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India swept both the Open and Women's gold medals in Budapest, marking a monumental achievement in the sport

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mail to: [sportstar@thehindu.co.in](mailto:sportstar@thehindu.co.in)

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## OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta  
sportstar@thehindu.co.in



# THE NOT-SO-SECRET COST OF CHASING PROFITS IN SPORTS

Administrators' greed helps **inflate the already fattened sponsorship pool**, but like an overstuffed suitcase, the taxing schedule of athletes is on the brink of exploding.

**T**hey are going to kill us," Carlos Alcaraz bemoaned after beating Ben Shelton in straight sets at the Laver Cup. He's 21 but already weary. Athletes everywhere are stuck in a hamster wheel of endless matches as administrators gleefully ram the already-packed calendar with more matches, more tournaments. Their greed helps inflate the already fattened sponsorship pool, but like an overstuffed suitcase, the taxing schedule is on the brink of exploding, leaving players with very little choice and even less energy. **Alcaraz, the French Open and Wimbledon champion, has already played 52 matches in 38 weeks in 2024**, and his season will end with the Davis Cup finals in Spain in November.

"The ATP doesn't care about our opinion. It's a money business. It's the longest season in sports," world No. 2 Alexander Zverev said. The tennis season nowadays has barely an off season, with the 2025 jamboree starting with the United Cup in Australia on December 27.

UEFA, the European football governing body, trying to cash in on the lucrative club football scene, has launched an expanded Champions League, while FIFA's revamped Club World Cup, scheduled to be held in the USA next June-July, has ballooned into a 32-team event from the preexisting seven-team, seven-match affair. The semifinalists of this year's Champions League will play at least 14 matches (or 16 if they have to navigate the post-league stage playoff), whereas last season's top four got by with 12 games. Manchester City teammates Rodri and Phil Foden, who lined up as opponents in the EURO final on June 14 this year, played 63 (5,456 minutes) and

69 (5,526) matches for club and country, respectively, in the 2023-24 season.

The global players body, Fifpro's Football Benchmark Survey, indicates: "Some players are seeing their time off fall to as little as 12 per cent of the calendar year, the equivalent of less than one full day off per week, contravening international health and safety standards."

Rodri suffered an ACL injury — long attributed to higher workload — in City's recent Premier League game against Arsenal, only his second start of this season. A report coauthored by FifPro's chief medical officer, Prof. Vincent Gouttebarge, in 2024, investigating the reasons behind the high percentage of ACL injuries in women's football, stated: "The anterior cruciate ligament injury group made more appearances, had more instances of less than 5 days between matches, and had less rest time than the control group over a 28-day period preceding the injury."

Rodri, prior to his injury, has been vocal about the pressure on the players. "From my experience, I can tell you that 60-70 [is no good]. Between 40 and 50 is the amount of games in which a player can perform at the highest level. After that, you drop because it is impossible to sustain the physical level," the Spanish international had said.

Rodri's suggestion to down tools has found agreement across rival clubs. Players are the main characters of sport, the sport business, or whatever we call it these days. **Throwing more money or more rewarding contracts at them is not going to fix a physical burnout.** But has anyone ever found a cure for sport's never-ending hunger for more cash?



'Runner's Knee' describes the highly prevalent condition of runners with tight IT bands who experience pain on the outside of the knee. Stretching your IT band, mainly using foam roll self-stretches, would be beneficial. Whether you're going for a short or long run, make sure you spend enough time stretching before and after.

While running may be a passion for many, there are but a few for whom the serotonin high makes an otherwise healthy activity addictive. Since pain is an emergent qualitative phenomenon that emerged through the diachronic process of evolution as a warning sign for either a present or imminent challenge towards survival, pushing the boundaries of pain tolerance beyond critical thresholds could be detrimental and even injurious. It is, therefore, necessary that you give your body the rest required and pay attention to your senses to ensure that you are able to continue pursuing your passion for jogging, which would otherwise be impeded or interrupted by needless injury.

There are significant differences in running mechanics between field runners, forefoot runners, barefoot runners, long-distance runners and sprinters. Each one requires a unique approach regarding the muscle groups involved, breathing type, foot biomechanics, nutrition pattern, workout pattern and schedule.runners, barefoot runners, long distance runners, and sprinters. Each one requires a unique approach in terms of the muscle groups involved, breathing type, foot biomechanics, nutrition pattern, training workout pattern, and schedule.

**Halt Sports Injuries (HSI) : An Ortho One Initiative which helps the athletes from injuries by creating awareness through learning session and medical support at subsidised amount for deserving sports person.**

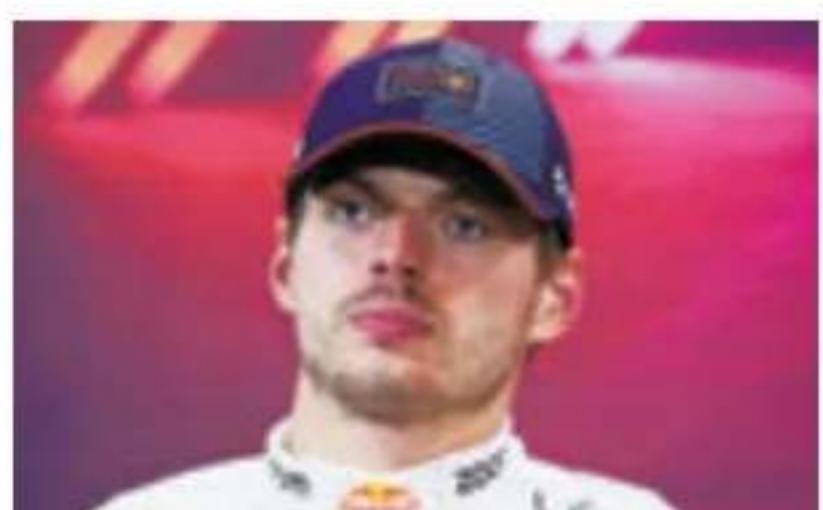
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## » WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT



**« If I am part of the white-ball teams' plans going forward in any way, shape, or form, then great. If I get the call saying, 'Do you want to come and play?' It's definitely going to be a 'yes'.**

— All-rounder Ben Stokes, saying he is open to England white-ball return »



**« It's just ridiculous to get a penalty for that. When you insult someone, that's pretty clear. I didn't even aim it at a person. It's a bit of a slip of the tongue moment.**

— Max Verstappen on his 'ridiculous' punishment for swearing »

# \$193m

Already an NBA MVP and an Olympic gold medallist, All-Star centre Joel Embiid now has until the end of the decade to try to win his first NBA championship with the Philadelphia 76ers. With another maximum contract secured, Embiid wants to chase that title in Philly — and remain a Sixer for the rest of his career. "Philadelphia is home," Embiid wrote on *Instagram*. Embiid, a seven-time NBA All-Star, and the 76ers agreed to a \$193 million extension with a player

option for the 2028-29 season.

The 30-year-old Embiid, who graduated from a Florida high school and played a season in college at Kansas, broke his own news when he posted a photo on *Instagram* of him signing a contract alongside team owner Josh Harris.



# 2026

Scotland has rescued the Commonwealth Games that were in jeopardy after Australia's Victoria state backed out of plans to host the 2026 sporting event. Glasgow, which hosted the event 10 years ago, will do so again. The event held every four years was established in 1930 as the British Empire Games and is open to 74 nations and territories. It has been staged in Australia, Canada, England, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales. Birmingham hosted the 2022 Games.

## KNOCK OUT!



**Britain's Daniel Dubois** destroyed Anthony Joshua's dream of becoming a three-time heavyweight world champion with a fifth-round knockout to retain his IBF belt at a packed Wembley Stadium. GETTY IMAGES

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# ENTER ‘THE LEGEND’

Mairon Santos is one of the **newest entries** into the world of UFC, earning his contract by knocking out Kaan Ofli in the TUF featherweight final.



GETTY IMAGES

**Nigamanth P**  
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

**“OK,**

I'm going down to bantamweight."

This was what UFC grappler Mairon Santos (**below**) had to say on X after the latest featherweight rankings were released.

Popularly known as ‘The Legend’, the Brazilian is one of the newest entries into the world of UFC. He earned his contract by climbing up the ladder in The Ultimate Fighter (TUF), a tournament that acts as a stepping stone into the promotion. **Santos earned his UFC contract by knocking out Kaan Ofli in the second round of the TUF featherweight final.**

His comment, although sarcastic, makes a lot of sense when you take a look at the featherweight rankings.

At UFC Noche, Diego Lopes outworked Brian Ortega from start to finish to earn a clean sweep of the judges' scorecards and moved ten places to sit third in the standings, stacked with world-class fighters.

Let's take a look at the outrageous top three ranked fighters in the featherweight division:

#### **Ilia Topuria**

In the lead-up to UFC 298, there was a lot of talk about Ilia Topuria being the ‘Next McGregor’.

The 27-year-old proved worthy of the comparison and made history by becoming the first champion from Spain and Georgia, earning a second-round knockout win over Volkanovski.

Topuria, although just 15 fights into his UFC career, has all the ingredients necessary to become a massive star in the circuit and someone who opens doors to new markets and audiences.

Topuria will be in action next on October 26 at UFC 308 in Abu Dhabi, where he will look to defend his title against current BMF champion Max Holloway.

#### **Alexander Volkanovski**

He might have been on the receiving end in his last couple of fights, but Alexander Volkanovski is a force to be reckoned with.

Once a two-division champion, Volkanovski lost both of his belts in consecutive fights via knockouts.

‘The Great’ has been a menace inside the octagon for most of his career, spanning close to eight years. His last win came in July last year, and it was one for the ages.

He lived up to his moniker, letting everyone know that his supremacy in featherweight was unquestionable, even though he was chasing lightweight gold.

He registered a dominant win against Yair Rodriguez, which enhanced Volkanovski’s reputation as one of the greatest featherweight fighters in UFC history.

#### **Max Holloway**

After suffering a unanimous decision loss in a featherweight title bout against Volkanovski back in 2022, Max Holloway (Blessed) has been unstoppable, winning three fights on the trot.

His unbeaten streak culminated in the BMF title he won against Justin Gaethje in spectacular fashion. The former featherweight champion was sharp from the start, picking at Gaethje with his long punches before being hurt on the nose by a spinning back kick on the last buzzer of round one.

From that point on, Holloway kept landing the better strikes. Just when people were anticipating a unanimous decision, he knocked Gaethje out cold with just a second remaining on the clock.



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#### BRICS 2022

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#### BRICS 2023

BIT students participated in 15 skills and secured 02 Gold, 05 Silver, 12 Bronze, 62 Excellence Prize (Students) and 03 Excellence Prize (Faculty Members)

and many more...



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### NATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

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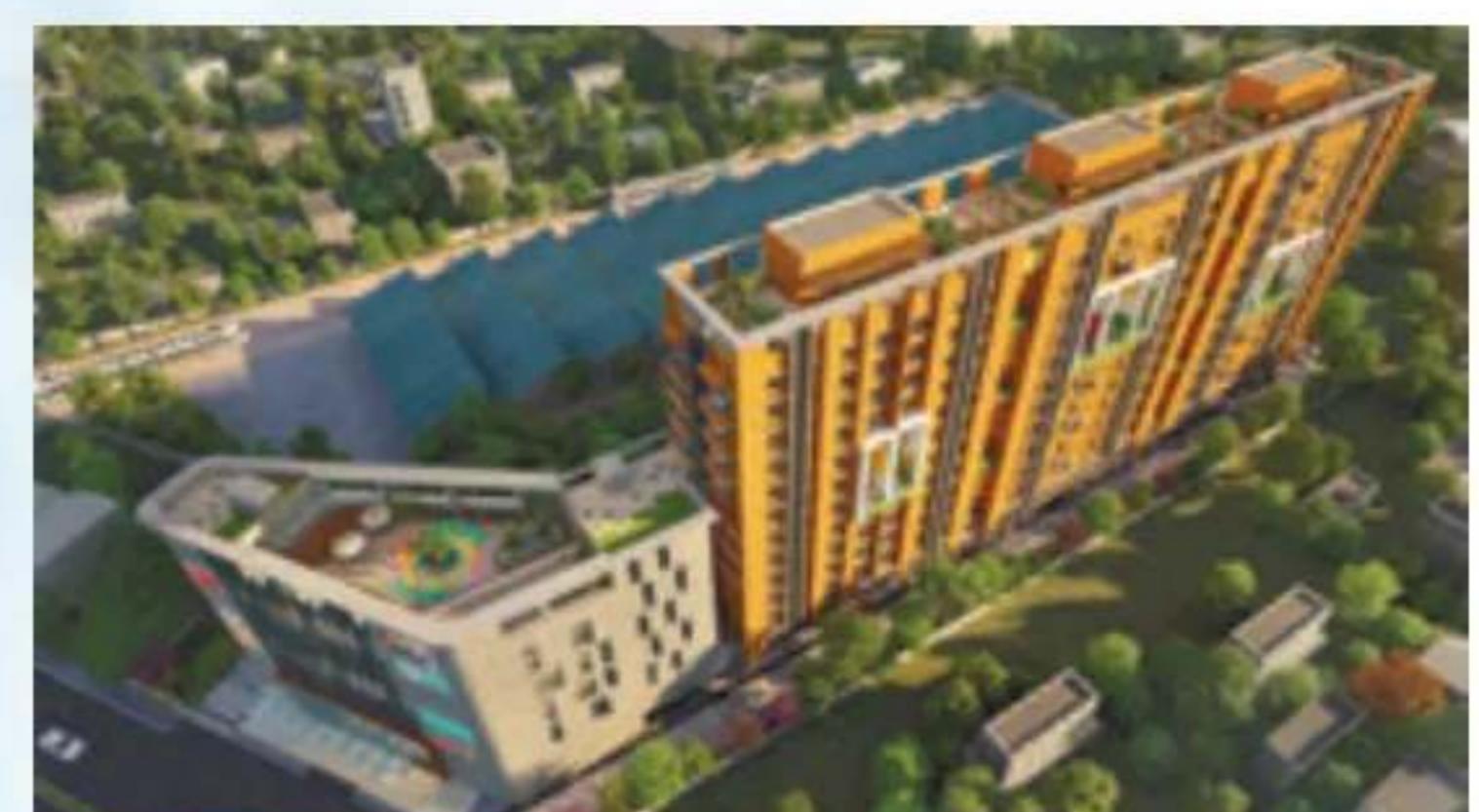
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# GOLD RUSH IN HUNGARY

INDIA SWEPT BOTH THE OPEN AND WOMEN'S GOLD MEDALS AT THE 2024 FIDE CHESS OLYMPIAD IN BUDAPEST, MARKING A MONUMENTAL ACHIEVEMENT IN THE SPORT.

Mayank

mayank.c@thehindu.co.in

**B**udapest, a city once synonymous with idyllic vacations, is fast becoming a landmark for triumphs and a place of many firsts for Indian sports. After Neeraj Chopra soared to World Athletics Championships gold here in javelin throw in 2023, the Indian chess teams have now scripted their own fairytale in the Hungarian capital.

Magyarország, the 'Land of Magyars,' offered a fitting stage to erase the ghosts of Mahabalipuram, where India fell short of the top prize two years ago. This time, there was no stumbling — just pure dominance, as India sealed its legacy with double gold.

From a total of 7,752 games played by 1,870 players across 11 rounds over 13 days, India's triumph is no small feat. After decades of Soviet dominance in the chess world, followed by Eastern Europe's rise post-1960, the nerve centre of chess seems to have shifted. India and the Central Asian nations now look poised to challenge the traditional powerhouses, and Chess Olympiad 2024 was a great example. Five Asian countries — India, Uzbekistan, China, Armenia, and Azerbaijan — secured



MARIA EMELIANOVA/FIDE

spots in the top eight of the Open section.

A similar pattern emerged in the women's section, with the same teams (excluding Azerbaijan) claiming top-seven finishes, signalling that this is no coincidence but rather the rise of new chess powers.

Leading this transformative wave is the young Indian contingent, whose consistent performances have captivated the world.

Coming in as the second seed



behind the United States out of 193 countries in the Open section, India's campaign at the Chess Olympiad was unblemished. The quintet of D. Gukesh, Arjun Erigaisi, R. Praggnanandhaa, Vidit Gujrathi and Pentala Harikrishna dominated the proceedings, winning 10 of its 11 rounds while sharing the spoils only once — against defending champion Uzbekistan in the third-last round.

Praggnanandhaa led the charge on the top board, while Gukesh sat out the first round. India cruised past

Morocco and Iceland with identical 4-0 victories, sweeping all eight games in the opening two rounds.

In round three, India faced Hungary's B team. Vidit, playing with the black pieces, was held to a draw by Gabor Papp, ending India's perfect win streak. In the same round, Peter Prohászka faced the wrath of Arjun on the third board. Playing with the white pieces in a Queen's Gambit Declined game, Arjun forced his opponent into mistakes before sacrificing his queen

for a brilliant checkmate, which Prohászka graciously allowed. Arjun sealed the game in just 36 moves, validating his team captain Srinath Narayanan's decision to play him on Board 3.

"The great thing was that all the players were happy to do what was best for the team. So there was no pushback from anyone wanting to play on a fixed board. Chess-wise, it was straightforward: Gukesh and Pragg have been facing elite opponents with ratings of around



**Fiery form:** D. Gukesh secured eight wins on the top board and was the only player to cross a 3000 rating performance mark. MARK LIVSHITZ/FIDE

2700, while Arjun had been playing slightly lower-rated opponents in recent months. It made sense to keep them in their respective roles," said Srinath.

Serbia, undefeated at the time, posed little to no resistance in the fourth round. Gukesh, Arjun, and Vidit recorded comfortable wins, powering India to a commanding victory. The trend continued against Azerbaijan, where Praggnanandhaa and Vidit held their opponents to draws with dark pieces, while Gukesh and Arjun again delivered wins.

India then claimed a win over Hungary's A team to maintain its perfect record of 6/6, firmly establishing itself as the team to beat, but it was a job half done; the much stronger teams were waiting to pounce in the following rounds. Among them, in round six, was the 2018 gold medal winner China. After skipping the 2022 Olympiad, China was ready to take its top spot from Uzbekistan, but it had to overcome a surging Indian challenge first.

India's plan was simple: hold China to a draw and advance without taking a heavy blow. Coach Srinath crafted a bold yet risky game plan to execute this — he substituted Vidit with the experienced Harikrishna on board four, tasking him with neutralising the in-form Wang Yue.

Meanwhile, China made a

surprising move by benching reigning World Champion Ding Liren, denying fans the much-anticipated clash with Gukesh. The two will meet each other in the FIDE World Chess Championship final later this year. But here, Gukesh was pitted against an even tougher opponent, Wei Yi, who was having an extraordinary year.

Praggnanandhaa, Arjun, and Harikrishna obliged, playing solid, defensive games to secure draws, bringing the score to 1.5-1.5 with only the top board still in play.

Srinath knew Gukesh was a tough nut to crack, but now it was Wei's turn to experience it. He managed to hold the game on an equal footing for five hours, with Gukesh pressing hard with his pair of knights against his lone rook.



It was a high-stakes wager — one wrong move could have cost Gukesh the match. But this time, he was prepared. Having learnt from past mistakes, Gukesh maintained his composure, inducing errors from Wei who faltered, and India clinched a massive victory over its arch-rival.

India then comfortably dispatched Iran, but the unstoppable run met its first obstacle in the Vladimir Kramnik-coached Uzbekistan. The defending champion, impressive as ever, held India to a draw in a tightly-contested match. Arjun had chances against Shamsiddin Vokhidov but couldn't convert, while the rest of the Indian boards were kept in check by the 2022 gold medallist.

Heading into the penultimate round, India held a commanding

two-point lead over second-placed USA, setting up a highly anticipated showdown with its strongest rival. A victory would have all but secured India the gold, but Wesley So had other plans. Playing with the white pieces, So struck the first blow, defeating Praggnanandhaa in an Italian Game. Levon Aronian also piled on the pressure against Vidit, but India's top two boards — Gukesh and Arjun — were smelling blood. In a repeat of 2022, Gukesh took down World No. 2 Fabiano Caruana, while Arjun outplayed Leinier Dominguez Perez. India secured a stunning victory over the USA, putting it on the brink of history.

Had the practicality taken charge ahead of the mathematical possibility, India would have secured the gold with a round to spare. But

**Stirring effort:** Arjun Erigaisi stole the spotlight by claiming individual gold in the Open section. MICHAŁ WALUSZA/FIDE

the final confirmation had to wait as India steamrolled Slovenia in the last round to officially claim its first-ever Chess Olympiad gold.

#### Double delight

While Gukesh and Arjun led the charge for the men's team, winning eight and nine games respectively to claim individual gold medals, it was Divya Deshmukh and Vantika Agrawal on the bottom two boards of the women's team who did the heavy lifting, ensuring India's double delight in both sections.

The duo accounted for 14 of the team's total 23 wins, earning



**Promising talents:** With young stars like Divya Deshmukh eyeing GM titles and a new generation waiting in the wings, the future of Indian chess is in safe hands. MICHAŁ WALUSZA/FIDE

individual gold medals on Boards 3 and 4. Unlike the Open section, the women's category was fiercely contested. Top-seeded India got off to a smooth start, defeating Jamaica in the opening round before comfortably dispatching European powerhouses Czechia, Switzerland, and France in the following rounds.

Round five presented a tougher challenge in Kazakhstan. On the top board, Harika Dronavalli squandered a winning position with Black in a Petrov Defense against Bibisara Assaubayeva, dropping her second point in four games. But R. Vaishali and Vantika came to the rescue, securing crucial wins, while Divya's draw ensured India remained unbeaten.

Vantika, Divya, and Vaishali each secured a victory in the next two rounds against strong Armenian and Georgian teams. India didn't lose a single game on any board and looked poised to cruise to the top.

India's juggernaut came to a halt

against Poland, where Harika suffered her third loss and Vaishali also fell, creating a three-way tie at the top with Poland and Kazakhstan. The race for gold seemed to slip away after a 2-2 draw against the USA in the ninth round, which pushed India into second place behind Kazakhstan. Harika, who was rested for the USA clash as Tania Sachdev took the last board, was reinstated for the crucial match against China. Only a win would keep the team's gold hopes alive — and it delivered. Just like the men, three boards ended in draws, while Divya secured a decisive victory, giving the women's team a crucial boost.

India entered the final round tied with Kazakhstan, knowing that even a win might not guarantee gold. But as it had done throughout the tournament, India delivered when it mattered most, overwhelming Azerbaijan 3.5-1.5 to make a strong case for the title. The final nail in the coffin for Kazakhstan came from USA, which held it to a 2-2 draw, clearing the path for India to clinch its first-ever women's chess Olympiad gold in style.

