

# ONE

## The Punt

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**I**t started as a punt and like any speculative venture, the outcome would be decided as much by fortune and destiny as foresight and planning. Anand Mahindra instinctively knew this; indeed, it was something he had learnt at a young age as the scion of one of India's leading business families. Taking risks came naturally to him, it nourishes his drive and appetite for life. After completing his studies at Mumbai's Cathedral and John Connon School, he decided not to go down the 'IIT route' expected of him, opting instead to major in filmmaking and architecture at Harvard University. After returning to India, he joined the company started by his grandfather and led its transformation from one that was known for producing primarily steel, tractors and jeeps to a commercial powerhouse with tentacles reaching deep into the Indian economy and more than 100 other countries, employing almost 120,000 people. He had started India's first blues festival (he acquired a love for black American music during his time in the United States), now Asia's largest, bringing blues legends from around the world to the city where he was born. He also conceived the idea of a Mahindra Blues Bandhunt, to uncover India's up and coming talent in the musical genre of America's deep south. When it came to sport he was no less averse to pushing the boundaries. He started India's first and only Formula E racing team, the high-profile global street racing competition in which only electric cars can participate and funded basketball programmes and a football team (Mahindra United) that at one time was a formidable side in the country.

'The biggest risk is not taking any risk,' he liked to tell friends, family and his staff enthusing them about uncharted territory.

But as he paced apprehensively inside the National Sports Club of India (NSCI) on a sultry July evening, somehow this felt different. Perhaps it was because this had nothing to do with the corporate behemoth that had evolved under his stewardship; it was not a Mahindra and Mahindra risk, but a personal one, so some pride and ego were at stake. India's leviathan Star Sports network of television channels had taken over the nugget of his idea, reshaping it in a way he had never envisaged, investing millions

of dollars and man-hours into it in their quest to propel it to another stratosphere; the deal was struck with a handshake with its chairman and chief executive Uday Shankar. Long established friends had been cajoled to take a 'plunge into the dark', as he frankly admitted to them during long telephone conversations, bending their ears and arms; and there were also the endless hours of toil put in by his brother-in-law Charu Sharma to make it happen.

Most of all, Mahindra and Star Sports were taking a well-known desi product and rebranding and remarketing it to a clientele who, it must be said, had not shown very much appetite for it in its original avatar. A risky business strategy for any corporate name, let alone two so well known all over the country.

Mumbaikars were returning home negotiating rush-hour traffic in the evening as the final preparations were being made inside the NSCI (also known as the Sardar Vallabhai Patel Stadium) for the opening night of the Pro Kabaddi League. Eighteen cameras had been strategically positioned by specially trained technicians to capture the action that was going to unfold. Lights were double-checked to ensure they would vividly illuminate the playing arena; microphones had been surreptitiously placed under mats on which the principal actors would lock horns to relay their grunts and groans and more importantly, the cant. Star Sports' marketing executives diligently surveyed the arena to ensure their eye-catching branding got projected in a way that it would be in lens view, to be beamed into Indian homes. The gates to the stadium had been unlocked, all 5000 seats inside had been sold, and the place had been given a thorough clean. Keeping in mind the momentous event about to get underway, a red carpet was rolled out expecting big footfalls. But would anybody actually walk it?

Any product launch needs a 'big bang' moment; something to capture the imagination of its target audience and convince them it's worth buying. Mahindra, Star Sports and the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) caravan that was taking its first tentative steps towards an exciting future were relying on Abhishek Bachchan for theirs. There was little possibility of the actor letting them down; he was after all, the owner of Jaipur Pink Panthers, one of the eight teams participating in the inaugural competition. They were also first up on the opening night, taking on U Mumba, owned by Bollywood filmmaker Ronnie Screwvala. Abhishek also happened to be in Mumbai filming and had promised not just to come and watch his team's debut but bring his legendary father along. The two Bachchans; now that's a good sprinkling of stardust but nobody expected it would turn into a snowstorm.

