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OFF-SIDE

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ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

When the IPL trophy finally came, it was the **reward** for his waiting, for believing, for not walking away from the Bengaluru fans who had adopted him since 2008.

It had started to feel as though Virat Kohli was chasing a shadow that kept moving out of his reach. Kohli, at 36, had done the miles. The body had felt the wear, but the mind remained tuned to the rhythm of competition.

He trained, he ran, he watched, he learned. He lost. He came close. He kept coming back. There were finals he didn't win. Champions Trophy 2017. World Test Championship, twice. IPL, thrice. For the country. For the club. The result stayed the same. But he did not stop. He played every game as if the next game would change everything.

And then, it did.

First, the T20 World Cup final in Barbados in 2024. It was one more chance to rewrite a narrative that had begun to feel all too predictable. The team dragged him to the summit clash as he struggled for runs. But he was there, anchoring the innings in that final. Kohli's 59-ball 76 against South Africa set the foundation for a seven-run India win even as the other top-order batters faltered. The weight of unfulfilled expectations had started to lift.

Like Lionel Messi in Qatar 2022 and Sachi Tendulkar in 2011, Kohli had walked into that World Cup not just chasing his dreams but those of millions who had seen him rise, rage, and rebuild. Who had followed him from the day he first wore blue on an August evening in Sri Lanka in 2008, anointing him the successor to Tendulkar.

The ICC Champions Trophy followed – another long-denied title ticked off earlier this year. And finally, the one that always felt like a missing chapter – the IPL with Royal Challengers Bengaluru. No team was more attached to his image. No drought more personal. And now, no ending more fitting.

For 18 years, Kohli had stayed loyal. No titles. But also, no exit. In an era where players change teams for money or medals, Kohli never left. While others moved on, he held on. When the trophy finally came, it was the reward for his waiting, for believing, for not walking away from the Bengaluru fans who had adopted the chubby teenager from West Delhi in 2008 and never let go despite the absence of a trophy to forge that bond. Kohli is their boy. Their voice. Their forever hope.

Every run he scored, every celebration, every heartbreak – had all been shared. This trophy, too, is not just his. It is a joint possession. It is a reminder that happy endings do happen if you stay long enough.

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WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT

« He (Gukesh) really fights very, very well, and he was there to take his chance, so he deserves credit for that" – Magnus Carlsen, who slammed the table in frustration after losing to India's D. Gukesh in classical chess for the first time, during Norway Chess 2025 »

« Whoever is making the decision, I don't think they have daughters, because I don't think they want to treat their daughters like this" – Ons Jabeur slammed the French Open organisers after the Grand Slam sidelined women's matches from the coveted night sessions »

1st

Maja Stark won the U.S. Women's Open golf to claim her first major championship.
She became the sixth Swede to win an LPGA major, and the first since Anna Nordqvist earned the Women's British Open title in 2021. Meanwhile, Scottie Scheffler joined Tiger Woods as the only repeat winners of the Memorial. Woods is a five-time winner at Memorial who won three straight from 1999 through 2001. No one had repeated at Muirfield Village since then until Scheffler.

Testing

World Boxing announced that it will introduce mandatory gender testing to determine the eligibility of male and female athletes wanting to take part in its competitions. This policy introduction comes after the furore surrounding boxers, including women's gold medallist Imane Khelif of Algeria, at the Paris Olympics last year. The body also said it informed the Algerian Boxing Federation that Khelif would have to undergo the test if she wanted to compete at the Eindhoven Box Cup in the Netherlands, scheduled to be held on June 5-10.

ON TOP

Kunlavut Vitidsarn celebrated becoming the first man from Thailand to top the badminton world rankings by winning the Singapore Open in style after the 24-year-old demolished China's unseeded Lu Guangzu 21-6, 21-10 in just 37 minutes with his range of powerful smashes and deceptive drop shots. AFP

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'Bones' of contention

A champion in limbo, a contender in waiting. As calls grow to strip Jon Jones of his UFC title, the heavyweight division stands at a **crossroads.**

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

Over 1,80,000 people have signed a petition demanding that the UFC strip reigning heavyweight champion Jon 'Bones' Jones of his title.

For newcomers to MMA, Jones' dominance can be likened to that of Ricky Ponting in cricket — a serial winner. With 13 title defences to his name, the American wrestler is one of the sport's all-time greats.

But growing frustration among fans and analysts has reached a tipping point. The accusation? That Jones is leveraging his superstar status to delay fights.

While most UFC fighters step into the octagon two or three times a year, Jones has managed that just once in the last 11 years — in 2019, when he defended his belt against Anthony Smith and Thiago Santos. Since moving up to heavyweight from light heavyweight in 2023, he's fought just twice.

His most recent victory came via a third-round knockout of Stipe Miocic — a win that sent Miocic into retirement. However, three of Jones' last five wins have gone to decision, including a controversial split verdict over Santos in 2019.

So what's holding him back?

Age might be one factor — Jones is now 37. The heavyweight division demands an enormous level of endurance, and recovery takes longer. But injuries have played a more immediate role. A torn pectoral tendon forced him out of his 2023 clash with Miocic at UFC 295. That was followed by elbow surgery, delaying his return further.

Then there's the off-cage chaos.

Jones' career has been repeatedly derailed by legal troubles and out-of-competition controversies — DUIs, hit-and-run incidents, domestic violence allegations, and multiple failed drug tests. These missteps have led to suspensions, vacated titles, and long stretches of inactivity.

What now for Bones?

While the UFC hasn't officially announced his next opponent, the obvious challenger is Tom Aspinall.

Aspinall made an emphatic statement by knocking out Sergei Pavlovich in just over a minute to claim the interim title after Jones pulled out of their scheduled bout. He followed that with another first-round finish, this time against Curtis Blaydes at UFC 304.

Despite his momentum, Aspinall remains stuck with the 'interim' tag — a placeholder while Jones stays inactive.

Aspinall recently claimed he's "moving on" and believes Jones is "retired." But Jones responded with a cryptic message: "A lot of stuff is happening behind the scenes," adding that legal constraints are stopping him from sharing details.

So will Aspinall finally get his shot?

Or will the title — and the division — remain in limbo?

Stalled reign: From dominance to doubt — 13 title defences, but no clear next fight. GETTY IMAGES

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NO MORE NEARLY MEN

RAJAT PATIDAR LEADS, VIRAT KOHLI INSPIRES – A DEFINING IPL SEASON FOR RCB ENDS IN REDEMPTION AFTER YEARS OF NEAR-MISSES AND FAN ANGUISH.

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

After years of toil, there were tears of joy.

Seventeen years. 6,255 days. 286 games.

At long last, Royal Challengers Bengaluru broke its title jinx and lifted the Indian Premier League (IPL) trophy, sending players, fans and an entire city into rapturous celebration.

The women's team had already won the Women's Premier League title. A year later, it was the men's turn to finally add silverware to a cabinet that had remained empty since the tournament's inception in 2008.

Fittingly, it was also a tribute to the franchise's longest-serving cricketer and former captain, Virat Kohli — who, in his own words, gave his "youth, prime and experience" to RCB and helped shape it into what it is today.

Despite boasting some of the finest cricketers over the years, RCB consistently stumbled at crucial moments. Seasons came and went, heartbreaks mounted, and the fan base waited through near-eternity before their war cry — *Ee sala cup namde* — was finally realised.

Led by a calm and composed Rajat Patidar, this version of RCB had

VIJAY SONEJI

all the ingredients of a champion side. With Kohli's mentorship and quiet backing, they transformed from perennial underachievers into deserving winners.

As Kohli remarked, this was a team of focused, composed individuals on a mission. They kept emotions in check, remained grounded, and ignored the noise. That, in many ways, became their recipe for success.

Patidar absorbed the pressures of captaincy with poise. Behind him stood a solid backroom staff — Mo Bobat, Andy Flower and Dinesh Karthik — who kept things steady. At the auction, they went in with a clear plan: add impact. Phil Salt (403 runs), Jitesh Sharma (261 runs), and Liam Livingstone were the main additions. While Salt and Jitesh brought stability to the batting, Livingstone chipped in with a crucial cameo, 25 off 15, in the final.

The think tank understood one central truth — the team still revolved around Kohli. Their approach was to trust the players, allow instinct to take charge, and avoid over-coaching.

That trust extended to the bowling department, where much-needed gaps were addressed. "There was a strong, unwavering focus on assembling a quality bowling attack — that was recognised as essential from the very beginning," head coach Flower said.

Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Krunal Pandya, both experienced campaigners, were smart additions.

Crucial cameo: Jitesh Sharma's 24 off 10, including two bold sixes — one flat over cover, one scooped over the keeper — pushed RCB to a vital 190 in the final. AFP

Alongside Josh Hazlewood, Romario Shepherd, Yash Dalal and Suyash Sharma, they delivered time and again in clutch moments. But they saved their best for last, defending 190 on a pitch where runs had flowed all season — before the final, the average first-innings score in Ahmedabad was 219.

The turning point? Krunal Pandya's spell.

Punjab was cruising at 52 for 1 after the Powerplay. But Krunal's subtle variations in pace and turn stifled the batters. His first over went for just three runs. In the next, he dismissed the dangerous Prabhsimran Singh with a clever change of pace — a move that flipped the script.

"Krunal is a big-match player and a fierce competitor. That spell was the defining difference between the sides," Flower said.

For Patidar, too, Krunal was a constant. "Every time I was under pressure, he (Krunal) remained my go-to bowler... I looked for him every time the situation demanded."

For a franchise that had waited 17 long years, scepticism was natural. But with Kohli at the centre, belief never wavered.

Unlike earlier editions stacked with star power, this was a side built on experience and clarity. There were no single-handed rescue acts — it was shared responsibility. In the past, RCB relied heavily on individual brilliance — from Chris Gayle to AB de Villiers — without much success. This time, it invested in impact players and built squad depth. Mayank Agarwal, Devdutt Padikkal and Tim David shared the dugout with domestic talents like Rasikh Dar and Swapnil Singh. That blend allowed the team to remain competitive regardless of the XI.

Kohli, as always, was the centrepiece. He amassed 657 runs, but perhaps more crucially, offered timely inputs — often during strategic breaks or between overs — to keep younger players settled. As Patidar admitted, "It was a great learning experience for me. I think he deserves it more than anyone else — Virat Kohli and all the fans."

Wherever RCB played, Kohli drew crowds and support. And when the trophy was finally in hand, he dedicated the win to the fans of

RCB in IPL 2025

Most runs

Virat Kohli
Matches 15, Runs 657, Avg. 54.75, S/R 144.71, HS 73*, 50s 8

Most wickets

Josh Hazlewood
Matches 12, Wkts 22, Avg 17.54, S/R 12.0, Econ 8.77, BBI 4/33

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Key partnership: Phil Salt's pivotal role led KKR to the 2024 IPL title, and his partnership with Virat Kohli was again key to RCB's maiden triumph. PTI

RCB Man of the Match Winners in IPL 2025

vs KKR: **Krunal Pandya** 3/29
vs CSK: **Rajat Patidar** 51 (32)
vs MI: **Rajat Patidar** 64 (32)
vs RR: **Phil Salt** 65 (33)
vs PBKS: **Tim David** 50*(26)
vs PBKS: **Virat Kohli** 73* (54)
vs RR: **Josh Hazlewood** 4/33
vs DC: **Krunal Pandya** 73* (47) & 1/28
vs CSK: **Romario Shepherd** 53* (14)
vs LSG: **Jitesh Sharma** 85* (33)
vs PBKS: **Suyash Sharma** 3/17
vs PBKS: **Krunal Pandya** 2/17

Bengaluru. "This win is as much for the fans as it is for the team," he said, overcome with emotion, on his knees, head bowed to the turf.

After 18 seasons with one franchise and many heartbreaks, Kohli could barely believe the moment had arrived. The tears were inevitable.

But with his retirement from Tests and T20Is, one might ask — what still fuels him in the IPL?

"Even after 18 years, he has the same impact, same energy and same commitment that marked his debut season," said R. Sridhar, former India fielding coach. "His dedication to fitness and discipline has inspired others across teams to adopt similar routines."

And at RCB, Kohli's spirit has rubbed off. The squad rallied around him, and when the moment came, they gave it everything to win it for 'VK'.

Fire and ice. That's the contrast between Kohli and Patidar. One is all visible intensity, the other unreadable.

But Patidar's restraint masks depth. "He might look calm, but there's an ocean inside him," said Amay Khurasiya, his long-time mentor.

When few backed Patidar, Khurasiya, then heading the Madhya Pradesh Cricket Academy, doubled down. "When he was discarded from

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Legendary reunion: Virat Kohli celebrated RCB's first IPL title in 18 years alongside former stars AB de Villiers and Chris Gayle, who joined the festivities. PTI

the system, we worked closely. We knew we were backing the right person. Our interest was always on commitment and character. Rajat had those two qualities in ample and once we were sure of that, we only had to work on the technical aspects," Khurasiya, a former India international, explained.

Khurasiya had also once recommended Patidar and Kuldeep Sen to Kings XI Punjab (now Punjab Kings) as a scout. That didn't materialise. Ironically, years later, it was Patidar who dashed Punjab's hopes in a final.

Patidar's journey hasn't been smooth. "When you are not born with a silver spoon, you have to struggle," Khurasiya said. "He had to take five steps back in a bid to move one step forward."

But when the final was won, Kohli hugged Patidar. They had travelled very different paths — one a prodigy turned global star, the other a late bloomer. But over time, Kohli mentored him and helped ignite the fire that powered this campaign.

Together, they had finally brought the trophy home.

Flower's foresight: RCB head coach Andy Flower is known for thorough preparation well ahead of auctions. His team reaps the rewards.

K. MURALI KUMAR

FOR MORE STORIES

RCB Season-wise Finishes in IPL

2008: Seventh - 8 points, 4 wins, 10 losses
2009: Third - 16 points, 8 wins, 6 losses (final)
2010: Fourth - 14 points, 7 wins, 7 losses
2011: First - 19 points, 9 wins, 4 losses (final)
2012: Fifth - 17 points, 8 wins, 7 losses
2013: Fifth - 18 points, 9 wins, 7 losses
2014: Seventh - 10 points, 5 wins, 9 losses
2015: Third - 16 points, 7 wins, 5 losses (Qualifier 2)
2016: Second - 16 points, 8 wins, 6 losses (final)
2017: Eighth - 7 points, 3 wins, 10 losses
2018: Sixth - 12 points, 6 wins, 8 losses
2019: Eighth - 11 points, 5 wins, 8 losses
2020: Fourth - 14 points, 7 wins, 7 losses (eliminator)
2021: Third - 18 points, 9 wins, 5 losses (eliminator)
2022: Fourth - 16 points, 8 wins, 6 losses (qualifier 2)
2023: Sixth - 14 points, 7 wins, 7 losses
2024: Fourth - 14 points, 7 wins, 7 losses (eliminator)
2025: Second - 19 points, 9 wins, 4 losses (WINNER)

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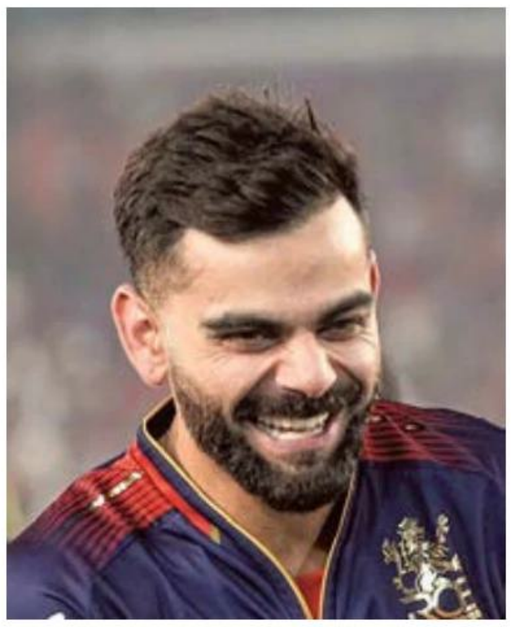


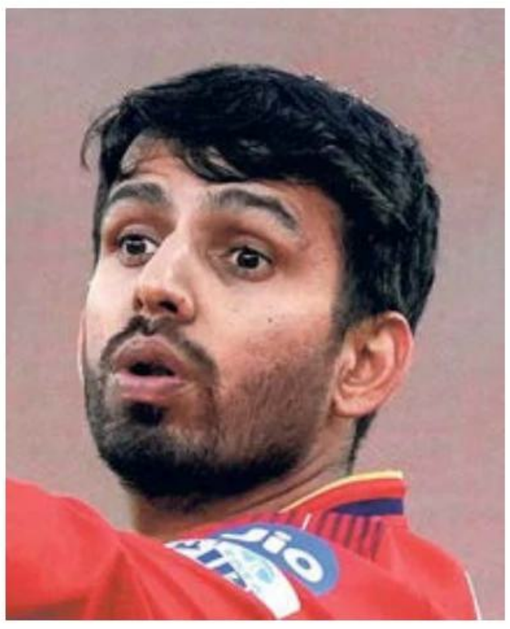
I've stayed loyal to this team. I've had moments otherwise, but I stayed with them, and they with me. My heart is with Bangalore; my soul is with Bangalore. Tonight, I'll sleep like a baby. ***— Virat Kohli***

It is really special for me, for Virat Kohli, and for all the fans. Those who have supported us for years — they all deserve this. It has been a great opportunity and a huge learning experience for me to captain someone like Kohli — he deserves this more than anyone else. I just want to say one thing to all the fans: Ee sala cup namdu. ***— RCB captain, Rajat Patidar***

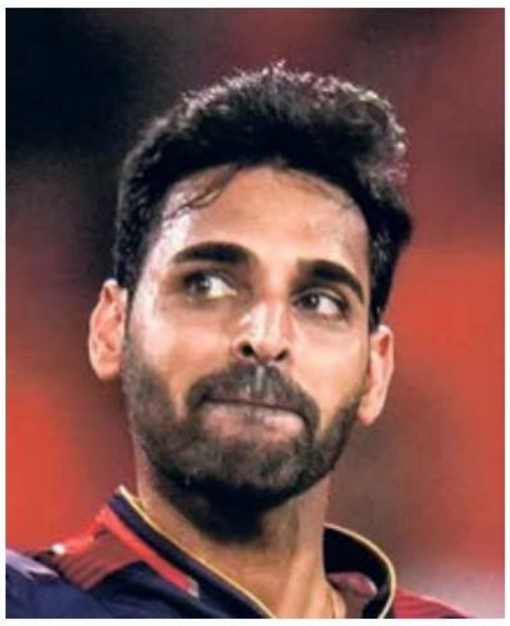
I've enjoyed my time with RCB so far, I said on day one, I wanted to win. I told Hardik, too, that the Pandya household will have nine trophies in 11 years. ***— Krunal Pandya***

Massive. It's a team that's waited 18 years. Played a lot of good cricket, had to wait for its time. But it belongs to every fan here. Virat Kohli. The greats like AB and Gayle, they've all tried their hearts out. Amazing work by the boys. ***— Dinesh Karthik***

It's an unbelievable feeling right now. I don't quite know where I am at the minute, I haven't had much sleep. I've got a lucky charm now (on his newborn child), feeling over the moon. ***— Phil Salt***



I won't be able to express anything right now; I am very happy for Kohli because he has been with this franchise for 18 years and has been waiting for a trophy for 18 years. I can understand as a human how it feels if you wait for 18 years. ***— Jitesh Sharma***



We knew the wicket was not easy. We thought 180 would be a good score to defend, and we got 190, 10 more than what we thought. And the way we executed our plans says a lot about the bowling unit. ***— Bhuvneshwar Kumar***

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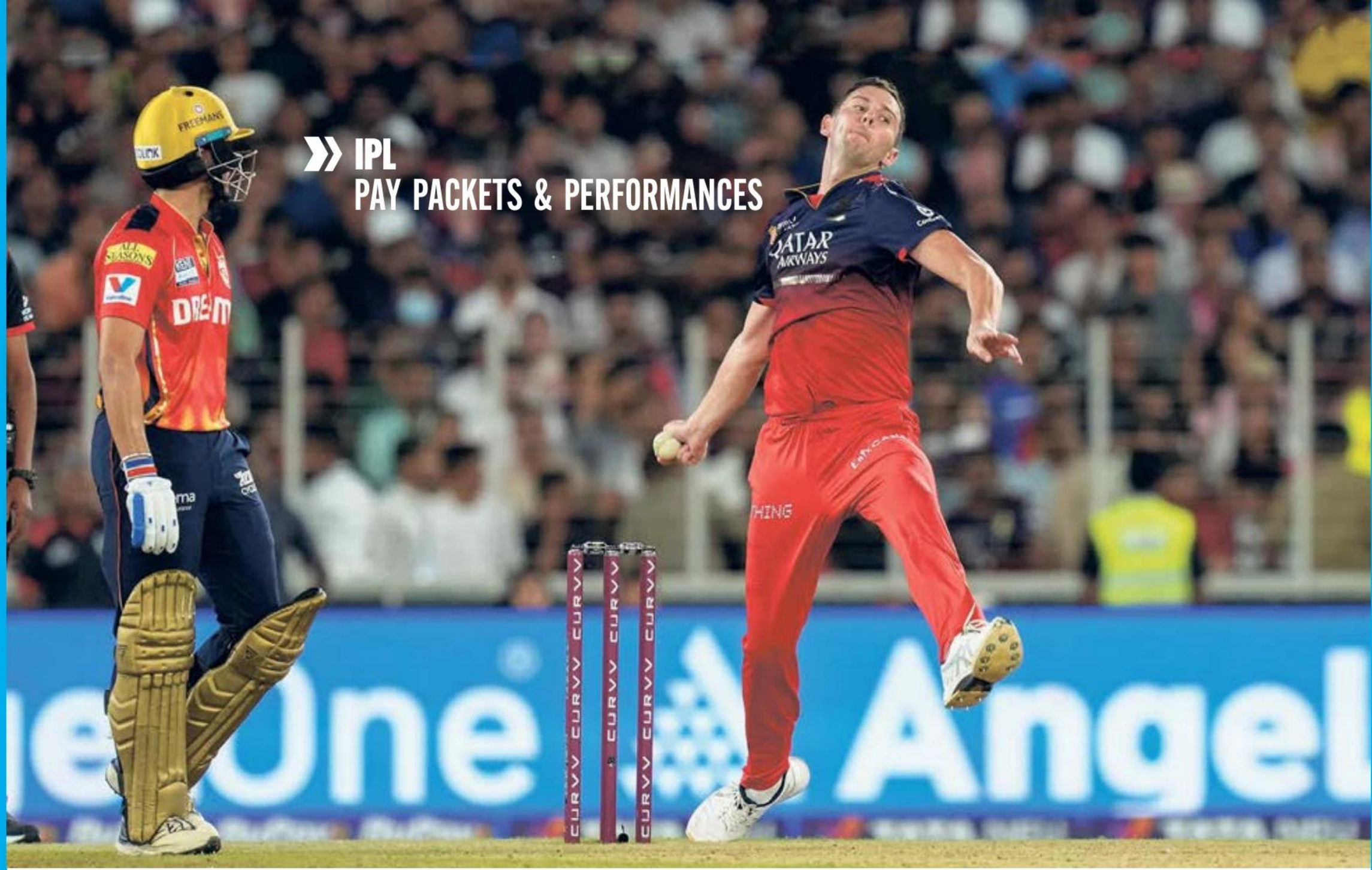

Standing tall: Josh Hazlewood wrapped up his season with 22 wickets in just 12 innings, striking first in the final by removing Priyansh Arya. PTI

FROM AUCTIONS TO IMPACT: THE TRUE MVPS OF IPL 2025

This year's IPL proved that **smart scouting and homegrown depth** now matter more than marquee names in the race for the title.

Anish Pathiyil
anish.p@thehindu.co.in

An IPL season that follows a mega auction rarely plays out as predicted. With reshaped squads, fresh coaching combinations, and the unpredictability of form and fitness, every franchise starts with more questions than answers. The 2025 edition — the league's 18th — was no different.

It ended with a new champion for the first time since 2022.

RCB's red-letter day

Royal Challengers Bengaluru clinched its maiden IPL title, winning a thrilling final against Punjab Kings by six runs in Ahmedabad on June 3. It was RCB's first appearance in a final since 2016, and it sealed the deal thanks to a well-rounded squad built through a sharp auction strategy — a distinct shift from its traditionally batting-heavy line-ups.

Led by Rajat Patidar, the team finally found the bowling depth it long lacked. RCB's biggest buy was Josh Hazlewood, acquired for Rs 12.5 crore. The Australian quick justified every rupee, taking 22 wickets at an economy of 8.77 and a strike rate of 12. His total bowling impact (+49.2) was the fourth-highest in the league.

Phil Salt, another marquee signing at Rs 11.5 crore, won his second consecutive IPL title after scoring 403 runs at a strike rate of 175.98. The English opener's explosive starts in the PowerPlay set the tone for RCB's innings. His batting impact score of +90.6 ranked 10th in the league.

High price, low returns

It was a mixed bag for some of the auction's top earners.

