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- 17. Dart Game
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- 31. Atm
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- 35. 24x7 Security
- 36. Rooftop Party Deck
- 37. Cafeteria
- 38. Package Lockers
- 39. VR Room
- 40. Ludo
- 41. Obstacle Maze
- 42. Banquet Hall With Kitchen

PARK 1 AMENITIES

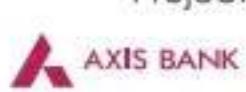
- 43. Kids' Play Area
- 44. Hopscotch
- 45. Trampoline
- 46. Adventure Climbing Wall
- 47. Toddlers' Play Area
- 48. Merry Go Round
- 49. Giant Board Games
- 50. Sandpit With Castle
- 51. Kabaddi Court
- 52. Badminton Court
- 53. Laughing Park
- 54. Aerobics
- 55. Yoga
- 56. Zumba
- 57. Pilates
- 58. Sculpture Court
- 59. Pottery
- 60. Bonfire Pit
- 61. Barbeque Lawn
- 62. Party Lawn
- 63. Lawn Mound
- 64. Pet Park
- 65. Arboretum
- 66. Family Lawn
- 67. Rock Garden
- 68. Mud Pathway
- 69. Aroma Garden
- 70. Cricket Net Practice
- 71. Senior Citizen Zone
- 72. HIIT
- 73. Outdoor Gym
- 74. Therapeutic Garden
- 75. Reflexology Pathway
- 76. Hammock Garden
- 77. Gathering Zone
- 78. Boulevard
- 79. Bamboo Drive
- 80. Meditation Zone
- 81. Pergola With Seating
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- 83. Jogging Track
- 84. Basketball Post

PARK 2 AMENITIES

- 85. Meadow Garden
- 86. Picnic Table
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BANGLADESH NEEDS TO STOP CHASING BIG NAMES FOR COACHING ROLES; FINDING SUITABLE CANDIDATES IS KEY – TAMIM IQBAL

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P. R. Sreejesh

He became a national symbol of optimism and pride when he stood in the goal. Now that he has bid farewell to the sport, we decipher the man hockey loved back

Cover: P. R. Sreejesh (Thulasi Kakkat)

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AGE OF EXCESS IS BLURRING LINE BETWEEN GOOD AND THE GREAT

We are **living in a time** where money, not love or talent, decides who wears the crown.

A king is made, not born. Gone are the days when you find yourself draped in royal robes simply because of your last name — well unless you're born into the Indian film industry, where being a star kid is still considered a useful talent.

Greatness is something you earn. You just don't wake up one morning and be the monarch of anything. It's more of a slow-burn romance, where you toil for years, gradually winning people over.

Argentina had to wait decades for someone who could truly inherit El Diego's legacy. Of course, there were hopefults — Ortega, Aimar, Riquelme — each dazzling for a moment before drifting into the fog of obscurity.

In tennis, Rafael Nadal, with his 14 French Open titles, is the undisputed King of Clay, while Novak Djokovic, winner of 24 Slams, is a worthy claimant to the 'greatest of the greats' throne. Not always the crowd favourite, his tenacity separates him from the rest. And Roger Federer with his artistry, and 20 Grand Slams, will always be the King of our Hearts. His persona, his game and his vulnerability make him a fan favourite even in the opponent's den.

These men are the true kings of sport. Their crowns were not bought in glitzy boardrooms or negotiated through glossy PR deals. But we are living in a time where money, not love or talent, decides who wears the crown. A two-time Grand Slam quarterfinalist now holds court with Nadal and Djokovic in the made-for-TV 'Slam of Six Kings', funded by Saudi Arabia, the new masters of world sport.

The four-day jamboree in Riyadh guarantees a prize of \$1.5 million to all six participants, with the winner set to be richer by \$6m, almost double the amount (\$3.6m) that Jannik Sinner earned for winning the 2024 US Open.

And here the unknown four-ATP tour title winner,

Holger Rune, can masquerade as a king, guaranteeing the biggest payday in his nascent career. The other three joining him, Nadal and Djokovic — Sinner, Carlos Alcaraz and Daniil Medvedev — at least have better credentials with seven Grand Slam titles between them.

This cash-grab circus is wedged between the last two ATP Masters of the year in Shanghai and Paris and offers a rest day on October 18 to circumvent the ATP's rule that stops top players from competing on three consecutive days in an exhibition event.

The tennis world, grappling with a taxing schedule and a widening pay gap, is divided on this latest addition. While world No. 93 Liam Broady said, "Speechless as to how damn cool this promo is. Probably best I've ever seen in tennis. Would watch this movie. 10/10", former world No. 1 Andy Murray was quick to denounce the event. "Except it's not a movie and you won't watch it because it's an exhibition tennis event that nobody cares about," the three-time Grand Slam winner said.

But ATP, which has named both its rankings and the year-end world number one award after Saudi's Public Investment Fund, will be the last one complaining even if events like this threaten its existence.

At home, the BCCI, usually good at getting things right — like overhauling the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru — seems to have taken a misstep by adding a Rs 7.5 lakh match fee for IPL games. The addition and the increase in base price might allow a non-capped player to earn at least Rs 1.35 crore if he plays all 14 group games, a sum far higher compared to the Rs 25 lakh (Rs 60,000 a day for players with more than 40 appearances) that a player gets for making the final of the Ranji Trophy.

The enchantment will only make an already seductive IPL more alluring at the expense of the domestic game.

STRONG JUMPS, NO STRAIN

IT'S ALL IN THE GAME



TRAIN RIGHT, JUMP HIGHER, STAY INJURY-FREE

For those who participating in jumping sports, anterior knee pain is typical yet preventable. The weak point for jumpers is where the muscle in front of the thigh, which produces the force for the jump, inserts below the knee. This issue is often observed in middle school students, especially during a growth spurt. Another common cause is not stretching methodically and regularly before and after sporting activity. A sudden increase in exercise intensity beyond what the individual is accustomed to, a shift in technique, or returning to training after a break could all contribute to this condition. Additionally, burnout, insufficient sleep, and repeated stress should be considered.

Prevention of this specific injury uses a multimodal strategy. Coaches should avoid subjecting children to repetitive high-intensity jump training during this time, as they are susceptible to age group onset and abrupt height gain. Experts in strength and conditioning must provide individualized exercise programs based on training intensity and strength, incorporating techniques like isokinetic muscle strength testing devices that are now available in Coimbatore. Meal plans should be customized to the athlete's training regimen and goals by a sports nutritionist.

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NBA legend Michael Jordan files anti-trust lawsuit against NASCAR

An auto racing team co-owned by NBA legend Michael Jordan (**seen above with co-owner Bob Jenkins**) filed an anti-trust lawsuit against the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) and its chief executive Jim France.

The legal fight in the most popular form of US auto racing had six-time NBA champion Jordan's 23XI Racing and Front Row Motorsports jointly filing against France and NASCAR in the Western District of North Carolina at Charlotte, where former Chicago Bulls star Jordan,

61, is a part-owner of the NBA's Charlotte Hornets.

"Everyone knows that I have always been a fierce competitor, and that will to win is what drives me and the entire 23XI team each and every week out on the track," Jordan said in a statement.

"I love the sport of racing and the passion of our fans, but the way NASCAR is run today is unfair to teams, drivers, sponsors, and fans. Today's action shows I'm willing to fight for a competitive market where everyone wins," he added.



« I did put in the effort (in the run-up to the Paris Olympics), and I went numb the moment I looked at the screen, which showed I had finished fourth. It felt like I lost somebody very close to me in my life. – Shooter Arjun Babuta, in a recent interview »



« Of course this is something I really want to do (become number one); it is one of my goals. But I learnt in the past that if you focus on the rankings and defending points, things can easily go wrong. – Aryna Sabalenka prior to the Wuhan Open »

10 km

Kenya's Emmaculate Anyango, the world's second-fastest woman over 10 km, has been provisionally suspended after a failed doping test, the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) said. The 24-year-old Anyango faces a ban of up to four years after testing positive for prohibited testosterone and the banned blood-boosting hormone EPO. An African U20 3,000m silver medallist in 2019, Anyango was tipped as one of the East African nation's rising stars.

She became the second Kenyan woman to run 10 km in under 29 minutes, finishing runner-up in Valencia in January behind compatriot Agnes Jebet Ngetich, who won with a world record of 28:46.



13

Turkish Grandmaster Yagiz Kaan Erdogan has made history by becoming the youngest player ever to achieve a 2600 rating at just 13 years old. Earlier this year, he also made headlines for surpassing Judit Polgar's longstanding record from 1989, becoming the highest-rated player in history before turning 13. Erdogan now holds the title of the youngest Grandmaster in the world and ranks as the fourth youngest ever to earn this honour.

DIAMOND LEAGUE



Zurich will stage the two-day season finale of the 2025 Diamond League in August, organisers announced. The 16th edition of track and field's premier one-day meeting series will kick off with two events in China and span 15 host cities across 14 countries and four continents, according to the provisional calendar. GETTY IMAGES



Unstoppable force: Alex Pereira's (left) fight against Khalil Rountree Jr. at UFC 307 in Utah exceeded everyone's expectations. Pics: GETTY IMAGES

ROUNTREE NO MATCH FOR POATAN POWER

The reigning champion showed why he is **among the best** in the business.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

Alex 'Poatan' Pereira has silenced his doubters once again, for the third time this year. The 37-year-old defended the light heavyweight title thrice in just 175 days, breaking the previous record held by UFC icon Ronda Rousey.

His fight against Khalil Rountree Jr. at UFC 307 in Utah exceeded everyone's expectations. The fact that Poatan is the reigning champion and

the second-best pound-for-pound fighter would send shivers down the spine of anyone facing him.

But Rountree Jr. was different.

The roughly four-and-a-half-minute stint inside the octagon was perhaps the longest and toughest period Pereira had experienced in a long while.

Rountree Jr. marginally overpowered Pereira in the first two rounds with impactful blows through hooks and jabs. However, as the fight wore on, the champion's slow and steady approach began to pay off. Pereira capitalised on every

opening and gained the upper hand over his opponent. The towering Brazilian began to punish the Las Vegas native, breaking him down, busting him up, and finishing him along the fence.

His dominance culminated in a knockout in the dying moments of the fourth round, as Pereira walked away with yet another win.

A controversial comeback

In the co-main event, Julianna Peña became a two-time UFC women's bantamweight champion, edging out Raquel Pennington in a



Shadow of the past: Despite showing shades of his prime in recent fights, Jose Aldo's (left) latest duel against a surging Mario Bautista showed that he was outclassed.

competitive back-and-forth battle that went the distance (**below**).

Peña returned to the octagon after a two-year hiatus but never looked out of shape as she secured a split-decision win over her compatriot. Peña started strong, outstriking Pennington in the first round and then controlling her for the second and third rounds. However, Peña began to slow down, getting dropped in the fourth round and dominated in the fifth. When the final bell rang, many believed Pennington had won rounds one, four, and five, but in the end, it was Peña who won via split decision.

"I wasn't sure," Peña responded when asked if she thought she had done enough to earn the victory. "I heard these judges tonight were doing some crazy stuff. Unfortunately, I went to a decision. Just a loss of focus, and that's what I would say — I got dropped. Need to be a little bit more focused."

Not an ideal swansong

The final chapter of José Aldo's UFC career has been a shaky affair. In

2022, a crushing loss at the hands of Merab Dvalishvili pushed him to the brink of retirement.

But earlier this year, Aldo returned from a brief retirement in May with a masterful decision win over Jonathan Martinez in Rio de Janeiro. It was a vintage Aldo performance, as the former featherweight champion looked sharp and focused, immediately putting Martinez on the back foot and never allowing him to build any momentum.

Although one could see shades of prime Aldo, his latest fight against the surging Mario Bautista showed that he was outclassed.

Bautista displayed a diverse range of attacks and maintained composure against 'Junior'. The 31-year-old's most rewarding moves came along the edges of the cage, where he repeatedly pushed and pinned Aldo.

Though Aldo had some very good moments, especially in the second round, Bautista's constant activity, relentless pressure, and the grinding nature of his fighting style proved too much.

Two of the three judges scored the fight in favour of the Arizona-based bantamweight, who continues to demonstrate that he is a rising name in the bantamweight division.



THE MIRACLE MAN OF KIZHAKKAMBALAM

P.R. SREEJESH BECAME A NATIONAL SYMBOL OF OPTIMISM AND PRIDE WHEN HE STOOD IN THE GOAL. NOW THAT HE HAS BID FAREWELL TO THE SPORT, WE DECIPHER THE MAN HOCKEY LOVED BACK.

Pranay Rajiv

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If you asked a random Malayali kid to sketch a Kerala town, it would likely resemble Kizhakkambalam. With its narrow but well-laid-out roads winding through vast, sun-soaked paddy fields and algae-covered ponds, Kizhakkambalam perfectly fits the image. But this town, located on the outskirts of Kochi, has something unique about it.

It's probably the only place in Kerala where flex boards of Lionel Messi — and by extension, the Argentinian football team — are outnumbered by those of another sporting icon: P.R. Sreejesh, the state's only double Olympic medallist. Amidst the sea of greenery, Sreejesh's red-tinted home stands out, much like he distinguished himself in the Indian hockey team for nearly two decades in his goalkeeper's colours.

When *Sportstar* visited Sreejesh's home, his goalkeeping kit was laid out in the front yard under the blazing afternoon sun, almost as if to reinforce his

Bowing out on a high: P. R. Sreejesh, India's legendary hockey goalkeeper, ended his career with an Olympic medal from Paris.

THULASIKAKKAT





“POST-OLYMPIC FAME HAS ALSO BROUGHT AN EXPLOSION OF BRAND ENDORSEMENTS AND NATIONWIDE ATTENTION TO THE 36-YEAR-OLD. BUT SREEJESH ISN’T EASILY DAZZLED BY FAME”



Laying down the armour: Sreejesh's iconic goalkeeping kit—worn when he twisted with agility, dove with fearless precision, and at times stood immovable, like an impenetrable wall; each movement an attempt at defying the fiercest attempts of opposing goal-scorers. THULASI KAKKAT

identity.

"I had a photoshoot yesterday where I had to wear the kit, and I wanted to dry it out before packing it up," Sreejesh explained, swiftly quashing any speculation of a potential return to international hockey, just over a month after his retirement.

The drying goalkeeping kit provided the perfect segue into a nearly two-hour conversation.

"I distinctly remember the first time I wore a hockey kit. It was during the 2000 Ayudha Pooja. That's when everyone sets aside their equipment for the pooja, and that was the day I first tried it on," recalled Sreejesh, leaning back on his verandah's sit-out, easing into the conversation.

"When I was in the eighth grade, my father bought me my first personal goalkeeping kit. It wasn't international standard, just enough

for state-level play," he added.

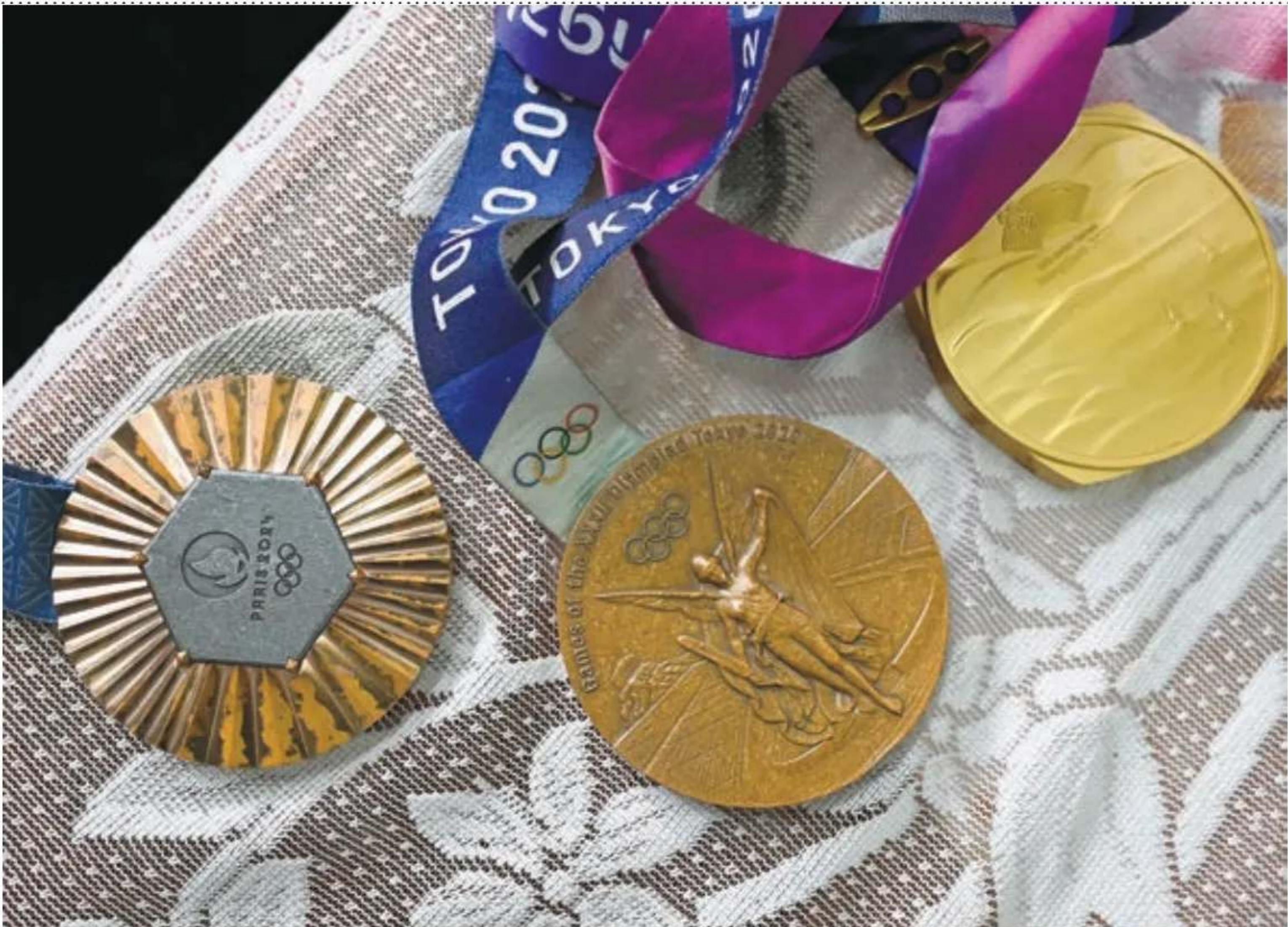
A hockey ball weighs just over 150 grammes, but anyone who's been hit by one would swear it feels much heavier. Now imagine that ball coming at you at nearly 100 kmph from different angles and heights! Scary. Overcoming the fear of pain is therefore crucial for a hockey goalkeeper to gain a foothold in the sport. And that process is closely tied to the trust placed in the armour—the goalkeeping kit.

"It wasn't until 2004, when I joined the junior Indian team, that I wore a

proper kit. A better kit not only reduces impact and pain but also improves rebounds. A lot of our confidence comes from the quality of our equipment. It's like the difference between wearing Rs. 100 canvas shoes and Rs. 10,000 Nike shoes. Both are shoes, but the perception and conviction change," explained Sreejesh.

A goalkeeper, across various ball sports, is an antithesis to the discipline itself. His role is to negate the very essence of the game—scoring a goal. But in modern Indian hockey, Sreejesh flipped this narrative. His stellar performances in goal became the foundation upon which Indian hockey experienced its revival.

◀ Sreejesh's stellar performances in goal became the foundation upon which Indian hockey experienced its revival. ▶



The heartbreak of not qualifying for the 2008 Olympics was replaced by the triumph of consecutive Olympic bronze medals, breaking a 41-year drought.

The second bronze, from Paris 2024, though, came with a bittersweet aftertaste. **A narrow defeat to Germany in the semifinal dashed India's hopes of reclaiming gold.**

"When we went to Paris, we were confident we could make the final. Our preparation and team unity were on point. So when that faith was lost, disappointment was inevitable. But the Olympics is not a stage to dwell on defeat. We needed to focus on the next opportunity, and that was the bronze medal match," Sreejesh said, his words tinged with regret.

Just as he hoped, the team regrouped, defeating Spain 2-1 in the bronze medal match, ensuring a glorious farewell for Sreejesh in his final international appearance. Sreejesh admits his decision to retire was made long before the Paris Games, though he initially planned to

Hues of glory: On the teapoy in Sreejesh's home, three glittering treasures lie in wait—the Tokyo '20 and Paris '24 Olympic bronze medals, and the Hangzhou '22 Asian Games gold. These symbols of triumph are more than just decorations; they're beacons of inspiration, fuelling Sreejesh's hope that they'll spark a fire in the hearts of young kids. THULASI KAKKAT

announce it afterwards. However, the weight of that secret affected his focus during the Olympic preparation camp, prompting him to share it sooner.

"I always wanted to retire on a big stage, and there's nothing bigger than the Olympics. Everyone told me to announce it afterwards, but as the tournament neared, it became a distraction. So, I told my coach about it.

"Before the Olympics, we had trips to Switzerland and the Netherlands. I usually speak first in team meetings, but in Holland, I decided to speak last. That's when I told the team, 'This will be my last tournament. All of you will have more chances, but this is my final one.' A week before the Olympics, I made it public, and then it was done," Sreejesh recounted.

A highlight of India's Paris 2024

hockey campaign was the quarterfinal win against Great Britain, where the team defended with just 10 men for nearly three-quarters of the game after key defender Amit Rohidas was shown a red card. India dragged the game to a penalty shootout, and once again, Sreejesh rose to the occasion. He saved one British penalty and forced another wide, securing his team's victory.

For all its inherent unfairness, a penalty shootout is often a goalkeeper's best chance to shine.

With the odds stacked against them, a save in a tiebreaker can propel a goalkeeper into folklore. Sreejesh has had his fair share of such moments, starting with his crucial saves against Pakistan in the 2011 Asian Champions Trophy.

His success in shootouts is even more impressive given that his career

Formidable partnership: From high-school sweethearts to marriage, Sreejesh and his wife Aneeshya's relationship progressed as smoothly as the former's rise through the ranks of Indian hockey. THULASI KAKKAT

spanned the 2011 rule change, which replaced penalty strokes with the current one-on-one format. Sreejesh believes the new system has levelled the playing field for goalkeepers.

"From a keeper's perspective, a penalty stroke is 90% a goal and 10% a save. The ball is just seven yards away, and the flick is usually accurate and powerful.

"But the current shootout format makes it almost 50-50 and fairer to us. The goalkeepers have an equal chance to make a save. The striker has multiple shots, but only eight seconds, and that's their biggest disadvantage," Sreejesh explained, briefly drowned out by the hum of crickets.

The post-Sreejesh era for Indian hockey began auspiciously, with Krishan Pathak stepping into the goalkeeper role during the team's recent Asian Champions Trophy win. This smooth transition was partly thanks to Sreejesh, who had shared minutes with Pathak, including during India's 2023 Asian Champions Trophy win. As Pathak recounted in an interview with this publication, Sreejesh also mentored him over the years, especially during the 2016 Junior World Cup.

However, Sreejesh downplayed his role, highlighting his own motivations in guiding the next generation of goalkeepers.

"I have a mentality — what I taught him [Pathak] felt like I was learning it twice. Sharing what we know allows us to learn it better too. More than being a service to others, it's something I did for myself. I learn more, and it benefits me. It's a selfish mentality, to be honest. Anything I did so far was 1) for the love of the game, 2) the love of the position, and 3) my own improvement," Sreejesh admitted.

Cramped legs and exhausted photo angles led to a location



change, prompting Sreejesh to invite us inside, guiding us through his vast collection of accolades with the skill of a seasoned museum guide. Anyone expecting a special, reverential spot for Sreejesh's Olympic medals would be surprised by their location.

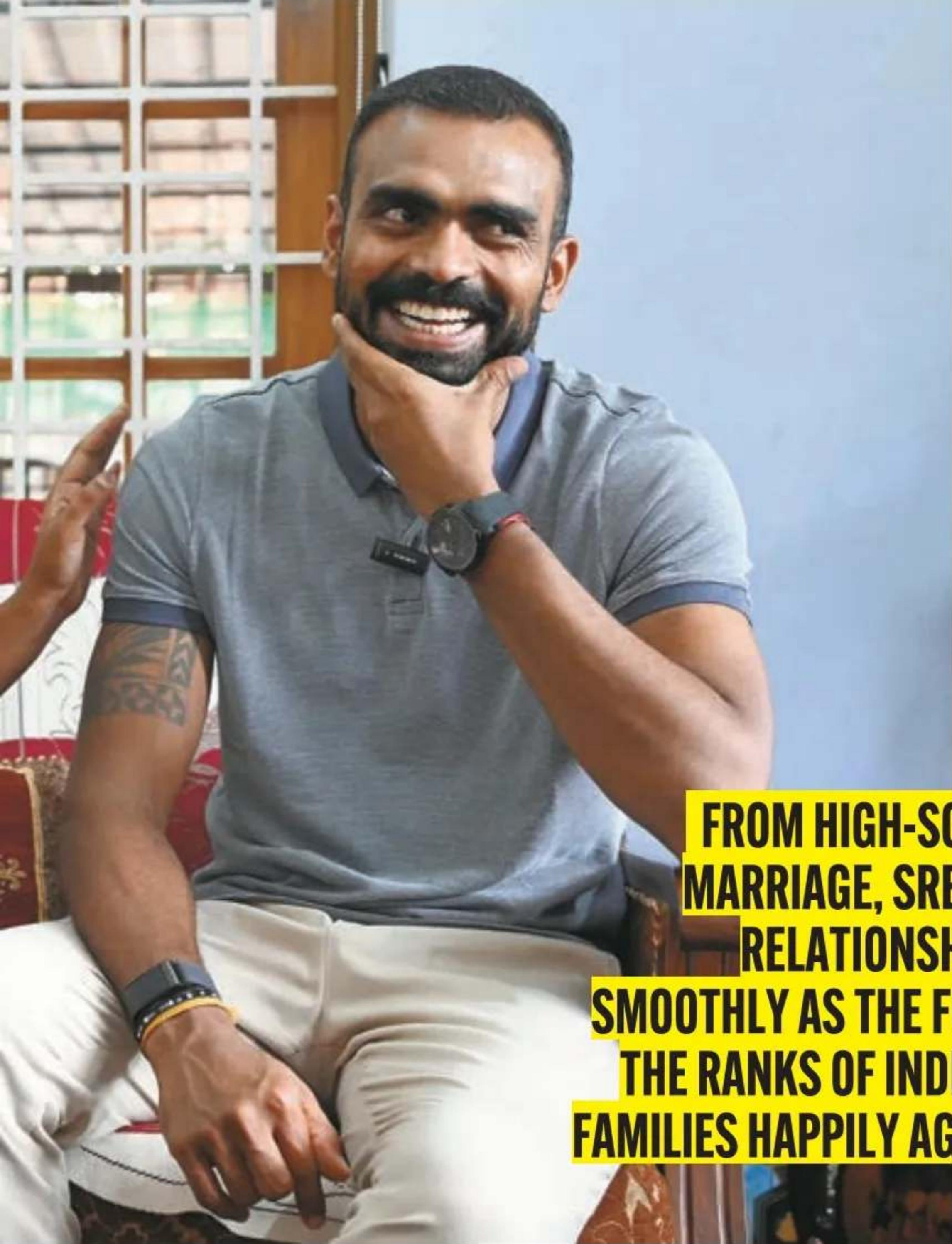
A rummage through cluttered showcases might uncover a Khel Ratna, an Arjuna Award, or even a Padma Award — but not the Olympic medals. **"They're hidden in plain sight, right in the middle of the living room, casually placed on top of the coffee table."** The only thing keeping them from being mistaken for coasters is the multi-coloured ribbons attached

to them.

