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VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY

**Haryana
ends
32-year title
drought**



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At the IPL auction, teams splurged Rs 230.45 cr on 72 players, with Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins breaching the 20 cr mark for the first time in the history of the tournament



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The auction preceding the 17th edition of the IPL gave a glimpse of several noteworthy aspects related to its financial dynamics

Cover: Mitchell Starc & Pat Cummins (Getty Images)

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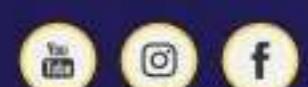
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THE UNSATISFYING SOUND OF SILENCE

Our sporting heroes, for long, have stood up as real heroes, **advocating for causes** we hold dear, yet we find ourselves too inconspicuous to champion. But now they are silenced.

Might the arena, with its pulse of competition, mend the shattered heart? Could it, perhaps, serve as an antidote to the self-inflicted afflictions our world seems all too eager to inflict upon itself? The prowess of sport as a force of unity has been chronicled for long, and love-lost forlorn figures have often sought sanctuary in the communal ecstasy that a match bestows upon us. Their problem and loss, if only momentarily, dissolve into the jubilation woven by a troupe of stranger athletes into our lives.

Sports presents us with a rare opportunity to revel in the collective triumphs of exceptionally skilled and devoted individuals, prompting a sense of self-affirmation through the vicarious thrill of our favourite teams and athletes. However, the inherent purity of sport — the sacred connection between its enthusiasts and the game itself — finds itself besieged daily at the altar of corporate greed. No longer merely a pastime, sport has morphed into a gargantuan moneymaking entity, siphoning the very essence of the game.

The stance taken by cricket's governing body, an irrational prohibition against Usman Khawaja wearing a pair of shoes emblazoned with the words "all lives are equal" and "freedom is a human right," strikes at the core of our fundamental rights as liberated citizens. Khawaja's footwear surely committed no transgressions against the International Cricket Council's regulation forbidding any exhibition of political or religious messages on team gear or attire.

Our sporting heroes, for long, have stood up as real heroes, advocating for causes we hold dear, yet we find ourselves too inconspicuous to champion. Indian great Vijay Merchant declined to tour England to protest the imprisonment of Mahatma Gandhi and other freedom fighters in 1932, while Jesse Owens used the Olympic

podium to throw light on Hitler's evils and the ills of segregation in his own homeland [the USA] four years later.

Yet, today, those resonant voices, once defiant and unyielding, find themselves stifled as associations and clubs look to protect their financial interests.

FIFA, the custodian of global football, was equally guilty of getting entangled in a web of compromises, succumbing to the desires of its oil-rich hosts.

Boardroom champion of equal rights and justice, the FIFA president swiftly betrayed its lofty ideals when it prohibited the display of 'OneLove' rainbow armbands at the 2022 World Cup. Seven European teams had planned to wear anti-discrimination armbands during their matches in Qatar. But FIFA, wielding the threat of sanctions, coerced them to abandon their cause, with the team captains warned of receiving straight yellow cards.

Seemingly learning from the public relations disaster, Gianni Infantino allowed the use of eight armbands with messages of gender equality, inclusivity, and peace at the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand. "It's not just about what happens on the pitch," the then FIFA secretary general, Fatma Samoura, said. "We are committed to using football's power as a force for good. United, we can make a difference."

But FIFA, though, promptly scored a self-goal as it brought in Visit Saudi as one of its sponsors. Players, coaches, and, thankfully, the host associations rightly questioned the wisdom of associating with a nation-state widely condemned for its treatment of women and LGBTQ+ communities.

The irony of FIFA's noble aspirations once again glaringly clashed with the stark realities of its sponsorship choices.

Incidentally, Visit Saudi is also the principal sponsor of the Board of Control for Cricket in India's cash cow [read Indian Premier League].

STILLKNOCKING IT OUT OF THE PARK

With an **indomitable spirit** and a calm demeanour, Dricus du Plessis has carved his path to the upper echelons of the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

Nigamanth P

nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

Born in Ermelo, South Africa, in 1994, Dricus du Plessis' love for fighting started very early. He began training in Judo at the age of five and moved to wrestling and kickboxing before finding his true calling in Mixed Martial Arts.

'Stillknocks', his infamous nickname, carries a touch of irony. Inspired by the insomnia medication, Stilnoct, it was bestowed by his brother after a staggering 30 knockouts in just 33 local circuit fights — an attestation to the raw power that has become his trademark.

From humble beginnings in the South African fighting circuit, du Plessis quickly amassed an impressive record, clinching championship titles in both welterweight and middleweight divisions of the Extreme Fighting Championship — a promotional MMA event. This dominance caught the attention of the UFC, leading to his much-anticipated debut in 2020.

Du Plessis' arrival on the global stage was marked by a series of impressive performances. In March 2021, his second-round knockout win over Trevin Giles earned him a 'Performance of the Night' bonus and firmly established him as a serious contender in the middleweight division.

Du Plessis has built a reputation for his

unorthodox striking, suffocative grappling, and deadly southpaw jabs. Despite being just six fights old in his UFC career, his progression has been nothing short of meteoric.

A testament to this rapid ascent was his recent victory over former middleweight champion Robert Whittaker at UFC 290.

Before the fight, in an interview with *Sportstar*, du Plessis said: "He's not lost to anyone else other than the champion and I'm going to be the first one who's not a champion to beat him." And he kept his word.

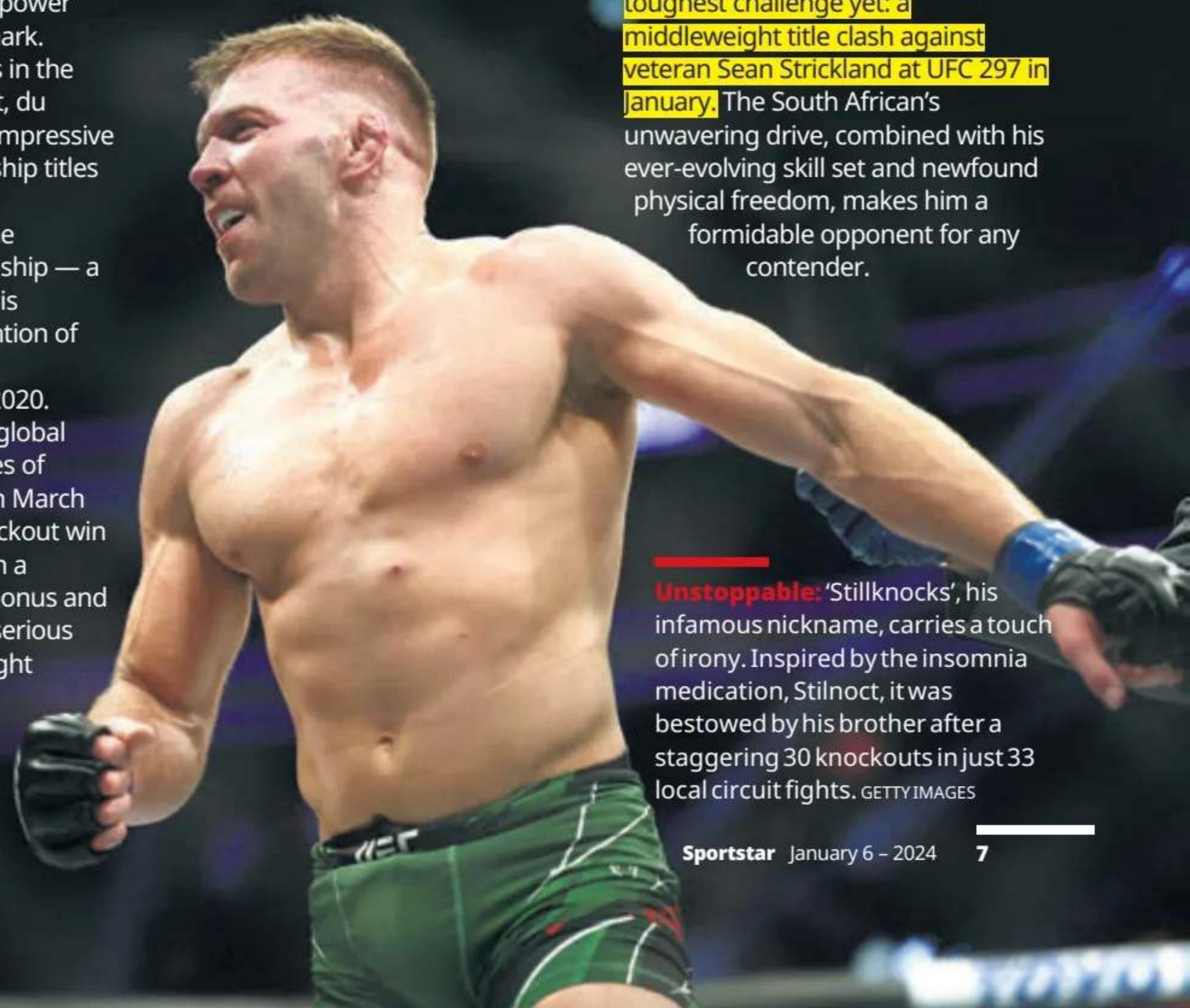
Facing seemingly insurmountable odds against a seasoned veteran like

Whittaker, du Plessis silenced the doubters with a comprehensive technical knockout win. His relentless pressure and tactical mastery showcased his evolution as a fighter and highlighted the effectiveness of his eccentric fighting style.

One potential obstacle — breathing issues stemming from a broken nose — was addressed before the Whittaker fight. After undergoing a successful nasal surgery, du Plessis entered the Octagon with an improved breathing pattern and delivered a dominant performance.

With the Whittaker hurdle cleared, du Plessis now gears up for his toughest challenge yet: a middleweight title clash against veteran Sean Strickland at UFC 297 in January. The South African's unwavering drive, combined with his ever-evolving skill set and newfound physical freedom, makes him a formidable opponent for any contender.

Unstoppable: 'Stillknocks', his infamous nickname, carries a touch of irony. Inspired by the insomnia medication, Stilnoct, it was bestowed by his brother after a staggering 30 knockouts in just 33 local circuit fights. GETTYIMAGES



Swiatek is WTA Player of the Year for the second successive time

Iga Swiatek's second consecutive season-ending No. 1 ranking helped her collect a second consecutive WTA Player of the Year award.

This makes her the first woman

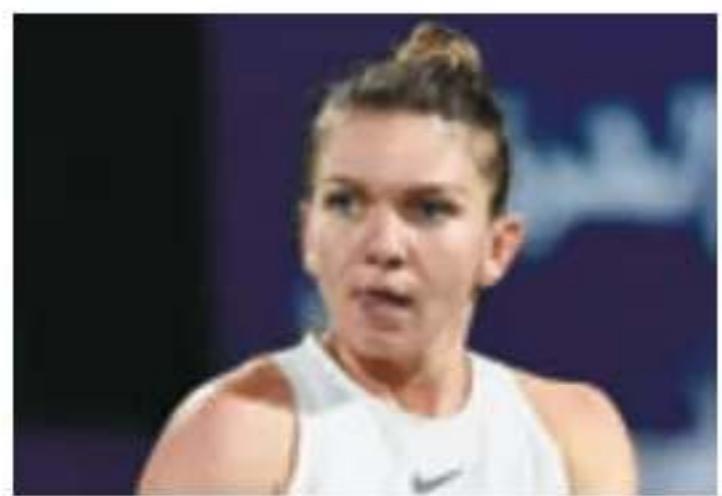
since Serena Williams to claim this honour twice in a row.

Serena, who retired last year, was the WTA Player of the Year every season from 2012-15, the final four of the total seven times the American

claimed this award. Swiatek went 68-11 in 2023 with a tour-leading six titles, including the French Open. That was her third title at Roland Garros and fourth overall at a Grand Slam tournament.



GETTY IMAGES



« Four years is going to be a lot for my age. It's catastrophic if it's going to be four years. And I don't know how I will handle it. Probably it's going to be (the) end of (my) career, yes.

– Simona Halep as she awaits ruling on her appeal of a four-year doping suspension »

800m

Irish swimmer Daniel Wiffen (right) set a short course world record in the 800-metre freestyle, beating Grant Hackett's previous mark by almost three seconds. Wiffen finished in 7 minutes, 20.46 seconds to take gold at the European Short Course Swimming Championships in Otopeni, Romania. Australia's Hackett had held the record for 15 years after swimming 7:23.42 at the Victoria Championships on July 20, 2008. France's David Aubry was second to Wiffen in 7:30.32, while the bronze



went to Mykhailo Romanchuk of Ukraine in 7:31.20. Wiffen had already won gold medals in the 400- and 1,500-meter freestyle events at the championships.

\$1.4m

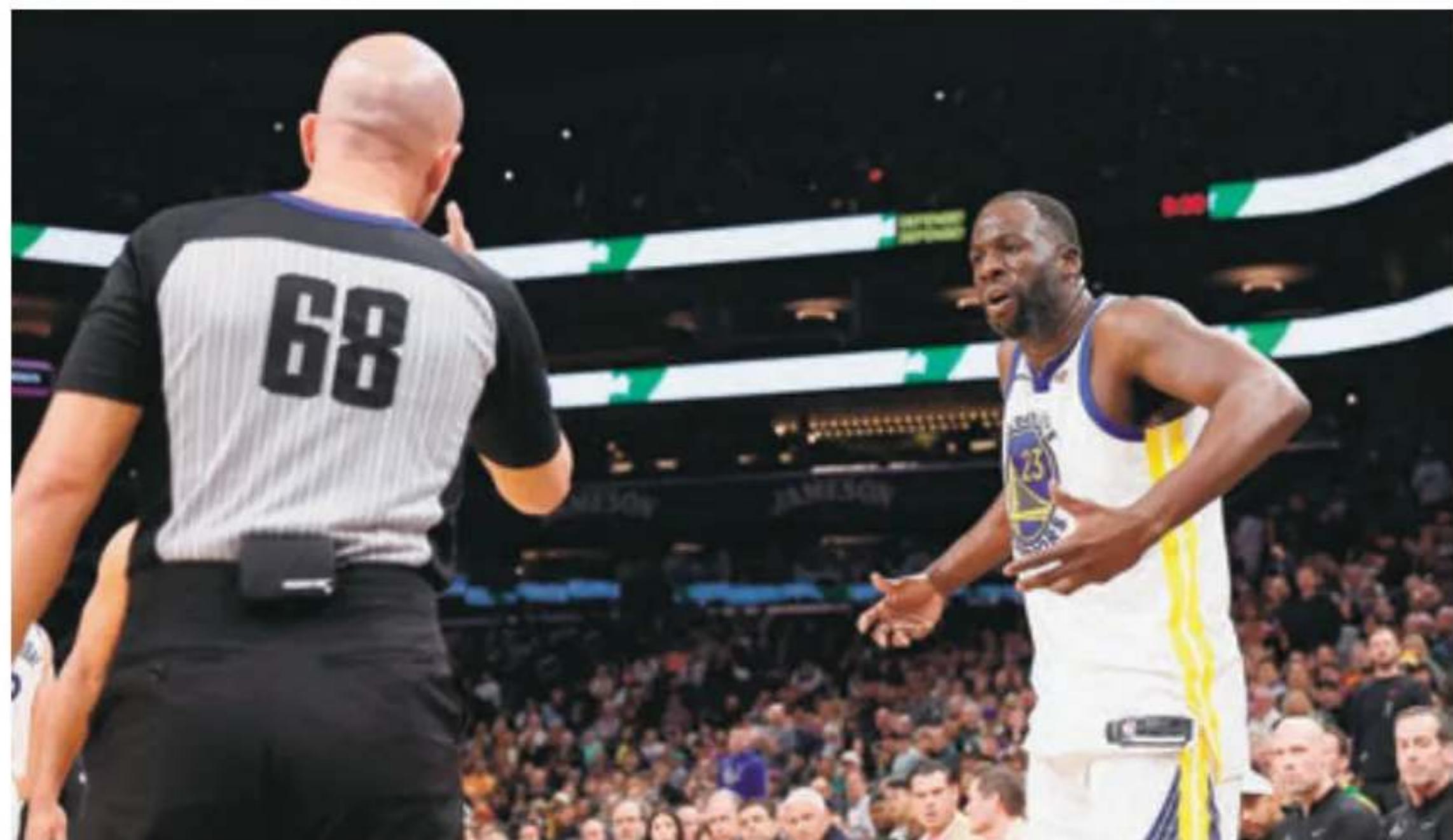
Haruyuki Takahashi, a former member of the Tokyo Olympic organising committee, appeared in a Tokyo district court and pleaded not guilty to taking bribes tied to the Games. Takahashi was arrested more than a year ago and it's unclear when his trial will end. The defence will present its case early next year. A former executive with the Japanese advertising company Dentsu, Takahashi is charged with accepting around 198 million yen (\$1.4 million) in bribes in exchange for awarding Olympic contracts for the Games.



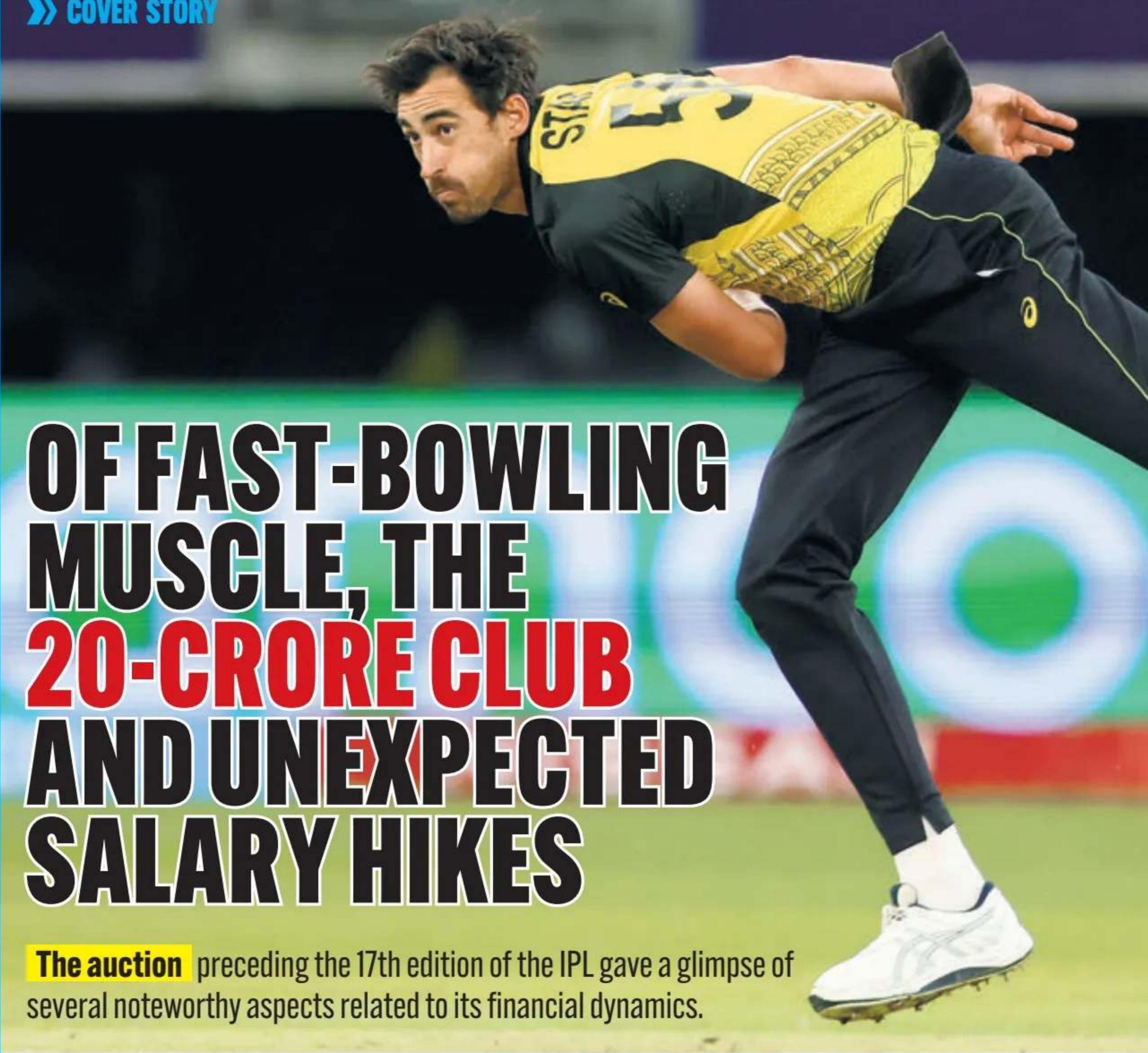
« I was talking to a close friend and he told me 'I already know you're gonna win three golds, I want you to win four', After what I did in Budapest and seeing what my body can handle, if I train for it, there is nothing to lose.

– Noah Lyles on targeting 4x400m gold at Paris 2024 »

SUSPENDED INDEFINITELY



Golden State Warriors forward Draymond Green was suspended indefinitely by the NBA, less than 24 hours after he hit Phoenix Suns center Jusuf Nurkic in the face and received a Flagrant 2 foul and ejection. The league said the penalty, handed down by operations chief Joe Dumars, begins immediately. This is already Green's second suspension this season. "He will be required to meet certain league and team conditions before he returns to play," the league said. The NBA noted that "this outcome takes into account Green's repeated history of unsportsmanlike acts." GETTYIMAGES



OF FAST-BOWLING MUSCLE, THE 20-CRORE CLUB AND UNEXPECTED SALARY HIKES

The auction preceding the 17th edition of the IPL gave a glimpse of several noteworthy aspects related to its financial dynamics.

