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VIRAT KOHLI

ROHIT SHARMA IN TESTS

A glass half full or half empty?

NEERAJ CHOPRA

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HE MADE WHITES SHINE BRIGHTER

Virat Kohli's Test career was a relentless quest for excellence – one that reshaped the identity of Indian cricket. Cover Story by **Ravi Shastri**

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OFF-SIDE

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REMEMBERING BRIAN GLANVILLE, INDIA'S WINDOW TO THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

Brian Glanville, the renowned football writer, opened India's eyes to English football through *Sportstar*. A tribute to **a voice that spanned generations.**

In the '80s and '90s, long before European football became a midnight obsession in India, Brian Glanville's weekly column in *Sportstar* was our only window into the English game. It brought us a world we were not part of but very much wanted to understand. The legendary football writer died on May 16, aged 93.

Brian, already a leading figure in English football writing — through his work for *The Sunday Times* and *World Soccer* — told us about the improbable implosion of Kevin Keegan-managed Newcastle United in the 1995–96 season, when it squandered a 12-point January lead to lose the English title. He brought to us the stories of Fergie's Fledglings; the wonder years of Arsene Wenger at his beloved Arsenal. And he never shied away from criticising FIFA ("Fifty ideas every day, 51 of them bad," he'll write often), the Premier League (the "Greed is Good League" for Brian), or the growing money-mindedness that engulfed the game.

Getting the maverick, celebrated Englishman to pen a column for an Indian magazine seemed improbable in 1978, though he had sporadically written for *Sports & Pastime* (*Sportstar's* predecessor) in the 1950s. Brian's acerbic, no-nonsense approach soon brought him many fans in the country, as he opened our eyes to a thrilling, unforgiving world of football that, until then, had remained out of reach.

In his early years, Brian would ring up a copy-taker to dictate his long reports — no drafts, no notes — amid the chaos and frenzy of a noisy football stadium. Even as the century turned, he filed his pieces the old-fashioned way: typed on a battered Olivetti Lettera typewriter that resented the relentless work he forced upon it. It was then faxed across continents — from London to *The Hindu*'s wires desk in Chennai — and retyped by whichever rookie was lowest in the newsroom food chain, much like the forward short-leg fielder in cricket. (When I joined *Sportstar* in 2008, it was almost always me.)

With the ink fading and half the letters missing, you stared, guessed, and tried rewriting. When stuck, you called Brian at his home. Landline, late night, via *The Hindu*'s switchboard operator. Brian cleared up your doubts in less than a minute, and then — generously, and at great expense to *Sportstar*'s promoters — spent another 30 reminiscing about Walter Winterbottom, Bobby Moore and Alf Ramsey, oblivious to the mounting international call rates.

Brian's big break came in 1958 when he covered the World Cup for *The Sunday Times* in Sweden. The very young English writer was bewitched by an even younger Pele. "Playing just off his centre-forward, astonishingly and precociously cool under pressure, acrobatic, dangerous in the air despite being only 5 foot 8 inches tall, he scored three times in the semifinal against France, two unforgettable goals in the Final, one with right foot, one with head, in the Stockholm decider against the hosts, Sweden," he wrote in *Sportstar*.

Brian went on to cover every subsequent World Cup for the next 44 years. For him, age was never an impediment. He was a regular in the press box in England even a few years ago, and his last published work — an obituary of Northern Ireland and Aston Villa footballer Peter McParland — appeared in *The Guardian* on May 5.

A prolific writer, he penned more than 20 books, not all on football. His 'The Story of the World Cup' remains one of the finest accounts of the tournament ever written. And as a turbulent World Cup approaches next year in the USA, Canada, and Mexico, it is hard to believe Brian won't be there to critique it with his usual bluntness.

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WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT

« A special thank you to my brother, who, rather than being here, is in Imola to watch Formula 1 – Jannik Sinner joked after losing the Italian Open final to Carlos Alcaraz »

3

World number one Scottie Scheffler claimed his third major title by outclassing Spain's Jon Rahm in the final round of the PGA Championship. Scheffler, the 2022 and 2024 Masters champion, became the 10th consecutive American to win the event. The win marked his 15th PGA Tour title, achieved in just three years and 94 days—faster than all but Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods.

2-1/2

Norwegian prosecutors are seeking a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence for Gjert Ingebrigtsen, who is accused of abusing his two-time Olympic gold medallist son Jakob Ingebrigtsen and daughter Ingrid, the country's media reported. The back-to-back 5,000 metres world champion took the stand in March, where he described a childhood marked by fear and manipulation and told the court about several incidents of violence.

« I think it is a huge success and hugely inspiring, not just for women in chess, but for women in sports overall – Chinese Grandmaster Ju Wenjun, heaping praise on Norway Chess, which became the first-ever tournament to offer female players equal prize money »

DOUBLE DELIGHT

Jasmine Paolini (left) became the first woman since Monica Seles in 1990 to win the Italian Open singles and doubles titles when she and Sara Errani (right) beat Veronika Kudermetova and Elise Mertens 6-4, 7-5. Prior to winning the doubles, Paolini became the first Italian woman to win the Rome singles title since Raffaella Reggi in 1985 after overcoming former U.S. Open champion Coco Gauff in straight sets, 6-4, 6-2. GETTY IMAGES

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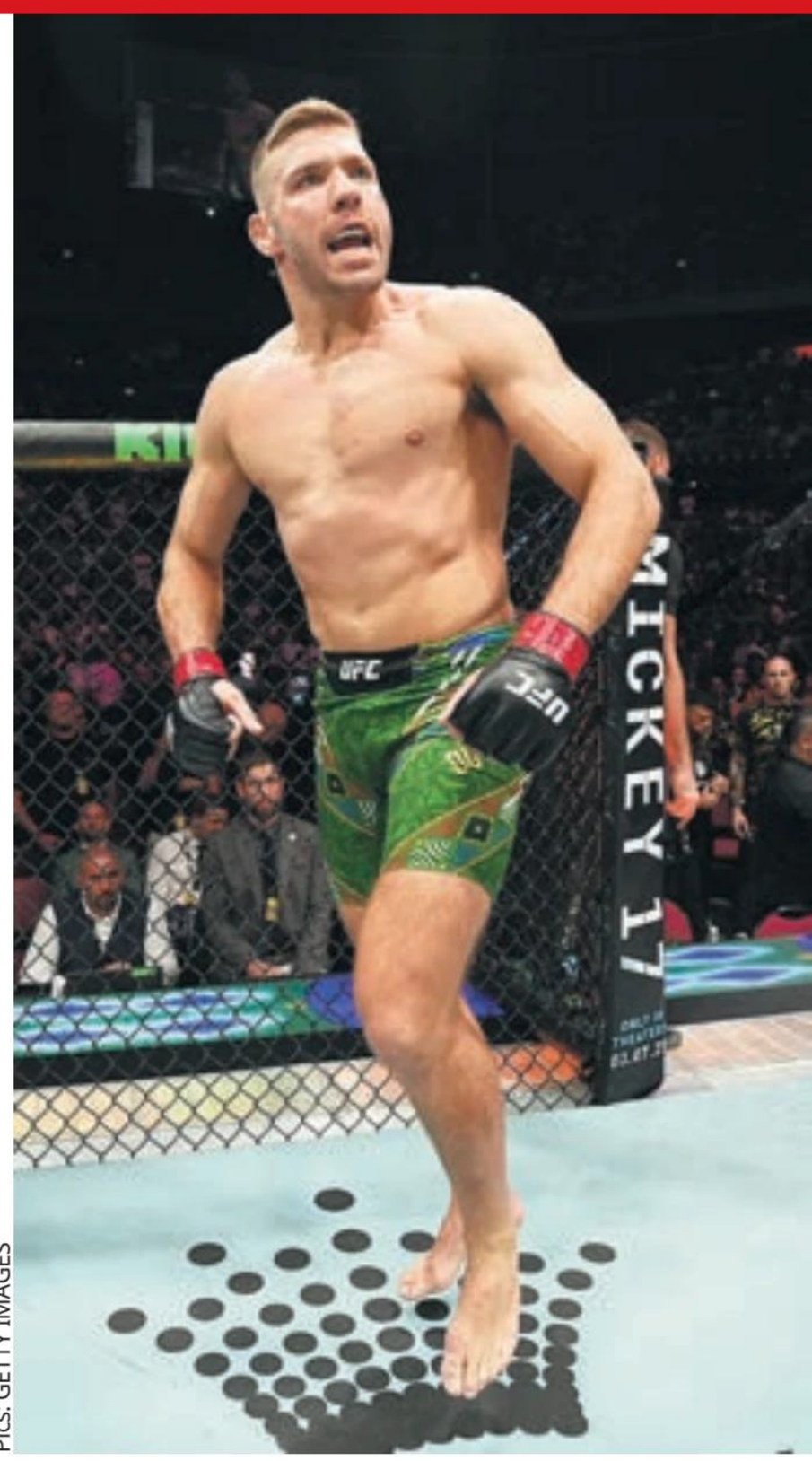

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

Ilia Topuria will face Charles Oliveira for the **newly vacant** lightweight title in the main event of UFC 317.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

With Dustin Poirier's retirement fight confirmed as the main event of UFC 318 early last month, the promotion's CEO, Dana White, announced two more numbered events. First, UFC 317 will be part of the annual International Fight Week — a week-long event that includes the Hall of Fame induction ceremony. The main event for this blockbuster card will be a clash for the newly vacant lightweight title.

With Islam Makhachev making a strategic move up to the welterweight division, the 155-pound throne is now open for two of the division's most electrifying talents to contest. Charles 'Do Bronx' Oliveira, the Brazilian submission ace and former champion, is set to take on the surging Ilia 'El Matador' Topuria **(above, left)**, who, with his devastating striking power, had been tearing through the featherweight ranks. His move up to lightweight for a title shot is a bold statement of intent. This match-up promises a classic grappler-vs-striker dynamic, with the coveted gold on the line.

The fight card is further bolstered by another exciting title bout. Flyweight champion Alexandre 'The Cannibal' Pantoja will defend his belt against the hard-hitting Kai 'Don't Blink' Kara-France. Pantoja, riding an impressive seven-fight winning streak and fresh off three successful title defences, will be looking to solidify his reign. Kara-France, meanwhile, after a quick TKO victory in his last outing, is eager for his second shot at undisputed UFC glory.

Meanwhile, middleweight champion Dricus 'Stillknocks' du Plessis **(above, right)** is set to defend his crown against the undefeated Khamzat 'Borz' Chimaev, in a match that will headline UFC 319 in Chicago on August 18. Boasting an unblemished professional record, Chimaev has been a force of nature with a 60 per cent finish rate, creating an aura of invincibility. His most recent triumph — a swift submission victory over former champion Robert Whittaker — cemented his status as a top contender and paved the way for this championship challenge, despite just five fights in the promotion.

Standing across the cage will be the reigning champion, du Plessis. The South African powerhouse captured the title in a hard-fought battle against Sean Strickland and has since defended his belt twice — once against Israel Adesanya and again in a rematch with Strickland. An underdog storyline is always exhilarating, and the middleweight title fight could very well fit the bill should Chimaev do the unthinkable.

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VIRAT IS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL CRICKETER OF THE LAST DECADE

From Sunil Gavaskar to Sachin Tendulkar, I have not encountered a cricketer with such a **fierce desire** to play the game.

RAVI SHASTRI

Knowing Virat Kohli has been a great privilege. I saw him grow, not just as a cricketer, but as a force of nature. From a fiery young talent to the colossus who came to define an era, he rose not by chance, but through an almost obsessive devotion to his craft. It was his punishing hard work that drove him to the summit.

And with him, he lifted Indian cricket, transforming it into a powerhouse, feared and respected, the most formidable team on the planet. Being part of this team built by Virat will remain special to my heart.

From Sunil Gavaskar to Sachin Tendulkar, I have not encountered a cricketer with such a fierce desire to play the game. He wanted to own it and did that with his unbridled passion and energy. He had the rare ability to stare down his opponent, seize control of the battle, and bend its rhythm to his will — a quality that placed Virat in a league of his own.

How do I look at Virat? An individual who had no challenge. A leader who cracked the whip to extract the best out of his team. A great ambassador for Test cricket when the format was losing out to the explosion of T20 cricket. True, T20 brings in the moolah, but Virat brought the fans to the Test arenas, at home and overseas.

Tendulkar's magical knocks drew cricket lovers from all over the world. Virat, too, achieved that status on the strength of his stupendous passion and talent, which he kept honing by accepting his role as the greatest ambassador for red-ball cricket.

To me, he is also the greatest red-ball captain ever. Forty wins in 68 Tests as captain places him in a rare category.

He was a man who loved to be in the thick of action. The camera would pick him in different acts — as a fielder, batsman, taking fantastic catches, inflicting incredible run-outs. You couldn't take him out of the game — he wouldn't let you.

At the fall of every wicket, he was the first to reach the bowler, roaring,

GETTY IMAGES

A GREAT AMBASSADOR FOR TEST CRICKET WHEN THE FORMAT WAS LOSING OUT TO THE EXPLOSION OF T20 CRICKET. TRUE, T20 BRINGS IN THE MOOLAH, BUT VIRAT BROUGHT THE FANS TO THE TEST ARENAS, AT HOME AND OVERSEAS

clapping, and leading. When he ran between the wickets, he didn't just run; he sprinted the fastest for the second and third runs. And when he celebrated, it was volcanic: fist pumping, feet thumping, joy uncontained and contagious. He didn't just want to win; he wanted the world to feel it with him.

I don't like comparisons. I've been asked about Gavaskar and Tendulkar. I was lucky enough to share the dressing room with them. But I saw Virat from a different vantage — not just from the comfort of the broadcaster's box, but through the suffocating pressure that only a dressing room can know. I saw him walk out not to play cricket, but to command it. To own the battlefield. In doing so, he didn't just win games; he rewired how India played cricket.

It was exciting as a coach to plot those Test victories. His batting form was paramount to the cause, but it was not just about coaching, making runs or taking wickets. Credit should be given to the magnificent work by the support staff, which made India the best fielding side in the world. It was collective, but Virat's positivity was critical to India's success. It was

Naked aggression: Virat Kohli's century and battle with Mitchell Johnson in Melbourne spiced up India's 2014 tour Down Under. AP

unreal the way he took on the responsibility of thinking for every member of the team.

Virat was the most reassuring presence for newcomers, a captain who stood firmly behind his players. The way he backed them, especially in difficult moments, drew out their best. Players embraced his leadership with the same trust and enthusiasm once reserved for MS Dhoni.

Virat was, in every sense, a player's captain — giving everything he had, and expecting nothing less from those around him. His handling of the Mohammed Shami episode exemplifies how he stood up for his teammate when the fast bowler was subjected to unfair social media trolling after the 10-wicket loss to Pakistan in the 2021 T20 World Cup.

I can rate Virat the best batsman of the modern era. A complete batsman who came to eliminate his flaws and turn them into assets on the pitch. At one stage of his career, his average across all three formats was 50-plus. What a phenomenal figure he was in world cricket. You had to see the joy enveloping his opponents when they saw his back. Getting Virat's wicket was a throwback to when the opponents were assured of a comfortable position on getting the scalps of Gavaskar and Tendulkar.

Do you remember how he rebuilt himself for England? He must have doubted his credentials after the nightmare tour of 2014 (134 runs in five Tests). Four years later, he returned to conquer. He toyed with the English attack (593 runs in five Tests). On his way to that long-awaited century on English soil, he walked the tightrope between restraint and radiance at Edgbaston. He tamed James Anderson —

> « Mental fatigue may have driven his decision to retire from Tests, even though he was as fit as any other player in the team »

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Staunch ally: Mohammed Shami faced widespread abuse on social media after India's 10-wicket loss to Pakistan in the 2021 T20 World Cup, but his captain Virat Kohli didn't just stand by him — he stood up for him. AFP

England's master of movement — not with swagger, but with patience. It was a masterclass in defensive batting. He assumed the stature of greatness on that tour.

And if that England tour revealed his resolve, Australia revealed his appetite. The seven Test centuries he hit in Australia confirmed his greed to excel. He studied the conditions, understood when to leave, when to strike, and always, when to fight.

Virat's work ethic was the most infectious trait that galvanised the team into world cricket's most performing and fit bunch. He was a terror for the opposition but a friend and guide for his teammates. I have seen players from the opposition approach him for guidance, and Virat was always eager to help. I have seen him part with some excellent bats because he was not an insecure competitor.

It was common to see Virat go through his fitness drills without being prompted, taking 40 to 50 catches and practising run-outs from different positions and angles. His drive for perfection was nothing short of madness. I remember this Test at Cape Town in 2018. India lost the Test, but Virat's show of tenacity left us all stunned. He hit a first-innings century (153) in the next match at Centurion that took the wind out of the South African bowlers.

To prepare for the second Test, he hit the nets with bowlers who were instructed to bounce the ball from 18 yards. He didn't flinch. He chose to meet fire with fire, and that's when my admiration for him deepened. He was the ultimate team man — selfless, relentless, unbreakable. He didn't just lead the team; he became its heartbeat. And when the fight got tough, you could bet he'd be the last man standing.

Virat was a captain forged in fire: relentless in pursuit, unwavering in intent. Every waking hour was bent toward one goal: to make India the best in the world. And he did. Under his leadership, India climbed to the top of the Test rankings, and more importantly, began conquering the final frontier — winning overseas.

What set him apart wasn't just his numbers, but his grit — a refusal to back down, especially against the best in the business. I can never forget his verbal exchange in 2014 with Mitchell Johnson in Melbourne. He kept needling the Aussie during the lunch break. Both stared at each other, but I could see that Virat's ferocity gave the Australian a strong message. A fight was on. It surely was. Virat hammered a sensational century (169) to win his battle with the bowlers in a draw that saw India

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Training beast: Virat's unmatched intensity at training — dozens of catches, endless run-outs — made his match-day brilliance feel routine.
K.R. DEEPAK

emerge with heads held high.

Of the centuries he has scored in Australia, I am fascinated by the one in Perth in 2018. It was a fast track with the ball flying around, but he tore into the bowlers even as most other batsmen looked ordinary on that pitch. Tendulkar also hit a century in Perth in 1992, but then the conditions were so different.

I am sure Virat still had two years of Test cricket left in him. I would have loved to see him in England this summer. It would have been a good idea to hand him the captaincy for the tour, but he would know best why he decided to leave. Maybe mental fatigue drove him to decide because he was as fit as any other player in the team.

He knew his body best, but the mind would have played the decisive role. I will not rule out burnout as the decisive factor in curtailing his career at a critical phase of Indian cricket.

For me, Virat will remain the most influential cricketer of the last decade. He had fans worldwide, especially those who turned up at Test matches to watch him bat like no one else. A batsman who could hit a boundary at will and someone who would pick the best bowler in the opposition camp to send a strong message.

Undoubtedly the most scrutinised batsman in world cricket, he was also the best prepared to fight in the middle. His making people watch Test cricket will be an enduring legacy. The team will forever miss his wild celebrations at the fall of a wicket and the joy he expressed at a partner's batting feat.

He is still around to serve Indian cricket in ODIs, but I also know that Virat will walk away from the game once he is done playing cricket. He is not the kind who would like to coach or take on the role of a broadcaster. I will miss him when India plays its first Test in England. He was a champion, and that is what I would like to remember — never conceding an inch.

As told to Vijay Lokapally

[Ravi Shastri served as India's head coach from 2017 to 2021 — a period that coincided with Virat Kohli's captaincy across formats. Together, they delivered India's first Test series win in 71 years in Australia, dominated bilateral white-ball cricket, and guided India to the 2019 ODI World Cup semifinal.]

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BATTER EXTRAORDINAIRE

A HALLMARK OF KOHLI'S STATURE AS A **MODERN GREAT** CAME FROM HIS ABILITY TO TAKE ON THE BEST BOWLERS.

K. R. DEEPAK

Virat Kohli pulled the plug on an illustrious Test career, announcing his exit from the longest format as India embarks on a fresh World Test Championship cycle.

Dwindling returns in recent years and a tame show in Australia — perhaps his favourite hunting ground away from home — at the turn of the year proved the last straw.

Since 2021, Kohli averaged less than 32 across 63 innings and produced only 11 scores of 50 or more, highlighting a sharp decline from his lofty standards. A dip in output at a time when his contemporaries, Joe Root and Steve Smith, for instance, were thriving under a second wind, only compounded Kohli's lack of form.

But an insipid end barely dulls the sheen off his almost 14-year run in Tests.

Kohli burst onto the fold during the 2014 tour of Australia when he commanded Mitchell Johnson, England's tormentor-in-chief in the Ashes just one summer earlier. Kohli racked up 692 runs in eight innings during that series, including four tons .

A hallmark of Kohli's stature as a modern great came from his ability to take on the best bowlers. On his next visit to Australia, he was up to the task against the hallowed pace trio of Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins, averaging more than 50 against Starc and Hazlewood. He averaged over 50 across all Tests against these two bowlers, before it plummeted during his final outings against them.

For Kohli, no challenge was too stiff. James Anderson and Stuart Broad found him out in the corridor of uncertainty during India's tour of England in 2014. But Kohli emphatically banished the horrors of that wretched tour on his next visit in 2018. He scored 593 runs in that series and averaged close to 60.

Anderson and Broad's late movement under swing-friendly conditions, once thought to be his 'kryptonite', was rendered ineffective. On that tour, Anderson failed to dismiss him in eight innings and Broad managed to do so

only twice in 10 essays. It was the appetite for taking on the opposition's premier bowlers that helped him accumulate 16 of his 30 centuries abroad. However, his dominance against pace did not take away his fondness for facing the tweakers.

His run haul against the slower bowlers (3,945) may not match that off pace (5,284), but he fared better against the spinners, as is evident from his average and dismissal rate.

Two of his most prolific years — 2016 and 2017 — were built on his excellence against spin at home, as he tallied back-to-back calendar years with 1,000 runs or more.

In 2018, Kohli scored 1,322, his best yearly haul, effortlessly transitioning his game to embrace overseas assignments. He became just the sixth batter to hold the distinction of scoring 1,000 runs or more in three successive years.

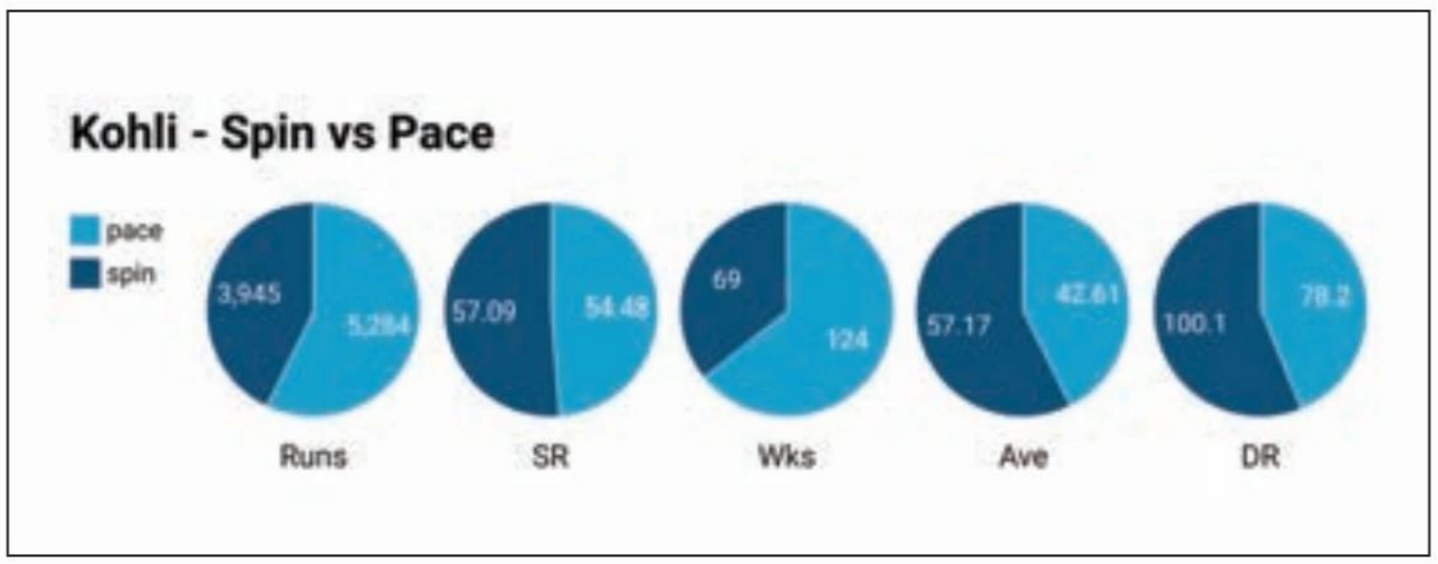
Over the numerous overseas tours, and the varied challenges they brought, Kohli tweaked his front-foot trigger movement and stance (shifting between open and side-on) to counter movement and the lure of the corridor of uncertainty. Through his successful years, Kohli was more assured playing off his front foot, with nearly 60 per cent (at times more) of his shots from 2014 to 2018 coming from pressing ahead. In more recent times, the rate has dropped closer to 50. This was evident Down Under recently, where Kohli was confronted by his old nemesis — poking outside the off stump. Very often, he was trapped in the crease due to minimal footwork.

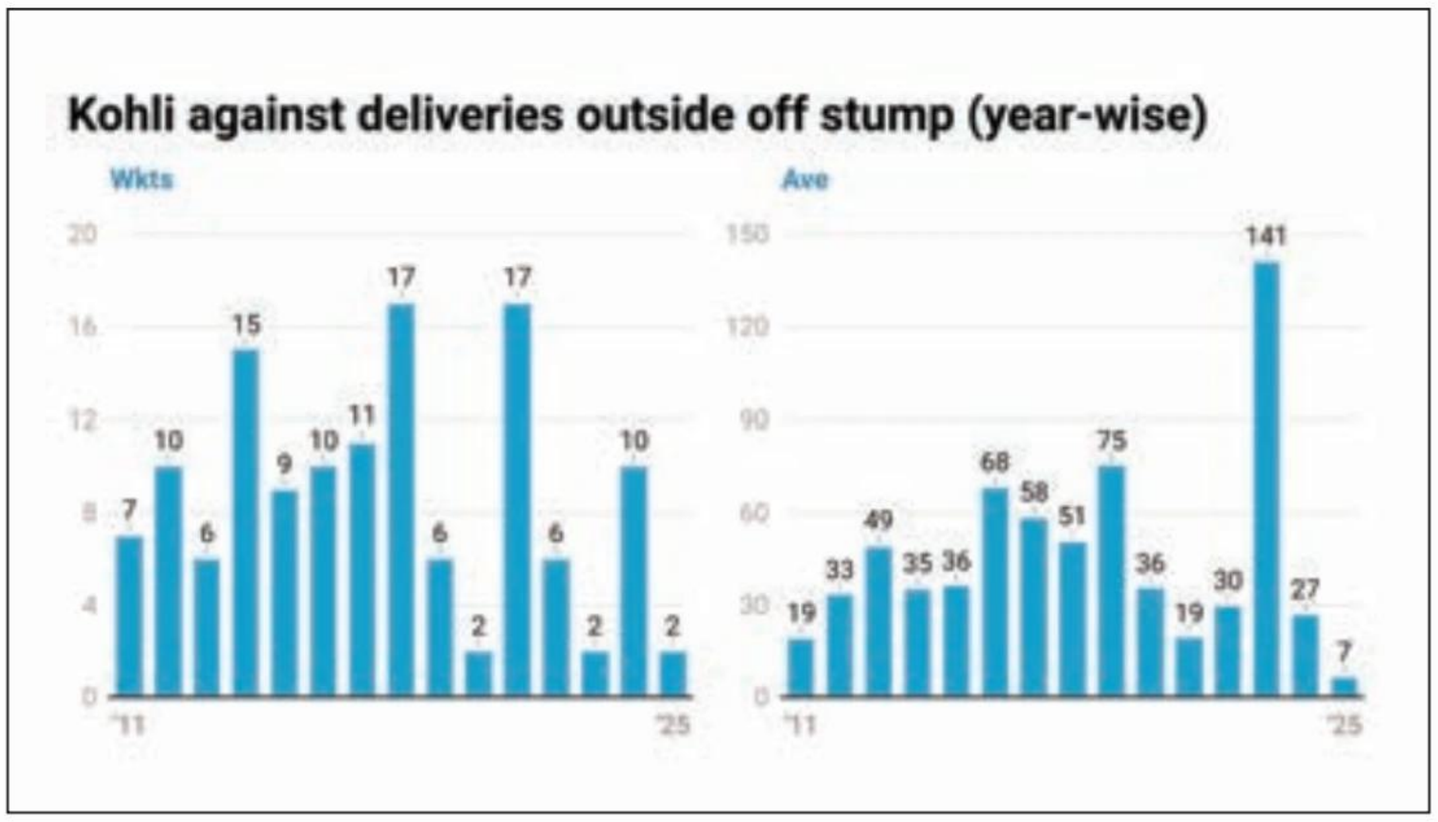
Between 2016 and 2019, Kohli's average against deliveries outside the off stump exceeded 50. Between 2021 and 2024, it dropped below 30 three times, emblematic of his struggle with the line. Kohli faced the prospect of redeeming himself once again in England during the upcoming series, but his decision on May 12 ensured there would be no redemption story.

