SPORTSTAR

SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 2024
₹100

FOLLOW US:
SPORTSTARWEB

POSTER

KULDEEP YADAV

PHOTO STORY

India's 17th straight home series win

FIH PRO LEAGUE

Contrasting outings for Indian men and women

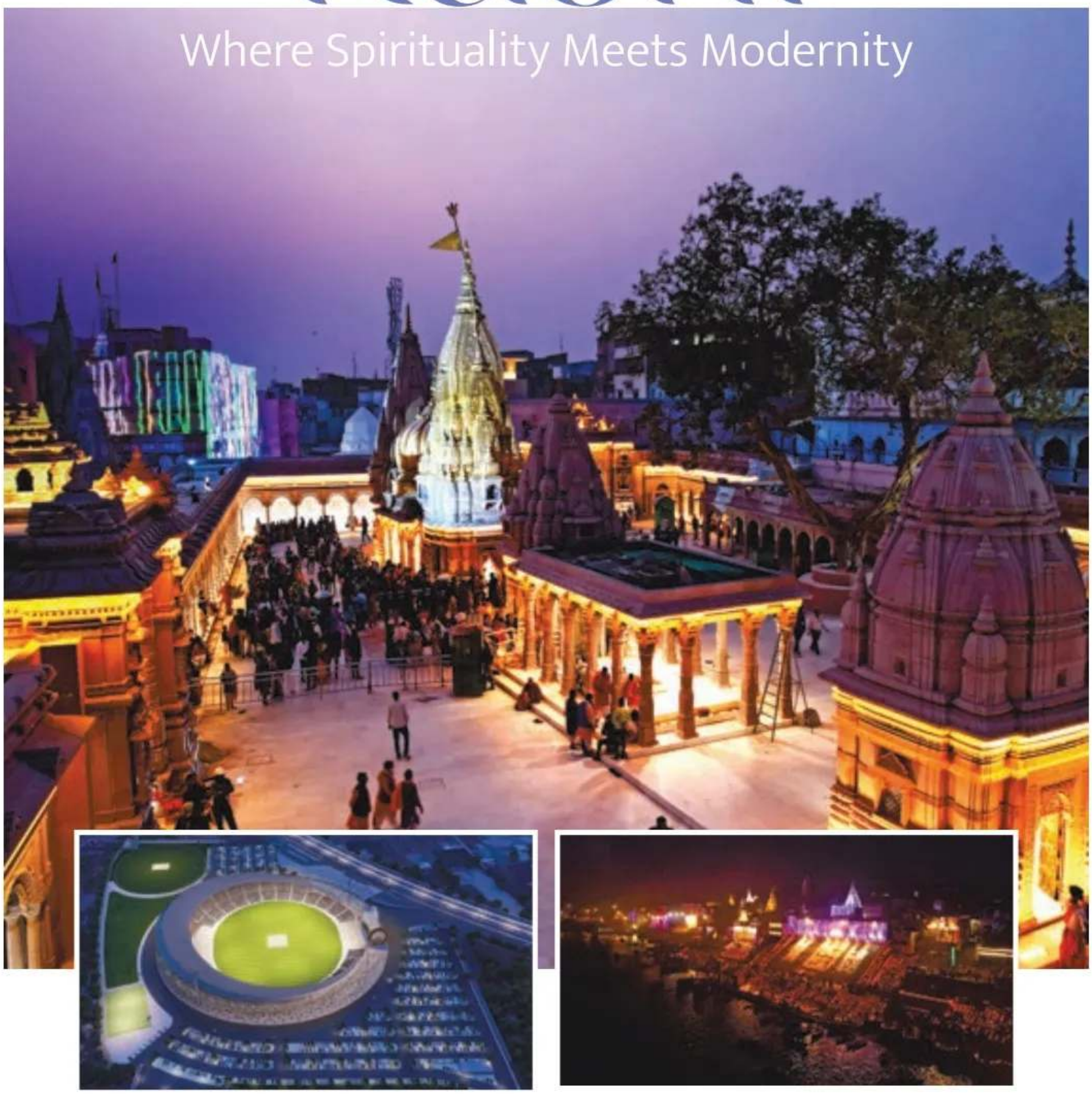
RAISING A RACQUET

The women's team's unexpected title run at the Badminton Asia Team Championships hints at a bright year ahead for Indian shuttlers

The Eternal City of Lord Shiva

Kashi

Where Spirituality Meets Modernity



- Development of Sri Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor
- Beautification of Ganga ghats and Grand celebration of Dev-Diwali
- Construction of the third International Cricket Stadium in Uttar Pradesh
- Cargo and cruise service between Varanasi and Haldia
- Construction of the Country's first urban ropeway project is in progress
- The Country's first freight village in Kashi
- Construction of the Rudraksha International Cooperation and Convention Centre

Information and Public Relations Department, U.P.

CONTENTS

Follow us: sportstarweb

Saturday, March 16, 2024
FOR THE FORTNIGHT MARCH 3-16, 2024

Volume 47 Number 6 ISSN 0971 359x 92 Pages

Badminton

14 **Anmol Kharb**
'I want to be a World Champion one day'

18 **Big Interview**
Doubles stars Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopi Chand on the Asian triumph

22 **P. V. Sindhu**
Bouncing forward in style

08
Cover Story
Badminton Asia Team Championships

Former National champion Aparna Popat on India's dramatic title run in Malaysia

Cover: Indian women's badminton team (AFP)

Sportstar Aces Interviews...

51 **Chandu Borde**
'We never played for money'

76 **Karnam Malleswari**
'I feel proud that I was the first one to overcome the hurdles that women athletes face'

78 **Anshul Garg**
The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board CEO says, 'All we are looking for is how good the athlete is'

80 **4x400 men's relay team**
Need for speed in Olympic year

Poster: Kuldeep Yadav (K. R. Deepak); Pages 43-50

www.sportstar.thehindu.com
mail to: sportstar@thehindu.co.in

Published by Nirmala Lakshman, Kasturi Buildings, 859, 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600 002 and Printed by SDT Rao at Kala Jyothi Process Private Ltd, Plot no CFC-1&2, Survey No 18, E-City, SEZ & General Industrial Park, Raviryal & Srinagar (Village), Maheswaram(M), R.R.Dist, Telangana - 501359 on behalf of THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., Chennai-600 002.

Editor: Ayon Sengupta (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRB Act).
All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited.

Disclaimer: Readers are requested to verify & make appropriate enquiries to satisfy themselves about the veracity of an advertisement before responding to any published in this magazine.
THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., the Publisher & Owner of this magazine, does not vouch for the authenticity of any advertisement or advertiser or for any of the advertiser's products and/or services. In no event can the Owner, Publisher, Printer, Editor, Director/s, Employees of this magazine/company be held responsible/liable in any manner whatsoever for any claims and/or damages for advertisements in this magazine.
Air Surcharge:
Colombo ₹ 15.00 | Port Blair ₹ 10.00

Editorial Team
Editor: Ayon Sengupta
Convergence Editor: V. V. Rajasekhara Rao
Design: R. Ravikannan
Design Consultant: Kannan Sundar
Digital Growth Editor: Ipsit Mohapatra
Editorial Consultant: Vijay Lokapally
Sr. Assistant Editor: Shayan Acharya
Assistant Editor: Jonathan Selvaraj, V. S. Aravind
Chief Sub-Editor: Karan Pillai
Sr. Sub-Editor/Sr. Reporter: Ayan Acharya, Aashin Prasad, Santadeep Dey, Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan, Saikat Chakraborty
Sub-Editor/Reporter: Dhruva Prasad, Neeladri Bhattacharjee, Aneesh Dey, Netra V, Pranay Rajiv, Nihit Sachdeva, Abhishek Saini, Nigamanth P, Mayank, Anish P, Sahil Mathur, Karthik Mudaliar
Senior Multimedia Producer: Sivasankar A

For Subscription:
Email: customercare@thehindu.co.in
No: 18001021878

For Advertisement
National Sales Head
Satish K Mendon
Satish.mendon@thehindu.co.in

Region
Delhi – Antesh Kumar Verma
+91 9818798519
Bengaluru – Gurunatha Reddy
+91 9845529981
Chennai – Siva Kumar M
+91 9841585969

OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE OF SPORTS JOURNALISM

For many of us, sports has **never been only about** the wins and losses but the connections and memories we forge.

We are all bundles of biases wrapped up in human flesh — childhood memories, schoolyard alliances, family loyalties, college dalliances — they all dance around in our subconscious, pulling the strings of our supposedly rational minds. Even we sports journalists, with our ideals of impartiality, are not immune to the siren call of whims and predispositions. We are not emotionless automatons devoid of any personal history or passion. For many of us, sports has never been only about the wins and losses but the connections and memories we forge.

An "all-time favourite" team or player, basking in the glow of our undying adoration, can lose it all in the blink of an eye, relegated to the sidelines as we are suddenly immune to the charms of their title-winning run. Their once lofty position usurped by a newcomer or simply lost in the shuffle of life's chaotic choices.

For us, it is a precarious tightrope walk to maintain impartiality while hobnobbing with celebrities and wrestling with our deep-seated prejudices and loyalties to clubs and nations.

The press box of the Salt Lake Stadium when Mohun Bagan and East Bengal lock horns becomes a battleground of divergent opinions, and the wafer-thin veneer of impartiality is soon tossed aside like the used wrapper of the famous Kolkata *Kati* roll.

For the large contingent of travelling Argentine journalists, the pleasure of witnessing Lionel Messi lift the World Cup in Qatar was cathartic, as most wept in joy, forgetful of the professional decorum and deadlines that threatened to eat into the euphoria of a lifetime.

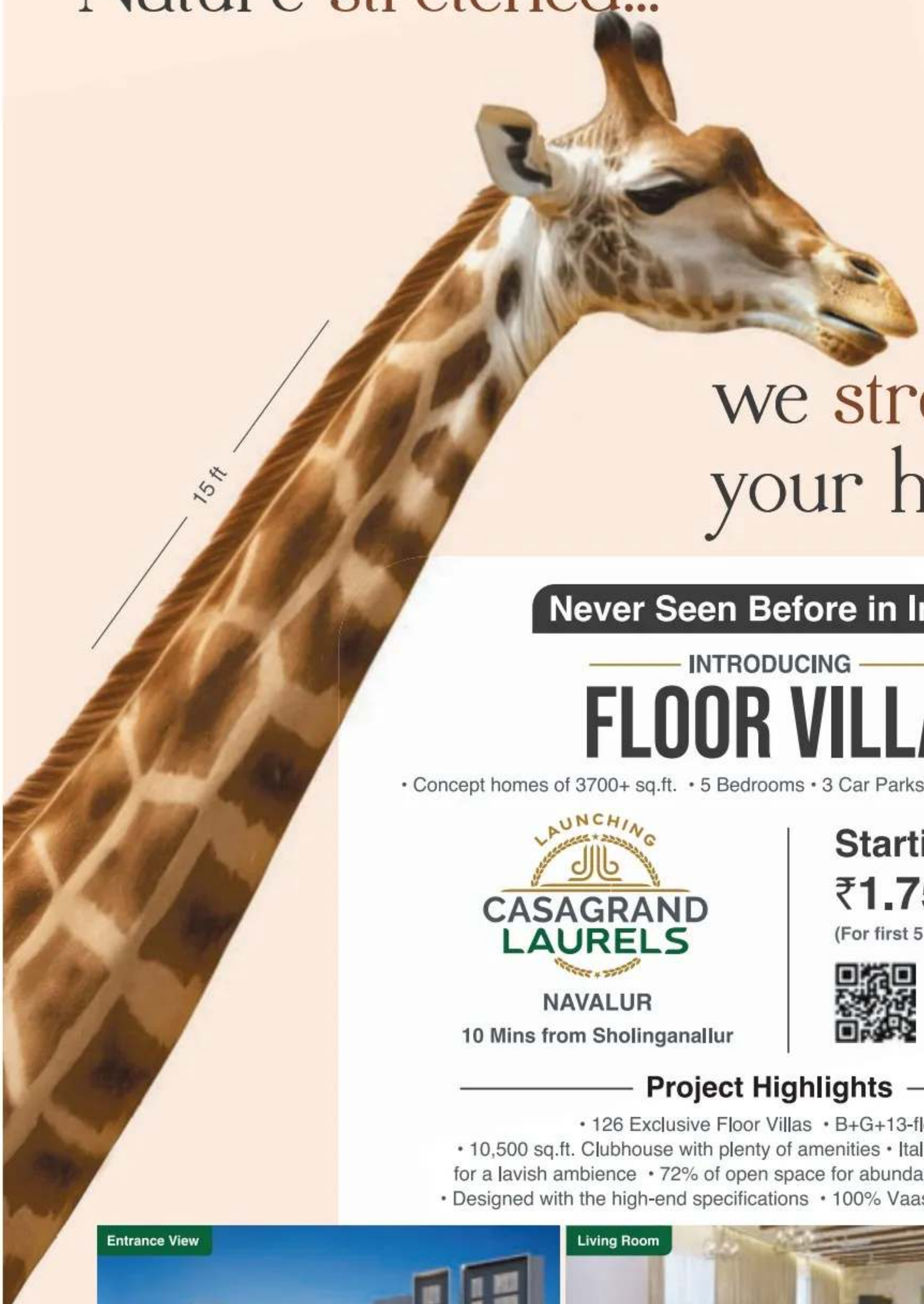
"It's impossible not to feel the vibes, the energy of a collective force made from the beating hearts of thousands of Argentinians who can't hide their emotions. Women, men, and kids of all ages are crying. How not to? They cry here in Qatar; they cry in Argentina as they take the streets. We all cry together on *WhatsApp, FaceTime, Instagram*, or *Messenger*. Argentina are world champions," celebrated Argentine football columnist Martin Mazur wrote for the *International Sports Press Association* a day after the final.

The legendary Argentine woman football writer Marcela Mora Y Araujo bid us goodbye a day after the semifinal on December 13 to be with family and friends in Buenos Aires for the all-important final, just as she had done ahead of the 2014 Maracana clash.

The love of sport is about such emotional ties that go beyond the game, the emotive responses that are triggered by events on the pitch. For everyone in India, memories of the 1983 World Cup win are about where we were that year. And it is the same for 2007, 2011, or when Neeraj Chopra finally got us a track-and-field gold medal from the Olympics in 2021.

Neeraj's gold was celebrated in an office full of excited, teary-eyed, and shouting journalists — the young, the old, and the cynical. But my happiest sporting memory will always be M. S. Dhoni's 2007 T20 World Cup triumph, watched with my *Dadu* (grandfather), the most emotional and vocal sports fan I have ever known.

Nature stretched...



we stretched your home (size)

Never Seen Before in India

INTRODUCING

FLOOR VILLA

• Concept homes of 3700+ sq.ft. • 5 Bedrooms • 3 Car Parks • Exclusive Plunge Pool

LAUNCHING

CASAGRAND LAURELS

NAVALUR

10 Mins from Sholinganallur

Starting From

₹1.75Cr*

(For first 5 bookings only)

Scan for a Virtual Experience

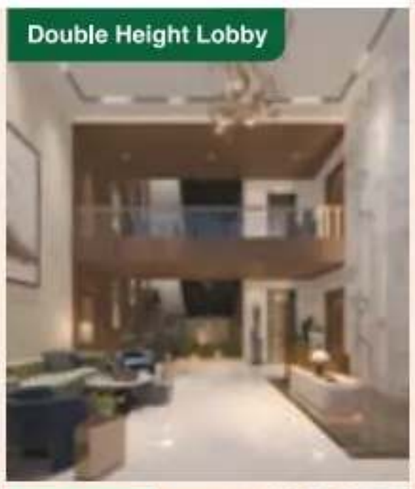
Project Highlights

• 126 Exclusive Floor Villas • B+G+13-floors
• 10,500 sq.ft. Clubhouse with plenty of amenities • Italian marble flooring for a lavish ambience • 72% of open space for abundant light & ventilation
• Designed with the high-end specifications • 100% Vaastu-compliant homes

Entrance View

Living Room

Exclusive Plunge Pool


Double Height Lobby

Bedroom

RERA NO.: TN/35/building/027/2024 | www.rera.tn.gov.in *T&C apply.

CREDAI

Exclusive site visit available. Visit model house at site

96775 56588 | www.casagrand.co.in

CASAGRAND
building aspirations

Hard pill to swallow: Prior to his bout with Merab Dvalishvili (L) at UFC 298, Cejudo (R) had hinted at retirement should he lose, which he did. AFP

Cejudo at crossroads

Following his defeat to Merab Dvalishvili, former two-weight UFC champion and Olympic gold medalist Henry Cejudo seeks **renewed career motivation.**

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) has recently provided fight fans with a rollercoaster of emotions, akin to a suspense thriller film. The past two weeks have been riddled with surprises and heartbreaks.

Standing out from the rest were Ilia Topuria's remarkable knockout triumph over the seasoned Alexander Volkanovski, while Robert Whittaker's commanding unanimous decision win against Paulo Costa demonstrated his resilience and determination to bounce back into the spotlight.

Adding to the excitement, Dana White, the CEO of the UFC, unveiled the highly anticipated lineup for UFC 300, slated for April 14. The main event will feature Jamahal Hill squaring off against Alex Pereira for the coveted light heavyweight title.

Amidst the glare of the spotlight, a significant narrative unfolded quietly in the background — the unexpected turn of events for former two-weight champion Henry Cejudo.

Prior to his bout with Merab Dvalishvili at UFC 298, Cejudo had hinted at retirement should he fail to secure victory inside the octagon. Much to his dismay, Cejudo ultimately lost against Dvalishvili in a unanimous decision.

However, the 37-year-old isn't quite ready to call it a career after re-evaluating it in the days that followed.

"If I could change everything, I probably would never come back, but now I'm back," Cejudo said in a video titled — 'Am I done?' — on his *YouTube* channel.

Cejudo, a decorated wrestler, emerged onto the MMA scene in 2013 following a remarkable Olympic career, which included a gold medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics in 55kg freestyle wrestling.

He kicked off his MMA career with a spotless 6-0 record, and eventually, the UFC came calling. He went on to defend his title twice and further added a cherry on top by clinching the vacant bantamweight title.

The American is currently ranked sixth in the bantamweight division, winning 16 out of 20 fights. He boasts an impressive record of eight wins by knockout and five first-round finishes. Triple C will be hoping to upend his momentum, and he has to just look at his past for a spark of inspiration. This is not the first time that Cejudo has dropped two fights in a row — the title fight against Aljamain Sterling and now Dvalishvili.

The first instance, which happened way back in 2016, set off an incredible turn of events. He went on to win six fights on the trot, which included back-to-back title wins, and will be hoping to at least emulate a percentage of his past in the near future.

SERVO®
WORLD-CLASS LUBRICANTS
THE SCIENCE OF EXTREME

SERVO 4T XTRA

CAN'T DO WITHOUT IT!

THE ULTIMATE ENGINE OIL FOR YOUR *BIKE.*

- *Advanced 3P Tech Formula*
- *Superior Fuel Economy*
- *Longer Drain Interval: Up to 6000 km*

'Every match, against any opponent, is a learning opportunity'

The women's team's title run at the Badminton Asia Team Championships hints at **a bright year ahead** for Indian shuttlers, particularly with Paris on the horizon.

APARNA POPAT

The Indian women's team, led by double Olympic medallist P.V. Sindhu, recently clinched the Badminton Asia Team Championships title with a thrilling 3-2 victory over Thailand in the final in Shah Alam, Malaysia.

The victory gives India a confident start to the season, which becomes important given the event roster 2024 has for badminton. This is India's first BATC title, a feat that saw the outfit beat badminton superpowers China, Hong Kong, Japan and Thailand enroute to the top of the podium.

Let's put this campaign in perspective. When we entered this tournament, I don't think there were expectations in terms of how the team would perform, but there were people looking out for individual performances like Sindhu coming back after a while post injury. There was focus on the doubles scene because of Paris qualification considerations and so those two pairs were closely watched. And then we had a couple of gifted youngsters as well in

First of many: The Indian women badminton players won the country's first BATC title, beating superpowers like China, Hong Kong, Japan and Thailand enroute to the top of the podium. PTI

the team to keep an eye on.

There is another asterix too. The top teams did not field a lot of their top players for their own reasons but my rebuttal to that is that a side can only face the opponent in front. If your top players don't show up for whatever reason, too bad. That worked in India's favour and we took advantage of it.

Now coming to the players. Sindhu had a good run. Coming off an injury layoff, Sindhu could ease into the tournament. Without the stiffest competition, she was able to get some wins easily to prepare her in the run up to important tournaments like the All-England coming up soon. Gayathri Gopichand and Treesa Jolly were also coming back after injury hiccups. To be able to come and win against top players injects confidence. Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto were also in the mix. Ashmita Chaliha and Anmol Kharb, who played lower down the order, got a chance to play experienced and higher ranked opponents, like former world no.1 Nozomi Okuhara, from Japan.

It was a well-placed tournament in the calendar. The layout was great for us. Now, will this team go on to become world beaters at, say, the Uber Cup? We do have a great chance and I say that because if Sindhu strikes form, that presents a big opportunity for India. We also have two doubles pairs. Earlier, the order of play would be different with singles being our area of confidence. Now, we have two strong doubles options who can double up on the individual brackets. We have a chance at the Uber Cup, but it certainly will be much more difficult.

The 2024 checklist

A long year lies ahead and keeping the increasing order of significance of the events lined up, a few elements need to be focused on. Everyone contributing and hitting form when it matters is one such aspect. The Uber Cup is a longer tournament with multiple ties. Each player plays an important role. The two benefits that players will take from this tournament is the confidence that comes from beating higher-ranked players and knowing that you can perform under pressure and do well. Seeing firsthand that it's possible to not crumble when things get hard means you go in without fear should such a situation happen again.

It might look like team events is where India thrives — look at the Thomas Cup triumph in 2022, the Mens Team silver medal at the recent Asian Games and now this win at the Asian Team

Top of the world: Treesa Jolly (L) and Gayatri Gopichand celebrate after winning against Thailand's Rawinda Prajongjai and Jongkolphan Kititharakul in their doubles finals match at the Badminton Asia Team Championships (BATC). AFP

Championships. It's too soon to manifest a pattern here but the one positive certainly is that we have top class players across different events now, which was not the case some time ago. India has three Uber Cup medals, two of those from the recent past and that was largely because of Saina (Nehwal), Sindhu, Jwala (Gutta) and Ashwini.

Therefore, having a smooth singles and doubles combination becomes very important. Look at the men's side of things. We have three top class singles players, but even if we had two, we still have Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty. Doubles becomes important because it will come up somewhere in the first three matches of a team event. I won't call it a safety net, but a good doubles pair balances the team and is a big advantage. Doubles is something India seems to have finally got right. It was the missing piece.

'THIS LAST LEG AHEAD OF PARIS WILL BE SPENT FOCUSING ON SECURING QUALIFICATION FOR A FEW AND PEAKING AT THE RIGHT TIME FOR OTHERS. WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT WILL BE AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION HERE'

A diverse talent pool

Let's look at the personalities involved here, starting with Ashwini. To come in and be part of a team as a senior and playing with a younger partner comes with a bit of pressure. You know that there is a lot at stake and so, on one side, it demands it a little more on court but there's also the weight of Olympic qualification, so you're guarding against injury. Yet the unfortunate injury to Tanisha Crasto, forced Ashwini to pair up with Sindhu. They had to adapt and to just show that she is willing to do whatever it takes for the team was quite incredible.

