

Nurturing talent pays off

Former Gujarat Champion Named US TT's 'Coach Of The Year'

Lionel Rodricks | TNN

Surat: On Sunday morning Rajul Sheth received a pleasant surprise in his e-mail. The message read: "It is my honor on behalf of the USATT Coaching Committee to award you the 2008 USATT Developmental Coach of the Year, as part of the USOC Coach Recognition Program, in recognition of your outstanding dedication to table tennis junior development in the United States." Sd/ John Allen, USATT Coach Committee Chair.

Rajul, 38, former Gujarat state TT champion and head of the TT facility of the Indian Community Centre in Mipitas, in the San Francisco Bay Area, had won a recognition no other Indian had. It was a singular distinction that he not anticipated, but had worked hard in the North America to become deserving of such a prize.

Rajul is in Surat to sign a deal with the Table Tennis Federation of India, this time to train India's junior national players at his facility at the Indian Community Centre (ICC) in California.

In July 2008, the Indian



Rajul Sheth

boys and girls teams trained at the ICC in preparation for the US TT Open and Ganesh Sathiyam went on to win the junior boys singles title at the tournament in Las Vegas.

Later in the year, Sathiyam scaled bigger heights when bagged the crown at Commonwealth Youth Games in Pune and earning the accolade, "the golden boy of Indian table tennis."

The TT facility has now grown into the biggest of its kind in North America. "We have," says Rajul, "the largest junior training programme in the USA, the biggest and most number of camps and the largest USATT appointed League."

Several Gujarat players, including India international Pathik Mehta who recently



Stellan Bengtsson, three-time world champion from Sweden, instructs trainees at the ICC

lost in the men's singles final to Sharath Kamal at the Sr National TT Championships in Patna, state women's champion Divya Gohil, also of Bhavnagar, and a host of other Gujarat paddlers have benefited from the coaching facilities at the ICC. "I am determined to give players from my home state as much assistance that I can, in my position," Rajul says.

For Rajul, who bagged the Gujarat state men's singles title in 1992-93, represented the state at ten Senior National Championships and went to the USA 2002, it has been a long but fruitful journey that he had never anticipated.

"When I first landed in America I used to work at retail stores, 'cause the Mechanical Engineering degree that I had earned at MSU was not recognised," says Rajul. "Then I got an opportunity to coach at ICC recreational area which had four tables.

"They had no intention to develop TT, but the response from children and parents was so much that we grew fast."

"In 2005 we introduced a professional training programme and the strength of our facility grew."

"Seventy per cent of my trainees are of India origin of which some 40 per cent are Gujaratis," says Rajul.