

Wonder(ing) Woman - Sanjita Chanu's Battles For Justice

The weightlifter's life and career have been put on hold for what may very well be an administrative error. How will this landmark case pan out?



By Makepeace Sitlhou
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It took us a while to locate Sanjita Chanu's residence.

My photographer and I, unfamiliar with the inner lanes of the leikais (colonies) in Imphal, were misled to another athlete's home, when asking for directions to "Sanjita, the weightlifter's" place.

Clearly, there are quite a few weightlifters in this town.

Bijen, her brother, with whom I had been corresponding about her case, leads us inside her modest home. It looks like the abandoned site of a protest with banners congratulating the lifter and placards demanding justice for her in equal numbers.

Rows of bricks and gravel were dumped right outside the entry to her tin roofed and walled house; a two storeyed building coming up right across.

"That's our house under construction. It has slowed down since the scandal broke out", he tells me. Her family says that they are yet to receive the 15 lakhs announced by the Manipur CM after she struck gold at the Commonwealth Games in Gold coast earlier this April.

Described as 'the original Chanu', who is, 'as under rated as she is under celebrated', her successful comeback (in a new weight category) brought her back into the Indian sports hype after a considerable gap.

But the hype was short lived as her worst fear turned to reality only a month later.

Born 'Khumukcham Sanjita Chanu' to Khumukcham Lukhoi Meitei and Khumukcham Takon Leima in Kakching Khunou Umathel Awang Leikai of Kakching district, Sanjita showed signs of talent and excellence in sports at an early age. It is normal in Manipur for parents to enrol daughters more seriously into sports and athletics if they show serious potential or talent.

Sanjita's father, who used to work in the sericulture department of the state government, brought her to Ranjan for training in 2006 when she was only 12. A former weightlifter, Ranjan started coaching in the early '70s when barbells were a luxury they couldn't afford. As someone who struggled to make a niche sport popular in the state, he appreciates the sincerity with which women weightlifters train.

"Boys are only sincere for two years after which they get a job and move on. Women sustain their training for a much longer time," he says. No doubt, you find a greater ratio of female lifters of all shapes and sizes in the training centre. When they aren't practicing their snatches, and clean & jerks, the sisterhood is seen helping each other stretch and press worn-out muscles. Other times, their faces are buried in school work.





Ranjan Singh, who has been the head coach for weightlifters at the SAI for the last three decades, attends to one of the junior athletes during training / Geroge Neihisial

But the once sincere and hardworking athlete, Sanjita has now been out of practice for more than five months after she tested positive for a banned substance.

On May 15, 2018, the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) suspended her citing a sample test result that showed traces of Testosterone (S1.1 Anabolic Agent) in her urine. With the Indian Weightlifting Federation (IWLF) copied on the email, IWF presumed she was notified of the test result by the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), which conducted the out-of-competition test in November 2017. However, the notification never reached Sanjita due to a typographical error in her email address. The IWLF, however, called Sanjita and informed her of the suspension.

Sanjita then, left the national camp on May 28, 2018, and has since been keeping to herself at home in Canchipur, East Imphal where she stays with her parents, brother, and elder sister's family. She looks visibly leaner and her frame is more petite compared to the photos I had seen of her.



Out of training for more than 3 months, Sanjita is filled with emotions as she assumes position for a snatch, if only for the photographer / George Neihzial

When I ask if we could shoot her while training or during her workout regimen, she regretfully informs us that it has all stopped for now. I suggest we drive early next morning to a place of her liking that brings her joy or solace and she reluctantly agrees to meet me at 6:00 am. "I haven't woken up this early in a while so I'm just out of habit now," she says. Unlike before the ban, she isn't entertaining as many friends at home anymore and rarely steps out to socialize.

Sanjita's homecoming after being dropped from national camp stood in stark contrast to the jubilation with which she was received a month earlier after winning gold at the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games (CWG). "She tries to hide it from us, but we know she's hurting inside," says her father. Her mother says that watching or reading about any sports reduces Sanjita to tears. "Every day, she's on the phone with her friend in Patiala camp asking about her progress. She regrets missing all these competitions for which she has been training for years," her Ima (mother) adds.

Amongst the five children, her brother Bijen is the only son and sibling in the family who studied outside the state. After graduating from the Indian Institute of Technology in Rourkie, he returned to prepare for the Union Public Service Commission examination as most youth in Manipur do. However, life took a different turn the day his sister was telephonically informed of her suspension by the IWLF.

