SPORTSTAR

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2023
₹100

FOLLOW US:
SPORTSTARWEB

BUMPER ISSUE

WORLD CUP 2023: DO-OR-DIE ODI

This World Cup in India offers ODIs, struggling with an identity crisis, another opportunity to attract the crowds and infuse life into the 50-over game

"बढ़ाये रिश्तों में प्यार,
स्वस्थ रहे पूरा परिवार"

बावर्ची®

Fitness Health

Mustard, Sunflower & Refined Soyabean OIL &

हाई प्रोटीन **सोया बड़ी**

EAT FOR HEALTH

Mantora Oil Products Pvt. Ltd., Kanpur
26/49, Birhana Road, Kanpur - 208001 Ph.: 0512-2353428

CONTENTS

Follow us: sportstarweb

Saturday, October 14, 2023
FOR THE FORTNIGHT OCTOBER 1-14, 2023

Volume 46 Number 21 ISSN 0971 359x 140 Pages

92

MEET THE INDIAN WORLD CUP TEAM

Specials

36 **The surprise package**
We showcase eight players who may deliver unexpected hits

46 **World Cup venues**
A close look at the venues in Delhi, Mumbai and Pune

72 **Previews**
SWOT analysis of the 10 participating nations

28
Cover Story
India may be firm favourites in the 2023 World Cup but has their task cut out against some strong sides from other countries

Cover Design: Kannan Sundar
Cover Illustrations: R. Rajesh

Read more...

6 **MotoGP**
Buddh revs back into action

12 **Asia Cup cricket**
India corners glory

32 **All-rounders**
As a breed they may have evolved over the decades but their importance continues to remain paramount in the game's bigger picture

38 **Starspeak**
Former players reminisce about their first World Cup

Poster: World Cup 2023 Schedule; Pages 59-66
Poster Design: Rajasekhar JVSN

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

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

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

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

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

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

For Advertisement
National Sales Head
Satish K Mendon
Satish.mendon@thehindu.co.in
Region
Delhi – Antesh Kumar Verma
+91 9818798519
Bengaluru – Gurunatha Reddy
+91 9845529981
Chennai – Siva Kumar M
+91 9841585969

OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

50 OVER?

In a world where T20 leagues are popping up like mushrooms after a rainstorm, ODI, **like a forgotten cousin at a family reunion,** has been feeling a bit left out.

Folks, hold on to your cricket hats as the global cricketing extravaganza — the ICC Men's 50-over World Cup — returns to the commercial and spiritual heart of cricket for a record-equalling fourth edition. India — host in 1987, 1996, and 2011 — is going solo, this time with no South Asian neighbours to share the burden or the joy.

But it has been all about last-minute planning for the officials and, more troublingly, the fans. The final schedule was released and then re-released, with 10 changes, with less than two months left before the opening salvo between England and New Zealand (finalists four years ago) at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad. The largest cricket stadium in the world will also be the venue for the summit clash.

Even as the glittering trophy took a trip to heaven (120,000 feet above sea level, attached to a balloon), the fans, who help fill cricket's coffers, are mostly without tickets despite moving heaven and earth.

The ICC, though, is expecting to earn a record Rs 4400 crore from broadcast rights, with fans left to clutch their remotes and popcorns and follow the action from 22 yards on screens of 22 inches (or more).

Recent history — India (2011), Australia (2015) and England (2019) — shows that host status gives you a leg up, and the Indian fans will hope to see the Men in Blue add to their festive cheer after a dry spell in ICC events since 2013.

But a daunting challenge awaits Rohit Sharma's men, who will be trying to emulate the glory of M.S. Dhoni's 2011 warriors. Virat Kohli, the only remnant of that victorious ensemble, still bears the weight of shepherding India's batting, which has the habit of going on vacation at the slightest whiff of pressure.

In a world where T20 leagues are popping up like mushrooms after a rainstorm, ODI, like a forgotten cousin at a family reunion, has been feeling a bit left out. The number of ODIs played has dwindled since the last World Cup — 465 between the 2019 World Cup and now, compared to 496 between the 2015 and 2019 editions. In fact, the top eight teams combined played 126 more ODIs between 2015 and 2019 than between 2019 and now. Clearly, the format needs a reboot.

However, the ICC's decision to shrink the number of teams to just 10 from the 2019 edition (the 2015 edition had 14 teams), leaving the newcomers to focus on T20s, is like inviting everyone to the party and then telling some to stay home.

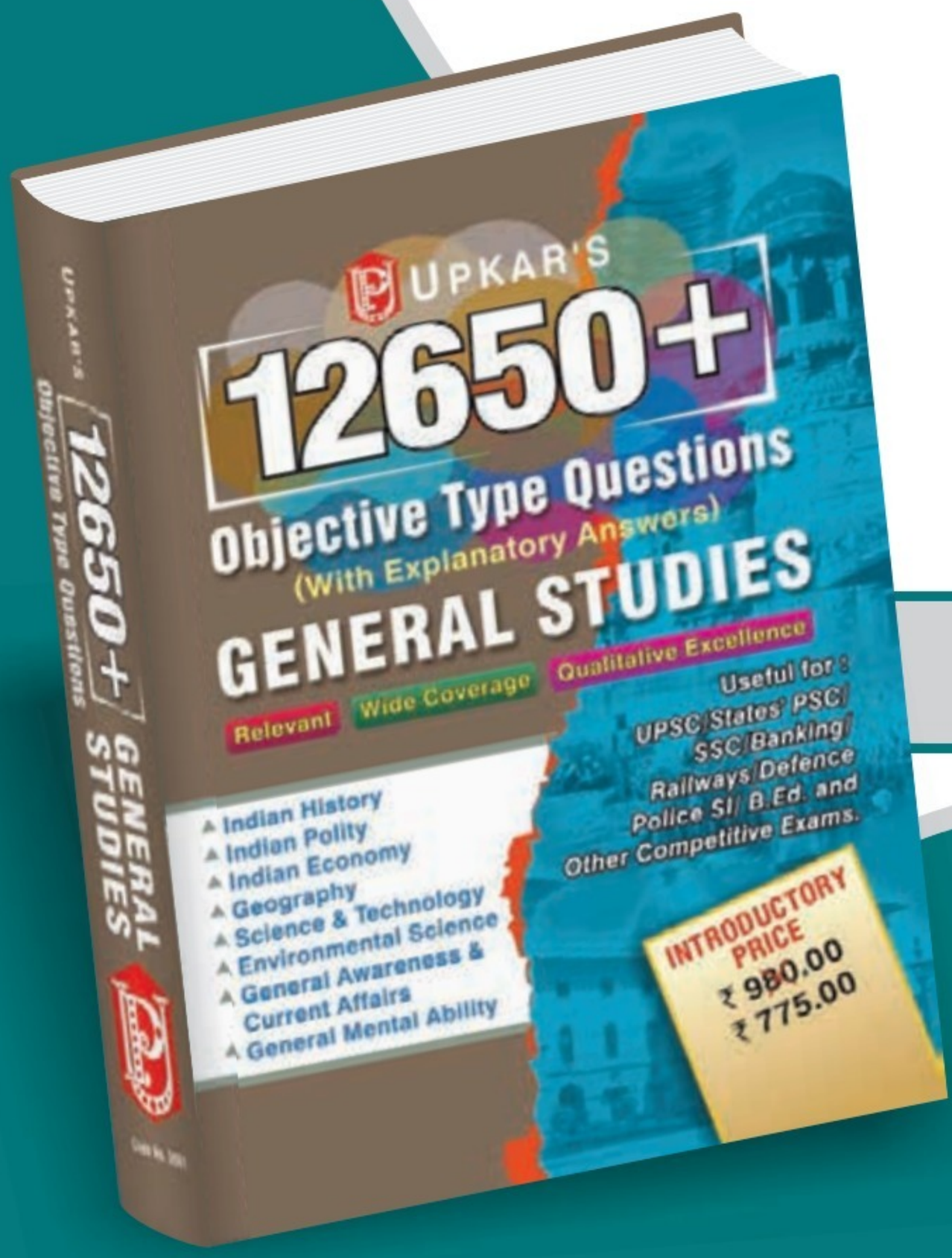
Hopefully, this World Cup in cricket-crazy India will help ODI regain its lost space in the hearts of fans constantly wooed by the romance of Tests and the frenzied razzmatazz of T20s.

But it's time to dust off those jerseys, grab a seat on the couch (as match tickets are nowhere available), and get ready for some classic ODI action.

The format is at a crossroads, and it's counting on India to give it a much-needed new lease of life.

From Curious to Confident

Elevate your exam prep with General Studies excellence



Code 3061

Introductory Price
~~₹ 980.00~~
₹ 775.00

Your One Stop Solution for Various Competitive Exams

Hindi Edition

Code 2728

Introductory Price
~~₹ 950.00~~
₹ 750.00

marketcreators.in

Crafted just according to your needs

Buy now from your nearest book store

UPKAR PRAKASHAN

www.upkar.in | sales@upkar.in

Available on : upkar.in amazon flipkart

AP

BUDDH REVS BACK INTO ACTION

India welcomed its first MotoGP race with **much fanfare and excitement,** setting the stage for an intense race.

Anish Pathiyil
anish.p@thehindu.co.in

The revving of 1000cc engines and the whirring of state-of-the-art pneumatic tools were heard for the first time in over 10 years at the Buddh International Circuit (BIC) as India hosted its first-ever MotoGP race, the Indian Grand Prix.

Things were a bit sour after Formula One pulled out from hosting Grand Prix races at the circuit and after a decade-long hiatus, MotoGP was seen as the knight in shining armour to resurrect the Grand Prix racing scene in the country.

The build-up to the event wasn't the greatest, with scepticism from fans and media alike about the condition of the circuit. Hermann Tilke had designed the BIC for four-wheeler racing and quite a few changes had to be made to make it suitable for the premier class of motorcycle racing.

Another subject of concern was the delay in issuing visas to the riders, team mechanics and the media, which cast a shadow over the participation of a few high-profile riders on the grid. But the visas landed in the nick of time as did the riders. The Grand Prix weekend got off to a start with the festivities on media day.

The riders were thrown into the deep end to try their luck in two significant cultural facets of India — Cricket and Cinema. The dancing required an extended period of coaxing, with the global hit 'Naatu Naatu' eventually getting the riders into their groove.

The cricket was more enthusiastically approached although the skill level on display was quite amusing for the fans who had made their way to the BIC. A few of the

Crizal® Rock™

Essilor®

#1 lens brand

recommended by eye care professionals worldwide*

Lens durability like never before**

www.essilorindia.com

*Quantitative research conducted among a representative sample of 958 independent ECPs by CSA in February 2019 - France, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, US, Canada, Brazil, China, India. **External laboratories tests and internal technical tests in 2019. Combination here defined as the merger of 2 distinct criteria which are scratch resistance and smudge resistance - Crizal® Rock™ coating rated best on smudge resistance and equal on scratch resistance, compared to the most known lens brands by consumers (MSW brand tracking 2018 in 17 countries). © Essilor International - July 2023 - Essilor® & Crizal® are trademarks of Essilor International.

Scan to know more

essilor

NETWORK ESS1175-23

Breezing through: Italian rider Marco Bezzecchi of Mooney Vr46 Racing Team won the inaugural Moto GP race at Buddh International Circuit. AP

cameramen who had entered the track had to bear the brunt of some wayward hitting. The brief session provided the adrenaline needed before the main business got underway.

More entertainment awaited the riders during the press conference as they were made to draw the BIC circuit layout blindfolded. The riders were in shock as the only recollection they had of the layout was trying the track out on PlayStation. The tightly contested event saw quite a bit of banter and disagreements, kick-starting the competitive side of the weekend for the riders.

Friday saw the commencement of on-track action as the stakeholders waited for the riders' feedback on the circuit, the final push needed to satisfy the bosses of the sport. The first run of the Moto3 bikes echoed across the 5.12km circuit, putting into perspective the level of noise these engines generate.

The paddock, situated in the middle of the layout, was pounded with sounds from all four sides after 30-odd riders hopped on to try the track out for the first time.

With the riders giving the thumbs-up, the nerves calmed with satisfaction that there would be no last-minute hiccups like the one the British Grand Prix experienced.

The aerial shot of the turn 1 gravel trap during practice was quite a sight as the riders spent more time in the gravel than on the tarmac itself.

The extremely tight Turn 1 corner would be an area of struggle for riders throughout the weekend as they tried to find the optimal braking point and wriggle through the narrow turn.

The fan turnout during the first day was low but not wholly unexpected considering that motorcycle racing is still yet to fully blossom in the country. The paddock too was a little barren, with only team personnel, organisers and the media shuttling about.

A humorous anecdote from the post-practice media scrums was KTM rider Jack Miller's attempts to make the assembled journalists understand the size of a monkey that had taken over the KTM garage. "When I say monkey it was not a small monkey. It was a big monkey almost like a baboon," he exclaimed.

The monkey was the main source of content for the KTM social media team over the next two days with the mammal also expertly positioning itself near the exit to bid adieu as the teams left after the weekend.

The speed on and off the track picked up on Saturday. The race distance was shortened based on the comments of the riders on the previous day, with many of them struggling to get accustomed to the humidity.

But just as the riders were getting ready for the afternoon session, the

PRIDE OF VELAMMAL

INTERNATIONAL TENNIS PLAYER

V. HARITHA SHREE

ASIA RANK NO.1 (U-14)

- Gold Medallist in the U-12 ITF South Asian Junior Championship, Pakistan
- Silver Medallist in the U-12 ITF Junior Asian Team Championship, Kazakhstan
- Winner in the Asian Championship, U-14 at PHNOM PENH, Cambodia 2023
- Represented Asia for Grand Slam Development Program for Europe Tour

ASIAN JUNIOR CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP 2023

held at Jharkhand

MISS TEJASWINI G
GOLD MEDALLIST

MASTER ASWATH S
SILVER MEDALLIST

VELAMMAL NEXUS

STUDY-SERVE-SMILE

VELAMMAL MATRIC. HR. SEC. SCHOOL | VELAMMAL VIDYALAYA

+91 73583 90408

VelammalNexus

Triumphant: Marco Bezzecchi receives the trophy from the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. AFP

heavens opened up, forcing a delay in schedule.

There was quite a bit of visible confusion on the faces of the Indian media as they tried to get their heads around the rules of the sport. The introduction of a last-minute wet session before the Sprint race and the notification of the use of medium-wet tyres didn't help their case either.

The first lap incident in the MotoGP sprint race saw the whole paddock and media centre ringing with gasps and gulps as the two VR46 teammates crashed into each other. But Marco Bezzecchi's stunning recovery brought the smiles back as they stood up and applauded the brilliance of the young Italian.

The crowds poured in on Race day, with the grandstand almost at full capacity and the picnic stand also seeing a fair number of fans, despite the high temperatures.

The paddock was packed too, with social media influencers and business honchos trodding along. The who's who of the state top brass and the entertainment industry also marked their attendance for India's biggest motorsport event in the last 10 years.

The three-day attendance figures were marked at around 1,10,000 which is the actual capacity of the track, showing that there was still work to be done in getting Indian fans hooked to the sport.

There was no shortage of support from the grandstand crowd, the decibel levels competing with the noises from the powerful machines on display.

Bezzecchi, the eventual race winner, remarked it was one of the best atmospheres he had raced in and left India a fan favourite with his performances on-track magnifying his vivacious personality off it.

The track was a big hit among the riders, with most of them having to be on the top of their game to deal with the highly technical corners.

The banked turn eight was also highly rated by the riders, with Francesco Bagnaia using the curvature expertly to speed past Jorge Martin during the race.

Despite a few niggling issues, the weekend was largely seamless and the quality of racing action on display was on par with any other MotoGP event in the world.

India can improve the way it organises these events and with support from the government and stakeholders, it can secure its position on the MotoGP calendar.

India is the largest two-wheeler market in the world and an ocean of opportunity for MotoGP constructors.

To take a cue from former F1 driver Karun Chandhok, who once said: "More than India needing MotoGP, it is MotoGP that needs India".

LIC HFL

LIC HOUSING FINANCE LTD

FESTIVAL OFFER

HOME LOAN

8.50%

Onwards*

50% Waiver in Applicable Processing Fees for loans upto 15cr*

- Facility of Online Loan Sanction Available
- Longer Repayment Period upto 30 years
- Exclusive Home Loan Scheme for Pensioners

*Terms & Conditions Apply

Home Loan Enquiry on

WhatsApp 8369998182

or log on to www.lichousing.com

Scan QR Code to download app now

Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play

India's Asia Cup takeaway: lots of new pieces but no clear pattern

Cruising to victory: Mohammed Siraj picked 6 for 21 as India skittled Sri Lanka for a paltry 50 before completing the chase in just 6.1 overs to become the Asia Cup champion for the eighth time. AP

The decision to **prioritise** batting depth over bowling options might need re-evaluation.

Dhruva Prasad
dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in

On August 30, the early morning rain-washed streets of Kandy were lined with devotees assembled for the evening procession of the Esala Perahera. The 10-day festival, a homage to the relic of the tooth of Buddha and perceived as a harbinger of rain, was in its home stretch. Despite a worrying dry spell in the country, the relief the showers brought was tempered with concern. Sri Lanka was to begin its Asia Cup title defence the following day against Bangladesh in Pallekele, and the island country was keen to put on its best behaviour after ceding the hosting rights of the previous edition to the UAE.

Seven of the nine games were interrupted by the island's mercurial rain, and Sri Lanka embodied the essence of the fickle weather in a 10-wicket defeat against India in the final as Mohammed Siraj's mesmerising six-wicket haul ended the summit clash, the third-shortest completed game in the format, in the blink of an eye.

But the Asia Cup, for the second time in a row, was more than an end in itself. As much as the T20 variant of the tournament had laid bare India's shortcomings in the shortest format in 2022, the tournament this year was just the tailwind the Men in Blue needed heading into a World Cup campaign at home.

While the Asia Cup title marked India's return to winning ways in multi-nation tournaments, it was the fine print that augurs well for the team as it shifts its focus to ending its 10-year drought in ICC events.

Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill's brisk starts in the first PowerPlay showed India wasn't beholden to the template of gradual acceleration and could take format disruptors such as England by the horns. India's pace ace Jasprit Bumrah, faced with the rigours of one-day cricket after more than a year, amped up his pace gradually, built dot-ball pressure upfront, and his four wickets in three matches proved that his skills and variations weren't casualties of a back surgery. A rejuvenated Kuldeep Yadav all but ended India's hunt for a wicket-taking spinner who could prey on spin-friendly

tracks at home, while Siraj's epochal spell in the final locked India's first-choice attack for the World Cup.

KL Rahul's fitness was imperative for a side that depends on his batting and wicketkeeping for depth and flexibility. After missing the first two games, he allayed all doubts with a masterclass in innings-building against an injury-hit Pakistan attack.

At the other end, he had Virat Kohli **(right)** cranking through the gears and shuttling between the wickets with stupefying speed in a 233-run unbeaten partnership, and suddenly, after a two-day one-day game, India looked like the team to beat.

Loose ends: Pakistan may have the most exciting ODI bowling attack in the world, but its early exit from the Asia Cup after losing to Sri Lanka has brought to light some glaring loopholes. AFP

The script had drastically flipped since India's first confrontation with Pakistan's pace trio, which blew the top-order away in a washout in Pallekele.

In hindsight, that was a timely test for an under-fire middle order, and Ishan Kishan and Hardik Pandya emerged as unlikely heroes with an alliance of grit and maturity.

A batting collapse against Sri

INDO-BRITISH
ADVANCED
PAIN CLINIC
RELIEVE ★ REGENERATE ★ REHABILITATE

KNEE PAIN? ARE YOU AFRAID OF SURGERY?

CONDITIONS WE TREAT

THE FIRST OF THESE IS "REGENERATIVE THERAPY" TO REPAIR ONE'S OWN KNEE.

Regenerative medicine is a newly emerging branch which involves repairing and regenerating worn-out tissues using bodily substances and cells. Tissues of the body tend to degenerate and get damaged with ageing, overuse or injury, resulting in pain discomfort and deformity. Regeneration therapy facilitates the regeneration of worn-out tissues, ensuring pain relief.

Growth factors that can regenerate cartilage are separated from the blood and injected back into problem joints. This is done through **Platelet Rich Plasma Therapy(PRP) Growth Factor Concentrates (GFC) and Stem cells.** The procedure involves collecting the patient's blood, separating platelet cells and growth factors from the plasma, and inserting them into the knee. With this procedure, the pain starts to subside from the start of the treatment. Various tissues that harbour stem cells such as bone marrow and adipose (fat) tissue are also extracted and administered in complex cases.

THE SECOND IS COOLED RADIO FREQUENCY ABLATION (CRFA):

Cooled Radio Frequency Ablation is an FDA (USA) approved advanced treatment that targets the small nerves that transmit pain from a well-worn knee to the brain. With this minimally invasive procedure, the nerve tissue is gently heated and cauterised using special needles containing water channels. It weakens the nerve sensation and blocks the transmission of pain signals to the brain. The special cooled radio frequency technology limits the lesion only to the affected pain nerves while the normal tissues are spared making it safe for the patients. Through this approach, patients can get quick relief and improve their quality of life. With these treatments, there are no surgical incisions and no bleeding as the treatment is done by the needle. There will be minimal pain and no major side effects. Bed rest is not required and patients can perform normal, daily activities as usual. Patients participate in rehabilitation immediately and speed up recovery. As the affected knee remains intact and no part is resected patients continue to have all other treatment options for the future such as surgery or rehabilitation.

- Advanced Non-surgical pain relief treatments
- Evidence pain practice
- World-class technology

Telangana state Medical Reimbursement Facility Available

*Insurance Cash Less Facility Available

DR. VIJAY BHASKAR BANDIKATLA
Founder, Pain Physician

FFPMRCA (Pain Medicine, RCOA, UK) FRCA (Anaesthesiology, UK), DA, MBA, MBBS,
CCT (Anaesthesiology with special interest in Pain Management)
Neuromodulation & Advanced Pain Research Fellowship (London)

For Appointment
9807 556 789

#284/A, Above IDFC Bank, 2nd Floor, Near Omega Hospital
Rd Number 12, MLA Colony, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad, Telangana 500034

AFP

Lanka's trial by spin and a shock defeat to Bangladesh in the Super Four reiterated the middle-order's struggles against spin, particularly against the left-arm orthodox type. And yet there were silver linings to them, notably the ability to defend low scores and Gill's first ODI hundred in a run-chase that showcased his evolving temperament in trying conditions.

Two 10-wicket wins and a washout out of a total of six games restricted India's preparations in terms of game time, and some questions undoubtedly linger. With left-hander Kishan earning his stripes, Shreyas Iyer's seamless transition back into a right-hander-heavy eleven could stir a hornet's nest.

Even as Pandya's return to bowling at good pace and probing lengths bodes well, the bowlers weren't pushed to the limit, and there were only five instances of them completing their complement of 10. That could also force the team to revise its strategy of shoring up the batting with Shardul Thakur by fielding a specialist bowler short when more formidable opponents come calling.

Despite the tournament's questionable scheduling and the exclusive provision of a reserve day for the Indo-Pak Super Four contest dominating a large part of the discourse, the continental event served its purpose as a fertile testing ground as teams brace for firmer challenges on Indian shores.

The 10-day festival of Esala Perahera is a homage to the relic of the tooth of Buddha and perceived as a harbinger of rain.

FOR MORE STORIES

LOG ON TO **www.jkbank.com**| FOLLOW US ON

Touching Lives. Transforming Dreams.

Around 20 million accounts, 1000 branches, more than 1400 ATMs in 18 states & 4 UTs

Retail Banking

Digital Banking

NRI services

SME Loans

Corporate Services

J&K Bank

Serving To Empower

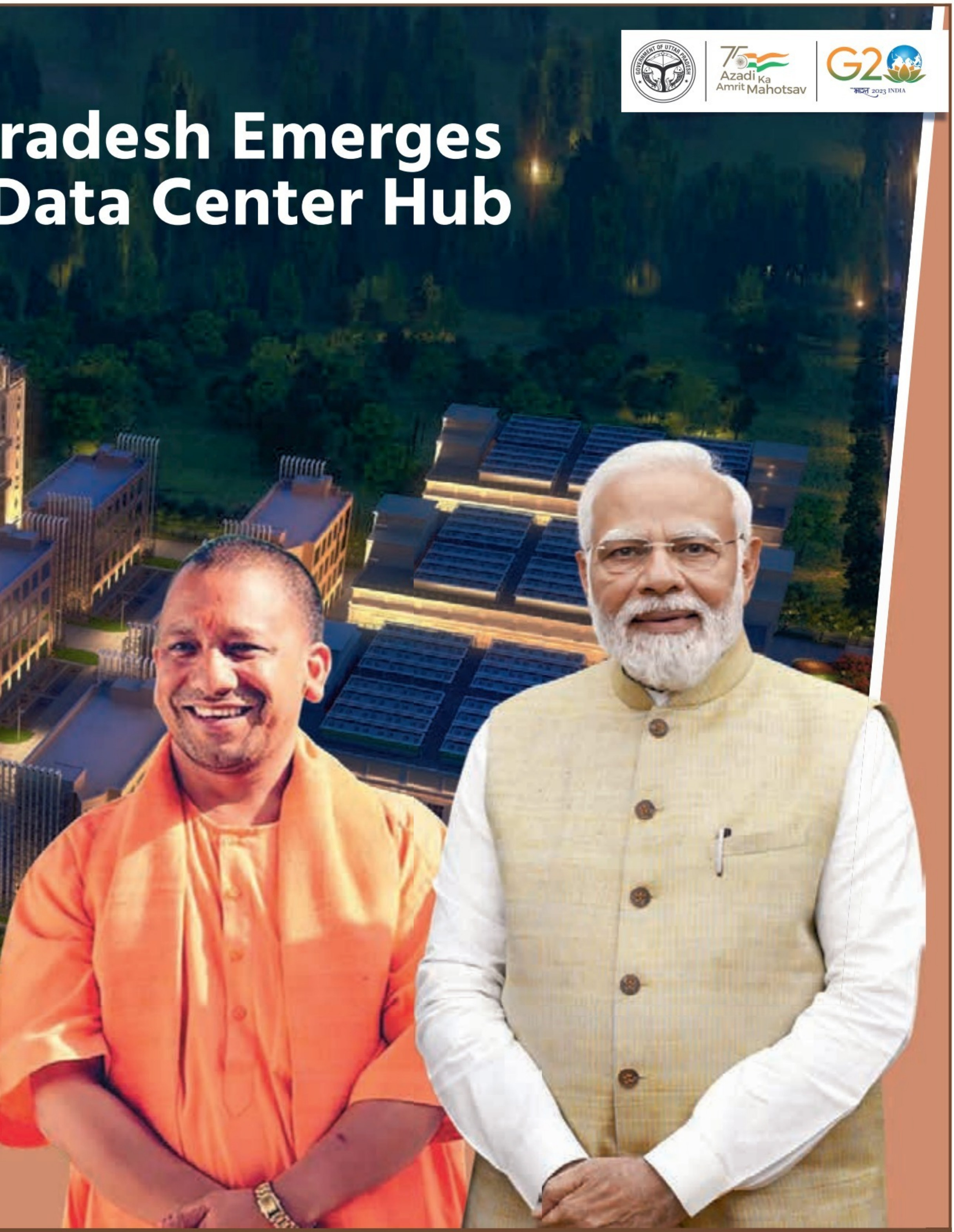
YOUR BANK SINCE 1938

Unleashing the Dream of Digital India | Uttar P as the

DOUBLE ENGINE KI SARKAR

Information & Public Relations Department, Uttar Pradesh

radesh Emerges
Data Center Hub



WORLD CUP NUMBER GAME

THE PAST 12 EDITIONS OF THE WORLD CUP HAVE THROWN UP SOME INTERESTING FACTS AND FIGURES. HERE ARE A FEW.

50

Only two players have the distinction of registering a fifty and taking a five-wicket haul in a CWC match. India's **Yuvraj Singh** was the first in 2011 and the other was Bangladesh's Shakib Al Hasan in 2019.

1000

Both **Sachin Tendulkar** and South African **AB de Villiers** are the quickest to reach the aggregate of 1000 runs in CWC. They achieved the landmark in their 20th innings in 1999 and 2015, respectively.

46

Australian **Ricky Ponting** has the distinction of appearing in the maximum number of CWC matches – 46 from 1996 to 2011, in five CWC editions.

1st

Pakistani **Wasim Akram** in the 2003 CWC in South Africa became the first bowler to claim 50 wickets in the CWC.

05**

Ireland's **Paul Stirling** was 20 years, 196 days when he made 101 against Netherlands on 18 Mar 2011 at Kolkata, thus making him the youngest to register a three-figure score in the CWC.

04

Sri Lankan **Chaminda Vaas** during the CWC match in 2003 against Bangladesh on 14 Feb 2003 achieved a unique feat, when he claimed the first four wickets in the very first over of the match. He had three wickets off the first three balls and then off the fifth ball of the over after conceding a four and a wide!

19

Pakistan's **Shaheen Shah Afridi** at 19 years, 90 days became the only teenage bowler to claim a five-wicket haul in the CWC, when he claimed 6/35 against Bangladesh at Lord's on 5 July, 2019.

30

UAE's Shaukat Dukanwala became the oldest to claim a five-wicket haul at 30 years, 40 days, when he took 5/29 against Netherlands at Lahore on 1 Mar 1996.

10

Lasith Malinga is among the ten bowlers to claim a hat-trick. However, he is the only bowler in CWC history to do so on two separate occasions – against South Africa in 2007 and against Kenya in 2011.

06

Sachin Tendulkar and **Rohit Sharma** have hit the maximum number of centuries in CWC. They have six centuries each. However, Rohit hit five during the 2019 edition, the most by any batter!

100

Only two players have the distinction of registering a century and taking a four-wicket haul in a CWC match. Feiko Kloppenburg for Netherlands against Namibia and Sri Lankan Tillakaratne Dilshan against Zimbabwe.

05

Only five players have the distinction of aggregating over 500 runs and claiming 25 wickets in their CWC career.

17

Bangladesh opener **Tamim Iqbal**'s 51 against India at Port of Spain on 17 March, 2007, made him the youngest to register a fifty in the CWC at 17 years, 362 days!

500

Only five players have the distinction of aggregating over 500 runs and claiming 25 wickets in their CWC career – Pakistan's Imran Khan (666 runs + 34 wickets), India's Kapil Dev (669+28), Australian Steve Waugh (978+27), Sri Lankan Sanath Jayasuriya (1165+27) and Bangladesh's Shakib Al Hasan (1146+34).

