

Heart in the game

K. Venkat, former badminton player, is now busy coaching youngsters at Nandyal, Kurnool. Armed with proficiency in sports medicine, he is totally involved in the training programme, writes A. JOSEPH ANTONY.



SHUTTLE SERVICE: K. Venkat's heart is with the children he trains at the Nandi Pipes Academy.

THE CITY-bred crave to get back to town the moment they begin tiring of the smallest vacation away from it. Not so for badminton coach K. Venkat, a hardcore Hyderabadi otherwise. His heart is now in Nandyal, Kurnool, with the children he trains at the Nandi Pipes Academy.

Initially, he'd long for Thursday night, to get away from Nandyal for the weekend to the twin cities. Now the kids have become an obsession and he's happiest in their midst. The thought foremost on his mind nowadays is to get back to the Nandi Pipes indoor stadium and resume training.

``Venkat has a knack with kids, ways to boost them and get the best out of them," says Dronacharya Awardee S.M. Arif. "His uncanny observation and total involvement with his work are two qualities that will help his coaching immensely."

Of Venkat's playing days, Arif recalls that a wonderful wrist gave the former enough ability to play for the country. Had he been more serious, he would have donned national colours, adds the mentor of all England champion P. Gopichand, Gutta Jwala, Shruthi Kurien and a string of other internationals.

The farthest Venkat got was to the pre-quarter finals in a National doubles event and the round of eight in mixed doubles. Therein lies a tale. Under the mistaken impression that he was very smart, he shirked the exercise regimen and played games without sufficiently limbering up.

That took its toll on his body. His knees gave way and couldn't take the load put on them from the rigorous badminton schedule. In 1997, he took up coaching at the Sport Authority of Andhra Pradesh's (SAAP) summer coaching camp at the L.B. Stadium, Hyderabad, primarily to influence impressionable minds on the necessity for physical exercise before actual competition.

A year later, he quit playing competitive badminton to become a coach. After a short stint at the Secunderabad Club, he accompanied a veteran's team as manager-cum-coach to the United States. The next major assignment was in South Africa at the behest of the International Badminton Federation.

He won plaudits for his training regimen from the legendary Morten Frost Hansen, the invincible Dane, who was Director of South African badminton. "It was a rare privilege," recalls Venkat working under the gaze of the great man. A duo of twins, trainees of his scheme there, clinched the under-13 doubles crown.

"I was compounder to my orthopaedic surgeon father. With the 'commissions' I made, I'd rush off to L.B. Stadium, buy shuttles and play badminton," Venkat remembers. Thanks to that experience, he grasped the concepts of sports medicine, gaining proficiency in the science, without formal education in the same.

Venkat's wife Savitha, a qualified National Institute of Sports (NIS) coach in volleyball, has been grooming talented players from the township as well. Venkat's own efforts have not been in vain, if one sees the alacrity with which A. Naresh, an under-10 quarter-finalist in the Krishna Khaitan all India tourney in Chennai, moves on the court. Also promising are Sri Teja, Jamal Ahmed and the youngest of his trainees, Sai Ajit Reddy.

Venkat's aim has been to wean away parents from slave-driving their children for competitive exams to professional courses and re-direct them to the badminton court instead. "There have been instances of school principals asking me 'What is badminton?'" he recounts from a drive to enrol more children in his training programme.

Sridhar Reddy, Executive Director of the Nandi group of industries has been very supportive. The staging of two State tournaments by the firm is sufficient indication of its resolve to back sports. The active support of Jayapaul to Venkat's organisation of the recent State junior badminton championships was enough evidence of parental support to his ventures.

Venkat himself attributes his success to his coach. An avowed disciple of Arif, Venkat says he's nothing without his guru. "Whatever I know, is thanks to him," he acknowledges as he hopes this private coaching enterprise will emerge as a full-fledged badminton academy with SAAP's back-up.