SPORTSTAR

SATURDAY, APRIL 26, 2025
₹125

FOLLOW US:
SPORTSTARWEB

POSTER
RAJAT PATIDAR

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Relive the drama

SHAHBAZ AHMED

A day with the hockey legend

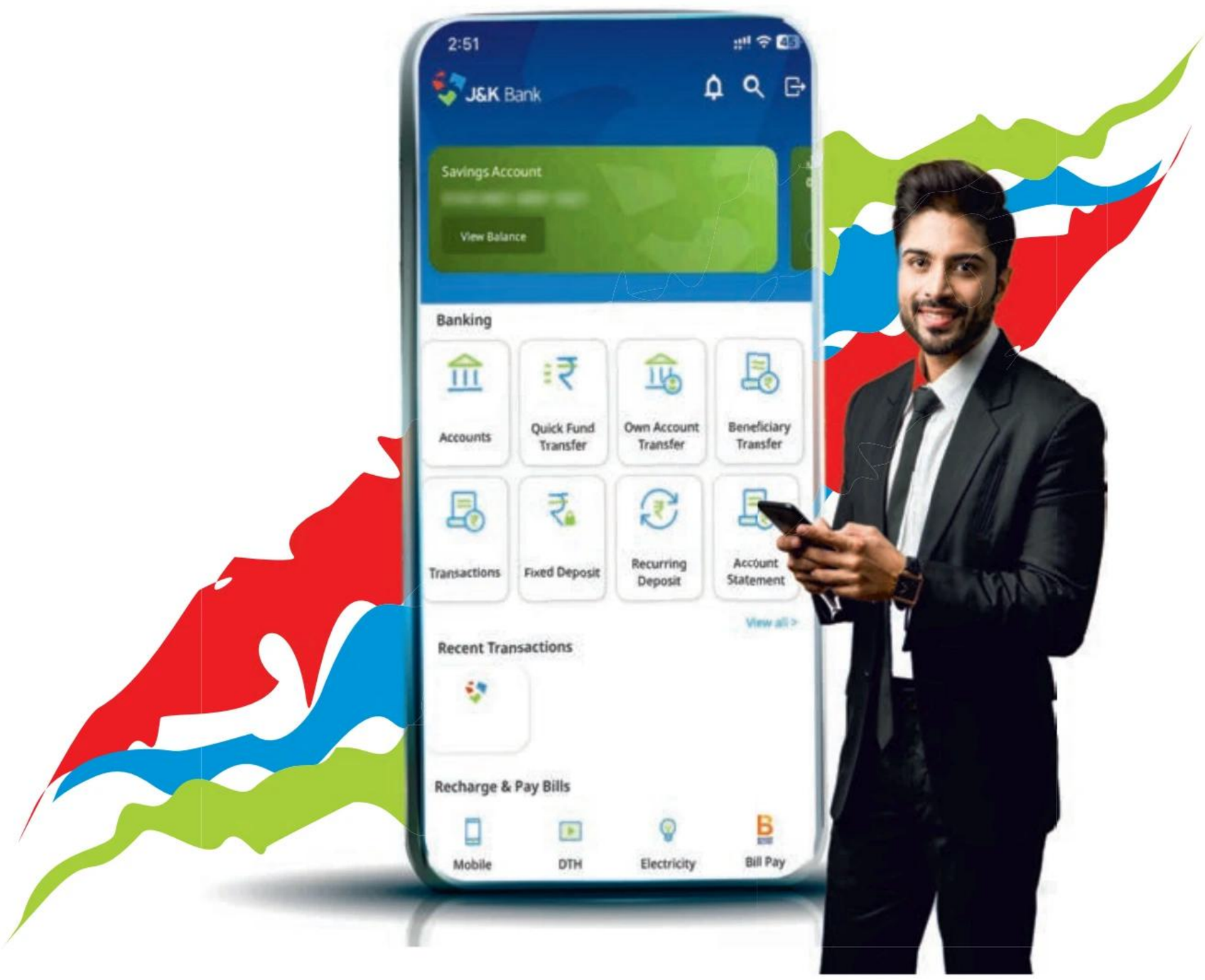
WALL OF WISDOM

In an exclusive interview with *Sportstar*, Rahul Dravid insists it is important to ensure that league cricket 'coexists' with international cricket, and much more....

GeNext

Banking with a Human Touch

We forge Relationships powered by
Cutting-Edge Technology



J&K Bank
Serving To Empower

Your Bank
Since 1938

Deposit Schemes | Savings Schemes | Retail Banking | Digital Banking | Corporate Services | Business Accounts | SME Loans | NRI services

FOR ASSISTANCE CALL **1800 890 2122** LOG ON TO **www.jkbank.com**| FOLLOW US ON

CONTENTS

Follow us: sportstarweb

Saturday, April 26, 2025
FOR THE FORTNIGHT APRIL 13-26, 2025

Volume 48 Number 9 ISSN 0971 359x 100 Pages

51

MINISTER OF STATE FOR SPORTS, RAKSHA KHADSE, OUTLINES THE ROADMAP TO BOOST INDIAN SPORTS

Indian Premier League

18 **Through the lens**
Images from last fortnight's action in the league

32 **Data analysis**
Sunrisers Hyderabad's IPL metamorphosis: Evolution or overcorrection?

Read more...

64 **Big interview**
Shahbaz Ahmed on the golden days and Pakistan hockey's recent struggles

84 **Sarpreet Singh**
Meet the Kiwi, of Indian origin, who will compete at the FIFA World Cup

10
Cover Story
Rahul Dravid

The former India captain, back with the Royals, reflects on coaching, continuity and cricket's changing landscape.

Cover: Rahul Dravid (Rajasthan Royals)

Announcement

Dear readers,
With inflation rising and production costs following suit, we've had to take the difficult decision to revise Sportstar's cover price to ₹125. This modest increase will help us continue doing what we love — bringing you the most compelling sports stories from around the globe, while always keeping a keen eye on our homegrown heroes. We are grateful for your continued love and support.
Thank you for staying with us in this journey.
— Editor

Poster: Rajat Patidar (PTI); Pages 43-50

www.sportstar.thehindu.com
mail to: sportstar@thehindu.co.in

Published by Nirmala Lakshman, Kasturi Buildings, 859, 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600 002 and Printed by SDT Rao at Kala Jyothi Process Private Ltd, Plot no CFC-1&2, Survey No 18, E-City, SEZ & General Industrial Park, Raviryal & Srinagar (Village), Maheswaram(M), R.R.Dist, Telangana - 501359 on behalf of THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., Chennai-600 002.

Editor: Ayon Sengupta (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRP Act).
All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited.

Disclaimer: Readers are requested to verify & make appropriate enquiries to satisfy themselves about the veracity of an advertisement before responding to any published in this magazine.
THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., the Publisher & Owner of this magazine, does not vouch for the authenticity of any advertisement or advertiser or for any of the advertiser's products and/or services. In no event can the Owner, Publisher, Printer, Editor, Director/s, Employees of this magazine/company be held responsible/liable in any manner whatsoever for any claims and/or damages for advertisements in this magazine.
Air Surcharge:
Colombo ₹ 15.00 | Port Blair ₹ 10.00

Editorial Team
Editor: Ayon Sengupta
Convergence Editor: V. V. Rajasekhara Rao
Design: R. Ravikannan
Editorial Consultant: Vijay Lokapally
Sr. Assistant Editor: Shayan Acharya
Assistant Editor: Jonathan Selvaraj
Chief Sub-Editor: Karan Pillai, Ayan Acharya, Aashin Prasad, Santadeep Dey, Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan
Sr. Sub-Editor/Sr. Reporter: Saikat Chakraborty, Dhruva Prasad, Neeladri Bhattacharjee, Aneesh Dey, Pranay Rajiv, Nihit Sachdeva, Abhishek Saini
Sub-Editor/Reporter: Nigamanth P, Anish P, Sahil Mathur, Joan Mathew Jacob, Rajdeep Saha, Kavita Menon
Senior Multimedia Producer: Sivasankar A

For Subscription:
Email: customercare@thehindu.co.in
No: 18001021878

For Advertisement
National Sales Head
Satish K Mendon
Satish.mendon@thehindu.co.in
Region
Delhi – Antesh Kumar Verma
+91 9818798519
Bengaluru – Gurunatha Reddy
+91 9845529981
Chennai – Siva Kumar M
+91 9841585969

OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

TRUMP'S AMERICA: A HOST NATION LIKE NO OTHER

Trump's tariffs and travel bans **threaten** the 2026 FIFA World Cup, forcing FIFA to navigate political tensions and uncertainty over team participation and fan movement.

In Donald Trump's America, it seems, everything is up for grabs — nothing is sacred, nothing sacrosanct. The US President nurtures the unconstitutional fantasy of a third term — unbothered by the reality that the US Constitution allows a President a maximum of two stints in office. Not willing to be cloistered just in his own country, he is also determined to dismantle the global order we had grown comfortable with.

The American President recently announced April 2 as "Liberation Day," imposing a blanket 10 per cent tariff on every country. And if you're on his bad list — China with a 54 per cent penalty and India with 26 — you'll foot an even heavier bill. As other nations retaliated with reciprocal measures, global stock markets tumbled into what financial analysts describe as a complete meltdown.

Sport, too, will soon face his unpredictable touch. With two international competitions heading to the US — the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics — the sporting world is desperate not to offend the often-erratic leader.

The 48-team FIFA World Cup, scheduled for June and July 2026, must navigate Trump's fickle decision-making first. Gianni Infantino, the FIFA president, has already made his pilgrimage to the White House, but soon he might be asked to perform a delicate diplomatic dance to ensure that every qualified country can participate in the tournament, despite the President's ever-shifting rules about who is — and isn't — welcome on American soil.

Already qualified, Iran might miss out on a fourth consecutive World Cup appearance, as it appears on a red list of 10 countries whose citizens are set to be barred from entering the United States under the Trump administration. According to the current schedule, the only loophole seems to be placing the Asian nation as the third-seeded team in Group A (one of 12 groups of four teams each), ensuring all its group-stage matches occur safely across the border in co-host Mexico. Iran would continue to play in Mexico until the quarterfinals, but only if it wins the group. However, it has never progressed beyond the group stage in six previous World Cup appearances.

Cuba, which is in the second round of the CONCACAF qualifiers, might face a similar conundrum if it secures one of the available slots — three direct and two inter-confederation play-off spots — to qualify for its first World Cup since 1938. It received three points from its home game in the qualifiers after Cayman Islands forfeited the match fearing potential travel risk for Cayman's players, a number of whom either study or train in the US.

The play-offs are scheduled for March 2026, and a last-minute change in fixtures, sure to throw organisers into a tizzy, can never be ruled out.

Seven years ago, when the joint bid of the United States, Canada, and Mexico was awarded the World Cup, the overriding theme was "the unity of the three nations," as articulated by Carlos Cordeiro, then-president of the US Soccer Federation. But much has changed since, and souring ties between the co-hosts and neighbours could bring challenges that FIFA had never envisaged.

"Oh, I think it's going to make it more exciting," Trump said during an Oval Office appearance with Infantino last month. "Tension's a good thing."

And tensions are indeed mounting between the three nations, as Trump provocatively talks about making Canada the 51st State and conducting an immigration crackdown at the Mexican border.

The foremost casualties of this trade and cold war might be football fans, as immigration policies and a reduction in government services in the US, under the DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) programme, could complicate movement between the host nations.

POORNIMA UNIVERSITY

OFFICIAL UNIVERSITY PARTNER

RAJASTHAN ROYALS

ADMISSIONS OPEN 2025

BBA Sports Management

B.Sc. Exercise & Sports Science

Begin your journey to mastering the world of Sports &

Get a chance to intern with the Royals

HALLA BOL!
YOUR DREAMS OUR GOAL

Programs also offered on

- Engineering
- Exercise & Sports Science
- Computer Science & Applications
- Journalism & Mass Communication
- Planning & Architecture
- Design, Visual Arts, Gaming & Animation
- Management & Commerce
- Hotel Management
- Science & Humanities
- Public Health & Yoga

+91 8875666617

+91 8875666618

www.poornima.edu.in

Scan to Apply!

Poornima University, IS 2027-31, Ramchandrapura, PO Vidhani Vatika Sitapura Extension, Jaipur, Rajasthan (India), Pin-code : 303905

« His breathing is back to normal, his wounds are healing, and he is definitely enjoying all the love he is receiving."
– Danielle Collins, who has adopted a dog she rescued while playing at the Miami Open »

« It was really tough initially to find out the extent of my injury, that I was going to have to have surgery ... But once it was done and it was successful, I was just focused on coming back stronger.
– Arsenal's Bukayo Saka has said he feels mentally refreshed after missing three months through injury »

1st

Min Woo Lee won his first PGA Tour title, holding off late charges from the chasing pack to win the Houston Open — and joining an exclusive club with the victory. Lee had led by five shots on the back nine, but surges from Gary Woodland — who went four-under on his last four holes — and Scottie Scheffler — who also had four straight birdies on the back nine — made it a closer affair. Although Lee bogeyed the 16th after hitting into the water, the Australian was able to finish with two pars and maintain his one-shot lead, tapping home from close range on the final hole to seal his debut PGA Tour victory. The 26-year-old bent over and pumped his fists multiple times when the win was confirmed, finishing on a 20-under 260 after four rounds, breaking the tournament record by four shots.

2025 class

Ten-time NBA All-Star Carmelo Anthony, eight-time All-Star Dwight Howard, and women's basketball legend Sue Bird are set to be enshrined in the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame as part of the 2025 class.
Also earning a place in basketball history is the United States' gold medal-winning 2008 Olympic men's team — famously dubbed the "Redeem Team" after rebounding from its unexpected failure to claim gold in 2004.

STUNNING VICTORY

Teenager Jakub Mensik stunned Novak Djokovic to claim his first ATP Tour title at the Miami Open, denying the Serbian legend his 100th career singles trophy. The 19-year-old Czech delivered a fearless performance, defeating Djokovic 7-6(4), 7-6(4) to secure the biggest win of his young career. AFP

ADVERTISEMENT

SPORTS DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY OF TAMIL NADU:

BUDGET ANNOUNCEMENTS 2025-26: FUELLING THE FUTURE

The Youth Welfare and Sports Development Department of Tamil Nadu along with the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu is proud to unveil its visionary budget for 2025-26, marking a transformative leap to better its previous track records and sustain its position as the sporting powerhouse of the country.

With a strong commitment to propelling athletes towards success and bringing honour to both the state and the nation, this year's budget unveils innovative initiatives aimed at unlocking greater potential, improving infrastructure, and delivering substantial gains for Tamil Nadu on both national and international stages.

Since the honourable Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu took office in December 2022, under the inspiring leadership of the honourable Chief Minister, the state has made remarkable progress in the field of sports, capturing attention not only throughout India but across the entire Indian subcontinent. While there was a complete overhaul of the existing infrastructure on one hand on a mission mode, new infrastructure was established across the state on the other. The state has also hosted prestigious international events, including the 44th Chess Olympiad 2022, the Asian Hockey Champions Trophy 2023, the World Surfing League QS 3000, the South Asian Junior Athletic Championships 2024, and South Asia's first-ever Formula 4 Street Night Race, earning its reputation as the "Sporting Capital of India."

Building on this impressive momentum, the Budget Announcements for 2025-26 aim to elevate Tamil Nadu's standing in the sports arena even further. With a record allocation, this budget outlines a comprehensive strategy to maintain Tamil Nadu's position as a national sports leader.

INFRASTRUCTURE: BLUEPRINT FOR SPORTING EXCELLENCE

Tamil Nadu has taken significant strides in establishing itself as a frontrunner in developing cutting-edge sports infrastructure, setting a high standard for excellence nationwide. The state's para-athletes have been achieving remarkable feats, consistently winning medals in both national and international arenas. To further nurture and support emerging talent, the Budget has proposed the creation of dedicated Para Sports Arenas in five more districts. This initiative builds on the existing facilities in five districts currently under development, offering enhanced training opportunities for para-athletes to excel.

In a noteworthy effort to boost sports at the grassroots throughout Tamil Nadu, plans are underway to construct Mini Stadia in every Assembly Constituency. This initiative, fuelled by a vision for increased accessibility to sports facilities, has already made headway in constituencies that previously lacked such facilities. A total of 40 Mini Stadia are slated for construction across 40 Assembly Constituencies at a total cost of Rs 120 crore. These Mini Stadia are designed to provide local communities with improved access to sports facilities, catering to a variety of athletic events while encouraging community participation thereby fostering a culture of health and wellness within the region.

Additionally, Salem and Ramanathapuram will soon benefit from a state-of-the-art Synthetic Athletic Turf, complete with a top-quality football field and dedicated jumps and throwing sector. Meanwhile, the Swimming Pool within the Aquatic Gymnastics Badminton (AGB) Complex in Velachery is set for a significant upgrade to meet Olympic standards.

The Sports Hostels run by SDAT have long been a stronghold for developing sporting talent across the state. Excitingly, a new three-storyed Sports Hostel is set to be built in Madurai, aimed at nurturing aspiring athletes. Furthermore, another modern Sports Hostel will soon rise next to the newly inaugurated Kalaignar Centenary Boxing Academy in Gopalapuram, Chennai. Alongside these new infrastructure projects, several existing facilities are also gearing up for impressive transformations. The Integrated Sports Complex at Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium is scheduled for significant enhancements, while the Anna Swimming Pool in Chepauk will be upgraded to boost its appeal and functionality. Additionally, the iconic Nehru Stadium in Coimbatore and the SDAT Mogappair Complex are both set for comprehensive revamps, promising to rejuvenate these iconic venues and elevate the overall sporting experience for athletes and fans alike.

GIVING WINGS TO SPORTING ASPIRATIONS

Athletes trained under the Sports Hostels of SDAT have gone on to secure medals at both national and international levels. To further support these talents in their quest for excellence, this year's budget has launched an innovative Competition Exposure Grant. This initiative aims to ease the financial pressures tied to participating in various sporting events by covering essential expenses such as travel, accommodation, entry fees, and other related costs. By doing this, it paves the way for more athletes to compete, significantly boosting their chances of winning medals and raising the profile of sports in the state.

The Player Support Schemes of SDAT have played a crucial role in fostering a wealth of talent in the state. In a proactive move to enhance the impact of these initiatives, the budget has announced plans to considerably increase the number of beneficiaries. Specifically, the ELITE Scheme will expand from 25 to 30 beneficiaries, allowing more athletes to access the resources they need. Additionally, the Mission International Medals Scheme (MIMS) will see its athlete roster grow from 75 to an ambitious 125. Moreover, the Champions Development Scheme (CDS) is set for significant expansion, with the number of beneficiaries set to double from 100 to 200 in the upcoming financial year. Through this move, SDAT is paving the way for a brighter future in sports, ensuring that the state and the country continue to shine on the global stage.

To offset the financial stress faced by athletes who sustain injuries while competing at State and National levels—such as in the National Games, National Championships, All India Inter-University Games, Khelo India Youth Games, and Khelo India University Games, as well as other events organised by recognized federations — a comprehensive Insurance Scheme has been proposed. This initiative aims to provide coverage for 25,000 athletes participating in these competitions, allowing them to concentrate on their performance without the added concern of potential medical expenses.

PREFERRED DESTINATION: WHERE THE WORLD COMES TO PLAY

Tamil Nadu has firmly established itself as the preferred destination for international sporting events, showcasing its vibrant culture and hospitality to the world. Continuing this illustrious trend, the state is set to host the highly anticipated Junior Men's Hockey World Cup 2025, a monumental event that promises to be one of the biggest highlights of the sporting calendar.

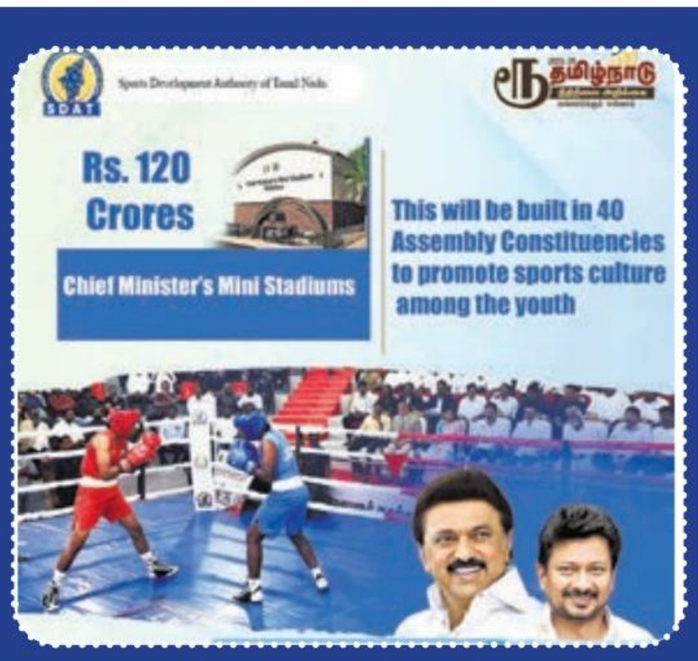
Following closely, the Squash World Cup 2025 will take place, building on the successful hosting of the Squash World Cup 2023, where the thrills of world-class competition captivated fans. Moreover, Tamil Nadu will also illuminate the e-sports landscape with the Chennai e-Sports Global Championship—a groundbreaking event tailored by the state to become the largest e-sports tournament in the country, drawing top teams from around the globe to compete for glory and recognition.

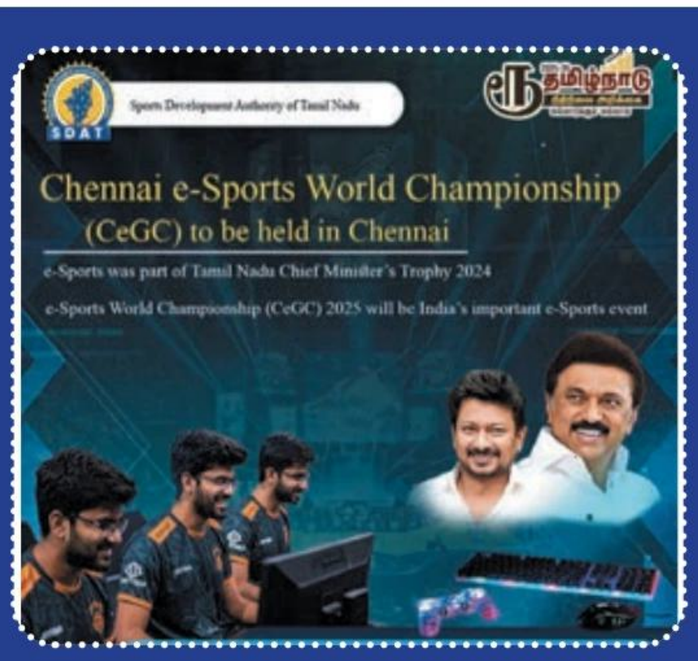
Additionally, the region will play host to the Asian Surfing Championship and the Asian Youth Sailing Championship, both of which promise to bring together the best young talents and seasoned professionals from across Asia, enhancing the competitive landscape. Rounding out the lineup is the renowned IRONMAN Challenge, a gruelling test of endurance that showcases the spirit of athleticism and determination. With such a diverse array of events, Tamil Nadu is poised to make an indelible mark on the global sports stage.

In addition, the state is poised to proudly host the Tamil Nadu Sports Science Conclave (TASCon 2.0), a significant event that builds upon the remarkable success of the inaugural TASCon held in 2023. This upcoming conclave promises to be an exciting platform for discussions, innovations, and advancements in sports science, further enhancing the region's reputation as a hub for excellence in sports.

The 2025-26 Budget for Youth Welfare and Sports Development in Tamil Nadu is a bold and visionary step toward transforming the state into a powerhouse of sports and youth empowerment. By implementing these transformative initiatives, Tamil Nadu is not just investing in sports—it is investing in its future champions, leaders, and changemakers, ensuring that the state emerges as a national and global contender in the world of sports and youth development.

ADVERTISEMENT





BUDGET ANNOUNCEMENTS 2025-26

INFRASTRUCTURE

- Establishment of Chief Minister's Mini Stadia in 40 Assembly Constituencies in the State at a cumulative budget of Rs 120 crores
- Establishment of Chief Minister's Youth Sports Arena at all Districts Sports Complexes at an estimated budget of Rs 19 crores
- Laying of International Standard Synthetic Athletic Track with Natural Football Turf at District Sports Complexes in Salem and Ramanathapuram at a total budget of Rs 25 crores
- Establishment of Para Sports Arenas in 5 more districts of Tamil Nadu at an estimated budget of Rs 7.5 crores
- Construction of a three-storeyed Sports Hostel in District Sports Complex, Madurai at an estimated budget of Rs 6 crores
- Establishment of a Shaded Multi-purpose Sports facility at Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium, Chennai at an estimated budget of Rs 3.5 crores
- Establishment of a Sports Hostel at Kalaignar Centenary Boxing Academy, Gopalapuram, Chennai at an estimated budget of Rs 3 crores
- Establishment of a Dedicated Throwing Sector at B Ground, Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium, Chennai at an estimated budget of Rs 2.5 crores
- Establishment of a dedicated hostel for Para Athletes
- Renovation and Upgradation of Swimming and Diving Pools at AGB Complex, Velachery, Chennai to Olympic Standards at an estimated budget of Rs 18 crores
- Renovation and Upgradation of 25 existing Chief Minister's Mini Stadia across the State at a cumulative budget of Rs 15 crores
- Relaying of Synthetic Athletic Track at the Integrated Sports Complex, Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium, Chennai at an estimated budget of Rs 8 crores
- Renovation of Spectators Gallery in Nehru Stadium, Coimbatore at an estimated budget of Rs 5 crores
- Renovation and Upgradation of Anna Swimming Pool, Chepauk, Chennai at an estimated budget of Rs 3 crores
- Revamp of SDAT Mogappair Sports Complex at an estimated budget of Rs 3 crores

SUPPORT SYSTEM

- Increase in number of beneficiaries under Sportspersons Support Schemes – ELITE, MIMS and CDS at a cumulative budget of Rs 38 crores
- Introduction of a dedicated Competition Exposure Grant for SDAT Sports Hostel Students
- Insurance for 25,000 athletes from Tamil Nadu participating in State / National Level Competitions
- Formation of Youth Clubs across all Panchayats of the State
- Conduct of Tamil Nadu Sports Science Conclave (TASCon2.0)

SPORTS EVENTS ON THE ANVIL

- Conduct of Men's Junior Hockey World Cup 2025 at an estimated budget of Rs 55 crores
- Conduct of Chief Minister's Youth Sports Festival across all blocks and districts of Tamil Nadu at an estimated budget of Rs 45 crores
- Conduct of Squash World Cup 2025
- Conduct of Chennai e-Sports Global Championship
- Conduct of Asian Surfing Championship
- Conduct of Asian Youth Sailing Championship
- Conduct of IRONMAN Challenge

«IT IS LIKE RAISING CHILDREN»

Rahul Dravid reflects on coaching, continuity and cricket's changing landscape

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

From traditional red-ball cricket to the immense popularity of T20s, Rahul Dravid has witnessed the evolution of the game from close quarters. The former India captain and erstwhile national team coach is now back with Rajasthan Royals as its head coach in the Indian Premier League after a decade.

He believes that, going forward, it is important to ensure that league cricket 'coexists' with international cricket.

In an exclusive interview with *Sportstar*, Dravid spoke about his return to the Royals as head coach, the rise of young cricketers, and why he was not particularly in favour of the Impact Player rule during his stint with the Indian team.

You returned to the IPL as a coach after a decade. How has the experience been? What are the changes that you see?

Yeah, it's good to be back at RR after so many years. When you look at the league over the last decade, you can see how much it has grown. It was always a big event, but its popularity has soared even further. When you travel to different cities, the scale and impact of the league are even more evident.

The IPL has become significantly bigger and, in many ways, more professional. The level of preparation and planning has increased considerably compared to earlier years.

Teams are now investing heavily in extended support staff and working with players not just during the IPL but throughout the year. There's a continuous engagement with players, which wasn't as common in the past.

The overall standard of the league keeps improving. The growth of Indian talent over the last decade has played a major role in this. You can see its impact in our white-ball performances at the international level. Since the strength of the IPL is largely driven by local players, their improvement has directly contributed to raising the league's quality.

This year's auction saw the Royals part ways with some notable players and focus on acquiring young Indian players. What was the idea behind it?

Over the last three years, RR built a really strong team and enjoyed a successful period. Letting go of some key players was tough, but that's the nature of the league.

The rules allow teams to retain only six players, which naturally leads to difficult decisions. In an ideal

Pic: RAJASTHAN ROYALS

INSTEAD OF REPLACING ANYTHING, THE IPL HAS EXPANDED THE DOMESTIC SEASON. IT HAS ALSO ELEVATED TOURNAMENTS LIKE THE SYED MUSHTAQ ALI TROPHY AND, TO SOME EXTENT, THE VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY, WHICH ARE NOW SEEN AS STEPPING STONES TO THE IPL

Watershed moment: Rahul Dravid led India to its first ICC trophy in 11 years with the T20 World Cup triumph last June. K. R. DEEPAK

scenario, many teams, including RR, would have liked to retain more. The auction reflected the value of the released players, and given budget constraints, it was never realistic to bring back the same squad.

That's the reality of this league — every three years, a reset happens. It was disappointing to part ways with some players, but we made a commitment to the franchise, the players, and the fans by retaining the maximum number allowed.

Most of the players we retained have been with the franchise for years and have grown within this setup. In Sanju (Samson)'s case, it has been much longer. This felt like the right time to trust these players with the responsibility of leading the franchise forward.

Although they are young in age, they have already gained significant experience within our system. Retaining them allows us to plan for the next two cycles, depending on future rules. It's rewarding to see players who developed under our care staying on.

That's what any franchise aims for. This auction gave us the opportunity to prioritise continuity. Of course, it came at the cost of releasing some senior and experienced players, which was difficult. But these are the rules, and every team has to make similar choices.

Fans may feel disappointed, but the system ensures fairness. It also provides players and teams with a fresh start, which is an integral part of the league's evolution.

After 17 years, do you think that an auction comes at the expense of a core?

I understand the sentiments behind this because we've been through the frustration of the auction cycle — having to let players go and then rebuilding. We always try to retain our core and build around it.

But the auction system is what keeps the league highly competitive. The ability to rebuild every three or four years ensures that no team dominates indefinitely. Any team can beat any other, and that's what makes the IPL so exciting.

The salary cap and equal purse for all teams further enhance this competitiveness. While there are valid arguments on both sides about the effectiveness of an auction, there's no clear-cut answer.