02

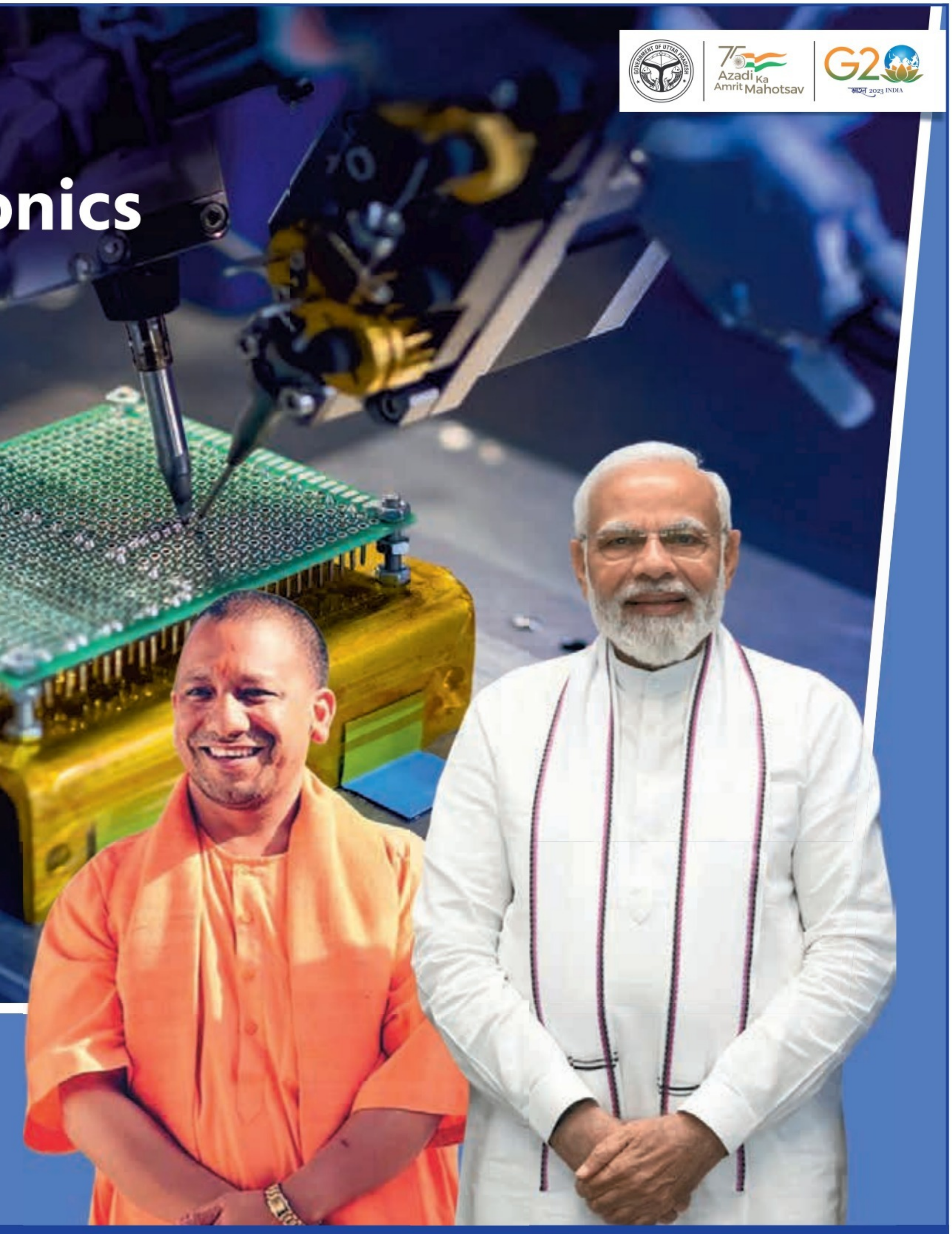
Australians Ricky Ponting and Glenn **McGrath** are the only two players who have appeared in the four CWC finals – in 1996, 1999, 2003 and 2007.

Statistics: **Mohandas Menon**

16

Canada's Nitesh R Kumar at 16 years, 283 days is the youngesat to appear in the CWC match. He did so in the 2011 edition against Zimbabwe at Nagpur on 28 Feb 2011.

Information & Public Relations Department, Uttar Pradesh


onics

THE HINDU GROUP

GET A RINGSIDE VIEW TO THE WORLD OF SPORTS

SUBSCRIPTION WITH DISCOUNT

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

SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM

SPORTSTAR

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

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

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

Name:_____

Mailing Address:_____

_____ City: _____

Pin: _____ District: _____ State: _____

Landline: _____ Mobile: _____ E-mail: _____

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

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

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

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

Bank: .....

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

IT'S TIME FOR HYBRIDS

SBI MUTUAL FUND
A PARTNER FOR LIFE

PLAN YOUR RETIREMENT ON THE FRONT FOOT

with HYBRID FUNDS

HYBRID FUNDS CAN INVEST IN MULTIPLE ASSET CLASSES LIKE EQUITY, FIXED INCOME, GOLD, ETC.

DIVERSIFICATION
Mix of multiple asset classes help provide stability to your portfolio.

TAX EFFICIENCY
These funds provide equity/non-equity taxation benefits depending on the asset allocation.

CONVENIENCE
You can invest in multiple asset classes through one fund.

SUITABILITY
Provides you the flexibility to choose a fund based on your risk profile and specific financial goal.

An Investor Education and Awareness Initiative by SBI Mutual Fund.

Investors should deal only with registered Mutual Funds, details of which can be verified on the SEBI website (https://www.sebi.gov.in) under 'Intermediaries/Market Infrastructure Institutions'. Please refer to the website of Mutual Funds for the process of completing one-time KYC (Know Your Customer) including the process for change in address, phone number, bank details, etc. Investors may lodge complaints on https://www.scores.gov.in against registered intermediaries if they are unsatisfied with their responses. SCORES facilitates you to lodge your complaint online with SEBI and subsequently view its status.

Toll-free: 1800 209 3333 | For more information contact your MFD/RIA | Visit: www.sbimf.com | Follow us:

Mutual Fund investments are subject to market risks, read all scheme related documents carefully.

THE BIG SHOW IS BACK HOME

India may be firm favourites in the 2023 World Cup but has their **task cut out** against some strong sides from other countries.

K.C. Vijaya Kumar
vijayakumar.kc@thehindu.co.in

FOR MORE WORLD CUP STORIES

The once-in-four-years battle for cricket's top crown will soon be upon us. The World Cup, ever since the 1975 inaugural run in England, has offered stirring memories, rousing coups and cricketing excellence. The latest 13th edition, being held in India from October 5 to November 19, will criss-cross the nation, wheeling relentlessly through the coastal plains, the hinterland and a Himalayan outpost.

As a host, India had a feel of cricket's top-dollar event in 1987, 1996 and 2011, but in all those phases, there were co-hosts from the Indian subcontinent. This time around, right from the time the first ball is bowled at Ahmedabad's Narendra Modi Stadium to the last ball again being unleashed at the same venue, India will be the lone host.

Having won in 1983 with Kapil's Devils reigning supreme at Lord's, and in 2011 with M. S. Dhoni striking the winning six at a feverish Wankhede Stadium on an unforgettable April night, the Men in Blue do have a legacy to strengthen. Rohit Sharma's men have slowly

Storied history: World Cups aren't always about the winner, it is also about fresh players making an impression, senior cricketers bowing out and the resultant change of guard. REUTERS

congregated in the last few months with key injured personnel making efficient comebacks, the prime being spearhead Jasprit Bumrah and batter K. L. Rahul, who will also double up as wicket-keeper.

The duo's performance in the recent Asia Cup in Sri Lanka, which India won, was from the top-drawer. Bumrah prised out early wickets while Rahul's batting was fluent as well as combative when the situation demanded. Rohit and Shubman Gill atop the batting tree with Virat Kohli stepping in at three, is an enviable combine. A lot would also rest on the all-round strengths that Hardik Pandya and Ravindra Jadeja offer to the unit. Be it 1983 or 2011, the multi-skilled players proved to be the cornerstone for India's success.

Remember, this is an outfit missing the services of the ebullient Rishabh Pant ever since his ghastly car accident. Pant is on his way back but it will take time and his X-factor would be missed. With the two Mohammeds — Siraj and Shami — adding potency to the pace attack besides Bumrah while Shardul Thakur remains in the mix, India does have a strong fast bowling unit. Siraj showed how dangerous he could be while blowing apart Sri Lanka in the Asia Cup final with a 6/21 spell, the fourth best by an Indian in ODIs. Among the twirly men, Kuldeep Yadav version 2.0 has been a revelation. And then the selectors, by picking R. Ashwin for the ODIs against Australia, bowled a googly and with Axar Patel, originally in the squad, suffering a niggle, the veteran off-spinner found a way back to the final Indian squad for the World Cup. Ashwin could well play the mentor that Kuldeep and company could lean upon while bowling under lights with the dew-factor cropping up. Pacers inflicting wounds and spinners holding tight in the middle-overs and quadrupling the pressure, could be a template.

Being the host and having won the latest

Mr. Dependable: New Zealand has not soared as much but with captain Kane Williamson's return and an effective bunch of speedsters under his watch, the men from the Southern Hemisphere cannot be ignored. REUTERS

INDIA IS AN OUTFIT MISSING THE SERVICES OF THE EBULLIENT RISHABH PANT EVER SINCE HIS GHASTLY CAR ACCIDENT. PANT IS ON HIS WAY BACK BUT IT WILL TAKE TIME AND HIS X-FACTOR WOULD BE MISSED

Host advantage: Being the host and having won the latest Asia Cup while all its vital cogs seemingly fell in place, India has topped the pundit's list as the favourite. REUTERS

Asia Cup while all its vital cogs seemingly fell in place, India has topped the pundit's list as the favourite. However World Cups can offer banana peels too — Zimbabwe ambushed India in the 1999 edition while Bangladesh launched a heist in the 2007 version. Fancied teams often find themselves stuck against fired-up rivals itching to prove a point and this time around India too could find itself in such sticky corners. Plus the loss to Bangladesh in an Asia Cup fixture where Rohit and coach Rahul Dravid preferred to test the unit's bench-strength, is still fresh in memory.

India has come a cropper in ICC events with the last major triumph being the Champions Trophy in 2013, and it is a bogey that the Men in Blue have to counter. Back in their backyard with packed stadiums rooting for them, Rohit's troops can find enough adrenaline but shadowing that would be pressure too as even the room service lad would whisper: "Sir, please win the Cup." India too has opted for a nerve-busting travel schedule in a bid to keep diverse venues happy. The Cup surely matters but equally for many, the game against Pakistan in Ahmedabad on October 14 would be the one to lean on with nationalistic fervour.

Among the rest, fireworks have started in earnest. England's Ben Stokes **(below)** has returned to ODIs and just pummelled a 182 against New Zealand. Having played 'Moses parting the seas' at Lord's in that 2019 humdinger World Cup final involving New Zealand, Stokes adds immeasurable value to the defending champion. Additionally he is familiar with Indian conditions through his dalliance in the IPL. Meanwhile New Zealand has not soared as much but with captain Kane Williamson's return and an effective bunch of speedsters under his watch, the men from the Southern Hemisphere cannot be ignored.

Australia had nearly scuppered India's chances in the 2011 championship before Yuvraj Singh

GETTY IMAGES

Two to tango: Babar Azam (in pic) and Shaheen Afridi have to strike a tandem like how it was in the Imran Khan-Javed Miandad era. GETTY IMAGES

WITH GLENN MAXWELL AND A FEW OTHER EXPLOSIVE STARS IN THE MIX, AUSTRALIA COULD GO ALL THE WAY

and Suresh Raina joined forces to prevail in the quarterfinal. And as always, Australia offers a clear and present danger. Pat Cummins is an astute skipper and the old guard of David Warner and Steve Smith are keen to prove a point. Add Glenn Maxwell and a few other explosive stars to that mix and surely Australia could go all the way. They did that in 1987 under Allan Border to lift the World Cup at Calcutta's Eden Gardens.

Pakistan, with its chutzpah batters and gun fast bowlers, is a team that, when on song, can ambush the strongest rivals. Babar Azam and Shaheen Afridi have to strike a tandem like how it was in the Imran Khan-Javed Miandad era.

And despite being ejected from the Asia Cup, Pakistan was the number one team in the ICC ODI rankings till its Asia Cup debacle. Surely Babar's men have done something right. Sri Lanka too had a long winning streak before its meltdown against India in Colombo and the Emerald Isle can always punch above its weight.

South Africa, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and the Netherlands can have their moments under the floodlights. The first-named often fails in ICC events but in Heinrich Klassen (left) South Africa has a phenomenal batter. That they just defeated Australia 3-2 in an ODI series back home will hold the Proteas in good stead.

Bangladesh has always been a tricky opposition, often using spin as a decoy with Shakib Al Hasan being the talisman.

For perspective, don't go beyond Afghanistan. This is a team that has men coping with excruciating trauma back in their country; and still, to focus on the turf and play a sport with gusto takes remarkable steel in their spines. And the Netherlands is here on merit and its strengths cannot be discounted. Remember, the West Indies failed to qualify — such is the growth among other countries and such is the freefall by the men from the Caribbean.

India leading the pack with England and the rest snapping at its heels could be the World Cup's tale while fans across the country are still seeking their tickets in an ecosystem that tends to put the key stakeholder — the game's lover — as the last priority. At a larger level, this World Cup will also offer a pointer to the overall health of ODIs, while T20s remain on the ascendant with Tests still being the Holy Grail.

World Cups aren't always about the winner, it is also about fresh players making an impression, senior cricketers bowing out and the resultant change of guard. Keep an eye out for the thrills and the spills. Some matches will threaten nerves and nails, and also keep that tissue-box handy — sport can excite and equally it can be a moving experience.

From both sides of the spectrum

All-rounders as a breed may have evolved over the decades but their **importance** continues to remain paramount in the game's bigger picture.

Perfect performance: With 281 runs and 17 wickets, Klusener bagged the Man of the Tournament award in the 1999 edition.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Lalith Kalidas
lalith.kalidas@thehindu.co.in

Lance Klusener and South Africa will never forget the events of June 17, 1999, in Birmingham.

Four days after conceding a victory to Australia in the Super Six stage of the ODI World Cup, the Proteas had whipped up a superb bowling performance in the semifinal against the same opposition. However, a 214-run chase progressively began to slip out of their hands before Klusener built a climax for the ages, arguably among the greatest sporting finishes in history.

With 38 required off 31 balls and four wickets to spare against a spotless Aussie bowling lineup, the match was only headed one way until Klusener, in blazing form, set out to fire once again. A barrage of boundaries helped 'Zulu' tie the scores in the final over. He dared to cross the line single-handedly. However, his lesser-gifted batting partner, Allan Donald, stood petrified in the face of a quick single, one that would have put South Africa in its maiden World Cup final. Klusener had one glance behind after he waltzed through to the non-striker's end. Adam Gilchrist had shattered the stumps and a booming yellow brigade thickened pitchside in jubilation.

"Donald did not go, Klusener came," and Australia was through to the final based on previous results.

If not for Klusener, it is hard to picture an incarnation of that fiercely fickle moment — exhilarating and heartbreaking at two ends at the same time. That his unbeaten 31 off 16 deliveries came on the back of a rare wicketless showing in that World Cup illustrated Klusener's class and the might of cricket's pedigreed all-rounder.

Klusener ended the campaign with 281 runs (11th-highest), unbeaten on six occasions while clocking runs at a strike-rate of 122.17 — years ahead of the times. His 17 wickets ranked him fourth, with a 26.76 strike-rate at par with the

Sanath Jayasuriya.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

SPECIALISTS WIN YOU MATCHES, BUT ALL-ROUNDERS CAN UNLOCK RIVETING PASSAGES OF PLAY

In legendary company: The feats of true-born all-rounders like Kapil Dev (in pic) and Imran Khan (below) are not to be replicated readily on the World Cup stage. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

best of the tournament. While he did not top the charts in either department, Klusener bagged the Man of the Tournament award, as Sanath Jayasuriya did in the 1996 World Cup with his captivating evolution as a hard-hitter and left-arm spinner.

In his first World Cup as an all-rounder who opened the batting, Jayasuriya fired with the blade in the initial rounds before chipping in with three crucial wickets in the semifinal win against India at the Eden Gardens. Though the final belonged to another champion, Aravinda de Silva (107 n.o., three for 42), Jayasuriya's haul of 221 runs and six wickets was acknowledged for its belligerence.

Specialists win you matches, but all-rounders can unlock riveting passages of play. Pure all-rounders are increasingly rare in the modern game. One cannot expect to see someone conjure an unbeaten 175 off 134 balls at number six and follow it up with 11 overs for a wicket or two, let alone marshalling the side to the World Cup title anymore.

The feats of true-born all-rounders like Kapil Dev, Imran Khan, Ian Botham and Klusener are not to be replicated readily on the World Cup stage.

Perhaps, the 2011 World Cup, the last before a new set of ODI rules led to higher scores, was the last time cricketers built

2500-plus runs and 100-plus wickets (Jan 1, 1990 – Dec 31, 2000)

C. Z. Harris (NZ)
» 2910 RUNS
» 513 WICKETS

L. Klusener (SA)
» 2535 RUNS
» 134 WICKETS

C. L. Hooper (WI)
» 3854 RUNS
» 133 WICKETS

W. J. Cronje (SA)
» 5565 RUNS
» 114 WICKETS

S. R. Waugh (AUS)
» 5098 RUNS
» 108 WICKETS

J. H. Kallis (SA)
» 3850 RUNS
» 102 WICKETS

on their primary skill. Yuvraj Singh added 15 wickets to his vital 362 runs and was adjudged the Player of the Tournament, while Shahid Afridi, the lower-order marauder, ended up as the joint-highest wicket-taker with 21 scalps.

ODI cricket has since been fast-tracked into a new realm. England's bohemian revolution of the format has thrown light on the modern all-rounder. Confined to their elemental traits and yet chipping in through other skills, players like Ben Stokes, Moeen Ali and Chris Woakes have added immeasurable depth. No wonder then that Stokes can come out of retirement for the 2023 edition as a specialist batter, having been restricted from bowling due to a nagging knee injury.

All-rounders across sides now play a similar role. Australia primarily depends on Mitchell Marsh and Marcus Stoinis for bludgeoning the ball in the top-order and the death, respectively. They act as a cushion for a surging pace trio led by Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood, not a part of the lead cast of a lineup like Shane Watson

Jacques Kallis. REUTERS

Out of the comfort zone: Conformed to their elemental traits and yet chipping in through other ways, players like Ben Stokes, Moeen Ali and Chris Woakes (in pic) have added immeasurable depth to the English side. AP

A win for spin: As the World Cup returns to spin-friendly conditions in India after 12 years, the definition of an all-rounder could be repurposed, with spinners like Jadeja (in pic) and Shakib gaining momentum again.

GETTY IMAGES

and Jacques Kallis of yore.

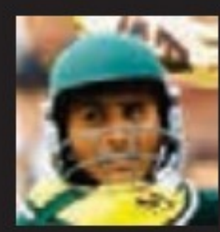
From the beginning of 1990 up until the 2011 World Cup final, 12 players amassed runs in excess of 2500 with a 30-plus average and also bagged more than 100 wickets with averages comparable to specialists — Kallis being the only recurring name to achieve the mark twice across both decades.

The numbers have dwindled drastically after the 2011 World Cup, with only one player — Shakib Al Hasan — qualifying for the same standards. Genuine seam bowling all-rounders have seen a major slide too, with just five players achieving the double of 1000-plus runs and 50-plus wickets since the 2011 World Cup; India's Hardik Pandya, Stokes and Marsh being the only active players to the mark.

However, as the World Cup returns to spin-friendly conditions in India after 12 years, the definition of an all-rounder could be repurposed, with spinners gaining momentum again.

Regulars such as Ravindra Jadeja and Shakib will be integral to their teams' balance, while part-timers like Glenn Maxwell, Aiden Markram, and probably even Joe Root will boost the depth of their respective sides to keep the clan of the all-rounders alive.

2500-plus runs and 100-plus wickets (Jan 1, 2001 – April 3, 2011)



A. Razzaq (PAK)
» 3934 RUNS
» 167 WICKETS

A.Flintoff (ENG/ICC)
» 3088 RUNS
» 162 WICKETS

J. H. Kallis (Afr/ICC/SA)
» 7377 RUNS
» 162 WICKETS

C. H. Gayle (ICC/WI)
» 7756 RUNS
» 144 WICKETS

Shakib Al Hasan (BAN)
» 2976 RUNS
» 137 WICKETS

ST Jayasuriya (Asia/SL)
» 7395 RUNS
» 134 WICKETS

S. R. Watson (AUS)
» 3643 RUNS
» 130 WICKETS

Shoaib Malik (PAK)
» 5137 RUNS
» 122 WICKETS

S. B. Styris (NZ)
» 4286 RUNS
» 115 WICKETS

P. D. Collingwood (ENG)
» 5092 RUNS
» 111 WICKETS

A. Symonds (AUS)
» 4611 RUNS
» 110 WICKETS

Yuvraj Singh (Asia/IND)
» 7791 RUNS
» 108 WICKETS

THE SURPRISE PACKAGE

We pick eight players **who may deliver** unexpected hits this World Cup.

Sahil Mathur
sahil.mathur@thehindu.co.in

Daryl Mitchell

New Zealand enjoys the privilege of having someone like Mitchell in the playing XI, who not only can bat at any position but gives the cushion of a wicket-taking bowler. In the build-up to the tournament, the 32-year-old has majorly played at the no. 4 position, where he has been the second-highest run-scorer for the Kiwis, and has also scored the 10th most runs overall — 913 — since 2022, with three centuries and as many fifties during the period.

Charith Asalanka

The left-handed batter has given a massive boost to the Sri Lankan middle-order since he made his ODI debut against England in 2021 and has scored the most runs batting at no.5 — 1248 in 32 innings while averaging 46.22 and scoring at a rate of 90.04, including one century and nine fifties. The 26-year-old has overall scored 1272 runs in 36 innings. Apart from his batting prowess, Asalanka is a valuable part-time off-spin option — he recently took his best figures of 4/18 during the Asia Cup match against India.

Mehidy Hasan Miraz

The 25-year-old could turn out to be the most important player for Bangladesh in this World Cup considering his spin-bowling credentials and value with the bat. The off-spinner's ability to extract drift from the new ball makes him a lethal weapon in most of the conditions he might encounter during the tournament. Since 2022, Mehidy Hasan has picked 38 wickets — most for his team during this period — out of which five have come in PowerPlay at an average of 22.20 in 11 innings. He has also upped his batting game during this period, scoring 620 runs at an average of 36.47. He was recently promoted as an opener against Afghanistan in the Asia Cup for the first time and scored a century.

Adam Zampa

The Australian leg-spinner is the third-highest wicket-taker since 2022 with 42 scalps, also making him the top wicket-taker for Australia going into the World Cup. The 31-year-old, who usually operates in the middle overs, is the frontline spinner for the five-time champion. Zampa averaged 22, struck every 27 balls for his four wickets, and had an economy of 4.88 when he last toured in India earlier this year for three ODIs. His experience of playing 19 ODIs, 14 T20Is, and IPL will be crucial for Australia.

Temba Bavuma

The South African captain has been the highest run-scorer for his team since 2022, scoring 868 runs in 17 innings at an average of 57.86. The opening batter has scored four centuries and two fifties in this period with a strike rate of more than 93. The 33-year-old has overall scored 1367 runs in 29 innings in ODIs, has made five hundreds, and four fifties.

Tom Latham

The 31-year-old often goes unnoticed in this format despite him being the 13th-highest run-getter for New Zealand with 3797 runs in 123 innings. Since 2022, the left-hander has scored 973 runs at an average of 37.42, making him the fifth-highest run-scorer overall, and most for his country during this period. Although the Kiwi vice-captain has batted in all positions from 1-9, in the last two years, Latham has been batting mostly at no.4 and 5. The middle-order mainstay's ability to tackle spin could come in handy for the other batters to rally around him.

Fazalhaq Farooqi

The left-arm pacer made his ODI debut for Afghanistan in January 2022 and has taken the most wickets for the team since then — 32, which is also the 11th most overall in this period. Farooqi usually starts with the new ball and has the ability to move it both ways, in the air and off the pitch, while clocking close to 140 kmph. While the Afghan team is known for its spin prowess, the 22-year-old could come in as a surprise, especially in the PowerPlay.

Pathum Nissanka

Ever since his one-day debut in 2021, this solid opening batter has scored 1396 runs in 40 innings, averaging 37. Nissanka is the one who takes charge of attacking the new ball, doesn't have problem facing spin, and has the ability to play long innings. Since last year, the 25-year-old has scored the third-most runs in ODIs — 1310 — scoring three centuries and nine fifties during this time. It won't be a surprise if he becomes the cornerstone of Sri Lanka's campaign.

We did not sleep before and after the match against Pakistan

It took us a **long time** to reach our hotel after the quarterfinal win against Pakistan, and I remember we were in the pool almost into the morning.

Nayan Mongia

When I was picked in the squad, Kiran More and his wife came to congratulate me at my home. It was so nice of them. It was a dream that I achieved two years after my ODI debut. To play in a World Cup was a great moment for me. And the World Cup was happening at home.

What more could I have asked for? The conditions were known, and the fans were there to cheer us right through. All matches were important, but believe me, the experience of taking on Pakistan in Bangalore was something.

We did not sleep before and after the match against Pakistan. The pressure was enormous, and the tension

FORMER INDIA WICKETKEEPER-BATTER
FIRST WORLD CUP: 1996, INDIA, PAKISTAN, SRI LANKA

High-octane duel: Team India celebrates its 1996 World Cup quarter final victory over Pakistan in Bangalore. PICS: THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

grew manifold on the day of the match. It was as if the nation wanted us to just win that one game. We also wanted to, because beating Pakistan was always special. I had heard of the excitement over our previous wins from my seniors. I wanted to be part of folklore by being in the XI.

What a night it was in Bangalore. I never felt such a thrill on the cricket field. The stadium was rooting for us, and the initial 10-15 minutes of the match made even the most experienced players on the team feel nervous. We all know how Ajay Jadeja (45, 25b, 4x4, 2x6) belted Waqar Younis, and that innings had a huge impact after Navjot Singh Sidhu (93) set up the total. We bowled well even as the Pakistanis threatened to take the game away from us. But Venkatesh Prasad swung it our way, and then Anil Kumble bowled exceptionally well. It took us a long time to reach our hotel after the match, and I remember we were in the pool almost into the morning.

We lost to Sri Lanka twice in the tournament. In the league and the semifinal. In the league match in Delhi, Sanath Jayasuriya played like a man possessed and destroyed us. In the semifinal, we made the mistake of fielding first. Sidhu had rightly suggested we should bat first, but then it was a collective decision, and we did not quite relish it. The Sri Lankans went on to win the World Cup.

They were the best team, even though I thought we had the depth to win the World Cup. We, too, had moments to cherish. Sachin Tendulkar and Kumble topped the list in batting and bowling.

As told to Vijay Lokapally

Our top six did not do their job

In the semifinal against Australia, **when it mattered the most,** Steve Elworthy and Allan Donald [both fast bowlers] shouldn't have been required to bat.

Lance Klusener

For a cricketer, your first World Cup is always a bit of excitement and a little bit of anxiety because you hope that you can put up a decent performance. The World Cup is the biggest showcase of ODI cricket, and we had good preparation and should have won the coveted trophy.

In 1999, we had a good team and most bases covered. For me, in that competition, the batting unit — the first six batters — did not come to the party. We were continuously short of runs, batting first or second, and relied on the lower-order all-rounders to consistently get over the line.

If you are always leaving runs out there and hoping for others to score them, then you eventually get caught out someday or another. That was our problem. There were numerous games where we shouldn't have gotten over the line, but we ended up winning those.

In the semifinal against Australia, when it mattered the most, Steve Elworthy and Allan Donald [both fast bowlers] shouldn't have been required to bat. That showed that the batting unit did not do its job.

It's always nice to be part of great ODIs. We did not get over the line technically. But a tie is not a loss, either. So, that, I guess, was the only good way of looking at it.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

FORMER SOUTH AFRICA ALL-ROUNDER
FIRST ODI WORLD CUP: 1999, ENGLAND

Heart-breaking: South Africa's Allan Donald walks away after being run out while going for the winning run against Australia. Though the match was tied, Australia reached the final by virtue of finishing higher in the Super Six table. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

But for sure, we were disappointed with the result of the semifinal. It's always easy to look back and say, "Oh, we should have waited and hit the next ball for four," but what if we were out in the next ball? Had that happened, you would be thinking, "why didn't we make the most of the opportunity that came your way earlier?"

It was unfortunate circumstances, but I still feel that with a pretty mediocre score to chase (214 runs in 50 overs), we shouldn't have left things till the end for the No. 11 batter, Donald.

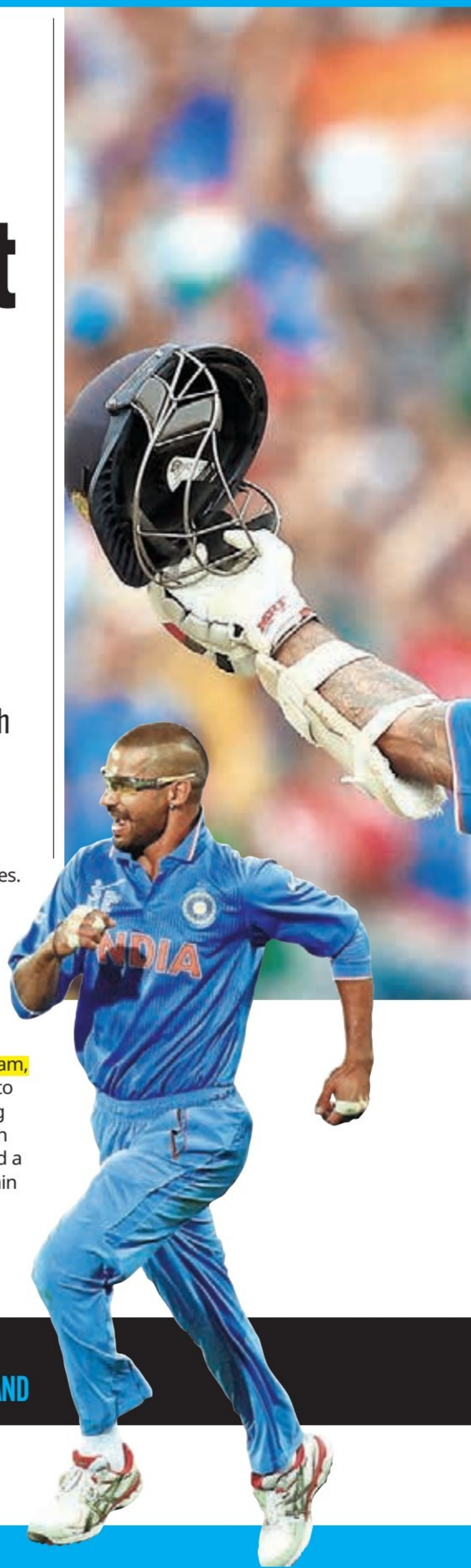
The ball was reversing, so it wasn't easy to bat either. It's been 24 years already, and as I look back, I feel that we had a good team in 1999. Everyone was settled in their roles and played good cricket. That was the best South African team that I have played for. But I would not go as far as to say that it was the best-ever South African ODI team because I think there were some amazing cricketers in the earlier era that the world did not see.

