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DEFEAT AND DESPAIR IN ATHENS

I don't dream any more of Athens. Never. I am thankful for it. It took a long time. It took me eventually to therapy to Germany. All defeat haunts, but this one, in the final of the 10-metre air-rifle event at the 2004 Olympics, cut deeper. It seemed to infect my nervous system, worming into my brain and flooding it with worthlessness. It devastated me and stirred me to anger.

One picture tells the tale.

The walls of my shooting range in Chandigarh are like a cluttered history of my sporting life. Photographs, certificates, badges, scoresheets. All framed behind glass. Except one. It is my Olympic certificate from Athens. It states that I came seventh in the 10-metre air-rifle event. I don't look at it, but it stares at me accusingly, an unmoving reminder of my worst failure. It's why one day, frustrated in training, I grabbed it from the wall and hurled it to the ground.

The certificate, glassless, is still there. The dreams of the final have gone away, but not what Athens did to me. This is

where my life turned. There is where we should begin. With a defeat in a Greek city where the Olympics began.

All I knew in life till 2004 was shooting, my vocabulary distilled to *gun, sight, aim, breathe, target, fire*, all these words strung together and running through my head like a sporting prayer. All I was in life till then was a talented boy with a gun, defined by my ability to hit a .5-millimetre bullseye from 10 metres with an air-filled rifle made by Walther, a gun-maker that was James Bonds's preference.

All my life didn't matter anymore, because now, on this Athens afternoon, I was nothing, a sporting irrelevance. Only sport can do this to you, strip you naked in an instant in public, step on your dreams, make four years of practice incidental. In this, sport can seem absent of grey: you triumph, you fail. Black or white. Shooting is worse, you can't even blame anyone, cannot excuse failure as a rival's inspired day, a referee's error, a lucky bounce. Only one person is responsible for defeat. You.

History. It's what I came to make in Athens. *First Indian to win an individual Olympic gold*. History is not why I shot, but history was also partially my fuel. I never felt the burden of a nation waiting, but I appreciated how long it had been waiting. Olympic Games after Olympic Games, watching athletes from countries like Suriname win gold, from Mozambique, listening to outsiders sneer, 'one billion people, not one individual gold'. I guess I had the power to alter that, I presume people believed I had the power to change that. Now I'd failed.

If you had asked me, any other day, who I was, I would have instinctively answered: *A desperately lucky man*. I had wonderful parents, a loving sister, supportive coaches, never had to worry about money, yet now I felt so desperately alone, so utterly useless. It was a twenty-year-old life at its lowest point.

I had been one of the strong favourites in the 10-metre air-rifle final at Athens. I had been in splendid form in practice. *Forty-seven* players competed for a place in the eight-man final, and after the qualifying I was sitting in third place. In touching distance of a gold medal, even closer to bronze. Then I fell to seventh out of eight shooters in the final. I had lost.

But it was more than that, for losing I had known, losing I didn't like, but losing I wasn't scared of. This had a different taste, this was a collapse of talent precisely when it was supposed to bloom. I didn't want to speak to anyone, see anyone, say anything. I was mystified by my own incompetence.

Air-rifle shooters fire sixty shots in qualifying competition from a distance of 10 metres, and each shot can be worth 10 points at best for a total of 600. In the final, the top eight shooters fire ten more shots, but the scoring goes into decimal places to separate the best. It means, when it comes to the bullseye, you can score from 10.0 points to a highest of 10.9. In our world, even hitting the bullseye isn't enough. We have to hit a particular part of the bullseye, we have to exist on the very edge of perfection.

Great shooters aren't supposed to shoot 8s in an Olympic final. They rarely shoot 9s in an Olympic final. Nines are nice, they're accurate, they're impressive. But they are not perfect. Not even close to perfect. Too many millimetres away from perfect in a sport where the bullseye is 0.5 millimetre. Let's just say this: William Tell with his crossbow had to hit the apple, I have to hit the seed inside the core of that apple. All the time, every shot, that's my job.

This is where great shooters live. This is where I thought I now lived. In an international air weapons competition in Munich in Germany earlier that year I had shot 10.4, 10.1, 10.4, 10.9, 10.5, 10.6, 10.2, 10.3, 10.3, 10.3 in the final. Every

shot above 10. One a perfect 10.9. But now I was looking at my scores in the Athens Olympics final and they were inexplicable. Like an elite sprinter timing 11 seconds in an Olympic 100-metre final.