In a rare departure from its usually reserved nature, the team celebrated with unbridled joy.

Gukesh and Tania's playful re-enactment of Ric Flair's iconic 'trophy walk' celebration perfectly captured the camaraderie and close-knit spirit of the squad.

This team bond, as Srinath emphasised, was key to its success. "There's no exact formula that guarantees success every time, but good team bonding increases the probability of better results. Being in a positive space helps you play better."

What makes this triumph even more remarkable is the age of the Indian contingent — six out of 10 players are under 23, with an average age of less than 20 among the four individual gold medallists.

Gukesh, in particular, solidified his status as one of India's leading chess stars, with eight wins on the top board, being the only player to cross a 3000 rating performance mark. His back-to-back gold medals, echoing his performance from 2022, leave little doubt about his ability to reign at the top. Arjun's rise to World No. 3 and Gukesh's close pursuit at No. 5, both nearing the elite 2800-rating mark, have been equally heart-warming. With young stars like Divya and Vantika eyeing GM titles and a new generation waiting in the

wings, the future of Indian chess is in safe hands.

The 45th Chess Olympiad truly lived up to its tagline for India — “Where the story becomes history.”

The seeds sown by Viswanathan Anand have flourished, with his prodigies now emerging as world-beaters. With top prizes across the board and the retention of the Nona Gaprindashvili Cup, India has now firmly cemented its place among the global chess elite.

#### TOP FIVE TEAMS (OPEN + WOMEN'S SECTION) INDIA WINNER OF NONA GAPRINDASHVILI CUP

Rank	Team	Rank Sum
1	India	2
2	USA	5
3	Armenia	11
4	China	11
5	Spain	14



**Queen's gambit:** Vantika Agrawal and Divya Deshmukh (not pictured) played pivotal roles on the bottom two boards of the women's team, leading India to a double triumph. MICHAŁ WALUSZA/FIDE

## Report card

### Open section



9/10 (Points/Games)

**3056**



6/10

**2713**



10/11

**2968**



7.5/10

**2744**



2.5/3

**2641**

(Performance Rating)

### PODIUM

#### Open section

##### INDIA

(average rating)

**2753**

21 MATCH POINTS

##### USA

(average rating)

**2757**

17 MATCH POINTS

##### UZBEKISTAN

(average rating)

**2690**

17 MATCH POINTS

#### Women's section

##### INDIA

(average rating)

**2467**

19 MATCH POINTS

##### KAZAKHSTAN

(average rating)

**2373**

18 MATCH POINTS

##### USA

(average rating)

**2387**

17 MATCH POINTS

### Women's section



4.5/9 (Points/Games)

**2424**



6/10

**2385**



9.5/11

**2608**



7.5/9

**2558**



3.5/5

**2336**

(Performance Rating)

# Lower-order a worthy fail-safe but overdependence can be costly

India's transitioning top-order can't rely solely on the stability of Ravindra Jadeja, Ravichandran Ashwin and Axar Patel. Rohit Sharma's team **must enforce** more accountability at the top to succeed in this Test season.

**Dhruva Prasad**

dhruba.prasad@thehindu.co.in



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India was tottering at 144 for six; a young and sprightly Bangladeshi pace attack had sent a vaunted top-order packing under overcast conditions in Chennai. That's when the ageing Ravindra Jadeja and Ravichandran Ashwin were called upon to mitigate the damage.

The duo responded with a 199-run partnership for the seventh wicket, pulling India to 376 in the first innings, which Bangladesh could just about overhaul in its two innings combined. That they picked 11 wickets between them with their primary skill to script India's 280-run win was secondary, and rightly so.

India has lost just four Tests at home since December 2012, and the spin duo has been the centrepiece of this invincibility. They have been part of 44 Tests at home since 2013, of which India has won 34 and lost just three, translating to a win percentage of 77.27.

Despite 800 Test wickets between them, the



Ashwin-Jadeja combine also tells a tale of a lower-order resistance with the bat that has allowed India to preserve its indomitable record at home in the longest format. It also includes the grit and valiance of other members of the spin tribe — Axar Patel and Kuldeep Yadav — who have extended India's tail.

Be it Ashwin and Dhruv Jurel combining in Rajkot for the eighth wicket against England earlier this



year or the latter with Kuldeep in Ranchi in the same series, the lower-order has been instrumental in waging inspirational fightbacks. Ashwin and Axar's 114-run stand in Delhi and Jadeja and Axar in Nagpur were also key in subduing Australia last year.

When India last faced Bangladesh in the latter's backyard in late 2022, it was again the lower-order that saved the team the blushes. Ashwin joined

forces with Shreyas Iyer for an unbroken eighth-wicket partnership, worth 71 runs, to eke out a three-wicket win in Mirpur, while the first Test in that series saw Ashwin and Kuldeep stitch 87 runs for the eighth wicket in Chattogram to help India to 404 in the first innings in challenging conditions.

In what were billed as India's toughest challenges at home in the last two years, the lower-order

**Rocking rearguard:** Ashwin and Jadeja's lower-order batting resilience has helped India maintain its dominant home record in Test cricket. AP



**Sizzling southpaw:** Axar Patel was India's second-highest run-scorer in the last Border-Gavaskar Trophy against Australia, played on raging turners, and topped the charts with a batting average of 88. K.R. DEEPAK

batters emerged as saviours. Axar was India's second-highest run-scorer in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy against Australia, played on raging turners, and topped the charts with a batting average of 88. Meanwhile, in the series against England, Jadeja and Axar averaged 38.66 and 33.25, respectively, significantly higher than specialist batters Iyer (26), Rajat Patidar (10.50), and wicketkeeper K. S. Bharat (23.00).

A cursory glance at batting averages for those who have played a minimum of 10 matches at home since 2021 further attests that lower-order rescue missions are not intermittent or miraculous instances.

Jadeja has the second highest average (44.00) at home during this period, bettered only marginally by Shubman Gill (44.90). Axar (39.60) is fourth on this list, above Virat Kohli (32.05), while Ashwin (26.44) tops an out-of-favour Cheteshwar Pujara (24.53).

India's lower-order, which entails batting positions 7, 8, and 9, has been doing the heavy-lifting largely owing to the middle-order's (positions 4, 5 and 6) dwindling returns. Since 2020, in Tests in India, the lower-order has contributed 23.91 per cent of the total runs scored, up from 14.48 per cent between 2016 and 2019, while the middle order's share has fallen from 39.68 per cent in 2016-19 to 32.53 per cent between 2020 and now. Alarmingly, the middle-order's average has plummeted from a whopping 60.78 in the 2016-19 period to 34.34 between 2020-24, and is now comparable to the lower order's 31.92 in the corresponding period. Meanwhile, the top order

(positions 1, 2 and 3) has also seen a sharp decline in averages, dropping from 55.61 in 2016-19 to 43.03 in 2020-24.

Between the periods 2016-19 and 2020-24, the top six batting positions have all witnessed a steep decline in averages in home Tests, with the No. 4 spot suffering the sharpest drop — from 82.06 to 29.80. This drastic fall coincides with No. 4 mainstay Kohli's dip in form, whose average has shrunk from 86.35 to 33.16 in that position at home between the corresponding periods. Interestingly, India's No. 7 (38.47) and 8 (36.78) boast of a higher average than No. 4 (29.80) and 5 (33.86) since 2020 in home games.

The No. 5 position, earlier held by Ajinkya Rahane, is likely to see some stability with the return of Rishabh Pant and the emergence of Sarfaraz Khan, after Iyer's unsuccessful bid for the spot.

The recent struggles of the middle-order, that have necessitated

the lower-order's rescue acts, coincided with a period when India opted for more result-oriented and spin-friendly pitches.

From averaging 119.8 at home against spinners in 2019, the top-six averages 49.13 in 2024, still an improvement on a dismal 25.9 from the previous year.

Moreover, the top six batters are over two times more susceptible to spin bowling in home Tests compared to 2019, when they lost a wicket every 160 balls, compared to 56 in 2023 and 76 in 2024.

However, the same period saw a drastic uptick in the ability of the lower-order to tackle spin, with its average against the tweakers rising from 19.60 in 2019 to 47.25 in 2022, before dipping again to 35.60 and 33.56 in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

Thus, in two of the last four years — 2022 and 2023 — the lower-order has fared better against spin than the top-six batters.

The importance of lower-order runs has also reflected in India's team selections, with Axar often pipping Kuldeep to the playing XI owing to his greater batting ability, or Jadeja being preferred over Ashwin in overseas Tests for similar reasons.

With India hamstrung by the lack of a genuine seam-bowling all-rounder, the team has relied on Shardul Thakur for the cushion of some extra runs in the lower order overseas despite his average of 19.47, batting largely at No. 8, not inspiring much confidence.

But new head coach Gautam Gambhir isn't losing sleep over trying to develop a fast-bowling all-rounder, which could also be an asset in increasingly pacer-friendly conditions at home.

"We've been talking about it since Kapil Dev that we don't have a fast-bowling all-rounder. If we don't have it, we don't have it," he had said ahead of the first Test against Bangladesh.

Gambhir, instead, found occasion to celebrate India's bevy of spin-bowling all-rounders, who fittingly repaid their coach's faith.

"We have to manage people like



**Dip in form:** Virat Kohli's batting average at No. 4 has dropped to 33.16 at home between 2020 and 2024.AP

Jadeja, Axar and Ashwin, who's got five [six] Test hundreds. Washi [Washington Sundar] is there as well. So, we've got quality all-rounders... Tell me how many international sides have a spin bowling all-rounder? There aren't many. India's got that luxury," he added.

With India getting its long Test season underway with its top and middle-order in transition, Rohit Sharma and his men have a dependable fail-safe in Jadeja and Ashwin, and by extension, Axar. They would, however, do well to limit their dependence on that luxury and seek more accountability at the top as India's challenges will only mount in its bid for a third consecutive berth in the final of the World Test Championship.

#### Tests in India since 2020

Batting Pos.	Runs	Average	100s	50s	Contribution
<b>1, 2, 3</b>	3701	43.03	11	14	40.76 %
<b>4, 5, 6</b>	2954	34.34	05	17	32.53 %
<b>7, 8, 9</b>	2171	31.92	03	11	23.91 %

#### Tests in India (2016-19)

Batting Pos.	Runs	Average	100s	50s	Contribution
<b>1, 2, 3</b>	5951	55.61	20	31	43.64 %
<b>4, 5, 6</b>	5410	60.78	15	21	39.68 %
<b>7, 8, 9</b>	1975	30.85	03	15	14.48 %

#### Tests in India (Averages by batting position)

Since 2020		2016-2019	
Batting Position	Average	Batting Position	Average
<b>1-2</b>	44.44	<b>1-2</b>	55.29
<b>3</b>	39.96	<b>3</b>	56.28
<b>4</b>	29.80	<b>4</b>	82.06
<b>5</b>	33.86	<b>5</b>	44.90
<b>6</b>	40.15	<b>6</b>	53.88
<b>7</b>	38.47	<b>7</b>	27.84
<b>8</b>	36.78	<b>8</b>	39.55
<b>9</b>	20.0	<b>9</b>	25.55
<b>10</b>	12.93	<b>10</b>	09.11
<b>11</b>	4.18	<b>11</b>	22.33



## ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



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# India fortunate to have Ashwin, Jadeja in the team

With Rishabh Pant also **back to form with his chirping** behind the stumps, the entertainment factor has gone up manifold.

**R**avichandran Ashwin again showed why he is a match-winner in India with a stirring performance at his home ground in Chennai. It is always special to play at home because, as a kid, one has gone to the same stadium and seen so many matches from the stands. The seats in the stands seem so distant from the champions that are playing out there, and now suddenly, some years later, you are the one in the middle, and so you want to impress the kid in the stand, which you were once.

As a kid, you would have walked from one stand to the other, just excited to be there, and so there's a familiarity with just about every inch of the ground. The hundred Ashwin got against Bangladesh in the first Test must rank as one of the finest in Indian cricket not just because it came at a time when India were in trouble but also for the fluency and sheer elegance of stroke-making. The pitch had a fair bit of bounce. It wasn't easy to bat on as the Bangladesh pacers were bowling splendidly too. That's why it was such a terrific century.

Chennai has produced some good bouncy pitches in the past too, especially when there were no instructions to prepare turners. The

fastest and bounciest pitch I have ever played on was in 1978 against the West Indies. Sylvester Clarke and Co were getting the ball to fly off a length, and on that surface, Gundappa Vishwanath scored the finest Test century I have seen from an Indian batter. Every single century of Vishy has been full of style and strokes of such visual splendour that even now just recalling them brings a smile to the face. On that surface, GRV, a master of playing beside the line of the ball, used that technique to play shots that left Clarke and his colleagues dumbstruck and simply shaking their heads in wonderment. Kapil Dev also got useful runs in his forthright manner and then bowled superbly to win us the game. The learning from that game was simple: technique is fine to some extent, but if you have the temperament to be innovative, you can overcome adversity.

Ashwin's was a similar knock, though one got to see bits of it on TV. Ravindra Jadeja played the ideal foil, and he also, like Ashwin, is another player who puts his hand up every time India is in trouble. The team is fortunate to have these two, and they lend such a balance to not just the bowling attack but also the batting. The value of all-rounders was once again proved not just by these two Rs but also by



another R, Rishabh Pant, who scored a century in the second innings in his comeback Test match. Pant is turning out to be as popular with teammates and opponents as Vishy was, and with him back to form with his chirping behind the stumps, the entertainment factor has gone up manifold. It was also good to see Shubman Gill getting another classy hundred.

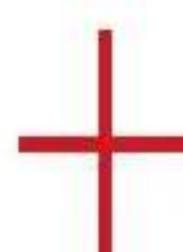
Speaking of allrounders, with Hardik Pandya not yet ready, or so it seems, to bowl more overs, it might be a good idea for the selectors to encourage Venkatesh Iyer to bowl a bit more in the Ranji Trophy. He was not part of any team in the Duleep Trophy, but he is a quality player and a left-handed batter to boot and should be kept an eye on, along with young Nitish Reddy.

Abhimanyu Easwaran's two hundreds in the

**Troubleshooters-in-chief:** Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja put their hands up every time India is in a spot of bother. R.RAGU

Duleep Trophy also should not be overlooked, for in Australia, India will need players who can play the short ball. It would be better to go with more opening batters in the squad as they can bat not only at the top but also in the middle order.

Well begun is half done, so India have started the red ball season with a terrific all-round performance to beat a highly confident Bangladesh. They know there are sterner battles ahead, and the going could get a bit more rough than what was seen in Chennai.



**It would be better to go to Australia with more opening batters in the squad as they can bat not only at the top but also in the middle order.**

## » STATSMAN MOHANDAS MENON

# India's Mr. Reliable

**4 }** The number of batters who have scored back-to-back centuries at the M. A. Chidambaram Stadium, Chepauk, in Chennai. R. Ashwin became the latest to join this elite list along with three other players.

### Back-to-back centuries at Chepauk, Chennai

Batter (team)	Scores	Opponent	Month, Year	Result
Duleep Mendis (Sri Lanka)	105 & 105	India	Sept 1982	Drawn
Sachin Tendulkar (India)	136	Pakistan	Jan 1999	Lost
	126	Australia	Mar 2001	Won
Andrew Strauss (England)	123 & 108	India	Dec 2008	Lost
R Ashwin (India)	106	England	Feb 2021	Won
	113	Bangladesh	Sep 2024	Won

Note: Both Mendis & Strauss made twin centuries in their only Test match at Chepauk.

**3 }** The number of players older than R. Ashwin to register a three-figure score in Test cricket for India.

### Oldest to score a Test century for India

Age	Batter (Runs)	Opponent	Venue	Date	Result
40y-22d	V. Merchant (154)	Eng	Delhi	3 Nov 1951	Drawn
38y-307d	R. Dravid (119)	WI	Kolkata	14 Nov 2011	Won
38y-269d	V. Mankad (231)	NZ	Chennai (Corpn)	6 Jan 1956	Won
38y-2d	R. Ashwin (113)	Ban	Chennai (MAC)	19 Sep 2024	Won
37y-255d	S. Tendulkar (146)	SA	Cape Town	4 Jan 2011	Drawn

Note: \*\* Only the player's last century has been listed above.

\*\* Dravid had five Test centuries after the age of 38.

\*\* Vinoo Mankad had two Test double centuries at the age of 38

\*\* Merchant was playing the final Test match of his career.

**2 }** The number of batters who have scored a maximum of four Test centuries while batting at number eight. Ashwin's century at Chepauk against Bangladesh allowed him to match New Zealander Daniel Vettori. For the record, Vettori has scored five Test centuries from batting positions eight and lower (including one at #9), while Ashwin has scored four (all at #8).

### Most Test centuries in batting position #8

100s	No #8	1st 100	2nd 100	3rd 100	4th 100	(Test 100s)
4	D. Vettori (NZ)	127	118	140	110	(6)
4	R. Ashwin (Ind)	103	124	106	113	(6)
3	K. Akmal (Pak)	109	154	113	—	(6)

### Most Test centuries in batting positions from #8 to #11

100s	Batter at #8	#8	#9	(Total Test 100s)
5	Daniel Vettori (NZ)	4	1	(6)
4	R. Ashwin (Ind)	4	0	(6)
3	Kamran Akmal (Pak)	3	0	(6)
3	Jason Holder (WI)	2	1	(3)



India's R. Ashwin. R. RAGU

**5 }** The number of Test sides with the distinction of winning more Test matches than defeats. Team India, the latest entrant to this special list, created history by achieving this landmark for the first time in its Test history since its inaugural Test match in 1932, 92 years ago.

### Teams with more Test wins than defeats (W-L)

Team	Win-Loss	(W-L ratio)	Tests since
Aus	414-232	(1.78)	March 1877
Eng	397-324	(1.23)	March 1877
SA	179-161	(1.11)	March 1889
Pak	148-144	(1.03)	October 1952
Ind	179-178	(1.01)	June 1932

**4 }** The number of occasions when India's batters in batting positions 7 and 8 scored 80-plus in the same Test innings. Incidentally, In Test cricket history, batters at #7 and #8 have scored centuries together on 12 occasions. In a Test match in Delhi in November 1948, the West Indian pair of Everton Weekes (128) at #7 and Robert Christiani (107) at #8 achieved this feat, which is the only instance on Indian soil.

#### Batters at numbers 7 and 8 making scores of 80+ in the same Test innings for India

Batter #7	Batter #8	Opponent	Venue	Month, Year	Result	Inns	Total
Chandu Borde (84)	Salim Durani (90)	England	Mumbai (BS)	Jan 1964	Drawn	1	300
M. S. Dhoni (92)	Anil Kumble (110*)	England	The Oval	Aug 2007	Drawn	1	664
Rishabh Pant (159*)	Ravindra Jadeja (81)	Australia	Sydney	Jan 2019	Drawn	1	622/7d
Ravindra Jadeja (86)	R. Ashwin (113)	Bangladesh	Chennai	Sep 2024	Won	1	376

Note: Ashwin, in Chennai, became the first Indian to register a three-figure score on Day1 of a Test match at #8

**9 }** The number of times a batting partnership fell just short of reaching 200 runs in Test cricket. The Chennai Test match provided the latest instance of Jadeja and Ashwin being the unfortunate pair.

#### 199-run partnerships in Test cricket

Wkt	Batter1	Batter2	For	Opp	Venue	Month, year	Result	M Inns
4th	Alick Bannerman (70)	Percy McDonnell (147)	Aus	Eng	Sydney	Mar 1882	Won	2
3rd	Gordon Greenidge (226)	Richie Richardson (99)	WI	Aus	Bridgetown	Apr 1991	Won	3
5th	Michael Slater (143)	Steve Waugh (151*)	Aus	NZ	Wellington	Mar 2000	Won	2
2nd	Gary Kirsten (220)	Jacques Kallis (157*)	SA	Zim	Harare	Nov 2001	Won	1
3rd	Lou Vincent (104)	Stephen Fleming (105)	NZ	Aus	Perth	Nov 2001	Drawn	1
2nd	Graeme Smith (147)	Hashim Amla (69)	SA	WI	Durban	Jan 2008	Won	2
7th	Cheteshwar Pujara (202)	Wriddiman Saha (117)	Ind	Aus	Ranchi	Mar 2017	Drawn	2
6th	Angelo Matthews (145*)	Dinesh Chandimal (124)	SL	Ban	Mirpur	May 2022	Won	2
7th	Ravindra Jadeja (86)	R. Ashwin (113)	Ind	Ban	Chennai	Sep 2024	Won	1

**6 }** The number of Indian pace bowlers with 400-plus wickets in all international matches for India. Jasprit Bumrah recently became the latest addition to this exclusive club of Indian pace bowlers during the first innings of the Bangladesh innings in Chennai, when he took the wicket of Hasan Mahmud. His strike rate of 33 balls per wicket is also the best among the bowlers listed in the table below.

#### Indian pacers with 400-plus wickets in international cricket

Wkts	Bowler	M	Ave.	S/R	Tests	ODIs	T20Is
687	Kapil Dev	356	28.83	56.68	434	253	—
610	Zaheer Khan+	303	31.48	48.50	311	282	17
551	J. Srinath	296	29.11	49.07	236	315	—
448	Mohd. Shami	188	26.06	37.90	229	195	24
434	Ishant Sharma	199	32.35	53.39	311	115	8
402	Jasprit Bumrah	196	21.02	33.33	164	149	89

+ Zaheer also played for the Asia XI in ODIs. His wicket tally includes 13 in 6 games.

Note: Overall, Bumrah is the 10th Indian bowler to claim 400-plus wickets across formats, with Anil Kumble leading the tally with 953 wickets.

**164 }** The number of wickets claimed by Jasprit Bumrah at the end of the Chennai Test, the 37th match of his Test career. His wicket tally is by far the most claimed by any Indian pace bowler at this stage of their career.

#### Most wickets by Indian pace bowlers after their 37th Test match

Wkts	Bowler	Date	Venue	Opponent	Ave.	S/R
164	Jasprit Bumrah	22 Sep 2024	Chennai	Bangladesh	20.51	44.56
145	Kapil Dev	18 Jan 1982	Chennai	England	27.82	56.08
133	Mohd Shami	10 Dec 2018	Adelaide	Australia	29.76	52.35
128	J Srinath	7 Feb 1999	Delhi	Pakistan	31.96	66.48
122	Ishant Sharma	13 Aug 2011	Birmingham	England	34.03	59.36

All records are correct and updated until 22 Sept 2024.

