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TRIUMPH OF SINNER

The Italian rising star stopped higher-ranked Novak Djokovic and Daniil Medvedev en route to the Australian Open title



“

Shri Ram is the faith of India, the foundation of India. Ram is the thought of India, the law of India. Ram is the consciousness of India, the contemplation of India. Ram is the prestige of India, the might of India. Ram is the flow, Ram is the influence. Ram is the norm, and Ram is the policy. Ram is the permanence, and Ram is the continuity. Ram is vast, Ram is expansive. Ram is all-encompassing, Ram is the universe, the soul of the universe. And hence when Ram is established, its impact lasts not for years or centuries but for thousands of years.

- Narendra Modi, Prime Minister

”



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Jannik Sinner rises like a phoenix from the ashes to clinch maiden Grand Slam title.

Cover: Jannik Sinner (Getty Images)

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NEVER PAST YOUR PRIME!

The **age-old adage** that age is just a number seems to be true, particularly, in the world of sports today.

The older they are, the better they get at sports. The age-old adage that age is just a number seems to be true, particularly, in the world of sports today. The elderly are no longer confined to bridge tournaments and tea parties, as the traditional constraints of time and age seem to have become outdated with the advances in medical sciences and training methods. Modern athletes have found the elixir of eternal youth with protein shakes and physiotherapy sessions.

Swiss great Roger Federer won his 20th and last Grand Slam title — the 2018 Australian Open — when he was 36 and played a Wimbledon final with Novak Djokovic a year later that lasted longer than an average *Netflix* binge. Djokovic, now part of the 36-and-still-kicking club, continues to lord over tennis. He won three of the four Grand Slams in 2023 and is still ranked No. 1 despite losing the recent Australian Open semifinals to Jannik Sinner.

Federer, Djokovic, and Rafael Nadal have enjoyed a stranglehold over men's tennis well into their mid-30s. Djokovic, the Benjamin Button of tennis, has won 12 Grand Slams since the big 30 milestone. Nadal and Federer, not to be outdone, have eight and four Slams, respectively, forming a triumvirate that has captured 66 out of 82 possible Slams since Federer's maiden Wimbledon triumph in 2003.

Their utter dominance has birthed the "lost generation" in tennis — players younger than Djokovic have won a mere seven Grand Slam titles since Federer's conquest over Mark Philippoussis in the 2003 final. Five of these rebellious victories have occurred in the last four years: Dominic

Thiem won the 2020 U.S. Open, Daniil Medvedev (2021 U.S. Open), Carlos Alcaraz (2022 U.S. Open and 2023 Wimbledon), and Sinner (2024 Australian Open).

Meanwhile, Djokovic shows no signs of slowing down and wants to play until he is 40, following in the footsteps of NFL great Tom Brady. Brady defied the odds and the laws of ageing to win seven Super Bowl titles in 23 seasons, while his fifth Super Bowl MVP came at the age of 43 in 2021. To put things into perspective, according to a study published by *Chron.com*, the online publication of the *Houston Chronicle*, in 2018, the average career span of an NFL quarterback is three years.

In India, as well, athletes are benefitting from better training and nutrition knowledge. At the recently concluded ODI World Cup, the country had the third oldest squad with an average age of 31.24 years, with Ravichandran Ashwin (37), Rohit Sharma (36) and Virat Kohli (35) as its three senior-most members. Rohan Bopanna, at 43, has also written his name in tennis history recently by becoming the oldest men's Grand Slam winner and doubles No. 1 after partnering with 36-year-old Matthew Ebden to win the Australian Open.

Clearly, in the 21st century, age — still an annoying, ever-increasing number of joint creaks and muscle twinges for the ordinary — is just a number for a motivated sportsperson. While, for us mere mortals, the descent into the abyss of ageing is often marked by a lamentable fixation on all things we are dreadfully declining at, for an athlete, it's just another opportunity to defy the odds.



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« Our Olympic top five target is more achievable than ever according to the latest forecasts, which show that France could have its best Games since 1900. I don't want to put too much pressure, but it's sound, healthy pressure. — France President Emmanuel Macron »



« I think it's all about having fun and enjoying the process. We are always doing a lot of crazy stuff with the team. It's helped me to stay focused on the court. — Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka on her new pre-match rituals and warm-up routines »

1st

Reigning U.S. Amateur champion Nick Dunlap became the first amateur since 1991 to win a PGA Tour title, winning a back-nine showdown to capture the American Express tournament. Dunlap, a 20-year-old sophomore at the University of Alabama, sank the winning par putt from just inside six feet at the 18th hole to fire a two-under-par 70 at the Pete Dye Stadium Course — one of three courses used. Despite his victory, however, Dunlap will not take home any money from the win. As an amateur, he is ineligible

for the winner's prize of \$1.51 million, which goes to runner-up Christiaan Bezuidenhout, who finished on 260 after a closing 65.

Dunlap finished on 29-under 259 to set a 72-hole record low winning score, breaking the mark of 28-under set by Patrick Reed in 2014.



SEEKING JUSTICE



Swimmer Lia Thomas, who became the first transgender woman to win the highest U.S. national college title in 2022, has lodged a case with the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in a bid to again compete in elite female races. In June 2022, World Aquatics voted to ban transgender women who had gone through male puberty from competing in women's races. The 25-year-old American has lodged a case with the CAS to overturn the ban. AP

5.80

Pole vault world record holder Armand Duplantis opened his year by clearing a modest 5.80 metres indoors as he won in Astana.

It was the first time since 2019 that he had started a year by failing to clear six metres.

The 24-year-old Swede, who last summer raised his world record to 6.23m, started by clearing 5.60m. He then failed twice before clearing 5.80 m, but failed three times at 6.00m. Duplantis still won the competition in Astana, the first big meeting of the winter, ahead of Belgium's Ben Broeders (5.70m).



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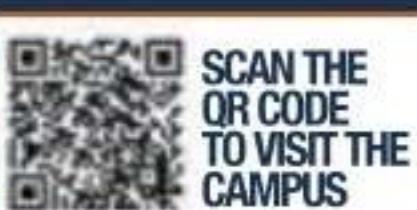
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SHOCK AND AWE

Dricus du Plessis's win against Sean Strickland **sets the tone** for Ultimate Fighting Championship this year.

Nigamanth P

nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

UFC 297 came to a controversial close as Dricus du Plessis was crowned the new undisputed middleweight champion after a split decision win against Sean Strickland.

Given how the five rounds had panned out, fans and experts were surprised when du Plessis was the one with his hand raised. Until the final moments of the fifth round, it had appeared that Strickland had the advantage, maintaining a

Surprise move: Fans and pundits were taken aback after Bruce Buffer, the announcer, declared Dricus du Plessis the winner due to the manner in which the five rounds panned out. AFP

higher significant-strike rate.

"I had it two-to-two going into the last round, and I thought Strickland won the last round. Guys who were sitting at the same table had it the other way. It's one of those tight fights," said UFC CEO Dana White after the event.

The dust from the previous event has barely settled, and the next major UFC event is already on the horizon. UFC 298, slated to take place on February 18, boasts an exciting lineup of fights, including the main event featuring Alexander Volkanovski, the current

« Volkanovski, nicknamed 'The Great', has successfully defended his featherweight belt five times »

featherweight champion, defending his title against the unbeaten Ilia Topuria at the Honda Centre Arena in California.

Sixth title defense for The Great

Volkanovski, nicknamed 'The Great', has successfully defended his belt five times before this fight. However, he has been unsuccessful in his attempt to become the UFC's fifth multi-weight champion. He suffered two losses in his previous three fights, both of which were against Islam Makhachev, the world's No. 1 men's pound-for-pound (skill-based ranking irrespective of weight class) grappler, while fighting for the lightweight title.

The first fight between Volkanovski and Makhachev, which lasted five rounds, was recognised as the Fight of the Year. The second fight, however, damaged Volkanovski's reputation when Makhachev knocked him out with a left-high kick that was well-executed and perfectly timed.

Despite the two losses, Volkanovski's dominance in the featherweight division was proven in the fight between his two losses. He highlighted his legacy in his division at UFC 290 at the T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas.

When Volkanovski switched his weight class, Yair Rodriguez, a.k.a. El Pantera, became the interim featherweight champion. With the belt and his pride on the line, Volkanovski successfully took down Rodriguez seven times out of 12 and landed a right hook to his face, which left Rodriguez vulnerable. Volkanovski seized the opportunity and used powerful strikes to knock his opponent out.

On the other hand, undefeated challenger Topuria has won all six of his UFC fights and earned three consecutive performance bonuses before his first title fight.

Topuria's striking skills were on display in his UFC main event debut, where he fought Josh Emmett in a Fight of the Night award-winning match. Although he did not finish the fight, his impressive display

Fiery days ahead: Defending featherweight champion Alexander Volkanovski takes on an unbeaten Ilia Topuria in UFC 299 at the Honda Centre Arena in California. AFP

confirmed his status as a title contender and put him next in line for a championship shot.

On an equal footing

One of the major reasons for Volkanovski's long-term success is his endurance. While other fighters tend to wear down as the rounds progress, *The Great* is at his volatile best in the fifth round. Four out of his five title fight wins have lasted the full 25 minutes. Volkanovski averages 6.91 significant strikes per minute in the first four rounds but ups his game in the final five, averaging 7.52 significant strikes per minute.

Volkanovski's strong suit is his durability, while Topuria has superior power.

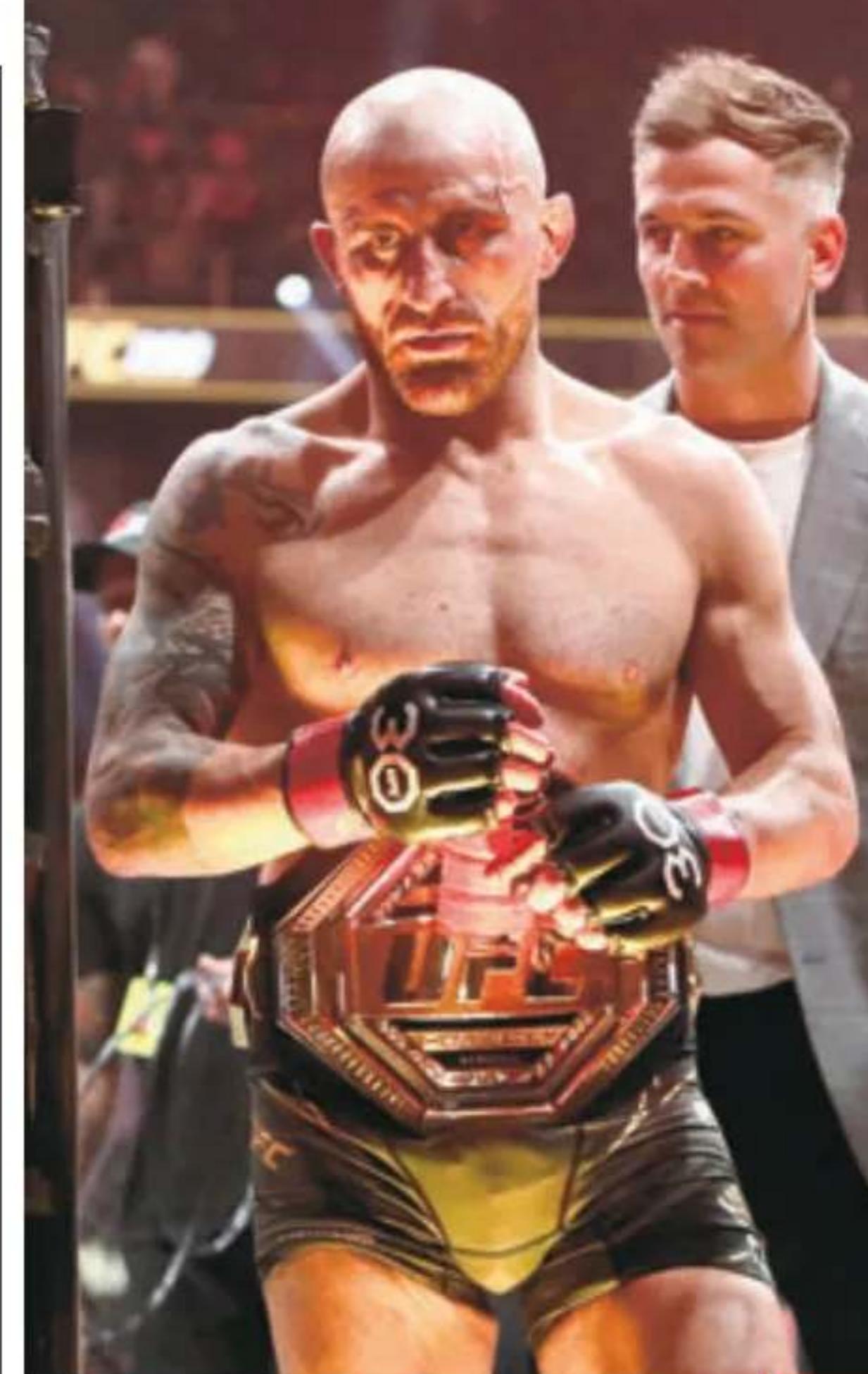
His six first-round submission wins are a testament to his striking prowess. Averaging close to one knockdown (forcing an opponent to fall down with a strike) per minute, Topuria will be a litmus test for Volkanovski's stamina.

Blockbuster fights

A fight that was supposed to happen a year ago will finally see the light of day. Robert Whittaker will take on Paulo Costa, who pulled out of UFC 284 due to an alleged dispute with the promotion, in a middleweight bout.

Meanwhile, initially paired off last summer as well, Geoff Neal and Ian Machado Garry will finally share the Octagon together.

A fixture in the top 15 in the welterweight rankings for the last several years, Neal combined with Shavkat Rakhmonov for one of the best fights of the year in 2023, but unfortunately for the Fortis MMA product, he landed on the wrong side of the results. Machado Garry has yet to occupy that position in his career, bringing a 13-0 record into his seventh UFC assignment.



Main card for UFC 298



Featherweight championship

Alexander Volkanovski vs. Ilia Topuria

Middleweight

Robert Whittaker vs. Paulo Costa

Welterweight:

Geoff Neal vs. Ian Garry

Bantamweight

Merab Dvalishvili vs. Henry Cejudo

Middleweight

Anthony Hernandez vs. Ikram Aliskerov

» COVER STORY

SINNER IS THE WINNER

The Italian came back from two sets down against Daniil Medvedev to **win his first** Grand Slam title.



If Sinner's fans were nervous wrecks during pivotal points in the 3-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-4, 6-3 final, especially during the last game, their hero wasn't. "I like to dance in the pressure storm," he said afterward. "I like it, because that's where most of the time I bring out my best tennis."





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AP



One for the record books: Sinner became the first Italian man to capture a Grand Slam singles title since Adriano Panatta won the 1976 French Open and the youngest men's AO champion since Novak Djokovic in 2008. GETTYIMAGES

Paul Fein

A woman in the crowd kissed the carrot she grasped for good luck. Like Jannik Sinner's 'carota' fans in Italy and his burgeoning legion of devotees around the world, she sensed victory. Sinner led 5-3, 30-all in the deciding set of the Australian Open final. But Daniil Medvedev, a tenacious competitor, had taken the last two points.

Could Medvedev somehow come back just as Sinner had after losing the first two sets? The preternaturally calm Italian attacked with a forehand that the tired Medvedev barely reached and couldn't return. 5-3, 40-30 championship point. With the poise of a veteran champion, 22-year-old Sinner moved his opponent around the court to set up his signature shot. Then he unleashed a rocket forehand down the line for his first Grand Slam title.

If Sinner's fans were nervous wrecks during pivotal points in the 3-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-4, 6-3 final, especially during the last game, their hero wasn't. "I like to dance in the pressure storm," he said. "I like it, because that's where, most of the time, I bring out my best tennis."

Perhaps the gangly strawberry blonde's remarkable sangfroid comes from Sexton, a small town in the German-speaking region of Italy just seven miles from the Austrian border. There he was a standout skier — nicknamed 'Jan the Fox' — until he switched to tennis at 13. His father worked as a chef in a ski lodge, while his mother was a waitress. Jannik likes to describe himself as "humble."

His surname is comically ironic because he's likable and low-key off the court and well-behaved and fair on it. "Jannik is an

incredibly nice guy in the locker room," said Nick Kyrgios, the 2022 Wimbledon finalist. "You always see him as super professional, but he's like a sponge. Ever since he came on tour [in 2019], that first match he played against Steve Johnson in Rome, the locker room was watching and thinking — 'Who is this skinny guy who has the crowd in the palm of his hand?'"

One such admirer at the Australian Open final used a fun pun on his T-shirt — "I'm a Sinner."

Sinner says he loves the solitude and problem-solving of tennis.

Medvedev, known for his high tennis IQ, laid a trap for the less experienced Italian in his first Grand Slam final. Instead of his usual counter-punching style, the Russian surprised him by returning first and second serves several feet closer to the baseline than he had in previous matches and attacking as often as possible.

The tactics paid off handsomely. After holding serve for 45 straight games, Sinner was broken in the third and ninth games of the 6-3 opening set. "We've flipped the script," said ESPN analyst Patrick McEnroe. "Medvedev is the aggressor."

Sinner should have taken the advice of 1920s tennis champion and genius Bill Tilden: "Always change a losing game." Instead, he continued to play passively and fell behind 5-1 in the second set. When he broke serve for 5-2, the partisan crowd roared. Though encouraging, it wasn't enough as Medvedev took the second set, 6-3.

For the third time, the Russian enjoyed a two-set-to-love lead in a major final. He won the first against Novak Djokovic at the 2021 US Open (denying the Serb a calendar-year Slam) and lost the second to Rafael Nadal at the 2022 Australian Open when he failed to counter Rafa's fifth-set aggression. Medvedev would suffer the same fate this fortnight.

Was Jannik playing possum for two costly, losing sets? Was he crazy like a fox?

Maybe both. Sinner had a plan, as

he explained after the final. "I had this feeling that he might come out a little bit more aggressive," Sinner said of Medvedev's tactics. "He played really, really well for the first two-and-a-half sets. I just tried to stay positive. I tried just to play even level and just stay as long on the court as possible, knowing that he has spent so many hours on the court. The more the match goes on, maybe physically I'm a little bit better today. When you win one very important game, the match can change occasionally, and that was the case today."

Coached by highly regarded Darren Cahill, Sinner was prescient in two respects. En route to the final, Medvedev had competed in many more games (259 to 177) and many more hours (23 hours, 33 minutes to 14 hours and 44 minutes).

Also, this strange role reversal would likely last only so long before both players reverted to their natural styles. Sooner or later, the long, grueling rallies would drain Medvedev of energy, and his running would slow, and his shots lost power.

Then Sinner, five years younger and fresher, would seize the initiative. **Remember Muhammad Ali and George Forman's *Rumble in the Jungle*, when Ali's 'rope-a-dope' tactic sapped Forman's energy, and then Ali knocked him out in the eighth round?**

Sinner's plan worked but not until Medvedev came within six points of the title, with Sinner serving at 4-all, 40-all in the third set. Nerves got to Medvedev, as they often do to players during closing time, and he made two unforced forehand errors. Sinner pumped his fist after the 6-4 set as most of the 15,000 Rod Laver Arena spectators cheered for the popular Italian.

Now Medvedev found himself in a tactical quandary. He lost the third set and the momentum. He knew he had to change a losing game and that the problem-solving Sinner wouldn't change his winning game. But, as Patrick McEnroe said, "I don't know if Medvedev has the energy he had in the first two sets to hit the ball

Future bright: Sinner is also the first Australian Open champion not among the legendary Big Three since 2014 when Stan Wawrinka upset Rafael Nadal. GETTY IMAGES



hard."

With Sinner about to serve at 3-all in the fourth set, Cahill yelled, "He's tired. Keep working him." Jannik needed that encouragement because he fell behind love-30 and then 30-40 break point. He escaped the crises with three aces.

When Sinner broke serve to take the set 6-4, the crowd erupted with loud cheers, while the stoical Italian calmly adjusted his racket strings during the break.

Both players had losing five-set career records — Sinner 5-7 and Medvedev 7-9.

At 2-3, Medvedev serving, Sinner had his tired foe on the ropes. A backhand passing shot winner made it love-30 and a forehand crosscourt winner broke Medvedev's serve and spirit.



Three games later, Sinner made history as the first Australian Open champion not among the legendary Big Three since 2014 when Stan Wawrinka upset Rafael Nadal.

He also became the first Italian man to capture a Grand Slam singles title since Adriano Panatta won the 1976 French Open and the youngest men's AO champion since Novak Djokovic in 2008.

Lastly, he dealt The King of Hard Courts, his first loss as the No. 1 seed after entering the AO at 47-0.

Tennis aficionados and historians will also remember Sinner as a massive streak breaker thanks to his 6-1, 6-2, 6-7 (6), 6-3 semifinal upset over Djokovic.

If the result was surprising, the score was shocking. Djokovic had to stave off a match point in the

tiebreaker just to extend the match to four sets.

Beating the GOAT at Melbourne — where The Djoker had amassed a perfect 10-0 record in both semifinals and finals — was a testament both to his superb performance and Djokovic's mystifyingly abysmal play.

When Novak committed his 13th unforced error, a backhand approach that landed deep, to lose his serve and fall behind 5-1, the crowd murmured in disbelief. A game later, *ESPN* analyst and 1980s superstar John McEnroe said, "I'd be truly amazed if Novak continued to play at that level."

At 2-all in the third set, McEnroe borrowed a catchphrase from the 1970s TV show *What's My Line* where contestants tried to figure out who

the masked celebrity was.

Mac quipped, "Will the real Novak Djokovic please stand up?", adding "soon." This Djokovic wasn't an impersonator at least during the tiebreaker, his forte.

