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Meet the nominees for this year's awards

THE SPIN DOCTOR

Ravichandran Ashwin has called time on an illustrious career, spanning more than a decade, where he established himself as one of the behemoths of the game

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At the Mahakumbh 2025, tent cities are being set up at the banks of the Sangam and key areas like Parade Ground, Arail, and Jhunsi.

The tent city will offer sheer luxury with three categories of accommodation to choose from.

Villa, Maharaja, and Swiss Cottage-the three types of accommodation will offer unique amenities to suit various preferences of the travellers.

The site at Parade Ground will have 55 tents/Swiss cottages, while the site at Jhunsi will spread over 2.5 acres and accommodate 200 luxury cottages, while a larger tent city at Arail will feature 2000 cottages across 25 acres, with deluxe, super deluxe, and luxury options.

IMPORTANT DATES OF BATHING FESTIVAL

1. Paush Purnima - 13th January, 2025
2. Makar Sankranti - 14th January, 2025
3. Mauni Amavasya - 29th January, 2025
4. Basant Panchami - 03rd February, 2025
5. Magh Purnima - 12th February, 2025
6. Shri Mahashivratri - 26th February, 2025

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Cover: R. Ashwin (Getty Images)

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OFF-SIDE

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NATIONAL SPORTS AWARDS HAVE ALWAYS HAD A TOUCH OF THE ABSURD

Manu Bhaker's exclusion from the Khel Ratna 'preliminary' list highlights persistent flaws in India's National Sports Awards system, **marred by** lobbying, bias, and controversy.

This is now a tradition, isn't it? Not the National Sports Awards themselves, but the drama, the inevitable outcry that accompanies them. Continuing with its longstanding commitment to the bizarre, the 12-member Awards Committee, this year, had purportedly left out Manu Bhaker from the Khel Ratna list. The only Indian with twin medals from an Olympics was not in reckoning for the country's highest sporting honour for failing to file a nomination.

The Ministry of Sports hasn't formally announced anything yet, but the leaked "preliminary" list has only Indian hockey captain Harmanpreet Singh and Praveen Kumar, para high jump gold medallist at the Paris Paralympics, as the two nominees. Faced with the collective disbelief at Manu's absence, the Ministry had to jump in, pleading that, of course, this was not the final list.

The norms allow athletes to self-nominate for these awards, so they're not entirely at the mercy of their federations. But the selection committee also has the freedom to add names that didn't come through the application process.

"It's really appalling. Why should a top sportsperson apply for or request an award? Awards should come naturally and automatically. How can it be ignored? There has to be some system in place," Manu's personal coach and former Commonwealth and Asian Games medallist Jaspal Rana rightly questions.

Manu's exclusion is especially strange since she won bronze medals in the 10m air pistol individual and 10m air pistol mixed team (with Sarabjot Singh) events in an otherwise lacklustre Paris Olympics for India.

But the National Sports Awards have always had a touch of the absurd. The committees and officials have often prioritised personal recommendations and good old-fashioned lobbying over actual sporting excellence. Milkha Singh, back in 2001, turned down his "lifetime contribution" Arjuna Award after he was grouped in an inglorious club with a sacked hockey coach, a gymnast who had never competed internationally, and an official who'd only ever won a half-marathon. Hardly flattering company for a national legend.

The Kapil Dev-led committee in 2014 had recommended capping the Arjuna Awards at 15 per year. But the Ministry, year after year, has succumbed to pressure and has been handing them out with increasing generosity. In the last Olympic year, in 2021, the Government gave 35 Arjuna Awards and 12 Khel Ratna, previously an honour reserved for one, maybe two athletes. In 2022, it presented one Khel Ratna and 25 Arjuna Awards, while it was two and 26 in 2023.

So, when you consider the sheer open-handedness with which these awards are doled out, it's genuinely baffling that this year's committee — composed of five sportspersons, two sports journalists, two Government officers, SAI DG and Joint Secretary, Sports, and a retired judge as the chair — somehow overlooked Manu's name entirely. And now, predictably, the Sports Minister is left scrambling for a last-minute fix to a problem that shouldn't have cropped up in the first place.

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HOT OR COLD?

WHAT WORKS BEST

For injured athletes, the road to recovery can seem endless and, at times, perplexing. The desire for a speedy return to the field often leads athletes to seek ways to expedite the healing process and alleviate pain. However, there's a caveat: strategies employed to reduce immediate pain might not align well with those that accelerate healing.

TWO CONTRASTING THERAPIES ARE COMMONLY USED

ICE PACKS AND HEAT THERAPY.

Ice therapy provides immediate relief by numbing pain receptors and constricting blood vessels, thereby reducing inflammation and swelling. However, there is a catch: reducing the inflammation can also hinder the healing process.

Inflammation is the body's natural response to injuries, wherein the white blood cell count is elevated, fighting potential invaders and removing damaged cells. Inflammation physically protects the injured area, creating a safe environment for new tissue growth. The increased blood flow, a crucial part of the inflammatory response, delivers essential nutrients to fuel the growth of these new tissues.

Another method used is heat therapy; since its mechanics are opposite to cold, heat therapy increases blood flow and, consequently, the inflammatory response. However, heat therapy isn't advisable immediately after an injury as excessive inflammation can further harm the tissues."

ICE VS HEAT

REDUCES PAIN AND SWELLING	PROMOTES BLOOD FLOW AND INFLAMATTORY RESPONSE; SOOTHES AND REDUCES PAIN
FOR UPTO A MAXIMUM OF 48-72 HOURS AFTER INJURY	USED AFTER APPROX 48-78 HOURS AND FOR CHRONIC INJURIES
MAY DELAY HEALING IF USED EXCESSIVELY	RISK OF BURNS
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HALT SPORTS INJURIES ABTP

Triumphant: India's Koneru Humpy after winning the FIDE World Rapid chess championship in New York. PTI

Humpy clinches second World Rapid chess title

India's Koneru Humpy beat Indonesia's Irine Kharisma Sukandar in Round 11 to win FIDE World Rapid Championship 2024 in Wall Street, New York on December 29.

Humpy finished joint-top in the 2023 Samarkand Rapid Championship before losing to eventual winner Anastasia Bodnaruk in tie-breaks.

This is Humpy's second World Rapid title after claiming the top spot in 2019 in Moscow. Humpy missed out on the Budapest Olympiad, where India won a historic double gold, due to personal reasons but recovered well to cap off 2024 with the Rapid title.

Going into the final round of the event, six players — Ju Wenjhun, Kateryna Lagno, Harika Dronavalli, Afruza Khamdamova, Tan Zhongyi and Irene — apart from Humpy were leading the tournament with 7.5 points in 10 rounds.

All top boards ended in a draw before Humpy struck the winning blow against Irene.

Final standings (out of 11 points): 1. GM Humpy Koneru 8.5; 2. GM Ju Wenjun 8.0; 3. GM Kateryna Lagno 8.0; 4. GM Tan Zhongyi 8.0; 5. GM Harika Dronavalli 8.0; 6. WIM Afruza Khamdamova 8.0; 7. GM Alexandra Kosteniuk 8.0; 8. IM Bibisara Assaubayeva 7.5; 9. IM Irine Kharisma Sukandar 7.5; 10. IM Stavroula Tsolakidou 7.5.

« He (Andy Murray) has a unique perspective on my game as one of the greatest rivals I've had. He knows the pros and cons of my game – Novak Djokovic on his new coach Andy Murray »

« It's OK to accept and acknowledge that the end is near. But only because it allows you to enjoy what's happening right now. – NBA star Stephen Curry, in an interview »

26

Sophie Hediger, a member of Switzerland's snowboard cross team at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, died following an avalanche at a mountain resort, the country's skiing federation said.
The incident occurred on December 23 at the Arosa resort in Switzerland.
Hediger, 26, competed at the Beijing Games in the women's snowboard cross and the mixed team version of the same event.
Hediger achieved her first two World Cup podium finishes in the 2023-24 season. Her best result was a second place in St. Moritz in January.

3rd

India's Lakshya Sen delivered a dominant performance, outplaying rising French star Alex Lanier in straight games to finish third at the inaugural King Cup International Badminton Open. The 23-year-old from Almora defeated Lanier 21-17, 21-11, securing a handsome prize purse of Rs. 36 lakh. Lakshya had earlier lost to reigning world junior champion Hu Zhe'an of China in the semifinals, going down 19-21, 19-21, in a closely-contested match.

TOP CLASS

Ukraine's Oleksandr Usyk (right) retained his WBA (Super), WBO and WBC world heavyweight titles by unanimous decision against Britain's Tyson Fury to remain undefeated after an enthralling clash in an electric atmosphere at the Kingdom Arena. Giving up advantages in height, weight and reach to his much bigger opponent, Usyk fought superbly throughout to win 116-112 on all three judges' scorecards as he again defeated Fury after his success in May made him the undisputed champion. GETTY IMAGES

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) looks set for an **eventful** first quarter as we head into the new year.

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

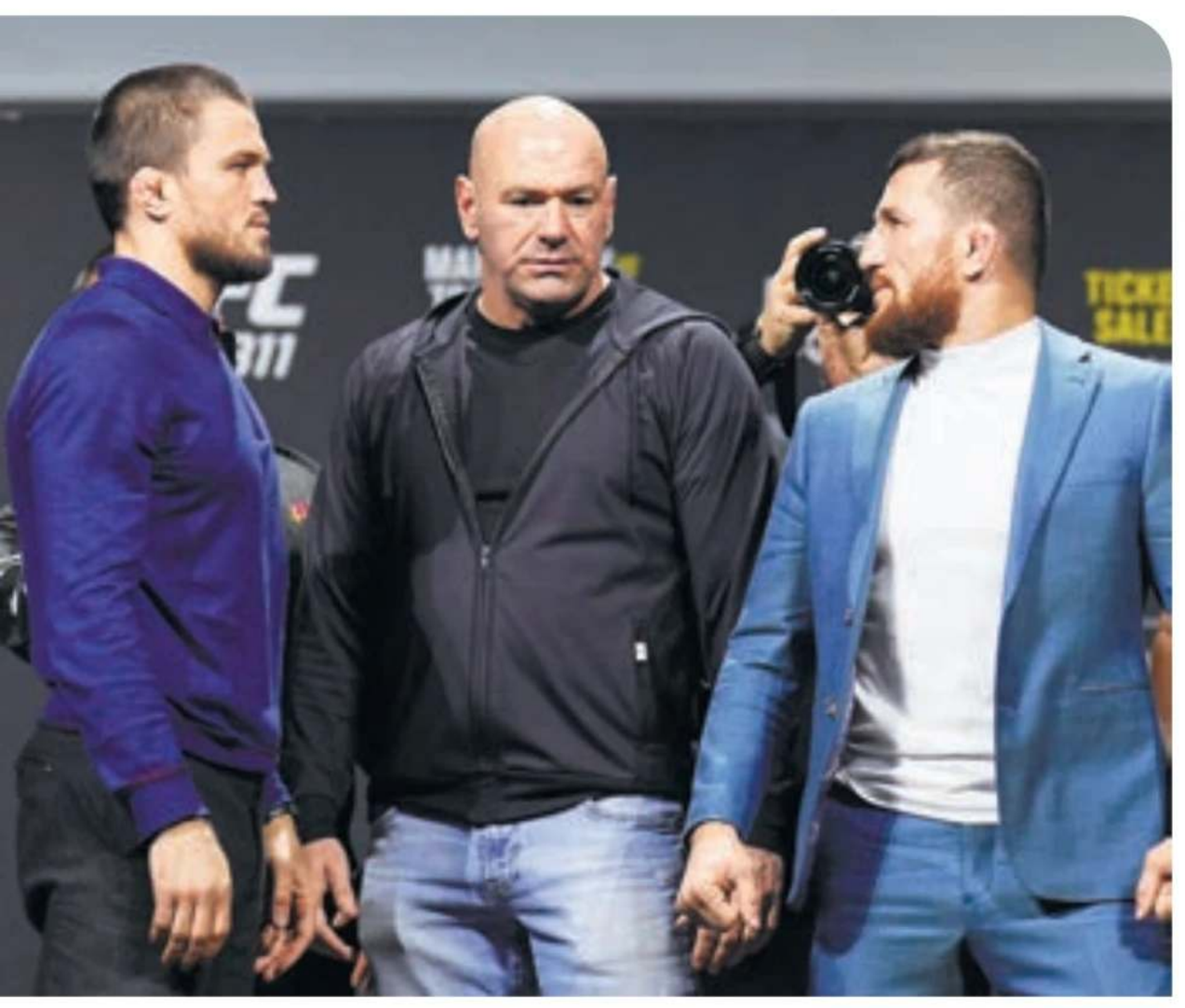
UFC 311 Makhachev vs Tsarukyan

The first numbered event of the new year boasts a stacked main card, headlined by the lightweight title fight between reigning champion Islam Makhachev of Russia and Georgia's Arman Tsarukyan.

Tsarukyan, who made his UFC debut in April 2019, has become one of the most talked about grapplers, with an impressive record of nine wins in 10 fights, including four finishes. Interestingly, life comes full circle for the surging fighter as he takes on a familiar foe. Tsarukyan's introduction to the UFC world did not go as he would have liked. The reason? His next opponent, Makhachev.

The 28-year-old has lost just twice in his UFC career, and the first of those losses was to the very same Makhachev, who is currently on a 14-fight win streak.

It ended in a unanimous decision in favour of Makhachev, but Tsarukyan did not go down without a fight. The 15-minute contest was one of the most technical displays from both fighters. Tsarukyan had a response to every takedown that Makhachev threw at him, but it came down to the officials' discretion, who ruled it in the Russian's favour. But that's the beauty of time — it changes things. Tsarukyan has evolved by leaps and bounds to become the monster he is today. If statistics are to be taken seriously, then Makhachev might actually have a worthy opponent in Tsarukyan.



UFC 311 Dvalishvili vs Nurmagomedov

Umar Nurmagomedov will finally get his much-deserved chance at the belt this January. Last November, he expressed his frustration with fighters not stepping forward to face him. "I'll fight anyone the UFC offers me because I want to be the best," he posted on X.

Fast-forward to January 2025, and not only will he step into the octagon, but he will also have a shot at the bantamweight title when he faces Merab Dvalishvili at UFC 311.

Dvalishvili claimed UFC gold last September, dethroning Sean O'Malley at UFC 306. The Georgian currently rides an 11-fight win streak, with standout performances against numerous former champions, including Henry Cejudo, Jose Aldo, and Petr Yan.

The Machine faces one of his toughest tests in Nurmagomedov, who boasts an 18-0 record as a professional. Nurmagomedov is coming off a dominant unanimous decision victory over Cory Sandhagen.

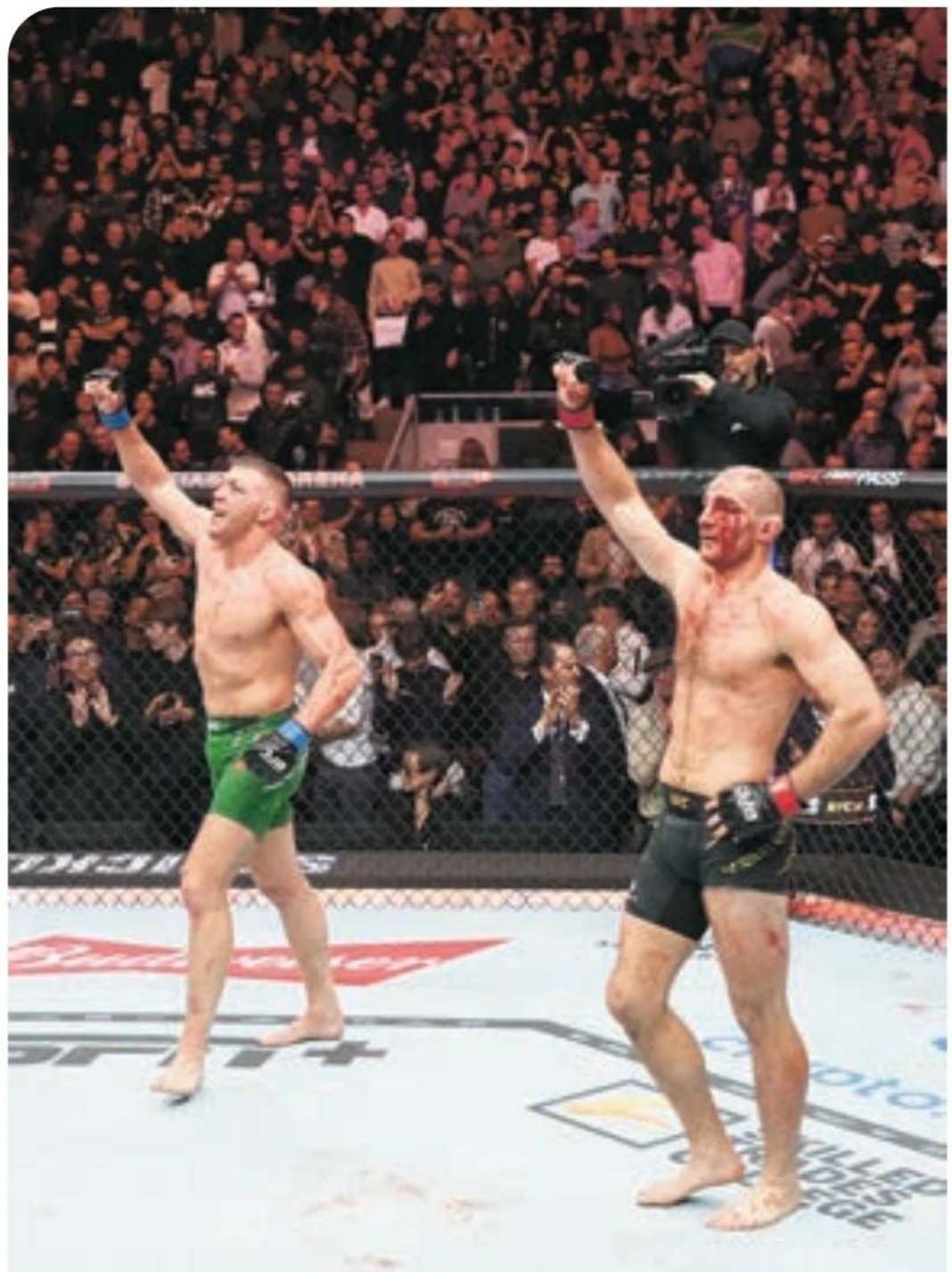
UFC 312 Du Plessis vs Strickland

The first weekend of February will feature another rematch when middleweight champion 'Stillknocks' Dricus du Plessis takes on former champ Sean Strickland.

Du Plessis became the division's champion after just six fights, outlasting Strickland to clinch the title. Stillknocks started on the back foot as Strickland found his rhythm with superior range and relentless jabs.

But as the rounds progressed, du Plessis found his footing, mixing heavy jabs with occasional takedowns. Eventually, the judges were tasked with determining the final verdict, and when their scorecards were tabulated, du Plessis became the first athlete from South Africa to claim UFC gold.

Du Plessis will look to replicate his success in February and become one of the few fighters to defend the belt multiple times, while Strickland will be out for revenge to reclaim what he lost.



UFC Fight Night Puja vs Bannon

After her successful foray into the UFC, India's Puja Tomar will travel to London to face fellow newcomer Shauna Bannon of Ireland.

Puja became the first Indian to win a bout in the UFC when she secured a split decision victory over Brazil's Rayanne dos Santos in June last year. She has built a five-fight win streak, including a title defence in the Matrix Fight Night promotion.

Bannon, on the other hand, is 1-1 in her UFC journey so far. The Irishwoman was unbeaten in her career before joining the UFC, with stints in Cage Legacy and Invicta FC.

She suffered her first loss in her UFC debut against Bruna Brasil in July 2023. However, she bounced back at UFC 304 after a year's gap, defeating Alice Ardelean for her first UFC win.

I HAVE ENCOUNTERED COMPARISONS BETWEEN ASHWIN AND HARBHAJAN SINGH. I DON'T BELIEVE IN COMPARISONS

Unexpected: Anil Kumble was shocked by Ashwin's exit from the game. "I remember telling him he should get to 600 when he crossed the 500 mark — and then 619," he said. REUTERS

ASHWIN SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IN EVERY MATCH OUTSIDE INDIA

It is unfortunate that the team management **did not consistently select Ashwin** to play in England, South Africa and Australia. This has always perplexed me.

Anil Kumble

Ravichandran Ashwin is a matchwinner. He is a thorough professional who has excelled throughout his career. Every time you watch him bowl, you can see that he wants to get better and is trying to outwit the batter in any circumstance. You want to see that in any cricketer, and he's done that for 14–15 years.

He is looking at identifying who the main threats could be from the opposition and invariably looks to be in the thick of the action. Look at the number of five-fors he has had. It tells you how much he matters to the team. Ashwin believes in being proactive and staying one step ahead. He says, 'This is what I'm trying to do.'

The first time I saw him in person was probably during the 2011 IPL final against Chennai Super Kings (CSK), where he took those wickets against Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB). He has certainly evolved in terms of trying to understand his craft. It's not easy when you have that kind of expectation from the team and everyone else. Day in and day out, you expect him to pick up five wickets, and he does so consistently.

Unfortunately, the team management did

not consistently select Ashwin to play in England, South Africa, and Australia, which has always perplexed me. With Ravindra Jadeja bowling in tandem, India could have had these two in every match. Ashwin has consistently picked wickets on every surface he has played on. So to typecast him as a spinner, mostly in subcontinent conditions, is not fair.

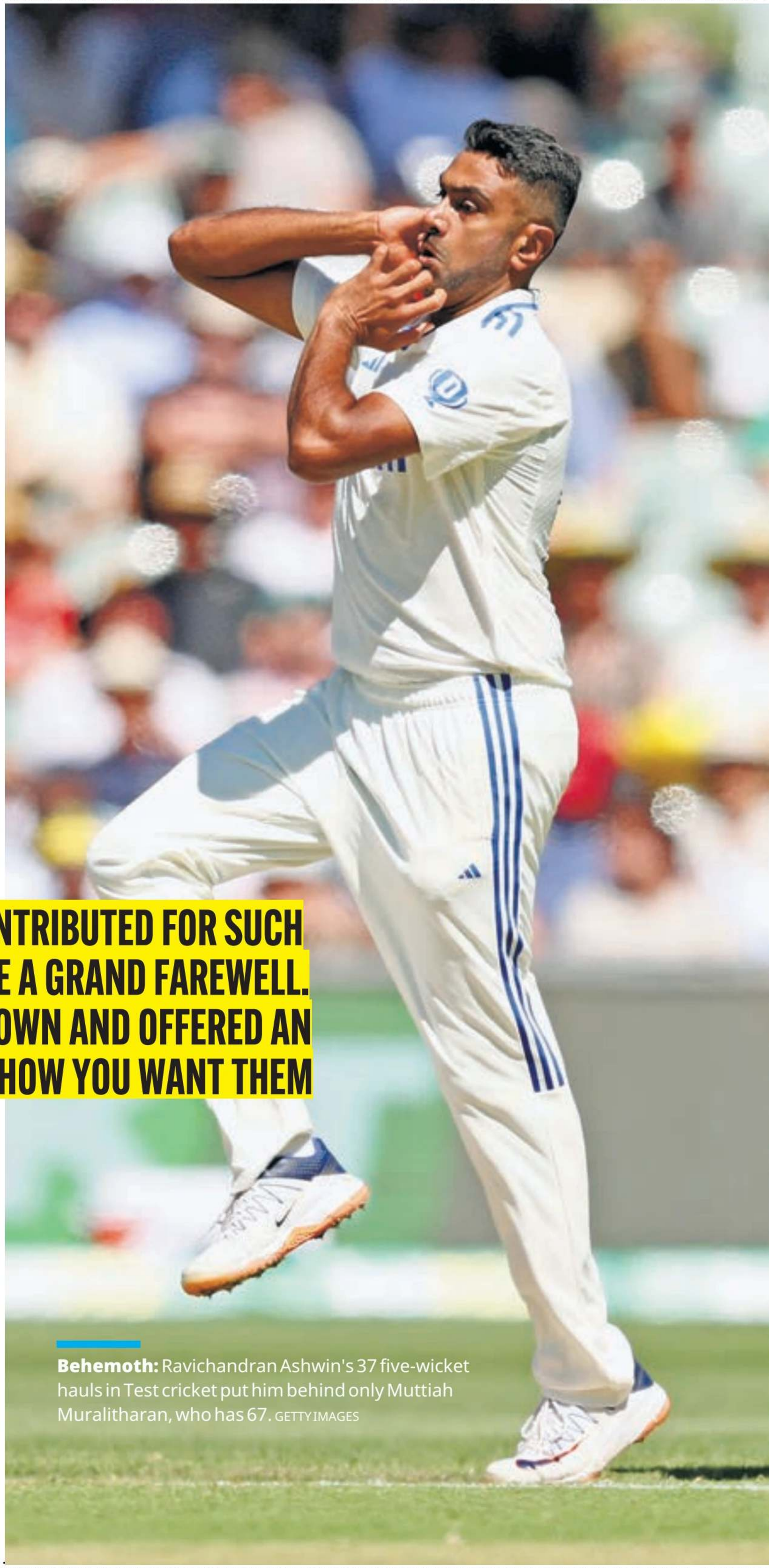
A good-quality batter or bowler should be able to adapt, and Ashwin has, even though he has not had the opportunity to play in those matches consistently. Otherwise, he would have been far ahead of everyone else in terms of his wicket-taking ability. Ashwin always gave enough indications about his hunger and ability to run through batting line-ups.

