

Aruna Shahi

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SEPTEMBER 24, 2026



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By Nepal Digest - September 24, 2026 - Nepal

Aruna Shahi's career is built around a position that rarely receives the loudest applause. Setters do not usually finish the rally; they make the rally possible. They read the block, judge the defence, decide who should attack and deliver the ball with enough precision for someone else to score. For more than a decade, Shahi has played that role for Nepal's women's volleyball team, growing from a schoolgirl in Myagdi into the captain of the national side and one of the defining figures in the professionalisation of the country's national sport.

Her story is not a simple rise from obscurity to fame. It is a story about persistence in a sport that, when she started, offered little money, limited infrastructure and few obvious career guarantees for women. It is also about how leadership looks in a team where the captain cannot dominate every point herself. Shahi's influence comes from organisation, calmness and the ability to understand what every teammate needs in the middle of a fast-moving rally.

By the time Nepal began winning regional titles and pushing India to five sets in major South Asian competition, Shahi had become more than a senior player. She represented a bridge between an earlier generation that played largely for passion and a newer generation beginning to see volleyball as a legitimate profession. Her career runs alongside the sport's own transformation.

Growing Up in Myagdi

Shahi's volleyball story began in Myagdi, where school courts and local competition gave her an early introduction to the game. In a 2020 interview with Kathmandu Post, she recalled being drawn to volleyball while watching older students play. What attracted her was not one spectacular skill but the speed of the game itself—the need to react, communicate and make decisions quickly.

At first, volleyball was simply enjoyable. Like many young athletes in Nepal, Shahi did not begin with a clear professional pathway in front of her. Coaches gradually recognised her potential and

encouraged her to train more seriously. That support helped move the sport from recreation into commitment.

She joined the western regional team while still young, entering a competitive system where travel, facilities and financial support were all limited. The experience exposed her to stronger players and higher expectations. It also made clear that reaching the national team would require more than natural ability.

Why the Setter Matters

Volleyball is unusual among major team sports because one player touches the ball on almost every attacking sequence without necessarily being the one who scores. The setter receives the second contact, reads the court and chooses which attacker to release. A fraction of a second can determine whether the hitter faces a single blocker or a wall of two or three defenders.

This makes the position both technical and psychological. The setter must understand the tendencies of teammates, recognise when one attacker has lost rhythm and know when to change tempo. She has to stay composed after mistakes because the next decision arrives immediately.

For Shahi, that role became a natural foundation for leadership. Captaincy is not only about giving speeches; it is often about distributing confidence. A setter is constantly doing exactly

that—deciding who receives the next chance.

Entering the National Team

Shahi's rise came during a period when women's volleyball in Nepal remained under-resourced. Players trained with limited access to high-performance facilities, international exposure was inconsistent and the professional club structure was still developing. Many talented athletes eventually left sport because employment and financial security mattered more than continuing an uncertain playing career.

Reaching the national team therefore represented both achievement and sacrifice. International selection brought pride, but it did not automatically solve the practical difficulties surrounding training, income or long-term career planning. Shahi stayed through that uncertainty.

Her continued presence gradually gave her a senior role inside the team. Younger players entered a squad in which she had already experienced the frustrations of insufficient preparation and the emotional weight of representing a country with far greater expectations than resources.

Volleyball Becomes Nepal's National Sport

In 2017, Nepal officially declared volleyball its national sport. Symbolically, the decision gave the game a level of status it had

long enjoyed informally in schools, villages and local tournaments. Volleyball is relatively accessible compared with sports that require expensive infrastructure, and it has deep participation across the country.

The declaration did not instantly solve structural problems. A national label cannot replace courts, coaching systems, sports science, domestic leagues or secure player contracts. But it increased public attention and created stronger expectations for the federation and national teams.

For Shahi and her teammates, the timing mattered. Their best international years would unfold just as the sport's national identity was becoming more explicit. Success on court could now be interpreted as success in the country's official national game.

The Central Zone Breakthrough

One of the defining achievements of Shahi's captaincy came at the Asian Volleyball Confederation Central Zone Senior Women's Volleyball tournament. Nepal won the title without dropping a set, securing the country's first major international championship in women's volleyball. The result changed how the team saw itself.

Winning mattered, but the manner of the victory mattered too. Straight-set results suggested control rather than survival. A team that had often entered regional competition as an underdog was beginning to expect that it could dictate matches.

For Shahi, the title was a validation of years spent in a sport where major international reward had been rare. It also gave younger players a reference point: Nepal did not have to treat participation itself as success.

The 2019 South Asian Games

The 13th South Asian Games in Kathmandu provided an even larger stage. Nepal reached the women's volleyball final and faced India, the region's traditional powerhouse. The match became one of the memorable team-sport moments of the Games as Nepal pushed India through five sets before ultimately losing.

Shahi later said that the silver medal meant more to her personally than the earlier Central Zone gold because of the level of competition and the magnitude of the event. The loss hurt precisely because Nepal had come so close. A silver medal can feel more painful than a comfortable bronze when the gold appears reachable.