9.4, 10.0, 10.0, 10.3, 9.8, 9.9, 8.8, 9.7, 9.6, 10.1.

One score in the 8s.

Five scores in the 9s.

Nothing higher than 10.3.

Damn.

I knew my craft. My gun was like an extra limb. I had studied balance, posture, technique. I could strip down every performance and tell you almost precisely why I failed or triumphed. Down to the last irregular breath. I knew myself, I knew shooting. But this didn't make sense.

My mood had been buoyant. A day or two before my event, Indian trap shooter Mansher Singh and I had chauvinistically kidded about what we'd need to do to win Olympic gold.

'Maybe I should enter the women's double trap,' I laughed, simply because it only had ten serious competitors in it. *We had nearly fifty.*

'Yeah,' he smiled, 'but you'd need more than a gun change for that.'

My form was flying, too. My German-Swiss coach, Gaby Buehlmann, later insisted that technically and mentally, I was a superior shooter in Athens to the one I was four years later in Beijing, when I won Olympic gold. India's Suma Shirur, both superb shooter and friend, told a reporter years later that 'Abhinav was in excellent form in Athens. I don't think at the 2006 world championships, where he won, he was even close to it.'

Ironically, inexplicably, I even *felt* I had shot great in the final, that I had done everything right. *Yet this was the lowest*

total I had shot anywhere in the world at any level. It was a total I couldn't shoot even if I was trying.

Questions coursed through me.

Had I overestimated myself, so driven by ambition?

No.

Had I miscalculated the difficulty of being an Olympic champion, the incredible amalgam of training and luck and performance on the day?

No.

Had I underestimated the value of just getting to an Olympic final, being one of the world's eight best shooters, in just my second Games?

No. A final was good but it wasn't enough. For me, seventh was as good as seventeenth.

Had I overlooked the intensity of my first Olympic final?

No.

Of course, an Olympic final was new for me, unknown territory, the pressure foreign. This was the place where you wonder, am I just a training world champion—great only in practice—or a real one? I could wake up at 3 am in my underwear and shoot a perfect 10 on command. But this was the Olympics, the unpredictable universe, people watching, cameras recording, the world's finest collection of talent nudging you from every side. Where a tiny mental error, or an infinitesimal misalignment on my hips, could mean victory denied. Nevertheless, I believed I was ready.

Had I been undone, slightly, irreparably that day, by my own expectation, by that of my family?

No.

Uwe Riesterer, a German who was my performance consultant, believes Indians handle expectation differently. His generalization goes like this: Constantly tell an American

he's the best, and he will saunter into the arena and say 'Let's kick ass and beat the hell out of everyone.' Tell an Indian he's the best and he tends to be defensive: 'I am the best, I better not make a mistake.' It's a reasonable theory, especially for me and Indian shooters of my generation—the new breed is different, bolder, more certain, like India itself—but that day it didn't apply to me.

I had been led to believe, from boyhood, that I *could* be the best. It was a belief broadcast to me more often than a propaganda message on China Radio. But this message was vital for me, for I was naturally negative, driven to almost a mild depression when results were erratic. My family was like a pack of boxing seconds, lifting me when I tired. So many times I wanted to quit, fall into some hole of self-pity, but my family never gave up on me. They kept me going, they reminded me of my talent. Never a burden, always a support.

So many theories abounded of why I failed, so many explanations, so many assumptions. Later, I'd weigh them, but right then, that night in the Olympic Village, I was unable to sleep, I kept thinking, something was wrong. The jury is going to discover there was a mistake with the target, the competition has to be redone, because these were scores I couldn't explain. But morning brought no solace.

You have to understand my reaction. Shooting, like all sport, is about incremental improvements. I started by wanting to be a district shooter, now I was at my second Olympics. Piece by piece, like a gun being assembled, I was being put together, and now I felt like the final polished product. I was no longer content getting to finals, I was winning finals.

I had started 2004 in Colorado Springs at the Rocky Mountain Championships—a series of three events in three days—with a 597/600 and a total of 103.5 in the final (103.5

was an average of 10.3 every shot for ten shots, and any score in that region is considered a good final performance). In the second event, I shot a perfect 600/600 and a 103.6 in the final, for an impressive total of 703.6, much better than the world record then. This didn't count as one because it wasn't an official event sanctioned by the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF). It didn't matter. World record scores are infrequent; 600/600 is infrequent—in ISSF competitions it has happened only three times.

