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POSTER
RAFAEL NADAL

PHOTOLINE
India tames the Aussies in Perth

DESI GAME, GLOBAL FAME

A decade into PKL, Indian kabaddi players are benefiting from a flourishing ecosystem

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OFF-SIDE

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FROM WUNDERKIND TO WONDERING WHY

Let us not weigh down kids with dreams and responsibilities too heavy for their small, still unsteady feet. **Let them run, but let them run free.**

Child prodigies aren't exactly a new phenomenon. Humanity, for long, has been captivated by the idea of children outpacing their age. Neighbourhood aunties, armed with cups of tea and unsolicited opinions, can't wait to crow about their little geniuses who have a knack for solving algebraic equations years before their classmates mastered the long division.

The world has always swooned over the Mozarts of history, composing symphonies before they turned five, or Sachin Tendulkar scoring centuries at 17 while the rest of us were figuring out how to talk to people we fancied.

But not every wunderkind can keep pace with the myth the world weaves around them. For every Tendulkar, there's a Budhia Singh — the boy who ran 50 marathons before his fourth birthday. But running marathons of expectations can be exhausting, both for the legs and spirit. Budhia disappeared from public consciousness as fast as he appeared in it; his talent wrung dry even before it had a chance to ripen.

Prithvi Shaw, a Test centurion when he was still too young to legally order a pint, is also paying the price of early fame and the paraphernalia it brings with it — money, endorsements, Insta reels and existential dread.

But the world doesn't pause to reflect. There's always another prodigy waiting. The three-year-old Anish Sarkar, the youngest-rated chess player with a FIDE rating of 1555; or the crorepati cricketer Vaibhav Suryavanshi.

The 13-year-old from Bihar scored a century for India in an Under-19 game against Australia earlier this year and was soon commoditised at the IPL auction. Rajasthan Royals secured his services for Rs 1.10 crore.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 32 protects children against economic exploitation. The sale (defining whether the auctioning of a cricketer counts as one is a debate for the lawyers) and trafficking of children is outlawed under Article 35. Neither the UNCRC nor the Committee on the Rights of the Child, however, has clearly defined a legal minimum age for professional sporting participation unlike it has for child marriage (18 years).

In football, clubs like Barcelona (2014), Atletico Madrid, Real Madrid (2016) and Chelsea (2019) have faced bans for circumventing FIFA rules that prohibit international transfers of players under 18. Yet, Lionel Messi signed his first Barcelona contract on a napkin when he was 13.

In Spain, players can sign a youth contract at 16 and a professional contract at 18 (Barca sensation Lamine Yamal is expected to sign a bumper professional contract when he turns 18 on July 13, 2025), while they can sign a professional contract on their 17th birthday in England.

In India, hiring children under 14 for any work, other than in certain family-based ones, attracts up to two years of jail time, according to the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986. However, its applicability to professional sport has never been considered.

"It is perhaps time for governing bodies to bring in regulations for the engagement of minors in professional sport to ensure they are not only protected from commercial exploitation by those who control them but also to ensure sport does not come in the way of their educational, emotional and social development," says noted sports lawyer Nandan Kamath. "One way to do this would be to ensure their sporting journey remains amateur until a certain age, which means they can play sport but are not paid for playing."

For Suryavanshi, there's hope in mentor Rahul Dravid and Rajasthan Royals's robust academy system. But how do we balance talent and childhood, ambition and innocence?

Let us not weigh down kids with dreams and responsibilities too heavy for their small, still unsteady feet. Let them run, but let them run free.

" Dr. Achyuta Samanta Makes History as First Indian Recipient of FIVB Grand Cross Award "

In a world where sports transcend boundaries and unite nations, few individuals have worked as tirelessly as Dr. Achyuta Samanta to ensure that young talents are nurtured and opportunities are created. The Founder of KIIT and KISS has added yet another feather to his already illustrious cap, being honoured with the Grand Cross Award—the highest accolade of the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB). This prestigious recognition, conferred during the 39th FIVB World Congress in Porto, Portugal, demonstrates his unwavering commitment to the development of sports.

Achyuta Samanta being presented the prestigious Grand Cross Award by International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) President Ary da Silva Graca Filho° in Portugal.

The three-day event, held from November 15 to 17, was a gathering of global volleyball leaders, with representatives from 222 countries in atten dance. Amid this distinguished assembly, Dr. Samanta shone brightly. FIVB President Dr. Ary S. Graça F° presented the award, highlighting the exceptional role Dr. Samanta has played in not just popularizing volleyball but also fostering sportsmanship at large.

For Dr. Samanta, this moment of glory was a culmination of years of dedication. "I am deeply indebted to Lord Jagannath for this recognition and dedicate this award to Him," he said in his acceptance speech. True to his inclusive vision, he also dedicated the honour to all sports enthusiasts and athletes of India, particularly those from his home state of Odisha and the institutions he represents—KIIT and KISS.

Building a Legacy in Sports

This award is only the latest in a series of honours that underscore Dr. Samanta's exceptional contributions. From being lauded with the Rashtriya Khel Protsahan Puruskar by the President of India in 2022 to receiving accolades like the FICCI India Sports Award 2022 and the CII Sports Business Award 2023 for "Best Sports Facility," his journey has been defined by a relentless pursuit of excellence in sports education and infrastructure.

At the heart of this success lies KIIT's state-of-the-art sporting facilities, widely regarded as among the best in India. These facilities have become the training ground for Olympians like Dutee Chand, CA Bhavani Devi, Shivpal Singh, and Amit Rohidas—names that have etched India's name onto the global sports map. Over the years, KIIT has sponsored the education and training of hundreds of athletes, creating opportunities where none existed.

A Vision Beyond Borders

Dr. Samanta's achievements in sports stem from his broader mission of holistic development. KIIT and KISS have championed the cause of nurturing young talents, p roviding them with world-class education alongside opportunities to excel in sports. His efforts have been lauded not only nationally but also internationally, with the Grand Cross Award serving as a crowning jewel.

The FIVB accolade is more than just recognition—it is an inspiration for others to follow in Dr. Samanta's footsteps. As he continues to build a legacy that blends education and sports, his work stands as a shining example of what vision and determination can achieve.

Rising Stars: India's Next Generation of Esports Athletes Take the Spotlight

Looking back at 2024, Indian esports has made significant strides, fueled by structured pathways and impactful community-building initiatives by Riot Games.

This year, India's competitive gaming scene reached new heights, with local talent advancing on the global stage. A defining moment was Revenant Esports' thrilling run at the VALORANT Champions Tour Ascension Pacific 2024 tournament in September, marking a pivotal chapter for Indian esports.

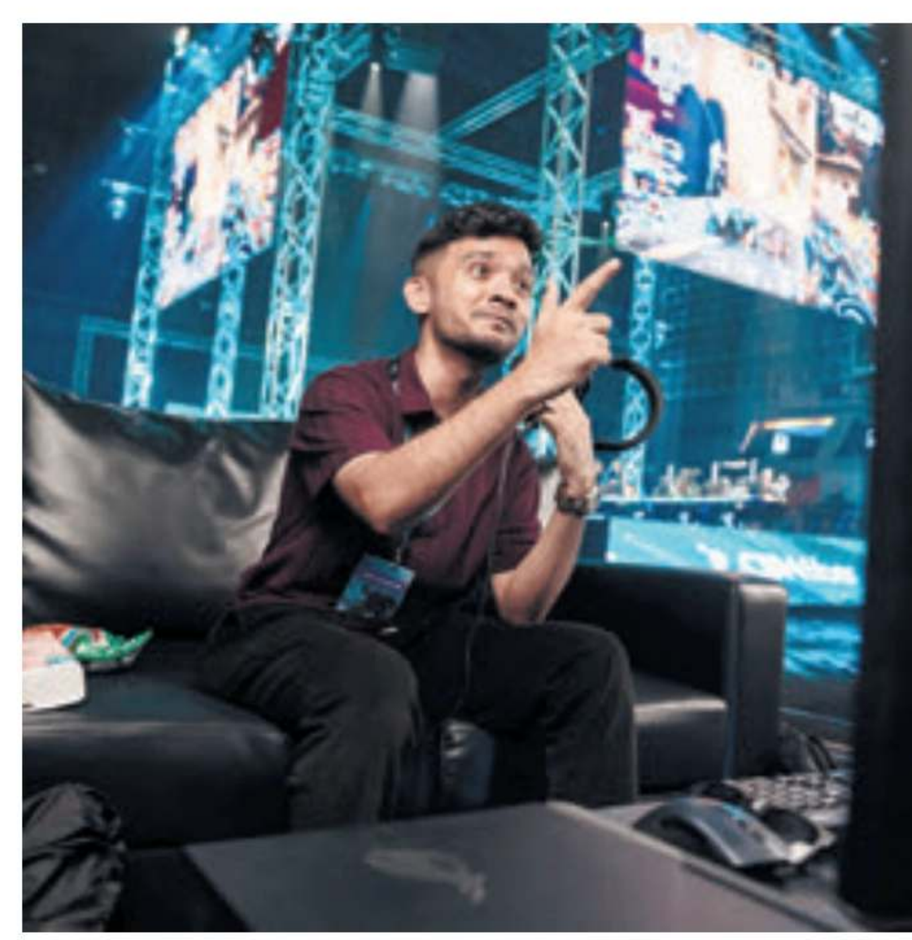
This wasn't just another tournament; VCT Ascension Pacific is where the best of the best in the Asia-Pacific region clash. Revenant Esports, one of India's premier VALORANT teams, went head-to-head with powerhouse teams from Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia, proving that Indian gamers can hold their own against international competition. Organized by Riot Games, the VALORANT Champions Tour (VCT) has provided a structured pathway for Indian teams to climb the competitive ladder.

Riot Games' role in Indian esports goes beyond major tournaments. Through regional competitions like the VALORANT Challengers South

Asia, the company has laid the foundation for a vibrant and competitive scene across India. It's not just about the big leagues; Riot Games has actively supported local initiatives, nurturing talent from the ground up and fostering a sense of community and opportunity for aspiring gamers nationwide.

Arun Rajappa, Country Manager, India & South Asia at Riot Games, said: "The passion and enthusiasm within the Indian gaming community are evident. With a large and diverse player base, India holds immense potential for growth and development in the gaming sector. "We're looking to work with everyone in the ecosystem to shape the growth of this market".

The VALORANT Champions Tour



Harsh Khelraay at VCT Ascension Pacific Jakarta 2024.

Sin Prisa Gaming wins the trophy at VCT Ascension Pacific Jakarta 2024.

(VCT) has become synonymous with high-stakes competitive gaming, and Revenant Esports' presence in Jakarta was a testament to the burgeoning talent pool within India. Their journey began with a dominant performance in the VALORANT Challengers South Asia series. This highlights how accessible platforms like VCT play an instrumental role in fostering grassroots esports development. It's a reminder that Indian gamers are not just participating but competing at the highest level, and the future looks brighter than ever.

Consistent regional tournaments play a crucial role in shaping the unique gameplay styles of different VALORANT communities. Just as China, Japan, and Korea are known for their systematic gameplay and South America for its aggressive gameplay, India has the opportunity to develop its own signature approach. By participating in more local and regional tournaments, Indian teams can refine their strategies and contribute something new to the global VALORANT scene.

Sukamal Pegu, Esports Lead, India & South Asia at Riot Games, highlighted the growing impact of the VCT on the Indian esports scene: "Revenant Esports' performance at VCT Ascension Pacific is a testament to the progress of esports in the region," he noted. "We are committed to nurturing this development and providing the platforms necessary for Indian gamers to succeed on global stages. We hope this inspires a new wave of Indian esports athletes to be motivated to reach their full potential."

Revenant Esports at VCT Ascension Pacific Jakarta 2024.

Riot Games continues to solidify its position as a leader in competitive gaming, drawing top talent and captivating audiences worldwide. The thriving esports scene reflects a strong dedication to competitive gaming and a commitment to hosting world-class events. The VCT Pacific circuit had three splits in 2024 – Kickoff, Stage 1, and Stage 2. This format provides a framework for the competitive VALORANT season in the APAC region. Kickoff was an important phase as it qualified teams for Masters Madrid 2024. Stage 1 and Stage 2 served as qualifiers, culminating in the prestigious VALORANT Champions event.

This season saw Singapore's Paper Rex claim victory in Stage 1, while South Korea's Gen.G Esports emerged triumphant in Stage 2. The impact of this structured tournament circuit is undeniable. It has opened new doors for aspiring gamers, provided a clear path to success, and made esports a more viable and exciting career path.

VALORANT has been instrumental in fuelling the growth of esports in India, providing crucial infrastructure and inclusive tournament circuits across South Asia. The rise of underdog teams in the VCT signals a bright future for Indian esports, with increasing opportunities for players to reach new heights. As Indian teams continue to gain experience and make their mark on the international stage, the region's esports ecosystem will undoubtedly flourish, solidifying its place in the global VALORANT community.

With the next VCT season on the horizon, anticipation is building for another year of thrilling competition and exciting breakthroughs. The future of Indian esports is brimming with potential, and the world is watching.

Fans cheering for their favourite teams during VCT Pacific 2024.

Triumphant: Players, coaches and staff of Team Italy lift the Davis Cup Trophy after their team's victory during the Davis Cup Final match against Netherlands at Palacio de Deportes Jose Maria Martin Carpena, in Malaga, Spain. GETTY IMAGES

Jannik Sinner leads Italy past Netherlands for its second consecutive Davis Cup title

Jannik Sinner clinched Italy's second consecutive Davis Cup title and capped his breakthrough season at the top of tennis by beating Tallon Griekspoor 7-6 (2), 6-2 for a 2-0 win over the Netherlands in the final of the team competition.

Matteo Berrettini put Italy ahead with a 6-4, 6-2 victory over Botic van de Zandschulp in the opening singles match on an indoor hard court at the Palacio de Deportes Jose Maria Martin Carpena in southern Spain. The Italians, backed by a loud contingent of singing fans playing drums and armed with megaphones in the crowd of 9,200, became the first country to win the Davis Cup twice in a row since the Czech Republic in 2012 and 2013.

Italy's women won the Billie Jean King Cup by defeating Slovakia.

“We were going through names and I realised that the perfect coach for me at this point would be someone who has been through the experiences I am going through, possibly a multiple Grand Slam winner, a former (world) number one.”

– Novak Djokovic on appointing Andy Murray as his coach

“I’m pleased to say that I take home a declaration of intent, a letter of application to join the bidding discussions for the 2028 Under-20 World Championships.”

– World Athletics head Sebastian Coe revealed after Athletics Federation of India submitted a letter of intent

5th

Kenya’s Sebastian Sawe went fifth in the all-time list after winning the Valencia marathon in 2hr 2min 5secs on his debut in the event.
Only compatriots Kelvin Kiptum and Eliud Kipchoge, and the Ethiopian pair of Kenenisa Bekele and Sisay Lemma, have gone faster than Sawe, the world half-marathon champion in 2023. Ethiopia’s Megertu Alemu took almost two minutes off her personal best to claim the women’s title in 2hr 16min 49secs.

8000

A French court fined an Australian man who tried to disrupt the start of the men’s Olympic 100m final at the Paris Games the sum of 8,000 euros ($8,440). Judged in absentia, the 24-year-old Australian also received a three-year stadium ban from the court in Bobigny, north of Paris. Wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with “Free Palestine, Free Ukraine, Jesus,” the man was intercepted by security staff at the Stade de France as he tried to enter the track during the Games on August 4.

ATHLETES OF THE YEAR

Dutch marathon runner Sifan Hassan (right) and Botswanan sprinter Letsile Tebogo (second from left), both of whom took gold at the Paris Olympics, were named ‘Athletes of the Year’ by World Athletics in Monaco. Hassan, who also won the out-of-stadium award, was rewarded for her incredible performance in the French capital, which stretched beyond the marathon and on to the track. In the space of seven days, she won two bronze medals in the 5,000 metres, having also run a heat, and the 10,000m, and a spectacular gold in the marathon when she outsprinted Ethiopia’s then world record holder, Tigist Assefa, to win by just three seconds. Tebogo received his award after becoming the first African to be crowned Olympic champion in the 200m, crossing the line at the Stade de France in 19.46 seconds, edging out the American Kenny Bednarek and favourite Noah Lyles. AFP

ALTER EGO

Shi Ming, a full-time medical practitioner, not only earned a UFC contract but also a **$50,000** Performance of the Night award after beating Feng Xiaocan.

Nigamanth P
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Shi Ming snatched a UFC contract in spectacular fashion in the Road to UFC strawweight finale, putting Feng Xiaocan to sleep with a thudding head kick in the opening minutes of the third round.

Feng never stood up after that. After an initial inspection, she was stretchered out by medical professionals and taken immediately to a local hospital. The UFC broadcast reported that the 22-year-old was conscious and talking at the time she was placed on the stretcher.

Shi, who is currently on a five-fight win streak, earned not just a contract but also a $50,000 Performance of the Night award.

Zhang Weili, the first Asian UFC champion and current women's strawweight titleholder, watched the match and was caught on camera expressing her excitement over Shi's knockout, stating it made her "hair stand on end."

Since 2020, Shi has reportedly claimed 12 MMA championships across China, South Korea, and Myanmar. But what makes this victory significant? Her story.

Shi, nicknamed Dr. Sleep, is a full-time medical practitioner specialising in acupuncture. Hailing from Heilongjiang, China, the grappler began training in taekwondo when she was 13 and transitioned to MMA in her 20s. Despite her 5'2" stature, she has developed a striking prowess and fierce fighting style, allowing her to maintain an impressive 17-5 professional record.

Following her Road to UFC win, Shi shared that her parents remain unaware of her MMA career, believing she participates in traditional martial arts. "I don't think I'm going to mention it to them," Shi was quoted as saying. "For my parents, they are traditional Chinese parents, and they worry about me. Only a doctor or a lawyer; I don't have other choices," she added.

Shi emphasised that she would continue participating in the UFC and established that she would be a force to reckon with. "I think I'm going to be a dangerous opponent in the future. Good luck to my next opponent."

Pantoja vs Asakura
Alexandre Pantoja

Starting early: Hailing from Heilongjiang, China, Shi Ming (right) began training in taekwondo when she was 13 and transitioned to MMA in her 20s. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

(right) will defend his flyweight title for the fourth time when he faces Japan's Kai Asakura at the T-Mobile Arena in the main event of UFC 310.

Pantoja's most recent outing was an astounding success, as he secured a first-round knockout win over Australia's Steve Erceg at UFC 305 in May earlier this year.

On the other hand, the Japanese MMA star has won 21 of 25 fights in his career so far and now has the chance to become his country's first champion against one of the greatest flyweights in history.

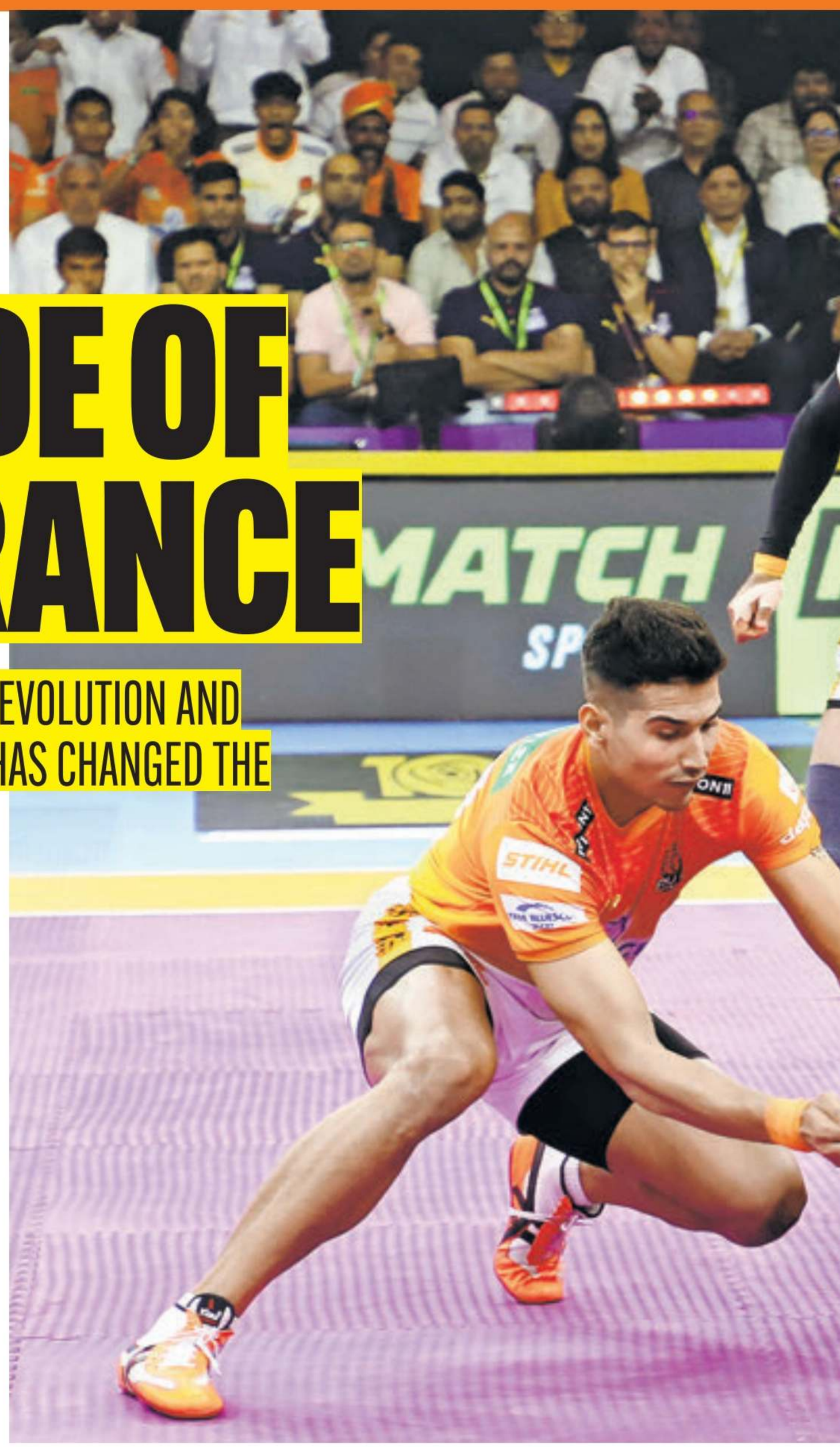
Meanwhile, the supposed welterweight title bout had to be scrapped after Belal Muhammad suffered a bone infection in his foot in October.

Muhammad shared the news in a social media post. "Caught a bone infection in my foot," Muhammad wrote. "Had to put a PICC (peripherally inserted central catheter) line in my arm for IV antibiotics for the next six weeks with no physical activity," he added.

Muhammad, aka Remember the Name, clinched the title with a unanimous decision victory over Leon Edwards at UFC 304 in July. He is unbeaten in his past 11 bouts and hasn't faced a defeat in nearly six years. Meanwhile, Rakhmonov earned his first UFC championship opportunity with a second-round submission of Stephen Thompson at UFC 296 this past December. Nomad, as his moniker goes, has finished all 18 of the opponents he's faced as a professional.

Welterweight number seven Ian Machado Garry was roped in as the replacement, and the bout will now be a co-main event instead of a title fight.

UFC 310 will be the final numbered event of the year. The series will resume next year on January 19 with UFC 311, for which the cards have yet to be announced.