## » CHENNAI TEST PHOTOLINE INDIA-BANGLADESH



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IMAGES



# 1st

**Immediate impact:** Hasan Mahmud's opening burst sent Rohit Sharma, Shubman Gill, and Virat Kohli back to the pavilion inside an hour into the first day's play. The 24-year-old later removed Rishabh Pant and Jasprit Bumrah to become the first Bangladeshi bowler to pick a Test five-for in India. R. RAGU



# 2nd

**Breezy rearguard:** After being reduced to 144/6, India staged a formidable recovery through Ravindra Jadeja and Ravichandran Ashwin on the opening day. The pair went on to forge the highest seventh wicket stand at Chepauk — 199 runs. While Jadeja scored 86, Ashwin scored his sixth Test hundred. R. RAGU



# 3rd

**Business as usual:** Jasprit Bumrah led the Indian pace attack by claiming four wickets in the first innings to skittle out Bangladesh for its second-lowest total in India — 149. Along the way, Bumrah also became the sixth Indian pace bowler to pick 400 international wickets. R. RAGU



## 4th

**Redeeming touch:** After an eight-ball duck in the first innings, Shubman Gill rode the bounce against pacers to employ strokes on either side of the wicket while getting to the pitch of the ball with assured footwork against the spinners to get his fifth Test hundred in near-flawless fashion. R. RAGU



## 5th

**Back to where he belongs:** After a 629-day break from red-ball cricket, Rishabh Pant returned in style, showcasing his fitness and sharp shot selection to score his sixth Test century in just 124 balls, equalling M.S. Dhoni's record for the most Test hundreds by an Indian wicketkeeper. R. RAGU



## 6th

**Can do no wrong:** R. Ashwin finished the Test match with a six-for, equalling late Shane Warne's record of most five-wicket hauls in the red-ball format as he bagged his 37th. The 38-year-old also recorded a double—a century and a five-for in same match—for the fourth time in his Test career. PTI



**Fresh take:** Pooja Vastrakar (centre) and Arundhati Reddy have added more pace and variations to their game. R. RAGU

# A SONG OF RESILIENCE, RESURGENCE AND REDEMPTION

The upcoming Women's T20 World Cup has seen contrasting build-ups for the participating teams, with India gearing up to bid for its **maiden ICC trophy**.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

lavanya.ln@thehindu.co.in

**T**he final few grains of sand are falling in the hourglass ahead of the Women's T20 World Cup, which will be played in the heat and humidity of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, India's run-up to the biennial event has been unusually cold.

Harmanpreet Kaur will lead India's campaign, starting under the lights on October 4 against New Zealand in Dubai.

Grouped alongside the White Ferns, defending champion Australia, reigning Asia Cup champion Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, India has seen a rather quiet build-up, with no international matches for nearly two months before the showpiece event.

The national team was last in action in the T20 Asia Cup final against Chamari Athapaththu's Sri Lanka in late July. After largely cruising through the group stage, poor fielding and struggles against spin came back to haunt India once more. The Women in Blue eventually relinquished their Asian crown to their neighbour.

India arrived at its 15-member squad after months of significant tinkering — this involved workload management, motivated rotations, and trial and error with players of promise based on current form.

One such experiment was the extended opportunity given to Dayalan Hemalatha at number 3 in the batting line-up. Despite plenty of



ups and downs, the 29-year-old registered a healthy rate of 123.17, with 186 runs in eight games this year. She struck at over 127 during the Women's Premier League campaign with the Gujarat Giants this year, giving chief selector Neetu David, head coach Amol Muzumdar (**above, centre**) and Harmanpreet (**above, right**) the confidence to back her in place of the injured Yastika Bhatia. Both players have been named in the squad, with a close eye on Yastika's fitness.

Openers Shafali Verma and Smriti Mandhana (**above, left**) have enjoyed all-format success both individually and as a pair, while Jemimah Rodrigues has come a long way from the batting slump that

affected her confidence a few seasons ago. **Richa Ghosh's explosive finishing abilities have greatly eased India's anxieties about closing out games.**

India is carrying a spin-heavy bowling arsenal to the UAE. In Deepti Sharma, Radha Yadav, Sajana Sajeevan, Asha Sobhana Joy, Tanuja Kanwer (reserve), and Shreyanka Patil, the team has versatility and effectiveness in its ranks. A nagging injury to Shreyanka's left hand has been a worry, due to which India has been frugal while using her in matches. The Bengaluru-based allrounder and Yastika — a crucial left-hander in India's batting plans — will push the coaching staff to err on the side of caution.

**Unfamiliar territory:** India's run-up to the biennial event has been unusually cold. K. MURALIKUMAR



EMMANUEL YOGINI

« Australia, now led by Alyssa Healy (right), has won the tournament a record six times in eight editions »



**Leading the way:** While seasoned captain Chamari Athapaththu (forefront) remains the face of the Sri Lankan team, the focus this time will be on the youngsters she has long been pushing to the forefront. GETTY IMAGES

The pace group faces an interesting challenge in the Middle East. Surfaces in Dubai and Sharjah are not averse to providing swing and bounce. Pooja Vastrakar and Arundhati Reddy have evolved significantly this season, adding more pace and variations to their game.

Renuka Singh's ability to generate movement with the new ball has been a boon, and she will hope to rediscover her 2022 Commonwealth Games rhythm as India bids for its

maiden senior ICC trophy. While the individual pieces look good, will they all click in place perfectly to complete the jigsaw? Only time will tell.

#### Not as immovable

Australia, which has won the T20 World Cup a record six times in the eight editions of the tournament, is undoubtedly the biggest obstacle for the Indians. With the last three titles — 2018, 2020, and 2023 — in the bag and a large part of the core from then still intact in the squad announced for the 2024 chapter, the Aussies are among the favourites to go the distance.

They will be without the services of ruthless batter and unmatched tactician Meg Lanning, who led Australia to four of its titles. Skipper Alyssa Healy, who has been a part of

the senior core that has carried this team to countless victories, will aim to register one as captain, helping her officially step out of Lanning's very large shadow.

In 12 T20Is this year, the Aussies have come out on top 10 times. Australia hosted New Zealand in a T20I series, predictably sealing it in the second game itself. However, the experience was not without its hiccups. In the second fixture, the Kiwis bundled Australia out for 142 in a batting innings that was every colour of bizarre.

Amelia Kerr's (facing page, right) imperious figures of 4/20 proved to be the catalyst. However, Sophie Devine and Co. could not capitalise with the bat, an issue that has consistently pulled the side two steps



## ALL TEAMS WERE EXPECTING TO PLAY THIS TOURNAMENT IN BANGLADESH, THE ORIGINAL HOST, WHICH LOST THE EVENT DUE TO DOMESTIC POLITICAL TURMOIL

back despite its bowling group's efforts.

In the 13 T20Is the team has played in 2024, it has won just one game — against England — and that too by a whisker (three runs). Its defeats have been fairly comprehensive, hardly the signs a side wants in a World Cup year.

With the odds stacked against them, it's understandable that the White Ferns have opted for experience over experimentation.

Outgoing skipper Devine and Sophie Bates, the steel pillars of New

Zealand cricket, will prop up the team on their shoulders for the ninth edition. From the Kerr sisters and Lea Tahuhu to a returning Rosemary Mair, it's familiar faces all around. Keeper-batter Izzy Gaze is the only name to not have featured in a World Cup for the Kiwis before.

Their Trans-Tasman neighbours have taken a similar approach. Tough calls have been made, with senior pro Jess Jonassen missing out on a World Cup for the first time while being fit and available.

Sophie Molineux, whose stock as a shrewd spinner has risen exponentially after a famous WPL

Malaysia in the Asia Cup. Skipper Nigar Sultana Joty continues to be the team's fulcrum for longer than she would have liked, and will desperately need her colleagues to step up with the bat if they are to compete well in this tournament.

A demand for better intent was underlined by chief selector Sajjad Ahmed when he defended dropping Rumana Ahmed for not showing enough aggression with the bat. This was one of the five changes from the country's Asia Cup squad.

### Building blocks

Perennial batting woes aside, Bangladesh's strength continues to be its bowling. Seasoned pro Jahanara Alam made her way back into the setup during the Women's Asia Cup and is headed for her sixth T20 World Cup. She will hope to find her rhythm in a partnership with the young but versatile Marufa Akter.

With Fahima Khatun, Nahida Akter, and Co. on one side, and the young Shorna Akter on the other, there's a potent spin pool at Joty's disposal on surfaces that will eventually offer greater turn.

Bangladesh last played an international fixture in July, much like India, and has been

triumph with Royal Challengers Bengaluru, will be key to Australia's fortunes. Allrounder Grace Harris will hope to devastate as much as she entertains, while Darcie Brown and Tayla Vlaeminck have made the cut to bolster their respective departments. Phoebe Litchfield is set for a debut World Cup.

All teams were expecting to play this tournament in Bangladesh, the original host, which lost the event due to domestic political turmoil. While the nation's cricket board has retained hosting rights, it will rue the missed opportunity to bring the best of the world to its lands after a decade, giving the game within its peripheries a shot in the arm.

The Bangladeshi side has played 12 T20Is this year, winning just two of them — against Thailand and



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## « New Zealand has opted for experience over experimentation »

+

**Bangladesh's skipper Nigar Sultana Joty continues to be the team's fulcrum and will desperately need her colleagues to step up with the bat.**



grappling with the uncertainties of civil unrest and political change. It will open proceedings in Sharjah against debutante Scotland. Led by the Bryce sisters — skipper Katherine and vice-captain Sarah — the Scots have always been eager to punch above their weight.

The team fought for its right to be in the UAE, having made the cut through the qualifiers held in the same country a few months ago. The side is therefore ready for the conditions there, having played

under the famous ring lights in Dubai and familiarised itself with the wickets.

Scotland recently registered encouraging victories against the Netherlands and Papua New Guinea in a tri-series but last played an international in August. The month leading to the World Cup has been more focused on training and skills development.

The strongest opponent Scotland faced this year was Sri Lanka in the World Cup qualifiers, and they will

enter the event as the sprightly underdog hoping to ruffle as many feathers as possible.

Sri Lanka, meanwhile, is on the brink of transformation, like a caterpillar about to break out of its cocoon with new wings. While seasoned captain Athapaththu remains the face of the team, the focus this time will be on the youngsters she has long been pushing to the forefront.

The side is a cocktail of age groups that's managed to hit just the

WHILE MARIZANNE KAPP REMAINS A FORCE ON ANY SURFACE, SOUTH AFRICA'S SPINNERS WILL BE UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT AS THEY LOOK TO STEP OUT OF THE SHADOW OF ITS PACE AND SEAM ATTACK



GETTY IMAGES

right notes over the past year. The Lankan outfit has called up 38-year-old left-arm spinner Inoka Ranaweera, keeping an eye on the conditions. The collateral damage appears to be 21-year-old Kawya Kavindi, whose exclusion has hacked down Sri Lanka's seam bundle. However, veteran Udesika Prabodhani, 39, will lead the pace attack. **The team has adopted a 'Why fix what isn't broken' philosophy regarding its selections and squad**

choices. Age hasn't been a factor that the team has fixated on, and its performances have reflected the success of this outlook.

The young players in the batting department have a point to prove, as pressure can sometimes dampen their overall impact on the team. Vishmi Gunaratne, Harshita Samarawickrama — Sri Lanka's Asia Cup final hero — and Kavisha Dilhari have the unwavering support of their captain and will hope to repay her faith in them.

Sri Lanka has been among the most active teams this year, playing 19 T20Is with just four losses. While a maiden World Cup title may be harder to achieve than its first Asia Cup crown, the side would be disappointed if it didn't leave a trail of upsets in its wake.

**The West Indies, despite all its problems and uncertainties, is another team that cannot be overlooked in a World Cup.** The 2016 champion has struggled to recapture its title-winning form but hopes the

The winner will walk away with a cheque of USD 2.34 million, marking the first time that the men's and women's teams will receive equal rewards for their triumphs.



GETTY IMAGES

2024 campaign will offer a shot at redemption.

In the eight T20Is the Windies have played this year, they have won six. However, these matches have only involved two nations — Pakistan and Sri Lanka — both of which have structural flaws in their squads.

The standout player is undoubtedly allrounder and skipper Hayley Matthews, who has had an enviable successful lead-up to the World Cup with both bat and ball. However, all eyes will be on former captain Deandra Dottin, who came out of retirement and has slotted herself back into the mix.

The West Indies will fare better if the onus isn't placed on one player to carry the team, even if it is someone as well-rounded as Matthews. That

strategy didn't work with Dottin and Stafanie Taylor, and will likely set it up for failure if it's relied upon again.

Another team undergoing a metamorphosis is Pakistan. With new captain Fatima Sana at the helm, the side is still trying to gel as a unit and stitch together coordinated performances to move the team's cause forward.

In the 15 T20Is played this year, the Women in Green have triumphed just four times. While there have been plenty of close games, the team's long-standing inability to close out matches has haunted it so far this year.

A World Cup campaign without off-field chatter has become an anomaly for Pakistan, with the issue of denied daily allowances

dominating headlines before its last international assignment against South Africa ahead of the UAE trip.

On the field, the cricket itself was quite encouraging against the Proteas. With the likes of Muneeba Ali and Sidra Ameen finding form, and the total of 181 in the second fixture boosting confidence, Pakistan can be optimistic. Sadia Iqbal had a memorable series, taking six wickets, and even former skipper Nida Dar bowled economically in key stages.

Despite this, Pakistan needs to work on plenty of basics, and with a leader learning on the job, the think tank will have its work cut out for this tournament.

#### Slow and steady

South Africa has been approaching the world event with a



lot of precision. After rumours of Shabnim Ismail and Dane van Niekerk potentially coming out of retirement fizzled out, the Proteas have retained much of the side that reached the final last year. In a team brimming with experience, unheralded 18-year-old leggie Seshnie Naidu and 20-year-old seamer Ayanda Hlubi stand out as fresh faces.

In the 12 T20Is the team has played this year, its form and rhythm have steadily evolved with each game. Marizanne Kapp stayed away from bowling for the first half of these fixtures due to a back injury, but the team showed the wisdom of keeping its eyes on the ultimate prize.

The Proteas leave for the UAE

**Early edge:** With a pre-season camp in Abu Dhabi proving valuable for acclimatisation, things have worked out quite conveniently for England, led by Heather Knight. GETTY IMAGES

after thwarting Pakistan 2-1 in a three-match series. Over the past few months, several members of the team have stepped up and carried South Africa through crucial phases of play, leading to some memorable victories. An important cog in the wheel will be Tazmin Brits, who has the ability to make or break a game for South Africa, depending on whether she gets her rhythm or not. **Laura Wolvaardt's fluid form, along with Annerie Dercksen and Sune Luus finding runs, bodes well for South Africa, who will hope to replicate last year's success and do one better.**

While Kapp remains a force on any surface, South Africa's spinners will be under the spotlight as they look to step out of the shadow of the team's deep pace and seam attack.

Standing in South Africa's way is Heather Knight's England, the inaugural champion of the tournament.

Things have worked out quite conveniently for the team, with a pre-season camp in Abu Dhabi proving valuable for acclimatisation after the event was moved to the Middle East. Coach Jon Lewis tickled the imagination of many when he suggested the use of artificial intelligence in squad selection.

Other experiments were more deliberate, such as giving Nat Sciver-Brunt a chance at captaincy while Knight sat out one of the games against New Zealand a few weeks ago. **This simulation exercise, as revealed by the team, was meant to be preparation for any unexpected unavailability.**

In the 15 T20Is England has played this year, it has faced New Zealand twice within a few months, coming out on top both times.

A narrow three-run loss to the Kiwis in Nelson and a famous five-wicket thrashing at the hands of Ireland are the only blemishes in an otherwise smooth run leading up to

the World Cup.

Meanwhile, England's spin cartel will be licking its lips. In Sophie Ecclestone, Charlie Dean, Sarah Glenn, and Linsey Smith, the side boasts one of the most exciting and competitive spin units in the tournament. However, its efforts will be futile if England's batting doesn't fire in tandem.

#### Levelling the field

Outside the cricket field, and as a welcome extension of the spirit of parity championed by the Olympics and Paralympics, there will be a 134 per cent increase in prize money for this year's champion, compared to what Australia earned for its record victory last year.

The winner will walk away with a cheque of USD 2.34 million, marking the first time that the men's and women's teams will receive equal rewards for their triumphs. The overall pot has also surged to USD 7.95 million, a 225 per cent increase from last year. As teams play more frequently throughout the year, and the gaps between traditional powers and emerging sides continue to narrow, there's much to look out for in the UAE. **While several teams are already on a path of evolution, others are still rooted in the early eras of the format.** This tournament will hence serve as a step towards progression when the teams congregate in the Middle East.

## Group A



India  
Pakistan  
Australia  
Sri Lanka  
New Zealand



Bangladesh  
Scotland  
West Indies  
England  
South Africa

**Shayan Acharya**  
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

In 2021, after successfully hosting the Indian Premier League (IPL) for the second consecutive year amid the global Covid-19 pandemic, then BCCI treasurer Arun Singh Dhumal praised the UAE venues, likening them to "the best banquet you could have for any celebration."

With much of the world in lockdown, few expected the IPL to proceed, but the Emirates Cricket Board (ECB), with strong government support, ensured the tournament ran smoothly in 2020 and again in 2021 across Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Sharjah. The UAE also hosted the 2021 Men's T20 World Cup, with India holding the hosting rights.

Now, as Dubai and Sharjah prepare to host the Women's T20 World Cup — the first global women's cricket event in the region — Dhumal, currently chairman of the IPL's governing council, still stands by

his statement.

Dhumal credits the UAE's world-class facilities, accessibility, and professional approach for establishing it as a premier cricketing destination. "During COVID, when no one imagined we could go ahead with a tournament like the IPL, they ensured everything was prim and proper. Those two years have certainly helped the UAE build a positive image. The stakeholders have understood that the UAE not only has all the facilities but also the expertise to get things sorted in a very short period," Dhumal explained.

That expertise has helped what many now call the 'UAE model' thrive.

Despite being an associate member of the International Cricket Council (ICC), the UAE has projected itself as a prime destination for cricket, often considered an alternative venue for major events during times of crisis. This year's Women's T20 World Cup is a case in point.

Originally, Bangladesh was slated to host the event. However, political turmoil, followed by the fleeing of then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, forced the ICC to seek an alternative location, although the hosting rights

remained with the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB).

"The travel advisories from the governments of several participating teams meant it wasn't feasible (to host the event in Bangladesh)," explained ICC's chief executive, Geoff Allardice. The ICC explored other options. India, which shares a similar time zone with Bangladesh, was considered a possible host. However, with its home season in full swing, the BCCI declined. Eventually, the UAE emerged as the preferred choice.

"After India refused to host the tournament, we had discussions with the UAE and Sri Lanka, but the former was preferred for several reasons. The UAE has hosted several big-ticket tournaments recently, and it was also convenient to hold the games there," said BCB president Faruque Ahmed, who recently visited Dubai to oversee the preparations.

"Logistically, it's convenient," said Ahmed. "For the teams, it's easy to travel to the UAE in terms of accessibility. Also, we have two top-quality stadiums nearby, and that's a huge advantage for a high-octane tournament."

The 10 participating teams will be based in Dubai, a city with approximately 180 five-star hotels.

» WOMEN'S T20 WORLD CUP

# UAE answers international cricket's SOS call, again

They will train at the ICC Cricket Academy grounds and commute 30 kilometres to Sharjah for their matches. Abu Dhabi was not considered this time due to prior commitments to hosting a bilateral series between Ireland and South Africa.

Allardice emphasised the UAE's diversity as one of its standout features: "One of the exciting things about the UAE is its diversity. It's a place where the entire world is represented, and that's why there will be quite a bit of crowd support."

Organising such a massive event on short notice, however, is no easy task. "It came as a surprise, but we are used to such surprises," said Mazhar Khan, General Manager of Sharjah Cricket Stadium.

One major challenge for Dubai and Sharjah was getting the grounds ready in peak summer, with temperatures soaring to nearly 50 degrees Celsius. "When the news came in, it was peak summer, so we had to prepare the grounds. Thankfully, with no games in between, the pitches were well-rested and are now ready," said Khan, a seasoned administrator. "We are quite used to these situations because, in the UAE, there is a lot of coordination between the ECB and

the venues — Dubai and Sharjah. The teamwork helps overcome the initial challenges."

With the ICC headquartered in Dubai, coordination is streamlined, avoiding unnecessary delays in execution. Administrators familiar with the UAE's transformation from a distant vantage agree that "smooth operations and excellent government support" are the cornerstones of the UAE's success.

"We've been able to deliver successful events every time due to the immense support of our government and the wealth of experience in staging such events. The UAE has hosted cricket matches for over 40 years. With that kind of experience, it becomes easier to manage logistical and security challenges," pointed out Zaid Abbas, a board member of the ECB.

While Dubai International Stadium has not hosted a match recently, Sharjah Stadium held three T20 Internationals between Afghanistan and South Africa, serving as the perfect lead-up to the World Cup. "The grounds are in good shape, a new scoreboard has been installed, and new lights are in place — everything is ready for the showpiece

event," Khan added.

Last year, the men's Asia Cup was played in a hybrid model, with Pakistan and Sri Lanka hosting two legs. There were many logistical challenges for the cricket boards and the teams, with lots of travelling from one city to another.

"Last-minute changes make it a logistical nightmare," Ahmed says. "But with the UAE, travelling is easy, and it is convenient in terms of access to the best facilities, hospitality, and everything else. That certainly makes the UAE a go-to destination for any global events, and over the years, it has lived up to the expectations."

Since the onset of the pandemic, the UAE has taken on the responsibility of hosting several major sporting events — MMA, BWF badminton series, IPL, PSL (Pakistan Super League), and Asia Cup — and each time, the nation has delivered a flawless experience.

As the UAE prepares to host the Women's T20 World Cup, it is determined to uphold its sterling reputation for delivering world-class events.

**Last-minute change:** The 2024 Women's T20 World Cup was moved from Bangladesh to the United Arab Emirates following civil unrest in the original host country. GETTYIMAGES

Despite being an **ICC associate member**, the UAE has become a prime cricket destination and an alternative venue for major events in times of crisis, as seen with this year's Women's T20 World Cup.

# Richa Ghosh finally checking all the right boxes

On the brink of turning 21, Richa is already one of India's trump cards ahead of the Women's T20 World Cup in the United Arab Emirates — evidence of her **immense talent** and meteoric rise.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

lavanya.ln@thehindu.co.in

**D**uring the Senior Women's Inter Zonal Multi-Day Trophy final in April this year, a spirited South Zone side, featuring players such as Sajeevan Sajana, Minnu Mani, and Arundhati Reddy, threatened to ruin what had been a fairly smooth run for the Deepti Sharma-led East Zone.

