

Fighting forever

Boxer Sapna Saini fights through injuries and obstacles to chase her Olympic dreams.

by EMMA EIDSVOOG

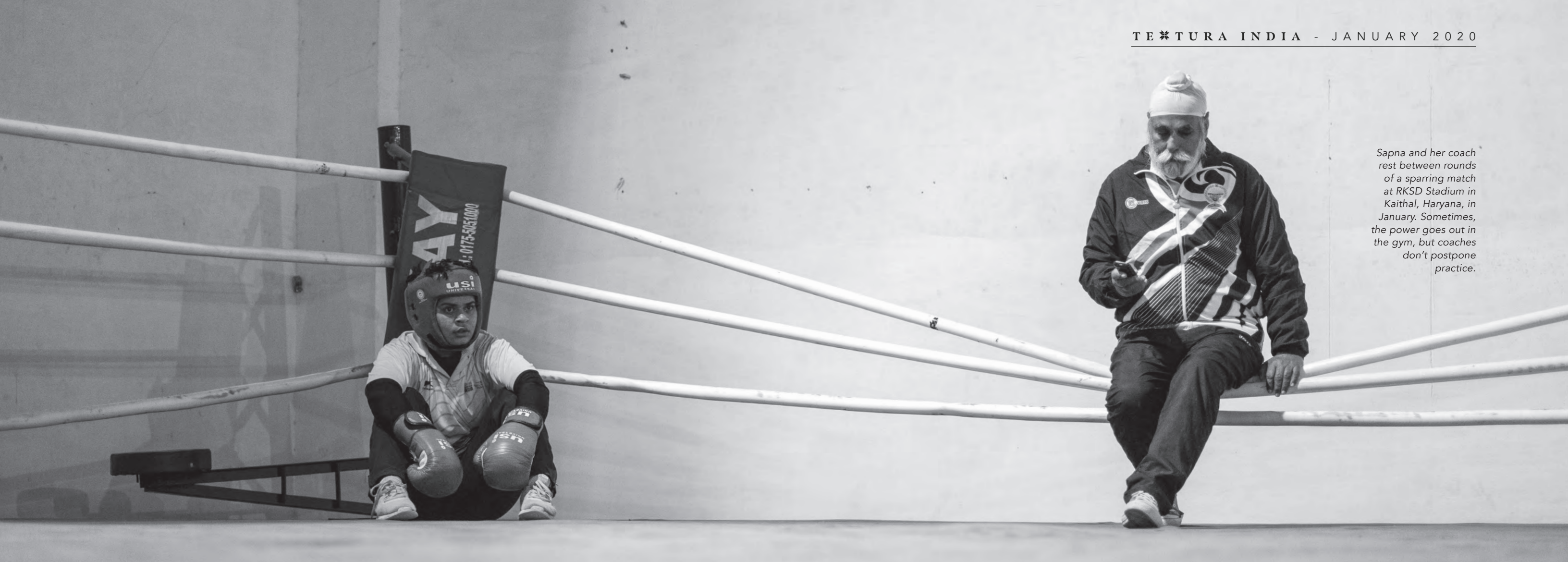
Sapna Saini straps the red boxing gloves onto her hands under the lights that decided to work that January day at Diamond Jubilee training center in Kaithal, Haryana. The 20-year-old stands outside the ring on one side of the gym while other girls, and some boys, shadow box on the other. She prepares to spar with one of her coaches, Kuldeep Singh, 31, whose professional career earned him medals from Ukraine to Singapore. She lifts the rope and enters the ring, armed with her red headgear, gloves and grit that comes from her beautician mother and a burgeoning sense that she will not be constrained by any cultural limitations on women.

Rajandra, the gym's lead coach, starts a four-minute timer on his phone, and an exchange of light taps to the face takes place between Kuldeep and Sapna. Sapna's shoulders bounce up-and-down over her shuffling feet as she calculates her first punch.

Left, left, right. She grunts with each shot she fires.

Sapna Saini cools down after a few rounds of sparring against her teammate. She works out in the January cold in hopes of fighting for her country in the 2024 Paris Olympics.

INDIA



Sapna and her coach rest between rounds of a sparring match at RKSD Stadium in Kaithal, Haryana, in January. Sometimes, the power goes out in the gym, but coaches don't postpone practice.

She hesitates for a moment, and Kuldeep strikes her jaw. Sapna steps back in surprise. The coach stops them so she can ready herself for another string of hits and bruises. Then she's ready again to take the hits she needs to become an Olympic medalist.

