

Once the helmet is on, there is no man or woman, says ace biker Aishwarya Pissay

Bengaluru-based racer **Aishwarya Pissay** became the first Indian to bag a world title in motorsports when she won the FIM World Cup in women's category in Hungary. Now back in India, the 23-year-old spoke to Hindol Basu about what it is to be a woman in a traditionally male-dominated sport, and how she overcame physical and mental challenges to fulfil her long-cherished dream

■ Now that you're a world champion, has the feeling sunk in?

No matter what the title brings, I think it's just one step closer to my bigger dream, and that is to participate in the Dakar Rally.

■ How did this love for bikes and motorcycling happen?

Right from childhood. But I began riding my own bike only at 18. I saved up and bought my first bike, which was a Duke 200. I started using it for my daily commute. Every time I used to take out my bike, people used to make fun of me. But I decided that riding a bike is not rocket science and if somebody else can do it, so can I. Then I took part in MTV's Chase the

Monsoon, which took me on a path from the Rann of Kutch to Cherrapunji for 24 days. I

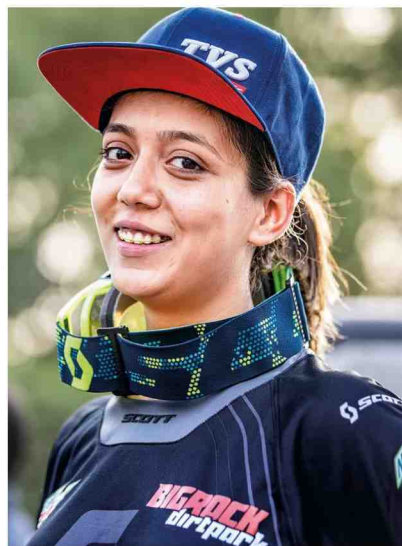
was able to complete the whole journey, which was very gruelling. After that, my belief that I had the skills to get into professional racing got strengthened.

■ What does a motorcycle mean to you?

A motorcycle gives me a sense of freedom. It makes me feel alive, which is why I do what I do.

■ What is it like being a woman in a sport which is traditionally male-dominated?

I think it has been called a male-dominated sport for the longest time because there have been only men in it. But, over the years, it has evolved as women have started participating and I don't think it's a man's world anymore. It is motorsports and the chequered flag doesn't discrimi-



nate gender. Once the helmet is put on, there is no man or woman.

■ Did you face any kind of gender discrimination or snide remarks when you took up the sport?

Ever since I started riding, I was told that it is not a woman's sport. In fact, there were not a lot of women back then who were into the sport at a professional level. I did get a lot of backlash. People used to say that I should probably get a job; this (racing) is something I should do over the weekend. When all of that happened, I used to keep quiet because I knew what I was working on. I knew that my performance and results would speak for me. To be honest, I just kept silent, ears closed

and my eyes on my goal. That's exactly how I gave answers to those people who shunned me when I started racing.

■ You broke your collarbone in 2017 and had to undergo surgery. Doctors had to insert a steel plate and seven screws to fix it. And then again in 2018, you underwent surgery when your pancreas was ruptured. Were there any mental scars?

I am a normal human being at the end of the day. In fact, the depth of the injury was a lot more than any normal injury. The only way I could cope with it was by having a positive mindset. Firstly, being an athlete, I always had that determination to come back stronger and better. What made the most difference is my team TVS did not give up on me. They were there at every step of the recovery along with my family, friends and coaches. They made sure all I was thinking was to compete once again.

■ Do you follow other sports?

Yes, I follow cricket. I also follow snowboarding — it is very thrilling. I used to play volleyball, throwball and also a bit of basketball when I was in school and college.

■ You missed your Class XII board exams....

That time I didn't know what would be there in store for me in life. I was very uncertain because coming from a normal Indian family it is kind of the end of life if you don't do well in academics. But, I've always believed that there is another way and that's exactly how I found motor-sports as my calling.

■ Obviously Dakar is your aim, and you'll need a lot of financial backing to realise that dream. Do you expect more sponsors to join you after this historic win?

Firstly, my career has turned into a career only because of TVS Racing coming in. In India, there are only two factory teams, and with a factory team like TVS backing me is only why my dreams have been possible to the extent they have. I do have a couple of other brands who support me. As I am growing, my aspirations are also growing. So the monetary aspect also kicks in and that grows. I do urge sponsors to join hands and help me fulfil my dreams.

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