Yet the match changed public expectations. Nepal had not merely reached the final; it had forced India into a genuine contest. For a national team trying to redefine its place in South Asian volleyball, that mattered enormously.

Leadership After Disappointment

Captains are most visible after victories, but their real value often appears after defeat. A five-set loss in a home final creates emotional turbulence: players replay individual mistakes, supporters focus on turning points and the team has to absorb the disappointment quickly.

Shahi's role required turning that frustration into motivation rather than allowing it to become a permanent psychological burden. In her 2020 interview, she described the defeat as something that pushed the team to aim higher rather than simply celebrate the silver.

This attitude became part of her leadership style. Nepal's women's volleyball programme could not afford to define itself by near-misses. The standard had to move from "competitive with stronger teams" toward "capable of beating them."

The Captain as Emotional Regulator

Shahi has spoken about the weight of captaincy and how different it felt from simply being a senior player. The responsibility was initially overwhelming because the captain becomes the point through which pressure from coaches, officials, media and teammates often converges. Every tactical problem can become a leadership problem.

Volleyball intensifies that pressure because momentum changes rapidly. One poor rotation can transform a comfortable lead into a tied set. Players need emotional stability as much as technical instruction.

From the setter's position, Shahi is uniquely placed to influence that stability. She touches the ball constantly and can physically reconnect a nervous teammate with the match by giving her a well-timed attacking opportunity.

A Generation That Stayed

One of the realities Shahi repeatedly highlighted is that previous generations of volleyball players often left the sport because there was little long-term security. Some went abroad, others found work and stopped training seriously. The talent loss was not always about motivation; it was about economics.

By the late 2010s and early 2020s, conditions were beginning to improve. Departmental teams, clubs, tournaments and sponsorship opportunities offered more pathways than before, even if the sport still lagged behind its potential. National-team success helped accelerate that process because visibility attracts investment.

Shahi's career therefore represents a transitional generation. She began when "career in volleyball" sounded uncertain and stayed

long enough to see younger athletes enter a more promising environment.

The Importance of Domestic Competition

International results are impossible to sustain without a strong domestic calendar. Players need regular high-intensity matches to improve decision-making, fitness and tactical understanding. Occasional national-team camps cannot replace competitive repetition.

Shahi has long benefited from Nepal's club and departmental volleyball structure, where stronger domestic teams provide a base for national players. But the gap between the best teams and the rest remains a challenge. A deeper league would produce more setters, hitters and defenders capable of pushing national players for places.

For Nepal to move permanently beyond regional competitiveness, women's volleyball needs professional seasons rather than sporadic events. Shahi's generation showed what can be achieved with limited resources; the next generation will need a stronger system.

What Makes a Setter a Leader

Setters need to know people as well as tactics. One hitter may respond well to direct criticism, another may lose confidence. A

young attacker might need a simple set to regain rhythm, while a senior player may demand the ball in a difficult moment.

This interpersonal awareness is why setters frequently become captains. They are already managing relationships within the match. The job is partly about distributing the ball and partly about distributing responsibility.

Shahi's leadership has often been described through calmness rather than flamboyance. That suits the position. The setter's best work is often invisible because the point is remembered for the spike rather than the pass that made it possible.

The Physical Demands of Longevity

Volleyball may not involve the constant running of football, but it places enormous stress on knees, ankles, shoulders and fingers. Setters jump, dive and change direction hundreds of times through training and competition. Over a long career, recovery becomes as important as practice.

For athletes in Nepal, sports science and rehabilitation support have historically been inconsistent. Veteran players often learn body management through experience rather than through large performance departments. Staying at international level therefore requires discipline beyond what supporters see on match day.

Shahi's longevity reflects that hidden work. A captain cannot lead if she is not fit enough to remain on court and technically sharp enough to justify selection on merit.

Women's Sport and Visibility

Shahi's career also sits inside the larger growth of women's sport in Nepal. Female athletes in volleyball, football, cricket and athletics have gained stronger media attention, but the commercial gap between men's and women's sport remains significant. Success alone does not automatically produce equal resources.

Women's volleyball has an advantage because the national team has repeatedly generated strong public interest and because the sport is widely played by girls across the country. The challenge is converting that popularity into stable salaries, youth academies and a professional league.

Captains such as Shahi inevitably become advocates as well as athletes. Every interview about the team becomes an opportunity to explain what the players still need.

Representing Myagdi on a National Stage

Shahi's journey from Myagdi also reflects the decentralised nature of volleyball in Nepal. Unlike sports whose elite pathways are concentrated almost entirely in Kathmandu, volleyball talent often

emerges from districts where the game is part of school and community culture.

This geographic spread should be one of Nepal's strengths. A national development system capable of identifying and training players from outside the capital would have access to a much larger talent pool.

Shahi's story shows what can happen when local enthusiasm meets sustained coaching. The next challenge is making that pathway systematic rather than dependent on individual luck.

Changing Expectations for Young Players

When Shahi began, young girls who loved volleyball had few senior examples of women sustaining long national-team careers. Today, they can point to a captain who has led Nepal to titles and regional finals. Role models change the perceived possibility of a profession.

