

Empowering lives through sports - Archana's story of breaking barriers and inspiring change



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The profound impact of sport on an individual's life extends far beyond mere physical fitness. It serves as a transformative force, offering a myriad of pathways for personal growth and development. Whether it is instilling discipline, fostering teamwork, building resilience, or promoting inclusivity, sport has the extraordinary ability to create a lasting impact. It is through this impact that sport enables individuals to transcend the limitations imposed by circumstances and carve out a path to success and fulfilment in life.

Archana Pradhan, a former participant of the [Khel Vikas Program](#), an initiative started in 2013 by [Pro Sport Development \(PSD\) in collaboration with Gram Vikas](#), experienced this life changing impact due to her participation and excellence in sports. Hailing from the tribal hamlet of Kuruguda in Ganjam district in Odisha, Archana was introduced to this initiative of PSD when she was a class 9 student at Gram Vikas' Kankia High School.



Archana Pradhan

Embarking on a sporting journey

Archana's introduction to sport occurred during her time at Kankia High school, where she was acquainted with weightlifting. While her fondness for weightlifting grew during this period, it was her involvement in the Khel Vikas Program that truly enabled her to nurture and expand her interest in this sport. As her involvement in weightlifting got more frequent, she began experiencing changes in her personality, focus, as well as her fitness levels, as she shares:

“Sport definitely has had a significant impact on my life. It has kept my mind and body fresh and helped me stay physically fit. I don't have enough words for how sport has helped me.”

Archana's confidence was one of the biggest areas of improvement, which experienced significant particularly when she started participating in multiple national sports competitions. She first gained the opportunity to participate in a national level competition at the age of 15, which proved to be life altering, as it provided her with extensive exposure, allowing her to meet people from diverse backgrounds. Her once fragile confidence began to flourish, enabling her to discover her passion for weightlifting and inspiring her to work towards it.

Archana's involvement in weightlifting also had a great impact on her academic performance in school, as she was consistently topping all her classes in school. This supported her negotiations with her family to complete junior college (grades 11 and 12), which was rare in her village as other girls her age would usually drop out of school after class 10. As a result of her persuasive negotiations and excellence in weightlifting, Archana got an admission in a nearby college, and continued to represent her college in weightlifting competitions at state and national levels.

Archana was provided with a platform by PSD to further support her dreams as well as aid her development. Suheil F. Tandon, the Director-Founder of PSD, has been a witness to Archana's journey since 2013. Reflecting on the factors contributing to her personal development and growth, he noted:

“Archana's participation in weightlifting saw her compete in various national-level competitions; however, it was the development of crucial life skills, access to exposure opportunities and excellence in academics that highlighted her success.”

The invaluable experiences and guidance offered by PSD served as a compass for Archana, sharpening her focus on her goals and aspirations. This newfound clarity enabled Archana to take the decision to pursue a bachelor's degree in Physical Education in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. However, there was a significant obstacle to overcome. Her family's financial situation was not conducive to supporting her pursuit of a bachelor's degree. It was at this pivotal moment that Archana's weightlifting connections and network proved invaluable, as a local supporter from Ganjam extended a helping hand, providing the crucial financial support required for her course. With this financial backing, Archana's dreams began to take shape, as she prepared herself to embark on a new chapter in her life.



Archana during one of the events at Khel Vikas back in 2013

This transition from her hometown in Ganjam district to Bhubaneswar marked a significant milestone in Archana's life. Although her family had their apprehensions about her being so far away, her unwavering determination to chase her dreams reassured them of her wellbeing and encouraged them to support her in making this bold move.

Navigating challenges

Archana's relocation to Bhubaneswar was a transformative chapter in her life, a stark departure from her familiar hometown surroundings. This transition, however, proved to be far from a smooth ride, as she grappled with the financial demands of city living, further exacerbating her family's already strained finances. In addition to the financial burdens, Archana and her family had to endure the weight of unwelcome comments and judgments regarding her pursuit of sports and her chosen career path.

“I have been subjected to various comments with regards to my participation in sports like ‘why are you wearing [track] pants’ or ‘you should help out at home!’ In our society, girls get married at a young age and are not given a chance to pursue education or sports or anything else.”



Archana (extreme left) with members of the PSD team in Bhubaneswar

As Archana was navigating these challenges, PSD entered Archana's life again in 2021, allowing her to ease her struggles. PSD recognized the potential in her and provided her with a scholarship opportunity, in collaboration with [KickOff Solutions](#). This partnership between KickOff Solutions and PSD intended to support and guide girls, like Archana, to help them stay connected with sport, excel in education, and gain economic empowerment.