In retrospect, the much-improved Sinner should have been considered a slight favourite given his terrific record against elite opponents in the past four months: 2-1 against Djokovic, 1-0 against Carlos Alcaraz, and 3-0 against Medvedev.

During the press conference, Djokovic graciously told the crowd, "I want to congratulate Sinner for playing a great match. He outplayed me completely today."

Then he admitted, "I was shocked by my level — in a bad way. This was one of the worst grand Slam matches I have ever played."



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Sabalenka overpowers Zheng for second Australian Open title

When her parents sent 15-year-old Aryna Sabalenka to the national tennis academy in Minsk in 2014, the coaches thought she was too stupid for the sport.

Her father Sergey, a former ice hockey player, knew better. Aryna recalled, "He told me then that I have everything I needed to achieve this goal — I just had to learn myself better, to learn how to control my emotions, and one day I'd be world number one. It was like our dream."

That dream came true last September when she grabbed the top spot, but it was bittersweet. Sergey, who unexpectedly died in November 2019, did not live to see it.

Her dad had set another goal that she was determined to fulfill — two Grand Slam titles by age 25.

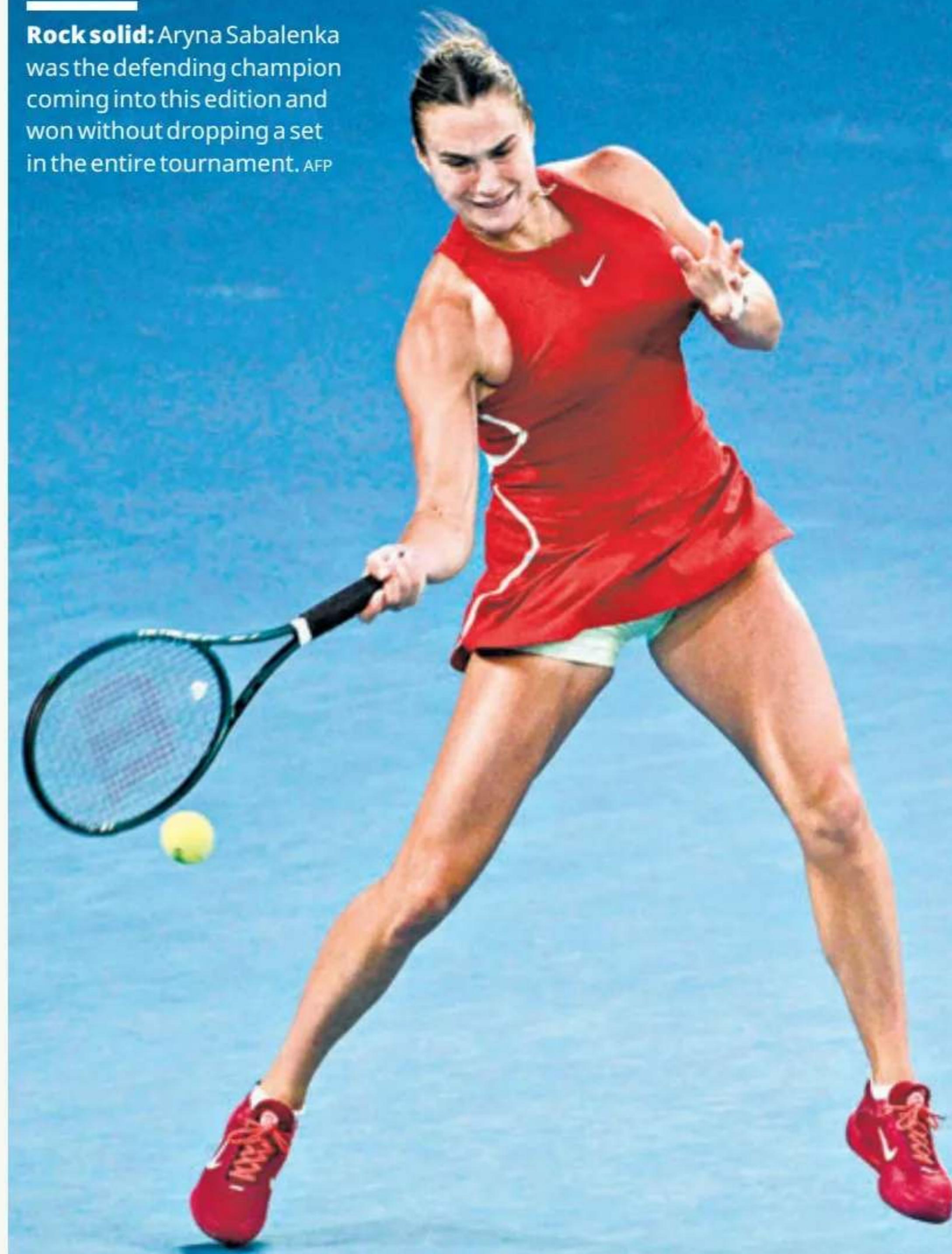
A year ago in Melbourne, Aryna finally exorcised the demons that had plagued her in extremely close, high-stakes matches to win her first Grand Slam crown, overcoming Elena Rybakina 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 in a ferocious, power-hitting final.

Still, doubts persisted about her newfound mental toughness. "Pressure is a privilege," as tennis legend Billie Jean King famously said, but Sabalenka, who turned 25 last May, succumbed to the P word at the next three majors in 2023. Karolina Muchova, a hyper-athletic Czech ranked a misleading No. 43, upset her 7-6, 6-7, 7-5 in the French Open semifinals. Then, at Wimbledon, Tunisian trickster Ons Jabeur bamboozled her with a disruptive blend of power and touch shots, 6-7, 6-4, 6-3, in another disappointing semifinal.

Two months later in New York, Sabalenka overwhelmed five opponents before coming back to outlast red-hot Madison Keys 0-6, 7-6, 7-6. "She broke the curse of the US Open semifinals," ESPN analyst Mary Joe Fernandez said, referring to the heartbreaking three-set losses Aryna suffered against heavy underdog Leylah Fernandez in 2021 and Swiatek a year earlier.

The 2023 US Open final demonstrated once again how cruel tennis can treat players — especially

Rock solid: Aryna Sabalenka was the defending champion coming into this edition and won without dropping a set in the entire tournament. AFP



the stars. Teen phenom Coco Gauff, buoyed by the fervent Flushing Meadows crowd, absorbed and defused Aryna's power and added topspin for forehand consistency to upset the increasingly error-prone Sabalenka 2-6, 6-3, 6-2 for her first major title.

Nothing motivates a tennis player more than revenge. "I'll follow that son-of-a-b*#@#h to the ends of the earth," Jimmy Connors memorably vowed after Bjorn Borg humiliated him in the 1978 Wimbledon final.

Sabalenka had a score to settle with rising star Gauff in the 2024 Australian Open semifinals. After pummeling No. 9 seeded Barbora

Krejcikova 6-2, 6-3 in the quarterfinals, Aryna said, "I love it. After [the] US Open, I really wanted that revenge. It's always great battles against Coco, with really great fights. I'm happy to play her, and I'm super-excited to play that semifinal match."

Before their eagerly anticipated rematch, former No. 1 Lindsay Davenport, now a *Tennis Channel* analyst, voiced what many wondered: "[At] the last three majors, Sabalenka has really melted down. Does Sabalenka have the mental game to hang in there?"

The 5'11" Belarussian, brimming with confidence, started with an ace

and held serve easily, as she raced to a 5-2 lead. The momentum abruptly switched as Gauff, the game's best defender, used her speed to surge ahead 6-5 after staving off a set point when serving at 4-5. But the American couldn't close the deal, and three forehand errors set the stage for a tiebreaker that would prove critical.

Blasting a backhand winner for a quick mini-break and a 1-0 lead, Sabalenka extended that to 4-0. Controlling her power as well as her emotions, Sabalenka played a superb tiebreaker to prevail 7-2.

Highly animated but much less agitated this season, the new Aryna relentlessly attacked Gauff's second serve. At 4-all in the second set, Gauff saved a break point with a backhand winner only to get broken two points later when her backhand sailed long.

Sabalenka reached match point at 5-4, 40-30, but Gauff boldly struck a forehand down-the-line winner to escape — temporarily. Aryna took the next two points with an ace and Coco's backhand serve return error for a 7-6 (2), 6-4 triumph.

After exacting sweet revenge, Sabalenka smiled and blew kisses to the Rod Laver Arena crowd.

She became the first to reach consecutive finals at Melbourne Park since Serena Williams in 2015-17.

Pointing to her winning 14 of 17 points on Gauff's second serve, Davenport called it "an A-plus performance. All-time great Martina Navratilova said, "She managed her emotions really well."

Gauff, who failed in her last bid to win a major as a teenager, looked at the bright side. "A lot of positives to take. I didn't feel like I played bad. I just felt there were certain points that I just didn't win. So, it's tough with the result, but I'm trying to look at the positives."

The Floridian had plenty of positives to be proud of. Not only did she become the youngest woman to make the AO quarterfinals since Agnieszka Radwanska in 2008 without dropping a set, but she became the first teenager to make back-to-back semifinals at a major

Steely run: Despite not facing a top-50 opponent en route to the final, the 21-year-old Zheng Quiwen dropped three sets, the toughest battle coming against 94th-ranked Wang Yafan. AFP



since 2007 and the first teenager to win 10 straight major matches since Serena.

Winning Ugly — the title of her coach Brad Gilbert's best-selling book — Gauff survived a rollercoaster 7-6(6), 6-7(3), 6-2 battle against unseeded, world No. 37 Marta Kostyuk, the versatile and volatile Ukrainian. After the 3-hour, 8-minute marathon that set a record for her longest Grand Slam match, Coco said, "Didn't play my best tennis, but really proud that I was able to get through. Problem-solving is tennis. Today was frustrating because I knew how I needed to play, I just couldn't execute. Eventually I was able to find it, which is what I'm proud of. Mentally, I'm one of the strongest out there, and I try my best to reset after each point."

In the top half of the draw, major upsets decimated the top seeds. No. 1 Iga Swiatek, who has trouble against power players, rallied from a 4-1 third-set deficit to edge 2021 AO runner-up Danielle Collins 6-3, 4-6, 6-4, but Linda Noskova, a 19-year-old Czech, ousted the speedy Pole 3-6, 6-3, 6-4.

In a lesser surprise, (except for the score), the precocious 16-year-old Russian, Mirra Andreeva, used her superior strokes to trounce No. 6 and three-time major finalist, Jabeur, 6-0, 6-2. "Andreeva is on her way to becoming a superstar," predicted Davenport.

Maria Timofeeva, a 20-year-old qualifier from Russia known as a great fighter, proved it by stunning 2018 Aussie titlist Caroline Wozniacki 1-6, 6-4, 6-1 and 10th-seeded



ARYNA'S HIGH-PERCENTAGE POWER TENNIS REPEATEDLY ELICITED ERRORS FROM ZHENG, PARTICULARLY HIGH-BOUNCING, WIDE SERVES

Beatrice Haddad-Maia 7-6 (7), 6-3. In the most dramatic first-week upset, Anna Blinkova, yet another Russian, outlasted No. 3 seed and 2022 Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina 6-4, 4-6, 7-6 (20). The fluctuating tiebreaker — in which Blinkova fended off six match points before prevailing on her 10th match point — prompted *ESPN* analyst Pam Shriver to say, "You don't see 16 match points, maybe once in a lifetime."

After the longest singles match tiebreaker in men's or women's tennis history, Blinkova wrote, "Never give up" on the courtside camera. Then she went down on her knees and cried.

The carnage opened up the draw for the highest seed left, No. 12 Zheng Qinwen. Despite not facing a

top-50 opponent en route to the final, the 21-year-old Chinese dropped three sets, the toughest battle coming against Wang Yafan,

Belarussian took the opening set 6-3. No longer could opponents count on double faults, once her bête noire. Sabalenka committed just 10 in her first six matches, and she was even stingier in the final with none.

Instead, it was Zheng who double faulted three times to start the second set, the last on break point to give Sabalenka, a great frontrunner, a 1-0 lead. Aryna produced the most dazzling shot of the match at 30-all when she returned a second serve with power, spin, and accuracy for a severely angled crosscourt winner.

Zheng fought gamely with positive body language despite the match slipping away. When she overhit a forehand serve return to increase Sabalenka's advantage to 3-1, the crowd moaned.

Throughout the final, the Belarussian's high-percentage power tennis repeatedly elicited errors from Zheng, particularly high-bouncing, wide serves.

With new balls, the wind at her back, and a 5-2 lead, Sabalenka served for her second Grand Slam title. Could Zheng somehow stop her foe's seemingly irresistible offense?

The Chinese stepped up her aggression and had a break point at 30-40. Sabalenka squelched that with a 116-mph ace, coaxed a forehand error, and finished it off with a forehand crosscourt winner.

In a low-key victory celebration, she raised her arms and blew kisses to the cheering crowd. Then she scurried to hug her team, tapping her easy-going fitness trainer Jason Stacy on his bald head. It was all good fun as Sabalenka slapped and autographed the bald dome before matches and even stretched her legs by kicking objects off it.

During her speech to the crowd, she evoked memories of Li Na's funny remarks about her husband Dennis when she thanked her team and then wisecracked, "Without me, you wouldn't be as good as well."

Summing up Aryna's 6-3, 6-2 masterclass, Mary Joe Fernandez said, "There are no holes in Sabalenka's game. This is as dominant a performance as you'll see in a Grand Slam final."

her 94th-ranked compatriot, 6-4, 2-6, 7-6 (8). Conversely, Dayana Yastremska, Zheng's semifinal opponent, knocked out three seeds — No. 7 and reigning Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova 6-1, 6-2, No. 27 Emma Navarro 6-2, 2-6, 6-1, and No. 18, two-time AO champion Victoria Azarenka 7-6 (6), 6-4. Thus, she became the first qualifier to advance to the AO semis since 1976.

But nine matches had taken a mental and physical toll on the hard-hitting, but inconsistent Ukrainian. Zheng finally ended Yastremska's Cinderella story 6-4, 6-4 with 33 winners and 11 aces.

In the final, both the players indulged in 'first-strike' power tennis, though Sabalenka did it better as Zheng found out when Sabalenka whipped her 6-1, 6-4 in the 2023 US Open quarterfinals, winning 16 of the first 19 points. With a potent serve that smacked a tournament-high 48 aces, a strong forehand, and superior court coverage that can turn defense into offense, Zheng had a puncher's chance.

That small chance never materialised as a supremely confident Sabalenka, much like at the US Open four months earlier, streaked to a 3-0 lead. Zheng's best chance for a service break came when she led 0-40 on Sabalenka serve in the third game. But the Chinese lost her nerve and played tentatively, allowing Sabalenka to seize five straight points, highlighted by a backhand winner at 30-40. The



» BADMINTON
INDIA OPEN

THE SHOW GOES ON

Despite a tough loss in the India Open final, Satwik-Chirag remain focused in their pursuit of Olympic glory.

Jonathan Selvaraj

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Chirag Shetty wouldn't have liked what he did with the final shot of the India Open badminton tournament. At the end of a flat, fast and furious rally, he whipped a backhand return into the barrier. As soon as the fault occurred, he crumpled to the floor in disappointment. He lay

there for a while before getting up and, along with partner Satwik Rankireddy, sportingly congratulated the winners of the men's doubles tournament — Min Hyuk Kang & Seung Jae Seo, who had won 15-21 21-11 21-18.

It was a disappointing outcome for the capacity crowd at New Delhi's KD Jadhav stadium. While the rest of the Indian challenge had ended in the semifinals — following HS Prannoy's loss to Shi Yuqi in the men's singles — the final saw the stadium filled to the brim.

Everyone was excited at the prospect of witnessing the Indian pair repeat their title run of the 2022 edition, which, due to COVID restrictions, was played in front of empty stands. They cheered even when the Indians trailed 6-11 in the



MAKING THREE CONSECUTIVE FINALS AT THE MOST ELITE LEVELS (WORLD TOUR 750 AND HIGHER) IS SOMETHING UNPRECEDENTED IN INDIAN BADMINTON



Strong show: For over five tournaments in nearly two years, Satwik-Chirag had not lost a final. Their recent defeats have put a major dent to their reputation as finals specialists, even though they have come against the very best — World champions Kang and Seo (below) and former World No. 1, Liang Weikeng and Wang Chang from China.

PICS: SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

decider and egged them on during each point as they inched closer to the Koreans.

Although the Indians had their chances in the final game — they had closed the gap to just one point at 15-16 and 18-19 — the Koreans held their nerve. At the end of the final point, there was a pall of disappointment across the stadium.



The Korean pair — who are the reigning world champions — had snapped a three-match losing streak against the Indians, including one in the Malaysia Open semifinals a week before this match.

For over five tournaments in nearly two years, Satwik-Chirag had not lost a final. But the India Open defeat is now their third consecutive loss in finals — the previous two being the China Masters last November and the Malaysia Open. It's a major dent to their reputation as finals specialists.

Although they would have been hurting after the loss, Chirag and Satwik would acknowledge that their disappointment was naturally relative. Making three consecutive finals at the most elite levels (World Tour 750 and higher) is something

Close enough: In the India Open final, the Indians had their chances in the final game—they had closed the gap to just one point at 15-16 and 18-19—but the Koreans held their nerve.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

unprecedented in Indian badminton. Also, their defeats have come against the very best—World champions Kang & Seo and former World No. 1, Liang Wei keng & Wang Chang from China.

In the earlier stages of the India Open, the Indian duo secured what was likely one of their sweetest victories in recent times—against Denmark's Kim Astrup & Anders Rasmussen. The 21-7, 21-10 triumph over the 2023 Worlds silver medallist ended a two-match losing streak for the Indians and erased memories of a painful upset in the quarterfinals of the 2023 World Championships.



'IF WE HAD FIVE PER CENT MORE CONTROL IN OUR SHOTS, WE WOULD HAVE BEEN FAVOURITES TO WIN. WE PLAYED THREE FINALS AND WE LOST ALL OF THEM CLOSELY' – SATWIK

And now, following the Chinese pair's loss in the quarterfinals, the World No. 1 crown has been passed to the Indians once again.

Knowing Shetty and Rankireddy, it's a statistic that won't flatter them too much though. After the match, Rankireddy would reiterate what he had told *Sportstar* ahead of the start of the season—that while winning feels good, sometimes it's the losses that hold more significance in the pursuit of a larger goal.

For the Indian pair, that remains the Paris Olympics, coming up in six months. Losses like the one in Delhi and also the previous ones in Kuala Lumpur and Shenzhen allows Satwik-Chirag to work on aspects of their game that may have been previously left unresolved.

"Sometimes I feel losing is better than winning. We may have lost a few tournaments but (what that means is that) when the situation demands, we can rise to the occasion. There were a lot of moments when we could have changed the result (at the India Open), especially when it was 16-17 in the third game of the final."

"If we had five per cent more control in our shots, we would have been favourites to win. We played three finals and we lost all of them closely. All of them went to three games. We lost the final game 21-19 in China and then 21-18 (in Delhi). We could have kept calm in those crucial situations. We need to hang

in there. I think we need to have the courage to take those decisions in those situations," Satwik said.

There were also tactical issues to improve upon. "I think we were a little too aggressive in the final. We used our defense well in the quarters and semifinals. But in the final we were focussing more on just attacking. We should have used the court a bit better," Satwik would say later.

If anything the losses have only whet their appetite for bigger things. "Losing is better because it will give us a lot of motivation. Personally I am happy we lost in front of a home crowd because it gives a lot of motivation to make them happy



seeing us winning a big title."

"There are some good things in our performance. We aren't just playing well one week and then resting during the next one. We wanted to hit the podium. We are still hungry. We aren't satisfied. We are more hungry for the next few days," he says.

Those hunger pangs will have ample time to become more intense. After the India Open, Satwik & Chirag have opted to take a break from competing.

They skipped the Indonesia Masters and Thailand Masters that took place during the last week of January and first week of February.

Apart from the Olympics, there

are a few big ones. There's the Asian Team Championships starting February 13, the French Open and All England in March and then the Asian Championships and Thomas Cup in April.

Make no mistake the two Indians will be pulling out all the stops to make it count at these major competitions. "Mentally we are there.

We didn't give up easily. We have that hunger. Physically we can be much better. We are going to keep our head down and work towards converting this loss into a win in the next tournament," Shetty would say.

Although they did not get the result they wanted in New Delhi, the final chapter of Satwik-Chirag's season is yet to be written.

While winning is good, sometimes it's the losses that hold more significance in the pursuit of a larger goal



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



ROHAN BOPANNA PROVING SOME THINGS GET BETTER WITH AGE

Novak Djokovic, winner of 24 tennis Majors, asked Bopanna to play doubles with him, which is possibly the **ultimate tribute** to a largely unsung player.

This column has to start with a salute to Rohan Bopanna for winning the Men's Doubles Trophy at the Australian Open and attaining the No. 1 ranking. To do this at the age of 43 is remarkable and once again emphasises that age is just in the mind, and if an individual makes the effort to stay fit and on top of his game as far as preparation, effort, and subsequent recovery protocols are taken care of, then success can be attained at any age. A couple of years earlier, we had seen the super legend Sharath Kamal win the Commonwealth gold medal in table tennis at the age of 40, which once again tells you that anything is possible with hard work and self-belief.

In badminton, look at H.S. Prannoy. Though he is falling just short of the gold medal and winner's trophy, he is putting younger players to shame. For the winner of 24 tennis Majors, Novak Djokovic, to ask Bopanna if he could play doubles with him is possibly the ultimate tribute to a player who has been largely unsung but has been delivering regularly at the Majors. Well done, Rohan, and more power to your elbow.

