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INDIAN MEN'S HOCKEY TEAM

US OPEN

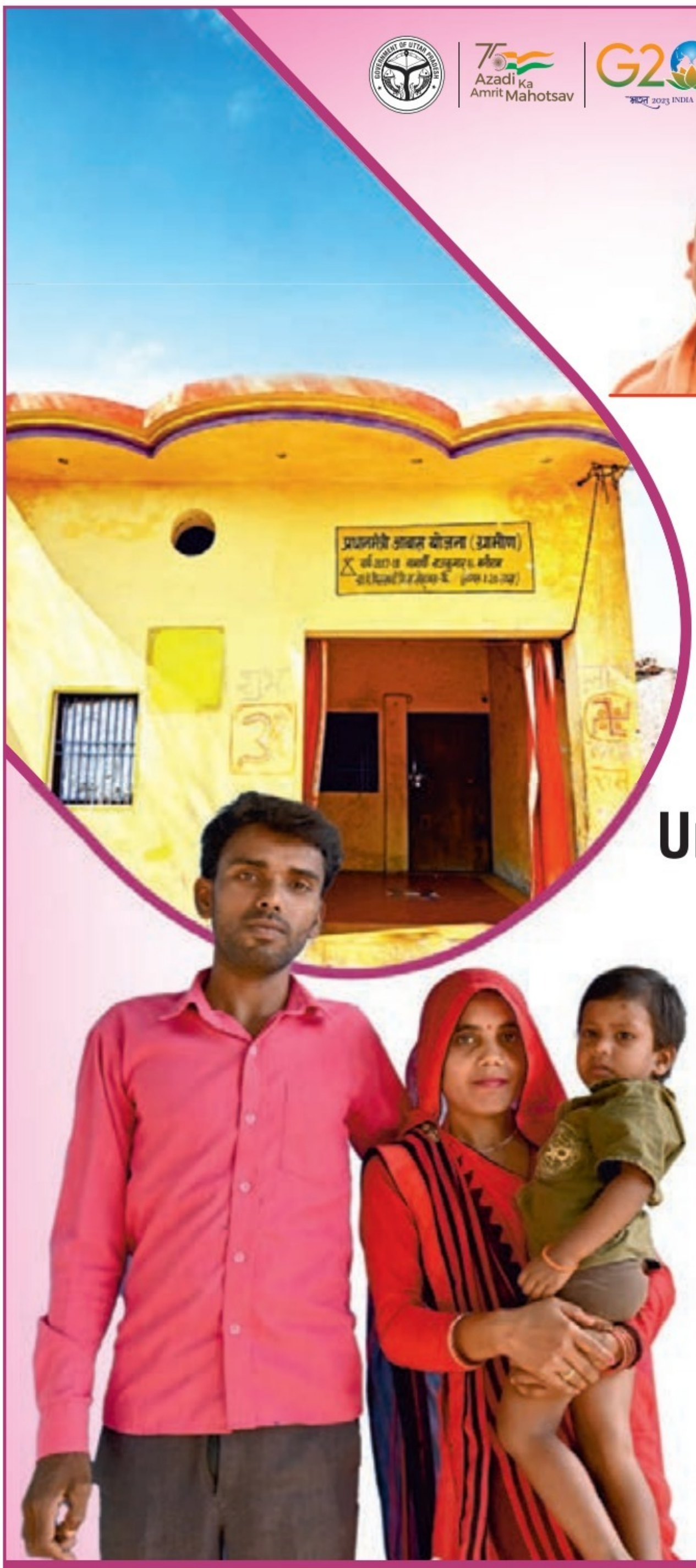
All eyes on Spanish sensation Carlos Alcaraz

WORLD ATHLETICS

Medal-hungry Indians descend in Budapest

INDIA GETS ITS ACT TOGETHER

Harmanpreet Singh's men may have won their fourth Asian Champions Trophy title, but sterner tests await in Hangzhou



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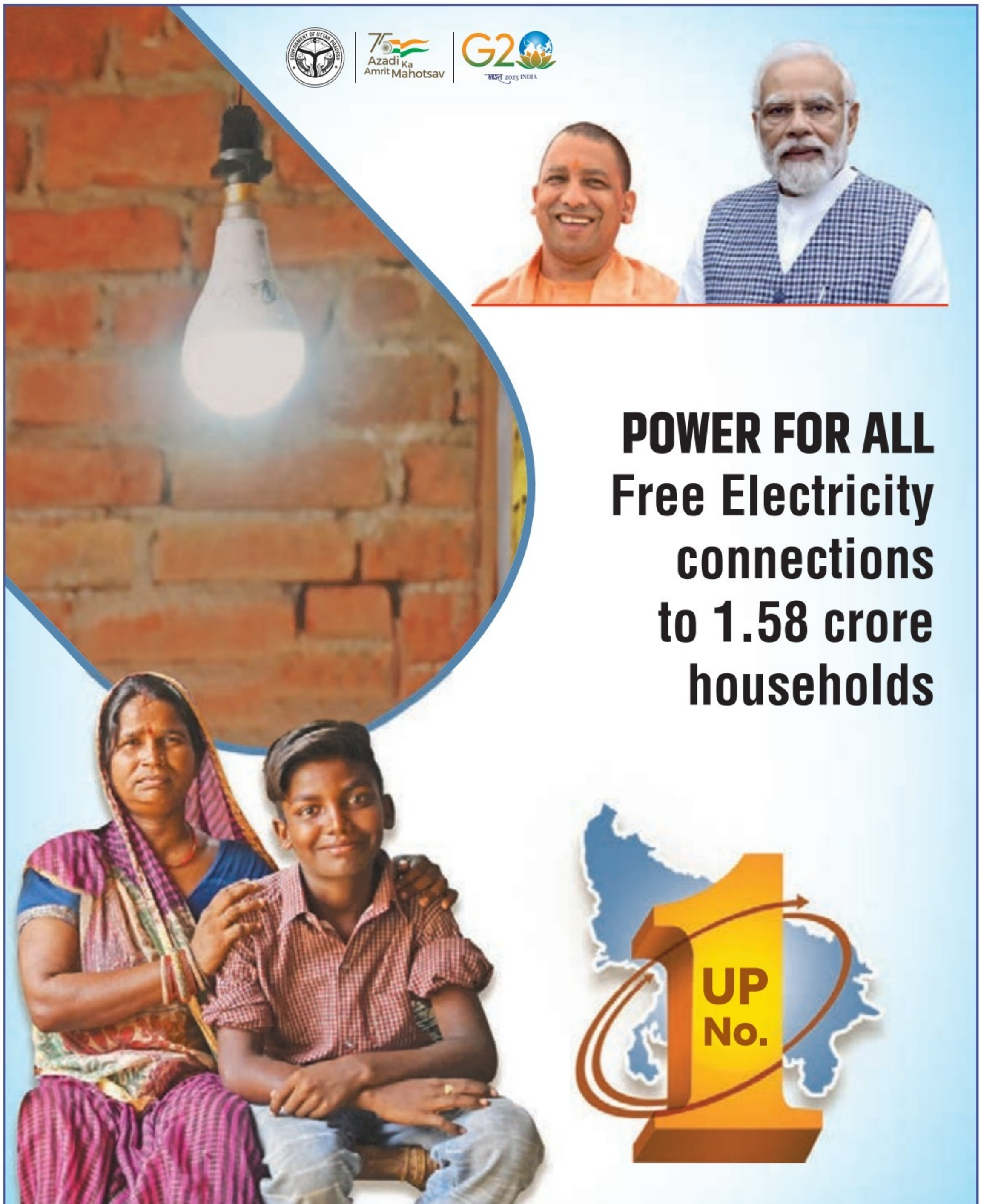

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OFF-SIDE

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TO BE, OR NOT TO BE, THAT IS THE QUESTION

In our love for sports, **no logic should hold sway,** and our hearts should follow the same unique, undeniable human fickleness in discarding a player or a team as it did in choosing them in the first place.

Sports fandom is never defined by logic. Our unhealthy obsession with clubs or players stems from myriad reasons — we often follow in the footsteps of our parents or peers, or we rebel and opt for the other extreme. Sometimes, a dazzling star lights our way to a team. But once in, we rarely waver, religiously engaging in the worship of the cult, our days, our moods dictated by their fortunes, our social schedules governed by their calendar. And yet, the same loyalty is rarely reciprocated by the club or the players we adore.

Our heroes are fickle; their allegiances are easily bought and sold, and their loyalties change as often as the trends on X (nee Twitter) and TikTok.

But as fans, we are in flux. Should we linger with Barcelona, where Lionel Messi kept us hooked for close to two decades, or do we move with him to the Parisian shores and then to the desert heat of Miami as he embraces the life of an exceptionally well-paid nomad?

Do we forget the atrocities of a dictatorial regime as Cristiano Ronaldo makes Saudi Arabia his new home?

Or do we, too, move and recalibrate our affections? Not for us Ronaldo and the Saudi sands with their dubious human-rights record, or Jordan Henderson, who will no longer wear the rainbow armband with which he once championed the LGBTQIA+ community.

Messi and the allure of Major League Soccer, too, might be discarded as the timings clash rudely with our circadian rhythms, and the Reds — post their folly of joining the rich-only European Super League bandwagon — must learn to forge on without my endorsement.

We can choose to unfollow a team because of a foul-mouthed owner, an erroneous choice to overlook allegations of sexual violence, or simply the metamorphosis of a team's hues. Our loyalties can shift even with the sudden revelation of a newfound love for our club by a person we irrationally dislike.

In our love for sports, no logic should hold sway, and our hearts should follow the same unique, undeniable human fickleness in discarding a player or a team as it did in choosing them in the first place.

Our heroes are fickle, their allegiances easily bought and sold, their loyalties changing as often as the trends on X (nee Twitter) and TikTok.

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WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT

« It's beyond words. I've been working so hard for a long time, and I knew something special was going to come at some point.

– Bryson DeChambeau, after firing a rare 58 in the final round to win the LIV Golf Greenbrier title »

1st

Italian seventh seed Jannik Sinner secured his first Masters 1000 title with a dominant 6-4, 6-1 win over Australian Alex de Minaur in the Canadian Open final. Sinner, appearing in his third Masters 1000 final after runner-up efforts at the Miami Open in 2021 and this year, broke De Minaur five times and saved two of four break points to lift the biggest title of his career.
The 21-year-old Italian, who enjoyed a run to the Wimbledon semifinals recently, felt his ability to deal with pressure-packed situations helped him to navigate past De Minaur. Sinner lost a pair of Masters finals in Miami in 2021 and last April but could not contain his enthusiasm after storming past his Australian opponent in 90 minutes.

7 rounds

Former world champion Anthony Joshua needed seven rounds to stop stand-in opponent Robert Helenius in their heavyweight bout on Aug 12. Joshua, 33, looked ponderous in the early stages and was jeered by his London home crowd. But he finished the fight with a thunderous knockout of Finland's Helenius at the O2 Arena. The victory kept Joshua on course for a bout with fellow former world heavyweight champion Deontay Wilder.

« The thing that I love about watching him is the freedom that he plays with, and part of that is youth, I think. I just hope he doesn't lose that.

– Andy Murray on Carlos Alcaraz during the Canadian Open »

INJURY WOES

American 400 metres hurdles Olympic champion and world record holder Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone said that she will miss the World Championships due to a "minor knee issue", with the global showcase set to begin in Budapest. "After consulting with my doctors and coaches, I need to take care of a minor knee issue so that I can be fully healthy for next year's Paris Olympics. I look forward to seeing everyone back on the track soon!" AP

Meet the 'ring'fluencer

From social media fame to boxing acclaim, Jake Paul's journey from influencer to pugilist **reveals a surprising range** of depth and dedication.

Lalith Kalidas
@lal__kal

How does one take Jake Paul seriously? How does he do it himself?

For a 16-year-old who started out his social media influencer career before the pop in 2013, Jake and his elder brother Logan have come a long way since their days in Los Angeles. A *Disney* series appearance and a burgeoning *YouTube* following helped Paul rake in a fortune, celebrity status and 'live the life in L.A'.

Paul may not be an everyday essential, but the now 26-year-old from Ohio got one thing spot-on from the start. He knows how to seek and gain your attention.

Do not let his social media empire befuddle you now, or so he says. Not by word but by literal action. Not on his *Instagram* profile, but in a boxing ring where things get heated up for real.

Amidst all the chaos and controversies in his social and public engagements, Paul found his calling in the ring. He relished the brutality and realness of a punch in the face. And he loved giving it back too.

Paul's intersection with the sport began with no profound background when British YouTuber KSI called the brothers out for a fight in 2018.

In an eight-fight pro-boxing career, the 'Problem Child' has managed a 7-1 record against fellow influencers and retired MMA fighters. His win over former UFC star Nate Diaz at the American Airlines Center in Texas on August 5 ascertained that he's no mug with the gloves.

The wealth from his social media presence has helped him jump the line of the punishing amateur scene and straight up roll out huge spots in pay-per-views. Paul's simultaneous promotional career with his Most Valuable Promotions establishment also made headlines in 2022 when he secured a seven-figure paycheck for Puerto Rican world champion Amanda Serrano against Katie Taylor, regarded as the biggest fight ever in women's boxing.

While Paul's hustle may be overlooked, the cracks in world boxing's drive for quality have also helped him forge an ostensibly splendid start to his career.

As the fights get real and Paul attempts to contend for a world title, it will be enticing to see what unfolds.

Can the 6ft 1-frame bear a jab-and-hook from a world champion?

Blood and sweat: Jake and his elder brother Logan (below) have come a long way since their L.A. days. GETTY IMAGES

Concerns remain, but Fulton's vision is taking shape

India may have bagged a fourth Asian Champions Trophy title in stellar fashion, but **head coach Craig Fulton still needs to address the team's struggles** with capitalising on opportunities and finishing games.

Uthra Ganesan
@OnTheSportField

The Indian men's hockey team won its fourth Asian Champions Trophy title, cheered on by a capacity crowd. It burnished its credentials as the top side in the continent, at par with the best in the business, and set both the template and expectations for the Asian Games just over a month away. After arriving in the city 68 hours before its first match and a lone session for the players to get a feel of the newly-laid turf at the Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium, the Indian team went through a lot in 10 days to emerge victorious on a dark, muggy night.

There were days when the host struggled: the ball wouldn't go in, passes ended with opponents, and players appeared dazed. But there were nights when everything worked like clockwork, with the Indians

All smiles: India beat Malaysia in a seven-goal thriller to win the Asian Champions Trophy 2023, which marked the return of international hockey to Chennai after 15 years. M. VEDHAN

skating on ice with ease. It was frustrating, concerning, beautiful, and wondrous. It was Indian hockey with its ebbs and flows, making even its staunchest supporters and harshest critics uncertain.

And yet, it wasn't the old Indian team. There may not have been the magic of Mohd. Shahid dancing past the defence, but it had Manpreet Singh dodging defenders and interceptors at will, in impeccable control of the ball through the length of the field. It had a 35-year-old PR Sreejesh and Krishan Pathak stretching and leaping around in kits weighing between 18 and 23kg. It may not have had the fiery runs of a Dhanraj Pillay in full flow, but it had the likes of Mandeep Singh and Akashdeep Singh racing for the ball and, more often than not, being the first to get to it. This team, including its latest and youngest member Selvam Karthi, is known for its unwavering determination and exceptional fitness.

"Any team that plays us knows we're fit, and they have to match us in all four quarters. But the biggest [advantage] is that, mentally, you start to believe that you have another gear. There is no guarantee that you will win just because you are fit. But you definitely would not be winning a lot if you were not. Fitness at crucial moments, like towards the end of the tournaments, is important. You have to have enough in you if you are chasing a game. Like we had to do [in the final], press for the whole second half. You still need to have that in you. Fitness is one of the main priorities of the modern game we play," coach Craig Fulton admitted

INDIA CAPTAIN HARMANPREET SINGH (BELOW) SCORED A BRACE IN THE WIN AGAINST PAKISTAN DURING THEIR ASIAN CHAMPIONS TROPHY MATCH

MORE FROM THE TOURNAMENT

after the final.

The skills were always assumed to be there, and they were. Old-timers may continue to insist that the artificial turf doesn't favour skills. But anyone who has seen the likes of Jamie Dwyer, Ashley Jackson, Robbert Kemperman, Christopher Ruhr, or Arthur van Doren over the years won't believe them. Those who saw Shamsher Singh, Sumit, Vivek Sagar Prasad, Hardik Singh, Jarmanpreet Singh, Nilakanta Sharma, or Amit Rohidas here wouldn't either. It puts a premium on fitness and finds a balance between the two. And in Chennai, the Indian team outran, outplayed, and outlasted the toughest challengers.

A jetlagged India started with an easy win against China but hit a wall against Japan. It ran circles around Malaysia, then struggled against Korea. It was only against Pakistan that the team began to find some structure and took it to the next level in the semifinal against Japan, a game as close to perfect as can be. It was again rattled by Malaysia in the final, going behind by two goals, and it had to dig deep to find a way out — and found it in a few moments of magic, an ability to switch gears, and an innate belief that it isn't over till the final whistle.

PTI

Pakistan coach Mohammad Saqlain had quipped that India played only on fitness and PCs. What he did not say was that the fitness he was talking about did not develop overnight. The hard work gone into it, with support from all the trainers the team has had over the years — David John, Wayne Lombard, Robin Arkell, and now Alan Tan — is visible. And the ability to step up towards the end, to push hard and accelerate in crucial moments, has been the key for this side.

It is also a testament to the players' faith in the system Fulton has brought in. That has been the Indian style, the attacking hockey that is a delight to watch. But that also leaves space for the rivals to mount counterattacks and take advantage of space at the back. It was also something Graham Reid approved of, coming as he did from the Australian school of hockey that plays a similar high-press, all-out game

Volatile threat: Pakistan may not have lived up to the expectations in Chennai, but it has potential for causing an upset at the upcoming Asian Games with individual performances. AP

giving little breathing space to the opposition.

Fulton prefers controlling the game and every zone of the turf, winning matches and tournaments, instead of seeking praise for brilliance without rewards. His playing style is influenced by Belgium and Germany, relying on holding, defending, and pressing hard when necessary instead of going gung-ho all the time. It helps teams to stay on top of the game and close gaps at the back with at least two layers in action in every area.

It is also a lot more demanding on the players — the midfielders have to fall back or move up as the situation demands, and the defenders need to push ahead while constantly staying alert to not leaving the goalkeeper unaided. It is also a sign of the Indians' fitness levels that they have been able to implement it with little fuss and sustain the momentum in back-to-back outings.

"Every coach has a different mentality. When Graham [Reid] was the coach, he was the best. Now, Fulton is the best. Every coach thinks about the betterment of the team. While we have brought in structural changes in our team, managing it at such short notice is a highly positive point for us. All credit to him for making us believe in it," captain Harmanpreet Singh added.

The other important thing is trust — in the system, in the planning, and each other. The players have repeatedly asserted that on-field mistakes — and they do happen even to the best — are best forgotten right away, and it was the job of everyone to ensure they don't linger either with the player concerned or on the team

Up to the task: Japan finished third, ahead of higher-ranked Korea, signalling readiness to defend its Asian Games crown. PTI

as a whole. "I think you will find these are guys who are trusting each other. And also, trusting that they can do the job... I thought the guys were class. The younger guys stood up, and so did the older ones. So, it was a really good collective mix of those who were playing and those who came on to keep the pressure on. The character of the group was great," Fulton added after the final.

