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OFF-SIDE

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SWINGING FOR GLORY BETWEEN TOAST AND TEA

It was *Noboborsho* morning in Kolkata. While others queued for breakfast, I played a cover drive only I could see — because some of us **still believe** every corridor is Eden Gardens.

Last Tuesday, while waiting for my order at a packed Kolkata teahouse, I caught myself midway through a cover drive. Not in theory, but in action. A full, fluent, graceful flourish — wrist soft, eyes on the imaginary ball, elbow high enough to make even the legendary Ramakant Achrekar proud.

There was no bat. There was, unfortunately, a long queue of patrons who had braved the April heat for an early morning cup of Darjeeling tea, toast, eggs, baked beans and cakes — an English breakfast to celebrate the Bengali *Noboborsho* (New Year). A child stared, puzzled; the mother ostentatiously shuffled him away, as though madness might be contagious. And my niece — who had, until then, walked beside me with affable tolerance — chose, quite suddenly, to develop a raging allergy to embarrassing uncles.

I'd like to pretend that this was an isolated, spontaneous fit of imaginary sporting prowess that I have never actually possessed. But men — particularly Indian men — are afflicted with such sports-induced derangement. We have done worse.

We've delivered Wasim Akram's in-swinging yorker between gunny sacks of basmati rice and towers of Surf Excel. We've shadowboxed in office corridors, or jogged down an airport terminal like we were running between wickets — bag in one hand, boarding pass in the other.

We are the men in linen trousers pretending to be Sachin Tendulkar with no bat and no shame. We are Virat Kohli playing the pull shot on the pavement of Park Street, utterly certain that we've dispatched Jofra Archer through the mid-wicket boundary. Our arms whirl, hips rotate, and the laptop bag thumps against our ribcage as the scooterist hoots and passers-by ogle.

Women, meanwhile, seem oblivious to such a malady. My sister has never lunged across the dining table to replicate P. V. Sindhu's smash, and my mother is yet to fling the rolling pin like Neeraj Chopra's javelin — despite the trouble we create in her kitchen. My partner, though, had mastered a Jonty Rhodes dive, flinging herself into a Mumbai local with an agility that suggests Olympic potential.

They view our imaginary athleticism with patient bewilderment, grateful not to have caught the illness, while we rehearse history in fluorescent hallways and risk our rotator cuffs to honour heroes who will never know our names.

"What are you doing?" they ask, half-laughing, half-concerned.

"Practising," we say.

"For what?"

We don't know. For nothing. For everything. For the moment when someone, somewhere, recognises the genius of our kitchen-floor footwork and says: "You could have played for India."

We won't. Obviously. Our knees crack. Our shirts strain against our muffin tops. We can't run without groaning. But inside our heads, every corridor is Eden Gardens, every lunch break is a World Cup final, and every cover drive in the office pantry is worthy of Harsha Bhogle's exuberance.

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How KIIT and KISS Became Sports Powerhouses

KIIT - Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology and KISS- Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, Odisha, India, are the two names synonymous with excellence in sports, and have developed a model of sporting excellence that has become an example for other universities to learn, follow, and implement. With the success of the kind that KIIT and KISS have seen in terms of sports, one would assume that the Founder of these institutions either came from a rich pedigree or was a sportsperson. It is hard to believe that this model has been ideated, created, curated, and catalyzed by a person who was born in poverty, raised in poverty by his widowed mother with seven siblings, losing his father at the age of four in the remote village of Kalarabanka in Odisha in the 1970s. Sports was never in his remotest thoughts.

➢ The same person grew up to start two educational institutions, KIIT and KISS, at the age of 25 with just 100 US dollars at that time in 1992-93. He has always focussed on creation of sports infrastructure since its inception. KIIT and KISS together have 17 sports complexes, Olympic-size swimming pools, an athletics stadium, archery grounds, a cricket stadium, rugby and hockey stadiums named after legends, and India's first and only velodrome within a university campus. These facilities are complemented by a 2600-bed hospital, ensuring world-class medical support for athletes, training in the campus or coming to play. However, just the infrastructure doesn't guarantee success. KIIT and KISS nurture sports talent by providing free education, training, scholarships, and international exposure. Many athletes are identified at a young age, provided with rigorous training, and given academic support to ensure holistic development. Over 5000 sportspersons have been nurtured at KISS, with 1500 competing at national and international levels across 32 sporting disciplines. The vision for the 2028 Olympics and beyond is ambitious yet attainable, with 10-15 students from KISS anticipated to compete, reinforcing its reputation as a cradle for future champions.

KIIT and KISS have hosted numerous important tournaments, setting a benchmark in sports excellence. These institutions have successfully organized prestigious events, including the FIFA Football for Schools Programme, the KISS FIVB Volleyball Foundation Festival, the 1st Khelo India University Games, the 25th All India Forest Sports Meet, and the first-ever Janjatiya Khel Mahotsav in 2023. Over the years, KIIT and KISS have nurtured 21 Olympians, 3 Paralympians, 11 Arjuna Awardees, and 1 Khel Ratna Awardee, along with 5000+ athletes who have brought glory to India at the Olympics, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, and various other international and national championships.

KIIT and KISS are nodal centers for the FIFA Football for Schools Programme and the FIVB Volleyball for All Programme in South Asia. KIIT received the Rashtriya Khel Protsahan Puruskar 2022 from the Government of India. The institutions have been awarded the Sportstar Award (2022, 2025), FICCI India Sport Award, CII Sports Business Award (2023), and Biju Patnaik Award for sports promotion. Prof. Achyuta Samanta was awarded the FIVB Grand Cross, the highest honor in volleyball, recognizing his grassroots promotion of the sport in India including the term when he was the president of Volleyball Federation of India. KIIIT and KISS have been chronicled in Guinness World Records for the largest volleyball exhibition match in 2024.

Prof. Samanta has played a key role in fostering sports like Rugby, Kho-Kho, and Chess in Odisha, helping KIIT & KISS, as well as the state and country, gain global recognition in hosting these sports. KISS is the only institution in India to integrate Chess into its academic curriculum. It is also an associate sponsor of Rugby India. Both KIIT & KISS have also aimed at making Sports more inclusive by establishing 10 sports academies for talented sportspersons in and around Odisha. The institutions have also introduced sports in rural areas. Every year around 1.5 lakh sportspersons, coaches and managers come to KIIT and KISS to participate in the various tournaments and training camps hosted by the institutions.

Believing in the philosophy that investing in youth and sports is investing in the future, he aspires to double all stadiums and sports complexes seeing the fruits of his work. If more institutions adopt this model of right support that can turn talent into champions, India's rise in the global sporting arena will be unstoppable.

« I love the guy, I love this game. Men's tennis needs him. But if I did that, I would have gotten 20 years. Let's be honest – Serena Williams, referring to Jannik Sinner's three-month ban over clostebol use »

25th

Laureus awards saw Swedish pole vaulter Armand Duplantis and American gymnast Simone Biles clinch the top honours in Madrid. Double Olympic champion and world record holder Duplantis was voted 'Sportsman of the Year', while Biles was named 'Sportswoman of the Year' at the 25th ceremony of the awards. Spanish tennis legend Rafael Nadal, who retired from the sport last November, was given a 'Sports Icon' award.

21

Tunisian swimmer Ahmed Hafnaoui, Olympic champion in the 400m freestyle at the 2021 Games, has received a 21-month suspension for three anti-doping whereabouts failures, the Aquatic Sports Integrity Unit said. Hafnaoui withdrew from the Paris Olympics last July and August. He won gold in the 400m freestyle at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and world titles in the 800m and 1500m in 2023 in Fukuoka. The ban will end on January 10, 2026.

« Now I really can't run any more. I have done everything I could to the best of my ability, and I have no regrets in my career – China's Su Bingtian, the first Asian runner to break the 10-second barrier, said he may have run his last 100 metres »

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Ju Wenjun etched her name in history by winning the 2025 FIDE Women's World Championship, defeating Tan Zhongyi 6.5–2.5. This marks the fifth time she has claimed the world title, placing her alongside legends such as Vera Menchik, Nona Gaprindashvili, and Maia Chiburdanidze, who have each won the title five times or more. ANNA SHTOURMAN / FIDE

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Pics: GETTY IMAGES

POINT TO PROVE

Both Deiveson Figueiredo and Cory Sandhagen will be looking to **re-establish** themselves as bantamweight title contenders after facing roadblocks in their previous bouts.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

Former featherweight champion Deiveson Figueiredo **(below)** and former bantamweight title contender Cory Sandhagen **(above)** will face each other on May 4 in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

Both fighters will be looking to re-establish themselves as bantamweight title contenders after facing roadblocks in their previous bouts. Figueiredo suffered a gruelling five-round unanimous decision loss to Petr Yan in a main event back in November last year. Meanwhile, Russia's rising superstar Umar Nurmagomedov made light work of Sandhagen at UFC Fight Night in August.

After conceding the flyweight belt to Brandon Moreno in January 2023, Figueiredo moved up to bantamweight. His transition to the new weight class was seamless, as he secured a unanimous decision win over the experienced Rob Font. The Brazilian topped it off with a submission victory and another decision win in consecutive fights.

This bout presents a high-stakes scenario. For Figueiredo, a win over a top-five bantamweight would immediately solidify his position as a serious title threat in his new division. For Sandhagen, victory is crucial to regain momentum after his recent loss to Nurmagomedov and to prove that he has what it takes to earn a title shot.

Volkanovski reclaims his throne

Alexander Volkanovski successfully reclaimed the UFC featherweight title at UFC 314, defeating Diego Lopes via unanimous decision (48-47, 49-46, 49-46) on April 12. The victory marked Volkanovski's second reign as featherweight champion, a testament to his resilience after losing the belt to Ilia Topuria earlier in 2024.

The fight itself was a compelling 25-minute affair. Volkanovski started strongly, utilising his experience and technical striking to control the early rounds.

However, Lopes, known for his aggressive style and dangerous submission game, came back strongly in the later rounds, particularly the fourth, where he hurt Volkanovski with an uppercut and applied relentless pressure.

Despite Lopes's surge, Volkanovski relied on his movement, jab, and composure to weather the storm to secure the decision.

The dominant win was significant for Volkanovski, as he became only the second fighter in UFC history to hold the featherweight title twice, after Jose Aldo. Furthermore, at 36 years old, he became the first fighter over 35 to win a title in the lighter weight classes.

For Diego Lopes, despite the defeat, his performance against a seasoned champion demonstrated his potential as a top contender in the featherweight division. The bout was awarded 'Fight of the Night' for its thrilling back-and-forth action.

In the co-main event, Paddy Pimblett emerged victorious against Michael Chandler, delivering a dominant performance.

Pimblett's effective combination of striking techniques and grappling skills proved overwhelming for Chandler, as the contest concluded in the third round with a TKO. This victory propelled Pimblett four places up in the lightweight rankings, and he now sits in eighth place.

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AROUND 80 PERCENT OF MY FOCUS GOES INTO REFINING MY EXISTING SKILLS, AND 20 PERCENT INTO DEVELOPING A NEW VARIATION

Wrecker-in-chief: Varun Chakaravarthy led India's bowling in its Champions Trophy win, claiming nine wickets in three innings at an impressive average of 15.11. REUTERS

Varun Chakaravarthy may appear calm on the field, but his mind rarely rests. "I think about how to improve 24x7," he says, admitting it can be "irritating" for those close to him. But that's just how he's wired — constantly consumed by the game.

Over the last few months, the leg-spinner has been on a remarkable run. A key figure in India's Champions Trophy triumph, Varun emerged as the team's second-highest wicket-taker in the tournament with nine wickets, thriving in the heat of Dubai. Yet, the 32-year-old isn't getting carried away. "I want to see where I stand in seven months," he says, his focus already shifting to what lies ahead.

Speaking from Kolkata Knight Riders' team hotel, Varun reflects on his unusual path — one marked by late entry, multiple injuries, and a dramatic reinvention.

"My goal wasn't a comeback. I just wanted to be more impactful," he says, referring to the change in bowling action that revived his career in 2021.

An architect by qualification and a cinema buff by passion, Varun's journey feels almost scripted. From school-level wicketkeeper to medium-pacer, from quitting a corporate job to becoming a spinner due to a knee injury — his story defies the norm.

Spotted in the Tamil Nadu Premier League, he rose swiftly, only to hit a rough patch three years ago. But he bounced back. With IPL in full swing, Varun remains grounded, chasing consistency and believing firmly that his "peak is yet to come."

The last few months have been a roller-coaster for you. If you could take us through your journey and how confident were you coming into the IPL?

Yes, the last few months have been significant for me in cricketing terms, as I had the opportunity to play for the country and contribute to the Champions Trophy victory. And now that the IPL has started, I'm feeling good about the team and about myself.

In IPL, where wickets are different from one venue to another, how do you prepare?

At Eden Gardens, the conditions usually favour batters. That's always at the back of my mind, so I prepare accordingly. Whenever I get the ball during practice, I make sure to train with that in focus.

I also set specific challenges for myself with certain batters in the nets. That helps me stay sharp.

Our head coach, Chandu sir (Chandrakant Pandit), and Bravo (Dwayne) have been very supportive of what I do.

You've been with KKR for a while now and are one of the senior bowlers. What kind of conversations do you have within the bowling group?

At Eden Gardens, the boundaries are smaller than most other grounds in India, so that's always on our minds. We plan carefully, especially if there's a longer side—we focus on how to bowl into that area.

The Powerplay is particularly challenging here. There are certain lengths you need to hit to get the

most out of the pitch. Death bowling is another key area. A lot of our planning goes into how to approach the last five overs.

Sometimes the plans work, sometimes they don't. But when they do, we usually end up on the winning side. That's how it is—cricket is all about probabilities. You can never be 100% sure a plan will work. You just play the odds.

Do you actively work on adding new variations to stay ahead, or is it more about refining your existing skills?

Both. Around 80 percent of my focus goes into refining my existing skills, and 20 percent into developing a new variation.

Over time — say two to three years — that new variation gradually blends into my overall skill set, and I start refining that as well.

That's the process: introduce a variation, then keep refining it. But the work on your core skills never really stops.

How do you ensure that batters don't start reading you easily, given that most 'mystery spinners' eventually get figured out?

In the first two or three years, I used to overthink that a lot. But over time, I realised — even if batters figure you out, they still have to play the ball.There's always a human element, and the pitch will always offer some natural variation. So even if they know what I'm bowling, they still need to get the timing right.

Now, I don't worry about it much. The pitch, the human touch, and the element of surprise — like when I choose to bowl a particular delivery — those are things they can't fully predict. That's what I rely on.

You appear very calm and composed on the pitch, but do you carry your office back home?

I think about the game constantly — 24x7. Whether I'm waking up, in the shower, at the gym — whatever I'm doing, my mind is on the last match and how I can improve.

It can be irritating for people close to me because I'm often lost in my own world. But that's just who I've become. And honestly, that's what the game demands today.

Standing out: When Varun Chakaravarthy had pushed for a Champions Trophy spot despite no ODI caps, Rohit Sharma backed him, saying he'd "clearly brought something different to the table." REUTERS

India captain Rohit Sharma mentioned that you don't use your variations in the nets. What's the thought process behind that?

(Laughs) That's not true. I've already clarified this before. It's not that I don't use all my variations—I do. It's just that I sequence them differently in ODIs compared to T20s.

In T20s, I rely more on certain deliveries, while in ODIs, I use others more often. That's all there is to it.

How do you balance the need to keep your variations secret while still preparing effectively for matches?

I don't think there's anything to keep secret anymore. Everyone knows what I bowl — it's all out there in the media and video analysis.

I rely more on the natural variation from the pitch and my own decision-making — knowing what to bowl and when.

So no, I don't focus on being secretive now.

You started late and didn't come through the age-group or domestic system. Without that base to fall back on, how did you manage to bounce back so quickly after setbacks?

I didn't play age-group cricket at all — I started playing seriously only at 26. But since then, I've played a lot of domestic matches. The last two Vijay Hazare seasons, in particular, helped me prepare for the Champions Trophy. Whenever I'm not playing international cricket, I'm playing domestic games. I believe the quality of domestic cricket in India is very high. Some domestic sides could beat international teams on their day. You have to stay sharp — there's no room to take it lightly. For me, that's the real preparation ground.

Any specific aspects that you have learned from your domestic experiences?

Domestic batters are excellent against spin and can hit you anywhere. What helped me prepare was learning how to outsmart them and stay ahead. If you can dominate

Varun Chakaravarthy in IPL

Matches
78

Wickets
93

BBM
5/20

Average
23.33

Econ
7.44

FOR MORE STORIES

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

such batters, you'll naturally do well in international cricket too. These experiences and exposures have played a key role in my development.

Are you a believer in planning things for the long-term or do you take it step-by-step?

I'm definitely a long-term planner. The foundation for this phase was laid in 2021 when I switched my bowling from side-spin to over-spin. That journey began four years ago, and I believe in the next six to seven months, I'll reach my peak. After that, wherever life takes me, I'm open to it. Once I reach that point, I'll have more time to focus on my batting and other aspects. But right now, my priority is bowling. If I don't bowl well, no matter how fit I am or how much I improve my batting, it won't matter. I need to be the best version of myself as a bowler. That's when I can build on other things.

In 2021, when you changed that action, how challenging was it?

It's all about putting in the volume. I started practising for two to three hours

AFTER 2021, I WASN'T CHASING A COMEBACK. I FOCUSED ONLY ON REFINING MY NEW TECHNIQUE TO BECOME A MORE IMPACTFUL BOWLER

a day, bowling 200-300 balls daily. It was a long journey.

Every day, I'd wake up at 5:30 am and head to practice. After 2021, I didn't know if I'd ever get another call for the Indian team. I had no clear direction then. But I kept pushing myself, telling myself that if I could perfect this new technique I was working on, I'd become a more impactful bowler. That was my only goal — not to make a comeback, but to become a better bowler.

And it's working out so far. I'm still excited to see where I stand in the next seven months. I'm waiting for that time.

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THE TACTICAL RESILIENCE OF T20'S MYSTERY SPINNERS

From Mendis' carrom ball to Narine's tricks and Rathi's fast googlies, mystery spin in T20 has shifted from **turn to trajectory** – and it's still fooling batters.

Sahil Mathur
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Digvesh Rathi **(in pic)** idolises Sunil Narine. So, his strong start in IPL 2025 — nine wickets at an economy of 7.43 — shouldn't come as a surprise.

Rathi bowls quick googlies and leg-spin, hiding his grip till the final moment — almost Narine-like. His fast, straight-arm action makes it tough for batters to read him off the hand. The result? Deception through dip, speed, and length. **(See IPL figures — Graph 1)** He's already been added to the ever-growing club of IPL mystery spinners — a group led by Narine, Ajantha Mendis, and Varun Chakaravarthy.

The Carrom Ball Catalyst

Mendis pioneered the 'mystery spin' in limited-overs cricket — and the IPL — when he dismantled batting line-ups in 2008 with his carrom ball, flicked like a striker on a carrom board. It could skid on or turn away from right-handers.

That very weapon inspired Narine to develop his own repertoire. By the time Narine debuted in the IPL in 2012, he was unreadable — claiming 24 wickets at an astonishing economy of 5.47. His bag of tricks included the carrom ball, knuckle ball, doosra, off-break, and arm ball.

India spin legend Harbhajan Singh puts it simply: "They're finger spinners who bowl with the wrist — like me or (Ravindra) Jadeja — but they don't spin the ball as much. Their hands work like playing carrom; that's the mystery — the action."

Unlike conventional spinners who use flight and turn, mystery spinners operate differently. Traditional spin uses an upright seam with revolutions. Mystery spin comes with a scrambled seam, hiding the ball's behaviour till late.

Flatter, Faster, Trickier

Narine and Chakaravarthy both come from tennis-ball cricket, where bowlers use angles more than turn. The trajectory is flat. The speed, quicker than traditional spin.

"They learned that grip with the tennis ball. Now they're using it with the leather ball — and it's working. Batters just aren't used to that kind of wrist work," Harbhajan explains.

Their balls don't turn much. Data shows (wherever available) Narine's deliveries deviate just 1.27 degrees on average. **(See Chahal vs Narine comparison graph — Graph 2)**. In contrast, Yuzvendra Chahal — more conventional — sees deviations of up to 3.44 degrees.

Overspin and Dip: The Chakaravarthy Switch

Chakaravarthy had a breakout run with Kolkata Knight Riders in 2020 and 2021 — 35 wickets at under 7 runs per over — earning him a T20I debut.

But international success proved elusive. **(See Varun's variations — Graph 3)**

The turnaround came when he shifted from sidespin to overspin. The change gave him more dip and bounce instead of relying on turn. That tweak reignited his IPL form, earned him a national recall, and saw him play a key role in India's Champions Trophy win earlier this year.

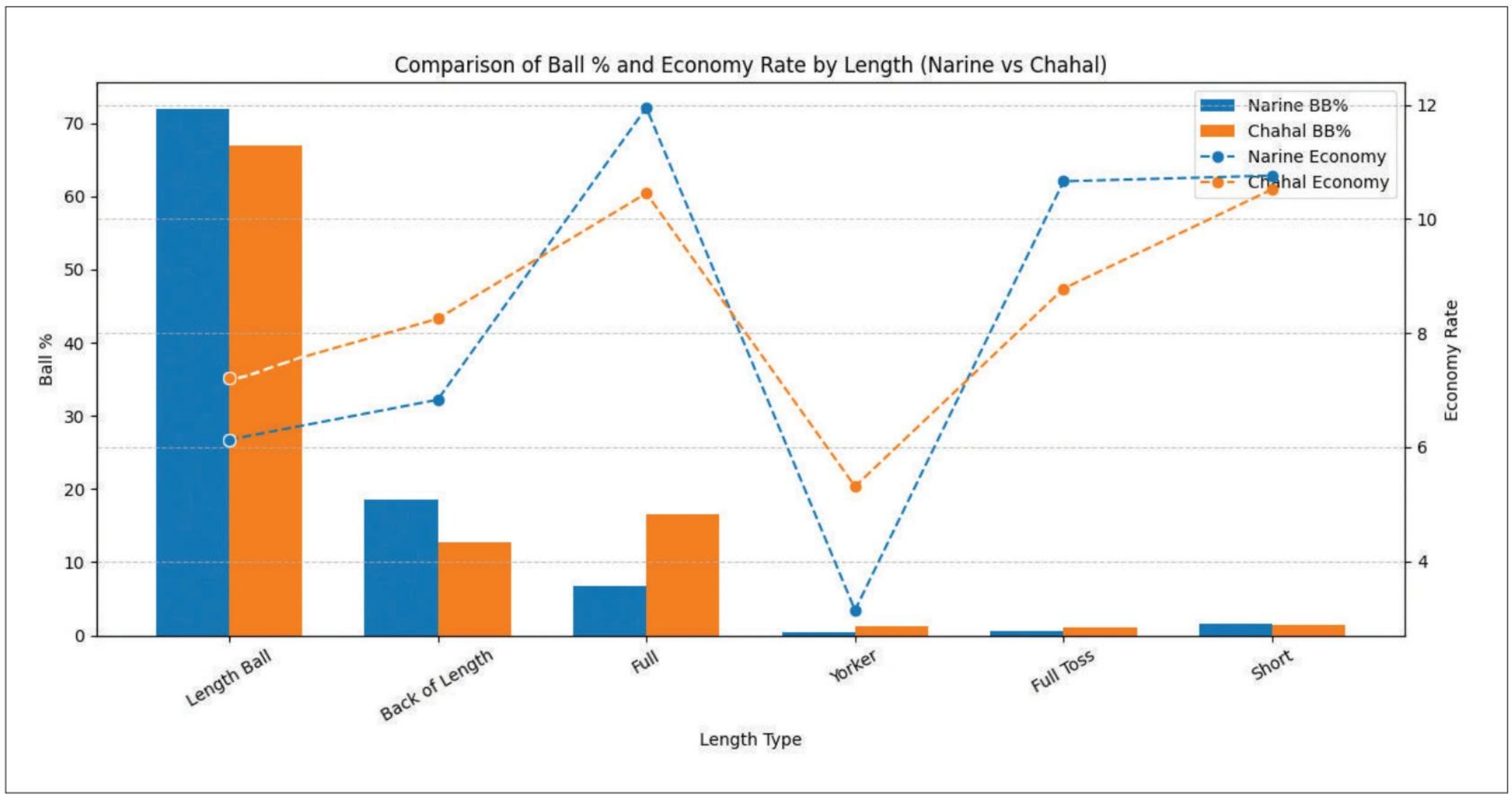
Why They Work in T20s

After a poor 2011 season, Kolkata Knight Riders wanted a strike bowler who was also economical. It bought Narine in the next auction — and he delivered both.

