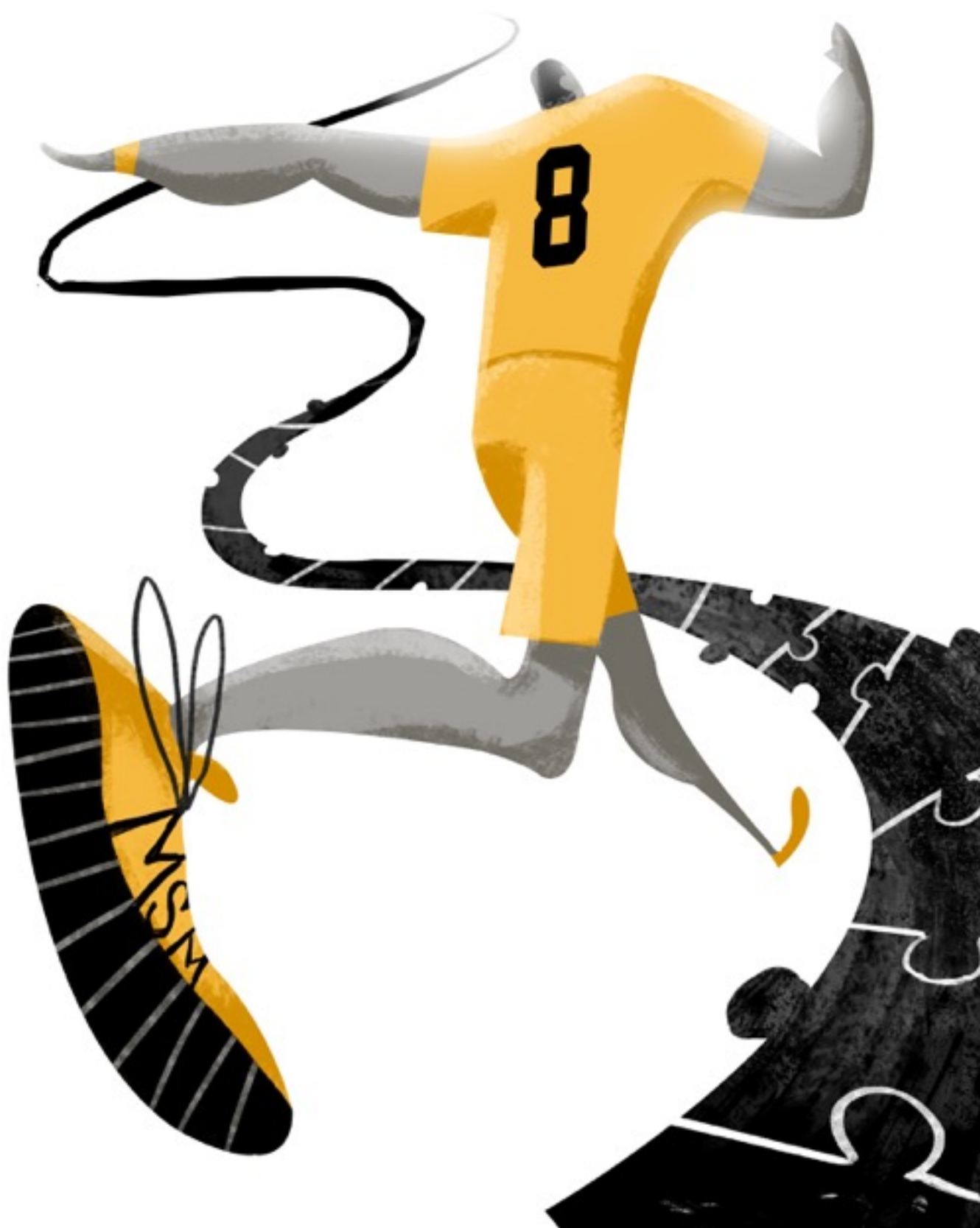


MSM
DIARIES





Mental Strength Matters

—

Let's get stronger together

CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	1
Introduction	2
Cricket	6
Badminton	18
Golf	22
Kabbadi	26
Chess	30
Tennis	34
Football	36
Racing	40
Athletics And Beyond	42

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank my *father* for being the reason for this project to take off. Had he only answered my question, this initiative would have only remained in the conversation for a day. However, he went above and beyond, enabling me to talk to the various sports persons that he knew and I would forever be grateful.

I would like to thank all the *sports people* for contributing their time and words, especially during the uncertain times of the pandemic. I thank everyone for being so willing to share their story, in hope that it will inspire and motivate. I have no doubt that these words will definitely make the readers rethink their version of failure and believe in themselves to try again.

Doing this project for Mental Strength Matters, I would like to believe that I have developed a great deal of understanding, all thanks to the sportsmen who were extremely gracious in describing their stories without any filter. And my biggest learning from this has to be the realization that if you persevere and stay true to your ambition and your goal, you will automatically push yourself in the direction of positivity and self-confidence.

INTRODUCTION

I have played cricket, trained to be a cricketer, every day since I was five years old. That stopped after the Covid-19 pandemic, and the lockdown, and I asked my father what I needed to do to deal with the changed circumstances. That was the start of it, one question, and it kick-started a campaign that has since taken on a life of its own, inspiring many - including me.

I asked my father what I could do to compensate for the missed training sessions, which would help me grapple with my anxieties, and cope with the loss of routine. One question led to another, and another, and it didn't stop with my father but went out to over a hundred sportspersons – cricketers like my father, chess masters, and everyone in between. The common theme was mental strength. I started to read up, research, and the deeper I went, the more I discovered until I formed a full-blown thesis paper. Talking to these renowned athletes, from Virender Sehwag to Pankaj Advani, has made me realize that everyone goes through ups and downs in their lives, no matter their age or ability. The way a person emerges from these difficulties is a testament to their mental strength. This can be taught to youngsters, teaching them to not give up and believe in themselves. It is this kind of learning that will shape the young and the impressionable, prepare them for the future.

