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**POSTER**

**ARYNA SABALENKA**

INDIAN SUPER LEAGUE

Looking  
ahead to  
Season 11

INDIA-BANGLADESH TESTS

All eyes on  
the WTC  
points table

KRISHAN PATHAK

India's new  
Wall in Blue

## » A NEW SUMIT FOR INDIA

With 29 medals, including seven golds, India finished its campaign at the Paris Paralympics on a record high





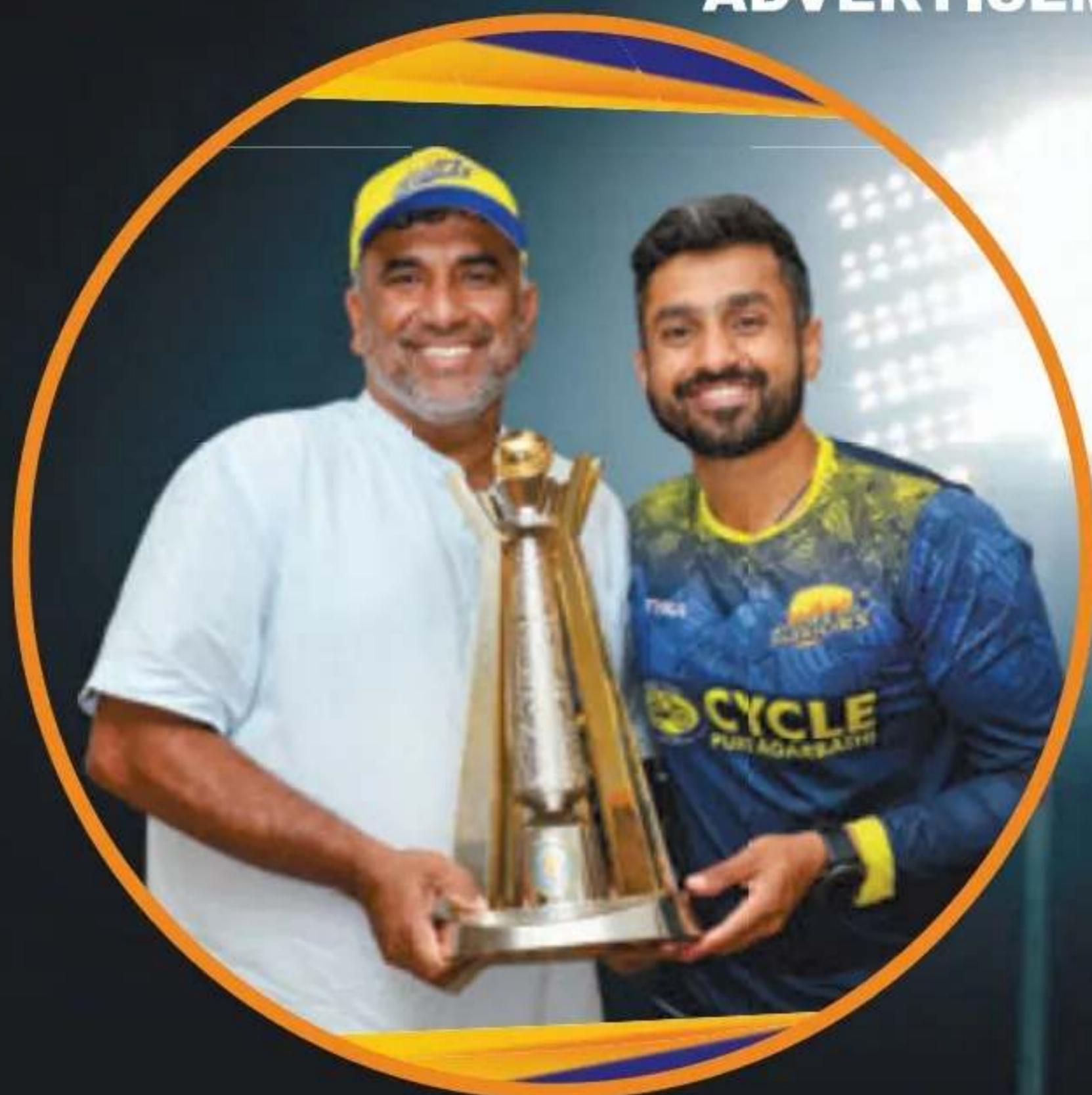
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Setting a three-peat target for LA 2028

Cover: Sumit Antil (Getty Images)

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## OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta

sportstar@thehindu.co.in



# THE TWILIGHT OF SPORTING GREATNESS

For the **first time in over two decades**, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi are absent from the Ballon d'Or nominees. Meanwhile, in tennis, it's only the first time since 2002 that no member of the Big Three has won a Grand Slam title in the same year.

**I**t seems even the gods of sport, much like that jar of pickles at the back of the fridge, are not immune to the slow, inevitable expiry of greatness.

In football, the once unthinkable has happened: the 2024 Ballon d'Or longlist is conspicuously lacking the names of Messi and Ronaldo. The two footballing titans, whose reign outlasted many British Prime Ministers, have been on that list for the last two decades, winning 13 of the 19 trophies.

**But time spares no one — not even the GOATs.**

Meanwhile, in tennis, Jannik Sinner ended an era with his US Open victory. 2024 will be the first time since 2002 that not a single member of the "Big Three" (Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic) will have a Grand Slam title to their name. Thomas Johansson, Albert Costa, Lleyton Hewitt and Pete Sampras were the four champions 22 years ago and the current winners, Sinner was just a year old, while Alcaraz was yet to be born.

In case you weren't keeping score, Federer (20), Nadal (22) and Djokovic (24) have hoarded 66 Grand Slams between them.

**In 85 Grand Slam tournaments between Wimbledon 2003 — the first of Federer's 20 Slam wins — and 2024, a member of this trinity has featured in 75 finals.** The 10 misses came at the 2005 and 2024 Australian Open; 2004, and 2024 French Open; the 2016 Wimbledon; and the 2003, 2014, 2020, 2022, and 2024 US Open.

Djokovic's shocking third-round defeat to Alexei Popyrin in New York recently handed the Serbian a Slam-less season for the first time since 2017. The 23-year-old Sinner's second Slam title at Flushing Meadows marks only the third time — and the first since 1993 — that the four Majors of the year were won by

players aged 23 and under since the Open Era began in 1968.

The 30-man Ballon d'Or list, meanwhile, is led by fresh-faced prodigies like Jude Bellingham, 21, and a trio of 24-year-olds in Erling Haaland, Phil Foden and Vinicius Jr. And then there is Barcelona and Spain's Lamine Yamal, who, at 17 years and 53 days, has become the youngest-ever nominee to France Football magazine's annual list.

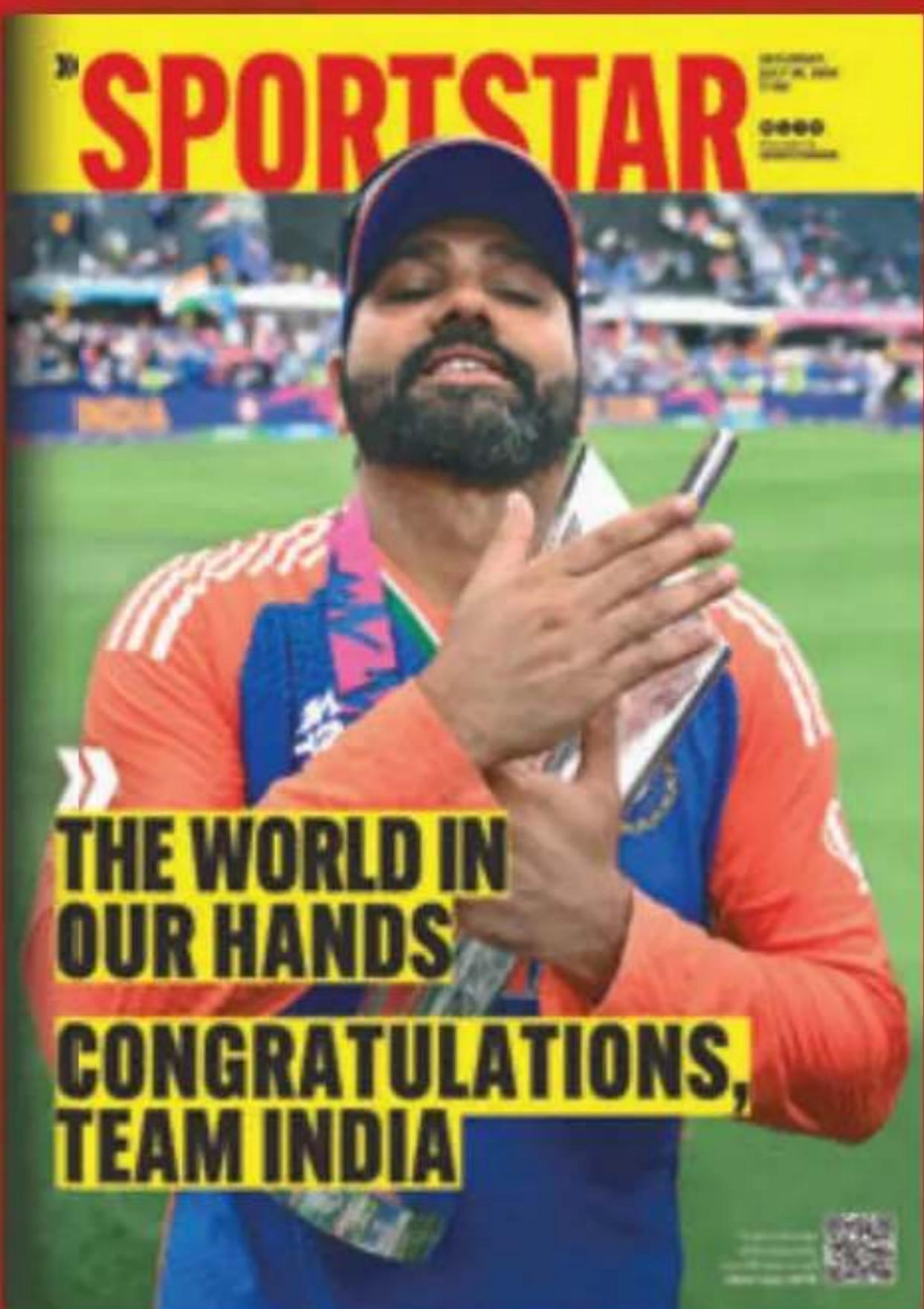
"I want to leave a mark in world football. Being among the 30 finalists for the Ballon d'Or and a top candidate for the Kopa Trophy at 17 is a dream. I'm the youngest in history to achieve this, and it motivates me even more," said Yamal, who shattered Pele's 66-year record as the youngest player at a major championship final when he starred for Spain against England at Euro 2024.

**Back home, the end of an era is sneaking upon us as Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli — for long India's batting mainstays — inch towards the twilight of their remarkable careers.** After bowing out from T20Is with a triumphant World Cup win in the US and Caribbean, their time with the national team might be ticking down to its final moments.

India has won 61.11 per cent of matches (393 of the 643) that either Kohli or Rohit or both have played. The winning percentage goes up to 63.002% when both have played while falling to 57.71% when neither has played.

Maybe, just maybe, a last hurrah awaits them at next year's ICC Champions Trophy, set for February-March, across the border in Pakistan.

As for Ronaldo and Djokovic, a record-extending goal or another Grand Slam title still seems as inevitable as a Monday morning after a rushed weekend.



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# HOW CULTURE OF TOGETHERNESS AND RESPECT DRIVES MYSORE WARRIOR'S SUCCESS

**Arjun Ranga**, MD of Cycle Pure Agarbathi, and the owner of Mysore Warriors which won the Maharaja Trophy KSCA T20 tournament, discusses the ethos driving his team.



The city of Mysuru rejoiced when the Mysore Warriors defeated the Bengaluru Blasters in the final to emerge as champion of the Maharaja Trophy KSCA T20 tournament at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru.

There were star performers aplenty. Captain Karun Nair finished as the highest run-scorer of the tournament and was ably supported by S.U. Karthik and Manoj Bhandage with the bat. The bowling attack was tremendous as well. Pacers Vidyadhar Patil and C.A. Karthik were unstoppable, as were experienced spinners K. Gowtham and J. Suchith.

The Mysore Warriors was guided by a top-quality coaching staff, including head coach Rx Muralidhar, assistant coach

Vijay Madyalkar, and bowling coach Adithya Sagar.

The champion side paid a visit to Mysore Palace and interacted with the Maharaja of Mysore, Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar.

Mysore Warriors's team owner Arjun Ranga believes that this victory has been a long time coming. Arjun, the Managing Director of Cycle Pure Agarbathi, spoke about establishing the right culture to nurture success.

"A lot of things have fallen into place — getting the right players, team culture, coaching



staff, and captain. Preparation and training are as important as performing in matches. We had a clear role for every player. Our team is built on a foundation of mutual respect and a shared commitment to hard work. These core values has helped us cultivate a culture of collaboration and excellence," Arjun said.

"Our campaign began with the divine blessings of Goddess Chamundeshwari in Mysuru, and after our victory, we visited the Chamundeshwari Temple to express our gratitude and offer our prayers," Arjun added.

Arjun explained the importance of creating an atmosphere where every player feels valued, whether he is a senior or junior.

"In our team, we have youngsters playing white-ball cricket for



the first time; we have cricketers who have played for India; and we have cricketers who have featured in IPL title-winning teams. The squad is a delicate mix. We created an atmosphere where everyone feels equally important. That is what makes a winning team. The seniors take responsibility for making the younger players comfortable. It takes a lot of effort to bring about this culture. I also attend all practice sessions and ensure fairness along with the coaches," Arjun said.

The team has built a strong connection with the city of Mysuru, with talent hunts held in both Bengaluru and Mysuru. Two players — Kishan Bedare and Gautham Sagar — were selected through these talent hunts.

"We always believe in giving equal opportunities. We conduct talent hunts very seriously. The players who are

selected get the opportunity to be part of the squad and play matches. This is a very critical aspect of improving grassroots-level cricket. We have the best fan base, on social media and otherwise. The reception for our title win from the people of Mysuru has been tremendous," Arjun said.

Arjun also spoke about the ethos of the sport imbibed through his company, Cycle Pure Agarbathi. "As a company, we believe sport builds character and a strong nation. As a prayer brand, we want to be associated with occasions where the nation prays. India prays during cricket matches, and India prays with Cycle Pure Agarbathi.

We also support young sportspersons from Mysuru. We promote young tennis players, golfers, and others, helping them excel. Our grandfather started our company in Mysuru in 1948, and he always wanted to give back to the city," Arjun said.





APP

## Mondo beats Karsten in exhibition sprint, clocks 10.37s

Pole vaulter Mondo Duplantis, who is rarely defeated, took on 400m hurdler Karsten Warholm in an eagerly anticipated 100-metre exhibition race in Zurich, bringing the two world record holders together in a neutral event. Duplantis had an explosive start and clocked an impressive 10.37 seconds, while Warholm followed with a time of 10.47.

"I'm pretty fired up. How could I not be? I mean, come on, stop playing. Stop playing. Stop playing with me," Duplantis enthusiastically exclaimed at the finish line.

The race stemmed from some friendly banter

between the athletes during training last year. Once the sprint was officially set after the conclusion of the Paris Olympics, it captured the attention of athletics fans worldwide.

In a grand entrance reminiscent of boxers entering the ring, Duplantis sported a blue satin robe, while Warholm wore red. The buildup to the race included plenty of playful trash talk and banter between the two friends.

They exchanged handshakes before shedding their robes and heading to the starting blocks. Duplantis surged ahead early, leaving Warholm unable to close the gap.



“What we are now exploring is using modern technology, like AI (Artificial Intelligence) to make judging more transparent.” – World Boxing president Boris van der Vorst



“After I lost my father, it has always been my goal to put our family name in the history of tennis. Every time I see my name on that trophy, I’m so proud of myself. I’m proud of my family that they never gave up on my dream.” – U.S. Open women’s winner Aryna Sabalenka

## 2026

In a first, the 2026 Asian Games, to be staged in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, will not have a Games Village, and the athletes will be accommodated in hotels and cruise ships instead. In his address during the 44th General Assembly of the Olympic Council of Asia, former Japan Olympic Committee president Tsunekazu Takeda (**in pic**) informed that the event, to be co-hosted by the Aichi Prefecture and the city of Nagoya, will have no Olympic village.

“We will not have the

Games Village as the Games will be held in two prefectures. Instead, we are trying our best to accommodate athletes and dignitaries in hotels and cruise ships,” Takeda said. “We have arranged for cruise ships for 4,000 athletes and officials besides hotel rooms,” added Takeda, the vice president of the 2026 Asian Games.



## 4-yr ban

Pakistani wrestler Ali Asad has been stripped of his bronze medal in the Commonwealth Games after testing positive for using performance enhancing drugs. The Pakistan Wrestling Federation confirmed that Asad had not only been banned for four years but also stripped of his bronze, which he won in the 2022 Birmingham CWG.

“His tests carried out by the International Testing Agency (ITA) have confirmed he took performance enhancing drugs during the event,” an official said.

## TWO-IN-TWO!



**Kensei Hirata of Japan poses with the trophy** after his victory in the Asian Tour’s Shinhan Donghae Open golf tournament at Club72 Country Club in Incheon. The Japanese held off a inspired Travis Smyth to win by a stroke — his second victory in as many weeks. AFP

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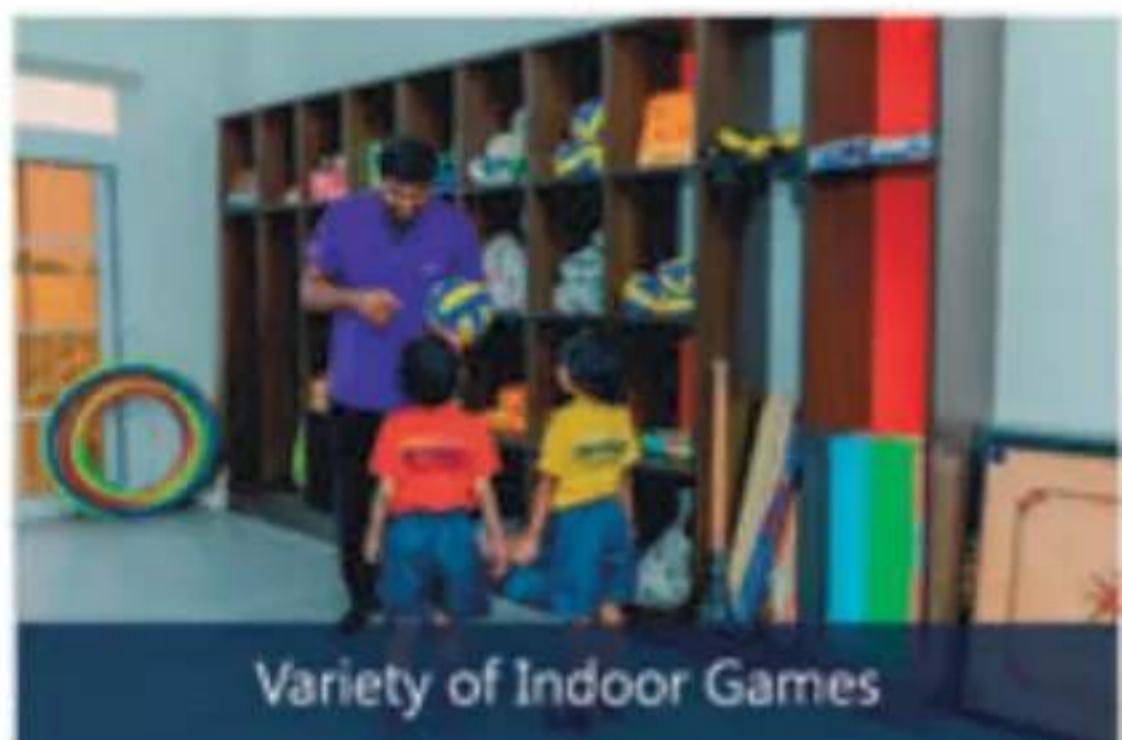
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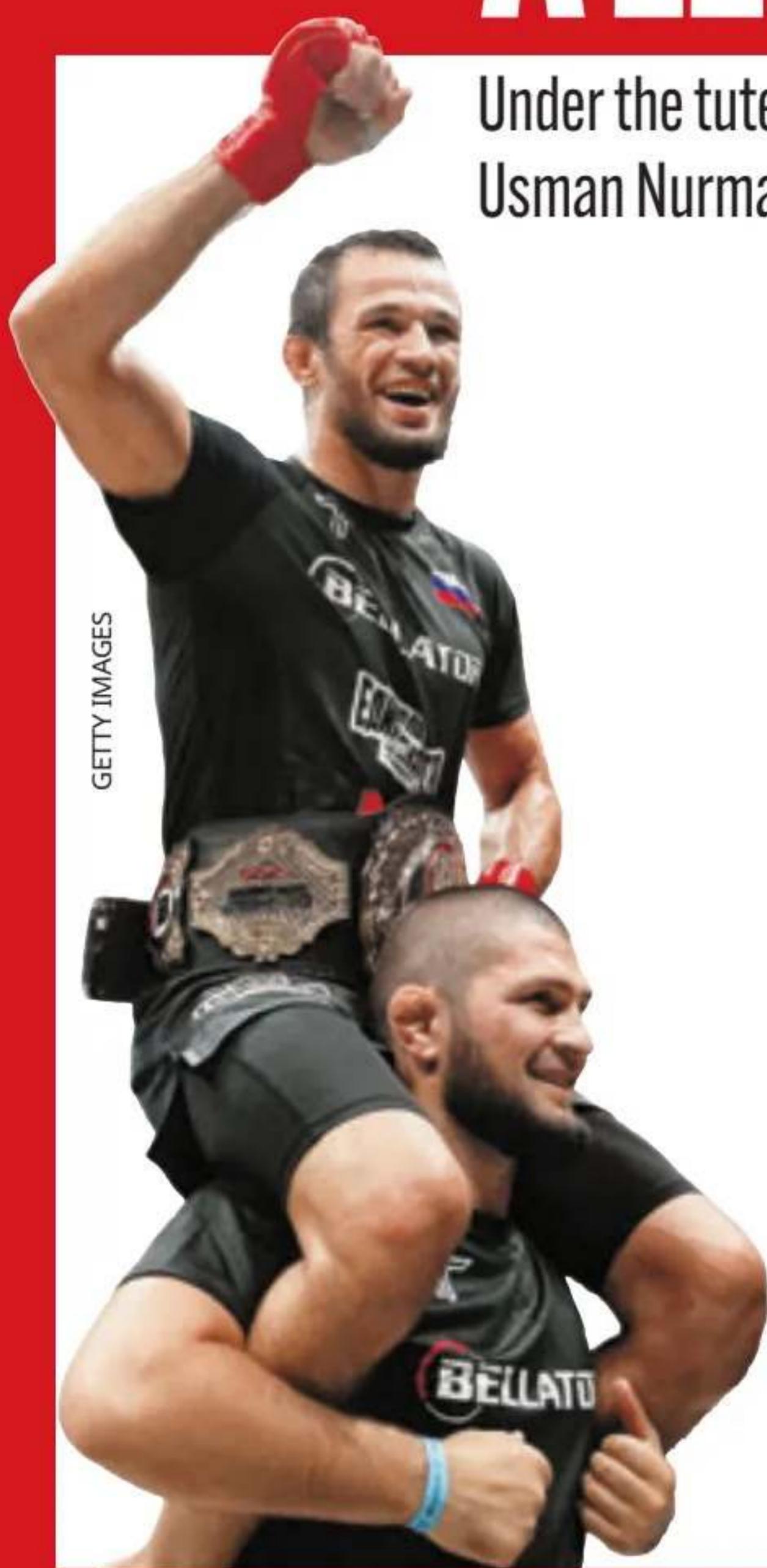


## » FIGHT CLUB



# A LEGACY TO UPHOLD

Under the tutelage of the late Abdulmanap Nurmagomedov and UFC legend Khabib, Usman Nurmagomedov has been **turning heads** since his Bellator debut in 2021.