Howsoever great the win may be, the team and the coach are aware that things will be different in a month. Playing against the teams they will face again at the Asian Games will help in fine-tuning plans, but it's the same for the rest as well. Malaysia managed to rattle India in the first half of the final, potentially providing insight for future opponents.

Despite finishing last, China's physical play and home advantage make them a tough opponent. Pakistan has potential for causing an upset with individual performance, a throwback to the hockey of yore. Japan finished third, ahead of higher-ranked Korea, signalling readiness to defend its Asian Games crown. Meanwhile, Korea will be itching to recover from the disappointment of missing on a podium finish here.

Fulton will look to address India's struggles with capitalising on opportunities and finishing games. And he is aware of the challenges. "It is important to have a game like this. It counts. At the same time, it is not the Asian Games. But if you asked me if I would win the Asian Games and lose this final, I would vouch for winning the Games. So, our feet are firmly on the ground. We had this moment. We did not play well in the first half but turned it around. That's character. But we still have another step to go," he insisted.

"This is an important step because you need to know you can come from behind. It is easy to play when you are two or three nil up. It is not easy to chase. But also, if you're two or three up and then the opposition scores, how do you still win? That is also a big challenge. I think we've covered a lot of those now, but we still have some work to do," he added.

India has the weapon — as Sreejesh calls Harmanpreet — and the wall — as the skipper returns the honour — but it will also need all hands to fire to ensure gold at Hangzhou. A start, though, has been made.

> « Playing against the teams India will face again at the Asian Games helped coach Fulton to fine-tune his plans. »

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FOR MORE IMAGES

1 **Tamil Nadu Sports Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin** with captains Harmanpreet Singh of India, Bhutta Umar of Pakistan, China's Lin Changliang, Korea's Jang Jonghyun, Malaysia's Jalil Marhan and Japan's Ohashi Masaki during a photo session at the Mayor Radhakrishnan Hockey Stadium. PTI

2 **India's Varun Kumar** scores a goal against China in the host nation's opening game of the Asian Champions Trophy hockey tournament at the Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium in Chennai. India won 7-2. M. VEDHAN

3 **Japan's Takuma Niwa (left)** tries to play the ball into the circle against Korea. Japan won 2-1. M. VEDHAN

4 India captain Harmanpreet Singh celebrates after scoring his team's equaliser against Japan. The match ended in a 1-1 draw. M. VEDHAN

5 **Mandeep Singh** and Hardik Singh celebrate after the former scored India's third goal against Korea. India won 3-2. PTI

6 **Harmanpreet Singh** celebrates after scoring India's second goal against Pakistan. AP

7 **Akashdeep Singh** tries to dribble past the Pakistani defenders in India's last league encounter. India crushed its arch-rival 4-0 with goals from Harmanpreet (2), Jugraj and Akashdeep. AFP

8 **Pakistan's Muhammad Ammad** takes a shot and scores his second goal against China in the fifth place playoff. Pakistan won 6-1. PTI

9 **Malaysia's Faizal Saari (left)** and Korea's Hyeongjin Kim in action during the first semifinals. Malaysia thumped Korea 6-2 to make it to the final. AP

10 **India's Karthi Selvam** slides the ball past the Japanese goalkeeper to score his team's fifth goal in the second semifinals. India defeated Japan 5-0 to set up a title clash with Malaysia. AP

11 **Akashdeep Singh** is on cloud nine after scoring against Malaysia in the final. In a remarkable turnaround, India completed a 4-3 comeback to clinch its fourth Asian Champions Trophy. M. VEDHAN

12 **Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. K. Stalin** and Union Sports Minister Anurag Thakur give away the Champions Trophy to India captain Harmanpreet Singh at the presentation ceremony. PTI

« The world wants to see India vs Pakistan contests. There is still a charm to it and interest among the fans »

DILIP TIRKEY

Aashin Prasad
@aashin23

Sportstar caught up with Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey on the sidelines of the Asian Champions Trophy in Chennai to talk about Craig Fulton, the revival of the Hockey India League (HIL), the future of India-Pakistan bilaterals and more.

It's still early days into the Craig Fulton era. What have you made of the progress made by the Indian men's team and their style?

Craig Fulton is a very experienced coach in world hockey. He helped Ireland qualify for the Olympics after a very long time, and he was the assistant at Belgium for many years. It's a big deal to be a coach for a long time with a top team. He would have gained plenty of experience with them. Belgium became champions in all major tournaments during that time. Day-by-day, we are seeing improvements from the Indian team during his time here. The Asian Games is a very important tournament for India, with Olympic qualification at stake, and we wish that all players play better hockey under Fulton.

When will official talks start about HIL and what is the progress made in terms of logistics, teams and talks with other associations?

Hockey India's main agenda is to revive HIL. Big Bank Media Ventures Pvt. Ltd. has already come on board as the commercial and marketing partner. The men's league will have eight teams. And we are also planning to have a women's version with four teams. We feel that HIL will have a worldwide reach, and for the Indian youth, the tournament will provide plenty of exposure. We had asked for a window from the FIH last year, but we weren't able to get it then. We will try again. Once we get the window, we will move forward from there. Talks are ongoing about where those eight teams will be; we are getting plenty of approaches, including from corporates. In six months, there will be more developments, and we will have an announcement on the same.

The appointment of Paddy Upton as the mental conditioning coach was a first for Indian hockey. Will we see a similar arrangement for the women's hockey team?

Of course. We will take help from him too [for the women's team]. Upton is currently with the men's team on a short-term deal. If the women's team also needs him, we will take help from him for them.

Odisha has done a commendable job of fostering a thriving hockey ecosystem. It helps that it has provinces that have been traditional hotbeds for talent in the sport. Chennai was, too, and this tournament has also sparked discussion on where the sport goes from here in the state. Does Hockey India plan to keep working with Hockey Unit of Tamil Nadu (HUTN) to continue what the ACT being hosted here has started?

Firstly, the infrastructure and then hockey fans in the city are also very important. I know that from 1995 until 2007, hockey had plenty of craze in Chennai. I myself have played in the 1995 SAFF Games and even in the 2007 Asia Cup and have seen the craze among the public, and for whatever reason, there has been no hockey here until the Asian Champions Trophy. You are seeing how we have had a really good tournament thanks to the state government's support. We wish that Chennai, as a venue with a hockey history, fans, and support, will be revived as a hockey centre. We wish we could similarly revive hockey in other traditional centres and bring international hockey to those places.

Will the Poligras turf be implemented in other centers as well going forward?

Of course. For international hockey, we need two turfs, including a

« When I was elected president, I had two main objectives. The first one was to revive HIL and the second was to reorganise the grassroots programme »

PTI

training surface. We will guide whichever state wants to come forward. We also wish that more international hockey comes to India, and wherever hockey used to be played, there should be turfs.

Hockey India wants to grow the game in every place. We want to organise events and implement our grassroots programme, which we want to strengthen in those places. If you talk about events, we are making approaches too and have spoken to state governments. Like the Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium, where renovation work wasn't done for many years and wasn't fit for international hockey. But when the talk of competition [Asian Champions Trophy] came about, the Tamil Nadu government showed interest, and they have now renovated the stadium.

Hockey India introduced sub-junior teams recently as part of the grassroots program. Was the initiative your brainchild?

The grassroots programme is very important, and we won't get quality players otherwise. We create teams in U-21 and then the senior teams. Kids play from the age of 16 to 19 or 20. There is a gap of five years, which we need to address. We need to train them properly in areas like fitness, modern hockey, and tactics and give them the required exposure. We wish to instill confidence in them by giving them importance and responsibility. How else will they develop? They need to have the interest to play for India sub-juniors first. It's a continued process and a long-term plan.

Recently, Rajpal Singh said that you are cultivating a good environment, which might see him join your team. Is there a pipeline to bring former national team players on board?

When I was elected president, I had two main objectives. The first one was to revive HIL, and the second was to reorganise the grassroots programme. But the grassroots programme doesn't have competition. We have zonal championships.

We are conducting special programmes for dragflicking and goalkeeping. In modern hockey, whichever teams have good dragflickers, they dominate world hockey. We know this, so why not train them at an early age for this? For this programme, we are looking to set up a centre and even requested Rupinder Pal Singh, like how we recently did a short programme in Odisha. We will do it in different states too. And goalkeeping is also very important.

The Asian Champions Trophy has seen the Pakistan team come and play without issues. Can hockey set a template for its cricket counterpart? With this success, can India and Pakistan play a Test series at any time in the near future?

Yes, definitely. We would like to play them because the world wants to see India vs Pakistan contests. There is still a charm to it and interest among the fans. Even through the difficulties [of the current political climate], India and Pakistan are playing here. In the future too, we can organise test series between the nations in India with the approval from the government, which will be great for the future of hockey.

Chennai has become a preferred sports destination

Atulya Misra, the Tamil Nadu Sports Secretary, says many national federations **want to do their events** in Chennai.

K. Keerthivasan
@Sportskeerthi

The success of sporting events is due in large part to government support and encouragement.

Tamil Nadu has excelled in infrastructure, finance, and coordination with national federations and other State associations, resulting in successful events such as the Chess Olympiad (July–August 2022), the Squash World Cup (June 2023), and the recently concluded Asian Champions Trophy hockey tournament at the Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium in Chennai.

Atulya Misra, the TN Sports Secretary, is well-versed in the sporting landscape of the state, having been a Member Secretary of the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu in 2007.

When asked about the learnings from the Asian Champions Trophy hockey tournament, Misra said, "Learning is a process. We keep learning every day."

"Without the State government being an active partner, no sporting event can be done because there is crowd management and revamping of the city and stadium. We did the 'Pass the Ball trophy tour' event in many districts, which promoted the sport of hockey in a big way."

Misra said Chennai has become a preferred sports destination. "If there is a clear political executive will that it wants to do and wants to do it fairly, everything else will fall into place. When we take up an event, no stone will be left unturned. Now, many national federations want to do their events in Chennai. It has become their favourite place. They know that if the State government decides to take up an event, its machinery will work in one direction with complete coordination."

Making a point: "Without the State government being an active partner, no sporting event can be done because there is crowd management and revamping of the city and stadium," says Atulya Misra (second from right), the TN Sports Secretary.
M. VEDHAN

Misra, a man with varied experience, also realised that holding a sports event would have an impact beyond the boundaries of the stadium.

"When you do an event like this [the Asian Champions Trophy], it is not just sports. You can make it

much better. You could make it a 'drive against drugs'. For us, the turf imported from Germany was carbon-free and bio-sustainable."

According to the IAS officer, stadiums should keep hosting events—international, national, or State-level—periodically, lest they go to waste.

"If we don't do events, the mega stadiums we have created will go into disuse. If we periodically have big tournaments, stadiums are revamped and repaired," he said.

"Things happen when State associations, national federations, and State governments work seamlessly without any confusion or personality conflict."

However, Misra added a caveat. "Ultimately, the games don't belong to the government; they belong to the associations and national federations. Governments, at best, can be facilitators. Let's be straight about it," he said.

The MOU signed between the Tamil Nadu and Odisha governments was a game changer, said Misra.

"The visit of Mr. Udhayanidhi Stalin, Sports Minister, to Rourkela to visit the Birsa Munda Hockey Stadium led to the MOU being signed.

"It meant we didn't have to reinvent the wheels from scratch. The layout and architecture of Bisra Munda Stadium were well set. We had to follow it with some tweaks to suit our specifications," he said.

Misra heaped praise on Hockey India, the Hockey Unit of Tamil Nadu, and the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu for working day and night to make the tournament a roaring success.

"Ultimately, the games don't belong to the government; they belong to the associations and national federations. Governments, at best, can be facilitators."

Bazball's Ashes vindication makes England's Test cricket revolution worthwhile

It was **easy to forget where England had come from:** one win in 17 under Joe Root had, by the end of the Ashes, become 13 wins out of 18 under Ben Stokes.

Lawrence Booth
@the_topspin

Not long after the end of one of Test cricket's most engrossing series, the Australians still seemed unsure about what they had just experienced. They had left England with the Ashes urn, thanks to a 2–2 draw that allowed them to brand as a success a tour that began with victory in the World Test Championship final against India. But off-spinner Nathan Lyon spoke for their bamboozlement when he insisted, he hadn't seen any Bazball cricket from England in the two Tests he played before a calf injury ended his series. To which the only possible retort was: had he been paying attention?

His comment could be ascribed partly to the age-old reluctance of cricketers on both sides of the Anglo-Australian divide to offer their opponents anything so much as a compliment. But it also said something about Australian discomfort at the subversion of an old dynamic: they, not England, were supposed to be the aggressors. And in the 2023 Ashes, it was England who threw almost all the punches.

Across five games of intriguing ebb and flow, Ben Stokes's team scored at 4.74 an over—England's fastest-ever Ashes—while Pat Cummins's Australians proceeded at 3.35. The discrepancy was the largest in any Ashes series. And if England still failed to reclaim the urn, they had last won in 2015, they could reasonably argue that only rain in Manchester prevented them from becoming the second team, after Don Bradman's Ashes-clinching

ACROSS FIVE GAMES OF INTRIGUING EBB AND FLOW, BEN STOKES'S TEAM SCORED AT 4.74 AN OVER—ENGLAND'S FASTEST-EVER ASHES—WHILE PAT CUMMINS'S AUSTRALIANS PROCEEDED AT 3.35

Trailblazers: Ben Stokes and Brendon McCullum have transformed the way teams approach Test cricket over the past 12 months. GETTY IMAGES

Australians in 1936-37, to win a Test series after being two down.

For those who had been following their fortunes closely since the resignation of Joe Root in the spring of 2022 and the accession of his close friend Stokes, England's flair came as little surprise. Of the 13 Tests they had played in the Bazball era under him and coach Brendon McCullum, they had won 11, including three big chases against the then-world Test champions New Zealand, a national-record pursuit of 378 against India, and an unprecedented 3-0 win in Pakistan. At Rawalpindi in December, they surprised perhaps even themselves by scoring 506 for four from 75 overs on the first day. They were rewriting the internal logic of a game that had been played mainly one way for 145 years.

Naturally, this irked Australia, who set about trying to prove that Bazball was, as Lyon later put it, smoke and mirrors. When they pinched the first Test at Edgbaston from under English noses, then saw off a Stokes tour de force at Lord's, they could cite their two-game lead to those who argued they were playing less adventurous cricket. And when it rained in Manchester, the extent of Australian sympathy amounted to: "You shouldn't have

ON THE FINAL EVENING AT THE OVAL, RIDING THE CREST OF AN EMOTIONAL WAVE TRIGGERED BY STUART BROAD'S RETIREMENT, ENGLAND SQUARED THE SERIES

FOR MORE STORIES

Memorable swansong: Stuart Broad grabbed Australia's final two wickets on the last day of the fifth Test at the Kia Oval, bowing out with a staggering final tally of 604 wickets at 27.68 in a 167-Test career. GETTY IMAGES

gone 2–0 down, mate."

But, to Stokes's and McCullum's credit, England held their nerve. They brought in Chris Woakes and Mark Wood for the third Test at Headingley and set about dragging themselves back into the series. It was soon 2–1, then nearly 2–2, only for rain to wipe out all but 30 overs of the last two days at Old Trafford, with England in the ascendancy. Then, on the final evening at The Oval, riding the crest of an emotional wave triggered by Stuart Broad's retirement, they squared the series. No one—not even Lyon in his more reflective moments—could argue that they didn't deserve at least a draw.

If anyone best summed up the difference in approach between the teams, it was two openers: England's Zak Crawley and Australia's Usman Khawaja. While Crawley, for so long Bazball's pet project, finally came of age, thrashing 480 runs at 53 with a strike-rate of nearly 89, Khawaja put behind him a poor record in England to grind out 496 at 49 with a strike-rate of 39. While Crawley faced 541 balls in all, Khawaja saw off 1,263. Both seemed to be making a point of their own: Crawley that he could hack it at the highest level, not least during his blistering 189 off 182 balls in Manchester, where England racked up 592 in 107.4 overs; Khawaja that you didn't need to score quickly to make an impact. They were different sides of the ideological coin.

Throughout, Australia seemed defined by the extent to which they could keep England at bay when a lot of Ashes history had been the other way around. Cummins started with a deep point for the first ball of the series, which Crawley spanked through the covers regardless, and Australia spent the day trying to spike English guns.

At stumps, after Stokes had controversially declared on 393 for eight, Josh Hazlewood claimed his side had done well to limit England to five an over rather than concede seven or eight. It was the admission of a team who would spend the series being reactive, not proactive.

In the event, England suffered none of the major collapses that many had predicted: their lowest total was 237 at Headingley, itself a recovery from 142 for seven. And they never gave Australia's big fast bowlers a moment's respite. Cummins went at 4.27 an over, Hazlewood at 4.56, and Mitchell Starc, while taking 23 wickets, the most on either side, at 4.86. Scott Boland, of whom much was expected after he took five wickets against India at The Oval, went at 4.91 in his two Tests and managed only two wickets at 115. His career

took a big step backwards.

This being the Ashes, there were squabbles, none greater than when Alex Carey stumped Jonny Bairstow at Lord's after England's wicketkeeper prematurely left his crease at the end of an over from Cameron Green. This triggered England's Spirit of Cricket brigade, who believe the game should be played on a higher moral plane than the laws themselves demand—ironic, given that the rumpus took place at the home of the lawmakers themselves, the Marylebone Cricket Club. Australia shrugged their shoulders, carried on, and were grateful when Stokes's retaliatory innings later that day ended at 155, just when it seemed England might chase down 371.

Australia had already taken offence at Ollie Robinson's sledging of Khawaja at Edgbaston. Now, they fumed at the treatment of their players by MCC members in the Lord's pavilion. The rest of the series was niggly, with Cummins facing repeated questions about whether he missed an opportunity to prove Australia had changed in the five years since Sandpapergate by refusing to recall Bairstow.

At The Oval, Australia were further irritated when a ball change in their second innings proved to England's benefit: from 140 without loss on the final day in pursuit of 384, they slipped to 169 for three against Woakes and Wood. Steve Smith and Travis Head added 95 before Woakes and Moeen Ali ran through Australia's middle order on a dramatic final evening. Broad then crowned his 167th and final Test with the scalps of Todd Murphy and Carey, wheeling away in delight as The Oval went berserk. He had finished with 604 Test wickets, of which 153 came against Australia—an English record.

Masterstroke: England's decision to call back Chris Woakes and Mark Wood for the third Test at Headingley set off their exhilarating pursuit of fighting back in the series after being 0-2 down. GETTY IMAGES

HAD ENGLAND QUESTIONED THEIR STRATEGY AFTER LORD'S, CUMMINS'S SIDE MIGHT HAVE RUN AWAY WITH THE SERIES. INSTEAD, STOKES'S MEN DOUBLED DOWN

There was still time for one last spat. Tradition dictated that the teams share an end-of-series beer, but when Australia knocked on their opponents' dressing room door at around 10 p.m., they were told England were still doing their post-series presentations. By the time England had finished, the Australians had left the ground. At around 4 a.m., Stokes tweeted a clarification: the two teams had met in a Soho nightclub instead—a very modern way of breaking the news. Not that it stopped the clickbait factories in both countries from squeezing out a couple more news cycles' worth of confected outrage.

Of more interest and deeper significance was the question of whether England's Bazball tactics could help reinvigorate Test cricket in general. Taking place in parallel

Contrasting philosophies: If anyone best summed up the difference in approach between the teams, it was two openers: England's Zak Crawley and Australia's Usman Khawaja. Crawley showed that he could hack it at the highest level, and Khawaja that you didn't need to score quickly to make an impact. GETTY IMAGES

was a two-match series in the Caribbean, where the West Indies hosted India on hopelessly slow pitches in front of demoralisingly small crowds. India's talented batting line-up scored at 3.41 an over, barely quicker than Australia managed during the Ashes against a stronger attack. The West Indies crawled along at 2.32. It was not a recipe for reviving the five-day game.

