

Manika Batra
Indian Table Tennis Player

YT : You have broken many stereotypes in Indian sports by putting table tennis in the spotlight. How did you stay motivated while pursuing a sport that was still growing in prominence in India?

MB: Uh, to be honest, from where I come from, table tennis was never a headline sport. There wasn't much funding, barely any brand endorsements and hardly any media attention. It was a humble space, quiet and overlooked, I would say, things started to shift after my Commonwealth Games medals, and even more so after the Olympics. You know that visibility changed a few things, but, but the core of my motivation, that never dependent. Depended on how mainstream the sport was. I was always surrounded by table tennis, lovers, coaches, training partners, my family, people who played or supported the game, not for fame, but for pure passion. That energy always kept me going. I never felt lack of spotlight, because my world was always lit up by purpose. But yes, there were moments when I saw other sports explore at the grassroots level, with, you know, massive fan bases and support systems that made me reflect. I felt a sense of responsibility like it's on me to push table tennis into that space in India, I want every kid with a rocket to dream as big as a cricketer does. That's what keeps me on this path. The motivation flows from the mission.

YT: Women athletes often break barriers both on and off the court. What is a misconception about women in sports that you wish more people understood?

MB: Let me say this, when a woman chooses to do something, whether it's sport, art, business, anything at all, she gives it everything. It's almost like it's built into us. We are raised to give our best no matter what, and yet, there are so many misconceptions that surround us, one of the biggest being that we are emotionally fragile or mentally weaker. Yes, we, I would say we are emotional, and there's nothing wrong with that, but being a woman in sport isn't about fragility. It's about resilience. We face bias, double standards, questions about our choices, our clothes, our commitment, and still, we show up every single day. Being a woman in sports doesn't come with any you know, leverage. There are no shortcuts, no soft corners. You have to earn your place with twice the effort and half the recognition. But that's also what makes us, you know, mentally so strong. We don't just train our bodies, we train our minds to carry the weight of both competition and expectation. And I can proudly say that that we do it with quiet strength.

YT: The support of institutions like the Reliance Foundation often extends beyond just infrastructure or funding, it can shape an athlete's mindset, confidence, and long-term vision. In what ways has your association with the Reliance Foundation influenced your journey, both in terms of performance and personal growth?

MB: Uh, my association with the Reliance Foundation has been incredibly empowering, not just for my performance, but for my mindset and overall growth as an athlete. Their support has always felt personal. It's not just about, you know, facilities or funding. It's about belief. When, when an institution as respected as Reliance Foundation believes in your journey, it reinforces your own confidence, I would say, and they have given me access to world class resources helped me stay focused during crucial phases, and most importantly, reminded me that I'm not alone in this pursuit, whether it's mental conditioning recovery or long term planning, they have always had my back, but beyond the court, they have helped me dream bigger. I have started thinking not just about my own matches, but also about the future of table tennis in India. That shift from being an athlete to a change maker is something they have helped me help nurture, and I'm truly grateful for that.

YT: You have trained and competed internationally for years. How do you adjust to different cultures and crowds when you travel?

MB: Competing across the world has taught me how to be open, observant and respectful. I have learned that adjusting to a new culture doesn't mean changing who you are. It means embracing new energy and allowing yourself to feel part of something bigger. I remember playing in Montpellier, France, where the crowd was incredibly loud and passionate. One day, they were cheering for my European opponent, and the next day, when I played against the Chinese player, the same crowd was chanting for me. You know, that's the beauty of sport. It breaks barriers and builds bridges, even when I don't speak the language or know the customs I connect through the emotion of the game. People everywhere feel joy, attention, pride. It's universal. No matter where I go, someone always comes up to you know, appreciate my game or share their support, that human connection that's what helps me adjust and feel at home anywhere in the world.

YT: International tournaments often create unforgettable experiences beyond the arena. Is there a moment outside of competition, perhaps a cultural exchange, a team bonding experience, or an unexpected encounter, that has stayed with you over the years?

MB: There have been many beautiful moments of the table, but if I had to pick one, it would be my experiences in China. In China, table tennis players are treated like superstars. every time I visit, I'm blown away by the love and attention, not just for the sport, but for me personally. You know, it's overwhelming in the best way. They have such deep respect for table tennis, if they admire a player, they almost worship them. I've had fans waiting outside venues handing me, you know, gifts, drawing sketches and, yeah, even trying to learn Hindi, just to connect. You know, it's a level of passion I've rarely seen anywhere else. That kind of admiration reminds me how far this journey has come. I went from being an unknown young girl in Delhi, to someone people in another country adore. it. You know, it humbles me and it stays with me always.

