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K. L. RAHUL

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Chelsea crowned champion in USA

IN IGA'S ERA

Queen of Clay, Iga Swiatek, defeated Amanda Anisimova 6-0, 6-0 in the final to win her first Wimbledon and sixth Grand Slam

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OFF-SIDE

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THE GREY ZONE OF GREATNESS

Gamesmanship is essentially sportsmanship's **sly twin** — rule-abiding on the surface, but underneath, just petty opportunism.

As the sun sank at Lord's in a haze of tired white flannel and sweat, Zak Crawley, as if auditioning for Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise*, wandered off twice before Jasprit Bumrah could bowl. He then called for the physio after a glancing blow to the glove. And one over quietly disappeared into the English dusk. The host walked off with 10 wickets intact, and Shubman Gill, visibly frustrated, offered a round of sarcastic applause.

What Crawley did was gamesmanship. A performance with just enough ambiguity to avoid a reprimand.

The next day, Akash Deep — tailender, rookie, and possibly hoping for the same Oscar nomination — tried the same trick. He gestured for attention, stalled for time, and hoped to escape one last over from Ben Stokes. But unlike Crawley, he failed. The England captain ended his brief stay at the crease, leaving India at 58/4 going into the last day of a fascinating Test match.

This was sport's legal grey zone — a space full of performative cramps and raised eyebrows. While sportsmanship is about fairness and restraint, gamesmanship is essentially its sly twin — rule-abiding on the surface, but underneath, just petty opportunism and loophole hunting.

Crawley's act — or *Glove Gate* — danced on that tightrope.

Unsportsmanlike behaviour, though, is something else. It's Dennis Lillee kicking Javed Miandad, Trevor Chappell bowling underarm to stop a six. It's Diego Maradona's 'Hand of God' goal at the 1986 World Cup.

In tennis, Novak Djokovic is the unofficial king of strategic disruption. He has taken medical timeouts mid-match, often when losing, sparking accusations of gamesmanship. During the Wimbledon quarterfinal against Jannik Sinner in 2022, Djokovic, two sets down, vanished for a bathroom break and came back a different player. He won in five sets and went on to clinch his seventh All England title.

A 2021 *Wall Street Journal* analysis found Djokovic wins 83.3 per cent of sets — 10 out of 12 since 2013 — immediately after bathroom breaks. It's higher than his overall career set winning percentage at Grand Slams (78.6). The ATP, in 2022, implemented stricter regulations, limiting players to one break per match for a maximum of three minutes (plus an additional two minutes for changing clothes), and only at the end of a set.

What Crawley and Djokovic share is the ability to game the structure — not break it, just bend it to suit their end.

And so, we arrive at the dilemma: is sporting greatness just measured in numbers — 24 Grand Slams, a Test hundred, a final-day escape. Or do we factor in the way they navigate the in-betweens? The pauses. The loopholes. The moral shade of performance.

Do we love our champions for what they win, or how they win it?

That, perhaps, is the loneliest line in all of sport. Not the crease or the baseline, but the one between winning, and winning good.

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WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT

« I was just trying to chase the ball. She was already celebrating it. I mean, that's a bit too early." – Aryna Sabalenka, taking a swipe at Amanda Anisimova over her behaviour during the American's stunning Wimbledon semifinal victory against the World No. 1 »

« WPL has been an integral part of the progress of the players. There's no doubt about it. It's been a happy hunting ground for us." – Indian women's team coach Amol Muzumdar after the 3-2 T20I series victory against England »

1st

Australia's Grace Kim **(in pic)** produced a series of stunning shots at the Evian Championship, starting with an eagle to force a playoff and following it up with another eagle on the second extra hole to defeat Jeeno Thitikul — securing her first LPGA Tour win in dramatic fashion. Meanwhile, Chris Gotterup held his nerve with clutch shots down the stretch, carding a 4-under 66 to claim a two-shot victory over crowd favourite Rory McIlroy at the Scottish Open.

45

Venus Williams accepted a wild-card invitation to play singles at this month's DC Open, a ATP-WTA 500 level event, which would be the seven-time Grand Slam champion's first tournament in more than a year. Williams, who turned 45 in June, is listed as "inactive" on the WTA Tour's website. She hasn't competed in an official match since the Miami Open in 2024.

RACING AWAY

American Noah Lyles made an impressive season debut in the 200 metres to beat Olympic champion Letsile Tebogo at the Monaco Diamond League meeting, where Kenyan Emmanuel Wanyonyi outclassed a high-class 800 metres field. Tebogo was quick out of the blocks and stuck with Lyles around the bend with the two side-by-side going into the home straight but the American pulled away in the final 50 metres to win in 19.88 seconds with Tebogo coming home in 19.97.

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» FIGHT CLUB

BEAST MODE

Derrick Lewis delivers a record-extending 16th UFC knockout with a 35-second demolition of Tallison Teixeira.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

The Bridgestone Arena erupted on a thrilling fight night as Derrick 'The Black Beast' Lewis delivered a lightning-fast knockout, solidifying his legendary status in the Ultimate Fighting Championship's heavyweight division. In a highly anticipated main event, Lewis swiftly dispatched Tallison Teixeira in merely 35 seconds of the opening round, further cementing his record for the most knockouts (16) in UFC history.

From the opening bell, Lewis demonstrated his signature power. Despite a brief moment where Teixeira managed to land a shot, Lewis quickly recovered and unleashed a devastating left hand that sent his opponent crashing to the canvas.

The referee wasted no time in stopping the contest, ensuring Teixeira's safety and marking a decisive victory for Lewis. This impressive performance secured back-to-back wins for Lewis against promising Brazilian contenders, highlighting his continued dominance and unwavering power inside the octagon.

Beyond the Beast

The night's excitement wasn't limited to the main event. The co-main event saw a closely contested battle where Gabriel Bonfim edged out Stephen Thompson, the oldest active fighter in the promotion, via split decision.

Thompson and Bonfim followed an action-packed main card, which saw three consecutive bouts end via finish, before Steve Garcia extended his winning run to six fights with a unanimous decision over Calvin Kattar. The opening few minutes of the fight saw both fighters exchanging leg kicks, but Bonfim's shots did most of the damage. The Brazilian then initiated a successful takedown, which rattled Thompson, but he was able to get back on his feet eventually. With the crowd backing homeboy Thompson to the fullest, Bonfim attempted multiple takedowns but found little success.

Bonfim, in the final round, was able to dominate towards the end as he pinned Thompson along the fence. The 27-year-old's efforts were enough to get the nod from two out of the three judges and take a split decision for his third straight victory.

The Reaper is back!

The UFC is set to deliver a highly anticipated middleweight clash as Robert Whittaker prepares to face the surging Reinier de Ridder in the main event of UFC Abu Dhabi on July 26 at the Etihad Arena.

Robert Whittaker, a former UFC Middleweight Champion, will step back into the octagon looking to reassert his dominance.

His opponent, Reinier de Ridder, a decorated former two-division ONE Championship titleholder, has made an impressive splash in the UFC, accumulating an undefeated record since his debut last year.

De Ridder's recent victory over Bo Nickal has further elevated his stock, making him a formidable challenge for 'The Reaper'. The match-up promises a compelling clash of styles, with Whittaker's precise striking facing de Ridder's grappling skills — potentially shaping the future of the middleweight division.

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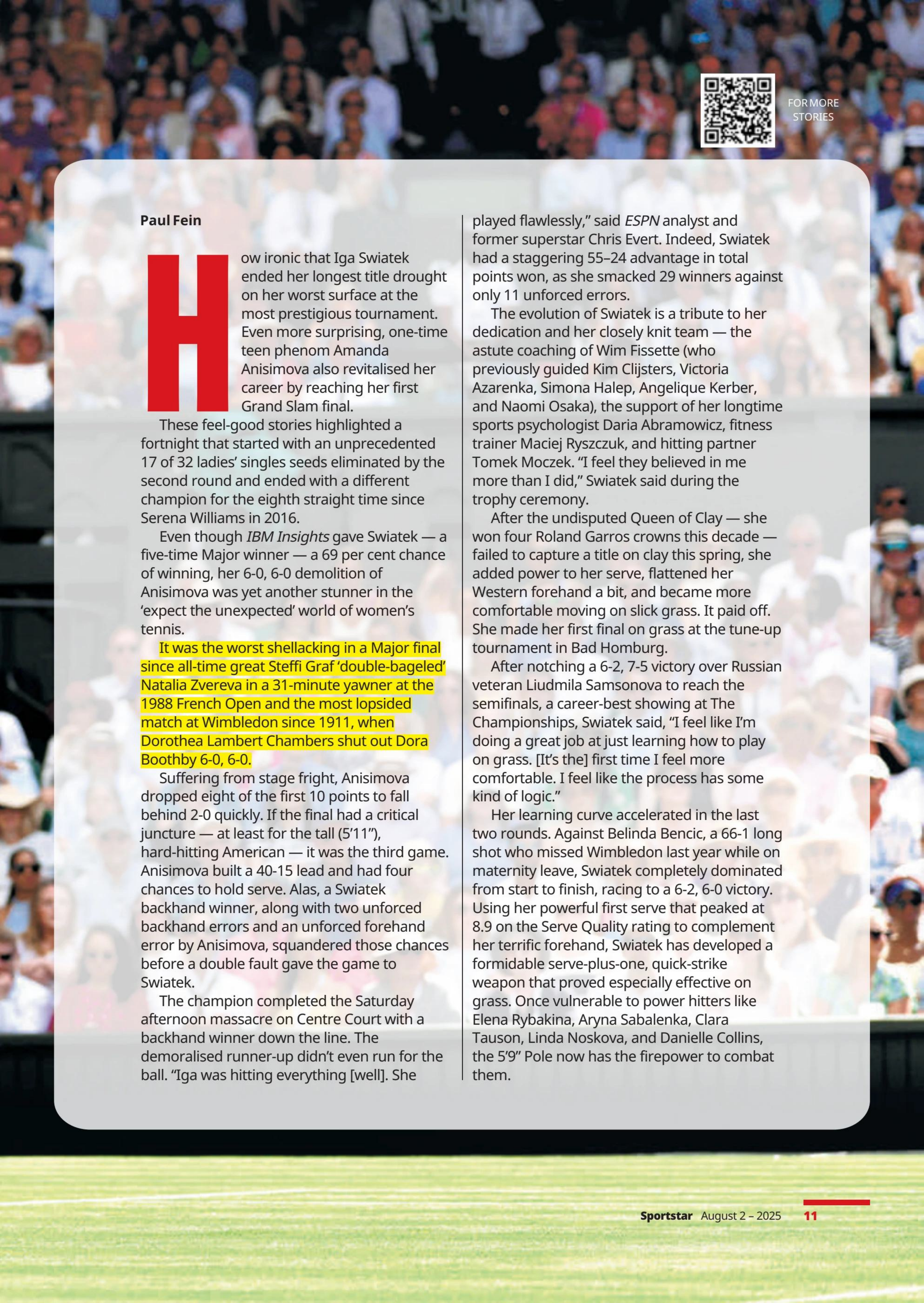
A NEW ORDER ON GRASS

Perfect storm: In a display of sheer dominance, Iga Swiatek dismantled Amanda Anisimova with a double bagel — 6-0, 6-0 — in the final. GETTY IMAGES

Wimbledon heralded two new champions as Iga Swiatek and Jannik Sinner won their **maiden titles** in contrasting finals.

Swiatek is now the eighth woman to capture Grand Slam singles titles on all three surfaces, joining Chris Evert, Martina Navratilova, Hana Mandlikova, Steffi Graf, Serena Williams, Maria Sharapova, and Ash Barty.



FOR MORE STORIES

Paul Fein

How ironic that Iga Swiatek ended her longest title drought on her worst surface at the most prestigious tournament. Even more surprising, one-time teen phenom Amanda Anisimova also revitalised her career by reaching her first Grand Slam final.

These feel-good stories highlighted a fortnight that started with an unprecedented 17 of 32 ladies' singles seeds eliminated by the second round and ended with a different champion for the eighth straight time since Serena Williams in 2016.

Even though *IBM Insights* gave Swiatek — a five-time Major winner — a 69 per cent chance of winning, her 6-0, 6-0 demolition of Anisimova was yet another stunner in the 'expect the unexpected' world of women's tennis.

It was the worst shellacking in a Major final since all-time great Steffi Graf 'double-bageled' Natalia Zvereva in a 31-minute yawner at the 1988 French Open and the most lopsided match at Wimbledon since 1911, when Dorothea Lambert Chambers shut out Dora Boothby 6-0, 6-0.

Suffering from stage fright, Anisimova dropped eight of the first 10 points to fall behind 2-0 quickly. If the final had a critical juncture — at least for the tall (5'11"), hard-hitting American — it was the third game. Anisimova built a 40-15 lead and had four chances to hold serve. Alas, a Swiatek backhand winner, along with two unforced backhand errors and an unforced forehand error by Anisimova, squandered those chances before a double fault gave the game to Swiatek.

The champion completed the Saturday afternoon massacre on Centre Court with a backhand winner down the line. The demoralised runner-up didn't even run for the ball. "Iga was hitting everything [well]. She played flawlessly," said *ESPN* analyst and former superstar Chris Evert. Indeed, Swiatek had a staggering 55–24 advantage in total points won, as she smacked 29 winners against only 11 unforced errors.

The evolution of Swiatek is a tribute to her dedication and her closely knit team — the astute coaching of Wim Fissette (who previously guided Kim Clijsters, Victoria Azarenka, Simona Halep, Angelique Kerber, and Naomi Osaka), the support of her longtime sports psychologist Daria Abramowicz, fitness trainer Maciej Ryszczuk, and hitting partner Tomek Moczek. "I feel they believed in me more than I did," Swiatek said during the trophy ceremony.

After the undisputed Queen of Clay — she won four Roland Garros crowns this decade — failed to capture a title on clay this spring, she added power to her serve, flattened her Western forehand a bit, and became more comfortable moving on slick grass. It paid off. She made her first final on grass at the tune-up tournament in Bad Homburg.

After notching a 6-2, 7-5 victory over Russian veteran Liudmila Samsonova to reach the semifinals, a career-best showing at The Championships, Swiatek said, "I feel like I'm doing a great job at just learning how to play on grass. [It's the] first time I feel more comfortable. I feel like the process has some kind of logic."

Her learning curve accelerated in the last two rounds. Against Belinda Bencic, a 66-1 long shot who missed Wimbledon last year while on maternity leave, Swiatek completely dominated from start to finish, racing to a 6-2, 6-0 victory. Using her powerful first serve that peaked at 8.9 on the Serve Quality rating to complement her terrific forehand, Swiatek has developed a formidable serve-plus-one, quick-strike weapon that proved especially effective on grass. Once vulnerable to power hitters like Elena Rybakina, Aryna Sabalenka, Clara Tauson, Linda Noskova, and Danielle Collins, the 5'9" Pole now has the firepower to combat them.

As for Anisimova's abysmal performance (eight winners against 28 unforced errors), Evert provided a ready explanation. "Amanda had nothing left in the tank, emotionally and mentally. After every win, she fell and put her hands on her face. She was so happy. She wasn't used to that."

Although her dream run at the Big W ended in a nightmare final, Anisimova **(below)** notched two excellent wins and a huge one to arrive there. Faced with a much tougher draw than Swiatek, Amanda outslugged No. 30 Noskova of Czechia, 6-2, 5-7, 6-4 in the fourth round and 2022 French Open finalist Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, 6-1, 7-6(9), in the quarterfinals. She won the hard way against the 34-year-old Russian, not converting match points at 5-4 in the second set and then escaping set points at 6-3 in the tiebreak.

Amazingly, none of this year's quarterfinalists in the women's draw had reached the same stage at Wimbledon last year — and not one had ever made it to the final before.

That included, of course, Anisimova, who reached her second Grand Slam semifinal six years after making her first at the French Open as a 17-year-old rising star who led Ash Barty by a set and 3-0 before bowing out. Three months later, her life was rocked when her father and long-time first coach, Konstantin, died of a sudden heart attack at 52, an event she called "the worst thing that ever happened to me".

Injuries and depression derailed her career, and in May 2023, she took an eight-month mental health break from the Tour. "A lot of people told me that you would never make it to the top again if you take so much time away from the game," she recalled. "That was a little hard to digest because I did want to come back and still achieve a lot and win a Grand Slam one day."

GETTY IMAGES

AFTER FAILING TO QUALIFY AT WIMBLEDON A YEAR AGO, ANISIMOVA RACKED UP A 5-1 RECORD AGAINST TOP-10 PLAYERS THIS SEASON. SHE ENDED UP BEATING SABALENKA IN THE SEMIFINAL

During her time away from the tournament grind, Amanda renewed friendships, painted, and took college courses. When she returned to competition in January 2024, she regained her love of the game. "It's all about the process and enjoying every single day," she said.

After failing to qualify at Wimbledon a year ago, Anisimova racked up a 5–1 record against top-10 players this season. Though she was a decided underdog against Sabalenka in the semifinals, the 23-year-old American boasted a 5–3 edge in their rivalry. She also had the fastest serve return of any player — male or female — in the tournament.

Sabalenka, however, was under immense pressure in this tournament, having lost three-set heartbreakers to Madison Keys in the Australian Open final and Coco

Heavy losses: After losing the finals in the Australian and French Opens this year, Sabalenka was under immense pressure. AFP

Gauff in the French Open final. In her semifinal against Anisimova, during an 18-point game serving at 4-5, the Belarusian double-faulted to lose the opening set 6-4. Sabalenka, who hadn't lost a match in straight sets at a Major since the 2020 US Open, fought back. Screaming, as she threw her body into every shot, she won the second set 6-4.

With Sabalenka serving at 4-5 in the deciding set, both had won 104 points. Anisimova earned three match points, leading love-40. Sabalenka staved off the first two. But Anisimova belted a bold forehand crosscourt winner to clinch the 6-4, 4-6, 6-4 triumph. Sabalenka, who converted only three of 14 break points, admitted, "I should have been a little more brave today." However, she showed more grace in defeat than she did after losing to Gauff five weeks earlier. "She was the better player. Losing sucks. You feel like you want to die."

Bencic **(right, below)**, the singles gold medallist and doubles silver medallist at the Tokyo Olympics, edged 18th-seeded Ekaterina Alexandrova 7-6(4), 6-4 in the fourth round. Bencic, who won the junior title here in 2013, said, "I'm happy I'm here to live the dream." She then upset 7th-seeded Mirra Andreeva 7-6(3), 7-6(2) to advance to her second Major semifinal.

Laura Siegemund, who had never advanced past the second round at Wimbledon, conjured the biggest upset against Australian Open champion and sixth-seeded Keys. Before The Championships, Keys said, ironically, "I've always loved playing on grass. It just makes sense for my game." Not against undersized (5'6"), ageing (37), much lower-ranked (No. 104) Siegemund, though. The German veteran, known more for her doubles success, had never gone past the Wimbledon second round before. Nonetheless, Siegemund stunned Keys 6-3, 6-3. With a masterly array of drop shots, stinging and touch volleys, extremely low slices, occasional powerful groundstrokes, accurate lobs, and splendid defence, Siegemund disrupted and defused the power game of the discombobulated Keys, eliciting a torrent of forced and unforced errors. It was a tactical masterpiece reminiscent of long shot Roberta Vinci's shocking upset of Serena in the 2015 US Open semifinals. Siegemund almost pulled off an even bigger upset against Sabalenka when she led 4-3, 40-30 in the deciding set of the most intriguing quarterfinal. But power ultimately overcame finesse, and Sabalenka prevailed 4-6, 6-2, 6-4. The often volatile Belarusian said, "I'm really proud of the way I handled my emotions out there."

In the final, after a flawless performance, Swiatek fell on her back, a la Bjorn Borg, the stoic Swede who introduced that victory gesture when he won his first Wimbledon in 1976. Swiatek is now the eighth woman to capture Grand Slam singles titles on all three surfaces, joining Evert, Martina Navratilova, Hana Mandlikova, Graf, Serena, Maria Sharapova, and Barty.

GETTY IMAGES

Leading a revolution: This was Sinner's fourth Grand Slam title and his second of the year, following his win at the Australian Open. GETTY IMAGES

JANNIK SINNER DETHRONES CARLOS ALCARAZ

Sometimes it takes a bit of good fortune to win Grand Slam titles, even for The Great Ones. Grigor Dimitrov, touted as 'Baby Fed' early in his career for his athletic and stylistic resemblance to superstar Roger Federer, was playing the match of his life in the fourth round against Jannik Sinner.

The 34-year-old Bulgarian, seeded No. 19, built a stunning 6-3, 7-5, 2-2 lead by attacking 29 per cent of the time (compared to 23 per cent for Sinner), hitting 36 winners, and taking 20 of 29 net points. Serving at 40-love, Dimitrov grabbed his right pectoral muscle during a routine backhand volley. Then at 40-all, he writhed in pain. He laughed and then cried at his cruel fate.

For the fifth Major in a row, the snake-bitten Dimitrov was forced to retire with a serious injury. Sinner would lose only one other set during The Championships, to Carlos Alcaraz.

About his unusual victory, Sinner rightly said, "I don't see this as a win." In fact, it took a toll on him, too. Jannik fell in the first game and landed on his elbow. Although it caused him pain, an MRI showed it wasn't serious. He wore a long protective sleeve covering taping on his serving arm against big-serving lefty Ben Shelton, the youngest American to reach the Wimbledon quarterfinals since Andy Roddick in 2004.

Shelton, seeded No. 10, certainly couldn't match Sinner's power, precision, and consistency from the baseline. But his improved volley helped him win 43 of 58 net points in his 3-6, 6-1, 7-6(1), 7-5 victory over Lorenzo Sonego. Shelton is coached by his father, Bryan, who made the fourth round here 31 years ago. After losing his first match against Shelton at the 2023 Shanghai Masters, Sinner went on to win five straight matches, all in straight sets. This encounter would prove no different. Jannik looked sharp throughout, while Shelton was timid in the critical opening set tiebreak and succumbed 7-6(2), 6-4, 6-4.

Alcaraz, a happy warrior, started his title defence against the insouciant Fabio Fognini. The 38-year-old Italian had lost his last 10 Tour-level matches and was contesting his last Wimbledon in his farewell season. Returning Alcaraz's serve phenomenally and casually hitting groundstrokes on the rise, he gave the heavy favourite fits. Alcaraz pulled out an entertaining 7-5, 6-7(5), 7-5, 2-6, 6-1 victory, but his 35 forehand and 62 total unforced errors were a bad omen.

Alcaraz looked much sharper in his fourth-round 6-7(5), 6-3, 6-4, 6-4 win over 14th seed Andrey Rublev. The often-tempestuous 27-year-old Russian, who has been open about

« Champions learn from...I'm not going to say their failures, but they learn from their losses. I knew he was going to learn from the French Open final and not make the same mistakes. That he was able to get over that so quickly and win here didn't surprise me at all – Alcaraz »

his mental health problems, stayed relatively calm and competed well, but his weak second serve and shaky volleying let him down. He won only 10 of 24 points at the net compared to 22 of 29 for Alcaraz. The knowledgeable, empathetic Centre Court spectators gave Rublev a standing ovation as he left the court.

Former world No. 9 and local favourite Cam Norrie offered little resistance to Alcaraz in their 6-2, 6-3, 6-3 quarterfinal. The indefatigable Norrie rode his bicycle to matches at The All England Club, but stamina was no factor in the one hour and 39 minutes on court. The Spanish maestro simply had too much firepower as he whacked 39 winners compared to 13 for his foe and more versatility, winning 22 of 31 at net.

IBM Watson made Sinner a 54 per cent favourite over Alcaraz in the Italian's first Wimbledon final. Curiously, the day before, *Watson* had Alcaraz as a 54 per cent favourite.

The championship match featured mercurial athleticism versus methodical power. Alcaraz took the first set 6-4 on a spectacular set point. Two amazing Alcaraz defensive gets kept him in the heavy-hitting rally. Then, he yanked Sinner outside the alley with a wicked forehand crosscourt and finished with a flicked backhand crosscourt winner into the open court.

Before the second set, McEnroe pointed out, "Because Alcaraz can do anything, he tries lower-percentage shots sometimes in critical situations. Not every shot has to be highlight reel stuff." So true!

GETTY IMAGES

In the last three sets, Sinner increasingly anticipated and foiled Alcaraz's drop shots and, more importantly, dictated baseline exchanges. When Sinner held serve for a 3-1 lead in the second set, Patrick McEnroe said, "We're seeing more frustration from Alcaraz than we usually see and more outward emotion from Sinner than we've ever seen. They both know what's at stake."