You must be a high-quality bowler to pick wickets on any pitch, right? Whether it's aiding you or not, you set such high standards in India because there is help for the spinner. India took great advantage of preparing such pitches for a few years, but you need the skills to score runs or take wickets.

Outside India, the conditions mostly favour the faster bowlers, at least in the first innings, and then slowly, it starts getting better for batting. Ashwin is a class act, and India missed the trick by not consistently giving him those opportunities. He is a thinking cricketer and would have adapted.

I preferred bowling with the new ball. I had the seam upright, the ball

PLAYERS WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED FOR SUCH A LONG PERIOD DESERVE A GRAND FAREWELL. THEY NEED TO BE SAT DOWN AND OFFERED AN APPROPRIATE PLAN ON HOW YOU WANT THEM TO LEAVE THE GAME



Behemoth: Ravichandran Ashwin's 37 five-wicket hauls in Test cricket put him behind only Muttiah Muralitharan, who has 67. GETTY IMAGES

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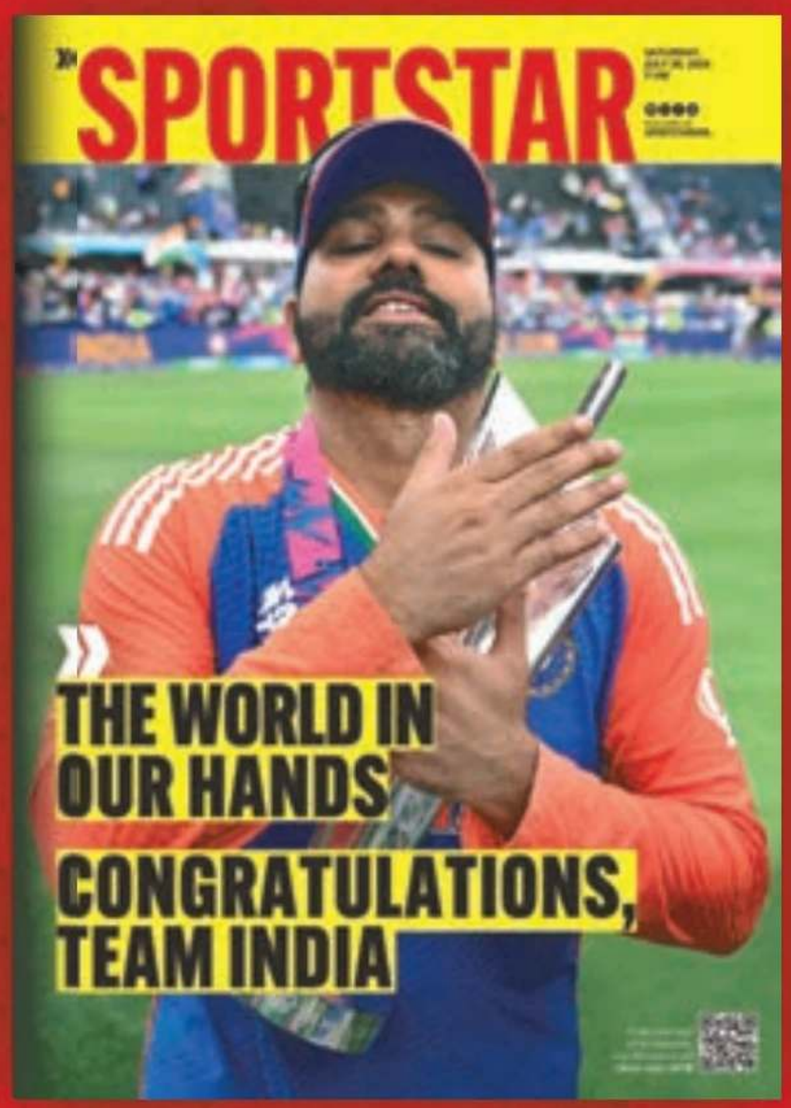

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All-round prowess: The author, during his time as head coach, encouraged Ashwin to value his batting, even promoting him up the order during the 2016 West Indies tour, citing his technique and ability to bat ahead of Wriddhiman Saha.
GETTY IMAGES

was hard, and I could use the shine. You would get a bit of drift or swing overseas with the new ball. Unlike overseas, you rarely have any breeze in India because the stadiums are closed. I also loved the new ball because you could extract more bounce. That's what Ashwin did, and he was highly successful.

On a personal level, I appreciated his approach to the game. He always had his views. It's not easy to convince an Ashwin. I might say he could try something for his benefit, but he would always counter, 'This is what I think I can do, and I'll still get you wickets.' He would have his views and stick to them. High-quality bowlers do that, working on the batter and getting him out. Ashwin was good at setting up batters.

I also encouraged him to value his batting. When I was the coach on the tour of the West Indies (in 2016), we moved Ashwin up the order because I, for one, believed he had the technique and ability to play ahead of (Wriddhiman) Saha. Ashwin batted at No. 6 and scored a couple of hundreds in Antigua (113) and St. Lucia (118). He was 'Man of the Match' in both those games.

I also felt he could be an ideal all-rounder. India always talks about fast-bowling all-rounders. You had quality spinners and batters in Ashwin and Jadeja. They were two good batters when in form and could bat anywhere in the middle order. They should have played in every match outside India.

I have encountered comparisons between Ashwin and Harbhajan (Singh). I don't believe in comparisons. I am the last person to say one is better than the other. Harbhajan could get serious bounce, bowl a different line outside the off-stump, and make the batter play through the offside. He mostly bowled over the stumps to the right-handers. Harbhajan also had the doosra. Both were great bowlers.

Ashwin was more stump-to-stump and rarely bowled the outside off-stump line to the right-hander from over the stumps. He was more round-the-stumps and tried to get the batter out LBW. The game has changed. The players' mindsets have changed. The batters have changed, too, in terms of approach.

I remember telling Ashwin he should get to 600 when he crossed the 500 mark — and then 619. The way he was going, he had a very good chance. He didn't have a great series against New Zealand, but that was one in 14 years.

Players who have contributed for such a long period deserve a grand farewell. They need to be sat down and offered an appropriate plan on how you want them to leave the game. I was very disappointed with the way Ashwin left. Many cricketers in the past missed out on a farewell, too. The kind of benchmarks he has set won't be easy for anyone to live up to. He served Indian cricket with distinction.

As told to Vijay Lokapally

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TROUBLING BATTERS LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTRE

With the 38-year-old R. Ashwin announcing his retirement from international cricket, here are some **standout numbers** from his illustrious career.

Pranay Rajiv
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

Few players have analysed cricket as deeply as R. Ashwin. Even fewer have dared to execute their ideas on the field with the same audacity. For over a decade, Ashwin strode the globe as one of the sport's premier spin exponents, playing a pivotal role in establishing India's dominance in Test cricket, particularly on home soil. With the 38-year-old announcing his retirement from international cricket, here are some standout numbers from his illustrious career:

Asymmetry

No bowler troubled left-handed batters quite like Ashwin. The off-spinner had a remarkable edge against southpaws, claiming more left-handed wickets than anyone else in international cricket.

Ashwin's Test record came tantalisingly close to a perfectly symmetrical left-right dismissal count – 269 right-handers and 268 left-handers. The balance was tipped when he dismissed Mitchell Marsh for his final Test wicket during the pink-ball match in Adelaide.

Three of his most frequent victims were left-handers. England's Test captain Ben Stokes tops the list, having been dismissed 17 times by Ashwin across formats. Retired Australian opener David Warner and Sri Lanka's Lahiru Thirimanne follow, with 14 dismissals each.

The Carrom Flicker

In his autobiography, *I Have the Streets: A Kutti Cricket Story*, Ashwin revealed that the carrom ball – a

R. ASHWIN BOWLING VARIATIONS IN TESTS

Variation

OFF BREAK

Balls	Wickets	Average	Strike rate
25580	461	26.66	55.4

QUICKER BALL

Balls	Wickets	Average	Strike rate
358	9	13.22	39.7

TOP SPINNER

Balls	Wickets	Average	Strike rate
128	4	8.75	32

CARROM BALL

Balls	Wickets	Average	Strike rate
578	34	6.58	17

ARM BALL

Balls	Wickets	Average	Strike rate
379	24	6	15.7

OTHERS

Balls	Wickets	Average	Strike rate
223	5	15.4	44.6

deceptive delivery breaking away from right-handers – was a variation he first encountered in Chennai's tennis-ball cricket circuit.

Ashwin not only adopted the carrom ball but perfected it in Test cricket. Of the 682 carrom-ball deliveries bowled in Tests since his debut, Ashwin alone accounted for 578. He also took 34 of the 39 dismissals credited to the carrom ball in this period.

Primarily reserved for right-handers, Ashwin delivered 337 of his carrom balls to them, claiming 24 wickets.

The Rival

Throughout their careers, Ashwin and Australian off-spinner Nathan Lyon were frequently compared, their performances scrutinised in parallel. While Lyon overtook Ashwin's Test wicket tally with a match-winning performance in the Boxing Day Test, the statistics reveal that Ashwin outshone his counterpart in nearly every head-to-head comparison. Ashwin even outperformed Lyon in Australia, despite often playing second fiddle to Ravindra Jadeja in away Tests.

Supporting Cast

During his retirement announcement press conference, Ashwin made it a point to acknowledge the contributions of his teammates, particularly his fielders, to his impressive Test wicket haul.

"I would like to thank Rohit [Sharma], Virat [Kohli], Ajinkya [Rahane], and [Cheteshwar] Pujara, who have taken those splendid catches around the bat to give me the number of wickets I've managed over the years," Ashwin remarked in Brisbane. Rahane was his most frequent collaborator, taking 34 catches off Ashwin's bowling, often while stationed at first slip. Kohli's impact extended beyond his 29 catches, as his fielding in the midwicket region helped build pressure during Ashwin's spells.

Among wicketkeepers, Wriddhiman Saha played a crucial role, contributing to 21 dismissals – 18 catches and three stumpings – off Ashwin's bowling.

ASHWIN NOT ONLY ADOPTED THE CARROM BALL BUT PERFECTED IT IN TEST CRICKET. OF THE 682 CARROM-BALL DELIVERIES BOWLED IN TESTS SINCE HIS DEBUT, ASHWIN ALONE ACCOUNTED FOR 578

R. Ashwin

	Overall	In Aus.	In Ind.
Mat	22	11	11
Inns	41	19	22
Balls	7013	3472	3541
Runs	3183	1697	1486
Wkts	109	40	69
BBI	7/103	4/55	7/103
BBM	12/198	6/149	12/198
Ave	29.2	42.42	21.53
Econ	2.72	2.93	2.51
SR	64.3	86.8	51.3
4w	3	2	1
5w	6	0	6
10	1	0	1

N. Lyon

	Overall	In Aus.	In Ind.
Mat	22	11	11
Inns	39	20	19
Balls	5576	2676	2900
Runs	2895	1363	1532
Wkts	88	32	56
BBI	8/50	6/122	8/50
BBM	11/99	8/205	11/99
Ave	32.89	42.59	27.35
Econ	3.11	3.05	3.16
SR	63.3	83.6	51.7
4w	2	1	1
5w	6	1	5
10	1	0	1

Ashwin's Test wickets distribution between right and left-handed batters

RLbat	right	RLbat	left
Span	2011-2024	Span	2011-2024
Mat	106	Mat	105
Inns	197	Inns	198
Conc	7567	Conc	5319
Balls	14682	Balls	12559
ER	3.09	ER	2.54
Wks	269	Wks	268
Ave	28.13	Ave	19.84
SR	54.5	SR	46.8
Dot%	71.9	Dot%	78
Bnd%	5.71	Bnd%	5.08

Most wickets against left-handed batters in international cricket

R. Ashwin
IND

264 Matches
S/R 42.4

Wickets
362
2010-2024

J. Anderson
ENG

311 Matches
S/R 56.1

Wickets
276
2006-2024

T. Southee
NZL

355 Matches
S/R 44.8

Wickets
260
2008-2024

S. Broad
ENG

296 Matches
S/R 52.7

Wickets
255
2006-2023

T. Boult
NZL

235 Matches
S/R 39

Wickets
235
2011-2024

M. Starc
AUS

267 Matches
S/R 35.5

Wickets
221
2010-2024

M. Johnson
AUS

217 Matches
S/R 35

Wickets
203
2006-2015

N. Lyon
AUS

149 Matches
S/R 56.2

Wickets
196
2011-2024

K. Rabada
SA

217 Matches
S/R 35.7

Wickets
194
2014-2024

Fielder summary

Fielder	Span	Mat	Dismissals	catches	c wk	st	Mat/Dis	Ave	0s
A. Rahane	2013-2023	64	34	34	0	0	1.88	17.76	7
V. Kohli	2011-2024	93	29	29	0	0	3.2	24.24	4
W. Saha	2012-2021	38	21	0	18	3	1.8	33.28	3
R. Sharma	2013-2024	52	19	19	0	0	2.73	24.05	5
C. Pujara	2012-2023	78	18	18	0	0	4.33	26	5
M. Vijay	2013-2018	40	17	17	0	0	2.35	19.47	1
R. Pant	2018-2024	26	17	0	11	6	1.52	25.05	0
K. L. Rahul	2014-2024	43	16	16	0	0	2.68	14.93	2
M. S. Dhoni	2011-2014	22	14	0	9	5	1.57	34.78	1
R. Jadeja	2012-2024	58	13	13	0	0	4.46	32.69	1

All Format
Batter dismissed

Batter	Span	Mat	Dismissals	bwd	c fie	c wk	st	lbw	Mat/Dis	Ave	0s
B. Stokes **(ENG)**	2011-2024	28	17	5	7	2	0	3	1.64	16.29	0
D. Warner **(AUS)**	2011-2023	32	14	2	4	0	1	7	2.28	29.92	0
L. Thirimanne **(SL)**	2012-2022	23	14	3	7	0	0	4	1.64	25.78	1
A. Cook **(ENG)**	2011-2018	35	11	3	2	3	1	2	3.18	40.45	1
J. Root **(ENG)**	2012-2024	35	9	0	6	0	0	3	3.88	24.77	0
J. Anderson **(ENG)**	2011-2024	29	9	1	5	1	0	2	3.22	2.66	4
D. Bravo **(WI)**	2011-2016	22	9	2	3	2	1	1	2.44	27.88	0
T. Latham **(NZ)**	2016-2024	10	9	1	2	1	1	4	1.11	33.22	0
M. Samuels **(WI)**	2011-2017	28	8	4	2	1	0	1	3.5	47	1
S. Smith **(AUS)**	2010-2024	27	8	0	5	1	0	2	3.37	34.37	2

1

103

5/156

India / v West Indies Wankhede

22 Nov 2011

Test # 2019

2

113

7/83

India / v West Indies Wankhede

21 Jul 2016

Test # 2207

100s & 5-fors for Ashwin in the same match

3

106

5/43

India / v England

13 Feb 2021

Test # 2411

4

113

6/88

India / v Bangladesh

19 Sep 2024

Test # 2550

Only Ian Botham has more **(5)**

What defines Ashwin is his openness to suggestions

I particularly enjoyed keeping when **Ashwin bowled to left-handed batters** from around the wicket.

Wriddhiman Saha

When I made my Test debut in February 2010, Harbhajan Singh was spearheading India's spin department, along with Amit Mishra. However, later that year, as I broke into the white-ball team, I met a bright, confident, young off-spinner who was also taking his first steps in international cricket.

We were around the same age, and back then, I obviously had no clue that over the next 11 years, we would go on to feature in 38 Test matches together, with 215 of his wickets coming when I was the wicketkeeper.

Throughout my career, I dealt with quite a few quality spinners, who carried the mystique associated with the art. But I have no hesitation in admitting that it was my old friend Ravichandran Ashwin whose off-spin challenged me the most.

I would not use the word "difficult"; rather, his deliveries were tricky to read. Unlike most spinners of his time, Ashwin's variations in length added to the challenge. Standing behind the stumps, I realised that spinners need to be read right from the hand, and if you could do that, half the job was done. The remaining part involved making adjustments based on the bounce and turn. Keeping up to 'Ash', as we fondly call Ashwin, boosted my confidence and helped me read spinners better.

While he tormented the batters, Ashwin was also one of the finest all-rounders of our times. Time and again, he has proved his mettle with the bat. I also have some really special memories of batting with him.

How can I forget our long stand — 213 runs for the sixth wicket — against West Indies in Gros Islet? Back in 2016, both of us went on to score centuries in that Test, and that partnership still remains India's second-highest in an away Test. As we batted along, Ashwin walked up to me repeatedly to ensure we were thinking along similar lines. As we approached our nineties, our conversations increased, and Ashwin made sure I wasn't feeling the pressure en route to my maiden century. Throughout my career, Ashwin, Jaddu (Ravindra Jadeja), and I rotated our batting orders — me at No. 6, Ashwin or Jaddu at No. 7 or No. 8 — so our understanding improved, and we got to know each other better. Batting in the lower middle order has its own challenges, but I am glad that Ashwin, Jaddu, and I could forge partnerships whenever the team needed. These are memories I will cherish forever.

I find it hard to believe that Ashwin will no longer be donning the

Trusted ally: Wriddhiman Saha revealed that Ravichandran Ashwin often expressed his trust and comfort when Saha was behind the stumps.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

whites for India. But as I look back, it brings memories of how we prepared for a match. Soon after playing a few games at the highest level, I realised there could be no substitute for solid preparation. Ashwin and I would often spend hours in the nets, even after the regular sessions were over. He would bowl, and I would keep — this was our way of getting ready for a game.

What defines Ashwin is his openness to suggestions from the wicketkeeper and his willingness to tweak accordingly. He often told me he trusted me and felt comfortable when I was behind the stumps. That bond was reflected in our performances, with me being involved in 21 of his dismissals — 18 catches and three stumpings.

I have always observed bowlers in the nets, and every time Ashwin bowled, I watched his action and how he generated bounce and turn from a surface, preparing myself accordingly. These minute observations helped me adapt to the conditions and improve, and we always made it a point to discuss strategies and back-up plans before a game. This helped us overcome the odds during crucial situations.

There have been times when I missed a catch or failed to effect a stumping, but I never saw Ashwin getting angry. Instead, he would walk up, pat me on the back, and encourage me to do better. When you get that kind of support from a colleague, you feel motivated and it brings out the best in you.

I particularly enjoyed keeping when Ashwin bowled to left-handed batters from around the wicket. It often threw challenges my way as well. It was essential to closely monitor the seam position as the ball would often skid and castle the stumps or produce sharp edges. Those deliveries were masterpieces that Ashwin could create with ease.

From 2014 to 2018, I was the keeper for most of Ash's bowling spells. It was a privilege to watch him emerge as one of the best in the business. His dedication to the game has been exemplary, and I have always admired how he prepared and remained deeply involved.

We have shared many moments, from glorious victories to heartbreaking defeats. Those times in the dressing room and on the pitch only strengthened our partnership and friendship.

At some point, all of us must hang up our boots and step into a new innings. Knowing Ashwin, I am sure he will remain connected to the game in some way. But every time we watch Test cricket hereon, he will be deeply missed.

One of India's finest and a truly hard-working cricketer — thank you for all the memories, Ashwin. I am glad to have been part of your journey!

As told to Shayan Acharya

« Ashwin effectively harnessed his cricketing intelligence and relentless hunger for success »

Pragyan Ojha

When we began playing age-group cricket more than two decades ago, I distinctly remember hearing the name Ravichandran Ashwin for the first time. While I represented Hyderabad, Ashwin, back then, was a top-order batter for Tamil Nadu. In one of the Vijay Merchant Trophy Under-17 fixtures, he opened the innings for his team, hammered us all over the park in Visakhapatnam, and went on to score 212 as an opener.

At that time, we recognised Ashwin as a highly skilled batter who could also bowl a bit of off-spin. That perception persisted for at least the next couple of years. As we progressed through the ranks, we heard that Ashwin was consistently claiming wickets at the domestic level and was beginning to be regarded as a specialist spinner.

Eventually, he earned his place in Tamil Nadu's Ranji Trophy team, featured in the Indian Premier League, and established himself as a genuine spinner, breaking into India's white-ball team in 2010.

A year later, when he made his Test debut against West Indies, it coincided with my comeback series.

I remember him coming into my room, where we discussed how to handle the pressures of Test cricket. He sought my suggestions on certain aspects, and having known each other for years, it was heartening to see how far Ashwin had come. That marked the beginning of our partnership for India.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Looking back at his career, it is remarkable to see his journey. Transforming from a batter into one of the legends of Indian cricket is an extraordinary feat. I believe he has effectively harnessed his cricketing intelligence and relentless hunger for success. Even in challenging situations, Ashwin has adapted to the ever-changing landscape of international cricket, and that adaptability has been key to his success.

If you consider it, cricket has evolved significantly since 2010. To excel, players had to embrace a degree of unorthodoxy in their approach, and Ashwin has never shied away from stepping out of his comfort zone.

This combination of cricketing intelligence and an insatiable drive to perform has enabled him to claim 537 wickets in Test cricket, which is phenomenal.

There is a fine line between being open to new ideas and selectively incorporating what enhances your skillset. In such scenarios, cricketing intelligence plays a pivotal role. Ashwin has excelled in picking up elements that add value to his game, and in doing so, he has become an inspiration for the younger generation.

As told to Shayan Acharya

« What makes Ashwin's career remarkable is how he consistently builds on his natural talent »

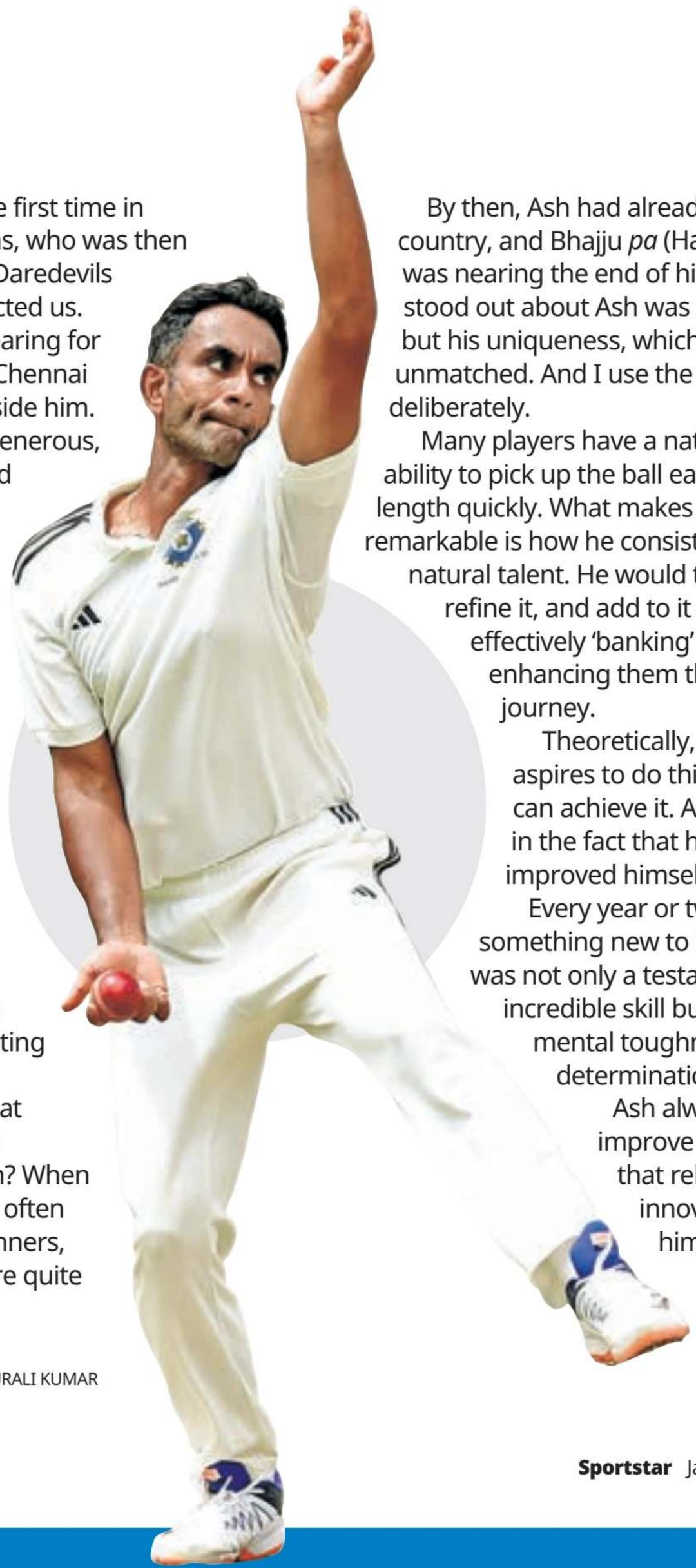
Jayant Yadav

A decade ago, I met Ash for the first time in Chennai, thanks to Eric Simmons, who was then the bowling coach of the Delhi Daredevils (now Delhi Capitals). Eric connected us. Around that time, Ash was preparing for the England tour. I travelled to Chennai to meet him and to bowl alongside him.