This paper, stitched together with thoughts from elite Indian athletes, tries to understand the difficulties that athletes face and how they deal with them and leads to a better comprehension of mental strength, what is it, how does it work. That eventually led to recommendations on mental strength training and proposals of inclusion of this training in the curriculum for young athletes.

This, *MSM Diaries* is, however, my thoughts on the responses that made this idea into a project. It is, at its core, a collection of stories to inspire youngsters involved in sports, but is equally applicable in every career; mental strength is relevant to everyone, and each story here – including a personal note from a sports legend – adds a little something to the foundation.

As I went through the interviews, I wrote down the most momentous lines from each athlete, based on the sport they play, to help me face the imminent challenges in my life. However, it was obvious that the problems, and the solutions, and therefore the learnings, were all in the same vein, irrespective of the sport. The skills used might be different but the demands of the game were similar. Stories of how to get back on one's feet, how to process failure, and much else are exactly the kind of themes that I want to touch upon with the help of stories of various athletes in my project 'Mental Strength Matters'. I hope that it will not only speak about the challenges they faced in their career but will also dwell upon the many aspects of mental strength that have remained unspoken despite the growing challenges that circumstances have thrown to all of us.

Regardless of the profession or prowess, stress and pressures evade nobody. It is the same with athletes. Maybe even more, due to the constant yet instant dalliance with victory and failure. And how many of us do our work with hundreds, thousands of people staring at us? It is only with experience that players develop mental strength that furnishes them with an edge over the rest while simultaneously managing pressure. This concept is gradually collecting the acknowledgement and significance that it merits from the key elements in the world of sports. It is evident in all the responses of the interviewed athletes. It is time that youngsters see these motivational words as more than tales of success and determination. These are hard truths, advice that aspirants cannot ignore if they want to pave their way in the obstacle-filled roads to glory.

For sportspersons across verticals, doing what they do and then doing that with distinction, has been something of a wild ride. It is a roller-coaster but it cannot be more ironic when we only see the success, celebrate alongside, but turn a blind eye to the rest of the story – that's where life's ultimate learnings are, after all. Here, I have tried to decode those stories and to bring to you the impact they have left behind. I hope that we can all learn and improve our thought process along the way.

All of the videos of the interviews are on the 'Mental Strength Matters' social media platforms.

I hope that these words and, more importantly, the interviews help us relate to these famous athletes, not with respect to their professions but, as humans.

*“Champions have to have the skill and the will.
But the will must be stronger than the skill.”*

—

Muhammad Ali



CRICKET

The buzzing Ahmedabad crowd makes it a deafening atmosphere. Whistles and chants threaten to break the roof as a young legend makes his way to the middle. Virat Kohli has just followed Sachin Tendulkar to the dressing room. Singles are taken with effortless ease and hope beckons. Soon, the poster boy of the new generation, Yuvraj Singh, puts his side in the semi-final of the 2011 World Cup and helps India do what no team in the last 12 years has done - shut the door on Australia in a 50-over World Cup.

Every Indian cricket fan must remember the moment, it still seems surreal. The magic of that night will linger for years to come and Yuvraj will have his place in the lore of Indian cricket.

I was eight at the time, yet I distinctly remember the joy I felt watching the men in blue that night. I saw the same joy on the faces of my parents. My father, Sunil, a former India cricketer himself, celebrated as if he was still a part of the team like he still had his precious blue jersey on. That was the sense of euphoria as India took a leap to have a crack at the ultimate prize. Again.

As we celebrated, however, we hardly noticed the pain and anguish. Yuvraj was the star but we had no idea about his story, his battle. We knew about his sweat but not about the blood that he had been vomiting. We knew about his fitness concerns, but not a thing about the deadly predator that was taking over his body.

“I always wanted to come back and play for India. Representing my country has always been my inspiration,” Yuvraj told me.

A strong personality, who played his cricket on his own terms and with a lot of passion, Yuvraj never expected his life to be defined by a disease that spares only a fortunate few. To rise above it, Yuvraj had two paths in front of him: either fall back on his mental fortitude or give in. But as history tells us, it would be the former, a fine tale of bravery and success, because Yuvraj chose the long and arduous path, he chose to fight.

“I was down mentally. There were times when I thought my body would give up. But it was mind over matter for me. Reading positive books, especially ones by Lance Armstrong, gave me perspective on how to make a comeback and I played for India once again.”

The concept of mental toughness has been discussed in quite a few studies over the last few years. Liew et al (2019) stated that the factor of eliciting a response that overpowers one's body is one of the highest-ranked psychological characteristics that determine successful performance in sports. It is always “mind over matter” as Yuvraj says, and how beautifully cricketers across generations have used that to achieve success. A wide range of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural competencies ensure the cricketers remain active to a sequential pattern. And for Yuvraj, it was a heady mix of self-belief, attitude, clarity of thought, and knowledge - a few components that define a cricketer's mental make-up. His has been an inspiring story and



a lesson of utilising mental strength to the maximum. The conversation with Yuvraj will always remain a lesson in how to raise the mental game when life throws a curveball.

From one World Cup legend to another. Kapil Dev was the symbol of a changing guard in Indian cricket. For someone who was born in 2003, it was natural for me to not be emotionally invested in an event that took place twenty years before my birth. However, being the son of a professional cricketer meant that I have been fed countless stories of how Kapil's Devils changed the perception of cricket in the country, and in the process, created a revolution.