As a coach, you want to keep your core intact for as long as possible. The debate over whether the cycle should last three years or five years is always open.

The league now permits teams to retain six players, the highest ever. But a large auction every three years ensures that teams can reassess their squads and remain competitive. It's also beneficial for players.

THE AUCTION SYSTEM IS WHAT KEEPS THE LEAGUE HIGHLY COMPETITIVE. THE ABILITY TO REBUILD EVERY THREE OR FOUR YEARS ENSURES THAT NO TEAM DOMINATES INDEFINITELY. ANY TEAM CAN BEAT ANY OTHER, AND THAT'S WHAT MAKES THE IPL SO EXCITING

Many players spend three years at a franchise without getting enough chances. A new team might offer them better opportunities, which is crucial for their careers. If a player gets stuck in a franchise for six to nine years without regular game time, it could harm their development.

For young Indian players especially, re-entering the auction provides a fresh start. Even a three- or four-year stint at a single franchise can sometimes limit a player's growth if they would have fit better into another team's balance or strategy.

There are arguments on both sides, and finding a perfect solution is difficult. But the results speak for themselves — the league remains competitive, different teams win, and the playoffs aren't dominated by just one or two sides. That balance keeps fans engaged and ensures the tournament's continued success.

RR has always focused on nurturing young talent like Riyan Parag, Dhruv Jurel, and now Vaibhav Suryavanshi. How do you develop youngsters in a high-pressure, results-driven IPL environment?

A large part of that is just the philosophy of the franchise. Since the early years, we have always tried to identify and develop — not necessarily just young talent — but those who are probably not as recognised.

I wouldn't call Pravin Tambe young, right? He was someone who got into the franchise. 'Young' is, of course, just one operative word, but it's about identifying talent that has probably not been seen by many.

We put a lot of time and effort into doing that. And I think a large part of the franchise's mission is not only to develop talent on the cricket field but also beyond it.

Even when you look at our marketing, sales, media, and digital teams, many of them are filled with young talent that has gone on to make a difference. You often bump into people outside cricketing circles who started here and are now part of other leagues or teams, having progressed in their careers.

Manoj (Badale) has always been

Close quarters: From Under-19 to Team India, Dravid has had a front-row view of Yashasvi Jaiswal's rise in Indian cricket. K. MURALI KUMAR

clear about this. A key part of Rajasthan Royals' ethos is to grow cricketers, but also to grow people — not just within cricket but across the organisation. It's deeply embedded in our DNA.

That's something we'd like to believe differentiates us from some other franchises. Of course, other teams are also trying to do the same, which is great for the league. But it remains an important part of the Royals' philosophy, reflected in the players we choose to retain.

You have been associated with the national setup for a long time, first with NCA and then the national team? How does your role at a franchise vary from those?

Some aspects of a franchise team are slightly different, which is natural. In a franchise, your connection with the players is much shorter — just about two months.

Of course, we do hold camps and maintain some level of contact throughout the year. But there are also additional responsibilities beyond cricket. As a head coach, you interact more with ownership and work closely with the sports science team.

That said, coaching teams, at their core, function similarly. It's always about working with people — the players and support staff.

The main difference is in the structure and timeframe. With the national team or at the NCA, you have more time to develop players and build long-term connections. The focus isn't on just one tournament.

In the IPL, however, your primary goal is to get the best out of your squad in a short, intense period and put the team in the best position to win the league.

As India head coach
2024 T20 World Cup win
2023 ODI World Cup finalist
2023 Asia Cup win
2022 T20 World Cup semifinalist
2023 World Test Championship (WTC) finalist

You've nurtured talents like Parag and Yashasvi Jaiswal at the U-19 and NCA level. How different was it managing them as a coach in the senior team or in an IPL set up, as compared to their junior days?

It's terrific to see these youngsters grow into full-fledged professionals and even senior players within their teams.

That growth is exactly what you look for as a coach of a junior or Under-19 team. You want to see how the players you've worked with evolve — not just in their game but also as individuals.

Naturally, the conversations you have with them now are very different from when they were 16 or 17. As a coach, you must adapt to their growth.

At the U-19 level, you often take on a more instructional role, guiding them closely. But at this stage, they are experienced professionals. Your role shifts from instructing to supporting. As a coach, you

Strong bond: According to Dravid, mentorship and trust define Sanju Samson's relationship with the Rajasthan Royals squad, which is evident in their mutual respect.
RITU RAJ KONWAR

experience both sides of this journey.

In some ways, it's like raising children. When they're young, your conversations with them are different, but as they mature, those interactions evolve. It's no different with players.

You have to adapt to who you are coaching and focus on the goal you're trying to achieve.

You compared nurturing young cricketers to raising children. As a parent to two young cricketers, has that experience helped you understand the psyche of budding players better?

Working with junior cricket at the NCA and the Under-19 level has definitely helped me connect better with young players.

Every cricketer is different. At one time, there was Riyan Parag, Sanju, and Yashasvi Jaiswal, and now we have youngsters like Vaibhav Suryavanshi. The players keep changing, but my experience at the NCA and with U-19 cricket has been invaluable.

I've really enjoyed that side of coaching — it has taught me a lot as well.

You've seen Sanju grow from his early days. What are your thoughts on his leadership at RR?

Sanju has grown significantly as both a cricketer and a captain. Captaincy is a skill where the more you do it, the better you become. It's about gaining experience and learning from different situations.

What stands out about Sanju is his curiosity and willingness to learn. He is always asking questions, eager to improve, and has really embraced his leadership role. There is great clarity in how he communicates with the group. He knows exactly what he wants from the team and what he aims to achieve.

I've told him that our job as coaches is to support his vision. That's how I see coaching — it's about helping the captain and his team create an environment where they can play the brand of cricket they want to. While the captain drives the vision, we are there to support, guide, and facilitate it.

Sanju leads by example and has a strong connection with the younger players. He has seen many of them grow within the franchise and played a role in their development. That mutual respect and trust between him and the squad is evident.

There's a great synergy within the team, which Sanju has fostered well. His experience and performances over the years have earned him respect, not just from the younger players but also from the overseas professionals. Beyond that, he genuinely cares about his teammates, and that balance of respect, care, and leadership makes him an effective captain.

What are your thoughts on the Impact Player rule in the IPL? How much has it changed the nature of the tournament?

It has certainly added a different dynamic. I'll be honest: when I was India's coach, I wasn't particularly fond of the Impact Player rule.

Not because it doesn't make the game more competitive — it certainly does. It adds complexity and keeps matches alive till the very end. But from a national team perspective, it posed some challenges. As a coach, you want to develop all-rounders, and under the old 11 vs 11 format, certain players would have had more opportunities to bat or bowl in different situations.

The Impact Player rule has changed that to some extent. That

Rahul Dravid in IPL

Rajasthan Royals' new head coach for a multi-year term ahead of IPL 2025

RR team mentor in 2014 and 2015 (team reached the playoffs)

Delhi Daredevils (now Delhi Capitals) team mentor in 2016 and 2017 – DD finished sixth in both seasons

said, I understand why it exists. It ensures every game remains competitive and allows an extra Indian player to feature in the league, which is a positive. Like with the auction and other rules, there are always pros and cons.

One major impact has been on scoring rates, which have statistically increased due to teams having an extra specialist batter. This means no team is ever truly out of a game. You can have a batter at No.8 or even No.9, which allows for aggressive hitting even after losing six or seven wickets. That has changed the way teams approach the back end of an innings.

Strategically, it has added layers to team selection and match planning. The role of all-rounders has also been affected. While having an all-rounder still brings balance, teams can now manage without one if they don't find the right fit.

It's been nearly a year since you stepped down as India's coach on a high, winning the T20 World Cup. Was there a particular moment during the tournament when you felt, "This team is ready to go all the way"?

There wasn't a single moment, but over the last two and a half years, I could clearly see our growth as a white-ball team. We were developing into a real force, and that was reflected not just in the 2023 ODI World Cup and the T20 World Cup, but also in bilateral series and other matches.

Our win-loss percentage over that period was very high, despite rotating a lot of players. The depth in our squad kept improving, and I always felt we would be competitive in any white-ball tournament.

At this point, India is consistently one of the three or four teams that start as favourites in global tournaments. That strength has been building for a while. Even during my time as the India A coach, I saw how much we were progressing in white-ball cricket.

But in these tournaments, you also realise that no matter how strong you are, it often comes down to one or two crucial games. On any given day, a top side can beat you — just like Australia did in the 2023 ODI World Cup final. They played better cricket and deserved to win.

Going into the T20 World Cup, I knew we were one of the favourites. But I also knew that in knockout games, you're up against teams who are capable of beating you. You prepare as best as you can, but you also need to acknowledge that skill alone isn't always enough.

You need to have depth, resilience, and the ability to handle high-pressure moments. But you also need humility to accept that, in a big final, a bit of luck can play its part too.

You worked with many coaches as a player — John Wright, Greg Chappell, Gary Kirsten. Did any of them influence your approach as a head coach?

Absolutely. Every coach I've worked with has influenced me in some way. You're constantly learning — observing how they operate, how they handle players, and what works in different situations.

In my early years, I had Sandeep Patil and (the late) Aunshuman Gaekwad, followed by Kapil Dev. Later, I worked with John Wright, Greg Chappell, Gary Kirsten, and briefly with Duncan Fletcher. I also spent a lot of time with Paddy Upton in various roles.

You naturally pick up elements from different people, but at the same time, you bring your own approach. Coaching isn't about copying — it's about blending what you've learned with your philosophy and personality. It's a mix of learning from coaches, observing others, and gaining insights through reading and watching.

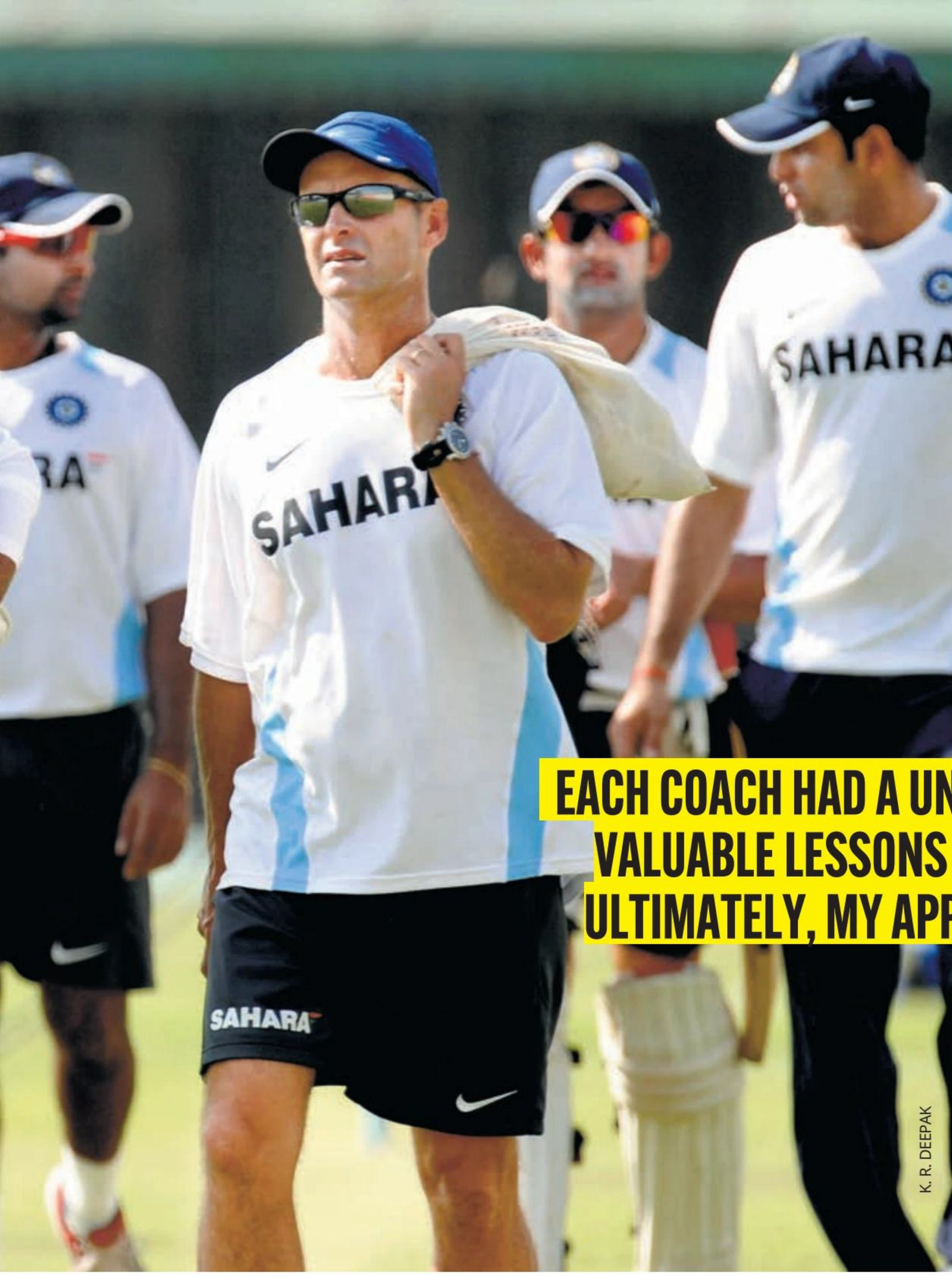
Each coach had a unique style, and I took valuable lessons from all of them. But ultimately, my approach reflects who I am as a person.

During your coaching stint, you closely followed India's domestic cricket and even made suggestions to improve it. Where do you see the IPL fitting into the overall domestic structure?

The IPL is perfectly placed in the Indian cricket calendar. Before it started, April-May was largely an off-season for Indian cricket. By scheduling T20 matches at night and leveraging the shorter format, the IPL made it possible to play competitive cricket during this period without disrupting the domestic structure.

Unlike other leagues worldwide, which often clash with domestic and Test cricket, the IPL fits seamlessly into India's schedule. It doesn't force players to choose between domestic and franchise cricket, which is a major advantage.

Instead of replacing anything, the IPL has expanded the domestic season. It has also elevated



K. R. DEEPAK

tournaments like the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy and, to some extent, the Vijay Hazare Trophy, which are now seen as stepping stones to the IPL.

While it has made the season longer and more demanding for players, the benefits — exposure, financial security, and a competitive environment — far outweigh the challenges.

Do you think cricket could follow football's path, where clubs take precedence over international teams?

There's no doubt that leagues are growing rapidly. With increasing investment and expanding schedules, they will play an even bigger role in the cricketing calendar.

That said, I still believe international cricket will remain the primary focus. It carries the history and tradition of the game, and I hope it continues to be a critical part of the schedule. However, leagues are becoming more influential, and the challenge will be to strike the right balance. Ideally, both international and franchise cricket can coexist without one cannibalising the other.

How challenging is it for Royals to manage two home bases, with Guwahati now designated as the second home?

Managing two home bases is definitely a challenge, but it's also an opportunity. Playing in Guwahati allows us to grow the game in the Northeast and build a fanbase there.

We saw fantastic support in the two games, especially against CSK and KKR. Of course, in the CSK match, their fans outnumbered ours, which was expected. But overall, it's been great to see the enthusiasm for cricket in Guwahati.

From a cricketing perspective, we must keep learning to adapt. It's still early days, but we'll find a way to establish two strong home grounds. Since we play only a couple of games in Guwahati, it doesn't feel as much like a home advantage yet. But as we continue engaging with fans here, we hope to make it a strong second home in the future.

EACH COACH HAD A UNIQUE STYLE, AND I TOOK VALUABLE LESSONS FROM ALL OF THEM. BUT ULTIMATELY, MY APPROACH REFLECTS WHO I AM AS A PERSON

With Kumar Sangakkara transitioning to director of cricket and you now leading the IPL campaign, how has the core team adapted to this change? What conversations have you had with the players?

My philosophy is to work closely with the captain and players — they drive the culture and vision. That hasn't changed, which is why we retained our core group.

Sanju leads the team, and our job is to support him with the right information and environment to succeed. It's a collaborative effort between me, the support staff, and the team, not just me imposing my approach.

I like the brand of cricket Royals play, and having been here before, I understand the setup.

We aim to be an exciting young team, push boundaries within our skillset. We want to evolve naturally rather than make changes for the sake of it.

1st

Sher-e-Punjab: Shreyas Iyer made a dream start to his captaincy stint at Punjab Kings, smashing an unbeaten 97 off just 42 balls to propel his team to 243 for five. In response, Gujarat Titans fell short by 11 runs. VIJAY SONEJI

2nd

New energy: Kolkata Knight Riders' new opener Quinton de Kock anchored a successful chase with an unbeaten 97 off 61 balls against Rajasthan Royals. KKR cruised to victory with 15 balls to spare, comfortably chasing 152. RITU RAJ KONWAR

FOR MORE
IMAGES
3rd
GOLDEN ARM: SHARDUL THAKUR DISMANTLED SUNRISERS HYDERABAD'S TOP ORDER, RETURNING WITH FIGURES OF FOUR FOR 34 TO RESTRICT IT TO 190 FOR NINE. LUCKNOW SUPER GIANTS THEN CHASED DOWN THE TARGET WITH EASE, WINNING BY FIVE WICKETS WITH MORE THAN FIVE OVERS REMAINING
K. V. S. GIRI

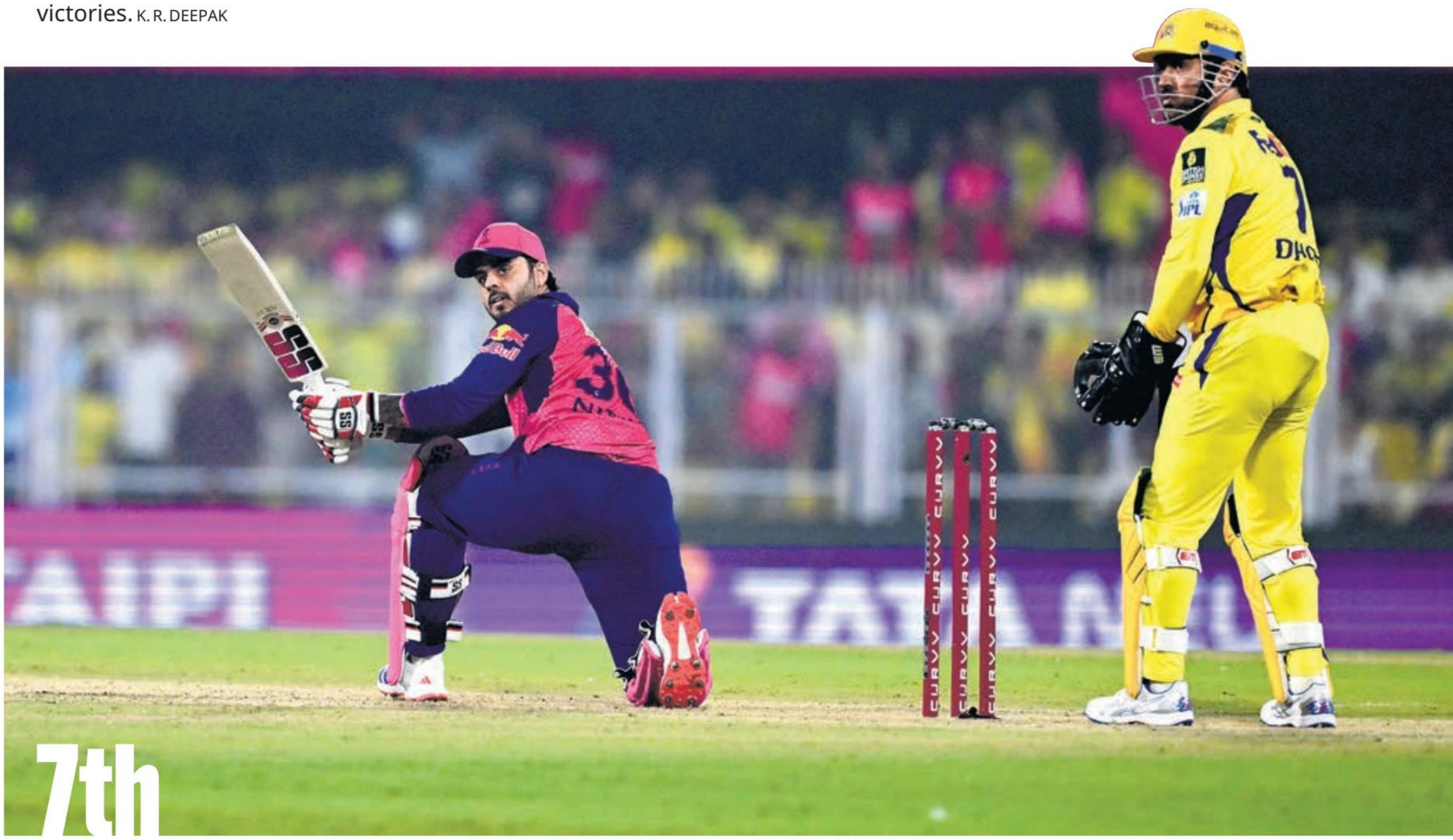
4th

Streak broken: Rajat Patidar's half-century powered Royal Challengers Bengaluru to 196 for seven, setting up a commanding 50-run win – Chennai Super Kings' biggest home defeat. It was also RCB's first victory in Chennai since 2008. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

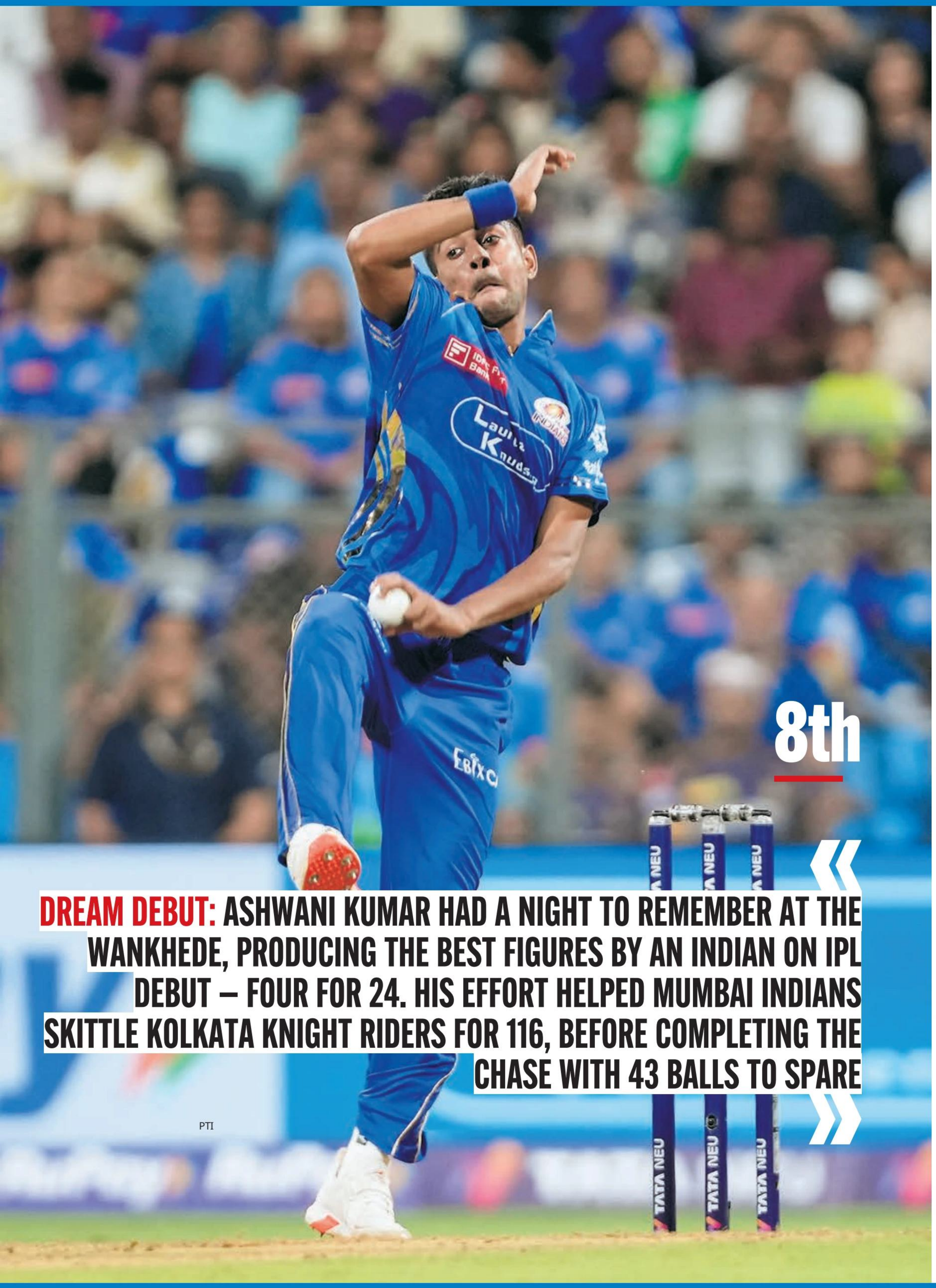
5th

Cutting it down: Prasidh Krishna's clever use of slower balls and cutters proved decisive as his spell of two for 18 helped Gujarat Titans defend 196, securing a 36-run win over Mumbai Indians. VIJAY SONEJI

Starc effect: Delhi Capitals rode on Mitchell Starc's career-best T20 figures of five for 35 to register a dominant win over Sunrisers Hyderabad, wrapping up its home leg in Visakhapatnam with two victories. K. R. DEEPAK



Demolition man: Nitish Rana made an explosive start, racing to his fifty inside the PowerPlay before hammering 81 off 36 balls. His knock took Rajasthan Royals to 182 for nine, a total Chennai Super Kings failed to chase, handing the Royals their first win of the season. RITU RAJ KONWAR



DREAM DEBUT: ASHWANI KUMAR HAD A NIGHT TO REMEMBER AT THE WANKHEDE, PRODUCING THE BEST FIGURES BY AN INDIAN ON IPL DEBUT – FOUR FOR 24. HIS EFFORT HELPED MUMBAI INDIANS SKITTLE KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS FOR 116, BEFORE COMPLETING THE CHASE WITH 43 BALLS TO SPARE

PTI

9th

Bossing around: Prabhsimran Singh's blistering 69 off 34 balls ensured Punjab Kings comfortably chased down Lucknow Super Giants' target of 172, securing its second consecutive win of the IPL 2025 season.

SANDEEP SAXENA

10th

Blast from the past: Mohammed Siraj haunted his former team, Royal Challengers Bengaluru, with a match-winning spell of three for 19. His efforts restricted RCB to 169 for eight, before Gujarat Titans chased it down with eight wickets in hand. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

11th

Power game: Venkatesh Iyer's explosive 60 off 29 balls, in partnership with Rinku Singh, powered Kolkata Knight Riders to 200 for six. In reply, Sunrisers Hyderabad collapsed to 120 all out, suffering its biggest defeat by runs in IPL history. K. R. DEEPAK

12th

Muscled: Mitchell Marsh launched a brutal assault, smashing a 31-ball 60 to set the tone for Lucknow Super Giants. Aiden Markram's composed fifty took it to 203 for eight, a total Mumbai Indians fell 12 runs short of chasing. SANDEEP SAXENA

THE HINDU GROUP

SPORTSTAR INDIAN POSTER LEAGUE

Play now & start winning!

We know what you did.

If your school library had a Sportstar subscription, you weren't just reading. You were plotting. A perfectly timed flick of the wrist, a quick glance over the shoulder, and just like that, a poster found its way into your bag.

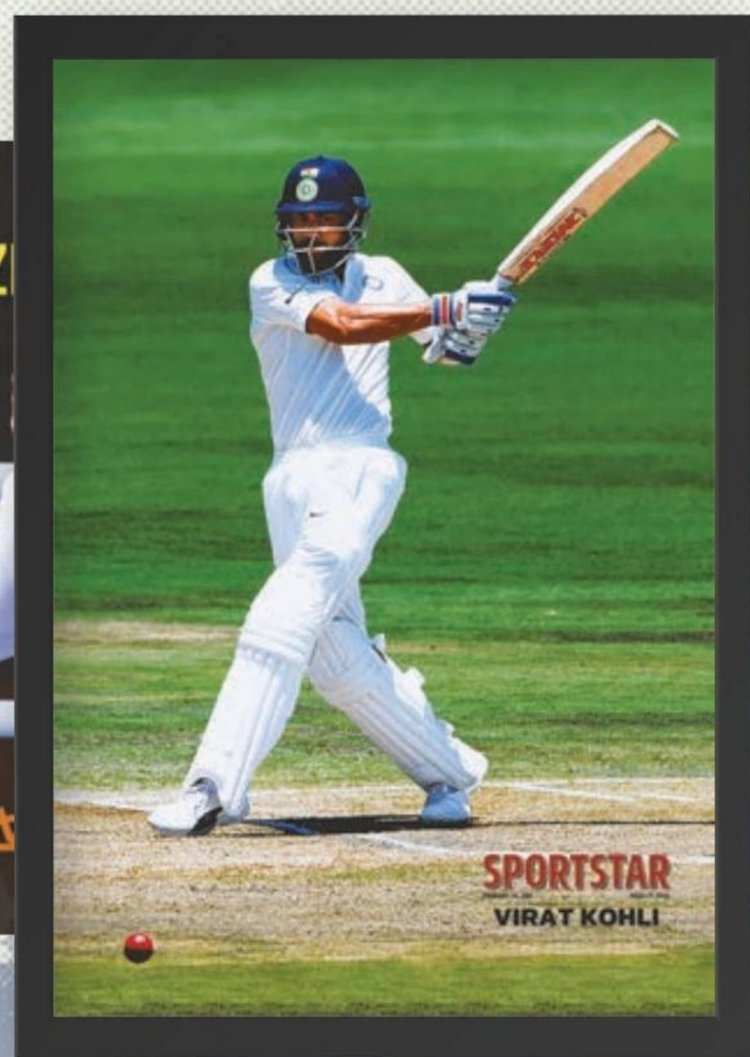
The world must have forgotten, but we haven't. The Indian Poster League is here, letting you unlock legendary digital Sportstar posters.

