championships, something unheard of till then. Two eighteen-year-olds reached the semi-finals of the World Junior Championships in the men’s singles event in Mexico in 2009, again results that would have been relegated to the realm of dreams not so long back. Saina Nehwal won the World Junior singles crown in 2008 and HS Prannoy reached the finals of World Youth Olympics in 2010. Jwala Gutta and V Diju stunned badminton fans by winning the Super Series and other events in mixed doubles and cracking the top five in world rankings. 2010 also saw India reach the final rounds at the Thomas and the Uber Cups simultaneously for the first time, thanks to some amazing performances by our players under Gopi’s guidance.

It took just four years of Gopi being at the helm of affairs for Indian badminton to scale heights previously thought impossible. The icing on the cake has, of course, been Saina Nehwal, who joined Gopi as a precocious thirteen-year-old in 2003. By 2009, she had won the Indonesian Super Series title. Saina broke all the jinxes attached to Indian sportspersons when, in a blitzkrieg, she smashed her way to three back-to-back titles in 2010, including the Singapore Super Series, and also retained her Indonesian title.

Saina climbed to a high rank of World Number Two, a place no other Indian of either sex, in any racket sports, had ever got to before. She did one better when, in her last championships, she beat the best China could throw at her, and won the Hong Kong Super Series title. After each victory, Saina thanked Gopi profusely for guiding her to her destiny.

For Gopi, all these results were music to his ears. His hard and consistent work was paying rich dividends. But professionally, as far as the sport was concerned in India, his best moments came when in front of packed crowds day in and day out, our players performed superbly to ensure that India snatched a silver medal in the team event of the Commonwealth Games, defeating the very highly rated and dangerous English team, Saina won the expected individual gold in singles and more satisfyingly, Jwala Gutta and Ashwini Ponnappa combined to win the doubles gold medal. The ladies’

doubles gold was to be cherished, as no other Indian pair in history had ever won such a highly rated title in world badminton. Gopi's protégé Parupalli Kashyap also pitched in with a well-deserved bronze medal in men's singles, bringing the Indian tally to four medals.

Of course, much more has to be done, as Gopi himself acknowledges, before India can even dream of competing with China or Korea for world supremacy. We need more top-rated coaches, more training centres all over India, better domestic setup with more competition to even contemplate having the bench strengths that China, Korea, Indonesia, etc., enjoy. But as an individual trying to bring about a change with very limited resources, Gopi has enjoyed tremendous success.

So much so that the Indian government also acknowledged his contribution as national coach, and on Saina winning the Indonesian Super Series in 2009, a tournament considered at par with the All England by the BWF, honoured him with the Dronacharya Award when he was just thirty-six years old. Gopi thus became the most rewarded sportsman in Indian history, and the youngest Dronacharya awardee ever, an achievement that might not be eclipsed for generations to come.

Gopi has deep thoughts on his style of coaching and what we should be doing to take the country forward. He has maintained that each player must be treated in a different manner and that coaching schedules should be tailor-made as per the weaknesses and strengths of any individual. It is better to let Gopi articulate in his own words his take on coaching:

Coaching for me is anticipating the needs of the player in the future, and preparing them accordingly. I will give a couple of examples. For Saina, strokes were an issue so I worked hard on the strokes control continuously for four-five years before we started getting results. Today, she is able to play the backhand drops, the flick shots, the crosses on the net – almost all the big strokes easily, on the big points in big matches. She was always fit and getting stronger physically, depending too much on her speed and mobility, but in my opinion, she needed backup at the higher level of play to get out of trouble when forced into corners.

