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THE WINNING INDIAN TEAM

ROHIT SHARMA

No ODI retirement on the cards

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How India won the final

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India staked its claim as one of the best white-ball sides in world cricket, remaining unbeaten throughout the tournament

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OFF-SIDE

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A STREAK AS RARE AS SPORTING PERFECTION

India's brilliance in white-ball format can **never be overshadowed** by accusations of unfair advantage.

India's latest ICC run — 14 games, 13 wins, one abandoned, zero defeats, two trophies — is the kind of record that commands genuine admiration. Perfection is a rare, elusive beast — except in Indian exams, where college cut-offs waver teasingly around 99 or 100 per cent, reducing our academic aspirations to mild despair.

Sporting perfection, though, remains more elusive, rare enough to inspire pub trivia that even the drunkest bloke can confidently mumble.

Rohit Sharma's men are now our homegrown version of Arsene Wenger's 'Invincibles'— that Arsenal side of 2003–04 which breezed through an entire Premier League season without a single defeat (26 wins, 12 draws), giving the Londoners an attitude of superiority despite 20 subsequent seasons without a league title.

Cricket has only known two previous moments of such dominance — the West Indies in 1975 and Australia in 2003, both of which completed undefeated World Cup campaigns.

Rohit Sharma's only loss in the tournament came in the coin toss — five out of five. Yet, without this minor advantage of deciding whether to bat or bowl first, India sailed through unbothered, with only the Kiwis in the final offering some resistance. "We went undefeated despite losing all five tosses," the India captain said. "Winning a tournament without a single defeat is a massive achievement, and it gives me immense satisfaction."

Each time, even before the pressure mounted, someone stepped up: Shubman Gill with a century in the opener against Bangladesh, Hardik Pandya and Kuldeep Yadav with crucial wickets against Pakistan, Virat Kohli against Pakistan and Australia, Rohit's measured 76 in the final, or an unruffled K.L. Rahul who kept any hint of an opposition turnaround comfortably at bay.

India did thrive in the comfort of staying in a single city, while others crisscrossed between Pakistan and Dubai just to face them. Runner-up New Zealand covered 7,048 km during the 19-day tournament. The slow, turning surfaces in the UAE allowed India to stack its squad with four spinners, while its opponents scrambled to adjust from the flatter, more obliging wickets in Pakistan. But it would be unfair to credit India's triumph solely on geography or the pitches.

India clocked nearly 10,000 kilometres during the 2023 home ODI World Cup, winning all but that ill-fated final at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad. Since 2023, the team has won 23 of its 24 white-ball matches in three ICC tournaments, across two formats. It is clearly the outstanding team of this era and perhaps one of the greatest white-ball sides the game has ever seen. Its brilliance can never be overshadowed by accusations of unfair advantage.

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Ruffy ruffles the King

The 28-year-old's audacious display set social media on fire, with fans and even pundits claiming it as the **knockout of the year.**

Nigamanth P
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Finishing a fighter of Bobby 'King' Green's stature is no mean feat.

But to drop him before the end of the first round is an achievement in itself. Brazilian lightweight grappler Mauricio Ruffy did just that and made it look easy at UFC 313.

In the build-up to the fight, the odds were heavily stacked against Ruffy, who was just two fights into his UFC career. Green, on the other hand, had the upper hand, not only because of his experience (31 wins) but also the backing of his home crowd. However, what happened inside the ring underlined the fact that stats can be deceiving.

Ruffy's superior striking ability was evident from the opening bell, but it was his audacious spinning wheel kick **(below)** in the second minute of the first round that sealed the deal.

With Green pressing forward, Ruffy unleashed a perfectly timed spinning kick, connecting flush with Green's head. The impact was devastating, sending Green crashing to the canvas and prompting an immediate stoppage from the referee.

The 28-year-old's audacious display set social media on fire, with fans and even some pundits claiming it as the knockout of the year.

Ruffy, a Dana White Contender Series graduate, earned his Ultimate Fighting Championship in October 2023 with a knockout win over Russia's Raimond Magomedaliev.

He then claimed two wins on the bounce but faced his biggest test yet when he was scheduled to take on Green. And he grabbed the opportunity with both hands, letting the world know that he is here to stay.

Shortly after Ruffy's stunning victory, fans were in for yet another shock. Magomed Ankalaev delivered a decisive performance, dethroning Alex Pereira to claim the light heavyweight championship. The bout saw Ankalaev utilise a strategic plan, involving aggression and precision, that effectively neutralised Pereira's striking prowess.

The first round saw both fighters being tentative with their choice of attacks. Ankalaev was well aware of Pereira's powerful leg kicks and stayed out of his range. Pereira found occasional openings to strike and ended the round on a positive note.

However, Ankalaev's dominance in the next four rounds was evident in the scoreboard as all three judges ruled the bout in his favour. While Pereira's calf kicks were a constant threat, Ankalaev's ability to control the fight through takedowns and strikes proved vital in his win.

Ankalaev joins Islam Makhachev and Khabib Nurmagomedov as the only natives of Dagestan to wear a UFC belt.

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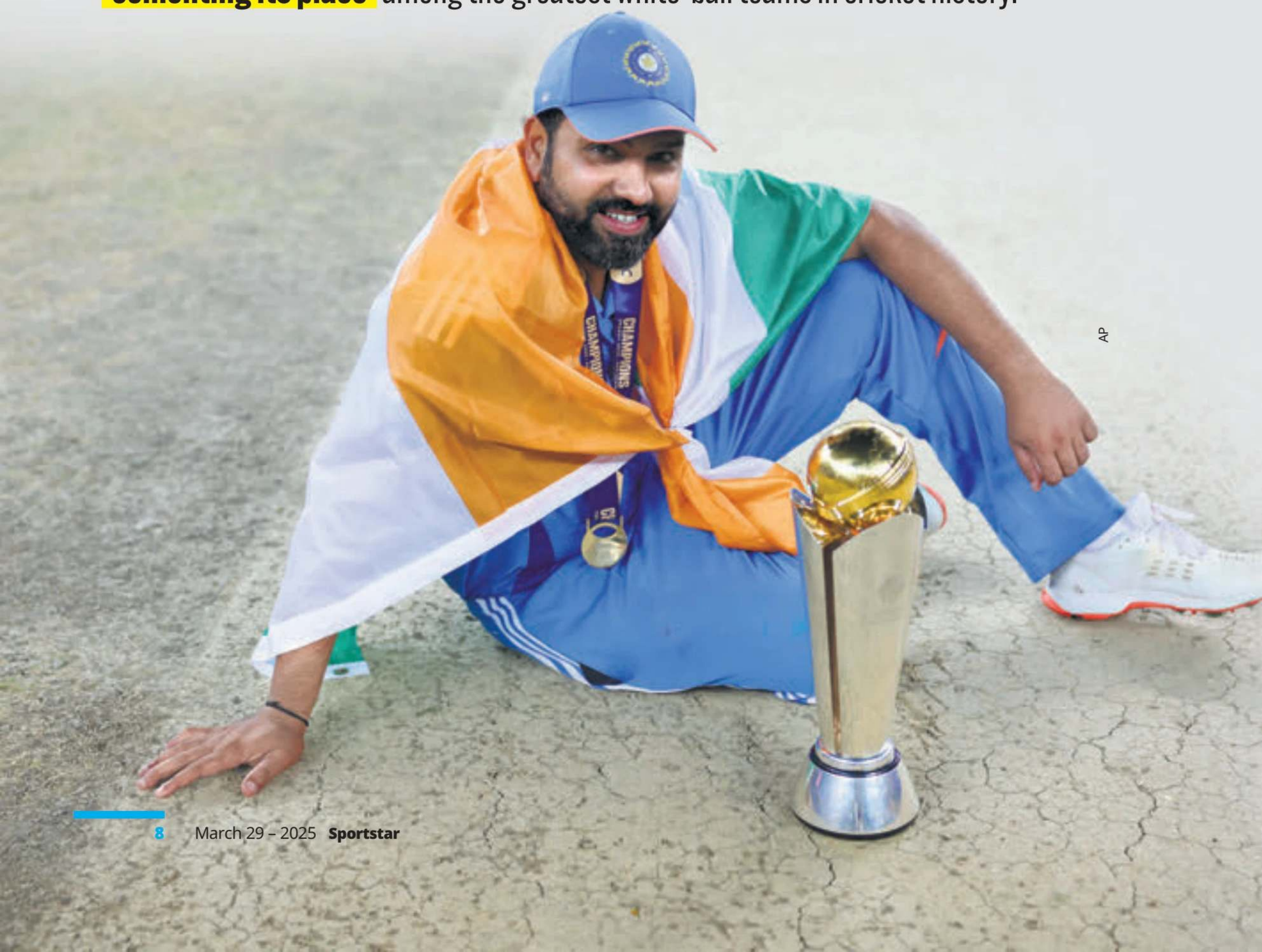
CLINICAL TITLE WIN A REAFFIRMATION OF CRICKETING SUPERPOWER STATUS

India has won 23 of 24 matches across three ICC events in three years, securing two titles, **cementing its place** among the greatest white-ball teams in cricket history.



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LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

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India has undoubtedly been among the best one-day international sides in the last decade. Before March 9, 2025, the Men in Blue had played 37 games in ICC ODI competitions (World Cups and Champions Trophy) and won 31.

Unfortunately, despite such a consistent record, the team had no silverware in its cupboard to show, as four of those losses came in the knockout stages. There were two semifinal exits in World Cups (2015, 2019) and two heartbreaks in finals — one in the 2017 Champions Trophy against arch-rival Pakistan and, more recently, the 2023 World Cup (vs. Australia).

However, in sport, as in any other walk of life, if one consistently persists at a task with sincerity, the rewards come sooner rather than later.

For India, that moment arrived on the second Sunday of March at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium when Ravindra Jadeja pulled New Zealand pacer Will O'Rourke through the leg-side to finally ensure India got its hands on an ICC one-day title, sealing a memorable four-wicket win in the summit clash of the ICC Champions Trophy. It was the perfect bookend to one of the finest tournament campaigns in recent times.

Heading into the competition, India was the odds-on favourite for the title. Over three weeks, it lived up to that status and, more importantly, in style, by remaining unbeaten.

The key to India's remarkable run lay in its precise plans and preparations for the tournament.

The event's hybrid model meant India was based in Dubai for all its matches, including the semifinal and final, while other teams shuttled between host Pakistan and the UAE.

There had been much discussion about India's perceived advantage, but it was what everyone had signed up for. However, there is no denying that being based at a single venue helps players acclimatise to the conditions. Four pitches were used for five games, and even if each played slightly differently, the overall nature of the surface was slow.

Considering the venue had been used for the ILT20 before the event, India selected five spin options, of which only two were frontline spinners: Kuldeep Yadav and Varun Chakaravarthy, a last-minute inclusion in the squad.

That the other spinners, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel and Washington Sundar, were genuine all-rounders showcased the strength of this Indian side. The decision to back the team's spin riches proved to be a masterstroke.

After starting with a conventional attack of two pacers and three spinners in the first two outings against Bangladesh and Pakistan, Varun replaced seamer Harshit Rana against the Black Caps in a dead-rubber league game. He made an immediate impact, scalping a five-wicket haul in only his second ODI.

The decision proved to be a blessing in disguise as it gave the management the confidence to play four spinners from then on, with Mohammed Shami as the only frontline pacer in the last three games. The weather in the Arabian Peninsula had been pleasant, and there was no dew in the evening, which meant that the toss was not a factor.

India's formula for success was similar across all five games, four of which were won while chasing, and a discernible pattern emerged.

Since Rohit Sharma took over as captain, India has refashioned its approach to the limited-overs format, shunning conservatism and embracing a hard-nosed approach that blends flamboyance with pragmatism.

Stability matters: India's recent ODI success stems from a stable batting core, with Shreyas Iyer and KL Rahul forming the core. AP **Right:** Varun Chakaravarthy's last-minute inclusion in the squad was an inspired decision. PTI

The high-quality spin attack choked opposition batters during the middle overs, restricting them to modest scores before India's batting prowess took centre stage. The spinners bowled 163.3 overs and accounted for 26 of the 47 wickets taken by the team, at an impressive economy rate of 4.5.

On the batting front, Shubman Gill stroked a fine century against Bangladesh, while Virat Kohli reinforced his credentials as the 'chase master' by batting through to script two memorable wins. Against Pakistan, Kohli scored an unbeaten century and then top-scored with a composed 84 in the semifinal against Australia.

The former India skipper worked hard on his game against spin, spending extra hours in the nets before the Pakistan clash. His incredible fitness levels allowed him to run hard between the wickets without taking risks against the slower bowlers.

His efforts were backed up by Shreyas Iyer and K.L. Rahul, two batters who flew under the radar but made telling impacts. Both had a point to prove, even if they never should have been put in a position that required them to do so. Shreyas, who was not a guaranteed starter, reeled in scores of 56, 79, 45 and 48 in the last four games, with those knocks coming under pressure when the game was delicately poised. His ability to attack spinners and find crucial boundaries during the middle phase was key to India making chases look easy.

Similarly, Rahul, pushed down a spot to number six, showed great adaptability to play big shots early in his innings, releasing the pressure immediately after the fall of a wicket.

More importantly, he was

Dubai delight: Ravindra Jadeja celebrates with his family after sealing India's victory against New Zealand in the ICC Champions Trophy 2025 final. Jadeja hit the winning runs as India clinched the title with a four-wicket win in Dubai. PTI

unbeaten in three of the four chases, getting the job done (he didn't bat on one occasion). Even with Rishabh Pant waiting on the sidelines, Rahul has shown that he remains India's first-choice wicketkeeper in ODIs.

While every individual contributed, much credit must go to Rohit Sharma, who led the side admirably.

Since he took over as captain, India has refashioned its approach to the limited-overs format, shunning conservatism and embracing a hard-nosed approach that blends flamboyance with pragmatism.

The skipper has been at the forefront of that revolution. His aggressive approach in the PowerPlay, taking more risks in pursuit of quick runs without putting a price on his wicket for the larger cause, was the hallmark of India's campaigns in the 2023 ODI World Cup and the 2024 T20 World Cup, and he continued in the same vein here.

On sluggish pitches, it was imperative to maximise the PowerPlay (with only two fielders allowed outside the 30-yard circle), and Rohit's methods paid huge dividends.

He had not scored a half-century in the first four matches, but it seemed he had saved his best for the big occasion. His breezy match-winning 76 in the final laid the foundation for India's successful chase of 252.

Over the last few years, Rohit's men have been the atypical scholars in the school of white-ball cricket. They have rigorously studied every fundamental concept required for success and systematically worked on it, leaving no stone unturned.

The result: India has won 23 out of 24 matches across three ICC white-ball competitions in as many years, clinching two crowns — the ICC T20 World Cup and the ICC Champions Trophy 2025. With this achievement, the current team can rightfully stake a claim to be considered among the best white-ball teams in the history of the sport.

"India is a bloody good team," said Rohit after clinching the title. "Without a doubt, in the last three or four years, we have managed to play the finals of all ICC tournaments, so I'm proud to be the captain of this team. Even though we didn't win the World Cup in 2023, reaching the finals of all four trophies shows how consistent we are as a team."

'Not retiring from ODIs'

Re ecting on the team's triumph, the 37-year-old **expressed satisfaction** that every player had contributed to the victory.

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Rohit Sharma saved his best for last, both on and off the field. The skipper led the Men in Blue to a record third ICC Champions Trophy title, top-scoring in the final.

Later, Rohit was at his animated best during the post-match press conference. After patiently answering questions from the press for over 20 minutes, he signed off with a remark that will delight fans worldwide.

"I am not going to retire from this format. I want to make sure that no rumours are spread," Rohit declared as he exited the stage.

Reflecting on the team's triumph, the 37-year-old expressed satisfaction that every player had contributed to the victory.

"In this tournament, we have seen that from the first match till now, all the boys have contributed. If you see from number 1 to 11, the boys who have had the chance to bat or bowl, they have contributed in their own way. Eventually, when everyone plays together and a lot of people contribute, you get a lot of success consistently."

Rohit set the tone for India's chase, delivering a blistering start with 49 off 40 balls in the PowerPlay. His 105-run opening stand with Shubman Gill laid a strong foundation, and he went on to score a fluent 76 off 83 balls. Discussing his own performance, Rohit said, "I did the same thing today (as in the previous games). I wanted to score in the PowerPlay as once the field spreads out, it becomes difficult (to score). So you have to take chances at the top. I pick the bowlers and the spots to hit."

He further explained, "You may not see consistency in scores, but I know what I'm doing. I changed my game after 10 overs. You get a lot of happiness when you win a match, and when you make a contribution in it, it feels even better. In the 2019 World Cup I had a good run but we didn't win the title. It was not fun."

Varun Chakaravarthy, who was not originally part of India's preliminary squad of 15, emerged as one of the standout performers of the tournament. He ended up as the second-highest wicket-taker, claiming nine wickets in three matches at an average of 15.11 and an economy rate of 4.53. After missing India's initial group-stage fixtures against Bangladesh and Pakistan, he made an immediate impact when brought into the XI, taking 5 for 42 against New Zealand.

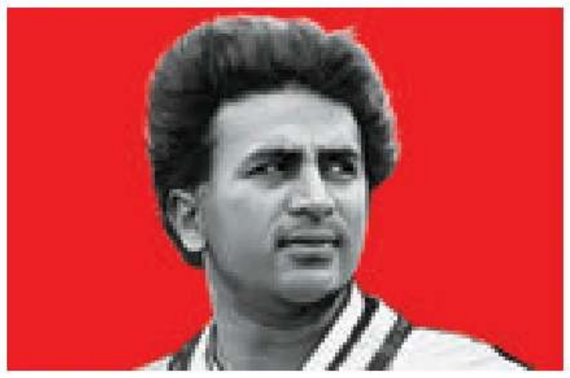
"He has got something different about him," Rohit said. "When we are playing on such pitches, we want the batters to do something different

and that's when he becomes a lot more dangerous.

"He didn't start off in the tournament for us, but when he played against New Zealand and picked up a five-for, we saw the kind of ability he possesses. We wanted to maximise that, and he didn't disappoint. He's got great quality in his bowling, luckily it came to use at various times."

Rohit was effusive in his praise for the entire spin attack. "Not just this game but right from the beginning, our spinners in particular, there's too many expectations when you are playing on a pitch like that, but they never disappointed," Rohit said. "We do understand their strengths; playing on pitches like these helped and we used it to our advantage. Throughout the tournament, in terms of bowling, we were very consistent."

Rarefied air: Since losing the 2023 World Cup final, Rohit Sharma has led India to T20 World Cup and Champions Trophy titles. REUTERS



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

INDIA WON CHAMPIONS TROPHY SIMPLY BECAUSE IT HAD A WELL-BALANCED TEAM

If **'home advantage'** is the reason India won, then how come England did not win the ICC Trophies till 2019 despite hosting it about half a dozen times earlier?

Three back-to-back finals of the ICC white-ball events and winning two successive ones make India the top white-ball team in the world. Like in the ICC T20 win last year, the Indians beat every team in the Champions Trophy too, and if that is not an indication of India being the best, then please let us know what is.

Yes, there will be the carpers who talked about the advantage India had playing only at one venue and not having to travel between matches. However, that was decided by the ICC much before the tournament started, and any negative comment about that should have happened before the tournament's first ball was bowled. And if 'home advantage' is the reason India won, then how come England, from where most of the whingers were, did not win the ICC Trophies till 2019 despite hosting it about half a dozen times earlier?