Rishabh Pant, the most expensive player in IPL history (Rs 27 crore to LSG), struggled throughout. He scored 269 runs in 14 games at an average of 24.45 — his worst season since debuting in 2016. His batting impact was a dismal -18.8, with 118 of his runs coming in a single match

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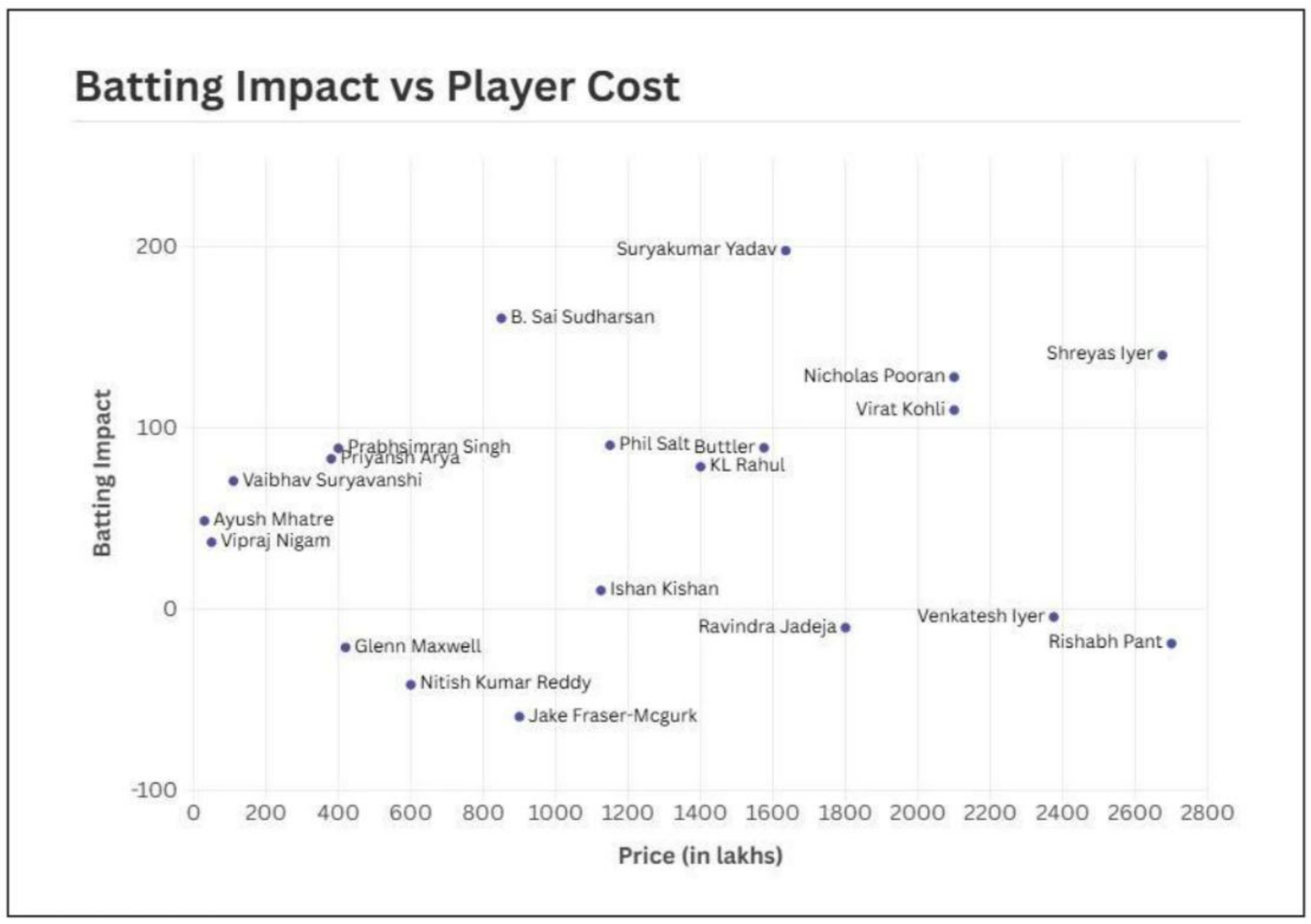

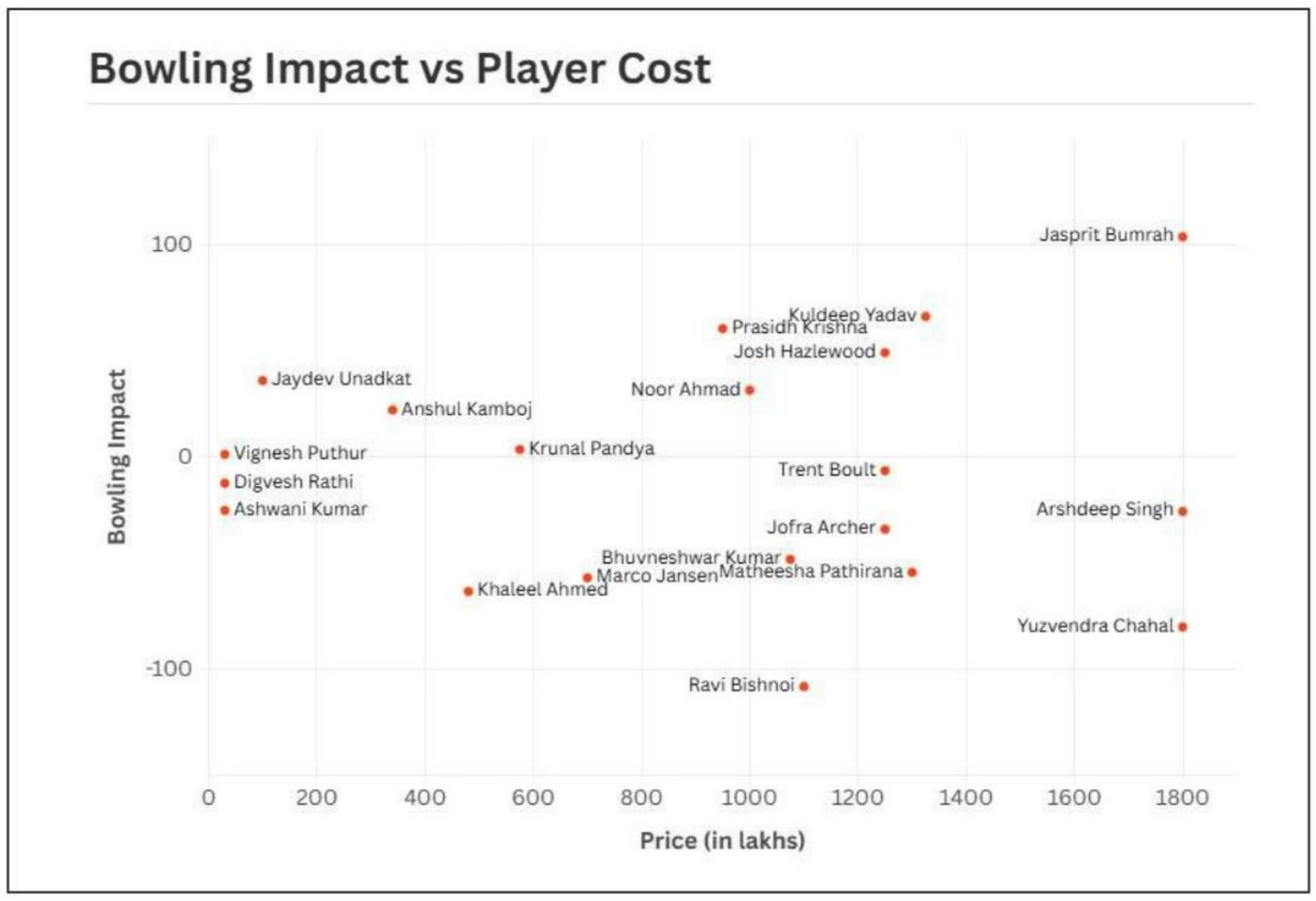

against RCB.

Shreyas Iyer, however, proved value for money. Bought for Rs 26.75 crore by Punjab Kings, he led the team to its first final since 2014. Iyer scored 604 runs at a strike rate of 175.07 and notched up a batting impact of +140.2 — the third-highest of the season.

Venkatesh Iyer, KKR's Rs 23.75 crore acquisition, had a season to forget. He scored just 142 runs in 11 matches (average: 20.29), with a batting impact of -4.1. He wasn't used with the ball either, continuing a three-season trend in which he bowled just one over — and that went for 28 runs.

Other big-ticket players — Arshdeep Singh, Jos Buttler, K.L. Rahul and Trent Boult — had solid individual campaigns and delivered key performances for their teams.

The rise of the uncapped

The real story of the 2025 IPL was the emergence of uncapped Indian players. Though batting-friendly conditions were expected, surfaces offered enough help for bowlers to ensure balance. And it was the Indian domestic stars — familiar with these conditions — who proved vital.

Punjab Kings benefitted the most from its domestic batting core:

Prabhsimran Singh (Rs 4 crore): +88.9 impact

Shashank Singh (Rs 4 crore): +60.1

Nehal Wadhera (Rs 4.2 crore): +67.3

Priyansh Arya (Rs 3.8 crore): +83.1

Elsewhere, Naman Dhir (MI) cemented his finisher tag with a +58 impact.

Teenagers Vaibhav Suryavanshi (14, RR) and Ayush Mhatre (17, CSK) stood out in tough seasons for their franchises, with impact scores of +70.9 and +48.9, respectively.

On the bowling front

Jaydev Unadkat (SRH, Rs 1 crore) had a resurgence, finishing with an impact of +36.

Anshul Kamboj (CSK, Rs 3 crore) impressed in the PowerPlay (+22.2).

Vipraj Nigam (DC), Digvesh Rathi (LSG), and Ashwani Kumar (MI) shared 36 wickets in their debut seasons, even if their net impact was negative.

Scouting's silent revolution

With data from domestic T20 leagues expanding and the format evolving fast, IPL franchises seem more reliant than ever on their scouting systems. The trust in local talent — and a gradual shift away from international dependence — bodes well not just for the league, but for Indian cricket's broader T20 ecosystem.

Note to readers:

The batting and bowling impact scores for IPL 2025 have been sourced from CricViz.

These scores are based on the Match Impact model, which evaluates every ball using context-specific data — including venue conditions and the average performance levels in a given match.

Each ball is assigned a plus or minus score, based on the actual and expected runs scored and the summation in considered for an innings. This provides a more accurate measure of a player's influence on the game beyond just traditional stats.

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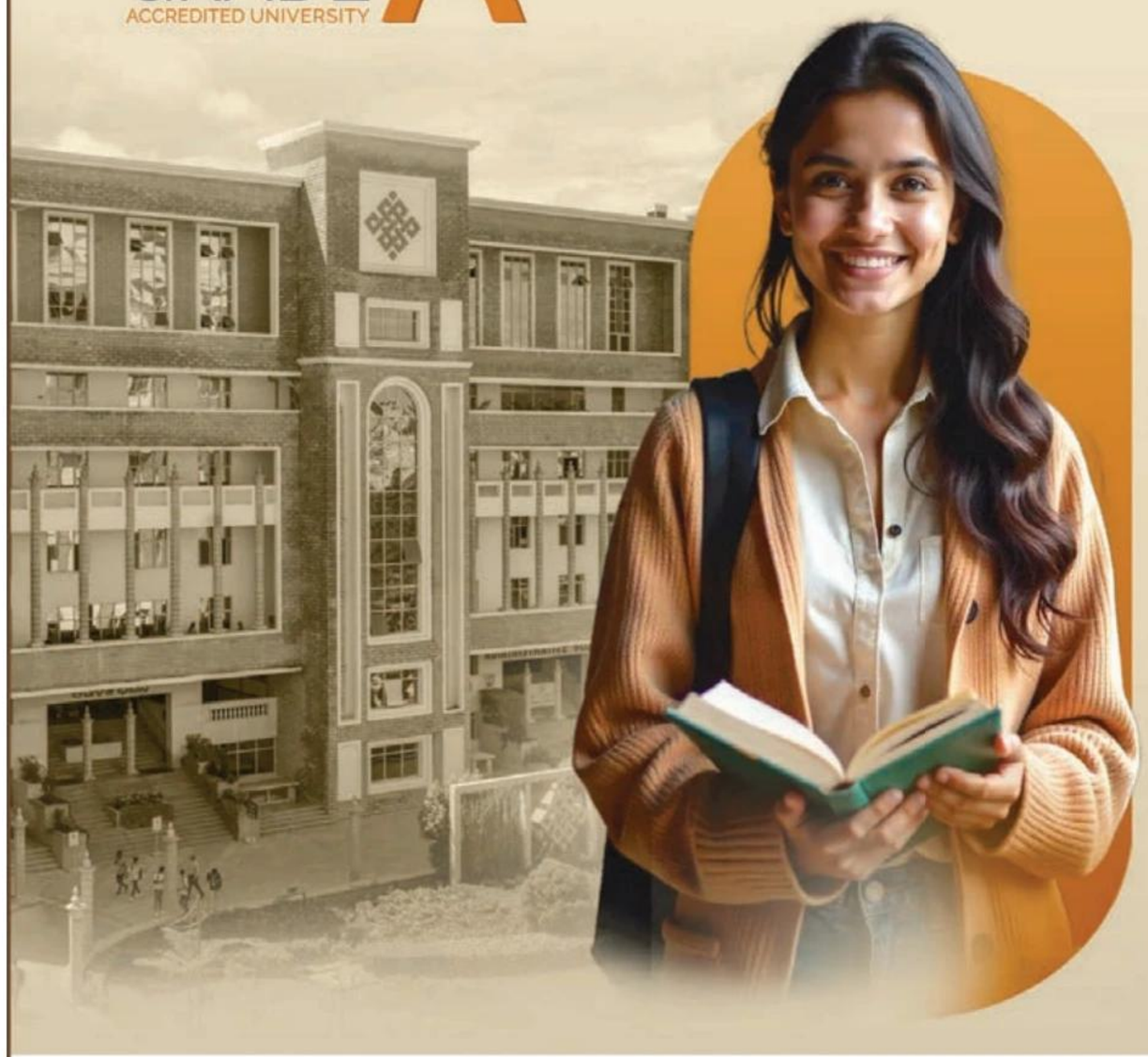

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The price of express pace in Indian cricket

Explore how India's fast bowlers face intense physical **strain and injury risks** due to workload pressures. This story uncovers the challenges behind the speed, injury management, and the urgent need for smarter player care.

Sahil Mathur
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By the time Jasprit Bumrah arrived in Melbourne for the fourth Test of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, he had already bowled 88 overs – 528 deliveries. In the first innings at the MCG, he added 28.4 overs more to his tally.

With a World Test Championship final berth on the line, the series carried immense significance for India. Captain Rohit Sharma had to win the fourth Test to take a 2-1 lead going into the fifth match.

On day four, Bumrah, India's lead bowler in the series, sent down 24 overs across three sessions, coming in for nine short bursts of spells. By the evening session, Bumrah was visibly fatigued and conveyed the same to his captain, Rohit: "*Bas ab, aur nahi lag raha zor* (Enough, I can't push anymore)," the stump mic picked up.

He bowled four more deliveries, finishing with a career-high 53.2 overs in a Test. Three days later, Bumrah was back on the field in Sydney. However, he could only bowl 10 overs before experiencing back spasms and did not take the field for the rest of the match.

Across 45 days, the speedster bowled 908 deliveries — not counting those in training. It was later revealed that the pacer had a stress-related lower back injury in the same region where he had an issue that ruled him out for 11 months in 2022–23.

"As is often the case, when a bowler's performing well, there's a natural reluctance – from both player and team – to slow things down," says Andrew Leipus, former physiotherapist with the India team and current Punjab Kings physiotherapist consultant.

Fast bowling is a high-load activity. Each delivery places several times the force through the lumbar spine. What Bumrah suffered was a lumbar stress injury – a precursor to what's medically defined as a stress fracture in the lumbar region.

"A lumbar stress fracture

The lumbar region of the spine is located directly above the sacrum (sacral vertebrae). It consists of five vertebrae (L1-L5) that form the lower back.

'Back' at it: Jasprit Bumrah, the world's top-ranked Test bowler, injured his back during the fifth Test against Australia in early January and was forced to miss England's white-ball tour to India and the Champions Trophy. GETTY IMAGES

represents the most severe end of what's known as the bone stress injury (BSI) continuum," Leipus explains. "Put simply, bone is a living, adaptable tissue that responds to mechanical load. When the stress placed on it consistently exceeds its ability to recover and adapt, the breakdown process outpaces repair, eventually leading to a cortical fracture."

Bowling pace is inherently risky; not every injury is avoidable, and sometimes even well-managed workloads can lead to breakdowns. But in most cases, patterns of mismanagement are clear and avoidable.

Leipus says that the progression of a BSI to a fracture in a pacer is rarely caused by a single factor. "They're typically the result of a complex interplay between biomechanics, workload errors, and systemic gaps in preparation or monitoring," he explains. Add to it: the player's age, bowling experience, various physical attributes, and individual biomechanical issues.

Ian Pont, head coach and founder of the National Fast Bowling Academy in the United Kingdom, doesn't find a problem in Bumrah's action, which he describes as "unique and biomechanically efficient."

"He did suffer injuries, but they weren't due to his action – more due to workload mismanagement; excessive play without rest," Pont, who has coached in India for over 15 years, says.

Rest and recovery are crucial aspects of a fast bowler's longevity. If the pacer is tired, fatigued, or sore, physiotherapists usually take it as a red flag for a stress reaction. Workload management is the science of planning how many balls a bowler delivers, how often, and at what intensity.

"It is the key to keeping bowlers injury-free and performing well over time. Done right, it extends careers and prevents stress fractures. Done poorly, it leads to injury, rehab, and re-injury cycles," Pont says.

According to Pont, the support staff – bowling coach, physiotherapist, and strength and conditioning coach – should take note of each delivery a pacer bowls, during a game and while training. "Increase weekly workload gradually," he says. "No more than a 20 per cent jump week to week. For example, going from 60 to 100 balls weekly too quickly raises injury risk."

Body physiology and mechanics

Bumrah's case isn't an isolated one. A decade ago, a young Indian speedster too found himself in a loop of back injuries.

By 2012, promising fast bowler Varun Aaron had developed a recurring back injury that had already ruled him out of India's 2011 tour to Australia and limited his

Trend-setter: From 1999 to 2004, Andrew Leipus served as India's physio and helped raise the team's fitness standards across the board managing players like Javagal Srinath, Ajit Agarkar and Zaheer Khan.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

participation in the Indian Premier League (IPL), where he was representing Delhi Daredevils (now Delhi Capitals). He eventually underwent surgery, which sidelined him for nearly 16 months.

"I had eight stress fractures in my back and three in my foot – so, 11 in total," Aaron says. According to the pacer, body physiology is one of the contributing factors for such injuries. "If your body is predisposed to taking extra load in one part – say, your back – you're more likely to suffer injury. I was born with an exaggerated arch in my back, called lordosis. Because of that, my spine hinges at the L3 vertebra. My first three or four fractures were in that region."

Certain bowling actions increase this stress, particularly mixed actions (part front-on, part sideways). "In biomechanics, problems arise when there's too much counter-rotation in your bowling action – when your hips and shoulders don't align," the now 35-year-old Aaron explains.

He believes that bowling coaches play a crucial role in the rehab process – a detail often overlooked. "Stress fractures happen because your body is absorbing load unevenly. Fast bowling is inherently unilateral – one side always bears more load. But if you can streamline your action efficiently, you reduce the risk of injury," Aaron explains.

For Pont, the role of a bowling coach is crucial in a bowler's life right from the grassroots, since the bodies of athletes under the age of 25 are still developing. "Fifteen to nineteen years of age is the highest incidence of lumbar stress fracture," he notes. "It's the most vulnerable age group since spines are still developing – vertebrae don't fully ossify until around 21–23 years."

Young bowlers often play year-round with high workloads but underdeveloped strength and poor recovery habits. If coupled with poor technique, this creates a perfect storm for injury. A study on English County Cricket fast bowlers between 2010 and 2016 showed that 368 pacers reported 57 lumbar stress fractures, with a mean age of 22.8 years.

"Coaches don't often adjust the technique, especially at the club and low level. I don't blame them; they

probably don't know this stuff. So, they will revert the bowler to the same mixed action or flawed posture. Without technical and biomechanical correction, the injury risk remains the same," Pont says.

Aaron was 22 when he had his eighth stress fracture. And it was during the rehab after his surgery that he realised his old action needed to be tweaked. "I stopped getting stress fractures once I made the right biomechanical adjustment," he says. "That was my last fracture," he adds.

Fast and furious

A 21-year-old, Mayank Yadav **(pic, right)**, took everyone by surprise by consistently clocking speeds over 150 km/h when he made his IPL debut in 2024. His fastest delivery saw the speedometer touch 156.7 km/h – the second-fastest for an Indian after Umran Malik's 157 km/h thunderbolt in the 2022 season. Umran had also made his IPL debut at 21 years in 2021 for Sunrisers Hyderabad.

While the explosive pace drew immediate attention, it also came with physical consequences.

Mayank managed just four games for Lucknow Super Giants before a back injury ruled him out. He returned in October to make his T20I debut for India. But, much to his misery, he took another trip to BCCI's Centre of Excellence (formerly NCA) owing to the same injury.

"Mayank and Umran Malik have fast, exciting actions but with high spinal loads and injury risk," Pont notes. "Modifying them slightly to reduce spinal twisting or increase load sharing can reduce the injury risk," he adds.

Mayank's highly anticipated return in IPL 2025 was delayed due to his extended rehab programme. He eventually arrived, played two games, before his injury reappeared, ruling him out of the season. Umran, too, was sidelined due to a hip injury.

"Bone density drops significantly in and around the spinal segment after a stress fracture," John Gloster, Rajasthan Royals' head physiotherapist, says. "Bowlers are usually sidelined for 4–6 months, but bone density remains low for 6–10 months after recovery, heightening re-injury risk."

Gloster believes there's excitement when a 150 km/h fast bowler comes along, but managing them requires restraint. "Overexcitement can lead to overbowling."

India hardly produces speedsters like Aaron, Mayank, and Umran, who can touch 150 km/h consistently. So, when they come along, there is a tendency to rush them into the system. "There's a scarcity mindset. As soon as someone clicks 150 km/h, particularly in India, they are treated as a rare asset. Selectors and franchises feel they must get as much as they can, and quickly, before they get injured or drop form," Pont opines.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

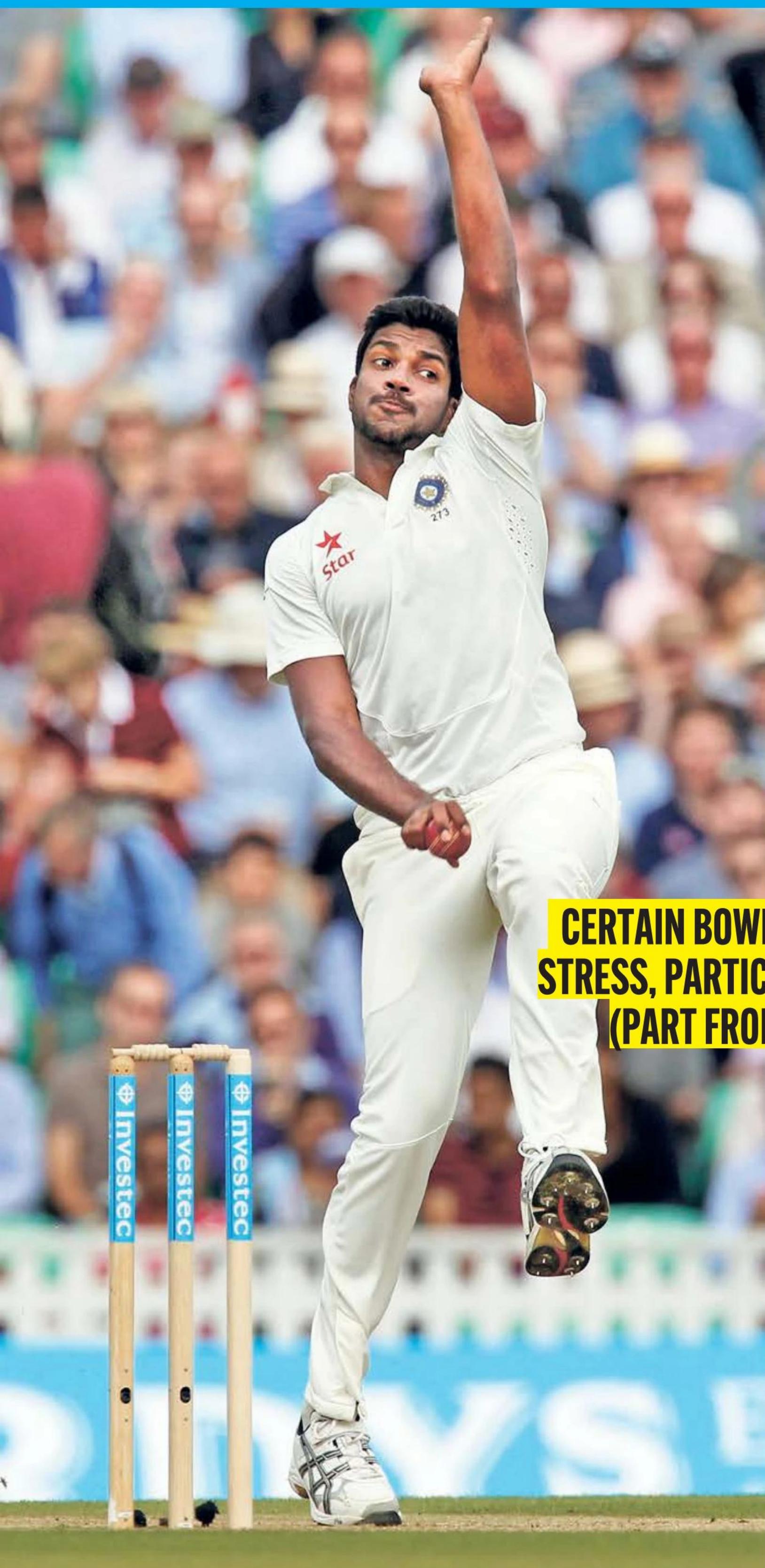
"In the IPL, there's a lot of franchise pressure. The teams see raw pacers as match-winning weapons. Young pacers can suddenly go from bowling 10 to 12 hours a week at full speed to three days with little build-up. There's pressure on these guys to keep bowling faster. There's a lack of patience and long-term planning," he adds.

Leipus worked with the Indian team from 1999 to 2004 and says the landscape has changed dramatically since. "Workload tracking is better understood and more sophisticated, and treatment modalities and interventions have evolved so we can mitigate injury recurrence," notes Leipus, who has also worked with Kolkata Knight Riders in the past.

The IPL typically spans from late March, concluding the international calendar, to late May, which marks the onset of the new cricket season.

Several international players arrive after finishing a series and leave the tournament to join the national team, hardly getting a chance to rest. Most often than not, there is a change in format almost immediately.

"Switching formats on short notice is incredibly demanding, especially for fast bowlers," Leipus says. "Test match bowling is about volume, rhythm, and control. T20 demands are almost the opposite – explosive spells, variation, and max effort. That quick pivot can be a challenge to the body if not managed carefully. T20s themselves aren't the problem – it's



Pace like fire: In a country starved of genuine pace, Varun Aaron stood out in the early 2010s, regularly clocking over 145 kmph. But recurring back injuries — the price of bowling fast — cut his career short. AFP

the transition without a buffer. And vice versa." When players arrive for the two-month high-intensity tournament, the team management already has data about each individual, tracking everything from workload to fitness.

"Throughout the year, we collect insights through relationships with respective boards, handovers, GPS data, and nutrition reports. When bowlers arrive, we already have a clear picture," Gloster says. "If a player is fatigued or not sleeping properly, that's a risk. While we don't control their training year-round, we use the data we have to tailor management plans during the IPL," he adds.

Gloster believes that bowlers are often blamed when they break down while bowling, but the problem often starts in other areas of their training. "Poor gym training – lifting incorrectly or lifting too heavy – also

CERTAIN BOWLING ACTIONS INCREASE STRESS, PARTICULARLY MIXED ACTIONS (PART FRONT-ON, PART SIDEWAYS)

contributes. When assessing workload, we must consider both bowling and gym activities."

"For fast bowlers, the focus should be on building a strong, responsive posterior chain and legs, maintaining core stability, and preserving mobility – not just adding muscle mass. When spinal loading is poorly managed in the gym, it adds to the cumulative stress on the body and can tip the balance toward injury," Leipus opines.

The teams screen each player on

arrival before they are allowed to start practising to ensure their readiness. "Often, we have to resist the temptation to over-train in short camps, yet, on occasion, also have to remind them that they might be behind on their training at times. Ironically, under-training occurs more frequently than over-training during the IPL," Leipus explains.

It all comes down to the coordination between the bowling coach and the physiotherapist. "It's a combined effort. Having a good relationship with the coaching staff – understanding their expectations and how much they need the bowler to bowl – is vital.

We might say a bowler needs to bowl four overs in training, but the coach may want him to bowl eight to perfect his skills – say, yorkers. That's a potential source of trouble," Gloster says.

Prepare for the long haul

Post his breakdown in Sydney, Bumrah missed the ICC Champions Trophy 2025 and the initial four matches of IPL 2025 for the Mumbai Indians. Despite being named the vice-captain of India during the recent Australia tour and stand-in captain of the final Test, Bumrah's injury woes have forced selectors to not burden him with more responsibility for the upcoming England tour. "We need him more as a player. We would rather have him bowling than putting extra pressure on him," India's chief selector Ajit Agarkar said during a recent press conference.

He also confirmed that Bumrah won't be playing all five Tests owing to workload management. "I don't think Bumrah will play all five Tests – whether it's four or three – we'll see how the series goes."

Bumrah's – or rather any fast bowler's – case study is a cautionary blueprint. It's a team's responsibility to treat workload like a Test match: plan for the long haul, don't burn out talent early.

Pont puts it perfectly: "It is about protecting the bowler from the game, not protecting the game from the bowler."

Major Indian pacers with back injuries	Latest year of back issue	Age during back issue
Jasprit Bumrah	2025	31
Mayank Yadav	2025	22
Hardik Pandya	2019	26
Prasidh Krishna	2022	26
Ishant Sharma	2024	36
Deepak Chahar	2022	30
Kamlesh Nagarkoti	2023	24
Shivam Mavi	2023	25

Jasprit Bumrah's workload in last three Test series

Opposition	Venue	Date	Bumrah Balls bowled	Avg BB other pacers
Bangladesh	Chennai	19-23 Sep 2024	126	140
Bangladesh	Kanpur	27 Sep-1 Oct 2024	168	81
New Zealand	Bengaluru	16-20 Oct 2024	162	175
New Zealand	Pune	24-28 Oct 2024	84	36
Australia	Perth	22-26 Nov 2024	180	164
Australia	Adelaide	6-10 Dec 2024	144	110
Australia	Brisbane	14-18 Dec 2024	204	115
Australia	Melbourne	26-30 Dec 2024	320	204
Australia	Sydney**	3-7 Jan 2025	60	146

*** Bumrah left the field after bowling 10 overs in first innings*

Workload management: Ian Pont, founder of the UK's National Fast Bowling Academy, stresses the need to track every ball a pacer bowls — in matches and training — to manage workload smartly. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Not all full tosses are created equal: What makes Bumrah's different

Most full tosses go the distance. Jasprit Bumrah's don't. Here's why his are an **outlier** — in both numbers and narrative.

Pranay Rajiv
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Over the years, we have grown accustomed to seeing Jasprit Bumrah top various elite bowling charts.