He was incredibly kind and generous, taking the time to talk to me and train with me. It has been a long time since then, so I don't recall every detail of our conversation, but I vividly remember how generous he was in allowing someone to come all the way from Delhi to train with him.

By then, he was already an established Test bowler, and that gesture speaks volumes about his character. Throughout my stint in Chennai, I remember the warmth and genuineness he showed towards me. He always encouraged me, which left a lasting impression.

Who could have imagined that years later, we would end up as teammates in the national team? When playing in the Ranji Trophy, you often look at other contemporary spinners, especially off-spinners, who were quite rare at the time.



K. MURALI KUMAR

By then, Ash had already represented the country, and Bhajju *pa* (Harbhajan Singh) was nearing the end of his career. What stood out about Ash was not just his skill but his uniqueness, which I believe was unmatched. And I use the word 'unmatched' deliberately.

Many players have a natural, inherent ability to pick up the ball early and read its length quickly. What makes Ash's career remarkable is how he consistently builds on his natural talent. He would take what he had, refine it, and add to it over time, effectively 'banking' his skills and enhancing them throughout his journey.

Theoretically, every cricketer aspires to do this, but very few can achieve it. Ash's greatness lies in the fact that he consistently improved himself.

Every year or two, he would add something new to his game. This was not only a testament to his incredible skill but also to his mental toughness and determination.

Ash always sought to improve and excel, and that relentless drive to innovate is what set him apart.

As told to Shayan Acharya

« For all of us who aspire to represent India one day, Ashwin has set an exceptionally high benchmark »

M. PERIASAMY

Sai Kishore

I was just 20 years old when I shared the dressing room with Ashwin for the first time. What struck me immediately was his determination and his relentless desire to improve, despite already having extensive experience. That quality is something I truly admire. For me, and for all of us who aspire to represent India one day, he has set an exceptionally high benchmark. The level of skill he possesses and the meticulous planning he puts into each Test match are aspects I deeply respect.

Reaching such a high standard requires immense dedication and an unwavering passion to constantly refine your craft. His journey of striving for perfection is nothing short of extraordinary.

There is so much to learn from simply observing him. You don't always need to engage in conversation; just watching from a distance as he prepares for a game is enough to instil confidence and inspire you. I wouldn't describe it as pressure to reach his level, but rather as a worthwhile target to aim for.

It's easy to feel content after taking regular wickets at the domestic level, but the aspiration to match Ashwin's skill set and emulate his determination keeps you motivated to push yourself further. For players like me, he serves as a powerful source of inspiration.

Ashwin's versatility as a bowler is remarkable — whether it's off-spin, the carrom ball, or firing the ball in, he brings an unparalleled variety to the game.

Developing such a complete repertoire takes tremendous courage and countless hours of dedication. That's what I aspire to emulate.

Following the path he has paved as an off-spinner, as a finger spinner, motivates me to keep improving and pursuing excellence.

As told to Shayan Acharya

« Ashwin consistently added to his arsenal, much like upgrading software »

K. Gowtham

Ash bhai has been a legend, and you naturally look up to him. I have always admired his mindset and approach towards the game. As a spinner, he is like a scientist — constantly experimenting and trying out new things. His ability to vary his bowling is simply incredible.

He is never a predictable bowler. If you observe his journey, you'll see that he hasn't confined himself to mastering just one skill. He developed the carrom ball with exceptional precision, added leg-spins and googlies to his repertoire, and continually experimented. He doesn't want to be a monotonous, traditional off-spinner, which sets him apart.

From what I have observed, he is someone who thrives on innovation. His smartness is evident in the way he outfoxes batters, carefully setting them up for dismissals.

These are some of the qualities I have tried to learn from him.

When you play international cricket regularly, every team studies your bowling through videos. They analyse your techniques and understand your mindset.

This is where a bowler of Ash *bhai*'s calibre stands out. He consistently cultivates and adds to his arsenal, ensuring he stays ahead of the opposition. It's akin to upgrading software — you have to keep evolving.

That's exactly what he has done throughout his career. He has continually upgraded himself, knowing it was essential not just to achieve success but to sustain it over a long period. His remarkable tally of international wickets is a testament to how beautifully he accomplished that goal.

What I truly admire about him is his insatiable thirst for learning and his willingness to innovate. This is why he's always a different bowler every time a batter faces him, keeping them guessing and staying one step ahead.

As told to Shayan Acharya

G. KARTHIKEYAN

« Ashwin *bhai* approaches his strategies like a chess Grandmaster »

K. C. Cariappa

Ashwin *bhai* is a legend, and since my early days, I have closely followed his journey, particularly because he was one of the first in India to bowl the carrom ball. As someone who bowls the carrom ball frequently, I have always taken inspiration from him. A couple of years ago, I finally had the opportunity to share the dressing room with him at Rajasthan Royals. Those two seasons were a tremendous learning experience for me.

I interacted with him extensively about how he sets up batters and formulates his strategies. Every time, he patiently listened and guided me on how to improve my game.

He emphasised the importance of having my own plans while bowling my quota of overs and made me realise that while execution may not always go as planned, the preparation and strategy must be flawless. I took his advice to heart and tried implementing it whenever I got the chance to bowl.

While Yuzvendra Chahal is known for being a chess master, I have always believed that Ashwin bhai approaches his strategies like a chess Grandmaster, constantly putting the batter in a spot of bother. Watching Ashwin *bhai* and Yuzi *bhai* prepare in the nets was fascinating — they strategised as though they were playing chess, always thinking several moves ahead and challenging the batter. Those practice sessions were incredibly insightful.

I still remember the first time I bowled to him in a practice match ahead of the 2022 IPL season.

After the match, I asked him what he had been planning while facing me.

He gave me his honest feedback and also told me that, as a bowler, it is crucial to have a Plan B and to keep the batter under pressure.

Those conversations with him were invaluable and significantly contributed to my learning curve.

As told to Shayan Acharya

IPL / SPORTZPICS

FOR MORE IMAGES

1st

Young cold blood: In a daring display of youthful audacity, 19-year-old Test debutant Sam Konstas fearlessly targeted India's pace ace Jasprit Bumrah, carting him for 34 runs in just 33 balls during the opening spell. His philosophy of scoop and scoop until you succeed worked as the opener scored a 65-ball 60. AFP

2nd

Fiery words: Virat Kohli and Sam Konstas clashed during the first innings, bumping shoulders and engaging in a heated exchange. The former Indian captain was subsequently sanctioned by the ICC for breaching the code of conduct. GETTY IMAGES

3rd

Dominance: Steve Smith brought up his second consecutive century as his innings of 140 helped Australia post 474 in the first innings. Smith registered his 34th Test hundred and his 11th against India, the most by any batter in the format. GETTY IMAGES

4th

Dramatic collapse: India's innings appeared steady until the 40th over, with Yashasvi Jaiswal and Virat Kohli building a solid century partnership. However, a miscommunication led to Jaiswal's dismissal for 82, sparking a dramatic collapse as India tumbled from 153/2 to 159/5.

GETTY IMAGES

5th

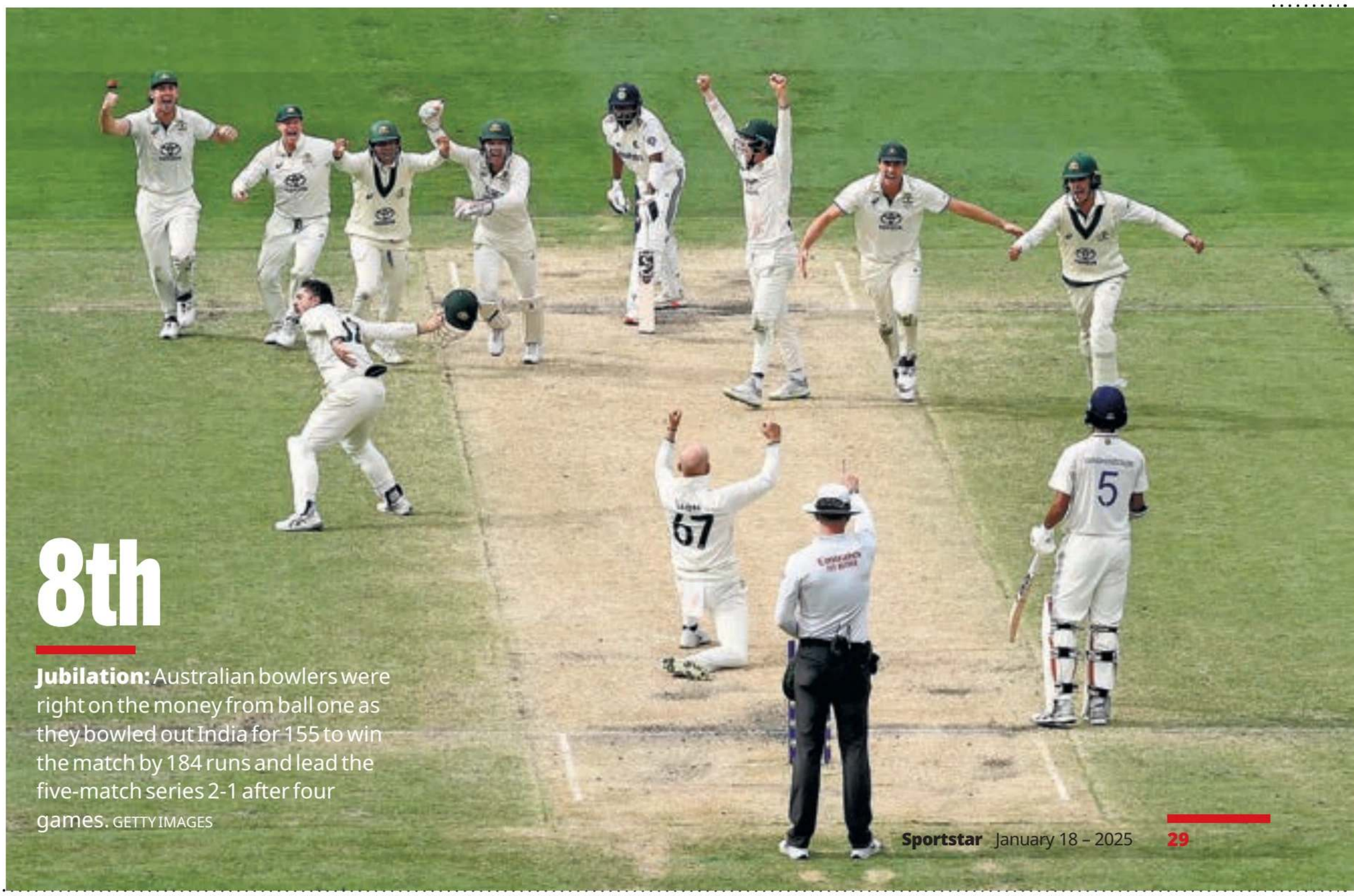
Fightback: Nitish Kumar Reddy and Washington Sundar staged an epic recovery as the duo added 127 runs for the eighth wicket. While Sundar scored 50, the day belonged to Reddy who completed his maiden hundred. The 21-year-old became the first Indian batter to hit a Test ton at number eight. AP

6th

Ripping apart: After India conceded a 105-run lead, Jasprit Bumrah blew open the game with a fiery spell, finishing with five for 57. In the process, the pacer also completed 200 Test wickets, becoming the joint second-fastest Indian bowler to achieve this feat. AFP

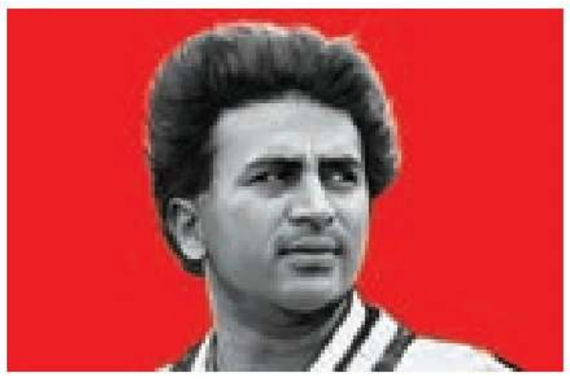
7th

Resilience: After being reduced to 91 for six by Bumrah and co., the Australian lower order fought back and took the total to 234. Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon scored 41 runs each as Australia set a 340-run target for India to chase on the final day. GETTY IMAGES



8th

Jubilation: Australian bowlers were right on the money from ball one as they bowled out India for 155 to win the match by 184 runs and lead the five-match series 2-1 after four games. GETTY IMAGES



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

CREDIT TO AJIT AGARKAR AND FELLOW SELECTORS FOR PITCHFORKING NITISH REDDY INTO TEST CRICKET

The Melbourne Test brought to the fore one of the **brightest young stars** in Indian cricket, Nitish Kumar Reddy.

Why Test cricket is the ultimate format of the game was seen at the magnificent Melbourne Cricket Ground. It was a match between two hugely talented and competitive teams, which brought a fitting end to what has truly been a memorable year for the sport, but more so for Indian cricket.

India won a World Cup after 11 years when they won the ICC T20 World Cup that was played in the West Indies with some games in the USA. That made up to some extent for the disappointment of losing in the final of the 50-over ODI World Cup at home in Ahmedabad in 2023.

There was more disappointment coming India's way as New Zealand did the unthinkable and beat them in all three Test matches at home to dent India's chances of qualifying for the final of the World Test Championship.

Then, it was off to Australia, where India had had successes on the last two tours. They began with a great win in Perth but then lost badly in Adelaide and showed great determination in the washed-out Gabba Test match. By the time the Melbourne Test came along, the Aussie media recognised that this team was not a pushover as some of the other countries that had toured Australia in recent times had been, and so, as is their wont, they began to find some incident or other to try and get under India's skin. Indian players since the mid-70s have known that the Aussie media is almost like an extension of their support staff, so they simply don't take them seriously, whatever they may have to say or write. Trying to get eyeballs is an old trick that has become even more intense with the advent of internet media, and peddling lies is an everyday thing.

The Melbourne Test brought to the fore one of the brightest young stars in Indian cricket, Nitish Kumar Reddy. He came to the attention of the Indian cricket fans with his performances for the Hyderabad franchise in the IPL, and while he had not done much at the first-class level, it's a credit to Ajit Agarkar and his fellow selectors to have seen enough to pitchfork him into the Test arena. In his debut Test match in Perth itself, it became evident that here was a cricketer who could read situations and play accordingly. With every subsequent Test match, that impression of a good 'cricketing head' on his shoulders began

to get stronger and stronger.

And in Melbourne, when India were looking down the barrel, he came through the fire with an outstanding century that has cemented his place in the team for a long time to come. Ever since the unavailability of Hardik Pandya for Test cricket, India has been looking for an all-rounder who can bowl medium pace and bat as well. Reddy's bowling is still a work in progress, but as a batter, he is definitely better than Pandya was around the same time.

India must also keep an eye on Venkatesh Iyer, who can be another fine all-rounder and is a left-hander to bat. His bowling too can do with some work, but he has played in England and can be a very good option to have there.

Finally, coming back to the penalty that was imposed on Virat Kohli. The match referee, Andy Pycroft, who was officiating in his 100th Test match, had earlier in the year also levied a penalty for a similar offence on (Ireland's) Josh Little. The maximum allowed under the offence is what Kohli got, so for the Aussie media to insinuate that he got off lightly is again a whole load of codswallop.

Belligerent knock: Nitish Reddy became only the second Indian batter to score a century at No. 8 or lower against Australia, emulating Wriddhiman Saha's feat of 117 in Ranchi in 2017. AFP

While the players and administrators in Australia have understood that times have changed and the veto power that England and Australia had is history, the media has still not come to terms with the fact that they no longer can influence World cricket.

Hopefully, they will wake up and smell the coffee soon.

Meanwhile, a Happy, Healthy and Peaceful 2025 to all Sportstar readers. May you have a sparkling sporting year.

The maximum penalty allowed under the offence is what Virat Kohli got, so for the Aussie media to insinuate that he got off lightly is again a whole load of codswallop.

From Gabba rain to MCG shine: The Tour rolls on!

India and Australia face off at the Gabba, where rain disrupts play, India earns a draw, and Ashwin announces retirement. Sportswriters **juggle emotions and deadlines** before heading to Melbourne for the iconic Boxing Day Test.

K. C. Vijaya Kumar
vijayakumar.kc@thehindu.co.in

There is a lazy charm to Brisbane. It is not too distant and a bit aloof like Perth. Not entirely pastoral like Adelaide. It does not have the rush and frenzy of Melbourne and Sydney. It is a city equally comfortable in its night pyjamas and the full suit.

In this city, India and Australia face off in the third Test at the Gabba. It is the venue where Rishabh Pant orchestrated a superb chase in 2021 to seal the then Border-Gavaskar Trophy. History cues echo positivity for the Indian unit, still nursing the scars of the previous defeat in the day-and-night Test in Adelaide. But the weather wavers between the grim and the sunny.

Hot chocolate and coffee fly off the shelves inside the press box. Later at night, the nearby German Club is sought by the tired scribes. Frothy brews in tall glasses are quaffed, the odd meatloaf is relished, and the ears strain for the odd snatches of German, but largely it is all about Aussie English and 'Howdya mate?'

Rain, rain go away: In Brisbane, the players spent more time in the pavilion watching the rain than actually playing. AP

Wagging tail

Steve Smith and Travis Head post centuries as Australia asserts itself in the first innings. India's reply, helmed by K.L. Rahul at the top and Ravindra Jadeja in the lower order, hits a rough spot as a follow-on has to be avoided. The last pair of Akash Deep and Jasprit Bumrah pulls off a miracle; the visitor's dressing room explodes with laughter and high-fives. There is something nerve-popping and equally laughter-inducing whenever the tail wags. But Akash and Bumrah have self-belief, and India survives for another day.

In a Test where the players spent more time in the pavilion watching the rain than actually playing, Australia gambles on its second innings in a bid to set a target; wickets tumble, a declaration is effected, and while the Indians make their tentative steps in their second dig, the rains have the last word. A draw is earned; India couldn't have asked for more, while Australia believes that it gained a moral victory.

Ashwin's googly

The third Test's climax ushers in a thrilling draw, and yes, cricket does throw up this oxymoron. But cynical sports writers now have to play detective. Word spreads that a big retirement is around the corner, and many eyes from the press box seek clues from the Indian dressing room. Television grabs sourced through social media are scoured. X, formerly Twitter, is abuzz.

One eye on the match and rains, and the other eye on whatever can be gleaned from the pavilion, the scribes discuss. Rohit Sharma? Virat Kohli? And then a visual is obtained: Kohli hugging R. Ashwin. Ah, so the legend from Chennai, then?

Once the wet dust settles on the match, Ashwin strides into the press conference with Rohit. The wait is over. "This will be the last day for me as an international cricketer," Ashwin says. He speaks a bit more, hugs Rohit, and leaves. The captain then deals with a flurry of questions about this massive departure. "It's a personal decision; I somehow convinced him to play at Adelaide," the skipper says.

The sports writers rush back to the press box. Match report, Ashwin tribute, reactions, and media interaction updates have to be filed. It is a mad rush; keyboards clatter and words leap. A gritty draw, a storied career's closure — surely it is all happening at the Gabba.

Melbourne beckons

The next morning is a blur. Early morning flights are a necessary evil, and bleary-eyed cricket writers hop onto a flight to Melbourne, the glorious city with its four seasons in one day feel. By the time the apartment is secured, the laundry done, and a late lunch tucked into, Ashwin is already in Chennai!

The Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) is one of cricket's spectacular venues. It is a theatre with an eternal vibe. As the road snakes past an ancient church, slips under a railway overbridge, and weaves past an expansive park redolent with eucalyptus fragrance, the stadium's floodlights shimmer into view.

Dennis Lillee and Shane Warne are all frozen as statues in their delivery stride. There is history in every corner. But the present beckons as the Indian team strides into nets. Located at a lower level, the training is watched by sports hacks and fans congregating at an upper level. This is a bird's-eye view with a difference.

Christmas Day is all about the family and fun, at least for the Australian cricketers. Pat Cummins and company, along with partners, wives, girlfriends, toddlers, are sprawled all over the MCG's turf. Debutant Sam Konstas soaks in the atmosphere.

The stage is set for the Boxing Day Test, an annual ritual Down Under.

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Bumrah's distinction

1 The number of Indian bowlers with 10 or more five-wicket hauls in Test matches outside Asia. Jasprit Bumrah's 6/76 in the first innings in Brisbane was the 10th of his Test career outside Asia. He now has the maximum five-wicket hauls for an Indian bowler outside Asia, going past Kapil Dev's tally of nine such hauls. Incidentally, only three other Asian bowlers have claimed more five-wicket hauls outside Asia.

Indian bowlers with most five-wicket hauls outside Asia

5-wkt hauls	Indian bowlers	Tests	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	Best	10wM
10	Jasprit Bumrah	31	147	20.27	44.74	6/27	0
9	Kapil Dev	45	155	30.78	71.21	8/106	0
8	B. S. Chandrasekhar	23	92	31.31	67.41	6/38	1
8	Anil Kumble	50	200	35.20	75.70	8/141	1
8	Ishant Sharma	50	171	32.49	60.15	7/74	1

Asian bowlers with most five-wicket hauls outside Asia

5w hauls	Asian bowlers	Tests	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	Best	10wM
15	**M. Muralitharan** (SL)	35	183	25.93	60.94	9/65	5
14	**Wasim Akram** (Pak)	45	198	24.80	57.09	7/119	4
11	**Imran Khan** (Pak)	37	157	26.11	60.10	7/40	3
10	**Jasprit Bumrah** (Ind)	31	147	20.27	44.74	6/27	0
9	**Kapil Dev** (Ind)	45	155	30.78	71.21	8/106	0

India's Jasprit Bumrah. AP

3 The number of Indian players with 150+ wicket-keeping dismissals in Test cricket. In the first innings of the Brisbane Test match, Rishabh Pant became the latest to claim 150 dismissals (135ct+15st) when he took the catch of Usman Khawaja off Jasprit Bumrah. The others ahead of him are M. S. Dhoni (294 dismissals) and Syed Kirmani (198). Pant is now the quickest among these keepers to reach this landmark, in just 41 Tests. Dhoni and Kirmani needed 48 Tests and 64 Tests, respectively. Pant is the 34th keeper in Test cricket to claim 150 or more dismissals.

Leading Indian wicket-keepers in Test cricket with most dismissals (Ct+St)

Keeper	Mts	Inns	Dism	Ct	St	Dism/inns	Tests to reach (dismissals)	
							100	150
M. S. Dhoni	90	166	**294**	256	38	1.77	36	48
Syed Kirmani	88	151	**198**	160	38	1.31	42	64
Rishabh Pant	41	81	**158**	143	15	1.95	26	41
Kiran More	49	90	**130**	110	20	1.44	39	–
Nayan Mongia	44	77	**107**	99	8	1.39	41	–
Wriddiman Saha	40	76	**104**	92	12	1.37	36	–

India's Rishabh Pant. AFP

11 The number of times Josh Hazlewood has dismissed Virat Kohli in international cricket. During the first innings of the Brisbane Test, Hazlewood dismissed Kohli for the 11th time, going level with New Zealand's fast bowler Tim Southee for most dismissals against the Indian batter.

Nemeses of Virat Kohli in international cricket

Wkts	Bowler	For	Bowling Style	Tests	ODI	T20Is
11	Tim Southee	New Zealand	RFM	3	7	1
11	Josh Hazlewood	Australia	RFM	5	5	1
10	James Anderson	England	RFM	6	3	1
10	Moeen Ali	England	ROB	6	3	1
9	Ben Stokes	England	RFM	6	3	0
9	Adil Rashid	England	RLB	4	3	2

8 } The number of Test centuries registered by Australia's Steve Smith after the opponent put his side in to bat. This is now the maximum number of three-figure scores any Test batter has made under these circumstances. South African Jacques Kallis held the previous record of seven such centuries.

Most Test centuries by a player in the first innings of a Test match after being sent in to bat by the opponent

100s	Batter (for)	Inns	HS	50s	Period
8	**Steve Smith** (Aus)	20	199	1	2010-2024+
7	**Jacques Kallis** (SAf)	30	224	2	1997-2012
6	**Brendon McCullum** (NZ)	28	224	9	2004-2016
5	**Sachin Tendulkar** (Ind)	21	155	4	1993-2005
5	**Justin Langer** (Aus)	14	191	2	1993-2005
5	**Kane Williamson** (NZ)	27	251	6	2011-2024+

+ Test career in progress

10 } The number of Test centuries Steve Smith has against India. The Brisbane century has taken his tally on a par with England's Joe Root, the most registered by any opponent batter against India. Smith was playing his 22nd Test and 41 innings, while Root took much longer when he became the first to reach this record in his 29th Test and 52nd innings against India in Ranchi on 23 February this year.