Shantanu Rege, one of Mahindra's executives, had been seconded to help with the PKL project over the past few months and with preparations on the night; one of his duties was to notify his boss of the arrival of India's

most famous father and son duo. He rushed in excitedly; they had indeed stepped out of their cars and onto the red carpet, both wearing Jaipur Pink Panthers team shirts. Seconds later, he returned even more excited. Aishwarya Rai Bachchan had also shown up (also wearing a Jaipur Pink Panthers shirt) as had Jaya Bachchan (in a graceful cream sari). It wasn't long before he came galloping up to him again; Shahrukh Khan had arrived (nobody was expecting him) also in a Jaipur team shirt. Minutes later, Rege was standing in front of his boss once again with more exultant news; Aamir Khan was in the house, wearing a Jaipur team shirt with his name emblazoned across the back. And returning soon after, the 30-year-old Harvard Business School grad was close to fainting; Sachin Tendulkar had arrived with wife Anjali.

This was celebrity endorsement that you could not buy either for love or money. Even though Mahindra was accustomed to socialising in such circles (he knew all of them on a first-name basis) he was left flabbergasted at the top-of-the-table celebrities witnessing his 'punt' paying off. Sure, Star Sports had pulled out all the stops with Gayatri Yadav, one of its senior executives given responsibility for working her impressive contacts book to ensure their delivery. But he did not know this and besides, when it comes to invitations for the showbiz elite, there is no guarantee that they will actually take them up, regardless of who they come from.

At one minute to 7.30 pm, creative director Siddharth Sharma ordered the countdown to begin for Star Sports' first ever broadcast of the Pro Kabaddi League. It had been an exhausting, nerve-wrecking day laced with uncertainty, as indeed had been much of his and the channel's 18-month journey to get to this moment. He edgily glanced across the production control room, wondering how the night was going to pan out for what was the culmination of their voyage into uncertainty. But it did not take long for his fears to dissipate.

As the match got underway, Mahindra took a step back from the night's proceedings, casting a contemplative gaze across the arena, his eye caught not just by a raucous crowd but the Bachchans, the two Khans and Tendulkars seated together, captivated by the drama unfolding before them; the excitement on their faces beamed live into millions of homes across the nation. How had things come to this? Kabaddi; so long derided and ignored as 'rustic'; dismissed as 'the common man's game', meant for the poor village folk who had nothing better to do; pilloried for so long by the urban elite. And now, the most illustrious amongst them had bought into its potential.

As he reflected later: 'Star Sports was determined that kabaddi had to be glamourised from the beginning and we could not have asked for a better start. This whole thing was a sheer punt, a major leap of faith. I had no idea how things would turn out. But I always tell my family and friends

that in life, when you take risks you need a healthy dose of serendipity and good luck. Who knows what would have happened if those big names had not come on the first night or Uday had not met me for lunch?’

Mahindra took out his mobile and clicked a photograph of the stellar guests in the front row, which he tweeted to his six million Twitter followers. Ten minutes into the Star Sports broadcast, a shout went up in the production control room; PKL was trending on the social media channel.

More than 22 million viewers tuned in for the opening night of the re-incarnation of India’s indigenous game. By the end of the inaugural season it was 435 million.

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On 13 September 2007, Lalit Modi, then a BCCI vice-president (at that time barely known to Indian cricket fans and much before controversies and investigations began hounding him) announced the launch of the Indian Premier League. He was joined by homegrown legends such as Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid, Sourav Ganguly and Anil Kumble as well as quite a few notable names from the international cricket. Eight franchises were to take part in a Twenty20 cricket tournament comprising India’s and the world’s best players that would see them earn unprecedented financial rewards for their services in what would be the world’s most high-profile and lucrative cricket competition. Accompanying it would be live television, the involvement of some of India’s largest corporate houses and the glitz and glamour of one of its most popular and successful industries—Bollywood. Cricket was going to be made sexy and rich. As a report by the Columbia Business School noted: ‘What Modi sought was nothing short of a revolution in a staid, proud and venerable game. Would Indians enjoy a fast-paced three-hour version of a game whose current short form took all day? Would they root for teams based in various Indian cities instead of for a national team? Would the BCCI and other important cricket boards around the world buy into this new format?’

