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Sport of call

Go behind the scenes with India's top athletes, says **Uday Bhatia**.



If you love sports but can't bear the thought of any more cricket, *Travelling with the Pros* should be a welcome diversion. Over the course of seven episodes, this documentary series, set to air on ESPN in June, will follow Sushil Kumar, Abhinav Bindra, Saina Nehwal, Jeev Milkha Singh, Narain Karthikeyan, Pankaj Advani and Mahesh Bhupathi on tour. The director is Bikramjeet Singh Saluja, whose past lives as sportsman (he played tennis on the junior circuit) and camera's subject (he modelled and acted in films like *Fiza*) helped him coax his subjects out of their comfort zones. Saluja told *Time Out* that the focus would be as much on player routines and other minutiae as the sporting action itself. "Nothing like this has been attempted before out here," he said. "At the most, someone has shot a day in their life, but no one's really seen what it's like on tour for these people."

How did the project come about?
 Mahesh [Bhupathi] was a compatriot from when I was a junior tennis player. My initial idea was to document his journey over a couple of tournaments. But in the back of my mind I was constantly thinking we ought to include other sports too. There was also the fact that, in the history of Indian sports, there've never been so many top athletes, in different sports, playing at one point in time.

What were the challenges you faced during the shoot?
 All the shoots were very tough. The days were long, and we were on the move all the time, getting up early, barely sleeping. Plus, because a sportsperson's routine is always the same, it would become very repetitive to film the same thing every day.

It must have been difficult to achieve your shots without disturbing your subjects.
 It was a huge challenge because when they're out there competing, they need peace of mind. It was doubly difficult because not only was there a cameraperson, there was also a still photographer, a sound man and myself, hovering over them at all times. But they were all really supportive.

Was it difficult to find backers?
 There were no backers in the beginning. No sports channel would commission this project [though ESPN came on later as a broadcast partner], so it was left to me to either take it upon myself or go the sponsor route. But finding sponsors would take a long time, and I also wanted creative freedom, so I put my own money in.

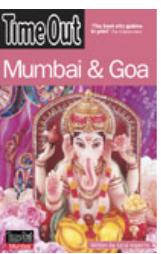
Any athletes you missed out on?
 Vijender Singh agreed, but I got restricted access to the World Boxing Championship, and I couldn't shoot that way. Another regret was not being able to get Vishwanathan Anand. Chess would have been the toughest sport to document, because it's so static.



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Travelling with the Pros will air every Saturday and Sunday at 7pm, from Sat Jun 2 onwards.