However, in the just-concluded Indian Premier League (IPL) season, Bumrah finds himself at the top of a list few would have expected him to feature in.

The Mumbai Indians pacer bowled more full tosses (58) than anyone else in IPL 2025, by some distance. In fact, this is the highest number of full tosses he has delivered in a single IPL season.

Bumrah's seemingly generous offerings, though, weren't capitalised on by many. His economy of 7.44 from full tosses was the best among bowlers who sent down more than 10 such deliveries in IPL 2025. To add to that, the 31-year-old claimed six wickets with full tosses – again, the most this season.

Jasprit Bumrah ended IPL 2025 with an economy of 6.87 – the best for any bowler who delivered at least five overs in the season.

The inability to put away Bumrah's full tosses could be attributed to two factors: the largely quantifiable elements of swing and swerve, and the immeasurable impact of his aura.

Bumrah thrived following the return of the saliva rule, using reverse swing to great effect and making even full tosses a formidable prospect. Add to that the much-discussed snap of his wrists, which imparts heavy backspin on the ball, and it becomes harder for batters to judge, not just the length, but also the height of the delivery.

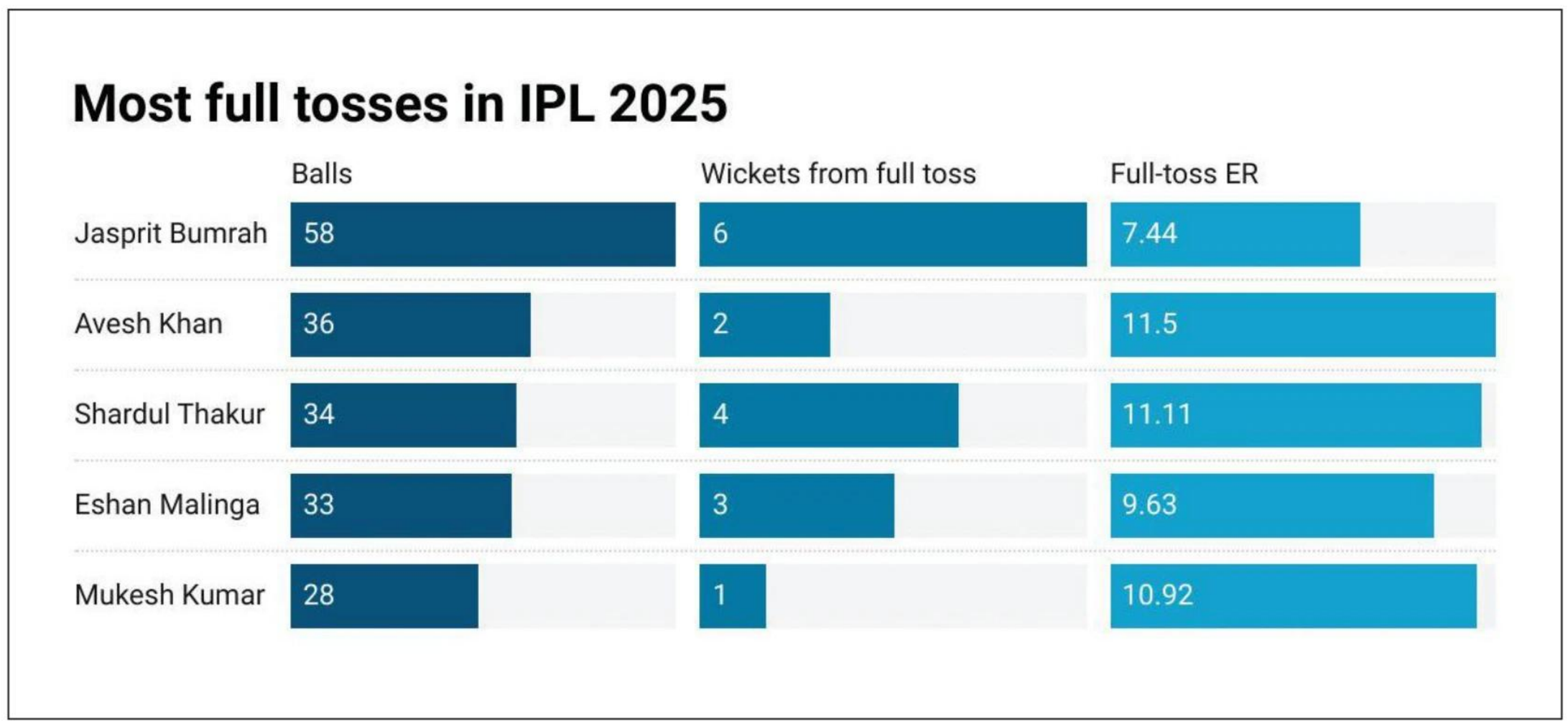
Psychologically, his hard-earned reputation plays a significant role. With most teams employing a 'do-not-take-on-Bumrah' strategy, batters often approached him with a defensive mindset, which helped the pacer even when he erred in length.

Full, fuller, fullest

Assuming full tosses are not an intentional strategy, Bumrah's glut of unbounced deliveries seems to be an outcome of trying to bowl fuller and nail more yorkers.

In IPL 2025, he sent down 32

EMMANUAL YOGINI



yorkers – the third-highest tally. Among the top five wicket-taking pacers this season, only his teammate Trent Boult delivered more. And that's despite Bumrah missing the first four games of the campaign.

A closer look at the length distribution of the aforementioned top five – Arshdeep Singh, Prasidh Krishna, Josh Hazlewood, Bumrah, and Boult – highlights Bumrah's aggressive approach with fuller deliveries.

More than 40 per cent of his balls were on the fuller side (full, yorker or full toss). None of the others had such a high share. Notably, among these five, Bumrah also had the largest gap between full-length balls and full tosses, pointing to the extra 'lift' he generates via his hyperextension and wrist-driven downforce.

Another standout is Bumrah's reduced share of length balls. Among the five, he bowled the fewest in that category. Over the last few seasons, this trend has only become more pronounced.

Why the shift? Batters today are more comfortable taking on length deliveries – encouraged by shorter boundaries, friendlier rules, and the high-scoring nature of modern T20s.

Bumrah has responded by tweaking his lengths, relying more on back-of-a-length and fuller deliveries – effectively cutting out a major scoring option.

Gulf in class

Since the introduction of the Impact Player rule, the bat-ball balance in the IPL has tilted heavily in favour of the batters. Run rates have soared and totals of 200-plus runs have become routine.

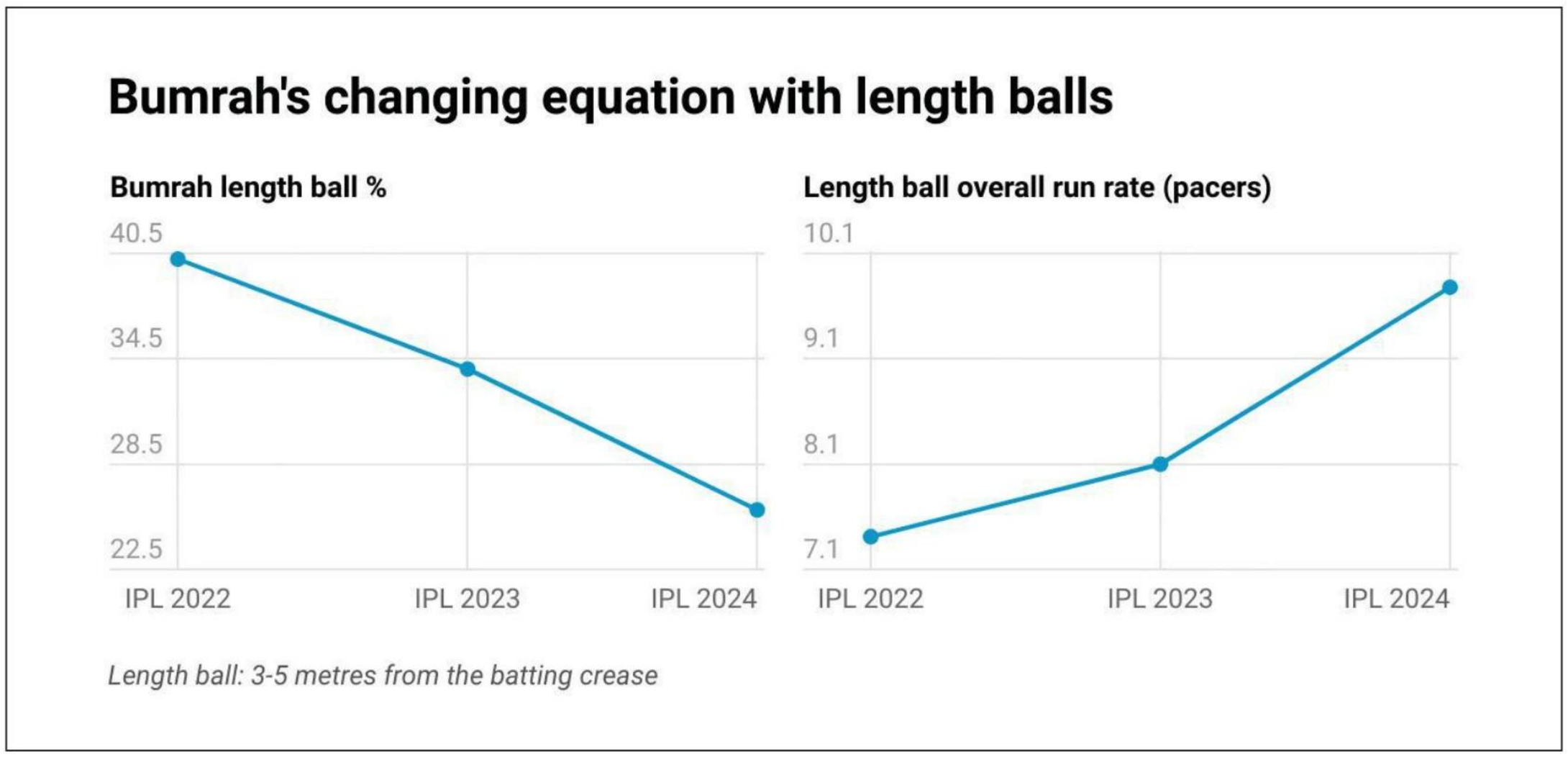
Bumrah, however, has not just kept pace – he has outstripped the trend. The Indian quick ended IPL 2025 with an economy of 6.87 – the best for any bowler who delivered at least five overs in the season.

It's long been accepted that Bumrah is a cut above the rest. But

In 'full' swing: Bumrah bowled 58 full tosses in IPL 2025 — more than any other bowler and the highest he's ever delivered in a single season. R. V. MOORTHY

Top five wicket-taking pacers this season and their length distributions

Player	back of a length	full	full toss	half tracker	length ball	short	yorker
Arshdeep Singh	21.43%	11.14%	3.14%	3.14%	35.71%	19.71%	5.71%
Jasprit Bumrah	21.48%	13.38%	20.42%	1.41%	20.42%	11.62%	11.27%
Josh Hazlewood	40.15%	4.17%	5.68%	0.38%	30.68%	13.64%	5.30%
Prasidh Krishna	36.44%	8.47%	4.80%	2.54%	23.45%	20.90%	3.39%
Trent Boult	19.36%	12.72%	7.23%	2.02%	40.75%	8.38%	9.54%



the gulf has never been this vast.

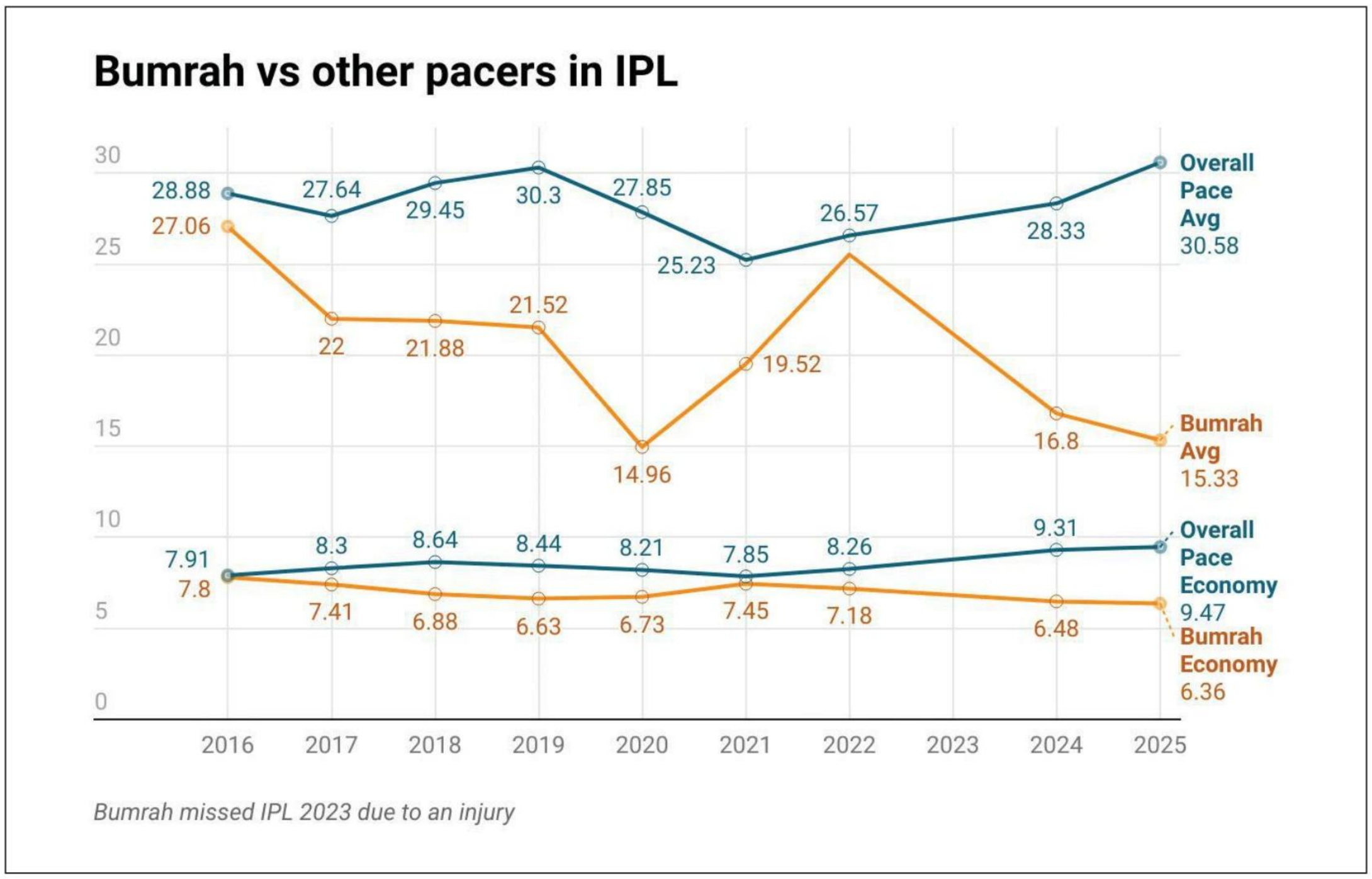
The difference in bowling average and economy between Bumrah and the rest has never been wider.

Across the last two seasons – the highest-scoring era in IPL history – Bumrah has conceded just 6.57 runs per over. No other bowler (minimum three wickets) has an economy rate of under 7.

The chasm is clear even in smaller samples. Since IPL 2024, Bumrah has bowled in 25 matches. He has gone for more than the match run-rate just three times. Only once – against Delhi Capitals this season – has he conceded over 10 runs an over.

Yet, despite his sustained brilliance, Mumbai Indians did not make the final as it fell to Punjab Kings in the Eliminator. Notably, Bumrah was taken for 40 runs in his four overs that night.

For all the advantages afforded by his unique action, what sets Bumrah apart is his ability to redesign his approach and stay ahead of the curve.



1st

Finishing touch: Chasing 188, Dhruv Jurel struck three sixes and two fours in his unbeaten 31 off just 12 balls to help Rajasthan Royals end its campaign with a six-wicket win over Chennai Super Kings. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

2nd

Beaten in air: Mitchell Santner dismantled Delhi Capitals' middle order with figures of 3 for 11 in four overs, as Mumbai Indians cruised to a 59-run win while defending 181.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

FOR MORE IMAGES

3rd

Marsh madness: Mitchell Marsh smashed his maiden IPL century — a blistering 117 off 64 balls, including eight sixes and 10 fours — to lift Lucknow Super Giants to 235 for two. It then restricted Gujarat Titans to 202 for nine. VIJAY SONEJI

4th

Flexing muscle: Ishan Kishan's unbeaten 94 off 48 balls, backed by strong contributions from the rest of the batting line-up, powered Sunrisers Hyderabad to 231 for six. Royal Challengers Bengaluru was bowled out for 189 in response. SANDEEP SAXENA

5th

Signing off in style: Sameer Rizvi's explosive 58 off 25 balls led Delhi Capitals to only its second successful 200-plus chase in IPL history. Earlier, Marcus Stoinis blasted 44 off 16 to take Punjab Kings to 206 for eight.

R. V. MOORTHY

6th

Ending on right side: Despite finishing at the bottom of the table, Chennai Super Kings ended its season with a commanding 83-run victory over Gujarat Titans. CSK posted 230 for five and bowled GT out for 147. VIJAY SONEJI

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

7th

CLASSY: HEINRICH KLAASEN'S UNBEATEN 105 OFF 39 BALLS, FOLLOWING TRAVIS HEAD'S 76 OFF 40, POWERED SUNRISERS HYDERABAD TO A MASSIVE 278 FOR THREE. IN REPLY, KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS WAS DISMISSED FOR 168, WITH JAYDEV UNADKAT, ESHAN MALINGA, AND HARSH DUBEY PICKING UP THREE WICKETS EACH.

8th

Josh the boss: Josh Inglis scored 73 off 42 balls as Punjab Kings comfortably chased down 188 against Mumbai Indians with seven wickets in hand, sealing a place in Qualifier 1. R. V. MOORTHY

9th

Taking charge: Stand-in captain Jitesh Sharma played a sensational knock of 85 off 33 balls to guide Royal Challengers Bengaluru to the third-highest successful chase in IPL history — 228. Earlier, Rishabh Pant had hit a century to take Lucknow Super Giants to 227 for three. SANDEEP SAXENA

10th

Ticket to final: Suyash Sharma's decisive spell of three for 17 bundled out Punjab Kings for just 101. Royal Challengers Bengaluru chased the target with 60 balls to spare, to reach the final. R. V. MOORTHY

11th

Knocked out: Gujarat Titans looked on course in its chase of 229 until Jasprit Bumrah bowled Washington Sundar with a yorker in the 14th over. Mumbai Indians then took control and won by 20 runs, despite Sai Sudharsan's valiant 80. Rohit Sharma's 81 had earlier set the platform in the Eliminator.

R. V. MOORTHY

VIJAY SONEJI

12th

SENSATIONAL: SHREYAS IYER DELIVERED ONE OF THE INNINGS OF THE SEASON – AN UNBEATEN 87 OFF 41 BALLS – TO TAKE PUNJAB KINGS INTO THE FINAL. HE WAS ABLY SUPPORTED BY NEHAL WADHERA AS PBKS CHASED DOWN 204 AGAINST MUMBAI INDIANS WITH SIX BALLS TO SPARE

13th

Impact play: Jitesh Sharma's fiery 24 off 10 balls, including a stunning open-chested scoop off Kyle Jamieson, gave RCB late momentum. Vital contributions from Virat Kohli, Rajat Patidar, and Liam Livingstone earlier had taken the team to a competitive 190 for nine. VIJAY SONEJI

14th

Clutch moment: Krunal Pandya delivered under pressure with figures of 2 for 17 in four overs, helping RCB defend a tricky total by just six runs. He was named Player of the Match, becoming the first player to win the honour twice in an IPL final. VIJAY SONEJI

15th

Hope and bliss: Overcome with emotion, Virat Kohli sank to the ground as Royal Challengers Bengaluru clinched its first IPL title. After 18 long seasons, the elusive trophy was finally his. AP

16th

Fan moment: Former UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who was present with other BCCI officials and dignitaries, cannot hide his emotions after RCB clinches its maiden IPL title. PTI

SPORTZPICS / IPL

CALM CHAOS

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Josh Hazlewood overcame an injury hiatus to emerge as the unlikely hero in Royal Challengers Bengaluru's (RCB) charge to a maiden Indian Premier League (IPL) title. The 34-year-old finished as RCB's leading wicket-taker, claiming 22 wickets from 12 innings. Head coach Andy Flower underlined the team management's focus on assembling a potent bowling unit, and Hazlewood proved to be its linchpin, justifying the faith placed in him despite missing the previous season.

Renowned for his relentless hard-length accuracy in Test cricket, Hazlewood stuck to the same formula in the IPL. He bowled back-of-length 106 times this season — only four pacers targeted the zone more frequently, but none took more wickets (8) off it.

In a format where yorkers are often viewed as the go-to death-over weapon, Hazlewood relied instead on precision length bowling. He bowled just 14 yorkers all season, yet picked up seven wickets and conceded at 10.69 runs per over between overs 16 and 20. His biggest impact, though, came in the PowerPlay. Half of his 264 deliveries this season came in the first six overs, where he claimed 10 wickets at a miserly economy rate of 7.27. While Khaleel Ahmed and Trent Boult also picked 10 wickets in this phase, neither matched Hazlewood's economy rate nor his average (15.80).

His early breakthroughs proved decisive in the Playoffs. Against Punjab Kings, he dismissed Shreyas Iyer and Josh Inglis inside the PowerPlay, triggering a batting collapse. In the final, he removed Priyansh Arya in the fifth over, snapping a threatening opening stand. RCB sorely missed his control late in the league stage when he was sidelined with a shoulder injury. That the side conceded 200-plus in three straight games without Hazlewood is telling of his ability to put shackles on batters.

For much of their 18-year IPL journey, RCB has banked on star batters to win matches. Hazlewood's standout season served as a timely reminder that bowlers, too, can shape titles — even in a batter-driven format.

MATCHES
12
Wickets
22
Economy
8.77
Average
17.54
Best
4/33

ORANGE CAP WINNER
Sai Sudharsan

PURPLE CAP WINNER
Prasidh Krishna

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER
Suryakumar Yadav

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

FROM PLAYOFFS TO PROPOSALS: TALES OF GLORY AND LOVE

Our correspondents capture the **essence of IPL's** Ahmedabad, Jaipur and New Chandigarh legs — thrilling action on the field and captivating stories beyond it.

It wasn't just the Chennai Super Kings' talisman M. S. Dhoni who faced a momentous question on May 25.

CSK and Gujarat Titans were playing their final IPL group-stage match that day, and as has become tradition in recent years, the world awaited Dhoni's word on his future.

On any other Sunday, this subplot would have had Trusha Vyas, a 29-year-old photographer from Ahmedabad, utterly thrilled. But this was no ordinary day. As her car pulled up in front of the stadium gate, she could feel her heart racing. She wouldn't call it "nerves" — it was something more personal, terrifying, yet strangely beautiful.

Trusha's partner, Aditya Shah, a cinematographer by profession, had accompanied her.

"Aditya and I have had so many memories together at the Narendra Modi Stadium. We watched India vs Pakistan and the 2023 ODI World Cup final here. We also attended the Coldplay concert," Trusha told the Diary. GT vs CSK was about to

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ANISH PATHIYIL

Roller-coaster of emotions: Love is in the air in Ahmedabad. Meanwhil e Jaipur turns red **(right, above)** for the Kings.

become the fixture they'd never forget. Ahead of the 15th over of the first innings, Aditya received the most emotional surprise of his life. Trusha, who had momentarily slipped away, returned with a shimmering platinum ring and a banner that read: "GT or CSK? Doesn't matter! My real win is you. Will you marry me, Aditya?" That night, there was no hesitation from the only two people who mattered.

Santadeep Dey

Deja vu

Stepping into Jaipur's Sawai Mansingh Stadium offered an instant sense of déjà vu. The boundless Jan Path leading to the majestic Vidhan Sabha, the fresh foliage outside the Rambagh Palace walls, and the shimmering lights surrounding Amar Jawan Jyoti at the entrance all evoked vivid memories. This marked the Diary's third visit to the charming venue in as many years. Yet, once inside, much had changed. Though pink remained the dominant hue, striking pockets of red quickly caught the eye. After hosting Rajasthan Royals for five matches, the stadium underwent a brief transformation to serve as Punjab Kings' home venue for its final two league games.

"*Bahar se gulaabi hai, par andar se poora lal hai* (The exteriors are pink but the stadium is completely red on the inside)," quipped a journalist accompanying the Diary.

While the original pink seats remained, temporary seating rows and VIP sections were draped in the home team's red.

Though the match against Delhi Capitals didn't draw a full house of jersey-clad Kings supporters, the home-like atmosphere wasn't lost. After conceding two boundaries in his first over during the PowerPlay, left-arm spinner Harpreet Brar roared back, dismissing opposition captain Faf du Plessis — spurred on by the stadium DJ blasting his Punjabi anthem 'Pagg'. The song returned in the next match against Mumbai Indians, as Brar scalped the prized wicket of Rohit Sharma.

The Kings wrapped up their run at a third home venue this season — after New Chandigarh and Dharamsala — with a win and a loss, enough to seal a top-two finish.

Anish Pathiyil

Plenty to cheer about

Cricket fans in Punjab have had plenty to cheer about over the past fortnight. Punjab Kings qualified for the IPL playoffs for the first time in 11 years.

The initial leg of the playoffs was staged at the swanky Maharaja Yadavindra Singh Stadium, an open-air venue on the outskirts of Chandigarh that began hosting IPL matches in 2024. And to top it all, Shubman Gill, who hails from a village in Fazilka district near the India-Pakistan border, was named India's 37th Test captain.

"I am happy that Gill has become Test captain. He is a Punjabi *munda* (lad)," said Harman, a fan who had travelled from nearby Ludhiana, just before Qualifier 1 between PBKS and Royal Challengers Bengaluru. "I hope he leads well. I didn't expect him to be named captain. I thought (Rishabh) Pant will helm the reins."

There was equal enthusiasm for Punjab's spirited playoff run after a prolonged wait. "There was frustration watching the IPL in previous years. This time, Punjab's team combination was very good. (Shreyas) Iyer and (Ricky) Ponting seem to have a good understanding as captain and coach. The young players have done very well," another fan remarked. In the coming weeks, as Gill embarks on a demanding Test tour of England in his first assignment as captain, Punjab's cricket faithful will hope there's even more to be proud of.

Vivek Krishnan

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Captain's knock by Jitesh

85 } The unbeaten runs scored by Jitesh Sharma in RCB's successful run chase against LSG in Lucknow on 27 May 2025. This is now the highest by any IPL batter batting at No. 6 or lower in a match-winning cause while chasing in the second innings.

Highest scores from #6 or lower in successful IPL run chases

Runs	(balls)	Batter	Bat#	For	Against	Venue	Date
85*	(33)	Jitesh Sharma	6	RCB	LSG	Lucknow	27 May 2025
70*	(34)	M. S. Dhoni	6	CSK	RCB	Bengaluru	25 Apr 2018
70*	(31)	Andre Russell	6	KKR	PBKS	Mumbai WS	1 Apr 2022
70	(47)	Kieron Pollard	6	MI	RCB	Bengaluru	14 Apr 2017
68	(30)	Dwayne Bravo	7	CSK	MI	Mumbai WS	7 Apr 2018

Note: Jitesh Sharma and M. S. Dhoni were also the captain/wicket-keeper

Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Jitesh Sharma. PTI

203 } The total runs scored by the opposing captains in the LSG-RCB game in Lucknow on 27 May 2025. This is the second highest in an IPL match, which also marked the sixth time that the opposing captains have combined to score 150 runs or more in an IPL game.