The Indian talisman walks off into the sunset short of 10,000 Test runs — once his dream — with an average below 50. Even if he falls short of these milestones, his legacy as a modern great remains untarnished, leaving footprints far beyond mere statistics.

Kohli - Against bowling types

Technique	Inns	Runs	RR	SR	Wks	Ave	DR
leg break	42	723	4	66	8	90	138
right pace	182	4,329	3	53	104	42	78
off break	117	1,966	3	57	40	49	86
left orthodox	86	1,148	3	51	19	60	118
left pace	68	955	4	62	20	48	77
left unorthodox	3	108	5	81	2	54	67



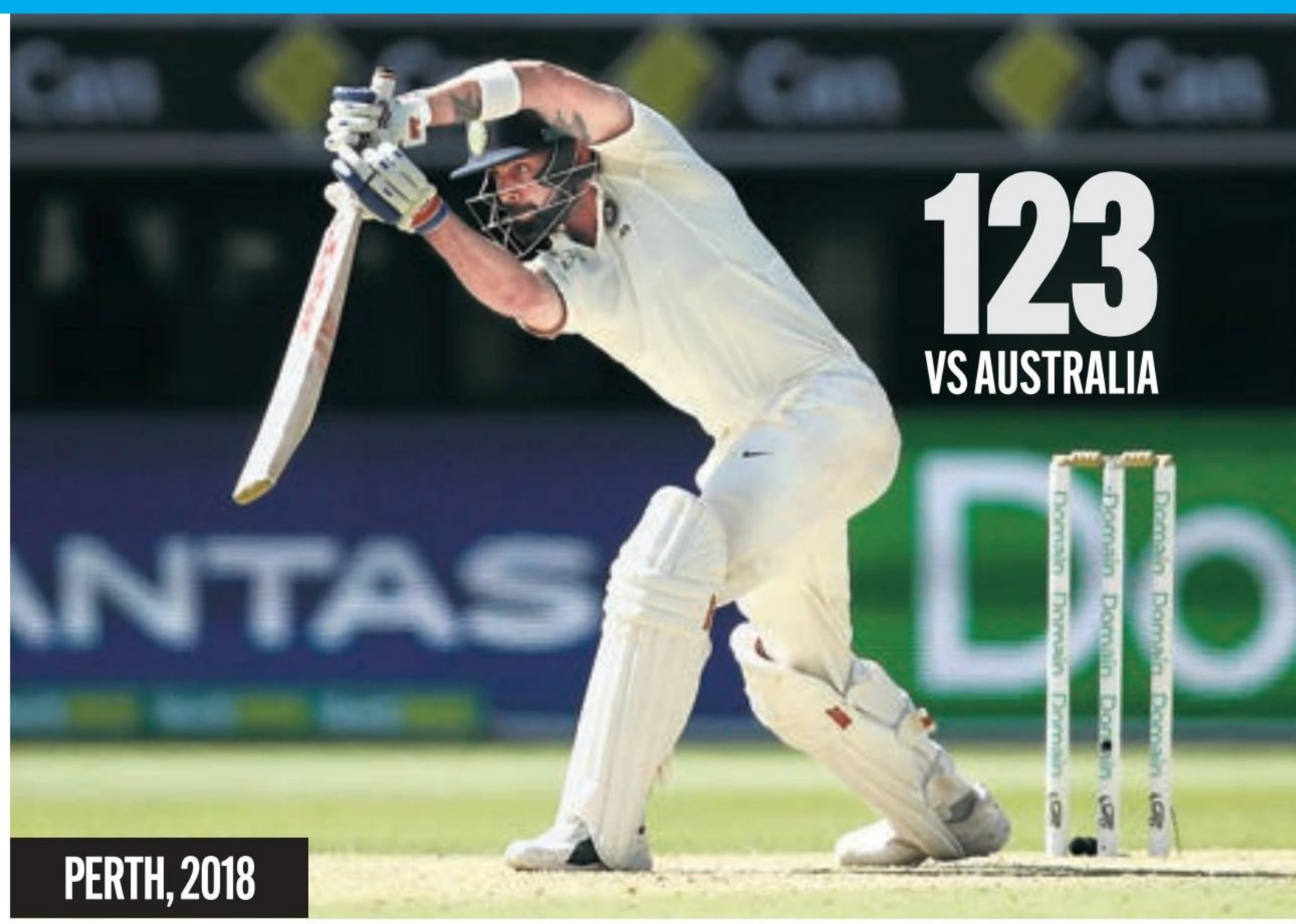


Fab 4 in Tests since 2021

	Inns	Runs	SR	Wkts	Ave	BpD
KS Williamson	43	2,399	51.83	39	61.51	118.6
SPD Smith	71	3,034	50.23	63	48.15	95.8
JE Root	101	5,149	62.7	91	56.58	90.2
V Kohli	63	1,912	49.43	60	[illegible]	64.4

VINTAGE VIRAT
BEST TEST KNOCKS

The pitch was chaos — sharp lift, late seam, bursts of spin, and bowlers breathing fire. Wickets tumbled, bodies took blows, and no one crossed 70. Yet Kohli stood apart, untouched by the storm. While others battled the pitch, he bent it to his will. However, Aussies prevailed by 146 runs. GETTY IMAGES



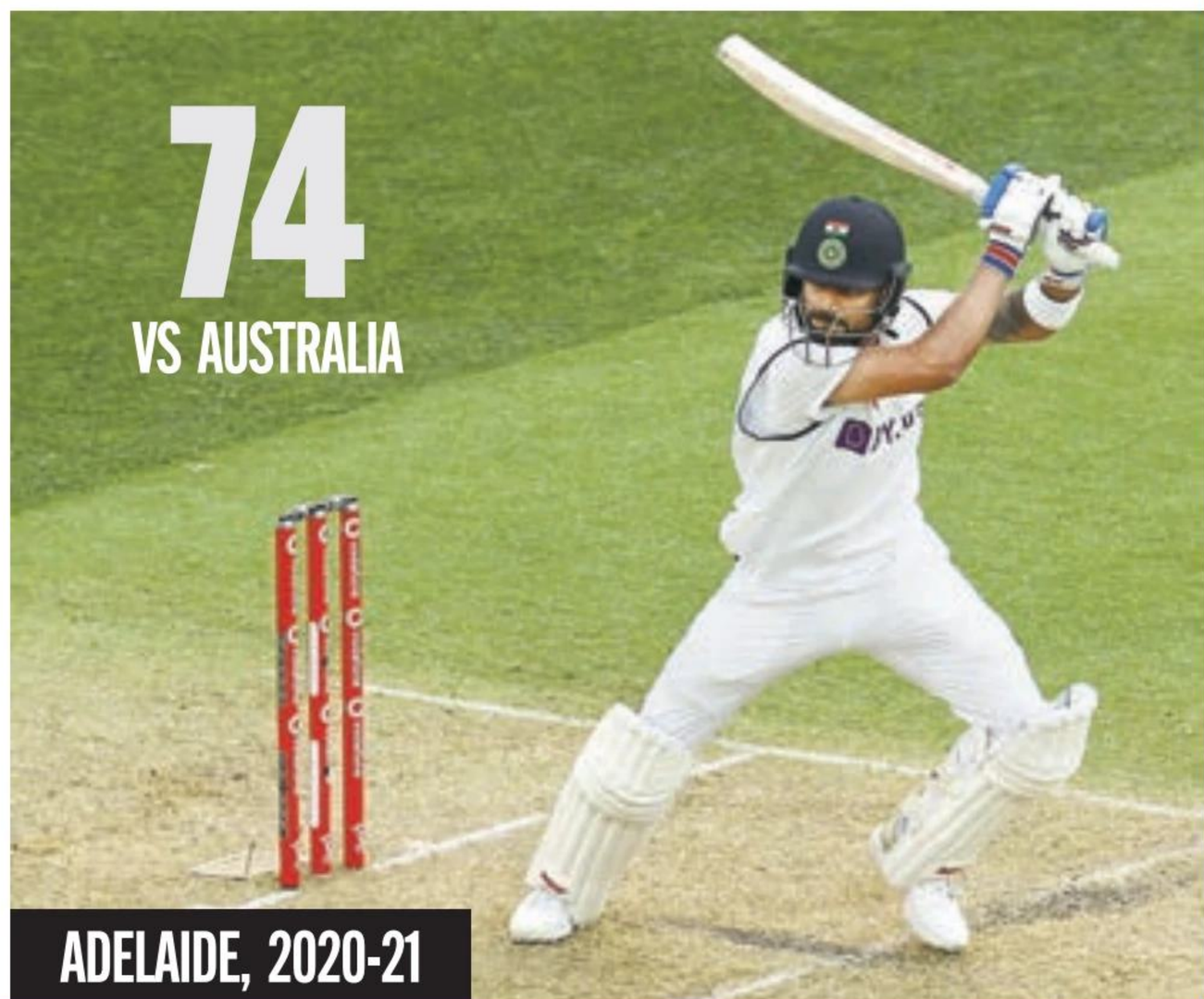
India's hopes fizzled, the series lost, and no one else crossed 46. Its second innings mustered just 151. But for 379 minutes, Kohli made you believe. Every stroke carried intent, every moment felt alive. He dragged India close, but AB de Villiers, with ice in his veins, slammed the door shut. One genius was simply outdone by another as South Africa won by 135 runs. REUTERS

Kohli walked into Edgbaston to jeers, faced a relentless James Anderson spell, survived on 21 — and then rose. He fought, adjusted, then dazzled. With no support, he dragged India close, falling last for 149. That hundred silenced critics, humbled Anderson, and dethroned Steve Smith at the top of the ICC rankings at the time. England won by 31 runs. GETTY IMAGES

On a spicy Eden pitch built, seamers ruled and India teetered at 159 for 7. Kohli, calm amid the storm, shifted gears late on Day 5 — piercing gaps with crisp drives and audacious flicks. His 104 off 119 turned pressure into thrill. By stumps, Sri Lanka was clinging on at 75 for 7 in a chase of 231, desperate for darkness. The match ended in a draw. K. R. DEEPAK

FOR MORE IMAGES

Don't let the score mislead you — this was spin domination at its finest. On a pitch tearing up by Day 3, with India six down and trailing, Kohli took charge. He swept from the rough, drove against the turn, and lofted with intent. By the end, England had no answers. India won by an innings and 36 runs. K. R. DEEPAK



Before the 36-run collapse in Adelaide etched itself into history, India had edged ahead — and Kohli was central to that. Under pink skies and tricky bounce, he reined in his strokes, trusted his eye, and built a 123-ball half-century with precision and poise. At 188/3, India looked set — until Kohli's run-out turned the tide and eventually handed Australia an eight-wicket win. GETTY IMAGES

Unfiltered Virat: A morning to remember — when Virat welcomed the author into his new home for an exclusive chat and a breakfast as warm as his hospitality. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

» FROM THE VAULT

THE VIRAT WE KNOW: FIERCE, LOYAL, OURS

He batted through grief, led with fire, and never forgot where he came from. A farewell to the boy **who became king.**

FOR MORE STORIES

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Don Bradman. Garry Sobers. Sunil Gavaskar. Sachin Tendulkar. Viv Richards. These players left a huge imprint on the game in their era. Their exits evoked heartfelt tributes from fans and media alike. Virat Kohli has joined that list by stepping away from Test cricket — a format that meant the world to him.

For us in Delhi, following the journeys of Virender Sehwag and Virat meant years of focused attention on their rise from the junior circuit to the international stage. Interestingly, both Sehwag and Virat were initially rejected by Delhi's talent spotters and junior selectors. But they forced a rethink by piling on runs and embarrassing the decision-makers at Ferozeshah Kotla (now Arun Jaitley Stadium).

While working on Virat's biography, I discovered a deep and widespread admiration for his dedication to the game. His contribution to Delhi cricket was acknowledged across the board. Coaches and colleagues spoke in awe of his ability to adapt and deliver. You couldn't keep him away from cricket. If given a choice, he'd have played 24 hours a day.

I always found him in a different zone when he stepped onto the field. Restless after a stint in the nets, he would quickly shift to fielding drills or bowl to teammates. His energy lifted everyone around him.

Like Tendulkar, watching him bat at the nets was a joy. He constantly experimented with his shots, especially against fast bowlers. It was routine to see him ask bowlers to send down bouncers from 18 yards. That was his way of preparing for international challenges.

His ability to handle pace impressed coaches and teammates alike. That skill was honed through long hours at the nets. He hated missing domestic games, convinced that they sharpened his edge. He relished tricky pitches because they tested his survival skills.

What I admired most was his eagerness to talk cricket. After returning from tours, he'd often join his Delhi teammates if they were playing at the Kotla. His presence on the dressing-room balcony had an immediate effect — the energy levels rose, and the desire to compete became visible.

That competitive streak came from the hard-nosed culture of Delhi cricket, where a youngster had to fight for space. Virat mastered that fight. He wasn't content playing only in his age group. He constantly pushed to move up the ranks. His coaches had to protect him from burning out, but he was obsessed with batting early and taking on senior bowlers.

He was happiest among cricketers. At his wedding reception in Delhi, he made sure to invite all his coaches and colleagues from junior cricket. He often helped juniors by observing their game and offering advice. He had no patience for laziness and wouldn't hesitate to let someone know, but he always followed it up with a quiet chat to make the player feel valued. He had the rare grace to apologise when he crossed a line.

Delhi cricket changed significantly because of Virat's success at the international level. I remember hearing stories of a young boy from West Delhi taking on senior bowlers in local matches, fearlessly. Reputation didn't faze him. He took the fight to the opposition — brave, even cocky, but always memorable.

There were strong echoes of Sehwag in him. Both backed themselves without hesitation. Sehwag was a big influence. When he sensed Virat was losing focus, he sent quiet reminders. Virat responded instantly and never gave Sehwag a reason to be disappointed again.

He was a natural motivator.

One incident still stands out. A young girl battling a serious illness wanted a video message from Virat. A friend connected her with me. When I asked Virat, he immediately recorded a heartfelt message.

K. R. DEEPAK

Young batters in Delhi often received high-quality equipment from him. Despite his busy international schedule, Virat stayed informed about the local scene and held the seniors of Delhi's past in high regard.

I was part of the organising committee for the inaugural Bishan Singh Bedi Lecture in 2017, where Virat was honoured by the legendary left-arm spinner. Stuck in traffic en route from Gurugram, he updated us every five minutes and was genuinely apologetic for arriving late. The audience loved it when he touched Bedi's feet on stage. Bedi was deeply moved too.

One incident still stands out. A young girl battling a serious illness wanted a video message from Virat. A friend connected her with me. When I asked Virat, he immediately recorded a heartfelt message. Not many sporting icons would do that today.

On another occasion, I asked Kapil Dev for a similar message for a friend critically ill with Covid in Hyderabad. The doctors weren't hopeful, but after seeing Kapil's video, the patient bounced back. Sporting heroes can sometimes be the best medicine. Virat and Kapil both proved that.

« THERE WERE STRONG ECHOES OF SEHWAG IN VIRAT. BOTH BACKED THEMSELVES WITHOUT HESITATION. SEHWAG WAS A BIG INFLUENCE »

I'll never forget the exclusive interview Virat granted us in late 2015. He offered to come home for the session but I had to remind him of the security issues. "There will be a stampede if people got to know you are in my house," I joked. He laughed and instead invited me to his new home in Gurugram. The interview was unforgettable, made even better by a sumptuous

Humble tribute: Virat Kohli touches Bishan Singh Bedi's feet at the inaugural Bedi Lecture in 2017, shortly after arriving late — visibly apologetic, and deeply honoured. PTI

K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

breakfast.

At the launch of my book on him, he came down an hour early from his room at the Maurya Sheraton in Delhi, mingled with the crowd, and didn't complain once about being mobbed. He enjoyed every minute of those three hours on October 19, 2016. On stage, he was joined by Kapil, Sehwag, Anil Kumble and Ravi Shastri. I still cherish the tweet he posted that day:

"Humbled to have a book written about me by @bradsobers. Thank you for this book sir #DrivenLikeVirat"

And then there was that unforgettable morning at Kotla — December 19, 2006. Day three of a Ranji Trophy match. Delhi was following on, 103 for five, with Virat on 40 and Puneet Bisht on 28. Virat had lost his father the previous night but insisted on playing. Manhas, the captain, had told him to go home. Virat refused. "Have to save the follow-on," he said.

I reached early and met coach Chetan Chauhan and Manhas outside the dressing room. Chauhan asked me to speak with Virat. I spent 10 minutes with him and saw, up close, his resolve to put the team first — even in a moment of personal grief. The Karnataka team shared his sorrow before he padded up. He scored 90 before being given out caught behind. Only then did he leave for his father's cremation.

That day, Virat took a decisive step in his journey to play for India.

It's been a privilege to follow his career and share these moments. Test cricket won't be the same without Virat Kohli.

The Virat Kohli story, told by those who know him best

From **Cheeku to champion** — teammates recall Virat Kohli's fierce will to win and unrelenting pursuit of greatness.

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

How would you define Virat Kohli?

Usually, such questions put people in a fix. But Wriddhiman Saha had no hesitation.

"A champion, who always wants to win."

The former India wicketkeeper, who played under Kohli's captaincy for seven years, listed his reasons without pause.

"Be it on the field or even on the PlayStation with us, Virat always had that winning mentality. He was never ready to lose without putting in his best efforts. This fierce competitiveness spoke volumes about his character. It explains why he could take India's Test team to a new high," Saha told *Sportstar*.

Kohli led India in 68 Tests — the most by any Indian captain — winning 40, losing 17, and drawing 11. His win percentage of 58.82 is the highest among Indian Test captains.

Abhinav Mukund, (left) who made his Test debut alongside Kohli in 2011, offered a more personal reflection. Having first met him at an Under-15 national camp, Mukund recalled that Kohli wasn't the best or the fittest then — but his hunger stood out.

Both made it to India's victorious Under-19 World Cup squad in 2008, where Kohli was captain.

"We hold our Test numbers very dear to our chest. I remember being extremely nervous and sharing that nervousness with Virat," Mukund said on *BBC Stumped*.

"He had already played white-ball cricket for India, but we all understood the importance of Test cricket. Virat wanted to be the best that ever was." He added, "We had very different journeys as cricketers, but Virat wanted to be the best batter in the team and the best version of himself."

It wasn't always smooth. Kohli had to wait seven months to score his first Test hundred. Saha, who had a ringside view of that knock in Adelaide in 2012, still remembers the morning vividly. India was reeling at 111 for 5. As Saha walked out to bat, Kohli — playing his eighth Test — approached him.

"He patted me on the back and said, 'Be confident,'" Saha recalled.

"He was very clear about our approach. Australia had posted a mammoth total, and we had lost five wickets. He told me to be in the moment and just play to my

Debut century: Wriddhiman Saha and a young Virat Kohli stitched a 114-run stand before Virat got to his first Test hundred in the fourth Test of the series against Australia in Adelaide in 2012. K. R. DEEPAK

strength."

The duo stitched a 114-run stand. Saha made 35. Kohli stood tall with a gritty 116 off 213 balls.

"He was someone who's always positive and could pass on that positivity to everyone around him," Saha said. That quality reflected in Kohli's captaincy from 2015 to 2021.

"A lot of us were perhaps a bit shy in showing our emotions, but that was never the case with Virat. Since his U-19 days, he showed the world what he was capable of. But to maintain that same level of energy and aggression at the highest level — that takes something else," Saha added.

"The fact that he could look the opponent in the eye and never give up made him what he is. Even broadcasters preferred showing his expressions after every wicket — those animated reactions captured how passionate he was about the game."

Saha admitted Kohli drew from Mahendra Singh Dhoni's leadership but forged his own style.

"He took inspiration from Mahi bhai, but he was a different

captain," he said.

Saha also praised Kohli's practice ethic.

"I have never seen Virat taking things easy during practice. Be it a preparatory camp or a match simulation, he was always well-prepared — often the first to arrive and last to leave. He worked in every department and focused particularly on fitness. The only other name that comes to mind is Jonty Rhodes," he said.

Fast bowler **Ishant Sharma, (Left)** Kohli's longtime friend from Delhi cricket circles, pointed to a lesser-seen side of the star.

"Imagine your brother has reached such heights. Everyone thinks he's great. But at the end of the day, he's a human being. We've spent time together, shared rooms. I have never felt that he is Virat Kohli. For us, he is Cheeku," Ishant said on *Star Sports* Press Room.

Kohli's decision to step away from the longest format has sparked debate. Some feel he should have played the England series. But those who've followed him closely believe he exited on his own terms — after an incredible run.

ROHIT SHARMA
ADIEU TO TESTS

AFP

ROHIT SHARMA, THE TEST PLAYER, TOOK HIS TIME. THEN MADE IT COUNT

He dreamt of **whites as a boy** in Borivali. The journey was long, often lonely, but Rohit Sharma finally lived it on his own terms.

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"I understand that I haven't done justice to my potential and abilities. It's okay. I want to stay positive and keep looking forward to every challenge that lies ahead." These words, spoken in October 2014 during an interview at the Cricket Club of India for *ESPNCricinfo* — my then employer — were Rohit Sharma's response to a question about having played just seven Tests, despite having made his white-ball debut in 2007.

Despite being one of the all-time greats in limited-overs cricket, Rohit's record in the whites has long been debated. Has he truly done justice to his talent in the Test arena? That question has followed him ever since his name first emerged on the maidans of Mumbai more than two decades ago, when he was seen as a potential torchbearer of the city's rich batting legacy.

His retirement from Test cricket earlier this month reignited that very debate among connoisseurs, critics and fans alike.

The writing had been on the wall since he sat out the deciding Test of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy in the New Year week. Perhaps age had caught up, evident in his movement. Or maybe he had gone too far trying to lead by example, pushing India's batting approach in white-ball formats into red-ball territory.

In that sense, the last five months of his career mirrored the long wait he endured after his First-Class debut. Back then, the questions were "when will it happen?" Later, they became "why isn't it happening?" and then "will it ever happen?" The doubts of 2025 weren't very different from those between 2006 and 2013 — especially from 2010 to 2013.

His Test career can be viewed in three distinct phases. The first was the frustrating wait for a debut, made more painful after he injured himself minutes before the toss in what would have been his first Test in Nagpur against South Africa in 2010. It would be three more years before he got his chance against the West Indies. During that phase, in various conversations — formal and informal — you could sense the weight of the *"mera number kab aayega"* (when will my turn come) mindset.

When the opportunity finally came, he made an instant impact with consecutive hundreds in his first two Tests. But the next five years saw him struggle to hold down a place. Injuries and India's preference for five specialist bowlers meant Rohit was frequently in and out of the side. That stretch also saw him competing with his close friend

Power precision: Rohit Sharma has smashed 88 sixes in Test cricket — the most by an Indian after Virender Sehwag. K.R. DEEPAK

Ajinkya Rahane for a middle-order slot — Rahane often getting the nod.

It wasn't until 2019, when then-coach Ravi Shastri promoted him to open in Tests, that Rohit finally found stability. Contrary to the widespread belief that he was merely a flat-track bully at home, Rohit excelled for almost five years, which included many an important knock in challenging conditions overseas. During a period when most Indian batters were seeing their averages dip, Rohit averaged

over 50 in the 32 Tests he played in that time. No other opener scored more centuries during that stretch. But the end came swiftly. The final few months saw a marked decline, and his time at the top quietly came to a close.

ROHIT'S TEST CAREER STATS

MATCHES
67

Runs
4301

Average
40.57

100s/50s
12/18

Highest score
212

Rohit belongs to a generation — alongside Virat Kohli, Rahane, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ishant Sharma, and Ravindra Jadeja — that grew up dreaming of the Test cap. And though his body didn't always cooperate at the peak of his Test career, Rohit the batter still scaled some significant highs. He has every reason to walk away satisfied.

Beyond statistics, Rohit has also had to contend with the recurring tag of being a "gifted" or "naturally talented" cricketer.

In that same 2014 interview — just weeks before his record-breaking 264 in an ODI against Sri Lanka — he responded sharply when asked about this label. With his trademark casual flick of the forearm to his forehead, he countered the idea. "I wasn't gifted," he said. "Everything has come through sheer hard work." He spoke about how much effort it took to make his batting look effortless— especially after transitioning from being an off-spinner.

His on-field nonchalance may sometimes be mistaken for swagger, even a "*tapori*" vibe in Mumbai cricket slang. But those close to Rohit know his emotional core has remained intact across phases of his career.

Even when competing with Rahane for a place in the XI, their friendship never wavered. After being called up as Yuvraj Singh's replacement for the 2011 West Indies Test series, Rohit told me how difficult it was to take the spot of someone he considered an older brother — even as he longed for that elusive debut. In 2025, the roles had reversed. Rohit had become the elder statesman, looking out for the next generation — firm, yet caring.

As a captain in Tests, Rohit may not have had the same impact he did in limited-overs formats. But for a boy from Borivali who once dreamed more about donning India's whites than owning luxury cars, 67 Test caps and five years of elite batting represent a fulfilling journey.

Whether his Test career is seen as a case of glass half full or half empty will remain a matter of perspective. What's certain is that Rohit gave it enough for the conversation to be worth having.

« Beyond statistics, Rohit has also had to contend with the recurring tag of being a "gifted" or "naturally talented" cricketer »

ENGLAND TOUR TO TEST INDIA'S NEW BATTING ORDER

With the combined **experience of 190 Tests** gone with Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, India faces a steep and uncertain transition.

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India's vaunted 'next-gen' stars, bred on an overdose of T20 cricket, will be tasked with filling the void left by the last decade's most celebrated cricketers — Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma — and preparing for life after them in the most testing format.

They will be thrown in at the deep end, beginning with a five-match Test series in England, which comes close on the heels of the Indian Premier League (IPL). A fledgling set of batters will be compelled to shelve flair for the hard grind in conditions where a Test series victory has been elusive since 2007. Add to that the absence of a cumulative experience of 190 Test matches, which Kohli and Rohit brought to the table, and all signs point towards a bumpy transition.

The recent rut in Tests, beginning with a shock whitewash at home against the Kiwis and followed by a 1-3 defeat in Australia, does not inspire confidence. But Yashasvi Jaiswal and K.L. Rahul emerged as silver linings in times of crisis, establishing themselves as reliable openers for the future during the tour Down Under after Rohit missed the series opener in Perth. While Jaiswal was India's top scorer on his maiden tour of Australia, Rahul was the foil to the youngster's natural aggression. Rohit dropping down to No. 6 on his return in Adelaide and Rahul retaining his opening spot for the following two Tests was perhaps an indication that the skipper's days in the longest format were numbered, before his decision to axe himself from the final Test in Sydney meant the die was cast. A tally of 164 runs in his last 15 Test innings at an average of 10.93 would have only precipitated the announcement to finally call it a day.

Dealing with Rohit's retirement alone would not have set off too many alarm bells. But Kohli hanging up his boots has thrown hallowed land into disarray. Ever since Sachin Tendulkar stepped out at No. 4 in 1992 against Australia, before Kohli stepped into the breach in 2013, the solid bridge between the top and middle order has been the

India's potential top seven in England

Batter	Overall Tests	Tests in England	Overall Average
Yashasvi Jaiswal	19	0	52.88
K. L. Rahul	58	9	33.57
Shubman Gill	32	3	35.05
Sai Sudharsan	–	–	–
Rishabh Pant	43	9	42.11
Ravindra Jadeja	80	12	34.74
Nitish Kumar Reddy	5	0	37.25

Bidding adieu to Tests: Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma had also retired from T20Is after India won the World Cup last year, and they will only be available for ODI cricket going forward. AFP

cornerstone of India's success in the longest format. The No. 4 spot, synonymous with the two generational talents, has produced the best average — 50.75 — amongst all other batting positions for India since Tendulkar first assumed the mantle, with No. 3 being a distant second, at 45.50. Understandably, the lack of an apparent successor seems to have amplified the lacuna left in the wake of Kohli.

Musical chairs

While Jaiswal, Rahul, and Shubman Gill are going to be staples in the top four for the years to come, the order could be informed by who is anointed at No. 4. India's five-match Test series against England at home last year saw a saga of musical chairs for that spot in the absence of Kohli. Rahul, Shreyas Iyer, Rajat Patidar and Devdutt Padikkal were slotted in that position over the course of that series, but Shreyas and Patidar are not in the scheme of things at present, while Padikkal is recovering from injury. Rahul, a recurring casualty of batting-order rejigs, may be shunted to No. 4 just as he was finding his feet again as an opener.

