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Green's purple patch

BIG INTERVIEW

Noah Lyles on how he views his legacy

LAND(O) OF THE FAITHFUL

After seven seasons with McLaren, the Briton finally realises his World Championship dream

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OFF-SIDE

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A GENUINE LOVE LOST IN DYSTOPIAN OPPORTUNISM

India didn't merely lose face in front of Lionel Messi. It revealed, yet again, **how we treat** sporting greatness. We see them as a prop for proximity, a backdrop for selfies, a means to manufacture relevance.

The last time Lionel Messi came to India, I was a rookie reporter with *Sportstar* and *The Hindu*. I remember the negotiation as much as the assignment. After days of pestering, Nirmal Shekar — the legendary tennis writer and then Sports Editor of *The Hindu* — finally allowed me to travel to Kolkata, even though two senior correspondents were already stationed there. It felt like a gift and an indulgence.

Kolkata, eternally in love with football, had slipped into carnival mode. The city had just emerged from elections, a new government replacing 34 years of Left rule, and optimism — political and sporting — hung in the air.

Argentina stayed next door to the Yuva Bharati Krirangan, and there was as much chatter about Sergio Aguero and Gonzalo Higuaín as there was about the then two-time Ballon d'Or winner. It was Messi's first game as Argentina captain.

On match day, the Salt Lake Stadium — seasoned by decades of Mohun Bagan-East Bengal hostility — had swelled to its full capacity long before kick-off. Even journalists walked nearly a kilometre before climbing five flights of stairs to the ageing press box. The two rickety lifts had surrendered long ago. Argentina won 1–0 in a game that never truly caught fire, but that hardly mattered. We had seen Messi. In person. In India.

Then came the press conference. Messi. Alejandro Sabella. And darkness. The Yuva Bharati power supply failed at precisely the wrong moment. There were minutes of awkward silence — embarrassed journalists and helpless organisers. When electricity returned, Messi endured a string of inane questions about the city and its fans. It soon became apparent that many in the room weren't journalists at all but "well-connected fans" who had elbowed their way in.

I wrote in *Sportstar* that the "Messi match" should be a beginning. That the AIFF, then flush with proposals for more friendlies, must "build on the success, cash in on the renewed public interest and give the correct impetus to the game." But even then, I had cautioned: "Given the AIFF's track record, we shouldn't peg our hopes too high."

Fourteen years later, Indian football stares at a year without a senior national football league. The country's most decorated footballer, Sunil Chhetri, has just played 279 minutes of football this season and was almost reduced to a prop during the Messi showcase in Mumbai.

Much has changed in Bengal since 2011, and some of it genuinely for the better. Sport, however, remains stubbornly stagnant. Three terms of the current government have yielded little in sporting performance. Only five Bengal athletes have qualified for the last two Olympics. The State finished 18th and then eighth in the last two National Games.

Frayed welcome: Messi briefly waved to the Kolkata crowd before his appearance ended abruptly, triggering fan frustration that spilled onto the pitch, with banners and tents vandalised. DEBASISH BHADURI

So, when Messi's return was announced — this time via a private organiser with a well-documented history of chaotic events — the unease was immediate.

Credit must be given where it is due. Believing in the unimaginable and delivering it takes audacity. But memory matters. A 2012 exhibition featuring Brazilian and Colombian legends nearly collapsed over unpaid fees. Diego Maradona's 2017 visit descended into farce, and Emiliano Martínez, fresh from Argentina's World Cup triumph in 2022, had to escape in a police van from the Milan Mela convention centre after one of the windows of his car broke as fans mobbed him.

But this catalogue of embarrassments did not prepare us for December 13.

Thousands of fans, paying upwards of Rs. 4,500, waited patiently for a glimpse of Messi. What they got instead was a masterclass in entitlement. As Messi attempted a lap of honour, he was engulfed by a suffocating ring of political aides, relatives of ministers, and assorted gate crashers, much like the press conference 14 years back.

Inside the stadium, the State Sports Minister wrapped his arms around Messi like a defender illegally marking inside the box, busy collecting frames for his Facebook page even as the crowd grew restless, unable to see anything through the melee.

Still, they waited. Hoping, against instinct, that their elected representatives would step aside and allow them their moment with *La Pulga.*

But the so-called VIPs tightened their grip, pushing even World Cuppers Luis Suarez and Rodrigo De Paul aside to get closer. Messi's irritation was visible. Twenty minutes into a scheduled 45-minute appearance, he walked away.

It was then that the stadium erupted. Not in joy, but in rage.

This was not just an organisational failure. It was a familiar moral collapse.

India didn't merely lose face in front of Messi. It revealed, yet again, how we treat sporting greatness. We see them as a prop for proximity, a backdrop for selfies, a means to manufacture relevance.

Organisers must be held accountable. But so must the ministers who rush to the front whenever a World Cup winner arrives, a franchise ends a title drought, or a medal is won.

Fourteen years ago, I argued these matches or occasions "should not turn out to be just a profit-making exercise for the visiting sides and promoters but stepping stones for the growth of the game in India."

This whole trip has just served the relentless hunger for reflected glory at the expense of the sport in the country. Even if a fraction of that money and interest was paid to Indian football, we wouldn't have seen it in such a sorry state today.

India is squash World Cup champion

India secured a historic gold medal at the Squash World Cup after beating top seed Hong Kong 3-0 (Joshna Chinappa bt. Ka Yi Lee 7-3, 2-7, 7-5, 7-1; Abhay Singh bt. Alex Lau 7-1, 7-4, 7-4; Anahat Singh bt. Tomato Ho 7-2, 7-2, 7-5) at the Express Avenue Mall in Chennai. The summit clash marked the first time that two Asian countries had reached the final of the tournament. Moreover, the host registered its best-ever showing at the event, bettering its bronze medal in 2023.

« There is only one fight that we should be fighting – and that is the fight against doping.

– International Olympic Committee president Kirsty Coventry, addressing World Anti-Doping Agency's World Conference on Doping in Sport »

$28

LA28 said that fans will be able to register starting January 14 for a random ticket draw covering all Olympic sports at the Los Angeles Games, with organisers promising at least 1 million tickets priced at $28 (approx. ₹2540 as of publishing). Registration via the LA28 tickets page will give fans a chance to secure a time slot to purchase tickets in April, with fans who are not selected automatically registered for subsequent ticket drops.

"Every sport starts at $28, and that's not just lip service to a couple of tickets in the corner of some venue, but a meaningful number of tickets," said Allison Katz-Mayfield, LA28's senior vice president of Games delivery revenue. "We're looking at least a million tickets at $28 and we've got about a third of our tickets under $100."

2nd

World number one Aryna Sabalenka has been named WTA Player of the Year for the second consecutive season after spending the entire year at the top of the rankings, the governing body of women's tennis announced. Sabalenka capped a dominant 2025 campaign by successfully defending her U.S. Open title, leading the tour in match wins and titles, reaching nine finals. Sabalenka also set a single-season prize money record of USD 15,008,519, the WTA said.

« I've started strengthening and started doing a little bit more of the rotational component that I haven't been able to do and just letting the disc set.

– Tiger Woods on his recovery from the disc replacement surgery he had in October »

WINNING MOMENT

Americans Andrew Novak and Lauren Coughlin with the trophy after winning the Grant Thornton Invitational 2025 golf tournament at Tiburon Golf Club in Naples, Florida. They posted a 28-under 188 for the three-round event.

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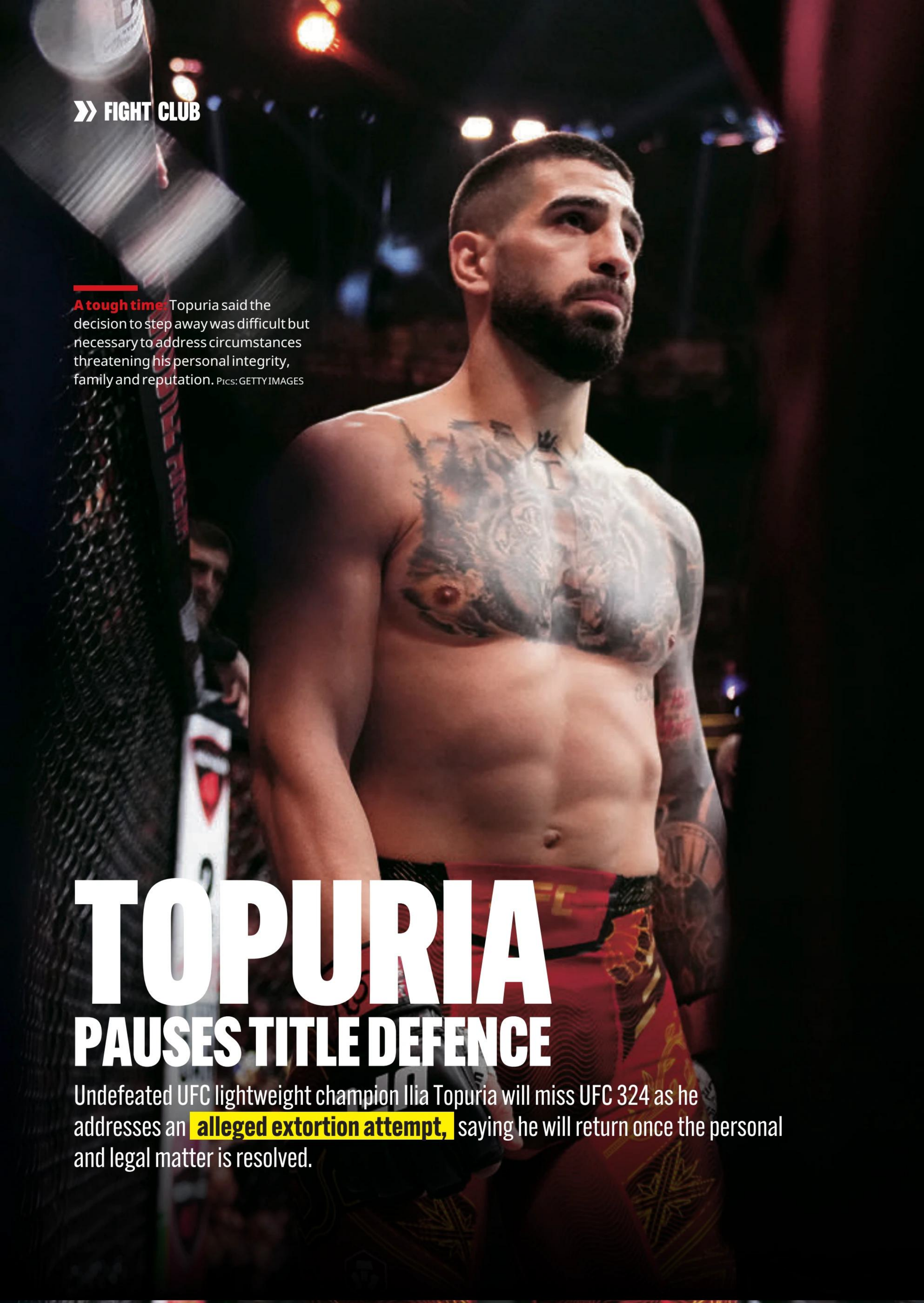

A tough time: Topuria said the decision to step away was difficult but necessary to address circumstances threatening his personal integrity, family and reputation. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

TOPURIA PAUSES TITLE DEFENCE

Undefeated UFC lightweight champion Ilia Topuria will miss UFC 324 as he addresses an **alleged extortion attempt,** saying he will return once the personal and legal matter is resolved.

Quick work: Manel Kape (right) knocked out former title challenger Brandon Royval (left) in the third minute of the first round during their flyweight clash.

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Undefeated UFC lightweight champion Ilia Topuria is temporarily stepping away from defending his title, not because of injury, but to confront an alleged extortion attempt, according to a statement he released on Monday via *Instagram.*

The 28-year-old Georgian fighter (17-0) will be absent from the upcoming UFC 324 event on January 24, which will feature an interim lightweight championship bout between Justin Gaethje and Paddy Pimblett in Paradise, Nevada.

Topuria said the decision to step away was difficult but necessary to address circumstances threatening his personal integrity, family and reputation. He claims he has been under severe pressure recently, including threats to circulate false allegations of domestic abuse unless he met certain financial demands. Topuria firmly denies the allegations as 'entirely unfounded'.

Topuria also said he has carefully preserved and documented all relevant evidence, including audio recordings, written communications, witness statements and video material, to combat the allegations and threats he has faced. This body of evidence has been submitted to judicial authorities as part of legal action against the alleged perpetrators.

The legal claims he is pursuing include attempted extortion, falsification of evidence, misappropriation of funds and personal property, and multiple threats.

Topuria has been the reigning lightweight champion since his knockout victory over Alexander Volkanovski in February 2024 and has since defended the title twice, both by knockout. He affirmed that he will return to the cage once this matter has been fully resolved.

Short and sweet

The final UFC event of 2025 featured a decisive flyweight victory, as Manel Kape knocked out former title challenger Brandon Royval in the third minute of the first round. The win was Kape's eighth in his last nine bouts and strengthened his claim for a shot at new champion Joshua Van.

The bout was evenly poised until Kape landed a decisive right hook, leading to a swift stoppage. Kape's career started rough in the UFC with losses to Alexandre Pantoja and Matheus Nicolau, but he has since gone on a tear, winning three straight fights by finish.

His recent dominance complicates the flyweight division for Van, with contenders Tatsuro Taira and former champion Pantoja — who is due an immediate rematch once healthy — also in the title mix.

Did you know?

Veteran Conor McGregor made one of the most significant impacts on the lightweight division despite never defending the title.
After winning the interim belt against Chad Mendes, McGregor faced dominant champion Jose Aldo at UFC 194.
In one of the most famous moments in combat sports, McGregor ended Aldo's five-year reign with a lightning-fast left hand, winning the undisputed title via knockout in just 13 seconds — the fastest finish in a UFC title fight across all weight classes.
McGregor was later stripped of the belt due to inactivity after immediately moving up to lightweight, where he became the first simultaneous two-division champion in UFC history.

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COVER STORY

INSIDE THE THREE-WAY BATTLE THAT MADE LANDO NORRIS AN F1 CHAMPION

Lando Norris sealed the 2025 F1 World Championship with a decisive third place in Abu Dhabi. A look at the season's turning points and the title battle.

Kavita Menon
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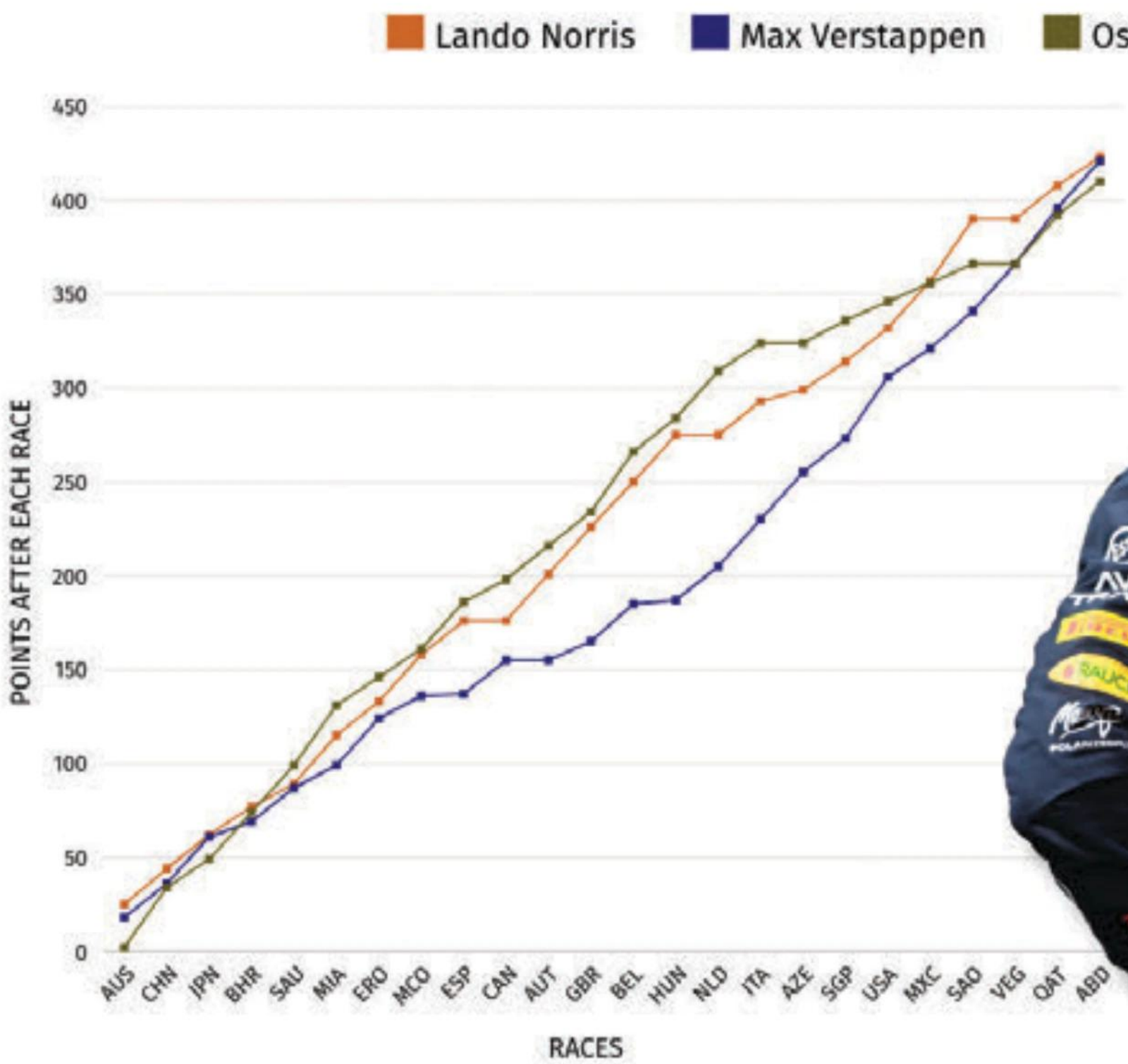
A weekend that demanded perfection. A series of bold overtakes, where the smallest misstep could have cost everything. And a champion's drive, unyielding when the stakes were highest. After 58 laps of pursuit around the storied Yas Marina circuit, Lando Norris claimed his place in history as Formula One's new king.

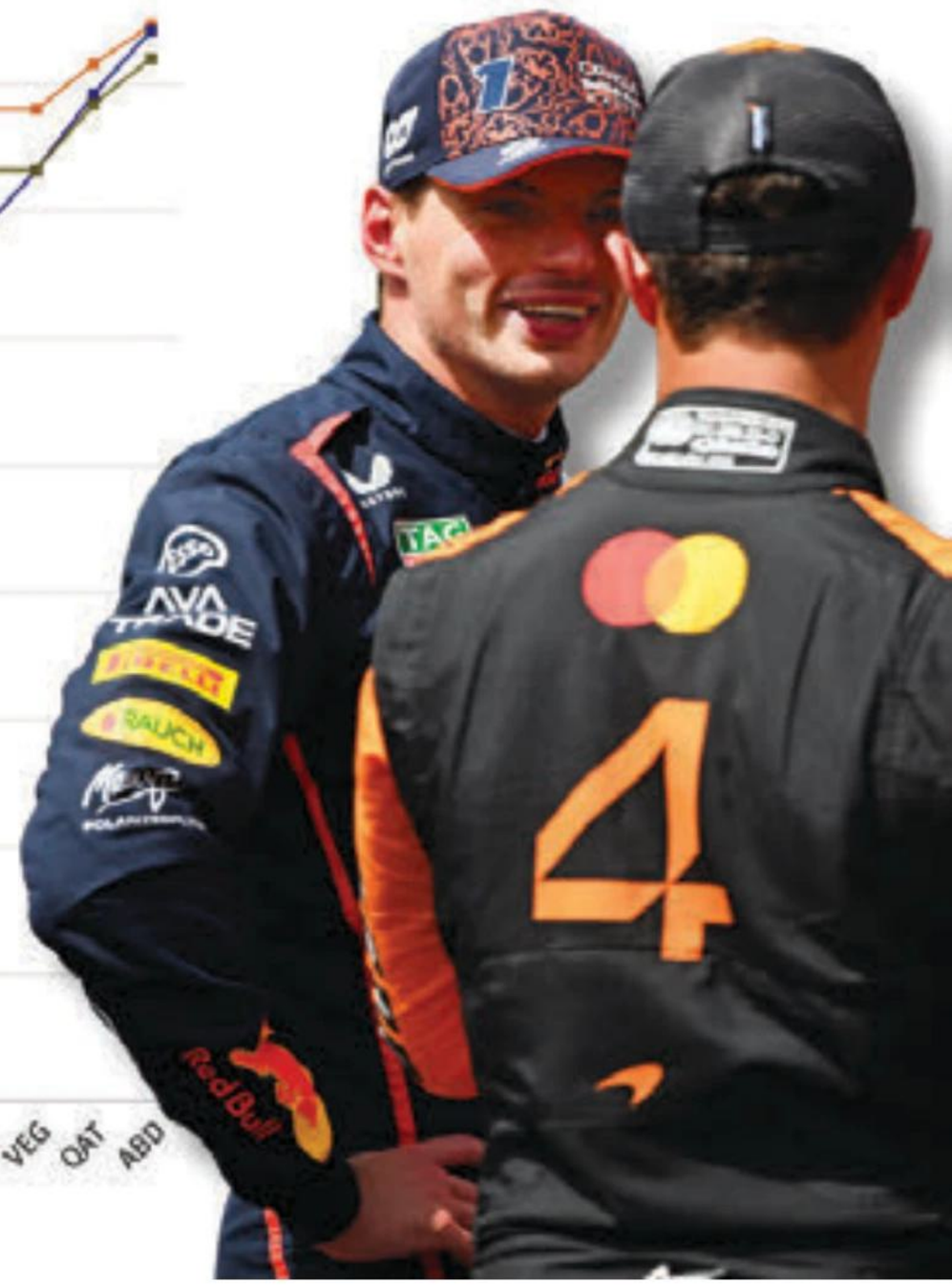
Heading into the finale with a razor-thin lead over Max Verstappen and Oscar Piastri, Norris knew steady laps mattered, but composure under pressure mattered more. A gritty third-place finish, when fourth would have spelt disaster, secured McLaren its first drivers' crown in 17 years.

