

SPORTS

PUNCHING ABOVE THEIR WEIGHT

The Mahanaim Boxing Club Story

By Shanthi Krishna



From the narrow lanes of Sowcarpet to the national boxing arena - a story of grit, discipline and hope.

“The hardest battles are often fought long before one steps into the ring.”

In the crowded bylanes of Elephant Gate in North Chennai, where cramped homes, financial hardship and limited opportunities often shape the destiny of young people, a quiet revolution is unfolding. Every morning before sunrise, and every evening after school, the rhythmic thud of boxing gloves striking pads echoes

through a modest training ground. Here, dreams are forged not through privilege but through perseverance.

Walk into the ground at dawn and you find a striking contrast—young children with innocent faces pulling on boxing gloves, revealing a fierce determination the moment they step into the ring.

At the heart of this transformation is Mahanaim Boxing Club, founded and led by Coach Saran Raj, a former national-level boxer whose life's mission has grown far beyond the medals he once pursued.

Today, he is shaping champions not merely in boxing, but in life itself. It is this extraordinary commitment to community upliftment through sport that has earned Mahanaim Boxing Club the prestigious Champions of Chennai Award, recognising its lasting social impact.

“Adversity does not decide who we become; it only tests how deeply we want it.”

Saran Raj's own story is one of remarkable resilience. Born and raised in Elephant Gate, he grew up in an economically disadvantaged family where survival often

came before ambition. Boxing entered his life early and soon became far more than a sport—it became purpose.

With little financial support but immense determination, he rose through district, state and national competitions, representing Tamil Nadu with distinction. He won medals at national championships, secured a Senior State Gold Medal and competed against some of India's finest boxers from powerhouse states such as Haryana, Manipur and Mizoram.

“Some dreams are interrupted; they are never extinguished.”

Life, however, demanded difficult choices. Financial hardship forced him to discontinue his education and take up physically demanding jobs while still a teenager. Marriage and growing family responsibilities eventually drew him away from competitive boxing, leaving behind dreams that remained only partially fulfilled.

Many athletes quietly accept such endings. Saran Raj chose differently. Instead of dwelling on opportunities lost, he asked himself one question: Could he give children the opportunities he never had?

The answer became Mahanaim Boxing Club.

“The truest answer to what we were denied is to give it freely to another.”

In 2020, Saran began conducting free boxing classes on an open ground with almost no infrastructure. There was no proper ring, little equipment and no sponsorship. What he possessed instead was knowledge, commitment and an unshakeable belief that sport could transform lives.

Only a handful of children joined initially. They learnt discipline before technique and character before competition. Gradually, parents began noticing remarkable changes. Confidence improved,





discipline deepened and youngsters who might otherwise have drifted towards unhealthy influences found purpose through sport. What began as a boxing class steadily evolved into a movement within the community.

“Discipline before technique; character before competition.”

For Saran Raj, boxing has never been about producing champions alone. Having grown up in a neighbourhood where many youngsters are vulnerable to substance abuse, violence and social challenges, he understands that the toughest battles are often fought outside the ring.

Every child at Mahanaim Boxing Club is taught values that extend beyond sport—respect, honesty, punctuality, humility and perseverance. Education is equally important. Having been forced to abandon his own studies, Saran constantly reminds his students that academics and sport must go hand in hand.

Training sessions often become life lessons. Through stories of sporting legends and inspiring personalities, he teaches that success is built on sacrifice, consistency and integrity. His students are reminded that wearing boxing gloves does not make them superior to anyone else. True strength, he tells them, lies in mastering one's emotions, remaining humble in victory and gracious in defeat.

“Medals are milestones; belief is the destination.”

The results speak for themselves. Despite operating with limited resources, Mahanaim Boxing Club has emerged as one of Chennai's most promising grassroots boxing centres. The academy has produced numerous state champions and several national-level boxers who have represented Tamil Nadu with distinction. Particularly inspiring has been the rise of talented young women who have excelled in national competitions and earned recognition from the Government of Tamil Nadu.

For children who once believed such achievements were beyond their reach, every medal has become a symbol of possibility. Each success quietly tells another youngster in the neighbourhood that where they come from need not determine where they can go.

“Great institutions are built not with money, but with conviction.”

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this journey is that it has been achieved with very little financial support.

For years, training continued without proper equipment, with Coach Saran investing his own limited resources to keep the academy running. Donations from well-wishers - whether T-shirts, tracksuits or training gear—made a meaningful difference.

A defining milestone came with the installation of a professional boxing ring comparable to those used in national competitions. For the academy, it symbolised something far greater than improved infrastructure: it affirmed that grassroots talent deserves world-class opportunities. Even today, nutrition, equipment, travel expenses and competition fees remain constant challenges. Yet the training never stops.

“One child's success can light up an entire neighbourhood.”

Saran Raj dreams of producing an international boxer - and one day, an Olympian -from Elephant Gate. But his vision extends far beyond individual glory.

He wants every successful athlete to return and inspire the generation that follows, believing that when one child from a disadvantaged community succeeds, many others begin to believe they can too. Already, former students have become role models for younger trainees, encouraging more families to choose sport as a pathway towards discipline and hope.

Today, Mahanaim Boxing Club is much more than a sports academy. It is a safe space, a mentoring centre and a second home for dozens of children. Parents trust the academy because they know their children are learning responsibility and respect alongside sporting excellence.

For many youngsters, Coach Saran Raj is not merely a coach but a mentor whose own journey from hardship lends authenticity to every lesson he teaches. He understands their struggles because he has lived them himself.

“True champions are not only those who stand on podiums; they are those who quietly build champions in others.”

The Champions of Chennai Award honours individuals and organisations whose work uplifts communities and creates opportunities for others. Mahanaim Boxing Club embodies that spirit.

Its greatest achievement cannot be measured in medals alone, but in the lives it has transformed—children who choose the boxing ring over the streets, students who stay in school because of sport, parents who begin to believe in brighter futures and young athletes who proudly represent Tamil Nadu.

Through relentless dedication and an unwavering belief in the transformative power of sport, Coach Saran Raj has shown that one determined individual can inspire an entire community. For the children of Elephant Gate, Mahanaim Boxing Club is not simply a place to learn boxing. It is where confidence is built, character is shaped and dreams are given the courage to fight.

The Champions of Chennai Award is a fitting recognition of this quiet revolution - and of a coach who transformed his own unfinished dream into hope for an entire generation.