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

The Ultimate Fighting Championship is often considered the pinnacle of mixed martial arts, with every MMA fighter either training toward or having a long-term plan to make it into the promotion.

However, Usman Nurmagomedov (**above, left**) seems to stand out from the crowd.

'Nurmagomedov' is one of the most influential surnames in the UFC due to the legacy created by Khabib (**left, carrying Usman**) and the efforts of his cousin Umar. This could easily serve as Usman's ticket into the championship, but he

remains disparate.

Under the tutelage of the late Abdulmanap Nurmagomedov and Khabib — a retired, undefeated lightweight champion in his own right — Usman has been turning heads since his debut in Bellator (a promotion similar to the UFC) in 2021.

He claimed the Bellator Lightweight Championship with a decision win over Patricky Pitbull at Bellator 288 in November 2022. He then successfully retained his belt with a victory over Benson Henderson, followed by a no contest (win overturned) against former champion Brent Primus. So far, he remains unbeaten, boasting 18 wins, including eight knockouts and six submissions.



Usman's latest success in Bellator came against Alexander Shabliy. Shabliy's MMA journey began with karate, and he later added boxing and Muay Thai into his skill set at a young age. With a 5-0 record in the Bellator cage, including wins over Bobby King Primus and another former champion, Patricky Pitbull, Shabliy was a formidable contender heading into his fight with Usman at Bellator 301.

Despite the build-up, the duel lacked action and excitement, with Nurmagomedov prevailing through a tactical approach, using his punches and kicks. The score read 50-45, 49-46, 49-46 in his favour.

The 26-year-old Nurmagomedov described his Russian opponent as "such a tough guy". He added, "I am happy with my victory and want to defend my title next in Dubai."

If the champion defeats Paul Hughes in their upcoming October match, AJ McKee, a former Bellator featherweight champion, could be his next challenger.

While he may add another feather to his Bellator cap, will he eventually make his way to the UFC? Only time will tell.

#### Sean Brady walks the talk

In the final bout at UFC APEX, Sean Brady defeated former championship challenger Gilbert Burns via unanimous decision, marking the biggest victory of his career.

Throughout the five rounds, Burns landed a few clean shots, but Brady, based in Philadelphia, was the more active fighter. He utilised a combination of well-timed strikes and patient punches to outmanoeuvre the Brazilian veteran. For most of the fight, Brady dictated the pace, setting the terms of engagement and proving to be the more effective fighter overall. Anytime Burns gained momentum, Brady worked to close the distance and regain control.

The three judges scored the bout in favour of Brady, who has now won three consecutive fights after

**No match:** Sean Brady (right) utilised a combination of well-timed strikes and patient punches to outmanoeuvre Gilbert Burns in the final bout at UFC APEX. GETTY IMAGES

suffering his only career defeat to current champion Belal Muhammad in Abu Dhabi two years ago. After this victory over the battle-tested Burns, combined with his impressive performance against Kelvin Gastelum last year, Brady should be in title contention in the fiercely competitive welterweight division.

Meanwhile, the all-Brazilian flyweight clash between Natalia Silva and Jessica Andrade lived up to its billing, with Silva claiming the biggest win of her career in the co-main event.

With her unanimous decision victory, Silva moved to 6-0 inside the Octagon, extending her overall winning streak to 12 and establishing herself as a top contender.

# SUMIT ANTIL SETS THREE-PEAT TARGET FOR LA 2028

THE DOUBLE PARALYMPIC MEDALLIST OPENS UP ON THE PRESSURE OF DELIVERING AT THE PARIS PARALYMPICS, OVERCOMING A BACK INJURY, THE CONTINUED PURSUIT OF THE WORLD RECORD, AND WHAT LIES AHEAD.



**Top-tier performance:** Sumit Antil broke the tournament record twice, starting with a massive opening throw of 69.11m, breaking his own previous Paralympic record of 68.55m set in Tokyo. He then went one better with a 70.59m throw on his second attempt. No one else in the field came close to either distance. GETTY IMAGES



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

If you were walking past Sumit Antil's room in the Paralympic village the night before his big javelin final, you might have heard songs from the 2013 film *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*. As sleep evaded him before the big day, some spine-tingling cinematic inspiration was his go-to remedy to run the clock down.

Much of it was pre-final adrenaline, but there was also some nervousness about the discomfort in his back that kept Sumit up.

"From early 2023, I started feeling pain in the L4, L5 region of my back. It's a fairly common problem area for javelin throwers. The pressure I was putting on my front leg to block was adding to the strain on my back. Only rest and strengthening can help in this case, but I wasn't able to give my body that because of back-to-back competitions," Sumit told Sportstar, with a gold medal and a Paralympic record safely in the bag.

He broke the tournament record twice, starting with a massive opening throw of 69.11m, breaking his own previous Paralympic record of 68.55m set in Tokyo. He then went one better with a 70.59m throw on his second attempt. No one else in the field came close to either distance.

For able-bodied athletes, javelin requires every engaged muscle to be in top shape to execute a throw with perfection. Look at Neeraj Chopra in the Paris Olympics a few weeks ago. His adductor issue visibly stiffened his blocking leg, and the advantage he gained from his run-up speed was hampered, as was the force he could exert on his left leg.

"When you have an injury, you lose the support of those muscles in your throw. That load shifts to another muscle, which disturbs your technique. I felt that pain (in my back) after my third throw last night."

That was a 66.66m throw, his second-lowest of the night. Right



**Three to tango:** Australia's Michal Burian, who won silver three years ago, got a bronze in Paris, while Sri Lankan Dulan Kodithuwakku went from bronze in Tokyo to silver in Paris. Sumit's place at the top did not change.

GETTYIMAGES

after, Sumit threw what appeared to be around the 67m mark but intentionally fouled his effort. Much like Neeraj, he knows when he hasn't reached the distance his lofty standards demand.

"I just wanted to keep pushing my limits constantly. But it wasn't happening, and I was getting frustrated. The throw was among my lower ones, so I fouled. That throw too would have gotten me to the podium by itself, but I wasn't happy with it," he explained.

Sumit is a tall, big-built athlete, which makes weight control crucial to his technique and flexibility. The nagging back injury pushed the team physio, Vipin, to put Sumit on a strict diet that involved sacrificing sweets, something he grudgingly endures leading up to major events.

This time, it was even more important as losing weight would reduce the strain on his spine. Sumit makes the block with the artificial limb, which makes things even harder.

"My landing leg is the one with the artificial limb, and it's difficult to balance on it sometimes because only the heel connects with the ground. It's hard to balance the full body on two nails. After doing all the work to set up the throw, it all comes down to the blocking leg. In the final here, too, I was losing balance, so the throw was not as long as I wanted it to be," he added.

With the injury on his mind, Sumit needed to keep things as simple as possible. The advice he got from Neeraj Chopra before his campaign stressed the same.

"I didn't speak to him [Neeraj] personally. My manager, Dinesh, spoke to Neeraj's team, and he passed on a message to me. He said that the atmosphere was great. 'Don't try anything new. Your experience will be enough,' Sumit said.

"My strategy was to secure the gold medal first. So I didn't do my warm-up throws either. I just did basic warm-ups. I had been training after taking painkillers, so I was a bit cautious at the start and careful not to do anything that might aggravate my back. In the last couple of throws, once I knew my gold was safe, I tried chasing down the world record (his own mark of 73.29m)."

"I had it in me. I was throwing better in training here than I did at the Hangzhou Asian Games where I got that world record."

But "gandi" (bad) technique, as Sumit sheepishly calls it, came in the way, potentially triggered by the fast Mondo track laid in the Stade de France for the Olympics and Paralympics.

"I could feel my leg skidding when blocking and throwing. We're not used to a track with such speed. I think my control was less than where it should have been. When I watched videos of my throws, I could see myself veering to the left a lot, which is not ideal. Mera technique bohot ganda tha. What I want to do is

**Peak mentality:** Sumit Antil reacts after a throw during the Paralympics 2024. GETTY IMAGES

revisit my basics and sort out my technique," Sumit nodded.

The men's javelin podium remained the same in the Paralympics in Tokyo and Paris. Australia's Michal Burian, who won silver three years ago, got a bronze in Paris, while Sri Lankan Dulan Kodithuwakku went from bronze in Tokyo to silver in Paris. Sumit's place at the top did not change.

Sumit's best effort of the night was 3.56m more than that of silver medalist Dulan. This margin was just a touch higher than Arshad Nadeem's lead over Neeraj in the men's javelin Olympic final a few weeks ago. Nadeem's monstrous 92.97m throw caught the world by surprise, but Sumit's lead was expected.

His effortless pursuit of bettering his own world record often feels like Armand Duplantis', the Swedish-American pole vaulter who holds the top 10 best marks in his discipline. Sumit, too, has broken the world record at least eight times in the last five years, and despite bursts of brilliance from his competitors, no one has come close. While his opponents aim for the 70m mark, Sumit has long set his sights on clearing 80 metres.

Much like Duplantis, watching Sumit compete is watching one man compete against himself, but he doesn't particularly enjoy hearing it.

"The aim is simple. If I am at 70m today, then tomorrow I need to get to 71, 72. But it would be unfair to say I am competing with myself because the others are also throwing well. The Sri Lankan athlete threw 67m — a new record in his category. The Australian athlete (bronze medallist Michal) has also been good. We can't view anyone lightly. But we do focus on how to improve ourselves and our performance," he explained.



With the major event of the year out of the way, Sumit now has clear priorities. Number one: fix his back and bring his core to peak fitness. Number two: make up for the time spent away from family. Number three: open himself up to the world a bit more. "I am conscious of the kind of attention I get when I am competing. I know people have high expectations of me. But I've never felt the need to change or edit myself just because people now have an eye on what I do or say. I usually speak from the heart, positive or negative.

"The idea now is to be a bit more active on social media. I have content from my own journeys that could perhaps inspire people to get into sports and do what I am doing. Achievements are one thing, but I'd like to show people our day-to-day journeys and inspire them. I hope I can give some time to this alongside everything else I do," he said.

The next big event on his radar is the World Championships next year, which India is hoping to host. The prospect of registering his next world record on home soil brings a little sparkle to Sumit's eyes.

"My team and I view the event

calendar in small portions. Immediately on my priority list is the World Championships next year. So the idea will be to perfect my body and technique as much as possible by then and give my best there."

There's also the chance of doing a three-peat at the Los Angeles Paralympics in 2028, and 26-year-old Sumit fancies his odds.

"As far as LA 2028 is concerned, I am 26 now. By then I'll be 30. In our game, the peak age is around 31-32. It would be great to top the podium there too. The efforts will certainly be in that direction."

With increasing attention on para-sports, and support from the government and private sponsors flowing in for para-athletes, Sumit expects the spotlight to increase.

"I feel an athlete who doesn't feel pressure is either not taking the game seriously or is on another level of legend in their sporting arc. In my case, I did feel a lot of pressure. There was the pressure to maintain my position at this level and meet people's expectations. Staying consistent is the hardest part — it's easy to reach the top, but remaining there is the biggest challenge."

## » INDIAN MEDAL WINNERS

# » NAVDEEP SINGH

**Category:** Athletics (Men's Javelin Throw F41)

Navdeep Singh secured India's seventh gold medal in the men's javelin throw F41 category, an event for athletes of short stature. After narrowly missing the podium at the Tokyo Paralympics three years ago and the Asian Para Games last year, the 23-year-old's perseverance finally paid off.

Initially, Navdeep won silver, but this was upgraded to gold after Iran's Sadegh Beit Sayah, the original gold medallist, was disqualified for violating Rule 8.1 of the World Para Athletics Rules and Regulations (Code of Conduct and Ethics). Navdeep's personal best throw of 47.32 metres was reinstated as the new Paralympic record.

Born prematurely in 2000 in Panipat, Haryana, Navdeep's challenges began early. His parents realised he had dwarfism when he was two years old, setting the stage for a life filled with challenges. Growing up, he endured not only the rigours of training but also cruel taunts from onlookers. His father, Dalbir Singh, a former national-level wrestler, provided unwavering support, encouraging him to pursue athletics.

Navdeep began his athletic journey at the age of 10, initially trying his hand at wrestling and sprinting before discovering his passion for javelin throw. He made a remarkable international debut at the 2017 Asian Youth Para Games in Dubai, where he claimed gold. He followed this with another gold at the 2021 World Para Grand Prix in Dubai.

However, his journey wasn't without setbacks. Disappointing fourth-place finishes at the Tokyo Paralympics and the Asian Para Games in Hangzhou tested his resolve. Yet, Navdeep never gave up, earning a bronze medal at the World Para Athletics Championship in Kobe earlier this year.

As the track and field competitions came to a close at the Paris Games, Navdeep's golden throw ensured the Stade de France echoed with the Indian national anthem, solidifying India's growing legacy in javelin on the world stage.

GOLD



REUTERS

GOLD



GETTY IMAGES

## » PRAVEEN KUMAR

**Category:** Athletics (Men's High Jump T64)

Praveen Kumar dominated the Paris Paralympics, capturing gold in the men's high jump T64 class with a stunning performance. The final included athletes from both the T44 and T64 classes, reserved for those with limb deficiencies, such as amputations or shortened limbs.

Born with a short leg, Praveen never let his condition hold him back. In Paris, he cleared every height — from 1.89m to 2.08m — on his first attempt, securing the title with a new Asian record and personal best.

Setting new records has become a habit for the young athlete from Noida. His gold-medal jump surpassed the Asian record he set three years earlier at the Tokyo Paralympics, where, at just 18 years old, he won a silver medal with a 2.07m clearance. That performance also made him the youngest Indian para-athlete to win a medal at the 2021 Games.

Before his Tokyo success, Praveen had already broken the previous 2.05m record at the World Para Athletics Fazza Grand Prix. A year later, he set a new Asian Games record with a 2.02m jump to claim gold.

Praveen's athletic journey began with a passion for volleyball, but he soon shifted his focus to high jump, where he competed fiercely against able-bodied athletes. This pivot to para-athletics proved to be the right choice, as Praveen quickly rose to prominence, breaking records and making history.

# » AVANI LEKHARA

**Category:** Shooting (Women's 10m Air Rifle Standing SH1)

Avani Lekhara made history at the Paris Paralympics by becoming the first Indian to successfully defend her Paralympic title, winning gold in the Women's 10m Air Rifle Standing SH1 category. She improved upon her previous Paralympic record from Tokyo, where she scored 249.6, with a remarkable 249.7 in Paris.

Born in Jaipur, Avani was left paralysed from the waist down after a car accident. Her father, Praveen, played a pivotal role in her recovery, encouraging her to explore sports as a means of physical and mental rehabilitation. She initially tried archery and swimming before discovering her passion for shooting at a local range.

Inspired by Olympic gold medalist Abhinav Bindra, Avani's dedication paid off as she won both gold in the 10m Air Rifle SH1 and bronze in the 50m rifle 3 positions SH1 during her debut Paralympic campaign in Tokyo. She became the first Indian woman to win a Paralympic gold and the first to secure multiple medals at the Games.

Alongside her athletic achievements, Avani has managed to balance her training with her pursuit of a law degree. Her success in Tokyo also earned her an out-of-turn appointment as Assistant Conservator of Forests by the Government of Rajasthan.

In the lead-up to the Paris Paralympics, Avani faced challenges, including a recurring gallbladder issue that required surgery, sidelining her for a month and a half during the final stretch of her preparation. Despite this, she triumphed once again.

Currently ranked fourth in the world, Avani has also won gold at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games, along with numerous accolades from Para World Cup events.



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## » **NITESH KUMAR**

**Category:** Badminton (Men's Singles SL3)

Pramod Bhagat had achieved a remarkable milestone by winning the first-ever Paralympic gold medal in badminton at the Tokyo Games, claiming the men's singles SL3 category title with a victory over Great Britain's Daniel Bethell.

Three years later in Paris, Bethell faced an Indian player once again, but it was not Bhagat — who was suspended for breaching the Badminton World Federation's anti-doping regulations — but Nitesh Kumar, a Paralympic debutant.

The 29-year-old Nitesh ensured the gold stayed with India by saving a match point and clinching a 21-14, 18-21, 23-21 victory over the second-seeded Bethell. This win marked Nitesh's first-ever victory over Bethell in their 10 encounters.

"I have lost in such situations against him before, and I didn't want to repeat the same mistakes. I had lost my composure in the past, so I told myself to keep fighting for every point. At 19-20 in the decider, I reminded myself to stay focused and make him earn each point," Nitesh said after his win.

SL3 class players, who have severe lower limb disabilities, play on a half-width court, hitting the shuttle on only one side of the field. Nitesh lost his left leg in a train accident in 2009.

Inspired by Bhagat during his time at IIT Mandi, Nitesh took up the sport and began his competitive journey in 2016 at the nationals in Faridabad. He faced Bhagat in the final of the 2022 World Championships, losing in two tight games.

At the Asian Para Games in Hangzhou last year, Nitesh showcased his talent by winning gold in men's doubles, silver in singles, and bronze in mixed doubles.



## » DHARAMBIR

**Category:** Athletics (Men's Club Throw F51)

In 2012, Dharambir was left paralyzed from the waist down after a diving accident that brought him into contact with rocks under a canal.

Two years later, in 2014, he took up club throw—the Paralympic equivalent of the hammer throw—under the guidance of Amit Kumar Saroha, who had also transitioned to the sport after a car accident ended his hockey career.

After finishing ninth and tenth in the 2016 and 2020 Paralympic Games, Dharambir triumphed at the Paris 2024 Paralympics, winning gold in the club throw F51 category with a new Asian record of 34.92m. His compatriot, Pranav Soorma, secured silver, while their coach, Amit Kumar, finished 10th. The sight of the three Indians ringing the winner's bell together was one of the highlights of the Games.

The 35-year-old Dharambir also won bronze at the 2018 Asian Para Games, followed by a silver medal at the Hangzhou edition.

GOLD

# » SUMIT ANTIL

**Category:** Athletics (Men's Javelin Throw F64)

Sumit Antil is among a select few athletes in Indian para sports who have managed to extend their dominance across two Paralympic cycles. Sumit shot into the public spotlight when he won gold in the men's javelin F64 event at the Tokyo Paralympics, his maiden campaign in the tournament, three years ago.

He effortlessly staked his claim to the podium top step, breaking his own world record three times in the process. He finished with a world-top mark of 68.55m, which also became the new Paralympic record.

Always a sports buff, Sumit nursed ambitions to enlist for the Indian Army. Staying true to the culture in Haryana, Sumit first trained to be a wrestler, but losing a leg in a bike accident on his way home from training changed his life and career's trajectories completely.

Given his father served in the Air Force, Sumit received treatment at the Army Hospital and was given a prosthetic limb attached to his left lower leg.

Sumit discovered para sports after meeting another para athlete, Rajkumar, during his B.Com. education in Ramjas College, Delhi. This is also when he met his coaches, Virender Dhankar — who won the shot put silver medal at the 2018 Asian Games — and Naval Singh.

One of the first things he asked the duo then was what the world record was in javelin throw. His coaches chided him for such lofty ambitions then, but little did they know that he would go on to reset the world record eight times in the next five-odd years.

Sumit defended his gold medal in the Paris Summer Games with another Paralympic record — a massive 70.59m throw. This despite nursing a recurring back injury. He wanted another world record mark but couldn't push hard enough to go past his own record of 73.29m, which he set at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games.

Sumit is the first Indian man to successfully defend his Paralympic title and is eyeing a historic three-peat in Los Angeles in 2028.



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# » HARVINDER SINGH

**Category:** Archery (Men's Individual Recurve Open)

Harvinder Singh entered annals of sporting folklore by becoming the first Indian to win a medal in para archery — a bronze in the men's individual compound open category. Three years later, he upgraded that medal to a historic gold, keeping calm and seeing off formidable opponents and his own nerves to finish on the top step of the podium.

Harvinder was born to a farming family in Haryana's Kaithal district. When he was just a year and a half old, he contracted dengue. A local doctor administered injections, which had an adverse effect on him, leading to a loss of function in his legs. While Harvinder worked his way back to mobility, the incident left him with permanently impaired movement.

Harvinder found his calling in archery after being inspired by following the 2012 London Paralympics. His first major success in the sport was a gold medal in the 2018 Jakarta Asian Para Games.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted his career trajectory too, like it did for scores of athletes around the world, but Harvinder was determined to keep perfecting his skills in archery. He requested his father to help him turn their farm into an archery range so he could keep training. The hard work paid off when he clinched bronze in Tokyo.

Between the Tokyo and Paris Summer Games, Harvinder won bronze in the Hangzhou Asian Games men's team event in 2022 and a silver in the Asian Para Archery Championship in 2023.

While he went from strength to strength in sporting merit, Harvinder also balanced his academic pursuits on the side, doing a doctorate in economics from Punjabi University in Patiala.



AFP

# » MANISH NARWAL

**Category:** Shooting (Men's 10m Air Pistol SH1)

Manish Narwal claimed his second Paralympic medal at the Paris Paralympics, winning silver in the P1 Men's 10m Air Pistol SH1 event, a category for athletes who shoot without a stand and rely on their impaired non-shooting arm for support.

The 21-year-old, born with a congenital impairment in his right hand, was introduced to shooting in 2016 when his family took him to a local range.

Under the mentorship of Jai Prakash Nautiyal and Subhash Rana, Manish's international career took off at the 2017 Bangkok World Cup, where he won gold in the P1 10m Air Pistol SH1 and set a Junior World Record.

His rise continued when he secured India's second para shooting gold in the P4 Mixed 50m Pistol event at the Tokyo Paralympics in 2021. He followed that success with a bronze medal in the men's P1 10m Air Pistol SH1 event at the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Para Games.

REUTERS



SILVER

# » NISHAD KUMAR

**Category:** Athletics (Men's High Jump T47)

Nishad Kumar secured India's seventh medal at the Paris 2024 Paralympics, earning silver with a jump of 2.04 metres in the men's high jump T47 final, an event for athletes with impairments below the elbow or wrist.

