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## The gold standard

In larger numbers and a wider range of disciplines — weightlifting and sailing, boxing, shooting, archery, badminton and more — India's athletes are boosting the country's chances in Tokyo. Meet the contingent keeping the dream alive

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India may win a medal on Day One of the Tokyo Olympics, and that's not pre-Games optimism talking. Consider the person in action on July 24. Early in the morning, India time, weightlifter Mirabai Chanu will attempt to win her first Olympic medal. With the usual caveat that an Olympic medal is won or lost on the day, Chanu's chances are dazzlingly bright. She is the first Indian to win a world championship since Karnam Malleswari in 1995, with a gap of more than two decades between the two golds.

Malleswari went on to become the first Indian woman to win a medal at the Olympics, with her bronze in 2000 in Sydney. But note the five-year gap between her best performance at the world's and her Olympic medal. At the 1996 Atlanta Games, when Malleswari was at the peak of her powers, weightlifting was still a men-only affair at the Olympics.

Chanu will not have that disadvantage. She won her world title in 2017, and has been constantly improving since, bettering her own personal best (and the national record) twice in the last two years and setting a world mark in overall weight lifted this year.

She is also the World No. 1 in her weight class, which makes her the first Indian weightlifter to be world's best going into an Olympics.

So it's optimism backed by cold logic and hard facts. At no other time in India's weary history at the Olympics have there been more Indians ranked within the global top 3 in their sports going into the Games. This is the first time we can hope for a spread of medals based on more than just emotion.

The boxer Amit Panghal is World No. 1 and the top seed for Tokyo, a first for an Indian boxer.

The wrestler Vinesh Phogat is World No. 1 and the top seed for Tokyo, a first for an Indian wrestler.

Bajrang Punia will go into the Olympics as the world's top-ranked wrestler in his category, having dominated his field in Asia and won medals at the last two world championships.

Of the nine people in India's shooting contingent, seven are ranked in the top 3 in their categories, two are World No. 1, and the pair of Saurabh Chaudhary and Manu Bhaker have won every World Cup gold except one since the new mixed pistol pair category was introduced in shooting in 2019.

In fact, India won more medals in the 2019 World Cup cycle than powerhouses such as Russia and China in shooting, an unprecedented feat (the 2020 cycle was sunk by the pandemic).

Archer Deepika Kumari will also go into the Olympics as the World No. 1, but because the Indian women's recurve team failed to make the cut for Tokyo, her opportunity for a medal will be restricted to the individual event and the newly introduced mixed team, where she will pair up with husband Atanu Das. Going by the couple's recent performances, a mixed team medal is a real possibility.

In track and field too, India has a rare chance at a medal. Neeraj Chopra's Olympic preparations may have been blighted by a lack of competitions due to poor planning, but he has recorded the fourth-best throw in the world this season, breaking his own national record. He is a whisker away from a podium finish.

What about the rest of the India contingent?

PV Sindhu may have slipped from the top 3 world rankings, but she remains the defending world champion and having made the world championships final three years in a row now, it's become clear just how gigantic her big-game temperament can be. It may help that her fiercest rival, Carolina Marin, who beat her to the Olympic gold in Rio, will not be in Tokyo, as a result of an ACL (knee) injury.

Beyond the obsessive quest for medals, there are also the wonderful sporting stories of transformation and of beating the odds.

Take Simranjit Kaur, a boxer from a village called Chakar near Ludhiana in Punjab, once infamous for drugs and violence, where a boxing gym began to effect deep social change. Kaur will be the first person from Chakar to compete at the Olympics; she is also the only Indian woman boxer who is seeded (4th) at Tokyo. (Speaking of women boxers, seeded or not, discount the legendary Mary Kom at your own peril.)

Nethra Kumanan, the first woman sailor from India to qualify for the Games, is set to hit the waves of Tokyo Bay. There are the lightning strikes of Bhavani Devi, the first Indian to qualify for a fencing event at the Olympics, rising out of nowhere in a country that has neither a culture nor the infrastructure for the sport.

Five years ago, India returned from Rio with just two medals. That was business as usual. Tokyo offers the first real chance to break that mould.

## INDIA SHINING BRIGHT

SAURABH CHAUDHARY, 19

10M AIR PISTOL

World Ranking 2

Gold, 2018 Asian Games  
Silver, 2019 Asian Championships

At 19, he has won 10 World Cup medals, including eight gold, shot world record scores in both junior and senior competitions and was only recently upstaged from the top rank by compatriot Abhishek Verma (who will also be at the Olympics). Chaudhary and teenager Manu Bhaker also form the world's leading mixed team pair.

MC MARY KOM, 38

BOXING, 51KG FLYWEIGHT

World Ranking 3

Gold, 2018 World Championships  
Silver, 2021 Asian Championships  
Bronze, 2012 London Olympics

She is less boxer, more legend now. At 38, Kom may have lost out on speed and reflexes, but she continues to be as fiercely competitive as ever and when you are a six-time world champion and India's only female boxer to win an Olympic medal, you know better than anyone exactly how to add one more big one to that already overflowing trophy cabinet.

VINESH PHOGAT, 26

WRESTLING, 53KG FREESTYLE

World Ranking 1

Gold, 2021 Asian Championships  
Gold, 2018 Asian Games  
Bronze, 2019 World Championships

She left Rio in tears, a career-threatening knee injury ending her Olympic dreams that year. The surgery and rehab that followed took a long and gritty path, but when she came back, she was better than ever. She is unbeaten this year, with golds in every tournament in the lead up to the Olympics, including at the Asian Championships.

AMIT PANGHAL, 25

BOXING, 52KG FLYWEIGHT

World Ranking 1

Gold, 2018 Asian Games  
Silver, 2019 World Championships

In a short span of three years, Panghal has gone from rookie boxer to world beater and top Olympics contender. The only Indian boxer ever to reach the finals of a world championship, Panghal goes into Tokyo seeded No 1 in his weight, which means the Olympic gold is his to lose. Supremely fit, Panghal has been acquiring skills at a devastating pace.

## GLOBAL STARS TO WATCH

MEGAN RAPINOE

CAPTAIN, WOMEN'S SOCCER TEAM, USA

The two-time World Cup winner and 2012 Olympic gold medalist leads a US team unmatched in dominance. They play a flowing, attacking brand of football that is a joy to watch. Rapinoe, 36, is also a powerful force off the field, aligning with fights for gender and LGBTQ equality as well as the Black Lives Matter movement. She is also leading a battle for equal pay for the US women's football team, which brings in more trophies but earns far less than the men's team.

SIMONE BILES

GYMNAST; USA

Every so often an athlete comes around who makes an Olympics their own. Biles, 24, pushes the limits of what was thought humanly possible — as runner Usain Bolt and swimmer Michael Phelps both did at Beijing and in London in 2008 and 2012. Barring an injury, Tokyo will belong to Biles, who does things on the gymnastics floor and beam that no one had even thought doable.



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