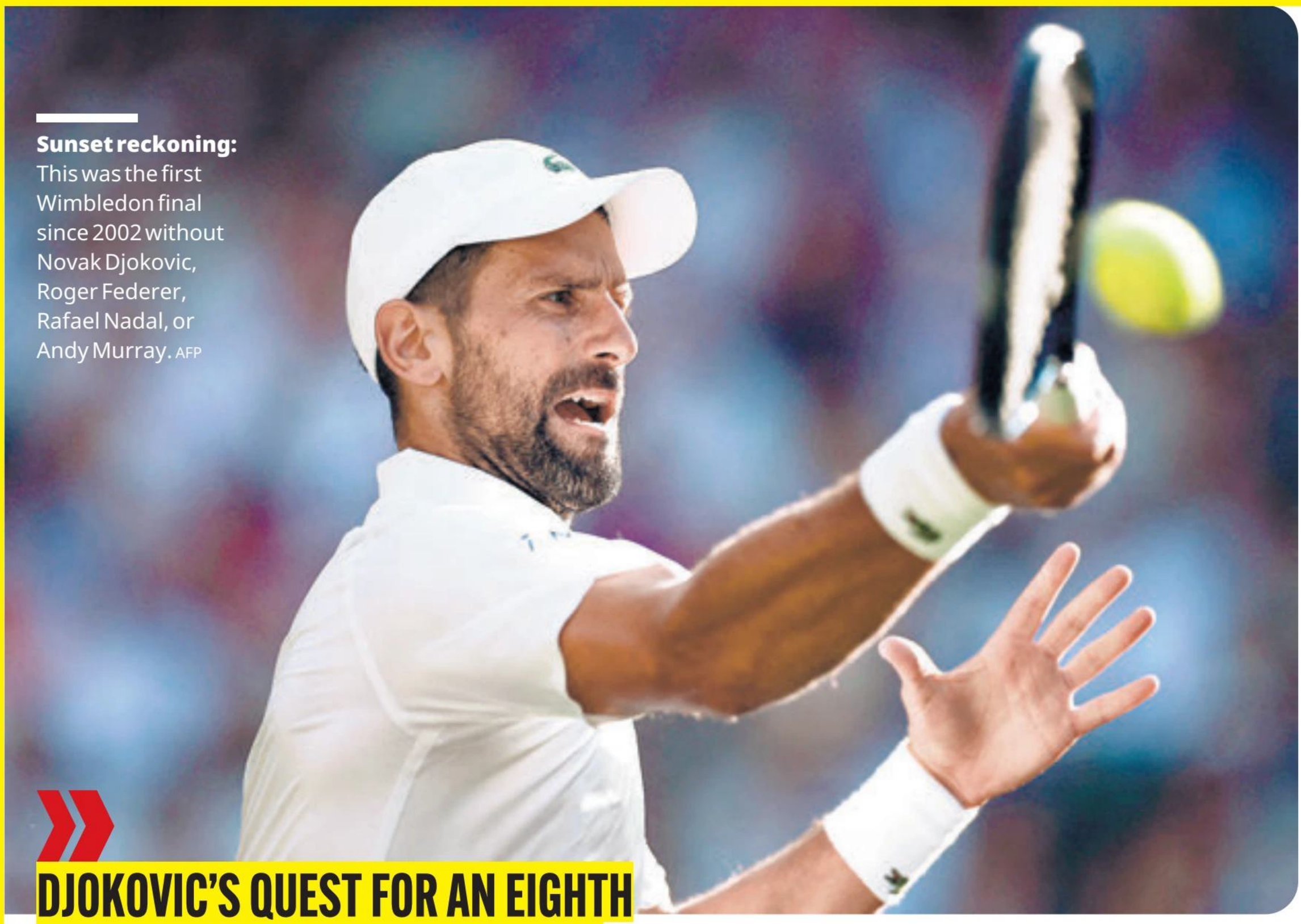
The 6-4 second set also ended with a sensational point. Sinner trumped Alcaraz's excellent crosscourt forehand with a ferocious crosscourt winner.

The Big Two elevated each other's games, but Sinner was more consistent and took the third set, 6-4. When Sinner broke serve for 2-1 in the fourth set, Alcaraz looked confused and unsure of what to do. "Sometimes Alcaraz gets himself into trouble, but today it's a case of his opponent hitting him into trouble," said Patrick McEnroe.

During the changeover with Sinner leading 5-4 and about to serve for the championship, spectators rose to their feet and cheered. They wanted more — a fifth set like the two young superstars had in their memorable French Open final. But it was not to be. Sinner clinched the match with a 137-mph serve, his fastest of the match, that Alcaraz couldn't return.

Game, set, and championship: 4-6, 6-4, 6-4, 6-4 for Sinner.

On the other half of the draw, No. 5 seed Taylor Fritz enhanced his already impressive grass-court resume when he won June tune-up events at Stuttgart and Eastbourne. There was no rest for the weary, though: he faced a pair of 6'8" rocket servers in the opening rounds. With the roof closed and the heat stifling, Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard, a 21-year-old Frenchman, blasted serves over 150 mph, including a Wimbledon record 153. Fritz survived the onslaught, 6-7(6), 6-7(8), 6-4,



Sunset reckoning: This was the first Wimbledon final since 2002 without Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, or Andy Murray. AFP

DJOKOVIC'S QUEST FOR AN EIGHTH WIMBLEDON TITLE ENDED IN THE SEMIFINAL AGAINST SINNER

7-6(6), 6-4. However, 12 seeds — most notably No. 3 Alexander Zverev, No. 7 and 2024 semifinalist Lorenzo Musetti, No. 8 Holger Rune, and No. 9 Daniil Medvedev — were upset in the first round.

The carnage continued in the second round when 2014 US Open champion Marin Cilic ousted British hopeful and No. 4 Jack Draper, Norrie eliminated No. 12 Frances Tiafoe, and unheralded Austrian Sebastian Ofner stunned No. 13 Tommy Paul. Once again, Fritz survived, but barely. Gabriel Diallo, a wiry 23-year-old Canadian, banged 27 aces before Fritz came through 3-6, 6-3, 7-6(0), 4-6, 6-3.

Cilic's 6-4, 6-3, 1-6, 6-4 victory over Draper, the best British man in the post-Andy Murray era, was the least surprising. As *ESPN* analyst James Blake pointed out, referring to the 6'6" Cilic's ability to return Draper's swerving lefty serve, "Cilic has a huge wingspan and one of the best backhands, so this was a great [style] match-up for him."

The heavy home country pressure, an intangible factor that Murray often talked about, clearly did Draper in, particularly on his normally powerful and consistent forehand, which he shanked and timidly sliced during crunch time.

Third-seeded Zverev's 7-6(3), 6-7(8), 6-3, 6-7(5), 6-4 first-round loss to 72nd-ranked Arthur Rinderknech — his earliest elimination at a Major since 2019 — can be partly explained by his off-court anguish. Zverev confided, "It's not a feeling on a tennis court, it's just a life feeling in general. I never felt this way before. It's difficult to find joy outside the tennis court at the moment. It's something I've felt for the past few months. Again, I just feel generally very, very alone and very lonely."

In Fritz's semifinal against Alcaraz, the Spaniard was a 60 per cent favourite according to *IBM Match Insights.*

A nervous start cost Fritz an opening game service break and the first set. But he battled back in the 88° F heat to end Alcaraz's streak of 42 service holds, when the defending champion played a terrible game, losing his serve at love and the second set, 7-5. Alcaraz regained his groove to take the third set, 6-3, and surged to a 4-1 lead in the fourth set tie-break. Stunningly, Fritz took the next five points to get two set points at 6-4. Alcaraz reversed the momentum one last time, grabbing the last four points — the most exciting one coming on a forehand passing shot for 5-6 — to win the tie-break and the match 6-4, 5-7, 6-3, 7-6(8).

Shock exits

12 seeds were upset in the first round, most notably No. 3 Alexander Zverev, No. 7 and 2024 semifinalist Lorenzo Musetti, No. 8 Holger Rune, and No. 9 Daniil Medvedev.

Rising star: Taylor Fritz put up an impressive fight against Alcaraz in the other semifinal. AP

Novak Djokovic, the last of the legendary Big Three, viewed this Wimbledon as his last best chance to capture a 25th Grand Slam title. Already the undisputed GOAT, with two more Majors than second-place Rafael Nadal along with a gold medal at the 2024 Paris Olympics, Djokovic knew the odds were stacked against him. Like all the contenders, he'd most likely have to beat both Sinner and Alcaraz.

But first, Djokovic had to take care of business against 22nd-seeded Flavio Cobolli. The 23-year-old Italian, thrilled about the most memorable run of his young career, posted *"Me versus my idol"* on social media. The idol prevailed 6-7(6), 6-2, 7-5, 6-4, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Sadly, on his second match point, Djokovic slipped and fell on the slick grass, injuring his hip. Grimacing in pain, he recovered enough to win the next two points. It was a small consolation that the triumph earned a 14th Wimbledon semifinal and 52nd Major semifinal, both of which are records.

Afterwards, Djokovic said, "Great performance from him. He was playing on a really high level. I think what surprised me a lot is his serve. He was serving at a really fast pace and going for his shots. He's such a talented and skilful player."

Djokovic's quest for an eighth Wimbledon title ended against Sinner, who Patrick McEnroe described as "a younger, more powerful version of Djokovic." Sinner was also healthier, as his elbow had recovered, while Djokovic's movement was compromised by his injured hip.

Aside from a short-lived 3-0 lead in the third set, neither his vast experience nor chants of "Nole! Nole" could save Djokovic during his decisive 6-3, 6-3, 6-4 defeat. When the GOAT didn't run for a backhand crosscourt winner, Patrick said, "It's painful for him, and it's painful for us to watch." Djokovic waved to the cheering crowd as he exited Centre Court. Later, he said he didn't think this was his last Wimbledon.

As for the Big Two, Sinner and Alcaraz have claimed the last seven Majors, relishing and thriving on their growing rivalry.

"Champions learn from... I'm not going to say their failures, but they learn from their losses," said Alcaraz. "I knew he was going to learn from the French Open final and not make the same mistakes. That he was able to get over that so quickly and win here didn't surprise me at all. The way he played today was really high, and he knew he was going to play like this. I know he's a really nice player and a huge champion."

Alcaraz continued, "I am really happy about having this rivalry with him. It's great for us, and it's great for tennis. Every time we play against each other, I think our level is really high. I don't see any other players having the level we do when we face each other."

Tech glitch: Play was halted during the Pavlyuchenkova-Kartal Round of 16 clash at Wimbledon due to a line-calling system fault. REUTERS

Between familiar rituals and unfamiliar calls

From pasta queues to press room rumours and line-calling controversies, the Diary captures Wimbledon 2025's **strange mix** of tradition and disruption.

N. Sudarshan
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The Diary likes certainty and repeatability. Ever since its first Wimbledon in 2019, it has always filled its stomach in the afternoon with a bowl of pasta and vegetables. It keeps the Diary going for a good six hours — the typical duration of work — considering the deadlines back home in India.

Whenever it enters the media cafeteria, it sees nothing but the pasta counter and the chefs, who have remained unchanged for the past six years. So, when an 'avocado controversy' hit Wimbledon, the Diary was at first oblivious, but then turned curious.

News agency *Reuters* reported that there were multiple claims suggesting the All England Club had culled avocados from the menu as a sustainability-driven move — given that growing vast amounts of avocados is considered environmentally unsustainable.

The World Avocado Organisation (WAO) sprang to the defence of the beleaguered fruit, stating that such "misconceptions can have non-desired impacts and affect small farmers who rely on growing avocados to make a living."

Wimbledon clarified that avocados were very much alive and cooking in their kitchens. The Diary, like a true journalist, heard both sides of the story — and then diligently stood in the queue at the pasta counter for one more bowl.

Djokovic, Alcaraz and the full house that wasn't

In the three times the Diary has been to Wimbledon, it has seen the

best, the worst, and the middling of Novak Djokovic.

The best: His epic 2019 final win over Roger Federer.

The worst: The straight-sets demolition Jannik Sinner handed him this year in the semifinals.

The middling: His loss to Carlos Alcaraz in the summit clash last year.

Each time, the Diary has looked forward to the Serb's press conference to better understand the genius' mind. Generally, players turn up for media duties a good hour after a match. So when it was announced that Djokovic would arrive barely 10 minutes after the loss to Sinner, scribes sensed something big.

Rumour mills buzzed: was the 24-time Slam winner — without a Major since 2023 Flushing Meadows — about to call it quits? Or was he going to announce that this was his last Wimbledon?

The Diary rushed to the already-packed press room, only to be told midway that Alcaraz would be coming in first. The Spaniard walked in and, seeing the overflowing media presence, grinned: "Haven't seen it this full, ya." Little did he know why we had all assembled.

Djokovic eventually turned up, and gladdened everyone's hearts by saying he would return to SW19 next year. The Diary was doubly relieved because it was in no mood to write a retirement tribute.

Not done yet: Despite his loss to Jannik Sinner in the semifinal, Novak Djokovic confirmed that he would return to Wimbledon next year.

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AI — Yay or nay?

Since landing at Wimbledon Park, the Diary has witnessed more than just tennis. Controversies have swirled around the electronic line-calling system, introduced for the first time in the tournament's 148-year history.

There were claims of malfunctions. In one match between Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova and Sonay Kartal, the system was even switched off inadvertently. But more than the accuracy of the calls, the Diary was heartened by the players' yearning for a return to human touch.

"I'm more for line umpires, to be honest," said Russia's Karen Khachanov. "You feel the court is a little bit too big, too alone, without them."

Marin Cilic, the 2014 US Open champion, offered an even stronger take. "I don't like it (that the line judges have been removed)," he told Carole Bouchard of *The Tennis Sweet Spot*.

"The line judges are a part of the tennis family. Maybe they were, at some stage in their life, trying to be a tennis player. Or they love sport, and it's so difficult to become a chair umpire, as you have to go through so many tournaments — juniors, national-level tournaments, Futures, Challengers, first-line referee, then the chair umpire — to get this experience to be at Wimbledon. You just get rid of this huge family of people who love tennis and were doing their job incredibly well. You erase this, which is, for me, very, very, very, very bad."

Sport is supposed to be the theatre of human expression. Who wants a sanitised environment?

The Diary always liked Cilic — and its respect for the big man from Croatia has now gone up a notch.

1st

Mr. Consistent: Opener Yashasvi Jaiswal notched up yet another half-century after being put into bat at Edgbaston. Jaiswal has now hit a half-century in each of his seven Tests against England. GETTY IMAGES

FOR MORE IMAGES

2nd

Too hot to handle: Shubman Gill shattered multiple records in what proved to be a dream Test for the Indian captain. His fluent 269 — the highest score by an Indian skipper in Test history — powered India to a commanding total of 587. GETTY IMAGES

Stepping up: Leading India's bowling attack, Mohammed Siraj claimed six wickets to rattle England's batting lineup. He first picked Zak Crawley, then removed Joe Root and Ben Stokes off consecutive deliveries before wrapping up the tail. AP

Bazball's up and running: With England tottering at 84 for five, Jamie Smith and Harry Brook came together and mounted a stunning rescue act. Smith struck an unbeaten 184 — the highest score by an English wicketkeeper in Tests — while Brook contributed a fluent 158. Their 303-run partnership propelled England to 407. AFP

Bat's off: Rishabh Pant's bat went airborne twice — and in between, the vice-captain blazed to a 58-ball 65, laced with eight fours and three sixes. Shubman Gill capped off his record-breaking Test with 161, while Ravindra Jadeja's unbeaten 69 pushed India's lead to 607 before the declaration came at 427 for six. GETTY IMAGES

6th

Sky is the limit: Akash Deep cut England's batting in half as he claimed his best figures of six for 99 and finished with a match haul of 10 for 187 — the best for India in men's Test in England. Akash's spell helped India bowl out the host for 271, and level the series 1-1 after two Tests. REUTERS

7th

A win to remember: Shubman Gill-led India registered its first-ever victory at Edgbaston – it had lost seven of its previous eight games. The 336-run win is also India's biggest ever by runs in an away Test. AFP

1st

Just another day in office: Jasprit Bumrah registered his 13th five-wicket haul in an overseas Test — most by an Indian bowler surpassing Kapil Dev's 12. Four out of his five wickets were bowled, equalling his own record from 2019. REUTERS

2nd

Holding the fort: Joe Root struck his 11th Test century against India and eighth at Lord's — most by any batter at the venue — to take England's total to 387 all out after opting to bat. REUTERS

3rd

On the honours board: K. L. Rahul struck his second century of the series and his fourth overall in England — no other Indian opener has achieved this feat. Rahul's 100 took India to 387, making it only the ninth Test where teams have tied on the first innings score. REUTERS

4th

High on emotions: As England came out to bat late in the day, opener Zak Crawley appeared to employ time-wasting tactics. The Indian players, led by captain Shubman Gill, took exception to the move, leading to a heated exchange and some close-in verbal sparring. GETTY IMAGES

5th

Classical spin: Washington Sundar became the first Indian spinner to take four or more wickets at Lord's since Bishan Singh Bedi's six-for in 1974. His four for 22 helped India restrict England to 192. PTI

6th

Spell from hell: Jofra Archer ran riot as the speedster picked three wickets — Yashasvi Jaiswal, Rishabh Pant, and Washington Sundar — to put India completely on the backfoot in the 193-run chase. Making his comeback after four years, Archer finished the game with five wickets across innings. GETTY IMAGES

7th

Lone survivor: Ravindra Jadeja was left stranded at one end as India fell 22 runs short of the target. His unbeaten 61, aided by gritty contributions from Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj, gave the visitor a genuine shot at an improbable win — only for them to fall agonisingly short of a famous victory. PTI

8th

The heartbreak and the high: Mohammed Siraj sank to the ground after his dismissal, unable to pick himself up, as England players ran in celebration, having sealed a slow-burning thriller. India was bowled out for 170, giving England a 2-1 lead in the five-match series.

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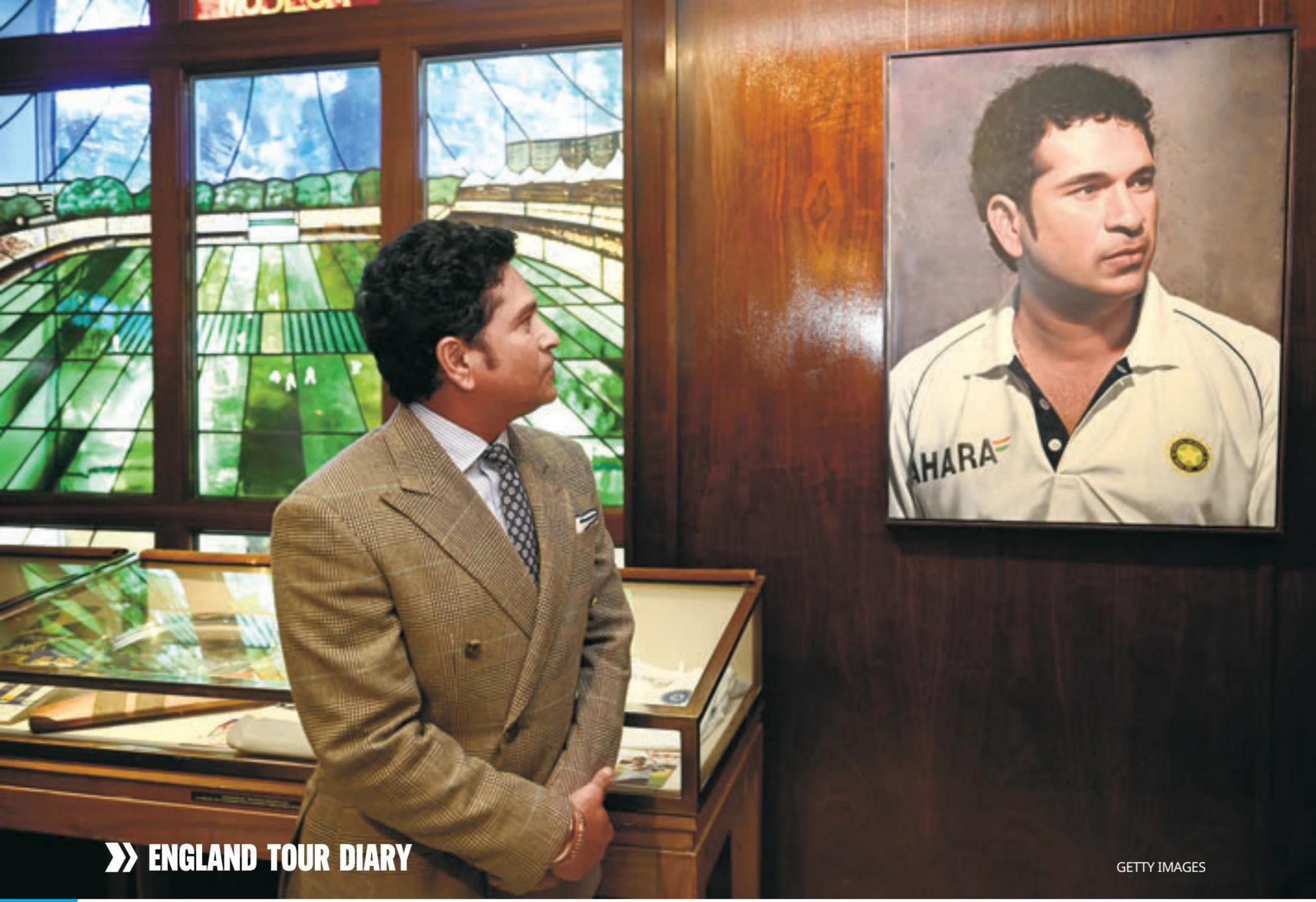

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CRICKET'S THEATRE OF THE SUBLIME (AND ABSURD)

From Lord's to Leeds, our reporters bring you **on-field drama** and off-field colour — stories of cricket, culture, and characters you won't find on the scorecard.

A Test match at Lord's is like a festival — a melting pot of culture, tradition, and, of course, cuisine. As Sachin Tendulkar says, "Where else would you find cricket legends, rock stars, and deep conversations in one place?"

This time was no different, as the iconic venue welcomed some of the world's leading figures — from across disciplines — who attended the game over five days and soaked up the warm English summer.

While Tendulkar started proceedings by ringing the bell, the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) marked the occasion by unveiling a portrait of the former India captain. Painted by Stuart Pearson Wright, miniature versions of the portrait were available at the Lord's merchandise stores and remained one of the best-selling items. "This being the Anderson-Tendulkar Trophy, the MCC launched quite a few souvenirs to honour Tendulkar. While customised sizes of the painting were available, there were mugs and diaries as well with pictures of Tendulkar. Since a large number of Indian fans attended the game, those items did really well," one of the Lord's store staff told the Diary.

With the temperature soaring and a scorching sun making things uncomfortable for spectators, many preferred watching the game on giant screens placed near the Nursery End, where players trained before and between sessions. While

FOR MORE STORIES

> « Sachin Tendulkar's portrait will be at MCC Museum through 2025, before its relocation to the Pavilion »

the crowd got a chance to come close to their favourite cricketers and click selfies, those were busy days for venue staff who had to clear the way. "It's that time of the year when everyone wants to be close to the players, and if they have their way, they can just go on and on with selfies and autographs. But we need to ensure that we start the game on time," a security personnel said in jest.

Of ladybirds and stoppages

The extreme heat on the opening day led to an influx of ladybirds at Lord's, causing a brief pause in play. Things got disruptive enough that England captain Ben Stokes had a word with the on-field umpires — Paul Reiffel and Sharfuddoula Saikat — about whether to continue.

Though play resumed shortly, England vice-captain Ollie Pope admitted he had never seen anything like it. Groundstaff attributed the incident to changing weather conditions. According to them, over the past couple of years, such influxes have become more common across England due to extreme weather.

Bumrah's shoes

Jasprit Bumrah donated his shoes to the MCC Museum following his five-wicket haul in the first innings. The shoes are now displayed in the upper tier of the museum, alongside kits used by legends of the game. While Bumrah kept the match ball, the signed shoes were donated after the third day's play. As he claimed his 13th five-wicket haul in away Tests — the most by an Indian — and made it to the prestigious Lord's Honours Board, Bumrah said the moment made him happy.

"It's a good thing to come to the Honours Board. When my son grows up, I can tell him that my name is on the Honours Board and it is also on many other places," Bumrah said.

Shayan Acharya

Of mistaken identity and fleeting fame

Who doesn't like being famous? The Diary is no exception. Once during a cricket tour of Bangladesh in late 2022, the Diary was travelling with a very capable YouTuber who had fans even in Dhaka. Two students from Assam, studying medicine in the Bangladeshi capital, came to meet him after watching his shows. The Diary, having spent over a decade in journalism without anyone batting an eyelid at the mention of its name, was understandably bemused.

So when taxi driver Haneef in Birmingham looked wide-eyed as the Diary entered his car en route to Edgbaston one morning, it was perplexing. Haneef stared at his phone, displaying the ride details, then at the Diary again, still in disbelief. The Diary, running late, asked him to hurry. That's when the driver's demeanour changed. "Oh! You are a reporter... I thought you were Sai Sudharsan," he said.

"What's in a name?" Shakespeare once asked. Well... quite a bit. Momentary fame and a potential ticket to fake stardom, perhaps, for the Diary!

GETTY IMAGES

AP

Gill's gesture and the Kohli complex

After India's loss to England in the opening Test at Leeds, a former England cricketer remarked that Shubman Gill lacked the persona and aura of Virat Kohli. Perhaps Gill took that as a challenge to prove that there was indeed some Kohli in him.

On the eve of the Edgbaston Test, a British journalist sitting just behind the Diary pointed out to Gill that India had never won a Test at that ground in eight attempts. Gill's response was measured.

He said he had the best Indian team, that they would not be weighed down by history, and would strive to chart a new path. But his actions after India's historic 336-run win seemed to undo all the good work. When someone asked him about breaking the Edgbaston jinx, Gill, grinning, said he wanted to meet "that favourite journalist" of his and pretended to look around the room searching for him.

