



MR. ABHINAV BINDRA

Olympic Gold Medalist and
Businessman

Taken by the Editorial Board

YT: You spent a lot of the formative months of your career training in Germany, living alone and testing your wits against some of the best shooters in the world. What was the reason behind the same? Do you think that the athletes who train abroad turn out to be more proficient because of the exposure they receive?

AB: A lot of expertise and the technology I received access to was, and still is, relatively unheard of in India. I was fortunate enough to travel to Germany and the USA to hone my skills. While I know that many things played a part in my success both in India and abroad, the time I spent training and utilizing the Global Best Practices did give a new facet to my training. Through the Abhinav Bindra Foundation Trust, I have championed the cause of providing accessibility, affordability and availability of such Global Best Practices to the Indian grassroots athletes. These are facets of training that enhance an athlete's performance and help them get that one per cent edge over others which can be the difference during elite competitions.

YT: There are instances in which an athlete's performance is affected due to certain factors that are beyond their control. This happened to you when the unstable wooden flooring had cost you a medal in Athens in 2004. How did you cope with this incident, where your hard work was denied fruition by reasons beyond your control?

AB: The 2004 Athens Olympics was an extremely low point for me. I had a very disappointing score in the finals after what I believe was the best I had ever shot. I found out later that the tile under me at the arena was loose, which can have a serious impact in a sport that requires complete accuracy. I was extremely upset and even considered quitting the sport. However, after a lot of introspection, I decided to train even harder and moulded myself to be perfect on an imperfect day. I wanted to be prepared for every possibility and did not want to leave anything to chance. I trained after that with a loose tile in my range, I even booked a marriage hall and designed it as an arena to give myself a better feel for the final competition. The most important thing I learnt along the way is that nothing

matters more than honesty to the work that you do, and ensuring that you have done everything you could to succeed. The process is all that matters and following it without worrying about external factors is what helped me get better as an athlete as well as a person.

YT: In the year 2005, you suffered from a prolonged injury because of which you had to stop practicing for almost a year. How did you ensure that you maintained positivity and that you didn't go out of practice during that time? How difficult was it for you to make a comeback after recovery?

AB: Physically, it was tough, yes. Coming back from an injury is never easy, since you have to realign every movement and it takes time to get back to full throttle. But my mind had recovered from the disaster of Athens 2004. The thought of redemption drove me and even though my back was in constant agony, I decided to not go for surgery, instead opting for intense rehabilitation in Germany. The pain did reduce me to tears sometimes, it was unforgiving but I did everything I could, spending five to six hours a day with a physio, trying to balance and strengthen my muscles, and alternating between exercise and therapy. It was draining but I learnt to dig deep, which is a very important lesson for any champion. As a professional athlete, you have to sometimes live with injuries and that means missing training. I too coped with it.

YT: In shooting, even the slightest of errors can affect the results of the sport significantly. In addition to this, there is an immense pressure that follows in representing your country at the international stage. How did you remain calm and maintain precision under such circumstances?

AB: It is very important to immerse yourself in the process and only worry about things that are under your control. It is obviously not as easy as it

sounds and some people are able to do it much earlier while others, like me, take time. Accepting the pressure of competing so that you can use your mind and energy on other things is the first step. The pressure can then drive you forward rather than hold you back. Once you accept pressure, it helps you perform better and gives you that little bit of edge to do your best.

YT: Many athletes, including you, have stressed on the importance of sports psychologists in India. Do you think that athletes, who focus on fitness and health considerably, being vocal about it can contribute immensely towards destigmatizing mental illness? With the aspirations and effort involved in striving for success, what are the issues that athletes sometimes face in regard to mental health and what, according to you, can be done to help those who experience this?

AB: I would recommend that as a first step, we need to understand that athletes are not superhumans. They are like any other person - they feel overwhelmed, face the sadness of rejection heavily and are prone to a variety of competition related stress. This is the mindset that sets the foundation for becoming advocates of athlete mental health. Whether it is a simple affirmation, a friendly chat, or just simply being there, each of these small gestures help build trust and a comfort level that will help an athlete open up to you, just like anyone else. It is important to make an athlete aware of what they are facing as well, many may be oblivious to why they feel the way they do. Grounding them in their strengths, and encouraging them to work on their weaknesses is an important and integral part. Moreover, we need to make them aware that winning and losing is not the measure of their success. Winning medals is great but it is not everything and it should not be the only aim in your life. These conversations may seem rather insignificant in a vacuum, but these are the building blocks to help athletes through dark

times, reduce the stigma associated with mental health, and even find a way to see this permeate into the society that we live in.