As told to Shayan Acharya

Hundred against South Africa at MCG one of my best phases

I was happy to end up as the **fifth-best run getter** with an aggregate of 412 runs.

Shikhar Dhawan



It is a memory that I have relived countless times. There were moments of despair and days of thrills. It was the World Cup that attracted unbelievable viewership across the world. The fact that it was played in Australia, which has some of the best grounds and pitches and stunning infrastructure, made it a tournament to remember.

We were favourites to win the Cup. As the host team, Australia too had a tremendous advantage. We lost to Australia [in the semifinal] on a day when our batting came apart, and they did nothing wrong. Steve Smith and Aaron Finch batted us out of the contest. We had a brilliant start to the chase; I got 45 but failed to sustain the momentum.

On the personal front, I was happy to end up as the fifth-best run getter with an aggregate of 412 runs. My best came against South Africa at the

INDIA BATTER
FIRST ODI WORLD CUP: 2015, AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND

majestic Melbourne Cricket Ground. In the preceding match against Pakistan in Adelaide, I was happy to score 73 even as Virat (Kohli) slammed a fine 107. It was the kind of start that propelled us on a great journey. I had been struggling to get runs in the run-up to the World Cup, but I am grateful to MS (Dhoni) for backing me. His faith in me was a huge factor in my success in the tournament. I had the confidence to prove myself worthy of a place on the Indian team.

Beating Pakistan is always special. We knew the expectations of the nation and our fans when we opened our campaign as the defending champions. On the day of the match, there were Indian fans all over Adelaide, outside our hotel, inside the stadium, and later, when they cheered us all the way to our room.

We had prepared well for the Pakistan match. We had someone giving us throwdowns from a height [standing on the chair] because Pakistan had left-arm pacer Mohammad Irfan, who stood at 7ft 1in. We gave enough cushion to our bowlers by scoring 300, and Mohammed Shami bowled splendidly to dominate Pakistan.

I rate my 137 against South Africa very high because of the quality of the opposition: Dale Steyn, Vernon Philander, Morne Morkel, and Wayne Parnell. I got into my rhythm in the match against Pakistan, and the subsequent back-to-back century against Ireland was enjoyable too.

As told to Vijay Lokapally

Bossing it: India opener Shikhar Dhawan's 146-ball 137 set up a massive 130-run win against South Africa in a 2015 World Cup league game in Melbourne. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

Trapping Imam-ul-Haq lbw off my first ball a cherished memory

But things took a **sudden turn** when a toe injury forced me out of the World Cup just before the England match at Edgbaston.

Vijay Shankar

That Sunday afternoon in Manchester was certainly one of the major milestones of my career, as I had to come in and bowl to Imam-ul-Haq. A game against Pakistan is always a battle of nerves, and the pressure certainly mounts up when you are playing your first World Cup game — that too against the arch-rival.

An injury to Bhuvneshwar Kumar meant I had to step in and complete his over. As the crowd chanted *'India, India'* at Old Trafford, I trapped Imam leg before off the very first delivery! I claimed a couple of wickets, besides contributing 15 runs with the bat. The build-up to the World Cup was equally

INDIA ALL-ROUNDER
FIRST ODI WORLD CUP: 2019, ENGLAND

Flying start: An injury to Bhuvneshwar Kumar meant I had to step in and complete his over. As the crowd chanted *'India, India'* at Old Trafford, I trapped Imam leg before off the very first delivery! PICS: GETTY IMAGES

eventful. Soon after I was picked in the squad, there were debates, but now, when I look back, I realise there will always be questions when a new player is selected or someone is dropped. As a player, those things are not in our control. We can only do what's best for the team. I cherished every moment playing against Pakistan, but things took a sudden turn when a toe injury forced me out of the World Cup just before the England match at Edgbaston.

It was tough to deal with that blow. It was difficult to watch the remaining games on television. After that, I haven't been able to return to the Indian team. I could not even come close to a comeback. But sometimes, some things don't come easy in life. As a professional, you need to shrug that off and look ahead. If you keep thinking about a comeback and what went wrong for far too long, it gets difficult to stay in the present. I did think about all that earlier, but now I have come to terms with it.

Every step, right from making it to the first-division team to featuring in the Buchi Babu Trophy, has been wonderful for me.

The key for any player is to enjoy the game and ensure that when we finally hang up our boots, there are no regrets.

As told to Shayan Acharya

Bastion of records

Renovation work is in **full swing** to get the Arun Jaitley Cricket Stadium ready in time for its first match between South Africa and Sri Lanka.

Venue: Arun Jaitley Cricket Stadium | **City:** Delhi

Matches: October 7 (South Africa vs Sri Lanka); October 11 (India vs Afghanistan); October 15 (England vs Afghanistan); October 25 (Australia vs Netherlands); November 6 (Bangladesh vs Sri Lanka)

Vijay Lokapally
vijay.l@thehindu.co.in

One of the five permanent centres and an iconic venue that saw Sunil Gavaskar hit his 29th Test century in 1983 to equal Don Bradman's record and Anil Kumble's stunning 10/74 to send Pakistan reeling in 1999, the Ferozeshah Kotla, now renamed Arun Jaitley Cricket Stadium, has often been in the news for the wrong reasons. In 2009, the fifth and final ODI between India and Sri Lanka was abandoned after 23.3 overs with Sri Lanka on 83 for five. The venue has come a long way from that dark day in Delhi's cricket history. The venue has been given a new look to stage five World Cup matches.

Capacity: Officially, the stadium, with old Delhi a stone's throw away, has a capacity of 37,499. Pillars block some of the seats in the general stands and the corporate boxes but the venue has progressed from the time when spectators were seated on roofless concrete stands. The stadium has gained 1700 seats in the old Club House with the permission of the

Comfort first: The authorities have installed a sauna bath in each dressing room and, in a first, provided ice bath tubs with chilled water available right through. Pics: SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Municipal authorities.

Hospitality boxes: A total of 37 Corporate Boxes are ready in the DDCA Lounge, Bay Area, Hill `B' and the BCCI Box. Six Boxes are available in the old Club House apart from Marquee Areas catering to every box. For the general stands, every seat has been replaced with new ones. The DDCA Lounge will have a bar and a restaurant that can cater to 110 people at a time.

Pitches: There are a total of nine pitches in the main square, two that have been freshly laid, under the supervision of chief curator Ankit Datta (right) , who has experience of the 2016 T20 World Cup and nine IPL seasons. Three pitches in the main square will be used for the World Cup. In addition, the two practice areas will also offer new pitches — two in area 1 out of a total of five and one in area 2 out of a total of eight. New nets have been installed in the practice areas. Black soil has been used to prepare the pitches with a 22 to 30-strong ground staff assisting Datta.

Drainage and outfield: The DDCA has procured a state-of-the-art cover that will protect the entire playfield. The cover is light in weight and easy to operate. The authorities have added a new super sopper in addition to the three they have. The drainage system promises to make the outfield available for play within 15 minutes of the stoppage of rain. A new outfield mower will also be in use.

Entry points: World-class signages will guide the spectators at the 18 entry points. Gate Nos. 10 to 18 will allow the general public. Gates 1, 3, 6 and 8 have been marked for VIP entry. Gate No 2 will be used for the players and ambulance. Gate No 7 and 9 will be for fire vans to be parked.

Accessibility and challenges: The stadium has a metro station within walking distance. On match days the metro rail authorities press extra services until two hours after the match is over. Every stand will have new lifts to cater to the elderly and individuals with special needs. A total of nine lifts have been added.

In case of emergency: The seats have been coloured in blue, orange and green and the stairway has been given a different colour for the fans to identify the steps in case of emergency.

Dressing rooms: Fully renovated dressing rooms will welcome the players with improved facilities. Seats have been made extra comfortable with dedicated lockers for the players. The authorities have installed a sauna bath in each dressing room and, in a first, provided ice bath tubs with chilled water available right through. At any given time, four players can use the facility which doesn't require ice bricks. The dressing rooms have access to a modern gym exclusive for the players with equipment to assist high intensity training too.

Washrooms: This was an area that invited scathing criticism for DDCA when it staged the Test match against Australia in February 2023. The authorities have put in place a total of 77 new state of the art washrooms, 47 for men, with special attention for women. The authorities will provide sanitary pad dispensing machines and stations for changing diapers for babies.

Water: Free drinking water will be available in every stand through a centralised Reverse Osmosis (RO) facility in the stadium. The authorities

have readied 30 drinking water stations (with 10 taps each) at various locations. Also, eateries at reasonable rates will be available for the fans.

Floodlights: There are four LED towers equipped with 400 LED fixtures. The authorities promise uninterrupted supply of electricity power.

What's new: LED lights adorn the stadium and facade lighting will illuminate the venue. Gas generators will be in use with an upgraded sub-station and new transformers. A total of 52 new turnstiles have been put in place at a cost of 5.5 crore. New air conditioners will be used in the entire stadium. A canopy at every gate is a new addition with water proofing and fresh paint in every stand adding to the improved infrastructure. There will be two linear scoreboards in addition to the manual scoreboard which is mandatory. The scores will be visible to every spectator in the stadium. A giant screen will add to the entertainment segment.

Pitch perfect: There are a total of nine pitches in the main square, two that have been freshly laid, under the supervision of chief curator Ankit Datta. Pics: SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

"The gate to chair experience is my priority for the fans. I have approached my responsibility as a spectator. I have to look at it from the perspective of a ticket-buying fan. We have to showcase a modern stadium. We have upgraded every facility from the time the stadium was renovated in 2008. I have given special attention to the food and beverages section for the fans with no compromise on hygiene. I saw my first match here as a seven-year old in the 1996 World Cup when India lost to Sri Lanka. I am in charge of the World Cup matches now and I want to give the spectators a world-class stadium. As an administrator, I can always look to provide the best of facilities. But the public should also assure responsible utilisation of the facilities. They have to come back again to enjoy the match viewing experience," says Rohan Jaitley, president of DDCA.

Areas that need attention: Parking is an issue at the stadium with space reserved for 300 vehicles catering to teams, broadcasters, BCCI officials, DDCA club members and some important government officials. The organisers have made parking arrangements for ticket holders on match days.

Hotels and tourism: There are many hotels in the vicinity. A popular place is the Delhi Parsi Anjuman Hall, located within 500 metres from the main gate, with rooms at reasonable prices.

Quite a few star hotels are available in Connaught Place. The tourism is a plus for any visitor to the Capital with the Red Fort, Rajghat and Jama Masjid less than three km from the stadium.

« The gate to chair experience is my priority for the fans. I have approached my responsibility as a spectator. I have to look at it from the perspective of a ticket-buying fan. We have to showcase a modern stadium – Rohan Jaitley, President, DDCA »

Where glory got a new meaning

The iconic Wankhede looks be in **top shape** for the World Cup, with quite a few changes being implemented.

Amol Karhadkar
amol.k@thehindu.co.in

PIC: EMMANUAL YOGINI

Even before the Indian Premier League final was held in Ahmedabad, the charm of the IPL had disappeared from the Wankhede Stadium. The much-prolonged repair work — to the outfield and a section of stands and hospitality boxes — was undertaken.

After weeks of relentless effort, the Wankhede Stadium is decked up to welcome the World Cup back. While the fans will be looking forward to India playing Sri Lanka more than 12 years later at the same venue where Mahendra Singh Dhoni sealed the World Cup with a six, the Mumbai Cricket Association officials are confident of putting up the best foot forward and offering the fans an enriching experience.

Capacity: The stadium has a capacity of 33,000. However, for each of the five World Cup games, approximately 30,000 spectators can be accommodated after factoring in wasted seats due to sight-screen extensions, giant screens, etc.

Venue: Wankhede Stadium | **City:** Mumbai

Matches: England vs South Africa (October 21), Bangladesh vs South Africa (October 24), India vs Sri Lanka (November 2), Afghanistan vs Australia (November 7), First Semifinal (November 15).

Of these 30,000, not more than 15,000 tickets were sold online through the official ticketing partner. The remaining tickets are distributed as complimentary passes among the ICC, BCCI sponsors, MCA's affiliated clubs, former international cricketers from Mumbai, and various state and central agencies that are affiliated units of the MCA, along with the state and central agencies that help in the smooth conduct of the matches.

The MCA has 211 ordinary Maidan clubs affiliated with it. Each club is allotted a certain number of tickets for every international game, which are expected to be passed on to cricketers representing those clubs.

"We have appointed a professional auditing firm to oversee ticket distribution. It has ensured that transparency of the highest quality is being maintained while distributing tickets for each of the five matches," says Ajinkya Naik, the MCA secretary.

Hospitality boxes: The Wankhede Stadium has 59 corporate hospitality boxes, of which 48 are sold through the tendering process. The tendering process had been undertaken recently after the previous lease expired in 2021. All the boxes put together fit almost 1,000 spectators.

While the previous lease had a combined clause for IPL and international matches at Wankhede, the MCA has devised a mechanism to attract varied bidders by dividing and adding an additional category only for the IPL.

Practice facilities: It has been a bone of contention at the Wankhede due to a lack of space in south Mumbai. As a result, teams practise on the sidelines at the main stadium in the lead-up to matches. Besides, the MCA will also utilise the adjoining Brabourne Stadium — owned by the Cricket Club of India — and MCA's very own Sharad Pawar Cricket Academy at the Bandra-Kurla Complex. Should the monsoon prolong into October, the indoor facility at BKC will come in handy for the teams. "Since BKC has a year-round activity going, all the arrangements are in place to offer the highest quality training for all the teams competing in Mumbai," says Naik.

Pitch and outfield: The Wankhede has 13 pitches on the main square, with four being prepared for the five games, including the semifinal. The red-soil pitches have behaved to the delight of the majority of teams and players. MCA curator Ramesh Mhamunkar, a veteran, is confident of offering "sporting pitches" for the event. "Let me assure you that all the players and spectators will thoroughly enjoy playing on these pitches, as they always do," says Mhamunkar, without getting into the nitty-gritty, citing a BCCI directive

The grass is greener: The relaying of the grass started in May, with M/s. L.S. Brothers being handed the ground.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

for curators to not open up about the pitches. More than the pitches, it's the relaying of the outfield that was among Mhamunkar's major concerns. With weeds having sprung up all over the outfield, the MCA was told to relay the outfield by BCCI's chief curator almost two years ago. But the continuous allotment of the games kept delaying it. Finally, the relaying of the grass started in May, with M/s. L.S. Brothers being handed the ground. According to Mhamunkar, the outfield was scrapped "three inches deep" and fresh grass was relaid. "Due to the rain, we had to keep cutting the grass frequently, but by the end of August, the outfield had a lush-green look," says Mhamunkar. "Andy Atkinson (the ICC pitch consultant) was all praise for our work when he inspected the pitch and the outfield."

Entry points: The stadium has six gates and 48 turnstiles on match days. With the two foot-over bridges having been damaged and closed for spectators due to the dispute between the MCA and the Western Railway authorities, the MCA, just like the IPL, has created an additional gate —5A — from the University Pavilion entrance with an eye on avoiding overcrowding. The MCA has ensured that additional signages will be displayed all over south Mumbai. Besides, at least one lift will be reserved for wheelchair-bound spectators, barring two stands. A ramp will also be created for physically challenged spectators. With the stadium being adjacent to the famed Queen's Necklace, it is well connected through public transport. The Churchgate and Marine Lines local train stations are right next to it, while the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus is a short walk away. Despite the convenience, a majority of spectators have to walk almost two kilometres due to traffic diversions and logistical issues. Add to that the parking woes that the majority of four-wheeler and two-wheeler drivers face, and it's most advisable for spectators to avoid driving down on match days. Parking has been a major challenge for MCA, with the limited parking space barely enough to accommodate team buses and VVIP vehicles. For other hospitality boxes, the MCA rents out major parking lots in and around the stadium on match days, but that only leads to a maximum of 600 parking lots being available to the MCA. It barely fits VIPs and hospitality box ticket holders.

Accessibility and challenges: The first point of tickets being scanned to the seats is a substantial walk. Besides, for major games — especially the India-Sri Lanka and the semifinal — smooth spectator flow into the stands will be critical. Should the MCA open the gates early, at least for these games, it will ensure spectator convenience and safety. "We have roped in an event management agency so that the spectators enjoy a memorable experience at the Wankhede. The agency has been appointed to ensure the World Cup experience is as memorable — if not more than — the IPL for each and every spectator.

Pitch perfect: The Wankhede has 13 pitches on the main square, with four being prepared for the five games, including the big semifinal. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Trained staff and volunteers will assist every cricket-crazy fan that turns up at the stadium," says Naik.

In case of emergency: Three ambulances for the spectators will be stationed at various points in the stadium premises for medical emergencies, should the need arise. Besides the MCA's arrangement with Bombay Hospital for allotting beds on priority, if required, for spectators on match days, the MCA will install at least one first-aid kid in every stand, and doctors will be available at every booth. Sensing the hot and humid climate in Mumbai, free water stations will be created at every level.

Dressing rooms: Both the dressing rooms have been renovated. From the seating to the flooring to the dining area to the physiotherapy corner to the lavatories, everything has been renewed in the last four months. "This was a major part of the revamp project. We consulted former and current cricketers from Mumbai and have tried our best to include their suggestions to make players feel at home," says Naik.

Washrooms: For spectators, the Wankhede Stadium accounts for 53 washrooms for men and 54 for women combined. While the spectator-washroom ratio is acceptable considering the relatively smaller capacity, the hygiene of washrooms on match days has been questionable. The spectators have often complained about choked washrooms, especially in the latter half of an ODI. "It will not happen any longer," exclaims a MCA official.

Water: The BCCI has roped in a pouring partner. Besides, the MCA will add to its previous policy of having at least one free water station in every stand, and at every level.

Floodlights: Naik states that the BCCI inspection expressed full satisfaction with the existing floodlights, and the MCA has ensured the requisite intensity levels as per the tournament guidelines.

What's new: Besides the new-look dressing rooms, the MCA has also amended the president's box. The key feature is the addition of a gallery to the president's box, in order to let some of the VVIPs experience the real vibe of a game by being outdoors for a while.

The association is also trying its best to jazz up the stadium by having it newly painted and adding vibrant colours to the concourse and the walls. The main entrance will have a light show, in sync with the IPL model.

The MCA has also refurbished the media centre. Despite curtailing the capacity of the Balasaheb Thackeray Press Box by creating three corporate boxes since the new box was made in 2011, the press box will accommodate no more than 150 individuals. The commentary boxes area has also been renovated, with additional boxes allotted to regional language commentators for the official broadcasters.

« The MCA prides itself on the Wankhede Stadium and the overall spectator experience. We have left no stone unturned in ensuring the biggest spectacle in world cricket ends up being the most memorable event for everyone who turns up at the Wankhede for the World Cup. All the preparations are done with. We cannot wait for show-time now. – Ajinkya Naik, secretary, MCA »

Rumble on the highway

The Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium has **undergone a face-lift** for the first time since its inauguration in April 2012.

Stadium: Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium | **City:** Pune

Matches: India vs Bangladesh (October 19); Afghanistan vs Sri Lanka (October 30); New Zealand vs South Africa (November 1); England vs Netherlands (November 8); Australia vs Bangladesh (November 11)

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

The last time Pune hosted an ODI World Cup fixture, way back in 1996, the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Gahunje was not even built. The group league outing between the West Indies and Kenya — which the latter won by 73 runs — was played at the Nehru Stadium.

But 27 years later as the city gears up to host five World Cup 2023 fixtures — including an India vs Bangladesh game — the excitement is in the air. The Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium, located about 30 kilometres away from the city centre, has undergone a face-lift for the first time since its inauguration in April 2012.

The State association recently organised a World Cup trophy tour, where fans gathered in large numbers, chanting slogans like, '*Jeetega Bhai Jeetega, India Jeetega*,' and '*Vande Mataram*'.

Under the leadership of MCA president Rohit Pawar, a new sunroof is being installed in the stadium to ensure a smooth experience for the fans. If you are planning to watch a game here, here's all you need to know...

Capacity: The stadium has a capacity of 42,653, but to accommodate sight-screens on both ends and extend the dressing room arena keeping the international protocols in mind, some seats remain out of bounds.

According to Maharashtra Cricket Association officials, more than 36,000 tickets have gone up for sale on *BookMyShow*. The association has partnered with the ticketing agency and plans to set up multiple kiosks in the stadium premises and in some parts of the city leading up to the tournament where spectators can collect the physical tickets.

The hospitality boxes: There are 32 corporate hospitality boxes with a seating capacity of 12 each. "There are exclusive washrooms in each of those hospitality boxes. There are designated dining areas and lounges to ensure absolute comfort of the guests and dignitaries," says Ajinkya Joshi, the COO of the Maharashtra Cricket Association. Apart from the hospitality boxes, some of which are owned by noted corporate groups of the city, the plush president's box can accommodate 54 spectators.

Practice facilities: Four strips on both ends of the

square have been earmarked for training and nets sessions. Apart from that, there is an indoor facility inside the stadium premises where the teams can train, if they wish to. A separate state-of-the-art gymnasium is located on the ground floor of the stadium, adjacent to the dressing rooms.

Pitches: In total, there are 11 wickets, of which four will be used for the World Cup on a rotation basis. The pitch is made up of black soil — unlike the stadiums in Mumbai — and the boundary is shorter. Even though the venue has hosted several IPL and T20Is over the years, it hasn't hosted an ODI since March 2021, but going by the previous records, the curators indicate that it will be a traditional Gahunje wicket, where batters could have the edge.

In 2021, when India played three ODIs against England in Pune, all the matches were high-scoring affairs, with the teams crossing the 300-mark. According to the MCA officials, some of the areas were given a bit of 'fine-tuning' after the Maharashtra Premier League got over a couple of months ago.

Drainage and outfield: The stadium has a sand-based outfield. A layer of gravel, blinding layers of washed grit and sand with the root zone layer of silica sand, zeolite and cocopeat have been deployed to make the drainage system as efficient as possible.

The stadium has a hover cover, which is used to cover the square. "With an improved drainage system, matches can resume quickly even if it rains," says an MCA official.

On match days, the association deputes 20 groundsmen to get the ground ready and the same will continue for the World Cup as well.

Entry points: There are four gates — of which Gate No. 2 is restricted to the players and the dignitaries. The stadium is located on the Mumbai-Pune Highway and reaching here could be a challenge as there are not many options in terms of public transport. The Maharashtra Cricket Association has decided to repair the access roads — which are quite narrow — leading to the stadium before the tournament, so that those coming in their own vehicles won't face any challenges.

To avoid any traffic congestion outside the stadium, about 20 acres of land has been rented from villagers to supplement its own parking space. "Once the rains are over, we will work on war-footing to repair the service roads to avoid any inconvenience to visitors," Joshi says, adding: "We have tied up with a professional agency that will help us with parking. Those who have valid tickets can use this parking space."

Accessibility and challenges: From the entrance to the stands is a long walk. And when India squares off against Bangladesh on October 19, things could get challenging for the fans to find their way to the respective blocks and zones amid tight security.

But MCA seems to have found a way to address the issue. While there will be signages put up in each and every corner of the stadium, volunteers will be deputed to make sure the fans are guided to their respective blocks.

In the South-East block, a particular area has been earmarked for the differently-abled. "There will be about 15-20 seats that will be kept exclusively for the differently-abled, and that block will have a ramp so that they don't have any problem in reaching their seats," says apex council member Sunil Mutha, adding: "We also have wheelchair services for the fans..."

In case of emergency: There's round-the-clock ambulance service in the stadium premises. During the tournament, medical kiosks will be set up across the stadium for spectators.

The MCA is set to tie up with a local hospital for on-ground medical

services. "The doctors will be available throughout the matches and we will have quite a few super-speciality ambulances," the MCA COO says.

Dressing rooms: There are two dressing rooms — one for the home team and another for the away team. On the first floor, there are two spacious viewing galleries from where the players can watch the proceedings.

There are toilets in each of the dressing rooms — along with a shower room. The state-of-the-art gymnasium is located on the ground floor and can be accessed by both teams.

Washrooms: There are 76 washrooms in the stadiums — of which 32 are in hospitality boxes. On the ground floor, there are 16 toilets — for men and women — while that on Level One is four. The second and third levels have six and 10 washrooms each.

There are six washrooms in the player arena, while the other two are in the Old Broadcast arena.

Water: There are water stations on all the ten blocks that would provide RO water to the spectator.

The BCCI also plans to tie up with the official 'pouring partner' of the tournament to provide free drinking water for all the spectators.

Solar panels and LEDs: Though the stadium hasn't installed solar panels yet, it uses LED floodlights in the stadium premises. "There are four floodlight poles with each having 142 LED lights," says an official.

What's new: Earlier, most parts of the stadium did not have a sunroof. But ahead of the mega event, MCA president Pawar has taken the initiative of putting up new sunroofs in the East-West and the diagonally opposite blocks. "The president has taken this initiative to make sure that the fans have a smooth experience, and it's because of his efforts that we have started the work on a war-footing," says Joshi.

The MCA officials are confident that the sunroofs will be installed by the first week of October.

To accommodate journalists from across the globe, the association has expanded the media centre and now it can accommodate around 150 people.

Areas that need attention

Since the stadium is quite far from the city, there are concerns regarding the availability of public transport. Narrow service roads and parking issues make it equally challenging for fans to book rides from the stadium on match days.

#As the World Cup returns to the city after more than two-and-a-half decade, the fans are excited to attend the games in large numbers, so keeping that in mind, it needs to be seen whether the MCA partners with the local authorities to arrange some local transport or introduce shuttle services to ply the spectators.

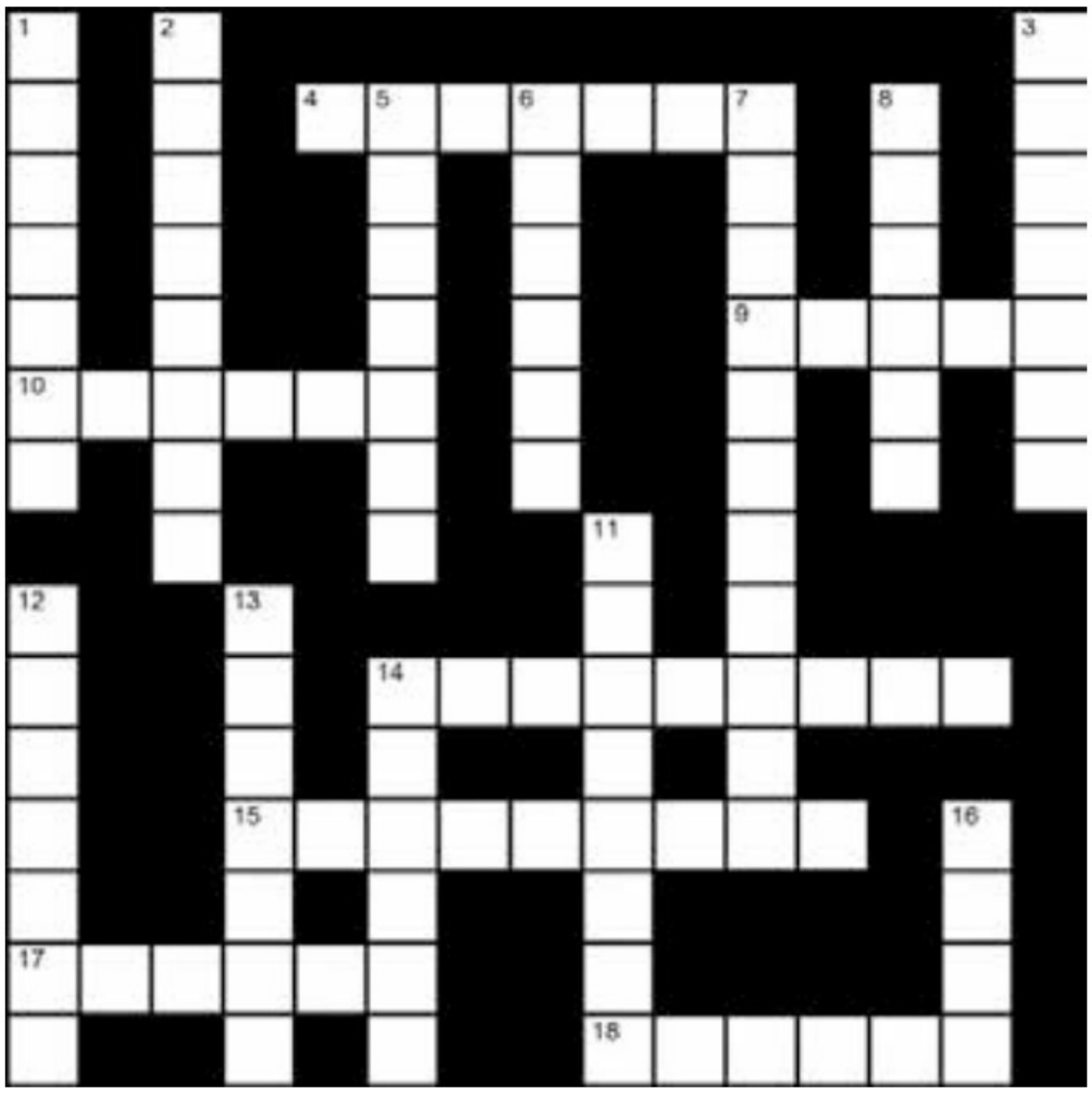
Spruced up: Stands, dressing rooms, trainning facilities and drainage system have been improved ahead of the World Cup in Pune's MCA Stadium.