By the time the inaugural tournament finished in May 2008 (Shane Warne’s Rajasthan Royals were the champions) the answer was all too apparent; a resounding *yes*. The IPL had sent seismic shock waves through the whole of the country and the wider cricketing and sporting world. It had successfully blended sport, entertainment and business, monetising cricket in a way that had never been done before. It enraptured Indians as they watched at home on their televisions while drawing a newer, younger and more vibrant generation of spectators into the stadiums. Also watching closely was Mahindra. In fact, he had been urged by his friends, the Ambanis, to buy a team for himself after they had secured the Mumbai franchise. He briefly flirted with the idea but decided against it, mainly

because it wasn't 'left field' enough for him.

'I have always enjoyed doing something different, it's just who I am. I enjoy taking risks. I don't like to follow the beaten path,' he says. Also underpinning his decision was the fact (and he does not like to admit this too vociferously) that, unlike millions of his compatriots, he does not share their cricket obsession. 'I'm not a massive fan, to tell you the truth. Obviously, I follow the big matches when the national team is playing but I actually find cricket a little bit tedious and am sick and tired of India being a single sport country.'

Whatever his feelings for the thwack of leather on willow, the astonishing success of the IPL (which has continued) convinced Mahindra that professional sport, combined with television, entertainment and big business was on the verge of a major explosion in India. He was determined to tap into this new market, with anything but cricket that is.

It was Mahindra's business head rather than sporting passion that struck on the idea of kabaddi. Since its founding in 1945 the company he now led had become the brand of rural and small-town India, selling its tractors, harvesters, rice transplanters, and other farm equipment and services not to mention jeeps and other vehicles suitable for rustic terrain. Officially, it is the world's largest manufacturer of tractors by volume, enjoying a 40 per cent share of the Indian market. The tough earthy men who were its customers had a passion for kabaddi, either as players, supporters or organizers. They loved the sport, attended tournaments in large numbers and also dreamt of the game joining the big league of cricket, football and hockey. Mahindra concluded that launching a modest, IPL-style league in the hinterland that may (or may not) grow incrementally over the years would help further enhance the Mahindra and Mahindra brand amongst its most loyal customers while also allowing him to indulge in the 'left field' ventures that motivated him. He appointed his marketing team to further explore the idea but what they came back with wasn't what he had in mind. Their proposals ranged from sponsoring the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India (AKFI), the sport's governing body or perhaps the Indian national team.

Frustrated at their inability to get on the same page as him, what proved to be the turning point was an inadvertent intervention from another sport – basketball. Not exactly a widely popular sport in India but in April 2010, the Mahindra Group had teamed up with America's NBA (National Basketball Association) to launch a new recreational league in Mumbai, Bangalore and Ludhiana; it was to be known as the Mahindra NBA Challenge and was seen as an important stepping stone towards accelerating the development of the game, which was becoming popular amongst urban youngsters in particular. It also formed part of Mahindra's own vision to move India away from its obsession with cricket.

Heidi Ueberroth was in Mumbai for the finals of the fledgling league. As the NBA's president of Global Marketing Partnerships and International Business Operations she was considered at the time to be the most powerful woman in the global sports industry, known for her savvy deal making and canny eye for a business opportunity. She also happened to be a chip of the old block; her father Peter was former commissioner of Major League Baseball and organizer of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. While in Mumbai, she wanted to meet the IPL administrators. The runaway success of T20 cricket had caught the attention of sports administrators all over the world and she wanted to know not only how they managed to pull it off but whether the same model could work for the NBA?

Mahindra had arranged a dinner at the city's Four Seasons Hotel so that she could pick Modi's brains but this being Mumbai, he phoned ahead to warn that he was stuck in horrendous traffic and was running an hour late. As they sipped their drinks awaiting his arrival, he began sharing with Uberroth his thoughts on kabaddi and asked what she felt about its potential.