Amol Karhadkar

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It was the first instance of the Indian Premier League's (IPL) player auction being held outside the country. It was the first time the auction was held in front of a live audience. It was the first time a female auctioneer conducted it. And to top it all, it was the first time that players (two) were sold for more than Rs. 20 crore.

Besides these firsts, the auction preceding the 17th edition of the IPL gave a glimpse of several noteworthy aspects related to its financial dynamics. Here are a few of them.

Value and worth

A player's worth does not necessarily reflect his value at an auction. For instance, Mitchell Starc being sold for more than double what his Kolkata Knight Riders captain Shreyas Iyer fetched in 2022 doesn't mean he is more valuable than Shreyas to KKR.

Similarly, Gerald Coetzee's Rs. 5 crore valuation might suggest, by the conclusion of IPL 2024, that he may have been undervalued at the auction. Such dynamics make IPL



OF THE 39 CROREPATIS THAT EMERGED FROM THE AUCTION, A WHOPPING 21 ARE PACE BOWLERS



No doubt the Knight Riders had to refill virtually their entire pace bowling unit, but even the other teams had to change their strategies at the last minute. It is understood that during the pre-auction briefing on the eve of the event in Dubai, an IPL executive told the gathering about the amendment of two bouncers being allowed per over.

It made the teams go big on fast bowlers. It will be interesting to see if the pacers succeed in bouncing out the opposition batters come March 22.

Domestic talent gets its due

They had been excluded from the auction for the first few editions. But ever since uncapped domestic cricketers were inducted into the auction fold in 2014, some of the little-known domestic cricketers have been earning big bucks.

Over the last couple of years, the IPL authorities have gone a step further and started introducing domestic cricketers up front in the auction. It's resulted in more crorepatis among the domestic pack.

The trend continued this time around as eight uncapped domestic cricketers were signed for an eight-figure sum. Chennai Super Kings outbid others to have Sameer Rizvi, a hard-hitting Uttar Pradesh batter, on its roster for a stunning Rs. 8.40 crore, while Delhi Capitals went all the way to have Jharkhand wicketkeeper-batter Kumar Kushagra on board for Rs. 7.40 crore. "All the domestic players are looking forward to the IPL. Delhi was the first to back the youngsters. We talk about Shreyas Iyer, Rishabh Pant, and Prithvi (Shaw); we are the

Regal comeback: Mitchell Starc will return to the IPL in 2024 for the first time since 2015 after opting not to enter the auction for the past five years. GETTY IMAGES

auctions refreshing, although the concept itself may have reached its sell-by date.

Recency bias plays a part. It was reflected in the Australian trio of Travis Head, Pat Cummins, and Starc returning to the IPL with a bang.

Similarly, Daryl Mitchell and his Kiwi junior Rachin Ravindra also hit the headlines, one for getting his worth and the other as a possible steal.

Pace is pace, yaar

If overseas allrounders were the flavour of the 2023 auction, the fast bowlers raked in the moolah this time.

Of the 39 crorepatis who emerged from the auction, a whopping 21 were pace bowlers. Ten of them fetched equal to or more than Rs. 5 crore.



Captain marvel: Aussie skipper Pat Cummins became the first player to breach the Rs 20 crore mark when Sunrisers Hyderabad edged out Royal Challengers Bangalore, Mumbai Indians, and Chennai Super Kings in a four-way bidding war to secure his services for Rs 20.5 crore. GETTYIMAGES

ones who backed them when they had hardly played T20 cricket," said Praveen Amre, the Delhi Capitals assistant coach. "Even this year, we wanted to have Kumar Kushagra with us. He is another guy we have backed, and hopefully, he will justify it because we have invested in and retained all the names I mentioned earlier. As team management, we are happy to back the youngsters as well."

Kushagra's fellow Jharkhand 'keeper-hitter Robin Minz fetched more than Rs. 3 crore towards the end of the auction. Tamil Nadu's left-arm spinner, M. Siddharth, went for Rs 2 crore plus, thus underscoring the extensive scouting system of IPL franchises.

The familiarity factor

Stephen Fleming has been the Chennai Super Kings head coach since the 2009 edition. The New

Zealand legend has brought the best out of Devon Conway at the top of the order. Conway will now have company in the Kiwi club at CSK, with the five-time champion adding Mitchell and Ravindra.

Daniel Vettori, another Kiwi legend, was Australia's assistant coach for the last two years. It wasn't just a coincidence, then, that immediately after Vettori was appointed head coach, Sunrisers Hyderabad went big on signing Pat Cummins and Travis Head.

A former India opener during the IPL retention show referred to it as the bias of overseas coaches. But more than the B-word, it's the familiarity and comfort with certain players that work for overseas coaches.

"You know their availability in their medical records, so that's a good starting point. There is a

comfort level there," Vettori said in Dubai.

"You have seen them up close and how they work and how they go about things. And so you have trust in their style of play and an understanding of how they can fit into a team. So I think that gives you a level of confidence that you can bring them into the environment."

The familiarity syndrome is not limited to overseas coaches. Kolkata Knight Riders signed wicketkeeper K.S. Bharat and promising Mumbai opener Angkrish Raghuvanshi, both mentored by its assistant coach Abhishek Nayar, at base price.

Price correction backfires

One of the features of mini-auctions is to rectify high prices, especially for some Indian signings. The Rajasthan Royals successfully did it with Jaydev Unadkat in 2019 and 2020. After



Change of guard:

India all-rounder Hardik Pandya will replace Rohit Sharma as captain of the Mumbai Indians in the 2024 Indian Premier League. But Rohit will continue playing for MI. K.R. DEEPAK

shelling out Rs. 11.50 crore for the left-arm pacer, the Royals released and re-signed him for each of the next two auctions for Rs. 8.40 crore and Rs. 3 crore, respectively.

However, two instances this time around showed that the price correction ploy tends to backfire on teams. The first instance was when Punjab Kings failed to re-acquire Shahrkhan Khan. Despite letting go of the Tamil Nadu power-hitter, who was signed for Rs. 9 crore in 2022, Punjab Kings chased him even after the Rs 7 crore mark.

But eventually, Gujarat Titans bought him for Rs. 7.40 crore, at 82 per cent of his last year's IPL fees.

The Titans were at the receiving end in the case of Yash Dayal. The left-arm pacer, bought at Rs. 3.20 crore in their debut IPL season in 2022, was released after suffering Rinku Singh's wrath in IPL 2023.

Even though Titans went much higher in their quest to retain Dayal, Royal Challengers Bangalore had the last laugh at the Rs. 5 crore-mark.

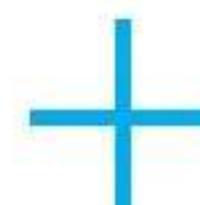
The Rohit Sharma trade conspiracy theory

Ever since Hardik Pandya was officially unveiled as the Mumbai Indians captain, the rumour mill has been abuzz with Rohit's possible

trade to another team during the post-auction trading window that began on December 20.

That's not happening? How? Sample this. Rohit's official auction purse is Rs. 15 crore, although he has been officially paid Rs. 16 crore per season since 2022. No team has a remaining purse anywhere close to Rs. 15 crore.

Of the 10 franchises, Delhi



It looks as if Rohit Sharma will guide Hardik Pandya, the captain, in IPL 2024 and will hopefully carry his silken touch with the willow from the World Cup to the IPL.



THE FRANCHISES SPENT A TOTAL OF RS 31.05 CRORE ON THE EIGHT INDIAN CAPPED PLAYERS AT THE AUCTION

JD marches on: If Jaydev Unadkat makes his Sunrisers Hyderabad debut next year, he will become only the second player to represent eight different franchises at the IPL.

SPORTZPICS/BCCI

Capitals has the highest purse remaining at Rs. 9.90 crore. But with the Capitals having already signed 25 cricketers — the maximum permissible squad size — the only way Rohit can be transferred is through a player swap. But that looks as distant a possibility as that of either Jasprit Bumrah or Suryakumar Yadav leaving MI for greener pastures.

As for Rohit playing under Hardik, Mumbai Indians head coach Mark Boucher stressed the decision was in sync with MI's leadership transition policy.

It looks as if Rohit will guide Hardik, the captain, in IPL 2024 and will hopefully carry his silken touch with the willow from the World Cup to the IPL.

What's in a name? Ask Punjab Kings

When two cricketers with the same name enter the IPL auction, it leads to confusion. The same was witnessed during the auction when the auctioneer, Mallika Sagar, called out Player No. 237, Shashank Singh, the Mumbai all-rounder who has also represented Chhattisgarh in domestic cricket and Sunrisers

Hyderabad in the IPL, during the accelerated auction. PBKS co-owner Preity Zinta raised the paddle, and the player was sold at the base price.

PBKS quickly realised that the Shashank Singh on its radar was Player No. 175, the Punjab big-hitter. However, once the hammer had come down, the all-rounder, Shashank, could not be withdrawn. A day later, PBKS issued a statement stressing it wanted to opt for the same Shashank Singh it bid for. The expressions on the PBKS table during the auction, though, suggested otherwise.

FIVE INDIAN UNCAPPED PLAYERS WHO STOLE THE LIMELIGHT

The Indian Premier League (IPL) Player Auction at the Coca-Cola Arena in Dubai saw teams breaking the bank for several high-profile stars. But there were also several lesser-known names who **stole the headlines**. Here's the lowdown on some of the top uncapped Indian talent that franchises bid for.



Sahil Mathur
sahil.mathur@thehindu.co.in

Sameer Rizvi



The **20-year-old** became the most expensive uncapped Indian player of this year's auction when he was signed by Chennai Super Kings for **Rs 8.4 crore**. The Uttar Pradesh batter came into the limelight during his recent exploits in the UP T20 league, where he scored **455 runs** in nine innings at a strike rate of **188.80**. In the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy 2023, Rizvi scored **277 runs** while averaging **69.25** and striking at **139.89**. He usually bats in the middle order and is well known for his power-hitting against spinners.

₹8.4 crore



Kumar Kushagra



A wicketkeeper-batter from Jharkhand, the **19-year-old** was roped in by Delhi Capitals for **Rs 7.2 crore**. Kushagra, at **17**, became the youngest batter to score **250** or more in a first-class innings. He bats with an aggressive mindset and likes to step out to dominate the bowlers early in his innings. In the Deodhar Trophy **2023**, he scored **227 runs** in five innings at a strike rate of **109.13**. He could be Delhi's middle-order mainstay for a long time.

₹**7.2** crore



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Shubham Dubey



₹5.8 crore

Known for his batting pyrotechnics in the middle order, the Vidarbha batter was valued at **Rs 5.8 crore** by Rajasthan Royals. Dubey was the highest run scorer for Vidarbha in the recent Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, scoring at a strike rate of **187.18** in seven innings and hitting **28** boundaries, including **18** sixes. The **29-year-old** has a strong base and is known for his big hits against fast bowlers. Using him in the backend of the innings against pace could prove to be a game-changer.



UP T20 LEAGUE/INSTAGRAM

Swastik Chhikara



Delhi Capitals got this **18-year-old** for his base price of **Rs 20 lakh**. The opening batter hogged the limelight in the UP T20 league, where he was the second-highest scorer with **494 runs**, including three centuries in 10 innings at a strike rate of **173.33**. On his Vijay Hazare Trophy debut for Uttar Pradesh in November, Swastik smashed a **101-ball 117**.

₹20 lakh



SPORTZPICS / IPL

Ramandeep Singh



₹20 lakh

He's one of the explosive lower-order hitters with pace bowling capability. The **26-year-old** Punjab batter was part of Mumbai Indians squad and has now joined Kolkata Knight Riders for **Rs 20 lakh**. In the Sher-E-Punjab T20 tournament this year, Ramandeep smacked 418 runs in 11 innings at a strike rate of **172.73**, finding the fence every **4.8** balls. He followed it up by striking at **222.80** in the SMAT **2023**, scoring **127 runs** in seven innings. He batted as a finisher, hitting a boundary every three balls.

Kingly sum: Harshal Patel was the Indian with the highest bid at this auction, as the Punjab Kings snapped him up for Rs 11.75 crore. GETTY IMAGES



MONEY TALKS

The teams that entered the IPL 2024 auction with the largest purses **left the arena** with the least baggage.

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FOR MORE STORIES

air warning.'

FEven if one were to guess the top two buys at the IPL 2024 auction, the likelihood of accurately predicting the winning bids would have been quite slim.

With 77 openings available and 332 players in the mix, franchises swiftly pursued their desired picks in the initial five rounds.

Here's a breakdown: Of the Rs 230.45 crore spent on 72 players — the most for a mini-auction and the

fourth-most since 2013 — a staggering 65.13 per cent (Rs 150.10 crore) was splurged on 25 players from the first 36 available in the pool.

The intense and assertive bidding concluded with record-breaking numbers and astonishing sales at the Coca-Cola Arena in Dubai. The auction strategies and choices boiled down to a significant gap in experience and skills between the



CUMMINS AND STARC COMBINED NOW HAVE A HIGHER PAY THAN THE PRIZE MONEY OF RS 20 CRORE RECEIVED BY IPL 2023 WINNER CHENNAI SUPER KINGS

first few sets of players and the rest.

There was unprecedented windfall for Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins, key figures in Australia's successful year with victories in the ODI World Cup and the World Test Championship.

After securing the top-tier players, a portion of the funds was allocated to emerging Indian talents, who have showcased their abilities, albeit somewhat unnoticed,

in focused scouting sessions and state T20 leagues over the past year.

The 10 million men

Starc: The Australian left-arm quick had limited appearances in just two of the previous 16 IPL seasons, in 2014 and 2015. Due to his unwavering commitment to his national team and a few injuries, Starc was not part of the IPL for the past eight years. But the upcoming T20 World Cup in June 2024 has

seemingly made the T20 league a crucial part of his preparation.

In a remarkable comeback, the leading Australian seamer in T20Is was signed by the Kolkata Knight Riders for Rs 24.75 crore, marking the highest-ever bid in the tournament's 17-year history. This amount was over 2.6 times the price KKR paid for him in 2018 (Rs 9.40 crore) before an injury disrupted their previous association. With



In elite company: Aussie quick Spencer Johnson joins a Gujarat Titans attack featuring Mohammed Shami and Rashid Khan as the franchise looks to make a third straight IPL final in 2024. GETTY IMAGES

SPENCER JOHNSON HAS GONE FROM A BIG BASH LEAGUE DEBUT IN JANUARY TO NEARLY BEING A MULTI-MILLIONAIRE WITHIN 12 MONTHS

initial interest from the Mumbai Indians and Delhi Capitals, Starc's bidding price soared from a base of Rs 2 crore to Rs 10 crore, and eventually, KKR secured the landmark deal, surpassing Gujarat Titans' quarter-billion bid.

Cummins: Australia's captain is quite close to 'completing' cricket. With ODI World Cup and WTC titles and an Ashes retention under his belt in the last six months, Cummins went further up on the sport's hot property charts with the maiden Rs 20 crore bid before compatriot Starc overhauled him. The IPL inventory says that he can tonk Jasprit Bumrah for four sixes in an over, hit one of the quickest fifties in 14 balls, and is a tad mercurial with the ball but a nagging presence for batters.

Combined with a coalescence of his leadership and cricketing nous, Cummins received intense bidding from three title-winning IPL sides: MI, Chennai Super Kings, SunRisers Hyderabad, and Royal Challengers Bangalore. SRH's bidding began at the Rs 8 crore mark, four times his base price, before catapulting Cummins onto uncharted shores at Rs 20.5 crore.

Daryl Mitchell: Yet to establish his spot as a true-blue T20I all-rounder, Daryl Mitchell received a whopping Rs 14 crore contract from CSK. Mitchell was among the most successful batters (552 runs) in the recent ODI World Cup, including two hundreds against host India. While at it, the 32-year-old also displayed a penchant for breaking down spin attacks and waging lone battles, a favourite trait in MS Dhoni-territory. "In Chepauk, we can



Plucking golden goose:

Sunrisers Hyderabad invested a scarcely believable Rs 20.5 crore in acquiring Australia's ODI World Cup and WTC-winning captain Pat Cummins. SPORTZPICS/IPL

slide him into a role. He fits in nicely," said fellow Kiwi and CSK head coach Stephen Fleming about Mitchell.

Harshal Patel: While he may have fallen off the national selectors' radar, Harshal continued to attract interest at the auction table. Although slated under the all-rounder tag, Harshal's expertise in bowling the middle and death overs places him in a rare bracket among Indian bowlers. Punjab Kings roped in Harshal for Rs 11.75 crore after fending off Lucknow Super Giants and Gujarat Titans.

Alzarri Joseph: In the auction's major surprise, West Indies seamer Alzarri Joseph landed a spectacular Rs 11.50 crore bid from RCB, with four other teams in contention to sign him. His figures of 6/12 — the best in IPL history — came on his debut four years ago. The Antiguan has only played 18 games since, taking 14 wickets. While he will

contribute with his hit-the-deck style at the Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru, Joseph's standing as a dependable choice remains uncertain.

Spencer Johnson: Fast on the rise in the Australian circuit, left-arm quick Johnson has only played 20 T20s. He was also taken for plenty in his solitary ODI appearance (0/61) against India in September. However, that did not deter a late surge for the 28-year-old, who landed his maiden IPL contract with GT at Rs 10 crore, 20 times his base price of Rs 50 lakh.

The catapults

The auction also threw in potentially life-changing deals for uncapped Indians. After impressive exploits in the state T20 league and age-group cricket, Uttar Pradesh batter Sameer Rizvi's CSK stocks increased from a Rs 20 lakh base price to Rs 8.40 crore. Following the Dhoni fad in Jharkhand,

wicket-keeper batters Kumar Kushagra (Rs 7.20 crore to DC) and Robin Minz (Rs 3.60 crore to GT) bagged headline-worthy deals. Shahrukh Khan (Rs 7.4 crore, GT), Shubham Dubey (Rs 5.80 crore, Rajasthan Royals), M. Siddharth (Rs 2.40 crore, LSG), Sushant Mishra (Rs 2.2 crore, GT) and Sumit Kumar (Rs 1 crore, DC) were the other overnight uncapped crorepatis.

Top spenders

Teams that entered the auction with the largest purses left the arena with the least baggage. KKR shelled out Rs 31.35 crore for 11 players, while SRH splashed out Rs 30.80 crore to sign Cummins, Travis Head, Wanindu Hasaranga, and backup bowlers.

CSK went all in to complete its quota of 25 players, spending Rs 30.4 crore. IPL 2023 runner-up GT used Rs 30.30 crore to add further variety in bowling and batting muscle.

» VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY



PROVIDING ANOTHER FLICKER TO ODI CRICKET'S EVER-GUTTERING FLAME

Haryana's **maiden 50-over title triumph** came as a timely reminder that domestic teams and states have their own life cycles, narrative arcs, and identities.



OUT OF THE 135 MATCHES, OR 270 POTENTIAL BATTING INNINGS, SCHEDULED FOR THE VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY, TEAMS TOUCHED OR BREACHED THE 300-RUN MARK ONLY 23 TIMES

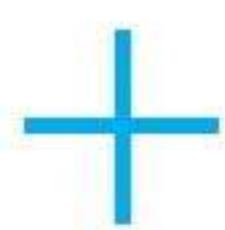
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Held under the shadow of India's World Cup final defeat and in a format overwhelmingly thought to be in limbo, the Vijay Hazare Trophy initially felt a little out of place.

In an age where the relevance of a format hinges on the ICC event scheduled to follow, in this case, the T20 World Cup in June 2024, it was tough to identify what the tournament set out to achieve.

Cricket, for the sake of it, is a concept that finds fewer takers by the minute, and every competition now either needs to entertain or unearth the next T20 sensation that could dazzle at the Indian Premier League (IPL).

But Haryana's maiden 50-over title triumph came as a timely reminder that domestic teams and states have their own life cycles, narrative arcs, and identities. The last time Haryana had won silverware was when Kapil Dev's side beat the Rest of India in the Irani Trophy in 1990–91 after handing the State team its first and only Ranji Trophy title in the same



Brief scores

Haryana 287/8 in 50 overs (Ankit Kumar 88, Ashok Menaria 70; Aniket Choudhary 4/49) **beat**

Rajasthan 257 in 48 overs (Abhijeet Tomar 106, Kunal Rathore 79; Sumit Kumar 3/34, Harshal Patel 3/47) by 30 runs.



Stealing the spotlight:

The 28-year-old all-rounder, Sumit Kumar, was one of the finds of this year's domestic 50-over competition. VIJAYSONEJI

season. Thirty-two years on, Haryana's leading run-scorer from that epochal Ranji Trophy campaign, Amarjit Kaypee, is in charge of the State team as head coach. The helmsman on the field, Ashok Menaria, had a moment of redemption after beating Rajasthan, his home State that he served for 15 years, before unceremoniously parting ways earlier in 2023, in the final in Rajkot.

For those on the prowl for a young potential IPL talent, there was 28-year-old all-rounder Sumit Kumar, whose late cameo with the bat and early salvo with the ball earned him the Player of the Match award in the final and the Player of the Series accolade. His 18 wickets and batting strike rate of over 150 in the tournament may have catapulted the Gurgaon-born cricketer high into the wish list of enthusiasts. But Kaypee wants Sumit to increase his pace before moving to the next level.

Rajasthan's Aniket Choudhary, the

tournament's joint-highest wicket-taker, was surprised to be clocking 140 kmph after dropping pace over the last few years. The 33-year-old left-arm quick highlighted the importance of telecasting or streaming domestic matches live when he said that he realised he had regained his speed only because there was an online stream available for the semifinal between Rajasthan and Karnataka.

Choudhary, tied with Varun Chakravarthy, Siddarth Kaul, and Harshal Patel's 19 wickets in the competition and the only uncapped player from the lot, was the most impressive.

