

Unshackled Wadhera finds his form with IPL-style knock in Ranji Trophy

After a subdued domestic season with meagre returns in both the Vijay Hazare and Ranji Trophy, it all came together for the youngster against Tamil Nadu in the final league match of the premier tournament where he slammed a sensational 109

S. Dipak Ragav
SALEM

Nehal Wadhera announced himself as a player to watch out for during the IPL last year with some crucial innings for Mumbai Indians.

The 23-year-old left-handed batter from Punjab hits the ball cleanly and impressed with two half-centuries at an impressive strike rate of nearly 150.

After that, he played a crucial role in Punjab winning the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy last year, including an unbeaten 61 in the final against Baroda.

However, since then, he has had a subdued domestic season with meagre returns in both the Vijay Hazare and Ranji Trophy.

But it all came together for the youngster against Tamil Nadu in the final Ranji Trophy league match, where he slammed a sensational 109 (107b, 12x4, 4x6) at the Salem Cricket Foundation Ground.

"I had the freedom to play my shots and could back my strength. So that's what I did. And I think it played out to be well," said Wadhera about his Bazball-style knock that had the TN bowlers and fielders ducking for cover.

"I don't think I have had a decent tournament because this is my first century of the season. I could have done much better, but it's a part of the game."

Counter-attacking approach

The youngster who had two First Class centuries, including a double last year, felt that in the previous games, he held back himself. But here, with his side already out of the tournament and asked to follow-on, his counter-attacking approach paid off.

"I just played some of the shots I didn't try in the previous games. So now I know that I can back these shots," said the middle-order batter.

"I just had the freedom, and if a particular shot was coming in my mind and the bowler was bowling there, I would go with that shot and just back my strengths. I think this is what this knock taught me, and I will continue to do this in the upcoming games, too."

Speaking about his maiden IPL and what he learned from it, Wadhera explained that his biggest takeaway was not to worry too much about technique and focus on winning games for his team.

"If you have performed well in the IPL, it boosts your confidence, and that was the major thing that IPL had on me. Coming to the domestic season, I had it in my mind that I have scored well in the IPL against the international bowlers. So I can perform and dominate here as well," he said.

"As you come to the senior level, only



E. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN



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one thing gives you an edge: winning matches for the team. How good a technique you have or how sound a batter you are doesn't matter without runs under your name. Everyone from Sachin (Tendulkar) sir to Mark Boucher and Rahul Sanghvi they don't focus much on technique. They tell us, 'You need to find a way to score runs, and if you have a problem, come to us'."

Perfect example

Wadhera, who used a mix of sweep and reverse-sweep to throw the TN spinners off their line and length, said, "I think this innings was a perfect example of that, you know, just dominating the bowlers rather than letting the bowler dominate by allowing them to bowl in only one area. I didn't want to let them do that."

"I wanted to (them) bring one more fielder towards that (off-side) region so that my leg-side could open up and I could hit the sweep. Once I hit the reverse-sweep and sweep, the bowler doesn't know where to bowl. That's how I built my innings, and it turned out well," he said.



FILE PHOTO: EMMANUAL YOGINI

THE GIST

Wadhera, the 23-year-old left-handed batter from Punjab, is a clean-hitter of the ball and impressed with two half-centuries at an impressive strike rate of nearly 150 in IPL 2023

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Dronacharya Suma works towards empowering underprivileged students

Kamesh Srinivasan

Suma Shirur is one of the pillars of Indian shooting. She made the Olympic finals in Athens. She had qualified for the 2004 Olympics with a world record 400 out of 400 in air rifle, an incredible feat in those days.

As a coach, Suma's growth has been meteoric. The High Performance coach of the national team is now more familiar in the shooting fraternity as the coach who guided Avani Lekhara to the gold medal in the Paralympics in Tokyo.

No wonder, Suma is among a handful of Indian coaches to be decorated with the Dronacharya award. In fact, she is the only woman shooting coach to be bestowed the honour so far.