"My medals are always on the teapoy. A lot of people come here who want to see and touch them. We don't have the right to shove them away in a showcase and say they can't be touched. So, they're right here. When a child comes and holds these medals, they should feel inspired to earn one of their own."

"When we go to temples, praying to an idol feels like a big deal — a marvel, a miracle. But these medals aren't like that. They're real. People touching them should realise that this is something they can work toward and achieve."

"Out of 100 people who touch the



FROM HIGH-SCHOOL SWEETHEARTS TO MARRIAGE, SREEJESH AND ANEESHYA'S RELATIONSHIP HAS PROGRESSED AS SMOOTHLY AS THE FORMER'S RISE THROUGH THE RANKS OF INDIAN HOCKEY, WITH BOTH FAMILIES HAPPILY AGREEING TO THEIR UNION

medals, if even one feels a strong desire, that's all we need. We won't be able to change an entire generation, but if we can inspire one person out of 100, that's job done," Sreejesh remarked with quiet pride. He also broke from tradition when he quickly labelled the Tokyo bronze as his favourite.

"The first medal, for sure, is my favourite. The taste of food for a hungry person is vastly different from that of someone who's already eaten. That first medal was like rain on drought-hit land. The celebrations, reliving each moment — it was all for that medal.

This time, we went expecting to

win. Last time, we didn't have that expectation; we just hoped for the best," Sreejesh explained.

Meanwhile, his wife Aneesha, an Ayurveda doctor, joined us with cups of sweet tea and a side of jokes, adding a casual, light-hearted tone to the interview.

The two met at GV Raja Sports School, where she was an aspiring long jumper and Sreejesh was just learning the basics of hockey.

"I was worried about him getting hurt in the beginning, but then I realised he had it under control. He was always so calm heading to the field," Aneesha recalled, as their children — 10-year-old Anusree and

seven-year-old Sreeansh — darted shyly through the living room, avoiding the cameras. From high-school sweethearts to marriage, their relationship progressed as smoothly as Sreejesh's rise through the ranks of Indian hockey, with both families happily agreeing to their union.

"There were no issues. Where else could they find a guy like me?" joked Sreejesh, teasing his wife.

The couple has found their own rhythm when it comes to raising their children, especially given Sreejesh's demanding career, which often takes him away for long stretches.

"Parenting is about raising your kids right. My wife and parents were there physically while I worked to secure their future. I feel that's better than being with them all the time but

not being able to provide for them financially.

"I'm always a star in their eyes, and that's what matters. Of course, they may have missed me when I was away, but I think they enjoy my success and stardom more," Sreejesh added. For all his daredevilry on the hockey field, Sreejesh prefers to play it safe off it.

A prized possession of his younger days, a yellow Pulsar 180, rarely ventures out of the garage, held back by Sreejesh's fear of potential injury. Like many of his Malayali peers, he subscribes to the middle-class holy trinity of investments: fixed deposits, land, and gold. His wife, Aneesha, proudly notes that "money

WHEN WE GO TO TEMPLES, PRAYING TO AN IDOL FEELS LIKE A BIG DEAL – A MARVEL, A MIRACLE. BUT THESE MEDALS AREN'T LIKE THAT. THEY'RE REAL. PEOPLE TOUCHING THEM SHOULD REALISE THAT THIS IS SOMETHING THEY CAN WORK TOWARD AND ACHIEVE.



management" is his best trait, and Sreejesh reveals that he has saved nearly 80% of his hockey earnings. This financial caution stems from the challenges Sreejesh and his family faced early in his career.

"My father was a farmer. We never went hungry; there was always food at home. But there wasn't any extra money. The first time I needed to buy an advanced goalkeeping kit was when we felt the financial pinch.

"I think I reached this level because of those early struggles. If everything is readily available, you don't appreciate its value. I am who I am today because of what I've been through," he explains.

The need for financial security was always a looming concern in his early career, but the pressure eased when Sreejesh was employed by the Indian Overseas Bank in 2006.

"That job was a huge relief. It allowed me to focus on hockey because some of my worries were taken care of. I had a steady income, and if I got injured, I had a fallback. That gave me a lot of confidence.

"Sportspeople are like show horses. If you get injured, you're cast aside. No one really tracks what happens to you afterwards. I always tell younger athletes to get a job alongside their sports careers, for that sense of security," adds Sreejesh. Post-Olympic fame has also brought an explosion of brand endorsements and nationwide attention to the 36-year-old. But Sreejesh isn't easily dazzled by fame.

"This fame didn't appear overnight. It's not like I won a lottery.



I've been playing hockey for 24 years and have been part of the Indian team for nearly 20.

Over that time, I've developed the ability to handle the attention I'm getting now."

The one thing that hasn't come his way is a film role. Aneesha interjects with a laugh, "He can act in a movie if he wants, as long as there are no heroines in it."

"There were talks about a biopic at some point, but it didn't materialise," Sreejesh says. When asked who he'd

want to portray him, he casually adds, "I don't have a special preference, but Tovino Thomas has the stardom and the physique." Retirement hasn't slowed him down much. He's been flying around the country and abroad, attending felicitations, promo shoots, and sponsorship events.

"I can't tell the difference [post-retirement] because he's still not home most of the time," Aneesha jokes.

His coaching stint with the junior



national team is all set to begin with the Sultan Johor Cup, starting on October 19 in Malaysia.

Sreejesh has also opted out of the upcoming Hockey Ibdia League player auctions, instead taking up the role of Director and mentor of the Delhi SG Pipers in the tournament. But amid all the shifts in his career, one thing remains certain: his connection to home.

"I don't think we can move from Kizhakkambalam. Even if I'm willing, I don't think my parents could. I can

Ubiquitous icon: Kizhakkambalam stands out as probably the only place in Kerala where P.R. Sreejesh, the state's only double Olympic medallist, has more flex boards than Lionel Messi and the Argentinian football team. THULASI KAKKAT

live anywhere, but there's a sense of belonging here. The people are cooperative in a way you don't find in cities or flats. **I'm away from all the disturbances when I'm here. It's a different feeling,**" says Sreejesh. As the interview wrapped up, Sreejesh picked up his heavier-than-they-look Olympic

medals and posed for photos in his front yard. It's a choreography he has mastered over time.

The medals, once again, will return to their place on the coffee table, waiting for that one-in-a-hundred visitor Sreejesh hopes will be inspired to carry his legacy forward.



» MCC-MURUGAPPA GOLD CUP REVIEW

Timeless legacy endures despite waning fan support

As the MCC-Murugappa Gold Cup fights for its place in an **increasingly packed sports calendar**, Indian hockey's key stakeholders reflect on the enduring significance of this historic tournament.

Nihit Sachdeva and Anish Pathiyil
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After a long, protracted summer, intermittent spells of rain signalled the return of domestic hockey to Chennai's Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium. The storied venue in Egmore hosted the 95th edition of the All India MCC-Murugappa Gold Cup, the oldest hockey tournament in South India, second only to the Beighton Cup held in Kolkata.

After a week of intense action, the Railway Sports



THROUGHOUT THE 1990S AND 2000S, THE MCC-MURUGAPPA GOLD CUP CONTINUED TO THRIVE, UNEARTHING NUMEROUS PLAYERS WHO WENT ON TO REPRESENT INDIA IN WORLD CUPS AND OLYMPICS

Promotion Board (RSPB), the defending champion, overcame a spirited comeback by Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) to win the final 5-3.

The roots of the Gold Cup stretch back to 1901, when the Madras Cricket Club inaugurated the Madras Challenge Cup at the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association (TNCA) grounds. In 1962, the Murugappa group launched a separate hockey tournament, the Murugappa Gold Cup Championship, which was played in Egmore. These two competitions merged in 1996 to form a single invitational tournament, ensuring that the finest teams from across the country would participate in Chennai's celebration of the national sport.

"I played here [Egmore stadium] at a very young age when it was still the Murugappa Gold Cup," said V. Baskaran, captain of India's 1980 Olympic gold medal-winning team. "There were temporary stands on one side and a cement stand on the other."

"I also played the MCC tournament at the centre pitch of the TNCA grounds," he reminisced. "There was a large gallery adjacent to the pitch, and the ground had lush grass maintained to world-class standards for a month."

Alongside Baskaran, several Indian hockey legends from the dominant teams of the 1960s and 70s — such as Udhamp Singh, Gurbux Singh, V.J. Peter, Prithipal Singh, and Vijay Phillips — showcased their skills

Retaining the crown: The Railway Sports Promotion Board (RSPB), the defending champion, overcame a spirited comeback by Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) to win the final 5-3. M. VEDHAN

in this tournament.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the tournament continued to thrive, unearthing numerous players who went on to represent India in World Cups and Olympics. Many of them remain involved, either as players or in coaching roles. "As a child, when we learned about the domestic circuit and the key tournaments to make an impact in the big league

and catch the eye of selectors and coaches, this was the one," said RSPB's Yuvraj Walmiki, who represented India at the 2014 World Cup. The forward from Mumbai was named the best forward in the league for the second consecutive year.

"This is one of the top-grade tournaments in the country," added V.R. Raghunath, a two-time Olympian. "It's the first tournament of the season, so the best players participate, and the teams are at their peak fitness. It's one of the most celebrated events in domestic hockey."

Despite its glorious past, domestic tournaments like the Murugappa Gold Cup have witnessed a significant decline in spectator turnout. The once-packed stadium now sees only a few hundred in

Blast from the past: A section of spectators filled the giant stands to watch the finals of the 81st All India MCC-Murugappa Gold Cup Hockey tournament in Chennai in 2003. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY



attendance.

One of the main reasons for this lack of interest is the increasingly crowded international calendar, which makes it nearly impossible for the core group of 30-35 national team players to participate.

"Around 30 players will always be occupied with international assignments—rest, recovery, and preparation for the next tournament. If they get a gap of one to one-and-a-half months, they can come and play. But for a break of just one week or 10-15 days, there's no point in coming and playing here," said Raghunath, who retired from international hockey in 2017 but continues to represent IOCL in the domestic circuit.

Another factor contributing to the decline in crowds, according to B.P. Govinda, a member of the 1975 World Cup-winning team, is the national team's inconsistent performance on the international stage over the past two decades.

DESPITE ITS GLORIOUS PAST, DOMESTIC TOURNAMENTS LIKE THE MURUGAPPA GOLD CUP HAVE WITNESSED A SIGNIFICANT DECLINE IN SPECTATOR TURNOUT

"When we played these tournaments, the whole stadium used to be full. Back then, the Indian team won many tournaments — like the bronze medal at the 1972 Munich Olympics, the silver at the 1973 World Cup, and the gold at the 1975 World Cup," he said.

"Since 1975, the Indian team hasn't been on the podium at the World Cup — it's been almost 50 years. After that [1975 World Cup], there hasn't been anything to draw in spectators," he opined.

"The public will return once the team starts winning international tournaments. The Indian team won

bronze medals at the Tokyo and Paris Olympics. If you keep winning, people will come to meet their heroes," he added.

Nasser, a fan who has been following the event for over a decade, suggests that the quality of the sport has dwindled compared to previous years. "Dribbling has gone down, and the schematic moves we used to see have decreased too. Now, it's all about aerial passes and penalty corners," he said.

"Earlier, we could identify players by their unique style of play. One player who immediately comes to mind is Dhanraj Pillay — he was the



Halcyon days: Indian hockey legend Dhanraj Pillay was a fan favourite, drawing large crowds to the stadium during the golden days of the MCC-Murugappa Gold Cup. M. VEDHAN



Legacy tournaments

Beighton Cup, Kolkata

- 125th edition held this year

All India MCC-Murugappa Gold Cup

- 95th edition held this year

Aga Khan Tournament, Mumbai - last held in 2011

Bombay Gold Cup, Mumbai

- last held in 2020

Obaidullah Khan Heritage Cup, Bhopal - last held in 2022

Maharaja Ranjit Singh tournament, Amritsar

- last held in 2019

All India Shri Guru Gobind Singh ji Gold and Silver Cup Hockey Tournament

- 50th edition held this year in Nanded

Nehru Senior Hockey Tournament, New Delhi

- 60th edition held this year

All India Trades Cup Hockey Tournament

- 99th edition held in Nainital this year

Mahant Raja Sarweshwardas Memorial All India Hockey Tournament

- 80th edition held this year in Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh

All India Police Hockey Championship

- 72nd edition held in Jammu this year

darling of the crowd," Nasser added. A potential solution to revive interest could be creating space in the national calendar to ensure the availability of India's regular players. Olympian Mohammed Riyaz sees this as a way to bring back the crowds.

"I have requested the [Hockey India] secretary and president to demarcate the top five tournaments in the Indian calendar where the national team can participate. Only then can these tournaments become more globalised, attracting more spectators. It will also improve the overall viewership," he said.

Sunil Kumar Singh, coach of RSPB, echoed this sentiment. "During these top tournaments, if Hockey India's calendar is not busy and they can release the national players, the charm of these events will be restored," he said. "The quality of matches will improve, and the players who primarily play in domestic events will get a chance to

test themselves against high-quality internationals," he added.

Despite the decline in attendance over the years, the importance of this legacy event remains undeniable. Baskaran credits the tournament with helping to discover talented players from Odisha. "In the 1990s, the army team started participating and many Odisha players emerged. The Army Services teams had players like Vincent Lakra and Gopal Bhengra, who played here and caught the attention of selectors," the former coach said.

"These tournaments have paved the way for many youngsters to go on and play in the Olympics or the World Cup," Baskaran added.

In the recently concluded edition, one match was held under floodlights each day to allow more spectators to catch the live action. According to Baskaran, the organisers have also proposed a women's tournament, which could be held simultaneously in the future.

» PHOTOLINE
WOMEN'S T20 WORLD CUP



1st

Leading the way: (L-R) Heather Knight of England, Laura Wolvaardt of South Africa, Chamari Athapaththu of Sri Lanka, Nigar Sultana of Bangladesh, Fatima Sana of Pakistan, Kathryn Bryce of Scotland, Alyssa Healy of Australia, Harmanpreet Kaur of India, Sophie Devine of New Zealand and Hayley Matthews of West Indies pose with the Women's T20 World Cup trophy. GETTY IMAGES



2nd

Four of the best: South Africa's Nonkululeko Mlaba celebrates the wicket of West Indies' Aaliyah Alleyne during a Group B encounter. The left-arm-spinner produced a Player-of-the-Match performance, picking four wickets to set up a 10-wicket win for her team. GETTY IMAGES



FOR MORE
IMAGES

3rd

Captain's knock:

New Zealand captain Sophie Devine led by example, smashing a blistering 57 off 36 balls, including seven boundaries, to propel her team to a commanding total of 160/4 in 20 overs against India. The White Ferns then secured a convincing 58-run victory, ending their 10-game losing streak in T20Is. AP



4th

Gunner glory: India's Asha Sobhana celebrated in style, mimicking Arsenal midfielder Leandro Trossard's iconic 'goggles' gesture after dismissing Georgia Plimmer during the match against New Zealand in Dubai. The leg-spinner finished with impressive figures of 1/22 in her four-over spell. AP



5th

Calm and composed: Australia's opening batter, Beth Mooney, played a crucial innings, scoring 43 runs off 38 balls to help her team secure a six-wicket victory over Sri Lanka in a challenging chase of 93 runs in Sharjah. AP



6th

Breakthrough: Bangladesh's Nahida Akter celebrated the crucial dismissal of England's top-scorer Danny Wyatt-Hodge during their encounter in Sharjah. The left-arm spinner took 2 for 32, helping to restrict England to 118/7. REUTERS



7th

Dejection: Bangladesh's Sobhana Mostary was visibly distraught after being dismissed for 44 in the penultimate over against England in Sharjah. The Tigers fell 21 runs short, marking their first defeat of the T20 World Cup. REUTERS

8th

Full and straight: India's Arundhati Reddy castles Pakistan's Nida Dar to pick up her third wicket during the Group A encounter. The all-rounder won the Player of the Match award for her bowling exploits. AFP



9th

Blinder: India's Richa Ghosh took an athletic catch to dismiss Pakistan captain Fatima Sana, off the bowling of Asha Sobhana. This vital wicket helped India restrict its opponent to 105/8 in 20 overs. AP

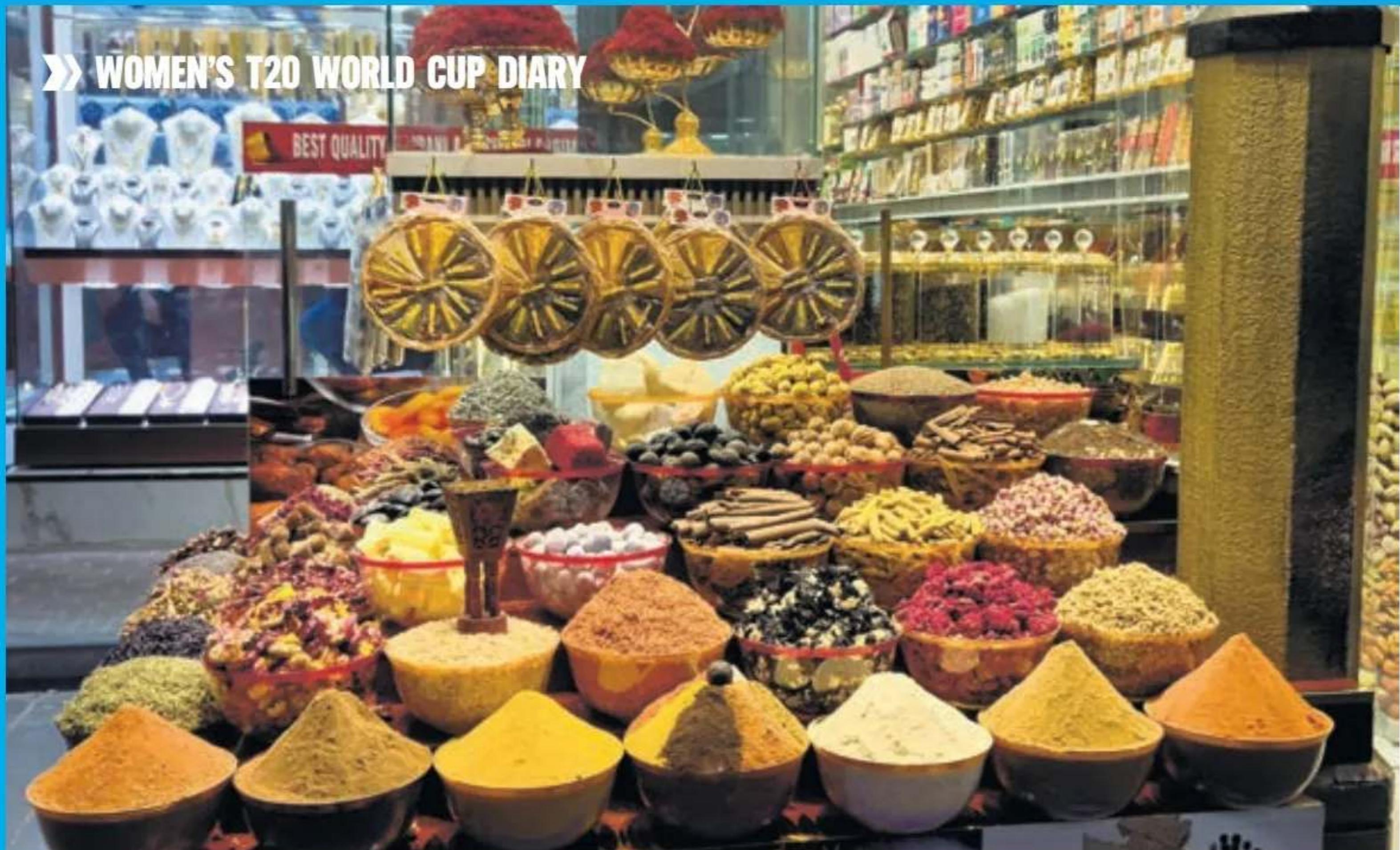


10th

Eyes on the ball: India opener Shafali Verma scored 32 to put her team in a comfortable position against Pakistan. India won by six wickets in the end.

AFP





Sensory feast: Scarlet Iranian saffron and the aromas of the choicest spices enveloped the bustling souks.

LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

Of saffron, souks and the sun – a UAE sojourn

Dubai is the land of potentially the smoothest roads the Diary has ever travelled on, where a **warm sun** hugs your face and never lets you go.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

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Preparations for a three-week assignment in the United Arab Emirates often come with numerous warnings about the heat and humidity. As someone born and raised in Chennai — very familiar with the unforgiving sun and stickiness of the coastal city — the Diary was quite amused by these warnings, confident it would feel much like home.

And for the first week, that confidence held. The Diary was better

off than the poor folks from cooler regions, particularly the Europeans in the press box and on the field. However, nothing could prepare one for the microwave-like heat that wafted through the windows of the Emirates aircraft on landing in Dubai.

Dubai is the land of potentially the smoothest roads the Diary has ever travelled on, where a warm sun hugs your face and never lets you go, and luxury cars zoom around for hire. The Diary's driver to the Airbnb was a middle-aged gentleman originally from Balochistan, Pakistan. "Madam, aap koi match dekhne aaye ho? Kaun khel raha hai yahan ab?" (Madam, are

you here to watch a game? Who's playing?), he asked when the Diary mentioned travelling for sport. There were no banners or promotional paraphernalia in sight. You couldn't tell that the city was hosting 10 of the world's best teams.

"Women's World Cup? Pakistan bhi hai usmein? (Pakistan is playing too?)" came his next question. A cricket romantic who stopped watching after mercurial Pakistan all-rounder Shahid Afridi retired, he perked up upon hearing that a player from his province — Diana Baig — was in Dubai. When he learnt ticket prices started as low as AED 5, he



City that never sleeps: The Diary's view at 'home' has the Dubai Stadium on the right and an expansive golf village on the left. LAVANYA LAKSHMINARAYAN

immediately called his wife. "Gul jaan, shall we take the girls to the cricket this weekend?" he proposed. The rest of the trip passed with the fast motorways of Dubai set against the backdrop of a sweet picnic-planning endeavour.

The Diary's view from 'home' included the Dubai Stadium on the right and a sprawling golf village on the left — soon to be visited by members of the Australian women's cricket team. Practice sessions were at the ICC Headquarters, a kilometre away in the other direction. The first cricket action on the schedule was a warm-up game against South Africa, with both teams running on half a tank of gas. The slow, gripping wickets at the practice venues hinted at what was to come.

The Diary had to grudgingly miss the tournament opener in Sharjah as India's training and press meet coincided with the match in Dubai. The ICC officials were kind enough to open their boardroom — where some of the sport's biggest decisions have likely been made — for the present journalists. Arabian wraps and fresh fruit juices were on offer.

India's loss to New Zealand in its first group game raised the stakes for the clash against Pakistan. A crowd of nearly 16,000 flocked to Dubai on a hot Sunday afternoon to watch the continental rivals (though not much of a rivalry on the field) face off. A Pakistani journalist, recording his piece to camera in the stadium's expansive parking lot, remarked, "It's quite a no-contest; India is way ahead." "Arey, yeh kaise bol rahe ho paaji, dekhte jao (How can you say that, brother? Just wait and watch)," countered a young man walking past.

Fatima Sana and her team seemed to embody that sentiment as they ran India close, ensuring anxiety at every moment in the chase. India eventually steadied the ship, earning its first points of the tournament. It was also the 100th T20I played at the venue, and the Emirates Cricket Board passed around red velvet cupcakes to mark the occasion.

The Diary, who finally met colleagues covering the women's game — people previously only seen on Zoom during press conferences — rounded off the week with an excursion to one of the city's oldest

quarters, the souks.

They were a sensory feast. Scarlet Iranian saffron and the aromas of the choicest spices enveloped the air, while some shockingly garish jewellery filled the gold markets.

Speaking Malayalam proved to be a bonus, helping secure better deals in most shops — though not in the jewellery stores. The souks had everything from ornate hijabs crafted in gold to extravagant boots and statement pieces, offering something for everyone. After exploring, the Diary found a tiny café with over 70 items on the menu. A shawarma was the first outdoor meal after days of media room food and home-cooked meals, modestly prepared to save money.

The Diary finally made it to Sharjah to watch England beat South Africa. Sharjah is a delightful venue — small and intimate, with an open press box a stone's throw from the field. The stands are so compact that surrounding buildings offer excellent views without a ticket. Family members of the England team made up most of the sparse audience and were rewarded with a win.

» KANPUR TEST PHOTOLINE INDIA-BANGLADESH



1st

Early inroads: Akash Deep put Bangladesh on the backfoot with twin strikes early in his opening spell on the first day after India opted to bowl under slightly overcast conditions in Kanpur. PTI

2nd

Under covers: Only 35 overs were bowled on the opening day, and the next two days were washed out due to persistent rain and a wet outfield at Green Park Stadium. SANDEEP SAXENA



3rd

Unbeaten: Mominul Haque slammed his 13th ton in red-ball format and became only the second batter from Bangladesh to score a Test century in India. While wickets tumbled at the other end, Bangladesh's number three, Mominul, stood firm, remaining unbeaten on 107. AP

4th

Rapid fire: Trailing Bangladesh's 233, Indian batters shattered several records by becoming the fastest team to reach: 50, 100, 150, 200, and 250 runs in Tests. Rohit Sharma and Yashasvi Jaiswal's opening pair set the tone as India raced to 50 in just three overs, breaking England's previous record of 4.2 overs.