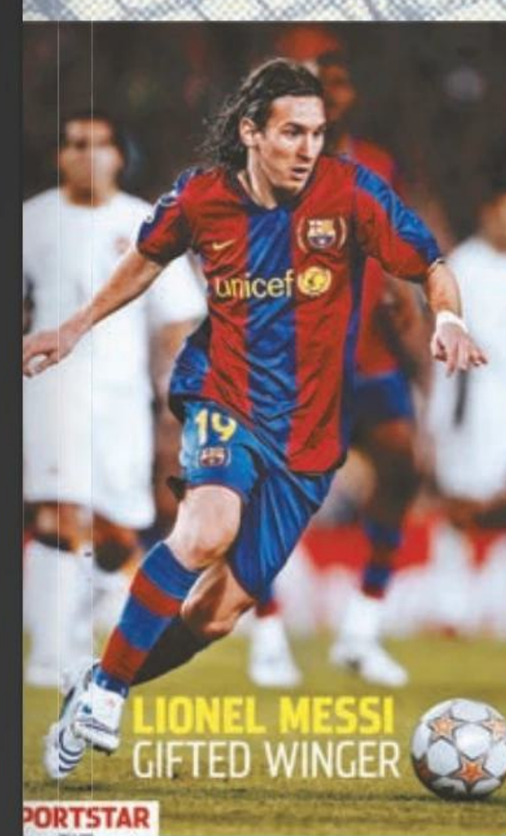
Answer three questions each day to claim your treasure without a trace of guilt.

Fastest 3 each day
Win gift vouchers

Unlock 30+ posters*
Get a 6-month Sportstar digital subscription

Unlock 50+ posters*
Get a full-year digital subscription





March 22 - May 25, 2025
Read The Hindu every day or follow sportstarweb on social media handles to participate in the contest.

Scan QR code or visit **newsth.live/SSIPLPA** to take the quiz.

*T&C Apply

13th

KLASSY: RAHUL, OPENING IN PLACE OF THE INJURED FAF DU PLESSIS, PLAYED A CONTROLLED INNINGS OF 77 OFF 51 BALLS, GUIDING DELHI CAPITALS TO 183 FOR SIX. THE TOTAL PROVED SUFFICIENT, AS CHENNAI SUPER KINGS FELL 25 RUNS SHORT

AP

14th

ROCKETMAN: JOFRA ARCHER WAS AT HIS LETHAL BEST AGAINST PUNJAB KINGS, REGULARLY CLOCKING SPEEDS ABOVE 151 KMPH. HE STRUCK TWICE IN HIS OPENING OVER, REMOVING PRIYANSH ARYA AND SHREYAS IYER, BEFORE RETURNING TO CLAIM ANOTHER WICKET AS RAJASTHAN ROYALS SECURED A 50-RUN VICTORY

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

15th

Steady hand: Gujarat Titans were in early trouble at 16 for two while chasing 153 against Sunrisers Hyderabad. Shubman Gill and Washington Sundar then stitched together a 90-run stand, guiding GT to victory with 20 balls to spare. Gill remained unbeaten on 61. K. V. S. GIRI

16th

Clutch performer: Krunal Pandya took four wickets for 45 with his left-arm spin while defending 19 from the last over as Mumbai Indians slipped to a 12-run defeat against Royal Challengers Bengaluru in a high-scoring match. EMMANUAL YOGINI

IPL
PLAYER OF THE FORTNIGHT

SCORCHING SIRAJ

Dhruva Prasad
dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in

After being snubbed from India's Champions Trophy squad, Mohammed Siraj has come back hungrier than ever, picking nine wickets in four matches and setting up Gujarat Titans' three back-to-back wins in the IPL this season. Six of Siraj's nine wickets came in the PowerPlay and helped set the tone for the Titans. During this phase, Siraj nabbed key batters such as Rohit Sharma, Phil Salt, Abhishek Sharma, and Travis Head, leaving the opposition reeling early on.

Siraj has also made the most of the lifting of the saliva ban this year, using reverse swing to keep the run-scoring in check at the death and picking crucial wickets during this phase. The 31-year-old is someone who can get carried away by the lure of picking early wickets, but he has shown exemplary control in the tournament so far, pitching 70 of his 96 balls in the back-of-a-length and good-length areas, which have accounted for seven of his nine scalps. He has erred on the fuller side only eight times and dished out full tosses just twice.

That Siraj is on a mission to prove a point was evident during his spell against his former franchise, Royal Challengers Bengaluru, when he picked 3/19 to silence the raucous M. Chinnaswamy Stadium crowd — one that egged him on for seven seasons. He then stunned the fans in his hometown of Hyderabad by tearing through Sunrisers with a career-best haul of 4/17. While Siraj has been ever-present in India's white-ball attack over the last few years, an unforeseen axing was just the break he needed to unleash a more potent avatar.

(All stats up to date as of April 8)

MATCHES
4

WICKETS
9

BBM
4/17

ECO
7.75

FOR MORE STORIES

Changing narratives, from icons to surfaces

Our correspondents capture **the essence of IPL's** Chennai and Lucknow legs — thrilling action on the field and captivating stories beyond it.

By the time M.S. Dhoni found the gap behind point and struck the first boundary of his innings in the final over of the chase against Delhi Capitals, there was a hush around the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium. That four left Chennai Super Kings needing an impossible 28 runs off two balls.

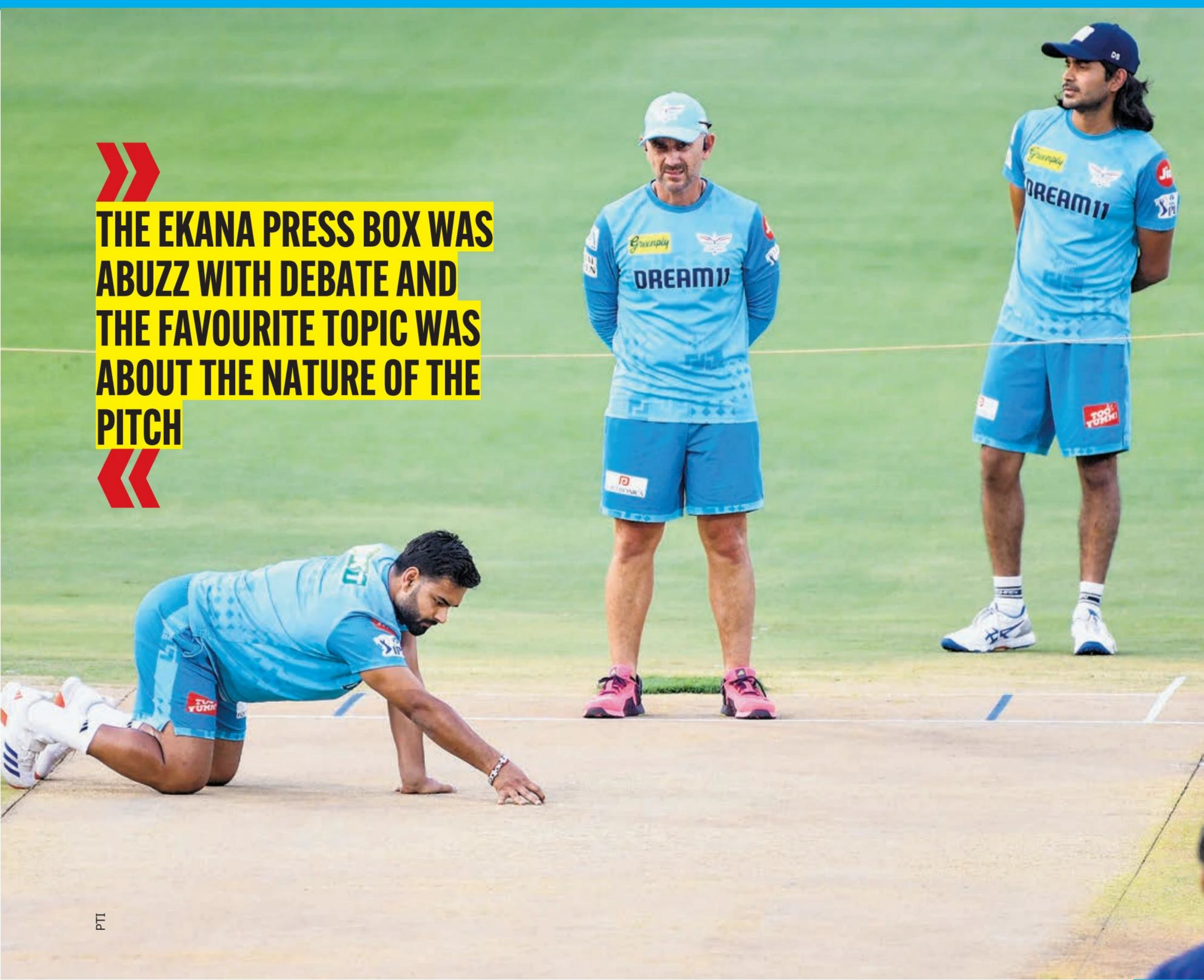
The Chennai crowd, which would throw itself into a frenzy at the very sight of the talisman on the giant screen, had watched the 43-year-old rage against age and conditions for 43 minutes during an unfruitful 84-run partnership with Vijay Shankar. The cheers had petered out, and the odd blow of the whistle was perhaps a portent of the shifting dynamics of sports fandom in the Indian Premier League (IPL).

At 18, had the IPL finally matured and shed itself of the scourge of 'the cult of personality'? Had the collective finally triumphed over the individual?

This was Super Kings' third defeat on the bounce and their second consecutive loss at home against teams they had not lost to at the venue in 15 years. Something had to give, and on that evening, perhaps an element of that unyielding hero worship did.

While there was criticism of Dhoni's entry points in the last two

REUTERS



THE EKANA PRESS BOX WAS ABUZZ WITH DEBATE AND THE FAVOURITE TOPIC WAS ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE PITCH

PTI

unsuccessful run chases, this time, he was in the middle as early as the 11th over. The crowd had plenty of time to feast on their hero and for Dhoni to redeem himself, but the question that lingered in the melancholic aftermath of the match was, "How much was too much?"

Dhruva Prasad

Pitch imperfect

The Ekana press box was abuzz with debate as the Diary walked in on the eve of the IPL 2025 match between Lucknow Super Giants and Punjab Kings. The topic? A familiar one among cricket journalists — the nature of the pitch **(above)**. The black-soil faction made its case early. "I was here three days ago and had a close look. It is definitely black soil," declared one of its strongest advocates.

The Diary glanced at the pitch and thought, 'Ah, this looks like a black-soil one.'

The red-soil supporters were quick to counter. "We spoke to the curator today, and he said it's red soil."

The Diary glanced at the pitch again. 'Ah, this looks like a red-soil one.'

Observer bias is real, friends.

True to India's democratic spirit, the Diary was consulted for its opinion. "It's a mix of red and black soil," it declared — ever the champion of the middle ground.

And true to India's democratic spirit, the Diary's opinion was swiftly ignored.

Eventually, the pre-match pitch report confirmed it was red soil. Half the press box celebrated, quietly.

The home team, which preferred black soil, was visibly unhappy. Punjab Kings dominated from start to finish, sealing an emphatic eight-wicket win.

At the post-match press conference, LSG mentor Zaheer Khan remarked that the Lucknow curator seemed to have favoured Punjab. The reporters had their headline.

Pranay Rajiv

SRH's IPL metamorphosis: Evolution or overcorrection?

SRH's transformation from Warner's bowling-first leadership to Cummins' batting onslaught is bold — but is its **high-risk strategy** running into the law of averages?

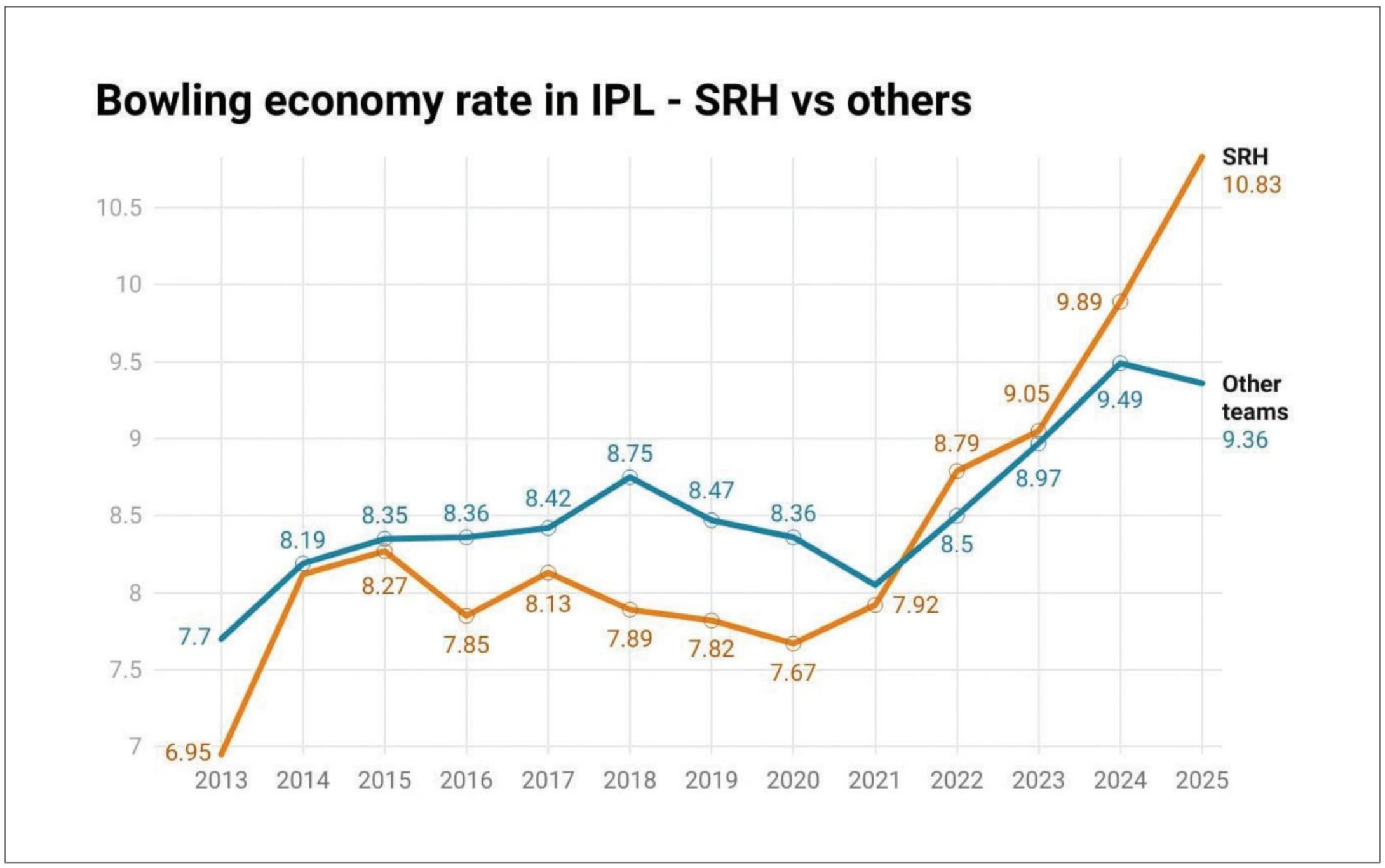
Pranay Rajiv, Anish Pathiyil
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in & anish.p@thehindu.co.in

Indian Premier League (IPL) team Sunrisers Hyderabad's 12-year existence can largely be divided into two eras – the first, anchored by David Warner and Kane Williamson, was characterised by bowling efficiency, while the ongoing second, helmed by Pat Cummins, is defined by an aggressive, batting-heavy approach.

Interestingly, Sunrisers have thrived despite these starkly different philosophies, emerging as one of the IPL's most consistent teams. Their evolution is not just the story of a franchise but also a reflection of how the IPL and T20 cricket have evolved.

Warner-Williamson era: A bowling powerhouse

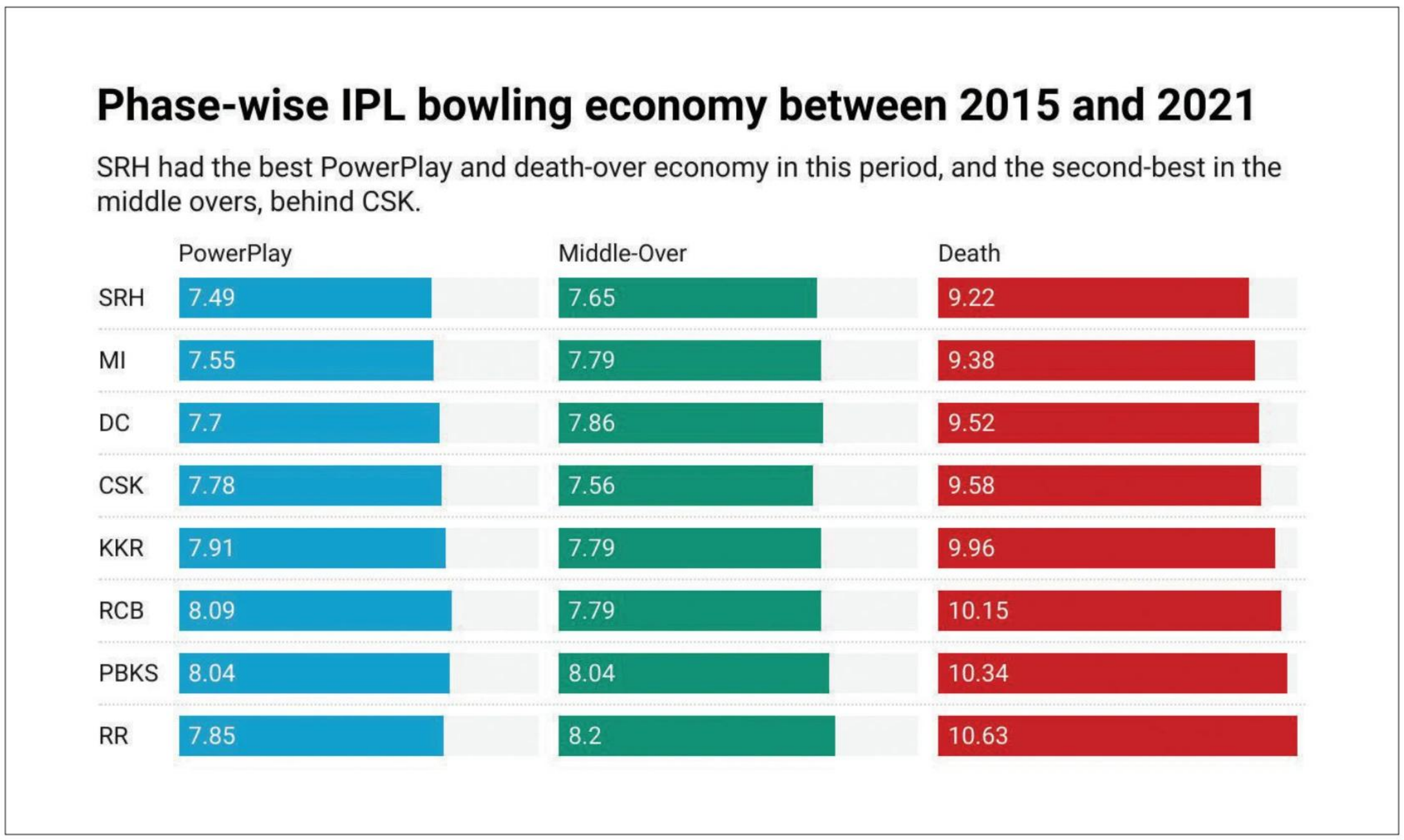
From its inception in 2013, Sunrisers Hyderabad maintained a reputation as a formidable bowling unit. However, it was under Warner's captaincy, beginning in 2015, that SRH's bowling prowess reached new heights. Between 2015 and the end of the 2021 season, SRH boasted one of the best economy rates in the IPL, second only to the short-lived Rising Pune Supergiant.

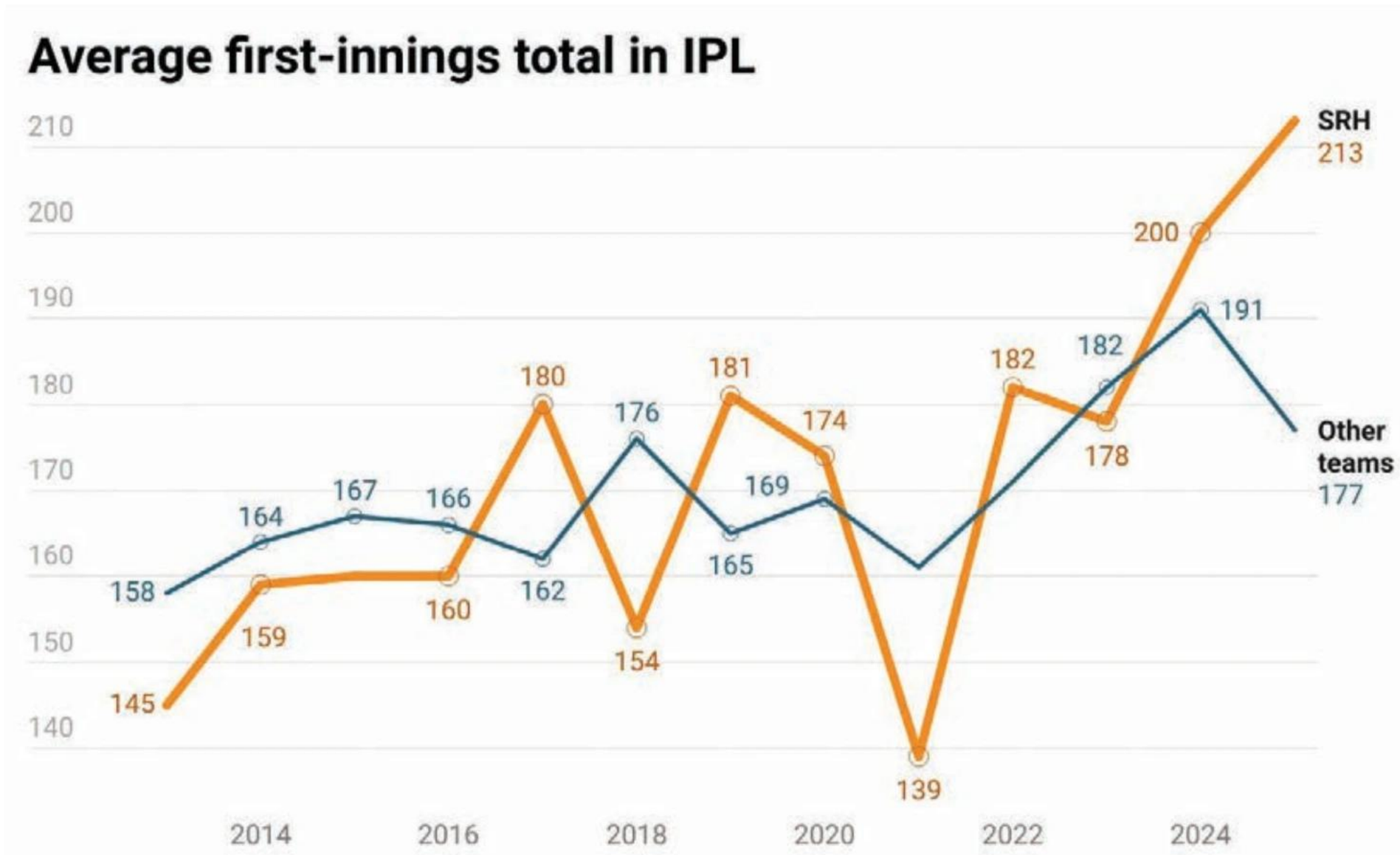


During these seven years, SRH recorded the best economy rate in a season three times and ranked second or third on two other occasions. While Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Rashid Khan led the charge, the team also relied on lesser-heralded bowlers like Sandeep Sharma, Siddarth Kaul, and Khaleel Ahmed to maintain its dominance.

Fielding complemented SRH's bowling strength, with Warner himself setting high standards. According to Cricviz's fielding impact metrics, SRH saved 2,028 runs in the field during this period, second only to Mumbai Indians (2,455). Their defensive skills peaked in 2018 when they successfully defended two low totals within 48 hours under Williamson's leadership, stepping in for the suspended Warner.

On April 24, SRH defended 119 against Mumbai Indians at the Wankhede, bowling it out for 87 in a 31-run victory. Just two days later, it repeated the feat at home,





dismissing Kings XI Punjab for 119 after setting a modest target of 132. Between 2015 and 2022, SRH failed to reach the playoffs just twice, making two finals and lifting its maiden title in 2016.

The shift: From defence to aggression

SRH's bowling-centric strategy began to unravel as Warner's form dipped and Rashid Khan departed for Gujarat Titans in 2022. Without their bowling linchpins, the team struggled, finishing near the bottom in the 2022 and 2023 seasons.

A transformation was inevitable, and with the arrival of Cummins as captain in 2024, SRH underwent a radical shift. The team adopted an ultra-aggressive batting philosophy, discarding its past conservatism. The results were immediate – in IPL 2024, SRH scored at a blistering run rate of 10.04, breaking the record for the highest IPL total twice in the season.

Gone was the steady accumulation followed by a death-over assault. Instead, SRH hit top gear from the outset. Travis Head's inclusion alongside Abhishek Sharma made for a devastating opening pair, smashing PowerPlay runs at 10.52 per over – an all-time IPL record – with the lowest dot-ball percentage (38.4%). The emergence of all-rounder Nitish Kumar Reddy alongside Heinrich Klaasen further strengthened the middle order, while the Impact Player rule allowed for sustained aggression. By the end of the season, SRH had racked up six 200-plus totals.

Challenge of sustainability

The high-risk, high-reward strategy proved highly effective throughout IPL 2024 – until the final, where SRH suffered a dramatic collapse against Kolkata Knight Riders, falling short in its quest for the title.

The start of IPL 2025 has raised fresh concerns. After a spectacular 286-run opening salvo against Rajasthan Royals, SRH has lost four consecutive matches, with its batting faltering on each occasion. However, Cummins remains steadfast in his commitment to an all-out attacking approach.

"A few teams, when they go to a new venue, they think, 'let's play it safe and get 160-170.' That's not our team. We got 280 vs RR; that's the kind of team we want to be," Cummins told his players after a defeat to Delhi Capitals.

Whether the numbers will eventually balance in SRH's favour or their approach proves unsustainable remains to be seen. What is certain is that Sunrisers Hyderabad continues to push the boundaries of T20 batting, embracing a fearless ideology that could redefine their legacy — for better or worse.

(All stats up to date as of April 8)

SRH's top five wicket-takers during the 2015-2021 phase

Player	Matches	Economy Rate	Wickets
Bhuvneshwar Kumar	87	7.59	98
Rashid Khan	76	6.33	93
Siddarth Kaul	43	8.6	52
Sandeep Sharma	43	7.78	41
Khaleel Ahmed	24	8.68	32

Sanjog Gupta: Our goal is to engage a billion viewers with IPL 2025

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

JioStar, the newly formed entity from Disney's Star India and Reliance's Viacom18, is gearing up to make the 2025 Indian Premier League (IPL) the biggest edition yet, targeting over a billion viewers across platforms.

"Our ambition continues to be about growth," said Sanjog Gupta, CEO-Sports at JioStar. "We are aspiring to make this the biggest IPL ever — both in terms of viewership and the business around it."

With television and digital rights under one roof, JioStar plans to engage audiences through multiple feeds and formats. "For IPL 2025, we will have about 25 concurrent feeds catering to different cohorts of fans," Gupta revealed. Regional platforms will play a crucial role, with broadcasts tailored to local preferences.

"What started as a language foray in 2013 with the addition of Hindi is now a complete reconstitution of the broadcast experience," he noted. Using Karnataka and Tamil Nadu as examples, he highlighted how regional broadcasts reflect cultural differences. "Virat (Kohli) is the most popular player in Karnataka, while Dhoni is in Tamil Nadu. This influences how home team affinity is expressed in each feed."

JioStar is also focusing on younger audiences. "We are using animated characters Motu and Patlu, who are very popular with kids, to present IPL in a way they can relate to," Gupta said. "They will do commentary, host segments, and have their own shows."

The record-breaking ICC Champions Trophy final set a high bar for cricket viewership, but Gupta believes IPL remains a steady draw. "Unlike ICC events, where sentiment is tied to the Indian team's performance, IPL is more consistent in terms of engagement." Despite non-stop cricket throughout the year, Gupta sees no risk of audience fatigue. "We see it as an opportunity. Consumers don't have to switch platforms to watch cricket — they can find everything in one place."

JioStar is eyeing untapped audiences, particularly households without traditional living room TVs. "There are 650 million smartphones and 200 million feature phones with connectivity. That presents massive headroom for digital growth."

With its expansive approach, JioStar is betting on IPL's unmatched ability to bring in new viewers. "There is no bigger recruiter of audiences than live cricket in this country, and particularly IPL," Gupta concluded.

Biggest ever opening weekend

137 cr digital views — Highest ever 35% growth YoY

25.3 cr TV reach (viewers) — Highest ever 14% growth YoY

39% — Growth YoY in TVR

4956 cr minutes of watch time (TV & digital) — Highest ever 33% growth YoY

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Jadeja's unique distinction

1} Number of players to do the all-rounder's double of 3000 runs and 100 wickets in IPL history. Ravindra Jadeja achieved this on 28 March 2025 while playing for CSK against RCB in Chennai, becoming the only one to do so. Of the 27 players who made 3000-plus runs in the IPL, only two have claimed fifty wickets (Shane Watson 3874+92 and Kieron Pollard 3412+69). Among the 25 players with over 100 wickets in IPL, Jadeja and Andre Russell are the only ones with 2000+ runs, with the West Indian, (119 wickets), still six short of 2500 runs. However, as listed below, five players have the distinction of scoring 1500-plus runs and claiming 100-plus wickets in their IPL careers.

Players with 1500+ runs and 100+ wickets during their IPL career

Player	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	S/R	HS	100/50	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Ave/	E/R	Best	4w/5w
Ravindra Jadeja	243	187	3033	27.57	129.57	62*	0/3	3877	4932	161	30.63	7.63	5/16	3/1
Andre Russell	131	108	2494	28.34	173.68	88*	0/11	1724	2702	119	22.71	9.40	5/15	2/1
Sunil Narine	180	113	1585	17.04	165.10	109	1/7	4141	4660	182	22.75	6.75	5/19	7/1
Dwayne Bravo	161	113	1560	22.61	129.57	70*	0/5	3119	4360	183	23.83	8.39	4/22	2/0
Axar Patel	152	114	1675	21.47	131.48	66	0/3	3141	3819	123	31.05	7.30	4/21	0/1

76} The number of runs conceded by Jofra Archer in his four overs for Rajasthan Royals in the IPL match against Sunrisers Hyderabad on 23 March 2025. This is now the most expensive four-over spell in IPL history. Last season, Gujarat Titans' Mohit Sharma was taken for 73 runs by the Delhi Capitals batters in Delhi on 24 April 2024. Incidentally, Archer's spell is the second-most expensive on Indian soil after Roshan Kumar's 2/81 in his four overs for Sikkim against Baroda in Indore on 5 December 2024.