A DECADE OF DELIVERANCE

STAKEHOLDERS WEIGH IN ON THE EVOLUTION AND IMPACT OF A TOURNAMENT THAT HAS CHANGED THE FACE OF KABADDI FOREVER.

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In 2010, young men in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh, particularly those inclined towards sports, had two main career paths before them: joining the Armed Forces or the Police. Rahul Chaudhari was no exception. A skilled athlete who wasn't particularly interested in academics (despite an aptitude for maths), Chaudhari found joy in sport, especially kabaddi.

"*Par haath, pair toot gaye toh?* (What if you break your limbs?)," his father would often say, admonishing him, especially for playing the sport he would later become synonymous with. Like many kabaddi players before and after him, Chaudhari came from a farming family, where seeking work outside agriculture was considered unconventional.

"We would look for jobs that offered 40-50,000 rupees a month. With that, you had to manage not only your family commitments but also dedicate resources to diet and training. Kabaddi is fortunate to have an entity like Pro Kabaddi League (PKL). Otherwise, players would never be in a position to give this sport their all," Chaudhari tells *Sportstar.*

He recalls a time when he sought out tournaments in nearby districts that offered a Bullet motorcycle as the prize for the top raider. "I had enough confidence to seek these competitions out because I knew I was going to come back with that bike."

That love eventually grew into a love for cars.

"I built a house with the money I earned from PKL. I got my brothers married and funded my own wedding. And yes, I got my share of cars. I bought an Audi. My father asked me why I was wasting money, but I told

Big stakes: Action from last season's PKL final between Puneri Paltan and Haryana Steelers. Pics: PKL

him I've worked hard for it. *Meri bhi koi life hai* (It's my life too)."

A step up the economic ladder

The star raider's prolific career has coincided with the birth and growth of the PKL. Modelled on the Indian Premier League (IPL), the PKL turned a rustic, relatively raw *maati se juda hua khel* (sport of the soil) into a hit television product.

For E. Prasad Rao, PKL's technical director, seeing players like Chaudhari, Aslam Inamdar (Puneri Paltan's PKL-winning captain), Siddharth Desai (a towering raider with Telugu Titans), and many others benefit financially from the league was one of two primary objectives.

"When we started PKL, the highest amount a player earned was ₹12 lakh, and we were incredibly happy with that," Rao remembers. "Now, that's what our junior-most players are getting. Some used that money to get a house, support their family, or even purchase a buffalo. It was big money, but they didn't spend it on themselves. That's what has changed over time. Players are now able to do all of the above while also spending on their own development — hiring trainers, physiotherapists, dieticians, and more."

The 2014 edition of PKL began with eight franchises, growing to 10 by 2017. League officials envision further expansion in the years to come, though those plans are yet to take shape. In the decade that has passed in PKL's life cycle, Rao believes that a key objective — potentially even the most binding one — has been fulfilled.

From strength to speed

"Look at cricket. Eighty per cent of the population that loves this game doesn't play it but stays connected in one way or another. Our biggest goal was to bring kabaddi to the common man in a similar manner. It's our own sport, born in India. Everyone here understands the basics of the game. Maybe some specific rules might be hard at first. But it never managed to carve a space in people's hearts. The game inherently has an excitement we needed to tap. The message we wanted to convey was to make people realise that such a fierce game is our own," he says.

Chaudhari was the young blood when the league began 10 years ago. Before him came legends like Anup Kumar, Rakesh Kumar, and Iran's Meraj Sheykh, who were the faces of the sport just after the turn of the millennium. Stellar performances, title wins, and a game whose international shape and

format were tweaked to cater to a television audience reaped massive benefits for the league. It eventually became the second-most watched sporting league in the country, after the IPL.

Chaudhari, donning the yellow of the Telugu Titans, became a household name and eventually the league's poster boy. It helped that the raider carried oodles of spunk and an almost arrogant confidence, often taking difficult games by the neck and turning them in his team's favour. His imperious performances earned him the title of 'Showman' — he was the league's first superstar.

"For me, the PKL trophy was the one jewel missing from a crown that had everything else. Despite the Asian Games medal, World Cup medal, and national titles, I would get asked, 'PKL *kabhi jeete*? (Have you won PKL?' All my achievements aside, it was the one trophy I didn't have that stood out."

Years past his prime in the PKL, when raiding opportunities were few

RAHUL CHAUDHARI BECAME A HOUSEHOLD NAME AND EVENTUALLY THE LEAGUE'S POSTER BOY. HIS IMPERIOUS PERFORMANCES EARNED HIM THE TITLE OF 'SHOWMAN'

and far between, Chaudhari — now in the Jaipur Pink Panthers' colours — finally won the PKL trophy in 2022. Team owner Abhishek Bachchan famously proclaimed, "From season 1, he has been putting in the effort to make a name for himself, so this title is for him."

The youngster who once just wanted to play his favourite sport on TV had finally earned his flowers, at a stage in his career when the league's

market had deemed him past his sell-by date. Ten years on, the realities of sport took over. He went unsold in the auction ahead of the ongoing 11th season and soon announced his retirement. His 'showman' title has passed on to another spunky, hotheaded superstar, Iranian allrounder Mohammad Mohammadreza Shadloui Chiyaneh.

"Look at the generations of players coming through. It's not only about player exposure and confidence; it's also about player height and weight. Now kabaddi has become about speed and agility instead of the earlier focus on brute strength," he explains.

Balancing faith with the market

Rao says the fact that defenders now fetch as much money as raiders — something he likens to how bowlers are now valued just as much as batters in the IPL — is also due to this shift. Earlier, raiding was considered the more glamorous skill. Today, a large chunk of players sees a higher value in being all-rounders. Pawan Sehrawat, the Indian captain and easily among the nation's smartest raiders, often doubles up in defence. This sets him apart and gives him an edge over an old-school muscle man-raider like Maninder Singh. Inamdar, Mohit Goyat. Even the league's latest raiding sensations, Devank (Patna Pirates) and Sushil Kambrekar (Bengal Warriorz), are handy in the backline.

Team dynamics have also evolved over the decade. Teams have had to balance faith in players and build personalities who can define their brand of kabaddi with actual performances on the mat. Warriorz have persisted with Maninder despite the ups and downs that come through in his season's raiding trajectory. Pune has built its brand around a core of five homegrown academy-developed youngsters who took the side to its maiden title in 2023.

Rising star: Devank (centre) has made heads turn this season by topping the raiding charts ahead of established names like Pawan Sehrawat, Ashu Malik and Arjun Deshwal.

Apurv Gupta, CEO of the Warriorz, calls it a chicken-and-egg situation.

"Maninder is Bengal Warriorz, and Bengal Warriorz is Maninder in some shape or form. That's the kind of association we want to build with a player," he explains. "We want to bring in players, have long-term associations with them, groom them, and build the brand around them." This, of course, has been a formula we've seen generate rich dividends in the IPL. The Pandya brothers and Ishan Kishan with Mumbai Indians, Yashasvi Jaiswal with Rajasthan Royals, and Chennai Super Kings sticking to tried and tested talents are just a few examples.

"A lot goes on behind the scenes. People see and evaluate a player based on just the 22 matches they play. But whether he was playing through pain, or whether his performance dipped for any other reason, these are all factors we consider. Good or bad seasons sometimes don't dictate the players we back," Gupta elaborates.

Kailash Kandpal, CEO of the Puneri Paltan, credits this frustration

« While more international fixtures would undoubtedly help elevate kabaddi's global stature, PKL serves as a critical platform for developing and nurturing talent that feeds into the national team – Anupam Goswami, Business Head, Mashal Sports & League Chairman, PKL »

for fast-tracking the establishment of the franchise's academy in Thane, which has produced championship-winning players for the side. "If you look at acquiring players from the auction, you barely get a few weeks to know the player and build team patterns around them. We can't hold players for long. Retention policies eased those stresses a bit, but we still have a long way to go there. Most of the boys you see now have been with us since season eight, but these are academy-groomed players rather than pure scouting acquisitions," he explains. Kandpal, however, does stress that the return on investment is quite small in terms of the number of players an academy can fashion into stars. He calls Inamdar and Goyat, the star duo of the Paltan, outliers rather than the norm, which makes kinder retention rules even more important.

Suhail Chandhok, CEO of U Mumba, is into his second season in the role after calling the game on broadcast since the league's inception. His entrepreneurial ventures into the sport involved setting up the Yuva Kabaddi Series and several other grassroots initiatives to churn talent for higher levels of the sport. He finds the current auction structure antithetical to the tendency franchises have. "Job security is one of the biggest anxieties players carry in this league. But the biggest problem, and the biggest frustration for me and many other team owners, is that when we sign a player, there's no guarantee that we will have this player for the next five years. As franchises, we might invest in Arjun Deshwal **(right)**, Abhishek Singh, or Siddharth Desai, but in two years' time, they could well be floating off to another team. The league needs to address this.

"Locking players down and building teams and systems around them has commercial value for the outfit and the fan base. Look at what Anup Kumar and legendary Iranian defender Fazel Atrachali **(facing page)** commanded at U Mumba. The youngsters coming through will also do that, but where is the guarantee? Where is the security for the investment I am making in that player? PKL is the second-biggest sporting league in the country, it's time we act like it and evolve from the patterns of the first decade. Long-term contracts, trading windows, player policies, exit clauses for teams to also be secure should all be on the table," he adds.

Globalisation in limbo

While the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a massive curveball to the sporting world as a whole, kabaddi and the PKL made a strong statement of intent by becoming the first contact sport to conduct a full-fledged league during the pandemic, albeit behind closed doors.

That said, inconsistencies in the sport's global scene predate the COVID era. World Cups sometimes come with gaps of over 8-10 years. Fazel told this publication a few years ago that the lack of robustly scheduled tournaments had robbed him of medals he would have otherwise definitely won. This season,he is more cynical at the mention of a scheduled world event in 2025. "I'll believe it when it happens," he said.

For franchises in the PKL, the bigger concern is having a player pool that has nothing to do outside of the domestic

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

THE LEAGUE, AFTER GOING THROUGH THE 12-CITY RIGMAROLE LAST SEASON, HAS RETURNED TO A THREE-VENUE SET-UP THIS TIME WITH A TWO-FOLD MOTIVE

structure for nine months outside the league's duration. "The longevity, I mean, two to two-and-a-half months of the league and then, you know, not being present for nine months is something that needs to be solved, either by the league, the franchisees, or as a collective," Gupta says.

Paltan does that with its Yuva Paltan participating in age-group leagues. UP Yoddhas is exploring the academy approach that Paltan has patented. Telugu Titans, Mumba and Tamil Thalaivas have often supported local tournaments to blood talent, but are yet to either develop academy structures or get their main squad into competitive patterns outside the PKL.

Breaking the duopoly

Chandhok believes that a blanket expectation of more international tournaments does no good when the only two competitive teams are India and Iran.

"What are you going to gain from playing an eight-nation or a 10-nation tournament where you're just waiting for an India-Iran match? I can understand why you're not pushing hard to keep doing international tournaments when you might as well just do a bilateral series and be done with it."

It doesn't help that the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India finds itself in all kinds of trouble. Despite a completed election and a declared winner, the court-appointed administrator continues to command the federation. This led to a blanket ban on Indian teams from tournaments like the first Senior Men's World Beach Kabaddi Championships in September, among a few others.

"I hope the handover happens so we're able to work with the federation and share our thoughts," Chandhok appeals.

He believes that cricket has lessons here too for kabaddi, and there is scope to develop an ecosystem that goes beyond pinning its hopes for solid competition at just the senior nationals.

"Kabaddi does not have an equivalent of a Ranji Trophy or a Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy. There are no bilaterals. Cricket has so much outside the IPL. We have the Nationals and Junior Nationals that aren't televised robustly. All of this needs work. We need to have an open policy with distributing highlights so these tiers of the sport are seen. Exclusivity can come once the audience is captured as proper investors. Yuva Kabaddi has been building that, and we're getting there step by step. There's also the tangible contribution of supplying more than 90 scouted talents to the PKL. That's the big dog, the elite level. But the support is really needed at the bottom."

Regional focus

The league, after going through the 12-city rigmarole last season, has returned to a three-venue set-up this time with a two-fold motive. Not only does this drastically reduce operational costs, but players also have to travel less and maintain steadier playing and recovery patterns. The league is also able to generate continuous kabaddi action without break days every week, which it hopes will reflect in broadcast numbers.

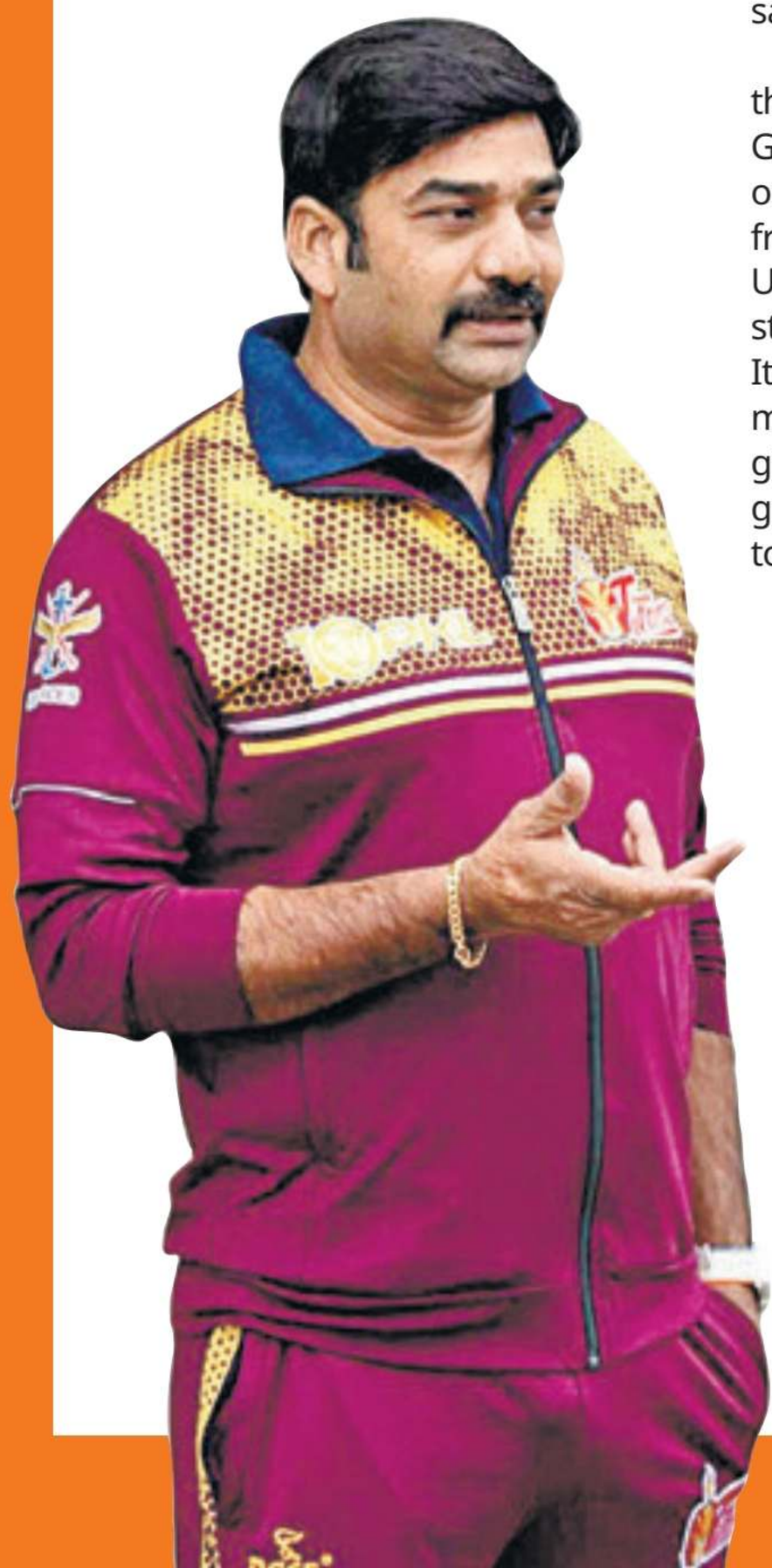
Hyderabad, Noida and Pune were the chosen venues this time, with two hotbeds of kabaddi, namely the Haryana-Punjab-UP belt and the Maharashtra belt, given priority. Other strongholds of the sport, like Tamil Nadu, missed out.

Gupta believes this is also the case for Bengal, but says that much more can be done than just wait for the league to be held there for three weeks. "Bengal used to be a very strong market for kabaddi in the 70s and 80s. Some of the best players have come from there, but it has gone through its own turbulent times.

"The sport in the 90s and probably the early 2000s sort of dwindled. As a franchise, one of the top priorities on our vision board is to revive that culture here. COVID did not help, as it was a lost opportunity to engage

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

On the bright side: This season, Telugu Titans have seen a young bunch, under the able leadership of vice-captain Vijay Malik (centre), give an encouraging account of themselves.



the fan base For us, drawing local talent and forming partnerships with local establishments for tournaments or scouting exercises are one way to fill that gap without the luxury of hosting it ourselves," he says.

Academies are another route into the heart of the market. "Anupam Goswami, the league commissioner, once conducted a workshop with all franchises where he took us to the UK to a few football academies to study how youth setups work there. It helped give these ideas in our minds some realistic shape and a glimpse into what some of the ground-level challenges could be too," says Kandpal.

« When we are not delivering, then the excitement or visibility drops, leading to a significant revenue decline. That's not a sustainable path for any organisation – Trinadh Reddy, CEO, Telugu Titans »

Star dynamics

Few understand the power of fan bases like Telugu Titans do. The franchise and its fans have learned one of the harshest lessons of the sporting market: a single player, however big a star they may be, cannot guarantee championship silverware.

The Titans have had the choicest picks over the years and a loyal base that unconditionally backed them through thick and thin. Chaudhari, Siddharth, and Pawan have all donned the Titans yellow, but a title is yet to come. With Chaudhari in the mix, they came close, making the playoffs. But since then, the Titans have largely languished in the depths of the table's bottom half.

Siddharth, their once-imperious raider, faded away under the pressure of carrying the team on his shoulders. Injury troubles with Pawan were an issue last time and this time too. But in 2024, the Titans have seen a young bunch, under the able leadership of vice-captain Vijay Malik, give an encouraging account of themselves. The side is currently placed second with a solid chance of making the playoffs once more.

"Having a star player in the team brings many advantages. Primarily, they have the ability to turn the table at the right moment, and that too single-handedly. They also nurture, shape and elevate the overall performance of the team. So if the captain, the superstar, does well, there will definitely be an impact on the overall performance of the team and on the brand itself," says Titans CEO Trinadh Reddy, standing by the franchise's decisions to keep pursuing these one-man armies to bolster his squad season after season. "There is pressure, but that's what separates the players from the stars."

A separate window

Another crucial aspect of stability for fans, along with long-standing stars and a consistent brand of play, is a marked window for the league. The IPL has a set window in the year. The Indian Super League (ISL), Indian football's top tier, also has a marked duration. 'Why not for kabaddi,'

Chandhok asks.

"Look at the ISL. They have a set window, and it does not matter whether the Indian cricket team is playing Australia, whether there's a World Cup, or whether there's anything else. The ISL window is the ISL window. So, why isn't there a kabaddi window? That July-August-September chunk that kabaddi had once was a solid space as it gave sponsors the ability to tap into a part of the calendar when not much cricket was going on. This is an indoor sport, and a monsoon window is the perfect time to slot this in for commercial value. Making that stable gives sponsors time to plan for it ahead of time too," he adds, taking into account the reasonable adjustments that can be made in years when the Asian Games or the Olympics are on.

"All teams struggle a bit when it's an end-of-year window as sponsors have exhausted their purses elsewhere and don't have marketing funds to give us."

Fostering a meritocracy

A decade is a great time to look both within and beyond.

As far as expansion goes, for several franchises, like the Warriorz who have interests in other leagues including cricket, a women's variant of the PKL is high on the to-do list. Gupta was part of the *Star Sports* team involved in organising the Women's Kabaddi Challenge, exhibition matches held before the PKL games, much like the now-defunct Women's T20 Challenge ahead of the IPL.

"This is very close to our heart. We've seen local tournaments where women's games are followed and attended much more than men's games. At the state and national level, there are no differences in organisation. But yes, it does need that jump to the league ecosystem," he adds, hoping to see something emerge for the growing domestic and international pool of women players in the sport.

Trinadh reveals that the franchise wants to begin with a tournament at least within the Telugu-speaking states and believes that could be a different approach to building on the appetite for women's sport in India at the moment. Chandhok also believes that a constant dissatisfaction with the product can help foster innovation continuously for an increasingly demanding audience.

While PKL came in with a simplified and television-friendly playing format, the one major change to the way the sport is played was the lobby rule change that was implemented a few seasons ago. Under the old rule, if a raider entered the lobby without touching a defender, or a defender followed the raider into the lobby, both would be sent to the bench. The tweak protected defenders, with the passage of play ending when the raider was eliminated.

However, a defender who was completely out of the mat, with no part of the body remaining, would be out. Still, there have been multiple cases where players, who were within the peripheries of the playing area, were benched due to a lack of contact with the surface, giving rise to contentious calls and enraged debates among players, coaches and fans.

Chandhok says, "We still don't have clarity on the rules, for example, when a player enters the midline from outside the lobby. There's each interpretation of that rule; every day your guess is as good as mine. And I think many teams are having matches won or lost on the basis of that single rule."

More professionalism can foster better results for the sport. Data can help that too. "I'd like to see heat mapping, heart rate monitors, data collection on raiding styles and defensive tendencies, which can add to the conversations around, and decisions made for the sport."

All-rounder: Pawan Sehrawat (centre), the Indian captain and easily among the nation's smartest raiders, often doubles up in defence.

« Regular broadcasting is a necessity for domestic tiers of the game. With the talent pool widening, fans should have more opportunities to discover and follow new players – Rishank Devadiga, U Mumba raider »

» INTERVIEW

From kickboxing to kabaddi

Ajit Chouhan has **led U Mumba's charge,** scoring 114 raid points at an average of 8.14 per match with a 63.33 per cent success rate.

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Pursuing success in sports often hinges on the ability to seize opportunities. In Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) Season 11, numerous young players have exemplified this principle through their performances. One such player is Ajit Chouhan of U Mumba, whose early-season brilliance has garnered significant attention.

The 19-year-old left-raider has been the standout star of the Mumbai outfit. The team, currently seventh in the points table, is fighting for a playoff spot after missing out for the past three seasons.

The youngster has led Mumba's charge, scoring 114 raid points at an average of 8.14 per match with a 63.33 per cent success rate. He has already notched five Super 10s in 14 matches, accounting for 42 per cent of the team's total raid points.

Swapping sports

For Ajit, kabaddi was initially a way to have fun with his schoolmates. Growing up in the Pune suburb of Thergaon, he began training in kickboxing at the age of five. However, his school friends were more interested in

High hopes: As the PKL 11 caravan moves to Pune for its third and final leg, Ajit Chouhan **(in orange jersey)** has expressed his desire to lead his team to a championship victory at home. PKL

kabaddi, so in seventh grade, he joined them and never looked back.

"Initially, I just wanted to play with my friends, but then I started to have fun. With time, I became more serious about the sport and got selected for the academy," recalls Ajit to *Sportstar.*

Initially a left-corner defender, Ajit transitioned into a raider at the SAI Sports Academy in Thergaon, leveraging his kickboxing skills to enhance his lower body strength and agility.