AFP



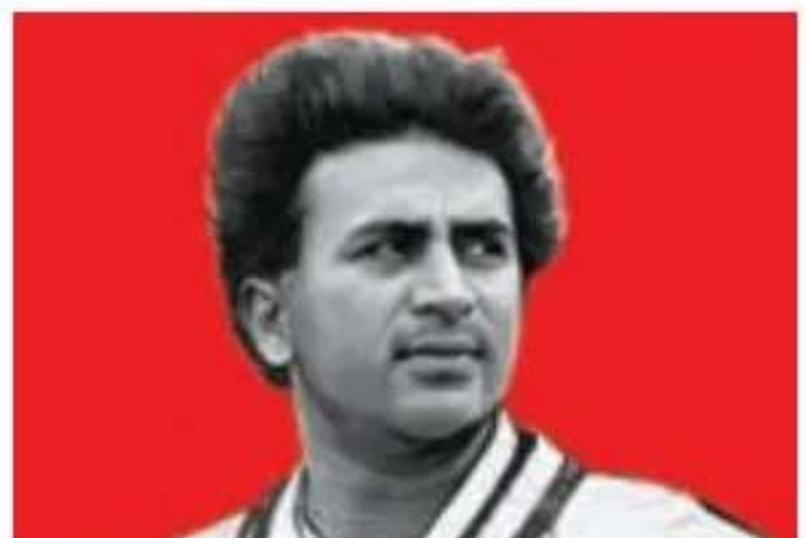
5th

Milestone man: Ravindra Jadeja became the first Indian left-arm spinner to pick 300 Test wickets. The 35-year-old also joined R Ashwin and Kapil Dev in the exclusive list of 11 players to have 300 wickets and 3000 runs in Tests. SANDEEP SAXENA

6th

Domination continues: India registered its 18th consecutive Test series win at home as it beat Bangladesh 2-0, chasing the 95-run target without breaking a sweat on the fifth day. SANDEEP SAXENA





ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



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India's inventive approach should be labelled 'Gohit' after their skipper

We have seen over the last couple of years that Rohit Sharma has been **batting aggressively** and encouraging his team to do so as well. If any credit is due, it is solely to Rohit.

India's batting in the recently concluded Test match at Kanpur's Green Park has come in for universal praise for breathing life into a game that seemed destined to be dead and buried. **Rohit Sharma, the Indian skipper who has led the revolution in batting approach since taking over as captain, once again showed the way forward.** The first two deliveries he faced [in the first innings] were smashed for sixes, and the innings gained momentum at breakneck speed from thereon. To be fair, young Yashasvi Jaiswal also hammered three boundaries in the very first over of the innings, but those could be described as risk-free punches. Rohit, on the other hand, took a risk as he advanced down the pitch to the very first delivery he faced, smiting it over long-on for a mighty six. When the bowler shortened his length for the next delivery, it was pulled over square leg for another maximum. This completely threw the Bangladesh bowlers off, and the others that followed just didn't know where to bowl.

Not surprisingly, the Indian approach drew reactions from the old powers who, as usual, wanted to take credit for it. That's how certain parts of the world work in everyday life, too — taking credit where none is really due. Sadly, while the batting was thrilling and refreshing,

the names given to the approach were the same old, same old. Just as any scandal is now called this-gate or that-gate after the Watergate scandal over 50 years ago in the United States of America, this Indian batting approach was labelled this-ball and that-ball after the term 'Bazball' was coined for the England team's batting attitude. It was called this because *Baz* is the nickname of their coach, Brendon McCullum from New Zealand, who batted exactly as his team is doing — throwing caution to the winds in an attempt to score runs.

As seen in India last year, this approach doesn't work in Test matches and may surprise the opposition for a game or two at best. While one paper called the Indian batting 'Bossball' because the captain or 'boss' of the team, Rohit, had shown the way, some from the old powers referred to it as 'Gamball' after the Indian coach, Gautam Gambhir. While the England batting approach changed completely under the new regime of Ben Stokes and McCullum, we have seen over the last couple of years that Rohit has been batting like this and encouraging his team to do so as well. Gambhir has only been coaching for a couple of months, so attributing this approach to him is foot-licking of the highest quality. Gambhir himself hardly ever batted in this fashion like



McCullum used to do. If any credit is due, it is solely to Rohit and nobody else.

Instead of using the words this-ball or that-ball, I would suggest using the skipper's first name, Rohit, and term it the 'Gohit' approach. Hopefully, brainier people will come up with a trendier name for this rather than the lazy option of calling it after 'Bazball'. That day's batting set the game up for India to secure a win on the final day and earn the much-needed points required to be in the race for a place in the World Test Championship (WTC) final in June next year. Would this approach have been adopted if there were no points on offer and no qualification needed for the WTC final?

Having lost two full days of play,

with the team batting first still having seven wickets in hand, not many teams in the past would have even looked at a result and would have been content to play out the remaining two days for personal records and milestones. So, full marks to the ICC for creating the World Test Championship and thereby making every Test match, including a dead rubber, important for the points teams can accrue from them. Every Test match thus has context and has livened up the long format, with teams wanting a win and looking to make things happen by trying something new and innovative.

However refreshing and thrilling the Indian batting was in the Kanpur Test match, let's face it: would they

Leading by example: Rohit Sharma's aggressive approach, both as captain and opener, has garnered praise from all sides. GETTYIMAGES

have batted in the same manner if there were no points on offer? The much-maligned ICC deserves every bit of applause for changing the perception towards every Test match by creating the World Test Championship. India know they have tough games ahead, and thus they had to try and secure maximum points while playing at home. Bangladesh are done and dusted, and now it's the Kiwis who will be in the firing line of Rohit and his boys. Will they overpower them as they did Bangladesh? We shall soon find out.



Full marks to the ICC for creating the World Test Championship and thereby making every Test match, including a dead rubber, important for the points teams can accrue from them.

» **STATSMAN**
MOHANDAS MENON

Ravindra Jadeja's all-round double

74} The number of Tests required for Ravindra Jadeja to reach the all-rounder double of 3000 Test runs and 300 wickets when he claimed the wicket of Bangladeshi Khaled Ahmed in the first innings of the Kanpur Test. He became the 11th Test player to achieve this double and the second quickest to do so. Ian Botham of England was the first to achieve this double in August 1984 and did it two Tests quicker than Jadeja. The Indian is now the fourth spinner (listed below), among these all-rounders to accomplish this feat and the quickest to do so.

Fewest Tests taken to reach the double of 3000 runs and 300 wickets in Test cricket

Tests	Player	Runs	Wkts	Achieved on	Opp	Venue	Result
72	Ian Botham (Eng)	4085	302	9 Aug 1984	WI	The Oval	Lost
74	Ravindra Jadeja (Ind)	3122	300	30 Sep 2024	Ban	Kanpur	Won
75	Imran Khan (Pak)	3000	340	26 Feb 1989	NZ	Auckland	Draw
83	Richard Hadlee (NZ)	3017	413	17 Mar 1990	Aus	Wellington	Won
83	Kapil Dev (Ind)	3486	300	7 Jan 1987	SL	Cuttack	Won

Fewest Tests taken to reach the double of 3000 runs and 300 wickets in Test cricket by a spinner

Tests	Player	Runs	Wkts	Achieved on	Opp	Venue	Result
74	Ravindra Jadeja (Ind)	3122	300	30 Sep 2024	Ban	Kanpur	Won
88	R. Ashwin (Ind)	3001	447	23 Dec 2022	Ban	Mirpur	Won
94	Daniel Vettori (NZ)	3329	301	26 Aug 2009	SL	ColomboSSC	Lost
142	Shane Warne (Aus)	3018	690	4 Dec 2006	Eng	Adelaide	Won

Note: The runs and wickets mentioned in the two tables above are the tally at the end of the innings after the double was achieved.

4} The number of batters to aggregate 27000 runs across formats in international cricket. Virat Kohli, in the first innings of the Kanpur Test match on 30 September 2024, during his blistering knock of 47 in 35 balls (the quickest of his Test career), when on 35, became the latest to reach the 27K run mark in international cricket history. He also became the quickest to reach this landmark — in fewest innings.

The 27K-run club in international cricket

Runs	Player (For)	Mts	Inns	No	Ave	100/50	in Tests	in ODIs	in T20Is
34357	Sachin Tendulkar (Ind)	664	782	74	48.52	100/164	15921	18426	10
28016	Kumar Sangakkara (SL+)	594	666	67	46.77	63/153	12400	14234	1382
27483	Ricky Ponting (Aus)	560	668	70	45.95	71/146	13378	13704	401
27041	Virat Kohli (Ind)	535	595	87	53.23	80/140	8947	13906	4188

Fewest innings to reach 27K runs in international cricket

Player (for)	Inns	Mts	Runs	Ave	Achieved on	Opp	Venue	Result	Format
Virat Kohli (Ind)	594	535	27012	53.17	30 Sep 2024	Ban	Kanpur	Won	Test
Sachin Tendulkar (Ind)	623	547	27092	48.12	15 Nov 2007	Pak	Gwalior	Won	ODI
Kumar Sangakkara (SL+)	648	580	27075	46.36	20 Jan 2015	NZ	Nelson	Lost	ODI
Ricky Ponting (Aus)	650	548	27006	46.48	14 Jan 2012	Ind	Perth	Won	Test

+ Sangakkara also appeared for the World XI and Asia XI



India's Ravindra Jadeja. R. RAGU



India's Virat Kohli.

SANDEEP SAXENA

13} The number of Tests victories for India without losing any against Bangladesh. This is one of the most dominant performances by a Test side against an opponent in history. Only Sri Lanka has won more Tests — against Zimbabwe — but it has taken more matches to do so. India's win percentage of 86.67 is second to South Africa's 88.89 against Zimbabwe, although the latter sides have played less than 10 Test matches against each other.

52} The number of overs faced by Indian batters to win a Test match at home. The Indian batters faced a minimal number of overs to secure a Test match victory in Kanpur, which was their second-quickest in Tests overall, and their quickest at home. Earlier this year in Cape Town, Team India defeated the home side, South Africa, in even fewer overs than it did in Kanpur. In Test history, its performance in Kanpur ranks as the fourth fewest overs faced to win a match.

Winning a Test after facing fewest number of overs in the match

Overs faced	Balls faced	Winning side	1st inns overs	2nd inns overs	Opp	Venue	Date	Result (won by)
46.0	276	Eng	29.3	16.3	WI	Bridgetown	10 Jan 1935	4 wkts
46.5	281	Ind	34.5	12.0	SA	Cape Town	4 Jan 2024	7 wkts
50.0	300	SA	50.0	—	Zim	Cape Town	5 Mar 2005	inns & 21 runs
52.0	312	Ind	34.4	17.2	Ban	Kanpur	1 Oct 2024	7 wkts
54.3	327	Aus	54.3	—	SA	Melbourne	15 Feb 1932	inns & 72 runs

8.22} India's run rate during its first innings against Bangladesh in Kanpur. This is now the third quickest total (of 50-plus) but by far the fastest for any totals of 100-plus in Test cricket history. No side has ever scored at eight or more runs per over in any 100-plus totals. India has thus set a new landmark in Test cricket by achieving this. Also, India's combined run-rate of 7.36 in the match is now the quickest in Test history.

Quickest team totals of 50-plus in Test cricket

R/o	Team	Total	Overs	Opp	Venue	Month, year	Result	M Inns
11.86	Eng	87/0	7.2	WI	Birmingham	Jul 2024	Won	4
10.00	Eng	50/0	5.0	SL	Manchester	Jun 2002	Won	4
8.22	Ind	285/9d	34.4	Ban	Kanpur	Sep 2024	Won	2
8.13	NZ	61/1	7.3	Pak	Karachi	Dec 2022	Draw	4
8.11	Pak	92/0	11.2	SL	Galle	Jun 2015	Won	4

Note: India is the only side in the above list to do it while batting in the first innings. The previous highest run-rate in the first innings of a Test was 6.80 by South Africa (340/3d in 50 overs) against Zimbabwe in Cape Town in March 2005.

Quickest team totals of 100-plus in Test cricket

R/o	Team	Total	Overs	Opponent	Venue	Month, year	Result	M Inns
8.22	Ind	285/9d	34.4	Ban	Kanpur	Sep 2024	Won	2
7.54	Ind	181/2d	24.0	WI	Port of Spain	Jul 2023	Draw	3
7.53	Aus	241/2d	32.0	Pak	Sydney	Jan 2017	Won	3
7.36	Eng	264/7d	35.5	Pak	Rawalpindi	Dec 2022	Won	3
6.82	WI	173/6	25.2	Ind	Kingston	Feb 1983	Won	4

Quickest combined (1st and 2nd innings) team match totals of 300-plus in Test cricket

R/o	Team	Total	Overs	Opponent	Venue	Month, year	Result
7.36	Ind	383/12	52.0	Ban	Kanpur	Sep 2024	Won
6.80	SA	340/3	50.0	Zim	Cape Town	Mar 2005	Won
6.73	Eng	921/17	136.5	Pak	Rawalpindi	Dec 2022	Won
6.43	Eng	536/4	83.2	Ire	Lord's	Jun 2023	Won

Note: South Africa batted only in the first innings in Cape Town

All records are correct and updated until 5 Oct 2024.

The ‘slow-death’ experience and the new metronome

Jasprit Bumrah's slower balls and Akash Deep's seam movement against Bangladesh showcase a **fast-bowling blend** of innovation and tradition. The numbers tell us the hows and whys.

Sahil Mathur and Pranay Rajiv

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In the recent series against Bangladesh, Indian pacers managed to match their spin counterparts for only the second time in a home Test series by taking an equal number of wickets — 20 each.

This feat highlighted a dynamic and effective strategy from the Indian fast-bowling unit. The charge was led by Jasprit Bumrah, who claimed 11 wickets, and he was ably supported by Akash Deep, who contributed with some crucial spells to end with five wickets.

Their success can be attributed to a mix of skill sets that combined the unorthodox with the fundamental. Bumrah's deceptive slower balls and Akash's relentless use of seam movement showcased a modern blend of fast bowling that leverages both innovation and tradition, allowing them to effectively navigate conditions that have historically been more favourable to spinners.

Bumrah's unconventional approach

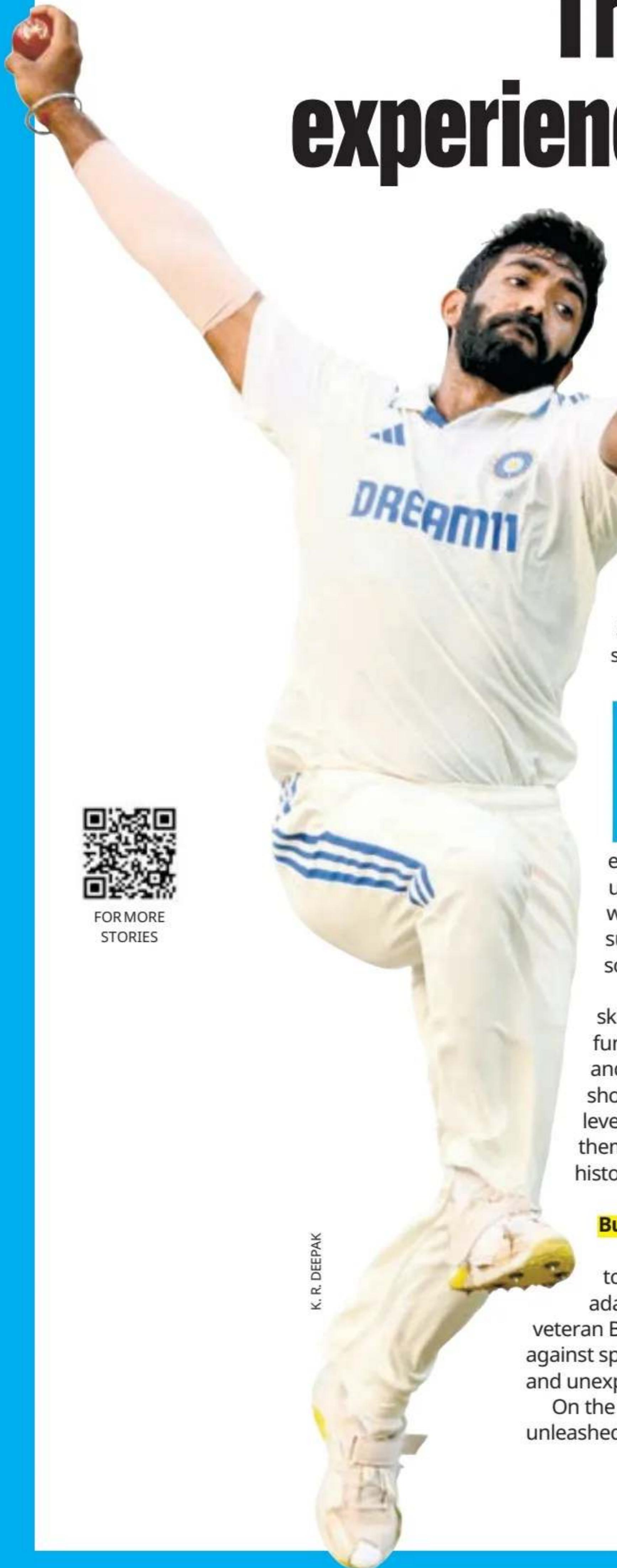
Bumrah has become a household name due to his unique bowling action and his ability to adapt to different formats. Mushfiqur Rahim, a veteran Bangladeshi batter known for his competence against spin, found himself on the receiving end of a rare and unexpected delivery from Bumrah.

On the fifth day of the second Test, Bumrah unleashed a 125 kmph off-cutter that confounded



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K. R. DEEPAK



Mushfiqur. The ball, delivered from over the wicket, veered in sharply and shattered his stumps, ending Bangladesh's second innings right before Lunch. This wasn't just a well-executed delivery but a testament to Bumrah's clever use of timing and variation.

Bumrah's penchant for using his slower deliveries towards the end of

an over has become a tactical hallmark. Nearly half of his slower balls/off-cutters in Test matches are bowled on the fifth or sixth delivery of the over, which has caught many batters off guard. Five of his 11 Test wickets from such deliveries have come in the final ball of the over.

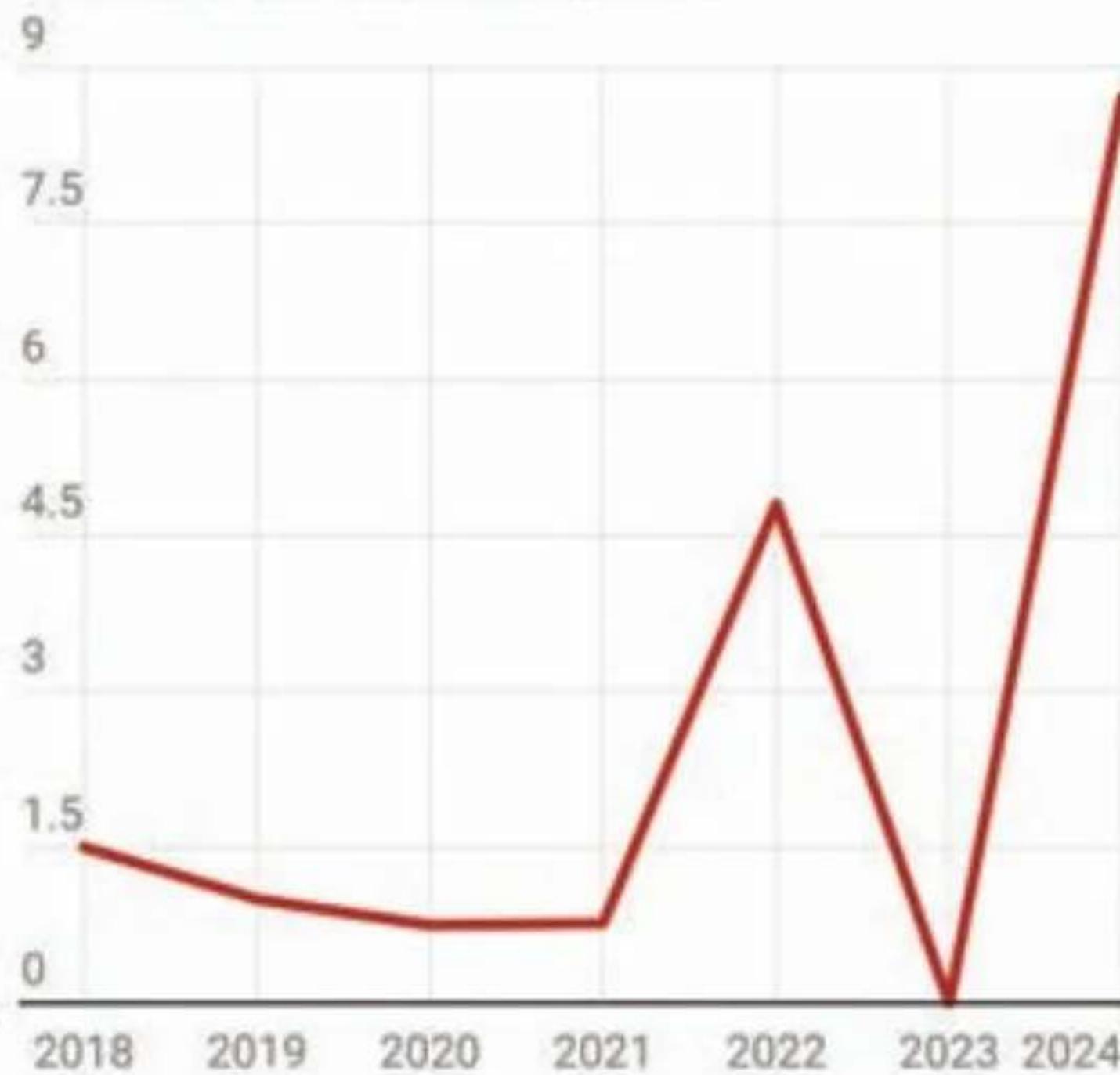
Bumrah's method is similar to a boxer setting up a powerful right

hook by first working his opponent with consistent jabs. He frequently bowls tight lines and lengths throughout the over, creating a rhythm that the batter becomes accustomed to. Then, just as he starts to settle, Bumrah unfurls his slower ball, turning the expected into the unexpected.

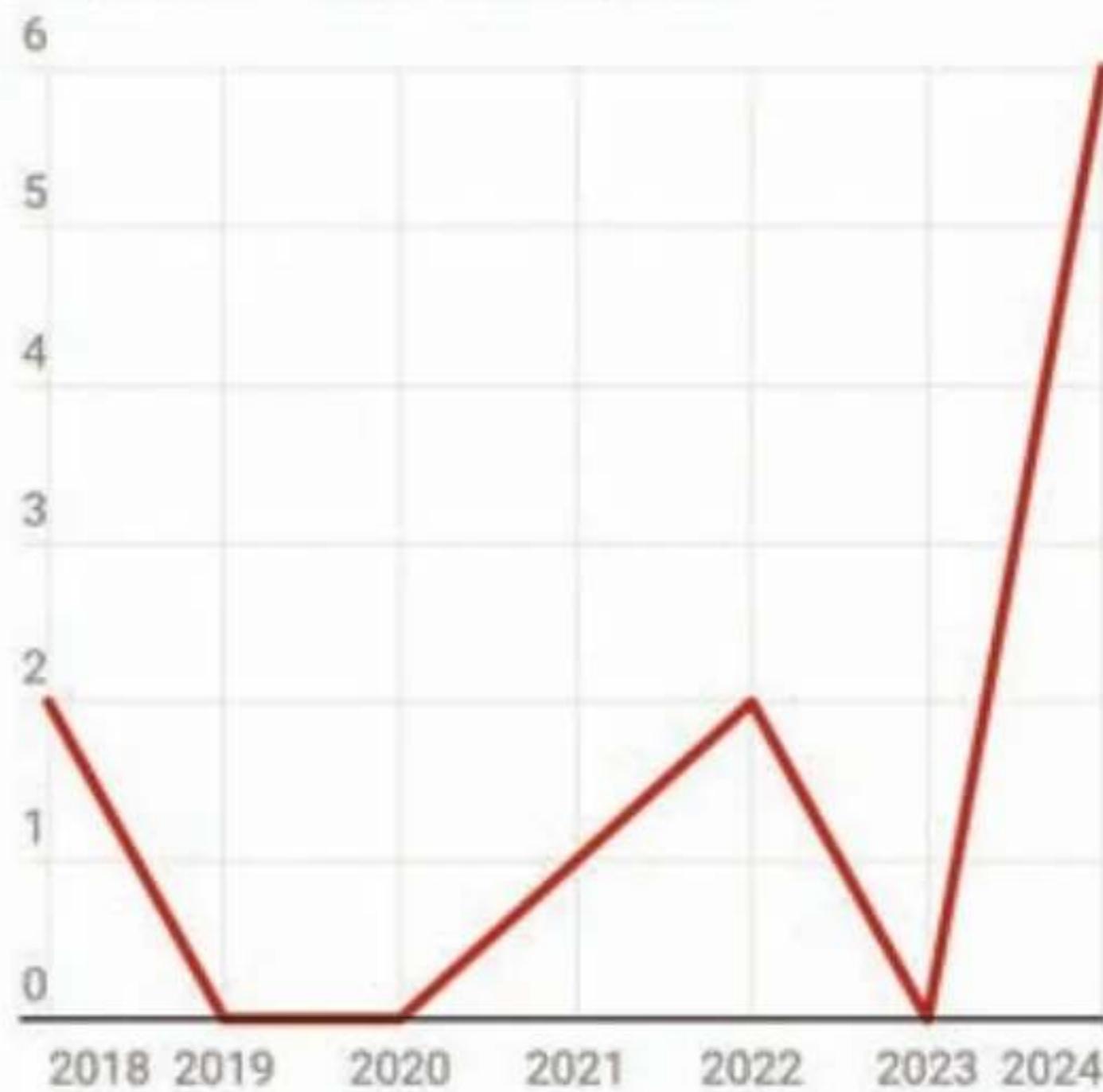
One of the most memorable

Bumrah's increased use of slow balls/off-cutters in Tests

Slow balls/off-cutters per game

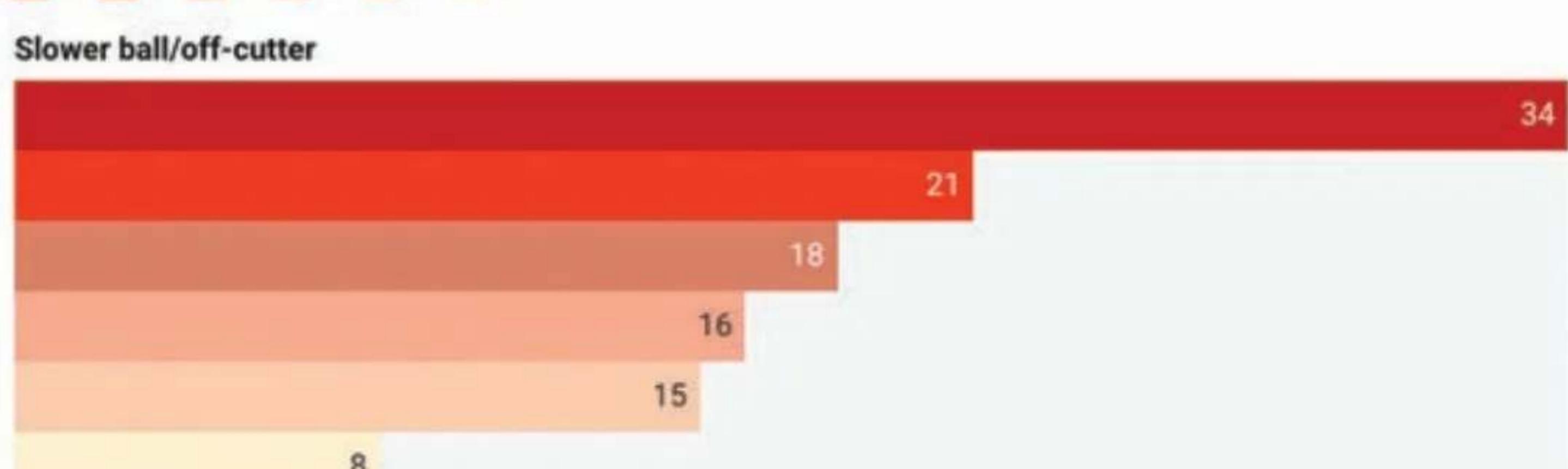


Wickets from slow balls/off-cutters



Bumrah's slower balls/off-cutters in Test by ball of the over

Slower ball/off-cutter





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instances of this tactic was against Shaun Marsh in the 2018 Melbourne Test. Bumrah had Marsh anticipating another length ball or outswinger. Instead, the Australian left-hander was surprised by a cunning off-cutter that swerved in, trapping him plumb in front of the

stumps. Such moments underline Bumrah's ability to innovate, incorporating elements like the off-cutter that are typically more prevalent in limited-overs cricket, into the longer format.