Bowlers conceding maximum runs in a T20 innings

Bowling	R/O	Bowler	For	Opp	Venue	Date
4-0-76-0	19.00	Jofra Archer	RR	SRH	Hyderabad	23 Mar 2025
4-0-73-0	18.25	Mohit Sharma	GT	DC	Delhi	24 Apr 2024
4-0-70-0	17.50	Basil Thampi	SRH	RCB	Bengaluru	17 May 2018
4-0-69-0	17.25	Yash Dayal	GT	KKR	Ahmedabad	9 Apr 2023
4-0-68-0	17.00	Reece Topley	RCB	SRH	Bengaluru	15 Apr 2024
4-0-68-0	17.00	Luke Wood	MI	DC	Delhi	27 Apr 2024

Note: All the above games were lost by the bowling side

4} The number of occasions Sunrisers Hyderabad (SRH) has crossed totals of 250+ in T20 cricket, when it amassed 286/6 (the second highest total in IPL cricket) against Rajasthan Royals (RR) in Hyderabad on 23 March 2025. SRH now has the maximum 250-plus totals in T20 cricket. Team India and English county Surrey have done it on three occasions. Interestingly, all of SRH's efforts have come within a year. Also, SRH now appears in four of the top five and top three IPL totals. For the record, Delhi Capitals, Punjab Kings and Mumbai Indians have the dubious honour of conceding 250 totals on two occasions in IPL cricket.

Team total of 250-plus in T20 cricket on most occasions

Four						
Total (ov)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Toss	Result
277/3 (20)	SRH	MI	Hyderabad	27 Mar 2024	Lost	Won
287/3 (20)	SRH	RCB	Bengaluru	15 Apr 2024	Lost	Won
266/7 (20)	SRH	DC	Delhi	20 Apr 2024	Lost	Won
286/6 (20)	SRH	RR	Hyderabad	23 Mar 2025	Lost	Won
Three						
Total (ov)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Toss	Result
250/6 (20)	Surrey	Kent	Canterbury	20 Jul 2018	Won	NR
258/6 (20)	Surrey	Sussex	Hove	9 Jun 2023	Lost	Won
252/7 (20)	Surrey	Middlesex	The Oval	22 Jun 2023	Lost	Lost
Total (ov)	For	Opponent	Venue	Date	Toss	Result
260/5 (20)	India	Sri Lanka	Indore	22 Dec 2017	Lost	Won
297/6 (20)	India	Bangladesh	Hyderabad	12 Oct 2024	Won	Won
283/1 (20)	India	South Africa	Johannesburg	15 Nov 2024	Won	Won

Notes:
**Also, 10 other T20 sides have done it twice*
**All the above instances came while batting first*

34 } The number of fours hit by the SRH batters against RR in Hyderabad on 23 March 2025. This is now the most hit by a T20 side in a match.

4s	Team	Opponent	Venue	Date	Batting
34	Sunrisers Hyderabad (286/6)	Rajasthan Royals	Hyderabad	23 Mar 2025	1st
33	Middlesex (254/3 in 19.2)	Surrey	The Oval	22 Jun2023	2nd
31	Somerset (197/3 in 18)	Glamorgan	Cardiff	18 Jun 2003	2nd
31	Delhi Capitals (197/8 in 19.4)	Gujarat Lions	Kanpur	10 May 2017	2nd
31	Somerset (241/5)	Hampshire	Taunton	9 Jun 2024	1st

Note: All the above sides won the game

81 } The total boundaries (4s & 6s) during the SRH-RR encounter in Hyderabad on 23 Mar 2025 equals the most boundaries hit in a T20 match. In two other T20 games in Centurion and Bengaluru, the maximum boundaries in a match were also achieved in 2023 and 2024.

Most boundaries hit in a T20 match

Boundaries	(4+6)	Team1 (4+6)	Team2 (4+6)	Venue	Date	Won by
81	(46+35)	West Indies (29+13)	South Africa (17+22)	Centurion	26 Mar 2023	SA
81	(43+38)	SRH (19+22)	RCB (24+16)	Bengaluru	15 Apr 2024	SRH
81	(51+30)	SRH (34+12)	RR (17+18)	Hyderabad	23 Mar 2025	SRH
79	(37+42)	KKR (22+18)	PBKS (15+24)	Kolkata	26 Apr 2024	PBKS
78	(45+33)	Multan Sultans (22+17)	Quetta Gladiators (23+16)	Rawalpindi	11 Mar 2023	MS

3 } Number of opening batters in the IPL to register a fifty score after the age of 40. Playing for Delhi Capitals this season, South African Faf du Plessis became the latest to join two others, Adam Gilchrist and Rahul Dravid, who incidentally, have managed two fifty scores after 40 (however, the table below lists only their latest fifty). Du Plessis joins two other overseas players, Adam Gilchrist and Chris Gayle, to make a fifty score after the age of 40.

Oldest batters to score an IPL fifty while opening the batting

Age	Batter (Runs/balls)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Bat#	Result
41y-181d	Adam Gilchrist (85* in 54b)	PBKS	RCB	Bengaluru	14 May 2013	1	Won
40y-260d	Faf du Plessis (50 in 27b)	DC	SRH	Visakhapatnam	30 Mar 2025	2	Won
40y-116d	Rahul Dravid (53 in 48b)	RR	DC	Jaipur	7 May 2013	1	Won
39y-362d	Sachin Tendulkar (54 in 47b)	MI	DC	Delhi	21 Apr 2013	2	Lost
39y-360d	Michael Hussey (56 in 46b)	CSK	RCB	Ranchi	22 May 2015	2	Won

Note:
** Only Tendulkar's knock came while batting first in the above list*
** Gilchrist was also captain and wicket-keeper*
** Dravid was captain*

6 } Number of bowlers to have claimed four or more wickets on their IPL debut. Mumbai Indians' Ashwani Kumar (4/24) became the latest to join this group at Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium on 31 Mar 2025. As on date, he is the only Indian to claim four wickets on debut in the IPL. The previous best performance by an Indian on debut was Amit Singh's 3/9, which came way back in 2009 in Durban.

Best bowling by Indians on their IPL debut

Bowl (ov)	Bowler	(Style)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
4/24 (3)	Ashwani Kumar	(LFM)	MI	KKR	Mumbai WS	31 Mar 2025	Won
3/9 (4)	Amit Singh	(RFM)	RR	PBKS	Durban	5 May 2009	Won
3/20 (4)	V. Vyshak	(RFM)	RCB	DC	Bengaluru	15 Apr 2023	Won
3/21 (4)	Suyash Sharma	(RLB)	PBKS	SRH	Mohali	11 May 2013	Lost
3/23 (4)	Mayank Markhande	(RLB)	MI	CSK	Mumbai WS	7 Apr 2018	Lost

Note: the best bowling on debut in the IPL is 6/12 (3.4 overs) by Alzarri Joseph for MI against SRH in Hyderabad on 6 April 2019

152 } The batting strike-rate achieved by Mumbai Indians' Surya Kumar Yadav when he crossed 8000 career runs in T20 cricket during his unbeaten knock of 27 runs in 9 balls against KKR in Mumbai on 31 March 2025. Only four batters out of the 35 who have aggregated 8000 runs in T20 cricket have reached this milestone, with a batting strike-rate of 150-plus. Surya's batting strike-rate is second-best after Andre Russell's, who reached his milestone with a much quicker strike-rate of 168.57.

Batters with strike-rates of 150+ to reach 8000 career runs in T20 cricket

S/R	Batter	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	100/50	HS	Achieved on
168.57	Andre Russell	476	411	8029	26.85	2/29	121*	11 Feb 2024
152.28	Surya Kumar Yadav	312	288	8007	34.21	6/54	117	31 Mar 2025
151.64	Glenn Maxwell	353	332	8013	28.21	5/46	154*	30 Apr 2022
151.15	Keiron Pollard	413	371	8049	30.14	0/40	89*	13 Mar 2018

Note: Chris Gayle not listed above is quickest to reach the milestone to 8000 runs in fewest number of innings (213)

All records are correct and updated until 31 March 2025.

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

BATTERS WILL HAVE TO FIND A NEW WAY TO BREACH THE RED LIGHTS ONCE AGAIN

SRH's aggressive batting is **faltering** as bowlers adapt. Slower balls and bouncers expose their top order. To succeed, they must rethink their approach.

There is something about speed, isn't there? Speed thrills but also sometimes kills. Last year, the Sunrisers Hyderabad, with their openers Travis Head and Abhishek Sharma, set up a new template for how to bat in the Powerplay as well as beyond. They batted at breakneck speed, taking the opposition completely by surprise, and as a result, their team came very close to crossing the 300-run mark in the IPL. Their batting was like youngsters in their fancy sports cars going through traffic red lights and not being caught.

This year, in the first match, SRH went through the red light without being caught. But just as the traffic police get smarter and capture those offending cars, so too have the bowlers of IPL teams started to put the brakes on not just SRH but also other teams trying to emulate them. SRH have now, at the time of writing, lost four consecutive matches, where the top three have not made much of a contribution. Bowling slower deliveries and mixing them with the odd one into the ribcage of the batters has resulted in them holing out to the fielder at deep square-leg and being dismissed in the Powerplay itself. The batters will certainly have to find a new way to try and breach the red lights once again.

That said, the 200 mark is being reached quite regularly — thanks mainly to batters going into fifth gear in the last quarter of the innings. As the summer gets hotter and pitches get drier, the spinners will come more into play, and we may not see 200-plus scores as frequently as we have in the first couple of weeks. The first couple of weeks have also shown that there is a big difference between smashing sixes and fours in the State premier league, where the attack is short of national or international class and the boundaries even shorter. In the IPL, with stronger attacks, sharper bowlers, and the use of technology to discern the strengths and weaknesses of the batters, most of the big hitters from the State premier leagues have hardly troubled the scorers. Likewise, some of the fast bowlers who were bought for crores are proving even more expensive on the field.

In the IPL auction, there is generally a trend to look at one or two international fast bowlers and believe that Indian bowlers who come off a slightly long run-up will be able to do the same. However, these are uncapped players, short on experience, and thus found wanting under the intense pressure of the IPL. Apart from fast bowlers, leg-spinners — both right and left-handed — are the flavour of the IPL, though again, most of them end up not being worth the sums spent on them.

The spate of injuries to India's budding fast bowlers is a real cause for concern. When you look at the names of those at the NCA in Bengaluru, you get a sense of the hazards of trying to bowl fast. There is a certain commonality to the injuries, which begs the question of whether the gym training they do is

suitable for Indian bodies. The one and only Kapil Dev hardly ever went to the gym, yet he bowled hundreds of deliveries in the nets and ran several laps of the ground after net sessions. Apart from a hamstring injury that ended his long career, he had no other injuries despite bowling heaps of overs every day on lifeless surfaces in India. The body science experts at the IPL, who do not want bowlers to bowl more than 20 deliveries in the nets, would have been horrified if they had seen Kapil bowl hundreds of deliveries. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as the old saying goes, and when you compare the career of Kapil with those of India's current fast bowlers — who bowl only 20-odd deliveries in the nets — it tells you that body science is an individual matter and that every player needs to be treated according to their own strength and endurance.

The recent news that the ECB is going to retire the Pataudi Trophy, given to the winners of the Test series between England and India in England, is disturbing indeed. This is the first time one has heard of a trophy named after individual players being retired, though the decision is entirely the ECB's, and the BCCI may well have been informed. It shows a total lack of sensitivity to the contribution made by the Pataudis to cricket in both England and India. There may well be a new trophy named after more recent players, and here's hoping that if an Indian player has been approached, he will have the good sense to politely decline — not only out of respect for two former India captains but also to avoid the same fate of having a trophy named after him retired after he is gone. The ECB is fully entitled to name the trophy after one of their own players, but I, along with loads of Indian cricket supporters, fervently hope that any other Indian cricketer will have the smarts to decline, lest history repeats itself as it has with the Pataudi Trophy.

Bumpy road: Travis Head has made a few blistering starts this season but hasn't turned them into the dominant innings he regularly produced last year. K.R. DEEPAK

The recent news that the ECB is going to retire the Pataudi Trophy, given to the winners of the Test series between England and India in England, is disturbing.

AFP

New Zealand completes clean sweep against Pakistan

1 The Kiwis won the **rain-reduced 42-over final** game by 43 runs

New Zealand completed a clean sweep of the three-match ODI series against Pakistan after the Kiwis won the final game by 43 runs.

The rain-reduced 42-over match saw New Zealand post 264 for eight, courtesy of skipper Michael Bracewell's half-century. Despite Babar Azam's fighting fifty, Ben Sears' second five-wicket haul in the series helped the hosts bundle Pakistan out for 221.

Sears' first five-wicket haul came in the second match, where Mitchell Hay's unbeaten 99 powered New Zealand to 292.

Pakistan was bundled out for 208, handing the hosts the series victory.

In the opener, Mark Chapman's century and Nathan Smith's four-wicket haul guided New Zealand to a 73-run win.

AP

Shai Hope assumes the role of T20I captain in addition to his existing ODI captaincy, taking over from Rovman Powell who had led the T20 side since May 2023. West Indies' Test captain Kraigg Brathwaite also announced his resignation. Brathwaite, 32, in charge for four years, was appointed Test skipper in place of Jason Holder in March 2021. During Brathwaite's tenure, West Indies earned its first Test victory in Australia in 27 years with a thrilling eight-run win in Brisbane in 2024. A replacement for Brathwaite is yet to be announced.

GETTY IMAGES

Charlotte Edwards has been announced as the new head coach of the England Women's team, taking over from Jon Lewis, who resigned recently. The former England captain represented her country over 300 times, winning two World Cups and lifting the Ashes five times across a 20-year playing career. Since retiring in 2017, Edwards has coached English domestic and global T20 leagues, enjoying success with Southern Vipers in regional cricket, Southern Brave in The Hundred, Sydney Sixers in the Women's Big Bash League, and Mumbai Indians in the WPL.

GETTY IMAGES

Will Pucovski announced his retirement from cricket at the age of 27 after a string of concussions, saying he would not risk "any more damage to my brain". The Aussie, who made his debut as a 22-year-old in 2021, scored an impressive 62 against India in the third Test in Sydney. He dislocated his shoulder while fielding in that match, the first of a series of injuries and concussions that derailed his career.

GETTY IMAGES

Harry Brook was named England's ODI and T20I skipper. The 26-year-old will succeed Jos Buttler, who stepped down from the leadership role after a disappointing outing at the ICC Champions Trophy 2025. Brook, who made his international debut in 2022, has played 26 ODIs, scoring 816 runs with a top score of 110 not out. In T20Is, he has earned 44 caps and was part of the team that won the ICC T20 World Cup in 2022.

GETTY IMAGES

South Australia completed the highest successful fourth-innings chase in a Sheffield Shield final to end a 29-year title drought. Playing against Queensland in the summit clash, South Australia needed 270 runs to win but was in early trouble before Alex Carey combined with Jason Sangha in a match-winning 202-run partnership. While wicketkeeper-batter Carey fell for 105, Sangha finished unbeaten on 126 to seal the four-wicket victory. It was South Australia's 14th title and first since 1995-96, completing a memorable season after lifting the domestic one-day competition earlier in the month.

THE HINDU GROUP

GET A RINGSIDE VIEW TO THE WORLD OF SPORTS

SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM

SPORTSTAR

SUBSCRIPTION WITH DISCOUNT

Periodicity	Price
6 months	₹1299
1 Year	₹2299

To subscribe, visit:
sstar.news/SSPS
or Scan QR code

❍ **New Subscription** ❍ **Renewal (Subscription No.)**

For Subscription, please fill the form, sign and send it to Circulation Department, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai - 600 002. E-mail: customercare@thehindu.co.in Toll-Free No.: 1800 102 1878

Name:_____

Mailing Address:_____

_____ City: _____

Pin: _____ District: _____ State: _____

Landline: _____ Mobile: _____ E-mail: _____

I am remitting ₹ _____ *(Rupees in words.....)* towards annual subscription.

Please furnish remittance details: Bank UTR No..... Subscription No .....

By ❍ DD/Cheque Number - **in favour of THG Publishing Private Limited.,** (Add ₹ 10 for non-Chennai cheque

DD/Cheque Number: ..... Amount: ₹ ..... Date: .....

Bank: .....

Branch: ..... **Signature with date:** .....

R. V. MOORTHY

'We need to develop a culture in which sport is seen as a way of life'

Raksha Khadse, Minister of State for Sports, stresses the need for stronger infrastructure, better governance, and grassroots development to **boost Indian sports.**

Ayon Sengupta and Vijay Lokapally
ayon.s@thehindu.co.in, vijay.l@thehindu.co.in

The Indian government has laid out an ambitious plan to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games and the 2036 Olympics. However, the country's performance at the 2024 Paris Olympics saw a dip from its Tokyo high, as Indian athletes returned with six medals (one silver, five bronze), one less compared to its Tokyo tally (1 gold, two silver, four bronze).

Minister of State for Sports, Raksha Khadse, in an interview with Sportstar, said the government is focused on improving sports infrastructure to help young athletes give their best. "We have to provide them with a healthy environment to compete and progress," she said.

Age fraud has been a huge issue in Indian sports. The Draft National Code Against Age Fraud in Sports shifts the focus from medical testing to digital document verification, among other measures. How does this new approach improve upon the 2010 framework, and how effectively do you think it can tackle age fraud in Indian sports?

Our digital verification system, the NSRS (National Sports Repository System), reduces reliance on invasive tests by ensuring authenticity through robust, traceable records. It streamlines processes and enhances transparency, as it works on a strong digital infrastructure and continuous audits. Records of all athletes will be documented. Going forward, their practice schedules and performances will be monitored daily. Nothing will be hidden. This transparency will help. From a young age, their progress will be monitored through this app, and that will help us tackle

Champions assemble: 1-3: Avani Lekhara, Sumit Antil and Navdeep Singh produced stellar performances in the Paris Paralympics last year, each winning gold in shooting and javelin. 4: Manu Bhaker won two bronze medals in the Paris Olympics, narrowly missing out on a third medal in the 25m air pistol shooting final. **Facing page:** Khadse, along with Union Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports Mansukh Mandaviya (second from left), felicitate the Indian paralympians from Paris 2024. GETTY IMAGES, REUTERS & PTI

the age fraud problem.

The proposed Sports Regulatory Board under the 2024 National Sports Governance Bill has raised concerns of government interference, potentially clashing with IOC norms. Do you anticipate friction with international bodies, and how can India navigate this risk?

I think it was necessary to do this because, as you can see, there are so many issues within these federations right now. For example, we have 100 federations, and about 60% or 70% of them are embroiled in litigation, and because of this, many athletes are suffering. The government is not going to take away the rights of the federations through this bill. This regulation will help them focus more on sport. There are ongoing dialogues with the IOC and other international federations to align policies and reduce potential friction.

What can we do to address the factionalism within NSFs and the legal challenges that keep coming up?

Long-term stabilisation can be achieved by establishing independent, transparent sports bodies with clear mandates, robust legal frameworks, and inclusive decision-making processes to reduce internal conflicts. The recently introduced Sports Governance Bill may provide a long-term solution to this. Establishing sports tribunals will also help address protracted legal disputes.

When can we expect the government to table the National Sports Governance Bill in Parliament?

The bill is expected to be tabled at an appropriate time after due consultations and requisite revisions to ensure comprehensive coverage of sports governance issues.

How do you evaluate the performance of our athletes at the Paris Olympics and Paralympics?

The performance had mixed outcomes: while some disciplines showed promise, the overall medal tally fell short of expectations, highlighting the need for further strategic improvements in training and infrastructure.

However, we must note that six of our athletes finished in fourth place at the Paris Olympics. This is an improvement — a step towards better performance.

The Paralympians showed tremendous improvement and increased their medal count to 29. The government is trying its best to provide better facilities for para-athletes, and their numbers will increase even further in the coming years.

The government has reduced the number of athletes under the reconstituted TOPS (Target Olympic Podium Scheme) list following a less-than-satisfactory performance at the Paris Games. What led to this decision, and how will it impact athlete preparation going forward?

The reduction reflects a strategic move to concentrate resources on the most competitive athletes. This focused approach aims to improve training quality and performance, though it may require transitional adjustments for those removed. We have also announced the Target Asian Games Group (TAGG) with an initial list of 37 athletes.

Neeraj Chopra and others have called for elite international events to be held in India. Are there concrete plans to host competitions like the Diamond League soon?

More events are happening in India now, compared to earlier. While infrastructure enhancements and regulatory adjustments are in progress, concrete plans will be finalised as these efforts mature in consultation with the NSFs. India has already demonstrated its capability to host large-scale events, with the Khelo India Games becoming an annual phenomenon.

India missed its double-digit medal target for the Paris Olympics. What specific strategies are being developed by your ministry and SAI to meet this goal at the 2028 Los Angeles Games?

Our performance over the last six or seven years has improved significantly compared to where we were earlier. We are providing all the equipment and facilities required by the athletes and ensuring they receive the best coaching, wherever they want in the world. Therefore, our

State-level funds could boost regional sports development. However, a robust framework ensuring transparency and targeted impact would be essential to integrate such funding effectively.

Should private sector involvement in grassroots and elite sports development be increased? If so, how can it be effectively integrated?

'THE OVERALL MEDAL TALLY IN PARIS FELL SHORT OF EXPECTATIONS, HIGHLIGHTING THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC IMPROVEMENTS IN TRAINING AND INFRASTRUCTURE'

numbers are slowly increasing now. The maximum benefit has come from the Khelo India Games.

We are also bolstering athlete preparation through advanced sports science, enhanced training regimes, improved talent identification, and increased funding for grassroots and elite development programmes. We have also released an Olympic Guidebook to assist NSFs and administrators in enhancing India's preparedness for the LA 2028 Olympic Games. The guidebook presents a well-structured, time-bound approach to streamline planning, coordination, and progress tracking for the Games.

Given that sport is a state subject, what initiatives can the central government take to ensure access to quality sports infrastructure in every district?

The central government plans to incentivise state governments through funding, public-private partnerships, and community-based programmes to ensure that every district benefits from improved sports facilities.

There are over 1,000 Khelo India Centres — i.e., one KIC in almost every district. This amounts to handholding state governments from the district level itself. Please remember that sport is a state subject as per the constitutional scheme, and the primary onus is on the state governments. The Government of India has guided and empowered them through Centres of Excellence, Khelo India Centres, Khelo India Academies, infrastructure creation and upgradation, and capacity building.

I have been travelling across the country over the last six-seven months, and in many States, I observed a lack of proper maintenance of existing infrastructure. There is also a shortage of quality coaches, which the State governments must address.

The central government's primary role is to pay more attention to our elite athletes and prepare them for international events. However, the Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi Ji, through Khelo India, has ensured that we also reach the grassroots. Hopefully, State governments will be inspired to further develop sport and ensure more children get a chance to play.

Should CSR funding for State Sports Development Funds be extended?

Extending CSR contributions to

The government supports the PPP model because it is necessary for further development of sport. There are many stadiums, even in Delhi, but their utilisation is very low, whereas the maintenance costs are very high. The PPP model can ensure better commercial utilisation of our stadiums.

The private sector can bring in investment and expertise, and we can ensure that sports infrastructure is available at the district, tehsil, and village levels. Effective integration requires structured public-private partnerships, transparent funding channels, and clearly defined roles to foster the development of grassroots and elite sport. We have several innovative models in mind:

- One corporate adopting one discipline/sport for grassroots and elite levels
- Corporates setting up High-Performance Centres
- Corporates establishing tech-driven talent identification and incubation systems
- State governments collaborating with corporates

There is also a need for more CSR funding to start flowing into the sports sector.

What tangible results have the

Khelo India and Khelo University Games initiatives delivered?

These games have improved talent identification, increased participation at the grassroots level, and spurred infrastructure development. They have also provided athletes with valuable competition exposure and improved facilities during the games.

We have also planned the Khelo India School Games, City Games, and Beach Games.

Khelo India has established itself as a brand. A prime example is the participation of 28 Khelo India athletes in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games and 41 medallists in the 2022 Asian Games.

We also have the Kirti programme for talent identification. Our team goes and analyses the children and then we support the best players from there.

Are there any programmes to support the girl child in sports? Are there special schemes to discover and train young girls in rural India?

Yes, schemes like Khelo India ASMITA (Sports for Women), all-women SAI training centres such as the one in Dharamsala, and targeted talent scouting programmes aim to identify and nurture rural girls. Special coaching camps and mentorship programmes are also being expanded. Our daughters are performing exceptionally well at present — our girls are winning more medals at the Olympics and the Asian Games. Even our para-athletes are doing well. And this number is only going to increase.

A 33% reservation will also be introduced for women coaches to ensure greater participation of women. There will also be reservation in administrative roles.

How will the RESET (Retired Sportspersons Empowerment Training) programme support post-retirement transitions of athletes?

RESET is an idea with multiple possibilities. It aims to offer retired athletes skill development, career counselling, and financial planning support, ensuring they have viable pathways into post-sport careers and improved financial security. More work is needed in this area to create employment opportunities for retiring athletes.

Apart from sports-related jobs like coaching, sports scientists may be developed through RESET as it progresses into other areas such as sports management, professional sports leagues, and the fitness industry.

Recruitment under the sports quota has declined in PSUs and government departments. Should entities like the Railways be mandated to reserve more positions for athletes?

Increasing reserved positions in PSUs like the Railways could enhance career opportunities for athletes. However, any mandate should be designed in consultation with stakeholders to balance both requirements and representation.

Under RESET, different certification courses of six months and three months are being conducted, which can help former athletes seek employment in private institutes or with the government. They can also work in federations or train children — this could be a huge factor in increasing the number of coaches.

India's topography is ideal for high-altitude training centres, yet we have just one centre in Himachal Pradesh. Why hasn't this potential been tapped, and are there plans to expand such facilities?

Historically, budgetary and logistical challenges have limited the development of such facilities. High-altitude centres are primarily meant for endurance training. However, there are alternative solutions, such as hypoxic chambers, which simulate high-altitude conditions. Innovations like these may pave the way forward, improving the efficiency and efficacy of high-altitude training.

Given your interest in sports science, how do you intend to use it to further enhance India's sporting potential?

The focus is on integrating sports science into athlete training, injury prevention, and performance analysis. Collaborations with global experts, increased research funding, and technology-driven interventions will be prioritised.

Despite large-scale recruitment by SAI, concerns remain about the qualifications of coaches and support staff. Does India have the human resources needed for elite athlete development, and how do you plan to address the gaps?

Sport is on the rise, and so is the requirement for a qualified workforce. We need to improve the athlete-to-coach ratio, which currently stands at around 1:8, 1:10, or 1:15. Although recruitment has expanded, there remains a need to upskill coaches and support staff.

The SAI and NSFs are continuously working to upgrade coaches through certification courses at various levels. Peripheral knowledge in sports science areas — such as Strength & Conditioning, nutrition, etc.— is also imparted. SAI NSNIS Patiala hosts multiple such courses. Recently, a 'Yoga for Peak Performance' course was conducted in March 2025. Focused training, certification programmes, and international collaborations are being implemented to bridge these gaps.

Additionally, all NSFs have been encouraged to hire High-Performance Directors to design and oversee the development of their respective sporting disciplines from grassroots to elite levels. State governments must also do more to upskill their workforce in this area.

Until more children start playing sport, the demand for coaches will not increase. To meet this future demand, it is necessary to introduce some changes.

I have put a proposal to our ministry that we should start expanding professional courses in sports science, as very few universities offer them right now. We need to introduce courses on sports science, sports medicine, sports

Correct vision: "I have put a proposal to our ministry that we should start expanding professional courses in sports science, as very few universities offer them right now" — Raksha Khadse. R.V. MOORTHY

nutrition, and sports engineering. This will create a new sector and open up new job opportunities.

Secondly, good coaches must also reach the grassroots — they must reach every school. You asked me earlier how the number of medals will increase. This is how. Right now, children are not receiving the right guidance at the right time. Many reach the national level purely through their own hard work, and only then do they get full support. If they get this support from the beginning — if they get access to these facilities and coaching from childhood — then I believe the number will increase significantly, and our chances of winning medals will improve.

Last but not the least, sport requires specialised manpower in managerial positions. One such example is SAI's Administrative Cadre, which is evolving into a specialised bureaucracy trained to facilitate sport-specific requirements such as coach development, talent identification, event organisation, and infrastructure building.

India consistently ranks high in global doping violations, yet NADA's (National Anti-Doping Agency) budget remains modest at ₹22.3 crore. Is this sufficient, and what reforms are needed to address the doping crisis?

Reforms should include increased funding, enhanced testing, stricter enforcement, and closer alignment with international anti-doping practices. From WADA's (World Anti-Doping Agency) side, a lot of awareness programmes are being organised, and workshops are being conducted. Through this, we are trying to create maximum awareness among athletes and coaches.

How strong is India's bid for the 2036 Olympics and the 2030 Commonwealth Games? What factors are in India's favour?

I am fully confident that we will win the 2036 Olympics bid because of the visible development in the country and the efforts of our Prime Minister. The international goodwill of our government and the personal relationships that our Prime Minister maintains with leaders of other countries give us an advantage.

Our bid is also bolstered by improving infrastructure, strong public support, and governmental commitment. Success will depend on meeting international standards and presenting a comprehensive, well-planned proposal.

What needs to be done over the next decade to achieve a top 10 finish at the 2036 Olympics?

Achieving a top 10 finish will require systemic reforms, increased investment in sports science, enhanced grassroots and talent identification programmes, improved infrastructure, and significant governance and policy overhauls.

How has your experience been as Sports Minister?

I am trying my best. Sport is a new area for me, but I am looking at a lot of things. I am focusing on sports science, nutrition, and engineering. I have noticed that while state governments allocate funds, there is often a lack of technical know-how, like how to build proper infrastructure, how to build and maintain a track. My focus will be to bridge this knowledge gap. We need to ensure that children get the best possible sports science, nutrition, and training from school level onwards.