Yuzvendra Chahal's 18 wickets in eight matches for Haryana also played a role in his comeback to India's ODI squad for the tour of South Africa. After there was no telecast of any group stage matches, only four knockout games, held at the Saurashtra Cricket Association Stadium, out of nine, saw live

coverage. Meanwhile, at the remote Sanosara Cricket Ground 'B', about 30 kilometres from the SCA Stadium, where the high-profile quarterfinal clash between Tamil Nadu and Mumbai was held, there was an air of incredulity. Set against the backdrop of unending fields and wilderness, the sight of Dinesh Karthik and Ajinkya Rahane in half-built and hastily whitewashed dressing rooms struck quite a discordant note.

While Karthik and Rahane are past their prime, Rajasthan skipper Deepak Hooda made a strong case for a recall with a situation-defying 180 against Karnataka's vaunted pace attack in the semifinal.

With 480 runs, the third most in the tournament, and a strike rate over 100 at No. 4, Hooda proved yet again that he is a different batter higher up the order.

A few rungs below Hooda, Shashank Singh of Chhattisgarh, who scored 450 runs in the tournament, set a unique record against Manipur



by becoming the first Indian batter to score 150 and pick five wickets in the same match in List A cricket. In another stunning record, Punjab registered the biggest win in List A cricket by balls remaining when it overhauled Nagaland's 75 with 275 balls to spare.

It wasn't always smooth sailing for the traditional heavyweights against the less-fancied teams. Wridhiman Saha may be in the twilight of his career, but he ushered in a new dawn for Tripura cricket, leading the side to two remarkable victories against defending champion Saurashtra and Mumbai.

Manisankar Murasingh's all-round brilliance in both games — he scored a combined 80 runs and picked up six wickets in the two wins — could mean cricket in the Northeast may have its first homegrown poster boy.

The Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, which ended in early November, indicated that T20 domestic cricket in India was in sync with international

Worthy opponents: Dinesh Karthik (left) and Ajinkya Rahane may be past their prime in international cricket but were entrusted with the captaincy of Tamil Nadu and Mumbai, respectively, in the Vijay Hazare Trophy. VIJAYSONEJI

trends as far as the emphasis on scoring briskly was concerned. However, the 50-over domestic tournament seemed incongruous with the evolving ways of One-Day International cricket. Out of the 135 matches, or 270 potential batting innings, scheduled for the Vijay Hazare Trophy, teams touched or breached the 300-run mark only 23 times.

If the recently concluded ICC ODI World Cup is a touchstone for where one-day cricket is headed, teams surpassed the 300-run mark on 25 occasions in a 48-match tournament.

Though day games with an early morning start, when the ball swings prodigiously, especially with the onset of winter, played a part in reining in the scoring rates, openers were often found wanting in technique and intent in the first

PowerPlay. Thus, the onus was on consolidation against spin in the middle overs and the finishers to crank through the gears in the last 10 overs. **The likes of Sumit, Manoj Bhandage, Vishnu Vinod, Abdul Basith, and Rahul Tewatia, in the second regard, ably stepped up to the challenge.**

Indian cricket has grown a little wary of winning streaks of late. But either Haryana or Rajasthan, on eight and nine-match winning streaks, respectively, ahead of the final, was bound to emerge unblemished. Haryana eventually extended its unbeaten run to 10 matches, leaving Rajasthan with the solitary consolation of arguably being the better team. That argument, as the recent past has shown, does little to dampen the spirits of the champion.



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



FOR MORE STORIES

COOLING-OFF PERIOD IMPORTANT BEFORE MAKING RETIRED PLAYER COACH OR SELECTOR

I have been witness to how a **perceived slight** has resulted to a huge extent in a player being left out of the team, though the reason given was the shot he had played.

Afew days before the Test series between Australia and Pakistan started, there was a huge uproar in Australian cricket circles, with Mitchell Johnson questioning David Warner's place in the Test team and also wondering why he should be allowed to bid goodbye to Test cricket when he wants to. His argument was that, apart from a double century last year, Warner hadn't scored enough runs in the previous few years to be guaranteed a place on the team. Warner had announced his intention of quitting Test cricket after playing at his home ground, Sydney, early next year.

Johnson was querying how Warner could consider himself a certainty for all three Test matches against Pakistan, looking at his lack of runs except for that double century. Warner has now answered that in fine style by hitting a brilliant century in the first Test match in Perth. Though he got out for a duck in the second innings, his 164 in the first innings pretty much assures him a spot in the eleven for the next two Test matches.

Johnson admitted that a text message from Warner in April had been the main driver for

his article about Warner's place in the side.

Players who have earlier been teammates falling out with each other is nothing new in sports, and that's why it's important to have a cooling-off period before a retired player is given the responsibility of coaching the team or being a selector. Some perceived slights with his former teammate may cloud judgement and lead to some ill-judged decisions against his former teammate, who is still playing. The BCCI has got it right with a five-year cooling-off period after retirement before appointing the retired player as a selector and coach, and that's how it should be. Hopefully, by then, any lingering ill feelings will have been tempered by the passage of time. Something similar should be done before a coach of a state or an IPL team is appointed a selector because you don't want any player suffering from bias by the state or IPL coach.

I have been witness to how a perceived slight has resulted to a huge extent in a player being left out of the team, though the reason given was the shot he had played. I was coopted with no voting rights on that selection committee because I was the captain of the team. The selector concerned was livid



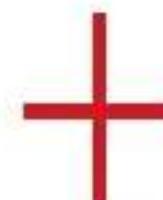
because, as he said in the meeting, this player had ignored him when, a few days earlier, their cars going in opposite directions were at a traffic light.

Try as he did to attract the player's attention by unrolling his car window, the player did not look his way, and so the upset selector said that the player had become too arrogant and needed to be taught a lesson. The player's bad shot became a very convenient reason to drop him, though all members of the selection committee, including me, were collectively responsible for the final decision. The selector had been appointed to the panel within two years of his retirement, and he had shown even before this meeting that he was going to get even with all those with whom he had perceived a problem, even though there was none intended.

Playing partners: Mitchell Johnson and David Warner played together in the Australia Test team from 2011 to 2015. GETTY IMAGES

Anyway, a much brighter subject than misunderstandings between former teammates is the news of Vijay Amritraj and Leander Paes being inducted into the Tennis Hall of Fame. This is a huge honour and a richly deserved one for both. Not only have they been outstanding players, but they have also been truly wonderful ambassadors for the sport and India in particular. This honour comes through being voted in by previous inductees in the Hall of Fame, and that's why it's doubly precious.

Well done, Vijay and Leander, and thank you so much for putting India on the world tennis map.



A much brighter subject than misunderstandings between former teammates is the news of Vijay Amritraj and Leander Paes being inducted into the Tennis Hall of Fame.



Nathan Lyon joins 500 Test wickets club

1 The spinner is only the **third Australian** player to achieve this milestone, following Shane Warne (708) and Glenn McGrath (563).

Nathan Lyon, the Australian off-spinner, joined the 500 Test wickets club on the fourth day of the first Test against Pakistan in Perth. He achieved this feat by dismissing Faheem leg before

upon review. Lyon is only the third Australian player to achieve this milestone, following Shane Warne (708) and Glenn McGrath (563). "(The milestone) is something I'm pretty proud of," Lyon told Fox

Cricket after Australia secured its win. "From a young kid growing up in country NSW, 500 wickets is a bloody long way away. A lot of hard work, but something I'm proud about."



2

Soumya Sarkar hit the second-highest score by a Bangladesh batter in ODIs, smashing 169 in the second ODI against New Zealand in Nelson, albeit in a losing cause. It was the highest ODI score by a Bangladesh men's player away from home and the highest in ODIs by a player from the sub-continent in New Zealand, passing Sachin Tendulkar's unbeaten 163 against the Kiwis in Christchurch in 2009. Sarkar hit 22 fours and two sixes during his monumental innings.



3

Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) has appointed former captain Sanath Jayasuriya as cricket consultant for a period of one year. "Under this role, Jayasuriya will be responsible for ensuring that SLC national programs achieve an optimum level of professionalism, and that all players and coaching staff are monitored in order to deliver excellence," SLC said in a statement. Jayasuriya scored 14 Test centuries from 110 appearances and reached triple figures on 28 occasions in limited-overs cricket from more than 470 white-ball matches.

NISSAR AHMAD



REUTERS

4

ICC has announced the revised schedule for the ICC U19 Men's Cricket World Cup 2024 which is set to be held in South Africa now from January 19 to February 11 on Monday. The 15th edition of the tournament, which was originally scheduled to take place in Sri Lanka, was relocated to South Africa following ICC's decision to suspend the Island nation in November. India prevailed in the last edition in the West Indies in 2022 and is placed in Group A with Bangladesh, Ireland and the USA as it attempts to claim a record sixth Under-19 title.



GETTY IMAGES

5

Phil Salt's second successive century helped England amass its highest T20 international total, 267. In a 75-run win over West Indies in the fourth T20 in Trinidad, Salt smashed 119 — the highest score by an England men's batter in the format — off 57 balls, including 10 sixes — the most by an England batter in a T20 international innings. Salt is the first England men's batter to hit two T20 international centuries, a feat which Danni Wyatt has achieved for England women. Surprisingly, Salt did not find any takers in the IPL auction.

Rohit Sharma's men must navigate fine margins to conquer final frontier

The series is India's second in the 2023-2025 cycle of the World Test Championship, after the two-Test series in West Indies in July.

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Thirty-one years have passed since Jimmy Cook edged Kapil Dev's outswinger to Sachin Tendulkar at slip and reluctantly walked back to the dressing room at the Kingsmead Cricket Ground in Durban.

It was no ordinary ball. It was history.

That was the first ball in international cricket in South Africa since 1970; there had been an ICC ban on the country because of its apartheid policy. Cook believed the ball hadn't carried, but the square-leg umpire thought otherwise and advised his colleague accordingly (ironically, this was the first match in which television replays were being used, though only for line calls).

More drama followed in India's first-ever Test against South Africa, which ended in a draw after the rain washed away an entire day's play. Pravin Amre made an



Righting the wrong: Rohit Sharma was ruled out of the Test leg of India's last tour of South Africa with an injury. He would hope to make amends this time as an opener and captain.

GETTYIMAGES

excellent hundred on debut after coming in at 38 for four. **The host, however, went on to win the four-match series 1-0, riding on the nine-wicket victory in the third Test at Gqeberha.**

Three decades later, India's quest for a series victory in South Africa



SOUTH AFRICA REMAINS THE ONLY MAJOR TEST-PLAYING NATION WHERE INDIA HAS YET TO WIN A TEST SERIES

continues. It remains the only major Test-playing nation where India has yet to win a Test series.

Rohit Sharma's men have an excellent opportunity to set that record straight. The two-match series begins on December 26 in Centurion. The second Test will be played in Cape Town from January 3.

Back in 2006-07, under Rahul Dravid, now on his second tour of the country as coach, India got off to a perfect start in a three-match series, winning the first Test in Johannesburg by 123 runs, thanks largely to a superb show from

seamer S. Sreesanth (five for 40 and three for 59). It, however, lost both the remaining Tests of the series.

History repeated itself 15 years later, when Dravid went to South Africa as the coach for the first time. In the 2021-22 series, held without spectators due to COVID-19 concerns, the visiting team won the initial Test in Centurion — its

first-ever at the venue — by 113 runs. However, it faced defeats in the subsequent two matches in Johannesburg and Cape Town, both by a margin of seven wickets each.

Two years later, both teams have different captains. The Cape Town Test was the last for Virat Kohli as the Indian skipper. He stepped down a day after the match. Temba Bavuma



Much-awaited return: Jasprit Bumrah last played a Test in Birmingham in July 2022. GETTY IMAGES

took over from Dean Elgar, whose obduracy at the top played an important role in South Africa's series victory last time.

The Proteas will rely on the experience and skills of those two batters, just as Kohli's class and intensity will be crucial to India's fortunes. In the absence of Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane, the Test specialists who played in the 2021-22 series, the former captain's role in the batting line-up assumes even more significance. Kohli is the only Indian batter to average more than 50 (after playing at least 10 innings) in Tests in South Africa. He has also scored two hundreds; only Sachin Tendulkar has more (five).

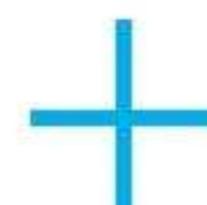
The Indian think tank wouldn't mind Kohli adding to his tally of hundreds. Neither would it mind some handsome contributions from

skipper Rohit. He may have gone past 40 only once in his eight previous Test innings in South Africa, but he has arrived in the Rainbow Nation after making 103, 80, and 57 in his last three innings in the longest format in the West Indies. The numbers from his last Test series against South Africa — in India, four years ago — are even more impressive, with scores such as 176, 127, and 212.

He also has his brilliant form from the recent ODI World Cup to lean on. Even in not the most ideal conditions

for batting, as in the final against Australia in Ahmedabad, he played with a freedom and confidence that very few others have shown. **Batting on the lively tracks of South Africa against a battery of quality quick bowlers may be tougher, but he is arguably the best puller in the game since Ricky Ponting.**

If Rohit gets going, so could India. After missing the 2021-22 series because of a hamstring injury, he will be keen to make use of this opportunity. K.L. Rahul had opened in that series and made a brilliant



South Africa is grappling with injuries, with Anrich Nortje already ruled out. Additionally, there are concerns about key players Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi as well.



Key player: Keegan Petersen played a key role in South Africa's last Test series win over India, making scores of 62, 72, and 82 in four innings as it came from behind to take the series 2-1.

GETTYIMAGES

century in the first Test. Former South African opener Alviro Petersen called it the finest from a sub-continental opener in South African conditions. The Karnataka batter-wicketkeeper is likely to feature in the middle order this time. Yashasvi Jaiswal, who scored a hundred on his Test debut in the West Indies, is expected to open.

The young left-hander will find the conditions much more challenging than most places, as will the likes of Shubman Gill, the likely No. 3, and Shreyas Iyer. One batter India will miss greatly is the counter-attacking Rishabh Pant, still recuperating from last year's car accident.

His stunning knock had set up India's greatest Test win — against Australia at the Gabba in 2020-21 —

and he had made a glorious hundred that helped India build its lead in the final Test against South Africa on the last tour.

Mohammed Shami's late withdrawal — he hasn't recovered from his ankle injury — is a big blow. In the ODI series against Australia and then in the World Cup, after being overlooked early on, he was a raging tempest. Imagine how effective he would have been in the far more helpful conditions of South Africa, where he was India's leading wicket-taker in 2021-22; he took eight in the Test win.

However, Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj could ensure the South African batters do not breathe easy. Prasidh Krishna may come in place of Shami; the Karnataka quick did not harm his chances with a five-wicket haul in the first unofficial Test between South Africa-A and India-A in Potchefstroom, and Shardul Thakur's best Test innings figures (seven for 61) came on the previous tour. Spin hasn't traditionally been as effective in

South Africa as pace, but India has two of the world's best tweakers, R. Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja.

Meanwhile, the home team is grappling with injuries, with Anrich Nortje already ruled out. Additionally, there are concerns about key players Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi, as per reports from South Africa. So the host might have to depend more on the young pace duo of Gerald Coetzee — a genuine quick and great prospect for the future — and Marco Jansen, the tall left-arm who has made rapid strides since making his debut against India a couple of years ago.

South Africa will want the classy batter Keegan Petersen to continue from where he left off against India; he was the Player of the Series. Besides Elgar and Bavuma, there is also the elegant Aiden Markram.

It should be a good contest between two well-matched sides on wickets that tend to produce absorbing cricket. Rohit's men will approach it believing they could conquer the final frontier this time.

» INDIA-SOUTH AFRICA T20 SERIES



A damp start: The covers were firmly on in Durban with the first T20I between India and South Africa called off due to rain. The match was abandoned without even a toss. AP



Among the runs: India skipper Suryakumar Yadav scored a brilliant half-century in 36 balls but couldn't make it a big one in the second game.

AP



Quick gun: India's latest finisher, Rinku Singh, scored an unbeaten 68 off just 39 deliveries, with nine fours and two sixes. In the end, the home side won by five wickets by the Duckworth-Lewis Method. REUTERS



4th

Racing away: Reeza Hendricks was off the blocks in a flash and blazed away during the chase to give South Africa early momentum. GETTY IMAGES



5th

Impressive: Pacer Mukesh Kumarar was the pick of the Indian bowlers with two wickets. GETTY IMAGES



6th

Scintillating knock: Suryakumar Yadav continued his fine form and smashed a brilliant century in just 56 balls to guide India to a big total in the third encounter. GETTY IMAGES



7th

Bamboozling the batters: Kuldeep Yadav proved his spin-bowling skills with a five-wicket haul, giving away just 17 runs in the 2.5 overs he bowled. AP



8th

Can't keep him away: Ravindra Jadeja was an able ally to Kuldeep, picking up the wickets of Aiden Markram and Andile Phehlukwayo. AFP



TATA
WPL
AUCTION



SMART BUYS, SMARTER TEAMS

Kashvee Gautam and Vrinda Dinesh stole the limelight with **impressive bids** in an auction that saw a shift in focus from star value to strategic team-building.

Money matters: Mallika Sagar, auctioneer of the WPL mini auction. It had only 30 slots to be filled by the five franchises, with an available collective salary cap of ₹17.65 crore. SPORTZPICS/BCCI

Shayan Acharya

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There has been a shift in dynamics of player auctions over the years. Instead of solely focusing on star value, teams have started looking to fill the gaps, making smart buys with limited resources at hand.

At the Women's Premier League (WPL) mini auction, held at a plush hotel in the suburbs of Mumbai, five teams had only 30 slots to fill, with an available collective salary cap of ₹17.65 crore. Naturally, one expected them to adopt the 'horses for courses' formula while picking their preferred players at relatively affordable prices.

But by the end of it, it was all about two uncapped young Indian players — Kashvee Gautam and Vrinda Dinesh — who stole the

limelight by attracting bids of ₹2 crore and ₹1.3 crore from Gujarat Giants and the UP Warriorz, respectively.

Gujarat Giants, which had 10 slots to fill, came into the auction with a purse of ₹5.95 crore, and it did not hesitate in splurging big on young Indian players who had an impressive run in the domestic circuit.

Kashvee — a seam-bowling all-rounder who went unsold in the last edition — made all heads turn. Having represented India A in the recent T20 series against England A, Kashvee impressed with her bowling performances, delivering breakthroughs in crunch moments.

Her 12 wickets at the Senior Women's T20 Trophy last month earned her a spot in the India A team. Prior to that, she was a part of



IN LINE WITH THE INAUGURAL EDITION, WHEN THE STATE OF MAHARASHTRA HOSTED ALL THE MATCHES (MUMBAI AND NAVI MUMBAI), BCCI SECRETARY JAY SHAH HAS MENTIONED THAT THE UPCOMING EDITION WOULD TAKE PLACE IN ONE STATE AGAIN

India's triumphant Under-23 squad at the ACC Emerging tournament in Hong Kong.

Mithali Raj, former India captain and Gujarat Giants mentor, said, "She (Kashvee) has the possibility of making it to the Indian team. We are also looking ahead by two more seasons and not just restricting to this season. Otherwise, we would have gone for an experienced player."

"We don't want to find ourselves in a position where we need to release an experienced player again next season. We need to have some players who are young but not very inexperienced."

The parameters, as Mithali pointed out, were quite specific in terms of choosing uncapped talent. "They have performed well in the U-19 World Cup or for India A or in the domestic circuit, so they have

some form along with experience. The roles might be a bit different in the WPL, but still, it's important to get that sort of performance from them," she added.

Just like Kashvee, Vrinda from Bengaluru has also impressed national selectors and franchises. She received invitations for trials from all the franchises in August, and, eventually, UP Warriorz got her on board. During the auction, Royal



Moment to savour: Mumbai Indians won the inaugural Women's Premier League, after beating Delhi Capitals in the final. SPORTZPICS/WPL

Challengers Bangalore (RCB) initiated the bid, but Warriorz escalated the price. In the tricky realm of franchise leagues, young players who secure big-money deals have often struggled. But Vrinda does not want to get carried away by the money.

"The price tag is not in my hands," the 22-year-old opener said. "I just want to give my best. At the end of the day, I am just here to play and enjoy the sport."

Vrinda, who played for India-A against England-A in the recent T20 series, is happy that she joined a WPL team led by Alyssa Healy, one of her favourite cricketers.

While some of the top international stars like Chamari



TOP FIVE BUYS



Kashvee Gautam (India, uncapped)
₹2 crore to Gujarat Giants.

Annabel Sutherland (Australia)
₹2 crore to Delhi Capitals.

Vrinda Dinesh (India, uncapped)
₹1.3 crore to UP Warriorz.

Shabnim Ismail (South Africa)
₹1.2 crore to Mumbai Indians.

Phoebe Litchfield (Australia)
₹1 crore to Gujarat Giants

Athapaththu and Deandra Dottin went unsold, Australia's all-rounder Annabel Sutherland was the most expensive overseas player, attracting the joint-highest bid of the auction at ₹2 crore.

The Capitals had a purse of ₹2.25 crore coming into the auction and the franchise exhausted most of that money by acquiring Sutherland, who was earlier released by the Giants.

An intense bidding battle unfolded



A spinning mystery: Mithali Raj, mentor of Gujarat Giants, said, "If it (tournament venue) has a spinning track, then every team would be happy because they are all stacked up with spinners. The question is, on a batting track, how good would those spinners be?" SPORTZPICS/BCCI

between Mumbai Indians and Delhi, with the latter ultimately sealing the deal. With its core set of players already intact, the Capitals wanted someone who could be multi-skilled. The seasoned Sutherland happened to be the perfect fit.

"The staff wanted Sutherland and the Indian players (Aparna Mondal and Ashwani Kumari). After discussing about it, we eventually got them. The squad has been good since last year, so they are valuable additions," Sourav Ganguly, former India captain and Delhi Capitals' director of cricket, said.

