

Love at first flight: Indian javelin thrower inspires nation

By Pat Graham
The Associated Press

EUGENE, Ore. — There was no grand plan that launched Neeraj Chopra on the path to becoming an Olympic champion javelin thrower, only a simple suggestion.

Pudgy and pampered — his description — as a kid growing up in the northern part of India, Chopra's uncle suggested one day that he head out to a nearby stadium to get some exercise.

It was there that Chopra first saw the javelin. Some might say it was love at first flight — a twist of fate that has made him a gold medallist and a recognizable name in a country of a billion people. Last month at the world championships in Eugene, Oregon, Chopra added a silver medal to his list of achievements.

"I keep hearing stories about kids wanting to take up athletics and parents also being more open to allowing their children to take up sport," the 24-year-old Chopra said in an e-mail interview with The Associated Press. "That is what I believe is the true legacy of my medal, and it is something I am incredibly happy and proud about."

Since he became India's first Olympic gold medallist in track and field last year, Chopra has appeared on the cover of *Vogue India* and his name has become one of the most searched on the internet among athletes in a country where cricket rules. August 7 in India is National Javelin Day — the day he took the gold in Tokyo.

It wasn't all by accident.

Growing up, he always loved to throw. He'd get the family's cattle out of the water by throwing stones close to them, no matter how far away he was. He loved throwing sticks as far as he could while walking around his family's wheat and rice farm.

It helped turn his right arm into a potent machine. His very first javelin throw was a modest 30 or so meters (98 feet, 5 inches). Two weeks, and a few tips later, he was already up to 45 meters (147 feet, 7 inches).

"I remember it felt very good to be able to throw so far,"



he said.

He was only getting started. His winning throw in Tokyo was 87.58 meters (287 feet, 4 inches). These days, he's recognized everywhere he goes in India — streets, malls, airports, and restaurants. Everyone wants to take a picture with Chopra or get his autograph.

"It's different from earlier when I could be more carefree about roaming around in public, but I like to think of it as me being privileged to receive so much adulation," Chopra said. "I'm mostly grateful for the support."

There's pressure, too, as one of the most familiar faces in a country that reveres cricket, soccer, badminton, field hockey, and, now, the javelin.

"I try to go into every competition with the same aim, which is to do my best and try to achieve my best throw," Chopra said. "As long as I've been training well and feeling good about my body, I am confident about my chances and that's the mindset I usually use going into any competition, be it the Olympics or world championships. It's worked for me in the past, so hopefully, it continues to work for me."

ACCOMPLISHED ATHLETE. Silver medallist Neeraj Chopra of India poses during a medal ceremony for the men's javelin throw final at the World Athletics Championships on July 23, 2022 in Eugene, Oregon. Since becoming India's first Olympic gold medallist in track and field last year, Chopra's name has become one of the most searched on the internet among athletes in a country where cricket rules. August 7 in India is National Javelin Day — the day Chopra won gold in Tokyo. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

In May, the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) debuted a kids' javelin to encourage an even safer way to take part in the sport. The launch was announced by none other than Chopra in a video message.

"We cannot let go of the spike in interest for athletics among youngsters in India," AFI president Adille J. Sumariwalla said in a release.

Chopra also is in the Indian Army, holding the rank of subedar, which is one higher than junior commissioned officer, he explained. He's been given no specific military requirements other than to keep doing what he does best — throw.

In that regard, Chopra is still searching for that "perfect" throw, where everything comes together. He had a setback in May 2019 when he underwent elbow surgery to remove bone fragments that had dislodged. That led him to miss the world championships in Doha that season, which made him more eager for the version of worlds held in Oregon last month.

Chopra has returned to the shape he was in before elbow surgery. In late June, he threw 89.94 (295 feet, 1 inch) — the longest throw of his career. For perspective, the world record is 98.48 (323 feet, 1 inch) set by Jan Zelezny in 1996.

"Despite the many competitions I've competed in and throws I've thrown, there's always this feeling that something could have been better," Chopra said. "Having said that, I think that feeling is also important to keep the hunger and drive to do better alive."

It also helps knowing there are kids in India getting involved because of him.