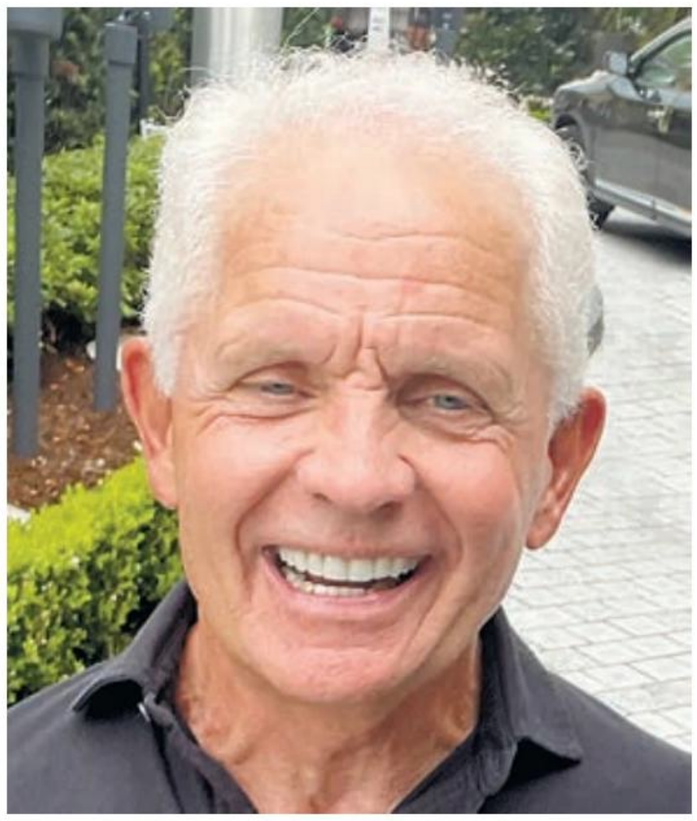
There is immense potential in Indian athletes, but we need a long-term vision. Strengthening grassroots programmes, addressing governance issues, and promoting athlete welfare remain focal points. I am convinced that Indian sport has yet to truly realise and reap the benefits of women in sport — Nari Shakti.

Sport is not just about winning medals or getting a job through a sports quota. Today's generation is struggling with issues like depression and anxiety. Parents often say that their children are inactive and rarely leave the house. Sport can help tackle these problems. From sport, you can learn time management, fitness, teamwork, coordination, and so much more. We need to develop a culture in which sport is seen as a way of life — a path to building a healthier, happier society.

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

What's the ideal physique in tennis?

Sports performance expert Mackie Shilstone discusses the **physiology of tennis athletes** in an in-depth conversation with Paul Fein.



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Paul Fein

Superb physiques have long been the hallmark of tennis champions. Harry Hopman, the legendary Davis Cup captain, made superior fitness the cornerstone of the Australian men's dynasty in the 1950s and '60s. As a teenager in the late 1950s, Margaret Court **(above)** — the trailblazer for rigorous training in women's tennis — became the first woman to use weights. Dozens of double-knee jumps every day, jumping rope, and two-hundred-yard wind sprints also made the Australian superstar the best-conditioned and strongest player of her era.

Bjorn Borg, the lean Swedish speedster who reigned in the 1970s, once told arch-rival John McEnroe he never got tired in a tournament match. Martina Navratilova turned into a muscular, super-fit 'bionic woman', as the media labelled her, and became almost unbeatable for much of the 1980s, while another Czech-turned-American star and

Necessary transformation: Martina Navratilova (left) turned into a muscular, super-fit 'bionic woman' while Ivan Lendl (right) became renowned for his insanely gruelling off-court training.

fitness fanatic, Ivan Lendl, was renowned for his insanely gruelling off-court training. Novak Djokovic, perhaps the most dedicated and knowledgeable champion in tennis history, often talks about his 'holistic' approach that includes hyperbaric oxygen chambers, 'pyramid water', and superfoods like goji berries, spirulina, and sea algae. No wonder *Men's Health* magazine's 2021 feature about the GOAT was titled — 'Is Novak Djokovic The Fittest Athlete of All Time?'

To learn more about the physiology of tennis athletes, I consulted Mackie Shilstone **(facing page, below)** one of America's most influential fitness, wellness, and sports performance experts. The New Orleans-based author of seven health and fitness books has played a pivotal role in the success and longevity of more than 3,000 professional athletes and teams over the past 43 years. His most famous sports clients include Serena Williams, boxing champions Roy Jones Jr., Bernard Hopkins, and Michael Spinks, NFL Hall of Famers Peyton Manning and Morten Anderson, Hockey Hall of Famer Brett Hull, and baseball super-athlete Ozzie Smith. Serena won 14 of her Open Era-record 23 Grand Slam singles titles during Shilstone's 14-year stint.

The sports ax˙om that a good b˙g man beats a good small man ˙s truer than ever ˙n tenn˙s. The top 20 men averaged 5'9" ˙n 1973, shot up to 6' ˙n 1989, and now stands at 6'2.85". Close to that average are the legendary Big Three of 6'2" Novak Djokovic, 6'1" Rafael Nadal, and 6'1" Roger Federer as well as the new Big Two of 6'3" Jannik Sinner and 6' Carlos Alcaraz. In 2019, Reilly Opelka, a 6'11.75" American who upset Djokovic at Brisbane this January, told *The Telegraph (UK)* **that "6'3" to 6'6" ˙s go˙ng to be the ˙deal." The women's game has also trended taller. The top 20 now averages 5'8.6", and players 5'9" or taller have won n˙ne of the last 10 Grand Slam t˙tles and the Par˙s Olymp˙cs. What ˙s the best he˙ght or he˙ght range for men and women pro players?**

Shilstone:There isn't a single 'best' height for male and female tennis players, as success in the sport depends on a combination of factors, including skill, athleticism, strategy, and mental toughness. However, there are height ranges that tend to be more advantageous based on historical and current top players.

'Heights' of greatness: The top 20 men averaged 5'9" in 1973, shot up to 6' in 1989, and now stands at 6'2.85". Close to that average are the legendary Big Three of 6'2" Novak Djokovic, 6'1" Rafael Nadal, and 6'1" Roger Federer.

For men, they are as follows: The Shorter but Highly Successful Range (6'), The Ideal Balance Range (6' to 6'5"), and The Taller Players (6'6" +). The women's ranges are The Shorter but Highly Successful Range (5' 6"), The Ideal Balance Range (5'7" to 5'11"), and The Taller Players (6'+).

In general, shorter players tend to rely more on speed and agility and can handle low balls better. Medium-height players offer a balanced mix of power, speed, and endurance.

Taller players benefit from greater reach and power, especially on serves, but may face challenges with movement and agility.

During parts of their careers, leading American players Mardy Fish, Lindsay Davenport, Taylor Townsend, Jack Sock, and Andy Roddick, as well as Europeans Marion Bartoli, Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, and Jelena Ostapenko, have been significantly overweight. How does a tennis player determine their ideal weight range?

Here are the six ways to determine the ideal weight range:

❶ Assess Body Composition (Not Just Scale Weight)

◆ Lean Mass vs. Fat Mass: Tennis players should aim for a lean physique with a high muscle-to-fat ratio while avoiding excessive bulk.

◆ Body Fat Percentage:

◆ Men: ~8-12%

◆ Women: ~16-22%

◆ DEXA Scan, BodPod, or Skinfold Measurements can help assess body composition.

❷ Consider Playing Style and Positioning

◆ Baseliners (Endurance and Speed): Need a lighter weight to move efficiently and sustain long rallies.

◆ Serve-and-Volley (Explosive Power and Strength): May carry a bit more muscle mass for explosive bursts.

❸ Strength-to-Weight Ratio

◆ More strength without excess weight improves acceleration and agility.

◆ A strength test, such as relative squat/deadlift ratios, ensures enough power without slowing movement.

❹ Energy Expenditure and Metabolic Needs

◆ Players burn 800–1,500+ kcal/hour in matches.

◆ They must maintain a sustainable weight that allows adequate caloric intake for performance and recovery.

❺ Injury History and Joint Health

◆ Carrying extra weight — even lean muscle — increases impact forces on knees, ankles, and the

lower back.

◆ A history of injuries might dictate a leaner weight to reduce joint strain.

❻ Trial and Performance Data

◆ Test different weight ranges over the training cycle, considering both the off-season and competitive season.

◆ Use speed, agility, endurance, and recovery markers to evaluate performance.

NBA scouts and coaches tout the advantages of having a long reach or wingspan. In 2012, the average height of an NBA player was about 6'7" with an average wingspan of around seven feet. In what ways is a long wingspan an advantage in tennis?

There are four important ways.

First, a longer wingspan increases court coverage. It allows a player to reach more balls, making it easier to return shots that would be out of reach for players with shorter arms. This is especially useful in defence and when stretching for wide shots when returning serve and during baseline rallies.

Second, it helps you play better at the net. A longer reach aids in volleys and overheads, allowing a player to cover more area and put away shots more effectively. Players like 6'10" John Isner and 6'6" Daniil Medvedev use their reach well at the net.

Third, it enhances both the quality and consistency of serves. A long wingspan contributes to a higher contact point on serves, generating more leverage and power. This can help in hitting a more effective kick serves and achieving greater angles.

Fourth, it provides greater ball-striking leverage. A longer arm span can create more torque on groundstrokes, increasing shot power and spin potential.

However, longer wingspans have potential downsides. First, they generally result in a slower swing speed on groundstrokes. A longer lever arm requires more control and strength, which can make quick adjustments harder.

Second, players with a longer wingspan typically have less

Tall order: The new Big Two, Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz, stand tall at 6'3" and 6' ,respectively.

Net worth: A wide wingspan leads to a longer reach, which in turn helps during volleys and overheads, allowing a player to cover more area and put away shots more effectively. Players like 6'10" John Isner (in pic) used their reach well at the net.

manoeuvrability. They may struggle with rapid hand-eye coordination for short, fast exchanges. Specifically, compact strokes are harder to execute, particularly when returning fast, swerving body serves and volleying bullet-passing shots at the body .

In the 2000 book, TABOO: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It, Jon Entine wrote: "Since the first known study of differences between blacks and white athletes in 1928, the data have been remarkably consistent: in most sports, African-descended athletes have the capacity to do better with their raw skills than whites." Entine listed eight categories of "physical and physiological differences known to date" that "Blacks with a West African ancestry generally have." The first category is: "relatively less subcutaneous fat on arms and legs and proportionately more lean body and muscle mass, broader shoulders, larger quadriceps, and bigger, more developed musculature in general." How much do you believe these genetic advantages relate to superior tennis performance?

Genetic advantages play a significant role, roughly 55%, in superior tennis performance, but they are just one piece of the puzzle. Tennis success is a combination of genetics, training, nutrition, mental toughness, and strategy.

Here are some key genetic factors:

1. Fast-Twitch Muscle Fibres — Elite tennis players often have a high proportion of fast-twitch muscle fibres, which enhance speed, explosive power, and agility — critical for quick reactions and acceleration on the court.

2. Aerobic and Anaerobic Capacity — A strong genetic predisposition for both aerobic endurance and anaerobic power helps players maintain high energy levels throughout long matches while also executing explosive movements.

3. Height, Limb Length, and Leverage — Height and limb proportions influence serve speed, reach, and court coverage. While taller players, such as 6'11" Ivo Karlović, have powerful serves, shorter players, such as 5'7" Diego Schwartzman, typically have superior agility and baseline movement.

4. Neuromuscular Efficiency — Superior coordination, reaction time, and proprioception are often influenced by genetics. This helps players react quickly to shots and execute complex stroke mechanics under pressure.

5. Injury Resistance — Some genetic markers influence tendon and ligament strength, reducing the risk of common tennis injuries such as ACL tears, stress fractures, and shoulder issues.

6. Mental Resilience and Competitive Drive — Certain genetic factors influence dopamine and serotonin regulation, potentially affecting a player's ability to handle pressure, maintain focus, and thrive in high-stakes matches.

Do female tennis players have some anatomical, biomechanical, and physiological disadvantages compared to their male counterparts?

They do, and that can present certain disadvantages in performance. However, these differences do not diminish their athletic capabilities but rather shape how they train, compete, and excel in their own right.

Anatomical Differences

● Hip Structure: Women typically have a wider pelvis, which affects movement mechanics. This can slightly limit lateral speed and agility compared to men, whose narrower hips allow for more efficient side-to-side motion.

● Shoulder and Upper Body Strength: Men generally have broader shoulders and a higher percentage of muscle mass in the upper body, providing more power in serves and groundstrokes.

● Limb Proportions: Women often have a higher Q-angle (the angle at which the femur meets the knee), which can influence knee stability and increase the risk of ACL injuries.

Biomechanical Differences

● Serve Speed and Stroke Power: Due to differences in upper-body muscle mass and leverage, men generally hit harder serves and groundstrokes. One of the fastest recorded women's serves (Sabine Lisicki at 131 mph) is still well below John Isner's record of 157 mph.

● Explosiveness and Speed: Men tend to have higher levels of type II (fast-twitch) muscle fibres, contributing to quicker bursts of speed and acceleration on the court.

● Grip Strength and Racket Control: Greater grip strength in men allows for better control over spin and shot variety, particularly on heavy topspin groundstrokes and when returning powerful serves or volleying high-speed passing shots.

Short and swift: While taller players have powerful serves, shorter players, such as 5'7" Diego Schwartzman, typically have superior agility and baseline movement.

Physiological Differences

● Aerobic and Anaerobic Capacity: Men have a higher VO_2 max (oxygen uptake capacity), allowing them to sustain higher intensities for longer durations. However, women are often better at endurance due to differences in fat metabolism.

● Hormonal Impact: Oestrogen can lead to greater fat storage, affecting body composition, while testosterone in men promotes muscle hypertrophy and recovery.

● Recovery and Injury Risk: Women have higher rates of knee injuries (e.g. ACL tears) due to anatomical and hormonal factors. However, they often show greater resilience in endurance recovery.

How Elite Female Tennis Players

ELITE FEMALE TENNIS PLAYERS HAVE FOUND WAYS TO OPTIMISE THEIR STRENGTHS, MAKING THEIR GAME JUST AS COMPELLING AND PHYSICALLY DEMANDING AS MEN'S

Adapt

- Technique and Strategy: Women's tennis emphasises angles, consistency, and court coverage rather than sheer power.
- Training Adaptations: Strength training, mobility work, and biomechanical refinements help female athletes maximise their potential.
- Mental and Tactical Edge: Women's tennis often features longer rallies and more strategic point construction, requiring high levels of mental toughness and endurance.

While these differences exist, elite female tennis players have found ways to optimise their strengths, making their game just as compelling and physically demanding as men's tennis. It's not about disadvantages — it's about playing to their strengths.

How much do training and environment matter?

Even with the best genetics, training, nutrition, recovery, and coaching are essential. Serena Williams **(facing page, below)**, Rafael Nadal, and Novak Djokovic didn't just rely on their natural abilities — they optimised every aspect of their game through relentless work and smart preparation.

What is the remaining 45% that contributes to elite performance in tennis?

Technology, such as racquet design, weather conditions, court surface, travel schedule, and coaching quality, to name a few factors.

Need for speed: Due to differences in upper-body muscle mass and leverage, men generally hit harder serves and groundstrokes. One of the fastest recorded women's serves — Sabine Lisicki (in pic) at 131 mph — is still well below John Isner's record of 157mph.

Training methods of champions

Besides tennis champions Novak Djokovic, Serena Williams, and Maria Sharapova (left), several other sports superstars have used hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT).
They include Cristiano Ronaldo, LeBron James, Michael Jordan, Simone Biles, Lindsey Vonn, Michael Phelps, and Usain Bolt. Proven benefits for athletic performance include accelerated recovery, reduced inflammation, improved oxygen intake, increased endurance, enhanced mental focus, improved speed and power, and treatment of sports injuries.

Salt room therapy is another increasingly popular training method used by Novak Djokovic.
According to *saltchamberinc.com*, "Halotherapy (aka salt therapy) is a holistic therapy that involves breathing in salty air. Halotherapy is a fast-growing treatment that may provide numerous health benefits for people with respiratory and skin conditions, as well as anxiety and depression. The effectiveness of salt therapy is dependent on a halogenerator. This machine grinds particles of pure-grade sodium chloride (salt). Then, it disperses the particles into a hygienic and controlled environment known as a salt room."

Less known in the sports world but highly effective is a machine designed for astronauts to help prevent their muscles from atrophying in zero gravity.
The use of this machine strengthened the left arm of the teenage Rafael Nadal. And that well-muscled physiological weapon — combined with his great athleticism and Western grip — created Nadal's out-of-this-world topspin forehand, averaging 3,200 revolutions per minute and peaking at over 5,000 rpm. The greatest groundstroke in tennis history bounded viciously over and outside opponents' strike zones and helped Rafa capture 22 Grand Slam titles.

Was it just a coincidence when the six-year world record for the indoor mile fell twice within five days?
U. S. runner Yared Nuguse set it on February 9, only for Norway's Jakob Ingebrigtsen to eclipse it on February 14. Super spike shoes and high-tech track surfaces designed to propel runners faster than ever before partly account for this rapid record-smashing. However, a perfectly legal supplement that middle-distance runners call "Bicarb" could also explain it. Its main ingredient is sodium bicarbonate — household baking soda — which helps reduce the painful physiological effects of shorter, maximum-intensity exercise.

« I miss the junoon among youngsters »

SHAHBAZ AHMED

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Mornings in Lahore are unhurried. As the city slowly stirs to life, a steaming cup of doodh patti tea, flaky parathas, and a serving of halwa are breakfast staples.

But Shahbaz Ahmed Sr. is an early riser, known for his punctuality.

It was no surprise that he arrived at the roof-top cafe on MM Alam Road — nestled in the heart of the city — 10 minutes ahead of schedule. As he put it, it's this 'discipline' that keeps him going.

A former Pakistan hockey captain and a legend of the game, Shahbaz was renowned for his razor-sharp passes to centre-forwards, earning him the title of 'Maradona of hockey'. While he appreciates the moniker, he is deeply saddened by the current state of Pakistan hockey.

Over a breakfast of paratha and garam *ande* (eggs) — two quintessential Lahori delicacies — a nostalgic Shahbaz reminisced about leading Pakistan to victory at the 1994 World Cup in Sydney, one of the nation's greatest triumphs in its 'national sport'.

Midway through the conversation, nostalgia took over. Shahbaz paused, picked up his phone, and dialled an old friend — former India captain M.M. Somaya — to relive past memories. He acknowledged that the Odisha government's investment and support have significantly boosted Indian hockey in recent years.

In an exclusive chat with *Sportstar*, the former captain and erstwhile administrator reflected on Pakistan hockey's golden years and how the country has struggled to sustain its rich legacy.

What are your thoughts on the current state of Pakistan hockey?

Hockey has struggled to attract young players, and our performances in major international events reflect that decline. We are out of the World Cup and the Olympics, and there is no guarantee of jobs for those who take up the sport. As a result, the younger generation has moved on.

We have talent, but there is a lack of passion. I miss that *junoon* — the hunger among young players to step up, play the game, and carry forward the legacy.

Another major issue is that after playing at the local or junior level for a few years, many players leave to compete in sub-standard overseas

If you look at our players' statistics, their ball possession and touch rates barely exceed 10-15 minutes across three or four tournaments. That's simply not enough for players aiming to compete at the highest level.

SHAYAN ACHARYA

leagues in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Thailand for the sake of earning $1,000 or $2,000. They lack the quality to secure spots in top leagues in Germany or the Netherlands, so they settle for these smaller competitions. Unfortunately, this stagnates their growth, and they fail to progress further.

But why are young players moving to these smaller leagues? At a time when India is reviving its love for hockey, what is holding Pakistan back?

The main issue is a lack of proper patronage. Hockey is our national sport, yet it is not part of the national budget. Players are aware that there are no secure jobs, and since we play only two or three international tournaments a year, the financial incentives are minimal. This uncertainty pushes them towards leagues in Hong Kong or Malaysia, where they can at least earn a living.

Unless we streamline our system and establish a Centre of Excellence, revival seems difficult. Despite once dominating the sport, we have fallen behind — disconnected from major leagues and global events. Our physical fitness levels are also not on par with international standards. Collectively, these factors have left us trailing far behind.

India has revived hockey in recent years. What do you think has driven this turnaround?

The state of Odisha has made massive investments in Indian hockey, which is remarkable. In Pakistan, the interest simply isn't there. It's not just about funding — it's about prioritising the sport.

India will also benefit from the relaunch of the Hockey India League earlier this year. Their women's team has broken into the world's top four, while the men's team competes in the Pro League and has won medals at the Olympics and World Cup. India has embraced hockey professionally, and once a structured system is in place, a strong talent pipeline naturally develops.

With financial backing, India has hired top coaches at various levels, and the players have reaped the rewards. Crucially, every Indian player competes in around 40-50 matches annually, boosting confidence and teamwork.

Meanwhile, our cycle has stalled. Even if we secure the same level of funding as India, it will take at least five years to rebuild. The first challenge is bringing young players back, refining their skills, and preparing them for top-tier competition against teams like the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany.

If you look at our players' statistics, their ball possession and touch rates barely exceed 10-15 minutes across three or four tournaments. That's simply not enough for players aiming to compete at the highest level.

Hockey India is led by former captain Dilip Tirkey. You were once part of the Pakistan Hockey Federation. Should Pakistan bring in an ex-player to lead its hockey administration?

The real issue is that we never built a proper system. We couldn't even plan a fixed calendar — whether the team would travel to Europe or elsewhere remained uncertain. Without a steady flow of funds and a structured process, it's impossible to move forward.

Revival is difficult because hockey

Livewire: Shahbaz Ahmed of Pakistan, a dynamic force in attack, showcased his touch-tap-dribble skills to dismantle defences during the 1990 Hockey World Cup in Lahore. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

has become an expensive sport. Travel costs have soared, and equipment — shoes, sticks, and other gear — is now costly. Unlike other nations, we lack a system where talent-hunting programmes provide proper accommodation or hockey hostels for young players.

When I visited Bhubaneswar a few years ago, I was amazed by the state-of-the-art facilities at the stadium. It was a world-class venue. Whoever takes charge in Pakistan must prioritise developing such venues with complete infrastructure.

Hosting major tournaments is key. When international events take place at home, young players learn far more by watching top-level competition than by reading about it.

Pakistan failed to qualify for the last three Olympics and two of the last three World Cups. Does that hurt?

It's hard to put my feelings into words. Whenever our teams play — even in friendlies — I struggle to watch. It breaks my heart.

When I saw the 2021 Olympic final, I realised the standard wasn't particularly high, yet Pakistan wasn't even there. That hurt even more. When we played, the game's quality was far superior — it's simply not comparable to today.

But I don't blame the players. This is a failure of investment and legacy-building, not individual effort.

That said, things can improve. Government backing and visionary leadership are crucial. We need a technocrat who understands an athlete's struggles and can manage the calendar to bring long-term benefits. If these changes happen, hockey has a future. I'd be happy to help the government or any organisation working to revive the sport. I can share my experience

Grand welcome: Star forward Shahbaz Ahmed (wearing spectacles) and captain Tahir Zaman (right) arrive at the Indira Gandhi International Airport on March 17, 1998, ahead of the Test series against India. Pakistan won the eight-Test series 4-3, with one game ending in a draw. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

One to keep: Shahbaz Ahmed shows his *Sportstar* magazine poster to teammates during a break in practice before the final Test against India in Chennai on March 26, 1998. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

with young players, but the system must first improve.

Is skillset making the difference between Indian and Pakistani players?

Skillset is not the main difference between Indian and Pakistani players; rather, it is the system that develops them for high-performance hockey. The key factor is how well players execute game plans and fulfil their roles within the team's structure—essentially, their game intelligence.

Indian players tend to utilise their skills more effectively, adapting to the playing conditions and match situations with greater precision.

You praised the Hockey India League. Should the PHF consider launching a similar tournament?

Absolutely. A premier hockey league would provide young players with financial support and exposure.

Beyond that, our national team must tour abroad for 3-4 months every year, ensuring each player competes in at least 30 high-quality matches.

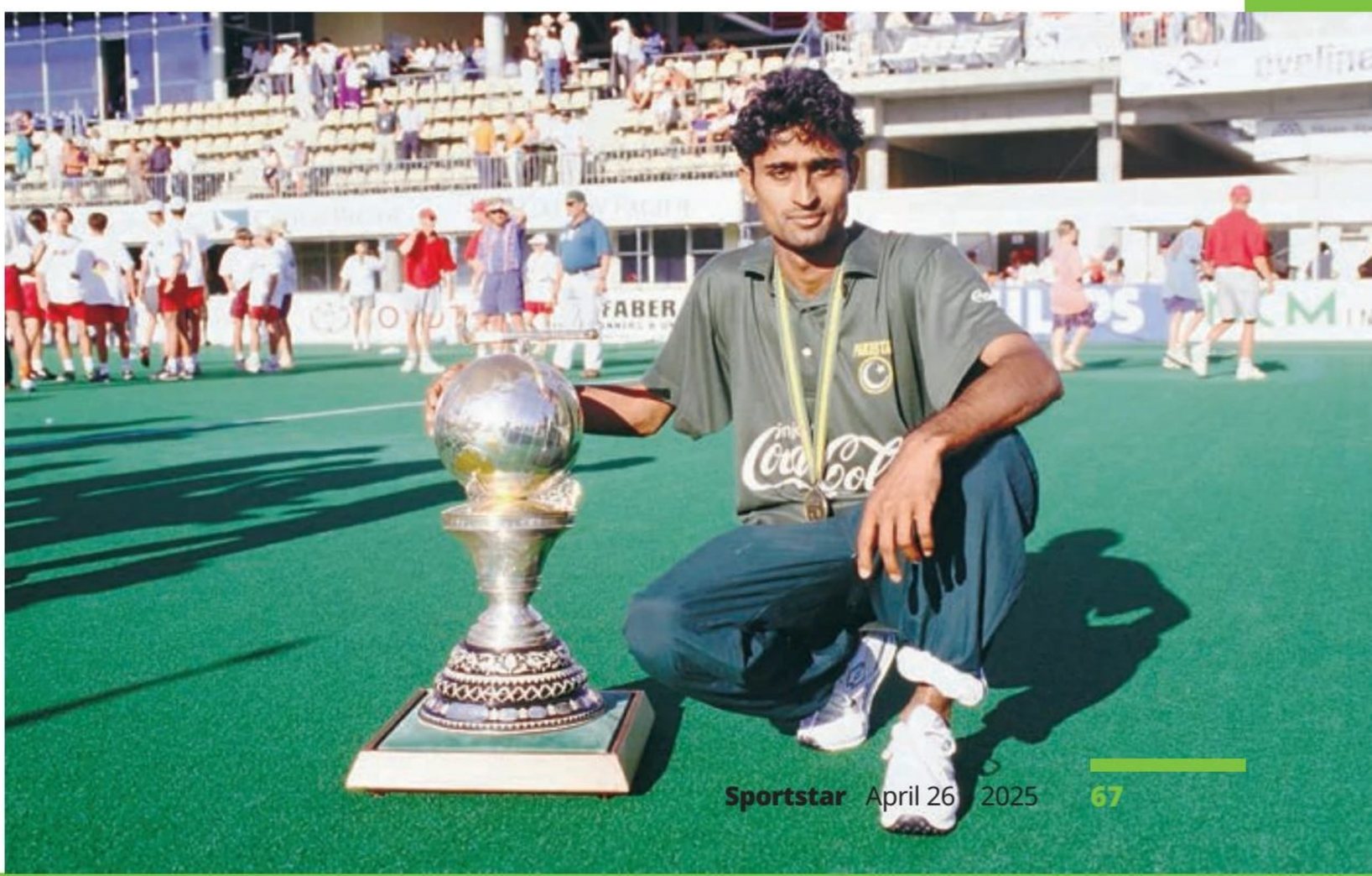
That's the only way to groom talent and gain international experience.

You had a long and successful career. What's your most cherished memory?

I played for Pakistan for 18 years, one of the longest-serving members of the team. Some moments will always stay with me. In 1987, when I played the Indira Gandhi Gold Cup in India, massive crowds turned up to support us. Fans carried banners calling me 'Superman' and chanted my name. That was unforgettable.

Another moment was the 1994 World Cup final in Sydney. Fans from New Zealand and Australia approached me, saying, "You're the only one who truly knows how to play hockey." Such encouragement and respect kept us going.

Top of the world: Pakistan captain Shahbaz Ahmed poses with the World Cup after his team's tie-breaker win over the Netherlands in the 1994 Hockey World Cup final in Sydney on December 4. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

FROM WATCHING ON THE SIDELINES TO OWNING THE FIELD

How Deepika went from watching hockey as a child to becoming one of India's most promising forwards and a **rising drag-flick** specialist.

Nihit Sachdeva
nihit.s@thehindu.co.in

"Hockey or nothing."

For Deepika, the decision was swift. After all, she was just an eight-year-old child. It didn't matter that she didn't know the name of the sport or its basics. Watching a group of girls training at a hockey stadium on her way to the wrestling arena at the SAI Centre in Hisar was enough. She had made up her mind.

"When the girls were passing the ball to each other, I didn't even know it was called passing. They were encouraging one another, saying, 'Come on!' I liked that," the 21-year-old told *Sportstar*.

When she returned home, she told her father, "*Mujhe khelni hai toh hockey hi khelni hai, nahin toh koi aur sport mein jaana hi nahin hai* (If I am to play a sport, it will be hockey; otherwise, I won't play anything)."

Deepika's father, grandfather, and cousins had all participated in wrestling and kabaddi at some point. Sending her with her brother for wrestling practice was a natural step in continuing the family tradition.

But for now, her father decided the wrestling mat could wait. He approached coach Azad Singh Malik and asked if his daughter could play hockey at the same ground where she had first witnessed the game. Given her small stature and young age, Malik initially refused to train her. However, after her father's persistent requests, he allowed her to sit on a wooden bench and observe the sessions.

For three days, Deepika watched the other girls play before Malik finally asked, "*Hockey khelni hai*? (Do you want to play hockey?)"

That girl from Haryana, who first

picked up a hockey stick 13 years ago, is now one of India's most promising forwards.

"My family and neighbours thought I was just playing hockey for fun and that I would eventually return to wrestling," said Deepika, who has since scored 27 goals in 56 matches for the national team.

However, she was serious about the sport. Two years later, Malik told her that with focus and hard work, she could become an exceptional player. It didn't take long for her to prove him right. At the Sub-Junior Nationals in Hisar in 2018, she netted 18 goals, leading Haryana to the title and earning the 'Best Player of the Tournament' award. Soon after, she was called up to the junior national camp.

Tough initiation

When captain and ace forward Rani Rampal was sidelined with a hamstring injury following India's historic fourth-place finish at the Tokyo Olympics, newly appointed coach Janneke Schopman introduced Deepika to the senior squad during the FIH Pro League 2021-22 season. The youngster, however, failed to score in her six appearances and was omitted from the Commonwealth Games squad that went on to win bronze in Birmingham in 2022.

