

SHANTA
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BANAL ON MUMBAI'S CULTURESCAPELiked/hated her column? Write to Shanta Gokhale at mirrorfeedback@indiatimes.com

Taming the Chinese dragon

If there's one thing television does right, it is sports coverage. Even those who call it the idiot box (which of course, it is), must give the devil its due when it comes to sports. On its screens we see the human body at its most beautiful, most tensile, most fully exploited — every leap, stretch and run recorded in close-up.

I am not talking about cricket. That's the daily staple for those who are inclined that way. I am talking about the feast that's laid out for us every four years. I am talking of London 2012. Here on display are archers' bodies as tightly tuned as their bowstrings, eyes focused on target, cutting out all else; the sinuous mermaid-tail thrusts of butterfly stroke as they slice their way through the water; the breath-taking coordination of synchronised divers, who somersault through the air and hit the water in the same split second; the sublime grace of gymnasts as they perform impossible-looking feats on mats, horses and rings.

While all this is happening, my biased heart and mind wait for Saina Nehwal, the 22-year-old shuttler on whose young shoulders we have placed the enormous responsibility of winning gold. For Nehwal-watchers, the past few days have brought a double bonus. We have not only seen her toss, smash and net-play her way through two rounds, but we have also seen a telecast of an interview and action-based film made on her by Bikram Saluja. It is one of a collection of seven titled *Travelling with the pros*, featuring topnotch sportspersons Abhinav Bindra, Mahesh Bhupathi and Sushil Kumar.

Nehwal is not a widely interviewed sportsperson; not only because shuttlers don't get the space other sportspersons do, but also because this no-nonsense young woman has no time for anything besides badminton. She makes a laugh-out-loud comment in the film about young people going out for coffee. It's an idea she can't wrap her mind around. Coffee is something she can have even when she's 40, she says. Right now, it is nothing but badminton for her. Saluja's film gives you a comprehensive idea of what it means to be Saina Nehwal. It provides a context to

every move she makes on court, from the moment she waits to receive the first serve, racquet raised, limbs tightly wound like springs, to the time she unleashes a merciless smash to clinch a point. Other players will curse themselves for mistakes; Nehwal will simply proceed to the next point, eyes focused on the shuttle.

Defeat doesn't faze her. She says as much in the film, and we see it for ourselves. The camera crew of *Travelling...* didn't follow her to the cities where she won a line of super series in 2009 and 2010. It followed her to Changzhou, for the 2011 China Masters Super Series, where she lost in the quarter finals to world number one, Wang Yihan of China in straight sets.

Despite this, she tells the camera that the Chinese dragon doesn't scare her. The Chinese are not invincible. They too, are open to defeat like anybody else. She herself has walked all over some of them in previous tournaments, and she will do it again. Her trainer and mentor, Pullela Gopichand, tells us that unsparing hard work and a will to win are the twin virtues that make Nehwal what she is. Hers is not the touch game of Nandu Natekar and Prakash Padukone. Her game is more like Gopichand's. She is an aggressive player, who will not play safe. She will try all strokes she has learnt during training, and not unclench her teeth until she has played the last point.

Badminton is the only life she has known and cared about from the time she was nine. So she is flummoxed when journalists (bless their chirpy ignorance) end interviews with the question, "What next?" wondering if she plans to get into films. "Why would I want to do that?" she asks, with a bemused expression. "I am playing badminton for the country. That should be enough."

Just before the Olympics, Nehwal won the Thailand Grand Prix Gold and the Indonesian Super Series Premium. She is in top form. The second round at Wembley, where she defeated Lianne Tam of Belgium, was hardly a match. The real battle will be against the Chinese champs. And all power to her for that.

