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Epsom student wins badminton in Baku

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An 18-year-old student at Epsom's Nescot College has returned from Azerbaijan with two medals after representing Great Britain at the Special Olympics European Badminton Tournament.

Rathanan Pathmanathan, who lives in Tolworth and studies at Nescot in Ewell, won gold in the doubles competition and silver in the singles at the international tournament held in Baku.

The remarkable achievement marks another milestone in the sporting career of a young man who, just a few years ago, struggled even to hold a badminton racket.

Rathanan is now ranked number two in Great Britain in Special Olympics badminton and has ambitions to reach the number one spot.

From beginner to international champion

Rathanan first took up badminton shortly before the Covid pandemic. At the time, he spoke very little, often communicating in single words, and found it difficult to concentrate.

His father, Sutharsanan, initially took up badminton himself in an effort to find a coach who could help his son develop his sporting abilities.

Following a gold medal victory for his school, Rathanan was introduced to Special Olympics Surrey and professional coaches. His dedication soon began producing remarkable results.

He has since won silver medals in the top open category at three consecutive National Games and at the most recent Summer Games.

His training regime is demanding. For the past three years he has trained four times a week, sometimes beginning at 7am, at Wimbledon Racquets & Fitness Club.

He also benefited from two years of coaching by Toby Penty, the former England number one who represented Great Britain at the Tokyo Olympics.

More than sporting success

Rathanan attends Nescot's Foundation Department, where he studies English, Maths and vocational skills. The college reports that he has made excellent progress in his studies alongside his sporting achievements.

His father believes that badminton has transformed much more than his son's physical abilities.

Sutharsanan said: "I believe, purely because of badminton, he has improved an enormous amount, even in his communication. He can express himself and his needs better now, and his confidence is high. I know even the top mainstream players at Wimbledon really value him."

The Special Olympics movement provides year-round sporting opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities, with competitions ranging from local events to international championships.

Rathanan's success in Baku demonstrates how those opportunities can enable athletes to develop their talents and compete at the highest levels.

Principal beaten before departure

Before leaving for Azerbaijan on 18th November, Rathanan demonstrated his abilities in a badminton match against Nescot's Principal and Chief Executive, Julie Kapsalis MBE, in front of students and staff.

The outcome was a decisive victory for the young international competitor.

Julie Kapsalis said: "Rathanan is an inspiration. His dedication and determination have taken him from struggling to hold a racket to representing Great Britain, and we couldn't be prouder. It was a pleasure to take him on, although he definitely showed me who's boss on court! Rathanan's story shows what is possible when students get the right support and encouragement, and we'll be cheering him on all the way to Baku."

That encouragement has now been rewarded with a gold medal and a silver medal, bringing international sporting honours home to Nescot and the Epsom area.

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With his sights already set on becoming Great Britain’s number one, Rathanan’s badminton journey may have many more victories ahead.

Lionel Blackman

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