A year later, during India's victorious Junior Asia Cup campaign in Oman, Deepika amassed seven goals in six matches, four of them from penalty corners (PCs). This performance earned her a spot in the squad for the Asian Games in Hangzhou. In India's tournament opener, she finally opened her international account, scoring a PC against Singapore.

"Coach Malik first introduced me to drag-flicking. He told me that, coming from a family of wrestlers, I already had the power. But he also warned me about the higher risk of injury," she said.

Once in the senior camp, Rupinder Pal Singh, one of India's finest drag-flickers and a bronze medallist at Tokyo 2020, taught her the nuances of the skill.

Deepika learned a tough lesson at the FIH Olympic Qualifiers 2024 in Ranchi. On the eve of the tournament, Schopman noted that opposition coaches viewed Deepika's drag-flick as a serious threat. However, she managed to convert just one PC in five games as India finished fourth, failing to qualify for the Paris Olympics.

R. V. MOORTHY

"That experience taught me the importance of staying calm as a drag-flicker. Not every attempt results in a goal, but at the same time, not every shot is a miss," she reflected.

Learning from the best

During the inaugural Women's Hockey India League (HIL) in January, she received invaluable tips from Dutch star Yibbi Jansen, currently the best drag-flicker in women's hockey.

"She told me how she adjusts her speed and positions her feet. She also suggested watching videos of opposition rushers for better preparation," Deepika said.

Her drag-flicking prowess took centre stage during India's successful defence of the Women's Asian Champions Trophy in Rajgir last year, where she finished as the tournament's top scorer with 11 goals, six from PCs. Her performances drew praise from Indian men's captain Harmanpreet Singh, who posted on X (formerly Twitter): "A special shoutout to Deepika – from one drag-flicker to another, you're destined for greatness!"

Deepika ended 2024 as the third-highest female goalscorer worldwide with 17 goals. Recognising her consistent performances, Hockey India recently honoured her with the Asunta Lakra Award for Upcoming Player of the Year (Women's Under-21), while goalkeeper Savita Punia won the Balbir Singh Sr. Award for Player of the Year for the third time.

A photograph of a young Deepika garlanding Savita at a felicitation function years ago resurfaced on social media soon after the awards ceremony. "That day, she had just returned from an

Bleed blue: After the HIL, Deepika rejoined India for the FIH Pro League 2024-25, where it stunned the Olympic champion Netherlands in a shootout after a 2-2 draw. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

international tournament, and a function was held for her at the SAI Centre. We all welcomed her with garlands. The coach told us about her journey, even though her career had only just begun. It was an emotional moment, and I wanted to experience the same," Deepika recalled. She finally had her moment when she returned to the same ground in Hisar after the Women's HIL – the first of many such instances to come.

A special goal

Soon after the HIL, Deepika returned to international duty for India's FIH Pro League 2024-25 campaign in February.

India stunned reigning World and Olympic champions the Netherlands in a penalty shootout after a 2-2 draw in Bhubaneswar. Despite trailing 0-2 at half-time, India's more aggressive style under new coach Harendra Singh, who replaced Schopman, turned the match around. Five minutes into the second half, Deepika scored a sensational solo goal, a moment that quickly went viral, garnering over 31,700 views on X.

Receiving a pass from Sunelita Toppo just after being subbed in, Deepika surged down the left flank. Within 10 seconds, she entered the shooting circle, deftly lifted the ball over a defender's stick, and scooped it past the onrushing Dutch goalkeeper Josine Koning into the top-right corner.

In that electrifying sequence, Deepika displayed her fitness, game awareness, and decision-making.

With the second leg of the Pro League (June 14-29 in Europe) and the Asia Cup (dates and venue to be announced) approaching, where World Cup qualification spots will be at stake, Deepika's form bodes well for Indian women's hockey.

Age: 21
Position: Forward
Matches: 56
Goals: 27 (Penalty Corners - 14, Field Goals - 9, Penalty Strokes - 4)
Debut: Against China in FIH Pro League on January 31, 2022
Maiden goal: Against Singapore in Hangzhou Asian Games on September 27, 2023
Most goals in a match: Five against Thailand in Asian Champions Trophy, Rajgir, on November 14, 2024
Major Achievements -
Bronze medal at Hangzhou Asian Games 2023
Gold medals at Asian Champions Trophy (2023 and 2024)
Bronze medal at Asia Cup 2022

ChangHo on the charge

ChangHo Lee made a **stunning UFC debut,** securing a dominant TKO win. With 11 wins in 12 fights, he's South Korea's next MMA hope.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

South Korea's presence in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) has been limited.

Its most accomplished fighter, Dong Hyun Kim (22-4-1), faded from the scene after a loss to former interim welterweight champion Colby Covington in 2017. However, that narrative may be about to change.

ChangHo Lee, the latest South Korean to join the promotion, made an emphatic statement in his UFC debut. The 30-year-old secured a dominant technical knockout victory over the USA's Cortavious Romious at UFC Fight Night in Nevada, which earned him a 'Fight of the Night' bonus.

The Road to UFC Season 2 bantamweight champion capitalised on Romious's over-aggression in both the first and second rounds. Lee's constant, rapid movement proved too much for the American, who struggled to maintain his defence and was soon nursing a bloodied eyebrow. From then on, it was carnage.

Late in the second round, Lee spotted an opening, took Romious to the ground, and unleashed a relentless barrage of elbows to claim his maiden UFC victory.

In an interview, Lee revealed that he admires former UFC champion Khabib Nurmagomedov and strives to incorporate elements of Khabib's cage wrestling, grappling, and chain wrestling into his own style. Though the sample size was small, glimpses of Khabib's aggression and technique were evident in Lee's performance.

Lee earned his place in the UFC with two emphatic victories in Road to UFC Season 2. In the quarterfinals, he dismantled India's Rana Rudra Pratap Singh with a first-round knockout via strikes.

However, his first real test came against China's Daermisi Zhawupasi, a submission specialist. Daermisi controlled the early minutes of the fight with relentless grappling and came close to securing a rear-naked choke. Lee, however, managed to escape.

The decisive moment arrived in the final minutes of the third round. Lee pinned Daermisi against the cage, forced him to the ground, and finished the fight with a fierce display of ground and pound.

He then secured a split-decision victory over China's Xiao Long, earning himself a UFC contract.

Despite entering the UFC at a relatively late stage in his career, Lee has already made a strong impression on both fans and analysts. With 11 wins from 12 professional fights, he has built a formidable reputation. How far he can go in the UFC remains to be seen — but he is certainly one to watch.

No mercy: ChangHo Lee unleashed a flurry of elbows to secure a statement win in his first UFC fight. GETTY IMAGES

FSDL

SHOOT TO THRILL

Two **stoppage-time goals** sealed the outcomes in the ISL semifinals, setting up a final clash between Mohun Bagan and Bengaluru FC.

Lalengmawia Ralte (Apuia) produced a stunning finish late in added time to find that elusive goal which had kept a gathering of over 50,000 Mohun Bagan Super Giant fans waiting for their moment of triumph.

Apuia **(above, 45)** justified his billing as one of the most accomplished (and expensive) Indian midfielders as he pulled off a spectacular long-ranger past Albino Gomes in the Jamshedpur FC goal.

This effort realised the 2-0 margin that helped Mohun Bagan ensure a decisive 3-2 lead on aggregate and secured its place in the Indian Super League final for the third time in succession.

Apuia's individual brilliance proved the perfect piece in the final denouement of the ISL semifinal's second leg, where Mohun Bagan succeeded in overturning the ultra-defensive strategy of Jamshedpur FC. The Red Miners arrived with the advantage of leading the first leg 2-1 and sought to create a fortress around their goal by placing the bulk of their players in a low-block defensive role.

After a lacklustre first half, Mohun Bagan went ahead in the 51st minute when its Australian forward Jason Cummings converted a penalty to create the first breach in the seemingly impregnable defence planned by Jamshedpur FC head coach Khalid Jamil.

The match did not see the level of contest expected in a semifinal as Jamshedpur devoted itself to defending in an effort to preserve the one-goal lead.

The lopsided nature of the contest was evident in the way Mohun Bagan enjoyed nearly 75 per cent possession but found all its efforts falling flat in the jungle of legs stationed in the Jamshedpur box.

The first half justifiably remained barren as Jamshedpur put up a resolute defence, frustrating Mohun Bagan's every effort to take the lead. Jamshedpur mounted some counter-attacks but lacked the incisiveness to upset Mohun Bagan's defensive arrangement.

With the duo of Tom Aldred and Alberto Rodriguez holding fort in the Mohun Bagan backline, Jamshedpur's plan of surprising the opponent with pacy counter-attacks did not bear fruit.

Mohun Bagan head coach Jose Molina persevered with his starting line-up and did not seek any alteration in the team's attack after the break.

His faith in the combination of Australian forwards, Jamie Maclaren and Cummings, at the centre of the

Last laugh: Veteran Sunil Chhetri rescued Bengaluru with a late strike to take it to the final. ISL

attack, and the Indian midfield of Ashique Kuruniyan, Anirudh Thapa, Apuia and Liston Colaco, made Mohun Bagan's attacks quite effective.

Before things could go out of control, Mohun Bagan earned a penalty in the 50th minute thanks to Jamshedpur defender Pronay Halder handling the ball while trying to clear Cummings' corner. The Australian forward converted the spot-kick and levelled the aggregate at 2-2.

Back in the game, Mohun Bagan redoubled its effort but failed to convert its chances until Apuia discovered his golden touch in added time (90+4 minute) to get the ball past Gomes and prevent the match from trickling into extra time.

Amitabha Das Sharma

Chhetri to the rescue

On April 6, the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Fatorda and its vicinity was painted orange and blue.

FC Goa clashed with Bengaluru FC in the second leg of their ISL semifinal. With the home team coming into the match trailing 0–2 from the first leg, the onus was on Manolo Marquez's men to turn the tide.

Before the second leg, Marquez appealed to the FC Goa faithful to turn up in numbers — and the fans did not disappoint. Braving the harsh Goan heat, fans started arriving at the ground almost three hours before kick-off.

As the Bengaluru fans began to roll in, the inevitable happened, as chant wars broke out between the two fanbases.

The police remained vigilant to ensure that the banter did not take an ugly turn. However, both sets of fans behaved and kept the spirit of football alive as the 'Forca Goa' and 'Namma Bengaluru' chants reverberated across Padre Pedru Ferrao Road.

The Diary, whose hotel was located very near the stadium, heard K'naan's iconic song *Wavin' Flag* being played on speakers, prompting him to get ready even faster and join the thick of the action to gauge the mood of the fans.

"That 2-0 loss was just a decoy to lure Bengaluru into our home. Today, FC Goa will show their real strength, and we will beat them 5-3," said Oscar, an FC Goa fan since 2016.

Countering him, Smarth, a Bengaluru fan and part of the famous 'West Block Blues', said, "You really think Goa can get back into the match? We're already planning to book tickets for the final. We're already through."

In the end, it was the fans in blue who had the last laugh. While Goa pulled back two goals to level the tie, Sunil Chhetri had the final say by scoring in the 90+2 minute to send Bengaluru to the final, where it will face Mohun Bagan Super Giant on April 12.

Aneesh Dey

Is it enough? Churchill Brothers celebrate the draw with Real Kashmir, which kept the team provisionally on top of the I-League standings. AIFF MEDIA

SHROUD OF CONTROVERSY

Though both Churchill Brothers and Inter Kashi celebrated as if they had won the title, the final seal of approval on **who the I-League champion truly is** rests with the AIFF.

Aneesh Dey
aneesh.dey@thehindu.co.in

LISTEN TO OUR EXPLAINER

At the end of another photo finish on the final day of the I-League season, pictures emerged of both Churchill Brothers and Inter Kashi simultaneously celebrating their achievement of winning the I-League, leading to confusion all around.

It is not often that a club that finishes a season with the highest points must wait to be officially called champion. But the latest conundrum could see Churchill Brothers denied its third I-League title despite finishing on top.

On April 6, as the whistle blew at the TRC Polo Synthetic Turf Ground in Srinagar, Churchill Brothers had finished the 2024-25 I-League season with 40 points — the highest tally among all the teams.

Elsewhere, Inter Kashi — which won 3-1 against Rajasthan FC — had finished second with 39 points. Yet, its celebrations mimicked those of a champion.

The reason for this is that Inter Kashi is yet to hear from the All India Football Federation (AIFF)

Disciplinary Committee regarding its match against Namdhari FC on January 13.

Kashi was awarded three points by the AIFF Disciplinary Committee after Namdhari was found to have fielded an ineligible player during that encounter, which the latter won 2-0. That decision was challenged and later stayed by the Appeals Committee, with the next hearing scheduled for April 28.

If it decides that the forfeiture stands, Kashi would move to 42 points and topple Churchill Brothers as the I-League champion of the 2024-25 season.

Churchill, meanwhile, had missed the opportunity to become the outright champion after its 1-1 draw against Real Kashmir.

"While the draw against Real Kashmir keeps Churchill Brothers at the top of the table, they must await the result of the AIFF Appeals Committee's hearing on the match between Namdhari FC and Inter Kashi (Match No. 45)," the AIFF said in its official report.

Inter Kashi remains confident of a positive verdict which would hand the club its maiden I-League title.

"We are very confident with our legal recourse, and we believe that we will get those three points. There was a reason why those points were initially awarded to us," Inter Kashi Director and Co-Founder Aryaman Shukla told *Sportstar*. "If the decision doesn't go in our favour, we as a team will take a call on how to move forward," Shukla added.

Meanwhile, in Srinagar, the Alemao family, owners of Churchill Brothers, celebrated in full vigour after the full-time whistle only to be informed that the club had 'provisionally' finished at the top of the table.

"If we became the champion, why were we not given the trophy then? We have to go with the law. If they had any confusion [Inter Kashi waiting for the three points in their match against Namdhari], why did they play the match yesterday?

"The whole of India knows that Churchill Brothers is the champion but now they [Inter Kashi] are saying there is confusion. If the decision is pending in court (Appeals Committee), why play the game yesterday? That does not interest me," Churchill Alemao said.

Before the final day encounters on April 6, Churchill needed only a point to win the league.

When asked about the Appeals Committee informing of their decision on April 28, which could see the title being snatched away from Churchill Brothers, Alemao claimed his club is a victim of manipulation.

"102 per cent I will not accept this decision... I know the system and law in football. FIFA rules say that if there is any confusion, then you should clear that and then play. If there is confusion, why have they [Kashi] not settled it? Now that we have become the champion, you're trying to fool us?"

While the AIFF Appeals Committee keeps both clubs hanging on a wire, Alemao said he even got a call from AIFF President Kalyan Chaubey, congratulating him after Churchill's draw against Kashmir. *Sportstar* reached out to Chaubey, but he was not available for comment.

CHURCHILL MISSED THE OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME THE OUTRIGHT CHAMPION AFTER ITS 1-1 DRAW AGAINST REAL KASHMIR

Despite the cloud of confusion surrounding who will eventually be the I-League champion, Alemao said that according to the law his club is the champion and a big party was organised after the players landed in Goa.

It is yet to be seen whether a similar celebratory mood prevails in Goa on April 28 or whether it will shift towards Varanasi should the decision go in its favour.

Job not yet done: Inter Kashi players celebrate their win against Rajasthan United at the Kalyani Stadium in West Bengal. AIFF MEDIA

AP

END OF AN ERA

After 16 titles at Manchester City and 106 goals to his name, **Kevin De Bruyne** announced that he would be leaving the club at the end of the season.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee and Joan Mathew Jacob
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in, joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in

The Premier League, for most of the 21st century, has been defined by eras — the Alex Ferguson era, the Jose Mourinho era, and now, the Pep Guardiola era. Out of the many players who made their name amid these managerial eras, Kevin De Bruyne **(above)** stands out as one of the best ever in the league.

With 16 titles at City and 106 goals to his name, the Belgian talisman announced that he would be leaving the club at the end of the season. Naturally, expectations were sky-high for his last Manchester derby against United. However, when the two arch-rivals locked horns for the 196th time, the encounter ended up being anything but memorable.

A dull goalless draw at Old Trafford was an accurate representation of both teams' shoddy form this season, with defending champion City sitting fifth while United reeled in 13th after the final whistle.

Meanwhile, champion-elect Liverpool's title parade was delayed after it suffered a surprise 3-2 defeat against Fulham. Sloppy defending allowed Ryan Sessegnon, Alex Iwobi and Rodrigo Muniz to score within 14 minutes in the first half and hand Arne Slot only his second league defeat of the season.

However, the Reds will take comfort in the fact that their closest challenger, Arsenal, also faltered in its title bid after being held to a 1-1 draw by Everton. The result leaves Arsenal trailing Liverpool by 11 points, with seven games left to play.

At the other end of the table, Southampton set an unwanted record by becoming the earliest team to be relegated from the Premier League after losing 1-3 to Tottenham Hotspur.

Having registered only two wins

An old habit: Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) clinched a record-extending 13th Ligue 1 title with a 1-0 win over Angers. AP

with seven games remaining, the Saints beat Derby County and Huddersfield Town to the record (6), returning to the Championship after just one season in the top flight.

Mission accomplished

Records tumbled in France when Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) clinched a record-extending 13th Ligue 1 title with a 1-0 win over Angers. It was the first league title for Luis Enrique with Les Parisiens, and the club's first since 2018 without Mbappe.

Under Enrique, PSG focused on a decentralised attack and youth development, which saw players like Ibrahim Mbaye (16) and Desire Doue (19) earn game time.

Mbaye made his Ligue 1 debut at 16 years, 6 months, and 23 days, against Le Havre, becoming the youngest player at the club to do so. He later scored against Saint-Etienne in March.

Doue, on the other hand, scored and assisted 11 goals each in 42 games, after impressing for France in the 2024 Olympic Games. The cherry on the cake was his winner against Angers, which sealed the title for PSG.

But Ousmane Dembele proved to be the most clinical of all forwards, scoring a career-best 21 goals this season and finding his feet in France after falling out of favour at Barcelona.

Meanwhile, the race for the UEFA Champions League spots is heating up between Marseille (2nd), Monaco (3rd), Strasbourg (4th), and Lyon (5th), the last three separated by a point, with six games remaining.

Real drama

The La Liga title race saw the top two, Real Madrid and Barcelona, drop points at home, while Valencia, struggling in the bottom half, gave its fans plenty of reasons to smile in round 30 in the Spanish capital.

Los Che, who were hammered 1-7 by Barcelona in January, have turned the tide since, losing just one league match, and rode the same momentum to beat Los Blancos 2-1 — its first win at the Santiago Bernabeu in 17 years.

Vinicius Jr. had a chance to put

> « Luis Enrique's first league title with PSG was also the club's first since 2018 without Mbappe »

FOR MORE STORIES

AP

Madrid ahead when Kylian Mbappe was fouled in the box, but Giorgi Mamardashvili saved the penalty in the 13th minute. Within seven minutes, Mouctar Diakhaby headed the ball home to give Valencia the lead.

Vinicius redeemed himself after the break when he found the net through a penalty-box melee, but Hugo Duro's stoppage-time strike rang the death knell for the hosts' hopes. Duro, who had scored in each of the league clashes against Madrid in the last two seasons, added another to his tally, heading Rafa Mir's cross into the net.

There was a slice of history in the other high-profile game involving Barcelona, which drew 1-1 with Real Betis. The result saw Betis remain unbeaten against Barca in La Liga for the first time in 18 years.

Meanwhile, Pablo Barrios rose to the occasion for Atletico Madrid to strike in the dying moments from outside the corner, earning all three points against Sevilla.

After 30 rounds, Barce tops the standings with 67 points, while Real and Atletico are second and third, with 63 and 60 points respectively.

HUGO DURO'S STOPPAGE-TIME STRIKE ENSURED LOS CHE'S FIRST WIN AT THE SANTIAGO BERNABEU IN 17 YEARS

End of Muller time

Harry Kane maintained his focus on the elusive maiden trophy of his career after scoring his 23rd league goal of the season in Bayern Munich's 3-1 win against 10-man FC Augsburg.

Defending champion Bayer Leverkusen, recovering from a shock German Cup semifinal defeat against third-division side Arminia Bielefeld in midweek, needed a stoppage-time

Workshorse bids goodbye: Bayern Munich legend Thomas Muller (right) will draw the curtain on a tenure spanning 25 years, during which he won 33 trophies. REUTERS

winner from Emi Buendia to see off relegation-battling FC Heidenheim.

The result helped Leverkusen cut the gap to Bayern down to six points and remain within touching distance of the leader, with just six matches left.

Bayern, however, will hope to cling to the top spot and provide club legend Thomas Muller with the perfect send-off after he announced he would leave the side after the Club World Cup in June.

The 35-year-old will draw the curtain on a tenure spanning 25 years, during which he won 33 trophies and became the club's record appearance-maker with a total of 743 competitive matches.

Tense days for Milan

Inter Milan put its chances of retaining the league title in danger after squandering a two-goal lead to draw against bottom-side Parma.

Matteo Darmian and Marcus Thuram's first-half goals were cancelled out within nine minutes by Parma's Adrian Bernabe and Jacob Ondrejka, as Inter manager Simone Inzaghi watched from the stands due to a touchline ban.

The result has left the door wide open for Antonio Conte's Napoli, which trails the leader by just four points, having played a game less.

Meanwhile, Inter's city rival, AC Milan's chances of playing in the Champions League seem increasingly unlikely after being held to a 2-2 draw by Fiorentina. The Rossoneri has now won only two of its last seven league games and sits ninth in the standings.

From the realm of the legends

Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice for Al Nassr to help his side beat Al Hilal for the first time since August 2023. The 3-1 win rekindled Nassr's hopes of challenging for the title, with the team third after 26 rounds — three behind second-placed Hilal and eight behind leader Al Ittihad.

The brace also cemented Ronaldo's position at the top of the scoring charts, with 21 goals, as he looks to win his first Saudi Pro League trophy since his move to the country two years ago.

Meanwhile, Lionel Messi continued to break records at Inter Miami when he scored against Toronto FC in Major League Soccer, becoming the player with the most goal contributions at the club.

With 24 goals and 20 assists, he surpassed his compatriot Gonzalo Higuain, who had 43 goal contributions in 67 matches. Messi, meanwhile, breached that milestone in just 29 matches. Messi, who moved to Miami in July 2023, has won two trophies with the American side — the Leagues Cup (2023) and the MLS Supporters' Shield (2024).

(All results updated as of April 7)

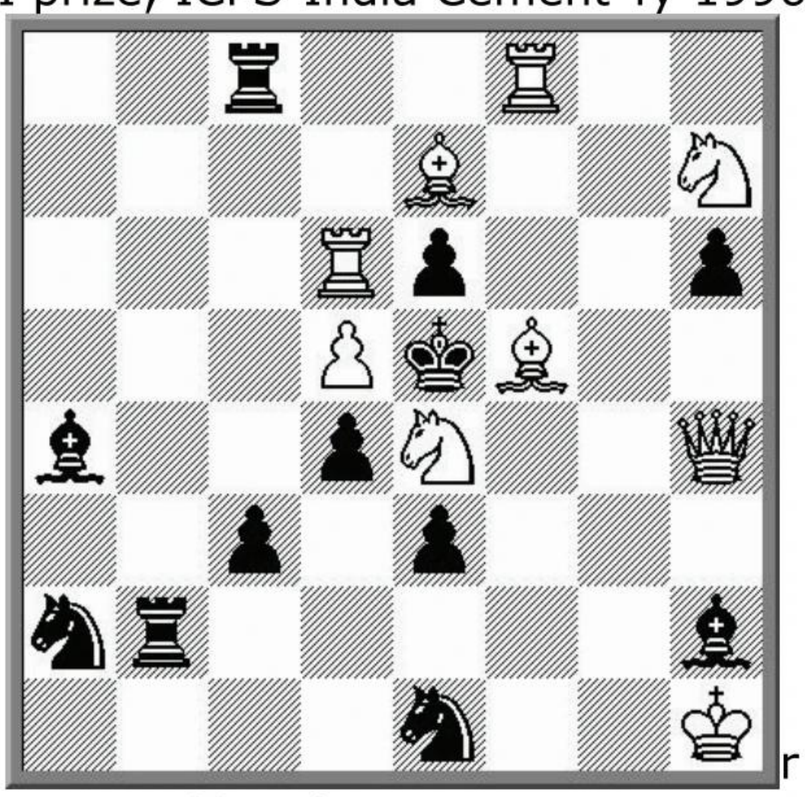
A study in white correction

By C.G.S.Narayanan

In white correction problems, inclusive of the tertiary and quaternary correction, one can often notice that the corrections are born out of the necessity to provide for a particular black defence and the random moves of the correcting piece do not commit nor carry any significant error. It is imperative that the random move of white itself leads to an irrevocable error which is corrected subsequently by providing for or by preventing that black move. The problem below quoted fits into this definition of an ideal white correction problem.It deservedly won the premier honours in the second ICPS-India Cements composing contest which was adjudicated by the eminent British problemist and FIDE International master and judge, Barry P Barnes,who passed away recently.

Viktor Melnichenko (Ukraine)

I prize, ICPS-India Cement Ty 1996



Mate in two moves

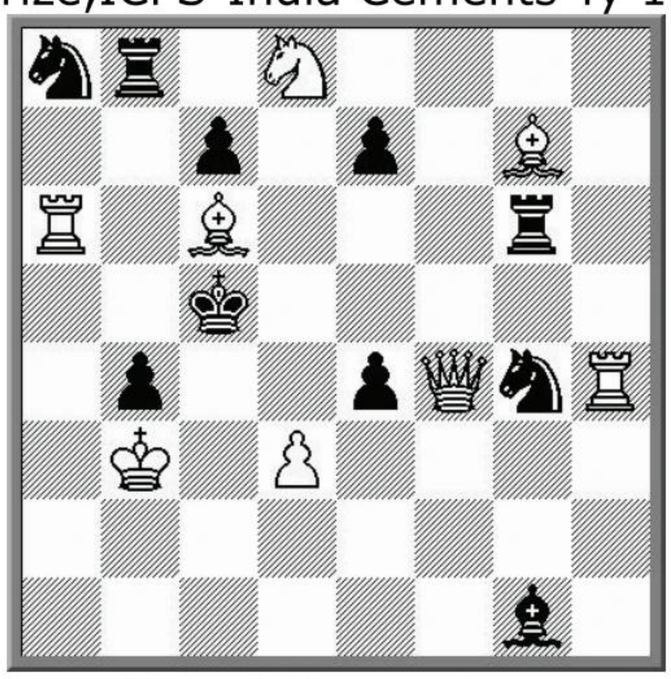
Barnes wrote:" Four prominent set mates are changed by a fine key to grant the BK a flight square at f5.Logic drives the WNe4 to f6 after the random move error of not providing for 1…exf5 which defeats the threatened 2.Qe4.The WN tries and key provide a fourth mate (one in the set play) after 1…exf5 with correction errors, in part negations of setmates. This is class white (secondary) correction which should be widely quoted".

Set:1…exf5/exd5/Bf4/Bc2 2.Bf6/Re6/Qf6/Qxh2 1..Nany! (2.Qe4)exf5! 1.Neg5?(2.Qe4) exf5 3.Nf7 but 1…Bf4! (2.Qf6?)1…Ng3? exf5 2.Rxf3 but 1…Bc2! (2.Qxh2?) **Key 1.Nef6**! exf5/exd5/Bf4/Be2 2.Re6/Rxd5/Ng4/Nd7.

The second diagram shows changed mates after four black interferences with a flight giving key.