I have thought about it many times and asked myself - would it have been possible if not for that iconic mid-innings speech? Even before the tour of England kicked off, many players thought of it as a stopover on their way to the USA for a long vacation, but Kapil believed in his process and inspired the team to lift the trophy that glorious afternoon at Lord's.

When I caught up with Dev to discuss that particular day and how he channelled the dressing room for the fight against the Windies champions, he was kind enough to reveal the same. "Self-belief is the biggest strength. You can do it if you don't lie to yourself and understand your limitations," Kapil says. "Off the ground, I respect everybody. On the ground, I feel no one is better than me. I always believed in Plan A and never in Plan B. I waited for the right patch and things started to fall in place in the 1983 World Cup final".

Cricketers and cricket fans try to quantify achievements through statistics and performances but the full nature of the tales of glory is best found when taking the metaphorical route. It approaches alchemy and raises the possibility of overcoming barriers that would not otherwise have been broken so easily. Kapil will forever remain an icon and the man who showed what Indian cricket could achieve in the subsequent years.

Looking at it retrospectively, be it 1983 or 2011, a deep understanding of mental strength was what made the difference, giving Indian cricket fans the moments to savour, and for the heroes on the field, their time under the sun. And for another legend of Indian cricket, Virender Sehwag, it was actually the combination of both that did the job.

"When I was dropped from the Indian team in 2007, I was really upset and not sure what to do. Then I realised I could only control what was controllable for me. I raised my fitness level, worked hard on my skills, and made a comeback to the Indian side in September 2007. I never looked back after that," Sehwag says.

We know Sehwag was one of the most destructive batsmen to have played the game, raising his game when no one saw it coming before smashing the bowlers to pieces. It was this fundamental approach and an undying belief in his skillset that made Sehwag what he eventually became - a revolutionary. When he was dropped from the squad, he channelled his inner demons and honed his skills to get over the pause to his career.



If Sehwag was all about instinct, VVS Laxman was the opposite. He was all about batting long, crafting beautiful innings, playing correct strokes with full respect for the copybook manual. But when it came to expressing themselves with a bat in hand, both Sehwag and Laxman got as close as possible to meditation on a cricket field.

That Eden Gardens 281 is the stuff of legend, and batting with a stiff back, which he has written about in his autobiography, was no easy feat. But it was not the first time Laxman had to make a tough decision. It was a constant in his career since he was seventeen.

“In the 1990s, medicine was a proven career option and both my parents were doctors. I was the state topper in the tenth class and passed with distinction in eleventh and twelfth. Simultaneously, my cricketing career was progressing and I was already a part of India Under-19. I feel my mental strength helped me take the decision. I feel believing in one’s strengths is the right representation of mental toughness and I never looked back since then,” Laxman told me.

And just that, knowing your strengths and believing in them, corresponds to higher competitive standards, achievement levels and performance outcomes, according to Cowden (2016), based on a review of a large number of studies.

Speaking for myself, I have grown up to idolise my father more than anyone else in the world. He is my first coach, my mentor and my cricketing hero. He has always permitted me to make my own decisions and has backed me to the tilt. And his journey to becoming an Indian cricketer is such an inspiring tale of strong-willed determination for me.

“Due to the lack of practice facilities in Gadag, close to 400 kilometres from Bengaluru, where Sunil Joshi grew up, I used to go to Hubli [the biggest city near Gadag] six days a week to practice. It was 120 kilometres up and down for me every day and for that, I had to wake up at 3.30 in the morning to be able to reach Hubli by 6 am. That routine somehow bred a sense of discipline and will power in me which came good for me in the later years,” my father says.

“We all know what happened in Bangladesh’s tour of New Zealand in Christchurch last year [the terror attack in a mosque the players were going to]. I was a part of the Bangladesh coaching unit when the incident happened. Everyone was panicking but I decided to stay positive and take inspiration from the things which had put me in an uncomfortable situation earlier. Remember, it is always important to think of the good things you have done in your life when life becomes a bit unfair with you.”

I felt that no one could explain it to me better. At the end of the day, every sporting tale is the extension of a classic that celebrates virtuosity and bravery in no unclear terms. When that attains a numeric sense, be it through statistics or moments, we tend to go with the flow. But it is the behind-the-scenes stuff that becomes



a legend - it is what a player does when no one is watching him or her, it is when a cricketer ensures he or she puts in the hard work to brave the demons within.

Being a cricketer myself – I have represented Karnataka in all the age-group levels – I have found the stories of these magnificent performances inspiring. Their tales give us a sneak peek into their processes. However, no-one probably encapsulates the importance of mental strength more than Mithali Raj, the Indian women's cricket stalwart. It is perhaps changing now, but when Mithali came through the ranks in the early 2000s, representing India in two World Cup finals must have been a dream too unrealistic. Over the years, she has given us a lot of stories to savour, and, more importantly, a lesson in what willpower can do.

“In 2005, I injured my knee while playing a domestic tournament - roughly a month before the World Cup,” she says. “Honestly, it was a scary place to be in because the diagnosis revealed that I had a ligament tear. I was a young captain, had a good team, and we fancied our chances. I had two ways - to opt-out of the World Cup or use mental strength to endure the pain and give my best in the World Cup.”

“Each time self-doubt crept in, I countered it with an affirmation that I have immense ability to withstand the pain and give my best for the country. When you embrace self-belief, the confidence that you get is the most powerful thing for an athlete. That self-belief helped me hit one of the most important knocks of my career – 93 against New Zealand in the 2005 semi-final – despite immense pain.”

India eventually lost the final but what Mithali learnt then became the foundation of a glittering career. Her confidence and self-belief helped her go through an entire tournament while ending up as the tournament's fifth-highest run-scorer. It became a constant in her career, which has spanned over two decades. And despite prejudices and lack of support for women's cricket, she has emerged as the face of a new generation of inspiring women athletes the world over.