This silver mirrored his achievement at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, where he also took home a silver medal.

Nishad's life took a dramatic turn at age six when he lost his right hand in an accident involving a grass-cutting machine on his family farm.

Inspired by his mother, a state-level volleyball player and discus thrower, Nishad initially pursued wrestling and athletics before finding his passion in the high jump.

He gained international recognition after winning bronze at the 2019 World Para Athletics Championships, followed by a silver medal at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics.

In 2022, he won gold in the men's high jump T47 at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games and continued his success with back-to-back silver medals at the World Championships in 2023 and 2024.

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SILVER



# » THULASIMATHI MURUGESAN

**Category:** Badminton (Women's Singles SU5)

Hailing from a modest family in Kancheepuram, near Chennai, Thulasimathi Murugesan was born with a deformity in her left hand. Despite financial hardships, her father, Murugesan, a sports enthusiast, encouraged his daughters to pursue sports.

At 22, Thulasimathi became the first Indian female to reach a para-badminton final at the Paralympics, defeating compatriot Manisha Ramadass in the semifinals. She secured a silver medal in the SU5 category after a straight-game loss to Tokyo 2020 gold medallist Yang Qiu Xia of China.

Earlier, at the 2022 Asian Para Games in Hangzhou, she had won gold in women's singles. She also partnered with Nitesh Kumar to win bronze in mixed doubles SL3-SU5 and with Manasi Joshi to claim silver in women's doubles SL3-SU5. Thulasimathi and Manasi went on to secure another silver at the 2024 World Championships.



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# » SUHAS YATHIRAJ

**Category:** Badminton (Men's Singles SL4)

Suhas Yathiraj claimed a silver medal at the Paris Paralympics in the men's singles SL4 category, which is designated for athletes with impairments in one or both lower limbs and minimal difficulty in walking or running.

He narrowly missed out on gold, losing to France's Lucas Mazur in the final, marking his second consecutive silver after a similar result at the Tokyo Games. Suhas remains the only Indian para-badminton player to win back-to-back Paralympic medals.

Born with a congenital deformity in his left ankle, Suhas overcame physical challenges to pursue both his passion for badminton and a successful career as an IAS officer.

The 41-year-old's rise to prominence began with a gold medal at the 2016 Asian Para-Badminton Championships. He later won a bronze at the 2018 Asian Para Games, followed by a gold at the 2022 Asian Para Games.



SILVER

## » SHARAD KUMAR

**Category:** Athletics (Men's High Jump T63)

Sharad Kumar upgraded his bronze medal from the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics to silver in the men's high jump T63 category — which also included athletes from T42 — at Paris 2024. The T63 classification is for athletes with a single through-knee or above-knee limb deficiency.

Sharad was diagnosed with polio myelitis at age two, which left his left leg paralysed. Despite this, he excelled in high jump during his school years.

His international career took off at the 2010 Asian Para Games, and in 2012, he became the World No. 1 after clearing 1.75m at the Malaysian Open Para Athletics Championship.

Although Sharad missed the London Paralympics due to a doping violation, he

bounced back by winning gold at the 2014 and 2018 Asian Para Games. He also claimed silver at the 2017 World Para Athletics Championships with a jump of 1.84m. At Paris 2024, he surpassed compatriot Mariyappan Thangavelu's Paralympic record (in T42) by clearing 1.88m, bettering Thangavelu's 1.86m mark set in Tokyo.

## » AEJET SINGH

**Category:** Athletics (Men's Javelin Throw F46)

Ajeet Singh earned his first Paralympic medal at the 2024 Paris Games, winning silver in the javelin throw F46 category, which is for athletes with moderate arm impairments or limb absence.

In 2017, Ajeet lost his left arm below the elbow in an accident while trying to rescue a friend from a train. Remarkably, just four months later, he resumed training and made his national debut in 2018 at the Para Athletic Senior National event in Panchkula, Haryana.

His international breakthrough came in 2019, when he won gold at the Beijing Grand Prix and secured bronze at the World Para Athletics Championships in Dubai. He continued his success with a gold at the 2023 World Para Athletics Championships.

Alongside his athletic achievements, Ajeet is pursuing a Ph.D. in physical education at the Lakshmi Bai National Institute of Physical Education (LNIPE) in Gwalior, reflecting his deep passion for sports.



SILVER

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**SILVER**

## » SACHIN KHILARI

**Category:** Athletics (Men's Shot Put F46)

Sachin Khilari won a silver medal at the Paris Paralympics in the men's shot put F46 category, which is for athletes with arm deficiencies, impaired muscle power, or limited range of motion in their arms, competing in a standing position. The 34-year-old achieved this with an impressive Asian record throw of 16.32m.

As a child, Khilari suffered a bicycle accident that led to permanent damage, limiting the movement in his left hand. Despite these challenges, he pursued his athletic dreams, initially competing in javelin before switching to shot put due to a shoulder injury.

In 2023, he won his first world para title with an Asian record throw of 16.21m at the World Para Athletics Championships. He continued his success with another title at the Asian Para Games. At the 2024 World Para Athletics Championships, Khilari set a new personal best throw of 16.30m to secure gold once again.

**SILVER**

## » PRANAV SOORMA

**Category:** Athletics (Men's Club Throw F51)

India achieved five double-podium finishes at the Paris 2024 Paralympics, with the standout performance coming in the men's club throw F51 event. Dharambir secured gold with a new Asian record throw of 34.92m, while Pranav Soorma took silver with a throw of 34.59m.

This result reversed the podium positions from the previous year's Asian Games. For Pranav, who works as an assistant manager at a nationalised bank, achieving such a performance in his debut Paralympics signals promising future prospects.

Pranav became quadriplegic at age 16 when the roof of his house collapsed on him in 2011, causing severe spinal cord damage and resulting in the loss of movement in his legs and hands.

In the F51 category, athletes sit in a throwing frame within a circle consisting of a chair and a vertical pole. They have all six attempts at once and use a sticky substance to grip the wooden club, which weighs approximately 400g.

## » YOGESH KATHUNIYA

**Category:** Athletics (Men's Discus Throw F56)

After clinching a silver medal at the Tokyo Paralympics, discus thrower Yogesh Kathuniya found himself in a bit of a "silver rut," unable to reach the top spot on the podium. In Paris, he again finished with a silver medal — but there's no room for complaints, given the tough couple of years leading up to the event.

At just nine years old, Yogesh was diagnosed with Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS), an autoimmune condition that attacks the body's nerves. It left him wheelchair-bound for two years. At the time, walking again, let alone playing sports, seemed like a distant dream.

However, his parents, Meena Devi, a homemaker, and Gyanchand Kathuniya, a retired Indian Army officer, refused to give up on him. Meena even learned physiotherapy to aid her son's recovery, and sure enough, within three years, Yogesh was back on his feet.

In 2016, at the age of 19, Yogesh discovered para sports with the help of Sachin Yadav, the General Secretary of the student union at Kiroli Mal College. From that moment, there was no looking back.

Yet, 2023 brought new challenges. Yogesh contracted chickenpox early in the year and was later diagnosed with cervical radiculopathy affecting the C4, C5, and C6 vertebrae. Despite these setbacks, he fought through to win a silver at the Asian Games. His silver medal-winning throw of 42.22m in Paris was his season's best — a performance that has only intensified the 27-year-old's hunger for gold.



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SILVER

## » MONA AGARWAL

**Category:** Shooting (Women's 10m Air Rifle Standing SH1)

Mona Agarwal, along with Avani Lekhara, took the podium in the women's 10m air rifle standing SH1 event, which is for pistol shooters with movement affected in the arms and/or the lower trunk and legs, or those with missing limbs. Mona, who contracted polio at nine months old, affecting both her legs, won bronze in her first Paralympic Games.



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After exploring several para-sports, including shot put, discus throw, javelin, and weightlifting, and pioneering women's sitting volleyball in India, Mona transitioned to para-shooting in late 2021. In 2024, the 37-year-old mother of two became a Paralympic medallist.

In 2023, she won gold in the Para Shooting World Cup in New Delhi, which also helped her secure a spot for the Paris Paralympics. She then partnered with Aadithya Giri to win a silver medal in the mixed team air rifle standing (SH1) event. The Lower Division Clerk in Jaipur District Court followed that with another gold in the Para Shooting World Cup in Changwon, Korea, one month later.

**BRONZE**

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## » PREETHI PAL

**Category:** Athletics (Women's 100m, 200m T35)

Born with weak legs and an irregular posture, few in her village expected Preethi Pal to even survive. She had to wear callipers from the age of five to 13.

However, she defied expectations and proved her doubters wrong.

Preethi set the tone for India's athletics contingent at the Paris 2024 Paralympics. The 23-year-old from Meerut clinched a bronze medal in the women's 100m T35 event with a personal best time of 14.21 seconds.

The T35 classification is for athletes with coordination impairments such as hypertonia, ataxia, and athetosis.

Not only was this India's first athletics medal at the ongoing edition, but it also marked the first time an Indian

stood on the podium for a track event in Paralympic history.

Preethi, who trains in Delhi under coach Gajendra Singh, also won a bronze in the 200m event in the same classification, making her the second woman, after Avani, to win two Paralympic medals at the same edition.

**BRONZE**

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## » RUBINA FRANCIS

**Category:** Shooting (Women's 10m Air Pistol SH1)

Rubina Francis became the first Indian woman pistol shooter to secure a medal at the Paralympics when she clinched bronze in the women's air pistol SH1 event. This category is for athletes with upper and/or lower limb impairments who can hold their gun without difficulty and shoot from a standing or sitting position.

Hailing from Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, Rubina was born with leg dysfunction and faced financial constraints when she took up shooting in 2015. She secured her first Paralympic quota at the Lima 2019 World Cup and became India's first female pistol para-shooter at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics.

Building on her Tokyo success, Rubina continued to excel on the international stage. She won a bronze medal at the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Para Games and followed it up with a string of impressive performances at the 2023 Para Shooting World Cups.

Her winning streak began in Osijek with a silver medal, and she subsequently clinched a bronze in Changwon. Rubina's contributions to team events further solidified her status as a leading para-shooter.

# » MANISHA RAMADASS

**Category:** Badminton (Women's Singles SU5)

Manisha Ramadass became the first Indian woman to win a para-badminton medal at the Paralympics after clinching bronze in the women's singles SU5 category, which is for athletes with impairment in the upper limbs in the playing or non-playing hand.

The 19-year-old was born with Erb's Palsy, a nerve condition in the shoulder and arm that results in weakness or loss of muscle function. Manisha began her journey in 2019, competing alongside able-bodied players in the domestic circuit.

In 2022, her first year on the international circuit, she collected 11 gold and five bronze medals, becoming World No. 1 in her category. She also won the 2022 World Championships and was named BWF Female Para Badminton Player of the Year 2022.

Her success continued with a silver in the singles and a bronze in doubles with Mandeep Kaur at the 2024 World Championships.

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# » NITHYA SRE SIVAN

**Category:** Badminton (Women's Singles SH6)

What started as a hobby with her friends has brought Nithya Sre Sivan multiple accolades on the international stage.

She won bronze in the para-badminton women's singles SH6 at the 2024 Paralympic Games after a 21-14, 21-6 win over Indonesia's Rina Marlina in the bronze medal match. The SH6 class is for athletes with short stature.

The 19-year-old's only loss at the Games came against China's Lin Shuangbao, once in the group stage and again in the semifinals. She also came close to bagging a medal in the mixed doubles SH6 with Sivarajan Solaimalai but lost in the bronze medal match against Indonesia's Marlina and her partner Subhan.

Nithya, who trains in Lucknow under national team coach Gaurav Khanna, also won two bronze medals at the 2023 Asian Para Games in Hangzhou, in women's doubles and mixed doubles.



## » DEEPTHI JEEVANJI

**Category:** Athletics (Women's 400m T20)

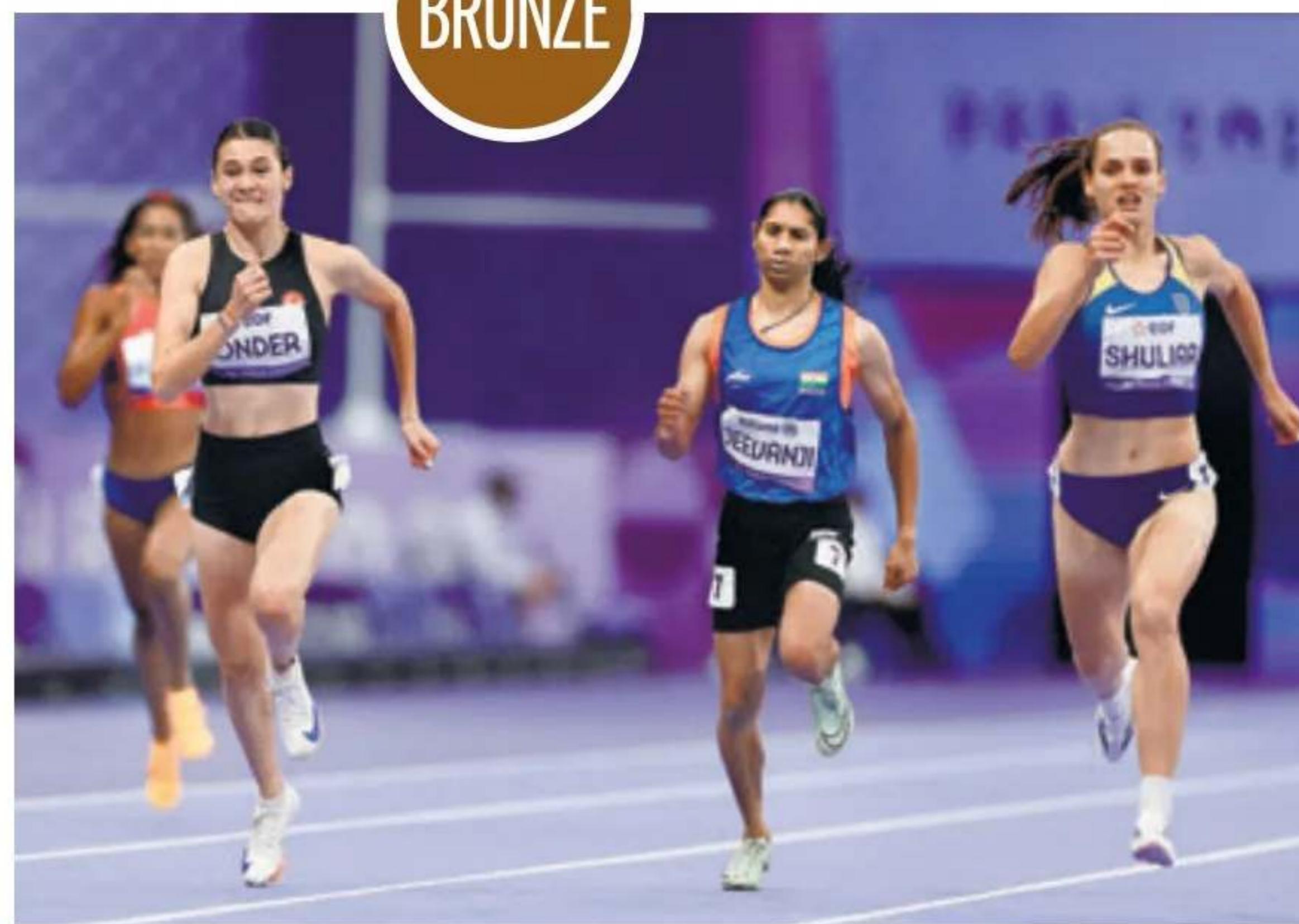
Deepthi Jeevanji came into the limelight after breaking the women's 400m T20 world record on her way to winning gold at the World Championships in Kobe earlier this year.

Making her Paralympic debut, Deepthi was one of India's top prospects in track events at Stade de France, and the 20-year-old did not disappoint. She qualified for the final as the Heat 1 topper, though Türkiye's Aysel Onder broke Deepthi's world record of 55.07 seconds in another heat.

In the final, Deepthi was heading for a historic silver medal before Onder overtook her at the finish, with Ukraine's Yuliia Shuliar clinching gold.

Nevertheless, it was not just a memorable triumph for Deepthi but also for her parents, Jeevanji Yadhagiri and Jeevanji Dhanalaxmi, both daily wage labourers. Despite being advised by fellow villagers to abandon their eldest child, who was born with unusual features and intellectual impairments, the couple always stood by Deepthi. On September 3, she put Kalleda, a village in the Warangal district of Telangana, on the world map with her remarkable performance.

BRONZE



REUTERS

## » MARIYAPPAN THANGAVELU

**Category:** Athletics (Men's High Jump T63)

A veteran of three Paralympic Games, Mariyappan Thangavelu secured bronze in the men's high jump T63 at Paris 2024. He won gold in the men's high jump T42 category on his Paralympics debut in 2016 and followed it up with silver in Tokyo 2021 in the T63 category.

Born in Periavadaragampatti in Salem, Tamil Nadu, Mariyappan was raised by his mother, who worked as a daily wage labourer to support her family of six. The 29-year-old suffered permanent disability in his right leg after an accident involving a drunk bus driver.

In 2024, Mariyappan also won gold at the World Championships in Kobe, five years after winning bronze at the 2019 World Championships in Dubai. He also has a silver medal from the Asian Para Games in Jakarta in 2018.

With this third Paralympic medal, Mariyappan now ranks among India's most successful Paralympians, joining the ranks of Avani, Devendra Jhajharia, and Joginder Singh Bedi.

BRONZE



REUTERS

# » SUNDAR SINGH GURJAR

**Category:** Athletics (Men's Javelin Throw F46)

Sundar Singh Gurjar transitioned to para-sports after his left hand was amputated in 2015 following an accident when a tin roof fell on him. At the 2024 Paris Paralympics, he replicated his Tokyo bronze medal, becoming a two-time Paralympic medallist.

Hailing from Rajasthan, Sundar competes in the men's javelin F46 category, which is for athletes with arm or hand impairments, such as above- or below-elbow amputations.

Despite losing his hand and battling depression, Sundar persevered, qualifying for the Rio 2016 Paralympics but was disqualified after missing the roll call. However, he bounced back and won three gold medals in javelin, shot put, and discus throw at the 2017 FAZZA IPC Athletics Grand Prix in Dubai.

In 2022, Sundar set a world record at the Asian Para Games in Hangzhou with a throw of 68.60 metres, after securing silver in the previous edition. He also earned a bronze in discus throw F46 in Jakarta.



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BRONZE

BRONZE

# » KAPIL PARMAR

**Category:** Blind Judo (Men's -60kg J1)

Kapil Parmar made history as the first Indian to win a Paralympic medal in judo, clinching bronze in the men's -60kg J1 category at the 2024 Paris Paralympics.

Hailing from Shivor village in Madhya Pradesh, Kapil's life changed drastically after a near-fatal electrocution accident as a child, which left him in a coma for six months and severely affected his vision.

At his lowest point, Kapil found solace in blind judo. He shifted to Lucknow to train at the Indian Blind and Para Judo Academy, where he began to make a name for himself. In 2019, he won his first international medal at the Commonwealth Championships in Birmingham, followed by several accolades at IBSA Judo Grand Prix events. He won silver at the 2022 Asian Para Games and gold at the IBSA Judo Grand Prix in Tbilisi earlier this year.

Kapil also had to endure financial hardships in his journey. At one point, he and his brother Lalit had to run a tea stall to support his passion for judo. And now, his perseverance has paid off on the world stage.





REUTERS

## » HOKATO HOTOZHE SEMA

**Category:** Athletics (Men's Shot Put F57)

40-year-old Havildar Hokato Hotozhe Sema of the 9 Assam Regiment became the first athlete from Nagaland to win a Paralympic medal after securing bronze in the men's shot put F57 event with a personal best throw of 14.65 metres.

A landmine blast while on duty in Jammu and Kashmir in 2002 resulted in the amputation of Hokato's left leg below the knee, ending his dream of joining the Special Forces. Encouraged by his seniors, he began training in athletics, competing in the F57 category, which is for athletes with a limb deficiency, leg length difference, impaired muscle power, or impaired range of movement.

In 2023, Hokato won a bronze medal at the Asian Para Games in Hangzhou and narrowly missed the podium at the 2024 World Championships before sealing his Paralympic medal in Paris.



## » SIMRAN SHARMA

**Category:** Athletics (Women's 200m T12)

Simran Sharma clinched a bronze medal in the women's 200m T12 final at the Paris 2024 Paralympics by clocking a personal best time of 24.75 seconds, alongside her guide Abhay Singh. (The T12 class is for runners with visual impairments, hence athletes compete with a guide on the track.)

This medal came after the Ghaziabad-born athlete agonisingly missed out on a bronze medal in the 100m event.

Born prematurely at six and a half months, Simran was visually impaired and required six

months of incubator care. Inspired by her father, Manoj Sharma, she pursued sports and trained under Naik Gajendra Singh, whom she married in 2023.

Simran became the first Indian para-athlete to qualify for the Tokyo Paralympics but she did not get any medals. At the 2022 Asian Para Games in Hangzhou, she won two silver medals in the 100m and 200m T12 events. Earlier this year, she also claimed a gold medal at the World Para Athletics Championships in Kobe, Japan.



Pics: GETTY IMAGES

## » RAKESH KUMAR & SHEETAL DEVI

**Category:** Archery (Mixed Team Compound Open)

**Sheetal Devi**, the only female armless archer participating in the Paris Paralympics, had a debut Summer Games to remember. She became India's youngest Paralympic medallist, winning bronze in the mixed team compound open archery event. Earlier, she exited the individual competition in the 1/8 elimination round, losing to Tokyo silver medallist Mariana Zuniga by just one point.

Born in 2007 with phocomelia, a rare congenital disorder leading to underdeveloped limbs, Sheetal's arms did not fully form. The Indian Army identified her core strength and ability to use her legs as effectively as one would use their arms. Her archery journey began there.

In 2023, Sheetal became the world record holder in the women's doubles event at the Para World Championships. She also clinched a silver medal at the World Archery Para Championships, becoming the first female armless archer to do so. She ended the year ranked world No. 1 in the women's open category.

The para-archer from Loidhar, a small village in the Kishtwar district of Jammu and Kashmir, gained national attention when her exploits at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games earned her three medals — two golds and a silver.

The nation was captivated by videos from the tournament, showing the young athlete effortlessly lifting the compound bow with her feet, using her mouth to hold the arrow's nock, and consistently hitting the centre of the target board.

**Rakesh Kumar**, from Katra in Jammu and Kashmir, was born in 1985 to a carpenter and a housewife. An accident in 2010 caused paralysis in both legs, leaving him permanently wheelchair-bound.

The challenges of life nearly drove him to suicide, but Rakesh found hope when sport entered his life.

In 2017, when an archery centre was established at the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board Sports Complex, he was introduced to archery during a demonstration and has stuck with it ever since.

At the Tokyo Paralympics, Rakesh finished sixth in the individual event. Alongside consistent national-level success, he won gold at the Asian Para Games in the mixed team event with Sheetal, as well as silver medals in the individual and men's team compound events. In 2023, he claimed gold in the mixed team event at the World Para Archery Championships and secured a golden double at the Asian Championships.

