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medal or
two at Paris
2024

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THE BOY WHO WILL RULE

The starry-eyed Lakshya Sen from the hill town of Almora is taking on the world's best shuttlers and winning. Peek into the making of one of India's most exciting badminton players





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India needs
a longer
league
season

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PROMISE OF A TALL FUTURE

Sivasakthi Narayanan is shaping up to be inheritor of the best 'Indian footballer' crown. The Karaikudi youngster's emergence as the country's goal-scoring machine augurs well for the future of the sport

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A GIRL OF CALIBER

Para shooter Avani Lekhara, who won gold at the Tokyo Paralympics, now wants to use her prowess and fame to champion parasport's quest for visibility and equality



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HERE TO CREATE A RACQUET

Anahat Singh is ready to take flight in the world of squash with her supremely light feet. The teenager is living up to the hype, and soon might be living out a nation's dream



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Putting
faith in
hockey's
GenNext

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DRIBBLING INTO NATION'S HEARTS

The 23-year-old from Sonipat, Haryana, has settled quickly into the Indian hockey squad. With the Asian Games around the corner and one eye on Paris 2024, Abhishek is relishing the opportunity to show all the hype has been justified



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Indian
shooting
can strike
big in
Paris

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RHYTHM DIVINE

How teenage gusto, love for guns and an insatiable appetite for medals have come together to give India its next big shooting star in Rhythm Sangwan



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ANJU BOBBY GEORGE

Expect
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medals from
jump events

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GIANT LEAP OF FAITH

Shaili Singh's recent exploits have ensured many people from many small towns will feel pride in the story of a girl from Jhansi who has risen from anonymity to stake her claim as India's latest Indian track and field sensation

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wrestling
will
emerge
stronger

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HOME IS WHERE THE MAT IS

From the hallowed square of the clay pit to the wrestling mat, Aman Shrawat is primed to batter opponents and stir hearts to earn a place in the pantheon of Indian greats



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Batting on
spin-friendly
pitches is a
challenge

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DOLLAR LUMI

LIVING UP TO HIS NAME

Yashasvi Jaiswal has not set outlandish goals, but his barnstorming form in domestic cricket and the ongoing IPL has vaulted him into contention for an India cap



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Saturday, May 27, 2023

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SATWIK AND CHIRAG HAVE QUICKLY SOARED TO THE TOP ECHELONS OF THEIR SPORT. THE CHALLENGE NOW IS TO STAY THERE. LUCKILY FOR INDIAN BADMINTON, THE TWO HAVE WHAT IT TAKES.

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Expert opinion



Developing home-grown professionals, such as coaches, trainers, and other experts, will enable us to maintain healthy growth in sports at all levels, says Abhinav Bindra.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Ayon Sengupta



CHANGING WITH THE CHANGING TIME

Keeping pace with the taste of today's generation, brought up in a world of Instagram reels and e-sports thrills, **we are unveiling a newer, bolder Sportstar**, while still holding on to the ethos of honest journalism that we have always practised.

I discovered a treasure trove on my recent trip back home. Tucked away in a corner of our Kolkata home was a box full of Sportstar posters that, for much of my childhood, were my most prized possessions.

The posters of Kapil, Sachin, Maradona, which adorned every free wall of the house, made them a part of my daily life and not just some stars whom I watched occasionally on black-and-white TV.

The Sportstar posters brought our heroes closer to millions like me.

To my surprise, I have realised over the years that our heroes, too, were equally enamoured by them and many of them measured their success with an appearance in that much-loved centrespread.

Sportstar magazine, for 45 long years, has been their fellow traveller, chronicling the trials and triumphs of our athletes across the globe. Our strong team of 50+ dedicated sports journalists have been capturing true stories of grit, passion and success, while always keeping our readers in the forefront.

Sports, much like everything else in the

world, have gone through dramatic changes in the past decade and a half. The scoops and ramps of T20 franchisee cricket have taken over the copybook defence of Test cricket, while in football offside rules now change every season.

Sportstar, too, is changing with the changing game.

Keeping pace with the taste of today's generation, brought up in a world of Instagram reels and e-sports thrills, we are unveiling a newer, bolder Sportstar, while still holding on to the ethos of honest journalism that we have always practised.

We have combined new journalistic features that have become a staple in the digital era, where we consume a lot of our news and information on hand-held devices. We have brought the best of mobile storytelling to the print pages of the magazine, creating layouts that are vibrant with visuals, graphics, quotes, bolder colours, closer crops and a daring and more legible typeface that we feel would best accentuate the drama and passion that sports evoke.

The much-adored posters, too, will see a dramatic change and we will mix our love for

A TREAT TO THE READERS

action photographs with inspired artworks from our talented designers – turning our champions into Superheroes.

As Sportstar seeks to entertain and enthrall our audiences with sharp and incisive narrating of major games and sports as they unfold, we also see it as our mission to raise consciousness in our country of the need to become a major sporting nation. We want to reach out to the youth, to participate in the national endeavour to build skills in grassroots sports and to identify new talent that will be an asset to our country.

We have never been just about the stars. We wrote about a little-known Sachin Tendulkar when he was knocking big hundreds in the Mumbai maidans, we highlighted the achievements of an adolescent Leander Paes in the Bertram Tournament in Chennai, or a young Virat Kohli's steely resolve to play in the face of personal tragedy. Sportstar will continue to regularly cover and report on age-group tournaments. Extraordinary young talents, ready to shoulder the burden of India's expectations, will find pride of place in our pages, as you can see in our effort to put the spotlight on India's nine brightest young sport stars of today.

It's a thrilling time for Indian sports as our athletes gear up to beat the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics medal count at next year's Paris Games, and we at Sportstar will continue to take you closer to all the thrilling action that'll unfold.

We, like you, are all in for sports!



It's a new Sportstar you are enjoying today, the results of months of research, meetings, design experimentation and rethinking how this iconic publication can best serve its many readers in a mobile world. We in journalism are transforming the way we create and display content across platforms. Today, the average person is bombarded by news and information 24/7.

Specifically, sports fans catch every detail of an event as it happens, in real time. Many turn to their mobile devices as many as 114 times or more a day. Headlines are there to be consumed, tempting us to read stories constantly. We lean forward to read those headlines, and often lean back to read the stories beyond the headline. We already know that 85% of you read Sportstar on a mobile device. That is the backdrop of how we at Garcia Media, working closely with the team of Sportstar have conceptualised the publication you are reading today. First, we have taken into account the rich history of Sportstar, one that makes it one of the most read magazines in India. Second, we analysed ways to incorporate new journalistic strategies that adapt to the digital era of communications in which we now consume news and information. Third, we have redesigned the publication to create pages/screens that are vibrant with visuals, graphics, photos, videos and a legible typeface and appropriate colour palette. We at Garcia Media are honoured to be involved with this transformation. Our last engagement with Sportstar was in 2006, at which time we helped with a change of format to a newspaper tabloid size. It was colourful and vibrant, and today's editors of the Sportstar wanted to capture some of that youthful energy. I think we have accomplished that. Some key center-pieces of the new Sportstar: we have refreshed the brand, emphasised a Multiplatform approach, with more mobile driven stories, a more photo-oriented print edition, and more up to date push notifications and breaking news. You will find the new Sportstar easier to navigate, in your platform of choice. A treat lies in store for all of you readers of the Sportstar. If you are a habitual reader, you will recognise the sports magazine that you are familiar with; if you are a new reader, you will benefit from what happens when a news title with an unmatched history of greatness aims to be greater and more appropriate for the way we consume news and information today. Cheers to a successful launch!

Mario Garcia & team

Rahm sets record for most money earned in a PGA Tour season »

Jon Rahm fell short in his bid to successfully defend his Mexico Open title but the Spaniard's second place finish set a new benchmark for the most money won in a single season on the PGA Tour.

World number one Rahm, who counts a Masters triumph among his four PGA Tour wins this season, made \$839,300 for finishing second at Vidanta Vallarta, bringing his 2022-23 season total to \$14,462,840.

That tops the previous record of \$14,046,910 set last season by 2022 Masters winner Scottie Scheffler.

LEGEND IN HIS OWN RIGHT



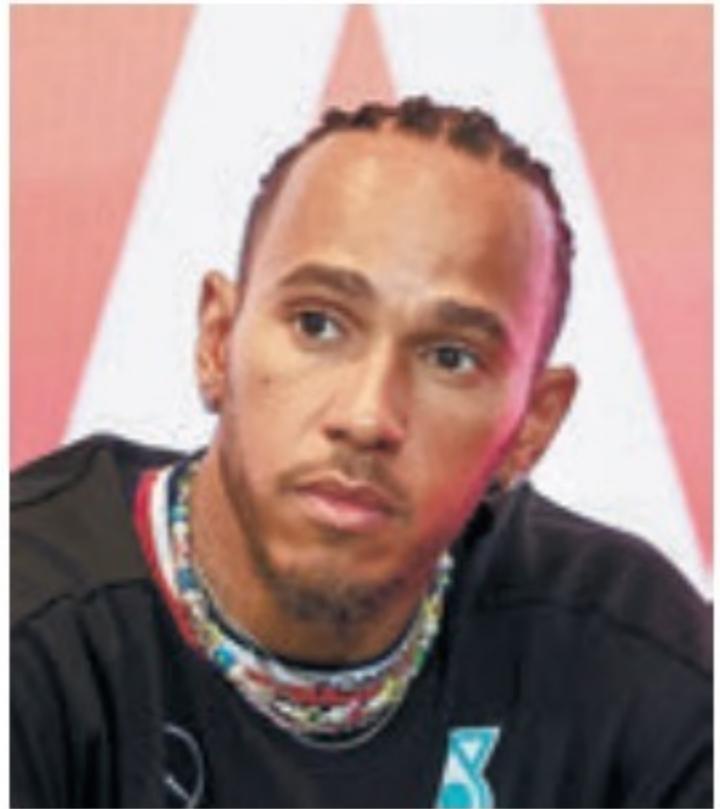
Ralph Boston, the 1960 Olympic long jump champion who broke the world record several times, has died aged 83. Boston broke Jesse Owens' remarkable stranglehold on the world record when he leapt 8.21m in 1960 in Walnut, California.

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« The media is making me a villain, the fans making me a villain, and then that just creates a whole different persona on me. — Memphis Grizzlies guard Dillon Brooks »

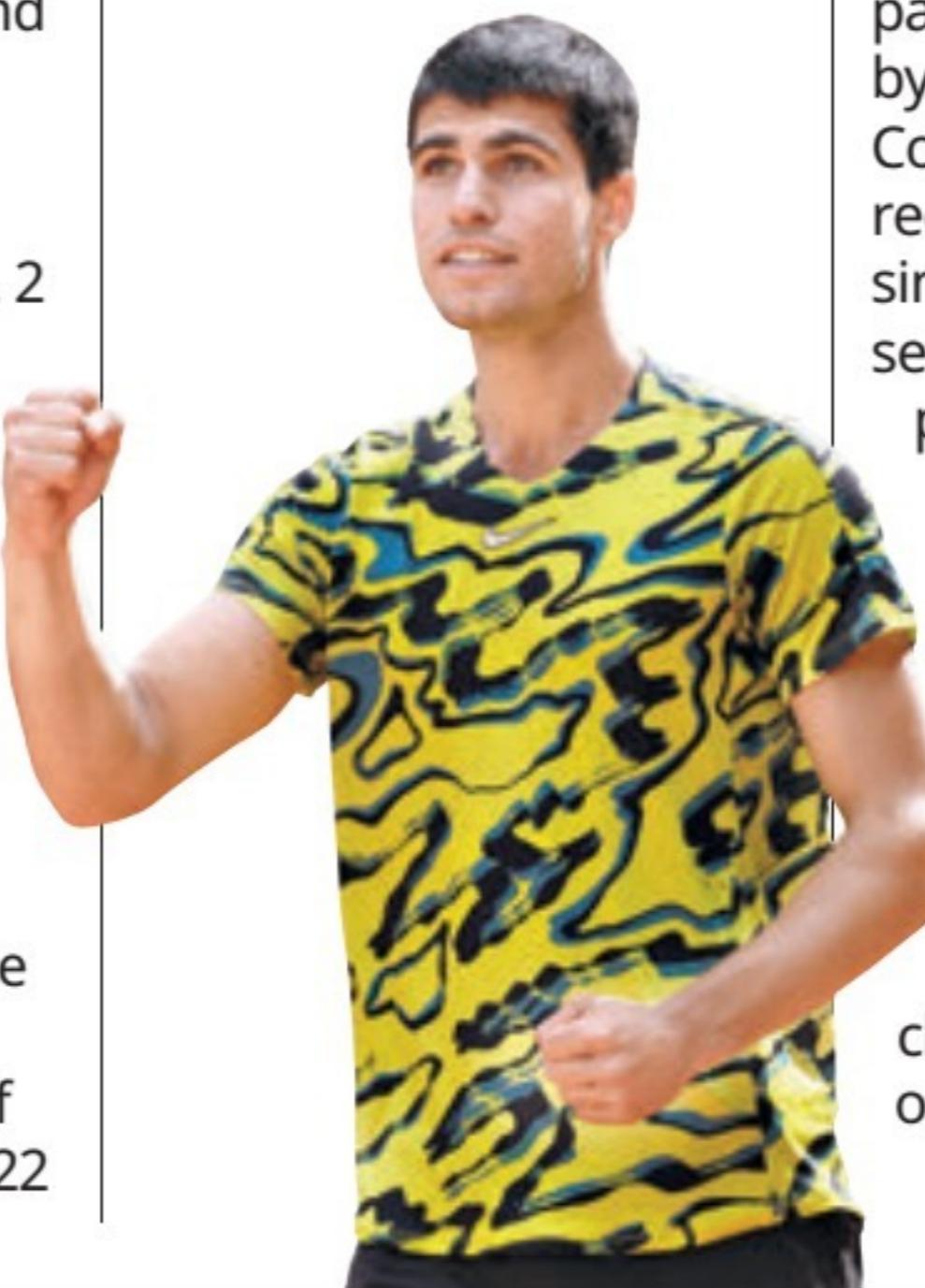


« It's not good at all I stand by those within the community here (Miami). I hope they continue to stand firm. I'll have the rainbow on my helmet. It's no different to when we were in Saudi. — Lewis Hamilton »

May 5

Carlos Alcaraz turned 20. When compared with 'The Big Three' — Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic — and how they fared during their teen years on the ATP Tour, the World No. 2 Spaniard (9) is ahead of Federer (1) and Djokovic (5) in terms of titles and lags behind compatriot Nadal, who had 16. In terms of highest ranking achieved as a teenager, Alcaraz went past all three as he made the biggest jump to the top spot in the history of ATP Rankings. When 2022

began, he was ranked 32nd but with his U.S. Open triumph in New York in September, he became the first-ever teenage World No. 1.



35

goals scored by Erling Haaland in the ongoing season has seen him go past the mark of 34 set by Alan Shearer and Andy Cole in the 1990s to set a record of most goals in a single Premier League season. The Norwegian powerhouse showed his swiftness of foot and subtlety in front of goal by racing clear to score Manchester City's second in a 3-0 win over West Ham that put the English champions back on top of the table.

INTO THE HALL OF FAME



China's Lin Dan (right) and Malaysia's Lee Chong Wei have been elected to the 2023 Badminton World Federation (BWF) Hall of Fame, the world governing body of the sport announced. Lee and Lin, who retired in 2019 and 2020 respectively after glorious careers, will be inducted at a ceremony on May 26 at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre in Malaysia. GETTYIMAGES

KEEPING ALIVE THE LEGACY

Napoli finally wins the Scudetto, 33 years after Diego Maradona's heroics.

Serie A

Fireworks went up in unison. The streets were adorned in Blue and White. There were tears of elation and shrieks of joy. 33 years after Diego Maradona's fabled era, the city of Naples had reason to celebrate. The South had broken the dominance of the North. Napoli was the champion of Italian top-flight football, and no team in the land deserved the title more than Luciano Spalletti's men.

The equation was simple for Napoli — one point



FANS INVADED THE PITCH AT THE DACIA ARENA, AND THE NAPOLI FAITHFUL BACK HOME CELEBRATED LIKE THERE WAS NO TOMORROW.

against Udinese, and the title was there for the taking. After passing up on an opportunity earlier to clinch the title at home after a 1-1 draw with Salernitana, celebrations were put on hold. The wait could have been prolonged after Sandi Lovric scored early for Udinese in the 13th minute. But Victor Osimhen scored the equaliser in the 52nd minute - a strike that ended a city's patient wait for the Scudetto. Fans invaded the pitch at the Dacia Arena, and the Napoli faithful back home celebrated like there was no tomorrow.

Despite the title picture being done and dusted, Serie A still has a lot to offer in terms of Champions League qualification.

Juventus, after its recent lifeline — temporary restoration of its 15 points, which were deducted due to financial

irregularities in transfer dealings — is well on its way to securing a place in Europe's most prestigious club competition and strengthened its position with a 2-0 win against Atalanta, which still has a chance of qualifying for the UCL.

It was a good week for the Nerazzurri and the Rossenari. While Inter secured a comfortable 2-0 win against Jose Mourinho's Roma, Milan won against Lazio with the same scoreline.

And, lest one should think Napoli would put its foot off the pedal, having already clinched the league, it continued its dominating season

One for the ages: Napoli players celebrate their latest Serie A title at the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona in Naples, Italy. AP

with a 1-0 win against Fiorentina in its latest fixture.

After matchday 34, champion Napoli enjoys a 17-point lead at the top. Juventus, Lazio and Inter are second, third and fourth with 66, 64 and 63 points, respectively. Milan is breathing down on Inter's neck in fifth with 61 points, with Atalanta and Roma in sixth and seventh — both teams having 58 points.

Premier League

Manchester City is well on course to win three back-to-back Premier League titles with a 2-1 win against Leeds United, which brought Sam Allardyce on board to save itself from relegation.

It is unlikely Arsenal would win the title, considering how ruthless City is at the moment but Mikel Arteta's men kept themselves in the race with a 2-0 win against Newcastle United, which is itself looking to qualify for the UCL.

Talking about Champions League spots, Erik Ten Hag's Manchester United failed to capitalise on Newcastle's loss and suffered a 1-0 defeat against West Ham United, which played with swagger at home. Earlier in the week, the Red Devils conceded a late penalty against Brighton and Hove Albion courtesy of a handball by Luke Shaw, which saw them succumb to a 1-0 defeat as well. Meanwhile, Liverpool, which has recovered well in a season that seemed like a lost cause, is inching closer to dethroning United at fourth with a 1-0 win against Brentford. Tottenham Hotspur also kept its hopes alive with a 1-0 win against Crystal Palace.

After six-straight defeats in all competitions, Frank Lampard's Chelsea officially saved itself from relegation after beating Bournemouth 3-1. The win keeps the Blues in 11th position with 42 points.

After matchday 35, Man City enjoys a one-point lead at the top of the table with 82 points over second-placed Arsenal, with an extra





game in hand. Newcastle and Man United occupy third and fourth with 65 and 63 points, respectively. Liverpool is fifth with 62 points, having played one more game than its arch-rival. Spurs are in sixth with 57 points.

La Liga

Barcelona is on course to win its first La Liga title since Lionel Messi's departure after a narrow 1-0 win against 10-man Osasuna. Jordi Alba scored a late goal in the 85th minute, sealing all three points for the Blaugranas.

Real Madrid lost 2-0 to Real Sociedad, but the Los Blancos had reason to celebrate after clinching the Copa del Rey for the first time since 2014. With league hopes nearly extinguished, it could be a nice morale booster for Carlo Ancelotti's men, with a crucial UCL semifinal tie coming up against Pep Guardiola's well-oiled City.

Atletico Madrid maintained its stellar form with a 5-1 win against Cadiz, stretching its unbeaten run at home to nine games in the league.

After matchday 33, Barcelona is top with 82 points. Atletico's recent form has put Diego Simeone's club in second in his last season at the club. Real Madrid is third with 68 points,

Pulsating: Jordi Alba's matchwinner takes Barcelona one step closer to La Liga glory. AFP

and Sociedad occupies the last UCL spot in fourth with 61 points.

Bundesliga

Defending champion Bayern Munich has not been at its clinical best over the past few matches, but Thomas Tuchel's men did enough to clinch a 2-1 win against Werder Bremen to maintain its narrow lead at the top of the table.

Borussia Dortmund gave a 6-0 thrashing to VfL Wolfsburg, with Karim Adeyemi and Jude Bellingham scoring a brace each for the Ruhr side. Sebastien Haller continued his inspirational comeback with a goal, and Donyell Malen also bagged one.

RB Leipzig did enough to eke out a 1-0 win, while Union Berlin suffered a disappointing 1-0 loss against Augsburg.

After matchday 31, Bayern is top with 65 points. Dortmund is second with just a point behind. RB Leipzig and Union Berlin are in third and fourth with 57 and 56 points, respectively. Freiburg also has 56 points, but Berlin is above due to a better goal-difference.

Ligue 1

There was drama inside the house of defending champion Paris Saint-Germain, and Lionel Messi was at the centre of it. After the club suffered a 1-3 loss against Lorient, the Argentine took an unauthorised trip to Saudi Arabia with his family, which irked the club management and resulted in a two-week suspension for Messi. Since then, Messi has issued an apology video, stating his point of view, and despite his absence, PSG managed a 3-1 win against Troyes in its latest match.

Lens has enjoyed a great season, and it showed why it is in UCL contention with its latest 2-1 win against Marseille. Monaco also kept its UCL hopes alive with a 2-1 win against Angers. Lyon played a thriller of a match in its 5-4 win against Montpellier. With the score level at 4-4, Alexandre Lacazette scored a penalty in the 10th minute of second-half additional time to win three points for Lyon. After matchday 34, PSG enjoys a six-point lead at the top with 78 points. Lens is second with 72 points, with Marseille and Monaco in third and fourth, with 70 and 64 points, respectively.

Aneesh Dey

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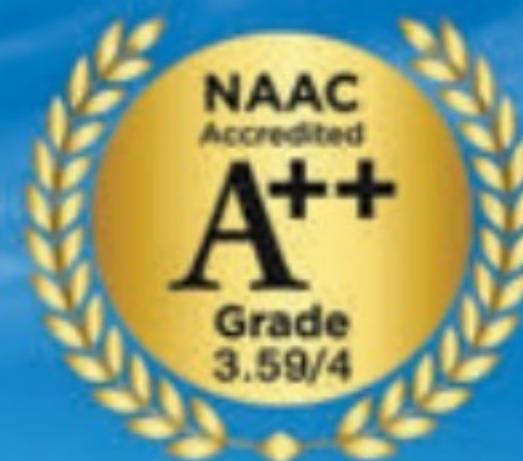
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ONE FINAL HURRAH

Lalith Kalidas

Twitter @lal_kal

Jonathan Dwight Jones was born for the Octagon. For a man who has dominated the UFC since his early 20s, Jon Jones has made the spotlight among the pound-for-pound fighters his own.