Her response caught him by surprise. She had actually seen kabaddi on her previous visits to India. Channel-surfing in her hotel room, she happened upon national broadcaster Doordarshan, the only station in the country that showed it. Sure, it wasn't the best camera work and the production and presentation was not exactly up to the standards she was used to but, she told him: 'I've always thought what a great sport this would be for television if done in the right way. It reminds me of basketball; it's played on a small court, involves big guys who are fast and strong and the crowds are close to the action, which adds to the atmosphere. I think you might be on to something here.'

And as we will discover later, she was not the first American to have an influence on the sport. Uberroth had watered the seed, convincing Mahindra of the merit of his idea. There was no point in pursuing it further with his marketing team; he knew just the man to rope in to try and make it come to life. He called Charu Sharma, who four years ago had spoken with him of kabaddi's huge potential after witnessing it for himself; they needed to meet urgently, he told him. Given their busy schedules, dinner was arranged at a five-star hotel in New Delhi.

Sharma confesses that he was left gobsmacked when he heard what Mahindra had in mind for kabaddi; a league made up of eight teams; effectively, a mirror version of the IPL, only less high-profile and cheaper. There was no talk of the associated trimmings of Bollywood glamour, national coverage and slick television production; that would all come later, once Star Sports took over. Sharma would have to do all the legwork and bring it to fruition. Mahindra would provide the connections and the financial muscle and it was something that he was only prepared to bankroll (up

to a point) in his personal capacity and not as the chairman and CEO of Mahindra and Mahindra.

‘I was really taken aback,’ says Sharma. ‘I knew kabaddi had potential but I had never toyed with the idea of a league on this basis, however modest. I really didn’t know what to say at first. But I told Anand, if this was the only way to get him involved, let’s then move this forward and let’s do it in the way that you want. It then dawned on me that I had a hell of a lot of work to do.’

There were two things in Sharma’s favour that made him the ideal candidate for the project. First, experience, which, as the old adage goes, money just can’t buy. Before the start of the inaugural IPL he was appointed Chief Executive of the Royal Challengers, Bangalore, the team owned by liquor baron Vijay Mallya. It was to end badly; he was sacked with only five games played, as the second most expensive side in the tournament struggled to make any impact, eventually finishing the season second from bottom. Unperturbed by having got his fingers burnt, a year later he started the Karnataka Premier League (KPL), an intra-state T20 tournament modelled on the IPL, which proved to be successful. He planned and executed the whole thing, roping in local business groups, the state’s cricket association, broadcast partners as well as playing a key role in how it was to be governed.

‘I still get a little bit worked up about the whole Royal Challengers thing,’ he admits. ‘It was the hardest I had ever worked in my life so let’s just say that I felt I was unfairly treated and not backed properly. But it taught me a lot of valuable lessons and the KPL also gave me wonderful experience of what it takes to start and run a league and what and what not to do.’

But experience aside, there was one other valuable quality that he possessed, a passion for kabaddi, which started with a phone call six months before the 2006 Doha Asian Games.

‘Tell me you’re our man,’ hollered a haughty English voice outright dispensing with initial formalities as Sharma answered the phone in his Bangalore office. They had, it informed him, been appointed to broadcast to the world one of the competitions that was taking place in six months’ time at the Games.

‘Kedad, kebab, kiband,’ stuttered the voice.

‘You mean kabaddi,’ interrupted Sharma.

‘Oh that’s how you say it,’ the voice replied, going on to introduce itself as Simon Reed from Buzz Entertainment in the United Kingdom. ‘Yes kabaddi. And I’ve been asking around and all roads seem to lead to you. Everybody tells me that you’re our man, so tell me, are you our man?’