If you take the fifteen-year-old [PV] Sindhu, who at a five-feet-ten-inch height can tower over opponents and has already won the Sub-junior and Junior singles titles in the country this year [2010], the needs are vastly different. She has to make her net play strong and work on her parallel

game and her defensive game as she will be vulnerable in these areas. She hits hard and fast and has natural ability to use her height to great advantage. So I have to cut out the apparent weaknesses in her game and still ensure that the aggressive game she has is updated all the time. Both Saina and Sindhu had different needs and I understood these, and together with the players in question, we worked out in the correct manner. Saina has already arrived, while Sindhu is the great prospect of the future. From the beginning, I allowed them to get better on their stronger points so that they are able to win matches, as winning gives you confidence. So a good coach will address issues psychologically also.

And then, I also have to see overall development. On fast court with a fast shuttle, an aggressive Sindhu will walk through the opposition. On a slow court with slower shuttle, Saina will make mincemeat of all since she is physically very fit. But what happens if Sindhu plays on a slower court with slow shuttle, and Saina on a faster court with fast shuttle? These things are not in our control. Sindhu should still be able to win without smashing much and Saina must know what it takes to attack all the time, without allowing the shuttle to be lifted to the other girl as much as possible. So my duty as a coach is to teach them to cope with all sorts of circumstances and situations. I must also ensure that their weak points are not weak enough to lose a match, yet strong points are strong enough to win the match.

These are simple formulas that Gopi follows with each and every player who comes to him. He has brought excellence in terms of coaching in Indian badminton, and this single-minded pursuit of excellence has reaped rich dividends. Gopi tries to bring in an element of discipline all around him. He feels that badminton is probably the most physically torturous game and therefore, the fitness regimen has to be addressed with seriousness. Strength is another issue that is important for Indian players, and this is one area he personally keeps harping on. Gopi is also able to work on another area which was neglected all the time. He makes sure that players understand the meaning of self-belief and what it will take for them to do well in international badminton. 'The right approach to winning matches is important because once they know how to win and understand what is required to win, then we have beaten the challenge. So the player must know how to prepare, and once you know you have done the preparation, then you must also know

how to implement that on the court.’ This has been Gopi’s focus all the while he has been in charge of the Indian squad, apart from ensuring that his players are not far behind the opposition in terms of fitness.

He is proud not only of Saina, who is probably one of the fittest players in her event in the world, but of players like Parupalli Kashyap, D Guruprasad, Jwala Gutta, Ashwini Ponnappa and juniors Sindhu and HS Prannoy who are all able to match foreign opponents as far as physical fitness is concerned. Gopi’s strength as coach also lies in the fact that today, Indian players can go out and play with confidence, simply because they are hitting as hard and moving as fast as the opponents. This was not the case earlier.

He is well aware that India cannot be termed a badminton superpower unless we win team events like the Thomas and Uber Cups, the Sudirman Cup or the CWG and Asian Games team titles. Today, our bench strength is simply not good enough. We may produce one Padukone, one Gopi or one Saina every ten to fifteen years, players who dazzle with individual brilliance and stun the world now and then. But that equation has to change and Gopi acknowledges this. He feels more players are needed and that for getting more players, bigger grassroot programmes are required where coaches with international vision will be needed to monitor all aspects of coaching. Gopi feels that Indian badminton has to rise to the challenge of producing a number of quality coaches who have the confidence to train players or even tell players exactly what is that they are lacking in terms of what is required to do well in international badminton. And this is essential at every age group, where the kids are taught speed, the importance of power, body-balancing exercises, and they are taught the game required at international levels in their age groups. It is essential that the Indian kid is as good, if not better, in comparison to, say, a Chinese or an Indonesian kid of the same age.