His variations made him a wicket-taker. His speed and back-of-length bowling made him hard to hit. He rarely bowled full. Most deliveries were either a good length or shorter. At nearly 93 km/h, batters couldn't line him up.

IPL career figures

Player	Balls Bowled	Wickets	Best figures	Avg	Econ	SR
Ajantha Mendis	240	8	2/19	35.63	7.13	30.00
Sunil Narine	4,202	187	5/19	25.27	6.75	22.47
Varun Chakaravarathy	1,750	93	5/20	23.33	7.44	18.82
Digvesh Rathi	168	9	2/30	23.11	7.43	18.67



Chakaravarthy and Rathi follow a similar template. Both bowl back of a length, keep the stumps in play, and use a flatter trajectory for each variation.

"Length is very important," says Harbhajan. "If you bowl Test-match lengths, batters will slog without caring where it's turning. But if it's slightly shorter — like Varun or Narine bowl — it's neither too full nor too short. Batters get stuck. You can't go back and pull, or come forward and slog." **(See Foot movement table — Graph 4)**

In this IPL season alone, batters trying to play these three spinners on the front foot have been dismissed 16 times — mostly while playing attacking shots. Playing them on the back foot is safer, though it only yields 6.35 runs per over. Their quicker pace also makes it harder to step out.

Varun Chakaravarathy's variations in IPL over the years

Variation	Balls Bowled	Eco	Wks
leg spinner	958	8.21	41
slider	13	12.92	0
googly	564	6.12	43
quicker ball	174	7.55	5
top spinner	11	3.27	3
flipper	25	6.24	1
arm ball	1	6.00	0
off break	4	4.50	0

Foot movement against Narine, Varun, and Digvesh in IPL 2025

Foot Movement	Ball %	False Shot %	Attack%	Wickets
back foot	48.03 (219)	17.40	43.70	8
front foot	47.37 (216)	22.70	61.80	16
moves in front	1.97 (9)	30.00	80.00	0
down the track	1.32 (6)	33.30	33.30	2
backs away	1.32 (6)	50.00	50.00	0

What's the Shelf Life of a Mystery?

In the age of high-speed cameras, detailed video footage, and data analysis, mystery spinners don't stay mysterious for long.

Mendis' carrom balls were decoded. Narine faced a career dip after multiple action-related suspensions. Batters evolve fast, analysing every detail to exploit even a minor giveaway.

Author Julia Cameron once said, "Mystery is at the heart of creativity. That, and surprise." As T20 cricket continues to evolve, so too must its bowlers.

The moment one puzzle is solved, another needs to be posed.

That might be the real mystery: what's next?

(Data till IPL 2025 Match 33 — MI vs SRH)

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1st

Lethal pair: Nicholas Pooran smashed an unbeaten 87, while Mitchell Marsh scored 81 as Lucknow Super Giants posted a total of 238 for three after being put in to bat. Kolkata Knight Riders' collective batting effort wasn't enough to surpass the target, with the home team falling short by just four runs.

K. R. DEEPAK

FOR MORE IMAGES

2nd

A star is born: Priyansh Arya struck the fastest century by an uncapped Indian batter – off just 39 balls – and the second-fastest by an Indian in IPL history, as Punjab Kings posted 219 for six. Chennai Super Kings came close but ultimately fell short, losing the match by 18 runs. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

3rd

Dream run: Sai Sudharsan continued his fine form, scoring 82 off 53 balls to guide Gujarat Titans to 217 for six after batting first. Prasidh Krishna then took three wickets for 24 as Rajasthan Royals was bowled out for 159. VIJAY SONEJI

4th

Local hero: KL Rahul's unbeaten 93 off 53 balls guided Delhi Capitals to chase down a 164-run target with ease at his home ground in Bengaluru. Earlier, Kuldeep Yadav's economical spell of two for 17 restricted Royal Challengers Bangalore to 163 for seven. K. MURALI KUMAR

5th

Too good to handle: Sunil Narine took three for 13 and did not concede a single boundary during his four-over spell as Kolkata Knight Riders restricted Chennai Super Kings to 103 for nine at Chepauk. Narine then scored 44 off 18 balls as the visiting KKR completed the chase in 10.1 overs. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

6th

Dominance: Nicholas Pooran combined with Aiden Markram to seal the 181-run chase, as Lucknow Super Giants ended Gujarat Titans' winning streak. Earlier, Shubman Gill and Sai Sudharsan added 120 runs for the first wicket before the visitor suffered a middle-order collapse, finishing on 180 for six. SANDEEP SAXENA

8th

Classic Salt: Phil Salt made light work of the 174-run target, scoring 65 off 33 balls. Virat Kohli (62) and Devdutt Padikkal (40) helped complete the chase with 15 balls to spare against Rajasthan Royals. R. V. MOORTHY

7th

Saturday night mayhem: Abhishek Sharma blasted 141 off 55 balls – the highest score by an Indian in IPL history – as Sunrisers Hyderabad achieved the second-highest chase in the tournament's history, reaching 246 against Punjab Kings. Earlier, Shreyas Iyer's 82 had guided the visitors to 245 for six. K. V. S. GIRI

9th

Hanging in there: Karun Nair's 89 off 40 balls nearly guided Delhi Capitals to the 206-run target before Karn Sharma's three wickets brought Mumbai Indians back into the game. DC lost its last three wickets to run-outs on consecutive deliveries, as MI had the last laugh in Delhi. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

10th

Still got it: M.S. Dhoni struck 26 off 11 balls and teamed up with Shivam Dube to guide Chennai Super Kings over the line, ending a five-match losing streak, in a challenging 167-run chase against Lucknow Super Giants. SANDEEP SAXENA

11th

Magic in the air: Yuzvendra Chahal's crafty spell of four for 28 stunned Kolkata Knight Riders, which was chasing a modest 112-run target. Punjab Kings bowled out the visitor for 95 to record the lowest total defended in IPL history. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

12th

Nail-biter: Chasing 189, Rajasthan Royals needed 11 runs off the final over, and Mitchell Starc held his nerve to take the game into a Super Over. The Royals managed only 11 runs, which the Capitals chased down in just four deliveries. R. V. MOORTHY

13th

Will makes the way: Will Jacks' all-round skills were on display at Wankhede Stadium as he removed Travis Head and Ishan Kishan, finishing with two for 14 from his three overs. After restricting Sunrisers Hyderabad to 162, Jacks scored 36 off 26 balls. Mumbai Indians completed the chase with 11 balls to spare. EMMANUAL YOGINI

14th

Smooth operator: Chasing 96 in a rain-affected game, Punjab Kings was in a spot of bother when Nehal Wadhera arrived at the crease. He scored 33 off 19 balls and finished the game with 11 balls remaining, handing Royal Challengers Bengaluru its third defeat at home this season. K. MURALI KUMAR

15th

Commanding: Jos Buttler scored an unbeaten 97 off 54 balls to help Gujarat Titans chase down a 204-run target in a last-over finish against Delhi Capitals on a hot afternoon in Ahmedabad. VIJAY SONEJI

16th

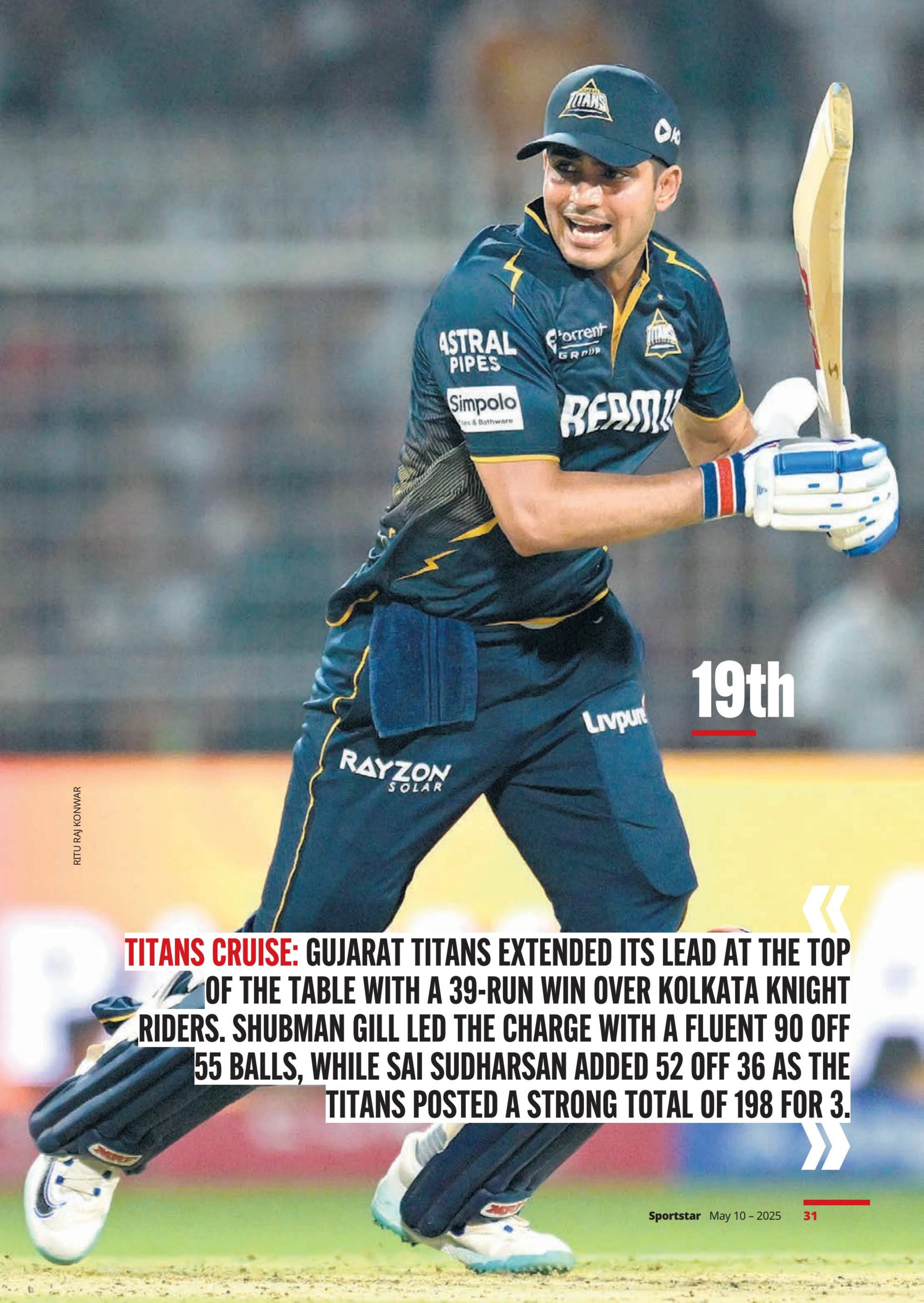
Cool and calm: Avesh Khan got the ball to reverse and was at his accurate best, defending nine runs off the last over as Rajasthan Royals fell short by two runs, chasing 181, against Lucknow Super Giants in Jaipur. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

17th

Chase master: Virat Kohli's controlled knock of 73 not out off 54 balls, combined with Devdutt Padikkal's 61, helped Royal Challengers Bengaluru avenge its earlier defeat to Punjab Kings, chasing down a 158-run target with more than an over to spare. R. V. MOORTHY

18th

Resurgence: Rohit Sharma struck six sixes and four fours to score an unbeaten 76, while forming a 114-run unbroken partnership with Suryakumar Yadav (68 off 30 balls), as Mumbai Indians chased down a 177-run target with 26 balls to spare against Chennai Super Kings. EMMANUAL YOGINI



RITU RAJ KONWAR

19th

TITANS CRUISE: GUJARAT TITANS EXTENDED ITS LEAD AT THE TOP OF THE TABLE WITH A 39-RUN WIN OVER KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS. SHUBMAN GILL LED THE CHARGE WITH A FLUENT 90 OFF 55 BALLS, WHILE SAI SUDHARSAN ADDED 52 OFF 36 AS THE TITANS POSTED A STRONG TOTAL OF 198 FOR 3.

VIJAY SONEJI

Once rare, now ruthless: The rise of left-arm wrist spin in IPL

Left-arm wrist spin has quietly become IPL 2025's **most effective** bowling type. Here's how variation, angles, and strategy are driving the shift.

Pranay Rajiv
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For years, left-arm wrist spinners remained on the fringes of cricket, sidelined by their rarity and the difficulty of mastering the craft.

But in recent seasons, especially in T20s, they've gone from being mere curiosities to game-changers — turning their uniqueness into an advantage.

This shift has reached new heights in IPL 2025. At the halfway mark, the league's three left-arm wrist spinners have combined for 30 wickets — the highest for their type in any IPL season.

They also top the Cricviz average match impact rankings for bowling types this year. Left-arm wrist spin is, in fact, the only category with a positive overall impact in IPL 2025.

Leading this surge are Chennai Super Kings' Noor Ahmad and Delhi Capitals' Kuldeep Yadav **(pic above)** — both strong contenders to become

Left-arm wrist spinners' wicket tally in IPL 2025 so far

Player	Team	Inns	Wks	RR	Ave	Dot%
Noor Ahmad	CSK	8	12	7.44	16.75	32.7
Vignesh Puthur	MI	4	6	8.45	15.5	32.8
Kuldeep Yadav	DC	7	12	6.21	14.5	39.6

the first left-arm wrist spinner to win the Purple Cap.

Kuldeep, the most seasoned of the lot, has continued his consistent run. The 30-year-old justified Delhi's decision to retain him, taking 12 wickets with his trademark flight and subtle variations.

Noor, meanwhile, has had a breakout season. After spending years behind Rashid Khan at Gujarat Titans, his Rs 10 crore move to CSK gave him a lead role — and he's responded with relentless wicket-taking in an otherwise tough campaign for his team.

Despite their shared skill set and success, Noor and Kuldeep operate differently.

Noor's quick, whippy action and beyond-perpendicular release generate awkward angles and pace. Kuldeep, more orthodox, relies on drift, loop, and deception through the air. Backing them is Mumbai Indians' 24-year-old Vignesh Puthur, a rookie who hasn't yet played senior cricket for Kerala.

Spotted through MI's vast scouting system and mentored by Rashid Khan at MI Cape Town, Vignesh made an immediate impact with a three-wicket haul in his debut against CSK.

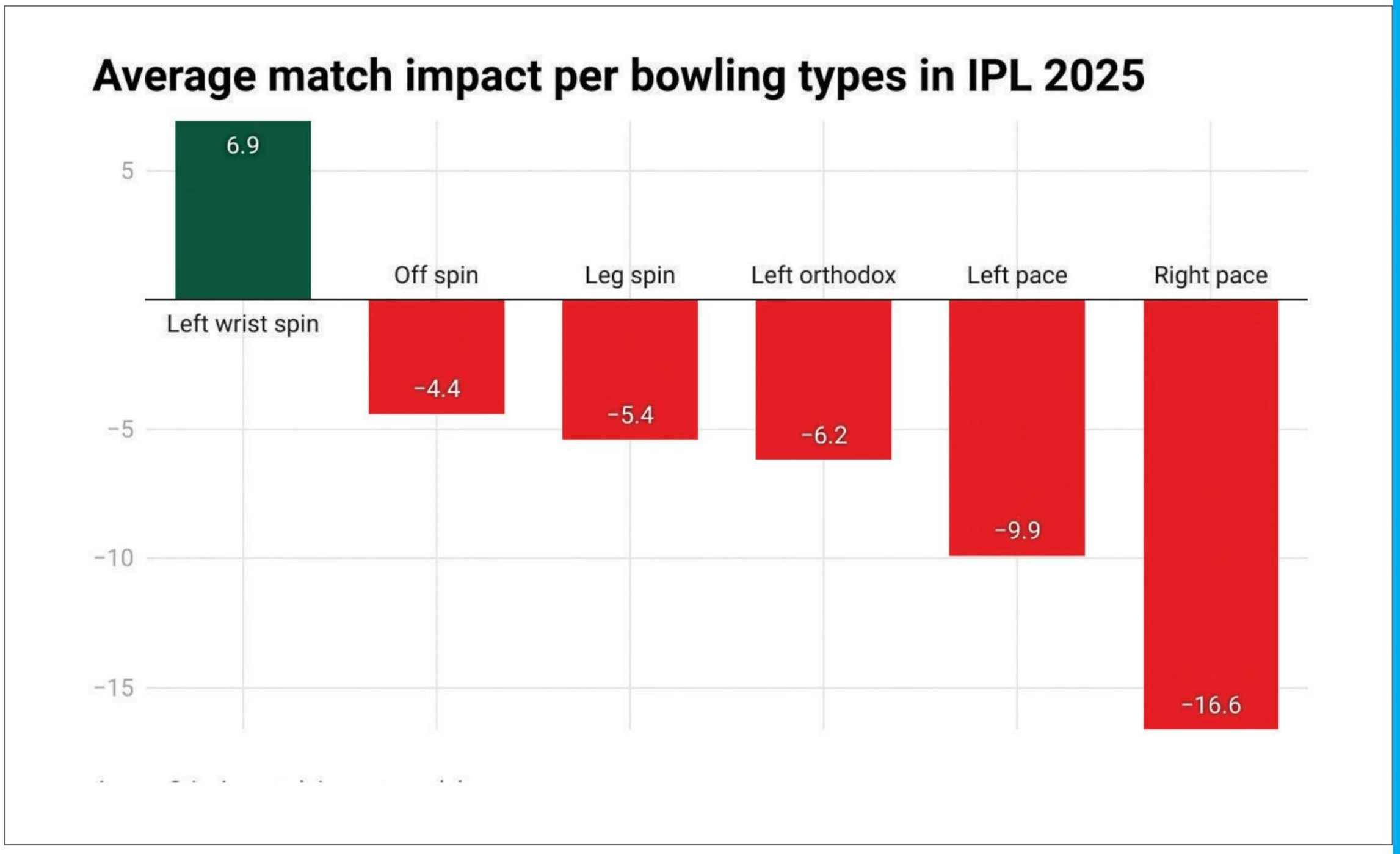
Another notable name is Rajasthan Royals' Kumar Kartikeya Singh, whose hybrid style blends orthodox spin with wristy variations — blurring the lines further.

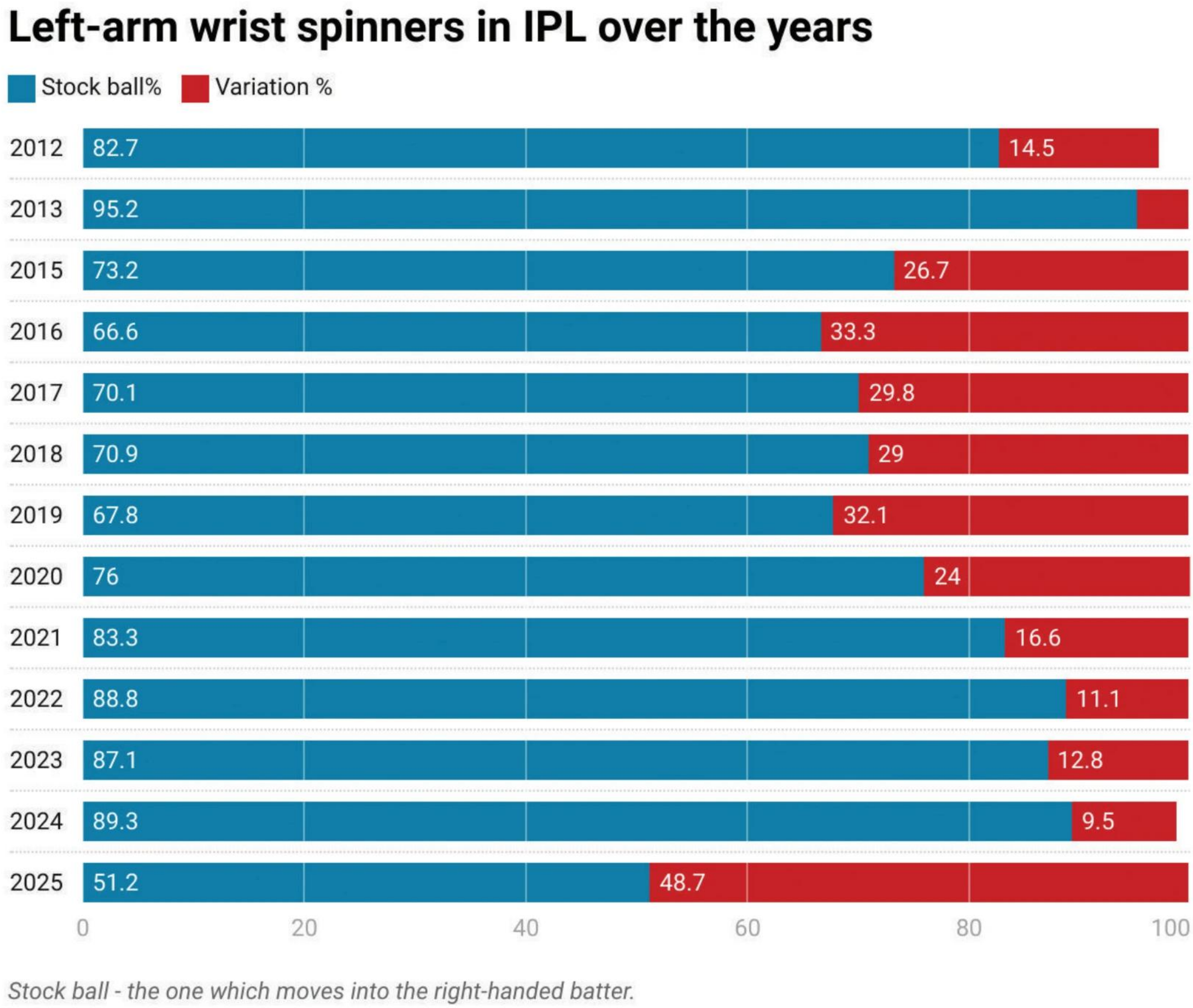
Together, this group has delivered the best economy rate of any bowling type this season: 7.09. It's also the third-best for left-arm wrist spin in IPL history.

