

*Striking Again*

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MARIA IRUDHAYAM

Arjuna award! An award instituted by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India, is given to outstanding achievements in sports. The award demands of sportsmen an extraordinary commitment that would set standards for others to emulate, a consistent excellence in performance at an international level, a demonstration of inspiring leadership, high levels of sportsmanship and a sense

of discipline. This prestigious award that carries a cash prize of Rs. 5,00,000, a bronze statue of Arjuna and a scroll is awarded to such prodigious men and women who leave their blazing footprints and forever change the course of history, taking the country to greater heights in the international arena, thereby upholding the pride and glory of one's country.

Maria Irudhayam, the only Arjuna award winner for carrom in India, lives a quiet, unsung, unassuming life, far away from the blaring spotlights in the small bylanes of Periamet, a locality behind the Central Station in Chennai.

The small 300 sq. ft. of space in the Naval Hospital Road, announces itself as the 'Chennai District Carrom Association'. It is partitioned into an office area and a players' den, where under the watchful eyes of the coach, students and wannabe champions sit under the overhead light that projects on the carrom board. And it is here that one finds the Arjuna awardee, the two time World Champion, and the four time National Champion in carrom, Mr. Maria Irudhayam. His piercing eyes, like the original Arjuna of Mahabharata, are fixed only on the board, the coins and the pockets. They also fixate on the opponents' movements and make quick decisions on how to obstruct moves. They look up only after all the coins are pocketed to satisfaction. This kind of complete focus and steadfastness takes years to develop and it becomes immediately obvious that one is in the presence of a master.

Maria, as he is called, says, like everybody he too started playing carrom just to kill time when he was just in 9th std. He started taking it seriously only when he was defeated in the game by someone who used to lose to him. He says at every point in his life, it was this aspect – defeat that goaded him to correct his mistakes and want to play better.



After failing his 11th std he just stayed at home and focused on playing full time.

The next turning point came when someone who had lost to him went on to win an All-India title. This motivated the young

Maria enough to move from district, to State level. Although he unfortunately lost in the finals, he retained rank. No.3, this gave him the chance to go for the Nationals. In the Nationals he came up to the quarter finals and lost, which still enabled him to be No.6 in the All-India level. From thereon, he credits the patronage of one Mr. Kabir Das who recognized the innate talent in him and helped him find coaching to improve his game. He is also thankful for the mentorship of Mr. Lazar, his uncle, Mr. Bangaru Babu, ex-All-India Secretary for Carrom and Mr. Anandan, ex-TN secretary who trained him separately by teaching techniques and rectification of mistakes, after they spotted his talent in a coaching camp. He says he was lucky to have found mentors at the right stage in his life.

From No.6, he moved up to All-India No.3 position and it was this that got him a job at the Madras Customs, which gave appointments on sports quota. Playing became a necessity to sustain his job and a necessity that fuelled his path. Every time he lost a match he withdrew into a shell, not to be lost in morose, defeatist broodings but to reflect on the coin that was responsible for his undoing and how not to repeat the same.



Maria urges parents to let their children find a balance between priority and passion. He of course rues his own lack of education saying he lost out on promotion prospects at the Madras Customs owing to the fact that he was not a graduate. So, he says not just basic education but being at least a graduate is vital for doors to open upon knocking. This is the reason why he insisted that his own children not play but study first before trying their hand at the game.

Maria worked for the Customs between 1979 and 1991, during which time he won his first national title in 1982 followed by seven more. In 1989, he won his first international title, Single Cup at Zurich. He then resigned from his job and joined Indian Airlines as a Traffic Assistant where regular promotions followed on par with his strides in carrom.

In the year 1991 Maria again found himself questioning his purpose when he lost his daughter aged 6. He lost focus, interest and motivation to play. He credits his mentors again who forced him out of his self-imposed reverie to play. The sweetest song is often the saddest. Maria went on to win his world title as a comeback to his sport. He credits carrom for rescuing him from the deep pit he had fallen into, for when he came out he zoomed out to hit the top slot.

Maria cannot emphasise enough on the importance of practice, the kind where one is attentively building capabilities and honing circuits. For a newcomer two hours of practice a day can help, according to Maria.