India's defeat in the first Test [against England in Hyderabad] was a rude eye-opener, and if there's an honest analysis, they will find

that the batters are to blame. On a second-day pitch, instead of cashing in after getting their eye in, they went for the big shots and threw their wickets away. If they had gotten 550, they would have shut the door on England. Some of the shots were just baffling, as they found the lone fielder placed on the boundary precisely for that mishit. Then, when Ollie Pope played one of the finest century innings seen in India, there was a listlessness about the fielding, and it appeared as if the players were going through the motions waiting for something to happen. R. Ashwin continuing to bowl around the wicket when there were follow-through footmarks outside the off-stump created by Mark Wood bowling around the wicket to the two left-handers, Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel, was also hard to understand. It seems like a negative mindset with the intention of not giving away runs rather than taking wickets. Look at Nathan Lyon, who keeps picking up lots of wickets and bowling over the wicket on the hard pitches of Australia, where there's not much turn on offer. Even with a lead of 190, more men were saving the boundaries than in catching positions. During England's last visit to India three years ago, India lost the first Test but managed to make a comeback by winning



Age is just a number: The 43-year-old Indian, the oldest men's doubles number one, also became the oldest major men's doubles winner at the Australian Open. REUTERS

the next three Tests comfortably. Hopefully, this team will pick themselves up and give their fans plenty of reasons to celebrate.

India certainly didn't help their cause by playing a T20 series with Afghanistan before a marquee Test series like this one against England. Even if bilateral commitments had to be adhered to, those playing in the Tests should have played a Ranji Trophy game or two, for suddenly changing the mindset from a frenetic format to another less rushed one can take

time. The bat speed and the desperation to play a 'get out of jail' shot can and do manifest themselves, as we saw with the dismissals in the first innings. Playing in the Ranji would have given the batters some good practice against domestic Indian spinners.

Sadly, tactical schedule planning is absent, and unless there's a concerted effort to do so, India will keep ending up as the bridesmaid but never the bride, as we have seen over the last few years.



If an individual makes the effort to stay fit and on top of his game as far as preparation, effort, and subsequent recovery protocols are taken care of, then success can be attained at any age.



A historic victory for the Windies

1

The triumph was inspired by **Shamar Joseph's** seven-wicket haul in the second innings

West Indies cricket rose like a phoenix from its ashes with a historic eight-run win against Australia at the Gabba in Brisbane to record its first Test win Down Under since 1997.

The triumph was inspired by Shamar Joseph's seven-wicket haul in the second innings as the Aussies stumbled in the 216-run chase and fell to their first defeat in a pink-ball Test.

Joseph, just one Test match old, exhibited grit and resilience in bowling almost 12 overs on the trot at high pace with an injured toe and deservedly became an overnight sensation.



2

South Africa beat Australia for the first time in women's international cricket when the Laura Wolvaardt-led side trumped Alyssa Healy's team by four wickets in the second T20 International. Before this match, the Aussies were unbeaten in eight T20Is and 15 One-Day Internationals (one tie) against the South Africans. Wolvaardt (**with Chloe Tryon in pic**) shepherded the 143-run chase with an unbeaten 53-ball 58 and had the support of fellow opener Tazmin Brits, who scored a brisk 28-ball 41 in the 75-run opening partnership.

GETTY IMAGES



3

Hyderabad opener Tanmay Agarwal hammered the fastest First-Class triple-hundred, off 147 deliveries, against Arunachal Pradesh during a Ranji Trophy Plate Group match and went past the record of South Africa's Marco Marais, who had scored 300 off 191 balls for Border against Eastern Province in 2017. Agarwal also shattered former India all-rounder Ravi Shastri's 39-year-old record for the fastest First-Class double-hundred by an Indian after reaching the 200-run mark in 119 balls. It was also the second-fastest First-Class double-century ever.

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4

The International Cricket Council (ICC) has lifted its ban on Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) with immediate effect. SLC was suspended in November last year as it was deemed to be in breach of its obligation, which requires an ICC member to ensure the non-interference of the government in the administration of cricket in the country. In November, then Sports Minister Roshan Ranasinghe sacked the incumbent Shammi Silva administration and appointed an interim committee headed by former captain Arjuna Ranatunga. Silva was later reinstated, and Ranasinghe was fired by President Ranil Wickremesinghe. The suspension resulted in Sri Lanka losing the right to host the ongoing U-19 World Cup, which is now taking place in South Africa.

AFP



5

England's women cricketers will soon need to make a choice between playing for the country or featuring in the Women's Premier League. The final of the WPL is slated for March 17, and England is due to begin its five-match T20I series in New Zealand from March 19. The ECB has reportedly told its players that if they choose to remain in India for the closing stages of the league, they will not be considered for selection for the first three T20Is. England captain Heather Knight and Lauren Bell have already pulled out of the WPL, with Royal Challengers Bangalore and UP Warriorz naming Nadine de Klerk and Chamari Athapaththu, respectively, as their replacements.

AP

» HYDERABAD TEST PHOTOLINE
INDIA-ENGLAND



1st

Spinning a web: India's spinners took eight wickets as England was bowled out for 246 on Day 1. R. Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja took three each. K.V.S. GIRI



2nd

Taking the attack:
Yashasvi Jaiswal got off to a great start, scoring 80 runs off 74 balls to give India an advantage in the first innings. K.V.S. GIRI



FOR MORE
IMAGES



3rd

All smiles: Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel stitched together a crucial 78-run partnership for the eighth wicket, allowing India to secure a 196-run lead. K.V.S. GIRI



4th

Swept of the feet: Ollie Pope played the reverse sweep and sweep shots with gay abandon. His 278-ball 196 helped England post an imposing 231-run target. K.V.S. GIRI



5th

Pulling a rabbit out of his hat: Ben Stokes runs Ravindra Jadeja out on Day 4 to dent India's hopes of going 1-0 up in the five-match Test series. AP



6th

On cloud nine: Tom Hartley celebrates the wicket of Mohammed Siraj, his seventh of the innings, which sealed the 28-run victory for England. GETTY IMAGES



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Rohit Sharma's 150!

5 } The number of cricketers to appear in 150 or more matches in T20 internationals. India's Rohit Sharma became the latest to do so in Indore in the T20I match against Afghanistan on 14 January 2024. However, Rohit is the first male cricketer to achieve this distinction. Before him, four other female cricketers have reached this landmark in international cricket. India's captain, Harmanpreet Kaur, is the first to achieve this coveted landmark.

Players with 150+ T20 international appearances

Total Matches	Player	For	Achieved on	Venue	Against	Result
161	Harmanpreet Kaur	India-Women	20 Feb 2023	Pt. Elizabeth	Ireland	Won
152	Suzie Bates	New Zealand-Women	3 Dec 2023	Dunedin	Pakistan	Lost
151	Danni Wyatt	England-Women	6 Dec 2023	Mumbai WS	India	Won
151	Rohit Sharma	India-Men	14 Jan 2024	Indore	Afghanistan	Won
150	Alyssa Healy	Australia-Women	9 Jan 2024	Navi Mumbai	India	Won

First to reach the following landmarks in men's T20 international cricket

Match	Player	For	Achieved on	Venue	Against	Result
50th	Shahid Afridi	Pakistan	3 June 2012	Hambantota	Sri Lanka	Won
100th	Shoaib Malik	Pakistan	2 July 2018	Harare	Australia	Lost
150th	Rohit Sharma	India	14 Jan 2022	Indore	Afghanistan	Won

First to reach 150 matches in each of the international formats in men's cricket

Format	Player	For	Achieved on	Venue	Against	Result
In ODIs	Allan Border	Australia	8 Feb 1987	Melbourne	England	Lost
In Tests	Allan Border	Australia	3 Dec 1993	Perth	New Zealand	Lost
In T20Is	Rohit Sharma	India	14 Jan 2024	Indore	Afghanistan	Won

90 } The number of sixes hit by Rohit Sharma as captain in T20 internationals. These sixes are now the most hit by a T20I captain. Rohit went past the previous record of 86 sixes by England's Eoin Morgan during his record fifth career century in this format, against Afghanistan in Bangalore on 17 January 2024, while scoring 121 with eight sixes!

Batter to hit 50 or more sixes while captaining a T20I side

6s	Captain (For)	Mts	Inns	Runs	Balls	Balls/six	six/inns
90	Rohit Sharma (Ind)	54	54	1648	1108	12.31	1.66
86	Eoin Morgan (Eng)	72	65	1469	1047	12.17	1.32
82	Aaron Finch (Aus)	76	76	2236	1626	19.82	1.08
59	Virat Kohli (Ind)	50	46	1570	1117	18.93	1.28
53	Asghar Afghan (Afg)	52	48	1020	863	16.28	1.19
53	Kane Williamson (NZ)	71	71	2125	1719	32.43	0.74

Note: Only players from Test playing nations are considered



India's captain Rohit Sharma. K. MURALIKUMAR

30} The number of players who have the distinction of achieving the double of 2000 or more runs and 200 or more wickets during their T20 career. This list has 12 Asians, including two Indians. In the second T20I match against Afghanistan in Indore on 14 January 2024, Axar Patel emulated his India team-mate Ravindra Jadeja by becoming the latest to join this list.

Indians with 2000-plus runs and 200-plus wickets in T20 cricket

Player	Mts	Inns	Runs	Ave.	S/R	Wkts	Ave.	Eco
Ravindra Jadeja	310	222	3382	25.42	129.33	216	29.87	7.57
Axr Patel	234	168	2545	22.52	134.65	200	27.95	6.97

Note: The other 10 Asian players to achieve this double are Pakistanis Azhar Mahmood, Imad Wasim, Mohd Hafeez, Shahdab Khan, Shahid Afridi, Sohail Tanvir; Afghanistan's Mohd Nabi and Rashid Khan; Sri Lankan Thisara Perera and Bangladeshi Shakib Al Hasan

16} The number of innings Yashasvi Jaiswal needed to aggregate 500 runs of his T20I career during his brief innings of four runs in the final match of the series against Afghanistan in Bengaluru on 17 January 2024. Among Indian players, only K. L. Rahul needed fewer innings to reach his 500th run in this format. However, Jaiswal, at 22y-20d, is the youngest of the 17 Indian players who have aggregated 500 or more runs in T20Is.

Quickest to reach 500 T20I runs in fewest innings for India

Inns	Mts	Batter	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	100/50	HS
13	15	K. L. Rahul	18 Mar 2018	500	45.45	1/3	110*
16	18	Virat Kohli	22 Dec 2012	522	37.29	0/4	78*
16	16	Ishan Kishan	26 Jun 2022	521	34.73	0/4	89
16	17	Yashasvi Jaiswal	17 Jan 2024	502	33.47	1/4	100



India's Yashasvi Jaiswal. R. V. MOORTHY

3} The number of bowlers with the dubious distinction of conceding maximum runs in a single over in a T20 international match. Afghanistan's pacer Karim Janat became one of the unfortunate bowlers in this format to concede 36 runs during the final over of India's innings in Bengaluru on 17 January 2024.

Bowlers conceding maximum runs (36) in a single over in a T20I match

Bowler (For)	Runs off the over	Batter (for)	Venue	Date	Over#	M Inns	Result
Stuart Broad (Eng)	6 6 6 6 6 (36)	Yuvraj Singh (Ind)	Durban	19 Sep 2007	19th	1	W
Akila Dananjaya (SL)	6 6 6 6 6 (36)	Kieron Pollard (WI)	Coolidge	3 Mar 2021	6th	2	W
Karim Janat (Afg)	4 nb 6 1 (18)	{Rohit Sharma (Ind)	Bengaluru	17 Jan 2024	20th	1	W
	6 6 6 (18)	{Rinku Singh (Ind)					

5} The number of occasions Team India has been involved in a tied T20I match. On four of these occasions, the Indian side has been successful in the tie-breaker event that usually follows the tied game. However, the Super Over against New Zealand in Napier did not occur on 22 November 2022 because of rain. The Bengaluru T20I match was the first in international cricket, which saw two Super Overs after the first tie-break also ended in a tie.

Tied T20I matches involving India

Team1	Team2	Venue	Date	Tie-break result
India (141/9)	Pakistan (141/7)	Durban	14 Sep 2007	India won the Bowl-out
India (179/5)	New Zealand (179/6)	Hamilton	29 Jan 2020	India won the Super Over
India (165/8)	New Zealand (165/7)	Wellington	31 Jan 2020	India won the Super Over
New Zealand (160/10+)	India (75/4#)	Napier	22 Nov 2022	No Super Over was taken
India (212/4)	Afghanistan (212/6)	Bengaluru	17 Jan 2024	India won 2nd Super Over after the 1st was tied

+ in 19.4 overs, # in 9 overs in Napier

** For Afghanistan, it was its second involvement in a Super Over in T20Is, with both unfortunately unsuccessful. Its first also came in India — in Greater Noida on 10 March, 2020, against Ireland, when the latter won the Super Over (a.k.a one-over eliminator)

** The tied matches in Hamilton and Wellington came back-to-back

All records are correct and updated until 27 January 2024

» PHOTOLINE
INDIA-AFGHANISTAN T20Is



Beginnings: Rohit Sharma and Ibrahim Zadran led in India and Afghanistan's first ever T20I bilateral series. R.V. MOORTHY



2nd

Solid at the top: Indian opener Yashasvi Jaiswal hit six sixes and five fours en-route to his match winning 68 off 34 balls in the second T20I in Indore. R.V. MOORTHY



3rd

Right in the middle: Mohammad Nabi was the fulcrum of Afghanistan's middle-order throughout the series, scoring 90 runs at a strike rate of 147.54. R.V. MOORTHY



ALL-ROUNDER SHIVAM DUBE WAS THE PLAYER OF THE SERIES FOR SCORING MOST RUNS, 124, AND PICKING TWO WICKETS.

R. V. MOORTHY

5th

Flying high: Virat Kohli saved a six in a match that eventually went into two Super Overs before India won in Bengaluru. PTI



6th

Reinventing: Rohit Sharma became the first batter to score five T20I hundreds when he hit an unbeaten 121 in the third game in Bengaluru.

K. MURALIKUMAR

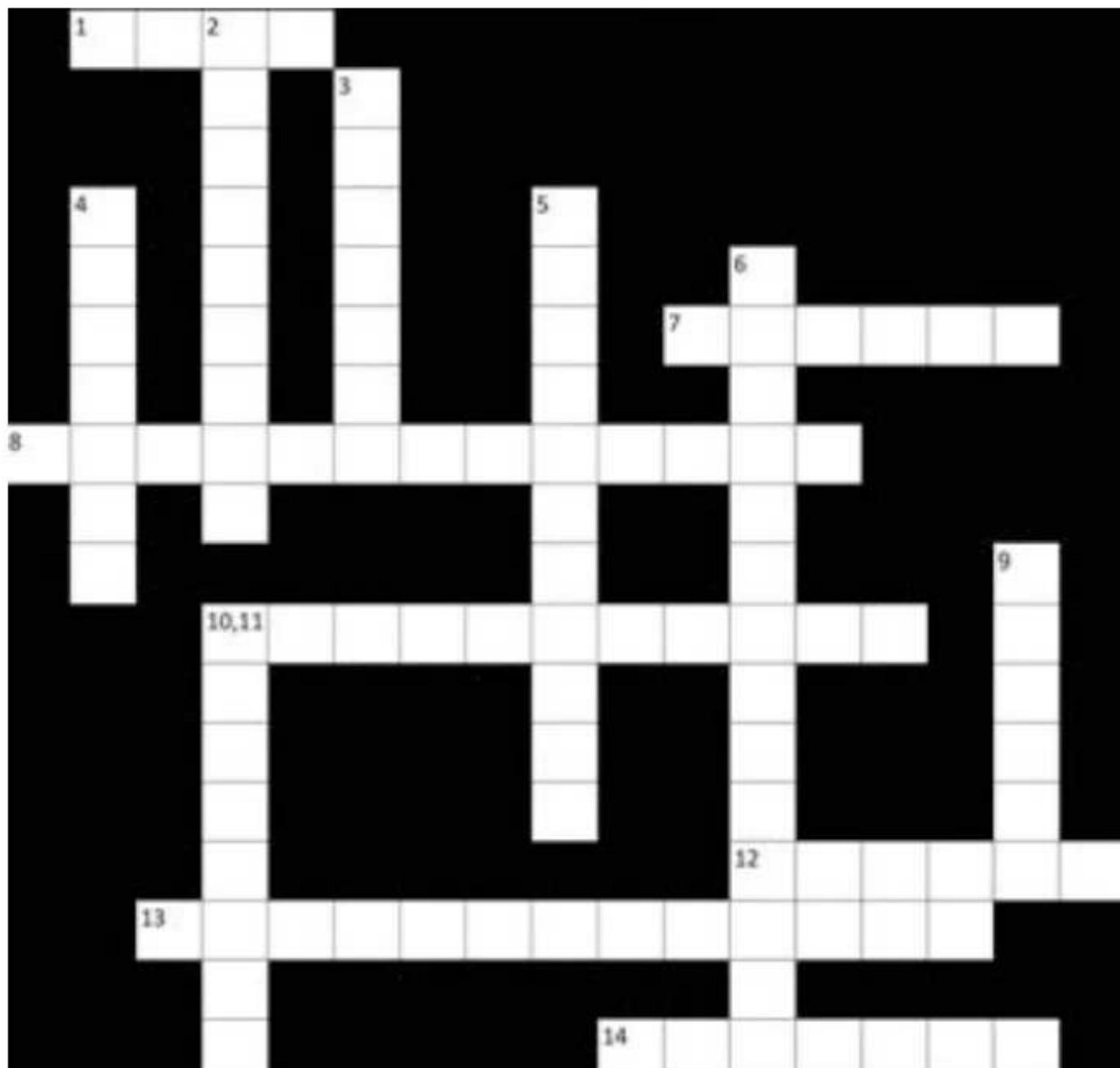


7th

Superman stuff: Gulbadin Naib scored 112 runs in just two outings while striking at over 193 with the help of eight sixes — joint-highest with Rohit Sharma — in the series. R.V. MOORTHY

» CROSSWORD

KARAN PILLAI



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1** The first sport played on the moon. (4)
- 7** This French city is famous for its 24-hour motor race. (2,6)
- 8** In which sport do participants perform the ritual of throwing salt on the floor before a match? (4,9)
- 11** *Open* is the autobiography of this tennis player. (5,6)
- 12** Novak Djokovic is allergic to (6)
- 13** This sports legend played himself in a movie that featured cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. (13)

14 The birthday of all racehorses in the Northern Hemisphere falls on the first of this month. (7)

DOWN

- 2** Which football team's victory is also known as the 'Miracle of Istanbul'? (9)
- 3** The highest possible break in this sport consists of 147 points. (7)
- 4** Besides lawn tennis, which other sport is associated with the All England Club? (7)
- 5** Player with the most ODI double hundreds. (5,6)
- 6** In the Australian Open, Roger Federer saved seven match

points against this player whose first name rhymes with the sport he plays. (6,8)

9 Former Australian World Cup-winning captain Michael ... (6)

10 In sports, the Cruciate Ligament is the most injury-prone part of the knee. (8)

Spearheading the attack

Naveen-ul-Haq has quickly become a key member of the Afghanistan pace battery. EMMANUAL YOGINI



IT HAS BEEN A GREAT JOURNEY, AND I AM HUMBLED TO HAVE ACHIEVED WHATEVER I COULD THUS FAR. HOPEFULLY, I WILL BE ABLE TO WORK HARDER TO ACHIEVE MANY MORE THINGS FOR MY COUNTRY

» **INTERVIEW**

ODI World Cup performance altered Afghanistan's T20-centric reputation »

NAVEEN-UL-HAQ

Shayan Acharya

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It is a sunny Saturday afternoon at the Holkar Stadium in Indore, and Naveen-ul-Haq has just completed his training for the second T20I against India. The young Afghan fast bowler obliges a few fans with selfies and autographs before joining his teammates in a huddle. India, which had already clinched the series with a match to spare, won the third T20I

in Bengaluru after two thrilling Super Overs to effect a 3-0 clean sweep.

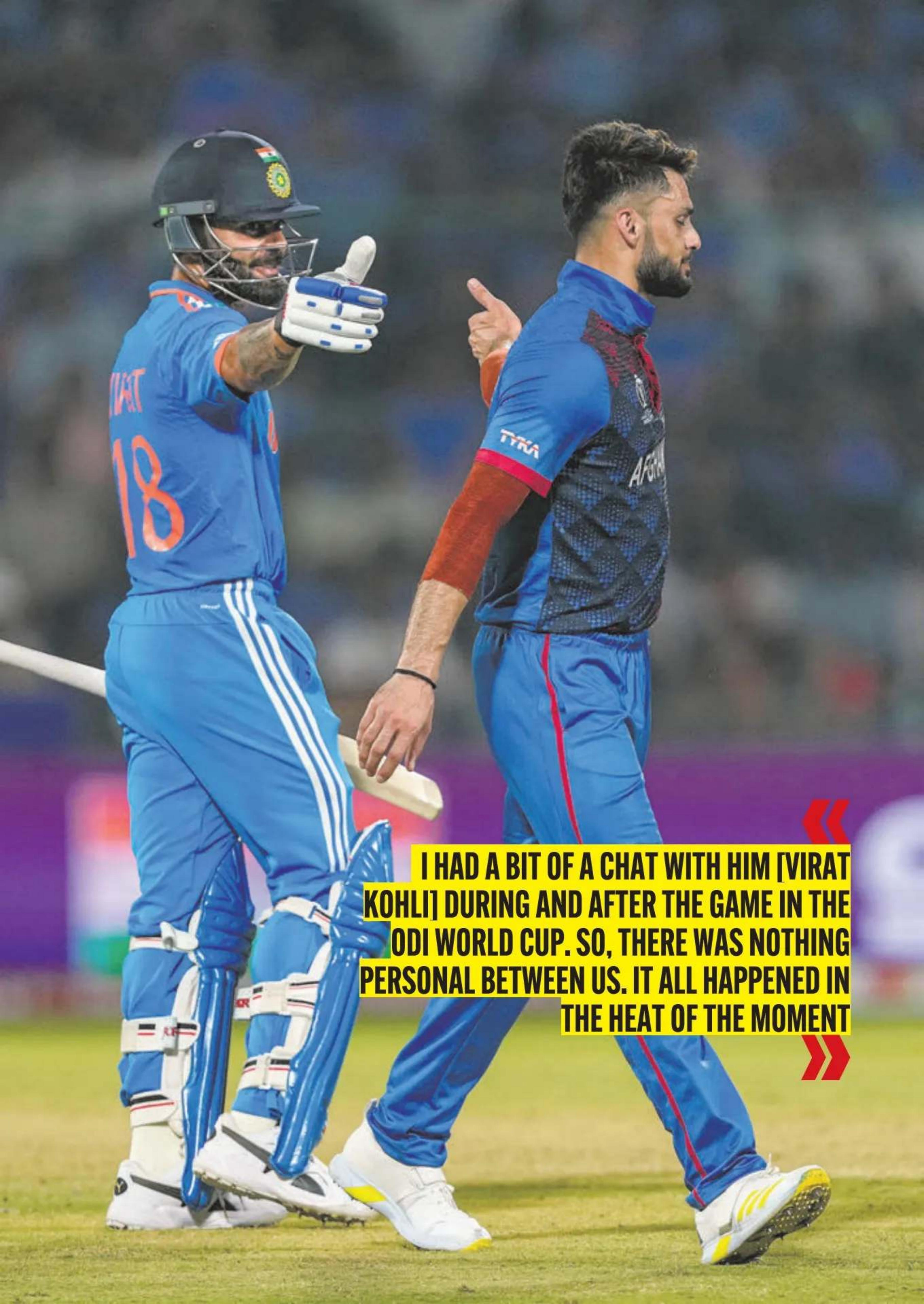
Naveen-ul-Haq could snap up just one wicket in two matches, but it has been a rewarding 12 months for him and Afghanistan, whose dazzling run in the 2023 ODI Cricket World Cup — where it beat former champions England, Pakistan and Sri Lanka — captivated fans.