So powerful was the confidence accelerating through me that I felt, put me in a final and I will win it. In Europe, before the Athens Olympics, I won gold again in Germany, against a field comprising Dick Boschman of the Netherlands, Wolfram Waibel of Austria, Torsten Krebs of Germany, Peter Sidi of Hungary, Artem Khadjibekov of Russia, Rajmond Debevec of Slovenia, Konstantin Prikhodtchenko of Russia. Nobodies to you, but for us, at that time, these were the heroes of the bullet business. I felt I was as good as them; in finals, ironically, I felt I was better than them.

So I came to Athens expecting gold, yet I left wanting to vomit. Not only because I failed, and *how* I failed, but also because of *when* I failed. Any time is fine, except now, except Olympic time. These Games are impossible to overstate for the runner, the shooter, the archer, the wrestler, the boxer.

Athletics aside, there are no hefty prize money cheques on offer for us. Week in and week out, it's all paper certificates and tin medals. It's a planet of few headlines. Negligible sponsors. Not many agents. Small fan bases. In a way, without diminishing other sports, our pursuit is pure. Pure gold. The Olympics is the single moment that beckons us, defines us, and it is a moment that arrives infrequently.

The cricketer has Test matches through the year, the tennis

player has four grand slam events in twelve months, the golfer the same number of majors annually. Constantly, there is an opportunity for redemption, a chance to stake a claim for greatness. Not for me. My only chance comes every four years. My only chance is seventy shots in 125 minutes every four years (the first sixty shots are to be fired in 105 minutes, each of the final ten shots within 75 seconds).

We have to be a little insane to do this, a trifle obsessive, almost as single-minded as shaven monks who sit for years meditating under trees in search of distant nirvana. No joke. I once got yak milk from China because I was told it enhances concentration. (It didn't.) I attached electrodes to my head to view the activity in my brain when I shot well. I lasered off my love handles. Let's be clear: we're not you. We're not better than you, or other athletes, just caught in lives mostly weirder than most. Shooters can't suddenly shout 'fuccckkk' as football strikers do after a missed opportunity to score, we can't throw guns as one might a tennis racket, we have to absorb everything, swallow conflict, keep it tightly leashed within, not let it out, give up our humanness to become a machine. It's probably what makes us neurotic.

Athletes in general tend to talk a lot about processes and journeys and the need to savour them, because if we thought of our reality—investing our entire beings, our savings, our sweat into a single Olympic day—we'd go crazier. We're looking to become highly tuned instruments almost agitating to perform. It is a high, a unique feeling only athletes and musicians and actors might have. An Australian Rules football player once said that at season's beginning he was so sharp, every muscle in his body so alive, that it was hard for him just to walk. Every time he did, he wanted to break into a run.

The pressure of the Olympics is that right then, at that

precise two-hour period every four years, I have to be perfect. Or just more perfect than everyone else in the world. And the world of shooting is reasonably large. Germany itself has 1.5 million shooters; across the world, in an inexact estimate, there are close to 70 million. It's why we're nervous, why athletes throw up before competing, why we chant, sit quietly in corners, put on particular socks in a particular order, hold on to superstitions, look to God. It's why gold is so meaningful.

This is what the Olympics' appeal is, for it is the ultimate proof of readiness. Earlier in 2004, I had casually mentioned that the Olympics was just another competition. I was lying. Deliberately. I was trying to detach myself, trying to remain relaxed, trying to stave off pressure. But the truth is that the Olympics is everything, it is the mission.

There is no higher achievement in my sport, no finer examination of sporting worth, no more excruciating confirmation of skill produced under the suffocation of tension. In India, we all grow up to the yell of a distant 'Howzzat' from an adjoining field, but for some of us, our temples go beyond a pitch. They become instead a ring, a court, a track, a pool, a range. Instinctively, as a boy, the moment you actively pursue a sport, in your childish dreams—which never quite die—you look to its ultimate expression. The crown that represents excellence is the crown you wear in your sleep. For tennis players perhaps it is Wimbledon, for badminton players the All-England Championships, for golfers the Masters.