England had not claimed to have invented a failsafe formula, as some critics seemed to imagine. At Edgbaston, they were careless in their second innings, when another 50 runs would have put the Test beyond Australia's reach. And at Lord's, they were suckered into attacking the short ball when a period of caution might have served them better, especially with Lyon (in pic) limping out of the series . For some, this was proof that Bazball didn't encourage rational thought and had no serious future. For others, it was just bad cricket.

Bazball was about soaking up pressure, when necessary, then choosing the moment to attack. This was just brainless.

But England stuck to their guns. No team had ever salvaged a draw from 2–0 down against Australia. Don't forget, either, that they were up against the newly crowned world Test champions with a pace attack that was the envy of the game. Had England questioned their strategy after Lord's, Cummins's side might have run away with the series. Instead, Stokes's men doubled down, handing Australia

Number Nuts

Suart Broad had a fitting end to his storied career by picking the last two Australian wickets in England's **49**-run win at the Oval. In doing so, he also surpassed his long-time bowling partner **James Anderson's** tally of most wickets against an opposition on home soil as **Alex Carey** became his **106**th scalp in Tests in England.

England's playing XI at the Oval Test had a combined wickets tally of **2009** wickets at the end of the match, the highest-ever. It helped that the pair of **Broad and Anderson,** the most prolific fast-bowling pair with **895** wickets in **117** Tests, were part of that XI.

No batter was dismissed run out in the **2023** Ashes across the five matches, making it only the second such occurrence in a series comprising five Tests or more. The first such instance was during the **1998-99** Ashes in Australia.

the mother of all hammerings before the rain fell in Manchester.

It was easy to forget, too, where England had come from: one win in 17 under Root had, by the end of the Ashes, become 13 wins out of 18 under Stokes, with three of the four defeats by margins of one run, two wickets, and 43 runs. Had England tackled Australia with the conservatism of old, they would probably have gotten nowhere close.

Will other teams take note of their approach and agree that Test cricket needs to do something to keep the march of the T20 franchises at bay? Pakistan have already tweaked Bazball to suit their own game, "The Pakistan Way," and in Colombo in July, they made 576 for five at 4.29 an over to subdue Sri Lanka. When England revisit Pakistan late next year, we could be in for non-stop fireworks.

First, though, in early 2024,

ENGLAND 2 | AUSTRALIA 2

Aussies retain Ashes

England face a five-Test series in India – as difficult an assignment as world cricket can serve up. They will be told in advance that Bazball won't

The last two Ashes series in England **(2023, 2019)** have been drawn **(2-2).** Interestingly, the last time an Ashes series was drawn before **2019** was back in **1972 (2)**. This was the fifth Ashes drawn in England while two have ended in a stalemate Down Under.

England scored at **4.74** runs an over in Ashes **2023,** the highest run rate for a team in a five-match series. Second on this list is Australia's **4.26** in the **2001** Ashes, which happens to be the last time the Aussies won a Test series on English soil.

work in India, but they will give it a go anyway. One thing is for sure: the cricket will be more entertaining than England's previous two visits, which they lost by a collective margin of 7-1. Bazball is no guarantee of anything. But it is certainly preferable to the alternative.

The writer is editor of Wisden Cricketers' Almanack and a writer for the Daily Mail.

Above: Urn returns Down Under: From being 0-2 down, England was on course to level the Ashes at 2-2 when the Old Trafford rain washed away the final day's play and left the fourth Test as a draw, ensuring Australia retained the urn. GETTY IMAGES

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

TIME FOR INTROSPECTION

The loss to the West Indies should not be a dampener **but a wake-up call** to see the areas where India needs to improve and strengthen its side.

India's loss in the first two T20 games against the West Indies immediately raised alarms about the performance. The team fought back well to level the series, and as can happen after a long tour, when it comes to the last match, the mind is mostly on the flight back home, and the intensity can die down a fair bit.

That said, it would do well to remember that some key regular members of the team had been rested for this series, so it wasn't the full-strength Indian T20 team. While some performances were good, others were disappointing, raising question marks about the temperament factor. At the highest level, it's always the temperament that separates the men from the boys, and there can be nothing more testing than an international game.

A player could do well at the franchise level, but when it comes to playing for the country, it's a different ball game of pressures and expectations. It is one step up, which can be too steep for even some of the best performers at the franchise level. How often have we seen this when the Under-19 performers just aren't able to take that one step up from a boys' tournament to a men's competition? Yes, the kids look great playing against kids, but when they come up against the men, they suddenly find that what looks like a piece of cake at the under-19 level is more like mud at the senior level. That's why so many who looked good at the boy's level have been found wanting at the senior level. It's not just the temperament; even the skill set is way below the standard required at the franchise level. Then, having been bought for crores, some of these youngsters lose the fire in the belly and are happy to cruise along in later years and get their contracts extended, even if it is for a lesser amount.

The loss to the West Indies should not be a dampener. Don't forget that they have won the ICCT20 World Cup twice, and their players are the match-winners for the different franchises they play for in the IPL. So, they are a top-class T20 team, and there's no shame in losing to them. It should be a wake-up call, though, to see the areas where India needs to improve and strengthen its side. Some of those who rested for this series may not be around for too long, so their replacements need to be found pretty quickly too, as the next ICC T20 World Cup is just a year away.

The Ashes series was thrilling and provided a perfect finale for Stuart Broad, who not only hit a six off the final ball that he faced but also

Wake-up call: India's multi-format tour of the Caribbean and the USA ended with a 2-3 T20I series defeat to the West Indies. AFP

took the wicket that gave England a series-levelling win. He may not have been everybody's cup of tea with his theatrics and petulant actions, but there's no doubting what a terrific cricketer he was. Since the England team invariably plays more Test matches per year than any other country, it's no big surprise that he played so many Test matches, but to get 600 wickets is truly special and praiseworthy.

Now that he has joined the TV commentator ranks, if he can bring the same goading banter into the box, it will be huge entertainment for viewers.

Well done, Stuart Broad, and thanks very much for your services to the game.

Stuart Broad may not have been everybody's cup of tea with his theatrics and petulant actions, but there's no doubting what a terrific cricketer he was.

Kuldeep spins a web

5 The number of occasions when an Indian bowler has managed to claim a four-or-more wicket haul in an ODI match while delivering 25 balls or less. In the first match of the series in Bridgetown, Kuldeep achieved this during his spell of 18 balls (3 overs). This is the second time Kuldeep has managed to do this in 25 balls or less.

Fewest balls needed to claim a four-wicket haul by an Indian bowler in an ODI match

Balls	Overs	Wkt/Runs	Bowler	Opponent	Venue	Date	Result
17	2.5	4/6	Virender Sehwag	Bangladesh	Dambulla	16 Jun 2010	Won
18	3.0	4/6	Kuldeep Yadav	West Indies	Bridgetown	27 Jul 2023	Won
24	4.0	4/21	Sourav Ganguly	Sri Lanka	Nagpur	22 Mar 1999	Won
24	4.0	4/17	Yuzvendra Chahal	West Indies	Port of Spain	27 Jul 2022	Won
25	4.1	4/18	Kuldeep Yadav	South Africa	Delhi	11 Oct 2022	Won

Kuldeep Yadav. AP

3 The number of 50-plus scores in consecutive innings by Ishan Kishan as an opener against the West Indies in ODIs. His 77 in the final match of the series in Tarouba on 1 Aug 2023 made him the fifth Indian opener to score three or more fifties-in-a-row against the West Indies in ODIs. He now joins a select band of players to do so. Sachin Tendulkar and Ajinkya Rahane have registered 50-plus scores as openers in five consecutive innings against the Windies.

Three or more consecutive fifties as an opener for India against the West Indies in ODIs

50s	Batter	1st 50	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	From	To	Batting position
5	Sachin Tendulkar	66	54	88	105	70	5 Nov 1994	21 Feb 1996	#2
5	Ajinkya Rahane	68	62	103	72	60	17 Oct 2014	2 Jul 2017	#1
3	Sunil Gavaskar	83	76*	63	–	–	7 Dec 1983	30 Nov 1986	#1 #1 #2
3	Rohit Sharma	159	63	60	–	–	18 Dec 2019	6 Feb 2022	#1
3*	Ishan Kishan	52	55	77	–	–	27 Jul 2023	1 Aug 2023	#1

** Sequence still in progress*
— It was Gavaskar's final three ODI innings against the WI

3 The number of 50-plus scores by Ishan Kishan in consecutive innings while keeping wickets in the recently concluded ODI series against the West Indies. He thus became only the second Indian wicketkeeper to achieve this feat against any opponent in ODIs. He joins M. S. Dhoni, who has done this on five occasions.

Three or more consecutive fifties while keeping wickets for India in ODI cricket

50s	Batter	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	From	To	Opponent
4	M. S. Dhoni	69	78*	50*	87*	9 Sep 2011	14 Oct 2011	Eng
3	M. S. Dhoni	94	53	84*	–	5 Feb 2009	3 Mar 2009	SL, SL, NZ
3	M. S. Dhoni	58	113*	54*	–	4 Aug 2012	3 Jan 2013	SL, Pak, Pak
3	M. S. Dhoni	56	50	79*	–	22 Jan 2014	28 Jan 2014	NZ
3	M. S. Dhoni	51	55*	87*	–	12 Jan 2019	18 Jan 2019	Aus
3*	Ishan Kishan	52	55	77	–	27 Jul 2023	1 Aug 2023	WI

** Sequence still in progress*

Ishan Kishan. AFP

143 India's first-wicket partnership in the final ODI in Tarouba on 1 Aug 2023 between Ishan Kishan and Shubman Gill is now the side's highest stand for any wicket against the home side in the Caribbean. The pair bettered the previous highest of 135 for the third wicket in Kingston in 2009.

Highest partnerships for any wicket for India against the home side in the Caribbean

Runs	Wkt	Pair	Venue	Date	Result
143	1st	Ishan Kishan & Shubman Gill	Tarouba	1 Aug 2023	Won
135	3rd	Dinesh Karthik & Yuvraj Singh	Kingston	26 Jun 2009	Won
132	1st	Ajinkya Rahane & Shikhar Dhawan	Port of Spain	23 Jun 2017	No result
130	2nd	Sourav Ganguly & Rahul Dravid	Arnos Vale	30 Apr 1997	Lost
125	4th	Virat Kohli & Shreyas Iyer	Port of Spain	11 Aug 2019	Won (DLS)

Ishan Kishan and Shubman Gill. AFP

351 India's total after 50 overs in Tarouba in the final ODI of the series. This is the first time India has breached 350-plus against the home side in the Caribbean. For the record, India once crossed a 350-plus total in the Caribbean. However, it was against Bermuda when it amassed 413/5 in Port of Spain during the 2007 World Cup, on 19 March 2007.

India's highest ODI totals of 300+ plus against the home side in the Caribbean

Total	Overs	Venue	Date
351/5	50	Tarouba	1 Aug 2023
339/6	50	Kingston	26 Jun 2009
312/8	49.4	Port of Spain	24 Jul 2022
311/7	50	Port of Spain	5 Jul 2013
310/5	43	Port of Spain	25 Jun 2017
308/7	50	Port of Spain	22 Jul 2022

2 The number of occasions India managed a total of 350-plus without any batters making a three-figure score. In the third and final ODI in Tarouba, India achieved its highest-ever ODI total without anyone making a century. Shubman Gill's 85 was the highest.

** India batted first and won all the above games*

Highest ODI totals for India without a three-figure score by a batter

Total	Overs	Opponent	Venue	Date	Top scorer (runs)	50s
351/5	50	West Indies	Tarouba	1 Aug 2023	Shubman Gill (85)	4
350/6	50	Sri Lanka	Nagpur	25 Oct 2005	Sachin Tendulkar (93)	3
349/7	50	Pakistan	Karachi	13 Mar 2004	Rahul Dravid (99)	2
348/5	50	Bangladesh	Dhaka	27 Dec 2004	Virender Sehwag (70)	4
340/6	50	Australia	Rajkot	17 Jan 2020	Shikhar Dhawan (96)	3

200 The victory run-margin inflicted by India against the West Indies in the Tarouba ODI on 1 August 2023 is the biggest defeat for the home side in its ODI cricket history. Its previous biggest loss at home was when it had lost to England by 186 runs in Bridgetown on 9 March 2017.

Biggest home defeats (in terms of runs) for the West Indies in ODIs

Defeat margin (runs)	Opponent	Venue	Date
200	India	Tarouba	1 Aug 2023
186	England	Bridgetown	9 Mar 2017
169	Australia	Basseterre	6 Jul 2008
139	South Africa	Basseterre	15 Jun 2016
133	Australia	Bridgetown	20 Jul 2021

13 The number of consecutive bilateral series victories in ODI cricket for India against the West Indies since 2007. This extends the head-to-head record for a team in this format. The last occasion the West Indies managed to win an ODI series against India was in May 2006, when the home side won the five-match series 4-1.

Most consecutive H2H bilateral series victories for an ODI side

Series	Team	Against	Victory sequence (From-to)	Home victories	Away victories
13+	**India**	West Indies	Jan 2007 to Aug 2023	7	6
11+	**Pakistan**	Zimbabwe	Oct 1996 to Nov 2020	5	6
10+	**Pakistan**	West Indies	Sept 1999 to June 2022	3	7
10+	**India**	Sri Lanka	Feb 2007 to Jan 2023	5	5
9+	**South Africa**	Zimbabwe	Oct 1995-Oct 2018	5	4

+ winning sequence still in progress
Note: South Africa has won all its nine ODI series against Zimbabwe

All records are correct and updated until 12 Aug 2023

1st

Spin wizard: Kuldeep Yadav claimed four wickets in his clinical three-over spell, ending with match figures of 3-2-6-4. Kuldeep and Ravindra Jadeja engineered a collapse as the West Indies stumbled from 88/3 in 15.3 overs to a paltry 114 all out in just 23 overs. AFP

3rd

Bowlers shine: Gudakesh Motie and Romario Shepherd restricted India to 181 in the second ODI. Ishan Kishan once again batted well with a run-a-ball 55. AFP

2nd

Gritty response: Ishan Kishan's aggressive fifty steered India to a convincing five-wicket triumph. AP

4th

Leading from the front: West Indies was never in trouble in the low-scoring chase. Captain Shai Hope's calm and composed 63 and his unbeaten 91-run fifth-wicket stand with Keacy Carty guided the host to a comfortable six-wicket win. AFP

5th

On top: India made a formidable 351/5 in the third ODI, with Ishan Kishan and Shubman Gill setting the platform with a 143-run stand. AFP

6th

Champion stuff: India's dominant display resulted in a commanding 200-run victory. The Men in Blue secured the series 2-1. AFP

PHOTOLINE
INDIA VS WEST INDIES T20Is

Captain's knock: Rovman Powell (48, 32 balls) rescued West Indies, which was struggling at 58 for three, and powered his team to 149 in 20 overs in the first T20 International. AFP

Holding it tight: Jason Holder's crucial spell of 2 wickets for 19 runs saved the Windies. His wicket-maiden in the 16th over helped his team take a 1-0 lead. AFP

Standing tall: Batting first in the second T20I, India's top-order failed yet again. However, Tilak Varma kept his cool with a fifty. AFP

4th

Nicky P's day out: Nicholas Pooran's clean striking led the host to a 2-0 lead. He demolished the Indian bowling attack with a 40-ball 67. AFP

5th

Skyscraper: Suryakumar Yadav's blistering knock of 83 from 44 balls in the third T20I helped India keep the series alive. AFP

6th

Spin to win: Kuldeep Yadav restricted West Indies to 159/5 with his 3/28 in the third T20I, setting up the game for India. AFP

7th

Singh on song: The 24-year-old Arshdeep Singh picked up three wickets in the fourth match, including those of openers Kyle Mayers, Brandon King, and later, a well-set Shimron Hetmyer. AFP

8th

Young blood: India's new T20I opening pair, Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill, dominated the run chase of 179, adding 165 for the first wicket and recording the joint-highest opening partnership for India in the shortest format. AFP

9th

Shepherding the Windies: Romario Shepherd was the wrecker-in-chief, picking up a career-best 4/31 to restrict the visiting side to 165/9 in the decider. He was later adjudged Player-of-the-Match. AFP

10th

King size: West Indies' opener Brandon King bossed the run-chase with an unbeaten 85 off 55 as West Indies won the series 3-2. AFP

11th

Mission accomplished: West Indies players celebrate first T20I series victory over India since 2017, while the loss broke India's streak of 12 consecutive bilateral series wins. AP

AFP

1

Shakib Al Hasan has again been appointed Bangladesh ODI captain and will lead the side in the Asia Cup and World Cup. Shakib takes over from Tamim Iqbal, who stepped down from the role on August 3 after he was ruled out of the Asia Cup because of a back injury. Shakib last led Bangladesh in an ODI in 2017 and is now the captain in all three formats.

AFP

2

The Pakistan Cricket Board has reappointed former captain Inzamam-ul-Haq as the men's national team's new chief selector. Inzamam has played 120 Tests, 378 ODIs, and one T20I between 1992 and 2007. In his previous tenure as the chief selector, Pakistan won the 2017 ICC Champions Trophy by beating arch-rival India by 180 runs at The Oval.

GETTY IMAGES

3

New Zealand white-ball captain Kane Williamson is recovering from an ACL surgery and has started practising in the nets. However, he has no definite timeline for his return yet. "To be at the World Cup [in India] is always special. It's still just guesswork at the moment in terms of when the day is or how it's tracking at the time," Williamson told reporters. He admits New Zealand's ODI tour to Bangladesh next month will be too early for a comeback.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

4

Steven Finn, England fast bowler, has retired from professional cricket after an 18-year career. Finn played 36 Test matches and took 125 wickets at an average of 30.40 between 2010 and 2016.
He debuted for Middlesex in 2005 and played 69 one-day internationals and 21 T20s for England. Due to a knee injury, he has not played red-ball cricket since July last year.
Finn expressed his gratitude towards his teams and fans.

GETTY IMAGES

5

Indian batter Prithvi Shaw has hit a purple patch in the ongoing One-Day Cup in England.
He followed up his brilliant innings of 244 — the second-highest score in English List A history — with a knock of 125 not out to lead the Northamptonshire Steelbacks to a dominant six-wicket win over Durham. Shaw is the fifth Indian to feature in the county circuit in England this year after Cheteshwar Pujara (Sussex), Ajinkya Rahane (Leicestershire), Arshdeep Singh (Kent), and Navdeep Saini (Worcestershire).

The Valve theme

By C.G.S.Narayanan

A 'Valve' by definiion is a move by black that opens one line of a black line piece and closes another line of the same black piece.The two three movers below on the theme, posted on BCPS website, one by the all time greats and the other by a lesser known composer, with similarities in post key play provide interesting comparison.

L.I.Loshinski
British Chess Magazine 1947

Mate in three moves

Loshinski's problem shows the Valve theme where a defence opens a line controlled by a piece but errs by closing a second line controlled by the same piece (here the line closure is an anticipatory effect ,since the rook is not yet on the closed line).The four moves of the black knight open up BRh8 line to avoid the threat by the white knight but closes anticipatorily the files controlled by the same rook.