The progress Treesa and Gayathri are showing as a pair is another shot in the arm for India. The best indicator isn't just that they're winning regularly, but it's about the kind of matches and the quality of opponents they're able to beat now. The draw is never in our hands, so the more you beat top-ranked players, the healthier your growth chart gets. What's interesting is, at one point, they were the favourites to for the Paris Olympics, but right now, there's competition between them and Ashwini/Tanisha to make the cut. It's one thing to compete against an opponent, but to take on this qualification pressure is another story altogether. Then again, they train at P. Gopi Chand's academy, where these situations are not new. That makes a huge difference.

This also underlines why 17-year old debutante Anmol's story is such an incredible one because she has not yet had exposure to a setup like this. You can have personal expectations and ambitions, but she's not in an environment where Olympic medallists, world champions and world top ten players are training and walking in and out of the room.

Duo on the rise: Ashwini Ponnappa (R) and Tanisha Crasto have developed a formidable partnership, as seen at the Yonex-Sunrise Guwahati Masters last year. RITU RAJ KONWAR

So much has been said about her and her remarkable victories. For me, her temperament stands out, which also includes her presence of mind. It's not only about being calm, but it's also about making the right decisions and having the right clarity under that kind of pressure. I liken this to the Neeraj Chopra brand of simplicity and calm. Her attitude was a mix of ambition and humility - it's like she's saying, 'I'm here, I'm self-assured. I know I don't know it all but I am confident of what I do know and with that I will do my utmost best for the team'. Such brilliance in one match is fine, but to do it thrice against higher-ranked opponents in the deciding match of the tie at such a young age is remarkable.

When the giants return

The big names will return. Every match, against any opponent, is a learning opportunity. Each match is like a ladder you climb to get closer to the top. Now whether you play them in a World Tour event, a Team Championship or anywhere else, the brief is the same. You must scale those rounds and gain that experience, to get ahead.

Sindhu is the top ranked Indian player in

Peaking at the right time: Satwik-Chirag is one of the most feared doubles pairings in the world right now. A lot will be expected of them at the Paris Olympics. GETTY IMAGES

singles and she's almost always going to go up against the best players on the other side of the court. Her personal discomforts against certain players do not matter and Sindhu has seen it long enough to not be bothered either. For someone like Ashmita, this will get a bit harder. If you look at Okuhara, she too hasn't been in great form lately. She has had her fair share of challenges and injuries, but it doesn't matter. She might be a former World Champion, but you have to beat her and get ahead and build from there. A good example to see here is H.S Prannoy. He had defeated many top players. Just that he wasn't able to get those wins consistently enough and in back-to-back matches to put him in a position for a podium finish at the bigger events. Now he's found that consistency and the results are telling. It's a journey and going through the motions of these matches is the only way forward.

Future of Indian women's badminton

Whenever we see young talent

'Doubles becomes important because it will come up somewhere in the first three matches of a team event. I won't call it a safety net, but a good doubles pair is a confidence booster'

coming through the ranks in badminton, everyone is tempted to ask questions like — who the next Sindhu is, who the next Saina is, who will headline the future for Indian badminton?

When the results came, I thought it was a fitting reply and I hope this question doesn't come up at least for a few days. We've been saying there are many talented players out there, but they were just visible in flashes. I don't know if it's a good problem that we have maybe five or seven girls who are talented, but then we weren't able to identify those one or two who were really outshining the others over a period of time.

That is what I want to see now. I want to see players maintain their form; and this doesn't involve only performance because that is sometimes dictated by the draw. These players should maintain a certain standard of play without being erratic. The second thing we need to track is the improvement curve. An upward trajectory is important but also as we have seen with Saina and Sindhu, the speed of improvement is of essence. Ideally, we need good players with a steeper upward curve.

Gopi Chand, in an interview recently, said that Anmol and Ashmita might now be marked. My interpretation of this is that there is scope to learn and fix. I don't say fix because something is broken, but because that kind of learning has to happen constantly to perform at a high level.

Looking ahead to the Paris Games

I am expecting two medals, and maybe even three for India at the Paris Games. Three will be outstanding.

This last leg ahead of Paris will be spent focusing on securing qualification for a few and peaking at the right time for others. Workload management will be an important consideration here.

Prannoy and Satwik/Chirag might have a choice to skip a tournament or two if they want, but the same may not be true for Sindhu or our womens doubles pairs who want those ranking points and competition exposure.

One important thing that we as the ecosystem should remember is to not read too much into the performances over the next few months.

From now until the Olympics, players will strategically prepare to ready themselves for the Games. It's the process not the result, so hopefully critics, fans and the media are kind to the players through it all.

The author is a two-time Olympian, Commonwealth Games silver medallist, and nine-time Senior National badminton champion

'I want to be a world champion some day'

"... and I hope I can be on the podium at the 2028 Olympics," says Anmol Kharb after **leading India** to its maiden Badminton Asia Team Championships title.

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

Anmol Kharb needed a few days to handle the overwhelming adulation that followed her win in the final singles tie against Thailand at the Asian Badminton Team Championships. After all, it was her victory that sealed India's historic gold medal.

"After I won my match, I didn't touch my phone for two hours after the final. It was just blowing up," the 17-year-old tells *Sportstar*. "There were just so many notifications; I got so many follow requests on *Instagram,* DMs (direct messages), and story tags. I tried my best to respond to as many of them as I could. There are just so many people who want to meet you that I've not had time to train properly. I won't mind when things get a little calm once again. I don't know how those big star players manage to do it," she says.

Anmol is close to becoming a star player herself, and that has its own perks.

"One of my friends is a very big fan of (Indian men's doubles player) Chirag (Shetty). Actually, before I joined the Indian team, she told me to get his autograph. And after we won the gold medal, I got a message from Chirag bhaiyya directly. So, I took the chance to ask him if he could record an audio message for her. He said, 'Of course. You have made our country proud, so this is the least I can do'. Then he recorded a personal message for her. It felt really good that such a big star was doing that for me. And my friend was also very happy," says Anmol.

"They are saying now we need you to give us your autograph. They are only teasing, but it's a little funny because I've never seen myself like one of those stars," she adds.

A few years ago, not many would have. Not even Anmol's father, Devender Kharb, who set her career in motion when he and a group of his neighbours got together to build a cement badminton court at their residential complex in Sector 16 in Faridabad.

"I just did that because we thought it would be a nice recreational activity," says Devender, who travelled to Selangor, Malaysia, where he watched from the stands as his daughter scripted history over the course of the week.

In the final against Thailand, India was tied 2-2 before Anmol secured a decisive victory by defeating world number 45, Pornpicha Choeikeewong, with a score of 21-14, 21-9. National coach Pullela Gopi Chand enthusiastically gave her a high five, and her teammates lifted her amid cheers. This marked Anmol's third consecutive win against higher-ranked opponents at

Prodigious talent: Anmol Kharb beat Thailand's Pornpicha Choeikeewong in the fifth and deciding match of the final to steer India to its first Badminton Asia Team Championships title. AFP

DESPITE BEING THE NATIONAL CHAMPION, ANMOL ADMITS SHE FELT NERVOUS WHEN SHE WAS INCLUDED IN THE INDIAN TEAM FOR THE ASIAN TEAM CHAMPIONSHIPS

the Asian Championships. Earlier, she defeated China's world number 149, Wu Luo Yu, 22-20, 14-21, 21-18 in the group stage and played a crucial role in India's semifinal win over Japan by beating world number 29 Natsuki Nidaira. Both of these victories were decisive in their respective ties.

Gopi Chand lavished praise on the youngest who, at world number 472, was the lowest-ranked member of the Indian team.

"To take the pressure on and show that kind of nerve, it is very refreshing. She is fearless. The kind of strokes that she plays all come naturally to her. She is reading the game well; you can see her intelligence. She played beautifully," Gopi Chand would say.

As she flawlessly competed with older and higher-ranked rivals, it became clear that the 17-year-old was meant for the elite level. However, it was by chance that Anmol stumbled upon badminton. Her father, Devender, played kabaddi for Delhi at the national level, but an injury forced him to retire and pursue a career in law. Anmol's brother, Hardik, was a skater who also competed at the national level before a fall at high speed made him reconsider his interest in the sport.

"He was really good in studies, and after that fall, he didn't want to take a chance with injuries, so he gave that up. But I still wanted him to play some sport, so I decided to set up some cement courts in our housing society," says Devender.

While the court was meant for his son, it was Anmol, then just 10, who

took a fascination for the sport.

"She was really young, but she wouldn't let anyone else play on the court until she first got a game. And at that age, we all indulged her," recalls Devender.

He soon realised, though, that Anmol's interest in the sport wasn't a passing one.

"There's a saying in Hindi: *pooth ke paon palne me dikh jate hain* (A person's future can be determined by their present actions). I looked around for coaching classes to put her in. There might have been a hundred kids along with her, but her first coach told her after a few sessions that she would go further than all of them," recalls Devender.

It wasn't obvious right away, in terms of results, that Anmol would go as far as she did. At her first State championships, she got to the finals, but she lost in the quarterfinals of her first Under-13 nationals the same year. The next year, she lost at the U-15 nationals to then Indian No. 1 Samayara Panwar. The results did not worry her or her father.

"At that time, she was really very young. She was competing against girls who were two years and older than her. But despite losing, she never got disheartened. I'd always see her smiling. She'd make friends and get along with girls from all the other States. After a tournament, I'd be looking to take her home, and I'd find her chatting with some opponent or another," he says.

Anmol would get her breakthrough season towards the end of 2021, when she finally became the U-15 champion. "That was when she actually started hitting her growing years. She was always very quick, but she was finally able to reach shuttles that she otherwise wasn't able to," says Devender.

It was right about then that Anmol started getting serious about her training.

"Although she was very good at studies, she decided to take a non-science stream. She also shifted her training centre," says Devender.

Anmol now trains in Noida under coach Kusum Singh, once a contemporary of Saina Nehwal. Her mother, Rajbala, makes the three-hour round trip with her every day from their home in Faridabad. Her training, though, isn't restricted solely to badminton.

"We are from Haryana, so we have some traditional ways of preparing her. She drinks a lot of milk and eats halwa and bajra roti for strength. But we also have some methods that people can say are different. Every day in the morning, Anmol wakes up at 5 a.m. and heads to a park where a former international boxer takes a physical training class. She's one of about 40 kids, but she's the only badminton player. The idea was her mother's because she felt Anmol needed to have that kind of power in her game," says Devender.

It's unusual, but there's no doubt it has worked. If her coach once competed against Nehwal, Anmol, who idolises her fellow statemate, emulated her feat by winning the national championships last year.

Despite being the national champion, Anmol admits she felt nervous when she was included in the Indian team for the Asian Team Championships.

"I was a little nervous because everyone on the team was older than me. And I was getting a chance to play alongside P.V. Sindhu. The boys team was also with us, and you have players who are world number 1 with them. The first time I met everyone, I was just really quiet because I was so nervous. But everyone was really friendly.

Everyone welcomed me," she says.

Indeed, Anmol says her being a rookie turned out to be an advantage. "Everyone pampered me. No one put any pressure on me. Even the coaches looked after me. They would always see if I was eating well and recovering well," she says.

The coaches would look out for her on the court too. "During the match, at every point, Gopi sir was telling me where to get ready, where to stand on the court, and where I could play the shuttle. If I lost a point, he would say, 'The next point is yours'. If the rallies were very long and I was getting tired, he would say that if I was tired, I needed to realise just how tired my opponent would be. He told me not to show any sign that I was tired. At every point, he was telling me what to do and what not to do," she says.

That constant advice and reassurance is what Anmol says helped her play some of the best

> « Anmol Kharb trains in Noida under coach Kusum Singh, once a contemporary of Saina Nehwal »

Glued to the action: India's players from (L-R) Shruti Mishra, Anmol Kharb and Tanvi Sharma watch P. V. Sindhu play against Thailand's Supanida Katethong at the 2024 Badminton Asia Team Championships. AFP

badminton of her career.

"I think after I beat the Chinese player, I got a lot of confidence in my ability. I've played better in this tournament because I was really patient during the rallies. I mostly played a lot of tosses and drops. I didn't hit a lot of smashes. I was really calm in this tournament. I think it was because of the team support and Gopi sir," she says.

However, Anmol admits there's a lot more she can improve on. "There was a moment in the semifinal (against Japan's Nidaira) where I was leading 15-10 in the second game before she came back 17-17. I think I was playing a little defensively there. I should have tried to control the points a bit more. I also think I can improve on my net play," she says.

She has another couple of months to work on those skills as she prepares for the Uber Cup in May. While the squad hasn't yet been named, it would seem that Anmol had shown enough potential to guarantee a place in the team. But her goals are even higher. "I want to be a world champion some day, and I hope I can be on the podium at the 2028 Olympics," she says.

Anmol might be her toughest critic, but while she continues to hone her skills, there's one aspect in which at least her father believes she's unlikely to change much.

"She has always been a very happy-go-lucky girl. She's always pulling pranks. Like, when she comes back from her training, she will come from the back gate and then hug me from behind just to scare me. Even when she wins a match or a tournament, she'll expect a reward like a meal from a restaurant. But in particular, she will demand chocolate ice cream. Because that is something she's not allowed to eat generally," he says.

A cheat meal was her reward for the Asian Team Championship gold as well. "After the tournament, we went out for lunch. We didn't eat ice cream, but we had boba tea. I've had it before, but the one we had in Malaysia was really tasty," she says.

As the baby of the squad, Anmol only got to enjoy herself, but now that she's back in India and is being hailed as one of the biggest prospects in Indian badminton, the roles have been reversed.

"All my friends and teammates are teasing me a little bit. They are saying you are a big player; you won't speak to us anymore, so, at least give us a party. I'll have to give a pizza party at least," she says.

Double delight: World No. 23 Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopi Chand took out World No. 10 pair Jongkolphan Kititharakul-Rawinda Prajongjai of Thailand to facilitate India's historic win at the 2024 Badminton Asia Team Championships. GETTY IMAGES

Double(s) whammy for Indian badminton!

Women's doubles pair, Gayatri Gopi Chand and Treesa Jolly, talks about the BATC exploits, how their partnership was formed, their contrasting personalities and more.

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

India's victory at the Badminton Asia Team Championships (BATC) was a team effort, but the women's doubles pair of Gayatri Gopi Chand and Treesa Jolly played a significant role. The two 20-year-olds were unbeaten throughout the tournament and won crucial doubles matches against higher-ranked opponents. They helped India secure a 3-2 win against China in the group stage, defeated a former World number 2 pair in the semifinals against Japan, and secured the championship against a World number 10 pair in the final against Thailand.

Ahead of the European leg of the international badminton circuit, the two spoke to *Sportstar* about how their partnership was formed, how their contrasting personalities complement each other perfectly on the court, their aspirations for the Olympics, and why Treesa is referred to as the 'Kumbhakaran' of Indian badminton.

Congratulations on your win at the Badminton Asia Team Championships. How did you celebrate the win?

Treesa: We celebrated the win right after the Championships were over. The entire team went for lunch, and we had boba tea. It was a pretty fun evening.

When you go out for lunch, what

do you guys end up ordering? Do you guys have the same thing?
Gayatri: Taste-wise, the only thing we try to avoid is sugar. But Treesa loves sushi, and I prefer eating Indian food these days. It wasn't always like this. Last year, I liked Japanese food, and Treesa would eat Indian food. But these days, I'm not so much into raw food.

Treesa: She's the one who changed my taste. She got me into Japanese food. Last year, she told me to try sushi, and I ended up liking it. But nowadays, she likes Indian food!

You play in different positions on the court (Gayatri at the net and Treesa towards the back), and you also seem to have very different personalities off it.
Gayatri: We have completely different personalities. Even our kit bags are different. Treesa collects so many keychains! She is also very outspoken. She can mingle with people very well. That's something very nice. I think I'm a little private. I feel it's a little better to keep it like that these days. I've always found it better to be alone. My Instagram is private because I don't like to have interactions with too many people. It's changing a little, and I think the BATC helped with that. I enjoyed being with friends and with the whole team.

You were part of a historic win at the Asia Team Championships. What does that do for you?
Treesa: We got a lot of confidence from how we played there. We played and won a few good matches. The match against the Japanese pair (current World No. 6 and former World No. 2 Nami Matsuyama and Chiharu Shida) was important. We were leading the third game 19-13, and then it became close — like 20-all. And it was tricky because both of us (India and Japan) were wondering which way it was going to go. The whole team was cheering for us. And in the end, we managed to get the win. When it's that close, there is a lot of pressure, especially when they made it 20-20. We just hung in and didn't make that many errors. We just told each other, 'Don't make errors'.

Gayatri: I wasn't that confident before the tournament because I was coming back from an injury. We had played just a couple of tournaments before the BATC. Even against Japan and China, I didn't think we would win.

But it was different after we beat Japan. Compared to that match, I was much more confident against Thailand in the final, even though they were also higher ranked than us (Jongkolphan Kititharakul and Rawinda Prajongjai are currently World No. 10).

We had beaten these players before. Although we were confident, they also changed how they played against us. We were trailing in the third game, but once we caught up, the match changed very quickly in our favour.

You picked up three consecutive wins (they beat China's World No. 22 Li Yi Jing and Luo Xu Min in their opening match of the competition), and you also have many wins over higher-ranked players in the past year. At what point did you stop seeing these as upsets and just as regular wins?
Treesa: The confidence came at the 2022 All England (when they beat World No. 2 and reigning world silver medallists So-hee Lee and Shin Seung-chan). We have confidence that we can beat the top players in the world. But even now, we don't go in thinking we have to win. Gayatri always says, 'Go with the flow'. So we go with the flow, and even now, I think we are just chilling out on the court!

You've had a lot of good results over the years — the Commonwealth Games bronze, the runs at All England, and, of course, the BATC gold — where would you rate this?
Treesa: I think we place all of them on the same shelf. We played quite well during BATC. That gives us the confidence to play well in the coming tournaments. After the All England, both of us felt very motivated and confident that we could be among the best in the world. We are proud of the medal we have won. Hopefully, we can get more medals and make India proud.

Part of what is fascinating about your partnership is that you only started playing together recently. Treesa has always been a strong doubles player, but Gayatri was a really strong singles player. Why did you decide to shift?
Gayatri: I love doubles. Even when I was a singles player, I had a passion for playing doubles. I love singles as well. But there's something about doubles that I like. During the [Covid-19] lockdown, me and my dad were sitting, and I thought maybe I should try playing this, and it just worked out very well. In the first few years, we were playing in the All-England semifinals, and we were getting to play the top players in the world. That was a really fast improvement. Playing (and beating) the Korean players changed everything. I was a lot more confident (about sticking to doubles) after that. I started playing it, thinking maybe this could be an option, but it worked out in my favour. So I'm happy.

"We don't specifically think about the Olympics. There's a lot of tournaments coming up. We know that if we play well, we could make it to the Olympics."
— Treesa Jolly

Best mates: "What I like about Treesa is that she is very energetic most of the time. Unless, of course, she is sleeping," says Gayatri. SANDEEP SAXENA

I LOVE DOUBLES. EVEN WHEN I WAS A SINGLES PLAYER, I HAD A PASSION FOR PLAYING DOUBLES. I LOVE SINGLES AS WELL. BUT THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT DOUBLES THAT I LIKE – GAYATRI GOPI CHAND

Treesa: I was surprised when Gayatri played doubles. I think when she played juniors, she played both awesomely. She played doubles in juniors as well. But she was very good at singles. She's much better than me, for sure. If I play singles, she will beat me below ten! After lockdown, she shifted to doubles, and the coaches decided that we would play doubles together. They felt that the combination would be very good. That's how it went.

Gayatri, was it ever difficult to deal with the expectations that come with being Pullela Gopi Chand's daughter?

Gayatri: It's something that I can't avoid. At the same time, he's never put that pressure on me. He is very chill. He always tells me to just play and enjoy myself. He tells me, 'Whatever happens, I'm happy with you.' There's never been any pressure from his side.

I've noticed you have a tattoo on your right arm. What's that about, and was that something he was chill with?

Treesa: Finally, someone asked her about it!

Gayatri: I just liked the design, so I got it. It's the yin-yang symbol. Although Treesa and I get along really well, it's not about her. It's something that makes sense to me. It's about balance, but I mostly got it because of the design. Dad was okay with it.

Dad liked it. I had asked him before getting it. I talked to him about getting a dad-daughter sort of tattoo, but he told me, 'Why do you want to get something on your body?' And ultimately, Dad is in my heart!

Two Indian pairs are very strong right now. Aparna Popat told us that the strength in women's doubles is India's biggest strength in women's team events now. What's it like to have another really strong Indian pair who is on your side at the Asia Team Championships but who you also have to compete with?

Treesa: We practise with Ashwini didi and Tanisha (Crasto). The experience we can gain by practising with Ashwini didi is a lot. Even at this age, she is playing really well. That's the inspiration we get from her. She has extensive experience playing against various countries and in different conditions, which she shares with us. It is a pleasure for us to learn from her because not everyone gets this opportunity.

Gayatri: People say there is a different pressure when playing someone from the same country. But it's the same. There's always pressure. I've never gone into a match without pressure.

There's a bit of competition between the two of you about who gets to go to the Olympics. (Ashwini and Tanisha Crasto are the higher-ranked Indian pair at World No. 20 compared to Gayatri and Treesa, who are World No. 23.) The Games are just a few months away. Is it something you guys are thinking about?

Treesa: We don't specifically think about the Olympics. Right now, we are playing in Europe. There's the German Open, the French Open, and then the All-England. There's a lot of tournaments coming up. We know that if we play well, we could make it to the Olympics.

Gayatri: At this moment, we want to do well in the tournaments that are coming up. If (Olympic qualification) it happens, we will be really happy. But if it doesn't happen, it's not the end of the world. We are just looking forward to the tournaments we have right now. Just playing against different players. Sometimes, the pressure is

something we need to enjoy. You can't help the pressure, so when you enjoy the feeling, it helps a lot. I genuinely don't have long-term plans. I don't think that far ahead. I enjoy the moment.

Treesa: I don't even know what's going to happen tomorrow! I think at this age, we just need to enjoy and play as much as we can and gain as much experience as we can. There's no extra pressure. If I feel extra pressure, she (Gayatri) will make me relax. She comes and talks to me in a very cool and calm way.

You seem to get along well! Do you hang out together a lot?

Treesa: We do. I think when we go for tournaments, we might go shopping. We also like roaming around the mall. I think Gaya makes us go out. She loves to go out.

Gayatri: I can't sit in the room. I can't sit there and do nothing. Whereas she likes to sleep!

Has there ever been a time when you guys didn't agree on something?

Treesa: Of course, sometimes we do get into a disagreement. It's not an argument or anything. But there are moments where there is a doubt about who goes to the shuttle.

Gayatri: When one is not in form, the other is always there to help. When I'm not playing well, she's there to guide me and be solid in that position.

Gayatri was coming back from an injury towards the end of last season. How hard was it for both you and Treesa to bounce back from it?

Gayatri: This isn't the worst injury I've had. I think you have to realise that every time you get an injury, you have a chance to recover and work on areas where there is some sort of pain. I've been able to do that. I think right now I'm feeling pretty good and fit.

Treesa: When Gayatri was dealing with this, I was waiting for her to come back to court soon. I was just practising. She feels that I need her, and it's true. We all have gone through bad situations (injury), and she also feels I need to get back on court as well. I place her at 100 per cent fit. She is fully fit now!

You train together at probably the best badminton academy in India. You have the likes of Satwik Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty training alongside you. What do you pick up from them?

Gayatri: The one thing I noticed is that the seniors come to training sessions an hour ahead of everyone else. They do a lot of small strengthening exercises. I didn't use to do it before, but that's something I'm incorporating as well. Those are the sort of little things that I try to do.