It was also the culmination of Norris' 16-year dream, sparked in karting tracks, sharpened through turbulent junior formulas and finally realised under Abu Dhabi's floodlights. It capped a rare trifecta of a home win at Silverstone, a tour de force in Monaco, and the world championship in a single season.

The emotion within the cockpit and across the paddock was palpable. The gruelling 24-race journey reached its end in a victory shaped by family sacrifices and personal setbacks, weaving together the strands of a story long in the making.

The path to glory in 2025 was not





Chase master: Max Verstappen (left) mounted a remarkable late-season charge, closing rapidly on Norris. By the end of the final race, just two points separated them in the standings.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

without hurdles. Tense moments with his teammate, simmering dynamics within McLaren, and the resurgence of an unexpected yet anticipated rival tested him at every turn. Those challenges pushed the 26-year-old to adopt a steelier, more resolute mindset, a marked contrast to the jovial, easygoing youngster once celebrated as the sport's rising talent. In his seventh year in F1, he finally lived up to that promise, an achievement that had often felt distant.

Fleeting heights

Four races at the top, five at the end. That was all of Norris' time leading the championship, despite entering the season as the favourite. For 15 races in between, it was his teammate and rival, Piastri, who carved out his own ascent. The Australian emerged transformed after the heartbreaking season opener at home, sharpening his precision and resolve. His blend of aggression and adaptability fuelled a growing narrative: the grid might be witnessing its next world champion, perhaps at the expense of the man who had long carried McLaren's hopes.

Norris' slump after Australia strengthened Piastri's case, as the 24-year-old's rapid rise made the Briton's winless streak more glaring. Barring the curtain raiser, only a string of podiums kept Norris' fragile advantage intact. The Bahrain Grand Prix became his third consecutive weekend without the highest points haul, and he knew his position was under threat. His confidence faltered, and he did not shy away from voicing the doubts gnawing at him.

The next outing in Saudi Arabia marked the start of Piastri's dominance and Norris' misery, as the former claimed his third triumph in five races and seized the all-important lead.

Narrow margins

Piastri, in only his third F1 season, produced a tenacious first quarter of the campaign. A driver whom few tipped to contend for the title was outshining his far more experienced teammate nearly every weekend. He went from an intriguing contender to a genuine favourite for the crown, but his next-door rival was never far behind.

Winning Monaco, widely considered the sport's crown jewel, offered a glimmer of hope for Norris. His first victory in six races cut the deficit to just three points, enough to keep belief alive.

But Canada shifted the dynamic. In Montreal, the two collided: Norris crashed out, and Piastri salvaged 12 points. It exposed the first public crack in the so-called papaya rules, McLaren's debated approach that

Apt finish: The climax to the Formula 1 World Championship could hardly have been better set up, with the three title contenders lined up together at the front of the grid for the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix. GETTY IMAGES

allowed drivers to race freely without team orders.

Norris, however, bounced back, clinching three of the next four races, including a surreal home Grand Prix at Silverstone. It was another lifelong goal accomplished, but the ultimate prize looked out of reach.

At Zandvoort, he approached the weekend full of promise, but a sudden reliability issue forced him to retire, extinguishing the momentum he had built. He sat alone on the grassy banks of the orange-clad track, watching in dismay as the gap to Piastri stretched to its widest point.

Fault lines

It was becoming clear that the competition between the teammates would not settle easily. McLaren held firm to its principle of healthy racing for as long as it could, an earnest attempt to keep two evenly matched contenders in harmony. But by the Italian Grand Prix, that balance gave way.

A botched pit stop for Norris forced McLaren to assert itself: Piastri was instructed to cede second place, stunning him and everyone watching. The team had declared its number one driver, and it was not the championship leader.

The decision struck a nerve with Piastri. Sudden insecurity and a perceived lack of support sent his form into decline. He never voiced disapproval, but the youngster's dejection was unmistakable. His freefall began with a crash at the next race in Azerbaijan, where Norris, despite the chance to strike, could not fully capitalise.

Amid the shifting tides, the hegemony atop the leaderboard that the two teammates once held comfortably began to feel precarious. An unlikely contender surged back, winning three of the four races from Italy, and in doing so, Verstappen roared back into contention.

Cli'Max'

Following the Dutch Grand Prix, Verstappen was a distant third in the standings, 104 points behind Piastri. It had been a strangely subdued campaign for a driver who had left the field gasping in previous seasons, with only two wins from the first 15 races.

Some traits, though, have always defined the Dutchman: he is never far from the fight, and pressure often brings out his best. With renewed pace in the Red Bull and the poise of a four-time world champion, he emerged as a threat with nothing to lose.

At the US Grand Prix, Verstappen claimed maximum points from the sprint and main race. His surge was no longer a faint prospect but a gathering inevitability. This purple patch coincided with Piastri's final day in the lead and marked the juncture at which Norris' momentum started to shift.

The South American leg of the season saw Norris rediscover his long-lost mojo, excelling in Mexico and Brazil to reclaim the top spot. Piastri's penalty in Sao Paulo widened the gulf, while Verstappen's pit lane-to-podium masterclass brought him closer to the two.

Against the shimmering backdrop of Las Vegas, all the frontrunner needed was a win to seal his place, but nothing came easy. He lost prime position to Verstappen, and McLaren suffered its biggest debacle of the season: a double disqualification for breaching a technical regulation. It stripped Norris of second and Piastri of

fourth, altering the tenacious story in one brutal stroke.

Final reckoning

Few expected a three-way battle this year, not even the latest entrant himself. With only two races remaining, momentum sat with Verstappen, who had won the first of the concluding triple-header and was now just 24 points shy of Norris.

At the penultimate Qatar race, a catastrophic strategy call hit both McLarens hard. Piastri fell from a near-certain victory to second, Norris dropped from second to fourth, and winner Verstappen vaulted to second in the standings, turning the chase into a knife-edge clash.

The finale arrived with permutations and echoes of past contests looming large. The leader held a 12-point advantage, while just four points separated second and third, with 25 still on offer. All eyes were on the hunters and the hunted.

Qualifying was intense. Verstappen claimed pole, Norris second, Piastri third. But attitudes diverged: Verstappen seemed content with a shot, Piastri nearly resigned to falling short, and Norris reminded himself quietly that the pinnacle was within reach.

Norris knew better than to tussle with Verstappen, a man who had repeatedly edged him in wheel-to-wheel fights. On the first lap, the Briton took the safe route, but was overtaken by a determined Piastri. Third was still enough, but he had to defend it with everything he had.

With gutsy moves, he threaded past midfielders, even two in a single turn. Anticipating that Yuki Tsunoda would play the team game for his Red Bull senior, Norris pushed every limit to climb back. By the final laps, he knew he had done enough.

When the chequered flag fell, the release was instant. The tears, the weight, the years of effort converged at once. New fights will come and new mountains will rise, but for this moment, he stands exactly where he long dreamed of being.

MCLAREN'S PUSH TO KEEP BOTH DRIVERS ON EQUAL FOOTING BECAME A NEAR-CONSTANT TALKING POINT THROUGH THE 2025 SEASON

GETTY IMAGES

KIMI ANTONELLI (Mercedes)
Seventh place — 150 points
Broke Hamilton's record (109) for most points in debut season
Three podiums — Canada (3rd), Brazil (2nd), Las Vegas (3rd inherited)
One sprint pole — The youngest driver to ever start from the top spot in any F1 session
Reached Q3 16/24 times

CLASS OF 2025

Tracking the highs and lows of F1's **bold** new batch of rookie drivers.

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Every new Formula One season brings hope, but 2025 brought possibility. It marked the rise of a new generation, with several rookies stepping onto the grid together, a wave of fresh talent arriving at a moment of change. They were ready to test themselves against the machinery, the men who had defined the era, and the relentless spotlight of F1.

Over 24 races, some shone with brilliance, while others faltered under the sport's unforgiving demands. For this junior group, the campaign was as much about lessons learnt as it was about flashes of promise.

Leading the pack was Andrea Kimi Antonelli, Mercedes's newest hopeful. Tasked with filling the vast void left by Lewis Hamilton, he repaid the faith with glimpses of his prowess. Despite scoring less than half the points of his experienced teammate George Russell, the teenager produced a debut campaign that

PICS: GETTY IMAGES

stood out. Antonelli **(right)** claimed three memorable podiums in Canada, Brazil, and an inherited finish in Las Vegas. The Italian's consistency — reaching Q3 sixteen times, second only to Hamilton's 2007 rookie record of seventeen — hinted at a future star still sharpening his racecraft, with much more to come.

Not far behind in intrigue was Isack Hadjar at Racing Bulls. The Frenchman's tenure began with a harsh introduction as he suffered a formation-lap crash in Australia. But in a team that lacked the machinery of the front-runners, Hadjar's ability to extract performance from every session was remarkable.

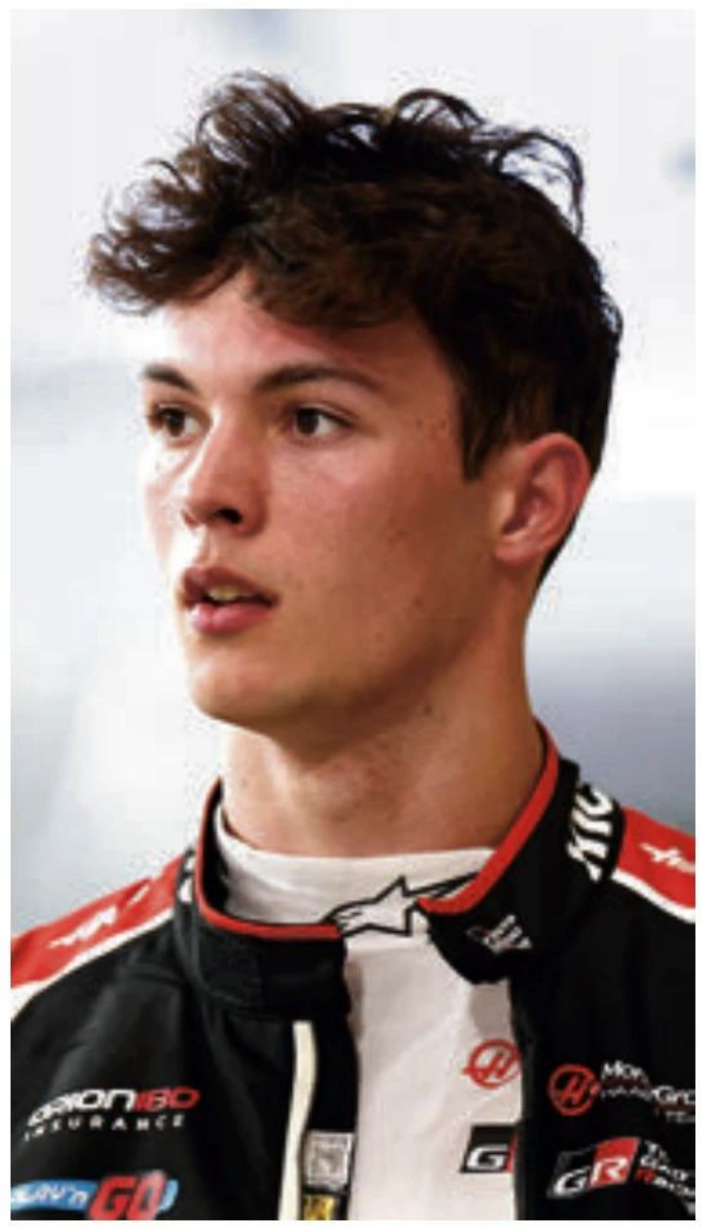
Single-lap pace, equalling Antonelli's mark in qualifying consistency, and a hard-fought podium in the Netherlands confirmed his skill set. By race 23, he had earned a promotion to the Red Bull second seat — a cursed revolving door that could define the next stage of his career.

Other debutants experienced the sport's learning curve in their own ways. Haas' Oliver Bearman consistently fought within the midfield, shining in single-lap performances. The Briton is a familiar face around the paddock, having filled in at Ferrari and Haas last year. His first full season had positive returns, with a career-best finish of fourth in Mexico.

Liam Lawson turned over a new leaf after a challenging start with the senior squad. The Kiwi, who had made sporadic outings with Racing Bulls since 2023, endured two difficult races with Red Bull before being reassigned. He gradually regained form and delivered a fifth-place finish in Azerbaijan, securing his seat and another chance to prove his capabilities.

For Gabriel Bortoleto, Sauber offered both opportunity and challenge. The Brazilian entered F1 after dominating junior categories, but the team's limited development this year meant extracting performance was often a test of patience.

Yet a sixth-place finish in Hungary and multiple points finishes



OLIVER BEARMAN (Haas)
13th place — 41 points
Best finish — 4th (Mexico)
Reached Q3 6/24 times

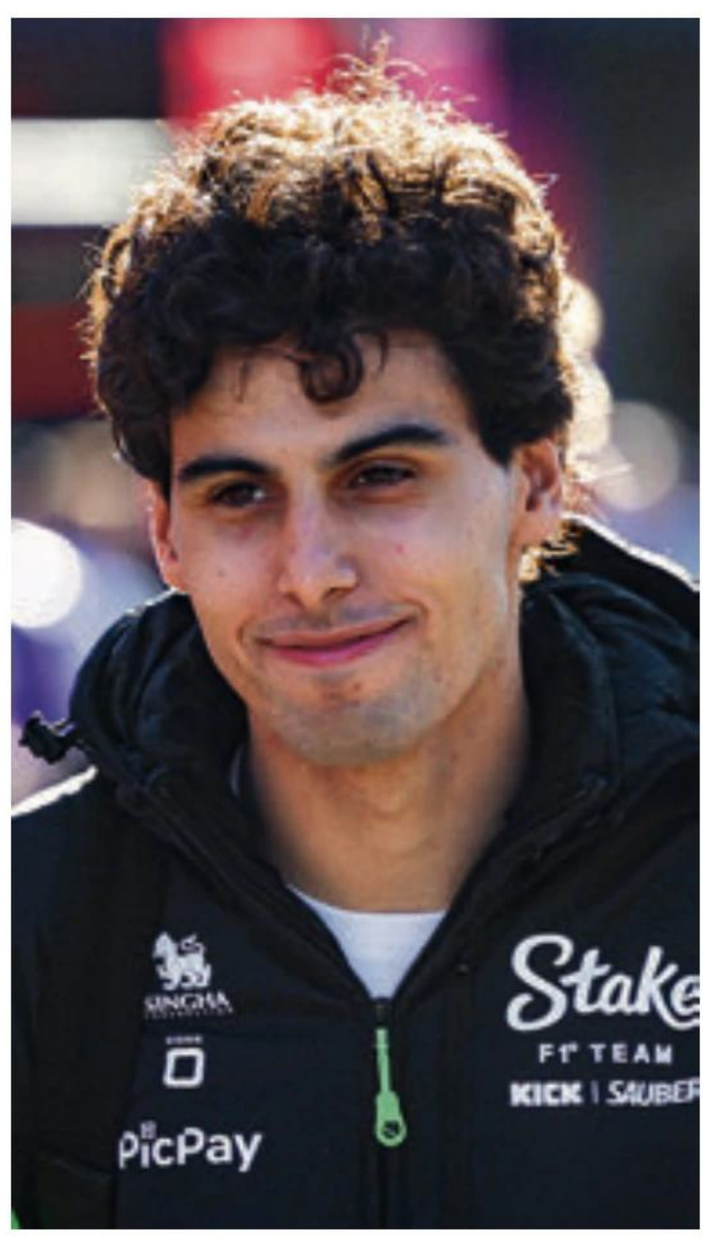
LIAM LAWSON (Racing Bulls)
14th place — 38 points
Best finish — 5th (Azerbaijan)
Reached Q3 8/24 times

highlighted his adaptability and potential.

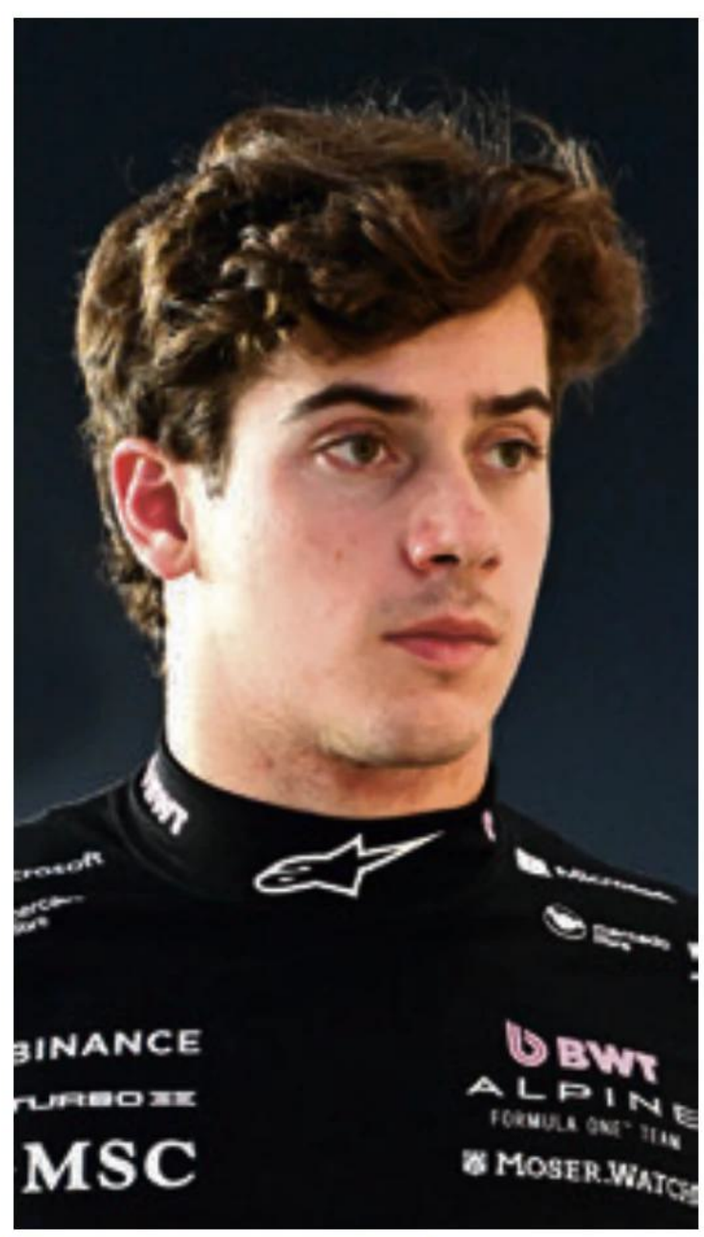
Franco Colapinto and Jack Doohan, limited to a partial campaign with Alpine, faced the steepest challenges of all. Doohan was shown the door early, while his successor, a familiar fill-in on the grid, had no real standout drives. The Argentinian, gaining invaluable knowledge despite scarce chances to score, has been handed another golden opportunity in 2026 to establish himself.

