



**FEATURED ATHLETE**

**MR Poovamma (Photo: 2014 Incheon Asian Games @Getty)**

**POOVAMMA ENJOYING  
TRANSITION TO SENIOR  
STATESMAN ROLE IN  
DYNAMIC RELAY SQUAD**

M R Poovamma has travelled a long way from being the baby of the Indian athletics contingent in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing to being the elder statesman in the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta. She has experienced the transition, slipping into the new role effortlessly and enjoying the process, too.

"It has been a different experience over the past couple of years. Till 2017, I was part of a squad that had runners who were either as old as me or a couple of years older. But now, most of the girls in the team are six or seven years younger than I am," she says from Patiala. "On the track they see me as a competitor but outside, they look up to me like a member of their family."

The lockdown, forced by the Covid-19 outbreak, and the aftermath have given her the opportunity to don the leadership mantle. "For a couple of months, I managed the workout of the other girls. I enjoyed the role assigned to me," says the 30-year-old. "We were able to maintain our fitness even during lockdown."

Poovamma reveals that the women's relay squad trained in the lawn in the hostel premises. "It was a change off the track. We hung out together. It was not like it was a punishment, being forced to stay away from the track and the gym. Our coaches and Athletics Federation of India President Adille (Sumariwalla) sir and (Dr. Lalit) Bhanot sir kept us motivated," she says.

"I am glad I share great relationships with all my team-mates. They are comfortable sharing their thoughts with me. I mingle with them and have never made them feel that I must be respected because of my age. Ayyasamy Dharun, for example, keeps asking me to stop competing. 'How much will you make us work to keep pace with you?' he says," she reveals.



Poovamma, now a triple Asian Games gold medallist, has her sights set on the 2022 Asian Games as well. "I am sure I can qualify for the individual event too besides contributing to the relay team," she says. "I want to set an example for the coming generation that more than age, dedication and hard work show on the track."

The Mangalorean, who missed the 2012 Olympic Games with an excruciating disc bulge, says she wants to change the thinking of the people that athletes cannot perform well or compete hard beyond a certain age. "I can see a number of athletes overseas who are 32 or 33 and doing well. I want to make a difference to the mindset in India," she says.

Poovamma is a huge advocate of the relay runners training together. "We are all in the same place and working under the guidance of the same coach, Galina (Bukharina) ma'am. It is not just the women's team but also the men's squad which is training together in one place since 2018. It has fostered a team spirit that has to be experienced to be understood," she says.

"It is easier for the coach and the athletes. I am aware that some argue that being together is not as important for the 4x400 team like it is for the 4x100 squad. This happens because we win at the continental level by a comfortable margin but for us to make an impact at the global level, it is imperative that the team trains together and handle pressure better," Poovamma says.

"Galina ma'am is like a second mother. She has an answer to everything I ask. She has been a great motivation and has kept me going. She instils confidence in everyone who has worked with her. While I respect all coaches who have influenced my career, I can say without hesitation that she is the best I have worked with," Poovamma says.

"She is strict on the track and very friendly off it. We enjoy the training and there is no favouritism at all. She treats everyone the same and keeps the team together. We feel motivated to work very hard because of the support and encouragement she gives us when we need it the most," she says.

Poovamma picks the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon where she won an individual bronze medal and a relay gold as the two best moments of her life as an athlete. "The latter instance was a good example of holding together under stress. I built the pressure on myself with the intense desire to do well for myself and for the country," she says.

"I am addicted to my passion, athletics. I know I may have to stop sometime in the future, but I can't think of it at all. I am grateful to the Federation, especially Mr. Sumariwalla and Dr. Bhanot, for their faith in my abilities," Poovamma says, hoping that some form of competition resumes for the Indian athletes soon.

"Kiran and I ran an unofficial race in March after the AFI Grand Prix was cancelled. Otherwise, the last race was at the World Athletics Championships in October 2019," she says, thanking her parents for their support and encouragement. "Most parents push their daughters to get married but mine have allowed me to carry on with my athletics. I am grateful."