Nine months into his MMA training in 2008, 21-year-old Jones was walloping his small-time opponents in Massachusetts and New Jersey.

It took the skinny teen from Rochester, New York, just two minutes in the haloed Octagon on August 9, 2008, to offer a glimpse of what he could bring with his fledgling striking and hardened Greco-Roman grappling against Brazilian Andre Gusmao.

A win in his first title fight on March 19, 2011, over champion Maurício "Shogun" Rua in a third-round TKO finish at UFC 128 built a cult following and a stream of animosity. Jones' flashy lifestyle outside the arena has seen him spiral from one turmoil to another. A hit-and-run case in 2015 was just the start. A tiff with UFC chairman Dana White over his pay in early 2020 would prompt Jones to relinquish his Light Heavyweight title after a record 11 defences.

Jones hoped for a return with a jump to the heavyweight division, but a long-standing tryst with alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs haunted him again. Jones has failed numerous dope tests since 2015, ceding his title twice to one of his biggest adversaries, Daniel



Accomplishments:

Youngest UFC champion: 23 years, 243 days

Longest reign as Light Heavyweight champion in UFC history: 1501 days

Eighth UFC fighter to become champion in multiple divisions

Longest unbeaten streak in UFC history: 19 fights

Most wins in UFC title fights: 15

Cormier. A salacious drift in an Albuquerque nightclub in 2019 and a domestic violence charge against his long-time partner, Jessie Moses, tainted his legacy further.

"Bones" would have known he had only one place to win it back. After a hiatus of three years, a bulked-up yet sagacious Jones returned in a clash against Frenchman Ciry Gane for the vacant Heavyweight title at UFC 285.

Jones relished his return with a seamless guillotine choke submission within two minutes and four seconds at the T-Mobile Arena in Nevada in March 2023, sending the fraternity into rapturous applause for one of its greatest conquerors. At 35, there's nothing left to prove for Jones, who continues to rule the Octagon. While he prepares for a final hurrah, the inimitable fighter will still have to live with the odd jab on his questionable off-field sanctity.

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EN PASSANT

Viswanathan Anand



'DESTINY'S CHILD' CONQUERS THE WORLD

The story of Ding Liren, now the first Chinese male world champion, **is a heroic tale of endurance**, but with a miraculous quality about it.

Back in 1970, Bobby Fischer got into the Inter zonal because Pal Benko stepped aside, going on to win it by a 3.5-point margin. He was never behind, except against Boris Spassky, and we all know his match for the world title. Similarly, in Ding Liren's case, he had not qualified at all. This may have had something to do with the COVID restrictions, but nonetheless, he hadn't qualified.

Sergey Karjakin had to get himself banned for his conduct. Ding had to play multiple games against his compatriots to meet the qualifying criteria for the Candidates, which was dominated by Ian Nepomniachtchi. Ding finished second in the last minute by beating (Hikaru) Nakamura in the last game from a drawn position. **If the game had ended in a draw, Nakamura would have been playing the title match, instead of Ding.** Moreover, with Magnus Carlsen giving up his world title, a spot became available for Ding. He didn't lead once in the match. And when he led, it was over.

Six decisive games? That's insane. All the things that people were saying about classical chess that in World Championship matches teams are well-prepared and fight these two guys went at each other with gusto. They seemed to be happy to take the battle into each other's territory. Ding went to insane levels to destabilise the position, and we had a phenomenal match. This was the most exciting



match that anyone can recall.

In the rapid tiebreaker, there were multiple moments that could have gone one way or the other, but nothing sensational. And finally, in the fourth rapid game, Ding had the courage to try something with Rg6. By itself, the move doesn't win. But if you don't try and just agree to perpetual checks, then you won't win.



Creditable show: Ding Liren receives his trophy from FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich during the closing ceremony. REUTERS

Ding went to insane levels to destabilise the position and we had a phenomenal match. This was the most exciting match that anyone can recall.

What he showed is that sometimes you must make a bold attempt to win something. You have to take the risks. And like I said, it has a little bit of this miraculous quality. He was so unlikely to become a world champion. I mean, firstly, it was impossible, because he hadn't qualified. Then, after multiple events, we now have a Chinese world chess champion. It's quite a story!

In fact, Ding has a reputation for being a solid and technical professional player. His openings were well thought out and his playing methods were modern. There was nothing to suggest otherwise, but what was funny in this match was that their roles reversed. **Ding started to take risks like he had never taken before and seemingly went to unbalance the position of his opponent.** Maybe, it was really Richard Rapport's influence on him.

Nepo, as he had already shown in the previous match, had prepared thoroughly. He was happy to participate and get into the mud with Ding. And they fought brilliantly. The fact that we had so many decisive results, and there could have been even more, tells you a little bit about how hard they fought. The main thing was that they just fought like crazy, kind that doesn't happen anymore. That's what made this match so special.

Nepo could be 'God' one day. He could play horribly in the next game, going back and forth. I think the match itself was reflected strongly in the 12th game. That is, maybe, the most significant game of the match. Nepo could have doubled his lead or at least taken a one-point lead in the end. What happened that day was crazy. I feel that Nepo had the match in his hand and simply squandered it. Tension certainly played a role, but he often played impulsively.

Ding had a lot of fans who were really rooting for him in this match because he seemed so gentle and soft-spoken. I think his biggest impact is going to be as the first Chinese men's world champion. China has had multiple women's world champions, but Ding is the first men's world champion. That's going to be, maybe, the way in which he has maximum impact. Otherwise, a lot of the discussions about the World Championships are going to be the same old ones we've had multiple times.

I think the tenacity of Ding made the eventual difference. He simply hung in there. In my opinion, Nepo landed most of the blows. Ding hung in there till the end and almost collapsed onto the winner's podium. He defended very well. The thing is, we can talk about Nepo's mistakes, but there had to be somebody on the other side to provoke them and Ding did that.



ABHINAV BINDRA

India's first individual Olympic
gold medallist



CHANGE FROM PEOPLE-DRIVEN TO SYSTEM-DRIVEN APPROACH

It is our fervent hope that the wrestlers actions will lead to the establishment of a **more secure ecosystem** where athletes can train, excel, and thrive in a safe environment.

India stands at a pivotal juncture in the world of sports. The recent protests by our wrestlers at Jantar Mantar have ignited a passionate debate throughout the nation. These Olympic medallists, driven by their love for the sport and the greater good, are seeking to hold the federation president accountable. While the investigations are now underway, it is crucial that we deal with the issue with the utmost sensitivity.

As the Asian Games loom on the horizon, these wrestlers are sacrificing their own preparation in pursuit of a larger cause. It is our fervent hope that their actions will lead to

the establishment of a more secure ecosystem where athletes can train, excel, and thrive in a safe environment. This is especially important for our young demographic, as sports continue to engage youth across various disciplines.

Efforts must be made to ensure that proper mechanisms and systems are in place. This includes addressing the much-discussed topic of sports governance. We must transition from a people-driven system to one that is system-driven for the sake of consistency and success.

The establishment of athlete commissions for the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) and national federations should follow in this direction, allowing athletes' voices to be heard and strengthening our sports ecosystem.

While elite athletes are generally well supported, it is essential to address the sporting needs of the remaining 99%. This group, though perhaps not engaged in competitive sports, helps to bolster the strength of that top 1%. By fostering a holistic appreciation for sports among the entire



It is essential to remember that athletes belong to the nation, not to individual organisations.



Seeking justice: Wrestlers Bajrang Punia, Sakshi Malik, Vinesh Phogat and Sangeeta Phogat hold a candlelight vigil during their protest at Jantar Mantar, in New Delhi.

SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

population, we promote the development of our youth and contribute to nation-building.

Sport has the power to mould young minds, guiding our youth towards purposeful lives, imbued with strong character and an unwavering work ethic. By fostering a confident and resilient society where sound minds and healthy bodies thrive, we can ignite a vibrant energy that resonates across all aspects of our nation. It is through embracing the Olympic values of excellence, friendship, and respect that we can unite in the pursuit of sportsmanship, not only for the elite but for every individual, irrespective of their competitive aspirations. In doing so, we champion the transformative power of sport and its ability to inspire hearts and elevate the human spirit.

We must celebrate the government's prioritisation of sports and the upward trend in Indian sports performances. However, increased participation requires an environment that embraces both success and failure. As a society, we must learn to accept failure as a stepping stone towards success.

Education plays a vital role in providing clear career pathways and striking a balance in athletes' lives. Emphasising the importance of dual career paths and acknowledging that

there is life beyond sports helps nurture well-rounded individuals who contribute positively to society.

Moreover, developing home-grown professionals, such as coaches, trainers, and other experts, will enable us to maintain healthy growth in sports at all levels without relying on overseas expertise.

Organisations that support elite athletes should also adapt their roles, focusing on collaboration and prioritising grassroots development. Talent identification and nurturing should be at the forefront of these efforts.

It is essential to remember that athletes belong to the nation, not to individual organisations. As we look ahead to the Asian Games in Hangzhou and the race for Olympic qualification, let us strive to create a supportive ecosystem in which our athletes can flourish, inspire the nation, and uphold the Olympic values that are the foundation of our sporting endeavours.



Developing home-grown professionals, such as coaches, trainers, and other experts, will enable us to maintain healthy growth in sports at all levels.

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ANIL KUMBLE

Former India cricket captain



BATTING ON SPIN-FRIENDLY PITCHES A MAJOR CHALLENGE

The amount of cricket being played the world over has led to **players getting injured more** as they stay busy through the year.

The state of Indian cricket appears healthy to me. You can always enhance the quality by having the right number of teams and planning the calendar in such a way as to accommodate players who play for India. When you have the ideal competition level, it facilitates the best possible structure. It can be achieved by prioritising the quality of the competitions and identifying the players for the red ball and white-ball cricket. We have seen how the Indian Premier League (IPL) has provided the platform to push players for T20 selections.

The competitions at the domestic level are mostly aimed at selections for various formats by identifying and nurturing talent. **If you are looking at Test cricket, the focus would obviously be on the Ranji Trophy, Duleep Trophy, and Irani Cup.** These are the pipelines for players rising through the ranks. It also brings to the fore the issue of how much cricket is good for a player.

Please note that the game has changed, and the amount of cricket being played the world over has led to players getting injured more and more as they stay busy through the year. They are constantly under pressure to perform. That brings us to workload management. It is a

very difficult segment of building a team.

Any coach and captain would need to rest somebody and yet manage to get the best combination. To achieve that, one has to plan for individuals according to their strengths in the particular format.

It is tough to plan for all the players in a collective process. You can't have the same 15 and hope for them to be at their best in terms of fitness. A player, when he recovers from an injury, should be tested to see if he is match-ready.

There is an area of importance regarding the focus on spinner friendly pitches in India. There is nothing wrong, but then you also have to strike balance between bat and ball. There are hardly any spinners competing with R. Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja , Axar Patel and Kuldeep Yadav. You may have the bowlers, but you need the batters to start scoring runs (against the spinners) on such pitches.

Personally, I think batting has become a major challenge (such pitches).To help achieve the right results, it is imperative to address the quality and competitiveness of domestic matches to enable the batters to play some good spinners.

As told to Vijay Lokapally

« You can't have the same 15 and hope for them to be at their best in terms of fitness. »

Man of the moment

Riding on the back of a stunning century, **the 21-year-old has shown he is the man to watch out for in the future.**

Shayan Acharya

Twitter @ShayanAcharya

It's one of those hot May afternoons in Jaipur and Yashasvi Jaiswal is lounging by the pool at the luxurious Jai Mahal Palace — the team hotel of Rajasthan Royals. That's his favourite pastime. When he is not whacking sixes or sweating it out in the nets, chances are high that you'd find Jaiswal by the poolside.

There's a three-day break and most players are in a mood to unwind after a gruelling first leg of the Indian Premier League. Some have gone for short getaways, while others are spending quality time with their families.

But for Jaiswal, there's no escaping from the continuous ringing of his phone. After he slammed his maiden IPL century against Mumbai Indians on April 30, everyone — be it the media, fans or his friends — has tried to catch hold of him.

The soft-spoken 21-year-old answers every call with a smile, listens patiently, and ensures he answers each and every question to the point.

"For me, the best way to relax is going into the water and being around the pool. That's where I spend some alone time, and I like that," he tells *Sportstar*.

Throughout his cricketing career, Jaiswal has deliberately stayed away from the limelight, and it was



no different in the last domestic season either.

While two of his contemporaries from Mumbai cricket — Prithvi Shaw and Sarfaraz Khan — were talking points with big scores, Jaiswal, true to his nature, went about his business without much ado. He



I AM A
BELIEVER IN
DESTINY. NO
ONE CAN TAKE
THAT AWAY
FROM ME.

All eyes on him: Yashasvi celebrates his century for Rajasthan Royals during their match against Mumbai in the IPL. PTI

started off the season with two consecutive double centuries in the Duleep Trophy, followed it up with 203 off 154 deliveries against Jharkhand in the Vijay Hazare Trophy, and ended the season with another double ton — this time, against Madhya Pradesh in the Irani Cup. And, in between those doubles, there came quite a few hundreds.

Jaiswal has carried that golden run to the IPL as well. Featuring in his fourth season with Rajasthan Royals, Jaiswal started the tournament with three half-centuries before hammering that 62-ball-124 against Mumbai Indians.

Just like any other cricketer, Jaiswal dreams of donning the India colours soon, but he does not state the obvious. "I don't have any long-term targets. I want to take it one step at a time and just want to win the next game

for Royals. You can say, that's my target," Jaiswal says with a smile.

But he's just being modest. After all India captain Rohit Sharma and Royals' director of cricket, Kumar Sangakkara feel that the Mumbai-based batter, who originally hails from Uttar Pradesh, has a bright future not just with the franchise, but also in international cricket.

And these are not mere conjectures. Jaiswal's consistency has bolstered their belief. "I watched him last year, he's now taken it to the next level. I asked him 'where did you get the power from?', and he said that he's been going to the gym. That's good for him, India and Rajasthan Royals," Rohit said. His fluent drives and delightful pulls have brought him quite close to national reckoning. Those who

have followed his career are optimistic that he would break into the side — if not in all formats immediately — before the year end. And, then, it will be about learning the art of survival at the highest level. Struggles, though, are nothing new for Jaiswal. Living on his own after his parents left Mumbai, the gritty teen weathered many a storm.



FACTFILE

Age: 21
State: Maharashtra
Events: First class & IPL

2022-23 season:

First-class
Runs: 1169
Highest: 265 (Duleep Trophy)
Average: 83.50
50s/100s/200s: 1/3/3

List A

Runs: 396
Highest: 142 (Vijay Hazare Trophy)
Average: 79.20
50s/100s: 2/2

T20s (domestic)

Runs: 266
Highest: 66* (Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy)
Average: 33.25
50s: 1

IPL

Runs: 428
Highest: 124
Average & Strike rate:
47.55 & 159.70
50s/100s: 3/1

*Stats updated till May 4

At one point, he even lived in a tent on the *maidans* of Mumbai, which would fill with knee-deep water during the harsh monsoons.

Undeterred, Jaiswal would wade through water, armed with his kit bag, and make his way to the Azad Maidan or the Oval Maidan to chase his dreams. Those years were life lessons for the youngster. "I am mentally strong because I have seen those challenging times early on in life. Whenever I feel low or demotivated, I keep telling myself that if I could overcome those challenges, then I will be able to battle past any odds," Jaiswal says.

Not a believer in fairytales, Jaiswal understands that nothing comes easy. For him, it was an uphill task to come so far, but he had "khud pe



bharosa" (self belief) and went on piling runs — first in inter-school tournaments, then in Mumbai U-16 team and eventually rattled off a century and four 50-plus scores in the U-19 World Cup in 2020.

His reputation as a swashbuckling opener earned him a Rs. 2.4 crore contract with Rajasthan Royals ahead of the 2020 season, but the nationwide lockdown during the COVID pandemic meant that Jaiswal had to wait for his chance. When the tournament finally got underway in the United Arab Emirates, he failed to impress in the limited chances that came his way.

But even then, the franchise never gave up on him. With Zubin Bharucha and Sangakkara backing him to the hilt, Jaiswal slowly climbed up the ladder.

"I always tried to do well every day, but then, you need to be realistic and understand that it's not

possible to be the best every day. After all, no matter what you do today, tomorrow you will have to again start your innings from zero. This has been my mantra and if you can get this in your head, then you can battle through any situation," Jaiswal says.

Contrary to the belief that franchise cricket is a difficult place to be in, Jaiswal finds himself at ease in the Royals dressing room. That, he feels, has allowed him to express himself better on the field.

Over the last four seasons, he's had regular conversations with Jos Buttler, whom he now calls Jos bhai.

Future is here: Yashasvi Jaiswal's performances this IPL have caught everyone's attention. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

"I have learnt a lot of things from him. He told me how I should tweak a few things, which I listened to and that advice helped me in hitting sixes at will..." he says, adding that even Virat Kohli, Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Rohit have told him not to move out of his zone.

"They have all told me to stick to my shots and stick to the good zone that I am currently in. I keep working on their advice and try to get better..."

And the conversations with the stars have also made him learn the value of discipline and change a few "chhote-chhote cheezein" (small things).

"I work more on my mental toughness. When you play a four-day game, you have to wake up early and take the team bus by 7 o'clock in the morning. If you are playing for four or five days, your body needs to be fresh. Eating healthy, good sleep, training in time —all these factors are important," he says.

"In IPL, it's the opposite. Here, we stay awake till late night and sleep in the morning, so I have the experience of both. I try to manage myself well to play in all formats..."

With quite a few of his contemporaries also in contention, it has become important to be ahead of the others, but Jaiswal is competing with himself.

"I know I need to work hard and keep improving my game. Rest is not in my hands. There's no point in thinking about things beyond my control," he says.

"I am a believer in destiny. Mere naseeb mein jo hain, woh koi nahi chhin saka...(no one can take away what's in my destiny)."

» I try to manage myself well when playing multiple formats, be it a four-day game or a T20.





PRAMOD BHAGAT

Parabadminton paralympic gold medallist, reigning SL3 men's world champion



EXCITED TO SEE WHAT HEIGHTS WE SCALE NEXT

With each passing year, more **youngsters are taking to para sports** to create better lives for themselves.

I took up badminton by chance. Growing up, all children my age wanted to play cricket. It was what was around us — on TV screens at home and advertisement hoardings. We would see other sports like athletics and football only when we switched to DD on the TV. Any discipline one can think of is at the tip of our fingers. *Jo dikhta hai, wohi bikta hai* (what one can see sells) and that perfectly encapsulates what has changed for the paraspot ecosystem in India.

Para badminton was not a part of the Paralympic Games until the 2021 edition. I have been playing at the elite level since the late 2000s. It was a frustrating wait. I considered quitting the sport many times and I even took a break for over a year. So, when we got to prove what we were made of on the biggest stage, we were determined to make the most of it. That was the drive behind the journey which ultimately ended on the podium in Tokyo with a gold medal around my neck. We, as athletes, are not satisfied easily. I have my eyes fixed on a gold medal at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

With each passing year, more youngsters are taking to paraspots to create better lives for themselves and this is expected. There is a lot of talent yet to tapped across the various disciplines within para sports. Thanks to the

government and support from the federation, top para-athletes are now able to train around the world. Our facilities, though, especially **inclusive ones for athletes with physical challenges**, particularly at lower levels of competition, are yet to level up to the standards abroad. Making quality coaching and infrastructure available to the grassroots is a big gap India must address at the earliest.

As para-athletes move from strength to strength in terms of medals won and laurels earned, a parallel focus needs to be on people with disabilities accessing sports as an audience. One aspect that can be taken up as priority is making stadiums inclusive so that people from all walks of life and ability can come and enjoy their favourite players and sports comfortably. Access to seating, restrooms, parking are small things that go a long way in making the spectator experience seamless for a person with disability.

I was felicitated for one of my earliest medals in a small public park in 2009. We've come a long way since, to the gala welcome and grand honours we got after our best-ever medal haul at the Paralympics. The only way forward is up and I am excited to see what heights we scale next.

As told to Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

« One aspect that can be taken up as priority is making stadiums inclusive. »

Shooting for the stars

With **Paralympic medals in the bag**, ace para shooter Avani Lekhara is settling into her role as an crusader for better facilities and support for the physically challenged.

Lavanya Lakshminarayanan
Twitter @lav_narayanan

For people living with disabilities in India, a major point of debate and legislation for decades has been access — to infrastructure, services and assistance. Against this background, it is quite remarkable that Avani Lekhara, India's first female Paralympic gold medallist, was introduced to this sport thanks to this very thing — access.

"I started shooting in 2015. The sport happened to me quite by chance," Lekhara tells *Sportstar*, while on the road from Jaipur to New Delhi for the national camp.

"I was in class nine and it was our summer vacation. I tried out a number of sports like archery, swimming. The (Jagatpura) shooting range is close to where I live in Jaipur and so it was the easiest option to pick," she says.

Eight years later, she has two Paralympic medals, a number of World Cup medals, a world no.1 ranking and a world record to her name — things she did not even dream of after an accident in 2012 left her paralysed from waist down.

And now, she is one of the brightest talents from India in para shooting. "The first time I went to the range, I got 10-20 shots in the black circle. The coach there then suggested I try the sport full time. As I progressed from one tier of competition to the next, I started loving the

sport. Shooting made me feel self-confident and happy. That range was like home. I felt like I belonged there," Avani remembers.

But, how hard can it be to shoot while sitting in a wheelchair? Very, especially when you're doing it for hours, Avani learnt.

"I am paraplegic. I don't have sensation, motor power or balance from the waist down. It does get hard trying to position a 5-6 kilo rifle on the body for up to three and a half hours," Avani explains.

"It takes a lot of physical strengthening for the upper body. You need to do a lot of cardio because in shooting, we shoot in between breaths and that needs control."

Usually people run or do treadmill work. But in my case, I can't do any of that so it took a lot of time to customise a workout for me," she says. A massive part of Avani's process is between the ears.

"After you reach a certain level, 70-80 per cent of the task is purely a thing of the mind. So, I do a lot of



FACTFILE

Age: 21

State: Rajasthan

Career highlights:

1 gold - Tokyo Paralympics 2021

1 bronze - Tokyo Paralympics

2021

2 gold - Chateauroux Para
Shooting World Cup 2022

1 silver - Changwon Para Shooting
World Cup 2022

1 silver - Al Ain 2021 World
Shooting Para Sport World Cup

2021

1 silver - Croatia Para
Shooting World Cup in 2019

World record score of 250.6
in women's 10m air rifle

standing SH1

World no.1 in
Women's 10m Air
Rifle standing

SH1

Shooting to the top: Avani
Lekhara is one of India's most
successful para shooters. SPECIAL
ARRANGEMENT



**ALL PARA-ATHLETES' ABILITIES ARE
DIFFERENT. DATA AVAILABILITY AND SOLID
RESEARCH (ESPECIALLY IN AREAS LIKE
PROSTHETICS) CAN COMPLEMENT THEIR
WORK TO KEEP IMPROVING.**



PIC: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

yoga, pranayam and meditation with my trainer," she says. This handles composure, but the real beast is nerves.