The 2025 season was an opportunity to make their mark, each with a unique journey, but all enduring the same baptism of fire. Every weekend offered glimpses of how F1's future could look in the coming years, laying the foundations of what may become long, successful careers.

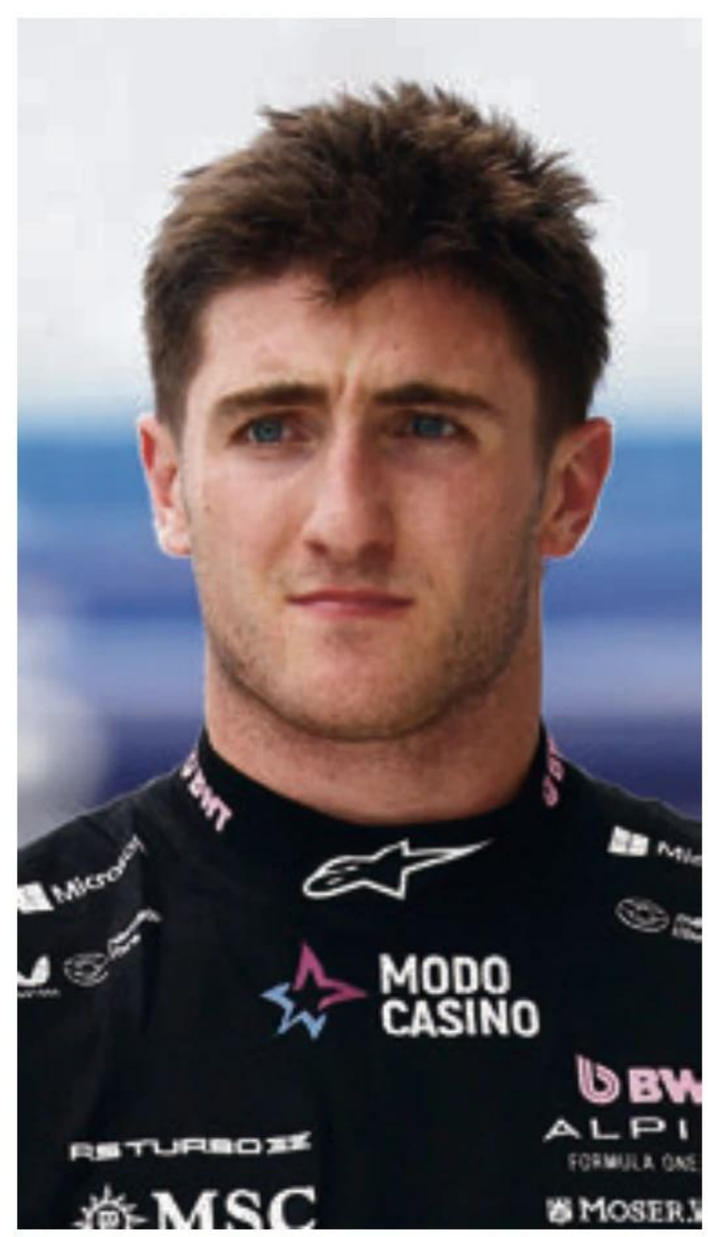
ISACK HADJAR (Racing Bulls)
12th place — 51 points
One podium — Netherlands (3rd)
Reached Q3 16/24 times



GABRIEL BORTOLETO (Sauber)
19th place — 19 points
Best finish — 6th (Hungary)
Reached Q3 5/24 times



FRANCO COLAPINTO (Alpine)
20th place — 0 points (18 races)
Reached Q3 0/24 times



JACK DOOHAN (Alpine)
21st place — 0 points (6 races)
Reached Q3 0/24 times

Credible steps: For the first time in years, Williams paired speed with alignment. Carlos Sainz and Alex Albon turned intent into points. AFP

GOOD DRIVERS, PATIENT TEAMS, AND THE SEASON THAT REFUSED TO BE WASTED

With a reset looming, 2025 was meant to be expendable. The midfield treated it as a **measure of intent** instead.

Measured promise: Isack Hadjar's rookie season offered speed without noise, and ambition without excess. AFP

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Away from the champagne popping, celebratory donuts and the coronation of a new World Champion, the 2025 Formula One season also became a canvas for strokes of improvement and illustrations of tenacity.

With the imminent onset of new regulations in 2026, most expected teams to put a lid on development early in the season and focus on the subsequent car. However, despite the rewards being temporary, many midfield teams made steady progress through the year, climbing the constructors' standings.

Williams made the most headway. The 137 points achieved by the team this season were more than eight times its tally from the previous year. "Our future isn't racing for 8th, 9th or 7th. Our future is racing for championships. You'll see we're making sacrifices for the next few years to bring ourselves to where we need to be," Williams team principal James Vowles had told *Sportstar* on the sidelines of the Saudi Arabia Grand Prix in April this year. Yet the team still managed to rake in more points than it had across the last seven seasons combined.

"The Williams story, for me, underlines the importance of drivers. They have not had two top drivers since 2016," said former F1 driver-turned broadcaster Karun Chandhok. With Felipe Massa and Valtteri Bottas behind the wheel, the Grove-based team had finished fifth in 2016 with 138 points.

"Carlos Sainz was winning races last year at Ferrari. He's really at the top of his game. Having him alongside Alex Albon, suddenly they are driving the [Williams] team forward," he added.

Albon and Sainz finished eighth and ninth in the drivers' championship with 73 and 64 points respectively. The last time the British team had two drivers in the top 10 was in 2015. In April, Vowles termed his driver pairing 'a breath of fresh air'. "Neither one wants anything more than for the team to be successful, which means that every meeting we have is about the greater good. How do we make it better next year? What's our direction of travel? What can I do to help?" he had said. Sainz also bagged two podiums during the year, in Baku and Qatar, breaking the team's unwanted four-year streak.

The season, however, ended on a slightly sour note. Both drivers failed to finish in the top 10 at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, and Sainz said it underlined how much more remained to be done to replicate the success of the 20th century.

"I hope it serves as a good wake-up call to the team, that after a podium, you come back to Abu Dhabi, and we were quite weak. I'm actually happy this happened, so we go into the winter without falling asleep," Sainz told reporters.

Forward steps

Despite the early-season melee involving Red Bull's second driver seat, which saw Yuki Tsunoda replace Liam Lawson after just two races, Racing Bulls forged a strong campaign, doubling its points haul from last year. Leading the charge for the Faenza-based outfit was rookie Isack Hadjar, who bagged 51 points in his debut season, including a podium finish at Zandvoort.

The diminutive Frenchman will

Ray of hope: After finishing bottom this season, Alpine will hope Formula One's sweeping 2026 reset offers a way back into contention. GETTY IMAGES

now have to cope with the ill-fated second seat alongside Max Verstappen in 2026, hoping to be the last man standing in the game of musical chairs. "For me, he was the top rookie of the season," Karun exclaimed. "I hope he doesn't suffer the same pain as all the others who've gone to Red Bull recently. He's a great kid. There's a real inner fire in him," he added.

Kick Sauber also climbed the constructors' ladder in its final season before rebranding as Audi's works team. Nico Hulkenberg finally put a full stop to the longest wait for a podium in F1 history, finishing third at the British Grand Prix in his 239th race start. Back-to-back feeder series champion Gabriel Bortoleto contributed 19 points, including four top-10 finishes in six races during the European leg.

Reset button

The forward strides made by the midfield will, however, be washed away by a wave of change as a new era dawns in the top tier of single-seater motorsport. The 2026 regulations, focused largely on engine-related changes, will effectively clear the slate. Under the new statutes, the power unit will be 50 per cent electrical, up from the 15 to 20 per cent share that has defined the hybrid era since 2014. The MGU-H (Motor Generator Unit – Heat), which converted exhaust heat energy into electrical power, has also been removed.

"There is a huge challenge for teams to figure out how they'll charge these big batteries without the MGU-H. There's going to be a lot of emphasis on the software to get the right combination of electric and engine power for the whole lap," Karun explained.

"The drivers will not be able to drive at 100% all the time. They will have to be careful about using their energy. We're going to see a very different style of racing. The intelligent drivers will be the successful drivers next year," he added.

The renewed reliance on engines could tilt the balance towards traditional power unit manufacturers such as Mercedes and Ferrari, rather than customer teams, when the cars roll out for the season-opening Australian Grand Prix.

"Someone will get the engine formula fantastically right, and some will get it fantastically wrong. I hope that we don't have big gaps, because we want everyone to be close together for the show," the former Red Bull junior opined. "We're going to see a lot of development in the first 18 months. What you see in Melbourne for the first race next year is not a guarantee. We'll see a lot of development and progression through the year," he added.

The former Hispania Racing Team and Lotus Racing driver also noted: "The FIA has created a system where, if a team is too far behind, they will get some dispensation to make some big changes. So, there'll be some games playing with all of that as well."

When the track opens for preseason testing in Bahrain in three months, midfield teams will hope the regulation reset acts as a catalyst for further progress. Because one backward step might be enough to send them tumbling down the pecking order.

IPL AUCTION

WATCH OUR WRAP

X/IPLT20

When the League chose the unfinished over the established

The IPL 2026 auction revealed a preference for projection over pedigree, as teams invested heavily in uncapped players and showed restraint with experienced but capped names.

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The IPL 2026 auction saw a combined total of Rs. 215.45 crore spent on 77 players by the 10 franchises. Emerging from the exercise was a clear pattern of calculated signings targeting specific roles, driven by sharp, ground-level scouting

Unsurprisingly, Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) and Chennai Super Kings (CSK) were the busiest teams at the auction, having entered the proceedings with the biggest purses.

Their approaches, however, diverged sharply. While KKR focused on marquee overseas names, CSK trained its sights firmly on uncapped Indian talent.

Overseas firepower

KKR made three of the six most expensive signings of the IPL 2026 auction: Cameron Green (Rs. 25.20 crore), Matheesha Pathirana (Rs. 18 crore), and Mustafizur Rahman (Rs. 9.20 crore).

Green, expectedly, emerged as

Windfall: Cameron Green, formerly with Mumbai Indians and Royal Challengers Bengaluru, learned of his lucrative IPL signing while gearing up for the third Ashes Test against England, a sharp turn of fortune after missing the 2025 season due to back surgery. GETTY IMAGES

the most expensive player of the auction and is now the third-most expensive player in IPL history. The 26-year-old's power-hitting ability, combined with his capacity to deliver disciplined medium pace, sparked a bidding war between KKR and CSK, with the Knight Riders eventually prevailing.

"If we felt it would affect the rest of the auction, we would have let it go. Fortunately, it came within the range we were looking at. He adds a lot to our team, especially with our new power coach Russell," KKR CEO Venky Mysore said.

KKR views Green as a like-for-like replacement for the now-retired Andre Russell, both in role and impact.

Calculated gamble

While Green's acquisition was largely expected, KKR's move for Pathirana at that price point raised eyebrows. The Sri Lankan slinger endured a difficult IPL 2025, managing just 13 wickets at an economy of 10.14, which led to his release by CSK.

KKR appears to be banking on Pathirana as a long-term death-overs specialist, another role Russell once fulfilled.

Alongside Pathirana and Mustafizur, the franchise also added Akash Deep and Kartik Tyagi, bolstering an already imposing pace unit that includes Harshit Rana, Vaibhav Arora, and Umran Malik.

Doubling down on youth

CSK's auction strategy reflected a broader shift in philosophy. After a disastrous start to IPL 2025, the franchise introduced young replacements such as Ayush Mhatre, Urvil Patel, and Dewald Brevis, all of whom made an immediate impact.

That youth-first approach carried into the auction. CSK spent the bulk of its purse on uncapped players

VIJAY SONEJI

Youth gamble: Chennai Super Kings made a bold statement at the mini-auction, splurging a record Rs. 14.20 crore each on uncapped youngsters Kartik Sharma (left) and Prashant Veer (right), betting big on raw Indian promise.

rather than established names.

Uttar Pradesh all-rounder Prashant Veer and Rajasthan wicketkeeper-batter Kartik Sharma were the biggest beneficiaries, with both landing Rs. 14.2 crore deals, the highest ever paid for uncapped players in IPL auction history.

"As the game evolved, we may have been slow to evolve with it," CSK coach Stephen Fleming admitted midway through the auction. "Halfway through [the 2025] tournament, we made a big shift. We identified that we needed to change."

On paper, Prashant, a 20-year-old lower-order batter who bowls left-arm spin, looks like a long-term replacement for Ravindra Jadeja, who was traded to Rajasthan Royals for Sanju Samson.

Kartik's signing, however, creates a problem of plenty. The 19-year-old power-hitter becomes CSK's fourth wicketkeeper, alongside Samson, Urvil, and MS Dhoni.

Domestic pacers in demand

The other major uncapped windfall went to Jammu & Kashmir pacer Auqib Nabi, snapped up by Delhi Capitals for Rs. 8.4 crore. A consistent performer in domestic red-ball cricket, the 29-year-old has recently sharpened his death-bowling skills, earning him a maiden IPL contract.

Defending champion Royal Challengers Bengaluru also chased domestic pace, signing left-arm quick Mangesh Yadav for Rs. 5.20 crore, making him its second-most expensive buy behind all-rounder Venkatesh Iyer (Rs. 7 crore).

Big reputations, little interest

The scramble for domestic talent coincided with a cautious approach towards overseas players, particularly early in the auction. Liam Livingstone, Jake Fraser-McGurk, and Devon Conway all went unsold initially.

K. R. DEEPAK
AP

Fresh start: Matheesha Pathirana's struggles in 2025 hit MS Dhoni's side hard, but a move to KKR offers him a chance at renewal and relevance. **Right:** Sunrisers Hyderabad will be all-rounder Liam Livingstone's fourth IPL team.

Livingstone eventually found a home at Sunrisers Hyderabad for Rs. 13 crore.

Indian batters Prithvi Shaw and Sarfaraz Khan also needed re-runs before finding teams, both eventually being picked up at their base price of Rs. 75 lakh.

Their modest valuations underscored the league's unforgiving nature and its growing preference for future-facing investments over stalled potential.

Losing value

Franchises were notably wary of capped Indian players not in the national reckoning. Six of the nine capped Indians who received bids were sold at base price, including Test regular Akash Deep.

Venkatesh Iyer and Ravi Bishnoi also saw sharp valuation drops after falling out of favour with the Indian team. Venkatesh's price plummeted from Rs. 23.75 crore at the mega auction, while Bishnoi, retained for Rs. 11 crore by Lucknow Super Giants, fetched Rs. 7.2 crore.

State T20 League pipeline

In contrast, 32 uncapped Indian players secured contracts, with

Rs. 2.2 crore

Mumbai Indians spent the lowest auction outlay in IPL history

30 per cent

Kolkata Knight Riders accounted for a major share of the total spend with Rs. 63.85 crore

Homecoming: After going unsold twice at his base price of Rs. 75 lakh, Prithvi Shaw found his way back to familiar ground, with Delhi Capitals signing him for Rs. 75 lakh, rekindling a partnership that ran from 2018 to 2024. PTI

franchises spending Rs. 63.45 crore on them. That figure represents 72.59 per cent of the total spend on Indian players.

Eleven of those uncapped players earned more than their base price, many emerging from State T20 leagues. Robust scouting networks ensured names such as Prashant (UP T20 League), Akshat Raghuwanshi (MP Premier League), Mangesh (MP T20 League), Tejasvi Singh Dahiya (Delhi Premier League), and Naman Tiwari (UP T20 League) were already well known before auction day.

This influx of State-league talent comes at a time when the IPL is witnessing higher scoring rates, flatter pitches, and shrinking margins for bowlers.

If pedigree and long domestic grind were once considered essential, the success of players like Priyansh Arya, Digvesh Rathi, and Vipraj Nigam suggests otherwise.

As conditions become increasingly unforgiving, the sustained success of this new crop of T20 specialists could further establish the IPL as an alternative and effective pathway for elite talent, reinforcing its position as the global benchmark for the modern game.

Rs. 10 crore

Kartik Sharma and Prashant Veer – the youngest players ever to cross the figure at an auction

95

Punjab Kings waited through these many players before making its first bid

AFP

South Africa smashes its highest-ever W-ODI total

1 The Proteas women **piled up** 375 for six, the 13th highest total in women's ODIs.

South Africa turned Gqeberha into a run carnival, sealing the three-match ODI series against Ireland with a commanding 74-run win in the second game as both teams rewrote record books. The Proteas smashed their highest ever women's ODI total, piling up 375 for six, the 13th highest overall. Ireland responded bravely, crossing 300 for only the fifth time, but fell short. Laura Wolvaardt **(above)** led with a majestic 124, ably supported by Sune Luus' 114 and Dane van Niekerk's fluent 88.

2

REUTERS

Azhar Mahmood's stint as Pakistan's Test head coach has come to an end, with both parties opting to part ways by mutual consent. Appointed as acting head coach in June, Azhar's contract was originally set to run until March 2026. However, with no Tests scheduled until the away series against Bangladesh in March–April next year, the decision was taken to conclude the arrangement earlier than planned.

3

AP

Preparations for the ICC Under-19 Men's Cricket World Cup 2026 will step up as host Zimbabwe joins Afghanistan and Pakistan in a tri-nation series ahead of the tournament. With the World Cup scheduled from January 15 to February 6 across Zimbabwe and Namibia, the series offers vital match practice. The action begins on Christmas Day, December 25, with Zimbabwe taking on Afghanistan at the Harare Sports Club.

4

PTI

The International Cricket Council (ICC) and JioStar have reiterated that their India media-rights agreement remains valid, countering reports that the broadcaster plans to step away from the contract ahead of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026. "Preparations for these (T20 World Cup) events are progressing exactly as planned, and there is no impact on viewers, advertisers, or industry partners," the statement read.

5

ICC

Bahrain pacer Ali Dawood etched his name into T20I history with a stunning spell of 7 for 19, the second-best figures ever recorded in men's T20 internationals. It marked only the second time a bowler has claimed seven wickets in the format. Dawood now sits just behind Malaysia's Syazrul Idrus, who holds the record with a remarkable 7 for 8 against China in an ICC Men's T20 World Cup Qualifier.

ODIs PHOTOLINE
INDIA-SOUTH AFRICA

1st

Dictating terms: Virat Kohli smashed 135 off 120 balls — his 52nd ODI century — with the help of 11 fours and seven sixes. In the process, he also added 136 runs with Rohit Sharma as India scored 349 for eight after being asked to bat first in Ranchi. R. V. MOORTHY

2nd

Early burst: Harshit Rana picked two wickets in the second over of the chase, and Arshdeep Singh got another in the fifth over to reduce South Africa to 11 for three. The top order's failure hurt the visiting side deeply as the lower order's fightback went in vain to hand India a 17-run win and give an early lead in the three-match series. R. V. MOORTHY

Tonned up: Ruturaj Gaikwad (105) slammed his maiden ODI century while adding 195 runs for the third wicket with Virat Kohli (102), who scored his second consecutive hundred **(right)**. A late burst from KL Rahul helped India reach 358 for five in Raipur in the first innings. PICS: R. RAGU

Stealing thunder: Aiden Markram smacked 110 off 98 balls, leading South Africa's response. Significant contributions from the rest of the batters helped the Proteas complete the 359-run target in the last over, making it the joint sixth-highest run chase in ODIs. R. RAGU

FOR MORE IMAGES

6th

Opening up: Quinton de Kock (106) saved his best for the final game as he hammered his seventh ODI ton against India. However, he couldn't find much support from the fellow batters as Kuldeep Yadav and Prasidh Krishna picked four wickets each to help India restrict South Africa to 270 all out. K. R. DEEPAK

7th

Jaisball: The Indian opener registered his maiden century in the format as India closed the 271-run target with 61 balls to spare. Jaiswal remained unbeaten on 116 while Virat Kohli, 65 not out, finished the game with a four as India clinched the series 2-1 in Visakhapatnam. K. R. DEEPAK

1st

Strike force: Hardik Pandya struck an unbeaten 59 off 28 balls to salvage India's innings from 78 for four in the 12th over. His pyrotechnics got India to an above-par 175 for six in the first T20I in Cuttack. AFP

2nd

Reaching a milestone: Jasprit Bumrah picked two wickets as South Africa was bundled out for 74 inside 14 overs in the first T20I. The two strikes took Bumrah past 100 wickets in T20Is, making him only the second Indian after Arshdeep Singh to record the feat. Bumrah is only the fifth bowler with 100 wickets to his credit in all three formats. AFP

3rd

Superb knock: Quinton de Kock, returning from retirement, slammed his first T20I fifty in almost 18 months and laid the foundation for the Proteas after India won the toss and opted to bowl in New Chandigarh. He was run out and fell agonisingly short of his second T20I century, but his 90 off 46 balls took his team to 213 for four.