India won simply because it had a well-balanced team, and at different times in the tournament, different players played a game-changing role in the team's win. Above all, there was the captaincy of Rohit Sharma, who, in winning two ICC titles as the captain, has joined the incomparable M.S. Dhoni in winning multiple titles as skipper of the Indian cricket team. Rohit also squashed rumours about his impending retirement, saying he has not decided to retire from the format.

The next big 50-over tournament is the ICC World Cup in South Africa in 2027, and the selectors will now have to tread gingerly around the team selection in the coming months. Seeing Rohit receive the Champions Trophy from ICC Chairman Jay Shah was a joyous moment for all Indian cricket lovers, and they will forever be indebted to the team for giving them this cherished visual.

It took away, to a great extent for me, the sorrow of losing not just one of my idols but also one of the nicest human beings, Padmakar 'Paddy' Shivalkar. Paddy bowled his heart out for every team that he bowled for but none more so than for his beloved Mumbai team. He and Abdul Ismail were decidedly unlucky not to get the India cap despite regularly picking heaps of wickets on the domestic First-Class circuit.

I have said this earlier too, that one of my regrets as the India captain was not being able to convince the national selectors to pick Paddy even in the squad of 15, let alone in the playing 11. The India captain is co-opted to the selection committee but has no vote in the selection of players. I copped a fair bit of stick from the Marathi journalists for not being able to get Shivalkar into the India squad, but I wish they had been flies on the wall to listen to the reasons given for him not being considered for the India cap. Sadly, in India, the actual discussions of the meeting are hardly, if ever, minuted, and only the end result is put out. Otherwise, the reality of many a meeting where I and many other India

Captain Marvel: Rohit Sharma, who has led India to back-to-back ICC titles, boasts an impressive win-loss record of 27 wins and three losses at ICC limited-overs tournaments. GETTY IMAGES

captains have been blamed for the selection or omission of players would be known to the cricket fans.

Anyway, back to cricket. In the last 10 years or so, the Ranji Trophy has been won by many States that earlier were not even able to qualify for the knockouts. This is a sign of how healthy Indian cricket is and the talent pool coming through now that the game has become a good career option. Many parents, who otherwise would have wanted their children to become doctors, engineers, bureaucrats, or pursue some such professions where income was guaranteed, are now encouraging their children to take up cricket if they see a spark in their child. They know that even if the child is good enough to play Ranji Trophy cricket, he will earn a decent living.

That said, the Ranji fees per match could do with another increase for the next season since the difference between what an ordinary uncapped but lucky player gets for the IPL and what a truly hard-working Ranji player earns is huge. If only other State teams could follow the example of the Mumbai Cricket Association and give a matching amount of fees to what the BCCI gives, then the players would get a really good amount commensurate with the number of days they play.

Every State Association gets a hefty subsidy annually from the BCCI, and most of it stays put in a bank instead of being invested in infrastructure building and the development of the game, which is why it is given. So, the States can afford to match the fees that BCCI gives for its Ranji teams. The good news is that there are more and more administrators coming through who love the game and are aware of the need to promote and encourage their teams.

Hopefully, this will translate into good players not leaving the game for alternate careers and staying on to make State cricket, and thereby Indian cricket, stronger by the day — so it continues to win more trophies like Rohit and his boys have done.

India's Champions Trophy win took away, to a great extent for me, the sorrow of losing not just one of my idols but also one of the nicest human beings, Padmakar 'Paddy' Shivalkar.

Breaking down India's victory

India secured the Champions Trophy with a hard-fought win over New Zealand. Key moments, including early aggression and tactical bowling shifts, defined a final where **momentum swung sharply.**

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Only a very brave man would have bet against India going into the Champions Trophy 2025 final against New Zealand. In fact, many projected the Men in Blue to steamroll the Kiwis to secure a second ICC title in as many years. However, New Zealand displayed fortitude to push the game deep, forcing India into several nervy moments, before eventually succumbing to defeat. No team pushed India farther away from victory in the tournament than what the Black Caps did in Dubai in the final.

Here are four major plot points which determined the fate of the high-intensity final:

ROHIT SHARMA'S POWERPLAY CHARGE

Heading into the run-chase, India knew its fate hinged heavily on a quick start, considering the potential impact New Zealand spinners were to have later in the innings.

India had the right ingredient to do that — skipper Rohit Sharma. Since the start of 2023, no one has scored more runs in the opening PowerPlay in ODIs than him. His strike rate of 122.56 in this phase is better than any batter with at least 500 runs.

Rohit stamped his authority in the final by wading into a depleted New Zealand pace attack, which was missing an injured Matt Henry. Eight of Rohit's 10 boundaries came against the Kiwi quicks as he lifted India to 64/0 in the first 10 overs.

Expectedly, New Zealand's spinners took over in the middle overs, conceding just 3.55 runs per over, bettering their Indian counterparts (4.25). But India managed to negate that through Rohit's charge on the Kiwi quicks, who leaked 8.33 RPO, compared to Indian pacers' 6.92 RPO.

HENRY'S ABSENCE

India's quest for a maiden ICC tournament final win over New Zealand received a major boost when Kiwi pace ace Henry was ruled out of the match, following a shoulder injury he sustained while fielding in the semifinal.

Despite missing the final, Henry finished the tournament as the highest wicket-taker. His success was based on his ability to zone in on the right line and length — 20.8 per cent of his deliveries were projected to hit the stumps, the second highest for any pacer in the competition.

Henry was New Zealand's best bet against India's vaunted top-order, having scythed through it earlier in the tournament with a fifer. Indian fans also won't forget his early burst in the 2019 ODI World Cup semifinal, which took the game away from India.

In Henry's absence, the Black Caps pace attack wilted as Rohit dazzled. Kyle Jamieson was viciously pulled away for a six in the first over, while Nathan Smith was smacked out of the attack after conceding 22 runs in his two overs. Will O'Rourke's ineptness in the death overs made it easier for India to tick off the chase.

KULDEEP YADAV'S DOUBLE BREAK

Kuldeep had a point to prove heading into the Champions Trophy final. Having drawn a blank in the semifinal against Australia, questions were raised regarding his big-game temperament. Both in the 2023 ODI World Cup and the 2024 T20 World Cup finals, Kuldeep had delivered uninspiring spells.

But, on Sunday, the left-arm wrist spinner altered the course of the game with the wickets of Rachin Ravindra and Kane Williamson

Rachin had started the game in a hurry, slashing and flicking the Indian pacers with aplomb, racing to 37 at the end of the PowerPlay.

He was threatening to race to his third hundred of the tournament when Kuldeep struck gold with his first ball of the day. The Indian spinner went with a googly first up, cramping Rachin for room and castling him.

Kuldeep struck again in his next over, deceiving Williamson with his dip to pouch an easy return catch. It was a match-up outcome India had hoped would unfold — Williamson's average of 26.20 in ODIs against left-arm wrist spin is his lowest against any bowling type.

By removing New Zealand's centurions from the semifinal, Kuldeep put the opposition on the backfoot.

NEW ZEALAND'S MIDDLE-OVER STEP DOWN

New Zealand lost its third wicket in the 13th over, bringing together Daryl Mitchell and Tom Latham in the middle. With Indian spinners taking control, the Kiwis went into a shell.

After scoring 6.90 RPO in the opening PowerPlay, New Zealand mellowed down in the middle overs. It recorded 3.20, 3.40 and 3.70 RPOs in the next three 10-over phases of its innings, as it prioritised seeing off the Indian spin threat.

Mitchell scored his slowest ODI fifty, and his strike rate of 62.37 was the lowest for an innings where he has faced at least 50 deliveries.

Moreover, New Zealand's cautious approach didn't pay off as it lost Mitchell and Glenn Phillips before they could take on the Indian pacers at the death. It was only thanks to Michael Bracewell's counterattacking fifty that New Zealand could reach a par score.

If the New Zealand middle-order had risked attacking one of the Indian spinners and succeeded, Hardik Pandya, who was tonked for 30 runs in three overs, would have been forced to bowl more overs.

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From Lahore to Sharjah: A journey through cricket's timeless charm

Lahore's cricketing soul shines through Saqlain's nostalgia and historic museums, while Sharjah's fading legacy reminds us of cricket's **ever-evolving journey** from past glories to modern spectacles.

It was a chilly Wednesday night in Lahore when we stood outside Chaman, the iconic ice cream parlour in Laxmi Chowk. Saqlain Mushtaq, our guide for the evening, smiled as he ordered, "*Teen pistachio... yeh sabse badiya hai. Hum bachpan se khaa rahein hain*." As we indulged in the sweet treat, he pointed to a nearby ground and said, "This is where it all started. This is where we would play cricket."

Between bites of ice cream, Saqlain reminisced about mastering the *doosra* on his rooftop, never imagining a future with 496 international wickets. "Ramzan nights meant cricket till *sehri*," he said, a nostalgic glint in his eyes.

Soon, nostalgia turned to action. Spotting a group of youngsters playing street cricket, he couldn't resist. As he stepped out of the car, stunned players gasped, "Saqlain *bhai*?" He took guard, flicked a few deliveries, then unleashed his signature spin. The first was a classic off-spinner; the second, a doosra — both unplayable. The kids cheered, posed for photos, and collected autographs **(pic, facing page)**.

As we drove through Lahore's historic streets, Saqlain spoke of its cricketing legacy. "This is Wasim bhai's *ilaka*," he said, pointing down a lane. "Back then, no smartphones — just cricket, school, and the streets."

Even as Pakistan struggles to find world-class spinners, Saqlain remains hopeful. Cricket shaped his childhood, and on

S. DIPAK RAGAV

this night, under the Lahore sky, it was clear, it still does.

Walk through Lahore's cricket museums

Lahore, with its deep-rooted cricketing culture, preserves the sport's rich legacy through two unique museums. One, curated by Yahya Ghaznavi at the National Cricket Academy, is run by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) and showcases the 1992 and 2009 World Cup trophies along with rare memorabilia. The other, founded by Najum Latif at the Lahore Gymkhana ground, captures the game's early history in Pakistan.

Walking through Bagh-e-Jinnah, where Pakistan played its first international match in 1948, history whispers through old photographs. The Gymkhana ground, where the PCB was founded in 1949, is home to Latif's passion project. Inspired by a visit to Lord's, he set up the museum in 2003, collecting blazers, ties, and signed memorabilia from greats like Majid Khan, Fazal Mahmood, and Imran Khan.

The PCB museum, meanwhile, feels grander, with trophies, gloves, and jerseys on display. A surprising find — a cap worn by India's Roger Binny from the 1983 World Cup squad — adds to the nostalgia.

Latif worries about the future, hoping the club members will continue preserving history. As I explore both museums, the artefacts, autographs, and photographs remind me of cricket's timeless charm. The legacy of the game lives on in these spaces, where past and present converge in a tribute to Pakistan's cricketing journey.

Shayan Acharya

Revisiting cricket's oasis

The Dubai International Cricket Stadium has firmly established itself as the Middle East's cricketing hub, hosting two ICC finals in four years — the 2021 T20 World Cup and the 2025 Champions Trophy.

Yet, for fans who grew up in the late 1980s and 1990s, cricket in the Arabian Peninsula will always be synonymous with Sharjah.

After three weeks in Dubai, the Diary made a nostalgic trip to the Sharjah Cricket Stadium. As one nears the venue, the sight of its iconic canopies brings back memories of Tony Greig's famous commentary: "They are dancing in the aisles in Sharjah," during Sachin Tendulkar's 'Desert Storm' knock against Australia in 1998. A sign at the entrance proudly declares: "Welcome to the home of cricket in the UAE." However, time has not been kind to Sharjah. Despite holding the world record for most ODIs and recently hosting its 300th, between South Africa and Afghanistan in November 2024, it feels left behind. Dubai and Abu Dhabi's modern stadiums have taken over, and apart from some minor branding updates, Sharjah shows little sign of evolving with the times.

During the visit, a two-day match featuring UAE's top players — overseen by head coach Lalchand Rajput — was underway as part of preparations for the 2026 T20 World Cup qualifiers.

Once a battleground for cricket's biggest names, Sharjah's legacy also carries a darker side. The match-fixing scandal of 2000 cast a shadow over the venue, and India has not played an international game here since. However, modern-day Indian stars got a taste of the ground during the IPL in 2020 and 2021.

While it would be nostalgic to see top-tier international cricket return, Sharjah's small dimensions struggle against today's power-hitting era. As witnessed in the IPL, batters regularly clearing the ropes made six-hitting feel routine, even dull.

In a way, Sharjah has served its purpose, and it is probably for the best that international cricket has moved on.

S. Dipak Ragav

SHAYAN ACHARYA

Destructive: Ibrahim Zadran smashed a blistering 177 off 146 balls, the highest individual score in Champions Trophy history, powering Afghanistan to 325/7 against England. AFP

Flexing muscles: Despite Joe Root's valiant 120, Afghanistan's bowlers held their nerve to defend 317, sealing an eight-run win and knocking England out of the tournament. AP

AFGHANISTAN VS AUSTRALIA

Rain returns: Afghanistan's batters put up a total of 273 before Travis Head gave Australia a strong start in the PowerPlay. At 109 for one, a heavy downpour halted play, and with the ground left too wet, the match was eventually called off. The result secured Australia's spot in the semifinals while ending Afghanistan's hopes of qualification. AP

FOR MORE IMAGES

AUSTRALA VS SOUTH AFRICA

Gloomy Tuesday: Persistent rain in Rawalpindi washed out the Australia-South Africa match without a toss. Umpires called off the game three hours and 10 minutes before the scheduled start. REUTERS

PAKISTAN VS BANGLADESH

Washed out: Pakistan and Bangladesh's hopes of finishing their campaigns with a win were dashed as rain had the final say in Rawalpindi, forcing a no-result without a toss. AP

New ball menace: Marco Jansen tore through the top order, dismissing Phil Salt, Ben Duckett, and Jamie Smith within seven overs. His early strikes set the tone as South Africa bowled England out for just 179. GETTY IMAGES

Quick finish: Rassie van der Dussen (72 not out) and Heinrich Klaasen (64) put together a brisk 127-run stand off 122 balls for the third wicket, guiding South Africa to a comfortable chase of 180 inside 30 overs. AP

Rebuilding: With India struggling at 30 for three inside seven overs, Shreyas Iyer and Axar Patel steadied the innings with a crucial 98-run stand for the fourth wicket against New Zealand, helping it regain control. AP

Matt finish: Matt Henry led New Zealand's charge, claiming his third ODI five-for and dismissing Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Ravindra Jadeja, Hardik Pandya and Mohammed Shami as India was restricted to 249 for nine. REUTERS

Old school: Kane Williamson anchored New Zealand's chase with a composed 81 off 120 balls but found little support at the other end. His resistance ended when he was stumped trying to take on Axar Patel. PTI

Mystery man: Varun Chakaravarthy bamboozled New Zealand's batting lineup with a five-wicket haul, becoming only the third Indian to achieve the feat in Champions Trophy history, as India sealed a 44-run victory. PTI

CHAMPIONS TROPHY SEMIFINALS
INDIA VS AUSTRALIA

Calculative: In the semifinal against India, Steve Smith anchored Australia's chase with a fluent 73, combining smart placement and sharp running to build key partnerships and keep his team in control. PTI

Accurate: Mohammed Shami struck three times, dismissing Cooper Connolly, Steve Smith, and Nathan Ellis, as India bowled Australia out for 264. PTI

Chase master: With India losing both openers inside 7.5 overs, Virat Kohli steadied the innings with a brilliant 84 off 98 balls, guiding the chase of 265.
GETTY IMAGES

Final touch: Hardik Pandya's quickfire 28 off 24, featuring three towering sixes, sealed India's chase with 11 balls to spare, securing a spot in its fifth Champions Trophy final. AFP

Future star: Rachin Ravindra continued his love affair with ICC events, smashing his fifth ODI century — and second of the tournament. His elegant 108 off 101 balls was a masterclass in timing, precision, and fearless strokeplay. GETTY IMAGES

Innovative: Kane Williamson mixed classical strokes with uncharacteristic improvisation in his fluent 102 off 94 balls. His 164-run stand with Rachin Ravindra — the highest for New Zealand in Champions Trophy history — powered the Black Caps to a commanding 362 against South Africa. AP

Decisive spell: Mitchell Santner turned the game in New Zealand's favour with a match-winning spell, removing Temba Bavuma, Rassie van der Dussen, and Heinrich Klaasen in quick succession. His figures of 3 for 43 in 10 overs sealed New Zealand's place in the final against India. REUTERS

Lone fighter: David Miller stood tall in South Africa's daunting chase of 363, fighting till the very end. He hammered four sixes and 10 fours, reaching his century off the final ball of the innings. Despite his efforts, South Africa fell short by 50 runs. AFP

Turning the game: Kuldeep Yadav struck gold with his very first ball, dismissing a well-set Rachin Ravindra before removing Kane Williamson in his next over, shifting the momentum firmly in India's favour. PTI

Counter punch: Daryl Mitchell's gritty 63 off 101 balls anchored New Zealand's innings before Michael Bracewell provided the late surge, smashing 53 off 40 with two sixes and three fours, lifting the total to 251 for seven. REUTERS

Leading the charge: Rohit Sharma set the tone from the start, launching the second ball of the innings for a six and dominating the PowerPlay. His fluent 76 off 83 laid the foundation for a successful chase. PTI

Moment to cherish: Ravindra Jadeja sealed the victory with a boundary, guiding India to its third Champions Trophy title after 12 years. Remaining unbeaten throughout the tournament, India clinched its second consecutive ICC trophy in style. GETTY IMAGES

Second coming: Before the Champions Trophy, K.L. Rahul edged out Rishabh Pant for the keeper-batter role. Settled at No. 5 in ODIs, he has refined his middle-order game, adapting with composure. He stepped up when it mattered most in the Champions Trophy, delivering crucial performances with the bat, this time at No. 6. GETTY IMAGES

Where's the party tonight: Virat Kohli celebrates India's victory in the ICC Champions Trophy 2025 final against New Zealand at the Dubai International Stadium. Kohli said the Champions Trophy triumph somewhat made up for India's Test series loss in Australia. GETTY IMAGES

SIX MATCH-WINNERS WHO DROVE INDIA'S TITLE CHARGE

India secured its third Champions Trophy title with an unbeaten run. Here are the main architects of that win.

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Rohit Sharma

Rohit set the tone once again at an ICC tournament with his aggressive approach at the top. Though he scored 180 runs in five innings, his strike rate of 100 stood out — only three batters tallied more runs at a higher rate.

His signature pull shot fetched 44 runs off just 15 balls. In the final, his 41-ball fifty powered India to 64 inside the PowerPlay, setting up a 104-run stand with Shubman Gill.

"It's not natural to me, but I wanted to try something different. The team backed me, and it paid off," Rohit reflected.

44

Runs from pull shots off just 15 balls

Virat Kohli

Virat Kohli's mastery in ODI chases was on full display in the Champions Trophy. He struck a century against Pakistan in the group stage and played a crucial 98-ball 84 in the semifinal, guiding India to its highest run chase (265) in Dubai.

On spin-friendly pitches, Kohli relied on singles to keep the scoreboard ticking. Against Australia, he scored 60 off 65 balls in the middle overs, with 48 runs coming through running. Against Pakistan, he picked 23 singles against spinners in this phase.