What's driving this effectiveness?

Variation. Nearly 50% of their deliveries this season have been

Immediate impact: Mumbai Indians' Vignesh Puthur picked three wickets in his debut game against Chennai Super Kings. EMMANUAL YOGINI





change-ups — an unprecedented split. Most of these have been googlies, which have fetched 19 wickets (13 against right-handers) at an economy of 7.08.

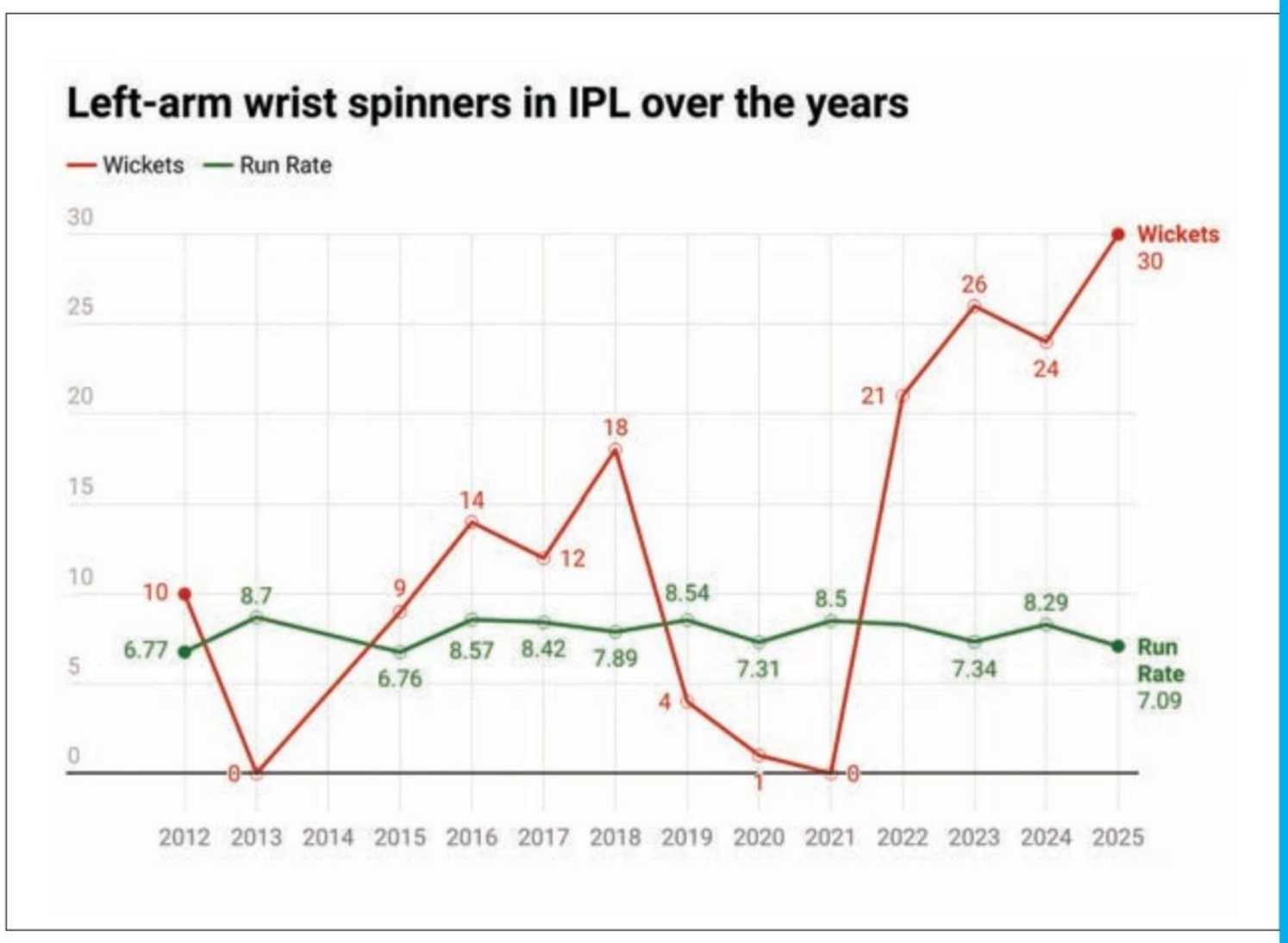
That shift in balance — from stock deliveries to deception — has powered the current success.

But the bigger question is whether this trend can last.

As more bowlers adopt the style and batters see it more often, the element of mystery will fade. T20 cricket evolves quickly, and novelty rarely stays novel for long.

For now, though, left-arm wrist spin has found its moment. And IPL 2025 may well be remembered as the season this once-niche art finally took centrestage.

All numbers up to 20/4/2025



PHENOMENAL PRIYANSH

Indrnill Bharti

MATCHES
8

RUNS
254

HIGHEST SCORE
103

STRIKE RATE
201.59

Priyansh Arya has been a revelation for Punjab Kings in IPL 2025, justifying the franchise's hefty investment of Rs 3.8 crore. His aggressive approach at the top of the order has provided consistent, rapid starts for the team, making him one of the standout performers this season.

Arya's best moment came in a high-profile clash against Chennai Super Kings, where he hammered a 42-ball 103. Facing a formidable bowling attack featuring Noor Ahmad, R. Ashwin, R. Jadeja, and Khaleel Ahmed, Arya dominated the opposition. With this century, he became the eighth uncapped player to score a three-figure knock in the IPL.

What stands out about Arya's game is his ability to dominate pacers. He has been particularly effective against them, with a strike rate of 211.45. While his strike rate against spinners is slightly lower at 170, it's important to note that he has faced far fewer deliveries from them — just 30 balls compared to 96 from pacers. This limited exposure to spin has given him fewer chances to accelerate in the same way he does against pace, but his solid execution against spinners still highlights his well-rounded skill set.

His fearlessness, regardless of the situation, is remarkable. After being bowled out for a duck by Jofra Archer, he returned in the next game to hit a six off Khaleel's first delivery.

With his fearless batting and consistent form, Arya is on the radar for future India selection in white-ball cricket, and his progress will certainly be one to watch in the coming seasons.

(All stats up to date till April 22)

R. V. MOORTHY

CAPTAIN COOL RETURNS, KINGS' HOPE, AND EMPTY SEATS: A ROLLERCOASTER ATMOSPHERE

SPORTZPICS / IPL

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

Ahead of every IPL game featuring the Chennai Super Kings at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium, Victoria Hostel Road, connecting the stadium to the Chepauk train station, is cloaked in a sea of yellow. The street sees a fascinating blend of people – the well-dressed elite heading to the Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi Stand, and the middle-class masses queuing up from as early as 4:30 pm, eager to enter before the crowds build up.

For the game against Kolkata Knight Riders, there was an added buzz despite CSK's poor start to the 2025 season. M.S. Dhoni, the team's most successful captain and Chennai's adopted son, had returned to lead the side.

A few hours before the match, the Diary visited Hostel Road to capture the mood ahead of Dhoni's return as skipper. From middle-aged fans venting frustrations to groups of kids showing off their cricket knowledge, the mix was lively and amusing.

"The whole season will turn around with Dhoni back as captain," one yellow-clad fan shouted as he noticed the Diary with a microphone.

Some fans, however, were less eager to participate. A young woman, ducking under the camera frame, said, "Ayyo anna! Inga vanthathu veetla theriyadhu (Oh brother! My family doesn't know I'm here)."

181 balls later, the mood had changed. Fans were fuming, ranting to local news channels, and some had even started leaving before KKR began its chase of a meagre 104. Dhoni's return to captaincy hadn't worked out, but with Thala, hope for a turnaround never dies.

Anish Pathiyil

Crowds contrast: As Punjab fans filled the stadium with energy, Jaipur's inadequate facilities left Dronacharya awardees watching from afar — or not at all. REUTERS & SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Starting strong

Punjab Kings has been part of the IPL since its inception but has yet to win a title. For most seasons, the team has hovered around mid-table, reaching the final only once, in 2014, where it lost to KKR. This year, however, it has started strong with five wins out of eight, playing entertaining cricket under new captain Shreyas Iyer.

The Diary notes that, like RCB fans, Punjab Kings supporters stay loyal as long as the team keeps things exciting — title or not.

This year, as the Diary walked up to the newly built Maharaja Yadavindra Singh Stadium in New Chandigarh, the air was filled with anticipation among home supporters in Punjab jerseys.

Even with KKR's star-studded lineup featuring Andre Russell, Sunil Narine, Ajinkya Rahane, and local boy Ramandeep Singh, the crowd stayed focused on the young Punjab side, cheering for every boundary and falling silent after each wicket.

The atmosphere shifted when PBKS was bundled out for 111. But Yuzvendra Chahal's spell of 4 for 28 reignited the crowd's passion. The stadium roared as Punjab's bowlers fought back. And when Marco Jansen took the final wicket, the fans erupted in ecstasy.

Sahil Mathur

A farce

At the Sawai Mansingh Stadium before Rajasthan Royals' game against Lucknow Super Giants, empty chairs on the terraces of the RCA Academy and Khel Bhawan were noticeable. In response to rising demand for tickets, the Rajasthan State Sports Council had set up special seating for Dronacharya awardees and other sporting dignitaries.

What began as a gesture to honour local sports icons quickly turned into an embarrassment. The temporary seating lacked the most basic amenities — no refreshments, no drinking water, not even proper lighting. The terrace was left in complete darkness.

As temperatures soared, the stands remained empty. A few policemen hung around, hoping to catch a glimpse of the cricketers.

"It's a temporary arrangement. If it's successful, we'll consider making it permanent. The idea was to increase the stadium's seating capacity," said Neeraj K. Pawan, president of the Sports Council, at the launch of the initiative. Despite the good intentions, the lack of basic facilities led to a disappointing turnout.

Shayan Acharya

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

TOP-NOTCH RANJI DEEDS DON'T EVEN GET HEADLINES

There are several stories every year of **consistent Ranji performers** getting ignored while the razzmatazz of the IPL ensures that one performance in the whole season gets headlines.

As the IPL reaches the halfway stage, there's a strong chance that one of the four teams yet to win the title could change that on May 25. All these four teams – Delhi, Punjab, Lucknow and Bengaluru have been playing top-class cricket. Yes, they have had the odd setback, which is expected in this format of the game, but have shown a great ability to bounce back. As is their wont, slow starters Mumbai are making the charge now, and if their batting continues the same way, then they could also be in the fray for another title. As of now, it looks very difficult for the former five-time winner Chennai, the inaugural winner, Rajasthan and last year's winner, Kolkata, to make the cut. That said, in this form of the game, a couple of good deliveries and a couple of big hits can change the direction in which the game is heading.

What this IPL has shown is that once again, one performance can catapult an unknown player into the reckoning for higher honours. One performance also means that the whole family, teachers, coaches, clubs and all the aunties and uncles in the town get publicity that they have never had before. This is in stark contrast to performance in the National Championship, the Ranji Trophy, where top-notch deeds do not even get headlines. Have you read or seen anything about the families and coaches of two of the star performers – Yash Rathod and Harsh Dubey, for Vidarbha in this year's Ranji Trophy season? Similarly, has there been anything that highlights the magnificent run that the Kerala team had for reaching the final of the Ranji Trophy? They did this without the talismanic presence of Sanju Samson, who was injured, and that is all the more reason their efforts should have been recognised with a lot more publicity than they have got.

There are several such stories every year of consistent Ranji performers getting ignored while the razzmatazz of the IPL ensures that one performance in the whole season gets headlines, which are more often than not, way over the top. There are many instances of these one-match performers being out of the game in a season or two, but one season of IPL often gives them much more than a whole career in the Ranji Trophy. While this imbalance can be attributed to the appeal of the IPL to the masses and thereby the huge broadcast and sponsorship rights, it does leave a sour taste in the mouth, especially for those who play almost thrice the number of cricketing games as in the IPL.

As if to rub salt into the wounds, at the end of the Ranji and domestic Vijay Hazare, Syed Mushtaq Ali seasons, those who have played the whole season do not even make the lowest

Making waves: Vidarbha's left-arm spinner Harsh Dubey topped the Ranji wicket charts last season with 69 wickets at an average of under 17. EMMANUAL YOGINI

base price of Rs 30 lakh of an uncapped IPL player. This imbalance can be reduced to a great extent if other associations, like Mumbai, match the BCCI's payments to Ranji players. Sadly, this doesn't happen as most associations are happy to keep the huge multi-crore subsidy that the BCCI gives in their bank and hardly even use it for the development of the game in their jurisdiction. Since BCCI fees reach players only after the Ranji season ends, State associations should also pay them an equivalent amount. After all, in which profession does one get paid months after the job has been done? Hopefully, in the next season, more and more State associations will come forward to bolster the income of their Ranji players and incentivise them to play at their best.

To end on a non-cricketing note, it was good to tick off the last and final item on my bucket list of watching world sports events by being there on the final day of the Augusta Masters. Rory McIlroy has been trying for the last 11 years to win the tournament and receive the green jacket, and thereby complete a career Grand Slam of the four golf Majors. He finally did that in a play-off with Englishman Justin Rose. My first trip to the French Open Tennis and the US Open Tennis resulted in Stan Wawrinka winning those titles for the first time and now with McIlroy also winning the Augusta Masters for the first time, maybe anybody who is coveting a title for the first time should invite me as their lucky charm.

Since BCCI fees reach players only after the Ranji season ends, State associations should also pay them an equivalent amount. After all, in which profession does one get paid months after the job has been done?

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Virat Kohli in 13K club

5 The number of batters to aggregate 13000 runs or more during their T20 career. Virat Kohli, on 7 April 2025 at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai, during his 67 against Mumbai Indians, became the latest to join the list. In achieving this milestone in 386 innings, he became the second quickest after Chris Gayle, who did it in 381 innings.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Virat Kohli.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

The 13000-club in T20 cricket

Runs	Batter	M	Inns	Ave.	S/R	HS	Inns to 13K runs
14562	Chris Gayle	463	455	36.22	144.75	175*	381
13610	Alex Hales	494	490	30.04	145.28	119*	474
13571	Shoaib Malik	557	515	35.99	127.24	95*	487
13537	Kieron Pollard	695	617	31.33	150.19	104	594
13135	Virat Kohli	406	389	41.56	134.33	122*	386

Reaching 13K runs in T20 cricket in fewest innings

Inns	Batter	M	Runs	Ave.	S/R	HS	Achieved on	While playing for	Venue
381	C. Gayle	389	13013	39.07	147.55	175*	15 Sep 2019	Jamaica Tallawahs	Kingston
386	V. Kohli	403	13050	41.56	134.31	122*	7 Apr 2025	RC Bengalore	MumbaiWS
474	A. Hales	478	13047	29.65	145.14	119*	2 Jan 2025	Rangpur Riders	Mirpur
487	S. Malik	526	13010	36.44	127.67	95*	20 Jan 2024	Fortune Barisal	Mirpur
594	K. Pollard	668	13001	31.25	150.64	104	30 Jul 2024	Southern Brave	Leeds

169 The strike-rate achieved by Nicholas Pooran when he reached 2000 runs in the IPL in LSG's match against KKR in Kolkata on 8 April 2025. This is the second-best among the 53 players who have achieved this milestone in IPL. Only fellow West Indian Andre Russell has done it with a better strike-rate of 179.

Batters with the fastest strike-rates to reach 2000 IPL runs

S/R	Batter	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	HS	Achieved on	While playing for	Venue
179.17	Andre Russell	97	81	2030	30.75	88*	14 May 2022	KKR	Pune
168.88	Nicholas Pooran	81	78	2057	34.86	87*	8 Apr 2025	LSG	Kolkata
165.41	Virender Sehwag	70	70	2028	31.20	119	21 Apr 2013	DC	Delhi
158.80	Chris Gayle	49	48	2012	50.30	128*	16 Apr 2013	RCB	Bengaluru
153.31	Rishabh Pant	64	64	2010	35.26	128*	31 Oct 2020	DC	Dubai

141 The runs scored by Abhishek Sharma for SRH against Punjab in Hyderabad on 12 April 2025. This is now the highest by any IPL batter in a run chase. Abhishek's score is also the highest of any Indian player in the IPL. Meanwhile, his knock, which came in just 55 balls, is the fourth fastest by a centurion in the IPL. His knock is now the third-highest individual score in IPL after Chris Gayle (175* for RCB v PWI in Bengaluru in 2013) and Brendon McCullum (158* for KKR v RCB in Bengaluru in 2008).

Highest individual IPL scores while batting second in a match

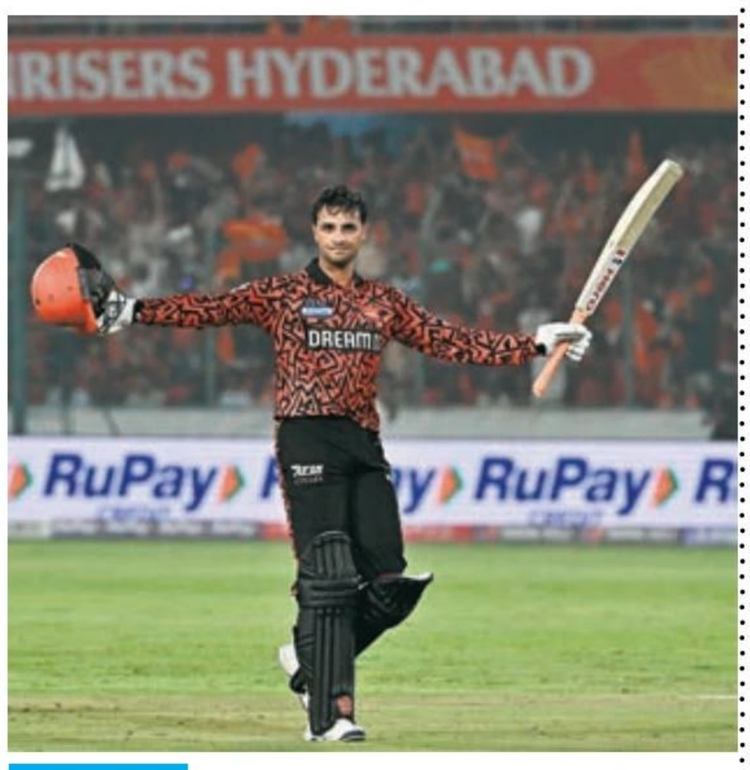
Runs	Batter	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
141	Abhishek Sharma	SRH	PBKS	Hyderabad	12 Apr 2025	Won
124*	Marcus Stoinis	LSG	CSK	Chennai	23 Apr 2024	Won
120*	Paul Valthaty	PBKS	CSK	Mohali	13 Apr 2011	Won
119	Virender Sehwag	DC	DecCh	Hyderabad	5 May 2011	Won
119	Sanju Samson	RR	PBKS	MumbaiWS	12 Apr 2021	Lost

Highest individual scores by Indians in the IPL

Runs	Batter	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
141	**Abhishek Sharma**	SRH	PBKS	Hyderabad	12 Apr 2025	Won
132*	**K. L. Rahul**	PBKS	RCB	Dubai	24 Sep 2020	Won
129	**Shubman Gill**	GT	MI	Ahmedabad	26 May 2023	Won
128*	**Rishabh Pant**	DC	SRH	Delhi	10 May 2018	Lost
127	**M. Vijay**	CSK	RR	Chennai	3 Apr 2010	Won

Fastest individual knocks of 100-plus in the IPL

S/R	Batter	Runs (balls)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
270.27	**Yusuf Pathan**	100 (37)	RR	MI	MumbaiBS	13 Mar 2010	Lost
265.79	**David Miller**	101* (38)	PBKS	RCB	Mohali	6 May 2013	Won
265.15	**Chris Gayle**	175* (66)	RCB	PWI	Bengaluru	23 Apr 2013	Won
256.36	**Abhishek Sharma**	141 (55)	SRH	PBKS	Hyderabad	12 Apr 2025	Won
248.78	**Travis Head**	102 (41)	SRH	RCB	Bengaluru	15 Apr 2024	Won



Sunrisers Hyderabad's Abhishek Sharma. K. V. S. GIRI

2519 The number of days between Karun Nair's two fifty-plus scores in the IPL. This is now the longest taken by any player in the tournament. He set this record during his recent career best of 89 for Delhi against MI in Delhi on 13 April 2025. His fifty score before this was on 20 May 2018, when he made 54 for PBKS against CSK in Pune.

Batters with the longest gaps between two fifty-plus scores during IPL career

Days	Batter	from		to	
2519	**Karun Nair**	54	for PBKS on 20 May 2018	89	for DC on 13 Apr 2025
2515	**Travis Head**	75*	for RCB on 7 May 2017	62	for SRH on 27 Mar 2024
2190	**Wriddhiman Saha**	59*	for KKR on 3 May 2008	59*	for PBKS on 3 May 2014
2167	**Dwayne Bravo**	70*	for MI on 12 May 2009	62*	for CSK on 19 Apr 2015
2029	**Deepak Hooda**	54	for RR on 12 Apr 2015	62*	for PBKS on 1 Nov 2020

43 M. S. Dhoni's age when he received the Player of the Match award for CSK against LSG in Lucknow on 14 April 2025 for his unbeaten 26 in 11 balls. This makes him the oldest individual in the IPL history to claim this award.

Age	Player of the match	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
43y-281d	**M. S. Dhoni** (26* in 11 balls)	CSK	LSG	Lucknow	14 Apr 2025	Won
42y-209d	**Pravin Tambe** (3/26)	RR	KKR	Ahmedabad	5 May 2014	Won
41y-223d	**Shane Warne** (3/16)	RR	KTK	Jaipur	24 Apr 2011	Won
41y-181d	**Adam Gilchrist** (85* in 54 balls)	PBKS	RCB	Bengaluru	14 May 2013	Won
41y-35d	**Chris Gayle** (51 in 29 balls)	PBKS	KKR	Sharjah	26 Oct 2020	Won

111 The team total successfully defended by Punjab Kings against KKR in Mullanpur on 15 April 2025. This is now the lowest by any side batting first to win an IPL game. Previously, CSK's 116/9 against Punjab Kings in Durban on 20 May 2009 was the lowest.