Set: 1…b3+ 2.Kb3 any 3.Bc4/Be4

Key 1.Ka3! (2.Nxa4 3.Nb2/Nc5)
1….Nb7 2.Na2 3.Nb4(Rb8!?)
1….Nc6 2Ne4 3.Nc5;1…Ne6 2.Nb5
1….Nf7 2.Nxf4;2.Kxe2 3.Bc4

The second three-mover is more economical. Instead of threat idea where black is forced into zugzwang and separates the continuations.

Otar Tabidze
1-2 Pr ex.aq ,Georgian Sports Committee 1947

Mate in three moves

Key 1.Nf4 waiting!
1…Nd7 2.Ne2 (3.Nd4)
1….Ne6 2.Nd3 (3.Ne5)
1….Ng6 2.Nh3(3.Ng5)
1….Nh7 2.Ng2 (Nh4)
1…Rh8 2.a7 3.a8Q
1….Rxg7 2.gxh8Q

A two-mover involving valve is given for solving where both knights and the black pawn at d7 participate in the play

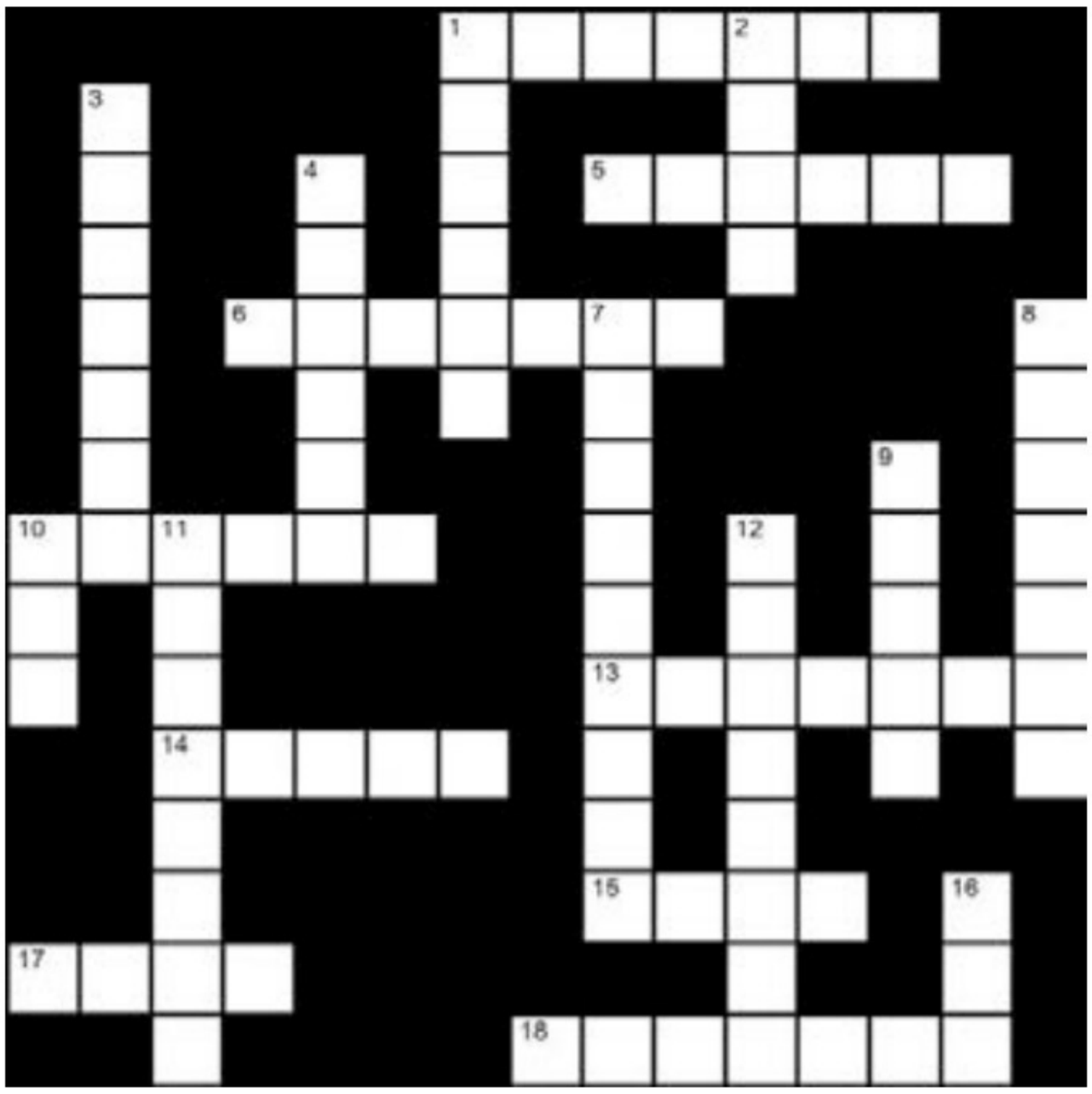
Funk Jacob E
The Pittsburg Post 1923

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article:'Battery and half-pins' **Key 1.Kb7**!(2.Nxf6)

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

CROSSWORD
SRIRAM SRINIVASAN



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 I-League team ... Kerala FC. (7)

5 Indian long jump record holder ... Aldrin. (6)

6 The motorcycle racing team founded in 1997 by the two-time 125cc world champion Fausto ... (7)

10 Pakistan hockey player, and the AHF Emerging Player in 2023, Abdul ... Shahid. (6)

13 French tennis player Gael Sebastien ... (7)

14 ... Swami, youngest world champion in archery. (5)

15 ... Deotale, men's compound archery champion. (4)

17 Name common to golfer McIlroy and cricketer Burns. (4)

18 The Spanish legend who is moving to Emirates Club. (7)

DOWN

1 India's top-ranked chess player Dommaraju ... (6)

2 ... Sthalekar, former captain of the Australian women's cricket team. (4)

3 Sport Lisboa e ... (7)

4 In the Indian Super League, the Blasters are from here. (6)

7 Japanese badminton player Kenta ... (9)

8 Diana ..., first WNBA player to breach the 10,000-point mark. (7)

9 ... Espargaro, Spanish Grand Prix motorcycle racer. (5)

10 Chris ..., British cyclist who is a 11-time world champion and 6-time Olympic champion. (3)

11 The American GM Praggnanandhaa defeated to move into the last 16 of the FIDE World Cup. (8)

12 Emma ..., who won the women's sprint title at the track cycling world championships recently. (8)

16 Harmeet Desai's Challengers are from here. (3)

REUTERS

Fresh starts and fine finishes

Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool **overcame a tactical masterclass** to deny Chelsea a well-deserved win.

Mauricio Pochettino proved his worth as a top-level manager on his Chelsea debut as the Blues held Liverpool to an exhilarating 1-1 draw in a game where blows were traded almost evenly.

Chelsea, which fielded a practically new side after a pre-season exodus, outplayed the Reds tactically to take home a well-deserved point.

But it was Liverpool — which started in a traditional 4-3-3, albeit without a proper defensive midfielder — that started the game on the right note. Jurgen Klopp's side took the lead in the 18th minute through a goal which would have ticked all the boxes for the German manager. A silky move, which started from goalkeeper Alisson Becker, was coolly poked in by attacker Luis Diaz, following a scything through ball by Mohamed Salah.

Liverpool would have been two goals to the good if not for Salah's effort, soon after the first goal, being chalked off for offside. This would prove to be the wake-up call for Chelsea, which would assume control of the game from there.

Set up in a 3-5-2 structure, a formation employed by Pochettino to great success during his stint with Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea would stretch Liverpool's anchorless side to great effect.

The wing-back duo of Ben Chilwell and Reece James were the primary attacking outlet for the Blues as they rampaged up and down the flanks. Chelsea drew parity following a spell of continued pressure, with newly-signed defender Axel Disasi sweeping in a looped header from Chilwell following a corner.

Chelsea would then overpower Liverpool, particularly in the midfield. The home side thought it took the lead when Chilwell latched onto a pass from Enzo Fernandez, who had a sparkling game in the midfield, before sidestepping Alisson to tap it in. But just like Salah before him, the left-back was deemed offside.

The game mellowed down in the second half but was still in Chelsea's grasp, with both sides fluffing late chances. Pochettino will be augured well by the performance of his new signings, all of whom seem to be fitting into his system without much trouble.

FOR MORE STORIES

1

AFP

Cristiano Ronaldo proves to be the 'clutch' again

Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice for Saudi Pro League side Al Nassr in the Arab Club Champions Cup final to win his first silverware in over two years.

Playing against rival Al Hilal, Al Nassr trailed 0-1 for most of the regulation time.

Ronaldo scored the equaliser in the 80th minute and then headed the winner in extra-time, securing his first silverware with a team since May 19, 2021, when he won the Coppa Italia with Juventus.

He also finished as the highest goalscorer in the tournament with six goals.

2

REUTERS

Lionel Messi becomes Inter Miami's messiah

Inter Miami has not won any silverware since its inception in 2018. But the club looks increasingly likely to script history, as it has found a serial goalscorer in Lionel Messi.

Messi has scored in every match he has played so far, scoring eight goals in five matches, helping the Major League Soccer side reach the semifinals of the inaugural edition of the Leagues Cup.

He has also become the highest goalscorer in the tournament, surpassing Bongokuhle Hlongwane's (Minnesota United) tally of seven goals.

3

GETTY IMAGES

Arsenal wins Community Shield

For the third season in a row, Manchester City slipped in the Community Shield as Arsenal began its season with silverware.

City took the lead midway through the second half through a Cole Palmer curler, while Arsenal left it late to equalise with Leandro Trossard scoring via a deflection. In the ensuing penalty shootout, the Gunners pipped the Cityzens 4-1.

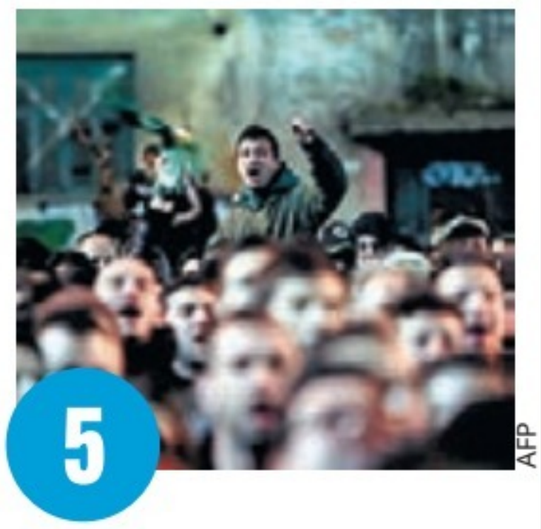
4

GETTY IMAGES

Harry Kane's disastrous Bayern debut

Harry Kane's long-drawn-out move to Bayern Munich finally happened, with the tough-to-negotiate Tottenham Hotspur letting go of its record goalscorer for a reported £100 million.

The England captain, though, didn't enjoy a memorable debut as his side was upset 0-3 by RB Leipzig in the DFB Supercup. Kane came in just after the hour mark, but barely made an impression, with the forward recording just three touches.



AFP

5

Fan killed in UEFA Champions League qualifying game

A 29-year-old fan — identified only by his first name Michalis — was killed in fierce clashes between rival supporters in Athens. He died of stab wounds.

This prompted UEFA to postpone a Champions League qualifying game between AEK Athens and Croatia's Dinamo Zagreb on August 8.

PTI

6

East Bengal wins Kolkata derby after four years

East Bengal won the Kolkata derby for the first time since January 2019, when it beat arch-rival Mohun Bagan Super Giant 1-0 in the Durand Cup 2023 at the Salt Lake Stadium on August 12. Nandhakumar Sekar (in pic) scored the winning goal. It was also its first win under new head coach Carles Cuadrat.

K. MURALI KUMAR

7

Indian football's Asian Games schedule released

The Indian men's national football team, led by Sunil Chhetri, will begin its Asian Games 2022 campaign on September 19 against China. It will then face Bangladesh and Myanmar on September 24 and 27, respectively. The gold medal match is scheduled for Oct 8.

The women's team will face Chinese Taipei and Thailand on September 21st and 24th respectively, with the gold medal match scheduled for Oct 6.

AFP

8

Angel Di Maria makes a winning return

Angel Di Maria shined in his second debut with Benfica as he scored the opening goal in the Portuguese Super Cup final to help his side get the better of Porto. Di Maria, who joined from Juventus, was with Benfica from 2007 to 2010, before donning the colours of Real Madrid.

AP

9

Jewish club makes debut in tournament started under Nazis

Makkabi Berlin, a club founded by Holocaust survivors in 1970, made history by qualifying for the 64-team German Cup (DFB-Pokal) — a tournament started under the Nazis in 1935. Jews were excluded from DFB-Pokal then.

The team qualified by winning the Berlin Cup for the first time to become the first Jewish club to take part in the tournament.

Pranay Rajiv & Neeladri Bhattacharjee

TRIUMPHS AND

The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup had a lot of surprises in store, but there was **no dearth of exciting action** on the field.

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan
@lav_narayanan

When you read this piece, the world will have a new women's football champion. A new name will be inscribed on the base of the silver and gold FIFA Women's World Cup trophy, heralding the dawn of a fresh legacy in world football.

When the 2023 edition kicked off in July, there were predictions aplenty. USA, England, Netherlands, Spain — these were the popular names making their way into betting pools and online polls. There was also apprehension about expanding a rather guarded tournament for the world's creamy layer to 32 teams.

Eight debutants came into the 2023 edition, mainly just grateful for the chance to compete on the biggest stage in their sport. A little under a month later, at the time of writing this piece, only Spain has survived from the aforementioned list, the 'minnows' have done

TRIBULATIONS

enough and more to decommission the use of that label and we have one of the most open World Cups in the tournament's history.

For hosts Australia and New Zealand, this tournament was a chance to boost the women's game on either side of the Tasman Sea. For New Zealand, this was a higher hill to climb given that the island nation's heart beats for rugby. The country only has one professional women's side — the Wellington Phoenix Football Club, which plays in the Australian A-League. The best of the Football Ferns ply their trade in leagues in Europe, the National Women's Soccer League in the USA and teams in Australia.

The World Cup started with worries about filling seats and pumping up broadcast numbers. New Zealand's first-round exit didn't help allay the fears. However, trepidation was replaced by triumph with healthy ticket

Megan Rapinoe. GETTY IMAGES

Hot takes

Despite not starting England's first game, Lauren James has the most goals+assists of any player at this year's #FIFAWWC (3 goals, 3 assists). In England's group game vs China, she became the first England player to be directly involved in 5+ goals in a game at the World Cup (men's or women's).

Ary Borges is the fourth Brazilian to score a hat-trick at the FIFA Women's World Cup. She's both the youngest (23y 208d) and only one of the four to do so on their debut in the competition.

Argentina featured in its fourth #FIFAWWC, though it has never managed to get past the group stage. No country has ever managed to hold the World Cup title for both men and women at the same time.

France's Hervé Renard became the second head coach to lead teams at both the men's and women's World Cups (previously Morocco and Saudi Arabia at the men's edition), after John Herdman (Canada's men's team and New Zealand's women's team).

Chloe Kelly's penalty against Nigeria was the fastest shot this World Cup, struck at 110.79 km/h (68.84 mph).

sales and an attendance of 43,217 for Spain's 5-1 win over Switzerland — the most for any football game (male or female) — in the country.

For the Matildas, who made the semifinal for the first time in World Cup history, the impact was even more wide-reaching. The TV viewership records have been rewritten while packed stadiums cheered the team on, game after game. For the quarter final against France, major free-to-air network *Channel 7* pushed its 6pm news bulletin back. Sam Kerr's girls thus joined an exclusive club of sportspeople for whom the bulletin was delayed — which includes Steve Waugh (for his 100 in Sydney in 2003), Michael Clarke (when he took three wickets in the last over to beat India in 2008) and Dylan Alcott (when he played his final Australian Open match earlier this year). As a result Australian Football League fixtures also had to adjust to make way for the exciting 20-penalty shootout which sent the Matildas into the last four.

When Thailand was thrashed 0-13 by the USA in the 2019 edition, the quality of the game beyond Alex Morgan and Co. and a few steady European outfits came under the microscope. This was one of the major reasons why faith in a 32-team tournament was not automatic for many stakeholders and supporters. The tournament set out to prove the world wrong.

Of the four nations to win the tournament before 2023, Germany did not make it past the group stage; the USA and Norway bowed out in the round of 16, while Japan went down to Sweden in the quarterfinal.

South Africa, featuring in its second World Cup, made it to the round of 16. Nigeria and Jamaica (that did so at Brazil's expense) also went past the group stages. Morocco's journey was brought to an end by France, but its round of 16 finish in its maiden World Cup pairs perfectly with the heartening journey of the men's side in Qatar last year.

England was given plenty of reasons to sweat in its World Cup opener against Haiti, managing an ordinary 1-0 win against the debutant. Portugal almost dumped USA out of the World Cup in the group stage but the defending champion managed a 0-0 draw. Colombia's 2-1 win over Alexandra Popp's Germany was why the former champion eventually fell to an early exit.

THE RAPINOES, MORGANS AND MARTAS TOOK A BACKSEAT WHILE NEW HEROES EMERGED LIKE COLOMBIAN STRIKER LINDA CAICEDO, AUSTRALIA'S MACKENZIE ARNOLD AND ENGLAND'S LAUREN JAMES

The Rapinoes, Morgans and Martas took a backseat while new heroes emerged, like Colombian striker Linda Caicedo, an ovarian cancer survivor who has set this edition on fire with her pace and agility. There's also Australia's Mackenzie Arnold, a brick wall in goal for the Matildas, and England's Lauren James, whose three goals have been crucial in carrying England through the group stage. The tournament moved into its business end with three out of its top five goal scorers out of the World Cup.

The World Cup this year is a bubble. Since it has begun, the focus has singularly been on what these women do on the field, as it should be. However, when the bubble bursts, there are stark realities to return to for many of the teams here.

Spain has a solid chance to lay its hands on a maiden world title, but the team has travelled for the tournament amid a period of intense strife back home.

Last September, 15 national team players declared themselves unavailable for selection around events they said impacted their emotional and physical health, with the majority of grievances attributed

Silver lining: Nigeria was one of the brightest teams in this tournament despite financial issues running deep for the Super Falcons. GETTY IMAGES

to coach Jorge Vilda.

The Spanish Federation backed him. After a painful and public standoff, only six of the 'rebels', Aitana Bonmati (three goals until the QF stage) being among them, were called back for the World Cup. Spain looks on course to challenge for the trophy but uncomfortable conversations remain to be had back home for *La Roja*.

A more prevalent concern for many teams in the tournament is brittle financial foundations. Nigeria was one of the brightest teams in this tournament, shining in a 3-2 win over Australia and giving England reasons to stop breathing by holding it to a 0-0 draw in the RO16 (the Lionesses eventually won 4-2 in the penalty shootout). However, issues run deep for the Super Falcons with the team's coach Randy Waldrum saying he was owed seven months' wages and some of his players had not been paid in two years.

Jamaica featured in its second World Cup campaign this year, but the financial issues remain the same for the Reggae Girlz. The women's team has been disbanded twice in more than a decade by the national federation due to a lack of funds. Its last campaign had assistance from Bob Marley's daughter Cedella, who has supported the side for close to 10 years. This time around, the mother of one of the players set up a crowdfunding appeal and also released a statement on the alleged mismanagement within the federation. South Africa's coach Desiree Ellis too echoed the same sentiments when she addressed the press after the Banyana Banyana's loss in the RO16. "To the sponsors: I don't know how you can ignore something special like this. I don't know how you can't assist in getting us to climb up the ladder and assist in getting us better."