I have come to the conclusion that the different ways that athletes used mental strength to deal with their specific problems prove the diversity of the concept. General principles like commitment, dedication, positivity and setting goals are common, along with routines from daily life like time management, meditation, yoga, helping others, staying physically fit. Trusting oneself is the highest explanation for mental strength. Then there is perseverance, motivation, taking the right decisions, but breathing exercises did not find many takers.



Most of the ideas were in tandem with the existing standard of mental strength mainly because of their experiences or some form of training. However, there seemed to be a lack of clarity over the important terms used in mental strength. The concepts of mental strength may be arbitrary but all the answers were invariably found to be easily categorised in the predetermined components. Here, 'attitudes' held a more emotional outlook while 'knowledge' held the most specific outlook of the athletes. In regards to that, the life and legacy of the sportspersons amidst a host of other names give us a perspective on how to use mental strength as a vehicle to achieve a greater good in life and that is not just limited to the game of cricket. I hope every reader across age and gender can use this to their benefit in the future.



*“When you embrace self-belief,
the realisation and confidence you get
is the most powerful tool one
can have in challenging times.”*

—

Mithali Raj



BADMINTON

The story of Indian badminton is an intriguing one - of rise and fall in equal measure. One can credit Prakash Padukone for making Indian badminton players dream, one can credit Saina Nehwal for Revolution 2.0, and give it to PV Sindhu for ensuring India's rise continued. However, all the dots find common ground at a certain Birmingham court, circa 2001, which witnessed perhaps the most significant win of the modern era for Indian badminton.

What Pullela Gopichand did that day at the All-England Championship was the stuff of dreams. Life was difficult seven years prior to that when Gopichand suffered a major anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tear in his left knee during the 1994 National Games in Pune. It had left him fearing his career was over. Only determination could have saved him.

Fast forward seven years to 2001 and Gopichand was ready for the most prestigious badminton event in the world. Facing him in the final was Chen Hong, who was in a league of his own at that time. But Gopichand put up a stunning summit clash display, securing a 15-12, 15-6 victory to become the second Indian after Padukone to clinch the coveted title.

If that was a tale of belief and faith in his abilities, seeds for it were planted years ago when Gopichand had to choose between studies and badminton. Pretty much like Laxman, he had to battle preconceived notions about career choices - playing sports professionally, outside of cricket, was not an option.

“Sports was never a career option when we started playing. It became one much later. For us, during that time, the initial challenge was to manage both studies and sports together. I had to miss a lot of classes. Sometimes, teachers were not supportive. Even in the family, many wouldn't understand. Rising above it required immense mental toughness and I was extremely fierce in that regard. Then everyone in my family and even school teachers started supporting me regarding my sport.”

It wasn't just at the All-Englands, but more examples of that trait could be seen in the way Gopichand performed in the national championships. With Dr Ashok Rajagopalan's help, Gopichand never compromised his natural style of play – even on hard courts where a minor slip could have had a career-threatening impact – and went on to win the nationals five consecutive times. Inspiration, focus, self-control, discipline, and strong work ethic played a massive part in what he eventually achieved as a player and the same traits he has tried to inculcate in his wards, some of whom have gone on to make themselves the faces of India's rising stature in world badminton.

The role Dr Rajagopalan played cannot be overstated. This included a faculty of sports psychologists, mental health experts, performance coaches, and trainers with experience in psychological and behavioural sciences. That help from the good doctor helps us understand that the right teachers and coaches are essential for the



fulfilment of the goals of mental strength. They would provide the emotional and intellectual changes required for the maximum development of a player.

Even for the Gen Z star, Lakshya Sen, there is a similarity in contrast. The Uttarakhand boy might not have to face the same problems as Gopichand did, for his father is a reputed badminton coach and his brother Chirag is also an international player, but the toughness of mind was something he had to build for himself.

“Since I was a kid, I had a mental trainer for myself and to toughen myself up, I used to exercise and do pranayam (the yoga exercise), which keeps me fresh mentally,” Sen, a former No. 1 junior singles player in the world, says.

The fundamental aspect of these adventures cannot be any farther from the truth. In calculated terms, what the duo taught us about mental strength exemplify a banal duality - simplicity is not always simple if not approached without clarity of thought and then backing it up with a lot of hard work, and complexity is not that complex if it can be made simple, well, by using the tricks of rule No. 1.

Mental strength plays a huge part in both of these situations and the moment a shuttler understands the basics of the same, it would keep them in good stead. This is an affirmation and can act as a catalyst in all of us achieving a degree of freedom in our respective careers even though the chips are down and we are far away from the circulated reality.



GOLF

The toughness of mind is a must in every sport, but no single game has probably encapsulated the ideology quite like golf. To quote the legendary Bobby Jones, “Golf is a game that is played on a five-inch course – the distance between your ears.”

A sport that needs its practitioners to walk to the ball more often than actually hitting it requires every single golfer to be at the top of their mental game to get rid of the arbitrary thoughts that could cripple a layperson. It can breed anxiety to such an extent that a mentally-weak character might buckle down and never get up again.

The life and legacy of Shiv Kapur give an interesting insight into this aspect of the sport. After winning the Indian Open and the Malaysian Open as an amateur at the dawn of the millennium, Kapur brought laurels to the country by winning the Asian Games gold medal a couple of years later. From the outside, it was easy to presume that things were served on a platter for the Delhiite when he made the professional jump within five years on the amateur circuit. The subsequent win against Jyoti Randhawa on his professional debut added to the belief but the result was, in fact, just an extension of his approach – a confident golfer who backed himself in difficult circumstances.