With 218 runs in this edition, Kohli became the second-highest run-scorer in Champions Trophy history, behind Chris Gayle. He also joined Sachin Tendulkar and Kumar Sangakkara in the elite 14,000-run ODI club, reaching the milestone in just 287 innings — the fastest ever, surpassing Tendulkar's record.

100

Remained unbeaten in a crucial run chase against arch-rival Pakistan

Shreyas Iyer

Shreyas was India's leading run-scorer in the Champions Trophy, amassing 243 runs in five innings, including two fifties.

His finest knock, 79 off 98 balls, came against New Zealand in the group stage, rescuing India from a top-order collapse. He also notched a half-century against Pakistan.

As a middle-order anchor, Shreyas navigated spin on Dubai's sluggish pitches, facing 233 deliveries — the most by any batter — and averaging over 56. His false shot percentage (6.8%) was bettered only by Shubman Gill and Joe Root among those facing 100+ balls of spin.

Balancing caution with intent, he maintained a strike rate above 72 despite a dot-ball rate of 53% (third highest). His 64 runs in boundaries against spin were the most by any batter.

6.8%

False shot percentage, third-best among 100+ ball players against spin

3

Times unbeaten, excelling as a finisher

K. L. Rahul

Rahul once again adapted to India's needs, shifting down the order to accommodate Axar Patel at No. 5.

Before the Champions Trophy, Rahul had batted at No. 6 just four times, scoring 54 runs at an average of 18. In Dubai, he embraced the role, scoring 140 runs in four innings while remaining unbeaten thrice.

"Whatever the team requires, you have to accept it and find a way to perform," Rahul said after the final.

He excelled as a finisher, guiding India to victory in both knockout games. His unbeaten 42 off 34 balls helped chase down 265 against Australia, while a steady 34 off 33 ensured India crossed the line against New Zealand in the final.

5/42

His match-winning haul against New Zealand

Varun Chakaravarthy

India's late decision to include Varun Chakaravarthy in the squad paid off as he finished second on the wicket-takers list, claiming nine wickets in three matches at an average of just over 15.

Despite having just one ODI appearance before the tournament, he thrived under pressure, completing India's spin quartet and reinforcing its horses-for-courses approach on Dubai's slow pitches.

His 5/42 against New Zealand in the group stage was only the second five-wicket haul by a spinner at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium, after Shahid Afridi's 6/38 in 2009.

Known for his variations in the IPL, Chakaravarthy relied mostly on his leg-spin (111 balls) and googly (60), with his quicker ball, carrom ball, and slider used just nine times. Yet, he remained unpredictable, taking five wickets with the googly (economy 3.70), one with the slider, and three with his stock delivery.

2.81

Economy rate of his googly, which took four wickets

Kuldeep Yadav

Like Chakaravarthy, Kuldeep Yadav proved a tough challenge for batters with his variations.

His googly, bowled 66 times in five matches, yielded four wickets while conceding just 31 runs at an economy rate of 2.81. It played a crucial role in the final, deceiving Rachin Ravindra and halting his aggressive start on 37.

Like the rest of India's spin quartet, Kuldeep choked the scoring in the middle overs, maintaining an economy of 4.56. Among bowlers who delivered 150+ balls between overs 11 and 40, his dot-ball rate (52.7%) was bettered only by Mitchell Santner and Michael Bracewell. He also induced the highest percentage of false shots (16.3%) in this phase, with the next-best Indian spinner, Ravindra Jadeja, managing 10.7%.

WHAT THEY SAID...

« I don't think I can say this on camera, but I was s**ing myself at the end. But we still had a couple of batters to come, so I was confident we could get over the line. But in moments like these and big games, it's more about holding your composure, which we all know about. It's not easy, but I'm happy to win this and get over the line this time. I think I've batted in times like these in three out of the five games.** – K. L. Rahul »

« "It's always amazing to win an ICC event, and especially the Champions Trophy. I remember 2017 very closely to my heart. We could not finish the job that time. But very, very pleased with the way we have played throughout the tournament. And, at the same time, how everyone contributed. That was fantastic.
– Hardik Pandya »

« "I was a sudden inclusion, and I didn't expect it to turn out like this, and it's a dream come true. – Varun Chakaravarthy »

« "Feeling ecstatic, to be honest. It's ineffable. It's my first ICC trophy, and I'm kind of overwhelmed. Looking at everyone in the dressing room, how we've turned up for this tournament, and how we've progressed, it was simply magnificent.
– Shreyas Iyer »

« "Felt amazing. For the most part, I was sitting back and enjoying Rohit bhai's batting but we kept talking to each other and the [opening] partnership was important for us. It's definitely very satisfying, we missed out on the last one that we played in 2023 [World Cup], and it's a surreal feeling to win this one, starting with the ODI series in England, winning eight ODIs back-to-back, amazing feeling. – Shubman Gill »

« "My batting number is such that I'm either a hero or a zero [on finishing India's matches often]. Hardik and KL had a good partnership in the last 10 overs because the wicket was not so easy for new batters, but the partnership they had changed the momentum of the game. – Ravindra Jadeja »

« "Luckily [I didn't have to bat]. Credit goes to KL bhai and Jaddu bhai to finish the game. There are certainly a lot of expectations when you're playing well over the years, and you enter the tournaments as favourites, although I don't believe in the favourites' tag. I dedicate this win to the fans.
– Kuldeep Yadav »

India on top

3 The number of occasions India has won the Champions Trophy title. This is the most CT titles won by any side.

Champions Trophy title winners

Titles	Team	(Year)
3	India	(2002+, 2013, 2025)
2	Australia	(2006, 2009)
1	South Africa	(1998)
1	New Zealand	(2000)
1	Sri Lanka	(2002+)
1	West Indies	(2004)
1	Pakistan	(2017)

+ shared

7 The number of ICC trophies that Team India has won. This includes four 50-overs, two 20-overs and one 60-overs titles.

ICC trophies won by India

Year	ICC tournament	Overs	Venue	Winning captain
1983	World Cup	60	Eng	Kapil Dev
2002	Champions Trophy (shared)	50	SL	Sourav Ganguly
2007	T20 World Cup	20	SA	M. S. Dhoni
2011	World Cup	50	Ind	M. S. Dhoni
2013	Champions Trophy	50	Eng	M. S. Dhoni
2024	T20 World Cup	20	USA/WI	Rohit Sharma
2025	Champions Trophy	50	Pak/UAE	Rohit Sharma

5126 The number of balls India's Mohd Shami required to claim the 200th ODI wicket of his career. This is now the quickest in terms of number of balls taken by any of the 43 bowlers who have the distinction of claiming 200 or more wickets in ODI cricket. Australian left-arm pacer Mitchell Starc previously held the record. However, Starc is still the fastest to 200 ODI wickets in fewest games (102), while Pakistan offie Saqlain Mushtaq has done it in fewer innings (101).

Fewest balls taken to claim 200th ODI wicket in career

Balls	Bowler (for)	Achieved on	M	Inns	Wkts	S/R	Victim (from)	Venue
5126	Md. Shami (Ind)	20 Feb 2025	104	103	202	25.45	J. Ali (Ban)	Dubai
5240	M. Starc (Aus)	3 Sep 2022	102	102	200	26.23	R. Burl (Zim)	Townsville
5451	S. Mushtaq (Pak)	5 Jun 1999	104	101	200	27.33	J. Kallis (SA)	Nottingham
5640	B. Lee (Aus)	12 Jul 2005	112	109	200	28.44	M. Trescothick (Eng)	The Oval
5783	T. Boult (NZ)	13 Oct 2023	107	106	200	29.01	T. Hridoy (Ban)	Chennai

*Notes: *The fastest to 200 ODI wickets in fewest matches: Mitchell Starc (Aus, 102th game), Saqlain Mushtaq (Pak, 104), Mohd Shami (Ind, 104), Trent Boult (Ind, 107), Brett Lee (Aus, 112). *The figures for the wickets and strike-rate are calculated at the end of the match.*

10 The number of players to aggregate 11000 runs in ODI cricket. In the CT match against Bangladesh in Dubai on 20 Feb 2025, Rohit Sharma became the latest to join this elite list of batters. In doing so, in the 261st innings of his career, he became the second quickest to achieve this milestone after his team-mate Virat Kohli, who, in 2019, did it in just 222 innings.

Quickest to reach 11000 runs in ODI cricket

Inns	M	Batter (for)	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	Score	Opp	Venue
222	230	V. Kohli (Ind)	16 Jun 2019	11020	59.57	77	Pak	Manchester
261	269	R. Sharma (Ind)	20 Feb 2025	11029	49.02	41	Ban	Dubai
276	284	S. Tendulkar (Ind)	28 Jan 2002	11039	44.16	87*	Eng	Kanpur
286	295	R. Ponting (Aus/WXI)	24 Feb 2008	11023	43.92	124	Ind	Sydney
288	298	S. Ganguly (Ind/Asia)	27 Aug 2007	11011	41.55	72	Eng	Birmingham

*Note: Kohli took 11831 balls to Rohit Sharma's 11868 balls to reach the above milestone. *The figures for the runs and average are calculated until the end of the match.*

India's Rohit Sharma. PTI

6 } The number of batters who have made 9000 or more runs while opening the innings in ODI cricket. In the CT match against Pakistan in Dubai, Rohit Sharma became the latest opening batter to cross this landmark in ODIs. In doing so, he became the quickest to achieve this in fewest number of innings. The table below lists all the openers who reached this milestone in ODI cricket.

Quickest to reach 9000 ODI runs while opening the batting

Inns	Opener (for)	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	100/50
181	R. Sharma (Ind)	23 Feb 2025	9019	54.99	30/44
197	S. Tendulkar (Ind)	23 Feb 2003	9064	49.53	31/40
231	S. Ganguly (Ind)	14 Oct 2007	9057	42.13	19/58
246	C. Gayle (WI)	24 Sep 2017	9051	39.35	22/47
253	A. Gilchrist (Aus)	15 Feb 2008	9071	36.87	16/52
268	S. Jayasuriya (SL)	22 Aug 2004	9006	35.18	18/53

**The figures for the runs and average are calculated until the end of the match*

287 } The number of innings Virat Kohli needed to reach 14000 runs in his ODI career. During his unbeaten 100 in the CT match against Pakistan in Dubai, he became only the third batter in ODI history to reach this landmark after team-mate Sachin Tendulkar and Sri Lankan Kumar Sangakkara. However, Kohli is the quickest to reach this milestone in the fewest innings (287).

Inns	M	Batter (for)	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	Score	Opp	Venue
287	299	V. Kohli (Ind)	23 Feb 2025	14085	58.20	100*	Pak	Dubai
350	359	S. Tendulkar (Ind)	6 Feb 2006	14009	44.19	100	Pak	Peshawar
378	402	K. Sangakkara (SL)	8 Mar 2015	14065	41.74	104	Aus	Sydney

**The figures above for the runs and average are calculated until the end of the match*

20 } The number of Indian batters who have made 3000 or more runs in ODI cricket. In the CT match against Australia in Dubai, K. L. Rahul became the latest Indian batter to cross this landmark in ODIs. In doing so, he became the third quickest to achieve the career milestone in fewest innings. From the list below, it will be noticed that Rahul has left behind several top Indian batters from the previous generation to reach this milestone much quicker than them.

Quickest to reach 3000 runs in ODI cricket for India

Inns	M	Batter (for)	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	Score	Opp	Venue
72	73	S. Dhawan	20 Jan 2016	3000	43.48	126	Aus	Canberra
75	78	V. Kohli	14 Feb 2012	3001	46.17	15	SL	Adelaide
78	84	K. L. Rahul	4 Mar 2025	3009	48.53	42*	Aus	Dubai
79	83	N. S. Sidhu	5 Nov 1994	3005	40.61	28	WI	Kolkata
82	87	S. Ganguly	12 Jan 1999	3036	40.48	38	NZ	Napier

**The figures for the runs and average are calculated until the end of the match*

68 } The number of sixes hit by Rohit Sharma in all ICC ODI tournaments (World Cup + Champions Trophy). Combined, this is the maximum by any batter in these two prestigious world ODI tournaments. He went ahead of Chris Gayle's tally of 64 sixes when he hit his only six in the CT match semifinal against Australia in Dubai on 4 March 2025.

6s	WC	CT	Batter (for)	M	Inns	Balls	6/inns	Balls/6
68	54	14	R. Sharma (Ind)	43	43	2256	1.58	33
64	49	15	C. Gayle (WI)	52	51	2201	1.25	34
49	43	6	G. Maxwell (Aus)	35	30	655	1.63	13
49	35	14	D. Miller (SA)	23	31	1040	1.58	21

Note: Rohit's 54 sixes are the most hit by any player in the WC history

All records are correct and updated until 9 March 2025.

A gentleman's game and a civil servant's duty

Javed Burki reflects on his cricketing journey, from Pakistan's 1960-61 India tour to his civil service career, recalling friendships, discipline, and the game's evolution.

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"I play golf every day. That's part of my routine," says Javed Burki as we walk around his house in one of the elite neighbourhoods of Islamabad. It has been raining for the past few days, causing the temperature to drop further. As he takes me to his garden, Burki introduces me to his pet dog, Shadow.

"Be careful, he is very friendly, but if you ignore him, he will start jumping," Burki smiles before engaging in a game of throw-ball with his pet. A former Pakistan captain, erstwhile chief national selector, and civil servant, Burki will turn 87 in a couple of months. But age, clearly, has not caught up with him.

The word 'discipline' repeatedly comes up in our conversation as Burki turns back the clock and recalls his first visit to India with the Pakistan Test team in December 1960. He was just 22 then and among the youngest members of the squad, led by the legendary Fazal Mahmood.

All five Test matches in the series ended in a draw — unimaginable in today's era. "But those days were different," he says. "Even after the India series, when we played against Australia and New Zealand, it was the same story — we did not win, we did not lose, but we drew..."

Four months before the team left for India, Burki returned to Pakistan from England to prepare for the civil services examination in November. "Around October, they held trials to select the team for India. I was picked, but I told the selectors I would not be available for the first few tour matches due to the examination," he says.

Once the examination was over in late November, he arrived in Bombay — modern-day Mumbai — for the first Test. But Burki faced an unexpected challenge upon checking in at the Cricket Club of India premises. "Since returning from England, I had been busy preparing for the civil service examination. As a result, I hadn't been exposed to much of the subcontinental sun. And in Bombay, the sun was so bright that I felt very uncomfortable," he remembers.

He requested that the team management not consider him for the first test at the Brabourne Stadium. "I wanted to acclimatise. But the team management rejected my request and said I'd have to play..."

It was not an outing to remember, as he scored just seven runs in the first innings before falling to Subhash Gupte. Though he remained unbeaten on 13 in the second, Burki did not have much to write home about.

But off the pitch, there were memorable moments.

Starry experiences

"Yusuf Khan, who?"

Burki remembers asking a gentleman this question at a party hosted by the noted filmmaker and producer Mehboob Khan in Bombay. The gentleman appeared awkward, as Burki failed to recognise him. "The first day, he introduced himself as Dilip Kumar, and a couple of days later, he walked up to me and said, 'I am Yusuf Khan, remember me?' And my answer was —'no'..." Burki says with a smile.

Back then, Burki was unaware that Dilip — the revered actor — was originally known as Yusuf Khan. "And that led to the confusion. But he was a very nice man, and we had a great time discussing his roots in Peshawar and his family," he recalls.

During that tour, Burki also met yesteryear actors Ashok Kumar and Raj Kapoor, as well as the illustrious Saira Banu, who later married Dilip. "Back then, they weren't married. And when we were in Bombay, Fazal (Mahmood) and I socialised with many people from the film industry, and it was a great experience," he

FOR MORE STORIES

recollects. From Bombay, the journey continued to Kanpur. In those days, air travel wasn't the norm, and Burki recalls that separate train bogies were reserved for the Indian and Pakistan teams. "There was a different excitement," he says.

Once the second Test got underway in Kanpur, Burki played a gritty innings of 79 before being run out. "On that tour, I always contributed when my team was in trouble, and the innings in Kanpur was one such occasion," he says. "When we played the fourth Test in Madras (now Chennai), the wicket had become very easy to bat on. By the time my turn came, I had no interest, and I was out quickly... But I always performed under pressure."

While he recalls that most wickets were placid, the one at Eden Gardens favoured the bowlers. "I thought this was a Test where we could maybe get India on the run. It was a wicket where he (Mahmood) could work. On the other grassless turf wickets, he couldn't do anything. But in Calcutta, where the ball gripped a little, I thought we could get things done. So when I went in, I went for the Indian bowling and played a quickfire innings," he says.

However, Pakistan's captain, Mahmood, did not press for a win. "Back in those days, the mentality was to not lose. And we were not trying to win. Both teams were afraid of losing..." Burki remembers how the Pakistan batters looked comfortable against India's medium pacers, Surendra Nath and Ramakant Desai.

Before breaking into the Pakistan team, Burki had played against a touring Indian team for Oxford, where he scored a century.

"That experience helped. I had previously played against Gupte and Chandu Borde, so I'd already seen all these boys on a sporting wicket in Oxford. And here I was, playing against them on these very easy wickets. So it wasn't much of a problem," he says.

Feeling at home

The touring team had little trouble adapting to conditions, but the Pakistan players encountered an unforeseen predicament upon arriving in Madras for the fourth Test — finding familiar food. "Some of us from the north, northwest, were not able to eat too much rice. We were sort of wheat eaters. And in Madras in those days, nobody had ever heard of chapati. We tried to explain to the gentleman in the kitchen, and they whipped up something from white flour," Burki recalls, adding, "We ended up eating a lot of rice..."

Born in Meerut in undivided India, the tour of India felt like a homecoming for Burki. However, as a youngster, it was also about acclimatising to international cricket. "The cultures were not different. And for me, it was not different at all," he says. "I was born in Meerut, and our family, we were Afghans. We had 12 fortified villages outside Jalandhar, and I came to Pakistan in October or November of 1947 from Lucknow. So this was new for me, but not India, so that tour was a great moment for me," he adds.

Pakistan's team at the time was a product of the Ranji Trophy, with several of its players having gained considerable First-Class experience in undivided India. Burki believes that

university-level cricket in the United Kingdom also played a significant role in shaping many players.

Burki made an impressive start to Test cricket, scoring over 650 runs at an average of more than 50 in his first two series. He eventually captained Pakistan on its tour of England in 1962. "I was initially reluctant to accept the role, but I had to accept it since most of the selection committee members were senior civil servants and I was a junior civil servant," he says with a smile.

Despite playing 177 First-Class matches, Burki featured in only 25 Tests. As he explains, the decision to step away from international cricket was influenced by his flourishing career in civil service.

