

CHAT SHOW

MAKING RAPID STRIDES

"The Arjuna Award was not my goal. It came and I am happy about it. However, doing well in tournaments is important," says Dipika Pallikal to S. R. SURYANARAYAN.



V. GANESAN

24 | SPORTSTAR, OCTOBER 13, 2012

Chennai has been a city of squash champions. Vaidehi Reddy, Joshna Chinappa, Saurav Ghosal, Dipika Pallikal... The list promises to expand. However, of this lot, Dipika has scaled heights that no other squash player in India has ever done.

The 21-year-old Asian junior champion, who is now ranked No. 15 in the world, is clear about her goal and is confident of achieving it. On a short visit to Chennai in the midst of a hectic season, Dipika took time off to speak to *Sportstar*.

Excerpts:

Question: Was it a surprise winning the Arjuna Award?

Answer: After the forms were sent, I did not follow it. I told myself that 'if I have to get it, I will get it'. Yes, I did not expect it.

'AT A TIME WHEN EFFORTS ARE ON TO MAKE SQUASH A PART OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES, SUCH RECOGNITION (ARJUNA AWARD) WILL FURTHER INSPIRE YOUNG TALENT TO TAKE UP THE SPORT IN A BIG WAY.'

FACTFILE

Name: Dipika Pallikal

Born: September 21, 1991

* National champion at the age of 11

* Ranked No. 1 in Europe and Asia in U-15

* Reigning National champion

* Turned professional in 2006

* Won her first WISPA title — Orange County, California, in 2011

* First Indian to enter top eight in World Open in 2011

* First Indian to reach the final of the Tournament of Champions (New York) in 2012

* First Indian to reach the semi-finals of the Australian Open (a gold event) in 2012

* Ranked World No. 14 — her highest ever — in February 2012.

* Her latest ranking is 15, making her the highest ranked Indian in world squash.

* Conferred the Arjuna Award in 2012



Finally, when I got the news, it was on the day when I had lost in the semi-finals of the Australian Open. I was in a sad mood, but when this news came, it was like a balm. The feeling did not sink in initially. Only when I attended the function and received the award from the President did I feel proud.

You are the second squash player after Saurav Ghosal to be honoured...

This is good for Indian squash. At a time when efforts are on to make squash a part of the Olympic Games, such recognition, I believe, will further inspire

K. PICHUMANI

'IT IS MY COACH SARAH FITZ-GERALD'S (IN PIC, WITH DIPIKA) STYLE THAT I AM TRYING TO EMULATE. ONCE IN NEW YORK, SOMEBODY SAID MY BACKHAND VOLLEY BROUGHT MEMORIES OF SARAH, WHO HAD BY FAR THE FINEST BACKHAND IN THE GAME. I THOUGHT THAT WAS THE BIGGEST COMPLIMENT I EVER RECEIVED. WHEN SHE IS AROUND, I AM INSPIRED.'

young talent to take up the sport in a big way.

What about your goal to reach the top 10 in the world?

That is my next aim. The Arjuna Award was not my goal. It came and I am happy about it. However, doing well in tournaments is important to achieve my goal of entering the top 10 in the world by December. In fact, until December there are back-to-back tournaments — in the U.S., Macau and China. Then comes the World Team Championship in Nimes, France. Hopefully, I can do well (in these tournaments). I surprised myself by reaching the semifinals of the Australian Open. That has certainly enhanced my confidence.

As one who has played most of the top rung players in the world, is there anything that you miss?

Yes, the presence of Sarah Fitz-Gerald, my coach and the one whom I idolise. The five-time World champion and Commonwealth Gold medallist has been through it all in her career, and it is her style that I am trying to emulate. Once in New York, somebody said my backhand volley brought memories of Sarah, who had by far the finest backhand in the game. I thought that was the biggest compliment I ever received. When she is around, I am inspired. I hope I will have

sponsors to fund her trips with me. If I am half as good as Sarah was, then I must say I have lived up to her expectations.

How has the experience of travelling and playing around the globe been?

In Egypt, squash is like cricket in India in terms of popularity. The reason for this is that most of their players are champions. Malaysia too is not far behind, thanks to Nicol David. She is looked upon like Sachin Tendulkar here. Then there are the cultural aspects, climate, ambience, living with friends' families. It is all tough but there's much to look forward to.

Among Indian sportspersons, whom do you admire the most?

Saina Nehwal for the way she has set a high platform for all women in sport in the country. Her excellence has driven her to a new high in badminton and has made the sport so much more popular. She has done brilliantly for the country, handled pressures in a mature way. I wish I could also do the same for squash. Surely, Saina is a role model for all taking up sport.

How do you overcome distractions?

Basically, I know what I have to achieve and so I am focussed. In any case, my people, mom and sisters, ensure that I am firmly grounded always.

So at home, I am as normal as a normal girl is, being scolded by mom for anything not done right! Still I keep reminding myself of my ranking and my goal to reach the top. That keeps me going.

What about your studies?

I have a year more in Ethiraj College (in Chennai), but I have not attended even one class this year (smiles). But then, I hardly miss anything. My mom ensures that the notes come to her and my sisters (I have two) ensure that they reach me and I finish them and send them back. This has been working perfectly. Indeed, I feel blessed to have such lovely support from my near and dear ones.

Who would you thank for what you are today?

My family, my working parents and my sisters. They have given up so much for me. My mom travelled with me for so many years. They made a lot of sacrifice for me and that is unforgettable. My coaches — there are so many right from my early days — and now Sarah Fitz-Gerald have all ensured that things fall in place. That is a great feeling. My trainer Basu Shankar, who has been with me from the age of 14... There are so many others, my sponsors Nike and now UltraTech Cement. At least for them I must achieve my goal.



AIMING FOR THE TOP... Dipika Pallikal in action against Kasey Brown of Australia in the WISPA Masters Tournament in New Delhi. Her immediate goal is to enter the top 10 in the world by December this year.

SANDEEP SAXENA