Sportstar caught up with the

24-year-old right-arm medium pacer.

Could you share the journey from leading Afghanistan's U-19 team to becoming the pace spearhead of the senior side?

It has been a great journey, and I am humbled to have achieved whatever I could thus far. Hopefully, I will be able to work harder to achieve many more things for my country. The



I HAD A BIT OF A CHAT WITH HIM [VIRAT KOHLI] DURING AND AFTER THE GAME IN THE ODI WORLD CUP. SO, THERE WAS NOTHING PERSONAL BETWEEN US. IT ALL HAPPENED IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

Burying the hatchet: Virat Kohli and Naveen-ul-Haq exchanged handshakes during the latter stages of India's World Cup run chase against Afghanistan, putting the IPL fracas behind them. PTI

main aim is to work hard, be disciplined, and stay focused. In the past, these are the things that have worked for me. Apart from that, the support of my family and friends has been immense. They have been kind and contributed greatly to my journey.

Your decision to quit ODI cricket at the age of 24 surprised many. Was it a forced decision or a planned move?

(Smiles) Just before the ODI World Cup, I had a knee injury, and the decision to retire from the one-dayers was subject to that.

How do you motivate yourself to be part of Afghanistan's historic white-ball bilateral series against India, considering the six-year gap since making its Test debut against them in 2018?

The series is motivating for all players. It's historic. We hope to play India and other teams more often to gain confidence. This year's T20 World Cup [in the USA and the West Indies] is approaching [in June], so we hope to gain experience from this series that will help us during the tournament.

Afghanistan head coach Jonathan Trott has urged the cricket boards around the world to play more bilateral series against your side. What are your thoughts?

As mentioned by the coach, it has been a challenge for many teams, including Afghanistan, to find opponents to play against. Some major teams do not have space in their Future Tours Programme (FTP) to schedule matches against us. It is a commendable initiative by the BCCI and the Afghanistan Cricket Board to organise the first-ever bilateral series against India. Hopefully, this will be the start of many more series against

India and other big nations. Such opportunities would help us improve our performance at ICC events. It's a global game, and things should be equal for every full-member side. That's what many cricketing nations think, so I feel this is a new start for Afghanistan cricket, and after our performance in the ODI World Cup, many big teams will now be willing to play against us.

Would you say that the 2023 ODI World Cup took Afghanistan cricket ahead by a mile?

It was a historic World Cup in many ways. Since the 2015 World Cup, where we just had one victory against Scotland, we have not been able to win in any other editions. But in the 2023 edition of the tournament, we had four wins, and we narrowly missed out on the semifinal spot. It's a big step for Afghan cricket. Earlier, Afghanistan cricket was only known for its expertise in T20s, but this was quite a significant change for people to see during the ODI World Cup.

Ever since making your debut for Afghanistan, you have been known to wear your heart on your sleeve.

As a cricketer, it is an individual's choice whether to display emotions on the field. Every time I represent my country, club, or franchise, I put

my heart and soul into the game, and that commitment will remain with me until I retire. As a cricketer, you will inevitably experience ups and downs in your career, and it's important to accept and embrace these challenges and continue to enjoy the game.

Playing style is a personal choice, and everyone has their unique approach. I won't change my style of play, even if it appears different to those watching from the outside. It is not necessary to justify our actions to others.

As a young cricketer, how do you manage social media trolls and their impact on your game, especially considering the controversy with Virat Kohli during IPL 2023?

I don't have a problem with trolling and I don't see it as a negative thing. I have a friends and family group on WhatsApp where I share the memes I receive during the IPL. To me, these memes are just harmless jokes and don't bother me at all. They even motivated me to play well during the IPL and the World Cup.

But eventually, you and Kohli patched up...

(Laughs) Yes. I had a bit of a chat with him during and after the game in the ODI World Cup. So, there was nothing personal between us. It all happened in the heat of the moment.



Morale booster: Afghanistan players celebrate the dismissal of Englishman Mark Wood during the ICC World Cup in 2023. The Afghans were on a giant-killing spree in the tournament before being blown away by a Glenn Maxwell blitzkrieg.

R.V. MOORTHY

« I never liked studying. I used to bunk classes and you could find me playing kabaddi »

SACHIN TANWAR

Mayank

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The Indian kabaddi ecosystem is familiar with the exploits of Sachin Tanwar. The raider from Rajasthan has donned Patna Pirates colours for a few seasons now, and his consistency earned him a spot in India's successful campaigns at the Asian Kabaddi Championship in Busan and the Asian Games in Hangzhou.

A striking feature of Sachin's career so far has been his efficacy as his team's crisis man. While he often finds himself waging a lone battle, he had the company of his elder brother, Deepak Kumar, when he started out in the sport. Sachin, the younger of the two siblings, is a household name while Deepak's perseverance bore fruit with a Pro Kabaddi debut this season, in his brother's team no less.

Brothers in arms

Early on, however, Sachin's big break came at his brother's expense.

"In 2015, my brother was selected for the 2015 Junior Asian Championship. However, he suffered a ligament tear. Eventually, for reasons we don't know, the whole tournament was cancelled," Sachin tells Sportstar on the sidelines of PKL's 10 edition.

"Following this setback, our state coach reached out to my brother to check on his fitness. During their conversation, my brother recommended my name to fill in for him in the district and state

tournaments. The coach conducted a trial for me, and that marked the proper beginning of my journey in the sport. I owe whatever I have achieved to Deepak," he adds.

Sachin comes from a farming background and was introduced to kabaddi by his uncle, Rakesh Chauhan, a national player in his time.

His parents initially held reservations about their sons venturing into the world of sports. Their aspirations were firmly anchored on ensuring the boys studied well. Kabaddi didn't immediately captivate Sachin either.

"I was not very disciplined at the start. Kabhi mann kiya toh chala gya... warna nhi gaya (If ever I felt like going, I went; otherwise, I didn't go). I used to hide from my brother, who used to take me to the ground initially," he says sheepishly.

Watching Deepak keep at it rubbed off on Sachin too, who eventually found enjoyment in the sport. Then there was no turning back.

Fighting for India, one way or the other

"I never liked studying. I used to bunk

classes, and you could find me playing kabaddi," he adds.

Sachin never imagined himself as a professional kabaddi player, as his wish was to enlist in the Indian Armed Forces.

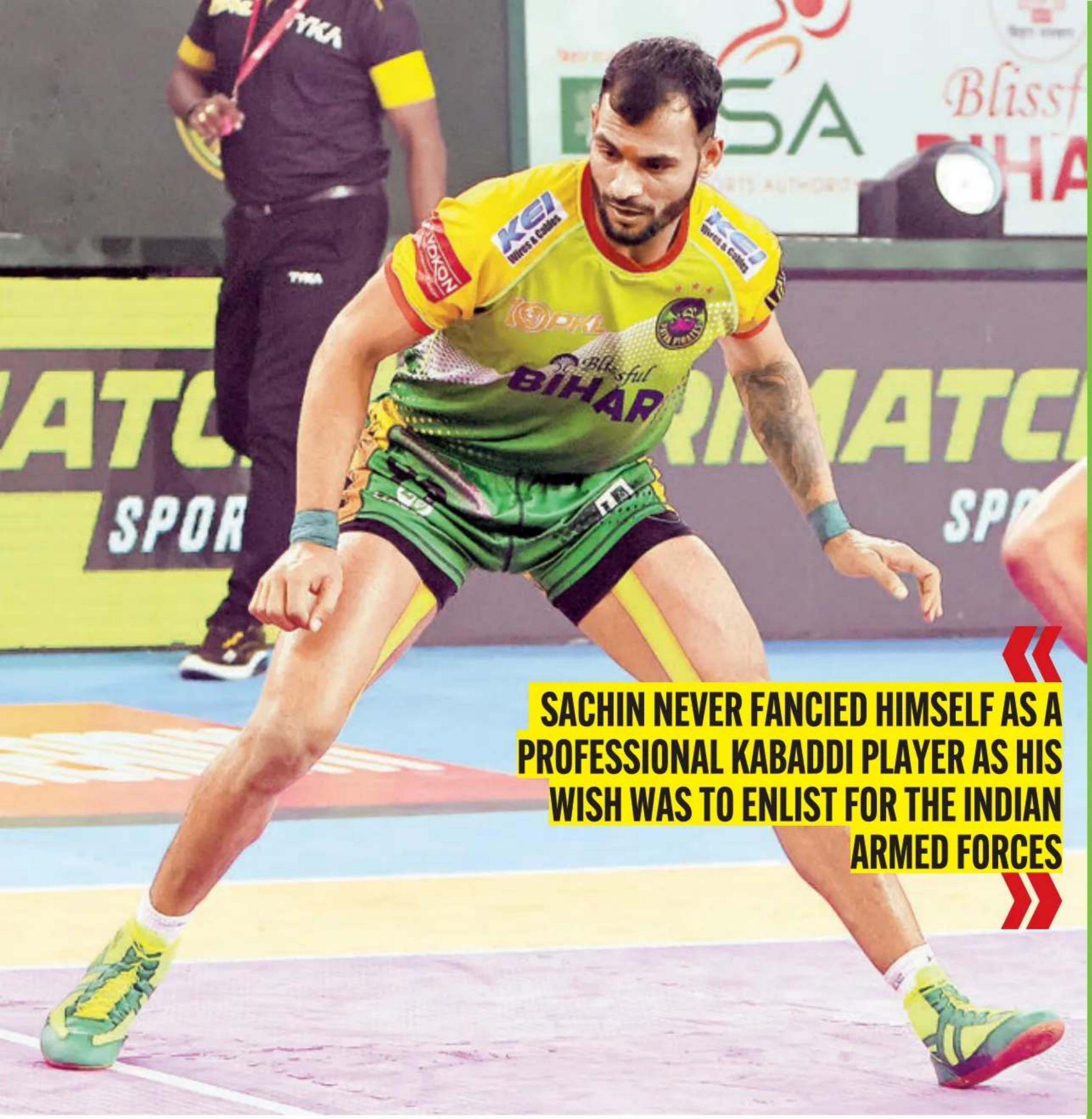
"Boys from middle-class families often harbour a single ambition: to join the Army and serve our country. We begin running and preparing for the physical tests; the craze for defence services in my hometown is there for all to see," he recollects.

Meanwhile, his kabaddi career was blossoming. At the age of 17, he earned a spot on the Rajasthan Under-19 team and played for the Junior Nationals in Madhya Pradesh, where his state finished third. He emerged as his team's top raider.

His success helped him break into the national side for the Junior Asian Championship in 2016. Sachin was also made captain for that campaign, held in Iran — another kabaddi hotbed — and came home with a gold medal, beating the host in the final.

Sachin's first taste of success at the senior level came the very next year, in the same country, when he was chosen for the senior side heading to

« My brother and I were, for a long time, the only kabaddi players from our village. That has changed now. I love going back home. So many people come up to me, they are either players or fans. Now 50-60 kids have taken up the game after seeing me on TV and what I do — Sachin Tanwar »



«
SACHIN NEVER FANCIED HIMSELF AS A
PROFESSIONAL KABADDI PLAYER AS HIS
WISH WAS TO ENLIST FOR THE INDIAN
ARMED FORCES
»

Gorgan for the Asian Kabaddi Championship. He rubbed shoulders with seasoned pros like Ajay Thakur, Rahul Chaudhari, Deepak Niwas Hooda, Nitin Tomar, and Surender Nada.

Pro Kabaddi comes calling

Despite two triumphant sojourns in Iran, Sachin missed out on a Pro Kabaddi spot in 2016 due to a technicality. While he had been signed by the Telugu Titans, he couldn't participate due to the New Young

Programme, which requires players to be at least 18 years of age or older.

"I was playing on a contract basis for ONGC under coach Manpreet Singh saab (who currently coaches the Haryana Steelers in PKL). We participated in numerous tournaments in Chennai and Kanyakumari. Manpreet paaji saw what I could do and assured me that he would pick me up at the auction," Sachin remembers.

Manpreet was then the coach of one of the new franchises in the PKL

Dependable: A striking feature of Sachin's career so far has been his efficacy in being his team's crisis man.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

— Gujarat Fortune Giants (now Gujarat Giants). He kept his word and secured Sachin for a sum of Rs. 36 lakh.

The teenager quickly got off the blocks to become Gujarat's poster boy ahead of more experienced players like Mahendra Singh Rajput and



Numbers don't lie: As of January 27, Sachin has 904 raid points to his name (956 overall), out of which 223 have come from do-or-die raids. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Sukesh Hegde.

This was around the same time that names like Pawan Sehrawat and Rohit Gulia were still fresh-faced talents taking their time to settle. Not Sachin, though. He wasted no time in accumulating 173 points in 24 games, playing a key role in the side making the final of that edition.

His performances sealed his retention for the next season, and Sachin came through once more, scoring 204 points (190 of those in raiding) and seeing the side through to its second consecutive summit clash. Gujarat lost both of those title bouts, but Sachin was the silver lining, scoring resilient Super 10s on both occasions.

The seventh season of PKL was underwhelming for the raider, who could accrue only 85 points.

Testing times

Eventually, he moved from Gujarat to Patna, and it was business as usual as he managed 183 points playing in a three-pronged raiding unit and played his third final in four seasons.

While much had changed for the man, his bad luck in finals continued as Patna finished second best to Dabang Delhi by the barest of margins — a solitary point.

"This has happened to me three times, where I've missed out on the trophy after getting so close," Sachin says.

While the 24-year-old has seen the euphoric highs of dominant campaigns, he has also dealt with the difficulties of poor collective form. Particularly in PKL 9, when Patna could not replicate its command on the mat from the previous edition and finished 10th in the standings.

Rain or shine, it didn't matter. Sachin's consistency endured, with the raider registering 179 points in the season.

It's not so much the hoard of points he has as how those points have come. As of January 27, Sachin has 904 raid points (956 overall), out of which 223 have come from do-or-die raids.

His effectiveness in these crunch raids, where the player has to come back with either a bonus or a touch, has set him apart from the more widely followed stars of the league.

"My life's very first raid in PKL was a do-or-die raid. I still remember that match against Dabang Delhi.

"I came back with points when I was sent early on for do-or-die raids, and success meant I got more opportunities. It has now become

something I am associated with," Sachin explains.

Becoming Sachin

Sachin's unassuming nature means that the celebrity status that often gets accorded to his peers slips past him. It doesn't bother the Patna raider. For him, the raucous welcome he gets when he heads home is the biggest ego boost of all.

"My brother and I were, for a long time, the only kabaddi players from our village. That has changed now. I love going back home. So many people come up to me; they are either players or fans. Now 50–60 kids have taken up the game after seeing me on TV and what I do.

"So I spend time sharing what I know with them. During the off-season, when I am home, I practise with them, and that motivates them a lot," Sachin says.

An Asian Games gold, national recognition, and a formidable record in the best league in the sport — life's not too shabby for Sachin.

However, bringing back a PKL champion's medal and cheque to parents who worried about the comforts a life in sports could give him would be a great way to let life come full circle.

Strategic three-movers

By C.G.S.Narayanan

"Variation play is most fundamental chess problem effect of all and is most satisfying when it is logically necessary" wrote Robin Matthews, one of the finest composers of strategic three-movers of modern era. Self-block has been used in variation play extensively as a strategic form of black defence in problems of different kinds. In the problem below by the great Russian composer for study, the three main lines are sufficiently curious and interesting. After the **key 1.Qa3!** The quiet threat is 2.Qf3 followed by double threat 3.Nd7/Qf4

Lev Loshinski

I prize Kubbel Mem.Ty 1945-46



Mate in three moves

The defence 1...Nxf6 leads to 2.Qb4 Nxe4 3.Bd4 mate, a white interference. After 1...Bf5 the battery opens differently 2.Be3! Kxf6 followed by 3.e5 mate. Again white interference is caused by the self block on f5. There is a third of the same kind in the extended field of black king in the variation 1...g5 2.Bd6 Kxf6 3.Be5.

The White queen is used cleverly to guard d6 and e7 during the play including the line following the BK flight. 1...Kxf6 2.cxd8Q Rxd8 3.Be7. A brilliant combination of battery play and white interference.

Leonid Zagoruyko
2 PI.USSR Championship 1953



Mate in three moves

In the second problem above two white line pieces guard e5. While threat closes one the black defence closes the other.

Key 1.Bf7! Try 2.Nh5 threatens 3.Ng7 2Re3/Be3 3.Qf4/Ng3 but refuted by 1...Bh6! The true threat is 2.Qf6+ Kg4 3.Bh5 After 1...Re3 2.Nh5 (3.Qf4) 2...R~ 3.Ng7/Ng3 accordingly and 2...Rxe5+ 3.Rxe5. If 1...Be3 2.Ne2 (2.Ng3) 2...B~ 3.Qf4/Nxd4 accordingly. The e3 Grimshaw is complete. If 1...Ne3 2.Nxh3 (2.Qf4) 2...N~ 3.Qe4 and 2...Ng4!?(self-block) 3.Qxh7.

Finally a quaternary black correction
For solving.

Robin Matthews
I prize, Observer 1964



Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Tries and white correction':

1.Nf7?(2.Qe5/Qxf4) Qc3! 1.Nc4?
Bb8! (2.Qc4?) **Key 1.Nc6!**
(2.Qe5/Qxf4) 1...Bb8/Qxf5
2.Rd4/Bd5

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

« We are pushing to improve on India's Tokyo Olympics performance. We are looking forward to the journey »

CRAIG FULTON

K. Keerthivasan

keerthivasan.k@thehindu.co.in

Since assuming the role of India's head coach in April 2023, Craig Fulton has significantly elevated expectations for the men's hockey team. Under his guidance, the national side has evolved into a cohesive unit, characterised by a robust defensive structure and a swift and efficient forward line.

In a short period of four months, the 49-year-old South African successfully guided India to a gold medal in the Asian Champions Trophy in Chennai in August. The side then secured another gold at the Hangzhou Asian Games, simultaneously earning a coveted spot at the Paris Olympics.

However, the Paris preparations commenced on a challenging note, highlighted by the team's performance in the 5 Nations tournament in Valencia last December.

It concluded with a solitary 5-4 victory over France. Germany, Spain, and Belgium were the other participants.

The men's senior team subsequently began a 15-day training programme in Cape Town on January 14. During this period, the team worked to improve its skills and participated in friendlies against South Africa (3-0), France (4-0 and 2-2), and the Netherlands (1-5).

Acknowledging the high

expectations following India's historic bronze in the Tokyo Olympics, Fulton remains optimistic about the team's prospects in Paris.

Can you begin by offering insights into the training approach of the Indian team?

It's a very complex question. Everything is geared towards peaking at the right time at the Paris Olympics. And making use of all competitions and blocks of training to do that. The Pro League will be there in February 2024 in India. Then, we have a training camp in South Africa. There will be lots of training in March and April. We again start at the end of May-June with the FIH Pro League.

What was your experience as an assistant coach for Belgium, winner of the 2018 Men's World Cup?

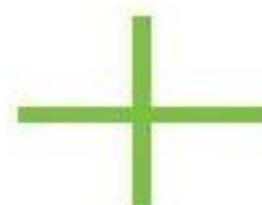
Belgium is very good. It was a great experience, and I gained a lot of

good friends along the way and learned a few good lessons, too. I suppose it is a more professional league that leads to the national programme. Working with top players and coaches, including Belgium's head coach, Shane McLeod, was great. Shane is a very tactical coach. He has a different approach. And with my own experience and by mixing it up, the results were great. Being part of the winning team was the cherry on top.

What were your takeaways from Belgium's club system, particularly its administration and culture?

Belgium has a national league that attracts the top coaches and top international players, which is always good as it brings different cultures to the DNA of hockey in the country. Lots of players with different cultures bring different ideas.

The National Programme is a highly professional initiative, and the Belgian league is notably strong,



I will get some of the younger players from India to play in the European League. That will be a positive step. I am looking to identify core players who can go to Europe.