India has the fewest medals per capita of any country. Its 28 medals rank 142nd, one for every 44 million people. The cricket-fanatic country has seen fewer medals than Uzbekistan. The British game of cricket isn't big in Haryana, but a male boxer from Haryana won a bronze in 2008 in Beijing, then a female boxer from

the eastern border of India won a bronze in London in 2012.

Sapna wants one of those medals.

Despite Haryana's reputation for athletes and the growing boxing community, her gym isn't of Olympic caliber, with spotty electricity and few resources. But if Rajendra's gym loses power, like today, boxers will run drills in the dark or outside in the cold. If they have no jump ropes, they'll simulate jumping rope in a circle with the same seriousness and heart rates. And maybe that kind of toughness will get Sapna to the 2024 Olympics in Paris.

Her tough skin holds her together. After six years of boxing she's used to pain. She doesn't notice her sore left ankle. She never flashes a smile while in the ring and outside no one would guess the beaming smile across her face is made of fake teeth courtesy of a tumble off a neighbor's roof. Her T-shirt covers the scar on her left shoulder from when she leaned too close to a table fan and the time a cow ran into her while she stood in the street holding her thumb in her mouth.

For another two minutes, they go back-and-forth, Sapna's unveiled

face dripping with sweat and her stance weakening. The round ends, and Sapna yells to a friend for water.

"If I fail once, I'll try again," Sapna said. "I'll try again and again and again."

The next round, she boxes a younger man wearing a camouflage shirt. She deflects a jab to her abdomen and hits him back with a left, left, right, pushing him to the ropes.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!," her coach Rajendra yells. Victory for Sapna, a story rarely told in Haryana, where many women cover their

faces if a man from their village can see them, many wish to escape the field work, domestic work – and sometimes domestic violence – that are worse than poverty for some. They want to win control of their lives.

Control for Sapna began in the ring where she isn't afraid of fighting back.

"No matter who's in the ring, a boy or girl, they are an opponent to me," Sapna said.

Sapna's note was scrawled on the concrete wall above her bed

covered with floral patterned sheets:

Never give up. Work hard. I want to play India.

She signed her name, looping the "S" two times. A punching bag hung three feet away.

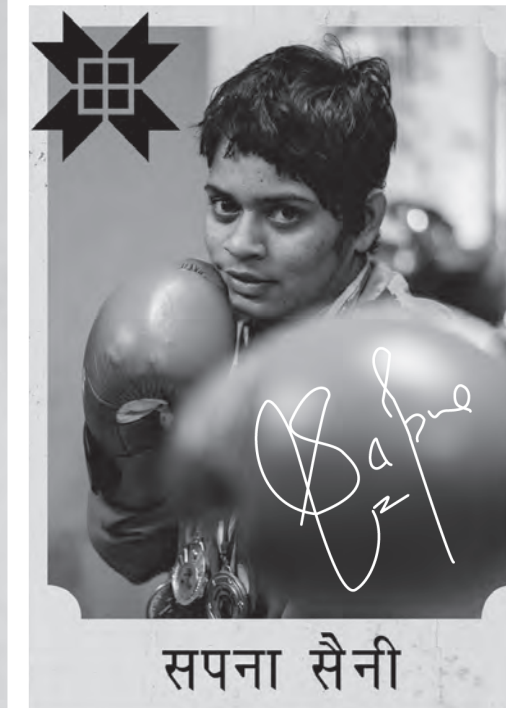
Once their home centered around the punching bag and the trophies and medals piled up on shelves, Sapna realized she could do more than cook, clean and raise children. Sapna dreams of boxing at the 2024 Olympics.


Each medal on the shelf defies those who say she's too short,

“Girls are not only for cleaning houses. They can have their name in society.”

– Asha, Sapna's mother

Sapna and 31-year-old Kuldeep Singh face off at practice at RKSD Stadium in January. Kuldeep won medals internationally in his career and hopes to push Sapna to global success.





SAPNA SAINI

WOMEN'S

Known for her undying work-ethic, Sapna Saini is motivated as an established young boxer on the rise who represents Kaithal, Haryana, India with hopes to represent India internationally one day.

3 BRONZE MEDALS

3 SILVER MEDALS

4 GOLD MEDALS

2018 NATIONAL BOXER OF THE YEAR

Hometown: Kaithal

Date of Birth: 4/10/1999

GRAPHICS BY BRAEDEN PETERSON

those who pay off officials so their boxers can compete ahead of her and those who say she needs to accept her place in society as a woman.

