

Harbhajan Singh
Cricketer and Member of Parliament

YT: A bowler's career is not remembered just by the number of wickets that he takes, but also by those special dismissals that you leave that have an everlasting imprint on your career. So, which wickets in your career do you remain the most vivid in your memory and what makes them stand out in your career?

HS: Well, for me, to just pinpoint one wicket and say this was the best wicket or this changed my career will be very difficult for me to, you know, kind of choose one wicket. So, I've taken so many wickets with the grace of God and with all of you people's blessings.

But the most satisfying wicket I can tell you is when I got Steve Waugh out in 2001 because he used to be my childhood hero and playing alongside with him was a big, big occasion for me to be able to get him out was a big, big moment for me and of course that gave me so much of confidence going forward and that made me believe that if I can get people like Steve Waugh, I can get anyone out.

YT: Sponsorships, endorsements and media rights play a huge role in the financial ecosystem of cricket. So, as a player, how did you balance the commercial demands with maintaining your focus on the game?

HS: I think it's a very good question. You know, when I was growing up, obviously I come from Jalandhar, a very small little town and, you know, for me, you know, coming on a big stage and when you do well, a lot of things happen, you know, around you and your career, you know, which kind of take your focus away from the game. You know, obviously I had very, very good seniors who could always advise me on that, that you know, whatever you are getting as an endorsement or, you know, people knowing you or they want you to be part of their brand, it is just because of your cricket and make sure that due to cricket, when everyone is coming close to you, just make sure that that remains at the top and if that goes down, these people will not be seen around you because they will try and find new people, you know, who will do well.

So, it's a part and parcel, you know, endorsement and everything, you know, the money, but, you know, the main focus should be to play for India and to be able to do it for many years, you know, what can you do? You know, how hard you can work on your game to get better every day to sustain there and keep winning games for India, that is more important than you know, these money, endorsement, these are via products. So, I've never kind of, you know, got really attracted towards the endorsement and the money because my motive was to play for India, you know, that shouldn't change, you know, and it never changed, you know, I always wanted to play for India and money, cars, house, everything was, you know, via product. So, you know, I kept it like that and I would advise all the young guns also, you know, who are making their careers, not just in cricket but when you're doing something special in your sports or even in study or even

anywhere else, just make sure that, you know, nobody or nothing could take your focus away from what you want to achieve in life and that should never change, you know, and if you want to be a doctor, you know, how you can be the best doctor of India, you know, for that you have to continue to work hard in your journey to get to that level. So, all these things should never distract you to get you to where you want to be. So, the focus should be there at all times. So, the moment focus shifted, you know, then all these things will become heavier on you and it will try to pull you down.

So, the idea is to keep moving, keep moving forward and keep moving upward and the only way we can do that is if we continue to work on our journey on the process to become what we want to become.

YT: So, do you think that fame and all the factors are the adjusting point for most of the young generations, like personally speaking, when I was young, like most of the boys used to say that I want to become a cricketer when I grow up. So, but most of us at that time didn't think about playing for the country and playing the sport. Originally, we always thought of the popularity because cricket being a very popular sport and seeing high-profile players like you, we used to think that they are getting the fame. So, do you think that the fame point is the attracting factor for most?

HS: Sir, the core group who is working hard towards the development and the points you stated is fine. But most of the people who want to pursue cricket, are they attracted towards the fame or the real motive of playing cricket for the country? Well, I don't know.

It is very personal. As you rightly mentioned, you were running after that fame. You wanted to become famous while playing cricket.

For me, my motive was to play for India. There are two totally different things in terms of the way you were thinking and the way I was thinking when I was at your age when I started playing cricket. My idea was to be a successful cricketer was the biggest thing for me.

That I want to be the cricketer. Not to become famous, but I want, because I like doing this and I want to make a name for myself in this. Everything else is very secondary or not even secondary.

What you have, what you don't have and whether you have money, whether you have support.

But the only thing in my hand was how I can work on my game to get better. I never thought that just because this game I play and this is a very famous game, I will become famous, people will know me. It's a by-product. You will get that. But don't start your career on thinking that one day I'll become famous just because I played this game.