Afraid that Sanjita might be taken for a ride by the federation, he jumped in to handle all her communication, especially since she isn't as fluent in English, and started reading up on the international doping policy and federation rules. "From May 18 to June 1, the response of the Indian Federation was quite unsatisfactory. We didn't get the support I expected," he told Nation of Sport, saying he had no other choice but to get involved.

Panic, confusion and delays

In an email dated January 9, 2018, USADA wrote to Sanjita with the result of her 'A' sample that tested positive for an anabolic androgenic steroid listed as a prohibited substance on the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) list. Eva Nyirfa, the legal counsel for IWF, was also marked on that email along with Julien Sieveking of WADA. In the same month, as per their anti-doping policy, they announced the suspension of four athletes who tested positive during last year's IWF World Championships anti-doping tests. Sanjita's name, however, was not announced.

After the IWF, Sanjita went on to win bronze in the Inter Railways Weightlifting Championship (she is employed as a travelling ticket examiner (TTE) by the Indian Railways in Assam) in Kapurthala, Punjab and Silver in the 33rd Women Senior National Weightlifting Championship in Mangaluru, Karnataka. Later in April, she snatched her second CWG gold and India's first-ever in the 53 kg category in the Gold Coast.

As per her suspension letter from the IWF, Sanjita's sample was collected out-of-competition and sent to a laboratory in Salt Lake City, Utah whilst the aforementioned four were collected in-competition and analysed in Montreal and Los Angeles. However, this still doesn't explain how or why an athlete who tested positive was allowed to participate in an international event.

One explanation could be that IWF may have used the time to carry out an internal investigation as per article 5.1.2.2 in the anti-doping policy, which states: "...to gather intelligence or evidence (including, in particular, non-analytical evidence) in order to determine whether an anti-doping rule violation has occurred under any of Articles 2.2 to 2.10." The IWF is yet to respond to an email from Nation of Sport officially confirming the reason for the delay in notifying the athlete. WADA said they were not in a position to comment on a pending case.

In an email written to Sanjita on May 30, Nyirfa claimed that the IWLF was notified of the "potential anti-doping rule violation by the USADA on January 19." In her reply, dated May 31, Sanjita stated that IWLF could not find such an email from USADA in their server. Sahdev Yadav, the General Secretary of IWFL, told Nation of Sport that they never received any notification before May 2018 and demanded to know how, then, did they let Sanjita participate at Gold Coast. However, as per a forward sent by IWF on June 4, 2018, an email was written to IWLF on January 19, 2018 requesting them to notify the athlete.

Another glaring anomaly in the doping charges was the discrepancy between the sample numbers committed by the IWF in their notification letter where two different sample numbers - 1599000 and 1599176 - are mentioned. However, in an email sent to Sanjita on June 5, the IWF clarified that the sample numbers listed in the doping control form and the analysis report were consistent.

While being a minor administrative mistake, this discrepancy became a rallying point for Sanjita's campaign and reason for discontentment with the IWLF for not immediately raising it with the international body. IWLF finally wrote to the IWF on June 13 and on June 21 with the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) following up on the same, to which the IWF finally responded. This time, they admitted the 'administrative mistake', without any consequence on the analytical findings. Sanjita, however, demanded a DNA test to be done against the tested samples and the name of the athlete that the second sample number, 1599176, belonged to.

Bijen says while the Indian federation told the media they supported Sanjita, they were rude and impatient with the family every time they made an inquiry. "We just expected a few words of encouragement and moral support from her coach and Yadav, but they stopped taking our calls and influenced the Indian federation against us," he said.

The email exchanges, as accessed and analysed by Nation of Sport, tell a slightly different story. Apart from suggestions to ask for the complete documentation package of the 'A' sample, there are at least two emails where Yadav has assured IWLF's administrative support and accepted her innocence.

Speaking to Nation of Sport at the IWLF office in New Delhi, Yadav says that much as he believes in her innocence, the burden of proving it rests solely on her, not the federation. "I have known her for the last eight years and all her achievements are purely a result of her hard work," he said. Another official, who did not wish to be named, said that the first email to IWF was sent in her presence, contrary to allegations made by Bijen that her email was hacked and her signature forged.

