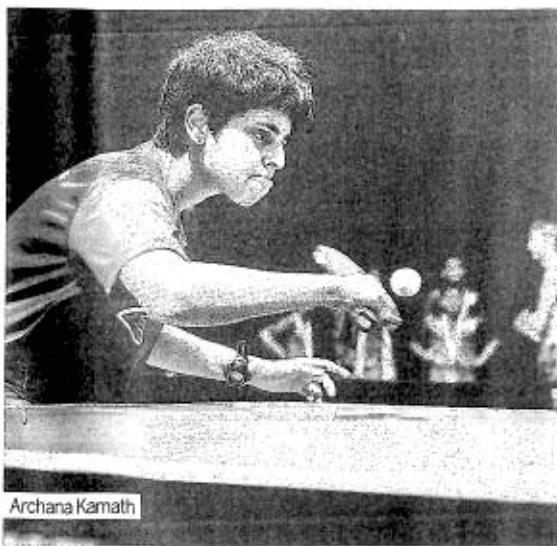


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'I PLAYED AT YOUTH OLYMPIC GAMES WITH ZERO EXPECTATIONS'



Archana Kamath

Krishnendu Banerjee

After a 36-hour long journey, travelling almost 14,000 kilometres, when Bengaluru paddler Archana Kamath took to the table at the YOG Series Oceania event at Rarotonga, the Cook Islands in June last year, she was tired. But she kept reminding herself that this was her last chance to secure a place in the Buenos Aires 2018 Youth Olympic Games. That mental strength won over all the tiredness and a final battle against Malaysian Chang Alice Li Sian 4-1 to seal her place in the quadrennial event.

She surprised everyone in the girls' singles to finish

fourth in the premier junior event – a journey that proved her mettle in the coming days.

"I went there with zero expectations but when I continued winning, I was expecting a medal. But that loss in the bronze medal match against Andrea (Dragoman of Romania) was upsetting. But the run gave me confidence," Kamath said, adding, "Thanks to Massimo Costantini sir (India's former TT coach), who helped me qualify for YOG."

The girl, who started her journey in table tennis just to accompany her brother, has now grown into a matured player full of confidence which was on show at the senior nationals last week.

At the age of 18, Archana conquered some of India's best female paddlers to win her first senior national title and shot to first place in the TTFI (Table Tennis Federation of India)

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—Archana Kamath, TT player

ranking.

En route, Kamath recorded some memorable victories. She overturned a 0-3 deficit to beat Telangana's Niveditha Balusuri 4-3 in the Round-of-32 while she also conquered arguably India's best women's singles player Manika Batra 4-1 in the semifinals. In the final, she was up against West Bengal's Kritwika Sinha Roy, an opponent she had never beaten before. But Kamath wasn't the same girl anymore as she cruised to a 4-2 victory in the final and became the second youngest woman to clinch the title.

"I tried the last three times but couldn't win it. This time though, I was more confident. So, I wasn't thinking of the opponents. I was focusing on my game," she said.

The journey, however, has just begun for the youngster. With the senior national title, although Kamath has announced her arrival at the senior stage, she feels she still needs to improve her game to challenge the world's best players.

"Qualifying for Tokyo 2020 Olympics is my target. But my aim is to get more exposure by playing against the best players in the world in order to improve my overall game. I also want to improve my world ranking so that I can play bigger tournaments," said the Jain University Economics (honours) student, who is taking part in the ongoing Hungarian Open in Budapest.