This is not merely inspirational. It affects practical decisions. Families are more likely to support a daughter's athletic ambitions when they can see evidence of scholarships, employment, national recognition or international opportunities.

The growth of women's volleyball therefore depends partly on stories like Shahi's becoming normal rather than exceptional.

What Nepal Still Needs

Regional success has shown that Nepal can compete, but the next step requires structural investment. Better youth coaching, strength and conditioning, international exposure and a reliable domestic league would help close the gap with stronger Asian programmes. The sport also needs more specialised coaching for positions such as setter, libero and middle blocker.

Federation governance matters too. Athletes can train harder, but they cannot create competition calendars, facilities or development pathways on their own. Sustainable success requires administrative systems as disciplined as the players.

Shahi's generation has already demonstrated the competitive potential available. The responsibility now extends beyond the team.

The Meaning of the Captaincy

For Shahi, captaincy has always been closely tied to representing Nepal rather than to personal status. She has described the pride of wearing the national jersey and the emotional weight of leading teammates in international competition. That feeling is difficult to reproduce in club sport.

The captain becomes the public face of collective effort, but the role can be misleading if treated as individual glory. Volleyball is

structurally resistant to hero-ball. No player can receive, set and attack the same ball alone.

This may be why Shahi's leadership fits the sport so well. Her position already teaches that the best individual decision is often the one that allows someone else to succeed.

A Career Defined by Connection

Aruna Shahi's legacy will not be measured only by medals. It will also be measured by the players who came after her and by whether Nepal's women's volleyball team can sustain the standards her generation established. Individual careers eventually end; sporting cultures either continue or disappear.

Her years as setter and captain have helped create continuity in a team that moved from limited international expectation to genuine regional ambition. She has been part tactician, part organiser and part emotional anchor.

The Setter's Craft in a Changing Game

Modern volleyball is becoming faster, which places even greater demands on setters. Quick middle attacks, combination plays and back-row options all require precise timing, while video analysis allows opponents to study tendencies in detail. A setter who repeatedly makes the same choice becomes easier to read, so deception becomes part of the position.

Shahi's experience gives her an advantage because she has played through several tactical phases of Nepal's development. She learned in an environment where basic consistency was often the priority, then helped lead a team increasingly expected to use speed and variation against better-prepared opponents. That evolution requires constant technical adjustment rather than relying on seniority alone.

It also changes the relationship with younger hitters. New generations often arrive with greater physical preparation and different attacking habits, forcing the setter to keep learning even while serving as the senior figure in the group.

The Importance of Continuity

National teams from smaller sporting systems frequently struggle with continuity. Players leave for work or study, coaching staffs change and international schedules can be irregular. Every departure forces the group to rebuild relationships that stronger programmes take for granted.

Shahi's long presence provided Nepal with a rare point of stability. A setter who knows how teammates respond under pressure can shorten the time a new combination needs to become functional. This kind of institutional memory is difficult to measure statistically, but teams notice immediately when it disappears.

The same continuity matters off the court. Younger players inherit habits about preparation, communication and national-team responsibility from veterans long before those habits are written into formal manuals. Shahi's generation helped turn informal experience into a culture future teams can build upon.

When Leadership Becomes Legacy

A captain's final impact is often visible only after she is no longer the centre of the team. If younger setters understand the position more deeply, if players expect professionalism as normal and if Nepal continues entering major matches believing it can win rather than merely compete, then the standards established by Shahi's era will have become institutional rather than personal.

This is why her career should not be measured only through the medal table. The Central Zone title and South Asian Games silver are important milestones, but the broader achievement is helping women's volleyball move from occasional national excitement toward a clearer professional identity. The next generation should not have to begin from the same uncertainty she did.

For Shahi, that may be the most fitting legacy for a setter. Her best work has always been about preparing the ball for someone else.

The Next Generation of Setters

One of the clearest signs that Shahi's era has mattered will be whether Nepal produces more specialised setters rather than relying on talented players to learn the position informally. Setter development requires repetition, tactical education and coaches willing to teach decision-making rather than only technique. The position is too important to be treated as whoever happens to deliver the second ball.

Young players watching Shahi have a model for what the role can become at international level. They can study not only her hands but her positioning, communication and emotional control. A strong succession plan would allow Nepal to preserve those lessons while also developing setters with different physical and tactical strengths.

That is how an individual career becomes a national system: when the next player begins from a higher starting point than the one before her. For another view of women's elite sport in Nepal, Nepal Digest profiles football midfielder Preeti Rai and swimmer Gaurika Singh.

Her career also shows why national-sport status must be matched by institutional ambition. Recognition can inspire players, but only sustained investment can protect the progress they create. The strongest tribute to Shahi's generation would be a volleyball system in which future captains inherit better facilities, deeper

leagues and clearer professional security than she did.

In that sense, her leadership has always been consistent with the position she chose.

That is what makes her story distinctive. Aruna Shahi did not lead Nepal from the most glamorous position on the court. She led from the place where every attack begins—reading the game, trusting her teammates and putting the ball exactly where someone else could finish the point.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/aruna-shahi-nepal-womens-volleyball-captain/>