

Not a tall order for goalkeeper

V.K. SANTOSH KUMAR

The goalkeeper is usually the tallest player in a water polo team.

Mounisha Devi is just 1.57m tall.

But that has not stopped her from lifting her game and becoming the first Indian to guard the posts for the national women's water polo team.

"I'm the smallest in my team, so it's very unusual for me to be the goalkeeper," the third-year medical student at National University of Singapore told *tabla!*.

"Even my parents asked, 'How can they choose you as a goalkeeper when you are so small?'"

"But goalkeepers have unique techniques. I tap my explosiveness and positioning to make up for my lack of height. I can't afford to make as many mistakes as a tall goalkeeper, so I ensure my technique is good.

"I always ask players and coaches how I can do better. I try to improve with constant training and drills."

The 23-year-old trains at least nine times a week at the OCBC Aquatics Centre in Kallang as the national team prepares for the SEA Games in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from May 5 to 17.

"I'm really excited and looking forward to my second SEA Games," said Mounisha, who has been in the national team for five years.

"We have been training hard."

Covid affected the team's preparations but the squad in recent months has been travelling and competing against higher-ranked opponents.

"We have all improved a little bit (since the team won silver at the 2019 SEA Games in the Philippines). I've also gained a lot of experience, learning from my injuries and the different goalkeepers I've observed," said Mounisha. "I've tried to work on my own techniques, so I'm really looking forward to showing everyone what our team and I can do at the SEA Games."

Mounisha is confident her team will pip main rival Thailand in Phnom Penh. "It is a long-standing rivalry. It started when we lost the gold medal to them in Singapore in 2015. We have



Mounisha Devi (above) in action. PHOTOS: P. KARTHIKEYAN, SINGAPORE SWIMMING ASSOCIATION



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yet to win it back," she said.

"Last year, we beat Thailand 9-4 to win the Water Polo Inter Nations Cup in Singapore. It was a morale booster because we realised we were on a par with them.

"So in Cambodia, it will all be about executing our plans and controlling our nerves and the game."

Mounisha takes inspiration from the "No. 1 women's goalkeeper in the world, American Ashleigh Johnson". But that came only after she ventured into water polo by chance.

"Indian girls in Singapore rarely take up water polo," said Mounisha.

"I wasn't a good swimmer and stopped swimming after Primary 5 as I was doing other things like bharatanatyam and veena.

"But I have loved sports since young, even if no one else in my family does. My 24-year-old sister

Swathi Nachiar, who is pursuing her PhD at Yale University, is more artistically inclined. She plays the veena and has made her stage debut."

In secondary school, Mounisha played basketball but ACS (Independent) did not have a basketball team for girls.

"Then a friend dragged me to the water polo trials and it looked really interesting and a lot of fun. The coach was really nice" she said. "So I thought I would just give it a try and ended up falling in love with the sport."

Mounisha's father Madhavan Manivannan, a 59-year-old sales director at an IT company, was initially concerned that she would not get enough rest with the water polo training sessions on top of her classes.

"But my mother Saradha Devi would drop me off and pick me up – saving me a lot of commuting time,"

Mounisha said of the 53-year-old housewife.

"When my parents saw that I was doing well in water polo, they felt very proud and gave me their full support."

Mounisha admitted that "it's definitely a big struggle juggling studies and sports because Singaporeans are rarely full-time athletes, unlike the Thais".

"They train twice a day and have the time to take breaks," she said. "My teammates and I struggle because all of us are working or studying. But we take comfort in the knowledge that we have each other's backs."

The national team's centre-back Gina Koh said Mounisha "is positive, trains well and really gels with the other players".

"It's very important to have good communication between the players and goalkeeper because we have to constantly switch between defence and attack," she added. "Mounisha pushes everyone to be better. She plays a key role in the team."

Head coach Luo Nan, who has trained Mounisha since her ACS(I) days, said: "She's a very nice girl. Very easy to talk to and learns very fast.

"She's stable and steady as a goalkeeper. Her saving skills, long passes and jumps are good. She has strong legs."

Mounisha has had to give up her social life to become a permanent member of the national team, often missing out on outings with friends.

"But it doesn't really feel like a huge sacrifice because I enjoy the company of my teammates," she said.

"They are like my second family. We celebrate birthdays and special occasions together.

"Water polo looks really aggressive because everyone's very competitive but it's a very good experience and teaches you good values such as discipline, hard work and team spirit.

"I just hope I can continue to balance my studies and water polo so that I can play for the national team as long as possible."

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