Pics: EMMANUAL YOGINI

EMMANUAL YOGINI

« We have upgraded the facilities at the stadium and will make sure that none of the spectators face any challenges and can enjoy the World Cup – Rohit Pawar, President, Maharashtra Cricket Association »

CROSSWORD
SRIRAM SRINIVASAN



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

World Cup 2023 Special

ACROSS

4 The only bowler to take five wickets in the finals of the inaugural edition. (7)

9 He scored the highest in the 1992 finals match. (5)

10 It scored just 36 against Lanka in a 2003 Cup match. (6)

14 His 149 gave Australia the victory in the 2007 edition. (9)

15 The only Indian bowler to go wicket-less in the 1983 World Cup finals. (5,4)

17 The 1996 finals was hosted here. (6)

18 No one has scored more in World Cups than him. (6)

DOWN

1 Like Eoin Morgan, he also represented Ireland and England in World Cup matches. (2,5)

2 The South African who was player of the 1999 tournament. (8)

3 First to take two hat-tricks in World Cups. (7)

5 The team with the highest run chase in any World Cup. (7)

6 The only man to score a century in the 2011 finals, which India won. (6)

7 He hit five centuries in the 2019 World Cup. (5,6)

8 He led Australia to victory in 2015. (6)

11 The centurion for the victorious Windies team in the 1979 finals. (8)

12 The highest-ever individual score of 237 was achieved by .... (7)

13 The umpire with the most number of appearances in the finals. (7)

14 The highest-ever 10th wicket partnership of 71 was between Roberts and ... against India in 1983. (6)

16 His 75 helped Australia narrowly beat England in the 1987 edition. (4)

Reliable mind: Kumar Dharmasena officiated at the 2019 World Cup final.
GETTY IMAGES

ANALYSIS

IN THE HOT SEAT

Cricket umpiring has seen an unbelievable transformation over the years with the officials **feeling the pressure more** in the big matches, especially World Cup games.

Vijay Lokapally
vijay.l@thehindu.co.in

A commentator was once challenged to give his decision on air the moment an appeal was made by the fielding side. The player realised it was easy to be wise after the event. He was getting most decisions wrong.

"Umpiring is not everyone's cup of tea" — the great Swaroop Kishan Reu, the late Indian umpire who officiated during the 1970s and '80s, would often tick off people who would question his rulings. Reu was an umpire who was friendly with the cricketers but at no point did he compromise his position. He would not stop from admonishing the players on the field.

For retired English umpire Dickie Bird, who stood in three ICC World Cup finals, nothing could match the excitement of officiating in a Test match. Bird wrote in his autobiography — "I have always found it difficult to come back down to earth after a big game, particularly after the excitement and tension of a World Cup final." To stand in a World Cup is indeed a matter of immense pride for every match official — umpire or match referee.

Cricket umpiring has seen an unbelievable transformation over the years with the officials feeling the pressure more in the big matches, especially World Cup games. But for Nitin Menon, who will be officiating in the 2023 edition, there is nothing like a big match. He

Expert opinion: Simon Taufel's sense of judgment and reading of the playing conditions went a long way in helping him give consistent decisions.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

told *Sportstar*, "We do not think of matches as 'big' or 'small' as such. For us each game is important. But we do prepare differently for matches – to deal with different conditions, different teams. For example, our preparation for the sub-continent may be different. There would also be matches where we will keep the rivalry between teams in mind. The position of the tournament – knockout game or league game, etc. may also be at the back of our mind."

To bring some consistency in the system, the cricket authorities introduced technological support to make umpiring as error free as possible by taking the help of the third umpire, a concept that made its debut in the 1992 series between India and host South Africa. Incidentally, the first victim of the third umpire was Sachin Tendulkar himself, run out and appealed for by Jonty Rhodes. The same year had seen the introduction of the Match Referee too, during India's tour of Australia.

Fast forward to the 2010s, the 2011 World Cup saw the introduction of the Decision Review System (DRS) where a team could challenge the decision of the on field umpire. India had long opposed the DRS system and ironically it was this very use of technology that saved the home team the match against Pakistan in Mohali. Umpire Ian Gould ruled Sachin Tendulkar leg-before to Saeed Ajmal and a review showed the ball missing the leg stump.

Ball tracking and Hot Spot have been innovations that have added to the pressure the umpires endure. Their decision being overruled can create self doubt in the minds of the umpires but then they are well prepared for such moments. Playing conditions are kept in mind when giving decisions like leg-before. "We do keep pitch conditions in mind, not only how much the ball is turning but also the bounce. Is it high bounce, low bounce or variable bounce? All these things matter, especially for lbw decisions," asserts Menon, the youngest umpire in this tournament, at 39.

Menon will partner Kumar Dharmasena in the opening match of the 2023 World Cup between England and New Zealand. Incidentally, Dharmasena also officiated in the final between the same two teams at Lord's four years ago. Paul Wilson (TV umpire), Sharfuddoula Ibne Shahid Saikat (fourth umpire) and Javagal Srinath (Match Referee) will be the other officials for the opening match.

The ICC follows an elaborate selection process that it runs with the help of Member Boards. The initial recommendations come from Member Boards and then they are assessed by the ICC. The Member Boards, on their own, are expected to help prepare quality umpires through a robust system that assesses performances in domestic cricket before candidates are upgraded to the next level.

There can be exceptions like Simon Taufel, who was a born umpire. His

2023 World Cup

Umpires
Chris Brown (New Zealand), Kumar Dharmasena (Sri Lanka), Marais Erasmus (South Africa), Christopher Gaffaney (New Zealand), Michael Gough (England), Adrian Holdstock (South Africa), Richard Illingworth (England), Richard Kettleborough (England), Nitin Menon (India), Ahsan Raza (Pakistan), Paul Reiffel (Australia), Sharfuddoula Ibne Shahid (Bangladesh), Rodney Tucker (Australia), Alex Wharf (England), Joel Wilson (West Indies) and Paul Wilson (Australia).

Match Referees
Jeff Crowe (New Zealand), Andy Pycroft (Zimbabwe), Richie Richardson (West Indies) and Javagal Srinath (India).

sense of judgment and reading of the playing conditions went a long way in helping him give consistent decisions. Taufel stood in his first Test when he was only 29 and came to be regarded as the best umpire on the circuit. Despite this, he couldn't stand in a World Cup final until 2011, due to his home country's relentless victory run in the 2003 and 2007 editions.

Fearless force: Nitin Menon is the youngest umpire in the tournament at 39.
GETTY IMAGES

NITIN MENON WILL PARTNER KUMAR DHARMASENA IN THE OPENING MATCH OF THE 2023 WORLD CUP

Apart from the Elite panel, there is also an International Panel in place, which steps in when required for events like the World Cup and also many other international matches. The process again is strict and the emphasis is on the consistency of giving good decisions. In fact, old timers maintain that a good umpire is one who gives the least number of bad decisions.

There is a system in place for the development of the umpires. The umpires are groomed by the ICC's Umpires' Coaches over the years and they get feedback on everything — right from their decisions to how they controlled the games and their reactions. It is here that the officials learn to back each other because umpires are known to have great bonding on and off the field. Umpires and Match Referees discuss situations, decisions, teams and players. Having meals and travelling together is an integral part of their process of understanding each other.

The Match Referees are mostly famous players with deep knowledge of the game and its conduct. Each match official has his/her strong point — some excel with onfield decisions and some are better with onfield decisions, like TV umpires. The ICC has women umpires coming through too and it is confident their number will grow in the coming years. The ICC also runs workshops — previously used to be a set time of the year but now is generally before major events. It is understood that a workshop will be held before this World Cup because the subcontinent offers various challenges in terms of weather and pitches.

Sean Easey, the ICC Senior Manager — Umpires and Referees, says, "The selection and appointment processes that we run in conjunction with Member Boards has helped us to identify highly skilled elite panels and a robust feeder system that includes international and development panels. The ICC Cricket Operations department has a system of assessing umpire performance that helps in their development, but what is also important is the teamwork and support they get from colleagues. They all back each other and share experiences. I am confident that we will have many good match officials coming through in the years ahead, including several females who have been consistently doing well."

The biggest irritant for the umpires and Match Referees is the relentless scrutiny they are subjected to. How do they deal with it? "The best way to deal with scrutiny is to avoid social media and what the newspapers, experts or former players are saying. Whenever we get free time between games, we avoid talking about cricket. We read books, some play golf, some just hit the gym or go for a swim," Menon concludes.

For this tournament in India, the ICC has announced 20 officials — 16 umpires and four Match Referees. England enjoys the highest representation among the umpires with four, followed by Australia (3), NZ (2) and SA (2). Twelve of them come from the Emirates ICC Elite Panel, while there are six debutants — Sharfuddoula, Menon, Ahsan Raza, Adrian Holdstock, Alex Wharf and Chris Brown. Sharfuddoula, especially has additional reasons to be proud as he is the first ever umpire from Bangladesh to be selected in the WC panel.

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

INDIA NEEDS TO FIND A FIFTH BOWLING OPTION FOR WORLD CUP

For several players around the world, this World Cup could mark their last appearance. **Let's hope they leave on a high,** even if their teams don't go on to lift the trophy.

The last three World Cups have been won by the countries hosting the event. India started the trend by winning in 2011, followed by Australia, who beat co-hosts New Zealand in the finals in 2015, and in the last tournament in England in 2019, it was England who had the rub of the green and won the tournament for the first time, and that too in a super over.

Over the years, the World Cups have become far more competitive as players from all the countries have gained more experience playing white-ball cricket in the T20 leagues that have mushroomed all over the world. Of course, this World Cup is a 50-over side event, but the players bring the T20 boldness and innovativeness into the 50-over game and liven things up considerably. It will thus be a surprise if there are any easy matches in this World Cup. Even the Netherlands, an associate member country, have earned their place by virtue of some stellar performances in the qualifying tournament in Zimbabwe, beating the huge score put up by former champions the West Indies. That the Caribbean Islands team is not in this edition of the World Cup is a lament that cricket lovers from all over the world are having. That said, they have been playing some ordinary cricket and have just not been able to win the close games.

The defending champions, England, are again the favourites to win the title. The disaster in the 2015 edition, where they were knocked out at the group stage itself, brought about a transformation in their thinking and approach to one-day cricket. They were shown the way by the runners-up of that tournament, New Zealand, who were touring England in the first half of the English summer. The swashbuckling manner in which New Zealand played under the leadership of Brendon McCullum was almost blindly copied by England, and they went on to win the one-day series by either scoring or chasing more than 300 runs in just about every game. Now, with Mccullum as the England Test team coach, their Test match batting is like in limited overs cricket, totally unafraid to take any bowling on. They are also blessed to have some of the game's best all-rounders in their ranks. These players can change the direction of the game with both bat and ball.

The Indians have a top team too, though in

All-round impact: Hardik Pandya has started bowling more regularly, and his knack for picking important wickets will hold India in good stead at the World Cup. GETTY IMAGES

recent times they have struggled to defend even big totals put up by the batters. They still have some work to do regarding who their fifth bowler is going to be with Hardik Pandya, the sixth bowling option. Pandya began to bowl a lot more than a few months ago, and not only that, but he is picking important wickets too.

They, like any team, need a bit of luck in the knockouts to get through to the finals.

There's Australia, of course, who are always contenders for the top prize in any tournament they play, and Pakistan, who on their day can beat the world, are in the mix too, along with the South Africans, who showed admirable temperament in coming from behind to win the recent one-day series against Australia. Their temperament has been their problem in the knockouts. But if the just-concluded series against Australia is any indication, they could well be the dark horses in the tournament.

The other teams, with due respect, can be party poopers at best, winning the odd match here and there, but it's hard to see them going on to win the competition. For several players around the world, this World Cup could mark their last appearance. Let's hope they leave on a high, even if their teams don't go on to lift the trophy.

Over the years, the World Cups have become far more competitive as players from all the countries have gained more experience playing white-ball cricket in the T20 leagues that have mushroomed all over the world

Number of matches at World Cup

83

Number of matches won

49

(includes tied final vs NZ in 2019)

Title | 2019

England

THE RETURN OF STOKES AUGURS WELL FOR ENGLAND'S TITLE DEFENCE

By Dhruva Prasad

Jos Buttler

PREDICTION

England should make it to the final, especially considering its recent performances in white-ball cricket. Its attacking approach with the bat is likely to take many teams by surprise, including host India, and it has variety in the bowling department to go the distance.

While England's awakening after the 2015 World Cup debacle was followed by a title win in the following edition, its Bazball revolution in Tests has informed a major change in its ODI squad. Jason Roy, England's top scorer in ODIs since that the 2019 World Cup, lost his place to Harry Brook, pacesetter of the team's frenetic tempo of late in Tests. Despite Brook's harrowing series against New Zealand, captain Jos Buttler values his ability to float anywhere in the top six of a line-up that runs as deep as No. 8 – where Moeen Ali is likely to be slotted.

Batters such as Joe Root and Liam Livingstone, who can bowl handy overs, and the return of Ben Stokes, who struck a blinding 182 after coming out of retirement, lend the defending champion this depth. England is the fastest scoring team across phases since 2019 and clarity of role and approach has been its hallmark. Dawid Malan, set to open with Jonny Bairstow, had a prolific series against the Kiwis and has bought into the philosophy, and Root will be vital to England's hopes of being true to it in spin-friendly conditions. England has largely maintained the 2019 title-winning core, barring Roy, Eoin Morgan and Jofra Archer, in whose place Mark Wood, subject to fitness, will spearhead the attack. With Sam Curran and Chris Woakes possibly completing the pace trio, the batting is further bolstered. The plethora of all-rounders also allows England to field Adil Rashid on turning tracks without significantly impacting the team balance.

KEY PLAYERS

Joe Root

Moeen Ali

Number of matches at World Cup
89

Number of matches won
54

Runner-up | 2015 and 2019

New Zeala

WILLIAMSON, ALONG WITH SOUTHEE, WILL BE PLAYING IN THEIR FOURTH ODI WORLD CUP

Kane Williamson

By Ayan Acharya

PREDICTION

We will spend the next six weeks talking exhaustively about the inevitability of New Zealand's bouncebackability during World Cups. There will be a lot of pressure to make it to the finals, but with key players injured and increasingly competitive opponents, this tournament will not be a walk in the park for the Black Caps.

Trent Boult and Tim Southee rely on their swing bowling skills, compensating for their lack of express pace, while Lockie Ferguson adds sheer speed to the quartet, complemented by Matt Henry. Yet, there are significant concerns about their effectiveness in restraining aggressive batting during the death overs. New Zealand has struggled, conceding close to eight runs per over in the final 10 overs of all ODIs played this year.

In captain Kane Williamson, New Zealand possesses a world-class batter who can rebuild or accelerate the innings as needed. However, there are reservations about his return from a prolonged injury absence. Although he is named in the World Cup squad, Williamson has yet to make a competitive cricket comeback. Williamson, along with Southee, will be playing in their fourth ODI World Cup, having featured in 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Devon Conway and Tom Latham, both left-handed batters in the top six, can discourage the opposition from using left-arm spin and leg spin against top-order. Mitch Santner and Ish Sodhi are the frontline spinners.
New Zealand will likely play both, and the most effective way to counter this pair is for teams to utilise right-hand and left-hand combinations.

Devon Conway

Ish Sodhi

and

KEY PLAYERS

Number of matches at World Cup

94

Number of matches won

69

Titles | 1987, 1999, 2003, 2007 & 2015

Australia

THE AUSSIES WILL START AS ONE OF THE FAVOURITES DESPITE A SHAKY BUILD-UP

By Ayan Acharya

Pat Cummins

PREDICTION

Australia has 'big game' hunters and will be in the final. Who will join it is a hard choice to make but it would certainly be interesting, and make for a great match, if it is England. That said, Andrew McDonald's side has had a lacklustre build-up to the tournament. It has lost five successive ODIs and its death-overs economy this year stands at over 9 — the worst for any team. Australia will be hoping Mitchell Starc's return provides some relief.

Australia has adopted a top-heavy strategy, aiming to maintain strong batting until No. 8, provided the team composition allows for it. While they expect high-scoring games on Indian pitches, they are also prepared for spin-friendly conditions, particularly in matches against India (Chennai), Sri Lanka (Lucknow), and South Africa (Lucknow).

The squad emphasises flexibility, avoiding a fixed approach or starting XI. This is reflected in the presence of numerous all-rounders like Marcus Stoinis, Cameron Green, Mitchell Marsh, and Glenn Maxwell. If Stoinis and Marsh can contribute with the ball upfront, Australia can reduce its reliance on specialist seamers. The absence of the left-arm tweaker, Ashton Agar, is a concern, and leg-spinner Adam Zampa seems to be the only wicket-taking spinner at the moment. It also means Maxwell will be the second spinner.

Australia has decided to carry opener Travis Head through the first half of the tournament despite his broken hand. While Marsh opened with David Warner during the India series, Australia could also consider elevating Cameron Green up the batting order. Green struggled in the middle order against India but found success as an opening batsman for the Mumbai Indians in his first-ever IPL appearance earlier this year.

Number of matches at World Cup
64

Number of matches won
38

Semifinalist | 1992, 1999, 2007 & 2015

South Africa

A STABLE YET DESTRUCTIVE MIDDLE-ORDER AND A STRONG PACE ATTACK WILL HOLD THE KEY

Temba Bavuma

By Pranay Rajiv

PREDICTION

South Africa should make it to the semifinal, considering how explosive its batting unit is. One thing that can hold it back will be its spin bowling unit, with Tabraiz Shamsi's tendency to leak runs a major drawback.

South Africa's performance in its recent series win against Australia provided a glimpse of the side's approach going into the World Cup. The Proteas have a deep and experienced batting lineup, with batters capable of lifting the side to huge totals. Over the last four years, only English batters have gone at a faster clip than South Africans in ODIs. Skipper Temba Bavuma and wicket-keeper batter Quinton de Kock are expected to kickstart the proceedings

rica

up top. In Heinrich Klaasen, Aiden Markram, David Miller, and Rassie van der Dussen, South Africa has a stable yet destructive middle order. Among batters to have scored more than 1000 runs in the last four years in ODIs, only six have a strike rate greater than 100, of which three are South Africans — Klaasen, Markram and Miller.

South Africa's strength extends to its bowling unit, which is pillared by pace sensation Kagiso Rabada, who is equally proficient with the new ball and at the death. There is also Lungi Ngidi and young gun Gerald Coetzee, who was a surprise pick in the squad. Fast-bowling all-rounder Marco Jansen will act as the bridge between the bowling and batting unit. But Anrich Nortje's presence will be sorely missed, who has been ruled out of the tournament due to an injury.

KEY PLAYERS

Heinrich Klaasen

Kagiso Rabada

Number of matches at World Cup
79

Number of matches won
45

Title | 1992

Pakistan

ITS OVERRELIANCE ON THE TOP ORDER COULD POSE A CHALLENGE

By Lalith Kalidas

Babar Azam

PREDICTION

Pakistan has been jostling with India and Australia for the No. 1 ranking in ODIs this year, but Babar Azam's men look far from a settled unit. As unpredictable as it can be, Pakistan will start the World Cup playing catch-up for a semifinal spot and probably finish just below the top four.

It was all a cruise for Pakistan in the preparatory marathon for the World Cup until it dropped momentum in the most inopportune lap. A harrowing Asia Cup campaign has dampened the fire in the engine room, exposed certain chinks and also broken down a few bodies. Pakistan's overreliance on the top order means captain Babar Azam will have to bring his inimitable best to take his side deep into the tournament.

While a wavering Fakhar Zaman could make way for Abdullah Shafique up top with Imam-ul-Haq, Babar remains the most vital piece, shepherding a mercurial middle-order alongside Mohammed Rizwan.

In Shaheen Afridi, Haris Rauf and Naseem Shah, Pakistan had the most enviable pace attack in readiness for the tournament. However, with an untimely shoulder injury sidelining Naseem indefinitely, Pakistan enters yet another World Cup with uncertainties reeking through the ranks. Its spin closet wears a woeful look after its lead spinner Shadab Khan was blunted on tacky Sri Lankan pitches.

While Iftikhar Ahmed can chip in with his crafty off-spin besides his batting muscle in the lower-order, Pakistan heads into the tournament with a pack of unsettled cards, riding thin on the prowess of a few lead characters.

KEY PLAYERS

Shaheen Afridi

Iftikhar Ahmed

Number of matches at World Cup
80

Number of matches won
38

Title | 1996

Sri Lanka

THE ISLAND NATION HAS DEVELOPED THE KNACK OF DISCOVERING UNLIKELY MATCH-WINNERS

By Dhruva Prasad

Dasun Shanaka

PREDICTION

Despite a precipitous fall since its glory days between 2007 and 2014, Sri Lanka often defies expectations. However, translating success at the continental level to the global stage will be a bridge too far and in reaching the semifinals, Sri Lanka will exceed expectations again.

Sri Lanka was stretched across the spectrum during its recent 13-match winning streak in ODIs. It dismissed the opposition in 14 consecutive matches but its batting collapses were a persistent refrain during this period.
With Wanindu Hasaranga's injury ruling him out of the World Cup, Sri Lanka will miss its star all-rounder, whose leg-spin was pivotal to the team defending a string of low scores during its unbeaten run in the World Cup qualifiers. Whether Maheesh Theekshana's mystery spin and Dunith Wellalage's recent exploits are enough to take Sri Lanka over the line will depend on the batters, who will be under the scanner on Indian pitches that are either rank turners or flatbeds.

Be it Kusal Perera or Kusal Mendis' flamboyance at the top or Sadeera Samarickwarama's composure in the middle, Sri Lanka has the personnel to counter different conditions. During the rough transition since 2015, the island nation has developed the knack of discovering unlikely match-winners and the Asia Cup title in 2022 was testimony to this ability.

While Charith Asalanka and Dhananjaya de Silva will be called upon to deliver with bat and ball, the burning concern for Sri Lanka is the form of captain Dasun Shanaka in the lower order. His woeful form with the bat reflects in Sri Lanka's third-lowest run rate at the death since 2022, which contrasts sharply with its death bowling, led by rising star Matheesha Pathirana.

Number of matches at World Cup
40

Number of matches won
14

Best finish | Super Eights (2007), Quarterfinal (2015)

Bangladesh

ITS BATTING LINE-UP STILL LARGELY REVOLVES AROUND 2007 WORLD CUP CAMPAIGNERS SHAKIB AND RAHIM

By Dhruva Prasad

Shakib Al Hasan

PREDICTION

Bangladesh enters another World Cup campaign without having shed the giant-killer tag and with a core that has been a constant since 2007. Its over-reliance on this nucleus will see Bangladesh reduced to little more than a side capable of pulling off the odd upset, particularly at venues where spin holds sway.

Injuries to key players and rotation of personnel have prevented Bangladesh from fielding a full-strength team ahead of the World Cup. As much as the return of Najmul Hossain Shanto lends stability to the top-order, Bangladesh will miss the experience of Tamim Iqbal.

The Tigers lost only one ODI series at home between 2015 and 2022, but defeats against England, Afghanistan and New Zealand this year have punctured the aura of invincibility. The slump can largely be attributed to a brittle batting line-up, that still largely revolves around 2007 World Cup campaigners Shakib Al Hasan and Mushfiqur Rahim. The middle-order is often forced to restrain itself in the wake of a top-order collapse and an impending long tail when the team opts for a bowling cover. Amidst that pressure, Towhid Hridoy has emerged as a calming influence with a higher gear.

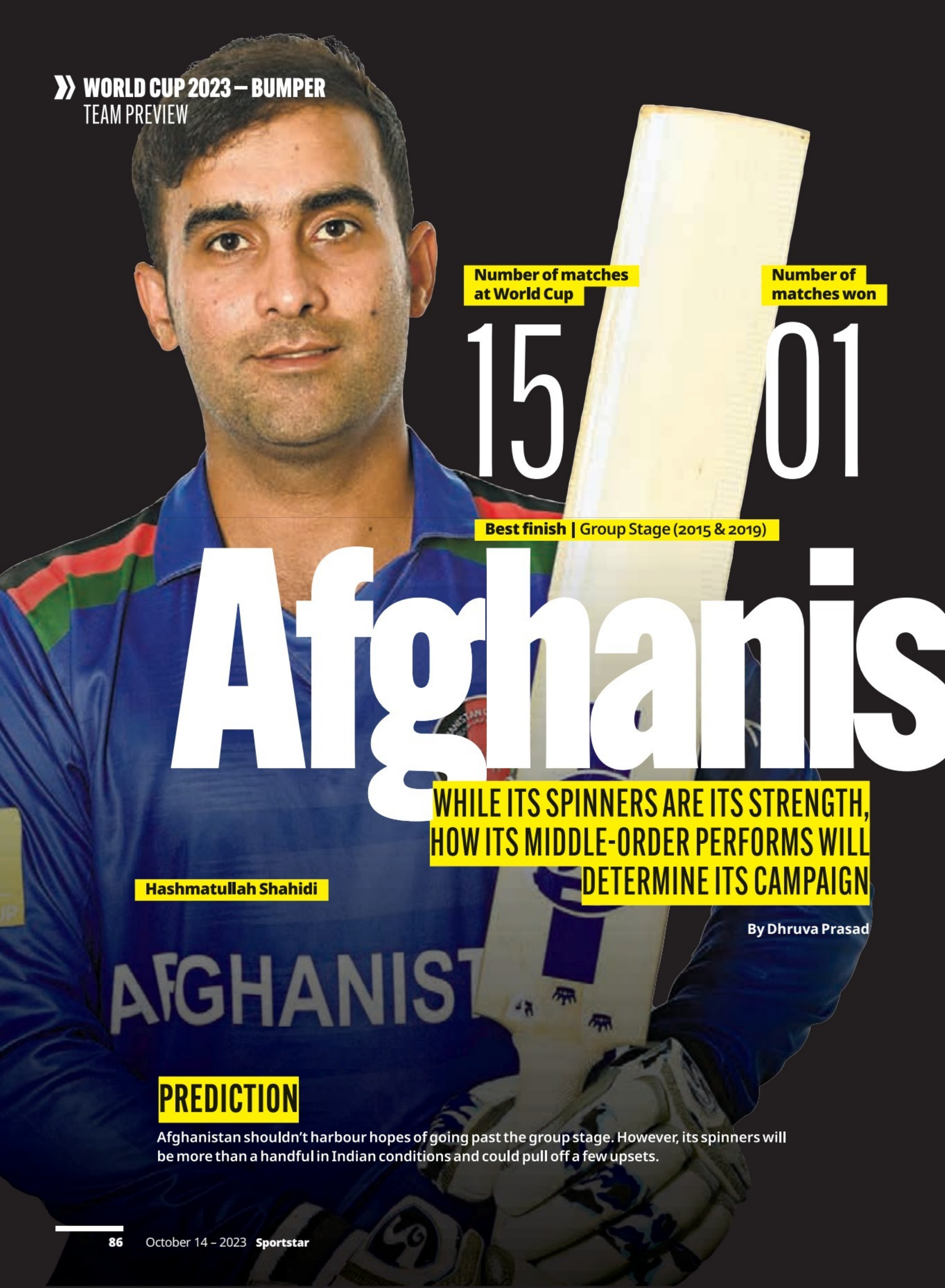
All-rounders Mehidy Hasan Miraz and Shakib will be vital as they offer batting depth and ensure the team's bowling resources are not hamstrung. Despite its traditional reliance on spinners, Bangladesh has had an awakening in the fast-bowling department, which includes the pace of Taskin Ahmed and Hasan Mahmud and the variations and bounce offered by left-armers Mustafizur Rahman and Shoriful Islam.

esh

KEY PLAYERS

Mehidy Hasan Miraz

Towhid Hridoy



Number of matches at World Cup

15

Number of matches won

01

Best finish | Group Stage (2015 & 2019)

Afghanis

WHILE ITS SPINNERS ARE ITS STRENGTH, HOW ITS MIDDLE-ORDER PERFORMS WILL DETERMINE ITS CAMPAIGN

Hashmatullah Shahidi

By Dhruva Prasad

PREDICTION

Afghanistan shouldn't harbour hopes of going past the group stage. However, its spinners will be more than a handful in Indian conditions and could pull off a few upsets.

Afghanistan's recent results in bilaterals, T20I and ODI series wins against a second-string Pakistan and Bangladesh, respectively, have shown that the team has what it takes to beat the Full Members. They seem to be maturing as a cricketing force with every passing series and the World Cup will provide clues into whether they can translate those learnings at the highest level. Afghanistan's chaotic two-run defeat to Sri Lanka in the Asia Cup, where it was unaware of the permutations needed to qualify for the next round, typifies the team's nerves

stan

in multi-nation tournaments. Its recent success has come on the back of the prolific opening duo of Ibrahim Zadran and Rahmanullah Gurbaz and world-class spinners Rashid Khan and Mujeeb Ur Rahman. Consistency in the middle-order has been a sore spot for most Asian teams and Afghanistan is no exception.

The batting form of Mohammad Nabi and Rashid, especially at the death, becomes crucial in the face of an undercooked middle-order as Afghanistan's innings often fizzle out after promising starts. Afghanistan, however, has made rapid strides in the fast-bowling department, led by left-armer Fazalhaq Farooqi, who played a key role in Afghanistan's notable victories recently.

While the top-order and the spin department will be the cornerstone of Afghanistan's campaign, how the comparatively weaker middle-order and pace attack fare against stronger opposition could be the difference between agony and ecstasy.

KEY PLAYERS

Rashid Khan

Rahmanullah Gurbaz

Scott Edwards

Number of matches at World Cup

20

Number of matches won

02

Best finish | Group Stage (1996, 2003, 2007 & 2011)

Netherla

ITS HOPES HINGE A LOT ON ITS BATTING LINE-UP, LED BY SKIPPER EDWARDS

By Pranay Rajiv

PREDICTION

It is highly unlikely that the Netherlands will make it to the semifinals. But the Dutch side has the potential to upset a few apple carts on the way.

For the Netherlands, at the ODI World Cup, the prize lies in participation. Having found its way to the quadrennial event after toppling two-time champion West Indies in the qualifiers, the going will get even tougher for the Dutch in India.

Their hopes will hinge a lot on their batting line-up, led by skipper and wicket-keeper Scott Edwards, who has been the side's top-scorer over the last three years.

bowling unit though will be significantly weakened by the absence of the left-arm pacer Fred Klaassen, who misses out due to a stress fracture.

The Dutch bowling will also be hampered by the lack of quality in their spin department. Over the last three years, their spinners have picked just 66 wickets, at a whopping average of 53.43.

nds

Adding heft to the batting unit will be opener Vikramjit Singh, who top-scored for the side in the World Cup qualifiers and Indian-born middle-order batter Teja Nidamanuru, who scored a whirlwind century against West Indies.

