



Kajal Advani

When people ask me if I knew, ten years ago, that my son Pankaj Advani would become a world champion in snooker and billiards, my answer is, “No, I did not know he would, but I believed he could.”

Nobody knows what is going to happen tomorrow, let alone after a decade. But when a ten year old takes to a sport like Pankaj took to snooker, then you have to give him the freedom, the opportunity, the time, to pursue it. But first, let me delve further into the past to give you a clearer picture of what our lives were before snooker invaded our turf!

My husband Arjan, elder son Shree, Pankaj and I were happily settled in Kuwait till the 1990 Gulf War created mayhem in our lives. At the end of a vacation in the United States, we were unable to return to Kuwait because of the Iraqi invasion. So, we returned to our motherland and settled in Bangalore, certain that one day all would be well in Kuwait and we could go back and pick up the threads of our lives.

Kuwait did reopen. My husband did go back. But he was afflicted with what we believe was ‘the Gulf War Syndrome’ which may have been caused by the burning oil wells and the chemical warfare used in Kuwait. He came to Bangalore after three months and a month later, on March 10, 1992, he breathed his last.

Life had to go on. Shree was fourteen then and Pankaj not even seven. I decided to be a full-time house-mother (I was working in Kuwait earlier) because I knew that being a single parent to two growing young boys was not going to be easy. Lucky for me, my mother came and stayed with us. Our life was simple but comfortable. My husband’s Kuwaiti partner in Kuwait had swindled all the money from the business but thanks to some savings in India, we did okay.

When Pankaj was ten, he started following Shree to a snooker parlour down the road from our house. At first, he would just watch Shree play with his friends. Then, after a few weeks, he begged him to let him try hitting the balls. On his very first try, he potted the red ball. From that moment on began Pankaj’s love story with cue sports.

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Initially I thought, “It’s just a sport and if he is happy playing it, so what? Let him be happy.” But I realised the extent of his passion when he started playing snooker at home on his carom-board, using marbles for balls and a chopstick for a cue. The turning point in Pankaj’s life I feel was when he was booked for his annual vacation to Mumbai but he did not go because there was a snooker and billiards coaching camp at the Karnataka State Billiards Association (KSBA) at that time. He enrolled for two consecutive camps which took up his entire six week long vacation. He would be at KSBA from morning till night – when I would go pick him up in an auto. He was totally consumed by the sport. I am really grateful to the management of KSBA which gave an Talent Category Membership to a eleven year old boy. This meant that he could play on the tables for as long as he wanted each day for a meager monthly payment of Rs.250/-. It was a big boon to us as my finances were being stretched because of his frequent snooker parlour trips!

I never stopped Pankaj from playing but I did take a promise from him that he would never neglect his studies. In this respect, I have to give a lot of credit to

The Frank Anthony Public School’s principal – Mr. Browne – who supported Pankaj totally and assured me that sportspersons became better students because of their discipline and focus. Since a sportsperson knows that he has to give so much time to his sport, he gives unwavering attention in class so that he can absorb everything and not have to rack his brains later. (Pankaj went on to become the Head Boy of the school in his final year there following in the footsteps of his brother Shree who was Head Boy seven years earlier).



So, if your child is a good student and is shaping up to be a good sportsperson, why should you not let him follow his passion? At the age of 11 years 7 months, Pankaj won his first major State title, defeating his elder brother in the finals. In his first every interview to the press, when asked what he wanted to become, he said, “I would like to become a world champion one day.”

It was said very innocently. Readers laughed at his naiveté . So did I. Pankaj forgot about the interview and continued with his life - going to school, finishing his homework, rushing to KSBA, coming home tired, but happy and fulfilled.

Then Mr. Arvind Savur came into Pankaj’s life. He is the best snooker coach in the world and seeing the potential in Pankaj, he started coaching him at his home (where he has a snooker table) for free. Soon, Pankaj became a part of the Savur household, and Arvind became a father figure to him.

In Pankaj’s case, destiny played a big part. His school and then college (Mahaveer Jain College) gave him ample support and scholarships. Mr Chenraj Jain, the Chairman of the Jain Group, would tell Pankaj whenever he saw him in college, “What are you doing here? Go practise!” Special classes were arranged for

the sportspersons a month before the exams. That’s the only time Pankaj went to college.

Pankaj won his first Men’s World Snooker title at the age of 18 in China. Nobody expected him to win it. Nobody except his coach and himself. I remembered then when Pankaj was just 14, I was thanking Mr. Savur when he told me, “A day will come soon when I will thank you for letting me coach your son because he is going to be a world champion someday.”

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However, parents have to be warned that things are not always hunky dory in a sportsperson’s life, however successful he may be. First, there are the Mexican crabs in the circuit who revel in pulling one down. Then, there are comparisons with other sports – in India, read that as cricket. A sportsperson feels demoralised when in 10 years he doesn’t earn as much as a cricketer does in a 45 day IPL. We have to keep our kids motivated no matter what we feel within. It’s not only the money but also the media, the corporates, the public, who discriminate so much between cricket and “non-cricket sports”.

Passion begins to wane but we have to keep on refueling it. I feel my son was born to play snooker and billiards. It would be a pity and a waste were he to give it up. And that’s what I tell him.

I didn’t care if he did not score in his 90’s in exams. He got 80 in his ISC and 75 in his B.Com. That’s great for me. I would have been happy with even less. I don’t care if he doesn’t earn in crores. Money is not

## A Sporting Chance

the be-all and end-all of life. We have to prioritise. For a sportsperson, the game must always come first.

At 19, while still in college, Pankaj was appointed by ONGC as an HR executive. In five years he received three promotions because of his world titles. His is a non-reporting job so he has ample time to give to his sport.

My elder son Shree was a National level billiards player, but he chose to pursue his Masters degree in Australia. He loved it there but after six years he chose to return to Bangalore because he felt his brother needed him. Perhaps sport is in their system for Shree is now doing a Ph.D in psychology, specializing in sport psychology. He is already doing mind-coaching for many sportspersons and his favourite student is his li'l brother Pankaj.

Pankaj owes a large portion of his success to Shree's mentoring and to the fact that he is there for him 24/7.

Should parents allow their children to pursue their passion or should they have a more practical approach and make their children follow a path which will bring maximum material gain? We Indians are basically a very insecure people, which is why we look for a hundred percent security in any decision we take. We

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need to be socially secure – go by the social norms (what people will say or think is of paramount importance to us), financially secure – aim for tried and tested lucrative careers (never mind if our hearts are not in it) and mentally secure – nobody should be allowed to reason with us once our minds are made up.

No one can understand a child better than his parent. A mother or father can differentiate between interest and passion. If a child is passionate about a sport or anything like painting, or singing, let the child pursue it. Why do parents always feel that 'studies will suffer' if children want to pursue their passion? Academics can be the backdrop; the child should be the main actor and the play should be about the child and his/her passion.

There are 24 hours in a day for everyone. Our Prime Minister has the same 24 hours. If he can rule a huge and diverse country like India, why can't our children manage two things – studies and sport? In fact, sport helps a lot in character-building, enhancing discipline, concentration and spirituality. One should look at sport not as something you play with a bat/racket/cue and ball but as a holistic package. This is what my sons have taught me and I feel blessed for having them.

Let us give our children the chance to live their dreams, not ours. Let them be the central character of the play of their life. We may or may not have been given a chance by our parents. If we have, then now is the time to pay it forward. If we haven't, then all the more reason for us to let them follow their passion. Let's help our children spread their wings and rejoice when they take to the skies!

*Let's give them a sporting chance!*

*Kajal is the mother of the billiards champion Pankaj Advani.*