No, you played this game because you wanted to play and you wanted to do something in life and that's what gives you the satisfaction. It is end of the day, your satisfaction. If you like getting famous, you know that is a different thing. But there are other ways also to get famous but if you want to be a cricketer, if you want to be a doctor, if you want to be an engineer, if you want to be someone who is productive, then you'll have to work hard. You can't just wake up in the morning and feel that one day I might be a cricketer or one day I might be the best doctor in

the country or one day I might be the best businessman. Those are your dreams and do dreams which is good but let's work towards your dreams to achieve those. I always say that dream big dreams but dream while you are awake because when you dream while you are sleeping, when you wake up in the morning, those dreams fly away. But when you are dreaming during the day, your mind is there, your conscious mind is there, you want to achieve that, you want to get there, then you will start working towards it. Only when you work towards it, you'll know the path to get to that place where you want to be.

YT: Behind every successful sportsperson, there lay the guidance of mentors, the support of family and the inspiration of role models. As you look back, who were the people who most influenced your path in those formative years and what was the most valuable lesson they gave you that still stayed with you over the years?

HS: For me, my father was the biggest hero. He left us in 2001. I think that was the moment when I was at my lowest in my life but it was my dream to play for India and without my father's support and my family's support, I don't think I would have reached where I am today.

I think that was always going to be there and I always say that no one achieves alone. There is a team, there is a force behind you which is to push you to achieve your own goals and of course my mother, my sisters, they all sacrifice a lot just for me to achieve my own goals. So my father was my real heroes and my support system was my sisters, my mother.

You know, they continue to give me that comfort or whatever I need to become you know, in life. So, you know, I, you know, say like thousand of times if I say thank you to them every day, it will be less. It will be less even if I say thank you a thousand times because what they have done, they do a lot less. And for me, my family, they were my pillar of my strength.

YT: So my question is that we all know that cricket is as much about temperament as it is about skill and the movement of pressure can easily test a player's emotion. How did you manage to stay composed and focused instead of giving in to the frustration during the matches?

HS: See, very nice question. You know, as a player, there will be frustration.

There will be expectation. There will be always people looking to do you, do things, you know, how they want you to do. And, you know, as you know, in any game, whether cricket or any sports, you know, you can't predict results, what can happen. And the opponents can give you different challenges during the day, no matter how hard you have prepared yourself. And they also are there to compete with you. So there are times, you know, when I've gone through bad frustration in the game, not having the best of the day and nothing is working out. You know, easy catch being dropped on your bowling or you playing some reckless shot and getting out. And, you know, those things are bound to happen. But you can only control the controllable. You know, I can tell you today because I'm no longer playing the game. I'm a retired player. But I