The presence of capable all-rounders like Logan van Beek — who is also the side's top wicket-taker over the last three years — Bas de Leede and Roelof van der Merwe, who returns to the side after missing the qualifiers, provides the Dutch team with some much-needed balance at both ends. The Netherlands'

Rohit Sharma

Number of matches at World Cup
84

Number of matches won
53

Titles | 1983 & 2011

India

ROHIT, KOHLI AND GILL FORM A FORMIDABLE TOP-THREE AND WILL NEED TO FIRE IN TANDEM

By Lalith Kalidas

PREDICTION

Nothing short of an implosion can keep India away from a semifinal berth. However, the quest to clinch that elusive ICC trophy remains as bumpy as it has been over the last decade. The team's core matches the best in terms of skill any day and only the quantum of verve during knockouts could become the difference between world domination and an earlier ride home.

Virat Kohli

Jasprit Bumrah

KEY PLAYERS

India's build-up to another home World Cup has been sketched primarily along predictable lines, save for R. Ashwin's last-minute inclusion. Its winning form has been the best since the start of 2023, and an Asia Cup triumph certainly will be a shot in the arm.

Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli and Shubman Gill form a top-order that oozes finesse. It is those big moments that they need to shoulder collectively. They are supported by able right-handers in KL Rahul, Hardik Pandya and Shreyas Iyer. The lack of a left-hand bat raises a question of variety; it will be interesting if Ishan Kishan remains a backup opener.

Weaknesses of the likely starting lineup against left-arm bowlers — pace and spin — could pose some hard questions. Intent and counter-attacking ability are other vexing issues on the table.

India can, however, be content with three fearless first-choice bowlers in the arsenal. A fit-again Jasprit Bumrah looked deadly in his fleeting spells in Sri Lanka. Mohammed Siraj, with his seam and swing upfront and a rejuvenated Kuldeep Yadav will be a force to be reckoned with. Hardik, too, is reeling in more overs with the white Kookaburra.

However, the indifferent form of left-arm spin all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel's absence will be a reminder of a roster short on X-factors.

PIC:BCCI

BORN TO BAT: HOW THE HITMAN CAME TO BE

Rohit's childhood coach, Dinesh Lad, traces back the progress of a **stunning career** that could easily frustrate.

Amol Karhadkar
amol.k@thehindu.co.in

When Rohit Sharma left for England four years ago as Virat Kohli's deputy for India's ODI World Cup campaign, his childhood coach and mentor, Dinesh Lad, expressed the same sentiments as most of Rohit's fans. "The World Cup means the world to him. When he missed out in 2011, it ended up being the turning point of his career. Now, I hope that he returns with the trophy in his hand."

Fast forward to 2023, and Rohit has achieved remarkable success. He did return with a trophy in 2019 but being adjudged the Player of the Tournament could only be a consolation for missing out on the ultimate prize.

Rohit is now the joint-most successful captain in the Indian Premier League. He is also one of the most feared openers in white-ball cricket and has managed to establish himself as a dependable Test opener. In 2020, he was conferred with the Khel Ratna Award, the highest sporting honour in India. The guru's efforts were also acknowledged. Lad, who has also coached Shardul Thakur, was presented with the Dronacharya Award.

Carrying the burden of expectations has always come naturally to Rohit. When he was 12, his father and five siblings pooled resources and borrowed money from

friends to send him to a cricket camp in Borivali. At the time, Rohit was living with his grandparents and uncle Ravi.

Lad — who was coaching at the camp — was impressed with Rohit's off-spin and convinced Ravi to enrol him at Swami Vivekanand International School. He also managed to get his fees waived. Rohit quickly became the focus of the school management and the local cricket community's expectations, which he met by winning games with his off-spin.

One day, when Lad was late for a net session, he saw Rohit shadow-practising his batting strokes. This is when Lad realised that Rohit could bat as well.

"It is often said that kids from financially humble families do not flourish as cricketers. I can tell you that if you have the talent and the willingness to work hard and are lucky, your financial background doesn't matter at all. Rohit Sharma is a glaring example of it," says Lad.

After being impressed by Rohit's talent, Lad, a protégé of the legendary Ramakant Achrekar and a former player for Western Railway, tried to convince his friends in Mumbai to "notice kids beyond Bandra."

Promising start: (Above, left) Rohit Sharma's childhood coach, Dinesh Lad, was privy to his ward's transformation from a promising talent to a batting colossus. (Right) Rohit Sharma — sitting third from right — with his teammates after National Cricket Academy won the MRF Trophy in 2005 in Bangalore. EMMANUAL YOGINI & THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Rohit faced initial setbacks when omitted from the Under-16 selection trial, but a stroke of luck intervened when the BCCI changed the age categories to U-15 and U-17, granting him an extra year. His talent shone through, earning him the title of Player of the Tournament during Mumbai's selection trials.

Lad played a crucial role, assisting Rohit and his family in finding a home in his building. Additionally, the keen eye of Vasoo Paranjape, known for spotting exceptional talent, ensured Rohit's progress. Paranjape's influence secured Rohit's place not only in the U-17 squad, but also in the playing XI. Paranjape compelled Pravin Amre, the chief junior selector at the time, to watch Rohit bat in a local match. By 2004, Rohit was already touted as Mumbai's rising star.

Soon after seeing Rohit's potential, Amre, an influential figure in Air India's cricket set-up, secured a cricket scholarship for Rohit, even before he was selected for the U-19 World Cup in 2006. Lad had by then stopped discussing Rohit's dismissals. "A good coach always must realise that when a talent knows his or her game well, he must let go of him. Don't keep coaching all the time. Instead, you have to wait for the player to come to you with a query," says Lad.

"If he doesn't, it means the player has matured or sometimes feels the childhood coach cannot add to his skills. That's fine, so after he passed his 10th, seldom did I discuss his cricket with Rohit. We would

Investing in talent: Pravin Amre, a key figure in Air India's cricket setup, secured a cricket scholarship for Rohit Sharma well before his selection in the U-19 World Cup in 2006.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY & GETTY IMAGES

WHEN ROHIT SHARMA WAS 12, HIS FATHER AND FIVE SIBLINGS POOLED RESOURCES AND BORROWED MONEY FROM FRIENDS TO SEND HIM TO A CRICKET CAMP IN BORIVALI

constantly discuss the game, but hardly his game."

After Rohit made his international debut in Belfast [Ireland vs. India, June 23, 2007], he felt left out as the youngest member of India's T20 World Cup squad in South Africa the same year. Although Lad's role had changed from coach to mentor by now, that didn't stop Rohit from calling Lad. "'*Sir, pak gaya hoon* (I'm bored, sir)'," he said. Lad sensed that a lack of game time had started getting to Rohit. "All I told him was to learn from the seniors and enjoy whatever he was doing. Then Yuvraj Singh missed the South Africa game due to an injury. Rohit got an opportunity to bat, and he made the most of it with a fifty," says Lad, before reiterating. "Again, talent and luck!"

Upon Team India's return from a historic trip, Rohit and his teammates were swarmed by thousands of fans during an open-top bus parade from Mumbai airport to Wankhede Stadium, where MS Dhoni's men were felicitated for winning the inaugural World T20.

A little over a week from that day, Rohit returned home and told Lad that he was hungry. "I knew what he was referring to. Non-vegetarian food could not be cooked at his home back then, so he would come to our place. He couldn't resist half-fried eggs that I cooked," Lad says. "You won't believe it. That night, Rohit, his brother, my son Siddhesh, and another boy—four of them—gulped more than 60 eggs. I was tired of cooking, but it was worth it." Rohit has retained his craving for eggs and street food.

As Rohit embarks on his most cherished dream, Lad hopes for an encore. "It will be difficult for him to get another chance. But I know he believes in himself. And I believe in him and destiny, so let's hope he does the same in Ahmedabad as Dhoni did at Wankhede in 2011," he says.

PIC:BCCI

GILL'S JOURNEY FROM YOUNG'UN TO BIG GUN

Shubman Gill was always destined to be a **batting phenom.** This is the story of how he got there.

Vijay Lokapally & Shayan Acharya
vijay.l@thehindu.co.in /
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Last month, Shubman Gill stood in the middle of the PCA Stadium in Mohali, his home ground, and spoke about his dream of playing an international match there. He would go on to smash 74 off 63 balls in the first ODI against Australia and play a hand in India becoming the second team in men's history to occupy the No. 1 spot across formats.

The world is a small place these days. Less than five kilometres away from the very stadium where Gill dazzled his home crowd with an array of breathtaking shots, is Sukhwinder Singh Tinku's cricket academy - the place where Gill's dreams first started taking shape.

Tinku lives his dreams through his students. He is not one to make tall claims; he is happy to give his wards the foundation and then watch them grow into decent players and good human beings. Lessons in life are as much an integral part of his teaching as the basic cricket process that he imparts at his academy located in Paragon Senior Secondary School in Mohali.

It was here that an eight-year-old Shubman Gill came to meet Tinku. "He was accompanied by his father [Lakhwinder Singh Gill]. His father was keen that he join our coaching classes. I was stunned to learn from him that Shubman was given a piece of homemade bat carved from a tree trunk by his grandfather, and he would middle every ball. His father used a *chatai* (straw mat) to simulate pace and bounce. The middle of the blade had a ball-sized dent. That convinced Lakhwinder ji to encourage his son to play cricket. That was the

Passing on the knowledge: Shubman Gill's childhood coach, Sukhwinder Singh Tinku, giving batting tips to his students during a practice session at the Paragon Senior Secondary School in Mohali, Chandigarh. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

beginning," says Tinku, sitting in his compact room at the academy. To help Shubman achieve his goals, Lakhwinder shifted to Chandigarh from their village, Chak Khehrewala in Ferozepur District, in 2007.

Former Indian fast bowler Bhupinder Singh (Sr) praises Tinku's ability to teach the basics effectively to young students aged 8 to 12. Once these players are ready for competitive cricket, Tinku encourages them to pursue their dreams independently. Shubman followed a similar path. Shubman was like any other trainee for Tinku, but his exceptional talent quickly set him apart. The coach noticed Shubman's sharpness, impeccable timing, and overall game, which seemed destined for a higher level. Shubman's rapid learning and dedication delighted Tinku, prompting him to provide extra attention to the budding batsman. In those early days, Tinku marvelled at Shubman's innate understanding of the sport.

He was quick to rectify mistakes that were pointed out, spending long hours in the nets. What impressed Tinku the most was Shubman's confidence and the fact that he never wasted time during his academy sessions.

Tinku emphasised the importance of scoring big runs to Shubman, encouraging him to catch the selectors' attention by consistently performing against all oppositions. "I remember there was a district match on the ground outside the PCA Stadium. He made a century and played a casual shot. The catch was dropped. At the break, I advised him not to be satisfied by just a century. I told him to get to 150. He made a 150. And then 200. Gradually, he went on to make a 300. He quickly learned that big scores would make him known all over the country, not just Punjab. He was 14 and ready to step into the big league," says Tinku.

Shubman (351), playing for Mohali, shared a 587-run opening partnership with Nirmal Singh (267) in that Inter-District U-16 match against Amritsar at the IS Bindra PCA Stadium.

Even at such a young age, Shubman displayed remarkable dedication to his training. He faced the bowling machine for nearly an hour every day at the academy, regardless of the weather. "Lakhwinder would accompany his son to Mohali twice a day, patiently waiting for him to finish," Tinku recalls. "After each training session, his father bowled throw-downs to him for another 30-45 minutes."

Shubman also benefited from his association with former India all-rounder Yuvraj Singh, who took him under his wing. Once he graduated to Punjab's senior men's team, Yuvraj guided Shubman on how to build a season and stay focused. The fact that they hail from the same city helped. "It was before the series in Australia (in 2020). I told him to bolster his defence because you need solid front-foot defence against good fast bowlers. I requested Sachin (Tendulkar), Shubman's idol, also to speak with him. Sachin told him the same, sharing his experience of playing against the Aussies," remembers Yuvraj.

Former India fast bowler Karsan Ghavri, too, played a role in Gill's career. More than a decade ago,

Go big or go home: Sukhwinder Singh Tinku (left) impressed upon a young Shubman Gill the importance of scoring big. (Right) Former India international Karsan Ghavri saw early glimpses of Gill's transformation from a tennis-ball cricketer to a proper batting phenom. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR & EMMANUAL YOGINI

Ghavri was overseeing the BCCI pace bowlers' academy in Mohali. During an U-19 camp, he struggled to find young batters. Initially, they conducted drill sessions in the indoor facility, but after a week, Ghavri realised there were no batters available to face the pacers. He requested the Punjab Cricket Association for U-16, U-19, or U-23 batters to help.

Gill was consumed by his love for the sport. When not training at the academy in Mohali, he would play tennis-ball cricket. "Around this time, I remember it was raining one day and there was leakage in the indoor facility, so we had to stop our practice sessions. Assistant coach Yoginder Puri and I walked across the road to this huge ground, which hosts PCA's district games, and saw some kids playing in the rain. One young boy caught my attention because of his batting style, and that kid was Shubman," Ghavri says. Moments later, Ghavri walked up to a gentleman sitting outside the boundary.

"I asked him whether he knew about this boy who was batting so well. To my surprise, he replied, '*Woh mera beta hai* (he is my son).' I told him not to allow Shubman to play tennis ball cricket and insisted on bringing him on board for our camp," Ghavri recollects.

SHUBMAN'S GRANDFATHER HAD CARVED A HOMEMADE BAT FROM A TREE TRUNK AND HIS FATHER USED A *CHATAI* (STRAW MAT) TO SIMULATE PACE AND BOUNCE. THE MIDDLE OF THE BLADE HAD A BALL-SIZED DENT

"Shubman was just 11 or 12, and I wanted him to face our U-19 fast bowlers. He came to our camp the next day, and over the next few days, he gelled so well with our group that he started training with our boys. Every day, he would bat for an hour. During the camp, the U-19 bowlers were given a fresh, new ball every day, and he faced some of the promising young bowlers, including Sandeep Sharma and Baltej Singh. He played them really well," Ghavri says. Ghavri asked Sushil Kapoor, the academy's administrative manager at the time, to place Gill in the U-14 squad for Punjab. Gill's impressive performances there led to his inclusion in Punjab's age-group teams. He also played a significant role in India's U-19 World Cup victory in 2018 and secured an IPL contract with the Kolkata Knight Riders the same year.

What do Ghavri and Tinku expect from Shubman going forward? "I would love to see him maintain his aggression at the crease.

He is a performer, and that is what I want him to remember. I am sure he will emerge as India's leading player at the World Cup," Tinku says.

For Ghavri, Gill, the "next superstar of Indian cricket," can go far if he remains grounded.

PIC:BCCI

A STUDENT WHO LOOKED LIKE A LEADER, AND THEN BECAME ONE

Over the years, Raj Kumar Sharma has observed Virat Kohli's growth as both a **cricketer and an individual.**

Vijay Lokapally
vijay.l@thehindu.co.in

On May 30, 1998, a young Virat Kohli and his father, Prem Kohli, entered the West Delhi Cricket Academy (WDCA), marking the beginning of a remarkable journey. Virat's deep desire to become a cricketer was evident even at the age of nine, and his father's support was unwavering. Raj Kumar Sharma, the academy's coach, was struck by Virat's intense focus and determination.

Despite the initial promise shown by his brother, Vikas, Virat quickly surged ahead. Sharma recalled the moment he saw the spark in Virat. "A flat throw that thudded into the gloves of the wicketkeeper. The ball came in at a searing speed. The power behind that throw stunned me. It clearly showed that he had the basics in place: passion, talent, and discipline," he says.

Virat's commitment to the academy was unwavering. His attendance was never in question, and even received coaching from former India medium-fast bowler Atul Wassan. Eight years after that first encounter, Wassan selected Virat in the Delhi team for the Ranji Trophy match at home against Tamil Nadu in 2006.

"Sachin Tendulkar was a genius who inspired thousands of youngsters to look at cricket as a career. Virat followed in his footsteps by working very hard with the devotion of a master craftsman. I call him a craftsman because he has set new benchmarks and crafted one great innings after another every year," says

Caring touch: Raj Kumar Sharma has been a father figure to Virat Kohli, and has been instrumental in instilling values and principles in him that have helped shape his successful career. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

AFP

Sharma.

Virat was exemplary as a student. "Virat never came late for the nets. He looked after his gear so well. He would not like stains on his pads and bats. He was always anxious to dominate. I worried for him sometimes when he insisted on playing in the senior group. I had to admonish him a few times, but then I realised he was ready to take guard at the next level. I gradually promoted him to play with the big boys, and he was soon towering above them with some amazingly consistent performances.

"He wanted to do everything: bat, bowl, and field. During a local under-15 game at the Picnic Hut ground, he was 12, and our team was in a spot of trouble, chasing a total of 220-230. He said, 'Let me bat up the order, sir'... So, we promoted him, and he took us over the line by scoring a century. We won comfortably," Sharma recalls. "Even though he always batted at no. 4, he'll pad up with the openers and will restlessly wait for his turn to go in."

Virat's ability to lead and inspire his teammates was evident, and he seamlessly transitioned into domestic cricket. Over the years, Sharma has observed Virat's growth. They continue to discuss batting techniques before every series. "I remember a session we had before the tour to England in 2019. He had failed on the previous trip in 2014 [134 runs in five Tests]. I organised a grassy pitch and got hold of some bowlers who swung the ball well. We focussed on how to leave the ball. I also advised him not to try and play every ball, as is his habit," Sharma reveals.

What truly impresses Sharma is Virat's unwavering mental strength, especially during challenging times. Sharma has been a friend in moments of distress and a father figure in life. "His father told me, `I am handing my son to you. He is your son now.' I have not forgotten those words," Sharma said.

He vividly recalls the heart-wrenching moment when Virat lost his father during a Ranji Trophy match against Karnataka. On December 19, 2006, with Virat unbeaten on 40 and Delhi struggling at 103 for five, his father Prem passed away. Despite this tragedy, Virat continued his innings and ensured Delhi avoided the follow-on. "Virat went for the cremation straight from the ground. He made me immensely proud that day. I had asked him to go and bat," recalls Sharma.

Eight years after his father's death, Virat added a new chapter to his relationship with Sharma. On September 5, 2014, on Teacher's Day, Virat, on tour to the United States, gifted his father-figure and mentor a new car. "I answered the bell and found Vikas at the door." Virat's brother's arrival at his house so early in the day was cause for concern for Rajkumar. "Vikas stepped into the house, dialled a number, and handed me the cell phone. 'Happy Teacher's Day, sir,' Virat said, and Vikas put something into my palms."

A perplexed Rajkumar stepped out with Vikas, and a gleaming Skoda Rapid was parked at the gate.

Growing up, Sharma had taken care of his students' needs. "After he made it to the Delhi U-15 team, Virat needed a regular supply of bats, and I spoke to Rakesh Mahajan of BDM, and he kindly made the best bats available for Virat. It was a big help," recalls Sharma.

Virat, like most other Punjabi teenagers, was fond of fast food. "He

"HIS FATHER TOLD ME, 'I AM HANDING MY SON TO YOU. HE IS YOUR SON NOW.' I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN THOSE WORDS"

used to regularly go to Rama Chole Bhature shop in Rajouri Garden (west Delhi), but once he made it to the Indian team, he stopped eating fried stuff to set an example," says Sharma.

Sharma helps Virat refine his game through dedicated shot-making sessions, focusing on strokes like the square cut and the cover drive. "He can produce his own batting manual on how to play the big innings. He has done it innumerable times. His 82 not out against Pakistan in Melbourne [2022 T20 World Cup] should rank as the best by an Indian in the modern era. What pressure and what a tremendous response from Virat. He is a case study in producing match-winning shows."

Sharma also praised Virat's transformation due to fatherhood, highlighting the supportive role of his wife, Anushka. "She has been a positive influence. Helping him stay focussed and calm. Anushka has been his greatest support in difficult times when he failed with the bat. Virat is also a caring father, sharing parenthood duties like any doting father. He is at ease with whatever he does now to serve Indian cricket for a long time."

Sharma is confident that Virat will perform well in the upcoming World Cup. What would he tell Virat ahead of his fourth ODI World Cup? "He knows what is best for him. He can change gears during his innings to speed things up and slow down to assess the situation better. His presence galvanises the team. Just stay in the middle and mark his bowlers to attack. India needs him in the middle, and that is what I want him to remember."

Picture perfect: Virat Kohli (top), during a Ranji game. Above: The dashing batsman with the DDA Hari Nagar Sports Complex kids, after he was appointed the captain of the India Under-19 team. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

PIC:BCCI

THE MANY FACES OF RAHUL

Sometimes the hero, sometimes a villain, **always in the thick of it.** Samuel Jayaraj, K. L. Rahul's coach in his formative years in Mangaluru, talks about his ward's journey.

N. Sudarshan
sudarshan.narayanan@thehindu.co.in

Samuel Jayaraj still vividly remembers the time K.L. Rahul first came to meet him at the Mangalore Sports Club ground. Rahul had signed up for the Mangaluru Zone under-13 selection trials but had missed out. His enthusiasm for the game, though, had not dimmed, and he sought out Jayaraj.

"He was 10-and-a-half then," recalls the 57-year-old. "He came and asked us where we practised. We showed our nets. He asked for the timing, and we told him that we'd start by 3.30 p.m. daily.

"I always go half-an -hour or one hour early. The next day, I saw a boy sitting with his bag. It was Rahul. It was 2.30 p.m. Something made me think: a small boy coming one hour early. He turned out to be a very studious, committed, and obedient student."

Two decades on, Rahul is one of India's batting mainstays. Going into the World Cup at home, he has been pencilled in as the team's middle-order fulcrum, a kind of responsibility he has always enjoyed, according to his coach.

"Responsibility gets the best out of him," says Jayaraj, who now runs the 22 Yards School of Cricket academy in Mangaluru. "Back then, in the Mangalore zone, we never had any good batters. Very good bowlers, but no batters. Even when the opponents were all out for 150, we used to be out for 80 or 90. We always used to tell Rahul, 'You have to bat at both ends.'

"And when he batted, it was a different ball game. He used to build the innings. And we used to tell him, 'You got to play four balls from this end, take a single, and go and play the next over also.'

"There are so many incidents from his younger days. I

still remember a match we played in Shivamogga. It was a new wicket, but Rahul said he would get a hundred; And by lunch, he was already batting on 89. When he was 12, I think he got two double hundreds in the [KSCA] inter-mofussil tournament, one of those with Rahul Dravid in the vicinity.

"During his younger days, there were some very good players... Mayank Agarwal, Karun Nair, Shishir Bhavane, and others. If Rahul got a hundred, we used to go and tell Karun, 'Rahul has got a hundred.' Karun would come back and tell us, 'Then tomorrow I'm going to get a hundred'. It was healthy competition, and it helped everybody."

Even as he plundered runs in age-group cricket, among the first signs that Rahul was made for the big league arrived when he scored three back-to-back centuries against Hyderabad, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra in an U-15 tournament. The buzz in the local circles was palpable, says Jayaraj.

"There was talk [that he was a star in the making]. I am not exaggerating because he has now played for India. But when he got those hundreds, we felt the boy had

First sighting: Samuel Jayaraj (above) still vividly remembers the time K.L. Rahul first came to meet him at the Mangalore Sports Club ground. Rahul had signed up for the Mangaluru Zone under-13 selection trials but had missed out. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH & H. S. MANJUNATH

something. Back then, we had a very good left-arm spinner named Nagaraj playing local cricket. He also used to come to watch our matches. One day he asked me, 'Jayaraj, will anybody from here play for India?' And Rahul was batting. Some good local bowlers like Umesh Karvy and Mohammed Arif were all bowling to him, and this boy was middling everything.

"Nagaraj watched him and said, 'We see some spark there.' Nagaraj was the first person to call me when Rahul was selected for the Under-19 Indian team [in 2010]. We still speak about that incident."

Rahul's propensity for excellence wasn't limited to cricket. He was academically sound, but his father, Prof. K.N. Lokesh, a former director of the National Institute of Technology in Surathkal, allowed his son to chase his cricketing dreams. After 10th grade, Rahul opted for commerce instead of science.

"Dr. Lokesh was fantastic," Jayaraj says. "In 10th grade, Rahul secured 96.5%, if I am not mistaken. It would have been a tough decision for Dr. Lokesh and Rajeshwari ma'am, to put their son into commerce. They were very sweet parents, and Rahul was very lucky. They always supported him."

And Rahul repaid their faith handsomely. "Every match, he performed. He never came back without scoring, be it in inter-zonal cricket, a probables tournament, or for the state. He never disappointed his parents."

Despite intense scrutiny and a recent lack of centuries in Test and one-day internationals, 31-year-old K.L. Rahul has earned unwavering support from the team management led by Rohit Sharma and Rahul Dravid. A hamstring injury that sidelined him from IPL 2023 till September raised concerns, but Rahul's unbeaten 111 in the Asia Cup Super-Four match against Pakistan in Colombo demonstrated his enduring capabilities and justified the team's faith in him.

Moulding futures: Samuel Jayaraj, K.L. Rahul's childhood coach, prepping his wards at the 22 Yards School of Cricket academy in Mangaluru.

H. S. MANJUNATH

PTI

RAHUL'S PROPENSITY FOR EXCELLENCE WASN'T LIMITED TO CRICKET. HE WAS ACADEMICALLY SOUND, BUT HIS PARENTS ALLOWED HIM TO CHASE HIS CRICKETING DREAMS

"He has taken it very positively," says Jayaraj of the phase leading into the World Cup, where the critical press has examined him with stern eyes.

"I don't think any one of us doubted his skill or technique. It was only the injury part [that was worrying]. But he has recovered well. He has come out of it earlier than I expected, and that is good.

"For me, it is his temperament that stands out. His commitment to the game is very high. Like [against Pakistan], he was very determined to get a hundred. He told me that if he got a chance to play, he would get a hundred. That is what KL Rahul is all about."

Such is the trust that apart from his batting role, Rahul, likely, will also shoulder the wicketkeeping duty. "That is not a new role for Rahul," says Jayaraj. "He was a wicketkeeper even for Karnataka U-13 and U-15. He always played as a wicketkeeper-batter. He came into our academy as a wicketkeeper-batter. And he has continued it."

Jayaraj expects Rahul to revel in this role at the World Cup.

"I am looking forward to a lot of runs from him. I think he should get one or two hundreds. I will be the happiest person.

"I have seen that boy working and toiling. He should make the best use of it. He is still very down to earth and the same Rahul I saw 20 years ago. I see him having the same fun.

"Our interactions sometimes happen on a day-to-day basis. If he is doing well, I will not speak to him. If he is not doing well, then all my assessment yardsticks will come out," Jayaraj adds, with a gentle laugh. There is, however, a quiet confidence that it won't come to that.

PIC: BCCI

HE DIDN'T CHOOSE THE WAITING GAME, BUT HE IS ACING IT

Shreyas Iyer has a history of waiting for opportunities and **hitting the mark** when they arrive. The question now is whether he can maintain this trait.

Amol Karhadkar
amol.k@thehindu.co.in

Shreyas Iyer's journey has been one of patience and untapped potential. He should have debuted in Test cricket three years earlier than he did in December 2021, but circumstances delayed his entry. Similarly, he was touted as India's No. 4 for the 2019 World Cup, but that opportunity never materialised.

Over the last two years, recurring back injuries have sidelined him, leading to more missed international games than appearances. However, he remains resolute in his pursuit of fitness, poised to seize the chance that eluded him four years ago.

Intriguingly, Iyer's story of waiting and making the most of opportunities dates back to the mid-2000s, when his father, Santosh, took him from their Worli residence to the revered Shivaji Park Gymkhana (SPG). The esteemed coaching trio of Pravin Amre, Padmakar Shivalkar, and Sandesh Kawle at SPG recognised the potential in the 11-year-old.

"But we had already selected our batch of 25 players for that year, and he came late, so we told him to come back next year," Amre recalls. "He waited and was selected right away. Since then, he has continued to improve with every passing year."

Under the watchful guidance of Shivalkar and Kawle, with Amre closely monitoring his progress, Shreyas displayed rapid improvement.

However, it's worth noting that Shreyas didn't always stand out, even during his early years. It was Vinod Raghavan, Mumbai's Under-19 coach in 2013–14, who played a pivotal role in propelling Shreyas' burgeoning career. Raghavan's influence led to Shreyas becoming the captain of the Mumbai U-19 team.

Amre's return as the Mumbai head coach in 2014 for the senior domestic season worked in Shreyas' favour. Despite Shreyas' reputation as a formidable top-order batsman, often batting at No. 3 in local and age-group cricket, he was initially asked to bat at No. 7 in his first three Ranji Trophy matches.

When Mumbai travelled to Kolkata for a crucial tie against Bengal in the 2014-15 season, Amre was looking for a new No. 3. "I approached Siddhesh Lad since he was batting consistently and was a senior to Shreyas. I asked Siddhesh whether he would walk in at No. 3, But he said, 'I am happy with my position,' says Amre.