“I want to be a boxer forever,” Sapna said.

And no injury, man or corruption will stop her.

Her inspiration: 5-foot-2-inch Mary Kom, the Indian boxer who won bronze at the 2012 Beijing Olympics. At 5 feet 4 inches tall, Sapna started boxing when she was 14 after years of jumping off the school bus to skip school and spending hours every day sucking her thumb. Her life began once she stepped into the Diamond Jubilee Sports Center .

Sapna arrived with an already athletic physique and confidence – a gift from her mother, Asha Saini, a former judo athlete. The one who feeds Sapna millet roti and almonds, when she can afford it.

Asha practiced judo until age 18, when her in-laws forced her to give up her sport to be a housewife – someone who would be quiet, stay indoors and cook meals. Now, she “sees the world through [her] kids’ eyes.” Her dream is for her daughter to box internationally.

“Girls are not only for cleaning houses,” Asha said.

“They can have their name in society.”

Sapna means “dream” in Hindi, but she almost didn’t have a name. She almost didn’t live long enough to get one.

At last count in 2013 to 2015, only 831 girls were born for every 1,000 boys in Haryana, according to government websites. That’s the lowest of any state in India, which has a national average of anywhere from 900 to 940 girls born for every 1,000 boys, depending on who is counting.

Families wanted boys to carry on the family name, home and land. In 1994, the government outlawed gender screening by doctors, even though it was already illegal to abort a baby simply because of its gender. However, those laws weren’t enforced when Asha became pregnant with Sapna. Asha’s in-laws told her to have an abortion if she was having another girl.

Asha cried once the doctor revealed the gender of Sapna. She wouldn’t abort her.

“A voice from my heart said, ‘It’s wrong. You shouldn’t do this,’” Asha said.

After the appointment, she and her husband didn’t tell

their family they were having a girl. Her husband simply told his parents, "What you want is there in her womb."

Asha dreamed of raising a strong daughter, so she drank milk every day during the pregnancy to help her grow.

When Sapna was born, Asha's sister, a mother of one son, offered to adopt her. Asha gave into the pressure from her family, so her sister prepared a name and announced a party for the adoption. Three days later, Asha changed her mind. She couldn't give a part of herself to anyone else.

The two became more like sisters, as they teased each other over the years. Sapna was able to pick up her mother by age 11. Although her mother took care of her, Sapna still cries "Papa" whenever she's hurt. Her father lives hours away in another state for work but visits once a month.

Another trial brought the mother and daughter together when Asha discovered bumps on her neck in 2019. The first doctor in Kaithal thought cancer, but months later, a Delhi doctor diagnosed her with tuberculosis. Boxing took second place, as Sapna skipped practice to carry her mother throughout the house. Asha's weakened state left her with a breathing problem, and she struggled to walk up stairs or dance.

Suddenly their finances dipped, with only income from the beauty

parlor and the little money sent from her husband. Asha's mother helped pay for medical expenses. During hospital visits, Asha would seem optimistic with Sapna next to her, but upon returning home, symptoms worsened.

Sapna recalls holding her mother in her arms and consoling her one night when she began to lose hope.

"Come near me. I'm going to die," her mother said. "I'm so weak that I don't think I can survive anymore."

Sapna had to be strong for her mother, who was always the

"When I become something, people will see my work, not my face."

- Sapna, 20

strong one. Asha's life didn't grant her the freedom of following her passions. Her marriage took her from judo, and dengue, a mosquito-borne virus, and took her from a training gym she ran for five years. She opened a beauty parlor 16 years ago in a small front room of their house to help pay the bills.

Sapna helps from time to time, a hard-hitting boxer specializing in bridal makeup, but she never wears it herself.

"When I become something, people will see my work, not my face," Sapna said.

Sapna's sweat-drenched, black locks of curls fell on her face during practice. She begged her mother to cut her hair short like the other female boxers at Diamond Jubilee. Once Sapna won gold, her mother said, she could cut her hair.

Then in 2017 at the Junior Women National Boxing Tournament in the state of Assam, Sapna won gold.

This didn't surprise her mother, who saw the strength in her daughter at a young age, and cut the hair short.

Before boxing, Sapna spent all day sucking her thumb. To make her kick the habit at 14, Sapna's mom tried medicine and even burning and cutting her thumb as punishment at the most desperate of times. It took getting dental braces for her to stop sucking her thumb. Once she was freed from the habit, Sapna got addicted to boxing.