Revvving up momentum: Craig Fulton, coach of the Indian men's hockey team, has achieved his first major task: win the Asian Games and qualify for the Olympics. Now all eyes turn to Paris! M. VEDHAN

though I cannot comment on other leagues.

If you would like to incorporate anything from Belgium hockey in India, what would it be?

I will get some of the younger players from India to play in the European League. That will be a positive step.

I am looking to identify core players who can go to Europe. But it hasn't been discussed. It will be a good step forward to develop young players and get a faster learning curve for different tactics and styles of play.

What was your most memorable experience as a coach?

Ireland was special. It was nice to come back to the Olympics (Ireland qualified for the Quadrennial Games in 2016; the previous time it played in the Olympics was in 1908, when it lost in the final to Great Britain), put a plan in place, and qualify. We did it well.

In the 2016 Rio Olympics, we lost a close match to India and missed a chance to advance to the quarterfinals. And qualifying for the World Cup, we haven't done it for decades [Ireland qualified for the World Cup in 2018 after last making the grade in 1990]. The improvements and learnings from the Rio Olympics to the World Cup qualification were great. And to get across to Belgium, and then within three months, Belgium won the World Cup (2018) in India. That was a very good validation. From there on,

it was really enjoyable. Commuting was a big thing. I lived in Ireland and worked in Belgium. But on the hockey field, the friendship we forged was special.

You have travelled to various countries. What has been your basic approach to coaching?

I have worked in South Africa and Ireland, where communication was not an issue since everyone spoke English. However, when I worked in Belgium, things were different as they had two languages: Flemish and French, neither of which I was proficient in. When I came to India, I had to deal with a wide variety of languages, which was a new experience for me. It is more about creating trust first. Once you have the trust, it's about how much you care for the programme, what you are trying to achieve with the players, and what environment you



Historic feat: India beat Germany 5-4 in Tokyo to win an Olympic medal in men's hockey after 41 years.

GETTYIMAGES

are trying to create. You can be honest in that space and drive standards and performance levels. It then becomes easier to communicate, regardless of the language.

In one of Sportstar's in-house discussions with India captain Harmanpreet Singh, former India skipper V. Baskaran had said that captains should have a say in selection matters. Your thoughts? No. The captain doesn't have much say. It's not like cricket. It is different. But at the same time, all the leaders' opinions are important. It is not fair to place the final selection on the captain. The coaching staff will do that. The captain will then lead the leadership group and implement the plans.

Describe your dynamic with players: Are you more of a strict disciplinarian or a laid-back individual?

We have a good balance. They work hard and play. It is a good, honest

group. At the same time, there is time for fun and time to be serious. They are enjoying it. They also want to get better.

What do you do to deal with the demanding nature of the sport? I've been in a team environment for a long time. As an individual pursuit, I play golf as a hobby, as it helps me switch off. It takes me away [from the pressure] for a longer time.

You and your wife, Natalie, have played hockey for South Africa. In the 2004 Olympics, you two became the first married couple to represent South Africa at the same Olympic Games. How is it to have a wife who is a hockey player? Nats (Natalie) is a very competitive player in her own right. It's nice to have her opinion. She tells us when we play well and when we don't play well.

That's great. I would not have been able to do what I am doing without Nats because she has to look after the house and the children. There's a lot that goes into it. I am away from home a lot. That's an agreement we have made for the period. It's not going to last forever. It is good to have a partner who

knows the sport. She realises what goes into work.

What are your thoughts on teams losing badly to top teams at the Senior National Championships in Chennai? Does the format need a tweak?

We can do with a better format. Now, it's a little bit frustrating for weaker teams to play and lose badly to the top teams. The talent is good. I think some teams are more prepared than others.

That's the discrepancy. If we split them and get strength on strength, it will be a different competition. We are discussing it, and if the coaches agree with it, I think we can set it up.

The core group of the Indian men's team is already formed. How much of the existing talent can be part of the core group?

The exciting talent here can be considered. There are a handful of good talents who can go for the selection trials. That would be a realistic way of doing it. Of course, there will be no change in the core group.

What do you like about the new talent you saw in Chennai?



Trump card: Captain Harmanpreet Singh, seen here competing at the Senior National Championship in Chennai, is the most important player for India going into the 2024 Paris Olympics. R. RAGU

Their natural ability, ball skills, and speed are good. The rest of it can be done through practice.

Young players locked horns with the Indian players after a five-year gap at the Senior Nationals. How important is it for the youngsters?

Aspiring players should observe how national players conduct themselves and maintain their fitness levels. It's crucial to set a higher standard for domestic players.

Additionally, it's beneficial for young players to have the opportunity to compete against international players so that they can assess their performance and identify areas for improvement.

What can the Indian team expect from the Paris Olympics?

We've got a good programme. Eighty per cent of it is complete. We are just not looking at doing anything different. It's what we have been doing well and consistently that will tell.

We have to follow the process properly. How we peak in June and July will be the key.

What are the areas of concern for the national team?

It's sometimes how a nation can build expectations that can put unnecessary pressure on a group and expect too much too soon. We have done well. We need to get everyone to get behind us. It is also about the post-Paris Olympics. There needs to be continuous planning. There is the World Cup in 2026. Some players who won't play in Paris will feature in the next cycle. So, there is a continuous treadmill of planning.

Since the onset of foreign coaches, there has been a change in the fitness levels of players over the years.

It's just what I said. Doing things consistently is what we have been doing. Our conditioning is massive, and so is the mental side of things. We have a good support staff. It's the basics of how our game is set up. Conditioning is massive. So is the mental side of things. Alan Tan is the strength and conditioning coach. Paddy Upton does mental conditioning. I do that as well. Rhett

Halkett, assistant coach, is heavily involved with tactics. Shiv (Shivendra Singh) is involved with the strikers. They are top-class staff. We rely heavily on them. It is just about the consistency of small improvements over a long period.

With the Olympics just around the corner, has the pressure cranked up a little?

I don't think there is more pressure than there was when I took charge in April 2023. I had three competitions for the Indian team to qualify for the Olympics. That is done. There is no real pressure, only expectations of what lies ahead. That is controllable in the way we approach our training and competition.

What legacy would you like to leave in India?

Indians are proud of their team across disciplines. It's been a great experience with cricket and how it can inspire the nation. We would like to do that as well.

When we come together, special things happen. We want to do it on a bigger stage. It is not easy. We are pushing to improve on India's performance at the Tokyo Olympics (bronze). We are looking forward to the journey.



FAILURE TO QUALIFY FOR PARIS POSES PLENTY OF QUESTIONS

The Savita Punia-led side could **only finish fourth** in the eight-team event where the top three were guaranteed a spot for Paris 2024.

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Indian women's hockey team's hopes of qualifying for a third straight edition of the Olympics were dashed in front of the home crowd in the FIH Hockey Olympic Qualifiers, held from January 13-19 in Ranchi.

The Savita Punia-led side could only finish fourth in the eight-team event, where the top three were guaranteed a spot for Paris 2024.

India entered the tournament without three experienced players — Deep Grace Ekka (defender), Sushila Chanu (midfielder) and Vandana Katariya (forward).

While Sushila, India's captain at Rio Olympics, and Vandana missed out on making the squad due to injuries, Deep's absence was mysterious. When asked in the pre-tournament press conference, coach Janneke Schopman could only say, "Only Deep can tell why she is not here."

Still, factors such as playing at the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh AstroTurf Stadium, the same venue where it won the Asian Champions Trophy in November last year, and being the second-highest ranked side behind Germany in the tournament were expected to give enough confidence to the side to finish in the top three. The stars had aligned.

However, it wasn't to be.

The host got off to a disastrous start as it lost 1-0 to USA in its Group



THE CAMPAIGN IS A CRUSHING BLOW AFTER THE HIGH OF THE FOURTH-PLACE FINISH AT TOKYO OLYMPICS AND LEAVES PLENTY OF QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED

B opener. The players started nervously, made basic errors and conceded an early goal. Despite earning seven penalty corners, India could not find the equaliser.

From there on, Schopman's team had to treat almost every match as a virtual final and it played like that.

In a must-win second Group B match against New Zealand, India took the lead inside 40 seconds with Salima Tete setting up the goal for fellow local player Sangita Kumari. While the Black Sticks did level the score, India kept its foot on the pedal and took a 3-1 lead as the first quarter finished. The team never relinquished that advantage and brought its campaign back on track.

With USA beating New Zealand 1-0 to clinch the top spot in Group B, India only needed a draw against Italy to finish second and progress to the semifinals. Just like the previous encounter, the women in blue made a blistering start as Urita converted a penalty in the opening minute. The

Painful exit: Playing the same venue where it won the Asian Champions Trophy last year and being the second-highest ranked side behind Germany were expected to give enough confidence to the Indian side to finish in the top three. However, it wasn't to be. PTI

host eventually wrapped up a convincing 5-1 win.

From Group A, Germany and Japan finished first and second, respectively, ahead of Chile and Czechia.

the 15th minute to put India ahead. However, lapses in concentration from the Indian defence not only allowed Charlotte Stappenhorst to equalise 12 minutes later but also give Germany the lead with three minutes remaining.

Ishika Chaudhary brought India back in the game after deflecting a rebound off India's third penalty in the 59th minute and the host team managed to take the game to a penalty shootout, giving itself another shot at victory.

Valentin Altenburg's side came back from 1-2 down to win 4-3 in sudden death in the shootout with Lisa Notle nutmegging Savita to take Germany over the line. While not as dramatic as this, USA too had come from behind to defeat Japan 2-1 in the first semifinal.

The bronze medal match between India and Japan was also set to decide who would join China, the Asian Games gold medallist, in Paris as the only other Asian team.

The after-effects of that devastating loss to Germany was felt as India turned up in less than 24 hours for its do-or-die game against

Search for the answers: The campaign, led by captain Savita Punia (left) and Janneke Schopman (right), is a crushing blow after the high of the fourth-place finish at Tokyo Olympics three years ago and leaves plenty of questions to be answered. PTI





Japan and failed to start on the right note.

Japan had lost its last three matches against India but on January 19, when it mattered, it played a tactically solid game — using the aerial balls to break the Indian press and forcing the opponents to go for inconsequential runs on the flank.

Kana Urata scored the all-important goal in the sixth minute and then, the Japanese defence, despite conceding nine penalties, stood like a wall. Coached by former Indian goalkeeper Jude Menezes, Japan eventually shut the door to the Olympics for India.

The campaign is a crushing blow after the high of the fourth-place finish at Tokyo Olympics three years ago and leaves plenty of questions to be answered.

What does the future hold for coach Schopman now? Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey told *Sportstar* that the federation has no major

concerns about the 46-year-old Dutchwoman but will look at the plans and talk to everyone concerned.

Where is India's next batch of drag flickers and players it can rely on when it comes to converting penalties in clutch situations? While the likes of Deepika and Urita did impress, whether they can succeed experienced players such as Gurjit Kaur and Katariya remains to be seen.

Is it time for the players to get some exposure from playing league hockey abroad? The likes of Dhanraj Pillay and Tirkey have done it. Playing

The road ahead: While the likes of Deepika (55) and Urita did impress, whether they can succeed experienced players such as Gurjit Kaur and Katariya remains to be seen. PTI

as an overseas player in such tournaments brings another level of pressure and expectations that can be useful at the international level.

The new Olympic cycle for India starts with the FIH Pro League matches in February and the preparation for Los Angeles 2028 needs to start as quickly as possible.

« Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey told *Sportstar* that the federation has no major concerns about Schopman »

» MATCH OF THE
FORTNIGHT

Sorry state of affairs: Goncalo Guedes (left) of Villarreal scores his team's third goal against Barcelona, whose chances of defending its La Liga title look increasingly bleak this season. GETTYIMAGES



FAIL OF THE GIANT

Barcelona's season took another **devastating hit** with a humbling loss at home against Villarreal.

BARCELONA

3

Gundogan 60'
Pedri 68'
Bailly(og) 71'

VILLARREAL

5

G. Moreno 41'
Akhomach 54'
Guedes 84'
Sorloth 90+9'
Morales 90+12'

The era of inexperienced managers taking over the reign at their former clubs found its latest casualty with Xavi Hernandez announcing his departure from FC Barcelona at the end of the season. The club's chances of defending its La Liga title look increasingly bleak, tottering at third position in La Liga, 10 points behind Real Madrid, and having also exited the Supercopa de Espana and the Copa del Rey in a matter of weeks.

The rut continued as the team succumbed to a 3-5 home loss to Villarreal at the Lluís Companys Olympic Stadium on January 27, enduring **its third loss in five matches**.

It was Barcelona that came closest to opening the scoring in the first quarter, with Villarreal needing Fillip Jorgensen to be at full stretch to palm Joao Felix's deflected shot over the bar.

Gerard Moreno thought he had given the Yellow Submarine the lead in the 22nd minute, but his goal was ruled offside after his strike

partner Alexander Sorloth was adjudged to have interfered with play by blocking Ronald Araujo.

The pair wasn't going to be denied the next time, though. Sorloth's pass from the left wing following a throw-in found Moreno, who rifled a first-time shot into the net.

A mistake from substitute Joao Cancelo gifted the visitor its second, with former La Masia player Ilias Akhomach putting the chance away.

Barca clawed its way back into the contest with two goals in eight minutes — a couple of accurate finishes from inside the box from midfielders Ilkay Gundogan and Pedri.

The comeback seemed complete when Eric Bailly bundled in a freekick into his net in the 71st minute.

But Goncalo Guedes brought Villarreal back level, putting the finishing touch on a swift counterattack in the 84th minute. Barca was ultimately undone after a rush of blood from Araujo in the ninth minute of stoppage time — gifting the ball to Etienne Capoue inside the penalty box — helped Sorloth complete a tap-in and put his team ahead. Jose Luis Morales added a fifth in the 102nd minute following another counter, settling the result.

» FROM THE WORLD OF FOOTBALL

AFP

1



2

Super Bowl debut for Messi

Global football icon Lionel Messi will make his Super Bowl debut, headlining a Michelob Ultra — an alcoholic beverage brand — commercial. The Inter Miami star will anchor a 60-second advertisement that will air at the Super Bowl on February 11, 2024, in Las Vegas. The ad will show Messi playing beach football with a dog and ordering a Michelob Ultra beer at a bar.

Klopp to step down

After nine eventful, trophy-filled years, Jurgen Klopp will step down as Liverpool manager at the end of the ongoing season.

Klopp, who took over the reins of the Premier League side in October 2015, led the Reds to their first league win in 30 years, in 2020. In 2019, the German manager guided Liverpool to the UEFA Champions League title.

"It is that I am running out of energy. I know that I cannot do the job again and again and again and again," said Klopp.

Liverpool is currently atop the Premier League points table.

3



GETTY IMAGES

Haaland to return soon

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola revealed that his star striker, Erling Haaland, is close to making a comeback from a prolonged injury break.

"He is on the verge of returning. Training camp was good; we trained some sessions, and the last two days here he trained, but he's not perfect, and we wait a little bit more," said Guardiola.

Haaland has missed City's last 10 competitive fixtures following a foot injury. City has coped well with the loss of its primary goal threat, winning the FIFA Club World Cup and progressing in the FA Cup during the period.

Osimhen to part ways with Napoli

The Nigerian striker will part ways with Napoli at the end of the 2023-24 season, according to the Italian club's president and owner, Aurelio De Laurentiis.

"We know he's either going to Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain, or an English club," added De Laurentiis. Osimhen joined Napoli from Lille in 2020 and has scored 67 goals in 119 appearances in all competitions. The 25-year-old striker powered the side to its first Serie A title in 30 years last season with a league-high 26 goals.



AFP

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5

FIFA dismisses Rubiales's appeal

FIFA's Appeal Committee dismissed an appeal by Luis Rubiales, the former head of the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF), to retract a three-year ban imposed on him.

Rubiales was banned from all football-related activities on October 30 after kissing player Jenni Hermoso on the lips, allegedly without consent, following Spain's Women's World Cup final win over England in August.

FIFA said it had taken the decision after a hearing. But Rubiales still has the option to appeal before the Court of Arbitration for Sport.



AFP

6

Real Madrid pips Manchester City as highest revenue-generating club

Real Madrid ended Manchester City's two-year-long reign as the highest revenue-generating club in the world, as per the Deloitte Football Money League. Real Madrid, which last reached the top spot in the 2017-18 season, generated a total revenue of 831 million euros, followed by City (826 million euros) and Paris St Germain (802 million euros).

Fellow Spanish giant Barcelona is fourth in the tally, while Premier League side Manchester United is fifth.

Anish Pathiyil & Pranay Rajiv



FOR MORE
STORIES



Missing the target: India failed to score against Australia, Uzbekistan and Syria, crashing out of the Asian Cup with zero points. AP

» ASIAN CUP

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

India's pointless run at the Asian Cup ends with three losses and no goals, **raising concerns** about coach Igor Stimac's leadership and the team's future.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

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India entered the AFC Asian Cup 2023 with the hope of achieving an underdog success story.

Two weeks later, it exited the tournament with three losses in as many games, zero goals, and zero points, as coach Igor Stimac rummaged for excuses.

The Blue Tigers started their campaign with a 0-2 loss to Australia, the only match it showed serious

spine — stifling the Socceroos in the first half and almost scoring from a Sunil Chhetri header.

But Jackson Irvine's goal pushed them back into a defensive mindset, and a slip-up in that department had Jordan Bos score his first international goal to double the lead.

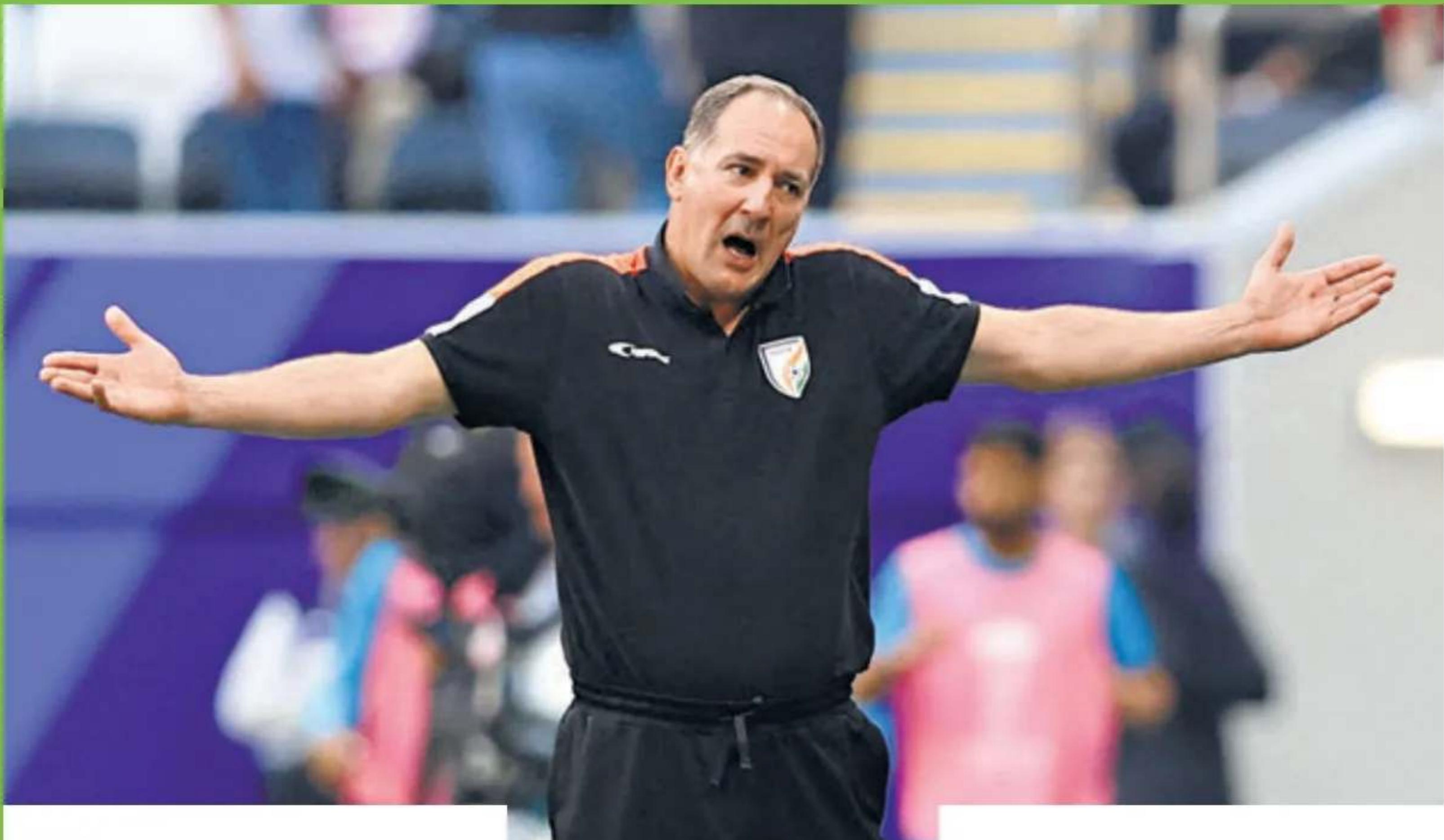
During its game against Uzbekistan, India looked like a bunch of schoolboys on tour for the first 20 minutes, which ultimately cost them the game. By half-time, Srejko Katanec's team had scored three

goals, almost guaranteeing India's disqualification from the tournament.

Hector Cuper, who had taken Egypt to the FIFA World Cup after 28 years, put the final nail in the coffin

Withering challenge: After nearly five years under Stimac, India's rank has fallen another spot — after rising to 99th for a month — to 102 in the last rankings and is expected to fall further after the AFC Asian Cup. AP





with his current side, Syria. Omar Khrbin scored in the 76th minute to beat India and march into the knockouts.