Early days: (Above) Shreyas Iyer with his childhood coach, Pravin Amre. Iyer made headlines when Delhi Daredevils bought him at the 2015 IPL auction for Rs 2.6 crore. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & R. V. MOORTHY

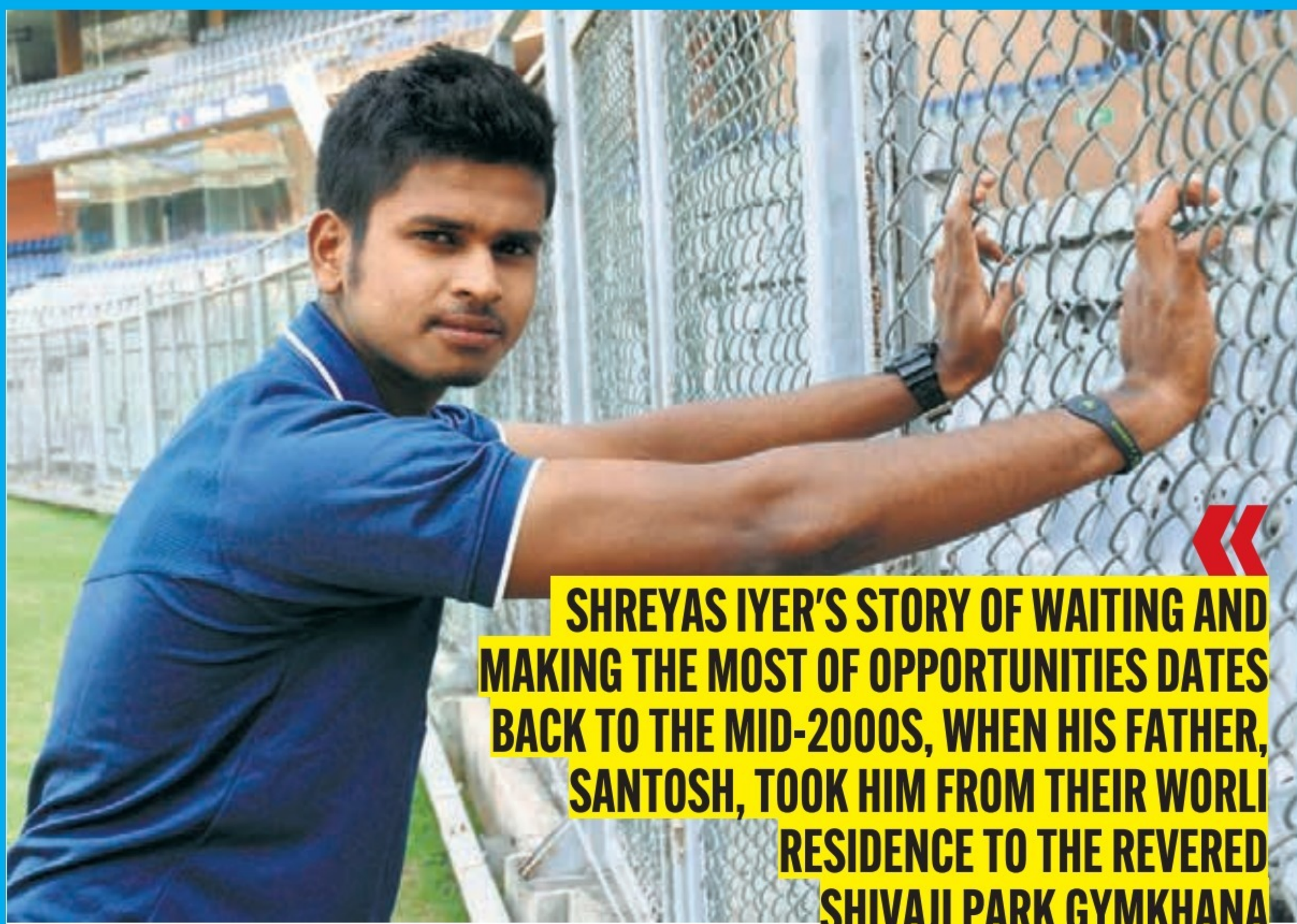
"Then I asked Shreyas, and his immediate reaction was, 'If you say so, I shall do it, sir'. The spontaneity in his response and the desire to take on challenges are amazing. The instant response of 'I'll go' made me sense he was different. He scored a hundred (153 off 175 balls) against Bengal. I realised he had the capacity to soak up challenges."

Shortly after agreeing to Amre's advice, Shreyas approached Abhishek Nayar, a senior teammate with whom he had formed a close bond. Interestingly, Amre had earlier urged Nayar to take Shreyas under his wing.

Reluctantly, Nayar had to bid farewell to his preferred roommate, Sushant Marathe, and instead teamed up with Shreyas. Over the past decade, their relationship has transcended that of mere teammates.

Shreyas once described Nayar as his "3 am friend" and now regards him as a "mentor." Nayar, in turn, considers Shreyas more than just a teammate; they're like brothers. Their journey has seen them transition from avid students of the game to fitness enthusiasts, and they even share a knack for impressive moves on the dance floor.

Before the memorable Bengal game, Shreyas and Nayar initiated a new ritual. Amre had suggested team-bonding sessions due to a lacklustre start to the season, and Nayar kicked it off with a gym session in Lucknow a week prior.



SHREYAS IYER'S STORY OF WAITING AND MAKING THE MOST OF OPPORTUNITIES DATES BACK TO THE MID-2000S, WHEN HIS FATHER, SANTOSH, TOOK HIM FROM THEIR WORLI RESIDENCE TO THE REVERED SHIVAJI PARK GYMKHANA

Right moves: Shreyas Iyer made his first-class debut for Mumbai in 2014 as a middle-order batsman but later moved up to open. He ended the season as the top scorer, amassing 809 runs at an average of over 50.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

On the eve of the Bengal match, Shreyas reached out to Nayar for assistance, and together they experimented with a new meditation and preparation routine in their room. It proved highly effective, and for the next three years, they faithfully followed it before every match.

While Nayar served as a guiding light, Amre closely observed Shreyas and his technique. Amre was instrumental in convincing the Delhi Daredevils management of Shreyas' ability to handle raw pace in the IPL. Despite having played only three T20 games at that point, Shreyas was acquired for Rs. 2.60 crore in the 2015 auction.

Recognising that the only available slot in the XI was that of an opener and that Shreyas, as a middle-order batsman, might struggle to break into the team, Amre took matters into his own hands.

He approached Gary Kirsten, the Daredevils' head coach at the time. "The overseas coaches on such matters always say 'you take that decision', so you are answerable. I took the onus on myself and told the team owners that he could deliver, having scored 800-plus runs in his maiden Ranji season. The other challenge, which eventually worked in his favour, was that he had hardly played T20 cricket, so there was no data to bank on," Amre says. Shreyas repaid the faith by scoring 439 runs and was adjudged the most promising youngster of the 2015 season.

After being named the captain of the Delhi Capitals in the IPL, Shreyas invited Amre over for dinner at his home. Amre set a condition: he would only accept the invitation after Shreyas scored a Test hundred.

Amre's pride swelled when Shreyas, like him, marked his Test debut with a century against New Zealand in December 2021.

Amre hopes that the first Shivaji Park Gymkhana cricketer to play in the World Cup since 1992 would follow in the footsteps of Sandeep Patil in 1983 by lifting the Cup.

Nayar, on the other hand, is cautiously optimistic. He has witnessed Shreyas endure the "toughest phase of his career" but says he is determined to make the wait worth it.

Shreyas has a history of waiting for opportunities and hitting the mark when they arrive. The question now is whether he can maintain this trait.

PIC: BCCI

HOW SKY BECAME MR. 360

Suryakumar Yadav's first coach on how he **tuned out the noise** to get clarity – and lots of runs.

Amol Karhadkar
amol.k@thehindu.co.in

In the bustling cricket landscape of Mumbai, where young talents often emerge with dreams but uncertain paths, a teenage Suryakumar Yadav stood out with remarkable clarity. Under the guidance of Ashok Aswalkar, a local coach in Chembur, central Mumbai, Suryakumar, known affectionately as Surya, boldly declared his ambition: "*Mujhe bahut bada cricket khelna hai* (I want to play really big league cricket)."

At that time, Surya may not have possessed the same level of talent or prolific scoring ability as some of his peers, but Aswalkar, who has been nurturing young talents for nearly three decades, recognised this fearless mindset.

Suryakumar's journey from those early days in BARC (Bhabha Atomic Research Centre) to the Mumbai maidans and ultimately to the heights of the IPL as "SKY" with Kolkata Knight Riders and then Mumbai Indians has been a testament to his unwavering determination and courage. Despite social media fame and a new moniker, for those who've known him, he has always been the resolute Surya.

"Surya's power-hitting prowess was evident from our coaching days at the BARC ground in 2002–03. At just 12–13 years old, he effortlessly cleared the 65-yard boundary, even without a high-quality bat," recalls Aswalkar. "My task was to encourage him to play straight, but once he stepped onto the field, he marched to his beat. He often ignored advice and improvised as he pleased, which is why he doesn't boast towering scores in local school or age-group cricket."

Despite hailing from Mumbai's renowned lineage of batsmanship, Suryakumar has always been an anomaly and a standout. While he can play with conventional technique, he prefers to improvise. Rather than accumulating runs for the sake of records, he has always

Fostering talent: Suryakumar Yadav's childhood coach, Ashok Aswalkar, has played a pivotal role in his overall development.

PICS: EMMANUAL YOGINI & VIJAY SONEJI

WHEN SURYAKUMAR WAS APPOINTED VICE-CAPTAIN OF KKR AND MUMBAI'S CAPTAIN WITHIN MONTHS, HE DID GET CARRIED AWAY FOR A WHILE

focused on scoring effectively, a trait ingrained in him since childhood.

Unlike most of Mumbai's batting sensations, young Surya from the BARC campus didn't receive much media attention, even from local cricket-focused newspapers. He wasn't a child prodigy like many cricket stars, and is considered a late bloomer.

Aswalkar refers to himself as 'the other Ashok' in Surya's lesser-known journey. He does this because Surya's father's name is also Ashok, who was a scientist at BARC. Aswalkar recalls an incident from his early days involving Surya's father, Ashok Yadav. While Aswalkar and other coaches commuted by local train from Chembur or Govandi stations, Yadav Sr. would ensure Surya's transportation, either in his car or on a moped.

"But never did he enter the station and carry Surya's kitbag. 'That's his work,' he used to say. When the parents realise that a child has to learn to carry the kitbag on his shoulders, a coach's job becomes easier since we know that the parents realise they cannot spoon-feed the child," Aswalkar says.

"When Surya started making a name and was either representing Mumbai or called to the MCA Academy at BKC. His parents told him clearly: 'You will either train with MCA coaches or with Ashok sir'. For a player as versatile as Surya, he did not get into correcting the technique."

When Suryakumar was appointed vice-captain of KKR and Mumbai's captain within months, he did get carried away for a while. Aswalkar, his coach, was perturbed by the rumours and murmurs, even from the security guards at the BARC colony.

However, during a candid conversation around 2017 or 2018, Surya seemed transformed. Late nights with friends and a flashy lifestyle gave way to a more focused approach. Supported by his wife, Devisha, he embarked on a determined journey to resurrect his childhood dream. "Look, there is no doubt he got carried away. But how you rise after a fall defines your character. That's what Surya is all about," says Aswalkar.

"Forget about everything else, he

Flamboyant player (Above): Suryakumar Yadav of Mumbai plays a shot during the Ranji Trophy semifinal between Tamil Nadu and Mumbai at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on January 11, 2012. (Right) Balwinder Singh Sandhu presenting Sportstar trophy to Suryakumar Yadav, captain of Vijay Manjrekar XI and Player of the Tournament. PICS: THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

was even dropped from Mumbai's team. In hindsight, I feel it may have worked in his favour. I always tell him: 'With Devisha's support, the five years that many feel you were pushed back has made you into the cricketer and the player you are now'". Despite witnessing numerous cricketers surge ahead on the national and international stage, Suryakumar remained steadfast in his pursuit. With the support of his wife, he restructured his daily routine. He performed consistently well, especially in shorter formats, but an India call-up remained elusive for nearly two years.

Even when it seemed certain for India's tour to Australia in late 2020 after a stellar IPL season in the UAE, disappointment struck. This period, marked by his disappointment, was a crucial test in his comeback journey. Aswalkar acknowledges Surya's resilience during those 15 days when he continued to train diligently despite his dashed hopes. "He had shut himself down from the outside world. '*Media wale satate rahte hain. Aaj bhi mera naam nahin hai* (the media is hounding me, I am still not included in the team)', he would say.

But all I told him was '*Mehnat karte rehne ka, ghar chale jaane ka* (keep working hard and go back home)'. Once he was through that phase, I knew that there would be no looking back for him."

Since then, Suryakumar has soared to new heights. While his ODI statistics may not fully reflect his talent, he has become a crucial cog in India's T20 cricket, shining in both the IPL and international T20 matches.

With the upcoming World Cup in India, Aswalkar hopes Surya can prove himself on this grand stage. It's a moment that aligns perfectly with the dreams he had for big-league cricket two decades ago.

SMALL FRAME, LARGE DREAMS

Uttam Mazumdar on the Ishan Kishan he **knows and admires.**

Vijay Lokapally
vijay.l@thehindu.co.in

Uttam Mazumdar is an energetic and enthusiastic coach. As much as his famous pupil, Ishan Kishan. They can pass off as colleagues. "He is my son," says Mazumdar proudly as Ishan prepares to play in his first World Cup. "This is what I had imagined when he first came to me" says Mazumdar at his home in Greater Noida.

Ishan was seven. Mazumdar was coaching at the Moinul Ul Haq Stadium in Patna when Pranav Pandey came to him with a request. "My son is a nuisance with his non-stop pranks at home. He wants to play all the time. Please admit him to your academy," Pandey pleaded.

"Too small," thought Mazumdar, but he sent the lad with a bat into the nets and took the ball. This was his way to test every new entrant. Ishan played an exquisite cover drive off the first ball. And then another, and one more. "I was flabbergasted. The timing and follow-through were incredible. I told his father to allow me to be his coach. If Ishan did not play for India, the loss would be the nation's," recalls Mazumdar.

There began a wonderful association between the two, which culminated in Ishan donning the India cap 14 years later. "Immediately after the selection, Ishan made a video call and seeked my blessings. When we met next, Ishan touched my feet," Mazumdar reminisces.

Life was tough for Ishan initially. "The lack of opportunities in Patna forced Ishan to move to Jharkhand. He shifted to Ranchi when he was just 12. I organised his move. Ishan stayed with some seniors in a small room. Since he couldn't cook, he was assigned the duty of doing the dishes. He did that because he just wanted to play cricket. And I was happy to see him grow, and within five years, he was representing the state in junior matches. He was on the right track. His Ranji Trophy debut came when he was 16 in 2014, and I was delighted that his focus was in the right place. In that match, he was advised to be

ISHAN HAS BECOME A CHERISHED MEMBER OF MAZUMDAR'S FAMILY. HE WOULD OFTEN STAY WITH THEM BECAUSE HE ENJOYS THEIR COMPANY

Proud mentor: Uttam Mazumdar has overseen Ishan Kishan's ascent to the Indian team. "He is my son," says Mazumdar proudly as Ishan prepares to play in his first World Cup. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

watchful against Abu Nechim, who was quick. Ishan drove him the first ball and later smashed two sixes that landed on the roof of the stadium (in Guwahati)."

Indian fans were fascinated by Ishan's sensational hitting against Bangladesh in Chattogram in December 2022. Opening the innings, he smashed 10 sixes and 24 fours in his 210. "Ten sixes, and all blasted with amazing power. He may have a small frame, but he generates power from his stomach. Right from his junior days, he would pick up the ball and bludgeon it long and high. The secret lies in the timing and also in his skills to reach the pitch of the ball." During a T20 under-14 match in Purnea, Ishan made a lasting impression by smashing four sixes.

Mazumdar always arranged sessions dedicated to hard-hitting shots daily. "He would sometimes try 500 balls, and 100 of them would land far into the stands. People would turn up to watch him in the nets," remembers Mazumdar, who shifted to Greater Noida from Jamshedpur to reestablish his coaching dreams. "COVID left me in depression as I lost my investments in cricket academies." Mazumdar, who lives with his wife (Soma) and son (Uttkrisht), now has an impressive workplace courtesy of SDRV School.

Ishan has become a cherished member of Mazumdar's family. He would often stay with them because he enjoys their company. Mazumdar's father had a special fondness for Ishan and had predicted a bright future for him when they were in Patna. "Such was the affection that Ishan dedicated his first Man of the Match award (on his T20 debut against England in Ahmedabad in 2021) to my father," he says. Ishan, a foodie, loves kebabs cooked by Mazumdar's wife.

He also likes mutton, gulab jamun, and ras malai [milk-based dessert], but the Team India nutritionist has advised him against consuming such high calorie treats. "But he is allowed to make an exception once in a while when he visits us," Mazumdar indulgantly says.

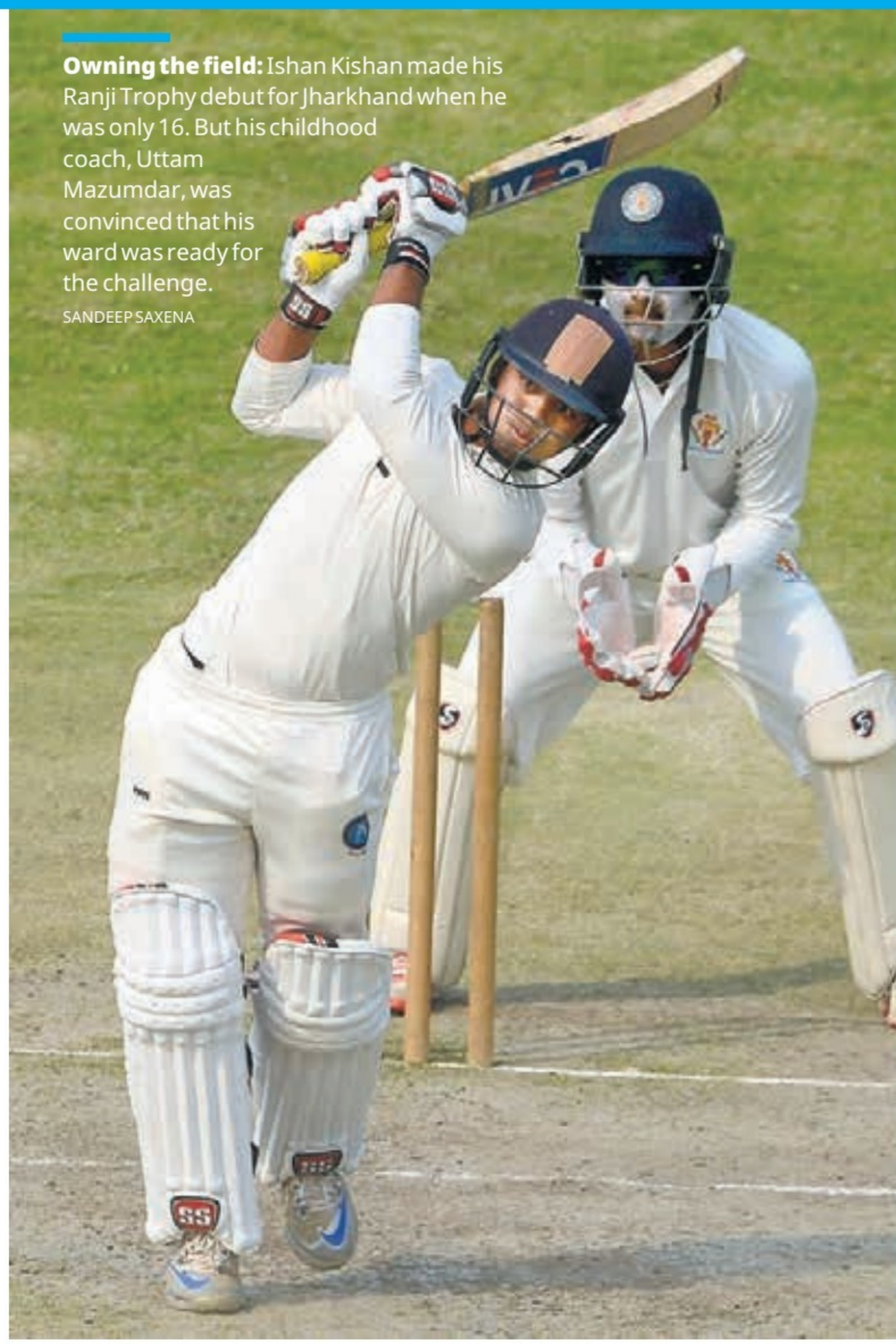
Mazumdar has had the privilege of playing alongside MS Dhoni, Deep Dasgupta, and Wasim Jaffer in the Sheesh Mahal tournament in Lucknow. He admires their fearless style of batting, which he has tried to instill in Ishan. "He is a natural. He never changed his grip: just like Sachin Tendulkar, who never changed his grip or his behaviour. Ishan's bat speed and shot selection are his two striking qualities."

Ishan even reached out to Mazumdar during the home T20 series against South Africa in 2022. "His hotel room in ITC Maurya became our training ground. For 4-5 days we worked on his head position and body balance to deal with the bounce generated by the Proteas," Mazumdar says.

Ishan ended the series as the highest run-getter with 206 runs from five T20Is.

According to Mazumdar, Ishan and Rishabh Pant are "great" friends. "They support each other and have celebrated each other's feats right from their junior days. It is rare to find such camaraderie between individuals who compete for the same slot in a team. There have been times when Ishan has used Rishabh's bat in a match. Ishan was very hurt when he heard of Rishab's accident."

Ishan goes by "Chotu" among his Ranji teammates and "Ishu" to Mazumdar. The coach is enthusiastic about Ishan's potential success in the World Cup. His advice to Ishan is clear: stick to your instincts when choosing which balls to hit. "While there might be occasional failures, Ishan's strength lies in his ability to bounce back. His versatility allows him to bat at any position, giving the team a valuable edge," he says.



Owning the field: Ishan Kishan made his Ranji Trophy debut for Jharkhand when he was only 16. But his childhood coach, Uttam Mazumdar, was convinced that his ward was ready for the challenge. SANDEEP SAXENA

Close watch: Ishan reached out to Mazumdar during the home T20 series against South Africa in 2022. "His hotel room in ITC Maurya became our training ground. For 4-5 days we worked on his head position and body balance to deal with the bounce generated by the Proteas," Mazumdar says. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

PIC:BCCI

HOW HE REACHED PEAKS AND HUNG THROUGH TROUGHS

Hardik's journey from carefree youth to leadership in IPL and India's T20I team has seen him **overcome many hurdles.** The men behind his rise and revival paint an unflinching portrait of his career.

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Being Hardik Pandya is not easy. Constantly enduring public scrutiny and rebounding stronger each time requires efforts of herculean proportions

Hardik's journey from carefree youth to leadership in IPL and India's T20I team has followed his coach Jitendra Singh's mantra: "Do what you believe is right, even if it's not easy."

During his teenage years, Hardik would hitch rides on trucks to get to different villages in Gujarat and earn 'charso-panchso rupiya (Rs 400-500)' by participating in local tennis ball tournaments. The money he earned from those day-night tournaments helped the Pandya brothers — Hardik and Krunal — purchase their cricketing gear.

They lived in a small one-room apartment at Parishram Park in Bapu Ni Dargah Gorwa – a middle-class residential area of Vadodara. Despite the financial struggles, their father Himanshu — a businessman — ensured that both his children were enrolled in former Indian cricketer Kiran More's cricket academy at the IPCL sports complex ground, now known as the Reliance Stadium — three

Impactful Triumvirate: Kiran More (above, left), Jitendra Singh (above, right) and Vinit Wadkar (top, right) have all made telling contributions to Hardik Pandya's rise as a cricketer. VIJAY SONEJI & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

kilometres from their residence.

Himanshu left his steady business – dealing with cars and finances – in Surat and relocated to Vadodara, because the city had a cricket culture. "Hardik was just four or five, at the time, but he accompanied his older brother to practice every day. He would stand in one corner of the ground, trying to emulate Krunal," says More.

After a few days, More invited Hardik to join. Every morning, the brothers were among the first to arrive at the academy. "Hardik spent most of his time on the field and quickly became the centre of attention for his skills," says Jitendra, who continues to work with Hardik and Krunal as their personal coach. "He was a top-order batter and was not afraid of taking on bowlers who were elder to him. He could bat on for hours.

"There were times, when after long sessions, he walked up to me and said, 'Sir, thoda aur batting kar na hai' (I want to bat a little longer)." Hardik was known not only for his on-field presence but also his off-field flamboyance, with a fascination for hair colours and later for luxury cars. "He would sometimes come for training with coloured hair, but we had to discipline him. There were times when I had to scold Hardik and make him realise his mistakes," Jitendra says.

In December 2009, on a chilly morning, Hardik scored a double century against Mumbai in a U-16 Vijay Hazare Trophy match at the Reliance Stadium, helping Baroda secure a first-innings lead. Hardik batted for over eight hours, crafting 228 runs off 391 balls with 29 fours and a six. It earned him a spot in the U-19 squad for the Cooch Behar Trophy.

Vinit Wadkar, the former Baroda captain and U-19 coach, noticed Hardik's indomitable spirit. "We were playing a U-19 game against Rajasthan in Jaipur and Deepak Chahar dismissed our regular batters, so I decided to send Hardik up the order (at No.4), hoping he would stop the collapse. And he scored 44 in the first innings," reminisces Wadkar. "Chahar claimed a five-for in the first innings, followed by four in the second essay. But in the second innings, our bowlers did well, and we eventually won the game. But it was Hardik's mental toughness in the first innings that impressed me."

Hardik started fast bowling relatively late. Initially, he dabbled in leg-spin, but it was coach Sanath Kumar who saw his potential as a fast bowler. "One afternoon, we had a net session, and all our specialist fast bowlers were tired. So, we needed some pacers to bowl to our lower-order batters, and that's when Hardik volunteered," Kumar recalls.

"I was surprised because all this while, he was a leg-spinner. So, I

Bouncing back: Hardik Pandya grappled with the repercussions of a significant back injury suffered in 2018, at times hindering his ability to bowl. However, he is back to bowling at full tilt.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

HARDIK STARTED FAST BOWLING RELATIVELY LATE. INITIALLY, HE DABBLED IN LEG-SPIN, BUT IT WAS COACH SANATH KUMAR WHO SAW HIS POTENTIAL AS A FAST BOWLER

asked him whether he was serious, and he said, 'Haan Sir, main kar paunga' (I can do it, Sir). To my surprise, he bowled quicker than the specialist fast bowlers and had perfect control."

This was in the 2013-14 season. The following year, in 2015, Hardik was snapped up by the Mumbai Indians in the IPL auction for a base price of Rs 10 lakh. In 2017, Hardik repaid their faith by scoring 250 runs and taking six wickets. Consequently, MI retained him for a hefty Rs 11 crore in the 2018 IPL auction.

According to More, his time with MI was pivotal for Hardik's growth. "That environment, interacting with so many international players and getting to know the owners, made him a different man," says More.

But just when things were starting to look up, Hardik was carried off on a stretcher after suffering an "acute lower back injury" while bowling during the 2018 Asia Cup. It would continue to trouble him for a while. Hardik then suffered an irreparable loss when his father passed away in January 2021. Then in November, following the T20 World Cup, Hardik faced a significant setback due to a chronic injury that limited his bowling abilities. Hardik took a break from international cricket to focus on his fitness. "It was a conscious decision as his injury-ravaged body needed a more measured approach," says Jitendra. Soham Desai, Team India's lead strength and conditioning coach, had mapped out a recovery programme for Hardik. Suresh Kumar, a Chennai-based physiotherapist, worked with Hardik in Mumbai for a few sessions in December.

During Hardik's extended break, Jitendra and More meticulously planned a session-by-session routine for his recovery. Initially, the focus was on strength and conditioning, working closely with a physio to optimise his strength, flexibility, and running load. Yoga sessions were gradually introduced, and his workload was carefully monitored. Before his title-winning return, with Gujarat Titans, to the IPL in 2022, practice games in Vadodara were conducted to assess his progress. Once everyone was satisfied with his recovery, he was given the green light.

"His aim is to win a World Cup for the country. He has worked really hard at the NCA and looks all set to chase his dreams, desh ke liye," says Jitendra.

PIC:BCCI

HOW JADEJA BECAME JADDU: THE ORIGIN STORY

This is the story of an all-rounder from Jamnagar who came to **dominate** world cricket, and of the man who made it happen.

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Mahendrasinh Chauhan, in his early sixties, enters his modest office at the Cricket Bungalow, Jamnagar's historic cricket ground, and the phone immediately starts ringing. He takes out an old-fashioned phone and engages in a conversation in Gujarati, nodding along. Just before hanging up, he mentions, "*maari paase nathi... pan maari diary mah chhe...* (I don't have it now, but it's written in my diary)".

Chauhan retrieves a worn-out leather diary from an old cupboard, flipping through its pages to find a particular phone number. With a smile, he points to a name and says, "*Aa te chhe...*(here it is)". The number belongs to Ravindra Jadeja, India's star all-rounder and Chauhan's protege.

"But I don't have his number on my phone. I don't even know how to handle WhatsApp, so if anyone asks for his number, I need to find it in this diary," Chauhan says.

Chauhan has held on to the diary, a cherished possession, for about nine years now. Surprisingly, in all this time, he has never called Jadeja. Instead, whenever

Rapid strides: Ravindra Jadeja was the vice-captain of the India U-19 team that won the World Cup in 2008. (Below) Jadeja's childhood coach, Mahendrasinh Chauhan, with his wards at the Ajitsinh Cricket Pavillion in Jamnagar. GETTY IMAGES & VIJAY SONEJI

Jadeja is in Jamnagar, he visits his mentor, fondly called 'Mahendra sir'.

Chauhan shares, "Last year, during his extended stay for recovery, we met almost every day. He'd come to the ground and spend time with the youngsters. But I've never called him or asked for any favours. I don't want to bother him unnecessarily. That's why I don't have his number saved on my phone."

Since Jadeja entered the Indian team, Chauhan, not out of superstition but as a matter of principle, has refrained from watching any of his matches on television. "*Jab koi bolta hai ke Ravindra ne achha kiya, woh sun ne mein hi mujhe achha lagta hai...* (When someone tells me that Jadeja has done well, it gives me immense joy)," he says.

JADEJA'S UPBRINGING WAS MODEST. HIS MOTHER, LATABEN, WORKED AS A NURSE AT GURU GOBIND SINGH HOSPITAL, AND THE FAMILY RESIDED IN A ONE-ROOM FLAT.

Chauhan's friends diligently update him about Jadeja's performances in international matches and the IPL, even calling in the middle of the night. Despite India playing Pakistan in the ODI World Cup in Ahmedabad, around 300 kms away from Jamnagar, Chauhan won't change his routine. He emphasises, "The Indian team is going through a rough patch, but Ravindra has been consistent. He's a seasoned campaigner, and I trust he'll excel

Promising start: Indian all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja (3rd from right in whites, pic above) during his early days at the Ajitsinh Cricket Pavillion in Jamnagar. (Right) Jadeja (2nd from right) is all smiles as he makes his way to the field. PICS: VIJAY SONEJI

and guide the team."

Jadeja's upbringing was modest. His mother, Lataben, worked as a nurse at Guru Gobind Singh Hospital, and the family resided in a one-room flat. Despite their challenges, his parents, Anirudhsinh and Lata, ensured their children's well-being. While they aimed to enrol him in Sainik School, eight-year-old Jadeja had a different passion: cricket.

Enter Chauhan, a policeman acquainted with Jadeja's father. Chauhan ran the Nawanagar Cricket Academy at the unassuming Cricket Bungalow. Without formal coaching certificates, he trained a handful of youngsters, and quickly earned the reputation of a strict disciplinarian. Chauhan initially had doubts about Jadeja's ability to handle pressure. Despite offering free coaching, he made students sign contracts with guidelines. The office walls now display pictures of a young Jadeja alongside Ranjit Sinhji and Amar Singh, Jamnagar's icons.

Chauhan had zero tolerance for mischief. He candidly admits, "I have not beaten anyone as much as I have beaten Ravindra. Since I loved him, I could not tolerate any complaints. I would rebuke him straightaway." Remarkably, even after Jadeja started playing for India, he didn't hesitate to discipline him physically, and Jadeja never complained. According to Chauhan, it was all about the unique bond they shared — one that resembled a father-son relationship.

Their connection was so strong that whenever Jadeja found time, he would rush to Trishali Bhajipaun, a small eatery run by Chauhan on Vishwakarma Road, to assist him.