"You can't control everything. When you're at a stage where there's so much pressure and expectations from you, you can't cave in and forget the purpose behind why you are where you are. I try and plan for everything that can go wrong and what I can do to counter it," she explains.

"For Tokyo, I made an hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute schedule so that I knew at what time I had to do which activity and made provisions for what could go wrong. But things I didn't plan for still did go wrong and I had to control my anxiety. It taught me that there is always a solution," she says.

It helps that Avani finds herself in the safe embrace of her family at all times. She credits her parents, Shweta (who travels everywhere with her), Praveen and younger brother Arnav for keeping her grounded.

"I am so grateful that everyone around me is super honest and they're always there to be upfront with me. My parents, especially, keep me grounded. My brother too; you know how siblings are.

They easily show me my place and keep me rooted. Even if I try to wave the Paralympic medals around, they say, okay, that's done. What next? So yeah, this won't fly there," Avani says, with a chuckle.

Don't let her cherubic face fool you. Circumstances and, in many ways, her sport have made Avani wise beyond her years.

"I belong to a community — people with disabilities. They look up to me. Even if I manage to inspire one person and motivate them to live their life fully and not just restrict themselves to their disability, it would be a big success," Avani says.

The 21-year-old does see the gap between what's available to an elite athlete and what trickles down to regular people, calling this something the country needs to address.

"I am seeing development in the stadiums and ranges. They are



All smiles: Avani at the Sportstar Aces Awards in Mumbai. K.R. DEEPAK

slowly becoming wheelchair-friendly and have wheelchair-accessible washrooms. But this is not translating to the lives of regular people. People with disabilities have trouble with stairs, vehicular transport. Not all schools are wheelchair-accessible. These are big areas where we have not done enough to bridge the gap," she explains.

Another area Avani identifies as having potential for the future is research.

"Every para athlete's physical markers and abilities are different.

Data availability and solid research, especially in areas like prosthetics, can complement the work we do to keep improving," she adds.

Avani, who was honoured with the *Sportstar Aces Para Athlete of the Year (Female)* award in 2022, also believes this is a good time for private players to do what they've done for able-bodied sports and athletes in the para ecosystem.

The National Camp in New Delhi is step one in a busy calendar for Avani. She heads to South Korea first for the World Cup, with all her preparation geared towards finishing on the podium at the Asian Para Games in China later this year.

"When I won the Paralympic gold, it didn't sink in for quite a long time. But then I took a break and started competing again. The idea was to leave the baggage of success behind and start afresh," she adds.

Currently pursuing a degree in law, academics take up any gaps in her training itinerary. The real challenge is juggling family and friends while globe-trotting

"I am an absent friend and family member because I barely get time. So when I am back or taking a break, catching up with the important people in my life takes top priority," Avani says.

Her discipline and focus in the range is balanced perfectly by a chaotic playlist she turns to right before she goes to shoot, swearing by Punjabi pop sensation Diljit Dosanjh to pump up her mood before any big tournament. For now, Avani is living in the moment; something sport taught her to do when she was at her lowest.

"Sport is the only place where you can keep going, even if you lose, and for that I am grateful," she concludes.

« I belong to a community – people with disabilities. Even if I manage to inspire one person, it's be a big success. »



M. M. SOMAYA

Former India hockey captain and 1980
Moscow Olympics gold medal winner



REVIVE TRADITIONAL TOURNAMENTS FOR GROWTH

The inclusion of U-12 and U-14 age groups in the programme could offer more time to mould youngsters into international stars.

India's victories against Australia and Germany in the Rourkela segment of the FIH PRO League caused a flutter, coming as they did after the blip at the Odisha World Cup in January. Importantly these matches gave one a peek into Gen Next India.

Abhishek, with his trickery and 'off the mark' acceleration, bids fair to lead the attack. Karti Selvam possesses quicksilver finish. Sukheet and Samsher play the steady supporting role, retaining possession smartly and then driving into attack.

Hardik Singh looks set to assume a pivotal role in midfield for long. Jugraj Singh is getting better at open field play and can be a trusted drag flicker from PCs. In goal, Pawan Mallik has been reliable. Add the experience of Harmanpreet, Manpreet and a few others from the present batch and you have a promising Indian team for the next international cycle. New coach Craig Fulton would have to manage this transition of team personnel with care.

Both Fulton and the women's team coach, Janneke Schopman, are eyeing gold in the September Hangzhou Asian Games. A direct passage to the Paris 2024 Olympics by finishing at the top beckons. Schopman has the benefit of being in the job longer. Her fit and skillful team with Savita Punia as custodian evokes

confidence.

A revival of the Hockey India League (HIL) is imminent. Harbinger of great success for India at the international level when first conducted, the revival of the HIL is bound to spur on a new generation of players and bolster the image of the sport.

India's national team continues to have a large representation from States located above the Vindhyas. Players from former bastions of the sport like Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai are conspicuous by their absence. Repackaging traditional events like the Mumbai Gold Cup, the Murugappa Gold Cup, the Beighton Cup and the Clarkes Tournament to make them marquee events on the lines of HIL will bring the spotlight back on these centres. The dual benefits of unearthing hidden talent as well as retaining emotional connect among dwindling base of hockey enthusiasts could be achieved.

The Grassroots Programme has been conceptualised by Hockey India to create a wider talent pool and it is a noteworthy initiative. Going ahead, the inclusion of U-12 and U-14 age groups in the programme could offer more time to mould youngsters into international stars. Paris 2024 may be the immediate target but nurturing a high quality supply line is a prudent investment.

« The revival of the Hockey India League will spur on a new generation of players and bolster the image of hockey. »

» COVER STORY
ABHISHEK



FACTFILE

Age: 23

State: Haryana

Matches: 38

Goals: 16

Career highlights:

Silver – 2022 Commonwealth Games, Birmingham

Gold – 2016 U-18 Asia Cup, Dhaka

THE ‘ZIDDI’ STAR OF INDIAN HOCKEY

Abhishek's ascent towards **becoming one of the mainstays** comes when there are high expectations from the national team.

K. MURALIKUMAR

Relentless: Abhishek training at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) South Centre, in Bengaluru. K. MURALIKUMAR



WHEN I FIRST CAME INTO THE SIDE, I WAS BOTH NERVOUS AND SCARED. THERE WERE MANY BIG PLAYERS. BUT THEY TREATED ME LIKE FAMILY.

N. Sudarshan

Twitter @sudunarayan

Abhishek is a throwback to an era when the world was seemingly simpler, less sophisticated, and not prone to mystification. He doesn't go by a second name, is soft-spoken to the point of being apologetic, plays hockey in an unobtrusively efficient but mildly flashy way, and can recall 10-digit phone numbers with ease.

But there is one thing that connects him to the present — a certain kind of 'ziddi', according to Shamsher Singh, his childhood coach and biggest influence.

It's a time-tested quality essential to achieving greatness, a trait that has acquired an additional halo in the current world that swears by high performance. Be it moving from a reputed public school to a Hindi-medium institution just to play hockey or continuing in the sport long after his best friend, who introduced him to the game at the age of 11, stopped competing, Abhishek has been persistent.

He once fell from a *jamun* tree onto a wall with broken glass and a barbed fence and needed more than a dozen stitches to mend a snapped nerve in his left hand. It nearly ended his life, but couldn't empty his zeal for hockey. Today, the 23-year-old from Sonipat, Haryana, is one of India's brightest prospects.

After making his national team debut during the FIH Pro League tour to South Africa in February 2022, he was part of the silver medal-winning Commonwealth Games side (Birmingham 2022). In 38 senior India appearances, the forward has scored 16 goals, and as India kickstarts its Paris 2024 Olympics cycle, Abhishek is expected to be one of the key members.

"When I first came into the Indian side, I was both

nervous and scared," Abhishek says. "There were many big players like Manpreet [Singh] *paaji*, Akashdeep [Singh] *paaji*... I had a slight fear that I shouldn't make any mistakes, be indisciplined off the field, or say something that is not right."

"But they treated me like a friend, and it felt like I was part of a family."

When I made a mistake, they explained things very softly. *Aisa nahin hai jaise bachchon ko dhabake rakhte hain* (It's not like where they keep children under tight control). They support youngsters, and it has been very good."

This freedom has reflected in his game. He doesn't flinch from dribbling past defenders, going on mazy runs, and taking a hopeful shot at goal. Hockey, like football, is a heavily coached sport where combination plays and moves are often



Intense: Abhishek competes with Jeremy Hayward of the Kookaburras.

GETTYIMAGES

simulated on the training field. Abhishek, however, retains a bit of individualism.

"He is an independent thinker and won't necessarily do things just because they are taught that way," says Shamsher. "Depending on the situation at hand, he'll act. This has been his quality since his younger days. He thinks on his feet and does what he feels is right at that moment. He reminds me of former Pakistan great Shahbaz Ahmed."

During his pomp, Shahbaz used to be called the 'Maradona of Hockey'. Abhishek has a Lionel Messi connection in that Shamsher used to make his wards read about the Argentine legend and even turned him into a striker because of his undying love for Messi. These are two gigantic crosses to bear, but Abhishek doesn't feel overwhelmed.

"My coach used to like Messi a lot," he says. "*Shayad mere andar Messi ko dekhte thhe, isliye unhone mujhe striker khilaya* (He may have seen a Messi in me and made me play as a striker). I learned a lot by watching Messi. Where to be before the ball comes, how to anticipate and be in the best position to receive the ball — I watched all that during the FIFA World Cup and am still learning."

Romesh Pathania, a noted coach and Dronacharya Award winner (lifetime category), feels speed is Abhishek's biggest asset. Pathania was his mentor at Punjab National Bank, a stint Abhishek landed after he was dropped from the junior national team in 2018.

His performance at the Hockey India Senior Men's Inter-Department National Championship in Bengaluru in 2021 helped him catch the eyes of the senior national selectors. PNB finished third in the competition, with Abhishek scoring six goals.

"We had just 14 players during that tournament, and I had to rotate," recollects Pathania. "I told him that he would be selected and had to prove himself. And he did it!



"The skills are there... His lifting is good, and so is his wrist work. [More than that] he has speed, and you can't compare that to anything. Speed speed *hota hai* (speed is speed), and if that mixes well with skills, the combination is great.

"It helps create gaps and earn penalty corners. If there is a chance, he scores as well. You can see the number of class goals he has scored. Such qualities make a good player."

These facets were on full display in the Pro League in 2022. Two instances were particularly instructive.

Against both New Zealand and Spain, he received the ball with his back to the goal, spun around, dodged defenders, and moved swiftly on the offensive; the first resulted in a pass that was eventually finished off by Raj Kumar Pal, and the second had his name etched on it.

Abhishek's ascent towards becoming one of the mainstays comes when there are high

expectations from the national team. Once a powerhouse, India went four decades without an Olympic medal before the bronze in Tokyo bridged the gap with its golden past.

Years of lament were replaced by euphoria, and with that has come the thirst for more. Nothing can be more revealing than the criticism the outfit received for a lowly ninth-place finish at the home World Cup earlier this year.

"The World Cup experience wasn't as good as we had hoped," Abhishek says. "Hockey raises expectations in India. After 40 years, we had that success at the Olympics. So, a podium finish in any tournament has become a basic requirement.

"The pressure from the fans is always going to be there. But I am feeling positive. We have a new coach (Craig Fulton), and the goal is to win gold at the Asian Games and qualify for the (Paris) Olympics. Last time at the (Tokyo) Olympics, we were on the podium, and we want to remain there."

I LEARNED A LOT BY WATCHING MESSI, LIKE WHERE TO BE BEFORE THE BALL COMES AND HOW TO BE IN THE BEST POSITIONS.



APARNA POPAT

Two-time Olympian, winner of four medals at Commonwealth Games and nine-time Senior National Champion



EXPECTING ONE AND HOPING FOR TWO MEDALS IN PARIS

Keeping the bigger picture in mind, **there is an opportunity for all our players to focus on solid preparation** – to work tough and ready themselves.

Right through the past decade, the superlative performances in Indian badminton have continued — through events, continents and through one champion player or another. This pattern has urged us, sometimes impatiently, to ask 'What next?

With the Paris Olympics coming up in 2024 and the qualification period already underway from May 1, 2023, one can safely say the next target is the Olympics. From badminton, we are once again expecting at least one medal and hoping for two. This seems realistic — especially after the recent historic title of Satwik Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty at the Badminton Asia Championships. As the current world No. 5, this pair is no longer in the 'have the potential' category but has 'arrived' in a very assured and reliable way, proving to be strong medal contenders.

Providing more proof of our doubles prowess — the women's duo of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand have had a promising year, creating a few notable upsets and reaching the semis at the All-England Championships.

On the singles front, with H. S. Prannoy being the most consistent at No. 9, it's really the second place quota that will lead to some

interesting competition between two World Championship medallists, K. Srikanth and Lakshya Sen, both of whom have had rather dull results so far this year. In women's singles, we have realised that two-time Olympic medallist P. V. Sindhu's performances at the smaller tournaments are no indication of what's to come on the bigger stage.

In my opinion, some of the top players have juggled around their training set up with new coaches, training venues, different strategies for training and competition participation. They need to stabilise and get comfortable with their set up at the earliest.

Another important part of the 'what next?' question is also about our bench strength and the youngsters next in line. The impressive win of Priyanshu Rajawat at the recent Orleans Masters gives us a lot to be optimistic about.

The rest of this year, apart from having an eye on Olympic qualification points, our top players will be gunning for a repeat of medals at the World Championship (August, Copenhagen) and postponed Asian Games (September, Hangzhou).

Keeping the bigger picture in mind, there is an opportunity for all our players to focus on solid preparation — to work tough and ready themselves to create a storm.

« Our players need to stabilise and get comfortable with their set up at the earliest. »

Destination Paris 2024

Meet the bona fide **torchbearer of Indian badminton** for the next decade.

Rakesh Rao

Twitter @sportyrakesh

Lakshya Sen has just played the most delicate of net shots, dribbling the shuttle over the white cord at an angle that is far too acute for Anthony Ginting to return. Lakshya collapses on the green court at Bangkok's Impact Arena, having propelled India to a 1-0 lead, an advantage that would go on to catalyse the country's historic win over 14-time winner Indonesia in the Thomas Cup final.

It has been almost a year since India's maiden Thomas Cup win, and Lakshya has established himself as the torchbearer of Indian badminton. He is a confident young man, who shuttles between dizzying success and a normal life with effortless ease. His *Instagram* feed is dotted with images that gives his fans an entryway to his jet-setting life — where he is 'just being myself'.

Lakshya hails from the small hilly town of Almora, Uttarakhand, that seems far removed from the hustle and bustle of Bengaluru, where he has been training at the Prakash Padukone Badminton Academy since he was

10. "I was very reluctant to allow Lakshya to move out of home. He was only 10 at that time. Obviously, as a father, I was worried about the negative influences that he could face in a big city. **Thankfully, Lakshya is a disciplined boy, and has stayed focused purely on badminton all these years,**" his father DK Sen had told *Sportstar* in 2018.

Currently, India has three players in the world's top-25 bracket: H. S. Prannoy (9th), Srikanth (22nd), and Lakshya (23rd). Among them, Lakshya, at 21, promises to be the face of the sport in the next decade. At 30, Prannoy and Srikanth could have a few more seasons at best.

Lakshya has already displayed talent and tenacity by beating some of the big names in the game. He is known to analyse his play well, has a no-nonsense approach to training, and takes his matchdays more seriously than some of his seniors in the bygone era. He has a good coach in Vimal Kumar, an ideal training environment in Bengaluru, and valuable input from a competent support staff.

These days, Lakshya is eyeing a place in the 2024 Paris Olympics. The reigning Commonwealth Games champion is focussed on raising his

IF I AM PLAYING WELL, THE RESULTS WILL TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES. I HAVE TO STAY AWAY FROM INJURIES AND HEALTH ISSUES.

On the upswing:

Lakshya Sen is a force to reckon with in the Indian badminton scene.

NAGARA GOPAL



FACTFILE

Age: 21

State: Uttarakhand

Career highlights:

Gold

- Commonwealth Games 2022
- Asian Junior Championships 2022
- Thomas Cup 2022
- Youth Olympic Games 2018
- Arjuna Award

THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP AND THE ASIAN GAMES ARE GOING TO BE THE REAL TESTS.

ranking, which has tumbled from a career-best No. 6 last November to 23.

Since winning the Commonwealth Games title last August, Lakshya's consistency has suffered. Severe throat and stomach infections have taken a toll on his immunity. Due to these health reasons, he had to opt for a different diet plan and deal with some niggles. But things have slowly started falling in place.

"The immediate goal is to use the National trials for the Asian Games to

be in the right shape for the upcoming Asian circuit involving the Opens in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia," says Lakshya, continuing, "I am not really focussing on the ranking at this point. If I go deeper into these four events, I am sure my ranking will take care of itself.

"I also plan to play in the US and Canada in July and August before going to Japan and Korea. This will be followed by the World Championship and the Asian Games. These are going to be the real tests," says a determined Lakshya, keen to make up for the lost time.

Having suffered a few setbacks on the health front, Lakshya is taking extra care. "When you return from infections and opt for a new nutrition

chart, your body takes time to recover. I am focussing on my preparations without ignoring my health and fitness."

Looking ahead to the season and beyond, Lakshya says, "I'll try my best to do well in every international tournament. Personally, I have some performance goals. But if I am playing well, the results will take care of themselves. I have to stay away from injuries and health issues."

The ultimate aim, of course, is the Paris podium, but Lakshya knows that his seniors in the National team will be no pushovers. "Before the cut-off next year, I should be among the top-16 in the world rankings. Since only two players from a country will make it from the top-16 bracket, I am sure Srikanth and Prannoy will also go flat out in the qualification race. They are my seniors and have plenty of experience. But I will be focussing on the goals I have set for myself."

Lakshya's early exits from tournaments since last August helped Prannoy and Srikanth move

◀ Prakash sir keeps reminding me to trust the process; the results will come. ▶

ahead in the rankings. After winning the Commonwealth Games gold and reaching the pre-quarterfinals of the World Championship in August, Lakshya faced a series of disappointing results. He made first-round exits in the Japan Open, French Open, and Hylo Open, with his best performance being the quarterfinals of the Denmark Open.

This year, too, in six events on the BWF calendar, Lakshya could not get past the second round in five events. The only bright spot has been the quarterfinal appearance in the Indonesia Masters.

"When I analyse my results, I look

at areas where I need to improve. I believe in the trial-and-error method. There have been times when I realised that I lost because I was trying something new. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. If it works, I will build on it. If it doesn't, I'll change it. I do draw a lot from the positives of each match."

His interactions with coach Vimal and sports psychologist/mental trainer Gayatri Vartak play a huge role in keeping him in touch with reality. "Apart from this, in the last six months, I have understood my body better. Now that I have a new nutrition plan, I try harder to take care of my health."

What about the suggestions from Padukone? "Prakash sir is amazing. He stays aware of what's happening with my play, besides keeping track of the happenings in world badminton. He keeps reminding me, "Trust the process; results will come." For many years, I approached him with any problem that I had, any small thing, and he was always ready to help. I have bonded well with him since I was very young. So that familiarity helps immensely."

Notwithstanding his age, Lakshya has more experience than his peers. His on-court demeanour, quick thinking, and sharp anticipation have turned him into a formidable player. "When I am doing well, I think of playing and beating the likes of Viktor Axelsen or Loh Kean Yew. I look at matches as opportunities to learn. I am sure I will regain my form and peak fitness ahead of the premier events this year."





SAURAV GHOSAL

Former World top-10 player and bronze medallist
in the 2022 Commonwealth Games



WE NEED TO IMPROVE OUR COACHING STANDARDS

At the moment, we have coaches who can produce good junior players and not world-class players. For that, **we need to get foreign coaches and train our coaches** so that we can produce top-class players.

Indian squash has come a long way. We have to see the brighter side of things. The number of players in the junior and senior sections is much higher than it was 10-15 years ago. There are a lot of players in the professional circuit.

Of course, a lot needs to be done to make it reach the masses. **First, school kids need to be involved, and sports need to be part of the school curriculum.** Squash should try to get into that space. The sport has to broaden itself.

The responsibility to grow the sport rests on the players as well. We need to shine more in major international events to put squash on the global map.

Another major aspect that one needs to look into is access.

In Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Jaipur, players who are not members of clubs can play squash. This should be introduced in other cities as well.

Public courts should be made available, as is

done in badminton and 5-a-side football.

For women's squash, Joshna Chinappa and Dipika Pallikal-Karthik have been the torch bearers. The next generation of players has these two players to look up to. We have Anahat Singh, a rising star, and a few other girls who can make Indian sports proud. I would say that things are definitely better. The blip is still the number of boys playing squash outnumbering the girls.

Apart from taking the sport to schools, we need to streamline and improve our coaching standards. At the moment, we have coaches who can produce good junior players but not world-class players.

For that, we need to get foreign coaches and train our coaches so that we can produce top-class players. To win consistently on the world stage is not easy. We need quality coaching for that.

As told to K. Keerthivasan

« The responsibility to grow the sport rests on the players as well. We need to shine more in major international events to put squash on the global map. »

A teenager's squash buckling journey

Having had her best year in 2022, **Anahat Singh looks to continue the momentum** until she becomes a world champion.

Divyakriti Singh
Twitter @DivyakritiSingh

Nearly a year ago at the Commonwealth Games, Anahat Singh was on the brink of becoming the new poster girl for Indian squash. That's when she declared, "I want to be the World Champion." She was just 14 at the time, an age when studies and wild ambitions take centre stage. Anahat, though, is not cut from the same cloth, and seems

to have figured out her path already.

In 2022, out of the 16 tournaments she played, the Delhi girl stood first in all but three — the Commonwealth Games, the National Championships and the National Games, events where she was beaten by some of the world's top players, such as Joshna Chinappa.

"Last year was probably the most important one ever since I started playing 5-6 years ago. That's when my game improved the most. So, yeah, I feel like until the next Commonwealth Games or until I get

V. V. KRISHNAN



a medal in a major tournament, I'll keep saying that 2022 is the biggest year for me," says Anahat.

Over the years, a common problem plagued Indian squash players: a late transition to seniors. While Nour El Sherbini from Egypt, the current world number 1, had already won the World Championship by 20 and is now on her way to winning her sixth title, Indian players are usually just starting to play senior tournaments by then.

However, these players were also victims of circumstance. With little to no PSA tournaments happening in India until 2019, one had to shell out large sums of money to travel abroad and play to get points.

Anahat started playing the sport when it was on the cusp of gaining momentum in the country. The HCL India tour, a multi-city challenger level circuit, started in 2019 to help Indian players get PSA points without having to go outside the country.

Apart from the umpteen national circuit tournaments she played last year, a part of her focus was also on

playing the India tour tournaments. For her to get adept at playing at the international level, her parents motivated her to play a few of these tournaments so that she did not waste a single year when she became eligible at 15.