“They said golf is a very mental sport and I couldn’t agree more. Probably it is seventy per cent mental and thirty per cent physical. I truly believe that what separates good from the great is the mental aspect of it,” Kapur says.

On the final day of the Asian Games, the atmospheric conditions were frustrating and many players lost a bit of their patience in the process. Only twenty at the time, Kapur kept his calm under the rain and delivered a goosebumps-inducing gold-medal finish at the Asiad Country Club in Busan.

“It was cold, it was windy and the rain was coming down sideways. People were complaining about the conditions and were struggling. But I was positive and had a good attitude. The harder the rain got, I thought my chances got better. As it turned out, I holed in the last moment and won the gold medal for India. Till date, that is one of my proudest moments for me as a golfer. I will always attribute that to the mental toughness and my positive attitude that day.”

Belief systems, emotions, self-assuredness, mental orientation, all of which impact the motivation of an individual, play a big role in facilitating their evolution and growth. When you are aware of facts and concepts that prompt modifying attitudes and applying skills to perform a certain task better – as Kapur did that day – ensure your state of mind is right for the task ahead.



Purely from a sporting point of view, Shiv Kapur's performance in the 2002 Asian Games was, in a way, a generational link for Indian golf but he, too, had a past to live up to – a pretty strong one at that. Arguably the most celebrated golfer to have come out of India, Jeev Milkha Singh, not only had to face up to the challenges that lay ahead of him as an athlete but also manifest the dreams of his parents Milkha Singh and Nirmal Kaur. His father, Milkha, remains one of India's most iconic track athletes, while his mother, Nirmal, is an achiever in her own right, and captained the Indian women's volleyball team in the post-independence years.

Jeev became the first Indian golfer to enter the European Tour in 1998. Unfortunately, he suffered a wrist injury in 1999 in Taiwan.

I cannot imagine what it must have been like, being a golfer and having a cast around the wrist for twelve weeks.

“When I came back, I lost confidence and my thought process was under pressure, and when I used to be in the golf course, I was not as good as I used to be. I didn't win a tournament from 1999 to 2006. Although I was working as hard as I could, it took me some time to realise what I was lacking. I pinpointed that it was the sudden absence of my mental strength.”

They say the first step towards solving any problem is to admit there is one. Jeev did exactly that and started harnessing his prowess with some positive thinking and reading. Joseph Murphy's *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind* worked as the perfect medicine for him to leave the injury behind and win the Volvo China Open in 2006, apart from winning the Japan Golf Tour four times and six Asian Tour titles.

“I started reading a paragraph of that book every day after I woke up and one page in the night before sleeping. I did these for years and things started to change after 2006. I had grown a belief system in my subconscious mind and that strength of mind played a big part in me performing to the best of my abilities.”

In a sport that is heavily reliant on the power of the subconscious, it is paramount for an athlete to keep his guard down yet believe in his abilities. The moment golfers overthink their last shot or what is going to happen in the future, they stand to lose out on the present and disturbing thoughts will wedge their way in. The stories of Jeev Milkha Singh and Shiv Kapur tell us how to deal with the struggles of the present and achieve glory.



KABADDI

I was thirteen, glued to the television set one winter evening when I was reminded of just why I wanted to be close to sport: it was when Ajay Thakur single-handedly demolished Iran in the 2016 Kabaddi World Cup final. Sport is about character and character building. Thakur reaffirmed it.

Puneri Paltan had bought him for the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) ahead of the World Cup but an in-form Deepak Hooda's presence in the line-up meant Thakur couldn't force his way into the team too easily. Even in the World Cup, he was not a confirmed starter, only to be brought back into the line-up in a do-or-die raid to prevent India from being all-out against Korea. In the final, it was a make-or-break moment for him – he had a chance to prove his worth.

It was not an easy feat. Before Thakur and his partner-in-crime Pradeep Narwal could analyse the situation, the Iran defenders had got hold of them, securing a five-point lead with fifteen minutes of the game left.

Champions rise to the occasion when things are not in their favour and what a moment Thakur chose to showcase his prowess. In a pin-drop silent stadium, Thakur stuck a foot across the half-line to initiate a day-out that turned the tide. Eleven points were pocketed by the man from Himachal and India became the champions of the world once again. Iran was awestruck, it was the zeal of one man that turned out to be the real difference. When the country was celebrating, Thakur could not stop but think about the time when he had to make do with little facilities at his disposal.

“When I started, we didn't have good grounds, facilities were poor and there was no one to inspire and motivate us. People used to enjoy the sport in our village, but I always dreamt of playing for India. However, I was unsure of the path. To overcome this, I used to read a book called *Chanakya Neeti*, and I kept reading about successful people.”

“It worked wonderfully and I would advise everyone to read up on the story of successful people when you go through personal challenges in life. We should always keep in mind that our situation will change one day and we have to grow no matter what.”



*“When faced with adversity,
don't think of it negatively.
Be positive and take it up as a test.
We shouldn't be afraid of the challenge.
We should overcome it and keep moving forward.”*

—

Ajay Thakur



CHESS

The legacy of Indian chess is as celebrated as other pioneering sports like cricket, hockey, badminton but somehow its prominence among the common fans have failed to seal beyond the tall frame of Viswanathan Anand, easily one of the finest, if not the finest, sportspersons India has ever produced. For people interested in the game, the wave that the Chennai-born Anand started way back in 1988, when he became the first Grandmaster from the country, was too big to ignore and following in his footsteps, Indian chess started to blossom in a way very few could have imagined.

A product of that wave was Koneru Humpy, who I had the good fortune of interviewing, and I managed to take a deep dive into her mind. The youngest woman ever to achieve the title of Grandmaster at the age of 15 years, 1 month and 27 days, Humpy was truly a legend and charted a path for many young women chess players in what was predominantly a male dominion.