Jadhav Bhai, an employee at the eatery for over two decades, fondly recalls how a young 'Revadi' — nickname given by his friends — would lend a hand.

"During festivals, when the eatery was bustling with customers, Ravindra would help serve orders and even support our staff in managing the crowd," Jadhav bhai reminisces, emphasising that Jadeja did it all for his beloved "Mahendra Sir". Again, it was Chauhan who helped a young Jadeja overcome his sleepwalking habit. During a trip to Mumbai for local tournaments, Chauhan noticed Jadeja sleepwalking. He vividly recalls the night he confronted Jadeja, asking him where he was going. When he received no reply, he delivered a firm slap. Remarkably, Jadeja stopped sleepwalking from that day on. Jadeja's mother, who spotted the issue for the first time, died in a kitchen fire when he was 16, leaving him devastated. But Jadeja resumed training, vowing to make his mother proud. At 17, he represented India in the 2006 U-19 World Cup and later became vice-captain for the 2008 World Cup, which the team won under Virat Kohli's captaincy.

This marked the beginning of his remarkable journey. His breakthrough came in the IPL with the Rajasthan Royals, under Shane Warne's guidance.

However, a ban due to rule violations followed in 2010. With support from Chauhan, he returned to excel with the Chennai Super Kings, also contributing to India's Champions Trophy win in 2013. Now, fans await his performance in the upcoming ODI World Cup, while mentor Chauhan hopes for his success from Jamnagar.

PIC: BCCI

THE 22 CALLS IN 3 MONTHS' TIME THAT CHANGED HIS LIFE

Amol Karhadkar
amol.k@thehindu.co.in

Dinesh Lad and Pravin Amre talk about the work that's **gone behind** making Shardul Thakur – the Man, the Myth, the Legend.

"The first time I was interviewed was not as Rohit's coach but as Shardul's coach."

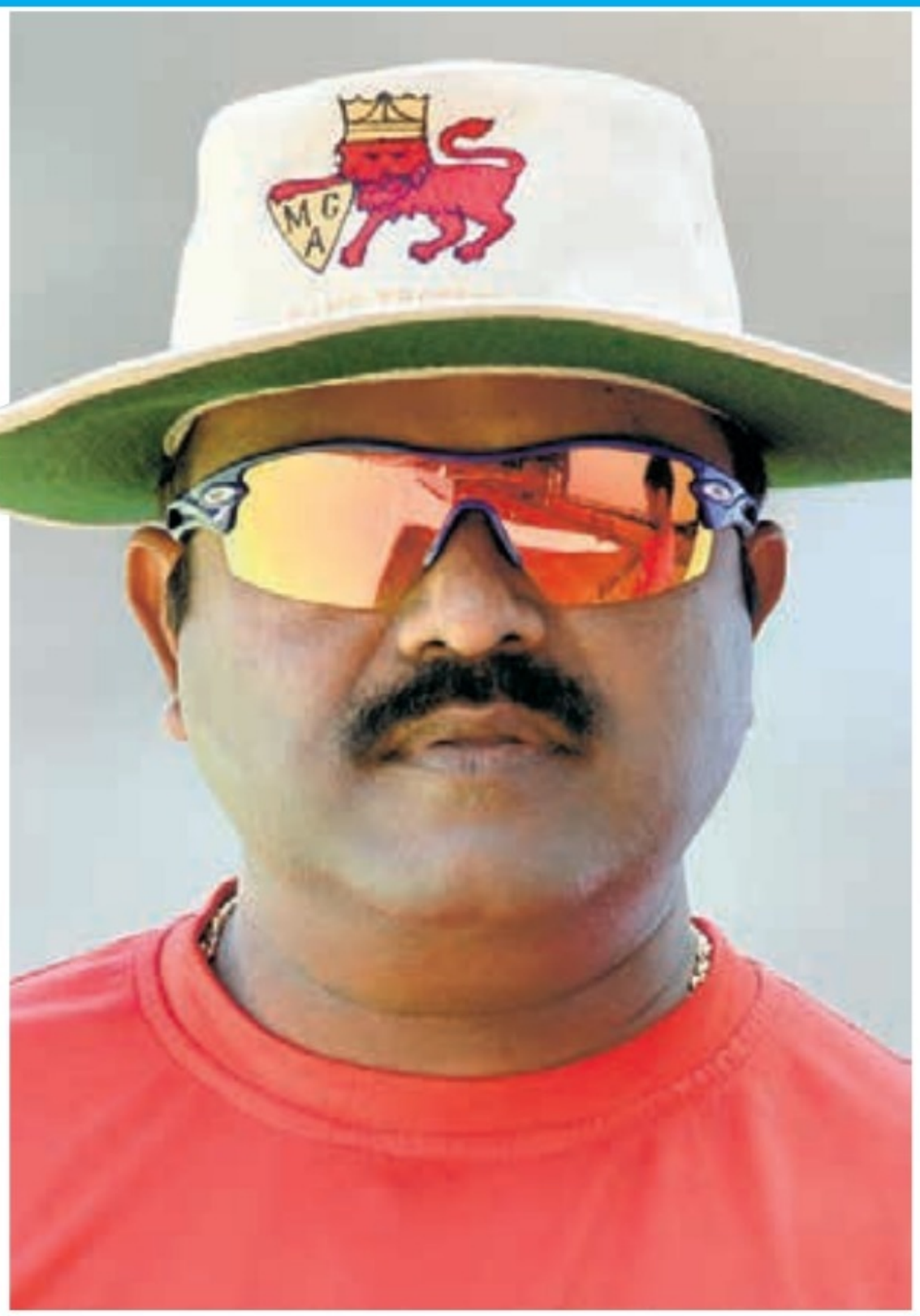
Dinesh Lad, a cricket coach in Borivali, a western suburb of Mumbai, says with pride.

Lad is credited with creating a factory of first-class cricketers. Standing atop the list are two of the four Mumbaikars who will feature in the 2023 ICC Men's World Cup. This piece is about Shardul Thakur, who has been a trending topic for Indian cricket fans for almost three years.

Shardul, hailing from Palghar, a distant suburb closer to Gujarat than Mumbai, caught the attention of Dinesh Lad due to his raw pace. He rose to fame when he smashed six sixes in an over during a school match and took a five-wicket haul in the same game in 2006. But it was Shardul's batting that saw him grab headlines in Mumbai newspapers, as he joined the exclusive club of Sir Garfield Sobers and Ravi Shastri — albeit at the school-cricket level.

"He always had the nose for batting. Once he joined me, I suggested a tweak to his top-hand-dominated grip, and it worked. But be it bowling or batting, I never got too technical with him. It was always about keeping him in a mentally good space, even at home," says Lad, whom Thakur refers to as "my second father".

After starting his journey from a village more than 10 kilometres from Palghar — now a district headquarter — Shardul would travel almost three hours one way to play an odd school game for his alma mater, Tarapore Vidyamandir.



Two wise men: (Above): Dinesh Lad (left) and Pravin Amre (right) were instrumental in Shardul Thakur's early growth as a cricketer.
EMMANUAL YOGINI & K. MURALI KUMAR

His father, Narendra, a farmer who was a popular cricketer in and around Mahim-Kelve, their native village, used to accompany Shardul. In 2006, Shardul was part of the Tarapore Vidya Mandir (TVM) squad which took on Swami Vivekanand International School (SVIS), coached by Lad, in a 45-over game.

"He picked up four wickets. But more than the wickets, I was convinced I had never seen a bowler bowling faster than him in Mumbai's under-15 circuit," recalls Lad.

The coach met him and his father and suggested he switch to SVIS, which had started becoming popular as Rohit Sharma's school. Thakur Sr. flatly declined. "He would have to travel almost three hours one way from his home, and the SSC Board exam was just a year away, so the parents refused."

Lad is relentless when it comes to honing a talent. He called the Thakurs "22 times in the next three months". Then, one fine day, he consulted his wife and called the Thakurs again. "I want him to live in my home," he told Shardul's parents.

The Thakurs relented and Shardul moved from Palghar to Borivali, staying at Lad's home for a year before relocating to another western suburb. This move disrupted his association with Bharat Chamare, who played a significant role in his early years in Palghar. Shardul then joined the prestigious Shivaji Park Gymkhana Academy, where Pravin Amre, a renowned coach known for transforming batters, guided his development.

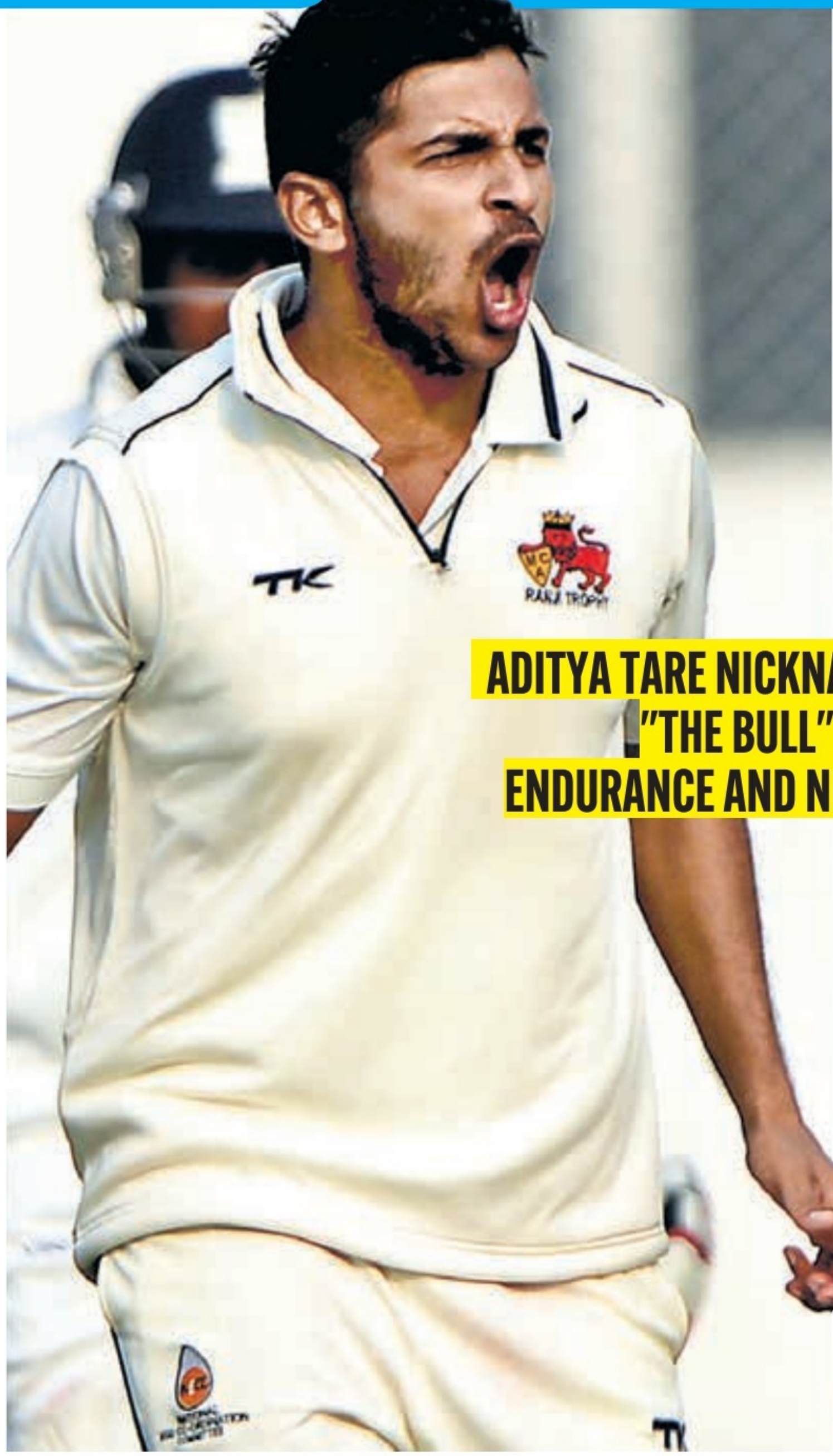
"Mind you, he was selected in our academy as a bowler, so perhaps we were negligent in paying more attention to his batting. But one could sense that he could think like a batter, a rarity for a genuine fast bowler," says Amre.

Shardul was fast-tracked into the Ranji Trophy set-up. Weeks after turning 21, he made his first-class debut against Hrishikesh Kanitkar's Rajasthan in 2012, coincidentally with Rohit as Mumbai's stand-in captain.

Despite being quick, Shardul had a reputation for being 'wayward'. Later in the season, with Ajit Agarkar lifting the 2012–13 Ranji title as captain and Sachin Tendulkar playing the knockouts, Shardul got an earful from the Mumbai seniors.

"Everyone told him his pace would be of little use if he didn't get fitter and learn control," says Lad.

The result: Thakur shed 13 kilos ahead of the next season and never looked back. To Shardul's fortune, Amre, who had guided Mumbai to three Ranji titles during his previous five-season stint starting in 2006, returned as the Mumbai head coach for 2014–15.



Purple patch: Shardul Thakur ended the 2014-15 season as joint-top of the Ranji Trophy bowling charts with 48 wickets at 20.81. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

By then, Shardul was swinging the red ball both ways at 140+ kph. "At the start of the season, I told him, 'You will do what I tell you to'. He listened to me, and the results are for everyone to see," says Amre.

Shardul was the joint-highest wicket-taker that season, claiming 48 wickets in 10 games. Aditya Tare, who became captain mid-season, nicknamed him "The Bull" due to his incredible endurance and never-give-up attitude. Shardul would willingly field in the scorching heat, making lunging saves to prevent boundaries or runs.

Despite his all-round contributions, he still carried the label of being 'wayward,' particularly in limited-overs cricket. In an interview with this writer in 2018, Shardul stressed that the "lack of white-ball matches in local cricket" meant Mumbai bowlers struggled to cope with the white-ball at the inter-state or IPL level. Amre was at the forefront of solving this problem. Quietly, during that season, he passed on two white Kookaburra balls to him and told him to keep bowling with them wherever he went. When Shardul thanked the coach, Amre told him "call me after you earn 100 wickets in international cricket."

ADITYA TARE NICKNAMED SHARDUL THAKUR "THE BULL" DUE TO HIS INCREDIBLE ENDURANCE AND NEVER-GIVE-UP ATTITUDE

The coach was all smiles when Shardul called him in 2022. "He reminded me about the conversation and told me he had crossed the landmark. I just had to give him a nudge," says Amre.

That's why Lad is confident that Shardul will come out with flying colours in the World Cup. "He is a self-made and combative cricketer and if you rub him the wrong way, he will quietly prove you wrong," Lad says.

"Time and again, be it in Australia, South Africa, or India, and across various formats, Shardul has shown the world that he can be trusted as an all-rounder. I am sure he will justify the tag in the World Cup."

Should Lad's prediction come true, he will again give many more interviews about Shardul, not just Rohit.

PIC: BCCI

SET ON A NEW PATH, HE LEFT NO STONE UNTURNED

Despite not being initially named in the squad, Ashwin has been included as a replacement for the injured Axar Patel and will make his **third appearance** in the World Cup.

S. Dipak Ragav
dipak.ragav@thehindu.co.in

Ravichandran Ashwin is one of the greatest cricketers India has produced, with 716 international wickets. He has already secured 489 wickets in Tests and is likely to finish his career as India's second-highest wicket-taker in the format. Though Anil Kumble's record of 619 wickets is currently out of reach, the 37-year-old can surpass it.

While Ashwin has been a dominant force in Test cricket over the past decade, his performance in white-ball international cricket has been sporadic. He was dropped in 2017, and it took him four years to return to the Indian team ahead of the 2021 T20 World Cup. Since then, he has made occasional appearances in coloured clothing, including at the 2022 T20 World Cup.

In one-day cricket, Ashwin played a few games in South Africa in 2022 but was not a regular member of the team until he was recalled for the three-match series against Australia ahead of the upcoming 50-over World Cup. Despite failing to make it to the initial squad, he has now been included as a replacement for the injured Axar Patel and will make his third appearance at the showpiece event.

During the 2011 World Cup in India, Ashwin played two matches. He even opened the bowling in the quarterfinal against Australia and took the wicket of Shane Watson.

Life will come full circle for the off-spinner if he is selected for India's opening match of the World Cup against Australia at his home ground in Chennai on October 8.

Incidentally, it is the venue where he made his World Cup debut in 2011 and played his first-ever First-Class match, in 2006, against Haryana. This place has always been a great hunting ground for the off-spinner, as he has managed to take two five-wicket hauls and score a century in Tests.

If Ashwin finds a place in the playing XI, C. K. Vijaya Kumar, who has been training young cricketers for over two decades at St. Bede's school ground a few kilometres away from the Chepauk stadium, will be proud of Ashwin even if he is not in the stadium.

In high school, Vijaya Kumar played a pivotal role in transforming Ashwin from an opening batter and medium-pacer into an off-spinner.

Recalling the decision, Kumar, in a chat with *Sportstar*, says, "He joined St. Bede's Anglo Indian High School from Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan for the 11th standard. While bowling one day at the school nets, he felt tired and asked if he could try bowling off-spin. I agreed, and he soon demonstrated great control. It was evident that he had a special talent for it."

However, Ashwin was keen to get back to bowling at full tilt until Kumar insisted on him focusing on his new craft. "The next day, he was unhappy and wanted to bowl medium-pace. But I did not allow him to bowl that day and told him to pursue off-spin. After that, we spoke with his father and decided this was the best for his future."

Under Kumar's supervision, Ashwin spent long hours in the sprawling St. Bede's School grounds, tucked behind the All India Radio premises near the world-famous Marina Beach, honing his skills in this new art form.

Explaining the rationale behind asking him to bowl off-spin, the 57-year-old Indian Bank employee says, "We had two off-spinners playing at the under-16 state level. But when I saw him, it was clear he stood apart. He was using his height well, getting that extra bounce, and having pace off the pitch. He was a quick learner, too, compared to others in his age group.

"If you are a batter, you are competing with many people. But picking wickets helps you get into the state team quickly. At that time, Tamil Nadu did not have many good off-spinners at the under-16 level. Even at that young age, with his bounce, he was getting people caught at bat-pad."

But once set on the new path, Ashwin left no stone unturned to succeed. "We knew he would shine as an off-spinner, but he has achieved everything in international cricket because of his dedication and hard work."

A key reason behind Ashwin's success has been the never-ending desire to stay ahead of the curve by constantly experimenting and outsmarting the batters. Was it evident even back then? "Yes, even at the school level, he had plans for every batter. He was very particular about match planning."

"What stood out more was the control he had

Fledgling career: Ravichandran Ashwin (above) in action during the Ranji Trophy Super League match against Mumbai at Gurunanak College Ground in Chennai in 2007. Although he has since emerged as one of the game's best spinners, Ashwin continues to impress with his batting skills. PICS: THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY & R. RAGU

ASHWIN SPENT LONG HOURS IN THE SPRAWLING ST. BEDE'S SCHOOL GROUNDS, TUCKED BEHIND THE ALL INDIA RADIO PREMISES NEAR THE WORLD-FAMOUS MARINA BEACH, HONING HIS SKILLS IN THIS NEW ART FORM

even then. He would set his field, bowling with close-in catchers, and could bowl to the field. A lot of cricketers at that age will not be able to bowl to a field," the veteran coach explains.

When asked about the specific aspects of the game he worked on, Kumar says, "Apart from the basics of line and length, we worked on how to be quick off the pitch. You need to develop control to be quick, even while giving flight. It is easy to start bowling flat when trying to be fast, and it won't be effective."

While Ashwin burst into the public imagination through the IPL and international cricket, he had by then done the hard yards at the competitive Chennai league circuit and had spent a few years in First-Class cricket.

It is this solid foundation right from his school days that has helped the 37-year-old be at the top of his game for the better part of the last decade. Apart from his talent and bags of tricks, Ashwin is also a fierce competitor and rarely gives an inch on the field. "He did not just want to do well; he also wanted the team to win. We won most tournaments when he played for us. More importantly, he used to guide other players. He was always ready to share his thoughts about the game."

On his expectations from one of his most famous pupils at the 2023 ODI World Cup, the coach says, "To play in three World Cups is a great achievement. I am sure he will do well because we are playing at home. I think an off-spinner is key to any bowling attack, and he is a wicket-taking bowler.

We saw how well he bowled in the previous match (3 for 41 in the second one-day against Australia in Indore). It will be great to see him play in the World Cup."

PIC: BCCI

KULDEEP'S RISE: A DREAM KAPIL PANDEY SPUN

Kuldeep Yadav's coach on how he came into his own by **embracing spin traditions** without letting go of his own strengths.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan
lavanya.ln@thehindu.co.in

In the bustling Kamla Club Ground in Kanpur, Kapil Pandey stands out with his unmistakable sports cap and sunglasses, a signature look for the former Navyman-turned bowling coach. Pandey, always approachable, welcomes discussions about the game with open arms, diving into intricate bowling details such as seam position and release angles. Yet his true passion shines when he talks about his most illustrious student, Kuldeep Yadav.

In the realm of sports, it's not uncommon to witness parents living their unfulfilled dreams through their children. Kuldeep's journey closely follows this narrative. Ram Singh Yadav, a brick kiln owner in Uttar Pradesh, once pursued cricket, but life's circumstances curtailed his aspirations. His dreams were now vested in his 12-year-old son, Kuldeep, whom he introduced to Pandey, then a teacher at Kendriya Vidyalaya in Unnao.

"Kuldeep's father wanted me to groom his son into a district-level cricketer," Pandey reveals. The young Kuldeep took to cricket effortlessly and expressed his desire to model his game after legendary Pakistan left-arm bowler Wasim Akram.

Pandey, talking about those early days, shares, "I immediately told him that it wasn't feasible. It might have been tough for the young boy to hear, as he believed in his abilities. While he had a knack for swing, he lacked the pace required to excel as a fast bowler."

Kuldeep faced a crucial decision in his journey. When Pandey advised him that swing alone wouldn't suffice,

Mentor and mentee: Indian spinner Kuldeep Yadav with his childhood coach Kapil Pandey. SANDEEP SAXENA

Kuldeep's immediate response was, "My ball swings a lot, doesn't it?" He focused on the present, but Pandey was thinking about his future. Pandey firmly told him that he needed to either explore spin bowling or sit out, a response that left Kuldeep in tears.

To trick his coach, Kuldeep pretended to accept the decision to bowl spin but ended up bowling a chinaman delivery, a wrist ball. Pandey seized this opportunity. Although Kuldeep thought he had outsmarted his coach, Pandey persisted in encouraging him to pursue spin.

After just 10–15 days of consistent practice, Kuldeep made it to the senior squad and realised the significance of spin bowling in his game. He replaced Akram with Shane Warne on his vision board.

Kuldeep's tenacity was apparent from a young age. Although his pursuit of pace bowling didn't pan out, he relentlessly sought more playing time and practice opportunities. "I would send him away after breakfast to get some rest or speak to him at the end of a day's training about the plan for the next day, only for Kuldeep to insist that we continue bowling right then. He wanted to know everything there was to know about spin, variations, run-up tweaks, and deliveries that swung in and away.

"I taught him everything by the time he was 13. At a local talent hunt, people were surprised that a teenager knew how to bowl a googly. If you ask me, only novel things are sold on the market. We used to think we should keep specialisation for a later stage in a cricketer's life, but that's not how the world works today. We need to guide children down their specific paths and fine-tune them towards excellence early on," Pandey explains.

Kuldeep's unwavering determination, honed through persistent effort, proved crucial in a competitive era of Indian spin talent. Injuries and rigorous training under coach Pandey shaped his resilience.

In 2019, during an IPL match against Royal Challengers Bangalore, an emotional moment captured Kuldeep's resilience. Despite conceding 26 runs in one

> « Kuldeep's unwavering determination has proved crucial in a competitive era of Indian spin talent »

KAPIL PANDEY EMPHASISES THAT KULDEEP'S FORM WAS UNFAIRLY CRITICISED, ESPECIALLY DURING HIS STINT WITH THE KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS

Watchful eyes: Kids (above) during a practice session at the Rovers Club run by Kuldeep Yadav's coach Kapil Pandey. (Right) Pandey interacting with the players. PICS: SANDEEP SAXENA

over against Moeen Ali, Kuldeep displayed unwavering determination. Pandey emphasises that Kuldeep's form was unfairly criticised, especially during his stint with the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR). It was only after he joined the Delhi Capitals that he demonstrated his true potential, earning multiple Player of the Match awards.

A five-month injury hiatus in 2021 allowed Kuldeep to reassess his technique. He worked on targeting the stumps, adjusted his bowling hand position, and introduced pace variations. Pandey continually reminded him that hard work would yield results, and Kuldeep embraced this ethos throughout his journey.

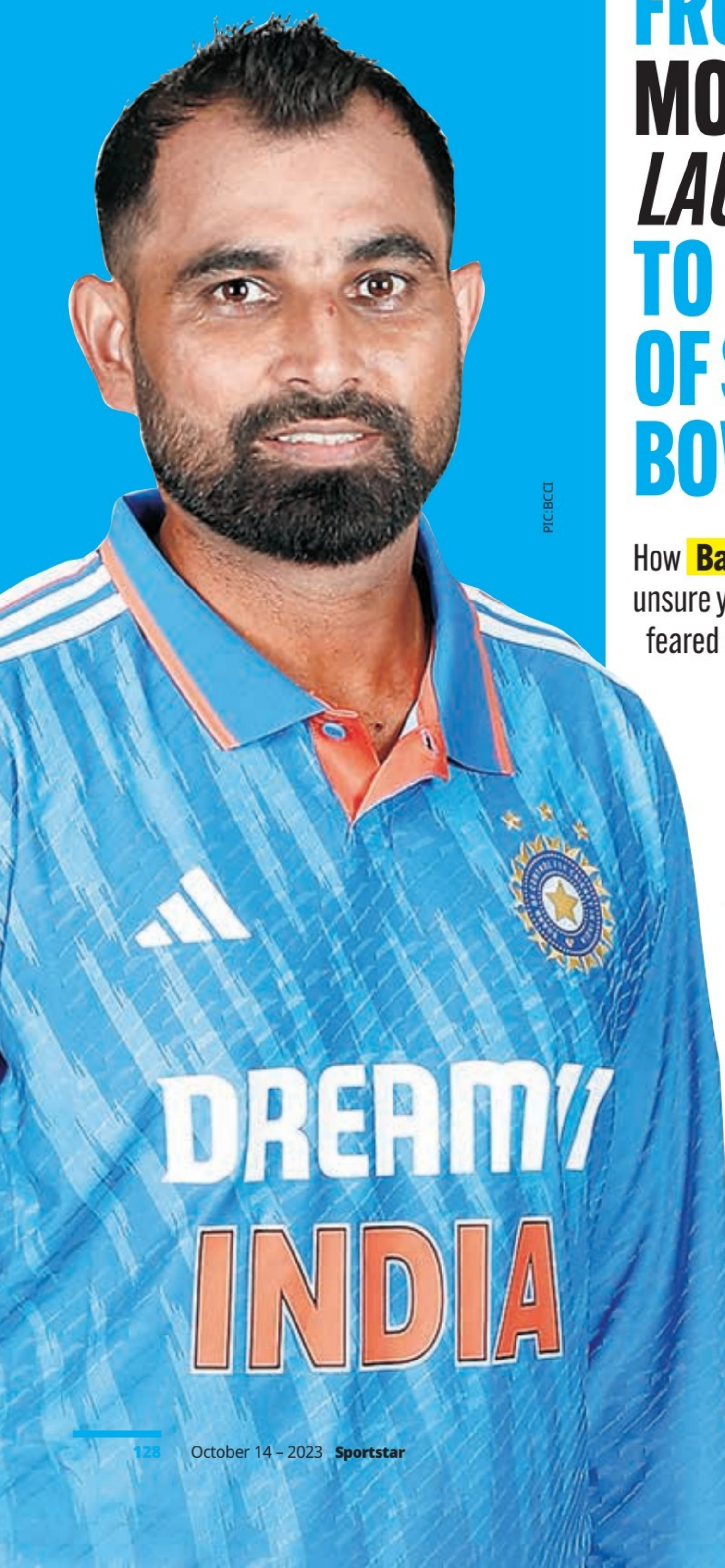
Kuldeep recently helped India win yet another Asia Cup title. In the 2018 edition of the tournament, he ended with the joint-most wickets (10). This year, he won the Player of the Series Award for his incisive spells against Pakistan and Sri Lanka, which handed India wins in both matches.

The 19-year-old association between master and apprentice remains strong. Kuldeep always checks back with his coach before and after every series, whatever the level of competition. When success came knocking, Kuldeep always kept Pandey in mind.

"When he was in the NCA, he once got me a pair of shoes. He called me to ask about my size. Our height and shoe size are almost the same, and he got me a pair. Whenever Kuldeep came back from his travels, he'd get me Oakley sunglasses. This swelling that I have under my eyes came from the long hours we spent training under the sun, and these glasses (pointing to the one he has on) are a pair he got me when he went on tour to Australia for the first time. And whenever they get old, he returns with a replacement. Whenever he comes back from tour, he'll call me, and the first thing he asks is, '*Sir, aaj practice kab karna hai* (Sir, when is practice today)?' Some things don't change with Kuldeep," Pandey fondly recalls.

When the home World Cup gets underway on October 5 and India bids for a third crown, Pandey won't be in the stands cheering on his boy. Instead, a 55-inch television has been installed at his home, and he keeps a constant prayer on his lips while keeping an eye on his disciple.

"Remember that ball to Babar (Azam) in the 2019 World Cup? I want more of that. More of striking the stumps, please!" Pandey says.



PIC:BCCI

FROM MORADABAD *KA LAUNDA* TO BAADSHAH OF SEAM BOWLING

How **Badruddin Siddiqui** helped an eager, unsure youngster become one of the world's feared quick bowlers.

Abhishek Saini
abhishek.s@thehindu.co.in

Mention the Dronacharya award to Badruddin Siddiqui, and he responds with a modest smile and a subtle look away. Amidst the ceaseless production on his factory line, Siddiqui exudes confidence in the imminent breakthrough of Mohsin Khan, a rising star in the Lucknow Super Giants of the Indian Premier League. Before Mohsin, two cricketing talents from his stable left an indelible mark. Piyush Chawla, hailing from Moradabad in western Uttar Pradesh, blazed a trail to the Indian cricket team, defying the odds.

However, the second protege, Mohammed Shami, captured Siddiqui's heart. It was in 2004 that Shami, then a wiry 14-year-old boy, turned up at the Sonakpur Stadium. It was at the insistence of his father, Tousif Ali, who felt his son was gifted with pace and that Siddiqui's tutelage could do the trick. "Every father thinks their kid is special, but the coach wonders if the boy can work hard. I asked him to bowl for half an hour, and what impressed me was that his intensity did not drop the slightest bit," says Siddiqui.