"On my 15th birthday this year we all sat together and enrolled in PSA, so now I am actually eligible to get points if I play the Challengers, since my world ranking right now is around 400," she says sheepishly, perhaps because the young gun is only used to being at the top.

However, her growth as a player has coincided with a growth in her support system. Saurav Ghosal, current world number 17 and India's best squash player, has been an ardent supporter of Anahat. He's been guiding her on the next steps, knowing all too well the challenges she could face.

For Ghosal too, his will to support the player comes from the determination he sees in her: "Anahat has already proved that she's right up there with the world's best juniors. Her mental strength is something that sets her apart and



FACTFILE

Age: 15

State: Delhi

Sport: Squash

Career highlights

Youngest Indian player at CWG 2022

Gold- British Junior Open 2022

Silver- British Junior Open 2020

Bronze- Asian senior team championship 2022

Gold- 29th Asian junior Individual championship

Silver- Senior National Championship 2022

3x -Junior National champion (under-15,13,11)

2x Dutch Junior open champion

2x Scottish Junior open champion

UNTIL I GET A MEDAL IN A MAJOR TOURNAMENT, I'LL KEEP SAYING THAT 2022 IS THE BIGGEST YEAR FOR ME.



Family time:

Anahat with her parents.

V.V.KRISHNAN



that is something you can't teach anyone."

For Anahat, her persona on and off court is like an actor playing a role on camera and being someone completely different off it. The fearlessness doesn't translate off the court; her shy mannerisms would never let any one know of the lengths she has reached in her short career. As *Sportstar* went to do a photoshoot with the evidently camera-shy 15-year-old, she tried to strike an awkward pose. Later she asked her mother to leave because she got even more nervous — a sign that indicates that she's still a young kid trying to navigate this new lifestyle.

However, on the court, as Ghosal says, "Mentally and physically she's very good. She's probably just a level lower than Amina Orfi who's the current world junior champion. A few more shots to her arsenal would help her become a more complete player."

Egyptian Orfi, for those unaware, is the current world junior champion and a four-time British junior champion. At the time of writing, she has broken the record for being the youngest player ever to reach the third round of the World championships at 15.

Squash in Egypt is like badminton in India, or perhaps even a level higher. Almost all of the world's top 10 players in the men's and women's sections are Egyptian and a lot of them are fairly young. Orfi is a product of this giant squash system where umpteen PSA tournaments take place every other day in the country and with the world's best players training together at the same club, finding the best coaches and sparring partners is never an issue for anyone.

For Anahat however, that is not the case. While she does have the likes of Ghosal, Dipika Pallikal and

Joshna guiding her, the lack of quality coaching remains an issue. Currently she's training with Stephane Galifi, a French coach and former world top-20 player. On being asked about how his training differs from Indian coaches, she says, "I guess it's a little hard for Indian players to adapt to foreign coaches because their training style is different. I like it because it's so much better than doing the same things on repeat for years the way the Indian coaches do it."

She's perhaps referring to the style of Indian coaching where you do practice drills every day and then play matches on designated days, and keep continuing with this for years.

"I only play matches. Stephane is based in Mumbai, so whatever he needs to tell me happens on the phone. I've never had a coach work with me every day," says the teenager.

Nonetheless, as her career progresses, she's ready to face the challenges head on, including her 10th standard board exams this year. Even though her ultimate aim is to become World Champion and World No. 1, finishing her education is also a priority.





SUNIL CHHETRI

India football captain



IMPORTANT TO STAY FOCUSED ON THE JOB

When I look at the youngsters around me in the national team, it fills my heart with hope. **These are boys who are talented and are willing to add the hard work** element that talent almost always needs.

To put it simply, I hope we do all the right things across the board, and put in an educated and honest effort in the right direction [in the next decade].

My expectations aren't restricted to just the men's senior national team, but to every single aspect of Indian football.

However, if I were to put it broadly, I want us to be considered among the best in the Asian continent over the next decade.

I am no soothsayer. What I will say is that we [the men's national team] do possess the talent to achieve things.

When I look at the youngsters around me in the national team, it fills my heart with hope. These are boys who are talented and are willing to add the element of hard work that talent almost always needs. It's important that we keep our heads down and stay focused on the job.

In terms of the league football structure and the future of the Indian Super League, there are more teams coming in, and that's a

fantastic sign. A solid, robust, and longer league season will do wonders.

What constitutes success for Indian football should ideally be a very long answer. Consistently qualifying for and progressing further in major tournaments in the continent, more games against quality opponents in every possible window, a longer league with more teams, a solid women's league, more competition for reserve and academy sides, top quality pitches for everyone — the kids, the reserves, the pros.

We need to keep up with the practices the best in the continent and world are embracing.

I am hopeful about the future [of strikers coming through], and I'm not just saying this to sound positive.

Talent isn't so much a problem as consistency is. We have some quality youngsters who possess the ability. What they need to do is have successive, consistent seasons. We can't be blowing hot and cold.

As told to Aashin Prasad

« In terms of the league football structure and the future of the Indian Super League, there are more teams coming in and that's a fantastic sign. »

The inevitability of Sivasakthi Narayanan

Indian football's newest sensation is on course to play for his country and fulfill his destiny.

Aashin Prasad
Twitter @aashin23

Sivasakthi's story is one of overcoming heartbreak and setbacks and coming out the other side with stronger self-belief. It was not too long ago when this footballer from Karaikudi, a small town in Tamil Nadu, kept getting rejected in selection trials across the state. He was denied not because of a lack of abilities but for his slender frame that stood at just 5'4", a figure not commonly associated with a No. 9 in any team.

"They weren't looking at my game. Everyone's reasoning was — 'No height. No body.' No one said — 'It's not a problem that you don't have the height; we will

give you a chance,'" remembers Sivasakthi.

Despite scoring multiple times in those trials, he didn't get a look-in. "I knew that it wasn't my fault, so why should I feel bad? I moved on to the next one." He continued doing what he knew well: scoring goals.

And to his surprise, it was Bengaluru FC, one of the country's premier football clubs, which came calling in 2020. Sivasakthi was then playing for Raman Vijayan Soccer School in the Youth I-League, where his performances against BFC impressed Naushad Moosa, then coach of the Blues' youth side.

However, his first foray into the Indian Super League (ISL) last year didn't go according to plan. BFC lost

FACTFILE

Age: 21

State: Tamil Nadu

Career highlights:

- Durand Cup 2022 title.
- Bengaluru FC 2022-23 top-scorer (11 goals).
- Goal on AFC Cup debut.
- Goal in first senior start for Bengaluru FC.
- ISL Emerging Player of the Season - 2022-23.

WITH THE KIND OF BODY I HAVE, I MANAGED TO SCORE IN BOTH THE BENGALURU LEAGUE AND THE AFC CUP. DESPITE MY HEIGHT AND FRAME, I WAS CONFIDENT.

eight of its first 12 matches that season, with Siva warming the bench after the first four games.

But at the start of this year, BFC renewed its playoff hopes with a run of three successive wins, fueled by two goals from Sivasakthi on his return to the starting XI. With the team just three points off a playoff place, his red hot form turned its fortunes around, surprising everyone, including his skipper, Sunil Chhetri.

"After the win over Jamshedpur, Sunil and I did an interview where I said that we will definitely reach the top four. Sunil responded, 'He is just over-confident'. But we did end up being in the top four! No one expected us to do that," recalls

Star in the making:

Sivasakthi Narayanan has emerged as one of the brightest young talents in Indian football.

FOCUS SPORTS/ISL

Sivasakthi. Remarkably, he scored six times and assisted twice, helping BFC win its last nine league matches to qualify for the playoffs.

It became clear that Bengaluru's upswing in form since the start of this year coincided with Sivasakthi's inclusion in the starting XI. He has a wide variety of goals and also possesses the passing technique to create chances for his teammates which make him a complete forward. In his first full season in the top flight, he has scored with either foot, a headed goal, tap-ins, lobbed finishes and by rounding off the 'keeper.

According to BFC coach Simon Grayson, his biggest strength is his decision-making to back his abilities.

Grayson also noted his calmness in front of the goal. "(Many players) fear one-on-one situations, but not him. When in that position, he slots it away like prime Sunil Chhetri. (But) he has a lot to learn and has a long way to go," said Grayson.

Sivasakthi's hope of a crowning moment, though, was taken away when a

Sitting idol: Sivasakthi could fulfill his dream of playing with Sunil Chhetri when he got roped in by Bengaluru FC.
AIFFMEDIA

collision in the very first minute of the ISL final left him with a bloodied nose, forcing him to leave on a stretcher. The injury also ruled him out of the India camp and the possibility of a national team debut in March.

While the season ended on a disappointing note with a defeat in the Super Cup final, Sivasakthi finished as the club's top-scorer with 11 goals, ahead of seasoned campaigners like Chhetri and Krishna.

Sivasakthi, born to CT Natarajan and Muthulakshmi, comes from a modest working-class family. Growing up in Kandanur, in Karaikudi, **there were early signs of his goal-scoring ability. Even while playing for fun as a budding teenager,** he used to love putting the ball in either net irrespective of the team he was playing for.

His father Natarajan encouraged not only him but also his brother Sivasubramaniam to take up football by taking them to nearby competitions during Diwali. At the end of one of these tournaments, Noble Football Academy, a non-profit academy in Chidambaram, hosted trials for promising footballers in 2014. Both Siva and his brother, a year older, were selected to move to the Academy that was run by former India international Raman Vijayan and his brother, Raman Prakash, who first gave Siva the opportunity to play as a striker.

The then 14-year-old reluctantly left behind his parents to move to Chidambaram. But tragedy struck a year later when his father passed away. That's when his mother moved to Coimbatore to work as a midday cook at a hostel, leaving her children with their aunt.

"It was very hard," Muthulakshmi remembers. "The boys were studying in 9th and 10th standard. It was very difficult to even get food to eat. No one from our family helped



us, even those who were in good standing. My boys did all the hard work. Seeing their mother go through hard times is what has taken them to where they are."

Muthulakshmi also turned to Vijayan to provide them with the necessary platform for her children to succeed in life. Vijayan stepped up by paying their school fees and for their meals. But due to a lack of funds at the Academy, Vijayan had to close operations for a year, which meant both Sivasakthi and his brother went back to stay with their aunt in Kandanoor before returning the next year.

"He was a completely different player when he came back, with all the qualities for a complete No. 9. He scored a lot of goals in the age group levels and became a reliable striker," he says. Post his schooling, Raman brought him to his football school in Chennai, giving him the platform to play in the Youth I-League.

It was in the Academy halls where he grew up watching his hero Chhetri on TV. Sivasakthi remembers how he was overawed and starstruck when he trained with the Bengaluru first team and was sent back down to the B team.

"Then I realised if I had played my game, I would have stayed there.

"They are always going to be here, and I will make sure I will play with them," says Sivasakthi.

Sivasakthi was offered generous praise from Chhetri himself who labelled him a 'superstar' after his goal in the Durand Cup final against Mumbai City FC. It was with the same 'height and body' people rejected him for that Sivaskathi brushed aside Mourtada Fall, a towering defender nearly a foot taller, to open the scoring in that match, which was also his first-ever start for BFC.

After his breakthrough season at the highest level in the country, Sivasakthi is keen to bounce back from the latest setback. The national team camp will be underway as coach Igor Stimac starts preparations for the AFC Asian Cup next January. Stimac has already outlined Sivasakthi as one of his key figures in attack.

"I had to miss national call-ups (across levels) for the third time now. I want to attend this camp and hopefully get the call-up and go on to play the AFC Cup," says the 21-year-old. Being a 'Chhetri fan', nothing would please him more than leading the line alongside his skipper.

It's fair to say that he won't be denied; Sivasakthi is inevitable.

Even while playing for fun as a budding teenager, Sivasakthi used to love putting the ball in either net.



MANSHER SINGH

Former Olympian and winner of the first World Cup medal for the country in 1997



STRONG DOMESTIC COACHES NEEDED

Efforts have been made by the national federation to address specific issues in a scientific way, and **there is no reason why Indian shooting cannot strike** it big in the Paris Olympics in 2024.

Shooting is the fastest growing and most successful sport in the country. The national championships are witnessing more than 10,000 shooters in competition, despite restrictions in terms of eligibility scores. When Jaspal Rana and I won the individual Commonwealth Games gold medals in 1994, it was viewed as a path-breaking exercise. Today, Indian shooting has won many medals across all levels, including the Olympics and the World Championships.

It was a golden period for Indian shooting when Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore won the silver in the Athens Olympics in 2004, then the gold in 2008 by Abhinav Bindra in Beijing, and two Olympic medals by Vijay Kumar and Gagan Narang in 2012 in London.

There has been a lull in Rio in 2016 and in Tokyo in 2021. Indian shooters have, perhaps, over trained and suffered mental fatigue, especially before the last Olympics. Efforts have been made by the national federation to address this in a scientific way, and there is no reason why Indian shooting cannot strike it big in Paris in 2024. Our shooters are absolutely world-class, and they have proven it time and

again. Excellent infrastructure is available, especially for air pistol and air rifle across the country. Efficient training has fast tracked the shooters to great success at a very young age.

Shooting is both technical and mental. It is not physically demanding like the other games. That is why we do so well in chess too.

The government's support has helped in tremendous growth at the grassroots level, strengthening the base of the pyramid for Indian shooting.

We will continue to excel at all levels in the current flow of things. What needs to be addressed as a priority is the training of Indian coaches to top standards, equipped with knowledge in all aspects. We cannot rely on foreign coaches if we want to capitalise on the enormous growth in the sport and take it to greater heights.

We need to have a strong coaching base to cater to the overwhelming emergence of quality shooters in the country. Together with more and better infrastructure, it will be hard for the rest of the world to match or catch Indian shooting.

As told to Kamesh Srinivasan

« Efficient training has fast tracked the shooters to great success at a very young age. »

Target Olympic podium

Rhythm Sangwan's **laser-sharp focus has propelled her to the top** in Indian shooting.



Santadeep Dey

Twitter @SantadeepDey

There is an air of intrigue around Rhythm Sangwan, the newest poster girl of Indian shooting. It's like there are two distinct dimensions in her character, each in glaring contrast to one another.

On the one hand, she is a chirpy 19-year-old Bollywood junkie who loves to hog on waffles, sketch portraits, and go shopping. She is the life of every party with an encyclopedic knowledge of the latest movie releases, and wishes to someday tap her feet to a number in a YRF (Yash Raj Films) musical alongside her favourite actor, Hrithik Roshan.

The other personality, however, is of a thorough professional who can be seen at shooting ranges, her eyes transfixed on the target with a strong sense of purpose. This version of Rhythm avoids interaction with anyone but her coaches until she is done with her

competitions. Sometimes, she even asks her mother, Neelam, not to attend her matches.

"She has always been like that. We don't mind. If that helps her get into the zone, so be it," Neelam had said, seated just outside the admin room of the Madhya Pradesh State Shooting Academy, even as Rhythm's qualification round during the 2023 Bhopal World Cup was in progress.

Rhythm admits she has always received unconditional support from her family, right from the day when she first visited the Dr. Karni Singh Shooting Range in New Delhi as a 12-year-old. Neelam used to accompany her to all training sessions, and her father, Narendra Kumar, never backed down from providing her with the best facilities.

THE SOUND OF THE GUNS FIRING, THE AMMUNITION, IT ALL REALLY EXCITED ME.

There have been many instances of parents being hesitant to let their children pursue shooting because of the hefty initial investment. The weapons, ammo, and all other equipment are very expensive. But Rhythm never faced such roadblocks.

"With my father (Narender Kumar) in the police force, I was used to being around guns. I wasn't scared of firearms. I was interested in sports but never really wanted to take them up professionally until one day my parents told me that shooting is a sport as well. When we went to the range, I got really fascinated by it. The sound of guns firing and the ammunition — it all really excited me," Rhythm says.

The next step was finding a qualified yet amiable mentor. "My personal mentor, Vinit Kumar, had already been an acquaintance of my father. So, things started working out quickly. It was just meant to be."

Maybe it was destiny, after all. Less than a year later, at the 61st National Shooting Championship in Thiruvananthapuram, Rhythm, then a student of the Delhi Public School in Faridabad, bagged three gold medals in the youth, open, and junior team events. She also brought home a women's team silver in 10m air pistol.

And thus started a journey

All ears: Rhythm Sangwan during the Sportstar Aces Awards in Mumbai.

V.V. KRISHNAN

that has seen the Haryana markswoman go from strength to strength to bring four junior World Championship gold, three senior Worlds silver, and six senior ISSF World Cup medals (three gold, two silver, and one bronze), among many other laurels. All in less than six years' time, even though two of those were marred by COVID-19.

Those were the toughest months for the pistol shooter. The range was shut, sporting calendars got shredded into bits, and she didn't have the wherewithal to put up a makeshift range at home. All of which took a toll on her mental health. "I was only doing dry firing and workouts. Also, strength and conditioning... But it was a huge gap because I was doing very well in 2019. Suddenly, everything came to a halt because of COVID-19."

Through that extended period of lull, there was one person who stuck with Rhythm.

"My coach felt and still feels the pain I do. When I win, I think he gets more excited than me. He always has my back. I have seen that people, generally, don't stay with you in bad times. But he has always been there with me. He understands me and knows how I think. He is a one-man army," Rhythm smiles.

Rhythm cannot put her finger on any other specific period when she felt helpless. "The only other tough moments that came along were when I could not fulfil the expectations of my country, parents, and coach."

When asked if the shock defeat in the World Championship was one of those moments, she laughs. On October 22, 2022, Rhythm fell just short of creating history in Cairo when she missed the mark on all five occasions in the last series of the erstwhile



+

FACTFILE

Age: 19

State: Haryana

Events: 10m air & 25m sports pistol

Career highlights

3 silver — Cairo World Championship 2022

4 gold — Lima World Championship 2021

3 gold — ISSF World Cup (Cairo 2022 & Cairo 2023)

2 silver — ISSF World Cup (Changwon 2022 & Bhopal 2023)

1 bronze — ISSF World Cup Changwon 2022

2 gold — ISSF Junior Cup 2022 in Suhl



ranking format. Having qualified third with a score of 587,

she was leading the pack of four with 11 successful hits until the third series and had looked all set to qualify for the medal match of the 25m pistol event. What made the loss worse was that she even lost the Olympic quota to Haniyeh Rostamiyan — tied with 11 hits in her respective ranking group — for having a lower score in the qualification round, wherein the Iranian had accumulated 588 points.

"No, there was no malfunction," she says, clearing the air about a suspected equipment snag.

"I was just focusing on the process—the technical aspect of the game, not on the result or anything else. I wasn't thinking about winning a quota or a medal. If I focus on the result, it generally doesn't go well."

Vinit later sat down with her to dissect the proceedings of the game. "You must be strong," my coach told me. He pointed out all that he had asked me to do, but I didn't. We analysed what the mistakes were. Yes, I was very upset for some time. My coach said maybe I wasn't ready for the biggest stage. If I had been, I would have been up there," Rhythm says, recollecting the events from that fateful evening.

"But that's okay. Ups and downs are a part of life," Rhythm says, indicating she has long moved on from the Cairo episode.

Rhythm goes on to say that she feels the person who values her and extends unconditional support should also have the opportunity to provide his invaluable inputs to the NRAI (National Rifle Association of India), the apex governing body of the sport in the country, as and when the need arises.

"The NRAI and HRA (Haryana Rifle Association) have supported me well. Athletes should be encouraged to speak their mind and ask for ideas from their mentors, who have been their backbone since day one. Working together as a team would be a nice way to move forward. Because the ultimate goal is to win medals for the country, and not the individual."



Rhythm was named the Best Young Achiever (Girl) at the *Sportstar Aces Awards 2023*. She understands not everybody is lucky when it comes to opportunities.

"There are many women who face difficulties in starting a sport, let alone continuing. There is an image that women are only meant to do household chores. I am sure that in certain parts of our society, women are looked down upon. We should support and encourage them to not just pursue sports but also whatever it is that they want in life," Rhythm says.

Rhythm, although from a different sporting discipline, reveres six-time boxing world champion Mary Kom. Whenever she feels demotivated, she watches the ace pugilist's Priyanka Chopra Jonas-starrer biopic on her iPad.

"The struggles she went through to be where she is now, is a story everybody needs to hear. She inspires me," Rhythm says.

While her idol is already an Olympic bronze medallist, Rhythm is eyeing a seat on what will be her maiden flight to the Summer Games. And hopefully, she would be able to

Team work: Rhythm Sangwan and Varun Tomar won silver in the 10m Air Pistol Mixed team Competition during ISSF World Cup Rifle/Pistol at Madhya Pradesh Shooting Academy in Bhopal.

A. M. FARUQUI

retrace Mary's steps in Paris and bring back to India a medal, which has eluded shooters since Vijay Kumar and Gagan Narang won a silver and bronze respectively in London 2012.

"I regularly have discussions with Vinit regarding the Olympics but that is not on my mind right now. **For now, I am only focusing on the next World Cup in Baku (May 8-15).** I will take it step-by-step thereon. All I know is that 2022 was a great year for me. I won many medals and made the nation proud. When you're working hard and putting in so much effort, you will see it bear fruit some day."

Is that 'some day' inside the next five years? "Obviously, Paris 2024 and Los Angeles 2028 are within that timeframe. Who would not want to win an Olympic gold? That has always been the dream."

« Athletes should be encouraged to speak their mind and ask for ideas from their mentors. »



ANJU BOBBY GEORGE

India's first World Championships medallist (long jump bronze, 2003 Paris Worlds), and Senior Vice-President of the Athletics Federation of India



NEW, CONFIDENT FACES BRIGHTEN OUR CHANCES

Even the **top athlete can fumble on a particular day** but we are preparing our athletes to be on the podium.

When I was an athlete and competing on the world stage, I could see the fear on the faces of my fellow athletes when they came to major championships. There were just one or two who had something to show at the international level. Most of them were able to perform at the Asian level but beyond that there was nothing. We had just one or two medals in the Commonwealth Games, but beyond that nobody expected anything... nobody even tried.

Now, when our athletes compete in big meets, they don't want to just go and come back, they want to perform. That is one big positive that has come now and that should see us do well.

The long-term plans of the Athletics Federation of India, with support from the Government, Sports Ministry and the Sports Authority of India, are showing results. And it's not just a single athlete but a bunch of athletes who are coming up. And the 'bench' (the second string) is also getting into the bigger group.

If you look at javelin throw, Olympic champion Neeraj Chopra is way ahead and there are a couple of athletes who are above 80m. In (men's) triple jump, they are competing

among themselves. Our long jumpers, both men and women, are doing well. It is a little slow in the 400m now but the event is also our strength. Walking is also doing good.

In the next Olympics (Paris 2024), there is hope not just in the javelin throw, but from our jumpers, too. Both the long jumpers and triple jumpers are closest to our next medal in the Olympics. And the walkers are also showing promise, but it is tough. Avinash Sable, in the 3000m steeplechase too... it will be tough for him but he will fight for it.