Lowest totals successfully defended by sides batting first in the IPL

Team1	Total1	(Ov)	Team2	Total2	(Ov)	Venue	Date	Won by
PBKS	**111/10**	(15.3)	KKR	95/10	(15.1)	Mullanpur	15 Apr 2025	16 runs
CSK	**116/9**	(20.0)	PBKS	92/8	(20.0)	Durban	20 May 2009	24 runs
SRH	**118/10**	(18.4)	MI	87/10	(18.5)	MumbaiWS	24 Apr 2018	31 runs
PBKS	**119/8**	(20.0)	MI	116/7	(20.0)	Mohali	29 Apr 2009	3 runs
SRH	**119/8**	(20.0)	PWI	108/10	(19.0)	Pune	17 Apr 2013	11 runs
MI	**120/9**	(20.0)	PWI	119/6	(20.0)	Pune	3 May 2012	1 run

Note: Truncated games are not considered for the above list.

Sides registering 200+ totals on most occasions during a chase in the IPL

200+ totals	Team	W	L	Tie	Win%
12	**Mumbai Indians** (MI)	5	6	1	41.66
11	**Punjab Kings** (PBKS)	7	4	0	63.63
10	**Kolkata Knight Riders** (KKR)	3	7	0	30.00
9	**Rajasthan Royals** (RR)	3	6	0	33.33
7	**Chennai Super Kings** (CSK)	3	4	0	42.85
6	**Sunrisers Hyderabad** (SRH)	4	2	0	66.66
6	**Royal Challengers Bengaluru** (RCB)	2	4	0	33.33
4	**Lucknow Super Giants** (LSG)	3	1	0	75.00
4	**Delhi Capitals** (DC)	2	2	0	50.00
3	**Gujarat Titans** (GT)	1	2	0	33.33

Note: Mumbai Indians lost its tied game against RCB via the Super Over in 2020 in Dubai

12 The number of occasions Mumbai Indians has made 200+ totals in a chase in the IPL, which is the most by any side chasing in the tournament. The side went ahead of Punjab Kings, which had done it on 11 occasions. However, Mumbai Indians has managed to chase successfully only on five occasions. Meanwhile, on 19 April 2025, in Ahmedabad, Gujarat Titans against Delhi Capitals became the 10th IPL side to win a match while chasing a target of 200+.

All records are correct and updated until 19 April 2025.

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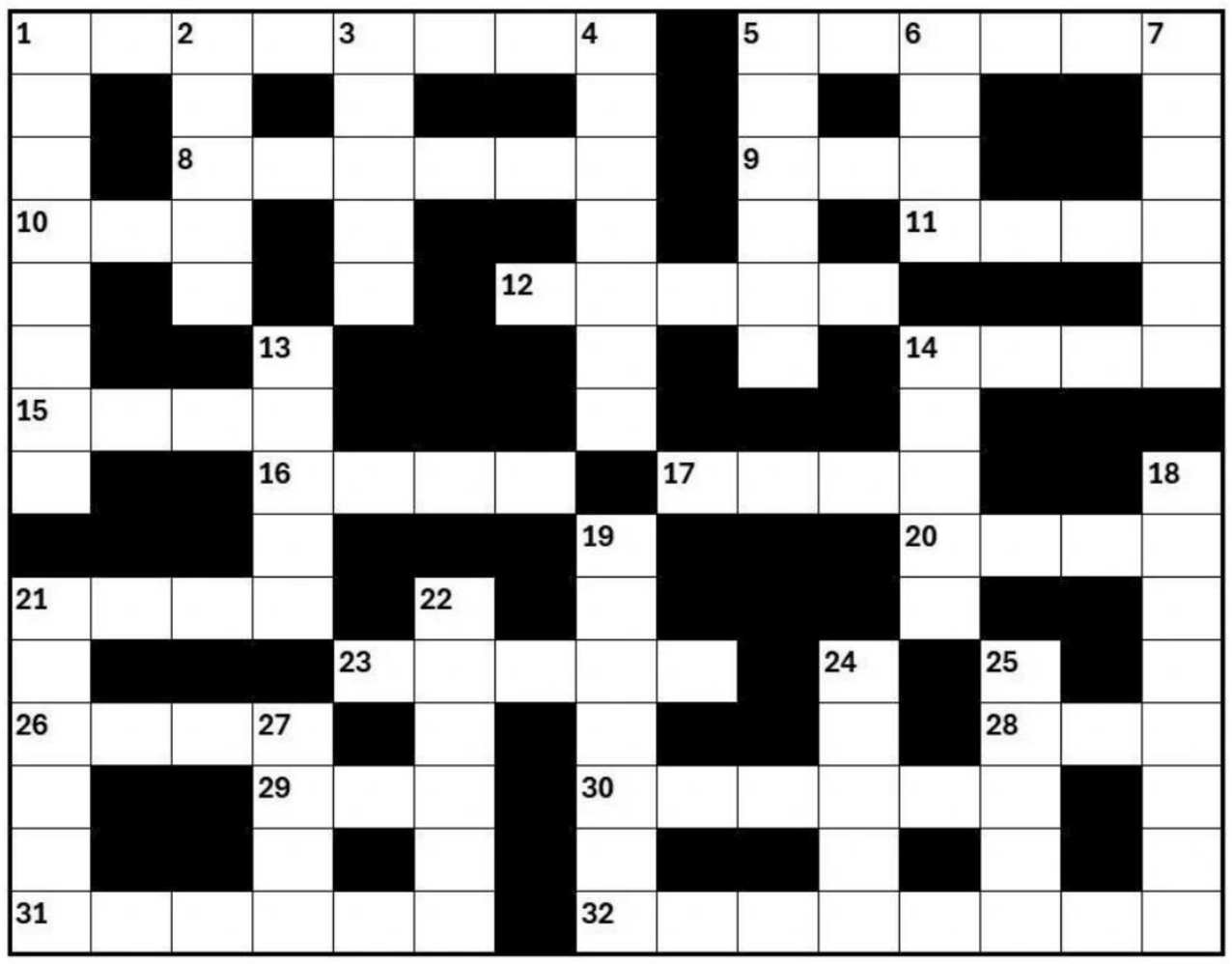

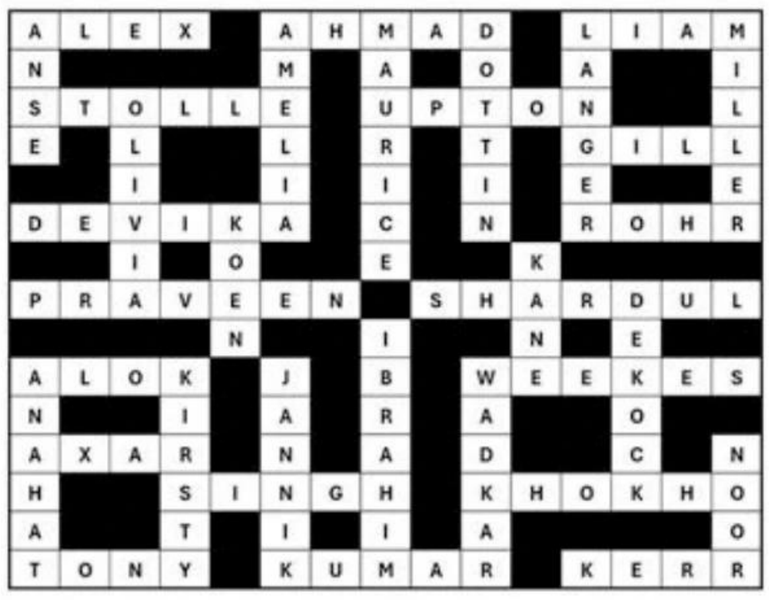

SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Identify this tennis player from Czech Republic who won the Australian Open women's doubles in 2025. (8)
5 Which city in India hosted the women's Asian Champions Trophy hockey tournament in November 2024? (6)
9 What is the abbreviation of the French name for the Court of Arbitration for Sport? (1,1,1)
10 What is the play situation in basketball called where a team isolates one player with the ball, allowing a one-on-one against a defender? (1,1,1)
11 Who became the first player in the world to perform two hat-tricks in Test cricket? (4)
12 Who took most wickets in the recent T20I series between New Zealand and Pakistan? (5)
14 Who partnered Olivia Gadecki to win the mixed doubles crown at the Australian Open 2025? (4)
15 Who scored a blistering 81 off just 36 balls for Rajasthan in the IPL match against CSK on March 30, 2025 and also won the player of that match award too? (4)
16 Who scored the winning runs for CSK in the IPL match against LSG on April 14, 2025? (4)
17 Who scored the highest individual score in an innings (99) in the Women's Premier League 2025? (4)
20 Which uncapped player scored a hundred for Punjab in the IPL versus CSK on April 8, 2025? (4)
21 Name the New Zealander who resigned as the white ball coach recently? (4)
23 Identify this German who won the ATP Tour doubles final along with his compatriot Tim Putz in November 2024. (5)
26 Who won the recently held Augusta Masters golf tournament? (4)
28 This is the abbreviation of a famous professional football club based in Riyadh. (1,1,1)
29 This is the abbreviation of the esports arm of the AC Milan football club. (1,1,1)
30 Which bowler became the first captain in IPL history to pick up a 5-wicket haul? (6)
31 Who ended up with the worst figures till date in IPL history in the match between RR and SRH held on March 23, 2025? (6)
32 Which team won the prestigious Ranji Trophy for the season 2024-25? (8)

DOWN

1 Who became the first player in Premier League history to score a hat-trick of penalties on November 30, 2024? (8)
2 Which boxer announced his retirement in January 2025? (5)
3 Identify this wicketkeeper who made his debut for Australia versus India in the 1977-78 series when most of the leading Australian cricketers signed for World Series Cricket? (5)
4 Who finished as the leading goal-scorer of the ISL recently? (7)
6 Who scored an unbeaten hundred for Australia and won player of the match award in the victory over England in the recent ICC Champions Trophy? (4)
7 & 18 Who scored most runs in the ICC Champions Trophy 2025? (6,8)
13 Who was the mental coach for D. Gukesh when he won the World Chess Championship last year? (5)
14 & Across 8 Identify this Indian domestic circuit giant who has scored more than 7000 runs and taken more than 480 wickets in all first-class matches but has not played any international match so far? (5,6)
19 Who is the youngest player in the IPL history to be picked in the auction held last year? (7)
21 Who scored a hat-trick for Alaves in the La Liga versus Real Betis on January 18, 2025? (6)
22 Who won the freestyle chess Grand Slam at Weissenhaus in February 2025, which is the first leg of the chess Grand Slam Tour? (6)
24 Which country won the Nona Gaprindashvili Trophy in 2024? (5)
25 Which Czech Republic tennis player recently won his first ever ATP Masters at the Miami Open 2025? (5)
27 & 5 Who scored most runs in the recently concluded Ranji Trophy for the 2024-25 season? (4,6)

K. R. DEEPAK

Shreyas, Ishan back in BCCI central contract list

1 The updated central contracts **cover the period** from 1 October 2024 to 30 September 2025.

Shreyas Iyer and Ishan Kishan have made their return to the Board of Control for Cricket in India's (BCCI) central contract list for the national men's team. The updated central contracts, which cover the period from 1 October 2024 to 30 September 2025, include 34 players, with seven being handed a central contract for the first time.

The contract categories remain unchanged, with top players like Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, Ravindra Jadeja, and Jasprit Bumrah retaining their positions in the A+ category.

K. MURALI KUMAR

2

For the upcoming tour of England, the Indian men's cricket team will be accompanied by a reduced support staff. The BCCI has opted not to renew the contracts of assistant coach Abhishek Nayar, fielding coach T. Dilip, and strength and conditioning (S&C) coach Soham Desai. The team will not see any new faces, except for South African Adrian le Roux, who will replace Soham Desai as the new S&C coach.

VIJAY SONEJI

3

For the first time in 25 years, West Indies has failed to qualify for the Women's Cricket World Cup. Meanwhile, Pakistan triumphed over Thailand to secure its spot in the prestigious tournament, which will be hosted in India later this year. Due to ongoing political tensions, matches between Pakistan and India will be played at a neutral venue. Pakistan displayed dominance during the qualifiers, easily winning all five of its matches.

AP

4

The International Cricket Council (ICC) has established a dedicated task force to assist displaced Afghan women cricketers, marking a significant step in supporting their continued participation in the sport. In collaboration with the BCCI, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), and Cricket Australia (CA), the ICC aims to provide substantial support to these players through this pioneering initiative. As part of the effort, the ICC will also create a dedicated fund to offer direct financial assistance, ensuring that the cricketers have the resources to continue their careers and pursue their passion for the game.

AP

5

Cricket is set to make a historic return to the Olympic Games at the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics, with the City of Pomona on the West Coast selected as the venue for the competition. This marks the first time in over a century that cricket will be featured in the Olympic Games, with the sport last appearing in 1900. The LA28 will host both men's and women's cricket competitions, each with six participating teams.

ICC

6

Afghanistan triumphed in a thrilling Asia Qualifier, securing first place and a spot in the ICC Under-19 Men's Cricket World Cup 2026, set to be held in Zimbabwe and Namibia. Its qualification came down to a superior net run rate after the final round of fixtures in Kathmandu was abandoned due to heavy rain.

YOU TALK, I WIN: MOLINA'S MIC-DROP SEASON AT MOHUN BAGAN

Mohun Bagan's historic ISL double, led by Jose Molina's tactics and squad depth, proves **resilience and substance** triumph over style.

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

Aashin Prasad
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The confetti flew, and the flares lit up the stands as Mohun Bagan overcame a 0-1 deficit against Bengaluru FC to claim a rare and monumental Indian Super League (ISL) double.

As the trophy celebrations wound down, ecstatic Mohun Bagan supporters began filing out of the stadium, their chants of 'Joy Mohun Bagan!' still echoing inside.

Yet, not everyone shared the same enthusiasm. "The football was boring," murmured Mithun, a Bagan supporter. "This isn't how Mohun Bagan should play. Bengaluru played better football."

Questions about style aren't the only criticism Jose Molina faces as Mohun Bagan's head coach. Throughout the season, rival coaches in the ISL have envied and sometimes thrown shade at Molina's success, largely due to the club's vast resources. In the last four seasons, Bagan has spent Rs. 10.11 crore in the transfer market, more than Rs 3 crore than the next best spender. Bengaluru FC head coach Gerard Zaragoza conceded it was like facing 'two teams' from Bagan in the final.

Such can be the life of a head coach at Mohun Bagan: doomed in defeat and damned even in victory.

But Molina would have cared little for the consequences of losing a final after a scrappy performance would have been far graver.

"It doesn't matter how we're playing. If we don't win, they're not happy. The most important thing is to win," Molina had said before the final.

With the trophy seemingly

"IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW WE'RE PLAYING. IF WE DON'T WIN, THEY'RE NOT HAPPY. THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO WIN" – JOSE MOLINA

Captivating scenes: Watching Mohun Bagan chase a game at the spiritual home of Indian football – Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata – is an experience beyond words. PICS: FSDL

slipping away in the second half, Molina and Bagan leaned on their storied history, star quality, and their expectant fanbase to pull through.

Watching Mohun Bagan chase a game at the spiritual home of Indian football – Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata – is an experience beyond words. Systems and formations fall by the wayside as the game is driven by the crowd.

With every tackle flying across the pitch and passes fired into the opposition box from all directions, the noise inside builds, inching toward a crescendo. Just as chaos seems inevitable, Mohun Bagan rises; the football and the supporters form a powerful synergy amid the madness. It wasn't 'total football', but it was substance over style.

While opposition players wilt under the pressure, Bagan thrives. It has been here before, and it knows exactly what to do – its dominance at home this season has been undeniable. There was only one likely outcome.

Jamshedpur FC painfully discovered this in the second semifinal leg, and 10 other teams had similar experiences in Kolkata during the league stage. Bengaluru was no different in the final.

To its credit, Bengaluru kept the cauldron under control, suppressing the atmosphere with possession and forcing Bagan into its own half. The pressure paid off when an own goal gave the visitor a deserved lead against the league's most defensively sound team.

Bagan played like a jazz band in revolt — no sheet music, no conductor, just pure instinct. Formations blurred, structure dissolved, and the tempo surged. Bengaluru's defence couldn't keep pace. A single error, and Jason Cummings pounced to equalise.

As the game wore on, the difference in squad depth proved decisive. Last season, when Bagan faltered at the final hurdle, its bench options were limited. Sahal Abdul Samad and Kiyan Nassiri were the only substitutes used during the 90 minutes.

The club ensured this season would be different. When Bagan needed to turn up the tempo, it had two India internationals (Sahal and Ashique Kuruniyan) and two former ISL Golden Ball winners (Greg Stewart and Dimitrios Petratos) to call on.

In extra time, Jamie Maclaren, another overseas international, who had scored on six separate occasions in the league to give Bagan the lead, delivered the knockout blow.

It was another smash-and-grab moment. Just as NorthEast United, Chennaiyin FC, Kerala Blasters, Jamshedpur, and others had found out, Rahul Bheke failed to clear his lines, and Maclaren pounced to deliver the dagger.

How he gets the job done may not please everyone, but Molina had once again orchestrated another famous night for India's biggest club.

"Money is important," admitted Molina, "but it's not the only thing." As the dust settled on the season, the records would speak for themselves. Along with the most wins, most points, most goals scored, least goals conceded, and an unbeaten home record, Molina became only the second coach in the league's history to complete the Shield and Cup double.

With another trophy in hand, Molina, in his own way, was able to settle scores off the pitch too, particularly taking aim at Chennaiyin FC boss Owen Coyle's remarks. The Scotsman had claimed he would win titles every season with Bagan's budget.

"I think it's a lack of respect to the other coach who is doing his job and trying his best. Everybody has their style. He can continue saying things, I'll continue working and try to win titles," Molina snapped back.

With a mic-drop moment, Molina, fittingly, had the last word.

ISL'S FUTURE IN DOUBT AMID STALLED GROWTH AND FINANCIAL STRAINS

While the Indian Super League has helped improve professional standards and technical expertise, it **has not taken the sport** in the country to the next level as was expected.

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In Indian football, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Before the start of the Indian Super League season, the host broadcaster ran a promo quizzing — 'Who is the next hero?' of Indian football. Recently retired international, Sunil Chhetri, considered the face of the league for the previous decade, with yesteryear star Bhaichung Bhutia in tow, was taking consensus from leading names in Bollywood, Indian cricket and badminton on who among the next generation would take the mantle from Chhetri.

Eight months on, the find of the season has been Chhetri himself!

At 40, he matched his season-best tally of goals, outscoring any other Indian, which prompted an international retirement U-turn. While it's a testament to his drive and skill to keep delivering at the highest level, the inability to find his successor leaves a question mark over the ISL despite the 11-season run.

No stopping him: In the 11 seasons, no Indian has won the Golden Boot. Sunil Chhetri leads the ISL scoring chart, but he has had the benefit of having played in 10 of the 11 campaigns. FSDL

While the league has helped improve professional standards and technical expertise, it has not taken the sport in the country to the next level as was expected. The over-reliance on foreigners in key positions both on and off the field has yielded mixed results.

In the 11 seasons, no Indian has won the Golden Boot. Chhetri leads the ISL scoring chart, but he has had the benefit of having played in 10 of the 11 campaigns.

The four-foreigner rule in the playing XI isn't helping unearth the next Chhetri or Bhutia. Goals win matches and teams over the years have imported players to carry out that task. During the ISL play-offs, Bengaluru played an all-Indian backline, which allowed it to stack its six available midfield and attacking positions with four overseas players.

Mohun Bagan's Manvir Singh **(left, below)**, who can play multiple positions in the forward line, is a case study on having to fulfil two different roles for club and country due to the foreigner rule in the league.

In his five seasons at Bagan, he has had to make way to the right wing position for overseas players in the striker and centre-forward positions. Of his last 111 appearances in the league, Manvir has played as a centre-forward just nine times. But for the Indian team, during the same period, he has featured more times as a centre-forward (13) than as a right winger (9).

At the home of the ISL double champion Mohun Bagan, it's also a

Hard talk: While the ISL has undoubtedly raised the ceiling among the Indian players, there have also been accusations of complacency, most notably raised the national team coach, Manolo Marquez. ISL

Money matters: Lalengmawia Ralte (centre) and Anirudh Thapa (left) are among the big-money signings at Mohun Bagan. FSDL

problem of plenty, with several players being lost in the shuffle. The Kolkata outfit has an array of Indian talent, which includes Anirudh Thapa, Sahal Abdul Samad, Lalengmawia Ralte, Liston Colaco, Manvir Singh, Ashique Kuruniyan and Deepak Tangri.

Thapa and Samad — two talented attacking midfielders, who made big-money moves to Bagan in the summer of 2023 — have enjoyed significant upheaval in their trophy haul and wages.

But this season, on the pitch, they have had to take a back seat since the arrival of another exciting midfield talent, Ralte. In the 2023–24 campaign, Thapa and Samad averaged 64.86 and 69.53 minutes per 90, but in the recently concluded season, the playing time has dropped to 55.38 and 42.94 respectively.

While the ISL has undoubtedly raised the ceiling among the Indian players, there have also been accusations of complacency, most notably raised by the national team coach, Manolo Marquez. "My feeling is that Indian players are very comfortable," the Spaniard pointed out. "Life is so good for them in the ISL that it is difficult for them to try and go abroad."

Last season, Ralte was reportedly registered outside the new salary cap regulations, while Thapa and Samad are also among the best-paid Indian players in the league.

The preference to look abroad also extends to coaching roles, with Indians often being overlooked.

Marquez, in his first press conference after his appointment, said, "In the future, the national team coach has to be Indian. An Indian coach will know better how the country works and the people in every part of India."

Indians in ISL since 2014

No. of Indian Golden Boot winners:
0

No. of Indians in the top 10 goalscorers
2

No. of Indians in the top 10 assist providers
3

No. of Indian head coaches in ISL
2

Uncertainties prevail: Mohammedan SC (in black) is a doubtful participant for the next season if it fails to find a sponsor and meet the league's financial criteria. FSDL

But there appears to be no definite pathway or track record in the ISL for them to make that step up. It took until the seventh season before an Indian was appointed in a permanent head coach role.

Among the 84 permanent head coach appointments in the ISL, there have been just two Indians — Khalid Jamil (NorthEast United in 2021; **right**) and Thangboi Singto (Hyderabad FC in 2023).

At the end of the 2024–25 season, the ISL — the country's top-flight competition from 2019–20 — is at crossroads.

After kicking off amid frenzied fanfare in 2014, the endeavour has become a loss-making exercise for the clubs involved.

There is no certainty over relegation being introduced next season as charted in the AFC-AIFF roadmap, while financial struggles continue to plague clubs.

After Hyderabad FC's turmoil in recent seasons, Mohammedan SC, who was promoted last year, is a doubtful participant for the next season if it fails to find a sponsor and meet the league's financial criteria.