Treesa: We, of course, see how Chirag and Satwik are playing. They have been the world number one too. We can learn from the confidence with which they play, but as Gayatri said, it's not just learning from what they are doing on the court; it's also about what they are doing before practice. Those are the small things you need to pick up.

What have you learned from your past year?

Treesa: We learn a lot when we lose matches. I think very early in our career, there was this understanding that we needed to be sharp after 15 points. Compared to us, the other players were playing more safely. We need to be more careful while playing in that last part of the match. I think we learned this very early on — that we need to change these things. Of course, once we understand where we are making mistakes, we need to get more confident about what we are doing.

Where's an area where you think you could get better?

Gayatri: There's a lot of room for improvement. We are playing the top 10 players in the world, and I'm confident we can give them a good fight and beat them. But in general, both physically and mentally, there's a lot of work to be done. The mental part of the game is crucial, especially towards the end of the game. It's still a place where we need to work.

Statement about ownership and other particulars about newspaper SPORTSTAR (FORTNIGHTLY) Chennai as required to be published under Section 19-D Sub-Section (b) of the Press and Registration of Books Act read with Rule 8 of the Registration of Newspapers (Central Rules) 1956.

FORM IV
SPORTSTAR (FORTNIGHTLY)

1. Place of Publication - CHENNAI
2. Periodicity of Publication - FORTNIGHTLY
3. **PRINTER**
   Mr. S.D.T. Rao, Indian
   6-3-879 & 879B, Begumpet Public Road,
   Hyderabad-500016.
4. **PUBLISHER:**
   Mrs. Nirmala Lakshman, Indian
   Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860,
   Anna Salai, Chennai-600002.
5. **EDITOR:** Mr. Ayon Sengupta, Indian
   Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai
   Chennai-600002.
6. Names and Addresses of Individuals who own the newspaper and partners or shareholders holding more than one per cent of the total capital -

Proprietors: THG Publishing Pvt. Ltd.
EQUITY SHARES:

Kasturi & Sons Ltd.,
Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai,
Chennai-600 002

Mrs. Menaka Parthasarathy,
No. 62, Kasturi Ranga Road, Chennai-600 018

Mr. N. Ram, 43-B, Kasturi Ranga Road,
Chennai-600 018

Mr. N. Murali, 260-A, T.T.K. Road,
Chennai-600 018

Mrs. Nirmala Lakshman,
No. 30-A, Kasturi Ranga Road,
Chennai-600 018

Mr. K. Balaji,
No. 34, Kasturi Ranga Road, Chennai-600 018

Mrs. Nalini Krishnan,
No.24, Parthasarathy Gardens,
Chennai-600 018

Mr. K. Venugopal,
No.30, Kasturi Ranga Road, Chennai-600 018

Ms. Malini Parthasarathy,
"Lux Villa", No. 11, Kasturi Ranga Road,
Chennai-600 018

Mrs. Lakshmi Srinath,
No.38, First Main Road, Raja Annamalaipuram,
Chennai-600 028

Mr. R. Ramesh and Mr. Rohit Ramesh,
No. 15, Parthasarathy Gardens,
Chennai-600 018

Mrs. Vijaya Arun,
No.189, St. Mary's Road, Chennai-600 018

Mrs. Akila Vijay Iyengar,
No. 65, Coronation Road, Singapore-269 464

Mr. M. Krishna, 22-A, Elvaston Place,
London SW7 5QE, U.K.

Ms. Kanta Murali, 8, Flagler Street,
Toronto, ON M4X 1T8, Canada

Ms. Vidya Ram, No.29, Micheldever Road
London SE12 8LX, U.K.

Ms. Madhumitha Balaji,
No. 34, Kasturi Ranga Road, Chennai-600 018

Ms. Divya Venugopal
Unit # 06-01, 5 B Ridley Park, Singapore-248478

Mr. Rohit Ramesh,
No. 15, Parthasarathy Gardens,
Chennai-600 018

Ms. Lavanya Venugopal,
No.30, Kasturi Ranga Road, Chennai-600 018

Mr. Archit Ramesh,
No. 15, Parthasarathy Gardens,
Chennai-600 018

Serendipity Investments (P) Ltd.,
No.28, Kasturi Ranga Road,
Chennai-600 018

I, NIRMALA LAKSHMAN, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

NIRMALA LAKSHMAN

Date: 01-03-2024 SIGNATURE OF THE PUBLISHER

Weathering the storm: P.V. Sindhu believes that facing tough times has strengthened her as a person, making the Asia Team Championships victory even more meaningful. GETTY IMAGES

BOUNCING FORWARD IN STYLE

P. V. Sindhu, returning after a long injury layoff, began the Indian charge in style, outclassing world No. 17 Supanida Katethong 21-12, 21-12 in the final, **paving the way** for a historic title win at the Badminton Asia Team Championships.

V. V. Subrahmanyam
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

P.V. Sindhu, a double Olympic medallist, regained her confidence and form after a standout performance at the Badminton Asia Team Championships in Malaysia, where Indian women beat favourite Thailand 3-2 in a thrilling final to win their first-ever gold in the tournament.

"It was just a question of getting the act right. Having played for so long at the highest level and won so many medals, I knew in my heart that all it takes to be back where you should be is to play quality games," Sindhu said.

"That's what happened. I enjoyed the whole championship and the challenge of giving a winning start. Stay focussed and confident is the mantra for me right now in the year of the Paris Olympics," the champion shuttler added.

Sindhu, the world No. 11, kicked off the Indian title charge in style, outclassing world No. 17 Supanida Katethong 21-12, 21-12 in the first singles to hand India a 1-0 lead. She paved the way for 17-year-old Anmol Kharb, ranked 472 in the world, who eventually beat world no. 45 Pornpicha Choeikeewong 21-14, 21-9 in the final to secure the title win. What made this victory even more impressive was that India managed to defeat strong opponents like China, Hong Kong, and Japan en route to the title.

Sindhu emphasises that winning the gold was unexpected. "But credit goes to the entire team. It was a fantastic team effort, and I'm truly happy to have contributed to the amazing journey," she said.

Sindhu, also a five-time World Championship medallist and winner of many Super Series titles, has been struggling to regain her form after suffering an injury at the Paris Open last October. She made her comeback after a gap of four months at the Asian Team Championship, where she showed great courage, mental toughness, and skills.

Off-court, she had to look for the right team combination. After training with former All England champion Muhammad Hafiz Hashim at Suchitra Academy, she moved to Prakash Padukone Academy in Bengaluru in January this year. "I think I am at the right place at the right time. It makes a lot of difference. Prakash Sir, being a legend himself, is aware of my requirements, demands, and challenges to help me return to the big league.," Sindhu said.

"With Prakash sir, I have learned to be even more patient, and positive, and keep working hard. Not that I have not done these earlier. But the intensity is something different now with him," she said.

The Badminton Asia Team Championships provided a great opportunity for players to earn valuable ranking points in the Race to Paris 2024. Moreover, the tournament also served as a qualifying event for the BWF Thomas and Uber Cup Finals 2024, with the four semifinalist teams (men and women) guaranteed a spot in the finals. Sindhu acknowledged the importance of the win while highlighting the challenges she had to endure along the way.

"Coming back from an injury layoff is never easy. I have always wanted my team to win and ensure a winning start by being the lead player. It is just fabulous the way the girls have responded in such style," the former World Champion Sindhu said. "Ending the tournament on such a high note does a world of good for all of us," she added.

"Everything takes time. But you have to believe in yourself. There is a big change in skills, technique, and other related issues as far as my game is concerned," Sindhu said. "It is a whole new team with a new coach and support staff. They know exactly what I need to be back at my best."

The Indian badminton star returned to the tour in January 2023 after taking a five-month break due to a stress fracture in her leg. However, a difficult season marked by early exits and struggles against top players resulted in her falling out of the Top 10. But just as she looked to be hitting her straps after the Asian Games in Hangzhou, Sindhu suffered another injury, this time to her knee, mid-match at the French Open in October. Sindhu was leading by a game in her second-round women's singles match against Thailand's Supanida Katethong when she hurt herself while trying to return a shot. Sindhu was subsequently granted a protected ranking. As per the BWF regulations, a player may request a protected ranking if they are unable to participate in tournaments for an extended period. This protection is granted when a player is unable to compete in any tournament for a minimum of three months, up to a maximum of 12 months. The player may continue to hold the protected ranking until they notify BWF that they wish to enter a tournament again.

Sindhu believes that facing tough times has strengthened her as a person, making the Asia Team Championships victory even more meaningful.

"There are a lot of emotions as this win comes after such a long break. There was the issue of what I would do. But hard work always pays off. I will gain a lot of confidence from this Asia Championship gold," Sindhu said.

"Definitely, in the Olympic year, these kinds of performances are very important. But gain, learning, and improving are everyday processes. I hope to learn a lot more," she said.

About her goals this year, Sindhu said, "There are no specific targets. I just hope that every time I go into a tournament, I give my 100 per cent. It is going to be hard, but again, you have to be at your best. It is important that you are right there mentally and physically. There is a lot of scope to improve, for sure, given the fact that the women's circuit is very challenging and competitive," she added.

"I am looking forward to a great year ahead and to ensuring that I am conscious of the kind of effort I have to put in."

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

PLAYING THE RANJI TROPHY AT THE START OF THE SEASON IN OCTOBER IS A PRUDENT CALL

Playing the Ranji matches with a **scheduled start time** of 09.30 am is pretty impossible in North India from mid-December to mid-January.

India defeated England by five wickets in the fourth Test in Ranchi to win the five-match series 3-1, with the final Test scheduled to be held in Dharamsala from March 7. What's been impressive is the way some of the younger guys have put their hands up, and while there will be sterner examinations, especially overseas, what has been heartwarming is the temperament.

It's always temperament that separates the men from the boys, and these boys are well on the way to becoming men if they stay true to the work ethic that has gotten them international status and don't get carried away with sundry things that invariably crop up when a bit of name and fame comes their way.

What would be even greater is for them to realise and remember that all that will come about only because of Indian cricket, and to never forget that and take Indian cricket for granted. The fact that the BCCI Secretary, Jay Shah, had to send a stern reminder to some of the players to participate in domestic cricket does indicate that maybe some players think that they can do without Indian cricket.

At the start of the IPL in 2008, the BCCI made it mandatory for domestic players to play a minimum number of Ranji matches if they were to get a NOC to play in the money-spinning IPL.

There was also a cap of Rs 20 lakh on the fees of those who hadn't played for the country. Then, when an uncapped overseas player went for more than half a million dollars, the question was raised as to why the Indian uncapped player should be restricted to 20 lakhs while the overseas player was not similarly restricted. Now, with an uncapped player fetching crores, there's understandably more keenness in not getting injured playing some other domestic tournament and thus missing out on a life-changing opportunity in the IPL.

Perhaps the best way to avoid this would be

Sensible move: Playing the Ranji Trophy in October will mean the players playing the longer format will be match-ready for the Test matches played around that time in India or overseas. M. PERIASAMY

to play the Ranji Trophy at the start of the season in October and finish by the middle of December. Then play the Vijay Hazare and Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy games, which would also be great match practice for those selected for the various franchises in the IPL.

This way, the national championship, the Ranji Trophy, will get the importance and attention it deserves from those who are giving it a miss to not get injured or stale for the IPL. Playing the Ranji Trophy in October will also mean the players playing the longer format will be match-ready for the Test matches played around that time in India or overseas.

Playing the Ranji matches with a scheduled start time of 9.30 am is pretty impossible in North India from mid-December to mid-January. This season, some teams have lost points because their matches didn't start until well after lunch or didn't start at all during this period.

Many years ago, when I was the Chairman of the BCCI Technical Committee, it was decided not to play any games in North India between December 15 and January 15 because of the fog conditions, which made play either delayed or called off for the day.

This year's Ranji season is almost over, with only the semifinals and finals to be played. But maybe for the new season, we could have a different schedule that will see every player keen and raring to play for 'personal reasons'. Those reasons include scoring heaps of runs and capturing plenty of wickets to get picked for the country, which is the highest honour and greatest privilege in the game.

The fact that the BCCI Secretary, Jay Shah, had to send a stern reminder to some of the players to participate in domestic cricket does indicate that maybe some players think that they can do without Indian cricket.

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Ashwin scales Mt. 500

India's Ravichandran Ashwin. VIJAY SONEJI

9 The number of bowlers who now have the distinction of reaching 500 wickets during their Test career. India's R. Ashwin became the latest to join this elite group on the second day of the Rajkot Test match on 16 March 2024. He thus became the second Indian after Anil Kumble (619) and the third off-spinner after Sri Lanka's M. Muralitharan and Australian Nathan Lyon.

Quickest to reach the 500th Test wicket (in fewest Tests) – the complete list

Tests	Bowler	For	Achieved on	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	Age
87	M. Muralitharan	SL	16 Mar 2004	500	22.78	59.04	31y-334d
98	R. Ashwin	Ind	16 Feb 2024	500	23.95	51.49	37y-152d
105	Anil Kumble	Ind	11 Mar 2006	501	28.88	65.79	35y-145d
108	Shane Warne	Aus	12 Mar 2004	501	25.51	60.32	34y-181d
110	Glenn McGrath	Aus	21 Jul 2005	504	21.12	50.83	35y-162d
123	Nathan Lyon	Aus	17 Dec 2023	501	30.86	63.10	36y-27d
129	Courtney Walsh	WI	19 Mar 2001	504	24.56	57.56	38y-140d
129	James Anderson	Eng	8 Sep 2017	506	27.39	55.85	35y-40d
140	Stuart Broad	Eng	28 Jul 2020	501	27.95	56.77	34y-34d

Note: The above career figures are updated at the end of the innings of the match during which milestone was achieved.

51.46 R. Ashwin's career bowling strike-rate at the end of the Rajkot Test match is now the best by any bowler with 500 or more wickets in a Test career. Behind him is Australian Glenn McGrath, whose bowling strike-rate is the closest to Ashwin.

Best career bowling career strike rates among the nine bowlers with 500-plus Test wickets

S/R	Bowler	For	Tests	Wkts	Ave.	R/O
51.46	R. Ashwin	Ind	98	501	23.94	2.79
51.95	Glenn McGrath	Aus	124	563	21.64	2.50
55.05	M. Muralitharan	SL	133	800	22.73	2.48
55.79	Stuart Broad	Eng	167	604	27.68	2.98
56.98	James Anderson	Eng	185	696	26.51	2.79

3 The number of players who have the distinction of doing the double of 3000 runs and 500 wickets during their Test career. Incidentally, Ashwin is now the quickest to do this in the fewest Test matches (98).

Players with 3000-plus runs and 500-plus wickets in Test cricket history

Player	For	Tests	Runs	Ave.	Wkts	Ave.	Achieved in	
							Test#	Date
Shane Warne	Aus	145	3154	17.33	708	25.42	142	4 Dec 2006
Stuart Broad	Eng	167	3662	18.04	604	27.68	140	28 Jul 2020
R. Ashwin	Ind	98	3308	26.68	501	23.94	98	16 Mar 2024

250 The number of left-handed victims claimed by R. Ashwin in Test cricket. He becomes the first bowler in Test cricket history to achieve this milestone. Way behind him is England's Jimmy Anderson, who has 216 left-handed victims.

Bowlers claiming wickets of left-handed batters on most occasions during their Test career

Bowler	For	LHB	RHB	Total wickets	%LHB	Matches
R. Ashwin	Ind	250	251	501	49.90	98
James Anderson	Eng	217	479	696	31.18	185
Stuart Broad	Eng	193	411	604	31.95	167
M. Muralitharan	SL	191	609	800	23.88	133
Nathan Lyon	Aus	184	333	517	35.59	127

7 The number of Indian players who have the distinction of doing the double of 7000 runs and 500 wickets in First-Class cricket. Ravindra Jadeja became the latest to join this elite club of players when he claimed his 500th wicket in Rajkot in the second innings on the fourth day on 18 February 2024. In the same Rajkot match, he had completed 7000 career runs during his knock of 112 on the opening day on 15 February.

7000-plus runs and 500-plus wickets

Batter	Mts	Runs	Ave.	Wkts	Ave.	From	To
Vijay Hazare	238	**18740**	58.38	**595**	24.61	1934/35	1966/67
Vinoo Mankad	233	**11593**	34.60	**782**	24.53	1935/36	1963/64
Bapu Nadkarni	191	**8880**	40.36	**500**	21.37	1951/52	1971/72
Madan Lal	232	**10204**	42.87	**625**	25.50	1968/69	1991
Kapil Dev	275	**11353**	33.00	**835**	27.09	1975/76	1993/94
Ravi Shastri	245	**13202**	44.00	**509**	32.89	1979/80	1993/94
Ravindra Jadeja	125	**7101**	45.81	**506**	23.86	2006/07	2023/24

India's Ravindra Jadeja. K. R. DEEPAK

10 The number of players who have made over 1000 runs and claimed over 50 wickets against England during their Test career. On the opening day in Rajkot, Jadeja became the latest to achieve this all-round feat and the third Indian player after Kapil Dev and R. Ashwin. However, Jadeja is the quickest to do this double, in just 18 Tests. Previously, Australian Keith Miller and South African Trevor Goddard did it in 19 games.

Quickest to reach 1000 runs and 50 wickets in Tests against England

					Test career against England			
Tests	Player	For	Achieved on	Venue	Runs	Ave.	Wkts	Ave.
18	**Ravindra Jadeja**	Ind	15 Feb 2024	Rajkot	1000	35.71	63	33.57
19	**Keith Miller**	Aus	23 Jul 1953	Leeds	1140	42.22	54	21.30
19	**Trevor Goddard**	SA	22 Jan 1965	Jo'burg	1119	30.24	54	25.98
20	**Gary Sobers**	WI	5 Aug 1966	Leeds	2032	65.55	55	32.78
20	**Kapil Dev**	Ind	21 Jun 1986	Leeds	1008	38.77	69	35.78

36 The age of Rohit Sharma when he registered the 11th century of his Test career on the opening day of the Rajkot Test match on 15 February 2024. The century was his third as India's captain in Test matches. He thus became the oldest Indian captain to register a Test century. The previous oldest was Vijay Hazare, who was 36 years and 279 days. Rohit was 12 days older.

Oldest Indian captain to register a Test century

Age	Batter	Runs	Against	Venue	Date	Result
36y-291d	**Rohit Sharma**	131	England	Rajkot	15 Feb 2024	W
36y-279d	**Vijay Hazare**	155	England	Mumbai BS	14 Dec 1951	D
35y-321d	**M. Azharuddin**	103*	New Zealand	Wellington	26 Dec 1998	L
34y-135d	**Rahul Dravid**	129	Bangladesh	Mirpur	25 May 2007	W
33y-182d	**Sunil Gavaskar**	127*	Pakistan	Faisalabad	3 Jan 1983	L

Note: Only the batter's final century has been listed above

7 The number of batters who have converted their first three centuries to a 150-plus score. Yashasvi Jaiswal achieved this feat during his unbeaten 214 in Rajkot against England, thus making him the first Indian to do so.

Batters converting their first three Test centuries to a 150+ score

Batter	For	1st Test century	2nd Test century	3rd Test century
Javed Miandad	Pak	**163** v NZ (Lahore) 1976	**206** v NZ (Karachi) 1976	**154*** v Ind (Faisalabad) 1978
Andrew Jones	NZ	**150** v Aus (Adelaide) 1987	**170*** v Ind (Auckland) 1990	**186** v SL (Wellington) 1991
Brian Lara	WI	**277** v Aus (Sydney) 1993	**167** v Eng (Georgetown) 1994	**375** v Eng (St John's) 1994
Mahela Jayawardene	SL	**167** v NZ (Galle) 1998	**242** v Ind (ColomboSSC) 1999	**167** v SA (Galle) 2000
Matthew Sinclair	NZ	**214** v WI (Wellington) 1999	**150** v SAf (Pt Elizabeth) 2000	**204*** v Pak (Christchurch) 2001
Graeme Smith	SA	**200** v Ban (E London) 2002	**151** v Pak (Cape Town) 2003	**277** v Eng (Birmingham) 2003
Yashasvi Jaiswal	Ind	**171** v WI (Roseau) 2023	**209** v Eng (Vizag) 2024	**214*** v Eng (Rajkot) 2024

All records are correct and updated until 18 February 2024.

JAISWAL BECAME ONLY THE SECOND BATTER TO HIT JAMES ANDERSON FOR THREE SIXES IN AN OVER IN TESTS – THE ONLY OTHER BATTER BEING GEORGE BAILEY IN PERTH IN 2013

1st

Doubling Down: Opening batter Yashasvi Jaiswal became the third Indian to score double tons in back-to-back Tests, after Vinod Kambli and Virat Kohli. The 22-year-old also scored a record-equalling 12 sixes to pummel the England bowling unit. VIJAY SONEJI

2nd

Like a duck to water: Serial domestic run-getter Sarfaraz Khan made a run-filled entry into Test cricket. The right-handed batter scored two fifties and looks set for a long haul. VIJAY SONEJI

3rd

Uprooted: England's humongous defeat was precipitated by an injudicious reverse scoop, which resulted in the dismissal of Joe Root in the first innings. VIJAY SONEJI

4th

Mt. 500: R. Ashwin became the second-fastest to get to 500 Test wickets after he scalped English opener Zak Crawley in the first innings. The off-spinner, though, was forced to withdraw from the Test due to a family emergency but came back on Day 4 to help India wrap up the win. VIJAY SONEJI

5th

Joining the party: India didn't need Jasprit Bumrah to do much in the third Test, with his pace partner Mohammed Siraj chipping in with a four-wicket haul to put an early full stop to England's first innings. VIJAY SONEJI

6th

All-round excellence: Ravindra Jadeja celebrated his return from injury with a century in the first innings and a five-for in the fourth, in front of his home crowd. The left-hander thus became the second Indian — after Ashwin — to record this feat twice in Test cricket. VIJAY SONEJI

A FORMIDABLE MATCH-WINNER

The **all-rounder** serves as both the attacking focal point and the creative hub of the Indian team.

Ayan Acharya
ayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Ravichandran Ashwin became the second Indian bowler, after Anil Kumble, to pick up 500 Test wickets when England opener Zak Crawley top-edged a sweep to be caught at leg-slip on the second day of the third Test at the Niranjan Shah Stadium in Rajkot.

Ashwin has consistently proven to be a formidable match-winner for the Indian cricket team, particularly excelling in home matches.

Notably, his effectiveness against left-handed batters has added an extra dimension to his bowling prowess. Of Ashwin's 501 Test wickets, 250 are of left-hand batters. No other bowler has dismissed left-handers as many times. James Anderson is second on the list with 217 wickets against left-handers.

THE HIGHLY SKILLED OFF-SPINNER IS OFTEN EVALUATED WITHIN THE LIMITED SCOPE OF HIS ABILITY TO INFLUENCE MATCHES IN UNFAMILIAR CONDITIONS

They are the only two bowlers to dismiss left-hand batters 200 times in Tests.

The aspect of Ashwin's career that stands out more than any other is his record at home: 348 wickets in 59 Tests at an average of 21.22. But it would be remiss if we spoke about Ashwin's impact without talking about his bowling partner, Ravindra Jadeja. India's current spin duo has already racked up better numbers than its illustrious predecessors, Anil Kumble and Harbhajan Singh.

In the 52 Tests (before the Ranchi Test) that they have played together, Ashwin and Jadeja have collectively

ASHWIN'S EFFECTIVENESS AGAINST LEFT-HANDED BATTERS HAS ADDED AN EXTRA DIMENSION TO HIS BOWLING PROWESS. OF ASHWIN'S 501 TEST WICKETS, 250 ARE OF LEFT-HAND BATTERS.