SHUBMAN GILL SHARED A LIGHT-HEARTED MOMENT IN THE POST-MATCH PRESS CONFERENCE, PLAYFULLY TROLLING THE JOURNALIST WHO HAD HIGHLIGHTED INDIA'S POOR RECORD AT EDGBASTON BEFORE THE MATCH

For the Diary, it felt needless. The journalist had merely stated a fact, not thrown down a gauntlet. The Diary was reminded of the days when Kohli, in true Jose Mourinho fashion, revelled in a siege mentality. Gill, who still sports a boyish look, doesn't seem cut out for such theatrics. In a match where his bat did all the talking — a double-century and a hundred — what additional point was he trying to make? The Diary is still searching for a non-Kohli explanation.

N. Sudarshan

Power revolution: Rishabh Pant launches another into the stands — emblematic of India's new Test batting ethos. GETTY IMAGES

SWINGING FOR THE FENCES: INDIA'S SIX-HITTING SURGE AND THE RISKS THAT COME WITH IT

A look at how India's Test batting has **evolved** from running-intensive innings to a boundary-heavy, six-hitting approach — and what the shift says about modern strategy.

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The first three Tests have been intense battles, with England and India pushing each other all the way. A few mini-sessions of play have been the difference between a buoyant win and an ignominious close loss.

England took a 2-1 series lead after India faltered in the final innings at Lord's while attempting a 193-run chase. The pressure of constant wickets ensured that the Indian batting order was never allowed to bat at its natural pace – reflected in the fact that there was only one six in the entire chase.

Since the start of 2022, India has scored 9.91 per cent of its Test runs through sixes – at least 2.01 per cent more than any other Test-playing

Run-scoring breakdown in Tests since 2022

Team	% from 1s	% from 2s	% from 3s	% from 4s	% from 5s	% from 6s
Afghanistan	31.57	13.71	4.09	40.74	0.21	4.09
Australia	28.53	12.03	5.11	43.29	0.06	4.56
Bangladesh	29.68	12.75	2.78	43.81	0.15	5.06
England	27.29	12.92	3.71	44.37	0.05	6.89
India	30.44	**9.97**	2.87	41.41	0.21	**9.91**
Ireland	26.22	11.23	4.25	47.03	0.30	5.14
New Zealand	28.13	11.85	4.37	42.41	0.08	7.90
Pakistan	30.65	13.52	5.34	40.01	0.04	5.61
South Africa	28.38	12.72	4.65	42.82	0.10	5.69
Sri Lanka	31.15	11.64	4.28	43.01	0.12	5.88
West Indies	25.97	14.47	5.89	41.59	0.23	6.42
Zimbabwe	27.50	14.39	5.30	42.97	0.00	5.25

nation. The average across all teams for this period is only 6.03 per cent. India has smashed 37 sixes so far against England – the most by any side on a tour away from home.

Correspondingly, in recent years, the team has relied very little on finding pockets of space in the outfield to keep the scoreboard ticking. Only 9.97 per cent of India's runs over the last three years have come from running twos – comfortably the lowest among any international team in whites.

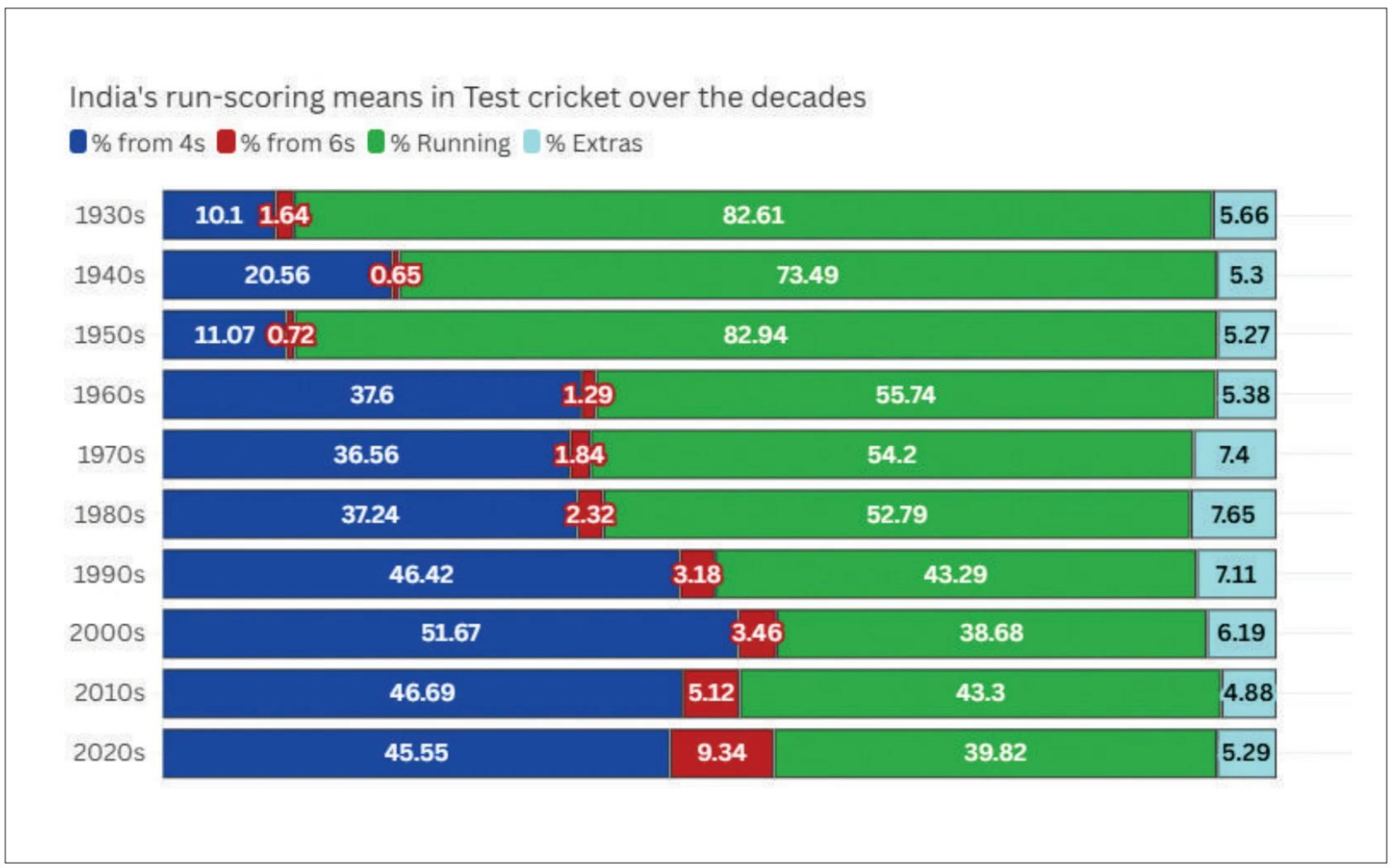
Boundaries weren't the primary source of runs for India when it began its journey in Test cricket. In its first-ever Test match – against England in 1932 – India scored just one boundary: a six by Amar Singh, who also made the country's first Test fifty.

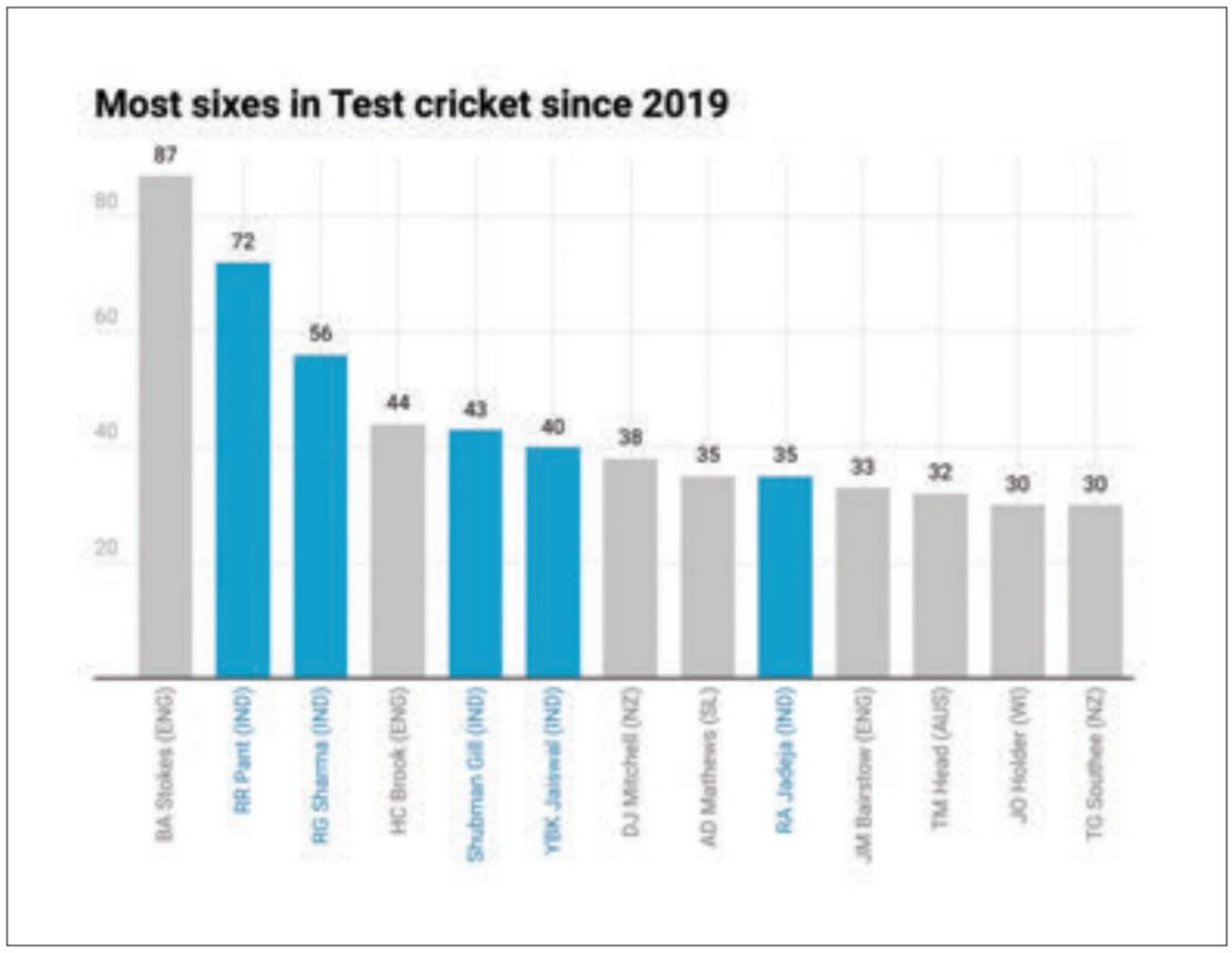
Larger boundaries, smaller bats and a general reluctance to play aerial strokes can all be cited as reasons for this.

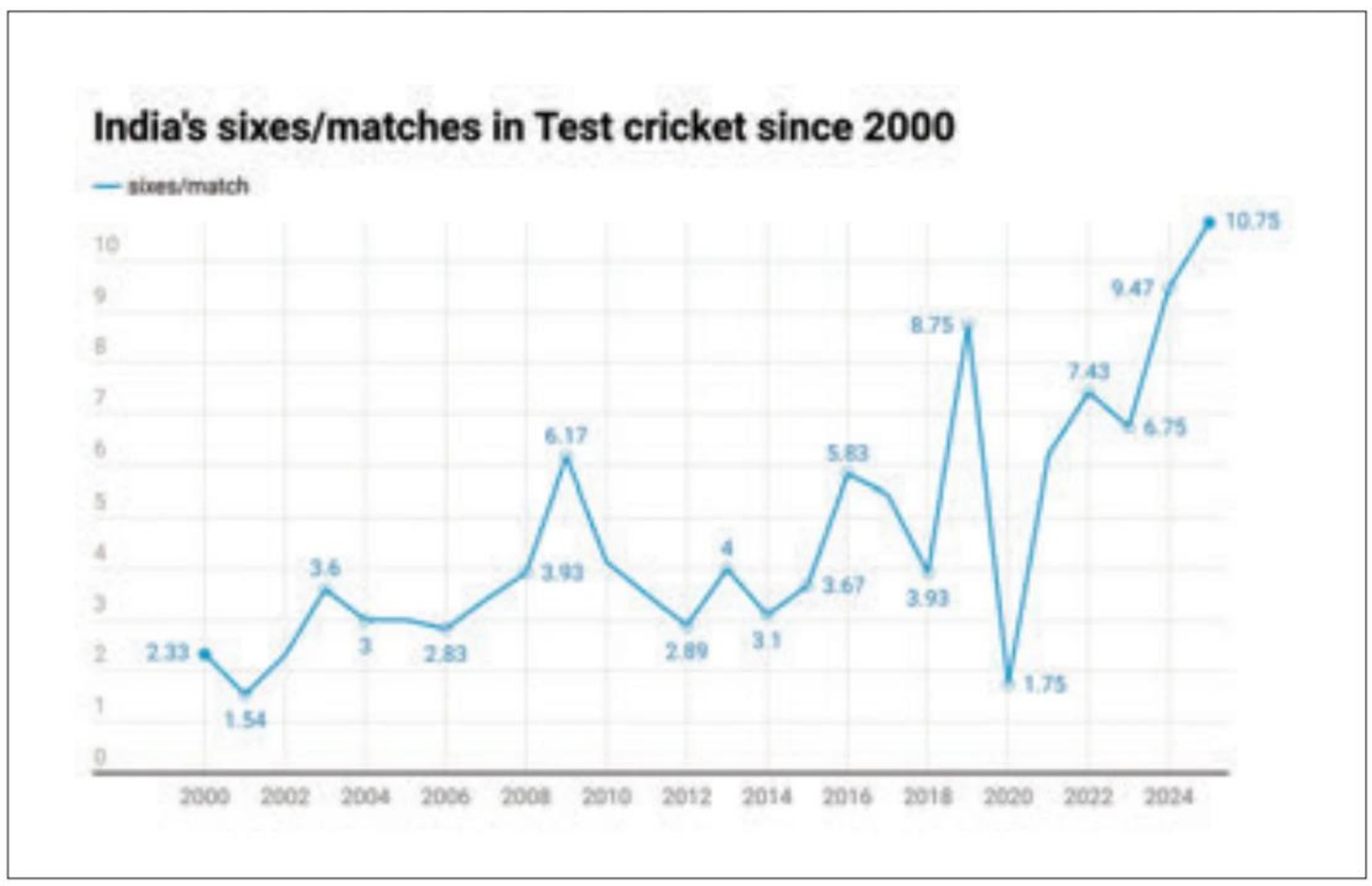
In its first three decades (1930 to 1959), 80.89 per cent of India's Test runs came from running between the wickets – second only to Pakistan (82.19%).

England and Australia, with their head start in the sport, were more efficient in their run-scoring during that era. While the English scored 28.52 per cent of their runs through boundaries, for the Australians it was as high as 30.66 per cent.

With time and experience, Indian batters began to adapt. The share of runs from running declined with each passing decade, finally dipping







below 50 per cent in the 1990s.

In the 2000s, it dropped further to 38.68 per cent, as batting-friendly conditions across the globe made boundary scoring a more viable prospect.

It helped that India was revelling in a golden generation of batters. Four Indians featured in the top 10 for most fours scored in the decade – Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, Virender Sehwag and V.V.S Laxman.

More than 50 per cent of India's runs in that decade came through fours. Sixes contributed just 3.46 per cent, with Sehwag accounting for the lion's share. The opening batter smashed 75 maximums and was the only Indian in the top 10 of that list.

The 2010s saw a mini-resurgence in running between the wickets, thanks in no small part to Virat Kohli, Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane. Among batters with the most non-boundary runs in that decade, Kohli ranked third and Pujara ninth.

A major shift in approach came in 2019 following Rohit Sharma's induction as Test opener. The Mumbai batter went on a six-hitting spree, tonking 20 maximums in just five Tests – the most by any batter that year.

Rohit successfully transposed his fluent white-ball strokeplay to the longer format. As a Test opener, he has accumulated 56 sixes from just 38 matches. Following in his footsteps, the next generation of Indian batters began clearing the fence with greater frequency.

Since the start of 2019, 13 batters have hit at least 30 sixes in Test cricket. Five of them are Indians – Rohit, Rishabh Pant, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill and Ravindra Jadeja. The latter is a surprising presence, considering he has a sub-50 strike rate since the turn of the decade.

Soon, India's sixes-per-Test count surged, staying above six in every year since 2019 – except for the COVID-affected 2020. Since the start of the current decade, India has hit more sixes than any other side (385), and at a better rate – 7.40 per match, which is 1.40 more than second-placed New Zealand.

Current vice-captain Pant has been the team's leading aggressor, hitting more fours and sixes than any other Indian batter since 2020. The wicketkeeper-batter has bludgeoned 70 sixes in 35 matches at a rate of 1.11 per innings – the second-highest for any batter with at least 15 sixes in this period.

Not far behind Pant is Jaiswal, who has struck 40 sixes in just 22 matches since his debut.

The year 2024, in particular, was fruitful for the southpaw, who plundered 888 runs in boundaries across 15 games – the fourth-highest in a single year.

India's boundary-seeking approach, influenced significantly by T20 cricket, is a strategy fraught with risk. When it works, it can blow the opposition out of the water – as seen at Edgbaston, where India launched 19 sixes en route to a massive win.

But on juicier surfaces, where six-hitting becomes harder and old-school accumulation proves more effective, India has struggled – as seen at Lord's.

Since the start of 2024, India has failed to register a six in its innings only three times – in Brisbane (vs Australia), in Bengaluru (vs New Zealand) and in Hyderabad (vs England) – and lost all three matches.

> Unless the ICC can think of redistributing the funds that can help out the poorer nations, we will see Test cricket declining apart from the top nations

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Former England captain David Gower isn't against Bazball — but he believes Test cricket's future hinges on something bigger than England's approach. One of England's most elegant batters, Gower scored 8,231 runs in 117 Tests at an average of 44.25, with 18 centuries to his name — and he's now calling for the ICC to urgently rethink how it supports its 'relatively poor' member nations if the longest format is to survive.

Speaking to *Sportstar* on the final day of the third Test at Lord's, Gower weighed in on the 'inevitably flawed' World Test Championship, praised Shubman Gill's early captaincy, and argued that for England, the challenge isn't to abandon Bazball — but to know when to rein it in.

With aggressive batting and quick results becoming the norm in Tests, how do you view this shift — and do you worry about its impact on batting craft?

The idea of batting positively isn't new. Back in 1985, during the Ashes here, we scored at over four an over in five of six Tests — which, for that time, was rapid. The Australians of the '90s did it too: they'd score quickly to give (Glenn) McGrath and (Shane) Warne time to bowl teams out — and still fit in a round of golf. So, the concept has always existed. What England have done under (Ben) Stokes and (Brendon) McCullum is take it to new heights. The (Jonny) Bairstows, the (Zak) Crawleys, and others who love their shots have recorded scoring rates that are the highest in the last three to four years. And on its day, it's thrilling to watch.

There's huge entertainment value in it, but also a slightly desperate need to prove that Test cricket can still be entertaining. We're talking on the fifth morning of this Test, and the buzz is absolutely electric. It was the same last night. This entire series has had moments that have reminded everyone what five-day cricket can offer.

For those lucky enough to be at the ground, it's a real event — something you feel. That isn't something you get with formats where you pop in for a couple of hours and leave with a result. I still believe Test cricket is the highest form of the game by some distance.

When Virat Kohli says it is, that's great PR — because 1.4 billion people hear him. But we need more people speaking up for it. What we — my generation especially — always wanted from England was a blend of flair and grit. In the Lord's Ashes Test two years ago, they collapsed in an hour of madness; only Stokes stuck it out. Since then, a few others have started to ride out the tough periods, then push on again with clear skies and fair winds. That's progress. Over the past four years, there were moments when a different approach for an hour or two might have changed the result. And now, in this series, you can see they've begun to learn from those.

The pace of the Lord's Test has been different. Batting hasn't been

SHAYAN ACHARYA

easy — there've been no soft 200s. That's fabulous. And you can feel it everywhere — the stands, the press box, the corporate boxes — this sense that you're watching something special.

(Smiles) I wasn't planning to come in today [final day]. But after last night, it felt like it would be a shame to miss it.

Is Bazball the way forward — or just a necessary tactic to keep Test cricket relevant in the T20 era?

If teams are capable of playing that way, then yes — it's important for Test cricket to prove it's still worth watching. In an era where white-ball formats dominate and data tells us fans love the instant thrill — balls flying to the boundary, sixes every few minutes — anything that shows how vibrant the long format can be is valid.

But not every team has the talent or depth to play that way. If you're lower down the pecking order, you've got to find the best way you can to win a Test — even if that means playing more conservatively.

Look at Australia. Sure, they have someone like Travis Head, who fits naturally into a more aggressive mould. But their overall approach has often been pragmatic. That alleged culture clash in the Ashes two years ago — England's ultra-positive style versus Australia's discipline — ended with the pragmatic side winning.

Ultimately, in iconic series like the Ashes or the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, or even the World Test Championship final, it's not about style points — it's about doing what it takes to win.

And part of keeping Test cricket relevant is showing people that drama can unfold in many ways. In that WTC final, the ball dominated for two days — low scores, not your usual white-ball fare — and then Aiden Markram played a stunning innings to snatch the game. That ebb and flow, those wild momentum shifts, are unique to this format.

I know it's a harder sell to younger fans — and nearly impossible to explain to Americans — but for those who still value Test cricket as the game's highest form, their voice still matters, even if it's a smaller group now.

With T20 leagues on the rise and bilateral interest fading, what reforms can help safeguard Test cricket without ignoring the game's commercial realities?

Well, I never quite know the answer to that sort of question. But what's telling is how the conversation has shifted. Two years ago, influential voices were busy

Ashes reverie: David Gower, England's debonair captain, stands tall on the Oval balcony, cradling the Ashes urn — the gleaming symbol of a summer triumph. The 3-1 series win in 1985 is his crowning moment. Beside him, Allan Border embodies the stoic dignity of defeat. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

carving out windows for franchise cricket. Now, those same people are saying we need a dedicated window for Test cricket.

And it's complicated, isn't it? There are so many factors — money, resources, infrastructure. Lord's is an exception: 28,000 people will turn up on a Monday for Day Five of a Test if the match is set up well. India still gets good crowds, though in a 100,000-seater, 30,000 can look sparse. Australia gets healthy numbers when we tour. But in the West Indies, the stands are nearly empty. Test matches there often lose money.

In New Zealand, they've at least adapted by using smaller grounds to make things feel fuller. But for many boards, the arithmetic doesn't work. You can understand why a board like Cricket West Indies, already under pressure, might prefer eight days of white-ball cricket over 15 days of loss-making Tests. That's a hard call to argue with.

So, unless the ICC can think of — I know it wouldn't go down well in India — redistributing the funds that can help out the poorer nations, we will see Test cricket declining apart from the top three, four, five nations. (This can't be) just an odd boost every other year or in three or four years, but year by year. So I'm not the Solomon who can tell you exactly how to solve this. But one of the things I do think very strongly is that if you want Test-playing nations to still be in business, then they need help.

With Bazball's rise, England's pitches seem flatter and more batting-friendly than before. Is old-school English cricket losing its edge?

(Smiles) I suppose these flat pitches suit Stokes' desire to chase — well, sometimes.

Even this England team would agree that a better contest between bat and ball makes for a better spectacle. That's been a mantra for so many of us over the years. Watching teams pile up 600 on certain flat pitches — it gets quite dull, doesn't it?

Then there's the commercial side to consider. Take this Lord's Test: if it finishes in three days, that's potentially two days of lost revenue. But how do you weigh that against the quality of entertainment the crowd has already had?

The dream is a fair contest, something in it for both batters and bowlers.

A game that lasts at least four days, stays tight, and builds toward a tense finish, like this one. That's when Test cricket is at its best.

> « The idea of batting positively isn't new. England has just taken it to new heights »

Captain's statement: Shubman Gill has made a blistering start to the five-Test series in England. Captaining India for the first time, the elegant right-hander has already racked up three centuries — including a commanding double. GETTY IMAGES

When Tests wrap up in just two or three days — especially in the subcontinent — does it hurt the format's appeal?

Home advantage can be abused, of course. And when the temptation is to win at almost any cost, teams sometimes go too far. That series in India last year, for example — dominated by turning tracks — you could tell it wouldn't last five days. And you could probably guess the result going in. But if you're trying to reach the World Test Championship final, you want points and wins — that's the reality.

England's tour of Pakistan last October showed both extremes. One Test was on a flat pitch — Harry Brook's triple hundred was brilliant in its own way. Then the next games, the ball spun, and we watched a side that was dominant unravel.

So yes, pitch preparation can shape a series — that's undeniable. Whether that's right or wrong is open to debate. Some dream of a unified pitch formula: 'no, no, no, no, no, no. It's only seam, flat and spin' — as if there's a dial you can turn remotely. That would be ideal. But let's be realistic — you take what you get and try to win on it.

The WTC has added context to Tests — but what changes would make the format more relevant and engaging?

The World Test Championship is inevitably flawed — whether it's the percentage system or the points lost for slow over-rates. It's a brave attempt to address the issue, but clearly not enough.

The real problem is that it's not an even contest. Not all top sides play each other, and everything depends on where, how, and who you play. No amount of maths can fix that imbalance.

That said, it does add context — especially for the teams in the top four pushing for a final spot. But if you're sitting at number nine, frankly, no one gives a flying fox what happens.

India is in a rebuilding phase under a new captain. If you had a word with Shubman Gill, what advice would you give him on bringing the best out of his players?