Now, our athletes know how to prepare. Initially, I was trying to educate them, told them to go for competitions, because I did the same. Now our athletes are going for quality competitions, they are getting the experience and that will definitely make a difference.

Regarding doping, information is readily available for everybody and the stuff is also easy to get. If they want to dope, they will do it. It is an individual's decision. Athletes are not with us 24 hours, they are somewhere, training with somebody. There will be a lot of influence from outside. We are trying our best to prevent doping but it is impossible to stop the menace completely.

As told to Stan Rayan

« We are trying our best to prevent doping but it impossible to stop the menace completely. »



'I want everyone to know who Shaili Singh is'

For Shaili Singh, all it took was **her mother's wish to spark her stunning run of form.**

Jonathan Selvaraj

Twitter @jon_selvaraj

For Shaili Singh, it was a phone call with her mother, Vinita, which inspired her to change her career trajectory. When compared to the calls that they used to have daily, this one hit different.

Shaili, who was training with long jump legend Anju Bobby George at the time, said, "Normally my mother and I just speak about my training and how things are going, but that day I remember asking what her hopes for me were. She said, 'I want everyone to know who Shaili Singh is.'"

During the four years since, Vinita Singh's dreams for her daughter slowly took shape. In 2021, at 17, Shaili jumped 6.59m to set a new junior national record and won a silver medal at the Junior World Championships in Nairobi.

She would improve on that mark a couple of years later at the Indian Grand Prix in

Bangalore in March 2023, where she recorded a giant leap of 6.76m. That vaulted her to second position on the all-time Indian list, behind only Anju.

Anju, who set the national record of 6.83m in the finals of the Athens Olympics 19 years ago, has already tipped Shaili as her heir apparent. "Shaili will break my record," she told *Sportstar*.

When reflecting on how far she has come, Shaili can scarcely believe it. The daughter of a single mother who worked as a tailor to make ends meet, she was picked out of obscurity by Anju and her husband, Bobby George, after they saw her finish fifth at a U-14 national tournament in Mangalore.

"Sometimes, I wonder





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The big jump: Shaili Singh, who won the women's long jump event, in action, during the Indian Grand Prix-4, at Sree Kanteerava Stadium in Bengaluru on April 15, 2023. K. MURALIKUMAR



FACTFILE

Age: 19

State: Uttar Pradesh

Career highlights:

1 silver - World Under-20 Championships in Nairobi 2021

1 gold - National Open Athletics Championships 2022

Won the Indian Grand Prix-4 in Bengaluru 2023

Second-longest jump by an Indian woman after Anju Bobby George

why Anju ma'am and Bobby sir picked me. I only jumped 4.64m and I was only fifth in that competition where they saw me. But now I feel very lucky that I'm in a position where people have high expectations of me. In fact, everyone tells me I've achieved a lot. But I feel I have to do more," she said.

While Shaili doesn't know why she was picked and found it very awkward to ask her coaches, Anju has no hesitation in answering the question. "There are certain things that are needed to be a quality athlete. You need a good coach,

basic talent and a high IQ, especially in a technical event like long jump. But what matters most is the never-give-up attitude," said Anju.

"Shaili had no technique when we saw her. She was small and physically not impressive. But when you saw her run you knew she was fast and most importantly she ran in for her last jump with just as much intensity as her first jump. She had that never-say-die attitude."

It's that same belief that Anju says will be crucial for Shaili during the next stage of her career. "Until now, her training was comparatively easy because she was so young. She also had a few injuries (Shaili suffered a back ailment that limited her performance in 2022), so we couldn't push her that much. But as she grows older her training pattern will



become more vigorous. It's not easy to push yourself each day in the way you need to if you are trying to become an elite competitor.

Sports training is not easy. It challenges the body every day. There is no comfort zone in training. Every day we need to show that killer attitude. I think Shaili has that," said Anju.

What also matters now is how focussed the youngster can remain as she inevitably draws attention due to her performances. Anju said, "As she jumps better and better, there will be a lot of things that would distract her. The world can be tempting. That will always be the case.

Shaili has to find a way to maintain the fire inside her. What will help is that I'm there to mentor her and Bobby is there to coach her. Whatever we have learned from our experiences is there for Shaili to learn from.

She has been with us ever since she was a young girl, so she trusts us. Shaili also can see the changes in her own performance. That gives us confidence that she will stay focussed. But at the end of the day, she must build and maintain the fire inside herself."

Shaili insists she has the desire to push herself. She has already met the qualification standards set by the Athletics Federation of India to select the national team for the Asian Games in September this year. As

things stand, she would be a favourite for the podium considering she holds the best jump by any athlete from the continent over the past two seasons.

"The Asian Games and the World Championships (July) are major goals for me. I've qualified for the Asian Games. I've not yet qualified for the Worlds (qualification standard 6.85m) but I will try," said Shaili.

Above the doorway in her room in Bangalore is a hand-painted poster that says, "Hangzhou 2022" (the Games were originally meant to be held there last year but were postponed due to the COVID pandemic).

"Last year I had wanted to qualify for the Commonwealth Games but because of my injury I wasn't at my best physically. Because of that the Asian Games are very important for me. I painted that poster last year. I want that to be the first thing I see when I wake up in the morning, so I am really focussed," she said.

But the Asian Games or even the World Championships are not the most important targets for Shaili.

Mentor motivation: Anju Bobby George with Shaili Singh after the latter's win at the 61st National Open Athletics Championship 2022.

K. MURALIKUMAR

That would be the Olympics. "*Main goal toh wahi hai. Mere liye bhi Olympics dream hai.* (That is my main goal. The Olympic Games are a dream for me)," she said.

In fact, if Shaili has a poster of the Asian Games on her wall, she has the Olympic rings as her phone wallpaper.

She will have to improve even more if she wants to make a mark at Paris 2024. A jump of 6.76m would have only been good enough for 8th place in Tokyo, while 13 athletes have already exceeded Shaili's personal best this season.

What Shaili does have though is self-belief. "I know that if I wasn't injured last year, I would have been able to perform better. But because of the injury, I wasn't very fit. This year, I have been able to prepare a lot better. I have built myself up very well. I'm physically stronger, but I think I am also mentally much tougher. That is the main improvement in me," she said.

While an Olympic medal might seem a steeping task, Shaili knows it can be achieved. "**After Neeraj Chopra won the Olympic gold in javelin throw, I got a lot of confidence.** If he can do it, even I can. Just like Neeraj was the first Indian man, I want to be the first Indian woman to win a medal (in athletics) at the Olympics.

When Anju ma'am broke the national record at the Olympics, she became so famous. That is what I want for myself also. Everyone knows who Anju ma'am and Neeraj Chopra are. I want people to also know who Shaili Singh is."

« I'm physically stronger, but I think I am also mentally much tougher. That is the main improvement in me. »



ALKA TOMAR

Former Worlds bronze medallist and Commonwealth Games champion



EMPHASIS ON SPEEDWORK AND STAMINA

In our time, we used to focus on the technical side of the game and learnt by watching others. Our wrestlers **needed to change with time** and they have done it well.

There is no doubt in my mind that the future is bright for Indian wrestling. A number of talented wrestlers are taking up the sport every year, and I am sure they will sharpen their skills to shine at the highest level.

Yes, at present, the ongoing controversy (due to the wrestlers' protest and allegations against Wrestling Federation of India president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh) has impacted the sport. But it is a temporary phase. The young wrestlers are not really affected by the distraction and are focused on their daily training.

If you remember, **the sport was also affected by COVID-19 for a considerable period of time** but came out stronger. This time, too, it will come out of the trouble. Over the years, the sport has changed a lot. The tactics and training have changed. There is a lot of emphasis on speedwork and stamina.

In our time, we used to focus on the technical side of the game and learnt by watching others. Our wrestlers needed to change with time, and they have done it well.

The facilities — the stadium, gym, training equipment, financial support, scientific support and exposure trips — have increased, and the government is supporting the sport in a big way in comparison to our times when there were fewer events and less money.

Among the male wrestlers, after (Olympic silver medallist) Ravi Dahiya, (his Chhatrasal Stadium mate) Aman Sehrawat has proved his worth. He performed very well in the Asian Championships to take the gold medal. His confidence is remarkable. There are a few others who have been performing consistently.

There are several young women wrestlers who can excel in the coming years. Antim Panghal, the World Under-20 champion and Asian silver medallist, is the best of the lot. She has done well in a short period and needs to get rid of some weaknesses to realise her potential.

The system of fielding different teams for different age groups, such as under-17 and under-23, has contributed to the youngsters' growth. The clear demarcation of age groups has allowed wrestlers at every level to flourish and has not stalled the development of younger wrestlers.

I hope I can contribute to the development of Indian wrestling by producing some talented grapplers from my own academy, which I started with my coach (Jabar Singh Som) and my brother at my village Sisoli (near Meerut) four months ago, and give something back to the sport.

As told to Y.B. Sarangi

« I want to contribute to the development of Indian wrestling by producing talented grapplers from my own academy. »

The fighter from Chhatrasal

Aman Sehrawat continues to push his limits as he looks to overcome bigger challenges and tougher competition.

Jonathan Selvaraj
Twitter @jon_selvaraj

It might not seem like much, but the walls of an underground hall in New Delhi's Chhatrasal Stadium are the closest thing Indian wrestling might have to a pantheon of greats.

What used to be an underground parking hall now serves as a training venue. Alongside the mats are framed photographs of some of the great wrestlers who have trained at this North Delhi wrestling institution.

"It's not easy to get your picture put up on the wall here. You have to be an Olympic medallist, a world medallist, or at least an Arjuna Award winner to have your picture put up here," says Parveen Singh, who coaches at Chhatrasal Stadium.

When you see the intensity of the training sessions there, it goes some way to explain the stadium's success. At a regular evening training session, coach Parveen counts out burpees or *utthak baithaks* in an unrelenting



Writing on the wall: Aman's favourite motivational quote.

cadence. When he finishes counting to 50, Parveen gives the wrestlers 30 seconds of rest before starting again. Only after 10 sets for a total of 500 burpees do the wrestlers begin their mat training.

Several of the wrestlers just about complete their sets before eagerly waiting for the half-minute break before the next one.

There is one exception, though: Aman Sehrawat, who wrestles in the 57kg category.

The 19-year-old ignores his coaches' count and sets his own fast pace as he powers through his burpees. By the time each set ends, he has done upwards of 65. While those around him are breathing heavily, Aman is going even faster. He cranks out 115 in four-and-a-half minutes. Almost everyone else is still at 50.

IF YOUR TARGET IS BIG, YOU HAVE TO DO MORE THAN OTHERS. MEHNAT SAB KARTE HAIN. ISME KOI BADI BAAT NAHIN HAI.



FACTFILE

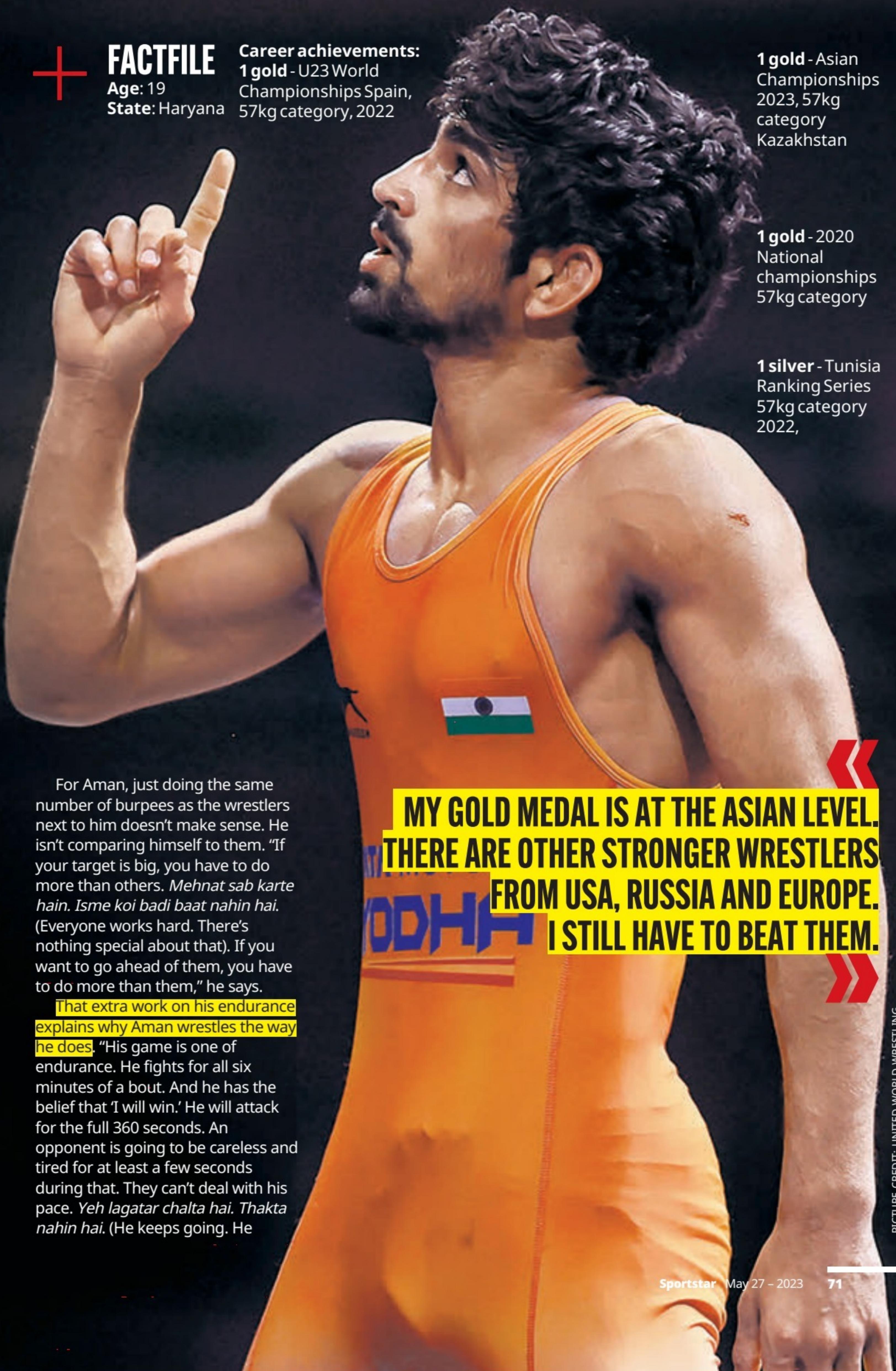
Age: 19
State: Haryana

Career achievements:
1 gold - U23 World Championships Spain, 57kg category, 2022

1 gold - Asian Championships 2023, 57kg category Kazakhstan

1 gold - 2020 National championships 57kg category

1 silver - Tunisia Ranking Series 57kg category 2022,



For Aman, just doing the same number of burpees as the wrestlers next to him doesn't make sense. He isn't comparing himself to them. "If your target is big, you have to do more than others. *Mehnat sab karte hain. Isme koi badi baat nahin hai.* (Everyone works hard. There's nothing special about that). If you want to go ahead of them, you have to do more than them," he says.

That extra work on his endurance explains why Aman wrestles the way he does. "His game is one of endurance. He fights for all six minutes of a bout. And he has the belief that 'I will win.' He will attack for the full 360 seconds. An opponent is going to be careless and tired for at least a few seconds during that. They can't deal with his pace. *Yeh lagatar chalta hai. Thakta nahin hai.* (He keeps going. He

**MY GOLD MEDAL IS AT THE ASIAN LEVEL.
THERE ARE OTHER STRONGER WRESTLERS
FROM USA, RUSSIA AND EUROPE.
I STILL HAVE TO BEAT THEM.**

doesn't get tired)," says Praveen.

Aman still doesn't have his picture in the training hall of Chhatrasal Stadium. But if he keeps up his recent performances, it is likely he will make it there. He was already a two-time national champion when he competed at the U-23 World Championships in Spain last year. There he created history, becoming the first Indian to win gold in that competition.

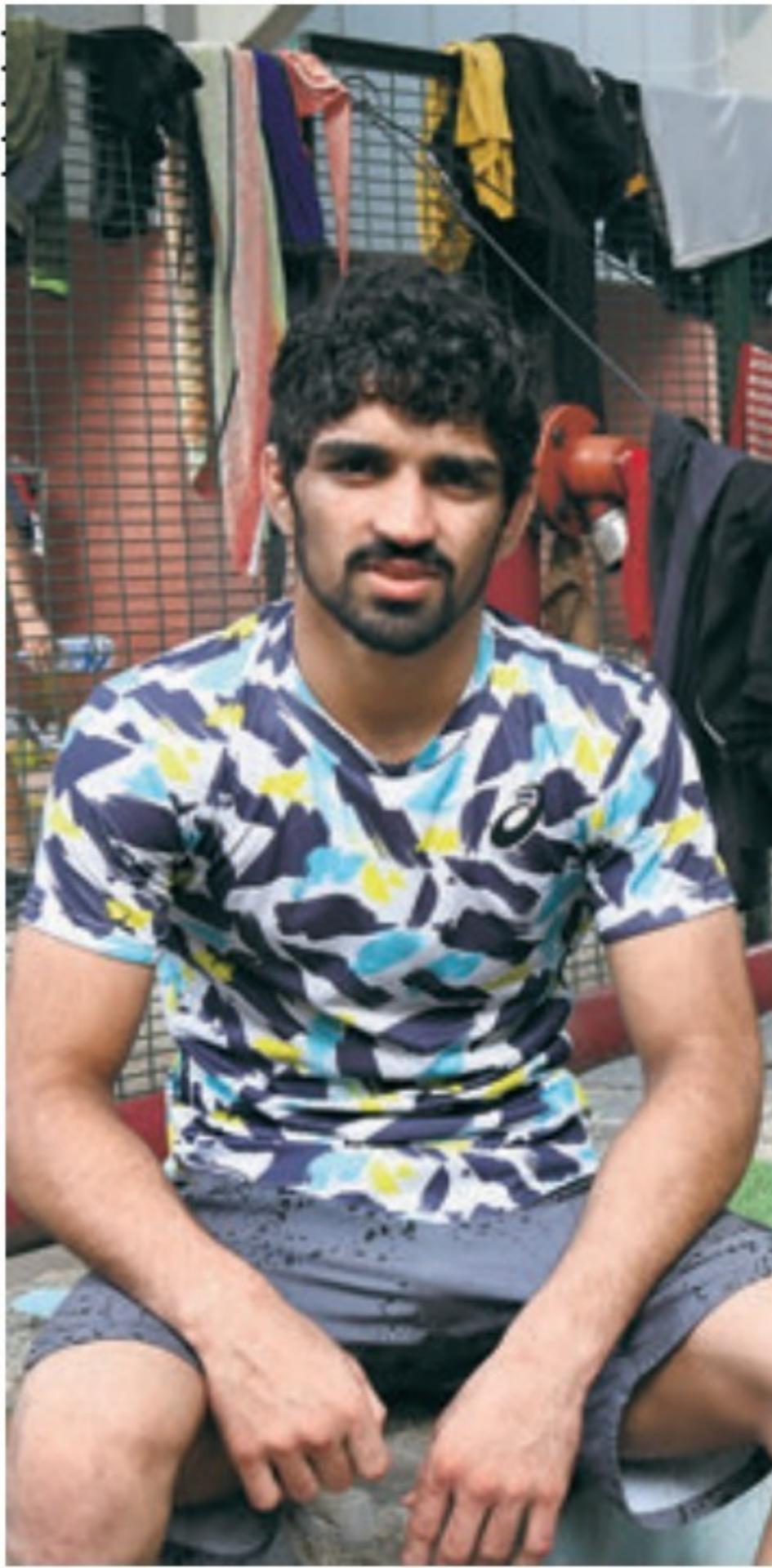
In doing so, he went one better than Olympic and world medallists Bajrang Punia and Ravi Dahiya, both of whom took silver at the U-23 World Championships.

Now Aman has been knocking on the doors of the senior age group too. Last month, he won a gold medal in the men's 57kg category at the Asian Championships, finishing ahead of a field that included 2021 World silver medallist Alireza Sarlak and 2022 World fifth place finisher Wanhai Zou.

Despite his victories, Aman is far from satisfied with where he is. "Right now, I've achieved nothing. I might be a national champion, but if I didn't win it, someone else from India would have won it. My gold medal is at the Asian level. There are other stronger wrestlers from the USA, Russia, and Europe. I still have to beat them. I think as a wrestler, I will give myself 60 marks out of 100," he says.

What his international wins did for him, he admits, was give him the confidence that at least he was on the right track. "It gives me the belief that I am doing things the right way. That I can fight and win at the senior level internationally," he says.

Aman's mentality can be summed up by a quote just next to the bed in his room at Chhatrasal Stadium. "*If it was easy, everyone would do it*" — reads the quote below hand-painted Olympic rings. "I like that message a lot. Wrestling is not easy. There are days when I feel like sleeping a little bit more and not going for morning practice at 5 a.m. Then I see that quote next to my face and I know I



have to get up," he says.

Indeed, Aman's life revolves around training and competition. This is not a new phenomenon. It's been that way since the time he first arrived at Chhatrasal Stadium as a 10-year-old boy from Birohar village in Haryana. "He has almost no distractions. He has a singular focus on training. Aman rarely even goes home," says coach Praveen.

Some of that is due to Aman's childhood. **After both his parents passed away early in his life, the stadium has been not just a place to train but also his home.** "Chhatrasal Stadium is my home. The wrestlers here are my family. If someone comes and asks me to go somewhere. I make it clear that I'm not leaving Chhatrasal for some time. Now people also know that this is my mentality. I don't like roaming around or going around Delhi," he says.

Aman's single-minded focus, as the painting of the five rings in his room suggests, remains the Olympic Games. For all his achievements, his

task of getting to Paris will not be an easy one. Perhaps his biggest hurdle won't be abroad, but right here in Chhatrasal.

India's current best in the men's 57kg category remains Ravi Dahiya — the three-time Asian Champion and Tokyo silver medallist. The one time the two wrestlers met — at a selection trial for the Commonwealth Games last year, Ravi won easily.

"I didn't fight freely against Ravi. I fought too defensively. I don't know what happened. I've never fought like that since then," Aman says.

Coaches at Chhatrasal admit that, as things stand, it is Ravi who is the more complete wrestler.

"Right now, Ravi and Aman are the best in the country in this weight category. But Ravi is no doubt a senior and has maturity and experience," says coach Lalit Kumar, who has worked with both wrestlers.

But Aman's loss was a year ago. Since then, he has continued to work on his weaknesses while sharpening his strengths.

"Right now, Aman still concedes a lot of points because his leg defence is a little weak. It was manageable when he was competing in the juniors. But at the senior level, opponents don't let you get away so easily. But he is a wrestler who is a quick learner. In another four or five months, he will be a much stronger wrestler than he is right now," says Lalit Kumar.