150+ run aggregates by the two opposing captains in an IPL match

Aggregate runs	Captain1 (score)	For	Captain2 (score)	For	Venue	Date	Match won by
210	K. L. Rahul (91)	PBKS	Sanju Samson (119)	RR	Mumbai	12 Apr 2021	PBKS
203	Rishabh Pant (118*)	LSG	Jitesh Sharma (85*)	RCB	Lucknow	27 May 2025	RCB
186	Rohit Sharma (94)	MI	Virat Kohli (92*)	RCB	Mumbai WS	17 Apr 2018	MI
163	Kumar Sangakkara (44)	DeCh	Virender Sehwag (119)	DC	Hyderabad	5 May 2011	DC
156	Sachin Tendulkar (100)	MI	Mahela Jayawardene (56)	Kochi Tuskers	MumbaiWS	15 Apr 2011	KTK
155	Rohit Sharma (98)	MI	Gautam Gambhir (57)	KKR	Kolkata	8 Apr 2015	KKR

224 } The number of innings K. L. Rahul needed to reach the 8000th run of his T20 career during the short knock of 11 (in six balls) at the Wankhede Stadium on 21 May 2025. Of the 36 batters who accomplished this milestone in T20 cricket, Rahul is the third quickest to reach this tally. However, his effort has made him the fastest among the six Indians with 8000-plus runs in T20s.

Quickest (in fewest innings) to reach 8000 T20 career runs

Inns	M	Batter	While playing for	(Against)	Venue	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	HS	S/R	100/50
213	217	Chris Gayle	Jamaica Tallawahs	(St Lucia Zouks)	Kingston	7 Jul 2015	8037	44.40	175*	148.86	15/52
218	227	Babar Azam	Pakistan	(England)	Karachi	22 Sep 2022	8089	44.69	122	128.29	7/67
224	238	K. L. Rahul	Delhi Capitals	(MI)	Mumbai WS	21 May 2025	8079	42.74	132*	136.53	7/68
243	257	Virat Kohli	Royal Challengers Bengaluru	(KKR)	Bengaluru	5 Apr 2019	8067	40.74	113	133.55	4/59
245	275	Mohd Rizwan	Pakistan	(South Africa)	Durban	10 Dec 2024	8044	42.78	110*	125.35	2/68

205 } The opening (unbeaten) partnership between Sai Sudharsan and Shubman Gill for Gujarat Titans against Delhi Capitals on 18 May 2025 is the first 200-plus stand in the second innings of an IPL match for any wicket.

Highest partnerships for any wicket in the second innings of an IPL match

Runs	(wkt)	Pair	For	Opp	Venue	Date
205*	(1st)	Sai Sudharsan & Shubman Gill	GT	DC	Delhi	18 May 2025
189*	(2nd)	David Warner & Naman Ojha	DC	DeCh	Hyderabad	10 May 2012
184*	(1st)	Gautam Gambhir & Chris Lynn	KKR	GL	Rajkot	7 Apr 2017
181*	(1st)	Shane Waton & Faf du Plessis	CSK	PBKS	Dubai	4 Oct 2020
181*	(1st)	Virat Kohli & Devdutt Padikkal	RCB	RR	MumbaiWS	22 Apr 2021

2 The number of occasions a side has successfully chased targets of 200-plus without losing any wicket in T20 cricket. Gujarat Titans' recent victory without losing any wicket while chasing Delhi Capitals' 199/3 in Delhi is the recent instance in T20 and the first such occasion in IPL cricket. Only once before did this occur in T20 cricket when Pakistan (203/0) successfully chased England's 199/5 in Karachi in September 2022. The tables below provide all the instances in IPL and T20 cricket where sides have chased big targets without losing a wicket.

IPL sides successfully chasing big targets without losing any wicket

Total1	Batting first	Batting second (winning side)	Total2	(Ov)	Balls left	Venue	Date	The unbeaten pair
199/3	Delhi Capitals	Gujarat Titans	205/0	(19.0)	6	Delhi	18 May 2025	Sai Sudharsan & Shubman Gill
183/4	Gujarat Lions	Kolkata Knight Riders	184/0	(14.5)	31	Rajkot	7 Apr 2017	Gautam Gambhir & Chris Lynn
178/4	Punjab Kings	Chennai Super Kings	181/0	(17.4)	14	Dubai	4 Oct 2020	Shane Watson & Faf du Plessis
177/9	Rajasthan Royals	Royal Challengers Bengaluru	181/0	(16.3)	21	Mumbai WS	22 Apr 2021	Virat Kohli & Devdutt Padikkal
165/4	Lucknow Super Giants	Sunrisers Hyderabad	167/0	(9.4)	62	Hyderabad	8 May 2024	Abhishek Sharma & Travis Head

T20 sides successfully chasing big targets without losing any wicket

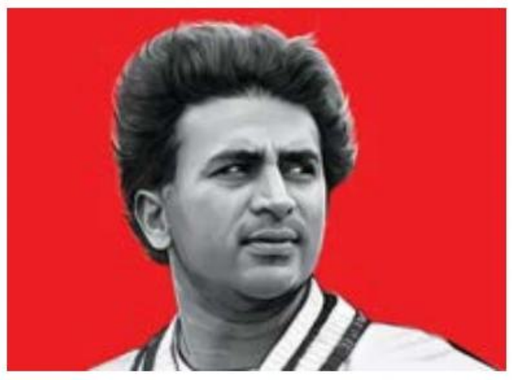
Total1	Batting first	Batting second (winning side)	Total2	(Ov)	Balls left	Venue	Date	The unbeaten pair
199/3	Delhi Capitals	Gujarat Titans	205/0	(19.0)	6	Delhi	18 May 2025	Sai Sudharsan & Shubman Gill
199/5	England	Pakistan	203/0	(19.3)	3	Karachi	22 Sep 2022	Mohd Rizwan & Babar Azam
183/4	Gujarat Lions	Kolkata Knight Riders	184/0	(14.5)	31	Rajkot	7 Apr 2017	Gautam Gambhir & Chris Lynn
178/4	Punjab Kings	Chennai Super Kings	181/0	(17.4)	14	Dubai	4 Oct 2020	Shane Watson & Faf du Plessis
177/9	Rajasthan Royals	Royal Challengers Bengaluru	181/0	(16.3)	21	Mumbai WS	22 Apr 2021	Virat Kohli & Devdutt Padikkal
170/4	Melbourne Renegades	Perth Scorchers	171/0	(18.4)	8	Melbourne Dock	30 Dec 2015	Shaun Marsh & Michael Klinger
168/7	Pakistan	New Zealand	171/0	(17.4)	14	Hamilton	17 Jan 2016	Martin Guptill & Kane Williamson
168/6	India	England	170/0	(16.0)	24	Adelaide	10 Nov 2022	Jos Buttler & Alex Hales

318 The aggregate runs by the four openers in the DC-GT game in Delhi on 18 May 2025. This is now the highest for an IPL match. This is only the second instance of the four openers combining to aggregate 300 runs or more in an IPL match.

Highest aggregate runs by the four openers in an IPL match

Aggregate runs	The four openers (runs)	For (total)	Venue	Date	Match won by
318	K. L. Rahul (112*)/Faf du Plessis (5)	Delhi Capitals (199/3)	Delhi	18 May 2025	GT
	Sai Sudharsan (108*)/Shubman Gill (93*)	Gujarat Titans (205/0)			
308	Phil Salt (75)/Sunil Narine (71)	Kolkata Knight Riders (261/6)	Kolkata	26 Apr 2024	PBKS
	Prabhsimran Singh (54)/Jonny Bairstow (108*)	Punjab Kings (262/2)			
294	Sai Sudharsan (39)/Shubman Gill (84)	Gujarat Titans (209/4)	Jaipur	28 Apr 2025	RR
	Yashasvi Jaiswal (70*)/Vaibhav Suryavanshi (101)	Rajasthan Royals (212/2)			
293	Wriddhiman Saha (81)/Shubman Gill (94*)	Gujarat Titans (227/2)	Ahmedabad	7 May 2023	GT
	Kyle Mayers (48)/Quinton de Kock (70)	Lucknow Super Giants (171/7)			
292	M. Vijay (127)/Matthew Hayden (34)	Chennai Super Kings (246/5)	Chennai	3 Apr 2010	CSK
	Michael Lumb (37)/Naman Ojha (94*)	Rajasthan Royals (223/5)			

All records are correct and updated until 27 May 2025.



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

PRIYANK PANCHAL DIDN'T GET THE INDIA CAP, BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE HIS CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN CRICKET ANY LESS

From time immemorial, this has been the case in not just Indian cricket but world cricket, where **some very good players** have missed out on their country's cap.

This year's Indian Premier League (IPL) saw a new champion. Two long-suffering teams — Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Punjab Kings — battled for the title in the best T20 league in the world. In the end, RCB came out on top, ending an 18-year wait.

That said, this column carries great pleasure and quite a bit of sadness about the retirement of one of Indian cricket's wonderful servants. It is a great pleasure to recognise his contribution to our beloved game, and sadness because we won't see him play again in his favourite whites.

Priyank Panchal, the former Gujarat captain, made the tough call to quit Ranji Trophy cricket after serving his State for almost two decades. He was part of the Ranji Trophy-winning Gujarat team, but if there's one regret he has, it would be that he didn't get the India cap. He came close to it on a couple of occasions but didn't have the good fortune to get it. That doesn't make his contribution to Indian cricket any less than those who have played for India. Sometimes it's just the misfortune of having been born at the same time as some others who were selected ahead of him and did well enough never to allow him to replace them.

From time immemorial, this has been the case in not just Indian cricket but world cricket, where some very good players have missed out on their country's cap. Look at Rajinder Goel and Padmakar Shivalkar. They would have been certainties in most other countries' Test teams, but with the four great spinners in Bishan Singh Bedi, Erapalli Prasanna, BS Chandrasekhar, and S. Venkataraghavan around, they couldn't get a look-in even once. Similarly, when the Fab Five batters of Indian cricket were around, many heavy run-scorers in Ranji Trophy cricket couldn't find a place in the team. Who could replace Sachin Tendulkar, Virender Sehwag, Rahul Dravid, Sourav Ganguly, and V.V.S Laxman when they were in their pomp? So, Panchal also missed out despite scoring consistently in the domestic circuit.

Apart from not getting the India cap, he also wouldn't have much to show in his bank balance, despite spending the better part of his youth trying to make a career and a living out of the game. It is here that the lopsided nature of remuneration for other domestic tournaments and that of the IPL, another domestic tournament, stands out.

It's doubtful if, after playing for two decades in all kinds of weather conditions all over the country, including the bitter cold in the North of India and extreme heat elsewhere, and also amid rains sometimes, Panchal has made even Rs. 3 crore in Ranji Trophy fees. Compare this with uncapped players in the IPL who make Rs.

Doyen of the sport: The 35-year-old Priyank Panchal finishes as Gujarat's second-highest run-getter in First-Class cricket, 19 short of Parthiv Patel's tally of 7011 runs. K. MURALI KUMAR

3 crore-plus a season and often do not even play a single game.

The argument that it is market forces is not really valid, for more often than not, it is sheer good fortune as some franchises want to take a punt with young talent. Have a look at the uncapped crorepatis throughout the IPL, and you will find that very few have gone on to do big things for India. It's their good luck that has made them the crores that they actually don't deserve.

Make no mistake, it is not their fault if franchises splurge on them, but then when you see somebody like Panchal spend his whole youth playing the game in all conditions as stated above, and then not even finish with half the amount that some uncapped youngster gets, it makes others also wonder whether it's worth playing in the national tournament, the Ranji Trophy.

The BCCI has increased the match fees in recent times, and that's very good, but if they add the slab system of fees whereby those who play more matches get more, then that would make more players turn up for the Ranji Trophy instead of feigning injury just a month or so before the IPL starts, so that they don't get injured and miss out on the IPL.

If the BCCI can also increase the match fees for the teams that reach the knockouts, then that also would be a great incentive for the players to keep playing further, instead of withdrawing in fear of injury before the IPL. Money is not the issue for the BCCI and its affiliated units, so hopefully, these suggestions will be considered before the new domestic season starts.

For now, congratulations to RCB and all the best to our boys as they take on England in what promises to be a tough series.

Look at Rajinder Goel and Padmakar Shivalkar. They would have been certainties in most other countries' Test teams, but with the four great spinners in Bishan Singh Bedi, Erapalli Prasanna, B. S. Chandrasekhar, and S. Venkataraghavan around, they couldn't get a look-in even once.

Match disparity: Table-topper South Africa played just 12 Tests in the 2023–25 cycle, the joint-lowest with Bangladesh, while England featured in 22 matches in the same timeframe. AFP

UNEVEN SERIES, UNEQUAL CHANCES: WTC'S STRUCTURAL PROBLEM

South Africa's WTC run **sparks debate** on whether the tournament's structure rewards the best team or the best schedule.

Dhruva Prasad
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When South Africa challenges Australia for the World Test Championship (WTC) mace at Lord's from June 11, the spectacle could serve as a touchstone of the competition's fairness and point towards what lies in store for the oldest format of the game.

The Proteas' run to their maiden WTC final has drawn scrutiny with regards to the format of the tournament, and questions have been raised about whether they are worthy of facing the defending champion in the Ultimate Test.

They head into the summit clash on the back of six consecutive wins — two each against lower-ranked Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Add to that the 1-0 series win in the West Indies in August last year, and South Africa's last four opponents in the current WTC cycle comprise the bottom-placed teams in the standings. What preceded South Africa's eight-match unbeaten streak is perhaps what makes its appearance in the final seem ironic to some. In what was considered a blasphemous snub to Test cricket, South Africa named an understrength 14-member squad for the two-match series in New Zealand, which included as many as six uncapped players. The touring party was led by an uncapped skipper, and its most experienced member had

played all of 15 Tests. That South Africa's frontline Test campaigners had to miss the series to honour their contractual obligations to SA20 — the country's marquee franchise T20 league — didn't sit well with the purists. Their absence resulted in the Kiwis running riot and securing their first-ever Test series win against the Proteas.

South Africa's resurgence from that nadir was marked by a resilient run, which included contending with a depleted pace-bowling attack on seam-friendly tracks at home. And while their spot in the WTC final shouldn't be up for debate, the Proteas' campaign warrants scrutiny of the WTC's format and structure.

A cursory glance at the standings points to a fundamental discrepancy that threatens the fairness of any league across sports. Table-topper South Africa played just 12 Tests in the 2023–25 cycle, the joint-lowest with Bangladesh, while England featured in 22 matches in the same timeframe. To adjust for the unequal number of matches, the International Cricket Council (ICC) had devised the percentage of points won (PCT) system after the inaugural 2019–21 championship. While the grading system satisfies statistical logic, it doesn't account for more subjective variables such as length of series, quality of opponents, and diversity of conditions.

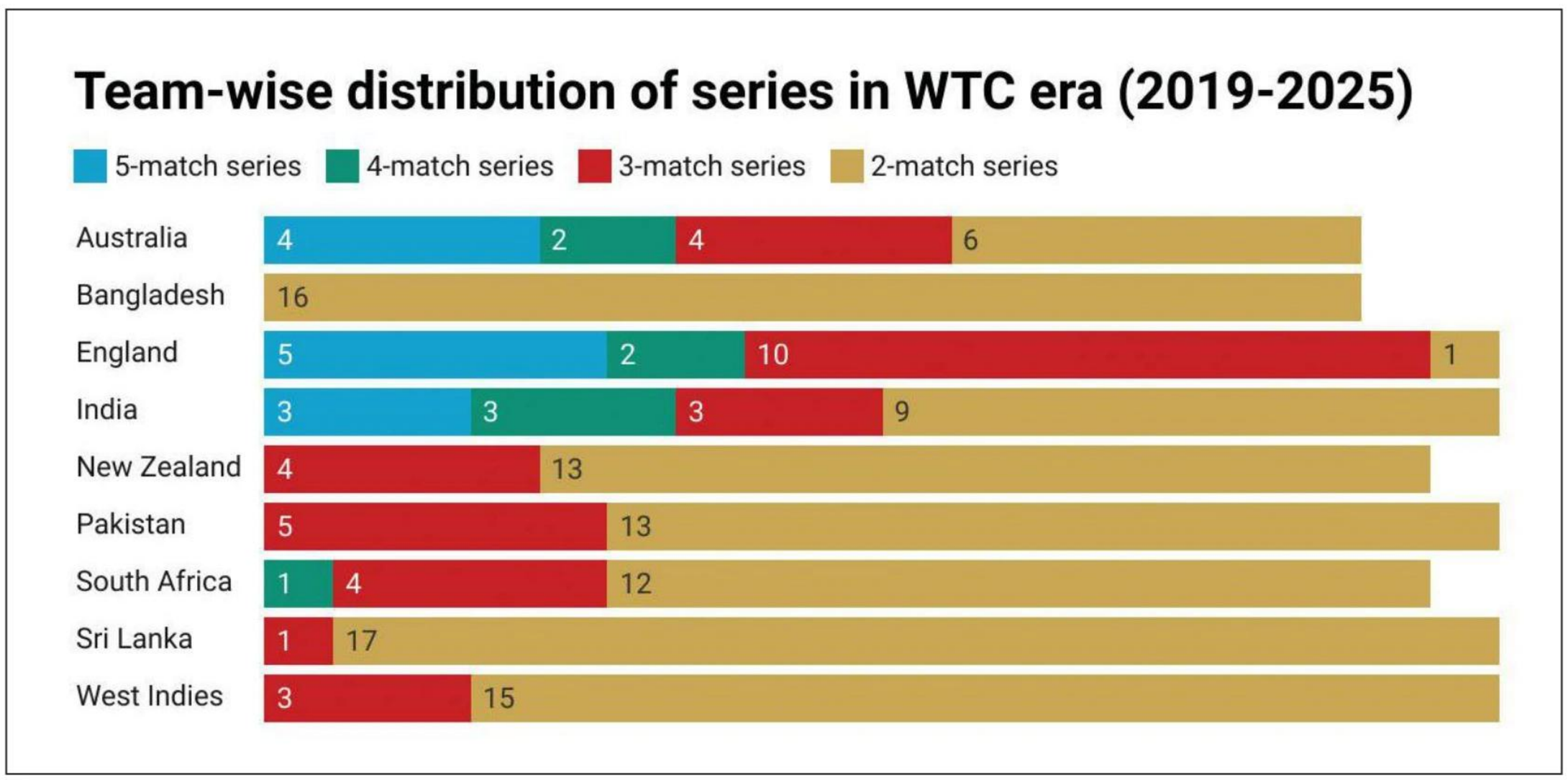
Top of the world: Australia is the defending World Test Champion, having beaten India at The Oval in 2023. REUTERS

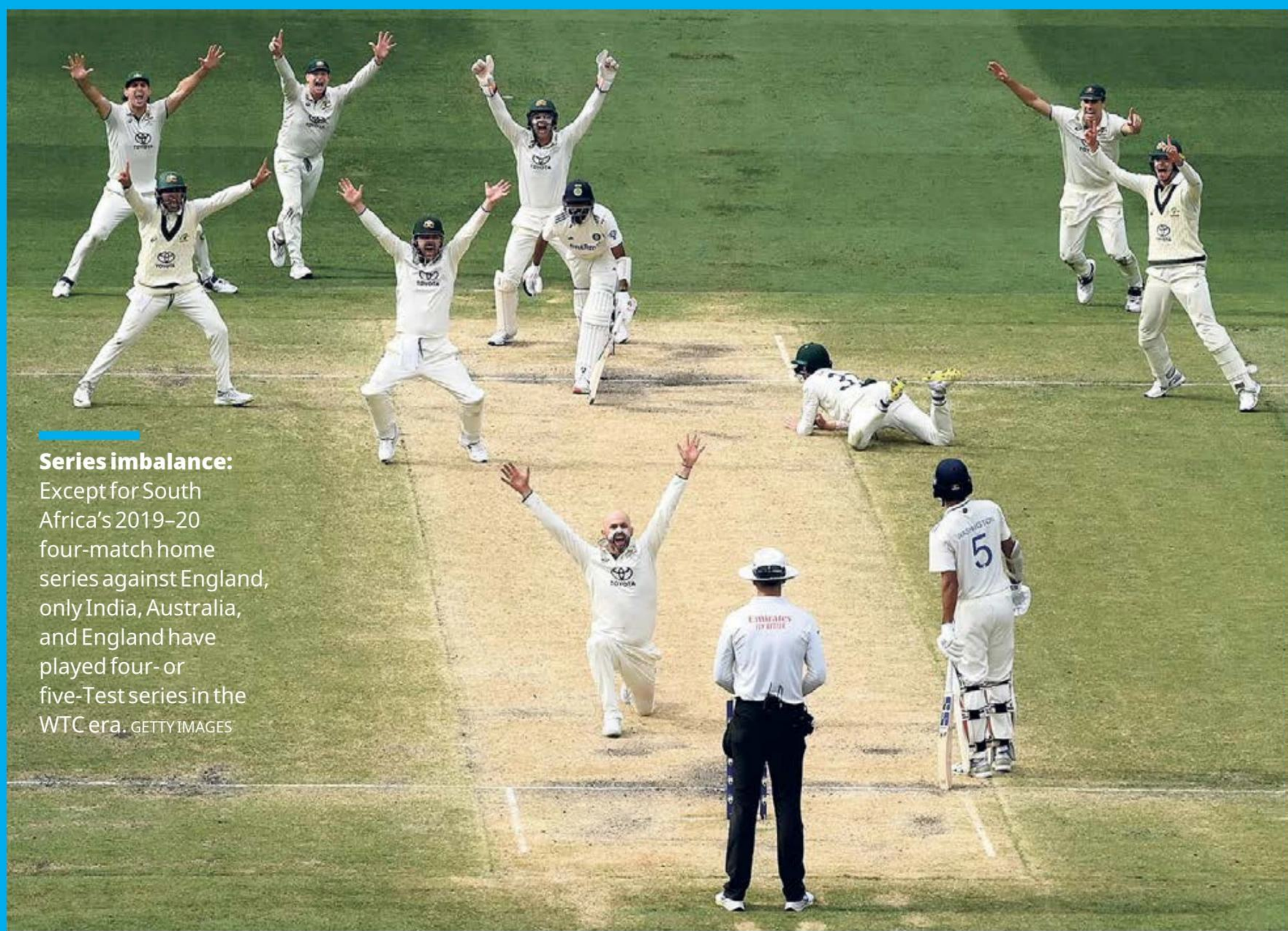
All six of South Africa's series in the current cycle comprised two matches each, and 12 of its 17 series since the advent of the WTC have been two-Test duels. The fewer number of matches in a series limits exposure to the most gruelling format of the game and reduces opportunities to test bench strength and expand the player pool. Moreover, it diminishes the ability to gather momentum and peaking, either to extend dominance or stage a fightback.

A case in point is India's tour of South Africa in 2023–24, which ended in a 1-1 draw after the visitor won by seven wickets at Cape Town in what is still the shortest completed Test match ever. In short, a two-match Test series often ends on a note of unfulfilment and leaves much to the imagination.

"Our Test team is playing two-Test series, which is ridiculous in my eyes. It's disappointing, and it doesn't sit well with the players because we want to play more cricket against these guys [India]...," former South Africa batter Heinrich Klaasen had lamented during a T20I series against India that followed the Tests.

While South Africa and Bangladesh are the only teams to have only played two-match Test series in the 2023–25 cycle, New Zealand, Pakistan,





Series imbalance: Except for South Africa's 2019–20 four-match home series against England, only India, Australia, and England have played four- or five-Test series in the WTC era. GETTY IMAGES

Sri Lanka and West Indies have also largely featured in two-match contests since 2019.

Moreover, barring South Africa's four-match series against England at home in 2019–20, India, Australia and England are the only teams to have featured in series lasting four or five Tests in the WTC era.

While the length of a series is agreed upon by the cricketing boards of the participating teams, an intervention by the ICC with regards to making a three-match Test series the bare minimum can help level the playing field.

The difference in the quality of opposition that teams face is also an aspect of the WTC that inhibits a fair assessment. The criticism of South Africa's seemingly easier path to the final involves the fact that it neither faced Australia nor England. Meanwhile, largely driven by market forces, India has played both Australia and England in each of the three WTC cycles.

Extending the WTC cycle from six series per team to eight and ensuring that all nine participants get a taste of each other is a straightforward solution.

The ICC's very own team rankings are also an indictment of the WTC standings. One would assume the rankings, which consider a minimum of 36 months and take into account the strength of the opposition, should largely be reflective of the points table of a tournament that runs over two years. However, in the rankings update issued in May, England was placed second, while in the WTC standings it sits a lowly fifth, largely owing to slow over-rate penalties.

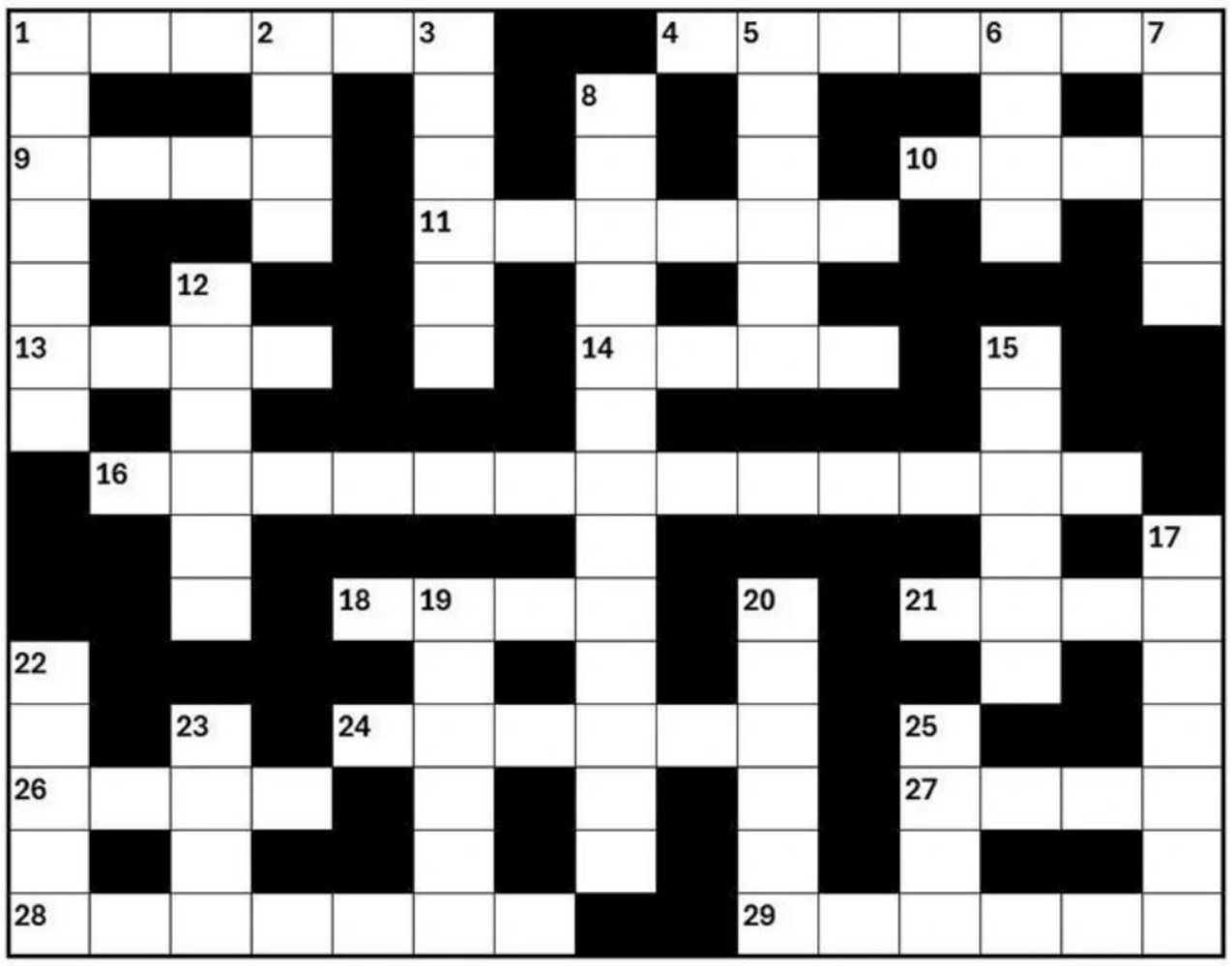
While the current structure of the WTC leaves much to be desired, the competition has kept the flame of Tests flickering amidst the gusts of T20 cricket.

