

SPORTSTAR Weekly!

VOL.32 :: NO.26 :: Jun. 27, 2009

'Sport unites the nation'

Viren Rasquinha is aware of the challenges at the Olympic Gold Quest Foundation. The former captain of the Indian hockey team says he is excited by OGQ's vision and objective. "I truly believe that I can make a difference to Indian Sport," says the foundation's Chief Operating Officer in a chat with Nandakumar Marar.

P.V. SIVAKUMAR



In India, not many Olympians retire from sport at the age of 28; quit a secure, high-profile job he earned thanks to his abilities on the hockey turf and turn to academics. Viren Rasquinha came out of his comfort zone in 2008 — he stood down as the captain of Indian Oil Corporation men's team in domestic hockey and gave up playing in the high-profile foreign leagues like the German Bundesliga to join the Indian School of Business (Hyderabad) for a full-time residential post-graduate programme in management.

Armed with a degree in management and majoring in Marketing & Strategy, the former India captain sprang another surprise by steering clear of corporate opportunities to accept a sporting assignment with the Olympic Gold Quest (OGQ) Foundation, which trains and supports select athletes in order to make them Olympic champions.

Far away from hockey action, Rasquinha will be involved in brand-building and fund-raising so that some of India's brightest talents get timely support. Designated as the Chief Operations Officer of OGO, the former India midfielder was picked by sporting icons, Prakash Padukone, Geet Sethi and table tennis ace Neeraj Bajaj — all founders of OGO — for a project that draws support from the followers of Indian sport worldwide.

The experience of having played in 180 international matches with the Indian team has taught Rasquinha some stark truths. He is of the view that hockey needs stars to connect with the masses.

Excerpts from an interview:

Question: The authorities are still groping in the dark, trying to market hockey. Did you find any answers during your stint with the Indian team or with Maratha Warriors during the Premier Hockey League or while playing for Stuttgart Kickers in the Bundesliga?

Answer: Right now every parent wants his child to be a Sachin Tendulkar, a Rahul Dravid or a M. S. Dhoni. No parent wants his son to be a hockey player because barring Dhanraj Pillay, the common man does not know the name of any Indian hockey player. Creating stars, role models and household names is important in marketing a sport. Secondly, there should be a hub-and-spoke system all over the country wherein the national federation creates a marketing plan and a hockey programme for all state federations. All local units should report to the state units, who in turn should report to the national federation. There must be proper monitoring and accountability at every level. Five-a-side hockey should be played all over the country, India's international matches and great hockey moments need to be shown on television. PHL must be popularised and domestic hockey should get priority in coverage in newspapers and on TV channels. These are just a few things we need to do for hockey.

How can hockey produce stars or famous faces when the National team is not doing well internationally?

Every sport and player goes through ups and downs. That does not mean looking down on a world-class achiever. We have to make the most of the opportunities when Indian teams or performers are doing well. After all, whether it's the Olympic gold from shooting or the cricket team's victory in a major tournament, India celebrates. Sport unites the nation.

Did sport teach you anything beyond dealing with success and failure? Is an experienced sportsman better equipped to handle decision-making in a boardroom or to be a corporate team leader?

Sport teaches you so much in life. It teaches you to work hard, it teaches you discipline, communication skills and how to respect your opponents and never underestimate them. It definitely builds your personality and makes you a stronger person. I can't generalise if a sportsman is better equipped to be a corporate team leader but being a sportsman would have given him the experience of planning well for a battle, making quick decisions and taking calculated risks which is so important in business as well.

An Indian Olympian attending a business school (Indian School of Business) is not a frequent happening. What made you break away from sport and take up management studies?



Viren Rasquinha with the OGQ founders Geet Sethi (extreme left)Prakash Padukone (second from left) and Niraj Bajaj.

I always wanted to pursue my management studies after my hockey career. Once I got the opportunity to go to ISB, I felt it was the right time for me to retire from the game when I was still playing reasonably well as I feel it is very important to retire on your own terms and in a dignified manner.

Joining the Olympic Gold Quest, instead of trying to find an entry point in the corporate world, is an unusual step. Were you tempted by the scope and reach of the 'business of sport'?

I have never based any of my decisions on whether others thought it was an 'unusual step.' The reason why I joined OGQ is that the vision and the objective excited me; the team on board OGQ is a brilliant mix of some of the best sporting and business brains in the country. I truly believe that I can make a difference to Indian Sport and last but not the least, this way I get to work with something that is my true passion.

Geet Sethi, Prakash Padukone and Niraj Bajaj have their own vision for OGQ. After appointing you as the COO, what do they want you to do?

My job is to come up with fund-raising, marketing and branding strategies for OGQ to create awareness and make it a mass movement, identify the elite athletes who we want to support, set performance parameters for them and constantly monitor them and support them in every possible way in order to make them Olympic champions. I will really be responsible for the execution of all the strategies.

Having joined the OGQ, how far ahead are you looking to make India's dream a reality?

I have always been a guy who takes things one step at a time. Right now, we really are in the initial phase of our plans. The good thing is that there is very little bureaucracy in OGQ and things are moving very fast. Efficient administration and fund raising are essential to give the best possible training to our athletes in OGQ. I have very high hopes for all eight sportspersons (see box) we currently have on Board and we are looking to sign up some more athletes as well. Gagan Narang is the current world record holder in his event in shooting. He is our brightest hope for a medal in the 2012 London Olympics.

Raising money to fund training and coaching of OGQ-supported sportspersons is tough work. Apart from NRI donors, how does the foundation organise resources?

We raise funds from corporates and individuals who believe in the cause. We call them supporters of OGQ and these people realise that Olympic medals don't grow on trees. We have to invest heavily in proper planning and training of the athletes over a long term before we can expect results. We need the financial help and support of many more corporates and individuals and we aim to give them the best possible mileage of being associated with the cause. For that to happen, the launch of our brand awareness campaign will play a major role.

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RASQUINHA'S ROLL OF HONOUR

2004 Olympic Games, Athens.

2006 World Cup, Monchengladbach.

2003 Asia Cup, Kuala Lumpur — Gold.

2003 Afro-Asian Games, Hyderabad — Gold.

2002 Asian Games, Busan — Silver.

2001 Junior World Cup, Hobart — Gold.

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OGQ list

The following athletes are supported by the Olympic Gold Quest Foundation.

Shooting: Gagan Narang, Rakesh Manpat, Rekha C, Mann Singh.

Badminton: Guru Sai Dutt.

Athletics: Vikas Gowda and Tintu Luka.

Boxing: Sanjay Kolte.

P. T. Usha School of Athletics