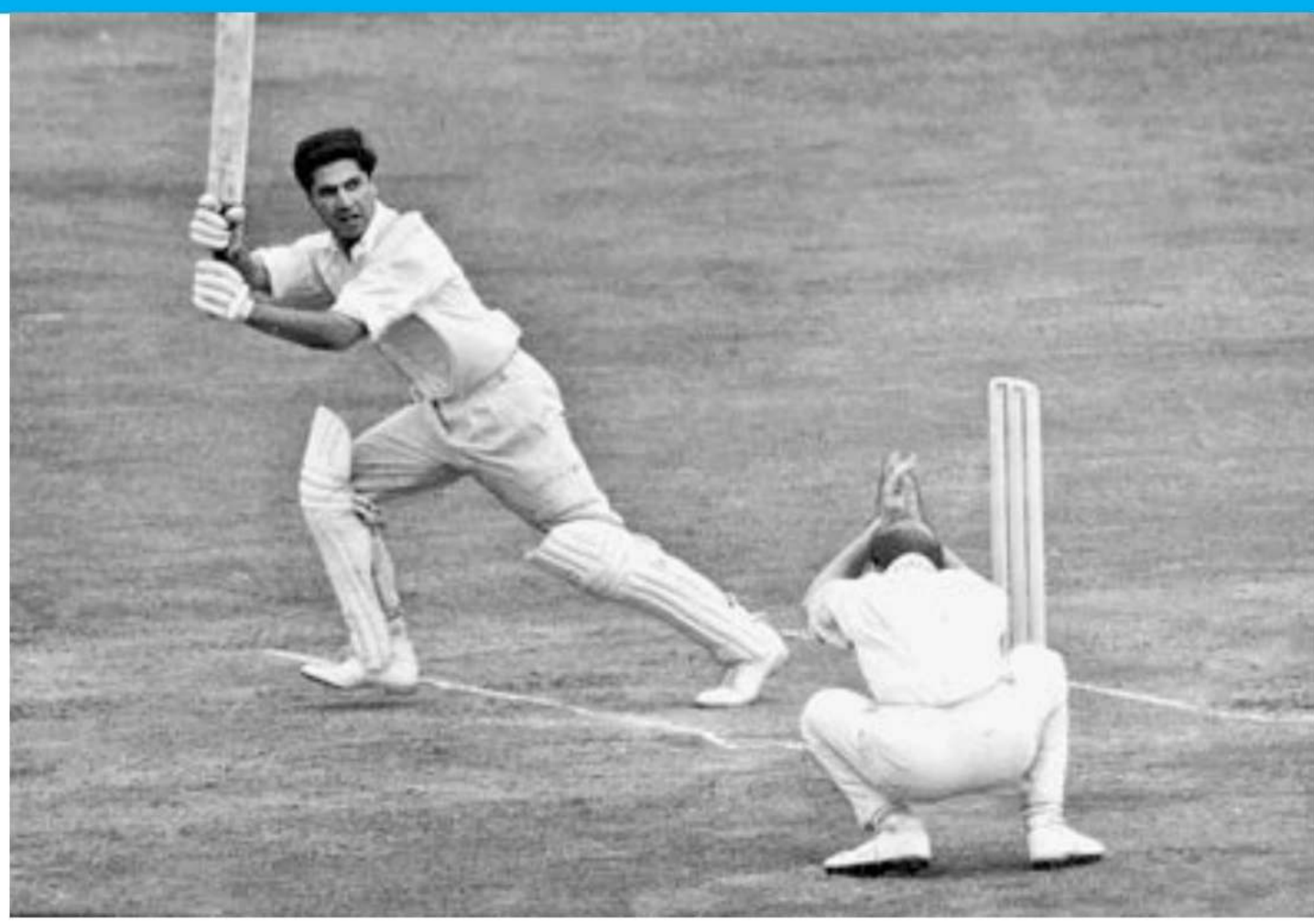
"The government of Pakistan had a rule that any civil servant who was a member of a national team in any sport had to be given time off to play for the national team, and his time with the national team was considered as on duty. So, they always had to release me for international assignments. After two or three years, it became a little difficult for me because I couldn't be given good posts," Burki says.

"That's when I decided to focus on my job, and cricket took a backseat. I could never really become a full-time cricketer mainly because of my job, and also since there wasn't much cricket, there was just not enough money here," he says. Over the course of his long career as a civil servant, Burki went on to serve the Government of Pakistan as Secretary in the Ministry of Water and Power.

Part of history

However, a couple of decades after calling it quits, Burki returned to the game — albeit as the chief selector of the national team, which went on to win the World Cup title in 1992 under the leadership of his cousin, Imran Khan.

During that phase — from 1989 to 1993 — a group of young cricketers, including Inzamam-ul-Haq, Waqar Younis, Saeed Anwar, and Moin Khan, made their international debuts. "Around that time, India U-19 and Sri Lanka A teams were touring Pakistan, and this was an opportunity for me to pick newer players. So, I got together with some managers of Pakistani teams, people who managed the United Bank team, the Habib Bank team, old cricketers, and asked them about young cricketers," Burki says.



Heroic knock: Pakistan captain Javed Burki plays a shot off Leonard Coldwell during his century stand with Nasim-ul-Ghani (101). Their 197-run partnership saved Pakistan from an innings defeat at Lord's in 1962. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Thus, players like Inzamam and Younis rose through the ranks. With the 1992 World Cup approaching, Imran would regularly call Burki. "Imran used to keep telephoning me from England, asking: Have you found somebody? I would say, yes. When he came, we presented him Waqar Younis, Inzamam and Anwar, who he did not like. But I insisted that Anwar should be considered," he says.

The rest, of course, is history, as Anwar went on to become one of the icons of Pakistan cricket across formats. Burki also notes that maintaining discipline was never a challenge.

"The boys knew that anybody who did not perform or was indisciplined would be out of the team. From January 1989, right up to the selection of the team for the World Cup in February 1992, we had this continuity of order and discipline and channels of communication. Nobody could go around us, nobody could go and talk to anybody on the board," he says. While many among the current generation may not be familiar with his name, Burki recalls an incident from 2006 when former India captain Rahul Dravid wished to meet him during India's tour of Pakistan. "The team was invited by a local banker for a meal, and Imran was also there. So, he called me to say that the Indian team wanted to meet me.

When I went there, it turned out to be Dravid, who wanted to meet me because he wanted to know about the tour of India in 1960-61 and asked me why the current Pakistan team was different," Burki says. "I explained that the cultures were now more diverse. Back in the 1960s, the Indian and Pakistani cultures were kind of similar, but now it was different..."

Though he continues to follow Pakistan cricket, and the team's struggles do disappoint him, Burki, sitting in a cosy corner of his Islamabad home, fondly reminisces about the game's golden days and the fierce on-field rivalry with the neighbouring nation.

While much of his time is spent with his pet dog and his parrot, Burki often finds himself missing his old friends and the cherished moments of the past.

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THE BIG SHOW
The 18th edition of the Indian Premier League kicks off on March 22, with Kolkata Knight Riders taking on Royal Challengers Bengaluru

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IPL 2025 SCHEDULE

Date	Match	Venue	Time (IST)
March 22	KKR vs RCB	Kolkata	19:30
March 23	SRH vs RR	Hyderabad	15:30
March 23	CSK vs MI	Chennai	19:30
March 24	DC vs LSG	Vizag	19:30
March 25	GT vs PBKS	Ahmedabad	19:30
March 26	RR vs KKR	Guwahati	19:30
March 27	SRH vs LSG	Hyderabad	19:30
March 28	CSK vs RCB	Chennai	19:30
March 29	GT vs MI	Ahmedabad	19:30
March 30	DC vs SRH	Vizag	15:30
March 30	RR vs CSK	Guwahati	19:30
March 31	MI vs KKR	Mumbai	19:30
April 1	LSG vs PBKS	Lucknow	19:30
April 2	RCB vs GT	Bengaluru	19:30
April 3	KKR vs SRH	Kolkata	19:30
April 4	LSG vs MI	Lucknow	19:30
April 5	CSK vs DC	Chennai	15:30
April 5	PBKS vs RR	New Chandigarh	19:30
April 6	KKR vs LSG	Kolkata	15:30
April 6	SRH vs GT	Hyderabad	19:30
April 7	MI vs RCB	Mumbai	19:30
April 8	PBKS vs CSK	New Chandigarh	19:30
April 9	GT vs RR	Ahmedabad	19:30
April 10	RCB vs DC	Bengaluru	19:30
April 11	CSK vs KKR	Chennai	19:30
April 12	LSG vs GT	Lucknow	15:30
April 12	SRH vs PBKS	Hyderabad	19:30
April 13	RR vs RCB	Jaipur	15:30
April 13	DC vs MI	Delhi	19:30
April 14	LSG vs CSK	Lucknow	19:30
April 15	PBKS vs KKR	New Chandigarh	19:30
April 16	DC vs RR	Delhi	19:30
April 17	MI vs SRH	Mumbai	19:30
April 18	RCB vs PBKS	Bengaluru	19:30
April 19	GT vs DC	Ahmedabad	15:30
April 19	RR vs LSG	Jaipur	19:30
April 20	PBKS vs RCB	New Chandigarh	15.30

Date	Match	Venue	Time (IST)
April 20	MI vs CSK	Mumbai	19:30
April 21	KKR vs GT	Kolkata	19:30
April 22	LSG vs DC	Lucknow	19:30
April 23	SRH vs MI	Hyderabad	19:30
April 24	RCB vs RR	Bengaluru	19:30
April 25	CSK vs SRH	Chennai	19:30
April 26	KKR vs PBKS	Kolkata	19:30
April 27	MI vs LSG	Mumbai	15:30
April 27	DC vs RCB	Delhi	19:30
April 28	RR vs GT	Jaipur	19:30
April 29	DC vs KKR	Delhi	19:30
April 30	CSK vs PBKS	Chennai	19:30
May 1	RR vs MI	Jaipur	19:30
May 2	GT vs SRH	Ahmedabad	19:30
May 3	RCB vs CSK	Bengaluru	19:30
May 4	KKR vs RR	Kolkata	15:30
May 4	PBKS vs LSG	Dharamsala	19:30
May 5	SRH vs DC	Hyderabad	19:30
May 6	MI vs GT	Mumbai	19:30
May 7	KKR vs CSK	Kolkata	19:30
May 8	PBKS vs DC	Dharamsala	19:30
May 9	LSG vs RCB	Lucknow	19:30
May 10	SRH vs KKR	Hyderabad	19:30
May 11	PBKS vs MI	Dharamsala	15:30
May 11	DC vs GT	Delhi	19:30
May 12	CSK vs RR	Chennai	19:30
May 13	RCB vs SRH	Bengaluru	19:30
May 14	GT vs LSG	Ahmedabad	19:30
May 15	MI vs DC	Mumbai	19:30
May 16	RR vs PBKS	Jaipur	19:30
May 17	RCB vs KKR	Bengaluru	19:30
May 18	GT vs CSK	Ahmedabad	15:30
May 18	LSG vs SRH	Lucknow	19:30
May 20	Qualifier 1	Hyderabad	19:30
May 21	Eliminator	Hyderabad	19:30
May 23	Qualifier 2	Kolkata	19:30
May 25	Final	Kolkata	19:30

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PREDICTED TEAM

Rachin Ravindra
Rahul Tripathi
Shivam Dube
Ravindra Jadeja
MS Dhoni
Sam Curran
R Ashwin
Noor Ahmad
Matheesha Pathirana
Khaleel Ahmed

IMPACT PLAYER

Andre Siddharth/Anshul Kamboj

COACH

Stephen Fleming

HOME VENUE

MA Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai

LAST SEASON

Fifth

Well-rounded spin attack

7.13

The economy rate for spinners at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai Super Kings' home venue. This is the lowest among IPL grounds that have hosted more than 15 matches. With Ravindra Jadeja, R Ashwin, and Noor Ahmad in its ranks, CSK boasts a well-rounded spin attack, perfectly suited to exploiting Chepauk's conditions.

Late-order powerhouse

220.54

MS Dhoni's batting strike rate in IPL 2024, the second-highest in any IPL season for batters with at least 100 runs, behind Jake Fraser-McGurk (also in 2024). Last season, Dhoni embraced the role of a finisher, specialising in clearing the ropes during the death overs. He hammered 13 sixes and 14 fours from just 73 deliveries. On average, he found the boundary every three balls. Remarkably, he remained unbeaten in eight of his 11 innings, underlining his effectiveness as a late-order powerhouse.

BEST FINISH - CHAMPION
(2010, 2011, 2018, 2021, 2023)

CAPTAIN: Ruturaj Gaikwad

CSK

Lack of early intent

8.55

Chennai Super Kings' run rate in the PowerPlay over the last three IPL seasons, the third-lowest in the league, ahead of only Gujarat Titans and Lucknow Super Giants. Rachin Ravindra is the most likely opening partner for captain Ruturaj Gaikwad in IPL 2025. While Ravindra has a T20 strike rate of 140.46, Gaikwad's is a comparatively modest 131.90. This lack of early intent often places additional pressure on the middle order to accelerate the innings.

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BEST FINISH - CHAMPION
(2012, 2014, 2024)

PowerPlay boundary percentage

26.16

In the last two IPL seasons, KKR's PowerPlay boundary percentage has been a key factor. Its title-winning campaign was fuelled by explosive starts from Phil Salt and Sunil Narine. This season, Quinton de Kock replaces Salt, aiming to deliver the same attacking intent. Both de Kock and Narine have a habit of finding the boundary every four balls in the PowerPlay, boasting a strike rate of 152.64.

KKR

CAPTAIN: Ajinkya Rahane

Spin economy rate in middle overs

7.36

KKR has retained two match-winning spinners in Sunil Narine and Varun Chakaravarthy, further strengthening the department by adding Moeen Ali. The trio aims to apply a spin choke in the middle overs on conducive surfaces. Collectively, they have picked up 55 wickets in 43 innings during this phase.

Economy rate in death overs

11.18

KKR has struggled in the last four overs over the past two seasons, lacking a reliable death bowler. Harshit Rana, Andre Russell, and Anrich Nortje have been expensive, conceding 88 boundaries in 34 matches. However, they have also been regular wicket-takers, striking every 14 balls at an average of 25.80 at the death.

PREDICTED TEAM

Quinton de Kock
Sunil Narine
Angkrish Raghuvanshi
Venkatesh Iyer
Rinku Singh
Andre Russell
Ramandeep Singh
Harshit Rana
Varun Chakaravarthy
Anrich Nortje

IMPACT PLAYER

Mayank Markande/Vaibhav Arora

COACH

Chandrakant Pandit

HOME VENUE

Eden Gardens

LAST SEASON

Winner

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PREDICTED TEAM

Travis Head
Abhishek Sharma
Ishan Kishan
Nitish Kumar Reddy
Heinrich Klaasen
Abhinav Manohar
Harshal Patel
Mohammed Shami
Rahul Chahar
Adam Zampa

IMPACT PLAYER

Sachin Baby / Simarjeet Singh

COACH

Daniel Vettori

HOME VENUE

Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium, Hyderabad

LAST SEASON

Runner-up

Marauding ways

13.46

Abhishek Sharma and Travis Head's opening partnership run rate. This is the highest run rate for any partnership with at least 350 runs in all T20s since the start of 2024. The SRH duo amassed 691 runs in IPL 2024 at an average of 49.35. Sunrisers Hyderabad will be relying on Head and Abhishek to continue their marauding ways in IPL 2025 as it seeks to reclaim the title it last won in 2016.

Dominating the spinners

163.16

Heinrich Klaasen has maintained a strike rate of 163.16 against spinners in T20s since the start of 2022, second only to Australia's Glenn Maxwell among batters with at least 1,000 runs against spin. He also boasts an impressive average of 41.52 – the fifth-best in this category. Klaasen's ability to dominate spin will be key to Sunrisers Hyderabad's success in the middle overs. He scored 224 runs at a strike rate of 182.11 against spinners last IPL and 264 runs at 191.30 in 2023.

BEST FINISH - CHAMPION
(2009 AS DECCAN CHARGERS, 2016)

Providing early breakthroughs

21.25

Since the start of 2022, Mohammed Shami has had the best PowerPlay bowling average in the IPL among bowlers with at least 10 wickets in this phase. Only Trent Boult (32) has taken more PowerPlay wickets than Shami (28) during this period. With most of its other bowlers excelling in different phases, Sunrisers Hyderabad will rely on Shami for early breakthroughs. The PowerPlay economy rate in Ahmedabad since 2023 stands at 8.38, while Hyderabad, Shami's new home base, sees a slight rise to 9.16. It will be interesting to see how Cummins utilises him in these conditions.

SRH

CAPTAIN: Pat Cummins

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PREDICTED TEAM

Yashasvi Jaiswal
Riyan Parag
Shimron Hetmyer
Dhruv Jurel
Nitish Rana
Wanindu Hasaranga
Jofra Archer
Sandeep Sharma
Maheesh Theekshana
Akash Madhwal

IMPACT PLAYER

Shubham Dubey/Tushar Deshpande

COACH

Rahul Dravid

HOME VENUE

Sawai Mansingh Stadium, Jaipur/Barsapara Cricket Stadium, Guwahati

LAST SEASON

Third

PowerPlay economy rate

8.08

Rajasthan Royals' economy rate in the PowerPlay since 2023 - the lowest for any team. Additionally, the team's bowling average during this phase (30.58) is the second-best over the last two seasons. However, the team achieved this largely due to the exploits of left-arm pacer Trent Boult, who was not retained by the franchise for the upcoming season. RR will hope Jofra Archer, who has an economy rate of 5.74 in the PowerPlay in the IPL, can step into the breach and fill this void.

Highest strike rate against seamers

159.16

The combined strike rate against pace (IPL 2024) of Yashasvi Jaiswal, Sanju Samson, and Riyan Parag, who could form Rajasthan Royals' potential top three this year. RR has traditionally relied on its top order to deliver with the bat, and the onus will be on the trio to continue providing the team with strong starts in the absence of Jos Buttler. All three feature in the top 10 list of batters with the highest strike rate against seamers last year (minimum 300 runs), with Riyan leading his team-mates with a scoring rate of 163.47 per 100 balls faced.

BEST FINISH - CHAMPION
(2008)

Vulnerable against spin

14.33

Shimron Hetmyer's batting average against spin in the IPL since 2023. The West Indian power-hitter has a very evident vulnerability against the tweakers, and RR, which has often lacked momentum through the middle overs, will need Hetmyer to overcome it. In IPL 2024, Hetmyer was dismissed by spinners three times in the span of just 17 deliveries and managed to score just eight runs. In the last two IPL seasons, he has fallen victim to spin six times in 77 deliveries, while striking at just 111.69.

RR

CAPTAIN: Sanju Samson

Dhruva Prasad
dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in

PREDICTED TEAM

Jos Buttler
B. Sai Sudharsan
Mahipal Lomror
Rashid Khan
Rahul Tewatia
Shahrukh Khan
Gerald Coetzee
Mohammed Siraj
Prasidh Krishna
Kagiso Rabada

IMPACT PLAYER

R. Sai Kishore/Anuj Rawat

COACH

Ashish Nehra

HOME VENUE

Narendra Modi Stadium, Ahmedabad

LAST SEASON

Eighth

Slow starters

7.72

Gujarat Titans' run rate in the PowerPlay in 2024 - the lowest in the tournament. The team failed to keep pace with the increasingly high scoring rates in the first six overs, falling behind teams such as Sunrisers Hyderabad (11.17) and Kolkata Knight Riders (11.07) by almost four runs per over during this phase. Gujarat was the only team to score at under eight runs per over during the tournament in the PowerPlay. GT's openers Shubman Gill and Wriddhiman Saha were the tournament's slowest openers in the PowerPlay (minimum 100 runs), scoring at a combined strike rate of 128.06 during this phase.

Lacking middle-over thrust

22.18

The combined batting average of Gujarat Titans' middle-order (No. 4-7) in IPL 2024 - the lowest in the tournament. With Hardik Pandya leaving the side ahead of the 2024 season, Gujarat struggled to find stability in the middle-order, and its woes were exacerbated by David Miller and Vijay Shankar's indifferent form. Moreover, GT's No. 4 to 7 batters could only score at 8.92 runs an over - the second lowest in the tournament after Punjab Kings (8.59).