R. V. MOORTHY

4th

Wrecker-in-chief: India's chase was rocked early after Shubman Gill fell for a golden duck in the second T20I. His opening partner Abhishek Sharma could score only 17 off eight balls. Ottniel Baartman nabbed Axar Patel for run-a-ball 21 before running through the tail. He picked four for 24 to cap off a commanding 51-run victory. R. V. MOORTHY

5th

Back to his best: Arshdeep Singh redeemed himself with two for 14 in the third T20I in Dharamsala, after a forgettable outing in the second match where he conceded 54 and created the ignominious record of bowling the longest over (13 deliveries) by an Indian in the format. Harshit Rana and Varun Chakaravarthy picked two wickets apiece to restrict South Africa to 117.

R. V. MOORTHY

6th

Paving the way: Abhishek Sharma blazed his way to 35 off just 18 balls as India added 68 runs inside the PowerPlay, with 60 of those coming for the opening wicket. Shubman Gill's run-a-ball 28 and Tilak Varma's unbeaten 25 anchored India to a seven-wicket triumph and a 2-1 lead in the series. R. V. MOORTHY

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

WORTH CHECKING WHETHER COMMITMENTS ON BOTH SIDES WERE HONOURED DURING MESSI'S KOLKATA VISIT

If he was meant to be at the stadium for an hour, then by leaving well before that time and disappointing fans who had paid good money, the **real culprit** was Messi and his entourage.

In the recently released Hindi film Dhurandhar, there's a scene where the Chief of the Indian Intelligence Bureau says, "Indians are India's worst enemies, then Pakistan." Of course, it's a filmy dialogue and has to be seen in the context of the story unfolding on the screen. As someone who has been involved with Indian cricket for more than six decades, starting at the school level, I have seen how, for personal ambitions or grievances, and sometimes even misconceptions and perceived slights, Indian cricket has been dragged by Indians through the mud and its reputation spoiled.

A few days before writing this piece, speculation surfaced that the current broadcast rights holders for ICC cricket were going to walk away from their contractual obligations and leave the ICC in the lurch for the remaining two years of the agreement. There was a flurry of reports until a joint statement from both the ICC and the broadcast rights holder clarified that everything was fine and there was no basis for the claims.

The broadcast rights holder is an Indian company and one of the largest conglomerates in the world, and the current ICC Chair and CEO are also Indians. The first version of this speculative story appeared in an Indian publication.

The joint statement clearly showed that the speculation was unfounded, but it wasn't altogether surprising that it was an Indian trying to create trouble for fellow Indians. We have had 18 years of the IPL, each a bigger blockbuster than the last, yet every year, within a week or a fortnight of the start of one of the top five sporting properties in the world, we read that viewership has fallen or advertising is not the same as in earlier years. Negative narratives that resurface every few days during the tournament. Why? What pleasure do these Indians get in trying to belittle an Indian sporting property that is the envy of the rest of the world?

Do you ever read such stories in British papers about the English Premier League or Wimbledon or the British Open golf, or even Formula One? Or in American papers about the AFL and the Super Bowl, or in Australian papers about something being wrong with the Boxing Day Test at Melbourne or the New Year's Test in Sydney or the Australian Open tennis event? At least I haven't read, heard or seen speculative or negative stories about the marquee tournaments in these countries. If anything, they go out of their way to project

So near, yet so far: Thousands of adoring supporters had paid up to Rs. 12,000 to catch a glimpse of football star Lionel Messi at the Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata. DEBASISH BHADURI

their events as the best in the world. Try arguing with a Brit by comparing the Spanish La Liga with the English Premier League or questioning Lord's as the home of cricket. See what happens. And here we are, trying to pull down Indians who have taken India to the top, just for a few headlines and a few hundred views or followers.

This is not to suggest that Indian cricket is beyond criticism. If anything, every Indian cricket lover should have the right to express honest views so that Indian cricket can progress and prosper. But writing speculative and critical pieces purely for eyeballs damages Indian cricket, from whose ecosystem we all make a rupee or two.

Even the recent episode at the Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata, where the Argentinian footballer, Lionel Messi, made a far shorter appearance than promised, was blamed on everyone except the person who failed to honour his commitment. What his agreement was is not public knowledge, but if he was meant to be at the stadium for an hour, then by leaving well before that time and disappointing fans who had paid good money, the real culprit was he and his entourage. Yes, he was surrounded by politicians and so-called VIPs, but there was no security threat to him or his entourage. Was he supposed to simply walk around the stadium, or do something tangible like take a penalty kick? If it were the latter, those around him would automatically have had to move, and the crowd would have seen their hero do what they had come to watch.

The other appearances went smoothly because commitments were met. So before blaming fellow Indians in Kolkata, it might be worth checking whether commitments on both sides were honoured.

Otherwise, it will be exactly what the Chief of the Intelligence Bureau says in the movie, that "we Indians are India's worst enemies".

Was Messi supposed to simply walk around the stadium, or do something tangible like take a penalty kick? If it were the latter, those around him would automatically have had to move, and the crowd would have seen their hero do what they had come to watch.

World champion, back at the drawing board

Fresh off an ODI World Cup triumph, India now turns its attention to a more unsettled format, using a home T20I series against Sri Lanka as the **first step** towards rebuilding for England next summer.

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Just over a month after Harmanpreet Kaur led her side to glory in the Women's ODI World Cup, attention now turns to the shortest format of the game, with all efforts tuned towards next year's marquee T20 World Cup, scheduled to be held in England and Wales in June-July.

When the originally scheduled white-ball series against Bangladesh in this window fell through, the BCCI, along with Sri Lanka Cricket, swiftly moved to set up a bilateral meeting between the neighbours as per the Future Tours Programme provisions for this cycle. The build-up was crucial for both sides, albeit they find themselves in different predicaments.

The Women in Blue boast a strong record against the island nation, having won 20 of their 26 encounters so far. While the overall numbers do not favour the visitor, Sri Lanka can draw some encouragement from the fact that the series begins at the same venue where it last defeated India, back in 2014. There is also that epochal Asia Cup final triumph against India in 2024 to look back on should the side find itself searching for motivation.

The five-match T20I series gets underway in Visakhapatnam on December 21 and 23, before moving to Thiruvananthapuram for the remaining fixtures on December 26, 28, and 30.

Drawing board

The road to the latest edition of the biannual tournament for India, after the tussle with Sri Lanka, includes two three-match series against its two biggest title rivals, Australia in February and New Zealand in May-June.

A little over a year ago, India exited the T20 World Cup, held in the UAE, in the group stage following a stunning loss to New Zealand in its opening fixture, setting the tone for an ordinary campaign. The thrashing at the hands of Australia definitively hit the nail in India's coffin.

Two series triumphs since in the format may have bandaged some of the wounds, if anyone remembers them at all, after the confetti and congratulations of an ODI World Cup triumph that followed. A 2-1 victory against West Indies at home and a close 3-2 win against England in its backyard gave India ample time to experiment and blood new talent in the past few months, with the primary focus firmly on the 50-over showpiece.

Several creases emerged that Amol Muzumdar and Co. can work towards ironing out. A familiar capitulation under pressure

witnessed during that World Cup would hopefully have been put to bed, given the spunk on show during India's recent ODI world conquest.

Batting collapses and strike rate issues plagued India in the UAE, but the side has since unlocked another gear in its white-ball batting engine. Not having to deal with the slow, low UAE tracks will offer another breather, with surfaces in India overwhelmingly favouring the willow.

This might even take some sting out of India's dismal run with the toss, having lost all nine of its last flips of the coin. Sri Lanka's T20 World Cup sojourn was far more dreadful. The side returned without a win and has played only one series since, a 1-1 draw against New Zealand away, where the final fixture in Dunedin was washed out.

As much as Sri Lanka attempts to move away from dependence on Chamari Athapaththu, when the going gets hard, it invariably turns back to her for salvation. The New Zealand series in March, where the skipper finished as Player of the Tournament, exemplified this. It was also the story of the T20 World Cup in 2024 and the ODI World Cup of 2025.

Favourites: The Women in Blue boast a strong record against the island nation, having won 20 of their 26 encounters so far.
K. MURALI KUMAR

The template for preview writers remains unchanged: how much can Athapaththu do alone?

Towards that end, Sri Lanka will field a new-look outfit for the India tour. Anushka Sanjeewani, Udeshika Prabodhani, Achini Kulasuriya, and Sugandika Kumar have been left out, making way for fresh faces eager to make an impression at the international level.

Among the inclusions are 17-year-old ambidextrous spinner Shashini Gimhani, returning to the national side for the first time since August 2024, and left-arm spinner Nimesha Madushani, who has earned her maiden call-up. Kaushini Nuthyangana is likely to step in for Anushka behind the stumps.

At the ODI World Cup, players such as Harshitha Samarawickrama and Vishmi Gunaratne were tested extensively. They showed signs of handling the pressure but fell just short of translating promise into wins. Sri Lanka will hope that the belief and momentum these youngsters generated during the Asia Cup triumph carry through against a formidable opponent in an important year.

Power of stability

India's ODI World Cup-winning squad largely features in this series. Pratika Rawal, who was never part of the T20 scheme of things to begin with, is missing, while the other two names, leg-spinner Radha Yadav and back-up keeper Uma Chetry, have made way for two fresh faces in left-arm spinner Vaishnavi Sharma and keeper-batter G. Kamalini.

Vaishnavi was the leading wicket-taker with 17 wickets at this year's Under-19 Women's World Cup. The 19-year-old has also been in good touch on the domestic circuit, picking up 21 wickets in the Senior Women's T20 Trophy and 12 scalps from five matches, the most, in the Senior Women's Inter-Zonal T20s.

Kamalini, who also impressed at the Under-19 Women's World Cup as the third-highest run-scorer with 143 runs, finds a place in the squad as the backup wicketkeeper to Richa Ghosh. The Tamil Nadu and Mumbai Indians player comes into the tournament on the back of a strong run in the Senior Women's T20 Trophy, where she scored 297 runs in seven matches. This effectively shuts the door on Uma, who also went without takers in the Women's Premier League auction.

Muzumdar's penchant for experimentation is not lost on anyone, and India has three solid opportunities, along with the fertile ground of the WPL, to fine-tune its eleven ahead of the showpiece in England.

India's squad: Harmanpreet Kaur (C), Smriti Mandhana (VC), Deepti Sharma, Sneh Rana, Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Harleen Deol, Amanjot Kaur, Arundhati Reddy, Kranti Gaud, Renuka Singh Thakur, Richa Ghosh (WK), G Kamalini (WK), Sree Charani, Vaishnavi Sharma.

Sri Lanka's squad: Chamari Athapaththu (C), Harshitha Samarawickrama (VC), Hasini Perera, Vishmi Gunaratne, Nilakshika De Silva, Kavisha Dilhari, Imesha Dulani, Kaushini Nuthyangana, Malsha Shehani, Inoka Ranaweera, Shashini Gimhani, Nimesha Madushani, Kawya Kavindi, Rashmika Sewwandi, Malki Madara.

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Deadly duo

2667 The number of runs scored at home by Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli while batting together in ODI cricket. Their dynamic partnership soared past the legendary Sri Lankan pair of Kumar Sangakkara and Mahela Jayawardene during a thrilling 136-run stand for the second wicket in Ranchi on 30 November 2025. Impressively, this marked their 18th time sharing a 50-plus partnership in ODIs.

Most runs for a batting pair at home in ODIs

Runs	Partners	Span	Inns	NO	HP	Avg.	100	50
2667	R. Sharma, V. Kohli (Ind)	2010-2025	41	2	246	68.38	8	10
2596	K. Sangakkara, M. Jayawardene (SL)	2000-2014	57	3	179	48.07	7	17
2364	J. Root, E. Morgan (Eng)	2013-2021	38	4	198	69.52	12	3
2310	V. Sehwag, S. Tendulkar (Ind)	2002-2011	51	0	182	45.29	8	7
2297	D. Boon, G. Marsh (Aus)	1986-1992	58	1	152	40.29	6	13
2222	S. Tendulkar, S. Ganguly (Ind)	1996-2007	45	0	175	49.37	8	7
2037	J. Bairstow, J. Roy (Eng)	2015-2022	32	0	174	63.65	11	5
2017	M. Guptill, K. Williamson (NZ)	2012-2019	39	2	163	54.51	6	11

Perfect pair: Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma have put on 2667 runs at home while batting together in ODIs.
R. V. MOORTHY

61 The number of 50-plus scores for Virat Kohli in his ODI career at home, which is the most by any batter in this format.

Most 50-plus scores at home in an ODI career

50+ scores	100	50	Player	Span	M	I	Runs	HS	Avg.	S/R
61	26	35	V. Kohli (Ind)	2009-2025	127	124	6627	166*	61.93	97.41
58	20	38	S. Tendulkar (Ind)	1990-2011	164	160	6976	200*	48.11	88.39
46	6	40	J. Kallis (SA)	1996-2013	142	135	5178	139	46.64	75.00
45	13	32	R. Ponting (Aus)	1995-2012	153	150	5406	134*	39.17	79.35
38	14	24	R. Sharma (Ind)	2007-2025	97	96	5013	264	56.96	103.89

355 The number of sixes hit by Rohit Sharma in his ODI career, which is the most by any batter in ODIs. In the Ranchi game on 30 November 2025, he eclipsed Shahid Afridi's long-standing record of 351 sixes. The second table below showcases opening batters who have launched the most career ODI sixes while chasing a target. Rohit Sharma, with a dazzling 75 in Visakhapatnam on 6 December 2025, smashed three sixes in India's second innings, surpassing Chris Gayle's formidable tally of 177 sixes.

Most career sixes by ODI batters

6s	Balls/6	Player	Span	M	I	Runs	Avg.	Balls	S/R	100	50	4s
355	34.94	R. Sharma (Ind)	2007-2025	279	271	11516	49.21	12402	92.85	33	61	1081
351	19.64	S. Afridi (Pak/Asia/WXI)	1996-2015	398	369	8064	23.57	6892	117	6	39	730
331	36.31	C. Gayle (WI/WXI)	1999-2019	301	294	10480	37.83	12019	87.19	25	54	1128
270	54.54	S. Jayasuriya (SL/Asia)	1989-2011	445	433	13430	32.36	14725	91.2	28	68	1500
229	53.72	M. S. Dhoni (Ind/Asia)	2004-2019	350	297	10773	50.57	12303	87.56	10	73	826
220	38.40	E. Morgan (Eng/Ire)	2006-2022	248	230	7701	39.29	8447	91.16	14	47	654
204	46.44	A. B. de Villiers (SA/Afr)	2005-2018	228	218	9577	53.50	9473	101.09	25	53	840
200	31.56	B. McCullum (NZ)	2002-2016	260	228	6083	30.41	6312	96.37	5	32	577

Most career sixes in a chase by an opener in ODIs

6s	Balls/6	Player	Span	M	I	Runs	Avg.	Balls	S/R	100	50	4s
178	30.06	R. Sharma (Ind)	2011-2025	106	106	5089	55.92	5350	95.12	16	30	509
177	33.71	C. Gayle (WI/WXI)	2000-2019	146	146	5513	41.45	5967	92.39	12	34	612
105	54.63	S. Jayasuriya (SL/Asia)	1993-2011	183	183	5448	32.04	5736	94.97	10	29	641
93	36.45	M. Guptill (NZ)	2009-2022	82	82	3166	46.55	3390	93.39	9	15	323
85	97.85	S. Tendulkar (Ind)	1994-2012	180	180	7557	46.07	8317	90.86	17	43	923

53 } The number of centuries for Virat Kohli is now the most for any one format in international cricket. During his three-figure knock in Ranchi on 30 November 2025, he went past Tendulkar's number — 51 Test centuries, and in the next in Raipur, he increased the number by two. Meanwhile, Kohli, during his Ranchi knock, has also now set the record for most centuries at home in ODI cricket, surpassing the previous record of 24 centuries at home by Englishman Joe Root in Test cricket. The second table has all the details.

Forty or more centuries in any format in international cricket

100s	Format	Player	Span	M	I	NO	Runs	HS	Avg.	50
53	ODI	V. Kohli (Ind)	2008-2025	308	296	47	14557	183	58.46	76
51	Test	S. Tendulkar (Ind)	1989-2013	200	329	33	15921	248*	53.78	68
49	ODI	S. Tendulkar (Ind)	1989-2012	463	452	41	18426	200*	44.83	96
45	Test	J. Kallis (SA/WXI)	1995-2013	166	280	40	13289	224	55.37	58
41	Test	R. Ponting (Aus)	1995-2012	168	287	29	13378	257	51.85	62
40	Test	J. Root (Eng)	2012-2025	160	292	25	13704	262	51.32	66

Most centuries at home in a format in international cricket

100s	Format	Player	Span	M	I	NO	Runs	HS	Avg.	50
26	ODI	V. Kohli (Ind)	2009-2025	127	124	17	6627	166*	97.41	35
24	Test	J. Root (Eng)	2013-2025	84	147	15	7329	254	55.52	33
23	Test	R. Ponting (Aus)	1995-2012	92	154	21	7578	257	56.97	38
23	Test	J. Kallis (SA)	1995-2013	88	143	19	7035	224	56.73	34
23	Test	M. Jayawardene (SL)	1997-2014	81	129	9	7167	374	59.72	34

Note: Tendulkar has 20 ODI centuries at home, the second most after Kohli's 26 centuries.

46 } The number of centuries for Virat Kohli batting at one-down. He has now set a new benchmark for centuries scored at a single batting position in international cricket. With his 102 in Ranchi on 3 December 2025, he surpassed Tendulkar's record of 45 ODI centuries as an opener.

Most centuries at a batting position in a format in international cricket

100	Format	# position	Player	Span	M	I	NO	Runs	HS	Avg.	50
46	ODI	#3	V. Kohli (Ind)	2009-2025	244	241	38	12436	183	61.26	66
45	ODI	opener	S. R. Tendulkar (Ind)	1994-2012	344	340	23	15310	200*	48.29	75
44	Test	#4	S. R. Tendulkar (Ind)	1992-2013	179	275	27	13492	248*	54.40	58
37	Test	#3	K. C. Sangakkara (SL)	2000-2015	125	207	15	11679	319	60.82	50

6 } The number of male players who have the distinction of scoring a three-figure score across all three formats for India. Yashasvi Jaiswal against South Africa in Visakhapatnam became the latest to do so. He is the third-youngest Indian after Shubman Gill and Suresh Raina to achieve this feat, and overall, he is the fifth-youngest in international men's cricket. The second table has all the details. For the record, Smriti Mandhana is the only Indian woman to achieve this rare feat.

Indian batters with individual centuries across all three formats during their careers

Batter	Tests	ODIs	T20Is	Total	Achieved on	Score and against (venue)	Latest 100 format	Age
Suresh Raina	1	5	1	7	29 July 2010	120 v SL (Colombo SSC)	Test	23y-244d
Rohit Sharma	12	33	5	50	2 Oct 2015	106 v SA (Dharamsala)	T20I	28y-155d
K. L. Rahul	11	7	2	20	27 Aug 2016	110* v WI (Lauderhill)	T20I	24y-131d
Virat Kohli	30	53	1	84	8 Sep 2022	122* v Afg (Dubai)	T20I	33y-307d
Shubman Gill	10	8	1	19	1 Feb 2023	126* v NZ (Ahmedabad)	T20I	23y-146d
Yashasvi Jaiswal	7	1	1	9	6 Dec 2025	116* v SA (Visakhapatnam)	ODI	23y-343d

Youngest batters to register three figure scores in all three formats

Age	Batter	Tests	ODIs	T20Is	Total	Achieved on	Score and against (venue)	Latest 100 format
		100s	100s	100s	100s			
21y-324d	Brian Bennett (Zim)	2	1	1	4	30 Sep 2025	111 v Tanzania (Harare)	T20I
22y-127d	Ahmed Shehzad (Pak)	3	6	1	10	30 Mar 2014	111* v Bangladesh (Mirpur)	T20I
23y-146d	Shubman Gill (Ind)	10	8	1	19	1 Feb 2023	126* v NZ (Ahmedabad)	T20I
23y-244d	Suresh Raina (Ind)	1	5	1	7	29 July 2010	120 v SL (Colombo SSC)	Test
23y-343d	Yashasvi Jaiswal (Ind)	7	1	1	9	6 Dec 2025	116* v SA (Visakhapatnam)	ODI

All records are correct and updated until 13 December 2025

FOR MORE STORIES

WHEN THE BIG NAMES COME BACK, THE VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY FEELS WHOLE AGAIN

India's senior players, including Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, return to domestic cricket as the Vijay Hazare Trophy becomes a **key part** of India's preparation for the 2027 ODI World Cup.