The viability of the league has also come into question with the Master Rights Agreement between the national federation and its commercial partner, Football Sports Development League (FSDL), ending in December this year.

The league's operational costs since 2014 have allegedly led to a loss of over ₹5,000 crores for the FSDL. Unless all stakeholders at the table strike a deal on a sustainable model, the competition will remain under a cloud.

And amid the lack of resolution from the top on the future of the ISL, Indian football will not be able to look past Chhetri as its main man.

FOCUS SPORTS/ISL

MAIDEN MOMENT

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

East Bengal won the Indian Women's League title for the first time, breaking **multiple records** along the way.

Rajdeep Saha
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"I know what it takes to be a champion."

Anthony Andrews **(right)** wasn't lying. He had just led East Bengal to its maiden Indian Women's League (IWL) title in the 2024–25 season. This was also the 29-year-old coach's third championship — he had previously won two consecutive titles with Gokulam Kerala between 2021 and 2023.

In addition to roping in serial winner Andrews, the Kolkata-based side also secured the services of several India internationals, including Sweety Devi, Anju Tamang, Ashalata Devi, Sandhiya Ranganathan and others. The team also boasted a formidable overseas contingent, spearheaded by Ghanaian forward Elshaddai Acheampong, who ended the campaign with 10 goals — East Bengal's top scorer and the second-highest scorer of the season.

While the Red and Gold Brigade romped to the title — breaking multiple records and losing just once en route to a spot in the preliminary stage of the AFC Women's Champions League — defending champion Odisha FC endured a fall from grace.

The team finished seventh and was relegated to IWL 2 — the second tier of Indian

Joyous moment: The Red and Gold Brigade romped to the title and lost just once en route to a spot in the preliminary stage of the AFC Women's Champions League. EAST BENGAL FC

women's football. HOPS FC also dropped down after finishing last.

Odisha managed just three wins from its 14 matches. Head coach Crispin Chettri — who is also in charge of the Indian women's national team — will now shift focus to leading the Blue Tigresses in the AFC Women's Asia Cup 2026 Qualifiers, scheduled between June and July.

Churchill crowned but drama continues

The air of uncertainty surrounding the I-League 2024–25 winner was cleared nearly a fortnight after the season's conclusion when the All India Football Federation's (AIFF) Appeals Committee declared Churchill Brothers as the champion.

The controversy centred on three points initially awarded to Inter Kashi by the AIFF, despite a loss, after a Namdhari FC player was deemed ineligible for a match between the two sides back in January. However, the federation overturned its own decision in March following Namdhari's appeal, thereby revoking the three points from Kashi.

Inter Kashi is now set to challenge the Appeals Committee's ruling at the Court of Arbitration for Sport. "From the very beginning, Inter Kashi has been clear that the case involves a simple interpretation of rules and regulations based on some undisputed facts. Inter Kashi will leave no stone unturned to secure justice, and any celebration in the interim may ultimately prove to be premature," the club stated.

In I-League 2, Diamond Harbour FC from West Bengal clinched the title after having already confirmed promotion to the I-League. Chanmari FC from Aizawl also earned promotion to the country's second tier.

Super Cup begins with Asia spot at stake

While East Bengal's women's team prepares to shine on the continental stage, the men's team had a below-par 2024–25 season, which ended with elimination in the Super Cup. The defending champion was knocked out in the Round of 16 after a 0–2 loss to Kerala Blasters.

The Yellow Army will face Mohun Bagan Super Giant in the quarterfinals after the Mariners received a bye in the first round due to Churchill Brothers opting out of the competition, citing the earlier uncertainty regarding the I-League title.

FC Goa and Punjab FC also advanced to the last eight after beating Gokulam Kerala and Odisha FC, respectively. Winning the Super Cup will grant the champion a place in the qualifying playoffs of the AFC Champions League Two.

Interest expressed to host 2031 Asian Cup

The AIFF has submitted India's Expression of Interest (EoI) to host the 2031 edition of the AFC Asian Cup. Indonesia and Kuwait have also submitted EoIs, alongside a joint bid from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India has never hosted the tournament, though it had previously submitted bids to host the 2023 and 2027 editions.

Contrasting fortunes: East Bengal was knocked out by Kerala Blasters (in pic) in the Super Cup. AIFF MEDIA

FOR MORE STORIES

Hot shot: Declan Rice (left) took centre stage with two stunning goals against Real Madrid at the Emirates Stadium, becoming the first player ever to score a brace through free-kicks in UCL knockouts. AP

SHOCK AND AWE

Arsenal ended Real Madrid's love affair with the UCL, while Manchester United lit up Old Trafford with an **unforgettable victory** over Lyon in the Europa League.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
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The 2024–25 season of the UEFA Champions League (UCL) featured a new format with more teams and, expectedly, more chatter about the success of more matches and a packed schedule. All of that went out the window in the quarterfinals, with each of the eight matches turning out to be blockbusters — especially the clash between defending champion Real Madrid and Arsenal.

Mikel Arteta's army completed a double over Los Blancos, denying them a semifinal spot in the continental tournament for the first time in five years. And the central figure over the home and away fixtures was England midfielder Declan Rice. Rice took centre stage with two stunning goals at the Emirates Stadium — becoming the first player ever to score a brace through free-kicks in UCL knockouts — in a 3-0 win in the first leg.

In the return leg, Rice donned the robes of a disciplined midfielder, marking Kylian Mbappe tightly at the Santiago Bernabeu, as the Gunners qualified for the semifinals after 16 years, knocking Madrid out with a 5-1 win on aggregate.

They will face Mbappe's former side, Paris Saint-Germain, in the semifinals, which reached consecutive semis under manager Luis Enrique, this time with a 5-4 win on aggregate over Aston Villa. Though Villa struck thrice in the return leg, an astute final 30 minutes by the French side helped

it secure the narrow win.

Barcelona would have thought it had qualified for the final four when it thrashed Borussia Dortmund 4-0 in the first leg. But the Yellow-and-Black tried a comeback in the return leg, falling short by two goals in the end.

Meanwhile, late comebacks ruled the roost in the other quarterfinal when Inter Milan staved off Bayern Munich to enter its second semifinal in three years. With a 2-1 lead in the first leg, Inter went behind at home (2-2 on aggregate) in the second leg when Harry Kane found the net in the second half.

Inter soaked up the pressure, rode on the raucous home support to score twice in three minutes, through Lautaro Martinez and Benjamin Pavard, to complete the comeback. The Italians will face Barcelona for a spot in the final.

An English Remontada

The UEFA Europa League quarterfinals were even more dramatic, with Manchester United securing a late 5-4 win over Lyon while an outnumbered Bodo/Glimt beat Lazio 3-2 on penalties.

United, going into the second leg with a 2-2 score, was flying through Manuel Ugarte and Diogo Dalot's strikes in the first half before Corentin Tolisso and Nicolas Tagliafico pulled the game back in balance, forcing extra time.

Over 73,000 fans at Old Trafford were stunned to silence when Rayan Cherki and Alexandre Lacazette scored two more for the French side. But United scored three in the last seven minutes — through Bruno Fernandes, Kobbie Mainoo and Harry Maguire — to turn the match on its head.

United will face Athletic Bilbao, which beat Rangers 2-0 over two legs, while Bodo/Glimt will lock horns with Tottenham Hotspur, which rode on Dominic Solanke's penalty to eliminate 2021–22 champion Eintracht Frankfurt.

Last laugh: Manchester United players celebrate after Harry Maguire (left) scored the winner against Lyon. AP

In the UEFA Europa Conference League, Real Betis brushed aside Polish top-division champion Jagiellonia Białystok to set up a semifinal against Fiorentina, the 2022–23 runner-up. The Serie A side was rattled by Slovenian club Celje, which restored parity through Aljosa Matko and Klemen Nemanic, but Moise Kean saved Fiorentina's blushes with a winner in the 67th minute.

Chelsea set up the other semifinal against Swedish club Djurgarden, after getting the better of Legia Warsaw 4-2 on aggregate. Djurgarden, on the other hand, sailed into the semis with a 5-2 aggregate win over Austrian side SK Rapid Wien.

(All results updated as of April 21)

Dramatic finish: Trent Alexander-Arnold (centre) came off the bench and scored the winner against Leicester City. AP

UNSTOPPABLE BY DESIGN

Liverpool is just **a win away** from a commanding title win in the Premier League.

Joan Mathew Jacob
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Liverpool had the opportunity to secure its first Premier League title since the 2019–20 season on April 20 itself, provided it beat Leicester City and Arsenal lost to Ipswich Town. Though the first condition was fulfilled, a win for the Gunners away from home meant the Reds, the current league leaders, would now have to wait a bit longer for their coronation.

Arne Slot's men were forced to work hard and needed Trent Alexander-Arnold to come off the bench and score the winner. The right-back, criticised for reportedly leaving his boyhood club for Real Madrid at the end of the season, ripped his shirt off in a wild celebration in front of the Liverpool fans.

The result also confirmed Leicester's relegation to the Championship, its second in three years.

Arsenal, meanwhile, thrashed Ipswich 4-0 with two goals from Leandro Trossard and one each from Gabriel Martinelli and Ethan Nwaneri.

Liverpool needs just a win in its next game against Tottenham Hotspur to be crowned champion, but it could happen earlier if Arsenal loses at home to Crystal Palace in midweek.

Newcastle United (3rd), Manchester City (4th) and Chelsea (5th) make up the rest of the top five, with Aston Villa and Nottingham Forest also in contention for Champions League spots.

La Liga

Barcelona needed an inspiring performance from Raphinha to come back from two goals down and

beat Celta Vigo in a seven-goal thriller, maintaining its lead at the top of the table.

Barca seemed to be cruising when Ferran Torres scored to take the lead, but Borja Iglesias' hat-trick at the other end turned the game on its head.

With 25 minutes of regulation time left, Dani Olmo halved the deficit before Raphinha levelled things up three minutes later. It was those two who combined for the winner, with Olmo winning a penalty and the Brazilian dispatching it into the top corner in the eighth minute of added time.

Meanwhile, Real Madrid seemed to be carrying the ghosts of its Champions League exit at the hands of Arsenal and was almost held to a goalless draw by Athletic Club. However, Federico Valverde produced a wonder strike in the third minute of stoppage time to ensure Los Blancos stayed four points behind Barca with six games left to play.

Serie A

The race for the league title is boiling down to the final games of the season, as the last two champions, Inter Milan and Napoli, are first and second respectively, level on 71 points.

Inter put its chances of retaining the Scudetto in danger after suffering a shock 0-1 loss against Bologna. Riccardo Orsolini's spectacular stoppage-time bicycle kick in the fourth minute of added time boosted Bologna to fourth in the standings and into the Champions League slots. Inter has now dropped five points in its last three games in the league.

Top gun: Raphinha put up a stellar show and finished with a penalty that helped Barcelona come back from two goals down to win against Celta Vigo.

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On the other hand, Napoli was made to work hard by the bottom-placed AC Monza and edged out a 1-0 win to put pressure on the reigning champion. Scott McTominay headed in his ninth goal in the league, midway through the second half, to take all three points.

If Inter and Napoli remain level on points at the end of 38 games, they will play each other in a single match

> « The race for the Serie A title is boiling down to the final games of the season »

to determine the league champion.

Bundesliga

After almost 15 years since his senior debut, Harry Kane **(right)** is within touching distance of the first major trophy of his career as Bayern Munich extended its lead at the top of the standings.

Following its exit from the Champions League, the Bavarians bounced back by thumping relegation-battling FC Heidenheim 4-0.

Kane opened the scoring while Konrad Laimer and Kingsley Coman added on before Joshua Kimmich landed the final blow early in the second half.

Bayern's closest competitor and defending champion, Bayer Leverkusen, virtually loosened its grip on the trophy after being held to a 1-1 draw by FC St Pauli.

Patrik Schick's strike was cancelled out by Carlo Boukhalfa, leaving Leverkusen eight points behind Bayern with four rounds remaining.

Bayern can secure the title in the next matchweek if it wins against Mainz and Leverkusen fails to take all three points against FC Augsburg.

Ligue 1

After securing a record-extending 13th league title, Paris Saint-Germain shifted its focus to another achievement: becoming the first French team to go unbeaten for an entire season. Luis Enrique's **(above)** men kept their hopes of the 'invincibles' title alive after beating relegation-threatened Le Havre 2-1. Desire Doue gave the Parisians an early lead thanks to Bradley Barcola's 10th assist of the season, while Goncalo Ramos tapped in from close range in the second half.

While the trophy will go to Paris, the others in the top six still have the three remaining Champions League spots (two confirmed spots and one qualifying round spot) to play for. Only four points separate second-placed Olympique de Marseille and sixth-placed Olympique Lyonnais with just four games left in the season. AS Monaco (3rd), LOSC Lille (4th) and OGC Nice (5th) make up the rest of the top six.

(All results updated as of April 21)

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LOVE-ALL FOR THE GAME

As a youngster, Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi was involved in multiple sports, but when his mother took him to a tennis session during one of the summer breaks, little did he know that he would go on to become one of the **icons of tennis.**

Shayan Acharya
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It's a rainy and cold afternoon in Islamabad, but it's business as usual for Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi. As president of the Pakistan Tennis Federation, he has had a long day — a meeting with the office-bearers, followed by some important discussions with a few stakeholders, and then a regular update on how the players are adapting to the new training regime.

But in between the meetings, he makes it a point to show us around the PTF-SDA Tennis Complex and share his vision. Despite hailing from a family of sporting icons — his grandfather Khawaja Iftikhar Ahmed was a tennis legend, having played for both India and Pakistan, and his mother, Nosheen Ihtsham, was Pakistan's No.1 tennis player for 10 years — things weren't easy for Qureshi as he strived to become a flag-bearer of tennis in a country that swears by cricket.

Having done the hard yards for years, he knows what challenges a young player faces while pursuing the sport. With that in mind, he wants to support the players to the hilt and produce a Grand Slam champion.

« I've been in touch with the ITF and ATP so that we can host Futures and Challenger tournaments here [in Pakistan], as they would be a game-changer for the sport in our country; it would give everyone a road map to start thinking big – Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi »

He knows it's not an easy task, but Qureshi isn't one to shy away from challenges. "Obviously, it has to start from the juniors. We have some really talented boys and girls at the U-12, U-14 and U-16 levels, and we are focusing on them a lot. We have to make the Davis Cup team a little bit stronger," Qureshi tells *Sportstar.*

He is also keen to ensure that the players are well taken care of and there aren't any financial restraints. "I've been in touch with the ITF and ATP so that we can host Futures and Challenger tournaments here, as they would be a game-changer for the sport in our country," he says. "India has already hosted ATP 250 events in Pune and Mumbai and several other tournaments, which actually gives everyone a road map to start thinking big. So, my aim is to create that road map and have those kinds of tournaments here..."

During his playing days, Qureshi also realised that getting wildcard entries in overseas tournaments could often be challenging. That's why he has signed MOUs with the tennis federations of Tunisia, Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka, among others, so that things become relatively easier for players from Pakistan. "In my singles career, I never got a wildcard entry. Generally, a player gets wildcard entries through the federation, but in

Experience is wisdom: Having done the hard yards for years, Qureshi knows what challenges a young player faces while pursuing the sport. With that in mind, he wants to support the players to the hilt and produce a Grand Slam champion.

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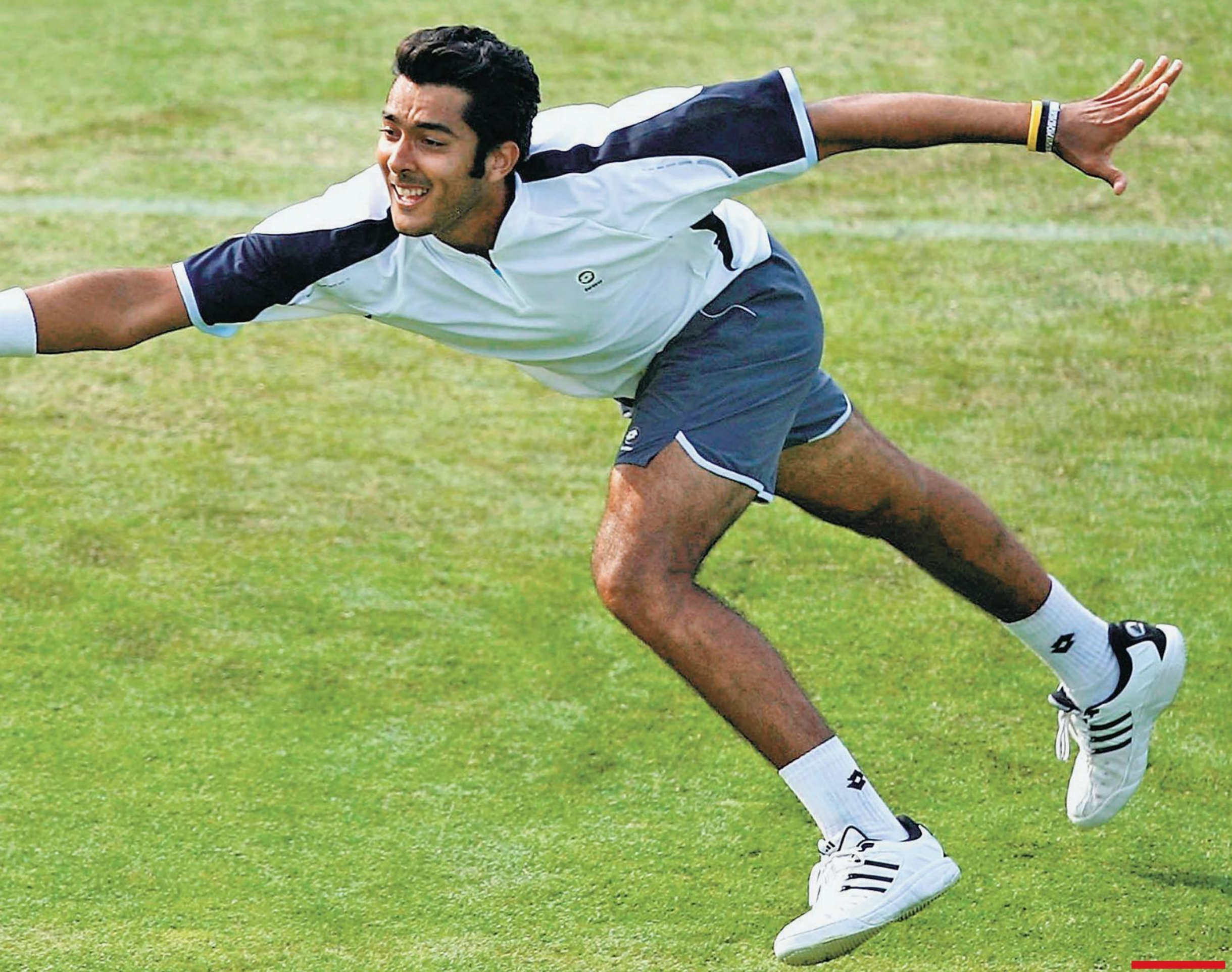

Up against the best: Popularly known as the 'Indo-Pak Express', Qureshi's pairing with Rohan Bopanna was one of his major career highlights. They reached the summit clash of the 2010 US Open where they lost to the Bryan twins after stretching them to tiebreaks in both sets. GETTY IMAGES

our times, our federation never tried. So, I don't want my players to suffer. As part of the MoU, our players will travel to these countries and train," Qureshi says, making it clear that the ATF 12&U Team Competition – South Asia, to be played in Islamabad in May, is also a step in the right direction.

After taking over as president of the federation, Qureshi has roped in quite a few international coaches and trainers, including Eduardo Vicencio Lalovic, and has also improved the facilities. "A year ago, we didn't have shower rooms, proper lockers, or a cafeteria, but now we have everything in place. The idea is to acknowledge the efforts of the players and respect them. If we don't respect them enough by providing basic facilities, how can we expect them to perform well? So, that's my priority," he says.

While Qureshi the administrator has set his priorities right, Qureshi the player, too, has set a few targets. He wants to bow out from professional tennis after donning the Pakistan colours for one last time at the South Asian Games, scheduled to be held across Lahore, Faisalabad and Islamabad in January next year.

In his long and illustrious career, Qureshi has won 18 titles, but one of his major career highlights was pairing with Rohan Bopanna. In fact, he and Bopanna reached the summit clash at the US Open in 2010 as the last seeded pair. Popularly known as the 'Indo-Pak Express', the pair was up against top seeds and arguably the greatest doubles team of all time — Mike and Bob Bryan. The two 30-year-olds stretched the twins to tiebreaks in both sets before going down 7-6(5), 7-6(4).

For Qureshi, though, the biggest moment with Bopanna was winning their first ATP World Tour doubles title at the South African Open in 2010, defeating Karol Beck and Harel Levy in the final. "We were winning Challengers until then in singles, but we decided to give it a shot in doubles and once we started, we had our moments of glory," he says. "I remember travelling to Bengaluru to train with Bops for a few weeks. Purav Raja and Mustafa Ghouse were also part of the training. That was a great experience, and during our partnership, we made so many memories. But of course, winning the first ATP title and a Grand Slam will always remain special..."

Qureshi has teamed up with several other Indian players, including Leander Paes, with whom he has fond memories. "If you look at my entire career, I've played with so many Indian players. It was the easiest thing when you were on the tour. The language is the same, the culture is the same, you get to spend so much time off the court, on the court, and in such times, those

Beyond borders: "Unfortunately, there was nobody from Pakistan to play with. So, playing with an Indian just came very naturally to me. I never thought about where they were from, what their religion was; it was just about playing the game and striving for success." SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

things become easy. I played so many tournaments in India, so I knew pretty much everyone," he says, adding with a smile, "Unfortunately, there was nobody from Pakistan to play with. So, playing with an Indian just came very naturally to me. I never thought about where they were from, what their religion was; it was just about playing the game and striving for success..."

While he enjoyed success in singles, the impact was not as significant as it was during his doubles partnership with Bopanna. "I wish the Indo-Pak Express lasted longer, but Bops had stronger line-ups. It was the Olympic year (2012), and they wanted to pair him with an Indian and give it their best shot, so it was not easy for me as I would have loved to continue. But then, that's how the sport is," he says.

Even though the 'Indo-Pak Express' is a thing of the past, Qureshi remains in touch with his old friend. When the Indian bettered his own record as the oldest player to win an ATP Masters 1000 title after winning the 2024 Miami Open with Australia's Matt Ebden, Qureshi and his parents congratulated him and spoke at length. "I cherish those memories with Bops and the friendship."

As a youngster, Qureshi was involved in multiple sports, but when his mother took him to a tennis session during one of the summer breaks, little did he know that decades later, he would go on to become one of the icons of the game. And he rightly sums it up, saying: "I would not have been the person I am today if I didn't have tennis in my life..."

FACTFILE

Serve-and-Volley Specialist
Qureshi is known for his classic serve-and-volley style, a rarity in modern tennis, which made him especially effective in doubles.