# HARBANS LAL SURI RECALLS 1964 OLYMPIC MARATHON RUN



**WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE**

*1964 Olympic marathon*



*Harbans Lal Suri, 1964*

He appears towards the end of the 17-minute video on YouTube around the 1964 Olympic Games marathon. The camera zooms in on his blistered soles and rises to a face that is grimacing in pain and, at the same time, reveals Harbans Lal Suri's grit and resolve that saw him complete the race rather than give up midway.

"I have seen that video many times and I draw pride from having finished the gruelling race. It would have been easy to give up, because of the bleeding feet, but it would have been tough to live with the thought that some would say I went on a holiday and eventually let the country down," the 82-year-old says from his Ghaziabad home.

As many as 56 years after his race, Harbans Lal Suri recalls the race as if he ran it just a few weeks earlier. "We had never experienced anything like that before. It was an eye-opener," the barefoot runner says, recalling that he finished the 42km in 2 hours 37 minutes 5.8 seconds. "I won the trials in Delhi in 2:28 to qualify for the Olympic Games."

"It was cold in Tokyo, but it was just as well for us that the marathon was in the afternoon. Honestly, we should have matched our time that we clocked in the trials," he says. "When running a sub-2:28, I picked up a cut in my foot when nearing the finish in the Railway Stadium, now called the Karnail Singh Stadium, in Delhi. That flared up during the Tokyo run.

"I was running a comfortable place till 35km or so when the blisters started bleeding and I was in excruciating pain," he says, pausing as if to erase that memory. It was only a strong desire to finish that took me across the line. I always hope that people will appreciate the hard work and determination behind the agonised look on the YouTube video," he says.

Harbans Lal Suri lights up at the mention of racing with the legendary Ethiopian Abebe Bikila. "When I look back at our conversations now, I smile. I do not think he understood what we said. Nor did we understand what he spoke. But running with him was sheer delight. Who needs language to understand one another when sport can bring people together?

"Till this day, I recall his stride length was consistent while lesser runners would end up shortening their stride length in the second half of the race. He had the amazing ability to relax during the race and accelerate without warning or apparent effort. We could not compare on any aspect – be his speed, experience, or competitive spirit," Harbans Lal Suri says.

He chanced upon running but cherishes his association with athletics to this day. He used to play football and cricket when in high school.

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"I used to be a wicket-keeper and opening batsman. But when I was not allowed to become the captain of the school team, because the teacher believed I did not have the leadership skills, I took to athletics in 1955," he recalls.

"I finished second in the university steeplechase and realised it was better to be a runner and let performances speak for themselves. It is what fetched me a job with the Railways when I ran faster than the man chosen to run for the Northern Railway in the National Championships. I owe this to a Mr. Ramamurthy who encouraged me to take up a job," he says.

German Olympian Otto Peltzer, who was coaching in Modern School, was the one who encouraged me to take to marathon after he saw me run the 5 miles and 10 miles events on one day in the Delhi State Road Races. It was only then that I competed in the Inter-University Championships, Northern Railway championships and the Inter-Railway Championships.

"I ran barefoot from the beginning of my athletics career – be it in the inter-collegiate or the inter-university or the national championships. I started off as a steeplechaser and then converted to a long-distance runner. It was a struggle to the top, with no formal coaching. The only help we would get was from coaches like JS Saini, TJ Francis and Illyas Babar," he says.

After the Tokyo Olympics, his only international marathon, Harbans Lal Suri gave up sport and focussed on his professional career. "I was heartbroken when Railways did not promote me – and a promotion would have allowed me to train longer – and gave up running for academics. Worse, I had to do my day job as TTE and then practice in the evening," he recalls.

"In any case, there was no great future as a marathon runner. It is only in the recent years that runners have been able to win prize money. I pursued graduation and post-graduation studies when with the Railways. After 13 years of service, I gave up that job to join my alma mater, MMS College in Ghaziabad, as the Director of Physical Education.