YT: Every athlete faces moments of doubt, especially in the early stages. Was there ever a time in your journey when you considered stepping away from the sport and what ultimately reignited your drive to continue?

MB: To be honest, I have never had doubts like that, not even once. I have never thought of stepping down from the sport because I love it. I love my sport. You know, every setback I faced has only pushed me harder. Ups and downs are part of any athlete's career. But you know, they don't define who you are. In fact, you only rise when you have hit the ground, to be honest. And in table tennis, we compete against countries like China, Japan, Korea, Germany, places you know, with Olympic level systems, unlimited support and coaches who are themselves Olympic medalist. You know, think about that. Players are being trained by gold, silver and bronze medal winners. That's the level of experience and legacy we are up against. So whatever we achieve, given our limited resources in India, is always a win itself. I've been India's number one for the past six, seven years, and I, and I intend to keep, keep it that way, but, but even if I lose my ranking at some point, I know it won't last long. I always come back. I always have, and I always will.

YT: Behind every powerful athlete is a personal sacrifice. What is something you have sacrificed that people don't see when you stand on the podium?

MB: Um, of course, people, you know, people see the medals, the national anthem, playing the victory smile, but they don't see the moments. I have had to give up just to get there. I honestly don't even remember the last time I celebrated my birthday with my family, Diwali, my favorite festival, comes and goes while I'm in some you know, other country, playing a tournament, preparing or competing in some tournament. It saddens me to the core so much, and I miss my family so much at that time. And you know, on Rakhi, I miss my brother and sisters deeply. I, you know, miss the warmth of home, cooked meals, the laughter of celebrations, the feeling of, you know, simply being home. Yeah, these, these may seem like small things to everyone, but they are everything to me. So when I stand, you know, on that podium, it's not just about to win on paper, it's a celebration of all those little sacrifices that built me. Every medal holds the silence of moments I missed and the strength I gained from choosing purpose over comfort, and that's what you know, makes each win deeply personal.

YT: You have played in halls packed with screaming crowds and almost empty arenas, what is harder: handling wild home crowd pressure or silence that makes every point feel heavier?

MB: Nice question. Honestly, I still haven't figured that one out. Sometimes I, you know, I crave the energy of a loud cheering crowd. It pumps me up, gives me that, you know, extra boost, but

other times I just want silence, the piece to focus. So in that sense, I have realized that both situations have their own, pros and cons, and as it leads, at least we are taught early on not to let external factors like noise or silence get into our nerves, but let's be real. It. It does affect you. It has affected me too at times, so I have stopped putting one over the other, whether you know it's a roaring home crowd or an almost empty arena at the end of the day, your biggest opponent is always your own mindset.

YT: With all the global leagues and formats you have seen, if you had the chance to shape a world- class table tennis league in India, what elements would you bring in to truly captivate fans and elevate the sport's profile?

MB: Um, I've seen and played in so many leagues around the world, and even in our own Indian League, UDT, it's been a great step forward for the sport. But if I had the chance to create a new league, I would definitely add a few bold tweaks to keep things exciting and fresh for viewers. First, I would introduce timed sets. Imagine a 10 minute match where the player with the most points at the end wins, regardless of sets and ya, so you have to finish that match in 10 minutes, and you have to win. You know how many points you can win for yourself. It, you know it could. It would create urgency, strategy and thrill in every second, second I would love to include men versus women showcase matches. I think that dynamic would be super entertaining and break a lot of stereotypes, plus it celebrates skill over gender and third to you know, spice things up. I would introduce a rule where, where? If a player misses a sir, the opponent gets two points instead of one. Just imagine the pressure and intensity in those moments. You know, table tennis is already such a fast, dramatic sport with a few playful rule changes and the right storytelling, we can make it a truly gripping experience for fans across all age groups.

YT: You have overcome intense competition, setbacks, and the pressure of performing on the world stage. After everything you've learned through that journey, what message would you share with the students of St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata who are still trying to find their path, both in sport and in life?

MB: There's something I heard recently in a round table with Tom Hanks that really stayed with me. He said, I wish I had known this too shall pass. You know, if you're feeling low, confused or stuck, this too shall pass. And if you are feeling great like you know all the answers this too shall pass, whether things are falling apart or falling into place, time has a way of balancing it all, that perspective has changed the way I look at every high and low in my life, and it really helped me a lot in my journey. So to every student still finding their path, don't rush at all. Be kind to yourself. Allow space for failure, for silence, for growth, the pressure to you know, have it all figured out is just noise. Focus on becoming better, not perfect. Keep showing up, keep believing

in yourself, and always remember whatever moment you are in right now. It's just a moment. It will pass, and what's meant for you will find you.