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ROUSING WELCOME

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BUDDING ATHLETES AMAZED BY GUJARAT'S HOSPITALITY

The 19th edition of NIDJAM (National Inter District Junior Athletics Meet) scheduled to be held in Gujarat's world heritage city—Ahmedabad---from February 16 to 18 will see budding athletes from as many as 619 districts jostling to showcase their potential at the national level.

While the competition will be held at Gujarat University campus in Ahmedabad, accommodation of athletes numbering 5,578 has been spread out to Ahmedabad as well as nearby Gandhinagar.

“The youngsters got a rousing welcome on their arrival in Ahmedabad,” Adille Sumariwalla, president of the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) said. “I’m sure budding athletes from across the country will enjoy their stay.”

According to Sumariwalla the government of Gujarat has made all necessary arrangements for the smooth conduct of the competition.

“The 2024 NIDJAM will certainly be a memorable event for the competitors.” Sumariwalla added.

Sumariwalla, one of the vice presidents of the World Athletics said, NIDJAM is synonymous with grassroots athletics development programme in India.

“The seeds of NIDJAM were sown in early 2000 and two decades later the flagship event of the AFI has blossomed into gigantic grassroots competition,” Sumariwalla added.

NIDJAM is also considered a platform for budding athletes from far flung regions of the country to showcase their talent at the national level.

Over the years there has been a steady increase in the number of athletes competing at the NIDJAM. Take for example, competitors at the 2023 edition were 5383, and it has swelled to 5578 in 2024.

There were 599 districts at the 2023 edition in Patna. This year the number has increased to 619.

Moreover, several states, including Jammu and Kashmir, Haryana, Delhi, and Bihar have become more proactive and will have good representation in NIDJAM.

“A state like Jammu and Kashmir is also active, setting an example for others. All



18 districts from Jammu and Kashmir have sent their entries for NIDJAM in Gujarat,” Sumariwalla added.

The 2024 NIDJAM will certainly be a memorable event for the **competitors.”**

Sumariwalla

Elite race walkers break barrier in Chandigarh's conducive weather

Conducive weather for endurance events in the last week of January in Chandigarh saw four race walkers breaking barriers that augurs well for men's 20km race walking event in future.

Performance of the top four athletes in men's 20km race walk was better than the Paris Olympic Games qualification time of 1:20:10.

The honour in the men's 20km race walk went to Punjab's Akshdeep Singh. The 24 years old won back-to-back national titles. His gold winning time was 1:19:35 which was also better than his national record of 1:19:55 clocked last year in Ranchi, Jharkhand.

Suraj Panwar, Servin Sebastian and Ashpreet Singh finished in that order and did better than the Olympic qualification time.

Asian bronze medallist Vikash Singh and Paramjeet Singh Bisht had qualified for the 2024 Olympic Games last year.

With six male race walkers earning qualification time for the Olympics, the final selection will be conducted by the Athletics Federation in June as only three athletes will be eligible to represent India at the Olympic Games as per the policy of the World Athletics.

The women's 20km was dominated by Punjab's international race walker Manju Rani. The 24 years old also added women's 10km to her kitty to brighten her chance to compete in the inaugural marathon race walking mixed relay event that will feature at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

Manju's gold medal winning time in the 10km was 45:20.00. She had paired with Ram Babu to win bronze in the 35km mixed race walking relay team



event at the Hangzhou Asian Games in China.

Manju was elated to have won back-to-back gold medals at the national competition in Chandigarh. "My main focus will be the mixed relay event this year," the elated race walker from Punjab said.

The senior 10km race walk event was included in the programme by AFI to select potential athletes for the national team that will compete at the April 20-21 World Athletics Race Walk Team Championships to be held in Antalya, Turkey. At the Turkey competition, the top 22 teams will get automatic qualification for the Olympic Games. The final selection of the national team for Turkey will be done in March.

In the men's 10km event, Sahil of Punjab outclassed more experienced athletes to claim gold. Sahil, 22, a college student from Patiala, clocked 39:25.00. He finished fifth in the men's 20km race walk.

