



A race well run

Manjit Singh's 800m gold at the 2018 Asian Games was unexpected. But it was a well-deserved reward for his determination and perseverance

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

Manjit Singh shot to fame with his 800m gold in the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta-Palembang. The middle distance runner from Haryana had taken part in his first international event—the Asian Athletics Championships, Pune—in 2013. But injuries and the lack of funds held him back. But these obstacles could not reduce his love for running. In the final in Jakarta, he stepped up when it really mattered, and made history. Excerpts from an exclusive interview:

Tell us about your early days. Were you always inclined towards athletics?

I belong to a family of farmers. I grew up herding cattle and running around empty fields with no real dream or passion. I was exposed to athletics by my father Randhir Singh Chahal, a former state-level shot-putter, who now runs a dairy business. I won many times in the National School Games. In fact, I was one of the 15 students selected for the Sports Nursery at Narwana in 2003. The coaches, Mewa Singh and Karan Singh, recognised my potential as a distance runner and insisted that I join the Jalandhar Sports Academy after Class XII in 2005. After that, I joined the NIS [National Institute of Sport], Patiala, from 2010 to 2013.

When did you realise you wanted to be a professional athlete?

I used to accompany my father to different state-level athletics tournaments and saw him win several medals. I remember my father telling me that I was five years old when I started running, and I used to run freely on our farmland, climb hillocks, run to Jind town and bring groceries. My father took the initia-

tive of taking me to the ground where I saw many people training. At first, it felt like a forced activity, but eventually I realised even I wanted to train and take up running professionally.

What challenges did you face in your journey as an athlete?

Life always gives us two choices. Either we can run away from our problems or we can run towards our dreams. There will always be challenges in our way, how we choose to overcome them is what defines us. I come from a very humble family with limited means. I did not have any sponsor or godfather to back me. However, I made the most of what I had. I made my mark at the Federation Cup in 2014. Sadly, back in 2010, when I ran the Commonwealth Games and finished last in my semifinal, I not only lost the race but my job as well. I was also unfortunately plagued by injuries for a couple of years, but I did not lose focus. There was a time when I had reached the peak of my frustration, but after meeting my coach Amrish Kumar, I gained perspective. He urged me to channel my frustration towards my own good. I remember, when I requested him to train me, he said 'You will have to forget everything and focus on just training'. My coach dedicated all his time and energy in training me. A lot of attention was focused on improving my timing for the Asian Games. Neither my coach nor I went to our homes for two years, even when my son was born. This is the level of dedication you need when you want to win.

Tell us about your training?

It is sheer hard work because I am training 24x7. Physically, I train for seven to eight hours every day and



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Manjit Singh crosses the finish line in the 800m final at the 2018 Asian Games

mentally I am constantly thinking about training and ways of improving myself. I run even in my dreams. While training in the morning, I am simultaneously thinking of my next training session. I watch videos of the races in which I had failed in order to remind myself of what I needed to do right to win. I also feel inspired by watching videos and reading about the journey of sports personalities such as Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Sachin Tendulkar and Michael Jordan.

After winning so many silver medals did you ever worry about why you could not finish first? Did this affect you negatively?

‘Second-only’ is what was expected from me and this is actually a fact. Even I thought that I will win silver everywhere but never gold. But then I would constantly remind myself of the promise I made to my father. He once asked me to run one race that I would be remembered for and I agreed. While preparing for and running at the Asian Games, I kept reminding myself of that promise again and again.

Your Asian Games gold was unexpected. Please take us through what was going on in your mind then.

It was not an easy win, because I was not leading for the most part of the race. My competition in most races, India’s Jinson Johnson and Qatar’s Abdalla

Abubaker, were busy in their own tussle. Nobody expected me to suddenly get the better of them because I had uneventful domestic seasons in the last few years. I do not clearly recall what was going on in my head because I was only focused on reaching my goal, the finish line. But, all I remember was I had to give it my best as this was the only opportunity I had. I simply put in every ounce of my energy to go ahead of my opponents and win, perhaps, the most important race of my life.

What is your advice to aspiring athletes?

You have to give everything to whatever you do. Being an athlete entails lots of choices, sacrifices, and above all, dedication because if this lifestyle was easy then everyone would do it.

What do you like doing when not training?

I love to help my father in his agriculture and dairy business. I also love to spend time listening to music and going on long drives.

Tell us something about you that people do not know.

I am very fond of playing volleyball. It helps me keep fit. Also, even if I am dead tired after training I make sure I grind almonds and have them with milk. I make sure I eat well. □