Bumrah's mastery of the off-cutter stems from his extensive

experience in T20s, where he has refined this skill under conditions that demand precision and minimal margin for error. The added wrist snap he applies to his slower deliveries increases revolutions on the ball, making it dip abruptly and swerve after pitching. This technique not only creates unpredictability but also amplifies the difficulty for the batter.

From 2018 to 2023, Bumrah's use of slower deliveries in Tests was sporadic. However, 2024 marked a significant shift. This year, Bumrah has bowled an average of 8.71 slower balls per Test, compared to just 1.64 in previous years. This heightened reliance on variations has also translated into wickets, with six out of his 11 slower-ball dismissals coming this year alone — four against England and two against Bangladesh.

India's home conditions, often favourable to spinners, seem to have influenced this change in Bumrah's approach. With the team relying on him to spearhead the attack, he has leveraged his slower variations as a means to disrupt the opposition and pick up crucial wickets.

Akash's fundamentals and seam movement

On the first morning of the Chennai Test, Akash ran in from around the wicket, delivering only his

Jasprit Bumrah's off-cutter/slower ball dismissals in Tests

Batter	Date	Overs	Dismissal type	Variation
F. du Plessis (SA)	13 Jan 2018	88.4	caught	off-cutter
S. E. Marsh (AUS)	26 Dec 2018	32.6	lbw	off-cutter
O. E. Robinson (ENG)	12 Aug 2021	50.6	lbw	slower ball
K. I. C. Asalanka (SL)	4 Mar 2022	57.6	lbw	off-cutter
A. D. Mathews (SL)	12 Mar 2022	28.1	caught	off-cutter
R. Ahmed (ENG)	25 Jan 2024	48.3	caught	off-cutter
B. A. Stokes (ENG)	25 Jan 2024	64.3	bowled	off-cutter
O. J. D. Pope (ENG)	25 Jan 2024	102.1	bowled	slower ball
B. T. Foakes (ENG)	2 Feb 2024	64.6	caught	slower ball
Taijul Islam (BAN)	27 Sep 2024	40.4	lbw	off-cutter
Mushfiqur Rahim (BAN)	27 Sep 2024	46.6	bowled	off-cutter



seventh ball of the day as the first-change bowler. Despite the ball being eight overs old, it still offered some movement.

Bangladesh opener Zakir Hasan had already faced three of Akash's deliveries, which tested the outside edge, but this time, Akash cocked his wrists, angled the seam into Zakir, and the wobbling ball held its line. With a front press, Zakir played straight but missed, and the ball crashed into the middle stump. Off the very next ball, Mominul Haque suffered the same fate.

Cocked wrists. Wobbled seam. Beaten. These are often associated with Mohammad Shami, but with Shami recovering from injury, Akash has stepped in with similar skills.

The 27-year-old Bengal pacer debuted against England earlier this year, quickly dismantling the top order with a mix of deliveries that either seamed away or nipped back in. Akash's deliveries mostly land on

a good length (62%) or back of a length (30.5%), keeping the stumps in play.

His unique wrist action and wobbled seam add an extra challenge for batters, as they have to guess whether the ball will straighten, seam away, or nip back in. Although he occasionally clocks 140 kmph, Akash often bowls in the high 130s, relying on deception over speed.

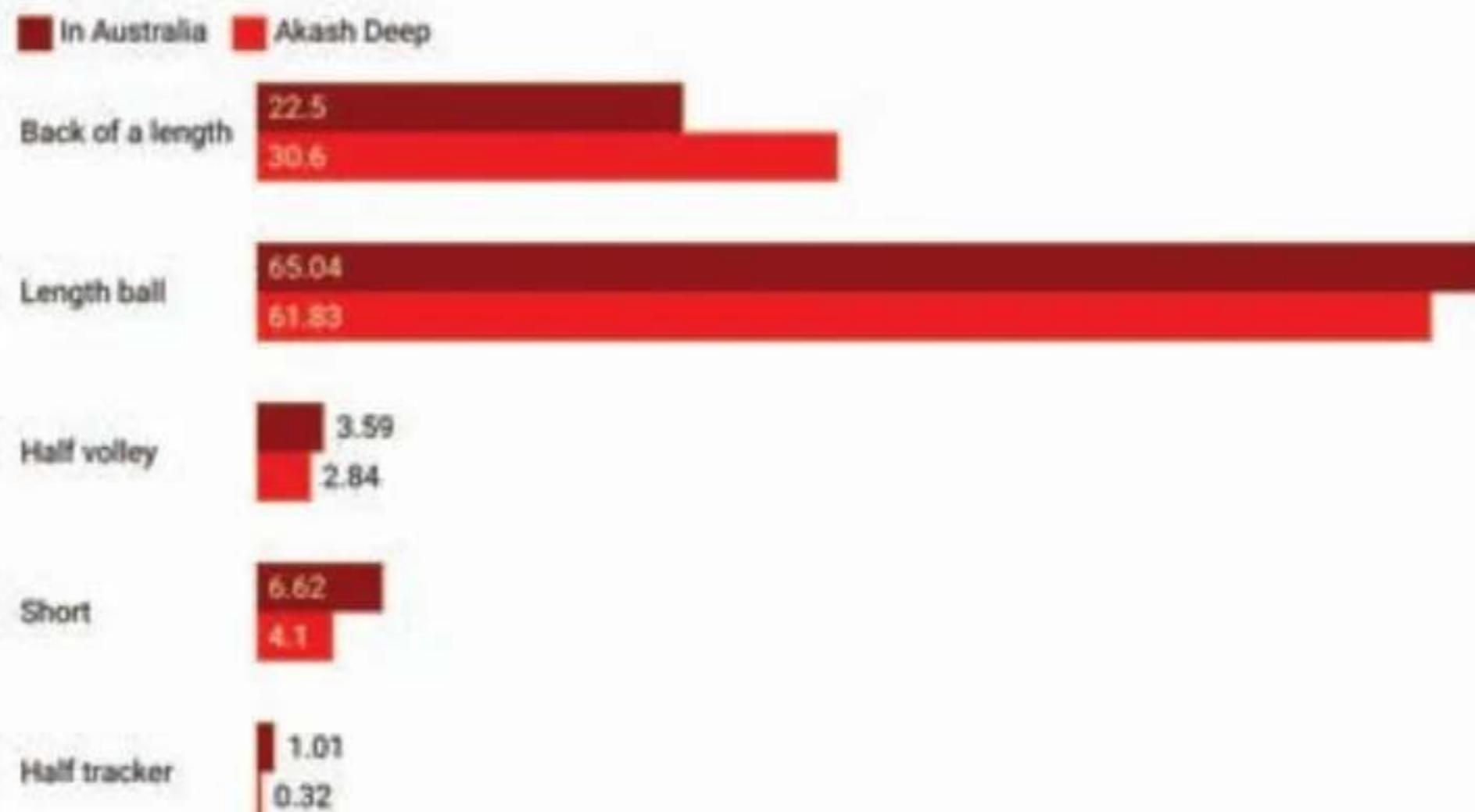
"Skiddy bowler. More pace than I expected. He got the ball to nip with variable bounce. It was tricky," said English opener Zak Crawley, who was bowled by Akash twice, although once off a no-ball.

With his promising start in international cricket, Akash appears to be an ideal addition to India's core fast-bowling group. His natural length, around four to five meters, aligns with what works in Australia, where 65% of deliveries have landed on a good length since 2020 and 22.5 per cent on back-of-a-length.

India's upcoming Tests against New Zealand will be an ideal setting for Akash to hone his skills before the November tour of Australia.

(Note: All stats updated till India vs Bangladesh Tests)

Lengths in Tests: In Australia since 2020 in comparison with Akash Deep



« We need to stop chasing big names for coaching roles; finding suitable candidates is key »

TAMIM IQBAL

Shayan Acharya

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Tamim Iqbal, once one of Bangladesh's most successful captains, faced a challenging period last year after being dropped from the ODI World Cup squad. Despite the setbacks, the dynamic batter has embraced a new role as a television commentator.

While Tamim is gearing up for a return to the Bangladesh Premier League next year, the question remains: will he also make a comeback to international cricket?

In this interview with *Sportstar*, Tamim shares his future plans, vision for Bangladesh cricket and reflects on his complex relationship with Shakib Al Hasan, who recently announced his retirement from Tests and T20Is.

How has the last one year been for you?

It has been quite a journey, to be honest. I never thought I wouldn't be playing for Bangladesh. At the time, my goal was to play in the Champions Trophy and then make a decision about my career. But then, a lot of unexpected things happened,

and they weren't pleasant either.

You can have bad relationships or differences with people, but when it comes to the national interest, everyone should come together. There should be no room for vindictiveness. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

I'm a very emotional person, and what happened to me during that period wasn't easy to handle, which led me to step away.

Many people believe my retirement was an emotional outburst, but it wasn't. Three days before the announcement, I spoke to my family about quitting cricket, so there must have been a reason, right?

I've played for Bangladesh for 17 years, but I had never witnessed anything like what I saw during that time. It was this experience that ultimately pushed me to announce my retirement.

How did you handle the phase?

Imagine I am the captain of Bangladesh and successful at that. I was performing well with the bat too, so everything seemed to be

going my way. Then why did I suddenly retire? What really happened?

Was it because I failed in just two or three games? No. Throughout my career, I've faced failures many times. If my place in the team had been in question, that would have been a different situation, and retirement might have made sense. But I was the captain, and statistically, I am probably one of the most successful ODI captains in Bangladesh's history.

On the surface, everything appeared smooth, so why did I step away? There must have been something I didn't enjoy, someone creating a situation that pushed me towards making this decision.

If you could share what exactly happened?

(Smiles) A lot of things happened. More than one person was involved, and they all played their roles very cleverly. However, I can't name them for obvious reasons. To this day, I haven't blamed anyone, and I never will. They know what they did to me, and I know what they did, so let's



leave it at that. I believe in karma and don't wish ill on anyone, because one day, it might come back to haunt me.

Your strained relationship with Shakib Al Hasan made headlines, especially after your omission from the 2023 ODI World Cup squad. Now, with Shakib retiring, how do you view your relationship with him?

Relationships go through ups and downs. The most important thing is to ensure that you're not harming each other because, ultimately, you're both playing for the country. I have never spoken out in the media or publicly blamed him or anyone else. However, I genuinely believe that what Shakib has done for Bangladesh is truly remarkable. You cannot deny that, regardless of whether you have a good relationship with him or not. He is the biggest superstar in Bangladesh.

Do you feel that Bangladesh cricket would have gained further had your relationship with Shakib not turned sour?

Oh, yes, definitely — without a doubt! I believe if our relationship had lasted longer, it could have been a game-changer for Bangladesh cricket. Both of us have done well for the country, and I'd like to think that we both have a positive mindset and want the best for cricket in Bangladesh.

During last year's selection fiasco, did you ever consider reaching out to Shakib and the BCB to resolve the issues amicably?

Very few people know what really happened. Neither they nor I have spoken to the media about it. I still can't forget what took place. If things were to be fixed, both sides needed to make the effort with a clear and open mindset.

Do you think cricketers like Mashrafe, Shakib and yourself, being seen as superheroes in Bangladesh, deserved better treatment and a proper farewell?

For that to happen, the person running the BCB must adopt a



similar mentality and understand that these players have served their country for a long time and deserve better treatment.

However, if the individual is vindictive in nature, it becomes problematic. This isn't just about me not playing in the 2023 World Cup; it could happen to anyone, even a player who has only played two matches for the national team.

Look at India. Everyone talks about the success of Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli or Rahul Dravid, but the people running Indian cricket are just as important and share equally in the team's success. If those at the BCCI didn't have a clear vision, the team wouldn't have achieved as much as it has.

Similarly, if the person at the top of the BCB lacks the vision for Bangladesh to win trophies or succeed in ICC events, the team will struggle, no matter how talented the players are or who the coach is.

Recently, Faruque Ahmed took charge, becoming the first BCB

president to have played any competitive cricket. How beneficial will it be to have a former cricketer at the helm?

It's too early to say. Look, there are always ifs and buts. In the previous BCB regime, there were three former captains involved in administration. Did the last Board get everything wrong? No, they did a lot of good things too, and that can't be denied.

I may have had issues with two or three people at the BCB, but that doesn't mean they haven't achieved anything.

This time, the president is also a cricketer, so you have to give him some time before making any judgements.

In a recent interview with this publication, president Ahmed mentioned he'd like to bring you into the BCB if you choose to retire. What's next for you? Do you plan to return to international cricket?

The way I finished wasn't



pleasant. So, if I were to come back and play, I'd need a clear purpose. I'm not someone who would return just for the sake of it and play only four or five games. What's the point?

Everyone says, "Come back, we want you," but if I only play five games, will that really help Bangladesh cricket?

If there's a proper plan in place regarding what they want to achieve, then I can consider it and we can have a discussion. But right now, you're talking about the Champions Trophy, where there are only four or five ODIs, and three in the West Indies. So essentially, we're talking about just six or seven games. Since I've stepped back and someone else has taken my place, it doesn't make sense to return for just a handful of matches.

However, it's a different story if the BCB says they want to win the Champions Trophy or at least aim for the semifinals, and that this will likely be the last tournament for three or four senior players, regardless of past differences, and that the BCB

Imminent return?: New BCB president Faruque Ahmed wants to see Tamim Iqbal return to international cricket. AFP

will work to resolve any issues. That's the right way to approach things.

If such a request comes your way, will you consider it?

Yes, of course. But the question is: do I play for the cricket board, or do I play for the team? Where should the request come from? The cricket board looks after me, but the players also need to be welcoming.

I have a good relationship with everyone, so I know that won't be an issue. But, for example, if I were the captain and wanted to achieve something, I would talk to you, share my vision and plan, and convince you to join me on that journey. If needed, I'd also assure you that everything would be taken care of.

Me joining the team and you wanting me in the team are two different things. If a situation arises where both the team and I feel that my presence is necessary, then I'll consider it.

Coming back to Shakib, do you think that this was the right time for him to announce retirement?

A lot is written about in the media and on social media, and people discuss various issues. Everyone — be it the captain, the coach, or the Board — has their own opinion. However, when you truly feel that it's time to step away, you do so accordingly.

If he has heard that call from within, then he has certainly made the right decision, and we should all respect that.

Having played together for a long time, is there any particular

memory with Shakib that you'll always cherish?

It was in 2009. We were participating in a tri-nation tournament alongside Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe in Dhaka. We lost our first game against Zimbabwe, and to reach the final, we needed to beat Sri Lanka with a bonus point. It was a rain-curtailed match of 31 overs per side, and Bangladesh had to chase down Sri Lanka's total of 147 within 25 overs to secure that bonus point.

Back then, winning games with a bonus point was beyond our imagination. We were struggling at 11 for 3 when Shakib walked out to bat. He played an unbelievable knock — an unbeaten 92 off 69 balls — to guide the team home in just 23.5 overs. Not only did we win the game, but we also reached the final with a bonus point.

Sitting in the dressing room, I knew there was a chance to win, but I couldn't have imagined that we would achieve that with a bonus point. However, Shakib had a different mindset. I genuinely feel that unbeaten 92 was the best-ever ODI innings by a Bangladesh cricketer. That's Shakib Al Hasan for you. His ability to think differently has shaped him into who he is today. I rate that innings very, very highly.

With Shakib stepping away from Tests and T20Is for now, how challenging will it be to fill his gap? Does Bangladesh have enough talent to replace him?

Replacing someone like me, Shakib, or Mushfiq isn't easy. It won't happen overnight. We have played the game for 17 years, so this will take time. However, the reality is that time doesn't wait for anyone. Eventually, someone will come along to fill that spot. I'm not saying it will never happen; it may happen, but it will take time.

◁ If you want Bangladesh cricket to advance, the entire system needs to transform ▷

Over the last few years, the Bangladesh team has been inconsistent in its performances. Why is that so?

In red-ball cricket, there is still a lot to be done. After playing Test cricket for 24 years, the fact that we still talk about improvement is not a pleasant situation.

I sometimes feel ashamed that, even after two decades, we haven't accomplished much.

However, it's important to understand that back home, ODI is the No. 1 format. If we truly want to succeed in Test cricket, the Board and team management need to act accordingly.

There are coaching staff members who come to work in Bangladesh for hefty salaries, knowing that if they can win two ODIs and a few T20Is, they'll be set. If that's the mindset, it's a problem.

Now, the question is: where does this mindset come from? It stems from the people running the Board. Everything needs to align if we want to tick all the boxes.

Over the last decade, the BCCI has appointed former Indian cricketers as head coaches, and now Sri Lanka has brought in Sanath Jayasuriya. Should the BCB consider appointing former Bangladesh cricketers as head coach as well?

I don't believe anyone in Bangladesh is currently capable of becoming the head coach. At the moment, there are two or three who are capable of becoming assistant coaches, but I don't think they are suited for the head coach role.

There should be a 70:30 ratio in Bangladesh's coaching staff, where you have an overseas head coach and perhaps two foreign coaches, while the remaining 70 per cent of the assistant coaches should be from Bangladesh. This approach would help groom local coaches so that, one day, they can step up as head coach.

There is a buzz that Bangladesh might get a new head coach soon. According to you, what should be



Crown jewels: Tamim Iqbal on his equation with Shakib-Al-Hasan: "I believe if our relationship had lasted longer, it could have been a game-changer for Bangladesh cricket." AFP

the criteria for becoming the head coach of the team?

Bangladesh should stop chasing big names, as not all well-known figures make good coaches for the team. They need to identify candidates who are suitable for Bangladesh cricket. The individual should be hardworking and able to add value to the team.

Is Ryan Ten Doeschate a massive name in world cricket? Yet he is still part of India's coaching staff. We need people like him who will work behind the scenes.

Is Abhishek Nayar a world beater? So why did the BCCI offer him the role of assistant coach? It's because he has something to contribute to the team. From what I have heard, he has done incredibly well with several teams and has worked closely with many Indian cricketers. We need to find such people instead of focussing on big names.

What are the areas that need to change for Bangladesh cricket to grow?

If you truly want to advance Bangladesh cricket and bring about change, the entire system needs to

transform. Will you achieve success in two years? No. It may take five years or even longer, so patience is essential.

Some aspects in Bangladesh are fine, but most need to change. I made my debut in 2006-2007, and as we speak in 2024, not a single new training facility has been developed in Dhaka over the past 17 years.

The funniest thing is that when the BCB claims to have Rs 1200 crore in its bank account, it feels like a slap in the face. There shouldn't be 1200 crore sitting idle; there should be 200 crore in the account, and the remaining 1000 should be invested in developing infrastructure. If you ask any corporate entity, they would tell you that reinvesting is the way to go. Did the BCB reinvest? No. And if they claim they did, then where are the facilities? Where is another stadium in Dhaka apart from the one in Mirpur? You definitely need a facility like Mirpur, and while I'm okay with playing to your strengths on certain pitches, it's crucial to produce quality wickets at the domestic level as well. This way, you can test your cricketers and prepare them for the international stage.



Making a mark: Jaydev Unadkat's Saurashtra has transformed into a formidable force in Indian First-Class cricket, carving a legacy that boasts two Ranji Trophy titles. PTI

Ranji Trophy's axis of power has shifted, signalling Indian cricket's growth spurt

Since 2014, Karnataka has won the title once and Mumbai twice, while less prominent teams **Vidarbha and Saurashtra** each secured the championship twice.

Shayan Acharya

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In the fast-paced world of T20s, the traditional red-ball format often gets sidelined, sparking debates about the significance of India's premier domestic tournament — the Ranji Trophy.

With another packed international calendar on the horizon, including India's Test

series against New Zealand and Australia in the coming months, the Ranji Trophy will once again compete for attention, lacking the star power as the top players remain occupied with international duties.

However, despite this, domestic talent from across the country will don the whites for four



Mumbai has won the Ranji Trophy 42 times since the tournament's inception in 1934, followed by Karnataka, which has eight titles. Until about a decade ago, it was almost expected that Mumbai would reach the final and go on to claim the trophy. But not anymore.

months of intense cricket, where conditions will vary, fitness and skills will be tested, and teams will strive to give their best.

As the game has evolved over the past decade, the Ranji Trophy has also witnessed the rise of newer teams, breaking the dominance of traditionally strong sides.

Since 2014, Karnataka has won the title just once, while Mumbai has added only two more trophies to its collection. In the same period, two less high-profile teams — Vidarbha and Saurashtra — have each claimed the title twice, with Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh winning in 2016 and 2022, respectively.

"The fact that a team like Mumbai, which is used to winning, had to wait nearly 10 years to claim a Ranji Trophy title (last season) speaks volumes about the competition," says Chandrakant Pandit.

Pandit, who was the head coach of Vidarbha when it secured back-to-back titles in 2018 and 2019, also guided Madhya Pradesh to its historic win against Mumbai in the final a couple of years ago.

"There is a lot of competition, and every team participating in the tournament wants to win. It's no longer just one or two teams dominating the show," says Pandit.

Mumbai has won the Ranji Trophy 42 times since the tournament's inception in 1934, followed by Karnataka, which has eight titles. Until about a decade ago, it was almost expected that Mumbai would reach the final and go on to claim the trophy. But not

anymore.

"That dominance among top teams is no longer visible because of the widespread nature of the game. It's reached the nooks and corners of the country, and each State now has a lot of talent," says Jaydev Unadkat.

An India international, Unadkat has led Saurashtra to two Ranji Trophy titles in recent years. Having witnessed these changes firsthand, he has no hesitation in admitting that alongside the growing talent pool, the facilities across the country have significantly improved — even in remote areas.

"Earlier, there was a notion that only five or six major centres had state-of-the-art facilities, but that's no longer the case. Now, every state has a ground that is almost of international standard. Be it Vizianagaram in Andhra Pradesh or Jodhpur in Rajasthan — even though they don't regularly host games — these places have some of the best practice facilities in the country," Unadkat explains.

"These are some of the reasons why so many players are emerging from all parts of the country, and the fact that now at least 18 to 19 teams are capable of winning the Ranji Trophy shows how much the game has grown."

Bengal captain Anustup Majumdar echoes a similar sentiment. When Majumdar and Unadkat began their careers, the idea of separate teams for red-ball and white-ball cricket was almost unheard of. "A lot of teams now



have a different pool for red-ball and white-ball because of the amount of talent that we have," Majumdar says.

Unadkat agrees. "When we started, there were about 15 or 16 players who would play in every format. But now, even the associations have realised the need for separate teams. If you look at Saurashtra, we have quite a few different players for red-ball and



white-ball. The standard has really gone up," the fast bowler adds.

Pandit, who has worked with multiple teams, notes that playing more cricket — whether red-ball or white-ball — has significantly helped players gain a deeper understanding of the game. "This wasn't the case earlier. And having played in the IPL or other competitions, young players have had the opportunity to

rub shoulders with international cricketers, giving them the confidence to perform well in domestic tournaments," Pandit says.

"Twenty or 30 years ago, we only had the Ranji Trophy, but with T20s, players have gained a lot of experience, and they bring that experience, skill set, and mindset to red-ball cricket, which makes things exciting," he adds.

Ending a drought: Madhya Pradesh claimed the Ranji Trophy 2021-22 title, triumphing 69 years after its previous victory, then as Holkar, and 23 years since it last contended for this prestigious accolade in Indian domestic cricket. K. MURALIKUMAR



Bifurcation of teams: Bengal captain Anustup Majumdar believes that the growing pool of talent has enabled State teams to develop separate squads for red-ball and white-ball formats. RITU RAJ KONWAR

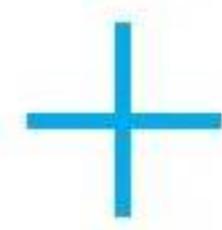
To mitigate weather disruptions, the BCCI has split the Ranji Trophy into two phases. The tournament will start with five league matches, take a break for the white-ball

competitions — Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy and Vijay Hazare Trophy — and then resume.

In this scenario, having two separate setups could be beneficial. In fact, Assam Cricket Association has taken the lead by appointing two different coaches. While Vivek Jaisimha will oversee the red-ball tournament, RX Murali will manage the white-ball sides. If this experiment proves successful, other states may follow suit.

But how challenging will it be for teams to switch formats with minimal turnaround time?

"It's all about the mental switch because it's not easy to shift to white-ball cricket after playing red-ball for a couple of months, and then switch again within a month. It'll be interesting to see how players respond to this challenge," says P.V. Shashikanth, former head coach of Karnataka and currently with Tripura.



Unadkat, however, points out that starting red-ball cricket as early as October could be tough for fast bowlers.

"It's a good move by the BCCI to split the season, as it gives more game time to teams whose matches are often disrupted by extreme weather."

"But now, with the heat in many parts of the country, I don't think the new ball will move much in the first couple of days, as it would in the winter," Unadkat says.