BEST FINISH: CHAMPION
(2022)

Trump card misfires

8.40

Rashid Khan's economy rate in 2024 - his worst for any season in the IPL. This was only the second time, after 2023, that Rashid conceded more than eight runs an over in a single edition of the IPL since his debut in 2017. His 10 wickets from 12 matches was also his lowest wickets tally for a single season in the IPL. The Afghan spinner's slump in form contributed majorly to GT's poor 2024 campaign, as the side picked up the least number of wickets (27) in the middle overs and had the second worst bowling average (37.48) during this phase.

GT

CAPTAIN: Shubman Gill

Anish Pathiyil
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PREDICTED TEAM

Phil Salt
Devdutt Padikkal
Virat Kohli
Liam Livingstone
Jitesh Sharma
Tim David
Krunal Pandya
Bhuvneshwar Kumar
Josh Hazlewood
Yash Dayal

IMPACT PLAYER

Rasikh Salam/ Suyash Sharma

COACH

Andy Flower

HOME VENUE

M. Chinnaswamy Stadium

LAST SEASON

Fourth

Economical PowerPlay bowlers

7.96

With Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Krunal Pandya, and Josh Hazlewood in its ranks, RCB boasts three of the most economical PowerPlay bowlers. The trio maintains a dot-ball percentage of 46.6% in the first six overs. While the two pacers have collectively taken 19 wickets in this phase, Krunal has only managed two. However, his boundary percentage is lower than the quicks – 20.83% compared to their 22.07%.

Middle-order strike rate in death overs

188.45

RCB's middle order promises fireworks in the death overs this season. Rajat Patidar, Liam Livingstone, Jitesh Sharma, and Tim David all strike at over 11.30 runs per over between overs 16 and 20. Across their last 42 innings, the quartet has struck 105 boundaries at the death, underlining their finishing prowess.

BEST FINISH - RUNNER-UP
(2009, 2011, 2016)

Economy rate at Chinnaswamy

9.78

Unlike most IPL teams, RCB has struggled to make its home ground a fortress, largely due to the venue's short boundaries and high-scoring nature. However, over the last couple of seasons, the gap between run rate and boundary percentage across innings has narrowed, signalling a more balanced contest between bat and ball.

RCB

CAPTAIN: Rajat Patidar

Sahil Mathur
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BEST FINISH: RUNNER-UP
2020

PowerPlay impact

168.04

Since 2023, Jake Fraser-McGurk has recorded the third-best strike rate in the PowerPlay across all T20s (168.04), trailing only Travis Head (184.8) and Abhishek Sharma (181.47). The 21-year-old made a sensational IPL debut for Delhi Capitals in 2024, amassing 330 runs at an explosive strike rate of 234.04. His remarkable performances meant he was retained ahead of the auction. As an opener, he will be expected to provide similarly aggressive starts, particularly on the quick-scoring surfaces of Delhi and Visakhapatnam.

DC

Axar Patel

Captain yet to be announced at the time of going to Press

Addressing spin struggles

24.66

Delhi Capitals endured two underwhelming seasons with the bat, often struggling against spin. It had the lowest batting average against spinners among all teams and scored at a modest 7.94 runs per over. To rectify this, DC has bolstered its middle order with the likes of Tristan Stubbs, Axar Patel and Sameer Rizvi, aiming for a stronger showing against slow bowling.

Strength in death overs

9.52

Delhi excelled in the death overs with the best economy rate (9.52) from the 16th to 20th over across the last two seasons. Its bowlers conceded boundaries from just 19.14% of deliveries in 27 innings. Mukesh Kumar, who picked up nine wickets in this phase, will once again be key, now partnered with Mitchell Starc – bringing the left-arm angle and toe-crushing yorkers – and Mohit Sharma, renowned for his deceptive variations.

PREDICTED TEAM

Jake Fraser-McGurk
Abishek Porel
Donovan Ferreira
Tristan Stubbs
K. L. Rahul
Sameer Rizvi
Ashutosh Sharma
Mitchell Starc
Kuldeep Yadav
Mohit Sharma

IMPACT PLAYER

Karun Nair / Vipraj Nigam

COACH

Hemang Badani

HOME VENUE

Arun Jaitley Stadium, Delhi; ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium, Visakhapatnam

LAST SEASON

Sixth

Abhishek Saini
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PREDICTED TEAM

Matthew Breetzke
Mitchell Marsh
Nicholas Pooran
David Miller
Ayush Badoni
Shahbaz Ahmed
Ravi Bishnoi
Avesh Khan
Mohsin Khan
Akash Deep

IMPACT PLAYER

Arshin Kulkarni/Mayank Yadav

COACH

Justin Langer

HOME VENUE

Bharat Ratna Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ekana International Cricket Stadium, Lucknow

LAST SEASON

Seventh

At snail's pace

8.10

Since 2023, Lucknow Super Giants' run rate during the PowerPlay has been 8.10 – the lowest among all teams. Despite this glaring inefficiency, the management failed to address the issue at the IPL 2025 auction. Unless it takes a bold approach by promoting a middle-order batter like Nicholas Pooran or Ayush Badoni, Lucknow's top-three options remain limited to Aiden Markram, Matthew Breetzke, Mitch Marsh, and Arshin Kulkarni. Among Marsh, Markram, and Breetzke, Marsh boasts the highest PowerPlay strike rate in the IPL (140). However, to accommodate both Pooran and David Miller in the XI, only two of the three overseas batters can be slotted into the top order. Given Markram's underwhelming PowerPlay strike rate of 90, he appears the likeliest to be left out.
This still leaves the team relying on the 20-year-old Kulkarni, who has featured in just two IPL matches, to deliver beyond expectations.

Subdued by turn

123.61

Given Lucknow Super Giants' left-heavy middle order, opposing teams are likely to deploy left-arm wrist spinners and right-arm off-spinners. Nicholas Pooran, Rishabh Pant, and David Miller have a combined strike rate of 123.61 against these types of bowlers – only marginally above the average and significantly lower than their combined strike rate of 155 against pacers. This presents a major challenge for LSG at the Ekana International Cricket Stadium, where spinners have historically dominated. Since 2023, slow bowlers at Lucknow's home venue have conceded just 6.41 runs per over. Their control is particularly evident in the middle overs (7-15), where batters have managed a strike rate of only 116.23. With Pooran, Pant, and Miller likely occupying positions four, five, and six, respectively, opposition teams could use this trend to their advantage, applying spin pressure in the middle overs to stifle LSG's scoring.
Compounding the issue, LSG's top order has already shown signs of vulnerability. If the middle order also struggles against spin, it could severely impact its batting prospects and, consequently, its home campaign.

BEST FINISH - ELIMINATOR
(2022 & 2023)

Death-over specialist

9.25

Since 2023, Avesh Khan has maintained an economy rate of 9.25 in death overs (16-20). Among pacers who have bowled at least 90 deliveries in this phase, only Jasprit Bumrah and Matheesha Pathirana have performed better. Additionally, 15 of Avesh's 27 wickets over the past two seasons have come during the death overs. Only three pacers boast a lower boundary percentage than his 19.21% in this phase.
Despite being traded to Rajasthan Royals last season, Avesh's effectiveness at the death has seemingly convinced LSG to bring him back. With Mohsin Khan and Mayank Yadav set to lead the attack in the PowerPlay, Avesh is likely to be deployed primarily in the latter half of the innings.

LSG

CAPTAIN: Rishabh Pant

Abhishek Saini
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PREDICTED TEAM

Prabhsimran Singh
Priyansh Arya
Shashank Singh
Glenn Maxwell
Nehal Wadhera
Marcus Stoinis
Azmatullah Omarzai
Marco Jansen
Harpreet Brar
Yuzvendra Chahal

IMPACT PLAYER

Arshdeep/Priyansh

COACH

Ricky Ponting

HOME VENUE

Maharaja Yadavindra Singh International Cricket Stadium, New Chandigarh & HPCA Stadium, Dharamsala

LAST SEASON

Ninth

Power-packed opening batter

176.63

Priyansh Arya scored 325 runs for Delhi in the 2024 Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy at a strike rate of 176. In the Delhi Premier League last year, he amassed 608 runs at a staggering strike rate of 199. Arya's presence is likely the reason Punjab Kings opted against signing a high-profile opening batter. The team's PowerPlay run rate in the last two seasons was below nine runs per over – ranking among the bottom five of the 10 teams. His inclusion could help address the team's scoring struggles at the start of an innings.

Support for slow bowlers

6.71

Spinners conceded just 6.71 runs per over at the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh International Cricket Stadium in New Chandigarh. Since 2023, only Lucknow's home venue (6.41) has provided better support for slow bowlers. Spinners also picked up 150 wickets at an average of 20 at Punjab Kings' new home ground. In contrast, pacers conceded over eight runs per over, with 197 wickets at an average of 22. Captain Shreyas Iyer is likely to maximise the three spinners at his disposal – Yuzvendra Chahal, Harpreet Brar, and Glenn Maxwell – ensuring they bowl their full quota of 12 overs combined. However, Punjab Kings will play just four matches in New Chandigarh this season before shifting to Dharamsala for its final three home games. While spinners have been more economical than pacers at the HPCA Stadium too, the advantage is not as pronounced as it is in New Chandigarh.

Struggles at the back end

11.06

11.06 - Punjab Kings has struggled at the death (overs 16-20) in the last two seasons, conceding at 11.06 runs per over – only three teams have fared worse in this period. At the 2025 mega auction, Punjab Kings released Kagiso Rabada and Harshal Patel, entrusting Arshdeep Singh with leading the pace attack. While Arshdeep's career economy rate at the death in the IPL stands at 9.62, it has surged to nearly 11 over the past two seasons (among bowlers who have bowled at least 50 deliveries in this phase). To make matters worse, the 26-year-old is set to receive minimal support. Marco Jansen has bowled just 12 deliveries at the death in the IPL, conceding at a costly 16 runs per over for Sunrisers Hyderabad. Other pace options – Kuldeep Sen, Lockie Ferguson, Azmatullah Omarzai, Vyshak V., and Marcus Stoinis – have all leaked over 12 runs per over in this phase. Punjab Kings will need to find solutions quickly to avoid repeating past struggles at the back end of innings.

BEST FINISH - RUNNER-UP
(2014)

PBKS

CAPTAIN: Shreyas Iyer

Sahil Mathur
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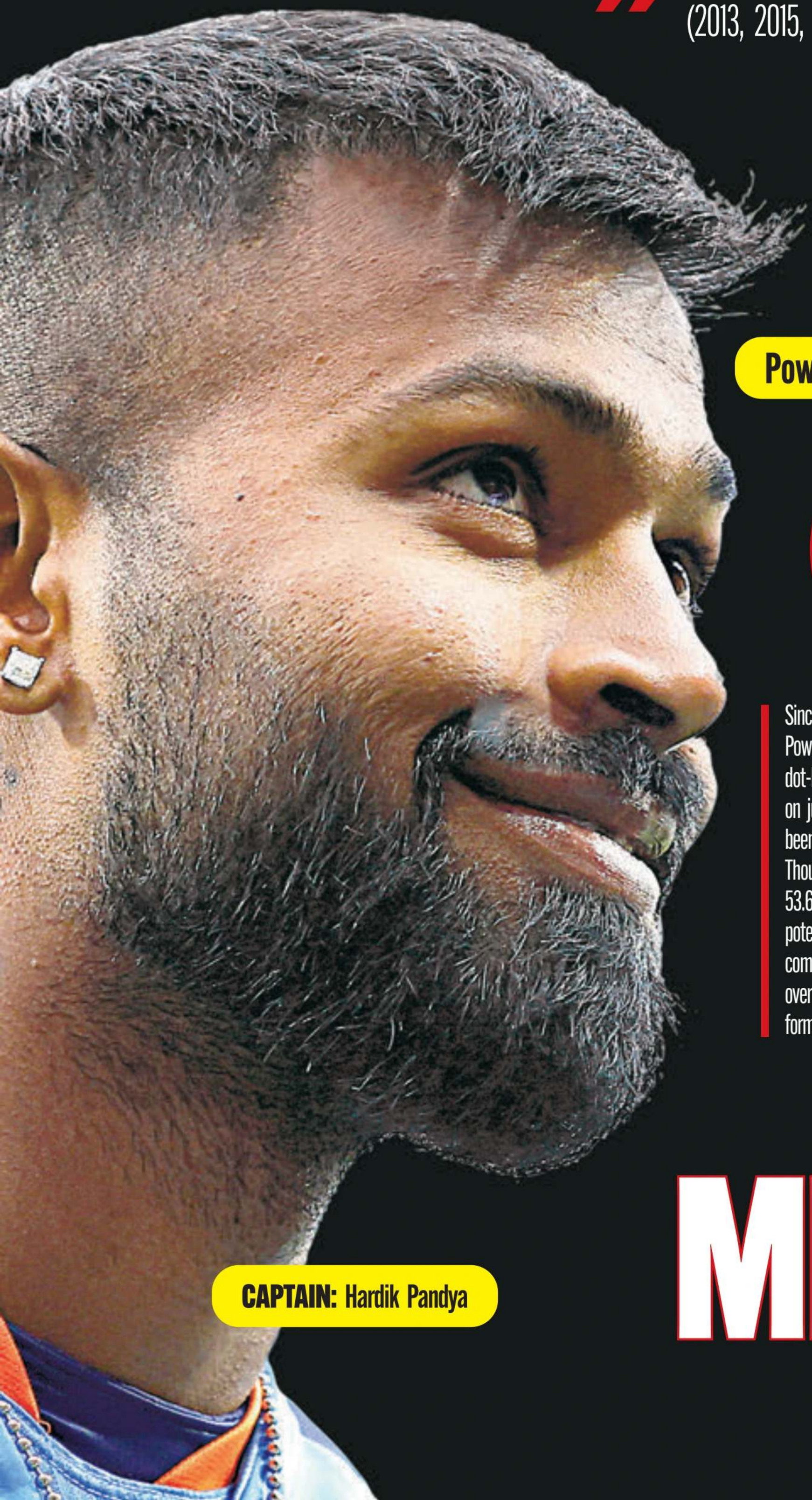


BEST FINISH – CHAMPION
(2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020)

PowerPlay economy rate

5.28

Since 2023, Jasprit Bumrah has dominated the PowerPlay across all T20s, with a 63.8% dot-ball percentage while conceding boundaries on just 12.85% of deliveries. In the IPL, he has been even tighter (6.00 economy, 62.6% dots). Though slightly more expensive (6.93 economy, 53.6% dots) in IPL, Trent Boult remains a potent new-ball threat. Together, they have a combined IPL PowerPlay economy of under 6.5 over the last two years, making them a formidable duo.

CAPTAIN: Hardik Pandya

MI

Top-order strike rate

150.62

Since IPL 2023, Rohit Sharma (142.15), Tilak Varma (141.02), and Suryakumar Yadav (168.04) have combined for a strike rate of 150.62 in overs 1-14, scoring at 9.04 runs per over. This season, Mumbai Indians' likely top four – Rohit, Ryan Rickelton, Tilak, and Suryakumar – promise an aggressive start. Across all T20s since 2023, they've maintained a scoring rate of 8.88 per six balls in this phase, with Rohit (143.62), Rickelton (150.62), Tilak (142.6), and Suryakumar (155.88) forming a solid foundation for the finishers to exploit.

High-scoring ground

9.84

In the last two IPL seasons, Wankhede Stadium has been the second-fastest scoring venue in terms of runs per over, behind only Kolkata's Eden Gardens (9.98). The red soil pitch has encouraged high-scoring encounters, with teams surpassing 200 runs on 12 occasions out of 28 since 2023. The highest total recorded in this period is 234 for five (MI vs DC in 2024). Due to the dew factor, teams that won the toss opted to bowl first in 13 out of 14 matches.

PREDICTED TEAM

Rohit Sharma
Ryan Rickelton
Tilak Varma
Suryakumar Yadav
Naman Dhir
Robin Minz
Mitchell Santner
Jasprit Bumrah
Trent Boult
Karn Sharma

IMPACT PLAYER

Will Jacks/Satyanarayana Raju

COACH

Mahela Jayawardene

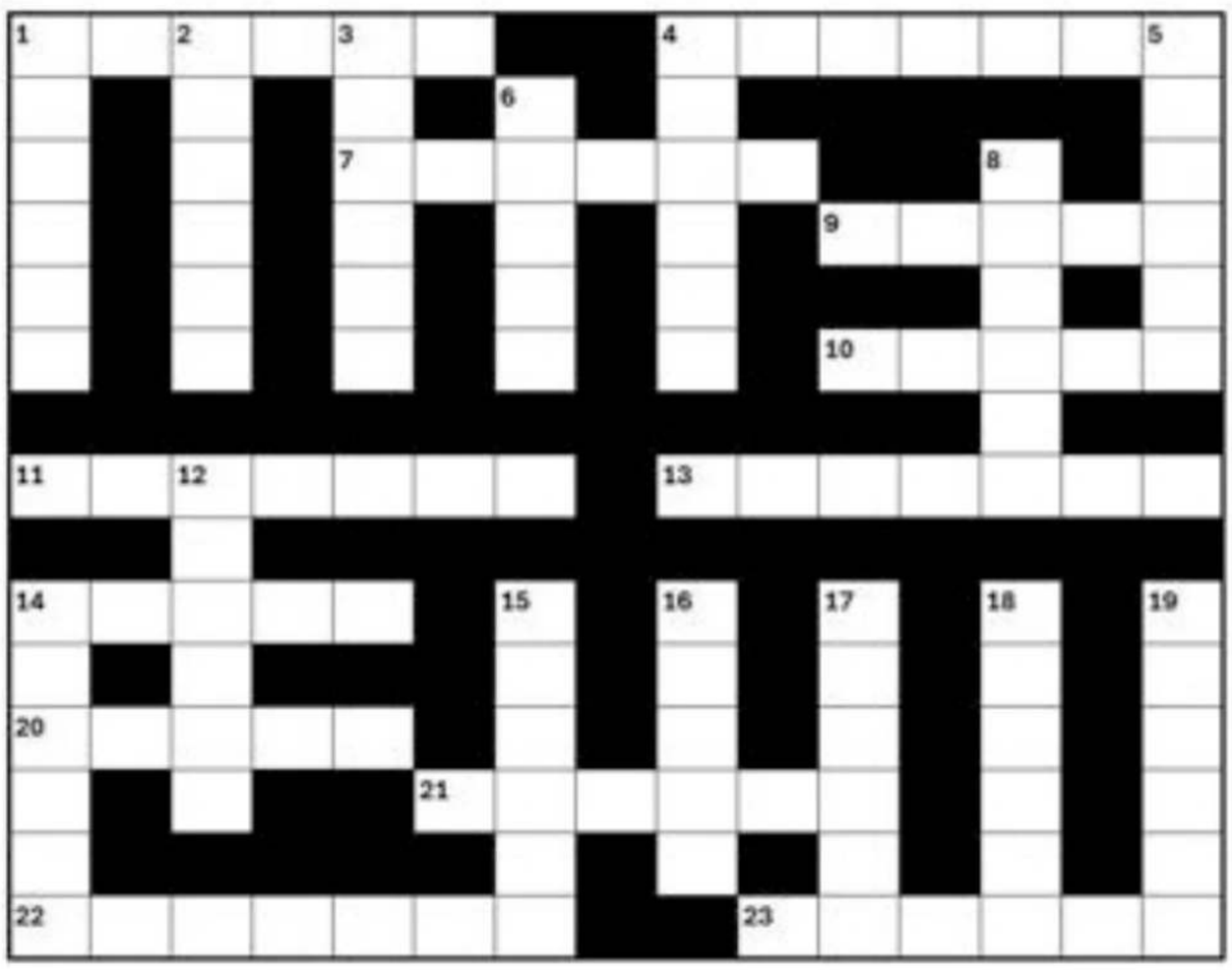
HOME VENUE

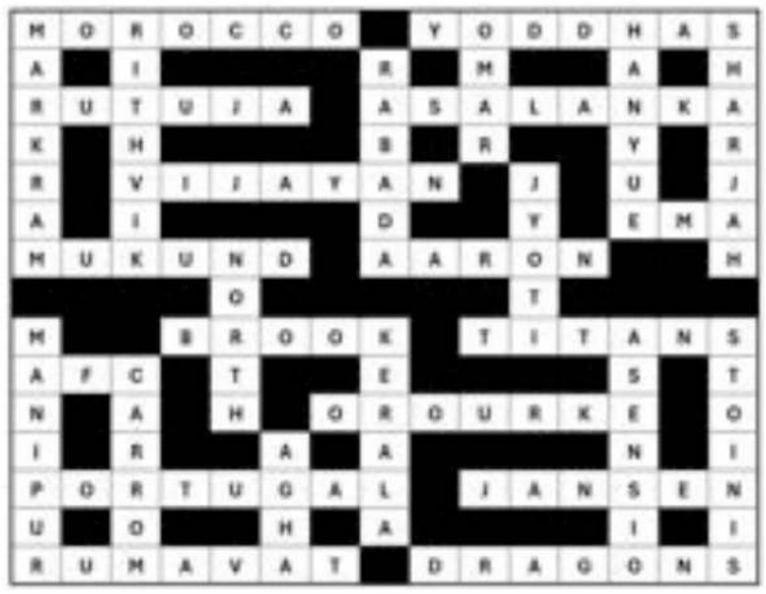
Wankhede Stadium, Mumbai

LAST SEASON

Tenth

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





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ACROSS

1 Who is the only player to score more than 370 runs in 12 consecutive editions of IPL from 2008? (6)

4 Which Indian shares the ignominious record of scoring most ducks in IPL history? (7)

7 Who is returning to the home "den" in 2025 after having played for it from 2009 to 2015 and four other teams from 2017 to 2024 and leading one of the teams for two seasons? (6)