But if we look at China as a model and try to emulate her successes in world badminton, then two aspects of coaching need to be seriously considered. One is how we manage our top players. Gopi says that at the moment, there is too much flexibility, lots of freedom and too much democracy for players in our system. Everyone’s views are taken into consideration before decisions are made, and there are not many people with the conviction and confidence to take part in decision-making. We have produced really good players but not top-level players. That, according to Gopi, needs to be addressed. In his generation alone, he names players like Manoj Kumar, Pravin Kumar, Vinod Kumar, Rajeev Bagga, Madhurjya

Barua, Dipankar Bhattacharya, Manjusha Kumar, Aparna Popat, Abhinav Shyam Gupta, Siddharth Jain, Nikhil Kanetkar and Sachin Ratti – all were absolutely top level players but were not handled properly. They all could have been in the top fifteen to twenty of world rankings, according to Gopi. Our system was not able to manage any of these players to any degree. We had players rising to a decent level, but they all got lost. We did not know how to convert them to a higher mode. And that is the biggest failure of our system, feels Gopi.

We need to be forceful in what we want. Our system is just not strict enough and this is where China scores against all the other countries. To some extent, Korea and Denmark also adapted this strict system and achieved mediocre success for a long time. Gopi wants that once the BAI appoints a chief national coach, all national squad players must come under the coach compulsorily so that a track of their fitness, rest periods, psychological behaviour and problems can be kept and addressed. In India, this has not been happening and therefore, as national coach, many a time Gopi himself is not aware of the fitness levels of players.

Players like Chetan Anand and Anup Sridhar went adrift after some great performances. Sridhar, in fact, defeated the likes of Taufik Hidayat, and Chetan entered the top fifteen rank. Arvind Bhat has played at the same level for years when he could have gone much higher. There are many other players who have been given exposure for years but have not been able to improve their standards. They are just hanging there and our system has not been able to either handle them or to take a call to drop these players.

Interestingly, Gopi says,

The players have to be managed not only in the five to six hours they spend training, but also what they do in their rest period. And if he or she is playing forty weeks of the year, what they do in the rest of the twelve weeks is also important. Everything makes a player. What has been happening is that players put in a lot of hard work and in the present system that we adapt, the players tend to become bigger than the coaches. Here, you run the risk of the coach not telling the player what is good for him, but telling the player what he likes to hear. So after a loss, the coach is not telling the player that he was bad and he needs to train harder and in a more focussed way. Since the coach is almost dependent on the player, he is just glossing over the loss by saying we will surely do better next time,



etc., etc. The system must give the final authority to the coach on all aspects of the player. I don't know if we will ever be able to change our system because here that sort of authority is not given to anyone, we just do not put our trust in any coach or anyone in authority to take decisive decisions.

In his academy, where most of the national players are emerging from, Gopi has the last say in everything. The results are there for all to see. Not only at the national level, where players from his academy are winning almost everything at stake, but in international events too, they have become a force to reckon with. His dream of India facing off China as a world badminton superpower one day may take some time but will be a reality, and of this, there is no doubt. Seeing his zeal and his sincerity, the system is bound to change. There are many Sainas in the making here, all thanks to a totally focussed mission he is undertaking. The students swear by him.

I started playing under Gopi sir simply because I found his thoughts very clear. I believed him when he said he wanted the best for me. He is very smart in thinking, knows my weaknesses and my strengths and is always willing to work hard. He is there on the court with me for hours. He is always trying to improve my game. I hardly had any strokes when I joined him, except for the basics, but he has moulded me into an all-round player. After every match, he will tell me where I went wrong, what more needs to be done with my game, etc., etc. He focuses on me whenever I am there with him. He is always studying what is happening in the world and is always open to suggestions. He is a total coach in the sense that he also taught me how to handle pressure, how to use meditation to calm my nervousness and how to treat injuries. He has gone through all these things in his career and, therefore, knows clearly what it takes to reach the top level of the game,

– Saina Nehwal, the one player who has really benefited  
by playing under Gopi, to my co-author Shachi Sharma in  
October 2010

However, Gopi does not force yoga on others. He himself reaped huge benefits due to yoga and the meditational techniques that he adopted. But he feels that these national players will one day learn all this on their own. Gopi, as a coach, according to former national champion Anup Sridhar, is also a

very intelligent reader of the opponent's game style and tactics.

