

Interview with Susanthika Jayasinghe

"There are thousands of talented athletes in Sri Lanka but they have no opportunity to develop"

Paninie Wijesiriwardhena
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Twenty-four-year old Susanthika Jayasinghe, one of Sri Lanka's leading female athletes, recently spoke to the World Socialist Web Site. Jayasinghe, who won a bronze medal in women's 200-metres sprint event at the Olympics Games in Sydney, is the country's first Olympic medallist for 52 years. The last Sri Lankan to win an Olympic medal was Duncan White, who won a silver medal in the 400-metres hurdles in 1948.

Born to a poor family in Atawala, a poverty-stricken village near Colombo, Jayasinghe, like most sportsmen and women from underdeveloped countries, had to overcome many difficulties in order to pursue a professional sporting career. Lack of basic facilities and scientific training methods prevent most athletes from Asia and Africa from competing in international sporting events let alone winning Olympic medals. Of the 199 countries competing at the Sydney Olympics, 80 won no medals. India, the world's second most populous country, won one medal—its third ever.

Jayasinghe, who was hailed in the Sri Lankan media for winning the bronze medal, has been embroiled in controversy since returning to the island. She provoked the ire of the Peoples Alliance government because she wore a yellow ribbon around her wrist at the Olympics, expressing her support for the "Yellow Band" movement against election violence and rigging. She is also involved in a long-running controversy involving a senior Sports Ministry official, who she claims sexually harassed her in 1997.

Paninie Wijesiriwardhena: Congratulations on your Olympic medal win. Why do you think Olympic victories are so rare for Sri Lanka?

Susanthika Jayasinghe: A good question. I would like to answer this by relating my own story and the obstacles that I have had to face.

I was born into an impoverished family in the remote village of Atawala, 60 kilometres northwest of Colombo. The games we had in the village school were Elle [a bat and ball game] and volleyball for boys, whilst girls participated in running events at inter-schools sports meets. We did not have many games to choose from and there was no proper equipment or facilities. For example, an average pair of spikes, used for running events, cost more than the month's wage of an ordinary worker, so we had to run without spikes or even shoes. There were no sports instructors.

I am sure that there are thousands of talented athletes, even more talented than I am, on this island but they have no opportunities to develop. As I understand it, that's why Olympic medallists are so

scarce in this country.

PW: Are you saying that countries such as the United States, Germany and others more easily obtain Olympic medals because there are plenty of facilities and opportunities for players to develop their skills?

SJ: Of course that is the case. I have been communicating with international athletic communities for nearly five years now and have travelled to various countries to take part in competitions. I was also in training for two years in the United States after winning a silver medal in the World Championship competition in Athens in 1997. I know from these experiences that players from those countries have relatively more opportunities than our youth here.

PW: What were some of the obstacles you faced as a child to a career in athletics?

SJ: In addition to the general drawbacks I've just mentioned, the poverty of my family was a huge handicap. When I was born my father was jobless. He had been previously been employed as a driver for the Ceylon Transport Board.

My mother did rubber latex tapping for a meagre wage to feed us. My brothers, sisters and I all had to work during our childhood. Rolling beedi [cheap cigarettes] was a cottage industry in our village and so some members of the family rolled beedi from the beedi leaves supplied by a merchant and others labeled them. I remember that when you labeled 1,000 beedies you received Rs 1.50. I earned Rs. 22.50, or about half a dollar, in four days labeling 15,000 beedies. I could label more speedily than others in the village.

I am telling you all these things so you can get an idea of the economic situation we faced then. During that time I didn't receive the sort of nutritious balanced meals needed for an athlete. I think the situation is still the same for most families in Sri Lanka.

PW: How about the support and guidance you received at the school?

SJ: I highly respect my school teachers but they didn't encourage children in games and other creative activities, which the kids love most. I don't see this is a personal mistake by my teachers but a result of an education system, which hasn't been oriented and shaped properly.

There wasn't a sports teacher at Uduwaka Vidyalaya, where I obtained my primary education and although there was a sports teacher at Atawala Vidyalaya, where I obtained my secondary

education, we didn't receive proper technical know-how in different sports. The teachers, through no fault of their own, lacked technical training.

