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PHOTOLINE

Men's Asia Cup T20 tournament

POSTER

OUSMANE DEMBELE

WOMEN'S ODI WORLD CUP

Analysing the eight contenders

WAITING IN THE WINGS TO BATTING FOR INDIA'S DREAMS

Can Jemimah Rodrigues inspire her nation to its maiden ODI World Cup title?

QUEEN OF THE MAHANADI

Rashmita Sahu's Rise in Indian Canoeing

The Mahanadi River, often described as the lifeline of Odisha, has long been a source of sustenance,culture, and inspiration. Among the countless stories it carries, one stands out of a young girl whose bond with the river transformed her life. That girl, Rashmita Sahu from district Cuttack, is today Odisha's "boat queen" a canoeist whose journey from hardship to national recognition is as inspiring as it is remarkable.

At just 20, Rashmita has already been recognised by none other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his Mann Ki Baat broadcast who lauded her achievements and even spoke to her personally. He praised her two gold medals at the Khelo India Aquatics Festival in Srinagar and said her journey would inspire the youth of India.

Rashmita lost both parents before her teenage years. Her father was left bedridden after an accident when she was nine, and four years later her mother passed away in another accident. Orphaned young, she turned to the Mahanadi for solace, where paddling became both an escape and an anchor.

Her potential was spotted in 2017 during a Sports Authority of India (SAI) selection camp at Jagatpur. Coaches were struck by her strength and determination, inducting her into the Aquatics Centre of Excellence. Since then, she has built an impressive record, collecting more than 30 national medals. Highlights of her journey include a silver and bronze at the National Games 2024 in Uttarakhand, a gold at the National Canoeing Championship in Bhopal, and a stunning double gold at the Khelo India Aquatics Festival 2025 in Srinagar, where she clocked 53.53 seconds in the 200m sprint. Her discipline also earned her a post as a constable in the Odisha Police in 2024, adding stability to her sporting life. The next big target is the 2026 Asian Games. Rashmita dreams of carrying the tricolour to the podium, and her coach Laishram Johnson Singh believes she has the potential to be a genuine medal contender. Odisha's increasing investment in water sports through the SAI Centre at Jagatpur and the Kayaking and Canoeing Association of Odisha has given her the platform to thrive. Rashmita's story is not just about sporting success.

It is about resilience, the ability to turn grief into grit. From losing her parents at a tender age to earning praise from the Prime Minister, she has shown that even the strongest currents can be conquered. Today, the Mahanadi's daughter stands as a beacon for India's youth, proving that courage, perseverance, and belief can chart a course to glory.

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OFF-SIDE

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FEAST FOR CRICKET, FAMINE FOR REST

Where cricket **enjoys a constant banquet** of sponsorship and visibility, the rest of Indian sport survives on crumbs.

Apollo Tyres' recent Rs. 579-crore deal for the Indian cricket team jersey, spanning until March 2028, tells us as much about the power of cricket as it does about the weakness of every other sport in the country. The company closed FY25 with Rs. 26,123 crore in revenue and Rs. 1,121 crore in profit, and will now spend nearly Rs. 230 crore a year – 21 per cent of its last year's profit – on the only guaranteed billboard: the Team India jersey.

GroupM's 2024 Sporting Nation report valued India's sports sponsorship market at Rs. 16,633 crore, and Apollo Tyres now accounts for three per cent of that total with this one deal. The jersey has long carried a sponsor's curse – Sahara, Oppo, Byju's, Dream11 all walked away – yet each handover made it more expensive.

Neeraj Kanwar, Apollo Tyres' vice-chairman and MD, says: "When you get into a bidding process, you will add a premium, and the jersey commands that." That premium, in this case, buys ubiquity – Tests, ODIs, T20s, men's and women's cricket, a full calendar year of constant exposure.

The exposure is unlike anything else in Indian sport. The 2023 ODI World Cup drew 518 million viewers, with the final reaching a peak of 300 million. The IPL's 2023–27 media rights were sold for Rs. 48,390 crore, and the 2025 edition garnered a billion viewers. Indian cricket doesn't just deliver eyeballs; it provides certainty.

However, every rupee spent on cricket can be seen as a rupee denied elsewhere. Indian football, whose Indian Super League was once heralded as the next big thing, had a Rs. 50-crore commercial guarantee from Football Sports Development Ltd. The deal, though, is no longer in place as the league struggles to reach 100 million viewers in a season. Hockey's professional revival, the Hockey India League, relaunched only last year, has already lost two franchises. The "emerging sports" basket is worth Rs. 2,461 crore, as cricket accounts for 85 per cent of sponsorship revenue, according to the GroupM survey.

The loop is vicious. Sponsors chasing certainty pour into cricket. Broadcasters, following sponsors, pay more for cricket. Administrators, flush with cash, schedule more cricket. Audiences, with no shortage of content, stay locked onto cricket. Meanwhile, other sports struggle for investment, visibility, and scale. Without scale, they cannot attract sponsors; without sponsors, they cannot fund their scale. It is the classic chicken-and-egg trap, and it has trapped Indian sport for decades.

The government is aware of this imbalance and has attempted to intervene by introducing a 40 per cent GST on IPL tickets; however, gate receipts are not where the money is. The real rivers are sponsorships and media rights.

The solution, too, can come from cricket – forcing cricket to share. Should IPL franchises be mandated to invest in other sports leagues? Some already do – RPSG in football, GMR in kho-kho and kabaddi, JSW in football, kabaddi and hockey, Capri in kabaddi, kho-kho and rugby. But mandating such investment could finally broaden the base.

The BCCI could also turn up its generosity. In 2008, it contributed Rs. 50 crore to the National Sports Development Fund, Rs. 10 crore to India's Olympic preparations for 2021, and extended financial assistance to the Indian Olympic Association for the 2024 Paris Games.

However, beyond financial considerations, the Board possesses unmatched expertise in marketing, branding, broadcast negotiations, and sponsorship packaging. If anyone can teach other federations how to sell sport, it is the BCCI.

As Kapil Dev reminded us at the recently concluded *Sportstar*-KPMG PlayCom Summit: "If you take Rs. 100 from the sponsor, you must deliver value worth Rs. 1,000. If you take Rs. 100 and give back only Rs. 10 in value, it won't work."

Cricket offers that multiplier because of its year-round fixtures, relentless broadcast distribution, and a captive fan base. But other sports can't, because they've never had or created the same runway. Unless policy, BCCI muscle, and franchise obligations combine to widen the base, the imbalance will persist. Cricket will eat first, eat last, and eat almost everything available.

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AFP

Italy defends Billie Jean King Cup

Italy successfully defended its Billie Jean King Cup with a 2-0 victory over record 18-time champion, the United States, taking its own tally in the premier women's team competition to six titles.

Elisabetta Cocciaretto and Jasmine Paolini both won their singles matches to help their country triumph in Shenzhen and prolonged the American wait for another title after its previous success in 2017.

World number eight Paolini's 6-4, 6-2 victory was her maiden win in her sixth clash with Jessica Pegula and helped Italy become the first team to capture back-to-back titles since the Czech Republic lifted three straight trophies from 2014-16.

« I have actually told him that one more world record, World Athletics loses its Christmas party, two more world records we lose the summer party.
– World Athletics president Sebastian Coe joking about pole vaulter Armand Duplantis »

2:02:16

Kenya's Sabastian Sawe won his first Berlin marathon with a Season's Best time of 2:02:16, to make it three wins in three races over the distance, but his world record attempt failed on a humid day. Japan's Akasaki Akira was a surprise second after a powerful second half of the race, finishing almost four minutes behind Sawe. Ethiopia's Chimdessa Debele came in third. It was a much tighter women's race with fellow Kenyan Rosemary Wanjiru completing the double for her country in 2:21:05, three seconds ahead of Ethiopian Dera Dida, whose compatriot Azmera Gebru was third.

2nd

India's men's doubles pair Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty finished runners-up at a BWF World Tour event for the second straight week, going down to World No. 1 duo Kim Won-ho and Seo Seung-jae in the China Masters Super 750 final in Shenzhen. The Korean pair, also the reigning world champions, beat the eighth-seeded Indians 21-19, 21-15 in 45 minutes. Satwik and Chirag had also lost in the Hong Kong Open final.

« I know Rafa is totally open to maybe playing some tennis. It sounds terrible to call it 'seniors tennis,' but maybe we can create a tour, like a Fedal tour or something –
Roger Federer saying he's open to the idea of launching a tour alongside Rafael Nadal »

PROUD WINNER

Indian Grandmaster R. Vaishali clinched her second consecutive FIDE Grand Swiss title and made it to the women's Candidates tournament after a hard-fought draw against former world champion Tan Zhongyi of China in the 11th and final round. Vaishali became the third Indian to make the Candidates. Divya Deshmukh and Koneru Humpy have already qualified after finishing first and second, respectively, in the women's World Cup earlier this year. FIDE/MICHAL WALUSZA

Power play: (R-L) Magomed Ankalaev battles with Alex Pereira in their UFC 313 light heavyweight title clash at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas.
PICS: GETTY IMAGES

Can Pereira solve the Dagestani puzzle?

Magomed Ankalaev defends his light heavyweight crown against Alex Pereira in a UFC 320 rematch. Can Pereira's lethal left hook topple Ankalaev's **grappling dominance?**

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The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is set to light up the T-Mobile Arena in Nevada on October 5 with UFC 320, one of the year's most anticipated events.

The headliner sees reigning light heavyweight champion Magomed Ankalaev defend his crown against former title holder Alex Pereira in a fascinating rematch.

At UFC 313 earlier this year, Ankalaev leaned on his grappling-heavy game to nullify Pereira's striking and claim a dominant unanimous decision win. His formula was simple yet ruthless: time his takedowns, drag Pereira into close quarters, and sap him of energy until resistance waned.

That blueprint worked once, but rematches are rarely identical. Pereira, a two-division champion and one of the most dangerous strikers in

combat sports, still carries a left hook capable of ending fights in an instant. His arsenal of kicks and pressure can tilt the tempo if the bout stays upright. The vulnerability, however, remains clear: when the takedown threat looms, his defensive options narrow.

For Ankalaev, the path is familiar: wrestle, control, repeat. For Pereira, survival hinges on denying that rhythm long enough to impose his own weapons. This is not just striker versus grappler. It is a contest of who can claim their preferred battleground first.

The bantamweight co-main brings another clash of contrasts. Champion Merab "The Machine" Dvalishvili thrives on non-stop pressure, overwhelming opponents with chain wrestling and constant motion. His goal is not the single takedown, but the cumulative weight of attempts that eventually grind opponents down.

Opposite him is Cory "The Sandman" Sandhagen, one of the division's most inventive strikers. His unorthodox footwork, spinning strikes, and ability to create openings from odd angles make him a puzzle few can solve. If he maintains distance, he dictates terms; if Dvalishvili traps him against the fence, the champion's grind takes over.

Did you know?

UFC history took a sharp turn in 2013 thanks to Ronda Rousey (left).

For years, Dana White insisted women would never fight in the UFC. Rousey's dominance and star power forced a change of mind, making her the first woman to sign with the promotion. Her run of armbar finishes drew a new wave of fans and proved the value of women's MMA. In 2022, she became the first woman inducted into the UFC Hall of Fame.

Her impact is a reminder that fighters who bring something different — be it Rousey's pioneering presence, Ankalaev's suffocating control, or Pereira and Sandhagen's striking artistry — often reshape the sport itself.

« Every setback sets you up for a greater comeback »

JEMIMAH RODRIGUES

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For nearly a decade, she has been a standout both on and off the field. On it, for her textbook cover drives that uphold Mumbai's rich legacy of batting in women's cricket. Off it, for the viral social media posts — often with a guitar in hand — that have made her one of the game's most recognisable personalities. Beyond the attention online, from India's perspective, she has steadily become the bedrock of the middle order. Her exploits for the national side, combined with consistent performances across franchise leagues worldwide, have established her as a genuine modern-day star.

Remarkably, despite featuring in four T20 World Cups, Jemimah Rodrigues is only now set to make her ODI World Cup debut — a dream she has nurtured ever since she watched Sachin Tendulkar return home on that unforgettable April night in 2011, carried on the shoulders of his teammates.

Now, a buoyant Jemimah, a newly signed Red Bull athlete, reflects on her journey to her first Women's ODI World Cup.

Four T20 World Cups, but this will be your first ODI World Cup. What does an ODI World Cup mean to you?

I'm really looking forward to it, and I think the wait makes it even more special.

Besides the wait, what makes the ODI World Cup stand out for you? In 2017, you were at the airport,

EMMANUAL YOGINI

Power-packed performer: "I want the same energy at the 300th ball as I had at the first," says Jemimah.
GETTY IMAGES

right?
Yes, I remember going as a 16-year-old to pick up the Indian women's team. Until then, hardly anyone followed women's cricket, but that day the airport was packed. That's when I knew women's cricket had made it.

Did the spark for you as a cricketer come then, or was it when you saw M.S. Dhoni lift the 2011 World Cup?
The spark ignited when India won the home World Cup. And my house at that time was just behind Sachin Sir's. So, when he came in his car, I actually saw him coming out, and there was no space for his car to move. It would have taken him three hours just to go less than a kilometre. So, I think, yeah, that's when I was like, okay, World Cups are special in India.

Would you say missing the 2022 ODI World Cup was both your biggest setback and a major turning point?
Hundred per cent. What they say is true — every setback sets you up for a greater comeback. At the time, being dropped before the World Cup felt like the worst thing that could happen. But looking back, it's one of the best. It forced me to change my game, work on my personality, understand myself better and step out of my comfort zone. That fall has made me a better player today.

Can you elaborate on how you made that turnaround happen?
It was a very difficult time. I used to cry almost every night and was struggling mentally. I even took a short break because I couldn't handle being dropped and missing out on playing for my favourite team. After some time, I sat down with my coach, Prashant Sir (Shetty), and my dad, who also coaches me. We made a plan: I'd play two matches, but on tough pitches. At Azad Maidan, for example, mornings had so much dew you could press the surface down, and by the afternoon it turned square. I played against quality Mumbai boys — sometimes Under-12s, sometimes U-19s, sometimes older. Stepping out of my comfort zone and training in those conditions helped me understand my game far better. So when I came back to international cricket, where you usually get good batting tracks, it felt much easier.

In that phase, besides your family and cricket support system, who was your biggest source of strength?
Apart from my family and cricket, I'd say God — Jesus — because my faith is built on Him. When everything around me feels uncertain, He is the rock that keeps me steady. I hold on to the belief that something good will

Hometown hero: Rodrigues savours the moment after India's eight-wicket win against Australia in a one-off Test at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai in 2023.
GETTY IMAGES

come, even when things look bad. It always works out, and that has helped me a lot.

You've never struggled with fitness, but maintaining cricket-level fitness across 12 months is demanding. How has your training adapted to that?
I take fitness very seriously because there's always room to improve. For me, fitness is as important as batting. You can have all the skill, but without fitness and stamina, you won't last — especially in a 50-over game, which is long and taxing. My goal is to have the same energy and strength at the 300th ball as I did at the first, and that's what motivates me.

Working with Red Bull makes it even more exciting. They have an athlete's performance centre in Austria with world-class facilities — half of which I don't even understand, but they're amazing. This partnership feels like more than just a signing; it's like working with family. They genuinely want to help me improve and reach my highest potential.

Do you think, over the past couple of years, your cricket has started to speak louder than the chatter about your social media posts?
I used to feel bad when people focused more on my social media, because I've always been lively and active there. But I didn't give it too much importance. I knew that if I worked hard and gave my 100%, that was enough. As long as my intent was right, the rest didn't matter. Even now, I'm not doing it to silence anyone — I'm doing it to help Team India win and to stay true to my intent in whatever I do.

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Quick singles

The most favourite roommate?
I think Smriti (Mandhana).

Smriti the roommate, or Smriti the batting partner?
Oh, that's tough. I think India needs us more as batting partners.

Jemi the guitarist, or Jemi the batter?
Batter.

Straight drive or cover drive?
I love the cover drive, with the satisfaction of a straight drive.

If you had to set a quirky fan challenge, what would it be?
Since Red Bull gives you wings, I would like to have a fielding challenge where the ball is really far away and you have to dive and catch it.

One Red Bull athlete you actually associate yourself most with?
Associate myself most with? There are a lot of crazy athletes. But I think all of them, to some extent. Each and every one. There is KL (Rahul), there is Ben Stokes, there is Shreyas Iyer. I think, maybe being a Mumbaikar, we have a lot of similar traits. I'll go with Shreyas.

On November 2, would you be happier with the Player of the Series trophy or the World Cup?
Easy question. The World Cup.

On the fast lane: In the third ODI against Australia recently, Smriti Mandhana hammered the second-fastest century in women's cricket history — the quickest ever by an Indian.
SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Age of audacity

Change is the only constant. As bumper-stickery as this adage sounds, it has been the tagline for the ODI format for much of the last decade.

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Seven hundred and eighty-one runs. This was the mammoth match aggregate India and Australia amassed in the final ODI of the recent three-match series in New Delhi. What started as an innocuous decider quickly became one of the best one-day internationals in the history of the women's game, with multiple records hacked away along the way. Those with a theatrical vein will appreciate the timing of this match. How often does one get to see the most dominant side in the sport walking around red-faced, lost for answers? Less than a fortnight away from a World Cup to be staged in the same country, this fixture earned the potential to single-handedly become the tournament's biggest endorsement.

Come a long way

Change is the only constant. As bumper-stickery as this adage sounds, it has been the tagline for the ODI format for much of the last decade. "There has been a shift in the sense that the numbers are going up, the average scores have gone up, and the way they're going about the entire format is different now," W.V. Raman, former head coach of the

Historic turnout: The 2020 T20 World Cup final at the MCG set a record for women's cricket, drawing 86,174 fans to the stadium. Increasing viewership and following across both white-ball formats in the women's game means that it is now being treated as a business, which brings with it its own positives. GETTY IMAGES

Indian women's national team, tells *Sportstar*. "A lot of spinners have come into the fray, and batters quite obviously are looking to step up the runs, looking to play this game at a much faster pace. The influence of T20s has seeped into the 50-over format too, which is an entertaining turn for the format," he adds.

Raman was around the unit when India was still figuring out its T20 character. He remembers a persistent lack of confidence and fear of failure within the setup, which has finally been discarded. "ODIs were a comfort zone because they provided an opportunity for everybody to play themselves in. Until the mushrooming of T20 leagues, the girls found the format quite taxing. There were a lot of inhibitions about not being able to keep up with the pace of the format and being unable to score at the pace we've come to see as normal in the men's game. But with time, 200 scores are getting common in T20s, and that's also changed the way ODIs are being approached," he explains.

There have been 66 instances of 300+ totals in women's ODIs since 2013 — the last time India hosted the 50-over showpiece. Of those, 35 have come after the 2022 World Cup. India has managed nine of its 13 scores of 300 or more in just the last two years, a shift the think tank has acknowledged as a priority.

Towards that end, picking horses for courses is one approach. And then there are some who tune themselves to the demands of the course, like Ellyse Perry, who completely changed her game to keep up with the flashy requirements of T20s. An undeniable addition to that club is her Royal Challengers Bengaluru teammate Smriti Mandhana.

Elegance — an adjective almost synonymous with her — often bears the burden of slowness. Smriti's tendency to take her time to get going was a tad too relaxed for the era the game was stomping into. She had to turn from a gentle breeze to a tornado, a change half mandated by Shafali Verma's axing from the side. The result? Smriti has the most runs in the format (2100) since the 2022 World Cup. Of the 15 centuries India has scored in this cycle, eight have come from her bat.

Raman believes this evolution epitomises the transformation of the format itself. "It's a clear example of how a player can play this game for a decade and a half and suddenly discover herself and do deeds that were considered impossible."

Lisa Sthalekar, winner of the 2013

From the album: Rachael Heyhoe Flint, captain of host England in the inaugural Women's World Cup in 1973, with the participating teams outside 10 Downing Street, London. **Below:** Mithali Raj (second from right) captained India in the 2005 edition, leading the team to the final. GETTY IMAGES

edition with Australia, attributes this to a fresh outlook on the PowerPlay — yet another gift of the T20 era.

"If you rewind maybe even 10 years ago, the mantra was to survive the PowerPlay, keep wickets in hand, and then slowly you can build and cash in at the end. I heard Beth Mooney and Kim Garth say that the third ODI felt like T20 cricket for 100 overs. That's how they were playing it as well," she tells *Sportstar*.

Cover all bases

What also helps is an increasing homogenisation of wickets around the world.

"If you're not familiar with the background in a particular venue and switch the television on and look at a strip, you won't potentially know where the game is played. The character of the pitch is more or less standardised, as the ICC says," Raman notes.

Sthalekar also brushes off conjectures of predominantly spin-friendly conditions in the subcontinent. "I don't think India is creating those dust bowls anymore. I think they're creating opportunities for fast bowlers," she underlines. "The pitches are providing a little bit more pace, good carry, which is effective. The theory that Indian pitches are dust bowls is coming from people who may have looked at the game 10 years ago."

This transition has bloomed along with the demands of the game. A potent pace pool was earmarked as top of the Indian wishlist, right from Raman's time through to when Amol Muzumdar took charge of the setup.

The Jhulan Goswami-sized gap (post her retirement) triggered a panic to find the next pace-bowling sensation. Several players have entered the musical chairs for the role, but injury (think Pooja Vastrakar), lack of faith from management (Shikha Pandey), or gaps in skill mean India doesn't have the ideal candidate yet. While still a work in progress, focused national camps and the seam demands created by the Women's Premier League have helped India advance down this path.

While India works on its teething troubles in pace, the rest of the world has attempted to catch up in the spin-bowling game. England, whose bowling annals boast ruthless seamers like Katherine Sciver-Brunt and Anya Shrubsole, comes into this World Cup with a top-notch spin quartet. Australia has always been ahead of the curve, carrying quality tweakers who thrive in subcontinent conditions. Spin still keeps India ahead, even if barely, with Deepti Sharma leading the bowlers' chart for this cycle with 59 scalps.

What India will draw confidence from is the healthy crop of youngsters making their opportunities count. In pacer Kranti Goud and spinner N. Shree Charani, the WPL has gifted the national team two adaptable, spunky players who are happy to take aggression to the opponent. That India has chosen to take a punt on them, like it has with Pratika Rawal at the top of the order at the expense of Shafali, signals a welcome change in perspective. "Thank God for that," Raman chuckles. "It's not always about how long you've been playing this game. It's good that they are not really taking decisions based on a predetermined stance and they are looking at who are the ones who are likely to serve a team well in a

UNLIKE THE MEN'S GAME, WHERE TEST CRICKET OCCUPIES THE PEAK OF THE CRICKETING MASLOW'S PYRAMID, ODIS ARE THE ZENITH FOR THE WOMEN

Ultimate champion: Australian players celebrate their title win in the 2022 edition. They have won the title seven times. GETTY IMAGES

competition or even in a bilateral series. That's the way it has to be done."

Big picture

Fifty-two years ago, women's cricket took shape through the one-day format. Unlike the men's game, where Test cricket occupies the peak of the cricketing Maslow's pyramid, ODIs are the zenith for the women. "We don't have anything close to a World Test Championship," Sthalekar exclaims. International red-ball cricket is restricted to four teams — Australia, England, India, and South Africa — with only the first two playing the format regularly, courtesy of the Ashes.

"Unless a higher aspiration presents itself, ODIs will be the peak," she adds.

While trends will come and go and the T20 format will continue to push its influence on others in the women's game, ODIs are the lifeline because of everything they bring along. Funding and stability of fixtures under the Future Tours Programme are cushions that teams outside the top tier — men or women — desperately need. This, however, doesn't erase the reality that the financial capabilities of boards still dictate how competitive teams can be, and that conversation isn't happening on the most basic of levels.

Sthalekar urges patience and persistence in investment across the board. "T20s may be the driving vehicle, but why not add ODI fixtures when on bilateral tours? ICC is figuring out plans for that second tier. It's a hard issue because not all the boards can afford to create optimum opportunities. There's only so much money that they have to split up to go to the men's, the women's, grassroots, and so forth. That said, it is important, even at a state level, to keep exposing those players to the longer format, because it will allow players to understand how to build an innings, how to bowl in a spell, how to bowl in partnerships, how to set up a batter, not just hope the batter mishits it and you've got the fielders in the right position."

The 2029 edition of the Women's ODI World Cup is set to feature 10 teams. The competitive nature of the qualifiers over the last few years, across both white-ball formats, means exciting things for the ecosystem. Increasing viewership and following also means the vertical is now being treated as a business, which brings with it its own positives.