"I am known as Neeraj Chopra," he said, "because of javelin."

One of Asia's fiercest soccer rivalries has become one-sided

By John Duerden
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — An Asian soccer rivalry unlike no other is starting to become one-sided.

South Korea has defeated Japan 42 times and lost just 16 matches. But Japan has won its last two matches against its regional foes by 3-0 score lines in the past 18 months, including a match last month in Japan.

When Japan made its first World Cup appearance in 1998, South Korea was playing in its fifth tournament. The South Koreans reached the semifinals in 2002 when the two countries co-hosted and remains the best performance by any Asian team at the World Cup. In 2018, however, Japan advanced to the knockout stages while South Korea failed to advance from group play.

In March 2021, Japan defeated its rival 3-0 in Yokohama and it repeated that feat in Toyota last week in the East Asian Championships, clearly superior in both games. And it is not just the senior team — a June meeting at the Asian under-23 championships saw Japan win 3-0 once



more.

"These days, Japanese players do not have a complex about Korea or feel that they are psychologically inferior," Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu said when asked if the country had overcome its stigma against South Korea.

Japanese media were not overly excited with the victory that gave the host nation seven points and first place in the East

Asian Championships which also featured China and Hong Kong.

"It was not a satisfactory win as Korea was too weak," said Soccer Digest.

South Korea coach Paulo Bento said the defeat resulted from defensive mistakes and preferred not to talk about the rivalry between the teams.

"It is dangerous to compare only with Japan because the environment, situation, and training methods in each country are different," he said.

SOCCER RIVALRY. Son Heung-min, second right, of Tottenham Hotspur, kicks the ball against Sevilla FC at Suwon World Cup Stadium in Suwon, South Korea, on July 16, 2022. An Asian soccer rivalry unlike no other is starting to become one-sided. South Korea has defeated Japan 42 times and lost just 16 matches. But Japan has won its last two matches against its regional foes by 3-0 score lines in the past 18 months, including a match last week in Japan. South Korea boasts Asia's biggest star in Son Heung-min, who won the English Premier League's Golden Boot award as the leading goal scorer with Tottenham Hotspur last season. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

Comparisons are inevitable, however, between Asia's two most successful soccer nations. With both teams missing European-based stars, the meeting was largely between players from the J-League and the K-League.

Japan, fielding a less experienced team, won comfortably.

Although South Korea boasts Asia's biggest star in Son Heung-min, who won the English Premier League's Golden Boot award as leading goal scorer with Tottenham Hotspur last season, Japan can name an entire roster filled with European-based players.

And domestically, the J-League is in the ascendancy with pre-pandemic attendances of 20,751 in 2019, more than double that of its South Korean counterpart.

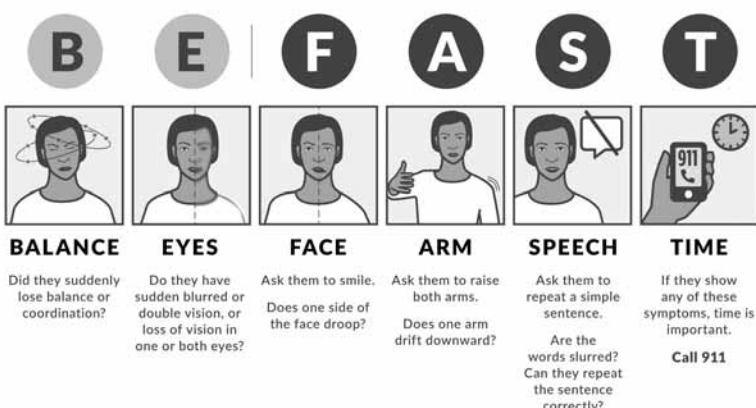
Regardless of recent results and the attendance drop, South Korean defender Kim Jin-su is confident that Asia's most successful World Cup team will be able to turn things around before the start of November's World Cup in Qatar.

Japan is playing in Group E with Germany, Costa Rica, and Spain. South Korea is in Group H with Uruguay, Ghana, and Portugal.

"Of course, we are worried (about the Japan loss) but there is still time to prepare for the World Cup," Kim said.

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