His rapid development caught the attention of state coaches, leading to his selection for the 2021 Junior Nationals in Haridwar. His impressive performance at the 2022 Khelo India Youth Games, where Maharashtra secured third place, caught the eye of the PKL franchise Gujarat Giants. Unfortunately, he was unable to make it to the final squad due to age restrictions.

Despite his release from the Gujarat team, Ajit remained undeterred. He intensified his training regimen and guided Pune to victory in the Maharashtra inter-state tournament earlier this year. His impressive performances in the tournament attracted the attention of Mumbai's scouts, who subsequently drafted him into their squad.

For Ajit, it felt like a homecoming. As an aspiring kabaddi player in Maharashtra, he had long admired the legendary Anup Kumar, the former Indian captain and the pivotal figure in U Mumba's lone PKL title victory in the second edition.

"Anup sir is a legend. He's my idol. His quick thinking and movements inspired me while I was training to become a raider. When I joined the U Mumba team, it felt like I had come home," says the youngster.

After a rigorous pre-season camp under the watchful eye of Mumba's Iranian head coach, Gholamreza Mazandarani, Ajit finally got the chance to go on the PKL mat.

When the moment finally arrived against Dabang Delhi in the second match of PKL 11, it was a whirlwind experience. The young raider, still in disbelief, couldn't fathom how he had managed to score 10 raid points.

"The stadium was full, the lighting was changing, like a carnival. The noise was deafening, I couldn't understand anything. I just played my game, and after a few games, I started to feel comfortable," he opined.

One of the standout features of Ajit's game is his sudden acceleration and power. His languid approach belies his sudden bursts of speed, catching defenders off guard. He often targets the opposition's top defenders, particularly the left-corners.

"The plan is to attack the top defender and send them to the bench. The more time they spend on the bench, the better for us to accumulate points," he explains.

One of the standout features of Ajit's game is his sudden acceleration and power. His languid approach belies his sudden bursts of speed, catching defenders off guard.

Hurdles to overcome

However, it has not been a smooth campaign for the burly raider, who hasn't been consistent. After a brilliant start, he has somewhat fizzled out. In the match against Telugu Titans, he was substituted after attempting six unsuccessful raids.

There are concerns about his ability to use his upper body to power through defenders effectively. He has struggled to score points against four or fewer defenders. Specifically, the technique of pushing defenders deep seems to be lacking in his game. The surprise element he brought for defenders has now diminished, and teams have started to plan for him.

Ajit is aware of the situation and is working on his skills with his coaches. He acknowledges that he has a long way to go and needs to improve his game.

As the PKL 11 caravan moves to Pune for its third and final leg, the Pune-born raider has expressed his desire to lead his team to a championship victory on home soil. While individual milestones are secondary, he has set a challenge for himself.

"My only goal is to help my team go all the way and lift the trophy in my hometown Pune. There is no such personal goal, but I would like to get more than 200 raid points in the season. It will be a big morale booster for me and will also be beneficial for the team," Ajit concludes.

An expected windfall and all-rounders out of vogue

The modified Right-to-Match (RTM) rule significantly influenced the **auction dynamics** this year. Here are some key numbers.

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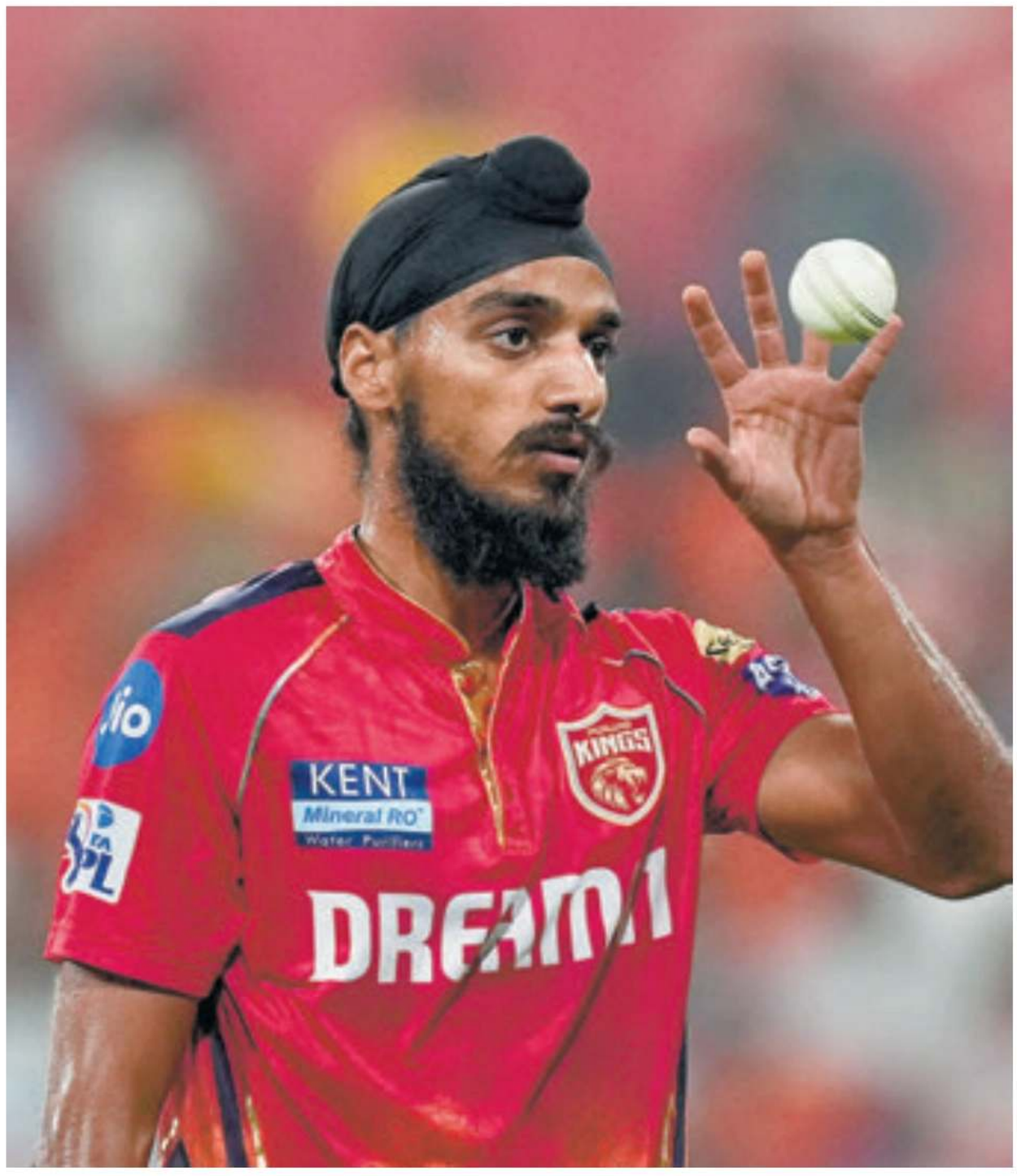


Breaking bank: Punjab Kings shelled out Rs 18 crore for Arshdeep Singh. "Left-arm fast bowler, obviously, with a great skill set with the new ball and the old ball and, you know, one of India's leading wicket-takers in T20 cricket. So he was a perfect fit for us to come back into the team," said head coach Ricky Ponting. PTI

The two-day Indian Premier League (IPL) mega auction, held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, witnessed a record-breaking windfall, with Rs 639.15 crore spent during the proceedings. Rishabh Pant (Rs 27 crore) and Shreyas Iyer (Rs 26.75 crore) emerged as the league's most expensive players, while the number of successful Rs 10 crore-plus bids doubled from the last auction. A total of 21 players were sold for Rs 10 crore or more, compared to just 11 during the previous mega auction in 2022.

The modified Right-to-Match (RTM) rule significantly influenced the auction dynamics. Under this rule, the highest bidder had the option to escalate their bid to an amount of their choice, allowing the previous franchise to match it. Beneficiaries of this provision included Rishabh Pant, Arshdeep Singh, and Naman Dhir.

Highest multiplier

Uncapped players often see their base price multiply dramatically in IPL auctions, and this time, Rasikh Salam Dar topped the chart. The J&K pacer was acquired by Royal Challengers Bengaluru for Rs 6 crore, a staggering 20 times his base price of Rs 30 lakh.

Though Rasikh made his IPL debut in 2019, he truly shone in the 2024 edition, impressing with his death-bowling skills for Delhi Capitals and taking nine wickets in 11 matches.

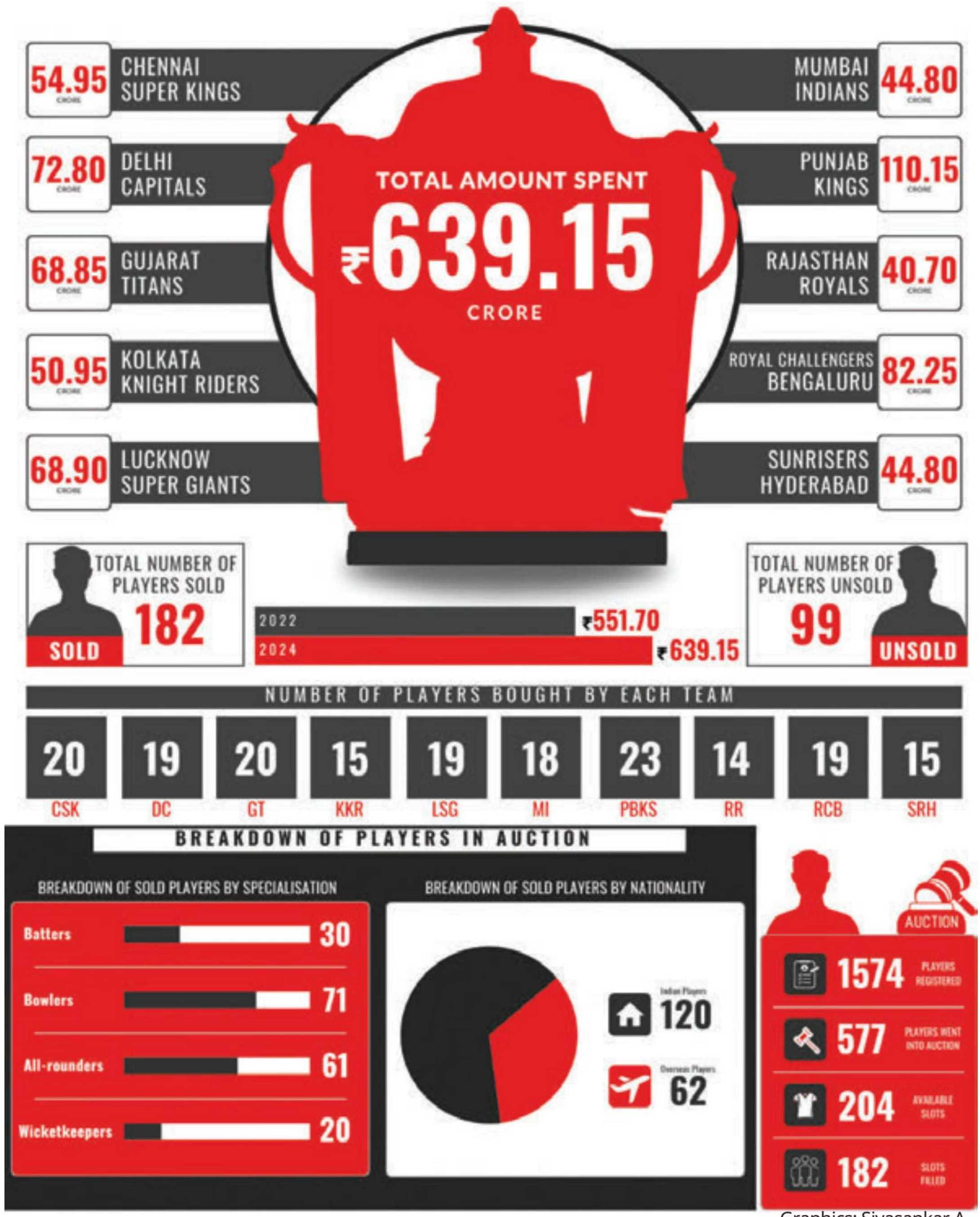
Overseas players

South African players were the most sought-after overseas cricketers in this auction, with 14 players picked by eight different teams.

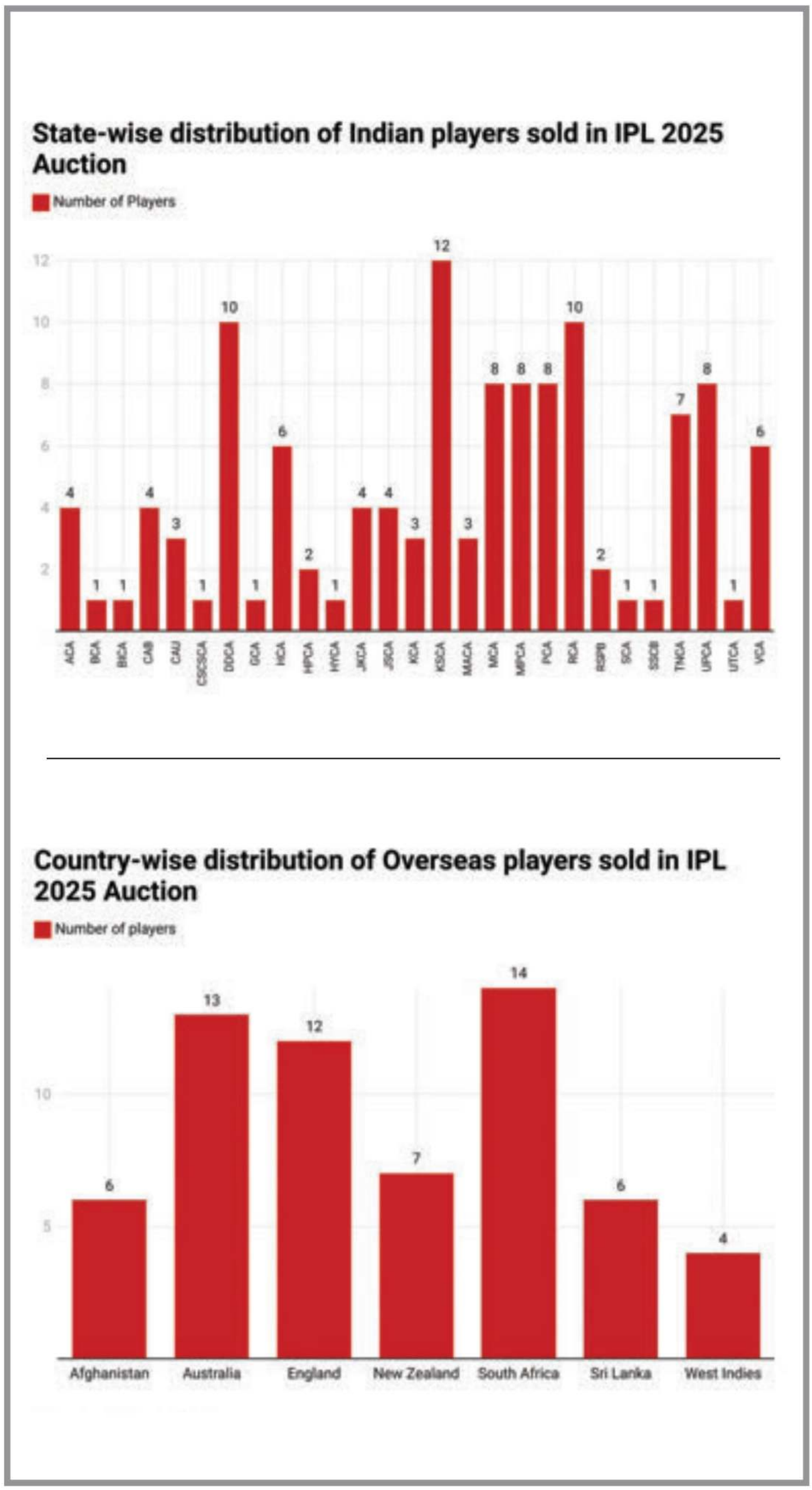
Making history: Rishabh Pant became the most expensive player in IPL auction history when he was signed by Lucknow Super Giants for an astonishing Rs 27 crore.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

MONEY HEIST



Graphics: Sivasankar A



Australians followed closely, with 13 players sold. Interestingly, Punjab Kings, coached by former Australian captain Ricky Ponting, acquired five Australian players.

In contrast, only four of the 22 West Indian players who enlisted were picked, with just one fetching a price above the base amount. Meanwhile, six Afghanistan players secured IPL contracts, joining Rashid Khan to form the largest Afghan contingent in IPL history.

State associations

The Karnataka State Cricket Association contributed the largest number of Indian players sold in the auction, with 14 players representing the state. Delhi and Rajasthan followed, with 10 players each.

Venkatesh Iyer's price tag

While it was anticipated that stars like KL Rahul, Pant, and Shreyas Iyer would command high bids due to their captaincy potential, the amount Kolkata Knight Riders paid to re-sign Venkatesh Iyer — Rs 23.75 crore — surprised many.

The 30-year-old played a crucial role in KKR's 2024 title victory, scoring 370 runs at a strike rate of 158.80.

KKR CEO Venky Mysore defended the decision, stating, "For us, it was about trying to keep our core. We've retained six players and brought back 2-3 others from last year. That was always the plan."

Declining demand for all-rounders

The Impact Player rule, now in its third season, has significantly diminished the demand for all-rounders. With teams allowed to swap a bowler for a batter (or vice versa) at any point during a match, franchises have increasingly favoured specialists.

This shift in strategy led to a drop in the number of all-rounders sold, from 77 in 2022 to 61 in 2025. Despite the overall money spent rising from Rs 551.7 crore in 2022 to Rs 639.15 crore in 2025, the amount spent on all-rounders fell from Rs 193.18 crore to Rs 162 crore.

Furthermore, only nine all-rounders fetched Rs 5 crore or more in 2025, compared to 19 in 2022.

Potential Playing 12

KKR	SRH	RR	RCB	CSK
Narine*	Head*	Jaiswal	Salt*	Gaikwad
de Kock*	Abhishek	Samson	Kohli	Conway*
Venkatesh Iyer	Kishan	Rana	Padikkal	Ravindra*
Raghuvanshi	Nitish	Parag	Patidar	Tripathi
Rinku Singh	Klaasen*	Jurel	Livingstone*	Dube
Ramandeep	Manohar	Hetmyer*	Tim David*	Jadeja
Russell*	Cummins*	Dubey	Jitesh	Dhoni
Harshit	Harshal	Hasaranga*	Krunal	Ashwin
Vaibhav	Rahul Chahar	Archer*	Bhuvneshwar	Khaleel
Nortje*	Zampa*	Theekshana*	Hazlewood*	Noor*
Chakaravarthy	Shami	Sandeep	Yash Dayal	Pathirana*
Anukul Roy	Sachin Baby	Madhwal	Suyash	Kamboj

* Foreign Players

Top Buys

Player Name	Country	Sold/RTM	Team	Final price	Age	Base Price	Multiplier
Rishabh Pant	India	Sold	LSG	2700	27	200	13.5
Shreyas Iyer	India	Sold	PBKS	2675	30	200	13.375
Venkatesh Iyer	India	Sold	KKR	2375	30	200	11.875
Arshdeep Singh	India	RTM	PBKS	1800	26	200	9
Yuzvendra Chahal	India	Sold	PBKS	1800	34	200	9
Jos Buttler	England	Sold	GT	1575	34	200	7.875
KL Rahul	India	Sold	DC	1400	32	200	7
Trent Boult	New Zealand	Sold	MI	1250	35	200	6.25
Josh Hazlewood	Australia	Sold	RCB	1250	34	200	6.25
Jofra Archer	England	Sold	RR	1250	30	200	6.25

Price in lakhs

MI	GT	LSG	PBKS	DC
Rohit	Buttler*	Markram*	Prabhsimran	Fraser-McGurk*
Jacks*	Gill	Marsh*	Inglis*	KL Rahul
Suryakumar	Sudharsan	Pant	Shreyas	Brook*
Tilak	Rutherford*	Pooran*	Maxwell*	Stubbs*
Hardik	Shahrukh	Miller*	Stoinis*	Porel
Naman	Washington	Badoni	Wadhera	Axar
Santner*	Tewatia	Shahbaz	Shashank	Ashutosh
Deepak Chahar	Rashid*	Avesh	Jansen*	Starc*
Ghaznafar*	Rabada*	Bishnoi	Brar	Kuldeep
Boult*	Prasidh	Mohsin Khan	Arshdeep	Mukesh
Bumrah	Siraj	Mayank	Chahal	Natarajan
Minz	Sai Kishore	M Siddarth	Vyshakh	Rizvi

VIJAY SONEJI

« For me, this auction wasn't about the money but about joining the right team »

DEEPAK CHAHAR

Shayan Acharya
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Deepak Chahar is set to don the Mumbai Indians colours in the next Indian Premier League edition, marking the end of his seven-year stint with Chennai Super Kings. Although he will miss the Chepauk dressing room and conversations with Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Chahar is excited to bowl alongside Jasprit Bumrah and Trent Boult at the Wankhede Stadium.

Chahar's ultimate goal is to return to the Indian team. He has bowled at full throttle in the Ranji Trophy and the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy. "The more I bowl, the better I will get," he says in an interview with *Sportstar*.

As you start a new journey with Mumbai Indians, have you set any target?

I'm looking forward to playing for Mumbai Indians. Certain things are not in our hands, so my focus is on playing the entire domestic season, featuring in the IPL, and returning to the Indian team. Mumbai is a great place for me as Wankhede Stadium suits my bowling style, with swing and seam movement on offer. I aim to perform consistently, stay fit, and ultimately return to the national fold. Everyone dreams of donning the Indian colours, and I hope to achieve that by giving my best.

This time around, when the mega auction was underway, did you watch the bidding war on television? How did you control your emotions?

For me, this auction wasn't about the money but about joining the right team to help me make a comeback to the Indian side.