Career calibration: Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma will return to domestic cricket in the Vijay Hazare Trophy as they look to remain in contention for the ODI side. K. R. DEEPAK

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The relevance of the Vijay Hazare Trophy, a premier domestic white-ball tournament, has increasingly come under debate. With the popularity of ODIs taking a hit globally amid the dominance of T20 cricket, the domestic competition has struggled to stay in vogue in recent years, as international stars increasingly give it a miss.

That, however, began to change last season. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has made it mandatory for all international cricketers to feature in domestic tournaments when not on national duty. This time, as the group stage of the competition gets underway across five cities, two of the biggest names in Indian cricket, Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, will represent their respective domestic teams,

Delhi and Mumbai.

They are unlikely to feature in all seven league games, but their presence will certainly boost their teams and give the tournament a much-needed lift.

The tournament also holds significance for Kohli and Rohit.

In the build-up to the 2027 ODI World Cup, India is scheduled to play 21 ODIs. Given that both Rohit and Kohli have retired from Tests and T20Is, their opportunities in the 50-over format are already limited. Featuring in the Vijay Hazare Trophy would help them find rhythm ahead of India's home ODI series against New Zealand in January and keep their World Cup preparations on track.

Both Rohit and Kohli were among the runs in the recent home series against South Africa, and their availability also allows youngsters to learn directly from them. "They are role models for the young cricketers, so it would be wonderful if they played. It will boost the morale and motivate the youngsters, if they get to share the dressing room with such players," Sanjay Patil, Mumbai's chief selector, tells *Sportstar*.

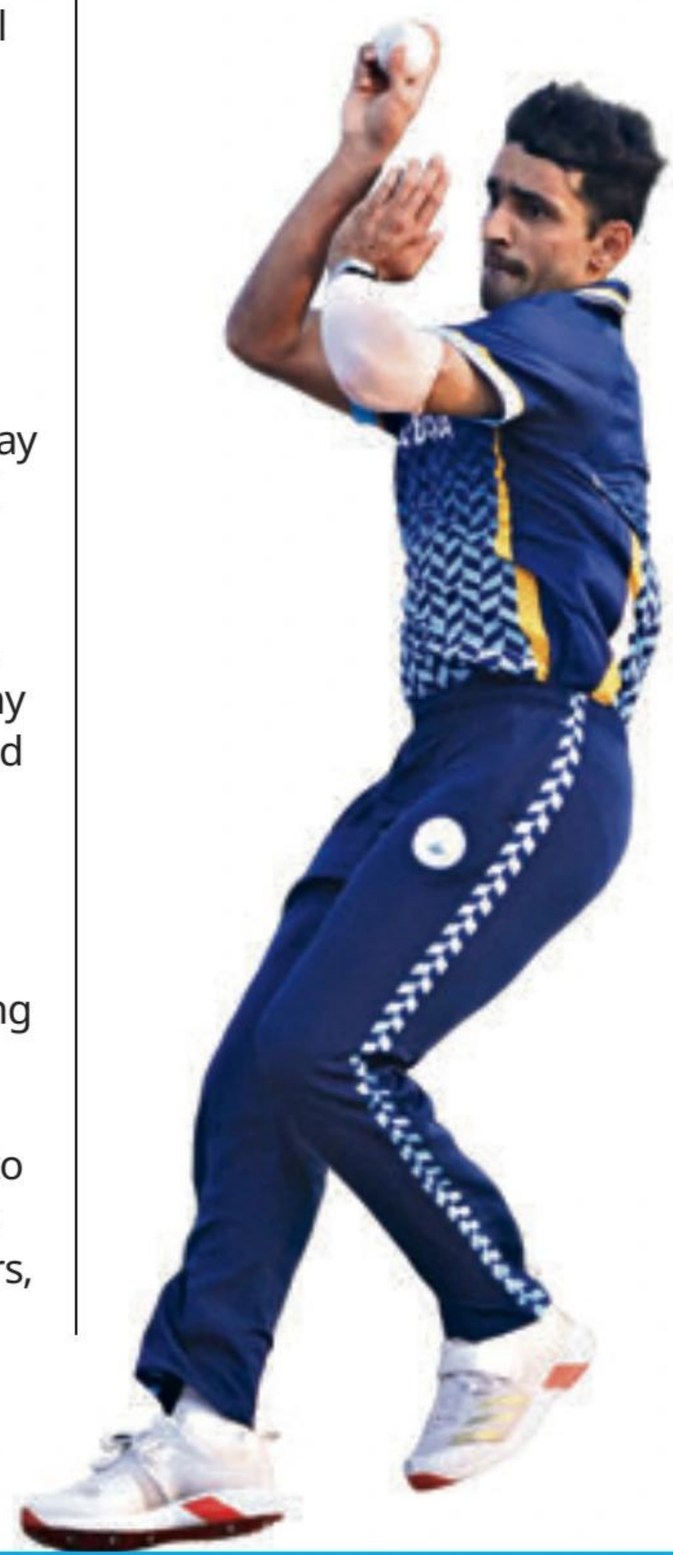
"We could win 42 titles for Mumbai because the younger players always had the backing of the seniors. In the earlier times, legends like Dilip Vengsarkar, Ravi Shastri, Sachin Tendulkar, and Sanjay Manjrekar always made themselves available whenever they were not on national duty," he says.

WHILE MOST CENTRES ARE LIKELY TO WITNESS RUN-HEAVY CONTESTS, THE THREE VENUES IN JAIPUR COULD ASSIST FAST BOWLERS EARLY, ESPECIALLY AS TEMPERATURES DIP

Yet, the focus is not limited to Rohit and Kohli.

Following the Board's mandate, a pool of international cricketers, including Rishabh Pant, K.L. Rahul, Mohammed Siraj and Yashasvi Jaiswal, is also expected to turn up, adding further depth to the competition. While Jaiswal and Siraj have featured in the Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 Trophy, for Rahul, Pant and a few others, it will mark a return to the domestic circuit after a hiatus. Meaningful contributions here could help them settle into rhythm ahead of a busy international calendar.

For the selectors, too, the tournament offers a fresh perspective. With the ODI World Cup still a year-and-a-half away, the Ajit Agarkar-led committee can closely track young performers who have



Sustained readiness: Anshul Kamboj, one of many fast bowlers balancing opportunity with workload as formats blur into one another. K.V.S. GIRI

shown consistency, while also assessing the fitness levels of Rohit and Kohli to gain clarity on whether they remain in the plans for the marquee event.

Not quite easy

The scheduling, however, leaves much to be desired. Teams that featured in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy Super League will have little turnaround time, needing to switch formats within a couple of days. That will pose a significant challenge.

"It would have been better if we had got three or four more days before starting the Vijay Hazare Trophy, because we didn't get rest even after the Ranji Trophy first leg, so a small break here would have helped. But the BCCI has already decided on the dates," says Jharkhand top-order batter Kumar Kushagra.

The workload challenge is even greater for fast bowlers. For players like Siraj and Arshdeep Singh, who have played almost continuously, managing workload will be key. In the previous edition, Arshdeep finished as the leading wicket-taker with 20 scalps, followed by Varun Chakaravarthy and Vasuki Koushik, who each claimed 18 wickets.

India international and Haryana pacer Anshul Kamboj believes that, given the packed calendar, staying in the present is crucial. "It is challenging for sure, but if you think too much about it, it only complicates things and puts pressure," he says.

Favourite no more?

Defending champion Karnataka, which won six of its seven group league fixtures last season, finds itself in a particularly demanding group alongside Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand and Pondicherry. Karnataka will pin its hopes on Karun Nair, the highest run-scorer in the previous edition (779), albeit for his former team Vidarbha, and captain Mayank Agarwal. Neither Karun nor Mayank had a memorable outing in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, and both will be keen to rediscover form when their campaign begins in Ahmedabad.

Group B also promises intrigue, featuring Bengal, Hyderabad, last year's runner-up Vidarbha and Jammu and Kashmir. While attention will be on Bengal's seasoned campaigner Mohammed Shami, who has been out of national reckoning since the Champions Trophy, Jammu and Kashmir, buoyed by its recent Ranji Trophy success, will also fancy its chances. With Aquib Nabi spearheading the fast-bowling unit, J&K will hope to make an impact in Rajkot.

Group C comprises Mumbai, Maharashtra and Punjab. With Ayush Mhatre, among the top scorers last season, likely to return for Mumbai, the domestic heavyweight appears to be placed in a relatively comfortable group that also includes Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Chandigarh.

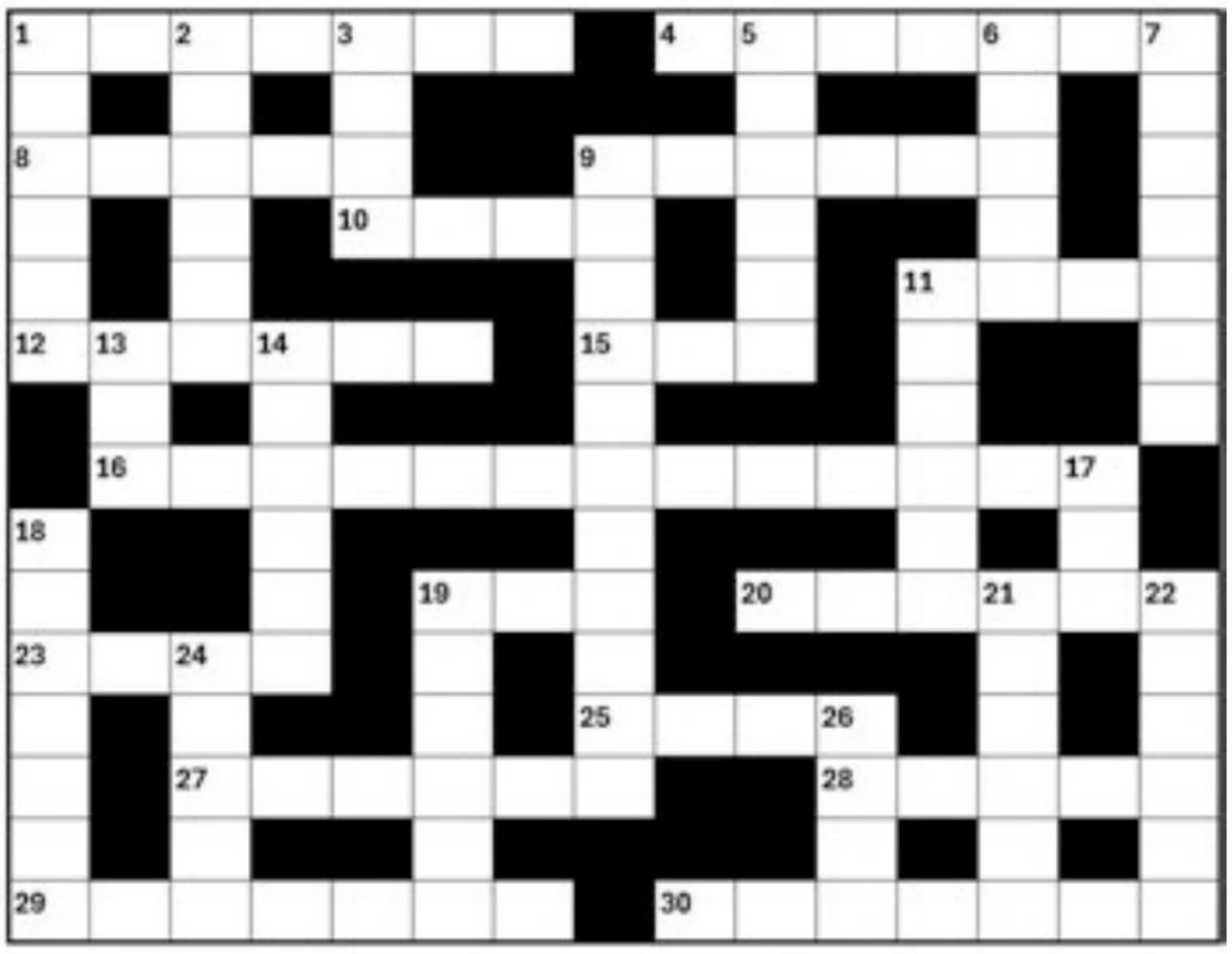
In Bengaluru, Kohli headlines Group D, with Delhi grouped alongside Haryana, Saurashtra, Andhra and Services. While some high-octane contests are on the cards, Delhi, which struggled in both the Ranji Trophy and the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, will need to address key shortcomings to progress. As Rajasthan coach Anshu Jain points out, white-ball cricket offers little margin for error. "One good spell or one good innings can change the game, so there's a level-playing field," he says.

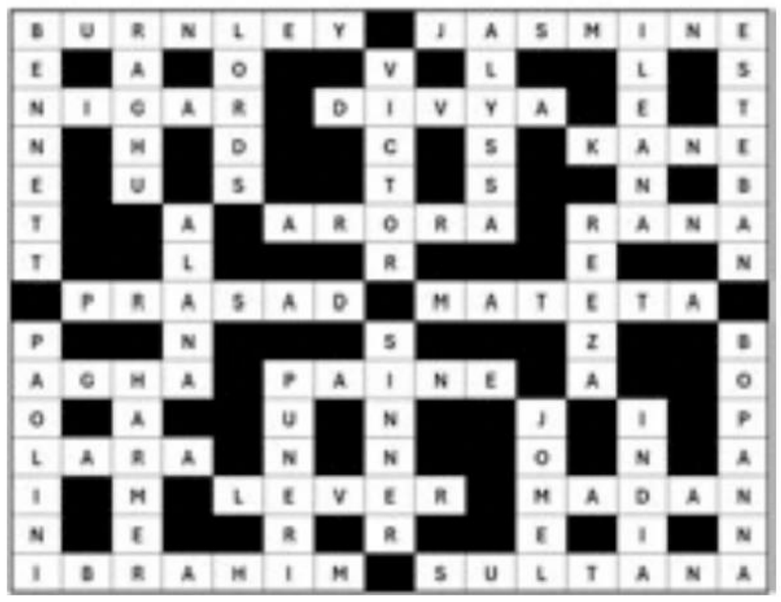
Pitch woes

Despite the BCCI instructing State units to prepare livelier wickets to move away from spin-heavy surfaces, conditions remain largely unchanged. During the first phase of the Ranji Trophy, most pitches were flat, forcing bowlers to toil. With little time between tournaments, curators have limited room for adjustment. While most centres are likely to witness run-heavy contests, the three venues in Jaipur could assist fast bowlers early, especially as temperatures dip.

Gradual reintegration: Rishabh Pant re-entered the ODI picture in the home series against South Africa, serving as the second wicketkeeper to K. L. Rahul after an absence that stretched back to August 2024. K. R. DEEPAK

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Identify the surname of this player who set the World record recently for most number of catches in a single Test. (7)

4 Identify the first name of this player who took a five-for against India in the league encounter in Vizag in the Women's World Cup held recently. (7)

8 Identify the first name of this English cricketer who passed away recently. (5)

9 Identify the first name of this cricketer who scored the most runs for India in the recently-held Women's World Cup. (6)

10 & Down 24 Who combined with Arjun Babuta to clinch the World Cup Shooting Mixed Team Gold in Germany in June 2025? (4,5)

11 & Down 3 Who took two wickets each in India's Women's World Cup league matches versus Sri Lanka, Pakistan & South Africa? (4,4)

12 Identify the first name of this cricketer with more than 560 Test wickets, who was surprisingly left out of the playing XI in the recently held Pink Ball Test at the Gabba. (6)

15 Identify the first name of this cricketer who scored his first-ever century on Australian soil in the recently-held Pink Ball Test at the Gabba. (3)

16 Who scored a magnificent double century in the fourth innings of the recently-concluded Christchurch Test? (6,7)

19 What is the acronym for the governing body of football in Japan? (1,1,1)

20 Which is the only Grand Prix that does not adhere to the FIA's mandated 305-kilometre minimum race distance for Formula One races? (6)

23 What is the popular nickname of this former tennis player from Argentina who won her only Grand Slam singles title at the U.S. Open in 1990? (4)

25 Which country did India beat in the Davis Cup World Group I Play-Offs in February 2025? (4)

27 Identify the first name of this shooter who created history at the 2024 Paralympic Games by becoming the first Indian woman shooter to clinch a medal in Paralympics? (6)

28 Identify the surname of this Olympic Champion who passed away at the age of 101 in October 2025. (5)

29 Against which country did former Bangladesh skipper Mushfiqur Rahim score a hundred in his 100th Test recently? (7)

30 Identify the first name of this footballer who scored the equaliser for PSG in the 94th minute of the UEFA Super Cup in August 2025. (7)

DOWN

1 Identify the surname of this Russian GM who won the World Rapid Chess Championship in December 2024. (6)

2 Identify the first name of this Polish footballer who scored a hat-trick for Barcelona in the La Liga encounter against Celta Vigo on November 9, 2025. (6)

5 Identify the surname of this West Indian who recently became the first bowler to take 600 wickets in all T20s. (6)

6 Identify the first name of this legendary football journalist who passed away in May 2025. (5)

7 Identify the first name of the shuttler who recently won the men's singles title at the Australian Open. (7)

9 Who assumed office as the ICC CEO in July 2025? (6,5)

11 Identify the first name of this cricketer who equalled Rahul Dravid's tally of 210 catches at the end of the recently held pink ball Test at the Gabba. (6)

13 Find out the shorthand used by the players especially in games like Bridge to denote holding a sequence of high-ranking cards of the same suit? (1,1,1)

14 Which pair of brothers played against India at the 2011 World Cup quarterfinal that also turned out to be their last World Cup match in their respective careers? (6)

17 Find out the acronym for the UEFA's initiative to equip football professionals with skills to implement environmental and social responsibility in clubs? (1,1,1)

18 Identify the surname of this Italian tennis star who retired from professional tennis in July 2025. (7)

19 Identify the first name of this British tennis doubles specialist who won the Wimbledon men's doubles championship in July 2025 partnering compatriot Lloyd Glasspool. (6)

21 Identify the first name of the Australian captain who went unsold for WPL 2026. (6)

22 Which club became the third and final team to get promoted to La Liga 2025-26 season in June 2025? (6)

26 Identify the surname of this French Formula One driver who participated in the 2025 season for Haas-Ferrari team. (4)

1st

Drought ends: Joe Root finally exorcised his Australian demons, striking a hard-earned century to keep England afloat on a gripping opening day of the second Ashes Test in Brisbane. Under the Brisbane lights, Root guided a delicate tickle off Scott Boland for four to bring up three figures in Australia at the 30th attempt. The landmark also made him only the second England batter to score a century on the opening day of a Brisbane Test, after Maurice Leyland's 126 exactly 89 years ago. GETTY IMAGES

2nd

Wickets and milestones: Mitchell Starc ripped through England, bowling it out for 334 with a blistering 6-75 to finish on 420 Test wickets, overtaking Wasim Akram on the all-time left-arm fast bowlers list. Among all left-arm bowlers, only Rangana Herath (433) is ahead of Starc. GETTY IMAGES

3rd

Two acts, one Starc: Starc joined elite Ashes company with a first-innings five-for and a rousing 77 in the second, a feat last managed by Mitchell Johnson in Perth, 2013. Australia surged to 511 and a decisive lead. GETTY IMAGES

4th

Blinder: Steve Smith's full-length dive at first slip removed Will Jacks for 41 and ignited a late collapse on day four in Brisbane. From 224 for 7, England lost Ben Stokes, Gus Atkinson and Brydon Carse in a rush as Australia cleaned up the tail. The host was set a target of just 65. GETTY IMAGES

5th

Reflex brilliance: Michael Neser led Australia off with five wickets to his name on day four at the Gabba. On his way to a maiden Test five-for, he plucked back-to-back caught-and-bowleds to remove Ollie Pope and Zak Crawley. Neser shrugged them off as "regulation". Steve Smith called them "sensational". GETTY IMAGES

6th

Long wait: England's winless run in Australia stretched to 17 Tests with the Gabba defeat, its last victory coming at the SCG in 2011. Since then, it has lost 15 and drawn two, now level with West Indies and Pakistan for the longest drought Down Under.

