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LASER RUN SPOTLIGHT: HARNESSING POTENTIAL ACROSS SOUTH ASIA

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The unexpected disruptions of 2020 may have put the sporting world on pause, but Laser Run has been a catalyst for growth of the UIPM Sports movement across South Asia that will continue once the restrictions on mass-participation sport have been eased.

From Kabul to Colombo, this part of the world has energetically embraced the simple plug-and-play format that enables Laser Run to support development in communities right across the planet.

In the fourth part of the Laser Run Spotlight series, we speak to senior office-bearers from National Federations in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (combined population circa 1.7billion) to find out more about their progressive grassroots initiatives, built on the platform of the UIPM Global Laser Run City Tour.

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Afghanistan: Students and soldiers provide a bedrock of participants

Khoshal Sarwari

President, Modern Pentathlon Federation of Afghanistan

Q: Your Federation is relatively new (membership of UIPM was approved in 2015). Do you consider Laser Run to be an effective tool for Modern Pentathlon development and promotion?

A: Yes, absolutely. Due to the lack of facilities in the country for other sports like Triathlon or Biathlon, we have focused on Laser Run competitions. This has been very successful and the sport has found its place in the heart of our grassroots, which makes us very hopeful for the future.

Q: How often did you organise Laser Run events in your country in 2019 and what was the average number of participants per event?

A: We organised many Laser Run competitions in 2019 but the two GLRCT events which were registered in the UIPM calendar had more than 300 participants. Most of the participants were school students and army soldiers, which is why we would like to invest in these two major areas.

Q: Are you planning to organise other UIPM Sports competitions (eg Biathlon, Triathlon) in Afghanistan in the near future, and will the experience of GLRCT be useful in this regard?

A: We do have a plan, but not at least for the next two years! We are looking for the facilities to enable us to organise such competitions and to train our athletes the appropriate Swimming skills. This could be a long-term project due to the funding required.

In the meantime, Laser Run is an event that can help us improve and raise awareness about the Modern Pentathlon, which is not a well-known sport in the country. We have experienced great feedback from our audiences for Laser Run competitions and due to all the restrictions applied to female participation within schools in the country and non-availability of facilities for other sports, we have a very good chance to include our sport in the school sporting curriculum if we can provide the required Laser shooting equipment.

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Pakistan: It's time to take a multi-lateral approach

Zahoor Ahmad

Secretary General, National Federation of Pakistan

Q: You are an experienced country in South Asia in organizing GLRCT. What are the benefits of GLRCT to your National Federation?

A: Specifically talking about the GLRCT format there are many positive impacts and outcome advantages for our National Federation. A few of them that we learned from our experience include:

- The format of GLRCT is very simple and very attractive for athletes (professional, non-

professional and beginners).

- The format allows and attracts athletes from other sports to test their skills and fitness through this platform.
- The format allows active participation from different regions of the country and it has been very effective for UIPM Sports development.
- It covers a huge number of participants and still the event can be completed in just a single day.

Q: Do you already have athletes who were introduced to UIPM Sports by GLRCT and started to do other Modern Pentathlon disciplines like Swimming, Fencing and Riding?

A: Yes, we received a great response on the younger age categories. A few parents approached us and offered to get their children registered for our annual calendar events that are organized locally. Therefore, we hold training camps from time to time for Modern Pentathlon disciplines and it is mandatory for GLRCT athletes to join those training camps to enhance their skills. Yet we do not charge any registration fee from the athletes for any of our local events.

Q: Can you please share with other (mainly new) countries some of your strategic goals?

A: Political relations with our neighbouring countries vary from time to time. There was a very popular culture in the past between in South Asian countries where many sports federations focused on organizing annual competitions between three, four or five nations and they were highly rated by the viewers. Countries like Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal played a very important role and their Governments were very supportive too.