In 1995, Maria won his second world title and in 1997 came the prestigious Arjuna award. Till date, he is the only carrom player to be awarded the Arjuna and he went on to win many memorable tournaments like SAARC in 1998 & 1999 at Maldives, French Open in 1998 at Paris, Champion of Champions in 1998 at London and US Open in 1997. After winning the Arjuna award in 1997, Maria wondered what next? A typical question one asks at the pinnacle. Along with contemporaries he made plans for revival when tragedy struck again. He lost his wife in an unfortunate accident in 2012.

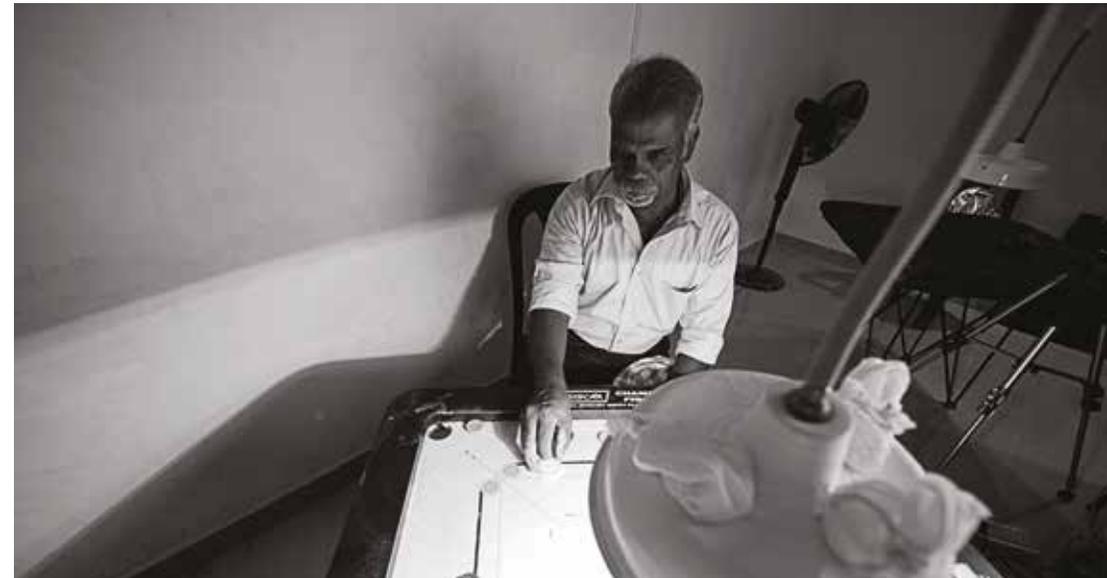
Maria retired in 2014 from Indian Airlines and since then serves as the Honorary General Secretary to the Chennai District Carrom Association. He is also the Co-Chairman & Advisor to the All India Carrom Federation – Adhoc Committee. He runs the Maria's International Carrom Academy at Chennai providing coaching to upcoming carrom players. He teaches techniques like minimum force for maximum

impact while striking, assessment of distance between two coins, placing of striker in the right place for correct tangent, appropriate fingering techniques (scissoring, thumbing, index finger usage), ways to obstruct the opponents, and the correct body movement while striking. He does free coaching too if the genuinely talented ones come his way and mentors them. Naga Jyothi, a young girl of 19 is one of his many students who has been playing from the age of 10 and is now a youth champion. She hopes to equal the records of her mentor and master.

Maria with a hint of sadness says now the game is being played as a means to an end. Once a player qualifies for the nationals and shows promise,

He envisions a time where the media will highlight carrom more, the way the other games like chess and cricket are featured.

He would like the government to recognize and acknowledge the contributions of the players who brought glory to the country. These players often play against all odds, so a little incentivising would go a long way. He thinks that corporate giants need to come forward to take the game to greater heights. He wants youngsters to be at it relentlessly and build the fire to excel within them. He wants parents to ensure sustainability of the game for their children and most of all he wants the game to be played for the passion to be discovered.



he is assured of a good job, which is the reason why carrom is often found amidst the lower echelons of the society, manifesting a culture of its own; an association that is feared, sometimes looked down upon. He says only people who have seen struggles and obstacles and live in poor conditions will have the will to sustain and play their way to a better life. Maria hopes for a brighter future for carrom.

In his lifetime, he wants to create future champions and restore the game to its lost charm and glory. It is indeed true that whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe, it can achieve. Maria's mind is such, the flashes of which are hard to ignore. Hope is one thing he holds on to for a brighter dawn for the game that he holds close, for generations to come.

*Meera Shivashankar*