C.G.S.Narayanan

II prize,ICPS-India Cements Ty 1996

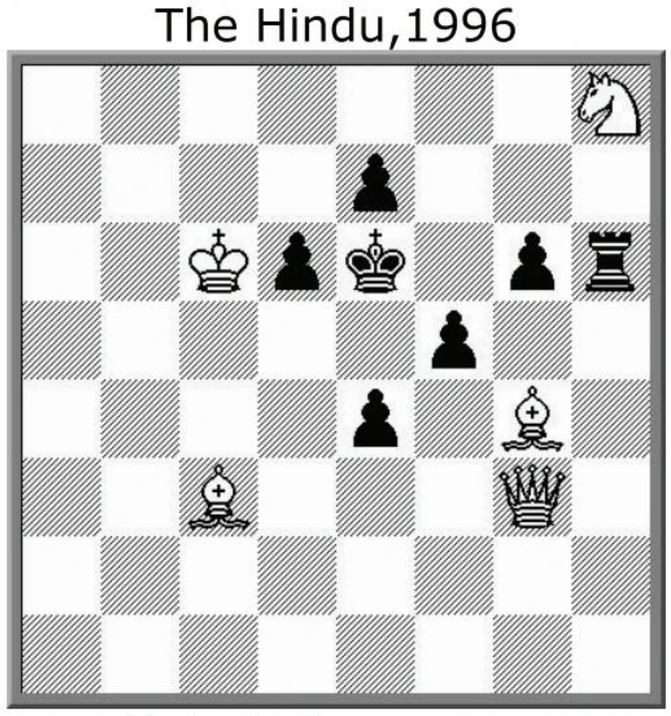


Mate in two moves

Problem for solving is an original by Barry Barnes sent exclusively for THE HINDU

Barry P.Barnes

The Hindu,1996

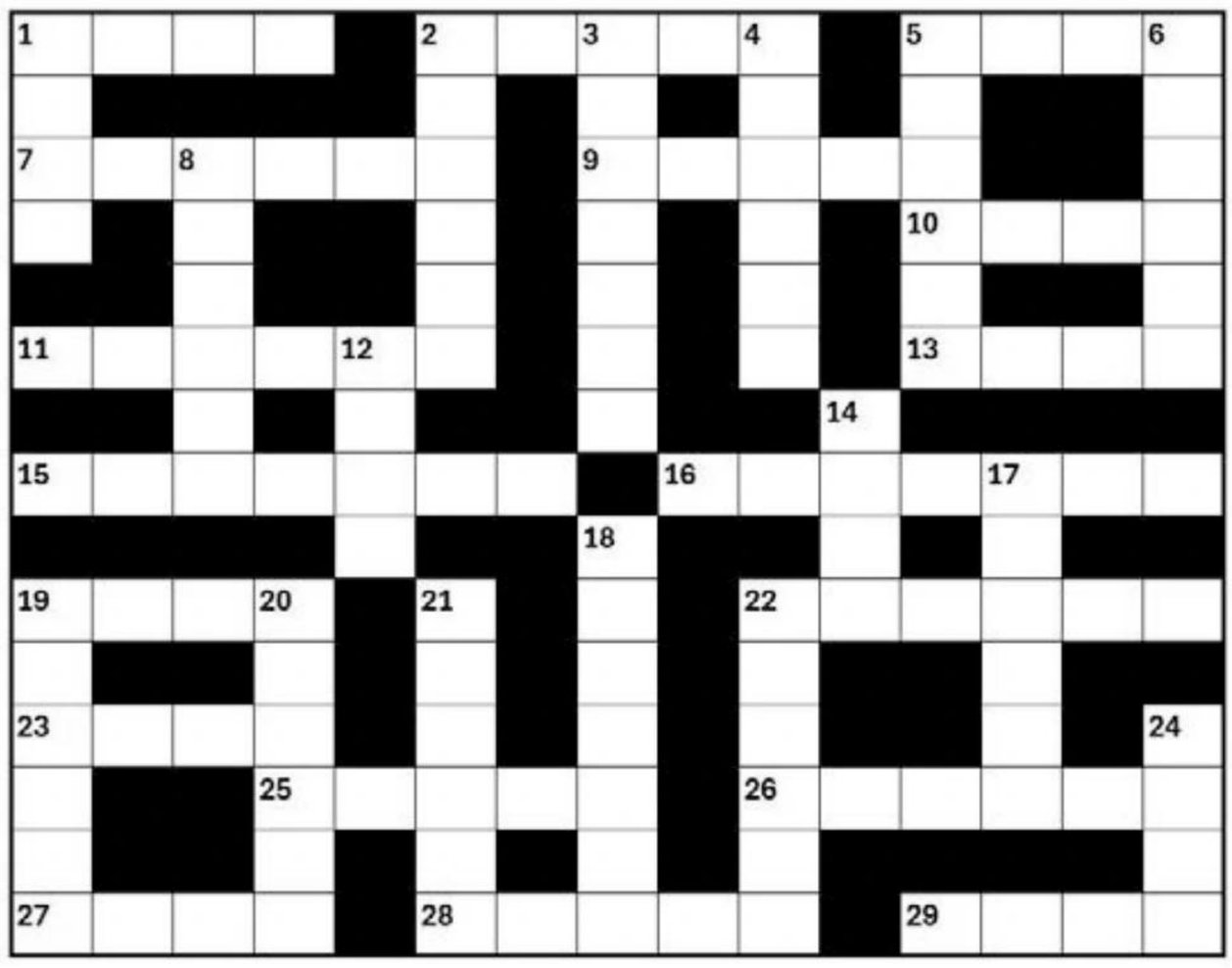


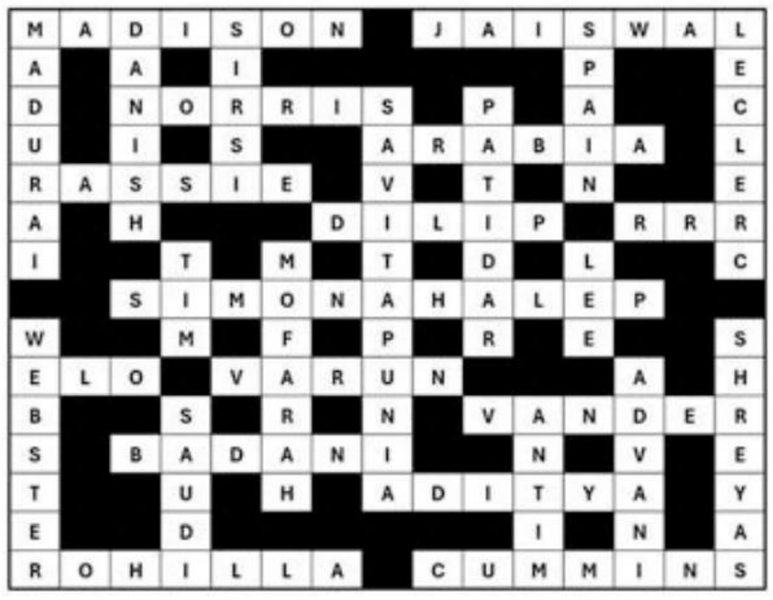
Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'The Gamage unpin':Key 1.Ng5!(2.Rf7) 1…Qa7 2.Be3;1…Qb2 2.Bd2;1…Qd4 2.Nxd4

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

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who won the Player of the Match award in the second Test between Sri Lanka and Australia in Galle in February 2025? (4)

5 Which F-1 racer drew as the second driver for Red Bull in the first two races in 2025 and replaced by Yuki Tsunoda from the third race? (4)

7 Which former Grand Slam champion tennis player from Australia passed away in March 2025? (6)

9 Who was the mental conditioning coach for D. Gukesh when he won the World Chess Championship in 2024? (5)

10 Who won the Player of the Series award in the three-match ODI series between India and England in February 2025? (4)

11 Who won the women's singles crown at the 86th senior national badminton championships 2024 in Bengaluru? (6)

13 What is the surname of this former German player who was one of the first footballers to play abroad in a foreign league in 1933? (4)

15 & 28 Which parathlete was awarded the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna award for 2024? (7,5)

16 Who went unsold in the IPL auction held last year but was selected at the start of the IPL-18 by Lucknow Super Giants team as replacement for the injured Mohsin Khan? (7)

19 Which player holds the record for picking fewest Test wickets in his career including a hat-trick? (4)

22 Which legendary West Indian holds the world record for five successive Test hundreds? (6)

23 Who is the captain of Delhi Capitals in this year's IPL? (4)

26 Which sport's first-ever World Cup was held in Delhi in January 2025? (3,3)

27 This English captain said, "I intend, with the help of Closey [Brian Close] and a few others, to make them grovel" (4)

DOWN

1 Which South Korean won the women's singles title at the prestigious All-England badminton championship in March 2025? (2,2)

2 & Across 29 Who is the only player to have taken a five-wkt haul in the recently-concluded WPL 2025? (6,4)

3 Who scored a hat-trick for FC Augsburg in the Bundesliga encounter against Borussia Monchengladbach on February 22, 2025? (7)

4 Identify this West Indian cricketer who became the first woman to score a century in T20 Internationals (6)

5 Who is the head coach of Lucknow Super Giants in IPL 2025? (6)

6 Identify this southpaw from South Africa who is playing for LSG this year — his fourth team in IPL (6)

8 This Australian woman tennis player won the mixed doubles title at this year's Australian Open (6)

12 Which Belgian football international goalkeeper, who, though, was part of two FIFA World Cup tournaments, in 2018 and 2022, but did not get to play any match, announced his retirement in March 2025? (4)

14 As on 31st March 2025, who is the highest goal-scorer in the Bundesliga 2024-25 with 22 goals and three hat-tricks? (4)

17 Who won the player of the match with an impressive unbeaten 97 for KKR in its second match against Rajasthan Royals in Guwahati? (2,4)

18 Who holds the record for the highest individual score in the history of ICC Champions Trophy? (7)

19 & Across 25 Which Indian squash player won the recently-concluded JSW Indian Open women's singles? (6,5)

20 Who is elected as the new president of the International Olympic Committee recently? (6)

21 Which World No. 1 one ranked singles champion is banned by WADA from February 9 to May 4, 2025? (6)

22 Who is the captain of the Vidarbha team which won the prestigious Ranji Trophy recently? (6)

24 & Across 2 Which Afghanistan spinner has caught the eye in the initial games for CSK? (4,5)

Epicentre of emotions: Eight major matches — Indian top division and international — have been played at Shillong's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium since its renovation in 2024, with the venue averaging at least 86 per cent capacity. ISL

MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

From rock anthems to **roaring crowds,** Shillong dreams to be India's football capital.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

Shillong has two things quintessential to it: football and music. For most of the year, the streets here are adorned with either banners of music festivals or players of the local club, Shillong Lajong, competing in the I-League.

The capital city has been touted as the rock capital of India, having hosted concerts by artistes like the Scorpions and Steven Wilson to nurtured home-grown bands like Soulmate, Afflatus, and Aberrant. Even Chief Minister Conrad Sangma is an electric guitar player and often performs on stage.

On the footballing front, Shillong is a prominent landmark among the Seven Sisters — seven states of north-east India — being the home venue of Lajong.

Previously known as Lajong FC, the club has been a touchstone for some of the best domestic talents in India — some from Meghalaya and many more from the neighbouring states.

"Football may not be the most loved sport in the country, but it is the most loved sport in Meghalaya. Our boys and girls are very passionate about football," Sangma told *Sportstar* in a select media interaction.

Redeem Tlang and Aibanbha Dohling — former Lajong players from the state — have won the Durand Cup with NorthEast United and FC Goa, respectively.

Meanwhile, Vishal Kaith (a two-time ISL Shield winner and an ISL Cup winner), Chinglensana Singh (ISL and Super Cup winner), Naorem Mahesh Singh (one-time Super Cup winner), and Bipin Singh (a two-time

winner of the ISL Shield and ISL Cup) — all started their senior professional careers in Shillong despite hailing from other states.

Beyond Lajong, the city remains a bustling hub of lower-division domestic football, with the Meghalaya State League and the Shillong Premier League (SPL) having played here regularly since 2017.

The SPL, the sixth division of Indian football, began in 2010 and serves as a feeder for successive higher divisions, starting with the State League. The structure has produced multiple stars like Tlang, who won the SPL in 2016 and went on to help NorthEast United to its first-ever trophy in 2024.

Padam Chhetri, SPL's best goalkeeper in 2019, helped Mohammedan Sporting win the I-League four years later and secure promotion into the ISL. The State now has six players competing in India's top flight league.

At the state level, Meghalaya reached the final of the National Junior Championship (Mir Iqbal Hussain Trophy) three times in the last five editions, winning it twice. It also reached the Santosh Trophy final (Senior Men's Nationals) for the first time in 2023.

"It's an economy that we are trying to create out of music and sports. It is like a passion for us and it makes sense to really push on it," Sangma added.

However, Meghalaya's presence in the national men's team remains quite limited.

In the last two international windows, 17 players were called up from the northeast — nine from Mizoram, seven from Manipur, and only one from Sikkim.

Rocus Lamare and Eugeneson Lyngdoh remain the only prominent players from the state to have played for India, winning the SAFF Championship in 2011 and 2015, respectively.

"When you plant a mango sapling, it takes time for it to grow into a tree and bear fruit. Similarly, in what we are doing today, it's not that we get all the fruits at once. It takes time," Sangma opined.

Call of duty: Action from a friendly between India and Maldives at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Shillong. Meghalaya's presence in the national men's team remains quite limited. AIFF

"If you look at the ecosystem that we are creating and the goals that we have set for ourselves, the investments and the commitment that we are making towards sports and football are in the right direction."

The state is investing over ₹1,200 crore in building a new football stadium in Mawkhanu and 50 new football turfs by 2028, 25 of which are already under construction.

"We want to target about 25,000 children through our grassroots programme by 2029," Sangma added.

This year, Shillong hosted an ISL game for the first time, with NorthEast United playing three of its home games here, as well as a play-off against Jamshedpur FC, at the renovated Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, also known as Polo Ground.

It also became home to the men's national team last month, for a friendly against the Maldives on March 19, and a draw with Bangladesh in the AFC Asian Cup qualifier six days later.

"It is the first time we are playing here, but I have worked with a lot of coaches and players from here. I knew it's a very nice place," Manolo Marquez, India's head coach, said before the Maldives game.

Eight major matches — Indian top division and international — have been played here since the stadium's renovation in 2024, with the venue averaging at least 86 per cent capacity.

The Asian Cup qualifier saw an attendance of 14,952 — just 148 short of a full-house. Unlike at a few venues in India, there were no schoolchildren dragged into the stadium to fill up seats.

For music, Shillong is already a capital. Can it now become one for Indian football?

Domestic football hierarchy in Meghalaya

ISL
I-League
I-League 2
I-League 3
Meghalaya State League
Shillong Premier League

LISTEN TO THE INTERVIEW

Small step, giant leap

Sarpreet Singh is poised to become the **first player** of Indian origin to compete at the FIFA World Cup since the 2006 edition.

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

As a football-loving kid growing up in New Zealand, one of Sarpreet Singh's foundational memories of the sport is from when he was a 10-year-old. He's watching from the stands of Wellington's Westpac Stadium as New Zealand beat Bahrain 1-0 to qualify for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. "My mother took me and my brother to Wellington for the game. I'd brought posters of the players and managed to get them signed as they came past us," he recalls. "It was a great tournament. I remember we only played the three group games but we were unbeaten in all of them. So I do remember those memories fondly," he says.

Sixteen years later, Sarpreet **(above, in white)**, now 26, is part of a New Zealand team that has qualified for the 2026 World Cup. On March 24, the midfielder was part of the squad that beat New Caledonia 3-0 in the final of the Oceania section of the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifiers played at Auckland's Eden Park.

The momentousness of the occasion isn't lost on Sarpreet. New Zealand will be competing at a World Cup for the first time since 2010 and only the third time overall. But it's also significant for another reason.

With 18 caps to his name, Sarpreet is well placed to represent his nation at the quadrennial

competition. Should he get to North America — the tournament is being held simultaneously in Canada, the USA and Mexico — Sarpreet will become the first player of Indian origin to compete at a World Cup since Vikash Rao Dhorasoo, who was part of the French team that finished runners-up at the 2006 World Cup.

"As a kid I looked up to a lot of those guys who were part of the team that qualified. You'd look at these people and you think it's so amazing and you just want to be there. As a kid you always dream of playing in a World Cup. But you'd never really think it could happen to you. Now I'm fortunate enough to be in that same position where I think maybe other kids, like I once was, will look up to me and want to be in the same position," he says.

Typical Punjabi family

Football might not seem like the first option for a lot of Indian-origin kids in New Zealand — the community sees far more representation in cricket and hockey. But growing up in Auckland, where his parents, originally from Jalandhar, ran a grocery store, Sarpreet says he always loved football.

"I'm from a very typical Punjabi family with a lot of uncles and aunties and cousins. We always used to play backyard cricket, a bit of basketball. Softball was pretty big at school and I played rugby as well — but not the tackling kind because I was always a bit small. But out of all the sports I played, football was the one I enjoyed the most. My elder brother and my uncle played socially as well, so perhaps some of that rubbed off on me," he says.

It wasn't the easiest being a football fan, Sarpreet admits. "I used to watch a lot of Premier League games as a kid and with New Zealand being on the other side of the world, the timing was completely opposite for us. So me and my brother would be up at 2 or 3 in the morning, just watching Chelsea and Manchester United games," he says.

But Sarpreet was more than just a fan. At seven, his mother Sarabjit put him into his first club. He's grateful for that opportunity. "I think sometimes with Punjabi parents, maybe they're a bit too strict on their kids or they want to turn their focus to education. I was put in an academy when I was younger and my mother would drive me to practice. That was a support that not every Punjabi kid got. My two elder siblings didn't get that. But that opportunity to train at a club really helped to shape me," he says.

Starting out at the Wynrs Wynton Rufer Soccer academy at the age of seven, he joined Wellington Phoenix Academy in 2015 **(below)**, Sarpreet says he figured out early on that he had some potential. "I think from a young age, like around 11 or 12, I kind of knew that I was above others. I often used to play above my age group. I wasn't the physically biggest player then, or even now, but in terms of my football capabilities, I was good enough to be able to cope with higher age groups. And then when I was around 15 or 16, I started to enter the national age-group teams. I guess that's when I started to realise that something's possible from this," he says.

Sarpreet was part of the New Zealand team at the U17 Oceania Cup and U20 World Cups, and his performance in the latter — he scored one goal as New Zealand reached the last 16 — was good enough for clubs in Europe to take note. In 2019, Sarpreet was picked by German giants Bayern Munich, becoming the first New Zealand player since Wynton Rufer (Werder Bremen) to be signed by a Bundesliga team.

"It was a really incredible moment, to be fair, because not many people go from New Zealand directly into Bayern. Even though I was playing for the second team initially, it was still a huge step up. I felt very motivated to want to do more. I realised just how these elite players lived their day-to-day lives, because very quickly I was promoted to train with the first team. I didn't play as many games [he would only play twice for the main team], but just the experience you gain from training is invaluable," he says.

Challenge for an outsider

Being one of the few New Zealand players at the highest level of European football came with its own share of challenges.

"Obviously, you're so far away from home. I think as Punjabi people, sometimes we're also not the most outspoken — or me anyway, you know — so sometimes you can feel lonely as a footballer. And there is the pressure of having to perform. If you don't perform, then there's a huge amount of pressure," he says.

Furthermore, as an outsider, he accepts he had to work harder than a native-born player.

"More than seeing me as an Indian-origin player or even a New Zealand player, the challenge comes from simply being a foreigner. In Germany, for example, if two players are at the same level and one is German and the other is a New Zealander or Indian or whatever, then obviously they take the German player. That's why it does become a lot more difficult. And because I don't have a European passport, it's a lot harder to unlock a lot of countries in Europe. And I know for sure it would be the same if you come from India. There are so many hurdles you have to overcome — the way people make their decisions, based on where you're from or if they have to go through other issues with visas and stuff. These things do play a factor for sure," he says.

What would be his hardest challenge came in 2020, though. Just as he was poised to break out with a transfer to newly promoted Bundesliga side Werder Bremen, Sarpreet got diagnosed with a significant osteitis pubis injury. He calls the subsequent phase the toughest of his career.

"There's nothing I can change about it. I do wish I could have continued at a much higher level. It wasn't a question of ability or talent. I had a couple of good loan spells [with Bundesliga 2 sides FC Nurnberg (2020) and SSV Jahn Regensburg (2021)]. I was also in line to sign a Bundesliga contract when I had my injury. It was a tough time for me. It still is a tough time sometimes when I think about what I could have been doing," he admits. "There is a physical challenge to confront, but what people don't realise is the mental side of it as well. The strain that you have because of all the things that go wrong. Day to day you're by yourself — you go to training for four or five hours and then the rest of the day you're stuck by yourself with no one to speak to," says Sarpreet, who would move to Bundesliga 2 side Hansa Rostock and now plays for Uniao de Leiria in Portugal's second division.

What eventually helped Sarpreet get through that phase was simply going through the grind of training and accepting that, even if he did his best, there would always be things outside his control. "In Europe I gave my best every day. That's what I try to pride myself on, so that at the end of the day you can't really be left with any regrets. You could have hoped that it goes like this. Or I could have gone to Werder Bremen. Could have played at Bayern more. I could have hoped for these things. But it's nothing I can regret because I did my best," he says.

International success

While Sarpreet's career in Europe has had its share of ups and downs, he's had far more success in his national career, having been a part of the New Zealand team since 2018. His international journey has even brought him to India — he scored his first international goal against Kenya at the 2018 Intercontinental Cup, and followed that up with two assists in New Zealand's 2-1 win over India in the same tournament.

"That was a crazy experience. It's a little bit strange being a Singh and playing for New Zealand in India against India. But the reception I received from the fans was really pleasing. I felt very proud to play that game. It was a little bit different but also a little bit special," he says.

As a New Zealander of Punjabi origin, Sarpreet — or Sari, as most of his teammates call him — says he's influenced by both sides of his cultural upbringing. "The most Punjabi thing about me is that I love *roti.* Sometimes I wish I could have it every single day, but as a sportsperson I obviously can't. I think the most Kiwi thing about me is that I have that small-town mentality. Sometimes you see people in Europe and they're too relaxed.

"There are people who don't put in the effort they should in training. I think coming from New Zealand, I was taught that I have to fight for everything. I have to work hard. Nothing's given to me. But these are values, I guess, that stem from both Punjabi and Kiwi cultures," he says.

That isn't to say he doesn't have any opinions on Indian football. As a 14-year-old, Sarpreet recalls going back to his parents' village in Punjab and getting to play with the local kids. "These were boys from the *pind,* so they of course wanted to show me how good they were — but I think I handled myself well," he recalls. While Sarpreet doesn't see himself playing in the ISL anytime soon, he's optimistic about the prospect of overseas players representing the Indian team.

"I think it's a good idea. In multiple countries, they have dual citizenship, and they can choose who they want to play for. I don't see why it should be any different for players of Indian heritage. Because if you do get these players that can come in and help lift the national team, then why not?" he says.

Factfile

Age
26

International debut
2018, Intercontinental Cup

Clubs represented
- **Wynrs Wynton Rufer Soccer Academy** - at the age of seven
- **Onehunga sports academy** - Youth level
- **Wellington Phoenix Academy** - 2015
- **Bayern Munich** - 2019
- **FC Nürnberg** - 2020, on loan
- **SSV Jahn Regensburg** - 2021, on loan
- **Hansa Rostock** - 2023
- **União de Leiria** - 2024

New hope: While New Zealand has qualified for the World Cup twice before, they've never gone past the group stage — something Sarpreet believes can change now. GETTY IMAGES

Sarpreet himself is more than grateful to be part of the New Zealand set-up. While there were never many players of Indian origin in New Zealand's football scene, he's never felt anything but included. "I never felt like an underdog in the team. If anything, I think I have enough experience and I've played a lot of good games for New Zealand, and people understand what I bring to the national team," he says.

Big ambitions

While New Zealand has qualified for the World Cup twice before, they've never gone past the group stage — something Sarpreet believes can change now.

"Our goal is to get out of the group stage and I don't think we have to change too much. There's a difference between the side we have now and the one we had in 2010. So many of our players are playing in Europe, while in the past I think some players weren't even completely professional. The standards have all been raised a lot. Obviously, you need a bit of luck in the draw and it won't be easy, but I do think we are capable," he says.

Sarpreet says qualification is significant not just for himself but for the country's football programme. "We've qualified for the World Cup both as a team and me individually, but I don't want to be at the World Cup just to participate. We want to do well. I want to do well because it's a great opportunity to show what I'm capable of. But I also want more people to see and talk about our team because that will help other players as well," he says.

Should he eventually compete next year, Sarpreet knows there will be many eyes on him. He says his social media inbox has already been flooded with Indians offering support. "I always knew that I was going to get a little bit more attention because of my roots. I've always had a bit of a following because of my journey to Bayern. And then I think in the last couple of years, where I haven't done as well, it maybe veered off a little bit — but then as soon as we qualified for the World Cup, it has all come back again. Sometimes when I see the messages, I feel quite privileged and motivated as well because that's what drives me to want to do more. I know there haven't been too many players of Indian origin who've played at World Cups. It's really a proud feeling for me. I'm aware of what I carry with me in achieving these things. That's what really drives me to try and go even further and make everyone proud," he says.

WATCH OUR TRIBUTE TO SHARATH KAMAL

Sharath Kamal bows out, a new generation rises

With Sharath Kamal's retirement, can Manav Thakkar lead Indian table tennis? A look at the **next generation** and the road ahead.

Nihit Sachdeva
nihit.s@thehindu.co.in

For a better part of Achanta Sharath Kamal's two-decade-long career, everyone else who became India's top-ranked male table tennis player at any point had an invisible asterisk in front of their names.

Sharath's ability to perform well at major events and the magnitude of his achievements —15 medals across the Asian and Commonwealth Games — made him the de facto India No. 1.

No Indian paddler has matched Sharath's longevity. Trained by his father, A. Srinivasa Rao, and uncle, A. Muralidhara Rao, he broke into the national team in the early 2000s, competing alongside veterans like S. Raman, Chetan Baboor, and Arup Basak. He then battled rivals from his own generation—Subhajit Saha, Soumyadeep Roy, Sourav Chakraborty, and Anthony Amalraj — many of whom have since turned to coaching.

Even as the next wave arrived — Soumyajit Ghosh, Sanil Shetty, G. Sathiyan, and Harmeet Desai — Sharath remained the benchmark. In 2018-19, he surpassed Kamlesh Mehta's record of eight National titles, defeating Sathiyan, 10 years his junior, in the final. He repeated the feat in 2021-22, securing his 10th title — an achievement unlikely to be matched anytime soon.

The 6'1" powerhouse, who carried Indian table tennis on his broad shoulders, retired at 42 after a round-of-16 loss at the WTT Star Contender event in his hometown Chennai on March 29. His departure inevitably raised the question: Who after Sharath?

Sathiyan seemed the obvious answer a while back. Ranked as high as 24 in the ITTF rankings in 2019 — India's best-ever for a male paddler — he followed in the footsteps of fellow Chennaite Sharath, collecting seven Commonwealth and Asian Games medals. But the expected "passing of the torch" never materialised. Sathiyan, now outside the Top 100, watched as Sharath remained India's top player even in his fifth Olympic appearance in Paris last year.

A few hours after Sharath's farewell, a bespectacled, lean, 5'10" paddler staked his claim to be India's next big hope. His name is Manav Thakkar.

Ranked 63rd, Manav Thakkar had struggled at the senior level, with WTT Contender quarterfinals in Nigeria and Argentina as his best results. In Chennai, he seemed headed for another exit at the same stage, trailing World No. 43 Lim Jong-hoon.

Then came a stunning turnaround — he won 20 of the next 21 points to seal a 3-2 victory, becoming the first Indian man to reach a WTT Star Contender semifinal. He also defeated World No. 35 Finn Luu.

Unlike Sharath's power-driven game, Thakkar thrives on counter-attacks. His Chennai performance highlighted newfound mental toughness. "In 2022-23, I lost many deciding-game matches. My mental coach, Gayatri Vartak, advised me to slow down, focus on serve and receive, and not overthink," he said. "Sometimes, if I felt nervous, I'd pause to adjust my shoelaces, just to refocus."

After his semifinal loss to unseeded Frenchman Thibault Poret, Thakkar was back at the practice tables with coaches Chris Pfeiffer and Massimo Costantini. "My touch was

Going down fighting: Manav Thakkar's impressive run at the WTT Star Contender in Chennai ended in a 3-1 semifinal loss to World No. 54 Thibault Poret. M. VEDHAN

off. I placed and timed the ball well, but my speed and spin need work," he admitted.

A former World No.1 in Under-21 (2020), Thakkar struggled for consistency at the senior level. Training under Pfeiffer at Sharath's academy in Chennai and competing in the French league with Top 10 stars Felix and Alexis Lebrun, he has become more proactive. "Earlier, he played safe. Now, he attacks more," Pfeiffer noted.

His Chennai success propelled him to a career-high World No. 47. Still chasing his first National Championship, his breakthrough at home signals a turning point. The next big test? Breaking into Grand Smashes and WTT Champions.

Meanwhile, another Indian, wildcard Snehit Suravajjula, made waves in Chennai. He stunned Japan's World No. 29 Yukiya Uda 3-2 after saving three match points. Then, in a mentor-vs-protégé clash, he defeated Sharath 3-0, denying the veteran a fairytale ending. Snehit lost 1-3 to Poret in the quarterfinals but achieved a career-best World No. 89 ranking. Other Indian contenders had mixed results. Reigning national champion Manush Shah (World No. 73) and Paris Olympian Harmeet (World No. 68) exited in the round of 32. Sathiyan (World No. 105) fell in the first round.

There were 28 Indians in the men's singles qualifying draw. Out of them, Divyansh Srivastava, Payas Jain and Anirban Ghosh managed to clinch three of the eight spots available in the main draw.

"With Sathiyan and Harmeet as seniors, and young talents like Manav, Manush, Snehit, Payas, and Ankur (Bhattacharjee) coming up, I'm confident Indian table tennis is in safe hands," said Sharath after his final match.

In 2026, India will have two big team competitions at the ITTF World Team Table Tennis Championships Finals and the Asian Games. A lot will depend on the consistency of the doubles pair of Manav and Manush, the only Indian duo in the Top 10, as well as the development of the current batch of singles to do well at these events.

A podium finish (India won a historic first-ever bronze in 2018 but lost in the quarterfinals in 2023), in the absence of someone as experienced as Sharath, will take something extraordinary.

The upcoming World Cup (From April 14-20 in Macao, China) and World Championships (From May 17-25 in Doha) will provide a clearer picture of Indian table tennis in the post-Sharath era.

Meet the champions

Men's Singles
Oh Jun-sung (South Korea)

Women's Singles
Miwa Harimoto (Japan)

Men's Doubles
Lim Jong-hoon and An Jae-hyun (South Korea)

Women's Doubles
Miwa Harimoto and Miyuu Kihara (Japan)

Mixed Doubles
Lim Jong-Hoon and Shin Yu-Bin (South Korea)

THE INTERNATIONAL RESPAWN

The International 2025 will be played between September 4-14 and will have **16 teams** competing in two stages — The Road (qualifiers) and The International (main event).

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

The Swiss format of competitions has become more and more popular across sports, with football and chess using it, in the UEFA Champions League and the Chess Olympiad 2024, respectively.

Dota 2, which has already implemented it in several of its esports tournaments, has now introduced it in its most important one at a global level – The International (TI).

Dota 2 is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), with over 89 million players (as of January 2025 according to Statista) and remains one of the most popular competitive esports titles in the world.

TI — started in 2011 — has had 10 winners over 13 editions since, with Team Spirit, Team Liquid and OG sports clinching the title thrice each.

TI 2025 will be played in two stages — The Road (qualifiers) and The International (main event) from September 4 to 14. The Road will take place between September 4 and 7 while TI Proper will take place from September 11-14.

Over the first three days, best-of-three matches will be played between teams with the same series record (a 2:0 team will face another 2:0 team, a 1:3 team will face another 1:3 team, etc.).

Five such rounds – having three games – will be played for a winner. A fourth series win will cause that team to automatically advance to The International; a fourth loss will cause that team to be eliminated.

Three teams with four wins will secure a spot in these rounds while three teams with four losses will be eliminated. The 10 remaining sides will compete in a special elimination round (strongest against weakest) with five winners completing the final roster.

The eight teams will then be seeded according to their performance in The Road, in the form of highest against lowest in a standard double-elimination bracket.

All matches will be best-of-three except the Grand Finals, which will be a best-of-five contest.

TOP 5 VALORANT PLAYERS IN INDIA

VENKATESH "VENKA" SHARMA

ABHIRUP "LIGHTNINGFAST" CHOUDHURY

PRANAV "KOHLIII" KOHLI

AKRAM "RAWFIUL" VIRANI

GANESH "SKROSSI" GANGADHAR

RONALDO A PLAYABLE CHARACTER IN FATAL FURY: CITY OF THE WOLVES

Playing as Cristiano Ronaldo has often been the favourite part of every FIFAe or eFootball player – the side-steps, the dribbles and finally, the signature 'SIUUU' celebration. But the Portugal legend has now entered unchartered territory, becoming a playable character in the Japanese fighting game Fatal Fury: City of the Wolves.

Originally released in 1991, Fatal Fury had its last instalment, Mark of the Wolves, in 1999. The latest edition, City of the Wolves, is scheduled for release on April 24 and will be one of the titles at the Esports World Cup 2025.