With major competitions such as the Worlds and the Asian Games coming up around then, could Aman prove to be a top contender ahead of even Ravi? Coaches only smile for now. "Aman is going to continue working hard and improving. If he stays away from injury and stays disciplined, you never know. It could be his picture on the wall next," says Praveen.

“Chhatrasal Stadium is my home. The wrestlers here are my family.”

Vasyl Dyachuk excels

By C.G.S.Narayanan

The problemists of Ukraine, Editor Valery Kopyl and his sub-section editors have to be congratulated for their undaunted commitment in the turbulent war times, in bringing out 64 page bi-monthly magazine 'The Problemist of Ukraine', keeping the chess culture in the country alive. I present a few prize winners from the #2 award for 2022 published in the first issue January–February 2023 with comments by British judge David Shire.

Vasyl Dyachuk
1 st prize, Problemist of Ukraine 2022



Mate in two moves

Two thematic defences are introduced as self-blocks in the set play. 1...Bf3 2.Bd3; 1...Bxe3 2.Qxb1

Two thematic defences are introduced as double threats in the try 1.Nb4? (2.Nd6/Re7) 1...Nxb4 2.Nc5 but 1...cxd5! Finally two main plays 1.Kxg4?(2.Bd3) 1...Bf3+ 2.Bxf3; 1...cxd5 2.Re7 but 1...Nd2!

Key 1.Bxf4! (Qxb1) 1...Bxe3 2.Qxe3 1...cxd5 2.Nd6 By play 1...Nb any 2.Nc3; 1...bxa2 2.Qc2; 1...Nb4/Nc5 2.Nxc5 "Not only do we have a double threat Dombrovskis but also two Dombrovskis paradoxes. The major try and key in turn guard the vulnerable squares f5 and e5. This fine mechanism will repay close study—a most deserved first prize-winner."

O,Derevchuk & M.Cherniavskyl

5th prize, Problemist of Ukraine 2022



Mate in two moves

"Ventura theme is presented in an elegant and economical setting. I appreciated enormously the use of single pin line with a single WR cutting different lines of BQ in turn" (D.Shire)
1.Rf3? (2.Nf5) 1...Rxh4 2.Ne2 (Qxe2?)
But 1...e4! **Key 1.Rg5!** (2.Nf5)
1...e4 2.Qg7 (Qxg7?) 1...Rxh4 2.Qf2
The WQ tries 1.Qg7? and 1.Qa8? are easily refuted by 1...Bc7 and 1...Ba5

A two-mover for solving
V.Dyachuk, S.Tkachenko, F.Kapustin
& P.Nolvitsky, 3rd prize,
Problemist of Ukraine 2022



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Valery Shavyrin-70': **1.d3!** ~ 2.Nd6+ Nxd6 3.Rf6#, 1...Raxd3 2.Kf7 ~ 3.Re5#(A), 2...gxf4(a) 3.Rg5#(B), 1...Rdxd3 2.Bc7 ~ 3.Rxg5#(B), 2...gxf4(a) 3.Re5#(A), 1...gxf4 2.Re5+(A) Kxe5 3.Rg5#(B).

Readers may send in their queries to
cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com



SHUTTLING BETWEEN INDIA'S YIN AND YANG

Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty became the **first Indian doubles pair to win a gold medal at the Badminton Asia Championship** and also India's first gold medallists in the event in close to six decades.

V. V. Subrahmanyam

The last 12 months have been spectacular for Indian badminton doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty. In January 2022, they became the first Indian pair to win the India Open. It was followed by the country's first Thomas Cup — the men's team world championships — win in May.

Satwik and Chirag then crowded their way into the limelight again in the second half of 2022 when they became the first Indians to win a men's doubles badminton gold at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in August and capped off a highly rewarding 2022 by becoming the first-ever Indian doubles pair to win a BWF Super 750 tournament, the French Open in October.

So, is it a new dawn in Indian badminton, or was last year just a flash in the pan? Well, the world No. 6 pair

seems to have answered that question by becoming the first Indian doubles pair to win a gold medal at the Badminton Asia Championship and also India's first gold medallists in the event in close to six decades! While this win comes right before the start of the 2024 Paris Olympics qualification cycle, Satwik is guarding against complacency. "No, we don't feel that we are in the safe zone as far as Paris Olympics qualification is concerned. Our target is to break into the top four and not be content with being in the top 16. Better rankings mean better draws in the Olympics," he told Sportstar.

Satwik threw light on what has made the two such a formidable pair. "We are both mentally much stronger and are no longer in a hurry to finish off the games," he said. "Like our doubles coach Mathias Boe used to play, never concede easy points and score points even when the opponents are playing a better

« Definitely, the first objective is to cut down on the tendency to give away easy points. Playing some really challenging matches under trying circumstances and that too in prestigious events like Thomas Cup has really helped us a lot. »



WE DON'T FEEL THAT WE ARE IN THE SAFE ZONE AS FAR AS PARIS OLYMPICS QUALIFICATION IS CONCERNED. OUR TARGET IS TO BREAK INTO THE TOP FOUR AND NOT BE CONTENT WITH BEING IN THE TOP 16.

Perfect pair: Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty celebrate after clinching gold in the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham. GETTY IMAGES

game. We are mastering that art of picking points to stay in the contest and turn around the fortunes."

Chirag echoed Satwik's view. "Definitely, the first objective is to cut down on the tendency to give away easy points," he said. "Playing some really challenging matches under trying circumstances, and that too in prestigious events like the Thomas

Cup, has really helped us a lot."

However, it has not always been a joyride for these two. They have had their fair share of injury setbacks, pulling out of their title defence at the India Open in January and then mid-match during the Madrid Masters in March. But Satwik credited Boe's unrelenting support for their bouncebackability. "Thanks



Smashing away: Satwiksairaj and Chirag in action against China's Xiang Yu Ren and Qiang Tan during their men's doubles final of the Swiss Open in March 2023. AP

WE ARE MASTERING THE ART OF PICKING POINTS TO STAY IN THE CONTEST AND TURN AROUND THE FORTUNES.

to the continuous support of our coach, we now understand better how to respect the body and the mind. We feel this is very important to keep winning major titles," he said.

It's easy to lose motivation during an injury-forced absence, but Satwik

remained optimistic. "I believed in God, especially during those testing times. Fortunately, this Asian Championship doubles gold after coming back from an injury was another special and unforgettable experience. We play much better under pressure, and that is the

reason why we have won so many finals," Satwik said.

"It is never easy to keep winning, especially given these challenges. What hurt us was that we were losing because of injury and not because we played poorly. The fatigue is a huge factor as we keep playing tournaments, given this is the Olympics qualification year.

"Given the nature of our game, more so for me since I play the attacking game with all those jumps, we realise the importance of recovery with sound sleep, proper diet, and equally invaluable workouts."

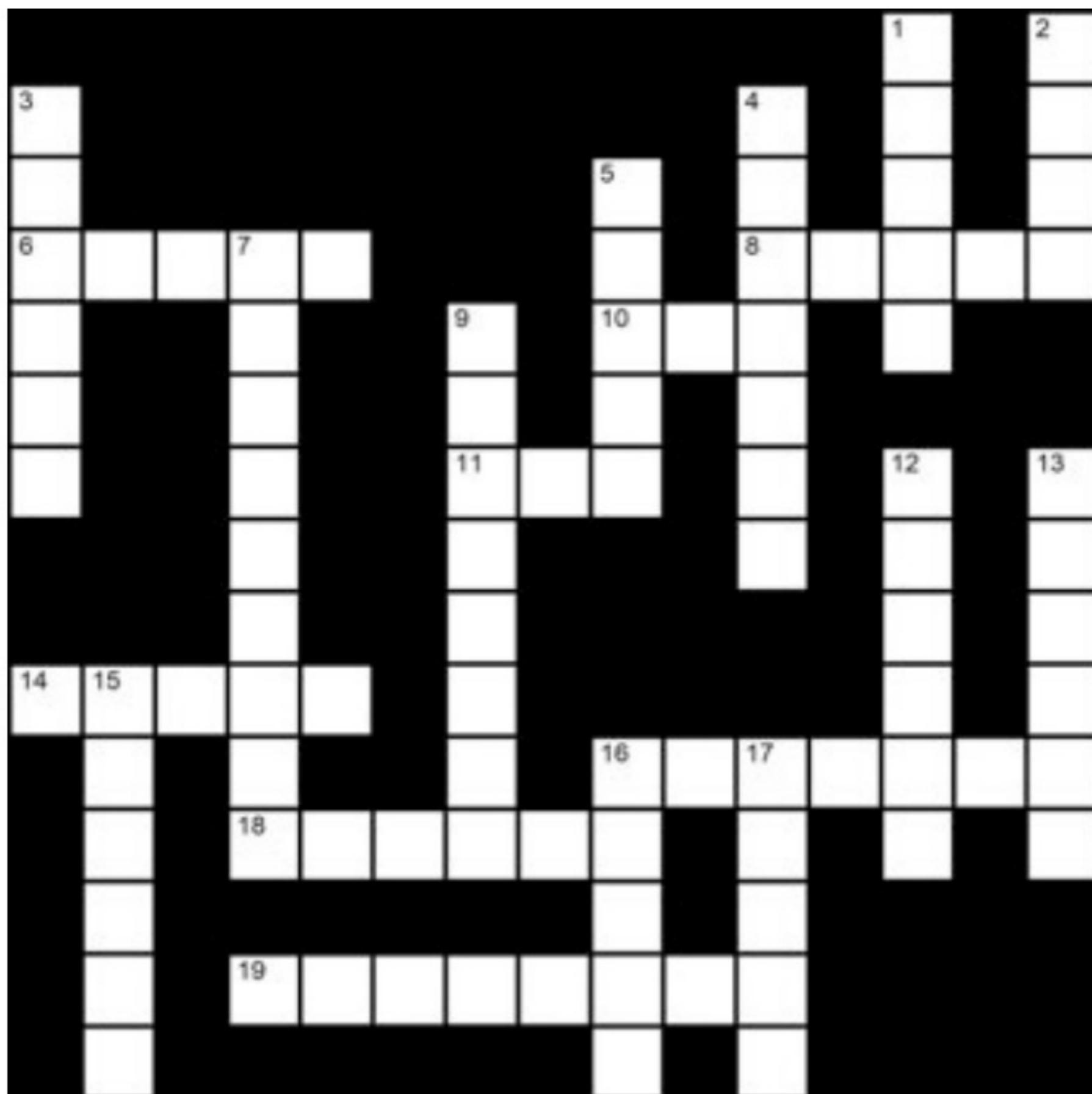
What was the biggest challenge during the injury break? "I felt really bad when I missed the Asia mixed championship. For the team, events are real fun, and you have the entire contingent supporting you, and somehow we always gave our best in them," Satwik said. "The next big targets are to win medals in the Sudirman Cup and the Asian Games," he said. "We want to keep the momentum going in the run-up to the 2024 Paris Olympics, for sure."

Chirag is not getting carried away either. "The ultimate goal is to win the Olympic medal. We know it will never be easy, but we will not be found wanting for lack of effort," said Chirag. "Definitely, the expectations for us are high. But we want to keep moving forward with self-belief that we can do it. "The Asian Games and the World Championships are also huge events, and it will be great if we have memorable outings."

« The Badminton Asia Championship win comes right before the start of the 2024 Paris Olympics qualification cycle. »

CROSSWORD

SIRAM SRINIVASAN



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 6 ... Singh, who hit five sixes off Yash Dayal in the last over of a recent IPL match. (5)
- 8 Belarusian tennis player ... Sabalenka. (5)
- 10 Arun Dhumal is its chairman. (1,1,1)
- 11 An open football stadium at 11,000 feet came up at Spituk here last year. (3)
- 14 Serbian footballer ... Mladenovic. (5)
- 16 Ousmane ..., Frenchman who plays for Barcelona. (7)
- 18 The International team for the Presidents Cup doesn't have members from the U.S. and from ... (6)

19 Russian tennis player ... Kudermetova. (8)

DOWN

- 1 Jim ..., who will lead the U.S. team for the Presidents Cup in 2024. (5)
- 2 Diogo ..., Portuguese forward who represents Liverpool. (4)
- 3 Football club Legia ... is based in this city. (6)
- 4 He recently beat the Premier League record of Shearer and Cole. (7)
- 5 Back-to-back Olympic titles winner ... Kipyegon. (5)
- 7 ... Sciver-Brunt, the England pacer who retired from international cricket recently. (9)

9 Wesley So is a ...-American GM. (8)

12 Pujara's county home. (6)

13 American Fred ..., 200m sprint star. (6)

15 Tushar Deshpande was the first such player in IPL. (6)

16 ... Booker, basketballer who represents Phoenix Suns. (5)

17 ... Essa Barshim, high jump champion. (5)



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



THE INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS' ASSOCIATION HAS NO RELEVANCE

It is hard to understand why, when most countries **have their own players' bodies**, there is a need for an international one.

This IPL is turning out to be one of the closest in terms of teams looking to qualify for the playoffs. At the time of writing this, all 10 teams are in contention for a place in the knockouts. The difference in points is not huge, and perhaps the defending champions, Gujarat, will be the first team to qualify by the time you read this. If they hadn't messed up an easy chase against Delhi, they would have qualified by now, for sure. They were strangely diffident in their pursuit of Delhi's small total and ended up five runs short. In the next game, they were again going after a modest total, but this time, they took the attack apart and won with only one wicket down and more than six overs to spare. That was champion stuff. What these scores tell you is how effective their bowling is turning out to be, with Mohammed Shami at the start and Rashid Khan and Noor Ahmed providing the spin combo to tie down and fox the opposition batters. Their fielding is also top-class, with arguably the best wicketkeeper in the world, Wriddhiman Saha, donning the big gloves.

The Lucknow skipper, KL Rahul, suffered an unfortunate injury against the Bangalore team and is not only out of the rest of the IPL but also from the World Test Championship finals in early June. Injuries are part and parcel of sports, and this was probably caused by the wet outfield due to unseasonal rains in Lucknow. Some people tried to make it out as a workload problem, but that's not the case. The T20 format is hardly taxing on the body as it requires fielding only for 20 overs and less sometimes. Yes, there could be fractures, but that is hardly because of the amount of cricket that is played. Rahul's injury was more likely because of a slippery outfield than anything else.

Speaking of workload, just before the IPL started in 2008, the so-called International Players' Association was moaning about the amount of cricket players were being asked to play. The word then was 'burnout'. For the start of the then-IPL too, the word was used, but as soon as the auction amounts were known and players realised that they could be making more money playing a couple of seasons of IPL than what the Association could get them from their respective Cricket Boards, they must have told the office bearers to shut up, for the 'burnout' word was



The Professional Cricketers' Association of England and the ACA in Australia do a terrific job of looking after the interests of not only the current players but also the retired ones.



Point to ponder: International Players' Association was moaning about the amount of cricket players were being asked to play ahead of the IPL. But as soon as the auction amounts were known the burnout word was never heard of again. PTI

never heard again. It is hard to understand why, when most countries have their own players' bodies, there is a need for an international one. One hasn't heard of anything constructive that the international body has done, like the individual associations in the countries.

The Professional Cricketers' Association of England and the ACA in Australia do a terrific job of looking after the interests of not only the current players but also the retired ones, especially those who have fallen on hard times. Many a former player contemplating bidding an untimely bye to the world has been saved by the timely intervention of these two associations in particular. That is why the question of why an international body that does not represent almost half of the full-member countries is required at all.

The ICC has given them a seat on the Committee that looks after cricketing matters, but what about seats for the associations of those countries not affiliated with the international body? If the argument there is that they are represented by their board members, why not make

the same argument for the countries whose player associations are affiliated with the international body?

Anyway, this international body has suddenly tried to show it is relevant by bringing up some figures about how much the BCCI shares with the players from its revenues from the IPL. The international body has cleverly not told us how much the ECB shares with its players from The Hundred or what Cricket Australia shares from the Big Bash. As always, the efforts of the Western media are focused on badmouthing India. The BCCI shares 50% of its revenues from the IPL with the franchises, and it's up to the franchises how much they pay the playing group. This, of course, is done through the player auction, and apart from the odd player from

England (surprise, surprise), no player is unhappy with what he gets. After all, the player has set his base price, so he can't complain if he gets picked at that and not for a higher price. What the BCCI shares with its players is a matter between them and the Indian players, so if the international body tries to poke its nose into the matter, it will only get bloodied. The BCCI is no longer the body in the thrall of the Western world as it probably was in the first three or four decades of its existence, nor are its players enamoured of foreign leagues.

You have your one day's headlines. Now go back to your office and try doing something for the game rather than trying to stir things up where you don't belong. Thanks very much.

+

What the BCCI shares with its players is a matter between them and the Indian players, so if the international body tries to poke its nose into the matter, it will only get bloodied.

Kiwi takes flight

09 } The number of batters with the distinction of registering four or more consecutive fifty-plus scores in the IPL. Devon Conway of CSK became the latest to do so in the match against KKR in Kolkata on 23 April. His four consecutive scores were 50, 83, 77 not out and 56. The IPL record is five in five by three players — Virender Sehwag, Jos Buttler and David Warner. However, Conway failed to extend this sequence and equal the record when he was dismissed for eight in the next match in Jaipur on 27 April. He then made a career-best unbeaten 92 against PBKS in Chennai on 30 April to register his fifth 50+ score in his last six innings. Conway emulated Faf du Plessis, the only other CSK player to make four fifties in a row in the IPL.

BATTERS WITH FOUR OR MORE FIFTIES-PLUS SCORES IN CONSECUTIVE INNINGS IN IPL CRICKET

50s	Batter	for	No	Runs	HS	Ave.	100s	50s	From	To
5	Virender Sehwag	DC	1	353	87*	88.25	0	5	21 Apr 2012	01 May 2012
5	Jos Buttler	RR	2	389	95*	129.67	0	5	02 May 2018	13 May 2018
5	David Warner	SRH	1	295	70*	73.75	0	5	08 Apr 2019	23 Apr 2019
4	Virat Kohli	RCB	2	351	113	175.50	2	2	14 May 2016	22 May 2016
4	Kane Williamson	SRH	1	271	83*	90.33	0	4	07 May 2018	17 May 2018
4	Shikhar Dhawan	DC	3	333	106*	333.00	2	2	11 Oct 2020	20 Oct 2020
4	Faf du Plessis	CSK	1	251	95*	83.67	0	4	21 Apr 2021	01 May 2021
4	Ishan Kishan	MI	2	269	84	134.50	0	4	05 Oct 2021	02 Apr 2022
4	Devon Conway	CSK	1	266	83	88.67	0	4	12 Apr 2023	23 Apr 2023



Devon Conway.

3015 } The number of T20 runs accumulated by Virat Kohli at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru. During his knock of 54 for RCB against KKR on 26 April, he became the first batter in T20 cricket history to aggregate 3000-plus T20 runs at a single venue.

MOST T20 RUNS MADE AT A VENUE/GROUND BY A BATTER

Runs	Venue (Stadium)	Batter	Mts	Inns	Ave.	100	50	HS
3015	Bengaluru (M. Chinnaswamy)	Virat Kohli	95	92	38.68	3	23	113
2989	Mirpur (Sher-e-Bangla)	Mushfiqur Rahim	129	121	33.96	0	18	98*
2813	Mirpur (Sher-e-Bangla)	Mahmudullah	137	130	28.70	0	8	70*
2749	Nottingham (Trent Bridge)	Alex Hales	90	90	33.52	2	22	101*
2706	Mirpur (Sher-e-Bangla)	Tamim Iqbal	94	93	31.10	2	19	141*



Virat Kohli

02 } The number of occasions an IPL side has used nine bowlers (highest ever) in its innings. Lucknow recently used as many in its match against Punjab in Mohali on 28 April. Incidentally, in the same game, Punjab used seven bowlers, which meant that 16 bowlers were utilised, which is again a record, equalling the tally of the Bengaluru match of May, 2016.

NINE BOWLERS USED IN AN INNINGS BY AN IPL SIDE

Used by	Against (total)	Venue	Date	Result	Best bowling
RCB	GL (104 in 18.4 ov)	Bengaluru	14 May 2016	Won	4/11 (3 ov) by Chris Jordan
LSG	PBKS (201 in 19.5 ov)	Mohali	28 Apr 2023	Won	4/37 (3.5 ov) by Yash Thakur



Punjab Kings.

03} The number of occasions an IPL side has been dismissed after making a total of 200-plus. PBKS was all out for 201 in 19.5 overs of the second innings in Mohali against LSG on 28 April 2023.

HIGHEST ALL-OUT TOTALS IN IPL

Total	Ov	By	Agst	Venue	Date	Result	Batting
210	19.4	KKR	RR	MumbaiBS	18 Apr 2022	Lost	2nd
202	19.1	KKR	CSK	MumbaiWS	21 Apr 2021	Lost	2nd
201	19.5	PBKS	LSG	Mohali	28 Apr 2023	Lost	2nd
188	20.0	MI	PBKS	MumbaiWS	21 May 2008	Lost	2nd
185	20.0	RR	PBKS	Dubai	21 Sep 2021	Won	1st
182	20.0	PBKS	MI	Mohali	25 Apr 2008	Won	1st



Punjab Kings vs Lucknow Super Giants.

05} The number of players who have the distinction of making a fifty and claiming a four-wicket haul in the same IPL match. Yuvraj Singh had achieved this feat on two separate occasions (both in a losing cause). Aussie Mitchell Marsh, playing for Delhi Capitals against Hyderabad on 29 April, in Delhi, claimed 4/27 and then scored a 63 to become the latest player to join this elite list. However, his side lost the game.

ALL-ROUNDER'S DOUBLE IN AN IPL MATCH (FIFTY-PLUS SCORE AND A FOUR-WICKET HAUL IN SAME MATCH)

Runs	Wkts	Player	For	Opp	Venue	Dare	Result
75	4/29	Paul Valthaty+	PBKS	DChr	Hyderabad	16 Apr 2011	WON
66*	4/29	Yuvraj Singh+	PWI	DC	MumbaiDYP	17 Apr 2011	Lost
64	4/44	Kieron Pollard	MI	RR	MumbaiWS	11 Apr 2012	WON
83	4/35	Yuvraj Singh+	RCB	RR	Bengaluru	11 May 2014	Lost
54	4/17	J. P. Duminy	DC	SRH	Visakhapatnam	18 Apr 2015	WON
63	4/27	Mitchell Marsh	DC	SRH	Hyderabad	29 Apr 2023	Lost



Mitchell Marsh.

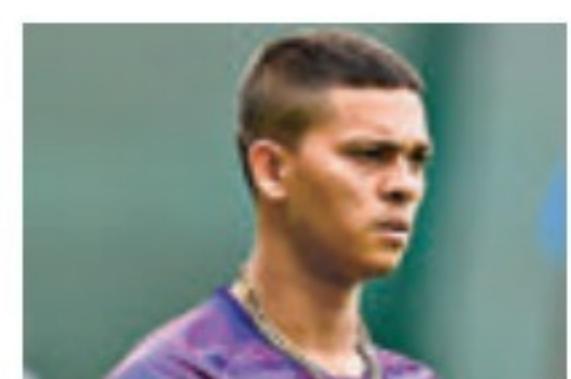
+ indicates this was also the highest score and best bowling performance of the match.