*Compiled by Netra V, Saikat Chakraborty, Anish Pathiyil, Nihit Sachdeva,  
Kavita Menon & Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan*



**Jiang Yuyan**, the 19-year-old Chinese swimmer, also known as the 'Flying Fish,' was the most successful athlete at the Paris 2024 Paralympics with seven gold medals. GETTY IMAGES



**French players celebrate** while the Argentine team members look dejected after the former's 3-2 win in the penalty shootout to clinch the country's first-ever gold medal in men's blind football. GETTY IMAGES



PARIS 2024

Afghan-born female taekwondo athlete **Zakia Khudadadi** celebrates with coach Haby Niare after winning the first-ever medal for the Refugee Paralympic Team — a bronze in the women's K44 -47kg event. GETTY IMAGES



**Hunter Woodhall** and **Tara Davis-Woodhall** turned out to be the ultimate power couple in Paris. Just a few weeks after Tara clinched her maiden Olympic gold in women's long jump, Hunter bagged his first gold in men's 400m T62 event at the Paralympics. GETTY IMAGES



**Japan's Tokito Oda** takes the wheels out of his wheelchair and falls flat on his back after beating Great Britain's Alfie Hewett, World No.1, to become the youngest Paralympic men's wheelchair singles champion ever, aged 18 years 123 days. GETTY IMAGES



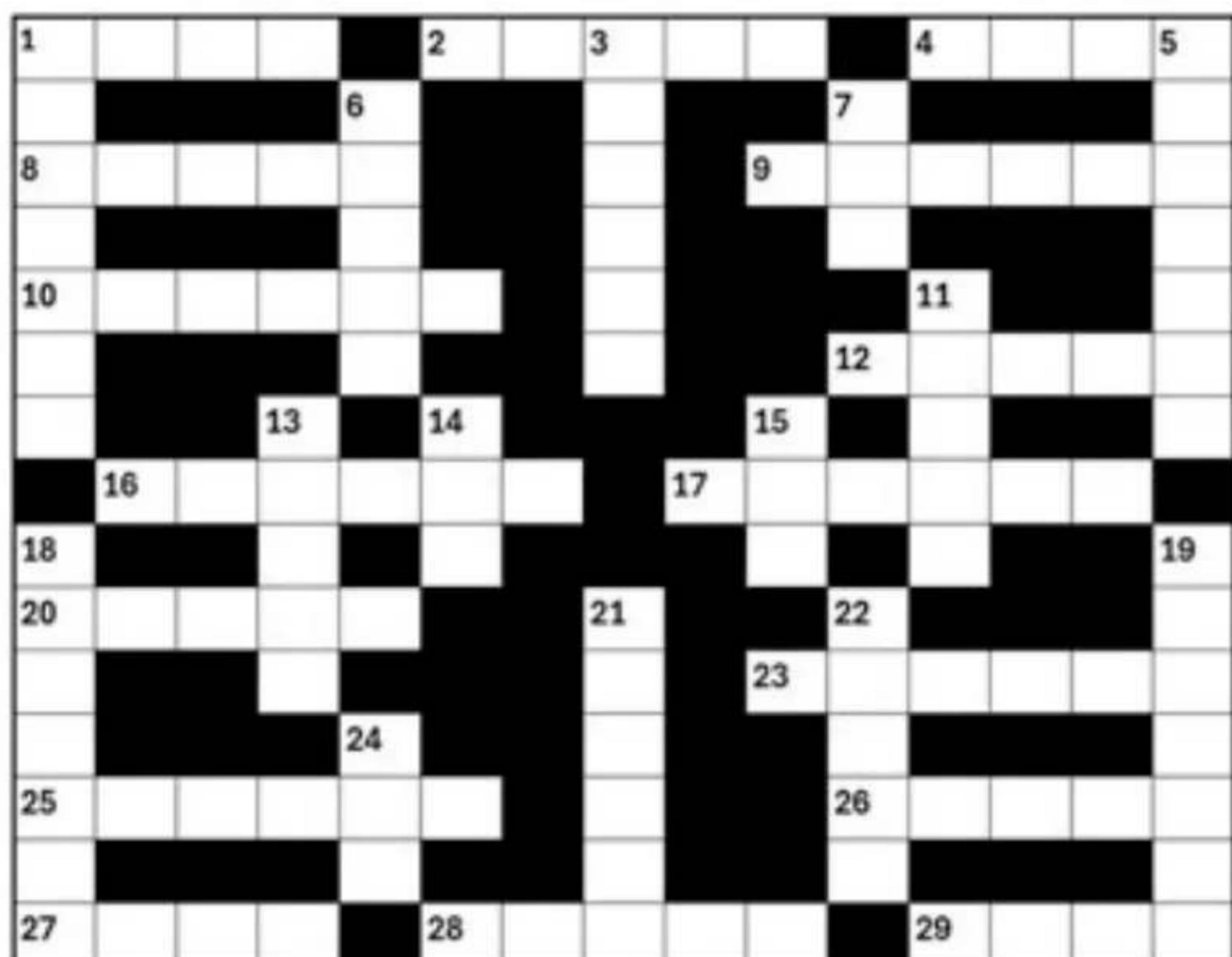
**Iran's Morteza Mehrzadselakjani** (centre), the tallest Paralympian in history at 8'1", celebrates with his teammates after winning the gold medal in men's sitting volleyball. GETTY IMAGES



**British archer Jodie Grinham** returned to the Paralympic stage for the first time since Rio 2016, while being seven months pregnant. She won a bronze medal in the women's individual compound open event before following it up with a gold alongside teammate Nathan Macqueen in the mixed team event. GETTY IMAGES

## CROSSWORD

### N. SOORYA PRAKASH



#### ACROSS

- 1 & Down 21** Which club won the UEFA Super Cup at the start of the 2024-25 season? (4,6)
- 2 & 9** Who has been recently appointed as Kenyan national cricket team coach? (5,6)
- 4 & Down 11** Who ended up with the most wickets jointly in the recently concluded The Hundred Cricket league for men? (4,5)
- 10** Who has already scored two hat-tricks in this season's English Premier League? (6)
- 12 & 8** Who is the new wicketkeeper for England who has already scored a hundred and two fifties in just five Tests that he has played so far? (5,5)
- 16** Name the dashing Indian southpaw who announced his retirement from international cricket recently? (6)
- 17** Who is the only Indian bowler to have taken more than 100 wickets in women's ODIs & T20Is? (6)

#### 20 & Down 19

Who won the Hungarian Formula 1 GP this year — his maiden win? (5,7)

**23** Who was the South African Test team captain during their recent series in the West Indies? (6)

**25** Which Ferrari driver won the Australian Formula 1 GP this year? (6)

**26** Who is the only batter to score two fifties in the recently held three-match ODI series between India and Sri Lanka? (5)

**28 & Down 18** Who won the prestigious Tour de France this year? (5,7)

**29** Who took most wickets in the three-match T20I series between India and Sri Lanka? (4)

#### DOWN

**1** Who won the Austrian Formula 1 GP this year? (7)

**3** Which oldest football tournament in Asia got over recently? (6)

**5 & 13** Who recently broke the record for scoring most goals on the opening day of English



#### SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

Premier League football? (7,5)

**6** Who still holds the record for being the youngest man in history to win any Grand Slam? (5)

**7** Which Formula 1 racing driver recently competed in his 200th race in the Dutch GP held in August 2024? (3)

**14** Who scored the most runs in the recently concluded The Hundred Cricket league for women? (3)

**15** Who scored the fastest Test fifty for England in the first Test against the West Indies? (3)

**22** Who holds the record for scoring the most goals for England & Tottenham Hotspur and second highest goal-scorer in Premier League history but plays for the Bayern Munich Club in Bundesliga since last season? (5)

**24 & Across 27** Who scored a century in each innings in the Lord's Test in the last week of August 2024? (3,4)



# ஏசுட்டீட்டு FORMULA RACING CIRCUIT

Home of India's First Night Race to host the Formula 4 Indian Championship and Indian Racing League



Chennai, often called the “Detroit of South Asia,” boasts a rich automotive heritage and is home to renowned brands such as Hyundai, Renault Nissan, Mahindra, Yamaha and Bharat Benz. The Irungattukottai Racetrack, situated just outside the city limits, is a premier racing venue in the country and continues to host major national championships, including the popular MRF-F1600 formula series.

Being a motorsports hub of the country, a street race was long due. This long pending dream of the motorsports aficionados of the city was fulfilled as Chennai played host to South Asia’s first-ever Formula 4 street night race on 31st Aug and 1st Sep 2024. It doesn’t get any bigger than this as the Formula 4 cars zoomed around in the 3.5 km circuit passing through Island Grounds, War Memorial, Napier Bridge, Sivananda Salai, Mount Road and Flag Staff Road.

The anticipation of the race day reached a fever pitch as ticket sales opened on PayTM Insider, resulting in an overwhelming response from the public. With a high-octane atmosphere, the race blended the excitement of motorsport with the charm of Chennai’s streets, drawing attention from motorsport enthusiasts, residents, and international viewers alike.

Formula 4 is a developmental category for young drivers aiming to reach higher levels like Formula 3 and Formula 2, and it has a dedicated following. Fans who attended the race in person or watched it live expressed widespread enthusiasm for the format and setting. In the weeks leading up to the event, social media platforms were abuzz with anticipation. Fans from all over the region shared their excitement about experiencing high-speed racing on the city’s streets under lights.

As the city awaited the highly anticipated event with bated breath, the day began with exhilarating stunt shows, serving as a thrilling appetiser for what was yet to come. With the flag off by the Honourable Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development of the Government of Tamil Nadu, the streets of Chennai came alive last night as the highly anticipated Formula 4 Night Street Race unfolded under the city’s sparkling skyline. Racing enthusiasts from across the region flocked to the circuit, which was illuminated by dazzling floodlights that transformed the urban landscape into a high-octane racetrack.

The Chennai Formula Racing Circuit (CFRC), with its narrow lanes, sharp corners, and sudden elevation changes, proved a formidable challenge for the drivers. The races, spanning multiple laps of a 3.2-kilometer track, featured a mix of tight hairpin turns and long straightaways, making both strategy and precision essential for victory.

For many Chennaiites, the Formula 4 race was a point of pride. It was a rare opportunity to showcase their city to an international audience and put Chennai on the global motorsport map. The inaugural Formula 4 night street race in Chennai was a resounding success, drawing enthusiastic support from motorsport fans, residents, and the media. Chennai once again showcased its ability to host a large-scale international event, and the race has set the stage for future motorsport events in the city.





Peek into the exciting South Asia's first  
Formula 4 street night race at Chennai





## » DURAND CUP

DEBASISH BHADURI

# NEUFC's Durand Cup title a product of long-term planning and investment

NorthEast United FC defeated 17-time winner Mohun Bagan Super Giant at Salt Lake Stadium to **clinch its maiden** Durand Cup in the season-opening tournament.

Amitabha Das Sharma

amitabhadas.sharma@thehindu.co.in

In a dramatic turnaround, NorthEast United FC emerged victorious in the 133rd Durand Cup, defeating Mohun Bagan Super Giant in a heart-stopping final. After trailing 0-2 at halftime, the team engineered a stunning comeback, levelling the score 2-2 in regular time before securing the title with a 4-3 penalty

shootout win. NorthEast United thus finished the tournament unbeaten with six consecutive victories.

The team's owner, renowned actor and producer John Abraham, captured the relief and joy of their achievement. "There's light at the end of the tunnel, and we proved it! Congratulations to the entire team and the staff. I am just a

representative standing here talking on their behalf. The real heroes are the staff, the coach, the players, and everyone involved in making this team," John said.

"Big congratulations to the team for making this happen. Also, to those fans who stood by us and supported us through thick and thin... Thank you so much!"



**All smiles:** Actor and owner of the NorthEast United FC (NEUFC), John Abraham, celebrates with coach Juan Pedro Benali after their team won the Durand Cup 2024. PTI

John embraced coach Juan Pedro Benali, the mastermind behind the triumph, while celebrating alongside the players and coaching staff.

"The feeling of winning the Durand Cup has not yet sunk in. This is just a lesson for all to never give up, to hold on to the team and support the team, not just in winning times but even when we are losing," John reflected.

Although the victory came later than expected, it must have brought him the long-awaited joy he had sought since pooling his resources into the franchise in 2014. His investment seemed to stem from a desire to fulfill his unachieved dream of playing for his country. John was also drawn to the unique distinction of owning a club that represents an entire region — the eight

NorthEastern states — rather than just a single city or state.

"It is a proud moment for all of us at the football club. It is the first trophy the club has won, and we would like to dedicate this trophy to all our fans," said the club's CEO, Mandar Tamhane. "We are a club that represents eight states, not just one state or one city. It's a big responsibility for us when we represent our fans. This victory is for the fans; they deserve it for supporting the club through highs and lows. It's the first victory, and it's very special."

The arrival of Benali in 2023 provided NorthEast United with the right tactician to build a team capable of competing against the giants of Indian football. Before this, the club's best performance had been reaching the ISL playoffs twice, once in the 2018-2019 season under Dutch coach Eelco Schatorrie and then in 2020-21 under Khalid Jamil. The club has been plagued by frequent changes at the top, with Benali being the 12th coach

in 10 seasons. During this time, the team has undergone 14 coaching changes, with Jamil stepping in on three occasions.

Roughly three seasons after its formation, NorthEast United FC had launched its first youth development initiative in partnership with Shillong United FC, unveiling the Centre of Excellence (CoE). This programme was designed to scout talent from the region and provide year-round training, education, and competition. However, the initiative fizzled out due to various challenges. The club later acknowledged its failure to sustain talent development efforts over the years and launched a second initiative this year to revive the tradition of scouting young players from the NorthEast.

Among the club's local talents is Parthib Gogoi, a promising young forward selected by coach Benali last season. Gogoi, who began his career with the AIFF developmental side Indian Arrows, is progressing well. He had one goal and one assist in this



**Moment of jubilation:** NorthEast United FC goalkeeper Gurmeet Singh celebrates after winning the Durand Cup 2024 final against Mohun Bagan Super Giant. DEBASISH BHADURI

#### Durand Cup.

Despite his success, there are still few players who can claim NorthEast United FC as the birthplace of their footballing careers. The club's recent Durand Cup win could serve as a catalyst for greater investment in youth development.

Recognising the need for fresh talent, Benali expanded his search to the southern regions of India, resulting in the arrival of players like Muthu Mayakkannan and more game time for Jithin M.S. These signings have since become pivotal members of the team's midfield. With his rich international experience, Benali persuaded the club's management to make key adjustments to strengthen the squad, positioning NorthEast United FC to compete with the best.

"In this moment, the team is in the building process. It is growing, and we have a lot of new players, better players with their experience. We think slowly, slowly there is a progression, and the players will start to understand the football we want for the team," Benali tried to put things in perspective. "You know, football is beautiful. It is easy to plan on the board, it is easy in training, but you need to go to the field and put what you have in mind — what you have been working on. And who better than Mohun Bagan to play against and see where we are? That's how we start to excel," Benali said about how the team was shaping up for the season.

NorthEast United narrowly missed out on a knockout berth in the previous ISL season. Still, Benali believes the upcoming season would offer the perfect opportunity to implement the extensive planning and team-building efforts.

**"We need to be more stable. This is why we tried to keep as many players as possible and not make a lot of changes in the team."**

"This was also the management's and the owner's idea. I am happy for it," Benali said.

The decision to maintain the core has paid off, and Benali hopes the squad can sustain this consistency in the ISL, which now presents its greatest challenge.

**Juan Pedro Benali's arrival has helped NorthEast United become competitive against giants of Indian football**



» INDIAN SUPER LEAGUE

# Shock transfer, familiar contenders and Marquez's dual role headline new ISL season

The upcoming Indian Super League season promises **renewed optimism** as teams gear up for a thrilling battle for the top.

Aashin Prasad

aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

**A**fter another disappointing result for the national team in June, which led to the sacking of Igor Stimac, and the retirement of long-serving national team captain Sunil Chhetri, a new season of the Indian Super League (ISL) will be underway, bringing renewed optimism.

The All India Football Federation (AIFF), however, will not be

Beginning of the end: In what could likely be Sunil Chhetri's final season of professional football, Bengaluru FC has brought in Jose Pereyra Diaz, Alberto Noguera, and Rahul Bheke, all from Mumbai City. PTI

imposing relegation at the end of this season, deviating from the 2019 Asian Football Confederation's (AFC) proposed roadmap. The league has also done away with the mandatory rule requiring an overseas AFC member player to be included in the playing XI. Mohammedan SC is the newly promoted side, having won the I-League for the first time.



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The summer transfer window saw its first major move when India international Anwar Ali terminated his loan deal with Mohun Bagan Super Giant and transferred to archrival East Bengal for Rs. 2.5 crore. The dust is yet to settle on the transfer as Anwar has been banned until the end of the year by the AIFF Players' Status Committee after Mohun Bagan disputed that the player terminated his contract "without a just cause". The player, however, can appeal the verdict.

Only Mohun Bagan, Kerala Blasters, and Punjab FC have made changes to their coaching personnel in the off-season. Jose Molina, who was the sporting director at the Royal Spanish Football Federation, will return to the coaching dugout with Mohun Bagan.

#### Who are the contenders?

On the field, it's hard to look past Mohun Bagan Super Giant and Mumbai City FC, as the two have shared the League Shield and the Cup between them over the last two seasons. Bagan splashed the cash to lure Lalengmawia Ralte from Mumbai City FC, adding to its already strong Indian midfield core, while Mumbai City has roped in Brandon Fernandes from FC Goa on a free transfer.

Mumbai City has refreshed its overseas roster with relatively younger players. Spaniard and La Masia graduate Jon Toral, who has had top-flight experience in Spain, Scotland, and Greece, is a significant signing for the Islanders. Meanwhile, Mohun Bagan has bolstered its attack with Jamie Maclaren, the A-League's all-time top scorer, who will link up with last season's best player, Dimitri Petratos.

Bagan has gone top-heavy this season with Maclaren, Petratos, Jason Cummings, and Greg Stewart, leaving no room for an overseas central midfielder. The onus will fall on the Indian midfielders to control the game from the middle of the

park, a role Joni Kauko played in previous seasons.

FC Goa could have faced a major setback if the AIFF had bought out Manolo Marquez's contract last month. Instead, Marquez will divide his time between his club and the national team this season, before taking on a full-time national role in 2025-26. Ahead of the season opener, Marquez was busy with the Intercontinental Cup in Hyderabad while his club side won the competitive Bandodkar Trophy, which featured strong teams like Brisbane Roar (A-League) and Defensa y Justicia (Argentina's Primera Division). Goa's title chances will hinge on how Marquez handles his dual role.

Odisha FC, runner-up to Goa in the final, has retained most of its foreign core while adding ISL's prolific attacking midfielder Hugo Boumous. Odisha challenged for the top spot for most of last season before fading away, but Sergio Lobera will be optimistic about adding to his team's solitary Super Cup title.

#### Challengers for the playoffs

The loss of Anwar for more than

half a season will no doubt hurt Carles Cuadrat's East Bengal. The club was also handed a two window transfer ban and a hefty fine to pay to Mohun Bagan. Besides spending a mammoth Rs. 3.3 crore in transfer fees to secure defensive midfielder Jeakson Singh from the Blasters, the club also signed Dimitrios Diamantakos and Madhi Talal, the best players from Blasters and Punjab FC, respectively, last season. David Lalhiansanga, I-League's top Indian scorer last season, has also made the step up to the Red and Golds.

NorthEast United FC finally shed its perennial underachiever tag last month by winning its first-ever trophy, defeating a full-strength Mohun Bagan in the Durand Cup final. Juan Pedro Benali brought the Highlanders within a point of a playoff spot last season, and the club

**Drama continues:** The dust is yet to settle on Anwar Ali's transfer as he has been banned until the end of the year by the AIFF Players' Status Committee after Mohun Bagan disputed that the player terminated his contract "without a just cause". SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT





has managed to hold on to its young striking talent, Parthib Gogoi, who contributed nine goals. With a trophy under its belt, Benali believes that the club is on the right path and will channel the added pressure to focus on achieving its goals this season.

Chennaiyin FC had a proactive summer transfer window, wrapping up most of its deals by June. Now the pressure is on Owen Coyle to get the best out of the Indian core and improve on last season's sixth-place finish. Forwards Kiyian Nassiri and Gurkirat Singh's moves to Chennaiyin will be closely watched to see if they can get regular starting roles.

In what could likely be Sunil Chhetri's final season of professional football, Bengaluru FC has brought in Jose Pereyra Diaz, Alberto Noguera, and Rahul Bheke, all from Mumbai City. The club will be hoping that striker Sivasakthi Narayanan can get back on track after a disappointing campaign last year. While winning the League Shield may be out of reach, the 40-year-old

Chhetri will want to have a crack at silverware through the playoffs.

The loss of charismatic coach Ivan Vukomanovic and Jeakson, combined with an underwhelming pre-season, may have dampened expectations for Kerala Blasters fans this season. The additions of Noah Sadoui and Jesus Jimenez bring some value to the squad, but the weakened domestic core could make it difficult for them to challenge for a playoff spot.

Khalid Jamil, the only Indian coach in the ISL, kept Jamshedpur FC firmly in the playoff hunt until a five-match winless run towards the end of the regular season scuppered its chances. Jeremy Monzorro's departure will likely hurt the club, but a refreshed foreign core, including Javi Hernandez, Javi Siverio, Jordan Murray, Stephen Eze, and Lazar Cirkovic, should keep JFC in the thick of things.

#### Uncertainties remain

Punjab FC will do well to offset the loss of Talal, Jordan Gill, and former

Test of the best: Chennaiyin FC had a proactive summer transfer window, roping in forwards like Kiyian Nassiri (25) and Gurkirat Singh. It remains to be seen whether they will get regular starting roles. PTI

head coach Staikos Vergetis and still compete for the playoffs as it did last season.

New entrant Mohammedan SC will add more history and rivalry to the competition with Kolkata giants Bagan and East Bengal. However, the club lost its top scorer, Lalhlansanga, to East Bengal and will bank on its overseas signings to guide it to a respectable campaign.

Hyderabad FC's participation was confirmed earlier this month after BC Jindal Group completed a takeover, resolving the financial issues that snowballed from bad to worse under its previous ownership. However, head coach Thangboi Singto will find it hard to rally a lacklustre squad to improve on its bottom-of-the-table finish from last season.

» INTERCONTINENTAL CUP



**False start:** The lack of preparation time and poor match fitness may absolve Manolo Marquez from much of the blame in his debut tournament as India's manager.

NAGARAGOPAL

# Nightmare start for Manolo era after tough Syrian lesson

Syria lifts maiden Intercontinental Cup as defending champion India **fails to impress** under new coach Manolo Marquez.