GETTY IMAGES

The GOAT arrives: Lionel Messi, alongside his Inter Miami teammates Luis Suarez and Rodrigo De Paul, made a brief visit to the iconic Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata on December 13 as part of the first leg of the GOAT India Tour, an appearance that was later overshadowed by organisational lapses and crowd-management issues at the venue. DEBASISH BHADURI

Power play: Messi along with Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy (RR 9) at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium in Hyderabad. G. RAMAKRISHNA

Icons assemble: Messi presented former India football team captain Sunil Chhetri with a signed Argentina jersey at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Future bright: During his visit to Mumbai, Messi played with young Indian footballers at the Wankhede Stadium, enthralling them with his skills and delighting the youngsters. EMMANUAL YOGINI

5th

Keepsakes: Messi, Suarez and Rodrigo were presented with Team India cricket jerseys by ICC chairman Jay Shah at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

WATCH MESSI WITH SACHIN

6th

Wild encounter: Messi later made a visit to Vantara, the wildlife conservation centre founded by Anant Ambani. The icon took part in traditional rituals and a guided tour, interacted with rescued animals and caregivers, and had a lion cub named 'Lionel' in his honour. PTI

FOR MORE STORIES

WHEN THE STARS DELIVER

Mohamed Salah laid all doubts to rest with a **record-breaking** performance as Harry Kane, Kylian Mbappe and Rodrygo hit the net in style.

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Liverpool has been in the news throughout this season — initially because of the Alexander Isak transfer saga and now due to the disappointment of Mohamed Salah, who claimed he was being thrown under the bus by the club.

However, manager Arne Slot soon doused the tension by allowing Salah **(right)** onto the field, and he delivered, assisting in a 2-0 win over Brighton. With it, he set the record for most goal involvements for a single Premier League club — 277 — surpassing Wayne Rooney's 276 for Manchester United.

Meanwhile, United beat Wolverhampton Wanderers and Crystal Palace, remaining three points adrift of a Champions League spot. Moreover, Bruno Fernandes (57) surpassed Paul Scholes (55) on the list for most Premier League assists for the club.

League leader Arsenal, stunned by third-placed Aston Villa, returned to winning ways, also against Wolves. Its relentless form has kept it atop the table in both the Premier League and the Champions League.

Manchester City — placed second — continues to try to climb back up, with Erling Haaland predictably leading the Golden Boot race with 17 goals, while fourth-placed Chelsea looks to have found its rhythm again with a 2-0 win over Everton after a barren run of four matches comprising two draws and as many losses in all competitions.

La Liga

Xabi Alonso has remained on thin ice as Real Madrid manager after Champions League defeats to Liverpool

AFP

and Manchester City, but he earned some breathing space after Kylian Mbappe and Rodrygo **(right)** scored in a 2-1 win against Deportivo Alaves to steer Los Blancos back to winning ways. The win, however, had little impact on the standings as Madrid remains second with 39 points from 17 games, with Villarreal breathing down its neck in third with 35 points from 15 matches.

League leader Barcelona has looked unstoppable in the league since the 1-2 El Clasico defeat in October and rode on a brace from Raphinha — who now has six La Liga goals this season — to cement its lead at the top.

Meanwhile, Antoine Griezmann, Atletico Madrid's record goalscorer, proved his class even at 34, scoring the winner as a substitute in a 2-1 win against Valencia. All his goals this season have come off the bench.

REUTERS

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich's Harry Kane **(below)** simply cannot seem to stop scoring, and that habit was on full display as he came on as a second-half substitute to bag a hat-trick and lead the Bavarians to a 5-0 thumping of VfB Stuttgart. The following week, he was once again called into action as he converted from the spot to draw level at 2-2 against Mainz, helping Bayern maintain its unbeaten start as well as a healthy nine-point lead at the top of the table, with RB Leipzig second (level on 29 points with Borussia Dortmund in third).

Meanwhile, both Leipzig and Dortmund failed to capitalise on the leaders dropping points for just the second time this season.

Leipzig fell to a 1-3 defeat against Union Berlin, while the Yellow and Black saw Jobe Bellingham sent off in their game against Freiburg before conceding an equaliser in a 2-2 draw.

AP

Serie A

Defending champion Napoli held its own against giant Juventus, winning 2-1 — courtesy of a brace from Manchester United loanee Rasmus Hojlund — when the two sides met for the first time this season at the Diego Armando Maradona Stadium. However, Antonio Conte's side faltered the following week, failing to assume top spot after a 0-1 defeat to Udinese.

AC Milan has re-established itself as a title contender this season, and a major part of its success can be attributed to Christian Pulisic, who grabbed a match-winning brace against Torino to take his league tally to seven, one behind leader Lautaro Martinez.

Pulisic, however, had a goal disallowed in Milan's following game against Sassuolo, which ended 2-2, ruining the side's chance to go top.

Napoli and Milan dropping points left the door open for Inter Milan, which thrashed Como 4-0 before eking out a 2-1 win against Genoa, courtesy of goals from Yann Aurel Bisseck and Martinez.

Only two points separate the top three, with Inter on 33 points, followed by Milan and Napoli in second and third, respectively.

Ligue 1

RC Lens maintained its grip on first place in the French league with assured wins against OGC Nice and FC Nantes. However, it will be wary of record winner and defending champion Paris Saint-Germain, which recovered from its shock loss against Monaco and thrashed Stade Rennais 5-0, powered by Khvicha Kvaratskhelia's brace.

The Parisians, however, were forced to toil harder in their next match by FC Metz, which levelled after trailing by two goals. Golden Boy award winner Desire Doue then came off the bench to score the winner and take PSG up to 36 points, one behind Lens. Olympique de Marseille sits third (32) after bouncing back from its defeat against LOSC Lille to beat AS Monaco 1-0, thanks to Mason Greenwood's strike, which took him to a league-high 11 goals this campaign.

Heavyweight clash

REUTERS

European giants serve up another chapter of **high-octane** drama in the Champions League.

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Real Madrid versus Manchester City is now a European clash settled into familiarity.

Since their first meeting in the 2012-13 season, the teams had played each other 14 more times before being pitted against one another again on matchday six of the ongoing league stage.

Los Blancos had blanked City in the play-offs last season, but this time they came out severely depleted, with injuries to several defenders and, more starkly, to UEFA Champions League Golden Boot leader Kylian Mbappe. Despite the disadvantages, it was Madrid that set the ball rolling. After knocking on City's door a couple of times, Rodrygo ended his nine-month scoring drought with a pacy run and a precise finish past Gianluigi Donnarumma.

City immediately switched on and piled on the pressure before restoring parity eight minutes later.

A stroke of luck helped Nico O'Reilly grab his first Champions League goal, with Thibaut Courtois spilling Josko Gvardiol's header into the left-back's path in front of goal, an opportunity he made good use of.

Five minutes later, Antonio Rudiger pulled down Erling Haaland **(above)** inside the box, allowing the Norwegian to slot in his sixth goal of the campaign. With the win, City moved back into the top eight and into fourth with 13 points and two matches left in the league phase, while Madrid sits seventh with 12.

Meanwhile, Arsenal maintained its 100 per cent record after an easy outing at Club Brugge, where Noni Madueke grabbed a brace, while Gabriel Martinelli kept alive his five-match scoring streak in the competition. However, its city rival Chelsea fared poorly against Atalanta, giving up a one-goal lead to lose 1-2, with Charles De Ketelaere grabbing an assist before scoring the winner.

Spanish leader Barcelona banished the ghosts of its 2021-22 Europa League quarterfinal defeat to Eintracht Frankfurt as the two sides met in the top tier for the first time. The Germans took the lead through Ansgar Knauff, but a quickfire header brace from Jules Kounde in the second half ensured the Catalans came away with all three points.

Meanwhile, amid a chaotic week in Merseyside following Mohamed Salah's scathing comments, Arne Slot brought Liverpool back to winning ways with a narrow victory against Italian giant Inter Milan. It took 88 minutes and a penalty to find a winner, with Dominik Szoboszlai converting from the spot after Alessandro Bastoni committed a foul.

The result leaves Liverpool just outside the automatic knockout qualification spots in ninth with 12 points, level with Atletico Madrid (eighth), Madrid (seventh) and Inter (sixth). Bayern Munich occupies second place with 15 points after a routine 3-1 win against Sporting CP, while PSG, Manchester City and Atalanta follow with 13 each.

At the foot of the table sit Kairat Almaty and Villarreal, both with just a solitary point so far.

REUTERS

A golden night

Lionel Messi led Inter Miami to its **maiden** MLS Cup title.

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When the final whistle blew on December 6, Chase Stadium looked consumed by a tsunami of pink towels and jerseys.

Javier Mascherano, now a victorious coach, kissed the grass and ran onto the pitch as if it were another of his playing nights at Camp Nou. And Lionel Messi, the star of the show, was embraced and applauded as if he belonged only to Miami.

Inter Miami had just beaten Vancouver Whitecaps 3-1 to win its first-ever Major League Soccer (MLS) Cup — the American top-flight title.

A team that had questions raised over tactics, players — anyone but Messi — and management after a disappointing Club World Cup campaign earlier this year finally had its moment of glory. The critics were silenced, and any room for doubt was glazed with confetti and winners' medals.

Messi was the key to all three goals in the final: he set up two, delivered a crucial pass for the other — the opening strike, an own goal — and won the league's Most Valuable Player (MVP) award for the second time in a row, a first for any player in MLS.

Tadeo Allende's cross, after a hoofed ball from Messi, was steered into the net by a retreating Edier Ocampo in the eighth minute, but the Whitecaps restored parity at the hour mark when Ali Ahmed's scuffed shot sneaked past Rocco Rios' arm.

Messi spurred into action immediately, and within 11 minutes it was 2-1 to Miami. He won the ball off Andrés Cubas and threaded a through ball for Rodrigo De Paul, who slotted it past Yohei Takaoka.

In stoppage time, Messi's magic yielded a third — his lobbed pass was received well by Allende, who then finished calmly to add a chef's kiss to a dominant performance.

The match had several subplots: Thomas Muller, who once rejoiced on a harrowing night for Messi after their Bayern Munich versus Barcelona clash in the Champions League — which ended in an 8-2 win for Bayern — now stood on the losing end.

The match was an exhibition of Argentine football's prosperity blended with a flavour of Miami. All players with goals and assists for Miami (except the own goal), as well as the head coach, came from Argentina, gelling seamlessly with American soccer and its players to script history for Miami. The match also marked the end of an era for Inter Miami at Chase Stadium, which has been its home since its inception in 2020.

The club will begin its next season at Miami Freedom Park — the team's newly constructed home.

Messi and Co. will be relieved that the farewell ended with a smile — and a broad one at that.

WATCH OUR ANALYSIS

Old gods, new rivals and America's uneasy romance with football

World Cup 2026 opens at the Azteca as Messi, Ronaldo, Haaland and Mbappe shape **new rivalries** in an expanded 48-team global spectacle.

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History provides its neat symmetries. The FIFA World Cup 2026 will have a chapter of its own when Mexico takes on South Africa in the opening match of the tournament at the iconic Azteca Stadium. The fixture, along with 71 more clashes, was marked in stone when the World Cup's die was cast in Washington earlier in December.

The opening clash will be a repeat of the 2010 opener, and Azteca's legacy — it has seen Pele and Diego Maradona lift the World Cup — only adds to the magnificence of the biggest-ever iteration of the quadrennial tournament.

FIFA's expansion to 48 teams from 32 has unfurled its tapestry across hemispheres, weaving new, distant threads into its storied fabric.

While it does spark fears of diluting the intensity of competition, as has been the case with the expanded UEFA Champions League, the charm of underdogs adds a seasoning of unpredictability.

Curacao and Cabo Verde, whose

REUTERS

combined population is less than that of Chennai, will test themselves against World Cup giants Germany and Spain.

Portugal, still nursing its wound from Morocco's conquest in 2022, will now be up against a Central Asian trailblazer in Uzbekistan, coached by a 2006 World Cup winner, Fabio Cannavaro.

Meanwhile, fellow Italian Carlo Ancelotti returns to the World Cup after three decades, and in the same country, the United States.

The decorated manager now adorns the role of tactician for the World Cup's most decorated son, Brazil, and the Moroccans will be giving his boys the biggest challenge in the group stage.

Old gods and new

The 2026 World Cup offers a last possible rendezvous between the two legends of modern football: Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. The rivalry reached its precipice in La Liga, with Messi playing for Barcelona and Ronaldo for Real Madrid, but has remained barren on the international stage.

Across five World Cups since their debuts, there have been no clashes between Argentina and Portugal.

If Argentina tops its group while Portugal sails through as one of the top two teams from its own group, Messi, now 38, and Ronaldo, now 40, would hope to walk into a World Cup sunset with one final battle.

But in their dusk, a new rivalry dawns: the Nordic *'Der Bomber'* Erling Haaland versus the French talisman Kylian Mbappe, who has already won the World Cup in 2018.

Their duel, unlike the former, is certain in a Group I clash and will dominate the headlines of most sports dailies the next day.

Soccer in America: Well, well...

Football in the United States remains the beautiful game that got away.

Though the World Cup draw at the Kennedy Center had far more razzmatazz than the 1994 ceremony, when the US last hosted the World Cup, it lacked the soul of a World Cup event, giving far more space to glamour than the sport itself.

The main draw, after the drawing of lots for the co-hosts, featured five sporting icons on stage: Tom Brady, Wayne Gretzky, Aaron Judge, Shaquille O'Neal and Rio Ferdinand. Only one of them, Ferdinand, had been a footballer and he conducted the draw.

For a country, the USA, to have won four Women's FIFA World Cups and still have no representation on stage was baffling.

Furthermore, there was no representation from sportspersons from Mexico, one of the co-hosts and the only one of the three to have been playing since the first World Cup in 1930.

If there were any doubts about a disconnect, they were cleared by TV presenter Dani Ramirez's daft question to Ferdinand, a former centre-back, about how many goals he had scored against Iker Casillas.

The US will have another roll of the dice in the summer when the World Cup actually begins, one that may finally test whether it can truly understand the sport it is trying so hard to sell.

World Cup Groups

Group A
Mexico, South Africa, Korea Republic, UEFA Playoff D Winner

Group B
Canada, UEFA Playoff A Winner, Qatar, Switzerland

Group C
Brazil, Morocco, Haiti, Scotland

Group D
USA, Paraguay, Australia, UEFA Playoff C Winner

Group E
Germany, Curaçao, Ivory Coast, Ecuador

Group F
Netherlands, Japan, UEFA Playoff B Winner, Tunisia

Group G
Belgium, Egypt, Iran, New Zealand

Group H
Spain, Cabo Verde, Saudi Arabia, Uruguay

Group I
France, Senegal, FIFA 2 Winner, Norway

Group J
Argentina, Algeria, Austria, Jordan

Group K
Portugal, FIFA 1 Winner, Uzbekistan, Colombia

Group L
England, Croatia, Ghana, Panama

DID YOU KNOW?

- Among the host countries, Canada will be travelling the most — 2084 miles — in the group stages of the World Cup.
- Among non-hosts yet to qualify, the winner of UEFA Winner Playoff A — Italy, Northern Ireland, Wales, Bosnia and Herzegovina — will travel the longest distance (3144 miles). Algeria will travel the most among non-hosts who have already qualified.
- Argentina will attempt to become the third team to win back-to-back World Cup titles after Italy (1934 and 1938) and Brazil (1958 and 1962).
- Haiti's gap between its first and latest appearance (1974-2026) at the FIFA World Cup is the fourth-longest in the tournament's history, after Wales (64 years), Egypt and Norway (both 56 years).

Urgent continuity: FC Goa, spurred on by local support, did lift the Super Cup title, yet its coach Manolo Marquez used the triumph to reiterate a familiar concern, stressing the need for regular football if India's young players are to develop with any real momentum. FC GOA MEDIA/AIFF MEDIA

THE SUPER CUP AND THE SILENCE BEYOND IT

Amid the Indian Super League's uncertainty, the Super Cup at least offered one assured route to Asia. Yet even that slot is now in **jeopardy** if the ISL season does not take place.

Time crunch: Mumbai City FC (left) in action against FC Goa, just over 16 hours after landing in Goa due to the IndiGo airlines crisis. AIFF MEDIA

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At least, that was something.

Amid uncertainty over the Indian Super League (ISL), a problem of the All India Football Federation's (AIFF's) making, the federation sought a face-saving exercise. It brought the season-ending Super Cup forward to open the new campaign in late October, with the official announcement arriving only a month earlier.

Teams were guaranteed a maximum of five matches, with a month-long break before the semifinals, and a minimum of three for group-stage participants. The rewards were a trophy and a spot in next season's AFC Champions League 2, still nine months away.

Gerard Zaragoza, Bengaluru FC's former head coach who left after his team's group-stage exit, summed it up best when asked for his takeaways from the three matches.

"Punjab FC started its pre-season in July. We started on September 15. Some teams have six foreigners, some teams have zero. I mean, what's happening here? You can't control anything," a bemused Zaragoza said.

Nothing seemed ideal for what was supposed to be the premier cup competition of the domestic calendar, and the performances in the group stages reflected that.

I-League clubs Rajasthan United and Dempo SC gave a good account of themselves, with Dempo salvaging three draws against ISL sides Mohun Bagan Super Giant, East Bengal and Chennaiyin FC despite having no training in the lead-up.

Twenty-four group-stage matches were held over 13 days across two venues in Goa, the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium and the GMC Athletic Stadium, at the tail end of the monsoon season.

The JLN Stadium in Margao, which was also hosting three FC Goa home matches in the AFC Champions League Two, bore the brunt of the congestion by staging an astonishing 13 matches in 16 days. The fatigue showed in the stands too, with average attendance dipping below 500 spectators per game.

The quality of the pitch deteriorated by the end of the league stage. Swathes of grass peeled off during matches, putting player safety at risk.

"You cannot play in conditions like this. For me, this is embarrassing," Kerala Blasters head coach David Catala told the host broadcaster. "This is not the image that the Indian federation has to give. This is dangerous for the players; they can get injured. They have to see... the conditions are not the best.. just with three weeks training and having to play every two days."

Then, ahead of the semifinals, the federation took evasive action that felt more reactive than planned.

When this publication asked East Bengal and Punjab FC's head coaches about the condition of the JLN pitch during the pre-match briefing, the federation's media officer skipped the questions. Only a softened version of the query was allowed, which FC Goa head coach Manolo Marquez answered.

After both semifinals and the final, access to the press conference rooms was blocked, with the briefings shifted to the mixed zone amid

Impressive effort: Rajasthan United, a second-division side, impressed in the Super Cup, beating Mumbai City FC in the group stages. RUFC MEDIA

Desperate appeal: "Just a call... I am begging them," urged Punjab FC head coach, Panagiotis Dilmperis. "If you love Indian football, you have to find a solution." AIFF MEDIA

blaring music and idling team buses.

East Bengal supporters attempted to highlight the situation by displaying a 'Save Indian Football' banner before their semifinal, but it was forcibly removed within minutes. Then, there was the football. While Catala was right to criticise the tournament conditions, he would still regret the missed chance to secure Kerala Blasters' maiden title. The team was in prime position to reach the semifinals for the first time, but a needless red card for Sandeep Singh and a late own goal allowed Mumbai City FC to advance.

"We were lucky enough to have this tournament, so we have to appreciate every single moment. We know it's only a matter of time before football comes back," said a hopeful Petr Kratky, Mumbai City's head coach, whose side lost in the semifinals to FC Goa.

Kratky's squad did well to compete with the defending champion despite spending more than 12 hours stranded at the Mumbai airport due to IndiGo's operational crisis. The team landed in Goa at 2 a.m. and reached its hotel at 4 a.m., just 16 hours before kickoff. The two finalists, FC Goa and East Bengal, appeared better prepared, with FC Goa benefiting from continental competition and East Bengal gaining minutes through the Durand Cup and the IFA Shield.