If you were standing by the East Zone tent, amidst all the cheers, one chant stood out: "*Haan, Richa aur Deepti hai. Maar lenge*" (Richa and Deepti will see it through). These words served as fuel for the young Richa Ghosh, just four years into her international career. Known for her explosive batting, she's feared and admired equally.

"This is something I've been experiencing a lot lately," Richa says, reflecting on the thrilling final that East Zone eventually won.

"I think hearing those cheers at the domestic level helped me a lot. Knowing that a bunch of people have so much trust in me, saying, '*Richa hai toh ho jayega*' (If Richa is there, it'll happen), is incredible. It makes you



want to prove them right. There are people who believe I can achieve something, so I have to, no matter what."

Just a month before this final, Richa played a pivotal role in an incredible turnaround for Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the Women's Premier League (WPL). During the second leg of the tournament in New Delhi, RCB's campaign was hanging by a thread, with its qualification hopes relying on increasingly complex scenarios. RCB began the final week with a gut-wrenching one-run loss to Delhi Capitals. The image of a devastated Richa, who was run out on the last ball, went viral on social media. She was inconsolable as Delhi's Jemimah



**Switching tactics:** Head coach Amol Muzumdar saw Richa's potential beyond her finishing role, promoting her to number 3 in ODIs to play more impactful and long innings. PTI

Rodrigues and Meg Lanning came over to comfort her.

"You'll win the World Cup for us, Richa!" Jemimah was overheard telling her India teammate.

"Every player should experience something like that at some point in their career because there's so much to learn," Richa shares. "I'm glad I faced something like that so early. I was very hurt after that game because I couldn't finish it in our favour. All I wanted was to move on quickly and finish the next game properly. As a hitter, I like finishing matches, and that time, I couldn't."

A week later, against the same opponent at the same venue, Richa righted the wrongs, hitting the winning runs and leading RCB to its

first WPL title.

All these experiences, transformative or otherwise, have sharpened Richa's focus on glory in India colours. At just 20, she's already one of India's trump cards ahead of the Women's T20 World Cup in the United Arab Emirates — evidence of her immense talent and meteoric rise in what is one of the most competitive eras for the sport.

#### Learning on the job

When India played England and Australia last winter, head coach Amol Muzumdar, fresh in the role, saw the potential for Richa beyond her finishing capability. He envisioned her as a more versatile player and gave her the number 3 slot in ODIs, hoping she could build larger and more impactful innings.

"Essentially, I'm a finisher. I'll do

**International experiences, like her stints in WBBL and The Hundred, have been instrumental in Richa's growth**



**Learning curve:** Last WPL, Richa Ghosh was inconsolable after being run out against Delhi Capitals on the final ball, with Royal Challengers Bengaluru needing two runs from the last delivery. But Richa says she has learnt a lot from that experience.

R.V. MOORTHY

that wherever I'm slotted. If I'm sent out to open, go one down, or come in at number 5, I aim to finish the game from there. So, I've never been particular about the batting order."

Richa's willingness to embrace pressure and her ability to step into this role address one of India's biggest challenges in big tournaments — maintaining momentum and closing out matches.

Several World Cup campaigns across both formats come to mind, including the heartbreaking ODI World Cup loss in England in 2017 and the collapse in the T20 World Cup final against Australia at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in

2020. As India continues to tackle issues like its inconsistent pace attack, middle-order stability, and fielding, Richa has been focusing on sharpening her technique.

#### Patience and perseverance

"I've tried to become a calmer version of myself," Richa shares. "When I was new to the team, there wasn't much pressure, but I was overly eager to make every opportunity count. I just wanted to hit every ball. Now, there's a lot of difference in how I construct an innings and focus on building partnerships."

Learning to value her wicket is

something Richa's father also pointed out, and over the past 12 months, it has become a conscious part of her game.

"International experiences, like her stints in the Women's Big Bash League (WBBL) and The Hundred, have been instrumental in her growth.

"I remember being very shy and nervous during my first WBBL stint. My English wasn't that good, and I wasn't sure how to communicate effectively with my teammates. I learnt to adapt, which not only helped me make friends but also understand how different leagues,

**"I'll do that wherever I'm slotted. If I'm sent out to open, go one down, or come in at number 5, I aim to finish the game from there."**



countries, and players approach the game."

While Richa was away with Birmingham Phoenix in August, the Indian team held a camp to work on fitness and skills. A week before its departure for the UAE, there was another camp focused on fine-tuning skills to prepare for what India hopes will be a strong World Cup campaign.

"I think my stint at The Hundred really helped with my preparation because I had to face swing and bounce. So I kept that in mind throughout the tournament. When I got back, I adjusted my practice to handle both swing and slower surfaces. Bowlers often try to slow things down against me, so I've been working on using that to my advantage."

India's preparation for the World Cup has been somewhat unusual. After losing to Sri Lanka in the Asia Cup final in July, the team hasn't played any international cricket, while countries like Pakistan, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand

have been playing bilateral series to fine-tune their squads.

Richa prefers match practice over training but has adapted to the lack of competitive games.

"I like playing matches, whether they're practice games or regular open nets. That's when I can identify my weaknesses. In regular nets, you might hit a shot and think it's a sure boundary, but in a match, it could go straight to the fielder. I set up cones in the nets and imagine fielders in certain positions to work on my shot-making and placement. This approach has helped me improve my batting and fine-tune my shot selection based on the delivery and the match situation."

Richa will turn 21 just before the World Cup kicks off in Dubai and Sharjah. After some quiet training and a holiday with her family in London following The Hundred, she's refreshed and ready for the big event.

Despite her focus, Richa still believes in having fun and hopes that energy will be contagious as

**Guardian of the sticks:** Richa Ghosh's presence behind the stumps will be key for India at the upcoming Women's T20 World Cup. K. MURALIKUMAR

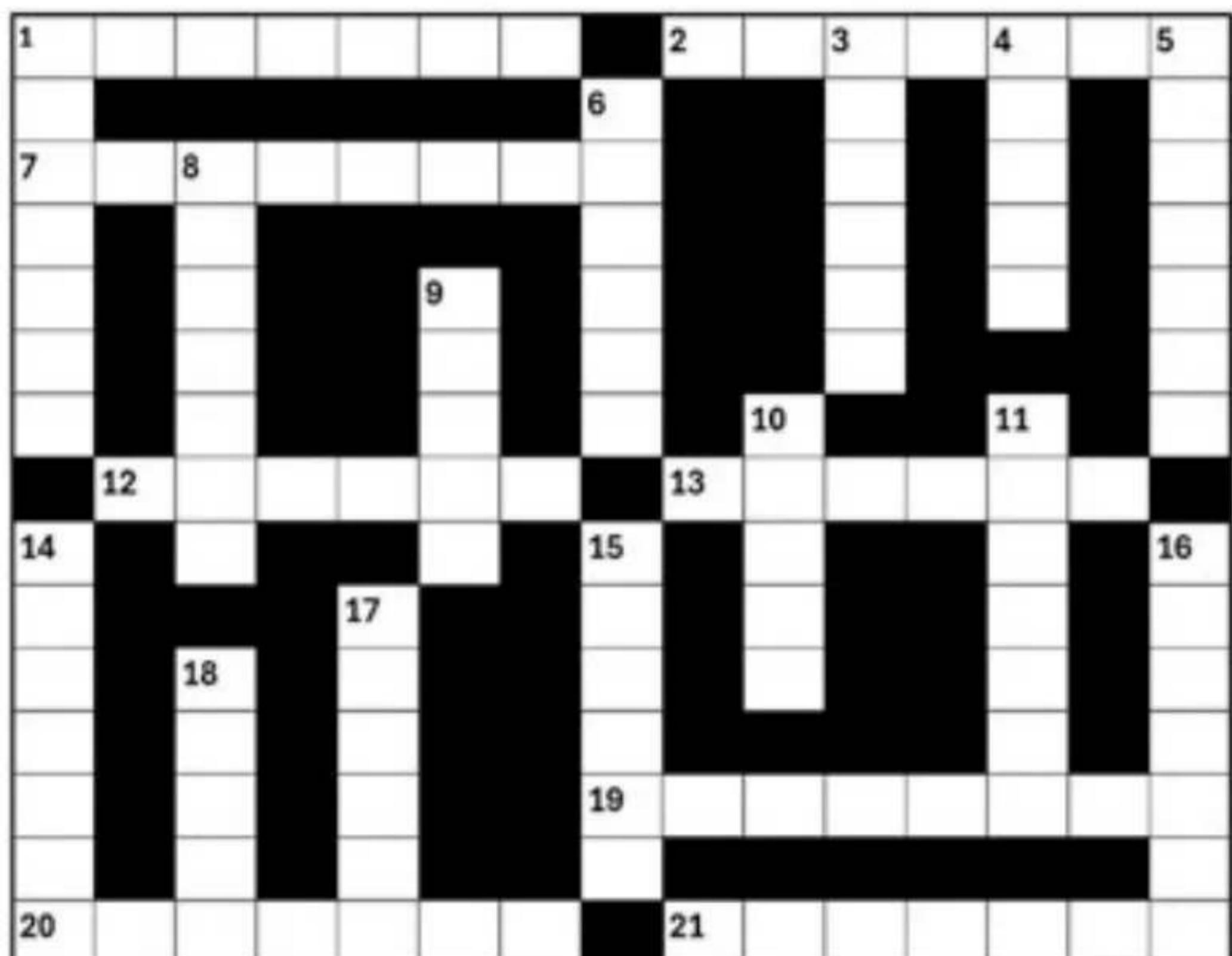
India aims for strong support in October. She also feels the gap between teams is narrowing.

"I think the World Cup is going to be really close because everyone's playing more games and playing them well. There's a lot of talent, and every team is improving. Just look at what Sri Lanka has achieved this past year. Ireland's results have also been impressive, even though they aren't in the World Cup. The whole ecosystem is improving, including us. We're thinking about how to beat Australia and New Zealand, but now they're also thinking, 'How do we beat India?' Every team is showing they deserve to be part of this international stage, which makes the competition really exciting."

*"Bohot maza aayega. Aap sab aao aur enjoy karo (It'll be a lot of fun. Come and enjoy it)", she signs off.*

## » CROSSWORD

### N. SOORYA PRAKASH



#### ACROSS

- 1** Who was the captain of the India D side in the recent Duleep Trophy? (7)
- 7** Identify the club which got promoted to La Liga this season, which happens to be one of the founding clubs of La Liga? (8)
- 12** Who won the Player of the Series award for Sri Lanka in its three-match Test series against England recently? (6)
- 19** Who scored a match-winning unbeaten hundred for Sri Lanka in the third and final Test match against England played at The Oval and also won the Player of the match award? (8)
- 20 & Down 3** Who defeated No. 1-ranked Iga Swiatek but ended up as the losing finalist in the U.S. Open? (7,6)
- 21** Name the second division league to which teams get relegated from La Liga? (7)

#### DOWN

- 1** Identify this armless archer who

won the bronze medal for India in the Paris Paralympics 2024? (7)

- 4** Who made the highest individual score in an innings in the two-Test series between Pakistan and Bangladesh? (5)
- 5 & 10** Who won the gold medal in the men's javelin throw F41 event in the Paris Paralympics 2024? (7,5)

**6** Identify this Indonesian tennis player who partnered India's Rohan Bopanna in this year's U.S. Open? (6)

**8** Who won the gold medal in the men's high jump T64 event in the Paris Paralympics 2024? (7)

**9** Who retained his gold medal in the men's javelin throw F64 event in the Paris Paralympics 2024? (5)

**11** Name the F1 GP in which the seven times World Champion Lewis Hamilton won his second race in 2024? (7)

**14** Who was the captain of the India C side in the recent Duleep Trophy? (7)

**15** Who replaced Shubman Gill as the captain of the India A side from the second match of the recent Duleep Trophy? (6)

**16** Who is the reigning double World Champion of MotoGP, who also claimed his 25th premier class victory at the Austrian GP in August 2024? (7)

**17 & Across 2** Who defeated the legendary Novak Djokovic in the third round of this year's U.S. Open? (6,7)

**18 & Across 13** Who among the current players of the 2024-25 season has played in more than 600 games in Premier League history? (5,6)



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# Dress rehearsal for Test hopefuls as Team India targets continuity in selections

The traditional zonal format of **Duleep Trophy** once offered bragging rights but this year's shift to a mixed pool system kept the focus on individual performances.

Abhishek Saini

abhishek.saini@thehindu.co.in

**T**he 2024 Duleep Trophy appeared to be heading for a predictable conclusion. Still, a last-minute twist saw Mayank Agarwal's India A claim the title by taking seven wickets in the final session to defeat India C.

India C needed 350 runs to win but a solitary point, which would be assured with a draw, was what it was really after. Sai Sudharsan and Ishan Kishan had guided India C through to tea and were on track to see the game out. However, India A's bowling attack dramatically changed the course of the match, securing a remarkable victory. India A also benefitted from India D's earlier win against India B, eliminating the latter from contention in a three-horse race.

In recent seasons, the Duleep Trophy has been reduced to a mere selection tournament for the Indian



team. The constant format changes have diminished the significance of winning the trophy. The traditional zonal format once offered bragging rights, but this year's shift to a mixed pool system kept the focus on individual performances.

Moreover, the teams were altered repeatedly, with players being added and removed at will. Ishan Kishan and Suryakumar Yadav, initially excluded due to injuries, were



drafted back into their respective sides for the later rounds at the last moment, without any official announcement.

The thrilling finale was a reminder that the Duleep Trophy still holds some relevance, especially ahead of the upcoming domestic season. It showcased the excitement that First-Class cricket can produce — something the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) is keen to

revive as part of its effort to restore the longer format's prestige. The passionate crowds, present at every game in Anantapur, added to the spectacle and highlighted the appeal of hosting domestic cricket in smaller towns.

The unexpected climax was even more surprising considering that a roster of star players, including Shubman Gill, Rishabh Pant, and KL Rahul, had been disbanded after the

**Crowning moment:** India A players celebrate after winning Duleep Trophy 2024. India A beat India C by 132 runs.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



**Making a return:** Ishan Kishan, featuring for India C, smashed a 126-ball 111 on his comeback to red-ball cricket since making his Test debut last July. **B.JOTHI RAMALINGAM**

first match to join the Bangladesh Test series. Their departure provided an opportunity for seasoned First-Class players to catch the selectors' attention.

Abhimanyu Easwaran, still awaiting a consistent run in the Indian team, showcased his talent with two centuries — one of which was an unbeaten knock for India B against India C in the second round. However, despite scoring 309 runs, Easwaran was only the second-highest run-scorer, surpassed by Ricky Bhui, a veteran of domestic cricket. Bhui, representing India D, amassed 359 runs in six innings, including two centuries.

Even now, the best these players can hope for is a call-up for an 'A' tour to Australia later this year, as

overtaking Sarfaraz Khan, Devdutt Padikkal, and Sudharsan in the pecking order seems unlikely.

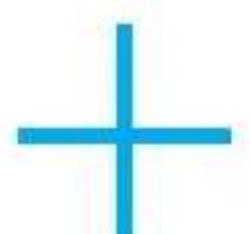
New names also rose to the occasion. One such player was Baroda's Shashwat Rawat, who was part of the victorious India A team. Rawat scored three fifty-plus innings in four outings, including a crucial 124 in the final round that helped India A tighten its grip on India C. This performance, which followed his 784-run tally in the Ranji Trophy last season, proved he could compete at the highest levels.

"This is the first time I've made it

to this stage. It validated my efforts in last season's Ranji Trophy, where I scored four hundreds in eight games, including a double century. I had a feeling I might be selected, so I was prepared," said Rawat.

His teammate, 20-year-old Aaqib Khan, who replaced Akash Deep for the last two games, impressed with his seam bowling, taking eight wickets in four innings. He particularly cherished dismissing India D's Sanju Samson, forcing him into a mistimed pull shot with extra pace and bounce.

"It's a big deal for me. I'm still a



**The thrilling finale was a reminder that the Duleep Trophy still holds some relevance, especially ahead of the upcoming domestic season.**



junior; I made my debut recently. I faced Samson in the Vijay Hazare Trophy last year, so to take his wicket is a huge achievement. It's an honour. The plan was formed on the ground — Mayank [Agarwal] bhaiya said I could try a bouncer if I wanted to since Samson was new at the crease," Aaqib explained.

Other notable performers included Anshul Kamboj, the tournament's highest wicket-taker with 16 scalps, Manav Suthar and Shams Mulani. Suthar and Rawat have found a place in the Rest of India squad for the upcoming Irani Cup, which will be played in Lucknow from October 1 to 5.

This edition of the Duleep Trophy also tested India's bench strength, particularly with a five-match series in Australia looming. The Anantapur wickets offered assistance to pacers, who were under scrutiny.

During the last tour of Australia in 2021, India had as many as six fast bowlers in the squad at one point. Akash's nine-wicket haul in the first

round earned him a spot in the squad for the first Bangladesh Test, positioning him as the first backup to the pace trio of Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj, and Mohammed Shami. However, the selectors will have even more options after strong showings from Mukesh Kumar (15 wickets), Navdeep Saini (14 wickets), and Arshdeep Singh (13 wickets). The return of Avesh Khan and Prasidh Krishna from injury has further bolstered India's pace options for the big tour.

Some of these pacers might even get an earlier opportunity, with the upcoming three-match Test series against New Zealand.

For the batters, the tournament yielded mixed results. Shreyas Iyer scored 154 runs in six innings but was let down by his attacking instincts on several occasions. Suryakumar Yadav, who returned to red-ball cricket in 2022/23 after nearly three seasons, managed only eight runs in his sole Test innings against Australia last year. Still

**Standout performer:** India C's Anshul Kamboj was a standout performer in this year's Duleep Trophy, claiming 16 wickets, including a remarkable eight-wicket haul.

B.JOTHI RAMALINGAM

hopeful of a comeback, Suryakumar participated in the final round, scoring 5 and 16.

In contrast, Kishan and Samson struck centuries, making positive strides with the former even being included in the Rest of India squad. A strong showing in the Irani Cup and then the Ranji Trophy could pave the way for Kishan's return to the top tier of Indian cricket.

Meanwhile, solid performances from Sudharsan and Padikkal should help alleviate concerns about India's batting transition, expected to begin after the 2025 World Test Championship final, when Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma could consider hanging up their boots from the longer format.



AP

# Sri Lanka takes 1-0 lead against New Zealand

1

Prabath Jayasuriya picked up his eighth **five-wicket haul** (5/68) and ended with match figures of nine for 204, taking home the Player of the Match award.

Sri Lanka beat New Zealand in the opening Test to take a 1-0 lead in the two-match series at home. New Zealand needed 275 runs to win but was bowled out for 211

despite top-scorer Rachin Ravindra's hard-fought 92. The host took the last two wickets within 15 minutes on the last day and won by 63 runs. Prabath

Jayasuriya picked up his eighth five-wicket haul (5/68) and ended with match figures of nine for 204, taking home the Player of the Match award.



X @ACB OFFICIALS

2

Afghanistan secured its first-ever series win against a team ranked in the ICC's top five, defeating South Africa 2-1 in a thrilling ODI contest. Under the leadership of Hashmatullah Shahidi, Afghanistan dominated the opening match by bowling South Africa out for just 106, comfortably winning with six wickets in hand. In the second game, Afghanistan posted an imposing 311, which South Africa failed to chase, resulting in a massive 177-run victory for Afghanistan. However, South Africa, led by Aiden Markram, managed to avoid a clean sweep with a consolation win in the final game, triumphing by seven wickets.



EMMANUEL YOGINI

3

Australia Women clinched the series by winning two of the three T20Is against New Zealand. In the first match, Phoebe Litchfield's unbeaten half-century steered Australia to a successful chase of 144. Although New Zealand levelled the series with Amelia Kerr's four-wicket haul, which restricted Australia to 142 in the second game, Ashleigh Gardner (**above**) made a triumphant return after a concussion scare before the opener, claiming three wickets to secure Australia's series win in the final match.



REUTERS

4

Ricky Ponting has been appointed as the head coach of IPL team Punjab Kings (PBKS) on a four-year contract. The former Australian captain previously served as the head coach of Delhi Capitals for seven seasons, stepping down after the 2024 edition. Under his leadership, the Capitals reached the playoffs in 2019, 2020, and 2021 and made their first-ever final appearance in 2020.



AFP

5

The three-match T20I series between Australia and England ended in a draw after the third match was abandoned due to rain. The Aussies took the lead after securing a 28-run victory in the opener. However, England made a comeback in the second game, beating Australia by three wickets. The final game did not see a ball bowled. In the five-match ODI series, Australia leads 2-1, having won the first two games by seven wickets and 68 runs, respectively.



# Road to fifth title dotted with experiments and cautious optimism

Head coach Craig Fulton could have considered resting more members from the Paris squad and introducing **fresh faces**, even if it meant risking a few losses.

Nihit Sachdeva

nihit.s@thehindu.co.in

In 2023, roughly six months after a forgettable ninth-place finish at the World Cup, the Indian men's hockey team had its first major test at the Asian Champions Trophy in Chennai under Craig Fulton, the successor of coach Graham Reid. The Men in Blue did have a few hiccups, including a two-goal deficit in the final against Malaysia at one point,

but managed to clinch the title in front of the home crowd.

The successful title defence at the 2024 edition, held in Moqi, China, from September 8 to 17, is the latest achievement, signifying the team's consistent growth under Fulton in

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CHINA 2024

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# AMPIONS

the last year. Post the tournament in Chennai, the side won a gold medal at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, one of the qualifying events for the Paris Olympics. Last month, at the Summer Games, the Indian team clinched its second straight bronze medal.

It was the only Asian outfit amongst the 12 participants and turned out to be the only side that did not lose its place on the podium from Tokyo 2020. It also gives perspective to the increased gap between the tricolour nation and other Asian nations in terms of efficient and high-quality hockey.

Showing no signs of a potential hangover, the Indian team has begun the new Olympic cycle in an emphatic fashion.

For the Asian Champions Trophy, coach Fulton retained 10 players and three reserves — goalkeeper Krishan Bahadur Pathak, defender Jugraj Singh, and midfielder Nilakanta Sharma — from the squad that competed in Paris. He chose to rest five players: Hardik Singh, Mandeep Singh, Lalit Upadhyay, Shamsher Singh, and Gurjant Singh. Hardik had sustained an injury on his left hand during the bronze medal match against Spain.

