The buzz of action in the air-conditioned 10 metre shooting range on the first floor of the shooting complex at the Shri Shiv Chhatrapati Sports Complex at Balewadi, located on the western fringe of Pune, can catch one off-guard after the vast spaces of almost empty shooting ranges downstairs. Even the little action seen downstairs and the busier skeet ranges on the first floor is attributed to the new shooting academy ‘Gun for Glory’ launched by one of India’s ace shooters and the first Indian to qualify for the forthcoming London Olympics, Gagan Narang. The master marksman, whose parents sold their property to buy him a rifle, is proud that he is able to give back to the game what it earned him. He is clearly drawing inspiration from the new breed of non-government organisations, founded by different sport personalities and sport lovers, to support and augment India’s chances for winning medals at the forthcoming London Olympics of 2012.

In fact, Narang was one of the first athletes to be backed by one such network – Olympic Gold Quest (OGQ), a programme of the foundation for Promotion of Sports & Games, the brainchild of two of the country’s biggest legends on the international sporting arena – the snooker professional Geet Sethi and the former badminton champion Prakash Padukone. Interestingly, Narang’s academy is being supported by another non-profit initiative – Lakshya – put together by a group of people, who have been involved in one sport or the other, including chess grand master Abhijit Kunte.

If Narang has benefitted from two non-government organisations (NGOs), his Indian team-mate, Abhinav Bhindra, who, in 2008, won India’s first individual Olympic gold medal ever, has the backing of another such institution – the Mittal Champions Trust (MCT) – an effort initiated by Mahesh Bhupathi, the country’s tennis professional with 11 Grand Slam titles to his credit, and backed by L.N. Mittal, the world’s richest Indian.

There has been a lot of criticism about the quantum of government funding available for sports development. But, in a country with varied economic needs, it is inevitable that the government funding is focussed on broader sporting requirements of the country, such as creating sporting infrastructure around the country – a few of them state-of-the-art facilities of international standards – and setting up national training camps and selecting players with potential. This leaves very little to be invested on individual players.

‘We need more’

“The government is doing its bit,” says Lakshya-sponsored Rahi Sarnobat, who has qualified for London Olympics, shooting pistol rapid fire. “But we need more,” she points out, practising with Gun for Glory at the Balewadi shooting range. “The government gives me money for the flight tickets, accommodation and ammunition for the matches,” Sarnobat informs. While this facilitates her participation in the tournaments, she is left to fend for herself otherwise, which includes training with an international coach, buying ammunition for her training and training at international venues, where the matches are to be held. Today, her association with Lakshya and Gun for Glory helps her train with Russian champion Anatolii Pidkubnyi, who is credited with guiding several world and Olympic champions. “Just the coach’s monthly fee is ₹3-4 lakh,” she explains. The equipment would cost her another ₹2-3 lakh. For Sarnobat, who started out in the small town of Kolhapur, training with old pistols without pellets, life
has certainly taken a dramatic turn.

Clearly, these non-profit organisations have become quintessential to take the Indian athletes that extra mile to play and win in the international arena. “More than money, it (his association with OGQ) made a huge difference to my emotional and motivational state,” says Narang. Not having to worry about how and from where his ammunition will come, simple things like booking air tickets and travelling to test his ammunition at international venues, he points out, OGQ has taken the big loads off his shoulder.

The athletes’ requirements are plenty and predictably vary from sport to sport. From getting the right world-class trainers, training at international facilities when necessary, participating in international tournaments not on the government’s sporting radar, finding a suitable physical trainer and, with all the doping controversies erupting, getting the right kind of medical advice has become critical for the players. All this calls for money power.