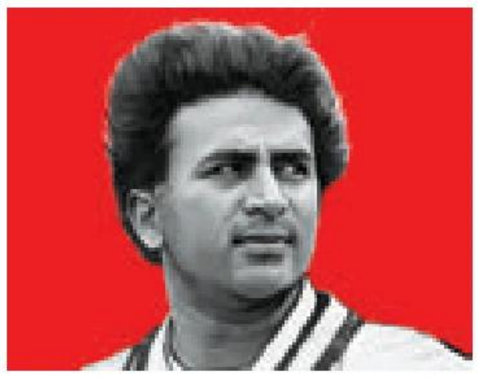
Building a team depends on so many things. At the start of the series, people focused on the absence of Rohit (Sharma) and Virat (Kohli). But Shubman stepped up and played beautifully in two Tests.

You don't have to be 34 to lead — you can be 24, if you've got talent, a good head, and a solid technique. That kind of player can fill the gap. If you're one or two players short of a great side, you work around it and trust others to develop.

I trust my old colleague Michael Atherton when he says India won nine of the 10 days. That's not bad for a team supposedly in transition. In Birmingham, they bowled better than us. At Lord's, England finally found something in the ball we hadn't really seen before.

Team-building often comes down to individual moments. Look at Stokes at Lord's — this is the Stokes we've missed: bowling 90 miles an hour, driving the attack forward. You want all your key players at peak performance — that's what shifts a match.

I always say, if six of your XI are playing to their potential, you're in a good position. If six are having a shocker, you're likely coming second. If all 11 hit their peak — you're unbeatable. But that rarely happens. As a captain, you can just try and find a way of motivating or inspiring each and every man to be at his best somehow. That's all you can do.



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

THE ERA OF ALCARAZ AND SINNER HAS BEGUN

The first three majors of 2025 have made it clear: Alcaraz and Sinner are defining a **new era in men's tennis,** sharing titles and setting the standard for the future.

Jannik Sinner exacted revenge for his heartbreaking loss to Carlos Alcaraz in the French Open tennis final by beating the same opponent in four sets at Wimbledon. Although Alcaraz came from 2-4 down to win the first set, the world number one quickly recovered and went on to beat the Spaniard to win his first Major on grass. In all three sets, he broke Alcaraz's serve just once, and that was enough to win the match. Sinner undoubtedly played tennis of the highest class, even as the Spaniard seemed somewhat resigned to his fate. This was a stark contrast to how he had fought back from three match points down to beat the world number one in Paris.

Sinner would consider himself fortunate to have progressed this far, as his fourth-round opponent, Grigor Dimitrov, who was leading by two sets to love, had to retire after damaging his pectoral muscle in the third set. Sinner made the most of the lucky break and never looked back in the following rounds, although he had his serving arm elbow wrapped up after falling awkwardly on it in the match against 'Baby Fed,' as Dimitrov is known. He is one of the few players left on the pro circuit who still plays the one-handed backhand, as the great Roger Federer did.

One of the things that has become noticeable in recent times is the increasing dependence of top players on their coaching and support staff. When things are not going well, they are often seen looking at the guest box, shouting, and ranting in frustration. This generally happens when they are playing against a much lower-ranked opponent about whom they may not know much, and so are finding it difficult to secure the easy win they had anticipated. But what can the support staff do if the unknown opponent has raised his level, especially in a Major tournament, and is playing well above expectations? It is difficult to say whether this frustration fuels adrenaline or simply acts as a distraction. Most times, the higher-ranked player prevails simply because they have more experience playing in Majors than the uninhibited young challenger taking his chances.

Another noticeable trend is what happens after the match. When they win, players typically leave their racquets next to their seats, return to the court, bow to the crowd, and acknowledge the support with waves or kisses blown to different parts of the stadium. But when they lose, they tend to just dump their racquets into their bags, collect their towels, and leave — barely offering even a wave to the

New-age rivalry: Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz have shared eight of the past nine Grand Slam titles between them. AP

crowd. Why is that? Didn't the crowd support you even in defeat? One can understand making space for the winner to enjoy the applause and ovation, but not even acknowledging the fans with a wave does appear somewhat ungracious.

Be that as it may, it was a terrific fortnight of high-quality tennis, with plenty of upsets in the first week alone, as many seeded players were knocked out. The unusually hot weather made life tough for some players, particularly those featuring in their first Major and having to play five-set matches. Other tournaments use a best-of-three format, so suddenly coming to a Major and facing two additional sets if a match goes the distance is a true test of physical fitness and stamina, and only the super fit come through.

The first three Majors of the year have made it clear that the era of Alcaraz and Sinner has well and truly begun, with the two sharing the titles between them for the second year in a row. Sinner now has two, while Alcaraz, following in the footsteps of Rafa Nadal, claimed the French Open on clay. The last Major is the US Open on a hard court. Will Sinner continue his domination there, or will Alcaraz — or even Novak Djokovic — find new wind and upset the Numero Uno tennis player in the world?

One of the things that has become noticeable in recent times is the increasing dependence of top players on their coaching and support staff.

STATSMAN
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Big-hitting Pant

24 } The number of sixes hit by Rishabh Pant in Test cricket on English soil. No other visiting batter has hit this many in one country. He went past the previous record of 21 sixes by England's Ben Stokes in South Africa. Incidentally, Pant also has hit the maximum number of sixes (15) by a visiting batter in Australia.

Most Test career sixes for a visiting batter in a particular country

6s	Batter (for)	Country	Tests	Inn	Runs	Ave.
24	Rishabh Pant (Ind)	Eng	10	19	853	44.89
21	Ben Stokes (Eng)	SA	8	14	729	52.07
19	Matthew Hayden (Aus)	Ind	11	22	1027	51.35
16	Viv Richards (WI)	Eng	24	34	2057	64.28
16	Harry Brook (Eng)	NZ	5	9	679	75.44
15	Clive Lloyd (WI)	Ind	14	22	1359	75.50
15	Steve Smith (Aus)	Eng	19	36	2000	57.14
15	Simron Hetmyer (WI)	Ban	2	4	222	55.50
15	Harry Brook (Eng)	Pak	6	10	841	84.10
15	Rishabh Pant (Ind)	Aus	12	21	879	46.26

India's Rishabh Pant. REUTERS

25 } Shubman Gill's age when he reached the maiden 250-plus score of his Test career, making him the second youngest captain after South African Graeme Smith to do so. Smith has two 250+ scores before the age of 23 years. Gill, meanwhile, has become the second youngest Indian captain, after Nawab of Pataudi Jr., and overall the fourth youngest to register a 200+ score while leading a Test side.

Youngest captain to register a 250+ score in Test cricket

Age	Captain (Runs)	For	Opp	Venue	Month, Yr
22y-175d	G. Smith (277)	SA	Eng	Birmingham	Jul 2003
25y-298d	S. Gill (269)	Ind	Eng	Birmingham	Jul 2025
27y-155d	P. May (285*)	Eng	WI	Birmingham	Jul 1957
28y-132d	D. Bradman (270)	Aus	Eng	Melbourne	Jan 1937
28y-135d	M. Crowe (299)	NZ	SL	Wellington	Feb 1991

Note: Smith, a week later, made 259 as captain against England at Lord's at 22y-182d, which also makes him the second youngest

Youngest captain to register a 200+ score in Test cricket

Age	Captain (Runs)	For	Opp	Venue	Month, Yr
22y-175d	G. Smith (277)	SA	Eng	Birmingham	Jul 2003
23y-39d	MAK Pataudi (203*)	Ind	Eng	Delhi	Feb 1964
24y-191d	M. Rahim (200)	Ban	SL	Galle	Mar 2013
25y-298d	S. Gill (269)	Ind	Eng	Birmingham	Jul 2025

Note: Mushfiqur Rahim was also the wicketkeeper

336 } India's victory margin by runs in Birmingham is its biggest in any overseas Test match, but overall, it is its fourth biggest by runs. This has been a remarkable victory, especially when you consider that no Asian side has won a Test at this venue in the first 18 Tests played here by India/Pakistan (8) and Sri Lanka (2). Incidentally, this defeat is England's seventh biggest by runs at home.

India's biggest Test victories by runs (in away Tests)

Runs	Opp	Venue	Date	Captain
336	Eng	Birmingham	6 Jul 2025	Shubman Gill
318	WI	North Sound	25 Aug 2019	Virat Kohli
304	SL	Galle	29 Jul 2017	Virat Kohli

India's biggest Test victories by runs

Runs	Opp	Venue	Date	Captain
434	Eng	Rajkot	18 Feb 2024	Rohit Sharma
372	NZ	Mumbai WS	6 Dec 2021	Virat Kohli
337	SA	Delhi	7 Dec 2015	Virat Kohli
336	Eng	Birmingham	6 Jul 2025	Shubman Gill
321	NZ	Indore	11 Oct 2016	Virat Kohli

Post script:

** England (407) became the first Test side to record six ducks in its innings after registering a 400-plus total. The previous highest total with six ducks was the 365 by Bangladesh.*

** England in the first innings, became the second Test side after South Africa (at Ahmedabad in Nov 1996) to record six ducks in an inning against India.*

40 } The number of innings Yashasvi Jaiswal took to reach 2000 Test runs in his Test career — during his knock in the second innings of the Edgbaston Test. He, Rahul Dravid and Virender Sehwag, are now the quickest to reach this milestone for India in Tests in the fewest innings. However, Jaiswal is the quickest to reach in the fewest matches for India. Jaiswal is also the quickest among Indians to achieve this in terms of days — in 723 days (1 year, 11 months, 22 days), and overall, he is the fifth fastest in terms of days in Test cricket, as shown in the second table.

Quickest (in fewest innings) to reach 2000 Test career runs

Inn	M	Batter	Opp	Venue	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	HS	100/50
40	25	R. Dravid	NZ	Hamilton	6 Jan 1999	2023	54.98	190	3/15
40	25	V. Sehwag	Aus	Chennai	14 Oct 2004	2145	53.63	309	7/6
40	21	Y. Jaiswal	Eng	Birmingham	4 Jul 2025	2018	53.11	214*	5/11
43	26	V. Hazare	WI	Port of Spain	21 Jan 1953	2027	54.78	164*	7/8
43	24	G. Gambhir	NZ	Napier	29 Mar 2009	2081	52.03	206	5/10

Quickest (in fewest days) to reach 2000 Test career runs

Days	Y-M-D	Batter	For	Opp	Venue	Achieved on	M	Inn
523	1-5-5	K. Pietersen	Eng	Aus	Melbourne	26 Dec 2006	22	41
612	1-8-2	M. Slater	Aus	Eng	Perth	5 Feb 1995	23	40
629	1-8-21	V. Richards	WI	Eng	The Oval	12 Aug 2976	21	36
720	1-11-20	A. Strauss	Eng	SL	Lord's	11 May 2006	25	47
723	1-11-22	Y. Jaiswal	Ind	Eng	Birmingham	4 Jul 2025	21	40

9 } The number of batters to aggregate 430+ runs in a First-Class game. India captain Shubman Gill is the latest to join this elite list. His aggregate of 430 is the second highest by an Indian after Bhau Nimbalkar's 443. However, Gill now has the highest by an Indian while leading a side. Only two others, Graham Gooch and Angelo Perera (as listed below), have made more runs as captain than Gill in a First-Class match.

Highest match aggregates (both innings combined) by a batter in First-Class cricket

Runs	(1st inn	2nd inn)	Batter	For	Against	Venue	Month, Yr
501	(501*	–)	B. Lara	Warwickshire	Durham	Birmingham	June 1994
499	(499	–)	H. Mohammad	Karachi	Bahawalpur	Karachi	Jan 1959
456	(333	123)	G. Gooch ©	England	India	Lord's	Jul 1990
455	(3	452*)	D. Bradman	NSW	Queensland	Sydney	Jan 1930
446	(244	202*)	A. Fagg	Kent	Essex	Colchester	Jul 1938
443	(443*	–)	B. Nimbalkar	Maharashtra	Kathiawar	Poona	Dec 1948
437	(437	–)	B. Ponsford	Victoria	Queensland	Melbourne	Dec 1927
432	(201	231)	A. Perera ©	Nondescripts CC	Sinhalese SC	Colombo PSS	Feb 2019
430	(269	161)	S. Gill ©	India	England	Birmingham	Jul 2025

Highest match aggregates (both innings combined) by an Indian batter in First-Class cricket

Runs	(1st inn	2nd inn)	Batter	For	Against	Venue	Month, Yr
443	(443*	–)	B. Nimbalkar	Maharashtra	Kathiawar	Poona	Dec 1948
430	(269	161)	S. Gill ©	India	England	Birmingham	Jul 2025
402	(252*	150*)	D. Shorey	Delhi	Assam	Guwahati	Dec 2022
389	(37	352)	C. Pujara	Saurashtra	Karnataka	Rajkot	Jan 2013
383	(178	205*)	R. Dalal	Arunachal Pradesh	Mizoram	Puducherry	Dec 2019

© captain

*Notes: * Gill's 430 runs are the most made by a #4 batter in a FC match. The previous highest was the 428 (in one innings) by Aftab Baloch for Sind against Baluchistan in Karachi in February 1974.*

** Gill's 269 is the highest score by an Indian #4 and by an Indian captain, bettering Virat Kohli's 254 not out vs South Africa in Pune in Oct 2019.*

** Gill is now the only player in cricket history with a 400+ in a Test match, a 200+ (208) in an ODI and a 100+ (126*) in a T20I match.*

** Gill (25y-301d) is second youngest captain in FC cricket to register a 200+ and 100+ in a match after South African Jean du Plessis (24y-345d) who scored 203 & 101* for South Western Districts in Nov 2023.*

** Gill (25y-301d) is the youngest captain in Test cricket to make twin centuries in a match. The previous record was held by his former teammate Virat Kohli (26y-38d) during his 115 & 141 in Adelaide in Dec 2014.*

4 } The number of Asian pacers to claim a Test 10-wicket haul in England. Akash Deep, the latest to do so at Birmingham, is the second Indian to join this select group.

Best match figures by a visiting Asian pace bowler in England in Tests

Bowling	Bowler	For	Venue	Month, Yr	Result
12/99	Fazal Mahmood	Pak	The Oval	Aug 1954	Won
10/77	Imran Khan	Pak	Leeds	Jul 1987	Won
10/187	Akash Deep	Ind	Birmingham	Jul 2025	Won
10/188	Chetan Sharma	Ind	Birmingham	Jul 1986	Drawn
9/110	Jasprit Bumrah	Ind	Nottingham	Aug 2021	Drawn

All records are correct and updated until 7 July 2025.

1st

Trailblazing ton: Smriti Mandhana lit up Trent Bridge with a masterclass, smashing her maiden T20I century off just 51 balls in the series opener. She became only the second Indian to notch up a hundred in women's T20Is — and the first ever from India to register centuries across all three formats of international cricket. A landmark knock from a generational batter. GETTY IMAGES

2nd

Spin supremacy: N. Shree Charani announced herself in style, claiming the 'Player of the Series' award with 10 wickets across five innings. The left-arm spinner made an unforgettable T20I debut at Nottingham, ripping through the English line-up with sensational figures of 4 for 12. GETTY IMAGES

3rd

Crucial stand: England openers Danni Wyatt-Hodge and Sophia Dunkley put on a commanding 137-run partnership at The Oval, laying the foundation for a narrow five-run win over India in the third match. Their stand proved decisive, breathing life back into the host's campaign and keeping the series alive. GETTY IMAGES

4th

Smart finish: Richa Ghosh produced a sharp moment of brilliance behind the stumps, running out England's Charlie Dean in the fourth match at Old Trafford. The decisive intervention punctuated a disciplined Indian effort, as the Women in Blue chased down 127 with three overs to spare — sealing the series with a match to go. GETTY IMAGES

5th

Parting punch: Charlie Dean starred with the ball, returning figures of 3 for 23 to help England secure a consolation five-wicket win in the fifth and final match of the series at Edgbaston. ECB VIA GETTY IMAGES

6th

Milestone moment: India Women celebrate a landmark moment after clinching their first-ever bilateral T20I series win against England. Until now, the Women in Blue had never beaten the English in a T20I series — home or away. This time, they held their nerve to seal a 3-2 victory. GETTY IMAGES

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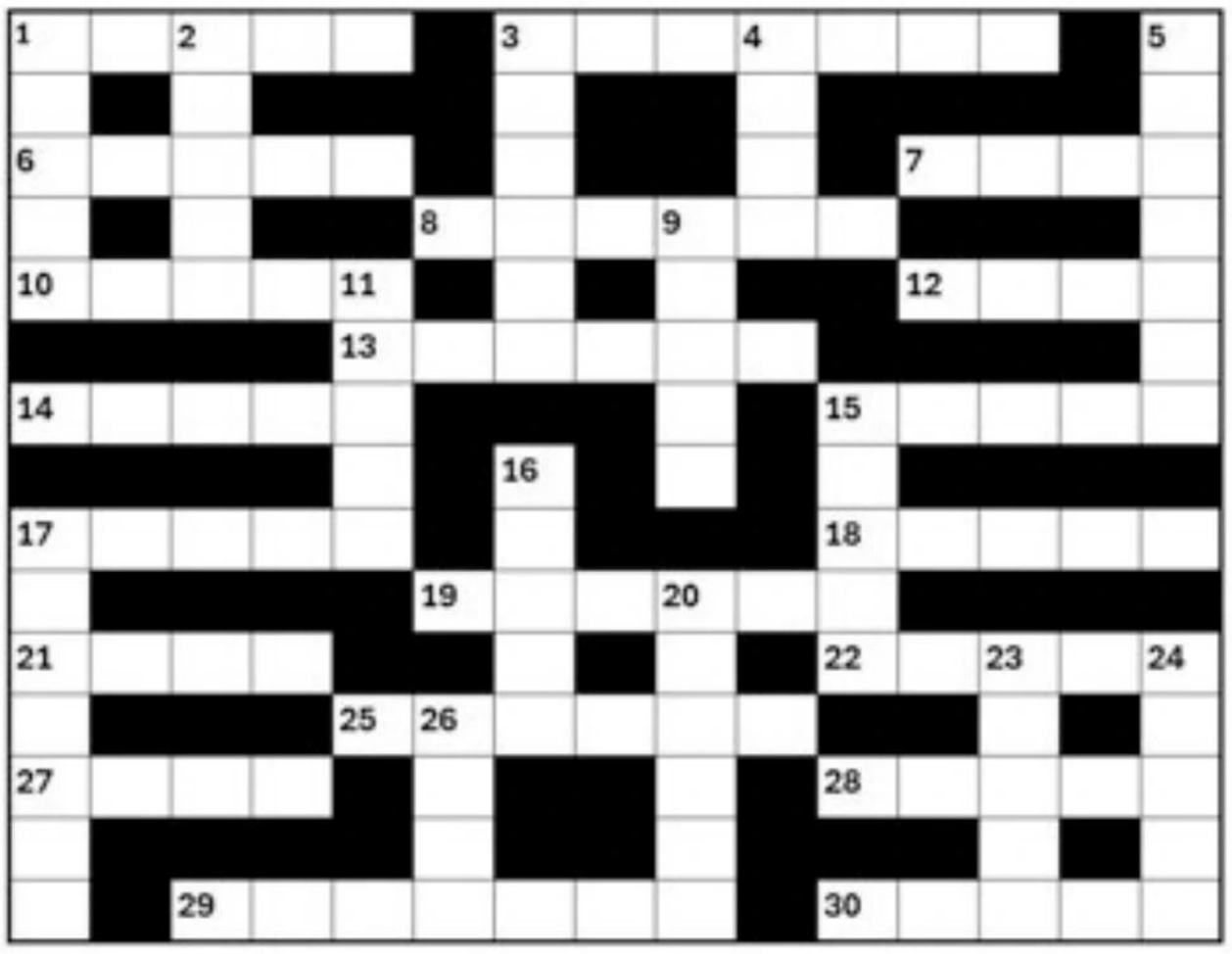

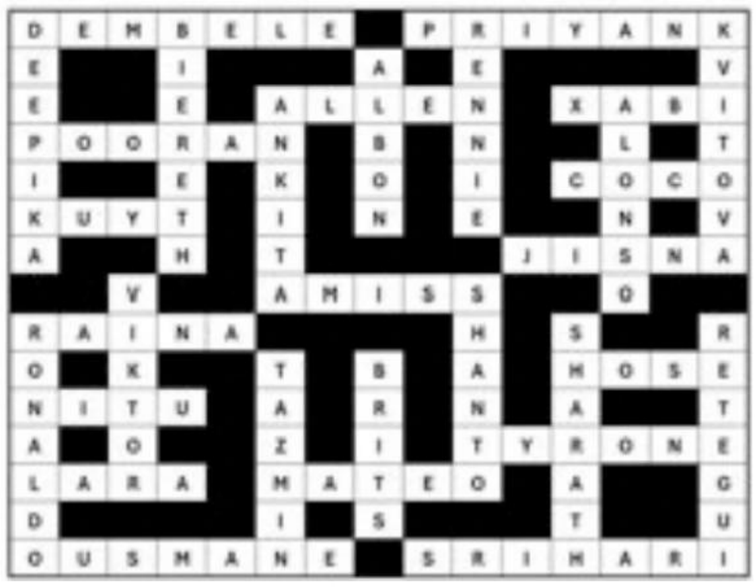

SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Identify this champion cyclist who secured his 100th career win in Stage-4 of the Tour de France recently. (5)

6 Which Indian star recently announced his retirement from international hockey? (5)

7 Which German driver participates in F1 for Kick-Sauber Ferrari? (4)

10 Whose record of most five-wicket hauls in SENA countries in Tests did Jasprit Bumrah go past during the Headingley Test against England? (5)

12 Who is the bowling coach of the Bangladesh cricket team? (4)

13 Which former racing world champion drives for Aston Martin F1 team this year? (6)

14 & 3 Who was chosen for the Player of the Match award in the WTC final held in June 2025? (5,7)

15 Who scored a century for England in its first innings of the Leeds Test versus India? (5)

17 Who scored a hat-trick for Bournemouth in the Premier League match against Nottingham Forest in January 2025? (5)

18 Which legendary F1 driver moved from Mercedes and drives for Ferrari F1 team in 2025? (5)

19 Which team won the sixth season of the Ultimate Table Tennis League in 2025? (1,5)

21 Who is the only player in football history to have played in three consecutive World Cup title clashes? (4)

22 Who is the batting coach of the Indian men's cricket team? (5)

25 Which former Indian cricketer, who was part of the 2007 T20 World Cup & 2011 World Cup winning teams, announced his retirement recently? (6)

27 Which West Indian won the Player of the Match award in the only T20 International held against Ireland in June 2025? (4)

28 Which country aggregated more than 1000 runs in a Test match (both innings put together) recently? (5)

29 Who won the Player of the Series award in the recently-held T20 international series held between England and the West Indies? (7)

DOWN

1 Which Indian batter recently scored a century on his county debut for Hampshire? (5)

2 Who is the fielding coach of the Indian men's cricket team? (5)

3 Who resigned as the Indian men's football team's coach recently? (6)

4 Identify this 2007 F1 world drivers' champion from Finland? (4)

5 This current World No. 1-ranked golfer has held the same for more than 100 weeks now. (7)

9 Who is the only football player in the world to have won the World Cup, Golden Boot, Golden Ball and Ballon d'Or awards — all four in the same year? (5)

11 & Across 8 Which British F1 driver won the home race at Silverstone on July 6, 2025? (5,6)

15 Who won the prestigious Zamora Trophy for the 2024-25 La Liga season? (5)

16 What is the surname of the Indian shooter who holds the world record in women's 50m rifle three positions event? (5)

17 Who won the Man of the Match award in the first Test between India and England in Headingley?

20 Who became the first South African to score a triple hundred in Tests recently? (6)

23 Who is appointed as the coach of the Juventus football team? (5)

24 & Across 30 Who won the Player of the Series award in the three-match ODI series held between Ireland and the West Indies in May 2025 by scoring two consecutive centuries? (5,5)

26 Who was the first New Zealand spinner to take five wickets in an ODI match? (4)

BLUEPRINT OF A BREAKTHROUGH

Tiruppur Tamizhans, the TNPL 2025 champion, built its **title run** on clarity at the auction table, trust in youth, and a core belief in its bowling unit.

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The recently concluded Tamil Nadu Premier League season delivered a compelling underdog story, as the Idream Tiruppur Tamizhans defied the odds to clinch a historic maiden title.

Under the leadership of R. Sai Kishore, the Tamizhans crafted a campaign defined by clarity, cohesion, and quiet belief. Their ascent culminated in a commanding win over defending champion Dindigul Dragons in the final — a fitting exclamation mark to a season few had foreseen.

"Looking at the composition of the team in the beginning, or when we just finished the auction, if somebody had told us that we would be reaching the finals, I would have happily accepted that. But looking at the whole tournament, the boys turned up very well," said RX Muralidhar, Tiruppur's head coach, in an exclusive chat with *Sportstar*.

Muralidhar's conviction in the group was forged well before the first ball was bowled — at the auction table. While retaining a trusted core, including the prolific opening duo of Tushar Raheja — the tournament's Orange Cap winner — and VP Amith Sathvik, the Tamizhans astutely added emerging, largely unheralded talent to their ranks.

Their bowling unit, marshalled by the seasoned T. Natarajan, proved decisive. He was complemented by the pace of Ragupathy Silambarasan and the breakout brilliance of Esakkimuthu.