In her long career, which has spanned over two decades, Humpy has flown the flag of Indian chess magnificently, but the more recent stories give us an idea of her true personality. After two years of maternity sabbatical from competitive chess, she came back in late 2018 to win Skolkovo Women's Grand Prix, followed by the World Rapid Championship, and finally the Cairns Cup 2020. But the highlight was her role in India's historic title-winning run in the Mixed Chess Olympiad. It was a show of great resilience and an example of the impact mental strength can have on a sportsperson.

“In a game of chess, it is mostly the points scored on several matches that matter a lot, and they total the points before calculating the final result. Hence, it becomes a story of paramount importance that you are at the top of your game in every single match and not worry about a single result.”

Even before this conversation, I was truly amazed by her strength of mind and willpower, and listening to her was an education. Like when she talked of performing below her best in the Women's World Chess Championship in 2011 and, according to her, so disastrous was her performance that she lost faith in her abilities. It took her a lot to come to terms with the defeat but once she accepted it, everything became so easy that good performances started to come in.

“But after a few days, I realised that I had to accept the defeat and come back from the position that I found myself in. That acceptance helped me big time when I played another important tournament a few days later where I won a gold medal. I think it is important to keep your heavy expectations at bay while playing a mind game like chess and focus on the moves while not beating yourself up for not living up to it.”

Intimate knowledge of one's abilities plays a big role in sharpening one's strength and, in her way, Humpy ensured that she was never too far from a good performance after understanding the fact that she had to forget about the loss and become a better version of herself going forward.

It was a solid inversion of the usually-accepted fact that a sportsperson should hold on to the loss to use it as an influence to do better. But, as Humpy said, when you play a sport like chess that requires you to be at the peak of your powers in terms of calmness, the contrarian view is absolutely necessary. And what a champion Humpy has been in using those traits to become successful.

*“You must not run behind success,
you must always enjoy your game and
give your hundred per cent towards it.”*

—

Koneru Humpy



TENNIS

In India, to compete for attention with cricket, sporting icons from other fields were needed to inspire the coming generations. Viswanathan Anand and Pankaj Advani reached the pinnacle of their respective sports but have failed to create a big buzz, possibly because they play niche sports, but it is staggering that Rohan Bopanna is not a bigger hero than he is. Bopanna was one of the superstars in Indian sports that I grew up watching and his resilience has been an inspiration.

The legendary duo of Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi had held India in thrall for a long time, and Sania Mirza had started to do very well as a doubles player. Between 2000 and 2007, these three had eight Grand Slam titles. By the end of 2007, Indian representation in the latter stages of the Grand Slams in doubles had become common, but Bopanna was out to make it even better.

Determination played a big part in his success, and Bopanna credits his calmness for it, a quality made better through breathing exercises. Bopanna believes that taking deep breaths in tough situations helps massively in regaining composure and having control over the situation. The successful tennis star he has been, Bopanna used his practical life experience and how he controlled the situation during a massive crisis in the air due to heavy turbulence.

“One year, I was travelling from New York to Dubai, and it was one of those massive A380 two-deck aircraft, and while we were about to land in Dubai, there was massive turbulence. A lot of people were crying and shouting but then I told myself the best thing to do was to take a deep breath, calm yourself down, and try to speak to the passengers and help them calm down.

“In tough situations, mental strength is the key, but eventually, as a person, you tend to panic. But the deeper the breath you take, the better you start to think and just that helps.”

Like MS Dhoni does on a cricket field, Bopanna's life teaches us an important lesson: patience and calmness dictate how quickly you can bounce back from the tough moments and take back what is rightfully yours. Breathing exercises, as Bopanna says, can help everyone attain a level of tranquillity and help develop mental strength magnificently.



FOOTBALL

India has been home to IM Vijayan and Bhaichung Bhutia, and a once-in-a-generation talent like Sunil Chhetri, as well as the many icons of the past, like PK Banerjee and Chuni Goswami, who turned down an offer from Tottenham Hotspur once, and Tulsidas Balaram along with Peter Thangaraj. Though Indian football has a low rank internationally, there have been the odd flashes of brilliance, like at the Asian Games and the AFC Asian Cup, and Gurpreet Singh Sandhu was inspired enough to try and become the next icon in Indian football.

In a country, where footballers are incredibly self-aware and do not dare to dream and take the leap of faith, Sandhu was an anomaly. He knew his worth, which helped him achieve several accolades, including becoming the first Indian to play a competitive match for the first team of a top-division European club; the fifth Indian to play professionally in Europe after Mohammed Salim, Baichung Bhutia, Sunil Chhetri and Subrata Pal; and then the first Indian to play in the UEFA Europa League. It is a record as uncompromising as the man himself.

The resilience that Sandhu showed and the audacity with which he managed to score the brownie points will always be a red-letter day for every single Indian football follower but the beginnings were inauspicious. After spending his initial years with East Bengal and then Indian Arrows, Sandhu signed for Norwegian club Stabæk in 2014 but life was posing some tough challenges.

“I have unfortunately faced a lot of challenges in my career. Be it a red card, abusing fans, and also not performing up to the mark - that resulted in me facing a lot of criticism. When I was in Norway, I wasn’t able to pay my monthly payments and registration and there were many more human struggles that I faced. I used to eat one meal a day, so I would save enough money and not waste too much on food.”

Having known Sandhu from his early days, I knew how passionate he had been about the sport, but it was not easy to navigate when you are so far away from home and suffer the problems that he faced. However, that is where mental strength comes in, and Sandhu used that to the maximum.

