

Shooting | Suma Shirur happy to join her gurus as a Dronacharya Award winner

To be counted in their league is a humbling experience, says Suma, who is currently guiding the Indian team to a handful of medals in Daegu, Korea.

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Suma Shirur with former National coach Prof. Sunny Thomas. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

Suma Shirur was a world-class shooter who made the air rifle Olympic final in Athens, 2004. She had also shot a world record score of a perfect 400 on her way to the Asian Championship gold earlier that year.

Having trained with some of the best coaches like Gaby Buhlmann and Heinz Reinkemeier, the architects of World and Olympic champion Abhinav Bindra, the 48-year-old Suma, an erudite student of the sport, had all along **learnt the art of coaching**.

Suma, who won the Arjuna award in 2003, has now been given the Dronacharya award, particularly for the acumen she showed in guiding the 19-year-old **Avani Lekhara** to the **Tokyo Paralympic gold** last year.

"There is a sense of fulfilment when efforts are recognised. It is even more special as the award is in relation to para-shooting, a discipline that I had to adapt as a coach, given its peculiarities. Avani is a gifted athlete and we formed a great team," said Suma when contacted in Daegu, Korea, where she is guiding the Indian team to a harvest of gold medals.

With only a handful of shooting coaches getting the award, Suma was understandably thrilled to join her gurus **Prof. Sunny Thomas** and **Sanjay Chakraverty**.

"We had four Dronacharyas in shooting till now. Two have been my gurus. Sanjay sir spotted me and nurtured me. Sunny sir was the constant support we had for about two decades as national coach. To be counted in their league is a humbling experience," said Suma.

Even as she pursued shooting, Suma also got into teaching the sport early.

"I was a top athlete for about 22 years. I was given the responsibility of handling the Indian junior team in 2018. The transition from shooter to coach had happened 12 years earlier, as I founded the **Lakshya Shooting Club** in 2006 and was coaching concurrently. That experience helped me sculpt my approach towards coaching," said Suma.

It is still a mystery that the world beaters in **Indian shooting could not win an Olympic medal in the last two Games**. Suma said that as a coach she would focus on the lessons from the failures and plug the loopholes to ensure future success.

"The national federation has been proactive in bringing much-needed expertise into the support team", she said, optimistic of a positive fare in Paris 2024.

"Air rifle is crowded at the top with youngsters. It does not mean that there is no room for slightly older ones. The 50-metre event has room for the mature ones. The team is always a fine mix of very young to slightly older ones.

"It is great to see how they help each other. If the youngsters learn patience from the old, the older ones learn fearlessness from the young brigade. The Olympic team selection would be dynamic and emphasise on current form.

"The bench strength is so strong that there is no respite for the top performers. This will help them cope with pressure in the Olympics as well," observed Suma.

With more para athletes taking up shooting, Suma is equally confident that para-shooting would sustain the success.