Silambarasan finished with 10 wickets, while Esakkimuthu — the tournament's surprise package — bagged 14, routinely rattling stumps with sizzling yorkers. In a sign of the team's depth, four of their bowlers ended the campaign with double-digit wicket tallies.

"I realised that bowlers are the ones who win you tournaments. I wanted bowlers who can not only contain the run flow, but pick wickets regularly. And the way our bowlers repaid the faith I had in them is gratifying," Muralidhar said.

He added, "I wouldn't say we got all our targets but we had a clear cut plan on how to structure our squad. We picked players who could fit into those roles and it was easier for them as well to go out there and explore."

With several players impressing throughout the tournament, it was no surprise to see a steady stream of Indian Premier League scouts at TNPL venues. Among them were former India pacers T.A. Sekhar and Vinay Kumar, the latter representing Mumbai Indians. A performer like Esakkimuthu, whose stump-hunting

Guided growth: RX Muralidhar's quiet revolution stems from a coaching mantra that favours minimal interference and maximum understanding — letting players grow through trust, not control. NIGAMANTH P

yorkers turned heads, may soon find himself on a much bigger stage.

Much of this quiet revolution can be traced back to Muralidhar's coaching philosophy — minimal intervention, maximum insight. "Instead of spoon feeding the players, I observe them a lot. After a certain point, I identify their weaknesses and present them with challenges that target those areas in practice. I assess them based on how they tackle those," he explained.

He closed with a nod to the game's cognitive demands: "I believe that any time a bowler or a batter walks in, there is a task waiting for them. It could be anything; taking a wicket, building a partnership or containing runs. If he is able to figure this task by himself and attempts to solve it, he will be backed in the coming games. It all boils down to situational awareness regardless of your training."

Purple Cap
Sonu Yadav (NRK)

Orange Cap
Tushar Raheja (TT)

Emerging bowler of the Tournament
A Esakkimuthu (TT)

Player of the Tournament
Tushar Raheja (TT)

Top run-getters

Player (For)	Innings	Runs	Strike Rate
Tushar Raheja (TT)	9	488	185.55
Aparajith B (CSG)	9	412	158.46
VP Amith Sathvik (TT)	9	340	139.34
Shivam Singh (DD)	9	327	141.55
R. Ashwin (DD)	10	297	153.88

Top bowlers

Player (For)	Innings	Wickets	Economy Rate
Sonu Yadav (NRK)	7	16	7.98
A. Esakkimuthu (TT)	8	14	7.46
R. Ashwin (DD)	10	13	7.36
Abhishek Tanwar (CSG)	9	13	9.55
R. Sai Kishore (TT)	9	12	5.44

AFP

Australia completes clean sweep against Windies

1 The visiting side clinched a **dominant 176-run win** in the third Test in Jamaica

Australia sealed a 3-0 series sweep over West Indies with a dominant 176-run win in Jamaica, underpinned by a historic bowling display.
Mitchell Starc ripped through the top order to reduce WI to 7/5, becoming the second-fastest to 400 Test wickets by balls bowled. Meanwhile, Scott Boland claimed the first-ever pink-ball Test hat-trick.

The West Indies' top six batters managed just six runs — the lowest in history — before their side was dismissed for the second-lowest total (27) ever in Test cricket.

AFP

2

Cardiff's Sophia Gardens **(in pic)**, the County Ground in Derby, and Loughborough University have been confirmed as host venues for the warm-up fixtures ahead of the 2026 ICC Women's T20 World Cup, which begins in Birmingham on June 12. While the full schedule is yet to be announced, the three venues will stage matches in the lead-up to the 10th edition of the tournament, set to be hosted in England and Wales.

SPORTZPICS

3

MI New York clinched its second Major League Cricket title with a thrilling five-run win over defending champion Washington Freedom in Dallas. With 12 needed off the final over, seamer Rushil Ugarkar held his nerve, conceding just six runs and dismissing Australia's Glenn Maxwell. While Washington had topped the group stage, New York — which finished fourth — stormed through the playoffs with back-to-back wins to lift the trophy.

ICRICKET ITALY

4

Italy and the Netherlands have qualified for the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026 in India and Sri Lanka, with Italy making its debut at a senior ICC World Cup. Despite a nine-wicket loss to the Netherlands in The Hague, Italy edged past Jersey on net run rate after both teams finished with five points. Jersey had stunned Scotland with a last-ball, one-wicket win, knocking the Scots out of T20 World Cup contention for the first time in four editions.

AFP

5

South Africa's Wiaan Mulder revealed that Brian Lara encouraged him to break his Test record of 400 during a conversation after the recent match against Zimbabwe in Bulawayo, where Mulder had declared on 367 not out. "He said records are there to be broken and he wishes if I'm ever in that position again, I actually go and score more than what he had," Mulder shared. Still, he defended his decision to declare: "Respecting the game is the most important part for me."

RESILIENCE AND REDEMPTION

From Norris's golden home win to Hulkenberg's long-awaited podium, the 2025 British GP delivered **pure theatre.**

Pics: REUTERS

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Fate unravels in unexpected ways — there's no way to predict who ends up on the right side of things, and who pays the price.

The 2025 Silverstone Grand Prix typified that truth. On a weekend that began with a mix of expected patterns and unpredictable turns, it ended with redemption for a veteran, heartbreak for some, and a home victory for a rising British star.

McLaren's 1–2 finish extended its season-long dominance, with Lando Norris once again leading the charge — but there's no denying that seeing the third-place winner, Nico Hulkenberg of Kick Sauber, finally have his day brought a bright smile to many a face. To walk into the paddock season after season, longing for an elusive moment of glory, the German's elation was shared by one and all.

For him, this wasn't just a podium — it was a narrative arc finally coming full circle. After 239 races, 15 seasons, eight constructors, and many near misses, he was finally able to reap the rewards of his toil and hard work, capping an emotional, ecstatic weekend for a driver who no longer bears the painful record for most races in F1 history without a podium.

For homeboy Norris **(left)**, fortune smiled wider. With the eyes of a passionate British crowd — including

thousands at the iconic 'Landostand' fixed on him, the McLaren driver was a man on a mission and delivered a mighty performance that gave him the golden memory of being crowned the British GP champion.

It was a confidence-boosting victory that could prove pivotal in his title bid — a battle that has been shifting gears every round. Starting from third, behind teammate Oscar Piastri, the changing weather and theatrics never bothered a focused Norris. Winning at Silverstone, his true home, was the dream he'd long waited for.

What certainly helped his push was the harsh hand dealt to the other side of the McLaren garage. Silverstone was a missed opportunity and a chapter Piastri would like to forget quickly. A 10-second penalty for erratic driving behind the Safety Car — after he had cruised past pole-sitter Max Verstappen — dented his chances.

A gamble backfires

Verstappen was poised for a better outing after the Austria disappointment, but it was Red Bull's ambitious choices that sealed his fate. The Dutchman was sensational in Saturday's qualifying to steal pole with a mighty lap.

But the gamble of driving a heavily tweaked car — the team's gamble to opt for a low-downforce setup, compromising balance in corners for greater speed on the straights — backfired.

A wet-and-dry race is always a challenge for drivers, and with Verstappen having to fight the car, he was out of the lead and soon tumbled further. Though making his way back up to fifth, his increasing inability to challenge the McLaren duo deepened Red Bull's woes. What was once an invincible partnership is now withering rapidly.

Only a few days after the race, Red Bull announced that its long-time Team Principal, Christian Horner, had been stripped of his duties. A 20-year tenure that saw six Constructors' titles and eight Drivers' crowns came to a grinding halt.

Whether Red Bull's future leads to recovery or collapse, one thing is certain — the old guard is gone, and the overhaul is in motion.

A veteran's day to remember

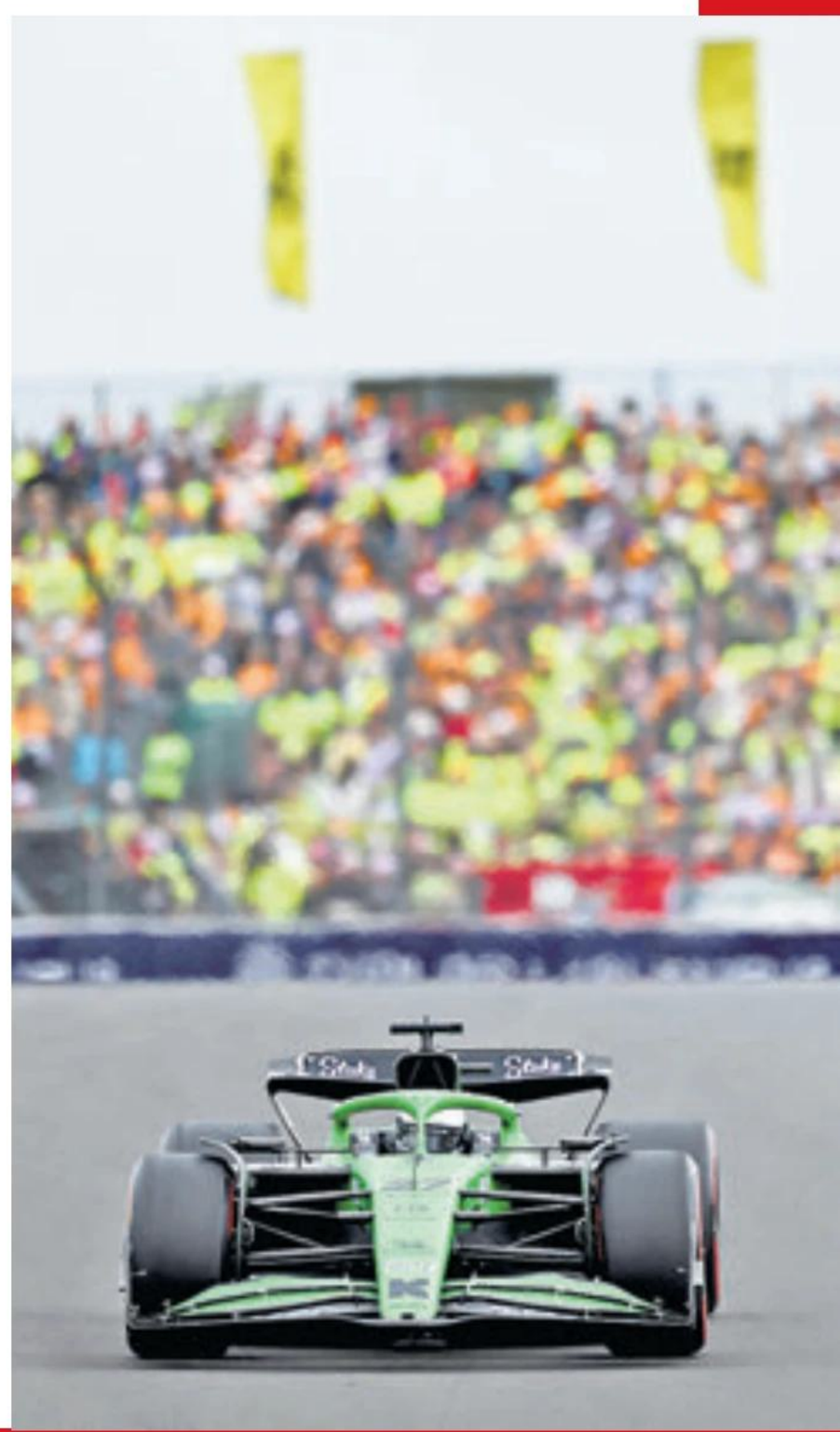
Amid all the turmoil at the front — a championship fight swinging wildly, a giant in disarray, and varying results — it was a quiet, beaming Hulkenberg **(above)** who gave Silverstone its purest moment.

Though far from the frontrunners in outright pace, Hulkenberg's charge from the back of the grid (19th) to the podium was nothing short of miraculous. That he succeeded with one of the slowest cars on the grid made the achievement even more remarkable.

To put it into perspective, there was less than a 10-second gap to the fourth-placed car with more than a handful of laps still to go. Hulkenberg had to nail every turn until the very last corner.

And the driver in hot pursuit? None other than Lewis Hamilton — the nine-time British GP winner, now in Ferrari red, desperate to extend his streak of 11 consecutive British GP podiums.

The fire was alive in the experienced Hamilton, but Hulkenberg extracted every ounce from the neon green car **(below)**, holding him off with composure. Hamilton never came close, but he was among the first to praise the veteran who finally had his day, and gave the sport a memory that will be cherished for years.



FORGED IN FIRE

Aryan x TMG Gaming won the Battlegrounds Mobile India Pro Series 2025, taking home a ₹1.25 crore prize and the honour of **representing India** at the Esports World Cup 2025.

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The Battlegrounds Mobile India Pro Series 2025 (BMPS) erupted in a blaze of adrenaline as 16 of India's fiercest BGMI teams competed in a high-stakes battle for supremacy.

The result: Aryan x TMG Gaming came out on top in an edge-of-the-seat showdown with NONX Esports, taking home a ₹1.25 crore prize and the honour of representing India at the Esports World Cup 2025 (EWC) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

However, the competition wasn't just about teams—it was also about individual heroes forged in fire.

NONXLEVII stood tallest among giants, dominating the competition to claim both the Overall MVP (Most Versatile Player) and Realme MVP of the Tournament titles, earning ₹4 lakh as prize money.

Elsewhere, NINJA BOY seized the KIA Clutch Award (₹50,000) while DRAGON OP was crowned Best IGL (In-Game Leader), securing ₹1.5 lakhs.

As the dust settles, Aryan x TMG Gaming will barely have time to rest, with the Esports World Cup already underway, featuring a massive prize pool of USD 70 million.

S8UL FINISHES 15TH IN APEX LEGENDS AT EWC

S8UL made history by becoming the first Indian esports organisation to field an Apex Legends team in the Esports World Cup.

S8UL's Apex Legends squad, featuring Rick Wirth (Sharky), Benjamin Spaseski (Jesko), and Tom Canty (Legacy), qualified for the EWC 2025 through the Apex Legends Global Series (ALGS) 2025: Split 1 Pro League for APAC South.

Though it progressed through the first round in Riyadh, it lost in the Last Chance Qualifiers, ending the tournament with an impressive 15th-place finish among 40 teams.

Chinese side VKG (VK Gaming) claimed the title with 96 points, nine points clear of ROC Esports and took home the USD 600,000 championship prize. The victory was China's first-ever Apex Legends world title and the first

VALORANT RANKINGS

ABHIRUP "LIGHTNINGFAST" CHOUDHURY

ZAID "R1SEN" QURAISHI

SHRAVANA "TECHNO" SAHOO

AMAN "HOAX" YADAV

GANESH "SKROSSI" GANGADHAR

championship won by a Chinese team at this year's Esports World Cup.

Chen Yin-hong (ID: QQ), 18, of VKG, was named MVP of the series.

NATIONAL SPORTS POLICY OMITS ESPORTS

Esports has made inroads into avenues of traditional sports, getting included in the Asian Games and earning recognition by the International Olympic Committee.

But its scene in India suffered a major dent when it was omitted from the National Sports Policy, the Khelo Bharat Niti-2025, released earlier this month.

The policy keeps India's Department of Sports as the nodal agency for esports in the country, without any recognition to the Esports Federation of India.

The Central Government has also made a distinction between competitive gaming — esports — and real money gaming — gambling included — with the latter falling under the purview of India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

FREE FIRE RETURNS TO INDIA AFTER 3.5 YEARS

Free Fire, once one of India's most popular games, marked its return to the country after three-and-a-half years, with Free Fire MAX India Cup 2025, which will take place from July 13 to September 28.

With a prize pool of ₹1 crore, the tournament will be India's first major competitive roadmap in the game, developed by Garena, since its ban in 2022.

The return is also expected to shake up the competition for MOBA Games in India, with BattleGrounds Mobile India (BGMI), the sole leader in the market, followed by Call of Duty Mobile.

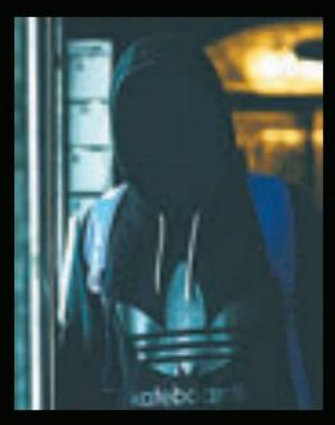
The tournament will run from July 13 to September 28 and will be held in four phases:

In-game Qualifiers: July 13
Online Qualifiers: July 26 – August 3
League Stage: August 22 – September 14
Grand Finals: September 27 – 28

After the In-game qualifiers, 48 teams have qualified for the next round.

Did you know? Wimbledon 2025 semifinalist Taylor Fritz is an Emerald 3 in League of Legends (LoL), ranking him over 80 per cent of the players of the game.

WHO AM I?



I won the PUBG Mobile India Tour in 2019, the PUBG Mobile India Series in 2020, and five additional championships as part of GodLike Esports.

The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Ankit "V3nom" Panth

BUSINESS OF
ESPORTS

MSI entered a partnership with Red Bull, where it will incorporate hardware into three of Red Bull's esports tournaments, including Red Bull Home Ground (including European events) and Red Bull Team5.

EASTER EGG
'SCRIM'

Scrim is short for scrimmages. These are practice matches played between two esports teams or individuals as warm-ups before major tournaments.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

Blues win on Palmer power

Chelsea **stunned** European champion PSG to lift the Club World Cup for a second time.

CHELSEA

3

Cole Palmer 22', 30'
Joao Pedro 43

PSG

0

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Under the searing New Jersey sun, Chelsea stunned Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in the final of the FIFA Club World Cup (CWC) 2025 on July 14 (IST), beating the UEFA Champions League winner 3-0 at MetLife Stadium to win the first edition of FIFA's revamped competition.

The United States hosted its first major FIFA tournament since the 1994 World Cup. For the final, there was a real sense of occasion at MetLife Stadium, with the backdrop of the Manhattan skyline and President Donald Trump in attendance among a crowd of 81,118. There was even the first-ever half-time show at a FIFA tournament, adding a Super Bowl vibe.

PSG's dominance undone

Going into the match, PSG was the overwhelming favourite to lift the title. The French side was eyeing a fourth major title of the season and had been ruthlessly majestic on its way to the final. It defeated Lionel Messi's Inter Miami in the round of 16, dispatched Bayern Munich in the quarterfinals, and demolished Real Madrid in the semifinal.

But having been three goals ahead midway through the first half in the semifinal, this time the roles were reversed as PSG found itself 3-0 down by the break.

Chelsea employed a simple high-press strategy, sticking some classic long balls over the top of the European champion's defence. It was a masterclass in counter-attack from Enzo Maresca's side to take home a jackpot of almost USD 125 million.

When Maresca arrived at Stamford Bridge in 2024, he was welcomed by a divided Chelsea fanbase. Still, the Italian ended his first season having secured Champions League football, a

Jubilant: Chelsea captain Reece James (holding trophy) and coach Enzo Maresca (25) celebrate with the team. REUTERS

UEFA Conference League trophy, and now the title of Club World Cup champion.

Chelsea's journey to the club football summit was marked by strong performances, a favourable draw, and the mid-tournament acquisition of an 80 million USD striker (Joao Pedro). It overcame LAFC, ES Tunis, Benfica, Palmeiras, and Fluminense to reach the final, bouncing back despite a 3-1 group stage loss to Flamengo.

Maresca outwits Enrique

To defeat PSG's previously irrepressible team represents a spectacular achievement for a Chelsea side that had been largely unfancied before the start of the tournament. Cole Palmer **(facing page)** was the hero of the night for the Premier League club and went on to win the Player of the Tournament award. The 23-year-old bagged a brace and set up another for Joao Pedro as the Blues became the first English side to lift the trophy twice after winning the 2021 edition.

Having played on the left of Chelsea's attack and as a drifting No. 10 this season, Palmer started on the right flank as Maresca looked to expose a chink in the armour of Luis Enrique's side. The selfless running of striker Pedro and wing-back Malo Gusto was integral to Palmer's punishing performance — either running in behind to create space or pushing to that flank to ensure there were bodies around him.

The Parisian side was uncharacteristically disjointed throughout the match, with its stars failing to make an impact. Maresca's tactical prowess was evident as he expertly outmanoeuvred Enrique. Chelsea's defence, anchored by a five-man backline, employed a low block to effectively stifle PSG's normally free-flowing attack.

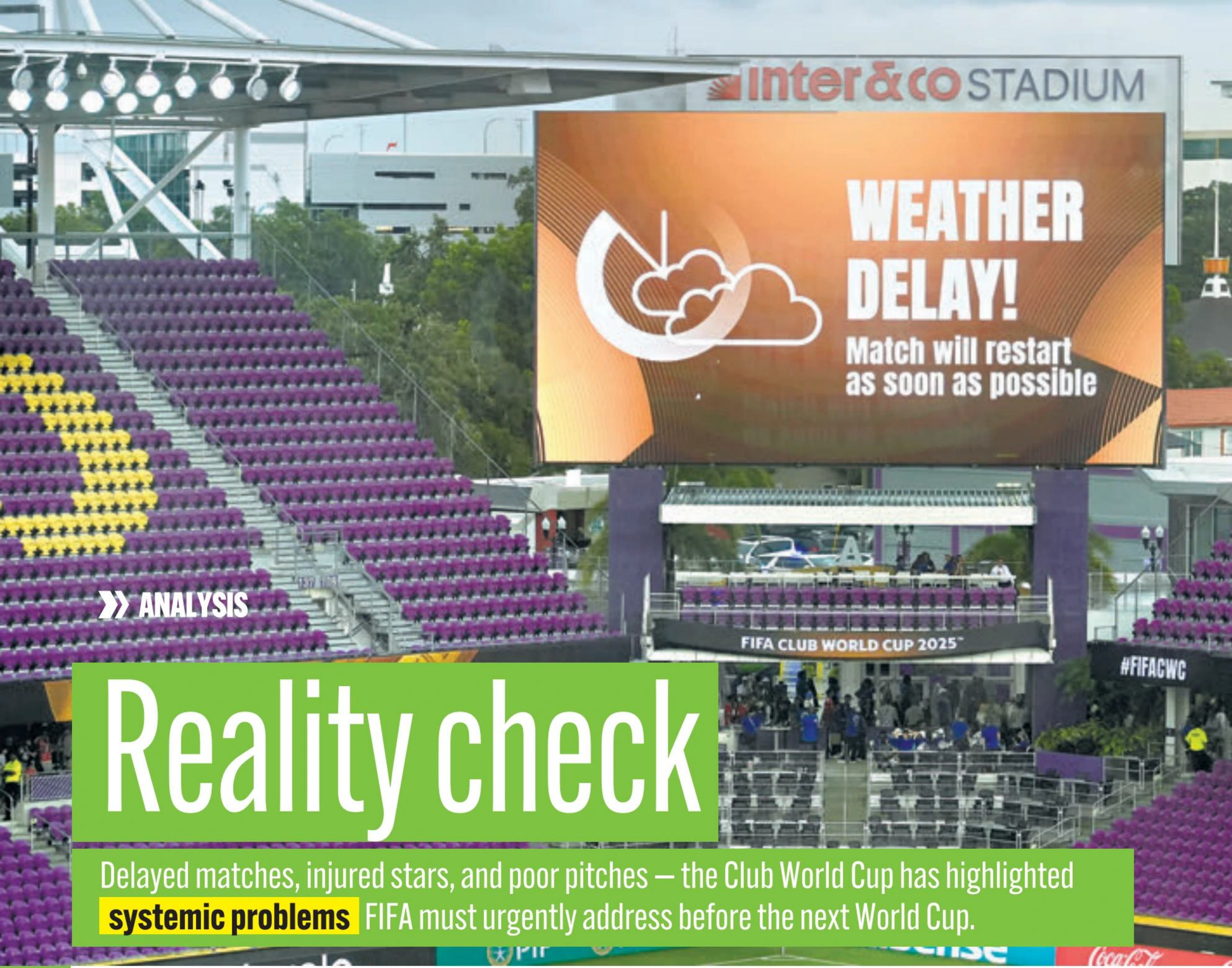
Adding to Chelsea's heroics, goalkeeper Robert Sanchez delivered a world-class performance, making a series of crucial saves that repeatedly thwarted PSG's attempts to get back into the game and dashed any hopes of a comeback for the French giant.

A glimpse into football's future

Since a Clearlake Capital-led consortium acquired Chelsea from Roman Abramovich for USD 3.2 billion in May 2022, the club has invested nearly USD 1.89 billion on over 45 players across six transfer windows.

This period has been tumultuous for the London club, but the CWC win suggests Chelsea may finally be heading towards a more consistent future. In the end, the final of a season-ending tournament boasting a USD 1 billion prize pool encapsulated the state of the game in 2025.

This was a clash between a club backed by a Qatari sovereign wealth fund and another owned primarily by an American private equity firm — two of the three highest-spending clubs in global football over the past decade.



Reality check

Delayed matches, injured stars, and poor pitches — the Club World Cup has highlighted **systemic problems** FIFA must urgently address before the next World Cup.

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A fresh model, more exciting clashes involving big teams, and a chance for small teams to shine — these were some of the primary agendas behind FIFA president Gianni Infantino launching a rebranded version of the Club World Cup (CWC).

Originally an annual affair, featuring the winners of just continental competitions, the rebranded version boasts a 32-team tournament, to be held once every four years.

However, the tournament started drawing criticism from bodies like FIFPRO and the World Leagues Forum due to the impact it is expected to have on fixture congestion and player welfare.