One thing that goes without saying in professional sports is that you cannot give up. Your mental energy decodes the level of success you are vying for, and in Sandhu’s case, it was the matter of not losing sight of the ultimate goal. There was audacity, the action was implemented, and the execution remained the only metric to solve. He stayed on, focused on his abilities, and ensured the goal continued to come closer and closer.

“When you face such situations in your life, you have two options in front of you - either to quit and come back or move forward towards your goal, which was hard to think about when you do not have enough

money to pay for your life. My mental strength helped me get through that phase and achieve success. I overcame those situations by believing in my abilities and backed myself under those situations.”

It is also the mantra that Sandhu lives by, and as the Covid-19 pandemic has tightened its grip around the world, he is taking inspiration from his struggles. It is also a trait he wants everyone to master to overcome the crisis and help the people around them.

“Of course, having mental strength helps in difficult times we are going through like the Coronavirus pandemic. It is extremely challenging and especially if your family is suffering, it can be daunting at times. But make sure you are there to help them and have the right frame of mind.”

*“Mental strength shows you
the light to the end of the tunnel.”*

—

Gurpreet Singh Sandhu



RACING

There is a niche audience base in India for Formula 1 racing, ever since Motor Race became an entity in India, but the discourse beyond F1 has been non-existent. 24-year-old Akhil Rabindra, however, is an anomaly to not only make a career out of GT racing but now he is the only Asian among the 23 drivers picked for the Aston Martin Racing Driver Academy. He is driving an Aston Martin Vantage GT4 for PROsport Performance, teaming up with Swiss racer Florian Thoma and his career is on a sky-rocketing pace.

But whenever Rabindra looks back at how his career has progressed in the last few years, the Bangalorean cannot help but stop for a bit in 2016 when everything seemed to be in distant outreach. After enduring a tough year professionally, he was mentally drained and could not look beyond the usual framework of reference.

“Back in 2016, I had a very bad year professionally and had many accidents and of course, didn’t have good results. Those results affected me a lot, mentally and physically. That was one of the worst years in my racing career. But I decided to put my cards down and decide what I need to work on to improve. But then I realised - I was training well and was doing everything outside the track well but the results were just not coming,” Ravindra told me where he touched upon the darkest period in his career.

“Then I realised that I was overdoing everything. I was over-training, over-pushing, over-driving. Then I sat down at the end of the year to analyse and started acting on it. It taught me an important lesson that when things are not going well, it is paramount to understand why it went wrong and what action could be taken to rectify them. Sometimes it is in your control, sometimes it is not in your control but coming to terms with it is the key.”

And surely he did with his PROsport Performance where he achieved the first podium for the New Aston Martin Vantage GT4 by finishing 2nd in the 2019 24H GT Series European held at Mugello Circuit. The success that he achieved after that was the ultimate differentiator but understanding his weaknesses played a part in what was a magnificent turnaround.

In my honest opinion, that is mental strength. It is this incredible self-awareness about one’s skill that has been a constant among many successful sportswomen and men across generations and Akhil proved the same in his endeavour.



ATHLETICS AND BEYOND

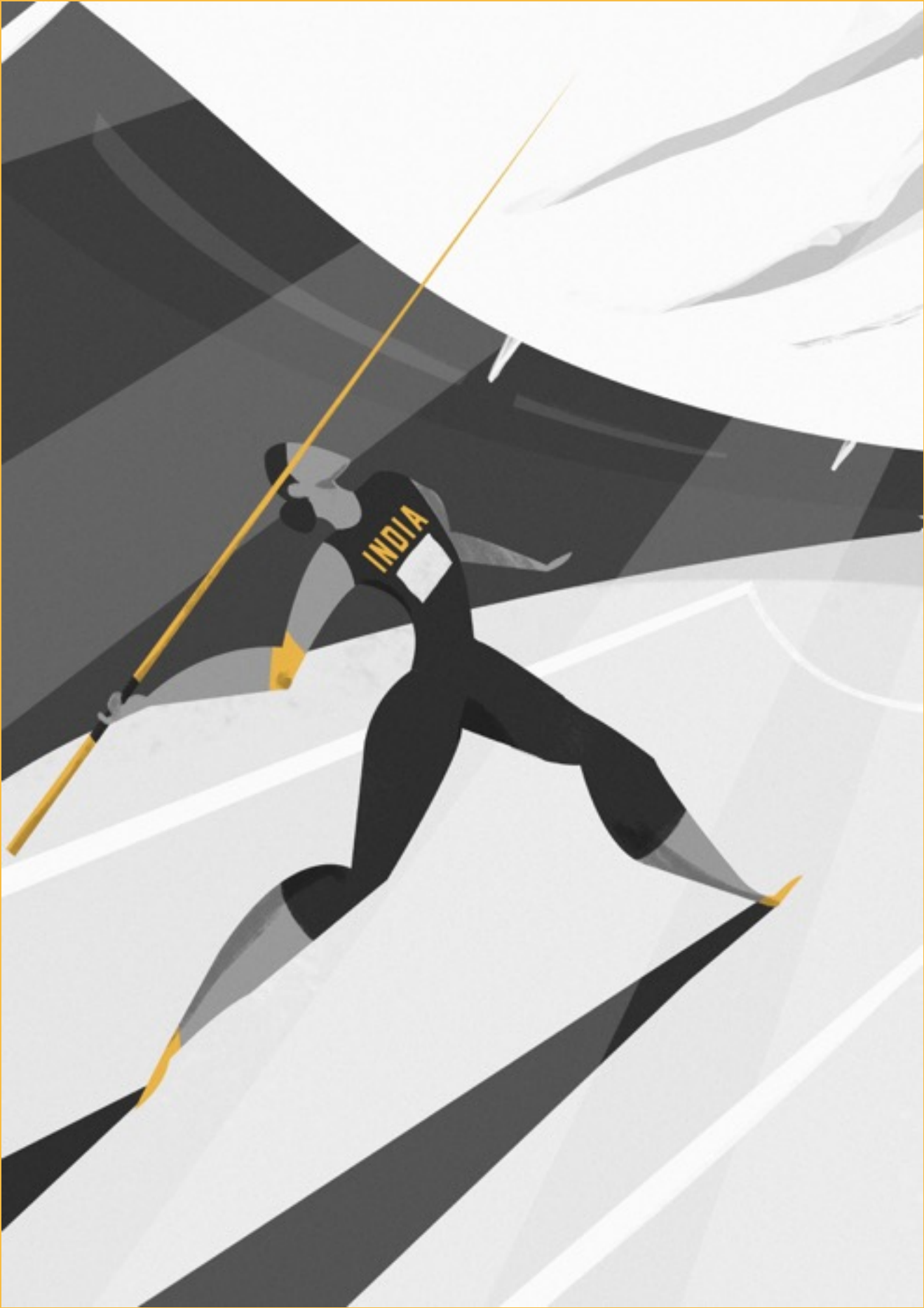
To have a wholesome perspective on this, I decided to spread the wing and talked to some of the greatest achievers across sports about how they used mental strength to overcome the obstacles in their life. The likes of Manjeet Chhillar, Pankaj Advani, and Annu Rani were welcoming in opening up about their struggles and shared their views.