Amanda Ilestedt. GETTY IMAGES

INDIA IN BUDAPEST: THE WORLD IS OUR STAGE

Led by Neeraj Chopra, Indian athletes head to the 2023 Athletics World Championships with **hopes of winning multiple medals,** backed by vital experience and improved form.

Jonathan Selvaraj
@jon_selvaraj

Avinash Sable probably doesn't have very fond memories of the 3000m steeplechase final at the 2022 Athletics World Championships in Eugene, Oregon.

There had been tremendous expectations from him in the build-up to the competition. After breaking the national record for the first time in the end of 2018, he had broken it a further seven times in three years. It had seemed that he was getting faster with almost every race.

By those standards, Eugene was a disaster. In a historically slow race, Sable finished 11th with a time of 8:31.75s — his slowest time since 2019. It wasn't that the Indian was out of steam. "He wasn't fatigued at all. He felt like he hadn't even run a race. He was disappointed, but more than that, he was just confused," coach Scott Simmons said after that performance.

Eugene had been something of a curveball. Sable's strategy until then was to stay in the middle of the pack before attacking towards the end. That's because he wasn't confident of taking the lead early on, Simmons explains. "His fastest time at that point was about 8.16 (8:16.21s to be precise). You have to be a lot faster than that to compete for the medals. He genuinely didn't know whether he would be able to run that fast," Simmons says.

But run fast he did. Just a few weeks later, he shrugged off the disappointment with a thrilling performance in the Commonwealth Games.

Displaying a tremendous finishing kick in the final lap, he won the silver medal, setting a new national record of 8:11.20s. Not only was this the biggest result of his career, but it also ended a 32-year CWG podium streak by endurance-running heavyweight Kenya.

Sable then followed this up with an almost identical performance this year — a time of 8:11.63s in the Silesia Diamond League in July. It's fair to say that there's far less doubt in Sable's mind now compared to a year ago.

He may have only finished sixth in Silesia, but his timing is a sign of what to expect when he returns to the World Championships in Budapest. "He still has more in the tank. He could probably run in the 8-point single digits right now. He knows he can do that. He knows that a medal might come in that range. That gives him a lot of confidence. He didn't have that confidence last year," says Simmons.

But Sable is not the only Indian athlete for whom this observation holds true.

While it's certainly Olympic champion and 2022 World silver medallist Neeraj Chopra who is the standard bearer of the Indian contingent at Budapest, what's clear is that the rest of the 28-member strong squad isn't there just to make up the numbers.

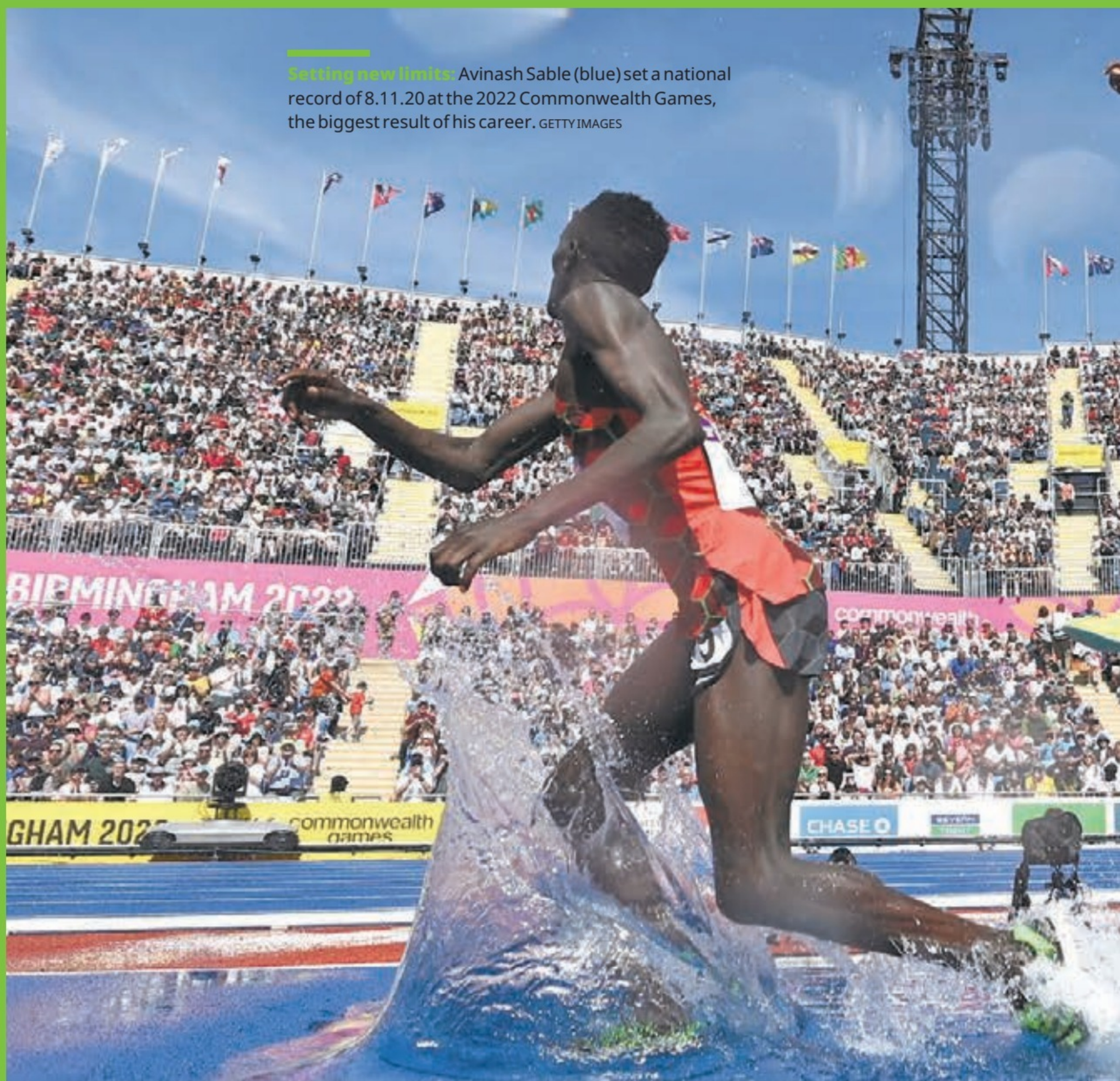
"All our athletes will perform well," says Adille Sumariwalla, president, Athletics Federation of India. "We have come to a stage where athletes are showing where they belong. We are almost there. I am not just hoping to feel strongly that most of them will come up with their personal bests. And if they perform their best, they should finish above 6–8 in most events."

While it remains to be seen whether India can improve on the solitary medal it won at Eugene last year, the fact is that the Indian contingent (without shot putter Tejinder Toor due to injury) is probably the best prepared — certainly a lot more than a year ago.

Sable wasn't the only Indian athlete who went to Eugene on the back of impressive performances before struggling to match that

Crown jewel: Although he's rattled a few nerves with an injury at the start of the season, Neeraj Chopra has come back strongly. He's unbeaten this year and, with a throw of 88.67m in the Diamond League, is third in the season's top lists. GETTY IMAGES

« All our athletes will perform well. We have come to a stage where athletes are showing where they belong. We are almost there. I am not just hoping to feel strongly that most of them will come up with their personal bests. And if they perform their best, they should finish above 6-8 in most events – Adille Sumariwalla, president, Athletics Federation of India »



Setting new limits: Avinash Sable (blue) set a national record of 8.11.20 at the 2022 Commonwealth Games, the biggest result of his career. GETTY IMAGES

form at the World Event. With a jump of 8.36m, Murali Sreeshankar had the world's third-best jump of 2022, leading into the World Championships, while Jeswin Aldrin had a wind-assisted jump that was 1cm more than that. At his first Worlds, Jeswin exited in the qualification round. Murali made his way to the final, where he finished seventh with a jump that was 4cm shorter than what he jumped in qualification.

While there were naysayers who criticised the Indian performance, long jumper Sreeshankar feels that this wasn't an unexpected result. "It's very difficult for us to just go, debut in the World Championships, and win a medal. It requires more and more experience, and we have to get used to the high-quality field. The last time I competed at the World Championship final, I was the only athlete who hadn't competed in any Diamond League. I was the only newbie out there. We have to get more experience in the global circuit so that we'll be able to be competitive among them," Sreeshankar says.

Indeed, as Sreeshankar says, "When Wang [Jianan] won the long jump gold at the World Championships with 8.36m, everyone was surprised that this guy jumped 8.36m. But no one realised that from 2015 to 2022, he had been in every World Championships final. He has been there in every Olympic Games final. He has been among the best, missing a medal here and there, but he used all his experience on his last

FURTHER BOLSTERING INDIAN HOPES IS THE FACT THAT MULTIPLE ATHLETES ARE NOT SEEING ANY DIPS IN PERFORMANCE EARLY ON IN THE SEASON

jump at the World Championships, and he won the gold medal. That kind of experience makes a big difference."

It's not just Sreeshankar who has made this observation. "When I discussed it with other athletes, my friend [triple jumper] Abdullah [Abubakar] and [100m hurdler] Jyothi Yarraji — both of whom will be competing in Budapest — were telling me this. Jyothi raced with [Olympic champion] Jasmine Camacho Quinn in Poland. Abdullah competed in the Diamond League. They were saying that the experience of competing with those top guns really helped them a lot in competitions like the Asian Championships [where Abdullah would win gold]. Abdullah had fouled the first attempt and then had a mediocre jump just so that he could reach the top eight in the second attempt. He was eighth or seventh when round two was over. So, it was very important for him to get the third jump correctly so that he could qualify for the top eight. But he could do that because he had that experience from the Diamond League. So, he managed a good jump in the third one and then the next one, and he got a gold medal. That's the kind of experience we get when we compete with all these top-quality athletes," Sreeshankar says.

But the 23-year-old has taken those lessons to heart. If he felt like a newbie in Eugene, he is a veteran in the European circuit now. He took

Hitting his peak: Kishore Jena, who will be one of three Indians in the javelin throw at the World Championships, is also hitting the best form of his career, throwing a personal best 84.38m at the Sri Lankan national championships earlier this yea. **Below:** Jyothi Yarraji, who raced with [Olympic champion] Jasmine Camacho Quinn in Poland feels that the experience of competing with top guns was really helpful in competitions like the Asian Championships. PICS: RITU RAJ KONWAR

part in his first Diamond League in Monaco following last year's World Championships and has taken part in another two — in Paris and Lausanne — this year.

He has been very consistent and is heading to Budapest on the back of a massive 8.37m jump that won him a silver at the Asian Championships.

Sable, too, has seen improvement as a runner after making a training base overseas. Last year, he moved to Colorado to train with Simmons and a group of accomplished endurance athletes. He has been training at the high-altitude centre since. "Initially, when I came to Colorado, I was not able to train with the same intensity as the rest of my group. But now I'm starting to match them," he told *Sportstar* then.

Sable's doing better than that. "When he first came to Colorado, he would struggle to run the same programme as Paul Chelimo [Rio Olympic silver medallist and Tokyo bronze medallist in the 5000m]. Right now, he's running at exactly the same pace. Chelimo is probably at his peak as a runner, and Avinash is right up there with him. He's not afraid of these guys anymore. That's going to give a lot of self-belief," says Simmons.

Sable's not the only Indian training in Colorado. 800m runner Krishan Kumar ran a personal best and the third fastest time by an Indian to win silver at last month's Asian Championships. Parul Choudhary, too, is heading to Budapest with a gold medal at the Asian Championships and a personal best (9.29.51) that's nearly 10 seconds faster than her previous best of 9.39.09 that she recorded in Eugene.

Further bolstering Indian hopes is the fact that multiple athletes are not seeing any dips in performance early on in the season.

Javelin thrower Manu DP (right) looked like he was caught in a mini-rut in the middle of the season but got back above 80m with a throw of 81.01m that won him a silver at the Asian Championships.

Kishore Jena, who will be one of three Indians in the javelin throw at the World Championships, is also hitting the best form of his career, throwing a personal best of 84.38m at the Sri Lankan national championships earlier this year.

SREESHANKAR IS HEADING TO BUDAPEST ON THE BACK OF A MASSIVE 8.37M JUMP THAT WON HIM A SILVER AT THE ASIAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

Man of promise: Sreeshankar is heading to Budapest on the back of a massive 8.37m jump that won him a silver at the Asian Championships.

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Aldrin, who endured massive swings in performance last season — from a personal best of 8.37m at the Federation Cup to a disappointing 7.78m at the World Championships— looks like he has started hitting his groove.

After going three competitions outside the 8m mark following a bout of COVID and a groin injury, Aldrin, who is the world leader this season with a jump of 8.42m, jumped 8.22m to put himself in the mix of potential medal winners in Budapest. And he's confident he has more in him. "I'm saving the big jumps for the Worlds," he told *Sportstar* following that performance.

While Aldrin might be a dark horse in the men's long jump, among the favourites in the men's javelin event is Neeraj. Although he rattled a few nerves with an injury at the start of the season, Chopra has come back strongly. He's unbeaten this year, and with a throw of 88.67m in the Diamond League in Doha, he's third in the season's top lists. As he looks to peak at the World Championships, it's going to be hard to bet against him improving on that throw. A year ago, all of India's hopes would have rested on Neeraj's shoulders. This year, there's hope that the weight of expectations can be more fairly spread out in the Indian contingent as they peak following a generally smooth preparatory cycle.

It certainly is on Sable, at least. "Last time around was about experience. This time, I think we will be looking to win medals," says Simmons.

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Crouser in control

Double Olympic champion Ryan Crouser is pushing his limits with innovative techniques and self-coaching, constantly aiming to surpass his own world record in shot put.

Jonathan Selvaraj
@jon_selvaraj

When Ryan Crouser steps up to the shot put ring in Budapest at the World Championships, his real competition will be with himself.

Standing 6 feet 7 inches and weighing 145kg, the American from Oregon is so far ahead of the rest of the field that he might as well be in a league of his own in international athletics.

The 30-year-old is a two-time Olympic gold medallist and the reigning world champion, with 10 of the top 15 throws of all time (including the three biggest in history). In comparison, Usain Bolt has seven of the top 15 100m times of all time.

This season, he has been in even more dominating form. In May, he smashed his own world record with a throw of 23.56m at the Los Angeles Grand Prix. That mark is nearly a metre clear of his closest pursuer, Joe Kovacs, who is second best this year with a throw of 22.69m.

Crouser is not done just yet, which probably isn't good news for his competitors in Budapest. Speaking to *Sportstar*, he dissects his world record throw. "In terms of execution on the day, I think it was very good," he says. "But in terms of improving on it or making the ball go further, I feel it needed more speed work and high-intensity throws. At that point in the year, I was doing a lot of heavy lifting and throwing a lot of heavy shots. So I was throwing the 18-pound shot (16 pounds, or 7.26 kg, is the usual weight) and doing 5s and 7s in the weight room," he says.

"I was very strong, but I didn't have much speed. Speed really lends itself to throwing far. So I feel the improvement would be more in terms of preparation — having more plyometrics, more speed work, and throwing light shots before that meet. It was an early-season meet, so I wouldn't be expecting to do that at that time of the year. That's what got me excited for the World Championships. Because now I'm doing a lot of speed work and plyometrics, and hopefully that distance will show up in the Worlds," he says.

Indeed, despite being so far ahead of the field, it says something about Crouser's mindset this year, boosted by a new technique that he thinks will make him go even further.

It's not that he needs to innovate as much as he wants to. "I'm always trying to get better and compete against myself and throw as far as I can. I think the new technique does let me throw further. That's the main reason I'm going with it," he says.

Ever since it has been a part of track and field, there have been essentially two techniques to throw the shot — the glide and the spin. In the glide — that's probably as old

Chasing the impossible: Ryan Crouser smashed his own world record with a throw of 23.56m at the Los Angeles Grand Prix in May, almost touching the fabled 24m mark. AFP

as the event — the putter faces the back of the circle, beginning with a crouching position, and proceeds with kicking his leading leg to the front of the circle, while the other leg follows in a 'gliding' motion. In the spin technique — invented in the 1980s — the putter faces the back of the circle, and then executes a series of 'pivoting' motions with his right leg generating power much like a discus thrower.

Crouser's technique, dubbed the Crouser slide, has the possibility of being as significant as the Fosbury flop in the men's high jump. It is an evolution of the spin technique.

"Instead of just starting with my feet fixed opposite the direction of the throw, I move them 45 degrees over clockwise, and then make a lateral shift with my left foot so it adds another 45 degrees to 60 degrees of rotation. That gives me a longer time to add force to the ball and also adds an extra step. So I'm able to add a lot of linear force to then transfer into rotational force and then back into linear force at the front," he says.

There is a bit of a trade-off, Crouser admits. "When you add the extra movement and the extra degrees of rotation, you have more

IT'S PERHAPS SURPRISING THAT SHOT PUT WASN'T EVEN HIS FIRST CHOICE OF SPORT. BORN IN PORTLAND, OREGON, CROUSER COMES FROM A FAMILY OF SERIOUSLY ACCOMPLISHED THROWERS

variables that can go wrong. So it's a bit of a chess match between figuring out how to increase the amount of potential energy created and how to minimise the inconsistencies in the variables."

For now, at least, Crouser has been remarkably consistent with the technique — throwing over 22m in every competition of the season. And when it does click, even when he's far from his physical peak — as it did in May — he improves his world record by nearly 20cm.

If anyone was going to reinvent a technique that appeared to be set in stone, it was probably going to be Crouser.

If you were to judge the book by its cover, at first glance, Crouser seems like a stereotypical brawny American jock — he has a penchant for cowboy hats, has a giant Stars and Stripes flag hanging in his training room, loves fishing in his spare time, rocks an '80s mullet, and of course, there's the fact that he makes a living by hefting a 16-pound iron ball.

Crouser is all that, but he also combines it with a deeply analytical mind. He has an academic background in engineering and finance — the cowboy hats come from his time at the University of Texas — and brings that scientific temperament to his throwing. He built his own shot put ring from scratch during the COVID-19 pandemic, created his own training programme, and is perhaps unique in international sports as a self-coached athlete.

Even his 'business up front party in the back' hairdo is something that

Innovation is key: Crouser's technique, dubbed the Crouser slide, has the possibility of being as significant as the Fosbury flop in men's high jump. GETTY IMAGES

'A LOT OF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN ASKING ME ABOUT 24M AND I THINK IT'S PHYSICALLY POSSIBLE TO DO BUT THERE ARE JUST A NUMBER OF VARIABLES THAT GO INTO IT'

makes sense from the shot put. "It started as a joke. I had long hair for a while. I had a training partner who had a bit of a side business doing hair cuts, so he was like, 'man, you should do a mullet'. I think most of the guys seem to like it, but most of the girls don't seem to find it as appealing. My girlfriend and mom were very against it, but I did it anyway. I enjoy throwing with it. It's actually better for throwing the shot because it keeps the longer hair out of the way. When my hair is long, it interferes with the shot being on my neck. The mullet I feel is a pretty ideal shot-putting haircut," he says.

For a guy whose name is now synonymous with shot put, it's perhaps surprising that shot put wasn't even his first choice of sport. This is doubly curious since Crouser, born in Portland, comes from a family of seriously accomplished throwers. His father, Mitch Crouser, was an alternate on the 1984 Olympic discus team, while his uncle, Brian Crouser, competed in two Olympics in the javelin.