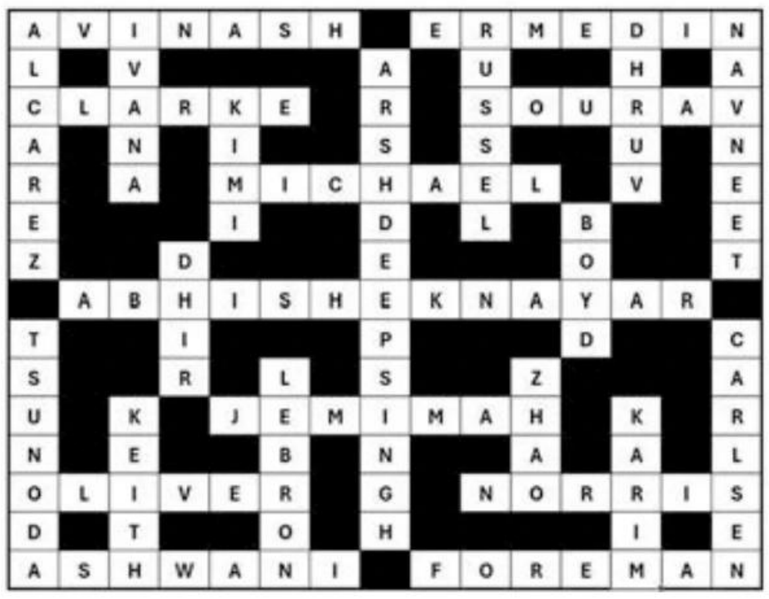
As murmurs of a two-tier system prioritising the Big Three — Australia, England, and India — do the rounds, the custodians of cricket would do well to not snuff it out for the rest.

Team-wise distribution of matches in WTC era (2019-2025)

Team	Matches	Won	Lost	Drawn
England	73	35	28	10
India	56	31	19	6
Australia	53	33	11	9
New Zealand	45	22	18	5
Pakistan	42	15	20	7
Sri Lanka	42	16	20	6
West Indies	42	12	23	7
South Africa	40	21	17	2
Bangladesh	38	10	26	2

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 & Down 3 Who won the player of the match award in the one-off Test between England and Zimbabwe in Trent Bridge? (6,6)

4 & Down 23 Which team got promoted to top tier Premier League after 22 years for the 2024-25 season only to be relegated for the next season? (7,4)

9 Who won the men's singles title at the Madrid Open 2025? (4)

10 Who won the men's singles title at the SRFI Indian Tour squash championship in March 2025? (4)

11 Identify this Frenchman who drives for Red Bulls Honda F1 team? (6)

13 Name this debutant for Punjab Kings who scored the first century of IPL 2025? (4)

14 Which South African athlete collided with Mary Decker in the 3000m race at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics? (4)

16 Who became the first overseas player to score a century in IPL 2025? (8,5)

18 What is the abbreviation for the governing body of a successful medal sport for India in Asian and Commonwealth Games for which Meghna Ahlawat became the first female president in December 2022? (1,1,1,1)

21 Identify this South African pacer who made a comeback to ODIs in the tri-series held in Pakistan in February 2025 after making his debut in 2018? (4)

24 Who lost to Carlos Alcaraz in the Italian Open final in May 2025? (6)

26 Which batter recently became the fastest to reach 13000 runs in Tests? (4)

27 Who led South Africa in the first-ever series after its return to international cricket in 1991? (4)

28 Who scored a hat-trick for PSG in the Ligue 1 game versus Montpellier on May 10, 2025? (7)

29 Which Aussie wicketkeeper won the man of the match award for PBKS in the last league game against Mumbai Indians in IPL 2025? (6)

DOWN

1 & 6 Who was chosen as the ICC player of the month for March 2025? (7,4)

2 Identify the first name of this former British tennis player who parted ways as coach with Novak Djokovic recently? (4)

5 Which country finished runner-up in the United Cup for tennis in January 2025? (6)

7 Who took most wickets in the Ranji Trophy for the 2024-25 season? (5)

8 Who scored the only century for Ireland in the three-match ODI series recently against the West Indies? (4,9)

12 Who ended the La Liga 2024-25 season scoring most goals? (6)

15 Who won the Golden Glove award in the recently-concluded 2024-25 ISL season? (6)

17 Which former Sri Lankan cricket captain announced his retirement from Tests recently? (7)

19 Who had the best bowling figures in an innings in the two-Test series between Bangladesh and Zimbabwe held in April 2025? (6)

20 Which Indian opener featured in the ICC Women's ODI Team of the Year 2024? (6)

22 Who hit six consecutive sixes, though not in the same over, in a game in IPL 2025? (5)

25 Identify the first name of the coach of the Indian men's cricket team at the 2007 ODI World Cup? (4)

FROM THE WORLD OF CRICKET

AP

Australian all-rounder Glenn Maxwell announced his retirement from One-Day Internationals. Since debuting against Afghanistan in 2012, Maxwell made 149 ODI appearances for Australia, scoring 3,990 runs at an average of 33.81 and a strike rate of 126.70. He also claimed 77 wickets with his off-spin and took 91 catches. The 36-year-old played pivotal roles in Australia's 2015 and 2023 ODI World Cup triumphs. His unbeaten 201 against Afghanistan in the 2023 edition, while battling severe cramps, is widely regarded as one of the most iconic knocks in World Cup history.

AFP

Pakistan secured a 3-0 T20I series sweep against Bangladesh after a nervy win in the third game. Chasing 197 in the final match, Pakistan reached the target with seven wickets to spare, led by Mohammad Haris, who scored his maiden T20I century. The host had posted identical totals of 201 in the first two matches, with captain Salman Agha scoring fifties in both. Bangladesh was undone by Hasan Ali's five-wicket haul in the opener and failed to impress with the bat in the second, handing Pakistan victories by 37 and 57 runs respectively.

GETTY IMAGES

Ireland and West Indies settled for a 1-1 draw in the three-match ODI series. Ireland dominated the opener with Andy Balbirnie's century contributing to a 303-run total. Barry McCarthy's four wickets and George Dockrell's three helped bowl out the Windies, securing a 124-run win. Rain interrupted the second match after West Indies had posted 352. The visitor carried that momentum into the decider, smashing 385 – powered by a second consecutive century from Keacy Carty. The target was revised to 363 in 46 overs due to rain, but Ireland folded for 165, handing West Indies a 197-run win and a series-levelling result.

REUTERS

The International Cricket Council (ICC) has announced that the upcoming edition of the eight-team Women's ODI World Cup will take place from September 30 to November 2 across five venues in India and Sri Lanka. The M. Chinnaswamy Stadium (Bengaluru), ACA Stadium (Guwahati), Holkar Stadium (Indore), ACA-VDCA Stadium (Visakhapatnam), and R. Premadasa Stadium (Colombo) are the designated stadiums for the tournament. The Sri Lankan capital will host all matches featuring Pakistan. The last ICC global women's event hosted by India was the ICC Women's T20 World Cup in 2016, which was held alongside the men's event.

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Stepping into the big league

Not afraid to make sacrifices, Kriish Tyagi is ready for bigger challenges as he navigates a **crucial transition** point in his career.

Nihit Sachdeva
nihit.s@thehindu.co.in

Kriish Tyagi, India's top-ranked junior player, is No. 44 on the ITF World Junior Tennis Tour and has seven singles titles to his name. But having turned 18 in April, he is now in his final year competing as a junior. The young player from Sarjapur, Bengaluru, now finds himself at a defining crossroads — where the river of junior tennis meets the vast, uncharted ocean of the senior circuit.

While a strong finish in his final showing at the Junior Grand Slams remains important, Kriish isn't afraid to make sacrifices for the bigger picture — which is why, after completing his Class 12 exams last month and facing limited clay-court training options in India, he and coach Harsha Lingappa chose to skip the French Open this year.

"The quality of clay courts in Europe is something you don't get in India. I don't feel my game is ready for that kind of clay. It's just tough to get a hang of it when you go for tournaments," Kriish told *Sportstar*.

He is, however, looking forward to Wimbledon and the US Open. "Playing on grass

Looking to build his ATP ranking, Kriish has also been adding more Futures events to his calendar – a move that's already showing results.

courts is mainly about hand skills, slices, volleys and serves, and I feel I'm good at that. As far as the US Open is concerned, I've won all my titles on hard courts. So, I'm confident about that surface," said Kriish.

Looking to build his ATP ranking, Kriish has also been adding more Futures events to his calendar — a move that's already showing results. He reached the semifinals as a qualifier at a $30,000 tournament in Ahmedabad and followed it up with another semifinal finish at a $15,000 event in Tashkent.

Once a swimming enthusiast, Kriish took up tennis at the age of 10 during his after-school lessons. Sapna, Kriish's mother, has been a huge pillar of strength for him as his father, Ajay, works in the port sector in Jeddah, while his elder brother, Akash, is employed at Procter & Gamble in Pennsylvania.

When a young Kriish, inspired after watching a match between Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal on TV, told his mother about his desire to give tennis a try, she didn't discourage him despite knowing well the tough road ahead for Indian tennis players.

"I just told him to be prepared and work very hard — don't worry about the results. You have to be ready for all the ups and downs," recalled Sapna.

While other top Indian juniors, such as Manas Dhamne and Maaya Rajeshwaran Revathi, went abroad to train, Kriish chose to stay in India, joining the Harsha Lingappa Tennis Academy in Bengaluru in 2021.

"I saw Kriish for the first time in 2021 at an ITF tournament in Nepal," said coach Harsha. "He was a very gritty player. He wanted to win the match but didn't know how to do it — strategy or technique-wise. It was easy for me to train this kid because he gave his 100 per cent on the court. We worked completely on his serve, his forehand, added a bit of strategy, and created a weapon out of it."

A few months before appearing for his Class 12 exams via the National Institute of Open Schooling, Kriish received an offer from a US college to play on the NCAA circuit — a path many young tennis players around the world have taken.

However, whether he takes that route will depend on how the coming months unfold.

"At the moment, I'm signed up with Texas A&M University, but I feel if I do something big — like maybe get into a Grand Slam or perform really well at the men's level — I'm going to take a one-year break, train more, and try to see if I can go further up before rushing to college," said Kriish.

Lessons aplenty: Kriish Tyagi trains at the Harsha Lingappa Tennis Academy in Bengaluru.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

STATFILE

ITF Juniors Ranking
46 (as of June 3, 2025)

ATP Ranking
1166

ITF Juniors Titles
7

Junior Grand Slam Appearances
Australian Open (2023–2025)

Coach
Harsha Lingappa

Sponsors
IndianOil and Yonex

Favourite Players
Novak Djokovic and Aryna Sabalenka

Favourite Grand Slam
Wimbledon

AFP

FROM CHAOS TO CHAMPIONS: PSG'S SECRET TO EUROPEAN GLORY

After a decade of turmoil, the French giant's magnum opus arrived, not just through individual brilliance but also the vision of a manager who traded **stardust for steel.**

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

What does it take to cruise a car to victory? A good engine, reliable tyres and a dependable cooling system — perhaps. But most importantly, it needs efficient fuel and a proven driver.

Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) implemented the theory with precision on a Saturday night when it obliterated Inter Milan 5-0 to win its maiden UEFA Champions League (UCL). That too, without the on-paper formidable trio of Neymar, Lionel Messi and its record goalscorer Kylian Mbappe.

Inter's former full-back Achraf Hakimi **(right)** opened the scoring and Desire Doue netted a brace, as the French league champion secured the biggest-ever win in a UCL final — all of it under the treble-winning Spanish wizard named Luis Enrique.

But before Enrique, PSG followed a slightly different script.

An assembly of Galacticos

Bought by Qatari Emir Tamim Al Thani in 2011 for €100 million, PSG returned to the Champions League for the first time since 2004 in 2012.

With stars like Zlatan Ibrahimovic and the then-record signing Edinson

Cavani, PSG started winning domestic trophies consistently over the next decade. It won 36 trophies, including 11 of the 13 Ligue 1 titles.

For fans outside France with limited football knowledge, PSG was the only club that mattered. But without much resistance, the crown grew hollow. The owners wanted more — the pinnacle of European club football: the Champions League.

Meetings were held, new managers were signed, and transfer records were shattered.

The existing stars, Ibrahimovic and Cavani, were replaced by bigger names — Neymar, the most expensive transfer of all time (€222 million), and Kylian Mbappe, the second-most expensive transfer to date at €180 million.

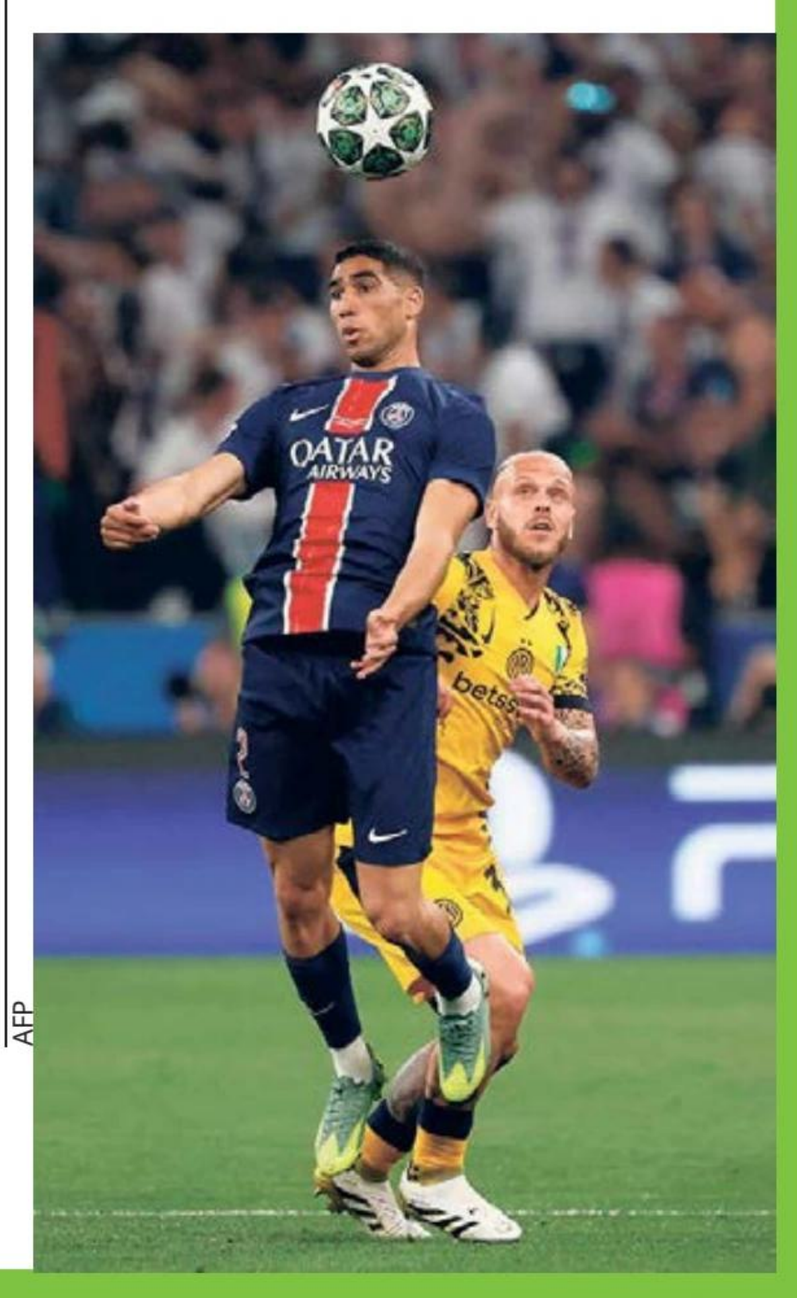
The moves eventually bore fruit: PSG reached the UCL final for the first time in 2020, where it lost to Bayern Munich. Defeat festered into discord. Coaches came and went, legends departed, yet PSG clung to its Galácticos doctrine.

Serial UCL winner Sergio Ramos joined in 2021, and within a month, Lionel Messi completed the holy trinity of modern-day PSG attack, along with Neymar and Mbappe. But only two Round of 16 exits followed. PSG remained the perpetual dreamer, the Sisyphus of the football world, pushing the boulder uphill.

The Enrique project

For solutions, the club signed Enrique as manager, someone who had won the treble with Barcelona nearly a decade ago. His philosophy was clear: dismantle the cult of individualism and forge a collective ethos with those desperate to prove their worth. So much so that the biggest transfer under him, Randal Kolo Muani (from Eintracht Frankfurt for €95 million), was loaned to Juventus because he fell out of Enrique's plans.

Goals galore: A brace by Desire Doue and goals by Achraf Hakimi, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and Senny Mayulu helped PSG win its first UCL title. AFP



AFP

Class apart: Having won the treble with Barcelona nearly a decade ago, Luis Enrique's arrival brought high hopes to PSG. REUTERS

In his first year, the coach tried get the club's blue-eyed boy Mbappe to buy into his vision. In a video of one of his individual sessions with the star forward, Enrique's mandate was quite evident: play as a unit, no matter what your position is.

"... you think you have to score goals for us. Of course, you're a phenomenon. No doubt about that. But that's not enough for me. A true leader is one who, when they can't help with goals, helps in everything (else) that matters," he was seen telling the Frenchman.

However, after a semifinal exit last year, Mbappe eventually got his dream move to Real Madrid.

PSG's front three now comprises Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, Ousmane Dembele **(right)** and Doue, whose combined transfer fees of €170 million stands less than what the club paid for Mbappe alone.

Dembele, once deemed one of the brightest youngsters in Europe, spent 784 days on the sidelines at Barcelona and struggled with off-field issues, including a video game addiction. It led to the Catalans offloading him.

The winger then revived his career in the French capital. In 2025, Dembele made 33 goal contributions (25G, 8A), more than any player across the top five leagues of Europe, also winning the UCL Player of the Season award.

Doue, on the other hand, was substituted within 18 minutes of coming on for Rennes in a 1-3 loss to Lyon in 2023 — an incident that sparked doubts about his first-team chances. "It does not mean I don't have great trust in him and that he'll fail to make a great career, but some things need to be understood faster," Rennes' manager Bruno Génésio had said. In the final, Doué became the first player to have three or more goal contributions (2G, 1A) and won the UCL Young Player of the Season award.

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UCL final strategy

Enrique's advice to Mbappe became Dembele's gospel in the final — he hustled, harried, and though he didn't score, he assisted twice.

Inter, which played with long balls — starting with the goalkeeper Yann Sommer passing it to the full-backs — was cornered

A star-studded disappointment: Lionel Messi, Neymar and Kylian Mbappe failed to win the UCL at PSG.
GETTY IMAGES

when Dembele pressed him incessantly, forcing errors in build-up play. That combined with a swarm of five players in the opposition half — Kvaratskhelia, Doue, Nuno Mendes, Achraf Hakimi and Fabian Ruiz — like wolves on the prowl, Inter simply had no answers.

Meanwhile, two small blocks — Vitinha and João Neves (central midfield), and Marquinhos and Willian Pacho — were stationed to contain counter-attacks.

The result: An inferno in Munich with Inter as the target. PSG had 23 attempts to Inter's eight and more than double the attacks (46 v 22).

After a decade of turmoil, PSG's magnum opus arrived, not just through individual brilliance but also the vision of a manager who dared to trade stardust for steel.

So, what does it take to cruise a car to victory? PSG now has the answer.

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INSIDE THE 32-TEAM CLUB WORLD CUP

Explore the revamped FIFA Club World Cup, running June to July in the USA, with **key details** on qualification, schedule, and what's at stake.

Joan Mathew Jacob
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Every alternate year, the summer break usually offers footballers a rare window of calm — a chance to relax and reflect after a long club season.

This year, however, 32 teams from around the world will see that downtime drastically reduced as they are called into action for the revamped FIFA Club World Cup, which runs from June 14 to July 13 across 12 venues in the United States.

While FIFA president Gianni Infantino **(in pic)** has described the competition as a chance to "create

opportunities for the entire world," the tournament will also serve as a dress rehearsal for the expanded 48-team FIFA World Cup to be held in the USA, Canada and Mexico in the summer of 2026.

What's changed in the format?

The Club World Cup debuted in 2000 in Brazil with eight teams, where Corinthians defeated Vasco da Gama on penalties to claim the title. Financial and logistical issues led to a three-year hiatus, but the competition returned in 2005 and ran annually until 2023 with seven teams: the six continental champions and the host nation's league winner.

UEFA and CONMEBOL representatives received byes to the semifinals, and the event typically lasted under two weeks.

From now on, the tournament will take place every four years and feature 32 clubs.

The format will mirror that of the FIFA World Cup — eight groups of four, followed by single-leg knockout rounds from the round of 16 to the final. There will be no third-place play-off.

How did teams qualify?

Team selection was based on performances between 2021 and 2024.

Each year's continental champions were awarded direct qualification. Additional spots were granted to the best-performing clubs from each confederation over the four-year period, using a ranking pathway. UEFA received the highest allocation with 12 slots.

Major League Soccer club Inter Miami was granted entry as the host nation's representative. Another MLS side, Los Angeles FC, qualified by defeating Club América in a play-off, after Club Leon was disqualified in March for breaching ownership rules.

What is the special transfer window?

Given the timing of the tournament at the end of the club season, FIFA has introduced a special transfer window from June 1 to 10 for the 32 teams.

Clubs can register new signings during this window, making them eligible to feature in the tournament.

FIFA has also created an in-competition transfer window from June 27 June to July 3. This allows clubs to adjust their squads mid-tournament.

According to FIFA, "The objective is to encourage clubs and players whose contracts are expiring to find an appropriate solution to facilitate the players' participation. This will ensure that the best players are playing, allowing clubs to add new recruits even during the tournament."

What's the prize?

While concerns around the scheduling and player workload persist, FIFA has set an enticing financial incentive: a prize pool of 1 billion USD will be shared among the 32 teams, with the winner set to take home up to 125 million USD.

The Club World Cup returns in a radically new form, and all eyes will be on whether it evolves into a celebrated tradition or ends up as yet another burden on clubs already stretched to the limit.

CONFEDERATION-WISE BREAKDOWN OF TEAMS

Africa (CAF) – 4 teams
3 via Champions Pathway (CAF Champions League); 1 via Ranking Pathway

Asia (AFC) – 4 teams
3 via Champions Pathway (AFC Champions League); 1 via Ranking Pathway

Europe (UEFA) – 12 teams
4 via Champions Pathway (UEFA Champions League); 8 via Ranking Pathway

North, Central America & Caribbean (CONCACAF) – 4 teams
3 via Champions Pathway (CONCACAF Champions Cup); 1 via Play-In Match

Oceania (OFC) – 1 team
Via Ranking Pathway

South America (CONMEBOL) – 6 teams
4 via Champions Pathway (CONMEBOL Libertadores); 2 via Ranking Pathway

Host Country – 1 team

STADIUMS

Mercedes-Benz Stadium – Atlanta, GA
TQL Stadium – Cincinnati, OH
Bank of America Stadium – Charlotte, NC
Rose Bowl Stadium – Los Angeles, CA
Hard Rock Stadium – Miami, FL
GEODIS Park – Nashville, TN
MetLife Stadium – New York/New Jersey
Camping World Stadium – Orlando, FL
Inter Miami Stadium – Orlando, FL
Lincoln Financial Field – Philadelphia, PA
Lumen Field – Seattle, WA
Audi Field – Washington, D.C.

GROUPS

A: SE Palmeiras (BRA), FC Porto (POR), Al Ahly FC (EGY), Inter Miami CF (USA)
B: Paris Saint-Germain (FRA), Atlético de Madrid (ESP), Botafogo (BRA), Seattle Sounders FC (USA)
C: FC Bayern München (GER), Auckland City FC (NZL), CA Boca Juniors (ARG), SL Benfica (POR)
D: CR Flamengo (BRA), Espérance Sportive de Tunis (TUN), Chelsea FC (ENG), Los Angeles FC (USA)
E: CA River Plate (ARG), Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN), CF Monterrey (MEX), FC Internazionale Milano (ITA)
F: Fluminense FC (BRA), Borussia Dortmund (GER), Ulsan HD (KOR), Mamelodi Sundowns FC (RSA)
G: Manchester City (ENG), Wydad AC (MAR), Al Ain FC (UAE), Juventus FC (ITA)
H: Real Madrid C. F. (ESP), Al Hilal (KSA), CF Pachuca (MEX), FC Salzburg (AUT)

Cruising to victory: The women's 4x400m relay won gold despite falling short of a national record. Pics: ASIAN ATHLETICS

FUTURE BRIGHT

India's stellar showing at the recently concluded Asian Athletics Championships was powered by a fearless **new generation** of athletes delivering breakthrough performances on the big stage.

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Javelin thrower Sachin Yadav **(right)** may have won silver on his international debut, but for coach Naval Singh, the real highlight wasn't the medal — it was the expression on gold medallist Arshad Nadeem's face.

"Arshad came to Gumi saying he was targeting the 100m mark. Around 2,000 Pakistani nationals had come to cheer for him. Everyone thought he was going to win easily.

Unstoppable: Gulveer Singh completed a golden double in the 5000m and 10,000m. **Middle:** 18-year-old Pooja became the youngest Asian champion from India in high jump, setting two personal bests along the way.

But by the end, they were all worried — even Arshad. I was watching from the stands, and *uske chehre se pata lag raha tha ki usko kuch samajh nahi aa raha tha* (from his face you could tell he didn't know what was going on)," he says.

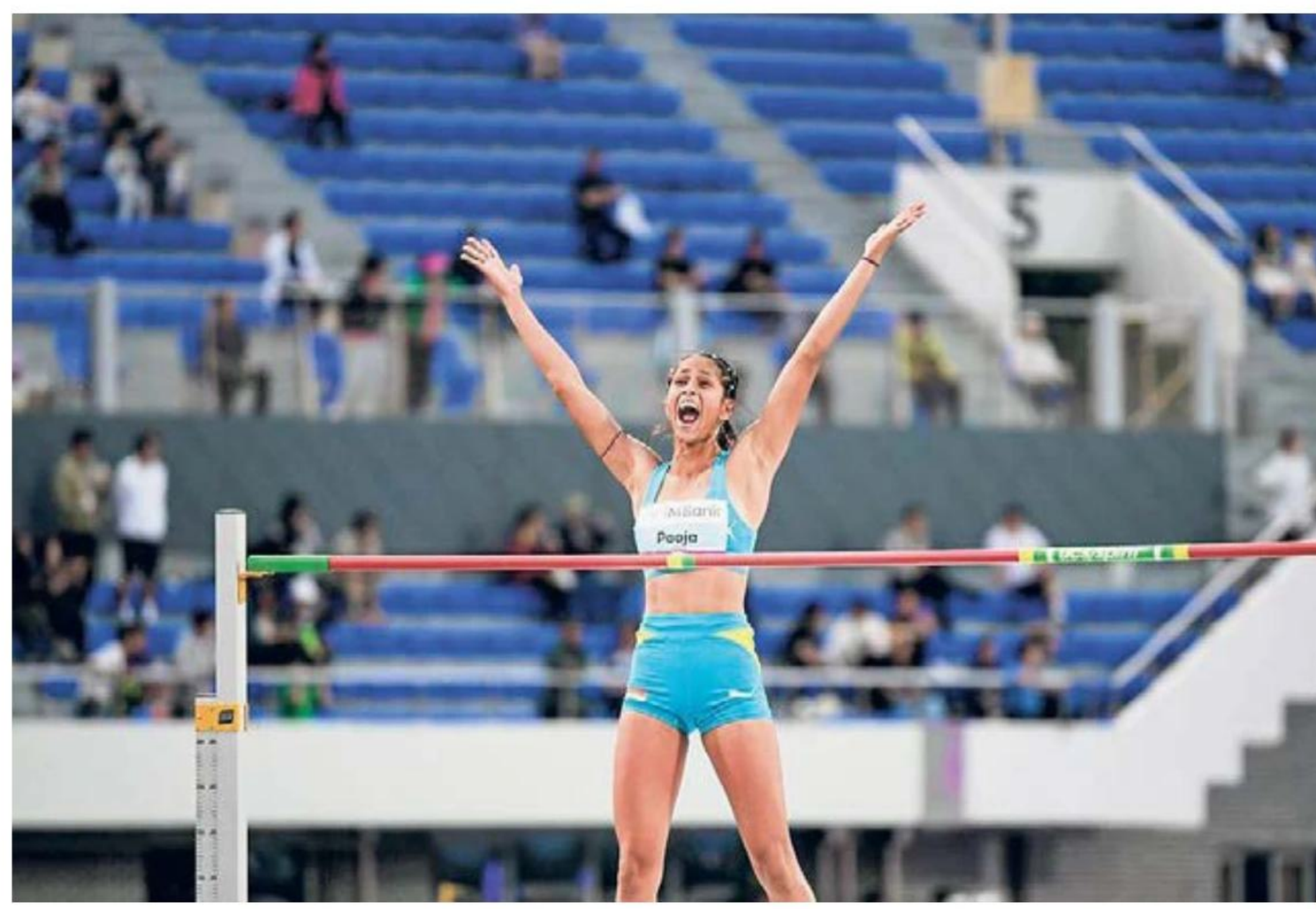
As the reigning Olympic javelin champion, Arshad had swaggered into Gumi expecting to coast to the title, only to end up trailing Sachin for the first three throws of the competition. He eventually pulled ahead on his fourth attempt, eking out a fairly narrow win with a throw of 86.40m. Sachin threw 85.16m — a new personal best.