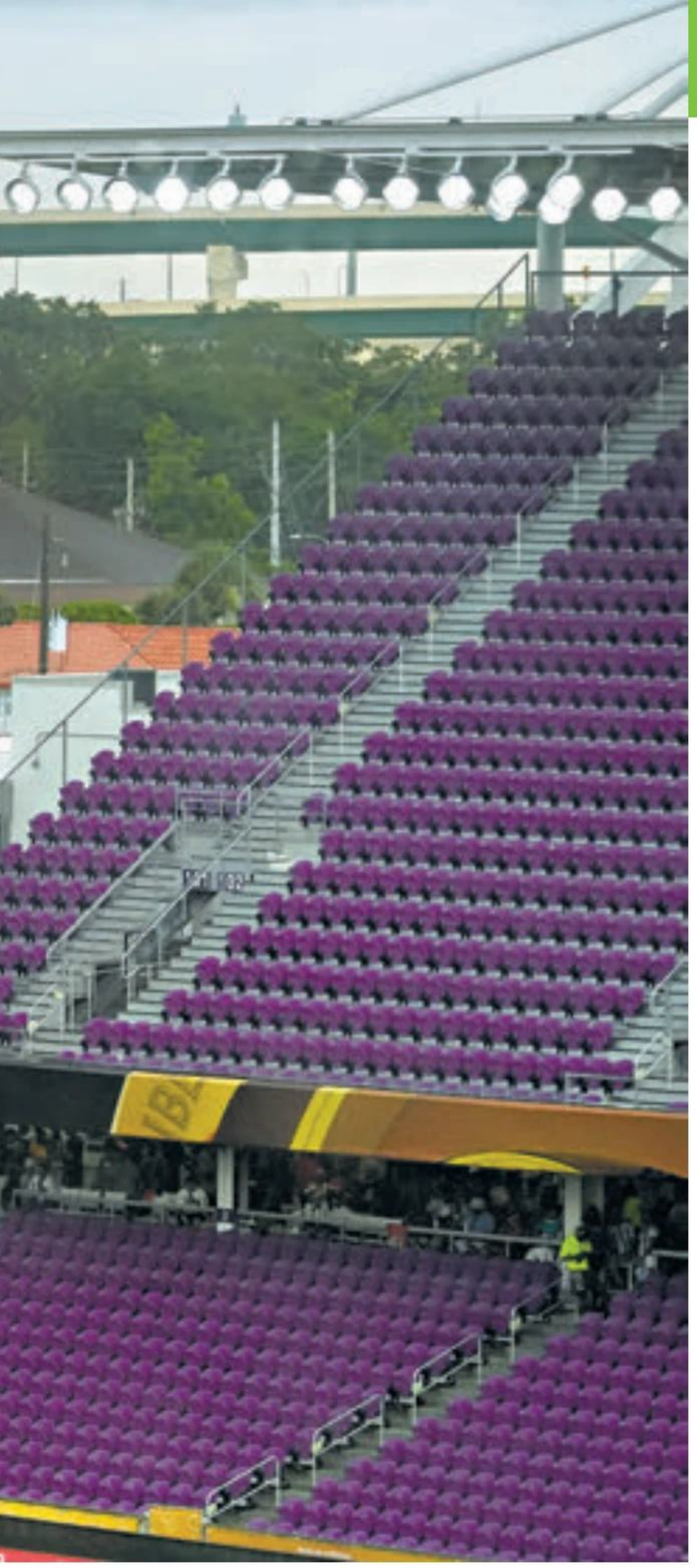
Global players' union FIFPRO, in collaboration with 70 medical and performance experts, released a study on June 12 (three days before the start of the CWC), which states that professional footballers should be allowed at least a four-week off-season break, plus a minimum four-week retraining period before returning to competition. It also recommends mandatory mid-season breaks and mandatory consideration of the travel burden on players.

To put this into context, let us take the example of Manchester City and Chelsea, the two teams that represented the Premier League in the CWC. While City got knocked out in the Round of 16, Chelsea, which reached the final and eventually won the title, will have a gap of only five weeks before their domestic season starts on August 15. Also, Chelsea's first game of the CWC took place on June 16, just 19 days after its UEFA Conference League final win over Real Betis.

Humans, not machines

The physical ability of sportspeople is often taken for granted, and footballers are not exempt from this. One of the major criticisms FIFA has faced for rebranding the CWC is the neglect of player welfare, with the global football body seemingly oblivious to the physical and mental stress a player endures throughout the season.

If we take Europe's top-five leagues into consideration, Premier League, La Liga, and Serie A teams play 38 games while Bundesliga and Ligue 1 teams play 34 matches. This increases for some teams depending



Poor planning: The Club World Cup has seen extreme weather conditions that have led to games being suspended for prolonged periods. AP

on how far they reach in European and domestic competitions.

Adding a 63-match tournament after that, albeit once every four years, is a stark indication of how players have become secondary in the modern game, which is now driven by business models and revenue.

Outside Europe, the Campeonato Brasileiro Série A, the top flight in Brazilian football, has a 38-match league. Unlike European leagues, teams competing here have their season running parallel to the CWC, meaning players of Botafogo, Palmeiras, Flamengo and Fluminense (who played the most CWC matches, having reached the semifinal) had to shoulder a significant extra workload on top of the strains of league football and domestic competitions.

Former Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said this when asked about his views on the rebrand: "It's all about the game and not the surrounding events. That's why the CWC is the worst idea ever implemented in football in this regard. People who have never had or do not have anything to do with day-to-day business anymore are coming up with something. There is insane money for participating, but it's also not for every club. Last year it was the Copa America and the European Championship, this year it's the CWC, and next year the World Cup. That means no real recovery for the players involved, neither physically nor mentally."

Last September, Manchester City midfielder Rodri **(below)**, who had a longer season after his title-winning EURO 2024 campaign with Spain, said players were close to going on strike because of the increase in games. Just a week later, he suffered a torn ACL in a 2-2 draw against Arsenal and was initially supposed to miss the rest of the season. However, due to a good recovery, he could return to the pitch eight months later.

GETTY IMAGES

A month after Rodri's injury, FIFPRO filed a legal complaint with the European Commission, citing FIFA's "abuse of dominance," specifically related to the CWC, even though the issue is not just limited to the tournament. Many players who have not had a proper post-season break since last season (those who competed in EURO 2024) will not get one even next year, as they will have to prepare for the FIFA World Cup immediately after their club season ends.

As FIFA continues to increase competitions, an alarming pattern is emerging in which players are seeing their post-season breaks being eaten into. And this cycle will continue, with 2027 being the only year this decade not to feature a tournament after the regular club season. 2028 will see the EURO and Copa America, 2029 will have the next edition of the CWC, and 2030 will feature the centenary FIFA World Cup, jointly hosted by Morocco, Portugal and Spain (with a match each in Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay).

Impact on the 2025–26 season

The teams that played in the CWC are concerned about the after-effects of this elongated 2024–25 season. Players have less time to recover from the physical and mental strain of a long season, including muscle fatigue and oxidative stress. This, in turn, can put them at risk of injuries next season. Clubs will now have to brainstorm how much time off they can give players, because there is also the factor of getting a few pre-season matches under the belt to gain match fitness before the new season starts. While those clubs with a deep run in the CWC should ideally allow more time off for their players, imbalances are bound to creep in that may negatively impact players. Also, more matches mean a greater risk of players getting injured, whether due to fatigue or an in-game incident. Bayern Munich's Jamal Musiala recently became a victim of the latter after suffering a horror injury during a quarterfinal clash with Paris Saint-Germain.

A matter of time: Post the CWC final, Chelsea will have a gap of only five weeks before the new season of the Premier League starts on August 15. AFP

In the 46th minute, an on-field collision with PSG keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma resulted in Musiala suffering a fractured fibula. "I know there are many things in life much more important than this, but for these guys, it's their life. Someone like Jamal lives for this. He just came back from a setback, and then it happens in the way it happens. You feel powerless," said Bayern manager Vincent Kompany.

While it is expected that Musiala will take at least four to five months to recover from the injury, it is unlikely that the midfielder will return to his best next season.

While it is yet to be seen how the 2025–26 season pans out for the CWC participants, it is a known fact that delayed injuries will occur due to the added stress of the tournament. But it will remain a grey area because the true extent is difficult to quantify.

Let's take PSG and Real Madrid as examples — the two teams playing one of the most high-profile clashes in the CWC, which the former won 4–1 to reach the final.

PSG has played 65 matches this season. In its squad, the top three outfield players who have played the most minutes so far are Achraf Hakimi (4668), William Pacho (4545), and Vitinha (4521). They now have less than a month to get match-fit again for the UEFA Super Cup final against Tottenham Hotspur. The 2025–26 Ligue 1 season starts just three days later.

Real Madrid has played 68 matches this season. In its squad, the top three outfield players with the most minutes are Federico Valverde (5556), Aurelien Tchouameni (4866), and Jude Bellingham (4794). Los Blancos finished their 2024–25 season on July 9 and will have 42 days (12 days more than PSG) before their regular La Liga 2025–26 season begins on August 20.

A potential deterrent

The CWC has also seen extreme weather conditions that have led to games being suspended for prolonged periods. Be it extreme heat or thunderstorm alerts, the natural flow of matches has taken a hit multiple times.

And this wasn't something that was suddenly sprung on the organisers, because pre-tournament forecasts had already predicted such conditions.

The first match disrupted due to extreme weather was the Ulsan HD vs Mamelodi Sundowns clash on June 17 in Orlando, Florida, which was delayed for more than an hour due to the threat of lightning. On the same day, in Nashville, Tennessee, the Boca Juniors and Auckland City game saw a 50-minute pause due to FIFA's lightning storm protocol being activated.

On June 18, the Pachuca vs Red Bull Salzburg match in Cincinnati, Ohio, suffered a one-hour and 37-minute delay due to heavy rainfall and lightning. The next day in East Rutherford, New Jersey, Palmeiras and Al Ahly's match was suspended for 46 minutes due to lightning strikes, with a cooling break also needed midway through the first half as temperatures soared to 88°F (31.1°C).

On June 20, the longest delay of the tournament till then took place in Orlando, between Benfica and Auckland City, as play was suspended for two hours due to a lightning storm in the area. Benfica was the victim of another halt due to weather, with its clash against Chelsea taking four hours and 40 minutes to complete, following a one-hour and 53-minute delay just five minutes before full time.

While there have been numerous discussions on these climate-change-driven weather incidents, scorching temperatures have also been a major point of

Statfile

No of matches played by PSG and Chelsea in 2024-25
PSG: **65**; Chelsea: **64**

Most individual minutes in each team
PSG: **Achraf Hak˙m˙ — 4668 m˙ns**; Chelsea: **Marc Cucurella — 4346 m˙ns**

discomfort for the players in the CWC. Also, the organisers scheduling afternoon kick-offs to help TV audiences in Europe and Africa watch matches at convenient times have also been met with criticism.

From a footballing perspective, the primary question being raised is how organisers plan to tackle this issue during the FIFA World Cup next year, where the USA is one of the three host countries. Scheduled to take place around the same time (June 11-July 19), similar halts will put a damper on football's biggest festival. The extreme temperatures also prompted FIFA to slash ticket prices for a number of matches, and if the same trend continues for the World Cup next year, it may lead to more logistical nightmares for organisers, who may have to brace for major economic ramifications.

Chelsea's Enzo Fernandez spoke about the sweltering temperatures, saying it is "impossible" to have a normal training session because of the heat.

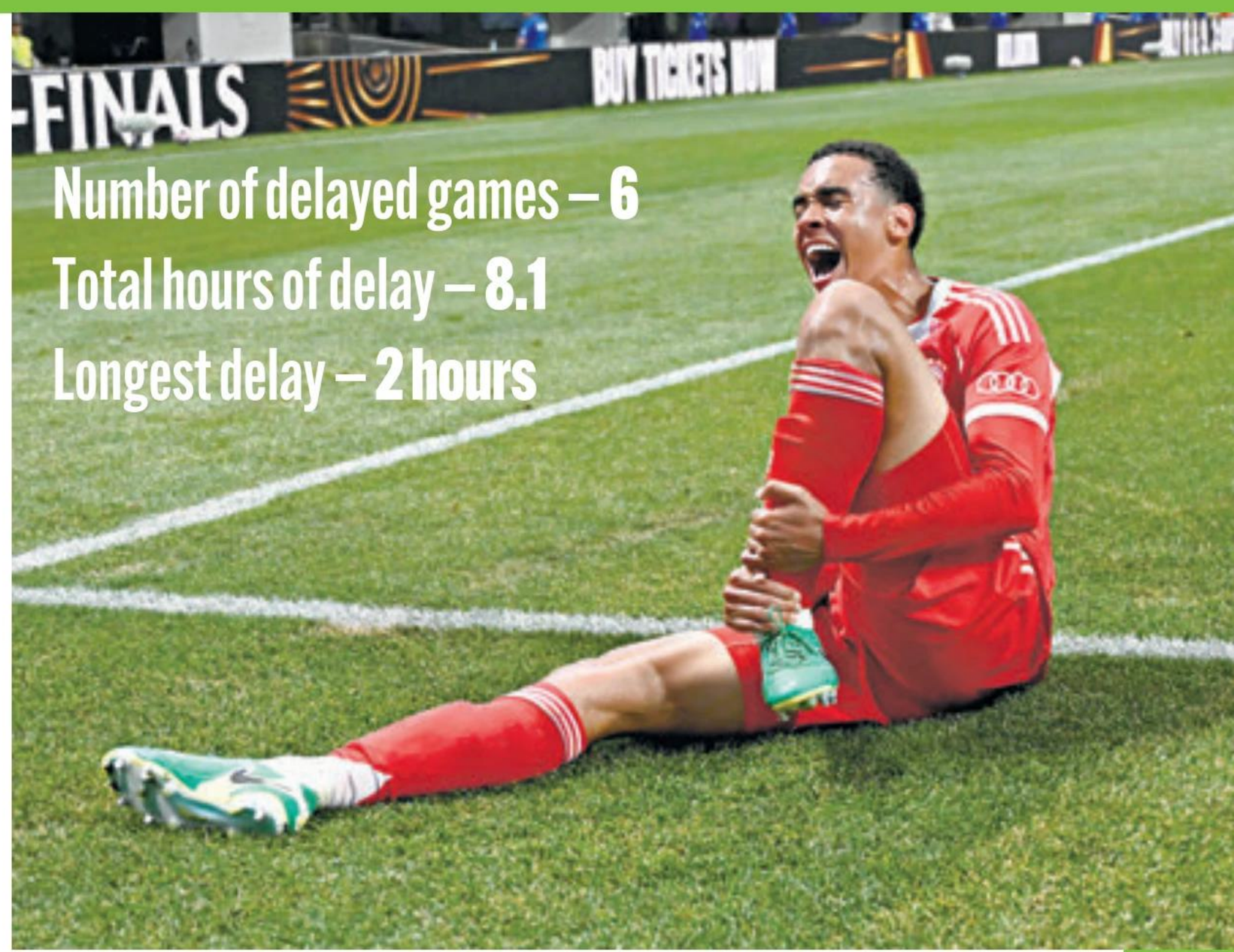
"Honestly, the heat is incredible. The other day, I had to lie down on the ground because I was really dizzy. Playing in this temperature is very dangerous, it's very dangerous. The speed of the game is not the same, everything becomes very slow."

Fernandez, a likely member of Argentina's World Cup 2026 squad, added, "Well, let's hope that next year they change the schedule, at least so that it remains a beautiful and attractive football spectacle, right?"

Pitch imperfect

The USA is steadily making progress in integrating football [or soccer, as it is known there] into one of its mainstream sports. However, it is not quite there yet, and a big indication of that is the poor pitch conditions, which have drawn complaints from players and managers — something almost unheard of in countries with rich footballing cultures like Spain or England.

A major reason for this is that several grounds use artificial turf instead of natural grass, which increases injury risk for players and disrupts the natural movement of the football.



Number of delayed games – 6
Total hours of delay – 8.1
Longest delay – 2 hours

Big setback: Bayern Munich's Jamal Musiala will take at least four to five months to recover from the horror injury he sustained against PSG. REUTERS

PSG manager Luis Enrique **(below)** did not mince words when criticising the pitch after his side's 2–0 win against Seattle Sounders, saying FIFA needs to "bear in mind" the quality of both match and training pitches. "I wouldn't imagine an NBA court full of holes. What I really care about is the state of the field of play. The ball bounces almost like it was jumping around like a rabbit," said the Spaniard. Bellingham also called out the poor quality of pitches after Real Madrid's 3–1 win against Pachuca. "The pitches aren't great at all. It holds up the ball, and the ball barely bounces. It's tough on the knees as well. Hopefully, there's someone who will look at that going into the World Cup next year."

GETTY IMAGES

The initial reception from FIFA has been slightly positive, perhaps because it has publicly acknowledged that there is a problem. Former Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, who is FIFA's Global Football Development chief, admitted: "I've been personally on the pitch at Orlando. It's not at the level that European clubs are used to because it's not perfect, but that will be rectified for the World Cup next year."

The USA has already hosted a World Cup in 1994, but a lot has changed since then. Modern football demands precision, the highest standards and top-notch facilities. The FIFA World Cup is football's biggest tournament, and organisers should give it the respect it deserves. It looks like the CWC has given a crucial reality check.

The USA has fewer than 365 days to get ready. Time is short, and the clock is ticking fast.

REUTERS

STARS SHINE BRIGHT

World champion and tournament favourite Spain **continues to impress** in the Womens EURO.

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The Women's EURO 2025 in the Playground of Europe — Switzerland — entered its make-or-break stage as the eight teams marched their way into the knockout stage.

It was a dominant showing from all four group winners — Norway, Spain, Sweden and France — in the first phase of the competition after each recorded three wins in three. World champion and tournament favourite Spain was the most impressive of the lot, bagging 14 goals and conceding just three in that period. Spain's bid for a first-ever European Championship title is spearheaded by two-time Ballon d'Or Féminin winner Alexia Putellas **(above, No. 11)**, who has three goals and four assists in three starts in the tournament.

In the quarters, La Roja will face host Switzerland, which will play its first-ever knockout game in the EURO, after dramatically securing second place in its group behind Norway.

In its final group stage game against Finland, Swiss midfielder Riola Xhemaili found the net in the 92nd minute to level the game at 1-1 and edge its opponent on goal difference.

Elsewhere, England had a rough start to its title defence, losing 1-2 to France, and became the first reigning champion to lose its opening fixture in Women's EURO history. However, the Lionesses bounced back in style, thrashing heavyweight Netherlands 4-0 and neighbour and debutant Wales 6-1 to secure a knockout spot behind France.

Rising tide

While the European Championship was underway, across the globe in the South Asian region, some nations were scripting their own history during the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026 qualifiers.

India managed to go unbeaten during the whole qualifying campaign and punched its ticket to

Fiery form: Inter Miami's Lionel Messi has taken his tally to 16 goals from 16 appearances in MLS this season, tied with Nashville's Sam Surridge in the Golden Boot race. GETTY IMAGES

the finals in Australia after holding its nerve to beat higher-ranked Thailand 2-1 in a do-or-die contest. Meanwhile, across the border, Bangladesh also broke new ground as it qualified for the Women's Asian Cup for the very first time.

Despite missing some of its most experienced players — like all-time top-scorer Sabina Khatun, who left the side in protest against English coach Peter Butler — Bangladesh managed to maintain a perfect record in the qualifiers.

With a squad of youngsters, the Bengal Tigresses opened their campaign with a 7-0 win against Bahrain before edging past better-ranked Myanmar 2-1 in a decisive battle that essentially sealed qualification. Bangladesh rounded off its campaign with another 7-0 drubbing, this time of Turkmenistan, to earn its place in the continental tournament.

Another notable qualifier was Uzbekistan, which marked its return to the premier tournament after last playing in 2003. Uzbekistan guaranteed a place at the expense of Nepal, which it beat on penalties in their deciding clash after it ended 3-3 in regulation time.

Nepal's hat-trick hero Sabitra Bhandari and goalkeeper Anjana Rana Magar missed from the spot as Nepal continued its wait since 1999 to play in the Asian Cup.

The result marks a successful year for football in Uzbekistan, as in June, the men's team qualified for the FIFA World Cup for the first time in its history. It will be part of the 48-team tournament to be held in the USA, Canada and Mexico next year.

A dash of magic

Inter Miami's Lionel Messi seemed to have taken his side's 4-0 loss against Paris Saint-Germain in the FIFA Club World Cup 2025 as fuel to perform better, as he bagged six goals in three games on his return to Major League Soccer.

The 38-year-old bagged a brace against CF Montreal, New England Revolution and Nashville SC since the start of July, making it five MLS games in a row in which he has scored two or more goals — a feat never previously achieved in the league.

He has taken his tally to 16 goals from 16 appearances in the league this season, tied with Nashville's Sam Surridge in the Golden Boot race.

Despite playing three games fewer than Eastern Conference leader Philadelphia Union, Inter Miami is fifth in the standings, just five points behind, and can top the table if it manages to win at least two of its games in hand.

Results updated as of July 14.

FOR MORE STORIES

THE FOURTH DIMENSION

Diamond Harbour FC is **poised** to join the legacy trio of Indian football's top tier.

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Barely three years into its existence, Diamond Harbour FC seems to have achieved a lot. In a city that is generally preoccupied with the legacy of its big three clubs — Mohun Bagan, East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting — Diamond Harbour FC is fast emerging as the fourth alternative in Kolkata's rich footballing heritage. Recording its birth on the Bengali New Year's Day on April 15, 2022, the club made a quick transition to the top division of the Calcutta Football League before turning its aspirations to achieving a national footprint.

That happened midway through April this year when it clinched the I-League 2 crown to secure a berth in next year's I-League, a milestone that very few clubs have been able to achieve in such a short span of time. The club is already eyeing a spot in the country's top league, the Indian Super League, which now remains just a step away. A title in the I-League will propel it to the constellation of the elites of Indian football (if the AIFF continues to follow the AFC roadmap).

That is currently the objective towards which the club is working. "Within a couple of years, we hope to qualify for the Premier A or B (of the Calcutta Football League). We are confident of reaching greater heights within four-five years. If needed, we will also make a foray into ISL," is the message of its chief patron Abhishek Banerjee that greets the visitor venturing into the club's website. Those words were spoken during the club's inauguration by Mr Banerjee, who is the national general secretary of Trinamool Congress and the 'inspiration' behind the club's foundation.

"The Diamond Harbour MP Cup football tournament was started in 2017 by our Chief Patron, who is very fond of the game. It became an overnight success, and brought all the people in Diamond Harbour together as one in support of the sport. After seeing this love and passion for football, Mr Banerjee had this vision of forming a football club for everyone of this region. Due to the pandemic this plan was delayed by a few years, but in 2022, once

Right moves: Diamond Harbour FC clinched the 2024-25 I-League 2 crown to secure a berth in next year's I-League. Pics: SAIKAT SAHA/DHFC MEDIA

everything was normalised, our club came into existence to address the aspirations of the youth of Diamond Harbour, the constituency which has elected him as the Member of Parliament," says Akash Banerjee, DHFC vice-president and the man responsible for the running of the club.

There might be a political undertone in the club's genesis owing to the involvement of a leading politician from the state, but the team is for everyone irrespective of regional, religious or political affiliations, insists the secretary of the club, Manas Bhattacharya. The former India international and Mohun Bagan midfield icon, Bhattacharya has been drafted in to

Gaining levels: Sustaining the momentum will be the biggest challenge for the club when it embarks on the more difficult job of excelling in the I-League.

provide the knowledge base that comes with his long association with football at the highest level. "The club was conceived with the idea of providing the right platform for excellence to the young players from within and outside the state. Everything was done with an open mind in order to facilitate the improvement of the infrastructure in the state. There was no scope for any narrowness that would bring political, religious or regional affiliations into consideration," says Bhattacharya while explaining the ethos behind the club's foundation.

The club's rapid rise is the result of a professional approach in the management of its affairs. "Every aspect of the club management is in the hands of professionals. This can be gauged from the decision of having a highly successful Kibu Vicuna as the head coach. The Spanish coach has a good understanding of Indian football, as he had secured the I-League title for Mohun Bagan barely a couple of years ago," Bhattacharya said.

"The team started performing quite well from the very start as we reached the top tier of the local league (CFL Premier Division) after finishing second in the First Division, where we started our journey. Next, we did well in the I-League 3 and took a step further in becoming the I-League 2 champion while remaining unbeaten in the whole tournament," he added.

A football club requires a dedicated fan base to ensure its survival, and Diamond Harbour FC is already garnering a lot of support among the population in the port town on the southern fringes of the state from which the club draws its name. "The legacy clubs like East Bengal or Mohun Bagan have a huge support base due to their presence for over a century. We are working with around three hundred clubs in the Diamond Harbour region to

Meteoric rise

2022
Club founded on April 15.

2022–23
Debuts in the CFL First Division. Finishes second in the final league standings, earning promotion to the CFL Premier Division.

2023–24
Finishes third in the CFL Premier Division and qualifies for I-League 3. Later secures promotion to I-League 2 in 2024.

2024–25
Wins the I-League 2 title with an unbeaten record.
Also delivers a strong performance in the CFL Premier Division, remaining unbeaten until the final two matches — both suspended due to a legal dispute. The tournament remains inconclusive.
Across all competitions, the team played 40 official matches during the season and lost only once.