The scholarship turned out to be significant for Archana, not only easing her financial worries but also broadening her future prospects. With this financial support, she could wholeheartedly commit to her dream of becoming a national-level weightlifting coach. It enabled her to access essential study materials and pursue the necessary entrance exams for a master's degree, which she saw as the initial strides on the path to realizing her aspirations.

In Archana's journey of transformation, the scholarship served as a powerful response to those who doubted her career choice and held outdated beliefs that sport is not suitable for women and girls. With this scholarship, Archana felt a surge of empowerment, sensing a newfound agency that allowed her to assert her independence and make decisions for herself:

“After receiving the scholarship, I became somewhat financially independent and did not rely on my father for my daily expenses. So, this helped to ease the burden, and somewhere it made me feel more certain about my choice to pursue physical education.”

Having gained this agency, Archana was eager to put her learnings to practice, and so she joined PSD as a community sports trainer.

Translating learning into practice

After completing her bachelor's degree in 2021, Archana started working with PSD as part of the [Community Sports Program](#). She led sessions for the program, imparting the knowledge that she once learnt from PSD herself, to other children:

“I used to take training sessions for children in the Community Sports Program led by PSD. Initially, I was a bit nervous to conduct and lead sessions, but as I got regular with conducting sessions, I got more confidence. This confidence helped me open up more and interact better with participants.”

In addition to understanding the use of sport to build soft skills like teamwork, communication, and leadership, Archana learnt how to promote gender sensitivity through the use of sport. These insights contributed to reinforcing her positive perception of sport, enabling her to recognize its transformative potential and enhancing her ability to utilize sport for good. All these experiences improved and strengthened her coaching and facilitation



Archana leading a session as a Community Sports Trainer at PSD

skills, helping her to land the job of a physical education teacher at Sri G.J. High School, in Ganjam District in Odisha.

Archana's experience with PSD also enabled her to acquire a strong understanding of safeguarding best practices, essential for working with children and youth. In her role as a community sports trainer at PSD, she directly engaged with children, understanding how to safely and appropriately interact with them. Lessons on safeguarding and child protection laid a solid foundation for her to conduct sessions with children confidently. She now utilizes this knowledge in her new position, as she elaborated:

"I learned some techniques and ways of how to behave and treat children and how to coach them from my time at PSD. That helped me in my journey to become a PE teacher."

Having gained insights into how sport can be used to advocate for gender equality, through her engagement with PSD, Archana now emphasizes the significance of gender equality in her new role as a PE teacher, ensuring that her students play in mixed-gender groups, and girls are given an equal opportunity to participate in all sports. Archana challenges the common notion that women and girls are weak, a belief that often leads to differential treatment of women in sports and physical activity. She firmly believes that women should be encouraged and given the opportunity to challenge these societal stereotypes, as only through such opportunities can this perception change.

Archana's personal experiences with these gender biases drive her commitment to eliminate gender discrimination in her school, as she believes that sensitizing children to gender issues at a young age is an important step in the right direction. Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of increasing women and girls' involvement in sports to break down gender barriers, a cause she actively champions as a PE teacher.

In her role as a PE teacher, Archana goes beyond sports and academics to educate her students on essential skills and aspects necessary for their overall wellbeing. For instance, she believes it's crucial to impart knowledge about nutrition and healthy eating habits to help the children maintain their health and fitness, and she actively talks about these in her sessions.

Continuing the pursuit of dreams

As evident from Archana's journey, sport has been a powerful force in her life. From securing a scholarship to landing a role as a PE teacher, sport has profoundly shaped her path, as Suheil F. Tandon shares:

“Sport has provided Archana with an identity, key skills, and education to pursue a meaningful livelihood and access to social networks that she did not have previously. Given her leadership ability, I am convinced that she will go to much greater heights in the sports field, in Odisha and in India.”



Even after her time with PSD, Archana’s commitment to sports and community development remains unwavering. Archana extends her influence beyond the school, visiting students in their homes, especially those who reside far from the school and lack access to a hostel. In her own way, she is promoting the use of sports and spreading awareness about its paramount importance,

leaving an indelible mark on the lives of those she touches. As a result of Archana’s efforts, two students in her village have taken inspiration from her, and decided to pursue a bachelor’s in physical education.

Inspired by her own experiences, Archana now aspires to become a national-level weightlifting coach, with a vision to train and nurture future national-level players. Her story is a shining example of the transformative power of sports and the pursuit of dreams. As she continues to forge ahead, Archana is poised to make a lasting impact on both her students and the broader sports arena, leaving a legacy of positive change.