While the Indian's performance may have fallen just short of pulling off a monumental upset, the fact that he showed no fear on the biggest stage of his career bodes well for the future.

Sachin admits as much: "Initially, my body was a little tight, but after a couple of throws, I was confident I could get the throw I wanted. It doesn't matter who I'm competing with — the only thing I think about is doing my best."

With 24 medals overall — 8 gold, 10 silver, and 6 bronze — India returned with its best-ever haul at an Asian Athletics Championships held overseas. But beyond the numbers, it's the composure and maturity shown by the country's next generation of athletes that stands out as perhaps the most significant takeaway.

Sachin wasn't the only first-time Asian Championship competitor to step up on the big stage. On the final day of the competition, 21-year-old Animesh Kujur **(right)** shattered his own national record by 0.18 seconds, clocking 20.32 to win bronze in the men's 200m — becoming only the second Indian in 52 years to medal in the event at the Asian Championships.



Soaring high: Parul Chaudhary set a national record — 9:12.46 — in 3000m steeplechase. **Right:** Shaili Singh secured bronze in long jump.

Medal tally

China - 32
19 gold, 9 silver, 4 bronze

India - 24
8 gold, 10 silver, 6 bronze

Japan - 28
5 gold, 11 silver, 12 bronze

WATCH AN INTERVIEW WITH JYOTI YARRAJI

WATCH A CHAT WITH ANIMESH KUJUR

Later that evening, 23-year-old middle-distance runner Pooja ran the seventh-fastest time by an Indian woman in the 800m, clocking 2:01.89 to take bronze.

The previous day, however, would see another Pooja deliver one of the all-time great performances by a young Indian athlete.

Although she was taking part in her second Asian Athletics Championships, this was her first as a senior (she had previously competed as a 16-year-old at the 2023 edition in Bangkok).

At least on paper, she shouldn't have stood a chance. Having turned 18 just a few weeks ago, Pooja was the second youngest in the women's high jump in Gumi. Five other competitors, including an Olympic finalist, had jumped higher than her in their careers.

Pooja, however, defied the odds, setting two personal bests — 1.86m and 1.89m — to stun a strong field. The result not only crowned her as the youngest Asian champion from India, but also opened the door to the World Championships in Japan later this year, where — as the continental titleholder — she holds a provisional qualification.

It remains to be seen whether the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) will submit her entry for the Worlds. Speaking to reporters after the tournament, AFI president Adille Sumariwalla didn't announce any change to the federation's policy of allowing only athletes who meet the World Championships' automatic qualification standard to compete in Japan.

"We want some athletes to be preparing for the big competitions of next year like the Asian Games," he said in response to a question from *Sportstar.*

At 1.97m, the qualification standard in the women's high jump might prove a leap too far for Pooja. However, some athletes — if their performances at the Asian Championships are any indication — could well meet the World standards too.

Parul Chaudhary won twin silvers in the women's 5000m and 3000m steeplechase, but it was her national record in the latter (9:12.46) that will have followers of Indian athletics

Clinical: Jyothi Yarraji clocked her fastest time of the season — 12.96 — to clinch a second consecutive Asian gold. **Below:** Avinash Sable won gold in 3000m steeplechase, even though he fell short of World qualification standard of 8:15.00.

eager for more.

Although Parul had already qualified for the World Championships at the Doha Diamond League last month, her new time ranks her seventh fastest in the world this season.

Jyothi Yarraji shrugged off a lengthy rain delay to win a second consecutive Asian gold in the women's 100m hurdles with her fastest time (12.96) of the season. Given the conditions — and the fact that her preparation was hampered by a hamstring strain a few weeks earlier — Jyothi's coaches believe she isn't far off the World Championships standard of 12.73.

Distance runner Avinash Sable also fell short of the World qualification standard of 8:15.00 in the men's 3000m steeplechase, but the time he managed (8:20.92) — as he cruised towards the finish line, even slowing down to acknowledge the applause on the final straight — suggests there's more to come.

For Sable, it seemed the title of Asian champion mattered more than the time.

Gold medals were also won by the Indian teams in the women's 4x400m relay and the 4x400m mixed relay — despite both falling short of national records.

Gulveer Singh, who completed a golden double in the 5000m and 10,000m, also fell short of his national records in both events, but made his priorities clear. "Timings are important, but it's more important to win the gold medal," says Gulveer.

Sachin might feel the same. While pleased to have come so close to Arshad in his international debut, he is already thinking about building on the performance.

"This was my first competition. I'll get better next time," he said.

'THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING FOR INDIAN ATHLETICS'

Fresh off a silver medal at the Asian Athletics Championships, **Tejaswin Shankar** reflects on India's rapid rise in track and field as he brings alive the gritty, emotional roller-coaster of the decathlon.

I landed in South Korea two days before the decathlon. It was my first time this far east — the farthest I'd ever been from home — and I could feel a quiet sense of anticipation building up inside me. My body felt good, my mind was calm, and for once, there were no lingering injuries like the one I carried into the Nationals. Spirits were high.

We were staying in a beautiful facility. And the best part? Everyone had their own room. For someone like me — who tends to travel with half a sporting goods store — this was a blessing. Ten spikes, a javelin, discus, tape, massage balls, recovery tools... you name it, I had it. My room was an organised mess, but it was my own little corner of controlled chaos. Just how I like it.

The Indian team was a fresh mix of new energy. I had trained with some of them at the pre-Asians camp in Thiruvananthapuram about three weeks earlier, but this group felt different. Passionate, intense, expressive — this new generation of Indian athletes is something else. They're there to win, and they wear their hearts on their sleeves. But they also know how to have fun, how to laugh, and how to lift each other up. There was an energy about them that made me proud to be part of this transition.

Charging ahead: Tejaswin (second from right) started Day 2 with a near-perfect hurdles race. ASIAN ATHLETICS

Since my competition started on the 27th of May, I did my pre-meet shake-out on the 26th. I felt springy, sharp, and ready. I caught up with a few friends from other countries — the usual pre-meet chats about training, competitions, and how the season's been going. One of my favourite things about international meets is the sense of belonging. This is our tribe. We may be from different places, but we speak the same language — the language of the sport, of pushing limits, of purpose.

A lot has changed since my first senior international in 2015. Back then, physios and doctors were few and far between. Now, our support staff is a core part of the Indian team experience. The physios, coaches, and doctors work relentlessly behind the scenes. And even the coaches, who once primarily raised their voices to correct us, now offer calm encouragement and insight. The

It's complicated: 'My relationship with the discus is like that of two old friends who respect each other but rarely get along.' ASIAN ATHLETICS

culture has matured. There's a shared goal now — to win medals, yes, but also to support each other as professionals. It felt fresh and meaningful.

I always make it a point to speak to as many people as I can in the warm-up area — not because I'm overly social, but because I'm curious. I like to know what people are up to, and honestly, I enjoy a little masala. It helps me feel grounded and human before the chaos of competition.

That day, I bumped into the distance crew — Gulveer (Singh) and his gang — mellow as ever, quietly doing their thing in endless loops. Then, in stark contrast, were the 4x100m boys: loud, wild, full of energy. In a surprising twist, the usually boisterous throwers like Yashveer (Singh), Samardeep (Singh Gill), and Sachin (Yadav) were unusually quiet, focused on their work. And then there's my personal favourite duo: Pooja and Abhinaya (Rajarajan) — the firebrand next-gen of Indian athletics. Bubbly, expressive, full of energy, and always chatting. Their energy is contagious.

After a good warm-up, some laughs, and a lot of banter, I reminded myself: "You still have to compete tomorrow." So, I made my way back to the hotel, full of warmth from the team but ready to crawl into my cocoon.

My small core team had arrived by then — Wayne (S&C), Siddhi (wife), Avantika (sister), and Devesh (friend). We had a quick team meeting that night to go over logistics. Wayne handled my supplements and recovery protocols, Devesh was in charge of food and logistics for the day, Siddhi and Avantika were responsible for shoe changes, videography, and coaching cues during events. Everyone had a role, and they played it perfectly.

That night was all about quiet preparation. Laying out the shoes, recovery tools, clothes, equipment, and food for the day. I had already done a venue recce the morning before, so I knew exactly where everything was. After dinner, I said my good-nights and turned off the lights by 9 pm. I had to be up at 5 am the next day — the decathlon was waiting.

I went to bed, ready to compete, mind buzzing with the possibilities the next day might hold. I woke up, I felt fresh and energetic. But just as I was about to get out of bed, I glanced at the clock.

12 a.m.

What?

Only three hours of sleep. I thought the whole night had passed. From that point on, I was wide awake — not with panic, but with relentless thought. Nothing I did could lull me back to sleep. Just thoughts, thoughts, and more thoughts. This wasn't new; it's happened to me before, especially before big meets. So, I didn't panic. But I *needed* to sleep — and that was the one thing I couldn't force.

Twisting and turning, counting imaginary sheep and permutations, I mentally simulated the decathlon a hundred different ways. If I do *this* in long jump, then *that* will happen in 400m... if I nail high jump, I can afford *this* in javelin... It just wouldn't stop. Finally, somewhere around 4:30, I dozed off — only for my alarm to go off at 5.

Showtime.

I had to be up — give my body at least four hours to wake up before the 9 am start. I did my morning routine, grabbed the bag I had packed the night before, picked up six 1-litre bottles of water, and headed down for breakfast. Forced down a meal at 6 am., chased it with a few cups of coffee to kick-start this diesel engine I had become, and reached the track by 7:15.

Decathlon warm-ups are different. I prefer to do one long, comprehensive warm-up at the start of the day to save energy between events. That way, all I need before each event is a short activation — and I'm good to go.

The sun was already glaring — way too bright for that time. The birds were chirping. The athletes were buzzing around the warm-up track. And then:

"First call for men's decathlon 100m."

Nerves? Under control. Body? Felt fast, sharp. But something was off.

I wasn't excited.

This moment — nine months of preparation, sacrifice, blood and sweat — and I would rather be in bed?

That was odd.

But there is no time for introspection. Time to execute.

We lined up in the call room. Usually, I'm buzzing before the 100m. It sets the tone for the two days. A fast, snappy start tells me I'm ready. The gun went off — I felt a slightly sluggish start, but powered through the drive phase, hit top-end speed.

Behind the scenes: From Tejaswin's core team, S&C trainer Wayne handles his supplements and recovery protocols, while his wife Siddhi and sister Avantika are responsible for shoe changes, videography, and coaching cues during events. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Usually by this time, guys are pulling up on me. But not today. I was ahead of everyone except *him* — Yuma from Japan, reigning Asian champ, and one of the few Asians to have ever crossed 8000 points.

I crossed the line right behind him, glanced at the clock, expecting at least a 10.9.

11.2.

What???

I was stunned. I'd run faster with a groin injury four weeks ago. And now, at 100%, this?

But decathlon teaches you one thing — analyse later. For now, stay composed. You have to separate yourself from your emotions between events. That's what makes a decathlete.

Before I could even blink, we were at long jump — switched spikes, warmed up. Three jumps. You *must* register a mark. First jump — 7.28m. A solid start, but Siddhi told me I was a shoe-length behind the board. I had more in the tank. Second jump — 7.29m. Third jump — also close.

But not the 7.40m I had trained for. Not even close to the 7.37m I jumped while injured.

Something wasn't clicking.

Panic started creeping in. My strongest events were slipping. And it's not like I could make it up later — discus, vault... there's a ceiling to how much I can claw back there.

Shot put was next. I was spiralling. Legs jittery, hands shaky, mind in chaos. My competitors were all over 13m. My first two throws? 12.80, 12.81. One throw left. The pressure was enormous. Another bad event and I'm out of medal contention.

See, I'm not a balanced decathlete. My strength is Day 1. That's where I build my lead. Day 2? It's more about damage control. If I don't build that cushion on Day 1, I'm toast.

So, I stood in the circle. One last throw. I took a breath.

This is it.

Either I crumble, or I fight.

Glide. Explode. *GRUNT.*

13.79m.

A new PB. I was back!

Next was high jump — but I had two hours to reset. I dug around, trying to understand what was going wrong. Came across something called 'pre-start fever' — a psychological condition due to stress and nerves that mimics fatigue. Pair that with my three hours of sleep. Probably explains it.

Wayne and I made a plan. Lunch. Contrast shower — 30 seconds hot, 30 seconds ice, repeat 4–5 times. Caffeine. Nap. Wake up. High jump warm-up

It worked.

I crashed for 45 minutes. Best thing that happened that day. I woke up fresh, sharp. The PB in shot put had lit a fire. I felt like myself again.

High jump is my bread and butter. It's where I *must* gain ground. If I miss here, I'm a sitting duck on Day 2. I opened at 2.01m — after most had bowed out. Cleared it easily. Then 2.04, 2.07, 2.10, 2.13, 2.16, 2.19 — all first attempts.

At one point, I saw Gulveer start the 10K. Between jumps, I clapped and cheered. It helped distract my mind — my little mental trick. But... okay, this may sound un-athlete-like: the 10K *got annoying*. The track was swarming with skinny distance runners. Every jump, I had to look left and right, make sure no one was running through.

Still, 2.19m was a season best. I went for 2.22m — just missed it. As I took my last attempt, Gulveer crossed the finish. I was thrilled for him — but secretly wished the race had been scheduled differently. That 2.22m was within reach. (Sorry, Gulveer. I made up for it later by screaming my lungs out for the 5K.)

Last event of Day 1: the dreaded 400m. One lap of pain. I remembered legendary coach Clive Hart's 4 Ps of the 400m — *Push for the first 100, Pace the next 100, Position yourself the next 100, Pray the last 100.* I nailed the first three... but forgot to pray.

That last 100m hit like a truck.

50.10.

Not a bad score at the end of Day 1. But the real test? Morning of Day 2. When you have to hurdle over hip-height barriers that suddenly feel like Mt. Everest.

So post-400m: recovery mode. Massage, ice bath, food, compression gear, activation. In bed early. Slept like a rock.

Day 2 — woke up feeling much better. Body ached like I got hit by a bus — which is completely normal. If you can crawl out of bed, you're good to go.

Breakfast. Bags packed. Time to go again.

Hurdles were up first. The most unforgiving event when you're tired. I needed a solid race to create a cushion before vault. I was dialled in.

But warm-ups dragged. Heat 1

Sharing stories: 'I always make it a point to speak to as many people as I can in the warm-up area — not because I'm overly social, but because I'm curious. I like to know what people are up to, and honestly, I enjoy a little masala'. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

was delayed. Then I saw a crowd, medical personnel, stretchers. Heard whispers.

Yuma had fallen.

The reigning champ. who was second in the standings — breathing down my neck.

For a second, I thought I had gold locked. But I knew better. Without Yuma, silver was a realistic goal. If everything went right, maybe even gold.

As I was getting ready for my race, I saw him come out, neck-brace on. Concussed. Walking out, *ready to run hurdles*.

I couldn't believe it. This event is hard *with* full senses. He was about to do it while concussed.

I put the focus back on me.

Ran a near-perfect race — **14.58** — and extended my lead. Yuma? 14.53.

Next up was discus.

Now this one — this one always gets to me. My relationship with the discus is like that of two old friends who respect each other but rarely get along. I've worked on it, I've refined my technique, I've visualised it a hundred times — but still, every time I step into that ring, I'm not quite sure which version of me is going to show up.

I wasn't expecting miracles. I just needed to hold my ground. My warm-up throws were decent — not amazing, but enough to give me hope. My first attempt went out to 36. Second attempt — a bit more aggressive — landed around 37. I knew it was safe, not a PR, but enough. Enough to move on.

Then came pole vault — the monster in my story.

The event I had dreaded the most. I had been training, working on my run-up, on getting more consistent, but let's face it — it's still a relatively weak event for me. Especially when you're trying to survive among men who are clearing 4.70–4.90m on autopilot.

I opened low at 3.80m and cleared it easily. That gave me a little boost. Then 3.90m — again, clean. I tried 4.00m to see if I could sneak in a little buffer but missed all three. Still, I was still very much in contention. The medal equation was now real.

At this point, it wasn't just about competing. It was about surviving with enough juice left for **javelin and the 1500m.**

Now going into javelin, we had five guys fighting for three medals, and I was sitting in third. Still, I believed I could win gold. I was feeling great — javelin had been coming along well in training, and I knew I had one of the strongest 1500m races in the field.

Remember how shot put went? Two bad throws and then one big heave that changed everything? Javelin was the exact opposite.

My first throw — as soon as it left my arm — I *knew* it was a personal best. It landed cleanly around 56 or 57 meters. I pumped my fist... but the joy was short-lived. I had barely — *just barely* — stepped over the foul line. It wouldn't count.

Now I had two throws left, and my best throw wasn't measured.

The second throw was more conservative, more controlled — it only went 50 meters. And suddenly, I wasn't just thinking about gold slipping away. I was staring at the possibility of finishing outside the medals altogether. The other guys chasing the podium had strong throws lined up.

My third and final throw: 51 meters. Not enough.

It would all come down to the 1500m.

By the time a decathlete reaches the final event, you're running on fumes. Forty-eight hours of emotional highs and lows, two sleepless nights, your body wrecked. At that point, it's not about fitness — it's about grit. It's about willpower.

We were all in the combined events area waiting for the 1500m,

In the zone: Tejaswin in action during the javelin throw and the 1500m (below) decathlon events. ASIAN ATHLETICS

and the mood was tense. Everyone was quiet, in their heads, calculating the permutations — times, medals, margins. Bags were packed. Nothing more to do but run.

And then, the skies opened.

A torrential downpour — not a drizzle, not a shower, but a full-on tropical storm. It was so bad the organisers *stopped the women's 10,000m race mid-run*. I've never seen that in my life — not even in a school meet. It felt surreal.

Luckily, the rain let up just in time for our start. No delay. We were ready to be done.

With Yuma having pulled out earlier due to injury, four of us remained in medal contention: India, China, Taiwan, and Japan.

The equation was clear.

For India to medal, I just had to finish ahead of Taiwan and Japan. For India to win **gold**, I had to beat the Chinese athlete by **10 seconds**.

It was an easy decision: **all or nothing**.

I already had a medal from the last edition. This time, only gold would be enough to cap off the Asian Championships the way I had dreamed. Before the race, I made a point to thank every decathlete. Once this race ended, we would all go our separate ways — but until then, we were brothers. Win or lose, we had fought together. And I was grateful.

The race began. I surged to the front right from the gun. I was going for it.

My legs started dying around the 1km mark, but my spirit was soaring. I was running for something bigger than points — for the effort, for the journey, for the people who had carried me here.

I crossed the line in **4:37** and turned around, eyes locked on the track.

1... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7 seconds.

The Chinese athlete crossed. I needed **10**.

I had missed gold by **3 seconds** — just **16 points**.

But in that moment, that wasn't what I thought about first. My instinct was to embrace every single athlete at the finish line. They were all winners — not winners of medals, but conquerors of their own fear, doubts, and inner demons that haunted us across these two days.

My silver was confirmed. After the usual photos with the national flag, a few minutes with my support team, the Indian coaches, and the athletes who cheered me on, I returned to the resting area.

As I sat down, processing it all, my thoughts drifted to Yuma — lying quietly in a corner with his team doctors. He wasn't in pain from injury — it was the heartbreak. A gold medal that should've been his, taken not by a competitor, but by fate.

I realised then: my medal wasn't complete without acknowledging his impact. I wrote him a letter — not just for him, but for myself. To thank him. For pushing me. For being the standard. For reminding me that real heroes don't wear capes. They fight. And whether they win or lose, they leave it all on the field.

Post-decathlon action

My competition was over. The emotions had settled, the celebrations were done, and my body was in a million pieces — but my soul was content.

Yet the Asian Championships were far from finished. For TJ the athlete, yes — but not for TJ the lifelong track

and field lover. I took the next morning off to rest, but by the evening, I was back at the stadium. Watching. Cheering. Supporting. Living the sport in its purest form.

The very next day, the men's high jump final was scheduled. India's brightest hope, Sarvesh, was competing, and I was there, loud and proud in support. But equally important was witnessing Sanghyeok Woo perform in front of his home crowd in Korea. What a show he put on — every jump felt like a celebration of sport.

Later that evening, I watched Avinash Sable cruise to a dominant gold in the steeplechase — so smooth, so in control. And then came Jyothi Yarraji's incredible gold in the hurdles. Her surge between hurdles 7 to 10 was a masterclass in both technique and tenacity. She didn't just win — she snatched it.

There were many unforgettable moments, but two stand out. One was the night of the women's high jump final. That morning, I got a message from Pooja **(right)** — "You better be at the stadium tonight." I even got a call from her coach, Balwan Singh reminding me.

Pooja, to me, is the next big thing in Indian athletics. She's fearless. As she moved through her warm-up, I noticed something different. Gone was the pronounced hop in the middle of her approach. Instead, she was attacking the curve with a speed and rhythm I hadn't seen before. I walked up to her and said, "The only thing that can come between you and a medal is you yourself. Keep doing what you're doing — you've got this."

She didn't need me after that. She didn't need anyone. Her coach had done his job. And she was *ready*. A double personal best at just 18 and a continental title? That's not potential — that's power. That's presence. That's a *flex*.

The second moment was quieter — but just as powerful. It was the night before the men's javelin final. I had just returned to the hotel after Pooja's competition, and when I connected to Wi-Fi, I saw multiple missed calls from Sachin Yadav's **(right)** physio. I called back

ASIAN ATHLETICS

immediately. "Nothing urgent," he said, "but Sachin wants to talk." When Sachin came to my room, he looked calm on the outside. He's a towering guy — even taller than me — but I could see the nerves in his eyes. This was his first big international meet. Expectations were high. Pressure was heavy.

Before he could even say anything, I said, "Let's go get ice cream." That was it. No motivational speeches. No deep strategy.

Just a breather. A small moment to forget the weight of the world and remember that he belongs here.

The next day? He launched a *monster*. Just centimetres shy of beating the Olympic champion. It wasn't just a medal, but it was a statement: **he's coming**.

The one thing I truly realised at this Asian Championships is that the Indian athletics team of this decade feels very different. I saw myself in transition — from being the young rookie who made senior teams at 17, like Pooja is now, to becoming one of the older guys in the squad at 27. But one thing hasn't changed: my intention has always been to go out of my way to make the younger ones feel welcome. Because I remember what it was like to be in their shoes a few years back — unsure if I belonged, quietly doubting myself.

The truth is, if you've made the team, you've already done something right. You *do* belong. And sometimes, reminding someone of that doesn't take a motivational speech. Sometimes, it's as simple as showing up, sharing space, and grabbing an ice cream.

I'm genuinely excited about the kind of athletes coming out of India right now — brave, talented, and hungry. This isn't a one-off. This is just the beginning for Indian athletics.

ASIAN ATHLETICS

KLAUS AND EFFECT

Klaus Bartonietz might be one of the **most recognised** foreign coaches across sports in India, but his fame is majorly due to his six-year tenure as coach of Neeraj Chopra.

K. R. DEEPAK

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Himanshu Jakhar might be the reigning Asian U-18 javelin champion and one of India's best prospects in the sport, but on a blistering evening at Hisar's Agricultural University last month, he was discovering just how much there is still left for him to learn.

To the average observer, the 17-year-old's throws seem fine — landing in the 70m range with smooth trajectories. But for Himanshu, the approval he craves for must come from a figure standing just off the runway — a septuagenarian in a baseball cap who is video-recording his throws on an iPad. When he doesn't get the thumbs-up he is hoping for, Himanshu studies the footage to check where he went wrong. This time, it looks like his left leg is bending too much as it blocks, costing him crucial energy.

Rather than be discouraged, Himanshu makes over a dozen more throws over the course of the evening, with the belief that he could do better. It's clear why he wants this man's approval — it's not every day that Dr Klaus Bartonietz **(with Neeraj Chopra, above)** comes over to critique his throws. By the end of the session, Himanshu is all smiles.

Klaus may have written many of the textbooks on javelin throw, but his fame as one of the most recognised foreign coaches across sports in India is majorly due to his six-year tenure as coach of Neeraj Chopra. Together they created history by winning gold at the Tokyo Olympics, followed by silver at the 2022 World Championships, gold at the 2023 Worlds, and finally silver at the 2024 Olympics in Paris.

Klaus concluded his six-year partnership with the Indian not long after the Paris Games, but last month he was back in India. Although in the country only for a week on his most recent trip, he plans to return more frequently in the months to come.

The biomechanics expert will be creating training plans, conducting online classes for coaches, and mentoring younger athletes including Himanshu, Deepika (a silver medallist at the 2022 Asian Under-18 Championship), and Jyoti (a

RITU RAJ KONWAR

former junior national gold medallist).

Having worked with India's all-time great in the sport, Klaus is aware of the gulf in quality. "In Germany, when we were trying to develop talent, we would say it was like making candy from sh*#t. Here, it's like making a diamond from the dung heap. It's a different kind of challenge, but a new challenge," he shrugs.

Klaus hadn't imagined he would be back in India so soon. When the 73-year-old retired after parting ways with Neeraj last year, he had been looking forward to going home. "I first told Neeraj about retiring after the Tokyo Games, but he convinced me to stay for some more time. He told me, 'Coach, it's just another three years until Paris.' So, I stayed. But both of us knew that I was going to leave after that. So, after Paris, he didn't try too hard to make me stay," says Klaus.

Klaus' home is in the village of Oberschlettenbach, located in south-west Germany, just across the French border. The difference between Oberschlettenbach and Hisar is stark. The former is home to just 130 residents, with pleasant summers, scenic hiking trails, forested mountains, and old castles built during the Holy Roman Empire. At the heart of his village is a fountain that draws crystal-clear drinking water from the surrounding mountains. Hisar, in contrast, is a bustling industrial town of over three lakh people, with temperatures reaching 45 degrees Celsius.

Oberschlettenbach might be idyllic, but Klaus' first project was yard work. "In six years, everything had been growing too much. I had to bring everything to order. In November, I was cutting overgrown trees for firewood. Then at the start of winter, I collected wild mushrooms. In the spring, there were flowers to be planted, and the apple and cherry trees were blossoming," he recalls, in a conversation with *Sportstar*.

> **One of Neeraj's greatest strengths is his creativity. He is always curious about various exercises – why something worked and why others didn't. He is always looking for ways to improve** – Klaus Bartonietz

Klaus and his wife also visited family members, something he never had time for during his previous stint in India. "My daughter is in Australia, so I was able to fly there and visit my two granddaughters. I told them about my time at the Olympics. I think they found it interesting, which was nice," he says.

It was impossible to keep him away from the sports ground, though. Klaus has been mentoring Swiss heptathlete Lucia Acklin for a while. "When Neeraj and I were in Switzerland, I contacted this young heptathlete, who trained with us. Neeraj gave her some advice as well. Then last year, she won a silver medal at the World Championships (in Lima). That was quite good," he recalls.

But Klaus was also returning to the grassroots. "There's a small club run by the administration of the town near my village. It's about 50 km away, but I'd go there and coach the children in javelin and discus. They only pay 12 euros an hour – like minimum wage – but it's something I enjoyed doing," he recalls.

It was around this time that Manisha Malhotra, president of Inspire Institute Sport, offered him the role of consultant in Hisar. "Manisha was like 'don't let him go so easily out of India. Let him come back and help us to work with our younger throwers'. So, we thought about such a project," Klaus says.