But that arrangement could disturb Gill's preferred No. 3 spot as he could be asked to partner Jaiswal at the top. Sai Sudharsan, with a prolific IPL season under his belt, is primed for a debut but the management could be averse to making him open at the outset in English conditions. Moreover, the southpaw has some experience of batting in the middle order in First-Class cricket and even scored a century for Surrey at No. 6 in the County Championship last year.

In the event of Gill opening with Jaiswal and Rahul dropping to No. 4, Sudharsan could take up the No. 3 spot, which is not too much different from opening the innings. He has two centuries at that position in First-Class cricket but has only tallied 12 runs in his last four innings at No.

Big shoes to fill: With Kohli and Rohit gone, Shubman Gill and Yashasvi Jaiswal must inherit the legacy of India's top order. AFP

3. At No. 4, Sudharsan has amassed 116 runs in three innings, including a fifty, in the red-ball format.

But Gill reprising the role of opener has its pitfalls. Other than potentially shouldering the burden of captaincy, he also needs to banish the demons of his indifferent record overseas, where he averages 27.53 in 15 matches. His technique against the new ball has been found wanting, as an average of 32.37 suggests. Ahead of the tour of the West Indies in 2023, Gill had asked to be slotted at No. 3, where he has averaged just under 38 in 17 matches since. Moreover, his struggles in England, where he eked out 88 runs in six innings in the last series, make it incumbent on the management to slot him in at his preferred No. 3 or No. 4 spot.

Opening with Rahul would solve twin problems. In the aftermath of Rohit and Kohli's retirements, the team needs to cement batting positions for the upcoming World Test Championship (WTC) cycle, and giving Rahul a longer rope in the same position would be a step towards ensuring continuity. After all, he has been an opener for the large part of his stop-start Test career, and has had a fair amount of success opening the innings in England, scoring two hundreds and a fifty while averaging 37.31 across eight games.

Inexperience galore

Amidst all the uncertainty

Team man: K. L. Rahul, a recurring casualty of batting-order rejigs, may be shunted to No. 4 just as he was finding his feet again as an opener. AP

surrounding the batting order, the only constant for the team will be the lack of experience. Not since the twin retirements of Rahul Dravid and V.V.S Laxman after the disastrous tour of Australia in 2012 has the team been as thin on batting resources. And back then, Kohli and Cheteshwar Pujara had proven themselves adequately to lend spine to the line-up, even as Tendulkar's towering stature loomed over them.

The current India Test setup affords no such sanctuary. Jaiswal is yet to play a Test in England, Gill has a point to prove overseas, Rahul needs to pin down his position, Sudharsan is bracing for a debut, and Rishabh Pant is battling poor form and a lack of clarity. In short, India's potential top five are in the wilderness and the most immediate challenge will be cohesion and not betraying the sense of the upcoming series being a tryout for individual survival.

The middle order could turn to Ravindra Jadeja, who with 80 matches under his belt is the most battle-hardened in the current Test setup. The all-rounder's batting stocks have dipped in the recent past and he may have to do more than just chip in with cameos, especially in overseas conditions.

At the crossroads

The WTC era in Test cricket has infused the need for a restart every time a new cycle beckons. With Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane being sidelined for almost two years, a comeback is unlikely. The duo has done its part by doing the hard yards in domestic cricket and the County Championship and keeping rust at bay, but the management seems to have moved on from them. Pujara and Rahane are the only active players with some experience at No. 4, having played seven and nine games respectively in that position. They could help smoothen the transition and imbue the younger crop with their never-say-die spirit, but that ship seems to have sailed.

That Jaiswal and Nitish Kumar Reddy were India's most successful batters in the 2024-25 Border-Gavaskar Trophy perhaps only reinforces the belief that experience is overvalued. That notion will be challenged imminently. As much as the term 'end of an era' is too often profaned, going by how generously it is thrown around in pop culture references, Rohit and Kohli's departure from Test cricket truly signifies an inflection point.

The years that will follow will be grouped under the 'post Rohit-Kohli era', much like the period that ensued after Dravid, Laxman and Tendulkar walked into the sunset. With their contrasting styles and fortunes in whites, Rohit and Kohli carved a sacred space for the game even as the swathes of franchise cricket expanded endlessly. It is for the next generation to safeguard that territory and ensure the Rohit-Kohli era is not reduced to a wistful memory.

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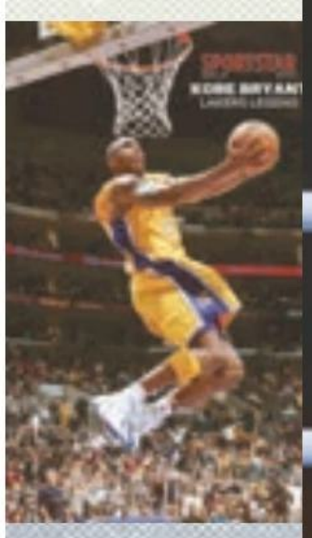

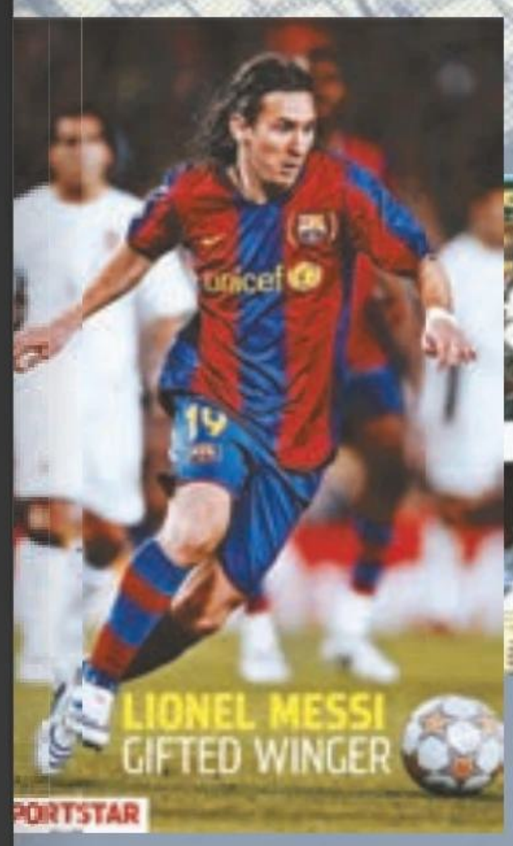

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1st

Chaotic finish: Mohd. Arshad Khan celebrated after hitting the winning run as Gujarat Titans edged past Mumbai Indians in a last-ball thriller at the Wankhede Stadium. Chasing 15 in the final over of a rain-hit match, Gujarat held its nerve to clinch victory. The game swung back and forth, with Jasprit Bumrah returning impressive figures of 2 for 19 and Shubman Gill contributing a crucial 43.

SPORTZPICS / IPL

2nd

Brevis Blitz: Chennai Super Kings ended a six-year wait by successfully chasing a 180-plus target in the IPL, beating Kolkata Knight Riders. Dewald Brevis led the charge with a blistering 52 off 25 balls, including a 30-run over off Vaibhav Arora. K. R. DEEPAK

3rd

Blackout: The Punjab Kings' match against Delhi Capitals was called off in the 11th over due to security concerns. The crowd at Dharamsala's HPCA Stadium was evacuated after reports of drone incursions within a 100-kilometre radius amid rising military tensions between India and Pakistan. R. V. MOORTHY

4th

Abandoned: Fans had to wait another day for the IPL to resume, as the first match after a week-long suspension — between Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Kolkata Knight Riders — was washed out due to rain in Bengaluru.

K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

5th

Turnaround: Harpreet Brar pulled Punjab Kings back into the contest after Yashasvi Jaiswal and Vaibhav Suryavanshi gave Rajasthan Royals a strong start in their 220-run chase. Brar's 3 for 22 delivered key breakthroughs and played a decisive role in setting up the Kings' 10-run win.

SPORTZPICS / IPL

6th

Deadly duo: Sai Sudharsan and Shubman Gill pierced the gaps with precision during an unbeaten 200-run stand that powered Gujarat Titans to a 10-wicket win over Delhi Capitals. The victory sealed a Playoff spot for Titans, alongside Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Punjab Kings.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

7th

Knockout punch: Abhishek Sharma's 20-ball 59, which included four consecutive sixes off Ravi Bishnoi, helped Sunrisers Hyderabad chase down a 206-run target set by Lucknow Super Giants. The loss also meant that the Super Giants were officially eliminated from the race to the Playoffs. SANDEEP SAXENA

K. V. S. GIRI

RUN MACHINE

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Gujarat Titans' drive for a third IPL final appearance in four years has been led by its opening pair – Shubman Gill and B. Sai Sudharsan. While Gill has been a reliable 400-run cornerstone for the team since its inception, Sudharsan's emergence has elevated the GT opening partnership to a position of dominance this season. Despite GT missing out on the Playoffs last year, Sudharsan enjoyed a breakthrough campaign, scoring 527 runs at an average of 47.91. This season, he has taken his game up a notch by adopting a more aggressive approach, as reflected in his improved strike rate of 157.

Sudharsan showcased why he is regarded as one of the country's finest young batters with an unbeaten century – his first of the season and second overall – which helped the Titans chase down 200 against Delhi Capitals with ease, securing a 10-wicket victory that confirmed its place in the top four.

Of Sudharsan's 617 runs this season, nearly 55 per cent have come through the onside. However, against the Capitals, he made full use of the width available, amassing 28 runs with well-placed cut shots. Seven of his 12 boundaries also came behind square on the offside.

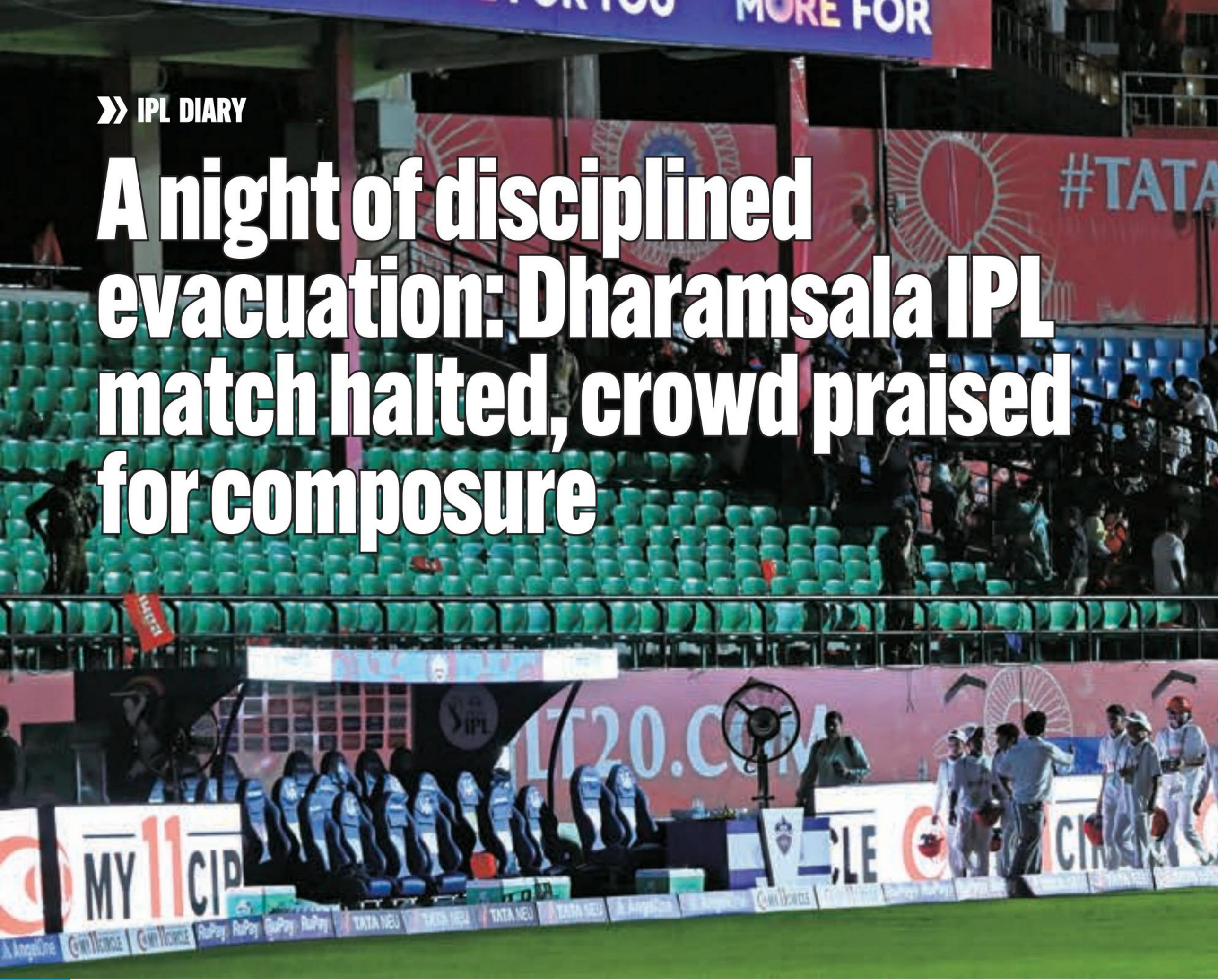
His ability to find gaps effortlessly, highlighted by a league-high 68 fours, is complemented by his excellent strike rotation. The Tamil Nadu batsman ranks second and third in the league for singles and doubles respectively this season.

With an improvement in his six-hitting, alongside his steady, compact technique, Sudharsan looks poised to become the next all-format batter for the national team as it enters a period of transition.

Matches
12
Runs
617
Average
56.09
Strike Rate
157

All stats as of May 20, 2025.

A night of disciplined evacuation: Dharamsala IPL match halted, crowd praised for composure



Tensions had already been simmering in the background following India's retaliatory strikes on nine **terror camps** across Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

Anish Pathiyil
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It was supposed to be just another IPL evening in the mountains — a league-stage clash between two teams scrambling to make it into the top four. But what began as a regular league fixture between Punjab Kings and Delhi Capitals at the HPCA Stadium in Dharamsala ended in a mid-match evacuation following reports of drone incursions within a 100-kilometre radius. IPL chairman Arun Dhumal, present at the venue, was seen assisting officials and spectators in vacating the premises, stepping in during a situation the tournament had never faced before.

Tensions had already been simmering in the background following India's retaliatory strikes on nine terror camps across Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The strikes came after weeks of escalating tensions between the neighbours over the terrorist attacks in the picturesque town of Pahalgam in Kashmir on April 22, which left 26 people dead.

With military escalation in the region, uncertainty loomed over whether the match would proceed. However, it was decided the game would go ahead as planned.

In the hours leading up to the match, the town retained its characteristic calm. Fans, mostly in Punjab red, flowed through the narrow lanes towards the

Game off: Fans leaving the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium after the IPL 2025 match between Punjab Kings and Delhi Capitals was called off in Dharamsala. R. V. MOORTHY

picturesque HPCA ground. Despite airspace restrictions in northern India, a few Delhi supporters had made the long journey via overnight buses to be part of the occasion.

A passing drizzle just an hour before the toss briefly interrupted proceedings, sending the ground staff scrambling with covers. But the sun returned within minutes. When the drizzle returned 15 minutes before the toss, it persisted, growing heavier and causing a delay of about an hour. Once play resumed under the blanket of a cool mountain night, Punjab got off to a flying start. The wet outfield offered little assistance to the bowlers, and openers Prabhsimran Singh and Priyansh Arya made the most of it. The pair put on a 122-run stand in just 56 deliveries, dismantling both pace and spin with ease. Arya eventually fell to T. Natarajan, and as captain Shreyas Iyer readied himself to walk out, the situation took a dramatic turn.

One floodlight tower went out. Then another. And another.

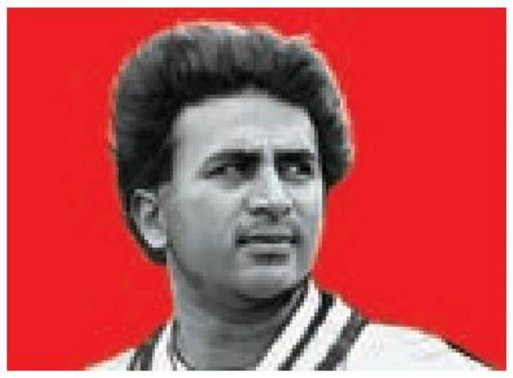
Word began to spread across social media of drone attacks in Jammu, Udhampur, and Pathankot — all less than 85 kilometres from the stadium.

Initially, the media contingent stayed put, assuming a routine power disruption. It wasn't until the host broadcaster's crew began packing their equipment — a full 10 minutes later — that the gravity of the situation became clear.

A policeman confirmed the decision to evacuate the stadium, prompting a hurried yet composed exit by journalists, many experiencing a crisis of this nature for the first time.

Contrary to what past evacuations might suggest, this one was largely smooth. External security personnel and stadium officials coordinated well, ushering spectators out in a calm and controlled manner. Fans, despite the shock, showed restraint and discipline as they moved to the streets without panic.

The players were also promptly escorted out before the formal announcement that the match had been abandoned.



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

OVER-RATE PENALTY CLAUSE IS VERY GOOD BUT PERHAPS NEEDS A TWEAK

The current rule, while effective, may need adjustments to **ensure fairness** during rain interruptions and tight finishes.

Please allow me to begin this column with heartfelt thanks to our armed forces and all those whose bravery and vigilance at the borders, as well as inside the country, let us sleep peacefully at night. No praise can be too high for these women and men who put their lives on the line for India. Let us try to be worthy Indians for them, who are putting their lives and their families' lives at stake.

It is because of their swift retaliation that the IPL could restart with just a week's play being lost. The BCCI engine room at the Cricket Centre in Mumbai swung into action and rescheduled the matches that were to be played on the days when the hostilities were ongoing, and a spanking new schedule was ready. Again, like those who guard our country, no praise can be too high for those at the headquarters of Indian cricket who work tirelessly under the radar to keep the game up and running, not just in the IPL but throughout the cricketing season. Whenever one bumps into these guys, there's always a smile on their faces, even past the midnight hour after a late match finish. Just as the commentators may be the faces of the tournament, the real stars are all those who sit in their chairs, focused on their monitors and sound systems to get you the broadcast pictures that you see on your TV and handheld devices. While the commentators could be ensconced in their beds a couple of hours or so after the end of the match, most of these unseen and unsung real heroes are still at the venue trying to derig and get ready for the next venue.

With monsoons anxious to start early, the BCCI had to take some hard calls about the selection of venues. So, Hyderabad and Chennai missed out while Bengaluru, falling in the same orbit, got a couple of games, out of which the first was rained off. The Chennai supporters are on tenterhooks about the future of their 'Thala' and would have been happy if one game was allotted to them. Anyway, that will give them hope that they will get to see him again next season.

The Mumbai Indians vs Gujarat Titans game was a thriller, with the current toppers of the league snatching a win off the last ball of the match. While the rains had halted the

Titans triumph: Rain delays, a crucial no-ball, and a run-out fumble — in a rollercoaster of drama at Wankhede Stadium, the Titans stunned Mumbai to claim a classic victory. EMMANUAL YOGINI

proceedings, conflicting reports were coming in as to what would be the last time for the fixture to be called off. Finally, when play resumed just before 12:30 in the morning with just one out of the two overs remaining to be bowled, Mumbai Indians, who were a bit tardy in bowling their overs, were also penalised with one less fielder beyond the 30-metre circle. That was a bit harsh, for if the game had not been interrupted by rain, they could have made up time in the 19th over and so had all five fielders outside the circle for the final over.

This penalty clause is very good, but perhaps needs a tweak in case a similar interruption happens. For example, if a team is a minute or so behind the required time and there are still six overs remaining, then the rains come in, play might restart with just one over left. This happened in the Mumbai vs Gujarat game. The penalty of having one less fielder is a stiff punishment in such cases. The bowling team had ample overs to make up for being a minute or so short of the required time. This penalty can make the difference between winning and losing. Hopefully, better cricketing minds than mine will come up with a solution or a reason to continue with the current penalty clause.

I end with sincere thanks to all the Indians all over the world who, despite differences — political, linguistic, ethnic or otherwise — have stood up wholeheartedly for our beloved motherland.

Jai Hind.

No praise can be too high for the women and men from the armed forces who put their lives on the line for India.

Sai Sudharsan quickest to 1500 IPL runs

35 } The number of innings Sai Sudharsan needed to reach the 1500th run of his IPL career. It was during his knock of 48 against Sunrisers Hyderabad in Ahmedabad on 2 May 2025. Of the 73 batters who accomplished this milestone in the IPL, Sudharshan is the quickest to reach this tally in terms of fewest innings. He just took one innings less than Shaun Marsh, who did it in 36 innings in 2012. Meanwhile, during this knock, Sai Sudharsan also crossed 2000 runs of his T20 career. It took him 54 innings to do so, which is now the second quickest in terms of innings among the 464 players who have 2000+ runs in T20 cricket history. Topping the list is Shaun Marsh, who did it in 53 innings.

Quickest (in fewest innings) to reach 1500 career runs in IPL cricket

Inns	M	Batter	While playing for		Venue	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	HS	100/50
35	35	Sai Sudharsan	GT	(v SRH)	Ahmedabad	2 May 2025	1538	48.06	103	1/11
36	37	Shaun Marsh	PBKS	(v CSK)	Chennai	28 Apr 2012	1515	50.50	115	1/13
37	38	Chris Gayle	RCB	(v DecChr)	Bengaluru	6 May 2012	1504	45.58	107	2/10
40	41	Michael Hussey	CSK	(v SRH)	Hyderabad	8 May 2013	1532	45.06	116*	1/11
44	44	Ruturaj Gaikwad	CSK	(v RR)	Jaipur	27 Apr 2023	1524	39.08	101*	1/12

Quickest (in fewest innings) to reach 2000 career runs in T20 cricket

Inns	M	Batter	While playing for		Venue	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	HS	100/50
53	54	Shaun Marsh	PBKS	(v DC)	Dharamsala	15 May 2011	2043	43.46	115	2/15
54	55	Sai Sudharsan	GT	(v SRH)	Ahmedabad	2 May 2025	2016	42.00	103	1/13
58	58	D'Arcy Short	Hobart Hurricanes	(Sydney Thunder)	Canberra	9 Feb 2019	2002	38.50	122*	1/16
58	58	Waseem Mohd	UAE	(v Scotland)	Dubai	11 Mar 2024	2023	38.16	112	2/15
58	59	Marcus Trescothick	Somerset	(v Surrey)	The Oval	30 Jun 2011	2020	38.11	108*	2/17

Note: The previous quickest by an Indian was 59 innings by Sachin Tendulkar

117 } The number of innings Jos Buttler needed to reach the 4000th run of his IPL career. It was during his knock of 64 against Sunrisers Hyderabad in Ahmedabad on 2 May 2025. Of the 18 batters who accomplished this milestone in the IPL, only three others have managed to achieve this in fewer innings — K. L. Rahul (105 innings), Chris Gayle (112) and David Warner (114).

Quickest (in fewest innings) to reach 4000 career runs in IPL cricket

Inns	M	Batter	While playing for		Venue	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	HS	100/50
105	114	K. L. Rahul	LSG	(v PBKS)	Lucknow	15 Apr 2023	4044	47.02	132*	4/32
112	113	Chris Gayle	PBKS	(v RR)	Jaipur	25 Mar 2019	4073	41.56	175*	6/25
114	114	David Warner	SRH	(v KKR)	Bengaluru	17 May 2027	4014	40.55	126	3/26
116	117	Jos Buttler	GT	(v SRH)	Ahmedabad	2 May 2025	4052	40.52	124	7/24
121	128	Faf de Plessis	RCB	(v RR)	Jaipur	14 May 2023	4034	36.67	96	0/32

1146 } The runs tally for Virat Kohli against CSK in the IPL, which is the most aggregated by any batter against any opponent. He bettered the previous tally of 1134 IPL runs by David Warner (for DC and SRH) against Punjab Kings. Incidentally, Kohli, overall, has 1160 runs against CSK (1146 in IPL and 14 in CPL) in all T20 cricket, the most against any opponent. Kohli also has 1154 runs against Delhi Capitals (1130 in IPL and 24 in CPL), the second most in all T20s.

Most IPL career runs aggregated against a single opponent

Runs	Batter	(for)	Against	M	Inns	NO	Ave.	100/50	Achieved date
1146	Virat Kohli	(RCB)	CSK	35	34	4	38.20	0/10	3 May 2025
1134	David Warner	(DC/SRH)	PBKS	26	26	3	49.30	0/13	23 May 2024
1130	Virat Kohli	(RCB)	DC	31	30	7	49.13	0/11	27 Apr 2025
1104	Virat Kohli	(RCB)	PBKS	34	34	4	36.80	1/6	20 Apr 2025
1093	David Warner	(DC/SRH)	KKR	28	28	3	43.72	2/6	3 Apr 2024

25 The number of balls that remained when Rajasthan Royals (212/2) successfully chased Gujarat Titans' 209/4 in Jaipur on 28 April 2025. This is now the quickest victory, in terms of balls remaining, achieved by any IPL side while chasing a 200-plus target.

IPL sides successfully chasing targets of 200+ with 10 or more balls to spare

Balls to spare	Batting first (losing team)		Chasing (winning team)	Result	Venue	Date
25	GT (209/4)	lost to	RR (212/2 in 15.5 ov)	by 8 wkts	Jaipur	28 Apr 2025
24	GT (200/3)	lost to	RCB (206/1 in 16 ov)	by 9 wkts	Ahmedabad	28 Apr 2024
21	RCB (199/6)	lost to	MI (200/4 in 16.3 ov)	by 6 wkts	Mumbai WS	9 May 2023
15	GL (208/7)	lost to	DC (214/3 in 17.3 ov)	by 7 wkts	Delhi	4 May 2017
12	SRH (200/5)	lost to	MI (201/2 in 18 ov)	by 8 wkts	Mumbai WS	21 May 2023
10	KKR (200/3)	lost to	PBKS (204/2 in 18.2 ov)	by 8 wkts	Kolkata	4 Apr 2010

23 The number of occasions a hat-trick has been claimed in IPL. 19 bowlers have achieved this distinction in this tournament since the first instance, which came in the inaugural edition in 2008. Yuzvendra Chahal, appearing for Punjab Kings on 30 April 2025 in Chennai against CSK, claimed his second IPL hat-trick. His first hat-trick came for Rajasthan Royals against KKR at the Brabourne Stadium in Mumbai on 18 April 2022. He thus became the third IPL bowler to take a hat-trick more than once after Amit Mishra (thrice) and Yuvraj Singh (twice).

Bowlers with an IPL hat-trick on multiple occasions

Hat-tricks	Bowler	For (bowling figures)	Against	Venue	Date	Result
3	Amit Mishra	DC (5/17)	Deccan Chargers	Delhi	15 May 2008	Won
		Deccan Chargers (4/9)	PBKS	Dharamsala	21 May 2011	Won
		SRH (4/19)	PWI	Pune	17 Apr 2013	Won
2	Yuvraj Singh	PBKS (3/22)	RCB	Durban	1 May 2009	Lost
		PBKS (3/13)	Deccan Chargers	Johannesburg	17 May 2009	Won
2	Yuzvendra Chahal	RR (5/40)	KKR	Mumbai BS	18 Apr 2022	Won
		PBKS (4/32)	CSK	Chennai	30 Apr 2025	Won

Note: 16 other bowlers who have claimed a hat-trick in the IPL are listed chronologically:
L. Balaji (2008), Makhaya Ntini (2008), Rohit Sharma (2009), Praveen Kumar (2010), Ajit Chandila (2012), Sunil Narine (2013), Pravin Tambe (2014), Shane Watson (2014), Axar Patel (2016), Andrew Tye (2017), Samuel Badree (2017), Jaydev Unadkat (2017), Sam Curran (2019), Shreyas Gopal (2019), Harshal Patel (2021), Rashid Khan (2023).

4 The number of occasions an IPL team had four batters with scores of 40-plus in the same innings. However, the recent occurrence in Jaipur on 1 May 2025 provided the first occasion in the IPL when four batters managed scores of 45-plus in the same innings. For the record, five individual scores of 45-plus in an innings has occurred only on five occasions in T20 history. Jammu-Kashmir and Baroda are the other sides in Indian domestic cricket, as shown in the second table.