For me, it was this ancient Games to which an Indian first travelled in 1900. Our bond to the Olympics came through a team wielding hockey sticks as if they were wooden wands and a wrestler named Khashaba Dadasaheb Jadhav, who won independent India's first individual medal, a wrestling bronze, in 1952. No shooter had won here. No grand record

of individual excellence at the Olympics existed. The gold medal was remote. Never seen by most, never touched. This very foreignness of it made the journey more mysterious and arduous. Yet it was also an inspiration. Everyone, after all, wants to be the first on any moon. So the Olympics is 99.9 per cent of the reason why I shoot; it is also the best place for me to judge how well I shoot.

Yet here in Athens, after four years of changing coaches, weighing hundreds of bullets, detailing guns, sitting with psychologists, firing in darkened rooms, taking a screwdriver to every tiny damn detail, you want to have something to show. I had done everything. Yet I had nothing except seventh position in the final.

It is deflating, it is humbling. No one understands. No one except other athletes. That day, Russian Olympic shooting medallists Liubov Galkina and Tatiana Goldobina came up to me in the dining hall and had tears in their eyes. We're not close friends, it's just a bond athletes share, an appreciation of pain. At one point, I just kept laughing and can only explain it as being in some sort of shock. When someone asked me if I wanted to eat, I answered with feeble amusement: 'No, thanks, I'm still digesting my 9s.'

But right then, wrapped so tightly in defeat, winning anything, like a world championship two years later, or an Olympic gold four years later, seemed unreal. I told one of my mentors, Amit Bhattacharjee, 'What have I done? I am a waste of space.' I mentioned to the American coach Dave Johnson that at least the last shot of my shooting career had been a 10. At that point, another four years to the Beijing Olympics seemed pointless, seemed too tiring, seemed simply not worth the investment if this was going to happen.

It was all over. As a shooter, I was finished. At twenty, I was ready to retire.



THE PARENT FACTOR

All my life, shooting has been a struggle. A contest with the self. Every 10 has been a battle, every performance has demanded that I look within for an answer. Just below my apparent calm there is tremendous conflict. To win you need an internal rage, a desperation, a hardness, and eventually I became a shooter who relished a fight.

If my stability was imperfect on a given day, perhaps because my stance was awry, or my body not relaxed, then I'd fight it. Ten times I'd raise my gun to fire, ten times I would put it down, fighting to find the tranquil balance that shooters crave. I didn't quit and I need to thank somebody for that.

My parents.

Are champions born? I don't think so. It is a bunch of extraordinary people who make champions out of ordinary kids. Would Tiger Woods have been who he is without his father, Earl? I'm not sure. Great, yes, unique, who knows? Unquestionably, champions are born with something, like a sprinter's fast-twitch fibre, or champion swimmer Michael Phelps's long torso-short legs physique that seems fashioned by God for the purpose of cutting through water.

But that is not enough.

Dreams require a team. And my Olympic and world championship golds arrived because my parents and a clutch of experts groomed a young boy to strive for excellence.

I believe destiny makes the world spin the way it does. But I also believe that positive energy drives champions. Great athletes don't just exhale this positivity, they surround themselves with similar people. Not yes-men, but believers. When people buy into your cause, cheer your dream, it's like an armour-plating of sorts: you're not alone. When this cheering is fake, and I've smelled that, too, it stinks. In India we tend to limp along because our sports are shrouded in negativity.

Every successive Olympics was presented as proof that something was wrong with us Indians—we were unable to win gold, we lacked the right strain to produce athletic heroes. We were seen as not strong enough, tough enough, disciplined enough. For athletes this can be disheartening, for winning is hard enough without the constant suspicion—from officials, forget the public—that eventually we will be proved incapable. Growing up, I faced this negativity. As the 1996 Olympics approached and I first understood, at age thirteen and from a distance, what an Olympic gold was, I found it was also portrayed as an unachievable dream. Eventually it took the collective intensity of my family and coaches to successfully unravel a puzzle that had perplexed Indian sports for over a hundred years: you have to stretch yourself to the limit and leave very little to chance. Only then does reward arrive.

The foundation of my confidence came from my parents. I believed because they believed in me. After the Athens final, with my world collapsing, my mother, Babli, came to me and said: 'The best you could have done anyway was silver, but that's not your goal. Your destiny is to win a gold.' My mother

never quit on me. Never. She was my reassurance, my faith. She spent cold days of my youth in Germany, just getting me ready for the range, just waiting for me to come home, never wavering in her belief. How do you forget that?