Star turn: Ashwin's skill with the new ball sets him apart as a spinner with versatility beyond typical spin attributes. VIJAY SONEJI

taken 520 wickets at a combined bowling average of 21.54. In the 43 home Tests, their numbers improve marginally: 448 wickets at 21.18. In comparison, Kumble and Harbhajan have a combined tally of 501 wickets from 54 Tests at a collective bowling average of 30.48. In the 34 home Tests, their numbers are thus: 356 wickets at a combined average of 27.47.

What further enamours Ashwin's feat of 500 Test wickets is that India's dominance over the last half-decade has been built around its incisive pace battery, spearheaded by all-condition quicks Mohammed Shami and Jasprit Bumrah. This also meant that Ashwin has had to warm the bench on a few occasions, with India tending to pick a seam-bowling all-rounder, like Shardul Thakur, for No. 8, while going in with just one spinner, often Jadeja, in places such as South Africa, England, and Australia. Kumble and Harbhajan played 20 Tests outside India, while Ashwin and Jadeja played just eight together.

Ashwin serves as both the attacking focal point and the creative hub of this team.

Despite his integral role, ongoing discussions have always revolved around his effectiveness at the age of 37.

The highly skilled off-spinner is often evaluated within the limited scope of his ability to influence matches in unfamiliar conditions. His exclusion from the playing XI in last year's World Test Championship final against Australia exemplifies the team's 'horses for courses' approach, despite Ashwin being India's leading wicket-taker in the WTC cycle.

This decision resulted in Ashwin missing six Test matches, including a pivotal five-Test series in England. His last appearance in England was in the 2021 WTC final in Southampton, where he had commendable figures of 25-10-45-4.

Ashwin's skill with the new ball sets him apart as a spinner with versatility, beyond typical spin attributes.

With the new ball, he bowls a swerving delivery with an upright seam and, through intelligent use of the crease, adeptly challenges both

All-round ability: Ashwin also has five Test hundreds to his name, the last of which came against England in Chennai in 2021. VIJAY SONEJI

edges of the bat. He has opened the bowling in 50 innings in Test cricket, snapping up 165 wickets at an average of 19.36, reaffirming his efficacy as a new-ball bowler.

Ashwin has brought a unique flair to cricket. His clever run-outs, and tactical retirements showcase his innovative approach to the ever-changing game. He has shown time and again that the beauty of his craft is its reward. The 10 Player-of-the-Series awards, one shy of Muttiah Muralitharan's record 11, attest to it.

It is easy to go overboard here and get drunk on superlatives while talking about athletes like Ashwin. Just as it is also easy to become inured by repetition to the pitch of Ashwin's brilliance, there has always been a sense of that little something in Ashwin's talent that never reached its end point.

It is conceivable that Ashwin himself shares this sentiment, as evident in his unwavering resolve. Rather than sulking over defeat, he appears to use setbacks as opportunities to regroup and press forward.

Beyond the mere act of delivering overs, Ashwin engages in a contest with his opponents, inviting them to a closely contested battle of wits, seeking to establish dominance in his sporting domain.

Ashwin also has five Test hundreds to his name, the last of which came against England in Chennai in 2021. That innings made him the first all-rounder since Garry Sobers at Headingley in 1966 to take five wickets and score a century against England.

Coming back to Rajkot, at the close of play on Day 2, he said: "It has been quite a long journey. Firstly, I'd like to dedicate the final wicket to my father. He's been through the thick and thin of everything I've done in my life. He's been a constant support for me." But then to business. "Five hundred wickets are done and dusted now; we've got a game hanging in the balance."

Just a few hours later, the BCCI announced Ashwin had withdrawn from the Test because of a family emergency. He would later return to bowl India to a 2-1 series lead on the fourth day, securing his place among the game's royalty.

GETTY IMAGES

Aussies sweep Kiwis 3-0 in away T20I series

1 Australia began by pulling off a **thrilling** 216-run chase in the first T20I.

Australia issued a stern warning ahead of the T20 World Cup, to be held in June, by sweeping New Zealand 3-0 in an away T20I series. It began by pulling off a thrilling 216-run chase in the first T20I, owing to skipper Mitchell Marsh and Tim David's firepower.

Leg-spinner Adam Zampa's four-fer gave the visiting side an unassailable 2-0 lead as the Kiwis were bundled out for 102, chasing 175.

Australia won a rain-truncated final by 27 runs to clinch a landmark 100th win in the format. Marsh, likely to lead the Aussies in the World Cup, was Player-of-the-Series for his 98 runs and two wickets in two games.

AFP

2

Sri Lanka all-rounder Wanindu Hasaranga was handed a two-match ban by the ICC following the third T20I against Afghanistan. Hasaranga was charged with abusing on-field umpire Lyndon Hannibal, who didn't rule a high full-toss as a no-ball in the closing stages of Sri Lanka's three-run defeat. "It would be much better if he did another job," Hasaranga reportedly said in a statement. The Sri Lankan skipper was the architect of his side's 2-1 series victory, with 102 runs and four wickets in three matches.

REUTERS

3

Australia's Annabel Sutherland slammed the fastest double-hundred in women's Tests, reaching the milestone in 248 balls in a one-off Test against South Africa. The 22-year-old struck 27 fours and two sixes in her knock of 210 off 256 balls as Australia amassed a mammoth 575 for nine, the highest team score in Tests in the women's game. South Africa, playing only its second Test since 2014, was shot out for 76 in the first innings, and though it showed more fight in the second, scoring 215, it fell to a resounding defeat, losing by an innings and 284 runs.

PTI

4

Mohammed Shami is doubtful for the upcoming season of the Indian Premier League (IPL) and is set to undergo surgery in the United Kingdom for a left ankle injury. The ace pacer last featured in India's defeat to Australia in the final of the ODI World Cup 2023, in which he was the tournament's top wicket-taker, with 24 scalps in seven games.

SPORTZPICS / BCCI

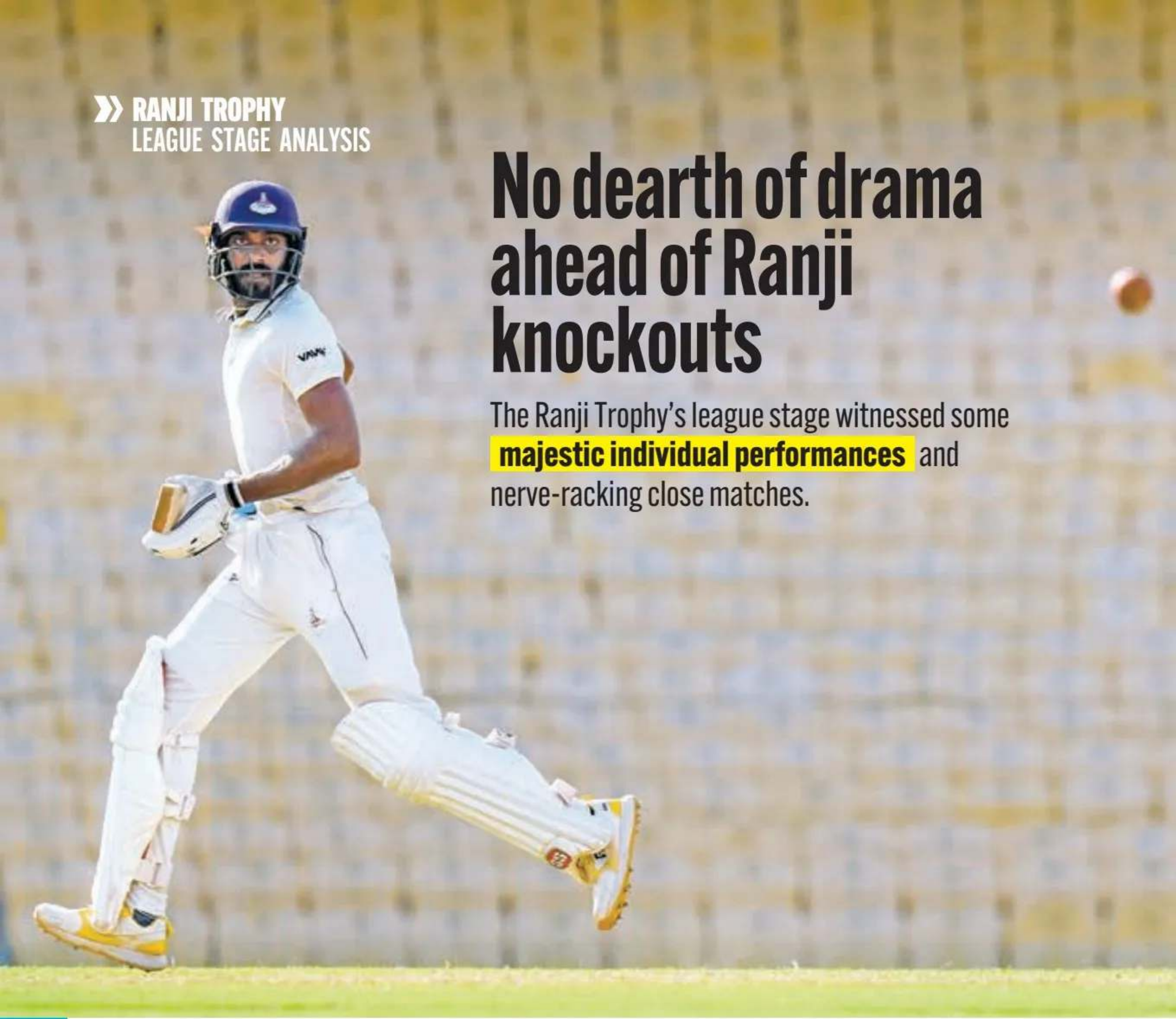
5

England spinner Jack Leach will undergo knee surgery after being ruled out of the ongoing Test series against India. The left-arm tweaker had featured in the first Test of the five-match series in Hyderabad, during which he injured his knee twice while fielding. England next plays a Test series only in July, at home against the West Indies, and Leach hopes to be fit by then.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

6

Former India cricketer Lalchand Rajput has been appointed head coach of the UAE's men's cricket team for a three-year period. The 62-year-old, coach of the T20 World Cup-winning Indian team in 2007, has previously worked with Afghanistan (2016–17) and Zimbabwe (2018–22). Under him, Afghanistan was awarded Test status, while Zimbabwe qualified for the T20 World Cup in 2022. Rajput's first assignment with the UAE will include an ODI tri-series with Canada and Scotland, followed by a three-match T20I series against the latter.



No dearth of drama ahead of Ranji knockouts

The Ranji Trophy's league stage witnessed some **majestic individual performances** and nerve-racking close matches.

Dhruva Prasad
dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in

Reputations were reinforced and legacies revived as the group stage of the Ranji Trophy Elite division wound to a close after over a month-and-a-half of action.

Under the full-time leadership of left-arm spinner R. Sai Kishore, Tamil Nadu witnessed a turnaround in its red-ball cricket fortunes when it booked its first quarterfinal berth since the 2016-17 season. The wait for five-time champion Baroda was even longer as it snapped a nine-season-long absence in the knockouts phase of the tournament.

Vidarbha topped Group A to qualify for the last-eight stage for the first time since its victorious season in 2018-19, while Mumbai was back to asserting its dominance after a rare blip in 2022-23.

Meanwhile, it was business as usual for Saurashtra, which rode on stalwart Cheteshwar Pujara's 781 runs in 11 innings, even as skipper Jaydev Unadkat had an underwhelming season with the ball, to continue its quest for a third title in four seasons.

In a hat tip to the defending champion's aura of invincibility,

Devdutt Padikkal of Karnataka is in stellar form this season, having piled up 556 runs in six innings at an average of 92.66, including three hundreds.

So close, yet so far: Chasing 355 to win, Baba Indrajith (R) and Vijay Shankar's 125-run stand almost won it for Tamil Nadu, but Karnataka held firm to eke out a draw. PTI

traditional heavyweight Karnataka seemed to settle for a draw on the final day of its last league game against Chandigarh to avoid meeting Saurashtra in the quarterfinal, instead preferring to face Vidarbha.

On the other hand, had Services' push for an innings-victory against Maharashtra on the final day of the league stage been successful, it would have pipped Saurashtra to the second spot in Group A.

Madhya Pradesh — the only unbeaten side in the league stage — and Andhra, a consistent but less fancied side, booked a quarterfinal clash, in a repeat of last year's fixture.

MP enjoyed a straightforward entry into the quarterfinals from Group D, with both departments clicking in unison for the 2021-22 champion. Its journey was in sharp contrast to Karnataka's brinksmanship. Mayank Agarwal's side tempted fate repeatedly, be it a 29-run escape against Tripura or a one-wicket win against Railways.

These two close shaves were sandwiched between one of the most dramatic batting collapses and an edge-of-the-seat blockbuster.

Chasing 110 against Gujarat, Karnataka succumbed to a six-run defeat after a 50-run opening stand between Agarwal and Devdutt Padikkal seemed to put the contest to bed. Then, in the Southern Derby against Tamil Nadu, it came perilously close to conceding a 355-run target after Baba Indrajith and Vijay Shankar joined forces for a 125-run alliance for the sixth wicket to pull off a run-chase for the ages. Eventually, salvaging three points for the first-innings lead was as close as Karnataka came to breathing easy.

That game, however, was Padikkal's ticket to a maiden Test call-up as the left-hander was drafted in the squad for India's third Test against England following his 151 in the first innings. Padikkal's breakout First Class season saw him hitting 556 runs in six innings at an average of 92.66, including three hundreds.

Meanwhile, Tamil Nadu's Baba Indrajith continued to make a strong case for higher honours even as he is handed a raw deal by selectors time and again. He notched up another 600-run season — his sixth in 10 seasons — and emerged as TN's crisis man. His omission from the 2023-24 South Zone squad for the Duleep Trophy and that an India A cap still eludes him add intrigue to Indrajith's non-selection.

Left-arm spinners Sai Kishore and S. Ajith Ram were also key architects of TN's uptick in First Class cricket, with the duo picking up 76 wickets between them. Opener N. Jagadeesan struck form with back-to-back scores of 245* and 321, helping his side obliterate Railways and Chandigarh with innings-victories.

While the youngsters made their performances speak, the veterans couldn't capture the attention of selectors. Despite a spate of injuries in India's squad for the ongoing Tests against England, Pujara's three hundreds and two fifties and an average of 78.1 wasn't enough to earn a recall. Mumbai skipper Ajinkya Rahane didn't help his case with just 112 runs in five matches at a dismal 16 runs per dismissal.

The long-time mainstays of India's

middle-order, Pujara (right) and Rahane, who last featured in India's defeat to Australia in the World Test Championship final in June last year, seem to have run out of rope. With young talent coming into its own in the England series, a smooth transition is underway, and perhaps the need of the hour.

But the closing stages of the league stage also coincided with a stern warning for the youngsters from BCCI secretary Jay Shah, who urged centrally contracted players to back their aspirations of representing India with regular appearances on the domestic circuit.

Ishan Kishan, Shreyas Iyer and Deepak Chahar have reportedly also incurred the wrath of the administration in the wake of this decree. Though Iyer was unavailable for Mumbai's final league game against Assam, reportedly due to a back issue, Shardul Thakur marked his presence with a 10-wicket haul in his side's innings-victory.

Though reiterating the importance of performances on the domestic circuit is a welcome move, the BCCI will also have to do its part

PTI

Left is right: Left-arm spinners Sai Kishore and S. Ajith Ram (in pic) were also key architects of TN's uptick in First Class cricket, with the duo picking up 76 wickets between them.

E. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

High impact: Mumbai's Shardul Thakur marked his presence with a 10-wicket haul against Assam.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

in trying to prioritise the Ranji Trophy. With the premier domestic tournament coinciding with the onset of winter in the northern part of the country, 24 out of the 44 matches that ended in a draw in the group stage were largely due to adverse weather. Additonally, 13 out of those 24 games lost at least an entire day's play. Returning to the October-November window could be the way ahead, though the IPL auction, typically held in December, warrants the white-ball legs to be scheduled during that period.

Also in focus was Ranji Trophy's Plate division, in which Hyderabad steamrolled its opponents, claiming six back-to-back innings-victories before beating Meghalaya by five wickets in the final.

Tanmay Agarwal's record fastest triple-hundred, off 147 balls, against Arunachal Pradesh, sparked a debate surrounding the First-Class status attributed to Plate games. Hyderabad smashed a whopping 529 runs in 48 overs on the opening day of that game.

While Hyderabad and Meghalaya will be promoted to the Elite division next season, Manipur (0 points) and Goa (4 points) are set to be demoted to Plate.

Though Delhi was staring down the barrel and looked set for relegation, with just one point after three games, it bounced back, amidst administrative issues and a mid-season captaincy switch, with three outright wins in its last four games to salvage some pride.

As the curtains drew on the league stage, an era also ended with the likes of Manoj Tiwary, Saurabh Tiwary, Faiz Fazal, Dhawal Kulkarni and Varun Aaron walking into the sunset. Though their influence on the international stage was limited, their dedication to the game serves as a fitting ode to contemporary domestic cricket — not always rewarding but a noble end in itself, nevertheless.

THOUGH REITERATING THE IMPORTANCE OF PERFORMANCES ON THE DOMESTIC CIRCUIT IS A WELCOME MOVE, THE BCCI WILL ALSO HAVE TO DO ITS PART IN TRYING TO PRIORITISE THE RANJI TROPHY

1st

Dream spell: On the first morning of his Test debut, India pacer Akash Deep rattled the English top order and reduced the visitors to 57/3. K. R. DEEPAK

2nd

Classy Joe: Root scored a vigilant, chanceless hundred to dig England out of a hole in the first innings.

K. R. DEEPAK

3rd

Uninterrupted: England off-spinner Shoaib Bashir bowled 31 consecutive overs on the second day. He ended up completing his maiden First-Class five-wicket haul. K. R. DEEPAK

4th

Marshalling: Dhruv Jurel celebrated his maiden Test fifty with a salute dedicated to his father, Nem Chand, who is a Kargil War veteran. His 90-run knock got India close to England's first innings total. AP

5th

Wrecker-in-chief: Ravichandran Ashwin picked up his first five-for of the series for India on day three. K. R. DEEPAK

6th

Zippy: Kuldeep Yadav removed Zak Crawley in the third innings with one that spun viciously into the right hander. K. R. DEEPAK

7th

Filling the big boots: Shubman Gill and Dhruv Jurel's 72-run partnership took their team home in a tricky run-chase after India had looked in a spot of trouble at one stage.

K. R. DEEPAK

For old time's sake: Former Indian cricketer Chandu Borde donned multiple hats after retiring from the game.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

'WE NEVER PLAYED FOR MONEY'

Chandu Borde was recently honoured with the **Lifetime Achievement Award** at the Sportstar Aces Awards function in Mumbai. In an engaging chat, he shares some memorable experiences from on and off the field.

Amol Karhadkar
amol.k@thehindu.co.in

Chandrakant Gulabrao, known as Chandu Borde, a versatile cricketer who played 52 Tests for India in the 1950s and 1960s, is set to celebrate his 90th birthday in July. After retiring from the game, Borde remained actively involved in Indian cricket, serving as a selector, team manager (de facto coach), and cricket manager until 2007. Recently, he was honoured with the *IDFC First Bank Lifetime Achievement Award at the Sportstar Aces Awards 2024*. Before graciously accepting the award and captivating the audience with his witty humour, Borde reflected on his cricket journey, sharing some memorable experiences from his time on and off the field.

Reflecting on nearly eight decades of your association with cricket, how do you perceive the journey you've undertaken thus far?

I have never thought about this. I have spent so much time with the game. I never felt like I was such an old man or something. Sometimes, when I sit back and think about the people with whom I played and the people with whom I was associated, I feel very, very happy. To know them, the wonderful time I had during my cricketing period, the ups and downs... I wonder about present-day cricket because there is so much change in the game — in bowling, batting, fielding, everything. I don't

think we could have survived with it. Hitting the ball through the legs (laughs), I don't think I could have done that, or hitting over the head. But watching these present-day cricketers and how they have adapted to this kind of cricket, sometimes I wonder whether we — or I — could have done that. Seven to eight decades is a long time, and I came across great cricketers — not only from India but abroad as well. That was a tremendous satisfaction.

It's well documented that Vijay Hazare was one of the biggest influences on you.

In three different eras, I was closely involved with three great cricketers. I was their mentee, manager, and selector. For instance, Mr. Vijay Hazare was a huge influence on me. Cricketing-wise, I learned a lot watching him because I bowled to him in the nets playing for Baroda; that was the first decade. And what a fantastic batsman! For me, he was the best in that era.

Later on came Sunil Gavaskar. The way he batted against the fast bowlers without a helmet, without protective gear, and getting so many runs was phenomenal. That's the second decade.

And the third decade or era was Sachin Tendulkar, when I managed the team on his first tour with the Indian team. These three great players performed very well for the country and for the cricket fraternity.

Can you recall the most memorable incident with each of these three people?

The first incident took place at Baroda during the Ranji Trophy final against Services, captained by Colonel (Hemu) Adhikari in 1957–58. Mr. Hazare was with the Indian team at that time, around 40 years old. Services planned meticulously to dismiss him promptly. Being a military man, Colonel Adhikari instructed the fast bowler Surendranath to deliver a bouncer on the off-stump as soon as Mr. Hazare came to bat. We noticed their preparation during the two days of practice before the final. As soon as Mr. Hazare entered at No. 4, Surendranath executed the plan with a beautiful bouncer. Mr. Hazare attempted to hook, missed, and the ball went to mid-on, where the fielder dropped the catch. Colonel Adhikari went and told the fielder, "Don't worry, boy, you will get the next chance when he scores 200." True to his words, Mr. Hazare scored a double hundred, and our partnership was around 100 runs (147). It was a tremendous learning experience to watch him.

Moving on to Sunil Gavaskar... I had the privilege of being a selector when he made his Test debut [in 1971]. More than a decade later, after drawing [the fifth Test] with England in Kanpur in February 1985, the team was set to tour Australia for the Benson & Hedges Trophy. I was the chairman of the selection committee, and we had decided to make Sunil the captain. But I heard that he may announce his retirement, and I didn't want him to do that. I visited his room one evening and we chatted over a cup of tea. I told him, "When you come back after winning the Benson & Hedges Trophy, don't announce retirement or give up captaincy." He responded with a wry smile, leaving us uncertain. He indeed gave up captaincy after winning the final, where Ravi Shastri won the Audi. That marked the second incident.

WE WON A TEST SERIES IN ENGLAND AFTER 21 YEARS, AND STILL, IT DIDN'T GET THAT MUCH RECOGNITION. (RAHUL) DRAVID WAS THE CAPTAIN. THAT WAS A VERY GOOD VICTORY

The third incident occurred in Sialkot during Sachin's tour with the Indian team. As the manager, I witnessed Sachin being hit by a bouncer, causing bleeding. I went to the ground, suggesting we go back to the dressing room for treatment.

However, Sachin insisted, "No, sir, I am going to play." The physio arrived and managed the bleeding. Sachin wore his helmet and promptly hit three clear boundaries. We were all surprised, and I was sure he was going to stay there for a long time.

Can you recall the 2007 Test series win in England when you were appointed as Cricket Manager during a turbulent phase?

We won a series in England after 21 years, and still, it didn't get that much recognition. (Rahul) Dravid was the captain. That was a very good victory. Just before that, the team had lost

Doyen of the game: Chandu Borde made 55 Test appearances and had a double of over 3,000 runs and 50 wickets. After retiring from the game, he contributed as chief selector, India's team manager, and even a match referee. EMMANUAL YOGINI

miserably in the (ODI) World Cup [in the West Indies], and there was unpleasantness among the players, so I was appointed.