Ronaldo will feature in his iconic No. 7 jersey for Portugal's national team and will be voiced by dubbing artist Juan Felipe Sierra, best known for voicing Shoto Todoroki in Spanish, one of the protagonists of the manga series My Hero Academia.

VELOCITY GAMING WINS SPLIT 1 OF VALORANT CHALLENGERS SOUTH ASIA 2025

Velocity Gaming remained undefeated to emerge as the winner of VALORANT Challengers South Asia 2025 Split 1, which took place between March 4 and 21, securing prize money of INR 12 lakhs and 60 challenger points.

Six teams, Global Esports, Orangutan, Reckoning Esports, S8UL Esports, Revenant XSpark and Velocity Gaming have now qualified for Split 2, which begins in May.

The final winner will secure a spot at the VALORANT Champions Tour (VCT) Ascension Pacific 2025.

Did you know? Four-time Formula One World Champion Max Verstappen has an e-racing team named Verstappen.com Racing, which will compete in the GT World Challenge Europe this season.

ESPORTS MAKING INROADS IN INDIA

Esports continues to make inroads into traditional sporting tournaments, with it now being a demonstration sport at the 2025 Khelo India Youth Games, set to be played in Patna and New Delhi.

The tournament, set to be played between May 4 and 15, will have 28 disciplines (27 competitive and one demonstrative). Esports will feature in the Games for the first time but the titles are yet to be announced.

Meanwhile, the Tamil Nadu Government announced that the state will host the Chennai Esports Global Championship (CeGC) later this year. The CeGC will be a multi-title esports competition featuring top teams from around the world.

WHO AM I?

I started my esports journey as a CS:GO pro before switching to Valorant. In 2023, I was one of only two Indian players to compete in the prestigious VCT Pacific League. The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Naman "Mortal" Mathur

BUSINESS OF ESPORTS

Reliance joined hands with Blast Esports Limited, a premier esports tournament organiser to develop esports in India. Blast has worked with giants of the industry like Valve, KRAFTON and Riot Games.

EASTER EGG 'GG'

GG is an acronym for Good Game and is commonly used at the end of a game or round as a sign of good sportsmanship. However, it is also used sarcastically in competitions.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

MAX CONQUERS SUZUKA

With Max Verstappen's victory at the Japanese Grand Prix, the battle for the Drivers' Championship is **now wide open.**

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

There's no denying Max Verstappen's admiration for the Suzuka circuit. Back in 2022, when the Dutchman won the Japanese Grand Prix for the very first time, all the signs pointed towards a special relationship brewing between the two. In a three-hour-long, rain-hit race that featured barely 28 of the scheduled 53 laps, destiny came into play for Verstappen as he crossed the finish line to win not just the Grand Prix, but his second consecutive championship.

In 2023, Verstappen was already comfortably ahead of the pack in points, pace and position, and he single-handedly guided Red Bull to the Constructors' title. The 2024 race, held much earlier in the season, saw him zoom through a cherry-blossom-adorned Suzuka Circuit to victory.

However, this season's victory was sweeter than ever. The defending champion, who had been constantly lurking in the shadows of the top runner, finally pounced at the perfect opportunity to climb atop the podium. A four-month dry spell came to an end, and Verstappen had announced his title defence bid.

McLaren playing catch-up

It was starting to look like the McLaren duo of Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri would become an untouchable force. With a win apiece, they headed into the third race of the 2025 Formula One season with one undeniable element — confidence.

They dominated all three practice sessions and firmly established themselves at the top of the grid. Even during the crucial qualifying, the current championship leader Norris had stitched together a terrific lap to all but guarantee himself pole.

However, in the dying moments of the session, Verstappen decided to switch gears. Zipping through the high-speed corners and demanding curves, he used every square of the track limits and whipped up a masterclass final lap to beat Norris by just over one-hundredth of a second.

Despite driving a Red Bull that was not fully up to scratch, the 27-year-old guided his car to the front of the grid. The Milton Keynes-based team was both shocked and elated; once again, their talisman had delivered.

What made it even more special was that it was Red Bull's final race with Honda in Japan. The resident engine manufacturer will partner Aston Martin in 2026, while Ford is set to power Red Bull. A seven-year relationship that delivered countless victories needed a fitting farewell, and it was up to Verstappen to see it through.

Action off-track

The build-up to the race revolved predominantly around the 'Max vs McLaren' storyline, but the second Red Bull driver was also the centre of

attention for more reasons than one.

Yuki Tsunoda **(below)**, who had been overlooked for the coveted promotion from the sister team Racing Bulls, had finally landed the Red Bull seat. Liam Lawson's lacklustre performances in just two races led to his departure, paving the way for his former RB teammate.

It was a dream-come-true moment for Tsunoda, as his race weekend debut with Red Bull was in front of his home crowd.

While the Japanese driver's abilities and talent were never in doubt, the conversation in the paddock was about whether Lawson had been given enough time to prove his worth. The full-season rookie was judged based on performances on two unfamiliar tracks, especially in a car that carried a dark cloud over it.

Now increasingly referred to as the 'second seat curse', Lawson had become the fifth victim after being given only two attempts. Such has been the case with Red Bull, which has remained cut-throat when it comes to finding the right driver to play second fiddle to Verstappen.

So, back in 13th and 14th on the starting grid, a two-way tussle between Lawson and Tsunoda was on the cards.

A damp squib

With showers early in the morning ahead of the race, it seemed like another dramatic affair was waiting to happen. The opening lap saw front-runners Verstappen and Norris point their cars towards each other, ready to put their elbows out heading into turn one.

As the lights went out, the pole-sitter cut off his McLaren rival perfectly, setting the tone for the rest of an error-free race. If there's one thing Verstappen excels at, it's leading from start to finish.

Behind the front three, Ferrari's Charles Leclerc held on to fourth, keeping the Mercedes pair of George Russell and Kimi Antonelli at bay. Russell had been consistently quick throughout the weekend, while the young Antonelli continued to impress.

The 18-year-old had a shot at becoming the youngest-ever race winner but settled for the title of youngest race leader. Meanwhile, Tsunoda needed only a few laps to pass Lawson, completing a significant single-place 'swap'.

But apart from a few scattered overtakes, the event was labelled 'boring' by the drivers themselves. The narrow layout and slim overtaking opportunities left little room for excitement — though mistakes could still prove costly.

Nevertheless, the race heated up in the closing stages, with Norris and Piastri trying to chase down leader Verstappen. The Australian driver Piastri, coming off a win in China, even urged his team to let him pass his teammate in pursuit of victory.

Verstappen could see his rivals closing in, but holding them off was critical — a task he executed with ease. With the trophy in hand and a commanding victory secured, he ensured the battle for the Drivers' Championship is now wide open.

Catch him if you can: If there's one thing Verstappen excels at, it's leading from start to finish. That's exactly what he did at Suzuka. Pics: GETTY IMAGES

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

1

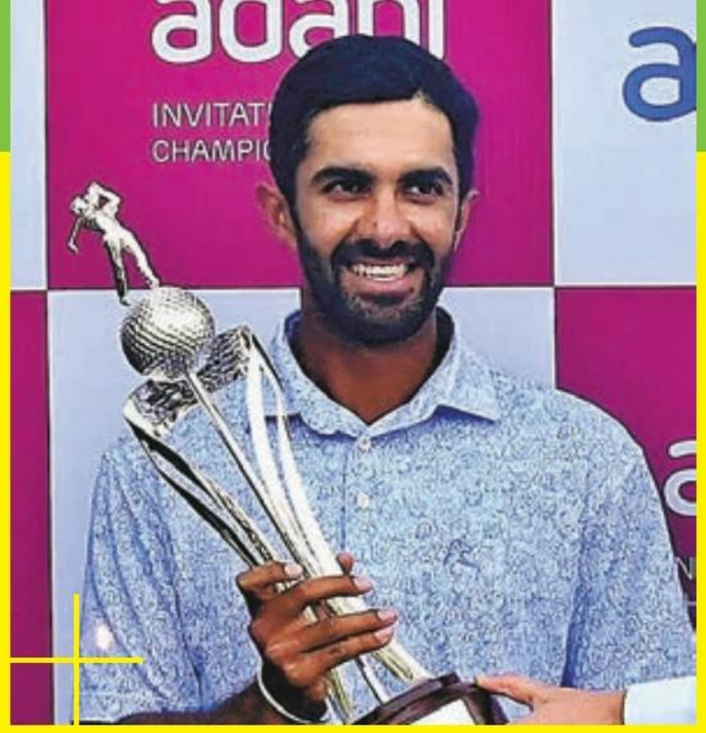
A MOMENT TO CHERISH FOR INDIAN MEN'S REGU TEAM

India's men's regu team clinched the country's first-ever ISTAF World Cup gold on March 25, 2025, in Patna, defeating Japan 11-15, 15-11, 17-14. The victory, celebrated nationwide, was aided by the absence of powerhouses Malaysia and Thailand due to tournament participation rules. "It helped us. They are the best teams, and we are yet to reach that level," admitted head coach Hemraj.

Bihar secured hosting rights due to its successful track record, sepaktakraw's priority-sport status, and strong backing from the Sepaktakraw Federation of India. The State, traditionally not a sepak takraw hub, now ranks second nationally. "An immediate effect of this success is sepaktakraw's inclusion as a medal sport in the Khelo India Youth Games," said Bihar Sports Authority Director General Raveendran Sankaran. Plans are underway to set up an elite academy.

Despite government support, the sport lacks a structured league or frequent national tournaments. A pre-tournament camp in Thailand was key to India's preparation. With the 2026 Asian Games in sight, the next challenge is sustaining momentum. "There's discussion within the federation about a professional league, and I hope it's now prioritised," Hemraj said.

Saikat Chakraborty



Saptak Talwar clinches Adani Invitational Golf Championship

Saptak Talwar produced a flawless fourth-round score of five-under 67 to claim his maiden title with an overall 13-under 275 at the Rs 1.5 crore Adani Invitational Golf Championship at the Jaypee Greens Golf and Spa Resort.

The 26-year-old had begun the tournament with an identical five-under 67 but slipped behind joint leaders Yuvraj Sandhu and Arjun Prasad over the next two rounds.

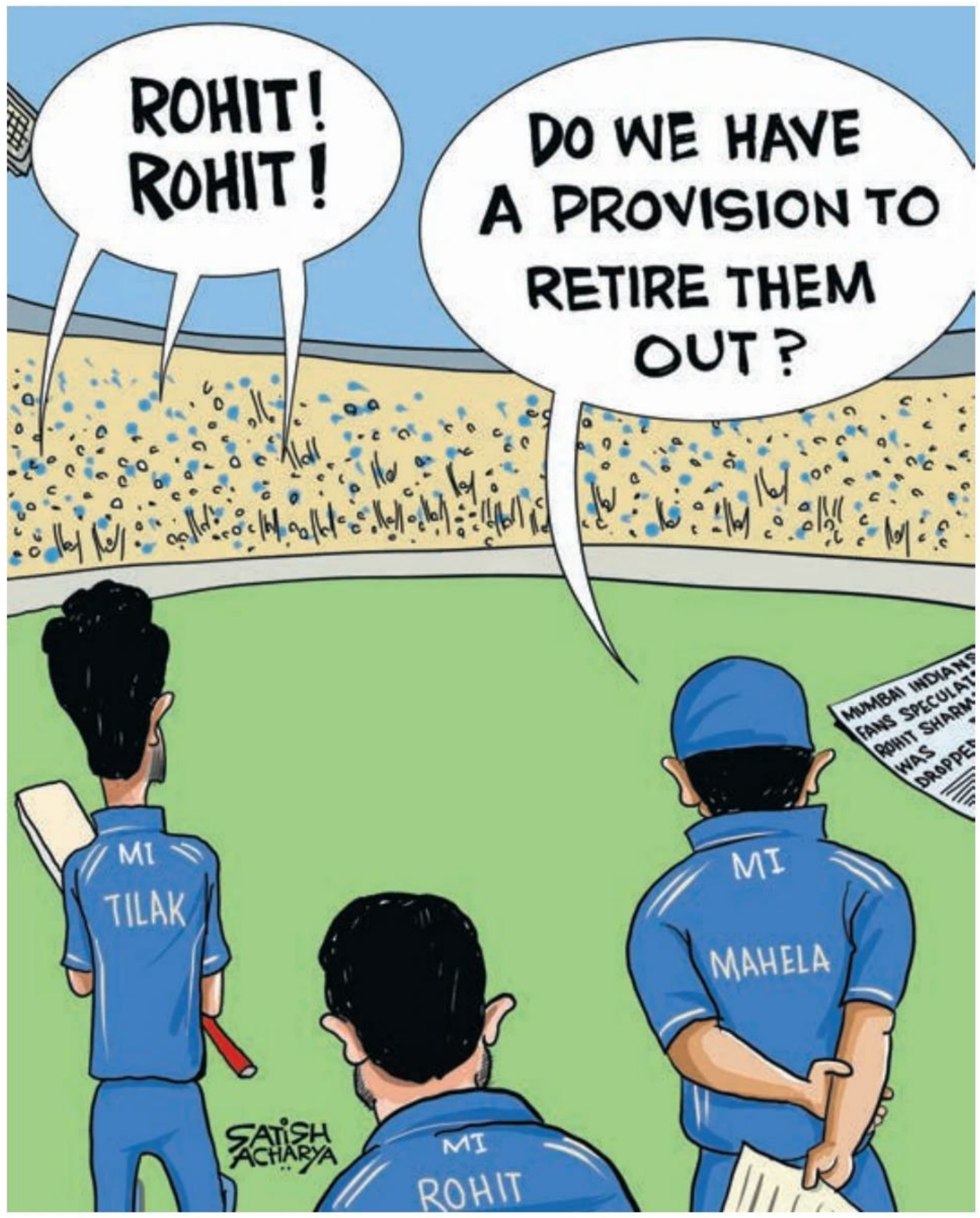
Eventually, Saptak edged past Arjun by a single stroke, while Yuvraj finished third with an 11-under 277.

Familiar with the course, Saptak delivered a composed performance, converting five birdies and saving par on the 16th for a bogey-free round. He did miss an eagle putt from five feet on the 12th but was pleased with his overall execution.

"It is great to win at my home course in the presence of my family and friends. This is my fifth straight week of competition, and my endurance was my biggest asset this week. I knew I would get my opportunities and stay patient. The eight-feet par putt on the 16th was pivotal, as it helped to keep my card clean and gave me the confidence to finish well," said Saptak, who collected the winner's purse of Rs 22,50,000.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

SPORTOON



2 Phantom Stars capped off a dominant campaign by clinching the inaugural Table Tennis Super League (TTSL) Maharashtra title with a flawless triumph, winning all seven ties across the league and knockout stages, including a commanding 14-8 victory in the final against PBG Pune Jaguars.

The league also showcased the next generation of table tennis talent in Maharashtra, with teenagers Divyanshi Bhowmick (PBG Pune Jaguars) and Prateek Tulsani (Mumbai Mozartt) being named Best Women's and Best Men's Players overall.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

3 The Rugby Premier League (RPL) — the world's first franchise-based Rugby 7s league — is set to be launched in India in June, Rugby India and GMR Sports have announced. The tournament will take place in Mumbai at the Brihanmumbai Kreeda Ani Lalitkala Pratishthan Andheri Sports Complex (Mumbai Football Arena, MFA) from 1 to 15 June 2025.

RPL will feature the best global Rugby 7s players alongside India's top rugby talent, with 34 matches played over 15 days. Six teams will represent major Indian cities — Bhubaneswar, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Delhi, Hyderabad and Chennai.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FAD OR FATAL?

Ryan Fernando explores how **trending diets** might be hurting athlete performance.

In today's world, your diet is as much a flex as your gym stats. Scroll through social media and you'll find everyone, from celebrities to recreational athletes, swearing by keto, intermittent fasting, or juice cleanses. But as a sports nutritionist, I have to ask a more serious question:

Are these trends really improving your performance, or silently sabotaging it?

Let's break them down through an athletic lens.

Intermittent Fasting — Boosting Discipline or Draining Endurance?

Intermittent fasting (IF) is gaining popularity. But when your eating window becomes too narrow, your muscles can't recover properly, and your energy may drop before the start of your training. A 2024 study by the American Heart Association found that individuals on an eight-hour eating window had a 91 per cent higher risk of cardiovascular death compared to those with more balanced meal timings. This is particularly concerning for athletes, given that the demands placed on their cardiovascular and muscular systems are quite a bit higher than for the average person.

Athlete Tip: If you're practising IF while training hard, ensure meals are timed around workouts to optimise your energy and recovery.

Ryan's Rule: Fasting is a discipline, not a punishment. If you're feeling weak, foggy, or underperforming, it's time to adjust.

Keto — High Fat, Low Carb... and Lower Performance?

The ketogenic diet includes plenty of paneer, eggs, and butter, which can appeal to Indian food lovers. However, for athletes, the lack of carbohydrates can reduce muscle glycogen stores — essential for sustained energy, high-intensity efforts, and proper recovery.

A study in Frontiers in Nutrition noted that while keto may support blood sugar regulation in the short term, it can raise LDL cholesterol and impair endurance performance over time.

Athlete Tip: Short-term keto may help with fat adaptation, but for high-performance training, carbohydrates are key to fuelling and recovery.

Ryan's Rule: If your sport requires stamina, speed, or explosive power, a keto diet may hold you back more than it can help.

Juice Cleanses — Detoxing or Depleting?

Juice cleanses are often marketed as a way to reset the body. But in practice, they spike blood sugar, lack protein, and can trigger muscle loss — the very opposite of what athletes need.

One glass of cold-pressed orange

FOR MORE STORIES

REPRESENTATIVE IMAGE

juice can contain 22–25 grams of sugar with minimal fibre or satiety. Over time, this can cause unstable energy levels and slow metabolic function.

Athlete Tip: Don't replace meals with juices. Add protein or nut butters if consuming smoothies, and prioritise whole foods for optimal recovery and muscle maintenance.

Ryan's Rule: If it doesn't fuel your training or support recovery, it's not a meal — it's a missed opportunity.

Low-Carb Diets — Cutting Carbs Means Cutting Output

Many athletes are avoiding rice, rotis, and fruits, thinking carbohydrates are the enemy. But for physically active individuals, carbs are the primary fuel for brain and muscle function.

Whole grains, legumes, fruits, and millets provide fibre, antioxidants, and other essential micronutrients like magnesium and potassium. A study in the *Journal of Nutrition* showed that low-carb diets are associated with higher rates of nutrient deficiencies.

Athlete Tip: Use complex carbs to fuel training, especially 60 to 90 minutes before activity. This improves stamina and focus.

Ryan's Rule: Don't cut carbs; instead, clean them up. Choose quality over quantity, and time them around your workouts.

OMAD — One Meal a Day or One Big Mistake?

The OMAD (One Meal A Day) approach is gaining popularity among fitness influencers and 'biohackers'. But for serious athletes, eating once a day can disrupt metabolism, impair digestion, and reduce nutrient absorption.

Large, single meals make it difficult for the body to efficiently absorb nutrients and maintain a consistent energy level throughout the day. Athletes risk losing lean muscle mass and feeling fatigued.

Athlete Tip: Aim for three balanced meals and two performance-based snacks per day to ensure constant nutrient delivery.

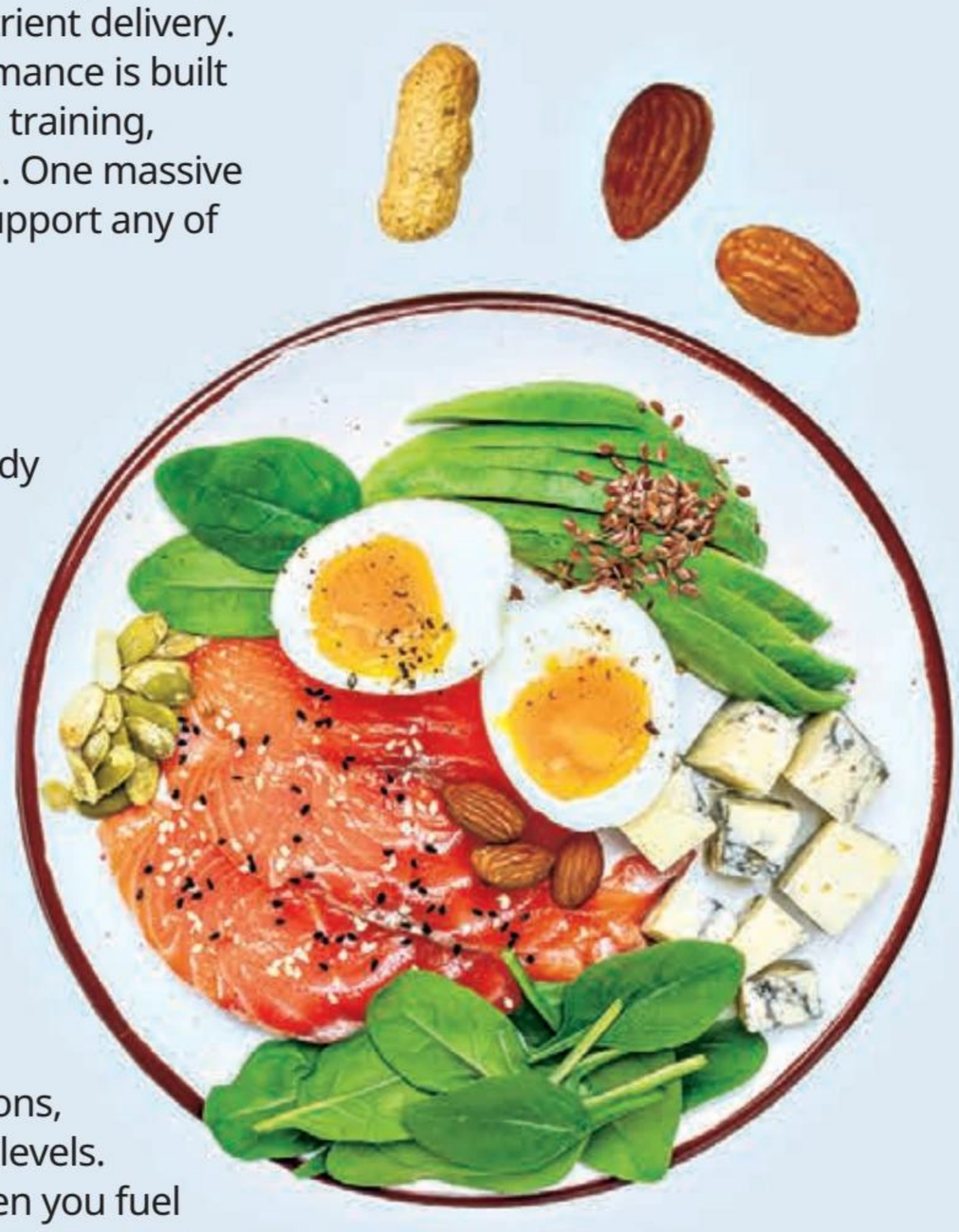
Ryan's Rule: Performance is built through consistency in training, recovery, and nutrition. One massive meal a day does not support any of these pillars.

Final Thoughts: Performance Over Popularity

As athletes, your body is your engine, your temple, and your tool. Trendy diets may look promising online, but sustainable performance comes from science-backed habits, not shortcuts.

Real wins are not measured by a weight scale, but by a strong finish, injury-free sessions, and consistent energy levels. That only happens when you fuel right — not when you follow what's trending.

Choose a real strategy over a social media strategy. Choose performance over popularity. And most importantly, choose what helps you recover faster, train harder, and compete stronger.



Sporting a beard

Sportsmen and beards have a long history. For reasons ranging from **superstition to health** and from laziness to team style, sportsmen have worn beards.

Suresh Menon

Nearly half a century after the New York Yankees were denied the right to wear beards or their hair long on baseball diamonds, a revolution! Now they may wear long hair. Beards too. But there's a catch. Beards must be well-groomed. And no, players will not get half a day off during practice to groom beards.

Sportsmen and beards have a long history. For reasons ranging from superstition to health and from laziness to team style, sportsmen have worn beards. The IPL generation might not remember W. G. Grace's contribution to cricket, but they are likely to know about his beard. Or if they don't, they need only to check out Hashim Amla who wore the best Grace beard.

Style statement: The Olympic gold-winning Italian high jumper Gianmarco Tamberi sports a half beard. "I like to entertain the audience," he told a reporter. It is usually his left cheek that carries the beard while the right is clean-shaven.

GETTY IMAGES

The Indian team is full of pogonophiles (beard enthusiasts). Probably inspired by Virat Kohli, they see the beard as crucial to the team look. The clean-shaven stand out, and no one wants that. In the 1970s, long sideburns were the mark of an Indian cricketer. Farokh Engineer, Bhagwat Chandrasekhar, S. Venkataraghavan, Erapalli Prasanna, Ajit Wadekar, Tiger Pataudi all sported them. That was the team look then.

The superstitious (and which athlete isn't?) believe that beards bring luck. Perhaps they scored a goal when they had one or claimed five wickets or effected a stunning forehand crosscourt shot. Perhaps they believe that Kohli's strength lies in his beard and that's the way to go. Following the manner of senior, successful players is not unheard of. Many decide not to shave when on tour. Some see it as necessary for thermal insulation, to soften the sun's rays; perhaps even UV protection.

Then there is the question of branding. Mike Brearley, the England captain once grew a beard that drew the nickname 'Khomeini'. Apparently a razor blade company offered to pay a small fortune to have him use their product to shave it off. Brearley declined.

The Olympic gold-winning Italian high jumper Gianmarco Tamberi goes one step further (or back, depending on how you look at it) with his half beard. "I like to entertain the audience," he told a reporter. It is usually his left cheek that carries the beard while the right is clean-shaven.

Swimmers shave bodily hair before competition to reduce water resistance or drag; cyclists, so the body hair doesn't act like Velcro if they fall from their cycles. It prevents gravel rash too. It may or may not help sprinters gain speed, but the psychological certainty is enough.

In the 1990s, the Yankees benched Don Mattingly for refusing to cut his mullet. The memorable headline in the *New York Times* said, *Mattingly Chooses Seat on Yank Bench Over Barber's Chair*. So the current change is significant.

It was George Steinbrenner, the owner of the team who laid down that rule; his son Hal has reversed it. But the 'no hair over the collar' rule remains. As one player said of the beard policy, "It allows for some individual freedom and a few less razor burns." Any reason is a good reason in beard country.

KiranaPro
India's Neighbourhood Shopping App

SCAN QR CODE TO DOWNLOAD

SHOP LOCAL SHOP FAST
SHOP FOR EVERYTHING
YOU NEED

DO MORE
WITH KIRANAPRO

KiranaPro
136, 1st Cross Rd, KHB Colony, 5th Block, Koramangala
Bengaluru, Karnataka 560034
+91 97411 53635 support@kirana.pro

Download Now
Download on the App Store
GET IT ON Google Play

Published on alternate Sundays. RNP No: HQ/SD/505/2023-25, RNI No. 30513/1978.
Postal subn. copies : if undelivered please return to SPORTSTAR, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600002

SAHRDAYA

COLLEGE OF ADVANCED STUDIES

AUTONOMOUS | KODAKARA, THRISSUR

EVER TO EXCEL

Accredited by NAAC with Grade 'A' | Affiliated to University of Calicut
ISO 9001:2015 & 14001:2015 certified | Included under 2(f) of UGC Act 1956

CALICUT UNIVERSITY 2nd BEST SPORTS COLLEGE AWARD WINNER

WE ARE PROVIDING FREE TRAINING TO BOYS AND GIRLS IN 36 EVENTS INCLUDING HANDBALL, TUG OF WAR, BASKETBALL, VOLLEYBALL, FOOTBALL, NETBALL, KARATE, BOXING, KORFBALL, KABADDI, DROP ROLLBALL, KALARIPAYATTU, LAWN TENNIS, SHUTTLE BADMINTON, SOFT TENNIS, POWERLIFTING, WEIGHTLIFTING, AND CHESS.

UG

PROGRAMMES WITH PROFESSIONAL ADD ONS

1. **B.COM PROFESSIONAL** WITH CA, CMA INDIA, CPA US
2. **B.COM FINANCE** WITH ACCA, CMA US, CFA-US
3. **B.COM TAXATION** WITH EA-US, CFP -US
4. **B.COM BANKING** WITH CS, CWM-US, LOGISTICS-UK
5. **B.COM COMPUTER APPLICATION** WITH FINTECH-US
6. **BBA FINANCE** WITH CWM-US, IATA
7. **BA ENGLISH /MALAYALAM**
8. **BA GRAPHIC DESIGN & ANIMATION**
9. **B.SC PHYSICS/ CHEMISTRY/MATHEMATICS**
10. **B.SC. PSYCHOLOGY/ GEOLOGY**
11. **B.SC. COMPUTER SCIENCE/WITH** DATA SCIENCE AND ANALYTICS
12. **BCA WITH** ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND MACHINE LEARNING
13. **B.SC INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY WITH** FULL STACK DEVELOPMENT
14. **B.SC ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE** WITH CYBER SECURITY

Certificate in Advanced Computing
Cambridge English Qualifications
Certificate in Media Production & Digital Communication
Certificate in media Writing & Film Studies
Certificate in Personal Growth & Counselling Skills

PG PROGRAMMES

M.SC. PSYCHOLOGY
M.SC CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY
M.A ENGLISH
M.COM FINANCE
M.S.W

ENROL NOW

For More Info:
+91 94 97 23 37 13

2025
ADMISSION
NOW OPEN FOR REGISTRATION

SHILPA
REPRESENTED INDIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL KORFBAS WORLD CUP-23 AT MALAYSIA

MEGHA C.P
REPRESENTED INDIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL TUG-OF-WAR CHAMPIONSHIP-23 AT MALAYSIA

ARCHA ANAND
REPRESENTED INDIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL KORFBAS WORLD CUP-23 AT MALAYSIA

SAVIDH M
REPRESENTED INDIA IN THE WORLD UNIVERSITY HANDBAS CHAMPIONSHIP-24 AT SPAIN

VINISHA VINCENT
REPRESENTED INDIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL KORFBAS WORLD CUP-23 AT MALAYSIA

JEEVAN JOSE JOJI
REPRESENTED INDIA IN THE WORLD UNIVERSITY HANDBAS CHAMPIONSHIP-24 AT SPAIN

NANDHANA K.S
REPRESENTED INDIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL TUG-OF-WAR CHAMPIONSHIP-23 AT MALAYSIA

SUKANYA PM
REPRESENTED INDIA IN THE TUG-OF-WAR WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP-24 AT GERMANY

www.sahrdayacas.ac.in
For Admission