



**NOVAK
DJOKOVIC,**
TENNIS; SERBIA

The World No. 1 drew even with Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal as the men with the most Grand Slams (an incredible 20 each) at Wimbledon this month. He's in fearsome form and has already swept the first three Grand Slams of the year. If the 34-year-old wins an Olympic gold (which he looks set to do) and the US Open, he would become only the second player in history, after Steffi Graf, to win the Golden Slam — all four Slams plus an Olympic gold in the same calendar year.

**ARMAND
DUPLANTIS,**
POLE VAULTER; SWEDEN

The 21-year-old has taken pole-vaulting by storm. Last year, he broke the legendary Sergey Bubka's record for outdoor vault, a record that had stood for 26 years, by soaring 20 feet and 2 inches. Duplantis also holds the world record for indoor vault, a record he has bettered twice in 2020. He's expected to better his outdoor record in Tokyo.

**KARSTEN
WARHOLM**
400M HURDLER; NORWAY

The Norwegian hurdler broke one of the longest-standing records in athletics a month ago: American Kevin Young's 400m hurdles mark set in 1992. "It might take another world record to win the Olympics," Warholm said after the race. He could be right. The 400m hurdles line-up at Tokyo will feature the only three men to have run the race below the mythical 47-second barrier: Warholm (46.7; world record), American Rai Benjamin (46.83) and Qatar's Abderrahman Samba (46.98).

PV SINDHU, 26
BADMINTON, WOMEN'S SINGLES

**World
Ranking 7**

Gold, 2019 World Championships
Silver, 2016 Rio Olympics
Silver, 2018 Asian Games

The reigning badminton world champion, Sindhu has been amazingly consistent in major badminton tournaments. She won a silver at the Rio Olympics and has since made the finals of all three world championships (2017-2019). On the biggest stages she becomes a colossus.

**ELAVENIL
VALARIVAN, 21**
10M AIR RIFLE

**World
Ranking 1**

Gold, 2019 ISSF World Cup Finals
Silver, 2018 World Championships

Mentored by Olympics bronze medalist Gagan Narang, Valarivan has made it to Tokyo because of her high level of consistency on the world stage, replacing quota winner Anjum Moudgil in the 10m air rifle individual event. The World No. 1 was a sensation in her junior years and has transitioned smoothly to the senior level.

**Illustrations:
Mohit Suneja;
Text: Avishkek
Roy and
Rutvik Mehta**

**DIVYANSH SINGH
PANWAR, 18**
10M AIR RIFLE

**World
Ranking 2**

Introduced to sport shooting by his parents as a way of breaking the teenager's obsession with first-person shooter games, Panwar seems to have transferred his gaming skills into real-life talent. In 2019, he swept through the world cup cycle with four golds, a silver and a bronze out of six tournaments. He has a legacy to uphold—India's only individual gold at the Olympics came in this event, when Abhinav Bindra won it in 2008. But Panwar is also one half of a formidable mixed pair with women's World No. 2 Anjum Moudgil.

NEERAJ CHOPRA, 23
MEN'S JAVELIN

**World
Ranking 4**

Gold, 2018 Asian Games
Gold, 2018 Commonwealth Games
Personal Best — 88.07 metres
2016 Rio medal distances: 90.3, 88.24, 85.38

The javelin thrower, India's first global track and field star in decades, has had a poor build-up to the Olympics. Yet he remains one of the world's top throwers. With a 88.06 metre throw that won him the 2018 Asian Games gold and a 88.07 m throw at the Indian GP this year, he is inching closer to that elusive 90 m mark that only one man in the world, Germany's Johannes Vetter, hits right now.

**BAJRANG
PUNIA, 27**
WRESTLING, 65KG FREESTYLE

**World
Ranking 1**

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

A wrestler who loves the big stage, there's no major tournament in the last three years where Punia has not won a medal. He is the complete package: power, speed, and skills. Injury free and with lengthy training stints in the US and in various European nations with a strong wrestling culture ahead of the Olympics, Punia is in the shape of his life.

