

Sport

Asian track queen going full steam at 34

by Raghunath Rau, India Abroad News Service

New Delhi, July 14 - The "Payoli Express" keeps steaming ahead, long after everyone thought it would have sputtered to a halt. Payoli Express, as the Asian track queen P.T. Usha from the village of Payoli in the southern Indian state of Kerala is endearingly called, has not let age become an obstacle. At 34, and a mother of one, she still continues to amaze the Indian sports world with comebacks after comebacks. In the latest, Usha travels to Fukuoka, Japan, next week to take part in what will be her fifth Asian Track and Field Championship beginning with the one held in Kuwait in 1983. At the Fukuoka meet, Usha is slated to take part in three individual events, the 100 metres, 200m and 400m, plus the two relays. Expected to be a gruelling test for anyone, certainly for someone of Usha's vintage, the "golden girl" is expected to have a major share of whatever medal haul the 33-member Indian squad is able to manage.

Ironically, 1998 could still be one of Usha's best years since her heydays in the late 1980s. She broke a string of her own national records at the Federation Cup in the southern Indian city of Chennai last week, though she strictly qualified only in the 200m and 400m for the Fukuoka meet. In the 200m, Usha clocked 23.30 seconds, as against her best-ever of 23.27 recorded at the New Delhi Asian Track and Field meet of 1989. Later, Usha insisted that this was the best race she had ever run, "no matter what the timing shows", implying that she did not really trust the clocking mechanism in Chennai. Usha made her international debut at the boycotted-ridden Moscow Olympic Games of 1980. She crashed out in the opening heat of the 400m. Just four years later, she drew international media attention at the Los An-

geles Olympics when she made the final of the 400m hurdles, the first Indian woman to do so. She missed the bronze medal in a photofinish, and her fourth place timing of 55.42 seconds is still a national record.

Just a year after Los Angeles, Usha took the Asian athletics world by storm at the Jakarta ATF meet. She won all the three individual events, and had the satisfaction in the process of beating the celebrated Lydia de Vega of the Philippines in the 100 m. In addition, Usha was



PT USHA

part of the gold medal winning 4x400m relay team and of the bronze medal winning 4x100m relay squad. The dream run continued at the Seoul Asian Games in 1986 and at Singapore in 1987. At Seoul, Usha won four golds and a silver - winning in the 200m, 400m, 400m hurdles and was a member of the 4x100 m relay team. She came second in the 100m race. At Singapore, Usha was second in the 100m, first in the 400m and first in the 400m hurdles. In addition, the relay teams of which she was a part won the

4x400 event and was second in the 4x100m race. The downslide started a year later. Usha made it to the Seoul Olympics of 1988 amid controversy following a heel injury. She crashed out in the heats of the 400m hurdles and was kept out of the relay team after much drama. Still, Usha won three golds (200m, 400m and 400m hurdles) at the New Delhi ATF in 1989. She won a silver in the 100m, was part of the gold medal winning 4x400m team and of the silver medal winning 4x100m squad.

The 1990 Asian Games at Beijing was a highly emotional occasion for Usha. Even though she finished second in the 400m, the entire attention of the stadium and of the media was on her. Many felt it was her swan song. That impression was soon reinforced. In 1991 came her marriage, and motherhood followed soon. The athletics world then wrote off Usha. But she stunned everyone in 1993 by expressing a desire to get back onto the track. Then followed much disappointment and even humiliation. She made it to the Hiroshima Asian Games of 1994 where she was once again the cynosure of media attention. But she could manage only a fourth position in the 200m and was part of the silver medal winning 4x100m relay team.

If motherhood has enhanced Usha's performances, another Indian athlete, Shiny Wilson, has achieved some of her best timings after becoming a mother. This, in fact, is a worldwide phenomenon, and has been attributed to the secretion of particular hormones in the body during pregnancy. As for Usha, there is yet another Asian Games round the corner, in Bangkok in December. This wonderful saga of Indian sport promises to endure for some more time.

