

# Bhiwani boxers punch their way to Beijing



**BHIWANI BOXERS HAVE SHOWN STEELY GRIT IN THE BEIJING OLYMPICS, WHICH HAS PUT INDIA IN THE GLOBAL BOXING MAP.**

*By Jaideep Sarin*

**THIS IS** where dreams are born - Olympic size. Under a tin shed in North India's Haryana state local youth punch their way out of their humdrum lives. Here the letters BBC stand not for the British Broadcasting Corporation but the Bhiwani Boxing Club. India's BBC has given the country an Olympics bronze medal and aspirations for many more.

In recent days, it has taken the heroics of just three BBC men to place the town of Bhiwani, about 120 km from the Indian capital New Delhi, firmly on the country's sporting map. In an amazing tale, India's most successful boxers trained not in internationally designed arenas but in a most spartan Bhiwani facility.

No one in either Haryana or India had ever heard of BBC, or the champion boxers from Bhiwani, till they got themselves noticed in Beijing's boxing ring. The first hint of fame came when three men - Vijender Kumar, Akhil Kumar and Jitender Kumar - made the national boxing squad for the recently concluded Beijing Olympics.

Of the three, only Vijender Kumar won a bronze in the 75 kg category. But the storm they raised in the town and the scores of villages around may be difficult to contain.

The success of BBC has spawned other clubs as well. Over 1,500 youngsters are enrolled in about half a dozen private boxing clubs in Bhiwani, including BBC. After the recent success, managements are expecting admissions to quadruple.

A four-hour drive from New Delhi, Bhiwani was always known locally as 'Little Cuba'. The reference was to the top class boxers Cuba produced over the years, and the bid by Bhiwani boxers to create a brand of their own. The brand has worked. Now, there are hundreds of Kumars and others who see a future not only in boxing but a career in sports.

"Yes, I would like my son to be a boxer. I want him to get good training here and earn fame for the coun-

try. One outing for these three boys in Beijing has changed their lives forever," pointed out Asha Devi of Kaluwas village on the outskirts of Bhiwani, home of bronze medalist Kumar.

Already, the village has a reputation that every household has at least one boxer. Kumar's feat will make sure the trend continues, at least in the next few decades.

"Boys from nearby villages have been coming to BBC and other local boxing clubs to train," said boxing coach Jagdish Singh of the Sports Authority of India (SAI). "The recent events will make the sport even more popular. We have a lot of talent among boys from rural areas. We will aim for gold in the 2012 London Olympics.

The Haryana government has now announced an international standard boxing academy here, along with cash rewards running into millions of rupees and several other incentives. But the road to success for Bhiwani and its boxers hasn't been easy. In fact, it was inundated in knee-deep water for over a fortnight in August when its boxers were competing in Beijing.

All that BBC offers for facilities even now is a tin-shed under which enthusiastic boxers - aged 10 to 30 years - practice hard in the most trying conditions. They don't have proper equipment, shoes or gloves. What they have in plenty, however, is the determination to succeed.

The love for boxing in this district started in the early 1960s with an armyman, Captain Hawa Singh. Hawa Singh, a champion boxer and an Asian Games gold medallist, scouted for trainees in nearby villages. After him, coaches Rajinder Yadav and Jagdish Singh took over the quest to produce national and international level boxers.

They may not have been very well known but their potential had been spotted even before the Beijing games. London-based Indian steel tycoon L.N. Mittal set up a trust to help the boxers, even sending Beijing quarterfinalist Akhil Kumar to South Africa last year for correctional surgery.

The Beijing-returned boxers returned home recently to one of the biggest welcomes that people in Bhiwani remember. The cavalcade of over 100 cars caused a jam in the town as crowds thronged the streets to catch sight of the boxers, garlanded and acknowledging cheers from a flower-bedecked open jeep.

"The welcome was so overwhelming," a visibly happy Vijender Kumar said. "We never expected this kind of a reception. It has made all of us even more determined to do even better in London in 2012.

The road has just got slightly easier. Literally. From water-logged pathways, the way to their villages in the district has recently been metalled.

The boxers from Bhiwani have not only set out a new roadmap for local youth. They have caught the attention of a nation where cricket is a religion and cricketers are gods. Their punches have shown Bhiwani's boys are really made of steel. It will only take some sharpening of skills to take them to the top.



**BOXER VIJENDER SINGH FROM BHIWANI IN ACTION AGAINST AN OPPONENT**