The Adani Sportsline-backed Gujarat Giants, having left out half of its squad, had several gaps to fill. It

managed to make some smart acquisitions, spending ₹1 crore on Phoebe Litchfield, along with Meghna Singh, Trisha Poojitha, Priya Mishra, Lauren Cheatle, Kathryn Bryce, Mannat Kashyap, Tarannum Pathan, and Veda Krishnamurthy.

England's Danni Wyatt (Warriorz) and Kate Cross (RCB) found takers, while South Africa quick Shabnim Ismail was picked up by Mumbai for ₹1.2 crore.

"The extra pace is something that we wanted. She is one of those players who brings a lot to the group. I'm really excited about having her on board," Charlotte Edwards, Mumbai's coach, commented on the inclusion of Ismail.

Among capped Indians, seasoned campaigner Ekta Bisht attracted the highest bid of ₹60 lakh for RCB, while Devika Vaidya did not find any takers.

When the auction concluded, the teams appeared satisfied with their overall selections, despite lacking clarity on the tournament's venue. In line with the inaugural edition, when the state of Maharashtra hosted all

the matches (Mumbai and Navi Mumbai), BCCI secretary Jay Shah has mentioned that the upcoming edition would take place in one state again.

However, with no clarity on the preferred state, the franchises proceeded to pick players they believed would perform well in any condition.

"I would say that if it's a spinning track, then every team would be happy because they are all stacked up with spinners," said Mithali.

"The question is, on a batting track, how good would those spinners be? How good are your uncapped spinners... It depends on that."

"In leagues of this nature, you would like to see high scoring games and chases. Therefore, every franchise is looking to gather a top-heavy batting side."

With the auction over, it's time for the franchises to wait and watch before finalising their strategies for the tournament, which is expected to begin on February 22.



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» WOMEN'S CRICKET
INDIA-ENGLAND TEST



The case for more women's Tests – long overdue but not as straightforward

India women are **scheduled to play only one more Test match in the 2022-25 women's Future Tours Programme (FTP) cycle, at home, in the 2023-24 season.**



WE DIDN'T GET TOO MANY OPPORTUNITIES IN THE TEST FORMAT WHEN WE WERE PLAYING CRICKET, BUT HOPEFULLY, THE NEW GENERATION WILL GET MANY MORE GAMES – HARMANPREET KAUR



2021. Op-eds, interview quotes, and analysis pieces of a similar vein came around once more after England drew South Africa in a lone Test in 2022. The conversation for more Test cricket in the women's game sometimes feels like a disc running in a broken record player, gratingly stuck in the same spot.

A big-three exclusive?

How practical is a call for more red-ball cricket in the women's international ecosystem?

"If you look at the larger picture, it's only Australia, England, and India playing because these are the boards with the resources to do so. Having said that, none of us have domestic cricket for the longest version of the game. To expect Test cricket to grow, it needs to return at the domestic level," former India captain Shubhangi Kulkarni points out.

"Australia and England play for historical reasons. India has always wanted to play Test cricket, and despite getting few games, it usually does well at it. From sponsorship to spectators and TV coverage, I don't know if there's as much of an appetite for Test cricket as compared to the shorter formats. But it can always be built, and a way to do that is by getting it back at the domestic level," the seasoned administrator adds.

After struggling to acclimatise adequately to the pressures of Test cricket in the unforgiving heat and humidity of Navi Mumbai, England skipper Heather Knight said this:

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

“We didn't get too many opportunities in the Test format when we were playing cricket, but hopefully, the new generation will get many more games. We have a busy schedule in the T20Is and ODIs, but Tests are actually a format that teaches you patience and gives a chance to improve your skills," India captain Harmanpreet Kaur said after her first game as Test skipper.

Acing the test: England was bowled out in the first session of day three to fall to a crushing 347-run defeat in the one-off Test against India.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

She led the team to a thumping 347-run win over archrival England in the one-off Test in Navi Mumbai this month.

Where has one heard this call for more Tests before?

Oh yes, after the remarkable draw against England in Bristol and the same result against Australia in the Pink Ball Test in Carrara, both in



Inability to adapt: England was undone by "super extreme" conditions in its Test defeat by India, said captain Heather Knight (middle). EMMANUAL YOGINI

"Maybe if we had a two- or three-match series, we'd be able to use these lessons and get better."

That suggestion makes former India women's coach and veteran cricketer WV Raman smile.

"I am sure that even the solitary Test played is happening after a lot of conversations back and forth. If we get anything more than a single Test, and if we get a two- or three-match series, I will be incredibly surprised. That can only happen if more than three or four countries want this for the game. Otherwise, allegations of just these top countries getting everything will understandably crop up."

From domestic to international

Kulkarni belongs to an era where Tests were part and parcel of the experience of international cricket. She was the first Indian woman to

score a half-century and take five wickets in a single Test, a feat Deepti Sharma emulated against England in the recently concluded Test.

However, as an administrator, she sees merit in going the white-ball way when the first task is to popularise the game as widely as possible.

"When I was in the ICC Women's Committee, before the merger with the ICC, a lot of Tests were played, but when women's cricket came under the ICC, T20s and ODIs became the priority. That move is helping the game grow, so when authorities make decisions, they look at data points, economics, and more. Sponsorship, affordability, and coverage will all be important points," she explains.

It's easy to see the parallels in England, which, along with Australia, has pioneered how women's cricket is promoted, with offerings like The Hundred.

"We're seeing the Hundred; we have T10. People are going shorter and shorter with game formats as

well. So how is that surge balanced with this need to revive and maintain Test cricket is one we'll have to watch out for," she adds.

Before the lone Test, vice-captain Smriti Mandhana said that domestic structures follow the demands of the international scene. With white-ball cricket being the order of business, the choice trickles down to the grassroots.

"To be fair, the domestic structure was formed based on one-day and T20 because those are the World Cups that are frequent at the international level. I've just played four Tests in 10 odd years of international cricket. Maybe we'll see a new tournament at the domestic level. But the domestic scene will change itself according to what the international demands are," Mandhana had said before the game.

Both Raman and Kulkarni believe that the domestic scene can set the pace.

"We have been proposing a two-day tournament at the



The bottom-up approach: "As the number of Tests increase, we may see a new domestic tournament for long-form cricket," Smriti Mandhana said, before the Test against England.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

inter-zonal level, which gives an opportunity to at least 15 girls from each zone. So 75 girls at least get a taste of the longest version of the game, which will definitely help fine-tune basic skills in the format," Kulkarni explains.

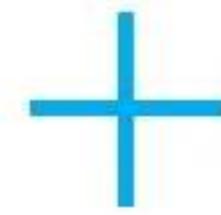
"At the domestic level, red-ball cricket can come up at the junior or age group levels so that you're not thrown into the deep end when the format comes up later in your career, as is the case with the U16 boys, who get a feel for it early on. A good phase for more red-ball cricket is the U23 phase. They'd be stronger physically; they would have had an idea of the two-day format at the U16 level and white-ball cricket. And they would be able to fine-tune their game better. With the advent of the Women's Premier League, we will

have more kids taking up cricket and white-ball cricket. Playing all formats should be done to fit a purpose, rather than blindly making all formats available. A balance is key," Raman states.

Pressure of expectations

Before one knows it, India plays another red-ball fixture against Alyssa Healy-led Australia. The Aussies play their 78th Test fixture against an Indian side that has shown great promise in the last three Tests it has played, all in the last two years. While the tape will play a similar tune at the end of that exercise around December 24, a tussle between two great rivals awaits, with a lesser-experienced India going in with a marginal upper hand.

"With these results fresh in the mind, pressure is on India, particularly because you're playing at home. The girls have created expectations. People are used to seeing you doing that well—a pressure Australia knows too well," Raman concludes.



Highlights

India beat England by 347 runs, the side's first victory over England on home soil in the format

Three Indian players made their debut in this Test—Jemimah Rodrigues (68, 27), Shubha Satheesh (69), Renuka Singh Thakur (two wickets), no debuts for England

Deepti Sharma's 9/39 match figures are the best by an Indian spinner in Women's Tests, going past Harmanpreet Kaur's 9/85 vs South Africa in Mysore in 2014

This was Harmanpreet's first victory as Test skipper, in her first game as Test captain

England batted only for 63 overs in total in this Test match; of 20 English wickets that fell, 13 fell to spin

India's win was its sixth in 39 Tests (has six losses, 27 draws in the format)

India's margin of victory is only the second instance of a 300-plus run victory in women's Tests, surpassing the previous high of a 309-run win by Sri Lanka vs Pakistan in 1998.



Deepti Sharma in elite club

4 } The number of players who have the distinction of registering a fifty in an innings and claiming at least nine wickets in the same Test in women's cricket. India's Deepti Sharma became the latest to join this elite group in the recent Navi Mumbai Test match against England. Australia's Betty Wilson and Englishwoman Enid Bakewell are the only players in the list to score a century and claim a 10-wicket haul in a match.

A 50 in an innings and 9-wicket hauls in a match in women's Test cricket

Runs	wickets	Player	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
90	4/37 & 6/28	Betty Wilson+	Aus	NZ	Wellington	Mar 1948	Won
111 & 22	6/23 & 3/39	Betty Wilson	Aus	Eng	Adelaide	Jan 1949	Won
12 & 100	7/7 & 4/9	Betty Wilson+	Aus	Eng	Melbourne (St. Kilda)	Feb 1958	Drawn
68 & 112*	3/14 & 7/61	Enid Bakewell+	Eng	WI	Birmingham	July 1979	Won
52	5/47 & 4/64	Kat Sciver-Brunt+	Eng	Aus	Worcester	Aug 2005	Won
67 & 20	5/7 & 4/32	Deepti Sharma	Ind	Eng	Navi Mumbai	Dec 2023	Won

+ Players with a fifty and 10-wicket haul in a Test match

49 } The number of balls debutant Shubha Satheesh took to record her maiden Test fifty in Navi Mumbai against England. Her performance is one of the quickest-recorded fifties in women's cricket. Both Vanessa Bowen and Shubha were on debut.

Fastest to 50 runs in women's Test cricket (where balls are recorded)

Balls to fifty	Batter (final score & balls faced)	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
40	Vanessa Bowen (63 in 52 balls)	Sri Lanka	Pakistan	Colombo, CCC	Apr 1998	Won
42	Sangita Dabir (50* in 42 balls)	India	England	Kolkata CCFC	Nov 1995	Drawn
48	Nat Sciver-Brunt (58 in 62 balls)	England	Australia	Canberra	Jan 2022	Drawn
49	Shubha Satheesh (69 in 76 balls)	India	England	Navi Mumbai	Dec 2023	Won
51	Smriti Mandhana (127 in 216 balls)	India	Australia	Carrara	Sep 2021	Drawn



India's Shubha Satheesh. PTI

428 } India's total in Navi Mumbai is now the highest in women's Test cricket, where none of the 11 batters could register a three-figure score. India also held the previous record.

Highest innings totals without an individual century in women's Test cricket

Total	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	50s	Highest score	Result
428/10	India	England	Navi Mumbai	Dec 2023	4	Shubha Satheesh 69	Won
404/9d	India	South Africa	Paarl	Mar 2002	5	Anjum Chopra 80	Won
396/9d	England	India	Bristol	Jun 2021	3	Heather Knight 95	Drawn
366/7d	Australia	England	Hove	Aug-Sep 1987	4	Ruth Buckstein 83	Drawn
362/5	New Zealand	England	Guildford	Jul 1996	4	Kristy Bond 97	Drawn

Note: the top four New Zealand players made 60+ scores

2 } The number of Test sides in women's cricket to achieve 400+ runs in a single day's play. In the Test match in Navi Mumbai, the Indian women emulated the English women after 88 years by scoring 410 runs on the opening day. The latter had made 431 against New Zealand in Christchurch in February 1935.

Highest team totals in a single day's play in a women's Test

Totals	Overs	For	Against	Venue	Achieved on	Result
431-4	– (data not available)	England	New Zealand	Christchurch	16 Feb 1935	Won
410-7	94	India	England	Navi Mumbai	14 Dec 2023	Won
362-5	100	New Zealand	England	Guildford	12 Jul 1996	Drawn
351-6	104	England	South Africa	Johannesburg	17 Dec 1960	Drawn
332-7	105	England	India	Worcester	12 Jul 1986	Drawn

Notes: ** in Christchurch, England made these runs after dismissing New Zealand for 44 in 28.2 overs
** All the above instances occurred on the first day of the Test match

23} The number of byes conceded by England wicket-keeper Amy Jones in India's first innings in Navi Mumbai. Her dubious effort is now the most-ever conceded by any wicket-keeper in an innings in women's Test cricket.

Most byes conceded in a Test innings in women's cricket

Byes	Conceded by	wicket-keeper	Against	Venue	Month, year	Result
23	England	Amy Jones	India	New Mumbai	Dec 2023	Lost
22	South Africa	Dulcie Wood	England	Cape Town	Jan 1961	Drawn
21	Pakistan	Asma Farzand	Sri Lanka	Colombo	Apr 1998	Lost
20	South Africa	Eleanor Lambert	England	Port Elizabeth	Dec 1960	Drawn

19} The number of wickets that fell on the second day of the Navi Mumbai Test match. This is now the joint second-highest number of wickets to fall on any day of a women's Test match and the most to fall in a single day's play on Indian soil. The record number of wickets remains at 24 in the women's Ashes Test match at St. Kilda in Melbourne in February 1958.

Most wickets to fall in a day's play in women's Test cricket

Wkts	Team1 (wkts)	Team2 (wkts)	Venue	Date	Day	Result
24	Australia (14)	England (10)	Melbourne (St. Kilda)	22 Feb 1958	2+	Drawn
19	England (9)	Australia (10)	Blackpool	28 Jun 1937	3	England won by 25 runs
19	England (9)	Australia (10)	The Oval	13 Jul 1937	3	Drawn
19	Australia (9)	England (10)	Worcester	1 Jul 1951	2	Australia won by 2 wkts
19	England (9)	Australia (10)	Brisbane	16 Feb 2003	2	Australia won by 5 wkts
19	India (9)	England (10)	Navi Mumbai	15 Dec 2023	2	India won by 347 runs

+ there was no play on the first day

66} The number of boundaries (including two sixes) hit by the Indian women batters in the first innings in Navi Mumbai against England. Only two other sides struck more in women's Test cricket in an innings.

Most boundaries (4s and 6s) hit in an innings in women's Tests

Bds	(4+6)	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
72	(72+0)	England (455)	South Africa	Taunton	Aug 2003	Won
67	(66+1)	Australia (569/6d)	England	Guildford	Aug 1998	Drawn
66	(64+2)	India (428)	England	New Mumbai	Dec 2023	Won
63	(63+0)	England (463)	Australia	Nottingham	June 2023	Lost
61	(61+0)	England (497)	South Africa	Shenley	Aug 2003	Drawn

Note: the number of fours hit by India is also the third-highest in women's Test cricket

479} The target set by India in the Navi Mumbai Test match is now the highest by any side in women's Test cricket. Sri Lanka is the only other side to set a target of 400 or more in women's Test cricket.

Highest target set in the fourth innings in women's Test cricket

Target	Set by	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
479	India	England (131)	Navi Mumbai	Dec 2023	Ind won by 347 runs
410	Sri Lanka	Pakistan (100)	Colombo CCC	Apr 1998	SL won by 309 runs
338	England	New Zealand (174/6)	Worcester	Jul 1954	Drawn
315	Australia	England (128)	Adelaide	Jan 1949	Aus won by 186 runs
311	New Zealand	England (225/8)	Guildford	Jul 1996	Drawn
311	India	England (210/6)	Delhi (Jamia Millia CG)	Nov 2005	Drawn

347} The margin of victory by runs for India against England in Navi Mumbai is now the biggest in women's Test cricket history. India became the second side to win by a margin of 300 runs or more in women's Test cricket.

Biggest victory margin by runs in women's Test cricket

Runs	For	Losing side	Venue	Achieved on	Winning captain
347	India	England	Navi Mumbai	16 Dec 2023	Harmanpreet Kaur
309	Sri Lanka	Pakistan	Colombo, CCC	20 Apr 1998	Rasa Silva
188	New Zealand	South Africa	Durban	13 Mar 1972	Trish McKelvey
186	Australia	England	Adelaide	18 Jan 1949	Mollie Dine
185	England	New Zealand	Auckland	29 Mar 1949	Molly Hide

All records are correct and updated until 16 December 2023

« Yes, it's time to say goodbye slowly. I haven't decided yet which date it will be but the new players are so strong and so fast. It's tough to play them »

LUKAS ROSOL

Nihit Sachdeva

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Lukas Rosol is a former top-30 player in the ATP Rankings. He was a member of the Czechia team that won the Davis Cup titles in 2012 and 2013 although he did not feature in either summit clash. He also went on to win two titles on the ATP Tour.

But perhaps, the biggest moment of Rosol's career came during Wimbledon 2012 when he stunned two-time champion Rafael Nadal in five sets in the second round.

Now, at the age of 38 and ranked 881 in the world, Rosol is close to the end of his career.

In a virtual interaction with *Sportstar* on the sidelines of the fifth season of the Tennis Premier League, the 6'4" Czech player spoke about the next generation of men's tennis from his country, Nadal's much-awaited comeback in 2024 and more.

You're someone who has played tennis at the highest level but in recent years it's been a bit tough for you to play consistently and make it to the main draws of the Slams. Being on the wrong side of 30, how tough is it for you to motivate yourself to keep pushing? Do you have a goal that you want to achieve before retiring?

It's very simple. As I have been playing for so long already (21

seasons), you just have to love tennis. I'm not doing it for money. I'm not doing it to show somebody that I will win against this guy or that guy or to win a tournament. If I win a match, it's for me. It's just a great feeling and these endorphins which you get from winning the match, you cannot buy or get somewhere. But, I think next year, I won't play much because I have a little son now. I would like to stay with him a lot and enjoy family time a little bit. Yes, it's time to say goodbye slowly. I haven't decided yet which date it will be but the new players are so strong and so fast. It's tough to play them.

What are your thoughts on the next generation of men's tennis in Czechia with the likes of Jiri Lehecka, Tomas Machac and Jakub Mensik?

After guys like (Tomas) Berdych and (Radek) Stepanek, there was a gap for a couple of years and I was sceptical. There were no players and if there were, they were around 300-400 rank. But they started to work on themselves. Lehecka, Machac and some of these young prospects are starting to play better and better. Their rank has started to improve. Lehecka is around 30 but top 20 is another step which he has to make. Machac, hopefully, is going to be in the top 100 longer than he has been so far. Mensik has a future. He has a good body and serves very

well. We also have more top women's players than men. There are always atleast 7-8 Czech women in the top 100. (Petra) Kvitova and (Karolina) Pliskova are slowly finishing their careers but there are a couple of new players like (Linda) Noskova. She was in the final in Auckland and is also good.

What do tournaments like Tennis Premier League and other leagues that take place at the end of the season mean in the current tennis ecosystem?

As many kids come to watch the sport, it is going to be more famous. It's not a bad idea to do this because if 300-400 kids come from schools everyday, they will start to like it. And even if five kids everyday start to play tennis, it's amazing. This is a great opportunity for them to start building something. Even if maybe two-three players come through, they will learn at a really good level and India will have new stars.

2012 was a great year for you since you won the Davis Cup and also, famously beat Rafael Nadal in the second round at Wimbledon. Can you share some memories from that match?

I won the first round against (Ivan) Dodig and then, I played Rafa in the second round. I was nervous and scared because it was my first time on Centre Court. It's like the best

place where you can play. I asked the organisers if I could watch it a little bit. Before me, (Ivo) Karlovic and (Andy) Murray were playing. I said, "Please, at least 3-4 games. I would like to watch the atmosphere and everything" because some of the players come in and they cannot even move and breathe because they are so nervous. They let me go. I was watching the spectators almost all the time and did not even pay attention to the game.

At the beginning of the match, my only focus was to not lose 6-0, 6-1, 6-0 because then it's gonna be a disaster, you know? I was focusing on one thing — to hold serve in the first three games and then, it's going to be okay. You're not going to lose badly. I was more relaxed after it. After I lost the first set 6-7, 30-40 percent of the spectators left. I said, "Okay, this is the challenge for me. I like it. I think I would like to call them back, you know?" Then, I won the second and third sets and already, the stadium was full.

Considering Nadal's return from injury in 2024, how tough is it for a professional tennis player to comeback at this stage, late 30s, in his career?

2024 is going to be tough for Rafa. He already said it's going to be his last year. He is playing because of the Olympics, right? And he probably wants to try the French Open. As you get older, it's going to be tough to start again after a break due to injury because you don't know how your body's going to react. It is better if the train is going. If you stop the train, the train is going to start again so slowly. He's practising and already preparing. I saw some videos from Mallorca, his base, and he's hitting the ball really hard. I'm not sure if he can win the Australian Open. I think every round that he's going to win is going to be great for him.

Nick Kyrgios recently said that the current batch of players plays faster and they can beat the older generation. Boris Becker replied to this on X and said Kyrgios does not have any credibility because he



Sunset days: The 38-year-old played for Pune Jaguars in the Tennis Premier League. Ranked 881 in the world, he is close to the end of his career. GETTY IMAGES

hasn't won a major title. What are your thoughts on this argument?

Well, tennis is really fast now. You can see (Carlos) Alcaraz — how is he running, what is he catching and from which angles is he playing? To compare the era when I was playing 10 years ago and now — everybody can now serve at 220kmh. Everybody is hitting the forehands so fast. Before, let's say, my rank was 30 and my opponent was 80. I would think, "This game, I will go only serve-and-volley. This game, I will

play only crosscourt." I wanted to practise and still I won the game. The gap was bigger. Now, in a match between a top-50 player and a top-100, 150 or 200 player, there is a gap of two, three points in every set, which is so small. The Challengers and the ATP250s are pretty even now. Before, the game was so slow. You can see on the videos. Even my coach, he was just playing rallies as they had so much time. Now, there is no chance as the rally will be finished thrice in that time.



FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

Here is a comprehensive list of pet peeves in tennis, spanning from player conduct and dress code issues to broadcasting quirks and organisational setbacks.

Paul Fein



FORMORE
STORIES

We all have our pet peeves. And if you play and watch tennis, you will surely have yours. Billie Jean King, the ultimate trailblazer, who crusaded to improve our sport since she was 11, has long targeted Wimbledon's strict all-white dress code. "Nothing is worse in sports than when you turn on the television and two players are wearing the same uniform or same outfit," she told CNN last year. "It's horrible. No one knows who's who. I've been yelling for years that this is one of my pet peeves. Have you ever seen any sport where opponents wear the same outfit?"

'Wasted time' tops Patrick McEnroe's list of pet peeves. "In no other sport do players have as much control to determine when

they want to start play as in tennis," said ESPN analyst McEnroe, a former world-class competitor, during the 2018 US Open. "Imagine getting ready to start an NFL game, a tee time at the Masters, or a World Cup soccer game, and the player says, 'Hold on! I need to go to the bathroom!'"

Time is of the essence in a sport where 'action time' — when the ball is in play — constitutes only about 15% of the 'total match time'



Scoring a point: Just as NBA teams don't lose games 108-115 or La Liga teams lose contests 2-4, tennis players at every level don't lose matches 4-6, 5-7. The proper score—whether written or spoken—is 6-4, 7-5.

GETTY IMAGES

compared to about 40% in soccer, basketball, ice hockey, and football. Rightly annoyed by lackadaisical, dawdling players, McEnroe lauded



the adoption of a 25-second 'serve clock' and escalating penalties for violations. "I am so happy that the US Open is employing the shot clock on court in the main draw," P-Mac said. "This is great for the fans. We have to keep things moving, change with the times."

As one of the world's most popular sports, tennis has plenty to brag about. But it should adopt and enforce rules—both written and unwritten—that promote fairness for players and entertainment for fans.

Towards this end, I've listed some pet peeves about what tennis can and should do without.

The wacko warmup — One of Australian pro Daria Saville's pet peeves is opponents hitting winners during the pre-match warmup. I can't conceive of that on the pro tour. At Forest Park in Springfield, Massachusetts, where I practice, a colourful character used to whack



We should look at how 24-time major winner, Novak Djokovic, graciously handles defeat, no matter how big the upset or how prestigious the tournament.

Ground reality: The primary responsibility of ball boys and girls is to efficiently remove balls from the playing area and then quickly return to their stationary positions. GETTY IMAGES

winners during the warmup, and when it was over, he'd crow, "I won the warmup!" At a senior tournament warmup, my opponent kept blasting balls in the corners. To add insult to injury, when I hit a weak return, he'd hit a drop shot.

Ball kids older than 14 years of age — Towering, older teenagers, and even young adults with beards, perform this important but routine job when much younger ball kids can do it just as well. The primary responsibility of ball boys and girls is to efficiently remove balls from the playing area and then quickly return to their stationary positions. However, I believe a secondary goal should be to inspire and educate young players from 10 to 14, the formative ages, about the many facets of tournament tennis they witness up close.

Backward scores — Want to know the score of the only Grand Slam match Novak Djokovic lost this year? Go to his 'Player Activity' section on the ATP website. There you will find the score for the Wimbledon final that he lost to



Carlos Alcaraz shown as: 6-1, 6-7 (6), 1-6, 6-3, 4-6. Try to unravel that monstrosity. The score should appear as the far more readable and understandable 1-6, 7-6 (6), 6-1, 3-6, 6-4. Just as NBA teams don't lose games 108-115 or La Liga teams don't lose contests 2-4, tennis players at every level don't lose matches 4-6, 5-7. The proper score — whether written or spoken — is 6-4, 7-5.

Lack of detail in scoreboards —

BJ Miller, an astute tennis observer from Oakland, California, contributed this pet peeve along with the remedy. "Major League Baseball and National Football League's on-screen scoreboards show a multitude of relevant stats and facts. In sharp contrast, tennis' on-screen scoreboards sometimes don't even give the players' last names, only the first three letters. They should show serve speeds, seeding, nationality [not with flags], and, ideally, number of winners, forced errors, aces, and unforced errors. The information that occasionally shows up on screen now is too complicated — 3D charts where viewers must sort out whether a player's data is by line or column before being able to compare between players, all in too short a time to even follow the announcer's explanation. The on-screen scoreboard should be in the upper left, not the lower left corner where it obscures important features of the match."

Incomplete scores —

TV networks that do not put the entire score during a match on the screen. Instead, they display the number of sets won by each player and the game score of only the set in progress. Viewers need to know the full score to understand the course and context of the match.

Caps or visors indoors —

Besides looking silly indoors, caps and visors provide no function. Mats Wilander

Shock therapy: Upsets — major and minor — occur every day at every level in tennis. But a player must embrace the underdog status — as 18-year-old qualifier Emma Raducanu did when she won the 2021 US Open. GETTY IMAGES

also pointed out that baseball caps partly hide the faces of players, citing four-time major champion Iga Swiatek. Part of the appeal of tennis is that we can clearly see the players' emotions, something much harder to do in ice hockey and American football.

Obsession with player boxes —

Is it necessary or desirable for *ESPN*, *Tennis Channel*, and other TV networks to turn their cameras on player boxes during matches so often? We see the player's family and friends cringe or cheer after points, especially big points, and their coaches, psychologists, and trainers shout advice. But when coach Brad Gilbert talked too much during the US Open, champion Coco Gauff mildly criticised him afterwards. Occasionally, members of 'the team' even argue with each other, as have the parents of Stefanos Tsitsipas. This soap opera stuff is interesting up to a point, but too much gets distracting and annoying.

Overweight players — I lose interest in and respect for players who don't get into and stay in tip-top shape. Criticism of overweight professional athletes is not 'body shaming,' as some apologists like Zina Garrison claim. It's justified, and TV tennis commentators should do it more often with neither fear nor favour.

Tennis commentator's use of 'underrated' to describe a player

or a player's stroke — There is a modicum of plausibility to this overused adjective when players are low-ranked, but otherwise, it's seldom justified. Also, the clear implication is that the commentator is the smartest guy in the room, and other analysts just haven't quite

figured out how excellent this player or stroke actually is. When *ESPN* analyst Pam Shriver once countered this 'overrated' assertion with "Who is underrating him?" she received no answer from her offending colleague, and I had to say "Hooray!" Shriver was saying what I had been thinking for years.

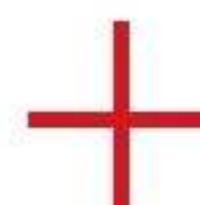
Sore losers — They never give

their winning opponent credit for their good or even excellent performance. Instead, it's all about them. These sore losers come up with all manner of excuses, from the nasty to the absurd. Serena Williams used to say she played only 20 percent of her ability and that the real Serena didn't show up. We should look at how 24-time major winner, Novak Djokovic, one of the most emotional champions in tennis history, graciously handles defeat, no matter how big the upset or how prestigious the tournament.

Distracting chatter by TV tennis

commentators — *Tennis Channel Plus*, the worst culprit, uses a split screen with one half showing a live match and the other one showing commentators talking about all sorts of tennis trivia, players, and events — anything but the match going on, which is hard to view anyway because it is on a half-screen.

Other channels have 'talking heads' who blabber ad nauseam about themselves even when it doesn't relate to the match and the players they're broadcasting. Early in the TV career of the late Vitas Gerulaitis, he memorably said, "No one cares what I did 15 years ago." A bit of an overstatement, but the 1977 Australian Open champion had a valid point.



Part of the appeal of tennis is that we can clearly see the players' emotions, something much harder to do in ice hockey and American football.



Players who celebrate after an opponent hits an unforced error —

Like him or loathe him, the charismatic Jimmy Connors started fist-pumping 50 years ago, and today it's more popular than ever. Often this celebratory gesture is accompanied by a shout of "Yeah!"

Spaniard Rafael Nadal's "Vamos!" after a dazzling shot added to his mystique as a fierce but sporting fighter.

However, fist pumps and yells after an unforced error — regardless of the score — are uncalled for and boorish.

Pre-match mini-interviews —

Perfunctory, boring, and uninformative. That describes the two-minute interviews with players just before they enter Center Court for matches at Grand Slam tournaments. In their futile quest to elicit something interesting, TV



I LOSE INTEREST IN AND RESPECT FOR PLAYERS WHO DON'T GET INTO AND STAY IN TIP-TOP SHAPE. CRITICISM OF OVERWEIGHT PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES IS NOT 'BODY SHAMING'

interviewers sometimes ask absurd questions like "What is your strategy today?" Even the most inexperienced player won't answer that question.

Players who say "I have nothing to lose" — I'm not a psychologist, but these world-class athletes may be trying to lessen the pressure they

feel as big underdogs. Whatever the reason, this pre-match expression defies logic. Upsets — major and minor — occur every day at every level in tennis. But a player must embrace the underdog status — as 18-year-old qualifier Emma Raducanu did when she won the

Not the real deal: Players who fake injuries to break their opponent's momentum, unlike Zverev here (in pic, on the ground) infuriate opponents, test the goodwill of ATP and WTA physiotherapists, and disappoint tournament directors, TV networks, and spectators. GETTY IMAGES

2021 US Open — and not prepare for defeat with the nonsense that they have nothing to lose. Memo: we all have a winnable match to lose. So don't say it or even think it.

The 'house money' line — A corollary to the previous

rationalisation is the equally nonsensical claim by TV commentators: "He's playing on house money now." *Wiktionary* defines this expression as "To be in a situation where little or no personal risk can be incurred" and "To act as though little or no risk can be incurred." Commentators trot out this logical fallacy when an unheralded player or a heavy underdog pulls two or more upsets and then faces a much higher-ranked opponent. But, in fact, these underdogs who have increasing momentum and confidence not only have much to gain in the coming match but also much to lose—typically a berth in the semifinals or final.

Faking injuries — Players who fake injuries to break their opponent's momentum and to get rest when they are exhausted and then defend it by saying — "Everyone does it" — when everyone obviously doesn't. These bad guys infuriate



Lost cause: Tanking is one of the worst sins—if not the worst—that tennis players like Bernard Tomic have committed. It also shortchanges and angers spectators, tournament directors, opponents, the media, and sponsors. GETTY IMAGES

opponents, test the goodwill of ATP and WTA physiotherapists, and disappoint tournament directors, TV networks, and spectators. While these rascals sometimes get away with it and win the match, they end up losing the respect of their colleagues.

Pointless replays and challenges — Asking for a replay or challenging a line call that was

obviously very far in or out. In 2025, the ATP Tour will use Electronic Line Calling Live — known as ELC Live — for all ‘out’ calls in all matches. Until then, umpires will indulge players who exploit the current Player Challenge rule and delay play for no good reason.

Hypersensitive players — These babies can deal with the roar of the crowd during high-pressure points but get bent out of shape and refuse

to play following a changeover because a couple of spectators way up on Row 37 in the stadium are unobtrusively returning to their seats. You cannot be serious!

Tanking — What Nick Kyrgios, Bernard Tomic, and Benoit Paire have done in this era and what Marat Safin did 15 years ago produces more than peeved reactions. Tanking is defined as intentionally losing a match by not trying. Typically, that means either not

« The ITF should have a Board of Directors that reflects its diverse membership »



In or out?: In 2025, the ATP Tour will use Electronic Line Calling Live—known as ELC Live—for all 'out' calls in all matches. GETTY IMAGES

running hard or at all to return shots, or hitting extremely low-percentage shots to get the match over with as fast as possible. Tanking is one of the worst sins — if not the worst — a tournament tennis player can commit. It also shortchanges and angers spectators, tournament directors, opponents, the media, and sponsors.

ITF sexism — On its website, The International Tennis Federation, the world governing body of the sport for its 213 member nations, proudly

declares, "The International Tennis Federation is fighting bias and discrimination against women in sport." If so, it should have a Board of Directors that reflects its diverse membership.

Denouncing the longtime and worsening leadership sexism within ITF leadership, Judy Murray, the eminent coach and mother of Andy and Jamie, recently said: "It's 14 men again.

It was 14 men when I first noticed it back in 2010. And in between time, because of certain people campaigning, there were 12 men and two women. And the two women who were on it were both former players, great players. And this is a global board, and they came

off it because they weren't being listened to." Look no further than Pam Shriver, Amelie Mauresmo, Mary Carillo, Leslie Allen, Stacey Allaster, Caroline Wozniacki, and Murray herself. These super seven are more than qualified to serve on the ITF Board of Directors, and their expertise, experience, and judiciousness would make a profound difference.

Now that I've gotten my peeves about all these human failures and foibles off my chest, I look forward to happier days in 2024.

Then establishment bigwigs everywhere will show us how open-minded and smart they are as they reform our beautiful, but imperfect sport.



» VOLLEYBALL

PERUGIA LIVING THE

Sicoma Perugia won the Men's Volleyball Club World Championships after a **dominant display** in the finals against Itambe Minas.

Netra V

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If domination had a synonym at the FIVB Men's Volleyball Club World Championships, it would be Sir Sicoma Perugia.

The club from Italy came into the competition as the defending champion, ready to conquer 'The Indian dream' — a motto written on the back collar of their staff jerseys.

India hosted the 2023 edition of the tournament, wherein the winners of the Prime Volleyball League participated along with clubs from around the world.

The 2023 edition saw Ahmedabad Defenders, the winners of PVL 2023, drawn with eventual finalists Perugia and Brazil's Itambe Minas in Pool A.

The other Pool saw four-time winner Sada Cruzeiro Volei of Brazil and two debutants, Halkbank Spor Kulubu from Turkey and Japan's Suntory Sunbirds.

Defenders, in its campaign opener, put up a tough

fight against Minas but lost in straight sets (22-25, 23-25, 19-25) at the Koramangala Indoor Stadium, Bengaluru.

In its second game against the Italian powerhouse Perugia, the team was awestruck by the Italian side's fiery attack and solid defence.

Perugia beat the Defenders 25-18, 25-19, 25-11, with the Cuban-Ukrainian duo of Jesus Herrera Jaime and Oleh Plotnytskyi causing the most damage.

With this loss, the Defenders became the only team in this edition to not win a single match.

Its captain Muthusamy Appavu, however, was proud of the way his men fought, considering that it was the first time they were facing these



INDIAN DREAM

teams and players. He expressed hope that they will make an entry into the tournament next year with a new team.

S. Dakshinamoorthy, the Defenders' head coach, said, "As the hosts we were able to face the top clubs from around the world. This experience will motivate our players. Players from other clubs are very experienced, have undergone a lot of training and are playing in top-level European leagues. If this culture and professionalism is developed in our country, our players can also move higher."

The setbacks for the Indian side started with players not receiving permission from their departments for the tournament training sessions;

the Defenders came together just 15-20 days prior. "What's problematic in our system is receiving permission from the respective departments that they work for, due to which the camp started late," said Dakshinamoorthy.

Another major woe was when SV Guru Prasanth got injured while training in Bengaluru, a few days before the tournament. Angamuthu Ramaswamy, another outside hitter, felt that the injury scare was a point of concern for the team but hoped the team would bounce back.

Adding a fresh perspective to the Defenders' side was the inclusion of Australian outside hitter Max Senica. "We watched the opposition very excitedly. Max saw this and called a

'AS THE HOSTS, WE WERE ABLE TO FACE THE TOP CLUBS FROM AROUND THE WORLD. THIS EXPERIENCE WILL MOTIVATE OUR PLAYERS' – S DAKSHINAMOORTHY, AHMEDABAD DEFENDERS' HEAD COACH

All hail the champion: Sir Sicoma Perugia won the FIVB Men's Volleyball Club World Championship after beating Itambe Minas 25-13, 25-21, 25-19. SUDHAKARAJAIN



meeting. He told us that we are not their fans and should not react like that when we see them since we will be competing against them. These words stuck with me," said Angamuthu, while recalling how Max expected them to stay grounded.

The home team enjoyed the support of fans from neighbouring States as well. Amidst the white placards and flags of the Ahmedabad team was a red banner from Chembada, the official fan club of its PVL rivals, the Calicut Heroes. The banner read — 'India's pride at World Volley Club Champs.'

Among the other five teams, two players got the most cheers from the Indian audience — Sunbirds' famed London Olympics 2012 winner Dmitry Muserskiy, who played opposite hitter, and Perugia's captain, Wilfredo Leon, who was benched for the entire tournament due to an injury.

Pool A saw Perugia comfortably top the table, while in Pool B, all the teams lost at least one match. The opening match saw the clash of the two debutants — Halkbank and Sunbirds — in which the latter pipped the former 25-23, 25-23, 25-16 after staying neck-and-neck in



JAPAN'S SUNTORY SUNBIRDS CLINCHED THIRD PLACE, COMING BACK FROM A TWO-SET DEFICIT TO TAKE THE NEXT THREE SETS, AGAINST HALKBANK

the first two sets. Also, for the first time in this edition, a five-set thriller took place when Sada edged past Sunbirds, 25-21, 31-29, 28-30, 22-25, 15-12.

However, all did not go as planned for the Brazilian side in the next match as it lost 26-24, 25-18, 28-26 to Halkbank.

Halkbank, needing either a 3-0 or 3-1 win to enter the semis, pulled it off courtesy the combination and tactical understanding between French Olympic champion Earvin Ngapeth and Dutch captain Nimir Abdel-Aziz.

However, the over-dependence on the two led Halkbank to falter in the first two sets against Perugia before attempting a comeback in the third. Yet it narrowly failed, 25-14, 25-16, 31-29.

The other semifinal saw a power tussle between Sunbirds and Minas, with the former heavily reliant on Muserskiy. Minas also faced an unforeseen circumstance when its star player, Isac Santos, suffered a fall in the first set and was benched. Michael Sanchez and Marcus Vinicius Evangelista Coelho stepped up in Santos' absence to seal the fifth set and match, 22-25, 25-22, 28-30, 25-20, 17-15.

Sunbirds eventually clinched third place, coming back from a two-set deficit against Halkbank, to take the next three sets and win 17-25, 23-25, 25-21, 25-19, 15-12, much to the delight of the 1000-plus audience.

The day of the final saw a huge crowd, with many coming with handmade placards ready to cheer their favourite players and get an opportunity to get autographs.

Among them were two friends who had come with their families. The two played college-level volleyball during their days at Trichy National College. They came from Tamil Nadu to meet with their favourite players, which included Muserskiy and Alain Junior De

Apex predator: Oleh Plotnytskyi was the most valuable player of the tournament and the best outside hitter. SUDHAKARA JAIN



History makers: Kamil Semeniuk (No. 16) of Sir Sicoma Perugia, which became just the third club in the tournament's history, apart from Sada and Trentino Volley, to successfully defend the title. SUDHAKARA JAIN

Armas. The final practice session before the match saw two contrasting training patterns. While the Perugia players were kicking the ball towards each other, Minas' trainers were offering tips and helping the players stretch in sync. Then came the last spike practice for the tournament, where balls flew all over the stadium with the audience cheering and hitting the ball away every time it came close to them.

To get a better view of their favourite players, the audience resorted to sitting on the floor in the stand, and they were not disappointed as the Italian and Brazilian outfits provided ample entertainment. In less than an hour and a half after the whistle that started the final between Perugia and Minas, the winner was decided. With a 25-13, 25-21, 25-19 clean victory, Perugia became just the third

club in the tournament's history, apart from Sada (winner: 2013, 2015, 2016, 2021) and Trentino Volley (winner: 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012), to successfully defend the title.

According to Minas' captain Lucas Loh, despite the team having a chance to get ahead of Perugia in the second set, they could not make the most of it. "This (the points Perugia earned back) is all in their service and the potential to get back in the game. Because of their service, we couldn't do that (create a lead and win the set)," he said.

Another setback for the Brazilian outfit was the absence of Santos on the court. "Isac is one of our most important spikers, who exerts immense pressure on the opposition and spikes high and hard. So (his absence) was felt. However, there is no excuse for us this time as we had good players that we could bank on.

"And we did a good job in the semifinal," said Loh.

Plotnytskyi, the most valuable player of the tournament and the best outside hitter, was glad that the four consecutive days of hustle and back-to-back games without a day's break had finally come to a halt. However, the Ukrainian was pleased to note that the team achieved the goal that it worked towards.

"We are happy that we won — it was our goal. But our main goal was to make our team stronger and grow as the tournament progressed, as we had to play for four continuous days with different food, gym and other changes. But we are professionals, so we had to be ready for this," said the 26-year-old.

In the end, Sicoma did end up fulfilling its motto and realising 'The Indian Dream' and hopes to replicate the same in 2024.