US Open Finalist (2010)
He reached the men's doubles final at the 2010 US Open with Rohan Bopanna, famously as the Indo-Pak Express — a landmark moment for both countries.

Won 18 ATP Titles
Over his professional career, he won 18 ATP titles proving his consistency and longevity on the tour.

Entered Top 10 in Doubles
Achieved his highest ranking of 8 in doubles in the year 2011.

Promoter of Indo-Pak Peace
Through his partnership with Bopanna, Qureshi launched the campaign 'Stop War, Start Tennis', using sport to promote peace between their countries.

Humanitarian Work and UN Goodwill Ambassador
Beyond the court, he's been involved in humanitarian efforts and was once a UNDP Goodwill Ambassador for peace and development.

Tokens of Appreciation
Received the President's Award for Performance by the Government of Pakistan in 2004, and the Arthur Ashe Humanitarian of the Year Award in 2002 and 2010.

India's UFC dream: Rising to glory or stumbling in the spotlight?

Indian UFC fighters face a tough journey, **balancing early hype with hard lessons,** as they strive for success on the global stage.

Jonathan Selvaraj
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Whenever MMA fighter Anshul Jubli posts on social media these days, the responses are almost instantaneous. This quick feedback is understandable. The 30-year-old from Uttarakhand became a social media sensation a couple of years ago, amassing over a million Instagram followers after winning Road to UFC and making history as the first Indian fighter to earn a contract with the world's premier MMA organisation, the UFC.

However, after two fights and two losses, much of the interaction on his social media is negative.

"It's almost a guarantee what the messages will say at this point. It will be some variation of '19 seconds,'" says Siddharth Singh, Anshul's coach and the founder of New Delhi's Crosstrain Fight Club, where Anshul began his MMA career.

The "19 seconds" jab refers to the length of Anshul's most recent UFC fight, which ended in a knockout loss to Australia's Quillan Salkilld at UFC 312 in February. Some of the mockery has been overtly racist, while an out-of-context quote from Anshul — where he said he had to believe he could beat all-time great Khabib Nurmagomedov — has also been used to ridicule Indian fighting talent.

While Anshul bears much of the criticism, he's not the only Indian fighter to struggle on the international stage in recent months. In March, Puja Tomar — the only Indian fighter to have won a bout in the UFC — was submitted by armbar in her second fight at UFC.

The performance of other Indian fighters in various promotions is equally disheartening. Ritu Phogat, perhaps the most accomplished Indian wrestler (a Under-23 Worlds silver medallist) to transition into MMA, suffered her third straight loss at ONE Championship, submitting to a kneebar by Ayaka Miura. This marked Ritu's first fight after a two-year layoff, and her future in the sport now appears uncertain. In December of last year, five Indian fighters competed at Brave CF 92 in a series of matches billed as "India vs Pakistan" — and lost all of them.

As Indian fighters increasingly compete in some of the biggest international promotions, many are questioning whether this is the kind

Power punch: Anshul Jubli lands a decisive blow against Mike Breeden at UFC 294, showcasing his striking skills in Abu Dhabi. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

of representation the country needs.

Bad reputation

Somesh Kamra, UFC panelist at *Sony Sports India* and talent scout for the UFC in Asia, is one of them. "Until about two years ago, I was very optimistic about Indian fighters going in the right direction. But as somebody who's developing the market for a major promotion, I'm actually very, very disappointed with where we are right now," he says.

"There was a wave, maybe a decade ago, when Indian fighters were encouraged to fight at the international level, but with the expectation that they would provide an easy opponent for others. I think in the last one and a half years, I'm seeing something similar happening," he continues. "They go there with the expectation that they're going to lose. That's because their managers convince them it's a good opportunity, and that even if they aren't ready, they will at least get the stamp of having competed at a major promotion. So they go there and lose. They might make $10,000 for their effort. But what it does is it creates a reputation for the fighters in India. People think Dagestani fighters are so tough because the fighters from that region who have competed internationally set a really high benchmark. That's not what we're seeing in India," he explains.

While Somesh is clear that Anshul wasn't one of those who didn't deserve to fight at the international level — he considers Anshul's win at the 2023 Road to UFC one of the high points of Indian MMA — he points out that matchmakers are struggling to find suitable opponents for him. "I was talking to UFC matchmaker Sean Shelby, and he was honestly struggling to decide where to place Anshul. He faced a 38-year-old grappler (Mike Breeden) who was going to be cut by the UFC, and he got knocked out. He faced a newcomer from the Dana White Contender Series (Quillan) and got knocked out in 19 seconds. So Sean, as a UFC matchmaker, was honestly not sure where he would place him," Somesh says.

While Anshul was at least a legitimate winner at Road to UFC, Indian fighters have made headlines for all the wrong reasons in subsequent seasons. Last year's Road to UFC saw allegations — later proven true — that Indian fighters had padded their records. This year, Chungreng Koren, considered one of India's best fighters, had to be pulled

Striking showdown: Puja Tomar delivers a powerful kick to Shauna Bannon at UFC Fight Night in London, showcasing her striking prowess in the strawweight division.

from the competition after he wasn't released from his contract by MFN, India's premier promotion, where he holds the lightweight championship.

"We're seeing a situation where, on one hand, some fighters are deciding to step up to a level of competition they aren't really ready for, and at the same time, some of the best Indian fighters for different reasons aren't getting the chance to step up at the right stage of their careers," Somesh says.

While other observers agree with Somesh's points, they add that it's unfair to judge Indian MMA by the standards of regions where the sport is far more developed. "We have to understand that MMA is still in a very nascent stage in India compared to the USA, where the sport has been around for over a quarter of a century. (For perspective, UFC 1 was held in the USA in 1993, while the Super Fight League — India's first televised MMA promotion — launched nearly 20 years later in 2012.) There's a whole generation of fighters who have already fought and made careers in MMA in places that we consider strong in the sport. We have Anshul and Puja, but they have hundreds of people who started doing this 10-15 years ago," says Peeyush Pandey, one of India's youngest MMA coaches at 28, who

runs Kaizen Academy in Bengaluru.

MMA scene not industry

"MMA in the USA can be considered a sports industry. Right now, there is an MMA scene in India. It's not an industry. It's mostly driven by passion. It's not entirely professional in terms of promotions, fighters, and coaching," says Shillong-based MMA podcaster and commentator Andrew Lu. Crosstrain founder Siddharth shares a similar view. "What is holding us back is the lack of a big and solid ecosystem where our homegrown athletes have access to the right platforms, the right places to train, the right coaching, the right amateur tournaments to compete in, and the financial support at the right time in their development. We are much better placed than we were a few years ago, but we aren't there yet," he admits.

Roshan Mainam, a fighter who has competed at One Championship, adds that only a small proportion of Indian fighters come with skill sets that translate well into mixed martial arts. "One of the major issues I've seen with Indian fighters is that most of us lack a strong wrestling background. If you look at any of the elite international fighters, they usually have a very strong wrestling base. Most of India's top MMA fighters come from a striking background. But no matter how good a striker you are, if you don't have a solid wrestling background, you will always have the fear that the opponent will find a way to take the fight to the ground," says Roshan, who himself competed as a freestyle wrestler in the Indian national championships before transitioning to MMA.

This isn't to say India lacks strong martial arts traditions. It does. But the ability to combine these skills into a style that works well in MMA is still missing. "In India, we have great wrestlers, boxers, and wushu fighters. But very few people have actually combined them all together. I think a lot of this is due to how new the MMA scene is in India. A country like the USA has been able to put everything together for at least the last 25 years. We are still in the first generation of this development. Honestly, we probably have only four or five high-level MMA gyms in India. The rest of the guys are kind of winging it. The academies and coaching need to catch up before we can say we should be rubbing shoulders with the best in the world," says Peeyush.

Even with the right coaching, a talented prospect will likely face another challenge: the lack of the right platform. "One of the biggest problems we face in India is the lack of an actual calendar. No one wants to train without being able to test that training in an actual fight. In the USA, you know that every weekend there's some event or another. The UFC has one event every week, and it's obviously the pinnacle, but there are probably a dozen regional

Leading light: Ritu Phogat is among the most accomplished Indian wrestlers to transition into MMA.
GETTY IMAGES

promotions where your opponents are of a really high standard, possibly even former UFC-level fighters. That doesn't exist in India. Our biggest promotion is Matrix Fight Night. But even they only conduct maybe three or four events each year. And not every fighter will get the chance to compete in every event. That means our best talent doesn't get to compete as often as they should," he explains.

Moreover, with many of the best Indian fighters locked into long contracts with MFN, there remains the possibility — as happened with Chungreng — that they might be unable to compete at the right time.

Financial struggles

For any fighter looking to improve, the lack of quality sparring and competition means they often have no choice but to go overseas for better training. However, this comes with its own set of complications. Training abroad costs money, and at all levels of the sport, that's in short supply.

"Even right now, it is a struggle to get the kind of support we need," admits coach Siddharth. "I remember there was a press conference before her last fight where Puja actually said she was broke and looking for sponsors. I think there's a distinction between what's popular and what's acceptable right now. MMA is popular in the sense that when there are fights coming up, Anshul is the hottest thing on the internet, and everyone wants to talk about it. But when it comes to sponsoring Anshul or Puja, sponsors will say it's a blood sport," he adds.

Despite Anshul's large celebrity following on Instagram, it is understood that, despite reaching out to them for help connecting with sponsors, he has received no response.

For India's top fighters, this means that training isn't just about getting better — it's also about carefully managing limited finances. "The fact of the matter is that most Indian fighters train in Indonesia because it's relatively affordable compared to training anywhere else," says Siddharth. But even 'relatively' doesn't make it easy. "Training in Indonesia costs about Rs 2 lakhs a month, and that's not even including flights. If you train there for 10 months a year, that works out to around Rs 20 lakhs. And as a fighter, you get about $20,000 per fight. So even if you fight just once, you're actually losing around Rs 4 lakhs. We try to manage as best we can. We compromise on flights, accommodation, and even coffee sometimes just to have enough to train. Anshul got $50,000 as prize money when he won Road to UFC, but after that, things have been really hard," he says.

Despite the challenges, most observers of MMA in India remain optimistic about the future. According to Forrest Griffin **(facing page)**, former UFC champion and current vice president of the UFC Performance Institute, success is a self-fulfilling cycle. He isn't too concerned about the immediate lack of success of Indian fighters as long

"WHAT IS HOLDING US BACK IS THE LACK OF A BIG AND SOLID ECOSYSTEM WHERE OUR HOMEGROWN ATHLETES HAVE ACCESS TO THE RIGHT PLATFORMS, THE RIGHT PLACES TO TRAIN..." — SIDDHARTH SINGH, ANSHUL JUBLI'S COACH

as the UFC itself attracts fans. "I think what's most important is that the sport becomes popular in the country. Once MMA becomes popular, the rest will fall into place. It also helps if the country has a history of martial arts. I don't know how much exposure MMA gets in India, but it's not enough! The exposure will grow, which will improve the training, which will lead to better fighters, and this, in turn, will cause the exposure to grow. So it will be a cycle of growth and improvement. When more kids become interested in MMA, there will be more gyms and more opportunities to train. India has a great wrestling culture, and I think that will transition to MMA quickly," he says.

Griffin is optimistic that India can follow the developmental path of nations like China, which had a negligible presence in the UFC not long ago but now boasts a UFC champion. "I think the country they most resemble in their growth will be China — another country with a large population, whose average personal wealth grew tremendously. They're also a country with a history and culture of martial arts," he adds.

Steady improvement

Even those aware of the challenges facing Indian MMA remain optimistic. "I'm actually very optimistic that we can improve the standard of coaching in the country. The best part of MMA is that you don't need to be the highest level in your individual sport. GSP (former UFC lightweight champion Georges St-Pierre) wasn't a top-level wrestler, boxer, or submission artist. But he was the greatest before the current era because MMA is about mixing these skills. That can be taught, rather than mastering a single skill set. One of the best MMA gyms in the world is City Kickboxing, in Auckland. Even though jiu-jitsu is crucial in MMA, neither of their founders had a background in it. They reached a high level through research and constant improvement," Peeyush points out.

India's fighters are evolving too. "The amateur fighters I see in India now are better than the professional fighters when I started," admits Mainam.

New promotions are emerging, especially in the Northeast, says Lu. "There's a lot of untapped talent coming from the Northeast. Promotions in Arunachal (Arturo) and Assam (Bidang) are doing a lot of the right things. They're matching Indian fighters with the right opponents," he says.

More significantly, says coach Siddharth, the average age of India's fighters is getting younger. "If you look at the fighters currently at the international level, most are in their thirties or older (Anshul is 30, and Puja is 31). Puja was a national-level wushu fighter for nearly 10 years before her first MMA opportunity. She and Anshul were pioneers who opened doors for others, but they got their chances later than some of the fighters we have now. (Current Road To UFC contender Mridul Saikia is 27). We also have promising fighters in their teens who've been preparing for a career in MMA for many years," he says.

If he ever feels discouraged, Siddharth recalls when he first started his MMA gym in Delhi two decades ago. "I left a career in finance in the UK to come back and start this. Back then, people thought I was crazy. 99 per cent of the first people who came to my gym were trying to lose weight. That's how MMA began in India. When I said I'd eventually produce a UFC fighter, my friends thought I was smoking something. But we got there. So when people criticise my fighters and say nasty things, I don't react. It's okay if they're talking about '19 seconds' now. Ten years ago, no one was even commenting. The fact that they're commenting means someone's in the UFC. We will get better, and there will be better things to talk about," he says.

Watch the Road To UFC - Season 4 on Sony Sports Network

WATCH THE VIDEO

« Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand »

BREAKING NEW GROUND

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The last Olympic cycle for Indian badminton was mainly about 'Sat-Chi' — the power-packed men's doubles duo of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty — and the dreams of an elusive gold.

At the same time, Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand or 'TreGa' were gradually learning the tricks of the trade in the demanding discipline of women's doubles.

Hyderabad's Gayatri (22), the daughter of Chief National Coach Pullela Gopichand, and Kannur's Treesa (21) were predominantly singles players on the junior circuit before the coaches decided to pair them up in 2021.

The duo has been grinding in the shadows for the last four years — developing chemistry, chasing titles and ranking points, and tackling injuries.

With Treesa nursing a shoulder issue, the pair had to miss the Badminton Asia Championships (April 8-13) and will also skip the upcoming Sudirman Cup (April 27 - May 4).

But this time away from courts, something which elite athletes seldom get, has also provided the duo a chance to reflect on their journey so far.

In an interview at their training base — the Pullela Gopichand Badminton Academy in Hyderabad — the two shuttlers tell *Sportstar* about the learnings from missing out on Paris 2024, the battles with the top-ranked Chinese pair, and breaking new ground.

You've been playing together since 2021. How has your partnership evolved — on and off the court?

Gayatri: Earlier, I was playing singles, but I thought doubles would be best for me. So, I paired up with Treesa, and initially, in a few tournaments, it was great to see what it was like. Then we got into the All England Open (in 2022), which we never thought would happen. We performed well (reached semifinals), and that's where we shone. Since then, it's been a great journey. We've played some good matches with the top pairs, and I got to learn a lot.

Treesa: In 2021, we started to play together. That's how I got to

NAGAR GOPAL

know Gayatri more, as in how she is. As a pair, we needed to share those moments. I am so grateful that, as a friend, off court also, she is so supportive. She is there if I need any help.

You won your first big tournament on the BWF World Tour circuit at the Syed Modi International in Lucknow last year.

Gayatri: It was the first time someone (Indian women's pair) had won. I didn't know that until we won the tournament. It's a great feeling to win in the country. After winning the tournament, both of us were in tears.

Treesa: We always dreamt of winning such tournaments. Being on the podium and receiving that gold medal is a different feeling. The fans were calling us with different names. It was like a dream. It's happiness that can't be described.

You narrowly missed out on Paris, but time is on your side. What did you take away from your first Olympic cycle?

Gayatri: We missed out on the Paris Olympics, but that's not the end. The LA Olympics 2028 is coming up. We didn't lose heart. We kept training hard, just looking for opportunities in the next tournament. The Olympics is not the only important tournament. There are a lot more important events. It was heartbreaking to lose out on making it to the Olympics, but I feel more opportunities are coming our way.

Treesa: Like she said, we missed out on the Olympics, but we did train continuously. It was a little hard to believe that we didn't qualify. But after that, the calendar was packed, and we started to play and perform from the next tournament.

And at the end of the year, we won the Syed Modi International. It's the 'never give up' attitude.

You mentioned that the calendar is packed. Does that make it tough to rest and recover?

Treesa: We need to accept that the calendar is hard. We need to be very choosy about the tournaments we play. During the tournaments, we need to focus on our physical health and condition, and how we play and recover. It is not only for us. It is the same for everyone. That's the reality we need to accept.

(To Treesa) How did you sustain your shoulder injury?

Treesa: The day after the All England Open pre-quarterfinals, it was hurting, and it was hard to play. Still, we continued to play the Swiss Open. We reached the semifinals, but it was getting hard for me to smash.

The physio said that I needed a break. We didn't take a break from January to March. We played continuous tournaments. That's why both of us decided to withdraw from the Asia Championships since it would be better for our health.

Gayatri: We just have to support each other because in doubles, it happens. Your partner is not fit

AP

sometimes. As athletes, we get injured pretty often. We'll get back stronger by the end of it.

Women's doubles is arguably the toughest among the five categories. The rallies can go up to 100-150 shots. How difficult is it to manage fitness?

Treesa: Physically, it is demanding. If it is a good match, it can easily go past 90 minutes. When we both started playing at that level, it was very difficult for us to play the rally games. But now, we are fighting with the Asian players and we have improved our strength in these four years.

Gayatri: Initially, it was a bit challenging. If we are playing against a top pair, it's going to be 90 minutes at least. You can't expect anything less. But we are giving them a fight at this point.

You've had close battles with World No. 1s Liu Sheng Shu and Tan Ning, even though they lead 6-1. What makes this matchup so compelling?

Gayatri: The first time we played against them at the Badminton Asia Mixed Team Championships in 2023, we beat them. After that, we've lost a few times. Even at the Swiss Open (semifinals) this year, we won the first set.

Both of us were confident that we could take the second set but it just didn't go our way. Also, the Chinese pair has a different game compared to the usual women's doubles. It is more like men's doubles. They are more powerful as well.

Treesa: At the Swiss Open, we could have won that match. I think it was the best match we played. Almost 90 minutes. Strength-wise, we need to accept that they are better than us, but if we

WE NEED TO ACCEPT THAT THE CALENDAR IS HARD. WE NEED TO BE VERY CHOOSY ABOUT THE TOURNAMENTS WE PLAY. IT IS THE SAME FOR EVERYONE. THAT'S THE REALITY WE NEED TO ACCEPT – TREESA

Dynamic duo: The Indian badminton women's doubles pair of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand (facing page) clicked almost instantly as the pair finished runner-up in its very first tournament together — the Polish International 2021. PICS: NAGARA GOPAL

improve those small areas, we can beat them.

Which areas need improvement to beat top pairs such as Liu-Tan?
Treesa: Play-wise, we are equal to those pairs, but physically and mentally, we need to be stronger to get the crucial points.

You started your doubles journey under coach Arun Vishnu. Now, B. Sumeeth Reddy has become your coach.
Treesa: We have learnt a lot from both the coaches. When Arun *bhaiya* was there, we had just started. We began to compete internationally, which was new for us. Bit by bit, standing on the side, he helped both of us improve our game. Sumeeth *bhaiya* has just started to coach us, and I am so grateful that he is there for us.

In January (when they were ranked World No. 9), not only did you break into the Top 10, but you also went past the all-time highest ranking for an Indian women's doubles pair, which earlier belonged to Jwala Gutta and Ashwini Ponnappa, who were World No. 10 at one point.
Gayatri: I definitely didn't know that we crossed them in the rankings — that's not something we were looking for. We were really happy to break into the top 10, and it's just a nice feeling. It was overwhelming.

Treesa: When we played the World Tour Finals in 2024, that was the last time Arun *bhaiya* was our coach. He told us that India's best women's doubles ranking has been World No. 10. If you manage to go higher, it will become history.

You were the only Indian representatives at the BWF World Tour Finals in Hangzhou last year. Tell us about the experience of making your debut at the season-ending event.
Gayatri: We played against Liu-Tan in the first match. It was close. We won against the Malaysians (Pearly Tan and Thinaah Muralitharan). We were confident playing against the Japanese pair (Nami Matsuyama and Chiharu Shida) but it didn't go our way. Even getting to contend against those pairs has been a great learning for us.

Treesa: I had always seen the players playing on the red mat on TV. I also wanted to play on the red mat. The stadium and the ambience were great. We played really good matches there and gained a lot of experience.

Tell us about the toughest environment you have faced during a tournament?
Treesa: Last year, we faced the Indonesians (Apriyani Rahayu and Siti Fadia Silva Ramadhanti) at the All England Open.

Obviously, wherever you go, the Indonesian fans will be there. The audience was shouting more than

the players.

What are your goals for the rest of the season?
Gayatri: Being consistent is one of the main things for us. We're on a break right now, but we'll start playing at the Thailand Open (May 13-18) and Malaysia Masters (May 20-25). Of course, the World Championships (August 25-31) are coming up. So, I'm just looking forward to those tournaments.

In the last few years, the profile of doubles players has witnessed a significant rise.
Treesa: I'm so happy to see the change. If we play the top-level tournaments and reach the quarterfinals, we get so many messages which boost our confidence.

Gayatri: Satwik *anna* and Chirag are who I really looked up to when I was transitioning to doubles. They have been number one in the world.

That's brought a huge change. After the matches, little kids are waiting for you to give autographs and say that they want to play doubles. It makes us really happy.

» RAPID FIRE

Which app do you use the most on your mobile phone?

Treesa and Gayatri - Instagram

Which movie did you watch recently?

Treesa - Maranamass
Gayatri - Chhaava

One favourite dish that you can sacrifice for the rest of your lives in exchange for an Olympic medal?

Gayatri - Anything. Biryani.
Treesa - Magnolia Tres Leches.

One shuttler whose style you really like or want to emulate?

Gayatri - An Se-young
Treesa - Lee Chong Wei

If not a badminton player, which profession would you have picked for yourself?

Gayatri - Tennis player or something related to fashion.
Treesa - I would have been in some different sport.

One habit you have picked from each other?

Gayatri - Being aggressive on court sometimes.
Treesa - Staying calm.

Which song is always there on your practice playlist?

Gayatri - Hall of Fame (Artist - The Script)
Treesa - Believer (Artist - Imagine Dragons)

CHESS GROWING IN DIGITAL SPACE

Online chess will feature some of the best players around the world, including Magnus Carlsen, Ding Liren and Ian Nepomniachtchi, **with three Indians** – Arjun Erigaisi, Aravindh Chitambaram and Nihal Sarin – joining them.

