

Small-town girl jumps high

By Nadeem Saeed

SEPTEMBER 27 was the third day of the SAF Games 99 in Kathmandu, Nepal, and the 181-member Pakistan squad was desperately looking for a gold medal. India, Nepal and Sri Lanka were carrying off medals, gold, silver and bronze. Pakistan needed one.

Then a teen-aged, pencil-slim, tall girl brought cheer to the Pakistani camp by grabbing the gold in the high jump event by clearing a height of 1.69 metres. This was to be the first of 10 gold medals Pakistan went on to win, and the only one by a woman member of the squad.

The girl was Rehana Kausar from Muzaffargarh. Soon after returning from the SAF Games, she took part in the 34th National Athletic Championship. Representing WAPDA, she helped her department maintain its superiority in the women's event by bagging gold medals in the high jump, heptathlon and triple jump (hop, step and jump) and was a member of the WAPDA team which won silver medal in the 4x100 relay race. Honouring her for outstanding performance, WAPDA sent Rehana to receive the championship trophy. Her specialized field is the high jump and she took part in other events because of the absence of Shabana Akhtar, who could not participate in the championship due to domestic preoccupations.

Rehana Kausar studies at the Khursheedabad School in Muzaffargarh and her father is a low-salary employee of an ice factory. The smart athlete is all praise for the support of her employers, WAPDA, but is bitter about the apathy of government and society, which do not encourage sportswomen. Rehana Kausar has two sisters and two brothers but would not like her siblings to take up sport. Her school headmistress, Mrs. Tasneem Sadiq, says that Rehana's younger sister is also talented but Rehana opposes her becoming a sportswoman.

"What have I gained from my



REHANA Kausar (centre) on the victory stand at the SAF Games in Kathmandu.

passion for athletics? I will not like my sisters and brothers wasting their capabilities in a society which discourages women from pursuing sports," Rehana Kausar said in an interview with *Dawn* the other day.

She hit the headlines when she cleared 1.49 metres in the National Games in 1997 and has been consistently improving her performance since then. She has devoted herself to athletics at the cost of her studies and has yet to pass the secondary school examination.

Had WAPDA not supported Rehana Kausar, she would have failed to make her mark. She was a

member of the WAPDA contingent which retained second position in the 34th National Games at the Railways Stadium, Lahore.

Rehana Kausar regretfully recalls the words of a senior Pakistani official, who had reportedly said before the SAF Games in Nepal: "We have no expectations from the women members and they are being sent to take part only in the march past at Kathmandu." This had created great sense of despondency and disappointment among the women members of the squad.

Rehana feels she has yet to give

of her best, but is dismayed at the existing attitudes in both officialdom and among the people. She cites the example of other SAARC countries which encourage their sportswomen without discrimination.

"The Indian top athlete, P.T. Usha, is provided facilities even at her village so that her training is not interrupted. Indian athletes were sent to Singapore immediately after the SAF Games so that they could fully prepare for the Asian Junior Athletic Championship to be held in that country later. But we haven't got to that stage here at all."

The Pakistani athlete is also perturbed over the shortage of competitions organized in the country. She says she cannot even afford her own equipment even for routine indoor weight exercises. "An athlete has to work hard to bring his or her muscles back in shape even after a training gap of five days."

She also hits out at society in general for always thinking the worst of professional women. "People often ask my father to remain vigilant about what his daughter does in camps. But, thank God, my parents have confidence in me. In fact, my family has played a vital role in my achievements and encouraged me through thick and thin."

Poetry is Rehana's second passion and she writes whenever she observes inequalities and class-based discrimination. Besides, she said she lends a helping hand to her mother at home.

Her school coach, Yamin Rahi, said Rehana's talent was yet to be fully tapped and if the government encouraged her she could win the Asian gold in the high jump. He said during training sessions at school she had cleared a height of 1.8m. He pointed out that the Khursheedabad school had produced other women sportswomen like Saira Fazal, Kulsoom Shehzadi, Nighat Hayat Niazi, Fauzia Khan, Bushra Magsi, Kanwal Habib and Shaista Kaiser. The last two are national basketball players while the others are athletes.