FC Goa had the slight advantage of playing at home, which proved decisive. After 120 goalless minutes, FC Goa edged the penalty shootout as Mohammad Rashid and PV Vishnu missed their attempts.

"Today, I think the fans made the difference, 100 per cent. In so many moments of the game, it made a difference (sic)," said Bino George, East Bengal's assistant coach.

Brison Fernandes, Ayush Dev Chhetri, Ronney Wilson and Hrithik Tiwari were central to FC Goa's back-to-back triumphs, with Marquez continuing his habit of trusting young domestic talent.

"But you need football. It's too much time without football for some players. You cannot go eight months without games. We need to play as soon as possible," Marquez said when asked whether he can keep giving opportunities to emerging Indian players.

Even as the confetti settles, the Super Cup champion and the larger ecosystem are left wondering what comes next, with the Master Rights Agreement between Football Development for Sports Limited and the AIFF having expired the following day. India's places in Asian competitions are also at risk if top-flight teams fail to play at least 27 matches this season, under Criterion 4. a of the AFC Club Competitions Entry Regulations 2023.

"Just a call... I am begging them," said Punjab FC head coach Panagiotis Dilmperis. "If you love Indian football, you have to find a solution."

With the national team at its lowest point in nearly a decade, a handful of matches will not change much. The players did what they could in difficult circumstances. It is now up to the stakeholders who matter to act with urgency.

ANOTHER HEARTBREAK FOR INDIA AT FIFAE WORLD CUP

India's best hope **Danial Patel,** aka DaNiAL, lost to MINBAPPE in the quarterfinals

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Danial Patel, aka DaNiAL, has been one of India's best hopes in KONAMI eFootball over the last two years. His quick passing, lightning reflexes, and composure on the phone have seen him wear the Indian jersey for esports even before he turned 18.

Last year, he reached the semifinals of the first FIFAe World Cup featuring eFootball-Mobile, beating esports powerhouses Japan and Indonesia. But in the semifinals, he faced Muhaimin Ahmad — aka MINBAPPE — of Malaysia.

MINBAPPE was Malaysia's best eFootball player, and the impediment proved too much for a younger Indian competitor, as DaNiAL lost 2-3, missing out on a historic medal. MINBAPPE went on to win the tournament.

A year later, history repeated itself, yet again in an agonising fashion: MINBAPPE won the first match 0-3 against DaNiAL and then won the next game 2-1. The contest ended 2-0, and India's dream run ended yet again, this time in the quarterfinals.

MINBAPPE, however, could not emulate his triumphant campaign this time around as eventual champion Jomkata JXMKT Yupraphat of Thailand beat him in the semifinals. JXMKT, playing for the esports wing of Thailand's most successful top-flight club, Buriram United, beat Malaysia and then Brazil – José Antonio 'JUNINHO' Maciel Junior – to clinch the title.

On the console, Poland – represented by Milosz 'Zilo' Zietek and Mikolaj 'Ostrybuch' Zietek — was crowned world champion, beating Italy in the final.

An esports champion at 92!

Esports, for the longest time, has been branded as a sport for the young. But Hisako Sakai of Japan broke the stereotype with authority.

Last month, Hisako participated in Tekken 8 in the 12th Care Esports Cup and came out on top. Her age? 92 years!

The tournament, organised by Care Esports Association, is a Japanese organisation that brings competitive gaming to an older generation, helping care home residents between the ages of 60-90 keep their minds healthy through esports.

Since the tournament was invitational, Sakai's win is unlikely to take the crown from the officially recognised oldest Esports champion, which belongs to Abbe Borg, who, at 78, was part of the team that won the DreamHack CS: GO seniors tournament in 2019.

Initial schedule announced for BGIS 2026

Krafton India has announced the registration dates for the fifth edition of its BGMI tournament, the Battlegrounds Mobile India Series (BGIS) 2026, set to begin on December 15.

Scheduled to run from January to March 2026, BGIS will feature a larger format this time, along with a prize pool of Rs. 2 crore.

Key dates for BGIS 2026

Registrations Open: December 15, 2025
Registrations Close: January 4, 2026
Registration Data Verification: January 5-7, 2026
In-Game Qualifiers: January 8-14, 2026

"In 2026, our goal is to elevate Indian esports by creating a system that is more inclusive, more aspirational, and more deeply connected to the millions of players who have supported BGMI over the years," Karan Pathak, associate director of sports, Krafton India, said.

WATCH THE VIDEO

« I've already achieved things that not all the greats have achieved »

NOAH LYLES

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Even though he competes in the sprints — one of the few events in track and field that has never suffered a shortage of outspoken personalities — Noah Lyles stands out as someone who is probably the brashest of his generation.

He enters the track with flamboyant pre-race routines and Yu-Gi-Oh cards, wins races wearing fingernail polish, a glitzy, multicoloured chain-link necklace and *Dragon Ball Z* socks, and celebrates his victories by cheekily calling out giant American domestic sports leagues for their claims of being 'world' champions.

He is more than just a flashy personality, though. Lyles is the reigning Olympic 100m champion, and a couple of months ago, he won a fourth consecutive gold medal in the 200m at the World Championships to become the only man, apart from a certain Usain Bolt, to accomplish the feat.

Lyles is a long way from his element in Pune, where he is flagging off the Bajaj Pune Marathon last Sunday. He thinks he was in high school the last time he ran any race longer than a minute. Yet the longer race brings out a more contemplative American.

Ahead of the event, Lyles speaks to *Sportstar* about how he views his legacy, the accomplishments that mean the most to him, and the vulnerabilities his personality hides.

You are here in India to flag off a marathon. What's the longest you've ever run yourself?

The longest I've ever run has probably been about four miles. It's what we used to do for conditioning in high school. Between November and December, we would come for practice, and our coach would say, 'Go run four miles.' We had different routes — triangle, square and circle. The triangle was three miles, the square was four miles, and the circle was about five kilometres or so.

I hated running those four miles. It's just too boring. My ADD kicks in too quickly. I'd be running, and almost immediately I'd start thinking about anything and everything that's not running. In fact, I don't like running beyond 60 seconds.

Which means that technically you could do the 400 as well?

Yeah, I could. I mean, I ran a 400m last year too, but I don't see myself running it competitively. If it does

happen, it will be after the Los Angeles [Olympics]. But I really don't like the training. It's not the race — it's the training. That's the hard part.

What's your favourite part about the 100m?
I think the 100m is more of a glory race. As my brother would put it, it's about being the show pony as opposed to being the workhorse. It has all the glitz and glam, all the excitement and fireworks. But of course, with that also comes the hard part: when you're not on top, it really sucks.

How do you cope with that?
I see losing as part of the journey. It's a lot more fun when you have one or two losses, because then you get to say, 'OK, this is where I need to get better. This is how I'm going to improve. I'm going to give it my all. I'm going to lock in.' Sometimes, when you're winning too often, you get a little complacent.

Whether you're trying your best or not, it's hard to constantly push yourself on your own. It's almost like in a story — you need to lose to have character development. That's exactly how I see it.

This year, you were nominated for another World Athlete of the Year award, but Mondo [Duplantis] won it. Do you ever think it's harder for you to win these awards because you need to do well in more events?
Um, I don't know. There's a lot more politics to these awards than you think. I don't think Mondo doesn't deserve Athlete of the Year — I mean he breaks the world record every year.

Personally, I didn't even think I was going to get nominated this year. I started out and then got injured midway through the season. I had some great 200m times. It wasn't until they nominated me and I actually looked at my season that I realised, 'Wow, that wasn't too bad. Why wouldn't I get nominated?'

But the World Athlete of the Year thing is kind of redundant. I mean, Melissa [Jefferson-Wooden, who swept gold in the 100m, 200m and 4x100m at the 2025 World Athletics Championships] wasn't even nominated. At this point, the award is kind of a joke.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

You have this aura of confidence around you. Does that follow you in everything you do in life?
There's plenty I'm insecure about. Just don't ask me to read. I have dyslexia, so reading was never one of my strong suits.

Spelling too — don't ask me to spell either. Reading and spelling were definitely not among the more fun things for me to do. Right now, you are looking at the finished product, something that's taken a lot of growth over many years. For most of my childhood, confidence was the

last thing I had.

I was very insecure. I was bullied early on. I used to take medication, so my teeth were really yellow, and I would get bullied for that. At that time, all I felt was that I was good at just a couple of things — drawing and running. Going to school, I didn't find what I was good at straight away. It was just constantly being in spaces where I wasn't confident.

Now, you can say that I have this air of confidence about me, and it's only because I've been able to find what I'm good at and excel in that space. A lot of my mental health journey has been about trying to develop that. A lot of the time, when I talk to kids and people, I tell them that sometimes you just have to go through a really rough time to get to that final destination of what you're supposed to be.

You've spoken a lot about your challenges with mental health, and it's hard to think of a sport where it would be harder to face these challenges than the sprints.
I mean, it's such a crazy sport. There are fractions of a second that decide everything. Sometimes everything is decided before you even get on the track. The way I keep things level around me is by having a very close circle. The people in my circle know me, and I trust that they know me. So, if I'm behaving erratically, I trust them to call me out and say, 'Hey, you need to fix this behaviour.' And I'm like, 'OK, if I'm hearing it from you, that must mean it's true.' At the same time, if I'm looking for a safe space, they are that safe space.

It's thanks to them that I know my worth and value. I know who I am, and I don't look for validation elsewhere.

How much of what we see of you on social media or TV is a dialled-up-to-10 version of you?
It maybe a dialled-up-to-12 version of me. When I'm in my safe space, it's a pretty heavy dial-down. Some people are shocked at how relaxed I can be, especially in my own home. I'm pretty quiet there. I might be playing video games. I might be laughing with friends. I don't have to be a 10 there.

At practice, though, I'm very driven. I might not even talk a lot because I'm hyper-focused on getting everything out of practice to make it better. Then, when we get to the races, I get to be the showman. I get to let out that personality, that excitement I've been building up.

But that's the misconception people sometimes have about me. The funniest one is when people expect me to be the same in my private life as I am on the track. That exuberance is very specifically for the sport setting. I might still carry my confidence outside it, but it's not over the top because that's no longer what's required of me.

People will come and meet me for the first time with the energy they see when I'm on the track. They'll go — 'Oh my gosh, it's Noah Lyles!' They'll be screaming at the top of their lungs and trying to hug me, and I'm thinking, 'Woah! You're a stranger to me. I don't even know you. You need to take a step back!'

They're wondering where all that energy has gone, but that's just for track meets. It's not for the public. I want everyone to use their inside voice then. If you come and meet me for the first time, I want you to introduce yourself with your name.

Do you feel some of that is almost like a character you have to play at times, or is it just a different part of you that comes out?
It's not that I'm playing a character; it's a different part of me. People asked me this when I was younger, and I've always been clear that it's all me, just dialled up to a higher level in those settings.

What's something you realised this year that others might not consider an accomplishment but which means a lot to you?
Something that means a lot to me has been watching the growth of the 200m as a competition. It's made me very emotional. When I first came into the sport, Bolt had just left. [Justin] Gatlin was on his way out. Yohan [Blake] was up and down. We had this drought in the 200m, which was my favourite event. I had come in watching these runners, so, when I came into the sport, I wanted to make the event great. I didn't feel it was at the level I wanted to see.

So for the next five years, it was part of my mission to run fast and force everyone else to catch up. For a while, it didn't look like anybody was going to. Then I started to see the times and averages drop. All of a sudden, we're hearing that 2025 saw the fastest National Championship time in the 200m ever. We've had the fastest semifinal time at a World Championship. We've also had the fastest final we've ever seen in the Olympics. That has been very enjoyable to watch.

When I was young, the mentality was that you were there to win everything. Then you start having competitors, and you see new people coming in. I'm now at the age where the new athletes coming through watched me and are now fans. They ask for advice, and I'm almost put into a role-model position in the middle of my career. That's something I really enjoy because I want to see everyone run their best.

Track and field has this perception of being a very individualistic sport where no one really cares what the others are doing. You seem to really care about the sport.
This sport is my passion. It's my love. I was born into it. My parents were runners. My aunts, uncles and godparents were runners, Olympians or Olympic coaches. I was born into the track and field world. It's what I love, and I want to see it at its very best.

People drop this word a lot, and you are just 28, but are you already thinking about your legacy?
I've thought about that since I first turned professional, and probably even before that. I don't think my legacy is going to stop at any point just on the track. Everyone thinks they are eventually going to retire from the sport, but I don't think I'm

going to be that way. I'm still going to be involved. I'm still going to be pushing for new avenues and new spaces for track to reside in, and trying to create new opportunities for the athletes coming behind me. I think that will add to the legacy I created while I was on the track.

You already have a pretty major legacy on the track — four straight world gold medals in the 200m and Olympic 100m champion. That's sizeable.
It's one of those things that comes with the territory. You say you want to be the greatest, you start winning, and all of a sudden you look behind you and see four World Championships gold medals in the 200m, or realise you're the third-fastest man ever and an Olympic champion.

Earlier this year, I showed up at a WWE event and they said, 'We want you to bring your medals.' And I was like, 'All of them?' And they were like, 'Yeah.'

That was the first time I'd put in that much effort putting them on, and when I started counting, I realised, 'Seven, eight, nine! Goodness, this is going to hurt my neck!' In my head, I know I'm halfway through my career, and I think I've already achieved things that not all the greats have achieved.

A few weeks back, Tyson [Gay] came to the track where I was training and did a bit of coaching. He was joking with my coach and shouting, 'Who's the baddest man in the sport?' I turned around and said, 'You're looking at him.'

You seem to get along pretty well with most of your competitors.
It's a lot easier to get along with the ones who aren't in the USA because I'm usually fighting with the Americans for the three spots at the US trials. But for the most part, I don't think I've ever been enemies with anyone. I feel like I can learn something from anybody, and I enjoy learning from people even if we're not friends.

Christian Coleman is a great example. I studied his start and acceleration very closely. I studied Trayvon Bromell's top-end mechanics. Going further back, I used to study Yohan [Blake] and Justin [Gatlin] because I wanted to know how they perfected their craft. Sprinting is a work of art, and I want to know everything about that story.

Inspiration: I'm now at the age where the new athletes coming through watched me and are now fans. They ask for advice, and I'm almost put into a role-model position in the middle of my career. That's something I really enjoy because I want to see everyone run their best," Noah Lyles.

GETTY IMAGES

Perhaps someone will want to use me as an example as well.

You see your career as halfway through, but if it were to end tomorrow, what would you be most proud of?

I think I'd be most proud of the fact that I was authentically myself. It's also only recently that I've been able to get to the point where I've been able to see the people whom I've inspired. I now have a new generation coming in and saying, 'Hey, I watched you, and you inspired me to run.' These are my first few years of hearing that, and it's very surreal. I never started my journey thinking I wanted to inspire people. I simply wanted to be the best and reach something nobody had reached. Along the way, I looked back and saw people following the path I was on. Now I think, 'Wow, I need to make better routes. I need to make sure the paths they're taking are safe and that they don't go through all the same struggles I did.'

One of the challenges you've faced is that it's not enough to be good on the track. Carl Lewis says the challenge for athletes today is balancing that with social media and commitments.

See, the thing is, I love running, but I also want to leave the sport in a better position than I found it. It's always interesting to see athletes become world champions for the first time. You can always tell what kind of world champion they're going to be by how they handle the first few days after winning the title.

As soon as you become world champion, the next day you're going to your sponsors' house, and you have to do media for three or four hours. You're up early signing autographs. That's what a world champion has to do.

When you see the energy they put into that, you get an idea of what kind of world champion they're going to be. Is this going to be somebody who will constantly try to push the envelope, or someone who might fold or crack under the pressure because so much is demanded of them?

I think we have to prepare athletes for more. It's not just about winning on the track; it's about being an inspiration. It's about carrying that mantle, no matter how heavy it gets.

QUICK BYTES

What's the first app you have open when you get up in the morning?

Probably *Tiktok* or *Instagram.*

What's your favourite Indian meal?

Butter chicken. Of course, there will be sides with it. But yeah, that's the part that I care about the most.

What's a rule you would like to change in World Athletics?

There are a whole lot of rules to change. We need to change the sponsorship rule and allow multiple sponsors to get involved, especially on jerseys and bibs, though I think that's more of a shoe sponsor issue than a World Athletics one.

One thing we really need to do is start getting into many more spaces where we currently aren't. I also don't know if it's even a rule, but simply changing the place where jumpers take off from isn't going to help with anything.

Photo finish: Noah Lyles won the 100m gold at the 2024 Paris Olympics by the closest of margins. RITU RAJ KONWAR

What's a race you wish you could be a part of?

There are two, actually. One would be the Olympic 100m final in 2012. The second would probably be the 200m final at the 2009 Berlin World Championships, when Bolt broke the 200m world record. I've never had the privilege of racing anyone who has run a faster race than me, and I've always wondered how I would respond to that — just how fast I could run when I had to race someone as fast as me.

When's the last time you really laughed?

I laughed really hard yesterday when we were driving down from the airport and I was talking about *The Office* with someone. It's my favourite show!

Who's the most famous person in your phone contacts?

Mr. Beast.

Who would you consider swapping bodies with for a day?

I've never really thought about it, but perhaps Kirk Franklin (gospel singer). He looks like he has fun. He's a man of God and a musician, and he loves what he does. He's gone through his struggles, as we all do, but he clearly enjoys what he does.

12 DAYS, 4,448 ATHLETES, 222 UNIVERSITIES

The numbers set it up for a big spectacle, but in reality the competition found itself questioning its relevance in the calendar, being **slightly marred** by shallow turnouts in some disciplines.

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The storied state of Rajasthan added another chapter to its history as it welcomed young sportspersons from far and wide across the country for the fifth edition of the Khelo India University Games.

Adding to the crowd from the peak tourist season, over 12 days, 4,448 athletes from 222 universities flocked to seven cities — Jaipur, Ajmer, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Kota and Bharatpur — which served as hosts.

And while the numbers set it up for a big spectacle, the competition found itself questioning its relevance in the calendar, being slightly marred by shallow turnouts in some disciplines.

With an all-time high of 23 events held, it was Chandigarh University **(facing page)** that retained its crown with a commanding haul of 67 medals (42 gold, 14 silver and 11 bronze). A chunk of the institution's success was due to its prowess in the newly added event of canoeing and kayaking, where it bagged 23 gold medals, one silver and one bronze each.

Lovely Professional University (32 gold, 25 silver and 22 bronze) and Guru Nanak Dev University (32 gold, 22 silver and 18 bronze) completed the podium. There were some seasoned faces around. Champion swimmer Srihari Nataraj was the cream of the crop and the best individual performer, securing 11 medals (nine gold and two silver) for Jain University, helping it settle into fourth place in the overall tally. Elsewhere, the shooting events were headlined by Asian Games medallists Sift Kaur Samra and Ashi Chouksey. While the two combined to secure a bronze for GNDU in the women's 50m rifle 3 positions team event, it was Ashi who came out on top in the individual event for her fourth straight gold in the competition, while Sift had to settle for silver.

In the men's competition, Olympic medallist Sarabjot Singh too had a fruitful outing, winning bronze in the men's 10m air pistol, silver in the men's 10m air pistol team event and gold in the 10m air pistol mixed team category for Panjab University.

Meanwhile, the choice to stage the Games in the middle of winter in the region came with its own set of challenges. Early sunsets and temperatures dropping to close to 10 degrees Celsius discouraged many individuals from participating and disrupted their time off, with athletics

Charging ahead: Animesh Kujur (in pic), along with D. Mrutyam Jayaram, Santa Mahendra and Abhay Singh, set a meet record time of 40.09s in the 4x100m final. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

bearing the brunt.

"The first reason for a lot of events missing participants is that the meet is being held during the off-season for the athletes," KIUG athletics competition manager Rakesh Save explained.

"Even the athletes who are in camp will not be allowed to participate now because this is an off-season for them. They have to get trained for the next season," he added. Numerous events witnessed a lack of participants, to the extent that the men's 400m hurdles final and the women's 400m final were run by Swarnim Gujarat Sports University's Ruchit Mori and Kurukshetra University's Manisha, respectively, on their own.

Moreover, he noted that the Association of Indian Universities' (AIU) directive not to allow jobholders to participate was another major blow. And with the government announcing last year that all Khelo India medal winners, across all disciplines, will be eligible for government jobs, the admissible bracket for KIUG has been severely narrowed.