9 Which stylish Australian middle-order batter played just two matches in 2016 for Rising Pune Supergiant? (5)

10 Which South African all-rounder has been roped in by Sunrisers Hyderabad in place of the injured Brydon Carse for IPL 2025? (5)

11 Who won the purple cap in the 2021 and 2024 editions and holds the record jointly for taking most wickets in a single IPL edition? (7)

13 Which wicketkeeper holds the record for most dismissals in IPL history among overseas players? (7)

14 & Down 3 Which former Indian speedster played a crucial role in Gujarat Titans winning the title in 2023? (5,6)

20 & Down 18 Who is this wicketkeeper-batter who has scored more than 4400 runs and effected 75 dismissals in IPL history apart from leading his team for the last four years, consecutively? (5,6)

21 Which West Indian all-rounder won the purple cap in the 2013 and 2015 editions, yet ended up in the losing team both times to the same team in the respective finals? (6)

22 & Down 12 Who is appointed as the new captain of the defending champion Kolkata for IPL 2025? (7,6)

23 Which player holds the unique distinction of having won the orange cap thrice in IPL history? (6)

DOWN

1 & 19 Which Pakistani player scored the winning run off the very last ball of the first IPL final in 2008? (6,6)

4 & 2 What is the franchise name of the third-most successful team in IPL history? (6,6)

5 Who is the most-capped among overseas players in IPL history? (6)

6 Identify this player who has played in most finals (11) in IPL history? (5)

8 Who is this former Indian all-rounder who has played for MI for a year, RCB for two years and RR for seven years. He is the son of a 1983 World Cup-winning player as well. (6)

14 Who holds the record for the most number of hat-tricks in IPL history? (6)

15 Who occupies the second position among most wicket-takers in IPL history? (6)

16 Which former South African speedster was SRH's bowling coach in the 2022 and 2023 IPL editions? (5)

17 Who is the only player to have performed the treble in IPL history — more than 1000 runs, 100 wickets and 100 catches? (6)

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A final that showcased India's domestic depth

Vidarbha won its third Ranji Trophy in seven years, defeating Kerala on first-innings lead. Kerala's historic final run ended despite spirited efforts, while Vidarbha's **young stars and depth** shone through.

P. K. Ajith Kumar
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Of the 22 players that played the Ranji Trophy final, only one had ever played international cricket. And that was not because the match was clashing with the Champions Trophy.

When the biggest match in domestic cricket is played by two teams that aren't among the most glamorous ones — read Mumbai, Delhi, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu — it tells us there is depth in Indian cricket and that the talent net continues to get wider.

Small-town cricketers are making it big. M.S. Dhoni's descendants continue to grow.

This year's Ranji Trophy final featured Vidarbha and Kerala, once among India's weakest teams. Both have made remarkable progress.

The final at the VCA Stadium in Nagpur proved Kerala had some way to go yet. Sachin Baby's men reaching the final itself is a great feat. It was not just their first-ever final; after starting to play in the Ranji Trophy in 1957-58, it was the first time they had made it to the knockout stage since 2018-19.

For Vidarbha, this was the fourth final in seven years. After losing the final to Mumbai last year, the victory against Kerala must have tasted particularly sweet for Akshay Wadkar's men, as they lifted the most prestigious trophy in India's domestic cricket on a bright Sunday afternoon early this month.

The scores

Vidarbha 379 (Danish Malewar 153, Karun Nair 86, M.D. Nidheesh 3-61) and 375 for 9 dec (Karun Nair 135, Danish Malewar 73, Aditya Sarwate 4-96) vs. **Kerala** 342 (Sachin Baby 98, Sarwate 79, Darshan Nalkande 3-52)

Result: Vidarbha won on first-innings lead

They were undoubtedly the best side in the competition, which began in October with teams from across the country battling it out in the league stage. Remarkably, they won six out of their seven league matches and took the first-innings lead in the remaining one; then, they beat Tamil Nadu in the quarterfinal and then Mumbai in the semifinal.

By such a high standard, it might have been a disappointment that they could win the final only by the first-innings lead. So Kerala did well enough not to lose outright to a team that had been playing dominant cricket all through the tournament.

And the fact is Kerala came close to taking that all-important first innings lead. At one stage, with the 36-year-old captain Baby looking determined to play the innings of his life and Jalaj Saxena, who has been a magnificent servant for Kerala cricket after moving out from Madhya Pradesh, giving him adequate company for the seventh wicket, the visiting side seemed quite capable of going past Vidarbha's total of 379.

Triumphant smile: Vidarbha exorcised its 2023-24 demons in style, clinching a thrilling first-innings lead before grinding Kerala down for nearly five sessions to secure its third Ranji Trophy title. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

But, when the Kerala score read 326 for six — another 54 away from the first-innings lead — Baby, batting on 98 in his 100th First-Class game, played a shot he will never want to watch the highlight of. The man who had hardly played anything risky until that moment went for a slog sweep against Parth Rekhade to find the only man in the deep on the leg side, Karun Nair.

Not since the England captain Mike Gatting reverse-swept his Australian counterpart Allan Border in the 1987 World Cup final have many men played such a costly shot at such a crucial juncture. Naturally, Baby was asked about it after the match.

"Nobody plays a shot to get out, and that shot wasn't actually on my mind at all," he explained. "Yes, maybe it was a brain-fade moment."

That wasn't the only regret for Kerala in the final. There was the dropped catch of Karun in Vidarbha's second innings.

Karun was batting on 31, and his team was on 55 for two when Akshay Chandran dropped him at slip off Eden Apple Tom, the 19-year-old seamer who impressed everyone on his return to First-Class cricket after a three-year break.

Karun went on to bat Kerala out of the final, making his fourth hundred in the Ranji Trophy this season. It was also his ninth century for Vidarbha, having made five in the Vijay Hazare Trophy, in which his numbers would have made even Don Bradman envious. After completing his hundred, he signalled the number nine through his hands. There was speculation if it was meant for the national selectors at the venue. Though Karun said he was addressing the support staff at the dressing room, he added with a mischievous smile, "You can take it whichever way you want."

Last season, Karun was more

Top five run-getters (2025)

Yash Rathod (Vidarbha)
960 runs in 10 matches (HS: 151, Avg: 53.33)

Shubham Sharma (Madhya Pradesh)
943 runs in 7 matches (HS: 240, Avg: 104.77)

Tanmay Agarwal (Hyderabad)
934 runs in 7 matches (HS: 177, Avg: 77.83)

Karun Nair (Vidarbha)
863 runs in 9 matches (HS: 135, Avg: 53.93)

Danish Malewar (Vidarbha)
783 runs in 9 matches (HS: 153, Avg: 52.20)

What-ifs: In their maiden Ranji Trophy final, Kerala skipper Sachin Baby and his men were left with plenty of moments to reflect on. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

categorical, though, when he called up the Kerala Cricket Association officials after being snubbed by Karnataka (Remember his heart-wrenching tweet, Dear cricket, give me one more chance?). Kerala, however, chose not to sign him. And it was not as if Kerala's batting line-up read like Sunil Gavasker, Gordon Greenidge, Ricky Ponting, Sachin Tendulkar, Steve Waugh...

In fact, the failure of Kerala's top order had been a cause of concern. From the 10 matches the team played, there was not even a single hundred from the batters up the order. In fact, Kerala scored just three hundreds, which came from the middle-order duo of Salman Nizar and Mohammed Azharuddeen.

They had been superb as they shepherded the tail and helped Kerala get slender first-innings leads

Slippery hands: Akshay Chandran had dropped the catch of second-innings centurion Karun Nair early on day four. Nair made the most of the reprieve, scoring 135 in the second innings. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

of one and two in the knockout matches. But, as it often happens in cricket, the law of averages caught up with them, and in the final, unfortunately for Kerala. Something similar happened to Vidarbha's leading scorer, Yash Rathod. He had come into the match having made 933 runs, but he failed in both innings. He, however, finished as the season's highest scorer (960 runs).

The tournament's highest wicket-taker is also from Vidarbha. Harsh Dubey actually set a new record for a Ranji season, with 69 wickets. The 22-year-old is a talented left-arm spinner who can also bat. He looks like a bright prospect.

Danish Malewar, the player of the final, is a year younger. While making 153 and 73, he displayed temperament, technique and the ability to play some pleasing shots on the leg side, especially on the back foot. And this was his maiden season in the Ranji Trophy.

Dazzling duo: Kerala's Mohammed Azharuddeen (635 runs in 10 matches) and Salman Nizar (628 in nine matches) were the standout performers for their team during this Ranji Trophy campaign. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Surely, Vidarbha knows how to blood its young players at the right time. And former India pacer Prashant Vaidya has shown how setting up an academy and working at the grassroots can slowly turn a team with no tradition into a champion side.

"It is great to see all our hard work paying off," Vaidya, who was once regarded as the fastest bowler in India, told *Sportstar*. "When I started out, Vidarbha wasn't a strong side at all. In fact, some cricketers were not even aware that Vidarbha had a Ranji Trophy team."

Fairy tales like this should inspire other teams, including Kerala.

Top five wicket-takers (2025)

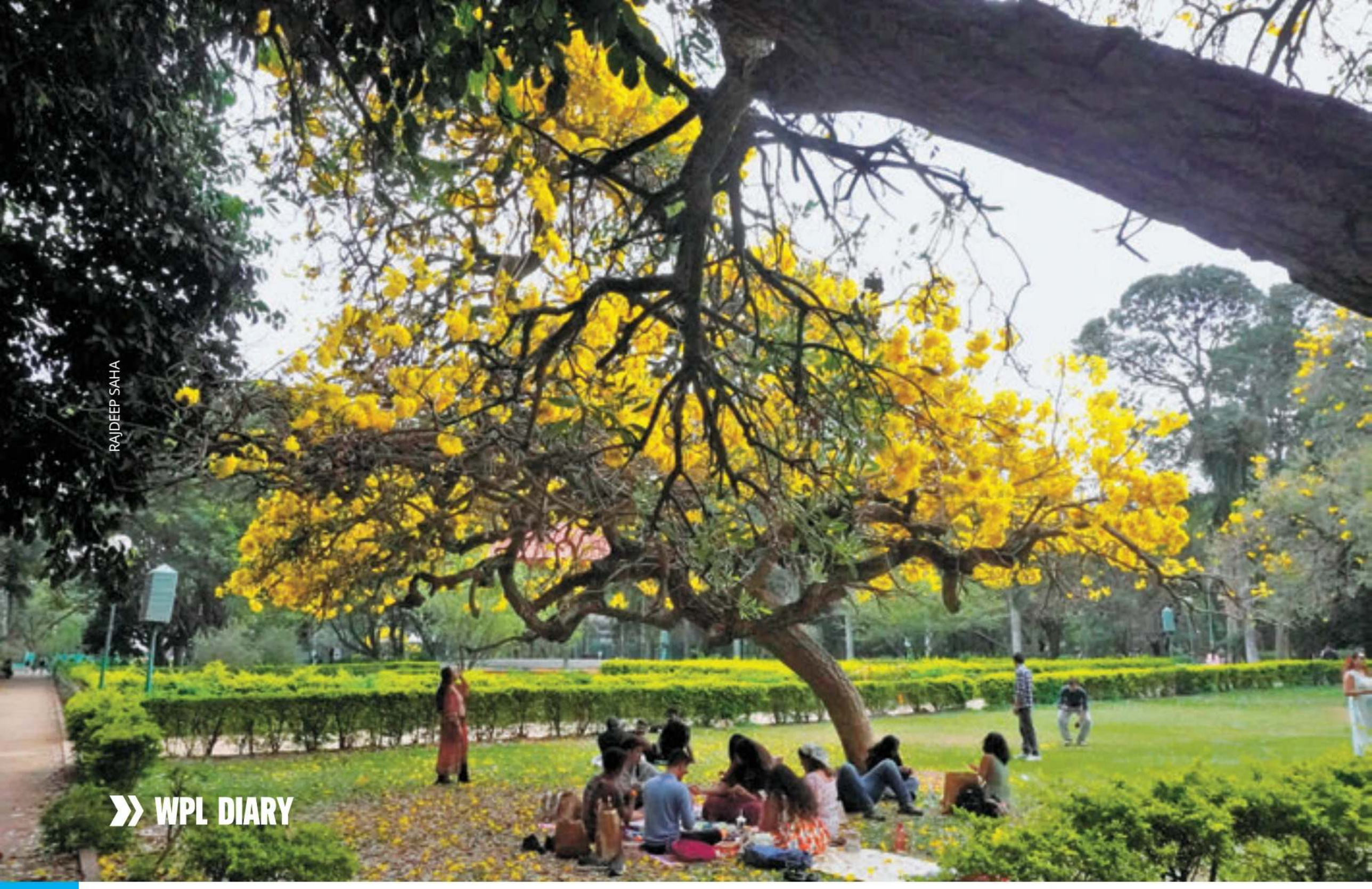
Harsh Dubey (Vidarbha)
69 wickets in 10 matches (BB: 6/36, Avg: 16.98)

Auqib Nabi (Jammu & Kashmir)
44 wickets in 8 matches (BB: 6/53, Avg: 13.93)

Shams Mulani (Mumbai)
44 wickets in 9 matches (BB: 6/85, Avg: 23.52)

Dharmendrasinh Jadeja (Saurashtra)
40 wickets in 8 matches (BB: 6/51, Avg: 20.85)

Jalaj Saxena (Kerala)
40 wickets in 10 matches (BB: 6/41, Avg: 22.55)


RAJDEEP SAHA

FROM FILM ROLLS AND PARK STROLLS TO EXPLORING WPL'S GROWING FOOTPRINT

Our correspondents **capture the essence** of WPL's Bengaluru and Lucknow legs — thrilling action on the field and captivating stories beyond it.

The Diary could never have imagined itself covering cricket. Yet, here it was, about to report on a sixth consecutive match of the Women's Premier League within the span of a week. To say the experience had been overwhelming would be an understatement. So, before making its final walk to the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium for this assignment, the Diary decided to explore the sights Bengaluru had to offer.

The first stop was a roadside shop on Indiranagar's 100 Feet Road, selling vintage film cameras. The venture was Instagram-famous, which had prompted a friend to persuade the Diary to visit Mr Azmath — the entrepreneur behind it. That the friend ultimately did not make a purchase was inconsequential. The sight of small and large point-and-shoot cameras from yesteryears —boasting brands such as Kodak, Konica, and Yashica — was enough to charm the Diary.

Possessing a film camera itself — a Yashica MF-2 from the 1980s — the Diary was keen to capture some scenes from the much-talked-about Cubbon Park. A 30-minute auto ride later, it entered the park. Within seconds, the Diary was transported back home. In Kolkata, Rabindra

Sarobar Lake — colloquially known simply as 'Lake' — is a favourite spot for people to idle away time at any hour of the day. Cubbon Park had the same charm, only on a much grander scale. Friends were enjoying picnics on the sprawling lawns, lovers strolled hand-in-hand, and, to the Diary's surprise, Pokémon Go was still a thing — groups of boys and men aimlessly walking around or perched on benches, eyes glued to their screens.

Wandering along one of the many nature trails, the Diary spotted a tree adorned with vibrant yellow flowers, a striking contrast against the green grass and the blue sky.

Seeking the perfect vantage point for the 35mm lens to capture the scene, the Diary climbed to a higher perch and clicked. Fortunately, that shot marked the final frame on the roll of film, and the Diary exhaled in relief.

Now back in Chennai, it eagerly awaits the grainy photographs to be developed, ready to relive the sights of the Garden City once more.

Rajdeep Saha

Fan favourites

In the Indian Premier League's 17-year history, it is no secret that Mumbai Indians, Royal Challengers Bengaluru, and Chennai Super Kings have established the largest fan bases. While the WPL is only three years old, MI and RCB (CSK does not have a franchise in the WPL) are already benefiting from their vast networks of supporters. In Lucknow, where the WPL was being staged for the first time, a sizeable number of fans were backing these two franchises. Even the counterfeit jerseys sold by hawkers outside the Ekana Cricket Stadium were largely those of MI, RCB, and CSK.

When asked about home advantage while playing in Vadodara during the opening phase of this year's WPL, Gujarat Giants skipper Ashleigh Gardner said: "Yeah, I mean, home advantage, I don't know about that, but there were a lot of RCB fans wherever we went. Hopefully, with the game growing and hitting different parts of India, we can have Gujarat fans wherever we go."

Rousing reception: In Lucknow, where the WPL was being staged for the first time, a sizeable number of fans turned up for the matches.
SANDEEP SAXENA

Among the fans in attendance for the game between MI and GG on March 6 was 22-year-old Divyanshu. A native of Delhi, he is currently completing his internship in Lucknow. Like a true Delhiite, his loyalty lies with Virat Kohli and RCB. "I'm a Kohli fan. In the WPL, I like Smriti Mandhana and Ellyse Perry too," he said.

He had also attended the WPL Eliminator and final at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in Delhi last year. "There was considerable buzz in Delhi for the WPL last year. In Lucknow, the venue is slightly away from the heart of the city. That may be a factor in the lukewarm response to the league here," he observed. However, he concluded on an optimistic note: "The WPL is definitely growing. The players are becoming more familiar to the fans."