"There is an incentive to evolve. The approach of 'safety first, results later' doesn't fly with the generations coming into the game now. Those governing the game are viewing it as a business. It's no longer about 10-year or 15-year plans. Vision for the sport needs to evolve every few years, and the ecosystem has woken up to that reality," Raman says.

Echoes of greatness

From Jackie Lord's miserly 6/10 in 1982 to Alyssa Healy's 509 runs in the 2022 edition, the Women's World Cup has seen trailblazing performances through the years. Ahead of the 2025 edition, here's a look at the names that **made this stage their own.**

1973
(Host: England)

Winner: England
Runner-up: Australia
Highest run-scorer: **Enid Bakewell** (England) — 264 runs in 4 innings; Avg: 88
Highest wicket-taker: Rosalind Heggs (Young England) —12 wickets in 6 innings; Avg: 14.91
Highest individual score: Lynne Thomas (England) — 134 vs International XI
Best bowling in an innings: Glenys Page (New Zealand) — 6/20 in 6.2 overs vs Trinidad & Tobago)

1978
(Host: India)

Winner: Australia
Runner-up: England
Highest run-scorer: Margaret Jennings (Australia) — 127 runs in 3 innings; Avg: 63.50)
Highest wicket-taker: Sharyn Hill (Australia) — 7 wickets in 3 innings; Avg: 7.57
Highest individual score: Barbara Bevege (New Zealand) — 67* vs India
Best bowling in an innings: Sharon Tredrea (Australia) — 4/25 in 10 overs vs England

1982
(Host: New Zealand)

Winner: Australia
Runner-up: England
Highest run-scorer: Janette Brittin (England) — 391 runs in 12 innings; Avg: 39.10
Highest wicket-taker: Lyn Fullston (Australia) — 23 wickets in 12 innings; Avg: 12
Highest individual score: Janette Brittin (England) — 138* vs International XI
Best bowling in an innings: Jackie Lord (New Zealand) — 6/10 in 8 overs vs India

1988
(Host: Australia)

Winner: Australia
Runner-up: England
Highest run-scorer: Lindsay Reeler (Australia) — 448 runs in 8 innings; Avg: 149.33
Highest wicket-taker: Lyn Fullston (Australia) — 16 wickets in 8 innings; Avg: 11.87
Highest individual score: Lindsay Reeler (Australia) — 143* vs Netherlands
Best bowling in an innings: Lyn Fullston (Australia) — 5/28 in 12 overs vs Netherlands

1993
(Host: England)

Winner: Australia
Runner-up: New Zealand
Highest run-scorer: **Janette Brittin** (England) — 410 runs in 8 innings; Avg: 51.25

Highest wicket-taker: Karen Smithies (England) — 15 wickets in 7 innings; Avg: 7.93
Highest individual score: Helen Plimmer (England) — 118 vs Ireland
Best bowling in an innings: Jennifer Turner (New Zealand) — 5/5 in 11.2 overs vs Netherlands

1997
(Host: India)

Winner: Australia
Runner-up: New Zealand
Highest run-scorer: Debbie Hockley (New Zealand) — 456 runs in 7 innings; Avg: 76
Highest wicket-taker: Katrina Keenan (New Zealand) — 13 wickets in 7 innings; Avg: 8.84
Highest individual score: Belinda Clark (Australia) — 229* vs Denmark
Best bowling in an innings: Purnima Choudhary (India) — 5/21 in 8 overs vs West Indies

2000

(Host: New Zealand)

Winner: New Zealand
Runner-up: Australia
Highest run-scorer: **Karen Rolton** (Australia) — 393 runs in 7 innings; Avg: 131
Highest wicket-taker: Charmaine Mason (Australia) — 17 wickets in 8 innings; Avg: 10.76
Highest individual score: Karen Rolton (Australia) — 154* vs Sri Lanka
Best bowling in an innings: Sarah Collyer (England) — 5/32 in 10 overs vs Netherlands

2005

(Host: South Africa)

Winner: Australia
Runner-up: India
Highest run-scorer: Charlotte Edwards (England) — 280 runs in 6 innings; Avg: 46.66
Highest wicket-taker: **Neetu David** (India) — 20 wickets in 8 innings; Avg: 8.35
Highest individual score: Claire Taylor (England) — 136 vs Sri Lanka
Best bowling in an innings: Louise Milliken (New Zealand) — 5/25 in 10 overs vs India

2009

(Host: Australia)

Winner: England
Runner-up: New Zealand
Highest run-scorer: Claire Taylor (England) — 324 runs in 6 innings; Avg: 64.80
Highest wicket-taker: Laura Marsh (England) — 16 wickets in 6 innings; Avg: 10.25
Highest individual score: Suzie Bates (New Zealand) — 168 vs Pakistan
Best bowling in an innings: Laura Marsh (England) — 5/15 in 10 overs vs Pakistan

2013

(Host: India)

Winner: Australia
Runner-up: West Indies
Highest run-scorer: **Suzie Bates** (New Zealand) — 407 runs in 7 innings; Avg: 67.83
Highest wicket-taker: Megan Schutt (Australia) — 15 wickets in 7 innings; Avg: 16.53
Highest individual score: Stefanie Taylor (West Indies) — 171 vs Sri Lanka
Best bowling in an innings: Anya Shrubsole (England) — 5/17 in 10 overs vs South Africa

2017

(Host: England)

Winner: England
Runner-up: India
Highest run-scorer: Tammy Beaumont (England) — 410 runs in 9 innings; Avg: 45.55
Highest wicket-taker: Dane van Niekerk (South Africa) — 15 wickets in 7 innings; Avg: 10
Highest individual score: Chamari Athapaththu (Sri Lanka) — 178* vs Australia
Best bowling in an innings: Anya Shrubsole (England) — 6/46 in 9.4 overs vs India

2022

(Host: New Zealand)

Winner: Australia
Runner-up: England
Highest run-scorer: **Alyssa Healy** (Australia) — 509 runs in 9 innings; Avg: 56.55
Highest wicket-taker: Sophie Ecclestone (England) — 21 wickets in 9 innings; Avg: 15.61
Highest individual score: Alyssa Healy (Australia) — 170 vs England
Best bowling in an innings: Sophie Ecclestone (England) — 6/36 in 8 overs vs South Africa

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

Text by Rajdeep Saha and Aditya Padinjat

'This World Cup will extend the movement for women's cricket'

Smooth operations, fan comfort, and women's cricket growth: BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia outlines the **World Cup vision.**

Shayan Acharya
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As India gears up to host an ICC Women's ODI World Cup after 12 years, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) is leaving no stone unturned to ensure the showpiece event is a success.

The tournament will also be the first ICC event at home since Jay Shah took charge of the global body, and BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia believes the month-long spectacle will inspire budding women cricketers to take up the sport.

To set the tone, the opening day in Guwahati will feature a cultural flourish. Noted singer Shreya Ghoshal, who recorded the tournament's anthem *Bring it Home,* will perform live. The Assam Cricket Association and the BCCI are also planning a tribute to the late singer Zubeen Garg, a music sensation and cricket enthusiast from Assam who recently passed away in Singapore. "There is a huge grief and tragic situation prevailing in Assam, following Zubeen's death... the Assam Cricket Association and the BCCI will have a tribute programme during the opening ceremony," Saikia says. The 40-minute show will feature some of India's biggest names in music performing Garg's most popular numbers. "It will be possibly the biggest tribute a cricketing fraternity can offer to him," he adds.

Being a former First-Class cricketer himself, Saikia knows it is no small feat to stage a tournament of this scale across five venues — Navi Mumbai, Indore, Guwahati, Visakhapatnam, and Colombo — during a prolonged monsoon season. Yet he is confident the BCCI will deliver.

"As far as the tournament is concerned, the BCCI is fully on the job. Whatever we have planned is going in the perfect line. All the verticals are being checked regularly, and we are ensuring everything is on time," Saikia tells *Sportstar.*

This year, several parts of the country, including Mumbai and western India, have seen early and persistent monsoon rains. That has complicated preparations, but organisers are optimistic. "As far as the weather is concerned, this is the last part of the monsoon, and this time, the country is receiving too much rainfall, and there is a prolonged and extended monsoon. But in spite of that, venues like Guwahati and others are getting ready for the event. The grounds and the wickets are being taken care of, the stands are ready," Saikia says. "Whatever infrastructure things have to be done, everything is on. We are perfectly ready to host the

Geared up: BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia says India is "perfectly ready" to host the Women's ODI World Cup despite monsoon challenges. AP

matches..."

Among the four venues in India, only Navi Mumbai is a regular stop for women's cricket, drawing packed crowds for India games and WPL fixtures. Organisers, however, chose Guwahati, Indore and Visakhapatnam to "spread the game" beyond traditional centres. Bengaluru was initially included but dropped after the Chinnaswamy Stadium stampede that killed at least 11 people during RCB's IPL-winning celebrations. Notably, frequent hosts such as Delhi, Mohali, and Vadodara were left out. But Saikia stresses, "There are adequate practice facilities with all necessary requirements, there are enough top-tier hotels, so in terms of arrangements and logistics, we are absolutely well equipped."

The ICC has priced tickets as low as Rs. 100 to attract young fans. Ahead of the opener between India and Sri Lanka in Guwahati on September 30, most stands are already sold out. But since this is the first major international event for several of the venues, the BCCI is taking "extra care" to ensure spectators have a smooth experience.

"We have deputed enough personnel to ensure that the hospitality area, the washrooms and the stands are clean, and provide all the facilities to the spectators. You have to understand that this is a long-term version of the game, where all the fans will have to be at the venue for seven to eight hours. So, it is our responsibility to ensure that they don't face any challenges," Saikia says. "There will be proper food stalls, a dedicated housekeeping team to manage stands and washrooms, and all necessary facilities across the venues. The BCCI is giving top priority to crowd management and hospitality. We want the crowd to go back home happily once the match is over..."

Sponsorship has also surged. Industry experts estimate rates are up nearly 50 per cent, with title sponsorship valued at around Rs. 35 crore and co-sponsor packages in the Rs. 8-15 crore range. With major corporate groups on board, the ICC hopes to harness the momentum of women's cricket and push the game to new heights.

"When Jay Shah was the secretary of the BCCI, he introduced the Women's Premier League in 2023. After that, there has been a big movement throughout the nooks and corners of the country. Women's cricket has got lots of popularity after the WPL was introduced, and we also introduced pay parity for women cricketers. So, when women's cricket is taking such a high and big stage now, this World Cup will extend the movement which was initiated by the BCCI in 2022-23," Saikia says.

"This event will give more encouragement to our women and our girls to take up cricket in a more serious, more competitive manner. And, they will see a proper and secured future in their career. So, this World Cup is not only about hosting matches, but it will also empower the Indian women to take their lives forward in a much more structured and disciplined way," he adds.

Impressive recent performances against England and Australia have raised hopes for Harmanpreet Kaur's side. As the World Cup approaches, the BCCI is confident the team can finally break the jinx at home.

Proven contenders: No side has defended the women's ODI World Cup since Australia's hat-trick between 1978 and 1988, yet few would be startled if this Aussie team broke the long drought. GETTY IMAGES

GLORY ONCE WON, GLORY STILL TO DEFEND

To win once is history; to win again is reinvention. At the 2025 Women's ODI World Cup, past champions confront the **harder task** of staying ahead.

Kavita Menon
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World Cups are as much about legacy as they are about the moment. Winning once cements an irrefutable status, but winning again often demands reinvention. That reality now faces Australia, England and New Zealand — the only teams to have lifted the Women's ODI crown.

As the 2025 edition begins in India, each arrives at a crossroads: Australia adjusting to life without Meg Lanning, England reshaping under captain Nat Sciver-Brunt and head coach Charlotte Edwards, and New Zealand balancing ageing stalwarts with untested promise.

The question now is: can these champions adapt and stay ahead in a rapidly changing landscape?

Continuity meets firepower

For Australia, transition has been more evolution than upheaval. Meg Lanning's shock retirement closed an era, but with 10 of the 2022 squad retained, stability underpins the side while younger players step up.

Alyssa Healy has assumed the captaincy with assurance, combining calm leadership and explosive batting. Beth Mooney, Ashleigh Gardner and Megan Schutt add balance, while Alana King and Annabel Sutherland inject energy. Even without Lanning and depth, a strong Women's Big Bash League (WBBL) pipeline and structured development keep Australia ahead of the curve.

The challenge lies in sustaining hunger. Blending proven match-winners with fresh faces, the seven-time champion pursues an

Steady anchors: Amelia Kerr, the architect of New Zealand's maiden Women's T20 World Cup triumph last year, now stands at the heart of the White Ferns' quest for glory in the ODI arena. **Right:** Heather Knight, having stepped aside as captain, is still central to England's World Cup push. GETTY IMAGES and AP

unprecedented eighth crown. Whether Healy's side can convert continuity into dominance again will define its campaign.

A new era in the making

England, a four-time winner, enters a period of recalibration. The 2022 final loss to Australia exposed flaws — inconsistent batting, over-reliance on a few players, fragile leadership — and the 2025 Ashes whitewash confirmed the need for change.

Edwards, a decorated former captain, has taken over as head coach. With Heather Knight stepping back, Sciver-Brunt now leads a squad in flux.

The new line-up blends experience and fresh energy. Knight, Tammy Beaumont and Sophie Ecclestone form the spine, while Lauren Bell, Emma Lamb and Lauren Filer add dynamism.

A versatile all-round group, supported by measured pace and quality spin, offers adaptability across conditions. The task is simple but steep: turning potential into consistency.

Old guards, new hopes

New Zealand, winner in 2000, has since wavered between brilliance and underachievement — last reaching a final in 2009 and falling at the group stage as host in 2022.

The succession problem looms large. Suzie Bates, at her fifth World Cup, and Sophie Devine, in her last, remain central but irreplaceable. Their exits leave Amelia Kerr as the bridge between generations.

Kerr, the all-rounder and team's brightest talent, leads a younger group including Georgia Plimmer, Izzy Gaze and Bella James. Whether she can weld promise to experience will decide if the White Ferns rise above recent struggles.

Chasing glory again

The 2025 World Cup is about proving it all over again.

Australia, England and New Zealand arrive with established cores, emerging players and the hunger for more.

Yet in today's game, battles off the field — development systems, depth and cohesion — may matter as much as those on it.

Meanwhile, the chasing pack has honed squads and sharpened combinations, determined finally to convert potential into results.

The champions cannot afford complacency: every rival, from seasoned contenders to ambitious newcomers, will test both skill and resolve.

On the World Cup's grandest stage, history is no guarantee. To lift the trophy again, all three champions must show not only pedigree but reinvention.

ICC RANKING: **3rd**

BEST WC PERFORMANCE
RUNNER-UP (2005, 2017)

STRENGTHS

India enters the 2025 ODI World Cup with a formidable batting order. Form in this ICC Women's Championship cycle reflects consistency too — 24 games played, 18 wins, five losses and one tie. Shafali Verma's axing has forced Smriti Mandhana to unlock a new attacking gear, much to her opponents' chagrin. India has shown that it can up the tempo at will and has been able to post scores of 300-plus with ease. India also has one of the strongest spin attacks in this World Cup, with the experienced Deepti Sharma, Sneh Rana, and gutsy youngsters like N. Sree Charani in the ranks.

WEAKNESSES

Despite developing a promising pace-bowling unit, India remains somewhat thin in the seam department. Renuka Singh's return from injury brings with it the inevitable concern of ring rust. Arundhati Reddy is diligent but can be expensive, while Amanjot Kaur still carries fitness concerns. Kranti Goud has been a revelation, yet none of these options offers India the reassurance of genuine express pace.

OPPORTUNITIES

Smriti's purple patch bodes well for India ahead of the home World Cup. Her century against Australia in India's last bilateral before the tournament saw her bring an uncharacteristic T20-esque brutality to One-Day batting, which makes India's batting look twice as impregnable. This World Cup also presents Harleen Deol with the chance to make the number three position her own. If she can address her strike-rate concerns, she will add further weight to India's pursuit of its '300-plus in every ODI' mantra.

THREATS

While India's woeful fielding continues to pose problems, the bigger issue is its frequent inability to see plans through. Faced with a 413-run target against Australia, India began dominantly, with the Aussies gasping for air for nearly half the chase. But, as it often has in the past, India lost the plot. Add to that the pressure of a home World Cup, and there is barely any margin for error. Additionally, unfamiliar 'home' venues take away much of the advantage that comes with being a host.

PREDICTION

With balance across departments and home advantage, India should be among the frontrunners. A run to the final looks the most likely outcome, though how well the side handles knockout pressure will ultimately determine if it goes all the way.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

GETTY IMAGES

CAPTAIN
HARMANPREET KAUR

COACH
AMOL MUZUMDAR

BEST WC PERFORMANCE
CHAMPION (1973, 1993, 2009, 2017)

ICC RANKING: **2nd**

STRENGTHS

England boasts enviable batting depth, with Heather Knight's return adding experience and stability alongside Nat Sciver-Brunt in the middle order. Danni Wyatt-Hodge's inclusion provides further firepower at the top. The spin attack, anchored by world no. 1 Sophie Ecclestone and supported by Charlie Dean, Sarah Glenn, and Linsey Smith, is another major asset in subcontinental conditions.

WEAKNESSES

England has often struggled with resilience. When momentum shifts, the side tends to lose collective focus, as seen in its white-ball capitulation at home against India in June-July. The bowling can appear short of ideas under pressure, while the batting leans too heavily on Sciver-Brunt, who has yet to find consistent authority as captain.

OPPORTUNITIES

This tournament offers a platform for England's emerging players — Em Arlett, Lauren Bell, and Sophia Dunkley, among them — to ease the transition from veteran dependence. After finishing runner-up in 2022, the side has the chance to prove it can remain a contender even while in flux. With 15 wins from 24 ODIs in this cycle, England has shown it can remain competitive even amid change. The World Cup offers a chance to consolidate that base and convert promise into consistency.

THREATS

The Charlotte Edwards era is still in its formative stage, and the team has shown vulnerability when unsettled early. Opponents are likely to target Ecclestone and Sciver-Brunt, England's twin pillars; if either is neutralised, the squad's balance and confidence could quickly unravel.

PREDICTION

More than England losing competitive ground, other teams have caught up in form, consistency, and squad balance. For a coach who collects trophies for fun, this World Cup will be the biggest test of whether Edwards' magic can make a difference. England should fancy making the knockouts, but it won't be easy.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

GETTY IMAGES

CAPTAIN
NATALIE SCIVER-BRUNT

COACH
CHARLOTTE EDWARDS

ICC RANKING: **4th**

BEST WC PERFORMANCE
CHAMPION (2000)

GETTY IMAGES

STRENGTHS

Amelia Kerr has been New Zealand's standout, carrying batting and bowling workloads with 927 runs and 23 wickets in the 2022-25 cycle. Alongside Sophie Devine and Suzie Bates, her all-round prowess anchors the team's balance. Jess Kerr's steady seam adds reliability, while Brooke Halliday and Maddy Green strengthen the middle order.

WEAKNESSES

The White Ferns' ODI form has slumped sharply — from a 61% win rate in 2014–17 to 37.5% this ICC Women's Championship (2022/25) cycle. Familiar batting issues persist, with over-reliance on Devine and Bates and instability in the opening and No. 3 slots. A six-month break since their last series against Sri Lanka in March leaves the squad under-prepared.

OPPORTUNITIES

The World Cup is a chance to accelerate transition. Flora Devonshire's call-up, along with Polly Inglis, Bella James, and Bree Illing, injects new energy. Amelia Kerr's adaptability up the order signals a fresh approach, while experimenting with young openers like Georgia Plimmer offers scope to discover long-term successors to the Devine–Bates partnership.

THREATS

The looming retirement of Devine and the advancing years of Bates could leave a leadership and batting vacuum too soon. Inexperience in high-pressure contests, coupled with limited recent international exposure, heightens vulnerability. Indian conditions may magnify these gaps, especially if the newer faces struggle to adjust quickly against stronger, more settled opposition.

PREDICTION

New Zealand's mix of veterans and emerging all-rounders, anchored by Amelia Kerr's form, offers hope. If experience and youth align, a semifinal return is possible

Kavita Menon

CAPTAIN
SOPHIE DEVINE

COACH
BEN SAWYER

ICC RANKING: **8th**

BEST WC PERFORMANCE
SUPER SIX (2009)

PAKISTAN

STRENGTHS

Pakistan arrives at the World Cup on the back of an unbeaten Qualifier campaign at home, winning all five matches with comfort. The top order was powered by Sidra Amin, Muneeba Ali, and Aliya Riaz, each chipping in with half-centuries. Captain Fatima Sana added balance with bat and ball, while Nashra Sandhu led a disciplined spin unit well suited to subcontinental tracks.

WEAKNESSES

Despite momentum from the Qualifier, long-standing batting frailties remain. The absence of a settled opening partner for Muneeba exposes instability at the top, while the lower order lacks finishing depth. Heavy reliance on Sidra and Aliya for runs, coupled with the retirements of Bismah Maroof and Javeria Khan, leaves the batting order thin. Fielding lapses and a struggle for timely breakthroughs add to Pakistan's vulnerabilities.

OPPORTUNITIES

This World Cup gives Pakistan a chance to fast-track transition under a young captain. Fatima's rise as a leader and all-rounder offers the side a fresh identity. With Nashra nearing 100 wickets and spinners like Sadia Iqbal and Rameen Shamim providing support, Pakistan has the chance to redefine itself as a spin-dominant unit capable of dictating terms in familiar conditions.

THREATS

Inexperience in leadership and squad depth could be exposed against stronger opposition. Without Nida Dar's wicket-taking presence, pressure on the spin attack intensifies. The pace unit, led by Diana Baig and Fatima, often struggles to strike early, leaving too much for the spinners to repair. If the batting collapses under pressure, the lack of fielding sharpness may magnify the slide.

PREDICTION

If batting depth and fielding improve, the side has the potential to clear the group stage and test stronger opponents.

Kavita Menon

GETTY IMAGES

CAPTAIN
FATIMA SANA

COACH
MOHAMMAD WASIM

ICC RANKING: **5th**

BEST WC PERFORMANCE
SEMIFINAL (2000, 2017, 2022)

STRENGTHS

South Africa's top order remains a force, with Laura Wolvaardt and Tazmin Brits crossing 1,500 runs as an opening pair since the 2022 World Cup — the most by any duo in this period. Marizanne Kapp adds world-class all-round depth, supported by Sune Luus and Chloe Tryon, giving the Proteas a proven backbone across formats.

WEAKNESSES

The 2022–25 ICC Women's Championship cycle exposed inconsistency: 12 wins, 11 defeats, and one draw for a fourth-place finish. Middle-order collapses continue to undo bright starts, while the retirements of Mignon du Preez, Lizelle Lee, and Dane van Niekerk leave gaps in reliability. Over-dependence on Wolvaardt and Tazmin Brits persists, straining South Africa's ability to post or chase competitive totals.

OPPORTUNITIES

This World Cup presents a platform to reduce reliance on the openers and broaden contributions. Young all-rounders like Nadine de Klerk, Annerie Dercksen, and Anneke Bosch bring freshness, while Nonkululeko Mlaba's spin variations suit Indian conditions. With Wolvaardt captaining her first ODI World Cup, South Africa has the chance to reset its batting identity and push beyond past ceilings.

THREATS

Shabnim Ismail's retirement leaves a major void in the pace attack. Ayabonga Khaka and Masabata Klaas must shoulder new-ball duties, but an inability to strike early could unravel balance. South Africa has often faltered in clutch situations, failing to close partnerships under pressure. On India's flat tracks, both fragile middle-order batting and lapses in bowling discipline could prove costly.

PREDICTION

South Africa has the resources for another deep run. If batting lapses are curbed and bowlers deliver under pressure, the Proteas could finally convert potential into a genuine title challenge.

GETTY IMAGES

CAPTAIN
LAURA WOLVAARDT

COACH
MANDLA MASHIMBYI

Kavita Menon

ICC RANKING: **6th**

BEST WC PERFORMANCE
QUARTERFINAL (1997)

STRENGTHS

Sri Lanka's batting has gained depth beyond Chamari Athapaththu. From June 2022 to August 2024, the top three – Athapaththu, Harshitha Samarawickrama, and Vishmi Gunaratne – accounted for 47 per cent of the team's runs across 23 matches. Samarawickrama has been particularly consistent, averaging 48 this year, while the middle order of Nilakshika Silva and Kavisha Dilhari has provided stability. Hasini Perera's shift to opener has also steadied the top.

