

## Profile

Sunita the retired cricket coach from sports authority on india has not only created sporting history by becoming the first woman cricket coach of India, with many of her students playing in the national and international teams. Sunita has even shattered a male bastion where the entry of women was thought to be an impossibility. India's new wicketkeeper-batsman, Deep Dasgupta is one among the many aspiring young cricketers coached by Sunita Sharma.

Sunita Sharma, the country's only woman cricket coach has been training many India team probables for the last 21 years at Delhi's National Stadium Cricket Academy run by the Sports Authority of India (SAI).

Her ultimate moment of glory came when Deep Dasgupta-- whom she has trained since he was seven---hit a ton at the first Test against England in Mohali.

For Sunita the road to success has not been strewn with roses. Being the only woman cricket coach in the country is by no means an easy task. In a set-up where the archetypal coach is a pot-bellied, balding man liberally mouthing four-letter words, her short stature and feminine image complete with bangles and tika initially created doubts in the minds of the mandarins at the Sports Authority of India. But they soon realised that behind the 'usual' look was a very unusual lady whose determination and dedication is now a byword in sports circles.

### **Critics Silenced**

Over the years, Sunita has effectively silenced her critics by letting her pupils do the talking on the cricket field. Though she's reluctant to talk about gender-discrimination, she says the best way to prove oneself is to show results. And this gritty lady has made it a habit of showing results.

If one goes by the sheer number of players who have played national and international cricket under her tutelage, then she surely deserves a place amongst the best coaches in the country.

Being a mother of two it wasn't all that easy for Sunita to manage both her home and her job simultaneously. Her job profile was such that she had to spend five hours daily on the field batting, bowling and fielding along with her students. But once at home she would transform into a normal housewife tending to kids and household chores.

An avid sports buff from childhood, she started her career as a national level Kho-Kho player. Even her parents initially discouraged her from participating in any sporting activity.

"Initially it was difficult", confides Sunita, " but slowly seeing my keen interest in sports and especially cricket, my family allowed me to pursue it as a career. After marriage my husband was very supportive and helped me a lot."

Her transition from Kho-Kho to cricket is an interesting story in itself. Once when her mother saw her spending a lot of time playing Kho-Kho she advised Sunita that no matter how good she became in the sport she would never be able to make a career of it as it was not a national or an international game. She told her to try her hand at cricket, as it was a very popular game.

Sunita took the advice seriously and turned her attention to cricket. Given her natural talent for sports, she soon came in the national reckoning and was selected for the India's women's cricket team as a medium pacer. Though she could not play in the national squad, her determination to realise her dreams through her students motivated her to take cricket coaching in the right earnest.

Being a woman cricket coach naturally had its own pitfalls. Initially, parents were reluctant to send their wards to her, but seeing her determination and her caring attitude, she slowly managed to gain their confidence. So much so that parents thought that it was just an extension of their homes when they used to send their children on the field. And for the students, it was welcome change from the strict image of a coach. They treated her just like an elder who deserved all the respect.

When Deep Dasgupta first started his cricket training in 1983 at age seven, his parents thought that a man coach would be better for their son, but young Deepu (as she fondly calls him) insisted that he would have his training from 'aunty'. For children she is a caring woman who teaches them the basic nuances of this game.

### **Proudest Moment**

" For me students are like kids whom I have to groom to become good players and my proudest moment comes when they represent the country or do well internationally," says Sunita smilingly.

But, do not be deceived by her femininity. For behind this caring face there lies the rock like resolve of a lady who is strict and unforgiving when it comes to maintaining discipline. On field she is completely transformed from the soft-spoken homely woman to a hard taskmistress. She shouts and yells at the students till they get their line, length and footwork right. And when it comes to expletives she can be as tough as any male coach.

When it comes to the overall improvement of her students she is much more than just a coach. Her interaction doesn't end on the cricket field. She dons the role of a counsellor as well as guide for the students when it comes to deciding their careers, which would help in honing their cricketering acumen.

For example, she persuaded Deep Dasgupta's parents to pull him out of one school and put him in Delhi's upmarket Sardar Patel Vidyalaya as it had a better cricketering environment. She even advises on the kind of diet a student should eat, his daily exercise routine, weight training and much more that generally do not fall under the

purview of a normal cricket coach. Sometimes she even goes out of her way to help reduce the fees for any deserving student with real talent.

"At the end of the day a coach stays for only four five hours with the boys, the maximum part of the day is spent along with the parents, the onus should be on them to provide the best possible diet and maintain discipline at home, but I feel that I have a special relationship with the boys I train and go the extra mile in training them," says Sunita.

### **Vital Tips**

At home the lady is just like any other working mom tending to the needs of her family with the same ease as she once fended short-pitched deliveries from opposing bowlers. Both her daughter and son are following in her footsteps and are good in swimming and cricket.

Sunita has not only just created sporting history by becoming the first woman cricket coach of India who has so many players in the national and international teams, she has also shattered a male bastion where the entry of women was thought to be an impossibility.

Two young boys standing in the sidelines of the National Stadium are observing with great concentration. Says one, " We could not get selected in Madam's academy so we thought we'd do the next best thing - watch her coach other boys. Even that is enough for us to get selected in our school team!"

This must be the ultimate compliment to her coaching abilities.