Most Test centuries by batters against India

100s	Batter (for)	Mts	Inns	Runs	Ave.	HS	50s	90s
10	**Joe Root** (Eng)	30	55	2846	58.08	218	11	0
10	**Steve Smith** (Aus)	22	42	2166	60.17	192	5	1
8	**Garry Sobers** (WI)	18	30	1920	83.48	198	7	2
8	**Viv Richards** (WI)	28	41	1927	50.71	192*	7	0
8	**Ricky Ponting** (Aus)	29	51	2555	54.36	257	12	0

Note: six other players (Everton Weekes, WI; Clive Lloyd, WI; Shivnarine Chanderpaul, WI; Jacques Kallis, SA; Michael Clarke, Aus; Alistair Cook, Eng) have seven Test centuries each against India.

Australia's Steve Smith. AFP

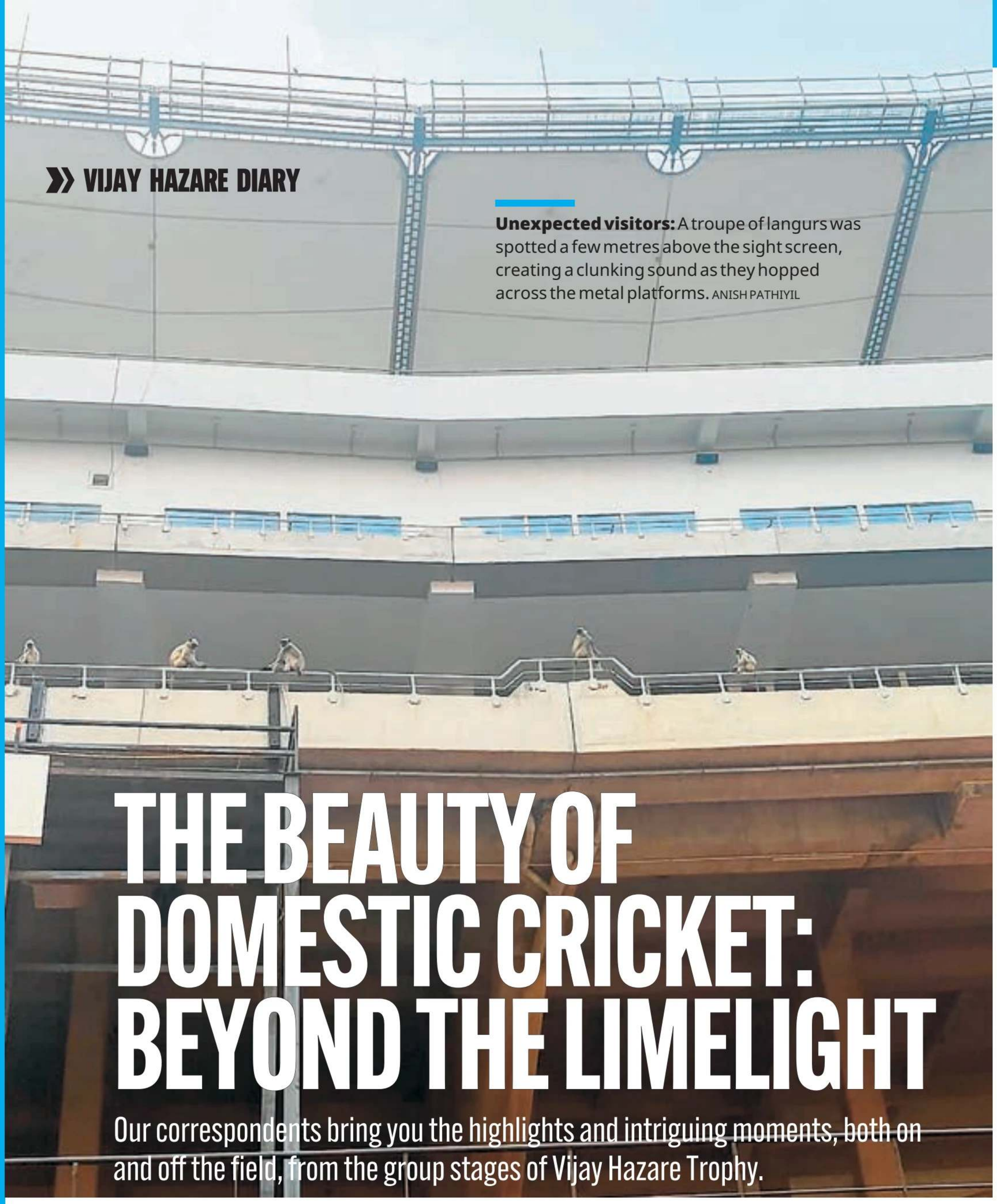
1 } The number of Test batters who have registered 10 or more three-figure scores against two opponents. Steve Smith is the only one to do it against two opponents in Test cricket history. Smith also achieved this against England, against whom he has 12 Test centuries. Nine elite batters, led by the indomitable Aussie, Don Bradman, with 19 Test centuries against England, have 10 or more centuries against a Test opponent, and these 10 instances are listed below.

Batters with 10 or more Test centuries against a single opponent

Batter (For)	Against	100s	Span	Tests	Inns
Don Bradman (Aus)	England	**19**	1928 to 1948	36	63
Sunil Gavaskar (Ind)	West Indies	**13**	1971 to 1983	27	48
Jack Hobbs (Eng)	Australia	**12**	1908 to 1930	40	71
Steve Smith (Aus)	England	**12**	2010 to 2023	37	66
Sachin Tendulkar (Ind)	Australia	**11**	1991 to 2013	39	74
Gary Sobers (WI)	England	**10**	1954 to 1974	36	61
Steve Waugh (Aus)	England	**10**	1986 to 2003	46	73
Kumar Sangakkara (SL)	Pakistan	**10**	2002 to 2015	23	45
Joe Root (Eng)	India	**10**	2012 to 2024+	30	55
Steve Smith (Aus)	India	**10**	2013 to 2024+	22	42

+ Career in progress

All records are correct and updated until the end of the Brisbane Test, on 18 December 2024.



Unexpected visitors: A troupe of langurs was spotted a few metres above the sight screen, creating a clunking sound as they hopped across the metal platforms. ANISH PATHIYIL

THE BEAUTY OF DOMESTIC CRICKET: BEYOND THE LIMELIGHT

Our correspondents bring you the highlights and intriguing moments, both on and off the field, from the group stages of Vijay Hazare Trophy.

A domestic cricket game in the country often unfolds as a scene of tranquillity, far removed from the clamour of bouncing franchise team supporters and loud DJs blaring out their mixtapes. Even the 1,32,000-seater Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad lay in all its barrenness during the Vijay Hazare Trophy encounter between Karnataka and Pondicherry.

Despite the absence of spectators in the stands, some unexpected visitors made an appearance at the game. A troupe of langurs was spotted a few metres above the sight screen, creating a clunking sound as they hopped across the metal platforms erected for the broadcast cameras. They didn't stick around for the cricket to start, seemingly content with watching the players warm up before climbing their way above the third umpire's box and vanishing into the distance.

In contrast, the ADSA Railway Ground, where Mumbai faced Punjab, was a stark departure from

the emptiness and silence of other venues. Nestled between a railway station and a national highway, with the High-Speed Rail Corporation building on one side, the ground offered quite the view.

The Punjab team's exuberant cheers after every wicket were punctuated by the distant blare of a car horn from vehicles descending the flyover, or occasionally by the louder, coarser horn of a goods train.

Early morning joggers in the area spotted a few familiar faces on the ground and quickly rang up their friends. In no time, a swarm of people had gathered at the periphery, shouting "Surya!" and "Shreyas!"

Despite the absence of Indian internationals, the crowd swelled, and by noon, there weren't enough plastic chairs to accommodate everyone. This led to an impromptu and intense game of musical chairs, with fans even trusting IPL scouts to save their seats during washroom breaks! If only they knew.

Anish Pathiyil

THE VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY REMAINS ONE OF THE PRIMARY PLATFORMS FOR YOUNG TALENTS TO CATCH THE ATTENTION OF NATIONAL SELECTORS

Team player: India and Delhi pacer Ishant Sharma was spotted carrying drinks during a Vijay Hazare Trophy match against Bihar. V. V. SUBRAHMANYAM

For the love of cricket

The timing of the Vijay Hazare Trophy, the national One-Day cricket championship, has often been a subject of debate in recent years due to the way it is scheduled during the season. Nevertheless, the championship remains one of the primary platforms for young talents to catch the attention of national selectors, which motivates these players to excel alongside the stalwarts of Indian cricket. This is despite the IPL mega auction taking place just a few weeks before the Vijay Hazare Trophy began in early December.

Franchises ensured that big names like Ishant Sharma and Venkatesh Iyer participated in the tournament, delighting fans. Even when rested, these players showed their commitment. Ishant, recovering from an injury, was seen offering valuable tips to young Delhi bowlers during a match against Bihar. Similarly, Venkatesh Iyer, who missed a match due to a back spasm, carried drinks with a smile, embracing the responsibility with enthusiasm. These moments highlighted the spirit of mentorship and teamwork in cricket.The presence of established players like Delhi pacer Navdeep Saini, who approached the game with notable seriousness, served as an important lesson for others in the team. Such gestures, whether sharing advice or demonstrating professionalism, can significantly influence the career trajectories of emerging players in the long term.

While cricketers were busy showcasing their talent — some aiming to secure their places, others attempting comebacks — individuals like former India left-arm spinner S. L. Venkatapathi Raju and Karnataka cricketer K. P. Appanna were seen scouting talent for Delhi Capitals, ensuring the future of Indian cricket remains bright.

V. V. Subrahmanyam

FOR MORE STORIES

« I always emphasise that you should be prepared to fail because if you're not ready for that possibility, you've already set yourself up for failure »

DEANDRA DOTTIN

Shayan Acharya
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Long before she became a superstar in women's cricket, Deandra Dottin excelled in athletics, winning medals for Barbados in the CARIFTA Games — the annual athletics competition established by the Caribbean Free Trade Association.

A prominent javelin thrower who also participated in the shot put, Dottin embraces her self-proclaimed nickname 'World Boss,' which motivates her to deliver stellar performances, particularly on the cricket pitch.

Dottin, a veteran of 146 Women's ODIs and 135 T20Is, was the first woman to score a T20I century, achieving the feat in just 38 balls against South Africa during the 2010 Women's T20 World Cup — a record that remains unbeaten.

On the recent West Indies tour of India, Dottin showcased flashes of brilliance despite her team losing both the T20I and ODI series.

Her visit to India also marked a major career highlight, as she was bought by Gujarat Giants for Rs 1.70 crore, making her the most expensive overseas player in this year's Women's Premier League (WPL) auction.

Dottin's WPL journey has been eventful — she was controversially released by Gujarat in the inaugural season, went unsold last year, but attracted a fierce bidding war this time. Gujarat eventually re-acquired her services.

Speaking to *Sportstar* in Vadodara, Dottin reflected on her journey, her return from retirement, and the road ahead.

You've recently come out of retirement to resume your international career with the West Indies. What has the experience been like for you so far?

The journey has been really good. I have been doing a lot of work behind the scenes, even before I came back, so that as soon as I hit the ground running, it would be a lot easier for me. I would be able to produce what I am accustomed to producing.

What led to your sudden retirement in 2022? Do you have any regrets about having made that decision?

I really don't talk about it, but what happened in the past and the decision I made back then have had a great impact on my cricket now. It was a really good choice at the time because I've learnt a lot. I've been able to catch up on many things and realise things I thought weren't a problem, which actually were. So, that break actually did something for me.

Would you say it was an emotional call?

I do not think so. I think everything happens for a reason. If it was not supposed to happen that way, then it would not have. You live and you learn. Things do happen. It is just how you pick up and go about it.

Windfall: Deandra Dottin was acquired by Gujarat Giants for a staggering Rs 1.7 crore, nearly triple her initial price of Rs 60 lakh at the WPL's inaugural auction in February 2023. VIJAY SONEJI

Trailblazer: Dottin became the first woman to score a century in T20Is during a World T20 match against South Africa in 2010. EMMANUAL YOGINI

As a senior player, how do you mentor and support the younger players in the team?

The main message I try to share is the importance of being fearless. I always emphasise that you should be prepared to fail because if you're not ready for that possibility, you've already set yourself up for failure. When you're prepared to fail, the impact of failure won't feel as overwhelming. I also encourage them to work hard and approach the game with fearlessness. Many of them are determined, eager to learn, and aspire to play in franchise leagues. I always try to motivate them, reminding them to focus on what they can control and leave the rest in God's hands.

Despite a fine blend of youth and experience, the West Indies has been erratic in its performances. Where is it lacking?

WHAT WE HAVE IS TALENT AND POTENTIAL. YOU CAN ONLY GO SO FAR WITH TALENT AND POTENTIAL, BUT IF YOU CAN BE CONSISTENT, YOU WILL GO EVEN FURTHER

I definitely think it's about consistency. We need to be more consistent. I believe we have the experience. Not everyone may be highly experienced, but there are enough players around to help and support the younger ones who are willing to learn. What we have is talent and potential. But you can only go so far with talent and potential. If you can be consistent, you will go even further. I think that is what we are lacking, and it's something we are actively working on.

What lessons did the team take away from the narrow semifinal loss to New Zealand in the T20 World Cup?

We were all on the same page and determined to win. We played really good cricket but it just wasn't our day and we lost narrowly.

However, I also know that more T20 World Cups are coming up, so we can definitely make a strong comeback.

In the Women's Premier League auction this year, you were roped in for a whopping Rs 1.70 crore. From withdrawing in 2023 and going unsold in 2024, you have come a long way in the franchise league...

Yeah, life has come full circle. I think everything happens for a reason. So, I was actually supposed to be in the 2025 WPL this time, and I will be there to showcase my talents and what I do best. It is actually good to play in a franchise league because you always get that experience.

To play alongside players from different teams like India, a couple of Australians, and others, you get to learn more of other players' personalities and how they go about their games as well.

When you share the dressing room with international players from around the world, what do you focus on?

We actually learn a lot from other players because you may not have the setup that they have, but you make use of what you have in order to match up or probably be better. In the process, you do learn a lot. Some of them play shots differently, whereas you can take a leaf out of their style of play and how they go about their game as well. But it is not going to be exactly the same. It is just taking an example of their performance and seeing if you actually fit in and see if it works for you.

What are the targets that you have set for the WPL?

I have played in that tournament (Women's T20 Challenge) in India before. So, I do not think it is going to be that much different. It will probably be just playing in a different State or a few venues. But it is just a

'World Boss' is back: Dottin, fresh out of international retirement, is coming off a run to the T20 World Cup semifinal with West Indies and the WBBL title with Melbourne Renegades. GETTY IMAGES

matter of hitting the ground, assessing it very quickly and trying to gain some quick runs for the job.

Who motivates you during tough times?

I actually try to go back to the basics, and I do pray a lot. So, I just try to be calm and patient and just control what I can. I just pray to God to give me health and strength, and he will do the rest.

Should women's cricket also have a World Test Championship to promote the longer format?

I think that, no matter the format, the crowd loves cricket. However, I also believe that Test cricket offers a valuable experience. Many girls primarily play 50-over matches and T20s but want the opportunity to experience Test cricket. I am one of those who have always wanted to play Test cricket, to experience the long days and understand what it entails.

Test cricket is a unique form of the game that helps develop patience. While T20 is fast-paced, having Test cricket around is really beneficial. Even playing one-off games in the format provides a great experience.

How do you plan to prepare for the ODI World Cup in India next year, and how do you adapt to different formats as a senior player?

I think the preparation started with this series. We had a good opportunity to assess the conditions, become familiar with them, and understand how they might play next year.

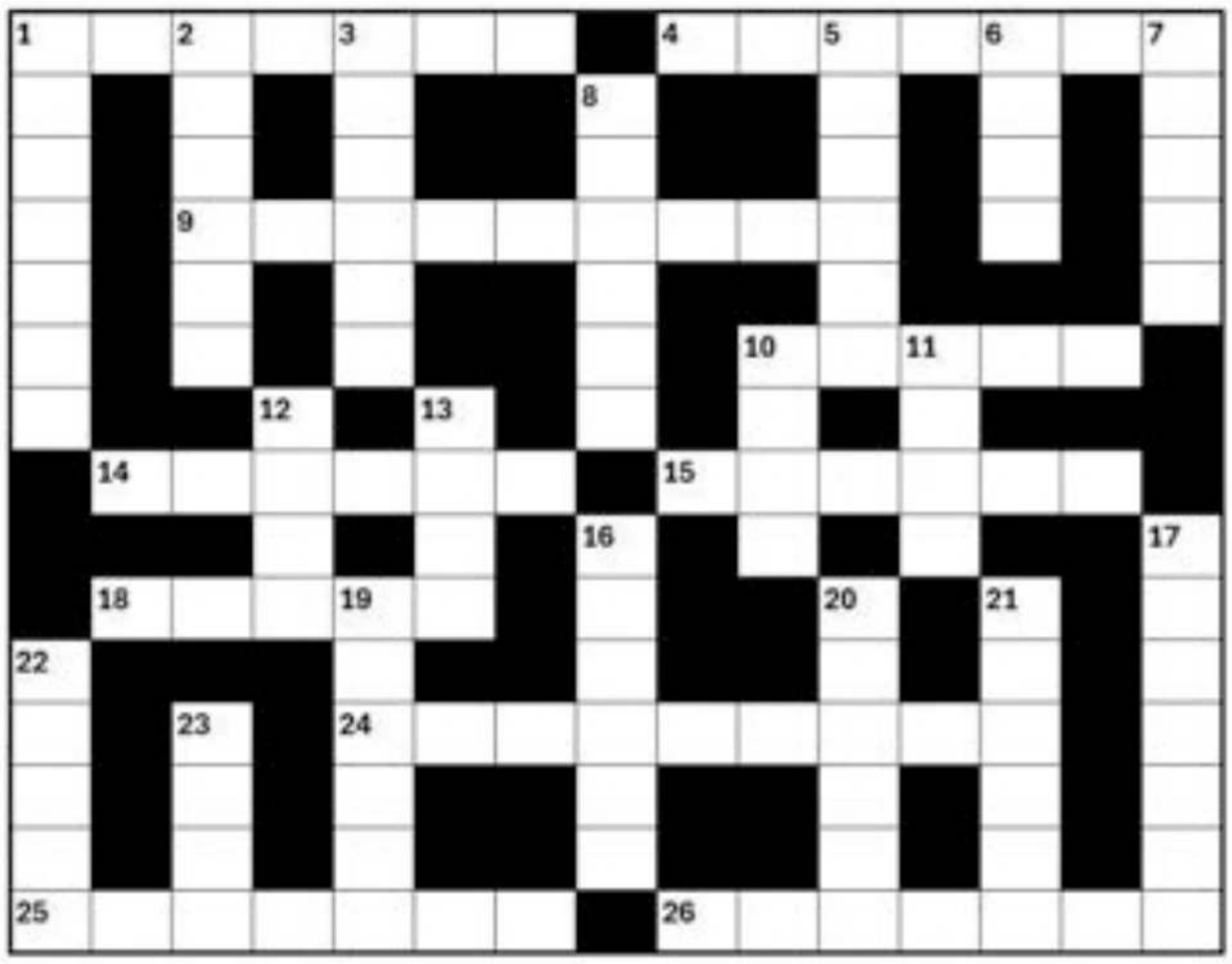
There is still some time, but at least we now have an idea and know who we are up against. Preparation is the main focus.

I always try to separate myself, whether it is fitness, bowling, or batting skills. I focus on taking one step at a time with what I plan to do in order to stay more focused and prepared.

While Chris Gayle is the 'Universe Boss,' you call yourself the 'World Boss.' Does the tag motivate you when you take to the field?

I enjoy that name. I gave it to myself because I was into athletics (javelin throw and shot put) before taking up cricket, and I was doing well there too — making and breaking records. That's how I earned the name. When I took up cricket, I started where I had left off in athletics, and throughout my career, I have enjoyed this tag.

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who won the player of the match award in the third Test between New Zealand and England in Hamilton? (7)

4 Which State team won the badminton senior National championship held recently? (7)

9 Who won the player of the series award in the T20I series between Sri Lanka and New Zealand in November 2024? (9)

10 Who top-scored for the West Indies with his maiden hundred in the third ODI versus England in Bridgetown in November 2024 ? (5)

14 Who scored an unbeaten hundred on his ODI debut and won player of the match award, too, in the third ODI between West Indies and Bangladesh in Basseterre in December 2024? (6)

15 Who was one of two players who were recently involved in the highest-ever partnership for any wicket in Ranji Trophy history? (6)

18 & Down 20 Which South African all-rounder scored his maiden Test century in the second Test against Bangladesh in Chattogram? (5,6)

25 Who recently joined Sir Donald Bradman as the third-fastest player to reach 1000 Test runs and also became the first player to score a half-century or more in each of first eight Tests since debut? (7)

26 Who scored a fifty and picked up five wickets in the third women's ODI between Australia and India at the WACA in December 2024? (7)

DOWN

1 & Across 24 Who has been ranked world No. 1 in the official golf rankings for more than 100 weeks? He also recently won the prestigious Hero World Challenge held in December 2024. (7,9)

2 Which Australian opener was dropped for the last two Test matches versus India in the ongoing series Down Under? (6)

3 Which city hosted the prestigious Hero World Challenge golf tournament? (6)

5 Who won the player of the series award in the recently-concluded Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy? (6)

6 Name the Australian wicket-keeper in the ongoing Test series versus India? (4)

7 Who won the WTA player of the year award for 2024? (5)

8 What is the name of the PKL team from Gujarat? (6)

10 Who scored most runs in the recently-held Test series between New Zealand and England? (4)

11 Who won the player of the match award in the first ODI between South Africa and Pakistan in Paarl in December 2024? (4)

12 Which former Russian woman tennis player reached a career high ranking of world No. 8 without winning even one singles title? (4)

13 Who was the match referee in the recently-concluded Test series between New Zealand and England? (4)

16 Who won the player of the series award in the recent three-match T20I series between West Indies and Bangladesh? (6)

17 Who took most wickets in the T20I series between Australia and Pakistan recently? (7)

19 In which city MotoGP of the Americas was held in April 2024? (6)

21 Who won the MotoGP Riders' World championship in 2024? (6)

22 Who won the player of the series award in the recently-concluded Test series between New Zealand and England? (5)

23 Who scored two hundreds in the three-match ODI series held recently between South Africa and Pakistan? (4)

GETTY IMAGES

South Africa qualifies for maiden WTC final

1 Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen put up a **crucial ninth-wicket stand** to see the Proteas through.

South Africa beat Pakistan in a nail-biting contest to take the lead in the two-match Test series and confirm its spot in the World Test Championship (WTC) 2023-25 final, set to take place in June. With a challenging target of 148 to win, South Africa found itself struggling at 99 for eight before lunch as Mohammad Abbas ripped through the batting line-up.

Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen, who took six wickets in the second innings, put up a crucial ninth-wicket stand to score the remaining 51 runs and help South Africa qualify for its maiden WTC final.

AP

2

England Test captain Ben Stokes has been ruled out of the upcoming Champions Trophy and the preceding white-ball tour of India. The all-rounder was not included in the ODI squads after suffering a left hamstring injury during the third Test between England and New Zealand. Jos Buttler will retain the captaincy of the two white-ball teams despite England faltering in the 50-over and T20 World Cups. The India series and Champions Trophy will mark England's first limited-overs tour and tournament under coach Brendon McCullum.

Afghanistan beat Zimbabwe to clinch the three-match ODI series 2-0. The first match was reduced to a 28-over-per-side contest but was eventually called off due to incessant rain. Afghanistan took the lead after registering its biggest win in ODIs — by 232 runs — in the second game. Chasing 287, Zimbabwe was bundled out for 54, its joint fourth-lowest total in the format, with A.M. Ghazanfar **(right)** and Naveed Zadran picking up three wickets each. The teenage spinner Ghazanfar shone again by taking a fifer in the final game to help Afghanistan win by eight wickets and claim the series 2-0.

3

GETTY IMAGES

INDIAN CRICKET TEAM@INSTAGRAM

4

India clinched the inaugural Women's Under-19 Asia Cup after beating Bangladesh by 41 runs in the final. The Niki Prasad-led side was unbeaten in the tournament, winning three games ahead of the summit clash. Gongadi Trisha, a key player in India's U-19 Women's T20 World Cup win last year, scored a half-century in the final, helping the team post 117 for seven. However, Bangladesh did not have the best of starts, with Sonam Yadav and Parunika Sisodia picking up two wickets each, and Aayushi Shukla taking three to guide India to the title.