wish, you know, I, you know, kind of did better in those situations. Of course, as you play, you learn and then you move on. And then again, there are new challenges which teaches you a lesson every day. So cricket or any sports, you know, teaches you a lesson every day. Sports is such a beautiful thing. You know, it teaches you how to, you know, behave when you are winning. And also how to behave when you're losing. And how to behave when you're achieving. And how to behave when you're not achieving. So it kind of, you know, keep you humble at all time. And the best thing you can do is just work hard and be ready for those pressure situations. And one thing which we all should do during those pressure situations, do what you know is the best. You know, if I bowled, say, 100 balls off-spin. I'm an off-spinner. And I bowled 20 balls Dusra. So in pressure situation, what would I do? Even though Dusra was my best weapon. But I will not use that because I bowled only 20% of that. And my practice for that is only 20%. So I would do something which I have done again and again, which is my normal off-spin. You know, think right in those pressure situations. Take a little bit more time. There's always a time. We always say, nahi nahi time nahi hai, bahut jaldi mein tha. There's always a time. Think. Whenever you're feeling the pressure, think a little more. And then you take your decision whether it is good or bad. Once you take the decision, go ahead fully hearted with that. You know, even if you've taken the wrong decision, but it's okay. Back yourself and then you'll see more often you'll be on the winning side. Sir, we have seen that in a lot of matches, there is sledging from behind the wickets by the wicket keeper, etc. While you're batting. So, how did you keep your composure at that time? And which match do you think that tested your composure the most? And so, just for that, adding on to that, we have also seen many follow-ons and the send-offs that player gives to the batsman and the aggression that the players internationally are adopting. So, is that the best way or the strategy? See, it didn't matter to me. To be honest, if people were talking around me and trying to sledge me, you know, I was always like, ears are closed. Ears are closed, mind is open. What to do? Focus on target. The way Arjun hit the target, he focused on the target. He didn't see what was here and what was there. And that's the difference. In an achiever, he targets what he wants to achieve. But most of us, what we do is, we start seeing different things, you know, around that target. Then we distract. That means, once you're distracted, your concentration is gone. You're not thinking right. And then you're making a mistake and you ended up getting out. Or, you know, you didn't want to be in that situation later on and you regret. So, the idea was to keep the focus on what is the job in front of me. Why I'm here in the middle? Why these people are shouting? It's their job. Why I'm here? That is where my focus should be and my concentration should be. So that's all that matters. To me, I tried my best to concentrate as hard as I could and think of those areas where I needed to work on. And, you know, most of the time, you end up finishing on the winning side. If you do things right, it's a small thing, but it's a very hard thing. Concentration, it's a very, very small thing, but it's the most hardest thing to concentrate. So, no matter what people are saying around you, you know, let them do what they're doing or saying you're a student or even, you know, people who are trying their ways to achieve something in life, you know, there will be people who will create those negative things around you and try to pull you down. But if we'll,

you know, shift our focus towards them, that means that's all they wanted. So keep walking straight and keep running straight. Don't look here and there. And someone gave me very good advice. Have you ever seen a horse? It's tied from here like this. It's tied from here so that it doesn't get distracted. Here and here. Both sides. So all he sees is in front of him. So whatever is there in front of you, just focus on that and look to achieve that rather than if you look around here and there, that means we are getting distracted. That's why when a horse runs straight, no one runs faster than it. So if you tell a horse to look here and there, then it will get distracted and it won't be able to run faster. So that's the mantra of life. Just keep looking forward, keep looking straight, keep your eyes on the target, you'll get there.

YT: Injuries often kept players away from cricket for long periods, making it challenging to return at full strength. How did you advise young cricketers to approach such setbacks in a way that allowed them to recover fully and adapt effectively when they return to the game?

HS: It's a mind game. Injuries are bound to happen. It is going to happen. When you're playing sports, till the time you're playing, it is continually going to be there. So that's not going to change. What we need to change is our mindset. How are we going to make a comeback? You get injured, it's okay. While trying something or doing something, you got injured. Nobody likes to get injured, but once you're injured, what are you doing about it? That is the time that discipline comes into the game. How much discipline a person has. If there is an injury, from physiotherapist to strengthening and making sure that you're eating right and doing the right sort of exercise for you to get back on to the path. Whether you're doing that or not. A lot of people, when they get injured, they lose their somewhere ahead. They think, why this happened to me? Why this happened? I was doing so well. So stop complaining about it. Take it on your chin. It's okay to be injured. That's not the end of the road. Look forward. How are you going to make a comeback? And work towards it. If you think that way, often people have seen good doctors have given 3 months or 6 months for you to return into the game. But if you're focusing right, if you're working on your fitness, your diet, and also your mental strength that I want to be there. You're thinking towards there. And you're almost there. In 3-4 months a person comes back. But the one who was told that he'll be back in 4 months, but if he's not thinking properly, he won't come back. You look at Rishabh Pant. I'm just giving you his example. He's gone through a very, very bad accident. Thankfully, nothing happened. He survived. And after that, a lot of people were actually doubting that if he'll be able to make a comeback. His leg is broken. There are fractures in different places. And whether he'll be able to ever play for India or not. Because as a wicketkeeper, squatting will be a difficult thing. But when he decided that everything is possible, and I will do it. You know, he played I think 8 or 9 months or a year he was back playing again. And more motivated to do well. That is a mindset everyone should have in life. It's okay. Setbacks happen to make you a better person. To make you a better athlete or you know, achiever. Because you don't want to let yourself fall from those setbacks. You have to get up