"I started with baseball and soccer, and then American football and basketball. Up until high school, I did that, and then I moved to basketball and track. I didn't focus solely on track and field until I went to college at 18. I think some of that helped me to be successful later on in my career as I developed a general athletic background because I had played all of these sports. I've seen so many athletes who specialise really early, and they play one sport year-round at 8–10 years old. It's really crazy to specialise at that young age because you lose out on a lot of athletic development," he says.

While he started out playing team sports and still admits he could probably have made a lot more money as a football player rather than a shot putter, it was track and field that ultimately drew him in. "I think the eye-opening moment when I realised I was pretty good at this (throwing) came when I was in eighth grade. I would have been 14 when I made a big jump throwing the discus in a school competition—about 60m with a 1kg discus. That was the year I realised I had a natural talent for this," he says.

What also fascinated him was that unlike other sports, athletics allowed him to see how much better he was getting every time he stepped on the field. "I could see that I was progressing weekly. That's one thing that's always attracted me to track-and-field — it's so easy to measure your improvement. What frustrated me about team sports is that you could have the best day as a player but your team still loses. So I like the aspect of track-and-field that if I go out and throw a personal best, I can say that I am the best that I've ever been. It's such a special feeling," he says.

That ability to measure progress was particularly appealing to a mind that has inherently been drawn towards science and numbers. "I think the math and science background lends itself to an appreciation of track-and-field because it's purely performance-based. If I were playing another sport, I'm sure I would have found a numerical breakdown of that as well, but it certainly is one of the reasons I gravitated towards the shot put," he says.

Crouser has admitted he took his throwing seriously, mostly because it offered him a full-ride scholarship in college, where he started out studying engineering before switching his major to economics.

"I've always been a math and science-based person. I liked numbers and excelled at math. I always liked engineering, math, and the numbers behind them. I did two years of engineering and only had the upper level of courses left. But then I was speaking to a senior who had graduated and was working as

REUTERS

an engineer. He was asking me if I enjoyed these upper-level courses. I said I wasn't really enjoying them but was continuing because it was a really good degree to have. He told me what we end up doing in his job is mostly the upper level of engineering, so if I don't really love it, maybe I should look at something else. I was doing my minor in business, and I took up a finance course and an economics course for my business minor. I really liked both of those, so I decided to finish my undergrad in economics so I could finish off early and then work and get my masters in finance while I was still on scholarship," Crouser says.

Just as Crouser's decision to switch majors came by chance, so too did the decision to focus on the shot put. In his first year of college, Crouser, it could be argued, was as good a discus thrower as a shot putter. At the 2014 NCAA Big 12 meet, for instance, he threw the discus 63.90m, which would have been more than enough to qualify for the final of the Rio Olympics. It was only in 2016 that he said he decided to become a full-time shot putter.

"For me, the reason I ended up as a shot putter is more of a coincidence than a plan. In my fifth year of college, I was only eligible to compete indoors in collegiate meets. So, I had to focus on shot put for my final year since you can't throw the discus indoors. That happened to be the Olympic year as well. I threw 21.73m and that happened to be the second-best mark of all time indoors. So, I figured it would be better to commit to throwing a shot at that time. But if I was throwing both shot and discus, then I might very well have ended up a discus thrower. I think I could have been a pretty solid discus thrower. I actually thought about going back to the discus a few years ago, but it is at such a high level right now. When I was throwing, it wasn't nearly as competitive as it is now. You see multiple 70m-plus throwers throughout the season," he says.

All-time records

Rank	Mark	Name	Date
1	23.56	Ryan CROUSER	27-May-23
2	23.37	Ryan CROUSER	18-Jun-21
3	23.3	Ryan CROUSER	5-Aug-21
4	23.23	Joe KOVACS	7-Sep-22
5	23.15	Ryan CROUSER	21-Aug-21
6	23.12	Randy BARNES	20-May-90
7	23.12	Ryan CROUSER	24-Jun-22
8	23.1	Randy BARNES	26-May-90
9	23.07	Ryan CROUSER	23-Jul-23
10	23.06	Ulf TIMMERMANN	22-May-88

If Crouser can break down his throws to the minutest detail, it's because he doesn't depend on anyone else to do so.

In the world of elite sports, he is an exception in the way he's completely self-coached. When he goes to the training field, it's usually just him. These days, he has his one-year-old black labrador, Koda, for company.

The choice to be his own coach, too, came by accident. "I started co-writing my training programme with my strength coach in the fall of 2015. My strength coach was leaving the university in the spring of 2016, so I felt I might as well start working on writing my own programme," he says. "I was lucky to have a good foundation in terms of the coaches I was able to work with, both in the weight room and in the throwing event. My dad and my coach at the University of Texas, Mario Sategna, were able to get me a good understanding of the fundamentals and get me to think for myself. I was lucky with the circumstances I had with the people helping me to understand and think for myself what works for me instead of constantly leaning on a coach. I started in 2016, and I've been writing my own throwing and weightlifting programmes ever since."

DIY effect: If Crouser can break down his throws to the minutest detail, it's because he doesn't depend on anyone else to do so. AFP

'AN OLYMPIC GOLD IS THE BIGGEST GOAL ON THE HORIZON. NO ONE HAS WON THREE CONSECUTIVE GOLD MEDALS IN THE MEN'S SHOT PUT, SO I'M DEFINITELY CHASING THAT'

It's not always been easy. "There have been points throughout my career where there are moments of self-doubt, and I think it would be nice to have a coach to guide me through this. But there are also advantages. After a meet when I

know what I did wrong, it's such an easy correction to make because it's a correction I've done by myself many times," he says.

At only 30 years old, Crouser still has plenty of time to send the shot flying huge distances. What's next for him?

A third Olympic gold, for sure. "It's the biggest goal on the horizon. No one has won three consecutive gold medals in the men's shot put, so I'm definitely chasing that. I want to go through 2024, as well as 2028. I would love to retire in LA after the 2028 edition, so doing an Olympics on American soil would be a big highlight in my career," he says.

As he polishes his 'Crouser slide' further, he believes he will add to his current best. "Progress will come in jumps. It's never a slow, linear progression of slow, steady improvement. You have a big throw, and then you try to get consistent at that, and then you get another big throw. I think 23m high is possible," he says.

What about the 24m mark — something no human has come close to?

Crouser thinks he can, but is also realistic that a lot of factors need to come together for that.

" I think it's physically possible to do, but there are just a number of variables that go into it. The training has to be perfect.

The body has to be healthy, and the preparation, execution, and technique on the day have to be nearly perfect," he says.

A superheroic journey from farm to field

Kristjan Ceh, the Slovenian discus thrower known as **'Superman'**, re ects on his journey to becoming a world champion and a rising star in track and field.

Jonathan Selvaraj
@jon_selvaraj

As far as sporting monikers go, Kristjan Ceh couldn't have asked for a better one. In international track and field circles, the Slovenian discus thrower is nicknamed 'Superman'. It's easy to see the resemblance. With clean-cut good looks, thick-framed glasses, and a powerful 6ft 9ins frame that stands out even in an event that's notable for the size of its participants, the 24-year-old is a ringer for Clark Kent.

He's more than capable of superheroesque feats once he steps inside the discus throw cage. Last year, in Oregon, not only did he become the youngest ever world champion in the sport, but also his throw of 71.13m smashed the championship record by almost a metre.

Expect more big things from him. Only three men — Lars Riedel, Virgilijus Alekna, and Robert Harting — have won world titles in

IF YOU ASK ME TO COMPARE IT TO THE OTHER TRACK AND FIELD EVENTS, I THINK THE DISCUS THROW IS THE BEST. IT HAS THE MOST HISTORY AND IS DEFINITELY THE OLDEST

Top tier: At the World Athletics Championships in Oregon last year, Ceh not only became the youngest ever world discus champion but also smashed the championship record by almost a meter, registering a throw of 71.13m. GETTY IMAGES

consecutive years, and Ceh, who has been in great touch this season, looks more than capable of adding his name to that list. He has improved his personal best to 71.86m, nearly half a metre ahead of Olympic champion Daniel Stahl (71.45m) and nearly a metre ahead of Mykolas Alekna (71m) who won European gold last year.

While it's hard to imagine Ceh as anything but one, he is the first to admit he wouldn't have imagined himself as an elite athlete. "I've got to travel the world and win world titles. I couldn't even have dreamt of it," he tells *Sportstar*.

Track and field was indeed not a likely career path for Ceh growing up. In another parallel to the life story of the 'Man of Steel' (who grew up in rural Kansas), Ceh grew up on a farm in the town of Ptuj in Slovenia. A life in the fields is what he assumed awaited him. "We have a small farm where we have both dairy cattle and crops. My family has been farming for many generations. No one, as far as I can remember, ever played sports," he says.

Ceh didn't plan on playing sports either. "I didn't even like sports. I was actually an anti-sport guy because I wasn't good at anything. I was definitely not good at any ball sport. I was quite clumsy. That's why I didn't really like sports at the start," he says.

He might not have had any ball skills, but there was no doubt that Ceh had farm strength. "We have cows, but we also grow things for the animals to eat. My favourite job was to be on a tractor. But we didn't have a big farm, so there wasn't much of that. What was probably the least enjoyable was in the

« I gained a lot of strength working on a farm. I think, at a young age, it's important to do other work besides sports. If you are between 8 and 15, it's better to do a lot of things rather than just train for a sport. I guess I was lucky there »

summer, when I had to spend the whole day in the field, scything hay or clearing out cattle waste," he says.

It wasn't much fun but in hindsight, Ceh says it worked out for him. "I gained a lot of strength working on a farm. I think, at a young age, it's important to do other work besides sports. If you are between 8 and 15 it's better to do a lot of things rather than just train for a sport. I guess I was lucky there," he says.

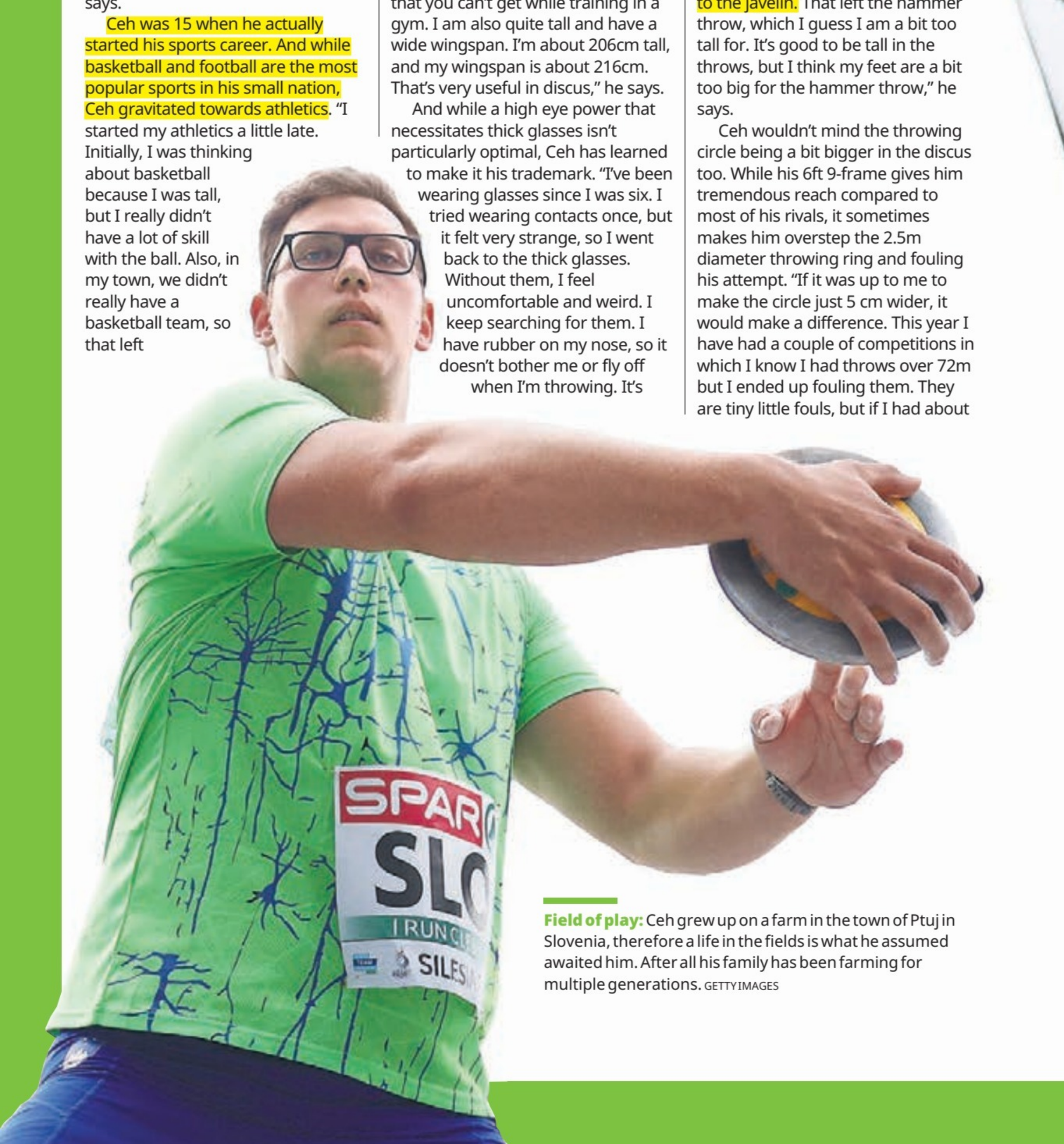
Ceh was 15 when he actually started his sports career. And while basketball and football are the most popular sports in his small nation, Ceh gravitated towards athletics. "I started my athletics a little late. Initially, I was thinking about basketball because I was tall, but I really didn't have a lot of skill with the ball. Also, in my town, we didn't really have a basketball team, so that left athletics for me. I still played for fun, but not for training. I like athletics because it's an individual sport. I can decide what to do. If I mess up, I mess up. If I win, I win alone," he says.

It didn't take him long to realise he was good at the throws. "I don't know if it was because I grew up on a farm and ate all that home food or because I helped out a lot in the fields, but I had a natural strength that you can't get while training in a gym. I am also quite tall and have a wide wingspan. I'm about 206cm tall, and my wingspan is about 216cm. That's very useful in discus," he says.

And while a high eye power that necessitates thick glasses isn't particularly optimal, Ceh has learned to make it his trademark. "I've been wearing glasses since I was six. I tried wearing contacts once, but it felt very strange, so I went back to the thick glasses. Without them, I feel uncomfortable and weird. I keep searching for them. I have rubber on my nose, so it doesn't bother me or fly off when I'm throwing. It's become part of my identity now," he says.

While the discus is what he's made his career in, it wasn't the only throwing event he tried. "I started with the shot put, actually, but changed in half a year. For me, discus was easier. I enjoyed it. I did the other throws as well, but I injured my elbow when I was throwing the shot, and I was always worried about my knee when it came to the javelin. That left the hammer throw, which I guess I am a bit too tall for. It's good to be tall in the throws, but I think my feet are a bit too big for the hammer throw," he says.

Ceh wouldn't mind the throwing circle being a bit bigger in the discus too. While his 6ft 9-frame gives him tremendous reach compared to most of his rivals, it sometimes makes him overstep the 2.5m diameter throwing ring and fouling his attempt. "If it was up to me to make the circle just 5 cm wider, it would make a difference. This year I have had a couple of competitions in which I know I had throws over 72m but I ended up fouling them. They are tiny little fouls, but if I had about



Field of play: Ceh grew up on a farm in the town of Ptuj in Slovenia, therefore a life in the fields is what he assumed awaited him. After all his family has been farming for multiple generations. GETTY IMAGES

MY GIRLFRIEND ANNA MARIA IS A GREAT CHEF. I ACTUALLY HAVE A LOT OF INDIAN FOOD BECAUSE THAT'S HER FAVOURITE CUISINE. TIKKA MASALA IS SOMETHING I EAT A LOT OF

5cm of space, I wouldn't have made them," he says.

Of course, in his early years, Ceh wasn't throwing anything near the 70m+ monsters he uncorks regularly now. "It took me about two years of training before I realised I was good and that I could do something that others really couldn't," he says. Even that was a gradual learning experience for Ceh, whose senior performance belies his rather modest results at the junior level — he came 26th at the European Youth Championships in 2016 and only 15th at the World Juniors a year later. "I didn't really win a lot. I took part in all the U-18 and U-20 tournaments, but I couldn't even make the final. Ideally, this should destroy me mentally," he laughs. "But it only gave me hope that I am not done yet. I can get better," he says.

As he's gotten better, Ceh's developed a genuine appreciation for his event. "If you ask me to compare it to the other track and field events, I think the discus throw is the best. It has the most history and is definitely the oldest. When you see the statues from ancient times, the Greeks were throwing discus at the ancient Olympics. It's also really interesting because it's one of the most competitive events in athletics. There are five throwers who have made throws over 70m and three of us have made throws over 71m. All of us are chasing the world record [74.04m set by Jurgen Schult in 1986]. This is the oldest world record in men's athletics, and a lot of guys are coming close. So it's interesting to see who is going to get it," he says.

Of his potential rivals in Budapest, the toughest will be 2020 Olympic champion Daniel Stahl and 2022 World silver medallist Mykolas Alekna. "Stahl is the oldest of us. He has a lot of experience. He is very strong. This year, he is technically better. Alekna is three years younger than me and still very young. He has very long arms, wide shoulders, and is very flexible, which is perfect for the discus. He also has a technique that suits him," he says, summarising his rivals.

But even if he has high praise for his rivals abilities and is more modest about his own, Ceh isn't writing himself off either. "I am the tallest of them even though my wingspan isn't great. Stahl and Alekna have actually got longer wingspans than me, so I'm relatively short in that aspect. But long arms, height, and strength aren't enough by themselves. What's equally important is a good technique. That makes the most difference. I have a decent technique, a stable one. We did a good job developing it. This is the main point," he says.

While Ceh sees Alekna as one of his challenging opponents, there's another layer to the their rivalry. Following the Tokyo Olympics, where he finished fifth, Ceh has been coached by former world and Olympic champion Gerd Kanter of Estonia. Mykolas, meanwhile, is coached by his dad — Olympic and two-time world champion Virgiljus Alekna, who in turn was among Kanter's greatest competitors. "People are talking about the

Ceh-Alekna rivalry like it is Kanter-Alekna all over again. I train in Estonia, and here in the Baltics, there are always people talking about it," he says.

For now, it is Ceh who has the upper hand in this rekindled rivalry, for although Alekna took a surprising win over him at last year's European championships, it's still the Slovenian who came through when it mattered the most — at last year's World Championships.

The win was the biggest of his career and a necessary one after a less-than-stellar performance at the Tokyo Olympics, where he finished fifth. Back in 2021, he still had a relatively modest record, and when he travelled to Japan, he did so on a shoestring budget. "I could have done better in Tokyo, but I fouled one throw that would have definitely put me on the podium, by just a millimetre or so. I think I did ok for my first Olympics. But I was there alone, with no coach and nobody else. I think I did well by finishing fifth," he says.

All that changed after the gold in Eugene. "Back in 2021, it was just me and my girlfriend [Estonian hammer thrower] Anna Maria [Orel] doing the season alone. She was consulting with Gerd on how to do training, but we were mostly doing it alone. Financially, it's a lot easier. I have Gerd come with me to every competition. He's a great thrower and shares with me a lot of his experiences at the Worlds and the Olympics. He tells me where he didn't do so well and where I can improve," he says.