Apart from the family testimony, there's no evidence to show that the federation was distancing itself from Sanjita since everyone in the national fraternity I spoke to believed she was innocent. "You don't think we have lost an athlete? Athletes like her don't just come in two years. To become a lifter like her, you need 15 years," said Yadav, visibly upset by allegations that they started treating her like a pariah.

Squarely blaming her brother for 'ruining her career', Yadav said that the sample number discrepancy could have been better used as an argument before the hearing panel. "I asked him to keep mum about the administrative error so that he could reserve all these points for the hearing," says Yadav, explaining his actions that he says have been misconstrued by the brother. "I hope you get a chance to meet and talk to her alone," he repeatedly told me.

However, her brother justifies going public for the sake of her morale and mental health. "In the absence of any communication or moral support from IWLF, she would have already given up and, who knows, taken a drastic step. The mounting public support in her favour restored some confidence in her to carry on," said Bijen. He, however, expressed regret over the relationship with IWLF turning sour and hopes it will be cleared very soon.

The strong arm of Manipur's civil society

When her trust and relationship with the Indian Federation started going south, a joint action committee comprising an alphabet soup of organizations teamed up to support her alleged 'victimization' by IWF and USADA. The two sample numbers quoted in the notification letter had convinced everyone that she was being framed and her sample must have gotten mixed up with another athlete's.

But in a state like Manipur, a media circus and civil society agitation against doping charges slapped on one of their athletes has been a recurring story.

Laishram Monika Devi, a 69 kg lifter who was once India's most promising Olympic hopeful, says that their peers and officials in the national camp see athletes from the North East region as 'weak' and 'gullible'. Manipur erupted in protests and bandh over the 'heavy handedness of mainland India to suppress the people of Manipur' after Monika was dropped from the 2008 Beijing Olympic squad hours before boarding her flight.

Her sample was found positive for a banned anabolic steroid on a dubious test conducted by SAI. She, however, pleaded her innocence and believes she was a victim of dirty politics played by SAI officials. Not only did the Manipur government launch a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry, the United Committee of Manipur (a conglomerate civil society body) even filed a court case against SAI. However, Monika withdrew the case before it reached any conclusive judgment.

"People here wanted to see me perform in the Commonwealth Games in 2010. I couldn't have let them down after all the support and love I received from them. My goal was to bring a medal for the state," she told Nation of Sport at her residence in Imphal. Although her dreams of participating in the Olympics remain unfulfilled, she feels content in the bronze she won at the 2010 CWG – a feat that seemed impossible after a scandal that left her emotionally wrecked and a ban that kept her out of training for more than a year.

She adds, “Manipur is a small state. We don’t have as many representatives in the Centre and our politicians take time to take matters to the top. So, people here feel the fastest way to get attention and build pressure is by publicly raising the issue.” Now, those days of glory and fall are behind her as she enjoys domestic bliss with a son and husband, who is a policeman, and the security of a job. While she continues lifting for championships in the Indian Police League, she looks forward to soon coaching young athletes.

Kunjarani Devi, who tested positive before the Sydney Olympics in 2000 because of which she faced a temporary ban of six months, says that testing positive for dope can mean one’s life is over in a single stroke. “Most people back home don’t hold it against you. When I tested positive, people were with me and there was no such stigma I faced. Also, public memory is short,” said the bespectacled athlete who is now a Commandant in the Central Reserve Police Forces in Delhi. The grand old woman of weightlifting has now hung up her boots after coaching for the national camp in Patiala from 2011 to 2017.

Over the phone, she feels compelled to ‘clarify’ what happened 18 years ago. “Actually, I tested positive for a stimulant called Strychnine, which is not even a performance-enhancing drug. It’s mainly found in rat poison,” she said. Strychnine is on the WADA list of banned substances. It is known to help improve endurance and is typically consumed by track athletes.

“The only reason my sample came out positive was because the container it was collected in dropped on the common bathroom floor. I had requested the official to change the container but couldn’t communicate properly with the Korean official,” she continued. But what she considers as ‘hardly dope’ got Izzat Artykov, a weightlifter from Kyrgyzstan, stripped off his bronze Olympic medal in 2016 after he tested [positive for Strychnine](#).

Roman Singh, a veteran sports correspondent for a local daily called The Sangai Express shares that sports is such an emotive issue in Manipur that even the Meira Paibis (women torch-bearers) get involved. “When Monika was accused of doping, she threatened to kill herself using her own licensed weapon if her ‘B’ sample came out positive. When the test results from Tokyo did, not a single paper in the state carried it,” he said.