Additionally, a change was necessitated by the retirement of veteran goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh. The remaining spots in the squad were filled by Suraj Karkera, Mohd. Raheel Mouseen, Arai Jeet Singh Hundal, Uttam Singh, Gurjot Singh, and Amir Ali, all of whom had been

**Indian men's hockey team** retained its Asian Champions Trophy crown with a 1-0 win over China in the final in Moqi. This was India's fifth Asian Champions Trophy title. PTI



## (Rankings as of September 17, 2024)

India - 5th  
Malaysia - 13th  
Korea - 14th  
Pakistan - 15th  
Japan - 16th  
China - 23rd

training at a camp while the Olympics were underway.

Performing like a well-oiled unit, India brushed aside China 3-0, Japan 5-1 and Malaysia 8-1 in its first three league-stage games.

It was Korea that made the Indians sweat for the first time. Quick goals from Arai Jeet and skipper Harmanpreet Singh made it seem like another one-sided contest was on the cards before the Koreans pulled one back at the stroke of half-time. Harmanpreet restored the two-goal lead in the 43rd minute, but overall, it was a brave effort from Korea as it saw the ball as much as the Indians in terms of possession and also earned more Penalty Corners.

The game against Korea was the perfect appetiser for India's last round-robin match against arch-rival Pakistan, which would decide the league-stage topper.

Pakistan's preparation for the tournament had taken a hit when Roelant Oltmans refused to accept another short-term assignment from its national federation. Olympian Tahir Zaman had to be urgently appointed as the new coach, just four days before the team's opening match against Malaysia.

However, Pakistan, one of the youngest squads, played far better than their last two outings against India — an embarrassing 2-10 loss at the Asian Games and 0-4 defeat at the previous Asian Champions Trophy in Chennai. Here, it even took the lead courtesy of Ahmed Nadeem's strike in the eighth minute. India was guilty of wasting a lot of chances, but Harmanpreet's brace proved enough for a 2-1 win. A glimpse of how fierce the rivalry

is came in the final quarter. Tempers flared when Waheed Ashraf Rana hit Jugraj in the face with his elbow, leading to an inaudible verbal exchange between the players of the two teams. The umpires were forced to separate the two groups. Rana received a 10-minute yellow card for 'serious misconduct'. Compared to the league stage, India had a much easier outing against Korea in the semifinals — a 4-1 victory featuring a hattrick from Harmanpreet. Host China, the lowest-ranked team in the tournament, had already shocked Pakistan 2-0 in the penalty shootout after a 1-1 draw in the first semifinal.

In the summit clash, China tried to

frustrate India with a low block, and the tactic proved to be largely successful. However, in the 51st minute, Harmanpreet made his way into the shooting circle with an incisive run on the left flank and moved along the baseline before finding Jugraj in front of the goalmouth, who slotted the ball into the bottom-right corner. The goal sealed India's fifth title, the most by any nation. Pakistan, with three, is second.

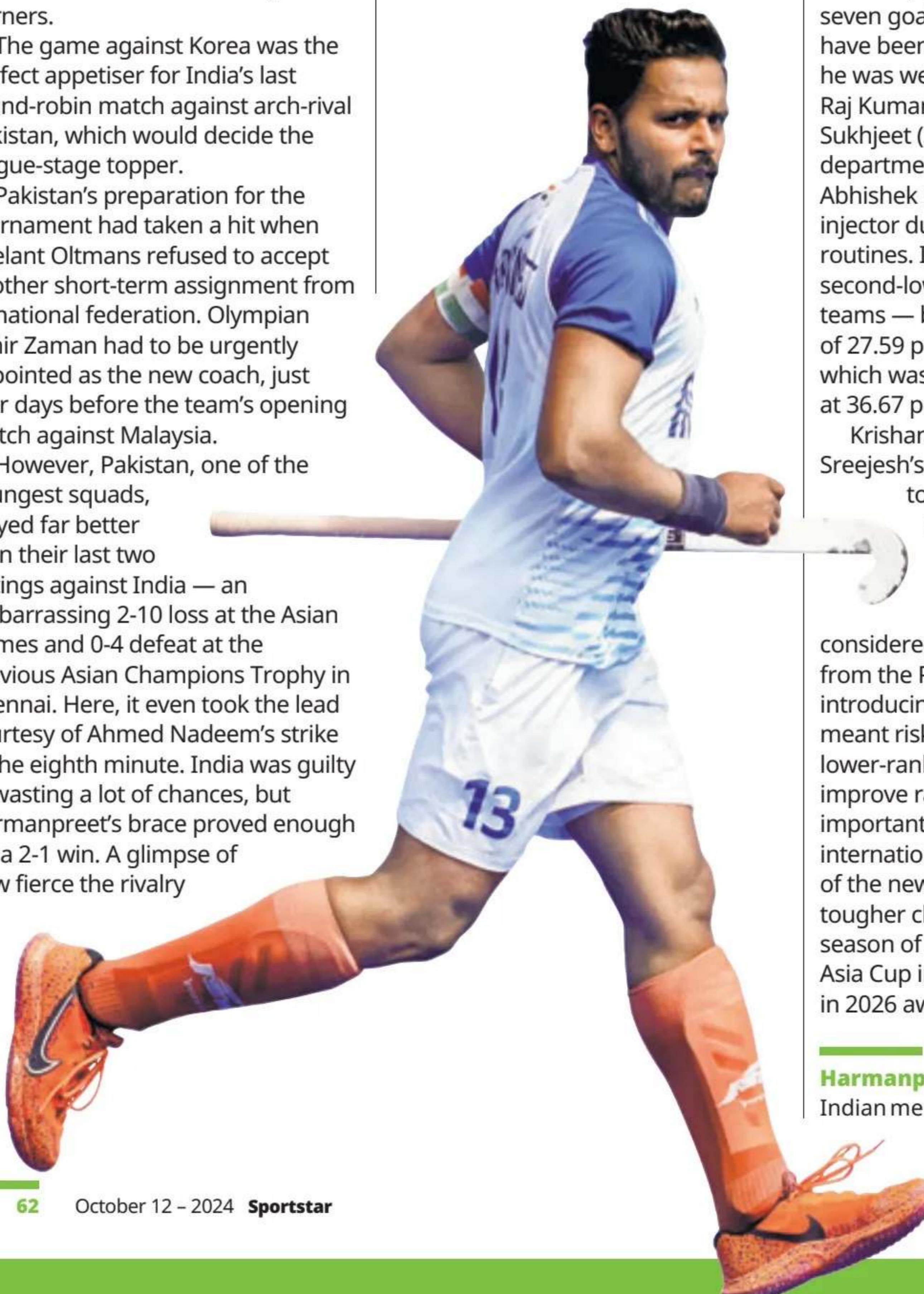
The 1-0 scoreline does not reveal the extent to which the Indians dominated the final, barring the rare counter-attacks from the host.

While ace drag-flicker Harmanpreet led from the front with seven goals, coach Fulton would have been pleased with the fact that he was well supported by Uttam (4), Raj Kumar Pal (3), Arai Jeet (3) and Sukhejeet (3) in the scoring department. In Hardik's absence, Abhishek Nain stepped in as the injector during the Penalty Corner routines. India earned 29 PCs — the second-lowest amongst the six teams — but it had a conversion rate of 27.59 per cent, only behind Korea, which was the most successful team at 36.67 per cent.

Krishan and Suraj, who had been Sreejesh's understudies, conceded a total of just five goals through the quarterly rotation which was in place for the tournament.

Fulton could have considered resting more members from the Paris squad and introducing fresh faces, even if it meant risking a few losses. Beating lower-ranked teams does little to improve ranking points. More importantly, giving young players international experience at the start of the new Olympic cycle is crucial, as tougher challenges such as the new season of the FIH Pro League, the Asia Cup in 2025 and the World Cup in 2026 await India.

**Harmanpreet Singh** has led the Indian men's hockey team with elan. PTI



## Black interference

by C.G.S.Narayanan

The term 'chess problem' owes more to past history where they were regarded as mere puzzles. The evolution of problem at the turn of the twentieth century witnessed many popular themes which aim not so much at difficulty but at expressing artistic ideas in themes. The object of these well grouped themes is to show chosen ideas as strikingly, intensively and as economically as possible. The theme based on black errors, Black interference, is one such popular theme in which black is induced to cut his own lines of guard to crucial squares.

M,Niemijer & Jan Hartong

Second prize,

Good Companion Meredith Ty1922



Mate in two moves

The first problem (above) by the two distinguished Dutch composers is an illustration of interference principle

Key move: **1.Qa8!** (2.Qf3)

1...Rd5 2.Qe8; 1...Bd5 2.e4

1...Rd4 2.Qh8; 1...Bd4+ 2.e3

The mutual interference between black rook and black bishop is termed a 'Grimshaw' and two such pairs are shown in economy of Meredith which use eight to twelve pieces.

The next two-mover by Loshinski, a Moscow mathematician, generally considered the finest composer of

our times, presents triple Grimshaw. Note as to how the mates are differentiated for the black defences on e6 and g4.

L.I.Loshinski  
1<sup>st</sup> Hon.Mention  
L'Italia Scacchistica 1930



Mate in two moves

**Key 1.Rb1! (2.d4)**

1...Rb2 2.Qxc3; 1...Bb2 2.Qf2

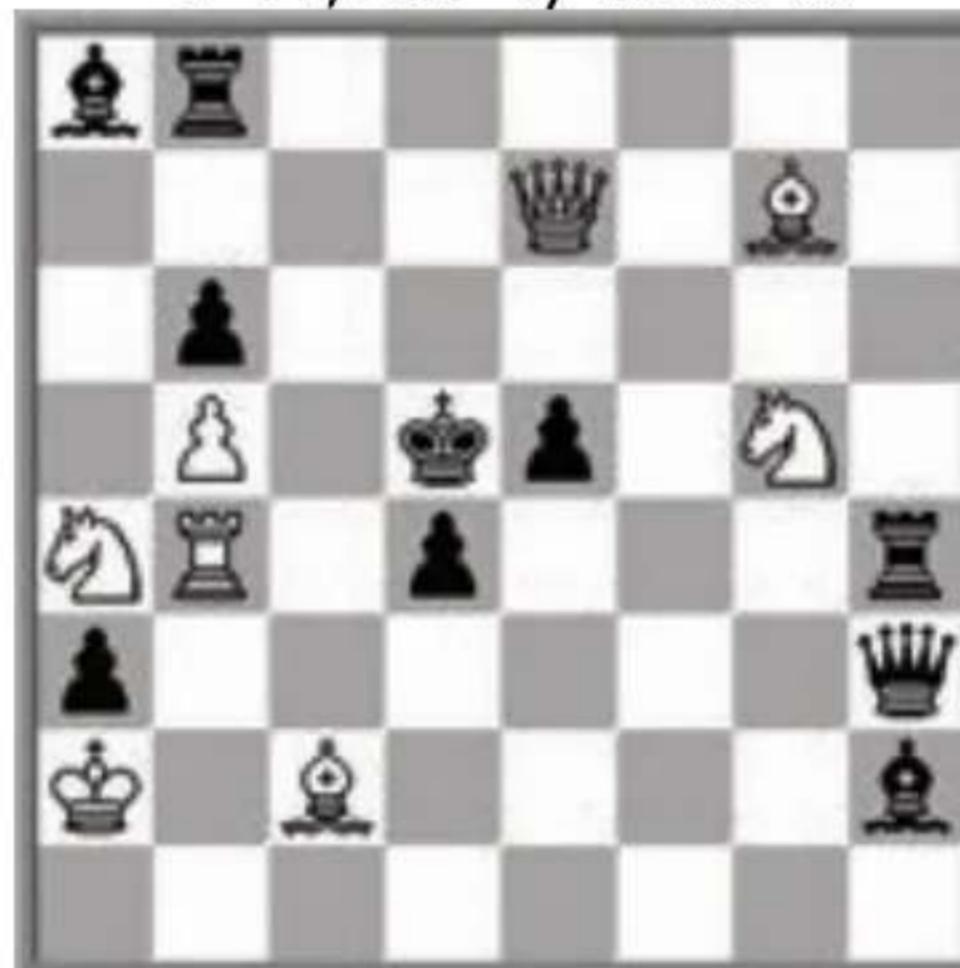
1....Re6 2.Nd7; 1...Be6 2.Bd6

1...Rg4 2.Ne6; 1...Bg4 2.Bg1

thereby preventing him from leaving the d-file. Seven moves of the BB defeat the threat with six distinct interferences.

The problem below for solving is a task record of eight interferences in an attractive and economical setting. The three interferences 1...d3 1...e4 and 1...Bg3 are dual free

W.Michalak  
4<sup>th</sup> Pr,BCF Ty 1960-1



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the

article 'Castling in problems'

Key 1.0-0 (threat 2.Rf8) 1...Ke8

2.Rf8

1...0-0-0 2.Rc1

» ATHLETICS  
DIAMOND LEAGUE REVIEW



**Thorn in the flesh:** A day after competing in Brussels, Neeraj Chopra downplayed his own achievement of finishing second in the Diamond League final. Instead, he spoke of the lessons learned throughout the year.

He also revealed that he had been competing in Brussels with a fractured hand. GETTY IMAGES

## A FLAT END AFTER MUCH PROMISE

From the start of the season until the end of the Olympic qualification period, **eight outdoor national records** were set. However, Indian athletics couldn't finish the year quite as well as it started.

## Jonathan Selvaraj

jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

**I**t was a near-perfect end to the season for Neeraj Chopra. Competing in the Diamond League finals in Brussels, he fell just one centimetre short of Anderson Peters' tournament-winning throw of 87.87m. While Neeraj might not have won the title, he once again underlined his status as one of the most consistent athletes this season.

Over the course of 2024, he competed six times and placed in the top two on each occasion. In fact, the last time Neeraj finished outside the top two was back in 2021.

Between then and the Kuortane Games in Finland, the 26-year-old competed in 19 competitions, finishing either first or second — a feat that includes both a gold and silver medal at the Olympics and the World Championships.

**No Indian athlete has a record like this, and it's unlikely many will in the future. Yet, a day after competing in Brussels, Neeraj downplayed his own achievement.**

Instead, he spoke of the lessons learned throughout the year, revealing that he had been competing in Brussels with a fractured hand.

"As the 2024 season ends, I look back on everything I've learned throughout the year — about improvement, setbacks, mentality, and more. On Monday, I injured myself in practice, and X-rays showed that I had fractured the fourth metacarpal in my left hand. It was another painful challenge for me. But with the help of my team, I was able to participate in Brussels.

"This was the last competition of the year, and I wanted to end my season on the track. While I couldn't meet my own expectations, I feel this

was a season in which I learned a lot. I am now determined to return fully fit and ready. I want to thank all of you for your encouragement. 2024 has made me a better athlete and person. See you in 2025," Neeraj posted on his social media accounts.

This self-assessment didn't come out of the blue. Although he had won silver in Paris with a throw that would have earned him gold in five of the previous six Olympic Games, he still seemed disappointed with the result, incidentally the best performance by an Indian at the 2024 Games.

**In the mixed zone, he spoke about competing since 2018 with an injured groin muscle.** He had considered surgery to treat the recurring injury but kept postponing the procedure because he wanted to participate in major competitions like the Olympics and World Championships.

Despite his injury, he managed to keep his battered body in the mix and perform well. However, when he needed to produce the biggest throw of his career in Paris to challenge an inspired Arshad Nadeem of Pakistan, his body couldn't back him up.

It was a frustrating result, as Neeraj admitted. Besides the medals, what he really wants is to perform the way he knows he can. While he jokes about not being able to go past the 90m barrier, it is something that genuinely rankles him.

"I know there is a big throw in me, but I'm not able to get it out, because I'm not able to throw with the freedom I want. Every time I throw, I'm constantly thinking about not getting injured again," he said in the bowels of the Stade de France.

Neeraj had spoken then about potentially undergoing surgery for a long-term solution to his groin issue.

Curiously, though, he hasn't had the procedure yet. While the rest of the Indian contingent at the Paris Games returned to India, with several medal winners attending felicitations and other ceremonies, Neeraj stayed to compete.

**He participated in the Diamond League in Zurich, followed by the Diamond League Finals in Brussels.** He claimed he wanted to finish the season on the track, but it seems more likely that he was trying to end the season on his own terms.

If he was not satisfied with his performance in Paris, there's not much to be said about the other Indian performances in track and field this year.

Neeraj's silver medal was the only saving grace for the Indian track and field contingent in Paris. The rest of the Indian contingent struggled. The men's 4x400m relay team narrowly

**Inside story:** X-ray of Neeraj's hand showing his fracture in the metacarpal. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



missed qualifying for the final by microseconds, while the women's 4x400m relay team delivered a disappointing performance, failing to leave any mark on the competition. Several of India's current national champions, expected to make an impact, also faltered.

Asian Games champion Annu Rani (women's javelin), Tajinderpal Singh Toor (shot put), Praveen Chithravel (triple jump), Jyothi Yarraj (100m hurdles), Jeswin Aldrin (long jump), and Parul Chaudhary (3,000m steeplechase) all failed to qualify for the finals, falling far short of their



## INDIA'S TRACK AND FIELD RESULT WAS PARTICULARLY DISAPPOINTING GIVEN THAT IT HAD A PROMISING BUILD-UP TO THE OLYMPICS



qualification marks.

Avinash Sable, the men's 3,000m steeplechase national record holder, was the only other Indian to reach a final, finishing 11th in his event. No other athlete achieved a personal best at the Olympics, and only Parul Chaudhary secured a season's best (in both the 3,000m steeplechase and 5,000m).

The result was particularly disappointing given that India had a promising build-up to the Olympics. From the start of the season until the end of the Olympic qualification period, eight outdoor national records were set. Athletics Federation of India president Adille Sumariwalla admitted that he was disappointed by the overall result.

There would be further disappointment at the Junior World Championships in Lima, Peru, where India finished with just one medal — in the women's 10km race walk. India made the finals in just four



events, and only one athlete, Sharukh Khan in the men's 3,000m steeplechase, set a new national record.

The Federation has talked about revamping the qualification system. Rather than peaking at one competition, Indian athletes will have to compete multiple times in India, earning points that will ultimately determine their spot on the Indian team for the upcoming season.

While the Federation is

attempting something innovative in hopes of improving India's performances, plenty of perennial issues remain.

Over the course of the season, several promising Indian athletes, including Manu DP (who finished sixth at the World Championships in the javelin throw), and Parvej Khan (who set an Indian record in the mile), failed drug tests and face lengthy bans.

It remains to be seen what the

# Diamond League 2024 champions



## Men

100m – **Ackeem Blake** (JAM)  
200m – **Kenneth Bednarek** (USA)  
400m – **Charles Dobson** (GBR)  
800m – **Emmanuel Wanyonyi** (KEN)  
1500m – **Jakob Ingebrigtsen** (NOR)  
3000m/5000m – **Berihu Aregawi** (ETH)  
3000m Steeplechase – **Amos Serem** (KEN)  
110m hurdles – **Sasha Zhoya** (FRA)  
400m hurdles – **Alison Dos Santos** (BRA)  
High Jump – **Gianmarco Tamberi** (ITA)  
Pole Vault – **Armand Duplantis** (SWE)  
Long Jump – **Tajay Gayle** (JAM)  
Triple Jump – **Pedro Pichardo** (POR)  
Shot Put – **Leonardo Fabbri** (ITA)  
Discus Throw – **Matthew Denny** (AUS)  
Javelin Throw – **Anderson Peters** (GRN)

## Women

100m – **Julien Alfred** (LCA)  
200m – **Brittany Brown** (USA)  
400m – **Marileidy Paulino** (DOM)  
800m – **Mary Moraa** (KEN)  
1500m – **Faith Kipyegon** (KEN)  
3000m/5000m – **Beatrice Chebet** (KEN)  
3000m Steeplechase – **Faith Cherotich** (KEN)  
100m hurdles – **Jasmine Camacho-Quinn** (PUR)  
400m hurdles – **Femke Bol** (NED)  
High Jump – **Yaroslava Mahuchikh** (UKR)  
Pole Vault – **Nina Kennedy** (AUS)  
Long Jump – **Larissa Iapichino** (ITA)  
Triple Jump – **Leyanis Perez Hernández** (CUB)  
Shot Put – **Sarah Mitton** (CAN)  
Discus Throw – **Valarie Allman** (USA)  
Javelin Throw – **Haruka Kitaguchi** (JPN)



upcoming season will bring. The 2025 calendar is relatively uneventful, with only two major competitions — the 2025 Asian Championships and the World Championships in Tokyo.

While India will, of course, hope to perform well at these events, what may be even more important is the shape Neeraj shows up in — and whether he will be able to finally throw with the confidence he so desires.

**Lone ranger:** Avinash Sable (in white), the men's 3,000m steeplechase national record holder, was the only other Indian to reach a final at the Olympics, finishing 11th in his event. No other athlete achieved a personal best at the Olympics, and only Parul Chaudhary secured a season's best (in both the 3,000m steeplechase and 5,000m). GETTY IMAGES



FOR MORE  
STORIES

# A CENTURION IN THE CITY

While Erling Haaland scored his **100th goal** for Manchester City, AC Milan was shocked by city rival Inter in the Milan derby.

Aneesh Dey  
[aneesh.dey@thehindu.co.in](mailto:aneesh.dey@thehindu.co.in)

**S**uch has been the rivalry between Manchester City and Arsenal in the past two years, that the clash between the two was already billed as a potential title decider this early in the Premier League season. And it didn't disappoint, at least from a neutral perspective.

After losing to City in the title race for the past two seasons, Arsenal head coach Mikel Arteta said his team had been preparing for this match against Pep Guardiola's men since pre-season. All the hard work would have paid off if not for City's dogged attitude of fighting until the last second.

Erling Haaland (**left**) scored his 100th goal for City, giving his team an early 1-0 lead in the ninth minute. Guardiola's team enjoyed the early momentum, but that was squashed by a 20-yard screamer from Arsenal's latest acquisition, Riccardo Calafiori, to equalise for the Gunners. Playing fearlessly in front of a hostile Etihad

ALL OF ARSENAL'S HARD WORK WOULD HAVE PAID OFF IF NOT FOR MANCHESTER CITY'S DOGGED ATTITUDE OF FIGHTING UNTIL THE LAST SECOND

GETTY IMAGES



crowd, Arsenal took the lead in the dying minutes of the first half as Gabriel Magalhaes headed in a corner delivered by Bukayo Saka.

However, the half ended on a frustrating note for the Gunners when Leandro Trossard was sent off in the eighth minute of added time. Already on a yellow card for his challenge on Savinho in the 34th minute, the Belgian charged through the back of Bernardo Silva and showed clear dissent, kicking the ball away after disagreeing with referee Michael Oliver's decision. This prompted Oliver to show a second yellow card, leading to protests from the Arsenal players.