Winds of change: Head coach Kibu Vicuna has had a transformative impact on the team.

build a lasting impact in the hearts of our fans at home. And now, by winning championships, we are hopeful of garnering support from all parts of West Bengal," Akash says.

Sustaining the momentum will be the biggest challenge when it embarks on the more difficult job of excelling in the I-League. "This is our fourth season in football. In the past three seasons we have performed really well with a very high success rate. Now the competition gets really tough, as you have to play on different surfaces and in varying weather conditions against opponents who are quite capable. The challenge will be bigger but we are preparing for that," says Vicuna while assessing his team's prospects. "It is important for us now to prepare a proper game model by getting the right balance in the side between the foreign and Indian players," he added.

Vicuna says the experience of helping Mohun Bagan to the I-League title will definitely count, but this is a new assignment offering new challenges. "We are a very exciting side and we will try to play the right version of football to get good results, much like the way we have done so far," he said.

Climbing the success ladder means a rising level of investment in terms of money and resources. In a situation where the legacy clubs like East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting are struggling to draw enough funds to create a competitive side according to the demands of the ISL, how does DHFC plan to stand up to this challenge?

"Most of our sponsors have been supporting us since the formation of the club. We are thankful to each and every one of them. Also, the club's success has brought in many more names who are ready to support us. We are currently focused on the current calendar year, but when the time comes, we are confident that our sponsors will support us in a bigger way once we are able to qualify for the Indian Super League," Akash is hopeful about DHFC's great future.

Key performers for Diamond Harbour FC in 2024-25 season (goals/assists):

Narohari Shrestha (forward)
CFL — 7/3
I-League 3 — 8/3
I-League 2 — 5/1

Jobby Justin (midfielder)
CFL — 10/5
I-League 3 — 2/5
I-League 2 — 4/4

Girik Khosla (midfielder/winger)
CFL — 5/4
I-League 3 — 2/1
I-League 2 — 5/4

Rabilal Mandi (defender/left back)
CFL — 1 assist
I-League 2 — 2/1

Long camps, young blood, and tactical clarity: How India's women qualified for AFC Asian Cup 2026

From heartbreak in 2022 to triumph in Thailand: India's women's football team books a **historic AFC Asian Cup spot.**

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LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

After years of dealing with a sense of apathy from stakeholders, cases of alleged harassment, and the Indian Women's League (IWL) being little more than an afterthought, the Indian women's national football team has quietly qualified for next year's AFC Women's Asian Cup.

This is the first time that the Blue Tigresses have made it to the continental tournament through the qualification route. In 2003, qualifiers did not exist. In 2022, India made it to the tournament as the host.

The Crispin Chettri-coached squad topped Group B after an unbeaten qualifying campaign, which included dominant wins over Mongolia (13-0), Timor Leste (4-0), and Iraq (5-0), before grinding out a decisive 2-1 win against higher-ranked Thailand.

Three years in the making

Forward Pyari Xaxa, who top-scored for India in the qualifiers with five goals, still remembers the heartbreak she and her teammates suffered at the 2022 edition of the Asian Cup. After a goalless draw against Iran in its opening game, India was forced to withdraw from the tournament after a majority of its players tested positive for COVID-19.

"When I tested positive for COVID, it felt as if the ground beneath me opened up. I cried a lot, but I hid my tears from my teammates so that they wouldn't get disheartened. Unfortunately, most of them tested positive as well. All the hard work had gone to waste," Pyari recalls.

Cut to three years later, the 28-year-old had seemingly manifested India's ticket to Australia, the host of the next edition.

"I'd written down my dreams in my diary about five to six years back. It's free to dream. After we qualified this time, I ticked it off the list. Next, the World Cup remains."

After Pyari, Sangita Basfore was India's next highest scorer in the qualifiers, netting four times. But it was her brace in the winner-takes-all match against Thailand that capped off a journey marked by perseverance and patience. "I still haven't mentally returned from that stadium in Thailand," she says of the match, at the end of which she broke down in tears.

In 2021, during the home camp for the Asian Cup, Sangita suffered an ACL injury that sidelined her for nearly three years. While it took the Bengal player time to regain her rhythm and command in midfield, coach Chettri had always believed in

Merit over miracles: The Indian women's football team scripted history by qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup on merit for the first time, toppling higher-ranked Thailand in a decisive showdown. AIFF MEDIA

her potential.

"He gave me the confidence to go up the pitch and have a free role in midfield," Sangita reveals.

That decision bore fruit in the 29th minute against Thailand. Anju Tamang passed the ball to an onrushing Sangita, who took a touch and half-volleyed it into the far corner from outside the box. Her second goal – the winner in the 74th minute – was a team move straight off the training ground.

Brushing up on the basics

"The set piece goal which Sangita scored, it was done for 53 days in training and then in three matches, but it came in use in the fourth match. That's why longer camps are always helpful," India head coach Chettri says.

In the lead-up to the qualifiers in Thailand, the Blue Tigresses trained at the Padukone-Dravid Centre for Sports Excellence in Bengaluru for almost two months. The extended camp allowed the team to play practice matches against local sides and two international friendlies against Uzbekistan, each ending in a 0-1 loss.

Chettri, who took charge in late January, believes such long camps are particularly important in the context of Indian women's football, where tactical basics are often underdeveloped.

"Women's football and men's football are completely different. The latter is thoroughly professional; they earn money in crores. But when it comes to women, as soon as the IWL is over, they are not that professional to take care of themselves," points out Chhetri.

Dynamic duo: After a carousel of coaching changes, the AIFF finally struck gold in 2025 — Crispin Chhetri took charge with Priya PV as his deputy, and together, the duo has forged a winning formula. **Below:** It was Sangita Basfore's brace in the winner-takes-all match against Thailand that capped off a journey marked by perseverance and patience. AIFF MEDIA

Planning ahead

Chettri's first assignment was the Pink Ladies Cup in the UAE, where India faced Jordan, Russia, and South Korea. That tournament, along with his stint with Odisha FC in the AFC Women's Champions League, gave him insight into where India stood in comparison to stronger sides.

I took a younger side because I knew technically we might not be there with these teams, but physically we could be. I needed more energy on the field. Mentally, I was building a team of players which could be suitable for all kinds of matches. While I did lose some players to injury, I had the core in mind," he explains, noting the absence of seasoned internationals like Dalima Chhibber, Ashalata Devi, and Bala Devi, keeping the 2031 FIFA World Cup in mind. "I need hungry players. I need good players who make a team great, not great players who think about their names rather than the badge. I think I took a risk [taking a young side] but the federation supported me in this, and I think now we know the result."

The 24-member squad for the qualifiers featured players like Manisha Kalyan, Grace Dangmei, Soumya Guguloth, Elangbam Panthoi Chanu, and Kiran Pisda – all of whom brought valuable overseas club experience.

"When our players go to Europe, they play at a certain intensity which we don't get regularly in IWL. With intensity, you improve your decision-making. That helps when they come and be part of the national team and inspire others to become better."

Room for improvement

"There were no shortcuts to success – this achievement was the result of a long-term vision and structured preparation," an All India Football Federation (AIFF) release stated, while announcing a USD 50,000 reward for the team.

The release also cited the impact of the ASMITA Leagues – a nationwide initiative launched in 2023 – which has contributed to a 232% increase in registered women footballers over the past year.

"How many people know about it?

Can we share data about it? What we have started is good, but we have to promote it, share data and be transparent. Now that everyone is aware, we have to make parents aware of it, so that good players come through," Chhetri says.

"While the federation and States have been working towards improving the women's game, the speed has been slow. This [qualification] will boost this process as well," says assistant coach Priya P.V. "We need to improve scouting from the grassroots level. You can find talent in schools, colleges, and even in random pockets. We shouldn't just stick to professional players because they have the IWL to play in," adds the former Kerala footballer, who's been coaching for the past 15 years.

Road to Australia — and beyond

Next year's AFC Women's Asian Cup in Australia will be the final edition that serves as a direct qualifier for the FIFA World Cup. The semifinalists will earn direct qualification for the 2027 tournament in Brazil, while losing quarterfinalists will contest for two additional spots through playoffs. Teams missing out here will still have a final chance via the inter-confederation playoffs.

"I'm showing them dreams here. It's important because when you have a dream, only then do you work towards it. After the Thailand match, I think everyone has started believing in themselves. We lacked that before," says Chettri. The Asian Cup will also act as a qualification route for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, with all quarterfinalists progressing to the second round of qualifiers. On July 11, the AIFF unveiled a 'roadmap' to support the team's preparation for the tournament. This includes an early IWL season (September to January) and an 83-day camp spread over three phases.

Financial boost: The All India Football Federation (AIFF) announced a reward of USD 50,000 (around ₹42.75 lakh) for the Indian women's team in recognition of its historic qualification for the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026.
AIFF MEDIA

The plan envisions "10-12 international friendlies and five to seven matches with domestic teams.

"According to the draw we get, we can dedicate one phase of the camp to each team. By the time the AFC comes, we have a camp of around 40 days and play friendlies against different nations with different playing styles.

"They could be an African country, a European team with a lot of intensity, or even a Latin American team that is very skilled. This will help us adapt to all situations," Chettri explains.

The draw will be held on July 29. Until then, the Indian team and its well-wishers can dare to dream about a successful tournament – one that could become a watershed moment for women's football in the country.

"It's high time we start supporting them. They should feel wanted. I think we'll go a long way," Chettri concludes.

Pots for draw (world rankings in brackets)

Pot 1	Pot 2	Pot 3	Pot 4
Australia (15)	China (17)	Philippines (41)	India (70)
Japan (7)	South Korea (21)	Chinese Taipei (42)	Bangladesh (128)
North Korea (9)	Vietnam (37)	Uzbekistan (51)	TBD

Neeraj Chopra's STAR POWER FUELS BUZZ

Neeraj and his team's efforts yielded results as the **maiden NC Classic** surged into a resounding success. Nearly 15,000 fans flocked to the Sree Kanteerava Stadium while millions watched it on screens.

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Neeraj Chopra has been a matchless pathbreaker in Indian athletics for close to a decade. He has brought home glories of the unprecedented kind — World Championships title, Olympic medals, Diamond League crowns and the hallowed 90-metre mark.

A byproduct of such blinding success is that it bequeaths one with immense soft power, something only cricketers and movie stars usually possess in this country.

Neeraj, though, never wielded the full potential of this fame. His public appearances were scarce, his social media activity mellow, and his endorsements never over-the-top.

But over the last few months, Neeraj was forced to come out of this cocoon and brandish his influence, following the announcement of the inaugural edition of Neeraj Chopra Classic, a top-tier javelin throw event set to display India's potential to host big-ticket events.

As the co-host of the NC Classic, the reigning world champion went out of his way to indulge in the organisational mire of the event. In addition to inviting elite international throwers, he dove head-first into the decision-making process — subduing the spice level of athletes' meals to picking the choice of stadium music during the event buildup.

Neeraj and his team's efforts yielded the results as the maiden NC Classic surged into a resounding success. Nearly 15,000 fans flocked to the Sree Kanteerava Stadium on July 5 to cheer on a top-class field, while millions watched it on screens across the world

Befittingly, Neeraj won the title, with an 86.05m throw in the third round, as he staved off challenges from Kenya's Julius Yego and Sri Lanka's Rumesh Pathirage.

The attention garnered by the NC Classic astounded the likes of Rio Olympic gold medallist Thomas Rohler, who has been to nearly all corners of the world as a competing athlete.

"Fifteen thousand people for only javelin is unique. To be honest, I have never seen something like this," said

K. MURALI KUMAR

Rohler. The 2015 World Champion Julius Yego echoed Rohler's thoughts. "It was amazing. Before I even threw my best, I was joining the fun with the crowd. I got a season-best throw, and I am going home happy."

In the end, it was validation for Neeraj. In the week ahead of the NC Classic, the 27-year-old had gone on a promotional blitzkrieg, almost as if he was afraid the event had failed to stoke up the necessary attention.

"To see athletics getting this much support is what we wanted. It felt so good. This is a reward for the athletes' hard work. I wasn't just thinking like an athlete. There was pressure, a different kind of pressure," said Neeraj after the meet.

The emotional toll of management that Neeraj spoke about was evident on the eve of the competition. The Indian athlete was fidgety at the pre-event press conference, a sense of apprehension about NC Classic's success writ large across his face.

The Neeraj who turned up for the post-event media interaction was far more relaxed. His smile was no longer weighed down by anxiety, while his words sang to the tune of relief.

"I was worrying about how things were being organised. Even the

Homecoming: This marked Neeraj's first appearance on Indian soil since winning the Federation Cup in Bhubaneswar last year with a modest 82.27m effort. K. MURALI KUMAR

smallest delay had me fretting. But eventually, everything went well. The crowd was fantastic. The athletes were enjoying the atmosphere. And I won too. It felt so good," added Neeraj.

Bengaluru's reception shone through even before the shower of javelins started.

An hour before the first throw, Jan Zelezny, Neeraj's coach and the world-record holder, was swarmed by a horde of fans keen to get autographs and selfies. In a country where athletics coaches go undetected every day, it was a significant indicator of javelin's burgeoning stature.

For his part, Zelezny was an exuberant presence on the sidelines, constantly chipping in with suggestions to Neeraj, as he expectedly outshone the rest of the field. The home favourite's win, though, came in arduous circumstances as the Bengaluru weather decided to throw an unexpected spanner in the works, in the form of an agitated headwind.

Even when it appeared the throwers had achieved the perfect launch, the spear's trajectory was often hindered by the moody air current. Neeraj was the only one to cross 85m in the night as he claimed the inaugural NC Classic title.

Flanking Neeraj on the podium in Bengaluru were two throwers on different ends of the experience spectrum.

While the 36-year-old Yego was forced to dig deep to produce an 84.51m throw to finish second, the young Rumesh Pathirage continued his impressive progression.

The 22-year-old Lankan produced an 84.34m effort — the third-best throw of his career — to claim the bronze medal.

Among the other Indians in the field, Sachin Yadav, who recently claimed silver at the Asian Athletics Championships, finished fourth with 82.33m.

The experienced Rohler, though, failed to adjust to the challenging conditions and was eliminated after the third round.

The churning headwind aside, the meet proved to be the perfect initiation for India to the bigger pastures of world athletics.

Speaking at the pre-event presser, Neeraj, sitting next to Germany's Rohler, suggested that the NC Classic will hopefully pave the way for more such elite competitions in the country, providing Indian athletes with a chance to rub shoulders with the best.

"We see so many competitions in Germany — A, B, C category. Similarly, I wish to see at least five to six such world-class competitions in India as well," said Neeraj.

Adille Sumariwalla, World Athletics vice president, backed Neeraj, saying it is imperative for India to host high-profile athletics events to boost its bid to bring home the 2036 Olympics. After the NC Classic, the former Athletics Federation of India (AFI) president announced India's

> « Neeraj Chopra sealed the title with an 86.05m third-round throw, holding off Yego and Pathirage's strong challenges »

plans in that regard. "We are preparing strategic bids for both the 2029 and 2031 [World Athletics Championships] editions. Since the hosting rights will be awarded together, we are open to securing either one."

Neeraj's idea of India's athletic future, though, isn't limited to just top-tier meets. He envisions more stadiums and a wider spread of elite coaches across the breadth of the country.

"I am from a village which didn't have a stadium. I used to go to Panipat for training. If there was a stadium nearby, maybe more children could have trained.

When I fly across Europe, I see some 50 stadiums every 10-15 minutes. In India, we will see as many stadiums if we travel from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. So, there should be as many stadiums as possible in India, with more specialised coaches training youngsters," said Neeraj.

For long, Neeraj has been the totem of Indian athletics, a glittering jewel of excellence for a success-starved nation.

With the NC Classic, he has established that he is capable of more, as he lights up yet another untrodden path for track and field sports in India.

Silver-lining: Kenya's Julius Yego, the 2015 world champion and Rio Olympic silver medallist, produced a season-best 84.51m on his fourth attempt to secure second place. K. MURALI KUMAR

Underwhelming return: Germany's Thomas Rohler, the Rio 2016 gold medallist, endured a disappointing outing, finishing 11th out of 12 with a throw of 75.85m. K. MURALI KUMAR

The teenage badminton prodigy juggling schoolbooks and smash shots

At 16, Tanvi Sharma is already a BWF World Tour finalist, **Junior World No. 1,** and a Class 11 student. Here's how she's balancing studies, travel, and global badminton ambitions.

Jonathan Selvaraj
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Tanvi Sharma didn't get to celebrate when she reached the final of the US Open World Tour 300 – her debut on the BWF World Tour – in Council Bluffs, Iowa, last month. She had travelled alone, and after a quick call to her mother and coach in India, she returned to her hotel room, cooked some rice, and paired it with the ready-made food she had brought from home.

Then she opened her Class 11 Economics and English textbooks and began to study. "I usually make it a point to study for at least two hours a day," says the 16-year-old.

That she has to manage school along with a burgeoning badminton career makes Tanvi's achievement even more remarkable. Only three other Indian women's singles players – Saina Nehwal, P.V. Sindhu, and Malvika Bansod – have ever reached the final of a BWF World Tour 300 event. Tanvi even came close to winning the title. She took a game off former World No. 9 Beiwen Zhang before eventually losing 11–21, 21–16, 10–21.

Even in defeat, the performance turned heads. With Saina retired and Sindhu nearing the twilight of her career, many see Tanvi as a standout prospect for the next generation of Indian women's singles players.

Tanvi's coach, Park Tae-sang, compared her attacking game favourably to Sindhu, whom he had guided to Olympic bronze in Tokyo. Veteran commentator Gillian Clark has observed similarities between Tanvi's game and that of Saina.

Tanvi hopes she embodies elements of both. "My coach, Park sir, told me my attacking game was like Sindhu, and I think the rest of my movement is like that of Saina *didi*. But I know I have a long way to go to match what they've achieved," says Tanvi, who keeps a picture of Tai Tzu Ying as her phone wallpaper — a quiet nod to the creative flair she also hopes to bring to her game. She is currently training at the National Badminton Academy in Guwahati for the Asian Junior Championships scheduled later in July. As the current Junior World No. 1, she's expected to perform well there.

Tanvi's mother Meena never imagined her daughter would be seen as a successor to two Olympic medallists. "I have two daughters

CAREER GRAPH

2022 U-15 and U-17 National Champion, silver medal at the U-19

2023 gold medal at the India Junior International tournament, silver medal at the Indian National Championships

2024 gold medal at the Bonn International BWF international challenge, silver medal at the Orissa Masters BWF World Tour 100, Quarterfinals at the Junior World Championships

2025 gold medal at the Denmark Open BWF International Challenge, silver medal at the US Open BWF World Tour 300

Age:
16

Education:
Class 11

From:
Hoshiarpur, Punjab

Discipline:
Badminton

IN 2021, AS A 12-YEAR-OLD, TANVI WON HER FIRST NATIONAL MEDAL - A SINGLES BRONZE IN THE U-15 CATEGORY AT THE NATIONAL RANKING CHAMPIONSHIPS IN GOA

PTI

Historic feat: Tanvi Sharma, the 16-year-old badminton player, made history at the 2025 US Open by becoming the youngest Indian to reach the final of a BWF World Tour event. PTI

(Tanvi and Radhika, who is her elder by three years), and I had hoped they might become national-level players. I never thought Tanvi would get to the level she has now," says Meena.

Unexpected start

Meena was a sportsperson herself, having played volleyball at the national level. After completing her postgraduation and later a PhD in physical education, she was determined that her daughters would play a sport. "I wanted them to play either tennis or cricket or badminton. Of the three, I liked badminton because when I was studying I had read stories about Saina and Sindhu. But when Radhika and Tanvi were children, they played all three sports," she says.

Hoshiarpur, their hometown on the NorthEastern border of Punjab with Himachal Pradesh, lacked quality sports infrastructure. When Radhika was nine, Meena took her to the badminton court at the town's indoor stadium. There, she was faced with a new challenge – the lack of good coaches.

Instead of giving up, Meena chose to teach herself how to coach. "At that time I didn't think too much of it. I went through online videos and coaching manuals. I didn't have any great expectations of Radhika as a player so I thought even basic badminton knowledge would be enough. I learned the basic shuttle drills and I already knew how to give physical training, so that's what I started with," she says.

Tanvi would accompany them. "She was only about five then, so I couldn't leave Tanvi by herself. I had to bring her along. She'd come and try to get involved with the training. She was a bit of an accidental player in a way," says Meena. Radhika showed results first, winning medals at the State level and then a bronze at the Under-13 Indian National Ranking competition in 2016. That performance drew interest from the Pullela Gopichand Academy in Hyderabad. "They asked if I would be willing to let Radhika come to Hyderabad. I thought it was a great opportunity for her. But I couldn't let her go by herself because she was just 13 then. So I had to come with her, and because Tanvi was even younger, I had to bring her to Hyderabad as well," Meena says.

From 2016 to 2020, Radhika trained with the hostel students at the Gopichand Academy. Meena took up a job at another badminton academy to support the family. At the time, Tanvi trained with beginners at Gopichand. Though she occasionally hit a few shuttles with Sindhu, there was little to suggest her future promise.

That changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the trio had to return to Hoshiarpur, Tanvi began to show signs of her potential – but not without uncertainty. "In 2021, when we had to move back to Hoshiarpur, I wasn't sure if I was going to continue to play badminton. I was good in studies as well, and we were under a lot of financial difficulties, which meant it was hard to train and also travel for competition. But we decided to try for one more year," says Tanvi.

Breakthrough year

In 2021, as a 12-year-old, Tanvi won her first national medal – a singles bronze in the U-15 category at the National Ranking Championships in Goa. She kept rising. In 2024, she claimed singles gold in both the U-15 and U-17 categories at the National Championships in Odisha. That same year, she was included in the Indian women's team for the Asian Team Championships, though she didn't get to play.

She remembers that tournament for another reason. "Sindhu *didi* was very good to me and her attitude was very good. I was only 15 at that time and I was injured so I didn't get a chance to play, but it was great just to be part of the Indian team and also to be alongside her. I talked to her, got to know her, and learned a lot just by watching her matches," she says.

By this point, Meena realised she could no longer offer the technical guidance Tanvi needed. "I was good enough to train her physically and mentally, but I couldn't provide the technical support she needed now

Rising stars: India's Shruti Mishra, Anmol Kharb, and Tanvi Sharma watch intently as P. V. Sindhu faces Thailand's Supanida Katethong in the women's singles final at the 2024 Badminton Asia Team Championships, held in Shah Alam, Selangor. AFP

that it was clear that she was the best player in her category in India," she says. In 2024, Radhika had already shifted base to the National Badminton Academy in Guwahati, and in October, Tanvi joined her there to train under coach Park.

The move paid off. In the months that followed, an unseeded Tanvi reached the quarterfinals of the Junior World Championships, losing a tight three-game match to eventual champion Xu Wenjing of China. She then reached the final of the Odisha Masters World Tour 100, won the Denmark International Challenge, and made the final of the US Open.

Long-term goals

She admits the result in Iowa came as a surprise. According to her, Park's target was simply to get her accustomed to a higher level of competition. "I was travelling by myself to the US Open. I was a little nervous also, but I was also excited to be taking care of myself. But coach Park wanted me to play a World Tour 300 event so I would have some match practice of playing against high-quality players. I also just wanted to play in a World Tour 300 for the first time. I want to go up step by step. I'd played International Challenges and World Tour 100 events before, but the level of players in a World Tour 300 event is much higher," she says.

Tanvi, who entered the tournament ranked World No. 66, was a serious underdog against World No. 20 Thuy Linh Nguyen in the opening round. "I didn't think I'd win that match, but after I did, I just wanted to see how far I could go," she says.

While she couldn't complete a fairytale ending, Tanvi says her coach wasn't disappointed. "When I spoke to him after the tournament, he was very happy. He never expected I would even go that far," says Tanvi, who reached a career-high ranking of World No. 50 after the US Open.

Following the result, coach Park has high expectations from her for the Junior World Championships in Indonesia, scheduled from July 23. "Coach Park told me he was very happy with how I did in the USA, but that our main target is the Junior World Championships. So, we will focus on that," she says.

There are other goals too. The 2028 Olympics are just three years away, and although Tanvi will only be 19 then, she's optimistic about making it to Los Angeles. "It will be hard, but it's my dream to win an Olympic gold," she says. But that's for later. Apart from the Junior Worlds this year, Tanvi's got another task she's hoping to excel in. "Next year, I'll have my Class 12 Board Exams. I'm making time every day to study for them and I'm hoping I can do well there as well," she says.

'Not to make an attempt with SLI would be a crime'

NRAI president Kalikesh Singh Deo on the Shooting League of India's vision, format innovations, esports plans, and **navigating** a crowded sports market.

Santadeep Dey
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Even as an 11-year-old top sporting league gasps under the crushing weight of a failing contractual framework and another can't pay salaries months after its conclusion, a new entrant steps into the fray — the Shooting League of India (SLI).

Bold, new, and ready to take its first shot in New Delhi on November 20, the 11-day competition is the latest to elbow its way into an already saturated landscape of homegrown leagues.

However, its backers are undeterred. Kalikesh Narayan Singh Deo, president of the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI), calls it an 'exciting adventure.'

Sportstar sat down with the man fronting the federation's newest gamble to understand whether the NRAI is truly ready to harness this fresh wave.

In a competitive market, with sporting leagues mushrooming across the country, what novelties does the SLI have to offer?