While the Manipur Olympic Association (MOA) came out in strong support of Monika, they weren’t seen much at the forefront of public protests to demand justice for Sanjita, presumably because of the association’s past support for weightlifter Sanamacha Chanu who failed the dope test before the 2004 Athens Olympics and the 2010 CWG.

Despite repeated follow-up, the General Secretary of MOA, Sunil Elangbam, who also presides over the Manipur Weightlifting Association, did not respond to requests for an interview. While GA Ibopishak, MOA Vice President, said he could not comment on Sanjita’s case, he too felt that the administrative mistake in the IWF letter created enough grounds for reasonable doubt.

Past grievances with IWLF

Off-stage, Sanjita looks as diminutive as she is demure around people. Even in the weightlifting arena, her face transforms from sincerity and focus to blushful smiles after the 24-year old successfully lifts up to over 100 kg with her bare hands. It’s no surprise then that in the din of high-pitched accusations, counter arguments and questions from the media, Sanjita’s voice comes out the faintest. It’s hard to gauge where she stands between the federation’s paternalistic attitude and the over-protective guidance of her younger brother.

The layer of protection surrounding her became evident when her brother and mother decided to come along for our quick sojourn away from the city for some ‘private’ time with her. With her mom trailing behind, we took a stroll around Lamsang, a village located on the outskirts of Imphal, in my attempt to get her unfiltered, and unmonitored, version of things.



Sanjita usually heads to Lamsang, on the outskirts of Imphal to clear her mind / George Neihzial

At the time of our meeting, Bijen and Sanjita had just returned from a meeting with Yadav in New Delhi, a few weeks after Nation of Sport interviewed him. The months of agitation against the IWLF and petitions and meetings with politicians and public officials culminated in no concrete change in their circumstances. While the federation had always been supportive, Sanjita says their attitude changed after the doping charges.

“They got irritated every time we called them up with a doubt. My brother once asked for a document from Aakrant Sinha (the camp physiotherapist) and the federation took it as an offense that we didn’t trust them enough,” she told me. But this wasn’t the first time she struggled with the federation.

Sanjita was less than thrilled when, in 2015, she was asked to shift to 53 kg from 48 kg. “My national coach advised that playing in a higher category would mean lesser injury. When I told Ranjan sir, he scolded me saying it was going to be more difficult for me to win medals,” she said. “I wasn’t angry, but I just felt that I was better off at 48.” Ranjan corroborated this to Nation of Sport saying he couldn’t do much about it.

However, athletes close to Sanjita told Nation of Sport that the transition wasn't smooth sailing for her. Monika said she had personally witnessed Saikhom Mirabai Chanu - Sanjita's former arch-rival in the 48 kg category - being favoured over Sanjita when in Patiala from 2012 to 2014. Echoing a similar experience as an SAI alumnus, she said, "I don't know why these national coaches give preference to state sports department players rather than their own from SAI."

N. Sumanbala Devi, a 58 kg national level lifter at SAI, similarly recalls how her friend, Sanjita, was anguished at being forced to move up a weight category. "Actually, the 48 kg is a very competitive category and all the competition is from Manipur only. But a letter from the federation had arrived," she said. "She told me that they favoured Mirabai over her despite the fact that her performance was better."

The two had always competed neck and neck in several international and national competitions. In the 2014 CWG, where both shot to fame with their stellar performances, Mirabai came second to Sanjita who won the gold. Strangely enough, their fates seem very closely entwined with neither ever managing to entirely out-perform the other.

In 2016, Sanjita failed to qualify for the Olympics due to her back injury and though Mirabai went through, she failed to deliver a performance on D-day. In an almost uncanny repeat of history, while Sanjita missed the chance to participate in the Asian Games this year, Mirabai requested to drop out two weeks prior due to a lower backache.

Her national camp coach, Vijay Sharma, told Nation of Sport that increasing her weight category was in her favour since most athletes perform better in a higher category. Yadav added, "She struggled to maintain her weight at 48 so would end up hurting herself every time she lifted."

Aakrant, who worked with Sanjita at the national camp in Patiala, told Nation of Sport that it took her close to three years to fully adapt to the new weight category. "She suffered an injury during her performance in the Commonwealth Championship in August last year, after which she gave herself a healing period of 10 days. But the inflammation got worse during the World Weightlifting Championship in the United States," he said. She lifted a total of 177 kg, her worst performance in the category. How her sample before this stunt tested positive still baffles everyone in the fraternity.