"If you're playing in Rajkot or Chennai, you'll see a lot of reverse swing. It's always a challenge to play five red-ball games in October when it's still very hot, but we need to adapt to the conditions and play accordingly," he adds.

In recent years, excelling in the IPL has often fast-tracked a player's inclusion in the Indian team, but there are always exceptions.

A notable example is Yashasvi Jaiswal. While his stellar performances for Rajasthan Royals in IPL 2023 (625 runs at a strike rate of 163.61) grabbed headlines, his dominant red-ball form also helped pave the way for his Test debut.

Around the time of his Test selection, Jaiswal boasted a remarkable First-Class average in the 80s. His standout performance came in the Irani Cup in March last year, where he hammered scores of 213 and 144.

The inclusion of players like Sarfaraz Khan, Rajat Patidar and Dhruv Jurel in the Indian Test team, after strong performances in the Ranji Trophy, has also given hope to others.

List of Ranji Trophy winners since 2014

2014-15: Karnataka
2015-16: Mumbai
2016-17: Gujarat
2017-18: Vidarbha
2018-19: Vidarbha
2019-20: Saurashtra
2021-22: Madhya Pradesh
2022-23: Saurashtra
2023-24: Mumbai

"There's no substitute for hard work," Pandit says as he prepares for another exciting season with Madhya Pradesh.

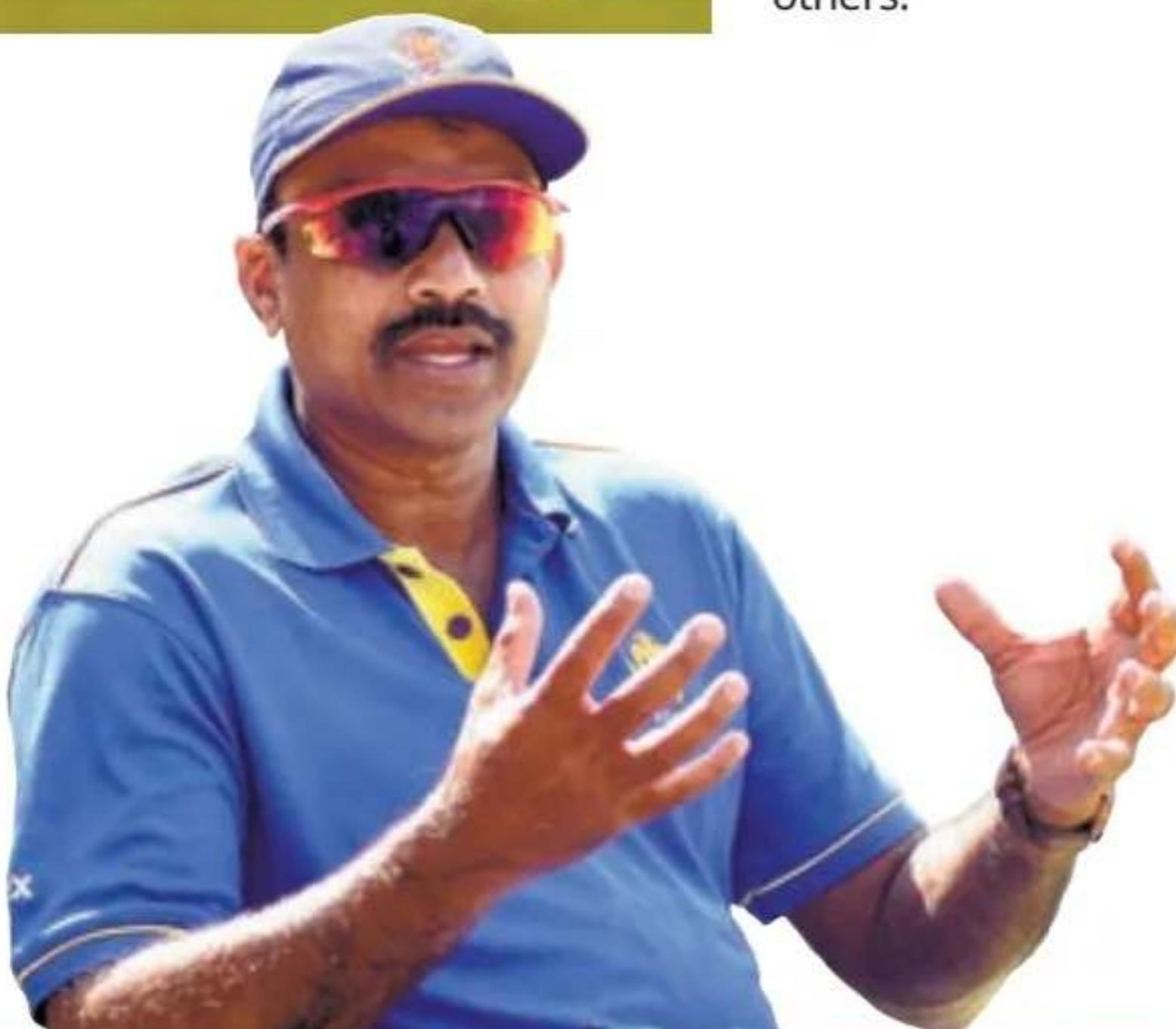
Meanwhile, expectations will be high from Mumbai after the Irani Cup win. But Ajinkya Rahane's side will need to stay grounded and address each challenge as it comes. With India set to play New Zealand in a three-match Test series, it's unlikely that Mumbai's run-machine Sarfaraz will be available for much of the Ranji Trophy.

This, however, opens the door for others to step up.

Players like Pradosh Ranjan Paul, Manav Suthar, Riyan Parag, and Abhimanyu Easwaran will be eager to make their mark, while seasoned veterans such as Wriddhiman Saha, Cheteshwar Pujara, and Rahane might see this as an opportunity to showcase their class and perhaps bow out on a high note.

With plenty of action ahead, another thrilling season of Ranji Trophy cricket awaits.

“It's not that traditionally top teams are struggling, but rather that other teams have upped their game. With a large talent pool and ample opportunities, players from smaller centres are now rubbing shoulders with big names, boosting their confidence. They have nothing to lose, so they seize every chance that comes their way” – P.V. Shashikanth, head coach, Tripura





GETTY IMAGES

Saint Lucia Kings clinches maiden CPL title

1

Roston Chase's blistering 39 off 22 balls, along with Aaron Jones' steady 48 from 31, guided SLK to victory with 11 balls to spare.

The Saint Lucia Kings (SLK) secured its maiden Caribbean Premier League title with a six-wicket victory over defending champion

Guyana Amazon Warriors (GAW). GAW set a target of 138, and SLK found itself in trouble at 51 for four. However, Roston Chase's

blistering 39 off 22 balls, along with Aaron Jones' steady 48 from 31, guided SLK to victory with 11 balls to spare.



2

The Global Super League, a new five-team T20 tournament, will take place from November 26 to December 7. Sanctioned by Cricket West Indies (CWI) and supported by the government of Guyana, the tournament will feature CPL's Guyana Amazon Warriors alongside four other T20 teams from around the world. This will mark South America's first standalone cricket event, with all matches scheduled to be held at the Guyana National Stadium in Providence.



3

Babar Azam has stepped down as Pakistan's white-ball captain for the second time in under a year, citing a desire to reduce his workload and focus more on his batting. The 29-year-old had previously relinquished captaincy across all formats following last year's ODI World Cup but was reappointed skipper of the T20I and ODI sides four months later. Meanwhile, Tim Southee stepped down as New Zealand's captain after the series defeat in Sri Lanka. Since taking over from Kane Williamson in 2022, Southee led the team in 14 Tests, securing six wins, six losses, and two draws.

REUTERS



4

Australia clinched the fifth and final ODI against England to secure a 3-2 series victory. After taking an early 2-0 lead, Australia saw England fight back to level the series at 2-2, setting up a thrilling decider. In the final match, Australia overcame both rain and England, winning by 49 runs via the Duckworth-Lewis-Stern (DLS) method. Despite Ben Duckett's (**pic, above**) second ODI century and a blistering knock from Harry Brook that helped England post a formidable total, Australia's explosive start to the chase proved decisive in sealing the series.



5

Sri Lanka dominated New Zealand in a 2-0 clean sweep of the two-match Test series, keeping its hopes alive for a spot in the World Test Championship final. After a 63-run victory in the first Test, Sri Lanka showcased its batting strength in the second, amassing a commanding first-innings total of 602-5 declared. In response, New Zealand crumbled to just 88 in its first innings and, following on, was bowled out for 360, handing Sri Lanka an emphatic victory by an innings and 154 runs.

AFP



REUTERS

STALEMATE OF CHAMPIONS

Bayern Munich held a determined Leverkusen to a draw, as it maintained its **unbeaten record** this season so far.

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Arne Slot made history as Liverpool manager while Lionel Messi secured his second title with Inter Miami. Take a look at what else has unfolded in the world of football as club matches halt for the international break.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich dropped its first points of the season after playing out a 1-1 draw against defending champion Bayer Leverkusen (**above**). First-half strikes from Robert Andrich and Aleksander Pavlovic ensured that Vincent Kompany and Xabi Alonso's men shared the spoils in the heavyweight clash.

After being shocked by Aston Villa in the Champions League during midweek, the league leader went on to drop two more points, after Eintracht Frankfurt's Omar Marmoush grabbed a stoppage-time equaliser to hold the German giant to a thrilling 3-3 draw.

Leverkusen, on the other hand, squandered a two-goal lead and was held to a 2-2 draw by newly-promoted Holstein Kiel, leaving the champion fifth in the table with 11 points, three points off league leader Bayern.

Days after its historic 7-1 demolition of Celtic in the Champions League, Borussia Dortmund slumped to a 2-1 loss against Union Berlin. Nuri Sahin's men are now seventh in the standings with 10 points from six games. Apart from Bayern, RB Leipzig is the only unbeaten side in the league so far, with a win against FC Heidenheim bringing it up to second in the table, level on points with the leader.



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Premier League

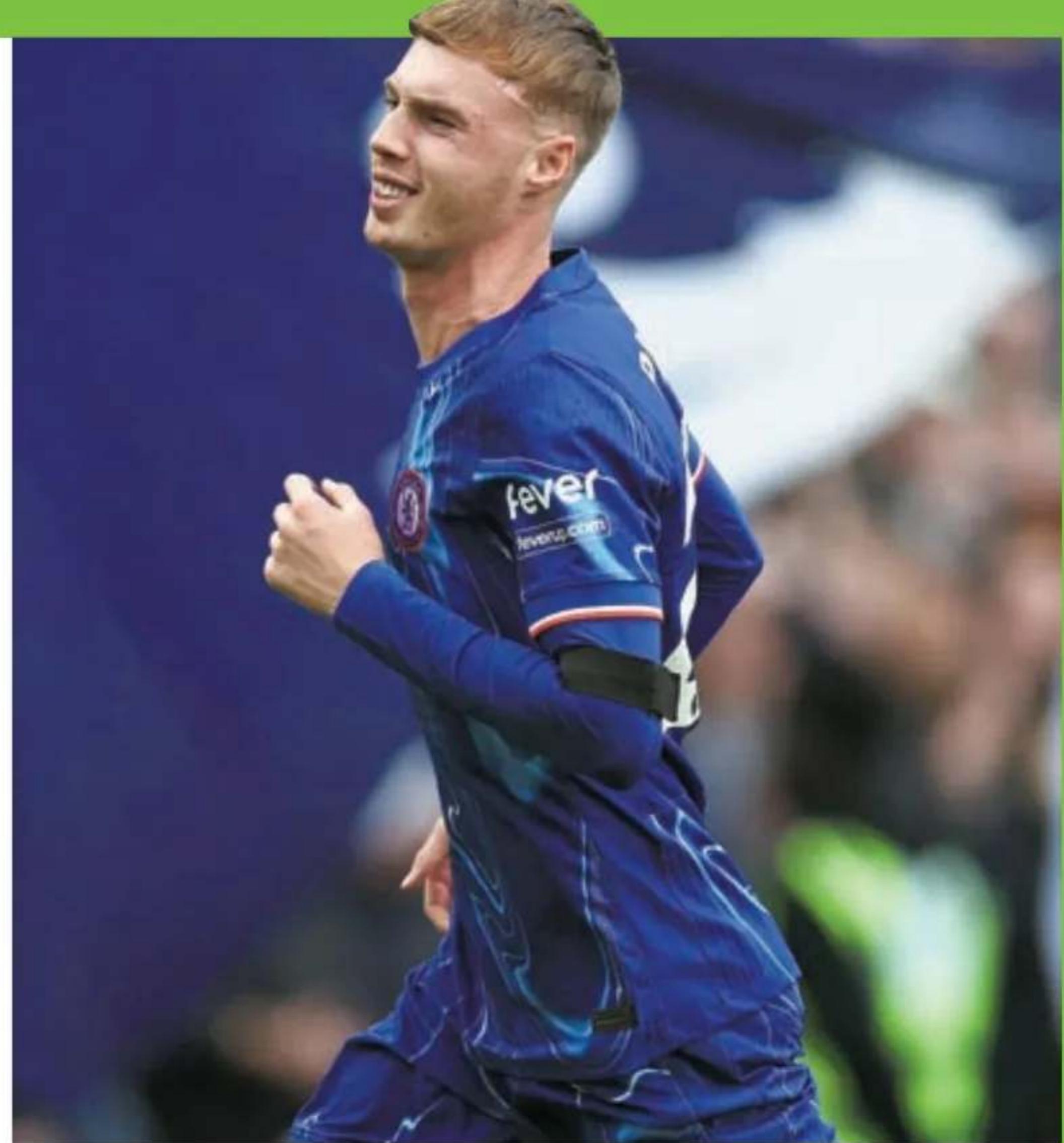
Manchester City's life without Rodri began on a shaky note as Newcastle United held the defending champion to a 1-1 draw. A first-half strike from Josko Gvardiol was cancelled out by Anthony Gordon from the spot, meaning that City had dropped points for the second consecutive week.

With Rodri set to miss the rest of the season after suffering an Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) injury, former Chelsea man Mateo Kovacic came to City's rescue the following week in a 3-2 win against Fulham. After going a goal down, the Croatian scored on either side of half-time before substitute Jeremy Doku sealed the match with a sublime strike from outside the box.

Despite the win, dropping points in successive games meant that City lost its grip on the top spot and went into the international break in second place, level on points with Arsenal and one point behind leader Liverpool.

Arne Slot has been relishing his role as Liverpool's manager as his side earned hard-fought wins on the road against Wolverhampton Wanderers and Crystal Palace. With nine victories in his first 10 games in all competitions, Slot has recorded the best start by any manager in the club's history.

However, Liverpool will be concerned about its goalkeeper



Alisson, who was substituted during the game against Crystal Palace due to a hamstring injury.

Two stoppage-time goals helped Arsenal overcome a comeback from Leicester City and win 4-2. The following week, the Gunners survived yet another scare against Southampton, with English winger Bukayo Saka providing two assists and scoring a goal to complete a 3-1 comeback win.

It was the Cole Palmer show for Chelsea in its 4-2 win against Brighton & Hove Albion, as the

In fine form: Cole Palmer became the first player in the Premier League era to score four goals in the first half of the match. GETTY IMAGES

22-year-old became the first player in the Premier League era to score four goals in the first half of the match. However, Enzo Maresca's men dropped points the following week after being held to a 1-1 draw against 10-man Nottingham Forest. The result meant the Blues are fourth in the table, level on 14 points with Aston Villa in fifth.

Manchester United's abysmal start to the season worsened as it was handed a 3-0 thrashing by Tottenham Hotspur. The match saw United's captain Bruno Fernandes sent off with a straight red card in the first half for a challenge on James Maddison. However, the decision was overturned by the English Football Association after a

+
With nine victories in his first 10 games in all competitions, Arne Slot has recorded the best start by any manager in Liverpool's history.



AP



Ruthless: Defending champion Real Madrid was held to a 1-1 draw in a nervy derby against Atletico Madrid, with goals by Eder Militao & Angel Correa (above). AFP

successful appeal by the club. United's hopes of heading into the break on a positive note were quashed as Crystal Palace held the Red Devils to a 0-0 draw in the following match. Erik ten Hag's future hangs in the balance as United sits 14th in the table, with just two points from its last three matches.

La Liga

Barcelona was handed a reality check after it was beaten 4-2 by Osasuna for its first loss of the league season. The league leader however, followed up the disappointing performance by

thrashing Deportivo Alaves 3-0, thanks to a first-half hat-trick from Robert Lewandowski.

The Pole leads the goal-scoring chart in the league this season with 10, four clear of Villarreal's Ayoze Perez in second. Additionally, the club announced that Polish keeper Wojciech Szczesny had come out of retirement to fill in for Ter Stegen, who is out for months with a knee injury.

Defending champion Real Madrid failed to capitalise on Barcelona dropping points, as it was held to a 1-1 draw in a nervy derby against Atletico Madrid. Angel Correa cancelled out Eder Militao's opener deep into stoppage time, in a match that was suspended for 20 minutes after Atletico fans hurled objects onto the pitch.

In its next match, a long-range strike from Federico Valverde and a screamer into the top corner from Vinicius Jr ensured that Los Blancos cruised past Villarreal to cut the gap to Barcelona down to three points.





Diego Simeone's Atletico will head into the break in third place, four points behind its city rival, after being held to a frustrating 1-1 draw by Real Sociedad.

Ligue 1

French giant Paris Saint-Germain continued its slump from the Champions League loss against Arsenal and struggled to find rhythm in the 1-1 draw against OGC Nice.

AS Monaco grabbed the opportunity and ascended to the top of the table after Folarin Balogun (**facing page, left**) scored for the third straight game, helping his side beat Rennes 2-1.

After an excellent start to the

Sour note: Barcelona (green) was handed a reality check after it was beaten 4-2 by Osasuna for its first loss of the league season. REUTERS

season, Marseille dropped points in consecutive games, losing 1-0 to RC Strasbourg before drawing 1-1 with Angers, in a match marred by first-half red cards for both teams.

The result left Roberto De Zerbi's side third in the table with 14 points, three behind PSG and five behind Monaco.

Serie A

Napoli climbed to the top of the league standings with



AP

« Romelu Lukaku (right) was among Napoli's scorers against Como, helping it take a two-point lead at the top »



REUTERS



REUTERS

comprehensive victories against Monza and Como. New signings Scott McTominay, Romelu Lukaku, and David Neres found the back of the net against Cesc Fabregas-led

Como to take a two-point advantage over second-placed Inter Milan.

Inter bounced back from its derby loss against AC Milan with 3-2 wins against Udinese and Torino, with Marcus Thuram grabbing a hat-trick against the latter.

Italian giant Juventus made it four draws in its last five league games after playing out a 1-1 stalemate against Cagliari. Despite being the only unbeaten side in the league, Thiago Motta's side sits third in the table with 13 points from seven games.

David de Gea was the hero for Fiorentina as the former Manchester United keeper saved two penalties to

help his side cause an upset against Milan, winning 2-1. The loss means Milan will go into the break in sixth place with 11 points, five behind leader Napoli.

Around the world

Major League Soccer: Lionel Messi (**above**) secured his second title with Inter Miami after scoring twice to beat defending MLS champion Columbus Crew 3-2 to clinch the Supporters' Shield, awarded for the best regular season record. He went on to feature as a second-half substitute in the 1-0 victory against Toronto FC, where Leonardo Campana scored a stoppage-time winner.

Saudi Pro League: Cristiano Ronaldo (**left**) announced his return to Al Nassr from illness by converting from the spot in the 2-0 win against Al Wehda. The following week, he put away another penalty to score his 905th career goal. Sadio Mane scored a brace as Nassr beat Al Orobah 3-0.



» INDIAN WOMEN'S FOOTBALL



Historic triumph: Odisha FC won the Indian Women's League this year, beating Kickstart FC 6-0 in the final to bag its maiden title. Pics: ODISHA FC WOMEN

A juggernaut on the rise

With two trophies in as many years and a spot in Asia, OFCW is now a leading example of Indian women's football making **significant progress** in a short period of time.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

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On a warm August night in Jordan this year, Crispin Chhetri (right), a former India international, lay waiting on the sidelines with his eyes riveted on the clock. When the full-time whistle blew, he smiled, knowing his team, Odisha FC Women (OFCW), had won.

But it took him a few minutes to realise that it was more than just a victory. His team had just beaten Jordanian top-flight champion Etihad Club 2-1, becoming the first Indian club to qualify for the inaugural AFC Women's Champions League (AWCL).

"At the final whistle, I didn't even realise we had qualified. When our coaches and staff started celebrating, then I knew," OFCW's head coach Crispin said in an interview after the match.

OFCW is not the first Indian women's team to qualify for Asia. Gokulam Kerala, the most successful team in Indian women's football, with four top-flight Indian Women's League



(IWL) titles, has played in the AFC Women's Club Championship before.

However, Gokulam Kerala did not have to play qualifying games to reach the tournament proper, nor did it make its first appearance in Asia within two years of its inception, as OFCW did. OFCW won its qualifying games against champions from Singapore and Jordan, earning a spot in the AWCL.

Starting from scratch

Odisha FC's plans for a women's team began in 2021, drawing from experience in both European and Indian football to spur a mix of financial and grassroots development.

The club announced Raj Athwal as its president in January 2021, an expert in commercial operations at British clubs such as Watford, Rangers, and Coventry City over two decades.

Later that year, Randeep Baruah, former General Manager of the Indian Super League side NorthEast United FC, joined the club as Head of Academy & Women's Football. The team eventually took shape and was officially launched on July 1, 2022.



All smiles: A jubilant Indumathi Kathiresan poses with the IWL trophy.

Pics: ODISHA FC WOMEN

OFCW scouted players with prior IWL experience, as well as local talent, to contribute to the club's development. Pyari Xaxa, an India international who had won the IWL with Rising Students Club in 2018 and was from Odisha, perfectly fit the bill as the first major signing.

More national team players, such as Shreya Hooda, Karthika Angamuthu, and Anju Tamang, followed, while Odisha State team captain Karishma Oram strengthened the defence.

In its first season itself, OFCW won the Odisha Women's League.

"To be in IWL, we had to win the State League. That was not much of a challenge because we had some of the best national team players," said Chhetri, an AFC 'A' Licence holder of

FIFA, who has been with the team from the beginning, in an interview with *Sportstar*. "But I think it was a good platform for us to build as a team because everyone was new to everything."

Though OFCW strengthened its squad for IWL 2022-23 by signing Ngangom Bala Devi (India's highest goalscorer in women's football) and young prodigy Lynda Kom Serto (the Most Valuable Player at the Under-18 SAFF Championship), the team lost in the quarterfinals to eventual champion Gokulam Kerala, losing 0-3 in penalties. "I think we sorted out many things we didn't do in the first year, and in the second year, as a coach, I knew what kind of players I needed for my team," Chhetri said.

Learning from mistakes

Moving forward, the Juggernauts stuck with their core players — Shreya, Lynda, Pyari, and Karthika —

and signed Indumathi Kathiresan, IWL's best player from the previous season at Gokulam Kerala.

Rather than relying solely on signings, Chhetri focused on improving the learning process at the club. "We passed less information (technical details) and focused more on learning (understanding the game) because if (and when players) go to the national team or other teams, they might have coaches with different philosophies. But if they learn something from me, it's for a lifetime," he said.

With 31 points and as many goals in 12 matches, a rejuvenated OFCW became the champion of India.

"In women's football, it's not just about the quality of the players, but the right mindset and the character in the dressing room," Chhetri said.

"Maybe with talent, you win one or two matches. But if you have the right character, I think you have more chances of winning a championship than with talent and quality alone."

While the club has signed several foreign players over the years, it has primarily preferred Indian players in key positions. This decision has turned out to be a fruitful one.

"I think some foreigners come here not to be part of IWL, but just to be comfortable, play for money, and leave. I need foreigners who want to excel and use this platform to go abroad, so that it sets an example for our youngsters," Chhetri said.

Chhetri's search for leaders may have ended this season with Ghana's prolific striker Jennifer Kankam Yeboah, who joined the club before the AWCL qualifiers. Jennifer scored for fun in the Egyptian Women's League (57 goals in 30 matches) and won the Ghana Women's Footballer of the Year award before moving to India to form a formidable pair with Lynda in front of goal.

"The coach's vision and the conversations we had were key to me joining the club. He outlined how I would fit into the team's plan and how he intended to develop my game," Jennifer told DW in a recent interview. Of OFCW's six goals in the AWCL qualifiers, all — except for two



own goals — came from Lynda and Jennifer, with Lynda netting a brace against Lion City Sailors and Jennifer securing qualification with a double against Etihad FC.

"I have earned a lot of experience playing here, especially with the seniors. When I came to the club, I was very young, but I've learned how to train and maintain my body. It has also helped me grow in football," Lynda told *Sportstar*.

Uphill battle in Champions League

OFCW's dream run to the AWCL is nothing short of inspiring. However, in its first match in the Champions League, it was left to pick up the pieces after a 0-17 thrashing by the defending Asian champion from Japan, Urawa Red Diamonds, on October 6.

The Red Diamonds had steamrolled Gokulam Kerala 8-0 in the AFC Women's Club Championship last year, scoring four goals in each half. Against OFCW, it handed Indian football another reality check, highlighting the gulf in quality between the two sides at the Thong Nhat Stadium in Vietnam. The Japanese side had a staggering 55 shots compared to Odisha's solitary

effort throughout the game.

The Juggernauts are travelling with a depleted squad, with five players missing out due to injury and transfer restrictions.

Pyari and goalkeeper Anshika are injured, midfielder Grace Haunhar is suspended for five matches, and new signing, Cameroonian defender Elaine Boddolo wasn't granted the International Transfer Certificate (ITC) by FIFA.

Additionally, Indian forward Munica Minz and defender Kretina Sangma missed the group-stage squad due to visa issues.

The team will next play Ho Chi Minh City from Vietnam on October 9 and Taichung Blue Whale from Chinese Taipei three days later in its remaining group-stage matches.

Despite the odds stacked against them, Chhetri believes his team will not throw in the towel.

"I think it's the greatest platform to learn from. But are we going there just to learn? No. I'm training every day, and I want my players to go there to win matches. At the same time, there is no pressure on them. We go there, give our 100 per cent, enjoy the game, and come back learning," Chhetri said.

Triumphant trio: Jennifer Kankam Yeboah, Pyari Xaxa and Lynda Kom Serto are vital to OFCW's success.

Regardless of the team's performance, it is assured a sum of \$100,000 (approx. ₹88.3 lakh), which is over eight times the prize money of the IWL (₹10 lakh). Chhetri believes this will help nurture women's football, not only at the club but also in India. "Everything is about money. It's not just about paying players because everybody needs security, especially women players, who are constantly asked why they aren't getting married," Chhetri explained. "Moreover, with the money, we can invest in their basic facilities – the training pitch, accommodation, food, and travel, because we want to create professional players."