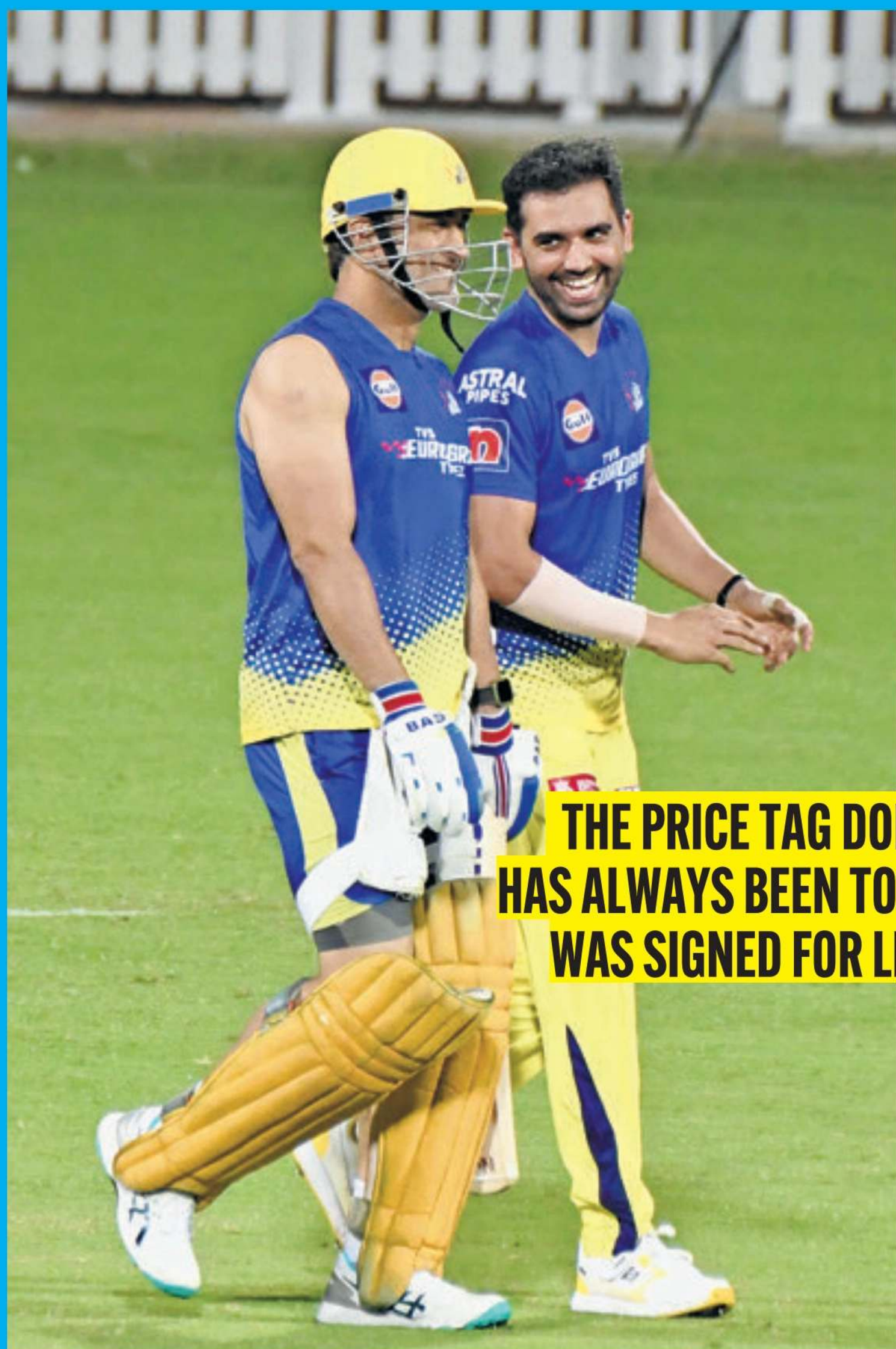
At 32, the next four to five years are likely my peak, so I wanted a team that provides opportunities. I'm happy to move from one top franchise, Chennai Super Kings, to another, Mumbai Indians. Watching the auction, I was focused on the opportunity, not the money.

Mumbai Indians signed you for Rs 9.25 crore. Does the price tag affect you? How do you handle the pressure?

The price tag doesn't matter. My goal has always been to win games, whether I was signed for less or for Rs 14 crore by CSK in 2022.

When you play for a team for a long time, they understand your strengths and weaknesses, but when you shift to a new team, it's basically starting from scratch. I aim to

After IPL, I trained in the UK with a top football club for 12 weeks, focusing on improving my lower-body strength, which has been a concern in the past.



All smiles: During his time with the five-time IPL champion, Deepak Chahar developed a special bond with former India and CSK captain M.S. Dhoni. R. RAGU

perform from the outset and enjoy being part of this champion side. The team is well-sorted, and I look forward to contributing.

With T20 cricket favouring batters, how do you stay motivated as a bowler?

T20 is a batter's game, but as a bowler, the focus is on claiming wickets and containing runs. Keeping the run rate under control — below 30 runs in four overs — is a decent performance.

I take one game at a time and stay calm, which helps me execute my plans better. The pressure is often more on batters to achieve big strike rates, so I focus on doing my job efficiently. It's always a challenge to keep the strike rate revolving around 150 to 180. That's how I look at it.

How do you view the competition among Indian fast bowlers, given your history with injuries?

Fitness has been my only concern, not performance. I've always delivered with bat and ball for India whenever I've played (16 wickets in 13 ODIs and 31 wickets in 25 T20Is; 203 runs in nine ODI innings with the bat and 53 runs in seven T20I innings). Now that I have played all the league games of the Ranji Trophy so far and am also playing the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy for Rajasthan this season, I am finding my rhythm.

I don't worry much about competition. The skill set I bring — swing bowling with the new ball and batting **(facing page, below)** at No. 8 — isn't very common. If I remain fit and consistent, I'm confident of earning another opportunity with the national team.

« THE PRICE TAG DOESN'T MATTER. MY GOAL HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO WIN GAMES, WHETHER I WAS SIGNED FOR LESS OR FOR RS 14 CRORE WITH CSK IN 2022 »

You went to England to work on your fitness after last IPL. Could you share your experience?

After IPL, I trained in the UK with a top football club for 12 weeks, focusing on improving my lower-body strength, which has been a concern in the past.

The training helped me prepare for the Ranji Trophy while also focusing on bowling consistently. The experience was invaluable in regaining rhythm and readiness for switching formats during the season.

Comebacks after injuries are challenging. How do you stay motivated?

Sport is about mental toughness and bouncing back from setbacks. I've had injuries throughout my career, but I've followed the process and returned every time.

Instead of overthinking injuries, I

stay calm and focus on what's in my control. Staying mentally strong has been key to handling failures and comebacks.

Who is your go-to person in times of crisis?

My family has been my biggest support, especially my father, who is also my coach. I talk to him regularly and discuss every aspect of my game.

Reflecting on your domestic career with Rajasthan, what have you learnt?

Rajasthan has taught me a lot. I've dealt with injuries and challenges over my 14-year career, learning about the game and its political undertones, which is part of every cricketer's journey.

Playing with legends like Mahi (Dhoni) bhai, [Virat] Kohli, and Rohit has been invaluable. Their experience inspires and motivates teammates to bring out their best.

Strong bond — Deepak Chahar on the journey with his State team:

Rajasthan has taught me a lot. I've dealt with injuries and challenges over my 14-year career, learning about the game and its political undertones.

VIJAY SONEJI

Have you spoken to Dhoni since leaving Chennai Super Kings?

(Smiles) Mahi bhai doesn't talk much over the phone, but I'll definitely meet him soon. I had a great time under him at CSK, and even though we'll be on opposite sides now, I'll catch up with him before the season begins.

> « At 32, the next four to five years are likely my peak, so I wanted a team that provides opportunities »

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

INDIA HAVE SILENCED SCAREMONGERS WITH DOMINANT PERFORMANCE IN PERTH

The panic in the Australian ranks is palpable, what with former players calling for heads to be chopped off and some even **hinting at cracks** in the Australian team.

What a splendid win, one of the best I have been privileged to be present at. All the boasts about how the pitch is going to be pacy and bouncy and scare the living daylights out of the Indian batters were exactly that — the boasts of a bully. Mind you, it wasn't the Aussie players but their support staff in the media, both electronic and print, who were trying to be scaremongers.

It was very similar to 2007/8 after the kerfuffle between Harbhajan Singh and Andrew Symonds in the Sydney Test match. The Australian selectors had added Shaun Tait to the Aussie squad for the next Test match in Perth, and the media were going nuts, suggesting he was going to blow the Indians away on the fast, bouncy WACA pitch in Perth. What happened? 'The Wall' was so solid, but before that, the swashbuckling Virender Sehwag had just swatted Brett Lee, Tait, and the others as if he was swatting the famous Perth flies. He singled out Tait for special attention as if to rubbish the Aussie media claims about the pacers scaring the Indian batters. At the end of the Test match, guess what happened? Tait took an indefinite break from international cricket. The Indians had the last laugh by winning the Test match and, if the umpires had not made some forgettable decisions under pressure from the Aussies in the previous Test match in Sydney, then India would have gone to Adelaide for the final Test of that series with the score 1-all.

This time India goes to Adelaide, having once again proven all the experts wrong in Perth with a performance that can be ranked in the top 10 victories in recent times. Jasprit Bumrah led from the front with a bowling effort that would have tested the greatest of batters across eras. He was constantly at them, and there was hardly a delivery that the batters could relax against, as he asked uncomfortable questions regularly. While Bumrah definitely had help from the pitch, the way the batters batted on an unfamiliar surface was most heartening.

That young Yashasvi Jaiswal showed he is a quick learner was evident by the straightness of his bat at the start of the second innings. As he settled down with wonderful guidance from

Epochal win: India goes to Adelaide, having once again proven all the experts wrong in Perth with a performance that can be ranked in the top 10 victories in recent times.
GETTY IMAGES

K.L. Rahul at the other end, one could see the Aussie shoulders sagging at the inevitability of another big hundred from this prodigy. Their heads drooped even more as Virat Kohli cashed in on the solid platform set by the opening pair to get another century in Australia. These two hundreds were terrific, as was the 200-plus opening partnership, but the most impressive innings was from Nitish Reddy. He showed an awareness of what was required which belied the fact that he was making his Test debut. Even in the first innings, he displayed a refreshing grasp of scoring opportunities and ended up as the top scorer. His bowling too came in handy, and his fielding was outstanding. Here is a man for the future.

The panic in the Australian ranks is palpable, what with former players calling for heads to be chopped off and some even hinting at cracks in the Australian team after Josh Hazlewood's media interview at the end of the third day's play, where he suggested that it was up to the batters to now do something. Now, a few days later, Hazlewood is out of the second Test and possibly the series too with a supposed side strain. Strange, that, since nobody had noticed anything wrong with Hazlewood at that media conference. Mystery, mystery — the like of which used to be common in Indian cricket in the past. Now it's the Aussies, and like old McDonald, I'm simply loving it.

The most impressive innings was from Nitish Reddy. He showed an awareness of what was required which belied the fact that he was making his Test debut.

Big-hitting Jaiswal

35 } The number of sixes accumulated by Yashasvi Jaiswal in 2024. This is the maximum hit by any batter in a calendar year.

Batters with the maximum number of Test sixes in a calendar year

Sixes	Year	Batter	For	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	6s/inn	Balls/6
35+	2024	Yashasvi Jaiswal	Ind	12	23	1280	58.18	1.52	50.42
33	2014	Brendon McCullum	NZ	9	16	1164	72.75	2.06	48.61
26	2022	Ben Stokes	Eng	15	26	870	36.25	1.00	46.77
22	2005	Adam Gilchrist	Aus	15	22	836	41.80	1.00	44.77
22	2008	Virender Sehwag	Ind	14	27	1462	56.23	0.81	77.41

Indian batters with the maximum number of Test sixes in a calendar year

Sixes	Year	Batter	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	6s/inn	Balls/6
35+	2024	Yashasvi Jaiswal	12	23	1280	58.18	1.52	50.42
22	2008	Virender Sehwag	14	27	1462	56.23	0.81	77.41
21	2022	Rishabh Pant	7	12	680	61.81	1.75	35.62
20	2019	Rohit Sharma	5	6	556	92.66	3.33	36.60

They held the Test record of hitting the maximum number of sixes in a calendar year

Sixes	Year	Batter	For	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	6s/inn	Balls/6
9	1902	Jimmy Sinclair	SA	3	6	286	47.67	1.50	34.78
14	1933	Walter Hammond	Eng	8	11	934	103.78	1.27	118.93
16	1965	John Reid	NZ	13	24	871	36.29	0.67	–
17	1999	Chris Cairns	NZ	10	15	548	39.14	1.13	58.88
18	2000	Chris Cairns	NZ	5	9	517	64.63	2.00	45.50
20	2001	Matthew Hayden	Aus	14	25	1391	63.23	0.80	110.65
21	2004	Andrew Flintoff	Eng	13	19	898	52.82	1.11	64.09
22	2005	Adam Gilchrist	Aus	15	22	836	41.80	1.00	44.77
33	2014	Brendon McCullum	NZ	9	16	1164	72.75	2.06	48.61
35+	2024	Yashasvi Jaiswal	Ind	12	23	1280	58.18	1.52	50.42

Note: 1965 was John Reid's final year in Test cricket, while 2024 is Jaiswal's second year in Test cricket
+ Potentially, Jaiswal can add to his tally of sixes this calendar year; he still has three more Tests in 2024

India's Yashasvi Jaiswal. AP

6 } Number of visiting opening pairs involved in a 200-plus stand in Australia. The recent 201 stand between Jaiswal and K. L. Rahul in the recently concluded Perth Test match was unique because they became the first pair in six instances, other than an English pair, to achieve this in Australia.

200-plus opening partnerships for visiting sides in Australia

Runs	Pair	For	Venue	Month, year	Inns	Result
323	Jack Hobbs/Wilfred Rhodes	England	Melbourne	Feb 1912	2	Won
283	Jack Hobbs/Herbert Sutcliffe	England	Melbourne	Jan 1925	2	Lost
234	Geoff Boycott/Bob Barber	England	Sydney	Jan 1966	1	Won
223	Chris Broad/Bill Athey	England	Perth WACA	Nov 1986	1	Drawn
203	Graham Gooch/Michael Atherton	England	Adelaide	Jan 1991	4	Drawn
201	Yashasvi Jaiswal/KL Rahul	India	Perth Optus	Nov 2024	3	Won

India's Jaiswal and K. L. Rahul. GETTY IMAGES

5 } The number of occasions a visiting opening batter registered a Test century in Australia after being dismissed for a duck in the first innings. Yashasvi Jaiswal is the latest entrant in this list, dominated by Englishmen and Indians.

A duck and century in the same Test match by a visiting opening batter in Australia

1st Inns	2nd Inns	Batter	For	Venue	Month, year	Result	Batting# (in both inns)
0	113	David Sheppard	England	Melbourne	Jan 1963	Won	1
0	118	Sunil Gavaskar	India	Melbourne	Jan 1977	Won	1
0	183	Michael Vaughan	England	Sydney	Jan 2003	Won	2
0	110	Andrew Strauss	England	Brisbane	Nov 2010	Drawn	1
0	161	Yashasvi Jaiswal	India	Perth Optus	Nov 2024	Won	1

Strauss was also the captain

662 } The number of Test runs aggregated by Rishabh Pant in Australia. This makes him the most successful visiting keeper-batter on Australian soil. On the opening day of the Perth Test, Pant went ahead of the previous highest aggregate of 643 runs by English wicketkeeper Alan Knott, who held the top position for the last 47 years.

Most successful visiting wicket-keeping Test batters in Australia

Runs	Keeper-batter	For	M	Inns	NO	Ave.	HS	100	50	Career span in Australia
662+	Rishabh Pant	India	8	14	2	55.17	159*	1	2	2018-
643	Alan Knott	England	13	22	3	33.84	106*	1	4	1970-1977
587	Jeffery Dujon	West Indies	11	18	2	36.69	139	1	2	1982-1989
484	Gerry Alexander	West Indies	5	10	2	60.50	108	1	5	1960-1961
477	John Waite	South Africa	9	15	0	31.80	77	0	4	1952-1964

+ career in progress

India's Rishabh Pant. AFP

7 } The number of occasions Test sides have managed to win by a huge run-margin of 200-plus despite being dismissed for 150 or less, batting first. India joins this list for the first time in its history, thanks to its exploits in the Perth Test match.

Test sides winning by a huge run-margin of 200-plus after being dismissed for less than 150 runs, batting first

Total	By	Won by	Against	Venue	Date	Winning captain
92	England	210 runs	South Africa	Cape Town	4 Apr 1899	Lord Hawke
112	Australia	229 runs	England	Melbourne	4 Jan 1902	Joe Darling
116	Australia	202 runs	West Indies	Sydney	29 Jan 1952	Lindsay Hassett
127	West Indies	204 runs	Pakistan	Port of Spain	18 Apr 1993	Richie Richardson
149	West Indies	343 runs	Australia	Bridgetown	24 Apr 1991	Viv Richards
150	Sri Lanka	240 runs	West Indies	Kandy	25 Jul 2005	Marvan Atapattu
150	India	295 runs	Australia	Perth Optus	25 Nov 2024	Jasprit Bumrah

295 } The victory margin by runs in the recent Perth Test is India's third most significant, away from home. It is Australia's seventh biggest loss by runs at home and its second worst this century after the 309-run defeat against South Africa in Perth WACA on 3 December 2012.

Biggest away Test victories for India by runs

By runs	Against	Venue	Date	Indian captain
318	West Indies	North Sound	25 Aug 2019	Virat Kohli
304	Sri Lanka	Galle	29 Jul 2017	Virat Kohli
295	Australia	Perth Optus	25 Nov 2024	Jasprit Bumrah
279	England	Leeds	23 Jun 1986	Kapil Dev
278	Sri Lanka	Colombo PSS	24 Aug 2015	Virat Kohli

All records are correct and updated until 25 November 2024.

Cynosure of all eyes: India and Hyderabad power-hitter Tilak Varma has been the most sought-after player in the Rajkot leg of the ongoing Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy. VIJAY SONEJI

In Hardik's slipstream and learning from august company!

Our correspondents bring you the highlights and intriguing moments, both on and off the field, from the **group-stage fixtures** of Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy.

Sahil Mathur and Vivek Krishnan
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Playing in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy — India's domestic T20 competition — has made many Indian Premier League (IPL) and India stars accessible for domestic cricketers to gain insights and for Rajkot locals to collect selfies and autographs.

Hyderabad's Tilak Varma has been the most sought-after player in the Rajkot leg. The 22-year-old star remains busy after every matchday. Following his record-breaking 151 against Meghalaya, Tilak was inundated with selfie requests — first from opposition players and then from locals. Later, he had lunch with a few Meghalaya players.

A similar pattern unfolds after each matchday. After the game against Bihar, roughly eight opposition players, including captain Sakibul Gani, gathered around him at the boundary. It was a lengthy chat; Tilak even took a five-minute break to remove his pads before continuing

the conversation. Afterward, he calmly posed for photos and signed autographs for a few children who had been waiting for him.

"When all these people support you, even when you play outside (India), they cheer for you. It's a great feeling and essential for building a player's confidence," Tilak told *Sportstar*.

Similarly, Madhya Pradesh's Avesh Khan and Rajat Patidar have also had extensive conversations with Meghalaya players. Avesh interacted with them immediately after their game, while Patidar chatted with them as he walked from Ground C of the Niranjan Shah Stadium towards the buses via the main ground.

For those unable to catch up post-match, hotel meetups are another option. "I talk to MP's Venkatesh Iyer. All of us interact with these players. We are learning a lot from them," Gani said.

At the start of the tournament, there was palpable excitement surrounding Mohammed Shami, who was returning to professional cricket after an ankle injury that had sidelined him for nearly a year following the 2023 ODI World Cup final. On the first day, Shami entered the ground to a standing ovation from around 40 people who had gathered above the dugout an hour before Bengal's arrival. After the match, Shami graciously posed for selfies and a group photo with the ground staff.

On another day, after finishing a game against Mizoram at the main ground, India and Punjab's premier fast bowler Arshdeep Singh strolled over to Ground C to briefly watch Bengal play Madhya Pradesh. His arrival took everyone by surprise, including the two security personnel. Three children quickly took advantage of the moment to get autographs before the security staff restricted access. Later, Arshdeep obliged a few fans with selfies before boarding the team bus.

Noisy turnaround

A huge roar erupted at Indore's Holkar Stadium when Krunal Pandya was dismissed by R. Sai Kishore in the 13th over of Baroda's run chase against Tamil Nadu in a Group B fixture of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy on November 27. The screams from the crowd were in anticipation of Hardik Pandya — Baroda's No. 6 for this game — stepping onto the turf to bat. Hardik promptly took centre stage, hammering a 30-ball 69 to take his side over the line in a chase of 222.

The 31-year-old has evoked similar responses in all of Baroda's matches in Indore, clearly showing that he is the major attraction in a group that also features other current India players like Axar Patel, Ravi Bishnoi, and Varun Chakravarthy.

This is the same player who was booed at stadiums around India during the IPL six months ago. So, what has changed? Simply put, Hardik is now a World Cup winner.

The all-rounder played a crucial role in India's T20 World Cup triumph in the Caribbean in June. Given the task of defending 15 runs in the last over of the final against South Africa, he held his nerve and got the job done.

Ever since, Hardik seems to have won the fans back. A happy consequence of this for Baroda in this tournament is that it is being treated like the home team in Indore.

"The environment at the stadium is brilliant," Baroda coach Mukund Parmar said. "So many are turning up to watch Hardik, and they are enjoying it. We are getting a lot of support."

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

HARDIK PANDYA SEEMS TO HAVE WON THE FANS BACK SINCE STARRING IN INDIA'S T20 WORLD CUP WIN IN BARBADOS IN JUNE THIS YEAR

JET MILES, KOHLI MANIA AND BORDER TALES: A CRICKET SOJOURN IN AUSTRALIA

Perth's Singapore-aligned time zone aids players and cricket writers, while Canberra's tree-lined avenues and laidback charm **offer a tranquil** contrast to bustling capitals.

K. C. Vijaya Kumar
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A trip Down Under commences with multiple flights on the Chennai-Bengaluru-Kuala Lumpur-Perth sector. A November 18th night and 19th day are almost entirely lost to the accumulation of jet miles. It is time for the Border-Gavaskar Trophy Test series pitting old rivals India and Australia, and in Perth, local papers even embrace the Indian vernacular while doing supplements on Virat Kohli.

After Sachin Tendulkar, Kohli has embedded himself in Aussie hearts. Aggressive batter, not averse to revealing his emotions and anger, perhaps fans Down Under see a kindred spirit in him. And with a second innings unbeaten 100, he does come to the party at the Optus Stadium. A gigantic structure that gives the vibe of a massive black forest cake from the outside and becomes a huge venue open to multiple sports from the inside.

Does it have the character of the nearby WACA Ground? No. But is it practical and convenient? Yes. And with that, most arguments about architecture and aesthetics cease. A stadium is never about the structure; it is also about its sporting lore, and perhaps after a few decades, Optus will acquire a nostalgic sheen, which it lacks now.

India does its bit to enhance the ground's brand recall as a come-from-behind 295-run triumph is secured on November 25.

After being bundled out for 150, the visitor finds battering rams in skipper Jasprit Bumrah's pace, K.L. Rahul's solidity, Yashasvi

Rain plays spoilsport: An electronic screen announces the abandonment of day one of the two-day tour match between Prime Minister's XI and India at Manuka Oval in Canberra. AFP

Jaiswal's fluidity and Kohli's sheer class. Strangely, the Australian media goes sniffing around for a split within the home team, pitting bowlers against batters, but skipper Pat Cummins counters, "We are a tight unit."

The vibe Down Under

Perth on the western coast has a time zone allied with Singapore, and that helps both the players and the travelling bandwagon of cricket writers adjust their body clocks. It is also a city that tends to get into snooze mode early as convenience stores wind up by 7 p.m. except for a few corporate ones. The people, like in the rest of Australia, are warm and to the point. Most are busy in perpetual motion, either heading to work, out on a jog, or walking the dog.

The houseflies out here act too familiar, often hovering around faces, and most sports writers develop a reflexive twitch as they try to dissuade these intruders. At Perth's Optus Stadium, a security guard accidentally swallows a fly, a cough ensues, water is quaffed, spittle is ejected, and hopefully the unpalatable nutrient was thrown out.

The cab drivers

Itesham, a Pakistani cab driver in Perth, is clued into issues, both sporting and political, on either side of the Wagah border. "We are all one; just ignore the politicians," he keeps repeating. A fan of Kohli, he admits to a grudging admiration for Bumrah too. The latter surely has taken Australia by storm, and a lot of prose is indulged in on his hyper-extension in the final delivery stride.