However, Sanjita's preparation in the new weight category can, at best, be considered patchy, if not reckless. While her coach maintains that she last participated in the 48 kg category in the 31st Women Senior National Weightlifting Championship in December 2015, in April 2016 she participated under the same category in the 27th Senior Women's Asian Weightlifting Championship in Uzbekistan.

According to Aakrant, while it is normally considered easier for an athlete to move up a weight category, Sanjita's back pain only got worse even though there was no formal diagnosis. The first time she ever competed in the new weight category was, in fact, the Commonwealth Championship where she delivered her record best of 195 kg. Aakrant concurred that by the time she reached Gold Coast, she had fully adapted to the new weight and was in her best form.

However, the suspension from IWF aside, competing in the new category would have only become more challenging as IWF announced [new bodyweight categories on July 5](#). With effect from the World Weightlifting Championship in November 2018, Mirabai Chanu will be competing in 49 kg. If Sanjita were to have participated, she would have to compete in 55 kg.

An honest mistake or performance pressure?

Most officials I spoke to state that seasoned international athletes like Sanjita Chanu and Mirabai Chanu are tested so frequently – at least twice in a month with 20 tests in a year – that they know better than to risk their career for a little boost in their performance. Sanjita tested negative in four tests conducted by NADA and one Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (ASADA) test right before the CWG.

However, the IWF is clear on its anti-doping policy that states: "Departures from any other International Standard or other anti-doping rule or policy set forth in the Code or these Anti-Doping rules which did not cause an Adverse Analytical Finding (AAF) or any other anti-doping rule violation shall not invalidate such evidence or results."

Some, like Yadav, even warn their athletes against sharing consumables with anyone or drinking out of an unsealed water bottle. Shortly after Sanjita was suspended by the IWF, Mirabai had [requested for CCTV](#) cameras to be installed in the national camp inside her room for the fear of being implicated in a doping scandal. IWLF backed her up with coach Vijay reportedly telling the media that two athletes in the past had complained about attempts to spike their food.

Mischief aside, there is increasing suspicion and literature around banned substances found in dietary supplements. In 2010, after Manipuri lifter Sanamacha Chanu tested positive for the second time, media reports raised questions about why the [IWLF was buying supplements from trusted suppliers](#) who were not located in Delhi. There was also doubt that the officials were not keeping up-to-date with the list of banned substances released by WADA every year.

P.S.M. Chandran, President of the Indian Federation of Sports Medicine, says that supplements are one of the main reasons for athletes testing positive for dope. “Adulteration of the content in energy drinks and protein supplements is so high that one can’t really trust labels. Moreover, manufacturers make a very high margin on these products that are imported and, therefore, not easy to afford,” he told Nation of Sport.

The biggest gap, according to him, is insufficient research on sports education and medicine in India, which could greatly benefit athletes rather than forcing them to rely on WADA labs that do not support research on commercial products. He said, “For example, Pepsi’s Gatorade and Powerade by Coca Cola are the two most popular energy drinks consumed by athletes in India. Why hasn’t there been any research on local produce like coconut water as an energy supplement? Similarly, such research could be carried out on local protein and carbohydrate supplements, free of banned substances.”

Interestingly, the first-ever National Sports University of India [was set up](#) in Manipur and, shortly after, a [bill was passed](#) by the lower house of the parliament in August. While several athletes and sportspersons have already enrolled in regular B.A. and B.SC courses, the university is envisioned as a space for specialized higher degree programmes and research in sports education.

Given that most athletes in India come from lesser educated families and lower income backgrounds, they rely entirely on the advice of their coaches. Despite weightlifting for the last 12 years, Sanjita admits she doesn’t fully understand the fine print written on supplement labels. “We were always warned not to take any supplements from the market without consulting the coach. I can read the ingredients, but I don’t always fully understand what it means,” she said.

In one of their decisions, NADA’s appeal panel rejected the plea by weightlifter Harkirat Kaur that she was ignorant of the supplement ‘Test Freak’ manufactured by Pharma Freak containing a prohibited substance. When the panel pointed out that the label on the bottle clearly has ‘hybrid testosterone support/testosterone support compounds’ (which falls under non-specified substances) printed on it, she said that she could not understand “typically technical medical jargon and their implications.” Even IWF’s anti-doping policy clearly puts the onus of consuming banned substances on the athlete, whether they do so knowingly or unknowingly.