In 2018, four years into the sport, Sapna faced another obstacle. She sliced her shoulder on a table fan and got 17 stitches from the cut. With the Youth Commonwealth Games trials approaching, Sapna kept training. She gave her shoulder 10 days to heal.

Despite the injury, she was chosen to represent Haryana at the Khelo India games.

After traveling 38 hours to Guwahati in the Easternmost part of India, nearer to the home of Mary Kom, Sapna checked in with a coach who told her she wasn't on the list. They replaced her with another girl whose parents, Sapna and her coach believe, could afford bribery.

Sapna's coach Rajendra admits this is a common occurrence in boxing matches. Without corruption and with Sapna's dedication, he says Sapna could fight all the way to the Olympics. Maybe she'll need to get to a better gym, but she has what she needs inside.

In January 2019, one year later at the same Khelo India tournament, she boxed the same girl who replaced her. Sapna won the match.

Sapna approached the coach who took her off the list and said, "See what I am and what I can do?"

Sapna now attends RKSD College in Kaithal, where she's in her second year of general studies, juggling school and her Olympic dream. If she doesn't make it to Paris, she'll need a job, so she keeps studying.

She is preparing for her next match at the Khelo University Games in February, where she'll be among 4,000 athletes from 100 universities across India. But Sapna's already competed in international competitions in Bulgaria and Kazakhstan. Her mother misses her when she leaves, but supports her dreams.

Sapna's teammate helps strap on Sapna's helmet before a sparring match.





“I have learned one thing from my mother. If it is not done in your first effort, do it again... I will definitely get what is mine. It can be late but I’m definitely going to get it.”

– Sapna

“I have learned one thing from my mother. If it is not done in your first effort, do it again. It will be done at some time,” Sapna said. “I will definitely get what is mine. It can be late, but I’m definitely going to get it.”

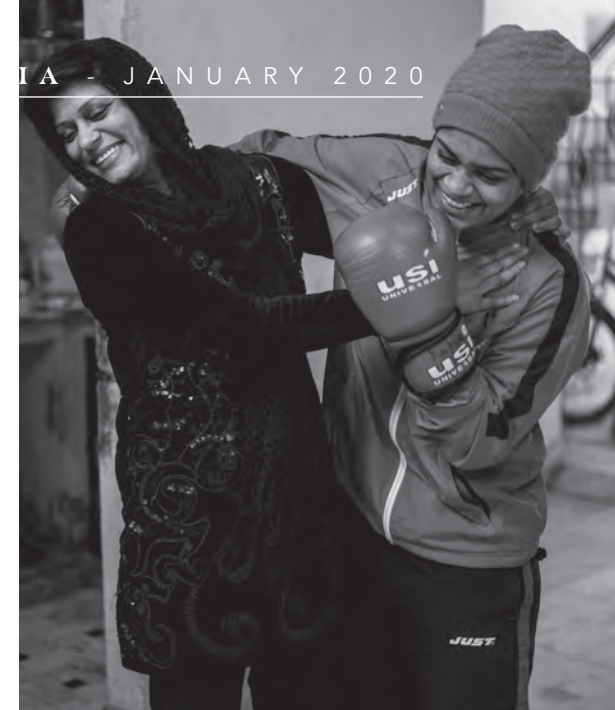
And the times when Sapna’s defeated, Asha says “Go back to the ground,” the Hindu School for Girls gym to where she runs two miles every morning, except for Sunday. At 6 a.m., Sapna works out on the basketball court doing pushups next to her friend Neha. Sapna sits down on the concrete, raising her arms next to her as Neha jumps over them like bar jumps.

She trains with girls like Neha, who wants to be a phy-ed teacher, and Muscan, who believes women should be able to defend themselves. Sapna just wants to box forever.

Marriage is a distant thought for the girls who shadow box for 10 minutes, hop from their hands and feet on the floor and strap up their calloused hands day after day. They practice from 5:30 to 7 a.m. and 4:30 to 6:30 p.m., before the sun comes up and until the darkness falls on the gym. Sometimes the lights in the gym work, other times they need to stand on the steps outside to see. Sapna stands with her red gloves on in the looming doorway of Diamond Jubilee with the setting sun hitting her face.

Left, left, right. *

PHOTOS BY JAKE VAN LOH



Sapna and her mother Asha embracing at their home in Kaithal.