—India Abroad News Service (Credit Mandatory)

Manchester yet to catch up

LONDON, July 15: As England prepares to send their biggest ever team to the Commonwealth Games in Malaysia, preparations for the 2002 games in Manchester are coming under increasing scrutiny, reports AP.

Norman Sarsfield, chairman of England's Commonwealth Games Council, admits the facilities at Manchester are still only in the planning stages.

Sarsfield, speaking at the announcement of England's swimming team for the games in September, said the stadium in Kuala Lumpur were the best he had ever seen.

But he said he was "ashamed" because the facilities at Manchester did "not measure up at all."

"The swimming pool at Kuala Lumpur is better than the pool used for the Atlanta Olympics and the (track) stadium - it's the best I've seen. Better than the Stade de France (venue of the World Cup soccer final)," he said.

Sarsfield, who visited Malaysia last month to inspect the facilities, said the Malaysian government had supported the Commonwealth Games and used it as an way to improve infrastructure.

Everything will be perfect. And the smog won't be a problem. The Malaysian's have ensured the air quality will be at suitable levels for the athletes," he said.

Kuala Lumpur is the first Asian city to host the Commonwealth Games, which started as the Empire Games in New Zealand in 1930.

British Sports Minister Tony Banks responded to questions about Manchester's lack of visible facilities by saying he was confident England would host a successful competition.

"There was an agreement between the Sports Council and the Manchester authorities about the 2002 Commonwealth Games - there's time enough for us to get it right," he said.

England will send a 452-strong team to Malaysia in a bid to restore some confidence in England's sporting ability for the nation's public.

Sarsfield predicted England would challenge Australia, which he rated among the top three swimming countries in the world, for Commonwealth Games supremacy.

Losers but not out of favour

BRASILIA, Brazil, July 15 (AP/Internet): Brazilian fans turned out by the thousands Tuesday to give their team a hero's welcome to the capital, despite their worst World Cup defeat ever.

President Fernando Henrique Cardoso hailed "our glorious team" and bestowed the National Merit Order on each player at a ceremony in the Presidential Palace.

"It is possible there is happiness across France. But we were four times world champions this century - they are champions just once," Cardoso said of France's 3-0 victory Sunday. "Our destiny is to grow and become champions. There will be other tournaments."

Two Brazilian air force fighters escorted the jetliner bringing the team from Paris as it approached the airport.

The welcome by thousands of cheering fans in Brasilia contrasted with the more subdued tone in Rio de Janeiro a few hours later, where only a few hundred fans greeted the players.

Rio authorities had been organising a massive welcome in hopes the team would bring home Brazil's fifth World Cup title, but called off the celebration after the defeat.

Soccer star Ronaldo, who suffered a sudden fit of convulsions hours before the game, looked tired Tuesday as he left the plane.

He was holding the leash of a white dog - a gift for his girlfriend, a television report said.



Aime Jacquet (C) holds aloft the FIFA World Cup while being landed by French President Jacques Chirac (L) and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (R) during the Bastille Day Garden party at Elysee palace on July 14. — AFP photo

Azhar — the comeback captain

NEW DELHI, July 15: Indian cricket has rarely seen comebacks of the calibre and kind which Moham-

mad Azharuddin has managed to pull off over the last seven months.

Azhar led India to a record number of Tests and victories before he was deposed shortly after the 1996 tour of England. Though the Indian team was far from disgraced during the series, the feeling was that the incumbent skipper did not have his mind on the job and it was time for a change.

Azhar was going through a turbulent time in his personal life with divorce from his first wife still pending even as he was seen in public with wife-to-be, the actress Sangeeta Bijlani. A prying press and public made things difficult for the pair. But the captain's decision to take Sangeeta with him on the England tour did not go down well with the authorities. A lack of runs, and the walk-out by Navot Sidhu and the knives were out.

The heir-apparent was none other than Sachin Tendulkar and at the age of 24 he was appointed captain.

If anything, the team's performance went from bad to worse. The pressures of captaincy proved too heavy a burden for the young man who was already India's leading batsman. Not only did Tendulkar's form suffer under the strain, Azhar too did not appear fully involved. The result: an abysmal record in 1997 of just wins from 39 one-day internationals.