In a country obsessed with cricket, sponsors are tough to come by for other sports. The good news is that things are just beginning to change. Some members of India Inc have started exploring possibilities in other field sports such as hockey and football. But the attention for individual sports is yet to be garnered and that is the three NGOs have stepped in. Interestingly, for the three, sponsorship has not meant purely ploughing in requisite funds. As Ajay Aggarwal, OGQ’s Pune volunteer and the chief customer experience officer, Persistent Systems, puts it – “It is not about giving cash to the players but providing the resources required by him or her to bridge the gap with world champions.” The NGOs operate as facilitators, responding aptly and timely to their players’ needs. On occasion their hand has extended to settling personal exigencies and Lakshya is even talking of international presence, tapping on the Indian diaspora to help and host Indian athletes visiting different countries, struggling with variant cultures and food habits.

All three organisations have been working with the backing of corporate funding and have been particularly in business since the last Olympics in 2008. OGQ’s Foundation for Promotion of Sports & Games, however, was registered in 2002. MCT came into being in 2005, while Lakshya is the youngest group in action, born in 2009.

Flexible budget

MCT, as the name suggests, has a single source of funding. When they started out, the Mittals committed to spending $40 million over six years. “We have a budget of $2 million a year,” says Manisha Malhotra, former tennis player and administrator for the trust. This budget is flexible to requirements, she clarifies. “Decisions here are made in less than 24 hours,” informs Bhupathi, when asked of the advantages or disadvantages of single source funding. “The Mittal family is powerful and sport-loving,” he points out. With L.N. Mittal’s son-in-law Amit Bhatia involved in the trust hands on, it makes things easier. Malhotra follows a weekly report system for tracking the development and progress of the athletes sponsored by the trust. With its focus on six sporting disciplines – shooting, squash, archery, wrestling, boxing and athletics – the trust is sponsoring 33 sportspersons today. The trust also supports and sponsors activities of the Indian Amateur Boxing Association.

“I would love to see 12-20 of our players make the cut for London Olympics,” says Malhotra. So far, four have qualified under the quota system. These include ace shooter and Beijing Olympics’ gold medallist Abhinav Bindra; Ronjan Sodhi, the champion trap shooter who hit silver twice at the 2010 Commonwealth Games and gold at the 2010 Asian Games; and two archers – Lai Shram Bombayala Devi of Manipur and
Nagaland's Chekrovolu Swuro. Malhotra is also betting on free rifle (prone) contender Joydeep Karmakar and wrestler Yogeshwar Dutt.

OGQ, besides the personal contributions of the sporting personalities involved, has about 12 corporate bodies pitching in, most of which are Mumbai-based. Among them are the Bajaj group, ASK group of companies, Edelweiss group and JM Financial. It has also the backing of the man tagged as 'India's Warren Buffet' – Rakesh Jhunjhunwala.

**Sustainable corpus**

The foundation has now launched a programme – 'Power your champions' to rope in employees of different corporate houses to contribute a small bit (₹100, to be precise) of their salary each month towards OGQ's initiatives for supporting rising sporting athletes. “We spend ₹100 on a cup of coffee at a Barista outlet,” points out Viren Rasquinha, chief operating officer, OGQ, and former captain of the Indian Hockey Team. “If we can inspire about a million individuals to enrol in this programme, we could generate a huge sustainable corpus that can help us support may be 2,000 grassroots level athletes,” he explains. The ‘Power your champion’ campaign is yet to take off in a big way, but has managed to enrol the participation of the employees of Pune-based Persistent Systems.

Supporting five sporting disciplines, namely, archery, athletics, badminton, boxing and shooting, OGQ currently has on board 27 athletes. This includes India’s big bets for London Olympics, such as shooter Narang, ace badminton player Saina Nehwal, archers Rahul Banerjee and Tarundeep Rai and five-time world champion boxer M.C. Mary Kom. In a first digression from supporting sporting individuals, the group has tied up to support the P.T. Usha School of Athletics. In fact, this school has brought on board a rising star in the Indian athletic scene – Tintu Luca, who holds the national record in 800 metres running and has to her credit a gold medal in the 4×400 metre relay at the 15th Asian Games held at Doha in 2006.

Rasquinha puts OGQ's financial requirement at ₹4 crore per annum, currently. “We are able to bring in only a little more than half of that,” he says. But, no, that does not mean the NGO is scrounging, he is quick to defend. “It is all a matter of setting your priorities,” he insists.