Reed required a commentator for the sport that he could not pronounce and that his company was contracted to relay via the world feed that



would go out to broadcasters in more than 50 countries. It wasn't surprising that he had ended up at Sharma's door; this was after all, one of India's best-known sports voices, providing the nation with incisive and colourful narrations of not just cricket but football, basketball, motor racing, badminton, tennis and gymnastics as well. But not kabaddi. In fact, he had never in his career done kabaddi commentary; of course he knew about it and understood the basics, even played it fleetingly as a youngster, like so many of his compatriots but he could not claim to be an expert and certainly did not possess the knowledge to articulate its intricacies and techniques to the millions of viewers who were likely to tune in during the Doha Games. Not that he let on to Reed. A deal was struck. Sharma proclaimed that he was indeed the man to fill the vacant post. Now all he needed to do was to know what he was going to be paid to talk about.

Ever the professional, Sharma set about immersing himself in the world of kabaddi. He attended tournaments in nondescript dusty towns and villages, which were watched by large, boisterous crowds; he witnessed first-hand the athleticism and strength required to play and befriended former and current players in an attempt to understand its finer arts and significance to their lives; he visited academies, spoke with coaches and formed relationships with officials from the AKFI. And like a veil being lifted before his eyes, he was amazed to discover that this was a sport that existed in a parallel universe to the one he and much of India lived in; as they ogled over cricket and flirted with golf and tennis brought by their former imperial masters, here was a truly indigenous and popular game being played out in the heart of India. And nobody paid it any attention, especially the mainstream media and city slickers.

The Doha Games too proved to be an eye-opener. All of India's games were sellouts, attracting huge crowds that generated a feverish atmosphere inside the Aspire Hall where they took place. Sharma was captivated by the pulsating pace of the action, which he followed not just with his own eyes but through television monitors, thinking to himself how suitable a game it was for the small screen. Tickets for the kabaddi final between India and Pakistan were exchanging hands for almost US \$1000 on the black market and spectators had even crammed into the aisles or squeezed themselves in between seats in an effort to watch the arch rivals in action. India returned home with the gold having won the final 35-23 while Sharma came home a convert, suffused with an awe for kabaddi, asking himself one simple question: 'Why doesn't India respect its own game?' He even shared his enthusiasm with Mahindra during a family holiday, which he would recall when he was looking for someone to help him execute his idea for a league.

Four years on, Simon Reed was back on the telephone. This time the Englishman had no problem pronouncing 'kabaddi' and Sharma did not



have as much exhaustive research to do as he agreed once again, to do kabaddi commentary during the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou, China for Buzz Entertainment. India brought home the gold again (as they had done at all Asian Games since the sport made its debut in 1990) beating Iran 37-20 and this was also the first time that women's kabaddi was played at the event with India winning the gold with a 28-14 victory over Japan. In 2018, the men's team lost to Iran in the semi-finals, the first time they failed to secure top honours in the competition.

In Guangzhou Sharma once again found himself enthralled by the action he was commentating on, the sellout crowds (many of them Chinese pulled by the sport's novelty value) and the power and athleticism of the players. He returned to India further convinced that not far from now kabaddi would have its day in the country that gave birth to it.

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After that dinner with Mahindra in New Delhi, Sharma returned to his Bangalore office and drew up a methodical plan. First on the list was establishing a legal entity which would drive their kabaddi vision forward. He and Mahindra purchased an existing company with 50-50 equity and renamed it Mashal (torch) Sports to reflect the pioneering path it was attempting to travel for a sport that had languished so long in the dark.

He then set about drawing up a budget, which proved to be particularly painstaking. First and foremost, he was not a number cruncher and while he had some experience of this, he did not have the resources to rely on as he had in his role with the Bangalore Royal Challengers and KPL. Nothing like this had ever been done before either. Kabaddi was completely virgin territory. How do you, for example, establish what franchise fees should be or how much it would cost to run a team? What about the cost of broadcasting rights? Luckily, there was one man he could rely on. Deoraj Chaturvedi, widely known as DC, Assistant Secretary of AKIF who helped crunch the numbers and a whole lot more.