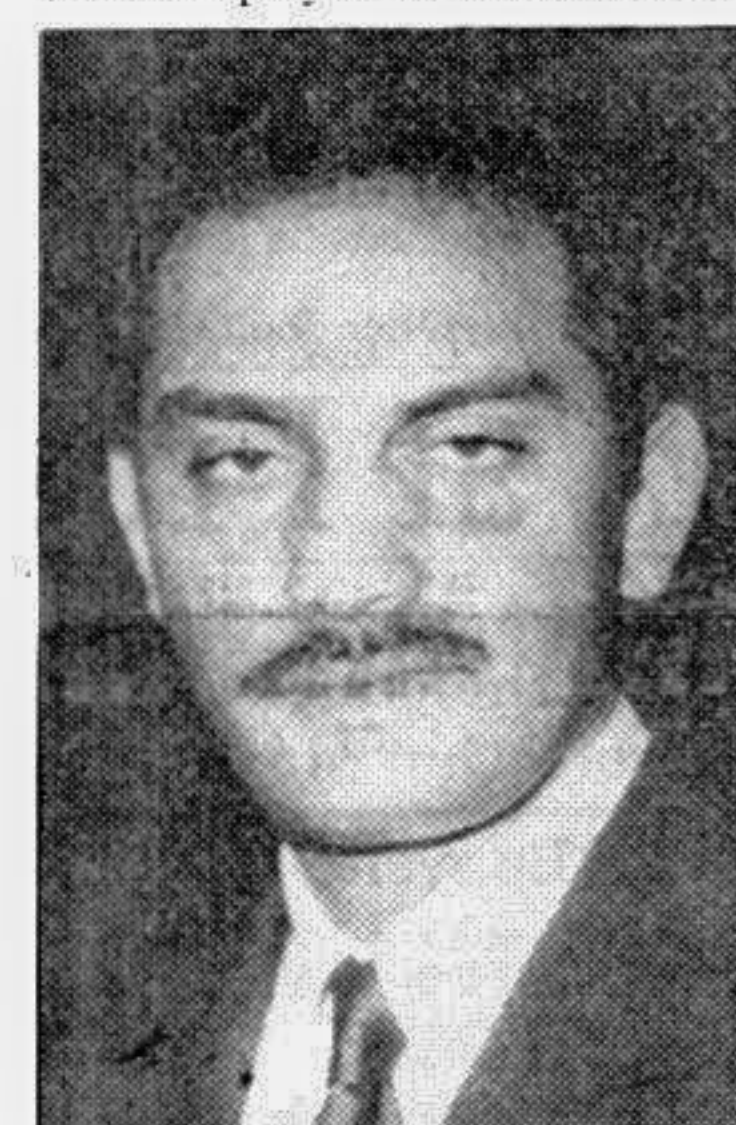
The last straw came in the Sharjah four-nation tournament held in December '97 in which India lost all matches and looked totally at sea.

Drastic steps were needed to salvage India's cricketing pride and to the eternal credit of India's national selection committee, drastic steps were taken. In effect the five-man team had said their mea culpas in front of the entire nation, and wonder of wonders, not for the first time, an India captain was recalled to his post and the immediate results were remarkable.

The first assignment was the Silver Jubilee Independence Cup tournament in Dhaka. After beating Pakistan in the preliminary game, it was back to

that old rivalry in the best-of-three finals. The decider can be put down as the turning point for the team's morale fortunes. India's feat of scoring 316, the highest winning total ever achieved in a one-day international, put them into the record books.

Playing his first Test at Calcutta in 1984-85 against England, Azhar scored a century on debut and then went on to score two more in the next two Tests, a unique feat in Test cricket. He has now played 91 Tests with 20



AZHARUDDIN

centuries over 100 catches and an average of 45.94. His first captaincy assignment was the 1990 tour of New Zealand. Azhar also recently crossed the 273-match mark held by former Australian captain Allan Border for most one-day internationals played.