WEAKNESSES

Despite progress, Athapaththu's dominance remains stark: her 1,088 runs in the 2022–25 Championship cycle more than doubled Samarawickrama's tally. If Athapaththu falters, the batting can still buckle under pressure. In addition, several key players, including Gunaratne and Dilhari, are relatively inexperienced at major global events, a vulnerability that stronger teams can exploit.

OPPORTUNITIES

This squad has demonstrated its ability to upset higher-ranked sides, with nine wins in the cycle, including a record chase against South Africa and a landmark series win over New Zealand. Dilhari's rise as an all-rounder, finishing as the leading wicket-taker (25 wickets at 26.24), adds balance. This year, young bowlers Dewmi Vihangi (11 wickets) and Malki Madara (6) offer fresh unpredictability to complement veteran Sugandika Kumari (9).

THREATS

After missing the 2022 edition, Sri Lanka faces both rust and scrutiny. A seven-month layoff before its ODI return (2-0 series loss) against New Zealand this year exposed fragility, while the attack still lacks sustained penetration against elite batting line-ups. The combination of inexperience and a bowling unit that can fade under pressure leaves the side vulnerable to collapses.

PREDICTION

Sri Lanka enters as a dangerous underdog. The team is better equipped to spring upsets than to mount a sustained run. If support around Athapaththu holds and the bowling unit continues to evolve, it could derail bigger campaigns. But a deep push will hinge on how well it reduces overreliance on its veteran.

Rajdeep Saha

GETTY IMAGES

CAPTAIN
CHAMARI ATHAPATHTHU

COACH
RUMESH RATNAYAKE

ICC RANKING: **7th**

BEST WC PERFORMANCE
7TH (2022)

BANGLADESH

STRENGTHS

Bangladesh's batting strength lies at the top. Fargana Hoque (715 runs at 34.04) and skipper Nigar Sultana Joty (557 at 29.31) have been highlights of the 2022–25 cycle, supported by Sharmin Akter Supta (348 at 34.80). Their form extended into the Qualifiers, where Hoque (266) and Joty (241) again scored heavily. Together, they give Bangladesh a solid platform.

WEAKNESSES

Beyond the top four, Bangladesh's batting lacks reliability. Middle- and lower-order contributions remain inconsistent, often leaving the side short of competitive totals. Despite occasional knocks from Ritu Moni or Fahima Khatun, depth remains limited. In this cycle, Bangladesh managed only eight wins in 24 matches, underlining its struggles against higher-ranked teams and exposing a fragile core.

OPPORTUNITIES

Spin remains Bangladesh's trump card, especially in Indian conditions. Nahida Akter led the attack with 32 wickets at 22.53 in the last cycle, supported by Rabeya Khatun and Fahima Khatun. With spin dominating the wicket charts, subcontinental tracks could tilt contests in Bangladesh's favour. If the spinners squeeze opponents and the top order holds firm, upsets are within reach.

THREATS

Over-dependence on individual brilliance leaves Bangladesh vulnerable. Victories over India and South Africa in this cycle were rare and often hinged on one player firing. The pace attack, led by 20-year-old Marufa Akter, lacks depth, making Bangladesh one-dimensional. Against stronger batting line-ups, over-reliance on spin and an underpowered middle order may unravel quickly.

PREDICTION

Bangladesh's spinners can keep matches competitive, but an underpowered batting line-up remains a major hurdle. Without middle-order support, the team risks finishing at the bottom of the group stage.

Rajdeep Saha

GETTY IMAGES

CAPTAIN
NIGAR SULTANA JOTY

COACH
SARWAR IMRAN

ICC RANKING: **1st**

BEST WC PERFORMANCE
CHAMPION (1978, 1982, 1988, 1997, 2005, 2013, 2022)

STRENGTHS

Australia remains the gold standard in the women's game, backed by depth across departments. Veterans like Ellyse Perry, Beth Mooney and Alyssa Healy are in form, while youngsters such as Phoebe Litchfield and Georgia Voll have slotted in seamlessly. With nine reliable bowling options, the squad carries an arsenal few can match. Their record underscores this supremacy: 24 matches in the current cycle, 18 wins and only three defeats.

WEAKNESSES

When opponents land early blows, Australia can lapse into passivity, as seen in India's rapid chase of 413 during the final ODI at the Arun Jaitley Stadium. Heavy reliance on matchup plans means that when those falter, the team appears unsettled, offering rivals a brief but exploitable opening.

OPPORTUNITIES

With at least 10 players from the triumphant 2022 campaign, experience is a clear asset. The younger group – Annabel Sutherland, Litchfield, Voll, Kim Garth – has shown the ability to shoulder high-pressure roles, giving the side both continuity and fresh energy.

THREATS

Alyssa Healy's reminder that "you can't defend a World Cup; you have to win it again" looms large. The third ODI against India highlighted that even Australia is not immune to batting collapses. From 378 for 5 in 44.2, it was bowled out for 412 in 47.5. Without Meg Lanning's tactical assurance, the team risks being reactive for longer spells, leaving strategic gaps for rivals to exploit.

PREDICTION

The most dominant ODI side of this cycle, Australia is a near-certain semifinalist. Stung by the T20 World Cup disappointment, the seven-time champion will chase redemption with trademark ruthlessness.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

GETTY IMAGES

COACH
SHELLEY NITSCHKE

CAPTAIN
ALYSSA HEALY

PICS: GETTY IMAGES

Glory, grit and heartbreak

We look at some of the most **epic encounters** and nail-biting finishes in the Women's World Cup over the years.

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Auckland 1982: New Zealand - 80; India - 37 | NZ won by 43 runs

On January 14, 1982, the Kiwis displayed a masterclass in how to defend the paltriest of scores on the biggest of stages.

Their decision to bat after winning the toss might have been a terrible one in hindsight. Only opener Nicki Turner managed to cross the 20-run mark, with skipper Trish McKelvey (16*) and Barb Bevege (12) the other players recording double figures.

Indian bowlers made merry on the Cornwall Park wicket, with Diana Edulji picking up three wickets and Lopamudra Bhattacharji and Shubhangi Kulkarni taking two scalps apiece.

Chasing 81, one would have thought it to be an easy win for the Indians. But riding on home support, the Kiwis were powered by Jackie Lord's splendid six-for, conceding just 10 runs in her eight overs.

Rajeshwari Dholakia was the only Indian batter to reach double figures as the visitors' last four willow-wielders were sent back for nought — all falling prey to Lord's masterful spin bowling.

India's innings was wrapped up for just 37 in 35 overs and the Kiwis clinched a 43-run win. To date, New Zealand holds the record for the lowest total successfully defended in the tournament.

In vain: Australia won comfortably despite a whirlwind unbeaten 178 by Chamari Athapaththu. **Facing page:** Charmaine Mason looks on as New Zealand players celebrate her wicket and its first World Cup title.

Mumbai 1997: Australia - 412/3; Denmark - 49 | Aus won by 363 runs

Australia's dominance in the sphere of women's cricket has long been established, but few results prove that like its 363-run drubbing of Denmark during the 1997 World Cup in Mumbai. On a day when seemingly everything went the Aussies' way, they won the toss and opted to bat first, scoring a mammoth 412/3. Captain Belinda Clark was the star of the show, showing no mercy to the Danish bowlers as she flayed an unbeaten 229, ably supported by fifties from Lisa Keightley and Karen Rolton.

The Aussie bowlers then gave the Danes no respite, with Cathryn Fitzpatrick and Charmaine Mason striking early before Rolton returned to remove the tail as Denmark was rolled over for a mere 49. Among the records to tumble under the scorching Mumbai sun were the highest team score in a World Cup, highest individual score in a World Cup, and the largest margin of victory (in runs) in a World Cup, all of which stand to this day.

Lincoln 2000: New Zealand - 184; Australia - 180 | NZ won by four runs

New Zealand is the only team other than England and Australia to have won a World Cup, and it took a nail-biting final against trans-Tasman rivals Australia to do so.

The hosts went into the 2000 final as underdogs against an Australian side that had won all seven of its matches in the tournament up to that point, and when New Zealand was bowled out for 184, only one result seemed likely.

Cathryn Fitzpatrick took three wickets for the Aussies and no New Zealand batter was able to cross the half-century mark, with Kathryn Ramel top-scoring with 41.

New Zealand struck early with the ball to remove the prolific Lisa Keightley and Karen Rolton, but captain Belinda Clark's 91 meant that Australia was still well-placed to take home a second consecutive trophy. New Zealand, however, hung on, chipping away with regular wickets, and forced the match into the final over, where Australia required five runs with one wicket in hand. On came off-spinner Claire Nicholson, who found Charmaine Mason's outside edge to seal a four-run victory and New Zealand's first World Cup title, on home soil no less.

Pretoria 2005: South Africa - 169; West Indies - 168 | SA won by one run

Both South Africa and West Indies came into this fixture looking for their first win of the tournament after their campaign openers didn't yield a result.

Winning the toss, host South Africa's openers Daleen Terblanche and Cri-zelda Brits came out to bat at the Laudium Oval in Pretoria. But Terblanche's walk back to the dugout came soon enough after she holed out to Shane de Silva off Debbie-Ann Lewis. The Proteas lost quick wickets — languishing at 61/5 in 7.4 overs —

Showstoppers: England's Anya Shrubsole (left) took six wickets in the 2017 final to deny India the title. **Below:** Deandra Dottin runs out Fran Jones in the final over as West Indies won by three runs against New Zealand in the 2022 edition.

and Brits was left waging a lone battle. With contributions from Shandre Fritz (23) and Claire Terblanche (20), Brits' 72 did the heavy lifting as South Africa posted 169 before being bundled out in 49 overs. Defending 170, it was Brits who was the architect of the Windies' collapse. The all-rounder trapped Juliana Nero lbw and sent her back for 41.

At this point, the chasing side was 108/5 in 31.4 overs. West Indies went on to lose five wickets for 60 runs, and Brits took 4/37 in 9.4 overs to cap off a historic one-run win for the Proteas.

Bristol 2017: Sri Lanka - 257/9; Australia - 262/2 | Aus won by eight wickets

Cricket may be a team sport, but once in a while an individual effort can outshine everything else. Chamari Athapaththu's unbeaten 178 from 143 balls against Australia during the 2017 World Cup is one such example. Sent in to bat, Sri Lanka consistently lost wickets from one end, while from the other, Athapaththu produced an astonishing display of stroke-making replete with elegant drives, crunching pulls, and towering sixes. By the time she was done, she had amassed the second-highest score in a Women's ODI World Cup. As it so happened, while her innings was worthy of winning any game, it would come in a losing cause. Alyssa Healy responded with a stunning 152 not out of her own as the Australians cantered to an eight-wicket victory. However, the story of the match was less the result, and more the extraordinary effort of Sri Lanka's No. 3.

Derby 2017: India - 281/4; Australia - 245 | India won by 36 runs

It was a chance for the Indians to reach only its second World Cup final. For the Australians, it was just another semifinal, another box to tick in another one of its title defences.

The last-four fixture began with the Mithali Raj-led side deciding to bat at the County Ground in Derby and straightaway, southpaw Smriti Mandhana was sent back at the end of the first over. The Australians saw the back of Punam Raut soon enough, but Mithali and her soon-to-be successor Harmanpreet Kaur added 66 runs for the third wicket to steady things. While Mithali too soon departed, the Australians suffered the wrath of Harmanpreet, who stayed put till the end and smashed a monumental 171* off 115 balls — a knock embellished with 20 fours and seven sixes. The Punjab big-hitter also stitched a 137-run partnership with Deepti Sharma to help India score 281.

The Indian bowlers, led by the pace battery of Jhulan Goswami and Shikha Pandey, cleaned up the Australian top-three for just 21 runs. The partnership of Ellyse Perry (38) and Elyse Villani (75) brought the chase back on track. When Rajeshwari Gayakwad sent Villani back, India might have felt the momentum swing back in its favour, but Alex Blackwell proved to be another thorn in its road to the final.

Her fluent half-century was slowly culminating in a ton, but Deepti cut the batter's innings short at a 56-ball 90 and handed India a 36-run win.

London 2017: England - 228/7; India - 219 | England won by nine runs

The 2017 World Cup final was a case of so close, and yet so far for India, as it fell agonisingly short of winning its maiden World Cup title.

For large parts of the match, it seemed that India was in control, keeping a lid on the runs with some tight bowling to prevent England from posting a large total. When Nat Sciver-Brunt fell for 51 to make the score 164/6, India appeared well positioned to limit the host to a low total. But a flurry of lower-order runs eventually pushed England to 228-7.

India started its chase well, and when Punam Raut and Harmanpreet Kaur were batting, it needed less than 100 runs with eight wickets in hand. However, starting with Harmanpreet, England slowly chipped away at the wickets to haul itself back into the game. Anya Shrubsole was the pick of the English bowlers, and it was her sixth wicket — a delivery that rattled into Rajeshwari Gayakwad's off stump — that ultimately sealed England's nine-run victory and the trophy.

Mount Maunganui, 2022: West Indies - 259/9; New Zealand - 256 | WI won by three runs

What better way to start a World Cup than with a thriller that goes to the last over? The last edition kicked off exactly like that.

After winning the toss, the Kiwis asked the Windies to bat at the Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui. Experienced pacer Lea Tahuhu laid a marker for things to come by sending back Deandra Dottin in just the third over. She and Jess Kerr steadily removed West Indies batters one by one, but opener Hayley Matthews stayed on.

She laboured to her third ODI century, peppering the outfield with 16 boundaries and clearing it once, and only departed the crease in the 45th over. West Indies, riding on Matthews' ton, posted 259.

If Matthews' knock accounted for much of her team's total, Sophie Devine did just that for the host. She notched up her sixth ODI ton and New Zealand took the match to the final over. Up to that point, Matthews herself and Anisa Mohammed had taken two wickets apiece. The Kiwis needed six runs from the last over. Katey Martin and Kerr were at the crease and Dottin was to bowl the final six balls. In remarkable fashion, the West Indies all-rounder sent both batters back in the second and fourth deliveries. Fran Jonas was run out on the penultimate ball to cap off a three-run win for the Windies.

Devastating finish: South Africa's Mignon du Preez hit the winning runs to send India out of the 2022 edition.

Christchurch, 2022: India - 274/7; South Africa - 275/7 | SA won by three wickets

Semifinal qualification for the 2022 World Cup went right down to the last ball of the group stage, with India facing South Africa at Christchurch knowing that only victory would be enough to knock out West Indies and secure a spot in the final four.

After winning the toss and opting to bat first, Smriti Mandhana and Shafali Verma produced a bright start for India, scoring 91 inside 15 overs. Mithali Raj and Harmanpreet Kaur both added useful runs as well, and though there was a late-overs slowdown, India ended its innings on an impressive 274/7, requiring South Africa to complete its highest-ever chase.

The South African chase got off to an inauspicious start as Lizelle Lee was run out early, but contributions from Laura Wolvaardt, Lara Goodall, and Marizanne Kapp kept it in the hunt. With five overs remaining, South Africa needed 45 runs with five wickets in hand, including Mignon du Preez and Chloe Tryon at the crease. A flurry of boundaries were then followed by Tryon's dismissal, and Deepti Sharma was tasked with defending seven runs from the final over.

The equation had reduced to three runs required from the final two balls when du Preez holed out to long-on, only to be rescued by the third umpire's call that Deepti had overstepped. Du Preez finished the match off the final delivery to send India out, and West Indies through to the semifinals, in the process completing South Africa's highest ODI chase.

WOMEN'S T20I PHOTOLINE
INDIA-AUSTRALIA

1st

Throwing down the gauntlet: Barely a fortnight after being named Player of the Tournament at the Women's Hundred, Australian opener Phoebe Litchfield carried her form into the 50-over arena, cracking an 80-ball 88 studded with 14 fours. Her knock powered Australia to an eight-wicket win over India in Mullanpur and a 1-0 lead in the three-match series. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

FOR MORE IMAGES

2nd

Reining in the Aussies: Kranti Goud overcame an erratic start to return figures of 3 for 28 in 9.5 overs, mopping up the tail and sealing India's 102-run win in Mullanpur. The result not only levelled the series but also snapped Australia's 13-match unbeaten run in the format — just its second defeat since the 2023 Ashes.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

3rd

Blazing trail: Smriti Mandhana lit up the series with a whirlwind 63-ball 125 in the third ODI, including a 50-ball hundred — the second-fastest in Women's ODIs — finishing as the top scorer with 300 runs. Mandhana's hundred is her 13th in women's ODIs, placing her joint-second alongside Suzie Bates. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

4th

Edge-of-the-seat thriller: Australia edged India in a record-breaking series decider in Delhi, a clash that produced the highest aggregate in women's ODI history. At the heart of it was Beth Mooney, blazing to a career-best 138 — her century off just 57 balls equalling the second-fastest ever in the format at the time. She was later overtaken by Smriti Mandhana. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Smriti on a roll

6 The number of batters who have scored fifty-plus runs in three or more consecutive Women's ODI innings against the Australian team. However, in the Delhi ODI on 20 Sep 2025, Smriti Mandhana's second century of the series made her the only player to register four fifty-plus scores against Australia.

Batters registering three or more consecutive ODI fifties against Australia Women

50+	Batter	(for)	From	To	Score sequence
4	Smriti Mandhana	(Ind)	11 Dec 2024	17 Feb 2025	105, 58, 117, 125
3	Debbie Hockley	(NZ)	4 Feb 1996	16 Feb 1997	50, 67, 78*
3	Charlotte Edwards	(Eng)	5 Jul 2009	7 Jan 2011	65, (dnb), 50, 90
3	Hayley Matthew	(WI)	11 Nov 2014	16 Nov 2014	55, 89, 60
3	Suzie Bates	(NZ)	22 Feb 2016	26 Feb 2017	61, 110, 55
4	Mithali Raj	(Ind)	5 Feb 2016	12 Jul 2017	58, 89, 69

PTI

*Notes: * A day before the start of her 50+ sequence, Hockley was dismissed for 49; * Edwards finished her fifties sequence by scoring an unbeaten 48; * It was Mathew's first three innings against Australia; * Before the start of her 50+ sequence, Bates's scores were 54, 102, 43*

50 The number of balls Smriti Mandhana needed to reach her 13th ODI century on 20 Sep 2025. This is now the second-fastest three-figure score in Women's ODIs. Only Australian Meg Lanning has done it quicker — in 45 balls.

Fastest centuries in Women ODIs

Balls	Batter	Score (balls)	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
45	Meg Lanning (Aus)	103 (50)	NZ	North Syndey	17 Dec 2012	Won
50	Smriti Mandhana (Ind)	125 (63)	Aus	Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Lost
57	Karen Rolton (Aus)	107* (67)	SA	Lincoln	13 Dec 2000	Won
57	Beth Mooney (Aus)	138 (75)	Ind	New Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Won
59	Sophie Devine (NZ)	108 (61)	Ire	Dublin	10 Jun 2018	Won

Fastest ODI centuries against Australia Women

Balls	Batter	Score (balls)	Venue	Date	Result
50	Smriti Mandhana (Ind)	125 (63)	Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Lost
77	Smriti Mandhana (Ind)	117 (91)	Mullanpur	17 Feb 2025	Won
79	Nat Sciver-Brunt (Eng)	109* (85)	Hamilton	5 Mar 2022	Lost
86	Lizelle Lee (SA)	102 (89)	North Sydney	23 Nov 2016	Lost
90	Harmanpreet Kaur (Ind)	171* (115)	Derby	20 Jul 2017	Won
90	Nat Sciver-Brunt (Eng)	148* (121)	Christchurch (HO)	3 Apr 2022	Lost

Fastest ODI centuries for India Women

Balls	Batter	Score (balls)	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
50	Smriti Mandhana	125 (63)	Aus	Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Lost
70	Smriti Mandhana	135 (80)	Ire	Rajkot	15 Jan 2025	Won
77	Smriti Mandhana	117 (91)	Aus	Mullanpur	17 Feb 2025	Won
82	Harmanpreet Kaur	102 (84)	Eng	Chester-le-Street	22 Jul 2025	Won
87	Harmanpreet Kaur	103* (88)	SA	Bengaluru	19 Jun 2024	Won
89	Jemimah Rodrigues	123 (101)	SA	Colombo RPS	7 May 2025	Won

Fastest ODI centuries for India Women against Australia Women

Balls	Batter	Score (balls)	Venue	Date	Result
50	Smriti Mandhana	125 (63)	Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Lost
77	Smriti Mandhana	117 (91)	Mullanpur	17 Feb 2025	Won
90	Harmanpreet Kaur	171 (115)	Derby	20 Jul 2017	Won
103	Smriti Mandhana	105 (109)	Perth	11 Dec 2024	Lost

23 The number of balls Smriti Mandhana needed to reach her fifty. This is now the fastest for India in Women's ODIs. Teammate Richa Ghosh had done it in 26 balls against New Zealand in 2022.

Fastest ODI fifties for India Women

Balls	Batter	Score (balls)	Opponent	Venue	Date	Result
23	Smriti Mandhana	125 (63)	Australia	Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Lost
26	Richa Ghosh	52 (29)	New Zealand	Queenstown	22 Feb 2022	Lost
29	Rumeli Dhar	50 (31)	Sri Lanka	Kurunegala	11 May 2008	Won
32	Veda Krishnamurthy	51* (33)	South Africa	Kimberley	7 Feb 2018	Won
32	Harmanpreet Kaur	52 (35)	Australia	Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Lost

5 The number of century partnerships for the first wicket by Pratika Rawal and Smriti Mandana in Women's ODIs. The two became the ninth opening pair in Women's ODIs to achieve five or more century partnerships and also the third Indian duo to do so. For the record, the Aussie pair of Belinda Clark and Lisa Keightley has the most number number of century partnerships while opening — 10.

Opening pairs with five century stands for India in Women's ODIs

100+	Opening pair	Inns	Runs	Ave.	50s	From	To
5	Anju Jain & Jaya Sharma	27	1229	49.16	3	6 Jan 2002	10 Apr 2005
5	Karuna Jain & Jaya Sharma	25	1169	50.83	6	6 Mar 2004	4 Sep 2008
5	Pratika Rawal & Smriti Mandhana	17	1302	76.59	7	22 Dec 2024	20 Sep 2025

76.59 The average partnership for the first wicket between Pratika Rawal and Smriti Mandhana. This is now the highest for any opening pair in the history of Women's ODIs among those pairs with at least 10 innings.

Most successful opening pairs in Women's ODIs (min 10 inns)

Ave.	Opening pair	For	M	Inns	NO	Runs	100	50	From	To
76.59	Pratika Rawal & Smriti Mandhana	Ind	17	17	0	1302	5	7	22 Dec 2024	20 Sep 2025
68.83	Caroline Atkins & Sarah Taylor	Eng	19	19	1	1239	4	5	25 Feb 2008	7 Jul 2009
63.41	Rachael Haynes & Alyssa Healy	Aus	29	29	0	1839	7	6	16 Mar 2012	3 Apr 2022
62.43	Belinda Clarke & Belinda Haggett	Aus	15	15	1	874	2	8	17 Jan 1991	29 Jul 1993
60.13	Tammy Beaumont & Amy Jones	Eng	24	24	0	1443	6	6	17 Nov 2016	22 Jul 2025

781 The combined total of both sides in Delhi. This is now the highest match run-aggregate in the history of Women's ODIs. The total exceeded the previous record by 103 runs.

Highest combined match totals in Women's ODIs

Total	Team1 (total)	Team2 (total)	Venue	Date	Won by
781/20	Aus (412/10)	Ind (369/10)	Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Aus
678/14	Eng (373/5)	SA (305/9)	Bristol	5 Jul 2017	Eng
651/16	Ind (337/9)	SA (314/7)	Colombo RPS	7 May 2025	Ind
646/9	Ind (325/3)	SA (321/6)	Bengaluru	19 Jun 2024	Ind
641/15	Aus (356/5)	Eng (285/10)	Christchurch	3 Apr 2022	Aus

Highest totals while batting second in a Women's ODI

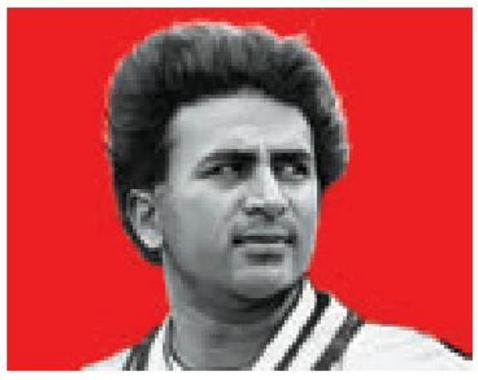
Total	(Ov)	Team	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
369/10	(47)	Ind	Aus	Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Lost
321/6	(50)	SA	Ind	Bengaluru	19 Jun 2024	Lost
314/7	(50)	SA	Ind	Colombo RPS	7 May 2025	Lost
305/9	(50)	SA	Eng	Bristol	5 Jul 2017	Lost
305/4	(44.3)	SL	SA	Potchefstroom	17 Apr 2024	Won
305/10	(49.5)	Eng	Ind	Chester-leStreet	22 Jul 2025	Lost

Highest totals against India in Women's ODIs

Total	(Ov)	Team	Venue	Date	Result
412/10	(47.5)	Australia	Delhi	20 Sep 2025	Won
371/8	(50)	Australia	Brisbane (AB)	8 Dec 2024	Won
338/7	(50)	Australia	Mumbai WS	2 Jan 2024	Won
332/7+	(50)	South Africa	Bengaluru	19 Jun 2024	Lost
314/7+	(50)	South Africa	Colombo RPS	7 May 2025	Lost

+ second innings

All records are correct and updated until 20 September 2025.