** Yuvraj Singh for PWI and J. P. Duminy for DC were captaining their sides.

04} The number of batters who have registered an IPL century below the age of 22. Rajasthan Royals' Yashasvi Jaiswal, during his 124 against Mumbai Indians at the Wankhede Stadium on 30 April, became the latest to join this exclusive list. The previous youngest RR batter to register an IPL century was Ajinkya Rahane at 23y-314d during his unbeaten 103 against RCB in Bengaluru on 15 April 2012.

YOUNGEST BATTER TO REGISTER A MAIDEN IPL CENTURY

Age	Batter	Score	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result	Bat#
19y-253d	Manish Pandey	114*	RCB	DChr	Centurion	21 May 2009	Won	2
20y-218d	Rishabh Pant	128*	DC	SRH	Delhi	10 May 2018	Lost	4
20y-289d	Devdutt Padikkal	101*	RCB	RR	MumbaiWS	22 Apr 2021	Won	2
21y-123d	Yashasvi Jaiswal	124	RR	MI	MumbaiWS	30 Apr 2023	Lost	1



Yashasvi Jaiswal.

124} Yashasvi Jaiswal's score in a losing cause for RR against MI at the Wankhede Stadium on 30 April, which is now the second-highest by any batter in a losing cause in IPL history — just four short of Rishabh Pant's effort of 128 not out for Delhi in 2018.

HIGHEST IPL SCORES IN A LOSING CAUSE

Runs	Batter	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Bat#
128*	Rishabh Pant	DC	SRH	Delhi	10 May 2018	4
124	Yashasvi Jaiswal	RR	MI	MumbaiWS	30 Apr 2023	1
119	Sanju Samson	RR	PBKS	MumbaiWS	12 Apr 2021	3
117*	Andrew Symonds	DChr	RR	Hyderabad	24 Apr 2008	4
115*	Wriddhiman Saha	PBKS	KKR	Bengaluru	1 Jun 2014	4



Rishabh Pant.

Notes:

* Saha's unbeaten 115 came in the 2014 IPL final

* Jaiswal's 124 is now the joint-highest score by a RR batter in the IPL. His opening partner Jos Buttler had also registered an identical score for RR against SRH in Delhi on 2 May 2021.

All records are correct and updated until 5 May 2023



Pakistan clinches 4-1 series win against New Zealand

1

Captain **Babar Azam** brought up his 18th ODI hundred to complete a convincing victory in the fourth ODI.

Pakistan endured a 47-run defeat against New Zealand in the final ODI but clinched the series 4-1. Earlier, Pakistan had thrashed New Zealand by 102 runs to become the No. 1 ODI team. Usama Mir registered his

career-best figures of 4 for 43, and captain Babar Azam brought up his 18th ODI hundred to complete a convincing victory in the fourth ODI.

However, to remain at the top of the rankings at the conclusion of

the series, Pakistan needed to win by a 5-0 margin in Karachi. After the defeat, Pakistan has slipped to third, while Australia has now regained the top spot with India behind it. New Zealand remains fifth.



2

Shabnim Ismail announced her retirement from international cricket. Ismail, whose career spanned 16 years, concluded with the home T20 World Cup in February. She has taken 317 wickets in 241 games, and reportedly broke the record for the fastest ball in women's cricket during the T20 World Cup, when she clocked 128 kph (80 mph) against England in the semifinals.



3

South Africa and Australia will prepare for the men's One-Day International World Cup with a five-match series in September. The Aussies would arrive in late August for a three-T20I, five-ODI tour that concludes in mid-September. Australia last toured the Rainbow Nation in 2020, when it won the T20I series 2-1 but didn't win a game in the three-match ODI series.



4

KL Rahul, the captain of the Lucknow Super Giants, has been ruled out of the remainder of the IPL and the World Test Championship final against Australia at the Oval on June 7. Rahul is set to undergo a thigh surgery after tearing a tendon in his right leg while chasing a ball in the second over of LSG's match against Royal Challengers Bangalore. This is the second major injury Rahul has suffered in recent years, following a sports hernia in 2022 for which he needed surgery. LSG signed Karun Nair as a replacement while Ishan Kishan took Rahul's place in the WTC squad.

AP



5

Nepal beat the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the final of the ACC men's Premier Cup in Kathmandu to qualify for the Asia Cup for the first time.

Nepal will take the last spot in Group A, alongside India and Pakistan.

Meanwhile, Nepal, UAE, and Oman will also feature in the ACC Emerging Teams Asia Cup in July, where they will take on 'A' teams of five full members in the region.

The venues for the Asia Cup, which was scheduled to happen in Pakistan, have been under constant debate due to political tensions between rival nations India and Pakistan, with the former demanding a neutral venue for the continental tournament.



6

Steve Smith and Cheteshwar Pujara batted together for Sussex in a red-ball first-class match for the first time against Worcestershire in County Championship Division Two. The two will face each other in the World Test Championship final at the Oval in June. While Smith was trapped in front by Josh Tongue for 30, Pujara scored his eighth Sussex century.



7

England pace-bowling allrounder Katherine Sciver-Brunt, a three-time World Cup winner and four-time Ashes champion, announced her retirement from international cricket. The right-arm seamer made her England debut in 2004, played 267 times for her country, and has taken 335 wickets across all formats. Brunt will continue to play in The Hundred.

» IPL PHOTOLINE



1st

Maxwell's day out: After Trent Boult dented Royal Challengers Bangalore with two early wickets, Glenn Maxwell and Faf du Plessis plundered 127 runs in just 66 balls to put Rajasthan Royals on the backfoot. While Royals eventually restricted RCB to 189 for nine, their batters botched a run-chase that looked straightforward, especially with Yashasvi Jaiswal and Devdutt Padikkal on song during a 98-run partnership for the second wicket. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



2nd

Second wind: CSK's Ajinkya Rahane has been on a hot streak in the IPL this season. Against KKR, Rahane blended timing and elegance with some inventive strokeplay. K. R. DEEPAK



3rd

Master of all trades: Axar Patel was the architect of Delhi Capitals' stunning seven-run win against Sunrisers Hyderabad. After scoring a watchful run-a-ball 34, the left-arm spinner took two for 21. NAGARA GOPAL

4th

Coming alive at the death: Abhinav Manohar flaunted his big-hitting prowess with a 21-ball 42 and set the wheels in motion for a storm in the death overs. The Mumbai Indians attack was buffeted by Manohar, David Miller (46 off 22) and Rahul Tewatia (20 off 5) as Gujarat Titans ransacked 70 runs off the last four overs to post 207 for six. The Afghan spin duo of Noor Ahmad and Rashid Khan then picked five wickets between them to leave Mumbai 55 runs adrift of the target. VIJAY SONEJI



5th

Flatter to deceive: When Phil Salt and Mitchell Marsh plundered 22 runs off Umran Malik's over after the PowerPlay, Delhi Capitals felt a drastic shift in momentum. However, their 112-run partnership off 66 balls for the second wicket was inadequate as Capitals lost a flurry of wickets, eventually falling nine runs short of Sunrisers' 197 for six. The defeat was a bitter pill to swallow for Marsh, who scored 63 off 39 balls and picked four for 27 in a losing cause. R.V. MOORTHY



6th

Bamboozled: Varun Chakaravarthy found breakthroughs at critical junctures and picked three for 27 to help Kolkata Knight Riders do the double over Royal Challengers Bangalore. Chakaravarthy first sent the dangerous Glenn Maxwell packing by cramping him for room, then curtailed Mahipal Lomror's valiant knock before ending RCB's chase for all intents and purposes with the wicket of Dinesh Karthik. K. MURALIKUMAR



7th

Zampa zaps CSK: Adam Zampa virtually ended Chennai Super Kings' challenge by removing Moeen Ali as Sanju Samson took a sharp catch behind the stumps. The Australian leg-spinner had foisted the marauding opening pair of Devon Conway and Ruturaj Gaikwad earlier as CSK never got going while chasing Rajasthan Royals' 202 for five, set up by Yashasvi Jaiswal's sublime 77 off 43.

SPORTZPICS/IPL



8th

Not so stoic: Marcus Stoinis, with chilling efficiency and devastating impact, slammed a 40-ball 72 to power Lucknow Super Giants to 257 for five — the highest team total this season and the second highest ever in the IPL. R.V. MOORTHY



9th

New avatar: Vijay Shankar has taken a special liking to KKR this season. After slamming a 24-ball 63 in a losing cause, his 24-ball 51 took Gujarat Titans over the line in the second leg. K.R. DEEPAK

10th

Dhoni Dhamaka: The delirious fans at Chepauk got their money's worth as Chennai Super Kings' talismanic skipper and crowd favourite M. S. Dhoni walloped two sixes off the last two deliveries to propel his team to 200 for four. However, with three runs needed off the last ball of the match, Sikandar Raza held his nerve to clinch a thrilling four-wicket win for Punjab Kings. M. VEDHAN





14th

Mohali marauders: While its bowlers came under the scanner against Punjab Kings once again, Mumbai Indians chased down a second 200-plus score in succession with a stupefying Suryakumar Yadav half-century dazzling the Mohali crowd.

R.V. MOORTHY

SURYAKUMAR YADAV'S 31-BALL 66 HAD EIGHT FOURS AND TWO SIXES AS MUMBAI INDIANS CHASED DOWN A 200-PLUS SCORE AGAINST PUNJAB KINGS.





15th

Mysterious swerve: Sunrisers Hyderabad was on course for a comfortable win in a 172-run chase against Kolkata Knight Riders before Varun Chakaravarthy imparted a twist. The wrist-spinner conceded just 12 runs in three overs at the death as KKR eked out a crucial five-run win. K. MURALIKUMAR



16th

Not over, not yet: While rain hampered an LSG-CSK clash in Lucknow, M. S. Dhoni sent fans into a spin after answering a question from broadcaster Danny Morrison at the toss on his IPL future. "You've decided it is my last IPL," quipped Dhoni as he maintained the mystery around his retirement. SPORTZPICS/IPL



17th

Wisdom to win: Ishant Sharma's impressive 2/23 helped Delhi Capitals trump Gujarat Titans by five runs in its den at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad. After castling Vijay Shankar with a spotless knuckleball, Ishant soared above Hardik Pandya and Rahul Tewatia to defend 11 runs in the last over. VIJAYSONEJI



18th

Slinging death: Matheesha Pathirana's toe-crushers incited a batting no-show from the Mumbai Indians against Chennai Super Kings at Chepauk. M. VEDHAN

19th

Rocking the Jaipur fort:

Rashid Khan's spellbinding 3/14 steamrolled Rajasthan Royals at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium in Jaipur. The Royals' abject surrender at 118 helped the Gujarat Titans notch up a massive nine-wicket win and assert its dominance over the standings. SPORTZPICS/IPL



20th

Salt peppers RCB: A ruthless charge from Phil Salt helped Delhi Capitals stay alive in the Playoffs race with a seven-wicket win over Royal Challengers Bangalore. The DC opener notched up a 45-ball 87, depriving the RCB bowlers of any options at the Arun Jaitley Stadium. R. V. MOORTHY



MURAL OF THE STORY

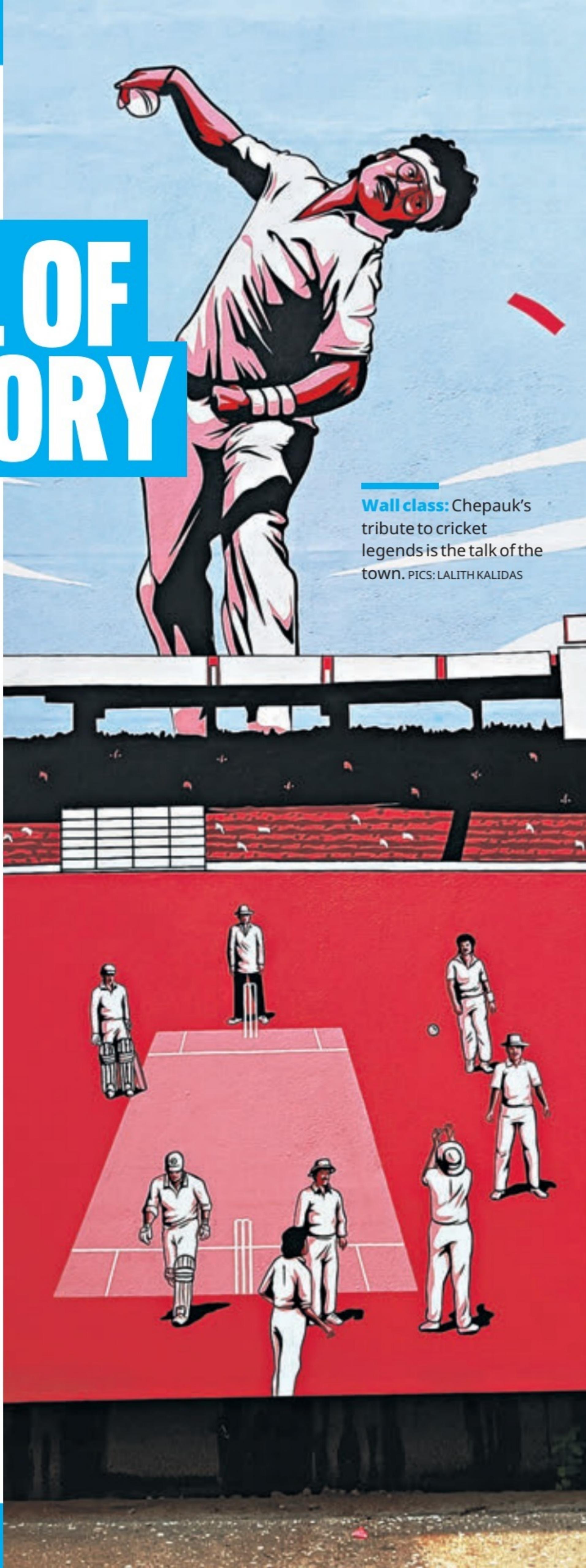
Chepauk salutes legends

This Chepauk buzz is something else. The Chennai Super Kings is alive and kicking, still riding on its talisman MS Dhoni's tactical brilliance on the field. However, the ticketing frenzy off it left the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association on the hook before CSK clashed with arch-rival Mumbai Indians. A TNCA official shares his plight, "People from far away call every day and say, 'Sir, if you promise one (ticket), I'm booking my trip right away.' The online tickets are selling like hot cakes, but nobody knows a person who's succeeded in securing one."

Far from the madness, the host association has silently embellished some corners of the M. A. Chidambaram Stadium with an artistic dive into its glorious past. Sachin Tendulkar's '99 classic adorns the interiors of the media centre, while epochal memories make beautiful murals outside the practice facility.

Gavaskar-Srikkanth, Hirwani and Harbhajan — all find a special abode. Even MSD's Test double hundred at the ground found its rightful place in pink at the Yellow Den.

Wall class: Chepauk's tribute to cricket legends is the talk of the town. PICS: LALITH KALIDAS





P. K. AJITH KUMAR

Zen mode



The journey to Chepauk on CSK matchdays is more of a pilgrimage, with thousands thronging the stands to catch a glimpse of their demigod, MSD, perhaps in action for the very last time in yellow. One mention of Dhoni, even on the giant screen, is enough to send the crowd into delirium. One man who has added technicolour to all the oohs and aahs is KC Senthil Kumar, a.k.a. DJ Zen (pic, below), the official disc jockey of the Men in Yellow at home. Zen, who started playing at the M. A. Chidambaram Stadium during the India vs Australia ODI in March, went viral when he timed one of music composer Anirudh Ravichander's many hits to Dhoni's entrance during a match against LSG. The lyrics "Once upon a time, there lived a ghost. He was known to be a killer... and feared the most..." came alive as Dhoni took guard. The song seemed to have had an effect on Captain Cool as well, who replied with back-to-back sixes over deep square leg and third man. "When it is Dhoni, extra care has to be taken. The music, and more importantly, the lyrics, must appeal to the crowd," Zen says.

**Lalith Kalidas,
P. K. Ajith Kumar &
Santadeep Dey**

Ultimate fan service



Chennai Super Kings is not just one of the IPL's most successful franchises but it boasts one of the strongest fan-bases as well. And the CSK management appreciates those fans. So much so, it flies a group of them to the venues where the franchise plays, for all the matches. They are put up in star hotels and paid a daily allowance. The *Sportstar* correspondent was on one of those flights carrying the CSK fans, all dressed in yellow. Shortly after the

take-off, the pilot announced: *Whistle Podu*.

Among those fans travelling for the match against Rajasthan Royals at Jaipur was Anoop Samraj from Coimbatore. "I was one of the five fans that formed the social media group for CSK fans that have now become the Whistle Podu Army, which has more than 2.4 million followers on Instagram," says the young entrepreneur. "I have been a CSK fan right from the first edition of the IPL."



SANTADEEP DEY



MAX VS PEREZ

» BULLISH DAYS AHEAD

Red Bull is leagues ahead of the **competition with their two drivers** dominating this season.



S. Dipak Ragav
Twitter @dipakragav

After the season's first three races, Formula One enjoyed a rare three-week spring break following the Australian Grand Prix in early April. The enforced break was due to the cancellation of the Chinese Grand Prix for the fourth year due to the pandemic. The break allowed the teams a pause before the circus was on the road for the Azerbaijan Grand Prix and Miami Grand Prix double-header.

The gap between races also allowed most teams to bring upgrades to the car, with McLaren, in particular, hoping it would help them get back on the right track after it launched the vehicle with a design flaw.

However, the pecking order has barely budged, as Red Bull romped home in both races without trouble, just like it did in



the first three events.

It is now clear that the battle for the drivers' title will be between teammate Max Verstappen and Sergio Perez, while it is difficult to see anyone dethroning Red Bull for the constructors' title.

Perez takes the fight to Verstappen

Perez has always gone well around the street circuits, and the Mexican driver did it yet again, acing both the Sprint and main race around the streets of Baku. In the sprint race, he out-qualified Verstappen and used the inherent pace of his car to hunt down pole-sitter Charles Leclerc's Ferrari to win the Sprint Race.

On Sunday, Perez got lucky as he pitted a lap after Verstappen during the Safety Car period and got the jump on his teammate. But what was impressive was his ability to ensure the reigning champion never got within one second of him even to try a move on him. Perez is known as the 'tyre whisperer' for his ability to manage tyre wear, and he showed yet again his ability to do that as he also won the Grand Prix.

World Champion hits back

After a sub-par outing in Baku, Verstappen got back on form to tell the world that he is still the overwhelming favourite to win the title with a dominant win in Miami.

The Dutchman started ninth after an error in qualifying, while his teammate started from pole position.

It was the race where Perez needed to assert his dominance if he had any hope of fighting for the title. But it needed just 15 laps for Verstappen to come through the pack and slot behind his teammate, who was just three seconds up the road. And after both drivers had done their pitstops, Verstappen took no time to breeze past Perez and eventually finished five seconds ahead and stretched his lead further.

If the Mexican driver hopes to have a realistic shot at the title, he can't have another weekend like Miami.

Moto GP



Reigning champion Francesco Bagnaia returned to the top of the standings dominating the Spanish Grand Prix in Jerez. The Italian driver finished second in the Sprint Race before winning on Sunday to pocket 34 points. It helped him retake the championship lead after modest returns in the previous two rounds in Argentina and the USA. The Italian now leads his compatriot Marco Bezzecchi by 22 points.

Duo on the charge: The battle for the drivers title is heating up between Red Bull drivers Max Verstappen and Sergio Perez.

GETTYIMAGES



FIGHTING THE SYSTEM

1

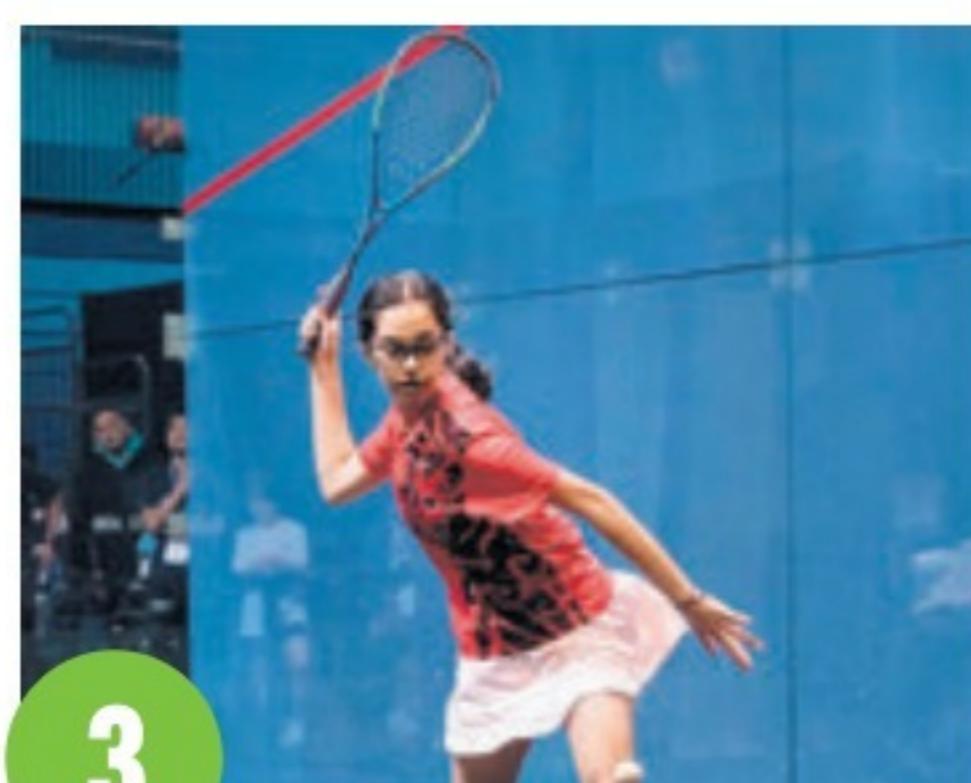


Wrestlers Vinesh Phogat and Sangita Phogat during a training session near Jantar Mantar amid their protest, in New Delhi, on April 26. The wrestlers were protesting against WFI chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh and have accused him of sexual harassment of many women wrestlers. PTI



2

Newly-appointed Indian men's hockey team chief coach Craig Fulton has arrived in India. The 48-year-old South African landed in New Delhi and met with Hockey India officials. He has joined the team in Bengaluru where the ongoing national coaching camp is being held at Sports Authority of India (SAI). "I am really excited to be here, finally. There is lots of hockey in the next few months in the build-up to the Asian Games," he said.