My mother, daughter of a man fond of shikar, was a fifth-generation descendant of the legendary general Hari Singh Nalwa, the commander-in-chief of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army. He once fought a lion armed with only a shield and a sword. My mother, single-handedly, took on slightly lesser foes—Indian sports officials—with as much bravery.

My mother is a woman of many fine parts—she has a Master's degree in psychology and is an athlete of some merit. She played softball, table tennis, hockey, basketball and was a part of the Panjab University's first women's cricket team. Dedication, determination, discipline—which Anil Kumble used to preach to schoolkids as the three Ds—were attributes she was familiar with. It's why the German coach Heinz Reinkemeier (Gaby's husband—they coach me as a duet) says, 'She is a very special mama. She is tough.'

My mother's fuelling of my dream, to let me chase sport and not a law degree, is perhaps rooted in her past. Having lost her mother at thirteen, she was desperate to be a doctor, but in more conservative times her father prevailed upon her to get married. She would not do that to me, she would let me go, not interrupt my dream but assist me in its pursuit.

If she gives me emotional sustenance, my father, Apjit, gives me spirit. He is my hero, my role model. He has backed my dream unflinchingly with every fibre, every resource, every encouragement he possesses. He'd be knee-deep in business deals, confronted by problems, but shooting was never dismissed. I was travelling the world, and he was the man left with a list of things to do: coaches to speak to, equipment to

be bought, formalities to be completed about travelling with guns. He'd get his secretary to pester journalists with my results, he'd fax them news, results, quotes. He didn't just get it done, he did it with an enthusiasm that was inspiring.

It may be tempting to believe that my father was living his dream through me. For many parents, children are the vehicles to sustain their unfinished dreams, as if there is some unfulfilled athlete, some disaffected dreamer, within them. It was not that simple in my case. My dad gave me the freedom to make the choice. Once he was convinced of my conviction, he backed me. In short, my dream became his dream.

My father, a Sikh, was born on 4 June 1949 in Lucknow. My grandfather, Bir Singh, was an army officer and retired as a colonel. He had played hockey for the Services along with the legendary Dhyan Chand. My grandmother, Kartar Kaur, specialized in Punjabi spiritualism and eventually could recite the entire holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib.

My father went to Yadavindra Public School in Patiala and attended the Punjab Agricultural University in Ludhiana and Panjab University in Chandigarh. His life altered with a scholarship to Denmark. He did his doctorate in animal sciences, became fluent in Danish, practised as a veterinarian and led a comfortable life. Then fate, not for the first time, interceded.

In 1971, the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, visited Denmark and my father was attached to her as an interpreter. Conscious of the brain drain from India, she told him that India needed young men like him. The work he did was work India needed. My father loved life there, but a more persuasive argument would arrive in the form of my grandmother. Loathe to travel anywhere, she bravely hopped on a Lufthansa flight and arrived only to find my father with cut hair disguised in a

badly-wrapped turban. She came to convince him it was time to come home. It was a mother's plea he could not refuse.

Life was kind yet testing for my father, it knocked him down yet he always got back on his feet. His plan for a breeding programme in Dehra Dun using Danish cows ran into a sea of red tape and only a visit to Mrs Gandhi, and a phone call from her, could cut through it. Business boomed, only for foot and mouth disease to kill his entire herd. He bought and sold animals, diversified into food processing, and gradually found success again. But life never promised to be smooth.

Mrs Gandhi was assassinated in 1984 and madness prevailed. Our home was attacked in Dehra Dun and a 300-strong mob tried to burn the house. On a terrifying day, where I was a two-year-old in a farmhouse under seige, my father and grandfather had to fire in the air to disperse the crowd. Finally it moved away, but not before burning down our limestone factory.

Eventually the family shifted to Punjab and my father became an industrialist. When problems arose, and they did, he was aggressive in finding solutions. If his lawyers said there was a 99 per cent chance of an idea failing, he would ask them to explore the remaining 1 per cent and find a way. Struggle was his style and eventually it became mine.

Perhaps, in all this, there was a subliminal contest going on within me. A son's need to prove himself worthy of his father. Intriguing theory, but not convincing to me. But coach Heinz Reinkemeier was sure that this was one of my motors. He saw a distinct connection between my father's success and my need to emulate it. Except in a totally different field. As if I had no choice. As if I was prisoner to the pull of my DNA.