Klaus admits he has a secondary motive to return to India. "I love the mountains. Wherever I go as a coach, I make it a point to go to the mountains. When I was in China, I travelled to the Pamirs near the Afghanistan border. One of the reasons I chose to come to India as a coach was because I'd always wanted to see the majestic Himalayas. I first explored them near Shimla, then I travelled from Mussoorie down the Yamuna, and

Lost in paradise: Besides training young athletes, Klaus was also drawn to India by a desire to visit the Himalayas — a fascination rooted in his childhood in Oberschlettenbach, a village nourished by mountain springs (centre) and surrounded by forested hills. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

then just before I left, I went to the Rohtang Pass near Manali. But there's a lot I haven't been able to do. I want to see the Nubra Valley and Spiti. Maybe I'll do it this time," he says.

Impressive as these heights are, equally impressive are the ones he scaled together with Neeraj.

When he arrived in India in 2018, Klaus wasn't specifically meant to work with the then 20-year-old. "At that time, Neeraj was training under Uwe Hohn. When I first came, I was working with the other athletes — Shivpal, Annu (Rani) and others. One day there was a meeting with (Lalit) Bhanot, the Chief Coach, the president of the AFI, and Uwe and Neeraj. And then, at the end of the meeting, Neeraj said, 'I won't work anymore with Coach Uwe.'

"At that time, I wasn't even aware that there was any issue between the two of them. They had just won the Commonwealth Games and Asian Games together. But not long after that, in the spring of 2019, Neeraj and I started working together," Klaus remembers.

The early days of their partnership coincided with a series of injuries for Neeraj, who eventually had to undergo surgery on his elbow that kept him out of action for most of 2019. For all of Neeraj's talent, Klaus admits he wasn't thinking about Olympic gold at that point. "At the time we started working together, we were mostly focusing on his rehab. So, we did a lot of gymnastics work. That's when I got an idea of just how well coordinated he was. He had a lot of endurance as well, which I saw during his training sessions in South Africa.

"But did I think he would become Olympic champion in Tokyo? No. Of course not. I thought he would make the final, but I didn't think he was going to win gold. The goal back then was to make the final, then get to the last three throws and see how that went. I think I only really started believing it when he made that throw of 87m in the Olympic final and there was no one who was getting close," he says.

But it wasn't Neeraj's physical attributes that stood out to Klaus back then. "Neeraj wasn't the strongest. There are other throwers who were much stronger than him, but the stronger he got, the poorer his throws became — and that was because he stopped using his brain. One thing that always stood out about Neeraj was just how professional he was. He has a few people he really trusts. There was this friendship he had with (physio) Ishan, but it was built on professionalism.

"He was always on time, always prepared. He never forgot anything. Just a very sharp person with a very sharp mind. He was very fixated on the javelin throw. He knew almost

everything there was to know about other athletes and their performances. Apart from that, one of Neeraj's greatest strengths is his creativity. He is always curious about various exercises — why something worked and why others didn't. He was always looking for ways to improve," he says.

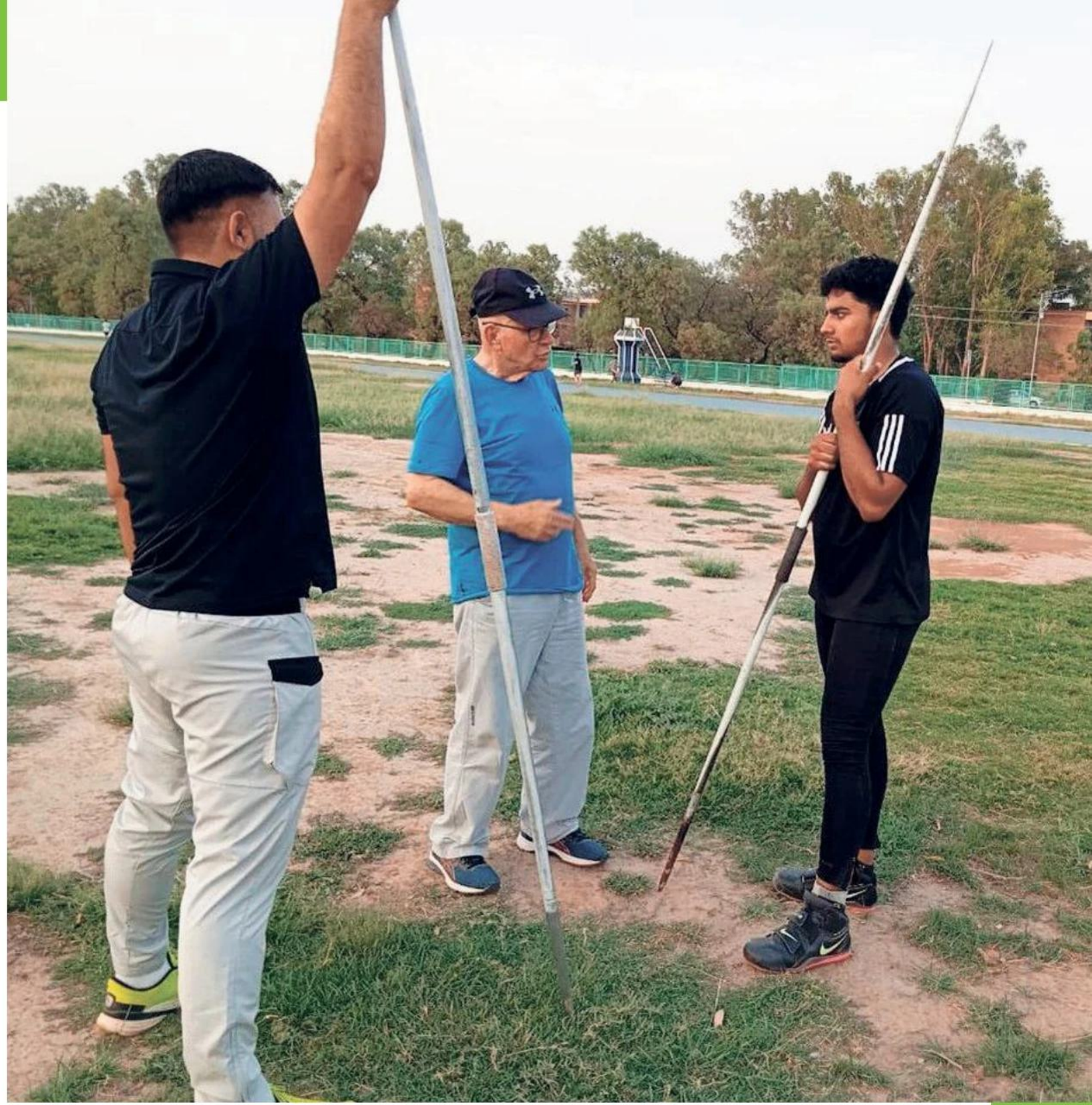
But there was something even more important that Neeraj had, feels Klaus. It was his sense of honesty. "Those are Neeraj's best qualities. His brain and his honesty," says Klaus. According to him, that is in short supply in Indian athletics. Athletes took advantage of each other, and intrigue was commonplace.

"I don't think the system in India is very honest. The middle administration wants to feel important regardless of what is needed. Very early in my time in India, I came across an incident when a senior athlete took money from a younger thrower. The junior didn't even realise he was being taken advantage of, and I had to go and recover his money," says Klaus.

Uwe Hohn, Neeraj's former coach, was subject to this too. "Before the Tokyo Olympics, it was clear that there were officials trying to get rid of him or at least not renew his contract. They had a couple of senior athletes give evidence that Uwe was coaching an athlete from Australia instead of paying attention to them. I was shocked at that. I said nothing like this had happened. It wasn't that Uwe was a bad coach. He had taken Neeraj to the Commonwealth and Asian Games gold. And when I asked these athletes why they had done this, they just said it was what they had to do," says Klaus.

He says he considered resigning alongside Uwe "as a matter of principle" before ultimately deciding to stay on with Neeraj.

There was none of this constant intrigue around Neeraj though. Klaus still isn't entirely clear why. "I think some of it probably has to do with his upbringing. Most of family members are farmers and is a very decent group of people. But there was a clear honesty to Neeraj which was not common when I worked here. The other seniors would treat juniors like servants. They would have them carry their equipment after their sessions. I've never once seen Neeraj not carry his own javelins himself. There was never this sense of superiority — and this was after he became an Olympic champion," he says.



Expert advice: Young javelin throwers like Himanshu (right) have the privilege of being mentored by Klaus. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Some of Neeraj's honesty, Klaus feels, came from his motivation for getting into sport in the first place. "I think a lot of the problem comes when you get into the sport because you are thinking about the outcome. I remember a piece of news I saw before the Tokyo Olympics, where Shivpal (Singh) was meeting the UP Chief Minister and he said something like India would win three medals but was not sure about the colour.

Perhaps this happened to Johannes Vetter too. He was going into the Olympics as the huge favourite. I think he was thinking about breaking the world record there, but in the end, he picked up an injury. But I always felt it was very different for Neeraj. He was motivated by the process of throwing, never by the outcome. Because of that, it was never difficult to keep him focused," says Klaus.

His own role, he says, was fairly simple. "As a teacher, I only had to support him in training and keep him on the right path. I don't think there was any pressure on me to work with Neeraj. I think the pressure was more on him. As a coach, I didn't think I could do it anymore, so there was no point in panicking. My job was to stay quiet and not do anything stupid that would disturb him," says Klaus.

While Klaus was able to play this role to perfection, some instances were harder than others. "The one time I was really nervous — like I was back in school giving an examination again — was before the finals of the Tokyo Olympics," he says.

The Olympic gold, unexpected as

R. K. NITHIN

it was, will always be a career-defining medal for Neeraj. "It is, of course, the one I am most proud of. Not the World Championship. The Olympics is what made Neeraj great. All his sponsorships and fame happened because of it, without which he wouldn't have his millions. Maybe he would still have won the Worlds, but the Olympics is his greatest achievement," says Klaus.

But Klaus clarifies that it didn't define him. "Nothing changed with Neeraj after the Olympic gold, and again I think that is because of his motivation for the sport. A lot of athletes get into the sport maybe because they wanted money or a job. But for Neeraj that wasn't the case, and I think that's where the difference is. So even though there was a lot of money, and there were all these girls who wanted to marry him, he didn't get distracted. I think the only thing that changed was that he got older and even more mature," says Klaus.

But while he didn't succumb to distractions, Neeraj was limited by injuries. Some have been well documented — like the elbow he had surgery on in 2019 and the recurrent groin injury that's bothered him over many years. There are also lesser-known ailments Klaus reveals — such as the time Neeraj fractured his little finger while practising hurdle jumps before the 2023 Worlds. But perhaps Klaus's toughest moment came in 2022, he says, when Neeraj picked up a groin injury during a practice session.

"He thought this was one of his best-ever workouts when it happened. He had warmed up well too. And he was throwing with a lot of power when he picked this up. When he got that, I felt it was going to be difficult to finish the season. We went to see a lot of specialists in Dubai, Italy and France," says Klaus.

Klaus credits Neeraj's eventual recovery to physiotherapist Ishan Marwaha's "creative rehabilitation work". However, he admits the injury did limit Neeraj's performance and says he wonders if he could have managed Neeraj's training better.

"I wonder if perhaps he was overloaded in training. That might have been a problem. But Neeraj was always someone who pushed himself. He always wanted to have a really good workout. That was his philosophy. I think 90 percent of his workouts were really hard ones. In all our time together, I remember there was just one day when he felt tired from throwing the day before and had to take a break," says Klaus.

Unfortunately for Neeraj, this time coincided with the rise of Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem, who would go on to beat him with a record throw at the Paris Games.

"I knew before Paris that it was going to be very difficult to win a second gold. Especially if you have to deal with athletes like Arshad. We knew Arshad had an injury because he had surgery, but right after that he was throwing over 90 metres! He's not a very fast thrower but he has textbook technique. I knew it was going to be difficult after he got that 92-metre throw (in his second throw of the Olympic final), but I thought Neeraj had that capacity. He got an 89-metre throw as well, but it wasn't enough. I am not disappointed.

"It wasn't that we did something wrong. Neeraj didn't have his best day, and that coincided with Arshad having a near perfect day. You can't be angry at Neeraj for this. You must accept it. Neeraj did so as well and he congratulated Arshad for it," says Klaus.

Klaus says he still keeps in touch with his former trainee. "We don't speak, but we do send messages to each other. I congratulated him after he threw 90m (in the Doha Diamond League)," says Klaus.

That throw, says Klaus, is a testament to how Neeraj — who now trains under world record holder Jan Zelezny — is still getting better. "I think there was good wind in Doha which helped the throw, but what really stood out for me was Neeraj's run-up speed. He was so fast. It was a very powerful run-up," says Klaus.

Neeraj has spoken of being injury-free, especially regarding the persistent groin issue, and Klaus says that has played an important role behind his runway speed. "The fact that his groin injury is healed doesn't really impact his running speed because the groin really gets activated at the crossover stage which follows the run-up. But at the same time, you won't run in so fast if you are afraid that your groin can't handle that power. Being injury-free is allowing him to run faster now. He's more confident that he can turn with that speed," says Klaus.

Despite becoming only the 26th man to breach the 90m barrier, Neeraj was beaten to first place by Julian Weber in Doha. He himself called the moment a bittersweet one, but Klaus believes he'll recover

quickly enough.

"Neeraj goes into each competition thinking it's a new competition and the dice has to be rolled again. What was before does not count. It's the same even now. He throws 90m and then Weber comes and throws bigger. But he's someone who is fine with it. If someone else does better than him, he's OK. It's a good quality to have. Otherwise, you take too much stress," he says.

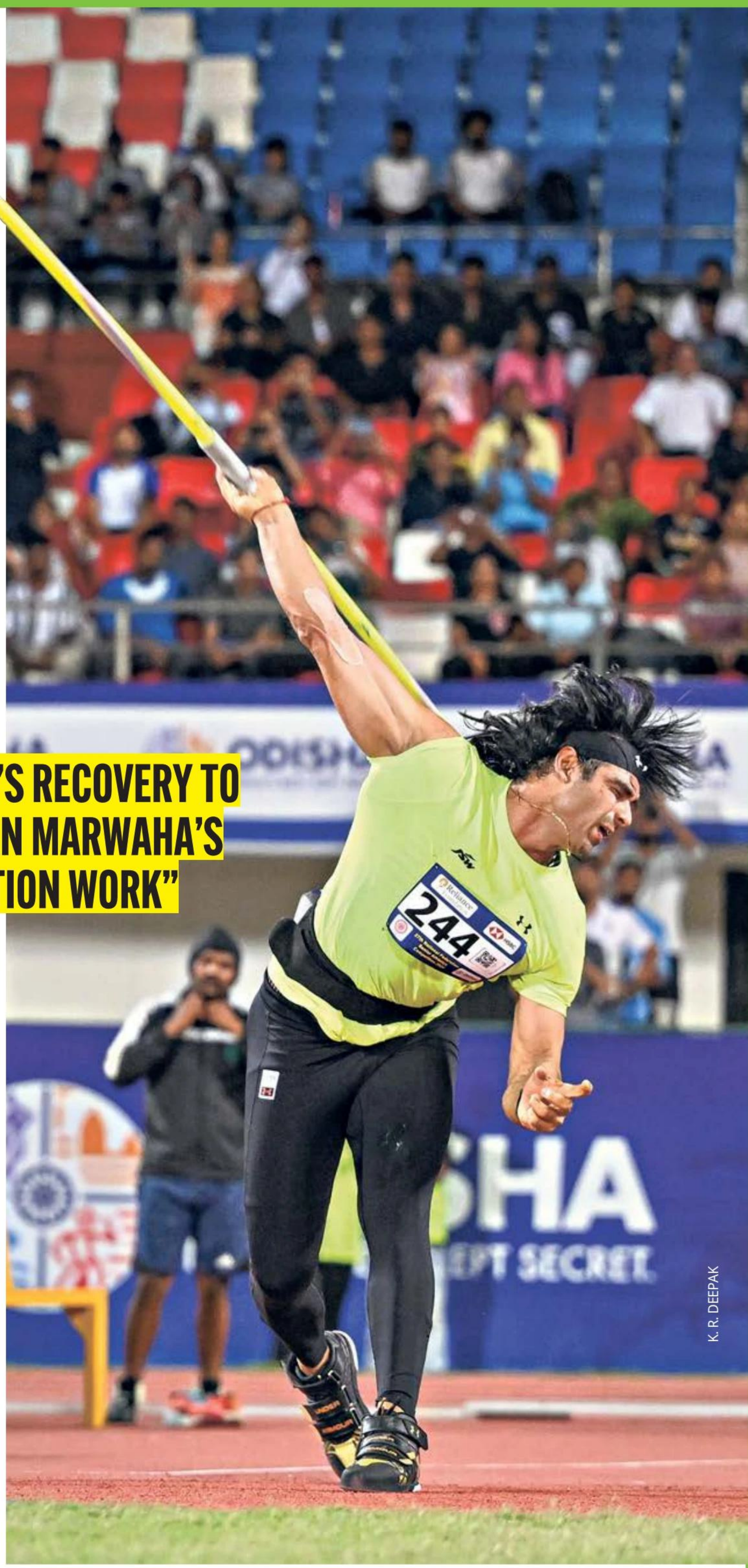
Klaus hopes Neeraj manages to stay injury-free if only so they could meet again. "There is a Diamond League in Paris in July. I might be back home at that time, but I think I can take the train to Paris and meet him there," he says.

But Klaus has higher expectations for Neeraj than just another Diamond League. "I think he can compete for many more years. He should compete in Los Angeles, of course, but I also think he can compete in Brisbane. I myself want to be around in another 10 years and I'd like to see this," he says.

KLAUS CREDITS NEERAJ'S RECOVERY TO PHYSIOTHERAPIST ISHAN MARWAHA'S "CREATIVE REHABILITATION WORK"

Although he's back in India looking to unearth more talent, Klaus knows it won't be easy. For one, he's not going to be spending as much time in India as he had during his previous stint. Then of course there's the question of whether there are more diamonds out there.

"You had two very good throwers (Shivpal Yadav and Manu DP) and they both failed dope tests. Now you have another good thrower — Sachin Yadav **(facing page)**, right? He is throwing well, and I hope he stays clean. But can you find another Neeraj? I don't know," he says.



K. R. DEEPAK

Infrastructure boost: Mallakhamb's debut at the 2024 Diu Beach Games sparked lasting change — a permanent training setup now stands at a school in Khanvel, Silvassa. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

From the margins to the mainstream

Khelo India Beach Games in Diu **elevates lesser-known sports,** showcasing untapped talent and shifting perceptions of beach sports as professional avenues in India.

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Manipur, a landlocked state, emerged victorious at the inaugural Khelo India Beach Games (KIBG), held on the Blue Flag-certified sands of Ghoghla Beach in Diu. Despite participating in only two disciplines, Manipur topped the table with five gold, six silver, and three bronze medals — four of the gold medals coming in the Pencak Silat event.

The KIBG featured six medal events: beach soccer, beach volleyball, Sepak Takraw, Pencak Silat, open water swimming, and beach kabaddi. Mallakhamb and tug of war were included as demonstration sports. A last-minute addition saw a boxing ring replace the Mallakhamb poles to showcase the local boxing talent.

This wasn't the first time Diu hosted beach games. Last year's edition, held in January, was an independent initiative by the Union Territory (UT) of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu (DNH & DD), with Madhya Pradesh — another landlocked state — winning. This year's Games were under the Khelo India banner, featuring 1,300 athletes from 31 states and union territories, up from 1,200 participants last year.

Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya hinted during the opening ceremony that Diu could become a permanent venue for the Beach Games. The move reflects the UT's growing ambition in promoting beach sports and boosting sports tourism.

Challenges and quick adjustments

It was only in March that the UT was told that it would host the KIBG. So, the Games came together in a short time. Arun Gupta, Director and Joint Secretary, Sports and Youth Affairs, DNH & DD, said, "Organising this edition wasn't a big challenge for us because we had the experience of

Inclusive sports: The KIBG featured six medal events, including Sepak Takraw, while in Silvassa **(pic, below)**, officials turned a flyover's underbelly into a vibrant multi-sport arena with local and indoor games.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

doing something similar last year. However, the timing was touch-and-go. The month of May is very hot, and there was a prediction of high tide after May 25. So we had to wrap up the Games before that."

Last year's edition was limited to Under-21 athletes. This year's KIBG was open to all, received national media coverage, and helped reshape perceptions of beach sports in a region where they're traditionally seen as leisure activities. Gupta noted, "Holding these Beach Games showed children they can play these sports professionally."

A lasting impact was visible in Mallakhamb. The sport's inclusion in last year's Games led to a permanent set-up at a school in Khanvel. Gupta shared how children are increasingly asking about beach sports and how to enroll. He expressed hope that hosting the Games regularly would give the UT's tourism a national appeal.

Investments and barriers

The UT has invested nearly Rs 300 crore in sports infrastructure over the last 5–7 years, funded from its budget. Arun T, Sports Secretary of DNH & DD, highlighted some of the major projects: a cricket stadium in Sayli undergoing modifications, a football ground in Daman, and two Olympic-sized swimming pools in Diu. A Khelo India State Centre of Excellence in Silvassa focuses on table tennis, archery, and athletics, with infrastructure for the latter two under development at an estimated Rs 70 crore.

In Silvassa, the department creatively repurposed the space beneath a flyover into a sports arena with facilities for chess, ludo, carrom, basketball, air rifle shooting, and judo. Gupta added, "One initiative the UT government took to bridge the urban-rural gap in sports is that we distributed standard kits of volleyball, football, and cricket to selected athletes from each ward and panchayat." A report from the Department of Youth Affairs & Sports, DNH & DD, states that 35,000 such kits were distributed.

However, challenges persist. "Changing the mindset is a task," Gupta said. "People here see sports as entertainment or something to do alongside other work. They don't yet view it professionally." Local sports federations also face difficulties in gaining recognition from their respective national bodies. Gupta cited cricket as a prime example. "Many local associations, like cricket, aren't recognised by national federations. If someone wants to play cricket, they can't represent the UT and must play for Gujarat. That's a loss because Gujarat would obviously favour its own athletes. We're trying to work with these federations to gain recognition."

A platform for athlete voices

The Games provided a platform for athletes from lesser-known sports to raise issues. Punjab tug of war men's team head coach, Mandeep Singh, said, "There is no gradation for tug of war in Punjab. Unlike sports like kabaddi or cricket, ours isn't recognised. Recognition would help us create more players who can represent India internationally."

Kerala tug of war women's team captain, Nima MT, spoke about the lack of funds for athletes. Pencak Silat's Princess Thomas, a world championship bronze medallist, said more state-level funding and national advertising are needed to improve the sport. Manipur's Sinam Chingkhei Singh, a double gold medallist at KIBG, called for cash prizes and government jobs for athletes. Chaoba Devi, an Asian Games bronze medallist in Sepak Takraw, urged the creation of an academy to nurture talent.

Boxer Suman Vijay Pahal, although not from the UT, asked for scholarships like those offered in Haryana. Beach soccer players, including Rohith Yesudas and Satish Naik, suggested launching a professional league akin to the ISL. Female players like Jasoda Munda and Naaz Shaikh participated in South Asia's first women's beach soccer tournament and expressed hope for more such initiatives to grow the women's game.

Arriving just before the closing ceremony, Raksha Khadse, Minister of State for Youth Affairs and Sports, said the government is learning from events like the KIBG. "We talk about the Olympics; events like this will give athletes a platform to perform and also help us gauge what we need to improve as a sporting nation."

Back on track

McLaren continues its dominance with **back-to-back wins** by Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri.

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Norris cruises to victory at Monaco

On this track, racing often takes a back seat. This year, it wasn't too different as the spectacle once again became a contest of patience and precision. On a circuit where overtaking is negligible, and there is more focus on pit strategy than pure pace, victory is decided long before the chequered flag — during qualifying.

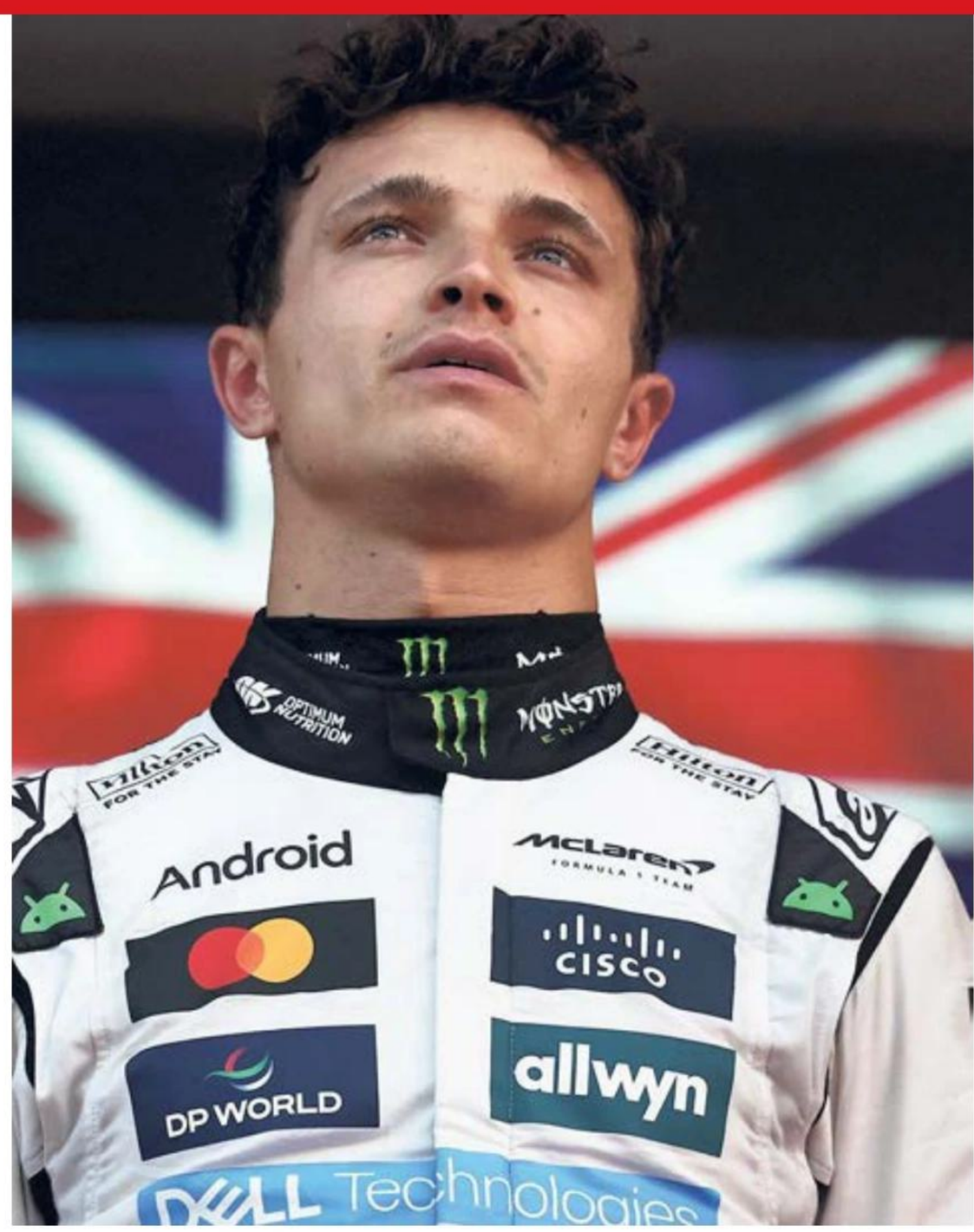
And on Saturday, Lando Norris delivered a lap that's worthy of Monaco folklore, snatching pole from hometown hero Charles Leclerc by the finest of margins. In Monaco — a place Norris now calls home — something shifted.

Coming into the eighth round, Norris had trailed his McLaren teammate Oscar Piastri in both form and fortune. After winning in Melbourne, his season became a frustrating string of near-misses — podiums and points aplenty — but a win remained elusive.

Even his sprint victory in Miami came under the shadow of a well-timed Safety Car. Each weekend chipped away at his confidence, and he admitted to the struggle. The pressure of expectation, both internal and external, was beginning to bite. He finally caught a break and received a much-needed push in Monaco.

The FIA's introduction of a mandatory two-stop rule aimed to add some excitement, but the status quo at Monaco remained intact. Over the 78 laps, the pit wall chess match defined the race. Teams strategically delayed the grid for pitting, bluffed tyre choices, and built significant gaps to gain advantages.