YT: Having obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration from the University of Colorado, you have not only performed exceptionally well in sports but also in academics. What advice would you like to give to young athletes, who, considering the time and effort that is required in this field, choose to drop out of education to focus on fulfilling their dream? What, according to you, can be done to ensure that these aspiring athletes from all around the country have access to education?

AB: Education is extremely important for an athlete, considering they do not really have another option to fall back upon in case things do not work out in professional sport. Additionally, after retiring from sport at a relatively young age of say 40, most athletes do not have any other career option and are entirely dependent on the pension they receive. Of course, some might not find it easy to balance both but it makes practical sense to pursue both in some form at least. What can also be done is to opt for courses that will help them in the sporting ecosystem, something they are already passionate about. That is what we have been trying to do through the Abhinav Bindra Sports Medicine and Research Institute, which is a one of its kind institutes bridging the gap between Indian healthcare and the sporting ecosystem. Currently, there are bachelors and masters level programmes with an aim to achieve excellence by bringing Global Best Practices to Indian healthcare and sports medicine.

YT: A key initiative for your outreach to Indian sports is through the Abhinav Bindra Foundation, a non-profit initiative where athletes are provided access to the latest

sports technology and physical training for free. Considering your significant contribution in this field, what in your opinion is it that we lack in terms of technology and what can the government do in this regard to provide a boost to the sportspersons of the country?

AB: There is no doubt that champions have to be built through systems and processes; governments and sports authorities have a huge role to play in helping build those systems. The technological advancements in the sporting ecosystem are the need of the hour and it is imperative that we as a sporting nation stay at par with the Global Best Practices, if we want to keep building on our success in the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics 2020. Look at the example of Odisha, the infrastructure they have implemented in partnership with various stakeholders to assist athletes through various High-Performance Centers. They did not achieve this overnight, instead they identified the need to build from the grassroots through state-wide talent identification programmes, and are now reaping the rewards with numerous athletes bringing glory to the state and the nation.

YT: In your autobiography, 'A Shot at History: My Obsessive Journey to Olympic Gold', you have mentioned that the sports with significant commercial advantage are prioritized over other sports as they are held more frequently and thus, provide the sportsperson with innumerable opportunities to prove themselves. Considering this situation, do you think that the Olympics should be held more frequently so as to give athletes more opportunities? Also, what can be done to ensure that these sports receive the required support from the administrators?

AB: Comparing the Olympics with commercial sport is not fair since it is a stage which comprises many

sports and different categories of events under those sports. For example, the Tokyo Olympics 2020 had athletes from 50 sporting disciplines competing in 339 different events. Some of those sports like badminton or tennis or football are more commercially viable than other sports. That is because their sporting federations or authorities have built a strong structure with relevant tournaments attracting audiences and viewers. All landmark sporting events are held after every four years. An alternative solution is to promote the less popular sports and make them more accessible and less niche. Neeraj Chopra won a Gold in javelin throw, but how popular is his sport compared to cricket or football or basketball? So, yes, these sports require support from the administrators, require funding and definitely require a proper cycle of tournaments to bring them to the eyes of the public.

to learn. The landscape is changing rapidly around the world and it is yours for the taking as long as you stay dedicated and focused on what you do. More important, however, is to always look at the bigger picture. It is a cliché but also the most important truth that everyone should accept - failure is not a setback. Failure, in fact, is a crucial step to success. You are bound to fail short sometimes even though you worked immensely hard for something. It is completely okay. Learn from it, reassess and restart. For example, only a minuscule percentage of the athletes win medals in the Olympic Games. That does not mean the majority of us are failures and should stop trying. Believe in the process, give your best. That is the only controllable factor, your only success. The result will come - sometimes early and sometimes, a bit later.

YT: Your journey to the pinnacle of success has been a source of inspiration for millions of Indians; the students of St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, are no different. What message would you like to give to them?

AB: I believe that regardless of how you choose to pursue success, as a student, an athlete, a businessman or an employee in any industry, make sure to be perseverant and always be ready