The gold also saw him named Slovenian Sportsman of the Year in 2022, beating NBA All-Star Luka Dončić — no easy task in his basketball-crazy nation. "That was really unexpected. The funny thing is, I've met Luka a couple of times, including at the Olympics, and of course we were born just a few days apart. We aren't great friends or anything. He has his own life. But maybe one day we will speak," he says.

> « Ceh was named Slovenian Sportsman of the Year in 2022, beating NBA All-Star Luka Doncic »

Although Ceh feels it unlikely that Dončić throws the discus, he certainly does shoot hoops. "I usually play basketball while warming up. It's a little harder to play with Gerd because now that he's retired from discus, he takes his basketball very seriously. He practises three times a week while I'm just playing for fun," he says.

While one-on-one matches with Kanter aren't always the easiest, Ceh says the fact that he trains in Estonia, away from his home in Slovenia, works for him. "In Slovenia, usually I always end up getting asked for pictures, but in Estonia, people generally let me be, which is useful because I can train easily," he says. When he's not training in Estonia, Ceh spends time with Anna. "She is a great chef. I actually have a lot of Indian food because that's her favourite cuisine. *Tikka masala* is something I eat a lot of," he says.

When he wants to unwind, Ceh returns to his homesteading roots. "One thing I really enjoy doing is forestry and chopping wood. Sometimes, when I go back home, I will go back and work in the fields. I actually enjoy this. I was actually studying agriculture before I started focussing completely on my discus throwing career. I'm only 24 right now, but one day I really hope I can return to farming. I want to have a big chicken farm eventually," he says.

For now, though, there's a career as an elite athlete to focus on, with the Worlds just a few days away. "I love discus throw. I love the fact that it lets me travel to different countries, although I don't like going by plane because the seats are too small for me. I love to compete, especially in big competitions when the stadium is full. In every competition, I want to be the best that I am capable of," he says. "Before a top competition, I always have this feeling that I'm about to puke. I actually look forward to that feeling. When I get that feeling, I know I am ready to compete. I know the World Championships is going to be exciting. Full stadium, good crowd — so it's going to be a really good tournament," he says.

And while Ceh says he will eventually hope to return to a life in the slow lane, for now he's looking to do as much as possible on the athletic field.

"There is just one period in my life — maybe 10–15 years — when I can do this. So I'm going to enjoy it right now, and I'll do the rest after that. I'll be a farmer later. Right now, I like being known as the Superman of Discus," he says.

GETTY IMGAES

INDIA'S NEXT GENERATION PRIMED AND READY

A look at the top five promising Indian paddlers who dazzled at the recently concluded Ultimate Table Tennis (UTT) Season 4, India's franchise-based table tennis league.

Amol Karhadkar
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Benedikt Duda and Harmeet Desai were on fire. Aruna Quadri, A. Sharath Kamal, and G. Sathiyan blew hot and cold. Lily Zhang and Manav Thakkar had a torrid run. And Alvaro Robles and Manika Batra justified their billing. While the seasoned campaigners stole the limelight in the fourth edition of the Ultimate Table Tennis—that returned after four years —at the Shree Shiv Chhatrapati Sports Complex from July 13 to 30, the fans were thrilled to see Gen Next of Indian table tennis in action.

Manush Shah

Team: **Puneri Paltan Table Tennis**

Performance summary
Singles: **7-7**
Mixed doubles: **10-5**

1 Manush Shah was undoubtedly among the top three performers. Manush, who is being mentored by veteran A. Sharath Kamal, showed why he is touted as Sharath's heir-apparent post-Paris 2024. How Manush used the left-hander's angles and displayed his game awareness and skills in plenty was one of the highlights of the tournament. He matched the fearsome pace of Quadri and Duda to show he was ready to be an India regular. Manush teamed up with his captain, Hana Matelova, to emerge as an unassailable combination.

T. Reeth Rishya

Team: **Goa Challengers**

Performance summary
Singles: **7-11**

2 Her win-loss record may not be impressive. But numbers never reveal the full story. T. Reeth Rishya, the Chennai girl who is based in Mumbai and trains in Hyderabad, emerged as one of the stories of UTT, helping the Goa Challengers to its maiden triumph. Had it not been for her snatching a game against Yangzi Liu in an otherwise horrible league outing for the Challengers against Chennai Lions, the Goa outfit may have been eliminated in the league stage. In the semifinals and the final, Reeth had to win the last game, with the scores tied at seven games apiece. While she held her fort against Sreeja Akula in the semifinal against Dabang Delhi TTC, it was incredible to see her composed demeanour in the deciding game against Sutirtha Mukherjee in the final. After all, Reeth failed to convert three championship points before missing her service off the golden point. But she backed her backhand topspin, despite missing a couple in the crunch moments earlier, to emerge victorious. After a disappointing Commonwealth Games campaign in 2022, Reeth proved that happy days are here again!

Jeet Chandra

Team: **Bengaluru Smashers**

Performance summary
Singles: **4-5**

3 Having moved from Bengal to Haryana in the domestic circuit, Jeet Chandra had had a brush with UTT earlier. But he had to wait until the third tie of the fourth season to earn his UTT debut. Had Sanil Shetty not lost all six games in the Bengaluru Smashers' first two ties, Jeet wouldn't have made his debut against the fancied Chennai Lions. Eventually, the Smashers were left to rue not playing the right-hander earlier, with the team falling a solitary point short of reaching the semis. The fact that he took a game off an on-song Benedikt Duda on debut to seal Smashers' first win in their maiden UTT appearance showed he belonged on the big stage. And how he stunned Harmeet Desai, who had been on a roll till then, in the Smashers' last tie, underlined that he is in it for the long haul.

Ayhika Mukherjee

Team: **Dabang Delhi TTC**

Performance summary
Singles: **4-5**

4 Ayhika Mukherjee was used as a trump card, primarily against fancied overseas opponents. Ayhika, having switched over to the Delhi franchise from the now-defunct RPSG Mavericks, justified the faith shown in her. Ayhika, with her uncanny combination of soft- and long-pimpled rubber on either side of the blade, won a point each versus Bengaluru Smashers' Natalia Bajor in her maiden appearance and Suthasini Sawettabut in a losing semifinal against Goa Challengers. But she was at her best in the tie against U Mumba TT, stunning Lily Zhang, the highest-ranked female paddler—ranked in the 20s—to have featured in UTT 2023. It was remarkable to see Ayhika retain her composure to win two of the three golden points in the match.

Diya Chitale

Team: **U Mumba TT**

Performance summary
Singles: **4-11**

5 She may have failed to win any of her five singles matches, but the fact that the 20-year-old withstood the big-stage pressure in her maiden UTT season augurs well for her. Barring a whitewash against two-time national champion and India teammate Sreeja Akula, Diya Chitale, the Mumbai girl, earned a game in each of her four ties. While she snatched a game off Manika in U Mumba's season opener, her next two outings marked her arrival in the big league. She first took a game off Australia's Yangzi Liu to hand U Mumba TT a famous win against the defending champion and eventual runner-up, the Chennai Lions. In the next encounter, she matched Thailand's Suthasini Sawettabut for pace to win a game. Despite her tendency to move too far back, Diya showcased her improvement in finishing the rallies by being more aggressive, especially with her forehand. She was one of the silver linings for U Mumba in an otherwise forgettable campaign.

IT'S THE VERSTAPPEN

The Red Bull driver has **dominated the first half of the season with ten wins**, despite Alonso's early aggression and Hamilton's late surge.

S. Dipak Ragav
@dipakragav

With the Formula One bandwagon taking a well-deserved summer break after 12 races, here is a look at some of the big talking points from the first half of the season and what to look out for when the season resumes at Zandvoort, Netherlands, on August 27.

1. Unstoppable force

The final race before the summer break was a Sprint weekend at the Belgian GP, where the juggernaut of Max Verstappen and Red Bull continued to roll unabated.

The Dutchman won his 10th race of the season at the iconic Spa-Francorchamps circuit despite starting sixth on the grid.

Though Sergio Perez led the early part of the race, Verstappen had little trouble overtaking his teammate and smashed the rest of the field, finishing 22 seconds ahead of the Mexican driver.

With this, the reigning two-time champion further padded his already almost unassailable lead in the drivers' standings.

With 10 wins out of the 12 races, Verstappen ended the first half of the season with a 125-point lead over second-placed Perez. If Red Bull senses a chance of recruiting a better second driver who is not this far off Verstappen, the Mexican's place could come under scrutiny despite his 2024 contract.

2. Old is gold

In the early part of the season, Fernando Alonso (right), the oldest driver on the grid, showed he still has fire in his belly as he racked up six podiums from the first eight races in what was a dream start to his maiden season with Aston Martin

EVEN AS RED BULL HAS SAILED OFF INTO THE DISTANCE, THE BATTLE BEHIND THEM IS FASCINATING. IN THE EARLY PART OF THE YEAR, ASTON MARTIN LED THE CHARGE BEFORE MERCEDES JOINED THE PARTY

Racing ahead: With ten wins out of the 12 races, Verstappen ended the first half of the season with a 125-point lead over second-placed Perez. AFP

Racing.

The team was firmly the second-best car behind Red Bull but has slipped up in the last few rounds, with Mercedes now occupying second place on the constructors' standings.

The 42-year-old Alonso has 149 points, is third in the drivers' standings, and has blown his teammate Lance Stroll out of the water.

The Canadian driver, whose father (Lawrence Stroll) owns the team, has only 47 points, and his underperformance is why the iconic brand is third and not second in the standings.

3. Fight for the best of the rest

Even as Red Bull has sailed off into the distance, the battle behind them is fascinating. In the early part of the year, Aston Martin led the charge before Mercedes joined the party, with Lewis Hamilton stringing impressive performances, like his pole-position lap in Hungary.

Thanks to a better driver pairing in Hamilton and George Russell, the Silver Arrows have been able to bank valuable points to move to second place in the constructors' standings, with Hamilton now just one point behind Alonso in the fight for third in the driver's standings.

In the last few races, Ferrari and McLaren, too, have upped their game a bit and unlocked some performance in their cars. Mercedes is ahead of Aston by 51 points, with Ferrari a further five points behind, but it will be a battle to watch out for when the season resumes.

4. Chaos at Alpine

During the Belgian Grand Prix, there was massive churning at the top management of Alpine, with Team Principal Otmar Szafnauer and Sporting Director Alan Permane, who had been with the team for more than three decades, leaving the group. Alpine CEO Laurent Rossi was also nudged aside to Special Projects, while Pat Fry, the Chief Technical Officer, too, has quit and will join Williams later this year.

The team had big hopes of moving up the grid after finishing fourth last year, but has had a horrid start to 2023. After being fifth at the beginning of the year, the team slipped further behind to sixth after McLaren banked some excellent results in the last few races. So much chaos at the top level is a recipe for disaster, and how it fares in the rest of the year remains to be seen.

Moto GP

Meanwhile, action on two wheels returned after its summer hiatus with the British Grand Prix at Silverstone. In a thrilling race on Sunday (August 6), Aprilia rider Aleix Espargaro snatched victory from championship leader Francesco Bagnaia on the last lap of the race to take his first win of the season. It was an excellent race for the Spanish rider, who started 12th but quickly moved up the grid. Despite losing out on the win on the last lap, reigning champion Bagnaia increased his championship lead to 41 points after his closest pursuer, Jorge Martin, finished sixth and another contender, Marco Bezzecchi, retired from the race.

VANTAGE POINT

by Paul Fein

FOR MORE STORIES

THE PRODIGAL SON RETURNS TO WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Spanish sensation **Carlos Alcaraz** will eye his second U.S. Open crown at Flushing Meadows.

"Yeah, I hope we get to play in the US Open. Why not? I think it's good for the sport—one and two in the world facing each other in almost a five-hour, five-set thriller. It couldn't be better for our sport in general, so why not?" — Novak Djokovic, after Carlos Alcaraz dethroned him at the 2023 Wimbledon final.

Tennis thrives on rivalries, especially between iconic champions who treat us to classic matches. The renowned Big Three of Djokovic, Rafael Nadal, and Roger Federer produced three of the greatest rivalries in tennis history, surpassed in length only by the 80-match competition between legends Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert. All these duels featured champions fairly close in age, which, in part, accounted for their longevity.

The last four men's Grand Slam titles, however, have been won by 36-year-old Djokovic and 20-year-old Alcaraz.

Djokovic's advanced age and Alcaraz's advanced game ensure their rivalry won't last more than two or three years, but while it lasts, it should prove extremely entertaining and historic.

Let's size up contenders who might threaten the Big Two and then predict the winner of the season's final Grand Slam tournament.

Jannik Sinner: On the New Gen standouts, Alcaraz said, "For me, Jannik Sinner is my biggest rival now." The 21-year-old Italian has won three of their six encounters, showing his surface adaptability by doing it on hard, grass, and clay courts. All of the Spaniard's wins have come on hard courts, most notably his come-from-behind,

DJOKOVIC'S ADVANCED AGE AND ALCARAZ'S ADVANCED GAME ENSURE WHILE THEIR RIVALRY LASTS, IT SHOULD PROVE EXTREMELY ENTERTAINING AND HISTORIC

The chosen one: Carlos Alcaraz will begin the U.S. Open as one of the tournament favourites. The 20-year-old Spaniard beat seven-time champion Novak Djokovic 1-6, 7-6 (8-6), 6-1, 3-6, 6-4 on Centre Court to win his first Wimbledon crown. GETTY IMAGES

five-setter at the 2022 US Open.

Sinner can't match Alcaraz in sheer athleticism, shot versatility, or tactical acumen. Who can? But he'll reach the quarterfinals and perhaps the semifinals at Flushing Meadows.

Holger Rune: Like Holger Danske, a Danish resistance group under Nazi occupation during World War II, this Holger is combative and relentless. He's tamed his teenage temper and unleashed his vast talent to notch up wins over Djokovic (twice), Alcaraz, Ruud, Sinner, Tsitsipas, Daniil Medvedev, Andrey Rublev, and Alexander Zverev. An all-court player whose game excels on every surface, Rune ranks No. 5 in the ATP "Under Pressure Leaders," winning 69.2 of his tiebreakers.

Unless he runs into the Big Two in the quarterfinals, Rune should advance to his first US Open semifinal.

Daniil Medvedev: He's nicknamed "The Octopus" for his gangly 6'6" frame and long arms that seem to encircle and defuse enemy shots and send them back. But has The Great Defender been exposed as The Great Pretender?

A favourable draw would help No. 3 Medvedev reach the semis, but he could easily get upset before then.

Stefanos Tsitsipas: Despite ranking in the top six for the past four years and winning 10 tournaments (five on hard courts), Tsitsipas, still only 25, has plateaued.

Stunningly, the handsome Greek hasn't defeated a top-15 player this year.

What's gone wrong? Although Tsitsipas boasts one of the best volleys on the ATP Tour and a powerful serve, his loopy, non-penetrating one-handed backhand too often breaks down on serve returns, passing shots, and long rallies. To compound the problem, his tactics are flawed.

Tsitsipas's tactics have failed miserably at the US Open, where he's won only five matches in five appearances. Unless he swallows his pride and changes a losing game, he won't make it to the quarterfinals.

Casper Ruud: The 24-year-old Norwegian's last name belies his mild-mannered personality. Casper said his goal is to go his entire career without smashing a racket. There was no chance of that in 2022 when he enjoyed a career year. Ruud made the French and US Open finals and captured clay-court titles at Gstaad, Geneva, and Buenos Aires.

Instead of taking a much-needed rest in December, Ruud and his good friend Nadal went on a lucrative exhibition tour in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Bolivia. All the matches wore him out because this season he's often faltered—aside from reaching the Roland Garros final again.

With a confidence-sapping 5-6 record on hard courts this year (as of August 6) and improved young guns like Rune and Sinner to fend off, Ruud likely won't get past the quarters.

Alexander Zverev: "It's been the hardest year of my life." After he defeated Frances Tiafoe in the French Open third round, Zverev recalled the horrendous ankle injury

TENNIS THRIVES ON RIVALRIES, ESPECIALLY BETWEEN ICONIC CHAMPIONS. NOVAK DJOKOVIC, RAFAEL NADAL, AND ROGER FEDERER PRODUCED THREE OF THE GREATEST RIVALRIES IN TENNIS HISTORY

Same old guard, same old zeal: French Open champion Novak Djokovic may have lost to Carlos Alcaraz in the Wimbledon final, but that does not diminish the threat he will pose in New York. Djokovic will be eyeing a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam. GETTY IMAGES

he suffered a year earlier in the semis against Nadal and his long rehabilitation.

"I love tennis more than anything in the world," the 26-year-old German said. "I don't play for the money or the fame; I play for the pure sport. I play for competitiveness, and I love being in front of [the crowd]. Being away from that, having that taken away from me... I'm so happy to be playing these big battles again."

After No. 4 Ruud demolished Zverev at the French Open in June, one stat revealed the latter's predicament: He's only 1-13 versus top-10 opponents at majors (versus 41 top-10 wins in best 2-of-3-set matches). If Zverev plays the big points aggressively, he'll make the quarters.

Novak Djokovic: Chris Evert knows how Djokovic must feel after Spanish sensation Alcaraz thwarted the Serb's bid for a record-tying eighth Wimbledon crown, a record-extending 24th major title, and a rare Grand Slam this year. "Novak's got someone to deal with now, for sure," Evert, an 18-time major singles champion, told The New York Times. "It's like when Steffi Graf came up and started beating me and Martina [Navratilova]. We saw right away how good she was, and she went on to win more Slams than either of us."

After romping to the French Open title in June, Djokovic said, "36 is the new 26." He'll get another chance to prove that on Sunday, September 10. The bet here is that, once again, youth will trump experience.

Carlos Alcaraz: "It's great for the new generation to see me beating him and making them think that they are capable of doing it," Alcaraz said after upsetting Djokovic in the dramatic, five-set Wimbledon final.

Those encouraging words reflect Alcaraz's generous spirit because he's a sui generis champion, as Djokovic was quick to acknowledge. "I haven't played a player like him ever, to be honest," Djokovic said. "Roger and Rafa have their strengths and weaknesses. Carlos is a very complete player."

Alcaraz will make us smile aplenty this fortnight at Flushing Meadows as he captures his second US Open and third Grand Slam crown.

Dark Horses: Andrey Rublev, Arthur Fils, Christopher Eubanks, Jiri Lehecka, and Sebastian Korda

WOMEN — MUSICAL CHAIR

"It's like watching a movie, and you don't know what's going to happen. That's the beauty of tennis." — Ons Jabeur

What happened to the so-called Big Three of women's tennis? When Elena Rybakina won the 2022 Wimbledon and Aryna Sabalenka won the 2023 Australian Open, defeating Rybakina in the final, these tall power hitters created a new trio, joining No. 1-ranked Iga Swiatek at the top of the sport. Or so we thought.

Let's take a close look at the Big Three and their likely challengers, and then predict the champion.

Coco Gauff: Since making her only Grand Slam final at the French Open last year, The Great American Hope has had mixed results. Gauff, still only 19, failed to advance past the quarters at a major, but she edged Sabalenka and Rybakina—both by 7-6 in the third set—at Toronto in 2022 and won titles at Auckland and Washington, D.C., this season.

After a disappointing first-round loss at Wimbledon, Coco rebounded in Washington with resounding victories over Olympic gold medalist Belinda Bencic 6-1, 6-2, defending champion Liudmila Samsonova 6-3, 6-3, and No. 9 Maria Sakkari 6-2, 6-3.

Gauff has a new team of full-time coach Pere Riba and temporary consultant Brad Gilbert, who is renowned for igniting Andre Agassi to greatness. They've improved her serve and forehand, told her to take more time between points when she's struggling, and convinced her to play more aggressively.