AP

5

Pakistan completed a historic 3-0 ODI series clean sweep against South Africa to become the first team to whitewash the Proteas in their backyard in bilateral ODIs. The opening game saw Pakistan's young opener, Saim Ayub **(above)**, chalk up a classy century to lead his team to a closely fought three-wicket win, and the visitor secured the series triumph with an 81-run win in the second match, courtesy of a high-quality four-wicket haul by Shaheen Shah Afridi. The 22-year-old Ayub delivered for Pakistan again in the final ODI, hitting a 94-ball 101 in a rain-reduced match to win it for Pakistan by 36 runs under the DLS method.

AP

6

Bangladesh thrashed the West Indies 3-0 to register its first clean sweep in a T20I series in nearly two years. The visitor bounced back after a humiliating 3-0 defeat in the ODI series and won the opener by a narrow seven-run margin, courtesy of a four-fer by Mahedi Hasan. The low-scoring second game saw West Indies restrict Bangladesh to 129 for seven, but Taskin Ahmed's three-wicket haul and two scalps apiece for Hasan, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, and Rishad Hossain helped dismantle the host for 102. In the third and final match, Bangladesh was powered to a total of 189 thanks to Jaker Ali's **(above)** unbeaten 72, while West Indies fell short in the chase, folding for 109.

GETTY IMAGES

7

Australia Women dominated the three-match ODI series against New Zealand, defeating the White Ferns 2-0. After the opening match was abandoned without a ball being bowled, Australia posted 291 for seven in a rain-affected second game, with Annabel Sutherland **(above)** scoring a century. New Zealand managed only 122 for five before play was called off, handing the visitor a 65-run win by the DLS method. In the final game, Australia set a target of 291, thanks to an 88-run opening partnership and Ashleigh Gardner's brisk half-century. Suzie Bates led New Zealand's charge with a fighting fifty, but it went in vain as Australia restricted the host to 215 to secure the series win.

Challenges ahead, but hope intact

This is the **first time** an exclusive league for women has found a place in the Hockey India League framework.

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The Women's Hockey India League (HIL-W) would be hopeful that the bumpy ride from the garage to the start line fades into a distant memory before lights-out at the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Munda Astro Turf Stadium in Ranchi on January 12.

A reduced number of teams, a lack of adequate cash, and the ever-dwindling count of foreign players may have dealt quite the damage, but Hockey India has not only stayed brave in its wake but also remained committed to the task at hand.

This is the first time an exclusive league for women has found a place in the HIL framework. And frankly, it's been a long time coming. When the high of an unprecedented fourth-place finish at Tokyo 2020 melted into the harrowing lows of non-selection for the Paris Olympics, the sense of disappointment was palpable. It was evident that although India had a truckload of talent, someone or something needed to switch gears and steer the vehicle in the right direction.

And maybe, the introduction of HIL-W answers that call by providing a crucial platform for female athletes. What it has surely done already is it has paved the way for a more inclusive future of Indian hockey, with the league running simultaneously alongside the reinstituted men's tournament in Rourkela.

"A few years after I started playing hockey, the men's HIL started. And that brought about a revolution in the men's game. We saw first-hand how the style of play and mentality of the boys changed post its introduction. Added to that, a lot of players got the chance to showcase their skills. I am expecting the same to happen to us now that we have got a stage to perform on. We will be

Top buy: Indian defender Udita became the most expensive player at the Women's Hockey India League auction. Known for her solid defence and attacking versatility, she brings immense value to Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers. RV MOORTHY

In its efforts to popularise the sport across the country, Hockey India has decided to forego the revenue it would have generated from ticket sales by making entry across the men's and women's competitions free for all.

learning a lot since it is the first time that a league of this scale is being organised," says Ishika Chaudhary, Odisha Warriors (ODWA) defender and the first player to have been sold at the women's auction for Rs 16 lakh.

The 'scale' Ishika mentions could have been grander had the plans of including two more teams not been deferred until the next season. After the closure of certain legal proceedings, it was announced that the Hyderabad Toofans and a franchise of the BC Jindal Group, Mumbai, will be invited to the party only in 2025–26.

While the official statement may have been the harbinger of good news for the competitive nature of what is now a four-team league, it might make life difficult for the new franchises, who would have to string together a squad from a depleted pool.

Presently, 96 players have been slotted into the Delhi SG Pipers (DSGP), JSW Soorma Hockey Club

HIL DID MISS A FAIR DEAL BY NOT ONBOARDING A PRIVATE BROADCAST PARTNER AHEAD OF THE AUCTION, BUT EVENTUALLY, THE MULTILINGUAL TELECAST RIGHTS WERE SOLD TO THE SONY SPORTS NETWORK ON DECEMBER 13

Set the ball rolling: Ishika Chaudhary was the first player to be picked during the Hockey India League 2024-25 women's auction, with Odisha Warriors acquiring her services for Rs 16 lakh. R. V. MOORTHY

(JSHC), Shrachi Rahr Bengal Tigers (SRBT) and the Warriors. These four franchises will compete in a round-robin format, playing each other twice in the pool stage that continues until 24 January. The top two teams on the leaderboard will then clash in the finale on 26 January.

The inclusion of foreign players adds to the star value of HIL-W, but the competition has witnessed a slew of pull-outs ahead of the upcoming iteration. As many as eight foreign players have backed out, including the Dutch duo of Olympic, World and European champion Xan Gerdien de Waard and triple Olympic champion Eva Drummond, Great Britain's Commonwealth Games 2022 gold medallist Anna Toman and her compatriot and double Olympic medallist Giselle Anne Ansley, among others.

The reasons cited for the mass exodus range from financial shortcomings and injury

Dutch drag-flicker Yibbi Jansen, Paris Olympics gold medallist and top scorer, was signed by Odisha Warriors for Rs 29 lakh, becoming the second most expensive player. GETTY IMAGES

rehabilitation breaks to not wanting to be away from family during the holiday season and other contractual nitty-gritty. *Sportstar* has learned that a few players had been insisting on signing a three-year agreement with the teams, but in vain.

Four of the eight withdrawals were from the SRBT outfit. India defender Udita, whose services were acquired by the Tigers for a record Rs 32 lakh, said, "Many international players have decided not to play after the auction. It would be wonderful if the foreigners could join us in full strength ahead of the next edition. They can help us develop our game better. I am sure things will change with the two new teams coming in next season," she said.

Having not lost any of its foreign players (yet), Odisha seemingly has the strongest squad on paper. But a lot of its momentum would hinge on the formidable Yibbi Jansen, the highest goalscorer and gold medallist at Paris 2024. The presence of Janneke Schopman in the backroom rounds the squad up. There won't be many who would be more acquainted with the nub of Indian hockey than the Dutch boss. She even managed to pick up the core of the junior Indian team she had guided to a first-ever Asia Cup in 2023.

"There's a good mix of experience and youth, and that is why we happen to be the favourite. But we have to understand now there is pressure to perform, and we have to live up to the expectations. Seniors like Grace di (Deep Grace Ekka) are returning, although she has retired from the international circuit (January 2024), and that makes me excited for the days ahead," Ishika said.

Incidentally, there were a number of prominent faces who did not get even as much as a sniff from the auction table. This saw the Hockey India League Governing Committee jump into action mid-auction to reduce the base price of unsold athletes of the Indian senior and junior women's teams to Rs 2 lakh. The decision, Hockey India said, had come in response to a collective appeal from the players.

Among the players who were eventually roped in, there was a consensus regarding the salary not being enough. "Yes, the money and budget are not that great as of now, but I am sure this league is going to touch new highs pretty soon," Pipers' Sangita Kumari had said despite being among the top five of the most expensive bids placed at the auction. She had been snapped up for Rs 22 lakh.

HIL did miss a fair deal by not onboarding a private broadcast partner ahead of the auction, but eventually, the multilingual telecast rights were sold to the Sony Sports Network on December 13. In its efforts to popularise the sport across the country, Hockey India has also decided to forego the revenue it would have generated from ticket sales by making entry across the men's and women's competitions free for all.

Whether the move indeed tempts Ranchi denizens to fill the 5,000 seats at the arena remains to be seen.

Haryana Steelers claims maiden title, but PKL's real winner is competitiveness

Before the Pune leg, a mere six points separated the second and seventh-placed teams, making this edition's league stage **one of the closest** in PKL history.

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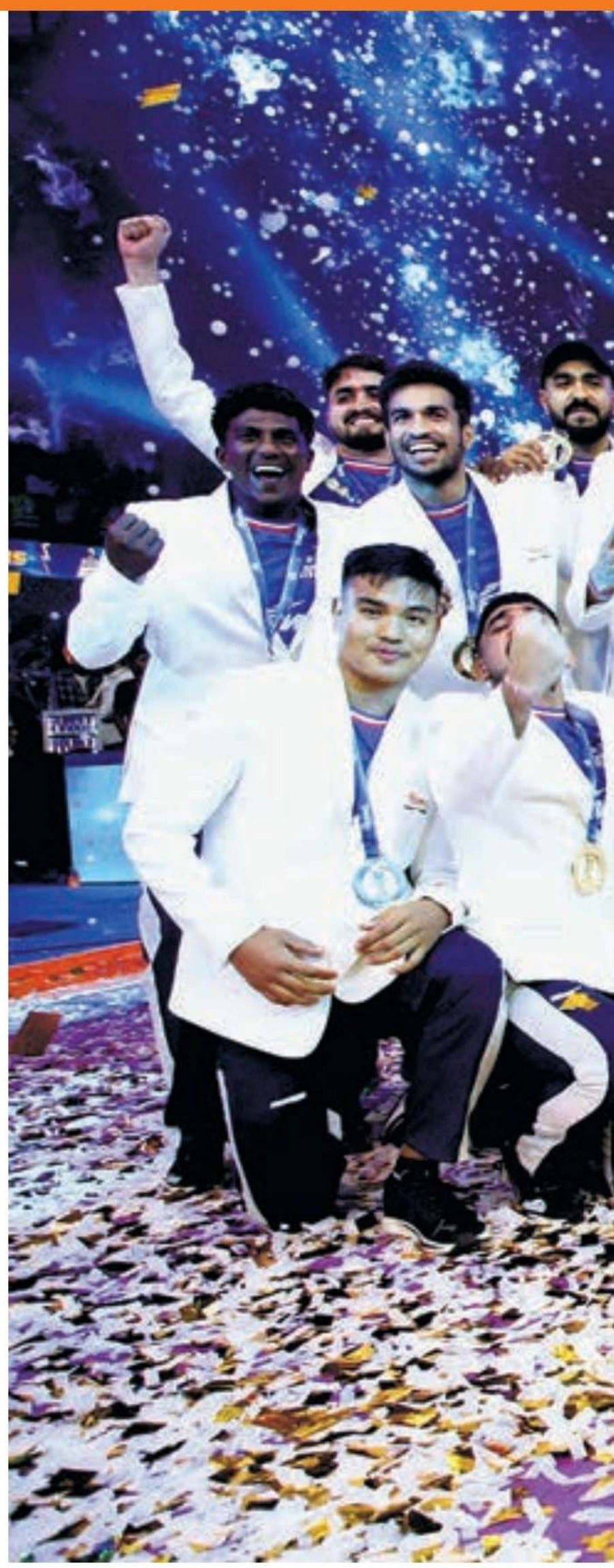

Nine months after losing the Pro Kabaddi League 10 final to Puneri Paltan, the Haryana Steelers finally got its hands on the coveted trophy by defeating the Patna Pirates in the season 11 summit clash in Pune.

The packed Shree Shiv Chhatrapati Sports Complex in Balewadi roared as coach Manpreet Singh guided the Steelers to their maiden PKL title. This victory stands as a testament to the resounding success of a system dedicated to fostering athletic excellence through cutting-edge technology and unwavering support, year after year.

The JSW-owned team's triumph continues the recent trend in the PKL, where the league topper emerges as champion. It also underscores the team's consistency and desire to improve each season. The Steelers retained much of their squad from the previous season and added dynamic all-rounder Mohammadreza Chiyaneh Shadloui to their playing seven. Chiyaneh, who was with Paltan last season, not only retained his title as the best defender but also claimed the MVP award for his all-round performance.

A core of homegrown talent, including Vinay, Rahul Sethpal, Shivam Patare, Sanjay Dhull, and skipper Jaideep Dahiya – all nurtured within the Steelers' system – brought a unique cohesion to their play.

Known for their defensive solidity, the Steelers combined aggression and precision in both defence and attack this season.

"This team has grown together over the last few years. The NYP (New Young Players) programme has been our priority. Most of our players are scouted and developed by us. Jaideep (Dahiya) joined us as an NYP four years ago, and now he's our title-winning captain. IIS (Inspire Institute of Sport) also plays a crucial role in helping players reach their full potential. It provides them with access to world-class training facilities, sports science expertise, and comprehensive support in nutrition and medicine," Steelers' CEO Divyanshu Singh told Sportstar after the final.

This victory also marks a significant milestone for Manpreet, who had previously experienced heartbreak in three PKL finals as a coach with both Gujarat Giants (formerly Gujarat Fortune Giants) and the Steelers. Finally, the former Indian all-rounder achieved victory against a team he once captained to a PKL title in

Crowning moment: Haryana Steelers won PKL 11 after defeating Patna Pirates 32-23 in the final. PKL

Perennial bridesmaid, not anymore: Manpreet Singh (R), who had previously finished runner-up as a coach on three occasions, finally savoured victory in his fourth final, guiding the Haryana Steelers to its maiden PKL championship. PKL

Season Three.

Curious case of Patna Pirates

While the Pirates, with three titles to their name, failed in their bid for a fourth championship, their presence in the final reflects the league's growing success in developing a new generation of talented players.

Led by former Indian Armed Forces coach Narender Redhu, the Pirates refrained from acquiring big names at the auction, instead focusing on scouted talent. Despite being underestimated early on, the team exceeded expectations, comfortably making the playoffs and reaching the final.

The young raiding duo of Devank Dalal – in his third PKL season – and Ayan Lohchab – featuring in his maiden campaign – captivated audiences and pundits alike. Devank became only the third raider in PKL history to accumulate over 300 raid points in a single season.

However, Redhu was immediately dismissed following the team's failure to win the trophy, a stark reminder of the cutthroat nature of franchise leagues.

Edge-of-your-seat encounters

This season saw a marked increase in competitiveness, with 11 of the 137 matches ending in a draw, and over 40 matches decided in the final minute, including both semifinals.

Before the Pune leg, only six points separated the second and seventh-placed teams in the league table. Indeed, the league stage of this edition was one of the closest in PKL history, with only one side assured of playoff qualification before the final matches.

One reason for this renewed competitiveness was the league's decision to abandon the original 12-city caravan format in favour of a three-city model for Season 11. This reduced travel for players and

The league's international aspirations were highlighted by the 'PKL Melbourne Raid', an exhibition event held in Australia during the playoff rest day.

allowed them to focus more on their game and recovery.

"We wanted to make it work as efficiently as possible, particularly to reduce travel time and fatigue for the squads. Whatever we do should resonate with as many fans as possible, so we strategically chose three locations that were significant for all 12 PKL teams," said PKL commissioner Anupam Goswami after the Hyderabad leg.

Challenges for teams

Three teams struggled this season. Bengaluru Bulls, once a trailblazer in the league, looked a shadow of its former self. Despite having the league's most successful player, Pardeep Narwal, the team managed only two wins from 22 matches and finished at the bottom of the table. Long-serving coach Randhir Singh Sehrawat was left searching for answers.

Bengal Warriorz and Gujarat Giants also endured disappointing campaigns, with the latter parting ways with coach Ram Maher Singh after the league stage.

Standout performers: The young Patna Pirates raiding duo of Ayan Lohchab (L) and Devank Dalal (R) captivated audiences and pundits alike. PKL

Telugu Titans, which had finished at the bottom for three consecutive seasons, showed remarkable fighting spirit. Despite losing star raider and Indian captain Pawan Sehrawat to injury, seasoned campaigner Vijay Malik stepped up, leading the team to the verge of playoff qualification. However, the Krishan Kumar Hooda-coached side fell short of the top six.

Defending champion Puneri Paltan, which topped the points table after the Hyderabad leg, was derailed by an injury to skipper and last season's MVP, Aslam Inamdar. Leadership issues, squad discord, and poor results followed. Coach B.C. Ramesh was dismissed, and PKL icon Ajay Thakur was brought in as an assistant coach under mentor Ashok Shinde, but the team still failed to qualify for the playoffs.

Future of international Kabaddi

The league's international aspirations were highlighted by the 'PKL Melbourne Raid', an exhibition event held in Australia during the playoff rest day. However, in the tournament itself, only 22 foreign players from six nations participated, with 16 of them from Iran. Notable international stars like South Korea's Jang Kun Lee and Nepal's Ghanshwam Roka Magar saw limited action. This comes amidst the International Kabaddi Federation's (IKF) ban on India's participation in international tournaments due to the suspension of the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India (AKFI). The IKF's decision stemmed from governance issues within the AKFI.

As the 11th season concludes, hopes remain high that the league will bridge the rift between the AKFI and IKF, paving the way for a more inclusive and global future for kabaddi.

PKL 11 Stats:
Most Raid points: Devank Dalal - 301 in 25 matches (Patna Pirates)
Most Tackle Points: Mohammadreza Chiyaneh Shadloui - 82 in 24 matches (Haryana Steelers)
Most Super 10s: Ashu Malik: 18 in 23 matches (Dabang Delhi)
Most High 5s: Nitesh Kumar: 8 in 22 matches (Tamil Thalaivas)
Most Super Raids: Ajit Chouhan: 9 in 23 matches (U Mumba)
Most Super Tackles: Yogesh Bijender Dahiya: 10 in 23 matches (Dabang Delhi)
Most do-or-die raid points: Vinay: 48 in 25 matches (Haryana Steelers)
Most Valuable Player (MVP): Mohammadreza Chiyaneh Shadloui: Total 139 points (82 tackle points and 57 raid points)

GULVEER ON THE RISE

Giant strides: Gulveer Singh broke Avinash Sable's national record in the 5,000m, clocking a time of 13:18.92 at the Portland Track Festival last year.
SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Should he meet his goal of **cracking the 27min** barrier this season, Gulveer Singh has even loftier targets for 2026 and beyond, leading up to the 2028 Olympics. But there are sacrifices on the way.

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Amongst the various familial obligations that Gulveer Singh had to fulfil when he returned home to his village of Sirsa in western Uttar Pradesh's Atrauli district early in December, there was one that meant a lot to him personally. He drove his new tractor — the one he had bought using part of the prize money he received for winning a bronze in the 10,000m at last year's Asian Games — down to the town of Atrauli. There, he got a custom decal fitted on the bonnet of the machine.

'Pari,' it reads now.

The name is special to him. It's that of his daughter, born just a few days earlier.

The 23-year-old wasn't at home for the birth of his first-born child on the 23rd of November this year. He was in Hachioji, Japan. There, running the 10,000m on a chilly evening at Kamiyugi Park Athletics Stadium during the Hachioji Long Distance Championships, Gulveer pulled away from the chasing group to finish in first place with a time of 27:14.88.

In doing so, he erased his own national record of 27:41.81, which he had set just a few months earlier at The Ten Championship in San Juan Capistrano in April this year.

"I was hoping to clock something around the 27:30 range. But when I saw that my average time for every kilometre was in the 2:43 range, I knew I had to push myself in the final few laps," he says.

While Gulveer's performance might have taken even him by surprise, it hasn't come as a shock to those who have been following his career. After first setting the national record in the 10,000m — incidentally, the then second-oldest record in Indian track history — he broke

Avinash Sable's national record in the 5,000m, clocking a time of 13:18.92 at the Portland Track Festival held last June. He improved that mark even further in September, clocking 13:11.82 at the Yogibo Athletics Challenge in Niigata.

Gulveer only had a few days of rest in Sirsa, spending time with little Pari, before he once again returned to racing — this time at the TCS Kolkata 25km race on 15th December, where he went on to set another Indian best time, finishing the race in 1:14.10.

The event finished, Gulveer has made his way back to the Sports Authority of India in Bengaluru, where he will look to build on an undoubtedly impressive year. With major competitions, including the Asian and World Championships, scheduled for next season, Gulveer, as India's standout long-distance runner, is expected to make his mark on the international stage. However, this push will bring its share of challenges for the new father.

"It's hard, for sure. The last time I was at home was for Diwali in 2023. Last year, I didn't go home because I had planned to compete and improve my records. Now I only got to spend a few days with my daughter. I don't think I'll get a chance to go home in 2025 or even until the end of 2026, after the Asian Games that year. The only time I will get to see Pari is over a video call on my phone. It's always at the back of my mind whether she'll recognise who I am," he wonders.

This isn't to say that Gulveer has any regrets about his career choice. In fact, sometimes he can scarcely believe how far he's come.

"If you had told me just a few years ago that I would be competing in Japan and the USA, and thinking of participating in competitions like the Asian Championships and World Championships, I wouldn't have believed you. I would barely have known what these events were," he says.

Late start

It's not as though Gulveer had no knowledge of the sport while growing up. For youngsters in Sirsa, as in many villages in this region of western Uttar Pradesh, joining the army is a coveted vocation. Like many others, Gulveer ran on dirt tracks between the fields of chicory and mustard to prepare for the army recruitment tests. In 2018, he joined the 23 Grenadiers unit of the Indian Army as a *sipahi* (junior-most rank).

He fulfilled his military duties, serving in the mountains of the Galwan Valley in Ladakh and later in Arunachal Pradesh along the border with China. It was during his stint in Arunachal Pradesh — in his second year of service — that Gulveer first thought of pursuing a career as an athlete, inspired by the inter-unit cross-country race.

"It's important for everyone to take part, and there are many incentives if you do well. I learned that if you're a good athlete, you can train specifically as a runner. That interested me. Army life is very tough, especially with guard duty. So, I was very interested in doing well in that race. I remember that was the first time I properly prepared for a race," he says.

Gulveer won his first cross-country race, and his performance was impressive enough to catch the eye of Younus Khan, coach of the long-distance running programme at the Army Sports Institute in Pune. "Someone called me from Arunachal Pradesh and said there was this really talented runner. He ran the 10km cross-country race in 30:58. That was very impressive, especially for someone who didn't have much experience in running," says Khan.

Right guidance: Gulveer's first cross-country win caught the eye of Younus Khan, coach of the long-distance running programme at the Army Sports Institute in Pune.
SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

That same year, Khan brought Gulveer to Pune, where the youngster would finally receive formal coaching. In 2021, Gulveer won another inter-unit race and was ready to move onto track running. Khan says he wasn't surprised by Gulveer's progress.

"He was very disciplined. I'd never see him miss a day of training. And he was really talented. Every day, you could see in the workouts that he was getting stronger," says Khan.

While his coaches had high hopes for him even then, Gulveer's own goals were fairly modest — a

Peak moment: Bronze medallist Gulveer (right) celebrates with silver medallist Kartik Kumar after the men's 10,000m final event at the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou. GETTY IMAGES

promotion to *havaldar*. "Someone told me that if I won a national medal, I'd get an out-of-term promotion. I just wanted to get a national medal somehow," he recalls.

That medal would come in his debut national meet — the 2022 Federation Cup in Calicut — where he won a bronze in the 10,000m with a time of 29:22.44. When you consider how much he has improved — Gulveer's current national record is nearly two minutes faster — it seems like a relatively modest accomplishment. Gulveer, however, rates it as the most significant of his career. "It helped me get my first promotion. It was the medal that made me start believing there was something I had in me," he says.

A few months later, he won gold with a new meet record at the National Games. That form would continue into 2023 as well. He won a bronze in the 5,000m at the Asian Championships and followed it up with the biggest medal of his career — a bronze in the 10,000m at the Asian Games in Hangzhou.

According to Surendra Singh, who once held the Indian 5,000m record, Gulveer possesses all the physical qualities of a top runner. "He has naturally great stamina. Along with that, he is a very economical runner. He has a very smooth running action. He doesn't have to fight when he's trying to keep pace with someone. In fact, when someone goes in front, it really suits Gulveer because he can follow them very well," says Surendra.

But while his talent was clear and his progress impressive, Gulveer believes what significantly aided his growth as an athlete was the opportunity to train in Colorado Springs in the USA under Scott Simmons.

Simmons, who was brought in to helm India's middle- and long-distance coaching programme in 2022, says the shift was critical. "When I came to India for the first time, I realised the weather in India in winter was not conducive to long-distance running. It was one of the key reasons why no Indian had run 5k or 10k and come out with a decent result. In terms of recovery and adaptations to training, it was problematic," he explains.

There was also an additional benefit to training in Colorado Springs: Gulveer got to test himself against a strong group of runners, including Paul Chelimo, a double Olympic medallist in the 5,000m. Gulveer wasn't the first Indian runner to benefit from running alongside stronger competitors — Avinash Sable had trained with the same group a year earlier. However, while Sable was already a seasoned runner and Olympian by then, Gulveer was still at a very early stage in his development. "At that point in his career, Gulveer was a high 28-minute runner (in the 10,000m), and he was getting a chance to compete against runners in the low 27-minute range. That played a huge role in speeding up his development as a runner," says Simmons.