Haryana's Aarti dominated the U20 girls 10km race walk. On her way to gold, she improved the national record to 47:03.00. The previous record of 49:01.00 was in the name of Mansi Negi, clocked in 2021. The U20 boys 10km gold went to Himanshu Kumar. His winning time was 41:11.00.

Marathon runner from highlands of Kumaon aims for Paris Olympic Games berth

Man Singh Bisht, marathon runner from the undulating terrains of Kumaon region has set his eyes on winning a Paris Olympic Games berth. Despite the challenging task at hand, the 34 years old Indian Army runner and Asian Marathon champion is confident of achieving his goal.

The gold at last month's Asian Marathon Championships in Hong Kong has further given a big boost to his confidence. He is the second Indian athlete to win gold at the continental marathon. In 2017, Rio Olympian T Gopi had won gold.

Despite the windy and challenging Hong Kong marathon course, the Indian runner covered the marathon race (42.195km) in 2:14:19 to win gold. "I could have done better," the Army runner said.

His personal best of 2:14:13 was clocked last year in February on the streets of Delhi during the 2023 National Marathon.

The former track runner switched to marathon running in 2023. "I didn't see my chance of making the cut for the Hangzhou Asian Games in track races. So, I switched to marathon," he added.

The Army runner was successful in qualifying for the Asian Games at the Delhi's National Marathon in February 2023, which was his second marathon. His first marathon race was in January 2023 in Mumbai. He clocked 2:17.

However, in his second attempt he lowered his personal best to 2:14:13 which was better than the Asian Games qualification time of two hours 15 minutes, a qualifying mark set by Athletics Federation of India (AFI).

He wasn't successful in further improving his time at the Asian Games. He ran nearly three minutes slower than his personal best. "I wasn't in good health. But I didn't quit the race," he recalled.

An athlete can either achieve the automatic qualifying



Man Singh

standard or improve global ranking to compete at the Paris Olympic Games. The Paris Olympic Games qualification time of 2:08:10 in the men's marathon race will be challenging to achieve. The national record is 2:12:00 clocked by late Shivnath Singh in Jalandhar, Punjab in 1978.

But Man Singh Bisht hopes to improve his global ranking to stay in contention for an Olympic Games berth. "I will give it a try. I'm confident of further improving my time," he said from his training base in Ooty, Tamil Nadu.

The 2024 Asian marathon champion didn't follow any sports in his formative years. But he did cover a distance of nearly 10km from his village near Didihat in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand to the main road.

He would often go to the market and fetch household stuff and walk 20km either way on the tough terrain, that too at an altitude of more than 1500m. "Sometimes I had to carry more than 10kg of ration on my back to home from the main road," he added.

The routine of regularly covering 20km on foot during his formative years made him withstand the vigorous aerobic exercise later in his life when he joined the Army in general category in 2009.

While in the army he further got a chance to showcase his potential as a distance runner. He rapidly made a mark in departmental competitions and was enrolled at Pune's Army Sports Institute (ASI) to focus entirely on athletics.

Initially he competed in 5,000m and 10,000m. He went on to win gold in men's 5,000m at the 2016 SAF Games in Guwahati, Assam. He clocked 14 minutes 02 seconds.

Last year the Army runner also got support from Reliance Foundation. "The sponsorship was timely as I was preparing for the Asian Games," he said.

During preparatory period of marathon training, his weekly mileage sometimes shoots up to plus 200km. The weekly distance is pruned as he approaches his main marathon competition.

"The longest weekly run and pace too varies during off season and main competition," the Army runner said.

After winning the Asian Marathon title, he took a fortnight to recover. He has also chalked out his programme for his next race.

"If all goes as per plan, I should be running a good race in April," he added.

An Indian athlete also had a good run at the Dhaka marathon recently. Anish Thapa won gold with a time of 2:17:09. Bangriya Vikram Bharatsinh claimed silver with an identical time of 2:17:09. Jasvant Singh finished fourth. His time was 2:18:48.

Indian long distance runners Sawan Barwal and Seema competed at the Baghdad international endurance event held in Iraq. Barwal finished seventh in the 21km, while Seema was sixth in the women's 10km race.