Aneesh Dey

aneesh.dey@thehindu.co.in

**H**e termed his debut match "a boring game." What were Manolo Marquez's thoughts about his second match as India manager? That may be left to speculation, as the All India Football Federation (AIFF) decided against a post-match press conference after India lost 3-0 to Syria at the GMC Balayogi Athletic Stadium on September 9, thus failing to retain the

Intercontinental Cup title.

The Spaniard may be spared from strong judgement after the Intercontinental Cup debacle if factors like preparation time and match fitness are considered. But the tri-nation tournament served as an open book, revealing the issues plaguing Indian football, with the Blue Tigers failing to find the net even once in two matches. The fact that it played its campaign opener against a

lower-ranked team in Mauritius makes the narrative grimmer.

On a positive note, India showed glimpses of its potential in both matches. Starting slow against both Mauritius and Syria, the Blue Tigers created some goal-scoring chances but failed to add the finishing touch. This brings forward the first topic that the Spaniard needs to discuss with his men — starting slow. At the professional level, requiring an entire



**Doubtful at the back:** Gurpreet, who captained India against Syria, has been a dependable presence between the sticks on countless occasions over the years. However, his recent performances for both club and country have shown signs of rust

NAGARA GOPAL

half to settle is a luxury India cannot afford, especially against more challenging teams. A slow start ultimately harmed India, and the positive glimpses were overshadowed.

#### The need to experiment

One could argue this tournament's main purpose was to help Manolo get a better idea of his players, which would aid in implementing his system and finding the right combination of players. In Indian club football, Manolo's tactical versatility has been lauded, with the manager showing a penchant for experimenting, in contrast to former manager Igor Stimac's rigidity and refusal to venture out of his comfort zone.

Manolo gave a glimpse of his experimenting in the tournament decider against Syria. Moving away

from his preferred 4-2-3-1 formation, he opted for the classic 4-4-2. But the surprise element lay in the Spaniard choosing Sahal Abdul Samad as the second striker alongside Manvir. Despite Sahal's finishing abilities, he thrives in midfield, with his preferred position being as a central attacking midfielder, or what some would call the 'No.10 role.' Even though the Mohun Bagan Super Giant midfielder registered a shot on target, he looked uncomfortable with his off-the-ball movement and positioning, playing as the second striker. Whether the change was desirable is debatable, but it's certain this won't be the last time Manolo turns heads with his team selection.

#### Failed flank play

India arguably has some of its most talented and promising players operating on the flanks, like Lallianzuala Chhangte, Liston Colaco, and Nandakumar Sekar. This works to Manolo's benefit, as his system relies heavily on wingers to create attacks in the final third. It was no different in the Intercontinental Cup, as most of India's attacks came from the flanks. However, what faltered was the final ball.

A pattern visible against both Mauritius and Syria was the absence of direct wingers who could service the striker inside the box. While Chhangte is the only player who deserves a mention for trying, overall, India's crossing inside the box was poor, with most attempts being intercepted or blocked. Service was scarce, leaving the striker pleading for more.

#### Knowing when to shoot

It is not just about shooting but knowing when to shoot — a common adage in basic football philosophies — which India failed to adhere to. The Blue Tigers' inability to carve out substantial chances led to futile shots reeking of impatience. Against Mauritius, India registered 10 shots, but only one was on target. Against Syria, it finished the contest with 18 shots, with just five on target. This is a crucial aspect Manolo needs to address with his team, particularly the forwards, about what to do when a good shooting position is not available.

#### Composure at the back

Despite the goalless draw against Mauritius, Manolo praised the centre-back pairing of Chinglesana Singh and Rahul Bheke, saying it was one of the few positives from the match. However, a more challenging opponent like Syria exposed glaring issues in India's backline that need addressing.

There was a complete lack of communication among India's defenders against the Eagles of Qasioun, with no one understanding their roles clearly. Fullbacks Subhasish Bose and Nikhil Poojary rarely made overlaps to aid their attackers and, when they did, were too slow to track back when Syria launched counter-attacks.

One prime example of India's defensive miscommunication is the events leading to Mahmoud Alaswad's opening goal for Syria in the seventh minute. After successfully blocking the initial shot from inside the box, India's backline had plenty of time to clear the ball. But the players looked at each other, unsure of what



**Off target:** The Blue Tigers' inability to carve out substantial chances led to futile shots reeking of impatience.

NAGARA GOPAL

to do. Alaswad punished this indecisiveness by toe-poking the ball with the outside of his boot to beat Gurpreet Singh Sandhu at his near post.

#### Time for a fresh face between the sticks?

Vishal Kaith's exclusion was criticised by fans when Manolo announced his list of 26 probables for the Intercontinental Cup, considering the custodian's stellar season with the Mariners, where he played a crucial part (nine clean sheets and a 61 per cent save percentage in 25 matches) in helping them win the Indian Super League Shield.

Gurpreet, who captained India against Syria, has been a dependable presence between the sticks on countless occasions over the years. However, his recent performances for

both club and country have shown signs of rust, and the fact that he conceded two goals against Syria at his near post does not help his case. With Kaith consistently flourishing and Gurpreet's level deteriorating, one can only wonder how long Manolo will wait before he starts choosing Kaith as India's number one

keeper. The lack of preparation time and poor match fitness may absolve Manolo from much of the blame in his debut tournament as India's manager. However, time is short, and the areas for improvement are substantial as India gears up for important matches in the future with higher stakes.



**Comprehensive win:** The Syrian players celebrate with the trophy, after beating India 3-0. NAGARA GOPAL



**First of many:** Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe found the back of the net twice in an otherwise shaky 2-0 win against Real Betis. AFP

# Leverkusen's dream run ends as Mbappe opens Spanish account

Here's what has unfolded in Europe's **top five leagues** as matches pause for the international break.

**Joan Mathew Jacob**  
joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in

## Premier League

It's three wins in three for defending champion Manchester City, as Erling Haaland (**left**) nabbed yet another hat-trick in a 3-1 victory against West Ham United.

The 24-year-old Norwegian has now scored seven goals in three games and climbed to joint-fourth in the all-time hat-tricks list in the Premier League, with his eighth coming up in just 69 games, four behind leader Sergio Aguero.

With Phil Foden, John Stones, and Rodri getting well-earned rest on the bench ahead of

the international break, Pep Guardiola's side sits at the top of the Premier League, with Liverpool right on its tail, level on points.

Liverpool cruised to a 3-0 victory against fierce rival Manchester United as Luis Diaz preyed on Casemiro's errors to take a two-goal lead in the first half, with Mohamed Salah adding a third 11 minutes into the second. Arne Slot has seamlessly filled the gap left by Jurgen Klopp as manager, with his side yet to



AFP



concede a goal this season.

On the other hand, despite Erik ten Hag stating that United has been the second-best team in the country since his arrival in 2022, his side sits 14th in the table after back-to-back losses. United will be banking on new signing Manuel Ugarte to shore up the midfield when the season resumes.

Arsenal faced its first setback of the season with a 1-1 draw against Brighton & Hove Albion. Declan Rice was controversially sent off for 'kicking' the ball away early in the second half, allowing the Seagulls to equalise through Joao Pedro.

Chelsea followed up its thumping of Wolves with an underwhelming 1-1 draw against Crystal Palace, while Newcastle United took advantage of Ange Postecoglu's high-risk tactics to beat Tottenham Hotspur 2-1, moving up to fifth in the standings.

Aston Villa and Brentford overpowered promoted sides Leicester City and Southampton respectively, securing sixth and

seventh in the table going into matchday four.

#### La Liga

Real Madrid's shaky start to the season continued with a 1-1 draw against Las Palmas on matchday three, as Mbappe again failed to register a goal or an assist.

However, the Frenchman was not going to be quiet forever as he stamped his arrival in the next game against Real Betis, finding the back of the net twice in an otherwise shaky 2-0 win. The so-called 'New Galacticos' sit second in the standings with eight points (level with Atletico Madrid and Villarreal), four behind leader Barcelona.

Despite financial concerns looming over the club, Barcelona has thrived under new manager Hansi Flick, maintaining a perfect record of four wins from four. New signing Dani Olmo, who missed the first two matches due to registration issues. He made his debut and scored the late winner in Barca's comeback 2-1 win against Rayo Vallecano.

**Fabulous start:** New signing Dani Olmo, who missed the first two matches due to registration issues, made his debut and scored the late winner in Barca's comeback 2-1 win against Rayo Vallecano. AP

The following week, Flick's ruthlessness was on display as his side put seven past newly-promoted Real Valladolid, with Raphinha stealing the show with three goals and an assist.

Atletico Madrid entered the international break in third place after a stoppage-time winner from Angel Correa against Athletic Bilbao on matchday four.

Last season's surprise package Girona rounded off the top five after back-to-back wins against Osasuna and Sevilla, with the latter languishing at the bottom of the table with just two points from four games.

#### Bundesliga

RB Leipzig broke Bayer



**Paris Saint-Germain maintained a perfect start to the season after comfortably beating 2020-21 champion Lille 3-1, with first-half goals from Vitinha and Bradley Barcola, along with a towering header from Randal Kolo Muani**



**Fresh blood:** The 22-year-old Barcola has been in fine form since the start of the season and sits in the second spot for most goals this season with four in three games. REUTERS

Leverkusen's 35-game unbeaten Bundesliga run with a 3-2 victory. Xabi Alonso's men (left) got a taste of their own medicine after Kevin Kampl and Lois Openda inspired Leipzig's comeback, following Jeremie Frimpong and Alejandro Grimaldo's two-goal lead for Leverkusen in the first half.

Leipzig became the first team to defeat Leverkusen in the Bundesliga in 462 days, since VfL Bochum did on the last day of the 2022-23 season. The Red Bull club now sits third, level on points with Bayern Munich and surprise table-topper FC Heidenheim.

Bayern's Harry Kane scored his first goal of the season from the spot, while Thomas Muller added a second as Vincent Kompany maintained a perfect start against SC Freiburg.

Heidenheim, which finished eighth

in its debut 2023-24 season, took a surprise lead at the top after hammering FC Augsburg 4-0. However, the side faces its first real test when it takes on Borussia Dortmund after the restart.

Dortmund, under new head coach Nuri Şahin, will look to bounce back after a goalless draw against Werder Bremen that saw centre-back Nico Schlotterbeck sent off.

#### Serie A

After a frustrating start to the season, Inter Milan set its title defence in motion with a 4-0 win over UEFA Europa League holder Atalanta on matchday three. Inter took the lead through an own goal in just three minutes before Nicolo Barella's stunning volley from the edge of the box doubled the advantage at the 10-minute mark.

Marcus Thuram scored twice in nine minutes in the second half, boosting the *Nerazzurri* to the top spot with seven points.

Juventus dropped its first points of the season, missing the chance to go



## BAYERN'S HARRY KANE SCORED HIS FIRST GOAL OF THE SEASON FROM THE SPOT, WHILE THOMAS MULLER ADDED A SECOND AS VINCENT KOMPANY MAINTAINED A PERFECT START AGAINST SC FREIBURG

**Back to scoring ways:** Romelu Lukaku returned to his goal-scoring ways in a lighter shade of blue, finding the back of the net in stoppage time for Napoli against promoted Parma. AP

top after being held to a goalless draw by AS Roma. Roma, currently 17th with two draws and one loss, will look to turn things around against Genoa after the international break.

Romelu Lukaku returned to his goal-scoring ways in a lighter shade of blue, finding the back of the net in stoppage time for Napoli against promoted Parma. André-Frank Zambo Anguissa scored the winner to complete a 2-1 comeback.

After AC Milan manager Paulo Fonseca dropped some big names from the side that lost to Parma on matchday two, it's nightmare start to the season continued after it scraped a 2-2 draw against Lazio. After giving up the lead to goals from Lazio's Valentin Castellanos and Boulaye Dia, Milan had 70th-minute

substitute Rafael Leao to thank, as he equalised two minutes after coming on.

After three matchdays, it's a four-way tie at the top, with Inter and Juventus leading, followed by Torino and Udinese in third and fourth, respectively.

### Ligue 1

Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) maintained a perfect start to the season after comfortably beating 2020-21 champion Lille 3-1. First-half goals from Vitinha and Bradley Barcola, along with a towering header from Randal Kolo Muani, ensured Luis Enrique's side was adapting well without Mbappe.

The 22-year-old Barcola has been in fine form since the start of the

season and sits in the second spot for most goals this season with four in three games.

The top spot, however, is occupied by Englishman Mason Greenwood, who scored twice in Olympique de Marseille's 3-1 win against Toulouse FC, taking his tally to five. Roberto De Zerbi's side is two points off leader PSG and tied on seven points with FC Nantes, RC Lens, and AS Monaco.

After two losses in its first two games, Olympique Lyonnais secured its first points of the season after a high-scoring 4-3 win against RC Strasbourg. New signing Gift Orban made his debut, scoring twice in nine minutes after coming off the bench in the second half.

« Fielding is a critical aspect that requires constant attention. In any team, the goal is always to seek continuous improvement »

# T. DILIP

Ayan Acharya

[ayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in](mailto:ayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in)

**I**t's been over two months since India's T20 World Cup victory in the Caribbean, and the team now has a new support staff, led by head coach Gautam Gambhir. However, a familiar face remains in the dressing room — fielding coach T. Dilip, who continues in his role from the previous regime.

In this chat, Dilip talks about that memorable World Cup final, modern fielding, coaching an elite bunch, and what makes Ravindra Jadeja such a gun fielder.

**The crosswind was a big factor at all venues in the Caribbean, including the final. How did the boys train for it? Were there any specific instructions given to the boundary riders?**

We recognised early on that adapting to these conditions would be key to maintaining our fielding standards. Boundary riders were particularly focused on, as they are most affected by the crosswind. We emphasised the importance of tracking the ball and adjusting their positions based on the wind's influence.

This involved drills where they had to take high catches using "variable-weight balls." We also stressed the importance of effective communication between the boundary riders and infielders.

**Suryakumar Yadav's catch has been touted as one of the best under pressure, if not the best. If you could describe your reaction, as well as the dressing room's response, as David Miller played that shot.**

I wasn't in the dressing room when SKY took that phenomenal catch — I was on the boundary, closely observing the game. The moment Miller played that shot, my heart skipped a beat as the ball went up in the air. Watching SKY position himself perfectly and execute the catch under immense pressure was an amazing feeling. My immediate reaction was pure elation, knowing that this catch could be a game-changer for us.

**Rohit Sharma usually fields inside the circle, but that day in the final, as Hardik came on to bowl the 20th over, we saw him stationed at long on. Was there a particular reason for that, or was it just a gut call?**

One of the reasons Rohit is such a valuable asset to our fielding unit is his versatility. He's comfortable fielding anywhere on the ground, whether it's inside the circle or on the boundary. We needed a fielder with experience, someone who could stay composed under pressure. In addition, it was a way of saving time.

Because in T20 cricket every second counts as there is a specific time limit to finish the overs.

**Given the squad was just coming out of the IPL, where the outfields were generally pretty lush and green, how different was it training the guys for fielding on the grounds, especially in the USA? Is there a distinct change in methods of practice?**

The outfields in the USA can vary significantly, with the grounds having softer, sand-based surfaces. This required us to adapt our training methods to ensure the players were aware of the challenges. One of the key adjustments was maintaining our attacking approach on the outfield but also being aware of the consequences of diving. We incorporated more drills that simulated taking good routes to the ball.

**Batsmen often have to change mindsets when they switch formats. Does it apply to fielding as well?**

In all formats, the fundamental skills of fielding remain the same, but the application and intensity vary. In T20 cricket, the pace of the game is incredibly fast, and fielding becomes an intense, high-energy activity.



VIJAY SONEJI

Fielders need to be prepared for quick reactions and rapid sprints. For ODIs, while the intensity is slightly lower than in T20s, the emphasis is on maintaining consistency over a longer period. Fielders need to be versatile, often switching between saving singles and cutting off boundaries. In Test cricket, the requirements shift significantly. Fielders need to display a high level of concentration and patience, as the game can stretch over days. The physical and mental endurance to stay focused for long periods is crucial.

#### **Talking of athletic ability, we've seen some incredible boundary catches in the World Cup. What is the key to being a good boundary rider?**

Firstly, athleticism is paramount. But being a great boundary rider goes beyond just physical attributes. Rope awareness is crucial — knowing exactly where you are in relation to the boundary rope can make the difference between saving runs and conceding them. Anticipating the batter's tendencies is another key aspect, as it allows the fielder to position themselves strategically. Finally, understanding

the density of the air and how it affects the ball's travel is key. In different conditions, it may travel faster or slower through the air.

#### **What makes someone like Jadeja such a good fielder?**

His speed, anticipation, and ability to react quickly are remarkable, allowing him to cover ground and respond instantly to the ball. His natural athleticism gives him the foundation to excel in various fielding positions, whether inside the circle or patrolling the boundary. Moreover, Jadeja's throwing arm is a significant asset. He has one of the most powerful and accurate arms in the game, capable of hitting the stumps from almost any position on the field.

#### **How much have throwing and diving techniques evolved over the last five years?**

These techniques have evolved a lot, and credit goes to the incredible improvement in ground conditions, especially here in India. The BCCI has done a fantastic job ensuring that our grounds are maintained to the highest standards, which allows players to execute these skills with greater confidence. These

advancements aren't just about the techniques but also about the overall fitness and strength that our players have built over the years. When you slide and dive, you're creating opportunities to make an impact, whether it's turning a single into a run-out chance or stopping a boundary that could shift momentum.

#### **Can cricketers make significant improvements after a certain stage?**

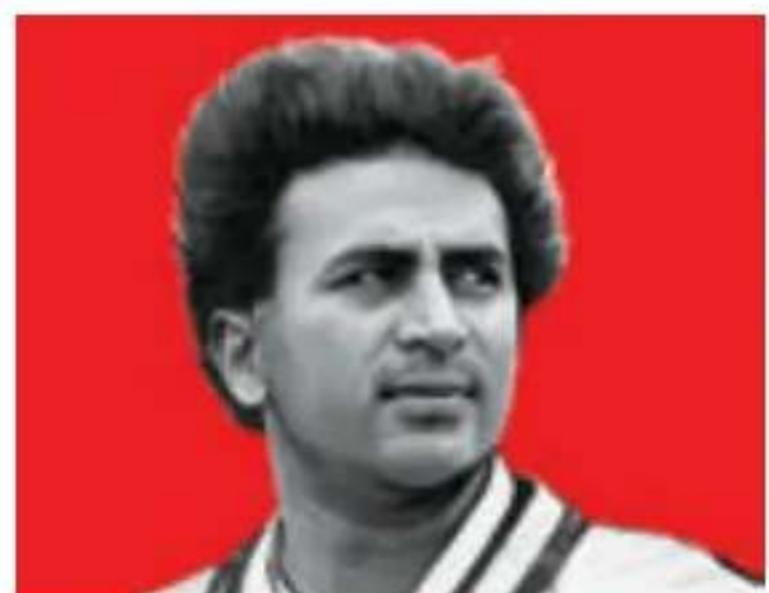
I believe that while natural athleticism might peak at a younger age, the experience and game awareness that come with age can actually enhance a fielder's effectiveness. We've seen senior players continue to set high standards in the field because they understand the importance of positioning, angles, and quick decision-making. Additionally, those who played multiple sports in their younger years often develop a broader range of cognitive skills.

#### **Is a fielder's position determined according to the batsman at the crease?**

This decision is influenced by detailed analysis and understanding of the batsman's strengths, weaknesses, and playing tendencies. For instance, if a batsman is known for playing certain shots frequently, like cover drives or sweeps, fielders are positioned strategically to counter it. For example, while one player may play the cover drive square of the wicket, another might tend to play it finer. The fielder's position is adjusted accordingly to anticipate and cut off potential scoring areas.

#### **Is there any area that Indian fielders need to improve in?**

Fielding is a critical aspect that requires constant attention. In any team, the goal is always to seek continuous improvement. Our team believes in maintaining high standards and constantly evolving. Every match and practice session is an opportunity to learn and get better.



## ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



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# BUSINESS OF INDIA BASHING HAS TO BE COUNTERED WITH AGGRESSION

Next time, when some commentator or media person from overseas talk about the **silence of the Indian crowd** when India is not doing well, we should ask them why their supporters haven't come to cheer for their team.

**A**ryna Sabalenka lying prone on the court after winning the point that crowned her the US Open women's singles champion is a familiar sight, often seen from winners of any of the Majors. Yes, it's a tough grind over two weeks, and achieving victory must be a huge relief as well as joy for sure.

While it's common to see men lying flat on their backs after a win, female athletes like Sabalenka face criticism for doing the same. Every individual has a right to celebrate his/her win as they think fit, as long as it's within the confines of propriety. Sabalenka had been beaten in the final last year by Coco Gauff, an American, and here she was playing another American in the final.

The crowd was understandably rooting for the home girl, so the pressure was enormous on Sabalenka. Just before the semis against Emma Navarro, another American, she had jokingly told the crowd that the drinks would be on her if they gave her some support. She

didn't really need that in both the semis and the final, as she was miles better than her opponents and won quite comfortably.

This home support business is a natural thing, as nobody likes to see their country or country's player lose, especially in a sporting contest. Yet this support is invariably held against Indian crowds by overseas media and commentators. They quickly forget that even in their own country it is the same, and their crowds are hardly likely to support the opposition.

I can say with experience of more than 50 years that it's not just the Indian crowds who are silent when their team is not doing well but crowds in every country. If there is some noise when, say, India is doing well overseas, it's because of the number of Indian supporters who travel long distances from India and who cheer for them and not the locals.

So next time, when some commentator or media person from overseas tries to talk



about the silence of the Indian crowd when India is not doing well, we should ask them why their supporters haven't come to cheer for their team.

This business of India bashing has to be countered with aggression because that's the only language they understand. Recently, I heard someone saying it would be good for Test cricket if Joe Root overtook Sachin Tendulkar's record for most runs and centuries in Test match cricket.

Please tell us what's wrong with Test cricket presently when Tendulkar is owning the record and how will Test cricket be better if (and that's a huge if) an Englishman goes on to hold it. In what way will it be better? Kindly enlighten us.

For some strange reason, there's a perception overseas that BCCI does not like Test cricket.

That's a ridiculous notion, as India play more than half a dozen Test matches every

**Backing your team:** It's not just the Indian crowds who are silent when their team is not doing well but crowds in every country. K.R.DEEPAK

season, be it at home or away. Just because the IPL is massively successful doesn't mean BCCI is not interested in promoting Test cricket, but that's the narrative that's being peddled by the overseas media.

The ICC just announced that the WTC final will be played at Lord's next June. Well, we have heard the same declaration twice earlier, but as soon as it's seen that England is not going to qualify for the final, the venue gets changed to Southampton or The Oval in London. Now that England is winning more Test matches in this period and there's a good chance that they may get to the final, we are being told the final will be at Lord's. Let's wait and see. As the old Indian saying goes, *DILLI (Lord's) abhi bhi door hai*.



**If there is some noise when, say, India is doing well overseas, it's because of the number of Indian supporters who have travelled long distances from India and who are cheering for them and not the locals.**

# Shikhar Dhawan, a gritty cricketer

Shikhar 'Gabbar' Dhawan, aged 38, who had recently announced his retirement from the game, has, over his 12-year career from 2010 to 2022, played 34 Tests, 167 ODIs, and 68 T20Is, amassing a total of 10,867 runs. The tables below examine his highs and lows in both international and franchise cricket.

