

News From Webindia123.com

Unassuming royal, Yashwant Singh helps out sportspersons like none other

New Delhi | February 12, 2007 1:15:17 AM IST

An unassuming ex-royal, Yashwant Singh of Alwar helps out sportspersons in distress like none other.

Picture this: Have the cheques due under the sports pension scheme not been cleared? Has the pass you are entitled to not been renewed? Have you misplaced or lost your Arjuna Award scroll? Are you in need of urgent medical attention or have the hospital bills you can ill afford to meet not been reimbursed?

Just drop a line to Yashwant Singh. He will take care of your worries for free if you are a retired international medal-winning athlete eligible for the benefits offered by the government.

A tall and handsome descendent of the erstwhile rulers of Alwar, Yashwant Singh, as chairman of the Athletes' Commission of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) and director of the Arjuna Awardees Association (AAA), has been doing precisely that for the last decade-and-a-half.

There is nothing officious or pompous about the man despite his blue-blooded lineage. Easily accessible in his IOA office or at his sprawling Aurangzeb Road residence in the exclusive Lutyens Zone of New Delhi, you are free to call him on his phone or cell any time during the day - and even at night. When offices are closed on holidays, he carries his work to the prestigious Gymkhana Club nearby.

All this honorary work he does for the love of sport.

Touching letters and telephone calls of thanks and appreciation from the famous and not so famous, and the smile he brings to the faces of old sportspersons in distress is his reward.

Take the case of footballer Fortunato A. Franco.

The 1962 Jakarta Asian Games gold medallist, now pushing 70, on receiving his post-dated monthly pension cheques for a full year, wrote glowingly in gratitude: "It's unfortunate that great sportspersons of yesteryears who virtually shed blood and tears to bring honour and glory for the country are sadly forgotten and hardly thought of."

"Then comes a ray of hope and a rainbow across the horizon in people like you; noble and lion-hearted who do the rescue act for the brave and forgotten ones."

The Goa-based Franco, who has happily recovered from heart surgery he underwent last year, remembers every moment of the campaign of the S.A. Rahim-coached Indian football team made famous by the by the goals headed in by Jarnail Singh despite seven stitches in his forehead - the result of a collision with a Thai forward in a group match.

In fact, it was off a Franco's pass that Jarnail scored the second goal against Korea to seal a victory in the final. The blood that Franco had mentioned in his letter to Yashwant Singh was the blood that flowed from the forehead of Jarnail, now no more like coach Rahim.

"What a tough and brave footballer was Jarnail!" Franco remembers in awe and admiration.

Jakarta also reminds one of Daljit Singh, who won gold medals in the 800 metres and the 4x100 metres relay. It was "Flying Sikh" Milkha Singh who brought Daljit's case to Yashwant Singh.

Both Daljit and Milkha were grateful when the former received his overdue pension cheques from the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC).

The files in Yashwant Singh's office also contain letters of appreciation and gratitude from many other sportspersons. To name some: Leo Pinto, Bishan Bedi, Ajit Wadekar, Kamaljit Sandhu Kooner, Farrokh Khodajji, Geet Sethi, Pankaj Advani, K. Easwara Rao, Arun Kumar Das and even Randhir Singh, the IOA secretary general himself.

The list is long and distinguished. No less than 90 veterans received pension cheques last year thanks in no small measure to the help rendered by Yashwant Singh through his Athletes' Commission.

According to a scheme of the ministry of youth affairs and sports, medallists at the Olympic, World Cups/Championships in Olympic and Asian Games disciplines and at the Asian and Commonwealth Games are entitled to a life pension ranging from Rs.5,000 to Rs.3,000 per month disbursed through the LIC.

However, retired sports stars living in distant parts of our large country need assistance to cut through red tape and bureaucratic hassles to claim their dues. This is where Yashwant Singh and the Athletes' Commission comes to their aid.

Yashwant shares a relationship of mutual respect with officers of the government and the state-owned LIC.

"I have found officers at the sports ministry and LIC helpful and responsive," says Yashwant Singh.

One is not sure if details of the pension scheme have been adequately publicised, and it is quite likely many a veteran medalist may have missed out on their cheques till someone made them aware of the measure.

So, if you are reading this and are know of a potential beneficiary who is in distress, do get in touch with Yashwant Singh.

(K. Datta is a retired sports editor of The Times of India. He can be reached at datta_rahul@rediffmail.com)

(IANS)