

THE LIVES OF OTHERS

A powerful new documentary series celebrates the icons who are heralding a brighter future for Indian sports



What most people don't know about one of India's most successful supermodels, Bikram Saluja, is that back in the early Nineties, before he set runways on fire, Saluja was an international-level tennis player, who represented India at both the junior Wimbledon and junior US Open. Now, two decades later, he returns to his sporting roots with his directorial debut, *Travelling With The Pros*, a seven-part series documenting the lives of some of India's current sports icons, including Mahesh Bhupathi, Abhinav Bindra, Saina Nehwal and Narain Karthikeyan. *GQ* caught up with the director for a sneak peek.

What inspired you about these particular players?

Each one of them has a life that's been dedicated to their particular sport. They're legends who've taken India to the world. Take [Olympic gold medallist] Abhinav, for example. He moved to Germany when he was 13 so he could train there. When he first approached his coach [Heinz Reinkemeier], he was brushed aside. When the coach saw that Bindra had made it to the World Cup final he wondered how it was possible for an Indian boy to have come that far. That's when he realized he needed to take him seriously. And [wrestler] Sushil Kumar – he's the first Indian to have won the World Championship. Then there's [world number four] Saina, who's had no Indian role models in women's badminton. But she's out there, taking on the Chinese, matching them step for step. For the first time in the history of Indian sports, there are about 10 or 12 athletes who are on top of the world platform – that's not happened before.

What kind of access did you have to these athletes?

Most of them gave me access to their rooms, their yoga, visualization, massage and acupuncture sessions, and even let us film them when they were just whiling away their time.

I guess being a sportsman myself, they were able to trust me. For the tennis docu, we were there when Mahesh was practising on centre court, at his gym sessions, his stretching sessions. We were with him when he was eating his meals, when he was relaxing in the players' lounge. It was a challenge for the athletes, though, because on one hand their focus had to be completely on their performance, but they also had a camera crew and five people following their every move.

Tell us about the process of putting the film together.

I wanted it to be a personal journey with the players, one where they themselves open up their worlds, so the entire documentary is narrated by them – there's no third-person voiceover. We shot them while on tour, so we had about 40-70 hours of footage for each player. The main interviews were extensive questionnaires that covered a spectrum of things – right from their preparation and fitness to their views on the sport. I sorted everything out topic-wise, which gave us a narrative, a road map of sorts, which we could then put pictures to. It was like piecing together a puzzle. Each 48-minute film took us about 60 days to edit.

Were some more challenging than others?

Each film had its own challenges. For some, I worried that the footage we'd got wasn't varied enough – players like Jeev and Saina hardly ventured out. All they did was train, go back to their rooms, eat, play, and then train again. For some, I wondered whether the pace

of the film would be too sluggish – golf is a slow sport, and there was only so much we could do to quicken the pace of things. Each film needed to be treated differently, too – the docu on shooting needed to be more descriptive, because people aren't really familiar with the sport. We had to address questions like: Why do the players wear the jacket? Why do they wear visors? That's something I didn't need to do for, say, tennis, motorsport or golf. In the end, each film had its own unique story and identity.

Any unexpected incidents along the way?

So many! We were shooting [the film on Pankaj Advani] in Damascus when it started snowing, which is unheard of there. I wanted to shoot the stadium with the snow in the background. So we – me and the cameraman – went outside the stadium and across the street to get the shot. As it turned out, though, not only was I not carrying my press accreditation that day, but the place we'd picked was also right in front of the headquarters of the Syrian secret police – we got taken in for questioning!

Do any of the players have pre-match superstitions or rituals?

Some do, others don't. Jeev, for example, will only wear certain colours at the start of a tournament.

What are your favourite sports films?

Raging Bull and *Rocky*. *Chariots Of Fire* and *Escape To Victory* were also good.

The series kicks off on June 2 at 7pm on ESPN

GOODFELLAS

(From left to right): Mahesh Bhupathi, Narain Karthikeyan, Pankaj Advani, Sushil Kumar. (Bottom row): Jeev Milkha Singh, Abhinav Bindra