The colossal rise of Snooker King Pankaj Advani saw 15 IBSF World Billiards Championship title, three IBSF World Snooker Championship (15 Reds), and two IBSF World Snooker Championship (6 Reds) along with four professional World Billiards Championship title to go with two ACBS Asian Snooker Championship. These are some serious achievements by arguably one of the greatest, if not the greatest, ever sportsmen India has ever produced. And there couldn't have been a more contrasting start to this glorious sojourn.

“Long ago, in 2003, when I was first representing India for the first time internationally in an IBSF World Cup, and quite naturally, no one gave me a chance,” Advani narrated. However, I thought differently. I realised that while this was a great experience and all that, maybe I would want to go out there and win it. If I would've told somebody that I am here to win it, they would've possibly laughed it off and brushed it off. And was in a tough situation, down 4-1 in a knock-out game against the Chinese player and was almost out of the event. And that's because I went too far ahead of myself and thought - okay, I was looking for the title. I forgot I have to win all these matches in the process as well. I had to concentrate on the present and take it at a time. I then broke the game down to smaller roles and was successful eventually.”

While Advani's success story after that tournament is pretty much self-explanatory, Annu Rani, however, gave a solid perspective on the life of a woman athlete wanting to do what she really wants to do. In a conservative country like India, it becomes tedious for a female sportsperson to juggle many responsibilities to achieve success and Rani is a live example.

“Women still don't get as many opportunities as they should get and when I was starting out, I had to convince my parents about the same. They didn't know much about sports and used to tell me it was not important. I forcibly persuaded them to agree with me. I would say no matter what both boys and girls should get equal opportunities.”



Another inspiring story narrated by Arjuna Awardee Manjeet Chhilar. “In 2013, doctors advised me not to play Kabaddi due to an injury. But I wanted to play the 2014 Asian Games and help the team win the Gold medal. I put in hard yards to recover from injury. In the finals against Iran, when our scores were level, I did the last tackle to help my country win the Yellow metal.”

“I would advise if there is a problem in front of you like we have found ourselves currently, face it with all your strength and automatically, you will emerge victoriously,” Chhilar said, stressing on the need of why every single person needs to have a strong-willed persona that would automatically spread across the entire performance structure.

Starting off her career to fulfill her desire to travel the world, Sakshi Malik is now an Olympic wrestling phenomenon. At a time when the medals started coming in, she suffered a knee injury that was sure to require a surgery. She was unsure if she would be able to go further but she decided to fight through and stay calm.

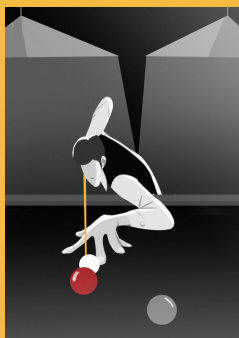
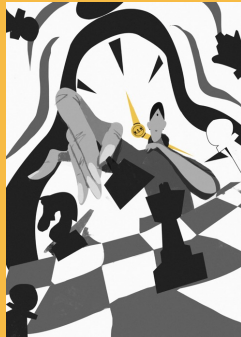
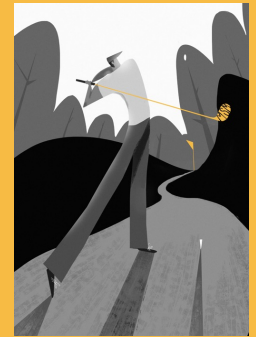
“It was a lot of mental pressure. If I had remained weak, and if I had stopped myself and believed that nothing would happen, then I would not have been able to progress further. The whole fight is in the mind.” Using meditation, yoga and the support of a psychologist, she made the event just a bump in the road to her success.



*“If I, a small-town girl,
can reach such heights,
then anybody can achieve anything.
The only thing you need is mental strength.”*

—

Sakshi Malik



For sportspersons across verticals, doing what they do and then doing that with distinction, has been something of a wild ride. It is a roller-coaster but it cannot be more ironic when we only see the success, celebrate alongside, but turn a blind eye to the rest of the story – after all, that's where life's ultimate learnings are.

Here, I have tried to decode those stories and to bring to you the impact they have left behind. It is my hope that we can all learn and improve our thought process along the way, that we see the mighty have risen because they could persevere through the fall.

Mental Strength Matters; is an initiative to understand the lessons needed and MSM Diaries is a collection of stories that provides those lessons.