With two trophies in as many years and a spot in Asia, OFCW has become a leading example of Indian women's football making significant progress in a short period of time.

While the results may not be favourable for the Juggernauts in their maiden AWCL campaign, they can take plenty of learnings back home and aim to return stronger next time.



Dream start: Newly promoted Mohammedan Sporting secured its first-ever win in the Indian Super League, beating Chennaiyin FC 1-0. FSDL/ISL MEDIA

SPORTING DELIVERS IN CHENNAIYIN'S DEN

The Black Panthers hunt down their **first prey** in the ISL to continue Chennaiyin FC's jinx at home.

Chennaiyin FC had started its Indian Super League (ISL) 2024-25 season with a 3-2 away win against Odisha on September 14.

So, naturally, when the team bus arrived at Chennai's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium for its first home game against Mohammedan Sporting nearly two weeks later, thousands of fans laid out a metaphorical red carpet with blue and yellow flares as players and the coach greeted them with smiles.

On a windy evening along the southern coast, the heart of the Marina Machans beat as one — some fans perched on the shoulders of their fathers, some holding hands with loved ones, and others waving flags and scarves — all chanting "Chennaiyin! Chennaiyin!"

"After the comeback last season, we are expecting more this time because Owen (Coyle, Chennaiyin's head coach) will always deliver," said Navneet, a local club fan, proudly donning Chennaiyin's jersey and holding its scarf. "Among the players, we're expecting Farukh

Choudhary to shine, and there's (Lukas) Brambilla, who's just come in, and we hope he can perform like (Rafael) Crivellaro."

Mohammedan, on the other hand, had come under the pressure of being newly promoted and winless after two games, with its backs against the wall.

Chennaiyin's fans made sure to keep that pressure on, unfurling a TIFO inspired by Turkish Olympian Yusuf Dikec that read 'Locked, Loaded, and Ready'.

The match began with Coyle's boys raining attacks on the visitors, with

Conor Shields sending frequent crosses from the left, while Farukh or Irfan Yadwad tested the goalkeeper.

But minutes after the cooling break, Mohammedan counter-attacked. Vanlalzuidika Chhakchhuak switched play with a long ball from the right flank, and Lalremsanga Fanai beat Chennaiyin's goalkeeper Samik Mitra to find the breakthrough. The local crowd was stunned into silence, as if struck by a bolt of lightning, as Mohammedan's camp celebrated the strike.

The roar of the local fans returned after the second-half whistle, with Chennaiyin's 12th man trying to inspire a comeback — one that almost came through Brambilla in second-half stoppage time.

However, Vanlalzuidika and Gaurav Bora's joint header, just inches in front of the goal-line, ensured that Chennaiyin failed to win its first ISL home game for the 10th consecutive season.

An evening that had begun with a mountain of hope for Chennai's home side ended with fans holding their heads in their hands and frowns on their faces. Meanwhile, the Black Panthers were the last to leave the dressing room, after a rousing celebration of hunting down its first-ever prey in the ISL.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

Cuadrat leaves East Bengal

In a world of intense competition, nothing succeeds like success. Some teams in the ISL realise this the hard way, as they are unable to find the recipe for success. One of them is certainly East Bengal. The 104-year-old club joined the league in 2020 but has since found fortune forsaking it. Failures bring about frustration among fans, while the management axes coaches to gloss over the team's shortcomings. The latest casualty in this regard is Spanish gaffer Carles Cuadrat (**right**), who lost his job after his side suffered



its third successive loss this season.

Cuadrat helped East Bengal end a 12-year-long title drought by shepherding it to the Kalinga Super Cup title at the beginning of this year. This sparked euphoria among millions of its fans, who felt that the Super Cup crown would be the harbinger of hope.

With its city cousin Mohun Bagan Super Giant making it a habit of winning laurels in the ISL (by adding the Cup and League Shield to its trophy cabinet in successive years), East Bengal had a lot to do to catch up. But with three successive losses at the start of this season, hope soon gave way to despair.

Having helped Bengaluru FC to the ISL title in 2019, Cuadrat was looked up to as the saviour as East Bengal became desperate for success. But

the magic wand that he seemed to possess appeared to lose its power, as the club hit the doldrums right from the start. Two successive wins in the group league stage of Durand Cup 2024 were its only achievements before succumbing to a string of defeats, starting with the

Shock treatment: Local fans were stunned into silence, as if struck by a bolt of lightning, when Mohammedan Sporting scored its first goal, the only one of the match. FSDL/ISL MEDIA

quarterfinal loss in the Indian football calendar's season-opener. The slide continued in the ISL, as it failed to recall the form and formula that gave it so much to aspire to last season.

Cuadrat could only depart reminiscing about the good times. "Thank you @eastbengal_fc for all the special moments we have lived together. It has been an Honour & Pride to represent such a great Club with such an important Legacy behind..."

From the very first moment, I understood what it means to represent a Club with so much History and so many Fans who love it, and I wish with all my Heart to the #amagofans and all the big & community many Successes and Joys in the Future...

Grateful to Indian football for giving us the opportunity to lead two winning projects, to win @indiansuperleague for BFC in 2019 & Super Cup for EBFC in 2024," Cuadrat posted on his X (formerly Twitter) account after saying goodbye to East Bengal.

Amitabha Das Sharma

FROM ROUGH AND TUMBLE OF FOOTBALL TO PEOPLE'S CHAMPION

For Norwegian and Punjab FC forward Mushaga Bakenga, football has always been the **cornerstone** of his life. To him, it's not just a game but a tool for a greater purpose.



Jonathan Selvaraj
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In 2018, Mushaga Bakenga, who last represented Norway in 2014, believed his footballing career had come to an end. At just 26, he had been battling a series of injuries, the most recent being a ruptured Achilles tendon in his foot, which required surgery. Only a year earlier, he had undergone the same procedure.

Just before he was ready to call time on his career, his mother's eldest brother asked to meet him. Of course, Bakenga agreed. This was not just any visit, and his uncle was no ordinary relative.

Denis Mukwege, a pastor and gynaecologist, founded the Panzi Hospital in the city of Bukavu in Eastern Congo. There, he specialises in treating women who have been raped by armed rebels during the brutal civil wars that



New addition: Punjab FC signed Norwegian forward Mushaga Bakenga ahead of the ISL 2024-25 season. FSDL/FOCUS SPORTS

have ravaged Congo since the 1990s. Throughout his career, Mukwege has treated tens of thousands of women subjected to sexual violence. In 2018, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for "his efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict."

"When he came to Oslo for the award ceremony, he invited me to come with him, and there we had a conversation. He was receiving one of the biggest awards in the world, but he asked me, 'Your mother told me you are quitting football. Is it true?'" Bakenga recalls.

"I said, 'Yes. I've had enough of the game. I don't enjoy it anymore, and now that my Achilles has ruptured for the second time, I've lost my speed. That was everything I had.' He said, 'Okay, so what are you going to do?' I replied, 'I already have a job.' That was true because I had been studying sports management and was almost into that field," Bakenga explains.

"He told me that wouldn't be the best use of my abilities. He said I could accomplish much more in my current path. He then pointed out one of the women doctors who had accompanied him to the Nobel Awards in Oslo. He told me her story. She had been raped when she was a child, and here I was feeling sorry for myself after two surgeries on my foot! This woman had undergone 20 surgeries.

My uncle had treated her when she was just 13 years old. Eleven years later, she had studied and become a doctor herself. She was now working with him, helping women navigate the trauma she had once endured.

Then he looked me in the eye and said, 'I'm not saying you have to think the same way, but don't give up living your life because you're feeling sorry for yourself,'" Bakenga recalls.

Six years after that conversation, Bakenga is still playing football. He currently plays as a striker for the table-topper Punjab FC in the Indian Super League. However, inspired by his uncle, Bakenga is doing much more than just playing football.

Award winner

Bakenga was on his way to a training session in New Delhi a couple of weeks ago when he received a call from a friend who worked at FIFPRO — the global union for professional football players.

His friend wanted to know if Bakenga was available the following week to attend the World Football Summit in Sevilla. He informed Bakenga that he was going to be presented with the Marcus Rashford Award, which recognises athletes who have promoted initiatives and efforts that bring about positive change in their communities.

The award was presented to Bakenga for developing a school for an orphanage of over 1,000 children in the Democratic Republic of Congo, called College Namugunga — named after his grandfather, Samuel Namugunga. Jabez World, the organisation Bakenga founded, fundraises and supports the needs of the school.

Until then, the 32-year-old striker had no idea he was even up for the award. Although his professional commitments in the ISL meant that his sister collected the award on his behalf, he is grateful for the recognition. "I didn't even know I was nominated. It was a big surprise, but I felt a sense of pride. I hope this award will help to shine more light on the cause I am working for. I really hope it brings more people to come and help me," he says.

While the Norwegian international now hopes to bring more attention and resources to his project, there was a time when he wanted very little to do with the country. Bakenga

comes from an educated family — his aunts and uncles are doctors, politicians, and pastors. His mother worked with UNICEF, and although he was born in Trondheim, Norway, he would visit Congo during school vacations. When he was four years old, a civil war broke out. The First Congo War claimed a quarter of a million lives and displaced many hundreds of thousands more.

Targeted in civil war

Bakenga's family in the city of Bukavu, in eastern Congo, was among those affected by the conflict. The experience left him with mental scars that are still healing. "I remember all that happened, but for a long time, I repressed it. It's the kind of thing a child shouldn't see or experience," he says. "As a family that was educated and outspoken, we were always targeted. We were constantly hiding from soldiers, sometimes in the forest. For two years, all we did was try to survive. I remember one episode where my family was in a school building. All of a sudden, we learned that the fighters were almost there. They were literally coming in tanks. We went from laughing and playing to hiding in these small spaces we had created. I was just four years old at the time. We had babies and children even younger than me. I remember my mother covering my nose and mouth with her hand so I wouldn't make a sound. I was so quiet, and I remember how close those soldiers came to finding us. I could see their feet and hear their voices. They were looking for someone to shoot or kidnap," he says.

'At our home in Bukavu, I had a stuffed teddy bear in my room. I had to leave it behind when we were fleeing. One day, I was able to return home and ran back to my room to see my teddy bear again. But I found it riddled with bullets. I get goosebumps every time I remember this.'

Giving back to the society: Mushaga Bakenga with his uncle, Nobel laureate Denis Mukwege. Dr. Mukwege has treated tens of thousands of victims and become "the world's leading specialist in the treatment of wartime sexual violence," according to the Nobel Prize.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



While his family escaped on that occasion, Bakenga's father was eventually captured for ransom. "He was held for nine months. During that time, we had no idea whether he was dead or alive. When he eventually returned, he had lost nearly 40 kilos. As a child, I couldn't even recognise him for two months after he came back because he didn't look anything like my father," he says.

However, Bakenga's most traumatic memory wasn't the violence he or his family experienced, but an incident that symbolised the loss of his innocence. "At our home in Bukavu, I had a stuffed teddy bear in my room. I had to leave it behind when we were fleeing. One day, I was able to return home and ran back to my room to see my teddy bear again. But I found it riddled with bullets. I get goosebumps every time I remember this. It wasn't the most violent thing that happened to me, but it was the one that hurt me the most because it felt so personal," he says.

Bakenga says the few moments of happiness he experienced during those troubled days were found playing football. "Whenever we were in a place with some security, we kids would make a ball out of discarded plastic bags tied up with rope and play football with it," he recalls.

In 1998, Bakenga's mother, who worked for UNICEF, was evacuated along with the rest of his family back to Norway. He grew up facing his own challenges — he recalls playing football while parents of his opponents used racial slurs against him. While it hurt, Bakenga rationalises it. "At least no one was shooting at me," he says. His obvious talent in football eventually marked him out as one of the country's top prospects.

Unfulfilled life

His performances in the youth team of SK Nationalkameratene, and subsequently in the age group setups for Norway, attracted interest from Bayern Munich and Manchester City. Premier League club Chelsea invited him for trials and even made him an offer. However, Bakenga says



Face of hope: Bakenga's College, Namugunga, a school that now serves over 1,000 orphaned children in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

he wanted to stay close to his family and ultimately chose to remain in Norway.

Even as his career blossomed in Norway and later in Europe, where he played in the Belgian Pro League (Cercle Brugge and Club Brugge) and the German second division (Eintracht Braunschweig), Bakenga says he felt a lack of fulfilment. "A lot of people think that when you escape a situation like mine, you should just focus on yourself. I was playing at a high level. I was making millions of dollars as a top-level player. Why should I care about Congo? But I felt a lot of guilt. I didn't understand why I was so lucky, while so many in Congo weren't. I wanted to do something about it. I couldn't live my life as if I was the only one who mattered. Football is important, but it has to be a way for me to help others," he recalls thinking.

Bakenga initially thought of setting up a football academy in Congo, but he realised he had no oversight of where the money would go. Then in 2017, his grandfather suggested he open a school instead. "There are people who can't afford to spend even a dollar a month for education. I felt this was a way to actually make a difference," he says.

When he initially set up College Namugunga, Bakenga expected to house around 300 students. He was

taken aback when nearly 1,000 showed up at its opening. "I couldn't turn them away. But I also couldn't pay for everything from just my earnings. That's when I decided I needed to set up a trust. I also got my family — my sisters and brothers — to help with running the school," he says. "Since 2017, we've helped this village a lot. We've also started self-help groups where we've set up farms for women to grow rice and potatoes, and fish farms so that mothers can make extra money. A portion of this goes to the school, so the children can eat for free," he says.

Bakenga has also used his name as a footballer to draw funds from sponsors. He convinced the Norwegian government to ship used furniture to his school and initiated a programme in which Norwegian schoolchildren could send their used school bags (all schoolchildren in Norway receive a new set at the start of the academic year).

For all the work he does, Bakenga admits things aren't always easy. "When I first started going back to contribute, I received death threats, and there were attempts to kidnap me because people knew I was making money playing football in Europe. So now, I don't make an announcement when I go back to Congo. I go quietly, do my work with the school, and then leave," he says.



Pillar of strength: Bakenga's sister proudly stands alongside former Italy international Giorgio Chiellini, holding the Marcus Rashford Award. She accepted the honour on Bakenga's behalf while he was away fulfilling his ISL duties. INSTAGRAM/@MBAKENGA

He continues because he feels a responsibility. "There's so much to fix in Congo. There are so many children who have nothing. I can't express the feeling of knowing that some child's life is worth nothing just because they were born in the wrong place. Every child deserves a fair opportunity in life," he says.

Inspired by his uncle

Bakenga's activism might seem to be inspired by his uncle's, and indeed, some of his teammates have joked that he's trying to win a Nobel prize of his own. He readily admits this isn't the case, saying that his work is just a shadow of what his uncle has done. "My uncle is probably the greatest human being I know. He's incredibly sharp. He can meet you today, and even if he sees you

again five years later, he'll remember your name, your family's name, and your entire history. If you visit his hospital in Congo, he'll meet a woman and know exactly when she came to the hospital, who is left in her family, and how many surgeries he performed on her. It's both scary and impressive, but it also shows how much he cares about everyone he meets. The work he does is emotionally draining, but he still knows how to be funny. I talk to him at least once a week, and we just joke around and have fun. He'll say the smartest thing ever, and then go back to joking. Before I came to India, I spoke to him about playing football here. He was very happy for me. He likes Indians a lot because he's worked with many in Congo. He told me, 'Yeah, they are very smart, and you will love them. They are very similar to us'. He joked that I should have grown up in India's heat instead of Norway's cold because he says the cold has made me a 'white person', says Bakenga. While his uncle convinced him to stick with football when he was on the verge of quitting, his words also encouraged

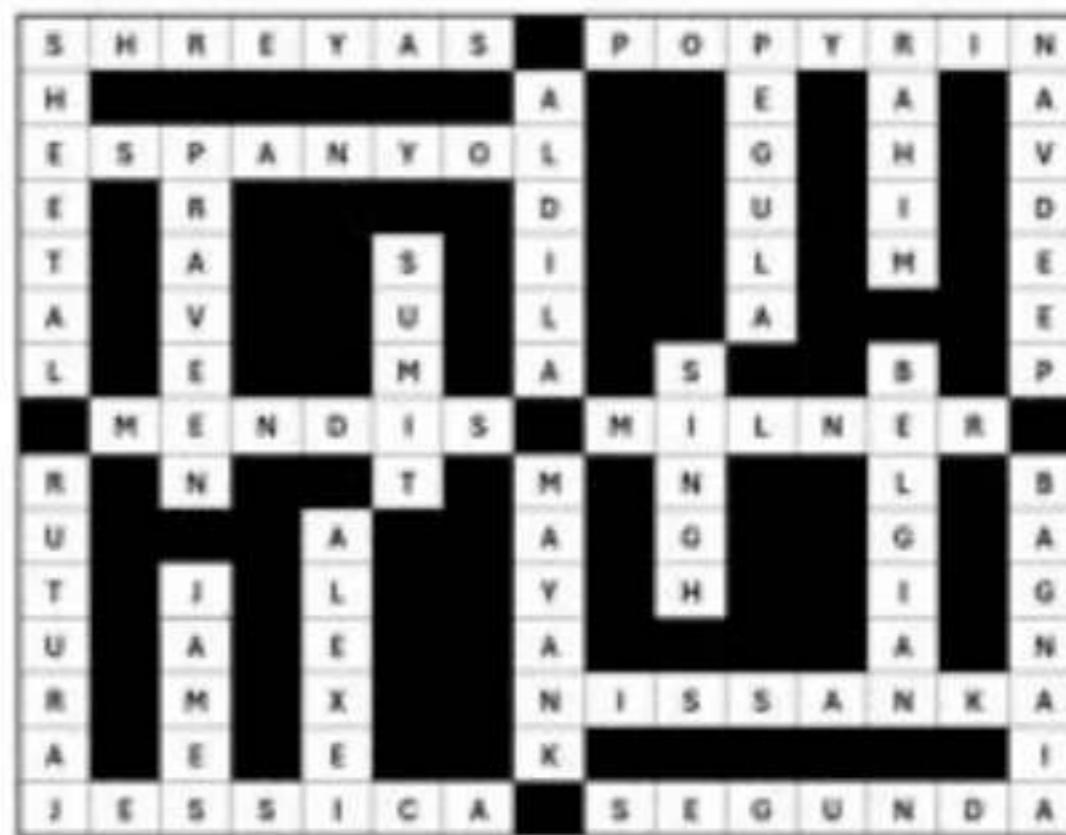
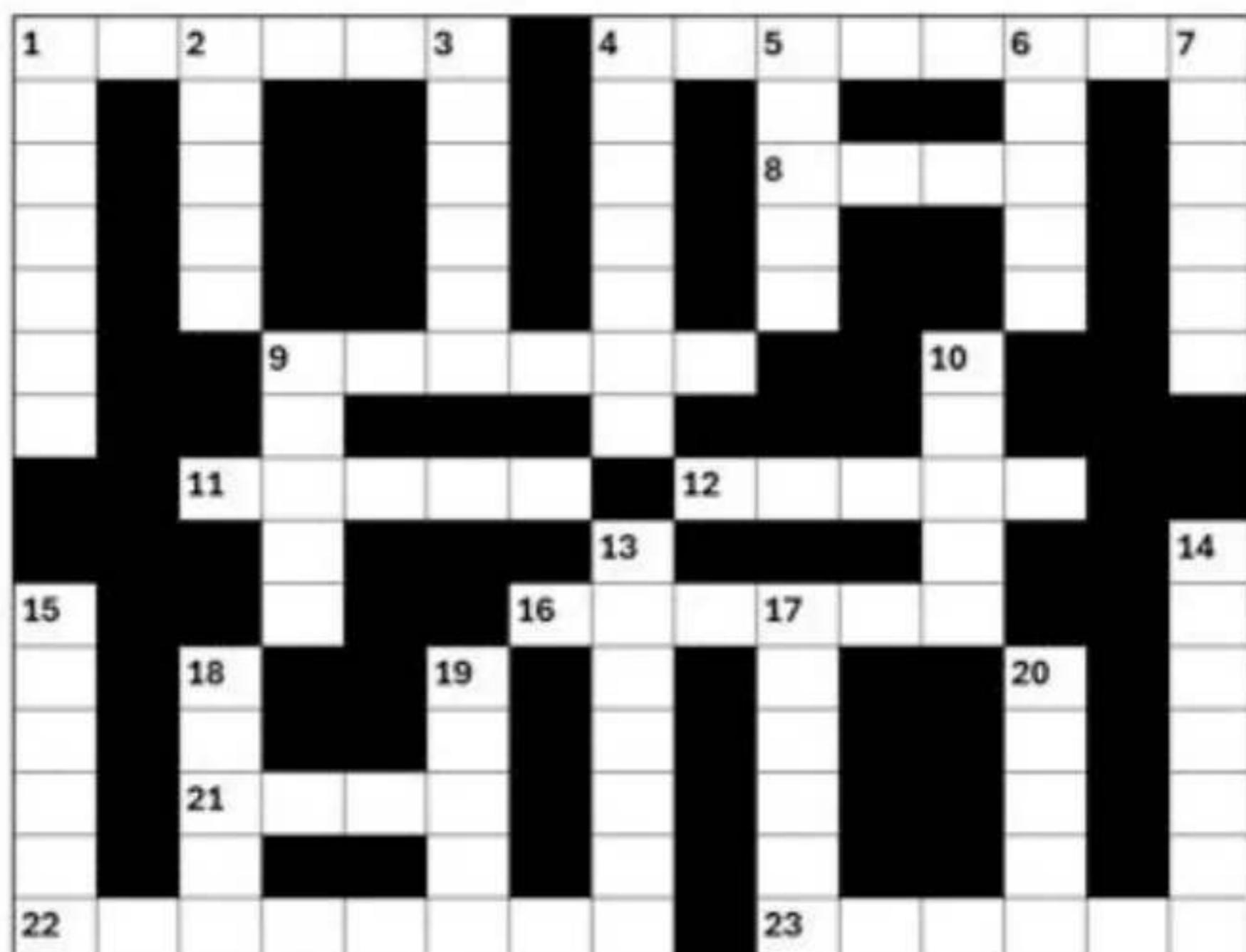
Bakenga to explore the world in a way he hadn't before. "I was happy playing football in Europe, but after our conversation, I started to consider exploring the world. That's how I ended up going to Japan to play in the J League. It's also why, when I got the chance to come to India, I took it rather than going to yet another country in Europe. I've never been here, and I wanted to see the place. I want to earn money to help run my school, but I also want to experience new cultures," he says.

This isn't to say Bakenga only sees his time in India as a way to earn money. "I'm someone who gives 100 per cent to my club. I really want the team to do well. If I'm in India, I want to make a mark here. This doesn't mean I have no interest in football – it's a part of my life too. My goal here is to help the team as much as I can. Every day, I talk to the younger players on the team and try to help them personally and professionally," he says. However, Bakenga admits his ultimate goal will eventually take him back to Congo. "Football is important, but I see it as a tool for a greater mission, which is to educate children. Right now, what gives me the most happiness in life is the work I do with the schools. Compared to my football career, that brings me far more joy. I love going back to Congo and seeing how I'm able to change the lives of these kids. Already, some of the children have gone to college. Several have come back and are now contributing to the community. I expected they would want to stay in the big cities, but instead, they've returned to help and improve their villages," Bakenga says.

"I know I'm a small person who has accomplished very little compared to what my uncle and others in my family have done. No matter what I do, I don't think I'll ever be able to match their work. It's just something I have to accept, and I'm fine with it. As long as I can make a difference in one person's life, that's enough for me. I've been blessed in so many ways. I don't know if I deserve it. When I think about it, it doesn't make any sense. The least I can do is pay it forward," he says.

> CROSSWORD

N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1** Who was the player to score a half-century, take three wickets and hold on to four catches in an ODI in the recently held series between England and Australia? (6)
- 4** _____ – Russell Cup was awarded to the Indian men's team that won the Open section in the Chess Olympiad last month. (8)
- 8** Who was recently appointed as one of the Assistant Coaches of the Indian men's cricket team after Gambhir took over as head coach? (4)
- 11** Who won the gold medal on the third board in the women's section of the 45th Chess Olympiad? (5)
- 12** Who lit the cauldron of the 45th Chess Olympiad? (5)
- 16** Who scored the highest individual ODI score for Australia in England in the recently held series? (6)
- 21** Who won gold in the men's club throw F51 event at the Paris Paralympics? (4)
- 22 & Down 18** Who was appointed as the new coach of the Indian Davis Cup team? (8,5)

23 Who was the captain of the Indian women's team in the recently held 45th Chess Olympiad? (6)

DOWN

- 1** Who scored the first hat-trick for Chelsea in the current Premier league season? (7)
- 2** Who scored most runs in the recently held Duleep Trophy? (5)
- 3** Who won the men's singles title in the U.S. Open 2024? (6)
- 5** Who was appointed as the new bowling coach of the Indian men's cricket team? (5)
- 6** Identify this chess presenter and commentator, who also took part as a player in the Indian women's team that won the gold in the 45th Chess Olympiad? (5)
- 7 & 4** Who scored most runs for Bangladesh in its two-Test series against India? (6,7)
- 9** Who bowled the most economic spell in the second T20I between Ireland and South Africa which the former won by 10 runs? (5)
- 10** The 45th Chess Olympiad was played in a _____ system format. (5)
- 13** Who won the player of the series award in the recently held two-Test series between Sri Lanka and New Zealand? (7)

15 Who became the latest entrant to the all-rounders club of achieving the double of scoring 3000 runs and taking 300 wickets in Tests? (6)

17 Who became the first Indian woman wrestler to win gold in both the Commonwealth & the Asian Games but was disqualified from participating in the final of the Paris Olympics, due to overweight? (6)

19 & Across 9 Who is running the three-time World Champion Max Verstappen close for the Formula 1 Driver's Championship race this year? (5,6)

20 & 14 Who became the first Indian woman athlete to win three medals in Paralympics? (5,7)

IT'S TIME FOR A NEW DAWN

The league has undergone a significant transformation ahead of this season. The game, now a whirlwind of speed and physicality, has demanded a **youth movement**, ushering out the legends who once defined it.

Saikat Chakraborty

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The much-anticipated Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) is set to return for its 11th season, bringing with it a new format, transitioning from the traditional 12-city caravan to a three-city structure that's expected to add a fresh dynamic to the competition.

The stakes have risen as always this year, with the blockbuster signing of Sachin Tanwar (**left**) by Tamil Thalaivas, along with the big-money moves of Mohammadreza Shadloui Chiyaneh and Sunil Kumar, setting the tone for an explosive season.

As the tournament enters a new decade, most teams have made significant changes at the auction to assemble more balanced squads that are aligned with their playing styles.