We would especially suggest that we can revive this culture once again. We can still add an annual South Asian competition as a UIPM Calendar event, and we would like to work with UIPM to develop the following outcomes:

- We need more UIPM-recognised referees and coaches in each South Asian country.
- We need technical training from UIPM for setting up the competition equipment according to international competition requirements.
- We need to set up efficient scoring equipment in each discipline to avoid any dispute as we are using manual time records targeted to each athlete. For Triathlon and, gradually, Tetrathlon, we can add Fencing and Riding.
- While providing all technical assistance under UIPM observation we will organise a local event according to international standards.

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India: A nationwide approach across all age groups

Namdev Shirgaonkar

Secretary General, Modern Pentathlon Federation of India

Q: You organized many GLRCTs in 2017 and 2018 and were one of the leading NFs in Laser Run development among various regions across India, but in 2019 there were no competitions. Was there a special reason for this?

A: Yes, we organised many GLRCTs in 2017-18. This was the first time we had organised any such international competition, but we faced financial issues due to very high Customs taxes and delays in the clearance process for equipment.

The expectations of organisers was very high, but due to the issues the MPFI core committee took time to evaluate the process of organising GLRCT events in India and while fixing the issues and covering for the financial losses of 2017-18 we missed our deadlines of application for 2019 GLRCT.

Our core committee decided to plan GLRCT in a better way and we applied for 2020 Laser Run and were granted two competitions, but due to the current COVID-19 situation all physical sporting activities are suspended until further notice by the Government of India.

Q: What are the main participant target audiences in your Laser Run events – kids, adults, families? What channels do you use to attract participants?

A: We have participants from all age groups such as kids, youths and Masters athletes in our Laser Run events and we have had a huge response from all parts of India across every age group. We have our website, Facebook and other social media platforms which we use for promotion and to invite participants in Laser Run as well as other events; we also use print and video media for promotion and invitation. One of the important channels is our state representatives – we have member organisations in every state of India where they are responsible for the development of Modern Pentathlon regionally.

Q: Do you involve national and local governments and government organizations in Laser Run events? In which aspects do they participate?

A: Yes, Laser Run events form part of our national activity at MPFI since 2018 and are included in our annual activity calendar for 2020. Last year we have organised a national Laser Run championships in which more than 300 participants from all over India participated. Our Indian team selected from the national championship participated in the UIPM 2019 Laser Run World Championships in Budapest (HUN) and UIPM 2018 Laser Run World Championships in Dublin (IRL).

Laser Run is one of the important events for our organisation and we are getting a very good response from all parts of India in every age group. Our active participation in the Laser Run World Championships and in organising national as well as international Laser Run events every year proves the rapid development of Laser Run in India. We would like to work with UIPM to be able to provide enough Laser Run equipment to organise more events in every part of India.

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Sri Lanka: Going beyond Laser Run in search of the ultimate athlete

Nishanthe Piyasena

President, Sri Lanka Modern Pentathlon Federation

Q: Do you see a link between Laser Run and Biathle/Triathle for the development of athletes and for Modern Pentathlon in your country?

A: Yes, I have seen a strong link between both segments because we started Laser Run as an introductory segment attract athletes towards Modern Pentathlon. We were able to conduct four highly successful Laser Run events that attracted more than 500 participants from under 11 to senior categories. Last year we were able to introduce the Biathle-Triathle National Tour to the country and more than 90% of the athletes who took part in BTNT came through the previous Laser Run events. Laser Run is helping to establish an initial platform in a country which has not practised Modern Pentathlon as a sport.

Q: What is the percentage of athletes who do both Laser Run and Biathle/Triathle at your events?

A: At the moment we conduct GLRCT and BTNT segments in a single day, with Laser Run offered

for Under-15s and BTNT for older categories. Therefore it is difficult to make this calculation. Also as an NF, we came to a decision that we only use Laser Run to attract athletes towards Modern Pentathlon sport and gradually we take them to the next level through BTNT, Tetrathlon and Pentathlon. We attract schoolchildren towards Laser Run, then make them strong until under 15 when we take them to the BTNT and other upper levels.

Q: How you would suggest GLRCT can be used in the most effective for Federations?

A: GLRCTs have glamour and attraction, especially in youth categories, therefore NFs can attract more participation towards it. Eventually that bigger anticipation can be converted to make a complete modern pentathlete, which is the prime goal.