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Arjun Erigaisi had made history in February, becoming the first Indian chess player to feature in the Esports World Cup 2025.

Now, Nihal Sarin and Aravindh Chithambaram have followed him, though joining a different team for the coveted esports tournament. The two Grandmasters joined S8UL, one of India's biggest esports companies, for the online chess title, scheduled between July 29 and August 1 in Saudi Arabia.

"Being part of S8UL's lineup for the Esports World Cup reflects how far the game has come and how it continues to evolve," Chithambaram said.

"The fact that a mainstream esports organisation is investing in chess players shows the growing recognition of chess as both a competitive and spectator sport in the digital space."

Online chess will feature some of the best players around the world, including Magnus Carlsen, Ding Liren and Ian Nepomniachtchi, with three Indians – Erigaisi, Chitambaram and Sarin – joining them.

S8UL, the only Indian organisation selected as a club partner for the tournament, announced that it will compete in Chess, EAFC 25, Tekken 8, Call of Duty (COD): Warzone, and Apex Legends, in its first wave of titles.

TOP 5 DOTA 2 PLAYERS IN INDIA

KRISH
"KRISH" GUPTA

MANAV
"MNZ" KUNTE

MOIN
"NO_CHANC3" IJAZ

VISHAL
"HBK" VERNEKAR

SHAHBAZ
"PINKMAN" HUSSAIN

BGMI AND PUBG PC SCENE IN INDIA

The finals of Battlegrounds Mobile India (BGMI) Series (BGIS) 2025, the biggest BGMI tournament in the country, will take place in Kolkata between April 25 and 27, with a prize pool of INR 3.2 crore.

BGIS 2025 started on February 3rd, with teams participating in two phases – the main event and the grind. Teams played six matches in each round, with the total pool narrowed down to just 64 over four rounds until the quarterfinals, followed by the wild card round.

The top 16 from the 64 made it to the finale, set to take place at the Biswa Bangla Mela Prangan.

Qualified teams for BGIS 2025 finals: GodLike Esports, Team SouL, Reckoning, Orangutan, Cincinnati Kids, 4EverxRedxRoss, FS Esports, HadesxH4K, Genesis, True Rippers, Medal Esports, THWxNONx, SOA Esports, Rivalry NRI, Team Versatile, Bot Army

At a global level, India has been given a slot in the upcoming PUBG Nations Cup 2025, marking its return to one of the premier events in professional PC battle royale esports.

The Nations Cup will take place in Seoul, South Korea, for the third time in a row but will now have a larger roster of 24 teams, instead of 16 in the last edition, and is expected to have a bigger prize pool.

PALMEIRAS, BUNDESLIGA ENTER ROBLOX

Palmeiras, one of South America's most popular football clubs that honed legends like Roberto Carlos, Cafu and Rivaldo, recently entered the Roblox universe – a gaming platform for user-generated content that reportedly has an average of 85.3 million daily active users.

The Brazilian side is not the first; the German Bundesliga entered a partnership with Roblox in January this year, becoming the first European football league to do so.

Did you know? Five-time UEFA Champions League winner Casemiro (centre), who played a pivotal role in Manchester United's Europa League quarterfinal win over Lyon, owns an esports company named Caseesports.

ESPORTS WORLD CUP SCHEDULE

The schedule of Esports World Cup 2025, set to take place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, was announced in April. The inaugural edition of the tournament will start on July 7 and continue till August 24, featuring 25 tournaments, where League of Legends, EA FC 25, DOTA 2 and PUBG will be among major titles.

The World Cup will have a USD 70 million prize pool, the biggest prize pool in an esports tournament, surpassing the record of DOTA 2's The International, which had a pool of USD 40 million.

WHO AM I?

I'm a two-time champion of The International Dota 2 tournament and have won four Dota 2 Majors. In 2015, I co-founded OG, now a major multi-game esports organisation. The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Ganesh "SkRossi" Gangadhar

BUSINESS OF
ESPORTS

Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois announced a partnership with Hull-based esports and sports hub Federation of Sport. The deal marked the first UK-based venture for the Belgian shot-stopper, who has previously invested in esports.

EASTER EGG
'PvP'

'Player vs Player', where a player battles against another player(s). It is a format popular in battlegrounds or first-person shooting matches and is different to 'PvE', where a player completes against the computer.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

LA Olympics induction big shot in the arm for Indian compound archers

Past success in compound archery doesn't ensure future Olympic success, but Indian archers are happy to have a chance to experience competing at the Olympics and potentially even **making the podium.**

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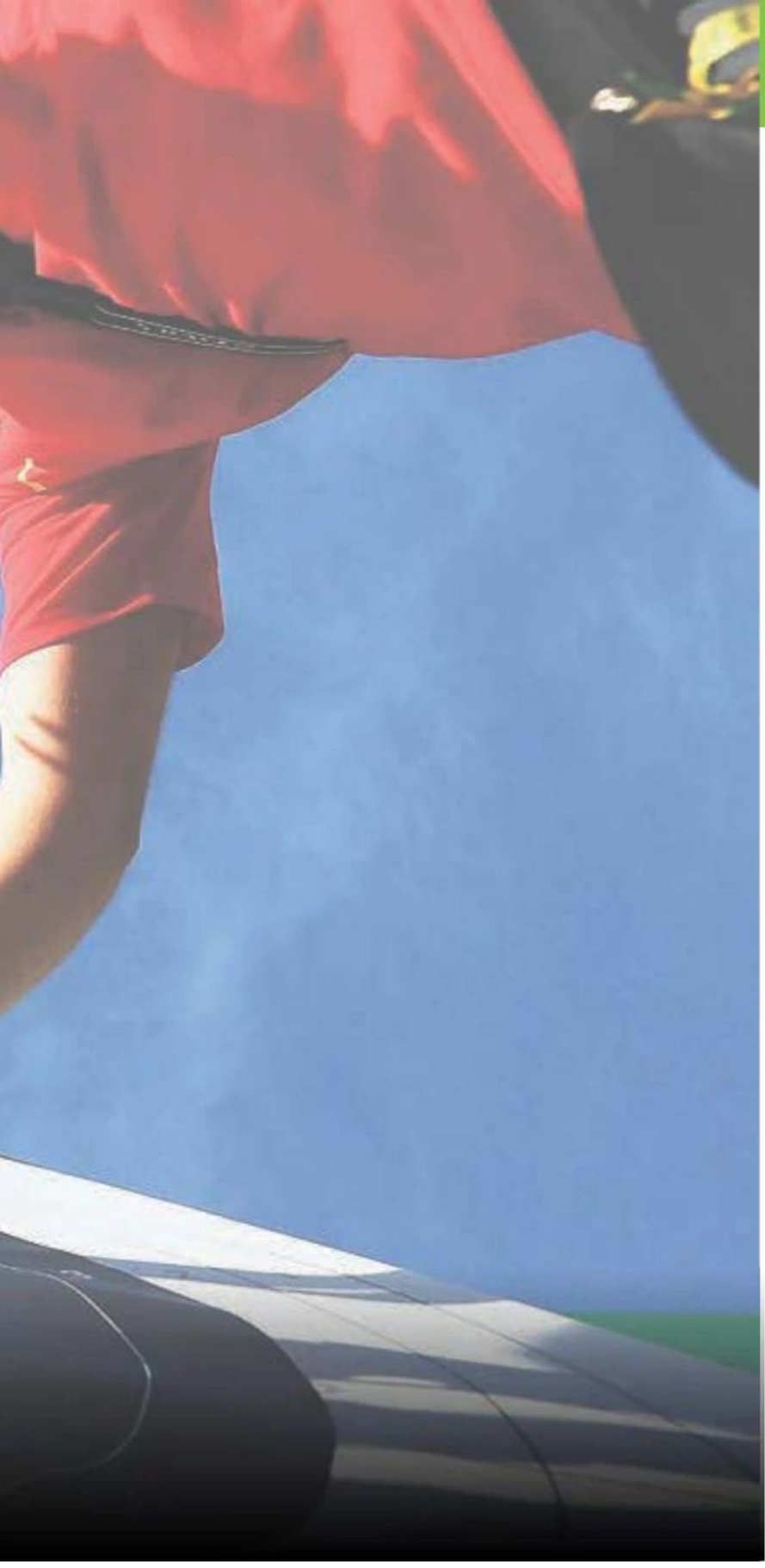
The tattoo on Rajat Chauhan's right forearm is nearly a decade old — a permanent source of motivation. He got it in 2015: the five interlocked rings, a reminder of his dream to compete at the Olympic Games.

At the time, the 20-year-old already had significant achievements. A year earlier, he was part of the Indian men's compound team that won gold at the 2014 Asian Games — the country's only archery gold from that tournament. Just months before getting the tattoo, Rajat won silver in the men's individual compound event at the 2015 World Championships — India's first medal in that discipline.

Yet, soon after making history, Rajat switched disciplines, trading his compound bow for a recurve one. His reason was straightforward: Olympic archery featured only the recurve bow. If he wanted to compete at the Olympics, he had no choice but to adapt. The transition was harder than expected. After two years of middling results, Rajat returned to compound archery. He won another Asian Games medal —



a men's team silver in 2018 — but his Olympic dream seemed further away. The tattoo, meant as motivation, became a constant reminder of an unattainable goal.

That changed on Tuesday.

The now 30-year-old received a call from a friend, later confirmed on the World Archery website — compound archery will be a medal event at the Los Angeles Olympics 2028. Though the discipline will feature only one medal event — the mixed team category — Rajat is ecstatic. "I couldn't even sleep all night that day," he laughs.

Despite his accomplishments, Rajat admits the lack of Olympic recognition always stung. "At the end of the day, no matter how much I'd accomplished in compound archery, I always felt the itch that I wasn't competing in an Olympic medal event. I knew in the back of my mind that compound wouldn't ever be as popular as an Olympic event," he says.

Out of focus: Compound archery's absence from the Olympics meant that despite India's success in the sport, it wasn't prioritised in funding and resources. GETTY IMAGES

Low priority

It wasn't just about popularity. The sport's absence from the Olympics meant that despite India's success — winning three out of five gold medals in the compound events at the 2023 World Championships and sweeping five gold medals at the 2022 Asian Games — compound archery wasn't prioritised in funding and resources.

"Compound archers have been winning medals at the World Championships since 2014. Our archers win medals at the Asian Games when our recurve archers haven't. But the moment the Asian Games end, we would be told by the authorities that 'okay, now your competitions are over, and the priority is the recurve team for the Olympics.' It was like we were stepchildren!" says Jiwanjot Singh, longtime coach of the Indian compound team.

Rajat acknowledges this disparity. "No compound archer has any sponsor. We are either self-funded or supported by the government. Until the Asian Games, we were supported just like the recurve archers, but after that, the focus shifted to them. But *uske baad Olympics bhagwan hota hai* (But after that, the Olympics is like God!). Sometimes, when we had to meet an officer after the Asian Games, they'd ask us what our next big tournament was, and it would get very awkward because compound archery wasn't part of either the Olympics or the Commonwealth Games," he says.

This lack of support wasn't unique to India. Jiwanjot, who briefly worked in Canada, saw the same pattern there. "Even in Canada, I noticed that the compound archers didn't get anywhere near the kind of support that recurve archers did," he says.

This scenario is likely to change now. "It's great news (that compound archery will be part of the Olympics). Compound archers will get the best possible support, on par with what is provided to recurve archers," says NS Johal, CEO of the government's Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS). According to

Target identified: With the discipline's inclusion in the Olympics, Rajat Chauhan sees an opportunity he cannot miss. SANDEEP SAXENA

ACCORDING TO SOURCES, COMPOUND ARCHERS WILL BE INCLUDED IN TOPS WITHIN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, EXTENDING THEIR SUPPORT BEYOND THE ASIAN GAMES

Right moves: Last week, the Indian compound mixed team of Rishabh Yadav and Jyothi Surekha Vennam (in pic) won gold at the Archery World Cup in Auburndale, USA. GETTY IMAGES

sources, compound archers will be included in TOPS within the next few months, extending their support beyond the Asian Games.

Switching struggles

Until recently, several compound archers considered switching disciplines. Last year, Prathamesh Jawkar, part of India's gold-winning team at the Asian Games, announced his transition to recurve to chase his Olympic dream. He has since returned to compound.

Jiwanjot says he tried to dissuade the 20-year-old. "The two events are very different. The mechanisms for drawing and release are distinct. When you switch, it's like starting from zero," he says.

So why do archers opt for compound archery in the first place?

According to Jiwanjot, despite its absence from the Olympics (until 2028), there were incentives. "Some states offer jobs and prize money for winning medals at the Asian level. It's also easier to pick up compound archery. You need at least six years of training to be consistent at a high level in recurve. In compound, you can reach a high level in about two years. If you need to shoot at least 400 arrows a day in recurve, you can get by with about 200–300 shots a day in compound," he says.

This means India's current dominance in compound archery isn't guaranteed to continue. "Three years is more than enough to develop an elite pool of talent in compound archery. The fact that the competition will be a mixed team event also makes it challenging because it's possible for every country to produce one good male and female archer," Jiwanjot says.

Olympic medals don't come easy

Past success in compound archery doesn't ensure future Olympic success. But it sure can be a marker.

A few days after the Olympic announcement, the Indian compound mixed team of Rishabh Yadav and Jyothi Surekha Vennam claimed the country's first gold medal of the 2025 season, edging past Chinese Taipei's Huang I-Jou and Chen Chieh-Lun 153–151 in the Stage 1 final of the Archery World Cup in Auburndale, USA.

In the men's compound team event, Abhishek Verma and Ojas Deotale secured a bronze, bringing India's overall tally to four medals — alongside a silver from the men's recurve team and another bronze in the men's individual recurve event.

With the Olympic inclusion, Jiwanjot expects competition to intensify. "Already, we have archers shooting 360/360 in qualification. I wouldn't be surprised if places are determined by the number of inner tens," he says.

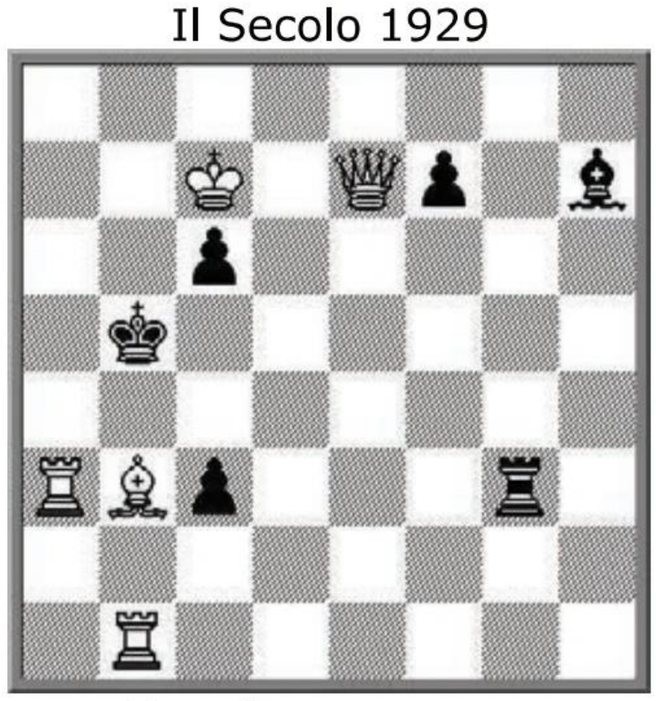
While Jiwanjot remains cautious about future success, Rajat is simply grateful for the opportunity. "I have medals in every international competition, but the Olympics always felt like the one that wouldn't happen. It was an itch I couldn't scratch for reasons beyond my control. But now I know I have a real chance to make it happen," he says.

Pick of British merediths

By C.G.S.Narayanan

'The pleasure of problem chess lies not merely in the difficulty of solution but in the appreciaton of the ways in which the mates are brought about' wrote Barry P..Barnes.International Master and FIDE judge for chess composition in his introduction to one of his best authored books 'The pick of the best chess problems'.The selected compilation features 200 two-move merediths, all by British composers.

G.F.Anderson
Il Secolo 1929



Mate in two moves

Problems with not more 12 pieces and not below 8 are Merediths after American composer, who made a lasting reputation for making such relatively lightweight problems towards the end of twentieth century.

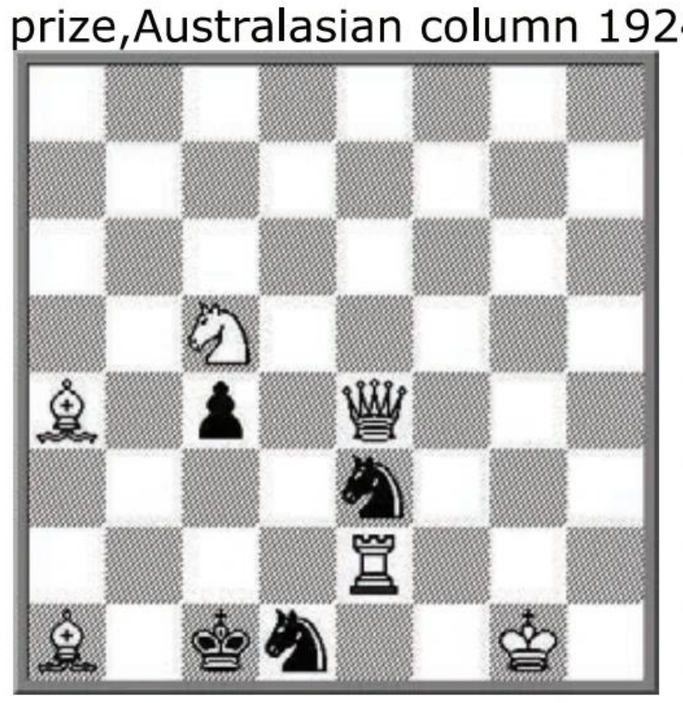
The first problem is probably the best ever cross-check made, The key grants the BK two flights and invites checks from the black rook.The matching pair of interferences on the Black bishop is excellent.After the **key 1.Kd6!** the threat is 2.Qb7 1….Rg6+ 2.Be6;1..Rd3+ 2.Bd4.The by play adds spice 1…Kb4 2.Kxc6;1…Kb6 2.Bc2.Gerry Anderson ,master composer of many problems types was the last person to play chess with that great World champion Alexander Alekhine.

The second problem is a classic mutate with three mate changes.

Key 1.Qb7! waiting

1…eN any 2.Rc2; 1..dN any 2.Qb2;1…c3 2.Nd3.All the mate changes hinge on the guard to b1

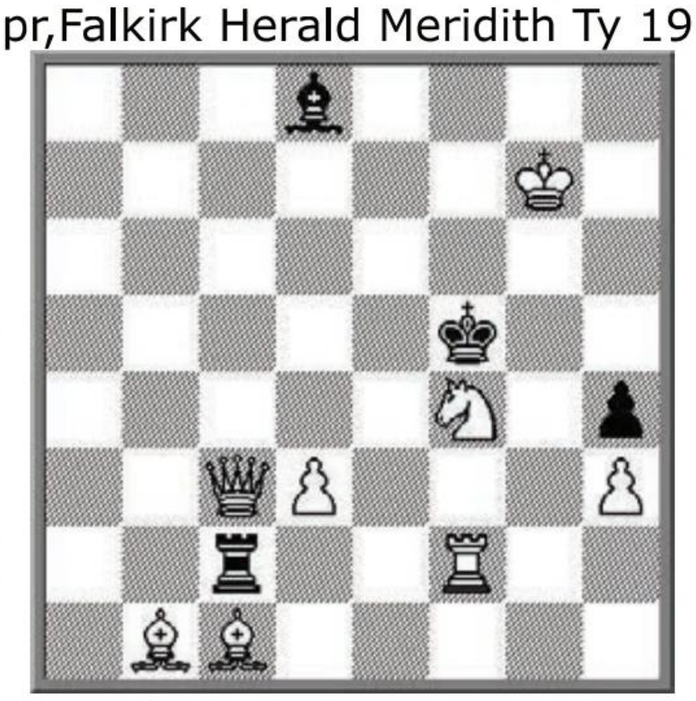
W.Grant
1 prize,Australasian column 1924



Mate in two moves

Soviet chess problem historian and IM E.I.Umnov has described Comins Mansfield as the minstrel of battery play,the recurring theme of Mansfield's work for more than 65 years.The core of this early masterpiece given below for solving revolves around pair of battery mates after black rook captures.

Comins Mansfield
2 pr,Falkirk Herald Meridith Ty 1932



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'A study in white correction'

Key 1.Bh5! waiting

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

PIASTRI PACKS A PUNCH

With Oscar Piastri's back-to-back wins, McLaren now faces a growing and potentially destructive challenge — a **fierce battle** amongst its driver duo.

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

A one-way battle for the drivers' championship had become a consistent occurrence over the last few years. Heading into 2025, with all eyes on the impressive McLaren unit, it was almost undeniable that one of its two drivers would be the favourite for the title.

Lando Norris, who has been the team's brightest asset since 2019, started the season with a statement win in the opener. With his rival from the past having a challenging time with Red Bull and the Ferrari duo seeming slightly adrift, the 25-year-old had a near-clear path ahead.

But in the last two rounds in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, his teammate Oscar Piastri — a young and fairly new driver — has announced his arrival, making it clear that the title is in his sights too.

The Bahrain victory

Piastri made it clear that settling for second would not be his label. After claiming an authoritative pole position for the Bahrain Grand Prix, the Australian blazed through the Sakhir circuit to become the first double race winner this year.

McLaren certainly moved on from the slightly bitter Japanese race weekend in no time, but now faces a growing and potentially destructive challenge — a fierce battle amongst its driver duo.

Though Norris drew first blood and won the season opener in style, he has been unable to climb the top step of the podium since.

It almost seems like the British driver buckles under high-pressure moments — an ever-present element in the sport.

Tense at the top: Oscar Piastri (in pic) now sits ahead of his teammate Lando Norris with a cushion of nine points. GETTY IMAGES

His attempt to catch Max Verstappen last year was always a long shot, but when he did come remotely close, a single, error-filled race brought an end to his ambitious dream.

Now, however, his 21-year-old peer has closed in, showing the composure and confidence to conquer. Norris fought through the pack from sixth to finish third in Bahrain, but Piastri was completely out of sight at the front.

He crossed the line a mighty 15 seconds ahead of George Russell, who commandeered his Mercedes to second.

It was McLaren's first-ever victory in Bahrain — at its 'second home Grand Prix' — with Piastri even completing the prized hat-trick of pole, fastest lap, and victory.

Heading the right way

The F3 and F2 champion, a calm but intense driver, is only three years into the job but has caught the attention of the paddock for his sheer talent.

Many say that he emulates his mentor and manager, Mark Webber, a former F1 driver and fellow countryman. Webber's experience of battling a teammate — Sebastian Vettel back in 2010 — for the championship has certainly reaped benefits.

Piastri needed a push after his home Grand Prix. A late error — sliding into the grass at the rain-hit Albert Park track — cost him a potential win and podium. "I've only got myself to blame," said a dejected Piastri, who managed to rescue two points from the outing.