## Indian openers dismissed for a duck in their ODI debut innings

Balls	Batter	Bat#	Against	Venue	Date	Result
10	K. Srikkanth	2	England	Ahmedabad	25 Nov 1981	Lost
1	Lalchand Rajput#	2	England	Nagpur	23 Jan 1985	Won
3	Wasim Jaffer#	1	South Africa	Durban	22 Nov 2006	Lost
2	Shikhar Dhawan#	1	Australia	Visakhapatnam	20 Oct 2010	Won

# in the second innings

Note: \*The Ahmedabad match was the first ODI to be played on Indian soil.

## Quickest knocks of 100+ by batting strike-rates on Test debut

S/R	Batter	(Runs/Balls)	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
107.47	Shikhar Dhawan	(187 in 174)	India	Australia	Mohali	Mar 2013	W
100.00	Dwayne Smith#	(105* in 105)	West Indies	South Africa	Cape Town	Jan 2004	D
98.43	Matt Prior	(126* in 128)	England	West Indies	Lord's	May 2007	D
91.86	Abul Hasan	(113 in 123)	Bangladesh	West Indies	Khulna	Nov 2012	L
88.96	Jimmy Neesham#	(137* in 154)	New Zealand	India	Wellington	Feb 2014	D

# in the second innings

Note: \*Dhawan's 100 came in just 85 balls

## Quickest knocks of 100+ by batting strike-rates on Test debut for India

S/R	Batter	(Runs/Balls)	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
107.47	Shikhar Dhawan	(187 in 174)	Australia	Mohali	Mar 2013	W
87.01	Prithvi Shaw	(134 in 154)	West Indies	Rajkot	Oct 2018	W
61.40	Shreyas Iyer	(105 in 171)	New Zealand	Kanpur	Nov 2021	D
60.69	Virender Sehwag	(105 in 173)	South Africa	Bloemfontein	Nov 2001	L

## Highest individual scores on Test debut by Asian players

Runs	(Balls)	Batter	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
201*	(548)	Brendon Kuruppu	Sri Lanka	New Zealand	Colombo CCC	Apr 1987	D
187	(174)	Shikhar Dhawan	India	Australia	Mohali	Mar 2013	W
177	(301)	Rohit Sharma	India	West Indies	Kolkata	Nov 2013	W
171	(387)	Yashasvi Jaiswal	India	West Indies	Roseau	Jul 2023	W
170	(253)	Yasir Hameed	Pakistan	Bangladesh	Karachi	Aug 2003	W

## Highest individual scores on Test debutant as openers

Runs	(Balls)	Batter	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
201*	(548)	Brendon Kuruppu	Sri Lanka	New Zealand	Colombo CCC	Apr 1987	D
200	(347)	Devon Conway	England	Lord's	Lord's	Jun 2021	D
187	(174)	Shikhar Dhawan	India	Australia	Mohali	Mar 2013	W
171	(217)	Hamish Rutherford	New Zealand	England	Dunedin	Mar 2013	D
171	(387)	Yashasvi Jaiswal	India	West Indies	Roseau	Jul 2023	W



India's Shikhar Dhawan. VIJAY SONEJI

Note: # in the second innings

\*Prior was the wicket-keeper;

Abul Hasan batted at #10

\*Dhawan reached his 100th run in just 85 balls, which is the quickest by any debutant in Test cricket history

Note: \*Only Jaiswal in the above list faced the first ball of the innings

### Highest individual scores by Test debutants against Australia

Runs	(Balls)	Batter	For	Venue	Month, Year	Result
287	(419+)	Reg Foster	England	Sydney	Dec 1903	W
187	(174)	Shikhar Dhawan	India	Mohali	Mar 2013	W
166	(330+)	Khalid Ibadulla	Pakistan	Karachi	Oct 1964	D
154*	(185+)	K. S. Ranjitsinhji	England	Manchester	Jul 1896	L
152	(294)	W. G. Grace	England	The Oval	Sep 1880	W

+ minutes batted

Note: \*Ranji's knock at Manchester came while following-on.

\*The Oval Test was the first to be played on English soil.

### The Fab-eight in ODI cricket with a batting career average of 40-plus and a 90-plus strike-rate

Ave.	S/R	Batter	(ODI runs)	For	Mts	Inns
58.18	93.54	Virat Kohli	(13906)	India	295	283
53.50	101.09	A. B. de Villiers	(9577)	South Africa+	228	218
49.16	92.43	Rohit Sharma	(10866)	India	265	257
47.00	90.20	Viv Richards	(6721)	West Indies	187	167
45.74	96.65	Quinton de Kock	(6770)	South Africa	155	155
45.30	97.26	David Warner	(6932)	Australia	161	159
44.11	91.35	Shikhar Dhawan	(6793)	India	167	164
40.54	90.44	Shane Watson	(5757)	Australia	190	169

+ also appeared for other sides in few games

The above is listed based on batting averages

### Batters with back-to-back IPL centuries

Batter (for)	Century1	Century2
Shikhar Dhawan (DC)	101* (v CSK at Sharjah, 17 Oct 2020)	106* (v PBKS at Dubai, 20 Oct 2020)
Jos Buttler (RR)	103 (v KKR at Mumbai BS, 18 Apr 2022)	116 (v DC at Mumbai WS, 22 Apr 2022)
Virat Kohli (RCB)	100 (v SRH at Hyderabad, 18 May 2023)	101* (v GT at Bengaluru, 21 May 2023)
Shubman Gill (GT)	101 (v SRH at Ahmedabad, 15 May 2023)	104* (v RCB at Bengaluru, 21 May 2023)

Note: \*Kohli and Gill achieved this in the same match!

\*These were the only two centuries Dhawan hit in his IPL career.

\*These were Gill's first two centuries of his IPL career. He managed a third one a match later (ie three centuries in four innings)

### Maximum 'fours' hit during an IPL career

4s	Batter	For	Mts	Inns	6s
768	Shikhar Dhawan	DCh, DD/DC, MI, PBKS, SRH	222	221	152
705	Virat Kohli	RCB	252	244	272
663	David Warner	DC, SRH	184	184	236
599	Rohit Sharma	DCh, MI	257	252	280
506	Suresh Raina	CSK, GL	205	200	203

### Batters with 500+ runs in an IPL season on most occasions

No	Player	500+ runs in an IPL season
7	David Warner	528 (2014), 562 (2015), 848 (2016), 641 (2017), 692 (2019), 548 (2020), 516 (2023)
7	Virat Kohli	557 (2011), 634 (2013), 505 (2015), 973 (2016), 530 (2018), 639 (2023), 741 (2024)
6	K. L. Rahul	659 (2018), 593 (2019), 670 (2020), 626 (2021), 616 (2022), 520 (2024)
5	Shikhar Dhawan	569 (2012), 501 (2016), 521 (2019), 618 (2020), 587 (2021)

All records are correct and updated until 6 Sept 2024.



» TEST SERIES PREVIEW  
INDIA-BANGLADESH

# Back to the grind in climb to Test greatness and a peek into the future

A 10-Test season is ideal for **identifying the next core group**, building pace reserves, and setting up a smooth succession plan.



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**Dhruva Prasad**

dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in

India's T20 World Cup triumph in the Caribbean may be less than three months old. But the silverware-drought-ending feat has done little to temper expectations around Rohit Sharma's men, who embark on the home stretch of their World Test Championship (WTC) 2023-25 campaign with a two-match series against Bangladesh.

The format of the WTC, which runs over two years across six series for each of the nine participating sides, has imbued bilateral engagements with jeopardy and consequence.

Even as India's post-T20 World Cup experiments against Zimbabwe and

Sri Lanka flew under the radar, in large part because of the Olympic Games in Paris, the assignment against Bangladesh or the oncoming packed Test season will afford no such leeway.

India will play 10 Test matches, five at home and as many away, over the next four months to consolidate its top position in the WTC standings and march into its third successive final. The upcoming four months will test the skill and fitness of India's finest long-format cricketers, whose last 10 Tests were held over 14 months, starting from the WTC 2023 final defeat to Australia at The Oval.

Though the trial by pace that awaits India Down Under during the Border-Gavaskar Trophy gets top billing, the Bangladesh test at home,

**Prepped for the grind:** The upcoming four months will test the skill and fitness of India's finest long-format cricketers, whose last 10 Tests were held over 14 months. K.R DEEPAK

before the Kiwis come visiting for three matches, will be a handful.

A historic 2-0 series win in Pakistan propped Bangladesh up to the fourth spot in the table, and The Tigers will be borne on that tailwind from Rawalpindi when they dock on the balmy shores of Chennai before moving on to Kanpur.

India has maintained a clean sheet against Bangladesh in Tests, but it came as close as it ever has to conceding that spotless record the last time the two met, back in December 2022 in Mirpur. On a



**Go-to circuit-breaker:** Rishabh Pant's significance this Test season cannot be overstated, especially with the Test series Down Under looming large and his heroics at the Gabba in 2021-22 still the flavour of the storied rivalry. K. MURALIKUMAR

day-four pitch that turned and kept low, Mehidy Hasan Miraz had the visitor in a bind before Shreyas Iyer and R. Ashwin's rearguard led to a scrappy three-wicket win.

Rohit missed that series, but he will keep his unit from drifting into complacency as Bangladesh is no stranger to these conditions.

India and Bangladesh are the most spin-friendly host countries in Tests since 2020, where the tweakers average 25.55 and 32.11 runs per wicket, respectively.

The host will take lessons from its four defeats at home in the last seven years, where rank turners were a double-edged sword, be it against Australia in Pune in 2017 and Indore in 2023, or versus England in 2021 in Chennai.

India's dwindling returns against spin bowling at home were arrested to an extent during the England series this year, and the absence of prodigious turn and uneven bounce meant run-scoring wasn't reduced to a mere lottery. That said, Tom Hartley's seven-for in Hyderabad did jolt the host initially.

India's top six batters' cumulative batting average against spin had dropped to 40 runs per wicket in 2021, and the slide continued in 2022 (36.5) and 2023 (25.9) before rising to 48.4 this year. With the return of Virat Kohli, KL Rahul and Rishabh Pant, India will hope to further allay its spin demons. Kohli missed the five-match series against England due to personal reasons, and with his

batting average against spin on the mend, his experience will be vital in the middle-order against the likes of Miraz and Shakib Al Hasan.

Rahul, meanwhile, freed up of wicketkeeping duties and coming off a half-century in the Duleep Trophy, will have a case to make after missing four out of five Tests this year due to injury. With Sarfaraz Khan breathing down his neck for a spot in the middle-order, his task will be cut out. Similarly, Pant will have to fend off a credible challenge from Dhruv Jurel for the wicketkeeper's role and reassert his indispensability as a left-handed, spin-bashing circuit-breaker.

Pant's significance this Test season cannot be overstated, especially with

#### WTC Points Table (as of 10-9-2024)

Position	Team	Matches	Won	Lost	Drawn	Points	PCT
1	India	9	6	2	1	74	68.52
2	Australia	12	8	3	1	90	62.53
3	New Zealand	6	3	3	0	36	50.04
4	Bangladesh	6	3	3	0	33	45.83
5	Sri Lanka	7	3	4	0	36	42.86



**Batting fulcrum:** Virat Kohli's improving batting average against spin makes his experience a crucial asset in the middle-order, particularly against formidable spinners like Mehidy Hasan Miraz and Shakib Al Hasan. VIJAY SONEJI

the Test series Down Under looming large and his heroics at the Gabba in 2021-22 still the flavour of the storied rivalry.

**Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill were India's top run-scorers against England this year, amassing 712 and 452 runs, respectively, and the youth brigade could lead the charge against the spinners.** Meanwhile, Rohit's average against the tweakers has been more than 50 for the first time since 2019, and he will hope to continue setting the tone at the top.

If that goes pear-shaped, the lower-order spin-bowling all-rounders will be expected to lead the rescue act, as has been the case of late in home Tests.

Ravindra Jadeja (41.20) and Axar Patel (39.60) boast of the third and

fourth-highest batting averages at home in Tests since 2021, respectively, amongst batters who have played at least 10 innings. With Ashwin and Kuldeep Yadav also in the mix, India's spin selection could hinge on the prevalent batting conditions. However, overlooking the role of the pacers in Tests in India would be anachronistic, especially with a certain Jasprit Bumrah in the ranks. The fast-bowling enigma had 19 scalps in the England series, was joint-second in the wickets' charts, and topped all the bowling averages with an astounding 16.89.

He will be supported by Mohammed Siraj, who is finding his stride in the longest format, as Mohammad Shami continues to be sidelined due to injury. Akash Deep is one of the five players who debuted in the England series and one of the three to be retained — alongside Sarfaraz and Jurel. Akash impressed with a three-for on debut in Ranchi and is coming off a nine-wicket haul in the Duleep Trophy. Perhaps the only surprise call-up was Yash Dayal, who has come a long way since being

an unwanted appendage to Rinku Singh's final-over six-hitting spree in the Indian Premier League.

The left-arm pacer is being groomed for a potential role in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy and has been on the selectors' radar since IPL 2024, where he was Royal Challengers Bengaluru's highest wicket-taker and a key member of the franchise's miraculous mid-season turnaround.

Though he has a limited First-Class experience of 24 matches, he picked up three crucial wickets in India B's win over India A in the first round of the Duleep Trophy.

**With Rohit (37), Kohli (35), Jadeja (35) and Ashwin (37) not getting any younger, workhorses Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane axed for the foreseeable future, and Bumrah's fitness and all-format availability a priority for the management, a 10-Test season will be the ideal breeding ground for identifying the next core group, developing effective pace reserves, and perhaps even setting in motion a smooth succession plan.**



PTI

# Moeen Ali announces retirement

- 1 Moeen was a **key member** of England's victorious 2019 ODI World Cup and 2022 T20 World Cup squads.

England all-rounder Moeen Ali has announced his retirement from international cricket after a distinguished decade-long career. The 37-year-old debuted in 2014 against West Indies and played

298 matches for England, amassing 6,678 runs and taking 366 wickets. Moeen was a key member of England's victorious 2019 ODI World Cup and 2022 T20 World

Cup squads. In Tests, he claimed 195 wickets, ranking as England's third-highest wicket-taking spinner, behind Derek Underwood (297) and Graeme Swann (255).



2

Australia completed a 3-0 sweep against Scotland in their three-match T20I series. In the opening game, Travis Head's blistering 80 off 25 balls powered Australia to a seven-wicket win, with his 73 runs in the PowerPlay setting a new record for the most runs scored in the first six overs of a T20I. The second match saw Josh Inglis hit a century and Marcus Stoinis take four wickets, leading Australia to a 70-run victory. Cameron Green's all-round performance, with an unbeaten 62 off 39 balls and figures of 3-35, sealed the win in the final match.

AP

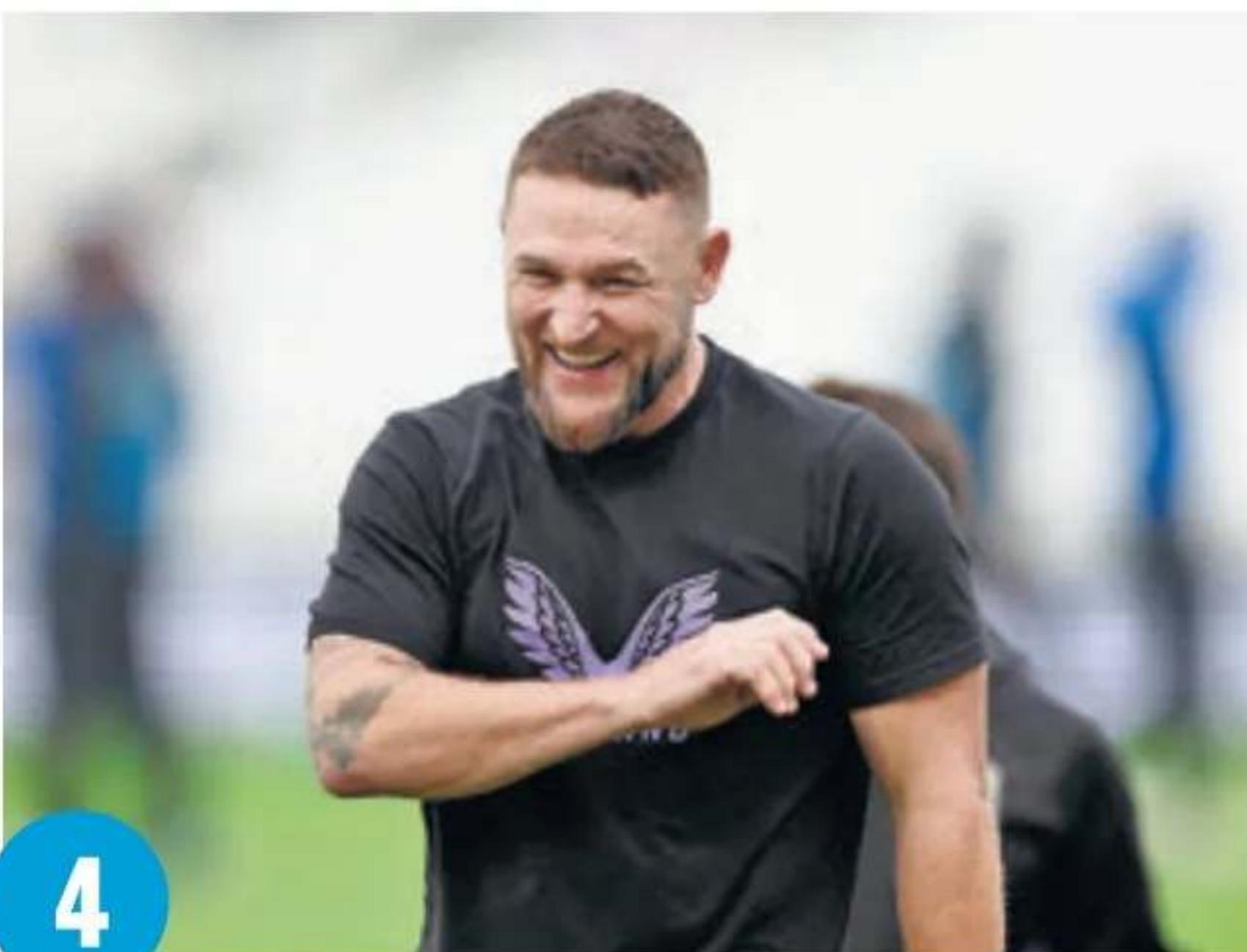


GETTY IMAGES

3

## Winners

England secured a 2-1 series victory over Sri Lanka in the three-match Test series, but the host was denied a clean sweep as Sri Lanka staged a strong comeback in the final Test. The visitor achieved only its fourth Test win on English soil, chasing down 125 runs on the last day. Opener Pathum Nissanka's unbeaten century guided Sri Lanka to an impressive eight-wicket victory.



REUTERS

4

Brendon McCullum, who has been England's Test coach since 2022, has now been appointed head coach of the country's white-ball teams following the resignation of Matthew Mott in July. The former New Zealand cricketer will officially begin his role with the One-Day International and Twenty20 squads in January, aligning with England's white-ball tour of India and the Champions Trophy. Until then, Marcus Trescothick will step in as interim coach for the upcoming white-ball series against Australia and the Caribbean tour.



AP

5

Bangladesh made a historic clean sweep in its two-match Test series against Pakistan, marking its third overseas Test series victory. Chasing 185, the experienced duo of Mushfiqur Rahim and Shakib Al Hasan (**above**) led Bangladesh to a six-wicket win. Its maiden Test triumph over Pakistan came in the opening match, where Bangladesh achieved a rare feat — winning a Test after conceding a 400-plus total in the first innings for the first time.

# DEJA VU AT MONZA

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc once again rolled back the years at the Italian Grand Prix, **repeating his stunning 2019 victory** with another remarkable win at Monza.

**Familiar position:** Five years later, in 2024, Leclerc pulled off a heist to deliver Ferrari's third win of the year, clinching the Italian GP and sending the Tifosi into rapture. GETTY IMAGES

**Dipak Ragav**  
dipak.ragav@thehindu.co.in

In Formula One, all drivers and teams want to win their home races. The images of Ayrton Senna winning in Brazil or Nigel Mansell's epic drive at Silverstone in 1992 at the height of 'Mansell Mania' are some of the most enduring in the sport.

But when it comes to home wins, nothing beats the magic of Ferrari winning in Italy. The passionate fans singing the national anthem under the pit lane is a sight to behold and something every fan should experience. However, the Scuderia hasn't had much success at Monza recently.

The Italian team's last win on home soil came in 2019 when Charles Leclerc took his second career victory. It was the year when the Ferrari engine was the class of the field.

However, the triumph carries an asterisk, as the team was later suspected of having run its power units in a way that broke the regulations, although the FIA couldn't prove the wrongdoing.

Five years later, in 2024, Leclerc pulled off a heist to deliver Ferrari's third win of the year, clinching the Italian GP and sending the Tifosi into rapture.

When McLaren's Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri locked out the front row of the grid, in that order, it portended

another win for the British team and a chance for it to further eat into Red Bull's lead in the constructors' championship.

However, the battle between the McLaren teammates allowed Leclerc, who started third, to take advantage of the squabble, which he duly did.

On the opening lap, Piastri pulled off an audacious move into the second chicane to take the lead from Norris.

The move also put Norris off his ideal line, compromising his exit from the corner and making him a sitting duck for Leclerc. The Ferrari driver pounced to move himself to second between the two McLarens.

After the first round of stops, Piastri was leading from Norris, who





**Long wait:** The Italian team's last win on home soil came in 2019 when Charles Leclerc took his second career victory. It was the year when the Ferrari engine was the class of the field. REUTERS

managed to get ahead of Leclerc by pitting earlier. The stage was set for a comfortable 1-2 for McLaren. Norris, though, made many uncharacteristic mistakes and struggled with graining on his front left tyres. He came in early for a second stop, and Piastri, too, hit similar trouble, though not to the same extent as Norris.

It was at this point that McLaren lost the plot when it took the cautious approach to stop Piastri on lap 38, giving up the lead to Leclerc. Ferrari, though, decided to brave it out on a one-stopper.

**Ultimately, it was a straight fight between Piastri and Leclerc, in which the latter managed to hold on to his lead and win it by seconds, showing excellent tyre management skills to take his second win of 2024.**

On a day when Max Verstappen struggled in his Red Bull, finishing only sixth, Norris had a chance to make a significant dent in the former's lead.

McLaren may have missed an opportunity by not imposing team orders at the start or even toward the end. Swapping places would have helped Norris gain three more points on the reigning champion.

Norris now trails Verstappen by 62 points and could have reduced the lead by ten more had things gone slightly differently.

McLaren will hope the points lost here don't come back to bite it at the end of the year. In the constructors' standings, McLaren only trails Red Bull by eight points, and if the form book continues, it is on course to win the title it last won in 1998.