FOR MORE STORIES

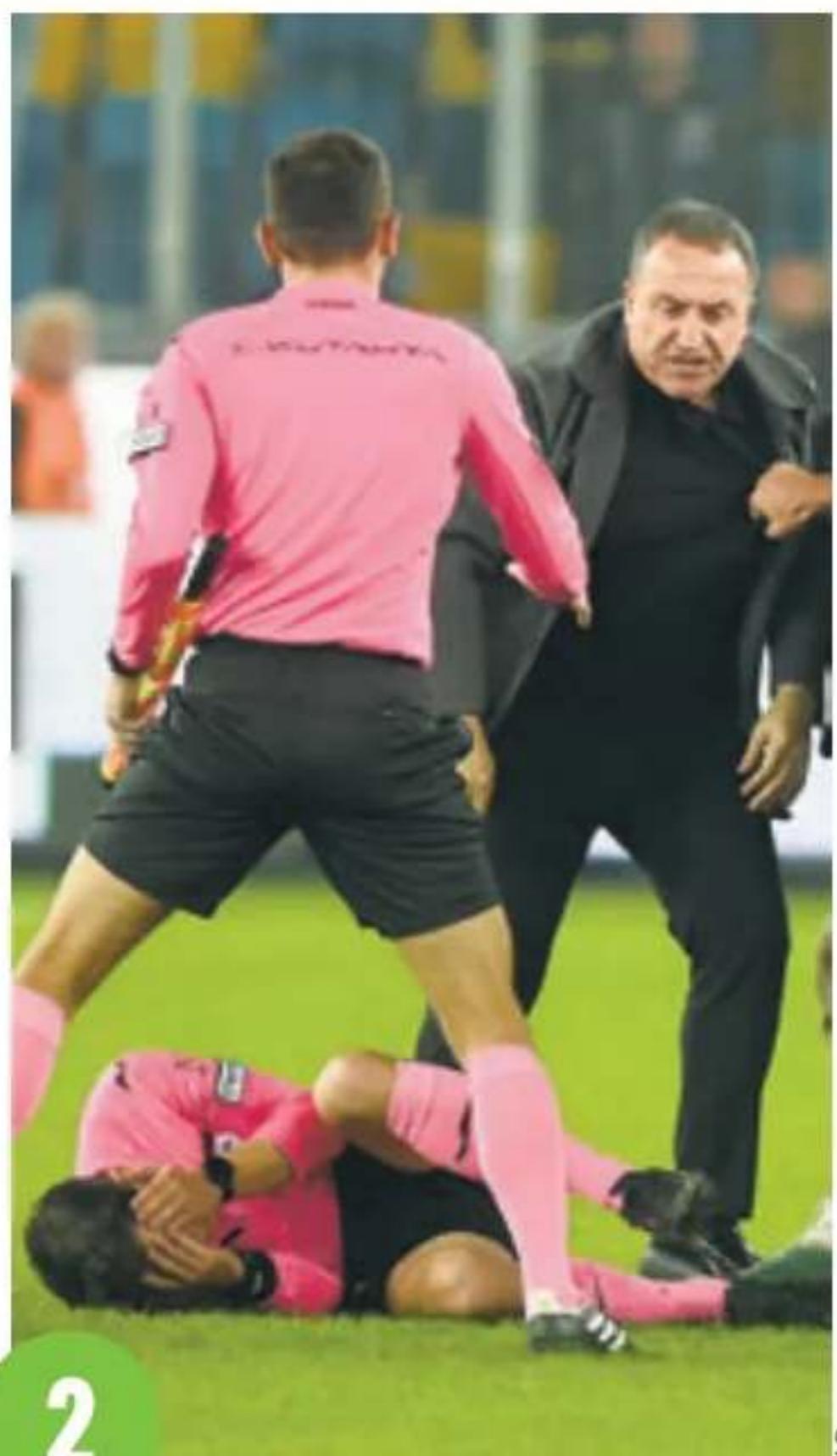


1

One last dance

Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo are set to face off once again when their present sides, Inter Miami and Al Nassr, meet as a part of the former's pre-season international tour.

The Major League Soccer (MLS) club announced earlier this month that it will participate in the Riyadh Season Cup, where it will also take on the other Saudi powerhouse, Al-Hilal.



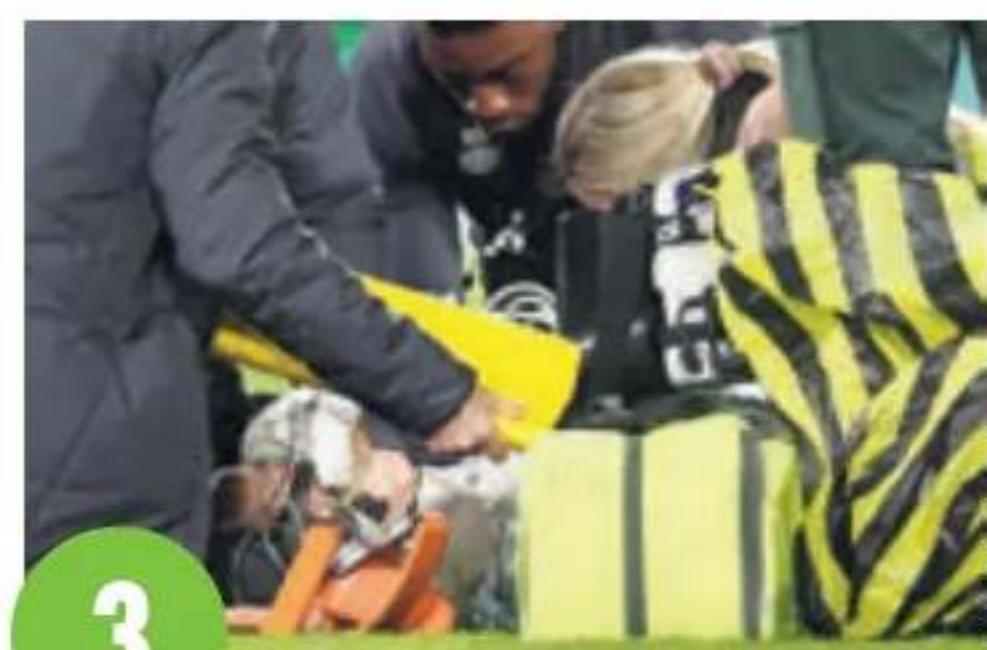
2

Turkish football comes to a standstill

Turkish football caught global attention for all the wrong reasons after a referee was attacked by a top-flight club president following a Super Lig match.

The referee, Halil Umut Meler (on the ground), was punched in the face by MKE Ankaragucu's president, Faruk Koca (in black), following which fans of the club kicked the sprawling match official. The incident caused the suspension of footballing action in the country, while Koca was arrested and later resigned from his position with the club. Meler suffered a minor fracture near his eye but was soon discharged from the hospital.

Koca was later banned from football for life by the Turkish Football Federation.



3

Premier League match abandoned due to medical emergency

The Premier League match between Luton Town and Bournemouth was abandoned after the former's captain Tom Lockyer collapsed on the pitch due to a heart attack in the 59th minute. Luton later conveyed through a statement that Lockyer, who was responsive by the time medics took him off the pitch on a stretcher, was in a stable condition.



GETTY IMAGES

4

Farewell Giorgio Chiellini

Legendary Italian defender Giorgio Chiellini (left) called time on his storied football career. Chiellini, who won the Serie A nine times with Juventus, played his farewell match with Los Angeles FC in the side's MLS Cup final defeat to Columbus Crew. The 39-year-old, who represented Italy 117 times, had retired from international football last year. Chiellini's greatest moment with the Azzuri came in 2021 when he captained his side to the Euro title.



5

Manchester United's embarrassing UCL exit

Manchester United recorded one of the worst-ever UEFA Champions League campaigns by a Premier League side after it crashed to a 0-1 defeat to Bayern Munich in the final group stage match and finished last in its group.

United, which became the first Premier League side to finish bottom of a UCL group twice, also set the unwanted record for most goals conceded (15) by an English side in the group stage of a UCL season.



6

Trailblazer Welch

The Premier League will have its first female referee when Rebecca Welch takes charge of Fulham's home game against Burnley later this month.

In November, Welch became the first female fourth official in a PL match, between Manchester United and Fulham.

The 40-year-old is a regular figure in the Women's Super League and was on duty at the Women's World Cup earlier this year.

Aneesh Dey & Pranay Rajiv

» MATCH OF THE
FORTNIGHT

A CATALAN CATASTROPHE

Girona handed Barcelona a shock defeat in La Liga, adding credence to its fairytale pursuit of the league crown.

BARCELONA

2

Robert Lewandowski 19'
Ilkay Gundogan 90'+2'

GIRONA

4

Artem Dovbyk 12'
Miguel Gutierrez 40'
Valery Fernandez 80'
Cristian Stuani 90'+5'

Usually, the top five leagues in Europe, over the years, have been accustomed to crowning some familiar names as champions at the end of the season. But now and then, there comes a team which breaks the norm. In the Premier League, Leicester City had a fairytale season in the 2015-16 season. Last season, Napoli revived the magic of the Diego Maradona era by clinching the Scudetto. This season, La Liga is seeing a similar story in Girona, which currently sits among the top three in the table with 44 points, after 17 matches.

To add some context to the gravity of this achievement, the club made their first division (La Liga) debut only in the previous decade (2017-18 season) and has since competed in only three seasons before this year, finishing never higher than 10th.

Magical seasons produce magical results, especially when the weaker teams beat the Goliaths of the league. That, complemented by a bit of luck, cooks up a perfect underdog story for the ages.

And Girona looks on course to writing its own after a fantastic 4-2 win against defending champion Barcelona.

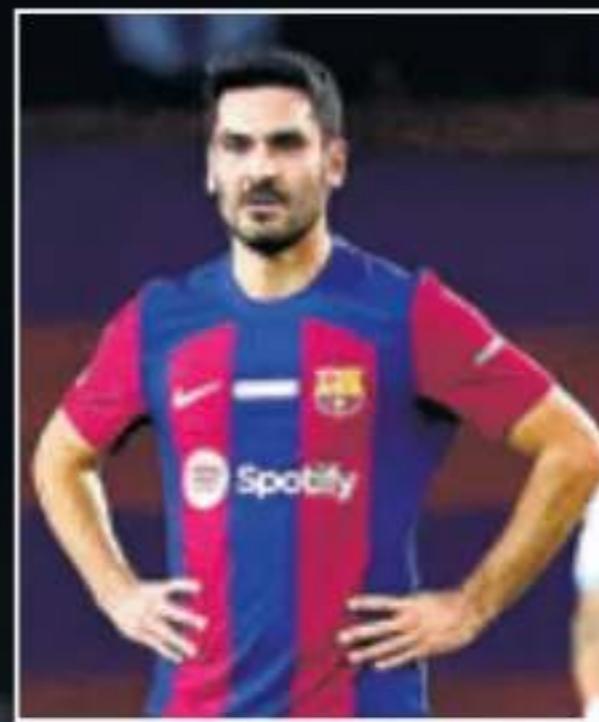
The match had a fast start, with Artem Dovbyk opening the scoring for the visitors in the 12th minute. But the Catalans replied swiftly with an equaliser by Robert Lewandowski seven minutes later.

Then started the Barca dominance. At times, the Girona defence was all over the place but somehow hung on amidst a barrage of attacks from the home team.

With half-time on the horizon, Miguel Gutierrez scored against the run of play to provide a 2-1 lead to Girona. After a one-two with Ivan Martin, Gutierrez dropped a shoulder to wrongfoot Jules Kounde, cut in and curled the ball past Barca keeper Inaki Pena Sotorres.

Barca started the second half strongly and even brought on Lamine Yamal and Ferran Torres to sharpen its attack. However, Xavi's men lacked the finishing touch and were punished again in the 80th minute, this time by Valery Fernandez, who found the net just two minutes after coming on.

While it did pull a goal back in the second minute of additional time via Ilkay Gundogan, any comeback hopes were squashed by Cristian Stuani, who made it 4-2 in the 95th minute to complete an extraordinary upset.



Giant killer: Miguel Gutierrez (No. 3) scores the second goal for Girona, which looks set to achieve its best ever finish in La Liga. REUTERS

Top: Ilkay Gundogan looks devastated after Barca's defeat. GETTY IMAGES



Game of draws

While Mohammedan SC and Churchill Brothers delivered a **thrilling stalemate**, the Indian Women's League kicked off with a draw and a win for defending champion Gokulam Kerala.



PICS: AIFF

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Mohammedan SC continued its unbeaten run in the I-League after a pulsating goalless draw away from home to Churchill Brothers. In what was an end-to-end game (above left), the latter battered the league toppers with 22 shots on goal but without much luck.

Mohammedan goalkeeper Padam Chhetri came up with crucial saves in the second half to ensure the Kolkata-based club remained top of the league, four points ahead of Sreenidhi Deccan and Real Kashmir, who are second and third, after 10 matches.

The other in-form team in the league is Real Kashmir, which has not lost in six matches largely thanks to a run of five goals from striker Gnohere Krizo, who has returned to the club after 2020.

Two-time champion Gokulam Kerala remained winless in six matches after its 1-1 draw at Aizawl FC. League top-scorer Alejandro Sanchez scored his first open-play goal in six matches while GKFC's struggles against the top half of the table continued.

The Indian Women's League, which will be played over four months for the first time, kicked off earlier this month.

While this season will be a seven-team league compared to 14 from last season, the teams will play in a home-and-away basis, as opposed to playing in a centralised venue in previous years.

The defending champion Gokulam Kerala began with a goalless draw against league contender Sethu FC before scraping a 1-0 win away to HOPS.

Kickstart (above, right) has maintained a 100 per cent start with two wins with four goals from Karishma Shirvoikar, while Odisha FC also got off the mark with a 3-0 win.

» ISL DIARY

Some matches assume an aura of exceptional competitiveness that keeps fans talking about them for a long time.

Such was the case when Mohun Bagan Super Giant met the Juggernauts (read Odisha FC) in matchweek nine of Indian Super League, a contest that took the form of a gladiatorial duel.

The season started with the two sides meeting in the AFC Cup group league fixtures. The Mariners won the first match (on September 19) 4-0 at the Kalinga Stadium before the Juggernauts visited Salt Lake Stadium to avenge the defeat 5-2 (November 27). The second result saw an end to Mohun Bagan's journey in the continental competition while brightening the possibility of Odisha's qualification to the next stage.

The conflict assumed a bigger form as the two met again in the Indian Super League fixture (on December 6) at the Salt Lake Stadium.

The action on the ground was an intense, venomous battle. Odisha FC enjoyed the first half, leading 2-0 in a scrappy encounter, before Mohun Bagan rallied back to draw level 2-2.

The frayed tempers of that fiery match left three Mohun Bagan players injured and saw the players and the coaching staff get involved in a verbal joust after the match, sometimes giving way to pushing and shoving.

Referee Crystal John finally brought an end to the undesirable post-match incident by flashing red cards to Mohun Bagan's head coach Juan Ferrando and Odisha FC striker Diego Mauricio. Roy Krishna, a former Mohun Bagan player now joining the Odisha FC ranks, also played a big role in the altercation but escaped with a booking.

Amitabha Das Sharma

Brutal encounter: Odisha FC enjoyed the first half, leading 2-0 in a scrappy encounter, before Mohun Bagan rallied back to draw level 2-2. PTI



AN INTENSE RIVALRY

The latest match between Mohun Bagan SG and Odisha FC was nothing short of a **gladiatorial duel**.



Mumbai City and East Bengal play out a draw

It was the dawn of a new era at the Mumbai Football Arena as the Islanders' faithful unsheathed a banner, which read 'The Kratky era.'

There was a vibe of optimism in the sea of blue, waiting with bated breath to watch Mumbai City FC play its first home game under the tutelage of Petr Kratky, the club's new manager after Des Buckingham's departure. To counter the rippling energy from the Mumbai fans was the age-old chants of 'Joy East Bengal' from the ones adorned in Red and Gold (above).

The balance tipped heavily in favour of Mumbai City ahead of its home clash against East Bengal, but last season's 1-0 away win against the Islanders meant that Carles Cuadrat's men had reason to believe as well. The Islanders tried to lay down the marker early in the match, with Kratky giving the Mumbai fans a glimpse of the football he expects his team to play — swift passing into the channels, making full use of the pitch and direct, attacking football.

But in the end, Kratky's first home match turned out to be anti-climactic because all that pressure resulted in just a point. The clash finished in a 0-0 draw. East Bengal, while tepid on the attacking front, showed discipline at the back and managed to earn a point despite being under pressure for most of the match.

It is early days for Kratky, however, and he, like any new coach, deserves the time to implement his philosophy. And judging by the clash against East Bengal, work remains to be done.

Aneesh Dey

Chennaiyin finally pips Bengaluru

Chennaiyin FC hadn't beaten bitter

rival Bengaluru FC in the Indian Super League for the past four years, and the Supermachans made sure they had a ball once Owen Coyle's men trumped Sunil Chhetri's side.

An 'unleash the beast' tifo — a regular feature in CFC home games — could very well describe how the home fans and team celebrated the much-awaited victory. The club faithful gathered close to the team bus and let out their loudest chants.

However, the decibel level reached its crescendo when the man who orchestrated their win from the sidelines sat on the driver's seat of their bus for a picture or two, obliging to the fans' request.

Coyle (left) stayed true to his words before the game:

"We want to win, not only for the points but also for our passionate fans."

Sankar Narayanan EH

« Each coach has taught me something important for a lifetime »

SELVAM KARTHI

K.Keerthivasan

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During the recent Asian Champions Trophy (ACT) tournament in Chennai, up-and-coming hockey players, along with a few senior citizens and kids, flocked to the Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium in Egmore to witness the performance of their home state player, Selvam Karthi.

The 22-year-old from Ariyalur, Tamil Nadu, didn't let down his fans, displaying flashes of shooting brilliance in several matches and contributing to India's gold medal in the tournament, which is considered a crucial practice event leading up to the Asian Games.

Before the ACT, Karthi showcased his striking skills in various games of the Pro League held in Rourkela, London, and the Netherlands, earning praise from both critics and fans.

While there were expectations that he might be selected for the Indian men's squad at the Hangzhou Asian Games, the selectors opted for senior players, leaving Karthi disappointed. Undeterred, he has

been working on improving his game based on feedback from coaches and well-wishers.

Now, his sights are set on the 2024 Paris Olympics. In an interview with *Sportstar*, he acknowledged the tough competition from senior players in his position. "I have to work harder to be part of the team for Paris," he said, while training with the Tamil Nadu men's team in Chennai for the Goa National Games.

Describe your journey from Ariyalur to the senior national team.

It has been a fantastic learning experience so far. I've interacted with a number of coaches and had the opportunity to play alongside individuals with varying playing styles from different states. Actually, when I joined the junior team at the camp in 2021, I trained a lot in Bengaluru, but I didn't get a chance to be a part of the junior set-up as I was not in the Indian team for the 2021 Junior World Cup in Bhubaneswar. I didn't worry about it too much. Soon, I made my debut in the men's Asia

Cup in Dhaka. Then I played in the Pro League and the ACT in Chennai. I couldn't have asked for more. At the same time, there is still plenty to learn and adapt to.

You are a product of the hostels of the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu, where you stayed at a young age while actively participating in tournaments. How was the experience?

I have been in sports hostels since my seventh-grade year at the YMCA College in Chennai. My journey led me to Tiruchi and later to Kovilpatti as I continued studying in sports hostels. A number of coaches, including Raja, Santhosh, R. Siva, and N. Muthukumar, shaped my game. It was coach Siva sir in Tiruchi who insisted that I switch my position from a center half to a forward/striker.

During inter-sports hostel tournaments in Tiruchi, I formed a strong partnership with Nanda, boosting my confidence as a striker. Subsequently, at the Sports Hostel of Excellence in Kovilpatti, I developed



PICS: M. VEDHAN

my game further. No doubt, sports hostels have played a huge role in shaping my journey.

How was it to change position from a centre half?

As a center half, my primary responsibility was distributing balls. However, Siva sir believed in my goal-scoring potential, prompting me to focus on drills that enhanced my shooting skills.

From your first coach, Raja, to the current Indian men's team coach, Craig Fulton, how have they groomed your game and style?

Each coach has taught me something important for a lifetime. I learnt a lot from everyone. Being in the same Indian team as B.J. Kariappa sir was an enlightening affair, while Sardar Singh shared his own experience while being a coach.

As for the senior team coaches, Fulton and Graham Reid, their approaches are different. When I was not selected for the junior World Cup, Reid advised me to enhance my speed and footwork. While under Fulton's guidance, I was provided with an opportunity to display my skills in the Pro League.

Reid taught me the importance of speed as he relies more on counter-attacks while Fulton insisted on building the game within the established structure. Both have taught me to be quicker and the need to work on movements.

Why didn't you get to play more in juniors?

That was due to the lockdown. When I got a chance in the men's Asia Cup, I proved my worth by scoring a goal against Pakistan. Overall, I did well.

How was the atmosphere in that game against Pakistan in the Dhaka Asia Cup?

When we face Pakistan, the crowd is always charged-up. It was no different in Dhaka. My confidence grew sky-high after my first goal in that match. Subsequently, I performed well in the following games. Reid was very helpful as he



analysed my game after every match and told me to maintain consistency at all costs. The Asia Cup memories were very sweet, with the seniors sharing their experiences and making me feel like I belong.

How have the senior players guided you?