That, pretty much, was India's show — a pointless tour which ranks second from bottom in its all-time performances in the tournament. **Only the 2011 edition was worse for India, where it let in six more goals than in 2024 in the same country.**

Shortly after the tournament, Bob Houghton, the then-head coach of India, tendered his resignation.

Stimac, on the other hand, was handed a two-year contract extension before the tournament and awaits an extension of two years if his boys qualify for the third round of the FIFA World Cup qualifiers.

Outplayed in tactics and quality

In three games, India had six shots on target and allowed the opponents 18, an average of six shots on target per game. It not only showed its lack of clinical attack but also its porous defence.

It started its campaign without four injured first-team regulars: Ashique Kuruniyan (winger), Anwar Ali (centre-back), Jeakson Singh (defensive midfielder), and Sahal Abdul Samad (midfielder), with Sahal

Call for patience: "I don't have a magic sword. I'm a hardworking guy who is asking you to turn things around and be patient because good things in football do not happen overnight," Stimac said. REUTERS

only ready for the final game.

While this did weaken the team, it was here that the prowess of a coach should have come into play. "The structure of the game and tactics should not suffer from who acts as a performer," legendary coach Valery Lobanovsky once said.

Stimac remained the second-best coach in all matches his boys played, and that will be something the All India Football Federation (AIFF) will have to look into after this forgettable outing.

India looked especially outplayed along both flanks, where its first-team starters, Akash Mishra and Nikhil Poojary, were both fit and available. All of India's goals came with build-up through the wings, with three goals from either flank.

Trevor Sinclair, brought in as an assistant just before the tournament to strengthen the wings, both in attack and defence, added no cure to the penury.

Rahul Bheke, filling in for Anwar, could never step up as a ball-playing center-back — a role the latter thrived in, alongside Sandesh Jhingan.

In attack, Lallianzula Chhangte was the only impressive player with his ubiquitous presence on the field. When the team had possession, he would march up the pitch to assist the offence and would track back soon after losing possession.

Chhetri (right) has been one of the best servants of Indian football, with 93 goals to his name, but at 39, this Asian Cup might have been his last appearance in the competition. He looked rusty throughout the campaign, and India will have to look at his replacement sooner rather than later.

In the midfield, Deepak Tangri came of age, impressing in his senior team debut, but Lalengmawia Ralte's lack of experience at the competitive level allowed the opponents to win the ball outside the penalty box, which saw Syria capitalise the most in its final match.

Going around in circles

Stimac, a member of Croatia's first golden generation that finished third in the FIFA World Cup 1998, has been in charge of the national team for nearly five years now.

His predecessor, Stephen Constantine, had taken the team from 173rd to 97th in the FIFA rankings, helped it register a win in an AFC Asian Cup match — 4 against Thailand in 2019 — and won the SAFF Championship and the Intercontinental Cup.

All in a spell — his second in India — shorter than the Croat's. Stimac, after the Asian Cup's no-show, however, has repeatedly shifted goalposts instead of taking responsibility for the embarrassment in Doha.

Injuries, a decrease in quality depth, and a lack of football infrastructure in India were pointed out as reasons for the team's poor performance. There were also instances when he openly criticised his players, throwing them under the bus. He also highlighted the shortage of proper centre-forwards and players of Indian origin not being allowed to play for the country.

"I'm not sure if there is any other country that is not allowing players of their origin to represent their country," he said. "It is a huge handicap because there are many good players of Indian

origin playing in Europe's top leagues."

On another occasion, he opined, "At the lower level, we're going to dominate games. But to have better efficiency at the AFC Asian Cup, we need complete players. We either have players who can pass the ball or cannot match the strength, or the opposite. Something is missing."

While his claims are true to an extent, what did Stimac expect while taking up the job of a side ranked outside the top 100 of the FIFA rankings? India was ranked 101 when he took up the job on April 4, 2019.

After nearly five years under him, India's rank has fallen another spot — while registering 99th for a month — to 102 in the last rankings and is expected to fall further after the AFC Asian Cup.

Malaysia, 130th in the world, made a group stage exit two days after India's last game. But when it played against South Korea, ranked 23rd, it pushed Jurgen Klinsmann's

side to the edge, leading the game 2-1 at a point in time before being held to a 3-3 draw.

Both Tajikistan, ranked four spots below India, and Thailand, ranked 11 spots below India, have qualified for the round of 16 of the Asian Cup 2023.

Irrespective of which opponent they play, Stimac's boys must remember that the scoreboard remains 0-0 at kick-off. But with the lack of ownership after failures, it will be tough for India to dream of bigger things in the future.

The Blue Tigers face Afghanistan in the second round of FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers in March.

With an expanded 48-team World Cup in 2026, making it to the third round will be an easier task than in previous editions, but Stimac has cautioned that he cannot promise anything beyond that.

"I don't have a magic sword. I'm a hardworking guy who is asking you to turn things around and be patient because good things in football do not happen overnight. In the next 12 months, I will take you to the third round of World Cup qualifiers. I promise that," he said.

"But after that, things need to speed up, with investments, foreign coaches in Indian football academies, and more serious competitions for age-group sides."

The Blue Tigers face Afghanistan in the second round of FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers in March.



AP

« I completely understand Igor Stimac. If I am the national team coach, I would like more time »

MANOLO MARQUEZ

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Four years ago, Hyderabad FC had set its course with Albert Roca as its head coach before the Spaniard got a call from FC Barcelona. The club then turned to another Spanish native, Manolo Marquez, who came in and changed the club's fortunes. In just his second season, he led the *Nizams* to the Indian Super League (ISL) title and into another playoff the following year, amid turmoil at the club.

The Catalan has since taken over the reins at FC Goa and is leading the charge for the club's return to the top of Indian football once again. *Sportstar* caught up with Marquez on the sidelines of the *Sportstar Goa Conclave* to talk about his time in Hyderabad, the future of Indian football, and more.

What do you make of the current situation at Hyderabad FC with the players and coaching staff leaving the club over lack of payments?

I am very sad about this situation. I had a very good relationship with the owner. We spoke a lot because of the bubble during the COVID-19 pandemic. My feeling is that they didn't value what went behind all the wins, so how will they know what they are losing?

The problem is that they don't have the correct people managing the club. We had the most incredible

group of players with an incredible atmosphere, which was the key to success. But the kind of problems they have now were there last season as well. We played all of last season without salaries. But that group was committed, and the guys were good; they played well, and we had a very nice season.

I always say that finishing second in the regular season and losing the semifinals of the playoffs on penalties [in 2022–23] was better and more difficult than when we were champions the previous season [2021–22]. I am very sad for the players and the staff because they went more than six months without salaries; I hope they can solve this situation as soon as possible. Because these people and the people of Hyderabad deserve a team in the ISL.

At the end of the third season at Hyderabad FC, you faced difficult circumstances and things ended on a sour note. After that, what prompted you to take up the job at FC Goa?

Out of the three seasons, I don't want to remember just the last months in Hyderabad and what happened in Kerala in the Super Cup. It was a complete disaster. They didn't pay the players and the staff, and we had to stay in two different hotels. It was a very bad way to finish three

wonderful seasons there.

But if you receive a call from FC Goa and you see the structure of the club, you know it's a real club. It has a developmental team, a youth team, an Under-15 team, and even one with the kids. I am very comfortable at this kind of club, where the facilities are very good. I would indeed like to have more Goan players on the main team. Let's see if we can do it in the future.

In the cricket panel, there was talk about how Goans like being laid back and enjoying their simple way of life. Is that culture prevalent among the talent in football?

I think every country is the same. Even in Spain, especially because of the weather, the people in the north are completely different from the people in the south. I worked in the Canary Islands, and it's sunny all year, similar to Goa. At Las Palmas, the players are very, very good with the ball, but when it comes to practical stuff, they go, 'Why do we have to do these exercises?'

Here, it's a little similar. The players are not used to or don't like working without the ball. Unfortunately, in football, you need to work on both aspects — with and without the ball. In places where the weather is very good, it's more difficult to work on these aspects. I



'IN THIS MOMENT, INDIA WON'T QUALIFY FOR THE NEXT WORLD CUP, EVEN WITH NINE SLOTS FOR THE NEXT EDITION. I WOULD LIKE TO BE WRONG ABOUT THIS'

Time to reflect: At the *Sportstar Goa Conclave*, Manolo Marquez, head coach of FC Goa, spoke about his time at the club and the future of Indian football SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

feel like I have the same problem that I had at Las Palmas.

Foreigners tend to take a liking to Goa and end up moving here. How have you taken to Goa and what have your experiences been like?
Of course, I like it here. It's the most European part of India. We arrived here during the monsoon. In the second week, I had to be taken to the hospital due to the extreme weather conditions. I felt bad initially, but now I am okay. I am very happy now in Goa. Now we have some days off, so I will explore the place with my staff.

You talked about how players don't think when it comes to strategising on their own and are

very dependent on coaches. How do you go about countering that?
It's not just a problem in India. The game is changing; it's very fast. It is played in 20-30 metres with a lot of players, and you have to think and use your brain very fast. If you don't understand the game, it's very difficult. If you play with a lot of space, even I can play with my tummy, being 55 years old. But if I know that I will be pressed while receiving the ball, you need to scan all the time, not only when you have the ball because you have players all around you. This is called understanding the game. Football is not just about playing with the ball; it's about more things. I tell a lot of players at the top level that they can still improve by being professionals.

With Indian football, the larger conversation is always about when will India qualify for the World Cup. As someone who

knows about the reality up close, how frustrating is it for you? Even with the Asian Cup, the expectations are set at qualifying for the knockouts. Do you think Igor Stimac could have benefitted from more time in preparation before the Asian Cup?

We can speak for 100 hours, but the problem is always the same. We are speaking about this moment, and we have to stand still in this moment. In this moment, India won't qualify for the next World Cup, even with nine slots for the next edition. I would like to be wrong about this.

We lost only 0-2 to Australia; we had a good first half, and then we lost 0-3 to Uzbekistan, and now everything is bad. It's not like this. I repeat, it's a long process, starting with the grassroots. It's the same story with Qatar. When they got the World Cup hosting rights, they played Copa America matches in Europe, and then they were okay [for the

Comfort zone: "I am very comfortable at this kind of club, where the facilities are very good. I would indeed like to have more Goan players on the main team, and let's see if we can do it in the future," said Manolo while talking about FC Goa. FOCUS SPORTS/ISL

2022 World Cup]. In 2002, South Korea finished fourth because they put the national team together in a camp for six months before the World Cup with a lot of strong games.

And India has to start one day. I know people talk about development, but they are more worried about organisation than development. I think development is more important. Of course, you need kids, but you also need coaches who know what they have to explain to the kids at every moment. You have to show up at every moment across ages six, nine, and 14.

We can speak about a lot of things, like the World Cup and the Asian Cup, but the problem is not these competitions. The problem is that you still don't have the correct structure to arrive at this level.

Stimac spoke about wanting more time in training ahead of the Asian Cup. Otherwise, he can't take responsibility for the results. How do you view his situation?

The organisation in India is something that can be improved. For example, on January 22, we play Odisha in the Super Cup, but after that, we don't know when our next game will be. If we win, we play [the knockouts] on the 25th.

I completely understand Igor Stimac. If I am the national team coach, I would like more time. I am sure Igor completely understands that the ISL coaches want to have the players for the maximum time possible. We need to know, for example, when the 2024–25 season starts and how the season is structured as to when the Durand Cup, ISL, and Super Cup are scheduled. But I understand things in

India don't work this way because, at the last moment, some teams will say they cannot play the competition.

For example, in the Durand Cup, Army teams and some teams from the I-League cannot play in the competition. It's a similar case with the Super Cup, and finally only five teams from the I-League decided to play this year.

If you don't have the right planning, it's difficult for the national team coach and ISL coaches to know when we have the second leg of the ISL matches. But obviously, people are interested in other things.

Will the ISL benefit from moving to a Conference system like the USA?

I prefer to play all the teams in the country as we do now. Yes, the distance is big. If you are in Goa or Hyderabad, you are more or less close to every team in the country. But if we have to go from Goa to Jamshedpur through Ranchi and take a three-hour bus ride, it is difficult. Or you have to go to Kolkata and then take a train to Jamshedpur, which is difficult. I prefer this to half-and-half. India needs more teams. One competition with 12 teams is not enough.

I worked in Croatia, which is a very small country. There are 10 teams, but you play four rounds. You have to travel to Zagreb eight times, which can be boring. Here, the flights are long, but you can go two days before. But this is not the problem; it is about how to organise in every state.

There are states where football is very good, but in some states, it isn't. I will give you an anecdote. Two days after we were the champions of the ISL with Hyderabad FC, I was wearing a polo shirt with the logo of the club. One person asked me what the logo was, and I said 'Hyderabad FC', and they replied, 'But which sport?'

And it made me realise that India is very big, and there should be space not only for cricket. I think there would have to be space for more sports in India.



» INDIAN FOOTBALL



On to the next one: With this victory, East Bengal has earned a play-off spot in AFC Champions League next season. BISWARANJAN ROUT

Ending trophy drought

East Bengal ended its 12-year national trophy drought with an **extra-time win** over Odisha FC in the final of the Kalinga Super Cup.

Aashin Prasad

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East Bengal ended 12 years of pain by lifting its first national title — Kalinga Super Cup — with a dramatic win in the final. In an end-to-end, ill-tempered summit clash, East Bengal overcame defending champion Odisha FC 3-2 at the Kalinga Stadium in extra time after both teams had been reduced to 10 men. East Bengal has earned a play-off spot in the AFC Champions League next season.

East Bengal looked like it would wrap up the title in the 90 minutes, but a penalty in the seventh minute of stoppage time allowed Odisha a way back, with Ahmed Jahouh converting with a panenka to make it 2-2.

Despite the clock ticking over to

110 minutes, Cleiton Silva showed immense work-rate in dispossessing Narender Gahlot in his own box before slotting the ball into the bottom corner to put the Red and Golds in front again. **The title win will be a much-needed boost for Carles Cuadrat and East Bengal, who have found proceedings difficult in the Indian Super League so far.**

Ahead of the second ISL leg, Hyderabad FC's woes escalate as it remains winless in 12 league matches. Head coach, Conor Nestor, and overseas players Peteri Pennanen, Oswaldo Alanis, Joe Knowles, and Felipe Amorim have all terminated their contracts in the last two months due to non-payment issues. Several domestic players, including Chinglensana Singh, Nikhil Poojary, and Nim Dorjee Tamang,

have also left. The Nizams face a transfer ban for not settling the dues of Nigerian striker Bartholomew Ogbeche.

IWL

Kickstart FC held league leader Odisha to a goalless draw in a top-of-the-table clash. However, the draw allowed Gokulam Kerala to capitalise and secure a 1-0 win over Sethu FC, moving just two points behind Odisha in the standings. Gokulam Kerala's Sandhiya Ranganathan scored the only goal of the match in the second minute.

On the other hand, Kickstart FC suffered a shocking 1-5 defeat against HOPS FC despite taking an early lead. Frederica Torkudzor's hat-trick helped HOPS FC stage a comeback victory to be placed fourth, behind Kickstart FC.

ATHLETIC CLUB IS BASQUE ONLY – FOR HOW LONG?

Athletic would rather be a struggling club with an identity than a successful club without one.

Abhishek Saini

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For a greater part of its history, Athletic Club, based in Bilbao, has been a notable contender challenging the dominance of Real Madrid and Barcelona in Spanish football. Boasting 35 titles, it stands as the third-most successful club in Spain. However, only two of these honours have been secured since the

beginning of the 21st century.

The last league and Copa del Rey titles for Athletic date back to the 1983/84 season. As Barcelona and Real Madrid flexed their financial might, Athletic found itself trailing in the competition. In this century, the club has clinched only two Super Cups, achieved in 2014/15 and 2019/20. The closest Athletic came to continental glory was its runner-up finish in the Europa League during the 2011/12 season.

Athletic, along with Barcelona and Real Madrid, has never experienced the setback of relegation. Maintaining this record is a goal for every season. The city feels a sense of relief when the club crosses 40 points in the season.

According to Mikel Gonzalez, the club's sporting director, this marks a safeguard from any potential relegation.

While Athletic may not vie for titles as consistently now, it proudly maintains its distinctive identity. Unlike Barcelona and Real Madrid, Athletic hasn't changed its approach. The club continues to adhere to its unique philosophy of exclusively choosing players of Basque origin, considering it a badge of



Carving a niche: Athletic Club, based in Bilbao, has won 35 domestic titles, making it the third-most successful club in Spain. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT/LA LIGA

honor. "We play with just Basque players. Those who are born or formed in Basque country. The first criterion is easy. The second is: What does it mean to be formed here? The player or the family has to come to the Basque country for natural reasons like work," says Gonzalez.

The Basque country comprises seven provinces spread across Spain and France: Biscay, Gipuzkoa, South Navarre, Alava, North Navarre, Soule, and Labourde.

"We are around two-and-a-half million people. Out of this, how many are professional players? Our market is small, so our investments are for our academy. We invest a lot in coaches and scouts," says Gonzalez.

Athletic has established a feeder line for its first and second teams through its youth academy in Lezama. This academy has tie-ups with 160 local clubs, ensuring that it never runs out of talent. This apparatus has been in place for 125

years, contributing to the club's 24 Copa del Rey crowns and three Super Cups, as well as their eight league wins.

"Just the opportunity to show the world that with this unique philosophy, we can fight against the best teams in Spain and the world," says Gonzalez.

As one moves closer to the Pyrenees, the ideology diverges. Donostia-San Sebastian is the third-largest city in the Basque country, situated in the Gipuzkoa province. It is also the home of Athletic Club's arch-rival, Real Sociedad. Real Sociedad followed a 'Basque-only' philosophy until 1989, when it signed Liverpool's John Aldridge. "We have a different way of doing things. Our academy is open to the whole world. We know that with 720,000 inhabitants [in Gipuzkoa], staying in the football elite is impossible. We must be able to attract players," says Luki Uriarte, director of grassroots football with Real.

The club's leeway yielded rich dividends when its academy, Zubieta, produced French international Antoine Griezmann. Arriving in the Spanish coastal city, aged 14, from Burgundy, France, Griezmann worked his way up the ladder before

moving away to Atletico Madrid in 2014.

"Griezmann has always been very clear in his statements that he is grateful for the work that Real did. It is very endearing. Technically, he was brilliant. He had good vision but lacked the strength to dribble away from trouble. We had to take good care of him," says Uriarte, who was Griezmann's coach at Real's Under-15 and Under-16 teams.

Even as Real allows foreign talent to walk through its gates, it holds on to its resolution to give back to the region. Its board ensures that 80% of the talent in its associate clubs is from Gipuzkoa. The number eventually drops to 60% in its academy's age-group teams.

"Our only policy is that our doors will never be closed for players from our community. The rest in our hands is to provide service to the players so they make it to the first team. We have a board of directors who believe in the grassroots system. We have a first-team coach who is willing to play them. We have to prepare them to take that leap. We are a modest club compared to the others in La Liga. When the players feel they can achieve something else at a different place, they are free to leave," says Uriarte.





Open to all: Luki Uriarte, director of grassroots football with Real Sociedad, says attracting talent from around the world is key to building a strong side.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT/LA LIGA

Real and Athletic have contrasting methods when it comes to their football teams. Real seems to prioritise the game over everything else, while Athletic tries to establish a unique identity. Real allows its academy players to leave and then signs non-Basque players to take their place. Meanwhile, Athletic makes every effort to promote its academy players to the first team. Two recent examples of this approach are Unai Simon and Nico Williams, who both came from Lezama and are now part of the Spanish national team. While Williams has already signed a long-term contract with Athletic, Simon reportedly has a verbal agreement in place.

In the Indian context, football teams in Goa experimented with the

strategy of prioritising local talent. Esteemed clubs like Churchill Brothers and Dempo SC exclusively fielded local players in the Goa Premier League, except for foreign signings. However, this approach, as noted by Pradhyum Reddy, the Chief Executive Officer of Dempo Sporting Club, was deemed unsustainable.

"In Goa now, you look at clubs like Vasco; they are getting players from other states. There were a lot of Goa players back in the day, no doubt. For example, Dempo went with a Goan squad last season in the second division, and we came up short. This year, we decided to include players from outside, and we won our group," says Reddy.

"If you are trying to be a top team, then maybe you need to get good players from everywhere through scouting. It is unlikely that one region in India is going to produce everything you need in every position," he adds.

Limiting a football club's recruitment to only local players would hinder its potential. Steve

Charles, a scout working in Mizoram for the Reliance Foundation Young Champs, explains that genetics vary across India and that by diversifying the squad with players from different regions, the club can benefit from a more well-rounded team with a variety of skill sets.

"Players up north are bigger in frame. Down south, [the physique] is above average; in the North-East, they're not among the tallest people. In the South, you see a lot of creative players; you see a number 10, a number eight. They are runners. They are box-to-box. They have a high level of endurance. So that could be to their advantage. In the North-East, you see a lot of very pacey wingers, whose centre of gravity is low."

"Considering that, we are moving in a direction to really understand the positional requirements of the ISL clubs and national team," Charles had said in a previous interview with Sportstar.

Back in Bilbao, Athletic has carved a path around this lack of diversity by



Homegrown talent: Mikel Gonzalez, Athletic Club's sporting director, takes pride in the club's 'Basque-only' philosophy, which selects players of Basque origin. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT/LALIGA

focusing on high-performance management. "We have made five verticals: medical, physical conditioning, nutrition, sports science, and psychology. For example, suppose we do not have enough centre-backs in the first team. Our only option is to improve the players on the B or C teams. So, one of these six or seven players has to be our next centre-back. They have specifics to work on. Physically, tactically, and so on. So, we train to improve the players in these areas. Even if they improve one percent, it makes a difference for us," says Gonzalez.