Which role have you found the most enjoyable yet challenging?
A cricketer's, of course. Particularly against the West Indians. We never saw that kind of bowling during our cricketing period, and they used to bowl from 18 yards because the front foot (no-ball) rule was not applicable then. We had no helmet or elbow guard.

The thigh pad was very thin. Sometimes, we used to put gloves inside pads. That was quite frightening. But I played some challenging cricket [during the West Indies tour of India in 1958/59]. I scored a hundred [in the first innings] in the Delhi Test but missed out on one in the second innings [he was dismissed for 96]. From then on, I enjoyed playing against all countries.

Do you have any regrets?
Regrets were few, or quite a bit. And very disheartening. Once I was told that I was going to lead the side the next day, and then in the morning, somebody else came in as the captain. Once the chairman [of the selection committee] came to Vidarbha, where I was playing a match and the team was selected. Though I was padded up and ready to bat, I was asked to remove all those things, and I was out of the XI. But when I look back, I think whatever happened, happened for

Standing tall: The Prime Minister of India, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, hands over a silver plate to Chandu Borde, who had the distinction of scoring the only Test century against the West Indies, before commencement of play on the third day of the fifth Test match at the then Feroze Shah Kotla Stadium in New Delhi on February 8, 1959.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

the best. If I had been selected as a captain but failed to give my best or win the series, I would not have played again. I took it in a positive way. So, I am quite happy now.

Despite going through such experiences and playing purely for passion with very little financial rewards, how do you not sound bitter when you see modern-day cricketers earning crores of rupees?

Not at all. In fact, I enjoy it. Yes, we never played for money. You will be surprised to know that during our time in the 1960s, we were getting ₹250 per match. Damodar Karmarkar (popularly known as Mama Karmakar) was the BCCI secretary then, and he told us: "In the evening, we are going to one gentleman's place for dinner who is financially well off, and you will be rewarded with ₹1,000 each." We were pleased; we went there, enjoyed a sumptuous vegetarian meal, and that's it. Those thousand rupees are still to come. We were hurt, but then we also forgot. This has happened during my cricket career. But it's good for life too; when you only get success, you get used to it and ignore the lows. Instead, when you experience all of it, success becomes a great feeling. This is what I am enjoying.

'...when you only get success, you get used to it and ignore the lows. Instead, when you experience all of it, success becomes a great feeling.'

Starry night: As the WPL 2024 opening ceremony concluded, Shah Rukh Khan, in his iconic pose, opened his arms wide, standing alongside all five team captains, marking the perfect end to the grand event. SPORTZPICS / WPL

LIGHTS, CAMERAS, AND CRICKET

Mumbai Indians secured a **thrilling victory** against Delhi Capitals in the season opener.

Mayank
mayank.c@thehindu.co.in

The Women's Premier League 2024 kicked off in style with a dazzling opening ceremony featuring Bollywood stars at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru.

Shahid Kapoor, Siddharth Malhotra, Tiger Shroff, Kartik Aryan, and Varun Dhawan added glamour to the event, but Shah Rukh Khan's arrival truly lit up the atmosphere.

The stadium echoed with cheers of "SRK... SRK" as Shah Rukh took centre stage, treating his fans to a captivating performance of 'Jhoome Jo Pathaan.' Each step he took ignited the crowd's enthusiasm, creating an unforgettable evening.

As the spectacle concluded, Shah Rukh, in his iconic pose, opened his arms wide, standing alongside all five team captains, marking the perfect end to the grand event.

Women bikers

When the Women's Premier League shifted from Mumbai to

Technological advancement: Taking inspiration from the Electra Stumps in the Women's Big Bash League, where stumps lit up instead of bails, the BCCI has introduced LED wickets, known as Zing Cricket Wicket, for the second season of WPL. SPORTZPICS / WPL

Bengaluru for its second season, there were doubts about attendance for women's games.

However, the local crowd, mainly loyal supporters of Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB), not only filled the stadium but also generated significant excitement.

She for Society, an innovative NGO represented by an all-women bikers' group from Bengaluru, showed up in large numbers. They organised a rally and escorted the RCB team bus from the hotel to the stadium, giving the team a grand entrance.

DRS rule

In the Women's Premier League, the Mumbai Indians secured a thrilling victory against the Delhi Capitals in the season opener. Notably, the league opted for an older Decision Review System (DRS) distinct from international matches.

The tournament retains the traditional stumping appeal rules, considering caught behind when appealing for a stumping. This contrasts with the international standard, which abandoned this practice in December 2023.

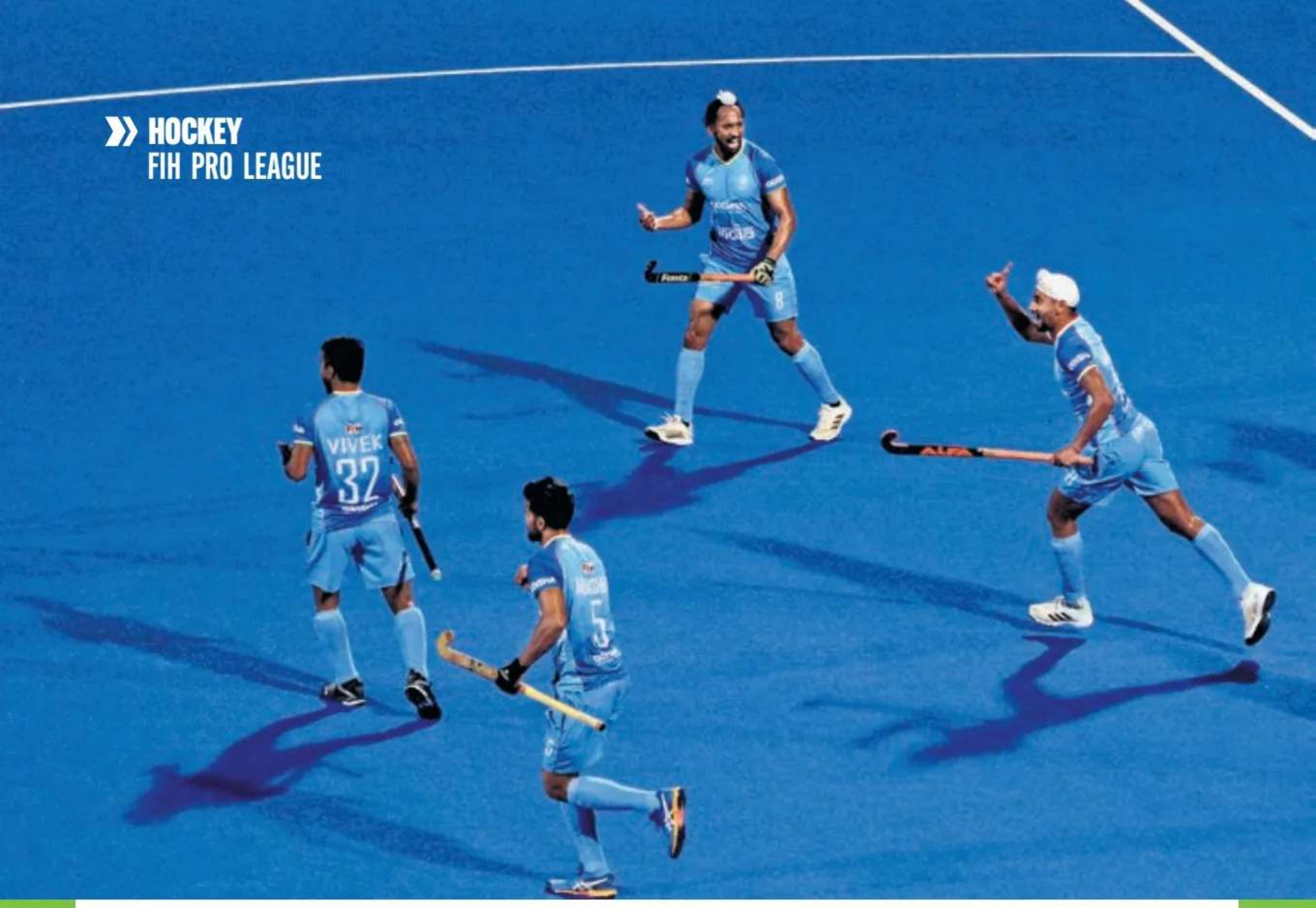
The International Cricket Council (ICC) implemented a crucial change in playing conditions to prevent DRS misuse. Now, umpires only review side-on replays for stumping, excluding potential caught-behind situations.

Considering that BCCI's domestic season began before the ICC rule update in September, the question arises if the Indian Premier League's 17th season, starting on March 22, will incorporate these international changes.

Flashing stumps

Taking inspiration from the Electra Stumps in the Women's Big Bash League, where stumps lit up instead of bails, the BCCI has introduced LED wickets, known as Zing Cricket Wickets, for the second season. Developed by Zing International, an Australian company, these LED wickets replace the traditional LED bails. The system involves lights flashing only when both ends of the bail lose contact with the stumps, ensuring clarity in dismissal decisions. Approved by the ICC in 2013, this technology has been utilised in international cricket. The introduction of flashing Zing stumps aims to enhance accuracy compared to standard bails, which could sometimes stay in place due to their weight, even on contact with the ball.

> « The local crowd, mainly loyal RCB supporters, filled the stadium and generated significant excitement »



Goals galore: The match against Australia was a 10-goal fest that saw India come back from deficit to take the lead, only to see it melt away.
BISWARANJAN ROUT

A FIELD OF CONTRASTS

The FIH Pro League revealed **starkly different trajectories** for the Indian men's and women's hockey teams, reflecting their struggles and aspirations both on and off the field.

Uthra Ganesan
uthra.ganesan@thehindu.co.in

When the Indian men and women returned to Bhubaneswar for the 2023-24 season of the FIH Pro League at the beginning of February, the contrast between them could not have been more stark. Their performances on the field over the next 25 days, to a large extent, mirrored their differences off it.

On the one hand, the men returned to their favourite ground to kick-start preparations for the Paris Olympics, fine-tuning plans and personnel and entering the home stretch of finding the final pieces that will, hopefully, see them atop the podium for a second successive time. The eight games — spread across Bhubaneswar and Rourkela — were also going to be their last bit of action at home before setting out on the journey to Paris.

The women, on the other hand, would have been contemplating both their recent past and their immediate future. Having missed the Paris bus, there is an air of uncertainty amidst a renewed clamour for an overhaul of personnel. The emotional outburst by coach Janneke Schopman at the end of the home leg in Rourkela, followed by her resignation, only made it worse for a team that is still coming to terms with its situation.

Post the Asian Games high, the men's team had sobering outings in Valencia and South Africa. The mixed results in the two events hinted that the team still had a lot of work to do in pursuit of Olympic glory. The Pro League at home, while indicating the team's strengths, reaffirmed the areas of concern — finding ways to score past stubborn defences when denied penalty corners being the most important one.

India scored 20 goals in eight games, winning three outright ones and two in shootouts, with 11 of the goals coming off penalty corners (PC). India's riches in terms of their PC batteries — led by Harmanpreet Singh **(below right)** and including Jugraj and Amit Rohidas with Araijit Hundal in the ranks — make it obvious for them to explore that as the main scoring option.

Yet, as Ireland and Spain showed over the two legs with their excellent defence, alternatives to scoring from open play will always be important. The Indians, in that respect, are far from a finished product. It was also an area that highlighted why the Dutchmen — with their incredible accuracy of passing and trapping and ability to stretch the defence and create space — are at the top of the table and lost only one game in regulation time here.

The Indian forwards did well to get their chances but they were also guilty of wasting them. Akashdeep Singh, the perennial potential star, continued to score a few but miss a lot. Along with Lalit Upadhyay, he is one of the seniormost members of the side but remains unsure of his spot in the team and the Pro League showed why.

With the likes of Abhishek, Sukhjeet and Sanjay impressing with their creativity and initiatives inside the circle, time is running out for the senior pros to impress coach Craig Fulton. Having missed the bus for Tokyo, Akashdeep — ironically, perhaps, the most naturally talented of the lot — would be hoping his luck turns soon.

The defence was equally solid but again had moments when it struggled to stay structured and calm, especially when up against unstoppable forces like the Australian team. The first match between the two was a 10-goal fest that saw India come back from deficit to take the lead, only to see it melt away towards the end. It was proof that the legs needed to be faster still, the stamina increased even more and the fitness taken up another notch.

« THE EMOTIONAL OUTBURST BY COACH JANNEKE SCHOPMAN, FOLLOWED BY HER RESIGNATION, ONLY MADE IT WORSE FOR THE WOMEN'S HOCKEY TEAM »

The beating heart of the team, however, remains the midfield. Between them, Hardik Singh, Sumit, Vivek and Manpreet kept the team running all through. They exchanged positions, shifted places as needed, moved up and down, left to right, through the middle and the flanks, constantly keeping the team moving and creating chances.

Goalscorers may be the stars in the spotlight but if India wants to still be in action come August 8, it will want the goal-creators to come good. And the goalkeeper — the one position where there will be no back-up with the choice between PR Sreejesh and Krishan Pathak getting tougher by the day — to step up.

The women, however, continued

to struggle. They did end their losing streak and win two of the eight games — and one in SO — but the problem of creating chances and not converting them remained. Physically, the Indian women proved they were a match for the best in the business — keeping pace with the Dutchwomen and the Australians for entire games — and held their own defensively. But in the end, it's the goals that count. And while the men boast of perhaps the biggest bench in drag-flick, the women's cupboard lies bare, with Gurjit a shadow of her old self and Deepika not yet there.

What the Pro League also confirmed was there was no substitute for experience. Vandana Katariya, the fulcrum of most Indian attacks over the past decade, had rarely missed a tournament until the Olympic Qualifiers, which she missed due to a freak cheekbone injury during training.

Her return made the Indian attack suddenly sharper, stronger

Problems aplenty: While the men boast of perhaps the biggest bench in drag-flick, the women's cupboard lies bare, with Gurjit a shadow of her old self and Deepika (in pic, No. 55) not yet there. BISWARANJAN ROUT

and better positioned in the Pro League. Others, including Salima Tete and Sangita, remained quick but if they managed to run riot against the Asian sides in the ACT, the games against the likes of Netherlands and Australia proved they have a long way to go. It will only get tougher going forward but hopefully, they would have realised it as well.

Of course, the ending was climactic — but it was not as surprising as one would have thought. The women's team's failure to make the Paris cut — first at Hangzhou and then at home in Ranchi, where everything from rankings to crowd support to home conditions were in their favour — had already put a target on Janneke's back. The coach only pre-empted what was expected to happen, perhaps after the European leg of the competition. That doesn't make it any easier for the girls, especially the senior players in the side, who now have an uncertain future.

At the end of it, the Indian men are currently placed third in the nine-team competition with 15 points from eight games. They are behind Netherlands on top with 26 points from 12 matches and Australia with 20 from eight. With two of the four teams the Indian men played against here — Australia and Ireland — present in the same pool at Paris, it helped the team management work out its strategies.

The women are sixth — ahead of USA, Belgium and Great Britain at the moment — but are also the only team that, come July, will not be present at the Olympics. The women will now go home, or to training, waiting for a new coach till the European leg of the Pro League before returning to the drawing board, hoping for a fresh start post Olympics.

The Pro League, in widely different ways, was both the beginning and the end — for the men and the women respectively — of different journeys that may well transform Indian hockey over the next few months.

BISWARANJAN ROUT

Rahul Sethpal: Haryana Steelers' defensive wall

With an impressive record of 65 tackle points and a 53% tackle success rate in 20 matches, Sethpal is **renowned for his clutch plays** and strategic acumen.

All smiles: Haryana Steelers right-corner Rahul Sethpal during a gym session. INSTAGRAM @RAHUL_RAWAL_7

Saikat Chakraborty
saikat.chakraborty@thehindu.co.in

Haryana Steelers' Rahul Sethpal has emerged as a standout performer in Pro Kabaddi Season 10. Despite a slow start, the right-corner defender evolved into a defensive force, playing a pivotal role in steering his team to the playoffs.

With an impressive record of 65 tackle points and a 53% tackle success rate in 20 matches, Sethpal is renowned for his clutch plays and strategic acumen. His remarkable feat includes 15 super-tackles (a tackle completed by a team with three or fewer defenders) in a single season.

Sethpal's journey in PKL began with U Mumba, but after two lacklustre seasons, he was released. The Steelers, recognising his potential, acquired him in the auction for PKL 10, where he has since flourished.

The 22-year-old admits that this season, marked by consistent playing time, has been a game-changer. "The trust placed in me by the team and the coach helped me a lot. This season, I have finally had the chance to shine, showcasing my talent with consistent playing time," he tells Sportstar.

From disappointment to domination

Last season's setbacks motivated him to prove his worth. He transformed himself through a meticulous approach and an unwavering focus. He carefully analyses the movements of his opponent raiders and capitalises on their weaknesses. He honed his skills and fine-tuned his strategies during the gruelling pre-season camp with the Steelers. Sethpal is a master of super-tackles. He understands the importance of these situations, knowing they can earn two points and prevent all-outs. His strategy involves patience, waiting for the right moment to strike when the raider gets desperate in the final seconds.

"I try my best to go for the tackle in those situations. Usually, we try to keep the raider waiting and not make any aggressive moves initially. We know once the timer enters the last 10 seconds, the raider will be desperate for a touchpoint, and we will get a chance to catch him," he explains.

Sethpal showcased his defensive brilliance in a standout performance against the Pawan Sehrawat-led Telugu Titans. With an impressive eight tackle points, he led his team to a thrilling victory. This exceptional display wasn't a one-time occurrence; he later replicated his highest points tally in a single game against the Patna Pirates.

Chaos to cohesion

Haryana Steelers initially faced struggles with a young and inexperienced team, losing the first match to UP Yoddhas by a substantial 30-point margin. However, as the season progressed, the team developed a strong bond through shared challenges.

Despite early obstacles, the absence of star players allowed individual talents to shine, fostering a robust team spirit. As it enters the playoffs, Sethpal is excited about his first PKL playoff game and is determined to contribute to his

Making inroads: Rahul Sethpal (in blue) in action against Telugu Titans' Pawan Sehrawat. PKL

team's quest for its inaugural title on March 1.

While acknowledging the heightened pressure, Sethpal cites his team's successful track record against the playoff opponent, the Gujarat Giants, this season.

"We cannot afford to take risks that we could take in league matches. We are very confident; we've defeated the Gujarat Giants twice in the league stage. It is going to be a tough match, but we're ready for the challenge," says Sethpal, who idolises Gujarat's captain Fazel Atrachali.

Coach's guidance

Coming from Bapulia village in Haryana, Sethpal was exposed to the sport of Kabaddi during his childhood. He was motivated by the local Kabaddi star Nitin Rawal, who is also a member of the Bengal Warriors and the Indian Kabaddi team.

Sethpal attributes his Kabaddi career's foundation to his village coach, Pramod Rawal, but acknowledges his current coach, Manpreet Singh, for his recent success.

"Coach Sir provides individual guidance, offering different strategies for each match and having backup plans in case of unforeseen circumstances. He also encourages us to express ourselves on the mat," he opines. The defender also values the leadership of his captain and fellow Haryana lad, Jaideep Dahiya. Their long-standing bond allows them to anticipate each other's moves seamlessly. "I've been playing with Jaideep since 2018. I know when he's going to pounce on a raider. As a defensive unit, we know when someone is enticing a raider, and the others get alert to make a move. We are getting a lot of tackle points, and that's because of the bonding and understanding," he concludes.

With frailties in its raiding unit, the Steelers will bank on their in-form defence to thrust themselves towards the centre of the podium, and Sethpal has to bring his best effort in that quest.

> « Sethpal carefully analyses the movements of his opponent raiders and capitalises on their weaknesses »

1

GETTY IMAGES

Klopp's farewell begins in style
Jurgen Klopp's last season at Liverpool will be adorned by at least one piece of silverware after the Reds managed to beat Chelsea in the final of the Carabao Cup. Despite a series of injuries to key players, a young Liverpool team managed to win thanks to a late extra-time goal by defender and captain Virgil Van Dijk.

2

AFP

Bundesliga investor deal collapses
The German football league dropped the cash injection deal that promised immediate investment in return for eight per cent of future media rights after continuous fan protests in stadiums across the country. German fan clubs hold formidable control over the league's clubs thanks to the '50+1' rule that restricts the influence of external investors.

3

REUTERS

Premier League title race heats up
The race for the 2023–24 Premier League title looks set to go to the wire, with the top three sides separated by just two points. Arsenal eased past Newcastle 4-1 to stay within touching distance of Liverpool (60 points from 26 games), while a first-half Phil Foden strike was enough for Manchester City to edge Bournemouth.

4

AFP

All square in Calzona's first
Francesco Calzona's first game in charge at Napoli saw the club fight back from a goal down to draw 1-1 with Barcelona in its Champions League round of 16 tie. Robert Lewandowski opened the scoring for the visitor in the 60th minute. Napoli struck back through Victor Osimhen fifteen minutes later to leave the contest evenly poised ahead of the second leg.

5

AFP

Madrid bound?

Reports in the media suggested that star forward Kylian Mbappe has communicated his desire to leave Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) to club officials upon completion of his contract in 2024. The 25-year-old declined to activate an extension in his contract last summer, which would have extended his stay at PSG till 2025.

6

AFP

Inter edges Atletico

Simone Inzaghi's Inter Milan missed a host of chances but managed to beat an Atletico Madrid side coached by his former teammate Diego Simeone. Marko Arnautovic, who replaced the injured Marcus Thuram at halftime, settled the game with a late goal, ensuring a slight advantage heading into the second leg.

7

AP

End of the road for Tuchel

Bayern Munich announced it was parting ways with manager Thomas Tuchel at the end of the season after three straight losses threatened to leave the club trophyless this campaign. Bayern trails Bayer Leverkusen by eight points in the Bundesliga and heads into the Champions League round of 16 second-leg tie against Lazio with a one-goal deficit.

Last laugh: Fulham's Alex Iwobi (R) bagged the winner in the seventh minute of second-half additional time, denying the host a fifth straight win in the league. AFP

RED DEVILS FAIL FULHAM TEST

A late Iwobi strike **halts Manchester United's winning run** in the Premier League.

MANCHESTER UNITED

1

Harry Maguire 89′

FULHAM

2

Calvin Bassey 65′
Iwobi 90+7′

Manchester United's four-match winning streak in the Premier League came to a painful end as Fulham clinched a late win against the Red Devils in front of a dejected Old Trafford.

The first proper chance fell to United, with Harry Maguire combining with Alejandro Garnacho. Maguire spread the ball to Garnacho on the left side of the Fulham box, and the Argentina international cut in and went for a curler. But Antonee Robinson showed good positional awareness to clear the ball with his head. Later, Diogo Dalot, finding himself with time and space, went for a shot from a distance and came agonisingly close as the ball hit the post and went out of play.

With the match goalless at the break, Fulham started the second half, making inroads inside the final third.

Fulham's pressure bore fruit in the 65th minute, as it scored the opening goal of the match from a corner. Timothy Castagne swung a good ball inside the United box from a corner, and Calvin Bassey ran to the near post to meet it. Bassey scuffed his initial volley but made no mistake with his second chance, rifling the ball into the roof of the net for the opener.

It looked like United would head for another drab loss, but it found an equaliser from one of the unlikeliest sources in the 89th minute.