IPL sides registering four individual scores of 40+ in the same innings

Team	(Total)	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
CSK (M. Hussey 46, M. Vijay 53, S. Raina 43, M. S. Dhoni 41*)	(196/3)	RR	Jaipur	9 May 2011	Won
LSG (K. Meyers 54, A. Badoni 43, M. Stoinis 72, N. Pooran 45)	(257/5)	PBKS	Mohali	28 Apr 2023	Won
SRH (T. Head 62, A. Sharma 63, A. Markram 42*, H. Klaasen 80*)	(277/3)	MI	Hyderabad	27 Mar 2024	Won
MI (R.Rickelton 61, R. Sharma 53, S. Yadav 48*, H. Pandya 48*)	(217/2)	RR	Jaipur	1 May 2025	Won

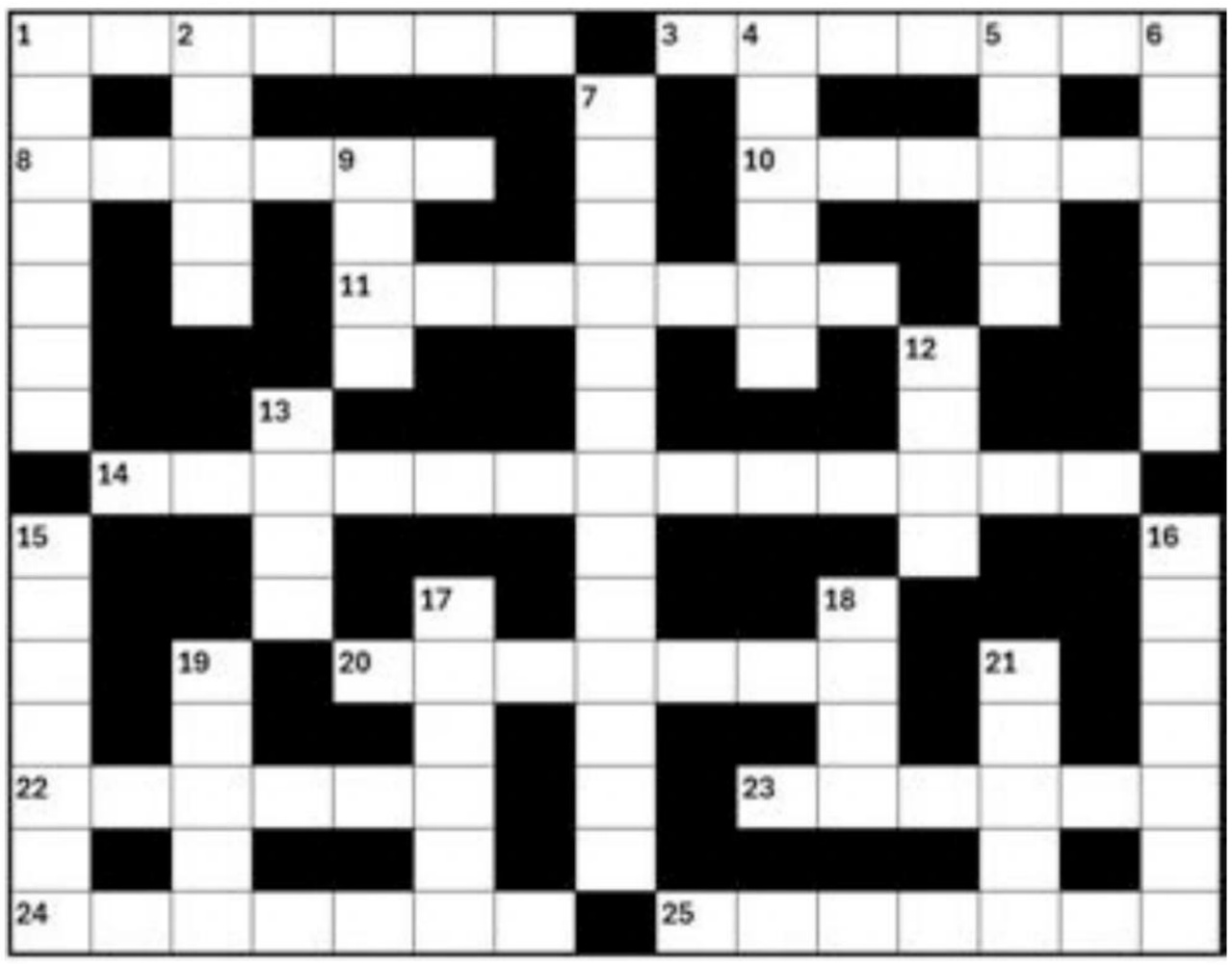
T20 sides registering four 45+ scores in the same innings

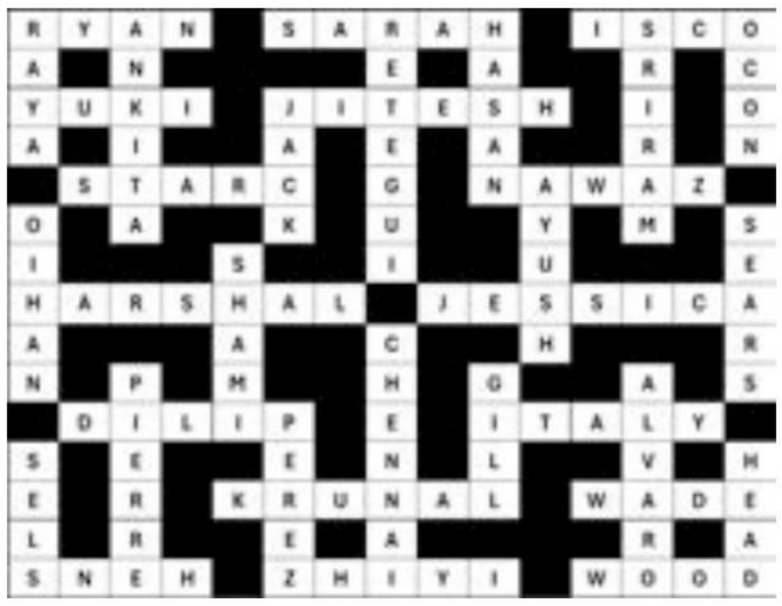
Team	(Total)	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
Jamaica Tallawahs	(255/5)	St Lucia Kings	Basseterre	27 Aug 2021	won
Jammu-Kashmir	(238/2)	Arunachal Pradesh	Mullanpur	12 Oct 2022	won
Zimbabwe	(344/4)	Gambia	Nairobi	23 Oct 2024	won
Baroda	(349/5)	Sikkim	Indore	5 Dec 2024	won
Mumbai Indians	(217/2)	Rajasthan Royals	Jaipur	1 May 2025	won

Note: Zimbabwe & Baroda (above) are the only sides to register four individual fifties in the same innings.

All records are correct and updated until 8 May 2025.

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who is the first Indian athlete to qualify for the final of the men's 3000m steeplechase in the Summer Olympics? (7)

3 Who scored a hat-trick for VfB Stuttgart in the Bundesliga encounter versus VfL Bochum on April 5, 2025? (7)

10 Who won the IBSF World billiards title in the final held in Carlow, Ireland on April 17, 2025? (6)

11 & 8 Which former World Cup-winning Australian captain was inducted into the Australian Cricket Hall of Fame in the 2024-25 season? (7,6)

14 Name the Indian national team batting coach who was dropped recently? (8,5)

20 Who scored the highest individual score in an innings in the recently-concluded women's tri-series held in Sri Lanka? (7)

22 Name the British Formula 1 driver who represents the HAAS team? (6)

23 Which British Formula 1 driver who is at second spot after the sixth race in Miami? (6)

24 Which bowler recorded the best figures on IPL debut in the 2025 season? (7)

25 Name the legendary former two-time world heavyweight boxing champion and an Olympic medallist who passed away in March 2025? (7)

DOWN

1 Who won the men's singles title at the Monte Carlo Masters tennis championship in April 2025? (7)

2 Which Serbian won the gold in long jump event at the World Athletics Championship in Budapest in 2023? (5)

4 Identify this former Sri Lankan cricketer-turned television commentator who holds his nation's record for the highest 10th wicket partnership in ODIs? (6)

5 Identify this opening batter from Vidarbha who scored more than 450 runs in its successful Ranji Trophy campaign? (5)

6 Who scored the winning goal for India in its third women's hockey test versus Australia? (7)

7 Who recently went past Piyush Chawla as the highest wicket-taker for the Punjab Kings franchise? (8.5)

9 Identify the middle name of this Italian teenage sensation in Formula 1 who drives for Mercedes? (4)

12 Identify this football player who holds the record for scoring the most number of goals in the history of Scottish Premier League? (4)

13 Who has held on to most number of catches in IPL 2025 till it was suspended for a few days? (4)

15 Who replaced Liam Lawson as the second driver for the Red Bull Race F1 team this year? (7)

16 Identify this Norwegian chess legend who holds almost all records in the sport? (7)

17 Which NBA legend recently set a record for the oldest player to score 40 points in an NBA match? (6)

18 Who recently became the first Chinese player to win the world snooker championship? (4)

19 Which former Australian cricketer, popularly called "Stacky", passed away recently? (5)

21 Identify this former Indian wicket-keeper whose cricketing career was cut short by an eye injury suffered while keeping in an ODI versus Bangladesh in 2000? (5)

Pics: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

EXPERIMENTS GALORE AS INDIA CHASES STABILITY AHEAD OF WORLD CUP

As the Women in Blue continue their **winning surge** with a recent tri-series triumph, a few chinks in the armour still remain to be addressed.

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There's great comfort in being the reliable bet when success is largely on autopilot. Ask India, the hot favourite in the recent tri-series against Sri Lanka and South Africa in Colombo. Harmanpreet & Co. cantered to a series win, after beating Sri Lanka in a final that was headlined by a sublime century from Smriti Mandhana **(right)**. The Women in Blue dominated every game in the series they played, barring one, where they could not defend 275, handing the Lankans their second-highest successful chase and just their third win over India in the format.

This outing in the island nation was a statement run for India's batting order. Pratika Rawal **(above)** has made hay under the shining sun of Shafali Verma's absence from the team, becoming the fastest player to 500 ODI runs — doing so in just eight innings. She surpassed England great Charlotte Edwards, who did so in nine.

« The improvement never stops though, such as areas like fielding, bowling and building good partnerships. Our medium pacers keep getting injured, so need to work on that. The team is working on that. But we're going to try and keep playing good cricket. There are a lot of positives to talk about, but just want to enjoy the moment right now – Harmanpreet Kaur »

Pratika's true utility, though, has been as Smriti's partner at the top of the batting pile. In 11 ODI innings, this duo has racked up 968 runs at an average of 88. The peak came in a record-breaking 233-run partnership against Ireland in January. Still, the bedrock of this pairing is nine 50+ run stands, which have set up India for competitive scores against its opponents.

Compare this with the Smriti–Shafali pairing, and the difference is staggering. This duo has 909 runs in 21 innings, at half the average (45.45) and just eight stands of 50 runs or more. Their brightest day was an unbeaten 174-run stand against Sri Lanka back in 2022, but it pales in comparison to the strike rotation and consistent consolidation challenges these two faced in both white-ball formats.

Shafali has tucked herself back into the shadows of domestic cricket, where her quality has repeatedly stood out as superior enough to amass runs rather effortlessly. Pratika's consistency might make the journey back to the Indian team a bit harder for the imperious batter, in what is shaping up to be the biggest challenge of her career thus far.

India's opening efficacy has eased life for a middle order where better sense has prevailed in slotting players where they are strongest. When head coach Amol Muzumdar took over, experimentation was the name of the game as he moved his batters like jigsaw pieces. Jemimah Rodrigues floated in the middle order and Richa Ghosh was tried at number three, while other talents walked in and out of the playing XI in an effort to find who best meets the side's demands — a masquerade that frustrated more than comforted the India faithful.

However, this series has thrown up quite a few positives. Jemimah **(above, left)** had a series to remember, finishing with 245 runs in four innings, averaging 61.25 and striking at a healthy 117.78. Her ODI comforts have been a few years in the making, with a generous amount of soul-searching involved in locking in her style of play.

"The confidence I have and, more than that, just me understanding my game (has helped me in ODIs)," Jemimah said after her match-winning ton against the Proteas. "Usually, I used to play four to five dot balls, get panicky, and throw my wicket. But now I think that a sense of calmness is there. I can make up anytime. A lot of T20 cricket has helped me," she added. Over three WPL campaigns and fiercely contested bilaterals in recent years, Jemimah — and by extension, the team management — has learnt to trust her ability to switch gears as an anchor. Her strengths lie in her impeccable timing and placement, and her ability to bore away at opposition bowlers by relentlessly picking the ones and twos. While pursuing boundaries has seen her become more audacious, this is a textbook player, essaying a textbook part to perfection. Her solidity allows Harmanpreet **(above, right)** and designated lower-order strikers like Richa Ghosh to play their natural game. It's a mould even someone like Sneh Rana — remember her five-ball 26-run cameo for RCB against UP Warriorz — is casting herself into.

Harleen Deol's starting trouble on the road-like pitches in Colombo is a point of concern, especially in the number three slot. Her 157-run haul came at an ordinary average of 39.25 and a strike rate crying for acceleration — 73.36.

Slow innings progression has

Cusp of history: India would be wise to learn from its past errors to give itself a chance to lift its first senior trophy — at home no less.

plagued the top order in its entirety and was a standout feature of the sole loss that India suffered in this series. Pratika (SR: 78.86) and Smriti (SR: 90.41) scoring at a sub-100 rate underline the value of someone as explosive as Shafali in the top three, which should keep Harleen on her toes as well. With the World Cup in mind, teams like Australia can capitalise on this aspect in key clashes.

Off-spinner Sneh **(above, second from left)** returned to the ODI setup after more than a year and immediately got comfortable. A 15-wicket haul, which included a fifer against South Africa, helped her walk away with the Player of the Series award. She maximised her pace-off deliveries and worked on wide yorkers and seam variations in her armoury to finish the tour with an impressive average of 14.00 and an economy of 4.73. As positive as Sneh's return to the mix is for the team on one hand, the generous debuts handed out largely to up-and-coming bowlers isn't the positive one might think it to be.

Of the 17 debuts in 23 ODIs since December 2023, 10 are fast bowlers (all-rounders) and two are batters. A part of this was mandated by injuries to the likes of Pooja Vastrakar, Renuka Singh Thakur, Asha Sobhana and Shreyanka Patil. While India having the depth to blood this much talent is an encouraging sign, the fact that the bowling still isn't set in stone barely five months away from the ODI World Cup is a fault line.

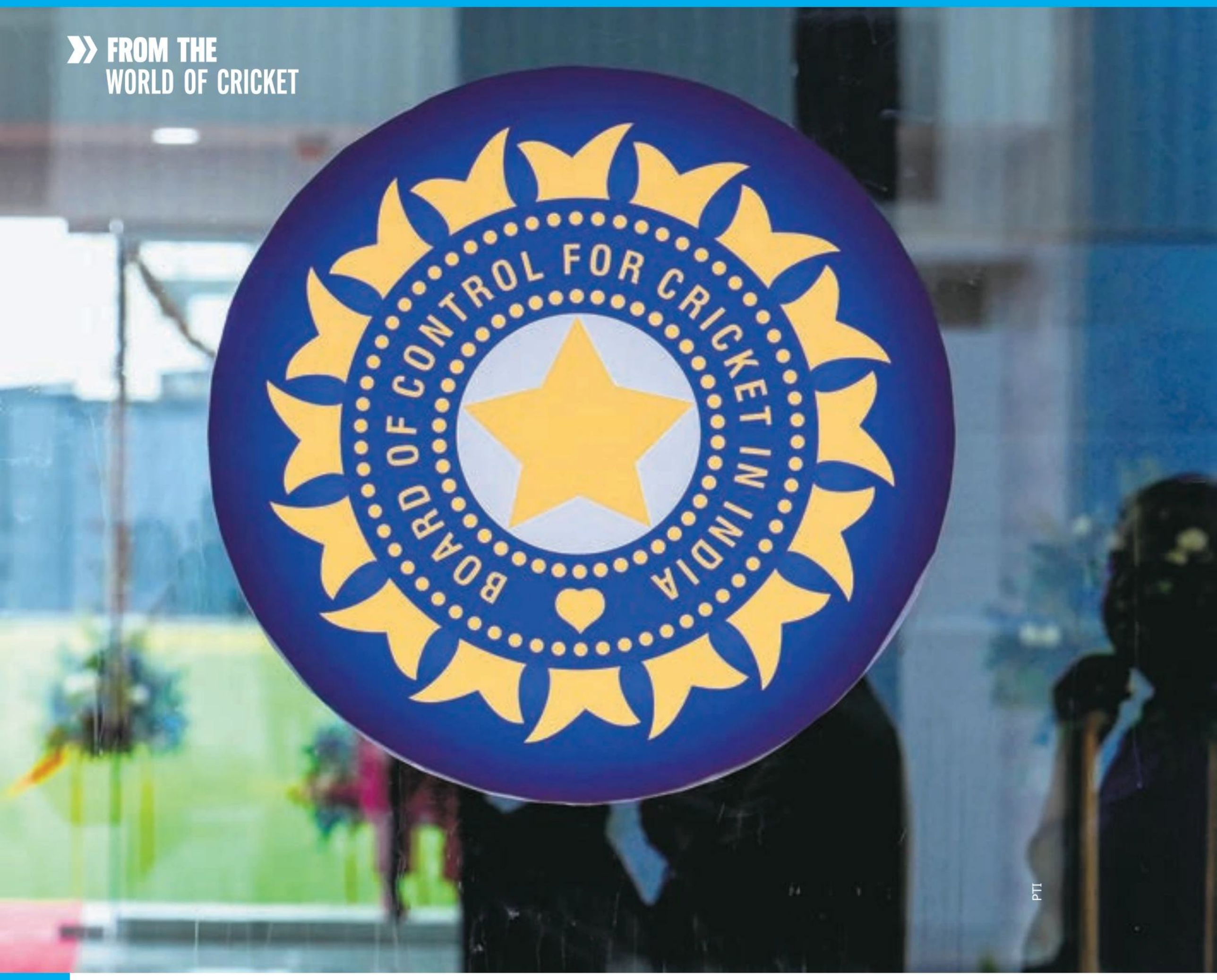
For all its experimentation, opportunities have not been consistent. Tejal Hasabnis made her entry to the setup during the New Zealand series in 2024, but hasn't been given a steady run. Minnu Mani is another casualty of the same tendency. The three debutants in this series — N. Sree Charani, Shuchi Upadhyay and Kashvee Gautam — all had rough initiations into the format, going for plenty of runs. Charani managed six wickets from the tour to Lanka and has impressed with her persistence and aggression.

However, the merry-go-round of bowling options brings more instability than otherwise, and India would be wise to learn from its errors in the T20 World Cup to give itself a chance to lift its first senior trophy — at home no less.

List of debutantes in ODIs for India since December 2023

Bowlers
Saika Ishaque, Arundhati Reddy, Mannat Kashyap, Asha Sobhana, Saima Thakor, Priya Mishra, Titas Sadhu, Minnu Mani, Sree Charani, Kranti Goud, Shreyanka Patil, Tanuja Kanwar, Sayali Sathgare, Kashvee Gautam, Shuchi Upadhyay

Batters
Pratika Rawal, Tejal Hasabnis



PTI

BCCI considering hosting 2025-27 WTC final in India

1 Reports indicate that **discussions on the matter** took place during the ICC Chief Executives' Committee meeting in Zimbabwe recently.

The BCCI is considering hosting the World Test Championship (WTC) final of the 2025–2027 cycle in India. England has hosted both WTC title clashes to date – in 2021 and 2023 – at the Utilita Bowl and the Oval, respectively. The upcoming final between Australia and South Africa is set to be held at Lord's. Reports indicate that discussions on the matter took place during the ICC Chief Executives' Committee meeting in Zimbabwe last month, where the BCCI was represented by IPL chairman Arun Dhumal. A formal proposal is expected at a later date.

2

AP

All-rounder Roston Chase has been named the new West Indies Test captain. The 33-year-old, who has not played a Test in over two years, replaces 32-year-old Kraigg Brathwaite, who resigned in March after three years in charge. Chase will lead in three home Tests against Australia in June and July. The off-spinner has taken 85 wickets, and as a middle-order batter, he has scored 2265 runs, including five centuries.

3

R. V. MOORTHY

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) has announced that Tim Southee will join as a Specialist Skills Consultant for the England men's teams on a short-term basis. Southee, 36, who retired from international cricket in December as New Zealand's all-time leading wicket-taker, will support England's squads across all formats through to the conclusion of the Test series against India.

4

PTI

Shukri Conrad has been appointed South Africa's limited-overs coach, taking charge across all formats. The 58-year-old had taken over the Test side in January 2023 and led it to its first World Test Championship (WTC) final appearance. He replaces Rob Walter, who resigned last month for personal reasons. The Proteas, who will face Australia at Lord's from June 11–15 in the WTC final, have enjoyed strong red-ball success under Conrad. His first limited-overs assignment will be a tri-series in Zimbabwe alongside New Zealand in July. Later in the year, South Africa will also tour Australia, England and India.

5

AFP

Pubudu Dassanayake has returned as head coach of the USA men's team. Dassanayake, who succeeds former Australian batter Stuart Law, had coached the side between 2016 and 2019, a period in which it earned ODI status. The 52-year-old played 11 Tests for Sri Lanka in the mid-1990s before moving to Canada, where he captained the national team.

6

X/@EMIRATESCRICKET

The UAE recorded its first-ever win over Bangladesh after a last-over thriller in Sharjah, chasing down 206 to clinch a famous victory. Batting first, Bangladesh made a strong start with opener Tanzid Hasan scoring a half-century and captain Litton Das contributing a crucial 40. Towhid Hridoy's 45 off 24 balls helped Bangladesh post 205 for five. In reply, UAE skipper Muhammad Waseem and Muhammad Zohaib shared a 107-run opening stand. Waseem smashed 82 off 42 balls, hitting nine fours and five sixes. Needing 12 off the final over, Haider Ali struck the winning runs off Tanzim Hasan on the penultimate ball.

7

PTI

Shaun Tait has been appointed Bangladesh's new pace bowling coach, replacing former New Zealand cricketer Andre Adams, whose tenure began in February 2024 and lasted only a few months. Tait's contract with Bangladesh runs until November 2027. Before this, he worked with teams including West Indies, Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as several franchise league sides around the world.

MEDALS GALORE AND RECORDS SHATTERED

Maharashtra **cruised to the top** of the medals table, but it was Bihar, capitalising on home turf, that delivered the most unexpected performance.

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Maharashtra has, time and again, managed to convince that its on-field prowess isn't a sporting fluke. The seventh edition of the Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG) in Bihar attested to this, as Maharashtra's Under-18 athletes **(above)** completed a hat-trick of team championships in the multi-discipline event.

The State not only accounted for close to 17 per cent of the medals on offer, but also ensured there was daylight between its tally and that of second-placed Haryana. Maharashtra's players won 158 medals (58 gold, 47 silver, and 53 bronze), while the runner-up bagged 117 (39 gold, 27 silver, and 51 bronze). Rajasthan finished third with 60 medals (24 gold, 12 silver, and 24 bronze).

Maharashtra won gold medals in 14 sports, with a majority of them coming from athletics (10), swimming (seven), gymnastics (seven), archery (six), and weightlifting (five).

According to a statement from the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, most of Maharashtra's standout performers — especially the archers and weightlifters — already train at Khelo India centres or the National Centres of Excellence (NCoEs) of the Sports Authority of India (SAI) in Aurangabad, Patiala, and Sonepat.

SAI's talent development team also deserves a hat tip for identifying and nurturing 186 of the 5,071 athletes — 50 per cent of them girls — who participated in these Games.

Meanwhile, Bihar, enjoying the privilege of competing in its backyard, sprang the biggest surprise, significantly improving its rank to 15th after finishing 21st in the previous KIYG in Tamil Nadu. It registered seven gold, 11 silver, and 18 bronze medals.

The host recorded a growth of 620 per cent over its showing in

2023, where it won five medals, including two gold, two silver, and one bronze. Raveendran Sankaran, Director General and CEO of the Bihar State Sports Authority, attributes the roaring success to multiple factors. "It didn't happen overnight. It took us four years. We initially concentrated on talent scouting. We empanelled the right persons for the right games, such as the Dronacharya and Arjuna awardees from across the country, who helped us identify talent. For coaching too, we had national and international awardees and Olympians mentoring our kids," he told *Sportstar*.

A lot of wrestling's history can be traced back to the *akhadas* of Haryana. Therefore, it came as no surprise when the State claimed eight of its gold medals in the sport. What's worth further praise is that Haryana's fencers won seven gold medals, indicating the state's foray into non-conventional sporting ecosystems.

Bihar tried something similar. It won both the gold medals on offer in Rugby 7s, a sport in which they have been improving by leaps and bounds for a while now. In fact, less than a month ago, the senior women's team from the State had lifted the trophy at the Nationals.

"I can't compete with Haryana in wrestling in the next 10 or maybe even 20 years. The same is true of Kerala and Tamil Nadu in basketball and volleyball. They are far ahead of us," explained Raveendran. "So, we selected such sports where not only is there potential in our athletes, but also where the competition is thin. But at the same time, those sports had to be part of the Olympics or Asian Games programme. Like Rugby 7s. We chose games where our medal probability would be higher."

Victorious: Both the men's and women's Rugby 7s teams from Bihar clinched gold medals.

Pics: SAI MEDIA-BSSA

A total of 26 records were broken at KIYG 2025, eight of them established by girls. Incidentally, five also became national youth records in weightlifting. Sairaj Pardeshi of Maharashtra accounted for three of these records himself, breaching the earlier Snatch, Clean and Jerk, and Total marks in the 81kg category.

Union Sports Minister Dr Mansukh Mandaviya elucidated how the Khelo India programme, launched on October 14, 2017, will help India realise its Olympic dream. He said, "Over the past decade, Indian sports have undergone a remarkable transformation. Under the Khelo India initiative, we have created a dynamic and inclusive sporting ecosystem with regular national-level competitions. Taking this vision forward, we will soon introduce a series of Khelo India Games throughout the year, including formats like the Khelo India Beach Games (KIBG) and others. These events will further strengthen our domestic sports structure and serve as a vital talent pipeline as we gear up for the Commonwealth Games 2030 and the Olympic Games 2036. India is on the move and the youth are at the heart of this sporting revolution."

The Khelo India caravan has hence set up camp in the picturesque Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, where the inaugural KIBG — a landmark event to draw national attention to coastal and beach sports — is currently underway.

R. V. MOORTHY

« We selected such sports where not only is there potential in our [Bihar] athletes, but also where the competition is thin. But at the same time, those sports had to be part of the Olympics or Asian Games programme – Raveendran Sankaran, Director General and CEO of the Bihar State Sports Authority »

AP

BARCA BACK ON TOP

WATCH THE VIDEO

With the **youngest squad** in the league, Barcelona sealed the La Liga title with two games to spare.

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"I won a few titles with Bayern Munich, and I'd like to continue this path at Barcelona," said German coach Hansi Flick when he took charge of the Catalan side a year ago.

One season on, he has led the Blaugrana to its 28th La Liga title **(above)** and completed a domestic treble after winning the Spanish Super Cup and Copa del Rey.

With the youngest squad in the league (average age 24.1), it was only fitting that youngsters Lamine Yamal and Fermin Lopez were the ones to find the back of the net in Barcelona's derby against Espanyol, sealing the trophy with two games to spare.

Having scored the most goals in Europe this season (99) — an average of 2.67 per game — Barca has also been defensively solid, conceding only 39 goals (the fourth-lowest) while allowing the fewest shots faced at just 285.

Moreover, one of the most satisfying aspects of the team's season will be its unblemished 4–0 record against arch rival Real Madrid — the first time it has won every El Clasico in a season in which the sides have met at least three times.

Down to the wire

While leagues around the world are wrapping up, in Italy, the race for the title is going down to the final matchday.

Defending Serie A champion Inter Milan trails leader Napoli by just one point, with both sides squandering opportunities to gain a significant advantage after drawing against Lazio and Parma respectively in their penultimate matches.

Inter manager Simone Inzaghi is also preparing for a Champions League final against Paris Saint-Germain, keeping his plate full as he tries to win the Scudetto back.

Meanwhile, Napoli's Antonio

Legend bids goodbye: Thomas Muller (No. 25) departs as Bayern Munich's record appearance-maker (751), with 13 league titles . REUTERS

Conte is aiming to become the first manager to win the Italian league with three different clubs, having previously won it with Juventus and, more recently, Inter.

With Napoli hosting Cagliari and Inter travelling to Como on the final matchday, fine margins could ultimately decide where the trophy ends up. And if both teams finish level on points, a play-off decider adds yet another layer of intrigue.

End of eras

For some clubs, the end of the season is also a time to bid farewell to legends. Some bow out on a high, while others aren't so lucky.

Bayern Munich's Thomas Muller oversaw the club's return to the Bundesliga summit before concluding his 25-year association with the club.