from those setbacks. If the setbacks are big, I'll get even bigger than that. So no setback comes to me next. So Rishabh Pant and many other people become examples. They become examples for other people. If he can, I can also do it. So hats off to Rishabh Pant for keeping that mind frame. I want to get back there. And I want to show the world that this is doable. And how he's done it is a commendable job. Your advice is truly that of a seasoned player. But as someone who has been a part of the game for so long, and even in earlier phases of your career, were there any injuries or situations as such that truly tested that mental strength of yours? Or maybe tested your discipline and focus? Yeah, I got injured a couple of times which kept me kind of away from the game for about 6-8 months. Those are difficult times. You feel very alone. You feel frustrated when you watch the game and you're sitting at home and you know that you want to be there. But you can't really do anything about it. So those are very frustrating times. But those are the times which make you the person you are and the fighter you are. Rather than thinking on those terms, work towards it so that you recover in time or before time to get back into the game. So when I got injured in 2003, I had about 10-15 stitches here. I don't know if you see the line here. At the moment, my ligament was torn. This was my bowling arm, bowling hand. Bowling hand was completely swollen. I was so much in pain. I couldn't even open the nub. So imagining spinning the ball was the impossible thing. So I had to go through the surgery and that surgery took place. After that, it was a process which I needed to follow and work towards it to make a comeback in the right frame of time. It was a frustrating time but as you rightly said, you need good advice, good people around you, positive people around you at that time to push you to get better and get back at the game. So luckily in my case, I had good people around me. You always should have people who are pushing you to achieve something rather than saying, why this happened to you? It's okay. That's his plan. That's God's plan. So whatever he plans is always right. So I believed in that and I got better and started playing again and the moment I started playing again, I was again winning games, again winning Man of the Matches. Everything happened for a reason. It comes and tells you you need to work. You need to be more disciplined. You need to still work harder than the others to get to that level. There will be obstacles in life whether you are a sportsman or not. In any life, even in your studies. But that is the time to push yourself. No, I don't want to lose. I am here to win in life. No matter what. Nothing can pull me down. The only thing that can pull you down is your own mindset. The moment you will start thinking that I can't do it, that is it. But the moment everyone is saying that I can't do it and you have thought that I will do it, then no one can stop you. That's why I say always believe in yourself and believe in that God that I will work hard or I will work hard and he will give the result. So people who work hard and believe in God always move forward in life. So no matter what happens to you all, in life, in any difficulty, everything has time. That too will pass. But you have to keep yourself right. That this will pass and I will come at the top again.

YT: Sir, we all know that you have played for different franchises, formats and ever-changing teammates. So, how do you quickly adapt with your role and gel with new teammates?

HS: It's not a big deal. As a professional cricketer, you play in different teams. You kind of adjust to those places where you go to. So, it's not a big thing, you know, going from one team to the other team and getting mingled there. If you're a person who likes talking or like mingling with people, you know, it becomes very easy. So, the more people you meet, you know, obviously a different mindset, you get to learn new things. So, I always look forward to meet new people and to understand, you know, how they approach their life and their cricket. But luckily for me, I played 10 years with Mumbai Indians and then afterward, I went to Chennai Super Kings for 2-3 years and then to Calcutta. So, it wasn't the biggest shift because all three teams, you know, I played with. You know, I think I know most of the people since I played a lot of international cricket. So, it wasn't a big deal for me. It's a big, big thing, you know, it's like you're representing your country, you know, when you go and play the Olympics, nothing gets bigger than that. You know, for any sportsman and our game is not in that. So, this is like the biggest moment for those who will participate. You know, I think nothing can be bigger than this when you go out there and represent your country. Yes, when you're playing for BCCI, yes, even though we say it's an Indian team, but if you look at it, it's a BCCI team. Which obviously holds the rights for the Indian cricket team, it's called India. But when it comes to the Olympics, it's a big moment. You know, you won't have like 10 teams playing in the Olympics. There'll be hundreds of teams playing. So, winning from 10 and winning from 100, it makes a huge difference. So, that's why the players who will play in the Olympics, I think they should see it as, you know, the lifetime moment of their life and just make it count. Just go out there and win it for India, you know, that will be the most satisfying moment. You know, I think it will be the good fortune of everyone who will get a chance to play in the Olympics. Thank you so much, sir, for the wonderful answer. We move on to the next question. Being a part of the same team and sharing the highs and lows of cricket often leads to friendships that go far beyond the game. And many players have formed bonds that last a lifetime.