Maguire crossed the ball to Fernandes on the far side, who tried to cut in and lose Castagne. His curled effort was initially saved by Bernd Leno, but the German could not hold on to the ball, spilling it. Maguire, in the right place at the right time, volleyed the ball inside the net, making it 1-1.

But it was Fulham's Alex Iwobi, who left it late and bagged the winner in the seventh minute of second-half additional time.

Traore made a darting run to the edge of the penalty area before squaring the ball to Iwobi to his left. Once he got the ball, Iwobi maintained his calm to touch it around Dalot and slotted the ball home, finding the bottom left corner. The loss keeps United sixth with 44 points — eight behind fourth-placed Aston Villa.

Anish Pathiyil & Aneesh Dey

THE HEAT IS ON

The I-League **title race intensifies** as Gokulam Kerala and Sreenidi Deccan continue to challenge Mohammedan SC.

Tough battle: Tempers flared in the 1-1 draw between Real Kashmir and Churchill Brothers, where Peter Hartley accused Shaher Shaheen of spitting at him. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Aashin Prasad
aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

The I-League title race is heating up, with both Gokulam Kerala and Sreeindi Deccan mounting a serious challenge to the current I-League leader, Mohammedan SC.

Gokulam has registered five wins on the bounce since the competition's resumption this year, while Sreenidi has now won four on the trot. The top three, as it stands, are separated by just two points.

The Malabarians have plundered 14 goals in the winning run, with the league top-scorer Alex Sanchez continuing to impress by taking his tally to 15 goals.

Mohammedan, which returned to winning ways with two successive victories, will need to show its mettle in a crucial week, where it will take on both Sreenidi and Gokulam in successive away matches.

It's been a mixed fortnight for fourth-placed Real Kashmir, which could also come into the title mix, with two contrasting on-field incidents taking the limelight.

Striker Gnohere Krizo scored a stunning goal-of-the-season contender in the win over Churchill Brothers, which was overshadowed by Peter Hartley's accusation that Syrian Shaher Shaheen allegedly spat at him in the ill-tempered 1-1 draw against Inter Kashi.

"17 years I've played professional. Today I was spat into my face by number 16 of @realkashmirfc. I've played in India for 4 years. This is not acceptable in our sport and certainly not acceptable in this country. I will be exploiting the options to report this player and he's [his] football club.

"I can't believe we are in 2024 and this kind of misconduct is still happening. Very disappointed and feel the player should be punished for he's actions," Hartley wrote on *X*.

THE SHOCK... AND THE CELEBRATION

Coach Ivan Vukomanovic reflects on Kerala Blasters' resilience in its **stunning turnaround** against FC Goa.

THULASI KAKKAT

After watching his team pull off one of its greatest comebacks in the Indian Super League — where it was down 0-2 at half-time against FC Goa and then went on to win 4-2 — Kerala Blasters head coach Ivan Vukomanovic (left) said his boys needed such a shock to get back on track after three straight losses.

"Nobody expected that. I think the Blasters have never come back with such a result after being down 0-2 at half time," said the Serb.

"Maybe we needed that kind of shock or maybe that kind of team talk again at half-time knowing that if we respond correctly in the beginning of the second half we could get back on track. And that actually happened. I'm so glad for them, so proud."

"But we must stay humble because we are still nowhere, we are in no man's land. We must not think we are great...we still have six big games, six big steps to respond and fight for every minute, for every point."

Never give up: Kerala Blasters was down 0-2 at half-time against FC Goa before coming back remarkably in the second-half to win 4-2. R. K. NITHIN

Changing team dynamics

Vukomanovic explained how difficult it was especially when the team lost a key player like Adrian Luna.

"When you are missing some foreign players and when they are key players, like our captain Luna, the complete team dynamics changes. Because all the other players are dependent on the leader. Then, as a coach you have to change the approach, your strategy of the game, how you want to play, then you have to change the mindset of the players.

"Then, we also had moments when (forward Kwame) Peprah not being in shape, then he kept that positive momentum, contributing to the team, assisting and when you lose him (with injury), again the team dynamics change."

Dimi, the punisher

The coach was all praise for the Greek striker Dimitrios Diamantakos (left, in yellow) whose two goals changed the match against Goa sharply around.

"Dimi is absolutely a scoring machine, he is a guy who can punish you quickly from a half position, from a half moment. He scored goals from situations where nobody expected," said Vukomanovic.

"Of course, we are happy because the boys got that positive feeling back. For Dimi it's absolutely important because it is pure instinct. Dimi, if you see him in training, if he doesn't score he is angry and that's a great value of a striker; it means that he cares."

Stan Rayan

A treat for the fans

The Marina Arena has been a happy hunting ground for Chennaiyin FC, especially against neighbour Kerala Blasters FC. Owen Coyle's side is currently on a nine-match unbeaten run against KBFC at home.

"We have to show that we are at our best at home," Coyle had said before the derby clash. Equally prepared for the task at hand were the Supermachans. They stood toe-to-toe and matched the energy levels generated by the famed travelling Manjappada fans, which added to the spectacle brilliantly.

"Great three points, fully deserved it, and absolutely brilliant from us. As I spoke about in the build-up, the fans were outstanding. Kerala came up with huge supporters as well, as they always do. Our fans were also outstanding, first person to last. They got behind the team, particularly when we were down to ten men and Kerala brought about the pressure," a happy CFC gaffer said after the match.

Sankar Narayanan EH

Heading to victory: Chennaiyin FC put up a superb performance against Kerala Blasters to gain three crucial points. M. VEDHAN

THE FUTURE IS HERE

We put the spotlight on **three talented teens** that the world should watch out for in men's tennis in 2024.

Paul Fein

GETTY IMAGES

They flipped the script. When a promising teen prospect faces his boyhood idol for the first time, he typically raves about his hero afterward.

Instead, after Dino Prizmic, a qualifier from Croatia, battled Novak Djokovic for four hours before yielding 6-2, 6-7 (5), 6-3, 6-4 in the Australian Open first round, it was the undisputed GOAT who heaped praise on the kid.

"I love the way he uses every inch of the court. He is comfortable coming in, he defends incredibly well," said Djokovic in his on-court interview. "Just an amazing performance for someone who is 18 years old and never had an experience of playing on a big stage."

Aside from first-set nerves, No. 171-ranked Prizmic didn't appear the least bit intimidated either by Djokovic or his own Grand Slam main-draw debut on Rod Laver Arena. That was just one of several attributes that impressed the 10-time and defending AO champion.

"I had an amazing opponent tonight,"

Djokovic, twice his age at 36 and playing his 410th Grand Slam match, said in his post-match press conference. "For an 18-year-old, he played so maturely and confidently on the court, fighting through, not giving up even when he was four down in the fourth set. Impressed with his mentality, with his approach, with his game."

DINO PRIZMIC DISPLAYED GUTS AND GRIT WHEN HE STAVED OFF FOUR MATCH POINTS AGAINST THE BEST SERVE RETURNER IN TENNIS HISTORY

Winning big points is another auspicious sign for Prizmic, who celebrated them with a 'Mr. T' scowl. Fearless shot-making gave him the second set tiebreaker 7-5 against Djokovic, who had racked up a superb 17-2 tiebreaker record at majors last year. The Croat again displayed guts and grit when he staved off four match points against the best serve returner in tennis history to hold in the penultimate game of the final set.

Djokovic noted their "grueling rallies, very physical games. Almost four hours for four sets." Then he paid Prizmic the ultimate compliment: "It felt at some point I was playing myself in a mirror already."

Not surprisingly, the hyper-competitive Prizmic enjoys the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). His favourite athlete, after Djokovic, is Kamaru Usman, the Nigerian-American former UFC Welterweight Champion and The Ultimate Fighter 21 tournament winner.

Although Prizmic, who upset No. 30 Jiri Lehecka and No. 81 Tomas Machac at the Stockholm Open last October, says his forehand is his favorite shot, Djokovic praised his backhand. "I hear that he liked to watch me when he was growing up. He's got an incredible defence, especially from the backhand side. Very all-round game. Of course, he's got every shot in the game [still] to improve."

On the teenager's rugged 6'2", 180-pound physique, fitness fanatic Djokovic noted, "I think I'm most impressed with his physical state for an 18-year-old. His legs are so super strong and so solid."

The Croat may have also studied his idol's 2013 book, *Serve to Win: The 14-Day Gluten-Free Plan for Physical and Mental Excellence*, which focused on nutrition, because Prizmic eats only natural foods.

But that's not all Djokovic liked. "Also the mentality. He came out there not with a desire to just play a nice set or enjoy the experience, but rather to win. Kudos to him. It was impressive. If he continues this way, he's going to have a very bright career ahead of him, no doubt."

Who will be the next great American men's player?

In the 20th century, this question conveyed optimism. That was when the U.S. produced champions with such regularity that we thought its domination would never end. But suddenly and shockingly, it did. All-time great Pete Sampras's 14th and last Grand Slam title at the 2002 US Open and Andy Roddick's only major title at the 2003 US Open were followed by an unforeseen, almost unimaginable drought.

The legendary Big Three — Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, and Novak Djokovic — ruled the men's game for the next 20 years. And now Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner are poised to dominate the rest of this decade.

Today this question is seldom asked. The more attainable goal is making the top 10, excellence to be sure, but not greatness. Currently,

Primed for attack: Prizmic has made a name for himself with his fearless shot-making and tested Novak Djokovic for four hours in their Australian Open encounter. GETTY IMAGES

GETTY IMAGES

Pro tennis requires more athleticism than ever. For Michelsen to crack the top 20 in the world rankings, he'll have to improve in all these areas, especially his sprint speed.

Big stage nerves: Alex Michelsen (L) faced Alexander Zverev in the third round of the Australian Open. The American put up a tough fight in the second set tie-break but eventually lost in three sets. GETTY IMAGES

America boasts three excellent players, all age 26 — No. 10 Taylor Fritz, No. 14 Tommy Paul, and No. 15 Frances Tiafoe — but none is likely to win a major or an Olympic gold medal.

With this context in mind, 6'4", 74th-ranked Alex Michelsen, the youngest player ranked in the top 100, has emerged as an intriguing talent. A year ago, the skinny 19-year-old from California wasn't even contemplating a pro career when he was ranked a lowly 466. Getting a tennis scholarship at a Division I college was still the family goal.

His father Erik, a three-time All-American at the University of Redlands (Calif.), and his mother Sondra, a standout at San Diego State, gave Michelsen the benefits of nature and nurture.

"They taught me from an early age [3 years old] how to play tennis," he recalled in a *Tennis Channel* video titled — 'Is Alex Michelsen the next big American star?'

"Especially my mom. I went out every single day to hit tennis balls with her," he said. "She's my hero. She's the biggest influence in my life."

When Michelsen was 16, he began training rigorously with the USTA's Tier 1 Performance squad of promising juniors. Jay Leavitt, who with Erik Diaz coached Michelsen, said, "He's a great competitor. He has a will to win that I haven't seen from many kids his age. When he was 16, 17, 18, he started surpassing the others." Leavitt and Diaz strengthened his backhand volley (which had been two-handed) and his forehand.

The summer of 2023 marked the turning point of his young career. At a Challenger event in Chicago, Michelsen, then ranked No. 190, upset former US Open finalist Kei Nishikori. Jubilant, he phoned his parents and asked, "What do you guys think about going pro?" His father, a real estate attorney, fired back, "Yeah, you're going to go pro, but it's going to be in real estate." In early August, Michelsen was still committed to enrolling at the University of Georgia.

He sealed the deal, though, when he defeated Maxime Cressy, James Duckworth, Mackenzie McDonald, and former top-tenner John Isner to reach the final at Newport. "Believe you me," said his father, "with me being an attorney and my wife being a teacher, we put up a lot of resistance." His mother said, "But with his recent results, it was just hard to say no. And he really wanted

Power-hitter: Michelsen's power was on full display when he blasted 52 winners against fellow American Tommy Paul in their Delray Beach Open clash. AFP

it."

On his remarkable breakthrough, Leavitt said, "He went from an ordinary junior to a pro within a year, which probably hasn't happened in 20 years."

At the US Open last September, the 127th-ranked Michelsen ambushed Spanish veteran and former No. 17 Albert Ramos-Vinolas, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4. Four months later, he proved it was no fluke when he stunned No. 23 Jiri Lehecka 4-6, 6-3, 6-4, 6-4 in the Australian Open second round. "He believed this was all going to happen the way it's happened, and we, as parents, didn't quite see that," said his father. Added his mother, "I think he has a great belief in himself."

Michelsen's nip-and-tuck 5-7, 6-4, 7-6 (4) Delray Beach Open loss recently to fellow American Tommy Paul showcased his power, blasting 52 winners. But another attribute caught the eye of *Tennis Channel* analyst Paul Annacone, who coached superstars Federer and Sampras. "His tennis IQ is off the charts. You rarely see him select the wrong shot. He's a fun player to watch."

Similarly impressed with Michelsen's precocious game, Paul said, "He's a great player, he makes everything super tricky. It's hard to break his serve, hard to beat him backhand to backhand. He's definitely improving every week, and he'll be on Tour for a long time. "

His meteoric rise and the accolades continued the following week at the ATP 250 event in Los Cabos, Mexico.

Michelsen notched his first top 10 victory, overpowering No. 9 Alex de Minaur 6-4, 6-1 with big serves, accurate backhands, and adroit volleys. "The all-court tennis he produced was mesmerizing and magnificent," said *Tennis Channel* analyst Rob Koenig.

A red flag appeared, however, at the ATP Next Gen Finals last November. In four tests measuring the athleticism of the elite eight players, he finished eighth in the 10-meter sprint, reaction test, and agility drill. He was seventh in the vertical jump. Pro tennis requires more athleticism than ever. For Michelsen to crack the top 20 in the world rankings, he'll have to improve in all these areas, especially his sprint speed.

Impressed with his performance at the Australian Open 2022 junior event, Djokovic invited Jakub Mensik to train with him for a few days

Checking in from Czechia: Jakub Mensik is one of the future stars from Czech Republic, following in the footsteps of Tomas Berdych and Ivan Lendl. But his idol has always been Novak Djokovic. GETTY IMAGES

"If you can see it, you can be it," Billie Jean King likes to say.

Jakub Mensik vividly recalls the first time he saw two Czech tennis giants in person. "Every year in my hometown of Prostejov, they had an exhibition with Tomas Berdych and Ivan Lendl. So all the little kids, 5, 6, 7 years old, had the opportunity to play one hour with them. I played with Berdych and took a lot of pictures with him," Mensik told Fabio Molle in a March 21, 2023 interview on *The Functional Tennis Podcast*.

Watching the Davis Cup on TV with his dad further inspired little Mensik to dream big. "Tomas Berdych and Radek Stepanek were like legends in our country because they won the Davis Cup twice," he said.

"Tomas was my tennis hero when I started, but my idol was Novak. When I started playing tennis, my goal, my dream was to be one of the best and win Grand Slams."

Mensik never had a chance to play 2010 Wimbledon finalist Berdych at a pro tournament because the former world No. 4 retired in 2019.

But he will never forget the bittersweet circumstance that led to his meeting and playing Djokovic.

At the 2022 Australian Open junior event, with temperatures hitting 35°C (95°F) every day, Mensik won five matches, including a tough three-set semifinal.

Enervated but at the same exhilarated by the prospect of capturing a Grand Slam title, he battled for more than three hours in a gruelling final against No. 1 seeded American Bruno Kuzuhara.

"In the third set, I felt my arms and legs and whole body telling me to stop," Mensik said. "But it was the final, so I was pushing, pushing on. After 5-all, 5-6, my body was absolutely dead. I can't remember what happened then."

Mensik suffered a painful, full-body cramp, and after Kuzuhara mercifully closed out the marathon 7-6 (4), 6-7 (4), 7-5, Mensik lay face down on the court, looking moribund. He was taken off the court in a wheelchair.

Unbeknownst to him, Djokovic had watched his valiant performance. A week later, Mensik received a text message from his boyhood idol with a video of Djokovic talking to him. "I was shocked and didn't know what was happening, that he knows [of] me," Mensik recalled. "Unbelievable. Unbelievable."

The world No. 1 was looking for a practice partner and invited the 16-year-old Czech to Belgrade for two or three days. Mensik gladly accepted. "I met Nole. He's very nice. I felt he was my friend at that moment, and I can ask him whatever I want."

They spent each day together doing Djokovic's routine: warm-up, on-court practice, fitness session, everything. Mensik called it "my biggest experience and a big motivation. After this experience, I'm a better player and a better person. He acts like a monster on the court, but off the court, he's the nicest guy

I've ever met."

Mensik spent another five days training with Djokovic in Montenegro, and the knowledge he gleaned from both sessions helped propel him to four titles on the Future Circuit in 2022.

The following year, in his men's Grand Slam debut at the US Open, he qualified and surged to the third round where No. 9 seed Taylor Fritz outclassed him 6-1, 6-2, 6-0.

Achieving a critical Davis Cup victory over Serbia's No. 52 Dusan Lajovic last September, and reaching a Challenger final in Canberra, Australia, this January, further boosted his confidence going into the Australian Open.

There the 6'4" Mensik again qualified and then upset former No. 10 Denis Shapovalov, a lefty shot-maker, in straight sets in the opening round.

Sometimes an impressive loss can prove as meaningful as a big win. That's exactly what happened when Mensik extended world No. 9 Hubert Hurkacz to 6-7(9), 6-1, 5-7, 6-1, 6-3 in the second round.

"The match with Hurkacz is something that I compared with the match against Fritz," he told *ATP.com*.

"Last year, I played Fritz in the third round, and he just beat me out of the court. Four months later, I played against the same kind of level of player and now it was five sets. I just can see the improvement.... I now have the confidence that I can play with these big guys and that I can really beat the big guys."

Mensik backed up those words soon enough. At the recent Qatar ExxonMobil Open in Doha, he whipped No. 24 Alejandro Davidovich Fokina 7-6 (3), 6-4 for his first win over a top 30 opponent.

He then outlasted former world No. 1 Andy Murray 7-6 (6), 6-7 (3), 7-6 (4) to reach his first ATP Tour quarterfinal.

Afterwards, he celebrated with a Djokovic-like primal roar. Heavily favoured Andrey Rublev became the Czech's next big-name victim, going down 6-4, 7-6 (6). That made Mensik the youngest player to defeat a Top-5 player since Carlos Alcaraz knocked out Stefanos Tsitsipas at the 2021 U.S. Open.

Nicknamed 'Menimal' — shorthand for his ferocious, animal-like power — the brawny Mensik will beat many more 'big guys' this year and for years to come.

Giant killer: Mensik outlasted former world No. 1 Andy Murray 7-6 (6), 6-7 (3), 7-6 (4) to reach his first ATP Tour quarterfinal. GETTY IMAGES

AFP

SOMETIMES AN IMPRESSIVE LOSS CAN PROVE AS MEANINGFUL AS A BIG WIN. THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED WHEN MENSIK EXTENDED WORLD NO. 9 HUBERT HURKACZ TO 6-7(9), 6-1, 5-7, 6-1, 6-3 IN THE SECOND ROUND OF THE AUSTRALIAN OPEN

'I feel proud that I was the first one to overcome the hurdles that women athletes face'

Pranay Rajiv
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

She is a two-time World Champion and has won countless other medals in the national and international competitions. But Karnam Malleswari will be forever remembered for the bronze she won in the 69 kg weightlifting at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, which made her the first Indian woman to medal at the biggest sporting event in the world.

Following her path, six more Indian women have brought home an Olympic medal. But as the saying goes, the first step is often the most significant one.

"It is a great feeling [to be the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal]. I feel proud that I was the first one to overcome the hurdles that women athletes face," said Malleswari, after she was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Sportstar Aces Awards 2024 held at the Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai.

"I started my weightlifting journey when I was 12. There was a weightlifting gym near my home in Amadalavalasa, Andhra Pradesh, where girls used to train. Inspired by them, I also tried out the sport. I never imagined I would reach where I am today. It all started just as fun. But with time, as my performance improved, my interest grew and so did my focus," reminisced Malleswari.

Malleswari credited her husband Rajesh Tyagi and her mother as the "two pillars" who helped her climb the pedestals of weightlifting.

"Before my marriage, it was my mother who supported me. And after marriage, my husband took over that role. He helped me through all the obstacles I faced in my career.

"What is truly great about his support is that he was a national-level weightlifter. But he understood that I had more potential and talent. So, he compromised his career and told me that he would take care of everything so that I can go onto the next level and achieve my dreams," said Malleswari.

One of the six Indian women to follow Malleswari's footsteps to Olympic glory was Mirabai Chanu, who, in 2021, did one better than her predecessor by winning silver in the 49 kg weightlifting at the Tokyo Games.

Mirabai added a gold at the 2022 Commonwealth Games but has since been held back by a spate of injuries. Malleswari, though, has faith that the Manipuri weightlifter will bounce back in time for the Paris Games.

"Back injury is very common in weightlifting. At the 2004 Athens Olympics, I too suffered a similar injury, which eventually ended my career. The good thing [for Mirabai] is that, unlike in our time, there are a lot of facilities available."

"The Sports Ministry is supporting her, and she is getting good treatment and training from top-class facilities abroad. I have total belief that she will recover in time for the Paris Olympics and bring home another medal," added Malleswari.

Mirabai's performance, though, has papered over a rather lacklustre spell for Indian weightlifting, with only three athletes qualifying for the Hangzhou Asian Games in the sport. Malleswari is pinning her hopes on the next generation to change the script.

'I can feel a growing sense of interest in the sport. All the talent in my academy have come from the grassroots level and a lot of them have already won medals at the national and international level'

Future bright: Malleswari is also doing her bit to prop up the sport, through her academy in Yamunanagar, Haryana, which currently trains 55 young weightlifters. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

"Among those three who went for the Asian Games, we had high hopes for Mirabai. Unfortunately, she couldn't deliver. There seems to be a shortage of good weightlifters in our country. Hopefully, in the next four or five years, the next generation will take over," she pointed out.

The 48-year-old Malleswari is also doing her bit to prop up the sport, through her academy in Yamunanagar, Haryana, which currently trains 55 young weightlifters.

"It [her academy] is a fully residential facility, where everything from training, diet, education and coaching is free. 35 of those students are supported by the SBI Foundation, while the other 20 are backed by the KM Foundation. I hope in the coming days, a lot more corporates come forward with their CSR backing so that we can develop weightlifting in our country.

I can feel a growing sense of interest in the sport. All the talent in my academy have come from the grassroots level and a lot of them have already won medals at the national and international level. I believe that by 2036, one of my academy products will bring home an Olympic medal," said Malleswari, with pride and a dash of optimism.

Another crisis plaguing Indian weightlifting has been the rise in doping cases. As per the National Anti-Doping Agency's annual report for 2022-23, 22 positive cases were reported in weightlifting in the country, the second-most after athletics.

Malleswari was quick to spell out the perils of doping. "Ultimately, nothing good will come out of doping. However, younger athletes often get misguided and then shift to the path of doping. What they don't realise is the consequences of engaging in doping."

"All I have to say to such athletes is — don't fall for doping. If you don't work hard with full focus and dedication during your training period, no medicine will ever help you in your performance. Results will only come if you practice wholeheartedly," she added.

The biggest highlight in the world of weightlifting in 2023 was the return of North Korea to the global fold, after a self-imposed break following the COVID-19 pandemic. Its weightlifters dominated the 2023 Asian Games, breaking six world records in the process. It only got better at the 2024 Asian Weightlifting Championship, where the North Koreans entered 11 athletes and won 11 golds.

But North Korean weightlifters will sit out of the Paris Olympics, due to their nation's non-compliance with global doping regulations. Malleswari though has no sympathy for them.