With the massively growing popularity of shooting in India, where for every competition, you have 10,000–20,000 people participating across the spectrum, it is an opportune time for the league to come in. This is a first-of-its-kind effort that introduces a new format. It will also potentially transgress to people who have been a part of shooting in different ways.

Do you remember the first toy you got as a child? A lot of us got small guns to play with. So, shooting has been an endemic part of our childhood in many ways — through movies, video games, and in some cases, the sport itself.

We have picked a mixed team format, and to begin with, we are looking to have anywhere from four to eight franchises. There's an exciting adventure ahead of us.

How does the league plan on integrating esports? The NRAI's SLI FAQ document does talk about a hybrid model integrating traditional shooting events with virtual competitions.

We are talking to technology partners to integrate a virtual aspect of the sport into our league. Whether it forms the mainstay of the league or not is yet to be decided, but certainly the idea is to capture audiences beyond the traditional shooting viewership. Let's not forget you may have one lakh shooters registered in India, but you will have maybe 100 crore who are gaming and doing stuff like that.

Shooting, not as dynamic as most other sports, has never been spectator-friendly. So, for social media and television, is there a snappier plan to reel in viewers?

We will look at innovative things the audience can relate to, like the pressure on a shooter, the release of the trigger, and an athlete's mannerisms. There will be data, graphics, VR, feedback from the shooters, biorhythms, and more. What will happen because of that is that the audience will understand and feel the excitement of performing. Couple that with the loyalty they would have with a

NRAI

shooter or a team over the years, and it would get increasingly exciting. And while all of these are on the drawing board, the idea is not to take away from the purity of the Olympic sport as well.

The viewership of Olympic sports is on the rise. But then again, a recently revived sporting league hit financial roadblocks just a few months after its return. Has the possibility of financial strain been a concern?

To get somewhere, we have to start the journey. Not to make an attempt would be a crime. In my opinion, leagues go into a downward spiral when you take an opposition view to your stakeholders, be it the athletes or franchises. The NRAI has decided to take the view of a partnership with our franchises and athletes. That's a win-win for everybody. We are not looking to bring money in on the first day. We believe we will create something different with a reasonable amount of value. We are not setting our expectations so high that we destroy the value to begin with.

Could you share some details regarding the owners of the franchises? The prospectus mentions at least six franchises, but earlier in this interaction, you mentioned four. Has it been difficult getting people on board?

No. We have positive talks going on with a number of potential franchise owners. Some of them own many teams across other sports. Some are individual buyers but command a lot of credibility.

Will the league eventually look at multiple venues, or would that become a logistical challenge?

No, it's possible. Currently, around 15,000 people are shooting across three major venues. But it does increase the cost for a franchise. So, we want to start with a lean model to make sure that the league becomes a success in the long run. The vision is long-term and not running it for a year or two before packing up and going home. We understand we've got to work with the franchises to help them break even as quickly as possible while realising the value is not in the cash flow but more in the valuation of the asset going ahead.

The NRAI elections are scheduled in September, and the league is set to happen after that. Could that interfere with the organisation of the league? Has there been any effort to postpone the elections?

No, the elections will be held as per law. I don't see any reason why the election should interfere with the league. We have kept the management and vendors of the league outside the NRAI format. And it's going to be done professionally. I'm certain whoever is in the seat of power then will carry on the work.

It's understood that Gagan Narang was approached to be the face of the league, but couldn't sign up owing to prior commitments. Are there other veteran shooters being considered for the same role?

We have asked all our past Olympians and shooting legends to be involved, be it as a mentor, technical specialist, or merely to give us suggestions. It's important that those who have contributed and gotten glory from the sport should give back to it in different ways, and as a federation, it is our job to ensure that we open up avenues for them to be able to contribute.

To conclude the interview, can you provide some exclusive information on the league...

(Laughs) In 25-metre pistol, we can't do rapid fire because women can't participate.

So, we're doing a duelling stage, which is going to be the Olympic format after 2028. For 50m 3 positions, members of the same team will be shooting all the positions simultaneously. It will save time.

White Batteries

Direct and Indirect

By C.G.S.Narayanan

A white battery ,more often than not, is used as a strategic device rather than as a central idea. Sometimes problems present an admixture of both. The three two-movers present ed in this article show battery play as central idea. The first problem below by the Russian maestro exhibits direct battery mates.The B+R battery is controlled by the BBa2 and the control of this bishop cannot be shut off by Rd5 and so the key 1.Ng6 facilitates this after the square g2 is blocked.The variation 1…Ng2 2.Rd5 is a White interference and 1…Nc4+ 2 Re5 a cross-check.In addition to these there are three more defences allowing mates by the battery

L.I.Loshinski

2 prize,Olympic Ty 1964

Mate in two moves

Key 1.Ng6! (2.Nf4)

1….Nc4+ 2.Re5;1..Ng2 2.Rd5

1…g2 2.Rf3;1…d5 2.Rf2

1…Rc4 2.Rf4;1…h1Q 2.Qxh1

Two by-play variations round off this attractive work which is notable mainly for the extraordinary economy of white force.The battery mates in the above are all direct since the rear piece is aimed straight at the black king.If the rear piece is aimed instead at a black king flight square, potential or actual, we have an indirect battery.

V.Chepizny

Ist prize,The Problemist 1982/I

Mate in two moves

The indirect battery created by the **key 1.Ne4!**(2.Nxc2) is aimed at e3 the flight granted by the key.The two direct batteries are Qd7+Nd4 and Ra3+Bb3..1..Ke3+ 2.Bc4 1…Rxe4 2.Be6;1…cxd4 2.Bd5 are the main variations.1…Nxf7 2.Bxf7; 1…Rxf5 2.Nxf5;1…Bc4 2.Bxc2;1…Nb8 2.Nxc5 1…Bf2 2.Bxf2

The problem for solving below adds changed battery mates.

R.E.Burger

Ist prize,US Problem Bulletin 1984

Mate in two mates

Solutions to problems for solving in the article:Excelsior,the lone warrior' (Wornaid Robert) **1.d4+** Kxd6 2. dxc5+ Kc6 3.cxb6+ bxc4 4.bxa7… 5.axb8Q mate(W.A.Shinkman)1.d4 Ke6! **1.d3** Ke6 2.d4 Ke7 3.d5 Kf8 4.d6 Kg8 5.d7 Kf8 (3…Kd8 4.d6 Kc8 5.d7+ Kd8 6.Bf6

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

Harikrishnan becomes India's 87th Grandmaster

For seven years, Harikrishnan A. Ra. remained an International Master. During that time, he competed in numerous tournaments in pursuit of the Grandmaster title but repeatedly fell short, often coming agonisingly close. The 23-year-old, coached by Shyam Sundar, finally earned his third and final GM norm at the La Plagne International Chess Festival in France. A draw with compatriot P. Iniyan in the final round secured him a fourth-place finish and confirmed his status as India's 87th Grandmaster.

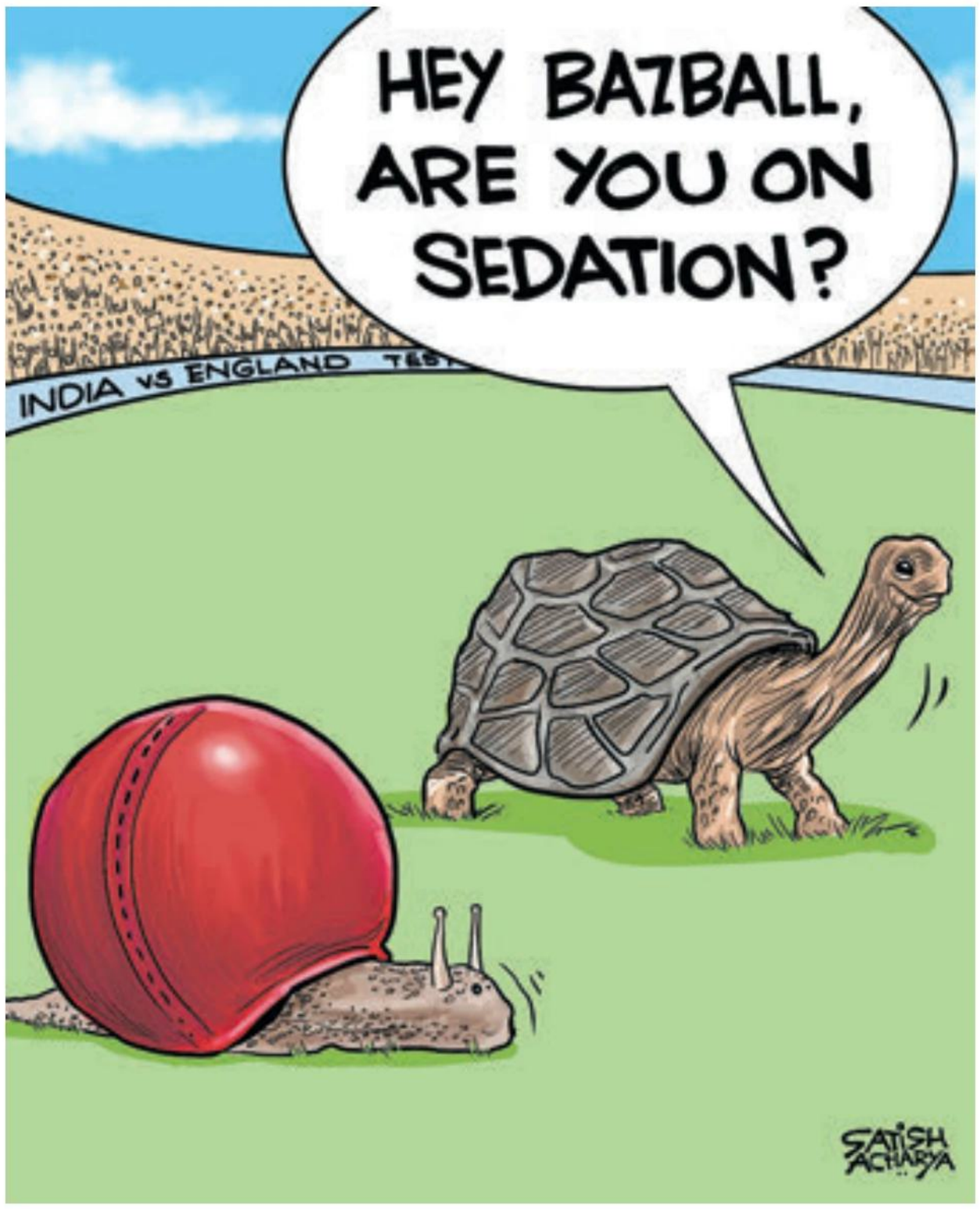
Speaking from La Plagne (France), Harikrishnan expressed a sigh of relief.

"Feel very happy. It's been seven years. I agree there was a huge delay in becoming a GM. From 2022, I have been competing regularly in tournaments, but couldn't get the GM norms. It was a struggle," Harikrishnan told Sportstar.

He achieved his first GM norm at the Biel International Chess Festival in Switzerland in 2023, followed by his second at the Lince Andujar Chess Open in June this year in Spain. Harikrishnan knew he needed 1.5 points from the last two rounds to become a GM. "There was pressure and I am glad I did it," he said.

K. KEERTHIVASAN

SPORTOON

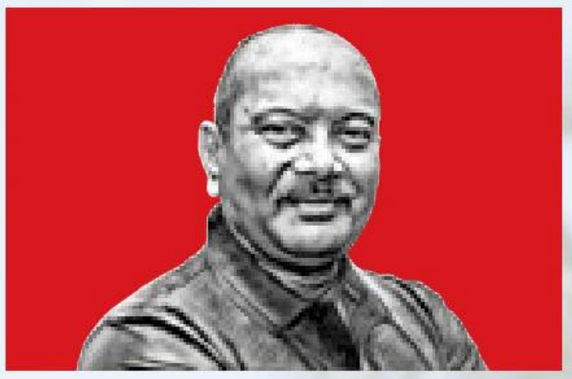


1 The Kalinga Stadium has undergone some infrastructural changes to host the one-day World Athletics (WA) Continental Tour Bronze Level meet — a qualifying event for the World championships in Japan in September — on August 10. Around 150 athletes — including 50 from abroad — are expected to take part in the meet, representing 12 countries such as Turkmenistan, Bhutan, the Philippines, South Korea, Malaysia, Iraq, Vietnam, Cameroon, Sri Lanka, Iran, the Maldives, and host nation India.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 In a move signalling continued confidence in ongoing reform efforts, World Boxing has extended the tenure of the interim committee, led by Ajay Singh, overseeing the Boxing Federation of India (BFI) till August 31, 2025. This decision acknowledges the structured efforts made by the interim committee to bring back transparency and stability to the BFI's operations. World Boxing had appointed an interim committee in April this year to run the day-to-day affairs of the BFI.

TEAM SPORTSTAR



FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

Faster, higher, stronger

How motion, energy, and force **combine to power** peak athletic performance.

We all love sports, don't we?

It does not require an IQ of 200+ to know that athletes wants to improve their performance, prevent injuries, and gain an edge over their opponents. In that case, a good knowledge of science can be of great help in understanding various aspects of physiology and the physics related to force, matter, energy and motion. It helps in understanding how things work — from the smallest finer movement to the largest or gross movement patterns.

Physics can also help athletes master their respective sports, be it cricket or Formula One. In that parlance, we will explore some of the physics concepts that are applicable to sports, and how you can use them to your advantage.

The power of force

One of the most important physics concepts in sports is force. Force is a push or a pull that causes an object to change its speed, shape, or direction. It can be applied in various ways — through muscles, gravity, air resistance, and friction. It can also be measured by its magnitude (how strong it is) and its direction (which way it points).

In sports, force affects the speed of movement, farthest distance thrown, height of jumps, and intensity of impact.

According to the Third Law of Motion, when you run, you apply a force to the ground with your feet, and the ground applies an equal and opposite force back to you. This ground reaction force propels you forward and upward, allowing you to run faster and longer. However, if the ground is too soft or slippery, the force is diminished, and you lose speed and stability. A simple example is running on grass as compared to running on a beach.

Similarly, when you throw a ball, you apply a force to the ball with your arm and hand, and the ball applies an equal and opposite force back to you. The ball's force pushes you slightly backwards, while it flies forward with a certain speed and direction. However, if the ball is too heavy or too light, the force will vary, and the ball will not go as far or as fast as you want.

To use force effectively in sports, you need to know how much force to apply, in which direction, and for how long. You also need to consider the effects of other forces acting on you or the object you are moving — such as gravity, air resistance, friction or wind direction. These forces will always be present to varying degrees. By adjusting your technique and training accordingly, you can optimise your performance and avoid injuries.

The art of work and energy

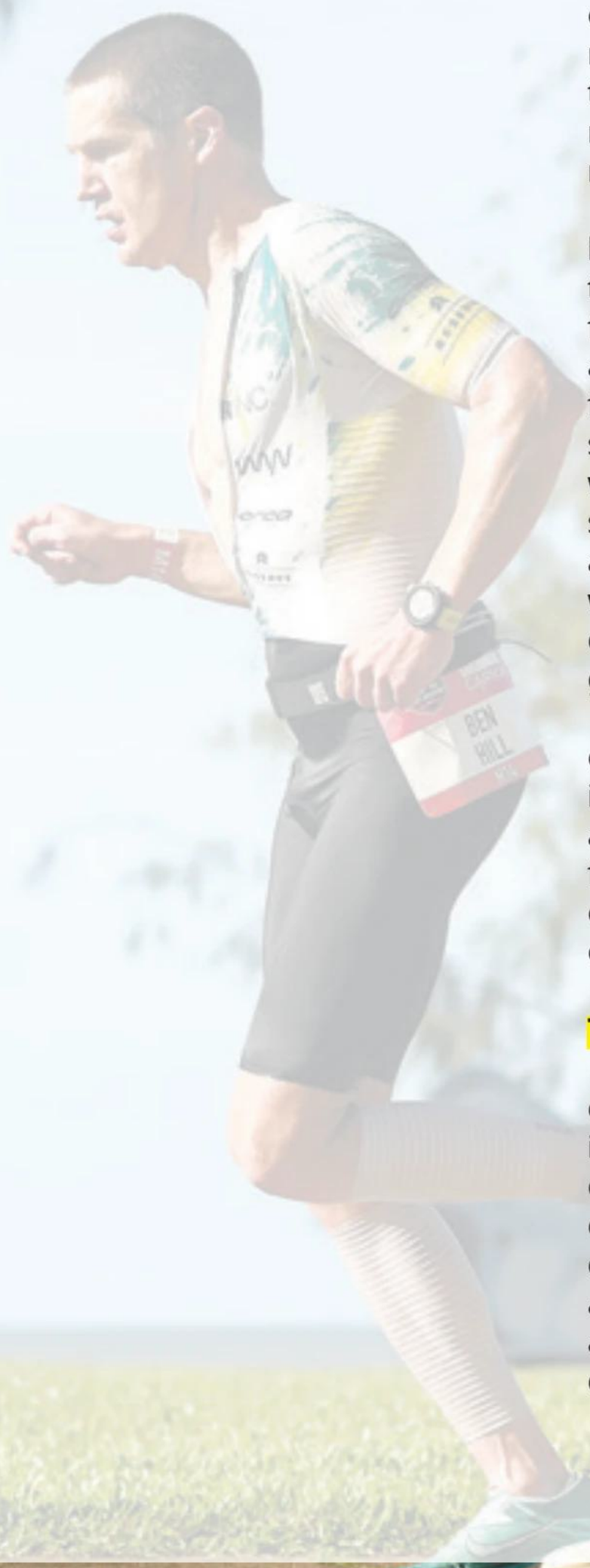
Another key physics concept in sports is work and energy.

In physics, work is defined as the energy transferred to or from an object by a force acting upon it as it is displaced. It is done when a force causes a displacement of an object. Energy, however, is the ability to do work. Some forms of energy are specific to sports and closely related in their transfers:

Kinetic energy: Energy of motion

Potential energy: Stored energy that has the potential to do work (e.g., a stretched rubber band, a ball held above the ground)

Thermal energy: Energy associated with temperature and heat



Ready for the long grind: Australian triathlete Ben Hill competes in the 2025 Ironman event in Cairns. By understanding work and energy concepts in sports, athletes like him can improve their speed, endurance, power, and accuracy while also preventing fatigue and injuries.
GETTY IMAGES

In sports, work and energy are involved in every movement and action. To explain in simple physics: in fast bowling, you transform chemical energy from your food into kinetic energy of your body while running up, creating momentum. The muscles store elastic potential energy to be converted into kinetic energy at the right moment. Part of this kinetic energy becomes elastic potential energy as the body positions itself, and gravitational potential energy as you rise above the ground. Then, this potential energy becomes kinetic energy while releasing the ball. The bowler aims to maximise the impulse (force multiplied by time) at the point of release.

The law of conservation of energy helps in efficiently conserving, transferring, and converting energy from one form to another, while accounting for energy lost due to friction, air resistance, heat and sound. This allows you to do more work and have more energy in sports. For example, when you swing a golf club, you want to uncork your wrists at the right angle so that the clubhead hits the ball with the greatest speed possible.

By understanding work and energy concepts in sports, one can improve speed, endurance, power, and accuracy while also preventing fatigue and injuries by managing energy levels and avoiding overexertion.

The science of motion

Another indispensable physics concept in sports is motion. Motion is the change of position or orientation of an object over time. It can be described by various quantities, such as speed, velocity, acceleration, momentum, and angular momentum. These quantities help you analyse and predict the behaviour of moving objects in sports across different frames of reference.

An example of the synergy between angular momentum and rotational inertia is skating. When you skate, you use angular momentum to spin faster or slower. Angular momentum is the product of rotational speed and rotational inertia. It is sustained in an isolated system, which means it stays uniform unless acted upon by an external force.

This means: if you decrease your rotational inertia by pulling your arms and legs closer to your body, you will increase your rotational speed and spin faster. Conversely, if you increase your rotational inertia by extending your arms and legs, you will decrease your rotational speed and spin slower.

By mastering motion in sports, you can control and manipulate your own movement and that of other objects. You can also anticipate and react to the movement of your opponents and the environment. This gives you an advantage in reflex, speed, agility, stability, balance, and coordination.

The magnificence of the physics and sports combo

Physics and sports are intimately linked. Physics helps you understand how things work and why they happen in sport.

It also helps improve your performance, prevent injuries, and gain an edge over your opponents. It does not mean one has to be a scientist to understand human movement, angles and forces. A simple understanding of it can pave the way for excellence.

But physics is not only useful for sports but also understanding oneself, especially through the lens of quantum mechanics.

A welcome addition to books on Indian cricket

The **triumphs and tribulations** are laid out and Cheteshwar's exceptional strength of character shines through in Puja Pujara's *The Diary of a Cricketer's Wife.*

Suresh Menon

In the 1980s, two books written by the wife of an international cricketer caused a furore. Frances Edmonds, wife of Phil, was wickedly funny. She did not believe what happens in the West Indies should stay in the West Indies, or indeed what happens in Australia. England players and their shenanigans came in for frank appraisals in *Another Bloody Tour*, and when this was a success (the book, not the tour where England lost the series 0-5) it was followed by *Cricket xxxx Cricket*.

These did so well that Australian wicketkeeper Tim Zoehrer sledged Phil as he batted in a Test with: "At least I have an identity. You're only Frances Edmonds' husband."

Frances Edmonds' husband, meanwhile, aware that his wife's interests were too varied and there was so much more to write about the countries they travelled through, politically and culturally, knew from the start that he was not going to be the focus. Ian Botham, for one, cried out for attention. Mike Gatting and David Gower were there too, apart from a phalanx of reporters with their own psychological issues.

"Two large men in a hotel room, cricket gear all over the place, dirty jockstraps, one wanting to go to bed early, the other coming back at three in the morning — it must be obnoxious. They start giving each other nicknames — Beefy, Lamby, Fender — it's fairly puerile," wrote Mrs. Edmonds.

You won't find similar observations in Puja Pujara's *The Diary of a Cricketer's Wife*. Told by an adoring wife of an introverted husband, it is no travelogue or treatise.

Memoir: Cheteshwar Pujara's wife, Puja, says, "Cheteshwar's life has always resembled a cardiogram — full of ups and downs." PTI

It is not strictly speaking a diary, and is sometimes over-written. Too many pages are spent in the meeting and marrying of an international cricketer; Frances meets Phil on page 13, and they are married on page 20. Puja hears of Cheteshwar on page 3 and they get married on page 137! In between there is much background of the families, the husband's baby steps in cricket and history both personal and of the sport.

Still, it is a welcome addition to books on Indian cricket. If the connection is tangential we must remember this is Puja's memoir. Tension and anxiety follow wives off the field as much as they do the husbands on it. The triumphs and tribulations are laid out, Cheteshwar's exceptional strength of character shines through.

The perspective — that of a wife, manager and fellow-tourist — is unique, and the reticence to get into the 'masala' is understandable. Cheteshwar's father played First-Class cricket, was his first coach and psychologist, and following the death of his mother took on yet another role. Puja draws out the father-son relationship with skill and empathy.

The cricketer who emerges is a man of dignity and character, with a strong moral centre and a remarkable ability to take the blows — physically, as in Australia, and mentally during the times he was dropped from the team — and come up smiling. Puja says, "Cheteshwar's life has always resembled a cardiogram — full of ups and downs."

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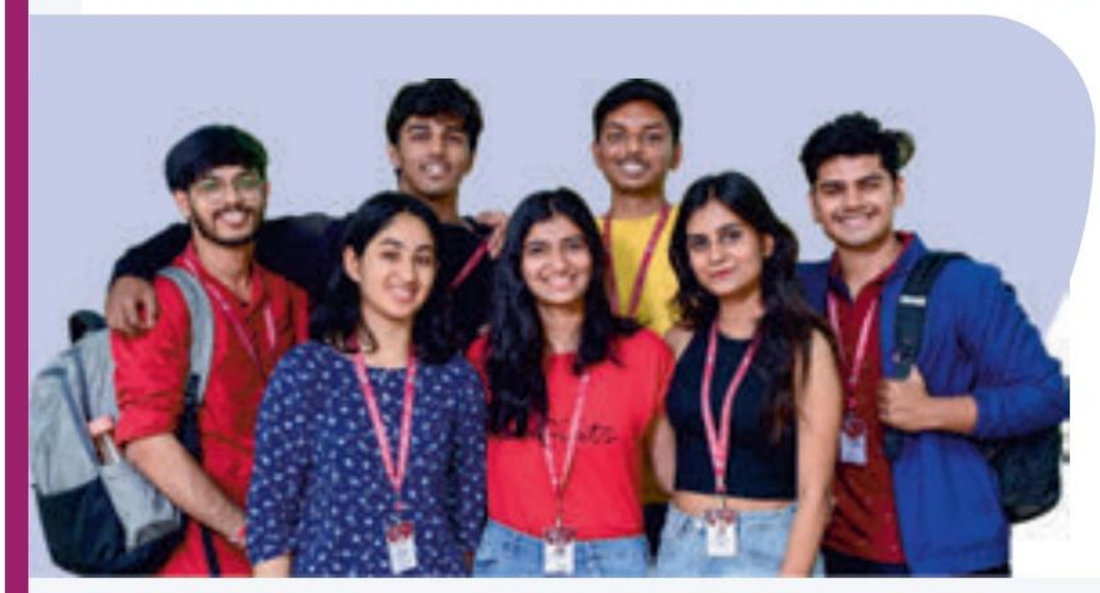

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