Harmanpreet, who has been my idol ever since I started playing hockey, gave me instructions on how to receive the ball better. Mandeep advised me on not only how to stand while receiving the ball, but also how to cut and pass. Everyone has been so friendly that I picked up Hindi

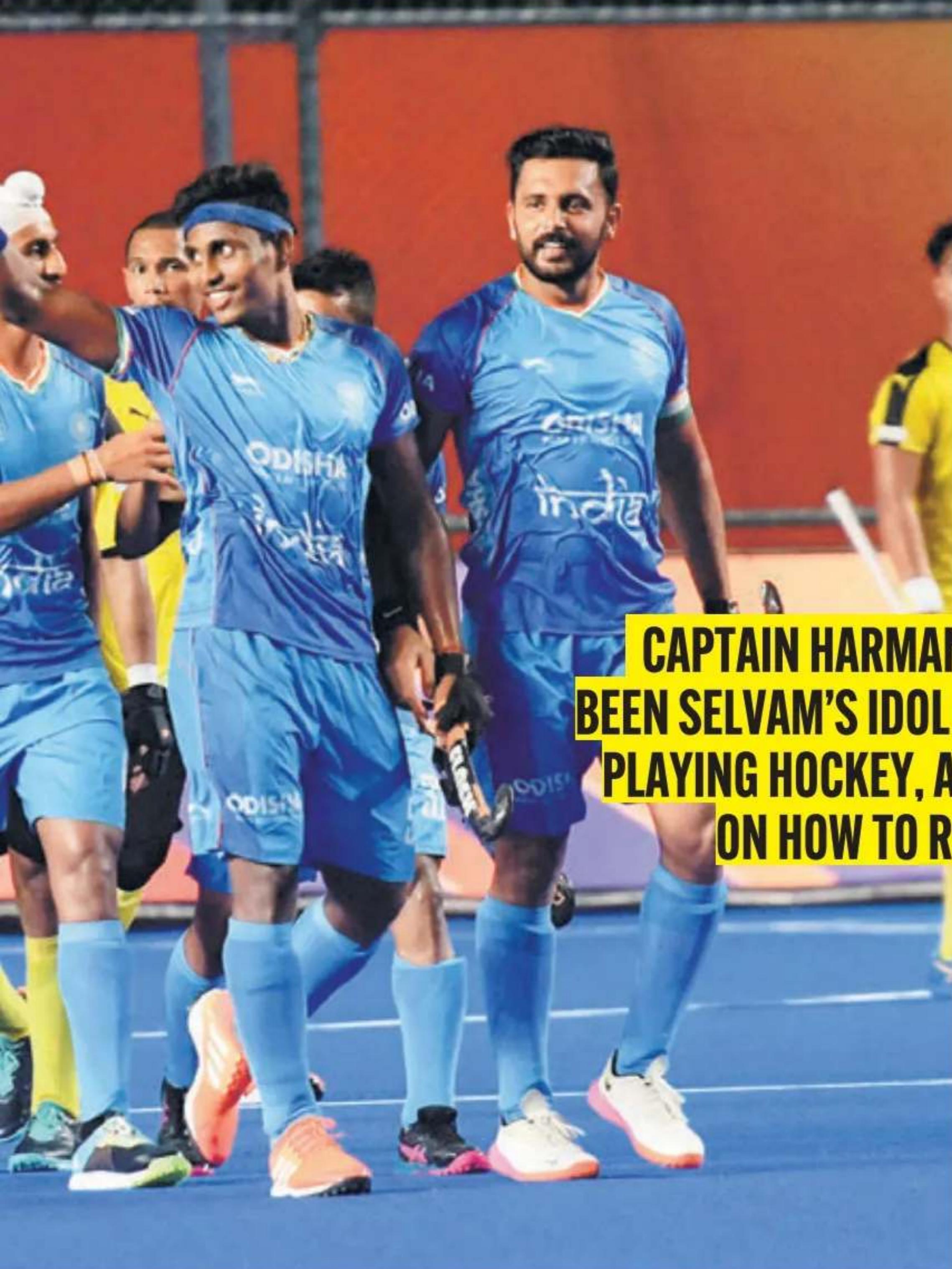
quite easily.

You were very impressive in the ACT. How was your experience in the tournament?

It was the first time that I was playing for the Indian team in front of a home crowd, which was really great. Also, playing in front of my parents was special indeed. The fans supported me too. There was so much energy in every match.

How was it training with your State mates for the Goa National Games?

I mingled with them well. It is not



CAPTAIN HARMANPREET SINGH, WHO HAS BEEN SELVAM'S IDOL EVER SINCE HE STARTED PLAYING HOCKEY, ADVISED THE YOUNGSTER ON HOW TO RECEIVE THE BALL BETTER

new. I have played with them before. Having played in the ACT, my mindset is now different. With my experience, I want to help the TN team do well in the National Games and the Senior National championships (in November in Chennai).

Can you share your Pro League experience in London, Netherlands and Rourkela?

I enjoyed and learnt from them. The Europeans play fast hockey with quick ball distribution. I felt the urge to compete and improve after playing in the Pro League.

You must have felt bad on missing the cut for the Hangzhou Asian Games?

I got news of my exclusion after the ACT. I didn't ask any questions. I was told that the seniors were given a chance and that I needed experience and to improve on certain things.

Such as?

I have to improve inside the 'D' and run better without the ball. I also have to improve my body language while running.

You must have watched the Indian

team's Asian Games performance.

Yes. There's a significant difference between the team's performance in the ACT and Hangzhou.

Take, for example, the way we played against Pakistan in Chennai and in the Asian Games. There were stark differences. We had speed and scored plenty in the Asian Games, but we couldn't replicate the same success in the ACT.

I regret missing out on the Games. My focus now is to secure a spot in the national team for the Paris Olympics, where competition for my position will be intense.



Your father is working as a watchman in a college while your mom is a domestic worker. Given the difficult economic situation, how did you manage your career?

In the early days, I didn't have many people to help me. It's only when I started playing for the national team that people started noticing me.

During difficult times, Ranjit Kumar helped me financially; he still does. My parents are happy now. Of course, it was a tough childhood. Now that I have got a job in the Income Tax Department (Chennai), we are more or less settled.

My younger brother is working and my elder sister is doing well. I am relieved as my parents' struggles have resulted in my dream becoming a reality.

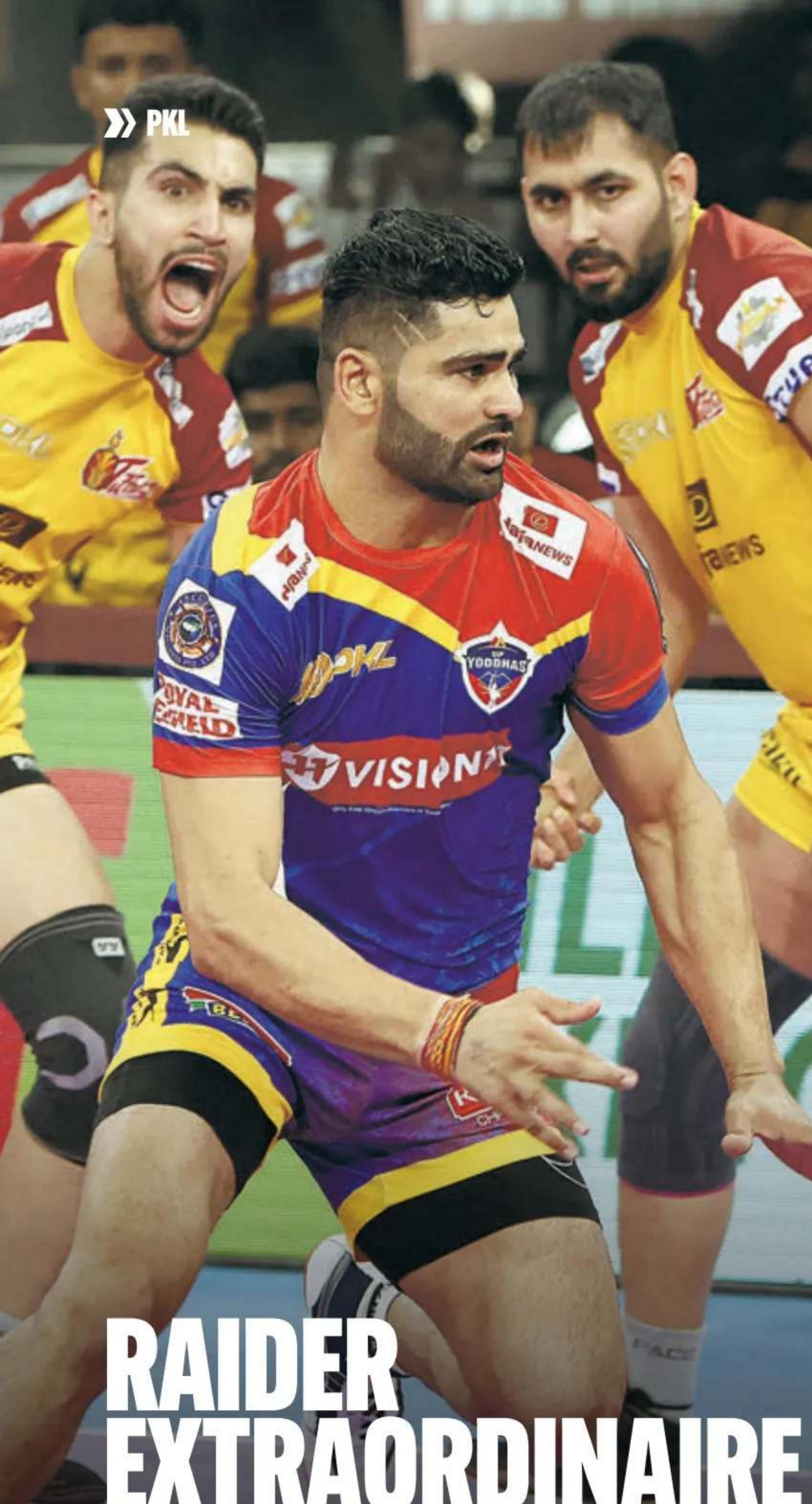
Your next target?

We have the Pro League coming up, and, sometime in January, we have the 5-on-5 World Cup. I hope to do well in the selection trials and be a part of the team.

» PKL

RAIDER EXTRAORDINAIRE

Pardeep Narwal, the most successful raider in Pro Kabaddi League, now stands on the verge of a **defining legacy.**



Mayank

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Through its decade-long journey, the Pro Kabaddi League has seen the rise of numerous stars, yet none have cast as imposing a shadow as Pardeep Narwal.

Having won three PKL trophies (with his erstwhile franchise, Patna Pirates), Narwal is one of the league's most successful raider. He was once the league's most expensive player as well, and now stands on the verge of a defining legacy.

"I feel so good to have this opportunity to play here. I got all the fame and praises after playing here, it feels complete," says Narwal to *Sportstar*. Hailing from the quaint village of Rindhana in Haryana's Sonipat district, he will now lead UP Yoddhas for the third year in a row.

But behind the glamorous spectacle and raucous cheers, he is now at a crossroad — where echoes of his past triumphs meet a challenging future.

In order to overcome his fitness struggles, Narwal dedicated himself to becoming one of the fittest players on the mat for UP this season.

"Whatever the coaches or fitness trainers say, we must follow it. I'm trying to go above and beyond. The game is all about speed and agility, so my main goal is to work on these aspects and stay on top of my game," he explains.

UP Yoddhas conducted a rigorous training camp for over a month and a half before the tournament, ensuring that all players, including Narwal, were match-ready. It also opened an academy a couple of years ago, providing players with training facilities, playing mats, a gym, and industry-standard equipment.

Yoddhas' coach Jasveer Singh chips in, "Previously, at the camps that we used to run, the players had

Leading from the front: Hailing from the quaint village of Rindhana, nestled in the heart of Haryana's Sonipat district, the 26-year-old will lead UP Yoddhas for the third year in a row. **PKL**



to practise in hotels without mats. We also used to not have outdoor practice tracks. The biggest benefit was acquiring quality NYP players through the academy."

UP, retaining its core for PKL 10, welcomed new additions like Gurdeep, Kiran Magar, Nitin Panwar and the experienced Vijay Malik. Narwal opines, "Our team is fine. We have quality players on our side like Nitesh and Surender. We also have Vijay this time but the team will only be called good if we perform when it matters."

Before the Bengaluru leg, UP found itself in troubled waters against the Bengaluru Bulls. Narwal, the standout performer for UP, orchestrated a remarkable comeback, amassing 13 points and reaching the milestone of 1600 career raid points along the way. Despite his extraordinary performance, UP suffered a narrow two-point defeat, leaving Narwal visibly frustrated.

"Dukh toh hota hi hai bhai (It hurts, brother)... Bengaluru had lost all four games before facing us, and we served the match to them on a

platter. It is painful," he says.

Discussing his on-field strategy, he says, "I never get angry at anyone. *Khair par gussa utarna bhi nhi chahiye....* (No one should vent their anger on someone). Nobody tries to wreck things on their own....mistakes happen, and you should calm down and explain to others so that they don't make the same mistakes. So, rather than intimidating someone, I believe in taking things slowly."

When a player of Narwal's stature enters the picture, pedigree follows. He will make you sweat and force you to fight for every point until the very end, which is what makes him the player he is.

Despite his reputation, a call-up from the national team eluded him in both the Asian Kabaddi Championship and the Asian Games. A sense of disappointment gripped him and his family. Narwal acknowledges their justifiable disappointment, stating, "Who wouldn't wish

Lone ranger: In the match largely dictated by the raiders of Bengaluru Bulls (in black), Pardeep (centre) orchestrated a remarkable comeback, amassing 13 points and reaching 1600 career raid points. PKL

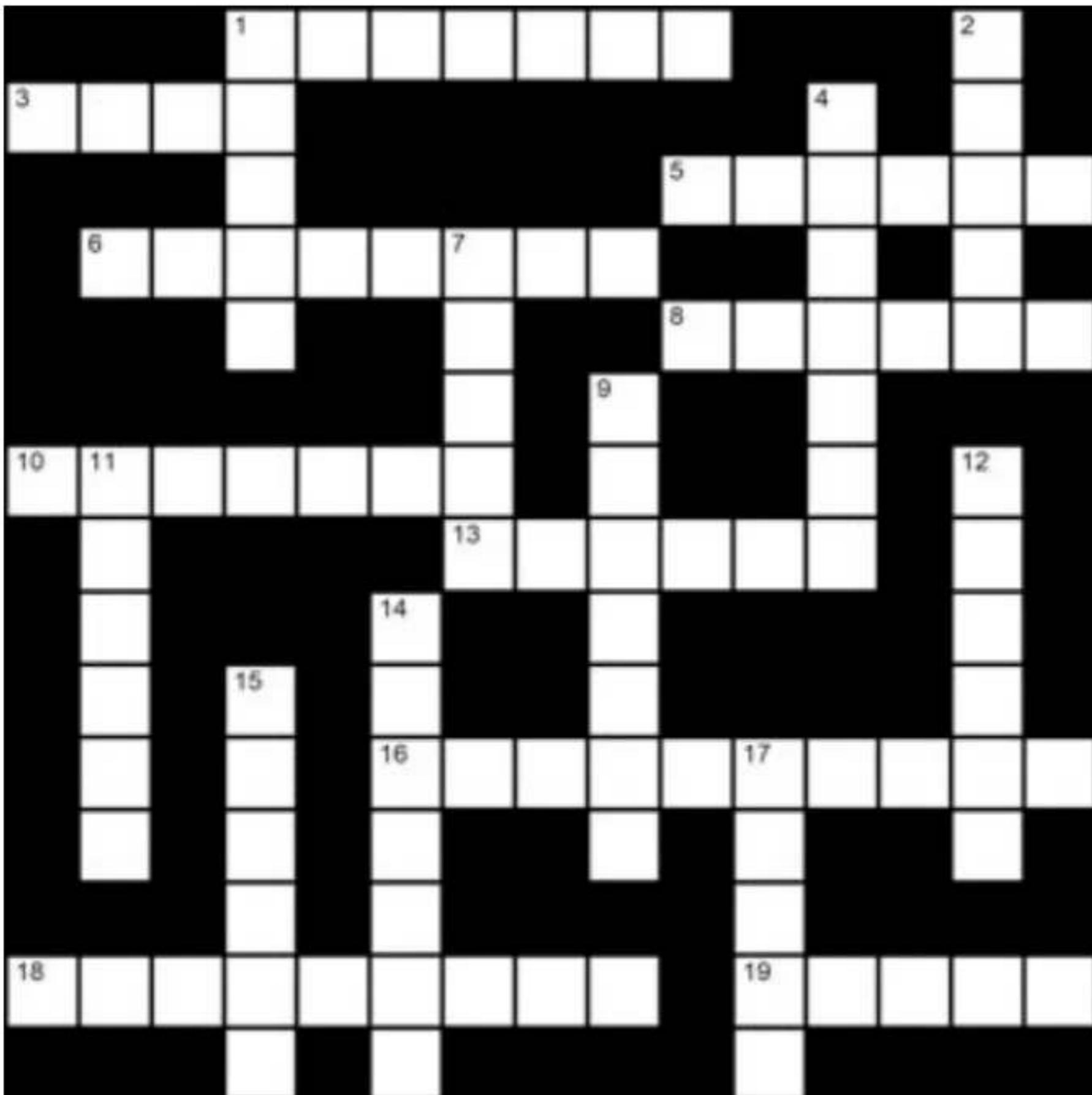
for their son to excel? They were disheartened. It took them a while, but they came to understand that playing for India was not destined for me at that time."

With aspirations of 1800 raid points and a trophy for UP, Narwal's vision board is ambitious. However, with the once-invincible raider looking more human as seasons go by, one wonders what uncertainties lie ahead for the maestro.



CROSSWORD

SRIRAM SRINIVASAN



ACROSS

- 1 ... Antetokounmpo, the Nigerian-Greek NBA player. (7)
- 3 The Jaguars in the Tennis Premier League represent this city. (4)
- 5 ... Sharma. She took 9 wickets in the recent Test against England. (6)
- 6 ... Park, Everton's home. (8)
- 8 Irish cricketer Joshua Brian ... (6)
- 10 Irish cricketer Curtis ... (7)
- 13 This team name returns to the F1 grid for the 2024 season. (6)
- 16 The 2028 Olympics will be held here. (3,7)
- 18 The E in FIA's sportscar

championship WEC stands for this. (9)

- 19 Aston Villa manager Unai ... (5)

DOWN

- 1 The Luigi Ferraris Stadium is its home. (5)
- 2 KwaZulu-„, Inland, a South African first-class cricket team based in Pietermaritzburg. (5)
- 4 ... Clare Knight, England cricket captain. (7)
- 7 The NBA team from San Antonio. (5)
- 9 ... Shahzad, the newest international pacer from Pakistan. (7)
- 11 Egyptian FC, African champion. (2,4)

- 12 Daniel ..., Irish swimmer who is the current 800m freestyle short-course world record holder. (6)

- 14 Indian squash player ... Senthilkumar. (7)

- 15 Former Aussie tennis player Samantha ... (6)

- 17 The cricketer who revealed he is suffering from a chronic kidney disease. (5)



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

Organ pipes

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Organ pipes is a curious configuration of line pieces on a single file or rank with two rooks between two bishops of the same colour. The play revolves mostly around the four possible black Grimshaw interferences which are inherent in the setting. These are also used in Nowotnies on intersecting squares.

V. Rudenko & L. Loshinsky
I prize, Revista de Sah, 1973



Mate in three moves

Key 1.Be5! ~ 2.Nd8 Bb7
3.Be6#, 1...Bb4 2.Qxe4+ Kxe4
3.Bc6#, (2...fxe4 3.Ne3#) 1...Rb4
2.Qxc5+ Rxc5 3.Ne3#, 1...Rb5
2.Rxd3+Rd4 3.Nc3#, 1...Bb5
2.Rxc5+Bxc5 3.Nc3#.

Sam Loyd's pioneer two-mover on the theme is given for solving below. Organ pipes is shown in three and more movers also. In the three-mover (diagram above) the two eminent Russian composers use active sacrifices by white queen and white rook in the variations.

In the second problem by the Dutch master the organ pipes theme is combined with white half-battery. Overlapping each other, black pieces cause weakening of their position, which allows white to transform his half-battery into a battery. In each

variation white has to choose the second move accurately.

Wasserman
Prize, Schakend Nederland, 1960



Mate in three moves

Key 1.Qa7! ~ 2.Qxd4+ Qxd4
3.Rf1#, but there is also a second threat 2.Rxf2. 1...Rf6 2.Nc5! Rxe6
3.Nc6#, 2...Bxd3 3.Nc4#, 1...Bf6
2.Nc4! Rxe5 3.Nc5#, 2...Bd8
3.Nc7#, 1...Rf5 2.Nc6! Bd8
3.Nc7#, 2...Rxe5 3.Nc5#, 1...Bf5
2.Nc7! Bxd3 3.Nc4#, 2...Rxe6
3.Nc6#

The two-mover below for solving presents organ pipe theme in block setting.

