

# TRAVELLING WITH THE PROS, AND A CAMERA

**Former model Bikram Saluja shoots TV series, starring seven Indian sporting stars including Bindra, Sushil Kumar, Mahesh Bhupathi and Nehwal**

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**I**T has Roger Federer paying a court-side compliment to Mahesh Bhupathi's backhand. And India's first World Cup winning captain Kapil Dev ungrudgingly conceding that an Olympic gold medal - like Abhinav Bindra's - ends all debate about choosing the greatest Indian sportsperson. Also, former Olympic champion grappler and illustrious collegiate coach Dan Gable reiterating that Sushil Kumar's Beijing bronze in wrestling forced the world to sit up and take note of the long-sleeping giant, a country which holds promise if stirred into awakening and action. But apart from getting legends of sport to join in the chorus of applauding some of India's finest contemporary sporting figures, Bikram Saluja, will have managed to demystify the glamour of sporting success and focus on the hard yards through his 7-part-TV series 'Travelling with the Pros.'

The former model-actor, who turned director with this series - to be aired on ESPN every Saturday-Sunday through June - has gone behind the scenes, to put together a first-of-its-kind attempt at showcasing the life of some of India's earnestly trying, high-achieving sportspersons of this last decade. A 7-member crew, helmed by Saluja - himself a former junior tennis player who plodded the circuit as a teenager - chased these big names from shooting, wrestling, golf, badminton, tennis, motor racing and cue-sports in their discipline's various outposts to compile some high quality footage and interviews for weekend viewing that will hold plenty of insights into what goes into the making of athletes who are expanding what the Indian sportscape looks like, beyond hockey and cricket. So, Saluja and Co started out at Toronto's Rogers Cup, capturing tennis doubles multiple Grand Slam champ Mahesh Bhu-



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pathi in August 2010, and then kept the camera rolling following Jeev Milkha Singh on a PGA tour event in Las Vegas, later shadowing Narain Karthikeyan on his Nascar stint in Talladega, USA. Also followed by the docu-crew were Olympic gold medallist Abhinav Bindra, at one of his finetuning events - a Grand Prix in Luxembourg and preparation at his training base in Germany, and Saina Nehwal, while battling the might of the world in the shuttle-crazy Chinese city of Changzhao. The crew also travelled to the World Wrestling Championships in Moscow where Sushil Kumar was engaged in a tight battle to defend his title, and went through some agonising filming days, nervously tip-toeing behind Pankaj Advani in his world professional title pursuit in Syrian capital Damascus.

Shot alongside as a travelogue over seven countries, Saluja's was an adventurous criss-crossing of the world over the two years. Thrilled to capture the first snow in Syria in 30 years, while they camped alongside Pankaj Advani's competition venue, Saluja's crew were taken in by the country's suspicious intelli-

gence agency. They even threw a sleepy Alabama town that was to host Narain's Nascar superspeedway series race into anxious scrambling as the group of 7 Indians, equipped with cameras scared off the locals. "The sheriff came and enquired on what we were up to. But Syria was real trouble," Saluja laughingly remembers. Once they came on board, he recalls, the athletes though, warmed up to the camera. Almost. "Someone from the crew spoke to me just before my final, and I had gotten really angry. It had been a long tournament, and a longer argument, when I lost that match. Billiards tends to be a reclusive sport, so I was curious to know how they would go about capturing all that," Advani says, recalling the botched attempt to win that title. However, the 26-year-old was fresh from his Asian Games gold two weeks before the Syrian meet and made ready allowances for the camera to get intrusive.

"After Olympics, a whole movement has been created in Indian sport, and other disciplines have been perceived differently. To be counted alongside these other big names is humbling," Advani adds.

Saluja first approached his tennis buddy Mahesh Bhupathi, whom he jokingly says he stalked everywhere, save the shower, while shooting for the series, right from their breakfast to the warm-ups to matches and chirpy dinners. "It was a different experience," Bhupathi says, adding that it was intriguing to see how what was glamorous to sports watchers would be broken down into the day to day, behind the scenes effort. "They've shown the work, the recovery, the training, the pre match rituals," he says, curious to know how it has turned out since his segment was the first to be shot nearly two years ago. While Sushil's race to the weigh-in - to fit into his category, where the champ forsake food and water - was a revelation for Saluja, he also pleasantly discovered how Jeev Milkha Singh turned out to be extremely articulate and a lot of fun, Saina Nehwal, stayed one amongst the guys and Sushil, was a hugely entertaining character once he opened up.

The toughest to shoot, was, well, shooting at the Luxembourg rangers. "The sport offers very little variation in composing frames," the director remembers, adding that Abhinav Bindra's self-hypnosis was carefully shot from the distance. Not disturbing the finicky routines turned out to be as challenging as getting all the permissions from sporting bodies. Saluja though has snared precious bytes from Rafael Nadal, the Bryan twins in tennis, PGA winners John Daly and Stuart Appleby, billiards legend Mike Russell as well as badminton World No 1 Yihan Wang and Danish shuttle stars Peter Gade and Tine Rasmussen. Still, the two names that couldn't work out were Vishwanathan Anand and boxer Vijender Singh. "I feel very strongly about non-cricket sports, and this is an exciting time with so many Indians in different sports competing at the highest levels," he says, eager that the Indian audience enjoys the journey as much.