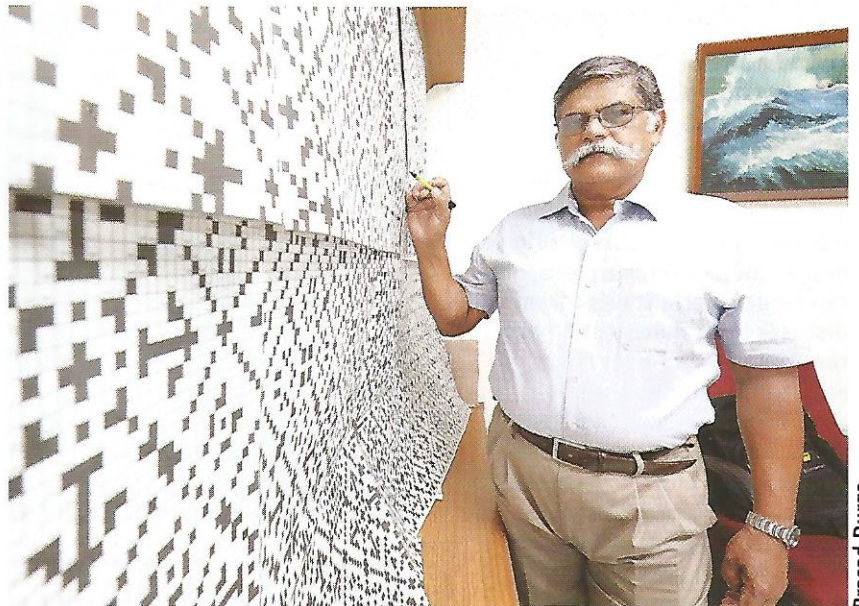


WORD PERFECT

Beating 250 participants through eight preliminary rounds and two final rounds over a period of three months, retired **Colonel Deepak Gopinath** won the first ever Indian Crossword League in December 2013. "Someone mentioned the contest on my blog and I decided to give it a shot," explains the 61 year-old resident of Bengaluru. "Every week, a challenge would be posted on the web. The top 10 scorers were called to the grand finale after eight weeks. The finals were held in Bengaluru, as seven of the 10 contenders were from here." He started with five points but zipped forward to 50 in the decider, which led him to be crowned champion.

He started solving crosswords in the 1970s, inspired by a cousin from IIT. "With no access to the Internet then, I would sit with a dictionary to crack the codes," he recalls. "Initially, I was just happy to figure out a few clues, but over the years I got pretty good at it." Having served in the Army, Gopinath has travelled across the country to Delhi, Pune, Baramulla and Port Blair, among other places. "I had not been consistently solving crosswords during my travels, but ever since I was posted in Port Blair in 1995, I have been doing them diligently every day."

He also runs a blog since 2009, where he posts the solution to *The Hindu's* crossword every day at 8:30 am, so the solution is available before people leave for work. How has he managed to do it every single day for five years? "My military discipline comes in handy," he says with a chuckle. "I start taking a stab at it around 6:30 am and it takes anywhere between 30 to 90 minutes to solve. Then, I format and add annotations for the benefit of the readers. There have been times when I have put up the solutions even while travelling in a train." Little wonder then, that he



Prasad Durga

has a strict community of followers who religiously visit his site everyday and share their comments.

"There is strong bonding within the community of crossword enthusiasts," he says. "We have met a few times in Chennai and in Bengaluru over lunch. Obviously, we talk a lot about our common passion, but we also chat about other topics." The strong sense of camaraderie in the group can be felt as there is mutual admiration for each other's blogs. "As a matter of fact, I have personally met four of the final 10 contestants even before the contest," he smiles.

When asked if he manages to complete the morning crossword every day, he replies, "Almost 99 per cent. Even otherwise, I still post the solution at 8:30 am and someone else takes a shot at the missing clues." So, are there standard solution techniques that are described in books? "There are books on the subject but my approach is self-learned. For example, with experience, I learnt that the definition of the word is always at the beginning or the end of

the clue, hardly in the middle." He also sets a crossword puzzle every Sunday at 10:30 am for his blog followers to attempt. "Setting a puzzle is not everyone's cup of tea. It's one thing to solve a crossword, but creating one is a different ballgame and needs experience."

What keeps his passion alive after all these years? "It's the novelty of the puzzle each day. You might lose interest in a Sudoku after some time because it's just playing with the numbers one to nine. But in crossword puzzles, it could be the same words but different hints, so there is an excitement to cracking it. Some newspapers carry American cues, like basketball players, so you either know them or you don't. But the cryptic crosswords in *The Hindu* are more fun to solve because you have to work out the hints." When prompted for advice to amateurs, he is quick to respond: "Nothing like practice! You need to have an obsession with words and the perseverance to go at it. Nowadays, the Internet also makes it simpler."

—Ramya Srinivasan