However, since then, he has outdone his teammate every step of the way. His ability to produce a clean race and extract the most from his strong McLaren has helped him surpass Norris with relative ease.

That the latter has been error-prone and once again playing catch-up has come to Piastri's aid.

Steering clear in Saudi

With only a three-point gap heading into Saudi Arabia a week later, it was the perfect opportunity for Piastri to prove his prowess.

An extremely tight qualifying session saw Verstappen edge his closest opponent Piastri by a hundredth of a second. Norris, though, was nowhere near, after an incident in the final session cost him dearly, forcing him to start 10th.

All the Australian needed was the perfect start — and he seemed to have done exactly that, getting ahead of pole-sitter Verstappen into Turn 1. A bit of scuffle meant the Dutchman went off track to retain his lead — a move that has stirred controversy numerous times.

Often ruled a 'racing incident' or one that required a penalty and a position reversal, the controversial decision went the papaya team's way. Piastri was in front of the pack and ensured he crossed the line the same way.

An unimpressed Verstappen chose to shun his inner critic while talking about the move and settled for a strong second. Meanwhile, Charles Leclerc steered his Ferrari to third — his first podium of the season.

With another 25 points in his bag, Piastri now sits ahead of his teammate Norris with a cushion of nine points. The latter is confident of making up the deficit in no time — 19 races remain, and it's safe to say the thrilling battle has only just begun.

Siblings on the charge

Three wins in four races — Marc Marquez has taken the path of domination right from the start of the MotoGP 2025 championship.

Thailand and Argentina witnessed a commanding display by the multiple-time champion. But he was dealt a minor hiccup when he crashed in the Grand Prix of the Americas, losing out to his Ducati teammate Francesco Bagnaia.

With Qatar hosting Round 4, the Spaniard was quick to shake off the jitters and return to winning ways — once again climbing to the top step for both the sprint and main race.

He beat his brother Alex Marquez on Saturday while leading his teammate to the finish line in the Qatar GP. The brothers are atop the standings, with the elder Marquez ahead by 17 points.

Meanwhile, defending champion Jorge Martin was finally fit enough to kickstart his title defence after a long injury layoff. Having had to sit out for three races, the Aprilia rider was raring to go before an accident during the race resulted in a couple of rib fractures and a collapsed lung, ruling him out for a while. Martin is expected to miss his home race in Spain, while fellow countryman Marquez will hope to continue his impressive form.

Family affair: Marc Marquez and his younger brother Alex are atop the MotoGP standings, with the former ahead by 17 points. GETTY IMAGES

Consistent show: Oscar Piastri has won three of the five Grands Prix so far this season. He leads by 10 points. GETTY IMAGES

DRONES, DJS, AND DRAMA: SAUDI GP DELIVERS A NEW-AGE RACING CARNIVAL

F1's Saudi Arabian GP mixed on-track tension with off-track spectacle as Jeddah **served up a weekend** built for fans and fast cars.

Anish Pathiyil
anish.p@thehindu.co.in

Oscar Piastri left the shores of his native land after the season-opening Australian Grand Prix, still unable to break the Albert Park curse – no Aussie driver has scored a podium at his home race.

A ninth-place finish gave him just two points, not the best of starts against fellow Drivers' Championship hopefuls Lando Norris and Max Verstappen.

In the five weeks since, the young driver from Down Under has won three out of four races, including a clinical victory at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, which made him the first Aussie to lead the championship since Mark Webber did at the Japan

Festive atmosphere: Drones, drums, and fireworks light up the grid at the Saudi GP. GETTY IMAGES

GP in 2010. The fifth round of the 2025 F1 season coincided with the fifth Saudi Arabian Grand Prix at the Jeddah Corniche street track. A controversial five-second penalty to defending champion and pole-sitter Verstappen eventually tilted the race in Piastri's favour.

McLaren looked in a league of its own during the practice session on Saturday. But as temperatures dipped after nightfall, Verstappen delivered when it counted – beating Piastri by just one-hundredth of a second in qualifying.

The Moves That Mattered

When the lights went off in Jeddah, Piastri got off the line quicker than Verstappen, leaving the latter on the back foot going into Turn 1. The Dutchman held firm on the outside and cut across the chicane to stay ahead.

Verstappen argued he had no room to make the corner, but stewards disagreed, handing him a five-second penalty which he served during his pit stop.

He ultimately finished 2.843 seconds behind Piastri after 50 laps on the 6.174 km circuit – a result that might have flipped had the penalty not been imposed.

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc earned his first podium of the season, a reward for his tyre management. Lacking the outright pace to fight the leaders, he stretched his medium tyre stint until lap 29, long after rubber marks had settled into the asphalt.

An aggressive push on hards in the second stint allowed him to edge out Mercedes' George Russell and stay ahead of a flying Norris, who climbed from 10th to fourth on a hard-to-medium strategy.

Norris salvaged 12 points after a brush with the wall in Q3 cut short his qualifying session and dashed hopes of a front-row start.

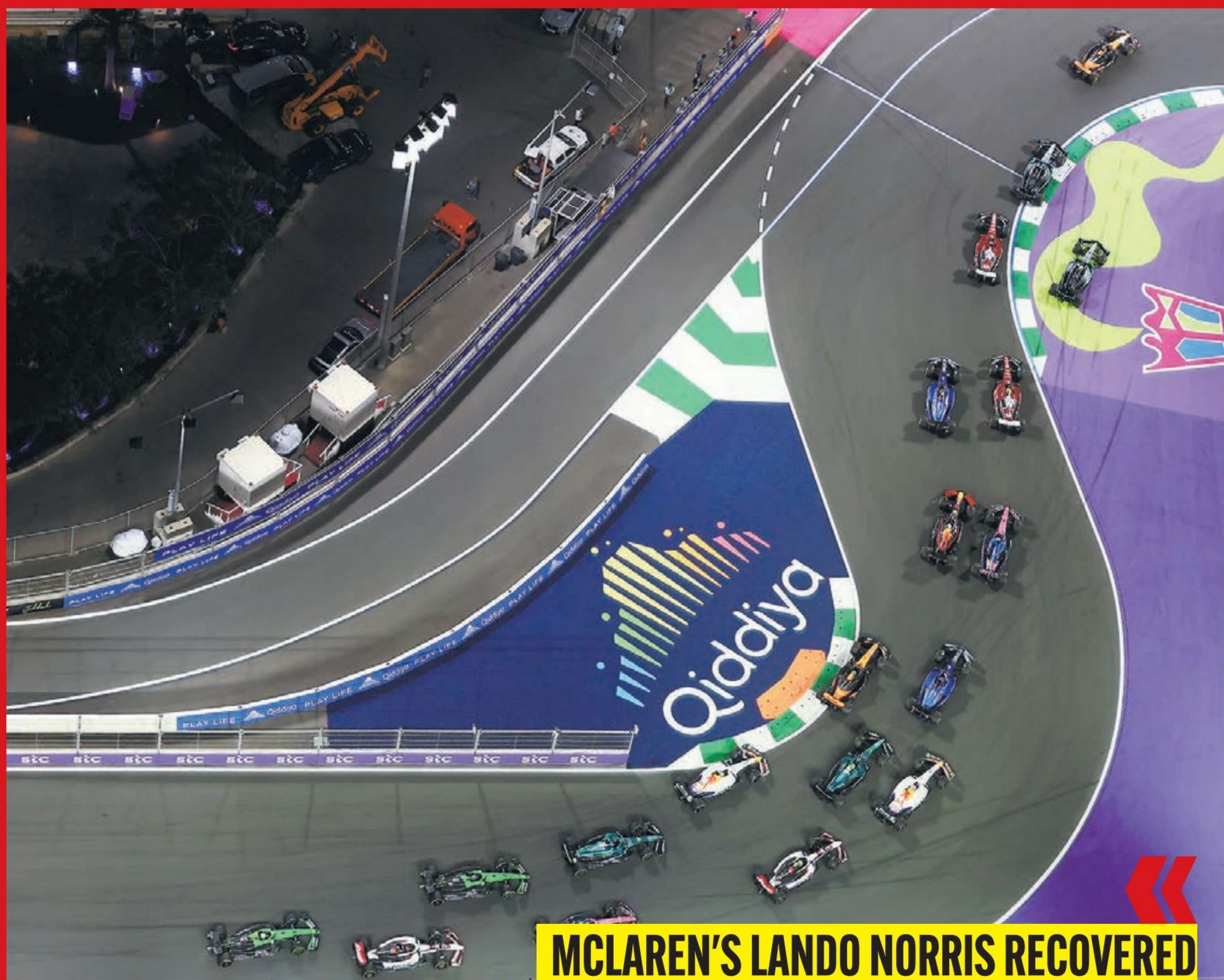
Kimi Antonelli and Lewis Hamilton had uneventful runs to sixth and seventh, finishing ahead of the two Williams and Racing Bulls' Isack Hadjar.

Aston Martin, Haas, Alpine, and Kick Sauber left Jeddah empty-handed.

Vying for the Big League

In Formula Two, MP Motorsport's Richard Verschoor executed the alternate strategy to perfection, finishing ahead of pole-sitter DAMS' Jack Crawford and ART's Victor Martins. The win vaulted Verschoor past fifth-placed Jose Maria Marti into the lead of the F2 Drivers' Championship.

> « Verstappen got a 5-second penalty for gaining advantage off-track while battling Piastri at Turn 1 »



MCLAREN'S LANDO NORRIS RECOVERED FROM 10TH PLACE ON THE GRID AFTER HIS CRASH IN QUALIFYING TO FINISH FOURTH BEHIND FERRARI'S CHARLES LECLERC

Rookies Leonardo Fornaroli and Alexander Dunne continued their consistent runs, placing fourth and eighth respectively.

Arvid Lindblad followed up his sprint race win with a seventh-place finish, leaving Jeddah with a strong points haul. Indian racer Kush Maini finally opened his account for the season after two tough weekends.

In the F1 Academy, Ferrari's Maya Weug inherited the win in Race 2 following a penalty to Red Bull Ford's Chloe Chambers, adding to her second-place finish in Race 1.

The Spectacle in Corniche

The absence of high-drama crashes or a late Safety Car meant the race played out mostly through pit strategies. But off-track, the organisers delivered a strong entertainment package.

Jeddah's night race brought more than just the glow of floodlights – fans enjoyed DJ sets, a Ferris wheel, fireworks, and a striking drone show.

The light show featured animated tributes to icons: a 1970s F1 car for Niki Lauda, Ayrton Senna's iconic yellow helmet, and seven trophies symbolising Michael Schumacher's titles.

The circuit remained busy throughout the weekend, with visitors enjoying concerts, paddock access, garage tours, pit walks, and rides on truck platforms.

The premium hospitality area overlooking Turn 1 – the track's best overtaking spot – was the place to be. From there, fans could also see Turns 22 and 23, adjacent to the Al-Bahr Mosque, where drivers flick their cars through at high speed with only a slight brake tap.

While talks continue about building a permanent circuit on the Red Sea coast, the Corniche layout continues to challenge drivers and thrill fans alike.

(The writer was in Jeddah for the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix on the invitation of Saudi Motorsport)

Veer, Anahat qualify for Squash World Championships

Veer Chotrani and Anahat Singh secured their spots for next month's Squash World Championships after winning the Asian qualifiers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Chotrani will join Ramit Tandon, Abhay Singh, and Velavan Senthilkumar in the men's singles draw, while Anahat will be the only Indian competing in the women's singles at the Championships, which will be held in Chicago from May 9 to 17.

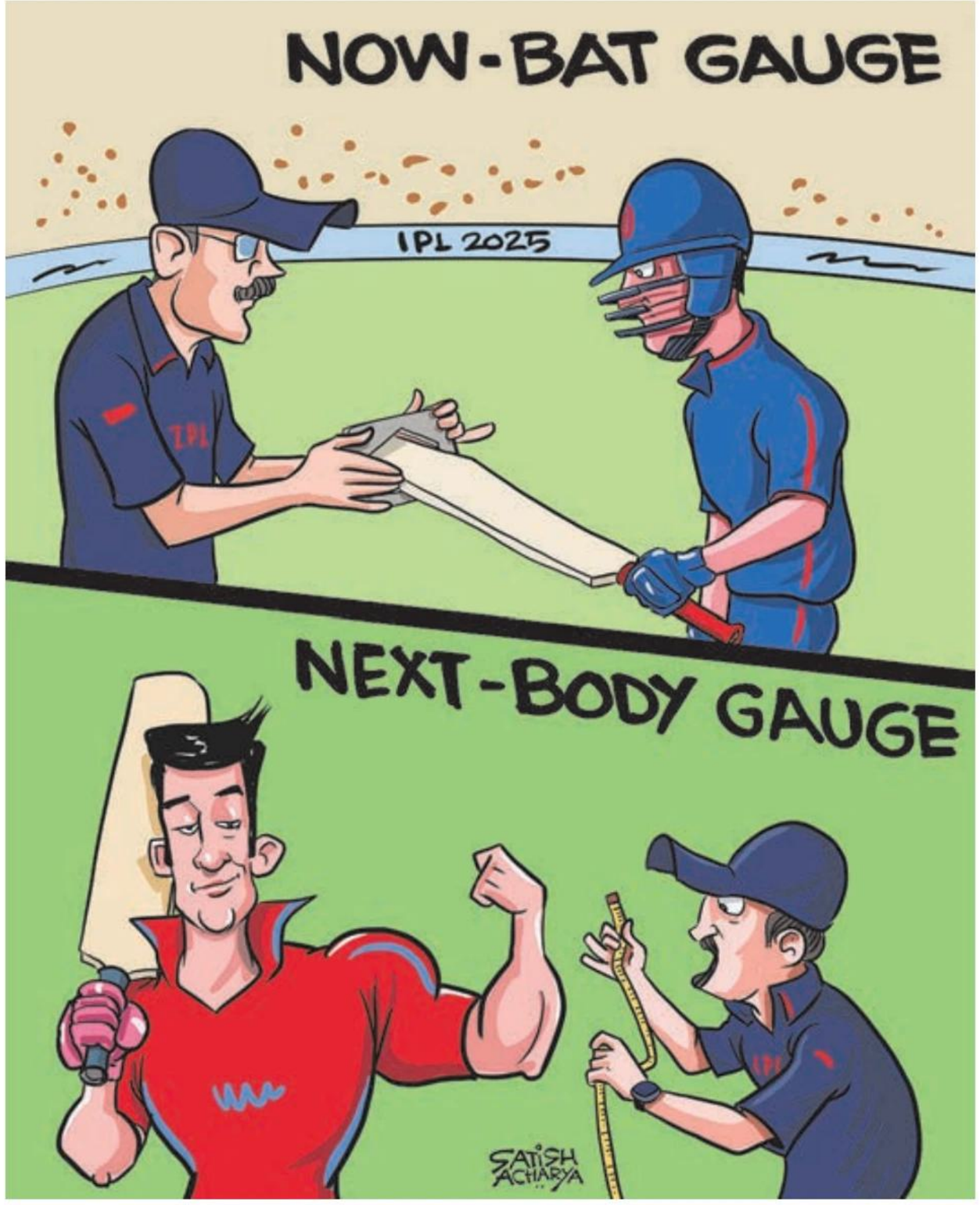
Seventeen-year-old Anahat earned her maiden World Championships appearance by defeating seventh seed Toby Tse of Hong Kong, China, 3-1 (11-4, 9-11, 11-2, 11-8).

Second seed Chotrani, 23, also booked his World Championships debut with a commanding 3-0 (11-3, 11-4, 11-8) win over local favourite and third seed Ameeshenraj Chandaran in the men's final, wrapping up the match in just 26 minutes.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON



1 Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra clinched the boys' and girls' titles respectively at the 40th National Youth Basketball Championships in Puducherry. In the boys' final, Tamil Nadu overcame defending champion Rajasthan 96-85, while Maharashtra stunned defending champion Karnataka 76-49 in the girls' summit clash. The Most Valuable Player award in the boys' category went to V. Sumanesh of Tamil Nadu, while Reva Kulkarni of Maharashtra received the honour in the girls' section.

K. KEERTHIVASAN

2 Servin Sebastian continued his strong form this year with another impressive performance, winning the 20km event at the 12th Indian Open Race Walking Competition in Chandigarh. Sebastian clocked 1:21.46, close to his personal best of 1:21.23 set at the National Games. In the 35km event, national record holder Ram Baboo secured victory with a time of 2:32:53.50, while Uttarakhand's Tushar Panwar took the top spot in the 5km Under-20 boys' event. In the women's section, Haryana's Ravina claimed first place in the 20km race with a time of 1:35:58.80, finishing ahead among the nine of 19 walkers who completed the event.

UTHRA GANESAN

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

Crossing new boundaries

Integrating cross-training can help develop a more **well-rounded athlete,** enhance recovery, build character and mental resilience, and reduce the risk of injury.

Cross-training is a series of exercises that utilises a variety of training methods outside an athlete's main sport to enhance overall fitness. As S&C coaches, we have been incorporating this form of training into performance development for quite some time. There are numerous benefits, as well as important considerations, if you plan to include it in your programme.

We shall outline the benefits and key points to bear in mind when integrating cross-training into your fitness programme. Much like participating in multiple sports, cross-training plays an instrumental role and yields similar outcomes in terms of athletic development.

However, playing multiple sports may not be a feasible option for every athlete. This is where cross-training can help, as it offers similar benefits.

All athletes work diligently to improve their skill and fitness within their sport. Keeping them energised and tapping into their full potential is the ultimate goal of any training programme. During the season, athletes are often subjected to repetitive movements.

To prevent boredom and reduce the risk of injury, introducing variety can be an effective complement to cross-training. Learning new skills, developing a robust mindset, and building work capacity across different aspects of fitness can provide a welcome break from repetitive strain and rigid norms.

Not only does training with these methods help develop various abilities relevant to an athlete's sport, but it can also foster a sense of competitiveness that simulates similar processes encountered on the field of play. Introducing a competitive structure within a controlled environment can assist athletes in pushing through challenging moments. It need not replicate actual competition entirely, but it can serve as an engaging and effective alternative.

Moreover, it can help cultivate leadership and team-building skills, particularly through the mutual encouragement that athletes offer one another while engaging in different sports or group training sessions. This is especially valuable for individual sportspersons, who can gain a great deal from such interactions.

Integrating cross-training can help develop a more well-rounded athlete, enhance recovery, build character and mental resilience, and reduce the risk of injury.

It is important to first identify the areas that require improvement before incorporating cross-training into a programme. The chosen activities should be enjoyable for the athletes to avoid boredom and, crucially, to prevent stagnation in their skill development and sport-specific performance.

Each athlete's individual ability and fitness level may present challenges. To address this, it's

essential to select appropriate exercises and modify them as needed.

Typical work-to-rest ratios range from 1:1 to 2:1 intervals, depending on the demands of the session. Progression is key — starting from low intensity and gradually moving towards higher intensities.

WHILE GETTING STARTED

✪ Execute a general warm-up.

✪ Start slow — pick basic and less intense movements.

✪ Identify a work-to-rest ratio that would be relevant to the current level of fitness.

✪ If using weights, make sure to choose the proper weight for the number of reps and/or time that will be required to maintain proper technique.

✪ Perform a proper cool-down.

✪ Get adequate rest between training sessions.

✪ Include proper recovery sessions.

✪ Ensure proper hydration and nutrition according to calorific need and goal.

CROSS-TRAINING PROTOCOLS

- Hiking (with and without weight vests/rucksacks or some added weight)
- High-altitude training
- Varied types of yoga
- Pilates
- Aqua strength work
- Gyrokinesis
- Swimming or surfing
- Rowing or sailing
- Weightlifting circuits
- Bodyweight circuits
- D.B. circuits
- K.B. circuits
- Hybrid combo training

BENEFITS OF CROSS-TRAINING

◆ Respite from boring routine

◆ Variety of stimuli

◆ Work capacity development

◆ Decrease burnout

◆ Prevent recurring injuries

◆ Prevent muscle imbalances

◆ Prevent overuse injuries

◆ Develop supplementary components of fitness

◆ Comprehensive improvement

Customised fitness: Each athlete's individual ability and fitness level may present challenges. To address this, it's essential to select appropriate exercises and modify them as needed.

GETTY IMAGES

Sport is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration

Athletes **sweat,** their equipment smells — a room full of the two at the end of a game is a horror movie come to life.

Suresh Menon

The German writer Patrick Suskind's *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* is a morality tale full of vivid olfactory imagery. He writes, "People could close their eyes to greatness, to horrors, to beauty, and their ears to melodies or deceiving words. But they couldn't escape scent. For scent was a brother of breath. Together with breath it entered human beings, who couldn't defend themselves against it. And scent entered into their very core, went directly to their hearts, and decided for good and all between affection and contempt, disgust and lust, love and hate."

Hardwork pays: Picture shows sweat pouring off the face of tennis superstar Rafael Nadal. NFL coach John Madden, once said, "Winning's the great deodorant; when you lose, everything stinks..." GETTY IMAGES

Smell is the most powerful of our senses, provoking memories and emotions we might have forgotten.

We were told in school that horses sweat, men perspire, women glow. One such glowing woman, French tennis player Lois Boisson was told she "smells really bad" by her British opponent Harriet Dart, who requested the umpire during their match, "Can you tell her to wear a deodorant?"

Boisson might have retorted with a quote from NFL coach John Madden who said, "Winning's the great deodorant; when you lose, everything stinks..." Actually, she did something even better, posting a photo on *Instagram* of her on court with a Dove deodorant, tagging the company and writing they "apparently need a collab." By the time you read this, she might have got herself a million-dollar contract. Sometimes smell can inspire the future too.

It is tempting to say that horses smell, men have an aroma, women are fragrant. But the fact remains, both Dart and Boisson in the middle of a match would have been glowing, glistening, shining, gleaming, or any other euphemism. It is the occupational companion of the athlete. Even millionaires sweat. And have you ever walked into a changing room at a sporting event? What Edison said about genius applies here: Sport is one per cent inspiration and ninety nine per cent perspiration.

Athletes sweat, their equipment smells — a room full of the two at the end of a game is a horror movie come to life. Hence the surprise when one athlete literally turns up her nose at another. On the other hand, sport has its share of slobs and stars with only a distant relationship with personal hygiene. The names of NBA star Shaquille O'Neal, golfer John Daly have often figured in these discussions. At the 2008 Olympics, a senior Australian official responded to a British win in the pool by saying, "It's not bad for a country that has no swimming pools and very little soap."

In a survey conducted by ESPN in 2014, one female boxer said, "I was fighting in Russia a few years ago, and not many fighters were wearing deodorant. I'm convinced they actually don't wear it on purpose. We got into a clinch once and instead of thinking about what I was going to do, the smell threw me off for about 10 seconds. You couldn't not smell it."

Some athletes identify with what Suskind said, "The persuasive power of an odour cannot be fended off..."

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