



**Sports and Youth Services, Department
Government of Odisha**

RELIANCE FOUNDATION ODISHA ATHLETICS HIGH PERFORMANCE CENTRE AIMS TO UNEARTH MEDAL WINNERS FOR INDIA: COACH JAMES HILLIER

Bhubaneswar, 20th August, 2020- In less than a year since it began active operations, the Reliance Foundation Odisha Athletics High Performance Centre (HPC) in Bhubaneswar has already produced encouraging results, with athletes under its wing impressing at several national level competitions. After clinching two gold and a bronze at the Junior National championships in Vijayawada in November 2019, athletes from the centre claimed a total of 25 medals including 10 gold, 8 silver and 7 bronze at the Odisha state championships in Cuttack a month later. At the Reliance Foundation Youth Sports (RFYS) National championships in Mumbai in January, 2020 a further 13 medals, including 4 gold, 3 silver and 6 bronze, were delivered by athletes from the HPC.

The High Performance Centre is a collaborative effort of the Odisha Government and the Reliance Foundation, who signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2018 with the aim to improve the standard of athletics across the state and produce home-grown athletes who can achieve both national and international success.

Head Coach of the HPC, **James Hillier**, emphasises that while producing medalists at the 2026 Youth Olympics and the 2032 Olympics are among the HPC's targets, the "holistic development" of athletes is integral to its mission.

"We are working towards developing this HPC into the most innovative High-Performance Athletics Centre in Asia," says Hillier. "It will create a sustainable development and support system to identify, nurture and maximize the potential of athletes from grass roots to elite level. Our marquee nationwide grassroots development initiative Reliance Foundation Youth Sports, which saw participation from 30,000 athletes in 2019-20 is also being used as a primary scouting platform for the HPC."

"We have ambitious plans to produce a home-grown Youth Olympic medalist and a home-grown Olympic Games Winner in the future. While winning is a long-term goal, the HPC is focusing on the journey, the strategy and the holistic development of the player that involves an integrated approach, a combination of physical, mental and psychological training."

To ensure the athletes have a clearly defined pathway towards progress, the HPC has split operations between a "Monitoring Cohort" and "Academy". Athletes in the Monitoring Cohort are between the ages of 13-17 and identified as being a maximum of 5 years away from winning a national level medal. 20 such athletes from all over Odisha are currently part of the monitoring cohort and reside at the Bhubaneswar state sports hostel.

Athletes in the Academy group are 16 years or older and identified at various stages of development – from being two years away from winning a national level medal to those with established international credentials.

There are 7 such athletes (4 from Odisha) at the HPC academy currently, who live at the Kalinga stadium. 9 more athletes (2 for the academy and 7 for the monitoring cohort) from the state have been identified for the programme after a trial selection camp for the best young athletes in the state was held in February. **These athletes will be integrated once it is safe to do so in the wake of protocols established to combat the Covid-19 crisis.**

“Odisha has the foundation of a really successful sports system,” explains Hillier, elaborating on his vision. “The government is incredibly proactive and is willing to invest in good people to create a performance system that allows talented athletes to flourish.”

For now, the HPC is focused on Sprints, Hurdles and middle distance running but further expansion will see the inclusion of a jumps and throws programme as well.

Quite clearly, the Reliance Foundation Odisha Athletics HPC is a unique venture, putting the building blocks in place to achieve success in one of the world’s most competitive sporting pursuits. Already, over the short period of its existence, there have been heart-warming stories of achievement such as Sabita Toppo, identified from the Sundargarh Sports Hostel, winning the Pentathlon gold while breaking the national record in the U-16 category at the national championships. At the same national championships, Rajendra Sahu, from the HPC Monitoring cohort, won a gold and bronze respectively in the Pentathlon and Long jump in the U-14 category.

We are confident we will unearth a new generation of stars from the state, athletes that can go ahead and win medals for India in the future, Hillier signs off.

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