The learning curve was steep, Gulveer admits. "It wasn't easy to run alongside runners of that level, at least in the beginning. I developed a lot of blisters on my feet, and initially, I wasn't even able to keep up. But now I have the confidence that I can at least match their level," he says.

Another factor in his improvement was the increased opportunities to compete. By training in the USA, Gulveer was able to participate in more high-level competitions. "In the past, opportunities to take part in international competitions simply didn't exist for Indian runners like Gulveer. Now, not only do they have the chance to train outside India at altitude, but it also serves as a base for them to regularly compete in high-level competitions. That's been a big factor in their progress," says Simmons.

Regularly competing and

Uplifting right: Gulveer's new tractor was bought using part of the prize money he received for winning the Asian Games bronze. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

improving has had a compounding effect on Gulveer's success. "If you are not already an accomplished athlete, it's hard to get entry into competitions. In Gulveer's case, when he first broke the national record in the 10,000m (at San Juan Capistrano), he wasn't even running in the main event because his timing wasn't considered good enough to be included in the starting list of that race. Now that he has improved so much, it will be a lot easier for him to get into other competitions. That's important because he has to keep competing in international events," says Simmons.

Continuous improvement

And there will have to be many more competitions. For all his progress as a runner, Gulveer missed out on the biggest competition of the year when he failed to qualify for the Paris Olympics in either the 5,000m or 10,000m.

"The automatic qualification standard for that competition was just too fast for me (the qualification standard in the men's 5,000m was 13:05, while that in the 10,000m was 27:00). It was disappointing to miss out, but it reminded me of just how much I have to improve as a runner," he says.

Gulveer says he is up for that challenge. His primary focus for the 2025 season is to qualify for the World Championships. The qualifying standard for the 10,000m (27:00.00) is as strict as that for the Olympics, while that for the 5,000m (13:01.00) is even tougher. However, Gulveer believes he can get there. "In both my best 5,000m and 10,000m races, I felt that I had more to give. I think I can improve my time in the latter to a flat 27 minutes," he says.

These are not easy benchmarks to meet, though. Even Gulveer knows that much. Should he meet his goals for this season, he has even loftier targets for 2026 and beyond, leading up to the 2028 Olympics.

His coaches believe he can do more than qualify. "He's still very young for a long-distance runner. His real peak will be at the end of this Olympic cycle," says Simmons. With the Olympic gold medal in the 10,000m at Paris being won in 26:43.14 and 5,000m in 13:13.66, Gulveer knows it's not impossible to dream of a medal either. But all that means more sacrifice.

It means more time away from his family and child. It will not be easy, but Gulveer has his sights set clearly. "When I left Pari at home, I knew I wouldn't be able to see her again for a long time. I don't think I will get a chance to go home until after the 2026 Asian Games. I wish I could be around her, but I have a very difficult target in front of me. Maybe when she is older, she will understand. I hope I will have something to show her for my absence," he says.

Big fish: FC Goa beat table topper Mohun Bagan Super Giant 2-1. ISL

GIFT OF THE MAGI

FC Goa gave the **perfect Christmas gift** to its fans by beating Mohun Bagan Super Giant in a thrilling encounter.

With Christmas on the horizon, the coastal town of Margao was all decked out as posters went up for the Indian Super League (ISL) match on December 20. Goa, one of India's traditional football hubs, was hosting table topper and defending champion Mohun Bagan Super Giant.

At face value, it was a contest between a side coached by the Indian men's national team manager, Manolo Marquez, and the most expensive team in the league this season: money and form versus Goa's flair and passion for the beautiful game.

On another level, it was also an occasion for pre-Christmas festivities.

Tourists from around the world thronged Goa's streets and beaches. A football match on a nippy evening served as the perfect *hors d'oeuvre* before the night's parties.

"We are a family of 17, and we got to know that there's a football match scheduled. So, all of us have come to have a good time," said Aasheim, who had travelled to Goa from Finland

Around the stadium, it felt as though the festival had already begun. Decorative paper stars, home team jerseys, and food stalls created a lively atmosphere, while some volunteers handed out free jerseys.

A FOOTBALL MATCH ON A NIPPY EVENING SERVED AS THE PERFECT *HORS D'OEUVRE* BEFORE THE NIGHT'S PARTIES

"The ticket prices for home games were initially reduced, and now the free jerseys only bring the community here closer to football," said Harsh Naik, one of the volunteers.

When the match kicked off, Goa took just 12 minutes to give its fans a reason to celebrate, as local boy Brison Fernandes scored the opening goal.

The cheers of over 13,000 fans briefly paused when a handful of travelling supporters found their voices. "Joy Mohun Bagan!" — they roared after Dimitrios Petratos scored an equaliser in the second half.

"We've come from Bengaluru and are part of the fan club Mariners Bangalore. We are about 20 people and we travel for several away fixtures, especially the ones along the coast, to Kerala and now, Goa," said Shubhankar Dasgupta, a lifelong Mohun Bagan fan.

"I remember watching Krishanu Dey in the early 1980s when he won the Federation Cup, the Durand Cup, and the IFA Shield with Mohun Bagan. I've been in love with the club ever since," he added.

As the noise from the home fans petered out after the leveller, a band stood up to play *Bella Ciao!* and kept going until most of the home supporters began clapping along to the rhythm.

The Italian folk song, once a partisan anthem against oppression, had become a symbol of solidarity during the pandemic. And that very solidarity unified a nervous crowd, rallying them behind their team.

Minutes later, Brison, the local hero, struck again. The final score: 2–1.

In Christianity, the Magi were the men who brought gifts to the newborn Christ. They are said to have given the first Christmas presents. On December 20, Goa received its own gift, wrapped in love from its people and a brace from a boy the state had nurtured with care.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

Inner walls crumble

Only ten minutes of regulation time remained in the game between Chennaiyin and Bengaluru. The Blues were leading 3-2, but Chennaiyin had equalised twice during the match, and the home fans were feeling bullish about a third.

Towards the Diary's right side, Bengaluru's Ryan Williams delivered a lackadaisical cross into the opposition box. Assuming that Chennaiyin defender Laldinliana Renthlei had a textbook clearance under control, the Diary shifted his focus to the scattered words on his laptop screen.

Suddenly, the vociferous crowd fell silent, drawing the Diary's attention back to the pitch. There, he saw Renthlei stooped over with his head in his hands, the ball nestled in the back of the net.

Confused, the handful of journalists in the press box turned their eyes to the big screen, which replayed the moment when Renthlei had sheepishly bundled the ball into his own goal, handing the derby victory to the visiting team.

With each passing minute until full-time, the home support depleted in noise and number as Chennaiyin succumbed to yet another defeat.

Joan Mathew Jacob

Costly mistake: Sunil Chhetri (centre) of Bengaluru FC celebrates an own goal by Chennaiyin's Laldinliana Renthlei. FSDL

Captain courageous

All sports demand something heroic from the person wearing the captain's armband — whether it involves providing leadership on the field or doing something intrepid to inspire teammates to deliver a superlative performance — akin to a general in war. This must have been the thinking that prompted Mohun Bagan Super Giant skipper Subhasish Bose to ignore multiple fractures on his left cheekbone and choose action over rest.

Doctors had advised the dependable left-back to undergo reconstructive surgery after a blow from FC Goa defender Sandesh Jhingan's elbow during a goalmouth tackle. Scans later revealed three fractures in the left cheekbone region.

Fully aware that his presence was vital for his side, which was aiming to regain its winning momentum following the defeat against FC Goa, Bose chose to sacrifice personal concerns and offer his services to the team.

"Given Mohun Bagan's status in the ISL, we cannot afford to suffer successive losses and relinquish our position as the leader (in the current league standings). That was why I chose to play, despite the doctors advising surgery, which would have kept me out of action for at least two months," Bose said after leading his side to a spectacular comeback win against Punjab FC (at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium).

Bose **(below)** was seen wearing a protective mask in the first half, which he removed after the break as it was hindering his vision. "The team doctors are attending to the injury very well, and I am hopeful of recovering with the prescribed medication. I cannot ignore the emotions of our fans during this crucial stage of the tournament," said Mohun Bagan's captain courageous as he looked ahead to the team's next match at home against Hyderabad FC.

Amitabha Das Sharma

ISL

A GREY WINTER IN MANCHESTER

Both Manchester clubs go into the new year needing some **soul-searching** as they desperately to salvage their campaigns.

Joan Mathew Jacob
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An inexcusable loss to Manchester United was not the end of a nightmare run for Pep Guardiola and Manchester City. In its following league game, Aston Villa's Morgan Rogers ran riot against City, casting a dark and gloomy shadow of doubt over whether Guardiola's reign on English soil had run its course.

The doubts escalated further when relegation-threatened Everton held City 1-1 on Boxing Day, with Erling Haaland draining any remaining Christmas cheer after missing from the spot **(above)**.

AP

"Life is not easy. Sport is not easy," Guardiola said after the match.

Over the last few years, City has been known for losing the odd game here and there during the season, but one win in 13 games is inconceivable. Now, even an unbeaten run similar to those seen in the recent past might not be enough to catch high-flying Liverpool at the top of the table.

However, Guardiola's record-breaking feats with the club are enough to ward off any suggestions of a sacking, especially with half the season remaining.

Lost cause: Even an unbeaten run similar to those seen in the recent past might not be enough for City to catch high-flying Liverpool at the top of the table. REUTERS

City will be buoyed by its 2-0 win against Leicester City in its final match of the year, and a busy January transfer window could very well rescue its season and secure a top-four finish.

Meanwhile, across the road, Manchester United has not fared well since shocking its city rival. Newly-appointed manager Ruben Amorim might feel he has bitten off more than he can chew after his side suffered successive defeats to Bournemouth, Wolves, and Newcastle United. For the first time in the Premier League era, United finished in the bottom half of the table at Christmas.

One of the major talking points of Amorim's tenure so far has been Marcus Rashford's exclusion from the team. The Portuguese coach has omitted Rashford **(left, below)** from the United squad in four of its last five games, starting with the derby, prompting the winger to admit that he is ready for a "new challenge."

Despite three of Rashford's four league goals this season coming under Amorim's tenure, a move away from his boyhood club in January is looking increasingly likely.

United ended the year 14th in the table.

Mbappe settles in at Real Madrid

Any doubts regarding Kylian Mbappé's impact at Real Madrid were quashed by the Frenchman after he scored and assisted in its 3-0 win against Pachuca in the FIFA Intercontinental Cup 2024 final.

In its last league game before the winter break, against Sevilla, he recorded yet another goal and assist to propel the record winners to second place in the table, above arch-rival FC Barcelona.

Mbappé has now already won two trophies with Real Madrid since his high-profile move in the summer from Paris Saint-Germain, scoring 13 goals and providing three assists in his 23 appearances so far.

His attacking partner Vinícius Júnior **(right)**, on the other hand, was compensated for his Ballon d'Or snub after being named The Best FIFA Men's Player.

He became the first Brazilian and the third Real Madrid player to win the award after racking up 24 goals in 39 appearances last season while winning La Liga, the UEFA Champions League, and the Supercopa de España titles.

Super League returns; almost

More than three and a half years later, the European Super League has re-emerged from the shadows, this time in a new avatar. Renamed the 'Unify League', sponsor A22 Sports Management announced that it had approached both FIFA and UEFA, requesting official recognition for the competition.

As an eye-catcher, the company revealed that the tournament, featuring 96 teams divided into four

Impactful: Kylian Mbappe scored and assisted in Real Madrid's 3-0 win against Pachuca in the FIFA Intercontinental Cup 2024 final. AP

AFP

Hungry for goals: Harry Kane (left) leads the goal-scoring charts in Bundesliga, with 14 goals and seven assists in 13 matches. REUTERS

leagues, would be streamed for free on its own platform.

However, just as in 2021, the proposed idea was quickly shut down. The European Leagues issued a statement saying that, despite A22's claims, they had not been consulted about the relaunch, describing the model as "unrequested and unsubstantiated" and warning that it would increase the number of international matches in an already congested calendar.

Eyes on the prize for Kane

In search of an elusive trophy, Bayern Munich striker Harry Kane has been tearing it up in the Bundesliga, with 14 goals and seven assists in his 13 appearances.

Despite being sidelined for three weeks at the start of December due to injury, the England captain leads the goal-scoring charts in the league, closely followed by Eintracht Frankfurt's Omar Marmoush, who has 13 goals.

His presence on the pitch was sorely missed as Bayern succumbed to its first league defeat of the season against FSV Mainz 05. Furthermore, a 10-man Bayern side was knocked out of the DFB-Pokal Round of 16 by Bayer Leverkusen, which edged out a 1-0 victory.

Nevertheless, Bayern tops the league standings with a four-point gap over second-placed Leverkusen. With Kane making his return in Bayern's 5-1 thrashing of RB Leipzig, the Bavarians will be cautiously optimistic about their chances of holding onto the lead and handing Kane his first major title.

REUTERS

David de Gea's resurgence fuels Fiorentina

Fiorentina has emerged as an early challenger for the Serie A title, sitting fifth after 17 games and nine points behind leader Atalanta, which has played a game more. Much of its success this season can be attributed to the addition of Spaniard David de Gea **(left)** between the sticks.

Returning from his one-year hiatus after leaving Manchester United, the 34-year-old seems sharper than ever, keeping six clean sheets in his 14 league appearances this season.

Despite spending the first three games of the season on the bench, De Gea is well on his way to surpassing Pietro Terracciano's tally of eight clean sheets from last season. He is also second only to Genoa's Nicola Leali in terms of save percentage in the league, with 78.6 compared to Leali's 79.2.

While lifting the Scudetto seems improbable, the veteran custodian could play a massive role in leading Fiorentina to a top-four finish and ensuring its return to Champions League football for the first time since 2009-10.

A litmus test

Messi's **Inter Miami** will open the 2026 World Cup against Egyptian champion Al Ahly Sporting Club on June 14.

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Lionel Messi's move to the United States after winning the 2022 World Cup made the country an immediate hotspot for football events, and FIFA did not disappoint.

Although the 2026 World Cup was already scheduled, its precursor was announced just months after Qatar 2022: an expanded format of the Club World Cup set for June 2025, featuring 32 sides from around the world.

The draw for the tournament took place in December in Miami, accompanied by a message from the USA's re-elected president, Donald Trump. Messi's Inter Miami will open the tournament against Egyptian champion Al Ahly Sporting Club on June 14.

NASA-inspired trophy

The Club World Cup will merge two international tournaments — its successor (retaining the same name) and the FIFA Intercontinental Cup — and will feature a new trophy inspired by NASA's Voyager space missions.

The golden shield comprises a series of discs that can transform into a 'multifaceted and orbital structure'. It includes engravings in 13 languages and Braille, and it sits on a black plinth adorned with FIFA's emblem in gold typeface.

A packed schedule

The tournament, however, has raised several questions about the sheer number of matches in a calendar year, particularly from FIFPRO and the World Leagues Forum.

Ballon d'Or winner Rodri and Asian Player of the Year Son Heung-Min are among the prominent players who have voiced concerns over the congested schedule.

The year 2025 is poised to be a real test for football scheduling, with an expanded Club World Cup, a restructured UEFA Champions League, and, finally, a 48-team World Cup the following year.

Talisman: Lionel Messi has had an immediate impact at Inter Miami, scoring 21 goals in 25 league matches in his two seasons at the club so far. GETTY IMAGES

FIFA Club World Cup 2025 draw

UNITED STATES, JUNE 15 - JULY 13
Top two from each group progress to knockout stage

GROUP A		GROUP B	
Palmeiras	BRA	Paris St-Germain	FRA
Porto	POR	Atlético Madrid	ESP
Al Ahly	EGY	Botafogo	BRA
Inter Miami	USA	Seattle Sounders	USA

GROUP C		GROUP D	
Bayern Munich	GER	Flamengo	BRA
Auckland City	NZL	ES Tunis	TUN
Boca Juniors	ARG	Chelsea	ENG
Benfica	POR	Club León	MEX

GROUP E		GROUP F	
River Plate	ARG	Fluminense	BRA
Urawa Reds	JPN	Dortmund	GER
Monterrey	MEX	Ulsan HD	KOR
Internazionale	ITA	Mamelodi	RSA

GROUP G		GROUP H	
Manchester City	ENG	Real Madrid	ESP
Wydad AC	MAR	Al Hilal	KSA
Al-Ain	UAE	Pachuca	MEX
Juventus	ITA	Salzburg	AUT

Host venues: *Atlanta, Cincinnati, Charlotte, Los Angeles, Miami, Nashville, New York New Jersey, Orlando (two stadia), Philadelphia, Seattle, Washington*

Sunday, July 13 — CLUB WORLD CUP FINAL — *MetLife Stadium, NJ*

Source: FIFA — Picture: Getty Images — © GRAPHIC NEWS

FOR MORE STORIES

A different homecoming

The 15th edition of the ASEAN Championship has been a **potpourri** of upsets, emerging stars, and foreign players, with or without Asian heritage, shining for their respective national teams.

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Indonesia, the runner-up at the AFF U-23 Championship and a semifinalist at the previous edition of the ASEAN Championship, was stunned by the Philippines, which secured a final-four spot after six years.

The winning goal in that match came from Bjorn Kristensen, a Norway-born forward who chose to play for the Philippines as his mother is from the country.

Meanwhile, defending champion Thailand saw the emergence of new youngsters in forward Patrik Gustavsson **(above, in blue)** and Nicholas Mickelson (defender), both of whom have a Thai mother but were born in Europe.

Gustavsson and Kristensen were crucial in the semifinal, with Thailand finally securing a late winner — courtesy of Suphanat Mueanta — to set up a repeat of the last edition's final against Vietnam.

However, the biggest surprise import was Vietnam's Brazil-born forward Rafaelson, who, after naturalisation, changed his name to Nguyen Xuan Son.

The 27-year-old scored three of Vietnam's five goals across two legs of the semifinal against Singapore and is the highest scorer in the tournament with five goals.

Renard to the fore, again

Saudi Arabia found itself in choppy waters under Euro 2020-winning coach Roberto Mancini.

The team won only seven of 18 games and finished outside the automatic qualification spots for the 2026 FIFA World Cup in the third round.

Enter Frenchman Herve Renard **(above, in white)**, the head coach whose fiery speech inspired a shock victory for the Saudis against eventual world champion Argentina in Qatar two years ago.

Renard had moved to the French women's national team after his stint with Saudi Arabia but returned to coach the side in October.

Within two months, the team appears to be firing on all cylinders, having knocked out defending Arabian Gulf Cup champion Iraq from the 2024 edition.

In the semifinals, the Saudis will play Oman, while Bahrain will face Kuwait, with the final scheduled for January 4.

This time for Morocco

Now a **heavyweight** in African football, Morocco is keen to host more big-ticket events, starting with the African Cup of Nations in 2025.

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Morocco captured the world's attention with a historic fourth-place finish at the FIFA World Cup 2022. This remarkable achievement has since inspired teams across various age groups and genders. Undoubtedly, Morocco is now a heavyweight in African football. It is also keen to host more big-ticket events after the FIFA Club World Cup 2022, starting with the African Cup of Nations in 2025.

Having ended a third consecutive year as the highest-ranked African country, Morocco is expected to be among the top seeds at the AFCON draw, scheduled for January. To add cherry to the cake, it was also announced as one of the hosts of the FIFA World Cup 2030, alongside Spain and Portugal **(above)**.

Lookman, Banda win honours

Nigeria and Atalanta forward Ademola Lookman **(top, left)** had a year to remember, clinching the Europa League title and finishing as runner-up at AFCON 2024. He added another feather to his cap by winning the African Men's Player of the Year Award.

Zambia's Barbra Banda **(above, left)**, who helped Orlando Pride secure its first National Women's Soccer League title and became Africa's top women's goalscorer at the Olympics, won consecutive Women's Player of the Year honours.

Morocco's success since FIFA World Cup 2022:

U-23 Men: Won the Bronze Medal at Paris 2024
U-23 Men: Won the African Cup of Nations 2023
U-20 Men: Won the UNAF U-20 Tournament (2024) after nine years
U-20 Women: Won the UNAF U-20 Women's Tournament 2024
U-17 Men: Runner-up at the U-17 Africa Cup of Nations 2023

Finding the right partner: While Red Bull's dominance stemmed from the brilliance of Max Verstappen, who clinched his fourth consecutive title, it found itself grappling again with a familiar issue — its second driver. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

TRIAL BY FIRE

For Liam Lawson, stepping into the Red Bull cockpit is not just a golden opportunity but a litmus test of **monumental proportions.**

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In Formula One, consistency is as crucial as the ability to adapt to the unpredictable, which was the deciding factor in the World Constructors' Championship battle of 2024. The eventual winner, McLaren, was one of only two teams to score points every weekend, alongside third-placed Red Bull, but their paths to this achievement were quite different.

While McLaren's resurgence was built on steady progress and team effort, Red Bull's dominance stemmed from the brilliance of Max Verstappen, who clinched his fourth consecutive title. However, the Milton Keynes-based outfit found itself grappling with a familiar issue — its second driver.

Sergio Perez, once Red Bull's perfect second fiddle, experienced a significant drop in performance and pace this season. Although under contract until 2026, the Mexican was eventually shown the door, bringing an end to a four-year partnership that delivered two constructors' titles. His departure meant a driver from the junior team, Racing Bulls, was primed to get the promotion.

Just a day after his exit, it was announced that Liam Lawson **(left)** would take his place in 2025. For many, it was unexpected to see

Lawson leapfrog Yuki Tsunoda, a four-year F1 veteran. However, within the paddock, the decision came as less of a surprise.

What ultimately cast a shadow over the Japanese driver's Red Bull prospects was something beyond his control. With Honda, the unit's current engine supplier, set to switch to Aston Martin in 2026, his chances were slim. Despite shining in the RB20 during post-season testing, the team's attention had already shifted to the talented Kiwi, who has yet to complete a full F1 season.

A bold move

Red Bull has consistently given opportunities to drivers from its academy, barring the one-off move for Perez in 2021. The 22-year-old Lawson, who joined the junior programme in 2019, gradually climbed the ranks, spending two years each in F3 and F2.

The 2021 Abu Dhabi Young Driver Test helped him secure the AlphaTauri (now Racing Bulls) reserve seat for 2022, and ended up playing a dual backup role for both teams, a position he held into the following year. He finally made his debut in 2023, filling in for an injured Daniel Ricciardo for five races before eventually replacing him for the final six weekends of 2024.

Lawson got promoted after just 11 races, mirroring Red Bull's strategy from 2016 when a 17-year-old Verstappen was promoted after just 23 races. That gamble paid immediate dividends, with Verstappen winning on his debut for the senior team and becoming the youngest race winner in F1 history.

The aggressive youngster may have taken his time to find his footing, but eventually delivered, with multiple wins and championships that solidified his status as the team's talisman. However, his rise marked the beginning of a carousel of second drivers after the departure of his closest competitor, Ricciardo, in 2018.

A double-edged sword

In his third season with Red Bull, Ricciardo partnered the Dutchman for 58 races (2016–18), a period that saw them often battle it out. The two were evenly matched in performance (608–590 points), but when it became clear to the Australian that his teammate was being prioritised more, he sought opportunities elsewhere.

