

**I** want to give back something to athletics and that's why I took the decision to set up this institute. I want more athletes to come up and perform well for the country," remarked P.T. Usha on starting her coaching academy 'Usha School of Athletics' at Koyilandy near Kozhikode.

Undoubtedly India's greatest athlete, the Sprint Queen has made a right,



daring move that will go down in the history of sports in Kerala, if not India. The Kerala Government on October 11 decided to allot 30 acres of land for the school at Kinalur on 50 years' lease for a nominal charge of Rs 3,000 a year, announced Sports Minister Dominic Presentation.

A welcome sign and a good example indeed for sports in Kerala in particular and for that in the country in general.

The land belonged to the KSIDC, acquired for industrial purposes. "I'm very happy. My aim is to mould athletes for 2012 Olympics," said a beaming Usha. The school is estimated to cost Rs 20 crore with the first phase involving Rs 10 crore. The facilities to be developed include a synthetic track, a swimming pool, gymnasium and a hostel of international standard.

The school at present has a strength of five students in the age group of 12-14 years. Usha said her plan was to admit 8-10 students a year in the same age group. At the same time, the government has set a condition that the land would

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be used solely for sports purposes. The price of the land was assessed at Rs 1.20 crore, and Usha could buy it paying the cost during the lease period.

"I want youngsters to come up. I look out for funds to make this establishment a success. I believe what I know will go a long next generation. I want India to win that elusive medal which I missed out by a whisker at Los Angeles Olympics," added Usha.

The government would be represented in the managing committee of the school by three of its representatives - The Kozhikode District Collector and a

Usha had to face ill health and poverty.

But what she had, even as a child, was an aptitude for sports which came in handy and won her a scholarship worth Rs 250 per month from the State Government, which entitled her to study at sports school in Kannur. That meagre amount went a long way in the making of Usha's career. It was at the sports school that she was noticed by O.M. Nambiar, who took her under his wings and became her coach for years to come.

The finest moment in Usha's career and also perhaps the saddest, however, came in a single race at Los Angeles. In

## Usha School of Athletics

### A giant stride forward

nominee each from the KSIDC and sports department. Dominic Presentation said the government appreciated Usha's efforts in training the future generation.

"We thought it necessary that a person like Usha needed to be encouraged, and that's why we took the initiative to hand over the land to the school," the minister said after Usha had made it public that she was planning to shift the school out of Kerala. "It would have been a shame for the State, had Usha taken that extreme step," he said. Usha said she was thankful to the government.

It will take one year to complete the construction activities of the first phase of the project. Hopefully, the school will be shifted to its new complex by December, 2005 from its current rented premises in Koyilandy. The construction is being undertaken by a Bangalore-based firm.

P.T. Usha is one of India's best-known athletes, the queen of Indian track and field for almost two decades, the woman who was nicknamed 'Payyoli Express' because of her speed on the race track. Payyoli Tevaraparambil Usha was born in a poor family at Meladi, a small village in Payyoli near Kozhikode. As a young girl,

the 400 metres hurdles, she missed the bronze medal by just 1/100th of a second. She recorded her best time of 55.42 seconds in that race - still a national record - but lost out in a photo-finish. Usha said she cried after the event because "it was difficult to believe that I had missed an Olympics medal by a whisker".

Usha hung up her boots for good at the age of 36, in July 2000 with a promise to groom bright, young athletes in her sports school. She has been honoured with the Arjuna Award in 1983, and the Padmashree in 1985. She was named the 'Sportsperson of the Century' by the Indian Olympic Association, and till date is the Indian with most international track and field medals.

In another development, Usha will team up with former Olympic champion from Morocco, Nawal El Moutawakil, under the Laureus Sports for Good Foundation umbrella on a project scheduled for next year, to raise opportunities for women in India. The two athletes competed against each other in '84 Olympics, and Nawal bagged the gold medal. The two legends met after 20 years at the 2004 Athens Olympics, each fired by an ambition to give back to sport, women's athletics in particular. ■