

## **Skarma Tsultin, Ladakh's first international speed skater, nurtured by belief, perseverance and Khelo India**

Skarma Tsultin's career took a massive upturn at the Khelo India Winter Games in Gulmarg in 2023

Leh (Ladakh), Jan. 21: When Skarma Tsultim first wore ice skating boots in the winter of 2018, there was no plan, no pressure, and no big dream attached to it. She was a schoolgirl attending a 15-day winter sports training camp, trying ice skating for the first time like many other children in Ladakh. She learnt basic skating during that camp and found it manageable. It didn't scare her. It didn't feel heavy. It just felt natural. That camp also gave her something else — an idea. That idea became a reality and courtesy, Khelo India Winter Games.

Winters came, the skating boots came out, and when the season ended, life went back to normal. That changed in 2021. In Ladakh as schools shut in winter and most sports slowed down, ice hockey and skating are everywhere. Frozen Gupukh's—the natural ponds of Leh—turns into open playgrounds, and Skarma and her brother were skating there like any other child from the region. She didn't know she was being watched.

Coach Abbas Nordak was scouting for talent, noticed her and selected her, a moment that quietly shifted her path. From then on, Skarma began attending regular winter camps, and within a year, under Nordak's coaching, she competed at the 17th National Speed Skating Championship at ISKATE, Gurugram.

Skarma Tsultim calls that first national experience “bad.” It was her first time on artificial ice, her first exposure to the scale of competitive sport, and the unfamiliar setting and level of athletes overwhelmed her. Training continued, extending into summers with muscle work and roller skating and staying active.

Even Skarma's father would take her for roller skating practice, at times even 20–40 kilometres, while her mother reminded her to stay grounded and skate for the joy of it, not just medals. She then also attended the 18th National Speed Skating Championship although without much recognition. The turning point came in 2023 at the 3rd Khelo India Winter Games in Gulmarg. For the first time, seven athletes from Ladakh participated. Skarma competed in short track speed skating and won a silver medal in the Junior Girls (15–19 years) 1000m event.

That medal mattered—not just for the podium, but for what it made her realise. It was here that she was selected for the Indian speed skating contingent and went on to compete at the South East Asian Championship 2023 in Singapore, with training in the Philippines.

“My international journey started here,” she says. It was her going to be her first international competition, and she was the only athlete from Ladakh on the team. “It wasn't easy. I felt out of place,” Skarma says. Language was a barrier, and being shy, she struggled to communicate even within the Indian contingent. Skarma recalls how she was intimidated by athletes from Japan, Indonesia, Chinese Taipei, and China—their professional gear, custom-made skates, stature, and confidence. Her performance, by her own admission, “wasn't good,” and she finished 11th in the 1000m. But the result did not define the moment. Khelo India became her landing point—the place where her international journey began.

Then came a phase when she questioned whether this sport was really for her, as her school performance slumped and the shift from basic to better felt like hitting a wall. Then she came home. What awaited her at the airport moved her and gave her a reason to keep going.

Family, friends, villagers, and the Goba (village head) had come to receive her. She wasn't welcomed for medals, but for representing India. She was also recognised by the LAHDC councillor from her region, and Geshe-la, the head chamberlain of Thiksey Monastery, invited her for tea and brought her gifts. She was touched and felt seen in a way she hadn't before. That support—from the entire community—became the reason she stayed with the sport.

At the 4th Khelo India Winter Games in Ladakh, she found her rhythm. Medals followed — gold in the women's team relay (the first time Ladakh stood on the top podium), silver in long track 500m, silver in mixed relay, and bronze in long track. The next year, at the 5th edition, she won her first individual gold in the 1000m short track among others— a moment she cherishes.

Skarma's coach Abbas was in Harbin, China, accompanying the Indian Ice Skating contingent as head coach. When he heard the news, she says simply, "Sir was happy." That year, Team UT Ladakh topped the medal tally as well, for the first time. Skarma later competed at the Asian Open Short Track Speed Skating Trophy in Jakarta in 2024.

She mentions it was Coach Abbas Nordak who became her main inspiration, motivation, and everything. He has coached many athletes from Ladakh without charging fees for all these years, often covering expenses himself.

"We skipped training more than sir, and he worked harder than any of us." Financial limits still keep many international leagues out of reach. But platforms like the Khelo India Winter Games gave her recognition, exposure, and confidence. They helped her "cross that line from basic to intermediate"—although now she is winning gold.

Now, at the 6th edition of Khelo India Winter Games, Skarma Tsultim will compete not in one but two individual events—500m and 1000m short track speed skating—along with the relays. Her journey didn't begin with ambition. It grew through steady coaching, consistent platforms like Khelo India, and a community that chose to stand behind her when she needed it most.

And the hope that individual speed skating can take her to the Olympics, which she still remembers from the day she wore her first skating boots seven years ago, gives hope not only to her coach or family but to Ladakh, and one day we may see Skarma—true to the meaning of her name, which translates to star in Ladakhi—shines not only on the Khelo India platform, but at the Olympics someday.