I have known Gopi since he was appointed as national coach in 2006, as we had to train under him for a good part of the year. Two of my best results, the semi-finals at the Asian Championships and the quarter-finals at the World Championships, came when he was present. The best thing about him is the confidence he gives you. He wants you to win, does not matter how strong a player you are up against. The other thing is the on-court coaching he gives us players during matches. I find him extremely intelligent and spot-on with his observations. He can read my opponents like no one else, and is able to condense all his thoughts in just two or three points so as not to confuse me. I am fairly certain that I was able to defeat Taufik Hidayat only because of Gopi's inputs during the intervals.'

The two junior players making waves in men's singles, Parupalli Kashyap and Sai Guru Dutt, have trained under Gopi from day one. Both these boys and the junior girl, PV Sindhu, who reached the semi-finals of the India Open Grand Prix 2010 in Hyderabad at the age of fifteen, feel that Gopi gives them whatever time they need. 'He is a hands-on coach, always available to advise and guide us. I can call him at midnight and he will answer my questions. I trust him completely. It is amazing that in the sixteen hours or so he spends at the academy, he is able to not only listen to every one of us, but is able to work out on court with every one, even the junior-most six-year-old who craves his attention,' says Kashyap.

With all the travelling and constant pressure of work at the academy, it is not surprising that Gopi cannot give enough time to his family. Wife Lakshmi, a former top-notch player herself, is understanding, yet feels he should give more time to their two kids. She has known him from 1987 and throws light on their relationship.

Gopi used to be a very shy person. I think I spoke to him first and we were good friends. I won the Senior Nationals before him in 1994 and 1995. He always worked the hardest in the camps and this is what he always tells his students. To win you have to be fitter than your opponent, is the one thing he is always telling them. He was always very disciplined, with very correct eating habits. He hardly ever sees movies or goes out. When he proposed to me in 2000 in Lucknow, it was without ever taking me out. That is just the way he is. Sometimes I think he is wedded more to

badminton than me. I admired his game a lot, and that is what made me accept him. I missed the two All Englands where he did really well. 1995, when he defeated Budikusuma, I could not go and in 2001, when he won, I could not go either, as my father was in hospital. As far as his coaching is concerned, I do not give any advice, but yes, sometimes I point out what I feel about junior players and he listens attentively and tries to incorporate my views in his training. But basically, he is one person who goes by his own thought-processes.

Lakshmi is all praise for Gopi as a coach:

Very simple, if you ask me. He hardly spends any time with the family. He leaves home at about 4.30 a.m. and comes back exhausted, at about 8.30 to 9.00 p.m. He personally attends to academy students who range from six years to fifteen years, then he has junior national players and finally the senior campers. He is successful because of his dedication and his focus. He loves this job and wants all his students to be better than what he was as a player. I think that is his strength as a coach.

And how does Lakshmi rate him as a father, son and a family man?

Gopi's main aim in life is to see Indian badminton on top of the world. In case I complain about the lack of time given to us, he says, 'You are there to take care of the kids'. He will then praise me sky-high, knowing fully well that for a month I will not complain again. So this goes on, and sometimes I feel sorry at seeing him work so hard. We see him only for an hour or so at night, and that also not daily. To meet him, we have to go to the academy. The only concession he gives nowadays is that at least once every two months, he takes me out for a movie, which also I must first see the reviews and ensure it is a good one and also buy the tickets in advance. For five years after our marriage, we did not see any movies. This has started only lately. Mind you, we always rush to the theatre and miss some ten minutes of the movie as he is late picking me up from the academy. The kids love him and once he is at home, his whole focus is on the kids. He is a very good father and I have never seen him scolding them. His parents also meet him more at the academy than at home. But I think we all realise that his time is not his and we have to give him that freedom. So it is quality time that he spends with us, whenever he can and we are happy to support him in what he is trying to achieve.

Gopi's expertise in mediation and yoga, his sheer personality and serene nature, and the way he looks at life also allow him to overcome problems that may overwhelm others.