{ **BULLSEYE** } SHARDA UGRA TALKS TO ABHINAV BINDRA

'The Games prove it is still possible to unite'

Sharda Ugra

letters@hindustantimes.com

The pandemic-era Tokyo Olympics, says Beijing gold medalist Abhinav Bindra, with no spectators and strict bio-safety rules, will in some ways benefit young Indian athletes by taking away "the sensory overload" of a Games and making it more like just another, normal competition.

In a video conversation with Wknd, Bindra, a five-time Olympian, said, "You enter an Olympic Village, you see the athletes, feel the aura and the atmosphere that exists in an Olympic arena and in an Olympic competition. In that sensory overload you are going to cognitively decline and that's going to affect your performance."

Tokyo instead has stipulated that every athlete will have specific designated areas they can access, and must list their movements, activity plans and regular contacts (they will all also be tested daily).

Athletes are also advised to eat on their own or two metres from the next person, and have been told to "avoid shouting, cheering and singing".

"You're pretty much locked into your room and are going to compete. So it's much closer to a normal tournament that you're used to competing in, so it should play up to our advantage and I'm being positive here," Bindra said.

Bindra, who retired at the Rio Games in 2016, added that the 12-month postponement of the Olympics called for "flexibility and adaptability" from athletes. They will now be allowed into Tokyo just five days prior to their event. "It's not much time and you have to learn how to adapt, you have to prepare for jet lag in advance, start getting into the time zone a couple of days prior. And in Tokyo, you have to plan your day to remain in a good frame of mind," Bindra said. "I think being flexible and open-minded and ready to adapt would have been my mantra. Go with the flow, because nobody knows what happens next... Just be open to change, ready to adapt a bit faster. The athletes that do that would probably be the ones who come through and perform well."

Of the 15-strong Indian shooting contingent, 11 are first-time Olympians, eight are 25 or under, with three teenagers and two having just turned 20. Bindra's advice to the Indian contingent, shooters and all, is to ignore the outcome and live in the moment. "Don't think too much about the possibility that awaits you. Do not carry the baggage of the past. Live in that moment. Do not waste mental capacities reminding yourself of the desired outcome. Rather, put that mental output into the execution of the skill."

Competing in an Olympics, "even though Tokyo is a very special and different Games, is the opportunity of a lifetime. So savour it



and live it, and if you do that, it gives you the best possible chance to perform to the best of your abilities and frankly, that is all you can do. The outcome you can't really script."

Bindra said he did not expect a difference in the quality of performances. "Athletes have got an extra year to train and a lot of sporting action has resumed." He estimated that "we have seen more than 250 championships and more than 30,000 athletes competing" and expected world-class performances across disciplines.

Post-retirement, Bindra said he hadn't followed shooting competitions closely, relying only on media reports. Having seen the Olympic start lists recently, he added that the Indian contingent "on paper looks so, so good. We have eight athletes starting as World No. 1 and No. 2 in just the sport of shooting" and was looking forward to the mixed group competitions. "A gold medal match between India A vs India B would be wonderful."

With the opening day of the Games coming up on July 24, Bindra said "what is nice to see is that a lot of conversations around the Games are now shifting to the athletes... We are all optimistic that it would be a safe and secure Games, and the concerns remain with everybody, but at least we are starting to hear about the athletes."

To Bindra, the Games are more than just a sporting event, and in a disrupted, fraught world, Tokyo could stand for something bigger. He pointed out during the two weeks, "the Olympic Village will perhaps be the most unique place on the planet". Athletes from 206 countries and the IOC's Refugee Olympic Team "will be staying together in friendship and respect and intense competition". "This spirit that is so unique to an Olympics is needed more than ever, especially after what we have seen in the last couple of years around the world with the pandemic, when there has been excessive nationalism and an excessive egoism."

Tokyo, Bindra added, "has a real chance to get this Olympic spirit back and remind the world that it is still possible to unite."

{ **THE FIRST AND THE FURIOUS** } TRENDSETTERS

The Indians breaking new ground in Tokyo

Rutvik Mehta

rutvik.mehta@hindustantimes.com

Among the 120-odd athletes heading out to represent the country at the Tokyo Olympics are a sprinkling who have taken India into fields where no Indian has qualified before: sailing, fencing, swimming, running.