"It is unfair to other athletes if you allow doped players to take part in competitions. If any country brings doped athletes to an event, it is an injustice as they will eventually lose the medal and those who deserve to win the medal will be heartbroken.

But, as a competitor, I strongly believe that it doesn't matter what country or athlete turns up. If your preparation is perfect, nobody can stop you," she added.

'All we are looking for is how good the athlete is'

Pranay Rajiv
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

A defining moment of Indian sports in 2023 was the sight of armless archer Sheetal Devi effortlessly winning medals for fun at the Para Asian Games in Hangzhou.

In addition to winning an Arjuna Award, along with countless other adulations, the 17-year-old's heroics have also brought the limelight onto another entity — the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB), which identified and groomed Sheetal's talents.

In just over seven years since its inception, SMVDSB — with its training facility located in Katra, Jammu — has established itself as a prominent player in Indian sports.

Speaking to *Sportstar* after SMVDSB won the 'Sportstar Sports for Social Good' award in Mumbai, Anshul Garg, its Board's CEO, opened up about the organisation's origin, ideology and ambition.

The Vaishno Devi temple is one of the most popular pilgrim destinations in India. How did your organisation enter the field of sports?

Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB) is largely dedicated to pilgrimage management. We are one of the most visited pilgrim sites in the country. Over the past seven, or eight years, we have diversified into a lot of other activities. This includes healthcare, education and sports.

Sports is a major part of our social outreach programme. We started in 2016 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated our sports complex. Then we started grooming local talent, focussing on four major disciplines — archery, shooting, judo and athletics.

There was no other platform like this in the entire state. That was the reason we started. Secondly, athletics comes naturally to the people of the mountainous regions. We have been trying to nurture their potential.

We have state-of-the-art equipment, trainers and a residential facility for local students. We are grooming them to excel at the national level. We have been lucky to achieve results at the international level within a short period.

Sheetal Devi's success has now propelled your organistation to national fame. How did SMVDSB wade into para-archery and how has it been to observe Sheetal's growth from such a close range?

We started archery in 2017. We hired two coaches, and we identified local kids. What interested us was that a lot of para-athletes in and around Katra were interested in the discipline.

So, Rakesh Kumar was the first para-archer we groomed. He represented India at the Tokyo Olympics, and this motivated a lot of people to take up the sport in the region. And Sheetal was one of them. She is from a remote village in Jammu and has been with us for the last two years. She trains and resides in our facility.

With the kind of energy that she carries, she is not scared of competition. For a girl of just 17, to perform at the national level itself is a huge deal. But going to the Asian Games, and winning the gold medal, is something worth celebrating.

Community interaction and local support are extremely important for such a residential facility to thrive. How do you feel the community has warmed up to the initiative?

When we started, our coaches and trainers had to go out to the villages to hunt for talent. We had to convince parents to send their kids. Nowadays, the process has reversed. Now, people across Jammu are approaching us, asking if their kids

'Rakesh was the first stepping stone. Sheetal has built on it and now a lot of girls in the region have been inspired by her. We have high hopes for both of them from the Paris Olympics' – Anshul Garg

Impactful: In just over seven years since its inception, SMVDSB — with its training facility located in Katra, Jammu — has established itself as a prominent player in Indian sports. RITU RAJ KONWAR

can be admitted. There is no bar for students from outside the region. All we are looking for is how good the athlete is.

A key component in a residential academy is the presence of experienced coaches. How did you manage to recruit them to a relatively new facility in an unexplored terrain?

It was a difficult process in the beginning. We started getting coaches almost a year after we began. We spent a lot of time identifying the right talent and convincing them that this is a good place. We have a lot of avenues for growth of coaches inside the organisation. And they have total freedom to train their athletes.

We are also flexible in our recruitment. People who excel in a sport are recruited as coaches. For example, Rakesh joined as a player and after performing consistently for four years and winning medals, has now been recruited as an assistant coach. So, that is a progression path.

Like every training academy, success at the regional and national levels is critical. How do you look at your organisation's growth and prospects?

Rakesh was the first stepping stone. Sheetal has built on it and now a lot of girls in the region have been inspired by her. We have high hopes for both of them from the Paris Olympics. Sarika is a para-archer from Haryana, who, we are hoping, will bring in a medal from Paris. Pragya and Raveena are our brightest prospects in shooting. We are expecting medals from them at the National Games.

Are you planning to expand to other disciplines and was it a conscious decision to stick to individual sports?

As of now, the plan is to focus on these four. We are trying to achieve excellence in these rather than diversify into a lot of other activities. If we do that, we might be spread out too thin. This again depends on the ecosystem. If a promising talent comes up in another sport from the region, the board will be open to broadening our approach.

It was not a conscious decision not to invest in team sports. Once we began, we understood it was easier to deal with individual sports. In future, we could look at team sports.

What do you feel is the defining philosophy of SMVDSB?

We are looking to create an environment of excellence. We have around 150 athletes, who are traning every day. And based on their performance we are also providing scholarships to some of the best performing athletes. This is to motivate them. Our ultimate ambition is to harness the potential of as many young athletes as possible. Because, once they reach a particular level, we do not need to support them. Take Sheetal as an example. She is being backed by IOC and she is guaranteed a job. We want to create options for our players so that they can get ahead in life.

AMOJ JACOB BELIEVES THAT HIS TEAMMATES ARE CAPABLE OF RUNNING A POTENTIAL TIME IN THE 2:58.00 RANGE, WHICH COULD HELP THEM SECURE A PODIUM FINISH IN PARIS

Being feted: The Men's 4x400 Relay team receives Sportsman of the year (Track and Field) award from P. T. Usha, President of Indian Olympic Association during the Sportstar ACES Awards 2024 in Mumbai. RITU RAJ KONWAR

NEED FOR SPEED IN OLYMPIC YEAR

The Indian men's 4x400m relay team is **optimistic about a podium finish** at the Paris Olympics.

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

In November 2023, the Indian men's 4x400m relay team assembled at the start of the national camp. Before their first training session, the national coach, Jason Dawson, addressed the team and shared his expectations for the upcoming season. "It's going to be a hell of a year. It's going to be nothing less than an actual war," Nihal William recalls Dawson saying.

After a well-deserved break, the team returned to training and already had an idea of what was in store. The Indian relay squad won the *Sportsman of the Year (Track and Field)* award at the *Sportstar Aces Awards* in Mumbai after an incredible 2023 season, in which it won gold at the Asian Championships, broke the Asian record, and took fifth place at the World Championships. The team, which included Muhammad Anas, Amoj Jacob, Muhammed Ajmal Variyathodi, Rajesh Ramesh, and reserve runners Mijo Kurian and William, then went on to win gold at the Asian Games in Hangzhou.

Reflecting on the season, William shares, "During the year, we all had aspirations of exploring different places at the season's end. Amoj and

One for the album: From (L-R): Rajesh Ramesh, Muhammed Ajmal, Amoj Jacob and Muhammed Anas celebrate qualifying for the men's 4x400m relay final at the World Athletics Championships. GETTY IMAGES

I, for instance, were keen on witnessing the Northern Lights. However, with only a few weeks off, we opted for a brief getaway to Goa."

The rest of the team swiftly concluded its vacation plans. Anas, the eldest member at 29 and the lead runner, says, "We mainly visited our families, and then the coach emphasised the need to resume training, so that's what we did."

Despite the lack of a cooling-off period, there were no complaints. The team had realised its capabilities over the course of the season. Amoj, 25 and the second oldest in the squad, running the second leg, reflects, "Last year was a bit of a roller coaster. We had some really good achievements at the Worlds, and then we ended with a high at the Asian Games. But as much as there is this recognition, it comes with pressure because it's an Olympic year."

Making it to Paris is not as significant as the team's belief in what it can achieve there. "We truly believe this team can be on the Olympic podium. We believe we can create history. The team is committed to reaching the podium," Amoj says.

The 2023 World Championships in Budapest unlocked this belief, according to Amoj. During the heats, the Indian relay team ran its first-ever sub-three-minute race. In the final lap, Rajesh even appeared to take the lead against track giant USA before finishing a remarkable second.

The next day, they proved that their heats wasn't a lucky one-off by covering the length under three minutes again before finishing fifth.

"I wasn't in the race myself, but after that race, it seemed like everyone was cheering for us," says William. "The Netherlands team approached us. We could see the Kenyans, Jamaicans, and Americans cheering for us. They were all used to winning among themselves. Now, they were seeing someone else. Everyone loves an underdog, right?" he says.

They now believed in their potential, just as their rivals did.

"If there's one thing that we learned last year, it's that the whole game at the elite level is about mindset," says Amoj. "Honestly, before last year, we didn't have it. We were competing on the world stage with the best athletes, but we didn't believe we were one of them. We were training for the Worlds, but in our hearts, we didn't believe that we were at that level. Now, we believe we are capable of winning in the Olympics. There is a change in mindset. Anything is possible. That is the key factor that is going to change for us," he says.

Even though the team finished out of the medals, they rate their performance in Budapest better than that at the Asian Games, where they coasted to a gold medal. "At the start of the year, we were focussing on the World Championships. We didn't think too much about the Asian Games. That was easy. We just wanted to have a good time at the World Championships, and we did it," says Anas.

And while its Asian record time of 2:59.05 might have been one of the highlights of Indian track history, the team believes it can go even faster. "Last year, we could have run a time of 2:58 if we had made fewer mistakes. In the final, one of us got blocked, another got pushed, and we still ran under three minutes. Even in the heats, where we set an Asian record, I don't think we ran a perfect race. It was our best race, but lots of things could have been better," says Amoj.

He points to the last lap, where Rajesh looked like he was about to overtake Justin Robinson of the USA in the first bend. "That was when Rajesh got pushed. When we see the race, it's nice to see an Indian guy leading, but you don't want to go in front so early. You want to be behind your opponent, so at the last stretch, you have enough energy to go around him and to the front. If that happened, then we would almost surely have run 2:58.00," says Amoj.

Amoj believes that his teammates are capable of running a potential time in the 2:58.00 range, which could help them secure a podium finish in Paris. To provide some perspective, the bronze medallist in the 2008 Olympics completed the race in 2:58.81; in 2012 it was 2:59.40; and in 2016 it was 2:58.49.

"We could have run in the 2:58.00 range last year as well, but this time we are trying to be optimistic and are trying for something in the 2:57.00 range. It's a very difficult target, but even if we don't get there; if we push hard enough, we should at least get

On song: Amoj Jacob of Team India hands the baton to Muhammed Ajmal Variyathodi in the Men's 4x400m relay heats during day eight of the World Athletics Championships Budapest 2023 at the National Athletics Centre on August 26, 2023, in Budapest, Hungary. GETTY IMAGES

to 2:58.00. It's like what they say — if you aim for the stars, at least you will land on the moon," Amoj says.

The team has reason to believe it is on track for that steep goal. "If you compare us to where we were last year, I think we are in much better shape. Last year, all of us were coming back from some sort of injury. We were carrying all sorts of aches and pains before the season. This year, we are thankfully not dealing with any sort of injury. We can focus on our training," says Amoj.

Even as they throw themselves into training, the Indian squad has a key date in mind: May 4. That's when they will get a chance to see just how good they are at the World Athletics Relays in the Bahamas. While their performance at last year's Worlds, Asian Games, and Championships should all but guarantee India a place in the Olympics via the ranking route, the team wants to qualify outright.

"For that, we need to make the final of the World Relays. Making the top eight will be our first goal. After that, we want to medal, and of course, we want to run a sub-three-minute race once again," says Anas.

Alongside its relay goal, the team has individual targets. "Last year was very good from the team's perspective, but we didn't all get our personal bests. This season, one of our targets will be to get fast. We want all six of us to run under 46 seconds, and maybe some will run under 45 seconds (Anas currently holds the Indian 400m national record of 45.21 seconds). That way, we will have more options in Paris. We might be able to send a fresh team for the qualifiers and another for the final," says Anas.

Amoj wants to get faster during the Olympic season, but if he runs in Paris, he won't focus on his split times. "I just want to make sure that no matter what, I'm going to be the first guy handing over the baton to my teammate," he says.

> «"Last year was very good from the team's perspective, but we didn't all get our personal bests" – Anas»

A valuable anthology of Indian sport and place of women in it

The author's **striking ability** to put herself in the story of these remarkable athletes and to seamlessly juxtapose the personal and the universal gives the reader a layered and contextual lens.

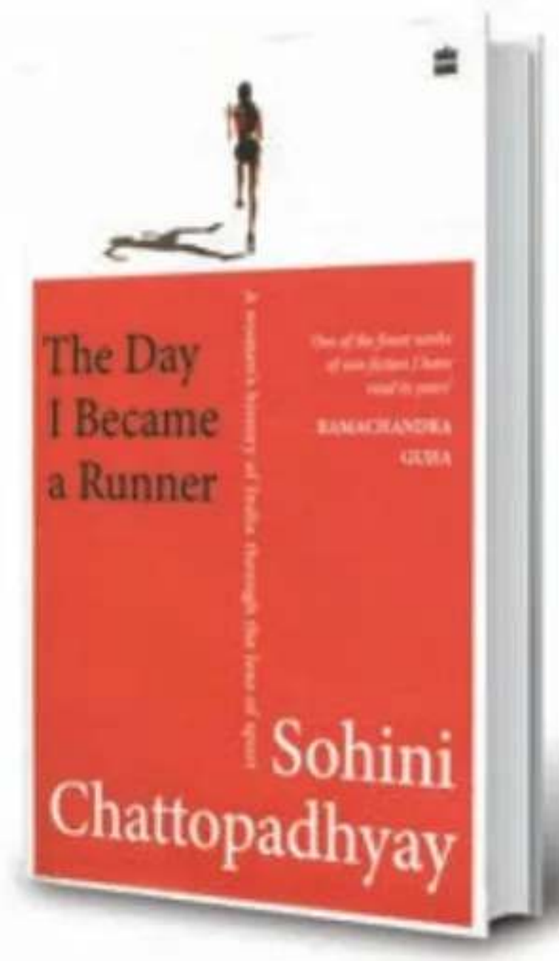
Dhruva Prasad
dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in

The Day I Became a Runner by Sohini Chattopadhyay is a compelling ode to the athletes of pre- and post-independent India who blazed a trail for women in a field as gendered as any — sport. The book is also an ode to the very act of running, a sport the author believes poses a more direct challenge to patriarchy than any other since it is a solitary activity conducted in the public sphere. Chattopadhyay establishes this premise in the opening chapter, 'The Bengali Woman's Running Diary', which explores the origins of her own journey as a hobby runner before the book moves on to the profiles of Mary D'Souza, Kamaljit Sandhu, P.T. Usha, Santhi Soundarajan, Pinki Pramanik, Dutee Chand, Lalita Babar, and Ila Mitra.

The author's striking ability to put herself in the story of these remarkable athletes and to seamlessly juxtapose the personal and the universal gives the reader a layered and contextual lens. In the age of Zoom interviews and virtual interactions, Chattopadhyay's work is testimony to the value of reporting from the ground and catching the athlete in their environs.

As she reminisces about a selfie she clicked at the beach in Kozhikode, where Usha trained, Chattopadhyay concludes that perhaps the most enduring legacy Usha left in her wake was 'that no one turns to look when a woman runs because Usha had made it so natural'. Pramanik's insistence on being interviewed at the Sealdah station in Kolkata, where she worked as a ticket checker, was equally poignant and insightful. "She [Pramanik] also wanted me to see her in a place where she is a figure of authority, in a blazer and trousers with the power to lock people up... If the public gaze had devoured her during her bizarre case, she was now unmistakably staring back at us all," Chattopadhyay writes.

The athlete profiles are detailed and strewn with insightful anecdotes that read as a searing indictment of society and the media's callous coverage of sensitive issues, such as gender identity. Barring the author's tendency of factual repetition while reintroducing a certain event and the long-winded nature of the last three slightly tangential chapters, which seem to lean inordinately on the author's political views, the book is a riveting anthology of Indian history and the place of women and sport in it.



From the tome

Is there anything for which women are seen as having a legitimate reason to put themselves out there in the world? The answer I have come up with is sport. Sports enables citizens to perform their patriotism. The high nationalism of sport bestows a certain licence to women to put themselves out there in the world in a way that almost nothing does. In particular, I chose to look at running because it is a basic, full-body, minimal equipment sport. It doesn't need a team –you can run on your own. It is also public in a way that swimming –also basic, full-body, minimal-equipment –is not. Swimming takes bodies out of view. Running puts them on view.

Disappearing Novotny

By C.G.S.Narayanan

The disappearing Novotny (also called Romanian Novotny) is one of favourite Novotny ideas on which American composer Kabe Moen wrote a series of articles in 'The Problemist'. In this theme a piece standing at the intersection of bishop and rook lines threaten two mates. However the captures of this piece, which usually allow only one of the mates, defeat both threats and allow new mates.The problem below by the British composer is the ideal illustration of disappearing Novotny.

Colin Sydenham
I prize, BCM 1979

Mate in two moves

Set:1...Kc3 2.Bd2

Key 1.Nb5! solves with standard Novotny threats 2.Qc5/Qxc4. However captures by the BR and BB do not separate the threats but lead respectively to the new mates 2.Rxc3 and 2.Bc5.The threats are indeed separated but by BPd7.The genesis of the problem was in the black/white correspondence elements. The Novotny captures are answered by the corresponding white pieces and the star defence 1...Kb5 (2.Qb6)like the key opens the line of two corresponding pieces on to the threat squares.

In the second problem below the "disappearing" part of the Novotny, i.e., the reason that the threatened mates do not work is because of the loss of guard on h7. It may be noticed that the threats are separately forced and the mates after the captures of the key piece depend on the mutual interferences of the rook and bishop.

Kabe Moen
Problemist 2019

Mate in two moves

Key:1.Bg6!(2.Bg7,Rh7)
1...Bxg6 2.Qf8 (Bg7?)
1...Rxg6 2.Qh8 (Rh7?)
1...Rb1 2.Bg7; 1...Rxa1 2.Rh7

Now a 10-piece aristocrat setting of the theme for solving

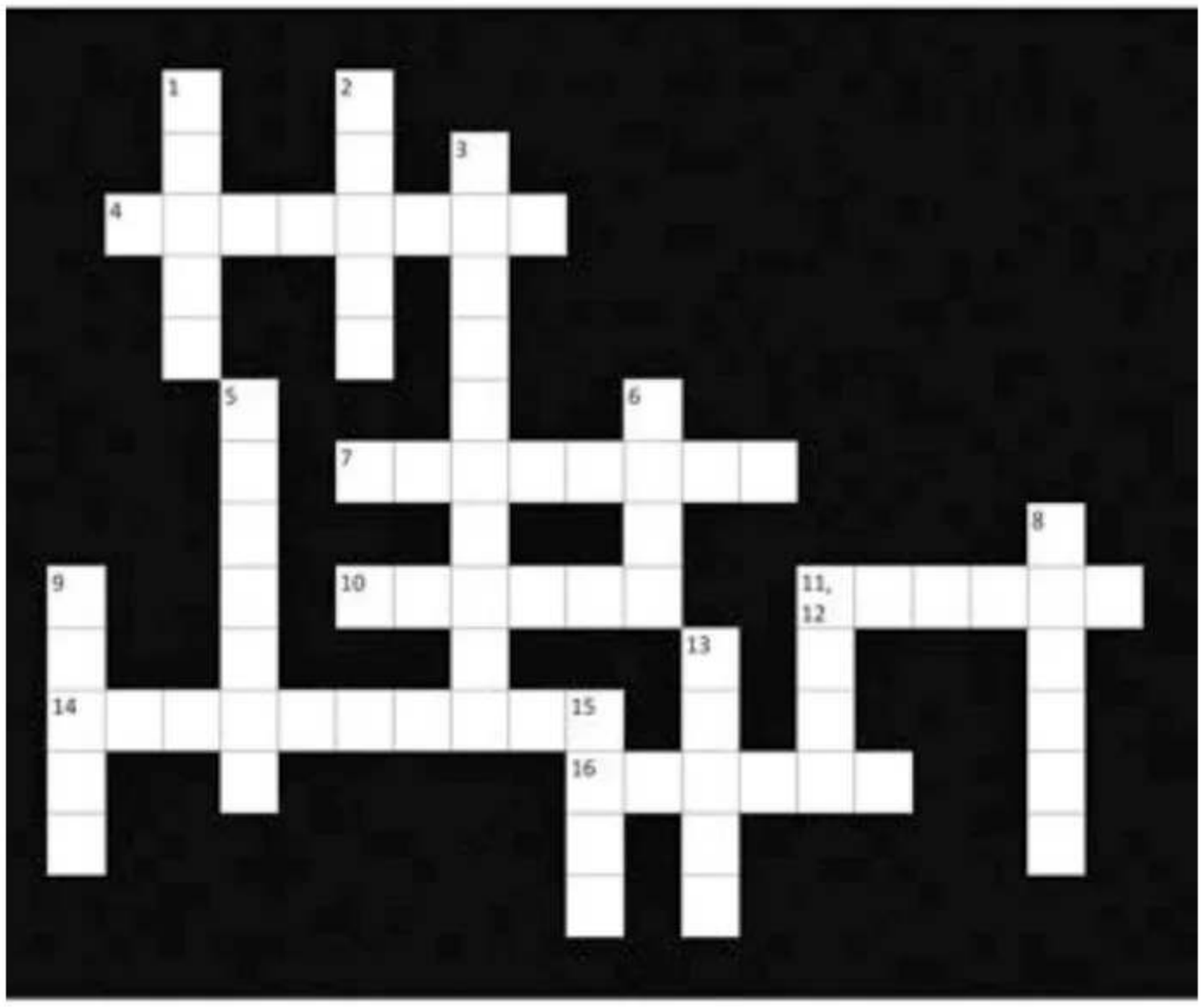
Kabe Moen
Super Problem 2019

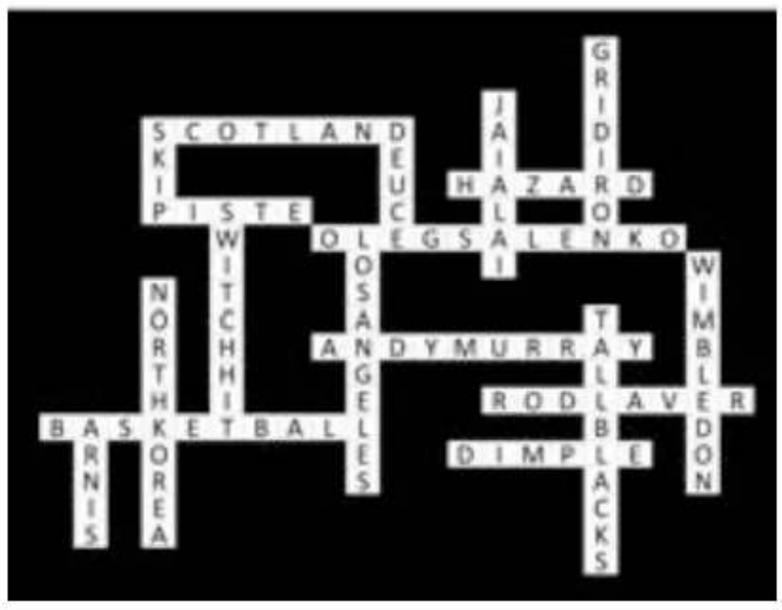
Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Salazar,a reversal theme':
Key 1.Qg2 ! (2.Qa2)1...Bxd3 2.Se5
1...Bxe6 2.Qg5 mate

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

CROSSWORD
KARAN PILLAI





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

4 Which town in Scotland has the world's oldest tennis court? (8)

7 Who holds the record for the fastest recorded serve in tennis? (3, 5)

10 Ligue 1 is the top football league competition in which country? (6)

11 Which city has hosted the Olympics the most number of times — 3? (6)

14 Simone Biles is a decorated Olympian in which sport? (10)

16 ..... Gibson was the first Black player to win the French Open, Wimbledon, and U.S. Open singles tennis championships? (6)

DOWN

1 A judo expert would have a belt of which colour? (5)

2 .... Baumgartner holds the record for the longest freefall in history. (5)

3 Lionel Messi left Barcelona to join which club? (5, 5)

5 A recreational sport in which participants are placed inside transparent plastic orbs. (7)

6 A zero score in tennis is called ... (4)

8 Golfer Jack Nicklaus was also known as The ... Bear. (6)

9 A 6-0 set in tennis is called... (5)

12 This sport involves participants on sleds racing on an icy track. (4)

13 What object is passed on between runners in a relay race? (5)

15 A tennis shot invented by Roger Federer. (4)

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Vooty Masters: Shaurya Binu triumphs

Shaurya Binu of Bengaluru came up with a dominant final round of eight-under 64 to emerge champion in the Dream Valley Vooty Masters golf championship at the Vooty Golf County in Vikarabad.