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

PAKISTAN HELD THE GAME TO RANSOM BY DELAYING START

There is simply **no excuse** for delaying the start of the game for an hour while haggling to get an apology from the match referee for something that was also not in any of the rule books.

The Asia Cup, as expected, has created a storm that will take a long time to settle down. Anytime India and Pakistan play each other in the sporting arena, the emotions are always taut and high, and every little bit can add to the tension that pervades. It is even more so when they play on the cricket field, and this time, after the two countries had gone to a brief war barely four months ago, those emotions are very raw and easily aroused.

India made their decision to go ahead and play against Pakistan in the Asia Cup, which caused a massive debate in the country. Another debate arose after the Indian players decided not to engage with the Pakistani players in any manner, with none of the courtesies that are sometimes seen even in the fiercest of contests. So, there was no shaking of hands after the game, as is seen in recent times, where teams line up after the game and shake hands before dispersing to their respective changing rooms.

The PCB complaining about it was hard to understand, as there is nothing in the rule books that says handshakes are mandatory. There are many previous instances in different sports, where opponents who have clashed have not shaken hands after their match has ended. The ICC quite rightly ignored the protest, if indeed there was one made as per media reports.

What needs to be looked at is the avoiding of the mandatory media meet on the eve of the match by the Pakistani contingent. They did not have to send the captain, players, or the coach. Anyone among the large support staff could have met the media. That did not happen, and it will be interesting to see if any action is taken for avoiding what is mandatory.

The other thing that left a sour taste in the mouth is holding up the game and starting it one hour late. If the PCB had any issues to discuss with and about the match referee Andy Pycroft, then it had two full days after their loss to India and before the game against the UAE in which to do so. By keeping everybody in suspense and not even turning up at the ground until almost the toss time, they held the game to ransom. There is simply no excuse for delaying the start of the game for an hour while haggling to get an apology from the match referee for something that was also not in any of the rule books. Then, despite the ICC, who appoints the umpires and match referees, saying there was no apology given, the PCB insisted that they had secured one and so agreed to play. They pounced on the words 'regrettable miscommunication' to say that this was the apology.

Presumably, just to get the game started, the mandarins may have used the word 'regrettable', when 'avoidable' would have been the apt word, for there was nothing to regret in the match referee informing, if indeed he did so, that the Indian skipper would not shake hands with his Pakistani counterpart. If he did, then it was simply to avoid an embarrassing situation for the Pakistan skipper. To suggest anything other than

that actually speaks a lot about the warped kind of thinking. And those who say sport and politics should not mix will see from this episode that it actually does, for why else was a team allowed not to start the game at the appointed hour but for the politics of keeping everything hunky dory? In no other sport would an individual or a team be allowed to delay the start of the game. It has set an unsavoury precedent for sure, and hopefully no other team is allowed to get away with this kind of bullying again.

When the second match came along, there was an improved batting performance by Pakistan in the first half before the loss of three wickets put them on the back foot again, and despite getting big runs in the final three overs, they were 20 runs shorter than what they would have wanted. India breezed to a win after a delightful opening partnership between Abhishek Sharma and Shubman Gill that took the breath away and crushed any hopes the Pakistanis had of winning the game. In the end, another super-talented batter, Tilak Varma, treated Pakistan's premier bowler, Shaheen Shah Afridi, like a net-ball spinner and smashed him around to wrap a win with deliveries to spare.

Of course, there were no handshakes but only head shakes from the Pakistan bowlers as to how to bowl to these Indian batters who start the game in fifth gear. There are a few days left before India's next game, and it will be interesting to see what excuses the Pakistanis come up with this time for another drubbing from the country they love to hate.

Crying foul: The PCB complaining about Indian players not shaking hands with their Pakistani counterparts after the game was hard to understand, as there is nothing in the rule books that says handshakes are mandatory, says the author. AFP

What needs to be looked at is the avoiding of the mandatory media meet on the eve of the match by the Pakistani contingent. They did not have to send the captain; players or the coach, and even any among the large support staff could have met the media. That did not happen, and it will be interesting to see if any action is taken for avoiding what is mandatory.

FOR MORE STORIES

Dickie Bird, one of cricket's most iconic umpires, has died aged 92. Born Harold Dennis Bird, he played 93 First-Class matches for Yorkshire and Leicestershire between 1956 and 1964 before becoming the game's most recognisable umpire. Renowned for his humour, humanity and authority, Bird stood in 66 Tests, 69 ODIs and three World Cup finals before retiring in 1996. His contributions to cricket and charity were recognised with an MBE in 1986 and an OBE in 2012. In 2014, he was appointed President of Yorkshire CCC, cementing his enduring legacy in English cricket.

1

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2

AP

Quinton de Kock has reversed his ODI retirement, returning to international cricket after more than a year out. The wicketkeeper-batter, last seen for South Africa in June 2024, has been named for seven white-ball games in Namibia and Pakistan from October 11 to November 8. De Kock retired from Tests in December 2021 and quit ODIs after the 2023 World Cup semifinal against Australia, but made no such announcement following the 2024 T20 World Cup final, his last appearance in the format.

3

GETTY IMAGES

Barbados Royals secured its third consecutive Women's CPL title with a three-wicket win over Guyana Amazon Warriors in Guyana, thanks to late fireworks from Shreyanka Patil and Aaliyah Alleyne. In the men's edition, Trinbago Knight Riders ended a five-year drought by lifting its record fifth CPL crown, also edging the Warriors by three wickets at the same venue, courtesy Akeal Hosein's all-round heroics.

4

R. RAGU

Ravichandran Ashwin has signed up for the Hong Kong Sixes 2025. The six-a-side tournament, scheduled for November 7-9, will likely be Ashwin's first outing since retiring from the IPL. He could also become the first capped Indian male cricketer in the BBL, with interest from at least four franchises. Ashwin retired from international cricket in December last year during the tour of Australia after a decorated career that saw him become India's second-highest wicket-taker (537) in Tests behind Anil Kumble (619).

Red-letter day: Central Zone won its first Duleep Trophy title since 2014-15 by defeating South Zone by six wickets.
K. MURALI KUMAR

A tradition tested by modern priorities

The Duleep Trophy 2025 showcased emerging talent but struggled with absent stars, empty stands, and questions over its **relevance** in a packed cricket calendar.

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Just a couple of months before V.V.S. Laxman and Rahul Dravid stunned the world with their 376-run fifth-wicket stand against Australia at Eden Gardens in 2001, the duo engaged in a dress rehearsal.

The preview show came in Surat, where Laxman and Dravid added 409 runs for the third wicket in a Duleep Trophy match between South Zone and West Zone.

At that time, the Duleep Trophy still attracted household names, as reflected in the team lists. Apart from Laxman and Dravid, South boasted several internationals — Sadagoppan Ramesh, Sunil Joshi, S. Sriram, Hemang Badani and Venkatapathy Raju, to name a few.

West, too, fielded a formidable eleven, with the likes of Wasim Jaffer, Vinod Kambli, Nayan Mongia, Hrishikesh Kanitkar and Ajit Agarkar taking the field with pride.

Such stellar line-ups were commonplace, for the Duleep Trophy held tremendous value. For fringe players, it was the gateway to an India call-up; for established internationals, it provided the perfect competitive match practice.

The sheen fades

Cut to the present, and the scenario is vastly different. The 2025-26 edition, held at the BCCI Centre of Excellence (CoE) grounds in Bengaluru, lacked sheen and purpose.

Many India stars skipped the tournament in preparation for the T20 Asia Cup, currently underway in the UAE. Others, like Arshdeep Singh and Kuldeep Yadav, played the opening round before being summoned to the national camp.

Shubman Gill, the Test captain, was named North Zone skipper but pulled out before the opening game due to illness.

South Zone was without Mohammed Siraj, K.L. Rahul, Sai Sudharsan, Prasidh Krishna and Washington Sundar. With no official explanation given, the general belief was that they had been rested.

The venue, used in senior domestic competition for the first time, was far from ideal. Located on the outskirts of the city, the ground was out of

Resilient effort: For South Zone, it was left to the lone spinner Ankit Sharma to wage a solitary fight — six wickets in the match and a fighting 168-ball 99 that pulled his side clear of danger. K. MURALI KUMAR

bounds for spectators. Several cricket fans working in nearby factories and warehouses turned up in support but were denied entry by security staff.

Lack of atmosphere

The BCCI must address this urgently, as keeping fans away robs the sport of a core element.

As a result, matches were played in silence, without the usual buzz. Apart from the final, no matches were telecast live, further deflating the tournament's presence.

The pitches across both grounds were absolute batting belters, reducing contests to mammoth run-scoring exercises. Even the final, between eventual champion Central Zone and South Zone, lost some shine when six players were withdrawn after being named in the India 'A' squad to face Australia 'A'.

South lost N. Jagadeesan and Devdutt Padikkal, while Central was without Khaleel Ahmed, Yash Thakur, Harsh Dubey and Manav Suthar.

Thanks to India's vast talent pool, replacements were not hard to find. One such was Ankit Sharma, drafted into the South squad for the final. The left-handed all-rounder made his senior debut for Madhya Pradesh in 2009 and even shared a dressing room with Dale Steyn, Kumar Sangakkara and Shikhar Dhawan at now-defunct Deccan Chargers in the 2012 IPL. Now 34 and representing Puducherry, Ankit has long been away from the IPL spotlight. Yet his performance in the final showed his career is far from over. He produced a fighting 168-ball 99, rescuing South from a precarious situation, and also claimed six wickets across two innings with his left-arm spin, albeit in a losing cause.

Ankit shone in a brilliant 192-run partnership with Andre Siddarth, another late South Zone replacement. The Tamil Nadu youngster displayed admirable temperament in his unbeaten 84 under mounting pressure.

Making a mark

Saransh Jain **(in pic)**, meanwhile, seized his chance to impress national selectors. With 16 wickets and two handy fifties, the Central all-rounder was named 'Player of the Series'.

Saransh is a rarity in Indian First-Class cricket — a spinner who can consistently land the ball on a good line and length. The 32-year-old from Madhya Pradesh tested batters with discipline and often came out on top.

His teammate Kumar Kartikeya also made a statement in the final. The versatile left-arm spinner, capable of bowling both orthodox and wrist spin depending on the match-up, had been overlooked for the earlier rounds, as well as the past two seasons.

A match-winning eight-wicket haul, achieved with clever flight and variation, was a timely reminder of his class.

Whether Ankit, Andre, Saransh and Kartikeya are rewarded with bigger roles remains to be seen.

South coach and former India pacer L. Balaji, however, underlined the tournament's enduring significance. Balaji recalled that he made his India comeback on the strength of Duleep Trophy performances. "The international and domestic schedules are packed nowadays. We also have State leagues. But still players are giving it their maximum to play here," Balaji said.

"The Duleep Trophy has been one of the major tournaments. The recognition for it has always been high. It is an iconic tournament. Good performances here can earn a place in the India 'A' team. I made my India comeback in 2005 after taking wickets in the Duleep Trophy.

I am sure that the Duleep Trophy will get the recognition it deserves," he added.

Brief scores (Final)

Central Zone 511 (Rathod 194, Patidar 101, Jain 69, Gurjapneet 4-124) and 66 for 4 (Wadkar 19*, Rathod 13*, Gurjapneet 2-21) beat South Zone 149 (Tanmay 31, Jain 5-49, Kartikeya 4-53) and 426 (Ankit 99, Siddarth 84*, Kartikeya 4-110, Jain 3-130) by six wickets

1st

Rapid acceleration: Afghanistan's Sediqullah Atal (left) and Azmatullah Omarzai smashed 82 runs off just 35 balls, powering their side to 188 for six and a commanding 94-run win over Hong Kong in the Asia Cup opener. AFP

2nd

Wristy wizardry: Kuldeep Yadav razed the UAE batting line-up with four wickets for seven, as India bundled the opposition out for 57 before Suryakumar Yadav's men raced to the target in 4.3 overs. AFP

3rd

Eyes on the ball: Skipper Litton Das struck a 39-ball 59, sharing a 95-run stand with Towhid Hridoy, as Bangladesh cruised past Hong Kong's 144-run target. GETTY IMAGES

Through the gate: Pakistan's Mohammad Haris, after a 43-ball 66, fell to Oman's Aamir Kaleem while attempting a reverse sweep. But his knock lifted the total to 160 for seven, enough to hand Pakistan a 93-run win. AP

On the up: Pathum Nissanka's fluent half-century, studded with six fours and a six, guided Sri Lanka past Bangladesh's 140 with ease in their Group B clash in Abu Dhabi. AP

Howzatt!: Kuldeep Yadav's guile proved too much for Pakistan, the left-arm spinner taking three for 18 to restrict the side to 127 for nine in the Asia Cup clash. India cruised home by seven wickets. REUTERS

7th

Breaking convention: India skipper Suryakumar Yadav and Shivam Dube skipped the customary post-match handshake after the win over Pakistan in Dubai, prompting the opposition to lodge a formal complaint with the ICC match referee. AP

8th

Lock and load: Junaid Siddique's four for 23 fired UAE to its first Asia Cup win, bowling out Oman for 130 in reply to 172 for five. AFP

9th

Leaving it late: Late fireworks from Dasun Shanaka and Wanindu Hasaranga spared Sri Lanka a scare against Hong Kong, after Nizakat Khan's fifty had lifted the underdog to 149 for four. AFP

10th

Caught short: Afghanistan's Karim Janat was run out for eight against Bangladesh, and despite a late rally from Rashid Khan and Noor Ahmad, the chase ended nine runs shy of the 155 target. AP

11th

Eye of the storm: Match referee Andy Pycroft was at the centre of controversy after Pakistan threatened to boycott its UAE clash in the wake of 'handshake-gate'. Play began an hour late after the PCB claimed he had "apologised" — a description the ICC disputed, saying he only expressed regret over a miscommunication. Pakistan went on to win by 41 runs. AP

12th

Flexing the shoulders: Afghanistan veteran Mohammed Nabi smashed five sixes off Dunith Wellalage in the final over to push his side to 169 for eight, but Kusal Mendis's 52-ball 74 steered Sri Lanka to victory in the penultimate over. AFP

13th

Fine wine: Oman's Aamir Kaleem, 43, became the oldest cricketer to score a T20I half-century against a full-member side, his 46-ball 64 bringing the Associate team to within 21 runs of India's 189. AFP

14th

Stretching every sinew: Bangladesh's Shamim Hossain dived full-length to make his ground against Sri Lanka, later holding his nerve to seal the 169-run chase in the final over. AFP

15th

Making amends: Abhishek Sharma atoned for two earlier drops with a stunning forward dive in the deep to dismiss Pakistan's Saim Ayub. AFP

16th

Fired up: Indian openers Shubman Gill and Abhishek Sharma put on 105 in the Super Fours clash against Pakistan, even engaging in verbal volleys with Haris Rauf and his pace attack along the way. India sealed the game by six wickets. AFP

Curtain-raiser: India captain Suryakumar Yadav and Afghanistan skipper Rashid Khan interact with the Championship mascot during the Asia Cup 2025 trophy unveiling in Dubai. ACC

WHERE NOTHING GETS LOST, BUT TEMPERS DO

In Dubai, where lost bags return in half an hour and discipline defines daily life, the Asia Cup brought **rare disorder** — with handshake spats, walkout threats, and Suryakumar Yadav's calm smile standing out amid India-Pakistan tensions.

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The forces of entropy have reigned supreme in the orderly streets of Dubai, where even supercars respect traffic signals at empty crossroads in the middle of the night. The Diary witnessed the metropolis' emphasis on discipline and safety first-hand, an hour after having landed there, when it left its backpack containing legal documents and government IDs in an airport cab. The Diary's restlessness was assuaged by the hotel's concierge desk's soothing words, 'Nothing goes missing in Dubai.' The bag was promptly returned within half an hour.

But the Asia Cup has infused considerable chaos, with bitter rivals India and Pakistan slugging it out off the field rather than on it. The cricketing order has been upended; the tables have turned.

A match referee, only fleetingly in the news when players are slapped with demerit points and captains fined for slow-over rates, has found himself in the crosshairs of simmering geopolitical tensions between India and Pakistan that spilled onto the cricket field recently.

Andy Pycroft **(in pic)**, a moral arbiter of the sport since 2009, was accused of breaching the ICC's hallowed Code of Conduct by asking the captains of India and Pakistan not to shake hands at the toss. The 69-year-old Zimbabwean was suddenly thrust into the spotlight; team combinations were forgotten, the toss became a formality, and the keen eyes of the media would trace Pycroft's heavy gait to the pitch when the ICC decided he would stay on as match referee for Pakistan's subsequent games against the UAE and India in the wake of the 'handshake gate'.

Pakistan was left miffed by the Indian team's 'unsporting' decision not to shake hands, but ironically kept the UAE's players waiting after Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman, Mohsin Naqvi, asked his players to deboard the bus at the team hotel, leading to an hour's delay in proceedings. Such a puerile stunt in any professional sport would have led to the opposition being granted a walkover, but this is the Asia Cup, a tournament that now seems shoehorned into the calendar to milk the 'India vs Pakistan' cash cow.

There were calls from the Indian public to boycott the game against Pakistan, followed by the PCB's protestations and pull-out threats, but the authorities from either country didn't relent. Much like in the world order, economics can strike an awkward compromise even amongst bitterness. Meanwhile, the media from both countries were united on most fronts, sharing notes, news and banter, and were at the receiving end of the only boycott that was enforced, with Pakistan cancelling consecutive pre-match press conferences.

The press meetings that were conducted came with the rider of 'no political questions', but Suryakumar Yadav invariably defused the tensions. Despite leading the team in a tense atmosphere and tackling off-the-field issues, a wry smile always floated around his lips in all interactions. Even when the media exhausted its allotment of questions, he entertained an additional one. *"Bindaas pucho* (ask freely)," he remarked.

AFP

A couple of days after his birthday on September 14, Suryakumar obliged the travelling Indian media contingent with a cake-cutting and photo session following a gruelling training stint at the ICC Academy.

The 34-year-old exudes an aura of calm authority and retains an air of exclusivity without being aloof or supercilious. Rudyard Kipling anachronistically saw his apparition when he wrote, "If all men count with you, but none too much," in his oft-quoted poem 'If'.

Even in his cheekiness, there is respect, and in his implied answers, a direct message. "Close your room, switch off your phone, and sleep" is his mantra to shut out the outside noise and advice to those caught up in the rigmarole of quotidian life.

He also came closest to striking any semblance of peace between the neighbours when he coolly proclaimed that India vs Pakistan 'is not a rivalry anymore' after the Men in Blue did the double over Salman Agha's men. The pronouncement momentarily caused a flutter; the Indian media had its headline, and a quiet acquiescence settled over the Pakistani tribe of scribes.

The madness of the relations between the neighbours needed the method of Dubai to survive. It is no surprise then that five of the last 10 encounters between them have been held in the UAE, where expatriates from both countries count as one. With your phone constantly buzzing with stern Public Safety Alerts from Dubai Police to 'comply with instructions and guidelines' during and after India-Pakistan matches, the scope for miscreants is limited.

With India being considered a runaway leader in T20I cricket, the Asia Cup has been more about competing for the tag of 'Asia's second-best team'. While that debate remains unresolved, Dubai is a frontrunner to be 'Asia's best host'.

SIX MONTHS AGO, I WROTE DOWN, "THANK YOU, UNIVERSE, FOR MAKING ME A WORLD CHAMPION"

Newly crowned World champion **Jaismine Lamboria** talks about how she manifested her win, why she views the Olympics as the starting point of her career, and why she can't afford any downtime.

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It's only been a few days since Jaismine Lamboria returned home to Bhiwani from Liverpool, where she won gold in the women's 57kg category at the Boxing World Championships. Yet she's already realising how much her world has changed. Her days have been filled with felicitations, media requests and podcast appearances. She's even been invited to meet the Prime Minister.

The scale of the reception has taken her by surprise. When she spoke to *Sportstar* just before flying out of Liverpool, the only thing she was looking forward to was the taste of home-cooked food. "*Ghar ka khaana aur maa ke haath ka churma* (Homemade food and a ghee, jaggery and wheat-based sweet dish made by her mother)," she had said.

In between all the events and appearances, Jaismine keeps her World Championships medal close. When she spoke to this publication again a few days after returning, the medal was tucked in her pocket. "I always wanted to win a gold medal for India. This medal means a lot to me. It's a reminder of the struggles and challenges that I've faced and also a motivation to do better in the future," she says.

That motivation is why Jaismine will soon set aside the media glare and even her indulgence in *churma*. "We have another World Cup (in Delhi) in November and before that a camp in Patiala in the first week of October. I'll be going there to begin my training once again," she says.

One might think Jaismine would

Jaismine isn't the first Indian athlete to retool her personality. Before the 2016 Olympics, badminton coach Pullela Gopichand had P. V. Sindhu yell at him in training to bring her out of her shell. For Jaismine, the breakthrough came through training methods.

Bouncing back: Jaismine Lamboria turned her Paris Olympics first-round exit into fuel for a world title. GETTY IMAGES

Deciding bout: India's Jaismine Lamboria (blue) battles Poland's Julia Szeremeta (red) in the World Boxing Championships final on her way to the title. GETTY IMAGES

allow herself more downtime. Descended from one of India's greatest boxers and with multiple national champions in her immediate family, she has carved out her own legacy with a World Championships gold. She won the title the hard way, too — in an Olympic weight division, beating Olympic silver medallist Julia Szeremeta in a final most observers felt she dominated.

Jaismine insists that, World champion or not, she isn't competing to see who the best boxer in her family is. "*Race thodi hai!* (It's not a race). Everyone in my family has the same dream as I, which is to make India proud. *Jab national anthem bajta hai woh best feeling hai* (It's the best feeling when the national anthem plays). That's the moment I want to create again and again," she says.

She is already thinking about how to recreate that feeling. "Right now, I'm feeling good. Our team's performance was also really good (India finished second overall in the women's tournament with two gold medals, including hers). I'm feeling full of confidence but *aage aur bhi karna hai* (I have to do more in the future)," she says.

Her family might wish she spent more time with them, but they understand. They've seen it before.

Last year, three days after returning to Bhiwani from the Paris Olympics, Jaismine had already packed her bags and left for the Army Sports Institute (ASI) boxing centre in Pune.

For many athletes, the Olympics would be a career highlight. For Jaismine, it was a source of dissatisfaction. Her journey there had been remarkable. She wasn't even supposed to go — her compatriot Parveen Hooda had already qualified in the 57kg category. But after she was handed a 22-month suspension for whereabouts failure, Jaismine seized her chance. The 57kg division wasn't natural for her — she had competed in 60kg before — but she took the risk and, against all odds, secured a quota at the World qualifiers.

At the Olympics, though, she was beaten soundly in her very first round. Although she finished far from the medals, Jaismine sees the Games as crucial for her development.

Preparing for the future

"There are two ways to look at how I did at the Olympics. It was disappointing to lose, but at least I got the experience of competing at such a big tournament. I also got the chance to be next to elite athletes. I could watch them, their behaviour, how they trained and how they motivated themselves. After I lost my bout, I would go to the stadium and watch all the fights. I saw how the score was going and how the judges were scoring. I observed all this so I could learn and apply it to myself when I got the chance again in the future," she says.

The moment the Olympics ended, Jaismine says she began putting into training what she had learned. "I knew I could have done well myself and that experience made me feel I couldn't just sit down and relax after my own tournament ended. For a lot of people, the Olympics was the end of their goals, *par mera journey wahi se shuru hua hai* (but for me, the Olympics is where my journey started)," she says.

