

Serving Aces, Driving Inclusion

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What would it be like if persons with disabilities had the opportunity to live a life of complete participation and contribution? This was a question that sat heavy on Sunil Jain's mind, prodding him on towards a path of introspection, self-reflection and dreaming big. The founder of Astha Foundation, Sunil is also the Chief Enabler at Indian Wheelchair Tennis Tour (IWTT) and is on a mission to use wheelchair tennis as a tool for social change.

Speak to Sunil about tennis and the passion shines through. "It is such a wonderful game for personal development," he says. "Whether you are a person with or without disability, it brings perspective into your life." Through tennis, Sunil and his team at IWTT strive to bring about inclusion and personal transformation. Their program First Serve creates awareness about wheelchair tennis, encourages current players to coach communities, and trains future players by providing them access to coaches, courts, food and accommodation. The organisation is also building accessible courts for players with and without disability to come together. This way, Sunil believes, tennis can foster inclusion and empathy. "Especially if we catch players young," he is quick to add.

Much of IWTT's approach is rooted in the inherent advantages of wheelchair tennis as a sport. The sport follows most of the same rules as non-disabled tennis, with the only exception of allowing players on a wheelchair to return the ball on two bounces. Sunil saw this as an excellent opportunity. In 2014, two years before IWTT was officially launched, he organised a *jugalbandhi* tournament, where doubles teams, each with one player on a wheelchair and one non-disabled player, came together in a series of friendly matches. The success of this event sowed the seeds of what would grow into IWTT.

Since its inception in 2016, IWTT has conducted over 10 tournaments. Each tournament comes with a Rs. 2.5 lakh cash prize. The number of wheelchair tennis players in the country has grown from 27 to over 90 during this time. "When we began, we had four women players across India," Sunil recalls. "Now we have over twenty-one. We are even participating in the Tennis Premier League on a team with non-disabled players!"

In Sunil's eyes, the key to scaling this impact lies in building awareness. "Sports, especially para sports, has not penetrated into our community," he rues. "In 2011, I had not even heard of para sports and the Paralympics. Access to sport is still not universal. Its inherent potential is not available to everyone." To address this, IWTT consciously builds awareness around para sports, particularly wheelchair tennis. When the organisation was launched in December 2016, Sunil decided to make it a celebration like no other. The team put up multiple hoardings in the city of Bengaluru and invited tennis player Rohan Bopanna as the chief guest. They conducted a tournament, the Tabebuia Open, named after the flower that blooms only in the winter. "If a beautiful flower can blossom in the cold winter, wheelchair tennis will flourish in the world today," Sunil explains.

Sunil has big dreams for the future of wheelchair tennis in India. IWTT has set out to transform the sport in India, adopting a 360-degree approach that works on everything from grassroots awareness to governance reform. In the short run, IWTT is encouraging players to engage with and create communities. Over time, the team hopes to expand its scope to other racquet sports as well. In five years, IWTT wishes to be consultants for the promotion of accessible sports across India. In the meantime, as far as tennis is concerned, the milestones are clear – participate in the 2022 Asian Games, win an Asian Games medal in 2026, bag a Paralympics medal in 2028, and impact at least 1000 lives with every medal won. Driven by Sunil's big dreams and IWTT's strong convictions, the future of wheelchair tennis in India looks exciting.