Tweaking its century-old method has been an unwelcome proposition among Athletic's top brass and 45,000-strong members, even in the face of an impending demographic

shift. The Basque Institute of Statistics had predicted that the region's population would decline by nearly five per cent between 2013 and 2023. In addition, the Basque country's average age was 45.6 years in 2023, two years more than Spain's average. Similarly, only 19% of its population was 19 or under in 2023.

But Athletic would rather be a struggling club with an identity than a successful club without one. "I do not see this happening. I am also one of those 45,000 members. For me, philosophy is the essence. Being unique guarantees our success," says Nerea Ortiz, Athletic's vice

president.

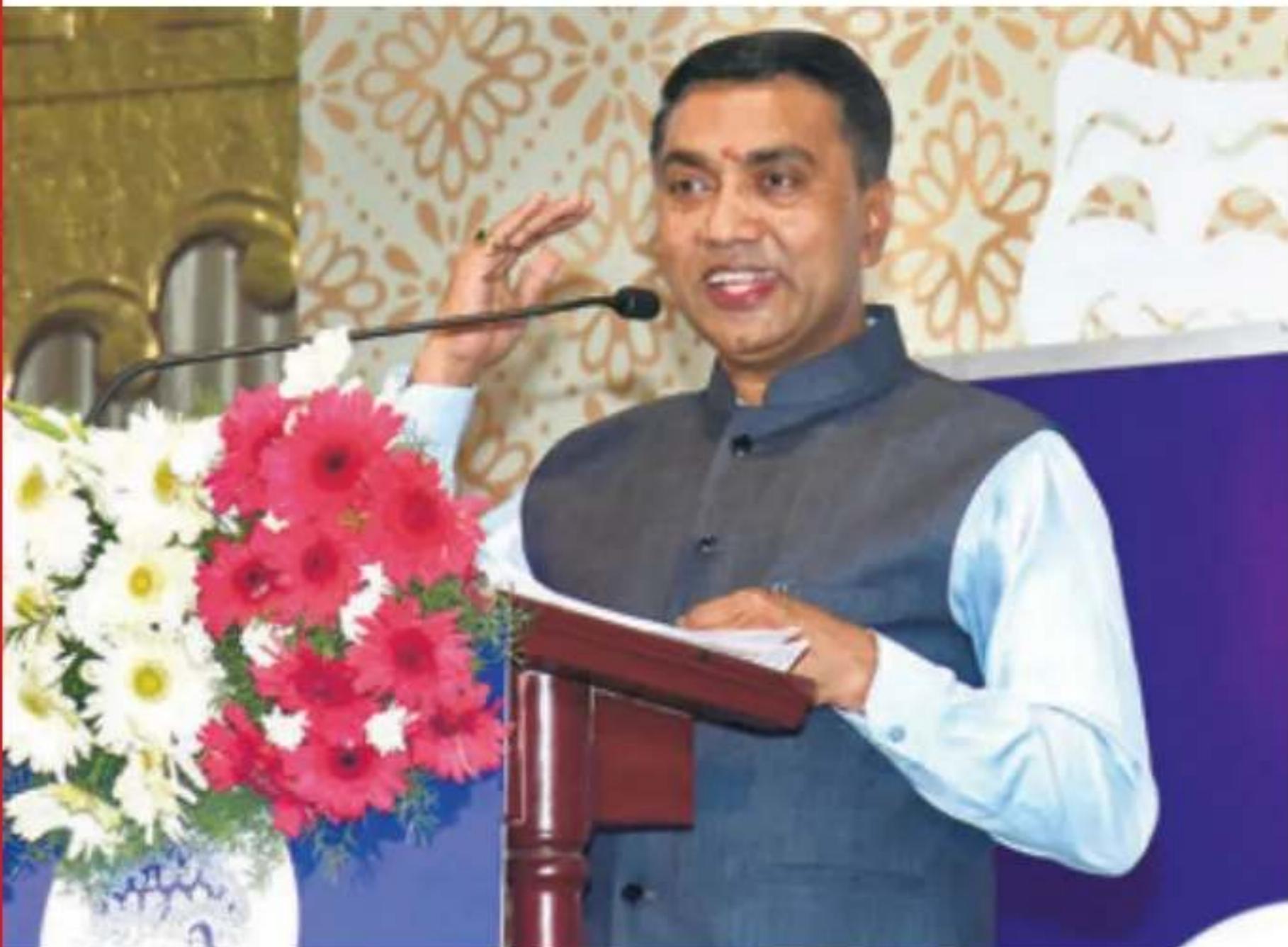
For a club that has carved a space for itself in the elite league over the past 125 years, the questions over the policy and its validity hold a familiar tone. But the players, the fans, and the management work single-mindedly to stay true to their beloved philosophy.

"This question, 25 years ago, was the same. We thought it would be impossible to play in La Liga because the clubs are investing a lot and taking players. It was the same 50 years ago," says Gonzalez.

The correspondent was in Spain at the invitation of La Liga, recently



Athletic has established a feeder line for its first and second teams through its youth academy in Lezama. This academy has tie-ups with 160 local clubs, ensuring that it never runs out of talent.



"We are also planning to have a sports university here in the future," says Pramod Sawant, Chief Minister of Goa. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY



CM Pramod Sawant: We're set to become a sports tourism destination as well

Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant addressed the gathering at Sportstar's first Conclave in 2024 in Goa virtually.

According to him, the state, otherwise known for being a major tourist destination in western India, is gradually turning into a sports hub. "Goa has been primarily known as a tourist destination, but it is set to become an epicentre of sports soon. Last year, Goa successfully hosted numerous national and international sporting events. Recently, under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the National Games were held in Goa, which saw more than 10,000 athletes participate across 43 disciplines. Goa also achieved its highest medal tally of 92."

The CM thanked the Hon'ble Prime Minister for his contribution to sports. He said he shared Narendra Modi's dream of a 'Viksit Bharat 2047', the Government's vision to see India become a developed country by its 100th year of Independence.

"Modi ji's vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 will be inclusive of all. It is a part of Fit India, Skill India and Inclusive India. The role of sports in working towards the vision should also be discussed today (at the Conclave). Goa should also come to be known as a sports destination. We are known for hosting the IFFI International Film Festival, but we must keep in mind that the state has also successfully

hosted the Purple Festival, the WTT (Contender) event, and world beach volleyball. The government is also pushing for sports tourism, adventure tourism, and spiritual tourism. To establish the skills for these, we are also planning to have a sports university here in the future."

Goa's Tourism Minister: Integrating Sports for Multifaceted Development of State

The Goa government will promote sports tourism in the coastal State by expanding its vision, Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte said. "We never spoke about sports tourism earlier. Sports was one department, tourism was another, technology was another department," Khaunte said.

"Goa is a preferred destination for your holidays. You come here to have a pleasant stay. When our government came in, we started talking about opportunities again. We are looking to go beyond beaches; we are using the hashtag #GoaBeyondBeaches. It is our responsibility to relook at what we have been doing as states. Tourism is the chief economic driver for Goa, contributing approximately 16.43 per cent of the GDP and creating 30-35% of direct and indirect employment. This economical vertical can't be monotonous."

"COVID times made people think differently. People switched to working from home. Goa started being



Focus Goa



Pearl Fernandes receives the Emerging Hero award from Rohan Khaunte, Minister of Tourism, Goa. EMMANUAL YOGINI

positioned as a sports tourism destination. The state has actively promoted a #VacationGoa campaign to redefine its identity by leveraging technology. We said, 'Let people come to Goa and start working. Today, digital nomads have found their space in Goa. This innovative strategy, encompassing the four 'S's of sun, sand, sea, and software, has evolved further with the addition of the fifth 'S': sports. By incorporating sports into our narrative, we are not only providing equal opportunities to the youth but also contributing to the multifaceted development of Goa.'

Politics must be kept aside from sport, says state Sports Minister Govind Gaude

Govind Gaude, the Hon'ble Sports Minister of Goa, delivered the keynote address.

He said he prides himself on how the state managed to pull off a successful National Games in 2023. "To host the 37th National Games was a dream for every Goan. Every national athlete was looking forward to participating in Goa. We had sleepless nights ahead of the competition. There needs to be meticulous planning to organise an event like this. We had given our best to deliver the best hospitality to our players. And they were



Sports Minister of Goa, Govind Gaude (right), felicitates Levino Dias with the Hero Unsung Champion award.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

all happy — even players who have represented India in multi-discipline events like the Asian Games."

Although the competition to get to the top has become tighter with each passing day, Gaude believes sports are blessed with better infrastructure nowadays. He said, "We have to tackle every difficulty. If you go 30-40 years back in time, there was no proper infrastructure in the country, but India was shining across the globe."

Infighting within sporting federations, says Gaude, often hampers the growth of fresh talent. He said, "There are a lot of politics in associations and federations. The news media must help out here. In every federation, there is a quarrel. We are spoiling the lives of the athletes by doing these."

The selection of athletes should be unbiased and solely based on merit, Gaude stressed. "Let's keep politics aside. We must come together to help sports grow. I have never asked associations to favour anybody. Selection has to happen on the basis of merit. We are giving the best services to our Goans. The government organisations and clubs need to work together."

During the event, Pearl Fernandes, a promising footballer, was named the Emerging Hero, while Levino Dias, a revered Goan football coach, was named the Sportstar Hero Unsung Champion.

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Indian football needs the best coaches in the academies, says FC Goa coach Manolo Marquez



From second left: Pradhyum Reddy, CEO Dempo SC, Manolo Marquez, Coach, FC Goa, Caitano Fernandes, President, Goa Football Association, and Brahmanand Sankhwalkar, former India captain and goalkeeper, during the Conclave. The session was moderated by Aashin Prasad (left). EMMANUEL YOGINI

The lack of representation of Goan players in India's age-group-level teams is a cause for concern and a testament to the state's dwindling stocks in the sport, Pradhyum Reddy, CEO of Dempo SC, said during a panel discussion at the Sportstar Sports Conclave.

"The number of clubs in the top tiers has declined. The absolute numbers in terms of players playing on the national team are around the same. The number of minutes played by players from Goa on the national teams is relatively constant. Just in the last World Cup campaign, it has dropped. We just have one player consistently playing minutes. Goa has very little to no representation at the Under-23, Under-20, Under-19, and Under-17 levels of the national team. The knock-on effect of that is seen 10 years down the line," Reddy said.

Goa Football Association president Caitano Fernandes believes the leadership's lack of vision in the last 10 years has played a part in the sport's decline in the State. "At the national level, we presently have three clubs. From 2005 to 2015, in India, we had around 300 players playing for the Indian team and the I-League. Today, we have three clubs and we have around, altogether, at the international level in the Indian team, 20 players. In the last 10 years, football in Goa hasn't been that popular because of a lack of vision of the leadership. Since we have taken over, we have made sure that our grassroots level is very strong."

"My dream for Goa is that we should have at least 400 to 500 players playing at the international level," he said.

Former India goalkeeper and captain Brahmanand Sankhwalkar said that this left players with few options after graduating from age-group football.

"Plenty of football is being played here; in schools, age-group tournaments are going on. But they will only go to a certain level. Earlier, there were many clubs. That platform is missing. Except Churchill Brothers in the I-League and FC Goa in the ISL, where will the rest of the players go?" he said.

Indian Super League (ISL) club FC Goa's head coach, Manolo Marquez, said that to take Indian football forward, the country needs to appoint the best coaches in academies.

"The structure of FC Goa is better compared to Hyderabad FC (his former franchise). But I have the feeling, in a lot of countries, that we are losing some important parts because we are only speaking of development. We have to improve at the grassroots. The money is in the highest category."

But the best coaches have to be in the academies. This is the moment when the kid has to start learning football. There is a process in some countries. Our assistant coach, Gourangi Singh, started to play football at 14 or 15, which is incredible. Development is only a word. What is important is how it is done," Marquez opined.

The session was moderated by Sportstar senior reporter Aashin Prasad.



Nehra expresses regret over not playing enough Test cricket due to injuries



Former India cricketer Ashish Nehra credited the Indian Premier League (IPL) for unearthing talent that would have otherwise gone unnoticed on the domestic circuit. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Former India fast bowler Ashish Nehra expressed his regret over not playing enough Test cricket during his 18-year-long international career due to persistent injury issues.

"I love Test cricket and I still regret that I didn't play enough Test cricket because of injuries," he said.

Though Nehra made his international debut with Test cricket in 1999, he only featured in 17 matches in the longest format and played his final Test in 2004.

On the relevance and health of the five-day format in the international calendar, the 44-year-old said that the survival of Test cricket will depend on smart scheduling of ICC's Future Tours Programme (FTP), while also making a case for the hosting of Test matches in traditional centres such as Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai for increased viewership.

While placing Test cricket on a hallowed pedestal, Nehra also credited the Indian Premier League (IPL) for unearthing talent that would have otherwise gone unnoticed on the domestic circuit.

"Earlier, when there was no IPL, so many people took so many wickets and scored so many runs in First-Class cricket, but they never even played an India 'A' game. Now, even 17 and 18-year-old fast bowlers can be spotted even if they haven't played domestic cricket. Now, when there is a talent, it will come forward," he explained.

On India's ICC title drought, Nehra, who was part of

the 2011 World Cup-winning squad, said that teams shouldn't be judged solely based on the number of ICC trophies they win.

"We can't be desperate about winning ICC trophies. We have to be patient and the way the team has been playing in the last few years, I don't think an ICC trophy is very far away. We shouldn't judge a team based on how many ICC trophies it wins because there is so much other cricket also happening."

Nehra, head coach of IPL 2022 winner Gujarat Titans, said he was a firm believer in coaching off the field and beyond the technicalities of the game.

"On the field, when there is practice, you talk about technique and all. I firmly believe that you can teach them off the field. You can discuss life, and I always try and give them suggestions so that they don't make the mistakes I did," he said.

Nehra, born in Delhi, revealed that his wife was the primary reason for his move to Goa seven years ago. "My wife brought me to Goa. I am not a Delhi kind of person, and my wife also grew up outside India. So, after we had kids, we wanted to live in a quieter place with less traffic. She was keen on living in a place that is less hectic and has less pollution," he explained.

Though Nehra admitted he didn't keep in touch with local cricket in the State, he contended that the lack of proper infrastructure shouldn't be an excuse for lagging. "You have to have that desire and you will find a way," he said.



Focus Goa – delving into diverse sports disciplines and exploring avenues for enhancing playing conditions



From left: Shrinivas Dempo, Chairman, Dempo Group, Suresh Balakrishna, Chief Revenue Officer, The Hindu, and Sagar Salgaocar, MD, Geno Group, during the Conclave. EMMANUAL YOGINI

ON SPORTS FOR COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Shrinivas Dempo (Chairman, Dempo Group): Goa stands apart with its numerous positive attributes. However, it brings forth a unique set of challenges, particularly in managing the aspirations of its populace. The evolving aspirations, particularly among the younger generation, contribute to a significant issue: the migration of talented youth either abroad or to metropolitan hubs like Bangalore or Mumbai. To address this, two essential factors demand attention: the establishment of a robust education system and the

development of critical infrastructure.

Dr. Sagar D. Salgaocar (Managing Director, Geno Sports Club): In India, nothing unites the population quite like sports.

It serves as a powerful medium through which society can assimilate core values such as discipline, perseverance, and, notably, two virtues paramount to the character of great sportspersons.

The first virtue lies in unity, as exemplified within a team. The second virtue is the ability to accept defeat with the same grace and humility as one enjoys victory. Geno Group contributes to fostering these values, recognising the impact sports can have on the development of society.



From second, left: Suneel Anchipaka, Director of Goa Tourism, Ravi Puskar, FC Goa Chief Executive Officer , Nidhin Valsan, Superintendent of Police of North Goa, and journalist and adventure specialist Ashwin Tombat (President of Triathlon Association, Goa) during the Conclave. The session was moderated by Prasanth Shanthakumaran, Partner, KPMG India (left). EMMANUEL YOGINI

MAKING GOA THE NEW-AGE SPORTS HUB OF INDIA

Suneel Anchipaka, IAS (Director Tourism and MD, Goa Tourism Development Corporation): The government has been working on not only building the assets but also on how to maintain them sustainably. We had stiff competition from states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Despite that, Goa became the destination for Pro Beach Volleyball. We have a host city partnership with World Table Tennis for another three years. For hinterland tourism and rural communities, the government has conducted adventure racing. It is a completely eco-based sports model."





Cricketers Shikha Pandey and Swapnil Asnodkar, along with GCA President Vipul Phadke, discuss the future of Goa cricket. The session was moderated by Shayan Acharya. EMMANUAL YOGINI

THE ROAD AHEAD FOR GOA CRICKET

India international Shikha Pandey: "The Goa Women's Premier League last year was one of its kind. Before that, 2016 was the last time we played a tournament of that sort. Unfortunately, we don't have club cricket for women in Goa.

There were a few girls who caught the eye of the selectors. They gradually moved to the Under-19 and

Under-23 teams. For women to have that opportunity to play under lights was really good. When you have a cricketer from Goa who is consistently in the national set-up, be it an NCA camp, or Under-23 or Emerging India camp, you gather a lot of information and standards that are to be set. Then you come back to the team and tell everyone else that, 'This is what we are supposed to be doing and this is what I learnt there.' That is something which is missing. With Suyash [Prabhudesai] being there in RCB, I am sure he must be coming back and talking to a lot of cricketers."



K. C. Vijaya Kumar, Sports Editor, The Hindu, in conversation with Olympic hockey gold medallist, Mervyn Fernandes, Indian badminton player Anura Prabhudesai and International windsurfer Dayne Coelho.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

BUILDING ON THE LEGACY OF THE NATIONAL GAMES

Mervyn Fernandes, a member of the 1980 gold medal-winning hockey team: "Football is the most popular sport in Goa, but it's important to recognize the contributions of other sports like hockey. Olympians from Goa, including Mary D'Souza, have made significant strides in hockey. Despite being less in the spotlight, efforts have been made to promote and popularize hockey. Recent initiatives, such as hosting the Sub Junior and Junior Nationals on Astroturf, suggest that hockey is gaining ground."



Mary Kom denies retirement reports

Six-time World champion and London Olympics bronze medallist boxer M. C. Mary Kom has denied media reports about her retirement.

"I haven't announced retirement yet, and I have been misquoted. I will personally come in front of the media whenever I want to announce it," said Mary. "I have gone through some media reports stating that I have announced retirement, and this is not true."

Mary clarified her statement, which she made at an event.

"I was attending a school event in Dibrugarh on January 24 where I was motivating children. I said I still have a hunger for achieving laurels in sports, but the age limit at the Olympics doesn't allow me to participate, though I can carry on with my sport. I am still focusing on my fitness, and whenever I announce my retirement, I will inform everyone," she said.

During the event, she also said the current generation, despite having more facilities and options in sports as compared to when she took up boxing, is not hungry enough. "This young generation, they (become) one (time) champion and finished, they are satisfied, (they) settle down. This is the difference," she said.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

» INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON



1 Top seed Ajeet Bhardwaj overcame stiff resistance from second seed Ashish Sen 5-7, 6-4, 6-3 in the over-65 final of the ITF Masters tennis tournament at the DLTA Complex in New Delhi. In an equally competitive over-70 final, AJS Chhatwal beat Ravi Singh in three sets after losing the first set in tiebreak. Priyanka Mehta and Sohini Kumar won the women's over-35 and over-45 singles titles, respectively. In the men's over-45 final, Swarandeep Singh Dhodi won a tough battle 6-4, 6-7(5), 6-4 against Syed Babar Zaidi.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 Indian Navy beat Indian Oil via penalty shootout in the final to win the title in the Coal India 125th Beighton Cup hockey tournament at SAI Astroturf Ground in Kolkata. Both teams were tied at 2-2 after regulation time. In the shootout, the Navy team prevailed 3-2.
The result:
India Navy 2 (Sushil Dhanwar, Akib Rahim) bt Indian Oil 2 (Gurjinder Singh-2) via penalty shootout [Indian Navy 3 (Prashant, Yogesh Singh, Kuldeep) bt Indian Oil 2 (Affan Yusuf, Ankit Pal)].

TEAM SPORTSTAR

Every year, the achievements get better and better ►

Chairperson of the *Sportstar Aces Awards*, **Sunil Gavaskar**, calls the event the top sports awards in India.

India batting great cricketer Sunil Gavaskar, chairperson of the Sportstar Aces Awards, called the annual event the *crème de la crème* of sports awards in the country.

"For me, what the *Sportstar Aces* Awards mean is recognition of a person's achievement, the impact he or she has had on their sport, and the legacy and example they are setting for future generations. That's why these awards are such a huge thing. There's a reason sportspeople take the time to come to this event every year. It's the *crème de la crème* of sporting awards in the country," Gavaskar said.

The Aces Awards is gearing up for its sixth edition, and Gavaskar is elated to see the standard of Indian sport improving each year.

"The process of choosing winners is always exciting for the simple reason that you get to see how Indian sport has progressed over the year. Every year, the achievements get better and better. Some of these milestones are staggering. The added benefit of being on this jury is being able to see other sports. Sometimes, you're so involved in your sport or covering them on TV that you are unable to find time for other sports. This exercise helps with that. Another thing is that now we have a wider field to choose from, and that is one of the most heartening parts of the exercise," he said.

While hailing the Indian men's cricket team's run in



the ODI World Cup, Gavaskar picked Olympic javelin champion Neeraj Chopra's run in 2023 as the standout achievement.

"Neeraj is getting better and better, and that's the mark of a great athlete — one who is not satisfied with accolades and is always hungry for more. High hopes from him for Paris 2024. No pressure.

"But he will know that the country is expecting gold for the first time. All along, the nation was hoping, but this time, it's an expectation, and that's a game changer in terms of pressure. The way he took Kishore (Kumar) Jena with him [at the Asian Games 2023] put the tri-colour on their shoulders and topped that podium with gold and silver. That's a moment to cherish for a lifetime," he said.