For example, on 9 May 2011, a surprising report emanated from Hyderabad, which stunned the country. An alarmed nation came to know through the national media that Saina Nehwal had chosen to play with coach Bhaskar Babu and not with Gopi, who, according to her, did not have enough time to concentrate on her career. However, it was neither a reflection on Gopi's handling of his star pupil, nor on his method or depth of coaching. 'I have decided to train with Bhaskar sir, as Gopi sir has to concentrate on so many other players, and as chief national coach, he cannot play just with me. I am sure that he will always be around to help me whenever I want him to. We have not parted ways, I still play in his academy, and he is still providing me with sparring partners whenever required,' she said, in a statement to *Mumbai Mirror* on 12 May 2011.

The story was actually broken by Abhijeet Kulkarni in the *Hindustan Times*<sup>1</sup>, and in a way, showed how ineffective the BAI had been in the entire episode. When contacted, Gopi told me:

It is true that for the last two months Saina has not been training with me at all. The training programme has also been drawn by [coach Babu] Bhaskar. Parupalli Kashyap (the men's singles bronze medallist at the Delhi Commonwealth Games) is also playing with him. The arrangement, I am told, will last till the 2012 Olympics. I was able to devote enough time to Saina till the Commonwealth Games which finished in October 2010 as my contract with BAI for two years before the games was basically to train the senior team members. But with the Games now over, I have to concentrate on so many other areas. Saina needs total concentration of at least up to six hours every day, and I am not able to devote so much time. She requested that Bhaskar play with her as he has been training her and travelling with her for past couple of years, whenever I was not around. The Sports Authority of India, with whom Bhaskar is employed, agreed to release him for this effort. So everyone is happy with this arrangement and I wish her luck.

But what was bewildering was the BAI's total lack of understanding of the situation. Gopi had brought Saina up to World Number Two spot with dedication and hard work. She had already proved to be the best badminton

player produced by the country, having won four Super Series titles and a host of other major events such as the Commonwealth Games gold for singles. The BAI should have interfered and allowed Gopi to concentrate on and train Saina alone, at least till the 2012 Olympics, simply because as a combination, the two had proved to be devastatingly successful. No Indian player was a patch on her when it came to world rankings or global standards. Unfortunately, by staying silent and not even trying to understand the situation, the BAI frittered away a chance to seek a reconciliation between the two. This was something that should have been a priority with the BAI, but no one took a step in the right direction. Perhaps it was because the BAI was itself embroiled in a feud internally, and there was bitter infighting between a couple of factions that the officials did not find time to clear this situation.

The question, as far as Indian badminton and Gopi are concerned, is whether Gopi has taken this as a setback and will he, for the good of the game in India, be able to overcome this hurdle and move ahead in his career as a top-notch coach.

Subbaravamma says:

Gopi is very strong mentally. He does not talk much but inside, he has lots of depth. Saina will always remain close to him, no matter what. She will remain his student and the world knows it. Gopi is far too focussed and is very dedicated in what he is doing. If there is any problem he will overcome it and will give his very best for the game which he loves. I am sure they will be together again soon.

Luckily for Indian badminton, Subbaravamma's prophecy came true. Within a fortnight of this news, to the delight of the badminton fraternity, the *Indian Express* of 3 June 2011, carried the news that both these stalwarts had reconciled. According to this report, Gopi said that Saina made the first move and he was very happy to be coaching her once again.

Gopi has already achieved great glory as a player. He has stamped his class and authority as the chief national coach, taking Indian badminton to heights hitherto thought impossible. He has received every single honour and award a grateful country could bestow upon him. But Gopi's quest for success is still unabated. Serious injuries did not allow him to reach the heights he wanted as a player. He now feels that as a coach, he can make Indian players reach world-class levels to compete against the very best in the world. That will be

as much as his success as theirs. He lives this dream night and day. Every single moment he is awake, Indian badminton is in his thoughts. He has always been a simple person, happy with what he has achieved and with what he possesses.