Vivek Krishnan

GETTY IMAGES

New Zealand Women clinch series against Sri Lanka

1 The **first game** of the series was abandoned due to rain.

New Zealand Women blanked Sri Lanka 2-0 in a three-match One-Day International series after the first game was abandoned due to rain.

New Zealand opener Georgia Plimmer smashed her maiden hundred in the third ODI to guide her team to a match-winning 280 for six before Sri Lanka folded for 182, with Jess Kerr and Fran Jonas picking up three wickets each.

The White Ferns took a 1-0 lead in the series thanks to Maddy Green's century in the second ODI, which helped her side post 245 for seven. In reply, Sri Lanka could only manage just 167 runs, as medium pacer Hannah Rowe picked up four for 31 to hand New Zealand a 78-run win.

2

AP

The 150th anniversary of the first-ever Test match will be celebrated with a day-night fixture between Australia and England at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in March 2027. The MCG hosted the first Test ever played in 1877 and the centenary match between Australia and England 100 years later. Australia won both matches by 45 runs. The 150th anniversary match will be the first men's Test played under lights at the 100,000-capacity venue. England will also tour Australia for a five-Test Ashes series later this year.

3

REUTERS

Steve Smith announced his retirement from One-Day International cricket after top-scoring in Australia's ICC Champions Trophy semifinal against India. One of Australia's most accomplished ODI players, Smith debuted in 2010 as a leg-spinning all-rounder before evolving into a batting mainstay. In over 170 matches, he amassed 5,800 runs at an average of 43.28, including 12 centuries and 35 fifties, while also claiming 28 wickets. A key figure in Australia's 2015 and 2023 World Cup-winning campaigns, Smith captained the ODI side from 2015 and led the team on an interim basis in his final match.

4

AFP

Bangladesh wicketkeeper Mushfiqur Rahim has announced his retirement from One-Day Internationals following his team's group-stage exit from the ICC Champions Trophy 2025. Rahim made his ODI debut against Zimbabwe in August 2006 and retired as the most-capped Bangladesh player in the format, with 274 matches to his name. He scored 7,795 runs — the second-most in ODIs for Bangladesh after Tamim Iqbal — including 49 fifties and nine centuries. As a wicketkeeper, he took 243 catches and effected 56 stumpings.

5

GETTY IMAGES

Harry Brook has pulled out of this year's Indian Premier League, citing his commitment to playing for England. The 26-year-old was signed by Delhi Capitals at last year's IPL auction for Rs 6.25 crore but has now withdrawn for the second consecutive season, potentially putting him at risk of a two-year ban from the tournament.

6

PTI

Michael Bracewell will captain New Zealand in the upcoming five-match T20I series against Pakistan, set to begin in Christchurch this month. Bracewell, who played a key role in New Zealand's journey to the Champions Trophy final, is among seven players from that squad named for the home series. He steps in for regular skipper Mitch Santner, who is unavailable due to IPL commitments.

TESTING TIMES

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

As the engines roared at the Bahrain International Circuit at the end of February, one thing became clear — this could be the **closest F1 season** in years.

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Pre-season testing offers a glimpse into the new season, yet it rarely reveals the full picture. While lap times and mileage offer clues, teams use this period to experiment rather than push their cars to the limit. The three-day testing is for refinement, setups and gathering mountains of data under varying conditions. As the engines roared at the Bahrain International Circuit at the end of February, one thing became clear — this could be the closest F1 season in years.

Given that F1 is entering its fourth season under the current ground-effect regulations, reliability was expected to be high — and that's exactly what was seen. This year's testing suggested a tighter fight at the front among McLaren, Ferrari, Red Bull and Mercedes, with the defending constructors' champion just edging ahead.

'Front'runners

McLaren appeared to have the most complete package, with both Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri confident in the cars' performance. The car was consistently quick, and if their testing form translates into race pace, McLaren could be the team to beat.

All eyes were understandably on car no. 44 of Lewis Hamilton, who took the scarlet red Ferrari out on track. Though it faced some technical issues on the final day, Charles Leclerc will hope to maximise its potential early in the season, while Hamilton settles into his new environment.

Red Bull, however, had a mixed test. While it was third in qualifying and simulations, early indications suggested that it might not be at striking distance of McLaren and Ferrari, but under threat from an improved Mercedes.

The most active team in mileage (458 laps), Mercedes looked like it had put behind the unpredictability element that haunted it last year. George Russell and Kimi Antonelli hit the ground running, and the car appears to have given the team optimism for the season ahead.

Midfield melee

A handful of teams are expected to be right on the tail of the grid leaders, meaning more competition for the point-scoring positions. Among the midfielders who seemed to have made the most progress is a certain Williams.

The nine-time constructors' champion team, which now has Carlos Sainz behind the wheel alongside Alexander Albon, showed promising signs and could be in a tussle with Alpine for the 'best of the rest' spot.

Aston Martin, once on the prowl for podium finishes, looks to have dropped down the order, finding itself among Haas and Racing Bulls. Fernando Alonso admitted that the car has slid from the front of the midfield, and expects a tough challenge for AM to maintain its

fifth-place finish for another season.

Kick Sauber, the slowest team last time around, may be stuck behind the entire field again. The slow lap time and long-run pace indicate an uphill task right from the get-go.

With veteran Nico Hulkenberg and F2 champion Gabriel Bortoleto at the helm, they will hope to make gains before it's too late.

Rookie show

Several rookies stepping into full-time F1 roles made headway during testing. Racing Bulls' Isack Hadjar logged the most mileage, covering a distance equivalent to four Bahrain Grands Prix. Jack Doohan and Bortoleto gained valuable track time, while Haas' Oliver Bearman made the most of a fresh start.

Looking forward

A two-week gap between pre-season testing and the season-opening Melbourne race suggests that the teams will be in a race against time to get their challengers up and running. But what is certain is that 2025 will be a highly competitive year, with closer-than-ever track battles and 24 thrilling races.

Back on the track: Max Verstappen (left) and Lewis Hamilton (above) during the pre-season testing at Bahrain. GETTY IMAGES

Marquez brothers conquer MotoGP opener in Buriram

Marc Marquez delivered a stunning debut for the factory Ducati MotoGP team, completing a perfect treble at the 2025 opener Thailand Grand Prix — winning the sprint, securing pole, and dominating the main race with a strategic masterclass.

Marc sat behind his brother, Gresini's Alex Marquez, for much of the race after losing the lead early to what seemed like a mechanical issue. The six-time champion regained his pace and managed tyre pressures before making his decisive move with four laps to go.

Alex slotted in behind to ensure a 1-2 finish for the Spanish brothers, while Ducati's Francesco Bagnaia, 2024 runner-up, had to settle for third despite closing in late.

Defending champion Jorge Martin was and will be out of action for the first few races after suffering a string of crashes ahead of the season. With two surgeries and a couple of fractures to heal from, the Spaniard will hope to get back on track soon to protect his crown.

FOR MORE STORIES

ISL

RETURN OF THE FAIL-SAFE

With the 2027 Asian Cup qualifiers approaching, Sunil Chhetri had to be recalled in order to resolve the crisis crippling the Indian attack.

Not many months ago, Sunil Chhetri **(above)** brought the curtain down on his international football career. The much-celebrated Indian football captain said the decision was prompted by his 'instincts', which may have told him that he had achieved enough in almost two decades of his association with the senior men's national football team.

Around 59,000 people turned up at the Salt Lake Stadium in the first week of June 2024 to see the 39-year-old legend walking into the sunset following a goalless draw against Kuwait. Emotional scenes unfolded at the venue as a tearful Chhetri accepted the adulations of his teammates and fans with folded hands before returning to the Indian dressing room for the last time.

Eight months later, Chhetri, who has scored 94 goals in 151 appearances for the country, had to fetch his scoring boots back from the hanger as the current national coach, Manolo Marquez, literally came knocking at his door with an SOS message.

Manolo, who assumed charge of the national team last July following the exit of Igor Stimac, saw the Indian side struggle for goals in the few international matches it played under his coaching. And with the 2027 Asian Cup qualifiers approaching, Chhetri had to be recalled in order to resolve the crisis crippling the Indian attack.

"This is the reason that I spoke to him (Sunil) personally because it is a difficult situation for the Indian team. In my four games with the national team, we scored just two goals. We need to score more goals, and we need immediate results," Manolo said.

"At this moment, Sunil is the best Indian striker. He is the top goalscorer among the Indian players in the Indian Super League (ISL) — 12 goals so far for his club, Bengaluru FC — and the team now needs players who can score goals," Manolo said in support of his decision to persuade the 40-year-old striker to end his retirement.

Amitabha Das Sharma

Fortune reversal

Memory is a fickle element in football. A couple of penalty saves makes you Hercules, and the next goal sets you up as a court jester.

About a year ago, when Chennaiyin FC played NorthEast United FC, the gates were flooded with blue shirts, nearly 7,000 of them, chanting slogans for Owen Coyle and his army at the Jawaharlal

Nehru Stadium in Chennai.

The match had ended 2-1 in their favour, NorthEast United was knocked out of the ISL playoffs, the hosts were almost in, and Tamil songs blared out of the boombox as players danced with fans in front of the team bus.

Cut to March 2025, Chennaiyin — already out of the knockouts race — is annihilated 0-3 by NorthEast United at the same venue, with only a handful of home fans perched on the stands, giving flashbacks to empty stadiums during the pandemic.

The lull outside the stadium was a stark contrast to that around this time last year. Coyle, the gaffer, looked dejected. So did the players. And the boombox was carried out of the dressing room in funereal silence. Winter had come for House Chennaiyin on a Monday night, and it had Alaaeddine Ajaraie written on the back of his shirt.

The Moroccan scored once, assisted twice and almost bagged another goal, only to be denied by the woodwork. With 21 goals and seven assists, he now has more goal contributions than any player ever in a single ISL season.

"To get a player like Ajaraei, who's a difference-maker, anybody in the league would crave having a (striker who can score) 21 goals. You can probably strike him as somebody who creates and works hard for his team. I think he's been a revelation this year," Coyle said after the match.

This *Aladdin* does not have a flying carpet or a fancy lamp, but he does have magic, one that left Coyle's army shell-shocked and the travelling fans in seventh heaven.

Memory is a fickle element in football — that was NorthEast United's lesson in 2024, it will be Chennaiyin's this year.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

On song: With 21 goals and seven assists, Alaaeddine Ajaraie has more goal contributions than any player ever in a single ISL season. FSDL/ISL MEDIA

Hoping for a Super comeback

After failing to make the ISL playoffs, the Kerala Blasters **(right)** has now decided to focus on the Super Cup, which begins in Bhubaneswar on April 21.

The Blasters had a disappointing season but still managed a stunning win over defending ISL champion Mumbai City FC in their last home game in Kochi, after which they were in eighth place with a match to go. And interim coach T.G. Purushothaman is hopeful that the Super Cup will offer his team a fresh start.

"The Super Cup is a competition where we can show our character and end the season on a positive note. The focus is to improve and ensure we come back stronger," said Purushothaman. Looking back on the season, Purushothaman — who had come into the spotlight after the team's Swedish head coach Mikael Stahre was sacked mid-December — admitted that his side lacked consistency but also said that some refereeing decisions affected the Blasters.

"This season had both positives and disappointments. We showed quality in many games, controlled possession, and created chances, but we lacked consistency in converting performances into results," he said.

"Injuries and some tough moments affected us, some refereeing decisions in crucial moments went against us but we take responsibility as a team. The key now is to learn from this and come back stronger."

Stan Rayan

FSDL

FSDL

Elite class: None has been as dangerous and clinical, in modern football, as the Egyptian talisman Mohamed Salah. AP

Reds inch closer to Premier League glory

Liverpool lifting the trophy at the end of the season now seems **more plausible** as it enjoys a 15-point lead at the top.

Joan Mathew Jacob
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Liverpool has had some prolific forwards, from Ian Rush, and Luis Suarez to Kenny Dalglish. But no one has been as dangerous and clinical, in modern football, as the Egyptian talisman Mohamed Salah.

Against Southampton on March 8, he scored a brace to power his side to a 3-1 win, taking his tally to 184 goals, making him joint fifth in the Premier League's all-time goalscoring list, level with Sergio Aguero.

Liverpool lifting the trophy at the end of the season now seems more plausible as it enjoys a 15-point lead at the top.

Second-placed Arsenal's chances of challenging the leader were further dented by

consecutive draws against high-flying Nottingham Forest and a floundering Manchester United. Bruno Fernandes scored from a free-kick for the Red Devils while Declan Rice's strike in the second period meant the spoils were shared. The result helped United end a four-game losing streak against the Gunners in the league.

Forest, the season's surprise package, cranked up its chances of securing a Champions League spot next season with a statement win against a struggling Manchester City. The defending champion showed glimpses of its original self during the 1-0 win against Tottenham Hotspur in midweek but was undone against Forest by a late strike from Callum Hudson-Odoi.

Hudson-Odoi's goal ensured that his former club Chelsea crept into the top four, above City, after convincing wins against relegation-threatened Southampton and Leicester City.

Premier League leaderboard

Player	Appearances	Goals
Alan Shearer	441	260
Harry Kane	320	213
Wayne Rooney	491	208
Andrew Cole	414	187
Mohamed Salah*	292	184
Sergio Aguero	275	184

La Liga

FC Barcelona maintained its grip on the top spot after effortlessly dispatching 10-man Real Sociedad 4-0. Gerard Martin and Marc Casado scored their first-ever league goals while Ronald Araujo and Robert Lewandowski added to the tally. However, the Catalans' hopes of taking a distinctive lead at the top were cut short after their match against Osasuna was postponed following the passing of first-team doctor Carles Minarro García.

However, they remained in first place after title challengers Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid suffered shock defeats in a span of days. Real Betis' Isco **(above, right)** came back to haunt his former club Madrid and converted the winner from the spot to scrape away a 2-1 win. Los Blancos returned to winning ways against Rayo Vallecano the following week, with Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius Jr. finding the back of the net.

On the other hand, their city rival

REUTERS

NAPOLI'S EFFORTS AGAINST INTER MILAN PAID OFF WHEN SUBSTITUTE PHILIP BILLING (CENTRE) SCORED EIGHT MINUTES AFTER HE CAME ON TO SNATCH A POINT

Atletico edged past Athletic Club thanks to a goal from in-form Julian Alvarez but failed to take the chance to go to the top of the table after suffering a last-minute collapse against Getafe. Alexander Sorloth gave Atletico the lead in the 75th minute but Angel Correa's late sending-off gave Getafe's Mauro Arambarri the determination to produce a last-gasp quick-fire double to take all three points.

Only one point separates the top three, with Barcelona leading with 57 points, level with Real Madrid in second and one ahead of Atletico in third.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich succumbed to just its second defeat of the season after blowing a two-goal lead at home against relegation-threatened VfL Bochum. Raphael Guerreiro's first-half brace was quickly halved by Bochum's Jakov Medic.

Joao Palhinha's sending-off two minutes after the break boosted the visitor's spirits. Ibrahima Sissoko nodded in the equaliser and Matus Bero scored past league-debutant Jonas Urbig.

Bayer Leverkusen, however, failed to cut down the gap with the leader after succumbing to a 2-0 defeat against Werder Bremen. Romano Schmid and Justin Njinmah scored for Bremen to keep the reigning champion trailing the Bavarians by eight points.

Borussia Dortmund continued its irregular form in the league after securing a 2-0 win against FC St. Pauli before falling to a 1-0 loss at home to Augsburg. The result leaves the Black and Yellow languishing in 10th on the table.

Serie A

The first spot was up for grabs

REUTERS

when Napoli hosted Inter Milan at the Diego Armando Maradona Stadium. The visitor took the lead courtesy of a sublime free-kick from Federico Dimarco and let the opponent control the rest of the game. Napoli's efforts paid off when substitute Philip Billing scored eight minutes after he came on to snatch a point.

Inter and Napoli secured hard-fought wins against Monza and Fiorentina, respectively, in the following weeks and sit first and second, with one point separating them.

Third-placed Atalanta made up for its goalless draw against relegation-battling Venezia by thrashing Italian giant Juventus 4-0. The league's top scorer Mateo Retegui scored from the spot while Marten de Roon, Davide Zappacosta and Ademola Lookman added the rest.

With 58 points, Atalanta remains three points from the top in third, while Juventus sits fourth with 52.

> « Only one point separates the top three in La Liga, with Barcelona leading the table with 57 points »

Ligue 1

Paris Saint-Germain's firing attack continued their form as they thrashed both LOSC Lille and Stade Rennes 4-1 to take a 16-point lead at the top of the table.

Ousmane Dembele **(above, right)** scored three goals across the two games, including a stoppage-time brace against Rennes, to take his tally to 20 this season, with his closest contender for the Golden Boot being Olympique de Marseille's Mason Greenwood with 12.

Second-placed Marseille fell further behind in its title challenge after conceding a stoppage-time winner against RC Lens in the latest game week.

(All results updated as of March 10)

When the stars align

The Champions League matches so far have been determined by exceptional performances from a few **standout players.**

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This has been Raphinha's season. Period.

The Brazilian **(below)** has been a late bloomer, developing in Portugal, France, and England, but his purple patch arrived in the 2024-25 season at Barcelona.

Raphinha had struggled to get going for Barca in the Champions League in his first two seasons (three goals, six assists). But this season, he has scored nine goals and assisted six more to become his club's most lethal weapon along the flanks.

Since the start of 2024, Raphinha has been directly involved in more UEFA Champions League goals than any other player (17 in 13 appearances — 12 goals, five assists).

He seems to have made Benfica his favourite opponent, scoring goals at crucial times and at regular intervals.

Against the Portuguese top-flight side in January, Raphinha scored the winning goal in second-half stoppage time to secure Barcelona's spot in the round of 16. In the next round, with Barca outnumbered, it was the flying Brazilian who came to its rescue, scoring after the hour mark, a goal that proved to be the winner.

Elsewhere, Brahim Diaz and Harvey Elliott played rescue acts for Real Madrid and Liverpool, respectively. Arne Slot's men, who have dominated the Premier League this season, were kept under the cosh by Paris Saint-Germain for 87 minutes until Elliott ended a swift counterattack into the net, giving the Reds a slender advantage.

Meanwhile, Real Madrid took a leaf out of Atletico Madrid's book to gain an upper hand over its city rival in the Champions League. A former Manchester City player had scored in the previous Madrid derby, which had ended 1-1, with Atletico's scorer being Julian Alvarez.

In a different competition, a month later, another former City player spoiled Atletico's party, not with a draw but with a 2-1 win as Diaz netted the winner, making full use of the chance he got as Jude Bellingham's replacement, who was suspended.

Some of the other games in the first leg of this round ended predictably in favour of the stronger teams on paper: Aston Villa beating Club Brugge 3-1 and Inter Milan pipping Feyenoord 2-0.

Also, Arsenal hammered seven goals against a meek PSV Eindhoven to become the first team in UEFA Champions League history to score seven or more goals away from home in a knockout-stage match.

Meanwhile, it was box-office drama in the games involving the German teams.

LOSC Lille held Dortmund to a 1-1 draw with its first shot on target, from Hakon Haraldsson, while Xabi Alonso's men lost 0-3 to Bayern, their first loss to the Bavarians in over four years.

Of the 16 teams in contention, the Gunners look set for the quarterfinals. However, half of the matches in this round have a deficit of one or fewer goals, making the return legs extremely crucial.