3

Anahat Singh continued her dominance to become the U-19 girls' champion, while Rohan Arya Gondi clinched the U-19 boys' title in the Southern Slam Squash Championships, a five-star event, at the ISTA in Chennai. Indian Squash and Triathlon Academy (ISTA) trainee Arihant KS prevailed over Gurveer Singh in a gruelling five-set final to emerge the U-17 boys' champion.



4

Armyman Arjun Pradhan, 41, who hails from Dehradun, comfortably won the Federal Bank Kochi Marathon, clocking 2:32.50s. Second-placed Vipul Kumar was more than three minutes behind. "It rained at the start but after 5km I took the lead and held it till 42km," Arjun told Sportstar after the victory. Meanwhile, in the women's marathon, two girls at the top of the pack were chatting almost all through the 42km event. It was a very close race too and in the end, Maharashtra's Jyoti Gawate pipped her State and club-mate Ashvini Madan Jadhav by seven seconds to take the title in 3:17.31s.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

TEAM SPORTSTAR

STAN RAYAN



Chinese keeping a close watch



With the Asian Games in Hangzhou a few months away, the Chinese are closely watching the Indian long jumpers and their stunning performances.

National record-holder Jeswin Aldrin, with his 8.42m at the Indian Jumps Open in Ballari in March, is currently the long jump world leader while M. Sreeshankar finished No. 3 in the world list last year with his 8.36m.

There were many Chinese at the MVA High Performance Meet in Chula Vista where Sreeshankar won the gold comfortably.

"The Chinese have recorded almost all my jumps. The videos were taken by the science head of their jumps group," Sreeshankar, the Commonwealth Games silver medallist, told *Sportstar* from the U.S.

China's Jianan Wang is the current World champion and also the defending Asian Games champion, having won the gold in Jakarta 2018. In fact, the Chinese have won the long jump gold at the last two editions of the Asiad.

"I spoke to the Chinese science team head. The Chinese, around 40 of them, have been in the U.S. since November," said Sreeshankar.

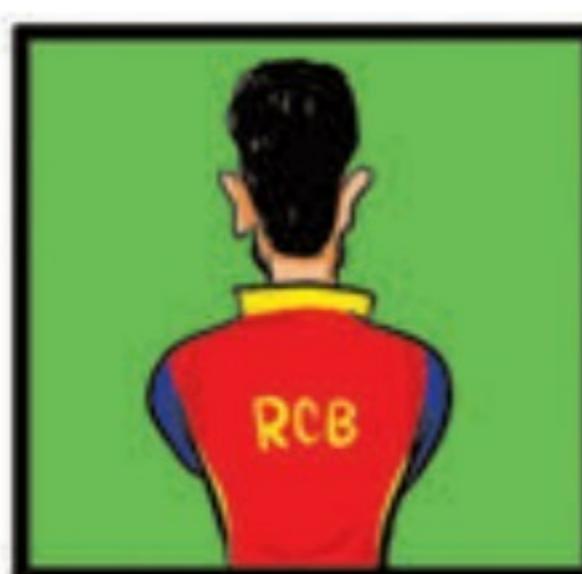
STAN RAYAN

SPOORTOON

IPL'S OLDEST RIVALRIES...



VS



VS



DELHI
VS
DELHI



5

Over 380 campers including 177 special athletes, from 23 States of India participated in 15 sports at the National Coaching Camp, supported by the

Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and the Sports Authority of India. The camp was held at the Amity University in Noida with all the sports disciplines organised within the sprawling campus of the University and, golf held at the Noida Golf Course. Special Olympics Bharat announced the strength of the delegation in the presence of Padma Shri Rani Rampal, former captain, of the Indian hockey team and Dr. Mallika Nadda, chairperson, SO Bharat, along with the athletes and coaches. This is the third preparatory camp for India's participation at the Special Olympics World Summer Games being held in Berlin, Germany in June 2023. The camp was held to further hone the individual as well as competitive skills of the athletes to finally face global competition. Sessions of coaches briefing and training of the athletes were run parallel to ensure a holistic experience for both, also providing expanded opportunities for engagements between the two.

TEAM SPORTSTAR



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando
Twitter @ryanfoodcoach



Beat the wheat

Gluten has long been considered a '**'silent killer'** for sportspersons, with intolerance towards the protein rendering sub-par performances.

Vyshak Vijay Kumar was a champion in the making when he came to me as a teenager in 2016. But he was overweight; eating rice being his main problem. After doing a nutrition gene test that covers DNA sensitivities to lactose and gluten, we overhauled his diet. Now, after having lost over 15 kilos, he is able to bowl at an incredible 140 kmph for the Royal Challengers Bangalore in the IPL.

Joshna Chinappa is another athlete powering her way with a diet that is wheat-free. With no inflammation, the squash player's diet leads to better recovery thus enabling her to cheat destruction of soft tissue damage while continuing to play without any hindrance. She will represent India at the Asian Games this September.

A higher awareness is always important to achieve victory in any sport. When athletes do not perform well, they assess the reasons with the help of multiple specialists, including the sports nutritionist whose evaluation is based on diet.

The sports diet can be assessed both positively and negatively. In the negative assessment, the focus is on wrong foods, wrong timings and portions that may not fulfil the athlete's metabolic needs. Athletes may mistakenly attribute poor performance solely to training load,

type, or intensity, while remaining unaware of potential diet allergies, which can adversely affect their performance.

Gluten, the silent killer

One of the key allergies for athletes is gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye. Oats also have a type of gluten known as avenin. These grains are silent killers for those seeking to win at the highest level. Tennis icon Novak Djokovic is a famous example of how an elite player changed his destiny by discovering the toxic effects this molecule had on his body.

Long-distance runner Ryan Hall and golfer Michelle Wie are other notable athletes who have publicly shared their experiences with gluten intolerance or sensitivity and have made dietary adjustments to manage their condition while competing at a high level. Personally, I have handled more than 600 athletes with gluten intolerance at a genetic level and managed to improve their performances.

How gluten enters the body

Gluten provides elasticity to dough and is commonly found in many staple foods, such as bread, pasta, and cereals. Wheat, being a staple crop, is cheap and difficult to be removed from a sportsperson's diet since it is found in most commonplace food items such as, wheat flour biscuits, sandwiches,

maida noodles, and desserts such as cakes, pastries, pies and even *gulab jamuns*.

A case to avoid gluten

The primary reason why gluten can be problematic is that it can cause inflammation and damage to the lining of the small intestine. This can impair nutrient absorption, leading to deficiencies in important vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients that are crucial for athletic performance, such as iron, calcium, and Vitamin B. Nutrient deficiencies can affect energy levels, muscle function, recovery, and overall athletic performance.

The role of diagnostics

A simple diagnosis and awareness about gluten intolerance can guide athletes towards the right treatment and help them achieve their personal best performance levels.

In addition to gastrointestinal symptoms, gluten intolerance can also cause other symptoms, such as fatigue, joint pain, brain fog, and skin issues, which can further impact athletes' ability to perform at their best. Gluten intolerance or sensitivity can be identified through a blood test and genetic test. Blood tests can be performed to check for specific antibodies related to gluten intolerance, such as anti-tissue transglutaminase (tTG) antibodies and anti-endomysial antibodies (EMA). Elevated levels of these



Wheat is found in most food items such as biscuits, sandwiches, *maida* noodles, and desserts such as cakes, pastries, pies and *gulab jamuns*.



antibodies can indicate the presence of gluten intolerance. **Genetic testing can be done to determine if an individual carries the genes associated with an increased risk of developing gluten intolerance, such as human leukocyte antigen (HLA) genes, specifically HLA-DQ2 and HLA-DQ8.**

It's important to note that proper diagnosis of gluten intolerance should be made by the nutritionist, and self-diagnosis or elimination of gluten from the diet without proper

Turning point: Having suffered breathing issues in the early part of his career, Novak realised his gluten problem and removed it from his diet completely. The rest, as they say, is history. GETTY IMAGES

evaluation may not provide accurate results.

Personally, I have avoided gluten for over a decade once I got tested. As a non-athlete I have seen immense health benefits to my digestive and

brain system. My workouts are easier, and my resting heart rate is lower due to lowered inflammation.

The need for right advice

In my over two decades of nutrition counselling experience, I have observed a lack of awareness among athletes regarding the potential impact of gluten intolerance on their performance. As some retire, I still request them to avoid gluten, but my pleas fall on deaf ears. **Gluten has an addictive molecule in it that stimulates the pleasure centre of the brain ensuring a temptation that's driven by the brain and not only your taste buds.**

The one book to end your doubts

Many athletes are unaware that eliminating certain foods containing gluten from their diet can significantly boost their performance. This realisation has prompted me to compile all my learnings from working with athletes in my new book, *Wheatless*. Writing this book is a way to explain the process to parents and athletes alike on what you should be looking for.

I not only highlight how gluten can affect health and performance, but also provide actionable steps for managing it and achieving optimal performance. *Wheatless* is now available on Amazon, serving as a valuable resource for athletes looking to optimise their nutrition and performance.

Many athletes will never be intolerant, and they can enjoy *garam wheat chapatis* and *roti*! But for those that do discover this Achilles heel, it's missi roti for you and me!

Proper noun to a common one

A Brazilian dictionary has **introduced a new word, ‘pele’,** as an adjective for someone who is “exceptional, incomparable, unique.”

Suresh Menon

It is one thing to dominate the sports pages or television screens over a period, but for true immortality, there is nothing like getting into the dictionary. A Brazilian dictionary has introduced a new word, ‘pele’, as an adjective for someone who is “exceptional, incomparable, unique.”

The dictionary entry reads: “The one that is extraordinary, or who because of his quality, value or superiority cannot be matched to anything or anyone, just like Pele; nickname of Edson Arantes do Nascimento (1940-2022), considered the best athlete of all time; exceptional, incomparable, unique. Usage: He is the Pele of basketball, she is the Pele of Brazilian theatre.”

I am not sure the usage of the adjective is right. We don’t say, “He is the rich of Brazil,” for example. The usage, as recommended by the dictionary (and I have only the translation to go by) is the usual noun usage. We might say of Kalidasa, for example, that he is the Shakespeare of India. The adjective form of the Bard would be “Shakespearean”. **If “pele” is an adjective, the other forms might be pelely (adverb), peleness (noun), and so on, each more inelegant than the last.** Perhaps these sound less clumsy in Portuguese.

A campaign by the Pele Foundation gathered more than 125,000 signatures leading to the inclusion in a Portuguese dictionary. That’s roughly two stadiums of spectators at a cricket match in India. A single suburb of Chennai alone might be sufficient to get “Dhoninian” into



Numero uno: A campaign by the Pele Foundation gathered more than 125,000 signatures leading to the inclusion in a Portuguese dictionary.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

the dictionary. To go from being a proper noun to a common one is an honour given to few. There’s ‘boycott’, of course, named not for the cricketer but for Capt. Charles Boycott, who in the 19th century fought against land reforms in Ireland for which he was shunned by the Irish Land League which convinced his servants to stop working for him. In short, to boycott him. In the 16th century, Jean Nicot, the French ambassador to Portugal sent tobacco seeds back to France, and the plant came to be called Nicotiana, after him. It gave us the word ‘nicotine’.

We sometimes convert proper nouns into readymade adjectives to make a point. Like when we say he played a Sehwagian innings or his batting was Kohlicious (ok, we don’t, but we could). Cricket’s best-known adjective does not suggest a player, but a writer: C. L. R. James. We say “Jamesian” for that mix of intellect, writing and politics associated with the Trinidadian.

What of other sports? Michael Jordan might have given rise to “Jordanian” except that it would have meant something else — a person from Jordan. The language will have to be kneaded and pounded and stretched before contemporary stars Federer, Woods, Bolt, Messi, Ronaldo can be turned into adjectives we are comfortable with.

Perhaps Tiger Woods is an exception. Woods is lovely, dark and deep, as the poet nearly said. From the record books to the dictionary is a long way. In making the journey, ‘pele’ has shown itself to be “exceptional, incomparable, unique.”

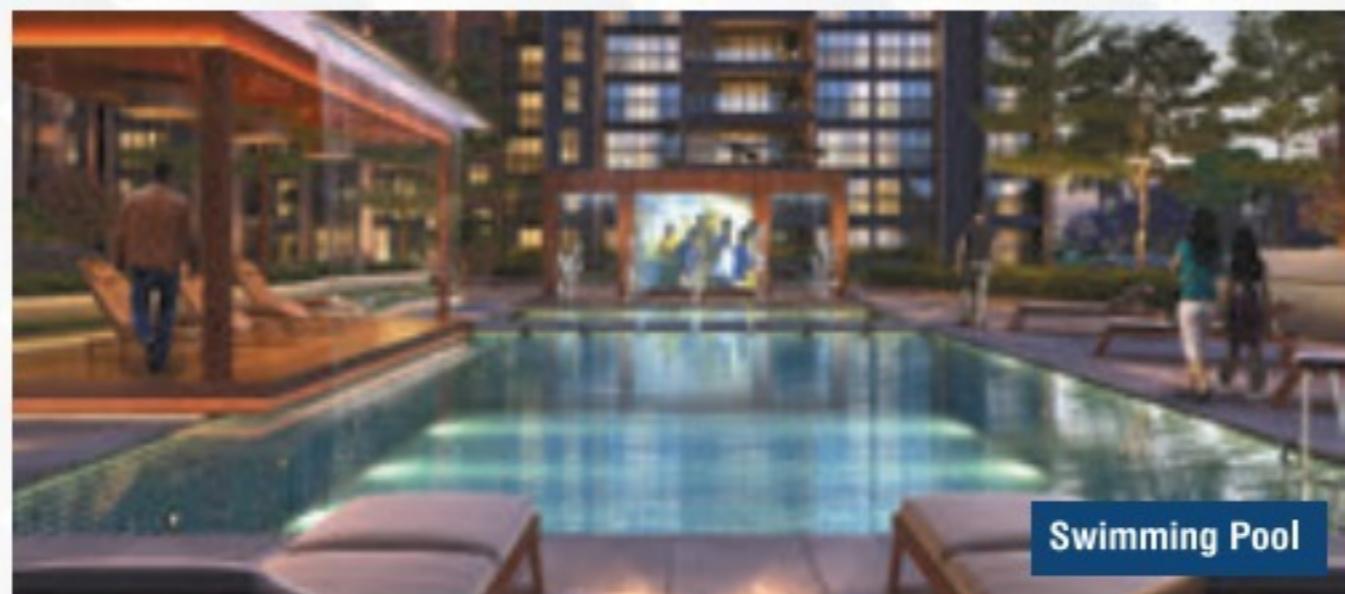
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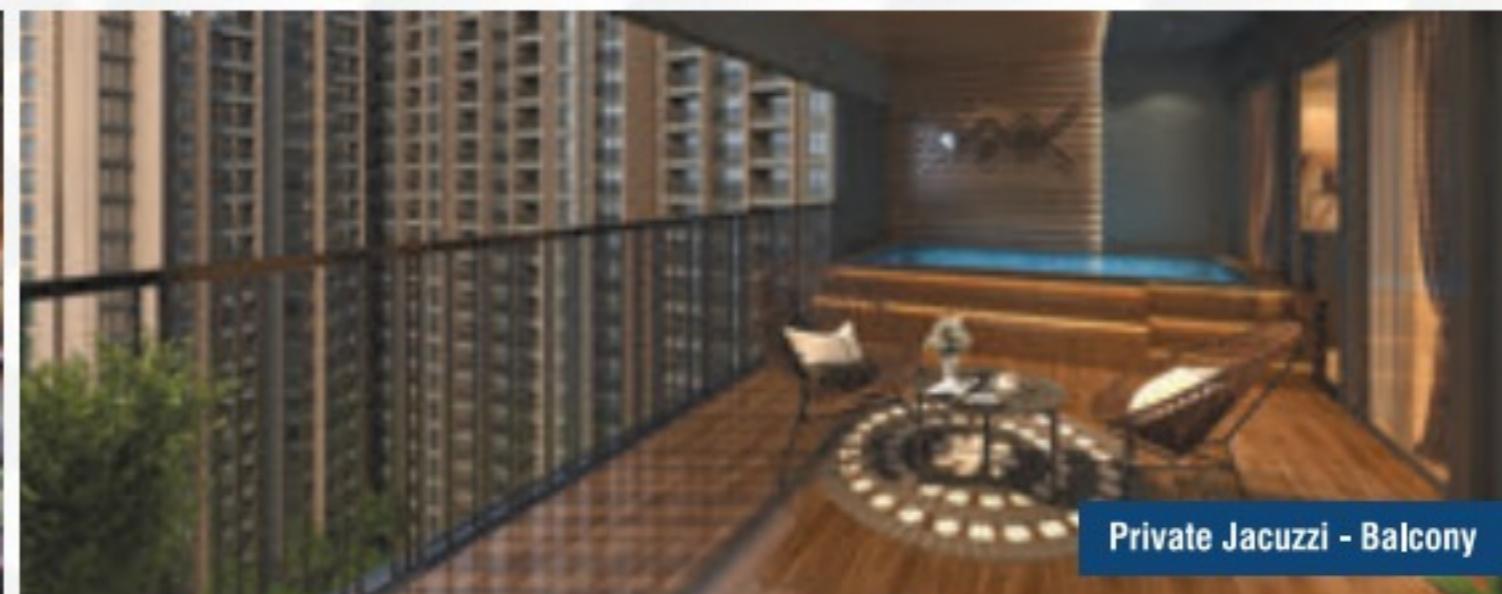
BANG ON SHOLINGANALLUR MAIN ROAD



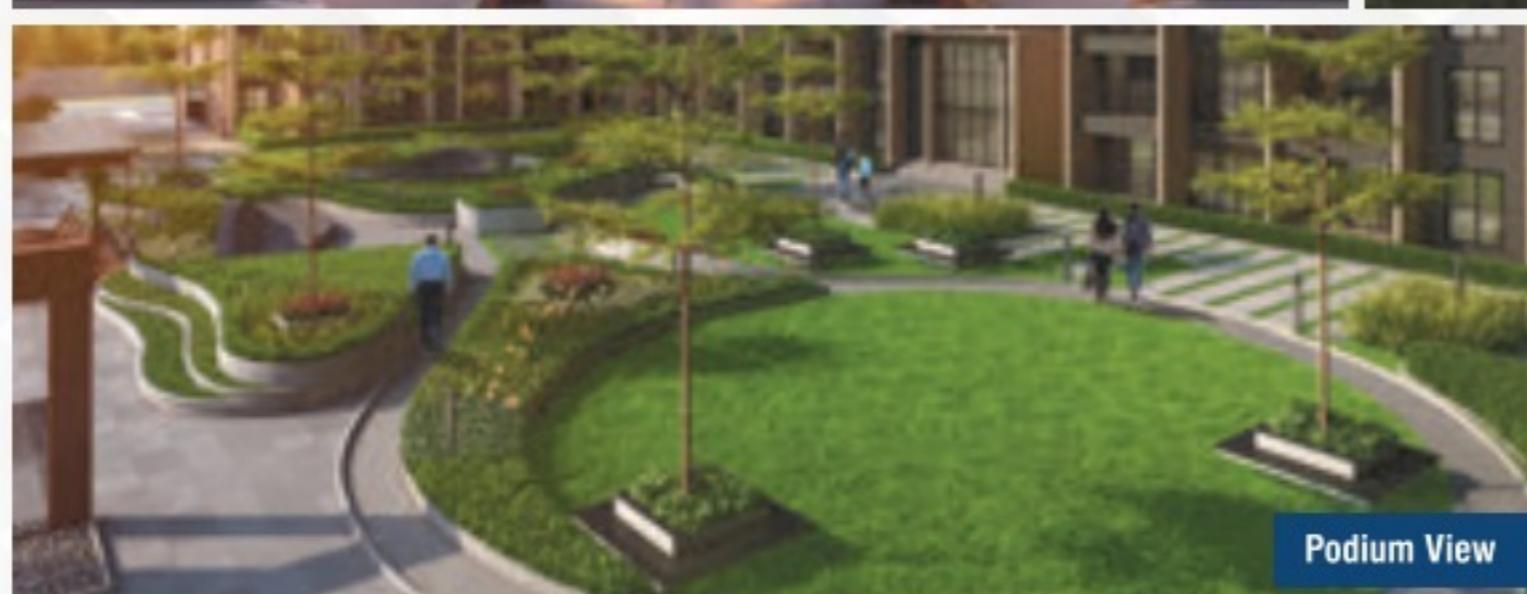
Elevation Night View



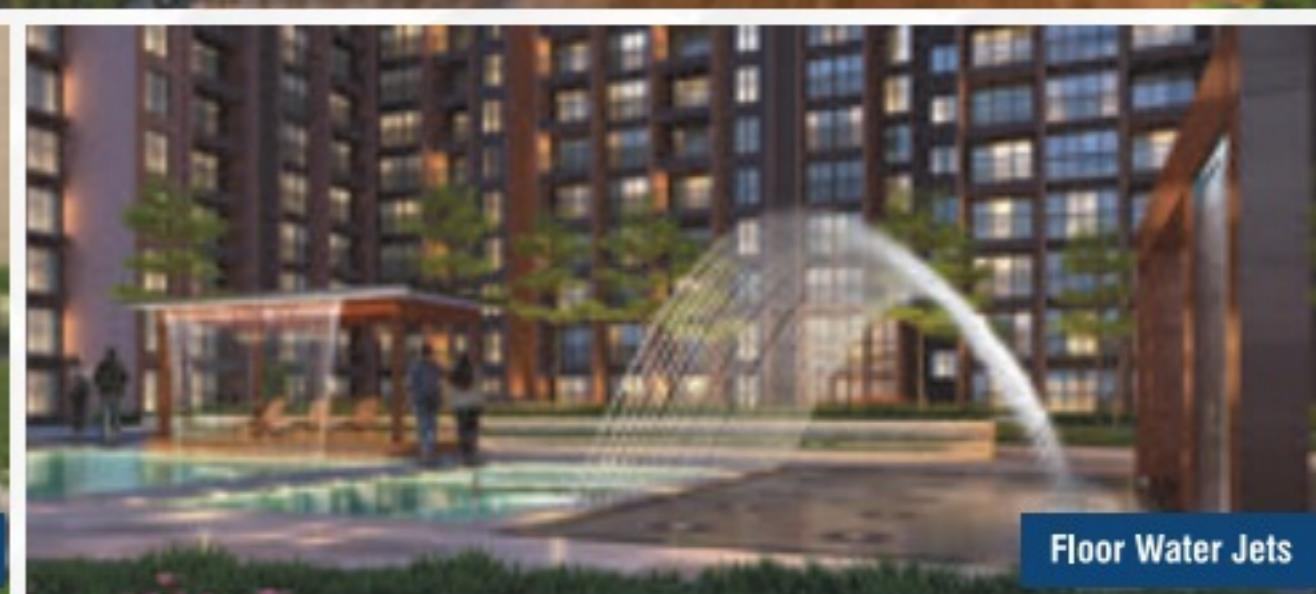
Swimming Pool



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Podium View



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