As he himself says,

We are all a working-class family. My grandfather and my parents still work. I am happy with what I have gained in life. I have very little need of anything. I am not brand conscious and can survive with little. A small old car will do for me. Simple food and a hard floor to sleep on is what I need. Nothing ostentatious. I have seen the best in life, have met and still meet the best of people from all walks of life. My money requirements are also little. Money cannot buy me happiness and it cannot make me compromise on principles that are dear to me. I like to be left alone doing what I like to and want to do to the best of my ability. First it was as a player and now as coach of my academy and my country's team. My motto in life always has been simple. Work hard, do not cut corners, do not be afraid, have belief in yourself, be dedicated, disciplined and focussed on what has to be done, and give a hundred per cent effort for the task on hand.

For a man who refused the cola endorsement rumoured to be around ₹15 lakh, who gave away his National singles prizes of ₹40,000 at Jaipur and Pune to victims of the Gujarat and Latur earthquakes, who gave away another ₹50,000 won at a Guwahati event to Kargil War Widows' Fund, money hardly carries any value or greed. The only person whom he took in confidence while giving away to charity was his mother. Subbaravamma would perhaps have refused had Gopi wanted to splurge even a small amount of ₹400 or ₹500 on luxury. But even though the amount of money stated above had huge meaning for the family, the mother and father did not wait even for a second to concur with Gopi. If he wanted to give it to charity, so be it. That was the way he was brought up. To think of others before you think of yourself. He feels that to be able to play sport is a dream, the best thing possible, and should be compulsory for all kids, rich or poor, and he would love for his two kids to take after him in badminton.

From a very humble background, Gopi is today surrounded by riches, for which he has no time. There was a stage when his family had to make several sacrifices to save money for his badminton-related expenses, the shuttles he

so desperately needed. There was a time when family jewellery was mortgaged so that he could live his dream of playing for India, donning the national colours. The family ensured that his playing kit was always intact while other family members did not buy new clothes or go socialising for months, since there was no money left after his badminton-related expenses. He cannot forget the times when, even as a national champion making waves abroad, he still collected old shuttles to bring them back to India, so that valuable family income could be saved and utilised for buying some schoolbooks for his sister Hima Bindu. How can he forget that the family did not have the money to pay for his knee operation and that his good doctor waived the fees, wanting the All England trophy for India in return? And that while he struggled from pillar to post to raise money for his academy, his family friend Matrix Prasad came as an angel in disguise to hand over more than ₹ 5 crore to ensure that the Pullela Gopi Chand Academy did not just remain a dream.

His has been a story of struggle against odds, which he overcame with brevity and fortitude. Through sheer will power, he triumphed over a serious and traumatic career-threatening injury and three operations on his left knee. He faced the gruelling, competitive world of international badminton and came out a winner on his own terms. His story is an inspiration for people from every walk of life, who are fighting odds everyday just to survive. His story tells us how we can write our own destiny through our own convictions, belief and focussed hard work. And his greatness also lies in the fact that in spite of reaching an iconic stature in Indian sports, the doors of his academy and his heart are open to all who want to reach him. His legacy will continue for a long time to come, with talented students like Saina Nehwal taking his brand of badminton forward.

This is Gopi's story.