Playing the entire second half with 10 men at the Etihad is a laborious prospect for any team. Arteta's men nearly held on, but they faltered at the very end when John Stones tucked in the equaliser in the eighth minute of stoppage time to secure a precious point for City.

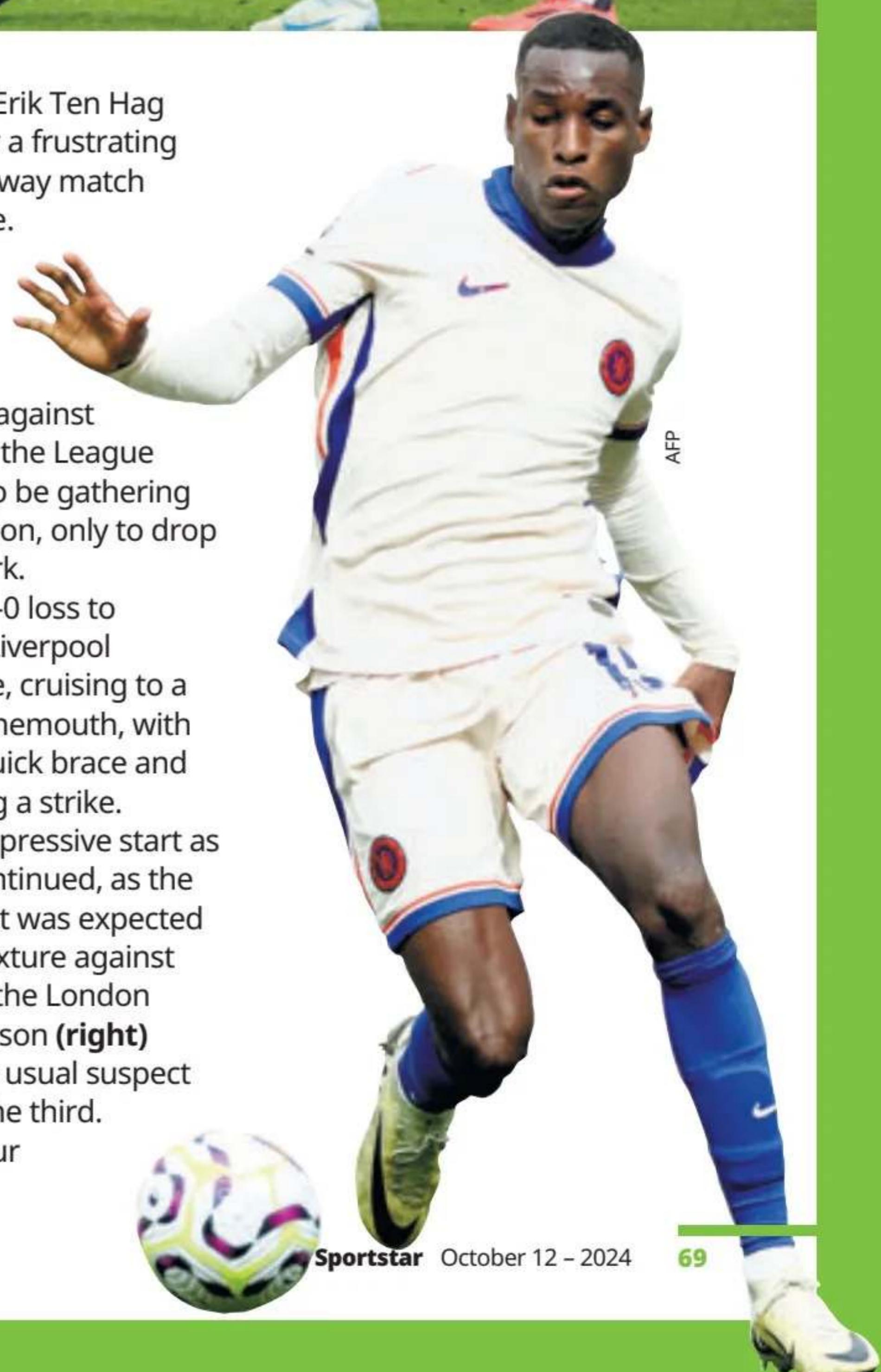
Meanwhile, Manchester United continued to be the epitome of

inconsistency under Erik Ten Hag (**above, centre**) after a frustrating goalless draw in an away match against Crystal Palace. Following a 3-0 win against Southampton in its last Premier League match and a 7-0 win against Barnsley midweek in the League Cup, United looked to be gathering momentum this season, only to drop points at Selhurst Park.

After a shocking 1-0 loss to Nottingham Forest, Liverpool bounced back in style, cruising to a 3-0 win against Bournemouth, with Luis Diaz scoring a quick brace and Darwin Nunez adding a strike.

Enzo Maresca's impressive start as Chelsea manager continued, as the Blues won 3-0 in what was expected to be a challenging fixture against West Ham United at the London Stadium. Nicolas Jackson (**right**) scored a brace, while usual suspect Cole Palmer added the third.

Tottenham Hotspur





**Rush of youth:** Barcelona has been stellar in La Liga, with 17-year-old Lamine Yamal (left) being the focal point of its success. AP

brushed off the disappointment of its North London derby against Arsenal, winning 3-1 against Brentford.

Dominic Solanke scored his first goal for the club after his summer move, with Brennan Johnson and James Maddison scoring the other two.

Aston Villa continued to shine under Unai Emery. After a 3-2 win against Everton, the Clarets followed it up with a 3-1 win against Wolverhampton Wanderers.

After matchday five, defending champion City tops the table with 13 points, followed by Liverpool, Aston Villa, and Arsenal. Chelsea is fifth, while Manchester United languishes in 11th.

### La Liga

Barcelona and new manager Hansi Flick might have faced ridicule after its loss against Monaco in its Champions League 2024-25 opener. However, the Blaugranas have been stellar in La Liga, with 17-year-old Lamine Yamal being the focal point of its success. After scoring a brace in Barcelona's 4-1 win against Girona, Yamal bagged an assist in its 5-1 thumping of Villarreal, where Robert Lewandowski and Raphinha each grabbed a brace, and Pablo Torres also found the net.

Defending champion Real Madrid

made easy work of newly-promoted Espanyol, thumping it 4-1. Dani Carvajal, Rodrygo, and Vinicius Junior scored the first three goals for Los Blancos from open play. Kylian Mbappe added the last from the penalty spot, as the Frenchman continues to settle into life at the Santiago Bernabeu. Goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois would have bagged a clean sheet if not for an error that saw the Belgian concede an own goal in the 54th minute.

After a brilliant win against RB Leipzig in its Champions League opener, the mood was positive in the

« The Milan derby was the biggest talking point in Italian football ahead of the last matchday »

**Whites march on:** Defending champion Real Madrid made easy work of newly-promoted Espanyol, thumping it 4-1 with goals by Vinicius Junior (left), Kylian Mbappe (right) and others. REUTERS



Atletico Madrid camp heading into the next La Liga gameweek. However, it was a frustrating day at the office for Diego Simeone's men, as it was held to a 1-1 draw by Rayo Vallecano. After matchday six, Barcelona tops the table with 18 points, maintaining a perfect record. Real Madrid follows with 14 points, while Athletic Bilbao is third with 13 and Atletico fourth with 12.

#### Ligue 1

Defending champion PSG, which started its Champions League campaign with a 1-0 win against Girona, had a disappointing gameweek in the league after it was held 1-1 by Reims.

Marseille continued its excellent form in the new season with a 3-2 win against Lyon, despite being down to 10 men from the fifth minute.

Monaco cruised to a 3-1 win

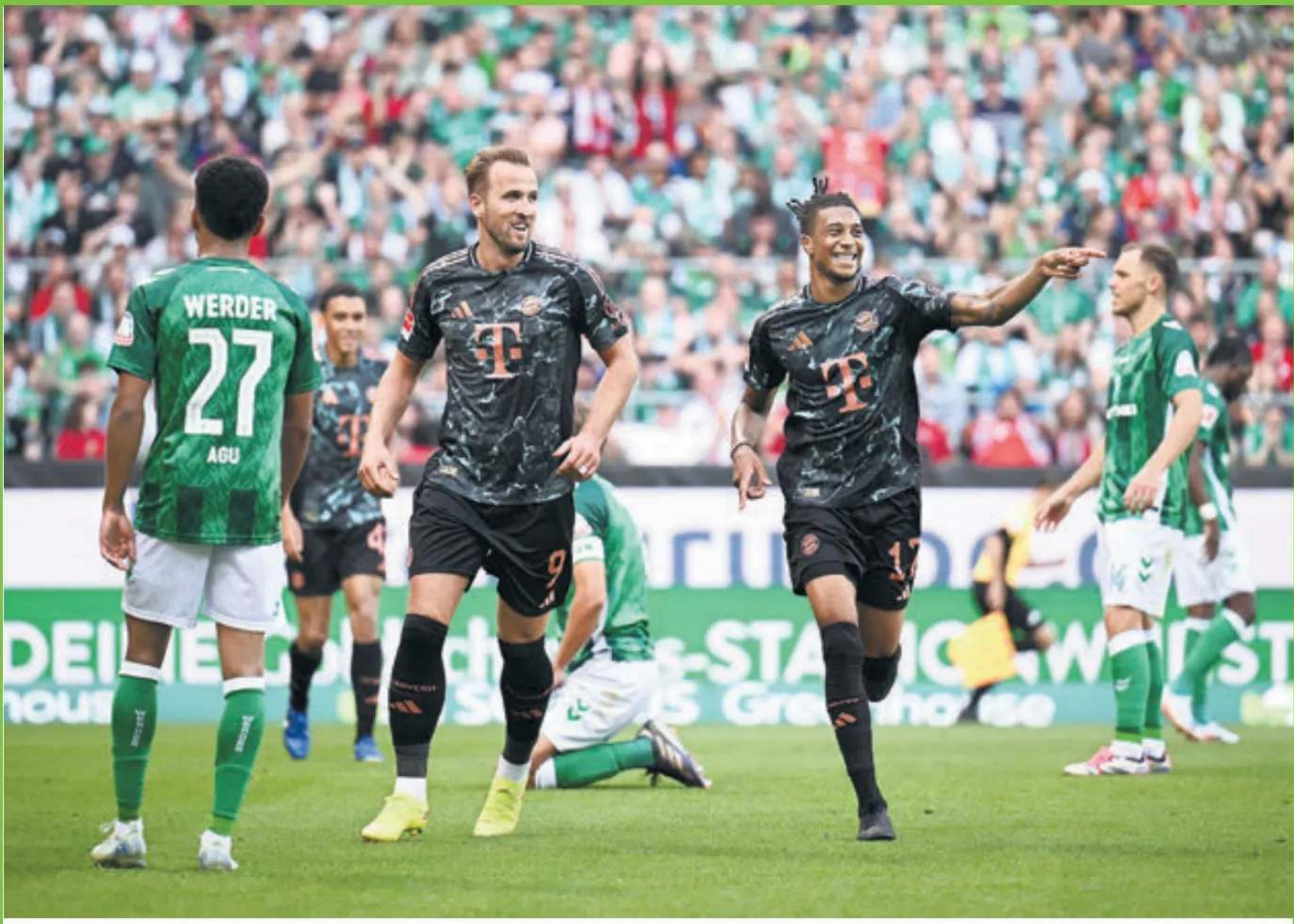
against Le Havre, while Nice fans celebrated an 8-0 thrashing of St. Etienne.

After matchday five, Marseille, Monaco, and PSG occupy the top three spots, each with 13 points.

#### Serie A

The Milan derby was the biggest talking point in Italian football ahead of the last matchday. Defending champion Inter was the heavy favourite, especially given AC Milan's poor start to the season. However, in a surprising turn of events, Paulo Fonseca's Milan beat Simone Inzaghi's Inter 2-1. Christian Pulisic opened the scoring for Milan in the 10th minute, but Federico Dimarco equalised for Inter in the 27th. With the match heading towards a draw, Matteo Gabbia (right) scored the winner for Milan in the





**Goals galore:** Bayern Munich dominated Werder Bremen with a 5-0 victory, with Michael Olise (right) scoring a brace, and Jamal Musiala, Harry Kane (left), and Serge Gnabry added to the tally. GETTY IMAGES

89th minute, as Fonseca praised his players for their courageous performance in the derby.

Juventus vs Napoli was another highly anticipated fixture, but it turned out to be a dull affair, finishing goalless. The 0-0 draw against Napoli marked Juventus' fifth instance of recording three consecutive goalless draws, with the last such streak occurring in May 1992.

AS Roma sacked Daniele De Rossi after a winless start, failing to win in its first four league games. New coach Ivan Juric stopped the rut by leading the side to its first league win, beating Udinese 3-0.

Meanwhile, Torino's positive run continued, beating Hellas Verona 3-2 in its last outing.

After matchday five, Torino surprisingly tops the table with 11 points, remaining unbeaten. Napoli and Udinese are second and third, both with 10 points, while Juventus sits fourth with nine. Inter and AC Milan are sixth and seventh, separated only by goal difference.

#### Bundesliga

New Bayern Munich head coach Vincent Kompany has enjoyed a perfect start to the Bundesliga 2024-25 campaign. In its latest outing, Bayern dominated Werder Bremen with a 5-0 victory. Michael Olise scored a brace, and Jamal Musiala, Harry Kane, and Serge Gnabry added to the tally.

Defending champion Bayer Leverkusen continued its tryst with late winners, with Victor Boniface scoring in the third minute of second-half stoppage time to beat 10-man Wolfsburg 4-3. Florian Wirtz, Jonathan Tah, and Piero Hincapie also scored as Leverkusen looks to mount a successful title defence.

Borussia Dortmund had a week to forget, suffering a humiliating 5-1 defeat against VfB Stuttgart. Deniz Undav scored a brace, with Ermedin Demirovic, Enzo Millot, and El Bilal Toure adding a goal each. Serhou Guirassy scored the lone goal for Dortmund.

After matchday four, Bayern tops the table with 12 points, followed by Leverkusen, SC Freiburg, and Eintracht Frankfurt, all with nine points. Dortmund is eighth with seven points.

#### Around the world

**MLS:** Lionel Messi returned from injury in style, scoring a brace in Inter Miami's 3-1 win against Philadelphia. Miami then drew 2-2 with Atlanta United and 1-1 with New York City. It currently tops the Eastern Conference with 30 points.

**Saudi Pro League:** Al Nassr had a shaky start to the season but beat Al Ettifaq 3-0 in its last match, with Cristiano Ronaldo scoring his 902nd career goal for club and country.



THULASSI KAKKAT

# The transformation of Kwame Peprah

With Mikael Stahre stepping in as the new coach of Kerala Blasters, Peprah seems to be **handling the pressure well** as the new season begins.

**Stan Rayan & Amitabha Das Sharma**  
 rayan.stan@thehindu.co.in,  
 amitabhadas.sharma@thehindu.co.in

Last season, there was considerable buzz surrounding Kwame Peprah's performance in the Indian Super League. At just 22, the Ghanaian forward (**above**, No. 14) joined Kerala Blasters in August 2023, but seemed to lack

confidence in front of goal and made several mistakes, frustrating many fans. Meanwhile, Dimitrios Diamantakos was in red-hot form, eventually winning the ISL's Golden Boot. This likely left Peprah feeling isolated in the squad.

When questions arose about his form, then-Blasters head coach Ivan Vukomanović came to his defence, emphasising the young forward's talent and urging for patience. Just as

Peprah seemed to be finding his rhythm and making an impact, a groin injury sidelined him for a significant part of the season.

Now, East Bengal FC has snapped up Diamantakos, while Kerala Blasters has brought in fresh attacking talent, including Morocco-born Noah Sadaoui, the Durand Cup's Golden Boot winner, and Spaniard Jesús Jiménez. With Vukomanović having departed and



**Guardian call:** "India should set up a national college for goalkeepers as soon as possible" — Panagiotis Dilisperis, head coach of Punjab FC.

PUNJAB FC MEDIA

Swede Mikael Stahre stepping in as the new coach, Peprah is facing considerable pressure as the new ISL season begins.

#### The saviour

But Peprah is handling the pressure well, proving to be Kerala Blasters' saviour with a late winner in its 2-1 victory over East Bengal FC, securing its first win of the season. In a dramatic twist, his goal came just 13 minutes after he was subbed in, stealing the spotlight from East Bengal's Diamantakos.

The Blasters had lost its season opener 1-2 to Punjab FC, conceding two late goals. However, head coach Stahre made smart late substitutions for the next match against the Red and Gold.

"The reason we won is not just because of a strong starting lineup,

but also because of a good ending lineup," said Stahre after the victory.

"In the ISL, we see a lot of late goals every single week, even every single day. People talk about the starting lineup, but it's also crucial who is on the field in the final minutes — to control the game, chase a goal, or whatever the situation calls for. Today, we were clearly the stronger team over the 90 minutes against a good opponent."

#### Urgently needed: Goalkeeping school

While Stahre spoke confidently after Blasters' win, Punjab FC head coach Panagiotis Dilisperis may have wanted to offer some advice to East Bengal FC goalkeeper Prabhsukhan

Gill, who had a tough time when Peprah scored that stunning goal.

A former goalkeeper himself, Dilisperis strongly believes that India should establish a full-fledged goalkeeping school. "India should set up a national college for goalkeepers as soon as possible," said the Greek coach, who played as a professional goalkeeper for 17 years before moving into coaching. "A school with goalkeeping coaches and teachers would develop goalkeepers from youth level to the professional ranks."

Dilisperis pointed to his own country's example: "In Greece, they started a goalkeeping school in 2015, and I studied there. Italy, Germany, Serbia, and South America all have similar programmes. India needs something like this. It's very necessary."

He went on to explain the importance of specialised training for goalkeepers: "Goalkeeping is a unique position, which is why they wear a different jersey. I love the position; everyone knows that. I work closely with my goalkeeping coach, Manish Timsina, who is highly professional and knowledgeable."

Dilisperis, whose Punjab FC started the season strong with two consecutive wins, added, "We focus on teaching the tactics specific to the position, and I think the players are really responding to it."

**Stan Rayan**

#### 'Slaps' that shape fortunes

NorthEast United FC's journey in the Indian Super League has chronicled disjointed performances in the first decade of the country's top football contest. The team, which by its nomenclature represents the most productive region of footballing talent in the country, has struggled for consistency, frequently changing

**Benali's philosophy and tactical acumen seem to be setting NorthEast United on the path to success**

coaches while trying to overcome the team's failures.

However, there is a welcome break in this trend as the tournament enters its 11th season. The Highlanders are reinventing themselves under the astute leadership of Juan Pedro Benali. The seasoned Spanish gaffer has had a long coaching career, a good part of it spent managing clubs in Morocco, an emerging power in world football. Drawing on all his expertise and knowledge, Benali has managed to assemble a NorthEast United side with a good balance of domestic and foreign talent.

NorthEast United made the biggest headlines at the start of the new season as Benali's boys defeated reigning ISL Shield champion Mohun Bagan Super Giant with a remarkable comeback to win the 133rd edition of the historic Durand Cup.

Does this create the perfect prelude to a successful ISL season? The coach responded with a philosophical answer: "You know time puts anyone in his place. Last season, time put us in our place. We missed many games, many points, and finally missed the play-off stage by a whisker. We have a young team that is learning. And we learn by slaps, by getting burned. We hope this season we don't do the same thing."

Benali felt that the small errors piled up to cause the big disappointment in the previous season. "Yeah, winning the Durand Cup gives us confidence and assurance that we are doing the right thing. But at the same time, we should not forget the 'slaps' we got last season. We have to keep that in mind as we plan for the long ISL season," he added.

Benali's words seemed to have resonated well with the team, as NorthEast United managed an injury-time goal to avoid defeat against Mohammedan Sporting in its first match. Benali's philosophy and tactical acumen seem to be setting the team on the path to success.

Elsewhere, his 'slap' analogy appears to have resonated even deeper within Mohun Bagan SG's



ranks. The Mariners saw their vessel slipping into the doldrums as the team played a succession of draws, making the start to its season rather uninspiring.

The winning rhythm deserted the ISL champion after it began the season under new coach Jose Molina with a 6-0 win against Indian Air Force in the Durand Cup group stage. Mohun Bagan beat Punjab FC and Bengaluru FC on penalties (after remaining tied in regulation time) to reach the final, where NorthEast United turned the tables on it and won the crown with successful conversions in the penalty shootout.

The ISL opener against Mumbai City FC also saw Mohun Bagan concede a two-goal lead to eventually end the match 2-2, before being held to a goalless draw by FC Ravshan of Tajikistan in its AFC Champions League Two group stage opener. The Salt Lake Stadium, the theatre of many success stories, suddenly became a stage of tragedy for Mohun Bagan SG. That was enough

**Instant impact:** NorthEast United made the biggest headlines at the start of the new season as Juan Pedro Benali's boys defeated reigning ISL Shield champion Mohun Bagan Super Giant to win its maiden Durand Cup.

DURAND CUP MEDIA

humiliation for a section of its fans, who blamed the coach for the team's setback and chanted "Go back Molina" after the insipid performance against Ravshan.

Odisha FC, FC Goa, and Kerala Blasters also received the proverbial smack on the face as they started their campaigns with home losses. It was a big shock for the home fans, as a defeat at the start of the tournament is never considered auspicious.

Among the reputed sides, Bengaluru FC and Jamshedpur FC seemed to buck the trend, with both teams picking up successive wins in consecutive match weeks, signalling their intent and ability.

**Amitabha Das Sharma**

# IN NEED FOR SOME ASIAN INSPIRATION

After a decade of ISL, **what more can be done** to help Indian football grow?

**Neeladri Bhattacharjee & Joan Mathew Jacob**

neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in, joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in

**T**he Indian Super League (ISL) started 10 years ago with hopes of emulating the success of the Indian Premier League (IPL) in cricket. However, it has not had the wide-ranging impact it intended in order to lift Indian football out of its quagmire.

India, the 1952 Asian Games champion, is now ranked 126th, its lowest in seven years. Despite having a league structure with 13 teams and no relegation, Indian football has failed to rise up the Asian standings.

"I'm very optimistic about this season for FC Goa, but I'm not very optimistic about the continuity of the ISL. This is my feeling — changing

14-15 players is not a problem for the players or the coach, but it is a problem within the system. We can speak 1,000 hours about it," said a pragmatic Manolo Marquez, head coach of the Indian men's national team, in a recent interview.

So, how can Indian football learn and grow beyond its leagues? Perhaps some of its Asian counterparts may present an answer.