The difference between the Azhar of '97 and the Azhar of '98 could not have been starker. Trudging back to the pavilion after a disastrous run-out against the West Indies at Sharjah in December, the former captain was a picture of defeat and dejection.

Just a month later, he was back at the helm and totally in control. Even as gloom descended on Dhaka and the umpires walked off the field in the deciding match, the current captain stood rooted to his spot. The umpires and the Pakistan players had no choice but to return and the record was established in light not fit for a school game.

Finally, the team had established faith in itself. The captain was back among the runs and Tendulkar was about to begin one of the most amazing streaks in international cricket.

The next opponents were the all-conquering Australians, the unofficial world champions of Test cricket and one of the top one-day teams as well.

The Test series was no contest. Azhar appeared do-motivated playing under Tendulkar's captaincy and was even warned by the selectors to show more interest. Tendulkar on the

other hand was all fired up with only his batting to concentrate on. His mountain of runs over the last six months has contributed in large measure to India's soaring success rate. With his pride restored and the captaincy back in his hands, Azhar too looks a changed man. His personal problems are behind him thanks to his marriage to Sangeeta. Indian cricket fans are a mighty relieved lot and all the betting and match-fixing allegations of 1997 seem to have suddenly been pushed under the carpet.

India has never lost a Test series at home since 1990 under Azhar's captaincy and that record was maintained as the Aussies were swept away in the first two tests. There was the customary blazing century by the captain himself at Calcutta where the series was wrapped up.

The Pepsi triangular series with Australia and Zimbabwe saw India winning all the preliminary matches with ease. But Australia's victory in the final punctured the balloon. There were no complaints though from any quarters regarding Azhar's captaincy or batting.

Next came the Sharjah tri-series with Australia and New Zealand. It turned out to be another triumph for the Indian teams, though it was very much a one-man show this time. Tendulkar's batting left the world of cricket and opposing bowlers — stunned and shaken.

Even a rare victory for Kenya could not stop the Indian team from winning the Coca-Cola Cup against Bangladesh and Kenya. That meant three title already this year and one runners-up place. A stark contrast with from last year where the lone triumph came in the Sahara Cup against Pakistan in Toronto.

Despite being the oldest member of the team at 35, Azhar is also the fittest. His work in the field is electric and the flashing strokes are evidence that the man from Hyderabad relished the reigns of captaincy.

There are quite a few tournaments to follow this year.

the Sahara Cup and the ICC tournament in Dhaka in October.

All these lead up to the one that counts the most, the World Cup in England in May '99. Though publicly the captain says it is still a long way off, there is no doubt it is very much on his mind.

It was India, under Kapil Dev, who pulled off the biggest upset of them all by beating West Indies in the final in 1983. Now after 16 years, the World Cup returns to England. Azhar is firmly in control and the batting looks mighty strong. There are high hopes that the bowlers will reach peak fitness soon.

Will Azharuddin do a Kapil Dev? — India Abroad News Service

Gilchrist made Aussie Super Max skipper

PERTH, July 15: At six feet (1.82 metres), Adam Gilchrist is the tallest wicketkeeper on the international cricket circuit, reports AFP.

The Western Australian player is also walking tall in the eyes of the Australian cricket authorities.

His selection as skipper of the five-nation super max 8s in Kuala Lumpur starting Friday illustrates how highly his leadership potential is rated.

Selectors were left in a quandary when original captain Steve Waugh withdrew so he could fulfil his role as patron of Udayan, a home for the children of leprosy sufferers in India.

Gilchrist, 26, has been picked as captain for the Friday-Sunday tournament even though he has yet to play in a Test and ahead of six players who have had successful Test exposure.

Gilchrist's path to Test status has been blocked by the durable Ian Healy, rated the world's best wicketkeeper. But he has displayed his talents in the one-day theatre, where his exhilarating left-handed batting makes him a better proposition than the little Queenslander.

In the last Australian summer he struck a sizzling 100 against South Africa in Sydney and an explosive 118 off the New Zealand attack in Christchurch.