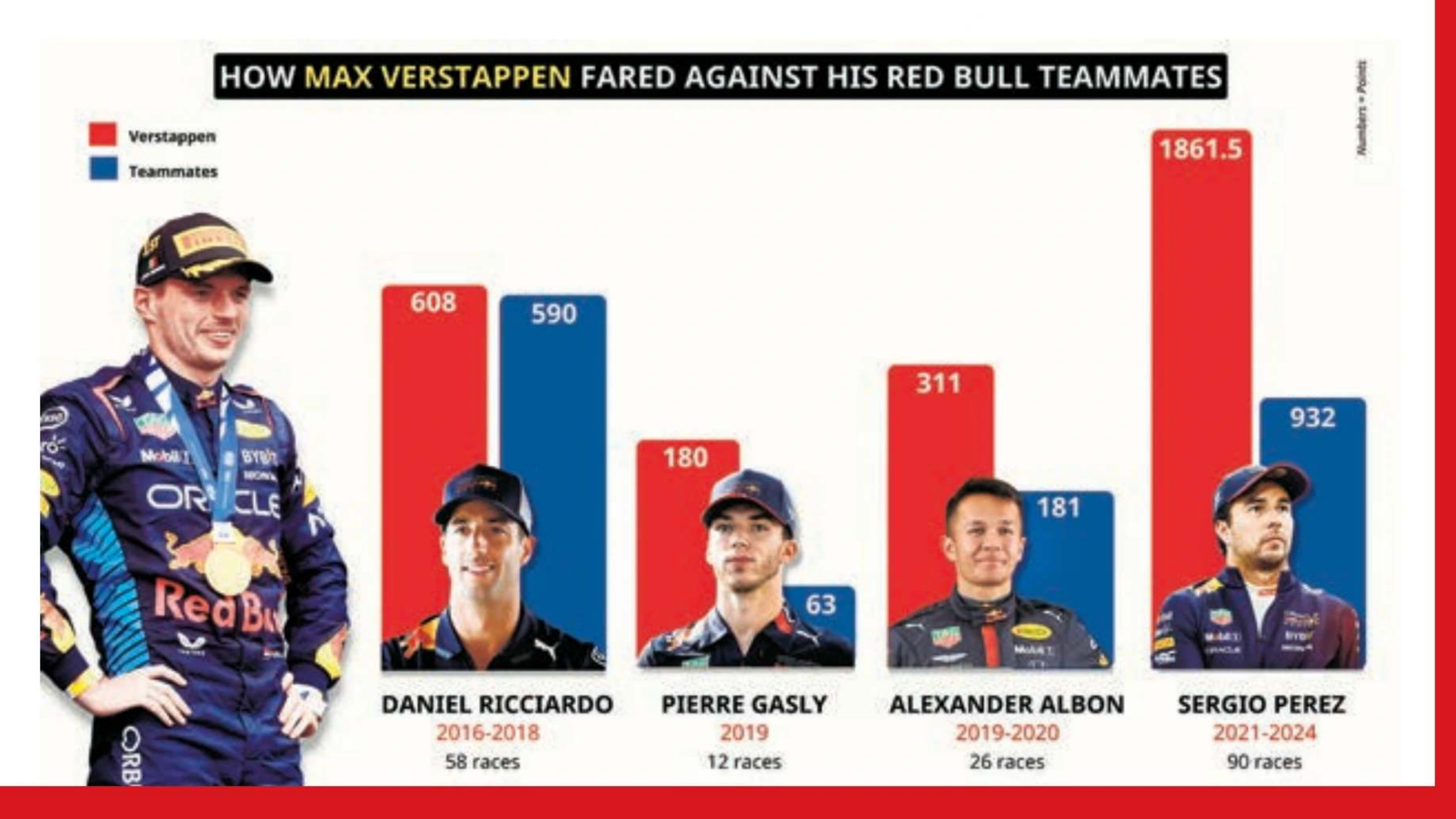
Over the next two years, not every Red Bull promotion yielded the same success. Pierre Gasly was given a chance alongside his rapidly rising teammate in 2019 but crumbled under pressure, with Verstappen amassing almost three times the points of the Frenchman in 12 races (180–63).

After an underwhelming stint, Gasly was demoted to Toro Rosso (now Racing Bulls), but an optimistic Red Bull handed the car to another rookie, Alexander Albon. The decision raised eyebrows, as the experienced Daniil Kvyat was overlooked — a driver who had previously been the sacrificial lamb in 2016 and was given only four races to prove himself.

The team showed more patience with Albon, who had just 12 races under his belt, granting him another season to shine. While he displayed flashes of his prowess over 26 races, he ultimately failed to match Verstappen's dominance (311–181). By 2021, however, Red Bull came across its perfect wingman in Perez.

The seasoned driver was pivotal in Red Bull's constructors' title campaigns and helped Verstappen secure his championships. But, in the end, even Perez began to struggle, especially against the much-improved McLarens and Ferraris. His declining performances in 2024 eventually led to the termination of a 90-race partnership (1861.5-932).

For Lawson, stepping into the Red Bull cockpit is both a golden opportunity and a trial by fire. But the challenge has more to do with his peer's relentless pace and consistency, leaving little room for error. While he may find solace in starting a new, full season with familiar faces around him, only time will tell if he's here to stay.



EVERY SECOND MATTERS

These **unsung heroes** of chess serve as the backbone of a player's preparation, operating diligently behind the scenes.

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It all began with Nick Fury assembling the Avengers for a battle that would decide the fate of the world. One by one, heroes with unique abilities were brought together, forming a team greater than the sum of its parts. Much like Fury's iconic call to arms, D. Gukesh's journey to becoming the youngest World chess champion was marked by a masterfully crafted team of Seconds and support staff, each contributing their own expertise to his triumph.

Seconds, the unsung heroes of chess, serve as the backbone of a player's preparation, operating diligently behind the scenes. While the player basks in the spotlight, it is their meticulous work that fuels the player's journey. Tasked with perfecting every aspect of preparation — from analysing openings and refining strategies to offering psychological reinforcement — Seconds form an indispensable support system.

After Gukesh's triumph at the Candidates Tournament in Toronto in April, assembling his team became a top priority. With backing from WestBridge and WACA, he was able to secure the resources needed to bring together the right people, both on and off the board.

Sharp minds

Leading Gukesh's campaign was Poland's Grzegorz Gajewski, a chess virtuoso with a keen eye for strategy, who had been working with the prodigy long before the World championship. It was Gukesh's mentor, five-time World champion

Backbone: Gukesh accompanied by his father and Grzegorz Gajewski (left). FIDE

Viswanathan Anand, who suggested bringing Gajewski on board as the primary trainer — a move that proved pivotal.

Gajewski led the charge, coordinating the team's efforts and ensuring Gukesh was battle-ready for every match. He enlisted his countryman Jan-Krzysztof Duda, a former World Cup winner known for his creative play, whose training games helped Gukesh stay sharp during the gruelling year.

Gukesh played over 300 online blitz games against Duda throughout the Candidates and World championship.

Radosław Wojtaszek, another Pole and trusted veteran from Anand's team, brought years of expertise to the table. Meanwhile, Pentala Harikrishna, who had previously played a key role in Ju Wenjun's 2023 World championship victory, added a unique edge. Harikrishna's insights into the Chinese mindset and strategies became invaluable as Gukesh prepared to face Ding.

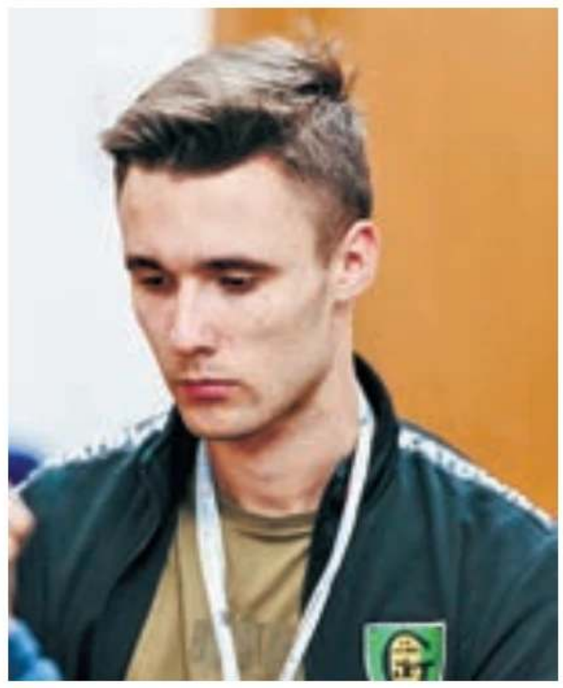
In Germany's Vincent Keymer, Gukesh found not only a formidable partner but also a friend to explore bold new ideas. A regular in the world's top 20, Keymer brought a fresh perspective to Gukesh's

Team Gukesh

Seconds
Grzegorz Gajewski (Poland)
Jan-Krzysztof Duda (Poland)
Radosław Wojtaszek (Poland)
Pentala Harikrishna (India)
Vincent Keymer (Germany)
Jan Klimkowski (Poland)

Mental Conditioning Coach
Paddy Upton

Mentor
Viswanathan Anand



Dream team: (Clockwise from above) Jan-Krzysztof Duda, Jan Klimkowski, Paddy Upton (left), Pentala Harikrishna (centre), Viswanathan Anand, Radosław Wojtaszek and Vincent Keymer. Pics: FIDE

opening preparations. Despite being contemporaries, their collaboration proved to be a vital cog in Gukesh's journey to the World championship title.

"There were mainly two reasons to join this team," Keymer explained in an interaction with *Sportstar*. "First, I felt we had always been friendly, and I believed our chemistry would work well with the rest of the team. Also, I felt that this could be a nice experience. Of course, I was thinking about the learning process this stint would give me because we were working on a very high level for a long time."

Their alliance began in a uniquely personal way. "It was Gukesh himself who contacted me, which I found very nice. He could have gone through a manager or trainer, but instead, he reached out directly. It showed his genuine interest in building a team where personal connections mattered," Keymer said. "We had a brief conversation during the Grand Chess Tour, but it was over the phone. Later, we got to talk face-to-face."

It's uncommon — and risky — for a player to choose a coeval as their Second, given the possibility of revealing strategic ideas that might be used against them in the future. But Gukesh saw things differently.

"Clearly, his main focus was on this World championship," said Keymer. "He wanted to win this match and, since I wasn't involved in either the Candidates or the Championship match otherwise, I don't think there was any direct competition. Of course, long term that could be possible, but it's very difficult to ask someone to be your Second. You either have players who are still actively playing and have ambitions themselves — and exposing all your ideas, strengths, and weaknesses can have some effect — or, if you don't pick players who are actively playing at the top, then you also have something missing."

> « It's uncommon for a chess player to choose a coeval as their Second. But Gukesh saw things differently »

Breath of fresh air

Jan Klimkowski, the 17-year-old Polish teenager, was a breath of fresh air.

"It all started with a simple message. He wrote to me, speaking about chess in general, and later left me two positions to analyse. I sent him the files, and he was very satisfied with my work and offered me the job," Klimkowski recalled.

Joining the team after the first rest day, Klimkowski's task was clear: provide Gukesh with innovative ideas and precise opening analysis. "I was playing a tournament in Menorca earlier, so I couldn't do two things at the same time. Once on board, my focus was on preparing specific lines for Gukesh's upcoming opponents," he said.

The young Second put in gruelling hours, often working six to seven hours daily and waking up at odd hours to fine-tune positions. His

dedication paid off as Gukesh clinched the Candidates tournament, paving the way for the World championship. "It required a lot of effort, but we did our best, and it worked," Klimkowski said.

By late November, while Keymer was working remotely with Radek and Harikrishna from Manilva, a small town in the southernmost province of Spain, Klimkowski was playing a tournament 11,000 km away in Singapore, close to Gukesh but not actively helping him there.

Strategic mastery and novelty

Gukesh's triumph over Ding was marked by his ability to deploy surprises and novelties that threw his opponent off balance. Ding, though accurate under time pressure, often found himself outprepared.

Keymer explained their strategy: "The goal was to surprise Ding early, ensuring Gukesh had the advantage of familiarity with the lines and evaluation while getting Ding out of preparation. It wasn't just about finding sharp ideas with White, it was about getting a fighting game and maintaining momentum. That strategy worked very well," Keymer said.

Beyond engine-assisted preparation, Klimkowski emphasised the importance of practical, human-centred insights. "A human touch is critical. If a player doesn't understand a position from engine preparation, they can easily misplay it. Sometimes, it's better to opt for a less optimal but more practical line — something a good Second should know," he noted.

The team faced criticism from Magnus Carlsen, who questioned their preparation for Game 12, where Ding secured a crucial win to equalise the match. Keymer addressed the scrutiny, defending their approach.

"I believe it's very clear that this line was relatively dangerous for Black. We changed c4-e5 to c4-e6 and Gukesh had to revise an incredible number of lines for this. We also have to understand that no matter how much work we, as Seconds, do for him, he only has a limited amount of time he can spend on preparation. Otherwise, he will not be able to keep up that same level of play for three weeks if he prepares five hours every day — it's simply not going to work," said Keymer.

"So, we always had to make sure to give him as little as possible but everything he needed to know," he added. Not to be overlooked is South African mental health coach Paddy Upton, who worked tremendously to help Gukesh maintain his composure and resilience under immense pressure.

With a team of brilliant minds and indefatigable support, Gukesh's victory seemed destined. Like Captain America calling on the Avengers to fight, Gukesh's team too assembled for the final showdown.

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- CLUB/STATE TEAM OF THE YEAR
- MOMENT OF THE YEAR

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The annual Sportstar Aces Awards is back to honour a number of incredible performances across the spectrum of sports. Here are the nominations for two of the Popular Choice categories, Sportstar of the Year (Male) and Sportstar of the Year (Female). The voting lines are open till January 31. Visit https://sportstar.thehindu.com/aces-awards/popular-awards/

SPORTSTAR OF THE YEAR (MALE)

Neeraj Chopra

Age: 26

Discipline: Javelin throw

A recurring groin injury saw Neeraj push himself harder than ever in the recently concluded season. He registered a throw of 89.45 metres in his only valid attempt in the Paris 2024 final, securing India back-to-back Olympic medals. His effort may have fallen short of the monstrous 92.97m Olympic record throw that won Arshad Nadeem the title in the French capital, but Neeraj continued to flirt with the 90m mark throughout the year. He came closest at the Diamond League in Lausanne, where he fell merely 51cm short of the coveted mark. During the Paris Olympics qualification, he hurled the javelin 89.34m. On a couple of occasions, he was left to rue losses by the narrowest of margins – by 2cm against the Czech Republic's Jakub Vadlejch at the season-opening Doha DL and by a centimetre in the DL final at Brussels, where Grenada's Anderson Peters recorded an 87.87m throw to win the Diamond Trophy.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

✪ Won the Olympic silver medal
✪ Became the fifth individual multiple medallist for India at the Olympics
✪ Won gold at the Paavo Nurmi Games with a throw of 85.97m
✪ Finished as runner-up in the Diamond League final by a margin of 1cm

D. Gukesh

Age: 18

Discipline: Chess

D. Gukesh, once the second-youngest Grandmaster in history and now the third youngest overall, is among the most talked-about chess players globally. Hailing from Chennai, he began his chess journey at age seven after being introduced to the game in school. Within just six months, he became a FIDE-rated player. Gukesh made headlines by becoming the third youngest player, following legends Bobby Fischer and Magnus Carlsen, to compete in the Candidates tournament. At 17, he also became the youngest winner of the tournament, an impressive achievement that cemented his place among the elite. Notably, Gukesh is the third-youngest player to achieve a rating of 2700 and the youngest ever to cross 2750. He is the first player to surpass Viswanathan Anand as India's top-ranked player in 37 years. He topped it all by becoming the youngest ever World Chess Champion, beating Ding Liren in a closely contested final.

Achievements in 2024 season:

✪ Became the youngest-ever World Chess Champion, beating Ding Liren in the final in Singapore
✪ Was the youngest player to win the Candidates Tournament in April 2024
✪ Won individual gold on Board 1 and team gold in the Open section of the Chess Olympiad 2024 in Budapest.
✪ Finished second behind Wei Yi in the Tata Steel Chess Masters 2024

SPORTSTAR OF THE YEAR (MALE)

Sumit Antil

Age: 26

*Discipline: Javelin Throw (F64) **

F64 is for field athletes with moderately affected movement in one or both legs or the absence of limbs. These athletes have to adjust for asymmetric balance during the run-up for javelin and across the throwing circle in shot and discus.

Sumit Antil, whose left leg is amputated below the knee, is the world record holder in men's javelin (F64). At just 26 years old, he became the first Indian man to successfully defend his Paralympic title with an impressive throw of 70.59 metres, surpassing his own Paralympic Games record. He kicked off the event with a throw of 69.11m, breaking his previous Paralympic record of 68.55m set at Tokyo 2020. He then improved his mark again with a throw of 70.59m in the next round. Prior to this, Sumit also secured gold at the World Para Athletics Championships 2024 in Kobe, Japan, with a throw of 69.50m. In 2023, he achieved gold at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games in the javelin throw F64 event, setting a new world record with a remarkable throw of 73.29 metres, breaking his previous world record of 70.83 metres that he set while winning gold at the World Para Athletics Championships.

Achievements in 2024 season:

✪ Paris Paralympics 2024 (gold)
✪ First Indian man to defend title at the Paris Paralympics
✪ Broke Paralympic record twice in Paris
✪ World record holder in men's javelin F64
✪ Has broken the world record at least eight times over five years (2019-2024)
✪ World Para Athletics Championships 2024 (gold)
✪ Forbes India 30 Under 30 2024

PR Sreejesh

Age: 36

Discipline: Hockey

The year 2024 saw the end of an era as goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh called time on his 18-year-long career after winning a second consecutive Olympic field hockey bronze at Paris 2024. The 36-year-old from Kizhakkambalam in Kerala played a crucial role in India's victory over Great Britain in the quarterfinal of the Olympic Games after the team was reduced to ten players following a red card for key defender Amit Rohidas. Sreejesh was at his best in the shootout following the 1-1 draw, producing two spectacular saves to lead India to a 4-2 win. He was once again instrumental in the bronze medal encounter, his last international match, producing a series of pivotal saves to help India over the line against Spain. The Khel Ratna award winner has stepped into the shoes of a coach and will be part of the junior national team setup going forward.

Achievements in 2024 season:

✪ Bronze medal at the Paris 2024 Olympics
✪ Conceded just five goals from penalty corners at Paris 2024
✪ Nominated for FIH Goalkeeper of the Year Award

SPORTSTAR OF THE YEAR (MALE)

Jasprit Bumrah

Age: 30

Discipline: Cricket

Jasprit Bumrah started 2024 by helping India beat England to maintain his side's winning run in the home Test series. The right-arm pacer took 19 wickets at an incredible average of 16.89 as India beat England 4-1. Bumrah continued his relentless form in IPL 2024, claiming 20 scalps at a miserly economy of 6.48, despite a below-par tournament for his side Mumbai Indians. But the 30-year-old reserved his best for the T20 World Cup, where his sharp bowling was vital in India's title win. Bumrah was nearly unplayable in the tournament, giving away just 4.17 runs per over while bagging 15 wickets. During the first Test against Bangladesh in Chennai, Bumrah reached 400 international wickets, becoming only the sixth Indian pacer to reach that mark.

Achievements in 2024 season:

- ✪ T20 World Cup 2024 title
- ✪ T20 World Cup 2024 Player of the Tournament
- ✪ Third-highest wicket-taker in IPL 2024
- ✪ Became the fastest Indian pacer to take 200 wickets in Test cricket

SPORTSTAR OF THE YEAR (FEMALE)

Manu Bhaker

Age: 22

Discipline: Shooting

Manu Bhaker scripted history at the Olympics when she became the first Indian after independence to win multiple medals in a single edition of the Games. Bhaker first won bronze in the women's 10m air pistol and secured another with Sarabjot Singh in the 10m air pistol mixed team event, also becoming the first woman from the country to win multiple medals in a single edition.The 22-year-old scored 221.7 to finish third in the eight-woman final of the 10m air pistol, winning the first medal for India at the Paris Games. It was India's fifth Olympic medal in shooting and the first since the London Games in 2012. At the previous edition of the quadrennial Games, Bhaker's weapon suffered a malfunction, leading to her missing the finals of both the 10m and 25m air pistol events. At the French capital this time, she seized the moment with two finishes on the podium. Before that, she bagged bronze in the women's 10m air pistol at the ISSF World Cup 2024 Stage II in Granada.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

- ✪ Won bronze in the women's 10m air pistol
- ✪ Won bronze in the 10m air pistol mixed team event
- ✪ Won bronze in the women's 10m air pistol at the ISSF World Cup 2024 Stage II

SPORTSTAR OF THE YEAR (FEMALE)

Smriti Mandhana

Age: 28

Discipline: Cricket

Smriti Mandhana, a left-handed opening batter, is a cornerstone of the Indian women's cricket team. Under Smriti's leadership, the Royal Challengers Bengaluru won its maiden Women's Premier League title earlier this year. She amassed 300 runs in 10 innings, including a crucial 39-ball 31 in the final to help her side post a comfortable win against the Delhi Capitals. In the Women's Asia Cup in July this year, she scored 157 runs across four matches at an average of 57.66 and a strike rate of 137.30, finishing as the third-highest run-scorer of the tournament.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

✪ Equalled the record for most ODI hundreds by an Indian during the series vs South Africa-W

✪ Broke the record for most runs by an Indian woman in a bilateral ODI series

✪ Led RCB to its maiden WPL title

✪ Fourth highest run-scorer in WPL 2024

Avani Lekhara

Age: 22

Discipline: Shooting (SH1)*

**The SH1 category is for athletes with movement restrictions in their arms, legs, or lower trunk, or who are without limbs.*

Avani Lekhara created history at the Paris Paralympics 2024 by successfully defending her women's 10m air rifle shooting standing SH1 title. She became the first Indian woman to win two gold medals in the Games' history. Avani also created a new Paralympic record with a score of 249.7 in the 2024 final and shattered her previous record of 249.6, which she set three years ago on her Games debut at Tokyo 2020, where she also won a bronze in the Women's 50m rifle 3 positions SH1. The 22-year-old has won seven gold medals in National Shooting Championships between 2016-20 and has won multiple medals at World Cups. Lekhara is the recipient of the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna Award — the highest sporting award in India — and was also conferred the Padma Shri in 2022.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

✪ Won her second Paralympic Gold by winning the women's 10m air rifle shooting standing SH1 title at Paris 2024

✪ Created a new Paralympic record with a score of 249.7 in the 2024 final

SPORTSTAR OF THE YEAR (FEMALE)

Preethi Pal

Age: 24

*Discipline: Athletics (T35)**

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

Born with weak legs and an irregular posture, few in her village expected Preethi Pal to even survive. At the Paris 2024 Paralympics, Preethi set the tone for India's athletics contingent. 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. Not only was this India's first athletics medal at the Paris Paralympics, but it also marked the first time an Indian stood on the podium for a track event in Paralympic history. Preethi also won a bronze in the 200m event in the same classification, making her the second Indian woman to win two Paralympic medals at the same edition. Earlier in March, she won two golds at the Indian Open Para Athletics Championships and later won two bronze medals at the World Para Athletics Championships in Kobe, Japan.

Achievements in 2024 season:

✪ Won two bronze medals at the Paris Paralympics
✪ Won India's first track medal in Paralympic history
✪ Became the second Indian woman to win two Paralympic medals in the same edition
✪ Won India's first athletics medal at the Paris Paralympics
✪ Won two golds at the Indian Open Para Athletics Championships
✪ Won bronze medals at the World Para Athletics Championships

Deepthi Jeevanji

Age: 21

*Discipline: Athletics (T20)**

**T20 classification is for athletes with intellectual impairment.*

Deepthi Jeevanji came into the limelight earlier this year when she shattered the women's 400m T20 world record on her way to winning gold at the World Para Athletics Championships in Kobe. As she made her Paralympic debut, the 21-year-old from Kalleda village in Warangal emerged as one of India's top prospects in track events—and she did not disappoint. Deepthi dominated her heats, qualifying for the final as the heat one topper. However, Turkiye's Aysel Onder broke her world record of 55.07 seconds in another heat, setting the stage for a thrilling final. As the final race unfolded, Deepthi seemed poised to secure a historic silver medal, but Onder surged past her at the finish line, with Ukraine's Yuliia Shuliar claiming gold. With this achievement, Deepthi became only the second Indian athlete to win a medal in a track event at the Paralympic Games. In 2023, she had already showcased her talent by winning gold in the 400m T20 category at the Hangzhou Para Asian Games, where she set an Asian record with a time of 56.69 seconds.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

✪ Held the world record for the women's 400m T20 event (was eventually broken)
✪ Won gold at the World Para Athletics Championships 2024
✪ Won bronze at the Paris Paralympics
✪ Second Indian to win a Paralympic medal in a track event

K. MURALI KUMAR

Raghu, Devika clinch crowns

In a thriller, Karnataka's M. Raghu saved three championship points to defeat Railways' Mithun Manjunath 14-21, 21-14, 24-22 for his maiden Senior National Championship men's singles title at the Karnataka Badminton Association (KBA) courts in Bengaluru.

In contrast, the women's singles final had none of the drama as Haryana's Devika Sihag, 19, secured her first National crown with a straightforward 21-15, 21-16 triumph over Telangana's Shriyanshi Valishetty.

The results (all finals):

Men'singles: M. Raghu (Kar) bt Mithun Manjunath (Rly) 14-21, 21-14, 24-22.

Women's singles: Devika Sihag (Har) bt Shriyanshi Valishetty (Tel) 21-15, 21-16.