Lakshya, which has an annual corpus of ₹2 crore, too survives on corporate funding and goes a step further to offer an ‘ownership feel’ to its partners, sponsors and supporters over individual athletes that each corporate are backing. The corporate bodies get a regular report of the progress and achievements of the athletes they are supporting. The athletes, (Lakshya is grooming 29 of them, including prospective Olympians, such as shooters Rahi Sarnobat and Hari Om Singh and another hopeful wrestler Pooja Rani), also become corporate brand ambassadors for some of these corporate entities. “We believe in offering maximum visibility to corporates,” says Sunder lyer, secretary, Lakshya, who is also treasurer, Maharashtra State Lawn Tennis Association. “This includes presence at corporate press conferences and wearing the corporate logo

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Gagan Narang delivers inspirational talk at Persistent Systems in Pune
badges,” he adds. Summing up the approach, he calls it ‘CSR (corporate social responsibility) with mileage’.

Most of the corporate entities associated with Lakshya have their roots in Pune, where Lakshya is based. Bharat Forge and Kalyani group, for one, supports Lakshya’s initiatives in lawn tennis and particularly backs five sub-junior tennis players. These include Ankita Raina, who won the $10,000 ITF Tennis Tournament earlier this year at New Delhi, Arjun Khade, who is ranked Indian number two in the Junior Davis cup team, Prarthana Thombare, Rutuja Bhosale, who won the Asian Closed Junior Tennis Championship at Chennai this year and Sahil Deshmukh, who will represent India in the Asian Under-14 team at the ITF Tournaments in Europe.

The leading poultry company Venky’s who made international news with its £23 million takeover of the British Premier League Club Blackburn Rovers, is sponsoring Lakshya’s support to the Hawa Singh Boxing Academy in Bhiwani in Haryana. While the academy trains over 100 boxers with national and international calibre, Lakshya, with Venky’s funding, has adopted 10 boxers. This apart, it is providing food supplement to 100 boxers. “We have transformed the kitchen there,” says Iyer, “besides bringing in a second coach for the academy.”

**Big support**

One of the biggest supports for Lakshya comes from the local construction company – Kumar Properties, which has even contributed the premises from which Lakshya operates. Manish Jain, managing director, Kumar Properties, is the president of Lakshya. The NGO also has on board, the local spice brand – Suhana, SSK Infotech, Sahyadri Industries, Foundation for Liberal and Management Education (FLAME) Institute, the roofing company Sahyadri Industries, another property developer, Vascon Engineers and the Indira group of institutes.

All three NGOs talk of complementing and supplementing the government’s initiatives in sports, working alongside government training camps and the different national sporting federations. “The environment may be far from ideal, but we give no room for grumbling and refuse to be bogged down by tricky situations,” says Rasquinha. “We have worked hard to build relationships within the federations and people are aware of our good work”, says Bhupathi. “Involvement of as many as NGOs may be interested in promoting sporting excellence is most welcome,” says Injeti Srinivas, joint secretary, department of sports, under the ministry of youth affairs & sports.

“However, in India such efforts are at a nascent stage, as bulk of the funding still comes from the government,” he hurries to underscore.

True, most of the sporting infrastructure has been set up by the government involving huge investments, but with utilisation of these facilities determined by the politics of the day, a good part of these investments could seem like wasted resources. In the wake of the scam surrounding the Commonwealth Games, which saw the arrest of Suresh Kalmadi, an MP from Pune and the chairman of its Organising Committee, all training camps have been moved to New Delhi and the Commonwealth facilities there. This has left the vast 153-acre sporting complex at Balewadi with state-of-the-art facilities wearing a vacant look, but for private initiatives such as Gun for Glory that have leased parts of the premises for its operations.

“With most of the elite receiving funding from the government as well as other sources, the credit for success cannot be attributed to one source,” urges Srinivas. Well, nobody is doing so, but beneficiaries of the non-government efforts cannot but see and acknowledge the strong personal leaning posts these initiatives are offering.

* SANCHITA DAS