Aggressive switch

Jaismine, a subedar in the Central Military Police, says she spent seven months in a row training at ASI. "After the Olympics, I knew I had time to prepare for my next competition. My coaches — (Mohammad) Ehteshamuddin sir and Chhote Lal sir (former coach of Mary Kom) — did a lot of technical work with me. All the results I got are thanks to the work we did. At the World Championships, I was able to implement what they taught me," she says.

"There were a lot of changes I had to make. I had to work on my strength. I also made small changes to my technique. For example, I was boxing a lot on the back foot. I started training to box more on the front foot. I added more cross punches to my game."

She also felt she had to change her temperament. According to Dr. D

Chandralal, chief coach of the Indian women's boxing team, Jaismine's soft-spoken, deferential nature was at odds with the boldness needed in the ring.

She says she consciously worked on it. "Everyone has their own personality. For some, aggression comes naturally; for others, you have to work on it. I think my calmness helps me think clearly under pressure, but I understood I needed to be more aggressive in the ring too. Before the bout I had to tell myself, 'I must show more aggression'. I wasn't able to before. I used to just back-pedal. It didn't look good to the judges, and I've lost a lot of close fights for this reason. I had to constantly remind myself: 'You aren't being aggressive, you aren't being aggressive,'" she says.

Jaismine isn't the first Indian athlete to retool her personality. Before the 2016 Olympics, badminton coach Pullela Gopichand had P. V. Sindhu yell at him in training to bring her out of her shell. For Jaismine, the breakthrough came through training methods. "My coaches wouldn't make me yell at them, but they would keep pushing me, saying 'you can do it, you can do it'. What helped most was training against boys at the Army Sports Institute. The only way to last in the ring against them was by being aggressive. There was no other option," she says.

She has also looked beyond the ring to build mental strength.

"I've started writing down my goals and charting my preparation. I've also started practising manifestation daily. Six months ago, I wrote down for the first time, 'Thank you universe for making me the World Champion'. I kept believing in it until it happened," she says.

Everything came together at the World Championships in Liverpool. Even though she faced a tough draw, Jaismine says she wasn't thinking about the field or the result. "I went in with confidence. I had trained well. I wasn't thinking about the result because I knew I would come from pressure. I focused on implementing the training I had done," she says.

Picture-perfect: (From left) Julia Szeremeta of Poland, Jaismine Lamboria of India, Alcala Cegovia of Venezuela and Valeria Arboleda Mendoza of Colombia pose with the medals following the World Boxing Championships finals. GETTY IMAGES

Now she has her sights set on more. "I have written one more thing in my manifestation journal. I won't say more about it until I accomplish it," she laughs. It isn't hard to guess. "Next year, we have the Commonwealth and Asian Games. I want to do well in both," she says.

It won't be easy. As the reigning World Champion, Jaismine is no longer flying under the radar. Opponents will study her style and prepare for her.

That doesn't bother her. "There will be extra pressure on me as a World Champion and as someone people want to beat. The main thing is how to improve my performance. Because the more we are afraid of anything, the more it affects our preparation. I'll continue to prepare and correct the mistakes I've made."

World Champion or not, she admits she still has plenty to improve. "I've achieved one thing, but I can't stop here. I can work more on getting stronger. I've had some good fights and was aggressive like I wanted to be at the World Championships, but I can be even more attacking. I also want to punch more and with more power. There are technical areas I can make more *mazbut* (stronger). My 2025 has gone well, but 2026 is very important," she says.

Lone warrior

Antim Panghal **redeemed** India's disappointing campaign in Zagreb with a solitary bronze medal in the women's 53kg category.

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Paris Olympics bronze medallist Aman Sehrawat and Worlds bronze medallist Antim Panghal were expected to hit the headlines at this year's World Wrestling Championships in Zagreb. They did so in contrasting ways.

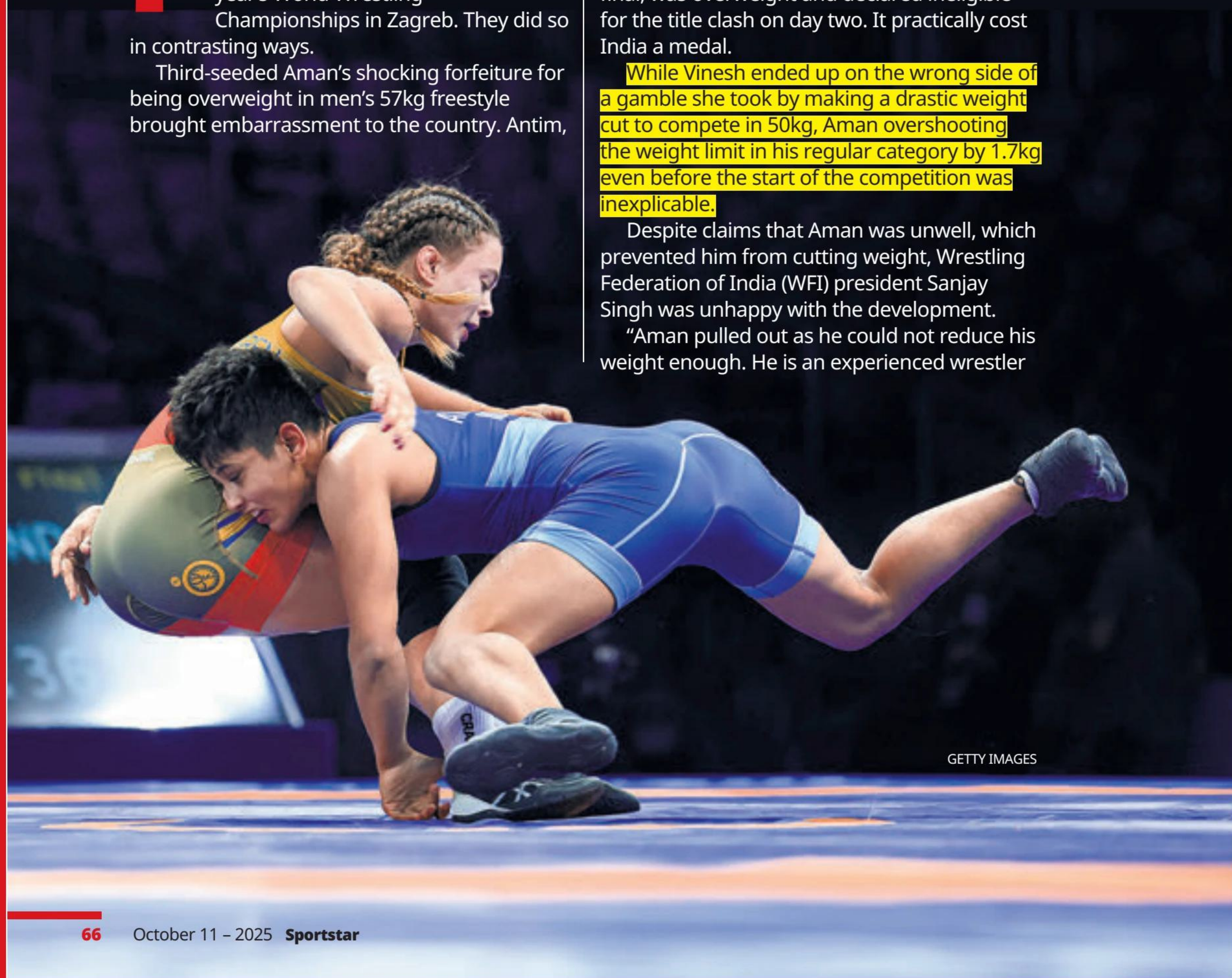
Third-seeded Aman's shocking forfeiture for being overweight in men's 57kg freestyle brought embarrassment to the country. Antim, however,salvaged some pride for the team with a lone bronze medal in women's 53kg.

The Aman episode was reminiscent of the Vinesh Phogat fiasco at the Paris Olympics a year ago. Vinesh, who had stunned World and Olympic champion Yui Susaki on the opening day of her competition on her way to the 50kg final, was overweight and declared ineligible for the title clash on day two. It practically cost India a medal.

While Vinesh ended up on the wrong side of a gamble she took by making a drastic weight cut to compete in 50kg, Aman overshooting the weight limit in his regular category by 1.7kg even before the start of the competition was inexplicable.

Despite claims that Aman was unwell, which prevented him from cutting weight, Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president Sanjay Singh was unhappy with the development.

"Aman pulled out as he could not reduce his weight enough. He is an experienced wrestler



GETTY IMAGES

Momentous achievement: This was Antim's second successive Worlds bronze, joining Vinesh as the most decorated Indian female wrestlers at the Worlds. GETTY IMAGES

and was a witness to a similar embarrassment (Vinesh's issue) at the Paris Olympics. It seems he has not learnt anything from that episode," said Sanjay.

"Both the wrestler and the support staff, who were assisting him, were responsible for this. Strict action will be taken against both. They have wasted a lot of Government money, which was spent on the (15-day) preparatory camp abroad."

This was the third such instance in about a year. Promising wrestler Neha Sangwan (59kg) was ineligible to compete at the World Under-20 Championships in August and was banned for two years by the WFI for negligence in managing her weight.

The recurrence of such episodes has prompted the WFI to consider a policy to tackle such issues. Starting with the trials for the World under-23 championships in Serbia, the federation has done away with the two-kg relaxation given to the wrestlers during selection trials in order to make them strictly follow weight restrictions.

Other Indian freestyle wrestlers also failed to make an impact. Twenty-year-old Mukul Dahiya (86kg) came closest to a medal but lost 0-10 to two-time World champion Iranian Kamran Ghasempur in the bronze medal bout.

Trying to re-establish himself in 92kg, Deepak Punia, a former Worlds silver medallist in 86kg, won one bout but lost the next. Vicky (97kg) also put up some good performances before facing reversal in the repechage.

The promising Sujeet Kalkal (65kg), a Hungary Ranking Series gold medallist, fought well but narrowly lost 5-6 to Olympic silver medallist and eventual champion Rahman Amouzadkhalili of Iran in the quarterfinals. He eventually bowed out in the repechage.

Antim saved India the blushes. The young wrestler — who underperformed at the Paris Olympics and was deported on disciplinary grounds after her sister used her accreditation card to enter the Olympic Village — recovered from that ignominious episode to refocus on her game and land a bronze. This was her second successive Worlds bronze (considering that the 2024 World Championships only had competitions in non-Olympic weights). With it, she joined Vinesh as the most decorated Indian female wrestlers at the Worlds.

The fourth-seeded 21-year-old steamrolled Spain's World junior silver medallist Carla Jaume Soler 10-0 in the pre-quarterfinals and beat China's 55kg Worlds silver medallist Zhang Jin 9-8 in the quarterfinals, before going down 3-5 to World No.1 and Paris Olympics silver medallist Lucia Yepez Guzman.

Antim then beat another Paris Olympian, Emma Jonna Malmgren, 9-1 in the bronze medal match and etched her name among the all-time great Indian women wrestlers. Her tears reflected her regret at a missed opportunity in Paris — a lesson that should make her wiser.

Meanwhile, Asian champion Manisha Bhanwala (62kg), who entered the repechage, could not rise to the occasion. For the women's team, mostly comprising youngsters — World Under-20 champion Tapsya Gahlawat (57kg) and Priya Malik (another World Under-20 medallist who lost to Olympic medallist Cuban Milaimy Marin Potrille in a 76kg bronze medal match) — the Zagreb exposure was valuable ahead of important assignments, including the 2026 Asian Games and 2028 Olympics.

There was little hope from the Indian Greco-Roman wrestlers. Asian bronze medallist Nitesh (97kg) and Aman (77kg) had outside chances as they reached the repechage rounds. Nineteen-year-old Worlds Under-20 bronze medallist Suraj (60kg) upset former World champion and Olympian Victor Ciobanu of Moldova 3-1 to underline his talent.

With the uncertainty and chaos surrounding wrestling administration finally ending earlier this year, the WFI and the wrestlers should learn their lessons from the below-par Zagreb outing and prepare to deliver an improved performance at the Asian Games in a year's time.

Antim beat Spain's World junior silver medallist Carla Jaume Soler, China's Worlds silver medallist Zhang Jin, and Paris Olympian Emma Jonna Malmgren on her way to the bronze

ON MAX CHARGE

The defending champion produced a stunning race in Baku to get his **second win in a row,** slashing the championship gap to within 70 points.

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Around the brutally narrow streets of Baku, there is virtually no margin for error. The unique blend of long straights and tight, unforgiving corners pushes Formula One drivers to their limits of skill and precision. The eighth running of the Azerbaijan Grand Prix came at a pivotal moment in the 2025 season and delivered a spectacle far from ordinary. If there is one driver who knows how to summon pace in the most difficult moments, it is the reigning world champion, Max Verstappen. Once doubtful whether his Red Bull could catch the front-running McLarens, the Dutchman silenced all concerns with a long-lost Grand Slam — pole, fastest lap, victory, and every lap led — an emphatic reminder of his pedigree.

Fresh from his triumph at Monza, Verstappen never put a wheel wrong, capitalising fully on a chaotic, mistake-ridden weekend for McLaren. For the papaya outfit, what looked like a smooth march to a second consecutive constructors' crown was forcefully delayed under the weight of errors and misfortune.

Joining Verstappen on the podium were Mercedes' George Russell and a surprise name — Carlos Sainz. The Spaniard delivered Williams its first podium since 2021, and his own maiden rostrum with the Mercedes-powered squad. The result was a landmark for the nine-time constructors' champion: its biggest points haul in a single weekend (15) since beginning its climb back from the depths of the grid.

Championship implications

For Oscar Piastri, however, Baku brought only heartbreak. After promising pace early in the weekend, the Australian fell victim to the circuit's ruthless nature — first crashing in qualifying, then bowing out on lap one of the race after a poor getaway. His struggles allowed teammate Lando

Long time coming: Carlos Sainz delivered Williams its first podium since 2021. Pics: REUTERS

Norris to chip away at the championship deficit, closing the gap by six points to 25.

Yet Norris, too, left frustrated: a disappointing seventh on the grid left him boxed in, and seventh was all he could salvage on Sunday. With rivals ahead profiting from a turbulent qualifying session derailed by crashes, rain, and chaos, the Briton saw a golden chance slip away.

Instead of emerging as the main beneficiary of McLaren's rivals' misfortune, Norris spent much of the race trapped in traffic, unable to show the raw pace that has defined his season so far. For a driver chasing his first world title, the sense of a squandered opportunity was unmistakable.

Qualifying, as often in Baku, was a story in itself. While practice ran smoothly, the Saturday shootout descended into mayhem. Lasting an extraordinary one hour and 58 minutes — longer than the entire 2024 Grand Prix — the session produced six red flags, a new record that surpassed the five seen at Imola 2022 and Sao Paulo 2024. Three stoppages in Q1, one in Q2, and two in Q3 left drivers scrambling for a single flawless lap.

Charles Leclerc's hunt for a fifth straight Baku pole ended in the barriers during Q3. By that stage, Sainz had surprisingly topped the timesheets, with the clock ticking down amid treacherous dry-wet conditions. Piastri, too, was caught out, damaging his car heavily.

For a brief spell, it looked as though Sainz might start from pole position, but Verstappen, calm as ever, produced one of the cleanest laps in the dying moments to snatch it away. That confidence and momentum he carried seamlessly into Sunday's lights-to-flag victory, his 67th career win and second in the Azeri city.

Battle intensifies

Having slashed the championship gap to within 70 points with his rejuvenated form, Verstappen thrives in the role of chaser. But McLaren's dominance, should it regroup swiftly, remains a formidable obstacle.

For now, it has two weeks to recalibrate before the United States Grand Prix. It must resolve internal frailties quickly, with a resurgent Red Bull and a relentless Verstappen looming large. With seven races remaining, the battle for the 2025 world championship is not over. In fact, Baku may have just lit the fuse.

MotoGP

The MotoGP season lit up with consecutive classics in Catalonia and San Marino. At the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya, Alex Marquez (right) stunned the paddock by beating his brother Marc (left) to claim victory and end Marc's extraordinary 15-race unbeaten run across Grands Prix and sprints. It was Alex's second win of the season, and he did so at the Marquez brothers' home race amid great fanfare. However, the champion wasted little time in reasserting control and struck back in Italy. A week later at Misano, Marc converted pole into a commanding win in the San Marino GP. Marco Bezzecchi, who had triumphed in Saturday's sprint, finished second, while Alex completed the podium in third. The back-to-back duels have ignited the Marquez brothers' rivalry, though Marc is already on the cusp of a seventh title.

Silver lining in Hangzhou

A **runner-up finish** at the recent Asia Cup gives Harendra Singh and his players a boost ahead of the all-important World Cup qualifiers in early 2026.

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The Indian women's hockey team will have to wait a few more months to know if it will join the men in Belgium and the Netherlands at next year's World Cup. A runner-up finish at the recent Asia Cup, behind host and eventual champion China, meant the Indians left disappointed but not without a measure of satisfaction.

Before the team left for Hangzhou, the venue of its Asian Games heartbreak two years ago, expectations were muted. A 4-1 series loss to Australia, preceded by an eight-match rout in Europe during the Pro League, had raised questions about both players and style. Unlike their male counterparts, the women never looked threatening enough. Against that backdrop, a silver medal was no small achievement.

India's campaign itself was a mixed bag. The absence of key players hurt, but it also created opportunities for youngsters. Injuries sidelined veteran goalkeeper Savita Punia and Sushila Chanu, yet Bichu Devi, long Savita's understudy, stepped up with confidence despite a few errors. Udita Duhan returned to shore up the defence and midfield. But the biggest blow came when Deepika, India's young drag-flicker and top-scoring hope, was forced out after slipping and hurting her hamstring and groin during the last training session before the team's departure. Her absence was felt in the team's desperate search for goals.

In attack, Navneet Kaur led the line and was ably supported by 22-year-old Mumtaz Khan. The resurgence of Sangita Kumari was another bright spot. Once the star of the 2022 Commonwealth Games and Asian Champions Trophy, the 23-year-old had struggled over the past year. In Hangzhou, however, she rediscovered her pace and sharpness. She scored just twice but was instrumental in creating chances with her assists and pace upfront.

India's group-stage journey reflected its broader inconsistency. Crushing wins over minnows Thailand (11-0) and Singapore (12-0) were offset by a 2-2 draw against Japan — a pattern of dominance

Traditional rivals: India and China have now clashed in three Asia Cup finals, with the Indians tasting glory in their 2017 meeting. X/@THEHOCKEYINDIA

against weaker sides but vulnerability against equals.

In the Super 4s, India's fortunes swung back and forth. A rain-hit 4-2 win over Korea briefly raised hopes, only for a 4-1 loss to China to bring it crashing down. A draw with Japan left qualification for the final hanging on China's result against Korea; when that fell India's way, another shot at World Cup qualification beckoned. But the team couldn't seize it.

Still, the final offered encouragement. India stunned China with a first-minute goal, only for the host to settle quickly, push back with control, and underline the gulf between the two teams. It was India's best performance of the tournament, yet the difference in class was unmistakable — evident in the world rankings too, with China at No. 4 and India at No. 10.

For China, the triumph was almost inevitable. Ranked fourth in the world, fresh from a silver medal at the Paris Olympics, and having plundered 38 goals in six games before the final, including a 20-0 demolition of Taiwan, the Chinese were always favourites. India, by contrast, had stumbled through a nervy campaign, needing other results to fall its way. That it still emerged second was commendable.

Stability restored: Udita Duhan's return plugged gaps in India's defence and midfield. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The result gives Harendra Singh and his players a boost ahead of the all-important World Cup qualifiers in early 2026. It also rekindles hope that India can re-establish itself as Asia's second force behind China, ahead of Japan and Korea. Challenges remain: relegation from the Pro League has complicated preparations, but Harendra is pushing for at least five or six high-quality friendlies against European teams. The upcoming Hockey India League will be another key step in testing combinations before the qualifiers.

Big setback: Deepika did not travel with the national team to China for the Women's Asia Cup due to a hamstring injury. R. V. MOORTHY

FOR MORE STORIES

NOT A RASH RETURN TO ENGLAND

AP

Marcus Rashford ticked **all the right boxes** for his new club, Barcelona, netting a brace away against Newcastle United in the Champions League.

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Life, more often than not, gives you a second chance. For Marcus Rashford **(above, front)**, it is certainly the case now. The England forward fell out with Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim last season and was loaned to Aston Villa, transitioning from United's blue-eyed boy to the one who cried foul.

But at Barcelona, his new club on loan from United, he looks to be finding his rhythm as he scored twice on his return to England for the UEFA Champions League (UCL) clash against Newcastle United.

In that game, pitching in for injured Lamine Yamal, Rashford ranked first or joint-first for shots (6), touches in the opposition box (10), dribbles (5), and possession won (6) for Barcelona, becoming the first player at the club with such numbers in a UCL match since Lionel Messi in 2015.

By contrast, Kevin de Bruyne's return to England had a different tale to tell, with the Belgian leaving Manchester City this summer on a free transfer as one of its most successful players.

Leading Napoli's engine room this time around, De Bruyne's side fell 0-2 to Guardiola's men, and to add insult to injury, the Serie A side was reduced to 10 men when Giovanni di Lorenzo was sent off within the first 22 minutes.

Real Madrid, another side that saw one of its wards — Dani Carvajal — sent off, rode on a brace from Kylian Mbappe to sail past Marseille.

Atletico Madrid almost haunted Liverpool with the ghosts of the 2020 UCL elimination with Marcos Llorente, as in the round of 16 match then, scoring a brace. However, Virgil van Dijk's injury-time strike saw the Reds rule the roost.

Defending champion Paris Saint-Germain shrugged off worries about consistency with a commanding 4-0 victory over Atalanta, while Lloyd Kelly's stoppage-time equaliser helped Juventus salvage a 4-4 draw against the 2024 UCL runner-up Borussia Dortmund.

Chelsea, which won its maiden UCL title against Bayern Munich in 2012, was humbled at the Allianz Arena this time, as Harry Kane's brace and Trevoh Chalobah's own goal saw the Bavarians coast to a 3-1 victory.

Premier League

A Merseyside derby and two heavyweight clashes between London and Manchester sides. Late drama, send-offs and fan hostility — the Premier League had an action-packed gameweek.

On paper, Arne Slot's Liverpool was expected to steamroll Everton. However, the Toffees put up a good fight even though it wasn't enough in front of the boisterous Anfield crowd. Liverpool edged a 2-1 win courtesy of goals from Ryan Gravenberch and Hugo Ekitike. Idrissa Gueye pulled one back for Everton, but David Moyes' men could not find an equaliser.

In the 67th minute, Anfield had another reason to cheer as Alexander Isak came off the bench to make his Liverpool debut.

Manchester City's clash with Arsenal once again raised the teacher-vs-student narrative as Mikel Arteta went up against Pep Guardiola. Despite City's Premier League dominance in recent seasons, a poor start to the current campaign meant the Gunners started as favourites, that too in front of home fans.

Therefore, when Erling Haaland opened the scoring, rounding off a brilliant counter-attack, the narrative certainly changed. City almost managed three points away from home but was denied by Gabriel Martinelli, who latched on to a brilliant aerial through ball from Eberechi Eze and then lobbed it over Gianluigi Donnarumma to score the equaliser in the third minute of second-half stoppage time.

Manchester United's home clash against Chelsea was another anticipated fixture. Looking to bounce back from the derby loss to Man City, United had the perfect start after Chelsea keeper Robert Sanchez was sent off in the fifth minute for a rash challenge on Bryan Mbeumo. Soon, the Red Devils capitalised with goals from Bruno Fernandes and Casemiro **(both above)**, but the latter got his team in trouble by earning his second yellow just before half-time and thus received his marching orders. With both teams down to 10 men, the second half was more competitive. Trevoh Chalobah pulled one back for Chelsea in the 80th minute, which led to a nervous end for the United faithful, but their team held on for a 2-1 win. The Old Trafford crowd did not miss the opportunity to make its hostile feelings known towards former player Alejandro Garnacho, who forced a move to Chelsea in the summer transfer window. However, the Argentinian was only on the bench and did not get any minutes against his former side.

AP

Tottenham Hotspur, which has had a good start to the season under Thomas Frank, almost suffered another hiccup against Brighton and Hove Albion, which took a two-goal lead at the break, but the north London side mounted a second-half comeback to earn a 2-2 draw. And the fact that Tottenham's second goal was the result of Jan Paul van Hecke putting the ball into his own net rubbed salt into the wounds of the Brighton fans. At the end of Matchday five, Liverpool tops the table with 15 points, followed by Arsenal, Tottenham and Bournemouth (all on 10 points but separated by goal difference) in second, third and fourth. Chelsea is sixth with eight points. Manchester City and Manchester United are ninth and 11th, both on seven points.