CA Bhavani Devi: Before the Budapest Sabre World Cup in March, Devi's mother was hospitalised in Chennai with Covid-19. Training in Italy, the Indian fencer was torn between heading to Budapest and returning home. "My mother told me from her hospital bed, 'Don't worry, I'll be home soon. You just focus on your game'. It struck me that the Olympics were not just my dream but also my family's," Bhavani Devi said.

That dream was realised. The 27-year-old sealed a Tokyo berth in the women's individual sabre event to become the first Indian fencer to qualify for the Olympics.

Nethra Kumanan: The 23-year-old spent all of last year miles away from her home in Chennai, sailing around the Spanish island of Gran Canaria, home-sick but determined to be battle-ready. At the Mussanah Open Championship in April, she became the first Indian woman sailor to make it to the Olympics, by finishing second in the Laser Radial event in Oman. She marked another first by earning a qualification for the Games; the previous nine Indian sailors made it to the Olympics by filling in quotas.

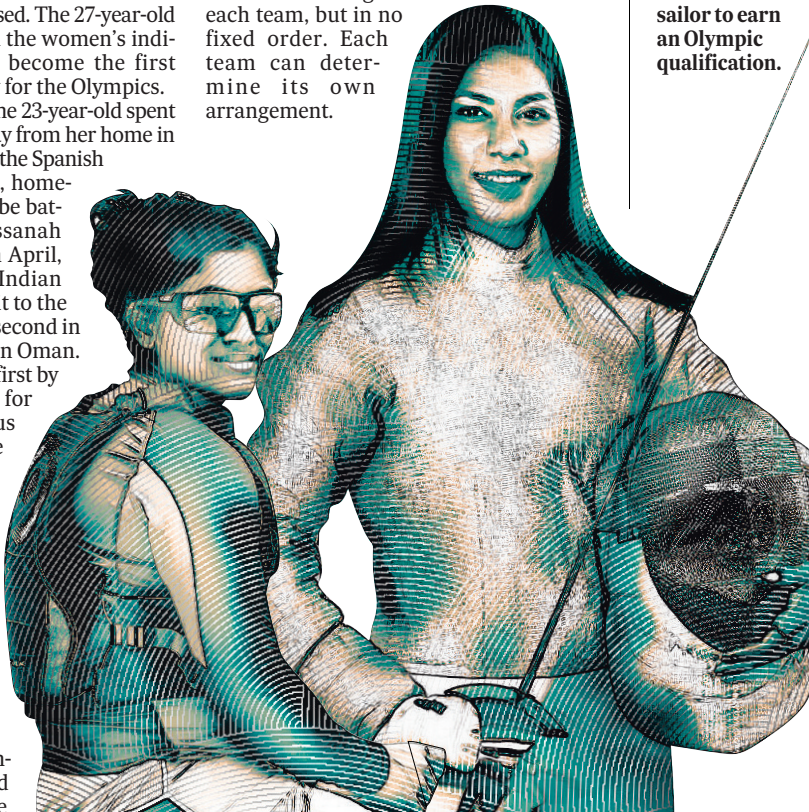
Sajan Prakash and Srihari Nataraj: First there were none. Then, over a couple of days at the Sette Colli Trophy in Rome last month, Sajan Prakash (200m butterfly) and Srihari Nataraj (100m backstroke) took Indian swimming into uncharted waters when they made

the cut for the Tokyo Games with the "A" qualifying mark.

This mark guarantees automatic qualification. All the Indian swimmers who have participated in Olympics so far made it either via the "B" standard (where you get a chance if a swimmer with an "A" time pulls out), or through the quotas given to countries from where no one has qualified.

4x400m mixed relay team: Sarthak Bhambrni, Alex Antony, Revathi Veeramani, Subha Venkatesan and Dhanalakshmi Sekar are India's first Olympic 4x400m mixed relay team, representing the country in an event making its debut at the Tokyo Games.

India made the cut at the 2019 World Championships in Doha, where the new format also caught the attention of the athletics world. The mixed relay has two men and two women racing from each team, but in no fixed order. Each team can determine its own arrangement.



The Games are more than just a sporting event; in a disrupted, fraught world, the spirit that is so unique to an Olympics is needed more than ever, says Bindra. HT ARCHIVE



Watch Abhinav Bindra discuss India at the Olympics, and the future of the Games, with Sharda Ugra and HT's Rudraneil Sengupta