Another cab driver from Vietnam is all excitement and a barrage of words. "It is just 150 Australian dollars by flight to home. Perth has a lot of money as there is mining around this city," Minh says, and then adds, "I don't follow cricket, but good luck to all of you."

It is a small world too, as in Canberra, one of the cab drivers is Amit. It turns out he is related to Neeraj Chopra, who had attended his wedding back home too. Talk veers towards athletics, wrestling and volleyball. Surely, there is more to sport than just cricket, a game invented by the British and owned by the Indians!

Owning Down Under: The local papers in Perth embrace the Indian vernacular while doing supplements on Virat Kohli. TWITTER | RAVI SHASTRI

Capital tales

Canberra, with its tree-lined avenues and laidback feel, lacks the buzz associated with traditional capitals. But it has history shimmering at every turn. Old churches and pubs that do a hat-tip to a past when settlers trooped in with their own quirks all add to the charm. Its cricket venue, the Manuka Oval, is another blast-from-the-past ground.

With a seating capacity just about adequate and stands named after Sir Donald Bradman, this is an outpost that is pastoral and a throwback to an amateur era. Rohit Sharma's men limber up, and they do feel at ease as they walk back towards their hotel. An activity they can never do in India.

For the media, it is time to adjust their body clocks again. At five and a half hours ahead of India, there is ample time to file copies, and yet this dissonance is unsettling. The harking back to the good old days is a theme that even radiates from a pub on Friday night as Mambo No. 5 is belted out and youngsters jive. The rains, though, throw a damp curtain, and questions linger about the prospects of the game between the Prime Minister's XI and India under lights at the Manuka Oval. Perhaps the weather gods would be kind as November winds to a close.

1st

Target man: Jasprit Bumrah celebrates after dismissing Australian batter Steve Smith for a first-ball duck in the first innings at Perth. Bumrah took five wickets, helping India restrict the host to a total of 104. GETTY IMAGES

2nd

Soaking it in: India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal celebrates after scoring his first Test hundred in Australia. He ended up making 161 off 297 balls. AP

3rd

Rock-solid stand: Indian openers K. L. Rahul and Yashasvi Jaiswal combined for a mammoth 201-run stand in the second innings to help India post a daunting target of 534. AFP

FOR MORE IMAGES

4th

Class is permanent: Virat Kohli celebrates after scoring his 30th Test century in India's second innings. It was his first century in 16 months in the longest format of the game. AFP

5th

Chin music: Australia's Travis Head sways away from a bouncer bowled by Harshit Rana during the run chase. Despite his 89, the southpaw's effort went in vain. AFP

6th

Debut delight: Harshit Rana castles Australia's Alex Carey to signal India's victory. The Delhi pacer picked up four wickets in his maiden Test appearance. AFP

7th

A win to savour: India skipper Jasprit Bumrah after securing his first Test win as captain, at the Optus Stadium in Perth. He was also adjudged Player of the Match for his eight-wicket match haul. AFP

GETTY IMAGES

Maiden WBBL title for Melbourne Renegades

1 Melbourne Renegades registered a seven-run win over Brisbane Heat in a rain-affected final.

Melbourne Renegades clinched its maiden Women's Big Bash League (WBBL) title with a seven-run win over Brisbane Heat in a rain-affected final. Renegades, playing their first WBBL final, posted a score of 141 for nine, with major contributions from opener Hayley Matthews (69), while Charli Knott took three wickets. In search of a record third title, Heat lost two early wickets before rain arrived in the fourth over and halted play, resulting in a revised target of 98 in 12 overs. Heat were reeling at 37 for five and needed 19 runs in the final over but fell short of the target.

England took the lead in the three-match Test series against New Zealand after an emphatic eight-wicket win in the opener. A returning Kane Williamson (93) propelled the Kiwis to 348 in the first innings, with support from Glenn Phillips (58 not out). However, Harry Brook's century dragged England back into the game, securing a 101-run lead. Although New Zealand managed to erase the deficit, Brydon Carse **(second from right)** shone with the ball once again, picking up six wickets and completing a 10-fer to restrict New Zealand to 254, despite a valiant effort from Daryl Mitchell. With only 104 needed to win, debutant Jacob Bethell brought up a fifty to take England across the line.

2

3

South Africa outperformed Sri Lanka to win the first Test by 233 runs in the two-match series. Temba Bavuma scored a fighting 70 off 117 deliveries on his comeback as the host folded for 191 in the first innings. But Sri Lanka was bundled out for 42 — its lowest-ever Test total — in 83 balls (13.5 overs), courtesy of a seven-wicket haul by Marco Jansen **(left)**. With a 149-run lead, skipper Bavuma (113) combined with Tristan Stubbs (122) to help the host post a mammoth target of 516. Dinesh Chandimal and Dhananjaya de Silva scored half-centuries, but Sri Lanka was eventually bowled out for 282, with Jansen picking up four more scalps to complete an 11-wicket haul.

4

West Indies won its first Test at home in two-and-a-half years after beating Bangladesh in the opener of the two-match series by 201 runs. Justin Greaves' hundred and nineties by Mikyle Louis and Alick Athanaze powered West Indies to 450 for nine declared in the first innings, while Alzarri Joseph picked three wickets to contain Bangladesh for 269 for nine. Taskin Ahmed dominated in the second innings with a six-fer, as the host was limited to 152. The visitor's chase of 334 was brought to a close at 132 for nine after Shoriful Islam, who was struck on the back of his shoulder, retired hurt.

AP

5

Pakistan registered a 2-1 victory over Zimbabwe in the three-match ODI series. The first match saw Zimbabwe win by 80 runs – the host was reduced to 205, but Pakistan crumbled to 60 for six before the rains ended the game. Pakistan bounced back in the second game, as Saim Ayub's blistering century helped Pakistan chase 145 with 10 wickets to spare. The visitor made it two in two after completing a 99-run victory in the decider – Kamran Ghulam's **(left)** hundred and Abdullah Shafique's fifty took Pakistan to 303, but Zimbabwe skipper Craig Ervine's half-century was in vain as his side could manage only 204.

GETTY IMAGES

6

England completed a 3-0 clean sweep over South Africa with a nine-wicket win in the third and final WT20I. Charlie Dean picked up three wickets to restrict South Africa to 124, before Danni Wyatt-Hodge made short work of the target with an unbeaten fifty. England's dominant run in the series was enabled by Nat Sciver-Brunt **(left)**, who hit back-to-back fifties in the first two games and tallied 126 in the series to bag the Player-of-the-Series award. With the ball, the spin duo of Dean and Sarah Glenn picked 11 wickets between them in the series to help England blank the Proteas.

Times of uncertainty: With India having no wins and also losing its Intercontinental Cup crown this year, along with facing a future without Sunil Chhetri, the football scene in the country has never been grimmer. AIFF MEDIA

A TEAM IN THE DOLDRUMS

A draw with lower-ranked Malaysia marked a **winless calendar year** for India for the first time since 2006.

At times, the lows in sports are so low that they evoke pity rather than optimism. Indian football, specifically the senior men's team, has endured such a phase this year.

With India having no wins and also losing the Intercontinental Cup crown this calendar year, along with facing a future without its record goalscorer Sunil Chhetri, the football scene in the country has never been grimmer.

The final act of this dismal saga unfolded in a draw with lower-ranked Malaysia at the GMC Balayogi Stadium in Hyderabad, on a day when the match atmosphere felt more like a school sports day than an international football encounter.

Two hours before kick-off, the venue saw school children queuing up and trickling into the stadium, while fans of the home team were scarcely in sight.

Even though a few arrived later, many others remained tied to their work commitments, unable to attend the match on a Monday evening.

Among those absent was P. Srikanth, an auto-rickshaw driver who had travelled earlier with the Diary in the hopes of watching India practice.

"Malaysia tomorrow, no? I worked there for a few years but came back during the pandemic," he said. When asked who he would support, he chuckled and replied, "India, *bhai,*" in his distinct Hyderabadi accent.

NEELADRI BHATTACHARJEE

On the field, the Indian team showed enough grit to equalise after being a goal down, offering the local supporters some joy.

But off the pitch, Hyderabad fell short of demonstrating its potential as a prominent football venue, instead settling for reflected glory and political vaudeville.

The venue's shortcomings were glaring: insufficient water for volunteers during the pre-match rush, hundreds of spectators trespassing into the stands mid-game, and schoolchildren throwing bottle caps at journalists seated in a press box that's awkwardly placed at a 45-degree angle from the goalpost **(above)**. The stadium was everything a venue should not be in a FIFA international friendly.

The draw at full-time marked a winless calendar year for India for the first time since 2006 (with at least five matches played), closing a putrid chapter for Indian football, both on and off the field, in the historic City of Nizams.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

Colaco golazo

Liston Colaco **(below)** stood on the touchline, caressing the ball like a baby. His expression radiated the joy of unbounded relief and achievement.

FSDL

The Mohun Bagan Super Giant forward was celebrating a goal that showcased the quality and class of a top international football striker.

For the 25,000 fans gathered to cheer their team against Jamshedpur FC at the Salt Lake Stadium, Colaco had delivered a brilliant moment to savour.

He weaved through Jamshedpur FC's defensive setup with the deftness and class that led many fans to draw comparisons with none other than Lionel Messi.

Known for his speed and creativity, Colaco had struggled for form earlier in the season.

However, the goal — where he outsmarted five Jamshedpur FC defenders before finishing with a precise angular shot — seemed to have dispelled doubts about his fitness and form.

The goal went viral online, with many users hailing it as "magical" and comparing his "stunning" skill to that of some of the best strikers in the world.

"Not many players have this kind of talent. I am really happy to see him score that fine goal," said his coach, Jose Molina, after the match.

Receiving praise from Molina, who previously served as the sporting director of the Spanish football federation, is a significant achievement for Colaco, given Molina's exposure to the best of international football.

"Liston had many chances so far in the league but had to wait until the eighth match to score. Hopefully, this goal will encourage him to go for more in the coming matches," Molina added, while cautioning his "talented" winger to be more consistent.

Amitabha Das Sharma

Target identified: Salah continued his superb run of form this season with a sublime goal. AP

AGONY AT ANFIELD

Manchester City delivered a **nightmare performance** against Liverpool, as it remains winless in its last seven games.

Joan Mathew Jacob
joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in

Pep Guardiola and Co.'s dire run of form across all competitions continued as it succumbed to a 0-2 loss against table-topper Liverpool in the high-profile Premier League clash at Anfield.

After a 0-4 thrashing at the hands of Tottenham Hotspur the previous weekend, City looked uninspired against the Reds and was blown away as Cody Gakpo and Mohamed Salah sealed the deal for the home side.

Salah recorded a goal and an assist in the same match for the 36th time in the Premier League, equalling Wayne Rooney's record. He also scored a brace to inspire his side to a 3-2 comeback win against Southampton the week before, taking his league goal tally to 11, one behind Erling Haaland.

City is now winless in seven games across all competitions, including six defeats, and have dropped to fifth, level on points with Brighton and Hove Albion in fourth. It is also the first time since 2008 that City has lost four league games in a row.

Following their 1-1 draw in the London Derby, both Arsenal and Chelsea bounced back with consecutive wins to take up the second and third spots in the table, respectively.

The Gunners put three past Nottingham Forest before thumping West Ham United 5-2 in a game where all the goals came in the first half.

Enzo Maresca led Chelsea to a 2-1 win against his former club Leicester City and followed it by thumping Aston Villa 3-0, thanks to goals from Nicolas Jackson, Enzo Fernandez and Cole Palmer.

Ruben Amorim's first match in charge of Manchester United ended in a 1-1 draw against lowly Ipswich Town. However, in the ensuing week, his tactical prowess was on show in his first league match at Old

Back to winning ways: Marcus Rashford scored a brace as Manchester United won its first home game under Ruben Amorim (below) in style. REUTERS

Trafford as Marcus Rashford and Joshua Zirkzee grabbed a brace each to send Everton packing. United is now ninth in the table with 19 points from 13 games.

Tottenham continued its unsteady form, following up the win against City with a 1-1 draw against Fulham to move into seventh place, two points behind Nottingham Forest in sixth. Bournemouth's Justin Kluivert and Evanilson etched their names in Premier League history by becoming the first player to score a hat-trick of penalties and the first player to win three spot-kicks in a game, respectively, during their 4-2 win against Wolves.

After his stint as interim manager of Manchester United, Ruud van Nistelrooy will return to the league in a permanent role, taking charge of Leicester City, who sacked Steve Cooper after its loss to Chelsea. Under stand-in manager Ben Dawson, Leicester went on to lose 1-4 to Brentford in its last match before Nistelrooy took charge.

Bundesliga

Jamal Musiala preserved Bayern Munich's unbeaten status this season with an 85th-minute equaliser against Borussia Dortmund in *Der Klassiker*, after Jamie Gittens's solo effort had given the home side the lead in the first half.

The German giant, however, suffered a blow as striker and top scorer Harry Kane was forced off the pitch with an injury during the game. The Englishman was coming off scoring a hat-trick in Bayern's previous league fixture against FC Augsburg, taking his tally to 14 goals this season.

Dortmund, on the other hand, came into the match on the back of its sixth home win in the league this season, cruising past SC Freiburg 4-0.

Dortmund is fifth in the table with 20 points, 10 fewer than leader Bayern. RB Leipzig dropped to fourth in the table after consecutive losses to Hoffenheim and VfL Wolfsburg, conceding nine goals across the two games.

Patrik Schick scored a hat-trick as defending champion Bayer

REUTERS

Late twist: Jamal Musiala (centre) preserved Bayern Munich's unbeaten status this season with an 85th-minute equaliser against Borussia Dortmund in *Der Klassiker*. GETTY IMAGES

Leverkusen completed a comeback to beat FC Heidenheim 5-2. In its next Bundesliga fixture, the Czech striker pushed the ball over the line with his chest to help his side edge past Union Berlin. Xabi Alonso's Leverkusen is third in the table with 23 points so far this campaign.

Veteran Mario Götze got on the scoresheet as Eintracht Frankfurt narrowly beat SV Werder Bremen at home before thrashing Heidenheim 4-0 away in its next match. Omar Marmoush scored a brace in the game, taking his tally to 13 goals this season. After Leipzig dropped points, Frankfurt moved to second in the table, four points behind Bayern.

Serie A

Title holder Inter Milan returned from the international break with a bang, thrashing Hellas Verona FC 5-0, with Marcus Thuram scoring a brace.

However, its following match against fourth-placed Fiorentina was suspended after midfielder Edoardo Bove collapsed on the pitch in the 17th minute. The 22-year-old was swiftly stretchered off to an ambulance and taken to hospital.

After 13 games played, Inter sits third in the table, level on 28 points with second-placed Atalanta.

Napoli edged Roma 1-0 in Claudio Ranieri's first game as Roma's manager since taking over from Ivan Juric, who was sacked following the club's home defeat to Bologna. Romelu Lukaku scored from close range to hand Napoli its ninth win of the season.

The 2022-23 champion extended

BARCELONA WAS HANDED ITS FIRST HOME DEFEAT OF THE SEASON AS LAS PALMAS' SANDRO RAMIREZ (BELOW) AND FÁBIO SILVA SCORED TO WIN 2-1

REUTERS

their lead at the top to four points after beating Torino in its next match, courtesy of a left-footed strike from new signing Scott McTominay **(right)**.

Italian giant Juventus remained unbeaten in the league after draws with AC Milan and Lecce but sits sixth in the standings, four points ahead of Milan in seventh.

La Liga

Barcelona squandered its lead at the top of the La Liga table after dropping points in consecutive matches against Celta Vigo and Las Palmas.

Hansi Flick's side was cruising to a win against Celta Vigo thanks to goals from Raphinha and Robert Lewandowski until 21-year-old Marc Casado was sent off in the 82nd minute. The home side then scored twice in two minutes to earn a point.

The following week, Barca was handed its first home defeat of the season as Las Palmas' Sandro Ramirez and Fábio Silva scored to win 2-1. After three consecutive games without a win, Barca still leads the standings with 34 points, one more than Real Madrid, which has a game in hand.

Jude Bellingham and Kylian Mbappe got on the scoresheet in two consecutive game weeks as Los Blancos breezed past Leganes and Getafe.

Despite being within touching distance of arch-rival Barcelona, Real will be wary of its growing injury list, which includes David Alaba, Eder Militao, Dani Carvajal, Vinicius Jr, Aurelien Tchouameni and Eduardo Camavinga.

AFP

Tacticians unite: Claudio Ranieri with Napoli coach Antonio Conte after the former's first game as manager of AS Roma. REUTERS

From the spot: Mason Greenwood (extreme right) scored a late penalty in the 89th minute to help Marseille win against AS Monaco. The team is now second, tied on points with Monaco. REUTERS

Atletico Madrid left it late to beat Deportivo Alaves in Diego Simeone's 700th game as club manager.

After going a goal down in the seventh minute, Atletico was awarded a penalty late in the match, which Antoine Griezmann dispatched into the back of the net.

With four minutes of regulation time remaining, Alexander Sorloth then squeezed the ball past the opposition keeper to complete the comeback win.

The following week, the club had five different goalscorers as it thrashed Real Valladolid 5-0 away from home. Simeone's side sits third in the table, one point behind second-placed Real Madrid, having played a game more.

Ligue 1

Joao Neves, Lucas Beraldo and Vitinha found the back of the net as Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) beat Toulouse FC to keep its unbeaten streak alive in the league this season.

Luis Enrique's side, however, dropped points when it was held to a 1-1 draw by Nantes at the Parc des Princes in its next league match. Achraf Hakimi's second-minute strike was cancelled out by Matthis Abline, as PSG took a seven-point lead at the top of the standings.

Marseille climbed to second in the table after back-to-back wins against RC Lens and AS Monaco, with Mason Greenwood scoring the winner from the spot in the 89th minute against the latter. Monaco sits third, level on points with Marseille, after 13 games.

Edon Zhegrova scored the only goal as LOSC Lille beat Stade Rennais, but it was held to a 2-2 draw by last-placed Montpellier in its next game. Arnaud Nordin grabbed the equaliser in the fifth minute of second-half stoppage time for Montpellier, in an ill-tempered match that saw Tanguy Coulibaly and Mitchel Bakker sent off in the closing stages following clashes between the teams.

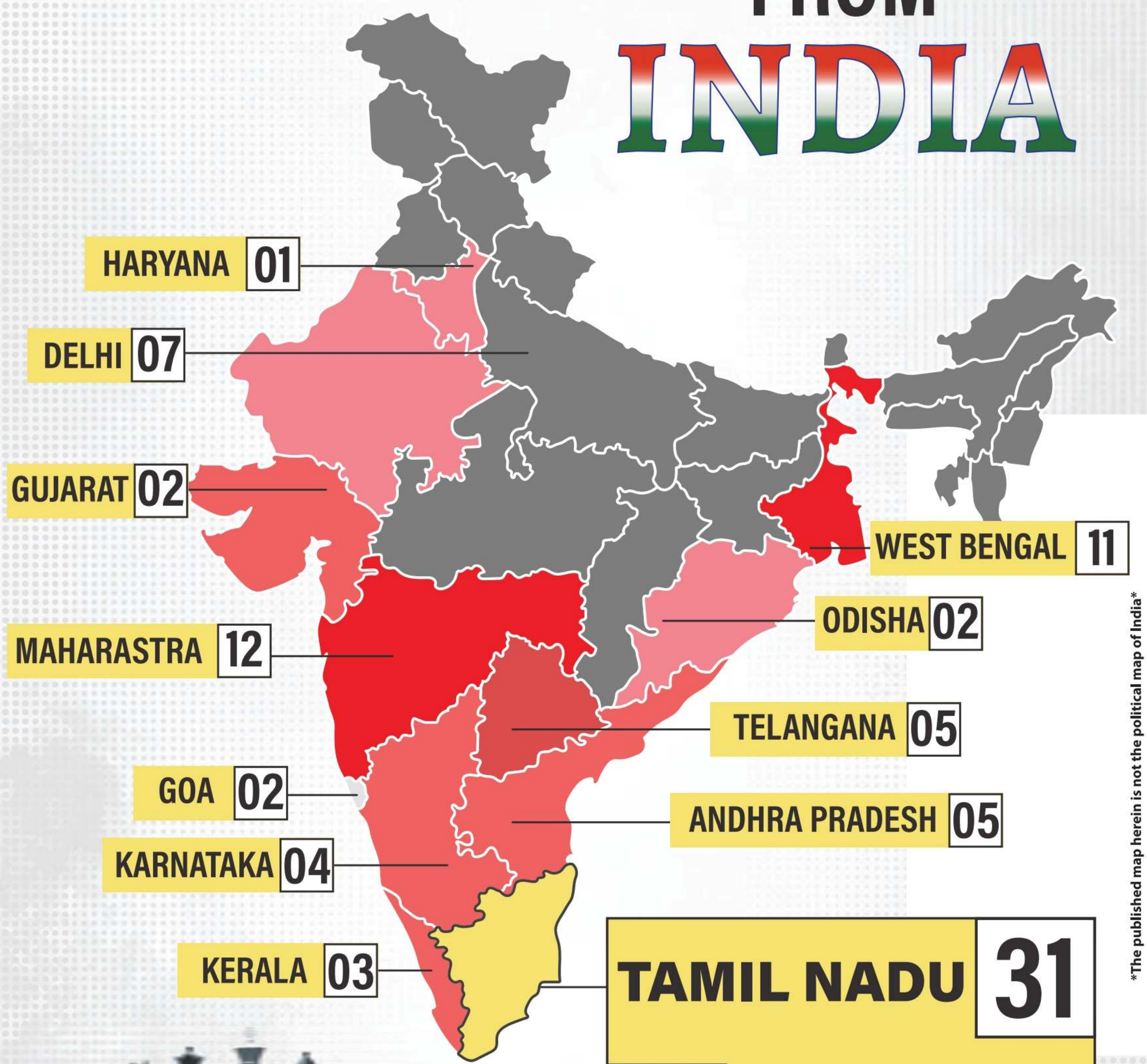
Lille makes up the top four, trailing leader PSG by 10 points.

> « Romelu Lukaku scored from close range to hand Napoli its ninth win of the season »

VELAMMAL NEXUS

STUDY-SERVE-SMILE

CHESS GRANDMASTERS FROM INDIA



21 ARE FROM VELAMMAL

The published map herein is not the political map of India

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EN PASSANT

Viswanathan Anand

GUKESH, DING LOCKED IN A PSYCHOLOGICAL DUEL

Gukesh still hasn't found any **chinks in Ding's** armour. Meanwhile, the defending champion hasn't been able to take the chances that have come his way.

The World Championship in Singapore has suddenly taken on the flavour of a psychological duel instead of a pure chess match. In the last few games, we have started to see a very clear trend where D. Gukesh is trying to provoke his opponent into a battle and is ready to decline draws and take risks. Ding Liren, on the other hand, seems pessimistic about his position, often going for the safest line at the first opportunity in the hope that Gukesh might overreach.

In Game 6, Ding chose the London System, which he had used to great effect in the last World title match against Ian Nepomniachtchi. Gukesh's preparation was excellent until move 16. On the next move, he had a couple of easy ways to make a draw but chose a slightly inaccurate one that allowed Ding to get the unbalanced position he was presumably seeking. On the 23rd move, Ding thought for a while, then gave up on his winning attempts and essentially offered a draw by repetition. Even more surprisingly, given that the position slightly favoured Ding, Gukesh turned down the draw and kept playing. He defended accurately but seemed to be taking extra risks. They agreed to a draw a few moves later.

