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Sprint queen on payback run - Former international gold medallist believes Indian women have potential

JAYESH THAKER



Kooner: Tireless Picture by Bhola Prasad

Jamshedpur, Sept. 5: She was the first Indian woman to win a sports medal.

That may have been way back in 1970, but Kamaljeet Sandhu Kooner is still fit enough to run a mile. From monitoring athletes at the national camp in Patiala to inspiring her son's performance before his swimming competitions, the 54-year-old former track-star is untiring in her efforts to keep national athletics on an even keel. She believes that this is her way of paying back something to the sport which has brought her fame and

money.

Kooner was the first Indian woman to win a medal — the 400-m gold in the Bangkok Asian Games in 1970. In the city as a special guest of the organising committee of the 43rd National Inter-state Athletics Championship, Kooner has high hopes for the national women athletes, who she thinks have the potential to win plenty of international medals.

"I have a busy schedule as director of the national athletic camps in Patiala. Besides that I also have my household to manage," she told The Telegraph. Her husband, Hardayal Singh, is a scientist who provides inputs for national campers in athletics, boxing, judo, women's hockey and weightlifting.

Halfway through the conversation, Kooner's mobile phone rang. It was her younger son, calling just before a school swimming competition. "Don't get distracted. Just concentrate on your job," she advised her son, a class XII student. Her elder son, Jai, is a second-year student of the Canadian Institute of Advanced Studies in Chandigarh.

The athlete, who held the national record in 400 metres and 200 metres for almost a decade until it was broken by Rita Sen of Calcutta and later by P.T. Usha, is not content with sitting on her laurels. "Whatever I am today is because of athletics. Now, I want to give something in return," said Kooner, who was the coach of the Indian women's sprint team in the 1982 Asian Games.

Kooner, who was awarded the Padmashree in 1971, was a finalist in the 400-m race in the World University Games at Turin, Italy, in 1971. She was also a part of the national team in the 1972 Munich Olympics. The former-ace sprinter underwent training in Los Angeles that year. Kooner finally called it quits in 1973.

"I have never lost a race in my life. I was equally good at basketball and hockey. I played national-level basketball and participated in the inter-varsity hockey meets," she added.

Kooner was all praise for Jamshedpur. "I visited the Centre for Excellence and the Tata Football Academy. I plan to go to the Dimna Lake and the Jubilee Park. This city is very well-maintained and the people are educated and warm," she said.



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