

## EXCLUSIVE - Avani Lekhara's Parents Deserve Credit for Backing Her: Lakshya Shooting Club Co-founder

By: [Nandakumar Marar](#) • Last Updated: AUGUST 30, 2021, 14:18 IST



Avani Lekhara (seated center) with Olympian Suma Shirur (seated right) and trainees at Lakshya Shooting Club (Pic Courtesy: Lakshya Shooting Club)

Lakshya SC, Avani's shooting range, is one of the centres identified for the Khelo India project, hosts young trainees shortlisted from a nationwide selection for talent development as part of the government's initiative.

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**A**vani Lekhara's win in 10m air rifle SH1 event at Paralympics 2020 in far away Tokyo will find a resonance in a shooting club on Mumbai's outskirts. Lakshya Shooting Club (Panvel) is planning a meeting among shooter-trainees there to celebrate the shooting gold for India earned by a fellow trainee with special abilities. "We are planning a video call with Avani. She is special as a person, way beyond the sport and we share her joy," noted co-founder Siddharth Shirur, husband of Suma Shirur, Olympic shooter and the 19-year-old's coach in Japan.

### [Avani Lekhara - India's Golden Girl at Tokyo Paralympics](#)

Avani topped the event, featuring 20 participants from across the world, with a score of 249.6 points. He added: "She came here in 2018 for training and within no time became part of our shooting family here at Lakshya. She has that quality to make people who come in contact feel for her. Her parents backed her to the hilt and deserve credit for moulding her this way." Siddharth, an architect by profession, informs that Avani's dad made first contact in 2017 and did whatever possible to make his child's dreams come true. The mother accompanies her and is currently in Tokyo as an escort.

The 10m range was re-modelled to accommodate her unique requirements.

"Accepting a shooter with special needs (wheelchair-borne due to a car accident in childhood) required technical adjustments in the range and in the relationship between trainees dealing with a child, she was 15 then I think. Our range is on the first floor, we considered how she will get there, then found other trainees happy to be with her, help her so training could go on. Within no time, Avani became close to our team, such is her approach and nature."

The youngster and mother checked into a nearby hotel and reported for training. "Initially it was for weeks, then Suma (Athens 2004 Olympian in 10m air rifle and one-time holder of the world record in women's category) kept in touch over phone when Avani returned home to Rajasthan. The pandemic posed travel problems for the trainee, so Suma realised the need to adapt the training for her accordingly, kept in touch using technology in common use by almost everyone," said Siddharth, adding: "Avani's mother continues to be with her, as participants with special needs can take an escort."

Suma Shirur is in Tokyo for the Paralympics, to guide the teenager in shooting preparation. The Olympic women's rifle shooter had earlier accompanied the regular rifle shooters to Tokyo for the Olympic Games and a preparatory camp in Croatia from where the shooting contingent had reached Japan directly. "Avani's father wanted the best for her on debut at the Paralympics, so with co-ordination between GoSports Foundation who support her, Sports Authority of India (SAI) and the Paralympics Committee of India (PCI), a decision was taken about Suma to accompany her from India to Tokyo."

Avani's favourite event is the 50m, revealed Siddharth. "Lakshya has a 10m range, so we created a simulation for trainees interested in the 50m events, from the feel to the scoring." After winning the 10m air rifle standing, the debutant's schedule at Tokyo Paralympics includes two events over the longer distance - 50m mixed rifle prone and 50m rifle 3 positions. Shooting sport is about balance gained from a standing position, stability from the core and mental strength to deliver on competition day. The 19-year-old made her parents proud with a gold medal and equalled the world record in the process.

Suma shares a close bond with her trainee with special needs. "I don't know how Avani makes the adjustment (when firing seated on a wheelchair). She was already at a level when joining us, her attitude to the competitive sport makes her different. Away from shooting, she makes you feel for her. Suma had to make her own adjustments when starting to coach a child with special requirements, once they got going the experience for us was incredible. The other trainees here got to know how to deal with a special person. I have a feeling Avani's best is yet to come."

Going into Paralympics 2020 as world number five in 10m air rifle standing, she emerged the champion, building on a silver earned at the Para Shooting World Cup 2021. Lakshya SC is one of the centres identified for the Khelo India project, hosts young trainees shortlisted from a nationwide selection for talent development as part of the government's initiative. The Panvel club also conducts an annual invitation competition called the Lakshya Cup, men and women compete side-by-side, based on the equal shot rule adopted by the world shooting body, ISSF. Shooting sport adopted mixed events in the regulation Olympic Games and Paralympics, as a way to treat male and female shooters on par.