"Some years later, I was appointed to as Physical Education lecturer in the Satyavati College in Delhi University. I am proud of the effort I put in when I was in athletics and later in academics. I acknowledge the help from a number of people in my journey, but I would like to believe that I am a self-made man, one who charted his own destiny," he says. Indeed.

## RELAY TEAMS GETTING READY TO SECURE OLYMPIC QUALIFICATION

Our team has started general preparation for Olympics Games in Tokyo with emphasis on technical corrections and strength development related to the event and in an individualistic way. After lockdown was lifted, we formulated a training plan which helped the athletes to improve the running methodology and individualised strength improvement.



### COACHES' CORNER

**(BY GALINA BUKHARINA, HEAD COACH AND RAJ MOHAN MK, COACH, TEAM 400M)**

*(Photo: 2019 World Championships Doha @Getty)*



We conducted periodic tests to evaluate the improvement by these athletes. Most did not take any leave for Covid-19 and are continuing their training sessions inside the NSNIS campus. This helped them to maintain their physical fitness level.

During the General Preparatory phase, we are continuing to polish the merits and demerits of these athletes. If everything goes well by the year-end, we will have preparatory competitions in February 2021 as Indian Grands Prix and the AFI Federation Cup in mid-March. These will be primary competition for selecting relay teams.

After the Federation Cup, we will have our first international competition at Songhkla, Thailand. The Asian Relays Championships is scheduled for April 3 and 4, 2021. We consider this competition as the preparatory competition for relay prior to World Relays which will be held on May 1 and 2 at Silesia, Poland.

This is where we aim to get our men and women's teams qualification for the Olympic Games. We will definitely make an effort to be among the best eight in both the relays and better our best. While we have already qualified for the Mixed relay, we are 12th and 13th in Women and Men's world ranking.

We will have the opportunity to compete in Asian Athletics Championships due to be held in Hangzhou, China from May 20 to 23. Before proceeding to Tokyo for the Olympics, we have our last national competition, the National Inter State Athletics Championships scheduled to be held in Bengaluru in June.

Apart from the relays, we have many athletes who are putting their heart and soul to secure qualification for the Olympic Games.

In men's 400m, we have promising Arokia Rajiv and Muhammed Anas, who are highly motivated and have the capacity to run below 45 seconds. They were in good shape before the lockdown and we expected then to lower their personal bests. If everything goes well, we expect something great from these two athletes.

Hima Das can easily make it below 22.80 seconds in the women's 200m. In women's 400m, Anjali Devi is a very enthusiastic athlete and on the verge of getting qualified individually, having clocked 51.53 in the National Inter State Athletics Championships 2019, very close to the 51.35 set as the qualifying standard. She was very consistent during the workout sessions before the lockdown. Another young aspirant, Vismaya VK also clocked 52.12 in 2019 and she improved her strength and speed which make her a strong contender to Anjali Devi.

In 400m hurdles, we have two strong athletes in Dharun Ayyasamy and Jabir MP. In the 2019 Asian Athletics Championships, Jabir won the bronze in 49.13 and secured a chance to take part in IAAF World Championships in Doha. He was a semi-finalist there and ranked World No. 25. Dharun clocked a National Record 48.80 in the Federation Cup, inside the qualifying mark for the Olympics. If 400 hurdles find place in European calendars, both will book their tickets for the Olympics.

As a team we are working with dedication towards our targets and very enthusiastic, determined. And disciplined. We believe that we can do it and achieve it together.



## GETTING TO KNOW STEEPLECHASE

The Steeplechase, one of the more challenging events on track, derives its name from the steeplechase in horse racing and has its origins, dating back to 1828, in Edinburgh. The word steeple denotes a tower on the building topped with a spire or pyramid-like structure. It started with riders racing horses from a steeple in one town to another steeple in another town. These steeples were used as they could be seen from long distances.

In the Steeplechase for horses, the course inevitably had streams and low stone walls separating estates. Thus, water jumps and the barriers were introduced in modern races. The course length was not standardised in Britain until 1913 and was set as two miles before it was fixed as 3000m, falling in line with the distance in the Olympic Games.