PW: What about encouragement from your family?

SJ: All my brothers and sisters were very talented in sports and were good at school level competitions so they always encouraged me. But this was an exception. Most children are directed towards studies only and many of them are forced to attend afternoon private classes to be successful at exams. This is because the opportunity for a career in sports is so rare in Sri Lanka. This is true in all creative cultural fields.

PW: The Department of Education says that it has opened sports schools at several places on the island. Can you comment?

SJ: If such schools are to be successful then the instructors must be armed with knowledge about current technical achievements in international athletics. International athletics has advanced enormously through the use of new technologies over the past few years. I am a sprinter but didn't receive correct technical guidance, even from the instructors at the national level. I was not even told by instructors in Sri Lanka of the importance of touching the front of the foot, not the heel, on the ground first. I learned that from Tony Campbell, the United States coach, which I arranged for myself through my own personal resources obtained from international competitions. The Sports Ministry did not help me.

I can't imagine for a moment that these sports schools would possess modern technical equipment. I know there is electronic gadgetry to measure the stride frequency of sprinters but my stride frequency has never been measured in Sri Lanka. The Ministry of Sports lacks this sort of equipment and so you can imagine the situation in the sports schools.

Instructors and coaches must have proper training, not only about sports technology but also about sports science and sports medicology. At present there are only a handful of sports doctors and sports science graduates in Sri Lanka.

PW: What happened after you joined the national pool of athletes?

SJ: Notwithstanding the lack of proper training facilities in Sri Lanka I gradually came forward and began winning international events. The silver medal I won at World Athletics Meet at Athens in 1997 was a milestone in my career. No Sri Lankan had performed at that level and on my return after the win I was received on the red carpet.

Yet within a few days everything changed. A powerful person in the Ministry of Sports sexually harassed me and when I exposed this fact, I was drowned in a sea of miseries. The gates of the playground of the Sports Ministry were closed to me and attempts were made to ban me from sports on a drug offence. But my drug test was done in a totally irregular way. In fact, the officers who obtained my urine sample didn't even seal it in front of me.

Mangala Samaraweera, a cabinet minister in the Peoples Alliance government also tried to insult me. He said: "No-one's sexual feelings would be aroused by Susanthika who looks like a Black African young man." This was said under the cover of parliamentary privilege. This is only some of the harassment I had to endure at that time.

PW: After these incidents you were somewhat silent. Why was that?

SJ: I was in constant mental agony during those days and my husband, Dhammika, and I spent every second in fear of death. Then I left for United States to join the training pool of Tony Campbell. I had to sell my trophies won at competitions to find the money to get US visas. I trained under Tony's guidance and was able to improve my skill considerably, which enhanced my confidence and helped me win

an Olympic medal in Sydney. I won the Olympic Bronze medal recording my best time at 22.28 seconds. The Bahamas athlete who won the silver was 22.27 seconds, so I only lost the silver medal by a hundredth of a second.

PW: What's your opinion of Sri Lankan sports ministry officials and coaches?

SJ: Actually, most of the officials have become political stooges of the existing government. Competition among coaches is intense so almost all the coaches willfully and purposely block the chances of the athletes trained under others in order to promote those who are trained by them. This cut-throat competition between coaches is very harmful because the influential coaches try to gain advantages for themselves at the expense of the athletes. I think this situation must be changed.

I would also like to say that the trainers in sports, as in every other field, must be trained properly. I think they need more and more international training, know-how and international support.

PW: At present all sport has become commercialised with sportsmen and women forced to go after big money. What's your comment?

SJ: Under commercialisation, sports and sports persons degenerate. I have experienced this and I am opposed to this situation. Those engaged in sports must be free to develop their performances, but this is hard to achieve amidst widespread poverty in society.

PW: At the Sydney Olympics you participated in events with a yellow band around your wrist and drew the attention of announcers and commentators to that fact. What was your intention?

SJ: As you know the Sydney Olympics was held during Sri Lanka's pre-election period. The yellow band movement had emerged in Sri Lanka to protest against election violence and malpractices and to demand a free and fair election. I agreed with that idea and wore a yellow band to appeal to the world to protect democratic rights in this country. I am a social product and have a responsibility for society.



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