## MotoGP

### Return of the King

When Marc Marquez (**below**) won in Misano in 2021, no one would have expected the six-time MotoGP champion not to win a race for the next three years. It has been a trying few years for the Spaniard as he dealt with injuries and uncompetitive Honda machinery. By the end of last year, he'd had enough of Honda and switched to Gresini Racing to ride a year-old Ducati bike for 2024. His decision proved correct when he won his first race after 1,043 days by winning the Aragon Grand Prix. He made it doubly special on home soil by doing the double, as he had also clinched the Sprint race on Saturday. The 31-year-old took pole position and cruised to victory ahead of Jorge Martin. Reigning champion Francesco Bagnaia, though, had a miserable weekend, crashing out of the race after colliding with Marc's teammate and brother, Alex Marquez, while fighting for third. A week later, Marquez showed he was well and truly back, winning the San Marino GP at Misano, beating Bagnaia in the factory Ducati.

The non-points finish followed a disappointing showing in the Sprint, where Bagnaia finished ninth. This allowed Martin, who had a pair of second-place finishes, to take a 23-point lead.

In Misano, Marquez beat Bagnaia in a straight fight in mixed weather conditions to climb up to third in the riders' standings. With this win, the Spaniard sent a strong message to the two-time champion Bagnaia, who will be his teammate next year in the works Ducati team.

However, Martin's huge blunder on Sunday was the big talking point in the race. When a brief spell of rain hit the track during the race, the championship leader pitted to change bikes with wet tyres. Unfortunately, the rain abated soon after. This meant the Prima Pramac rider on the satellite Ducati had to swap bikes again and settle for 15th place, taking home a solitary point. The gamble proved costly, and his healthy lead shrunk to seven points.



# Blueprint for a better UTT

With a few tweaks here and some tinkering there, the UTT could, in the foreseeable future, give global leagues like the Chinese Super League, Bundesliga and French Pro A **a run for their money.**

Santadeep Dey

santadeep.dey@thehindu.co.in



WATCH OUR REVIEW

*ultimate*

/'ʌltɪmət/

(adjective)

**being the best or most extreme example of its kind**

It has been seven years since the Ultimate Table Tennis (UTT) saw the light of day. Since its inception, the franchise-based league, conducted under the auspices of the Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI), has gone from strength to strength. With five editions now having rolled by — COVID-19 resulted in a downtime between 2020 and 2022 — it would be fair to give the tournament a once-over and find out to what extent it has lived up to its moniker.

Keeping up the practice from 2019, the UTT, in its entirety, was held at a single venue in 2024. In the first two editions, the UTT caravan had pit stops in three cities, which required players to live out of a suitcase for more than two weeks. Despite noble efforts to popularise table tennis, the sport's niche audience and player fatigue proved challenging. These hurdles led to a shift in the venue, with the action moving to Chennai this year, following successful seasons in Delhi (2019) and Pune (2023).

#### Promotion blues

With two of the biggest Indian stars, Achanta Sharath Kamal and Sathiyan Gnanasekaran, hailing from Chennai, it was safe to presume that the city would welcome some of India's best paddlers with open arms.

However, empty seats stuck out like sore thumbs on most matchdays, even though only 2,000 of the 8,000



fixed seats in the Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium (JNIS) were made available for booking. A careful consideration reveals why.

The advertisement campaign left much to be desired. Enveloping state-run buses in bright red UTT vinyl with caricatures of the biggest stars like Manika Batra and Sharath was a marketing genius. Although the move ensured the message got carried around the city on wheels, there were gaps to fill. For starters, the same ad wasn't propagated in the local language. There was a dearth of banners on the streets, even within a two-mile radius of the stadium hosting the event.

Tickets for the general stand were priced as low as Rs 49 — a masala dosa costs more in the metro city — but the tile to promote the same on the ticket-booking platform didn't



# CHAMPIONS 2024

appear on the landing page even with the location set to Chennai.

A total of 500 tickets for the VIP stands were made public, with price tags starting at Rs 1499. These not only provided audiences a side-on view from close quarters but also had lucrative add-ons like a dinner buffet, a chance to interact with stars and win merchandise, and an opportunity to play a few rallies with Adam Bobrow or the ping-pong robot. But none of these added attractions found a mention on the booking application.

Crowds continued to be thin, except when Chennai Lions or Sathiyan's Dabang Delhi TTC played, with SDAT trainees occasionally filling seats courtesy of complimentary tickets.

"We need to have more publicity. I think people were happy watching

the stream. We are a largely improving sport. We should have more people come and experience it first. The ones who watched the grand show wanted to come again. You would have to bring them once, and then they would know the league is organised in the best way possible. I think that would really create a good image. It will get better in the coming seasons," an optimistic Sathiyan said.

#### A fault in the stars?

The two previous iterations had seen a better turnout, mostly because of the presence of a vibrant table tennis community in both cities. This year, JNIS saw an average footfall of 600 per match. This can also be attributed to the dwindling number of top foreigners as well. Six of the 12 international stars from the 2023 roster were missing this year.

**Making history:** Harmeet Desai catapulted the Goa Challengers to its second straight UTT title. It was the first time that the franchise-based table tennis league witnessed a two-time champion. RRAGU

World No. 13 Romanian Bernadette Szocs, who beat India's Archana Kamath 11-5, 8-11, 11-7, 11-9 during the women's team round of 16 match at the Olympics, was the highest-ranked player in the league, followed by Nigeria's Quadri Aruna (20).

Other prominent international stars included World Team Championships silver medallists Jules Rolland and Lilian Bardet of France, four-time Olympian Joao Monteiro of Portugal, and Spain's Alvaro Robles, a 2019 Worlds doubles silver medal



**Top star:** World No. 13 Romanian Bernadette Szocs was the highest-ranked player in the league followed by Nigeria's Quadri Aruna (20). R. RAVINDRAN

winner.

Although a top-10 player in the draft always makes for a good show, one has to understand that for a league to accommodate stars of such stature, more cash has to be pumped in. In fact, save the inaugural season in 2017, the league has failed to attract a single top-10 player for the draft. After all, there are no ranking points that a player stands to gain from the UTT. Plus, most players would have opted for a break with the Paris 2024 Summer Games having only concluded recently.

#### A sense of identity

The curious case of the missing audience may also be traced back to a majority of fans not identifying themselves with a particular franchise. The reasons are layered.

Having adopted a draft structure to acquire players, the UTT allows the retention of only one player going

into the next season. There is no scope for the retention of either the foreign or the Indian coach.

This dynamicity only translates into a major conundrum with every stakeholder — the management, players, fans and journalists alike — struggling to remember the threads a particular player would sport at the beginning of every season. There was even a prominent Indian player who, when asked during the dying stages of the tournament about her most memorable match from the ongoing season, had to be reminded which side Suthasini Sawettabut belonged to!

#### Developing a core group

The title-winning captain of the Athlead Goa Challengers, Harmeet Desai, concurs that more retentions are the way forward. He said, "We (himself and coach Zoltan Batorfi) were discussing it. I think it will help because sometimes it takes time for the player to understand the coach and vice versa. In the first two matches, it took time (to gel with the others), but if there is a 'coach retention' and more players are retained for the next edition, then the bonding would be much better.

We have become like family."

Portuguese coach Francisco Santos, who helped carry the Ahmedabad SG Pipers to the semifinal in its debut season, stares at an uncertain future despite the roaring success. "If I can stay, it will be a pleasure. But I understand the limitations of the format. Even if I end up finding myself in another side, I will continue with the same passion, motivation and goals. I have high hopes of coming back, though," he said.

#### Dire need for replacements

Another concern, which gathered steam as the league progressed, was whether the increase in the number of teams this season, up to eight from the earlier six, has diluted the intensity of the event. With a limited pool to pick players from, shoring up the bench to help with substitutions was an area found wanting.

For the lack of viable options, moments ahead of the title-deciding clash, Dabang's Diya Chitale sustained an ankle injury while limbering up. Despite the provision to have an injury replacement up to 10 minutes prior to the match, Dabang coach Vesna Ojstersek

### **Fire in the belly:** Ankur

Bhattacharjee, 17, showed the UTT what it was missing out on with his wide array of shots. B.JOTHIRAMALINGAM

couldn't field an equally strong athlete.

Dabang's problems brought to the fore another issue that could be worked on ahead of season six. Diya's injury could have been the result of a tight calendar that crammed a total of 23 ties over 17 days with no breaks in between.

"It is unfortunate what happened to Diya before the match started. She was playing so well. This tournament is too long. Every day it is the same — practice, match, and practice again. Sometimes matches are back-to-back. It is very difficult for players to stay focused. There should be more space where players shouldn't feel physically strained. Maybe the matches can be spread across a month," Vesna opined.

### **VAR in TT: a possibility?**

Additionally, an age-old piece of feedback gained traction again: introducing the option to have a review on close calls when U Mumba's Aruna felt his ball had landed on Sathiyan's side of the table. The umpire, though, went ahead and awarded a point to the Indian paddler.

Eyebrows were raised once again when Cho Seungmin of the Jaipur Patriots was wrongly awarded a point against the PBG Bengaluru Smashers.

However, this is something even the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) has found difficult to develop in spite of a few dry runs. While the technology for the same can be difficult to devise, baby steps can be taken with appeals getting checked using the slo-mo action replays on the giant screen.

### **Shining bright like a diamond**

To look at the positives, the league stayed true to its tagline, "*Har Shot Mein Mazaa*" (Every shot is exciting). Seventeen days of end-to-end invigorating table tennis action culminated in the Challengers becoming the first team to retain the UTT title.



The tournament also delivered on the promise of giving a solid platform to youngsters, who are going to take up the mantle of making the country proud in the coming years.

There was fire in the eyes of Ankur Bhattacharjee, 17, who showed the UTT what it was missing out on with his blink-and-you-miss forehand topspin, unorthodox yet dangerously effective sidespin, and an impressive wristy backhand. His aggression, which helps the Kolkata lad get into the mind of his opponent, makes him stand out. Although he was sworn in as a Smasher last season, Ankur had to pull out of the tournament to participate in the South Asian Youth Championship.

Then, of course, there was Diya, who sang the redemption song after an insipid debut in 2023. With her pinpoint placements around the half-long region and quick wit, she won 13 of the last 14 games she played. Of these, she sensationally picked three off Manika, thus exacting revenge for the 2-1 defeat last season. This victory ensured Dabang stayed alive in the race to the semifinal.

Diya, however, has been making waves as a paddler for a while now.

In the last two years, she has won 12 gold, six silver, and eight bronze medals in various national and international tournaments, a testament to her immense potential. She was also named the most promising junior at the Senior Nationals in 2022, the same year she went on to represent India at the Commonwealth Games and Asian Games.

Jeet Chandra's giant-slaying tales have now become routine, hence losing the element of surprise. Coming in as a replacement for the Smashers in 2023, Jeet had then slain India No. 1 Harmeet. He was 20 then. The shining prospect lived up to expectations this time around as well, bedazzling one and all while chop-blocking his way to a 3-0 win over Sharath. Jeet's strong showing caught India coach Massimo Costantini's attention, securing him a reserve spot on the team for the October Asian Championships in Astana.

Justifying the 'Ultimate' in Ultimate Table Tennis isn't much of an uphill climb. With a few tweaks here and some tinkering there, it could, in the foreseeable future, give global leagues like the Chinese Super League, Bundesliga and French Pro A a run for their money.



**Ready to step up:** Filling P.R. Sreejesh's big shoes won't be easy, but Krishan Pathak is certainly not one to be intimidated. K. MURALIKUMAR

# Brick by brick, Krishan Pathak becomes the new Wall in Blue

Krishan Bahadur Pathak, a junior Hockey World Cup winner with over six years of national team experience, is poised **to take over the reins** from legendary goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh.

Anish Pathiyil

anish.p@thehindu.co.in

A

familiar face was missing from the Indian men's hockey team's training session as coach Craig Fulton put his squad through their paces at the Sports Authority of India's (SAI) National Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru.

After serving as India's goalkeeper for over two decades, P.R. Sreejesh retired following his second consecutive Olympic bronze medal at the Paris Olympics.

The absence of his commanding voice, often heard directing defenders, was palpable as the sound of hockey sticks slicing through the turf and clashing echoed around the training complex. Stepping into the shoes of a legend like Sreejesh is a daunting task. His legacy extends far beyond his impressive 336 caps and exceptional on-field prowess. As a revered senior leader, he has left an indelible mark on the team. Now, Krishan Bahadur Pathak faces the challenge of filling this void.

Pathak, a 26-year-old from Kapurthala, Punjab, was born to parents who migrated from Nepal in search of a better life. He credits his success to the support of his family and their adopted state.

"We didn't have much money in Nepal. It was very difficult to manage, so my parents, with my three siblings, moved to Punjab, where I was born," Pathak reminisced during a

conversation with *Sportstar*.

"Punjab played a big role in shaping who I am today. If I had stayed in Nepal, my story would have been different. From what I've seen — all the struggles my parents went through, the jobs they took, and the small things they provided for me — it's all very motivating," he shared. Pathak's journey with hockey began when he joined his friends to play at the Rail Coach Factory (RCF) in Kapurthala.

"The coach at RCF told me that they didn't have a goalkeeper, and that's where my journey as a keeper started. After that, I was selected for the Surjeet Hockey Academy in Punjab," he said.

## Succession plan

The men's hockey team has navigated the



**Krishan Pathak, a 26-year-old from Kapurthala, Punjab, was born to parents who migrated from Nepal in search of a better life.**



**Warming up:** Krishan Pathak in action during Indian men's hockey team's training session at the SAI National Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru.

K. MURALIKUMAR

delicate transition from a legendary figure to a new custodian with remarkable ease. Pathak, with 125 caps spanning six years, has had the privilege of learning from the best, ensuring continuity and stability within the group.

"When you've played 125 matches for your country, replacing someone or stepping into their role isn't a problem. You gain a different level of confidence after that. You've played in major tournaments like the World Cup, the Asian Games, and the Asian Champions Trophy," Pathak said.

He continued, "If I were in a different situation, where I hadn't played many games, it would have been very difficult. If a senior player is unavailable and you suddenly have to step in, the team needs to take

responsibility because you lack the necessary experience."

Much credit goes to former coach Graham Reid, who rotated Pathak and Sreejesh across matches and even as rolling substitutions within games, with each playing two quarters per game.

Pathak also advocates for the same approach to be followed in the future. "Junior goalkeepers need to play games to build their confidence. Otherwise, they won't know what situations they'll face or what kind of pressure they'll be under."

Throughout Pathak's career, Sreejesh has been a constant source of inspiration, mentoring him closely. Their relationship, which began during the 2016 Junior World Cup in Uttar Pradesh, where India won gold, has evolved from that of mentor and mentee to close friends.

"When we played the Junior World Cup in 2016, he joined our team in Lucknow. Having a senior player helps you to learn different things. You build confidence and become

more aware of your mistakes," Pathak reflected.

He added, "It's good to have a friendship with someone like that. We used to discuss our mistakes, which was beneficial for both of us."

#### Big shoes to fill

On the field, Pathak's biggest challenge will be to replicate Sreejesh's dominance in front of the goal. As modern hockey increasingly relies on Penalty Corners (PCs) to score, teams are continually developing new strategies to capitalise on these opportunities.

At Paris 2024, India defended PCs exceptionally well, with Sreejesh earning widespread praise for his crucial saves, particularly during the quarterfinal against Great Britain when the team was reduced to 10 men. Pathak will face similar tests in upcoming tournaments, but he remains confident in his ability to rise to the occasion, supported by a rock-solid PC defensive unit.

"We prepare extensively for the



penalty corners, collaborating with the analysts to understand the variations employed by different teams. This preparation is invaluable during matches," he said. "We have Amit Rohidas, one of the best first runners, along with Manpreet [Singh], Harmanpreet, and Jarmanpreet guarding the goalpost. Our penalty corner defence deserves a lot of credit too.

"When you have such a strong defensive unit, it instills confidence and trust in the team. At the Olympics, out of 57 penalty corners, we conceded only five goals, including straight flicks and rebounds. That's an incredible achievement," the goalkeeper added. Off the field, Pathak has embraced the joy of fatherhood.

"I feel really good because when I see him, especially during training breaks when I call and see his smile, it gives me a special feeling and motivation," he said about Jayden, his six-month old son.

"There are so many things happening around you. You have to

take care of your family and the baby. It's a lot of fun. I don't feel any extra pressure, and I'm thoroughly enjoying this phase of my life," he shared. Despite his best efforts over the years, including winning the Baljit Singh Award For Goalkeeper Of The Year twice (2019, 2022), an Olympic medal still eludes him. Pathak travelled with the team as a reserve goalkeeper for both Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024, but Olympic rules meant that only members of the main squad [18 in Tokyo and 16 in Paris] received medals.

"There is some sorrow. I've been part of the team for over six years, but there's also pride in being part of

**Prudent call:** Much credit goes to former coach Graham Reid's strategy of rotating Krishan Pathak and P.R. Sreejesh, with each playing two quarters per game, for Pathak's seamless transition. BISWARANJAN ROUT

this squad," he said.

"When I returned home this time, my wife told me, 'The team won bronze the two times you travelled with them; maybe next time when you play, the colour will be gold.' Her words give me added motivation."

*"Jo maine nahi paaya...usey paana hai (What I haven't achieved yet... I must achieve)."*

**On the field, Krishan Pathak's biggest challenge will be to replicate P.R. Sreejesh's dominance in goal**



# JANNIK SINNERTHWARTS AMERICANS TO CAPTURE FIRST US OPEN CROWN

European men have won the **last 59 Grand Slam singles titles**, a streak that started in 2009 after 20-year-old Argentine Juan Martin del Potro upset Roger Federer in the US Open final.

Paul Fein

**H**opes for the first American Grand Slam men's singles champion since 2003 soared at the last Major of 2024. The bumper crop of talent from the region featured No. 12 Taylor Fritz, No. 13 Ben Shelton, No. 14 Tommy Paul, No. 16 Sebastian Korda, and No. 20 Frances Tiafoe.

The optimism turned into irrational exuberance when Novak Djokovic was upset by a much-improved 28th-seed Alexei Popyrin in the third round, and four-time Major winner Carlos Alcaraz suffered a straight-sets loss to 74th-ranked Botic van de

Zandschulp. "You talk about a shocker," said ESPN's John McEnroe. "It has to be at the top of the all-time shockers."

The Djokovic loss meant that, for the first time since 2002, no member of the legendary Big Three would capture a Grand Slam title in the same year. Instead, Jannik Sinner,



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**Top draw:** Sinner became the first man to win his first two major titles in the same year since Guillermo Vilas, another Argentine, in 1977, and Jimmy Connors captured three in 1974. AFP

this year's Australian Open champion, would ensure that the remaining half of the new Big Two (Sinner-Alcaraz) reigned. The 23-year-old Italian outclassed a quartet of Americans, a fast-rising Englishman Jack Draper, and No. 5 Daniil Medvedev — who ousted Sinner at Wimbledon.

Those who thought Sinner would be distracted by the controversy swirling around his two failed drug tests in March and his exoneration just six days before the US Open were disabused of that notion at the Masters 1000 event in Cincinnati. Sinner outplayed Alexander Zverev, Andrey Rublev, and Frances Tiafoe for his fifth title.

Even so, ESPN analyst Mary Joe Fernandez remained optimistic before Championship Sunday. "I love Taylor's chances. Why can't he lift the trophy the way Roddick did?"

Perhaps, Fritz's confidence rubbed off on her. "I have a feeling I'm going to come out and play really well and win," said the 26-year-old Californian. "When I play good tennis, I think that level is good enough to win."

It certainly was against No. 8 Casper Ruud in his convincing 3-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-2 win over the 2022 US Open finalist and two-time French Open runner-up.

"Fritz is volleying the traditional volley better than ever and his



swinging volley is good," said ESPN's John McEnroe, an elite serve-volleyer himself, 40 years ago.

When Fritz edged No. 4 Zverev 7-6, 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 to reach his first Grand Slam semifinal, he recalled his crushing five-set losses at the Majors, saying, "Today it felt different. It was my time to take it a step farther." Patience and composure proved critical, especially in the tiebreakers, against the rocket-serving but otherwise mostly passive German baseliner. This was Fritz's fourth top-10 win at a Major this year, the most by an American man since Andre Agassi in 1999. "We

**Full of promise:** "Fritz (in pic) is volleying the traditional volley better than ever and his swinging volley is good," said John McEnroe, an elite serve-volleyer himself. AP

all want to be the one to end it," he said, referring to America's 21-year drought in winning a men's singles Major.

When asked if chants of "USA, USA" helped him, the appreciative Fritz left no doubt about his feelings. "The crowd support is amazing. They're helping so much in all my matches."

Fans would have divided loyalties, though, in the semis between Fritz and his good friend Tiafoe, the 2022 semifinalist. "When Tiafoe plays, it's as loud as it gets at the US Open," said Darren Cahill, a 1988 semifinalist here and now a co-coach for Sinner. That Tiafoe sported a New York Knicks jersey in afternoon practice sessions, and his girlfriend, a New York Rangers cap, showed his savvy in courting fans in this



**Novak Djokovic's loss to Alexei Popyrin meant that, for the first time since 2002, no member of the legendary Big Three would capture a Grand Slam title in the same year**



**Battle of the homeboys:** USA's Frances Tiafoe was trying to become the first Black American to reach the US Open final since Arthur Ashe in 1972 but was stopped in his tracks by Fritz in the semifinal. REUTERS

sports-crazy metropolis.

Tiafoe, a muscle-flexing showman whose father is an immigrant from Sierra Leone, revels in the raucous night atmosphere at Arthur Ashe Stadium. Who would win the all-American semifinal? "It's going to be the guy who is aggressive and doesn't blink at the biggest moments," Tiafoe predicted.

Fritz learned the hard way that talk is cheap. "I came into this tournament in 2022 saying I thought I could win it, and I lost in the first round. So, I think it's good to just take it one match at a time and focus on the person in front of you."

'Big Foe' was trying to become the first Black American to reach the US

Open final since Arthur Ashe in 1972. On a roll, he had won 10 of his last 11 matches, succumbing only to Sinner in Cincinnati.

But Fritz had taken their last six contests, which made him a 61 per cent favourite, according to IBM Match Insights. "If Tiafoe can make it a more athletic match than a ball-striking one, he can win," said Patrick McEnroe.

A courtside ticket sold for \$8,000 for this much-anticipated clash, attracting the likes of Bam Adebayo, Klay Thompson, Kevin Garnett, musician Fat Joe, golfer Rory McIlroy, soccer legend Megan Rapinoe, and actress Da'Vine Joy Randolph, among other celebrities.

For four sets, the duel between the Davis Cup teammates lived up to expectations. Fritz's improved court coverage and conditioning surprised Tiafoe, who in turn surprised his opponent with high-powered yet consistent groundstrokes.