A plan to include steeplechase in the inaugural 1896 Games in Athens was not realised due to disinterest. Paris 1900 saw not one, but two races over 2,500m and 4,000m. In the next two editions at St. Louis (1904) and London (1908), the distances were 2,590m and 3,200m respectively. Steeplechase was not held in 1912.

The Steeplechase with a 'standard distance' of 3,000m was introduced in the 1920 Olympics. Many years passed before the adoption of present specifications including a sloped-surface water jump, world record recognition, age-class competition, and acceptance of women steeplers in the Olympic schedule in 2008.



### TECHNICAL OFFICIALS

*(By Satish Uchil, Secretary- Maharashtra Athletics Association, Convener- AFI Technical Committee)*

From a technical official's standpoint, it is important that there have been no major Amendments in the Rules over the last decade and a half. In fact, the only key change has to do with the depth of water in the pit for the water jump. An amendment in 2020 requires the depth of the water closest to the hurdle to be  $0.50\text{m} \pm 0.05\text{m}$  for approximately 1.20m. From there, the bottom shall have a uniform slope of  $12.4^\circ \pm 1^\circ$  upwards to the level of the track at the farther end of the water pit.

It will be a good time to recap some rules. The standard Distance is 2000m with 18 hurdles and 5 water jumps and 3000m with 28 hurdles and 7 water jumps. The height of the hurdle shall be 0.914m for Senior Men and Under-20 Men, and 0.838m for Under-18 Men. It shall be 0.762m for Women. The distance between the hurdles should be equal.

The length of the Steeplechase hurdles is 3.94m and the length of the Water Jump Hurdle is 3.66m. The section of the Top Bar shall be 0.127sq.m. The base of the hurdles shall be between 1.2m and 1.4m. The Water Jump including the hurdles shall be 3.66m in length and the water pit shall be 3.66m in width.

Each athlete shall go over or through the water and shall go over each hurdle. Failure to do so will result in a disqualification. In addition, an athlete shall be disqualified, if he or she steps to one side or other of the water jump, or has his or her foot or leg, at the instant of clearance, beside the hurdle (on either side), below the horizontal plane of the top of any hurdle.

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The Europeans dominated the event in the Olympic Games till 1968 when Amos Biwot started Kenya's domination. The World Record has also been improved very frequently by Kenyans after it was ratified by the IAAF first in 1954 after introducing rules to fix the number of hurdles and to ensure that water jumps would be part of the Steeplechase.

The first officially ratified World Record was 8:49.6 by Sandor Rozsnyoi (Hungary). Moses Kiptanui (Kenya) was the first to go under 8 minutes when he stopped the clock at 7:59.18 in 1995. The current World Record of 7:53.63 is held by Saif Saaeed Shaheen (Qatar) since 2004. Known as Stephen Cherono when in Kenya, Shaheen migrated to Qatar in 2003.

*(This article is dedicated to Avinash Sable who hails from a rural district of Maharashtra and has become the first Indian to qualify for the Olympics in men's 3000m Steeplechase. He finished 13th in the 2019 World Athletics Championships with a time of 8:21.37, a new National Record. Incidentally, Lalita Babar, the first Indian to reach the 3000m Steeplechase final, also hails from Maharashtra.)*

## GDYNIA RECORDS BEST RESULTS OF WORLD ATHLETICS' AIR QUALITY PROJECT SO FAR

Preliminary analysis of data collected at last weekend's World Athletics Half Marathon Championships indicates that Gdynia has the best air quality of any major athletics event or road race measured since World Athletics' Air Quality Project started in 2018.

The data suggests that the clean air in the Polish city, combined with the optimal temperature and humidity, was among the factors that contributed to the high number of personal best performances in Gdynia, which included the world record set by the women's winner Peres Jepchirchir.

As part of World Athletics' continuing pilot programme to measure air quality at sporting venues around the world, and with the support of the local organising committee, World Athletics' health and science department measured clinical and environmental data in Gdynia.



