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In search of shooting stars

Sudeshna Banerjee



Joydeep Karmakar instructs Mehuli Ghosh, one of the best prospects at his SAI academy. (Sudeshna Banerjee)

Olympian Joydeep Karmakar, who had missed a bronze by a whisker at the London Games, has set up home in our midst — he is staying at Saakar, behind Home Town — and he wants his neighbours to pick up guns and shoot. Not at each other but at the bullseye.

Karmakar has set up a shooting academy inside the Sports Academy of India complex at the stadium where he aims to produce shooters who can compete at the national level. While his 10m range is up for five months now and already has 28 trainees, he is set to get another two ranges ready by next week.

One of them is at New Town School, the futuristic education address near New Town police station, and another inside the Siddha group's housing complex, Siddha Town in Rajarhat.

"All we have are rifle clubs where people are free to take a membership, shoot a few rounds and give up the sport after a while. But I make it clear to those that come to enrol that they would be regarded as professional aspirants. There is a vast gap in our country between Abhinav Bindra and those bursting balloons at the fair. I want to bridge this gap and show people that shooting need not be shunned as a rich man's sport. We need to have a steady supply line of shooters like China has in almost every sports discipline," says Karmakar.

On getting a go-ahead from SAI, he has converted a godown into a shooting range where he has set up Bengal's first electronic target. "This is the same make — SIUS — that was used at the Olympic Games in London and will be used at Rio de Janeiro. It costs Rs 3 lakh. We are also using the latest generation SCATT MX-02, an electronic computer trainer for shooting practice. It analyses the shooter's physical movements and intensity of focus while shooting by recording trigger movements, breathing pattern, head movement etc." It looks like a tab and is connected to the gun with a chord.

The academy has already acquired 10 rifles of foreign make, quite an achievement given how expensive shooting equipment is. "Beginners may not want to invest in guns themselves," says Karmakar, who went to competitions with hired guns as he could not afford one for the first 15 years of his career.

He has also picked a strong team of coaches at the academy, each of whom is a SAF Games or a National Games medalist.

"Coaches here are very supportive. The equipment used is also modern," said Mitali Ghosh, mother of Baidyabati girl Mehuli, who is showing a lot of promise. Among the students is also Koeli Dalmiya, cricket administrator Jagmohan Dalmiya's daughter-in-law. "She is hitting national level qualifying scores on a daily basis despite never having touched a firearm till five months back!" Joydeep's wife Radhica, who used to be a popular RJ on Friends FM, has taken up shooting as well.



Karmakar clicks the range under construction at New Town School

Campus call

Joydeep is excited about the range coming up at New Town School and the support he is getting from the school administration.

“We are converting half of the school’s indoor badminton court into a range. The design will be such that it can be dismantled within half an hour when they want to play badminton.” He got the idea from mobile shooting ranges abroad where caravans carry equipment to places without infrastructure and set up temporary ranges.

The school will also host the third West Bengal Inter-school Shooting Championship from which selected participants will make it to the national event under the auspices of the National Rifle Association of India. “This will give the students adequate exposure as they start playing the sport.”

The principal Satabdi G. Bhattacharjee is upbeat about the addition to the school’s games portfolio. “We want to promote unconventional disciplines which have potential. The educational institutes are the best places to spot talent,” she says. Initially all students from classes VI to VIII will be allowed to opt for shooting classes. “After three months of selection, we will train 16 chosen students to form a school team.”

The range should be ready by mid-June. The range at Siddha Town will open even earlier. “That I did not qualify for the Rio Games had a silver lining. I got the time to create all this. Give me two years, I will produce champions,” says the marksman, his eyes firmly set on the target.

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