The 19-year-old Shaurya (66-66-70-64) totalled 22-under 266 for the week to register an emphatic eight-shot triumph and pick up the winning cheque worth Rs. 15 lakh that moved him from 10th to first position in the TATA Steel PGTI Ranking.

Binu, playing only his second season as a professional, emerged wire-to-wire winner having led the field in all four rounds. His last round of 64 was the day's best score.

Karan Pratap Singh (73-66-68-67) struck a 67 to rise three spots and finish runner-up at 14-under 274.

"A three-shot lead, knowing that I was in good form and having my plans in place, I was quite comfortable from the start of the day. I knew the course well so it was all about controlling my emotions. I had to play the shots I knew I could. The birdie on the first just set the ball rolling for me. I'm quite proud of this effort," the champion said later.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON

1 **Santiago Marambio scored six goals to power Delta Polo to a 8-5 victory** over Mayfair Polo in the final of the Gen. Sparrow Cup polo tournament at the Jaipur Polo ground. Mare Jummy ridden by Naveen Singh was adjudged the 'best polo pony'. Angad Singh Sandhu was declared the 'most valuable player' of the match.

The results (final):
Delta Polo 8 (Santiago Marambio 6, Hurr Ali 2, bt Mayfair Polo 5 (Naveen Singh 3, Angad Singh Sandhu, Salim Azmi).

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

2 **The Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) announced the dates** for the Asian championships and the Olympic qualifier to be held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in April. As per the notification, the trials will be held at the Indira Gandhi Stadium in Delhi on March 10 and 11. The medal winners of the two National championships, held by the WFI and the IOA-appointed ad-hoc committee at Pune and Jaipur respectively, are eligible to participate in the trials. "In addition, all renowned wrestlers are also invited to participate in the above-mentioned trials," said the notification.

Y. B. SARANGI

THE HINDU GROUP

GET A RINGSIDE VIEW TO THE WORLD OF SPORTS

SUBSCRIPTION WITH DISCOUNT

Periodicity	Price
3 months	₹499
6 months	₹799
1 Year	₹1399
2 Years	₹2199

SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM

"SPORTSTAR

To subscribe, visit:
https://bit.ly/3PeVMlf
or Scan QR code

❍ **New Subscription** ❍ **Renewal (Subscription No.)**

For Subscription, please fill the form, sign and send it to Circulation Department, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai - 600 002. E-mail: customercare@thehindu.co.in Toll-Free No.: 1800 102 1878

Name:_____

Mailing Address:_____

_____ City: _____

Pin: _____ District: _____ State: _____

Landline: _____ Mobile: _____ E-mail: _____

I am remitting ₹ _____ *(Rupees in words.....)* towards annual subscription.

Please furnish remittance details: Bank UTR No..... Subscription No .....

By ❍ DD/Cheque Number - **in favour of THG Publishing Private Limited.,** (Add ₹ 10 for non-Chennai cheque

DD/Cheque Number: ..... Amount: ₹ ..... Date: .....

Bank: .....

Branch: ..... **Signature with date:** .....

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

Should coaches train along with their athletes?

Let's explore the **complex dynamics** of strength and conditioning (S&C) coaches engaging in player training sessions.

This highly intriguing and subjective topic often sparks debate among S&C coaches, generating a flurry of opinions from the fitness fraternity. There are a few key points to consider when evaluating its pros and cons.

There are high-profile coaches who don't fancy training with players and others who believe in it too strongly. On a personal level, I have had experience in both ways; therefore, I understand the real crux of the issue.

Initially, I used to train with players once or twice a week, either on the field or in the gym, but subsequently, I trained alone after the players' session was over.

To maintain a professional approach, I strictly focused on coaching during the week and then trained alone at the gym. This was for two reasons. First, intense training sessions during the week, be it in the gym or on the field, require my full attention to get the form and sequencing right.

Second, weekend training is more like a team-bonding exercise — either on the beach or through a game — that helps in understanding the players' psyche better.

An often ignored viewpoint is the notion of training along with players because coaches think there are only two possibilities — either the players think you're a dimwit for showing off or they see how ghastly poor you really are in executing movement patterns.

But this has nothing to do with knowledge or pleasing players, even when some players encourage you to demonstrate for their amusement.

Nevertheless, there are many points to ponder and many styles of coaching to choose from. What fits one coach need not fit another.

Here are some pointers that I think would be pertinent for many S&C coaches, although they may not be universally agreed upon.

Coaches are the least important athletes

It's necessary to understand that athletes are the first priority, and their performance is of prime importance. When athletes embark on strength and conditioning sessions, the duty of the coach is loud and clear — monitor them and give them feedback. If you fail to do so, you better not be there.

You're setting an example for your athletes

This can be a great opportunity to show your players what you expect of them and to set standards. Otherwise, your ignorance about the subject matter will be fully exposed, and they will not listen to you.

Players will observe you, and they'll model their behaviour on your own, consciously or not. If you behave in ways that you tell them not to, then don't be surprised when they ignore your lessons and pay attention to your bad examples instead.

Know your lifters

Many athletes admire coaches who continue their own training regimen, but don't mistake this for them wanting you to train alongside them.Make sure that your athletes are comfortable with you training

alongside them and have the courtesy to say 'no', even if they secretly resent you.

If you need attention as an athlete, train some other time

During your players' practice time, the focus should necessarily be on them.

If you want to be the centre of attention and expect praise and ego boosts for simply doing your job, you're totally the wrong candidate for training with your players. You'd be better off with your own cronies to be in that zone of self-affirmation.

Training with one specific player alone

This practice can disrupt the dynamics in a team environment, unless, of course, a player is undergoing rehab or specific improvement programmes designed by the team. Favouritism may creep in, driven by self-serving motives on the coach's part.

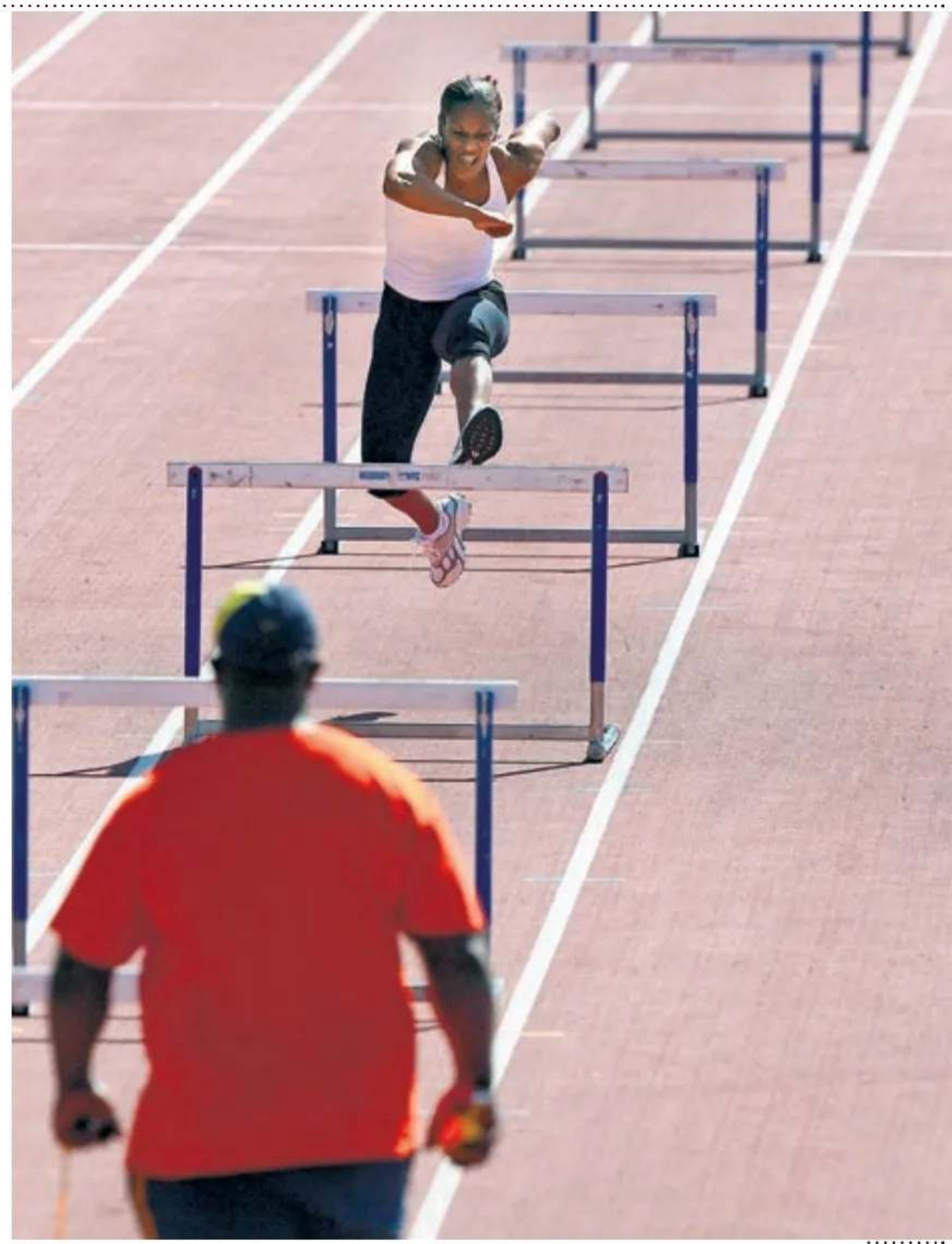
While individual training suits individual sports, it can be counterproductive within a team, creating rifts. It's important to have a professional approach to this methodology; otherwise, it can be perceived as a self-centred move by other players.

Using abusive language while training

This behaviour is a big no-no. Players may occasionally use harsh language, but that doesn't mean that coaches should follow suit. There's nothing fashionable or trend-worthy about this from a coaching perspective. Maintaining dignity, especially during a tough rep or set, will set a positive example for the players.

Keeping the workplace clean

All coaches must adhere to this etiquette. It is essential for them to maintain boundaries post-workout or after each set and keep things where they belong. This reflects the coach's self-discipline and commitment and serves as a powerful example for players to follow. No player should be too tired to maintain cleanliness after a workout.



Team comes first: While training with individual players may suit individual sports, it can be counterproductive within a team. GETTY IMAGES

Working on the correct form

The most critical aspect of coaching is to lead by example and train players whenever required. One wrong move here can lead to a negative impact, spilling into subsequent sessions, and potentially becoming a setback for the coaches.

To sum it up, if you want to be a superior coach or even just play-act like one, you cannot be focused on your own workout while your players are training. You only get to work out when others aren't and when you're not actively coaching someone. There are coaching ethics involved that need to be understood and designed according to the group's needs.

Ultimately, there will come a day when you have to decide if you're pretending to be an athlete or a coach. You can be both to some extent, but only one must be the unequivocal priority, and you'll have to accept the sacrifices in either case. The sooner you can figure this out, the better it is for your success.

'Always keep an open mind and a compassionate heart' — Phil Jackson.

Celebration in sport

The **best celebrations,** like the best moves in sport, have about them originality, spontaneity, and even humour.

Suresh Menon

Remember the Brazilian footballer Bebeto? At the World Cup he scored a goal against the Netherlands and celebrated in a manner that has been copied many times since. Bebeto shaped his arms into a cradle, and began to make the sign of rocking his new-born baby. That baby, who became a footballer himself, is now 30 years old. I don't remember the goal, but I remember the celebration!

Likewise with Cameroonian Roger Milla's hip-swinging dance at the corner flag in celebration. Or Pat Cash's leap into his player box after winning the 1987 Wimbledon. Bjorn Borg dropping to his knees after winning — the list goes on. The celebrations stay in the mind, the scores....well, there's always Google!

More recently, the Usain Bolt celebration caught the world's imagination. And my current favourite — Kevin Sinclair's cartwheel-somersault combo **(in pic)** on taking a wicket for the West Indies against Australia. Cricket is more about sobriety than flippancy — the high five and the team hug apart — so we must treasure Sinclair's effort!

How important is celebration in sport? The answer, of course, is that sport itself is a celebration — to deny this would be to misunderstand what it stands for. Celebrations can be intensely personal, familiar through repetition or even a commentary on a current event (although in this case, the athlete will need to tread a path between the acceptable and the punishable).

Non-celebration too can be as significant as celebration.

AFP

When Germany beat Brazil 7-1 at the World Cup in Brazil in 2014, the celebrations became muted with every goal. German coach Joachim Loew said his team felt "no euphoria." The Germans cut out all theatrics. Except for a raising of the arms there were no displays as the score mounted. After the game, one of the players said his team had decided they were not out to humiliate Brazil, adding, "You have to show your opponent respect...."

Some celebrations are carried out so regularly and so consistently that they become identified with the athlete concerned. Mo Farah's 'Mobot' and Bolt's 'Lightning Bolt' are good examples. Not surprisingly, both the long distance runner and the sprinter trademarked their celebration, as did the Welsh footballer Gareth Bale who did the same with his 'Eleven of Hearts' celebration, to be used as logos on clothing, footwear, headgear and whatever else their agents dreamed up.

The silhouette image of Seve Ballesteros winning the 1984 Open at St. Andrews is used for the Seve Foundation in support of cancer research.

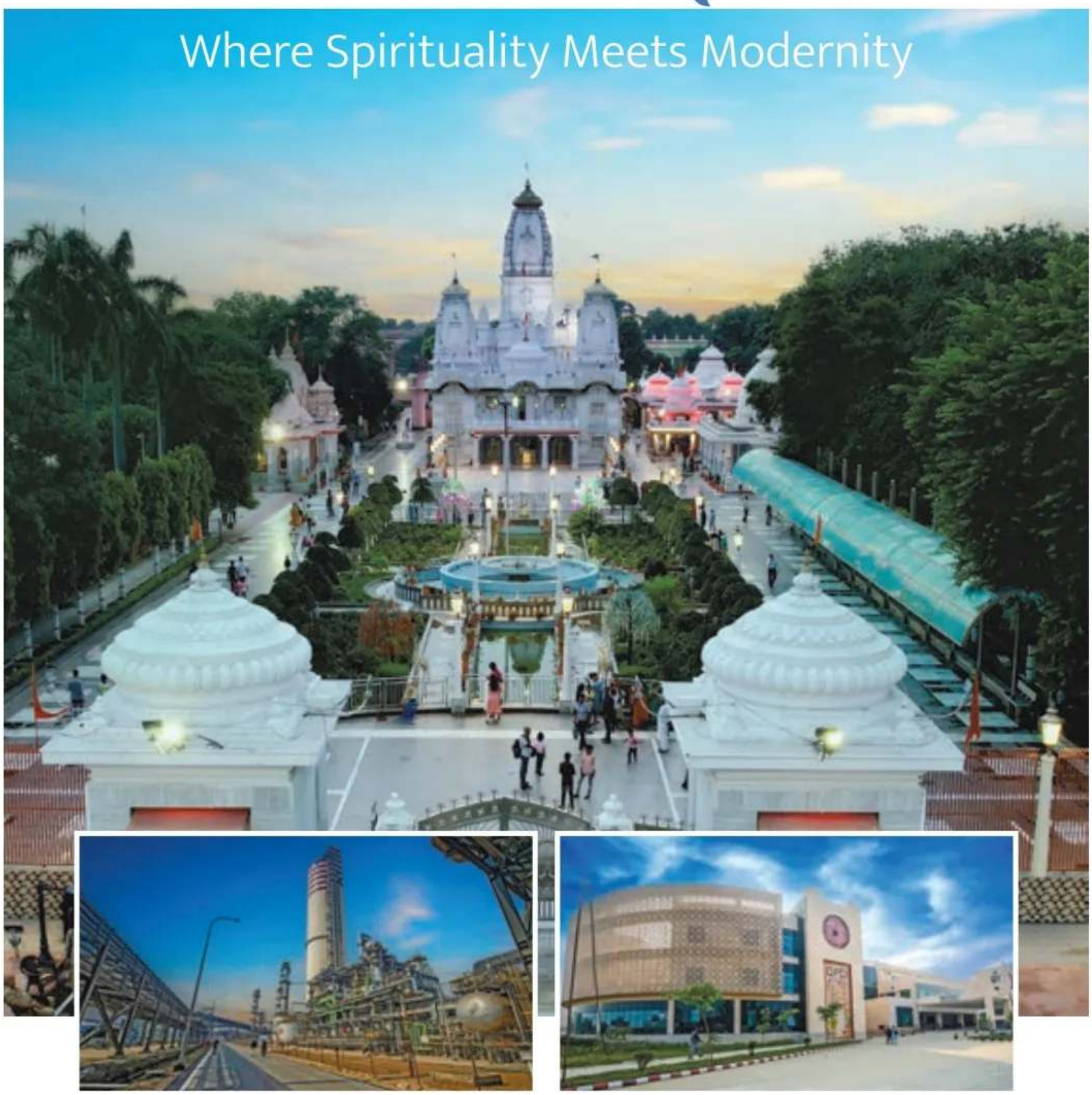
Periodically, governing bodies in sports decide how players may or may not celebrate. This is because celebrations are not always innocent or spontaneous. FIFA introduced a rule some years ago that banned the use of slogans on the undershirts of players who celebrate by flicking their jerseys over their heads and attract TV cameras to the slogans underneath.

The best celebrations, like the best moves in sport, have about them originality, spontaneity, and even humour. And perhaps that most important aspect of a contest too: unexpectedness.

The City of Guru Gorakshanath

Gorakhpur

Where Spirituality Meets Modernity



- Establishment of Mahayogi Guru Gorakhnath AYUSH University
- Construction of water sports complex at Ramgarh Tal
- Establishment of dairy and dairy product plant in Gorakhpur
- Re-operation of Gorakhpur Fertilizer Factory After 40 Years of Closure
- All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) operational
- Construction of ICMR lab with state-of-the-art facilities
- Construction of Shaheed Ashfaq Ullah Khan Zoological Park

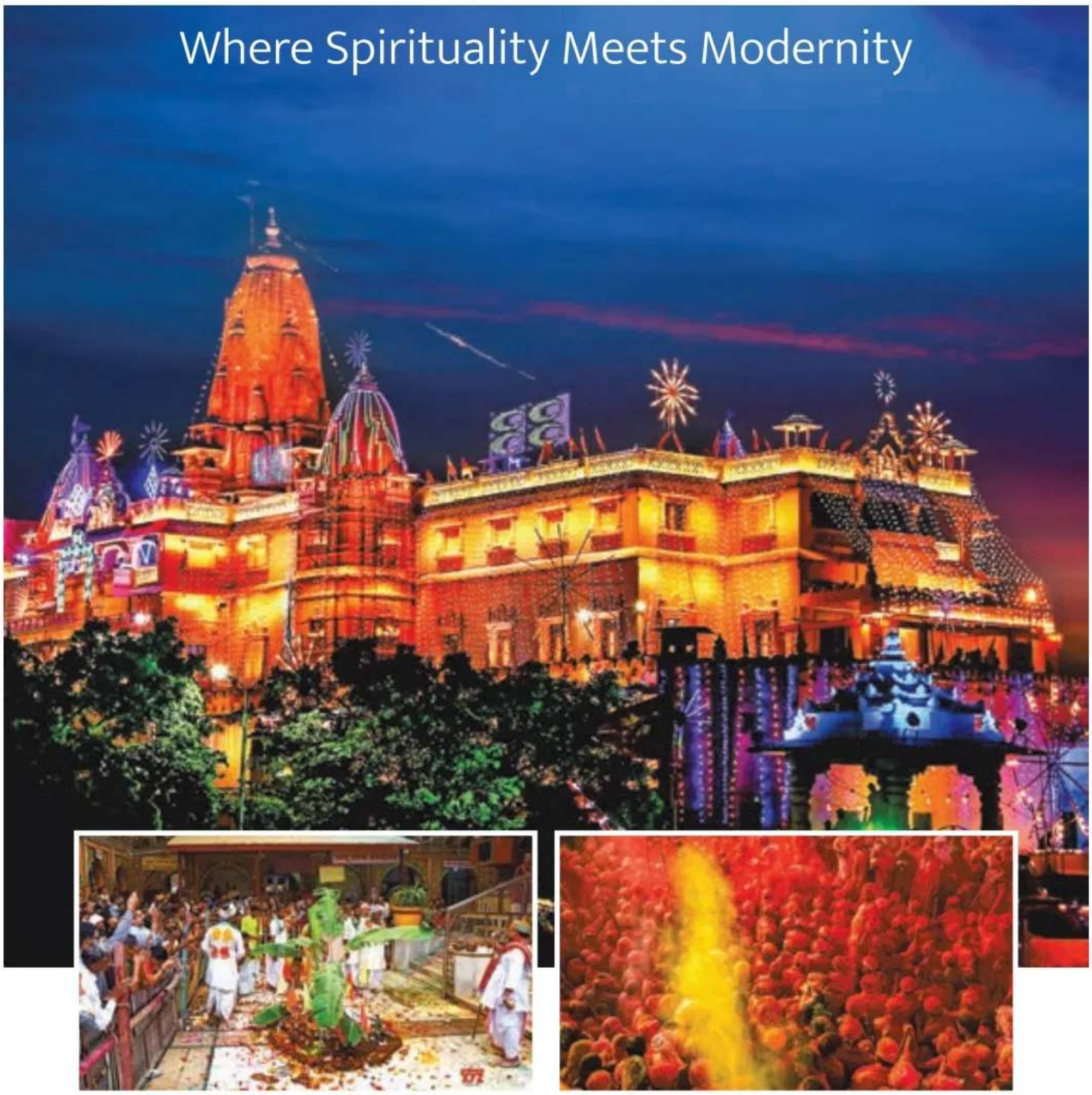
Information and Public Relations Department, U.P.

Published on alternate Sundays. RNP No: HQ/SD/505/2023-25, RNI No. 30513/1978.
Postal subn. copies : if undelivered please return to SPORTSTAR, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600002

The Blessed Land of Shri Krishna

Mathura

Where Spirituality Meets Modernity



- Celebration of Rangotsav, Brajraj Utsav, Shri Krishna Utsav
- Formation of Uttar Pradesh Braj Teerth Vikas Parishad
- Shri Banke Bihari Dham Corridor in Vrindavan
- Light and sound show at Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi
- Construction of helipad for Govardhan Parikrama
- Renovation of Vrindavan Research Institute building
- Ropeway facility in Barsana and Muktakashi Munch (Open Theatre)

Information and Public Relations Department, U.P.