

Ignored by Maharashtra, Nagpur's Chari scripts history in Tamil Nadu triumph

TNN | Jan 26, 2018, 10:37 AM IST



NAGPUR: When Mukund Chari shifted his base to Chennai last year, little did he know he would become part of history soon. The 19-year-old, who played for Maharashtra in the Under-16 nationals in 2014, was finding it tough to break into the Maharashtra senior squad and had to move south to get his talent recognized.

A year later, Maharashtra's loss is Tamil Nadu's gain. Chari became the first city hoopster among men to lift the national championship trophy when TN defeated Services on Wednesday. He chipped in with useful contributions whenever given the opportunity.

"It's indeed a proud and happy moment for me. I was speechless after lifting the trophy in my hand," Chari told TOI from Chennai.

"I never expected to be a part of this team in my first year itself. My hard work has surely paid off. I feel I made the right decision at the right time," he said.

"In Maharashtra, I used to play a maximum of 4-5 tournaments per year. It was too less and I couldn't get that experience of playing at a high level," Chari said.

In Tamil Nadu, the system is totally different, according to him. "There are a lot of tournaments at the college and association level. With so much exposure, players here are experienced and that helps them perform in pressure situations," said Chari.

In 68 years so far, many basketball players from Nagpur have played at the senior nationals with few women even winning the trophy in the 70s. It makes Chari's achievement all the more creditable.

Chari learned the nuances of basketball at the Shankar Nagar based Dharampeth Krida Mandal (DKM) when he started playing the sport in 2014. In his first year, he represented Nagpur in the inter-district championship and was selected for Maharashtra in the youth (U-16) nationals at Chandigarh which, incidentally, was his only national championship before this Chennai event.

After clearing HSC examination, Chari did a two-year diploma course. He couldn't participate in national events as his exam dates clashed with the inter-state championships.

Chari was annoyed missing many age-category nationals. Eager to play, perform and impress everyone, Chari started looking for more options. After discussing it with his club coaches he went to Chennai for selection trials.

He convinced his parents to allow him to make a basketball career in Chennai. Since the Chari family had relatives in Chennai, he was allowed to make a move. It wasn't a bed of roses for him in Chennai.

"It was really a huge decision for me and a tough call, because I didn't know what was coming. I've always heard, seen the Tamil Nadu team playing basketball at a high level and they were very impressive," he said.

Chari's first tournament exposure came soon when he represented Loyola College in the Chennai University tournament. "I did well in the university matches and got selected in the Chennai team. Then we won the all-India university tournament, which was my first big achievement," he said.

Chari's tall frame impressed the scouts in Chennai and after playing as a guest player for Customs in the TN state championship, he was picked as a probable for the nationals. After a strenuous two-month camp, Chari made it to the TN squad.