YT: Can you tell us about one such connection that you made during your career that you still cherish today?

HS: Yeah, I have a lot of friends that, you know, they are like my family. Someone like Ashish Nehra, I used to go to Delhi and, you know, spend a lot of time at his house. We are like brothers, you know, even though he's living in Goa, I live in Punjab and Mumbai. But we often talk over the phone and, you know, we share that special bonding. So, our love for each other is still intact. We share that bond with Yuvraj and Zaheer Khan as well. So, the players who play with you, that bonding is still there. That bond lasts for a lifetime. It's not a friendship, it's a brotherly love. Sir, it was wonderful to know about these different friendships that you had.

YT: IPL has become an important part of every cricketer's career. And it offers intense competition and exposure to international cricket. Sir, what do you think is the biggest insight and learning that you had gained from IPL? And how had it influenced your game?

HS: See, the biggest thing of IPL was to be able to share the dressing room with the opponents which you used to play against. And now suddenly they were your teammates. And you kind of get to know them, you know, their ideas, how they go about their business, when they're playing for their country. And it's just bringing everyone together in one platform. And learning from each other was the biggest take, I would say, from IPL. And of course, it's a great source of income for those players who were not able to play for India or for their respective states. But they were still able to get a chance in the IPL. And sharing the dressing room with the likes of great Tendulkar, Vaughan, Ganguly, and many other greats. And, you know, it was a big, big thing at that point of time. And now you see, the cricket has changed in India due to IPL. We have so much of a talent, a big pool of talent, where, you know, Team India can play three different formats in different countries. You know, still, you'll be able to beat those opponents. So, you know, IPL is probably the best thing that happened to the Indian cricket. Thank you, sir, for the answer. I want to follow up with this question.

They won't specify any specific player or team of the IPL. Sir, but just before the India vs New Zealand series, so one of the very famous IPL franchisees had provided grounds of training to one of the players, who was a part of the New Zealand team. And he was allowed to train in that particular camp two months prior to the India vs New Zealand series, which helped him a lot in getting sort of very good grounds. And he had performed fantabulous in the series. So do you think that the IPL franchisee giving such grounds of training over the national interest to the outsider player is fair enough on the part? I don't think that any IPL franchisees, they have any ground, you know, they can give it to any other team. I don't see that anyone has that ground. But yes, if they have given it, then I feel that ground, how many days have they been given for practice facilities, what have they been given? But any team comes to India, or when we go abroad, we also get practice sessions. And, you know, they were training in India, they will get some ideas about our condition. But still, you know, they can come and meet them, just, you know, practicing in those two months. I think the simplest answer for this was that they played better cricket than Team India. And of course, it was a learning for India, you know, and they learned quickly and move forward. And hopefully, next time when they come, or we go there, we'll be able to beat them there in their backyard and also when they come here.

YT: Sir, we know that fans continue to celebrate your contribution years after your debut. And that is also the case for the students at St. Xavier's College. What message would you like to share with them about pursuing their passion and leaving a positive mark in whatever they choose to do?

HS: To all the people who are listening to me, all I want to say that do dream big, as I mentioned earlier in this conversation. And while you're dreaming, make sure you're awake and work towards your dream. You will achieve everything in life. Don't ever doubt yourself. And don't let others let you feel that you can't do it. So you continue to work hard and be focused in life. And may God be with you all to achieve your goal. That's all I can say. And sky's the limit. You know, it's up to you how much you want to fly, how much you want to, you know, try achieving it. You know, there's no end to it. So continue to work hard, continue to get better and be the best human being of yourself. To try to be the best human being that you can be and try to help people. You know, that is what I would like to see in all of you.