What is not that well known is Suma's contribution to the sport, especially her attempt to empower the underprivileged students through shooting. She did a pilot project through her Lakshya Shooting Club with the Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation (NMMC), scouting for talent among students of government schools last year.

Two of the girls, Nutan Chaudhary and Anshika Prajapati, who were studying in ninth standard, latched on to the opportunity and rose to the national standards. In fact, Nutan has gone on to be part of the elite shooters, eligible to compete in the selection trials that identify shooters for the national team.



Despite being totally engrossed in national duty, Suma found time to talk fervently about the project.

"This project is very close to my heart. It was the brainchild of the Deputy Municipal Commissioner of the Sports Department of NMMC, Manojkumar Mahale. He was introduced to shooting during his visit to one of the centres in Navi Mumbai. He was impressed with the facilities and rigour shown by the shooters and coaches. He wanted underprivileged students of Municipal schools to pick up the majestic looking gun and fire away", recalled Suma, about how the seeds for the visionary project were sown, by the fag end of 2022.

"Little did we know then that the vision would lead to a real fairytale story for the two girls Nutan and

Anshika in just one year", Suma said, as she put things in perspective.

Through the project, a talent hunt was started, giving the chance for 136 students, including 51 girls, to try their hand in shooting. After the first phase, 26 were identified for further training. Eventually, 13 students got the chance to have a six-month training stint at the Lakshya Shooting Club. Four sustained their interest, and two of them made it to the national championship.

While Anshika progressed from scores of 371 out of 400, to 573.1 in the Olympic format and to 595.9 in the national championship, Nutan shot up from 364 and 385 to 593.6 and an impressive 612.2 in the last national championship in Delhi.

"The Lakshya Club along with Agnel Charities got together to sustain the pilot project beyond the six-month time frame, bearing the training cost of the four girls who persisted with shooting. It is heartening to see that even though two of the four girls could not cross the pre-national stage, all four continue to train", said Suma.

To touch such high standards in such a short time despite all the shortcomings has been a revelation about the determination of the two girls, and the sincerity with which they were being trained.

"What is special is that they still don't own a single weapon. They share weapons that are almost a

decade old and still manage to deliver the scores", said Suma.

Good work often finds the right people jumping in to support the cause.

"We got support from unexpected quarters. The Takshashila Prabodhani Samajik Sanstha agreed to fund the jacket-trouser set for Nutan, made to order for her size from Capapie. More support is needed for her to own a rifle and other equipment. In a sport where the entry barrier is high, and the barrier becomes bigger as you grow higher, it is extremely difficult to get a level playing field for the underprivileged", pointed out Suma.

Even as the Lakshya Club tries to sustain the support for the two talented girls who hail from big families with limited income, Suma talks about reviving the project with the current DMC (Sports), Arjuna awardee athlete Lalita Babar and the Municipal Commissioner Rajesh Narvekar.

"We want to revive the project and give wings to more aspirants from schools. I wish the project gets scaled up this year by NMMC not only in the numbers but also in extending support to their wards for equipment", said Suma.

Indeed, the young students need advanced equipment, and support in terms of sports science, strength and conditioning, physiotherapy, psychology sessions, nutrition, for further progress.



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

It was also identified that transport was an issue as majority of the students, staying far from the shooting range were irregular for the practice sessions. The talented kids also needed financial support for participation in competitions at various levels.

With the right support and extended period of training, Indian shooting may find more gems from the underprivileged strata of society. For the moment, Nutan and

Anshika provide the inspiration for everyone with their exhilarating journey. Of course, it requires the involvement of a pioneer like Suma to put the vision in motion, and take the young talent forward.

When Suma founded the Lakshya Club, one of the goals was, "live for the glory of the game, and strive for perfection".

It is shooting for all in an inclusive society, as one never knows where the stars are hiding!