La Liga

Mbappe continued his fantastic goal-scoring form as he found the net once again in Real Madrid's 2-0 win against Espanyol, with Eder Militao scoring the other goal. The Frenchman, who scored his fifth league goal of the campaign, tops the scoring charts.

Breathing down Mbappe's neck is Barcelona's Ferran Torres, who scored a brace in his team's 3-0 win against Getafe to take his season tally to four. Dani Olmo scored the

final goal of the match, assisted by Rashford, who found him with an excellent cutback. With virtually an empty net ahead of him, Olmo had the simplest of finishes to cap a dominant performance by the defending champion.

Atletico Madrid's woes, however, continued as it managed only a 1-1 draw against Mallorca. Diego Simeone's men went down to 10 after Alexander Sorloth saw red in the 72nd minute. However, it showed determination to push forward and took the lead through Conor Gallagher in the 79th minute. It would have been an impressive win had Atletico held on, but in the 85th minute Vedat Muriqi grabbed the equaliser, which led to the teams sharing the spoils. It was a bad week for the Basque sides. Athletic Club suffered a 0-2 loss to Villarreal, while Real Sociedad went down 1-3 against Real Betis. At the end of Matchday five, Real Madrid stays top with 15 points. Barcelona is second with 13 points, followed by Villarreal and Espanyol, both on 10.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich underlined its status as an early favourite to reclaim the German league title as it thrashed newly promoted Hamburger SV and TSG Hoffenheim, scoring nine goals across the two games. Harry Kane bagged five of them — a hat-trick against Hamburger and a brace against Hoffenheim — and cemented his spot at the top of the league scoring charts with eight in four matches, five clear of the next best, Eintracht Frankfurt's Can Uzun. While the Bavarians maintained their perfect start to the season (four wins in four), Borussia Dortmund too is unbeaten and sits second in the standings, trailing the leader by two points. First-half goals from Serhou Guirassy and Maximilian Beier helped the Yellow and Black beat FC Heidenheim, while a wonder strike from Karim Adeyemi proved the difference against VfL Wolfsburg. Meanwhile, Erik ten Hag's replacement, Kasper Hjulmand, had a thrilling start to his tenure as Bayer Leverkusen boss as his side beat Frankfurt 3-1, despite being down to nine men. Alex Grimaldo stunned the opposition with two successful free kicks, while Patrik Schick also chipped in for their first win of the campaign. The 2023–24 season champion, however, was held to a 1-1 draw in the following game by Borussia Mönchengladbach, thanks to a stoppage-time strike from Haris Tabakovic.

Serie A

Juventus seems to be on a mission to end its five-year wait to lift the Scudetto as it snatched victory in added time against Italian giant Inter Milan in a seven-goal thriller. Juve led twice, thanks to Kelly and Kenan Yildiz, but veteran Hakan Calhanoglu erased the deficit on both occasions.

Then, in a turn of events, Inter took the lead after Marcus Thuram powered in a header with 15 minutes of regulation time left. But the advantage lasted only six minutes as his brother Khephren responded with a header of his own before Vasilije Adzic **(below)** netted an added-time stunner from way out to put the Derby d'Italia to bed.

Inter, however, bounced back with a gritty 2-1 win against Sassuolo, while Juventus dropped points for the first time this season after a draw with winless Hellas Verona.

REUTERS

In other results, defending champion Napoli maintained its unbeaten start to the season, with debutant Rasmus Hojlund scoring in the comfortable 3-1 win away to Fiorentina. Meanwhile, 40-year-old Luka Modric planted his flag in Italy and bagged his first goal for AC Milan, scoring the winner in the 1-0 win against Bologna. Milan then continued its winning run against Udinese, with American Christian Pulisic steering the action with two goals and an assist. The results took Milan up to third in the table with nine points from four games, level with Napoli in second (with one game fewer) and one behind table-topper Juventus.

Ligue 1

Injuries to regular scorers Desire Doue and Ousmane Dembele set the stage for Frenchman Bradley Barcola to shine, and that's exactly what he did, bagging a brace to guide Paris Saint-Germain to a 2-0 win against RC Lens. The 23-year-old scored on either side of the break in a game that added to the French giant's injury woes, with Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, Lee Kang-in and Lucas Beraldo all limping off.

While Kylian left a lasting legacy in the competition, his brother Ethan Mbappe announced himself by bagging a late winner in LOSC Lille's 2-1 win against Toulouse FC. Lille had been trailing since the 50th minute before Nabil Bentaleb equalised from the spot in the 90th. Eight minutes later, Ethan volleyed the ball into the back of the net from close range to take all three points. Another youngster, Ansu Fati, also made his mark in the competition, scoring a brace in his league debut for AS Monaco as it thrashed FC Metz 5-2.

PSG remains the only side not to drop points in the league so far, with four wins in four, level on 12 points with AS Monaco, Olympique Lyonnais and RC Strasbourg, all of which have played one game more, while Lille is fifth with 10 points.

Results updated as of September 21

FOR MORE STORIES

Slice of history

India scalps a Davis Cup win after 32 years, courtesy some **spirited** performances by Sumit Nagal and Dhakshineswar Suresh.

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Home to brands such as Rolex, Omega and Swatch, the Swiss city of Biel is also referred to as the 'world capital of watchmaking'. It is, therefore, a little poetic that India's long wait for a Davis Cup win on European soil ended in a place with such a strong connection to time.

Three-time runner-up India took down Switzerland 3-1 in a World Group I tie at the Swiss Tennis Arena on September 12-13 to secure a place in next year's first round of Qualifiers. It also marked the nation's first triumph in Europe since Leander Paes and Ramesh Krishnan pulled off a stunning come-from-behind 3-2 quarterfinal win over France in Frejus, Cannes, in 1993.

The victory over Switzerland this month wasn't as dramatic as the one against France 32 years ago.

A year after his controversial decision to field N. Sriram Balaji, a doubles specialist, in a singles rubber against Sweden — a World Group I tie which India eventually lost 4-0 — captain Rohit Rajpal made another bold call. He preferred Dhakshineswar Suresh, initially a reserve, over India No. 2 Aryan Shah and India No. 3 Karan Singh for the opening singles.

The gamble paid off, as World No. 626 Dhakshineswar, a 6ft 5in, thin-framed player with a booming serve, beat World No. 155 Jerome Kym 7-6(5), 6-3 on a fast indoor hard court. Dhakshineswar hit nine aces, saved seven break points and converted the first opportunity he got to take a decisive 5-3 lead in the second set against Kym, who reached the third round of this year's U.S. Open.

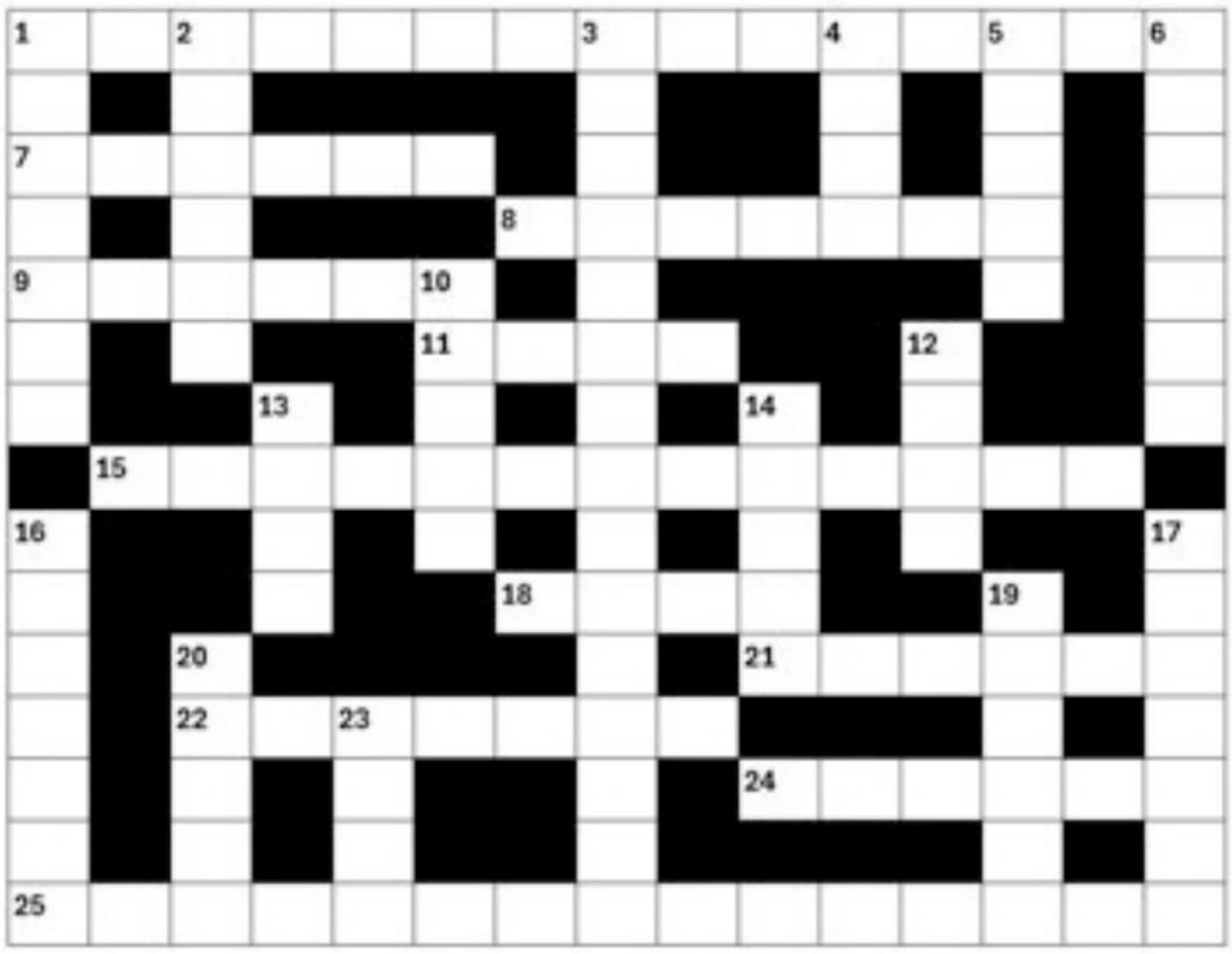
Sumit Nagal, back in the squad after two years, made it 2-0 for India at the end of Day 1 with a 6-3, 7-6(4) win over former World No. 47 Marc-Andrea Huesler.

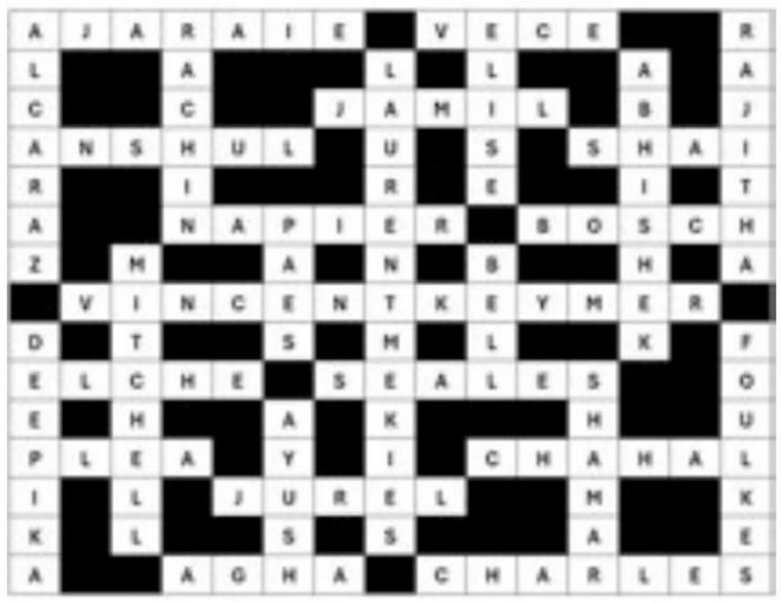
While Balaji and Rithvik Choudary Bollipalli lost to Jakub Paul and Dominic Stricker 6-7(3), 6-4, 7-5 in the doubles rubber, India No. 1 Nagal completed the job with a flawless 6-1, 6-3 win over 18-year-old Henry Bernet, the junior Australian Open champion making his Davis Cup debut.

India returns to the Qualifiers for the first time since a 1-3 loss in Croatia in 2020.

Giant strides: Dhakshineswar Suresh beat World No. 155 Jerome Kym, hitting nine aces and saving seven break points on the way. AP

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Which Italian with doubles ranking of World No. 6 won the re-jigged mixed doubles event at the U.S. Open 2025? (6,9)

7 Which former Australian cricketer who passed away in May 2025 had scored the first-ever triple century on Australian soil? (6)

8 Who took most wickets in the recently-held T20I series between Australia and South Africa? (7)

9 Identify the first name by which French Open is otherwise known as? (6)

11 Who did Novak Djokovic have as his coach for a brief period between November 2024 and May 2025 before parting ways? (4)

15 Who scored the first hat-trick in La Liga' s current season? (5,8)

18 FTB: Salto in ____ is the Italian term for high jump? (4)

22 Which mid-western state's team of USA finished runner-up in the last season of NBA? (7)

24 Which Indian cricketer was honoured with a stand named after him at the Old Trafford stadium during the recently-held Test series between England and India? (6)

25 Who became India's 87th Grandmaster in chess in July 2025? (12,1,2)

DOWN

1 Who won the men's singles title at the U.S. Open 2025? (7)

2 Who scored an unbeaten 125 off just 56 balls in the second T20I held between Australia and South Africa in August 2025? (6)

3 Who is the current World and Olympic champion in men's pole vault? (6,9)

4 & Across 21 Identify the partner of ACROSS 1 when they won the U.S. Open mixed doubles event? (4,6)

5 Which F1 driver has won seven out of the first 14 races this year? (5)

6 Identify the Premier League team from this county town of Suffolk in Eastern England that got promoted last season only to be relegated to second division this season. (7)

10 Who, in 1994, became the first New Zealander to pick up a hat-trick in ODIs? (5)

12 Who has scored most runs for New Zealand in Tests? (4)

13 Identify the surname of this player who became the first from Indonesia after 21 years to play in the U.S. Open main draw this year. (4)

14 Which South African all-rounder scored 74 and took 5 for 34 in a women's tri-series match versus Sri Lanka held in May 2025? (5)

16 & 17 Who is the only bowler from either side to take a four-wicket haul in an innings twice in the recently-held five-Test series between England and India? (7,7)

19 What is the name of the trophy that is given annually by *Marca*, the Spanish national daily tabloid sports newspaper, to the best goalkeeper of La Liga season? (6)

20 Who was the first Asian to conquer the English Channel? (5)

23 Who became the first cricketer to play for two different countries in T20 World Cups? (5)

Battery destruction

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Battery by white is a two-piece formation in which a rear piece, which is invariably a line piece and a frontal piece which can be any except the white queen, fire at the black king through discovered checks. White batteries can be created, abandoned or even destroyed to show creative ideas in chess compositions. In this article three-movers with battery destruction are presented. There are two ways of destroying a battery- one by black and the other by white.

I Agapov & Z.Janevski
Zadach I Etyudy 2012

Mate in three moves

After the battery forming **key 1.Qd6!** there are three black self-pins on e6 meeting the set battery threat 2.e7+ Re6/Ne6.Be6 3.e8N mate. These three black moves reappear as battery destruction defences in three variations.The problem also shows Umnov I theme where white's second moves are to the squares vacated by black pieces.

1...Rxe6 2.e4 any 3.e5(2...dxe3 e.p 3.Bc3; **1...Nxe6** 2.f4 (3.fxg5) Rxf4/gxf4 3.Qe5/Bh4;**1...Bxe6** 2.g4 (3.Ne8) B any 3.Qe7;1...fxe6 2.Qf8+ Nf7+ 3.Qxf7.

In the second problem below white forms the Q+P battery with the key **1.Rd6!** threatens 2.e6+ Ne5 3.Qxe5.Now for the first two defences on f4 white destroys his own battery to create new ones and after the third defence white abandons his battery.

C.G.S.Narayanan
1-2 Hon.Men,1st TT FRME Ty 2019

Mate in three moves

The variations are **1....Rxf4** 2.Nf6 (3.Rxd5) Kxe5+ 3.fNe4;**1...Nxf4** 2.Ng7 (2.Nxf5) Kxe5 3.Ne8;**1...gxf4** 2.Qa8 any 3.Q/Rxd5.

The problem for solving has doubled battery formation and destruction by capture of the front pieces.

M.Dragoun
2 Prize,Sachova skladba 2012

Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Unique Umnov': **Key 1.Qe2!** (threat 2.Qa2 Rf5 3.Qxf5) 1...Rf5 2.e5 3.any 3.Ne5)1...Rg5 2.Ne5 Kxf6 3.Rxf7 1...Rxc5 2.Be5 Rxe5 3.Rxc6.Single BR induces three-fold Umnov.

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

INDIA
TDK
S. YADAV
TOKYO 25
INDIAN ATHLETICS

TOKYO SHOW BRINGS HOME HARD TRUTH FOR INDIAN ATHLETICS

Sachin Yadav's personal best in javelin throw was the **lone bright spot** as India failed to win a medal at the 2025 World Championships in Tokyo. What does this mean for the road ahead?

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Naval Singh, coach of Indian javelin thrower Sachin Yadav, had mixed feelings at the conclusion of the men's javelin throw competition at the 2025 World Championships. On the evening of September 18, belying all pre-event expectations, the 25-year-old Sachin nearly pulled off one of the biggest upsets in Indian track and field history. He threw a Personal Best of 86.27m to briefly claim the silver-medal position before eventually slipping just off the podium and finishing fourth. Even without a medal on his World Championships debut, Sachin outperformed some of the sport's biggest names – world leader Julian Weber and Olympic champion Arshad Nadeem both finished behind him. From an Indian perspective, perhaps more significant was the fact that Sachin finished ahead of Neeraj Chopra – the first time in eight

So near, yet so far: Sachin Yadav's best of 86.27m placed him fourth in the javelin throw final. AP

Streak breaks: Neeraj Chopra's run of 26 top-two finishes ended at the World Championships 2025. REUTERS

Historic first: Sarvesh Kushare cleared a personal best of 2.28m to finish joint sixth in the men's high jump final at the World Championships in Tokyo, becoming the first Indian to reach a Worlds final in the event. AP

years that the Tokyo Olympic champion had been bested by another Indian. (The last instance was at the 2017 World Championships, when Davinder Kang made the finals while Neeraj failed to advance from qualification.)

Remarkable as it was, Naval – who had stayed back in India with a liver ailment just weeks earlier – told *Sportstar* he was not fully satisfied.

"On the one hand, I'm happy that he got a Personal Best throw in such a major competition. But it feels incomplete. After the first throw (86.27m), I was expecting him to cross 90m. In the past, Sachin had been throwing really hard in his first attempt, but something always went wrong. At the National Games (where he won gold in February this year), he had thrown over 86m in his warm-up but twisted his ankle in his first throw. Then at the Neeraj Chopra Classic (in July), he nearly slipped again. At the World Championships, the plan was to go at only 80 per cent in his first throw. So, after that went to 86m, I was confident a much bigger throw was coming. But luck was not on our side," says Naval.

Bad luck came in the form of one of the sudden downpours that swept across Tokyo's Olympic Stadium during the Championships. "When it rains, the Mondotrack runway becomes really slippery. It becomes really difficult to control your run-up. If it wasn't for the rain, Sachin would have been standing on the podium," he says.

Neeraj was another who might blame misfortune for his result. Having medalled at the last two World Championships, he seemed in good touch heading to Tokyo. He had crossed the 90m mark for the first time at the Doha Diamond League and sailed through qualification with his first throw. What was not known until after the final was that he had suffered a back injury just weeks before. Unable to train or even throw until the start of the competition, Neeraj managed one big qualifying throw, but the final proved a step too far.

India's contingent disappoints

Neeraj had entered the competition as India's best medal hope, with Sachin seen as a dark horse. With both falling short of the podium, India finished outside the medals altogether. This stood in stark contrast to the overall diversity of the medal table – a record 53 different nations reached the podium at these Worlds, surpassing the previous record of 46 set at Osaka in 2007 and equalled in Budapest in 2023.

Beyond medals, India's overall performance in Tokyo was notably weaker than at the 2023 Worlds. In Budapest, six Indian athletes reached finals, setting four Personal Bests, two National Records and one Continental Record. In Tokyo, only three athletes (high jumper Sarvesh Kushare, Neeraj and Sachin) made the finals, while just three (Sachin,

Medal rush: Sweden's Mondo Duplantis set a pole vault world record at 6.30m, while USA's Melissa Jefferson-Wooden claimed a sprint treble in Tokyo. AFP

Kushare and Pooja Olla in the 800m) set Personal Bests. The men's 4x400m relay team, which had set the Asian record and finished fifth in Budapest, did not even qualify for Tokyo. Other disappointments included double Asian champion Gulveer Singh, who finished 16th in the men's 10,000m and missed out on a 5,000m final spot by one place. In the women's 3,000m steeplechase, national-record holder and Asian silver medallist Parul Chaudhary ended 20th overall, failing to make the final. Triple jumper Praveen Chithravel, who had resgitered a national record-equalling 17.37m earlier in the season, managed only 16.74m in Tokyo.

Still, there were bright spots. High jumper Kushare cleared a Personal Best of 2.28m to finish sixth – the best ever result for an Indian high jumper at a global event. It was all the more remarkable given he was the shortest athlete in the elite final and had competed internationally only once this year, at the Asian Championships. Meanwhile, Pooja may not have advanced past her 800m heat, but her 2:01.03 clocking made her the seventh-fastest Indian ever in the event, marking her as a promising prospect for 2026.

Mondo, McLaughlin stand out

If India's results disappointed, the Championships still delivered a slew of headline performances in the first Worlds of the 2028 Olympic cycle.

One World Record, nine Championships Records and nine

Epoch-making run: Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone became the first woman in nearly 40 years to crack 48 seconds in the 400 meters, running 47.78 in a historically fast one-lap race. AP

Area Records were set or equalled. There were also historic firsts: Samoa's Alex Rose (men's discus), Saint Lucia's Julien Alfred (women's 100m) and Uruguay's Julia Paternain (women's marathon) all claimed their nations' first World Championships medals. Tanzania's Alphonce Felix Simbu won his country's first-ever gold in the men's marathon.

Mondo Duplantis set his 14th world record in the pole vault, clearing 6.30m. Melissa Jefferson-Wooden of the USA completed a sprint treble in the 100m, 200m and 4x100m. Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone ran the second-fastest 400m in history – 47.78 – becoming the only athlete to win both the women's 400m and 400m hurdles title (having taken the latter in 2022). For Indian officials, Tokyo leaves questions. Did athletes peak too early? How wide is the gap between India's best and the world's? And is the nation's track and field reputation still tethered to the health of one athlete – Neeraj?

Naval Singh, however, prefers to look ahead. "Sachin did the best he could, considering he didn't have the best preparation for the 2025 season. We didn't really get an off-season. We have been competing right through 2024. But we will be preparing properly for next year. At the next World Championships, we want to be on the podium," he says.

« FOR INDIAN OFFICIALS, TOKYO LEAVES QUESTIONS. DID ATHLETES PEAK TOO EARLY? HOW WIDE IS THE GAP BETWEEN INDIA'S BEST AND THE WORLD'S? AND IS THE NATION'S TRACK AND FIELD REPUTATION STILL TETHERED TO THE HEALTH OF ONE ATHLETE – NEERAJ? »

FROM INDIA TO THE WORLD: BGMI PAVES THE WAY

BGMI, an Indian version of PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), has had an **interesting** last five years in the Indian market

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
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Battlegrounds Mobile India (BGMI) might have gained popularity in this country as a favourite pastime, but it has now turned its attention to making major advances in competitive esports.

Krafton's primary tournament in India, the Battlegrounds Mobile Pro India Series (BMPS), started in 2022, and the South Korean company has announced a roadmap for the year in India, which also involves the BGMI International Cup qualifiers, scheduled in late October.

Verstaline Esports won the 2025 edition of Battlegrounds Mobile India Series (BGIS), which ended in April, while Aryan x TMG Gaming was crowned the Battlegrounds Mobile India Pro Series (BMPS) three months later, securing a spot at the Esports World Cup.

BGMI, an Indian version of PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), has had an interesting last five years in the Indian market. The game – originally known as PUBG — was banned twice due to national security concerns, but has since returned to the Indian market under a different name.

That made BMPS a crucial competition, as its winner then competed in a conventional PUBG pool outside India, at the World Cup, the first such occasion. And in accordance with Krafton's 2025 roadmap, there's more international exposure awaiting Indian esports athletes in their pioneer product. The game's latest competition, called BGMI Showdown (BMSD) 2025, will take place in Hyderabad from late September to mid-October.