Gilchrist moved four years ago to Western Australia from his native New South Wales, where his first-class progress was being limited by wicket-keeper Phil Emery.

He was quickly hustled into the state side at the expense of long-serving former Test wicketkeeper Tim Zoehrer, a favourite with Perth crowds. He weathered some early adverse sentiment from local fans angered by the ousting of Zoehrer.

Two seasons ago Gilchrist was made state vice-captain to Tom Moody, the giant Test and one-day all-rounder, from whom he has learned much about leadership.

On the few occasions he has taken over the reins for Western Australia, Gilchrist has impressed with his firm, thoughtful captaincy.

"Gilly," as he is known by team-mates, brushed off suggestions that his elevation for the Kuala Lumpur tournament suggested bigger responsibilities around the corner.

"It's just a sign of the times with different players and captains for different areas of the game," he said.

But some see Gilchrist as ideally placed for one of cricket's biggest jobs. Test captain Mark Taylor, one-day leader Steve Waugh and his twin brother Mark Waugh are all 33 and Healy is 34.

Real about to rope in Scala

MADRID, July 15: Italy's Nevio Scala looked set to become Real Madrid's new coach, replacing Jose Antonio Camacho who tendered his resignation last week after less than a month on the job, news reports said Tuesday, reports AP.

Scala, former coach of Germany's Borussia Dortmund, arrived in Madrid on Tuesday for contract talks with Real chairman Lorenzo Sanz. National television said a two-season contract could be announced later in the day.

If appointed, Scala would replace Camacho who resigned last Thursday after disagreements over the contract for one of his assistants. His decision came just over a month before the start of the new Spanish first division season on August 30. Camacho, in turn, had replaced German Juup Heynckes who was let go in June after one season, despite leading Real to a record seventh European Champions title. The side defeated Dortmund to reach the final.

Madrid had initially indicated it was chasing Dutch national team coach Guus Hiddink for the job.

Italian booter joins Everton

LIVERPOOL, England, July 15: Italian defender Marco Materazzi joined Premier League side Everton on Wednesday in a four-year transfer deal from Perugia valued at 2.8 million pounds (4.4 million dollars), reports AP.

Materazzi, 24, is the first player signed by Walter Smith since he left Glasgow Rangers to take over as Everton manager.

"We are very pleased to have got hold of him," Smith said. "He is an honest player who I hope will do very well for us. He is tall, quite aggressive, can pass the ball, has a good shot from free kicks and is in good the air at set pieces. He should be beneficial to us overall."

Smith confirmed more signings will follow soon.

"This won't be the end," he said. "We need midfield players. We have signed a good defender and now we also hope we can improve our midfield position in the next seven to 10 days. It looks like being an active period for us."

Paris mayor's Olympic dream

PARIS, July 15: Paris is to consider a bid to stage the Olympic Games following the success of the French World Cup, mayor Jean Tiberi said here Tuesday, reports AFP.

"We are going to study the possibility of an Olympic candidacy," Tiberi said at the annual Bastille Day garden party at the Elysee Palace. "We were so encouraged by the World Cup."

But he said that many factors would have to come together before an official approach could be made to the International Olympic Committee.

Sydney next stages the summer Olympic Games in 2000, with Athens getting the nod for 2004. For the 2008 games, five cities are in the running - Osaka, Toronto, Istanbul, Seville and Buenos Aires.

20 new stadiums for 2002 World cup

TOKYO, July 15: Japan and South Korea, co-hosts of the 2002 World Cup, are pushing ahead with their plans to build new stadiums despite the economic crisis in Asia, reports Reuters.

Officials say the problems facing their economies will not derail the preparations despite the feasibility check conducted by president Kim Dae-Jung's Koran administration.

"We are aiming to complete construction of the stadiums by October 2001," said Lee Yun-Je, an official of south Korea's organising committee.

Each country has already identified 10 host venues.

Two stadiums, Yokohama and Osaka, have been completed in Japan, while those in three South Korean cities, Pusan, Taegu and Incheon, are now under construction.