# **ACHIEVEMENTS OF PLAYERS COACHED BY GOPI CHAND AS NATIONAL COACH**



Tournament				
Name	2007	2008	2009	2010
Ajay Jayram		Waikato International 2008 – Winner, Men's Singles		Smiling Fish International Series 2010
				Yonex-Sunrise Malaysia Open Ground Prix Gold 2010–Semis
				Yonex Czech International 2010
				Yonex Dutch GP 2010 – Runner Up
Akshay Dewalkar		Bahrain International Challenge 2008 – Winner, Men's Doubles		
		Nepal International Series 2008 – Winner, Men's Doubles		
Aparna Balan		Bahrain International Challenge 2008 – Winner, Mixed Doubles	Jaypee Cup Syed Modi Memorial India Grand Prix 2009 – Winner, Mixed Doubles	

Name		Tournament			
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
				Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event	
Arun Vishnu		Bahrain International Challenge 2008 – Winner, Mixed Doubles	Jaypee Cup Syed Modi Memorial India Grand Prix 2009 – Winner, Mixed Doubles		
Arvind Bhatt	Yonex Czech International 2007 – Winner, Men's Singles				
	Syria International Series 2007 – Winner, Men's Singles				
	Jordan Satellite Badminton Championships 2007 – Winner, Men's Singles				
	Noumea International 2007 – Winner, Men's Singles				

Tournament				
Name	2007	2008	2009	2010
Ashwini Ponnappa				Commonwealth Games 2010 – Gold Medal
				World Championships – Bronze Medal, Women's Doubles
Bibin Basumatary				Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event
		Nepal International Series 2008 – Winner, Women's Singles		
Chetan Anand	Cyprus Badminton International 2007 – Winner, Men's Singles and Mixed Doubles	Bitburger Open Grand Prix 2008 – Winner, Men's Singles	Jaypee Cup Syed Modi Memorial India Grand Prix 2009 – Winner, Men's Singles	Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event
	Kenya International 2007 – Winner, Men's Singles	XXI Spanish International 2008 – Winner, Men's Singles	Yonex Dutch Open 2009 – Winner, Men's Singles	SCG Thomas & Uber Cup 2010 Preliminary Asia Zone
		Yonex Czech International 2008 – Winner, Men's Singles		India Grand Prix Gold 2010 – Series

Name		Tournament			
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
		Nepal International Series 2008 – Winner, Men's Singles			
		Kenya International 2008 – Winner, Men's Singles			
Jishnu Sanyal		Bahrain International Challenge 2008 – Winner, Men's Doubles			
Jwala Gutta	Cyprus Badminton International 2007 – Winner, Women's and Mixed Doubles	Bitburger Open Grand Prix 2008 – Winner, Mixed Doubles	Chinese Taipei Grand Prix 2009 – Winner, Mixed Doubles	Commonwealth Games 2010 – Gold Medal	World Championships – Bronze Medal, Women's Doubles
		KLRC Bulgaria Open Grand Prix 2008 – Winner, Women's Doubles and Mixed Doubles		Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event	
		Nepal International Series 2008 – Winner, Women's Doubles and Mixed Doubles			

Name	Tournament			
	2007	2008	2009	2010
P Kashyap				Li-Ning Singapore Open Super Series 2010 – Semis
				India Grand Prix Gold 2010 – Semis
				Commonwealth Games 2010 – Bronze Medal
				Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event
				SCG Thomas & Uber Cup 2010 Preliminary Asia Zone
PV Sindhu				Iran Fajr International Challenge 2010 – Runner Up
				Asian Youth (Under-19) Badminton Championships – Semis
Pranav Chopra				India Grand Prix 2010 – Semis
				Kharkov International 2010 – Semis

Name	Tournament			
	2007	2008	2009	2010
R.M.V Gurusaidutt		Bahrain International Challenge 2008 – Winner, Men's Singles		India Grand Prix Gold 2010 – Runner Up
Rupesh Kumar		Croatian International 2008 – Winner, Men's Doubles	Bitburger Open 2009 – Winner, Men's Doubles	India Grand Prix Gold 2010- Runner Up
			New Zealand Open Grand Prix 2009 – Winner, Men's Doubles	Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event
Saina Nehwal		BWF World Junior Championship, 2008 – Gold Medal	Djarum Indonesia Open Super Series 2009 – Winner, Women's Singles	SCG Thomas&Uber Cup 2010 Preliminary Asia Zone
		Chinese Taipei Grand Prix Gold 2008	Jaypee Cup Syed Modi Memorial India Grand Prix 2009 – Winner, Women's Singles	All England Super Series 2010 – Semis
		Commonwealth Games 2008 (Junior) – Gold Medal		Yonex-Sunrise Badminton Asia Championships 2010 – Semis
				Indonesia Open Super Series Premier – Runner Up
				Swiss Open Grand Prix Gold
				Malaysian Open Grand Prix Gold – Runner Up