The German departs as Bayern's record appearance-maker (751), with 13 league titles — including an extraordinary run of 11 in a row (2012/13 to 2022/23).

Meanwhile, in the Premier League, despite Leicester City's relegation, Jamie Vardy **(right)** signed off with his 200th goal for the Foxes in his 500th and final appearance, against Ipswich Town.

Vardy scored 145 of those goals in the Premier League, including 24 in the unforgettable 2015–16 season when Leicester defied 5000–1 odds to lift its first and only league title.

In Manchester, the blue side will part ways with one of its linchpins: Kevin De Bruyne. However, the Belgian — the last remaining member of the pre-Pep Guardiola era — did not get his perfect curtain call, as City fell to Crystal Palace in the FA Cup final, its last shot at silverware this season.

Nonetheless, De Bruyne leaves Manchester City as one of the finest midfielders of the modern era, with 14 major trophies to his name.

(All results and standings updated as on May 19)

Promoted and relegated teams

Premier League
Promoted: Burnley, Leeds United
Relegated: Leicester City, Ipswich Town, Southampton

La Liga
Promoted: *To be confirmed*
Relegated: Real Valladolid, Las Palmas

Serie A
Promoted: Sassuolo, Pisa SC
Relegated: Monza

Bundesliga
Promoted: Hamburg, FC Koln
Relegated: Holstein Kiel, Bochum

Ligue 1
Promoted: Lorient, Paris FC
Relegated: Montpellier, Saint-Etienne

BATTLE OF THE TITANS

The UCL final promises to be a **tactical battle** of gigantic proportions, as PSG's relentless midfield pressing goes up against Inter Milan's resilient defensive blocks and quick counters.

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Football is a game of infinite possibilities.

This season's UEFA Champions League (UCL), with a revamped format and an unexpected final between Inter Milan and Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), has only reinforced that notion. Inter finished in the top eight, while PSG, ending 15th in the league stage, cruised past Brest with a 10-0 aggregate win in the playoffs to reach the last 16. At home, PSG secured a record 13th Ligue 1 title, losing only two games all season. Meanwhile, at the time of writing, Inter was trailing Serie A leader Napoli by just one point.

So, what has made PSG so dangerous?

Central to PSG's transformation is manager Luis Enrique, who previously led Barcelona to a treble with a similar philosophy.

Enrique typically deploys a 4-3-3 formation, which morphs into a 4-5-1 when out of possession and into a 2-2-4-2 while attacking. As soon as PSG

Strike force: Ousmane Dembele of PSG (above) and Lautaro Martínez of Inter (right) have played key roles in driving their teams' success this season. GETTY IMAGES

The expanded UCL format drew scepticism at the start, with concerns over a diluted competitive standard. But after 187 matches, those doubts have faded.

FOR MORE STORIES

loses the ball, it presses aggressively in midfield. The higher and mid-block players converge centrally, forcing errors and winning back possession.

This strategy has made PSG the top team in ball recoveries this UCL season, with 694 — the third-highest in the past decade, trailing only Atletico Madrid (716 in 2015–16) and Barcelona (728 in 2014–15).

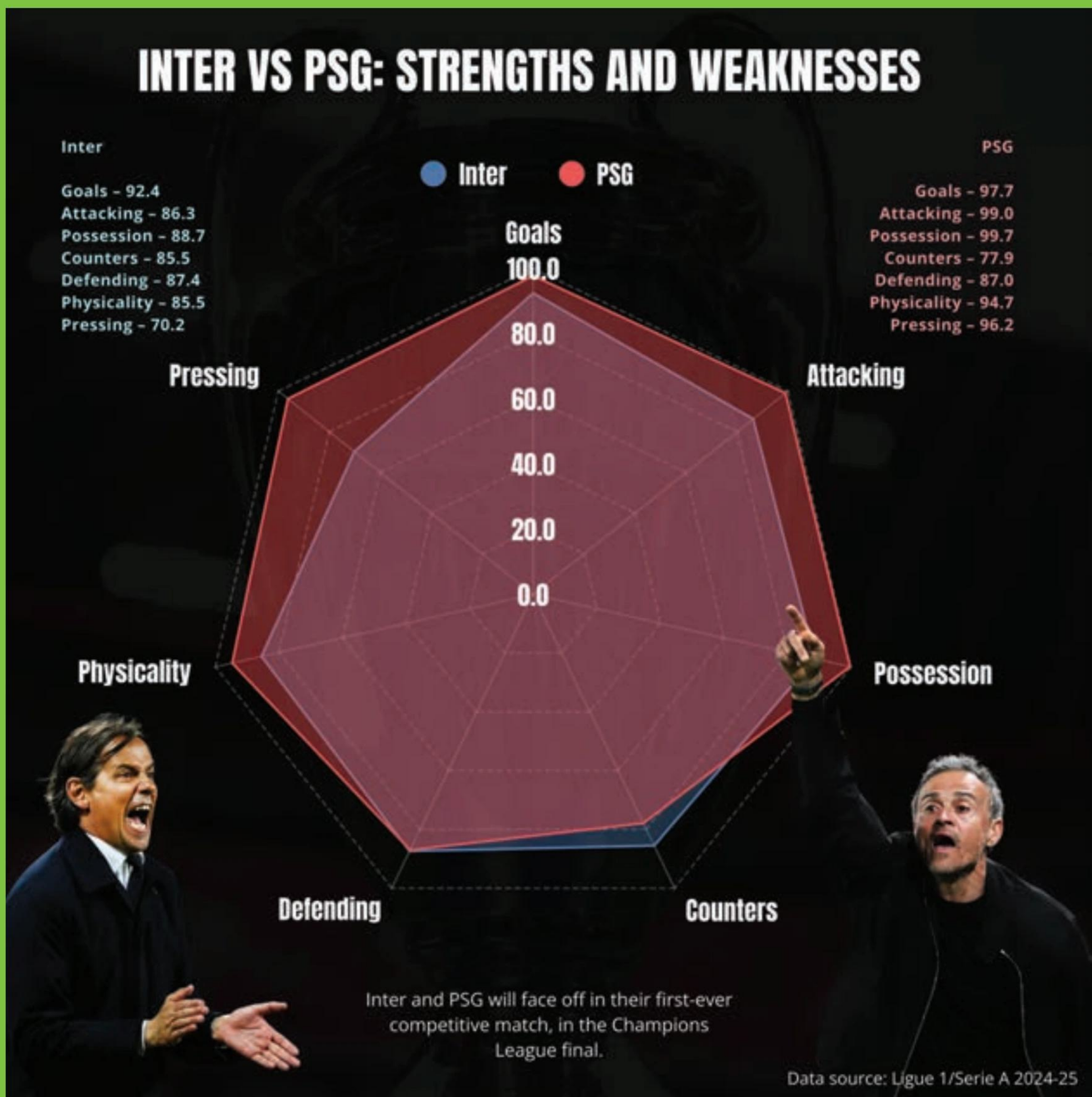
Midfielders Vitinha, Joao Neves, and Fabian Ruiz choke space in central areas, while Kvicha Kvaratskhelia and Desire Doue cut off wide overlaps. If the ball still gets through, a backline of four remains. And if that line breaks, Gianluigi Donnarumma — with six clean sheets in the UCL, the second-most this season — stands tall as the final barrier.

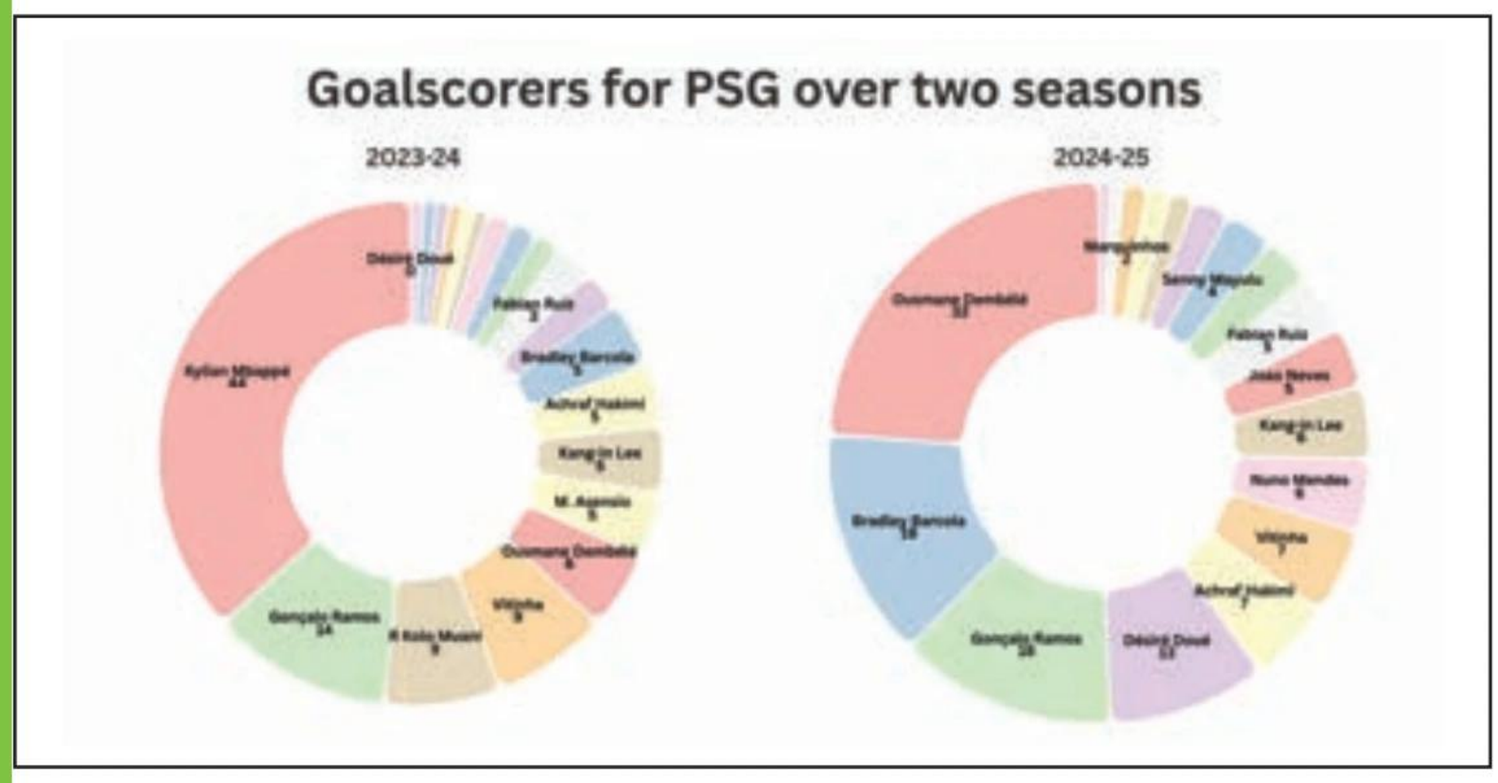
When PSG attacks, it commits numbers forward with purpose. Forwards Kvaratskhelia, Doue, and Ousmane Dembele swarm the box, while full-backs Achraf Hakimi and Nuno Mendes surge up the flanks with pace and intent.

This structure, paired with incisive ground passing, limits defensive space and opens up attacking options. The approach has helped PSG move away from dependence on a lone striker — a crucial shift post-Kylian Mbappe.

Notably, the number of goal scorers increased from 15 to 20 in Enrique's first season, with goals now more evenly spread across the squad.

The system mirrors Enrique's treble-winning Barcelona, where Messi, Neymar, and Suarez led the front line while Dani Alves and Jordi Alba offered width and support.





An old-school Inter Milan

The Italian term 'Catenaccio' — meaning 'door-bolt' — refers to a tactical system built on defensive rigidity and swift counterattacks. Inter's history with this approach, shaped by managers like Helenio Herrera and Alfredo Foni, remains relevant today.

Simone Inzaghi has drawn from this tradition to craft a resilient squad on a modest budget. He is now the second Inter manager after Herrera (four straight between 1963–64 and 1966–67) to reach the

semifinals in multiple European Cup/Champions League campaigns.

Inter's back three — Francesco Acerbi, Alessandro Bastoni, and Stefan de Vrij — anchor the defence, with Bastoni operating as a modern libero. When not in possession, Inter drops into a compact mid-block designed to regain the ball and trigger grounded counters.

If that fails, midfielders Hakan Calhanoglu and Henrikh Mkhitaryan drop into a deeper role, forming a seven-man low block focused more on clearances than recoveries. Forwards Lautaro Martinez and Marcus Thuram stay ready to exploit space on the break.

Inter leads the UCL in clearances and is second in offsides forced. Bastoni, the side's key distributor, has completed the most passes (658) and ranks second in ball recoveries (57) among his teammates.

In attack, while full-backs push forward, one midfielder stays back to maintain a four-man defensive line and guard against counters.

Goalkeeper Yann Sommer, signed as a low-cost replacement for Andre Onana, has been pivotal. He holds the most clean sheets (7) in this UCL campaign and made 14 saves over two semifinal legs to eliminate Barcelona, earning Player of the Match in the second leg.

Inter has also dominated aerial duels, winning 53.81% — the highest among clubs in Europe's major leagues. PSV Eindhoven (52.85%) and PSG (51.16%) follow. However, Inter's structure leaves space near the flanks. If the full-backs are pulled out of shape, the wide channels become vulnerable — an issue Barcelona exposed with two goals from the left and one from the right.

A fitting final

The expanded UCL format drew scepticism at the start, with concerns over a diluted competitive standard. But after 187 matches, those doubts have faded. Munich will now host a compelling final between two tactically disciplined sides — it's a case of an unstoppable force versus an immovable object.

Inter Milan's road to final

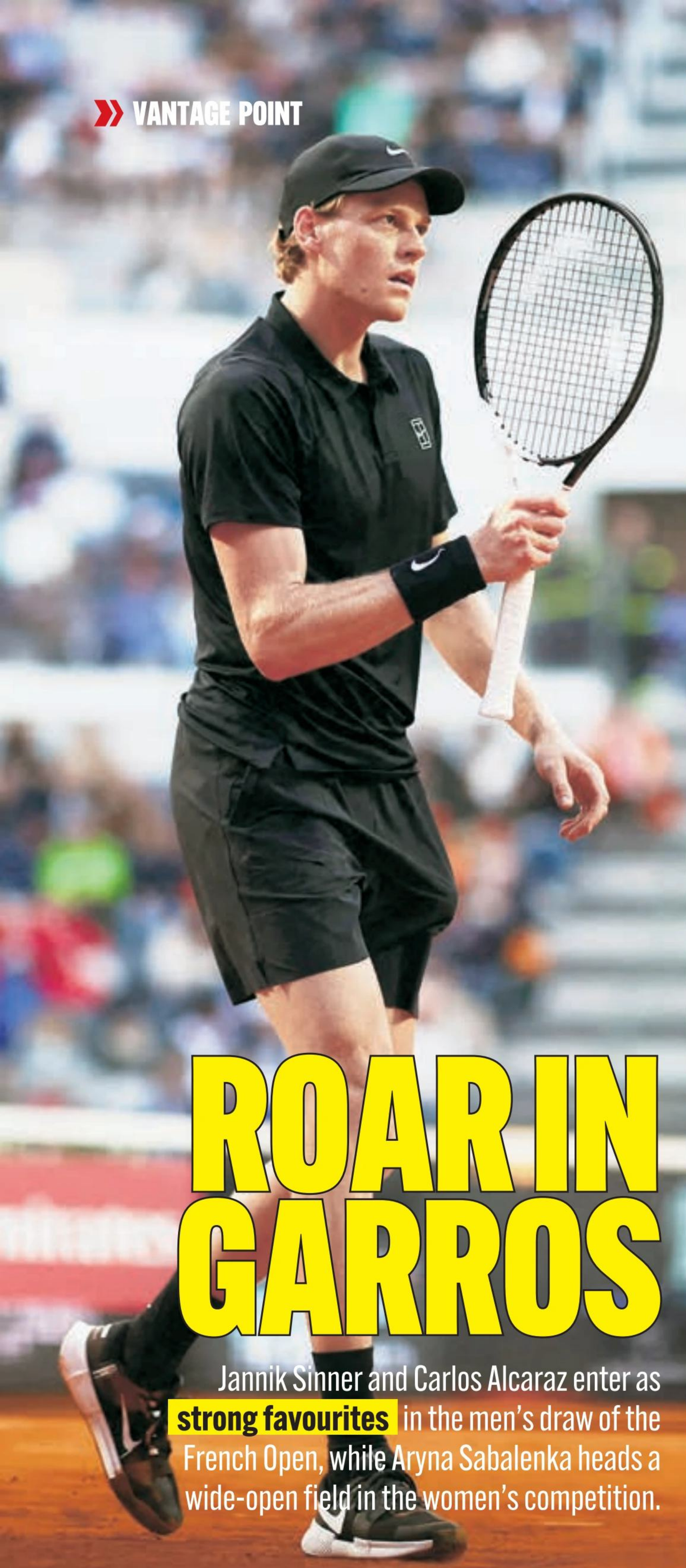
League Phase
Finished in 4th place

Knockout Stages
Round of 16 (Advanced 4-1 on aggregate)
2-0 win at Feyenoord
2-1 win vs Feyenoord at home
Quarterfinals (Advanced 4-3 on aggregate)
2-1 win at Bayern Munich
2-2 draw vs Bayern Munich at home
Semifinals (Advanced 7-6 on aggregate)
3-3 draw at FC Barcelona
4-3 win vs FC Barcelona at home

PSG's road to final

League Phase
Finished in 15th place (outside automatic knockout qualification)

Knockout Stages
Playoff Round (Advanced 10–0 on aggregate)
3–0 win at Stade Brestois 29
7–0 win vs Stade Brestois 29 at home
Round of 16 (Advanced 1–1 on aggregate, 4–1 on penalties)
1–0 loss vs Liverpool at home
1–0 win at Liverpool (4–1 on penalties)
Quarterfinals (Advanced 5–4 on aggregate)
3–1 win vs Aston Villa at home
3–2 loss at Aston Villa
Semifinals (Advanced 3–1 on aggregate)
1-0 win at Arsenal
2-1 win vs Arsenal at home



ROAR IN GARROS

Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz enter as **strong favourites** in the men's draw of the French Open, while Aryna Sabalenka heads a wide-open field in the women's competition.

FOR MORE STORIES

Paul Fein

The return of World No. 1 Jannik Sinner to a hero's welcome at his home tournament in Rome this month heightened the excitement for this season's second Grand Slam and its only Major on clay.

This is only the second French Open without the retired Rafael Nadal since the King of Clay took his first crown there in 2005, and intriguing questions abound. How much will Sinner's three-month absence from competition affect his match toughness — especially his shot selection and ability to win big points?

Even though Sinner was inadvertently contaminated when his physiotherapist used a banned substance (the steroid Clostebol) on his own hand before subsequently treating the Italian with it, will other players still regard him with the same respect and cordiality? Which players have improved most since the 23-year-old Italian captured the Australian Open for his third Grand Slam title in January?

Will Carlos Alcaraz, if he defends his title, begin to be compared to the incomparable Rafael Nadal, whose 14 Roland Garros crowns ranks as one of the most unbreakable records in tennis? And if Sinner wins his first Major on clay — historically his weakest surface — could he go on to triumph at Wimbledon and the US Open to achieve the rare feat of a calendar Grand Slam, last accomplished by a man in 1969?

Let's size up the field and identify the leading contenders, the dark horses, and the likely champion.

Ice cool: Jannik Sinner thrives on big games and points, and is expected to reach the final. REUTERS

Top draw: Clay should pose challenges for the outrageously talented but occasionally erratic Carlos Alcaraz. AP

No. 1 Jannik Sinner

When asked by *La Gazzetta dello Sport* what to expect from Sinner's return at the Italian Open, his close friend and compatriot Lorenzo Sonego replied, "An even stronger champion." That's bad news for the rest of the field — Sinner was already on a 21-match winning streak.

"He has a crazy desire to compete," added Sonego. "He can't wait to get back to what he loves — to feel the adrenaline of a match. He's very competitive." Although Sinner has won the last three Majors on hard courts, he's only reached the Roland Garros semifinals once — losing in five sets to eventual champion Alcaraz last year.

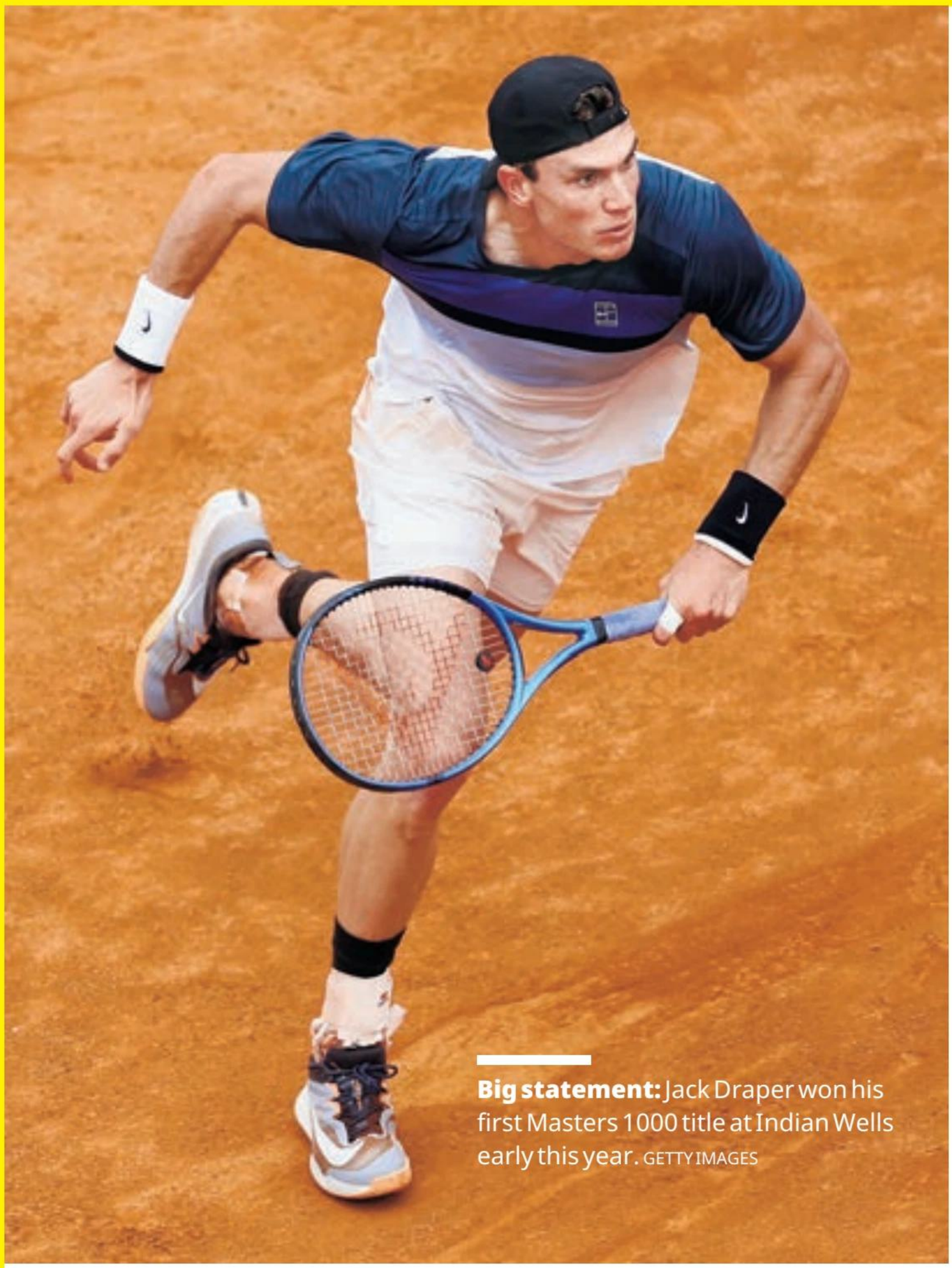
Despite taking the longest break of his career, Sinner impressed in early rounds of the Italian Open, beating an in-form Francisco Cerundolo 7-6(2), 6-3. He then overwhelmed Ruud 6-0, 6-1, winning 55 of the 77 points with a display of awesome power. "It's as near as perfect that I witnessed," Ruud said. "It's just immensely impressive. ... It was like playing a wall that shoots 100 mph balls at you all the time." Although he stumbled in the final against Alcaraz, it would be unwise to dismiss the possibility of a first French Open title for the Italian.

Performing with an icy calm similar to that of Bjorn Borg, Sinner thrives on big games and points. He leads the ATP's Under Pressure Ratings at 259.5, and has won 80.6% of his tie-breaks. He also ranks No. 4 in service and No. 5 in return statistics. "The beauty of Sinner is that he hits with both depth and pace," said *Tennis Channel* analyst Jimmy Arias. Those attributes — plus his vastly improved defence — should propel him into the final. It will take a performance of the highest calibre to stop him.

No. 3 Carlos Alcaraz

In theory, clay should pose challenges for the outrageously talented but occasionally erratic Alcaraz. It's the slowest surface and demands relentless consistency. In practice, however, this super athlete defies logical thinking. As Arias noted, "He wants to entertain the crowd, and it's sometimes to his own detriment." However, the Spanish phenom showed no signs of trouble in his final victory over Sinner at Indian Wells — 7-6(5), 6-1 — extending his head-to-head record against his arch-rival.

A year ago, Alcaraz came from two sets to one down to outlast Sinner in a hard-fought French Open semifinal thriller, 2-6, 6-3, 3-6, 6-4, 6-3, between the two wounded warriors. Alcaraz had a forearm injury that required him to wear a long sleeve, and Sinner had a lingering hip injury. After splitting the first two hard-hitting sets, both players suffered cramps in the third:



Big statement: Jack Draper won his first Masters 1000 title at Indian Wells early this year. GETTY IMAGES

Alcaraz in his right hand, and Sinner in his right forearm and left thigh. Alcaraz echoed the sentiments of Nadal, "You have to enjoy the suffering."

Like Sinner, he excels when it matters most. An exception was the Paris Olympics, where Djokovic edged him for the coveted gold. Still, Alcaraz has a stunning 10–1 record in Grand Slam and Masters 1000 finals. Crucially, he's beaten Sinner in their last three duels, all of them last year.

Sinner's absence from competition should make him the fresher of the two, in case they meet again. But Alcaraz must have his fervent fans worried after this revelation on his new *Netflix* documentary: "Right now, my biggest fear is ending up seeing tennis as an obligation. Sometimes I feel enslaved to tennis — and that causes anxiety, frustration, doubts. I ask myself, do I really want this life, with that pressure, and to keep going?" I personally think his passion for competing and showing off his dazzling repertoire will offset his fears, and he'll add a second Eiffel Tower tattoo to his sculpted body.

No. 5 Jack Draper

"Pressure is a privilege," tennis legend Billie Jean King likes to say. But for Jack Draper — this season's breakout British player — pressure has become an exhausting burden barely five months into the year.

"When I get out of bed, I feel so angry some days. And, you know, I've got to play a tennis match and lose points, so I've got to go through those emotional ups and downs," Draper told *Sky Sports*' Gigi Salmon. "I'm in a new position now. My ranking's going up, and I'm competing week in, week out, playing lots of matches. That's taken some getting used to — mentally and physically. I want to keep going, but yeah, it's sometimes difficult to always be perfect."

Even so, the 23-year-old British left-hander was runner-up at Doha, and upset Alcaraz and World No. 4 Taylor Fritz to win his first Masters 1000 at Indian Wells. The ruggedly built 6'4", 190-pound Draper also excels on clay. He made the Madrid final, overpowering Tommy Paul and Lorenzo Musetti before falling to the more experienced Casper Ruud in an exciting 7-5, 3-6, 6-4 contest.

"I think he has very few, if any, weaknesses," Ruud said. "He's big, strong, and moves well. He can defend brilliantly and also play aggressively.... You're scared of his forehand because he rips it cross-court and down the line. And you're scared of his backhand because he can rip and counter from that side too.... He's definitely got an incredible future on any surface."

Injury-prone Draper, who works with a breathing coach to manage stress, will be tested physically and mentally like never before in the long, gruelling matches at Roland Garros. With a favourable draw, a semifinal appearance is likely his ceiling this year.

No. 7 Casper Ruud

The greatest player in Norwegian tennis history has had the misfortune of facing two of the Big Three and a rising superstar in his three Grand Slam finals — Nadal, his boyhood idol, at the 2022 French Open, Djokovic at the 2023 French Open, and Alcaraz at the 2022 US Open. After achieving a career-high No. 2 ranking in September 2022, Ruud plunged to No. 15 in April this year. He endured a lacklustre season, failing to beat any top 15 opponent until his resounding resurgence in Madrid, where he defeated Fritz, Daniil Medvedev, Cerundolo, and Draper.

