

How the Community Sports Program has helped Sonali spend more time on the field and brought a positive change in her life



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The presence of sport in a young person's formative years is immensely valuable because of the multifaceted impact it has on their holistic development. But often, young people are restricted to just their classrooms and houses. In such cases, they rarely get the opportunity to be on the field, and their passion for sport remains unexplored.

A goal-oriented multi-sport program, the [Community Sports Program \(CSP\)](#) has been implemented by [Pro Sport Development \(PSD\)](#) in various community schools in Bhubaneswar since 2015. The program has been a driving force in kindling young people's interest in sport, particularly those coming from disadvantaged and marginalized sections of society. Trapped in a monotonous cycle of studying and performing household chores, the CSP has helped these young people break from their routine and indulge in fun and recreational sport activities.

In an effort to get more young people onto the playing field, the CSP has also been successful in helping participants develop a positive relationship with those identifying with other genders. The program has been effective in establishing a mutual sense of trust and support, while providing opportunities to support and develop essential soft-skills like teamwork, leadership and communication.



Sonali Patra

Getting into the game

Sonali Patra, a class 8 student studying in St. Joseph's High School in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, joined the CSP in 2022. Regular involvement in recreational sport and physical activity through the CSP has bolstered her passion and love for sport.

Sonali's joy when she gets to play is unparalleled. She is so enthusiastic about playing, that even on days when she has a holiday, all her friends gather to play the games that they have been taught in the CSP sessions. In fact, she has come to develop a fondness

for netball, a game she was introduced to by the CSP, as she shares:

"Netball sessions have been my favorite. In netball, we learn how to play in a group. We also use our focus to put the ball in the net. There is also communication within the team. I really enjoy playing netball - I do not even realize where the time goes!"

Sonali's active participation in the program has resulted in her reaping the wide benefits offered by sport and physical activity. Her enthusiastic involvement in the CSP has led to her physical transformation, improved communication, and an overall improvement in her wellbeing.

Empowering physical fitness

Sonali characterized herself as lethargic and disinterested in doing any work before joining the CSP. This included attending school, completing homework, or participating in household responsibilities. As per her, she was quite lazy and found an excuse every time to wriggle herself out from helping out her mother.

Ever since she has been associated with the program, her interest and willingness to take up responsibilities has improved. She has become more active and has started helping her mother with multiple household chores. Sonali is really happy that her mother has noticed this change in her and expresses:

“Earlier, my mother would say ‘how much do you play? you must study first or do some housework so that you are of use.’ I said that let me play first, then I will do the other work. But after I joined the CSP, I started working also, and my mother has noticed this, she says - ‘you do so much work, don't you get tired, doing all this work and playing as well?’ But the truth is that I do not feel tired anymore and I look forward to playing every day.”

The CSP has helped transform Sonali from being lazy and waking up late to becoming an early riser, ready to engage in school classes and the CSP sessions, with great excitement and enthusiasm. Rubi Rautaray, PSD's Community Sports Trainer, notes this transformation in her:



Sonali enjoying her time during one of CSP's sessions

“During the initial period of the program, Sonali seemed a little lazy. However, with her regular participation, I could see she was getting more active and agile. After observing this change, I thought she would be the right fit to lead a team in the netball tournament that took place recently.”

Learning to communicate

An increased interest in sport has compelled Sonali to spend more time on the field with her peers. Sonali now plays with her friends, in a team, on a daily basis, and as a result, there is a remarkable change in her ability to communicate effectively. She describes herself as being a shy person earlier, who would never talk to others, and being unable to respond whenever someone initiated conversation with her.

After being associated with the CSP for over a year, she has gained newfound confidence and an ability to talk to others at ease, which was not the case before.

Her newly gained communication skills have helped her talk to boys as well, which is something she would never do before. The polarization of genders is so embedded in society that to avoid any unwanted rumors, Sonali earlier refrained from even looking at boys. However, Sonali now feels extremely comfortable talking to boys in her class, and regularly plays sport and games with them. The CSP has made Sonali and her peers realize the power of unity, bridging the gap between boys and girls in her school.

Fighting the fight

Participation in the CSP has enabled Sonali to confront the restrictive norms in her school. The mixed-gender sessions used in the CSP empowered her to confidently engage and co-exist with boys on field as well as the classroom. This allowed her to challenge the prevalent stigmatization associated with boys and girls, serving as a groundbreaking example for other children in her school.

Sonali is sometimes still subjected to gender-based stereotypes at home. Sonali's father is not sure if Sonali should play sport so much - being a girl, he believes she should stay at home and help out in household chores. However, her mother has been a pillar of support and encourages her to play more. Through the confidence and interpersonal abilities gained through the CSP, Sonali is now able to deal with such comments effectively and corrects her father saying:

“Just the way you let your son go outside and play, I also want to go out and play.”

With such display of agency and courage, Sonali is provoking her family members to reflect on the roles and norms that disproportionately burden women and girls. Her actions serve as a powerful reminder to her family that she is capable of advocating for herself and pursuing her dreams, regardless of traditional gender expectations.

In just one year, Sonali is showing exceptional resilience and has overcome struggles to continue her participation in sport. For the road ahead, she hopes to make use of her experiences and learnings from the CSP to keep playing sport and explore her potential in netball, a sport she thoroughly enjoys and strives to achieve more in.

The Community Sports Program (CSP), in existence since 2015, aids the holistic development of young people between the ages of 5-16 years from marginalized communities in Bhubaneswar, Odisha through a specially-designed sports program, by teaching soft skills, imbibing sporting values and changing gender perceptions.