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AT 4pm on Saturday, Aug 7, I, together with my entire family, was glued to the television screen. Even my sister, who is generally not quite fond of watching sporting events, was on the edge of her seat. It was time to watch the men’s javelin throw final at the Olympics where Arshad Nadeem had qualified against all odds. This was probably the first time that I had ever watched a javelin-throwing event so it is possible to imagine a general sense of confusion regarding the rules of the sport. Naturally, this meant conducting periodic Google searches to fill some information gaps.

The story of my household in some ways mirrors that of many others across the country. It is very likely that most Pakistani viewers have very little idea about the intricacies of the sport. Some may have even been watching a javelin event for the first time in their lives. Yet, all of us were watching the final in part because Arshad Nadeem’s identity as a Pakistani is inextricably linked with our own. And who doesn’t want their own identity to be a symbol of excellence?

Such rare moments in sports and other fields give us a sense of immense hope about our collective potential. At the same time, we also feel a sense of frustration regarding the structural barriers faced by us in the pursuit of global excellence. Arshad’s journey illustrates this observation perfectly. While we were all in awe on Aug 7 at what he was able to achieve, one could not help but imagine several what-if scenarios. What if Arshad, and many others like him, had had access to better training resources? What if we did a better job at enabling our citizens to excel in their respective fields? What if international success had been a more common feature of national life than it is at this time?

Such questions might just be an exercise in imagination for us but they have been translated into reality by several other nations that have invested in solving structural issues in their pursuit of international excellence, be it in sports or any other field. While overcoming complex problems is indeed a challenging task, the effort does translate into huge rewards for countries that are willing to make the journey.

For every Arshad, there are millions who are unable to follow their dreams.

After the javelin throw final ended, my nephew came up to me and expressed his admiration for Arshad’s phenomenal achievement. But there was also a sense a disappointment in his eyes which said something to the tune of ‘why doesn’t Pakistan win medals at the Olympics?’ I wanted to deliver a long lecture on why structural factors put our people at a disadvantage on the global stage, and yet we manage to spring surprises. The moment, however, required something more emotionally intelligent — like offering a simple hug.

Arshad had the motivation, skill, tenacity and grit to overcome these structural barriers and make it to the highest level in the Olympic javelin event against all odds. His inspirational journey is something to celebrate and to admire.

At the same time, how many of us are hampered in our pursuit of excellence because of the structural barriers that surround us? How many of us feel at a disadvantage competing against citizens of other countries with better resources, support and guidance? How many of us have imagined our achievements in a different world where such barriers do not exist? For every Arshad Nadeem, there are millions of others who are never able to follow their dreams because the system just does not support it.

But it shouldn’t have to be this way.

The fact that so many of us flock to our television screens whenever Pakistan pulls off a sporting upset shows that we are all thirsty to showcase our excellence to the world. Arshad’s example shows that some of us are even willing to put everything on the line in the pursuit of this goal. Rather than squandering such thirst and motivation, we need to do a better job of enabling our citizens to succeed on the global stage. As we celebrate our rare sporting successes, we should also ask ourselves tough questions about the broader structural challenges that confront us in our respective fields. We should constructively think of ways in which we can collectively enable our citizens to succeed rather than requiring them to jump through so many hoops. Finally, we should start addressing these barriers today in order to enable the success of our citizens in the future.

Rare sporting successes might be a reason for us to smile, celebrate and be inspired. But they should also be reason for a collective exercise in soul searching by asking ourselves some hard questions.

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