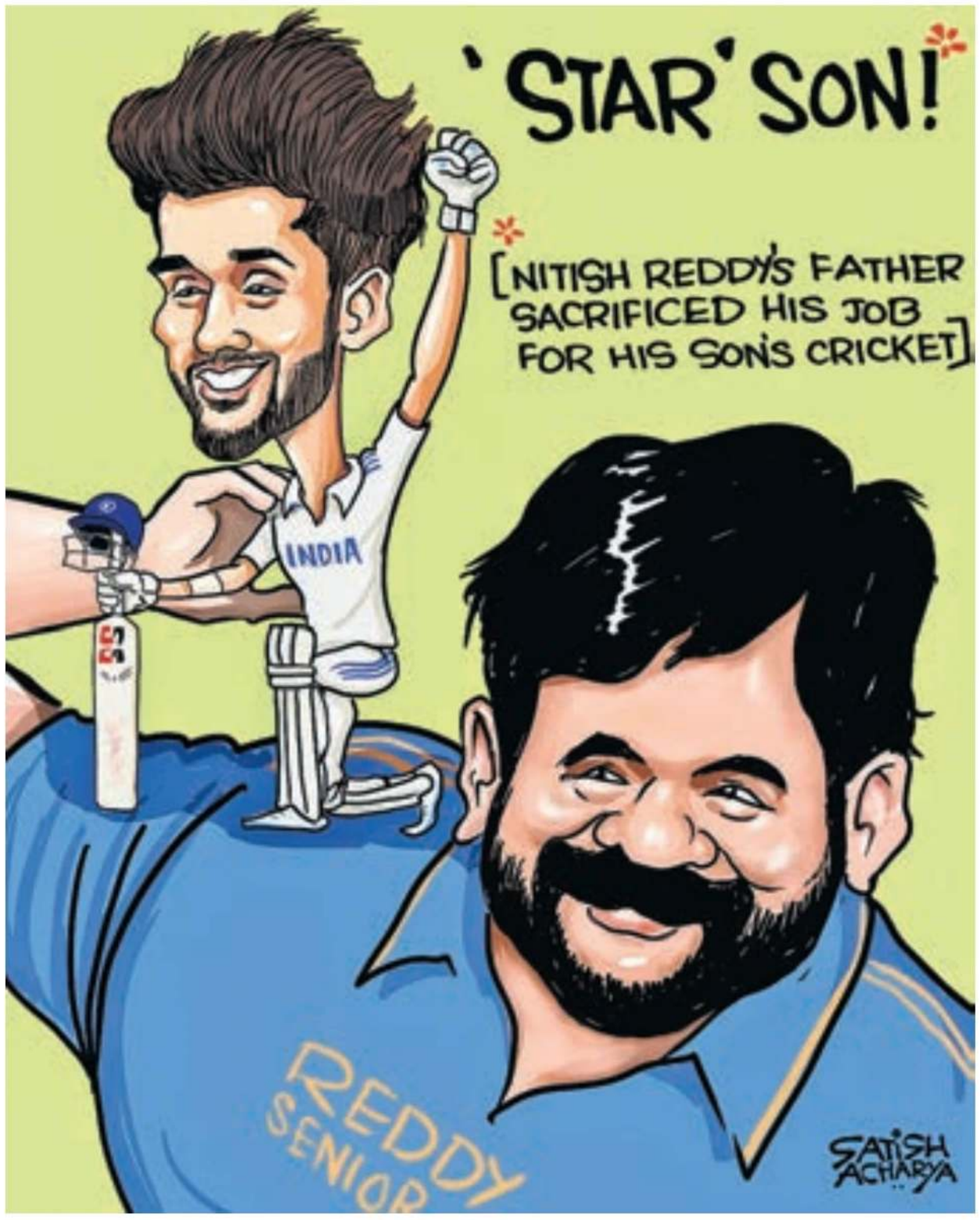
Men's doubles: Arsh Mohammad (UP) & Sanskar Saraswat (Raj) bt P. Naveen & V. Lokesh (TN) 21-12, 12-21, 21-19.

Women's doubles: Arathi Sara Sunil (Ker) & V.S. Varshini (TN) bt Priya Devi Konjengbam (Mnp) & Shruti Mishra (UP) 21-18, 22-20, 17-21.

Mixed doubles: Ayush Agarwal & Shruti Mishra (UP) bt Rohan Kapoor (Del) & G. Ruthvika Shivani (Pet) 21-17, 21-18

N. SUDARSHAN

SPORTOON



1 Uttar Pradesh boys and Tamil Nadu girls emerged champions in the 49th sub-junior national basketball championship at Saroornagar Indoor Stadium in Hyderabad. In the boys' final, UP scored a hard-fought 56-49 victory over Delhi after leading 34-30 at halftime. UP owed its victory to the trio of Jatin, Darshil and Kaushal, whereas for Delhi, Yadav and Shivam put up a good show. In the girls' final, Tamil Nadu scored an easy 68-46 win against Maharashtra after leading 35-15 at halftime. Tamil Nadu played a fast-paced game from the start with Swathika and Mercy dominating the offence.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 Vaishnavi Adkar outplayed Elena Jamshidi of Japan 6-2, 6-1 in the final of the $15,000 ITF women's tennis tournament at the Ace Academy in Palodiya.
It was a maiden title in the professional circuit for the 20-year-old Vaishnavi, who did not drop a set along the way.
She made it doubly special by winning the doubles title later in partnership with Pooja Ingale. The Indian pair saved three match points in the super tiebreak at 6-9 to beat the Japanese Honoka Kobayashi and Anri Nagata 6-3, 2-6, [12-10].

TEAM SPORTSTAR

BCPS Centenary review

By C.G.S.Narayanan

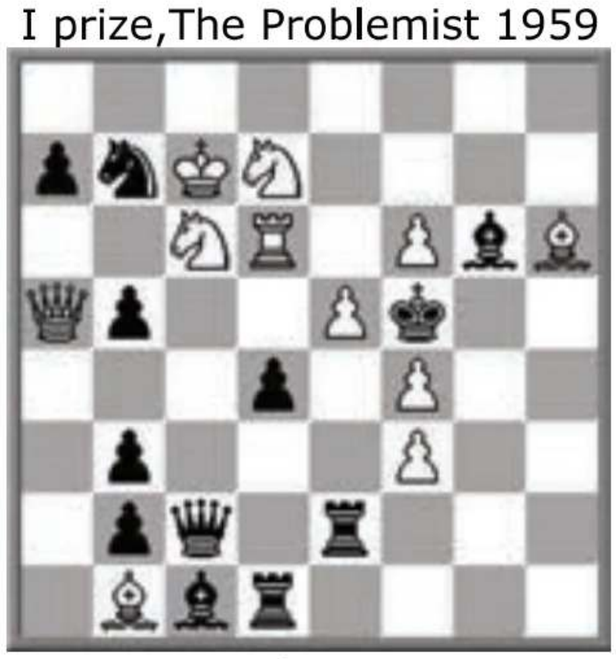
The oldest existing chess problem society, the BCPS (British Chess Problem Society) has turned hundred with international membership. Its Centenary Review brought out by British IM for chess composition Barry P. Barnes and IM for solving Michael McDowell presented activities of the society which promoted problem composition and solving during the period 1918-2018. In this review 463 prize winning problems and endgame studies by British and commonwealth composers show an astonishing variety of chess almost never seen in the game-the poetry of chess. Here I present three prize winners which incidentally won Brian Harley Awards as well.

R.C.O.Mathews
I prize,BCF Ty 72

Mate in three moves
Key 1.Qb5!(2.Rf3+Ke4 3.d3)
1…Rc5 2.Rd6+ Ng6 3.Rfxd4
1..Bc5 2.Re6+ Ng6 3.Qxc4
1…Rd5 2.Rc6+ Ng6 3.Qxc5
1…Bd5 2.Rb6+ Ng6 3.Rxd4
1..Qf6 2.Rh6+ Bg6 3.Rh3

The organ pipes placing of the bRs and bBs has them doubly guarding c4 and d4.In response to the threat bRs and bBs close the WQ line of guard to make e5 a prospective flight square but each defence at c5 and d5 cuts one line of guard. Discovered checks from the B+R battery arrive to close second line of guard for mates on c4 and d4.

W.A.Whyatt
I prize,The Problemist 1959

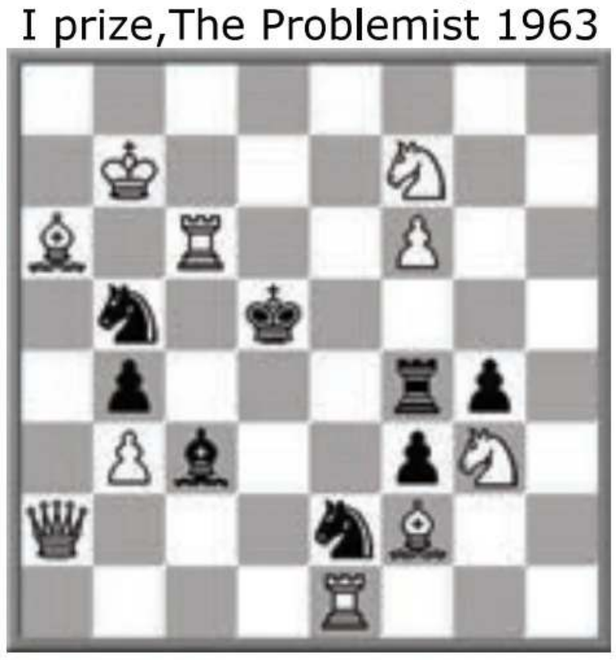


Mate in three moves
Key 1.Qe1!(Bxc2+ Rxc2 3.Qe4)
1..Rdxe1 2.Kb8 (3.Nxd4/Ne7)
1…Be3 2.Kxb7 (3.Ne7) 1..Nxd6
2.Kxd6 (3.Ne7)2..Rxe5 3.Qxe5

The down under key to put the WQ doubly en prise is a wonderful surprise for solvers but the further surprise is the trio of WK moves to unpin WNc6.

Problem below (for solving) by FIDE master shows correction play on d4.

M.Parthasarathy
I prize,The Problemist 1963



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'An unsung classic revisited': 1.h3? waiting 1…fxg5/Kh4 2.Qh7/Qg4 but1…Kh6! 1.h4? waiting 1…fxg5/Kh6 2.Qxg5/Qh7 but 1…Kxh4! Try 1.Kf8? waiting

1…Kh6/Kh4 2.Nf7/Nf3 but
1…fxg5!Key 1.Kf7! waiting
1….Kh6/Kh4/fxg5 2.Qg6/Nf3/Qh3

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

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

LIFTING TEMPO AND ITS BENEFITS

Focusing on tempo during reps can offer **significant physiological advantages** over time. Ignoring it can negate those benefits.

When you hit the gym to lift weights, have you ever paid attention to the speed of your reps or the pause between each one? Many people focus closely on exercise selection, load, rep ranges, and rest periods, but most fail to notice lifting tempo.

Even many experienced lifters or athletes with years of training experience go through their workouts without realising their rep speed. What's the deal with tempo? Is there real muscle hypertrophy happening, or are there other benefits beyond muscle mass gain from following a tempo protocol?

Focusing on tempo can offer significant physiological benefits over time. Ignoring it can negate certain benefits for sure.

More muscle gain?

As mentioned earlier, most discussions about lifting tempo centre around gaining muscle. In this context, mechanical tension is one of the primary drivers of muscle hypertrophy. Typically, there are two main ways to increase mechanical tension during a workout:

❶ Increase the weight you are lifting.

❷ Increase the time you spend lifting the weight.

Slowing down your rep speed essentially increases the time your muscles are under tension. Theoretically, this should lead to more muscle growth since there would be an increase in mechanical tension. Many bodybuilders deliberately lift weights slowly in an attempt to trigger greater muscle growth.

However, there seems to be a problem with the logic of speed versus load: you can't necessarily lift the same weight for the same number of reps when you slow down your lifting tempo. Generally, the slower your rep speed, the lighter the weight has to be in order to complete the same number of reps.

So, what triggers more muscle growth — lifting a lighter weight more slowly, or lifting a heavier weight more quickly? Research suggests that the hypertrophic benefit is essentially equal between the two approaches. In fact, it is believed that using a lifting tempo anywhere between 0.5 and 8 seconds will result in significant muscle growth. However, studies also show that less hypertrophy occurs when the lifting tempo exceeds 10 seconds.

Much of this research involves lifting tempo tactics where both the eccentric and concentric portions of an exercise are slowed down in a rep within the time frame. Some studies suggest that manipulating just the eccentric portion of the lift can also promote muscle gain. However, there isn't enough research to conclude that slow eccentrics are absolutely better for hypertrophy, still many studies are happening on varied fronts to prove which is the right template. The key lies in focusing on controlled movement execution. Your tempo should allow you to maintain a solid mind-muscle connection and maximise stimulation of the muscle's cross-sectional area.

Connective tissue strength

While slow tempo training may not offer magical benefits for muscle mass, it does provide other important advantages. Slower tempo training enhances connective tissue

repair and strength alongside muscle hypertrophy. The strength of the tendons and ligaments supporting the muscle is of paramount importance for overall muscle development. Several studies have shown that slow tempo training is particularly beneficial, not only as a rehab tool but also for building strong connective tissue and preventing injuries.

Neuromuscular efficiency

Another benefit of lifting tempo lies in improving neuromuscular efficiency. Steering through periods of slow and fast tempo is an effective way to prime the nervous system to handle more challenging loads.

With slow tempo training, your body learns how to absorb force and transfer it properly.

It can also help you refine proper form and technique while you work on sticking points in compound lifts. Both of these factors improve the nervous system's efficiency in managing progressively heavier loads.

This concept applies across many sports disciplines. We often practice skills slowly before attempting them at full speed. Once you progress to a faster tempo, your body is able to handle the heavier loads and produce more force. This not only increases strength effectively but also reduces the risk of injury.

Crucial knowledge: Many experienced lifters or athletes with years of training experience go through their workouts without realising their rep speed. GETTY IMAGES

Several studies have shown that slow tempo training is particularly beneficial, not only as a rehab tool but also for building strong connective tissue and preventing injuries.

One of sport's most tricky ambitions

Cracking the American market and **attract** them to a whole new sport is not easy. Yet, all sports have to try.

Suresh Menon

During President Donald Trump's new term, America will be the focus of the sporting world. All international sports have one agenda in common: to crack the American market. Football hasn't made it yet, nor has cricket, nor indeed rugby — sports which have definite plans to do so. The first two have held World Cups in America, while rugby has its shot in 2031.

America will host football's Club World Cup in 2025, the World Cup in 2026, and the Olympics two years later. Cricket's T20 World Cup came and went in 2024 without setting the Hudson river on fire.

According to one calculation, if rugby gains just one per cent of the sports rights market in the U.S., it would double the sport's global economy. It is thus more than a temptation, it is sound strategy. That may not mean new money, merely redirecting the money that now goes to the Big Three — NFL, basketball and baseball.

But, as Mike Tyson memorably said, everybody has a plan till they get punched in the mouth. Both football and cricket have been punched in the mouth, and stagger along without any significant impact. Many in these sports suspect that it is a case of throwing good money after bad after years of trying to force a sport down the throats of an indifferent American public and the consequent indifferent American market. The alternative, of course, is to spend that money in countries where the game already exists, and there is a legacy of sorts.

Focus America: According to one calculation, if rugby gains just one per cent of the sports rights market in the U.S., it would double the sport's global economy. GETTY IMAGES

That word, 'legacy' is probably key here. Despite America's interest in cricket in the 19th century, the game was quickly supplanted by baseball in the public consciousness. It is not a legacy sport, and nor is football (soccer). There is something to be said for a sport evolving organically to become an important element of society. Despite professional and semi-professional leagues, cricket, football and rugby are popular mainly among expatriate communities in whose countries these sports are big.

It is nearly 50 years since Pele first signed up for the New York Cosmos. It was, according to one report, "one of the great corporate chases of all time, logging 30,000 air miles, racking up $8,000 a month in phone bills, and finally having to solicit a telegram from U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to his Brazilian counterpart imploring the latter to allow Pele, to play for the Cosmos." Soccer had finally arrived in the United States. But it is yet to attain the levels of popularity or revenue as in the rest of the world.

Cracking the American market is one of sport's most tricky ambitions. For one, America is content with the sports they already have, from track and field to chess. The fact that they call their domestic baseball tournament the 'world series' says something about the mindset.

To attract them to a whole new sport is not easy. Yet, all sports have to try. Some to prosper and grow, others to merely survive.

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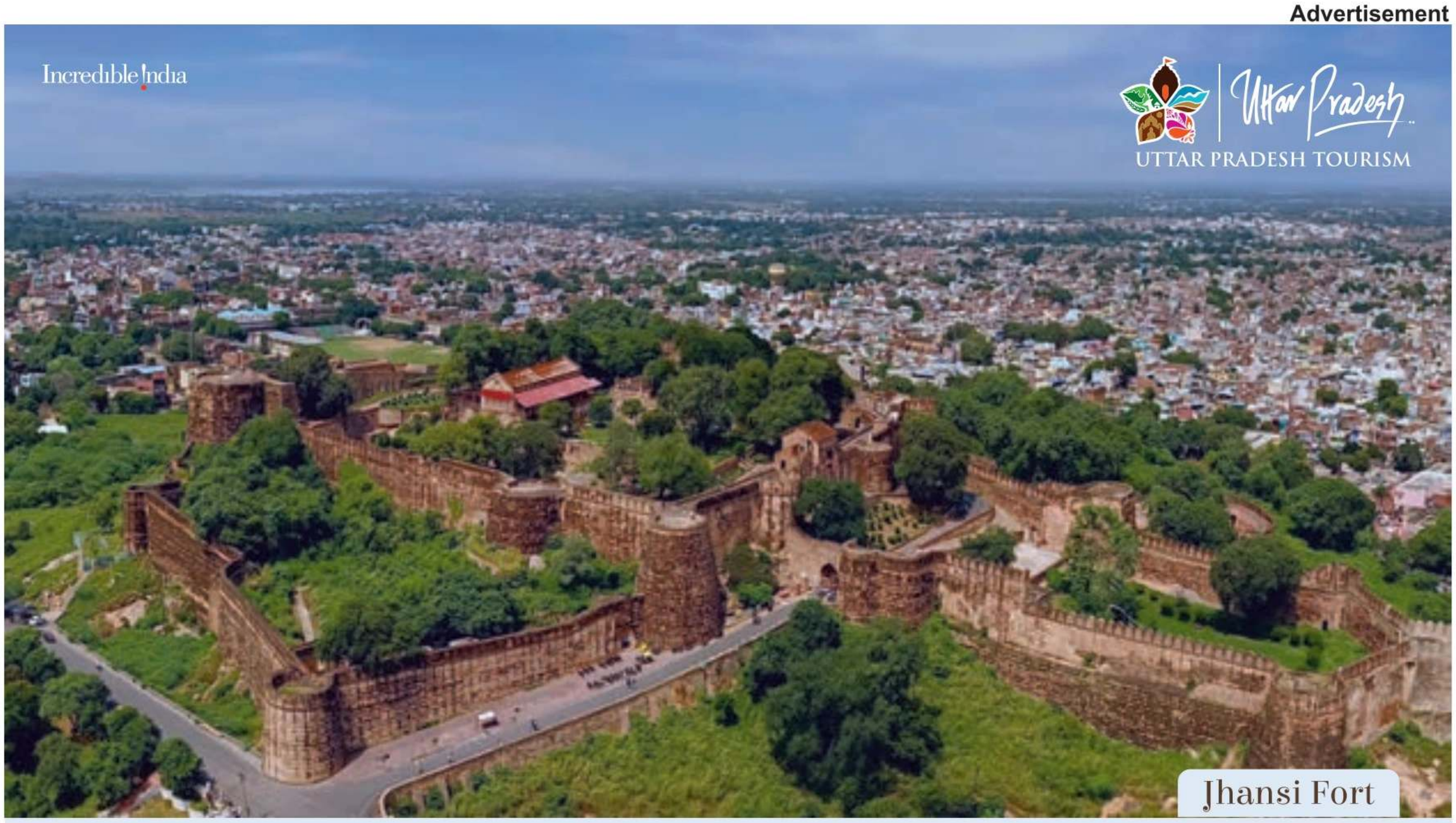

Jhansi Fort

Exploring Deogarh and Lalitpur amid History, Heritage, and Tranquillity

Bundelkhand, a region of rugged landscapes and royal grandeur, has been a witness to India's historical and cultural evolution. From the 9th-century Chandela kings to the Bundelas, who shaped its architectural legacy, Bundelkhand's heritage is deeply etched in its forts, temples, and rivers. The region also played a key role during India's first war of independence, led by Rani Laxmi Bai, making it a living testament to bravery and tradition.

Our journey began in Jhansi, a city synonymous with the indomitable spirit of Rani Laxmi Bai. The iconic Jhansi Fort, built in 1613 by Raja Bir Singh Deo, stood as a symbol of Bundelkhand's resilience. Exploring its expansive grounds and museum brought alive stories of valour and the region's royal dynasties. Just 22 km away is Barua Sagar's fort, built by Raja Udit Singh, showcased Bundelkhand's strategic importance. Nearby, the Parichha Dam on the Betwa River offered scenic beauty and demonstrated its role in supporting local livelihoods.

Heading 133 km to Lalitpur, we discovered Deogarh, a historical gem. Deogarh's Dasavatara Temple, dating to the 6th century, is a masterpiece of Gupta architecture, adorned with intricate carvings depicting tales from Vaishnava texts. The Jain temple complex, housing over 40 temples, stood as a testament to Jain devotion and artistry. Highlights included the 12-foot red stone idol and rock-cut Buddhist statues that underscored Deogarh's multi-religious significance.

Beyond its historical treasures, Bundelkhand's natural beauty unfolded at Mahaveer Swami Vanya Jeev Vihar, a wildlife sanctuary named after Jain Tirthankara Mahavira. Spanning dense forests and rolling hills, it is home to diverse wildlife and migratory birds. Trekking through its verdant expanse, we encountered Raj Ghat, where the Betwa River's tranquil flow framed lush greenery, leaving us spellbound.

The day concluded with a visit to Bandargurha village in Lalitpur, where a sudden downpour transformed the surroundings into a picturesque haven. Enjoying a meal as the rain painted the landscape, we reflected on Bundelkhand's rich tapestry of history, spirituality, and nature.

As we departed for Lucknow, hearts brimming with memories, we promised to return to Bundelkhand-a region where heritage and tranquillity meet to create an unforgettable experience.

Dashavatara Temple, Lalitpur

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Pilibhit: The Allure of Uttar Pradesh's Only Beach.

Pilibhit, one of Uttar Pradesh's most popular historical, religious, and cultural destinations, lies on the border of Nepal and is surrounded by dense forests. Despite its proximity to the Himalayas, the terrain here is flat, offering a unique geographical charm. The region's historical significance is well-documented, with references in ancient texts like the Mahabharata. Pilibhit was part of the Panchal kingdom during the Mahabharata era and was ruled by King Moradhwaj, a devotee of Krishna and a close ally of Arjuna.

Pilibhit offers a peaceful retreat for those seeking solace amidst nature. Watching the sun set against a vibrant orange sky is a mesmerizing experience, making it a perfect getaway. The region's cool and pleasant climate, enhanced by its proximity to the Himalayas, attracts tourists throughout the year, offering clear blue skies and refreshing breezes. Pilibhit is also home to Chuka Beach, a picturesque beauty for the tourists.

For the nature enthusiasts, Pilibhit offers a blend of adventure and tranquility. Popular attractions include the Tiger Reserve, Chuka Beach, Sapt Sarovar, and Sharda Sagar Dam. The thrill of mounting in an open vehicle and moving through the terrains of the jungle and observing every call of spotting a tiger can skip one's heart beat when the eyes meet with a majestic royal Bengal tiger. Pilibhit is ideal for eco-tourists, offering affordable ways to explore dense forests and enjoy the beach-like vibes of Chuka.

Chuka Beach, located between the Sharda Canal and Sharda Sagar Dam, is a hidden gem in Uttar Pradesh. While it lacks the sandy shores of Goa, its lush greenery and unique accommodations, such as tree houses, offer a one-of-a-kind experience. Visitors can enjoy sunbathing in the winter, making it an attractive destination for relaxation. Pilibhit is also home to the renowned Tiger Reserve, established in 2008 under the "Project Tiger" initiative, covering an area of 1,087 square kilometers. The reserve is a haven for wildlife enthusiasts and budget-friendly travelers. Surrounded by a significant tiger population, the stay at the tree houses here offers an aerial view of the dense forest where the big cats are always of the prowl.

Other notable attractions include Sapt Sarovar, which was developed during the British era and now draws large crowds with its serene ponds and scenic beauty. The Sharda Sagar Dam, a 25-kilometer-long marvel, offers breathtaking sunset views, while the Bifurcation Point, a canal junction surrounded by forests, is another captivating spot. Pilibhit also offers unique staying options with an ancient tribe called Tharus. Staying at the tharu huts offers a one of its kind experience with a better understanding of the traditions of the tribes in the region. The stay can be arranged through advance booking.

The state government is making efforts to integrate the tribal population with the eco-tourism initiatives, promoting tourism, opportunities for increasing livelihood of the tribes and also promoting sustainability. Religious landmarks like the Gaurishankar Temple and the Radharaman Temple further enhance Pilibhit's appeal. These temples, known for their intricate craftsmanship, are significant pilgrimage sites.

Accessible by air, rail, and road, Pilibhit is well-connected to major cities, with Lucknow being the nearest airport. The best time to visit Pilibhit is between October and April when the weather is pleasant and the beauty of the forest is at its peak. Whether one is a nature lover, adventure seeker, or cultural enthusiast, Pilibhit offers something for everyone, making it an unforgettable destination in Uttar Pradesh.

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