How does the mild-mannered

Ruud, now back up to No. 7, cope with the ups and downs in the sport? In an interview with *Tennis Channel* before the Italian Open, he shared: "When you talk to someone — a psychologist, psychiatrist, or whoever — it helps. It's like personal training for your brain. You get personal training in the gym to work on your glutes or arms; I think talking to someone in this aspect is like personal training for your feelings." "With tennis, there is so much focus on what's happening on court," explained the 26-year-old, "whether you could have played your forehand or backhand better." Ruud elaborated, "It's also a very mental game, which can make it frustrating many times. I think the whole lifestyle of it all, with the travel we do and the day in, day out. There's not much rest." With renewed mental strength and a punishing clay-court game — particularly his vicious topspin forehand — it may take one of the Big Two to stop him.

No. 6 Novak Djokovic

The last of the legendary Big Three, Djokovic has astounded the tennis world by defying Father Time, just as Nadal and Roger Federer once did. But the GOAT turned 38 on May 22, and injuries, poor form, a severe lack of match play, along with waning motivation might prevent him from extending his men's record of 24 Grand Slam singles titles.

The Djoker last showcased his sustained brilliance at the Paris Olympics, where he seized the only prestigious title that had previously eluded him. He won every match in straight sets, outplaying Stefanos Tsitsipas, Musetti, and defeated Alcaraz (7-6, 7-6) in the gold medal match. In retrospect, the 2025 Australian Open may have been his last hurrah. There, he stopped Alcaraz 4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4 — but it was a Pyrrhic victory as he tore his left hamstring and had to retire in the semifinal against Alexander Zverev.

As the European clay season began, former World No. 1 Andy Roddick, now a *Tennis Channel* analyst, remarked, "Is he what he was three years or 10 years ago? No. But who gives a s*#@! This guy is surviving. This guy can still win a Major." That confidence wasn't borne out, as Djokovic lost his third straight match — a 6-3, 6-4 debacle — to unheralded Matteo Arnaldi in Madrid. Not even former rival Andy Murray, who joined his coaching team for six months before they split on May 13, could help arrest the slide. "Trying to win a match or two, not really thinking about getting far in the tournament... It's a completely different feeling from what I had in 20-plus years of professional tennis," a humbled Djokovic acknowledged. "But that's the circle of life and of a career. Eventually, it was going to happen." Almost conceding Roland Garros, Djokovic skipped the Italian Open and took a wild card to enter the ATP 250 event in Geneva (instead of Hamburg, an ATP 500 one). If he reaches the quarterfinals in Paris, it will be a modest victory of sorts — and one that could help restore confidence ahead of Wimbledon, a tournament he has won seven times.

Best of the Rest: Jakub Mensik, Alexander Zverev, Francisco Cerundolo

Dark Horses: Lorenzo Musetti, Joao Fonseca, Arthur Fils, and Tommy Paul

Dip in form: After achieving a career-high No. 2 ranking in September 2022, Casper Ruud plunged to No. 15 in April this year. AFP

GETTY IMAGES

Rising star: Feeling the pressure to become The Next Great American Player, Coco Gauff sometimes struggles but always competes hard. GETTY IMAGES

GETTY IMAGES

In the post-Serena Williams era, several female players have jockeyed to fill that massive void: Naomi Osaka, Ashleigh Barty, Iga Swiatek, and, currently, Aryna Sabalenka. Swiatek has captured the most Grand Slam titles — five. With a ferocious topspin forehand, blazing foot speed, and relentless intensity, she's dominated one tournament and one surface more than her rivals, winning four Roland Garros titles and six others on clay.

A year ago, before Swiatek trounced surprise finalist Jasmine Paolini 6-2, 6-1 in the final, *NBC* analyst John McEnroe said, "She's fast becoming the Rafa Nadal on this surface," referencing the 14-time Roland Garros champion. After the final, all-time great Chris Evert, who racked up seven French titles, predicted, "She is the best clay court player, bar none. I have no doubt she'll break my record."

No tennis expert could have foreseen Swiatek's sudden fall from the pinnacle of the sport at age 23 — especially her unexpected decline on clay. It started with her stunning semifinal loss to Zheng Qinwen at the Paris Olympics. Swiatek hasn't even reached a final in her last 14 tournaments across all surfaces.

This shocking reversal of fortunes leaves the French Open wide open, with no clear favourite. Here are my five top contenders, the dark horses, and the predicted champion.

No. 3 Coco Gauff

Since she upset Sabalenka in the 2023 US Open final as a 19-year-old phenom, Gauff has been hot and cold. Feeling the pressure to become The Next Great American Player, she sometimes struggles in matches but always competes hard.

Named in *TIME* magazine's 2024 Women of the Year list — which honours "extraordinary leaders working toward a more equal world" — Gauff had an ordinary year by her high standards. The fleet Floridian failed to make a Grand Slam final or medal at the Paris Olympics, but salvaged the season by capturing the 2024 WTA Finals with impressive wins over No. 1 Sabalenka, No. 2 Swiatek, No. 6 Pegula, No. 7 Zheng, and No. 8 Barbora Krejcikova.

Gauff 's coach, Matt Daly, has tweaked her forehand and serve grips to solidify these strokes so she can confidently attack with fewer errors. "Her forehand looked as good as it's ever looked," praised former No. 1 Jim Courier when Gauff thrashed Swiatek 6-1, 6-1 in the Madrid Open semis — the Pole's worst loss on clay in six years. Gauff has now won three straight matches in their rivalry after losing 10 of their first 11.

Gauff can easily make the semis or final — but beating Sabalenka is a bridge too far.

No. 2 Iga Swiatek

What's wrong with Swiatek **(left)**? A coaching change from Tomasz Wiktorowski to the highly regarded Wim Fissette hasn't diversified her inflexible, one-dimensional game. Her most alarming match stat is second serve points won. In 2024,

she led the WTA Tour with 55%, but in her 6-1, 6-1 debacle against Coco Gauff in Madrid, it was only 40%. Even worse, during her 6-1, 7-5 Italian Open third-round loss to Danielle Collins, Swiatek won just 22% of her second serve points. Power players attack her second serve with increasing success and dictate rallies thereafter. She has also produced more double faults (91) than aces (83) this season.

"I think the biggest thing is between her ears. At that level, I really think the mental aspects lead the physical most of the time," said Paul Annacone, who coached superstar Pete Sampras, on the *Inside-In Tennis Podcast*. "She seems a bit on edge. She is a type A personality, where she is a little intense all the time, which looks great when you are winning... but if you are a little negative... it is tough to calm yourself down and get back into a cool, composed, confident process."

Swiatek will eventually recover from this slump — but it won't happen at Roland Garros. I believe the Queen of Clay will alas be dethroned there.

No. 7 Mirra Andreeva

Mirror, mirror on the wall, is Mirra the greatest of them all? She may well be before the decade is over, but the 18-year-old Russian **(above, right)** still has a thing or two to learn to beat the elite at Roland Garros.

Although she says her favourite surface is clay, her best results this year have come on hard courts. The clever tactician, with a serve topping 120 mph, conquered Dubai with wins over Swiatek and Elena Rybakina, and then grabbed her biggest title at Indian Wells, after defeating Sabalenka, Swiatek, Elina Svitolina, and Rybakina.

"She has no weaknesses and has really good technique," raved all-time great Martina Navratilova. "She loves competing. She's not scared. I love it. She's like a sponge. She takes everything in. She brings notes to the court." Coached by canny Conchita Martinez, the delightfully witty prodigy should make the semifinals.

No. 18 Jelena Ostapenko

The Latvian slugger **(right)** shocked everyone by winning Roland Garros eight years ago as a 100-1 long shot, becoming the first unseeded woman to capture a Major since 1933. She has more than a puncher's chance again — particularly if she faces Swiatek in the semis or the final.

She has Swiatek's number as perhaps no other non-star has ever had a champion's before: she has knocked her off all six times they've played, most recently on clay in the Stuttgart quarterfinals, 6-3, 3-6, 6-2.

On a given day, the go-for-broke Ostapenko can not only beat but crush anyone, as she proved by overpowering Sabalenka 6-4, 6-1 in the final. It was no fluke. At Doha in February, she knocked off Swiatek, three-time Major finalist Ons Jabeur,

REUTERS

All-rounder: Aryna Sabalenka boasts the athleticism, technique, and versatility to flourish on every surface. REUTERS

and 2024 breakout star Jasmine Paolini, losing just four games in each match. The feast-or-famine 'Penko' has also lost nine times in the first or second round this season.

On the pudgy side, she has a fitness coach but, oddly, no traditional coach. "No matter who coaches Jelena, she's always her own coach," said *Tennis Channel* analyst CoCo Vandeweghe.

Contrasting herself now with the 20-year-old who conquered Roland Garros, Ostapenko said, "At that time I was probably fearless, but I didn't have that much experience. I think honestly now I'm a better player — mentally as well. Getting a bit older and more mature is going to help me." Ostapenko won't win another French Open, but getting to the semis won't surprise anyone.

No. 1 Aryna Sabalenka

Unlike Osaka, who won her four Grand Slam titles on hard courts but fared decidedly worse on clay and grass, Sabalenka — the reigning Queen of Hard Courts — boasts the athleticism, technique, and versatility to flourish on every surface. And, crucially, she believes that.

Marrying finesse to her serving, groundstroke power, and volleying skill, the 27-year-old Belarusian had won 23 of her last 27 matches (85%) on clay going into the Italian Open.

"Sabalenka is an absolute frontrunner," said former No. 9 Andrea Petkovic, now a *Tennis Channel* analyst. "Once she gets rolling, it's very hard to slow her down."

No wonder she ranks No. 1 in both serving and returning statistics on the WTA Tour. And although she plays very few tiebreaks because she wins so many sets decisively, she holds a near-perfect 6-1 record in them.

Asked about her chances this season, Sabalenka said, "Physically I'm strong, and I'm not rushing the point, and I know I can stay in the point for however long I need. I think that's the key, because I think I have everything to be a good player on clay." Sabalenka proved that in spades at Madrid, where she won her third title there, defeating Gauff 6-3, 7-6 in the final.

The most emotional champion since Serena, she'll be ecstatic if she wins her first Grand Slam title on clay.

Best of the Rest: Jasmine Paolini, Zheng Qinwen, Clara Tauson

Dark Horses: Peyton Stearns, Victoria Mboko, Alexandra Eala, and Marta Kostyuk

» ULTIMATE TABLE TENNIS

Hat-trick on the cards: Goa Challengers defended its title in the previous edition, led by stellar performances by the likes of Harmeet Desai. R. RAGU

Paddlers poised to deliver ultimate drama in sixth season of UTT

After operating under a draft system for the first five seasons, the league held its **first-ever auction** in April.

Nihit Sachdeva
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LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

After delivering fast-paced action to fans in Delhi, Pune, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai over the first five seasons, the Ultimate Table Tennis (UTT) caravan is headed to a new destination.

The sixth edition of the franchise-based league is set to take place at the EKA Arena in Ahmedabad from May 31 to June 15.

Conducted under the auspices of the Table Tennis Federation of India and promoted by Vita

Past champions

2017 – Falcons TTC
2018 – Dabang Smashers TTC
2019 – Chennai Lions
2023 – Goa Challengers
2024 – Goa Challengers

No seasons were held between 2020 and 2022 due to COVID-19.

R. RAGU

Dani and Niraj Bajaj, UTT has featured the crème de la crème of Indian table tennis along with several well-known global stars since its inception in 2017.

The tournament has typically been organised in June and July, except for the last season, which began in late August due to the Paris Olympics. However, the upcoming edition, comprising 23 ties across 16 days, begins less than a week after the conclusion of the World Championships in Doha on May 25, where 20 of the 48 UTT players are in action. "It's a very small window that we have. Players don't play every day, and the amount of game time is also very concise," Dani told *Sportstar* when asked about potential concerns regarding fatigue or withdrawals by those participating in Doha.

"We have to strike a balance between the international and the sporting calendar in India. We usually like to start after the IPL (Indian Premier League) because that is when the excitement is maximum. It also helps with our promotions, as viewership is at its peak. Keeping the international calendar in mind, we don't want to clash with major events. It affects participation from both Indian and overseas players."

First-ever auction

After operating under a draft system for the first five seasons, the league held its first-ever auction on April 15 in Mumbai, where each of the eight teams had a notional purse of Rs. 50 lakh. Harmeet Desai and Sreeja Akula were retained by Dempo Goa Challengers and Jaipur Patriots, respectively, via the Right to Match card. Manika Batra was signed by Ahmedabad SG Pipers after PBG Pune Jaguars released the star paddler.

Fan Siqi, the only Chinese participant, emerged as the most valued player at Rs. 19.70 lakh. However, this value is not the actual amount paid. Each player has been contracted by UTT for an undisclosed fee. "It (the auction) is just to create more excitement. It introduces more variables and provides strategic options, opening up many avenues." Although there will be no top 10 player for the fifth consecutive season, Indian athletes will have the chance to compete with and against several established international stars, such as Romania's Bernadette Szocs (World No. 13), Puerto Rico's Adriana Diaz (World No. 17) and Nigeria's Quadri Aruna (World No. 25).

New additions

Apart from a new host city, this edition has several other additions. A new franchise, Kolkata Thunder Blades — co-owned by Uneecops and Mvikas — replaces Bengaluru Smashers. The Puneri Paltan has also rebranded itself as PBG Pune Jaguars. An Under-15 event titled Dream UTT Juniors will run alongside the main tournament.

Targeting organic growth in attendance

Since the league began in 2017, India has won 15 medals at the Commonwealth Games, three at the Asian Games, and seven at the Asian Championships. Indian players such as Manika, Harmeet, Sreeja, Manav Thakkar, Manush Shah, G. Sathiyan, Ayhika Mukherjee, Sutirtha Mukherjee and Diya Chitale have benefitted from competing in UTT against high-quality international opponents.

The presence of such players can only inspire and benefit the next generation of Indian talent.

However, Achanta Sharath Kamal **(above)** — India's most decorated paddler and a key figure in the country's global success in the sport — retired after the WTT Star Contender in March and will not feature as a player in UTT 6. Also, two

Format

- The eight teams have been split equally into two groups.
- Each team will face the other three teams in its group, as well as two sides from the opposite group.
- Inter-group match-ups (example):

If Group A has teams 1, 3, 5, 7 and Group B has teams 2, 4, 6, 8, then:
Team 2 plays Team 1 and Team 3
Team 4 plays Team 1 and Team 3
Team 6 plays Team 5 and Team 7
Team 8 plays Team 5 and Team 7

- Each tie comprises two men's singles, two women's singles, and one mixed doubles match. Every match includes three games.
- Unlike international rules requiring a two-point lead to win a game, UTT uses a Golden Point to decide games tied at 10–10. The team that wins eight games in total wins the tie.
- The top four teams will advance to the knockout stage.

Ready to roll: Manika Batra **(right)** was signed by Ahmedabad SG Pipers, while Bernadette Szocs **(below)** will play for U Mumba TT. R. RAGU & M. VEDHAN

SQUADS

Dempo Goa Challengers
Zeng Jian, Harmeet Desai, Tiago Apolonia, Ronit Bhanja, Krittwika Sinha Roy, Sayali Wani

Chennai Lions
Kiril Gerassimenko, Payas Jain, Sudhanshu Grover, Fan Siqi, Nikhat Banu, Jennifer Varghese

Dabang Delhi TTC
Diya Chitale, Maria Xiao, G. Sathiyan, Quek Izaac, Suhana Saini, Sourav Saha

PBG Pune Jaguars
Alvaro Robles, Anirban Ghosh, Mudit Dani, Dina Meshref, Reeth Rishya, Taneesha Kotecha

U Mumba TT
Lilian Bardet, Akash Pal, P.B. Abhinandh, Bernadette Szocs, Yashaswini Ghorpade, Swastika Ghosh

Kolkata Thunder Blades
Quadri Aruna, Ankur Bhattacharjee, Deepit Patil, Adriana Diaz, Selena Selvakumar, Ananya Chande

Jaipur Patriots
Britt Eerland, Kanak Jha, Sreeja Akula, Jeet Chandra, Pritha Vartikar, Yashansh Malik

Ahmedabad SG Pipers
Manika Batra, Ricardo Walther, SFR Snehit, Giorgia Piccolin, Divyansh Srivastava, Yashini Sivashankar

of Gujarat's finest players, Manav and Manush, will miss this season due to commitments in other foreign leagues.

"There are many rules across multiple leagues around the world that state that if someone is playing in one league, they cannot play in another. There will inevitably be some clash somewhere. Sometimes, we don't have a choice and will miss out on some good talent. But this also creates opportunities for younger and promising players. Our junior players will also be introduced to and gain exposure through the league," said Dani. While the single-city editions of 2019 (Delhi) and 2023 (Pune) had better turnout, the previous season in Chennai recorded an average footfall of just 600 per match, despite home favourites Sharath and Sathiyan in action.

Dani emphasised that the focus is on organic audience growth: "We want people to come for the sport itself. For that, we need to take the game to the people. That's why we have been to different venues. In some places, you feel only 700 people have come because the venues are larger-than-life. We want the right audience — those who attend because they genuinely want to."

On cloud 90

Neeraj Chopra's latest throw has placed him in one of the **most exclusive** groups in world athletics.

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AFP

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On his third attempt of the competition, even as high-speed TV cameras strained to frame the still-soaring fluorescent green projectile that he had flung into the black night of Doha, Neeraj Chopra threw his arms up, index fingers pointing to the sky. He didn't need to wait to see where his javelin would land on the turf of the Suheim bin Hamad Stadium many, many, many metres away. He has spoken before of knowing, the moment the spear leaves his hand, whether he's made a good throw — whether the job's done or not.

His arms were aloft in the final of the Tokyo Olympics, where he won a milestone gold. They were raised in victory at the World Championships in Budapest. They telegraphed his triumph at the Asian Games and Commonwealth Games. On the night of May 16 at the Doha Diamond League, they did so once more, as the 27-year-old entered the history books.

Barrier breached

90.23m.

The digital board at the other end of the ground flashed just how far his javelin had travelled. It was a new national record (not that surprising anymore, considering he's bettered it half a dozen times since first setting it nine years ago) and the world lead. But more than that, it placed him in one of the most exclusive groups in world athletics — the 90m club in men's javelin throw.

Ever since the implement was redesigned in 1986 — nearly four decades ago — Neeraj is the 26th man to know what it's like to throw a spear that far. Let's put the exclusivity of the 90m barrier in perspective: 183 runners have broken the 10-second mark in the 100m — perhaps the most well-known informal athletics standard. The equivalent of the 90m club in the 100m would be a tiny group of sprinters clocking 9.85 seconds or faster.

Despite the magnitude of the accomplishment, the overwhelming emotion on the face of the 27-year-old wasn't ecstasy or joy. It seemed to be relief. There was just a hint of a smile as he accepted handshakes from the rest of the field. Then, it was back to business once again.

A monkey off his back

At every Press conference and interview he's attended over the past seven years, including in Doha last week, Neeraj would be asked some variation of: "When will you cross 90m?"

Each time, he would respond with some permutation of: "It's a target and I'm getting close, but I'm not going to lose sleep over it."

It's possible that, with time, the number had lost some of its hold over Neeraj. He'd often make the fundamentally sound point that staying consistent and winning medals was far more important than chasing what was essentially an arbitrary number — much like the 10-second barrier in the 100m. His former coach Klaus Bartonietz had backed him on this as well.

"What's so special about 90m?" Klaus had once asked a reporter. Its significance, he'd explain, came only because we measure distances in metres, and that the base of 10 is used in mathematical applications so people tend to find it easier quantifying things in multiples of that number. "If we were measuring using feet, then we'd wonder what's so special about 295.276 feet (the equivalent of 90m)," he'd say.

Yet, as much as he denied it mattered to him, it was important for Neeraj to reach this mark — if only to prove to himself that he could hit it when it mattered most. In Paris, at the Olympic Games, Neeraj had once again come tantalisingly close with a throw of 89.45m. There, though, Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem produced a mammoth 92.97m to storm to the gold.

This time too, in Doha, despite Neeraj's milestone performance, he was pipped to the win by Germany's Julian Weber, who threw a personal best 91.06m with his final attempt of the competition. Add Anderson Peters (who came third in Doha) — someone who has thrown over 90m at five separate competitions, including once late last season — to the mix,

« I don't know about me, but I think the burden of Indians (who were waiting for me to breach 90m) would have gone down! This is a long season and we have the World Championships in September. *Abhi main khul ke maarunga* (now I'm going to throw freely) »

A 90s story: Julian Weber pipped Neeraj Chopra with his last throw of the competition. AFP

and it's clear that it may take another 90m-plus throw to decide the winner of the 2025 World Championships in Japan this September, where Neeraj will be defending his title.

Now that Neeraj has breached the 90m mark, he's unlikely to want to just dip his foot into this elite range and step back out.

Injury-free, improved technique

If 2025 is when he is finally throwing pain-free, it's not just because he has recovered from the groin injury that plagued him since 2018. Another significant factor is his new coach — world record holder Jan Zelezny. While Neeraj only has good things to say about his previous coach Klaus — under whom he became Olympic and World Champion — it's clear Zelezny has bigger ambitions, driven by his unquestionable belief in Neeraj.

"Normally, he does not go to the Diamond Leagues, but he came with me because he told me that today is the day to achieve 90m," Neeraj said after the competition.

Under Zelezny, he has made small but significant corrections to his throwing technique. In the past, Neeraj had observed that his throws often drifted to the left of the field rather than flying straight, costing him crucial metres.

Now, Neeraj's left leg comes down to make the block a lot faster than before. The block is the step where the thrower plants his left foot, forcing the body to pivot, and transferring forward momentum into the javelin's propulsion.

This latest adjustment prevents Neeraj from falling over to one side as much as he used to. He's also holding the javelin more parallel to the runway prior to release — meaning he has to do less work to keep it on a straight trajectory. The bulk of his power now goes directly into sending the spear as far as possible down the centre of the field.

Long road ahead

While he may have crossed the barrier, Neeraj isn't nearly satisfied. The fact that the 90m is ultimately an arbitrary figure was reinforced when he finished second, even after his best-ever throw.

"It is a little bit of a bittersweet result. I am very happy for the 90m, but this second place — it actually happened to me when I competed in Stockholm [Diamond League in 2022, where he threw a then national record of 89.94m]. I threw 89.94 and I was still second. And here too, I broke the national record and still finished second," he told reporters in Doha.

As he looks ahead to future competitions, he has, for now, taken at least one mandatory question out of press conferences.

"I don't know about me, but I think the burden of Indians (who were waiting for me to breach 90m) would have gone down! I think I can throw better, and I will do better. This is a long season and we have the World Championships in September. I used to throw 89m consistently, but now I will try to go over 90m regularly. *Abhi main khul ke maarunga!* (Now I'm going to throw freely)," he said.

Individual progress: From left: India's famed quartet, Gurindervir Singh, Amlan Borgohain, Manikanta Hoblidhar and Animesh Kujur, under James Hillier have made strides individually too. Four of the six fastest 100m timings by Indian men belong to them. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

HOW PRECISION IN THE EXCHANGE ZONE CAN POWER INDIA'S SPRINT RELAY SURGE

India's sprint quartet is on a record-breaking run — yet the **real gains** may lie in mastering the baton handover.

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Nothing unnerves a track coach more than a baton exchange in a sprint relay. You could have the fastest runners at your disposal, but even a slightly flawed handover can spell disaster for a relay team.

For Indian sprint coach James Hillier, however, the three 30-metre baton exchange zones on a 100m relay track aren't looming pitfalls. He sees them as fast-moving windows of opportunity — zones that could launch his team into the world's elite.

Under his guidance, the Indian men's 4x100m relay team — comprising Gurindervir Singh, Animesh Kujur, Manikanta Hoblidhar and Amlan Borgohain — broke the national record while representing Reliance at the National Relay Carnival in Chandigarh in April. Their time of 38.69 seconds now places them among Asia's best.

Triumphant quartet: The Indian men's 4x100m relay team — comprising (above, L-R) Borgohain, Gurindervir, Kujur and Hoblidhar — broke the national record while representing Reliance at the National Relay Carnival in Chandigarh in April.

PICS: THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY, K. MURALI KUMAR, RITU RAJ KONWAR & SUDHAKARA JAIN

But to progress further, Hillier and his athletes have little in terms of immediate gains — except how they exploit the baton exchange zone.

"The most critical part of the relay is the speed at which the baton moves through the box. If someone isn't brave coming into the box, the outgoing runner can't push out hard enough. All our changeovers in Chandigarh were very safe — we played it safe because I wanted them to get the record, to make a statement," said Hillier, Athletics Director at Reliance Foundation, in a conversation with *Sportstar*.

"What you want is to exchange the baton towards the end of the box. That's the fastest method, because the outgoing runner has been accelerating longer and is moving faster."

Pushing the limits of the exchange zone increases the risk of

Pushing the limits of the exchange zone increases the risk of disqualification, but it's a trade-off James Hillier and his team are willing to make.

disqualification, but it's a trade-off Hillier and his team are willing to make.

"We're working on giving the runners the confidence to take the baton in the last 10 metres of the zone. That brings the time down significantly. As the chemistry builds and they improve, I want those exchanges to happen closer to the end of the box."

Simple in theory, complex in execution. Four sprinters, running at full tilt, in a high-pressure environment. Hillier is under no illusions.

"Putting the baton in the hand isn't the issue. The critical thing is timing the run-out. Most relay errors happen because athletes leave too early. They get excited. When you see someone coming in fast, it's intimidating. You fear not getting out fast enough, so you end up going early."

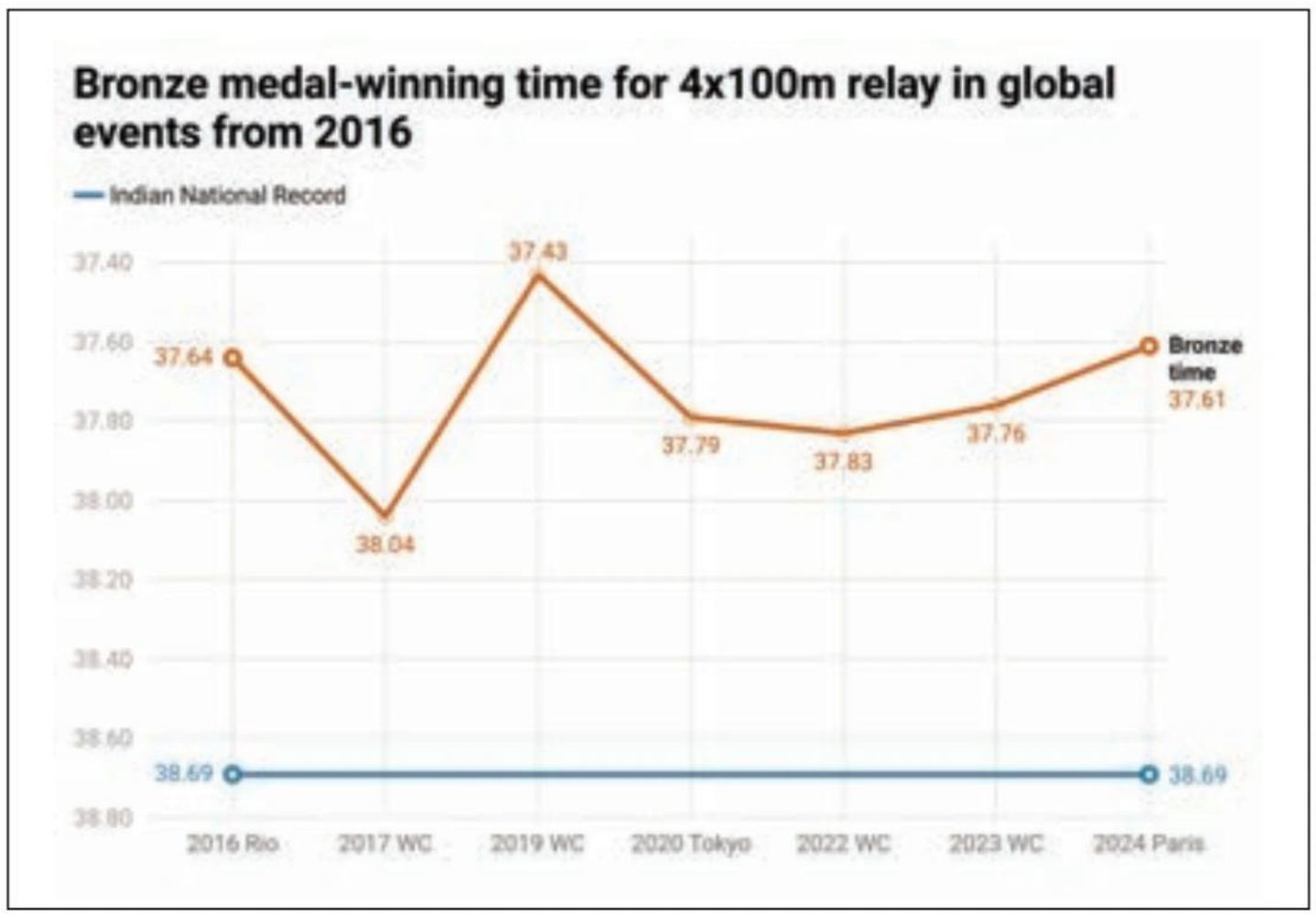
Hillier has adjusted the baton exchange, starting with the outgoing runners' start position. The Indian team no longer uses the three-point start — a crouched stance with two feet and one hand on the track — because Hillier believes it impairs depth perception and causes miscued acceleration.

