

Squash coach was invited by Bangalore players who contributed Rs 1 lakh to a charity initiative called Khelshala that he started in Chandigarh



Squash player Shaurya Saluja (left) hands over a donation to coach Satinder Bajwa after the five-day coaching programme

It's nearly a year since Khelshala was launched – Satinder Bajwa's latest stop in a long journey that began as a professional squash player in 1982. He would become world No.32, but would earn greater renown as a coach, working with, among others, world No.1 Jansher Khan. Now back in India, Bajwa faces perhaps his biggest challenge yet.

Starting a philanthropic organisation to promote sport among underprivileged children is not a novel concept. What's new about Khelshala is that it opens up opportunity to village children to pursue a sport considered elitist in India – squash. Khelshala, where the kids of Attawa village in Chandigarh can learn squash, music, yoga and academic lessons free of cost – is Bajwa's way of "giving back" to the country of his origin. He was born in India and moved to England when he was a child. "You wonder what you can do, India has many needs, and I don't have enough money," he says. "I have an abundance of squash. If someone makes use of it, and if they can get a scholarship, you can build a life."

Perhaps Khelshala might

produce some future champions, or perhaps it might not – Bajwa's primary concern at the moment is to keep it going. "It's not necessarily to make them champions," he says. "I think sports are for everybody. There's a myth that they're only for good players or gifted athletes. I think that was for 30 years ago, not now. Sport helps you have a better lifestyle. Their concentration levels go up, and they might get more disciplined."

Bajwa was invited to Bangalore on a coaching programme for 20 players initiated by a young squash enthusiast, Shaurya Saluja. The Bangalore teenager had visited Chandigarh to develop a cyber security curriculum with Punjab Engineering College; wanting to play squash, he chanced upon Khelshala and volunteered to coach the kids. His friends in Bangalore were keen to train with Bajwa, and they wondered if they could get him down to Bangalore. Saluja contacted players of the 'Bangalore Squash Ladder', and was able to enlist 20 players for a fee of Rs 5,000 each for a five-day programme that concluded on Tuesday. The players contributed Rs 1 lakh to Khelshala

Q&A

Satinder Bajwa
Ex-Harvard Univ coach

Despite all the impressive coaching stints Satinder Bajwa has had – Harvard University, US Military Academy, Indian and Israeli junior teams – none stands out as much as his relationship with Jansher Khan. Bajwa spent close to ten years as coach of Jansher – winner of eight World Open and six British Open titles – and one of the greatest names in the sport. Bajwa talks to DEV S SUKUMAR about the game and his vision for his Indian initiative, Khelshala, that offers free squash training to children of Attawa village in Chandigarh.

How come squash has not become a big sport worldwide?

It's just the nature of the game. What can you do with it spectator-wise? It looks easy from the outside, whereas tennis looks so difficult. Squash has a similar structure to tennis, it has all the ingredients – world championships, team championships, professional players and so on. But I think it's more alive than badminton; there are more professional opportunities in squash. I'm unhappy that squash didn't make it to the Olympics after being short-listed. Golf and rugby made it, and money played a role. I'm sad. The game would grow if it was in the Olympics.

You spent 10 years with Jansher Khan. What was that like?

Very good. Being around with the best... it's like spending time with Federer. Jansher Khan looked at the game differently. And you start to learn the deep things. So it's a learning experience from a young man very mature on the court, but very immature off the court. He was like a sage or guru on the court and a total nutcase off the court. So I

'...and a nutcase off it,' says top coach



Coach Satinder Bajwa (centre) with participants of the five-day coaching programme in Bangalore

saw a bit of that in him.

Overall it taught me the humility of great people. Jansher was seen as brash, but when it came to squash, he had respect for every opponent. He didn't take things for granted.

Was his success essentially built on fitness?

The work ethic of every great player has to be good. He worked hard in the sense that he was quality on court, but most of all, he was a student of the game. He was willing to learn all the time, even when he was a five-time world champion.

You don't coach a player like that, you mentor, you guide, you organise. You pinpoint certain habits or idiosyncrasies that could hurt him against some player. You provide training repetitions to hone his skill. It's like developing a trust in him that you are going to look after him. It's different from coaching.

How did this come about?

I was coaching another Pakistani kid, Mir Zaman Gul, partly be-

cause we spoke Punjabi. I coached him from no.90 to no.6. A year or two later, I happened to meet Jansher at Malaysia in 1989. He knew I was with Mir, and he asked me to join him.

Your opinion on the Jansher-Jahangir rivalry?

They were two different kinds of players, like Federer and Nadal. Jansher was the artist. Their rivalry was followed more in Pakistan, because Jansher was more brash but Jahangir was loved in the nation. One was liked a lot, and other was not, and they took a long time to accept Jansher.

When Jahangir came most players in the top-8 were over 30. You have to give credit to him, but it was partly that the time lent itself. When Jansher came, the competition was tougher – there was Jahangir, Ross Norman, Chris Dittmar...

How come the Pakistanis have produced so many top-class players, while India has struggled?

In 1963 Anil Nayar was the jun-

Jansher was seen as brash, but when it came to squash, he had respect for every opponent. He didn't take things for granted

Satinder Bajwa
Coach to Jansher Khan

ior champion. He could've become a top pro, but he went to Harvard. He was from a rich family. Indian squash players are upper middle class. The Pakistani game had a lot of Pathans who were markers at courts, it was an escape for them, as they could go to England and all that. Hashim Khan set the stage for Pakistan by winning the British Open from 1951 to 1956. He was a marker, and became a world figure.

What's your opinion of squash in India?

Squash is small; it's the same worldwide. The structure in India has grown and become better. The Indian junior team came fourth (at Chennai); it was their highest finish ever.

What memories stick out of the time you were with Jansher?

The biggest thing that sticks out is that you don't work for eight-nine years unless you have a certain respect for each other. At a time when Indians and Pakistanis were bad-mouthing each other... how he and I handled each other. It (nationalism) never mattered to him or to me. He was not one of the nicest guys, but he had respect.

What's next on your plate?

Making Khelshala as big as Jansher and Harvard. I want one of these kids challenging for places in one of the Ivy League schools!