Forty-eight teams will compete for a share of the ₹1 crore prize pool, while the top eight teams will qualify for the BGMI International Cup — a tournament featuring 16 teams, comprising four teams each from South Korea and Japan, along with the eight entries from India.

The International Cup is scheduled to be played between October 31 and November 2.

Japan's entries will be determined through PUBG Mobile Japan League, while South Korea will have PUBG Mobile Pro Series 2025 to confirm its teams for the International Cup.

A THOUGHT FOR THE FUTURE

While Krafton's agenda for 2025 remains clear, it is interesting to also note its plans for the longer term.

Under the Rising Stars program, the company plans to create more esports athletes in the future — a move that could lead to India having a larger presence in global esports contests, given that the Union government has officially acknowledged the need to encourage esports

after banning real-money gaming.

"BGMI Rising Stars 2025 is a celebration of passion, potential, and the future of Indian esports. It's not just about identifying talent—it's about supporting it with intent, helping them grow into the next big names in the industry," Karan Pathak, Associate Director- Esports, KRAFTON India, said.

MEMBERS OF FIRST COHORT OF BGMI RISING STARS 2025:

Shiraj Thapa, Kunal Bhaskar, Thongzalaikam Haokip, Paridhi Gupta, Oleed F, Samihan Kulkarni, Saumya Raj, Anand Aman.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Debanjan 'DEATHMAKER' Das

Pics: SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Mandaviya: India must be among the top five sporting nations in the world by 2047

Union Sports Minister Dr. Shri Mansukh Mandaviya inaugurated the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi, organised by *The Hindu* Group's *Sportstar* in partnership with global consulting firm KPMG India.

On the occasion, the Minister also unveiled the KPMG *Sportstar* India Business of Sports Report and inaugurated the Sports Tech and Manufacturing Expo, a showcase of innovation and industry collaboration in the sporting ecosystem.

Addressing the gathering in the presence of Indian Olympic Association president P.T. Usha, The Hindu Group Chairman, Dr. Nirmala Lakshman, and Sportstar's Editor Ayon Sengupta, the Minister underlined the need for a holistic and inclusive approach to transform India's sporting landscape.

"I am happy that through *Sportstar*, important conversations around sport, sports science, and athlete welfare are being brought to the forefront," he said. Referring to P.T. Usha's remarks earlier, he added: "As P.T. Usha ji rightly noted, sports is a way of life".

Highlighting government initiatives, he said, "To help our athletes compete and win on the global stage, the government has launched the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), which provides world-class facilities to elite

sportspersons. But to truly take Indian sport forward, we need a holistic approach — a vision document, clear planning, and the involvement of all stakeholders: athletes, coaches, researchers, administrators, and writers who shape the sporting ecosystem.

"We are working with both a 10-year and a 25-year vision. By 2047, when India completes 100 years of Independence, the Prime Minister has set the goal of making India a developed nation. Alongside that journey, our target is clear — India must be among the top five sporting nations in the world."

On the National Sports Policy, Mandaviya stated, "It draws on global best practices but is rooted in our own model. We must learn from the world, but our framework must reflect India's unique strengths. The policy emphasises good governance, strong infrastructure, the application of sports science, and systematic talent identification and nurturing."

The Minister stressed that India's diversity was a strength to be tapped. "At the same time of the year, one part of our country experiences heavy snowfall in the Himalayas, another faces scorching 45-degree heat in Rajasthan's deserts, while the South witnesses monsoon rains in Tamil Nadu.

"Nowhere else in the world is there such a range. Talent exists everywhere — in villages, cities, and tribal areas. Our responsibility is to build an ecosystem that gives every talented child a chance."

He underlined the importance of governance reforms, saying, "Too often, federations spend their energy in disputes rather than focusing on athletes. That is why we introduced the Good Governance Bill, which places the athlete at the centre. Representation of women has also been ensured, because 50 per cent of our society and our athletes are women — their concerns must be heard, their voices must be present in leadership."

Mandaviya pointed out that more than 30,000 athletes are employed under sports quotas across ministries and state governments. "These jobs were not given merely for routine duties but to ensure athletes continue to play, develop, and later transition into roles such as coaches. We must also build an academic culture where retired athletes with passion and knowledge of sport can contribute as teachers, mentors, and leaders," he said, adding that a "league culture is essential to create more competitive platforms within the country."

He cited grassroots initiatives such as Khelo India and Fit India. "The Sundays on Cycle movement, for example, began with just 250 cycling clubs registering, and now has grown to over 8,000 locations across the country. This proves there is no shortage of passion or ability in India. What our youth need is opportunity, respect, and the right environment to thrive."

He congratulated *Sportstar* for convening the summit. "The outcomes and insights will be valuable, and we will study them closely. If each of us, in our own sector, works with this commitment, we can place India at the very top and build a truly developed sporting nation."

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SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

P.T. Usha: Grassroots development holds the key to India's future success

P.T. Usha, the first woman president of the Indian Olympic Association and one of India's greatest athletes, called for a cultural shift in how the country views sport, saying grassroots development holds the key to India's future success. Usha began by congratulating the organisers of the of PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit. "*Sportstar* has been an iconic magazine for decades, one I have admired and had the honour of featuring in multiple times. KPMG too deserves appreciation for developing a mobile application for athletes who travelled to the Paris Olympics in 2024, a thoughtful innovation that was very well received."

Usha said her defining moment came at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, where she missed the 400m hurdles bronze medal by a hundredth of a second. "To many, it looked like defeat. But for me, it was a defining moment. It proved that an Indian woman could stand shoulder to shoulder with the best in the world."

"Dhyan Chand's hockey is our dream, Milkha Singh's inspirational runs, cricketers uniting the nation, and today's champions in badminton, wrestling, boxing, and shooting — these triumphs are not just medals or records, they are turning points that changed how India saw itself and what it believed was possible. But history alone cannot carry us forward. The real question is, what is the future of Indian sports? I believe the answer lies in grassroots development."

Usha pressed for a change in mindset across society. "Sports should not be something we watch only during a big match. It should be woven into our daily lives. Every school should give children time and space to play. Every community should have safe grounds for boys and girls to train. Parents should see sport not as a risk, but as an opportunity. When we build such a culture, medals and records will follow naturally," she said.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

IOC chairman unveils *Sportstar's* special World Para Athletics edition

Arvinder Singh Sahney, Chairman of Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), unveiled Sportstar's special World Para Athletics edition at the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit, jointly hosted by *Sportstar* and KPMG at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi.

Sahney said IOCL's partnership with *Sportstar* reflected a long-standing vision of using sport as a catalyst for nation-building and social change.

"Our belief has always been that sport goes far beyond just chasing medals and glory. That is what Indian Oil stands for when we associate ourselves with sport," he noted.

IndianOil has backed para athletics at the Asian Para Games 2022, the World Para Shooting Championships 2024, and the Paris 2024 Paralympics, where India returned with 29 medals.

Sahney also lauded the achievements of Sheetal Devi, an IOCian — the world's first female armless archer — as a source of immense pride. "We have been consistent supporters of all sports. A key contribution is the IndianOil Divyashakti programme — a pioneering scholarship initiative for 100 para-athletes across 16 sports, with half the slots reserved for women. Eight Divyashakti athletes have secured qualification for the 2025 World Para Athletics Championships in Delhi."

Sahney said the IndianOil–Sportstar coffee-table book on the country's sporting history and the new World Para Athletics edition mark milestones in a partnership aimed at inspiring future generations. "What drives us is our commitment to the youth and to the larger vision of developing a vibrant sporting ecosystem for the country," Sahney added.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Tamil Nadu emerging as India's sporting hub

Tamil Nadu is quietly scripting one of India's most compelling sporting stories. At the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit, senior officials outlined how the State has married grassroots programmes, elite athlete support, and marquee international events to build a national sporting powerhouse.

This success is closely tied to the State's Olympic Quest scheme initiated by the government. The programme rests on three pillars: hiring top foreign coaches at competitive salaries, setting up Olympic academies, and providing high incentives/jobs to medal prospects. Tamil Nadu has also borrowed ideas from elsewhere. "A delegation led by our Deputy Chief Minister visited Odisha," recalled Dr. Atulya Misra (centre), IAS, Additional Chief Secretary to the Government, Department of Youth Welfare and Sports Development. "There, the government builds infrastructure while corporates provide the soft power — coaching, management, international expertise. Tamil Nadu has adapted this approach, but with larger budgetary support."

"A fact-finding delegation to Paris found that in at least 10-15 Olympic disciplines, India has no representation — like BMX, climbing, taekwondo, and there is feeble representation in rugby sevens, softball, handball," Atulya added. The proposed Sports City will therefore include facilities like BMX tracks and climbing walls, ensuring Indian athletes at least have exposure.

Yet the officials admitted that gaps remain. "High-performance centres are valuable for elite athletes, but corporates should also invest at the grassroots level. Many young athletes lack basic financial support for equipment or travel," said J. Meghanatha Reddy (left), IAS, Member Secretary and CEO, Tamil Nadu Sports Development Authority.

The Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation has stepped into this gap. Reddy cited the story of M. Khazima, daughter of an auto driver, who needed ₹1.5 lakh to compete at the Carrom World Cup in the U.S. last year. "We supported her, and she went on to win the singles crown."

Tamil Nadu's sporting footprint extends well beyond the Olympic arena. The State has produced 34 of India's 89 chess Grandmasters, two World chess champions, four Paris Paralympic medallists, and 12 Olympians. At the Hangzhou Asian and Para Asian Games, TN athletes contributed to 43 medals.

Tamil Nadu has already staged the Chess Olympiad, Squash World Cup, and Asian Surfing Championship.

PICS: SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

UP and Punjab unveil ambitious grassroots sports blueprints

U.P. Sports Secretary and two-time Paralympic medallist Suhas Yathiraj (right) said the State's priority is to "take children away from screens and back to the playing fields." Under a new policy, a mini-stadium will be built in each of the State's 826 development blocks, with standardised facilities for volleyball, tennis, and wrestling.

"Talent identification and providing quality infrastructure at the grassroots remain our biggest challenges," said Yathiraj. "To address them, the government has expanded the Eklavya Krida Kosh, offering up to ₹5 lakh in cover for athletes, and launched sports schools that combine academics with professional training. Three schools are operational, with three more planned next year."

Yathiraj also pointed to signs of progress: "At the last Asian Games in Hangzhou, nearly 25% of India's medallists were from Uttar Pradesh. Sports reforms do not happen overnight — they come through structured effort."

Harpreet Singh Sudan (left), IAS, Director of Sports, said Punjab's approach to reviving its sporting dominance is built on three pillars — active lifestyle, youth development, and restoring past glory.

Sudan admitted the State's struggles with drug abuse but rejected the idea that the problem is unique. "We acknowledge the issue, but sports is the key we identified to address it," he said.

At the grassroots, the Kheda Vatan Punjab Diyan, featuring 37 disciplines including para sports, has become the State's flagship mass participation programme. Numbers have surged from 1.5 lakh participants in 2022–23 to 5 lakh in 2024–25, backed by a ₹97.3-crore allocation over three years and cash awards to foster community engagement and talent spotting.

Punjab's 2023 Sports Policy introduced financial and structural reforms, including expanded athlete assistance from ₹10,000 to ₹3 crore and, for the first time, "preparation money" even at the qualification stage of international events. "We have also created a new cadre for outstanding sportspersons, recruiting our past champions into regular government jobs as coaches and administrators. Already, 50 former athletes have joined as junior and senior coaches. Our goal is to employ over 1,700 coaches across various levels," said Sudan.

In terms of infrastructure, Punjab has adopted a pyramidal model: village playgrounds feeding into nurseries, hostels, district facilities, and centres of excellence.

Both States, though following different paths, are betting heavily on grassroots systems, structured support, and cultural revival to build a sustainable sporting future.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

'Sports Governance Act is essential to address ecosystem of sport'

"The National Sports Governance Act is essential to address the complete ecosystem of sport," said Kunal (left), Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, at the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi.

"When we see the issues which are plaguing the ecosystem, which hinges on the development of sport as a driver of the economy and as a vehicle of social change, the good governance framework is critical. This Bill, and now Act, is built upon three core pillars: athlete centricity, good governance and global alignment. So, it is holistically addressing the core issues which are required for the successful functioning of a federation, the successful participation of athletes, proper development of the sporting pyramid from top to bottom and adherence to the Olympic Charter and international regulations," he said.

Kunal explained that the drafting process drew on both Indian precedents and international models. "The principle of good governance was the broad framework under which we had functioned. The draft constitution of the IOA, formed under the direction of the Supreme Court, also served as a good base for framing our draft Bill. We also looked at international practices – the US system, then Australia, the UK and France, which all have courts of sport. So, these international best practices were thoroughly studied. Our own sports court, its functioning, different court orders – everything was studied deeply, and after due consultation, this Bill was framed."

The session, titled Breaking Down the National Sports Governance Act, featured Kunal and Vidushpat Singhania, Managing Partner at Krida Legal and one of India's foremost sports and gaming lawyers, in coversation with *Sportstar* Editor Ayon Sengupta.

Singhania highlighted the stabilising effect the new law could bring to Indian sport. "There is going to be more stability in the federations, which is actually the major requirement, especially if they are going to bid for major events like the Olympics, the Commonwealth Games and even world championships. You need stability. Even the leagues which are there need stability," he said.

The Act requires every national sports body to have a general body with equal representation from affiliate members, alongside designated ex officio members. Singhania pointed out that this framework should not be seen as undue interference by international bodies.

"I have had the chance to deal with international federations regarding sports governance in India. This autonomy question is a googly that is often thrown. The sports governance standards have been in existence since 1975. At no time has an international federation really said that imposing good governance norms is bad for Indian sport. Their issue is that the government cannot elect somebody to the federation's board as an executive committee member or determine who is going to be part of it."

Kunal weighed in: "Good governance norms are now well-recognised globally. Even the International Olympic Committee has laid down principles of good governance. While framing the bill, we held extensive discussions with major federations worldwide and studied international practices. The Act provides a framework — it does not in any way hinge on the autonomy of federations. Instead, it lays out broad principles for how federations should be run, how disputes should be resolved, and how smooth transitions can take place during elections."

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Hari Ranjan Rao: India has the infrastructure for hosting Olympics, CWG

India already has the capability to host an event on the scale of the Olympics, said Hari Ranjan Rao (second from left), IAS, Secretary, Sports, Government of India, at *Sportstar's* PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit.

"If you look at infrastructure building for hosting a multi-sport event like the Olympics and Commonwealth Games, India has already done it and proven it in the past.

"The infrastructure that was built at that time is still there and being put to use by athletes and various stakeholders.

"So, to my mind, creating infrastructure for hosting a multi-sport event is not a childhood dream. Especially where the country is today in terms of the growth curve," Rao said.

"There is a good case for putting our heads together and coming up with ways in which we could spend this money in a more nuanced, fruitful and useful way. In the typical sporting language, spending money on the field of play is more important than building huge, large-scale concrete stadiums that you will never be able to fill in one or two years," he said.

Achanta Sharath Kamal (left), former paddler and vice chairperson of the Indian Olympic Association Athletes Commission, underlined that building a competitive talent pool for the 2036 Olympics was also a priority.

"Getting the Olympics [hosting rights] is one goal, but if you plug everything in place from grassroots to high performance for the next 10 to 12 years, you will get athletes who will be at their peak by 2036. This is the generation we're looking to nurture. This will have a snowball effect where kids will have a way of life through sport," he said during the panel 'Gameplan 2036: India's Global Event Ambition', moderated by K.C. Vijaya Kumar, Sports Editor, *The Hindu*.

Paralympic Committee of India president and former para-athlete Devendra Jhajharia (second from right) echoed that India has both the experience and the capacity to host the Games. "An international delegation had visited us during the first edition of the Khelo India Para Games. When they saw the facilities, they said that India can host an international event very well. So, I would like to tell you that India is ready to host the Olympics. We can do it easily. We have the capacity," he said.

Both Jhajharia and Sharath expressed confidence in India's para-athletes when the Olympics eventually come home.

"We will be performing above expectations. In Paris, we were 18th. Mark my words, we will be in the top 10 at the home Olympics," Jhajharia said.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

IPL chairman Arun Dhumal: Strong talent pool will improve franchise-based leagues in India

At *Sportstar's* PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit at the Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi, the spotlight fell on how India's vast talent pool has shaped the country's leagues, with cricket leading the way and other sports seeking to catch up.

In a panel discussion titled 'India in a League of Its Own – How India Shapes Global Sport', moderated by K.C. Vijaya Kumar, Sports Editor, *The Hindu*, IPL Chairman Arun Dhumal (left) said the IPL's strength lies in the conveyor belt of domestic talent. "The BCCI organises more than 2,000 games a year, which leads to the strong pool. That is what other sports need to do," he noted.

"We think of the IPL starting in 2008. I think that the 1983 World Cup win was the transforming event that led to the forward integration of players.

"We had Kapil Dev, then Sachin Tendulkar, Virat Kohli and now Shubman Gill. That flow continued, and the kind of leadership that the BCCI had allowed that to happen," Dhumal added.

Anupam Goswami (second left), Business Head of Mashal Sport and League Commissioner of the Pro Kabaddi League, underlined that the challenge for other sports is to scale up competitive structures.

"The amount of competition, when you go into leagues as a business, the challenge will be to scale up on the ground.

"My sport has to be less than one-tenth in terms of competition at the ground level; that's the same with almost every other sport," he said.

For the NBA in India, the focus is firmly on nurturing the grassroots. Rajah Chaudhry (third left), Head of Strategy, Asia Pac & Country Head, India at NBA, pointed out that while basketball is popular in schools, the absence of a professional pathway has been a hurdle.

"We are in a very different situation than most other sports. The NBA is niche, but basketball is not, at least in India.

"It is popular at the school level. Unfortunately, we've not had a sustainable league in the country. Grassroots is crucial, hence. That is our focus. We want 13-14 year olds to pick up a basketball," he said.

Vita Dani (second right), Chairperson of Ultimate Table Tennis and co-owner of Chennaiyin FC, stressed that the growth of Indian sport depends on collective strength of disciplines.

"For us to be successful, multiple sports have to co-exist. We need not compete. The new generation has to be involved in a sport, any sport. That is the only way we can create talent. It is not only a top-down approach that the leagues bring to the table," she said.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Suhail Chandhok: Appreciate the sport, not just individual heroes

In the panel 'Young Turks – A New Sporting Vision for New India' (from left to right) Hannah Muthoot (Director, Muthoot Sport, Muthoot Pappachan Group), Akhilesh Reddy (Chairman & Managing Director, Racing Promotions Pvt. Ltd.), Suhail Chandhok (CEO, U Mumba & Co-Founder, Elev8 India Sportz), and moderator Suresh Balakrishna (Chief Revenue Officer, *The Hindu Group*) explored the need to push boundaries while reimagining what it takes to build a sporting ecosystem.

From volleyball in Kerala and motorsport nationwide to kabaddi on the national stage, Hannah, Akhilesh, and Suhail reflected on the challenges and opportunities of turning vision into impact at the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit.

"I entered sports after much of the initial groundwork was done by my father. People have genuinely wanted to guide and support me in developing it," Hannah said.

Yet, sustainability remains a challenge.

"Can we truly build a brand? Our academies in Kerala are recognised, but to strengthen the ecosystem, we need younger players to come in through colleges and our academies. Combining all three — grassroots, colleges, and academies — is a challenge," she added.

Akhilesh entered motorsport, driven equally by passion, while acknowledging its expense.

"Motorsport has the power to create industrial establishments, generate jobs, and become a platform for research and development and technology. It can push engineers and mechanics into innovation.

"There are already kids passionate about working on car engines. Motorsport gives them a pathway to turn that into careers, therefore boosting employment, and contributing to the GDP."

Suhail sees sport as community-building rather than just competition. "We had a team from Uttarakhand that didn't do very well (in the Yuva Kabaddi series), but we spotted one really bright young talent there.

"His team got knocked out early, so we moved him to the Puducherry team. That team made the finals, and the boy did really well. The year before he played Yuva, he was maybe earning ₹20-50,000 a year from kabaddi. Then he came through our series, made the final, got spotted by scouts in Pro Kabaddi, and earned himself a ₹78-lakh contract in the auction."

Hannah added that deeper community engagement is critical.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Olympians Rani, Sumit stress on all-round support for every sport

Former India women's hockey team captain Rani Rampal (centre) emphasised the need to support sports other than cricket during *Sportstar's* PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit in New Delhi.

"We respect every athlete and sport. But I honestly wonder if cricketers work harder than we do, since they receive more money and support.

"It's maybe because cricket has more visibility. Cricketers know that playing the Ranji Trophy can sort their careers. For us, even playing at the Olympics is not enough. Parents often say that khel se roti nahi milegi (sport won't earn you a living) to discourage kids from taking up sport.

"It's a hard fact," she said during the panel titled 'Athlete Economy and Influence: Nurturing India's Olympic Movement'.

Two-time Paralympic gold medallist Sumit Antil stressed that financial support should reach athletes in their formative years, not only after medal wins.

"Before a medal, a para athlete struggles. I came to Target Olympics Podium Scheme in 2019. A prosthetic limb costs ₹4-5 lakh, and it can break during training.

"People wait for an NGO or support from somewhere, where they lose out on time and opportunities. There is plenty of scope for improvement," he said.

Offering a counterpoint, Neerav Tomar (left), Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director of IOS Sports & Entertainment, spoke about how agencies have increasingly turned towards Olympic sports.

"Multiple agencies are behind Olympic stars. That's the change seen in the last two decades. Neeraj Chopra is now almost rubbing shoulders with the cricketers," Tomar said.

Tokyo Olympics silver-medallist weightlifter Mirabai Chanu (second right) also echoed the need for support that does not depend solely on sporting success.

"It is tough to qualify for Olympics and just be there. It's a big achievement for us, just to participate. At times, I feel I push myself too hard and get injured. When we win medals, we get praise. But the criticism is also severe when we don't win. This needs to change," Chanu said.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Divyanshu: We all need to collaborate and share best practices

Collaboration between major players will determine the growth and future of the corporate ecosystem in sports, felt industry leaders during a panel discussion at PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi.

The session, titled 'Moneyball India – Where Capital Meets Competition', featured (from left to right) Satyam Trivedi (CEO, GMR Sports), Sanjay Adesara (CEO, Adani Sportsline), Divyanshu Singh (CEO, JSW Sports), and Uditvanu Das (Associate Vice President, Head of Sports, Havas Play India), moderated by Kala Anand, Director, Sports Advisory at KPMG India.

"This industry is at a juncture where we all need to collaborate, create value, and share best practices. There is growth that happens because of being competitive," said Divyanshu.

Satyam broke down the profitability quotient in various sectors of the sports industry.

"Let's say when you talk about franchise or league-level investment, you go with a very long-term mindset because you know that it's going to take at least three to five years for you to break even. But manufacturing is very different from that. If you look at any property that we evaluate, financial discipline is key. That's, I think, the core of any investment that we look at because ultimately it's a business and it has to meet business sets," he explained.

Adesara stressed that sports remains an exception in the larger investment ecosystem. "In the 1980s, as economies opened up, industries accepted that heavy investments took two decades or more to yield returns. By the 2000s, the horizon shrank to 10 years, and today, ventures are expected to show profits within three. Sports, however, remains a highly capital-intensive business. In sectors like ports, power, and cement, decades of sustained investment are understood before returns arrive. Yet, in sports, we are at a juncture where the country tries to replicate the success of one discipline across many others. That is the real problem."

Calling the sector still fairly nascent, Uditvanu pointed to the larger macroeconomic context. "We are at a per capita income of around $2,800, similar to where China was in 2008. The moment we cross $3,500-3,700 per capita income, the amount of extra money this economy will generate is going to be huge," he added.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Making India the destination for global sports goods production

The panel titled, 'Made in India - The Manufacturing Muscle', at the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit featured (from left to right) Vivek Kohli (Owner, Stag International) and Dr. Kanishka Pandey (Faculty and Head-Centre for Sports Research, IMT Ghaziabad). The duo spoke about the importance of enhancing the sporting culture of the country and aiming to raise the demand and supply of quality Indian sporting goods not just in the country but across the world in a chat moderated by Mayank Goel (Partner, Trade, Customs & GST, KPMG India).

Pandey touched upon how the enhancement of sporting culture is connected to the rise in sports consumption. "More people participating means more demand, and more demand means more manufacturing. That is why we need to actively promote sports culture."

But which is the best place to manufacture sports equipment?