As of March 10, both finalists of last season — Real Madrid and Borussia Dortmund — are still in the running. It remains to be seen if they can set up a consecutive final, since both of them are on opposite sides of the competition.

REUTERS

» FIH PRO LEAGUE

Mark of a leader: Indian captain Harmanpreet Singh celebrates along with his teammates during an FIH Pro League match against England. BISWARANJAN ROUT

Coaches take stock as India betters its FIH Pro League show from previous season

With both the men and women finishing in the bottom half of the table in the previous edition of the Pro League, the current season has **a lot riding on it,** a spot at the 2026 World Cup being just one of them.

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The recent FIH Pro League marked the beginning of Indian hockey's international assignments in 2025. Coming just a fortnight after the revived Hockey India League, the Bhubaneswar leg of the competition was expected to be a testing ground for the year ahead, and the results, while encouraging, also highlighted areas that still need work for both the men and women.

With both the men and women finishing in the bottom half of the table in the previous edition, the women barely managing to hang on to their spot in the second-last position, the current season has a lot riding on it for Indian hockey, a spot at the 2026 World Cup being just one of them. It is also a chance for the men to continue building their core for the next four years leading up to LA28, and for the women to get back on the grind with a clean slate.

While the men finished their quota of eight games with five wins to be

placed third currently, the women had two wins, with a shootout bonus against the Netherlands, to be placed sixth with nine points — already one more than what they managed in total in 2023-24.

The road ahead is, in some ways, both simpler and tougher for the men. After two consecutive Olympic medals and a fairly well-settled system, it's more about fine-tuning what has already been proven to work, with an infusion of new faces. The team has consistently remained among the top five in the world, and there is little to separate them from the other top teams.

The HIL gave Craig Fulton an opportunity to assess the youngsters from the junior side, and the Pro League a chance to test them in tougher situations. The eight games — two each against England, Germany, Spain and Ireland — saw the India coach rotate as many as 27 players in his search for a core group leading up to the 2026 World Cup.

Among those were youngsters like Rajinder Singh, Araijeet Singh Hundal, Arshdeep Singh and Yashdeep Siwach, players who impressed with both their skills and game intelligence on the field. With a demanding 2026 that has the World Cup and the Asian Games scheduled less than a month apart, Fulton has admitted the need to prepare more than one core team. If the start of the Pro League is any indication, Indian men's hockey is on track to do so.

Fulton knows that not all seniors in the side will continue to be active for the next four years. Regardless of their fitness or experience, many in the side are expected to call it a day after the World Cup or the Asian Games, and a new leadership group is inevitable. The Pro League, in that regard, is also a test of leadership skills among the newer lot.

Hundal and Arshdeep have already been marked as long-term prospects in attack, but Rajinder on the flanks was the most impressive with his stick work, control, and accuracy in setting up goals. Fulton's mantra of defending to win was clearly visible in India's matches – the host conceded the least number of goals, 12, among all nations in the first half of the season. At the other end, however, goals have not been easy to come by, with penalty corner conversions remaining the bugbear in an otherwise sorted set-up.

India earned 30 PCs at the Kalinga Stadium, but Jugraj Singh, considered the best drag-flicker in India behind Harmanpreet Singh and coming in on the back of a red-hot streak as the top scorer in the HIL, failed to score a single goal, even when Harmanpreet was rested. On the other hand, field goals from Sukhjeet, Abhishek and Mandeep Singh helped release the pressure somewhat. Clearly, the stint with Australian Michael McCann for the strikers paid off. But with Amandeep Lakra impressing and waiting for his chance, it remains to be seen if Fulton will continue to persist with Jugraj or explore other options.

THE WOMEN'S HOCKEY TEAM IMPRESSED AND FRUSTRATED IN EQUAL MEASURE, HIGHLIGHTING INCONSISTENCY IN FORM AND FORTUNES

The other small worry for Fulton would be the persistent slow start from the team. The Indians bounced back after every loss to win big, and while it did show that the Indians did best with their backs to the wall, it also puts them in a situation where they are left chasing, instead of setting the terms.

It's more complicated for the women. Missing the Paris Olympics meant changes in both the playing and support staff, and while the seniors in the side have, so far, been vital to the team's prospects, coach Harendra Singh will have his hands full planning for both the long- and short-term future.

The team impressed and frustrated in equal measure, highlighting inconsistency in form and fortunes. On the positive side, the team managed hard-fought victories against England and Germany and a massive morale booster with a shootout win against the dominant Netherlands. Although

Central figure: There is no denying that Savita remains key to Indian's fortunes. THE HOCKEY INDIA

experimental, the Dutch and the Germans still landed with 11 and nine members respectively from their Olympic sides, which makes India's performances all the more laudable.

Harendra has always insisted on fitness being the backbone of all strategies and their executions, and the team, when playing to its strengths and sticking to its plans, proved capable of matching up to the higher-ranked sides. Deepika continues to go from strength to strength, both as a striker and the team's main drag-flicker. The newcomers — Sakshi Rana, Rutuja Pisal and Jyoti Singh — all impressed, and with more, including the likes of Kanika Siwach and Deepika Soreng, waiting in the wings, the team appears to be on the right track.

The biggest concern, however, will be to ensure a replacement is in place well in time for Savita Punia. Although Bichu Devi was competent in the chances she got, there is no denying that Savita remains key to India's fortunes, and by the time she calls it a day, one hopes Indian women's hockey has her successor ready.

The big caveat, though, remains that the Pro League continues to be a testing ground for all teams, both in planning and personnel, before more important tournaments, with its results valued accordingly.

But if the first half of the current season is any indication, Indian hockey seems prepared for the tough days ahead.

Remembering Barnes

By C.G.S.Narayanan

World Federation for chess composition (WFCC) in its website paid a tribute to British composer Barry Peter Barnes (1937-2025) who was a tireless promoter of the best in chess composition art for 70 years, since his first published problem in 1954. With his contemporaries Michael Lipton and John Rice, in the late 1950s and early 1960s he revolutionised the British two-mover, moving from the single phase content to modern multiphase content. Their joint book "*The Two-Move Chess Problem: Tradition and Development*" (1966) was a glorious monument to their revolution. He earned the FIDE IM title and title of International Judge of Chess Composition. Barry was a good friend and inspiration to many Indian composers. The first problem below is an elegant cross-checker in a Meredith.

B.P.Barnes
2nd prize,Evening news 1959
Brian Harley award winner

Mate in two moves
Key 1.Kb3! (2.Qb4)
1…Bc1+ 2.fNd3;1….Bd4+ 2.eNd3
Bxf2+ 2.eNf3

and the second one sent to me five years back was fairly recent success of his on which the judge Marjan Kovacevic wrote " how much I liked the quintet of mates after black queen moves"

B.P.Barnes
1st PreaTomas Salamanca MT 2020

Mate in two moves
Set: 1...Qxf4 2.Qxe4
Key 1.Nxe4! (2.Rf2);1...Kxf4 2.Rxf5
1...Qxf4+ 2.Nd6;1...Qe5+ 2.fxe5
1...Qxe4 2.fxg5; 1...Qd5 2.Nxg5
1...Qxh3 2.Nf6

"I think my old mentor, Comins Mansfield, would have approved using WQ as mere bishop wrote Barnes.

The problem for solving was a probably the fore-runner in the theme of cycic refutaton

B.P.Barnes
First prize, Problemnoter 1961

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in he article 'Turton doubling'
Key 1.Rh4! Kc5. Rgg4 any 3.Rc4
Brunner-Dresden doubling- doubling between line pieces of equal strength

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

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Shooting League of India to start from November 24

The inaugural Shooting League of India (SLI) has been allotted the dates from November 24 to December 7 by the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF).

Kalikesh Singh Deo, president of the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI), said that the official recognition of the event by the ISSF would ensure a world-class competition.

"We hope to attract most top shooters to the league, as India has a strong profile in the sport globally. A lot of work is going on behind the scenes, and this allotment of dates motivates us further to deliver one of the best-ever shooting events," said the NRAI president.

The NRAI earlier announced that Elena Norman would be the league's consultant, and New Horizons Alliance Pvt. Limited would handle its commercial and marketing operations.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

SPORTOON

1 The country's first-ever PSA Squash Copper event, the JSW Indian Open, is scheduled to take place at the Bombay Gymkhana in Mumbai from March 24 to 28. The competition will feature top talent from Egypt, Canada, Malaysia, and Japan, alongside India's finest players, including Ramit Tandon, Anahat Singh, Velavan Senthilkumar, Veer Chotrani, and Akanksha Salunkhe. The prize pool is worth USD 40,000. With the sport set to be introduced at the LA 2028 Olympics, the Indian Open will be the perfect stage for squash to reach new heights.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 Vani Kapoor won her second successive title with a one-under 71 in the third round, securing a three-shot victory over Ridhima Dilawari and Rhea Jha in the fifth leg of the Hero Women's Golf Tour at the Classic Golf and Country Club.

Kriti Chowhan produced the best round of the final day with a three-under 69 but settled for a tied sixth place with Sneha Singh, the champion of the second and third legs, along with Yaalisai Verma and amateur Ceerat Kang.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Is AI winning the game of personalised nutrition?

The champions of tomorrow will be those who combine human wisdom with AI-driven precision. And for those who adapt, AI won't be a competitor — it will be the **ultimate teammate.**

For years, I have crafted personalised nutrition plans for elite athletes, including top cricketers like Virat Kohli, Shikhar Dhawan, Robin Uthappa, Yuvraj Singh, and Harbhajan Singh. I have studied every detail — metabolism, micronutrient needs, gut health, hydration strategies, and recovery cycles. My approach has always been driven by human expertise, intuition, and experience — things no machine could replicate.

Or so I thought.

Today, AI is challenging even the best human nutritionists, offering real-time analysis, hyper-personalised diet plans, and predictive models that optimise athletic performance without the bias of human assumptions. And whether I like it or not, AI is winning in ways that even I must admit are extraordinary.

When elite cricketers transition from promising talents to world-class athletes, nutrition plays a pivotal role. I have had the privilege of crafting the diets of some of the finest names in the game, ensuring that every gram of protein, carbohydrate, and fat is precisely tailored to their match-day needs, recovery goals, and long-term endurance.

We relied on blood markers, gut microbiome data, genetic testing, and manual meal tracking to make micro-adjustments. Every food choice was deliberate — a perfectly calculated mix of science, discipline, and, yes, intuition.

But what took me weeks to analyse, AI can now do in seconds.

As a nutritionist, I always believed my greatest strength was my ability to see patterns — how sleep affected an athlete's hydration needs, how stress influenced food cravings, or how subtle nutrient shifts could optimise muscle recovery.

But AI doesn't rely on intuition.

❶ It analyses thousands of biomarkers in real time — predicting energy fluctuations before an athlete even feels them.

❷ It removes human bias — if an athlete needs more carbs despite trends favouring high-protein diets, AI will say it outright.

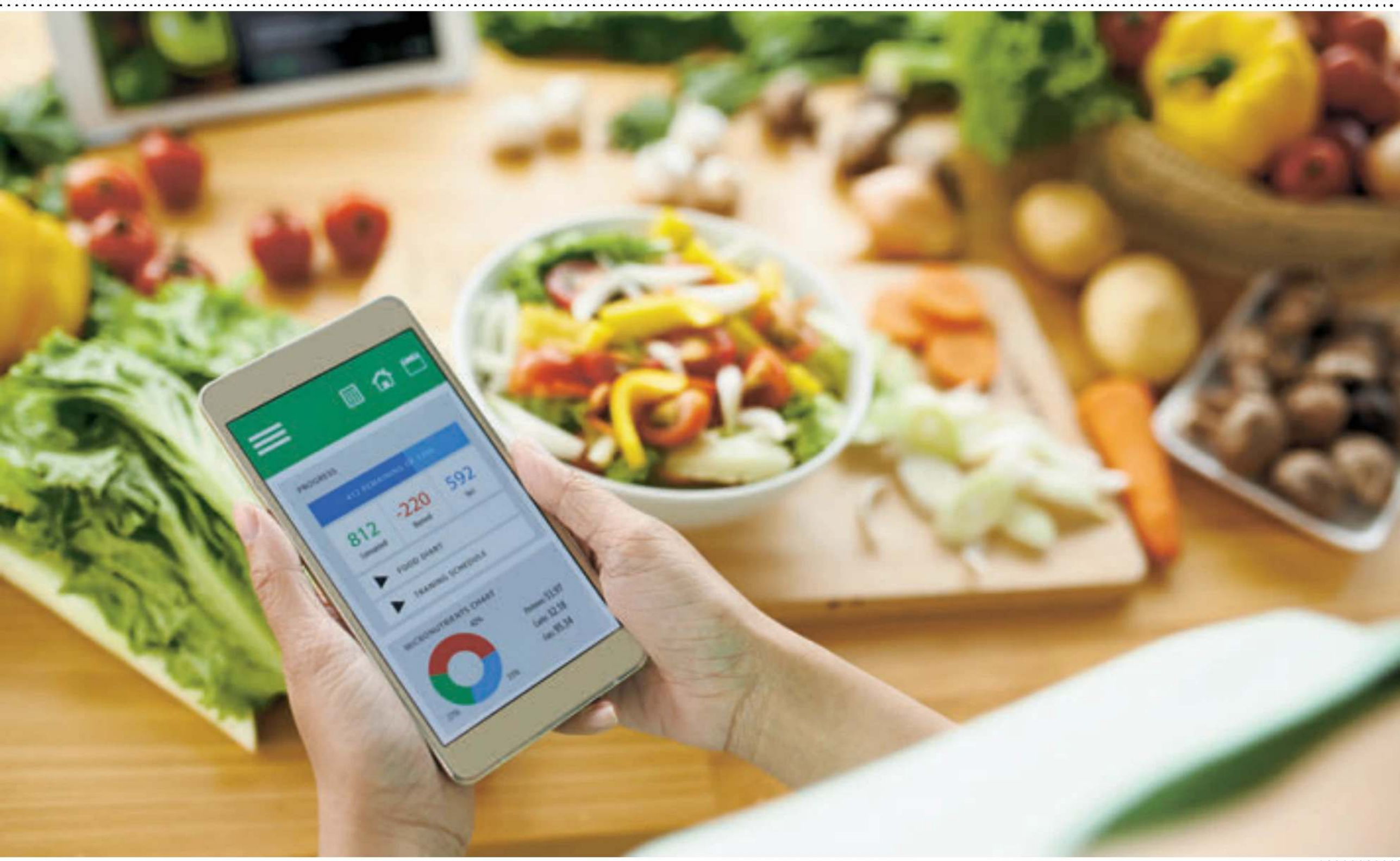
❸ It optimises meal timing, hydration, and recovery strategies — factoring in sleep cycles, match-day conditions, and stress levels.

❹ It can adjust plans dynamically — based on live training data, sweat analysis, and even weather conditions.

Where I spend hours correlating nutrition, sleep, and stress, AI does it instantly — without error, without fatigue, without hesitation.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently emphasised AI's role in healthcare, stating that it will revolutionise medicine, make treatments more accessible, and simplify complex medical and nutritional data.

He said: "If you upload your medical report to an AI system, it can



translate it into simple language, free of medical jargon, helping you understand what it means for your health."

This is exactly where AI is taking personalised nutrition.

Athletes will no longer have to guess their macros or rely on outdated meal plans. AI will provide real-time, data-backed, precision-driven dietary adjustments — from match-day carb-loading to muscle recovery meals.

It's not the future — it's happening now.

The next generation of athletes will not just have world-class training, but AI-assisted nutrition that adapts to their real-time metabolic needs.

Imagine: No more 'bad days' — AI predicts and prevents fatigue before it sets in. No more generic meal plans — AI curates diets based on individual blood markers, stress levels, and sweat composition. No more excuses — with sleep, nutrition, and exercise tracked down to the last micronutrient, performance gaps will shrink.

So where does that leave me? Am I, as a human nutritionist, obsolete?

No. AI cannot replace the human connection, emotional intelligence, and motivation that elite athletes need. But it does force nutritionists like me to evolve, to combine AI-driven precision with human-led insight.

In fact, I have personally begun integrating AI into my work, allowing real-time tracking, instant dietary insights, and personalised recommendations based on deep data analysis — something that once took weeks, now happens in moments.

The champions of tomorrow will be those who combine human wisdom with AI-driven precision. And for those who adapt, AI won't be a competitor — it will be the ultimate teammate.

You can download the Ryan Fernando AI Diet Plan from the Android or iOS store — just search my name and experience the future of precision nutrition today.

Future is here: Today, AI is challenging even the best human nutritionists, offering real-time analysis, hyper-personalised diet plans, and predictive models that optimise athletic performance without the bias of human assumptions.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Technology enhancing performance

Scientists are saying now that **women can break** the four-minute barrier thanks to advances in shoe technology and manipulation of aerodynamics.

Suresh Menon

For a while in Oxford, my son lived in rooms overlooking the Iffley Road track where Roger Banister broke the four-minute barrier for the mile. We marvelled at the history. It became, unsurprisingly, the Roger Bannister running track. That record came in May 1954, as Bannister, aided by pacemakers, ran in 3:59.4, a set of numbers as famous in athletics as 19 for 90 is in cricket or 3.14 in geometry. The current world record of 3:43.13 is held by Morocco's El Guerrouj.

Steve Scott of the U.S. who was born two years after Bannister's effort, ran 136 sub-four minute races. Today no international athlete worth his salt takes as long as four minutes to run the mile. Last year Parvej Khan, Haryana-born middle distance runner now in the U.S., raised the Indian record to 3:55.41.

Pioneer: Roger Bannister... the first to break the four-minute barrier for the mile. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

There is something about the mile that is at once romantic and challenging. Perhaps it is the single-syllable word itself, and the 70-year legends following that first record. Perhaps it is the tactical combination of brain and brawn demanded of the runner. More people have climbed the Everest than have broken the four-minute mile!

What about the women, though? The world record 4:07.64 was set by Kenyan runner Faith Kipyegon in 2023. Is there a sub-four minute mile on the horizon for women?

Twenty three days after Bannister's record, the lesser-known Briton Diane Leather ran the women's first sub-five minute mile. "Thank heavens that's over," she said after the race, "Now I can concentrate on my chemistry exams." At the Olympics then, 200m was the longest distance for women.

Bannister once said, "Doctors and scientists said breaking the four-minute mile was impossible, that one would die in the attempt. Thus when I got up from the track after collapsing at the finishing line, I figured I was dead."

Interestingly, scientists are saying now that women can break the four-minute barrier thanks to advances in shoe technology and manipulation of aerodynamics. According to a paper in the Royal Society, "aerodynamic drafting could allow (a woman) to run just 3.19% faster and thus break the 4-minute mile barrier. Drafting involves other athletes (pacers) running in formation around a designated athlete to reduce the aerodynamic drag force. Drafting allows the athlete to run faster at the same rate of metabolic energy consumption." The scientists have studied Kipyegon and conclude that she could be the one.

She can't use pacemakers or aerodynamic drafting in a competitive race, though, as it is not allowed. With the help of somewhat similar pacemakers, Eliud Kipchoge became the first person to run the marathon in under two hours.

The record, 1h:59.41, set in Vienna, is not recognised as a rotating team of pacemakers shielded Kipchoge from the wind, while he wore Nike's specifically designed carbon fibre plated shoes. The official world record is 2h:00.35, set by the late Kelvin Kiptum of Kenya at the 2023 Chicago Marathon.

The women's sub-four minute mile and the sub-two hour marathon? It's only a matter of time now.

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