Buoyed by the crowd, Tiafoe

grabbed the opening set 6-4. But Fritz played a sensational game at 6-5 in the second to break at love with a nifty backhand volley he sharply angled for a winner. That evened the match at a set apiece. When Tiafoe played the big points better to capture the third set 6-4, his hometown supporters watching on TV at the JTCC Watch Park in College Park, Maryland, exulted.

Serving at 3-all, 30-15, a gruelling 31-shot exchange wore out Tiafoe, who didn't run for Fritz's forehand crosscourt winner.

The pressure of a must-hold game at 4-5 got to Tiafoe after he built a 40-15 lead. Two double faults, a shanked forehand, and a poor forehand drop shot into the net due to a brain cramp cost him the fourth set 6-4.

Much fresher than his weary foe, Fritz broke serve three times and finished off Big Foe with an ace for a 4-6, 7-5, 4-6, 6-4, 6-1 triumph.

"The question will be, how much



does Fritz have left in the legs," wondered John McEnroe. Not much, according to the oddsmakers who listed Sinner as a heavy -450 favourite and Fritz a +320 underdog.

"Let's be honest," said Patrick McEnroe. "It's going to take a perfect storm for Fritz to pull it off — great serving and the 24,000 fans will have to carry him through."

**That 'perfect storm' never happened in the anticlimactic 6-3, 6-4, 7-5 final.** The nervous Fritz made only 38 per cent of his first serves and lost his serve thrice in the opening set. Sinner, more confident and experienced in big matches, proved superior in every department, especially movement, stamina, and shot selection.

The crowd rewarded Fritz with a loud ovation when he put away a smash to edge ahead 15-30 on Sinner's serve. A forehand volley winner and a Sinner double fault gave Fritz his only break of serve in the third set and a short-lived 4-3

lead. Fritz's last best chance came when he served at 5-4, 30-30. But the relentlessly powerful Sinner forced a forehand error, and then Fritz dumped a forehand volley into the net to lose his serve.

When Fritz netted a forehand on championship point, coach Cahill wept and then hugged Simone Vagnozzi, his coaching partner. Sinner raised his arms in a low-key celebration.

"I think that [now] you can find yourself a little deeper in the draws — quarterfinals and stuff if you just play solid tennis. [But] I still think to beat the top players, you need to bring your best game," said Fritz.

"The good news for Taylor Fritz is that his average level is unbelievably high now," said *Tennis Channel* analyst Paul Annacone.

On the four leading Americans — Fritz, Tiafoe, Shelton, and Paul — Patrick McEnroe was cautiously optimistic. "They're close [to the top players], but they're pretty far still.

**Big guns fail to fire:** While Novak Djokovic was upset by a much-improved 28th-seed Alexei Popyrin in the third round, four-time major winner Carlos Alcaraz suffered a straight-sets loss to 74th-ranked Botic van de Zandschulp. AFP

They still have to improve a lot of little things in their games."

European men have won the last 59 Grand Slam singles titles, a streak that started in 2009 after 20-year-old Argentine Juan Martin del Potro upset Roger Federer in the US Open final.

Sinner became the first man to win his first two Major titles in the same year since Guillermo Vilas, another Argentine, in 1977, and Jimmy Connors captured three in 1974.

Looking forward, Patrick McEnroe said, "These two guys [Sinner and Alcaraz] are going to dominate the way the Big Three did."

## Sweet redemption for Sabalenka at US Open

After heartbreaking losses in the US Open for the past three years, Aryna Sabalenka won her first title here and the hearts of many fans. More relaxed than ever, she joked about offering the crowd free drinks.

Following her second-round victory, Sabalenka was delighted by a 'mini-me' dressed in a replica of her pink Nike dress, along with a (presumably temporary) tattoo on her arm, next to her stuffed tiger. "It was a really adorable moment," Sabalenka said. "I just looked up, and I saw on the big screen, like, mini-me. It was so cute. It's such a motivation to keep going to inspire the young generation." Later, the champion hugged her little admirer while her family took photos.

The 26-year-old Belarusian will likely never be a crowd favourite when playing an American at Flushing Meadows. But everyone in attendance and those watching on TV were endeared by the tender side of the ferocious power hitter who seized her third Grand Slam title with a suspenseful 7-5, 7-5 final triumph

over Jessica Pegula.

Controlling Sabalenka's volatile emotions has always been key to controlling her high-velocity shots. For the past five months, her boyfriend Georgios Frangulis, a motorsports driver from Brazil, has helped stabilise Sabalenka. When she won the Cincinnati Open three weeks ago, she said, "Thank you to my boyfriend for keeping me happy every day."

Sabalenka recently told *People* magazine, "There was a really tough period where I was really happy to have him by my side, always cheering me up, always making sure that we are doing some fun stuff. But I make sure I kind of forget about tennis and focus on the good things and enjoy my life, even when things are going wrong in my career."

Her season got off to a rousing high with her second straight Australian Open crown. But in March, the suicide of Sabalenka's ex-boyfriend and former NHL player Konstantin Koltsov jolted her. In a social media post, Sabalenka wrote, "While we were no longer together, my heart is broken."

Stomach problems hampered Sabalenka at the French Open during her upset loss to Mirra Andreeva, and a shoulder injury sidelined her from Wimbledon and the Paris Olympics. Adversity proved a blessing in disguise, as she noted during the Cincinnati title run when

she knocked off world No. 1 Iga Swiatek and Pegula. "Things happen for a reason, I guess... I think it was much needed to... spend some time with myself."

The mid-summer break left Sabalenka fresher than her chief rivals. When she overwhelmed gold medallist Zheng Qinwen 6-1, 6-2 in the US Open quarters, *ESPN* analyst Pam Shriver raved, "Sabalenka is almost as intimidating as Serena



Reward for perseverance: Aryna Sabalenka poses with the US Open trophy after winning the title at Flushing Meadows for the first time ever. REUTERS

[Williams] was. It's almost miraculous how she has recovered from her serving yips in 2022 when she averaged 14 double faults a match." Similarly, Chris Evert noted, "Her [groundstroke] consistency has been a big improvement. Her shot tolerance is now six or seven shots."

But was Sabalenka still as mentally fragile — at the US Open, anyway — as she was physically strong and technically solid? Would the memory of squandering a lead in devastating three-set losses to heavy underdog Leylah Fernandez in 2021, Swiatek in 2022, and Coco Gauff in



AFP



2023 haunt her? Her 2-6, 6-3, 6-2 defeat to Gauff — after leading the American teenager 6-2, 2-0 — left Sabalenka in tears and so angry that she smashed her rackets on the locker room floor.

Pegula experienced much less drama during her tennis career, but tragedy also struck the 30-year-old Buffalo, New York native two years ago when her mother Kim suffered a stroke that left her with brain damage and memory loss.

"My mom loved to work. She did everything, and our family constantly told her how she needs to slow down and take time for herself," Pegula wrote in a poignant first-person post for *Players Tribune* in February 2023.

"She gave everyone so much of her time and effort. She lived it and loved it, and it was felt by everyone she met. Now we come to the

realisation that all of that is most likely gone. That she won't be able to be that person anymore."

Pegula made six Grand Slam quarterfinals from 2021-23 and lost all of them. Time wasn't on her side, and sensing that her results had plateaued, she split with her longtime coach David Witt and hired Mark Merklein and Mark Knowles, a former doubles No. 1.

Despite second-round defeats at the Australian Open and Wimbledon, the gamble paid off. On the summer hard-court circuit, she won the Toronto tournament and defeated resurgent standouts Karolina Muchova and Paula Badosa to make the Cincinnati final.

While the first semifinal saw Sabalenka overcome Emma Navarro in a close contest, the other semifinal pitted Pegula, the super-solid

stroker, against Muchova, the super athlete. One of the greatest "What ifs?" of this century is: what if the immensely talented 28-year-old Czech had not been plagued so often by serious injuries that derailed her career?

For a recent example, Muchova nearly upset Swiatek, the Queen of Clay, in the 2023 French Open final only to be sidelined for around ten months before and after a wrist surgery in February.

At Flushing Meadows, the lithe, 5'11" Muchova reached the semis without dropping a set. Her most impressive win came when she outclassed No. 5 seed and surprise French and Wimbledon finalist Jasmine Paolini 6-3, 6-3.

"I couldn't be more happy that I'm here," said Muchova, who played only 12 matches this year,



accounting for her highly misleading No. 52 ranking. The most relevant stat, though, is her excellent 7-5 career record against top-10 opponents at Grand Slam events.

While Pegula called reaching the final 'a childhood dream', Sabalenka hoped it wouldn't be a nightmare repetition of the final a year ago. To ensure she wouldn't have to listen to the cheering crowd — mostly for

Pegula — when they entered the court, Sabalenka kept her earphones on.

"She looks to overpower opponents," said Nick Kyrgios, who recently became an *ESPN* analyst. "She's a heavy favourite." Another *ESPN* analyst, Rennae Stubbs, who was trying to encourage Pegula's fans, said, "The crowd could be a difference-maker."

Smart move: Pegula made six Grand Slam quarterfinals from 2021-23 and lost them all. After splitting with her longtime coach, she hired Mark Merklein and Mark Knowles, a former doubles No. 1. The gamble paid off. On the summer hard-court circuit, she won the Toronto tournament and made the Cincinnati final. AFP

As rain pelted the closed roof over Arthur Ashe Stadium, the indoor conditions favoured the hard-hitting Sabalenka. IBM Match Insights made the Belarus Basher a 60 per cent favourite.

The fluctuating final had five service breaks in the opening set alone. When the American lost her serve for the second time to trail 4-2, she complained about her string tension — a detail that should have been dealt with before the match. "If she wants to win Majors, she has to add more power to her game," advised Evert after Sabalenka fired a 119-mph ace to go ahead, 5-2.

Pegula fought back to convert her second break point to slice the lead to 5-4. Raising her arms to encourage even more crowd support, Pegula increasingly fed off the energy of the boisterous fans.

It wasn't quite enough to turn the tide, though. Even when Sabalenka double-faulted to give her a break point for 5-all, 30-40 — and banged her racket on the hard court four times — Pegula couldn't capitalise. Down 6-5, she staved off three set points before Sabalenka, flashing her touch, feathered a nifty drop shot. Pegula couldn't handle to take the first set, 7-5.

"Sabalenka had a meltdown in last year's final against Coco," Evert said. "That won't happen this year. She's learned her lesson."

That prediction looked good. When the Belarusian won 12 of the next 14 points to race ahead 3-0, she made the classic mistake of being overconfident, later admitting she thought Pegula would give up.

Instead, Pegula reignited her game and stunned the fans by grabbing the next five games.

Suddenly, the momentum shifted again. A trademark forehand down-the-line winner gave Sabalenka another service break to tie it up at 5-all. She put the American on her back foot with more rocket forehands to break again and wrap up the 7-5, 7-5 final.

When Pegula's forehand sailed deep on championship point, Sabalenka went down on her back, with her hands covering her face. She then went to her player's box to hug her team — coach Anton Dubrov, fitness coach Jason Stacey, her boyfriend Georgios, and hitting partner Andrei Vasilevski. In the post-match interview, she praised them. "Without them, I wouldn't exist... I love you."

"I'm speechless. So many times, I was so close, and it's always been a dream of mine," said Sabalenka, recalling her past US Open frustrations. "In the second set, I was praying. I remember those tough losses; never give up on your dream. I am super proud of myself."

The new 'Queen of Hard Courts' racked up a near-perfect 30-6 record on the surface this year.

She joined Steffi Graf, Monica Seles, Martina Hingis, and Angelique Kerber as the only women to capture the Australian and US Opens in the same year.

Sabalenka proved she's no longer an aimless groundstroke slugger, displaying more versatility than ever.

More weapons in Sabalenka's arsenal will undoubtedly boost her chances to win on Roland Garros clay and Wimbledon grass, where she's never made the final at either Slam.

At 26, it's too late to challenge Margaret Court (24 Major titles), Serena (23), or Graf (22), but unless No. 1 Swiatek matches Sabalenka's increasingly all-court prowess and Gauff and Elena Rybakina regain their peak form, Sabalenka could dominate the rest of the decade.



Shock upset: World No.1 Iga Swiatek was beaten by Pegula in the quarterfinal.

REUTERS



**Comeback story:** Karolina Muchova nearly upset Swiatek, the Queen of Clay, in the 2023 French Open final, only to be sidelined for a total of 9 1/2 months before and after wrist surgery in February. She came back to reach the semifinal of the US Open, where she was beaten by Pegula. REUTERS



## FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan



# The precarious yet rewarding world of plyometrics

Plyometric training protocols have **tremendous benefits**. However, there are common mistakes that need to be avoided while administering them.

**T**he term 'plyometrics' comes from the Greek words *pleion* (meaning more) and *metron* (meaning measure). Plyometrics is a training method that focuses on the stretch reflex of muscles through jumping, bounding, and other explosive movements. It teaches athletes how to exert the maximum amount of force in a short amount of time and is an excellent way to build explosive power.

**It's true definition is the rapid stretching of a muscle (eccentric action) immediately followed by a powerful and fast shortening of the same muscle and connective tissue (concentric action).** T

This shortening uses stored elastic energy (also known as the Stretch Shortening Cycle) to produce greater force compared to a concentric action alone.

Research shows that adding plyometrics to a strength training programme can improve vertical jump, acceleration, muscular power, leg strength, and overall proprioception.

But the important question is: How to do it, and when to incorporate it?

There are tremendous benefits to be gained from correctly administering plyometric training protocols. When designing and implementing a plyometric programme to train athletes for greater explosiveness, several factors must be considered. A solid understanding of the science behind this type of training is essential to maximise benefits.

Too often, trainers prescribe exercises without fully understanding their purpose, which can result in more harm than good when using plyometric training.

While the exercises themselves might be effective, using incorrect sets, reps, inadequate rest, or improper

tempo can produce sub-par results. In such cases, results are well below expectations for both the athlete and the trainer. Additionally, poor programming can lead to injuries and prevent athletes from reaching peak performance at the right time.

Many athletes avoid plyometrics due to fear of injury. However, plyometric training is an important component of injury prevention programs.

It's essential to train the body to adapt to the jumping and landing demands of a sport before the season begins.

It's best to start by incorporating low-intensity plyometrics into warm-ups, then progress to a low volume of medium-intensity exercises. The progression should be tailored to the sport and the athlete's skill level.

The main goal of the program should be to apply the optimal amount of stress, provide sufficient recovery time between exercises and sessions, and design a plan that amplifies the training effect.

Let's discuss several common mistakes trainers or coaches make in the design and execution of their **plyometric training programs**:

1. Lack of understanding of key



scientific principles and fundamentals.

**2.** Overlooking basic principles in favour of added intensity and flair.

**3.** Using high-intensity plyometrics for conditioning too early when the athlete isn't prepared or has not developed basic form and fitness.

**4.** Emphasising quantity over quality — the volume of plyometric exercises should be determined by the exercise's intensity.

**5.** Focusing on force production without addressing force absorption is like having a powerful car with no brakes.

**6.** Overemphasising jumps onto boxes while avoiding drops from boxes.

**7.** Lack of recovery processes incorporated in the programme.

**8.** Improper progression incorporating high-intensity plyometrics before the athlete has adapted to low- and medium-level

exercises.

**9.** Misusing props like hurdles, boxes, or power bands in the training program.

**10.** Prioritising linear training over a multidirectional approach.

**11.** Lack of customised training modes with chosen exercises with respect to the sport and skill of the individual.

**12.** Improper program design reduces benefits and increases the risk of injury.

Here are some factors to consider for effective program design:

**1.** Need analysis

**2.** Mode

**3.** Intensity

**4.** Frequency

**5.** Duration

**6.** Recovery

**7.** Progression

Following these principles will help design a foolproof program that achieves the desired goals.

**Jump start:** Plyometrics is a training method that focuses on the stretch reflex of muscles through jumping, bounding, and other explosive movements. GETTY IMAGES

### Castling in problems

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Perhaps the most unusual chess move in over-the-board play is castling. In practical play castling, as a rule, occurs in every game, but in chess problems it appears much less often. Of particular interest are problems with two castlings of one of the sides, which, of course, cannot happen in a game according to chess laws. In general, there are not so many problems with two castlings of white, black, or one white and one black. Alexandre Kuzovkov in a recent article in the Russian magazine '64' points out that in Turevsky database there are only 14 two-movers, 15 three-move, and three longer-movers involving castling. Most of them are miniatures or lightweight problems with very modest content. I give below a few examples quoted by him.

F.Kapustin

'Chess composition' 2006



Mate in two moves

1.Bd6? (2.Qxe7), 1...0-0-0! 2.Rb8, 1...0-0! - the try has castling as a thematic refutation. 1.Bf6? (2.Qxe7), 1...0-0-0 2.Qc6, 1...0-0 2.Rh8#. In the second try there are mates to both of black's castlings, but 1...Bb4!

**Key 1.d6!** (2.Qxe7) 1...0-0-0 2.Qc4(changed mate!) 1...0-0 2.Rh8, 1...Kf8 2.Qxf7, 1...Kd8 2.Qxd7#.

In the solution, the checkmate is changed to a long castling for the third time.

The three-mover, compared to a two-mover, allows for much more varied ideas and meaningful play. Let's look at Kubbel's problem below with two white castlings.

L.Kubbel  
'64' 1940



Mate in three moves

1.Rd1? Bd6! 1.Rf1? Bf6!  
After **Key 1.e3!** Black is in zugzwang. 1...Bd6 2.0-0-0! B~ 3.Qxd7, 1...Bf6  
2.0-0! B~ 3.Bxf7 1...Bd8 2.Rd1! B~ 3.Qxd7, 1...Bf8 2.Rf1! B~ 3.Bxf7 the tries reappear as second move continuations.

Now a simple two-mover for solving

R. Heinen

"Deutsche Schachblatter", 1931



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Half-battery masterpieces':

1.Nc3? waiting 1...Kf3 2.Bd5; 1..Kh3 2.Bf1; 1...Kh5 2.Be2; 1...Kxf5 2.Bd3 but 1...d5! Key 1.Bd5 waiting 1...Kf3 2.Nc3; 1...Kh3 2.Nf2; 1...Kh5 2.Nxf6; 1...Kxf5 2.Nxd6. A remarkable star flight change in Meredith

Readers may send in their queries to  
[cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com](mailto:cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com)



SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

## Randhir Singh becomes first Indian to be elected as OCA president



Veteran sports administrator Randhir Singh became the first Indian to be elected as the president of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) during the 44th General Assembly of the continental body.

A five-time Olympic shooter, Randhir was the lone eligible candidate for the OCA president's post. His tenure will run from 2024 till 2028, and his election was unanimous.

The 77-year-old Randhir has been the OCA acting president since 2021, filling in for Kuwait's Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Sabah, who was handed a 15-year ban from sports administration in May this year over ethics breaches.

Randhir, who held different administrative posts in Indian and Asian sports bodies, was officially named OCA president in the presence of Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya and top sports leaders from all 45 countries of Asia.

He hails from Patiala in Punjab and belongs to a family of sportspersons.

Randhir was also a member of the IOC between 2001 and 2014, after which he continued as the honorary member of the global sports body.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

## » INDIAN PLAYGROUND

### SPORTOON



**1** Wrestler Bajrang Punia has approached the Delhi High Court, seeking to overturn the provisional suspension imposed on him by the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) for refusing to provide a urine sample during the National selection trials in Sonipat on March 10. NADA had suspended him on April 23 for his refusal to comply with the dope test at the selection trials. The global wrestling body, UWW, had also imposed a suspension on him. Bajrang had previously challenged this provisional suspension, leading to the NADA Anti-Disciplinary Doping Panel (ADDP) revoking it on May 31, pending NADA's issuance of a formal notice of charge. In response, NADA served Bajrang with the notice in June.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

**2** The National Pickleball Championship, featuring all age groups of boys and girls, apart from men, women and veterans, will be hosted at the Sewa Sadhana Kendra, Patti Kalyana, Samalkha, Panipat, from October 4 to 6. The affiliated units of the All India Pickleball Association (AIPA) will be eligible to compete. The last date for sending entries by the state units will be September 29. All the teams will be provided accommodation from October 4 to 7. The host will also serve all the meals for the players, coaches and officials at the venue.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

# Patriotism vs fairplay in sports

When I heard Luis Suarez was retiring, it wasn't his football I recalled so much as his biting and deliberate handball. Unfortunately, some athletes are **condemned** to be remembered by their worst acts.

Suresh Menon

**F**ourteen years after he put out a hand to prevent a Ghana player's header from entering his goal in a FIFA World Cup quarterfinal, Uruguay's Luis Suarez has announced his retirement from international football. That moment of madness, cheating, unfair play or patriotic impulse resulted in a penalty which Ghana missed, thus justifying Suarez's act in his own mind.

I wrote then: "The embarrassment has gone out of cheating. Uruguay's Luis Suarez, whose deliberate handling of the ball in the last minute of extra time against Ghana enabled his team to make it to the semifinals, says, **'It was worth it to be sent off in this way. It was complicated and tough. We suffered to the end, but the hand of God is mine now.'** Notice how he considers the exchange a fair one — I go out, but my country stays in. Is he a super patriot or a sportsman who has brought the game into disrepute?"

Suarez's reference was to Diego Maradona's 'Hand of God' goal in the 1986 World Cup, when the Argentine scored against England with his hand.

Not surprisingly, whatever the rest of the world thought about these acts, the footballers became heroes in their own countries. Sport tends to deify cheats who don't get caught, even if there is something uncomfortable about such partial heroes who are exalted in one country but vilified in another.

Suarez, undoubtedly a talented player who formed a great partnership with Lionel Messi at Barcelona, had



**Moment of infamy:** Luis Suarez received a four-month ban for biting Italy defender Giorgio Chiellini during Uruguay's final group game at the 2014 World Cup. AP

another claim to non-footballing fame. This, for biting opponents! It is so bizarre that no round-up of his excellent career can omit mention of this dental disintegration — only one letter away from Steve Waugh's famous line about handling opponents on the cricket field!

The shoulder seemed to be Suarez's preferred area for sinking his teeth into an opponent. The first recorded instance was against PSV Eindhoven's Otman Bakkal. When he bit Chelsea defender Branislav Ivanovic, the incident was missed by the referee; a year later, when he bit Italy's Giorgio Chiellini, that too was missed by the referee.

In his book *Crossing The Line: My Story*, Suarez wrote, "I know

biting appals a lot of people, but it's relatively harmless. Or at least it was in the incidents I was involved in. When Ivanovic rolled up his sleeve to show the referee the mark at Anfield, there was virtually nothing there. None of the bites has been like Mike Tyson on Evander Holyfield's ear. But none of this makes it right..."

France's Thierry Henry once said, after his handball probably denied Ireland a place in the 2010 World Cup, that it was necessary to exploit what was exploitable. This is the mantra of a particular type of sportsman. Often patriotism trumps fairplay, although it might just be selfishness rather than concern for the team's progress.

When I heard Suarez was retiring, it wasn't his football I recalled so much as his biting and deliberate handball. Unfortunately, some athletes are condemned to be remembered by their worst acts.



THE HINDU GROUP

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### *ISRO: Exploring New Frontiers to the Moon, the Sun & Beyond*

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