"Factories should be set up near the ports. We should look at regions like Gujarat, Maharashtra or Chennai. Manufacturing near the port also helps boost exports," Kohli said, adding that it also reduces logistical costs drastically.

He also advocated for 'Made in India' over 'Make in India'. "I would rather see Indian companies manufacture overseas than foreign companies manufacture in our country."

However, in the end, none of these optics will matter if children don't take up sport. Kohli said this is where schools come in. "They need to employ more sports teachers specialised in individual sports. It can be part of extra-curricular programmes. This will also create new sporting teaching jobs."

Pandey offered a quirky solution inspired by his organisation's Sports Literacy Mission, launched in 2017: "Instead of teaching the A for apple and B for ball, we should teach them A for athletics, B for basketball. Creating sporting awareness in this way can make a difference," he said.

(From left) Iris Cordoba Mondejar, Alan Davis, Chintan Shah and Mahesh V. Panchagnula share a light moment with a group selfie during the Playcom 2025: Business of Sports Summit. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

CricViz's Alan Davis: Balance needed for AI usage in sports

There exists a need for balance while harnessing Artificial Intelligence in sports, said Alan Davis, Marketing Head, CricViz, during a panel at the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit.

"With anything to do with AI and technology, it's about accuracy, depth of data. For example, we've got records of 75,000 cricketers. Ultimately, yes, we can run that through systems and programs and models, but you still need an element of human intelligence to match that," said Davis. The session, titled 'Wired for Winning: Tech, AI & the Science of Sport,' also featured Iris Cordoba Mondejar, Managing Director, GSIC Powered by Microsoft, and Chintan Shah, SVP – Teams, Leagues & Federations, Sportz Interactive and was moderated by Mahesh V. Panchagnula, Head, IIT Madras Centre of Excellence on Sports Science and Analytics.

Chintan spoke about the seasonal nature of Indian sports. "During the off-season, what we try to do is to build digital stadiums where you can give those experiences to the fans. And that's where technology can play a big role. The only challenge is that most of the teams are trying to do this on social media, which is again one too many. It's important to shift the focus to doing this on your own platforms, where you can track the user behaviour and drive meaningful conversation," he said.

Meanwhile, Mondejar underlined that technology in sports is not restricted to corporate entities.

"It's not only an opportunity for entrepreneurs, it's a need for the government. In a country in Europe where health care is public, you need to prevent obesity in kids. And fitness, wellness, practice, sport, is something that we need to promote in our country and in our family, because it's the way to reduce the cost of expenses in the future for the hospital, but also for your insurance or for your family or to extend your life," said Mondejar.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

'Fans should be given the power of choosing their own experience'

In the panel titled 'Stadiums Without Walls – Building the Next Fan Universe', (from left to right) Siddharth Sharma (Head, Viewership and Monetisation Initiative – Sports, JioStar), Veer Damaraju (EVP, Technology, DAZN India), Aneesh Madani (former Head of Partnerships & Innovation, International Olympic Committee), and Nikhil Bansal (Head – Gaming & eServices, Google India) joined L.V. Navaneeth (CEO, *The Hindu Group*) to discuss how sporting organisations are engaging fans worldwide.

The session explored how new-age technologies, data analytics, and collaborations are being harnessed to overcome the unique challenges of enhancing fan engagement.

According to Siddharth, fans should be given the power to choose their own experience. "The acceleration of technology has made sports more inclusive, interactive, immersive, and intuitive — the four Is that we as a network live by. We are fortunate to be at the forefront of this transformation, even acting as a catalyst."

Damaraju added that fans don't just want to be spectators.

"We are moving more towards the control shifting from editorial teams to the fans. Fans are now able to dictate what kind of video they want. It means video on demand is shifting to video on prompt. This is what the industry is moving towards."

Madani weighed in on innovation aiding accessibility, saying, "One of my favourite sports experiences was watching IPL on Hotstar, being able to seamlessly switch languages and really experience the sport differently. And one of the questions I think about, especially for cricket, is what the language of engagement is going to be like for cricket in the future? How is that enabled with AI technology?

"When cricket goes to the Olympics in 2028, we will get broadcast of the game in countries which have not necessarily had that sport before. So, what does cricket sound like in Mandarin? What does it sound like in French? Could be interesting. And hopefully some of that is inspired, and hopefully even from India to the world."

When asked how sporting federations, leagues, and teams can leverage the digital ecosystem to create interactive and personalised fan experiences, Nikhil said the sports economy itself is evolving. "When we talk about fan experiences, I think the fans and consumers have evolved, sports have become more diverse, and of course, the digital economy and even commercialisation of sports have come a really long way. You are talking about a $50 billion number; we took out a report as Google, a slightly larger number, we had a $130 billion number for 2030."

SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

Community-driven CSR key to sustainable sports

Leadership that strongly supports Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is crucial to building sustainable sports development programmes with lasting impact, said Anupam Nidhi (second left), Head of CSR, Vedanta Group & Hindustan Zinc, at PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit.

"Sport is not an area where you can expect results in one, three or even four years. You have to stay invested for nine or 10 years to bring about real change," Anupam said during the panel titled 'Purpose Play: CSR, Inclusion & Sport for All'.

Neelam Babardesai (left), Head of Sports at Tata Trusts, stressed that community-driven models can be self-sustaining and need not depend solely on corporate backing. She underlined that people must remain central to any programme.

"We piloted sustainability in our badminton programme in Mizoram. We started with 40 grassroots centres across the State with community ownership. Mizoram has an amazing sports culture where everybody plays.

"So, we initiated community-owned grassroots centres and asked them to collect fees, allowing them to decide the amount. These centres were managed by the local communities. None of that money came to us — we only helped set up the structures and supported them for the first three years. We funded the coaches' salaries, covered tournaments, shuttles and other essentials, and built the ecosystem around it.

"In 2021, when we could not fund the programme, we thought it might die down. But within six months, the community stepped up, using the money they had collected over the three years. They managed to sustain the centres through that eight to 10-month period without our support. Even today, about 25 to 26 grassroots centres across the State are able to run on their own," Babardesai said.

Prijoe Tharu (second right), Associate General Manager, HCL Foundation, added: "With 'Sports For Change', which we launched in 2017, we have been purely focused on grassroots development programmes, and the idea actually came from the students themselves. When we were running education programmes in schools, students asked us why we didn't start something in sports for them. That is how it began — as a purely volunteer-led movement. Today, we have reached more than 65,000 students across 20 States, which is one of our biggest achievements."

The session was moderated by Chitra Subramanium.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Navigating a tectonic shift in sports ecosystem

During the 'New Frontiers in Sports: Play, Fitness and More' panel at the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit, Neha Parab Kandalgaonkar (third left), the vice president and head of corporate communications at Procam International, highlighted a tectonic shift in India's definition of sport.

"If somebody told me 20 years ago that a 65-year-old would want to run a half-marathon, triathlon or any other endurance sport, it would have been unheard of. But that has been possible today."

Deepak Raj (left), country head of IRONMAN India and HYROX, said the inception of the latter, a global, mass-participation indoor fitness race, has given gym enthusiasts something to be excited about.

"When we brought the IRONMAN to India, there were only a few triathletes. Even the gym-goers never had a race or a sport despite being really disciplined and active. They do now," he said in a panel moderated by Aparajita Biswas (right), Marketing Head of *The Hindu Group*.

Parvin Dabas (third right), co-founder of the Pro Panja League, thanked the Government for fuelling the growth of non-conventional sports in the country. Furthermore, Dabas revealed that India has secured the hosting rights of the World Armwrestling Championship next year.

That spirit of diversification is not confined to armwrestling alone. Another sport steadily carving its niche in India is pickleball, an emerging trend that has trickled down to peri-urban locales through Instagram reels and YouTube shorts.

"If you have played badminton, squash, tennis or table tennis, it's easier. What that has done is, it has made pickleball very inclusive at the beginning stage itself," Sameer Pathak (second left), an administrator of the sport, said. Tuhin Mishra (second right), managing director and co-founder at Baseline Ventures and Director of the Prime Volleyball League (PVL), underlined balance as a priority.

"In India, our league's viewership is split 57-43 between men and women. It's one of those sports which is not skewed (gender-wise), which means that we can actually involve more women as well to take up the sport," Mishra said.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

John Gloster: Indian sports in global spotlight

It is the age of glory for Indian sports, Rajasthan Royals head physio John Gloster (centre) observed at the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit.

"We're very much on the global focus because of the IPL. It has now become the most valuable sporting property in the world.

"The whole world, particularly the US, is asking, 'What is this IPL?' The other thing that's firmly put us on the global map is we've firmly put our hand up for the 2036 Olympics," said Gloster in a session titled 'Beyond the Game: Building Careers in Sports', alongside Nilesh Kulkarni (left), Founder- Director of the International Institute of Sports & Management, Dr. Amit Bhalla (second left), Vice President, Manav Rachna University, and Dr. Shobhit Jain IRS (second right), Joint Secretary, Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, Government of India. The session was moderated by Varghese K George, Resident Editor, *The Hindu*, New Delhi.

Kulkarni underlined key areas India needs to focus on to accelerate sports development.

"One, obviously, is the grassroots development. That's where the talent needs to come up. And in that space, you require hundreds and thousands of people to create that filter process for a talent to grow. But you need the right person to identify that talent."

Bhalla highlighted the role of educational institutions in broadening the sports base.

"I first tried playing golf when I was 20, and my son tried golf when he was six. Because his school had that option for him, where he could try. So educational institutions play a vital role in broadening the base. Then, if you bring in some flexibility. It should not be either or. What we need to work on is to put education and sports together."

Meanwhile, Jain explained how a shift in sporting culture has been reflected in the government's refurbished sports policy.

"Earlier, the policy was largely about medals. Today, we structured it into five verticals and one whole vertical is devoted to the economy of sports. So, this whole shift is enabling the shift in the sporting ecosystem also. Today, when we talk of careers, you add sport to any career, and there is a career".

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

It angers me when kids want to play IPL and not for India: Kapil

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Kapil Dev belongs to a generation when the T20 cricket league was an alien concept, but as the game has progressed with the shorter format dominating it, he is happy to see the amount of talent that has emerged.

"Don't you feel good when teams score 300 runs in T20I? I feel very good because it shows the amount of talent we have. In our time, we struggled to score 100 runs in 50 overs. So, you have to admire this generation," Kapil said at the PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit.

In a fireside chat with Suresh Balakrishna, the Chief Revenue Officer of *The Hindu Group*, Kapil admitted that while it is heartwarming to see parents encouraging their wards to take up sports, it angers him when people want to play in the IPL and not for the country.

"The change is that now the parents want their kids to play cricket, whereas in our time, playing cricket meant parents would slap you. Now parents bring their wards to the ground with the hope that their child can play in the IPL. It angers me when you want to play the IPL and not for the country. That's when I get annoyed. The aim should be to represent the country, and not the club," he said.

At the same time, Kapil underlined the importance of building credibility in the larger sporting ecosystem, especially in its dealings with corporates. "You have to approach the corporate world with humility when asking for money. If you take ₹100 from them, you must deliver value worth ₹1,000. That's when it works. But if you take ₹100 and give back only ₹10 in value, it won't work — whether it's golf, basketball, or any sport," he cautioned.

However, he isn't against former players featuring in franchise league cricket abroad. "After playing, they have to look after themselves. And if they think they can make a better life by playing in the leagues, that's fine," Kapil said.

While the BCCI does not allow its players to feature in any franchise leagues, except for the IPL, the retired players are permitted to feature in overseas leagues. And, Kapil sees nothing wrong in that. "We should never raise our fingers, because either you give them a guarantee that they will be looked after leaving cricket. The fact is, we don't look after anyone," the 1983 World Cup-winning captain said.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Esports is India's next big growth story

At *Sportstar's* PlayCom 2025: Business of Sports Summit in New Delhi, Dilsher Singh Malhi (above), Founder and CEO of Zupee, said India's new online gaming regulations mark a turning point for the industry.

"The new online gaming regulations have done more than just regulate — they have recognised esports as a competitive sport, giving it the legitimacy and clarity it deserves. This sets the stage for something truly transformative, and shows the government's intent to develop esports in India," Malhi said.

He argued that regulations are only the beginning. "Every law needs vision, and every vision needs enablers — people who can turn ideas into reality. We believe Zupee plays that role."

Zupee already has a vast user base, Malhi noted, with over 200 million registered players engaged in culturally rooted games. "This is a ready community that can transition from casual play to competitive formats. For instance, we've taken Ludo — a game every Indian knows — and reimagined it as a skill-based format where strategy and focus are key. In doing so, we've brought millions into competitive play."

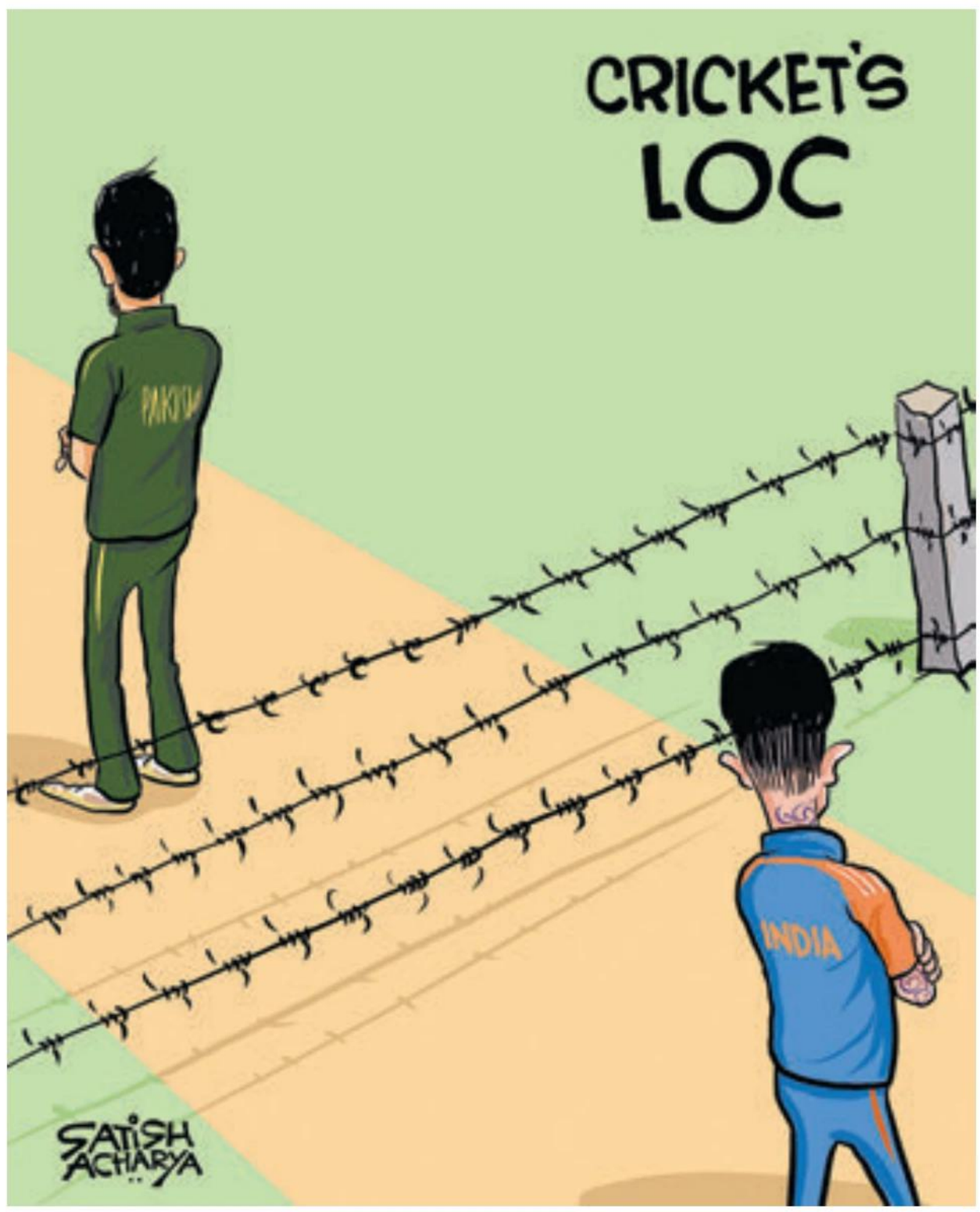
Malhi stressed that India's esports future lies in mobile-first innovation. "In India, there are fewer than 10 million gaming consoles, but over 750 million smartphones. Any kind of innovation needs to keep that in mind."

According to him, esports has the power to transform India across three dimensions — employment, technology, and culture. "Just as cricket has created an economy of coaches, broadcasters, content creators, and commentators, esports will do the same. Gaming has always been the gateway for new technologies to break through. And why can't there be a World Cup around Ludo? Anime did it for Japan, K-pop for Korea — India has the same opportunity."

For Malhi, inclusivity is the defining feature of esports. "All it takes is a smartphone. The next champion can come from a metro or a Tier-2 city. That's why we believe esports is India's next big growth story."

To accelerate this vision, Zupee has launched Zupee Studio, a platform designed to blend gaming and entertainment. Malhi described it as the company's next step in driving cultural and technological innovation in the sector.

SPORTOON



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

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The subtle art of weight management

Athletes must remember that medications alone will not create lasting health or fitness. It's the combination of medication, proper exercise, and nutrition that will ensure **long-term success.**

In recent years, the rise of GLP-1 agonists like Ozempic — originally designed to treat Type 2 diabetes — has taken the world by storm, particularly due to their effectiveness in weight management. Athletes, celebrities, and ordinary individuals alike have turned to these medications for assistance with weight loss.

Agonists are substances that bind to and activate cell receptors, leading to a physiological response. GLP-1 (glucagon-like peptide-1) agonists are medications that mimic a natural hormone in the body, helping to regulate blood sugar and suppress appetite. This results in weight

Treading with caution: Serena Williams would have likely paired her weight-loss medication post pregnancy with her usual regimen of workouts and a carefully structured diet. REUTERS

loss by reducing hunger, making them an effective treatment for individuals with obesity or metabolic disorders.

However, the question remains: should athletes use these drugs? And what does it mean for the integrity of sport and overall health?

I have been asked about this topic repeatedly, especially in light of recent stories such as Serena Williams' use of Ozempic after her pregnancy. Serena, who has always stood for defiance and overcoming personal obstacles, reportedly used the drug to lose a significant amount of weight. This sparked both appreciation and criticism. As a nutritionist, I think it's important to provide clarity about the real implications of using such drugs.

The Ozempic appeal

Ozempic is a GLP-1 agonist that helps control blood sugar and appetite by mimicking a hormone in the body. When used appropriately, it can result in weight loss by reducing hunger, which often leads to eating less. However, while it has been proven effective in helping those who struggle with obesity and metabolic issues, its rise in popularity among celebrities and athletes has caused concern.

I completely understand why someone like Serena Williams might use a drug like Ozempic. After pregnancy, many women face significant challenges when it comes to shedding weight. Pregnancy can alter one's metabolism, and the physical toll of childbirth is often underestimated. I believe Serena, like many others, may have sought medical assistance to help her manage these changes and regain her fitness. But the problem arises when these drugs are marketed as a quick fix, without clear discussions around the potential risks and necessary lifestyle changes.

Importance of medical oversight

From my perspective, the use of any drug, especially one like Ozempic, needs to be medically supervised. It's not something that should be taken lightly. These drugs are prescribed for medical conditions like diabetes and obesity, conditions that, if left untreated, can lead to serious health complications such as heart disease, stroke, and even premature death. For an athlete like Serena, whose health and fitness are her livelihood, the decision to take Ozempic may be a medical one, guided by her doctors and nutritionists.

However, I think it's important for the general public to understand that weight loss medications should never be viewed as a simple solution for vanity or appearance. We have to approach them as part of a broader, medically informed strategy. Athletes, or anyone for that matter, must remember that medications alone will not create lasting health or fitness. It's the combination of medication, proper exercise, and nutrition that will ensure long-term success.

Need for exercise and nutrition

While Ozempic can reduce appetite and support weight loss, it does not replace the need for proper nutrition or exercise. In fact, when people lose weight using this medication, they may also lose muscle mass, which can be detrimental for any athlete. For instance, studies have shown that a significant portion of the weight lost while using GLP-1 medications can come from muscle tissue.

That's why I always emphasise the need for an integrated approach. If you're losing weight with medication like Ozempic, you still need to maintain a balanced diet that provides essential nutrients. Exercise is crucial as well. When we work with athletes, we focus on building lean muscle and improving overall fitness. Without exercise, the weight lost can lead to negative outcomes such as decreased muscle mass and even bone density loss. For someone like Serena Williams, who is no stranger to intense training and conditioning, it's likely that she paired her medication with her usual regimen of workouts and a carefully structured diet. But many people overlook the fact that they need to eat well and exercise in tandem with using these medications.

Are these appropriate for athletes?

Now, we have to ask: should athletes be using drugs like Ozempic? While I understand the appeal of a quick solution, I am very cautious about recommending such drugs in the world of professional sport. In many disciplines, athletes rely on strength, endurance, and muscle mass to perform. If athletes use a weight loss drug and lose a substantial amount of muscle, it could hinder their performance.

In my opinion, athletes using a weight loss drug should be under the strict supervision of their healthcare team. And those who are using it solely for vanity, or to conform to societal standards, may not fully appreciate the long-term consequences for their health.

Nuanced understanding required

The rise of weight loss drugs like Ozempic has opened up new possibilities for individuals struggling with obesity and metabolic disorders. However, for athletes, I believe it's crucial to understand the full implications of using such medications. Drugs like Ozempic can help with weight loss, but they should not replace a well-rounded approach to health, which includes proper nutrition, exercise, and mental wellness. Once again, remember: only your doctor can prescribe medications like Ozempic, as they are best equipped to assess your health and determine what's right for you. Always consult with a healthcare professional before considering any treatment.

As a nutritionist, I urge athletes to focus on sustainable lifestyle changes that will lead to long-term success. Quick fixes like weight loss drugs may offer temporary results, but it's the holistic approach to health that will ensure both athletic performance and overall well-being for years to come. Athletes, especially in competitive sport, need to understand that their bodies are their most valuable asset and should be treated as such.

Of sports spectatorship

Spectators identifying with winners is almost a cliche. Watching top athletes winning their events, it is **easy to imagine** that they don't just represent their countries but humankind itself.

Suresh Menon

Why do we watch sport? It's a question that kept popping into my head, as it has been doing on and off for many years now, while watching the World Athletics Championships. Perhaps it was the presence of my wife for many of the events that made it more intriguing. For one, she barely watches sport. And yet here she was enjoying the high jump and the discus throw and the 10,000 metre races without knowing anything about the competitors or the countries they represented.

REUTERS

Perhaps there is a purity in this kind of viewing. There is, too, no emotional involvement that often ruins sport for those who watch only for the results and to bask in the reflected glory of national victories.

Triumphalism accompanies competition, but often limits the pleasure. Obviously more books are written about how to play than how to watch. Sports spectatorship isn't a field of study; I am not even sure if it ought to be.

In his book *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, a professor of literature, evokes Immanuel Kant and argues that spectatorship is "disinterested satisfaction" in a nonutilitarian performance. Here, 'disinterested' is used in the original sense of having no vested interest (unfortunately the word has since become a synonym for 'uninterested'). He says, too, that there is no ugly play, only one that "fails to fulfill the form it was supposed to become."

Spectators identifying with winners is almost a cliche. Watching top athletes Armand Duplantis, Hamish Kerr, Faith Kipyegon winning their events, it is easy to imagine that they don't just represent their countries but humankind itself. We watch the champions and are grateful to them because it removes from us the responsibility of having to train and sacrifice and give up the goodies while they do these things on our behalf. Only one man has run the 100 metres in 9.53 seconds, but the rest of us can glow in Usain Bolt's achievements.

I once read about someone saying, " By watching sports, we can enjoy, in our imagination, certain lives that we have neither the talent nor the time to live." Perhaps that is the essence of spectatorship. As Gumbrecht writes, "Watching sports can allow us to be suddenly, somehow, one with those beautiful and beautifully transfigured bodies."

But it's not always the winners. Sport has more losers than winners, and more of us have lost in sport than won. It is not unusual to identify with the runner at the back of the field, the thrower who messes up all his throws or finishes so far back he needs understanding rather than approbation. The sensitive spectator is aware of this. Many in India will forget who won, but will remember the heroics of Sarvesh Kushare **(in pic)** who cleared his personal best to finish sixth in the high jump and had a nation holding its breath while he attempted 2.31m and failed.

It brought together a nice mix of patriotism, emotional involvement, aesthetics, admiration and acceptance. Sport can do that.

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