Don't be surprised if the new and relaxed Gauff, inspired by roaring, partisan fans at Flushing Meadows, reaches the semifinals.

A worthy challenger: Alexander Zverev has what it takes to impress at the US Open. If he plays the big points aggressively, he'll make the quarters.
GETTY IMAGES

"I DON'T PLAY FOR THE MONEY OR THE FAME; I PLAY FOR THE PURE SPORT" – ALEXANDER ZVEREV

Jessica Pegula: "I would love to crash the big three party, if possible. That would be definitely a goal," said world No. 3 Pegula. To achieve that, the 29-year-old American would have to fare much better at the majors, where she's never gone past the quarterfinals in six attempts. That Pegula has captured only two WTA titles also reflects her relatively low ceiling.

Pegula's tennis idol was Martina Hingis, the best tactician in women's tennis history. She would do well to emulate Hingis—also 5'7" and a nondescript server—by using more variety and deception. That means more drop shots, angles, changes of pace, and net approaches.

Until Pegula expands her game plan, expect more quarterfinal finishes at majors.

Ons Jabeur: "My game reflects my character," Jabeur told ESPN during her run to the Wimbledon final. "I don't like routine. I like to entertain the crowd." The smiling sorceress from Tunisia defuses and discombobulates rivals with an audacious array of trick shots like tweeners and touch shots like drop volleys and drop shots.

Jabeur—who reached the US Open final a year ago without beating a top-15 opponent—may become the first Tunisian and Arab to win a major. But it won't happen on hard courts. A fourth-round (or earlier) loss is more likely this year.

Elina Svitolina: "I think having a child, war, has made me a different person," the 28-year-old Ukrainian said after upsetting No. 1 seed, Swiatek, 7-5, 6-7 (5-7), 6-2 in the Wimbledon quarterfinals. "Mentally, I don't take situations as disasters. There are worse things in life. I'm just calmer."

Although Svitolina rose to a career-high No. 3 in 2017, she'd never reached the final at a major. While she had no glaring weaknesses, she possessed no

GAUFF HAS A NEW TEAM OF FULL-TIME COACH PERE RIBA AND TEMPORARY CONSULTANT BRAD GILBERT, RENOWNED FOR IGNITING ANDRE AGASSI TO GREATNESS

exceptional weapons either.

So, Svitolina added more power to her sound groundstrokes and serves—she smacked eight aces against Swiatek—and variety to her relentlessly consistent but predictable game. Her newfound aggression and the joys of motherhood could take Svitolina to another major semifinal.

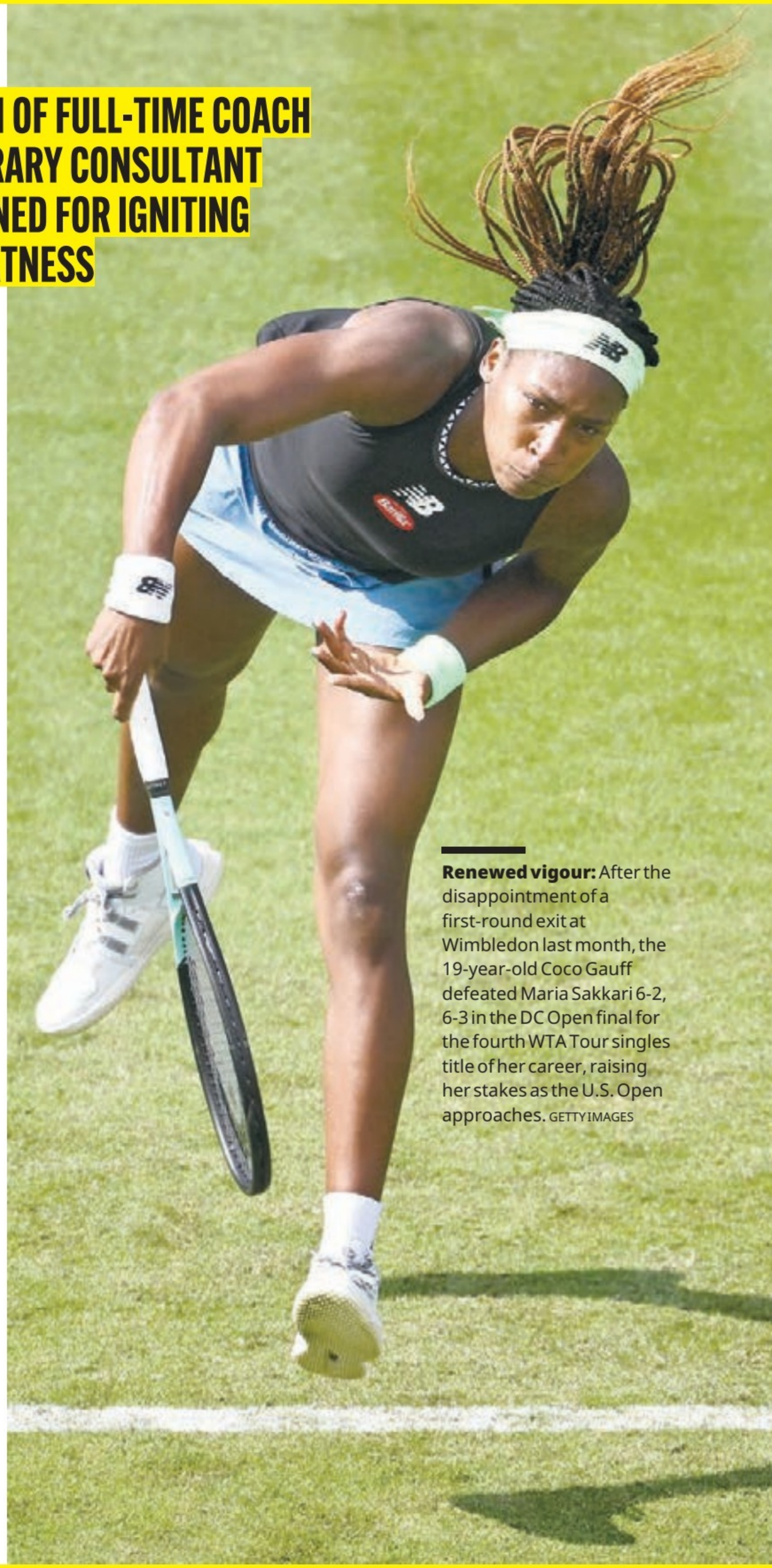
Karolina Muchova: At her athletic, versatile best, the late-blooming Muchova reminds this observer of a combination of fellow Czech Hana Mandlikova—a four-time major winner in the 1980s—and former No. 1 Ashleigh Barty.

The 26-year-old Czech finally started fulfilling her great potential at the French Open in June, where Muchova knocked out No. 8 seed Sakkari 7-6 (5), 7-5 in the first round and stunned No. 2 seed Sabalenka 7-6 (5), 6-7 (5), 7-5 in the semis.

Muchova showed those wins weren't flukes when she nearly upset Swiatek, the Queen of Clay, in a rousing, fluctuating final. After breaking serve for 4-3 in the deciding set, Muchova sabotaged her chances with a bad drop shot error to lose her serve for 4-all and a double fault on championship point to lose 6-2, 5-7, 6-4.

Despite her lacklustre 7-5 career record at Flushing Meadows, Muchova will reach at least the round of 16 and perhaps much farther this year.

Iga Swiatek: Besides the best forehand in women's tennis, blazing speed, and intense concentration, what makes Swiatek, a four-time major winner at age 22, the No. 1 player in the world?



Renewed vigour: After the disappointment of a first-round exit at Wimbledon last month, the 19-year-old Coco Gauff defeated Maria Sakkari 6-2, 6-3 in the DC Open final for the fourth WTA Tour singles title of her career, raising her stakes as the U.S. Open approaches. GETTY IMAGES

AT WIMBLEDON SEMIFINAL, SABALENKA LED JABEUR 7-6, 4-3, 40-30 ONLY TO FALL APART WITH TWO UNFORCED ERRORS AND A DOUBLE FAULT. SHE EVENTUALLY LOST 6-7, 6-4, 6-3

"If I coached a junior player, I'd advise her to look at Iga Swiatek's footwork," said former No. 1 Caroline Wozniacki, a Tennis Channel analyst who recently returned to competition after a three-year layoff. "She's moving [constantly] to adjust to offense or defense on every point."

At Wimbledon, however, low-bouncing slices bedevilled her Western forehand and two-handed backhand.

She lacked either the versatility or the tactical awareness to change a losing game in her upset loss to Svitolina.

Swiatek is terrific in tournament finals—15-4 overall and 4-0 at Grand Slam events. But the defending champion won't make it to this final.

Aryna Sabalenka: Reminder messages abound for Sabalenka to heed. Her coach, Anton Dubrov, wears a T-shirt that says, "Improvise, Adapt, Overcome." Sabalenka has a large tiger tattoo on her forearm. How well the sometimes tactically inflexible and emotionally fragile Belarusian summons these attributes usually determines her fate.

Staying focussed: How well the sometimes tactically inflexible and emotionally fragile Aryna Sabalenka improvises and adapts usually determines her fate. GETTY IMAGES

Exhibit A: At the Australian Open in January, Sabalenka finally exorcised her demons as a choking underachiever. She shrugged off the scar tissue from three disappointing major semifinals—losing them all 6-4 in the third set—to beat Magda Linette 7-6, 6-2 in the Melbourne semis. Then the heavy-hitting Belarusian rebounded from a slow start to vanquish Rybakina 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 for her first Grand Slam title.

Exhibits B and C: Ghosts of past semifinal collapses haunted Sabalenka at the French Open and Wimbledon. At Paris, Karolina Muchova trailed 2-5, love-30 in the deciding set, but Sabalenka's unforced groundstroke errors in that game and two costly double faults at 5-5 helped Muchova prevail 7-6 (5), 6-7 (5), 7-5. In another psychodrama at Wimbledon, Aryna led Jabeur 7-6, 4-3, 40-30 only to fall apart with two unforced errors and a double fault. She eventually lost 6-7, 6-4, 6-3.

Which Sabalenka will show up at the US Open? The best version. But even that won't be good enough, and she'll lose a three-set thriller in the final.

Elena Rybakina: "She's an amazing player," Jabeur said during Wimbledon. "You can see she's like 'boom boom' all the time! There's no mercy with her."

The 24-year-old Kazakh doesn't have Swiatek's speed or Jabeur's finesse, but she seldom needs these assets because she's on the offense so much.

Rybakina has more than enough weapons and an ideal temperament to win her second major title before boisterous—and sometimes raucous—crowds at Flushing Meadows.

Dark Horses: Jennifer Brady, Liudmila Samsonova, Mirra Andreeva, Quiwen Zheng, and Alycia Parks

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

BAI's 'dream' National Centre of Excellence in Guwahati

In a major boost for the development of Indian badminton, Badminton Association of India (BAI) inaugurated the state-of-the-art National Centre of Excellence in Guwahati, Assam.

The MoU was signed between BAI and the Government of Assam, unfolding a historic chapter for India sports during the launch event.

The ceremony was attended by various dignitaries including Assam CM and BAI President Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Olympics champion badminton legend Taufik Hidayat, chief coach of Indian team Pullela Gopichand, and members of the historic Thomas Cup-winning team.

The NCE boasts of an array of world-class facilities, including 16 courts designed to meet training needs of 60 athletes in phase 1. In addition, the centre features a 4,000 sq ft gymnasium with modern fitness equipment, a 60-bed hostel for players, and a dedicated 2,000 sq ft physiotherapy centre to ensure the athletes receive utmost care and support to maintain their peak performance.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

SPORTOON

Holistic development: *Sportstar* Editor Ayon Sengupta presents the white paper on the Paradigm Shift in Sports Focus Uttar Pradesh to the UP Sports Secretary Suhas Lalinakere Yathiraj. Suhas, an Arjun Awardee, had won silver at the Tokyo Paralympics in 2021. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

Unleashing true potential through intelligent training

Aspiring athletes must **tailor their own programmes,** avoiding critical mistakes and embracing holistic approaches to reach their true potential and achieve athletic greatness.

In a world where athletic achievements are celebrated and revered, many aspiring athletes find themselves on a quest to achieve greatness. However, it's ironic that so many of them make critical mistakes when it comes to training and recovery. These mistakes hinder their progress, preventing them from reaching their full potential and realising their dreams.

Here are a few examples:

1. Blindly following someone else's training programme just because that person is successful

2. The same training programme being followed for far too long without challenging the body and mind

3. Simply performing your particular sport and exercise regime at a lower intensity and calling it training

4. Wrong exercise pattern or movements not specific to on-field transfer

5. Reading and reacting to the wrong end of the workload management data crunched

6. Not able to understand the exercise prescription for particular skill and sport

7. Wrong choice of exercise to the skill and sport and expecting transfer

8. Focusing on one aspect of fitness than taking a holistic approach on the need for sport and skill

9. Low on Laws of Diminishing Returns (SAID principle)

10. Not able to test themselves when it's required to understand which component of fitness needs to be improved or maintained

'One man's food is another man's poison'— Taking a cue from this, one needs to be intelligent enough to not follow someone else's programme, especially if it is designed to take into account one's strengths and weaknesses. Following someone else's programme can move you ahead for some distance, but it's never going to help you reach your goal and true potential. The key, therefore, is a programme.

There is another familiar mantra of 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it!' There's a time and place for this thinking, but I guarantee that the 18-year-old version of oneself is a very altered athlete when compared to the 30-year-old version of oneself, and if you keep pushing your body in exactly the same way as your younger self, you will break down, needing a lot of fixing.

In most athletes, particularly fast bowlers, soccer players, racers, etc., the energy demand is tuned to a particular energy system, therefore 95% of their training should involve only strength or running, sprinting, etc. One needs to condition the body to perform for hours at a time, but if the focus is not on weaknesses specific to a sport and skill, then what is the training actually about and how can performance be enhanced?

If your stamina is poor, you need an exhaustive programme to strengthen yourself, both physically

and emotionally, for times of crisis.

If your explosive power is weak, you need plyometrics and full-body movements that ignite the muscle fibres in your body.

One does not need to deviate completely from the sport of choice. Training your movement with a multi-directional approach specific to skill and favoured sport is not rocket science.

So what do you need?

Sincere analysis and understanding of the programme are essential to see improvement from an athlete's point of view. Set goals, and if they do not bring the desired results, scrap the programme.

As understood by all professional Strength & Conditioning (S&C) coaches and support staff, adaptable athletes have more chance of being successful. Adapting to the imposed demand is akin to gold in programme design.

Understand what sport-related success looks like and determine what qualities you need to train. Working backward from the desired results and taking a step back and analysing the goal would be a better choice than surging ahead mindlessly with the programme by seeing benefits only in the gym and not on the field — especially transfer.

How training can transfer over to performance?

While most of your training should be specific to skill, a certain percentage of your training can be devoted to general conditioning, depending on the need of the athlete and the season. However, this comes with a caveat in choosing exercises that can transfer over during performance potential.

Strength training might seem unnecessary for some sports, but it will strengthen certain muscle groups to reduce the risk of injury on the field and increase robustness. Here one has to be mindful in loads of parameters before embarking on a programme.

Each sport comes with its positives and defects. Here's a simple example — athletes need to be aware of what their training and competition is doing to their body and correct any issues with appropriate training protocols that develop the anterior or posterior compartment set of muscles to reduce the risk of injury and prolong their career. Management of their workload with sensible data inference can boost performance and avoid injuries and extend their professional career.

High-performance athletes should inculcate a proper programme with correct energy systems and develop the most important muscle groups for their sport and skill movements.

For example, a fast bowler focusing on increasing the pace of the ball should use the training room as a golden opportunity to enhance performance with proper biomechanical analysis and net sessions. The training for pace bowlers requires a huge amount of force production/reduction training per delivery stride, back foot landing, front foot landing and post-delivery stride. Therefore, an athlete can focus on the posterior muscles diagonally on the back and shoulders to compensate the sport-specific demands.

At times, training agonist muscles in the field while training the antagonistic muscles at the gym is one of the ways in correcting any flaws and overcompensation that might occur.

Understand your sport, yourself and your position

Different strokes for different folks — players in the same sport can have different purposes and roles on the field. While teams enjoy the camaraderie of training together, all athletes need to train according to their purpose.

For example — a fast bowler has different styles of bowling based on unique skills, injury history, genetic predispositions and specific strengths and weakness.

It's of paramount importance to create training programmes that accommodate all these variables with no scope for error or experimentation. I believe that technical skills belong on the field and are up to the discretion of their coach. But other mechanical skills such as strength, speed, mobility, flexibility, and stamina can be greatly improved with the right approach with strength and conditioning.

When all the physical metrics fire in tandem, the athletes know that the training works and feel confident of reaching a new shift.

The right training programme will always take your game to the next level, one need to find a great S&C coach to create this.

To each their own: Following someone else's program can move you ahead for some distance, but it's never going to help you reach your goal and true potential. GETTY IMAGES

Empathy is important

What is lacking in 'fans' is compassion and the recognition that those who run, jump, kick a ball, or basket one are all humans.

Suresh Menon

Elite athletes — even those who are extremely sociable — often build barriers between themselves and their so-called adoring public. It is not that they are addicted to music or podcasts, but they are often seen in aircrafts and hotel lobbies with earphones. One reason for this is the amount of unsolicited advice they attract from fans who have all the answers.

They are at their most vulnerable in aircrafts, where the passenger walking past who once made 10 runs in his backyard feels compelled to tell a Virat Kohli just how to alter his forward defence or Rohit Sharma when to bring in a bowling change. Such cases are usually handled politely, although I once heard a player say softly and decisively, "Thank you sir, I will now change my coach and follow what you say."

In recent years, the word 'criticism' has split into two. There is criticism from the professional critic who has spent a lifetime studying, understanding, and writing or speaking about a sport and its players, and from the amateur troll for whom social media is a godsend to express mostly unwarranted vilification. And mostly anonymously.

There is a vast gulf between the two, and the effort at all times must be to keep the distance, not shrink it until they are indistinguishable from each other. 'Click bait', that nemesis of good intelligent writing, cannot decide the direction criticism must take.

Modern players have psychologists who advise them on handling both types without losing their equanimity or sanity. Sometimes the professional critic sounds like the worst troll as he searches for reasons beyond the game for what went wrong with a performance.

Transformation: Sometimes criticism fires up a player. Navjot Singh Sidhu has spoken about how 'Strokeless Wonder', a newspaper headline about his batting, inspired him into becoming a six-hitter.

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The right to criticise is seen as a fundamental right since a player is a public figure and his profession is a public performance. As a race, we are all critics, with opinions waiting to burst out.

The players are young and hardly have the life experience to handle abuse and ensure it doesn't affect their mental health. This is especially true of those in individual sports like tennis, and truer still of women, who seem to attract the worst of the trolls.

What is lacking in 'fans' is compassion and the recognition that those who run, jump, kick a ball, or basket one are all humans.

In the media, there is often competitive criticism, which aligns with the love for amateurish pop psychology to explain the 'why' of an event and reduces things to meaningless bauble.

A dropped catch is just a dropped catch and has nothing to do with a fielder being unloved as a child or having a complex about not finishing at the top of his class in school.

Sometimes criticism fires up a player. Navjot Singh Sidhu has spoken about how 'Strokeless Wonder', a newspaper headline about his batting, inspired him into becoming a six-hitter. Reporters working against deadlines don't always think about the effect their judgements might have on a player, especially one who is just starting out. But empathy is important.

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