

Trailing the Champions

Bikram Saluja debuts as a documentary filmmaker with a series that captures Indian sportspersons when they are most vulnerable — while playing



A working still of the documentary while shooting with Narain Karthikeyan

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HE WAS barely three years old, but he would pick up his tennis racket and play outdoors every morning. Later, watching him work hard on the game, his mother would worry about the outcome. But the boy was determined. It took him many tricky serves, blazing smashes and years of practice but in 1997, Mahesh Bhupathi won his first Grand Slam Title, the first Indian to do so. A new television documentary series, *Travelling With the Pros*, shows the sportsman, who has 11 grand slam titles to his name, compete in 2010 for one of the biggest tennis tournaments in the world, Roger Cup ATP Masters 1000.

"I've known Bhupathi for ages. It struck me as a good idea to travel with him during one of the tournaments and shoot alongside," says Bikram Saluja, director of the docu-series. He then decided to include six other prominent players from various sports, filming them as they competed in some of the biggest sporting events around the world.

An initiative of Aditya Birla Group and Puppeteer Films, *Travelling with Pros* constitutes seven, 48-minute short films on shooter and Olympic gold medalist Abhinav Bindra, badminton champion Saina Nehwal, Indian golfer Jeev Milkha Singh, India's first F1 racer Narain Karthikeyan, wrestler and Olympic Bronze medalist Sushil Kumar and snooker champion Pankaj Advani, besides Bhupathi. The series which took close to two years to make, will release on ESPN, June 2, and show every Saturday and Sunday at 7pm.

With cameras and seven crew members on their tail, the players share details of the lives they lead on tours. The documentary captures them in action, from the minute they arrive at their destinations, right through their training, till the very end of the competition. "For the viewer, it will be like undertaking a personal journey with these players. They have shared candid details, lending an insight into their sports as narrators of their own journey," say Saluja.

He agrees that it is a fine line one treads when following players around and beyond these championships. It is, after all, pressurising for the player, and the moments of anticipation, anxiety, winning or losing are extremely intimate. "Even if we did encroach on their personal space during testing times and crucial moments of the competition, thankfully, the players opened up like never before," Saluja asserts.

Quite unintentionally, the series works as a travelogue. With cities in Canada, USA, Russia, Syria, Germany and China as the setting, the documentary captures the local culture and the association of the sports with the places.

However, the focus remains in capturing sportspersons when they are perhaps most vulnerable. "We know their names, we know what they do, but this is the first time we'll find out what goes into making them who they are today," says Saluja.