FROM WORLD ATHLETICS

*(Photo- [www.worldathletics.org](http://www.worldathletics.org))*

Two Kunak air quality monitors were used in Gdynia – one at a fixed position near the start line, and one mobile device attached to a bicycle which followed the athletes around all four laps of both races. More than 70,000 data points were collected for various pollutant gases concentrations, particle concentrations and meteorological parameters across an 18-hour period in Gdynia.

Pending data validation, the data showed very low concentrations of pollutant gases and particulate matter. The low levels of anthropogenic emissions detected, combined with the location at the seaside, the timing of the competition, and the meteorological conditions of the day, have resulted in the lowest level of pollutants that the clean air programme has monitored to date in any urban race.



By publishing air quality from venues such as this, World Athletics hopes to encourage athletes, recreational runners, cities, local and national governments and member federations to become more conscious of air quality and the impact that it has on health and performance.

Most of the pilot project has so far been conducted in stadiums, with Kunak installing air quality monitors in a number of venues around the world. But as most road races are held in major cities that are generally susceptible to substantial amounts of air pollution, they are uniquely placed to provide a wealth of data to scientists and researchers, given the length of time runners spend on the course, and the varying environmental conditions they're exposed to over that time.

Upon implementation of air monitoring programmes, World Athletics will set air quality standards for major championships and sanctioned events, utilising the WHO air quality standards. The guidelines indicate that by reducing particulate matter pollution from 70 to 20 micrograms per cubic metre, air pollution-related deaths can be cut by about 15 percent.

## QUIZ TIME

### 1. Who won the men's event in the London Marathon 2020?

- a. Eliud Kipchoge    b. Shura Kitata    c. Kenenisa Bekele    d. Benson Kipruto

### 2. Who won the women's event in the London Marathon 2020?

- a. Ruth Chepngetich    b. Ashete Bekere    c. Brigid Kosgei    d. Sara Hall

### 3. The World Athletics Continental Tour Gold meeting in the refurbished Nyayo National Stadium in Nairobi was named after this track legend.

- a. Kip Keino    b. Henry Rono    c. Naftali Temu    d. Amos Biwott

### 4. In race walks, the term 'Pit Lane' has recently been renamed as:

- a. Penalty Zone    b. Rest Lane    c. Halt-and-Go Area    d. Penalty Area

### 5. Which country hosts the World Athletics Half Marathon Championships Gdynia 2020?

- a. Czech Republic    b. Poland    c. Hungary    d. Belarus



**6. Which new global event will join the World Athletics calendar in 2023 as part of changes approved at the most recent Council meeting?**

- a. World Athletics Road Relay Championships
- b. World Athletics ParkRun Championships
- c. World Athletics Hill Running Championships
- d. World Athletics Road Running Championships

**7. Who were the two Indian entrants in the marathon competition in the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo?**

- a. Balakrishna Atotkar and Harbanslal Suri
- b. Shivnath Singh and Hari Chand
- c. Ranjit Bhatia and Jagmal Singh
- d. Sadashir Datar and Phadeppa Chaugule

**8. Lalruata Sailo, who recently passed away in Aizawl at the age of 81 years, set a National record in 1966 National Games in Bangalore when representing Punjab. What was the event in which he set the mark?**

- a. 100m
- b. Triple Jump
- c. Javelin Throw
- d. Decathlon

**9. According to the AFI SOP for National and State meets, where will the medals be given to the top three in each event?**

- a. As usual, at the Podium
- b. Will be sent by Mail/Courier
- c. In the Call Room at the exit point
- d. There will be no medals.

**10. In the 2021 World Anti-Doping Code, the identification of athletes' rights in the Code has been specifically included as part of the Fundamental Rationale for the Code.**

- a. True
- b. False

## ANSWERS

1)Shura Kitata; 2)Brigid Kosgei; 3)Kip Keino; 4)Penalty Zone; 5)Poland; 6)World Athletics Road Running Championships; 7)Balakrishna Atotkar and Harbanslal Suri; 8)Javellin Throw; 9)In the Call Room at the Exit Point; 10)True