"There is no sense of urgency yet since it would only take about 32 months to complete a stadium," said Lee.

South Korea's organising committee has estimated it would cost 10 trillion won (7.8 billion US dollars) to build all the stadiums at the venues.

Seoguiipo and Suwon currently face some difficulties in raising finance but the problems are expected to be resolved with support from their provincial governments.

The South Korean government will provide 30 per cent of the costs of building each of the 10 stadiums.

As well as the two completed stadiums, Japan's host venues include Kobe, Ibaraki, Miyagi, Niigata, Oita, Saitama, Sapporo and Shizuoka.

The cost has been included

in the budgets of the local governments for the past three or four years so the plans will not be affected," Jumji Ogura, general secretary of the Japan football association (JFA), said in Paris last week.

The construction of nine of the stadiums will be completed by the spring of 2001, with the last one in the city of Kobe set to be finished by the autumn.

Hiroshi Uchijima, general secretary of Japan's World Cup organising committee (JAWOC) said the running costs of hosting the World Cup, which excludes building the stadiums, could be double the amount spent to stage France '98.

"Basically, the cost for Japan to host the event would be about the same as that for France. The same could be said for South Korea as well. In other words, the cost would be double the amount France had to shoulder.

But in the run-up to the year 2002 we don't know how much extra cost we'll end up with. I believe the total cost could be 50 to 60 billion yen each," he said.

With 64 matches taking place in the 2002 finals each of the 20 stadiums selected by the two countries could be expected to host only three matches.

The opening game will be held in Seoul along with the third place play-off if FIFA does not scrap that match.

The World Cup final will be staged in Japan at either the newly constructed 70,000-seater Yokohama international stadium or the 63,000-seater Saitama prefectural stadium.

A decision on which venue will host the final will be taken next year.



Hicham El Guerrouj of Morocco stands beside the display board showing his new world record timing in the 1500 metres at the Golden Gala athletics meet in Rome on July 14. — AFP photo

El Guerrouj's new record

ROME, July 15: Morocco's Hicham el Guerrouj broke the world 1500 metres record on Tuesday when he ran an astonishing three minutes 26.00 seconds at the Golden Gala Athletics meeting in Rome, reports AFP.

El Guerrouj chopped more than a second off the previous best mark of 3:27.37 set by his great Algerian mentor Noureddine Morceli in Nice three years ago this month.

The Moroccan, running in a low key field of competitors, on a humid, overcast evening at the olympic stadium was pulled along by Kenyan pacemaker Robert Kibbet for the first half of the race and then by Noah Ngeny, also of Kenya.

El Guerrouj hit the front 300 metres from the line and strode home comfortably inside the record, although his exact mark

was only confirmed a full 20 minutes after the run due to a fault in the timing system.

The supremely confident 23-year-old had no doubts about his time, which was more than three seconds inside his season's previous best, set at the opening golden league event of the season in Oslo last week.

"Before, it was said Aouita, then Morceli, now it's the hour of Hicham," he said. "Only the clock can beat me. My only enemy is Hicham."

"I came here with the idea of breaking the record. I ran 3:33 here in pouring rain last year. This time the weather was perfect," said el Guerrouj, who dedicated his win to Morocco's King Hassan.

"If God wants, I'll come back to Rome next year and run 3:24.00."

There were few surprises in

the blue Riband sprint events where American world champion Miron Jones powered to her second consecutive golden league victory over 100 metres to remain on target for an IAAF jackpot of 1.0 million US dollars.

Jones produced her best performance of the season to triumph in 10.75 seconds, seven hundredths faster than her time in Oslo last week.

Compatriot Chrystie Gaines was second in 11.00 seconds with Savannah Fynes of the Bahamas third in 11.02.

Namibia's Franke Fredericks, who had said he might not compete here due to a dispute with the organisers, turned up and won the men's 100 metres in 9.97 seconds.

Trinidad's Ato Boldon was second in 9.99 and world champion Maurice Greene was third in 10.04.