The ISL is a market worth INR 467 crores, ranking 12th among the 17 Asian countries (whose data is available) that are ranked above India in the current FIFA rankings.

It has attracted global superstars such as Roberto Carlos and



**Tough talk:** "I'm not very optimistic about the continuity of the ISL. This is my feeling — changing 14-15 players is not a problem for the players or the coach, but it is a problem within the system" — Manolo Marquez. AIFF MEDIA

**Japan's 100-year plan, initiated in 1992, has yielded results both on and off the field, with Vietnam and Thailand fully embracing the Japanese philosophy.**

Alessandro Del Piero, though they joined the league well past their prime to help boost its popularity.

Recently, players with more current international exposure have joined the ISL, such as Joni Kauko, who won the UEFA Nations League C with Finland while playing for Mohun Bagan Super Giant, or Jason Cummings (Australia), who joined the same team after playing in the FIFA World Cup 2022.

However, the opposite has rarely happened, and just twice during the ISL era.

Sunil Chhetri, India's all-time top scorer and the highest scorer in the league, played for Kansas City in Major League Soccer in 2010, while Gurpreet Singh Sandhu made just 11 appearances for Stabaek between 2014 and 2017.

Sandesh Jhingan, after moving to Croatian first-division side HNK Sibenik in 2021, failed to find any game time before returning to India.

In the ISL era, FC Goa's current player Jay Gupta developed at the now-defunct FC Pune City before moving to Portugal in 2019, where he played for the reserve sides of GDS Cascais and G.D. Estoril Praia, followed by a brief stint with Spanish side Ebre Escola Esportiva.

In all four cases, the movement was to Europe instead of Asia — a move that eventually saw them return after limited or no game time.

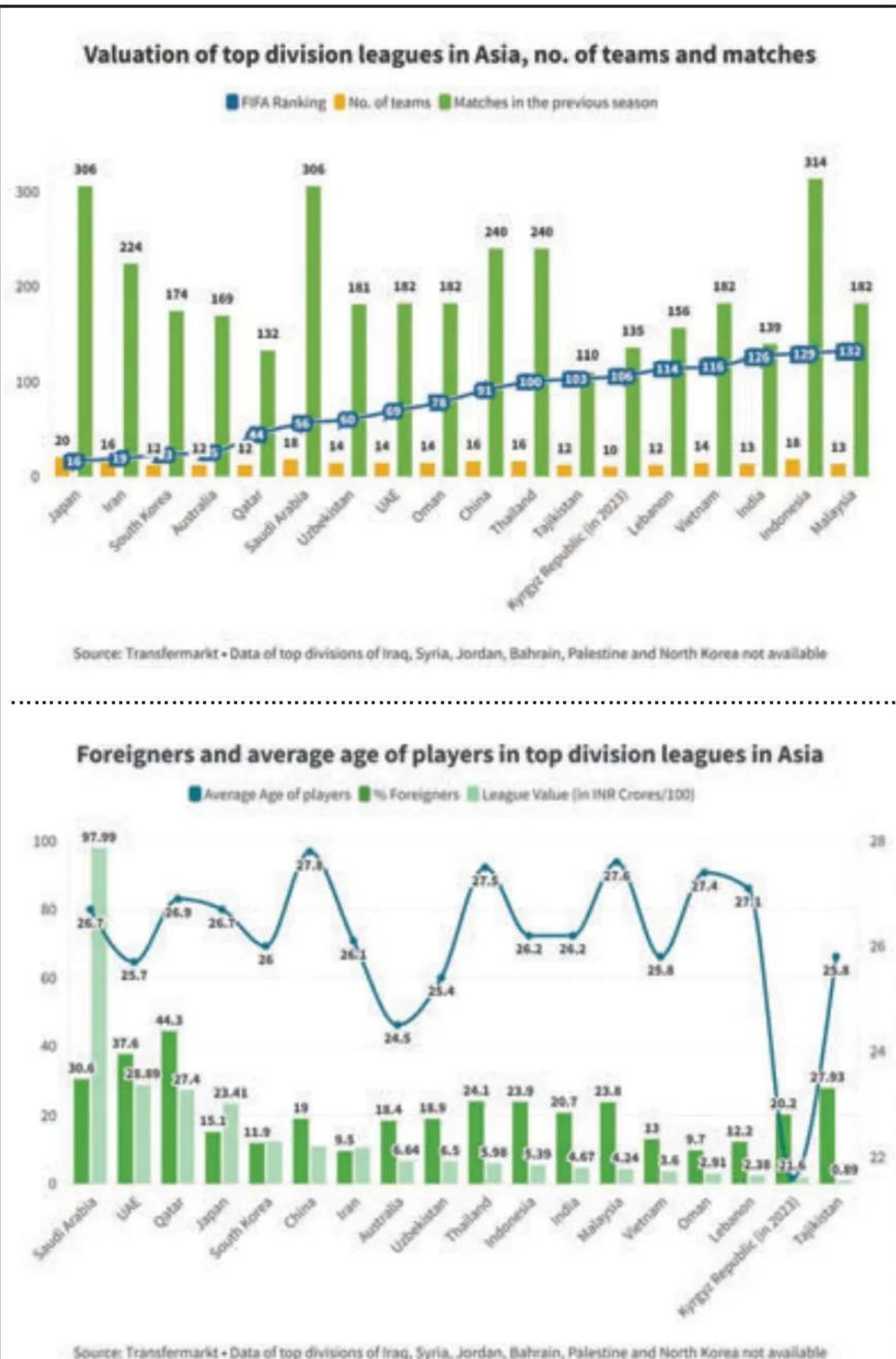
"My feeling is that Indian players are very comfortable. Life is very good for them in the ISL, and it is difficult for them to try and go abroad," Marquez said in his first press conference as India coach.

"You grow when you play abroad. I'm not talking about the top level, like the Premier League or La Liga. But if you go abroad and play against opponents who are better than you, you will improve."

### The Japan effect

Japan, the highest-ranked Asian country in FIFA, has been a trailblazer in football league management and youth development.

Its 100-year plan, initiated in 1992, has yielded results both on and off the field, with Asian countries such as



Vietnam and Thailand fully embracing the Japanese philosophy.

Thailand has seen some of its national team players — Supachok Sarachat, Sarach Yooyen, and Ekanit Panya — ply their trade in Japan, while some Japanese coaches have taken up jobs in Thailand's top division.

J1 League side Kashima Antlers' former head coach Masatada Ishii currently manages the Thai national team and helped it secure a knockout spot at the AFC Asian Cup in Qatar earlier this year.

Ishii was previously the head coach of Buriram United, while Makoto Teguramori is the other Japanese coach in the league, in charge of BG Pathum United.

Financially, Thai League 1 is better off than the ISL, valued at INR 598 crores.

Vietnam, on the other hand, has set an example by learning from Asian leaders, Japan and South Korea, despite having a league valued lower than the ISL.

In the last six years, its under-23 side finished as runner-up in the



**Enviable record:** Park Hang-seo (left) became one of the most successful coaches in Vietnam's football history, winning the 2019 and 2021 SEA Games with the under-23 side and the AFF Championship (2018) with the senior team. GETTY IMAGES

2018 Asian Cup, clinched consecutive AFF (ASEAN Football Federation) Championship titles (2022, 2023), and won consecutive gold medals at the Southeast Asian Games (2019, 2021).

Meanwhile, the senior team won the AFF Championship once (in 2018) and finished as runner-up in the tournament in 2022.

Vietnam's domestic league is valued at over INR 100 crores less than the ISL, at INR 367 crores. Additionally, its reliance on foreign players is much lower than India's, approximately 26 per cent.

The secret to its success lies in the Memorandum of Understanding with Japan, signed in 2014, and its reliance on South Korean coaches who have first-hand knowledge of how the game is played in this part of the world.

Over the past decade, former J1 League (Japan's top flight) side Vissel

Kobe coach Miura Toshiya has managed Vietnam's U23 and the senior national team.

Moreover, Japanese football experts like Tanabe Kazuyoshi have worked as the executive director of the V. League, while Yusuke Adachi and Takeshi Koshida have served as technical directors of the Vietnam Football Federation.

#### Coaching the South Korean way

According to the study, 'Coach Leadership Style and Korean Professional Soccer Team Performance: Collective Efficacy as a Mediator', the transformational and authentic leadership of head coaches had a positive effect on team performance.

Park Hang-seo, a former head coach in the K1 League (with Sangju Sangmu) and of the South Korean under-23 team, became one of the

most successful coaches in Vietnam's football history, winning the 2019 and 2021 SEA Games with the under-23 side and the AFF Championship (2018) with the senior team.

Hang-seo, who left the Vietnam job in January 2023, was also one of the candidates in contention for the Indian national team's head coach position before Marquez filled the role.

Hang-seo was not the only South Korean coach to attract attention.

Former South Korean international Shin Tae-yong guided Indonesia into the knockouts of the AFC Asian Cup 2023 for the first time and reached the final of the AFF Championship 2020, having taken over the team earlier that year.

With the under-23 side, he won a silver medal in the AFF U-23 Championship and a bronze medal at the SEA Games in 2021.

Meanwhile, compatriot Kim Pan-gon helped Malaysia qualify for the AFC Asian Cup on merit after 42 years, taking charge of the side in 2022. He also led Malaysia to a draw against South Korea, earning the team its first point in the tournament since 1980.

Such has been the demand for South Korean coaches that when Vietnam grew frustrated with French head coach Philippe Troussier, it turned to another South Korean, Kim Sang-sik, to find its footing again.

#### A lesson from Asia's elite

Australia and Uzbekistan are the only two nations in Asia's top 10 whose top-tier league market values are relatively close to India's league valuation.

However, both countries have made their respective marks on the international stage in different ways.

The Socceroos are known for

**« The ISL may no longer aspire to be an IPL-style competition but can still drive Indian football development »**



bringing in players from other nations to represent them in competitions, leveraging their Australian lineage.

Among the 26 players who were part of the team that reached the 2022 FIFA World Cup round of 16 in Qatar, eight were not Australian natives.

At present, six of the 25 players involved in the FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers were born in other countries and brought up through Australia's club system.

For instance, Tanzania-born Nestory Irankunda, who came through the ranks of A-League side Adelaide United, was signed by German giant Bayern Munich on a long-term contract starting in July 2024.

Uzbekistan, on the other hand, has focused on identifying and honing talent through age-group competitions, leading to a lower reliance on foreigners in their leagues — 18.9 per cent compared to 20.7 per cent in the ISL this season.

Additionally, the average age of their club squads (25.4 years) is lower than that in the ISL (26.2 years).

Uzbekistan has qualified for three FIFA Under-17 World Cups (2011, 2013, and 2023), making the

knockouts each time.

Its Under-20 team is the reigning Asian champion, while the Under-23 side secured a bronze medal at the latest Asian Games in Hangzhou.

After routing India 3-0 in the group stage, Uzbekistan's senior team reached the quarterfinals of the AFC Asian Cup earlier this year.

Following that loss, then-India head coach Igor Stimac underlined the importance of investing in youth development to create a steady assembly line of talent for future generations.

"We need to accept that Uzbekistan is working a lot better with underage groups. They are nearly dominating under-20s and under-18s. They have fantastic generations of players, and that's why the national team is becoming strong. That's where we need to speed up in India," Stimac had said after the match.

#### Quicksand of problems

All but one ISL team — Hyderabad FC — has its under-21 teams competing in the Reliance Foundation Development League (RFDL), but a set structure for younger age groups is still missing.

The top three teams from the

**Strategy that works:** Abbosbek Fayzullaev of Uzbekistan, which has focused on identifying and honing talent through age-group competitions, leading to a lower reliance on foreigners in their leagues.

GETTY IMAGES

RFDL last season — Punjab FC, East Bengal, and Muthoot FA — played in the Premier League Next Generation Cup this year. However, except for Punjab, the other two teams were thoroughly outplayed by the Premier League under-18 sides, conceding 32 goals over 14 matches and losing all of them.

In the last 20 years, India has qualified neither for the AFC U-20 Asian Cup nor the FIFA U-17 World Cup on merit. The burden of scoring goals for the senior team has primarily been carried by one man, Chhetri, until he retired at 39.

Yet, some Indian internationals continue to earn salaries higher than the median wages in Japan and South Korea.

According to FootyStats, Pritam Kotal, then captain of Mohun Bagan, earned over INR 2 crores annually in the 2022-23 season, which was significantly more than the median salary of K1 League in 2021 (1.3 crore).

Gurpreet, on the other hand, earned around INR 1.77 crores, which was at par or more than at least four J1 League clubs (Consadole Sapporo, Albirex Niigata, Sanfrecce Hiroshima, and Sagan Tosu) in the 2022-23 season.

This raises the question of whether Indian players prioritise high wages over playing competitive football in Asia.

While money does serve a key role in football development, a lack of appropriate planning would only see the league go down the path of the Chinese Super League — a sudden rise in demand followed by years of mediocrity if corrective measures are not taken in time.

The ISL may no longer aspire to be an IPL-style competition but can still drive Indian football development, provided its resources and funds are used judiciously.



# HOW INDIAN PARA SPORTS CAME OF AGE IN PARIS

The Indian Paralympic contingent returned from Paris with an impressive 29-medal haul, its best-ever performance in a single edition. Stakeholders who built this ecosystem brick by brick revel in their **moment of validation.**



**Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan**  
lavanya.In@thehindu.co.in

For Paralympic high jumper Mariyappan Thangavelu, the nerves of competition and the larger challenges of pursuing the sport with a disability sometimes overwhelmed him during the early stages of his career. Furthermore, a passport issue denied him the chance to compete in the London Paralympic Games, complicating an

already difficult journey. A little over a decade later, Mariyappan — the son of a single mother who worked odd jobs as a bricklayer and vegetable vendor — has earned three Paralympic medals — gold at the Rio Games, silver in Tokyo, and bronze in Paris.

"In Paris, my training was perfect. Even three days before my main event, I was clearing heights of 1.95m (the gold medal-winning jump in Paris was 1.94m)," Mariyappan told *Sportstar*.

**The winning combination:** The Indian para contingent during a felicitation ceremony organised by IndianOil to honour them for their historic performance at the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games. GETTYIMAGES

"However, just days before my event, I came down with a fever. It rained for a few days in Paris. The cold air and stiffness didn't allow me to perform a proper free jump," he added, expressing regret at missing out on gold yet again.



**Class apart:** (From left) Devendra Jhajharia, Mariyappan Thangavelu, Deepa Malik, Sachin Tendulkar and Varun Singh Bhati during a felicitation programme. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

There was a time when Mariyappan's fights on the field were intertwined with his battles off it — like seeking sustenance as an athlete, financial stability, and eventually gaining recognition. Now, he has the luxury of focusing solely on pursuing excellence, a privilege that has claimed plenty of blood, sweat, and tears in return.

#### Coming full circle

Mariyappan's blooming career coincided with the twilight of another para-athlete, veteran javelin thrower Devendra Jhajharia. The three-time medallist made headlines when he won gold at the 2004 Athens Paralympics with a world-record throw of 62.15m.

When Jhajharia, now retired and at the helm of the Paralympic

Committee of India (PCI), overcame the physical and mental toll of an arm amputation and found his calling in sports, naysayers quickly tried to gate-keep the space for able-bodied athletes.

"When I picked up the javelin and went to the ground to train, people would ask me, '*Kya kaam hai tera yahan?* (What are you here for?)'" Jhajharia recalls.

"Now, they ask, '*Aapko Sumit Antil banna hai? Navdeep banna hai? Devendra Jhajharia banna hai?* [Do you want to be Sumit Antil? Navdeep? Devendra Jhajharia?] Life has come full circle," he beams.

Para sports in India currently finds itself in an interesting phase. Team India returned from Paris with an impressive 29-medal haul, its best-ever performance in a single edition, surpassing the previous record at the 2021 Tokyo Games by 10 medals. For those who have followed and supported the Paralympic movement in India, including Jhajharia himself, this was a moment of validation.

"Before heading to Paris, in the lead-up to our departure, I said we would win at least 25 medals. One of the reporters there asked — 'Isn't this a bit overconfident?'

He replied. "This isn't overconfidence; it's experience."

His predecessor, Deepa Malik — a Paralympic silver medallist from Rio who is now the South Asia representative to the Asian Olympic Council — echoes this sentiment and doubly underlines the systemic changes over the past decade that have boosted India's performance from just one medal in 2012 to 29 this year.

"The growth of para sports in India is directly linked to policy changes toward this sector and a shift from viewing the Paralympic Committee of India as an NGO to a full-fledged federation," she tells *Sportstar*.

"Earlier, for tournaments, there used to be this casual attitude of '*kisi ko bhi bhej do*' (just send anyone randomly). Now, there's much more accountability for every single

decision and action. The system has become more athlete-oriented, and the results are there for all to see," she adds.

"Government facilities have played a huge role in pushing para sports. The Sports Authority of India (SAI) and National Centres of Excellence (NCE) have really upped the standards of facilities available for para-athletes, enabling them to train at these venues almost all year round. The absorption of para-athletes in the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) has also made a huge difference," Jhajharia points out.

"Another significant development is that now Central Government agencies like the Income Tax Department, the Revenue Department, and others have job quotas specifically set aside for para-athletes. In this system, jobs are secured, training facilities are provided, and a sports-conducive environment is created, leaving athletes with nothing to worry about except succeeding. Alone, any one of these elements would have posed challenges for people with disabilities. Therefore, these need to work in tandem.

"Increased funding has been the smallest part of the change. The more important shift, a direct consequence of that funding, has been in the training structures and approach. The map of centres for para-athletes across the country has many more pins now," he adds.

#### Course correction

Jhajharia remembers funding his own Paralympic dreams for the Athens Games, a memory that takes him back to what he describes as the 'dark ages' of the sport. Unlike today, when athletes returning from international events are greeted with elaborate processions and welcome ceremonies, only Jhajharia's father was waiting for him at the airport when he returned with gold from the Athens Summer Games. The Khel Ratna awardee has not forgotten, and hopes never to forget, the sting of that invisibility.

"My aim has always been to

ensure that the players under me get whatever I didn't. When I started out, I had spikes worth just 300-400 rupees and nothing else. I couldn't afford anything better, yet I broke the world record with those spiked shoes," he says, reflecting on a lonelier time in India's Paralympic history.

Back then, athletes were at the mercy of fate. If they managed to secure funding — often barely enough — their dreams survived, albeit on life support. Understandably, Jhajharia and Deepa, who came before him, praise the financial autonomy athletes now enjoy with the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) and increased attention from the Central Government in terms of policy and funding.

"We had 50 athletes under TOPS for Paris, and it not only put money in the hands of the player, but also ensured that an all-round support system could be forged to maximise performance. It gives players a lot of autonomy and puts decision-making back in their hands. They could choose their coaches, decide whether to train in India or abroad, and fine-tune their preparation as they saw fit," Jhajharia explains.

Deepa also reveals that the Government's funding for the Paris campaign exceeded INR 70 crore, a significant jump from the INR 8-10 crore that the PCI used to receive in the past.

Strengthening the SAI centres to include para sports disciplines and improving the NCEs paid rich dividends for the PCI in Paris. The inaugural Khelo India Para Games, held in New Delhi in 2023, also came at an opportune time for the Federation. Sixteen athletes from that event went on to compete in the Paris Games.

#### Hand-in-hand

The onus of supporting para-athletes is no longer just a Central Government issue. One of the mandates for the PCI has been to ensure greater participation from state federations, which has, in turn, helped the national body streamline

scouting better than ever before.

While state-level administrations play a key role in widening the talent pool, their primary contribution so far has been injecting booster funds into an athlete's training cycle. The Tamil Nadu government's support for Mariyappan is a case in point.

In 2016, when Mariyappan returned as the Paralympic champion in the men's high jump T42 category, the then-Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa announced a cash reward of INR 2 crore, putting him on par with able-bodied gold medallists from the state.

Eight years later, the political party in power has changed, but the support for the high jumper remains steadfast.

"Before the Paralympics, the TN government sanctioned an amount of INR 7 lakh towards my preparation and training. For a long time, it was very difficult to get the amount assured to us for winning medals at the national and international level. But the government ensured para-athletes received their money before the next order of business was taken up," Mariyappan says.

Another key stakeholder in this ecosystem has been non-profits like Olympic Gold Quest and the GoSports Foundation, who have chipped in with funding assistance, and more importantly, accentuated athlete performances by assembling competent and international-standard support staff for the Indians.

Nandan Kamath, co-founder and Managing Trustee of the GoSports Foundation, traces his organisation's involvement in para sports back to the 2010 Commonwealth Games when they worked with the likes of swimmer Sharad Gaikwad. Supporting para-athletes was a natural progression for the foundation, which prioritises nation-building through sports. This ambition was further aided by government legislation in 2013.

Just like in 2016, the heartbreak of the Summer Olympics campaign was eased by the Paralympics triumphs. In Rio, only wrestler Sakshi Malik and

shuttler P. V. Sindhu managed to reach the podium, while the Paralympics saw double that number. This trend would continue over the next two editions.

"At that point, Sachin Tendulkar reached out to us. We organised a celebration for the medallists and raised funds for not just them but also every single Indian medallist up to that point," Kamath says.

Every medallist, past and present, was given a cheque of INR 15 lakh. The contributory pool included Tendulkar himself, along with industrialists like Sanjay Ghodawat and Abhay Gadgil, sports team owners like Nimmagadda Prasad (co-owner of Kerala Blasters), and others.

Kamath suggests in jest that this kind of spotlight helped someone like Murlikant Petkar — India's first Paralympic gold medallist — finally receive his Padma Shri in 2018, 46 years after his triumph at the 1972 Games in Germany.

#### Avenues of change

Jhajharia had won his second gold medal in Rio but was not eligible for a Khel Ratna as per the rules at the time. However, the success of Indian athletes forced the system to take notice and make changes. Awards, felicitations, policy shifts, and the TOPS programme all came together to create a comprehensive care package for Paralympics in India.

Kamath recalls a directive from Rahul Dravid, a board member of the organisation, regarding the direction their efforts in sports needed to take.

"Rahul said there's no point in just following the herd. He suggested that we should try to bring marginalised sports and athletes into the mainstream. His idea was to focus on sports that haven't been supported, create one successful example, and look at areas like women's sports, or even extend that to disability sports."

"By doing so, you create examples that have a signalling or demonstration effect. You can change sport from the grassroots level, but you can also create a

person who becomes a catalyst for change. One person wins, and maybe 20 others think, 'If he/she can win, I can play too.' That kind of cascading change is what we're aiming for. A medal, the national anthem playing — those are wonderful moments, and they close the loop on what we're trying to achieve," he explains.