Gavaskar revealed he is eager to meet the next set of winners and had an important message for those who will be honoured at the Aces Awards in Mumbai in February.

"My message is, firstly, congratulations on what you've achieved. I have retired from the game for almost 40 odd years, but to see the progress that every sport has made and how a new bar is being set every year is so heartening.

"I see India becoming a sports-mad country thanks to your performances. You are setting the trend not just in one sport but across multiple disciplines. You are the torchbearers of the new generation of champions who will go on to hopefully win the *Sportstar Aces Awards*," he said.



Watching most events live helped me give a first-hand perspective to jury ▶

Olympic gold medallist **M. M. Somaya** drew insights from deputy chef de mission role at Hangzhou Asian Games 2023.

Olympic hockey gold medallist and senior Sportstar Aces Awards jury member M. M. Somaya was the deputy chef de mission for the Indian contingent at the Hangzhou Asian Games in 2023. While he calls the experience nourishing, it made life on the jury hard for the veteran.

"I was present at the Asian Games and saw so many of them perform. When you compare that with performances one has heard or read about, it's difficult to decide on a clear winner. For the first time, I was surprised at myself. Usually, when I decide on a winner, I stick to it. But this time, some of the decisions were very hard to make," Somaya said about the awards process this year.

"I was able to watch most of the events live. It helped me give a first-hand perspective to the jury. But then, comparing that to someone I have not seen personally made it challenging. That's where having a jury as diverse as this — where members have watched multiple sports and some are even involved in administration — makes things easy for us. In addition to that, the feedback given to us by field journalists from *The Hindu* and *Sportstar* gave us a detailed picture of how the nominees stacked up. That helped our discussions be more thorough," he said. Somaya lauded the Indian contingent's discipline and resilience in Hangzhou as he recollects the elation of seeing India cross the century mark in the medal tally.



"The confidence of our current sportspeople, which potentially comes from exposure to international events at an early stage, is different from our times compared to now. They have great ambition. At one stage, it didn't look like we'd go beyond 70 medals, our tally from the previous edition. As time went on, athletics (29 medals), shooting (22), and archery (9) came good for us. Even disciplines like rowing and equestrian, areas where we've thought winning might be difficult, came through. Overall, it was a satisfying campaign in Hangzhou. I am glad they've set a benchmark. This is the inflection year. Winning so many medals is a big thing. We will be better prepared and more confident in the Olympic year," he added.

With increasing success across the sporting spectrum coming India's way, Somaya admits that the jury has had to constantly shift its benchmark for choosing winners.

"It's getting harder because we have nominees who are winning more internationally, and that too gold medals. This pushes us to set a higher benchmark, perhaps. It's not just about playing at the international level

anymore. It's about getting a gold medal. If there's more than one gold medal winner, we need to look at whether a continental or world record was achieved. That addition will set them ahead of the pack. Pegging the benchmark higher makes it interesting. I would look at excellence and maintaining consistency over a considerable period," he explained.



Aces Awards a fossil record of Indian sports ▶

Viswanathan Anand, the chess Grandmaster and a member of the jury for the *Sportstar Aces Awards*, is delighted by the success of the sport in the country in 2023.

From being the man who put India on the global chess map to now seeing players slowly overtake his milestones and cement India's reputation as a chess superpower, Viswanathan Anand is a content man. The chess Grandmaster, also a member of the jury for the *Sportstar Aces Awards*, is elated by the kind of year 2023 turned out to be for the sport in the country. "From the point of view of our chess players rising to the top, we have five people qualifying for the Candidates [April 3–22, 2024]. The FIDE World Cup and FIDE Grand Swiss were some of the most followed events in India because of the possibility of our players qualifying. On top of that, we had multiple good results as well. So, a big year for the sport in general," Anand said.

Anand isn't playing as many tournaments as he used to, allowing players to go past him in rankings and try and chip away at achievements that long bore his name.

"I would say I hoped it would happen. The hope was what drove me to start my academy. It's a nice situation to be in. These things often come to you unexpectedly. It's hard to predict. I know we have a lot of participation and talent in India, and it's good that the results are



coming in," he added.

This abundance of talent poses a "problem" to the Aces jury, too, while deciding winners for *Sportstar*'s annual sports honours.

"The 'problem' is a very pleasant one to have. In every category, we have to wade through names and make some really hard choices. And this is getting harder and harder. We're not just doing well in sports we've traditionally done well in, but we're also surprising in new sports. The slate is getting bigger and bigger. It's a sportsperson's dream to be sitting with others from different areas of sports and discussing it all. But there are times when we wish more than one player could be honoured," Anand explained.

"The *Sportstar Aces* Awards becomes a fossil record, almost, to look back and see how far we've come. I enjoy these jury meetings a lot because you get a quick snapshot of everything that is happening in the ecosystem.

"It's difficult to follow every sport, and it's difficult to follow every sport with the expertise it very often demands.

"It's not just about seeing a person's victory in an event; it's also about how to rank that triumph in a broader context and what meaning it has," he added.



Sports broadcasting crucial for appreciation of achievements ▶

Aparna Popat, a longstanding member of the *Sportstar Aces Awards* jury panel, deliberates thoughtfully on different parameters before deciding the winner.

Advances in sports broadcasting are crucial in increasing the audience's appreciation of sports achievements, says shuttler Aparna Popat, an Olympian and a Commonwealth medallist.

"There have been many sporting moments in 2023, but the way a sport is telecast goes a long way in how much a sporting moment stays with us and how lasting an impact it has. Individually, what these performances mean to the athlete, their loved ones, their teams, and the nation makes these moments incredible by themselves. Of course, some stand out more than others, and they will be recognised," Aparna, a longstanding member of the Sportstar Aces Awards jury panel, said.

"There have been some great moments, especially with athletes winning gold medals or getting World no. 1 rankings or records to go along with them."

Speaking about the process of selecting winners, Aparna, a 16-time national badminton champion, is happy to have a well-rounded perspective on every nominee before deciding who takes the honours.

"It still doesn't get easy because we've had so many great performances by Indian sportspersons. There's a wide array of sports to choose from. There are different



considerations, from the age of the athletes to the impact the performance has had or just the scale of the performance itself. There's a lot to think about and different perspectives to consider. It's not easy by any measure, but it's great fun.

"The jury members, their perspectives, and the experiences they bring to the meeting make things very interesting. The team from *Sportstar* and the kind of information they make available to us when heading into this meeting, and the fact that they're there to clarify any doubts we may have when discussing potential winners, make the process a lot easier on us as the jury. This gives us a 360-degree picture of the performance, based on which we can decide who tops the category. Many things go into a successful performance, and having them all considered and appreciated makes the final chosen list more special and the process more meritorious," she explained. The winners of the 2024 edition of the *Sportstar Aces Awards* will be announced in Mumbai on February 8. When asked what her message to those being honoured is, Aparna said, "Just enjoy the victory. Huge congratulations for what you've achieved, for the hard work you've put in, and to all your teammates and family members. This is an award meant to encourage winners to keep achieving, and I hope it does just that."



Reliving highs and identifying areas for improvement ▶

During the *Sportstar Aces Awards* jury meeting, **Abhinav Bindra's** way of judging a hotly debated category was to go with a key element of team sports and leadership.

Abhinav Bindra, an Olympic gold medal-winning shooter, is serving as a member of the jury for the *Sportstar Aces Awards* for the second year in a row. He was thrilled to be a part of the decision-making process to select the winners for the Awards' sixth chapter.

"This jury has some legendary figures, and it's an absolute honour for me to be a part of this panel and the process. The discussions were very fruitful. When you have different points of view, everyone needs to have a chance to share those views and allow room for debate. That was done very well here. It was a chance for us to relive some of the highs and reflect on the areas we can improve," Bindra said about the adjudication process.

With success at the continental and world levels in many disciplines, Bindra believes the road ahead looks bright for a growing pool of aspiring athletes in India.

"It's been a fantastic year. Right from the Asian Games [in Hangzhou], where we got 107 medals, to a heartening show in Paraspors and the



performance of the men's cricket team, even though they didn't win, 2023 has been a good one for the country," the 41-year-old said.

During the jury meeting, Bindra's way of judging a hotly debated category was to go with a key element of team sports and leadership.

"Sometimes we make the error of viewing performances purely through the superficial outcomes of sporting events, but sport is so much more. Athletes are about so much more, which gives a powerful message to the sporting community and society. Performances in the field of sports are one thing, of course, but their role in impacting society is also important. And that's what a *Sportstar Award* winner should embody, in my opinion," he said.

"I look forward to seeing the winners on the day of the Awards. My heartfelt congratulations go out to the athletes for their scintillating performances and for all the hard work they've put in, not just over the last year but for many years prior. "Congratulations to their coaches, support staff, and families, often the unsung heroes of their sporting journey. Best wishes to all," Bindra added.





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Balancing act: The art of load management

The **transition** from receiving accolades to playing the blame game can be a wild journey in sports.

Following the recently concluded 2023 ICC World Cup and other global competitions, we've seen a range of opinions and discussions about our performance being conducted on various platforms, be it social media, live broadcasts or traditional media. But, instead of dwelling on the technical or tactical aspects of the game, let's focus on its physical aspect, particularly the buzzworthy and fashionable term — load management.

When an individual athlete or a team achieves competitive success, it is only natural for the coaching and support staff to celebrate it. After all, success is often built on hard work, perseverance, planning, discipline, and sacrifices — something which they have been witness to. We also know that injuries are an inherent part of sports, and athletes who manage to stay injury-free throughout the season have a better likelihood of success.

So, how much of the success, be it team or individual, can be attributed to the head coach, medical staff or strength & conditioning coaches? When a team succeeds, is it due to good coaching or skilled players? And when it underperforms, why is the blame often on 'inadequate fitness'?

Team dynamics

It is a common tendency to hold the performance and sports medicine teams responsible for injuries — either for making them train too hard or for not providing adequate rehabilitation. This is the reality of sports today.

With so many diverse opinions available on the benefits and drawbacks of high-training methods and protocols, it's no surprise that sport coaches, performance & medical staff, and even athletes themselves, debate over the optimal approach to developing robust performances. There is no universal mantra for success that can apply to all athletes.

All over the world, sports teams at various levels, including high school, college, and professional, are recognising the importance of 'load management'. But who is 'responsible' for it? Is it the coach, the performance staff, or the medical team?

We dissect each of their roles to find out the answer.

Performance and medical teams

If the goal of the programme is to develop the physical prowess required for competitive success, the strength and conditioning staff will monitor training and competition workload.

On the contrary, if the goal is to minimise workload-related injuries, the responsibility for collecting this data often falls on the physio and medical staff. However, these answers only partially explain who is responsible for load, performance, and injury management.

There's a famous phrase that has been in vogue for a long time in sports: 'Strength and conditioning staff break athletes, and the medical staff fix them'. It's understood that inappropriate strength and conditioning programmes can increase the risk of injury. Rapid increase in training loads can result in poor performance.

However, not all injuries occur due to rapid increase in load, so not all the blame need to be attributed to the strength and conditioning staff.

If the medical staff are too conservative with their loading and progression strategies, it can also result in injuries, repeated ones at that, and consequently, poor performances. Clearly, both performance and medical staff play key roles in keeping athletes injury-free.

Coaching staff

Many coaches often state — "My performance staff, medical team, and other support staff handle athlete workload and performance domains. I'm a coach — that's



Who is really responsible?: It is a common tendency to hold the performance and sports medicine teams responsible for injuries — either for making them train too hard or for not providing adequate rehabilitation. This is the reality of sports today. GETTYIMAGES

what I do!" Being a high-pressure job, it takes special skill to 'put their head in the fire every day'. While it's judicious to not distract them from their job, it's important they recognise that load can come from various sources, including skill-based activities that they engage in — like net practice.

Consider a fast bowler struggling with accuracy or preventing no balls. The first practice session after a game will likely include a lot of target practice at the nets. If the pacer is unprepared for this spike in bowling load, the session could increase the risk of injury.

In turn, if coaches don't have their opening pacers available for the match, it can adversely impact performance and outcomes. In this respect, coaches also play a vital role in keeping athletes injury-free.

Athletes

There is one group of people that is seldom mentioned when an athlete experiences a breakdown due to workload-related injuries — the athletes themselves.

Imagine an athlete who returns completely deconditioned after a break. The performance and medical team will then provide a training programme for them to follow.

But if the athlete decides to sip piña coladas on the beach or enjoy vodka in a pub, and then go on to experience a breakdown on the first day of pre-season training, why should the performance, medical, or

coaching staff assume full responsibility for it?

Athletes play a crucial role in arriving for training fully prepared on all fronts. It is their career — they 'own' it, and, therefore, they have a vital responsibility in keeping themselves fit and injury-free.

Stick to basics

Playing the 'blame game' is easy and can be fuelled by many people in many ways. But high-performance teams have the opportunity to change the way they view training load, injuries and performance, ultimately reaching new heights in individual or team events.

At the end of the day, what do all professionals aspire to achieve in high-performance coaching? The answer is plain and simple — high performance!

Be it winning a championship or simply achieving something previously considered unachievable, the goal is to perform well. In order to achieve high-level performances, athletes need to be fit. How do they do that? By training. Plain and simple.

When analysing the roles and responsibilities of sport coaches, strength & conditioning staff, sports medicine personnel, recovery staff and athletes, it's clear that all of them 'own' performance.

Progression is the key, whether it's in training load or training transfer, and athletes need to be adaptable to achieve peak performance. From both the professionals' and athletes' perspectives, all necessary boxes need to be ticked in order to become world-beaters.

Making art and history of sports

Sports writing has the **power to transform** a simple match into a narrative that encapsulates a nation's history.

Suresh Menon

Sport is seldom simply sport. Viv Richards going out to bat for the West Indies carried with him the pride of his race. Muhammad Ali made a point by first refusing the draft ("I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong") and then by changing his religion. Every time he won, the underdog won.

When I first read *Levels of the Game*, which describes a match between Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner (**in pic**) at the US Open in 1968, I was struck by what sports writing could do. Even a straightforward match can be made to carry a nation's history.

The author, the brilliant John McPhee, weaves together so many strands.

Both Ashe and Graebner were born in 1943. Ashe was black; Graebner was white. Ashe was "a trim arrangement of sinews," while Graebner could be "an ad for a correspondence course in muscle development." Graebner is a Republican, with a signed photograph of Richard Nixon on his desk at home; Ashe is a Democrat who, Graebner says, even plays tennis "with the lackadaisical, haphazard mannerisms of a liberal." A clash of archetypes, then, as well as top-rated players. The book has been called "the high point of American sports journalism."

Ashe and Graebner were both amateurs, with Ashe being an army officer and his opponent a printing-paper salesman. McPhee traces Ashe's origins: his forefathers came on a ship called *Dodingham* in 1735, which carried 167 slaves from West Africa. Ashe and Graebner are



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friends and play the Davis Cup together. When it is suggested that the white man's gait is a sign of arrogance, Ashe points out that a childhood medical condition makes it almost impossible for Graebner to bend at the waist. McPhee adds the detail that when "he brushes his teeth, he places his feet apart and leans like an A-frame against the mirror."

The author is at least as interesting as the players.

Now 92, McPhee is seen as a pioneer of creative nonfiction. He has written classics on freight transportation, shad fishing, birch-bark canoes, the cultural history of oranges, and a four-volume survey of the geology of North America. His *Draft No. 4* is a masterclass on the writer's craft, collected from eight

essays he wrote for *The New Yorker* magazine. "A compelling structure in nonfiction," he writes, "can have an attracting effect analogous to a storyline in fiction."

At one point in the match, McPhee quotes Graebner as thinking, "If I had his backhand and he had my forehand, we'd be invincible." Graebner's forehand is described as "Wagnerian."

Ashe goes on to win the title, cheered by his Davis Cup teammates. There is a suggestion that the Americans — Charlie Pasarrell, Donald Dell, Graebner, and Ashe — would rather win the Davis Cup than individual titles. When Ashe beats Tom Okker in the final, he "bows to them, giving them something of his moment as the winner of the first United States Open championship."

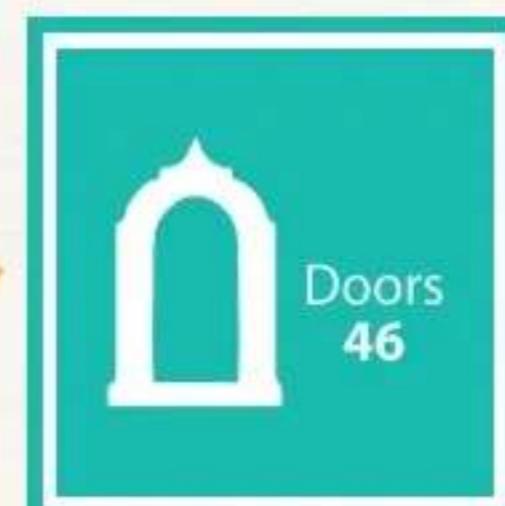
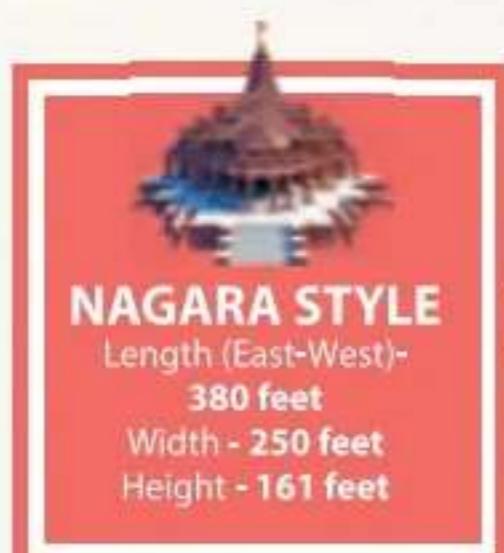
As an aside, the US beat India in the Davis Cup that year, with Ramanathan Krishnan defeating Graebner for India's lone win.

AMAZING UNFORGETTABLE MOMENT !



“There are some feelings in my heart that I cannot find words to express. Everyone is emotional and happy. On this historic moment, every city and village in the country has turned into Ayodhya, and every path seems to be heading towards the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi”

- **Yogi Adityanath**
Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh



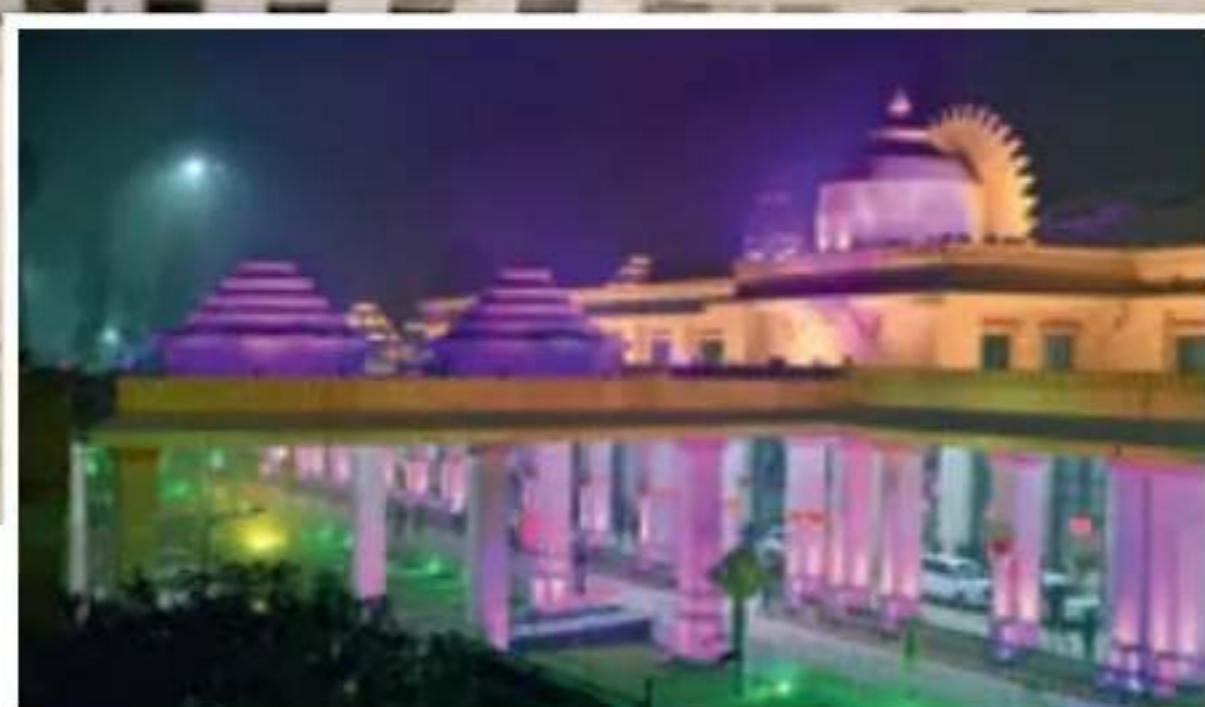
- **14 feet wide** Circumambulation path has been built along the temple complex
- **125 figurines** Made of bronze depicting Ramayana will adorn it
- **7 temples** in addition to the main Ram Temple will be built south of the main structure, dedicated to various sages and figures in the Ramayana such as Nishad-raj, Ahalya and Shabri
- **70% of the sprawling** 70-acre plot in the complex is to be left vacant for 600 plants
- **2.1 million** cubic feet of stone including pink sandstone, white marble and granite was used in the temple's construction
- **14 meter thick layer** of roller-compacted concrete has been laid at the temple's foundation. Granite plinth has been constructed to protect against ground moisture
- **A Visitor Facilitation Center** with a capacity of 25,000 is being constructed, where there will be lockers for keeping the luggage of the visitors and medical facilities





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- Strengthening and beautification of 84, 14 and 5 Kosi Parikarma Path
- Deepotsav, Grand Festival of Lights has set a new World Record