In Game 5, Gukesh surprised Ding in the opening by playing a peaceful variation. This year, the line has been somewhat popular, though, as people have discovered, it contained some venom. Ding was excellently prepared and equalised very easily. On the 23rd move, Gukesh made a serious mistake by not exchanging rooks. Ding went for perhaps the smallest of the three advantages. He could have put the knight on 'a4' or activated his rook first, which would have led to a significant advantage. He made Gukesh's moves easier to find, and then, shockingly, took his bishop to the wrong square, captured a pawn, and then returned it. The audience was astonished by this. In a game where Gukesh would have had

Change in tactics: Gukesh and Ding need to rework their strategies, given that neither seems to be getting his desired positions. ENG CHIN AN /FIDE

to defend precisely for a long time, he managed to draw within a few moves thanks to Ding's inaccuracy.

Game 4 was a fairly uneventful draw. Ding's opening preparation was not lacking in venom, but he did not follow up with the effort required for precise play. So, with a few natural moves, Gukesh solved all his problems.

It is nice to have the rest day at this point because both sides will need to rework their strategies, given that neither seems to be getting his desired positions. Gukesh still hasn't found any chinks in Ding's armour. Meanwhile, the defending champion hasn't been able to take the chances that have come his way in the last few games.

In the last few games, we have started to see a very clear trend where Gukesh is trying to provoke his opponent into a battle and is ready to decline draws and take risks.

FOR MORE STORIES

THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR

More than any champion in tennis history, Rafael Nadal exemplified the Greek philosopher Heraclitus's aphorism – **'Character is destiny'.**

Paul Fein

Youthful exuberance fuelled a record-smashing career that captivated the sporting world for 22 years. Bouncing up and down during the pre-match coin toss, Rafael Nadal resembled a boxer primed for a title fight.

His zig-zag sprint to the baseline for the warm-up warned opponents of his boundless energy. His bulging biceps delivered topspin forehands so ferocious and relentless that a rival likened the experience to 'Chinese water torture'. His muscular legs propelled him so swiftly that he could turn defence into offence with a single spectacular shot, and his rugged torso perfectly complemented his die-hard competitiveness.

This good-looking Spanish left-hander made his foes look bad for as long as it took. If he suffered for hours, they would suffer even more. Those few who managed to upset him often had little left for their next match. Either way, he broke down their bodies, spirits, or games with repetitive brutality. At Roland Garros, the incessant body punches earned him an astounding, unbreakable record of 14 titles and the honorific title of King of Clay.

« I play every shot like my life depends on it. It is suffering, but at the same time it's enjoyable, because that's what we do – Rafael Nadal »

Goliath in the arena: Nadal makes a deep return against Felix Auger-Aliassime at the 2022 French Open. An unbreakable record of 14 titles here has earned him the honorific title of King of Clay. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

Brains behind the brawn: Nadal with his first coach, uncle Toni, and his last coach, Carlos Moya.

He celebrated winners with leaping uppercut fist pumps and cries of "Vamos!" His body language projected hyper-confidence that intimidated opponents as much as his dynamic athleticism and jaw-dropping shots.

After the Spanish matador slew the bull for almost all of his 22 Grand Slam titles, he celebrated in ecstasy by collapsing on the court — either to his knees, pumping his arms with a last spasm of energy, or on his back in exhaustion.

And yet Rafael Nadal Parera, nicknamed 'Rafa', was a bundle of contradictions that endeared him even more to his admirers worldwide. In his 2011 memoir, *RAFA*, his mother, Ana Maria Parera, explained, "He's on top in the tennis world but, deep down, he is a super-sensitive human being full of fears and insecurities that people who don't know him would scarcely imagine." More than any champion in tennis history, Nadal exemplified the Greek philosopher Heraclitus's aphorism — 'Character is destiny'.

Let's look back at highlights of the life and times of this sporting immortal.

Family matters

Toni Nadal coached his nephew from the age of 4 to 28 without payment. Toni is as proud of Nadal's gracious acknowledgements after press conferences and the fact that he never broke his racket in anger as he is of his many Grand Slam titles and all-time records.

Nadal remained humble and gracious, always praising his opponents both in victory and defeat — and sometimes even consoling them, as he did with a weeping Roger Federer after their riveting 2009 Australian Open final.

Asked by *Tennis Channel* in 2011 when he realised he was special, Nadal's answer was as simple as it was humble: "Never."

In his memoir, he wrote: "There was fun and magic in my relationship with Toni, even if the prevailing mood when we trained was stony and severe. And we had plenty of success."

Toni whacked tennis balls near him to scare him when he wasn't paying attention, made him (and not the other kids) sweep the courts, ridiculed him as "mummy's boy", and seldom celebrated his victories. Sometimes the little boy came home crying, which distressed his mother.

As a teenager, Nadal called his mother every night while on tour, and well into his 20s, he contacted his sister, Maribel, multiple times in a day by phone or online.

The third woman in his life is Maria Francisca (Mery) Perelló, his girlfriend since 2005 whom he married in 2019. Mery gave birth to their son, also named Rafael, on October 8, 2022.

This extremely low-profile, private trio — especially his mother — created a safe haven for one of the

La familia: Nadal celebrates his 2019 Davis Cup triumph with his mother, wife, and sister (left-right), along with his father (top right).

world's most recognisable and admired athletes.

In *RAFA*, Ana Maria said, "The most important thing, now that I see fame has not gone to his head, and never will, is to make him feel at peace when he is home. He needs peace because that is the last thing he has when he is away on tour..."

In 2022, Nadal told *Essential Sport* about his mother's crucial role during his exhilarating but injury-plagued journey to the top.

"To underestimate the value of her role in everything that has come my way, to see her importance as less than Toni's, for example, would be as blind as it would be unjust."

Nadal's wife, who seems to be the antithesis of Mirka Federer, played no role in the Spaniard's career for several years and relished her anonymity and independence, working full-time at an insurance company.

She seldom travelled with him because, as she put it, "even if I could, [it] would not be good either for him or for me."

She never speaks to the media, and said in the memoir, "Even if my family asks me about Rafael, I prefer not to say much... It's what works for me, and what works for Rafael and me as a couple. We wouldn't have it any other way."

Today, Mery, who holds a degree in business administration, serves as the Project Director of Strategy and Relations with Institutions for the Rafa Nadal Foundation.

Big Three bonanza

Whenever the legendary Big Three clashed at a Grand Slam event, we were guaranteed a stellar performance from at least one of them. And when both played at their dazzling best, particularly in a final, they produced matches for the ages. Here are the crème de la crème:

✪ Nadal def. Federer 6-4, 6-4, 6-7, 6-7, 9-7 — 2008 Wimbledon final

So dominant were No. 1 Federer and No. 2 Nadal that they had combined to win 14 of the previous 16 Major championships leading into the 2008 Wimbledon. The Mighty Fed had seized five successive Big W titles

> « With 81 consecutive victories on clay, Nadal has the longest winning streak on a single surface among men »

Longest Open-era final: At 5 hours and 53 minutes, the 2012 AO summit clash between Djokovic and Nadal pushed every possible limit of endurance.

and pronounced himself "the big favourite obviously". For Nadal, the most devastating loss of his career — falling to Federer in the 2007 Wimbledon final — would inspire his most momentous triumph. After that defeat, he reportedly sat on the shower floor for 30 minutes, crying in despair and self-recrimination.

In 2008, the two protagonists brought out the spectacular in each other with attacks and ripostes that screamed "Anything you can do, I can do better!". Spectators chanted "Come on, Roger" and "Come on, Rafa" throughout changeovers during the dramatic denouement. Serving for the championship, the swashbuckling Spaniard struck three clever and bold winners, including his only serve-and-volley, followed by a Federer return error, to achieve his life's work, sacrifice, and dream.

For 28 years, cognoscenti ranked the unforgettable Borg-McEnroe 1980 Wimbledon final as the sport's most brilliant and riveting match. But after the Federer-Nadal extravaganza of almost superhuman tennis, which broke the record for being the longest final in Wimbledon history, John McEnroe — the very McEnroe of that famed 1980 match — couldn't restrain his enthusiasm: "This was a magnificent, unbelievable, truly memorable match. This has to be the greatest match we've ever seen."

✪ Djokovic def. Nadal 5-7, 6-4, 6-2, 6-7, 7-5 — 2012 Australian Open final

For sustained brilliance and suspenseful twists, the 2012 Australian Open final ranks as an all-time classic, second only to the Nadal-Federer 2008 Wimbledon final.

Nadal led 4-2, 30-15 on his serve in the fifth set but missed an easy backhand passing shot by inches.

SEA OF RECORDS

- Has won four different tournaments 10 or more times — French Open (14), Barcelona Open (12), Monte Carlo Masters (11), and Italian Open (10).
- First player to win multiple Majors in three different decades — six in the 2000s, 13 in the 2010s, and three in the 2020s.
- Holds the longest winning streak on a single surface among male players, with 81 consecutive victories on clay.
- Owns the men's record for the most clay-court titles, an astonishing 63, far ahead of Guillermo Vilas with 49.

Inflection point: Tennis got a new king in 2008 after Nadal dashed Federer's hopes of winning his sixth Wimbedon crown in a pulsating final.

Defending champion and World No. 1 Novak Djokovic capitalised, prevailing in a Grand Slam record 5-hour and 53-minute final. "I think we played a great tennis match. It was a very good show," said Nadal, who had lost to the Serb for the seventh consecutive time. Djokovic called the epic "definitely the greatest match I've ever played."

✪ Nadal def. Djokovic 6-4, 3-6, 6-1, 6-7(3), 9-7 — 2013 French Open semifinal

The stakes could not have been higher: Nadal was aiming for a record eighth title at Roland Garros, while Djokovic sought the only Grand Slam that had eluded him. He was also bidding to become the first man since Rod Laver in 1969 to complete a calendar Grand Slam. In what was considered the de facto final, Nadal clawed back from a 4-2 deficit in the deciding set to secure a thrilling victory in four hours and 37 minutes.

McEnroe summed it up for *NBC* when he said: "It's nice when something lives up to what you built it up to, and this 'match of the year' was all you could ask for.... You can make an argument that the match was the greatest we've ever witnessed on a clay court."

A powerful argument indeed!

Evolution of a legend

I first saw this whiz kid play around 2003 on my old-fashioned 28-inch TV. His performance left me gobsmacked as Nadal sprinted so far to retrieve shots that he briefly disappeared from the screen, only to reappear and stay in the point after three, four, or

● In 2010, Nadal became the only player to win all three clay-court Masters 1000 tournaments — Monte Carlo, Madrid, and Rome — as well as the French Open in the same season, achieving a historic sweep of the four most prestigious annual clay events.

● Helped his country win five editions of the Davis Cup — 2004, 2008, 2009, 2011 and 2019 — tying McEnroe for the Open Era record.

● His 112-4 match record at Roland Garros also gave him the highest winning percentage — 96.5 per cent — of any singles player at any Major.

A special bond: Federer played his last professional tennis match with his greatest rival and best friend at the 2022 Laver Cup.

even five seemingly impossible defensive gets. After winning the clay-court match, I predicted, "Nadal will win four to eight French Opens," even though the long-haired, determined Spaniard needed to improve significantly on other surfaces. Over the years, Toni and Carlos Moya, Nadal's longtime friend and advisor from Mallorca — who replaced Toni as head coach in 2018 — honed Nadal's technique and tactics. Nadal added power to his groundstrokes and improved his volley and serve. No longer a one-trick pony, he reached the Wimbledon finals in 2006 and 2007, winning the coveted title in 2008.

Before the 2008 US Open, where Nadal had never advanced past the quarterfinals in five appearances, Toni said, "Rafael needs to play like he is on grass all the time. He is still young. He has learned how to play on grass and make three finals. He will learn this on hard courts."

Following a similar progression, Nadal made the semifinals at Flushing Meadows in 2008 and 2009, and in 2010, he captured the only Major that had eluded him. His first serve, which averaged a modest 107 mph in 2009, shot up to an impressive 118 mph in 2010.

His volleying also improved dramatically. "His net play is way, way better than your average clay-court player. You can make a solid argument that he's a better volleyer than Federer," said McEnroe for *CBS* during Nadal's sensational 6-4, 5-7, 6-4, 6-2 victory over Djokovic in the 2010 US Open final.

Whether blasting astonishing forehand winners on the dead run from outside the alley or belting backhand passing shots, Nadal evolved into an offensive juggernaut and a baseline grinder. "To be in such defensive positions and hit outright winners is something I had never seen in this sport before Nadal arrived," McEnroe raved.

When Nadal captured his second US Open title in 2013, all-time great Billie Jean King told *Inside Tennis*, "Nadal is the most adaptable player I've seen in years. Every year he is better on hard courts. Same thing with the first time I saw him play on grass and now. He is so adaptable, and that is very hard to find in people. He's amazing."

By age 32, after taking his record 11th title at the Barcelona Open, Nadal noted, "Now I look for more angles, trying to open the court" to set up forehand winners. This tactic also applied to his serve, where his odds of winning the point increased dramatically, particularly when serving wide in the ad court, when his second shot was hit with a forehand more than 80 per cent of the time.

What former No. 1 Jim Courier rated as "the best forehand I've ever seen" was produced with a Western grip and a pronounced low-to-high, lasso-like swing with several different follow-throughs. These diabolically spinning "heavy" balls averaged 3,300 RPM — significantly faster than the ATP top 50 average of 2,800 RPM. These fearsome forehands bounded higher and wider (on crosscourt forehands), forcing errors and eventually wearing out opponents.

In Nadal's never-ending quest for perfection, court-positioning became his final frontier. A 2020 *New York Times* article referenced the findings of Sam Maclean, a data analyst with Hawkeye, which showed that in his 30s, Nadal's long, gruelling rallies gave way to aggressive, first-strike tennis.

"From 2012 to 2016, Nadal hit 30 per cent of his first shots after his serves from inside the baseline. But each year he has worked with Moya, that number has risen, first to 36 per cent, then to 39 per cent, then to 41 per cent, and last year to 42 per cent. Why is that so important? Because when Nadal hits that first shot from inside the baseline, he wins 74 per cent of the points. When he hits the first shot from behind the baseline, he wins just 59 per cent."

Despite debilitating injuries, Nadal managed to win eight more Grand Slam titles from 2017 to his last dominating year in 2022, when he seemed almost superhuman at the Australian and French Open. Neither chronic foot pain nor the effects of COVID in the previous six months stopped Nadal at Melbourne where he fought back from a two-set deficit to outlast Daniil Medvedev for the title. At Roland Garros, he needed injections to numb foot pain for the entire fortnight to conquer four top-10 players, including Djokovic, Alexander Zverev, and Casper Ruud.

End of an era: The 38-year-old bid adieu to the sport in the 2024 Davis Cup, where he played the final match of his career, losing to Dutchman Botic van de Zandschulp in straight sets.

Mr. Nice Guy

Sports mottos like 'Nice guys finish last' and 'Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing' never applied to Nadal. Before the sporting world knew much about him, they quickly warmed to the exuberant yet mature teenager. As the respected *ESPN* analyst Mary Carillo pithily observed, "He acts like a man out there. But he reacts like a boy. And that's why people like him."

His popularity soared as people learned more about the Spanish youngster in unconventional attire — pirate pantaloons and colourful sleeveless shirts — and noticed his acts of kindness on and off the court.

A tennis philanthropist, he launched the Rafa Nadal Foundation in 2010. It has improved the lives of thousands of children through a wide range of programmes, such as the NETS project (Nadal Educational Tennis School) in India, the 'More Than Tennis' meetings (where athletes with intellectual disabilities gather from schools across Spain), the opening of foundation centres in Palma, Valencia, and Madrid, charity races, 'Play All' for socially vulnerable children, and 'Study&Play.'

In October 2018, Nadal opened his tennis academy to victims of flash floods seeking shelter in Mallorca and donated $1.4 million to those affected. He partnered with Federer to donate $250,000 towards Australian bushfire relief in January 2020.

The two superstars' exhibition match — held before the largest crowd in tennis history in Cape Town, South Africa, in February 2020 — attracted 51,954 fans and raised $3.5 million for the Roger Federer Foundation.

Nadal's affection and compassion for his longtime rival and close friend were never more evident than during Federer's poignant retirement ceremony at the 2022 Laver Cup. As both giants of the sport wept, they held hands to comfort each other. It marked the end of the iconic 'Fedal' rivalry, but the memories will endure.

"I'm very proud to be part of his career in some way," Nadal said. "But even for me, I'm happier to finish our career like friends after everything we shared on court as rivals." Two years later, Nadal retired during the Davis Cup in Málaga, Spain, and two legends of the fabulous Big Three are now gone.

"There is so much to respect about Nadal, but what I respect most is the respect he had for the game, and for the athletes who played it," Carillo said. "Nadal changed the sport for good and with manifest goodness, and that is a legacy in and of itself."

Afshan Fathima shows us that there is a way to break the chains

At 23, a young woman from Anna Nagar, Chennai, never imagined a future in sports, let alone MMA. Yet today, she's among the sport's elite.

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Afshan Fathima walked away from her very first bout of the 2024 IMMAF World Championships in Uzbekistan last week not only with a win but also with a prodigious, rapidly darkening contusion under her eye. Although the injury was caused by an accidental headbutt rather than a punch from her opponent, many thought it meant the end of her campaign in the women's strawweight division (52.2 kg) at her debut World Championship.

"Everyone who saw me thought I wasn't going to be declared medically fit to take part in the next bout. But I did make it. And then after I won that bout, everyone thought my injury was not going to let me compete in the next bout. After every bout I fought, the other fighters thought I wasn't going to be able to make the next round because of how big the swelling had gotten. But I kept doing this. There was no way I was going to quit," she says.

Afshan says she had to save up for a year in order to pay for her fight camp, nutrition, travel and competition fees for her first IMMAF World Championships this year.

By the time Afshan's campaign at the IMMAF World Championships ended, she had gone further than any other Indian — reaching the final — at the premier global amateur competition in mixed martial arts. Amongst her wins was a guillotine choke submission of Ireland's Lisa Murtagh, who trains at the prestigious SB Gym — with the same team as former UFC champion Connor McGregor — and picked up a decision win over reigning World champion Matilda Bachurina of Kazakhstan in the semifinals.

Afshan, however, couldn't return from the competition with the gold medal she had hoped for. She ended up losing the final by a narrow points decision to Isabel Calvo of Spain. "Unfortunately, the day of my final coincided with the start of my period. It was pretty bad. I was puking and had really bad cramps. I wasn't anything close to 100 percent," she says. Afshan says

Laser-focused: Afshan Fathima's next target is to turn professional. "We have some offers but I'm still to decide whether I want to compete for one more World Championship and win a gold or take the jump into professional fighting," she says. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

she returned from the tournament with mixed emotions. "It stings, of course, to go so far and fall short in the final, but at the same time, I'm a little happy that I at least came this far," she says.

Few might not have predicted Afshan would get anywhere near where she's gotten. "Even I wouldn't," she says.

Mixed martial arts were never on the horizon for the 23-year-old from Anna Nagar in Chennai. Even sport wasn't really part of the picture. "There's no one in my family who has chosen sports as a career," says Afshan, the eldest of three sisters. That was the case for her as well. It wasn't as if she wasn't interested in sports. Some of her earliest memories are of watching WWE pro wrestling matches with her father and uncle. At school, she says she was one of the few children to actually make the most of the games period.

"Most of the other kids would be chatting with each other or catching up on their studies. I was the only one who would pester the games teacher to start a basketball match or something. I was also someone who used to roughhouse with my friends. They'd all tell me I was really strong or that I hit really hard. But I didn't know what I was going to do with that. While I really wanted to play something, my family only really wanted me to study. My grandmother was a teacher, and my aunt was a lecturer. I was also fairly good in studies, so I had no option but to focus on my books. Perhaps if I were a bit dull, they might have been more open to the idea of putting me in sports," she says.

It was only after her school when she began studying for a degree in Electrical Engineering at Hindustan Institute of Technology that Afshan

Owning the cage: Afshan Fathima says she knew she was meant to be a fighter when she stepped into the fighting cage for her first sparring session. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

says she finally got the chance to pursue her passion.

"I always wanted to do some sort of fitness activity. So, in my third year of college, I joined a crossfit gym. The gym where I trained also had a sign for mixed martial arts classes, but they didn't have any instructors. That was the first time I had heard about mixed martial arts. Although they didn't have classes at the gym. I did a Google search and found out about Combat Kinetics Chennai and coach Ajit Sigamani," she says.

At that time, Afshan says she told her parents she was just staying back to play basketball in her college since she knew the alternative would be something

they would never agree with.

"I'm from an extremely orthodox Muslim family. Back when I was in school and in college, I would wear the burkha. I couldn't even think of leaving the house if I wasn't wearing the burkha. While my parents were supportive of my education, they would have drawn the line at my getting into a sport like martial arts. So I used to wear the burkha when I left home. Then, when I went into the gym, I would change into my gear and back into the burkha when I was heading back home. It almost felt like I was living two lives. I tried to balance those two lives as much as possible. I knew I would have to tell my family eventually, but I was hoping I could ease them into it," she says.

It was at the Combat Kinetics Gym where she felt she truly belonged. "Because I had been somewhat sporty in the past, I didn't really struggle getting physically in shape. I enjoyed doing all the pushups and pullups. I absolutely loved actual combat training. A lot of our training in MMA is mixed gender, and I sometimes would think just how scandalised my family would be if they walked in on one of our grappling sessions. But I genuinely didn't think too much about it when I started. I just got on with it. It wasn't as if I'd stopped becoming religious or stopped praying, but I think it's what's inside your heart that counts a lot more than what you are wearing on the outside," she says.

Afshan says she knew she was meant to be a fighter when she stepped into the fighting cage for her first sparring session. "In contrast to a lot of the other individuals who were starting out, I was also someone who wasn't scared of sparring. A lot of beginners are scared of being hit. They close their eyes and turn their heads. When they get hit on the face for the first time, they decide this isn't what they want to do with their life. But fighting just came naturally to me," she says.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Her biggest fight would come outside the cage when her parents eventually found out that she was training in mixed martial arts. "My dad freaked out. There was a lot of screaming. They took away my phone, and I wasn't allowed to leave the house for a week. But I kept insisting that I would go, and eventually my parents gave in," she says.

Over time, Afshan's parents have come to terms with her choices. "I don't think my father and mother were personally against my taking up MMA. I think they were more concerned about what the society I came from would think about what I did. I think they first thought it was a weird sort of fad that I had picked up. Initially, as a compromise, my father would drive me to the classes

« IT WAS ONLY AFTER HER SCHOOL WHEN SHE BEGAN STUDYING FOR A DEGREE IN ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING AT HINDUSTAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY THAT AFSHAN SAYS SHE FINALLY GOT THE CHANCE TO PURSUE HER PASSION »

and bring me back right after. Later, I learnt how to drive a motorcycle and began to go myself. That gave him the confidence that I was really serious about what I was doing," she says.