An improbable team game took centre stage, and perfectly managed stints mattered more than bold overtakes. An unpredictable element was added to the monotony of the Monegasque event, yet not much changed. But rising above it all was Norris, who had revived himself once again, snatching his first win since the season opener in Australia. Shaky off the line but sharp thereafter, he didn't put a wheel wrong and absorbed pressure from a determined Ferrari, leaving no room for error.



Two-way drama: Lando Norris (above) and Oscar Piastri (right) won the Monaco and Spanish Grand Prix. REUTERS & AFP

Leclerc, who has endured a love-hate relationship with his home race, kept the pressure high throughout, but could not make it a second fairytale victory in a row in front of his people. Piastri rounded off the podium.

The result reignited Norris' title challenge and McLaren's hold on the top two of the standings. In his redemption drive, he realised a dream — to win in Monaco, the crown jewel of Formula 1 and the race every driver wants to conquer. In doing so, Norris reminded the world, and perhaps himself, that he still belongs at the very top.

MotoGP

The British MotoGP event witnessed the younger Marquez brother, Alex **(right),** cruise to sprint victory, while a surprise new race winner from Aprilia gave the team its first win in more than a year.

At the Silverstone circuit, Fabio Quartararo impressed with his single-lap pace once again and stormed to pole, pipping Marc Marquez. But his glorious lead lasted one lap in the sprint before the Spaniard overtook him to get back on course.

However, the older Márquez made a rare mistake, running wide on the second lap and handing the prized position to Alex, who had passed

Piastri ticks off Spain win

Just three points separated the McLaren duo atop the standings, with the team's dominance in the constructors' table cementing its status as favourite in Barcelona.

The Spanish Grand Prix, the final stop of another gruelling triple-header, seemed the ideal setting to end the team's 20-year winless streak at this venue.

As in Monaco, a front-row start in Spain is often half the battle, and McLaren had both drivers leading the pack. To the disappointment of previous winner Norris, it was Piastri who snatched pole with a commanding lap. However, the Max Verstappen threat loomed large from third on the grid.

The Red Bull ace made quick work of Norris but couldn't quite match the McLarens on raw pace. Banking on aggression, Red Bull went with a three-stop strategy, giving Verstappen the licence to push hard on fresher tyres. The gamble had begun to work until it all went downhill.

Norris, who had regained his place later on, had the Red Bull in his rear-view mirror just as they began to lap the slower cars. But a Safety Car upended everything — the entire field got a cheap pit stop. Verstappen's earlier stops were nullified, and the advantage dissipated.

With fresher tyres and track position, it was advantage McLaren once again. Piastri nailed the restart, Norris followed, and Verstappen fell into the clutches of Ferrari's Leclerc. Battling both the scarlet red competitor and his own car, the Dutchman's podium hopes faded quickly.

His frustration peaked with a clash involving George Russell, earning him a 10-second penalty and three penalty points. He slumped to a disappointing tenth, losing further ground to the runaway McLaren pair.

Piastri claimed his fifth win of the season, leading McLaren to its third 1–2 finish in nine races — its first in Spain since Mika Hakkinen and David Coulthard in 2000. Leclerc, continuing his comeback trail from Monaco with his third podium, offering a rare bright spot for Ferrari.

As the F1 bandwagon heads to Canada for round 10, McLaren sits firmly in control.

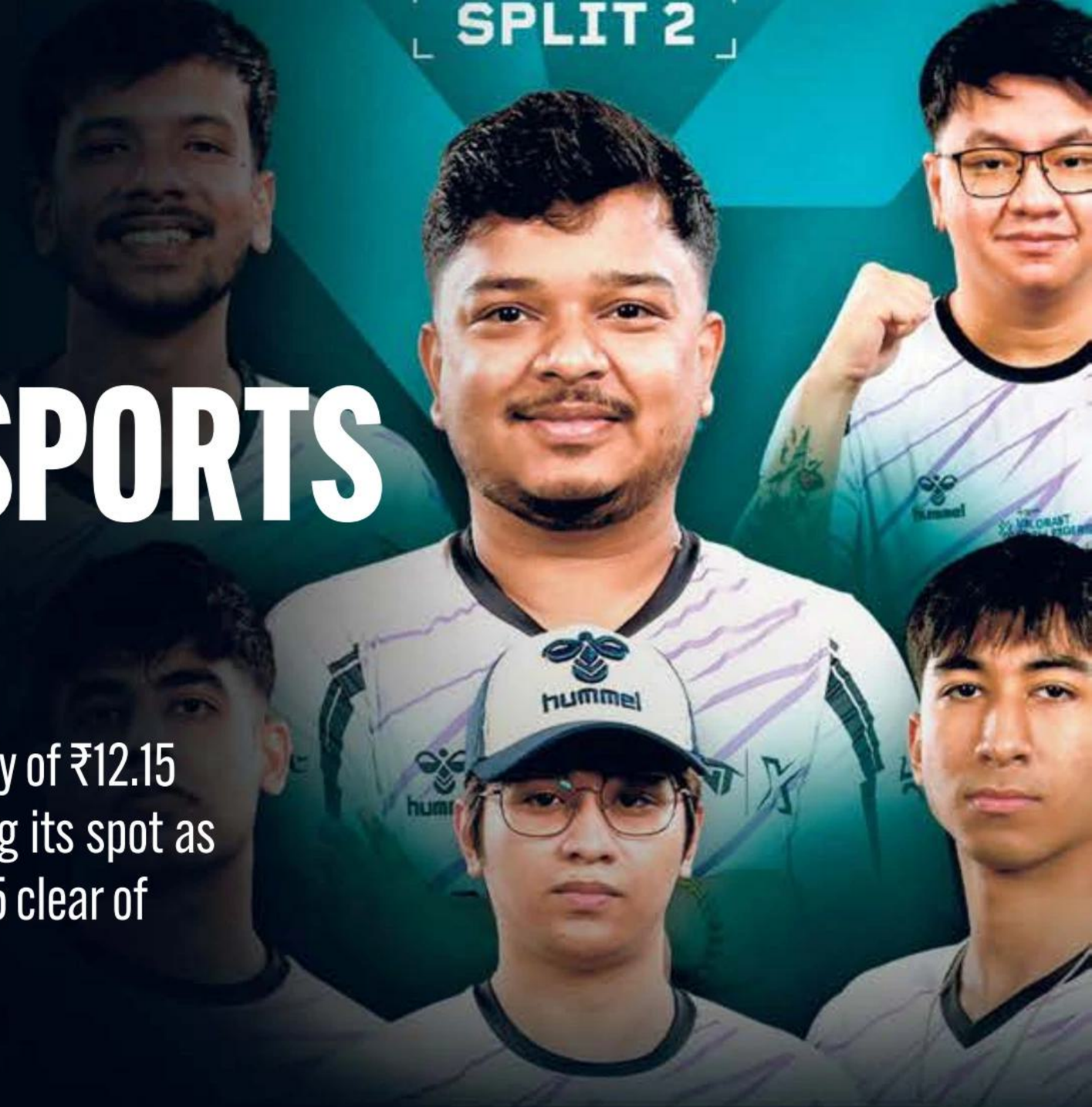
And with Piastri and Norris separated by 10 points, the championship fight is increasingly shaping up as a two-way race.

Quartararo moments before. Marc remained close to Alex for most of the race, but he was never allowed to bounce back.

Alex fittingly ended his brother's perfect record in this year's sprint races, guiding his Gresini Ducati to the finish line.

But on Sunday, it was Marco Bezzecchi **(left)** who starred, acing a masterclass in tyre management to win the Grand Prix for Aprilia — a long-awaited achievement in this dismal season without defending champion Jorge Martin, who recently announced his decision to leave the side.

Bezzecchi executed a soft-tyre gamble impeccably to take the chequered flag ahead of Johann Zarco and championship leader Marc. The Ducati rider, scoring consistently so far, enjoys a 24-point lead over Alex, who finished fifth.



REVENANT ESPORTS TRIUMPHS

The winner walked away with a prize money of ₹12.15 lakh and 105 Challenger Points, cementing its spot as **South Asia's best Valorant team,** 25 clear of second-placed Velocity Gaming.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

The 2025 edition of Valorant Challengers South Asia Split 2 Finals saw Revenant Esports win the crown in style, thrashing Reckoning Esports 3-0 in the best-of-five grand finals in Mumbai last week.

The winner walked away with a prize money of ₹12.15 lakh and 105 Challenger Points, cementing its spot as South Asia's best Valorant team, 25 clear of second-placed Velocity Gaming.

The tournament began with Revenant getting the better of Velocity Gaming in a close upper bracket match that ultimately swung in the former's favour in overtime. While Velocity Gaming retaliated strongly on the second map, it was Revenant which remained in control throughout the clash, putting the competition to bed on Sunday.

The two-day LAN event, organised by Nodwin Gaming, also coincided with Valorant's five-year anniversary.

GURASHISH FINISHES SIXTH IN BRICS ESPORTS CHAMPIONSHIP

India failed to match its historic finish at the BRICS Esports Championship from last year, with Gurashish 'Soul' Singh finishing sixth as the best player from his country, taking home INR 1.1 lakh.

At the 2024 edition, Wasfi 'YoshiKiller' Bilal from India had won silver while Khorwal had finished fourth.

But with the competition expanding from just four countries to 22, Gurasish's grit earned him a spot in the final eight after beating players like BIG PA from Cuba and Gazhilla from Indonesia. However, he finished second-best against Kazakhstan's Leonsluv. Meanwhile, Khorwal reached only up to Group Stage 3.

BRICS Championship winners:

1. XCC (Weibo Gaming, China) – USD 19,434
2. KaizokuLars (Turkey) second – USD 11,013
3. Strog (Russia) – USD 6,478

POKEMON UNITE RANKINGS

OM "SCEPTER" GORE

NIKHIL "FYURA" RAJPUT

RAUNAK "CROWLEY" SEN

LOKESH "TENSEI" KUMAWAT

VISHNU "XESOL" KHATRI

ESPORTS WORLD CUP 2025 GETS A DOCUMENTARY

Engaging fans through documentaries has been a trend in the last decade, with Drive to Survive – Formula 1 – and The Test – Cricket – attracting over seven million viewers.

Now, Esports has one of its own, with Amazon Prime announcing a documentary titled 'Esports World Cup: Level Up' on the inaugural edition of the tournament, set to be played in Saudi Arabia between July 8 and August 24.

Two-time Emmy Award-winner R. J. Cutler will direct the show, which will also feature FIFAe legend Mossad Aldossary – a FIFAe World Cup winner (2018) and the only person to win back-to-back XBox World Championships.

ASIAN YOUTH GAMES TO FEATURE THREE MEDAL EVENTS IN ESPORTS

The 3rd Asian Youth Games (AYG) is set to feature eFootball, Street Fighter, and Rocket League as official medal events, each to be contested in both boys' and girls' categories.

Scheduled to be held in Bahrain from October 22 to 31, 2025, the tournament will include 24 sports disciplines, with esports making its debut as an official medal event.

Open to athletes aged between 15 and 18 years as of December 31, 2025, the esports competitions will be governed by the Asian Electronic Sports Federation (AESF).

The inclusion of PC-based esports titles marks a significant development for India, a market conventionally dominated by mobile gaming.

Esports will also feature at the upcoming Asian Games in Aichi-Nagoya where 11 esports titles will be official medal events. India had competed in four titles at the last edition of the Asiad.

Did you know? Portugal and Al Nassr midfielder Otavio Monteiro has invested in Legacy, a Brazilian esports organisation, to primarily help with the growth of Counter Strike 2.

QEEYOU AND AVENGERS TO REPRESENT INDIA AT WORLD ESPORTS CHAMPIONSHIP

Qeeyou and Team Avengers from India secured spots in the 17th World Esports Championship (WEC), acing the Counter Strike 2 and Dota 2 titles, respectively, at the National Esports Championship (NESC).

The tournament began on May 22, with the final played six days later. Both titles were played in a double-elimination format.

Qeeyou clinched the title after dominating Fired Up Gaming in the CS2 finals with consecutive victories (13-6 on Anubis, 13-7 on Ancient).

Meanwhile, the Avengers reigned supreme in DOTA 2, pipping The Mob 2-0 in a lopsided battle.

WHO AM I?

I came in second place in the 2022 Esports Award for Mobile Players of the Year. I hold the record for the highest individual kill count with 16 kills in a PMIS semifinal tournament.

The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Tanmay "Sc0utOP" Singh

BUSINESS OF ESPORTS

Indian gaming Giant Nazara Technologies acquired UK-based gaming company Curve Games for INR 247 crore, expanding its global imprint in the esports scene.

EASTER EGG 'BULLET SPONGE'

Bullet Sponge in gaming refers to an enemy who is extremely difficult to neutralise or someone who is neutralised after a lot of damage to the opponent.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

Reciprocal change of mates

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Reversal of mate or continuation for two black defences over two phases is termed 'Reciprocal change' in problem parlance. It is a popular two-move theme extended to three-move as well where the second move continuations after two black moves are exchanged. Hundreds of problems on this pattern theme have been composed over the years using highly original schemes.In this article we would look at three two-movers with reversal effect where one of the two defences is a black king flight. In the first diagram below shows how the reciprocal theme relate set play to actual play.

C.G.S.Narayanan
First prize,StrateGems 2011

Mate in two move

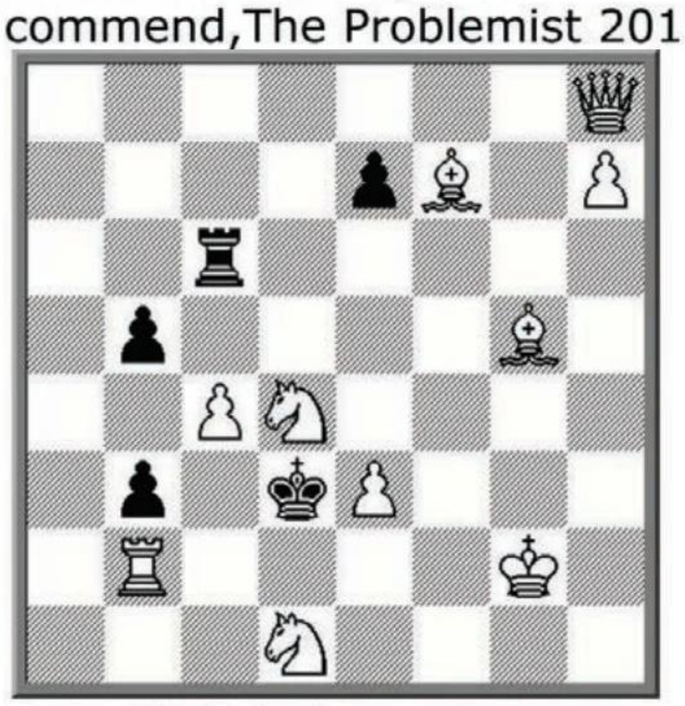
The two black defences to watch are 1....Rxb3 and 1...Kxe6 and the set play runs like this.1...RXb3 2.Ne3 (**A**) and 1...Kxe6 2.Ne7 (**B**).After the **key 1.Qc7**! the threat is 2.Qd6 1....Rxb3 2.Ne7(**B**) and 1...Kxe6 2.Ne3(**A**)not 2.Ne7 as f7 guard will be lost.

Let us study as to how the reversal of mates take place after key.In the set 1...Rxb3 eliminates guard of c4 and so 2.Ne3 has to cover this square.After the key 1...Rxb3 is met by 2.Ne7 opening up the masked battery to cover d5.Here 2.Ne3 cannot be played as guard for e4 is lost.

The second two-mover has some embellishments- a flight giving key and opening and closing BR line.

Set: 1...Rxc4 (self-block on c4)2.Bg6 (A);1...Ke4 2.Nf2 (B) **Key 1.Ne6** (threat 2.Qd4/Nf4) 1...Rxc4 2.Nf2(B) and 1...Bg6 (A) (WN closes the sixth rank) and the by-play 1....Kxc4 2.Qd4;1...Rd6 2.Nc5

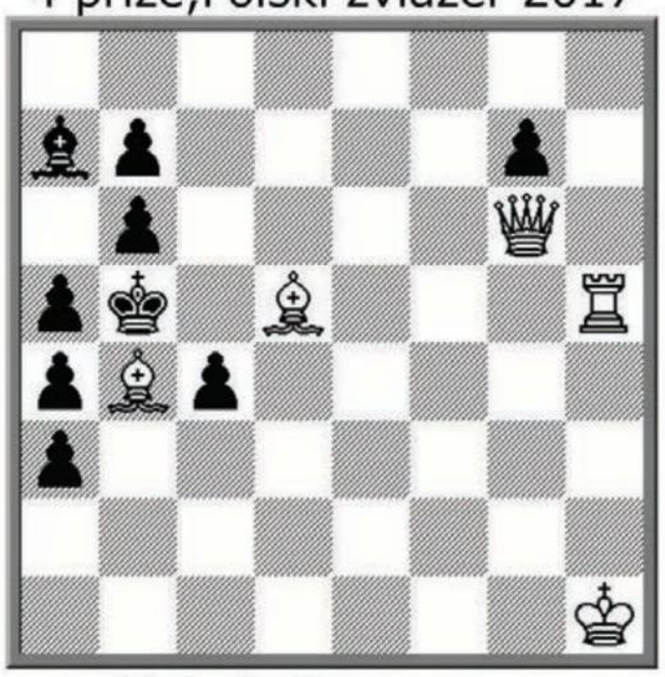
C.G.S.Narayanan
3 commend,The Problemist 2011



Mate in two move

The problem for solving below shows reciprocal change for the defences Ka6 and axb4 from set to key.

C.G.S.Narayanan
4 prize,Polski zviazer 2017



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article' On solving three-movers'

Key 1.Qb2! zugzwang Nice retreating key1...Kd7 2.2.Qe5 waiting

(2...Kc6 3.Qd5;2...Kc83.Qc7

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

Pardeep Narwal announces retirement after going unsold in Pro Kabaddi Season 12 auction

Pardeep Narwal, the most successful player in Pro Kabaddi League history with three titles, announced his retirement from kabaddi on Monday after going unsold at the PKL Season 12 players' auction.

He stunned kabaddi fans with the announcement during a live video with sports broadcaster Sunil Taneja. Narwal said he would now take up a coaching role.The 28-year-old played a pivotal role in Patna Pirates' three consecutive PKL titles during his five-season stint with the franchise before moving to UP Yoddhas in Season 8.

Narwal remains the most prolific raider in PKL history, having scored 1,801 raid points at an average of 9.47 per match.

However, over the last four seasons with UP Yoddhas and Bengaluru Bulls, he struggled to break into the league's top five raiders for raid points.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

SPORTOON

The Neeraj Chopra Classic 2025 will now take place on July 5 at Bengaluru's Sree Kanteerava Stadium, JSW Sports announced. Originally set for May 24, the event was rescheduled due to security considerations and in a gesture of solidarity with the nation.

Billed as India's first-ever international javelin competition, the event is a collaboration between Neeraj Chopra, JSW Sports, the Athletics Federation of India (AFI), and World Athletics (WA). It will be the highest-tier international athletics meet ever held in India.

Leading the field is Neeraj, Olympic champion and reigning world title-holder. He'll be joined by an elite group of throwers, including:

*Anderson Peters (Grenada), two-time world champion
*Thomas Rohler (Germany), Rio 2016 Olympic gold medallist
*Julius Yego (Kenya), 2015 world champion
*Kishore Jena, Asian Games silver medallist and India's rising star

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Collagen, a functional revolution in fitness

Here's why athletes across the globe are going **bonkers** over this performance protein.

It's 6:30 am.

My client — an elite athlete — walks into my clinic with aching knees after a 12 km run. He's in peak physical shape, gets eight hours of sleep, and follows a near-perfect whey-based recovery regime. Yet, the chronic joint soreness persisted. So did early signs of skin sagging at just 29. Why?

The solution, surprisingly, wasn't more protein powder — but collagen.

As a sports nutritionist with two decades under my belt, I've lived through every trend: BCAAs, glutamine, casein, vegan blends, and of course, whey protein's dominance. But in the last five years, collagen has emerged not as a fad, but as a functional revolution in athletic recovery, longevity, and injury prevention.

Let's break down the real science and reason why athletes across the globe — from runners and CrossFitters to swimmers — are choosing collagen as their primary performance protein.

What exactly is collagen?

Collagen is the most abundant protein in your body. It accounts for about 30 per cent of total protein and acts as the structural scaffolding for your skin, bones, tendons, ligaments, cartilage, and even your gut lining. Think of it as the internal glue that keeps your body resilient and springy — the kind of resilience every athlete needs.

Unlike whey, which is a complete milk-derived protein rich in muscle-building amino acids like leucine, collagen focuses on tissue repair rather than just hypertrophy. Its amino acid profile is rich in glycine, proline, and hydroxyproline — the triple threat responsible for collagen's repair magic.

Let me be clear — whey protein still has its place. It's anabolic, quickly absorbed, and supports lean muscle mass. But here's what most sportspeople aren't told:

✪ Whey does nothing for connective tissue. Muscle growth is just one part of performance. Your tendons, ligaments, fascia, and joints don't benefit from leucine the way they benefit from glycine and proline.

✪ Whey can trigger digestive issues. Many of my clients with dairy sensitivities experience bloating, acne, or fatigue with regular whey use.

✪ It's short-term focused. Whey helps you recover muscle. Collagen helps you sustain your body through years of training.

If you're serious about building not just muscle, but a body that lasts — collagen fills the gap that whey leaves behind.

Backed by research

Still sceptical? I was too, until I delved into clinical studies:

✪ Joint Health: A 24-week study published in the Current Medical Research and Opinion journal found that collagen supplementation reduced joint pain in athletes with activity-related discomfort. Participants taking 10 grams of collagen daily reported significantly less pain during movement.

✪ Tendon and Ligament Support: Collagen, when paired with Vitamin C pre-training, has been shown to improve tendon stiffness and reduce injury risk. This is game-changing for high-impact sports like football, tennis, and long-distance running.

✪ Skin and Recovery: Collagen stimulates fibroblast activity in the skin, supporting wound healing and tissue regeneration — both essential for post-game recovery and injury management.

✪ Bone Density: Collagen peptides can increase bone mineral density, especially crucial for female athletes prone to bone stress injuries or menstrual irregularities.

In my clinic, I've worked with many athletes. After integrating collagen into personalised recovery plans, I've observed:

Inside story: Collagen is the structural scaffolding for the skin, bones, tendons, ligaments, cartilage, and even gut lining. It's like the internal glue that keeps your body resilient and springy — the kind of resilience every athlete needs. GETTY IMAGES

✪ Faster injury rehabilitation

✪ Less joint stiffness after heavy lifting or long runs

✪ Improved skin quality, especially in endurance athletes exposed to oxidative stress

✪ Better gut health, especially when collagen replaces whey for those with intolerance

One elite female swimmer in her late 30s told me, "Whey helped my muscles, but collagen saved my shoulders."

Another pro cricketer said his chronic elbow pain reduced in just three weeks after switching to a collagen–Vitamin C routine post-training.

Tips on how to use collagen

If you're ready to make the switch or even pair it with your current whey, here's what I recommend:

✪ Dosage: 10 to 15 grams of hydrolysed marine or bovine collagen peptides daily is optimal for most athletes.

✪ Timing: The best time to take collagen is 30 to 60 minutes before a workout, especially when combined with Vitamin C to enhance absorption and tissue targeting.

✪ Form: Look for flavourless, odourless collagen peptides that mix easily into your black coffee, smoothie, or even *parathas* and *idlis.*

✪ Stacking: You can still take whey post-workout for muscle synthesis, but take collagen earlier in the day to support joint, tendon, and skin repair.

Marine vs Bovine: What's best?

I recommend marine collagen for most athletes because it's Type I dominant — the type most prevalent in skin, tendons, and bones. It also has superior bioavailability, meaning your body absorbs it more efficiently. It's ideal for those who want clean, heavy-metal-tested, sustainable options. Bovine collagen, known for its Type I and III collagen content, offers excellent support for skin and gut health. However, due to religious preferences in India, many individuals may choose to avoid bovine sources and opt for marine instead. Clean sourcing, no additives, and third-party testing are non-negotiable.

The biggest myth is that collagen is only for glowing skin. That's like saying protein is only for bodybuilders. As a performance nutritionist, my job is to help athletes last longer, heal faster, and age better. Collagen helps regenerate soft tissue, protect your joints, and even reduce inflammation through glycine pathways. In a world where ACL tears, shoulder impingements, and overuse injuries can end dreams, collagen is not a beauty supplement. It's a biomechanical insurance policy.

Collagen isn't a trend — it's a return to what your body needs, but modern diets lack. It's not a competitor to whey — it's the missing counterpart.

If you're an athlete or an everyday warrior who wants to train smarter, heal better, and age powerfully, start thinking beyond biceps. Start thinking about fascia, ligaments, cartilage, and recovery.

Collagen is not optional anymore — it's essential.

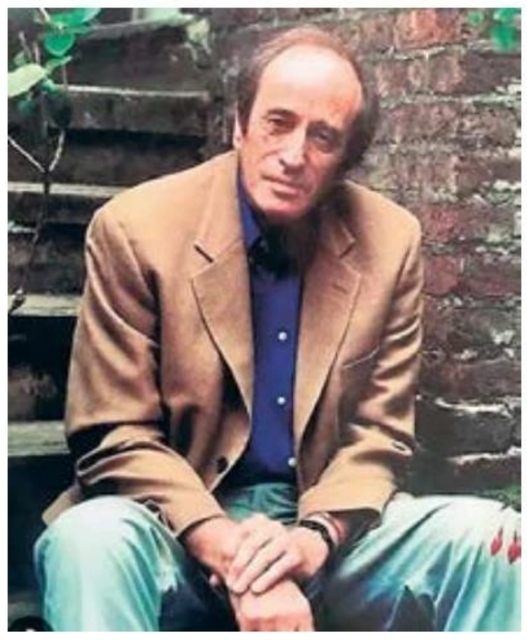
Writer par excellence

Brian Glanville's two collections — *People in Sport* and *Footballers Don't Cry* — are must-reads for any young aspirant.

Suresh Menon

At an impressionable age, I had two heroes in football. Besides those who played the game at the highest level, these were Geoffrey Green and Brian Glanville.

The latter came home on a regular basis over the years thanks to this magazine. Green I met later through his newspaper columns and his memoir, *Pardon Me for Living,* in which I read that he had been to the same college in Bengaluru where I had graduated from.



With the passing of Glanville **(in pic)** at 93, the great triumvirate of British football writers — Hugh McIlvanney was the third — have all left us.

When Hungary beat England 6-3 in 1953, Green wrote memorably of Ferenc Puskas who abruptly drew the ball back leaving the England captain Billy Wright, who had rushed to tackle him, charging past "like a fire engine going to the wrong fire".

It is a line Glanville quotes in his memoir, *Football Memories*, where he says of Green at his best was the best. There's always something special about a contemporary's praise.

"In his prime," wrote Glanville of Green, "he could ad-lib a match report effortlessly over the telephone.... Geoffrey's silvered prose flowed straight into the phone..." Funnily enough, that was my mental image of Glanville too, painted by a colleague of Glanville's in England.

This was confirmed by the *Daily Telegraph* which said of Glanville that "Extemporising to the copytaker, he would keep abreast of the number of words he had written with the help of a grid of boxes on a sheet of A4 paper, ticking each box off as he spoke." I find that quite incredible.

Glanville was probably the writer other sportswriters aspired to be, bringing to his work the discipline, the imagination, the charm that he brought to his plays, novels and screenplays. His two collections, *People in Sport*, and *Footballers Don't Cry* are must-reads for any young aspirant.

The former begins with the essay *Looking For an Idiom*, written in 1965, where he argues that British sports journalism is waiting for "the columnist who can be read by intellectuals without shame and by working men without labour." This is the profession's two cultures as it existed then.

On the one hand, the popular writer (in the tabloids), he wrote, "knows that every piece is a selling out... a cruel limitation of his powers," while the so-called quality writer is "an alienated figure, writing for an informed minority when, given the wide reference of his subject, he should be speaking to the generality..."

Glanville said then that what was lacking in Britain (unlike in America), was an idiom "which will throw a bridge across the two cultures."

Thirty years later, he revisited the theme in the second collection, and said, "Notwithstanding the new wave of football writing, Nick Hornby et al, not much has changed."

Simon Kuiper writes engagingly on football, as does David Winner, author of two delightful books on the game.

But for consistently attractive and provocative writing day in and day out, it is difficult to beat Brian Lester Glanville's output.

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