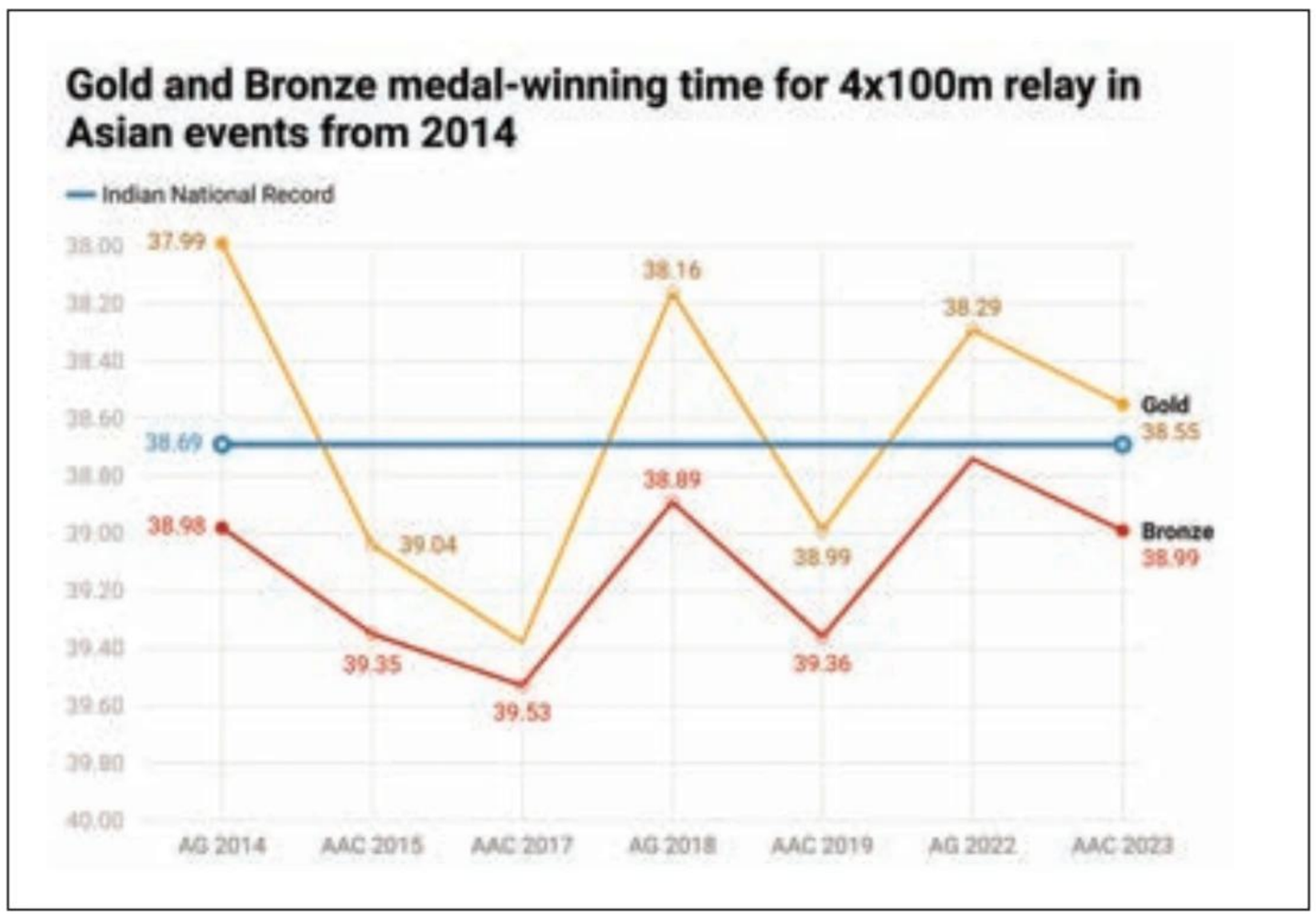
Another key change involves the mark, a tape placed in the exchange zone to cue the outgoing runner's acceleration.

"I have asked them [outgoing runner] not to focus on the chest of the incoming runner, but on his feet. They have to imagine a small circle around that marking tape, and when the incoming runner's foot lands in that circle, that's when they have to set off," explains Hillier.

Under Hillier, India's sprinters have also made strides individually. Four of the six fastest 100m timings by Indian men belong to this quartet. Gurindervir set a new national record of 10.20 seconds in March.

Three of the four — Gurindervir, Manikanta, and Animesh — are under 25. Still, expecting any of them to break the 10-second barrier may be unrealistic, given how marginal gains become at the elite level.





SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Yet Hillier believes India can break the 38-second barrier even without a sub-10 runner.

"To estimate a relay time, you add the four individual 100m times and subtract between 2.1 and 3.0 seconds. A 2.4-second differential is good; 3.2 is exceptional. Right now, our team has a 2.4-second differential. In the 2010 national record (38.89), it was 2.81.

"I had predicted 38.62 even with poor exchanges. So, the 38.69 they ran suggests the exchanges weren't great. With excellent exchanges, they could run 37.82. If they matched the exchange efficiency of the 2010 team, they'd be at 38.2."

Apart from striving to meet their coach's standards, the Indian relay team is also chasing history. India's last medal in the men's 4x100m relay at the Asian Athletics Championships came in 1979. To find a medal at the Asian Games itself, you have to go even further back, to 1970.

That drought could end soon. The 38.69-second effort would have secured India a podium finish at every Asian Games and AAC over the past decade — and even a gold medal at three of the last seven AACs. Since 2024, only Japan, China, and South Korea have clocked faster relay times among Asian nations. Notably, Japan and China were Olympic finalists in Paris.

Still, Hillier **(left)** isn't interested in burdening his athletes with expectations.

"Of course we want to win a medal. But we can't go in expecting it. In athletics, the moment you start expecting, things often don't go to plan. We need to make it happen.

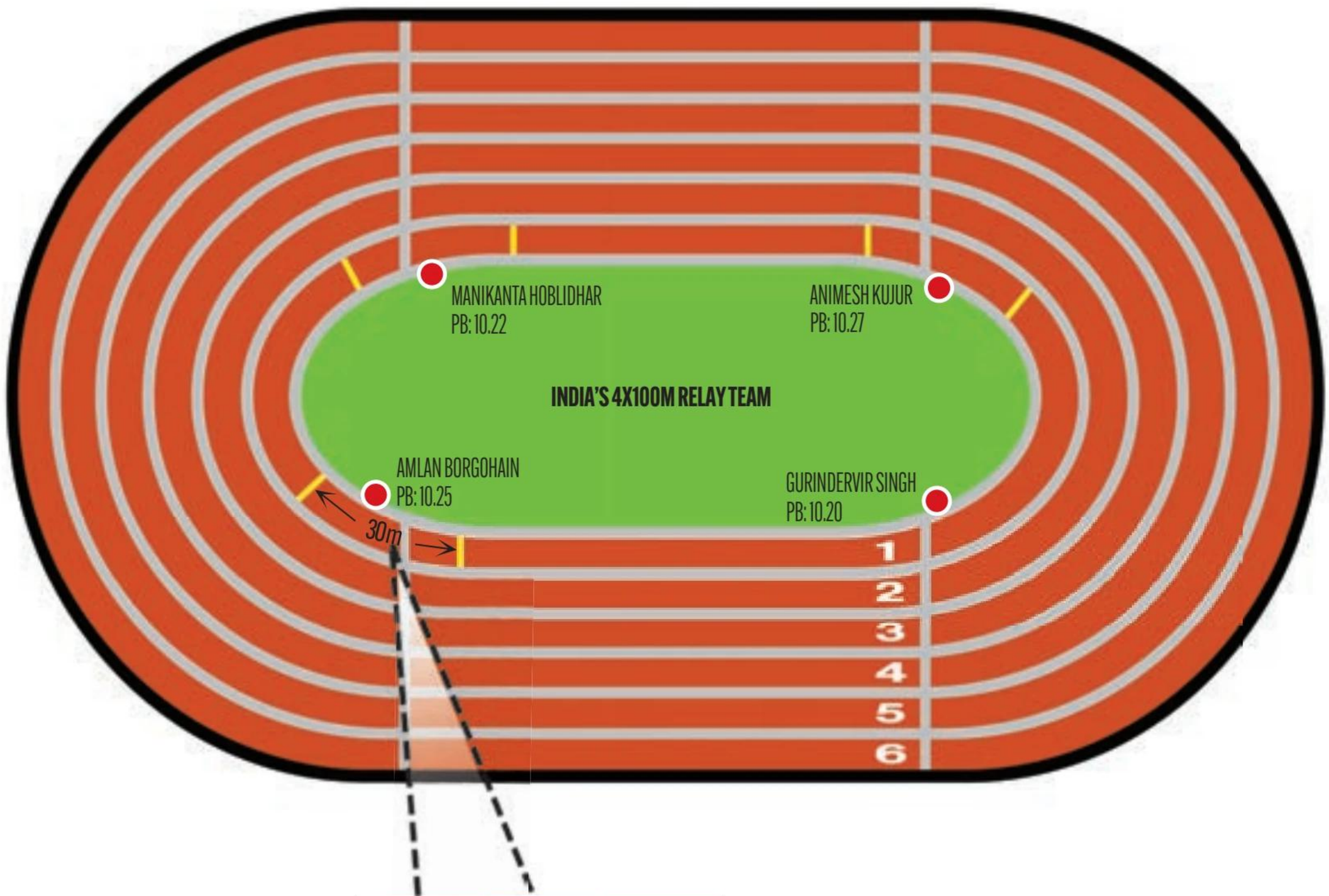
"The key is to stay focused. We can't let excitement get in the way. We have to get in and out of the exchange box at the right time."

But at the global level, the gap is wider. Indian sprinters would need to trim nearly a second off their collective timing to contend for a medal at the World Championships or the Olympics.

Their next big target is the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo, but the road is steep. India missed

Hillier explains the running order

The first leg is Gurindervir because you need a good starter and finisher. It is also the longest carry because you're carrying the baton for 120m. The second leg is one of your longer legs. So, you want a 200m athlete. That's where Animesh is a good option. Third leg, you want a shorter athlete because you have to go around the bend, and Manikanta is apt. He can go low 10.6 around the bend and has great chemistry with Animesh. In the final leg, you need a chaser. Amlan is perfect for it. He's a very good finisher, and he's good with a rolling start.



According to Hillier, the Indian sprint relay team has been going for safer exchanges so far. He expects the team to start making their changeovers towards the end of the box. With perfect exchanges, he expects the team to get close to 38.00, or even go below the mark.

Exchanging in the final third

Why risky?

By pushing into the final third, where both runners are at a higher acceleration, there is a greater probability of a baton drop or an exchange zone infringement.

Why faster?

By exchanging in the final third, the baton passes through the box faster, with both incoming and outgoing runners accelerating for a longer duration.

the World Athletics Relays in Guangzhou, which offered 14 of the 16 direct qualification spots for the Worlds. Jamaica, which missed out on qualifying in Guangzhou, is likely to claim one of the two remaining slots through the top season-best list. For India to claim the last spot, it must at least better the Netherlands' season-best of 38.20 seconds.

For Hillier, even this ambitious goal feels within reach — because of the progress already made.

"It's been a real challenge to get here — to convince people that Indian sprinters are good enough, that they can compete, and even win medals — not just in Asia but potentially at the world level.

"We've had to swim against the tide, against the idea that India doesn't have the athletes for a sprint relay. That mindset is changing. And that's crucial."

HURDLES BEFORE THE VAULT: HOW TEJASWIN GETS HIS POLES TO THE ASIAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

A lift used by the Prime Minister, five-hour waits, and letters to multiple officials — this is how **Tejaswin Shankar hauls his 16-foot poles** to the Championships.

REUTERS

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Tejaswin Shankar has set lofty goals for himself at this month's Asian Athletics Championships in Gumi, Korea. He hopes not only to improve on the bronze medal he won in the previous edition in Bangkok, but also to better his decathlon national record of 7666 points.

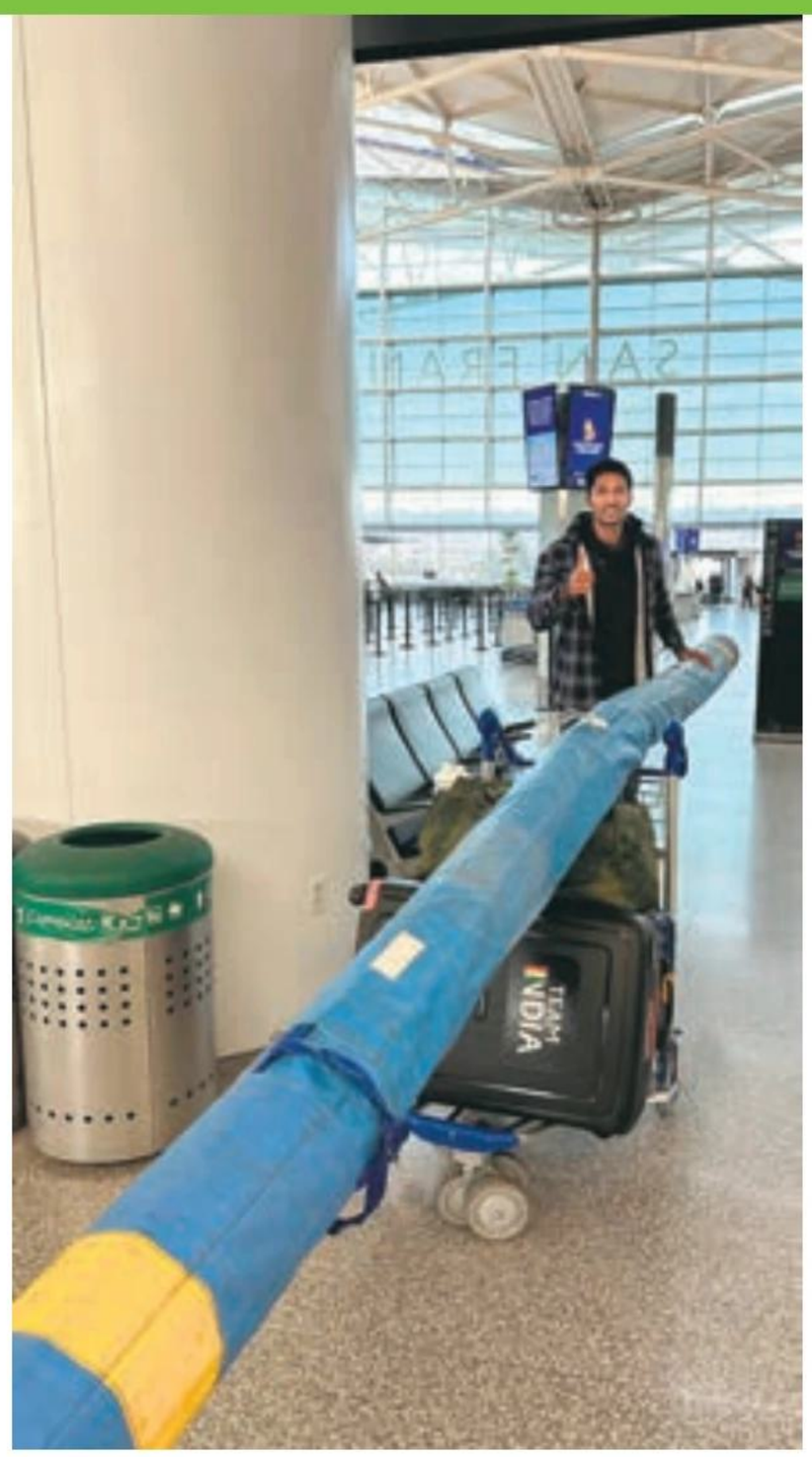
However, while his competition begins on May 30, the real challenge for Tejaswin will start much earlier — on the day of his

departure to Korea. That's when he'll have to figure out how to get his five, four-and-a-half-metre-long fibreglass poles onto the flight.

As a decathlete, Tejaswin usually travels heavy. He brings relatively few clothes, but a lot of specialised kit: different shoes for each event, massage gear, supplements, javelins, a discus, and sometimes his shot put. However, the toughest item to get through the New Delhi International Airport is the pole vault equipment.

When he can, the 25-year-old prefers to

All baggage at Delhi's Terminal 3 is transferred through two cargo lifts – neither of which can fit a 16-foot-long pole. A special lift has to be used instead.



Logistical grind: From airline hassles to Customs delays **(pics, above)**, Tejaswin's toughest vault often comes before the runway — just getting his poles there. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

transport his poles by train, tucking them alongside the overhead fans in the sleeper compartment. That, though, is not an option when he flies.

"The first challenge is to get it past the CISF guards at the entry gates. The moment they see them, they say I can't go inside. I'll have to explain I'm an athlete and I've travelled with these things before. While they are making up their minds, there will be a bunch of passengers all staring at me thinking I'm carrying a weapon or something," says Tejaswin.

Once inside, he still has to get the poles through the baggage counter. "Usually your javelins and those sorts of things can be accommodated in that big belt, but the pole vault poles cannot," he says.

All baggage at Delhi's Terminal 3 is transferred through two cargo lifts — neither of which can fit a 16-foot-long pole. A special lift has to be used instead.

Tejaswin discovered this the hard way when he first brought his poles from the USA, where he competed for Kansas State University in the NCAA. "The first time I came with my poles, I had a layover in Finland, and when I reached Delhi, I found that my poles hadn't come on the plane. When they did get to India on a subsequent flight, I was told that even though they had taken the poles out of the plane, they didn't know how to get it through the airport and that they were just going to send it back to Finland. That's when I had to ring up everyone I knew in Indian sport. Finally, after nearly four days, one person told me that there is a third way of getting oversized baggage out of a plane — and that was through a location known as the 'steel gate'."

Accessing the gate is complicated for a reason. "I found out later that apart from me, the only time that steel gate is used is when the airlines are transporting catering, or when the Prime Minister is travelling. So my poles are a bit special!"

That same gate is used when Tejaswin flies out of the country with his poles. "First, I have to get a letter written by the airline to allow me to use that gate. At check-in, the first thing they say is it can't be done because it's such a huge hassle, so I always carry a copy of every letter I've had made out in the past. In the letter, the airline writes that they've accepted my baggage and that it can't go through the two regular cargo lifts. The first time I got the letter made, they called it a 'pole bolt', and now every time I get a letter made, it says 'pole bolt'."

That letter is addressed to the CISF commandant, the head of security, and the head of customs, requesting permission to use the special gate. "I have to go and get the letter signed by all of them. This also takes time because it's hard to catch all of them. Someone is on his rounds, someone else might be having tea."

Eventually, the doors to that special cargo lift — about 15 feet high and 20 feet long, by Tejaswin's reckoning — open, and the poles go

in. The entire process, both outgoing and incoming, takes four to five hours. That's something he must factor into every trip.

"Regardless of how many times I go through this procedure, it never gets easier. There's a lot of running around, but more than that, you're dependent on other people being available. I have to get there well in advance so the airline doesn't have an excuse that I'm holding up boarding for other passengers or that there's no space for my poles. If you're one of the first people to go in, you can argue that the hold is empty.

"If you come in at your normal luxury time, there's no way they are going to take the poles. If you come in early, they're also fresh. Otherwise, their frustration levels go up. They also want to make sure the flight isn't delayed. If you're the first person to go, then at least they can find some way."

No matter how early he arrives, Tejaswin says he's usually one of the last passengers to board the plane. "It's only then that I can finally relax."

Things get easier once he lands — depending on the airport. "A lot depends on the airport you arrive at. Depending on where you are, the cargo lifts might be big enough to handle my poles. If that's the case, it'll just come out in normal baggage claim. It's not a country problem — it's an airport problem. While I have to do a lot of work in Delhi, I've been told that poles travel without a lot of issues in Bengaluru airport. I guess when Delhi airport T3 was being built, they didn't think they needed to make a baggage lift that was big enough to carry Tejaswin Shankar's 16-foot poles!"

So how do international athletes manage this? "What I've seen is that since elite pole vaulters usually compete either in Europe or the USA, they just keep one set of poles in each continent. So, they have a set in Europe, and when they travel there, they use those. And when they're in the US, they use the set they've kept there."

For the rest, it's trial and error. Much of the knowledge is passed through informal channels. Tejaswin learned about the steel gate from a former pole vaulter turned coach. Now, he's trying to systematise the information.

"I've reached out to a lot of international athletes and I'm making a list where pole vaulters can see which airports and airlines are helpful in carrying poles and which are not. Some carriers like American Airlines and British Airways clearly say they don't allow poles. Others, like Thai Airways and Singapore Airlines, are much more helpful. There are also aircraft like the Airbus A320 that don't allow poles in the cargo hold — so it's best to avoid them. It's a work in progress, but I'm trying to create a resource that other athletes can use."

Most competitions offer standard poles for use, but athletes prefer their own. Poles vary in length and stiffness based on the athlete's jumping ability — Tejaswin's longest is 15.7 feet, while world record holder Mondo Duplantis uses poles nearly 18 feet long.

"It's really important to travel with your own poles. It's like an extension of your hand. Every pole feels different. It's like playing with golf

PTI

SINCE ELITE POLE VAULTERS USUALLY COMPETE EITHER IN EUROPE OR THE USA, THEY JUST KEEP ONE SET OF POLES IN EACH CONTINENT

clubs or a cricket bat. Even if every pole looks the same — poles vary by length and stiffness — everything feels off when you use one that's not yours."

Even then, success is not guaranteed. "It's still possible that even if you manage to bring your own poles, you fail to make a clearance in competition. When I think about that, sometimes the hassle of carrying a pole seems more than the benefit. I think it's even more of a trade-off for me compared to a dedicated pole vaulter, since this is just one of nine events I do. So, the return is much less than the risk or hassle. But at the end of the day, I don't think there's any real option but to go through all of this."

In all his years of competing, there's been just one time when Tejaswin didn't have to go through the stress.

"When I won silver at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, I got off the plane and a representative from Singapore Airlines told me my luggage had already arrived. I said that's great, but I need my poles, and I knew that would take its own time. This time, though, my poles were already waiting for me. Someone even helped me carry them out of the airport. That showed me that I didn't have to go through all that procedure. But I guess it was different then, because they saw I was coming back as an Asian Games medallist. I guess that's some sort of motivation too — if I do well enough at a big enough competition, I'll just have my poles waiting for me when I get off the plane."

On solving three-movers

By C.G.S.Narayanan

'Compared to two-movers the extra move in three-movers introduces a new order of complexity into the solver's desk. Two-movers can always be solved by trial and error in fairly short time.But applying the same method to three-movers could take hours.The distinction between zugzwang and threat problems is of less significance' wrote GM John Nunn,one of World's great solvers, in his 'Solving in style' where Nunn analyses the humour in the following composition.

E.Zepler

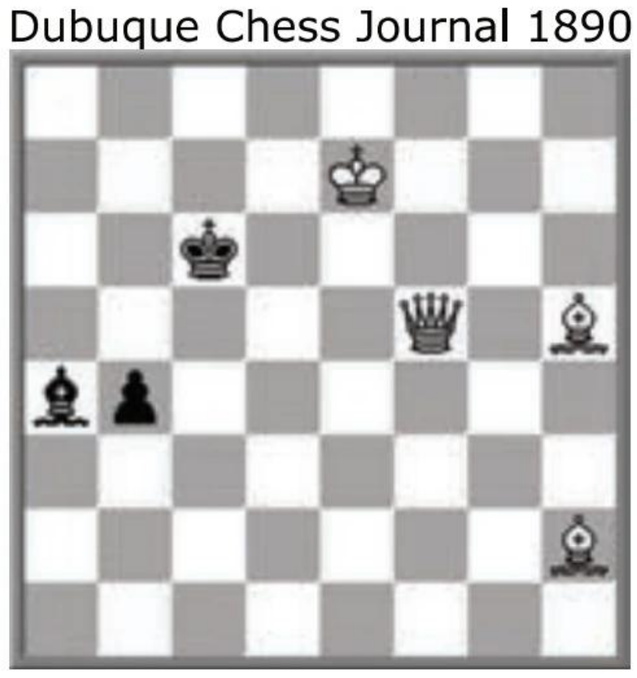
3HM,ThematurniersDredhnern1930

Mate in three moves

Black can move only his King ,but there are four flights available. Black's most prominent defences already have mates provided.1…Kxg3 2.Qe2 Kh3 3.Qg2;1…Kg1 2.Ng4 Kxh1 3.Qf1;1…Ke1 2.Ne4 Kd1 3.Qf1; 1..Kxe3 2.Ne4 Kd4 3.Nc2 the best of the four mates.Non-checking second move continuatios are considered praiseworthy.A waiting move is sufficient to solve the problem but it is surprisingly difficult to find one! Now the solvers attention is drawn to the WPh7.The argument seems suspicious as WPh7 takes no part in the set play and so why should it not promote? Searching carefully reveals the trap.1.h8=Q/B? Kxe3! 2.Ne4 stalemates.1.h8=Q/R? Kxg3! When Qe2 delivers another stalemate exploiting white's newly acquired control of h3.**So the key must be 1.h8 N!**

W.Shinkman

Dubuque Chess Journal 1890



Mate in three moves

In the above diagram it is not hard to see which piece makes the key in the above diagram .WBh5 is out of play all the more after 1..Kb6.It is tempting to put the WB on g4 behind the WQ black replies 1..Kb6 after which we find that wB finds no useful purpose.The likely key is **1.Be2!** with threat Qe6+,Qd6+Qc8+ 1…Kb7 2.Qc8+ Kxc8 3.Ba6 while 1…Kb6 leads to the echo 2.Qa5+ Kxa5 3.Bc7

A miniature three-mover for solving

W.Shinkman

Offiziers Scahchzeitung 1905

Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article'The duel feast': Tries 1.Kd5? c6+!1.Ke5? cxd6! 1.Kd4? c5+

Key 1.Kf4!

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

REUTERS

MAX MUSCLES THROUGH AT IMOLA

The Dutchman's victory at the Emilia-Romagna Grand Prix marked his **fourth consecutive win** at the circuit, adding yet another record to his already glittering resume.

Kavita Menon
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If there's anyone in Formula One who understands the art of maintaining incredible streaks, it's reigning world champion Max Verstappen. From having the most wins and points in a row to winning four consecutive drivers' titles, he is an expert in the subject. However, 2025 brought a change in fortune. Heading into Imola, the seventh race of the season, Verstappen had only one win under his belt — a stark contrast to previous years, where he had already claimed four victories by this point.

But write off Verstappen at your own peril. At the iconic Autodromo Internazionale Enzo e Dino Ferrari — better known as Imola — the Red Bull driver sent a powerful message.

With a bold overtake at Turn 1, Verstappen surged into the lead and never looked back. His victory at the Emilia-Romagna Grand Prix marked his fourth consecutive win at the circuit, adding yet another record to his already glittering resume.

Earlier, McLaren looked poised for another strong weekend after dominating all practice sessions. And sure enough, it was Oscar Piastri who once again outpaced teammate Lando Norris to snatch his third career pole position.

Verstappen had to settle for second on the grid, missing out on a hat-trick of poles. Yet, starting behind Piastri offered an opportunity for payback — after all, the pole-sitter had denied him wins in the two recent races.

With a mixed starting grid for the main race, and tyre strategies and degradation management being the talk of the town, the stage was set, and a silent comeback was in the reckoning.

Starting from second on the grid allowed Verstappen a potentially cleaner overtake in the first braking zone — the Tamburello *chicane* —

Return to form: Verstappen stormed to his second win this season — a crucial fightback after a rocky start to 2025. AFP

though it comes with its risks. But to Verstappen, any opportunity to pounce on the leader was welcome.

In a move that will be replayed for years, he braked late, swept around the outside of Piastri, and seized the lead with precision. It was daring yet calculated, and pure Verstappen — an overtake of the highest order.

Piastri likely expected pressure, but not such a bold lunge that early. Caught off guard, the Australian had no choice but to yield. While he stuck close in the following laps, the leader never put a wheel wrong thereafter and commanded the race in a vastly improved Red Bull.