The two first met in Guangzhou in 2010 but did not get off to the best of starts as they discussed their respective diets over a buffet lunch. Sharma proclaimed the merits of a being a life-long vegetarian to which DC replied: 'I'm a committed carnivore who has eaten everything except for the human flesh.' It was met with awkward silence then laughter, kick-starting a friendship that proved to be pivotal.

'I wasn't sure of what to make of him,' says DC flashing a genial smile from under a trademark trilby hat, which he is never seen without. 'Obviously I knew him as a commentator but I had no idea he had a passion and vision for kabaddi and this really cemented our friendship. Despite

our preferences for what we ate, when it came to kabaddi we were sharing the same dish.’

When Sharma arrived at his Jaipur home to brief him on what he and Mahindra had in mind for the sport and more importantly, seek the AKFI’s support, he was already preaching to the converted. Soon after DC joined the organisation in 2006 (after quitting his job in the pharmaceutical industry) he was asked to give evidence to a Lok Sabha committee hearing of different sports federations and the problems they faced, particularly with funding and attracting new players. All of them complained that they could not compete against the popularity of cricket. Responding to their concerns, one of the MPs admonished them saying that instead of whinging they had to change and be open to new ideas. DC returned to Rajasthan convinced that if kabaddi truly wanted to become more popular then it too needed to transform, something he urgently communicated to the AKFI’s senior management. The problem was that they were continually stalked by ‘Greeks bearing gifts’; tantalised by business proposals promising a new dawn for their sport that never amounted to anything.

DC reminisced: ‘When Sharma came to see me, I told him, “I’m not interested. I’ve heard it all before.” This was not the first time that I was hearing a proposal for kabaddi and it also wasn’t the first time that the Mahindra name was being mentioned. Obviously those ideas never progressed. But when he told me that he was his brother-in-law and that he could vouch for his involvement, that’s when I started thinking that there might be something to this and we decided to work with them.’

Securing the rights from the AKFI was key to the project’s success. Sharma was savvy enough to know that a ‘Packer’ was not going to work in India and it was a route he was determined not to take. Indian cricket fans are still livid about the maverick Australian’s arrogant attempt in 1976 to effectively take over international cricket by going against the established national boards and starting a private tournament signing up the best players. It led to major fissures within international cricket and is still viewed as one of the most controversial episodes in its history. Sharma was determined to have the AKFI on board from the outset but what could prove to be problematic was that he was asking them to break the mould of how sports governing bodies sell their rights.

Consultants might be appointed to help manage the process (or even sell on your behalf) but the accepted business model world over is that governing bodies themselves negotiate with sponsors, broadcasters or anybody else financially interested in getting involved. Contracts are signed for a specific period of time with individual parties but it is the governing body that continues to own the rights. The English Premier League, for example, has a three-year television deal with Britain’s Sky Sports to show matches domestically and separate ones with a number of commercial

partners. Sharma was asking for all the AKFI rights for a 10-year period (now extended to 20) and in return Mashal Sports would be the sole body that does it all on their behalf; from selling franchises for the new league, sponsorship, digital and television rights.

Once again, DC proved to be instrumental, acting as a conduit between Sharma and Janardan Gehlot, who at the time was the AKFI president. An imposing rotund man who shoots glances as if he were smelling out a predator, he had been in power for more than two decades, helping to get kabaddi into the South Asian Games, when it made its debut in 1985 and then the Asian Games. His style of management has been controversial; his wife assumed his post as AKFI president in 2013, as he became its “Life President” and remains president of both the International Kabaddi Federation and the Asian Kabaddi Federation. He is the go-to man of Indian kabaddi, feared and respected in equal measure for his no-nonsense approach and curt delivery. When he says ‘jump’ those around him usually ask: ‘How high?’ Despite this power and influence, in August 2018 the Delhi High Court quashed his appointment as ‘Life President’ of the AKFI and that of his wife as President, ordering fresh elections to be held, following a petition by a group of disgruntled former kabaddi players on the way the duo had run the organisation.