Defending champion Puneri Paltan has retained the strong core of players from its title-winning squad, including last season's MVP Aslam Inamdar, giving it a significant edge. However, it failed to hold on to its defensive lynchpin Shadloui but has added a fresh wave of talent to fill the void.

Meanwhile, Thalaivas has taken a bold approach by appointing two coaches, J.



Udaya Kumar and Dharmaraj Cheralathan, before snapping up Sachin for ₹2.15 crores. The Chennai-based team has also held on to defensive stalwarts Sagar Rathee and Sahil Gulia as it aims for its maiden PKL triumph.

Last season's runner-up, Haryana Steelers, has added Shadloui to its already strong defensive core. It will be looking to use the explosive Iranian as an all-rounder, a role he plays with effortless panache for his national side.

Bengal Warriorz brought back Maninder Singh and paired him with his friend Fazel Atrachali. The Kolkata franchise's youthful squad will depend on these two seasoned



warriors renowned for their physicality.

On the other hand, three-time PKL champion Patna Pirates and season two champion U Mumba have refrained from acquiring marquee names for their respective rosters.

Telugu Titans is aiming to break its cycle of underperformance this season under new head coach Krishan Kumar Hooda, who earlier led Dabang Delhi to the PKL summit in season eight.

Ram Maher Singh's Gujarat Giants has snagged PKL 10 standout Guman Singh. The 25-year-old all-rounder will be a key cog in its attacking machine alongside Parteek Dahiya and Rakesh.

Changing of the guard

The league has undergone a significant transformation ahead of this season. The game, now a whirlwind of speed and physicality, has demanded a youth movement, ushering out the legends who once defined it.

Rahul Chaudhari, the original showman of PKL, whose stardom ascended alongside the league's, was a casualty of this seismic shift. His unsold status, though anticipated, marked the end of an era. Like other veterans — Deepak Niwas Hooda, Nitin Tomar, Surender Nada, and Vishal Bhardwaj — Chaudhari's glory days have dwindled. Kabaddi, it seems, is entering a new age, where

Winning combination: Defending champion Puneri Paltan have retained a strong core of players from their title-winning squad. Pics: PKL

legacy alone is no longer a passport to continued success.

The torch has been passed. The old guard has made way for the next generation as all 12 teams exceeded the mandatory quotas of the NYP (New Young Players) programme. Scouts roamed local tournaments in search of future stars. Raiders and defenders alike were the targets of relentless pursuits, as teams spared no expense in securing the next set of superstars.



Comeback man: Pardeep Narwal made his return to the Bengaluru Bulls, the franchise that launched his PKL career in season 2.

"Young kabaddi players today are more professional than ever before. They train year-round, prioritise fitness, and focus on recovery and nutrition. The financial rewards from the PKL have significantly contributed to this increased professionalism," says UP Yoddhas coach Jasveer Singh to *Sportstar*.

Pardeep Narwal, the poster boy of PKL who holds most of the raiding records, has been roped in by Bengaluru Bulls for a mere ₹70 lakhs. Dubki King, as his moniker goes, hasn't enjoyed the best of outings in recent seasons, but the Bulls will be hoping Narwal can turn things around under the tutelage of the league's longest-serving coach, Randhir Singh Sehrawat, who gave him his PKL debut back in season two.

This feels less like a romantic

homecoming for Narwal and more like a last chance to prove himself. If he can't overcome his fitness challenges and perform on the mat, he risks becoming a mere squad filler and marketing tool before ultimately vanishing into obscurity like the erstwhile superstars.

Kabaddi evolution

Since its establishment in 2014, the league has transformed the ancient Indian sport into a televised spectacle, elevating its athleticism and engaging audiences.

Over the past decade, it has witnessed a remarkable progression, with squads comprised of younger, fitter athletes. These developments have paved the way for innovative tactics and strategies, revolutionising the game as we know it.

Paltan's triumph last season was not merely a show of superiority. On its way to the summit, it also revolutionised the way the game is played. Its blitzkrieg style blurred the lines between attack and defence,

Fact file



Season 1 - 2014

No. of matches - 60 (56 league matches and five playoff matches)
No. of venues - 8
Most expensive player - Rakesh Kumar (₹12.80 lakhs, Patna Pirates)



Season 2 - 2015

No. of matches - 60 (56 league matches and five playoff matches)
No. of venues - 8
Most expensive player - Hadi Oshtorak (₹21.1 lakhs, Telugu Titans)



Season 3 - January 2016

No. of matches - 60 (56 league matches and five playoff matches)
No. of venues - 8
No Auction*



Season 4 - June 2016

No. of matches - 60 (56 league matches and five playoff matches)
No. of venues - 8
Most expensive player - Mohit Chhillar (₹53 lakhs, Bengaluru Bulls)



Season 5 - 2017

No. of matches - 138 (132 league matches and 6 playoff matches)
No. of venues - 12
Most expensive player - Nitin Tomar (₹93 lakhs, UP Yoddhas)



Season 6 - 2018

No. of matches - 138 (132 league matches and 6 playoff matches)
No. of venues - 12
Most expensive player - Monu Goyat (₹1.51 crore, Haryana Steelers)



forcing other teams to rethink their strategies.

"The raiders need to contribute to the defence. All seven players on the mat have to work together; there is no more place for only raiders in the game," opines Dabang raider Ashu Malik.

The 22-year-old was the league's top raider last season and will lead Dabang's attack alongside star raider Naveen Kumar, who is returning from a serious knee injury.

The league's tactical landscape underwent a radical overhaul as teams scrambled to acquire dual-threat players. Even the stars have realised the new paradigm.

Pawan Sehrawat, the league's reigning superstar, exemplifies this evolution. The Indian captain,

Strong force: All-rounder Pawan Sehrawat (standing) aims to break Telugu Titans' cycle of underperformance in PKL 11.

renowned for his electrifying raids, entered the PKL 11 auction as an all-rounder. Titans secured his services for a staggering ₹1.725 crore by using their FBM (Final Bid Match) card.

Known as the High-flyer, Sehrawat has always lent a helping hand to his defence. But this season, he's aiming to elevate his defensive game to a whole new level.

With increased pace, new tactical insights, neutral venues for most teams, and a host of new faces, PKL 11 is here to enthrall and entertain.

Fact file



Season 7 - 2019

No. of matches - 137 (132 league matches and 5 playoff matches)

No. of venues - 12

Most expensive player - Siddharth Desai (₹1.45 crore, Telugu Titans)



Season 8 - 2021

No. of matches - 137 (132 league matches and 5 playoff matches)

No. of venues - 1 - Bengaluru (Due to COVID-19)

Most expensive player - Pardeep Narwal (₹1.65 crore, UP Yoddhas)



Season 9 - 2022

No. of matches - 137 (132 league matches and 5 playoff matches)

No. of venues - 4 (Bengaluru, Pune, Hyderabad and playoffs were in Mumbai)

Most expensive player - Pawan Sehrawat (₹2.26 crore, Tamil Thalaivas)



Season 10 - 2023

No. of matches - 137 (132 league matches and 5 playoff matches)

No. of venues - 12

Most expensive player - Pawan Sehrawat (₹2.63 crore, Telugu Titans)



Season 11 - 2024

No. of matches - 137 (132 league matches and 5 playoff matches)

No. of venues - 3 (Hyderabad, Noida and Pune) *playoffs venue has not been announced yet

Most expensive player - Sachin Tanwar (₹2.15 crore, Tamil Thalaivas)

» CHEQUERED FLAG

MCLAREN RACING TO THE TOP

With the **constructor's title in sight**, will McLaren let Lando Norris fully chase the drivers' championship as he continues to make Max Verstappen sweat?



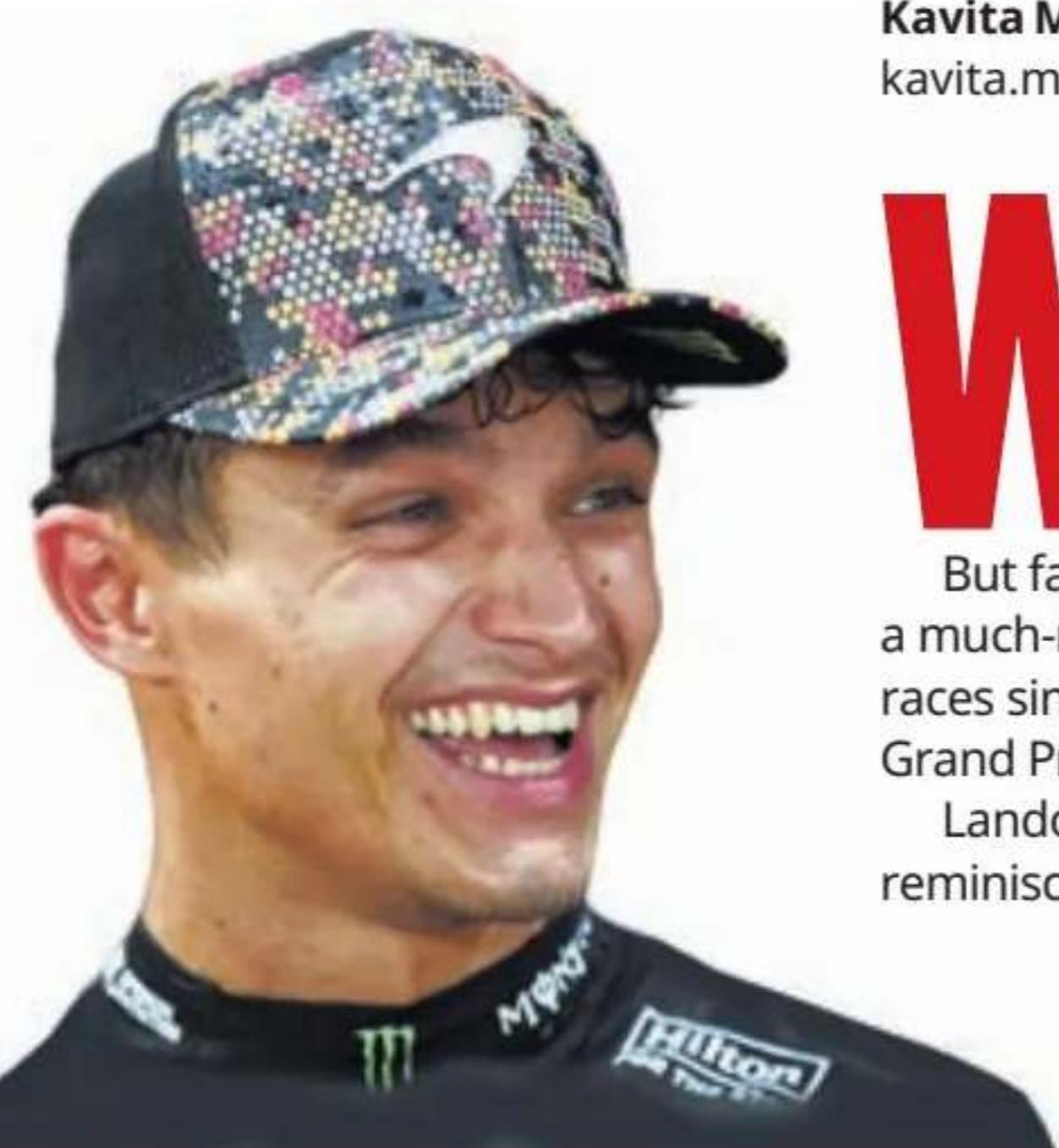
Kavita Menon

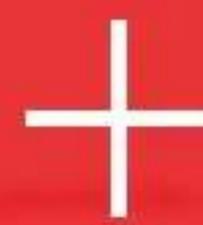
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

When the 2024 Formula One season began at the Bahrain Grand Prix in March, it was as if nothing had really changed. Defending champion Max Verstappen won in an all too similar fashion — with no car visible in his mirrors as he crossed the finish line 20 seconds ahead of the driver behind.

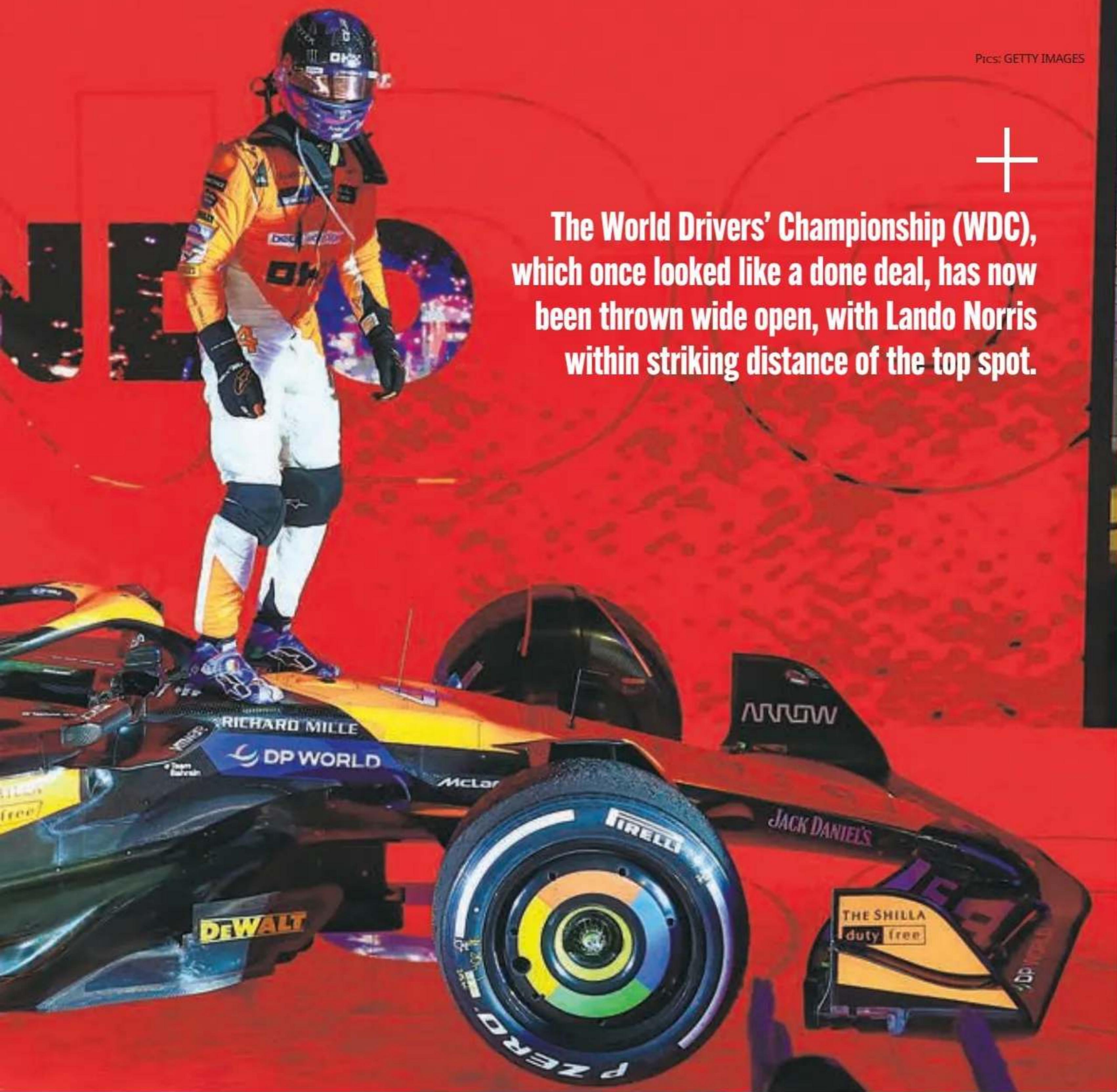
But fate decided to switch things up along the way, giving F1 fans a much-needed shuffle in the pecking order. It may have taken 17 races since Bahrain, but the miracle that ensued at the Singapore Grand Prix last month made the wait all the more worthwhile.

Lando Norris (**left**), in a special orange and white livery reminiscent of McLaren's old trademark look, dominated at the





The World Drivers' Championship (WDC), which once looked like a done deal, has now been thrown wide open, with Lando Norris within striking distance of the top spot.



Marina Bay Circuit, increasing his lead over Verstappen's Red Bull until he was completely out of sight, and ultimately taking the win with a commanding 20-second advantage.

The World Drivers' Championship (WDC), which once looked like a done deal, has now been thrown wide open, with Norris within striking distance of the top spot. Although Verstappen's great start to the season was followed by some forgettable races, the cushion of his earlier points has helped him maintain a lead at the top.

But no one expected a serious challenger to the throne, or anyone remotely standing in the way of the Dutchman's fourth successive crown. While Verstappen (**right**) may have faced a peaking Lewis Hamilton and the occasional threat from Ferrari's Charles Leclerc in recent past, not many would have expected McLaren and Norris to be a threat this time. To put it in perspective, Norris, who had never won a race in his five previous F1 seasons, has won three this year. His teammate, Oscar Piastri, has also secured his first two





Early gains: The 110-point run that Verstappen (in pic) had established early in the season, when Norris managed only 58 points, keeps the Dutchman ahead by 52 points. REUTERS

P1 finishes in 2024. After 10 long years, McLaren now leads the World Constructors' Championship (WCC), an accolade it last won in 1998.

So, what changed?

Given how McLaren started the season — just two podium finishes in five races — the sheer pace and performance that its MCL38 recently unleashed has raised eyebrows.

The car was given a significant revamp at the Miami GP, with major upgrades for Norris. While the 24-year-old's maiden F1 win there can't entirely be attributed to the modifications — since a timely Safety Car did help him — the subsequent results since then give more credence to the upgrade.

In the last 13 races, at least one of McLaren's drivers has finished in the top three, with the team having even secured double podium finishes in three races. Its average points scored per weekend surged from 19.2 to 32.3.

In the 18 races so far, McLaren has already doubled its podium count from 2023. Its drivers could get a best finish of only second place last season but this year it has stayed on

top not once, but five times, that too after a three-year drought.

In fact, McLaren concluded the 22-race 2023 season with 302 points, finishing fourth in the constructors' standings. But after three-quarters of this season, the Woking-based team holds the top spot with 516 points. Its average points per weekend also increased from 13.73 to 28.63.

Championship conundrum

A 41-point advantage may not guarantee McLaren the elusive Constructors' Championship, but the incredible performances of both drivers and the team's upward trajectory since Miami suggest otherwise.

McLaren has scored 420 points in the last 13 races, while its closest rival, Red Bull — which it overtook in the leaderboard after Piastri's win in Azerbaijan — has scored only 280, mostly through Verstappen.

If McLaren continues to gather solid points in the remaining races, the championship trophy could return to the eight-time winners. But this success might come at the cost of an ambitious, yet possible, WDC title for Norris, who currently sits second in the standings.

The British driver is having his best season yet and remains the strongest of the six drivers still capable of snatching the WDC from Verstappen. Whether Norris has caught up or

Verstappen has simply held on is hard to say, as both have scored identical points since round six — 221 each — with 11 podiums apiece.

The 110-point run that Verstappen had established early in the season, when Norris managed only 58 points, keeps the Dutchman ahead. Remarkably, the gap between them has remained at 52 points, despite Verstappen not claiming top honours since the Spanish GP in June.

Consistent top-10 finishes in every race thereon have helped Verstappen thwart any serious threat from Norris, who has been climbing the standings rapidly. At this rate, Verstappen could continue to offset the gains made by Norris, even if he finishes behind him.

Every additional point will count for McLaren's No. 1 driver if he wants to fight for the championship. In that case, Piastri may be expected to make way for him, which wouldn't be ideal if the team has its sights set on the constructors' title. Both drivers will likely be instructed to maximise points, regardless of who finishes ahead.

With only a quarter of the season remaining, all eyes are on the McLaren pit wall — will it focus on securing the constructors' championship, or will it allow its front-runner to chase the drivers' crown? It's all coming down to the wire!

The White battery

By C.G.S.Narayanan

A white battery is one formation of white men which can deliver a number of discovered checks which lead to mate. The white battery has two components- a frontal piece which discovers the check and a rear piece, always a line piece, which actually checks the black king. Batteries can be either diagonal or lateral. When the frontal piece is the king it is known as a Royal battery. The nomenclature of the battery is expressed in the order of rear and frontal piece. In the first example by the British Grandmaster who was one of the great exponents of battery play, it is the B+R battery on the long diagonal h1-a8 which fires on all cylinders contributing to six of the eight mates of the black knight wheel.

Comins Mansfield
Morning Post 1933



Mate in two moves

Every move of the BN is provided with a mate in the diagram above. **The key 1.Rh7!** cleverly changes mates for 1...Nxf6 with 2.Rg6 now white pinning the BN. This is a 'mutate' which changes one or more mates in a complete block setting.

The second is an evergreen masterpiece which combines battery

play with three-line play. Three line pieces- BQa8, BRa6 and BRa5 attack the R+B battery. WRe3 leaves the third rank to threaten 2.Qf3. There are two tries (near keys) and a key which shuts off one of the three black lines.

Alex Casa & Dr. Werner Speckmann
III prize, Die Schwalbe 1954



Mate in two moves

1.Re6? (2.Qf3) 1...Nc5/Nd8 2.Bf8/Be5 but 1...Nd6! Refutes. 1.Re8? (2.Qf3) 1...Nc5/Nd6 2.Bf6/Be5 but 1...Nd8!

Key 1.Re5! (2.Qf3) 1...Nd8/Nd6/Nc5 2.Bf6/Bf8/Rg5.

The problem for solving below combines battery with cross-check.

Albert Volkmann
Die Schwalbe 1954



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Black interference': Key 1.Qc7! Eight interferences are: 1....Bb7 2.Nxb6 1....Rb7 2.Qc6; 1...Bg3 2.Bb3; 1...Rf4 2.Qxe5; 1...Bf4 2.Be4; 1...Rg4 2.Qd7 1...d3 2.Nc3; 1...e4 2.Rxd4

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

'CHESS IN INDIA IS NOW ATTRACTING MORE CORPORATE SUPPORT AND GOVERNMENT INTEREST'

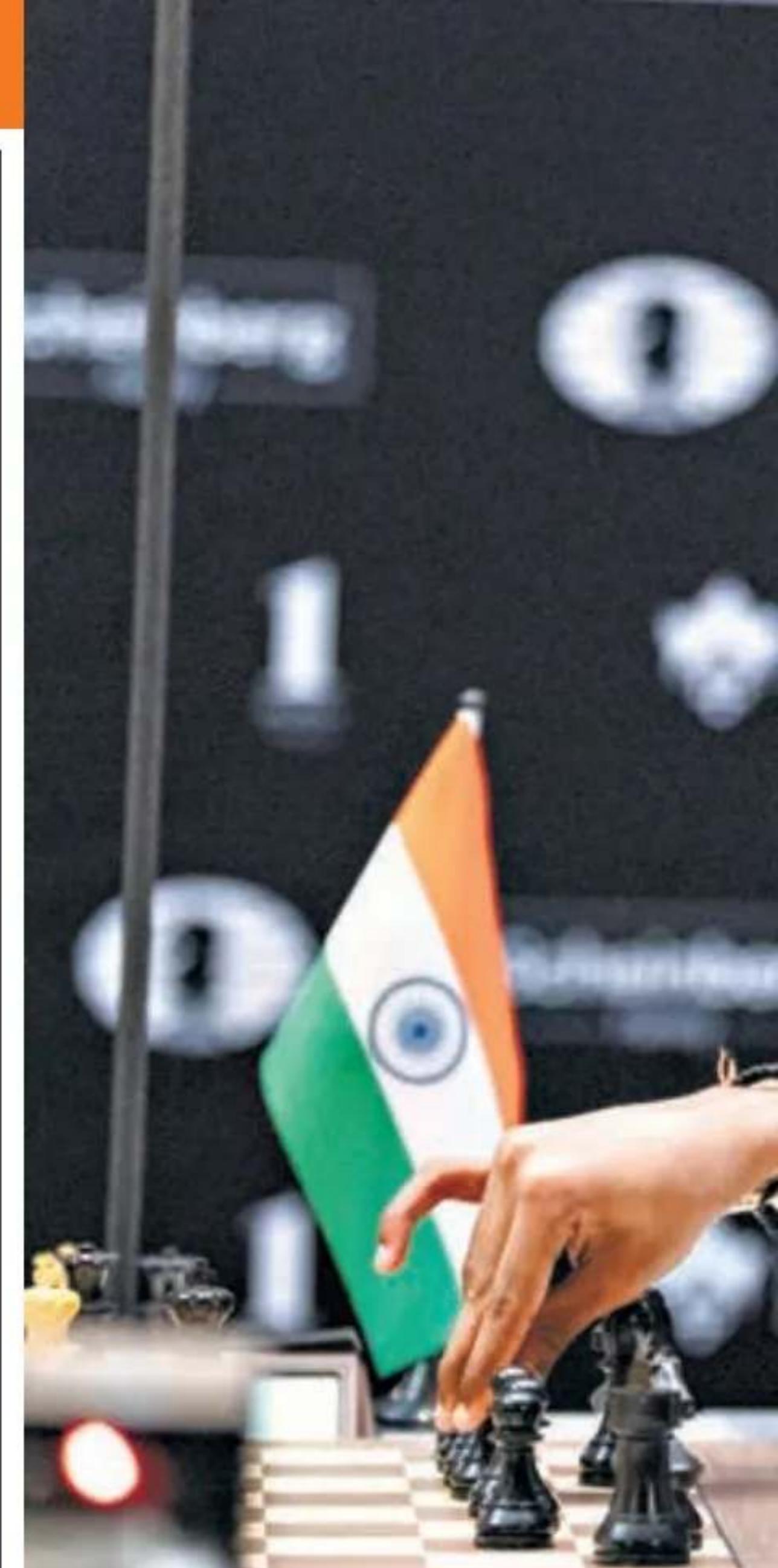
India's rising chess star, R. Praggnanandhaa, reflects on the country's golden moment at the Chess Olympiad, the **chess boom sweeping the nation** and the mental challenges that come with the game.

Mayank

mayank.c@thehindu.co.in

R. Praggnanandhaa, one of India's brightest chess talents, has firmly established himself among the global elite. In 2023, he made history by becoming only the second Indian, after Viswanathan Anand, to reach the World Cup final. His remarkable journey continued as he qualified for the prestigious Candidates tournament, alongside compatriots D. Gukesh and Vidit Gujrathi. Although Praggnanandhaa finished fifth, Gukesh went on to make history as the youngest-ever World Championship challenger following his victory in Canada.

2024 has been a landmark year for Indian chess. The country secured its first-ever gold in both the Open and Women's sections at the Chess Olympiad in Hungary. Praggnanandhaa played a key role, representing India on the second board, and delivered a solid score of 6/10.



In an exclusive interview with *Sportstar*, Praggnanandhaa discussed his advocacy for standardised time control in classical chess to enhance consistency in the game.