Kunjarani, who was briefly appointed to the NADA appeal panel last year, said that banned substances can be found in almost every common household item including coffee, cough syrup and other medicines. In fact, many local Ayurvedic and homeopathic supplements are being tested by NADA for banned substances, she told Nation of Sport. According to their website, over the past two years, the National Dope Testing Laboratory in New Delhi has been researching the ‘Detection of synthetic glucocorticosteroids in Indian herbal drugs and supplements’ as an ongoing research project.

V.K. Malhotra, President of the All India Council of Sports, said that after the [Ginseng scandal](#) in which six athletes tested positive from a food supplement in their diet that was meant to improve recovery, officials have started to have similar concerns about Indian Ayurvedic and homeopathic products like Chyavanprash.

“Since there are lots of false advertisements of Ayurvedic medicines carried in papers and other places, we thought it’s important that these medicines should be standardized by NADA. Allopathic medicines were also listed,” said Malhotra adding that NADA cited budgetary constraints when it comes to testing every product. “That’s when I wrote to the Finance and Health Ministry to increase their allocations as this was in public interest, not only for athletes.”

Several other sports officials expressed reservations about Ayurvedic medicines. “The availability of herbal medicines, ayurvedic and homeopathic medicines as well as unnamed supplements imported from India and abroad is a huge problem in Manipur,” said Dr. Akoijam Joy, an on-call sports medicine consultant for SAI Imphal.

Fall in global dope ranking a red herring?

Until last year, India was positioned in third place in WADA’s global ranking of Anti-Doping Rule Violations (ADRVs) with 110 AAFs (adverse analytical findings) and 117 ADRV. In a year’s time, this drastically improved to 73 AAFs and 69 ADRVs bringing down India’s ranking to a marginally less embarrassing position at No. 6. Marking the improvement of anti-doping testing in India, a NADA press release claimed that the WADA report indicates a 7% increase from 2016 in the number of doping tests conducted by the agency in 2017.

Declaring India as the leading nation in taking measures towards dope control, Navin Aggarwal, Director General of NADA, told Nation of Sport that the Indian body has stepped up its efforts to curb doping practices through education and effective testing at all levels including state level competitions. “Anti-doping education and awareness programs in junior level camps as well as clips in DD Sports and pamphlets have helped to reduce the incidence from 3 to 2.2%,” he said. He, however, admitted that doping was still at 3% in junior levels.

Chandran calls the improved ranking mere eyewash. “The number of testing samples have reduced since the year before. If you don’t do as many tests, then the country’s image will be high unless caught by international bodies,” he said. A glance at WADA’s 2015 and 2016 ADRV report shows that NADA’s total samples fell from 5,162 to 2,831, nearly half the number from last year.

However, contradicting the WADA report, NADA’s press release claims that the agency collected 3,174 samples from domestic events and 401 in international events. Aggarwal explained that NADA’s efforts have now been focused towards more quality testing. In one year, they managed to resolve 34 issues arising from the many ambiguities that were found in following the WADA code.

“Risk assessment was a major issue we resolved in developing parameters on games with a higher risk of doping, public importance of the sport, physiological aspect of doping in the game etc.,” he said. “Now we conduct more out-of-competition tests than before.” As per their figures, NADA in India conducted 49% out-of-competition urine sample tests, higher than the 46% of all National Anti-Doping Organizations globally.

Manipur trails behind in monitoring doping practices

While these glowing figures may hold true in national camps like Patiala and Shimla, the reality in state training centres and championships is far removed. Athletes and sports officials that Nation of Sport spoke to say there’s little that is done by way of monitoring dietary supplements or conducting tests.

Chandran bluntly admits that a country only counts medals, not doping violations and people only remember the name of the athlete who doped, not the country they represented. “A single doping test costs INR 20,000. Frequently conducting tests will only result in more athletes getting caught so it’s really not in our interest to do more,” he said.

Aggarwal, however, claims that doping tests have now been introduced in inter-school level competitions through the ‘Khelo India’ programme. “Our regional coordinator for the North East ensures that testing happens in three to four camps every month,” he said. However, both coach Vijay and Malhotra felt that more testing at junior state level was the need of the hour. “At the state level, many athletes have to win medals in order to get a government job. That’s why even their coaches encourage them to dope. I have personally written to all the Chief Ministers to conduct more tests in the state,” said Malhotra.