Name	Tournament				
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
				India Grand Prix Gold 2010	
				Djarum Indonesia Open Super Series 2010	
				Li-Ning Singapore Open Super Series 2010	
				Yonex-Sunrise Hong Kong Open Super Series 2010	
				Commonwealth Games 2010 – Gold medal	
				Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event	
Sameer Verma					Asian Youth (Under-19) Badminton Championships – Runner Up

Tournament				
Name	2007	2008	2009	2010
Sanave Thomas		Croatian International 2008 – Winner, Men's Doubles	Bitburger Open 2009 – Doubles Winner	India Grand Prix Gold 2010 – Runner Up
			New Zealand Open Grand Prix 2009 – Doubles Winner	Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event
Sayali Ghokale		Syria International Series 2008 – Winner, Women's Singles	Spanish Open 2009 – Winner	Proton Malaysia International Challenge 2010 (Sabah)
Shruti Kurain		Cyprus Badminton International 2008 – Winner, Women's Doubles		Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event
		KLRC Bulgaria Open Grand Prix 2008 – Winner, Women's Doubles		
		Nepal International Series 2008 – Winner, Women's Doubles		



Tournament				
Name	2007	2008	2009	2010
Trupti Murgande		Bahrain International Challenge 2008 – Winner, Women's Singles	Yonex Czech International 2009 – Winner	Maldives International Badminton Challenge 2010
V Diju		Bitburger Open Grand Prix 2008 – Winner, Mixed Doubles	Chinese Taipei Grand Prix 2009 – Winner, Mixed Doubles	Commonwealth Games 2010 – Silver Medal, Team Event
		KLRC Bulgaria Open Grand Prix 2008 – Winner, Mixed Doubles		
		Nepal International Series 2008 – Winner, Men's Doubles		
		Nepal International Series 2008 – Winner, Mixed Doubles		

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**Sanjay Sharma** is a former national badminton champion and captain of the Indian National Badminton Team. He was also the coach of the Indian National Badminton team, as well as a well-known broadcaster and freelance badminton journalist. This is his first book.

**Shachi Sharma** is a media student and a published writer with a Mumbai and Delhi-based newspaper.



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**AYAZ MEMON:**

In spite of having won the coveted All England title, Pullela Gopi Chand remains a relatively unsung hero in Indian sport. That's partly because of badminton (sadly) not being a particularly high-profile sport, and largely because Gopi himself prefers the backseat to the grandstand, as brought out with great insight in this book. Apart from winning the biggest title there is in the sport, Gopi has dedicated himself completely to raising the stature of Indian badminton.

A must read, and not just for sports buffs. Gopi Chand is not merely a champion, but one of a kind.

**DHANRAJ PILLAY:**

This is a remarkable story, nicely told by another badminton great, Sanjay Sharma. The book by Sanjay and Shachi brings out Gopi's humble beginnings and all the various problems and obstacles he had to overcome to make his dream a reality.

I have known Gopi on a personal basis, and he is highly disciplined and a great human being whose humility has touched the hearts of all Indians. A must read for all those who follow Indian sport.

**AMISH, AUTHOR OF *THE IMMORTALS OF MELUHA*:**

Like all Indians, I admired Gopi Chand from a distance. He has all the traits of a hero: fierce pride combined with awesome humility; spirited nationalism, a never-say-die spirit and deep discipline. After reading his story, insightfully brought out by Sanjay and Shachi Sharma, I feel I know the man behind this giant image. A great read!

