

THE ROYAL BENGAL ROARS AT ALLY PALLY

A landmark victory that could change the future of Indian darts forever

By Morgan Bennion

You might not associate India with top class darts. But Nitin Kumar is an exception. He comes from a country where darts is played so little that even Kumar's nickname nods to its unpopularity. Nicknamed 'The Royal Bengal', Kumar said: "Ever since I was a kid, I've had this fondness for tigers. One day it just sort of clicked - I was the only sort of 'pro' darts player India had. I was its number

one ranked player and the only player that was serious - I felt I was extinct. While the Royal Bengal Tiger is India's National animal, it's endangered as well. I saw a lot of parallels in this - hence the name."

The Alexandra Palace has birthed many 'cult heroes' over the years at the World Darts Championship, and the crowd took an interest in Kumar. He has played at the PDC World Championship five times, failing to get past the first round in his first four attempts, that was until he defeated Dutchman Richard Veenstra and created history by becoming the first Indian player to win a match at the World

Championship. The 40-year-old was delighted with the win and said that he feels proud. He said: "I felt relieved at the time. Now I feel a bit proud. These small victories help my confidence, and the millions of doubts in my head have become a little quieter."

He defied Veenstra's 92 average and five 100+ check-outs to win 3-2 on the biggest stage. Kumar gained fewer legs than The Dutchman but won due to the tournament's unique set-play format. Kumar believes that the crowd getting behind him was great and playing on the big stage is an experience he 'loves'.

He said: "The crowd was great. They willed me on to be honest. For a person like me, it's only when I come for such big tournaments that I ever experience such great crowds. You can never be ready or work towards it - you just have to get used to it. It's an experience that I just love."

It was an incredible achievement for the Indian international, but it was just the first step towards potential greatness at Ally Pally. The win meant that he would face the sixth seed Stephen Bunting in round two. That was unfortunately where the journey would end for Kumar, after he was defeated by the two-time World Championship semi-finalist 3-0. On reflection, Kumar said that he would perform with a different mindset next time. He said: "There

was actually no pressure at all. I just wanted to do my best. However, winning the first game put added pressure on myself and I lost the plan I had initially, which was just to enjoy the game. Against Bunting, I tried to do my best. While against Veenstra I was having fun - that's all it was. I won't let that happen again."

Darts has not exactly been a popular sport in the region with most people being unaware that the sport is played professionally, but Kumar says that it is gaining admiration. He said: "It's growing at a very fast pace. We've gotten a great organisation now in the Indian Darts Council (IDC) that is doing a good job in growing darts. The infrastructure is getting set up. We're at a growing stage but eventually, with the numbers, the growth will be huge. It's an awareness issue that we have. Most of India doesn't even know that darts is played professionally. Once that's cracked - the floodgates will open."

The 'Royal Bengal' has been playing the sport for 30



Credit: Nitin Kumar

years, first starting when he was just 10 years old.

"My parents played darts, and I used to practice at home until I got a bit older and could take part in league matches with them," said Kumar.

"It slowly became a family outing, and I got involved in darts slowly, just picking up the darts and throwing randomly alone at home or on tournament practice boards. My first big tournament was the Malaysian Open in 2007. I realised that I was not ready to handle the pressure then and lost against players who weren't very notable but the first step was taken."

He was born in India, but moved to Dubai from a young

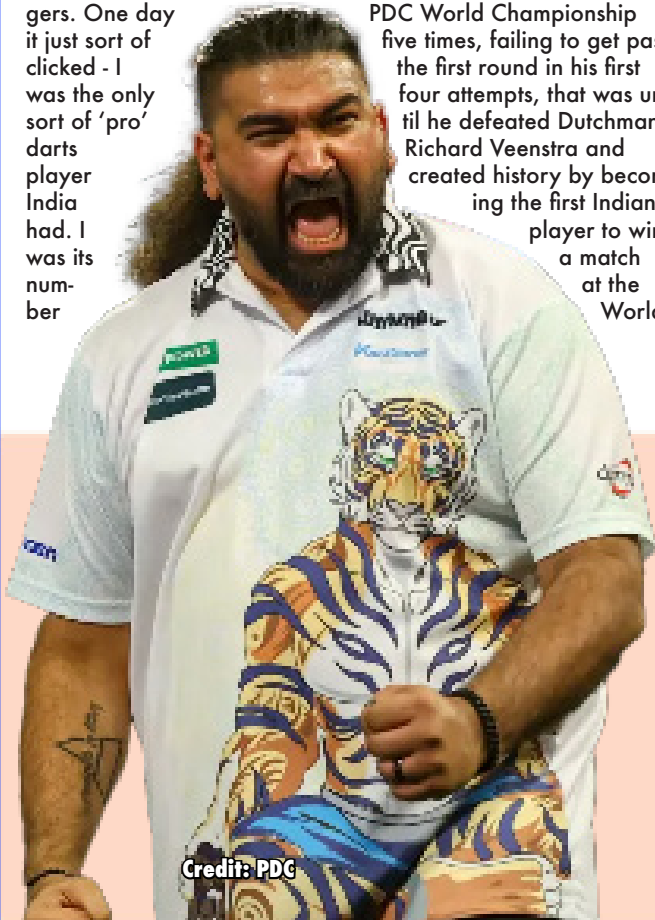
age, and has lived there ever since. He plays in local leagues in Dubai and has won various tournaments in his career. Looking towards the future, Kumar says that his immediate aims are to play on the pro tour.

"Go to Q-School, get a tour card, play on the tour and get into the world rankings," said Kumar.

"I hope that eventually I get so old that I can't play darts anymore or become a world champion - whichever comes first."

The question is whether he will be the first Indian player to win the World Darts Championship? We'll have to wait and see.

Nitin Kumar. Remember the name.



Credit: PDG