Until she joined national camp in 2010, Sanjita said she wasn’t subjected to tests in Manipur unless a national competition was happening. “Mostly, people playing in the state level dope. National level athletes are scared of even popping a pill like Sinarest without consulting our coach or the camp doctor,” she said. In a place like SAI Imphal, where

athletes are not routinely tested out-of-competition, Sumanbala Devi says that she has seen some of her seniors take performance-enhancing drugs. “A few athletes who have doped have managed to participate in national games without getting caught. They have stopped playing now and have become coaches,” she said.

However, Coach Ranjan, who has also trained athletes in national camps, says that athletes today are too well-aware of the consequences of doping. “We give them a lecture on doping every week. I don’t think they knowingly indulge in doping. In fact, we are so careful about their diet, athletes are not permitted to even take broiler chicken or Ayurvedic medicine,” he said.

Dr. Akoijam says that while he routinely advises athletes and coaches to check the components of any medicine before consumption, doctors are not consulted on supplements. “It is only in India where doctors trained in sports medicine are not in the loop about the supplements, which are decided by coaches including foreign coaches.”

According to Ibopishak, addressing the lacuna of testing is easier said than done considering the absence of a testing laboratory in the state. “So far NADA has only come for anti-doping awareness and education workshops. They need to expand their facilities in regional centres as well,” he said. But the larger challenge for athletes in Manipur is their lack of familiarity with federation rules and anti-doping policies. “Many athletes fail to even provide their whereabouts information as mandated under article 5.6.1 and 5.6.5 in the anti-doping policy,” said Roman.

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After months of waiting, Sanjita’s ‘B’ sample results finally arrived in her inbox on September 11, 2018. Anticipating that the results would be positive, Bijen states that they have abandoned the demand for DNA testing. At the time of writing this report, they were given one week to choose between their options for hearing, which will most likely be scheduled in November this year. While the Asian Games and World Weightlifting Championship have slipped out of her hands, Sanjita is keeping her fingers crossed on the outcome of this hearing.

For her coach, Vijay Sharma, her case can easily be argued on grounds of procedural delay. “I don’t know of any other sportsperson who waited for months before their ‘B’ sample results arrived. Even her ‘A’ sample results were inordinately delayed when I know for a fact that it doesn’t take more than 20 days for labs to test samples,” he told Nation of Sport. He adds that the administrative mistake committed by IWF might also work in her favour while making a case for procedural lapses.

Bijen told me he was looking to question the particular method employed by the laboratory that helped them arrive at the conclusion. It is unclear whether the same testing method was used on the ‘B’ sample as well because the report has been kept confidential. While challenging the scientific validity of the analytical method is within the scope of a fair hearing under ‘proof of doping’, it’s going to be an uphill battle. “Unless they can prove lapses in the chain of custody documents or tampering of the sample, it’s unlikely that challenging the lab testing protocol will work in their favour,” said Chandran, who served as a member on the NADA appeal panel until last year.



Bijen Chanu sits at the family residence preparing for the upcoming hearing scheduled in October at the IWLF in Budapest, Hungary / George Nehsial

Tirelessly struggling to beat the twin sharks of bureaucracy and politics that has circled her international sporting career, Sanjita said she was determined to fulfil her Olympic dream in 2020. Amidst the dark overcast, a High Court order instructing the Selection Committee for the Arjuna Award 2018 to consider her nomination “uninfluenced by the alleged charge of doping” has come as a silver lining. Ironically enough, IWLF played a crucial role in supporting Sanjita to take this matter to court last year after she was overlooked for two years in a row despite her gold-winning performance in 2014.

“I still have my doubts about the sample because I did not consume anything. Although I’m not sure if my Olympic dream will come true, but I will fight this to the end,” says a resolute Sanjita.

If unable to prove her innocence, she faces a suspension of up to four years from competitive lifting.



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About the Writer

Makepeace Sitlhou is an Independent Journalist who covers politics, security, gender, human rights, governance, policy and social justice in the North Eastern states. She has written for several publications like Caravan, Scroll.in, The Wire, Asia Times, Vice India, The Huffington Post, Economic Times and others. Prior to this she worked with The Print and Amnesty International India.

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