"Iske andar wo keeda tha (He had an

Guiding light: (Above) Mohammed Shami with his coach Badruddin Siddiqui. PICS: SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

SHAMI'S SKILLS WITH THE NEW BALL AND THE ABILITY TO REVERSE THE OLD ONE HAVE MADE HIM A POTENT FORCE

insatiable desire to learn)," says Siddiqui. "What others took a month to learn, Shami managed in five to 10 days. He would constantly pester me. There used to be so many kids, and he was scared that if he did not hang around me, I would not pay attention. Initially, it was irritating, but later I realised that he has something special."

In the decade since his international debut, Shami has seen more ups and downs than most have in their entire lives. On the cricket field, he torments batters with seam and swing bowling, but off it, he once hogged the headlines for off-field troubles.

Shami's skills with the new ball and the ability to reverse the old one have made him a potent force. Siddiqui recalls early signs of these talents. "He had a habit of taking home the old ball and throwing it against his bedroom wall, flicking his wrist just before releasing it. His parents were worried; his father even called me and said, 'Sir, he has gone mad.' The wall turned red with ball marks," Siddiqui reminisces.

Soon enough, Shami drew a line on the wall and kept practising. Holding the seam upright, Shami started directing the ball using his fingers. The right side of the wall was for the index finger, and the left was for the middle one. This is how Shami learned to reverse swing.

In 2016, Shami's career hit a speed bump with a failed yo-yo fitness test. But during his hiatus, Shami found an unconventional solution in his backyard. "He started running in the sand while getting a farmhouse built. His brother told me he did it for two to three hours daily, which I think made him quicker," Siddiqui explains.

However, Shami faced his greatest test when his father passed away a year later. Siddiqui encouraged him to carry on living his father's dream, saying, "'You must stand tall again.' His father did so much for Shami and would want him to keep going."

Siddiqui admires Shami's resilience and his passion for cricket, which was evident from a young age. At 17, Shami experienced the fierce competition of age-group cricket selection in India during UP's under-19 trial in Kanpur, leaving him disheartened as he grappled with the reality of the sport's challenges.

Siddiqui believed in fate and how it plays a significant role in a player's journey. Soon after, Shami's story took an unexpected turn. After returning home from Kanpur, a call from Kolkata altered Shami's path in cricket. A friend sought a fast bowler, and Siddiqui, Shami's mentor, saw potential in this opportunity. Convincing Shami's parents to let him go, he emphasised the necessity of dedication to cricket, even if it meant staying alone.

Shami arrived in Kolkata after a tiring two-day train journey with his cousin. He was accommodated in a cramped single room. Despite his exhaustion, he attended a net session with the Dalhousie Athletic Club on the same day. His initial deliveries hit the poles on either side of the batter, but after some patience and a second attempt, Shami

Proud teacher: Badruddin Siddiqui, Mohammed Shami's first coach, teaching his wards the tricks of the trade. Siddiqui's cricket factory keeps churning out prospects.

PICS: SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

impressed his coach. Although it took some time to adjust to life in Kolkata, Shami's cricketing career began to flourish. His standout performances, first for Dalhousie Athletic Club and then for Mohun Bagan, caught the eye of selectors, earning him a spot in Bengal's under-23 team.

Siddiqui hoped to see Shami play for their home state, but recognised that representing India was the goal. Despite the distance, their mentor-mentee bond remained strong through phone calls.

Game time was limited in the under-23 set-up, delaying Shami's Ranji Trophy debut. However, an opportunity arose when Sourav Ganguly, a former India captain, gave him a chance. "Shami and a few others were called up to bowl to him (Ganguly) in the nets [in Kolkata]. His first ball bounced off the pitch and took off to the keeper. Ganguly thought that it was the pitch. But the second was the same, and so was the third. Ganguly asked, 'Kya khel rahe ho? (Where are you playing?)' and Shami told him that he was not getting games. After the session, Ganguly called up someone, and for the next match, Shami was on the team. That was how he got on the board's radar. He performed consistently after that," says Siddiqui.

Their reunions are now reserved for Shami's visits back home.

Siddiqui playfully remarks, "Cricket never escapes from our discussions, not even with biryani on the table."

As a pleasant surprise, Shami arranges impromptu net sessions for Siddiqui's students. Siddiqui shares, "He tells me, 'Send the kids to the farmhouse today.' The young batters get nervous; they say, 'All we do is watch the ball reach the keeper.'"

The aspiring talents in line have matured, and Moradabad is no longer shy about dreaming big. Siddiqui's cricket factory keeps churning out prospects.

Aryan Juyal and Shiva Singh have represented India under-19, while a group is making their mark in the Ranji Trophy. Siddiqui says, "The label of 'fast bowling coach' has stuck. Perhaps one of them will help me shed that title."

The elusive Dronacharya award remains a cherished aspiration. Siddiqui concludes with optimism: "If it's written in our destiny, we will attain it."

PIC:BCCI

NIRMAN SCHOOL'S MOST FAMOUS ALUMNUS, NOW INDIA'S PACE SPEARHEAD

Jasprit Bumrah's childhood coaches talk about what has gone into his journey from the school playground to the Indian team.

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Nestled in the serene corner of Vastrapur, a bustling neighbourhood in Ahmedabad, stands Nirman High School. The school proudly displays images of a radiant Jasprit Bumrah at its gate. Once inside, the campus is adorned with photo collages of a young Bumrah and the array of trophies he earned during his school years. The school's grounds, adjacent to the main building, bear witness to Bumrah's transformation from a reserved schoolboy to a champion bowler.

Bumrah's coaches at Nirman, Kishore Trivedi and Ketul Purohit, recognised his potential early on. Bumrah was seven when his father, Jasbir, passed away, leaving his mother, Daljit, with the responsibility of managing the household and raising two children, Bumrah and his sister Juhika.

Daljit, then the vice-principal of Nirman High School's pre-primary section, turned to Trivedi, father of former Gujarat and Rajasthan Royals fast bowler Siddharth Trivedi, to enrol Bumrah in his

BUMRAH'S EARLY JOURNEY WASN'T A FAIRY TALE. A FEW YEARS PRIOR TO JOINING MI, HE TRIED OUT FOR THE DISTRICT U-19 TEAM BUT WAS NAMED AS A RESERVE

academy. It marked the beginning of Bumrah's incredible cricket journey.

Every day after school, a young 'Jassi' would hit the field. "When I saw him in the nets for the first time, he troubled the batters with pace generated by his quick arm action and short run-up. I watched him bowl for about 10 minutes and was convinced that if we could guide him well, he had the talent to go far," Trivedi says.

"He was bowling fair [legal] deliveries, and all he needed to focus on was maintaining the line and length," he adds.

Over the following days, Trivedi and Purohit closely observed Bumrah to ensure he wasn't 'throwing'. Trivedi, who has since moved on to run the Royal Cricket Academy in Prahladnagar, recalled advising Bumrah not to change his unique action, encouraging him to harness it. Earning the coaches' trust, Bumrah honed his yorker. Included in the school team, he received guidance from Siddharth, an IPL star, on precision bowling. "In one of the local tournaments, I made him play all four matches, and he bowled perfect line and length. What set him apart was his speed," reminisces Trivedi. Consistently reaching 140 kmph, Bumrah became a local cricket sensation, making rival batters lose their sleep whenever Nirman's team played.

But Daljit was still not convinced. "Initially, Jasprit took things casually and wasn't quite disciplined. So, one day, his mother called me and asked whether he indeed had a future in cricket. I told her that Jasprit certainly had talent, and if he came to my camp regularly, I would try and make him ready for at least state-level cricket," says Trivedi. Purohit echoed the sentiments.

After consulting both coaches, Daljit allowed Bumrah two years to pursue cricket. Those years transformed his life. At 19, he was chosen by the Mumbai Indians (MI) for the Indian Premier League (IPL). Notably, former New Zealand captain and ex-India coach John Wright, scouting for MI, was impressed and brought him on board.

However, Bumrah's early journey wasn't a fairy tale. A few years prior to joining MI, he tried out for the district U-19 team but was named as a reserve due to his unconventional bowling action.

However, he caught the eye of Anil Patel, the current secretary of the Gujarat Cricket Association. Patel recalls Bumrah initially sitting out for three games, but when he finally played, he took seven wickets. Bumrah's breakthrough came when he joined Gujarat's white-ball team,

Humble beginnings: Jasprit Bumrah's unorthodox action posed challenges when he was starting off as a teenager. But his ability to bowl inch-perfect yorkers at express pace helped him carve a niche for himself.

PICS: VIJAY SONEJI

making his debut in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy in March 2013. Just a month later, he made a striking IPL debut against Royal Challengers Bangalore, taking three wickets. His face-off with RCB captain Virat Kohli, conceding three boundaries before dismissing him, caught the world's attention.

Although Bumrah played only two matches that year, MI retained him for the next season. Hitesh Majmudar, Gujarat's coach during Bumrah's early days, noted his transformation. "Jasprit made his Ranji Trophy debut after playing in the IPL. Back then, he would bowl only in-swingers as he would come wide off the crease. But with time, he worked really hard and emerged as the best in the business," says Majmudar.

Despite making it to the IPL, concerns persisted about Bumrah's bowling action, with an umpire raising objections during the 2015–2016 Vijay Hazare Trophy. Fortunately, the Gujarat team management's support resolved the issue.

A month later, Bumrah flew to Australia, debuting for India on January 23, 2016. In seven years, he has become India's fast-bowling leader, overcoming injuries, and impressing mentors.

Looking ahead to the ODI World Cup in India, coach Trivedi anticipates a challenge for bowlers on batting-friendly pitches such as Ahmedabad. He emphasises the importance of managing Bumrah's workload and maintaining peak fitness. Trivedi acknowledges Bumrah's star status but still sees him as the young Jasprit with immense potential, hoping for his continued success on the field.

Trivedi won't attend the India-Pakistan match at Narendra Modi Stadium but is rooting for Bumrah to have a successful World Cup journey.

"Like always, I will be watching the game on television and hope that Jasprit plays a key role in India's victory," he says.

PIC:BCCI

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY IN STYLE, AND WITH KINDNESS

Mohammed Mahboob Ahmed, Siraj's first coach, tells the story of Mohammed Siraj, who has been **laughing in the face of adversity** his whole life.

V. S. Aravind & Shayan Acharya
aravind.vs@thehindu.co.in /
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Mohammed Siraj, fondly known as "Miyan," not only delivers thunderbolts on the field but also inspires dreams among aspiring cricketers.

Despite Siraj's remarkably swift rise as one of Team India's pace spearheads, life goes on as usual in Mehdipatnam, a neighbourhood in the southwestern part of Hyderabad, where the speedster spent his early years. The sound of the Namaz wafts in the background while street vendors and meat sellers jostle to open their shops for the day. On a nearby field, a young fast bowler adopts Siraj's Siu celebration — inspired by Cristiano Ronaldo — after taking a wicket.

Mohammed Mahboob Ahmed, Siraj's first coach, recalls the days spent with the young cricketer. "*Bacha hai apna Siraj* (He is our boy), and the way he used to bowl was exciting. What a star he has become, and we are all proud of his achievements. It was one of those beautiful days when I met him, and I still cherish those memories. I am delighted to be a small part of his journey," Mahboob says.

Located approximately 12 kilometres from Charminar's iconic minarets, the Charminar Cricket Club, affiliated with the Hyderabad Cricket Association (HCA), used to predominantly organise tennis ball tournaments before eventually making the shift to leather ball competitions. Siraj, too, first caught everyone's attention because of his skills with the tennis ball. "My friend Mohammed Kaleem,

Fond memories: Mohammed Siraj (extreme right) with his Charminar Cricket Club team-mates and club secretary, Mohammed Mahboob Ahmed (below), and other support staff. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & NAGARA GOPAL

a vegetable seller, first saw Siraj play on the streets. I went to the Vijay Anand Garden to meet Siraj. After watching him bowl, I inducted him into my club. Siraj took five wickets against Balaji Cricket Club in 2014 in his very first match playing with the leather ball. In the next two matches, he claimed 15 wickets, using his height to good effect," says Mahboob.

Mohammed Ghaus, Siraj's father, worked as an autorickshaw driver, while his brother, Mohammed Ismail, pursued a career as a software engineer. For the Siraj family, earning a comfortable livelihood was a challenge, especially when young Siraj was still trying to establish himself in the competitive Hyderabad cricket scene.

Education was not Siraj's priority; his heart was set on the game. However, his early career was marred by disciplinary issues. Skipping practice sessions and inconsistent behaviour during coaching camps led to his temporary exclusion from a camp conducted by the HCA. "No one knows this, but I intervened and requested the president and secretary to give Siraj a final chance. I met his family and convinced them to allow Siraj to play the game professionally," Mahboob says.

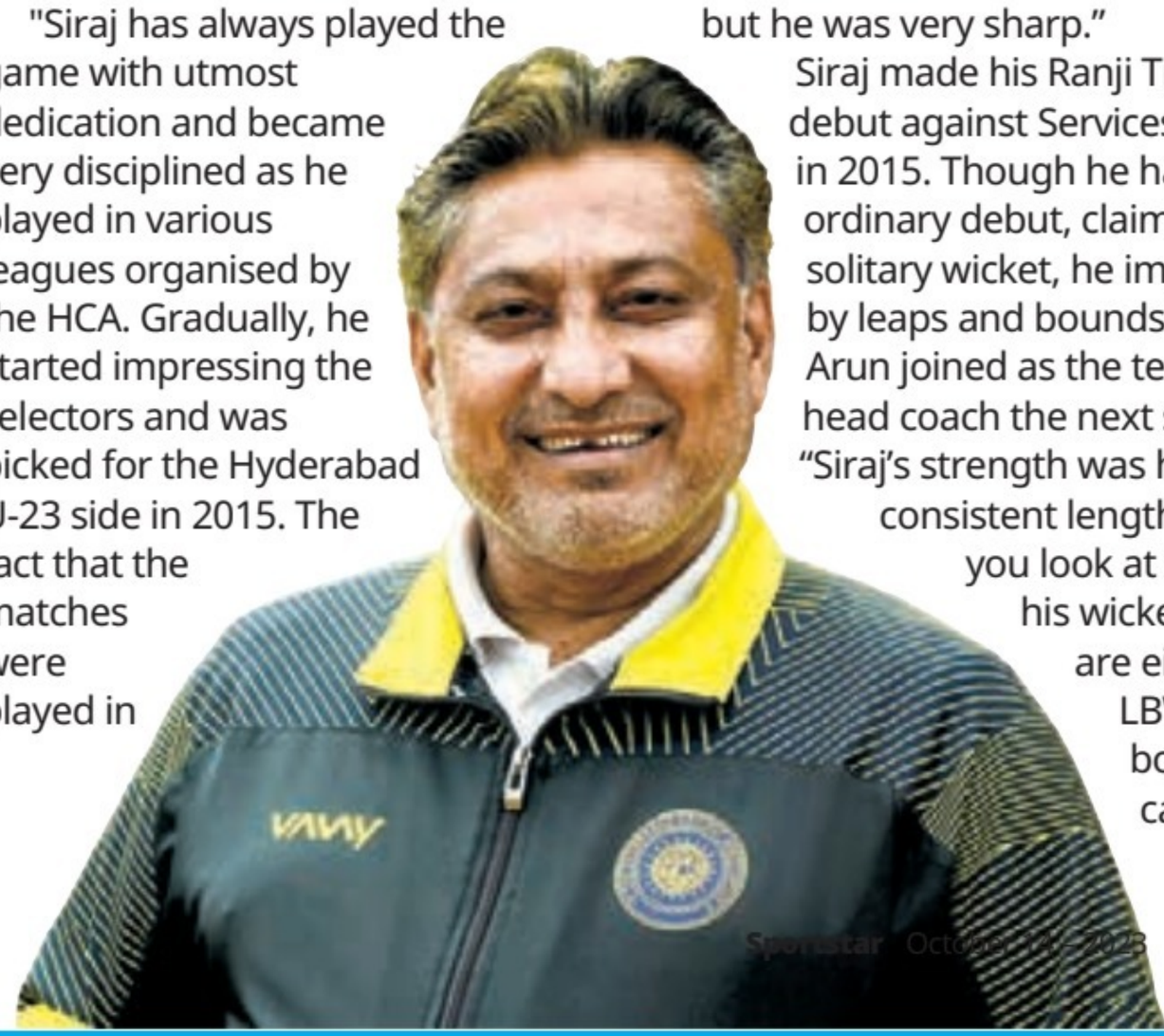
This incident prompted a transformation in Siraj. He became more committed, attending coaching sessions regularly. His newfound dedication paid off as he consistently took wickets, impressing the selectors in every match.

"Siraj has always played the game with utmost dedication and became very disciplined as he played in various leagues organised by the HCA. Gradually, he started impressing the selectors and was picked for the Hyderabad U-23 side in 2015. The fact that the matches were played in seamer-friendly conditions also helped."

A chance encounter with former India coach Bharat Arun opened doors to the Hyderabad senior team for Siraj. "Back then, I was the bowling coach of Royal Challengers Bangalore and we were in Hyderabad for an away game against Sunrisers, and during a nets session, he caught my attention," Arun tells *Sportstar*.

"Siraj was one of the net bowlers and after observing him for a while, I checked with VVS (Laxman) if he was playing for Hyderabad in the Ranji Trophy. He wasn't part of the team, but he was very sharp."

Siraj made his Ranji Trophy debut against Services in Delhi in 2015. Though he had an ordinary debut, claiming a solitary wicket, he improved by leaps and bounds after Arun joined as the team's head coach the next season. "Siraj's strength was his consistent length and if you look at most of his wickets, they are either LBW or bowled or caught



behind - so, the length that he hits is very important and also those lengths allow him to move the ball consistently," Arun says.

In the 2016-17 Ranji Trophy season, Siraj picked 41 wickets, which eventually earned him a spot in India's T20I side. On November 4, 2017, Siraj made his debut for India in a T20I against New Zealand in Rajkot. Arun believes that with a quick-arm action, Siraj has evolved over a period of time.

EDUCATION WAS NOT SIRAJ'S PRIORITY; HIS HEART WAS SET ON THE GAME. HOWEVER, SIRAJ'S EARLY CAREER WAS MARRED BY DISCIPLINARY ISSUES

"He understands his bowling more than anything else and that's the reason behind him being more consistent at the highest level," Arun says, "Earlier, he was exciting and raw, but now he is more aware of his bowling. He is more aware of what needs to be done according to situations."

But life hasn't been easy for the 29-year-old. Between 2013 and 2014, Siraj faced financial hardships. A teary-eyed Mahboob recalls how he supported the young bowler. There were days when Siraj relied on friends for rides to reach the grounds in time for matches, but Mahboob tried his best to ease the young cricketer's financial burdens.

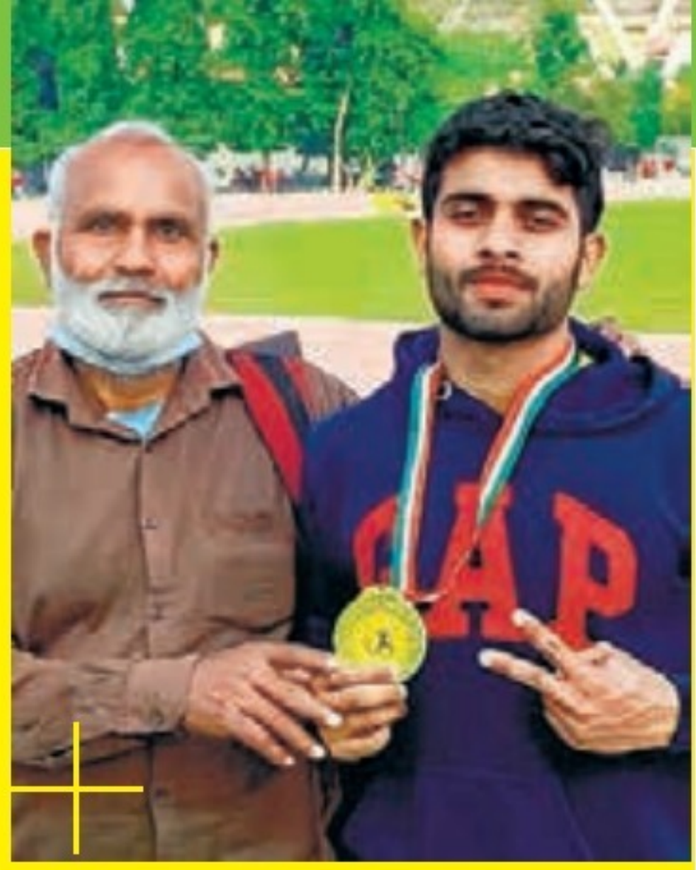
"We paid him Rs. 1500 for every match, whereas others didn't receive any payment and covered their own expenses," he says.

Siraj's journeys to the Gymkhana ground, the Uppal stadium, and the NFC cricket ground in Secunderabad covered approximately 30 kilometres roundtrip. After every match, the duo would savour a good biryani before heading home. Mahboob still cherishes their unique bond and, of course, their shared love for biryani. They were regulars at the Taiba Bakery and Cafe in the Masab Tank area, where Siraj lived during his formative years.

The fast bowler also enjoyed visiting the Fiza Hotel and Cafe Bahar with his friends, where they would often eat biryani.

"I haven't spoken to him for long, but *jab bacha bada hoke naam kamata hai, toh acha lagta hai. God gift hai apna Siraj* (When your son grows up and makes a name for himself, you feel good)," Mahboob says.

One for the album: A young Mohammed Siraj (below) takes a selfie along with his friends and coach Mohammed Mahboob Ahmed (in green). Above: Syed Hameed, former captain of the Charminar Cricket Club, with his wards. The team wishes Siraj the very best for the upcoming World Cup. NAGARA GOPAL & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Honesty is the best policy

Lalit Kumar might have taken first place in the men's 100m at the Delhi State championships but he went home without a gold medal around his neck or an official certificate of victory. On paper there is nothing wrong with it. Official rules state that no medals or certificates are awarded in a race conducted with less than three participants. Lalit's race was conducted with just one — himself.

Eight runners had officially qualified from the heats and semifinals. But in a bizarre turn of events, on hearing that dope testers had been sent by NADA to take urine samples from the participants, every one but Lalit didn't show up in the morning of the race. "*Kya gazab ka race hai*," jokes a spectator in a video of the one man race that was uploaded to social media. It was a testament to the seriousness of the problem of doping in Indian sports particularly at the State level. Indeed multiple athletes across other events didn't show up for their competition either although none of the other races had just the one participant like the 100m did. The video was also however proof of something else. The honesty of that one athlete who decided to compete knowing he was at a disadvantage.

JONATHAN SELVARAJ

SPORTOON

1 **B. Sai Sudharsan won the men's cricketer of the year award at the TNCA 91st annual day function at the M.A. Chidambaram stadium.** His father R. Bharadwaj received the award on his behalf from the guest of honour, former India captain and BCCI chairman of selectors K. Srikkanth.

S. Anusha bagged the women's cricketer of the year award.

Speaking on the occasion, former ICC chairman and BCCI and TNCA president N. Srinivasan who was the chief guest of the occasion hoped for Tamil Nadu to win the upcoming Ranji Trophy.

"One item missing is the Ranji Trophy. I start every year with the hope that they'll win this year. Anyway, I'm hoping again that this year we will get the coveted trophy and meet here and have a celebration. It will happen this year! If Vidarbha can win it, why can't we?"

Srikkanth hailed Srinivasan as "one of the greatest cricket administrators," and said that Srinivasan "has taken TNCA to a great level."

He added: "No one can replicate what N. Srinivasan sir has done to TNCA."

S. PRASANNA VENKATESAN

The loneliest sport

Alan Sillitoe's short story *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* wasn't so much about loneliness in sport as about alienation in society, but the **concept** is applied to most sports.

Suresh Menon

The sportsman as a lonely figure has almost been elevated (or reduced) to a cliche. Alan Sillitoe's short story *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* wasn't so much about loneliness in sport as about alienation in society, but the concept is applied to most sports.

Boxing is widely recognised as the loneliest sport. The boxer is alone in the ring, and survival depends as much on instinct as on training and luck. Things could go so wrong as to cripple a boxer for life or even kill him. "Boxing is a lonely sport," declared Mike Tyson, and found few to disagree.

Andre Agassi agreed in a roundabout way in his autobiography *Open*: "Only boxers can understand the loneliness of tennis players," he wrote, "and yet boxers have their corner men and managers... In tennis you're on an island. Of all the games men and women play, tennis is the closest to solitary confinement...."

Making a point: India's hockey goalkeeper Sreejesh wrote: "Being a goalkeeper is a lonely job. Not only are you completely alone during the match, your training sessions too are quite far removed from the rest of the team." K. MURALI KUMAR

Tiger Woods thinks golf is the loneliest sport: "When you're on, no one is going to slow you down. When you're off, no one is going to pick you up, either. This is a lonely sport," he said.

Where does that leave the athlete, the goalkeeper in any sport, and fencers and gymnasts? Individual sports can all be seen as being 'lonely'. Team sports too, where you are often competing against a bunch of rivals as well as your own mates.

As a Polish footballer once said, "Being a goalkeeper is like being the guy in the military who makes the bombs. One mistake, and everyone gets blown up."

India's hockey goalkeeper Sreejesh wrote: "Being a goalkeeper is a lonely job. Not only are you completely alone during the match, your training sessions too are quite far removed from the rest of the team."

U.K.'s Performance psychologist Katie Mobed who has worked with elite sports people, calls tennis "the loneliest sport in the world". The individual has too much time to think. As she explains, "They're actually only playing tennis for about 15 per cent of the time that they're on the court, which equates to about 10 minutes of the hour. The rest is changing ends, towelling down. In that thinking time, you are alone with your thoughts.

And so given that the natural preference of the brain is to be wired for negativity, and to worry about things that we can't control, that makes it a hugely challenging feature."

All of this makes sense. But how is it that cricket tends to have the highest number of suicides, as explained by David Frith in his book on the subject, *Silence of the Heart.* The explanation, says Frith, is "elusive".

Perhaps this insight from the late Peter Roebuck, cricketer and writer who took his own life might partly explain this: "It's strange that cricket attracts so many insecure men. It is surely the worst game for an intense character, yet it continues to find many obtuse sensitivities among its players. Men of imagination, men of ideals risk its harsh exposures."

REINVENT YOURSELF BEYOND BOUNDARIES

SNU
SISTER NIVEDITA UNIVERSITY

1 UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN INDIA

OFFERING BBA & MBA IN SPORTS MANAGEMENT

VISIT US @ www.snuniv.ac.in

15 SCHOOLS 23 PROGRAMS

Agricultural Science | Architecture and Planning | Business | Engineering | Hospitality & Tourism | Humanities | International Languages | Law | Media Communications, Fine Arts & Design |Sciences | Nursing | Health Science and Translational Research | Pharmacy |Social Science | Performing Arts

- 4 YEAR HONOURS UG DEGREE PROGRAMMES
- 4 YEAR HONOURS WITH RESEARCH UG DEGREE PROGRAMMES
- 3 YEARS GENERAL UG DEGREE PROGRAMMES

APPLY ONLINE SCAN NOW

1800-2588-155 (TOLL FREE)
7595044470 | 7595044471
7595044472 | 7595044473

- UPTO 100% SCHOLARSHIP
- STUDENT CREDIT CARD AND STUDENT LOAN ASSISTANCE

Approvals & Recognitions

/sisterniveditauniversity @sisterniveditauniversity 7797003333

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

Ha-Ko Industries Private Limited
Since 1978

HA-KO INDUSTRIES PVT. LTD.

First Indian company to offer Environment Friendly Professional Ground Equipment. Introducing new range of EV Walk-behind and Ride on Pitch rollers | EV Pitch and Outfield Mowers. Only Company in India to start the manufacturing of Ride on Lawn tractors Exported to Bangladesh, Nepal, Malaysia, Oman, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Thailand, Sri Lanka, USA, West Indies, Bhutan

WALK BEHIND PITCH ROLLER

- Engine: Diesel Engine
- Rolling Width: 800~1250mm
- Weight (Ton): 1, 1.5, 2, 2.2, 3

Gravity

GRAVITY Advance

- Speed: 30-95 MPH
- Balls: Dimple, Leather, Tennis
- Throws: Spin, Swing, Fastball
- wireless Android Control

SPORTS GROUND ROLLER

- Engine: Petrol Engine
- Rolling Width(mm): 800
- Weight (Kg): 500, 750

Gravity Hockey Ball Machine

- Speed Range: 30~95mph
- Adjustment: Lateral and Vertical
- Power: Mains & Battery

Tiger IV Pro

- Speed: 30-95 MPH
- Balls: Dimple, Leather, Lite
- Throws: Spin, Swing, Fastball

Bola Pro

- Speed: 15-99 MPH
- Balls: Tennis, Dimple, Leather
- Throws: Spin, Swing, Fastball

Outfield 800

- Engine: Petrol Engine
- Cutting Width (mm): 800
- Cutting Height (mm): 10~40

Pitch 550

- Engine: Petrol Engine
- Cutting Width (mm): 558
- Cutting Height (mm): 2~30

Lawncare®

Bola Cricket Bowling Expert...

Professional Bowling Machines
Operated on Battery & Mains Powered

SPORTS GROUND EQUIPMENT

A Worldwide Renowned Name In Quality
Sports Ground Equipment

Aquasoaker

- Engine: Petrol Engine
- Rolling Width (In): 36"- 48"- 72"
- Steering: Power Steering

LT4018 Ride on Mower

- Engine: Petrol Engine
- Cutting Width (mm): 1016
- Cutting Height (mm): 20~100

Aquasoaker
Water removal Solution

Lawncare®

RANGE OF PRODUCTS

Tiger Brand Static Tandem Diesel Roller, Single Wheel mini rider roller, Pitch Covers & Mobile Pitch Covers, Lawn Mower Ride On/Walk Behind Rotary And Cylinder Type, Cricket Bowling Machines, Turf (Synthetic Grass Surface),Sight Screen, Net on wheel,Gravity Hockey Ball Machine.

LAWN MOWERS

Cylindrical Blade Used for
Cricket Pitch OutField & Golf Courses

MAKE IN INDIA

+91-98205-62596
www.ha-ko.com
info@ha-ko.com
ha_kogroup | Ha-ko Group | YouTube @HaKoGroup | +91-22-26852596
Plot 1 - A Cama Indl. Estate, Service Road, Off I.B. Patel Road, Goregaon (East), Mumbai- 400063