He further added, "Many of these athletes are no longer just seen as 'disabled' individuals, but as athletes competing in disability sports because their excellence is the binding factor."

This change in perspective led to more interest from the corporate world. Hyundai Motors India Foundation, the CSR arm of the car manufacturer, approached GoSports to develop a programme aimed at supporting those aspiring to be Paralympians. Hyundai has also partnered with other NGOs, such as the Samarthanam Trust for the Disabled, to support blind cricket and provide assistive devices for people with disabilities.

The PCI also saw additional support from organisations like Vedanta and the SBI Foundation. The latter, Deepa says, offered scholarships not just for elite athletes but also for B-level athletes, helping develop the second tier of talent.

#### Building blocks

All these conversations occupy the tip of the Maslow's Pyramid in Paralympics. Meanwhile, the base — the grassroots — still has much work to do. Satyanarayana Shimoga, a former middle-distance runner turned coach and administrator, has witnessed the seasonal changes in India's Paralympic journey.

"I've spent time in East Germany and Kenya; both are polar opposites in terms of societal advancement. But Kenya, without resources, would win medals, sometimes on par with

East Germany. That left me stumped. If they can do it, why can't India figure out a way to excel?" he says, adding that he had asked himself this question over a decade ago. The answer now lies in training athletes like H.N. Girisha and Mariyappan, among others, to reach the podium over the next three Paralympic cycles.

For Satyanarayana, the health of the ecosystem boils down to the health of the most rudimentary block of the system — sports in schools. But he is candidly critical of the first identifiers of talent: physical education teachers in schools.

"Our physical education teachers need to get active themselves," he says.

"Sports teachers are supposed to observe students and recognise their potential. But now, they're just martials. If someone misbehaves, they're there to punish or correct. This cannot be how the system functions," Satyanarayana laments.

With vast experience working in senior positions within the athletics ecosystem, both for able-bodied athletes and athletes with disabilities, the Bengaluru native identifies a major area of untapped potential in India: university sports.

"The World University Games is a huge international event, and it's a stepping stone for many athletes who go on to become world champions. India has never taken this tier of competition seriously; it's treated as a formality. During the formative years — school and university levels — the same 15 to 20 people circulate through multiple sports. It requires better planning and collaboration from all stakeholders."

#### All about attention

Satyanarayana hails Deepa's role, particularly as an eloquent communicator, in rebranding the

**↳ Many of these athletes are no longer just seen as 'disabled' individuals, but as athletes competing in disability sports because their excellence is the binding factor — Nandan Kamath, co-founder GoSports Foundation ➤**



image of the PCI, which has often found itself embroiled in controversy over the years. Infighting, corruption — it's the usual menu.

That aside, the Paralympic vertical in India needs sustained attention, especially for a campaign the administration was so confident would succeed.

"Media rights are a crucial aspect of contributing to the Paralympics. No one wanted to purchase the bundle. We individually bought the rights to the feed and then approached Jio. The hesitation was there because no one believed we would win so many medals," Satyanarayana recollects.

The PCI also partnered with Zomato to amplify the stories of success from the Indian camp and assembled a sizable social media team to generate content from within the contingent.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's contribution too has been vital, not just as an elected official but as someone with the largest social media presence in the nation.

"He mentions us in his speeches,

shares our stories on his radio shows, and spends his birthday with disabled children in Navsari. That visibility, after being invisible for so long, goes a long way," Deepa adds.

#### Tip of the iceberg

But this is just the beginning. As para sports continue to evolve in India and around the world, Jhajharia and Co. need to find ways to keep the assembly line of talent running and ensure that facilities can keep up with the growing demand.

"Junior and sub-junior talent identification is the first order of business. We need to go into every district and scout for talent," Jhajharia explains. "If we start now, we can have them ready — if not for 2028, then at least for 2032."

He also highlights the potential within the Armed Forces.

"There are several soldiers with injuries or disabilities who we can induct into the Paralympic fold," he said.

Jhajharia hopes to adopt some of the best practices he observed during the Paris Games into India's

**A star is born:** Sheetal Devi being greeted with an enormous garland during a felicitation programme in Chennai. PTI

para sports programmes. He specifically mentions Tajikistan and its success in blind sports, which he hopes Indian officials can learn from during an exposure trip to the country and come back with ideas to enhance the Indian systems.

"Swimming is another area where we want to increase participation. If we improve participation, our chances of winning medals will also increase." For Kamath, improving India's performance in team sports is the ultimate marker of growth.

"If you notice, we weren't represented in any team sport this time. I think the maturity of an ecosystem is demonstrated when you don't just produce one or two players with potential, but when you can produce a full team of 15. If we can aim for that, I believe many other things will start falling into place."

# Norris tames Mad Max to reaffirm title credentials

McLaren's Lando Norris **dominated** the Singapore Grand Prix, cutting further into Max Verstappen's championship lead.

S. Dipak Ragav

dipak.ragav@thehindu.co.in

**N**ow that 75 per cent of the 2024 Formula One season is done following the double-header in Azerbaijan (September 15) and Singapore (September 22), the stage is set for an exciting finish. The championship battles for both the drivers and constructors are well and truly alive, with just six races remaining.

McLaren driver Lando Norris delivered a near-perfect weekend in Singapore, dominating from pole position and leading every lap of the race to clinch his third career victory. The win puts him 52 points behind championship leader Max Verstappen, with six races remaining, including three Sprint events in the USA, Brazil, and Qatar. Although it's still a tall order, Norris will fancy his chances of dethroning Verstappen, especially with 180 points still on the table.

Red Bull and Verstappen have not won a race since the Spanish Grand Prix in June, illustrating the reigning champion's precarious position, despite holding a two-race win's worth of a lead. Red Bull has struggled in recent events, even to fight for the podium. Fortunately for Verstappen, in Singapore, the car was good enough to qualify second on the grid. While Norris cruised to victory, Verstappen came in a distant second, nearly 21 seconds behind his rival but comfortably ahead of Oscar Piastri in the second McLaren.

## Piastri masterclass in Baku

It was a much-needed win for Norris following the disappointment in Baku, where

an untimely yellow flag during qualifying ruined his weekend. After being knocked out in the first part of qualifying, Norris started 15th but fought back to finish fourth, one place ahead of Verstappen.

However, it was a bittersweet weekend for McLaren. Piastri showed what was possible by taking his second career win, producing one of the best drives of the season.

The Australian put on a defensive masterclass, keeping Ferrari's Charles Leclerc at bay, soaking up the pressure, and not putting a foot wrong.

Leclerc controlled the first part of the race, starting from pole and building a six-second advantage before the first round of pit stops. Things got interesting when the drivers switched to hard compound tyres. Piastri, who stopped a few laps earlier, was able to quickly reduce Leclerc's lead, as the Ferrari driver struggled to get his new tyres up to temperature. On lap 20, Piastri made a brave move on the brakes, diving inside Leclerc at turn one when the Ferrari driver least expected it, taking the lead.

For the next 31 laps, Leclerc threw

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**Dominant win:** Lando Norris led every lap of the Singapore Grand Prix and ensured Max Verstappen finished a distant second in his Red Bull. REUTERS



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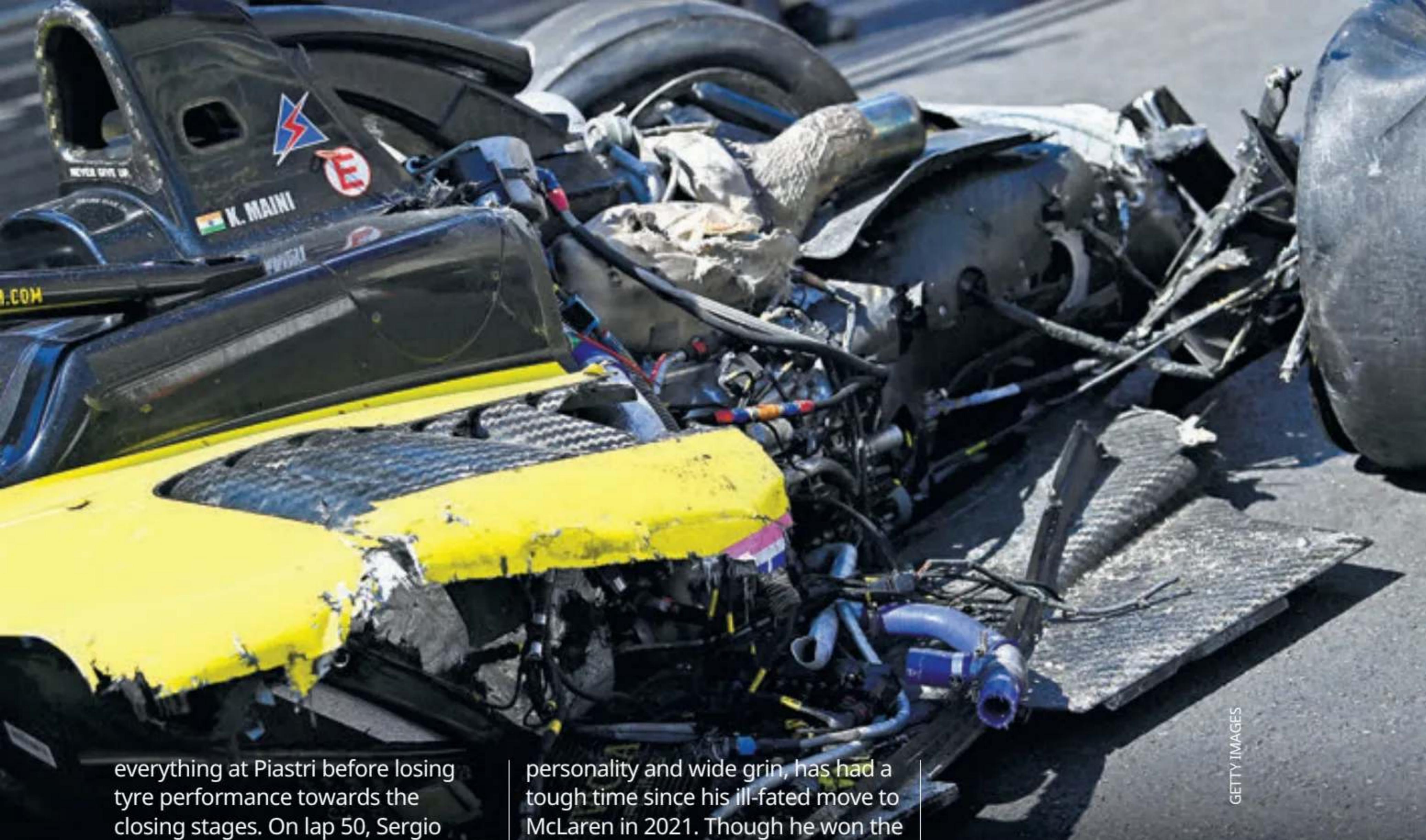


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Red Bull

RED BULL AND VERSTAPPEN HAVE NOT WON A RACE SINCE THE SPANISH GRAND PRIX IN JUNE, ILLUSTRATING THE REIGNING CHAMPION'S PRECARIOUS POSITION, DESPITE HOLDING A TWO-RACE WIN'S WORTH OF A LEAD



GETTY IMAGES

everything at Piastri before losing tyre performance towards the closing stages. On lap 50, Sergio Perez and Carlos Sainz crashed into each other while trying to catch Leclerc. George Russell was the beneficiary and secured third place.

#### **Eyeing the big prize**

Piastri's win in Baku allowed McLaren to take the lead in the constructors' championship for the first time this year. The 1-3 result in Singapore helped the British team extend its lead to 41 points over Red Bull. McLaren, which last won the constructors' title in 1998, is looking to end its 26-year drought. While the drivers' title is the most prestigious, the constructors' standings matter more, as they determine the prize money teams receive and staff bonuses, which are linked to the team's position in the standings. It would take a remarkable turnaround from Red Bull or Ferrari to take the title away from McLaren in the final six races.

#### **Honey Badger's last hurrah?**

It's rare for a driver finishing 18th to become the talking point, but after the Singapore GP, there was unease in the paddock with rumors swirling that it might be Daniel Ricciardo's last appearance in Formula One.

The Australian, nicknamed Honey Badger, known for his exuberant

personality and wide grin, has had a tough time since his ill-fated move to McLaren in 2021. Though he won the 2021 Italian GP, he was outclassed by teammate Norris during their two years together. His performance was so poor that McLaren bought out Ricciardo's contract for 2023 and replaced him with fellow Aussie Piastri. Ricciardo rejoined the F1 grid halfway through last year at Red Bull's junior team (then AlphaTauri) and was retained for 2024. The hope was that a good season could open the door for a return to Red Bull Racing, where he had previously secured seven wins.

But having failed to impress this season, Ricciardo is likely to be dropped before the next race in Austin, Texas. The 35-year-old appeared emotional afterward, conceding that Singapore could well have been his last race.

If so, it would mark a tame end to the career of one of F1's most beloved personalities. In his prime, Ricciardo went toe-to-toe with Sebastian Vettel and Verstappen at Red Bull and produced memorable wins.

His iconic "shoey" celebrations — drinking champagne from his race boots — endeared him to fans worldwide, and he played an influential role in popularising the sport globally.

## **Kush Maini's costly mistake**



Meanwhile, India's Kush Maini had a scary crash in Baku during the F2 Feature Race when he stalled on the grid, triggering a multi-car collision. Though he emerged unscathed, his Invicta Racing car was almost destroyed (**above**). More importantly, his reputation took a hit when stewards' reports blamed him for the collision. "The driver of Car 9 failed to engage the Start Set Up Procedure for the start of the race, an error that led to the car stalling on the grid and causing the subsequent collision," read the report from the stewards.

"The Stewards determined that, because of this, Maini was wholly responsible for the collision and, as a result, handed him a 10-second time penalty. Since Maini did not finish the Feature Race, his time penalty was converted into a five-place grid penalty for the next race," the report added.



## Wrestling Champions Super League announced

Indian wrestlers Sakshi Malik (**pic, above**) and Geeta Phogat announced the formation of the Wrestling Champions Super League (WCSL).

"The WCSL, a world-class international league, will skill and strengthen our wrestlers to dominate the sport globally by taking on the world's best in a hypercompetitive, expertly supervised environment with best-in-class support systems in place," Sakshi announced on X.

Aman Sehrawat, a bronze medallist at the Paris Olympics, is also said to be participating in the league.

"We are delighted that Aman shares our vision and is joining us on this journey," Sakshi said.

"This league is a very commendable initiative that will help Indian wrestling greatly, and therefore I want to be a part of it and support it fully," said Aman.

"We look forward to working closely with this bright young star of Indian wrestling," added the 32-year-old Sakshi.

Sakshi, who spearheaded the wrestlers' protest against Brij Bhushan Singh, along with Bajrang Punia and Vinesh Phogat, announced her retirement from wrestling last year.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

## » INDIAN PLAYGROUND

### SPORTOON



**1** The Maharashtra government has allocated land in Bandra to Indian cricketer Ajinkya Rahane for his international academy. Following the Chief Minister's announcement, Rahane expressed his gratitude to the government on social media. "This academy will empower young sportspersons with top-notch facilities and guidance, fostering the next generation of champions in the city where my own cricketing journey began," Rahane wrote on social media. "Grateful for your encouragement and leadership inspiring a brighter future for Maharashtra," he added.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

**2** The National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) elected Kalikesh Narayan Singh Deo as the president at the General Body meeting held at the Constitution Club. The election, conducted by the Retired Chief Justice of Rajasthan High Court, Anil Dev Singh, as the Returning Officer, was also contested by V.K. Dhall, and Kalikesh won 36-21. The post had become vacant following the ruling that Raninder Singh, who had been functioning as the president since 2010, could not continue in that position, even though he had won the last election in 2021.

TEAM SPORTSTAR



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando



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# The hidden toll of stress on athletes and how to counter it

From national expectations to personal hurdles, **athletes face intense stress** that depletes vital nutrients, leading to emotional burnout and chronic fatigue.

**B**ehind every gold medal and roaring crowd is a silent battle that few witness — one that tests an athlete's mind as much as their body. I've had the privilege of working with stars like Olympic medallists Kenneth Bednarek and P. V. Sindhu and cricketers like Shardul Thakur.

While they dazzle on the field, the real challenge lies in enduring the relentless pressure off it. From national expectations to personal hurdles, these athletes face intense stress that depletes vital nutrients, leading to emotional burnout and chronic fatigue.

Being a champion is more than just about physical strength — it's about surviving the mental grind.

### The biochemistry of stress

When athletes face stress — whether physical or mental — their bodies go into fight-or-flight mode, releasing cortisol and adrenaline to boost energy, speed up heart rate, and sharpen focus. While this helps in the moment, it comes at a cost.

These stress hormones deplete key neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, and acetylcholine, which regulate mood, focus, and muscle coordination. At the same time, stress increases the demand for essential nutrients like B vitamins, magnesium, calcium, and zinc.

Think of your body as a machine: neurotransmitters are the spark plugs, and vitamins and minerals are the fuel. When stress becomes constant, it's like running the

machine too hard — eventually, things break down. Without replenishing these critical nutrients, performance and overall health begin to suffer.

### The impact of stress on the body

- **Dopamine:** Vital for motivation and focus, stress burns through dopamine quickly, leading to exhaustion and mental fatigue.

- **Serotonin:** The 'feel-good' chemical, serotonin, stabilises mood. Low levels due to stress cause anxiety, irritability, and even depression.

- **Acetylcholine:** Essential for muscle contraction and cognitive function, stress depletes this neurotransmitter, resulting in poor coordination, memory issues, and slower recovery.

- **B-complex vitamins:** Crucial for energy production, they get depleted by stress, leading to fatigue, slow recovery, and muscle cramps.

- **Magnesium:** Key for muscle relaxation and heart rhythm, stress



drains magnesium, causing tension, spasms, and sleep issues.

Stress doesn't just challenge performance — it disrupts the very systems that athletes rely on to recover and thrive.

In simpler terms, stress depletes your brain's happy chemicals and energy reserves. Imagine trying to run a marathon without refilling your water bottle — eventually, you'll hit a wall and crash.

That's what happens to athletes if they don't replenish these neurotransmitters and nutrients. Their bodies are pushed to the limit, and without proper recovery, they can't keep up with the demands.

#### Break the shackles

I've got some secret hacks to restore your neurotransmitters and nutrients, helping you bounce back from stress like never before. It's not just about 'eating healthy'. Athletes need targeted nutrition. Here are some game-changing tips:

- **Tyrosine for dopamine:** Boost dopamine with foods rich in tyrosine

like *paneer*, curd, chicken, fish, *rajma*, *chana*, oats, nuts, bananas, and soy products to keep your brain sharp.

- **Magnesium for relaxation:** A warm cup of almond milk or dark chocolate before bed is perfect for muscle relaxation and better sleep, essential for recovery.

- **Vitamin B smoothies:** A smoothie with spinach, bananas, flax seeds, and protein powder can provide the B vitamins needed to calm your nervous system and combat stress.

- **Omega-3 for brain health:** Fatty fish like salmon or sardines, or Omega-3 supplements, protect neurotransmitters and keep your mind sharp and balanced.

- **Zinc for immune support:** Pumpkin seeds, chickpeas, and cashews are great for boosting zinc levels and strengthening both your brain and immune system during stressful times.

- **Rehydrate with coconut water:** Coconut water replenishes electrolytes like potassium and magnesium without the added

**The flip side:** When athletes face stress — whether physical or mental — their bodies go into fight-or-flight mode, releasing cortisol and adrenaline to boost energy, speed up heart rate, and sharpen focus. While this helps in the moment, it comes at a cost. GETTY IMAGES

sugars of commercial sports drinks.

These targeted nutrition strategies help athletes recharge both physically and mentally.

Managing stress — both physical and mental — is crucial to an athlete's success. While fitness and mental toughness are key, nutrition plays an equally vital role in preventing burnout.

High-level sports bring inevitable stress, but how athletes handle it can be the difference between winning and exhaustion.

The secret? Train smarter, not just harder.

Prioritise nutrition, replenish what's lost, and fuel your body with the right nutrients to handle stress like a true champion.

# Are professional athletes paid too much?

For **every top-earning athlete**, there are always players on the circuit who barely make ends meet.

Suresh Menon

**A**ccording to the Forbes list, Cristiano Ronaldo made 260 million dollars in the last financial year. A sports betting site had a more interesting calculation. Turns out boxer Anthony Joshua made twelve and a half million dollars per minute in the same period. Not surprisingly, every so often we get someone asking: do athletes earn too much?

I am not sure there is such a thing as "earning too much." The market believes Ronaldo is worth 260 million dollars, so that's what he is paid. The actor Robert Downey Jr. once said, "Acting is the most wildly overpaid profession imaginable." Roger Moore has been quoted as saying, "I enjoy being a highly overpaid actor." This is not so much an admission as a provocation. A David Hockney painting sold a few years ago for 90 million dollars. And why not?

You could stretch the "too much pay" argument to include rock stars, CEOs, royalty, celebrity writers — there's always someone who thinks they are paid too much, much more than doctors, soldiers and teachers who are seen as being in nobler professions. But that is a silly argument. True, the second lot is grossly underpaid, but that doesn't mean those who kick a football or try to knock a small, dimpled ball into a hole far away ought not to be paid for their work. In any case, the figures are about the top athletes — there are tennis players and golfers on the circuit who barely make ends meet.

Jon Rahm (second on the Forbes list with 218 million



**Minting money:** Portugal skipper Cristiano Ronaldo is the world's highest-paid athlete, earning around \$260 million. REUTERS

dollars), who won the LIV golf league recently, earned about 35 million for that effort and a diamond, emerald and gold ring worth 14 million. The ring has a concealed ball marker with a QR code on the back, which will allow him to watch back the winning moment. You can rub it, and a cave door opens, revealing untold riches. That last is an exaggeration, of course, but soon it might be difficult to tell.

In the future, as I write this, but in the past as you get to read it, Joshua will add a possible 30 million dollars to his kitty following the IBF title fight against Daniel Dubois. His earnings per minute are set to skyrocket.

Tyson Fury is believed to have earned 65 million dollars from a similar bout last year, part of the 'Riyadh Season', a festival of sports, culture and entertainment. The millions in golf and boxing above are a result of Saudi Arabia's investment in sport.

Those who have been screaming 'sportswashing' are quieter now, for the Joshua fight is not in Saudi Arabia but in Wembley.

Last year, Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, told *Fox News*, "If sportswashing increases my GDP by one per cent, then I will continue doing sportswashing."

There is a point beyond which concrete amounts begin to look and sound abstract. Like a painting if you stare at it for too long. Are salaries in sports getting there?

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