‘We decided to do business with Mashal because we believed it would be good for our sport. It was a very bold and forward thinking move. Of course, it was a risk but having the Mahindra name backing it, helped because it carries a lot of respect and trust in this country,’ Gehlot tells me. ‘Our dream was to see kabaddi as a popular sport across India amongst all the classes. Kabaddi had been through some very difficult times. It was the children of India, in the villages and slums, who kept this sport going and we wanted to give them and our sport some recognition.’

Draft agreements were circulated between the two sides and their lawyers for several months. Sharma had enlisted his old friend Rajiv Luthra, a Delhi lawyer to act on their behalf. In early 2011 what was called a Sanction Agreement, made up of 60 pages, was signed by Gehlot on behalf of the AKFI and Mashal.

Now all that was needed was somebody to show the rest of India the sport it hadn’t shown much interest in watching.

There is probably one thing that would attract anybody looking to buy a team in a startup league; television. It gives you exposure and kudos and with that come financial benefits in the shape of sponsors, branding and other commercial opportunities. Sharma knew that if the kabaddi exper-

iment was to be a success it needed television; and by that he didn't necessarily mean the kind of coverage the country has been used to on Door-darshan. But he certainly didn't have in mind the elaborately wrapped packaging and slick, top quality presentation with pristine pictures to boot that Star Sports would eventually come up with. But if they wanted to find eight buyers for their franchises then they needed to prove to prospective owners that they would be getting bang for their buck.

But television executives are a hard-nosed lot, driven mainly by two things – ratings and advertising, even in this digitised age that has revolutionised viewing habits. And kabaddi had a track record of achieving neither. Getting to see the head honchos who ran the nation's television industry was not a problem; Sharma was, after all, a name in the world of Indian sports broadcasting and they always made time for him in their busy schedules; even gave him a cup of tea.

'What, kabaddi!' they would universally exclaim. 'Are you being serious?' But rather than send him home dejected and crestfallen (he was held in too much regard for that) he was usually referred to the marketing officials and money men lower down the corporate ladder. They would stoically listen as he shared his vision for a new era for the sport and the role they could play in shaping it but it always came down to the twin pillars that underpin their work: ratings and advertising. He was always told before the proceedings ended: 'There's just no money in kabaddi.'

It was a phrase he would keep hearing as he flew around the country trying to convince a broadcaster that he wasn't losing his marbles but had hit upon an innovative idea. If they did show interest it usually meant they asking for payment for broadcasting the league instead of buying the rights to televise it, which anybody with half a business brain would tell you was not exactly financially viable.

Sharma calls this his 'dark period', when all he met with was what he felt was ridicule and rejection (no matter how politely it was put). However hard he tried, he just wasn't able to make any headway. The rights had been secured, a company had been established and a budget was in place. Television just did not want to know. And without television there was no going forward.

And who could blame them? Least of all Sharma. 'They just couldn't get their heads around it and I totally understood why; it was as "out of the box" an idea as you could get. It must have sounded quite ridiculous. I know enough about sports broadcasting to understand that it must have sounded quite preposterous; I was asking these channels to take a huge risk and a major leap of faith.'

By now, Mashal Sports had hired 2.5 employees (the 0.5 being a part-time administrative assistant); all of them young, fresh graduates who were no

doubt cheaper to employ than the more experienced ones. The company had still not made any money, Sharma had not received any salary (despite working on the project for nearly 18 months) and keeping costs as low as possible was imperative. Fortunately for him, they were equipped with bundles of blind enthusiasm that kept his dream alive in its darkest moments.

‘I would wake up every day with shivers and think to myself, “What the hell am I doing? What’s the point of all this work? I’m not achieving anything.” But I would go into the office and my young staff would say to me: “Don’t worry, Mr Sharma. It’s all going to be fine. Everything’s going to work out, just wait and see.” The ignorance of youth. What a gift!’

He knew nothing was going for him. ‘It felt as if the entire Himalayan range was on my shoulders.’

But the mountainous weight was about to lift. The serendipity and luck that Mahindra had sworn by throughout his life was about to come into play once again.