Verstappen was further aided by pit stop strategies. What was expected to be a routine one-stop became anything but, thanks to the appearance of the Virtual Safety Car (VSC) and later, a full Safety Car (SC).

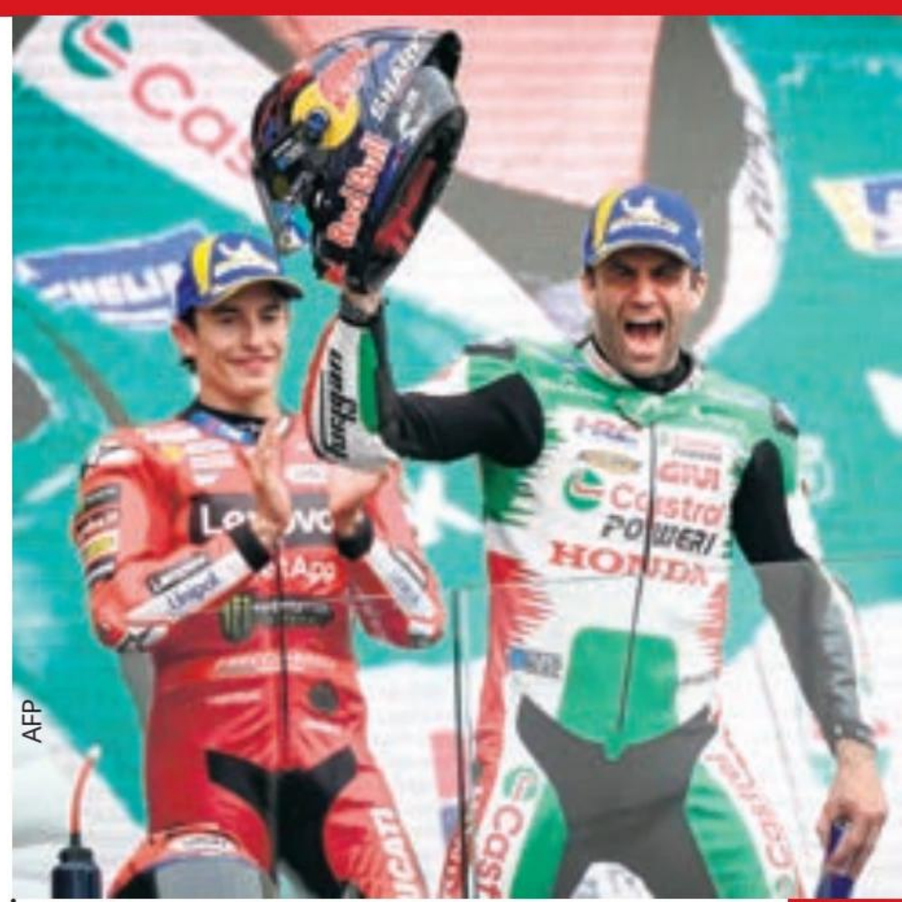
The slowed-down periods reshaped the race, especially for McLaren and a resurging Ferrari. When the VSC was triggered by Esteban Ocon parking trackside, Red Bull immediately pitted Verstappen, gaining an edge.

While Piastri opted for the otherwise advantageous undercut, the VSC came right after, forcing him to charge through the backmarkers and lose out. Ferrari, which seemed to have found some rhythm to enter the top 10, saw Leclerc's momentum also take a hit.

Both drivers made their way quickly, but had to slam the brakes again when Kimi Antonelli's race came to a heartbreaking end. The SC was deployed, and it was another cheap stop to change tyres. But it was their teammates — Norris and Lewis Hamilton — who swapped to fresher rubber with a handful of laps remaining.

At the restart, Piastri and Leclerc were left fending for their positions rather than attacking for more points, eventually losing out to their partners. Norris finished as the leading McLaren in second with Piastri in third. Fourth-placed Hamilton benefitted from the scuffle between Albon, who secured a second consecutive fifth-place finish, and Leclerc, who came sixth.

Away from all the chaos, Verstappen stormed to the chequered flag for his second win this season — a crucial fightback after a rocky start to 2025. It also commemorated Red Bull's 400th Grand Prix start, a landmark achievement on a track where it has seen success thanks to its trailblazer.



AFP

MOTOGP

From an unbeaten sprint winner to a French hero after decades, the French Grand Prix witnessed MotoGP history.

Heading into the weekend with a one-point deficit to his younger brother, Marc Marquez **(in red)** was dealt a blow when home rider Fabio Quartararo secured his second successive pole by smashing the Le Mans lap record and starting ahead for both events.

The 26-year-old former world champion had crashed out at the last sprint, handing the place over to Marquez. This time, the Frenchman could not compete with the sheer pace of the Ducati, having to watch the Spaniard make it a sixth sprint win in a row, maintaining a perfect record.

The main race, however, saw fortunes favour another hometown talent — Johann Zarco **(front)**. The LCR Honda rider became the first Frenchman in 71 years to win the French Grand Prix. Zarco won by a huge margin of nearly 20 seconds ahead of Ducati's Marquez, who hasn't won a Sunday race in the last two events. But the latter still enjoys a 22-point lead atop the standings as the riding contingent travels to the Silverstone Circuit for the British Grand Prix.

« Rallying has always been the pioneer of motorsport in India »

GAURAV GILL

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

Gaurav Gill has carved an extraordinary path on the dusty, winding stages of rallying. During a nearly two-decade-long journey, he has led the charge in a sport that struggles to gain mainstream recognition in India.

The 43-year-old is a multiple Indian National Rally Championship (INRC) winner and an icon on Indian terrain. Gill is the first Indian to win the FIA Asia-Pacific Rally Championship (APRC). He clinched the coveted crown as early as 2013, before adding two more to his cabinet in 2016 and 2018.

India's first Arjuna Awardee in motorsport (2019), he made a foray into the World Rally Championship-2 (WRC2) — the support championship of WRC — in 2018. After a few stints that saw near-misses but positive takeaways, Gill is now ready for another go at it, with his eye on the elusive podium.

Racing with JK Tyres in 2025, he is scheduled to participate in a few rounds of WRC2 this season, starting from June 26-29 in Greece. However, alongside international action, he will also be participating in the INRC.

In an interview with *Sportstar,* Gill discusses his journey and the challenges in the Indian motorsport ecosystem.

You've achieved what many Indian rally racers dream of — competing in the WRC2. How did that opportunity come about, and what did it mean to you personally?

The World Rally Championship is the biggest platform for anyone to go and compete. For us, coming from India, it's very difficult to raise a lot of sponsorship. I'm fortunate that I have partners and sponsors like JK Tyres (and previously MRF Tyres) and others who support me.

We've had a small break for a year as we wanted to concentrate on the Indian National Rally Championship as well, because that's an important market for the manufacturers. We are also looking at international

The 43-year-old is a multiple Indian National Rally Championship (INRC) winner and India's first Arjuna Awardee in motorsport

waters, so the idea is to get back into the World Championship — the pinnacle of motorsport and rallying — to showcase both our skill and our product.

How does WRC2 compare to the rallying formats you've dominated in India and Asia-Pacific?

It doesn't differ too much from the Asia-Pacific, apart from being a lot longer. But on the world level, there is absolutely no comparison because the cars we drive there are on a different level.

They use proper World Rally Cars — faster, more powerful, and non-production ones that are specifically built for these events. The cars here are pretty much production cars (modifying standard vehicles).

The other main difference is that those rallies last four days, while in India they span barely a day and a half — sometimes even less — due to the lack of available distance. Over there, we cover more than 2,000 kilometres, whereas here, it's usually closer to 300.

What's the biggest challenge when you step onto the global platform?

It's very different now compared to five or seven years ago [when he made his international debut]. People have very big budgets; they do nearly 20 to 25 rallies a year. They practise every weekend of the year because they have their own equipment and cars.

That's what puts India on the back foot because, in my case, I don't have that much funding to compete. Yet, I just set my goals, and I don't complain about it. I see it as another opportunity to go and make my mark.

Rallying in India goes back decades, with many legendary drivers coming to the fore. The number of events is increasing as well. What makes rally racing click here?

Rallying has always been the pioneer of motorsport in India. People were more inclined towards it because there were fewer racetracks in the country, with the prominent ones being in the South.

Naturally, that meant more people in the North opted for off-road races.

That's why, in the past, most of the top rallies and rally drivers were from the North.

We have the Himalayan rallies, the ones in the desert, and so many others, which were more difficult because of the terrain and region. It automatically became a more popular sport.

Home advantage: For someone starting their rally journey, domestic competitions present a great opportunity to learn the nature of this sport, feels Gaurav. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Considering how difficult the world of rallying is, how important are homegrown competitions like the INRC?

The INRC is a great grassroot-level of rallying. By far, we have the best early network programme in Asia right now. The number of teams and people competing is ten times higher compared to other countries. But those who participate in the regional championships will be up for a big shock when they go to something like the European Rally Championship or WRC.

The competition levels are extremely difficult. Even the level of the racetracks here is probably not even half as good compared to what we run in WRC. There is still a long way to go, but for someone starting their rally journey, it's a great opportunity to learn the nature of this sport.

Despite the rapid strides that rally racing has taken over the years, is the sport still considered niche?

I would say it's still niche, but it's growing in very large numbers, and quickly. The events we currently have in India feature almost 70 to 80 competitors and teams — by far the biggest in Asia. It shows that this is the fastest-growing motorsport discipline in India.

The ecosystem is focused on the domestic scene right now. But the government and the federation (FMSCI) should get together and consider at least waiving all the import costs for us.

Right now, for any small part being imported, we pay around 30–45 per cent. So, for equipment worth Rs.10 lakh, the price automatically becomes Rs.14 lakh.

That becomes a big challenge, apart from the equipment and the cars. The purchase cost and everything else are completely different — that's a big disadvantage for us.

What is necessary to produce a consistent pipeline of world-class racers across disciplines?

We need manufacturing support to begin with — full-time support from car and bike manufacturers at a larger level, where they understand how much R&D (research and development) can help, beyond just sales and marketing.

There are already so many countries that waive this, including those in Africa. With the costs and huge money involved, this country does not see it as a very high return-on-investment sport.

India is going to be the third-largest automotive market in the world soon. And when the country, along with the federation, helps reduce some of these costs — our biggest obstacle — that's when the sport is really going to kick off.

Delhi GM Open 2025 from June 7

The 21st edition of the Delhi International Open Grandmasters Chess Tournament, offering a total prize purse of Rs. 1.21 crore, will be held at Tivoli Gardens, Chhattarpur, from June 7 to 14.

The tournament will feature three sections. The top section, comprising around 20 Grandmasters, will have an overall pool of approximately 2,500 players.

Played in the classical format with a time control of 90 minutes, the top event carries a prize fund of Rs. 51 lakh. The top three finishers will receive Rs. 7 lakh, Rs. 6 lakh, and Rs. 5 lakh, respectively.

The two other sections are open to players rated below 1900 and 1700, respectively. Each will offer a prize pool of Rs. 35 lakh. All three sections will follow a 10-round Swiss League format, with different time controls.

"With every edition, we are strengthening the foundation for a sustainable, high-performance chess culture in the country," said Bharat Singh Chauhan, president of the Delhi Chess Association.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

SPORTOON

1 India is set to host its first-ever World Athletics Bronze Level Continental Tour meet, according to the list of competitions on the website of the sport's global governing body. The inaugural Indian Open World Athletics Bronze Level Continental Tour will be held on August 10 at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar. It will feature the following events:
Men: 100m, 200m, 400m, 800m, 1500m, 5000m, Long Jump, Triple Jump, Shot Put, Javelin Throw, 4x400m
Women: 100m, 200m, 400m, 800m, 1500m, Long Jump, Javelin Throw, 4x400m
Mixed - 4x400m

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 The Vidarbha Cricket Association (VCA) has announced that the inaugural edition of the Vidarbha Pro T20 League (VPTL) will be held from June 5 to 15, 2025.
All matches will take place at the VCA Stadium in Jamtha, Nagpur. The league will feature six men's franchise teams and three women's teams.
India pacer and Vidarbha stalwart Umesh Yadav, along with former India women's captain and pace legend Jhulan Goswami, have been named as league ambassadors.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

S8UL, ASSEMBLE!

S8UL, the only Indian esports organisation at the Esports World Cup 2025, has announced **rosters for eight titles,** which feature Indian as well as international stars.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
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S8UL roped in eChampions League and virtual Bundesliga winner Jonas Wirth and Mexican champion Aaron Rivera for the upcoming Esports World Cup 2025.

The company became the first Indian esports organisation to be selected as a club partner for the 2025 Esports World Cup (EWC), set to be played in Saudi Arabia between July 8 to August 24.

S8UL has announced rosters for eight titles at the EWC 2025.

'Jonny' Wirth won the virtual Bundesliga Club Championship, the Grand Final and the eChampions League last season, with all the titles featuring Electronic Arts' FIFAe, which is now called EA FC 24.

He has spent most of his professional career at the esports wings of two German football clubs, VfL Bochum (Bundesliga) and SC Paderborn (Bundesliga 2).

Later, the organisation entered the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) circuit by acquiring North American side BloodThirstyKings.

The roster qualified for the MLBB Mid-Season Cup (MSC) at EWC 2025 after winning the North America Challenger Tournament Spring Season.

S8UL roster for Esports World Cup 2025:

- Apex Legends: Rick Wirth (Sharky), Benjamin Spaseski (Jesko) and Tom Canty (Legacy)
- Call of Duty: Warzone: Colin Bowers-Wilson (Trikempathy), Braxton Trice (Braxtvn), and Ryder Skarzinski (Ryda)
- Chess: Nihal Sarin and Aravindh Chithambaram
- EAFC25: Jonas Wirth (Jonny) and Aaron Rivera (Happy)
- Mobile Legends Bang Bang: Michael Cosgun (MobaZane), Ian Hohl (FwydChickn), Jang Seong-hun (Hoon), Ziameth-Jei Caluya (ZIA), Vo Trung (Shark), and Carlos Ortega Vega (Bestplayer1)
- Starcraft II: Pyung Jae Koh (GuMiho)
- Tekken 8: Arja Gamoori (Sephiblack) and Nino Schwarz (Nino)
- Fatal Fury: Marcoantonio Malpica (Yurikov)

BEST VALORANT PLAYERS IN INDIA

ABHIRUP "LIGHTNINGFAST" CHOUDHURY

PRANAV "KOHLIII" KOHLI

GANESH "SKROSSI" GANGADHAR

SABYASACHI "ANTIDOTE" BOSE

AKRAM "RAWFIUL" VIRANI

SKYESPORTS BGMI CHAMPIONSHIP 2025 GRAND FINALS

Vasista Esports had a tournament to forget at the BGMI (Battlegrounds Mobile India) series 2025, finishing 18th among 32 teams. Before the Skyesports BGMI Championship 2025 Grand Finals, it announced a new roster, featuring captain Hector (Sohail Shaikh), Fury (Tushar Kumar), Scaryjod (Anshh) and Zin.

The change bore fruit as the side dominated the finals over three days, between May 16 and 18, finishing with three Chicken Dinners and 169 points to its name.

ESPORTS AT KHELO INDIA YOUTH GAMES

Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG) 2025 in Bihar this year saw esports played as a demonstration sport. Five titles were played at KIYG 2025 – BGMI, Street Fighter 6, Chess and eFootball, on console and on mobile – while six states took part in the event.

The host topped the medal tally with six medals (two gold, silver and bronze medals each), Maharashtra came second (one silver, three bronze), while Tamil Nadu finished third with a gold and a silver. Nagaland and Telangana bagged a gold medal each, while Arunachal finished sixth with one silver medal.

"Initiatives like these by the Sports Authority of India and the Government of Bihar reflect growing recognition for esports as a legitimate sport. This tournament has truly laid the foundation for identifying and nurturing grassroots talent," Akshat Rathee, Co-Founder & Managing Director, NODWIN Gaming, said.

Did you know? Former Germany and Real Madrid midfielder and FIFA World Cup 2014 winner Mesut Ozil owns an esports organisation called M10 esports, established in 2018.

NESC TO PICK TEAM INDIA FOR WEC 2025 BEGINS

The Esports Federation of India (ESFI) launched National Esports Championship 2025 (NESC25) on May 14 to select the Indian team for the 17th World Esports Championships (WEC). The national qualifiers, running online from May 22, will feature top Indian athletes competing in Counter-Strike 2 (CS2) and DOTA 2. Furthermore, last year's NESC winner in eFootball will be granted a direct slot at the WEC, following the game's removal from the previous edition's line-up.

The ESFI also finalised the Indian Tekken 8 roster for the upcoming BRICS Esports Championship 2025, set to take place in Moscow from May 28 to June 3m and will see participation from China, South Africa, the UAE and Turkey among other nations.

After a double-elimination qualifier featuring 60 players from across the country, Gurashish "Soul" Singh emerged victorious, followed closely by Shubham Khorwal.

WHO AM I?

I started my career with PUBG Mobile in 2018 and was cited as a gaming inspiration at the iconic Indian TV quiz show Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC).

The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Moin "NO_Chanc3" Ejaz

BUSINESS OF ESPORTS

OnePlus announced its entry into Indian esports through partnerships with three gaming teams – Gods Reign, K9, and Cincinnati Kids – with an aim to expand its presence in the gaming sector.

EASTER EGG 'NOOB'

Noob (or n00b) is short for 'newbie'. It's usually used to describe a rookie player or as a banter against a losing teammate in a game.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

From learning to leading

The transition from athlete to coach entails **exiting the known,** accepting the uncertain, and ultimately developing a new system tailored to the team's culture and needs.

Of the many soon-to-retire elite athletes worldwide, not everyone chooses to coach. And of those who do, not all will pursue it as a lifelong journey or become successful — let alone great — coaches. In the Indian context, a few examples include Rahul Dravid, Ravi Shastri, V. V. S. Laxman, Gautam Gambhir, Baskaran, P. T. Usha, P. Gopichand and Jaspal Rana, who have embarked on the difficult journey of coaching to train future players. Some continue to play and coach simultaneously — a rarity that reflects the player's commitment and the management's trust.

Some elite athletes and performers go into coaching to give back to their sport and to be a part of player development. Others do so because they have no other skills beyond knowing how to play their sport, or they have something else planned post-retirement. There are others who take it up because their sporting dream was cut short by deselection, a career-ending injury, or even politics.

The truth of the matter is that coaching positions are not open to all; selected individuals are recruited. Retired elites are headhunted to share their experience and wisdom, and to attract and inspire the next generation of players. There is often an inclination for their first job to be either with the first team they played for or the last one. Anything that serves the teams well, as long as their culture is maintained.

People become coaches for many different reasons and in many different ways. But do those reasons also explain why they continue with it? Take cricket as an example, with pace bowling as a specific and specialised case. Not everyone is Dennis Lillee — the player who brought sports science to cricket way back in the early 1970s, far ahead of his time, and to a large extent, still is. His adaptation from playing to coaching, supported by a multi-level knowledge base from theory to practice, is a life lesson in itself. He established a cult-like coaching system for fast bowlers in India, which transformed the entire narrative around producing tearaway pace bowlers in the country.

I know a few coaches who, though armed with a thorough knowledge base in theory and research, have not been able to make the cut into the system due to various reasons. The transition may not be smooth, despite their well-developed knowledge. There are quite a few coaches who were recruited to coach the national team, and despite doing their due diligence before accepting the job, ended up saying adios to coaching — and the sport altogether — within a year.

Others have quit coaching entirely because their wisdom did not translate into the desired results, or they were unable to comprehend or support someone else's dream. They may have been victims of circumstance, leading to an abrupt end to their careers — something that can continue to rankle in their minds and hinder their coaching philosophy.

Some cases are even more confusing — such as athletes who begin coaching immediately after retirement but soon decide to return to playing, and then retire again only to return to coaching, repeating the cycle on and on. This yo-yo effect can be frustrating, painful, and exhausting for any player-turned-coach.

I know of an early-career coach who screamed at his U19 players, telling them they were "ruining his reputation" after a below-par performance in a match. What reputation could the coach have when he had only been coaching for a few months? Some retired elite athletes-turned-coaches struggle to work with athletes who are not like them — who do not share the same dreams, commitment, determination, or even physiology. This represents a significant gap to be addressed.

The job insecurity and low

The right fit: Gautam Gambhir and Rahul Dravid, the current and former coaches of the Indian men's cricket team, had outstandingly successful careers as players. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

financial compensation when entering coaching at the youth and developmental levels, especially after an elite athletic career, can be financially and emotionally challenging for coaches. Many don't fully understand their mindset — whether they see themselves as good enough in their new role as a coach, after having been among the best as an athlete.

The knowledge we have about the athlete-to-coach transition is somewhat skewed, as it largely comes from a few countries and a few professional, high-performance sports. For instance, we also don't know much about the transition for the many non-elite athletes who get invited or volunteer to coach. A good coach does not necessarily have to have been a good player, and vice versa. There are few exceptions in the world who have been world-beaters both as players and as coaches — many of them found in football, athletics, hockey, cricket, badminton, and so on.

Recent research on elite athletes transitioning into coaching reveals how challenging it is to go from being the flower — with all attention focused on them — to becoming the gardener who cares for others. Research has shown that to move from *Me* to *We*, one must let go of the elite identity, ego, and mindset — something that is neither an overnight transformation nor an effortless shift.

Apart from their identities, retired elite athletes-turned-coaches often carry with them the methods of their former coaches, sometimes even perpetuating the same abuse they experienced as athletes. Even for those with formal coach education, the shift in identity, mindset, and practice from their playing days remains a significant challenge.

The transition from athlete to coach entails exiting the known, accepting the unknown and uncertain, and ultimately developing a new system tailored to the team's culture and needs. In this process, coach education, development, and support can serve as a starting point. Having the right support staff is also key to a coach's success. Else, it can lead to injuries and misleading narratives about the team, often aimed at safeguarding contracts.

Many coaches are unaware of the pitfalls that an incompetent physio or strength and conditioning (S&C) coach can create. I have seen, many times, players getting injured at crucial moments and being short charged due to the support staff's lack of knowledge.

In some cases, support staff are brought in based on player recommendations, which can seriously damage the team's entire ecosystem. Coaches must be vigilant when selecting the right professionals, doing their due diligence on each member of the support staff.

To avoid the above-mentioned issues, coaches need to educate themselves in the process — identifying the weak links in the team and hiring a robust team to pursue world titles. New toolboxes must be created to suit each coach's philosophy and approach — which is a no-brainer.

Frustration as careers wind down

To curse what you love most is not unusual — frustration and an awareness of **approaching mortality** will do it.

Suresh Menon

To understand that love and hate are on the same continuum, you do not have to read about spouses killing each other or lovers destroying themselves. Hatred isn't the opposite of love, it's just a variation of it. They both mean you have passionate feelings. I don't know who said that but you can see examples on the sports field.

Troubled times: Serbian Novak Djokovic has recently split from his coach Andy Murray. AP

As 37-year-old Novak Djokovic's career winds down, he has been struggling on practice courts, not just matches. He split from his coach Andy Murray. A video of Djokovic cursing his sport in Madrid (in Serbian) went viral. As Murray handed him the tennis balls, Djokovic reacted with "F*** sport, f*** tennis, f*** everything else." To curse what you love most is not unusual — frustration and an awareness of approaching mortality will do it.

Most top players begin as passionate lovers of the sport they excel at. As a boy Sachin Tendulkar slept with a cricket bat beside him, Maradona with a football under his arm when he was three. Even the casual weekend player will have stories of when he was first given a racquet or a ball or a bat and how he worshipped it. Not all of them grow up to become international stars.

"I hate the sight of tennis balls," Jimmy Connors once said, partly as a joke, "and that's why I try to hit the hell out of them."

Djokovic started playing tennis at four when his father gifted him a mini racquet. A pink one, as investigative journalists discovered years later. In the war years in Serbia, as the NATO bombs fell around him, Djokovic found places to practice, including a disused swimming pool.

In the introduction to his autobiography, he explains how the odds were heavily stacked against him. "A boy like me, growing up in Serbia, becoming a tennis champion? It was unlikely in even the best of circumstances. And it became ever more unlikely when the bombs started dropping," he wrote. Still, when he was seven, Djokovic told his interviewer on Serbian TV, "The goal for me is to become the world No. 1."

This has been a season of goodbyes — actually, most seasons are, but this involves some personal heroes and friends. Most careers beyond 35 in sport are probably bonus runs. Rohit Sharma is gone, as is Virat Kohli, from the format he loves most. Simona Halep, Tyson Fury have also quit their sports while question marks hang over the likes of Tiger Woods, Venus Williams and M. S. Dhoni.

Generational changes are taking place in sports all the time, and that period of uncertainty as the old order changes and the new hasn't fully established itself is part of the excitement too. Will Jannik Sinner finish with as many Grand Slam titles as Djokovic, who has 24? Will Shubman Gill be a like-for-like replacement for Kohli?

It is easy to understand Djokovic's exasperation. Most careers end in frustration, with top athletes cursing themselves for hanging on that bit too long!

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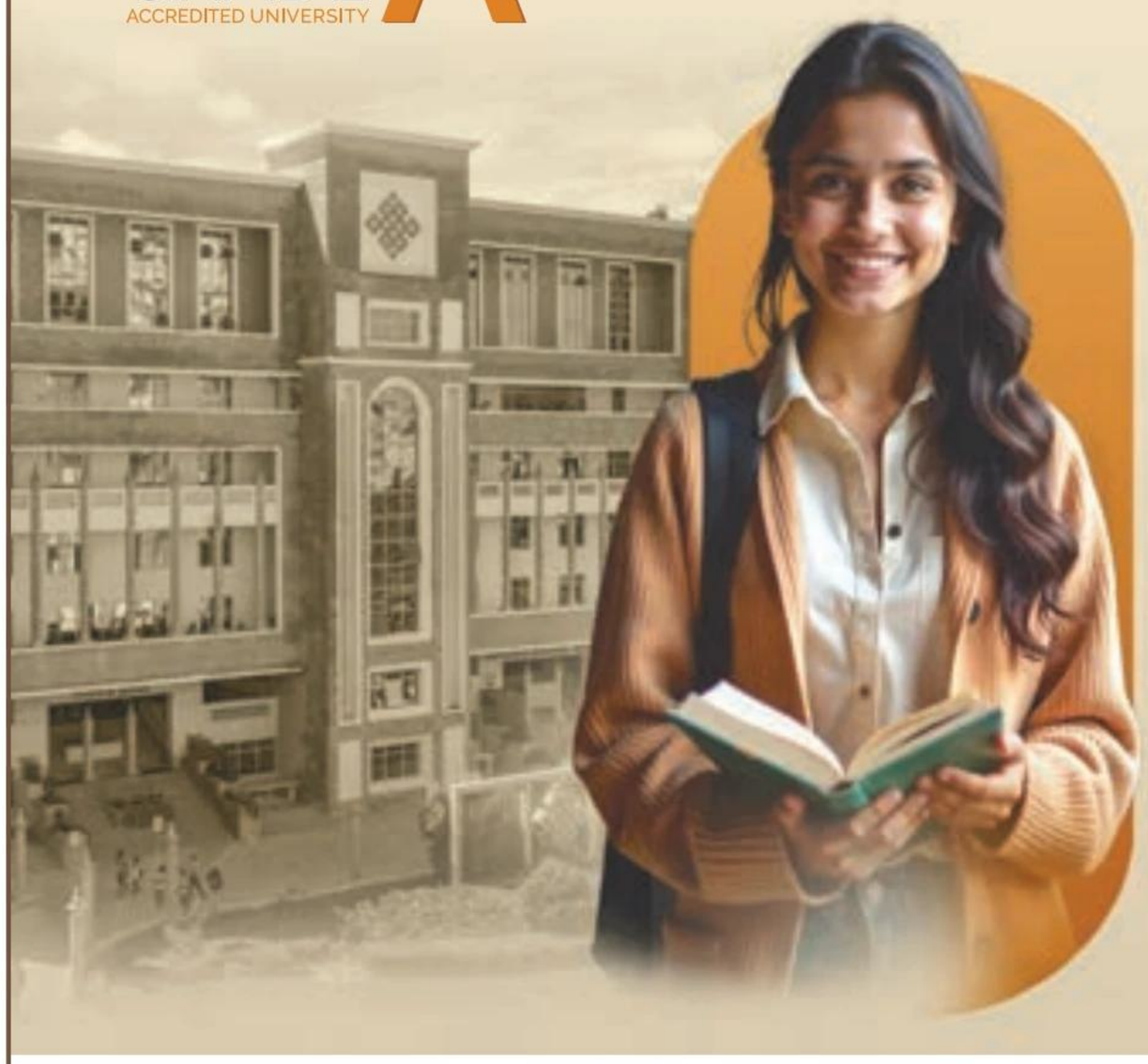

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