

An initiative by former sportsmen Geet Sethi and Prakash Padukone to identify and support the best of talent in a variety of sports to become world champions has started to pay off. Now, they are inviting common people to join the drive through small donations

# Playing For Country

## LEAGUE OF CHAMPIONS

### TOP ATHLETES OLYMPIC GOLD QUEST SUPPORTS

- **Saina Nehwal** (Badminton); World No. 2/3
- **Mary Kom** (Boxing); Won fifth World Boxing Championship this year
- **Gagan Narang** (Shooting); World champion
- **Vijay Kumar** (Shooting); Commonwealth Games champion
- **Omkar Singh** (Shooting); Commonwealth Games champion

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**PRAKASH PADUKONE**  
CO-FOUNDER,  
OLYMPIC GOLD  
QUEST



Meenakshi Verma Ambwani  
NEW DELHI

SAINA Nehwal might not have been able to travel with her coach and physiotherapist for the recent Hong Kong Open Series, which she won, if it wasn't for the not-for-profit organisation Olympic Gold Quest.

"Just three days before she had to travel, she texted me, 'I want to travel with my coach and physiotherapist'; we funded her entire trip and the results are for all to see," says Viren Rasquinha, former captain of the Indian hockey team and COO of Olympic Gold Quest.

A brainchild of five-time World Billiards champion Geet Sethi and India's first All England Badminton champion Prakash Padukone, Olympic Gold Quest funds training and individual needs of select athletes with a potential to win Olympics and other international events.

"The government and federations fund and train a large number of athletes, but they are not focused on the top performers. Identifying top sportspeople and looking after their individual needs is where Olympic Gold Quest comes in," says Padukone, co-founder of the not-for-profit foundation.

The idea took off once it found buyers in corporate India. DSP Merrill Lynch executive vice-chairman Shitin Desai and Sequoia Capital India senior advisor R Ramaraj were the two initial venture partners, bringing in seed capital for the foundation.

Today, besides Desai and Ramaraj, Accel Partners MD Neeraj Bhardwaj and Ambit RSM founding partner Rakesh Khanna are on the board of the foundation as venture partners.

And 10 companies, including Edelweiss Capital and Bajaj Foundation, support it.

The foundation has recently launched a fundraising campaign to widen its reach to the grass-root level.

Called 'Power the Champions', the initiative encourages individuals to support top athletes through small donations.

"Besides raising funds, it's also a sort of mass movement where every citizen gets an opportunity to help Indian athletes to be a success at the Olympics," says Geet Sethi.

The campaign has been initially launched among the employees of certain corporates.

Already, employees of Airtel, Dabur, Deutsche Bank, Max New York Life and Edelweiss Capital

among several others have become regular contributors in this initiative.

The foundation hopes to have at least 10,000 employees of corporate India to be part of the initiative by mid next year.

It also plans targeted marketing campaigns on social networking sites. "We believe that even if a million people contribute Rs 100 per month we will be able to fund 2000 sports professionals at the grass-root level," says Viren Rasquinha.

At present, the foundation supports 24 athletes across badminton, boxing, shooting and athletics.

From Saina Nehwal, who has won three consecutive Grand Prix tournaments this year, to Mary Kom, who won her fifth consecutive World Boxing Championship in September, Olympic Gold Quest supports a number of top talents. Other top names include Commonwealth Games winning shooters Vijay Kumar and Omkar Singh.

The organisation will soon add wrestling and archery to the sports it supports and aims at funding 2,000 athletes in the mid-to-long term.

It recently roped in World Chess champion Vishwanathan Anand and 11-time tennis Grand Slam doubles winner Leander Paes to join the board as mentors for the athletes.

For the organisation that receives one application per day for funding, identifying talent is the most crucial and rigorous process. "We have a team of specialised sports professionals who do methodical research and look at various parameters to identify whether a sportsperson has the potential to become an Olympian champion," says Rasquinha.

Each individual is meticulously screened at several levels based on their performances, temperament and ethics, and is adopted by the foundation after a final approval of the board.

Once a player is on board, his/her training, equipment, coaches, physiotherapist, medical professionals and mental trainers are facilitated accordingly.

"The key thing is that the sportsperson is given the opportunity to spend the funds in the way they want," says Padukone.

It all started back in 2001 when, appalled by the lack of training facilities and preparations of the Indian contingent at the Sydney Olympics, Geet Sethi decided its time to do something about it.

A brainstorming session with Padukone gave birth to the organization. But the going was not easy.

"Even though we the foundation was set up in 2001, the real work started happening three years ago when we got corporate support who gave us the seed capital to set this foundation," says Sethi.

Now, it is betting on the country's growing middle class to grab a chance to own the moment when an Olympic Gold Quest athlete becomes a world champion.



**GEET SETHI**  
CO-FOUNDER, OLYMPIC GOLD QUEST

**We want to start a mass movement where every citizen has an opportunity to help Indian athletes to be a success at the Olympics**



**VIREN RASQUINHA**  
COO, OLYMPIC GOLD QUEST

**We believe that even if a million people contribute Rs 100 per month, we will be able to fund 2,000 sports professionals at the grassroot level**