Sam Loyd
Saturday evening gazette 1859

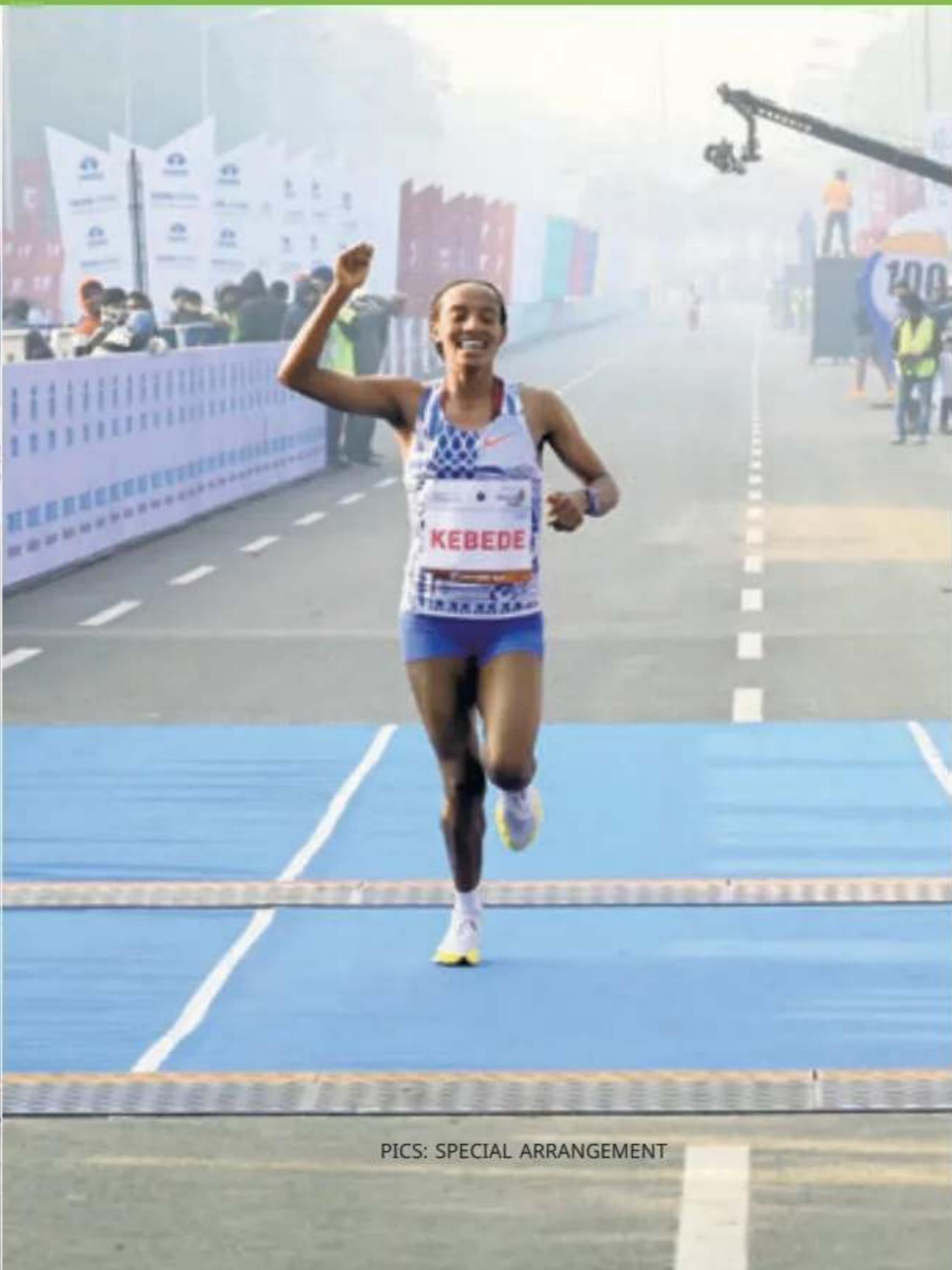


Mate in two movers

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Strategic reciprocal changes'
Set: 1...Qxd3 2.Re7 (A) 1...Qxd3
2.Rb4 (B)Key
1.Bg5!(2.Bf3) 1...Qxd3 2.Re7
(B); 1...Qxf5 2.Rb4(A)

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

» INDIA PLAYGROUND



PICS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

1

EBENYO, KEBEDE RUN AWAY WITH HONOURS

Kenyan Daniel Ebenyo and Ethiopian Sutume Kebede ran fast in perfect conditions to win the men and women's titles with new World Best times for standalone events in the Tata Steel Kolkata 25K. Each won the winner's purse of \$7,500 and a bonus of \$3,000. Overwhelming favourite Ebenyo, who took silver medals in 10000m in the Budapest World championships and half-marathon in the Riga World road running championships this year, gave a sensational performance to clock 1:11:13 to claim his second title in India after his Delhi half-marathon victory two months ago. He set the World Best mark for a standalone 25K race bettering Dennis Kimeto's 2012 time of 1:11:18.

Ebenyo ran back to encourage compatriot Victor Togom, who threw a strong challenge at the half-way stage, to get below the course record of 1:12:49 (by Kenyan Leonard Barsoton) before crying out of joy.

The legendary Eliud Kipchoge officially timed 1:11:08 at 25K en route to his victory in the Berlin Marathon last year where he set the marathon world record (2:01:09).

Sutume, a Berlin 25K winner and a podium finisher in Tokyo and Seoul marathons in previous years, ran most of her race in the company of another Ethiopian, Valencia 10K winner Yalemzerf Yehualaw, before going solo and crossing the line with 1:18:47. It was better than Mary Keitany's 1:19:53 in 2010.

Yalemzerf also bettered the course record of 1:21:04 (by Bahrain's Desi Jisa).

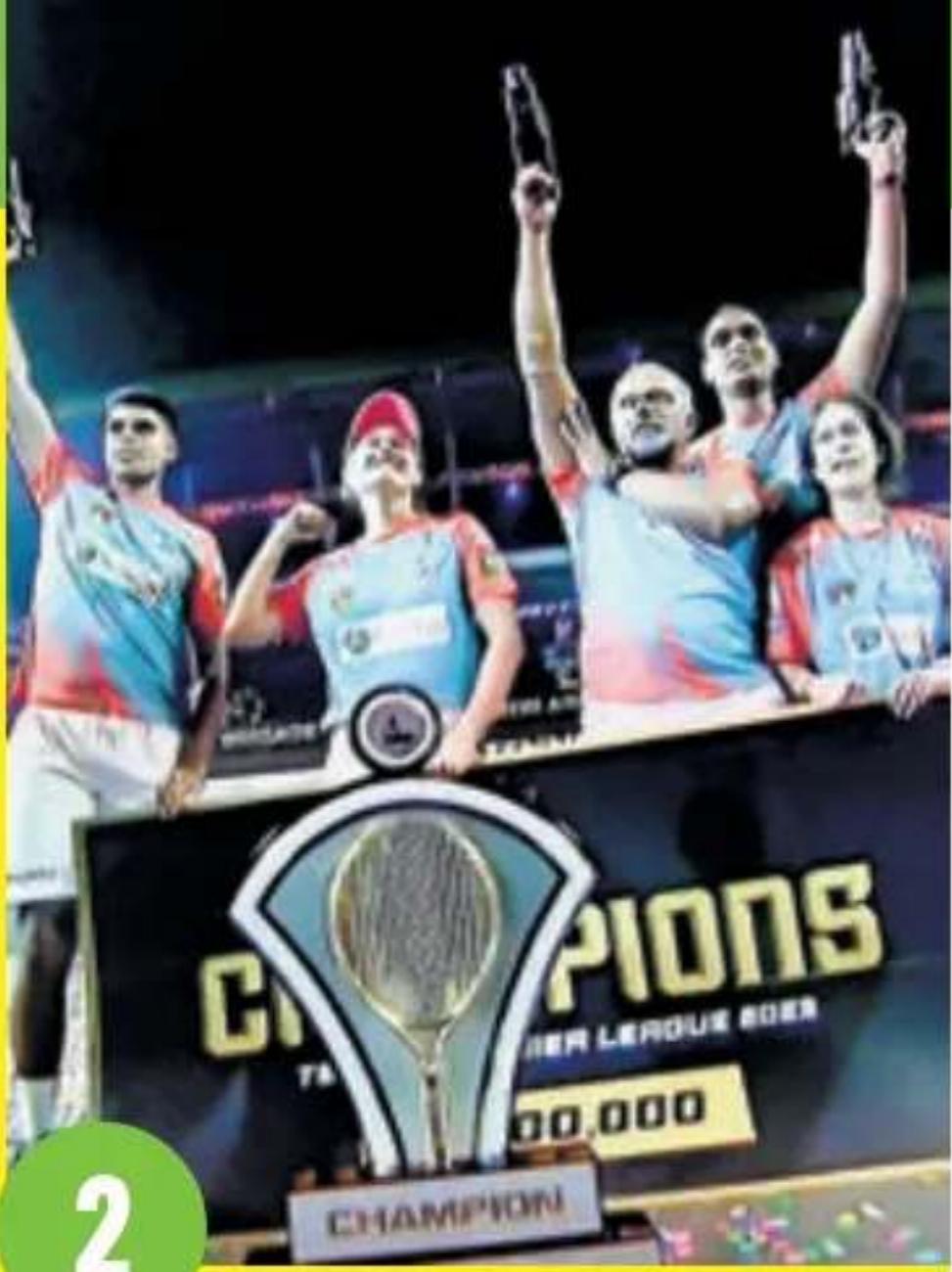
Sawan Barwal (1:17:49) and Reshma Kevate (1:30:38) recorded convincing wins among Indians.

The results:

International: Elite Men: 1. Daniel Ebenyo (Ken) 1:11:13, 2. Victor Togom (Ken) 1:12:26, 3. Tesfaye Demeke (Eth) 1:13:36; Elite Women: 1. Sutume Kebede (Eth) 1:18:47, 2. Yalemzerf Yehualaw (Eth) 1:19:26, 3. Betty Kibet (Ken) 1:21:43.

Indian: Elite Men: 1. Sawan Barwal 1:17:49 (Overall 9th), 2. Gaurav Mathur 1:20:33 (10th), 3. Mohd. Aseem 1:42:08; Elite women: 1. Reshma Kevate 1:30:38 (9th), 2. Seema 1:32:07 (10th), 3. Nirmaben Bharatjee 1:32:40.

Y. B. Sarangi



2

Tennis Premier League: Bengaluru Mavericks triumphs

The mixed doubles pair of Vishnu Vardhan and Arina Rodionova defeated Maria Timofeeva and Anirudh Chandrasekar 14-6 helping Bengaluru SG Mavericks to a 41-28 victory over Bengal Wizards in the final of the fifth edition of Tennis Premier League on the charcoal grey courts of the Shiv Chhatrapati Sports Complex.

The teams were level after the two singles matches, won by Timofeeva against Arina and Ramkumar Ramanathan against Sriram Balaji at 20-20. Arina rose to the challenge in the mixed doubles match which witnessed many arguments and disputed calls. Arina and Vishnu were able to stay focused and take the match away from the Bengal team.

Thereafter, it was a simple task of winning seven points in the men's doubles match. Ramkumar and Vishnu cruised to a 7-2 win over Sriram Balaji and Anirudh who had done remarkably well to take the team this far.

It was celebration time for the Bengaluru team with coach M Balachandran as mentor. The team was truly dominant right through after the 39-41 loss to Punjab Patriots in the first match.

For her energetic performance in the final, Arina Rodionova was declared the 'player of the match.'

Kamesh Srinivasan

SPORTTOON



3

Chennai's Sandeep Kumar and Bengaluru youngster Chetan Surnineni won the titles

in the showpiece MRF Formula 2000 and 1600 categories, respectively, of the MRF MMSC fmisci Indian National Car Racing Championship 2023 at the Madras International Circuit. Also picking up the National titles in their respective categories were Gurunath Meiyappan (Race Concepts, Indian Touring Cars), Deepak Ravikumar (Performance Racing, Indian Junior Touring Cars) and Diljith TS (DTS Racing, Super Stock and Formula LGB 1300).

The Championship battle in the MRF Formula 2000 went right down to the wire. Sandeep Kumar did just enough to pick up crucial points and pip Kolkata's Arya Singh by just three points to claim the championship. Incidentally, both the MRF F2000 races were won by Bengaluru's Aditya Swaminathan.

Another Chennai driver, Deepak Ravikumar edged out his Performance Racing team-mate Akkineni Anand Prasad for the title in the IJTC class by winning both the races today for a double while 30-year-old Diljith, who had effectively sealed the championship with a round to spare, only confirmed the title in the Super Stock category.

Team Sportstar



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando



FOR MORE STORIES

Power tips to succeed in 2024

Here are some ways in which athletes can **optimise** their performance this new year.

For athletes, appropriate nutrition and performance enhancement should always go hand-in-hand.

The quest of excellence is an ongoing journey for all sportspersons, from seasoned pros to aspiring athletes. The proverb — *You are what you eat* — is especially true for athletes.

Here are a few recommendations to help your body thrive in your respective sport this new year.

1. Recognise the needs of your sport

Evaluate the energy and nutritional needs that are specific to your sport. For best results, adjust your diet to fulfill these requirements.

2. Align with your genes

Genetic testing for nutrition can help you reach your full sporting potential, pinpointing specific nutritional demands and existing deficiencies. It can also help identify fitness tests based on physical requirements for strong/weak areas and personality tests that enhance mental function. Adapt your strategy based on individual findings from these tests to improve athletic performance.

3. Tiny microbiomes can do big things

Nobody can perform well with an upset stomach. Microbiome testing can provide important information

about gut health and how it is affecting performance. Athletes can maximise nutrition, strengthen immunity, and increase energy levels by examining the microbial population in their digestive systems. This gives them greater chances of gaining optimal physical condition and enhanced overall well-being.

4. Blood test for performance

Blood tests can significantly impact athletes' performance. They can learn more about their health issues, triggering parameters and existing nutrition deficiencies by evaluating important biomarkers. Through specific adaptations based on individual data, athletes can achieve unprecedented levels of excellence by improving their training, recuperation, and performance.

5. Tech-based recovery

Athletic performance can be enhanced with state-of-the-art recovery technology. These devices, which range from vibrating foam rollers to percussive instruments, improve circulation, reduce muscular discomfort, and speed up the healing process. Additionally, they are mobile-friendly and easy to use.

6. Omega balance

Omega balance test checks the body's ratio of Omega-3 to Omega-6 fatty acids. Maintaining a balanced ratio helps in lowering inflammation, promoting cardiovascular health,

and speeding up recovery, thus leading to optimal performance and improved overall strength, resilience, and endurance.

7. VO2 max score

Athletes' maximum utilisation of oxygen during strenuous activity is determined by their VO2 max test results. Increased aerobic capacity, endurance, and general cardiovascular fitness are linked to greater VO2 max values, which have a direct impact on an athlete's capability to maintain high-intensity effort and improve performance.

8. Body composition

An examination of body composition determines how much muscle, fat, and other components make up the body. An ideal body composition, with the right amount of fat and muscle, improves strength-to-weight ratio, agility, and efficiency — all important components in a variety of sports.

9. Make sleep your best friend

Sleeping well is essential for doing well in sports. The body heals itself, produces growth hormone, and solidifies memories when you sleep soundly.

Sufficient and peaceful sleep promotes physical restoration, sharpens cognitive abilities, and increases vitality, all of which are factors in peak performance and resilience.



10. Don't hydrate with plain water

For athletes to perform at their best, electrolyte replacement is essential because minerals like potassium and magnesium maintain fluid balance, nerve functioning, and contractions of the muscles. Maintaining appropriate levels of electrolytes helps athletes perform at their best by preventing weariness, cramps, and dehydration. Opt for an isotonic sports drink instead of plain water.

11. Watch your nutrient timings

For maximum energy, recuperation, and muscle synthesis, timing of food intake is essential. When the body requires nutrients the most for optimal function, they should be made available through well-time eating habits.

12. Rainbow diet for adding colours to your performance

A rainbow diet includes a variety of

Power hitting: David Warner hit a fine century against Pakistan on the opening day of the first cricket Test match in Perth recently. GETTY IMAGES

fruits and vegetables, offering a range of vitamins and minerals that boost immunity, lower inflammation, and deliver antioxidants that are essential for the best possible performance and recovery.

13. Say no to empty calories

Since empty calories have no nutritional value, avoiding them is crucial for optimal performance. Athletes who choose nutrient-dense diets are certain to receive essential nutrients, which maintain energy levels and enhance overall wellness.

14. Portion control

In order to guarantee that athletes get the proper ratio of nutrients

without going overboard, it is essential to monitor portion sizes. Appropriate serving sizes maximise vitality and facilitate maximal sports performance.

15. Avoid processed food

For athletes, cutting down on processed meals is key since they usually lack vital minerals and can include dangerous substances.

The best fuel for long-term energy and recovery is found in whole, minimally processed meals.

When you aim for athletic achievement, never forget that optimal performance is mostly dependent on appropriate diet.

By following these suggestions, you'll be providing your body with the best possible nutrition to help you excel in the sport of your choice. Cheers to a year full of energy, improvement, and success!

Sport is a business, too

It is **not unusual** for human beings, whether bankers or journalists or builders or sportspersons to move to where the pay is best.

Suresh Menon

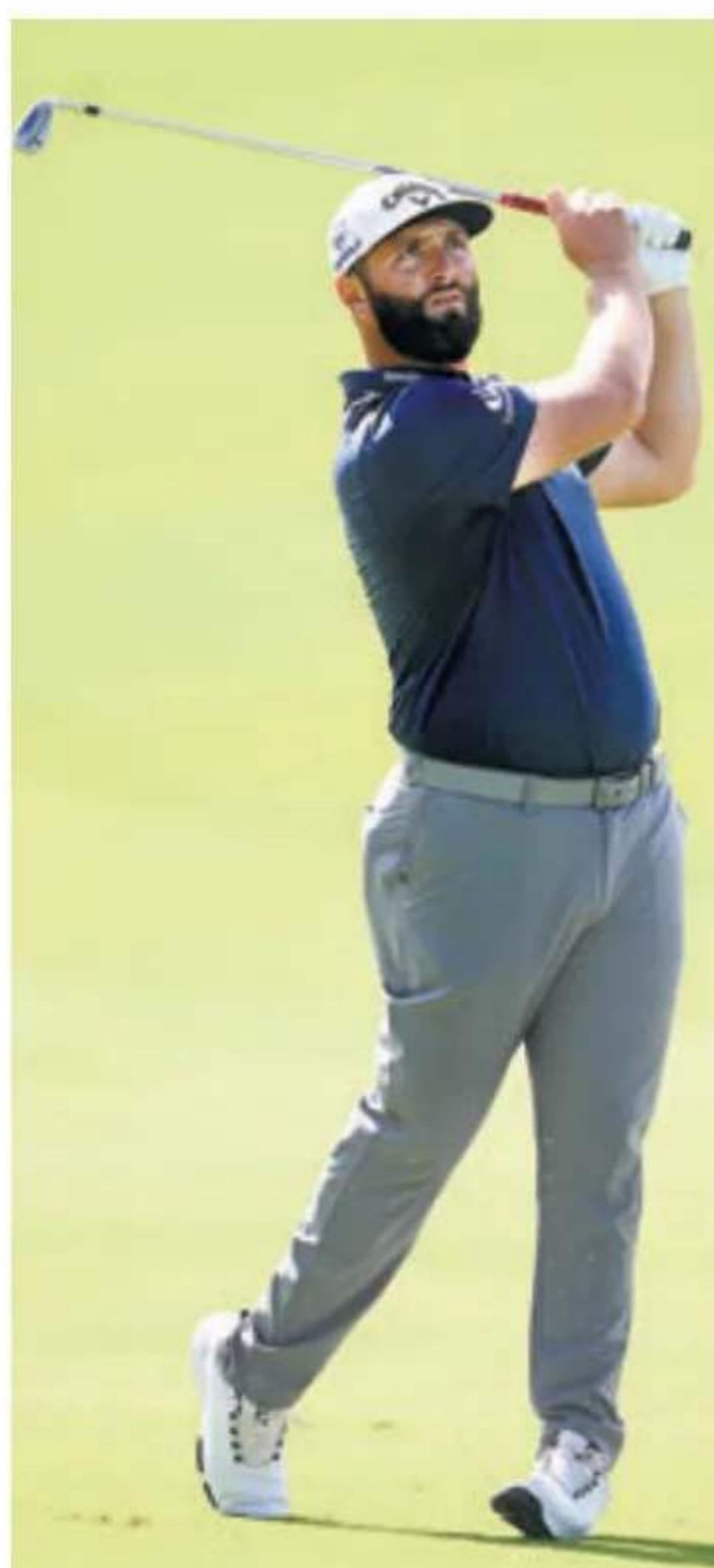
Just how much does a player owe his sport? Conversely, how much does a sport owe a player? When it was predicted recently at a literature festival that soon we would have a player earning Rs. 50 crores (about 60 million dollars) in the IPL, the audience gasped.

Earlier, the Spanish golfer Jon Rahm who had once said he was not interested in money, had jumped on Saudi Arabia's LIV bandwagon for a reported half a billion. That's 500,000,000 (five hundred million) dollars.

The door to further IPL riches has been opened by Hardik Pandya who returns to Mumbai Indians after leading Gujarat Titans to the title. His choosing to make the shift is a shot in the arm for player power — till now it was the franchises which decided if they wanted a player or not. And by getting a percentage of the transfer fee (beside his regular fee) he has shown where the money lies.

Those criticising the players for seeing sport merely as business (as many of us have done) usually don't have access to such numbers. But would you or wouldn't you accept the offer as one that would mean financial security for a few generations of your family while doing something you love and are probably among the best at?

Pandya's case is straightforward. The IPL rules allow him to switch teams, negotiate his salary and work out



Money matters: The Spanish golfer Jon Rahm who had once said he was not interested in money, had jumped on Saudi Arabia's LIV bandwagon for a reported half a billion dollars.

GETTY IMAGES

the percentages with the team he is leaving. Careers are short, made shorter by injury. This has been an issue with Pandya in particular. A second career outside the game means starting in the middle at best, which for a player who was at the top is difficult.

Sport has been a business, too, for years, and any pretense that it is otherwise is naive. It is not unusual for human beings, whether bankers or journalists or builders to move to where the pay is best.

In the case of Rahm, the question is whether he is letting his sport down by switching sides. When sports go through such churning, a small percentage of players make a lot of money but when things settle, players at the base of the pyramid get uplifted, too. This is what happened with cricket after Kerry Packer bought the players for a private league and then arrived at a compromise with the official body.

But as those who stayed loyal to the PGA are discovering, sometimes loyalty can cost you when the factions kiss and make up. That, too, happened with those who replaced the Packer players when the ones who had gone away returned.

Things are in a flux in the golf world, but the questions we started this column with will remain relevant as long as sport is played, and as

long as the imbalance in talent (which is the essence of all competition) exists. It may be old-fashioned to think that a player owes sport more than sport owes him if it owes him anything at all.

A SPECIAL PUBLICATION FROM THE HINDU GROUP

The Hindu's book, "State of Play: India's Tryst with Federalism" is a comprehensive and in-depth look at political, economic and social developments across Indian States that matter most from a policy perspective. This volume of articles from The Hindu's opinion pages from 2021-23 has been carefully curated to give readers detailed insights into the policy landscape of States in South India and other regions too.

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