Within a few months of training, Afshan says she was sure combat sports was what she wanted to do with her life. "I can say I was a quick learner. As part of our training, we

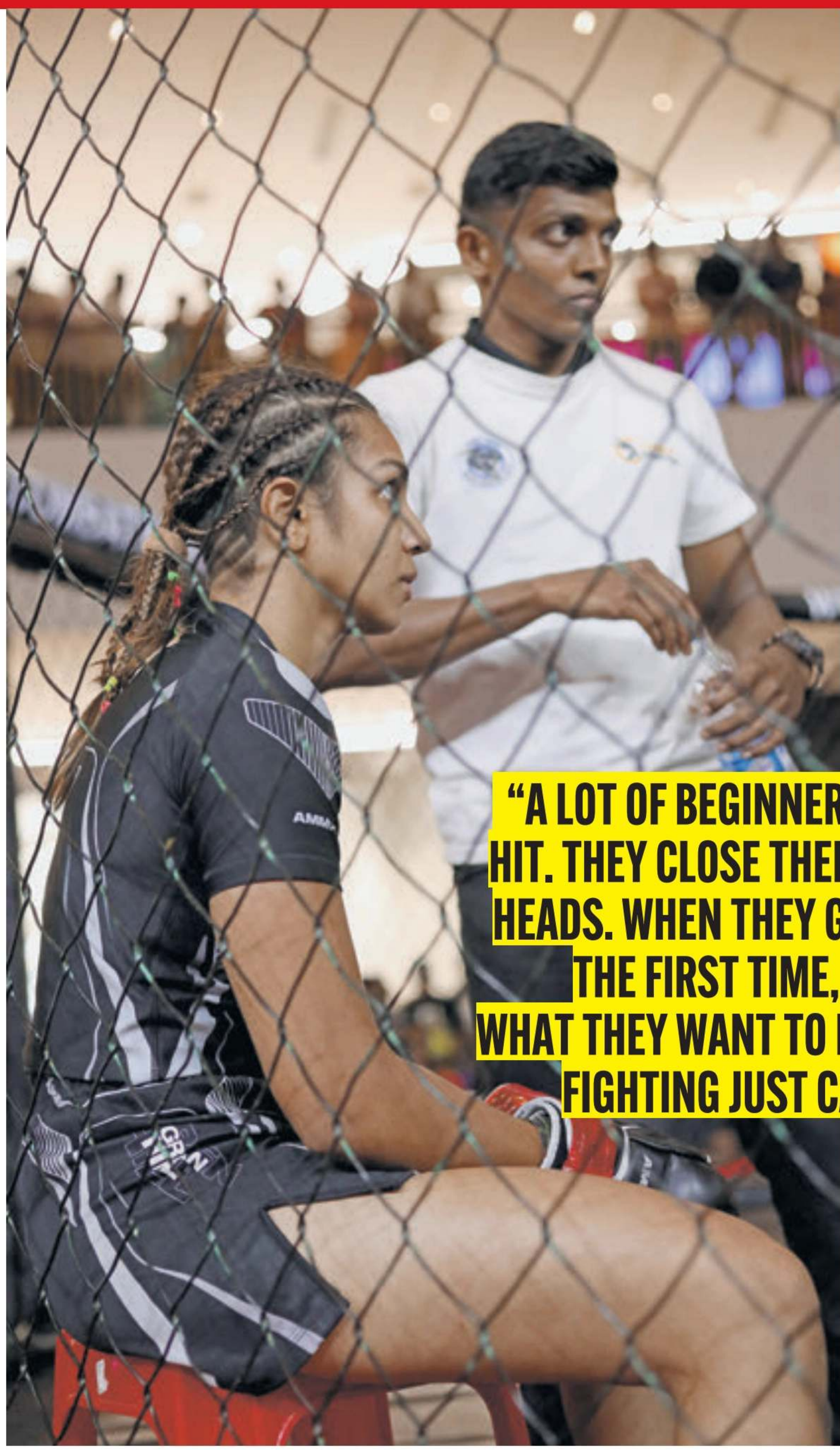
Breaking the glass ceiling: Afshan Fathima defied odds, reaching the final of IMMAF World Championships despite challenges and stereotypes.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

usually compete in boxing, judo and wrestling competitions. Within a few months of training, my coach entered my name in a district-level competition in boxing. Although I was nervous since I hadn't competed before, I ended up winning. Another few months later, I competed at my first national amateur championships in Lucknow, and once again I ended up winning," she says.

While the gold medal she won in Lucknow earned her some level of respect at home, Afshan knew it would always be hard for her parents to completely come to terms with her career. That was her key to becoming as independent as possible. "My parents have already gone far beyond their comfort zone to even accept that I can be an MMA fighter. Sometimes when they see me in shorts, they will grumble and say they gave me too much freedom. I like to live life on my own terms. I've never asked my parents for any money to fund my training or competition. My dad used to be in business, but he had to shut that down after he made a lot of losses. I also have two younger sisters, whom my parents are responsible for. At first, I used to beg my coach to charge me a nominal fee. I promised I'd pay him back when I started earning. After graduation, I worked in sales for Jaguar India, but I realised I wasn't getting the time to train like I wanted. I then started working as a coach in my MMA gym itself. MMA isn't a sport where, as an athlete, you get easily sponsored by the government or private organisations. So, if I have to compete in competitions, I have to raise my own funds," she says.

Afshan says she had to save up for a year in order to pay for her fight camp, nutrition, travel and competition fees for her first IMMAF World Championships this year.

It's not been an easy journey, and



Acceptance: Over time, Afshan's parents have come to terms with her choices. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

retire as a fighter and get married. But she doesn't understand that I've only just started," she says.

Afshan doesn't have any regrets. She's already looking to her next target — turning professional. "The amateur system is mostly a way to get some sort of experience. I think I'm a fairly well-rounded fighter. The next level for a fighter is to turn professional. My coach and I are still weighing our options. We have some offers but I'm still to decide whether I want to compete for one more World Championship and win a gold or take the jump into professional fighting," she says.

The professional ranks will be yet another giant step for Afshan to climb. She's looking forward to it. "There's this quote I always try to live by. It's that the mountains you carry are the ones you have to climb. There's no point taking pressure because of everything that I had to get through to get to where I am. When I look back, I think to myself, 'Wow, I've broken so many stereotypes, not just for women but for Muslim women in particular. Every once in a while, some woman will come up to me and say she lives through me or that she wants her child to become like me. That gives me a lot of motivation. I've faced some hard obstacles. I can deal with next to anything," she says.

"A LOT OF BEGINNERS ARE SCARED OF BEING HIT. THEY CLOSE THEIR EYES AND TURN THEIR HEADS. WHEN THEY GET HIT ON THE FACE FOR THE FIRST TIME, THEY DECIDE THIS ISN'T WHAT THEY WANT TO DO WITH THEIR LIFE. BUT FIGHTING JUST CAME NATURALLY TO ME"

Afshan has to keep herself motivated even when it's not the easiest. Within her family, Afshan says she is a bit of a polarising figure. "Just because I'm a fighter doesn't mean everyone's opinion has changed. My family is still very conservative. A lot of people wonder why I'm still not married. Both my younger sisters wear the hijab, and most of my cousins still wear the burkha. My relatives tell them not to hang around with me because I'm seen as a bit of a bad influence. My mother loves me, but she will still come up to me and say that I should

Finding silver linings in a year of turmoil

The three titles for the host at the Syed Modi India International Super 300 were **cathartic** in a year where Indian badminton had too many lows and sparingly few highs.

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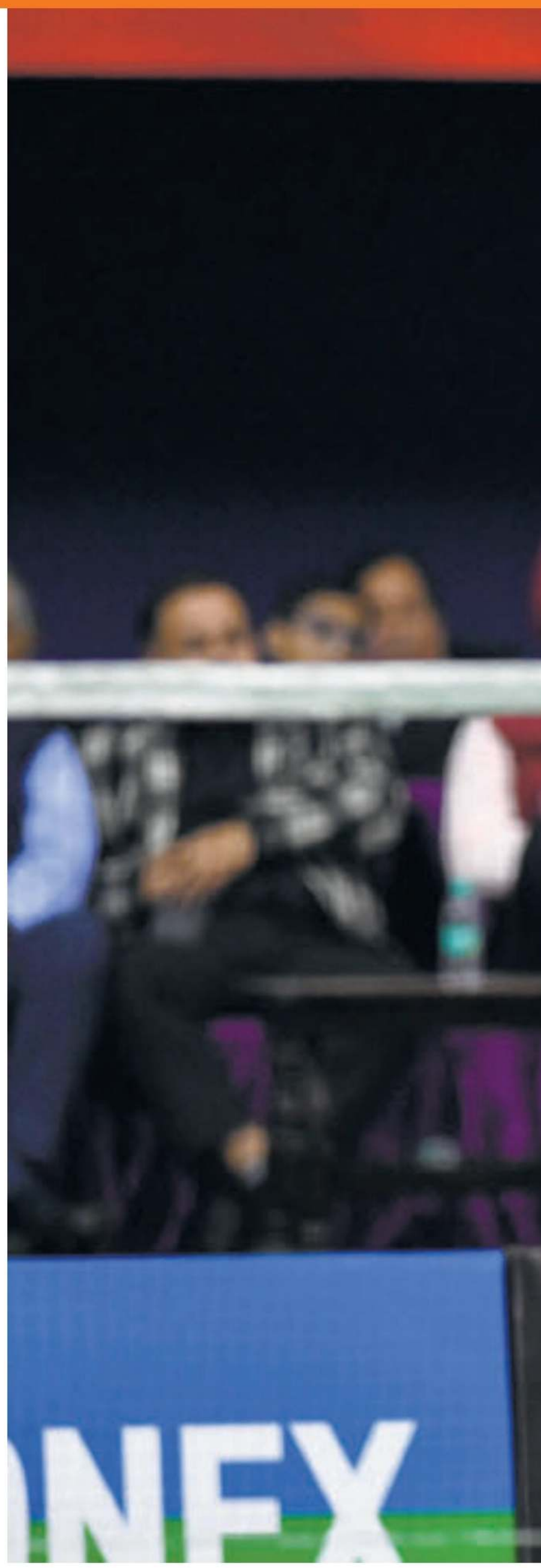
When Lakshya Sen finally hit the shuttle into the crowd on Sunday night after his most comprehensive win of the week to claim the Syed Modi India International Super 300, it was not just him celebrating a title win. Given the challenges Indian badminton faced throughout the year, it was a cathartic moment for fans of the sport, reigniting hope for a more promising future in the coming year.

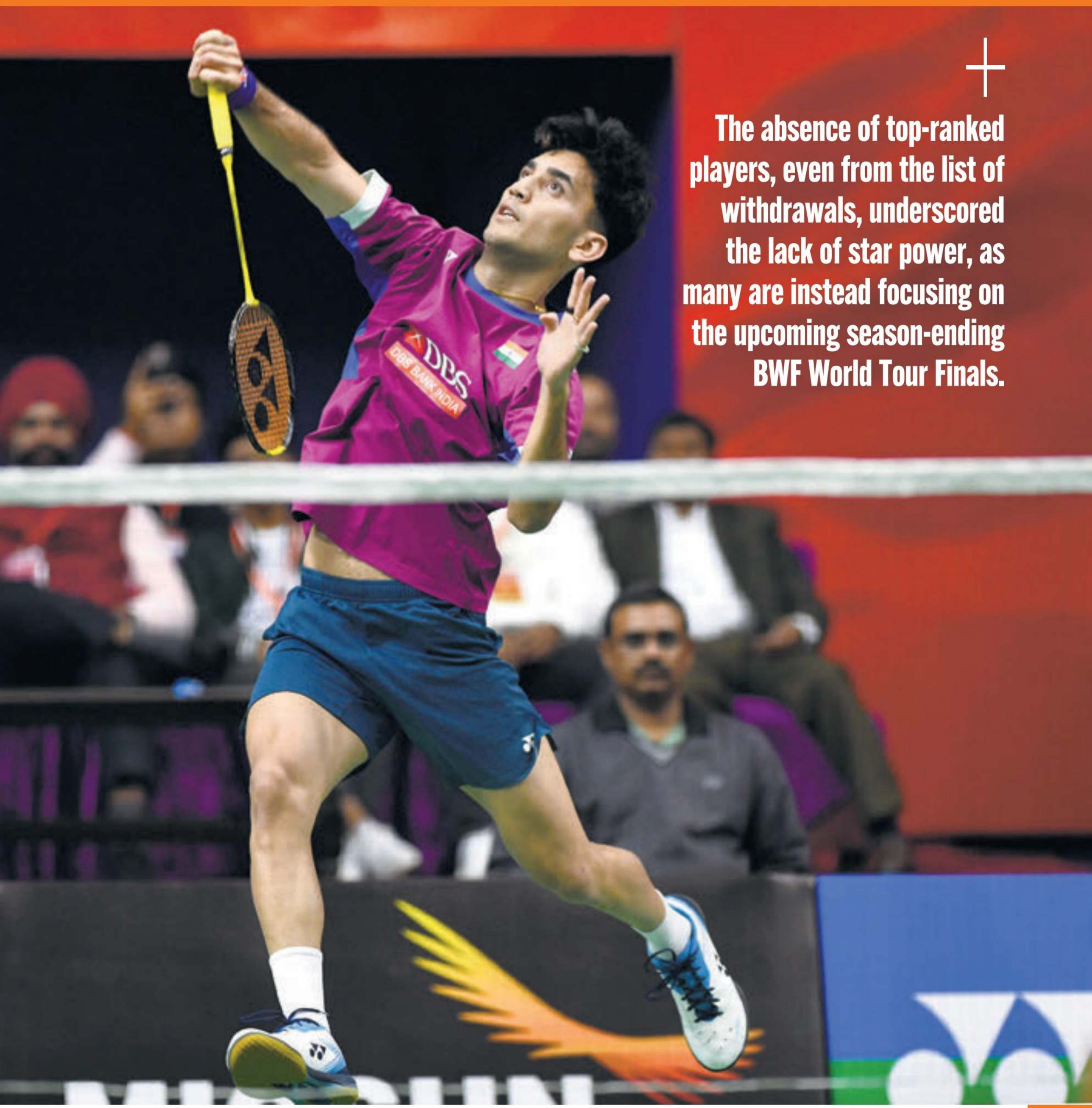
Before Lakshya, the centre court at the Babu Banarasi Das UP Badminton Academy had already witnessed three Indians being crowned champions in a competition that has been a happy hunting ground for the home favourites.

While PV Sindhu expectedly claimed her third title in the city to join compatriot Saina Nehwal as the only three-time winners, the pair of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand wrote itself into the history books as the first Indian women's duo to win the title since the tournament's inception in 2009. But Lakshya's win was the most dominating.

It was a fitting end to a week — and the year for the two top-seeded singles stars — that began on a less-than-promising note. Even before action could get underway in the City of Nawabs, India's continued struggles in the sport widely considered as the second most popular after cricket had suffered yet another setback. The top-seeded men's pair, Satwiksairaj



Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty (Sat-Chi), withdrew from the competition citing injury concerns and a focus on rehabilitation ahead of the next season. The tournament, which once featured legends like Tommy Sugiarto, Viktor Axelsen, and Taufik Hidayat at their peak, as well as champions like Carolina Marin and



The absence of top-ranked players, even from the list of withdrawals, underscored the lack of star power, as many are instead focusing on the upcoming season-ending BWF World Tour Finals.

Nozomi Okuhara in the women's category, had a significantly weaker field this year. Across all sections of the draw, Indian players dominated, with foreign participation largely limited to those chasing crucial ranking points ahead of year-end. The absence of top-ranked players, even from the list of withdrawals, underscored the lack of star power, as many are instead focusing on the upcoming season-ending BWF World Tour Finals.

Consider this: Five of the top eight seeds in both singles draws were Indians, including rising youngsters like Aakarshi Kashyap and Ayush Shetty. The highest-ranked men's

Bouncing back: After the disappointment of a fourth-place finish at the Paris Olympics, Lakshya Sen won his maiden title at the Syed Modi India International Super 300 tournament with a facile win in the final. SANDEEP SAXENA

Three-peat show: P. V. Sindhu claimed her third title to join compatriot Saina Nehwal as the only three-time winner at the Syed Modi India International Super 300 tournament in Lucknow. SANDEEP SAXENA

SINDHU WON HER FIRST BWF WORLD TOUR TITLE SINCE JULY 2022 AFTER BEATING CHINA'S WU LUO YU IN THE WOMEN'S SINGLES FINAL

foreign player was Singapore's Jia Heng Jason Teh, ranked 39th in the world. Among the women, Pornpicha Choeikeewong of Thailand was the top-ranked foreign player at 48 in the world. While the former managed to reach the final before being dismantled by Lakshya in half an hour, the latter was knocked out early.

To be fair, the entries or interest from overseas players are neither the problem nor a concern for the Indians in the fray. They have had their own fair share of worries, of form, fitness and results haunting them all through the year, none more than the two top seeds, who faltered on the biggest stage of all, the Paris Olympics.

While Sindhu was always an outsider to the medal prospects — she had last won a title at the 2022 Commonwealth Games and reached the final of a BWF Tour event only twice since then — Lakshya's fourth-place finish was a big shock. The youngster was one of the medal favourites and lived up to the billing in the initial stages before losing from winning positions in knockouts, raising questions on his mental toughness from none other than coach and legend Prakash Padukone.

Although he was accompanied by

SANDEEP SAXENA

his father here, Lakshya ruled out any change in the immediate future. "I don't think there are any major changes needed to be made. A lot of good things also happened throughout the year, and some that I can surely improve, so I just need to continue focusing on them while planning ahead. No big changes are planned; just trying to continue good training and improve in every way. The process is to be a better player all the time, and that will continue," he said when asked about any possible change in his coaching team.

Syed Modi was a tale of contrasts. Sindhu grew in confidence and performance with each match, rediscovering her love for the game and staying positive throughout, often smiling and sharing her insights. Lakshya, meanwhile, was all business—focused, efficient, and reserved. He dominated his matches with minimal interaction, showing only a brief smile after the final as his sole expression of emotion.

It was in the doubles that the Indians truly had a chance to prove themselves, and they duly obliged, none more than the 21-year-olds Treesa and Gayatri **(pic, above)**. As the only Indians to have qualified for the Tour Finals, the duo has already proven it is in for the long haul. In Lucknow, the two showed how much they had put in to reach this level over the last few years. "We just wanted to win very badly and kept moving, kept fighting," they said after winning the final.

That desperation to win was visible on the court too. Despite being stretched to hour-long, three-game matches multiple times, the pair kept finding more in the tank to stay in the hunt and sustain every day all through the week. With every match, various areas of their gameplay kept getting highlighted — if it was the precision of drops in one, it was the rock-solid defence in another, and the ability to dig deep for power at others. Clearly, the youngsters are marked for greater heights.

However, the men's and the mixed doubles remain a concern. While Dhruv Kapila and Tanisha Crasto managed to show glimpses of possible growth as a pair in their second-place finish, the absence of a genuine successor to Sat-Chi was clearly felt among the men. But in a year that had too many lows and sparingly few highs, Indian badminton fans will take all they can get. Fingers crossed for a better 2025.

No surprises: Verstappen achieved the feat in a race he did not win — he crossed the chequered flag to take fifth place at the Las Vegas Grand Prix — and secured the coveted championship. AP

MAXIMUM CHAMPION

With a **fourth successive** World Drivers' Championship crown, Max Verstappen joins an elite group.

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He was pushed to the limit this year, often finding himself in unfamiliar territory — the back of the grid. But greatness is forged in the fire of adversity, and Max Verstappen rose above all challenges, reaffirming his status as the sport's indisputable champion.

The 2024 Formula One season witnessed a Verstappen who was not as dominant as before. Yet, despite driving a car that didn't obey his every command, he emerged from a tight corner to claim what was rightfully his — a fourth consecutive World Drivers' Championship (WDC) title.

Verstappen, who won as many as 19 of the 22 races last season, had to fight long and hard with his competitors and his RB20 to notch up nine wins, with the last two coming after a shocking 10-race winless slump. It took time for the Red Bull driver to rediscover his form, stirring debates over his drive and sometimes his demeanour, but he eventually put an end to the doubts and ascended to the throne again.

With a fourth successive WDC crown, Verstappen joins an elite group alongside Juan Manuel Fangio (1954–57), Michael Schumacher (2000–2004), Sebastian Vettel (2010–2013), and his 2021 rival Lewis Hamilton (2017–2020).

But he achieved the feat in a race he did not win — he crossed the chequered flag to take fifth place at the Las Vegas Grand Prix, the first stop of the season-ending triple-header, and secured the coveted championship.

The illuminated Las Vegas strip, on a Saturday, had F1 cars zipping past for only the second time, with Mercedes' George Russell in control throughout. The weekend belonged to the Silver Arrows, which topped all the sessions and hit the jackpot with a 1–2 finish after unearthing some unbelievable pace. It was Mercedes' turn to take home maximum points, making this the first season to have four different teams secure a top-two finish.

Russell led Hamilton — who bids farewell to the Brackley-based team after a 12-year journey — to the line, with the former taking a dominant victory from pole and the latter delivering a spirited fight through the field. Verstappen, though, didn't look his usual aggressive self, even letting cars go by, except for the orange McLaren of Lando Norris —

all the Dutchman needed to do was stay ahead of his British counterpart, and he completed the straightforward task without much fuss.

There may have been some relief for Verstappen after closing out the championship battle. A flame seemed to have reignited, one that was nearly snuffed out by an uncommon mid-season glut. Despite initially lacking pace, he pieced together a perfect lap to start at the front of the grid for the penultimate race in Qatar.

His first pole position in five months was short-lived after a rare one-place penalty for impeding Russell, the driver who started alongside him. But it was no hindrance to Verstappen or his surprising pace, as he led from the first lap to finish at the Lusail International Circuit, taking his ninth win of the season. The sprint race, however, told a different story.

It was yet another commanding drive by both McLaren drivers, with pole-sitter Norris letting his teammate Oscar Piastri go by in the nick of time for the victory. The 25-year-old paid no heed to team orders as he repaid the favour from the Brazil affair, back when he was on a mission to chase Verstappen for the title.

In the main race, Norris had a good start and maintained a minimal gap to the driver ahead, Verstappen. However, he was slapped with a harsh 10-second stop/go penalty, effectively losing 35 seconds and dropping to the back of the grid, wiping out any shot he had at taking the lead.

Though he may have fallen short of the ask, it was undoubtedly Norris' best season thus far, aided by a much stronger, faster McLaren. Playing the team game prevailed in the end, as the Woking-based unit inched closer to its first World Constructors' Championship (WCC) since 1998. Nevertheless, if this topsy-turvy nine-month spectacle has taught fans anything, it's that there's always a new contender just around the corner.

Ferrari has been a consistent side, gradually climbing through the points. The Italian outfit is within striking distance — 21 points — of leader McLaren, with a maximum of 44 up for grabs in the finale. They are the only teams left in the WCC fight, as Red Bull was eliminated, losing out on crucial points due to the lack of contributions from Sergio Perez, who has endured a miserable time in the midfield. With only one no-result race, Ferrari has managed to score an average of 26.9 points combined, compared to McLaren's 27.8, with five race wins between its two drivers, Charles Leclerc (3) and Carlos Sainz (2). While the latter will find himself behind the steering wheel of a Williams in 2025, with seven-time world champion Hamilton taking his place, Leclerc has pulled up into the final-race tussle for second place with Norris.

Only eight points separate the two as the F1 contingent lands at its curtain-closer destination, Abu Dhabi.