In quest for podium in Paris, Kishore Kumar Jena trains Down Under

In pursuit to excel at the 2024 Olympic Games, Odisha's 28 years old Kishore Kumar Jena has gone Down Under to polish his javelin throwing skills. The Hangzhou Asian Games silver medallist in men's javelin throw will be training at Australia's High-Performance Centre in Gold Coast until March.

Last year the promising thrower soaked in high voltage pressure to claim the silver medal at the delayed 19th edition of Asian Games held in Hangzhou, China.

He hurled the javelin to a distance of 87.54m to briefly challenge supremacy of Olympic and world champion Neeraj Chopra. His silver-medal winning throw was better than the Paris Olympic Qualification mark of 85.50m.

Neeraj Chopra eventually prevailed over in-form Odisha's javelin thrower to earn back-to-back Asian Games title with a throw of 88.88m. But the contest

turned out to be a good platform for the Odisha's thrower to showcase his potential at a bigger stage.

Kishore Kumar Jena's overall demeanour at the Asian Games gives insight to his belief. He is considered having potential to earn a podium finish at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

The Odisha's javelin thrower had a good run in the second half of 2023 season. He improved his overall world ranking to earn a berth at the July 19-27 Budapest World Athletics Championships held in Hungary. Despite facing a challenging situation ahead of the global competition, his visa processing was delayed and he missed vital training sessions, but he kept his composure to finish a creditable fifth in Hungary with a throw of 84.77m.

His goal in the 2024 season is to further improve his personal best of 87.54m. "I'm aiming for a consistent performance in the coming months," he said.

Indian athletes on right path to make an impression at Indoor meet in Tehran

Elite Indian athletes are all set to make an impression at the Asian Indoor meet starting February 17 in Tehran, Iran. Several Hangzhou Asian Games medal winners, including shot putter Tajinderpal Singh Toor and middle distance runner Ajay Kumar Saroj, will start their 2024 campaign with indoor competition in Iran.

Tajinderpal Singh Toor will compete in shot put, while Ajay Kumar Saroj in 1500m. Mohammed Afsal will compete in the 800m. Asian Games bronze medallist in men's 10,000m Gulveer Singh will compete in 3000m track race.

India's leading female middle distance runner Harmilan Bains will compete in the 1500m event in Iran. The national record holder in women's 100m hurdles Jyothi Yarraji will compete in 60m hurdles.

TEAM

Men: Gulveer Singh (3000m), Ajay Kumar Saroj (1500m), Mohammed Afsal (800m), Dhanveer Singh (shot put), Tajinderpal Singh Toor (shot put), Tejas Ashok Shirse (60m hurdles), VK Elakya Dasan (60m).

Women: Ankita (3000m), Harmilan Bains (1500m), Baranica Elangovan, Pavithra Vengatesh (both pole vault), Jyothi Yarraji (60m hurdles), Nayana James, Shali Singh (long jump).

Good response to World Athletics coaching course



To regularly update the knowledge of the coaches, the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) has been conducting the World Athletics Level 1 and Level 2 courses across the country in the last two months, Radhakrishnan Nair, chief athletics coach said.

“There is also a proposal to conduct a Level 2 refresher course in sprints, jumps and middle and long next month,” the chief coach added.

According to the chief coach, overall, 102 coaches have successfully completed Level 1 and 2 courses held in batches at Sports Authority of India (SAI) campus in Patiala and

at KIIT University Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

“There is also a proposal to organise two additional Level 1 courses in February,” the chief athletics coach added.

Apart from Level 1 and 2 courses, a fortnight course in Kids Athletics was also conducted last December. “There is a proposal to conduct a Manual Sports Physio Course next month,” Radhakrishnan Nair said.

The Level 2 courses were conducted in sprints, jumps, throws, middle and long distance and combined events, the chief athletics coach added.

ARJUNA AWARD WINNERS



Murali Sreeshankar and Parul Chaudhary were awarded the prestigious Arjuna Award. The sports award ceremony took place on January 9 at Rashtra Bhawan.