He also reflected on India's golden moment at the Chess Olympiad, the ongoing boom in the sport across the country, and the mental challenges players face.

How important is this Olympiad gold for India, especially with the growing popularity of chess in the country?

This gold is incredibly significant for Indian chess. It will inspire many more children to take up the game, and it will encourage broader involvement across the country. We're finally getting recognised for our achievements.

It's also attracting more corporate support and interest from government, which is good for the



growth of the sport. It's an exciting time for chess in India.

How do you evaluate your performance this year?

I've had some strong tournaments this year. My rating reached 2762, and I was ranked World No. 7. However, I had a poor result at the Biel Chess Festival, which cost me some Elo points.

Still, I believe my game is improving, and that's what matters. I performed well at Norway Chess, finishing third. There have been some lows in between, but I just need to focus on becoming more consistent.

Dutch Grandmaster Anish Giri mentioned the concept of 'mental injury' in chess. What are your thoughts on mental exhaustion affecting players?

Yes, it's definitely an issue, especially when you're playing

back-to-back events. You can burn out and feel the need for a break. But the tournaments keep coming. Sometimes, you lose motivation to play your best. The mental aspect of chess is crucial. We often talk about physical injuries, but I think mental exhaustion can be just as impactful — it's like a form of injury in chess.

What's your take on changes in time control with every new tournament?

I like new ideas, but I feel time control is one thing where they could have found one and tried to keep it fixed at least for some official events. It is important because we are playing too many tournaments now, and with each tournament, the time control changes.

Does the financial aspect of chess motivate you, or is it secondary to your passion for the game?

I don't think the financial side

Stirring effort: Grandmaster R. Praggnanandhaa contributed significantly to India's gold medal in the Open section at the Chess Olympiad in Hungary, scoring 6/10 on the second board. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

motivates me. My focus is purely on playing my best games and improving my ranking. Right now, I'm driven by the goal of increasing my rating. I don't really think about money; my parents handle that. I play chess because I love it and want to achieve something meaningful.

How does travelling with your family, particularly your mother and sister, impact your preparation and performance?

When my mother travels with me, she takes care of my meals and helps me bounce back when I'm feeling down. When I'm alone, I have to manage these things myself. As for my sister, I've played enough



Upper hand: Praggnanandhaa believes his teammate and fellow Grandmaster, D. Gukesh, will be the favourite in this year's World Championship match against Ding Liren. FIDE/LENNART OOTES

tournaments with and without her, so I'm used to both situations.

Chess training can be expensive. How has your sponsorship with Adani Sportsline helped you?

Their support has been crucial. Chess can be an expensive sport, especially when it comes to training and competing abroad. Working with foreign coaches costs a lot. The Adani Group has provided vital financial support, especially during the Candidates, by helping with the expenses for foreign trainers. Thanks to them, I don't have to worry about the financial aspect and can focus entirely on my game.

What are your thoughts on

franchise-based leagues like the Global Chess League (GCL)? Do you enjoy the format?

It's a great concept and perfectly timed. Chess is growing, and the league adds excitement for fans. Last year's tournament was thrilling, with two dominant teams missing out on the finals. The final itself was dramatic, coming down to sudden death. It showed that chess can be marketed as a fan-friendly sport. I really enjoyed playing in the GCL last year, and I'm looking forward to more excitement this year.

The GCL awards an extra point for winning with Black. How do you feel about the dynamics this adds to the game?

The format is unique and exciting. Winning with Black can completely change a match, which is rare in other formats. I remember one of our matches last year—it was incredibly tense. We lost two games with Black, and there were two draws. Then I won my game, and the

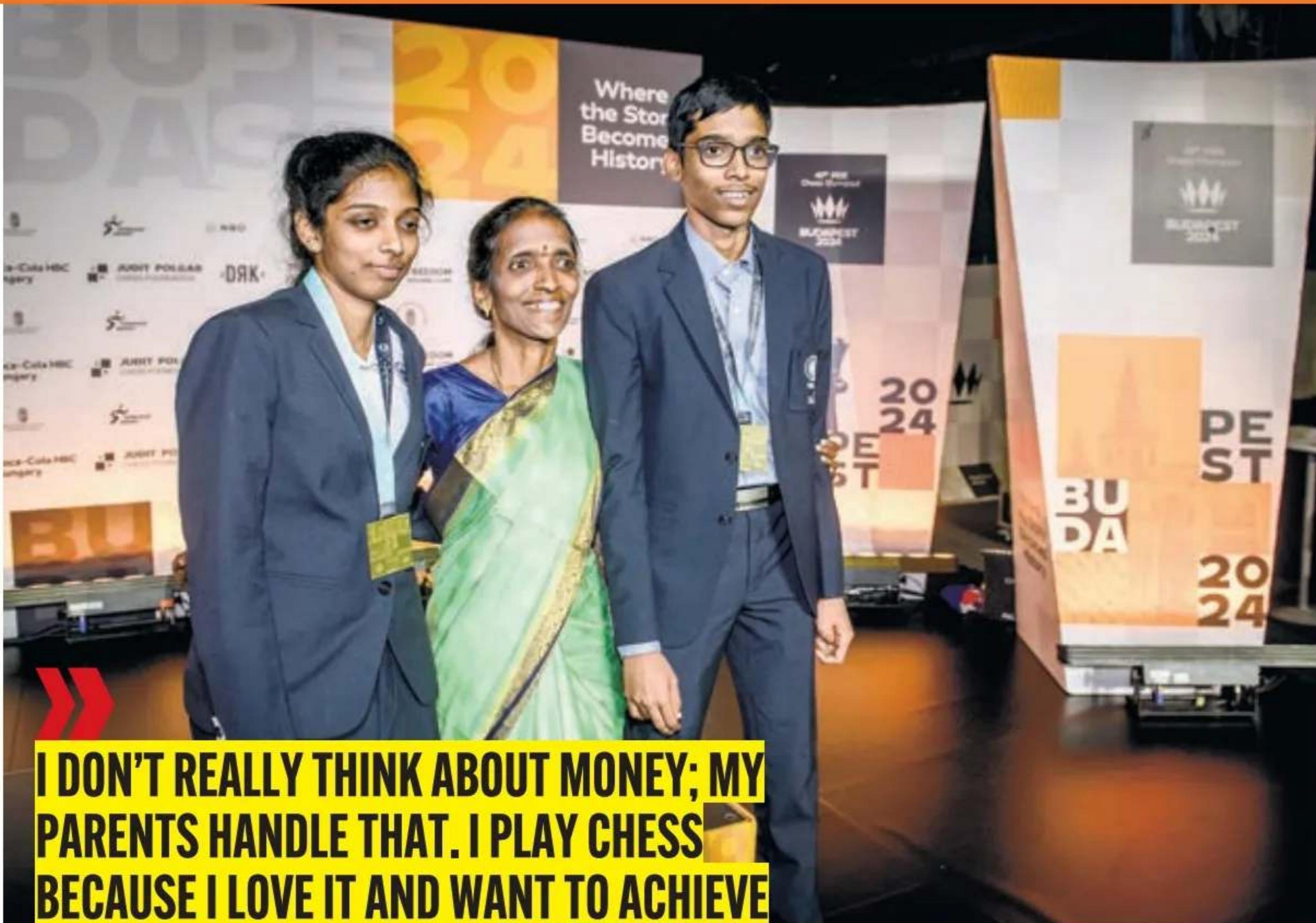
legendary match between Anand Sir and Magnus turned everything around. It was chaotic, but in a good way, making the tournament much more exciting.

How was your experience playing with Magnus Carlsen in U Mumba? What did you learn from him and your other teammates?

It was an amazing experience. I had the opportunity to discuss chess with him during team meetings, dinners and even some training games. It wasn't just beneficial for me but also for Arjun (Erigaisi) and Gukesh. This year will be interesting too, especially with Richard Rapport in the team. He's a very creative player, and I'd like to see how he thinks — I might even incorporate some of his ideas into my own game.

Do you think India can dominate team chess events like the Olympiad in the future?

Absolutely. We are a strong force in team events. In the coming years,



I DON'T REALLY THINK ABOUT MONEY; MY PARENTS HANDLE THAT. I PLAY CHESS BECAUSE I LOVE IT AND WANT TO ACHIEVE SOMETHING MEANINGFUL

India will definitely be one of the favourites, if not the favourite, in competitions like the Chess Olympiad.

What's your take on the upcoming World Championship match between Ding Liren and Gukesh?

As a chess player and fan, I hope we see some exciting games. I'd love for the match to go down to the wire, though I'm not sure if that will happen. Gukesh is the favourite because he's been playing at a very high level, while Ding hasn't been at his best. But this is the World Championship, and Ding has experience in high-pressure situations. It's going to be tough.

You've said you focus on your own goals rather than external expectations. What are your current goals?

Right now, I'm focused on increasing my rating. If I stay in the right mindset and continue playing good-quality chess, I believe I can break into the world's top five. That's my goal.

How has RB Ramesh influenced your growth, and how important are India's top trainers like Vishnu Prasanna, N. Srinath, and Abhijit Kunte?

Ramesh sir has played a massive role in my life. We've worked on everything — chess, mindset, life philosophies and even physical fitness. My father and Ramesh (sir) also handle off-the-board matters like dealing with the media and sponsors.

We're fortunate in India to have some of the best trainers, like Ramesh (sir), Srinath, and Vishnu sir. One key difference between Indian

Strong bond: R. Praggnanandhaa stands alongside his two pillars of strength: his mother, Nagalakshmi, and his sister, fellow Grandmaster R. Vaishali. FIDE/MICHAL WALUSZA

and foreign trainers is that Indian coaches form a personal bond with their players. They don't just focus on chess but also help with other aspects of life, which has made a big difference in my development.

Do you think India needs more Open tournaments to help young, underrated players gain experience and exposure?

Yes, Indian players are generally underrated, which is why we need more Open tournaments in the country.

These events give young players the chance to compete against top players and learn from them. While tournaments in Chennai and Delhi are good, we need more. Corporate involvement in chess is essential to support these events.



Vizag Open golf: Angad Cheema wins playoff against Aman Raj

Chandigarh golfer Angad Cheema capped off a season of remarkable consistency by holding his nerve in a playoff to claim his second PGTI title at the Vizag Open, ending an 11-year title drought. Cheema edged out Aman Raj of Patna at the East Point Golf Club after a gripping final round.

Angad, who led by three strokes overnight with rounds of 69, 61, and 70, carded a solid three-under 68 in the final round, bringing his total to 16-under 268. However, a series of birdies by Aman (66, 68, 69, 65) resulted in a six-under 65 — the best score of the day — bringing him level with Angad and forcing a playoff.

In the playoff, Angad sank a crucial eight-foot birdie putt to secure the win and take home a cheque worth Rs 15 lakh. The victory also propelled him from fourth to third place in the TATA Steel PGTI Rankings, marking a well-deserved reward after six top-10 finishes this season, including two runner-up spots.

Bengaluru's Aryan Roopa Anand (67) and Gurugram's Kartik Sharma (70) finished a distant tied third at a total of 10-under 274.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

» INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON

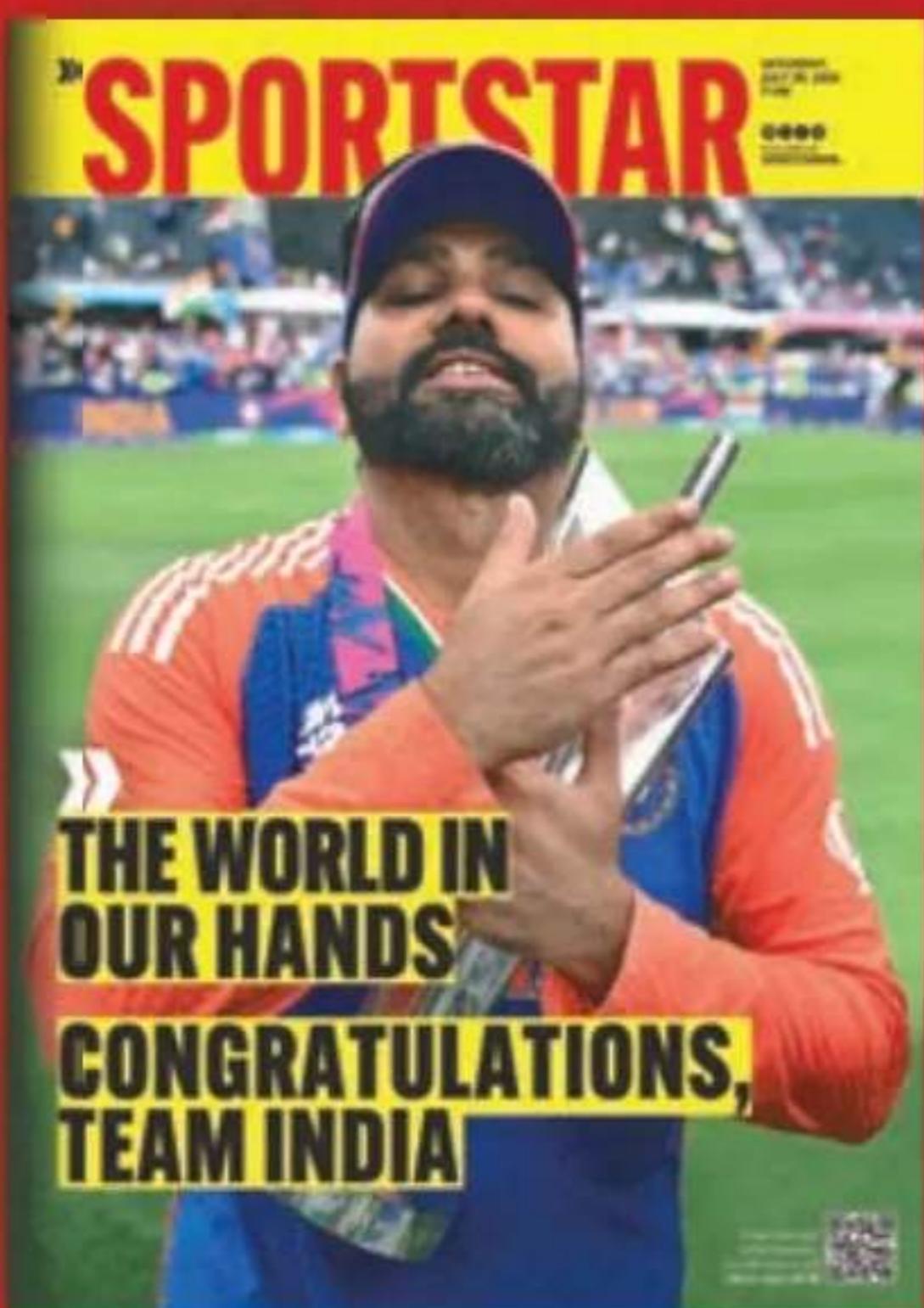


1 Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president Sanjay Singh announced that no Indian team will be fielded for the World Championships unless the Union Sports Ministry revokes its decision to de-recognise the national body. "We will not send any team to the World Championships. The problem is due to the Government's de-recognition (of an elected WFI on December 24). I will write to the UWW stating that because of Government interference, we are not able to send a team, as doing so will result in contempt of court," Sanjay Singh told *Sportstar*. "It's not good for our wrestlers, who have been performing so well."

Y. B. SARANGI

2 The Kho Kho Federation of India (KKFI) and the International Kho Kho Federation have announced that India will host the inaugural Kho Kho World Cup in 2025. The historic event will feature 24 countries from six continents, with 16 men's and 16 women's teams competing. With its origins deeply rooted in India, Kho Kho has evolved from being played on mud to modern mats, gaining international recognition. Today, the sport is played in 54 countries, and the World Cup will celebrate both its rich cultural heritage and the competitive spirit that has driven its global expansion.

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FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan



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STORIES

The importance of Needs Analysis in sports science

By breaking down issues into specific components and working from a first-principles perspective, coaches and athletes have a **prospective shot** at success.

Imagine you're a Strength and Conditioning (S&C) professional who has been contacted by young athletes flourishing in their sport and ready to take their performance to the next level. To help them achieve that, they have reached out to you through a referral, say, a team that has been impressed with what you've demonstrated on social media regarding your competence in helping athletes achieve peak performance. However, the challenge you're now facing is, "How do I design a successful interpolation programme for this athlete?"

Needs Analysis is key to design

One effective way to address this challenge is by conducting a Needs Analysis to determine the starting point for the intervention.

What is a Needs Analysis? Essentially, it involves breaking down the first principles related to the individual, their sport, skills, environment, and other variables to understand where to start and what will be an effective programme to implement.

Let's go through some of these first principles and break them into simple sections, which are the most essential components for understanding the athlete and other variables in order to create a Needs Analysis.

WHO?

What are your athletes' backgrounds? Have they trained systematically before? What is their age? What is their history of injuries, if any? Do you know their preferred communication or training style? Will other coaches or support staff be involved?

WHAT?

What is the sport in question? Is there published research on training interventions for it? Is there specific

footage on platforms like YouTube or educational videos? Can you figure out the type of sport and the physiological systems it involves? What is the level at which the sport is being played? What other resources are available that can help you understand the sport and break it down into skill sets?

WHEN?

When will your athletes be training and competing in their sport? Is it in the morning, afternoon, evening, or night? When will they be able to complete the intervention around these schedules? What influence does the time of day have on your athletes' physiology and motivation? (Consider circadian rhythms, nutrition, recovery, and any personal schedule.)

WHERE?

Where will your athletes be completing this programme? At home or away ground? Abroad? Will you be monitoring them remotely, or coaching them in person, or will you need to appoint a coach for the location to monitor and collect necessary data?

WHY?

This is a big one. Why are your athletes engaging in this programme? What are their



motivations? What is driving their desire to achieve? Are they doing this because they feel they have to, or is there a deeper reason behind starting the training programme?

Understanding this is crucial for designing a programme that is effective and tailored to the athletes' needs.

HOW?

How will you implement the programme, and how will the athletes manage it on a day-to-day basis? Will your approach be hands-on or hands-off? How will you deliver the programme — physically, digitally, or on paper? How will you log and track their progress?

LENGTH

What is the duration of the programme? This will be influenced by many factors, but deciding on an initial timeline will provide a target for the athletes to aim for.

COMPETITION

Will there be competition throughout the programme, or is it structured in a phased manner? Do you need to prepare for these

competitions in a periodised manner? Or is this an off-season opportunity to focus solely on preparation without worrying about performance deadlines?

GOALS

What do the athletes want to achieve from the programme? Are these goals grounded in reality or fantasy? It's easy to say, "I want my 20m sprint time to be X" or "My reactive strength should be Y." But do they truly understand the effort and energy required to achieve those goals? This is where reality and false promises are revealed for both the athletes and the coach. It's essential to ask these questions to ensure realistic goal-setting for the athletes.

TESTING

How will you measure the progress and success of the intervention? Deciding on an appropriate battery of tests is important to ensure you are implementing effective changes for the athletes. Testing will also allow you to make adjustments as needed to stay focused on the goals. It's wise

Test to be the best: Deciding on an appropriate battery of tests is important to ensure coaches are implementing effective changes for the athlete. Testing will also allow them to make adjustments as needed to stay focused on the goals. GETTY IMAGES

to have one or two solid tests, along with a few additional tests that can help assess other fitness domains. Time and equipment availability will always be factors, so tests don't need to be overly flamboyant — they just need to measure what you are trying to change.

Concluding thoughts

By breaking down the issues into specific components and working from a first-principles perspective, you have a prospective shot at success.

Programmes and interventions can make significant changes by leveraging the information you gather from the areas above, increasing the likelihood of achieving desired success.

It is coming home

As the sport gains in popularity and more academies are established, chess is poised to be India's sport soon.

Suresh Menon

In the 1930s, the United States was a quadruple Olympiad gold winner and the leading chess nation in the world. Then in September 1945, it played the Soviet Union in a 'radio' match. USA played at the Henry Hudson Hotel in New York and the USSR at the Central Club of Art Masters in Moscow.

The Russians gained a thumping win, 15.5 to 4.5, and for nearly five decades after that dominated the sport (with a brief period when American Bobby Fischer became world champion).

India's crushing win in the Olympiad recently might presage something similar. In D. Gukesh, 18, it has a potential world champion. He takes on China's Ding Liren for the title in November. Gukesh is now No. 4 in the world rankings, while Arjun Erigaisi is No. 5. Both are poised to pass the 2800 rating landmark soon. Erigaisi is 10.3 short, Gukesh six.

Among women, Koneru Humpy is ranked sixth in the world and Divya Deshmukh No. 11.

It all began with Viswanathan Anand, who became India's first GM in 1988. Since then, we have added another 84. Anand was world champion five times and led the Indian revolution in the sport. After India's success at the Olympiad, former champion Garry Kasparov messaged: "Vishy's children are all grown up, and chess is coming home." It was an acknowledgement of Anand's pioneering role and the fact that the sport, now looking for an entry into the Olympics, was invented in India.

This is a good time to repeat something I have been



Deserving candidate: The time has come to bestow the nation's highest honour, the Bharat Ratna, on Viswanathan Anand. PTI

saying for years: The time has come to bestow the nation's highest honour, the Bharat Ratna, on Anand. Sachin Tendulkar is the only sportsman to have been honoured thus; his induction into the elite implied that among the statesmen and artists and scientists, sportspeople too had a place.

Anand is a great sportsman, still ranked No. 11 in the world at the age of 55, and a wonderful example of everything we admire in a sportsman: talent, intelligence, courage, consistency, magnanimity, compassion, and the passion to give something back. "Vishy's children" will endorse that.

That both the men and the women won gold at the Olympiad (from among 193 countries) is

probably one of Indian sport's top half-a-dozen achievements of all time and certainly the greatest this year. But India beating lowly Bangladesh in cricket will garner more media attention and headspace in the country. This is one of the anomalies of Indian sport. Other sports have learnt to live with cricket!

For long, chess had been, like badminton, tennis and other individual sports, a 'family' sport in India, with the thrust and encouragement coming from the parents of talented sportspersons.

Thus, the Krishnans, Amritrajs, and Padukones. The brother-sister team of Pragnanandha and Vaishali, who were in the Indian teams at the Olympiad, is a throwback to those days.

But as the sport gains in popularity and more academies are established (again, like badminton and tennis), chess is poised to be India's sport soon. It is coming home.



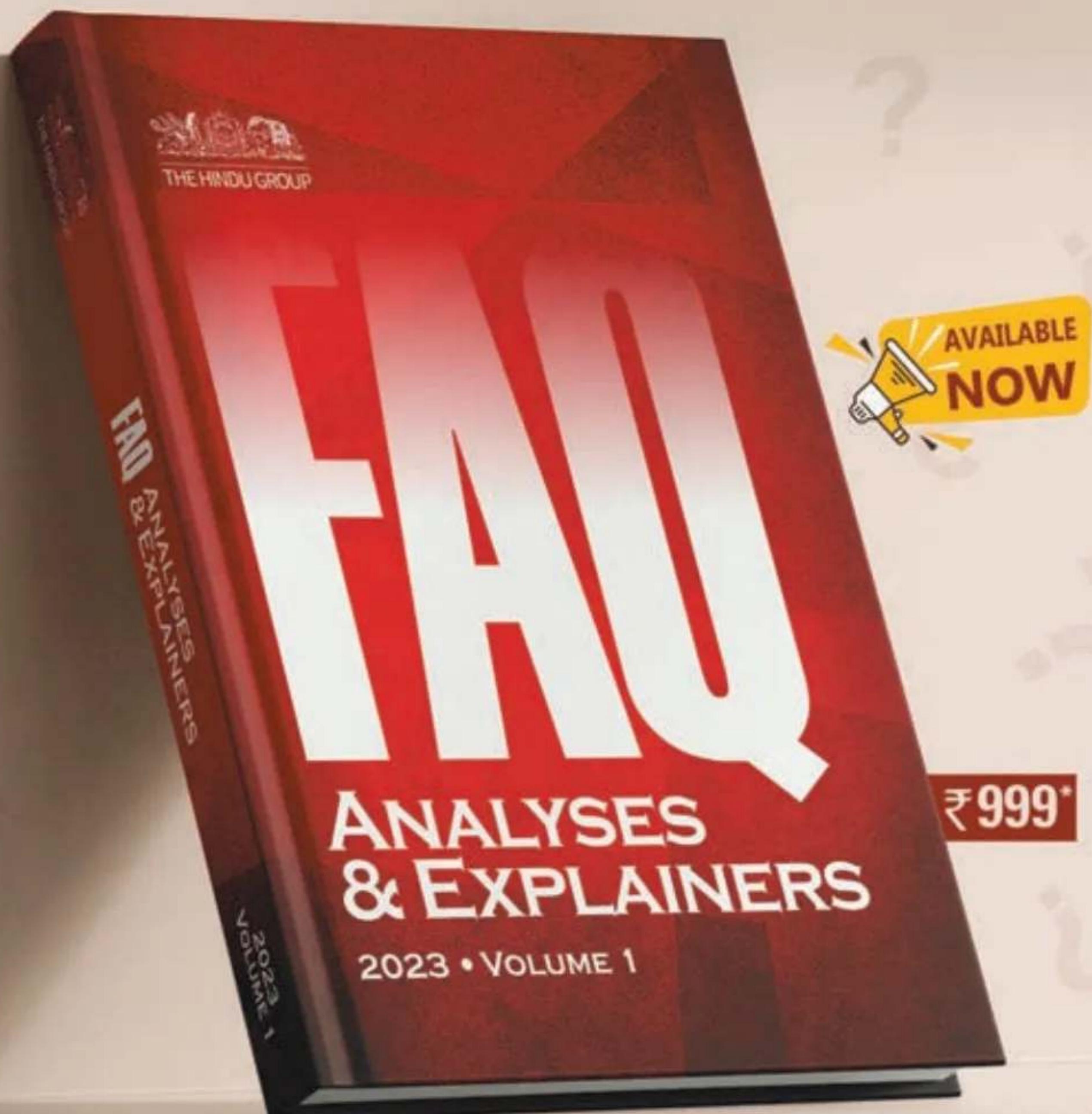
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3 BHK	1479 - 1784	79L - 94L	77L - 92L
4 BHK (PINNACLE)	2529 - 2533	1.32Cr - 1.33Cr	1.29Cr

FLOOR VILLA & VILLA PRICE

TYPE	SIZE (Sft.)	Launch Price (₹)	Early Bird Price (₹)
FLOOR VILLA	3794 - 3796	2.05 Cr	1.98Cr
4 BHK VILLA	3126 - 3228	2.8Cr - 3Cr	2.7Cr - 2.9Cr

TOTAL UNITS: 1800 | SOLD OUT: 410+ | AVAILABLE UNITS: 260

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