The Yas Marina Circuit will see the fight for second place in the WDC and, more importantly, the constructors' championship, unfold. With the track favouring Ferrari, it could be eyeing its first WCC title in 16 years, while McLaren aims for its first in 26. A thrilling end awaits, as the stage is all set for a showdown that will declare a new champion and celebrate a peerless one.

Fast lane: Verstappen led from the first lap to finish at the Lusail International Circuit, taking his ninth win of the season at the Qatar Grand Prix. GETTY IMAGES

GETTY IMAGES

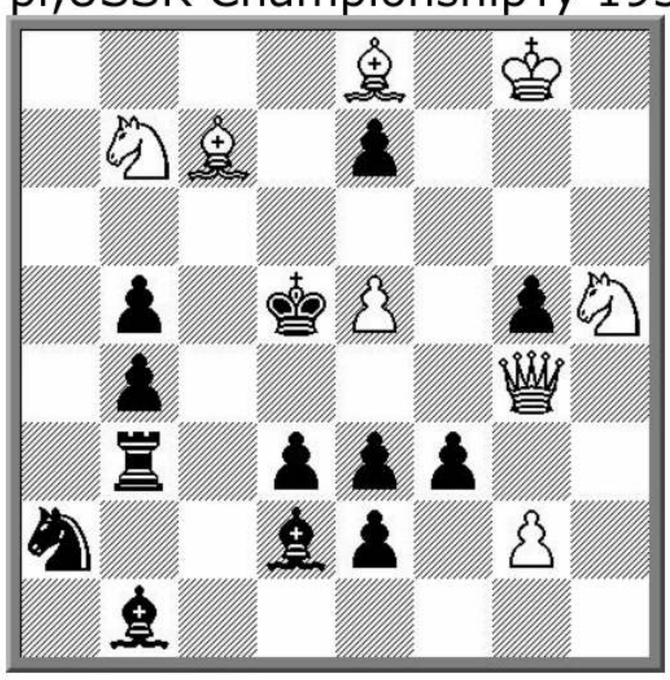
Play by the white queen

By C.G.S.Narayanan

When black obstructs a potential black defence white exploits the weakness on the second move in Dresden theme. The strategic three-mover by the Russian master extends the idea to three pieces with very fine dual avoiding mechanism for the black defences at c3.The second move continuations are good tries but defeated by the three prominent defences at c3.1…exf3? Nc3!;1…Bb6? Bc3! 1.Bxb5? Rc3! The **key 1.Ng7** plans 2.Nf5 followed by 3.Ne7

L.I.Loshinski

3 pr,USSR ChampionshipTy 1931



Mate in three moves

The defence motif is to cut off white queen's guard by both 1…Nc3 and 1…Bc3.After 1…Nc3 both 2.Bb6 and Bxb5 appear to be playable but only Bb6 works with Ne4 3.Qe6 mate.1..Bc3 subtly eliminates 2.Bb6 for 1..Kxe5! and so 2.Bxb5 Bd4 3.Qxf3 yet another self-block.1…Rc3 thwarts 2.Nf5 with 2…Rxc7 but the continuation is 2.exf3 Rc4 3.Qd7.The three quiet moves followed by three different self blocks ending in attractive queen mates make this Dresden most appealing and the cyclic obstruction is made to look incidental by the composer's virtuosity.

The second problem presents white queen in a non-checking quiet mode in the three variations. After the **key 1.Bh2!** the white queen threatens to vacate with 2.Qf5 for 3.Ne6 shutting off BR route to f6.The apparently far away BNc1 provides entertaining play to counter the threat.

Touw Hian Bwee

First prize,Neue Zurcher Ztg 1978

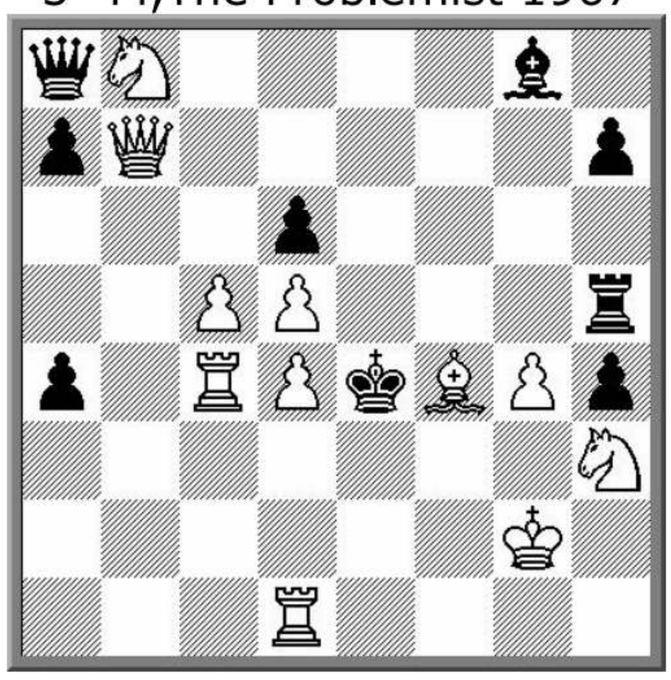
Mate in three moves

After moves BNc1 BR is tied down to guard d3 WQ moves quietly sets up appropriate battery to provide mates for interferences by the BN with BB and BR. 1…Nb3 2.Qd6 Nc5 3.Nxe7. Similarly 1…Ne2 2.Qf6 Nf4 3.Ne6

In the problem for solving (below) the clue is how to open up the R+P battery.The quiet moves of WQ follow the three captures on d5.

W.A.Whyatt

5th Pr,The Problemist 1967



Mate in three moves

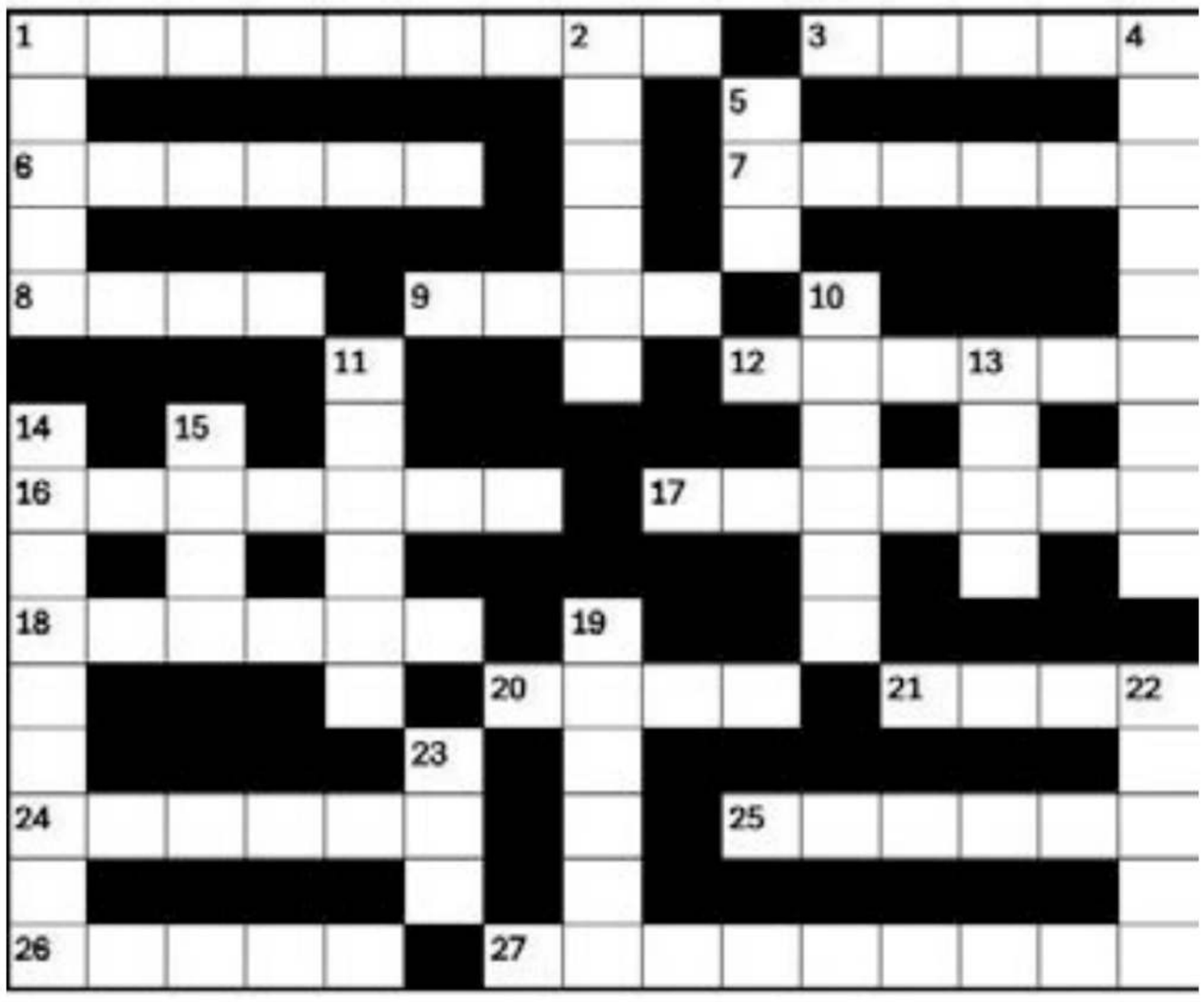
Solution to problem for solving in he artcle'Correcting the correcton':

Try:1.eN any? (2.Bg6) 1..Rg5 2.Qf7;1..Be4 2.Be6;1…Ng3 2.Qd1 but 1…Bxf6! Try 1.Nf3? 1…Ng3 2.cNxe3 ;1…Rg3 2.cNb4;but 1…Bh3!

Key 1.Ng4!! (2Bg6)1…Bxf6 2.Nxf6; 1…Ng3 2.gNxe3

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

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who won the Player of the Match award in the India versus Pakistan women's T20 World Cup match? (9)

3 Who won the Player of the Series award in the three-Test series held between India and New Zealand recently? (5)

6 Who is appointed as the new manager of the Manchester United club? (6)

7 Which State team won the senior national hockey championship held recently? (5)

8 & Down 1 Who won the Player of the Series award in the T20 International series held between South Africa and Ireland recently? (4,5)

9 Who scored a hat-trick for Fiorentina in its Series A match against Hellas Verona? (4)

12 Which Pakistani player not only scored a hundred with the bat but also gave away more than 100 runs while bowling in the first Test versus England in Multan recently? (6)

16 Which Indian won both men's singles and mixed doubles titles at the 2024 WTT Feeder Caracas tournament held recently? (7)

17 Who ended up as the top goal-scorer and won the best player award in the recently concluded Women's Asian Champions Trophy hockey tournament? (7)

18 Who won the18th straight year on the PGA Tour Champions recently? (6)

20 Who won the men's doubles title of the ATP Tour Finals, partnering Kevin Krawietz, recently? (4)

21 Which country is the Indian tennis team drawn against to play in next year's Davis Cup World Group I Play-offs? (4)

24 Who recently became only the third bowler in Ranji Trophy history to claim all 10 wickets in an innings? (6)

25 Which Italian tennis player won the prestigious ATP Men's Tour finals held recently? (6)

26 Which city hosted the final of the Women's T20 World Cup? (5)

27 & Down 11 Who won the men's singles title at the Paris Masters Tennis tournament held in October 2024? (9,6)

DOWN

2 & 19 Who has been chosen as the next head coach of the England football team? (6,6)

4 Which mystery spinner from Afghanistan has been bought by Mumbai Indians in the recently held IPL Auction? (9)

5 The first name shared by the New Zealand captain and wicketkeeper during the historic Test series win over India. (3)

10 The England football captain plays for this German club. (6)

13 Which former Pakistan captain is the head coach of Quetta Gladiators in the PSL? (4)

14 Who scored a hat-trick in the senior men's hockey championship final held recently? (9)

15 Name the current bowling coach of the IPL team Kolkata Knight Riders. (4)

22 Who was recently appointed as the bowling coach of the IPL team Royal Challengers Bengaluru? (5)

23 What is the surname of the bowler who took most wickets in the three-Test series between Pakistan and England in October 2024? (3)

1 Devi Academy students win the Playmaker Award. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Sportz Village-Get Kids to Play Summit
Chennai chapter puts spotlight on media's focus on inspiring children to take up sports

The caravan of 'Sportz Village-Get Kids to Play Summit' made a pit stop at IIT-Madras for its third chapter on November 27.

The forum brought together various stakeholders from across the fraternity under one roof to discuss actionable ways to get the youth and children interested in taking up sports.

Ayon Sengupta, Editor of *Sportstar*, threw light on the media's role in lighting the proverbial spark. "At *The Hindu*, we focus on covering local age-group sports extensively. It is really heartening for a parent to find their kid's name in the newspaper," he said.

L. V. Navaneeth, CEO of *The Hindu Group*, added that the media must play a role in driving resources to the bottom of the pyramid. He said, "Our role is not only to highlight the problems but also be a part of the solution. What we do at *Sportstar* Conclaves is a step in the right direction... We need to talk more and get more like-minded people on a shared platform."

IIT-Madras professor Dr. Mahesh Panchagnula delivered the keynote address. He said, "We have a plan to admit two students through Sports Excellence channels to each of the 16 B.Tech programmes here. At least one student in each of these departments will be a girl... Our vision is to have the first IITian-Olympian in a few years."

Naveen Velagapalli, managing trustee of Shraddha Children's Academy, elucidated the importance of balancing sports and academics. He said, "Although I want more Physical Education periods in my school, I have been unable to do it. There's pushback from teachers and parents. They say we don't have time to complete the syllabus."

The event additionally honoured companies which have come up with game-changing CSR programmes and talented schoolchildren with the Playmaker Awards.

SANTADEEP DEY

2

Yusha Nafees beats Aryaveer Dewan to secure Xtreme Open squash title

Yusha Nafees **(in front)** showcased his exceptional skills, defeating Aryaveer Dewan 15-13, 11-7, 11-7 in the Under-19 boys final at the Xtreme Open squash tournament, held at the Dhyan Chand National Stadium.

The match between Yusha, the rising star, and Aryaveer, the reigning US Open champion, lived up to expectations, offering a thrilling contest after a series of surprising upsets in the other boys' and girls' events. Yusha's remarkable play was the difference, as he outlasted Aryaveer with intense rallies, systematically breaking his opponent's resistance, and ultimately securing the title.

In the U-11 boys final, Prahlad Singh Majithia made a strong comeback after losing the first two games, edging Nirvaan Uppal 11-9 in a tense fifth game.

The U-17 girls final saw top seed Sanvi Batar triumph in a thrilling five-game match against Kaashvi Mangal.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

SPORTOON

3

Arjun Rathi played with patience and unleashed explosive strokes when needed to defeat top seed Arnav Paparkar 7-5, 2-6, 6-4 in the final of the ITF junior tennis tournament at the DLTA Complex. Both players delivered a high-quality match that entertained the sparse crowd.
In the girls' final, Rishitha Basireddy managed to turn the match around midway through the second set, securing a memorable 4-6, 6-4, 6-3 victory against qualifier Nelli Ivanova. This marked her second consecutive title, following her recent win in Guwahati.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

4

Vaishnavi Adkar won the women's singles title for host Bharat Petroleum, defeating Riya Bhatia of Indian Oil 6-2, 6-2 in the final of the 43rd PSPB Inter-unit Tennis Tournament at the Deccan Gymkhana in Pune. The country's No. 1, Sumit Nagal, won the men's singles title for Indian Oil, defeating Vishnu Vardhan of ONGC 6-4, 6-3. In the men's semifinals, Nagal defeated VM Ranjeet 8-6, while Vishnu accounted for Yuki Bhambri 8-6. In the women's semifinals, Vaishnavi beat Sohini Mohanty 6-4, and Riya Bhatia overcame Laxmisiri Dandu 6-2.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

THE POINT OF RECOVERY

With technology now widely used in fitness, it's **easier to identify** the appropriate recovery time and method to prevent injuries and improve performance.

Fitness + Recovery = Performance. This is the mantra to follow when embarking on a training journey. It's essential to train hard, train smart, and recover smart.

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on recovery rather than feeling guilty for missing a session. With technology now widely used in fitness, it's easier to identify the appropriate recovery time and method to prevent injuries and improve performance. Better recovery is directly proportional to better results.

With a wide range of recovery and planning protocols available today, choosing the most suitable one for your needs has become an art in itself. There are many proven strategies that promote faster recovery and greater gains. Here are some commonly used methods embraced by elite athletes and beginners alike.

Sauna/Steam

Living in a region with high heat and humidity can be challenging enough, and the idea of adding steam or sauna sessions might seem excessive. Nevertheless, these practices offer undeniable benefits.

Benefits

✪ Improves cardiovascular and mitochondrial function.

✪ Reduces muscle breakdown caused by workouts, contributing to a stronger physique.

✪ Regular use improves Heart Rate Variability (HRV), a marker of nervous system fatigue, and decreases muscle soreness following intense training. This supports faster recovery for both your nervous system and muscles, helping maintain optimal efficiency.

How to use sauna/steam

✪ Start with 5-10 minutes per session, ideally on a day that does not precede heavy training.

✪ Gradually increase to 20-30 minutes at temperatures between 120-180° F, 2-3 times per week.

Just make sure to stay well-hydrated before and after sessions and pay attention to your body's signals to avoid overexertion.

Ice bath and cryotherapy

Shifting gears and flooring the accelerator to the opposite side of the spectrum, cryotherapy has become quite popular in recent years. Having encountered many studies both for and against it, we shall leave it to the individual athlete's comfort zone and needs.

Benefits

✪ Many studies have shown that power output and work capacity improve significantly when post-workout cryotherapy sessions are performed regularly. Cryotherapy can also boost recovery.

How to use cryotherapy

The duration of cryotherapy depends on the method you choose. If you opt for a cryotherapy chamber, you will only need around two minutes to get the job done.

Cryotherapy chambers are extremely cold, so you don't want to spend too much time in one, as you could end up with frostbite.

If you use the ice bath method, you can spend 10–15 minutes sitting in the bath to gain the benefits. Of course, this method is much cheaper and can be done from the comfort of your home. In a cryotherapy chamber, five minutes may seem like an eternity. Start with shorter durations and gradually add 30–60 seconds each time until you reach your target.

Foam rolling and massage

You have probably seen plenty of people using foam rollers and may even have noticed others using massage guns to limber up their muscles. While these tools might not directly improve your fitness, they do appear to have considerable benefits for recovery.

Research has shown that foam rolling can reduce the pain associated with delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS). Similarly, massage has been found to improve range of motion, recovery, and DOMS when performed between training sessions. By incorporating massage, you can keep soreness at bay.

This process not only helps you feel better physically but also provides a mental boost, enabling you to train more effectively. Even if the benefits

are partly due to a placebo effect, they are still worthwhile nonetheless!

Sleep

One of the best recovery methods you can incorporate into your life is optimising your sleep. Many people overlook sleep because it's a normal part of life, but they often fail to recognise its importance when it comes to recovery.

Research has shown that poor sleep leads to slower and less complete recovery from training and reduces pain tolerance by up to 15 per cent. On the other hand, getting more sleep has been shown to significantly improve athletic performance. The general recommendation is 7–9 hours of sleep per night. Sleep quality is of prime importance — not just lying in bed tossing and turning.

Tips to enhance sleep quality

✪ Stick to a consistent bedtime and wake-up time.

✪ Avoid caffeine within 6–8 hours of bedtime.

✪ Limit alcohol intake at night.

✪ Turn off the TV and put away your phone well ahead of bedtime.

✪ Keep your room pitch dark.

✪ Ensure your room is cool and comfortable.

By following these tips, you'll enjoy a great night of uninterrupted sleep, helping you recover and feel refreshed each morning!

Nutrition

Training hard to become stronger and fitter is only half the battle; you also need to fuel your body appropriately. Unfortunately, many people put a great deal of effort into their training but just sort of hope for the best when it comes to their nutritional habits. This approach is an appetite for destruction.

It's a no-brainer that you need an adequate amount of calories to fuel your workouts, but nutrition goes far beyond calorie intake. Whether it's protein, carbohydrates, fats, minerals, trace elements, or even hydration, all play a crucial role in optimising your performance and recovery.

The quality of the food you eat matters too. For instance, if your goal is to build strength and muscle, you must consume sufficient high-quality protein to support muscle growth and recovery.

Equally important is ensuring you get the necessary vitamins and minerals. This is where eating a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole, nutrient-dense foods becomes essential. Proper nutrition fuels proper performance throughout the season.

Cold treatment: English goalkeeper Ellie Roebuck recovers in a cryotherapy chamber following a training session. Many studies have shown that power output and work capacity improve significantly when post-workout cryotherapy sessions are performed regularly. GETTY IMAGES

Writing without rancour

"Your ranking decides your social status. The guy ranked No. 90 won't get as warm a handshake as the guy ranked No. 20," says Ireland's Davis Cup captain **Conor Niland** in his book.

Suresh Menon

History may be written by the victors; so too are books on sport, reflecting the triumphalism associated with it. Occasionally you get an Andre Agassi writing about how much he hated the sport that made him rich and famous, or a journalist digging deeper to give us an insight into its corruption and abuse.

Seldom do we get a tennis insider's view on how it all looks if you are not a (Roger) Federer, Rafa (Nadal) or (Novak) Djokovic, each earning millions of dollars a year and travelling with an entourage comparable to a marriage party in India.

What if everything is not taken care of for you, from the personal to the professional? What if you have to scrounge and save and travel (arranging visas and hotels on your own) across too many forgettable cities and too many forgettable tournaments, with loneliness as your companion?

"Your ranking decides your social status. The guy ranked No. 90 won't get as warm a handshake as the guy ranked No. 20," says Ireland's Davis Cup captain Conor Niland in *The Racket: On Tour with Tennis's Golden Generation — and the Other 99%*. Written with honesty and humour, it is remarkable for its lack of bitterness or bile.

Niland sets the scene: "There are three tiers in the hierarchy of men's professional tennis. The ATP Tour is the preserve of the top 100 players. The Challenger Tour is populated mainly by players ranked between 100 and 300. Below that is the Futures tour (now the ITF World Tennis Tour), tennis's vast netherworld of more than 2,000 true prospects and hopeless dreamers.... it is a liminal space that exists only to be got out of as quickly as possible."

Setting the scene: Conor Niland has retained his dream, and his ability to see the funny side of things through it all, in his book. GETTY IMAGES

Niland won three Challenger Tournaments and achieved his life's ambition of qualifying for Wimbledon — at the age of 29. He qualified for the U.S. Open too, but food poisoning meant he couldn't complete his match against Djokovic. A year later, realising his hip injury might require surgery and a long rest, and he would have to start at the bottom again, he quit. "I would retire as a professional," he writes, "without so much as making eye contact with Federer on tour, never mind playing against him."

He might have achieved both had he managed to cling on to his 4-1 lead in the decider against a French player at Wimbledon, but he choked. *The Guardian* called it"a miniature epic of a match." He was ranked 181 and would have met Federer next (his description of that match is a report from the inside that no reporter has access to).

"Spend long enough outside the Top 10, among the sport's obscurities," he writes, "and you could lose the ability to dream. Life becomes about making ends meet."

Niland retained his dream and his ability to see the funny side of things through it all. *The Racket* — pun intended, one supposes — doesn't ignore drugs and alcohol or players tanking matches, and the establishment's throwing money and services at the top end when it is the bottom that needs all the money and encouragement. All written without rancour.

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