



Aditi Mutatkar

Badminton is not just my game, it's what defines me. It makes me who I am.

I started playing in Mumbai when I was nine years old. My dad was an active player in our colony and would play outdoor badminton with his friends. It was he who introduced me to the game. After I started beating him and his friends at the games, he let me participate in my first ever school tournament - where I secured third place. The following summer, I joined a summer coaching camp under Santosh Kshatriya and, in exactly two months, I won my first 'under 10' state tournament. My romance with badminton began then and is still going very strong.

I believe that playing a sport is a great leveller. In this, you are only as good as your form on the given day. It's a very tough life. You work harder than ever before and there is still no guarantee that you will get the desired result. You might still lose. The only thing you have to do is get up the next day and stretch your limit to work hard.

And the same logic applies to your victories. Even if you are the champion, you have to work twice as hard as your opponents to stay there. Everyone out there wants to beat you and you have to be strong enough to defend the champion tag. My sport has made me a very tough person. In all of my 14 years spent on the court, I have done everything short of killing myself to achieve my goals. I have achieved a little and am trying to achieve the rest.

A badminton player leads a life of discipline. Literally, my life has become a time table. I get up at 6.30 in the morning, meditate, have milk and fruits, head to the court to train for three hours, get back home, write my journal, have lunch, then take a nap for an hour, get

ready for my next session, train again for another two hours, come back and have dinner, write my journal, have milk and sleep by 10.30. I do this day in and day out, six days a week. On Sundays, I get to watch a movie, or meet my friends. I have never seen this lifestyle as a sacrifice. For me, this is the only life I know and I have no complaints. The court is my place of peace.

For me, sports is not about winning and losing. It is a way of life. I have had my share of victories and losses and, after years of experience in the sport, I have learnt to deal with these. What I find tough to handle are the injuries. India is not a sports-oriented country. But we are slowly getting there. We still don't have professional centres to deal with injuries. Sports injuries are totally different from the normal injuries and so they have to be dealt with differently. The diagnosis and the operations may be the same but the rehabilitation and treatment are totally different. Awareness of sports rehabilitation facilities is still lacking. It is very difficult to find personal trainers with specific knowledge about sports injuries. The very few that we have are either very difficult to spot or extremely expensive - especially for a middle-class girl like myself.

So when I had my first major fall six years ago, and broke my right knee (to be specific, I had an anterior cruciate ligament tear and a completely ruptured cartilage), it was a major setback. I was 17 years old then. I think my parents were the ones who suffered more than I did. At that point I was not sure if I would ever compete again. But I was determined not to let the injuries stop me from achieving my dream of being the best in the sport. I made my plans for treatment and found a good doctor (Dr. Sundresh from the Ramaiah Hospital in Bangalore). I still remember our first meeting. He looked at my knee and sat down on his chair. I had gone to meet him with my friend's mother, as my parents were in Pune. The first thing he said was that it was pretty bad and would need to be operated upon. I asked him when I would play again and he replied that it would take me at least a year to

get back on the courts. I wasn't expecting a wait of as long as a year and so, I was silent for a while. He said, "If you really want to be back to normal, a year is nothing." I looked at him and I told myself, I just need to believe him.

I was operated the next day. My rehabilitation started after a week. I got my programme from him and the doctors helped me till I could walk without my crutches. The real test started from then on. I got back to Pune and I had no idea about my rehab. So I started gathering information from the doctors I knew and from the Internet. I also spoke to senior players who had faced similar problems. I tried to find personal trainers but I couldn't find anyone, and people I did find were too expensive. I couldn't really burden my parents with that kind of expense; neither did I have any sponsors. It was very clear that I had to find a way out on my own.

Even though, as an outsider, this period of my life could be seen as unfortunate, it was in reality a blessing in disguise. It made me independent; it pushed my limits and showed me what I am capable of. It made me understand how important this game was to me, and made me humble enough to realise the importance of living life in each and every moment. My greatest good fortune was having the right people around me. My coaches never gave up or showed any sympathy. They never consoled me, nor did they question my future. They told me that self pity and sympathy would not help me. "The only things you have to ask for are solutions. You find your solutions and start working on the problems with the belief that anything done with honesty will always take you towards your goal," said one of my coaches.

I followed my path and came out with flying colours. I achieved my goals of becoming the national champion in all the age groups and being the world No. 27 in 2008 (presently I am 102) and never used my injuries as an excuse. My game has taught me that if you believe in something, then you just go ahead and get it. Nothing is impossible if you really want it.

A player gets to travel around a lot. At 23 years of

age, I have seen nearly 40 nations. I travel alone often, without a team or my parents. I feel privileged to have explored numerous countries, experienced their cultures, food, and languages. I have always loved travelling and my game helps me do that. Today, if I am more confident and better equipped than most



girls my age, my game is solely responsible for that. I know that I can live in any condition and survive, even in foreign lands amidst strangers.

Throughout my journey, the greatest gift that my game has given me are the people I have met. I have worked under Prakash Padukone, Vimal Kumar, Hemant Hardikarand and many others. I have seen them live their lives with extreme humility and integrity. They have never let their achievements change the people they are. They have taught me to play the game for the love of it, not just for the money or the fame. They have dedicated their lives to the game and continue to do so even today. People like them have always raised the bar for me, not just on the court, but off it too. They have had a very humbling effect on me.

I have infinite reasons to thank badminton. I think every child in India should get an opportunity to pursue a sport. Sport should be as important as academics. It builds your character, it teaches you to lose as gracefully as when you win. It makes you



independent and helps you believe in your abilities.

Today, in India, we have thousands of engineers and doctors but we don't see those numbers in sports. We still tend to follow the easier path and follow the crowd. I am hoping that I have given some good reasons to pick a sport as one's career.

If being good in studies gives you a good salary, being a sportsperson gets you the salary, and in addition, strengthens you to face life with all its drawbacks and sorrows. Let us help our children choose the path less travelled and bring glory to our nation.

*Aditi Mutatkar has been the national champion in all age groups, the under-13, U-16, U-19, and also the national badminton champion of India. On the international circuit, she has reached the finals of the Bitburger Grand Prix 2008. She was also the semi-finalist in the Bulgarian Grand Prix and the Dutch Grand Prix 2008. She has also won a Commonwealth Silver Medal at the Commonwealth Games 2010, held at NewDelhi.*