"These are the two main causes, because we have a limit of eight athletes qualifying for the competition. So if three or four of them go out because of these reasons, then we are obviously faced with a problem," Save noted.

However, despite the shortage of participants, the track and field events produced a fair share of memorable moments. A total of 12 meet records were set across the 45 events that took place in the men's and women's categories.

And perhaps the best was saved for last as India's fastest man, Animesh Kujur, lined up for Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) in the men's 4x100m final, much to the excitement of spectators and participants alike.

And, true to expectations, Animesh, along with D. Mrutyam Jayaram, Santa Mahendra and Abhay Singh, hurried to the finish line in meet record time (40.09s) to bring the curtain down on the athletics events at the Games. After the race, Animesh admitted that breaking the meet record was the only reason that motivated him to run, while also highlighting the importance of such university competitions, adding that "It is a very important platform for young athletes to be identified."

But with KIUG not acting as a qualification event for any next step, but rather as an extensive talent-hunt programme, the question remains as to whether it is — or ever can be — enticing enough to draw in the biggest athletes, who in turn could provide the rest of the field with tougher competition and the drive to do more.

Honour board

Chandigarh University:
42 gold, 14 silver, 11 bronze — 67

Lovely Professional University, (PB):
32, 24, 22 — 78

Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar:
32, 22, 18 — 72

Jain University, Karnataka:
30, 9, 11 — 50

Guru Kashi University:
15, 15, 18 — 48

Panjab University Chandigarh:
14, 33, 19 — 66

Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology:
10, 3, 8 — 21

Savitribai Phule Pune University, MS:
9, 17, 12 — 38

Shivaji University:
4, 3, 13 — 20

Maharshi Dayanand University:
4, 2, 5 — 11

Podium drought ends, but progress remains uneven

India's late surge in Chennai **earned bronze** at the Men's Junior World Cup, while the women's team fell short in Chile.

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India clinched the bronze medal at the FIH Men's Hockey Junior World Cup in Chennai, ending a nine-year wait for a podium finish, with a dramatic come-from-behind victory over Argentina after a late surge in the final quarter at the Mayor Radhakrishnan Hockey Stadium.

While the medal is a welcome result, the most intriguing outcome of any age-group global event such as this is the emergence of future stars. For India, however, it was a disappointing campaign despite dominant wins over weaker opponents in the pool stage. Coach P. R. Sreejesh's **(left)** squad struggled significantly in the crucial knockout matches. The biggest concern was arguably the midfield — historically India's strong suit — that lacked a standout central driving force.

From an Indian perspective, the

All smiles: India staged a remarkable comeback against Argentina in the bronze-medal match, with coach P. R. Sreejesh calling the 4–2 victory after being two goals down one of the defining moments of the team's campaign. PICS: R. RAGU

campaign offered little beyond Prince Deep Singh's commendable goalkeeping and Arshdeep Singh's attacking flair. The coach, however, highlighted the bronze-medal match as the campaign's definitive moment, stating: "For me, being down 0-2 and then coming out and winning 4-2 in the last quarter is the best thing to have happened in the Junior World Cup. This was a huge pressure moment, but they faced it and won that challenge."

In the final, Germany secured its record-extending eighth title, triumphing over Spain 3-2 in a shootout after the match ended in a one-all stalemate. This marked Die Honamas' 13th podium finish in 14 editions.

Runner-up Spain was arguably the tournament's most visually pleasing team. Featuring skillful Catalan players, their silky stickwork and masterful midfield domination were reminiscent of the country's all-conquering football team of the 2000s. Yet, their hopes of lifting a maiden world title were dashed in a thrilling shootout.

For the other hockey heavyweights, results were mixed. Belgium and the Netherlands both progressed to the quarterfinals but were unable to advance further. Meanwhile, France and New Zealand showcased steady progression. France, silver medallist in the previous edition, ultimately lost to Germany in a quarterfinal shootout.

Conversely, traditional powerhouse Australia had a poor outing. The Burras, who had won the Sultan of Johor Cup just prior to the event, looked vulnerable throughout and surprisingly failed to make it to the last eight.

Small steps on the grand stage

While the usual heavyweights made their presence felt in the knockout stages of the tournament, the

Individual brilliance

Best Player and FIH Rising Star of the Year
Casper van der Veen (NED)

Top Scorer
Amirul Islam (BAN)

Best Goalkeeper
Jasper Ditzer (GER)

WATCH OUR REVIEW

One for the album: Germany secured its record-extending eighth title, triumphing over Spain 3-2 in a shootout after the match ended in a one-all stalemate.

expanded 24-team league stage also gave many up-and-coming sides a taste of the world stage.

Oman finished bottom of the pile in its maiden appearance, conceding 48 goals across its six matches. The side, which was brought in as a last-minute replacement for Pakistan, will take home an abundance of lessons but also a slice of history — captain Alhussin Al Hasni scoring the country's first World Cup goal, against Egypt.

"The biggest thing in sport is to show up," head coach Mohammed Jandal Bait said. "Sport is about winning and losing, but it is also about building character. I have seen small improvements in my players in every match."

Namibia, another tournament debutant, endured a rollercoaster of emotions. Johann Weyhe's side was trounced by both Spain and Belgium in Pool D but managed to beat continental rival Egypt to earn its maiden win.

A gut-wrenching shootout loss to Austria, followed by another defeat to Canada, meant that it finished 23rd. "It was an interesting tournament. The environment definitely tested us. There's a lot we can take back home and show the younger guys looking to play the next World Cup," skipper John-Paul Britz said.

FIH president Tayyab Ikram's decision to incorporate a Challenger Trophy for teams playing the 17th-24th classification matches provided them with an extra injection of zest.

It was no surprise then that teams like Austria and Canada put their best foot forward in these knockout matches.

Austria, which qualified through the second division of the EuroHockey Championship, won back-to-back play-off matches via shootouts thanks to the exploits of custodian Lorenz Breitenecker, but fell at the final hurdle to Bangladesh, a side that gave Australia and France a tough run in the league stage.

"I think we've been playing better as the tournament has progressed. Extending the tournament to 24 teams has allowed us to play the best teams, and our boys have realised they are not far off," said Bangladesh head coach Siegfried Aikman, who has made a habit of improving lesser-heralded teams, following his achievements with Japan (Asian Games gold in 2018) and Oman (bronze at the 2024 Hockey 5s World Cup).

Tournament top-scorer Amirul Islam (18 goals), with his lanky frame, fuzzy hair and venomous drag-flick, turned out to be a fan favourite in Madurai.

Reality check

While the 13-day tournament showcased fierce competition on the turf, it simultaneously exposed glaring systemic financial deficiencies in hockey. Excluding established nations such as India, Germany, Belgium, Australia, Argentina, Spain and the Netherlands, many participating teams faced severe financial obstacles simply to attend the event. Several resorted to crowdfunding, while the majority were self-funded by players' families and friends. "Obviously, every camp you go to, you pay for," said New Zealand player Milan Patel. "When we went to the Sultan of Johor Cup a couple of weeks ago, we paid for that. It's not easy... I think, luckily, we have sponsorships from family friends and a lot of fundraising on tour." The presence of family members in the stands offered a poignant display of the profound passion that drives athletes in sport.

Honour board

Men's
Gold - Germany
Silver - Spain
Bronze - India

Women's
Gold - Netherlands
Silver - Argentina
Bronze - Belgium

Indian women fall short in Chile

The Indian women finished a disappointing 10th at the FIH Hockey Junior World Cup 2025 in Santiago, Chile.
Despite dominant wins over lower-ranked sides, a crucial 1-3 loss to Germany in the pool stage meant it missed the quarterfinals on goal difference. The team struggled with consistency and penalty-corner conversions in the classification matches, ultimately falling 1-2 to Spain in the ninth–10th place play-off. In the final, the Netherlands sealed its third consecutive title after defeating Argentina.

DZUMHUR'S SECOND WIND

The Bosnian tennis player reflects on his journey from surviving a war to **pushing** Carlos Alcaraz to the brink at Roland Garros.

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Around six months ago, when Damir Dzumhur entered Court Philippe-Chatrier for his third-round match at Roland Garros, not many gave him a chance. After all, the 33-year-old Bosnian was up against defending champion Carlos Alcaraz, who was in red-hot form. As expected, the 22-year-old Spaniard quickly took a 6-1, 6-3 lead. The Parisian crowd, perhaps out of hope to get its money's worth for a night session, started to get behind Dzumhur.

When Dzumhur trailed 2-3 in the third set, the writing seemed to be on the wall. But the Bosnian was not done yet. Shortly after a medical timeout to receive treatment for his groin, Dzumhur turned the tide. He started playing more aggressively, matching the rattled Spaniard shot for shot and grabbed the third set 6-4. Then he pulled ahead 3-1 in the fourth before Alcaraz found his touch again to clinch the fourth set 6-4 and close the fixture.

Facing Alcaraz isn't easy. Challenging him is even more difficult. But for Dzumhur, the Spaniard wasn't the first curveball life had thrown at him. Not even the biggest.

From the moment he came into this world, Dzumhur was surrounded by adversity. In 1992, the Bosnian War had begun just a month before he was born. "The war had started in Sarajevo. It was very

challenging. My father couldn't see me for the first 11 months. When everybody was leaving the city, he was trying to get into the city to see his son. The hospital where I was born was evacuated and bombed just a couple of days later," Dzumhur told *Sportstar* in an exclusive interaction.

"I started playing tennis when I was five and a half years old. My first memory of playing tennis is from a high school fitness place where there wasn't even a tennis court. Most of the courts in Sarajevo were destroyed," he added.

Dzumhur learned the basics of the sport from his father, Nerfid, who had started a tennis school in 1994 at Zetra Olympic Hall, a venue located near the same hospital where Dzumhur was born.

While growing up, tennis wasn't the only thing in young Dzumhur's life. He even acted in two movies — *Grbavica* (2006), as a background actor, and *Morderischer Frieden* (2007), in which he played a major role as Durcan.

"A few of the classes from my primary school were called for auditions. I went there and made it through two rounds to get cast for *Grbavica,* which wasn't a big project. A couple of months after that, I got called for another audition for *Morderischer Frieden*. I went there without any expectations. Later, I got a call asking if I wanted to do the movie. I signed the contract," recalls Dzumhur. "So my first earned money was not from tennis, but from movies. As a 14-year-old, it was a big amount for me. After that, I was called for two more movies in Bosnia but tennis became my priority. Who knows, maybe after tennis, this is something I can do."

Despite limited facilities and infrastructure back home, Dzumhur continued to work hard on his game. He won his maiden Tour-level title in St Petersburg in 2017. After his third title in Antalya in 2018, he achieved a career-high ranking of 23.

He had his struggles with form after 2018, but perhaps the biggest setback came after his first-round loss to Fernando Verdasco in the French Open qualifiers. "Definitely, it was the hardest part of my career. Just after the match, I had to go to hospital due to a bad stomach ache," he said. The Bosnian was diagnosed with acute pancreatitis. "I was in hospital for one month. I was recovering for another month. It was a hard period, not just in tennis but in life in general. I was really not sure what was going to happen with my tennis career. I didn't know if I was going to continue," he added.

But Dzumhur found a second wind.

In August 2022, he had sunk to 243 in the ATP rankings. He kept pushing to get better and after a sensational 2024 season, during which he won six titles on the ATP Challenger Tour, he was back inside the top 100. This resurgence set the stage for renewed confidence on the biggest platforms.

Reflecting on this year's French Open match against Alcaraz, Dzumhur said, "When I face Carlos, I have to play very offensively. I have to always be there on the ball, and I cannot let him be too offensive because once he gets the time, he's so dangerous and there is nothing you can do. So, playing very offensive tennis is probably what gives me a lot of chances against him. Perhaps playing with that mindset against other players will help me."

Test of mettle: Facing Alcaraz isn't easy. Challenging him is even more difficult. But for Dzumhur, the Spaniard wasn't the first curveball life had thrown at him. Not even the biggest. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

Dzumhur has returned to India for the first time since he played the Chennai Open, an ATP 250 event, in 2017.

The Bosnian is the marquee player for the Yash Mumbai Smashers side in the seventh season of the Tennis Premier League (TPL), a franchise-based competition being held in Ahmedabad from December 9 to 14.

"It's very important to have these exhibition tournaments. Sometimes, tennis events can be boring for those watching from the stands. For us, playing five hours might be great but it is very hard for the spectators. TPL's format is fast and dynamic. Many people are moving to pickleball and padel. These kinds of tournaments are crucial to maintain tennis' popularity," Dzumhur signed off.

GETTY IMAGES

AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL

Set to be inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame next year, renowned tennis broadcaster **Mary Carillo** reflects on a career that reshaped how the sport is told.

FOR MORE STORIES

Paul Fein

Insightful and probing, yet sensitive and humorous, Mary Carillo was acclaimed as the 'Best Announcer on Television' by *World Tennis* magazine in 1990 and by *Tennis* magazine from 1989–92. *Tennis* included Carillo, then broadcasting the sport for *ESPN* and *CBS*, as the only media star in its '20 Most Powerful People in Tennis' article in 1992.

In its encomium to Carillo and her fast-growing popularity, *Tennis* wrote, "With just the right blend of intelligence and irreverence, the game's liveliest voice has become tennis' voice of authority to those whose only exposure to the game is through TV."

If Carillo reminds many tennis fans of Bud Collins, the iconic American journalist and TV commentator, it's no accident. "His writing, his keen observations, and his sense of fun formed all my own ideas about how to cover tennis," Carillo told me in 2015. Like the eclectic, entertaining Collins, she spread her storytelling wings to broadcast other events beyond tennis at 16 Summer and Winter Olympic Games, including swimming, skiing, athletics, and badminton.

In recent years, the versatile Carillo has covered *The National Dog Show* for *NBC*, which airs on Thanksgiving Day and regularly draws 20 million viewers.

As a correspondent for *HBO's Real Sports*, Carillo earned four Emmy Awards, including two for Olympic coverage, and three Peabody Awards, including two for *HBO* documentaries —*Dare To Compete: The Struggle of Women in Sports* and *Billie Jean King: Portrait of a Pioneer*. In 2018, she was inducted into the Sports Broadcasting Hall of Fame.

Now, Carillo — arguably the most distinguished women's tennis broadcaster in history — will be enshrined in the International Tennis Hall of Fame in the Contributor category during the Induction Celebration at Newport, Rhode

Island, from August 27–29. Accompanying her into this tennis pantheon will be none other than 20-time Major champion Roger Federer.

In this interview, Carillo, 68, talks about her roots, her trailblazing career as the first woman to regularly broadcast tennis, the most memorable and transformative people she covered, and the burning controversies she analysed. With insights of an elder stateswoman, she also assesses today's game and predicts what the future holds for this intriguing, ever-evolving sport.

You fell in love with tennis as a talented teenager at the perfect time and place. Tell me about that exciting era and your tennis pals.

I was lucky in so many ways. I swam on the Douglaston Club swim team but kept getting swimmer's ear. One day, I climbed out of the pool and saw Court One down below me. The Sirna family took the court, wearing classic Fred Perry clothing that looked elegant and very warm to a shivering nine-year-old. I watched them play, then began watching the club pro, Dan Dwyer, give lessons. He was a gem. I picked up balls as he taught, listening to him the whole time. He liked me for it.

At the same time, John McEnroe, who lived up the block from the club, started playing, and Dan gave him plenty of time, too. John started entering tournaments, so I did, too. He started attending the Port Washington Tennis Academy, I followed. It was a fantastic hotbed of tennis. Harry Hopman was the head of Port, and all I wanted was for the great Davis Cup Captain from Australia to notice me, spend time on my court, and see how much I wanted to get better. My mom drove me to the academy every day, and I stayed for hours every day. Vitas Gerulaitis was there at the same time, and his younger sister Ruta became my best friend. When Vitas played at Wimbledon for the first time, I couldn't believe I knew someone who played there.

In elite company: During her playing days, Mary Carillo (left) shared locker room space with the likes of the legendary Billie Jean King (right) and other '70s tennis stars. GETTY IMAGES

When Mr. Hopman moved down to Florida to begin his own academy, I was a senior in high school. He asked me if I wanted to go with him, to teach and train, and without asking my parents' permission, I said yes. They let me. My mom was not thrilled, but they didn't stand in the way. I loved it there. Tennis was booming (in the 1970s), and world-class players came to train with Mr. Hopman. I worked for him for a few years and then again in between knee operations. He was everything to me.

I turned pro at a time when tennis was so damn popular and exciting. I was in locker rooms with Billie Jean King, Rosie Casals, Virginia Wade, Francoise Durr, Chrissie (Chris Evert), Martina (Navratilova). Billie put me on the WTA Board of Directors. I played World Team Tennis for the New York Apples. Fred Stolle was our captain, and Billie Jean, Vitas Gerulaitis, and Joanne Russell were on the team. I hung around famous tennis writers Mike Lupica, Frank Deford, Peter Alfano, and Lesley Visser. I soaked up everything. My knees told me that my time in tennis would be short, so I played everywhere I could get into a draw. Maybe everyone thinks that their time was the best time, but boy, I truly believe my time was as good as it gets.

When you started your broadcasting career with *USA Network* in 1980, you were 23. You had no TV experience and were entering a male-dominated field. What were your thoughts and feelings then?

When my knees gave out for the last time in the 1980 Wimbledon first round, I thought I'd go back to coaching for Mr. Hopman, then figure out what to do next. A few weeks after I got home from England, I got a call from Mark Stulburger, who was starting to produce women's tennis for *USA Network*. Mark had heard me call a match from the WTA Finals in Madison Square Garden earlier in the year — a late-night match that I got thrown into after being interviewed by the *MSG Network* announcers. All the big players and celebrities had gone home, so there

An ear for greatness: Over the years, Carillo has interviewed several leading players, including (clockwise from left) Martina Navratilova, Novak Djokovic, Andy Murray, Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer and Serena Williams.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND GETTY IMAGES

was no one else to talk to.

I had given the announcers every good reason why the upcoming Evonne Goolagong-Tracy Austin match was going to be good, and they liked my enthusiasm. They invited me to the booth for the whole match. Just a spare microphone in front of me. No headset, nothing. It was a fun match to call. It wasn't a big deal to me... but Mark had caught my drive — by my appearance — and remembered me.

I wasn't nervous calling a match or two for *USA Network*. I knew all the players, and I knew how they played. The money was okay, so I said yes to it, thinking it was going to be a one-shot deal. I had plenty to learn, and I was fascinated by the television end of it all. I couldn't have been more raw, but Mark kept me around, taught me things, and let me get better.

It was almost entirely an all-men crew, but I was accepted because it was women's tennis, and in that department, I knew more than the guys. It was rare that I felt out of my depth or apart from the crew. As the years went by and I started to call men's matches, a few of the guys felt I wasn't needed, which made me want to prove my worth even more. When I was with *CBS*, John McEnroe was hired, and he felt that I shouldn't keep calling men's matches. I should add that he had no interest in calling the women's matches. More than anything, he was not a fan of three people booths. Fortunately, for me, the executive producer kept me in the mix, a decision not met well by John. Once we started, I think he realised that we worked well together, but he took convincing. It was not an easy time for me. Eventually, it normalised, but there were definitely some difficult days. I kept my head down and tried harder.

How has TV tennis broadcasting evolved since the 1970s, when you first watched it, and the 1980s, when you debuted and developed as a broadcaster, to today, when *Tennis Channel* broadcasts 24/7?

Whew. It's changed so much, and forever. In the beginning when I worked, we were sometimes on tape, for one thing. We showed matches in pieces; we commentated after the tennis was over. And we had such limited graphics. One of my very best friends, the late Leo Levin, had so much to do with better stats, analytics, and graphics.

I personally think there's often too much screen time overly devoted to numbers, replays, predictions, betting odds, and the like. Especially betting odds — I hate that. I could rant about betting in tennis for hours, and it wouldn't be pretty. And as much as I can respect the efficiency of using AI in tennis, I truly hope our sport doesn't lean on it too much. Some of AI is truly illuminating. Too much of it puts me off. I wish Leo Levin, whom I called 'The Doctor' for his incisive diagnoses of players' games, was still around. So much of this is a matter of taste, and how TV can at once show the sport in a way that's entertaining and instructive. And to my mind, Leo had the best taste in tennis.

What were the major surprises about the evolution of pro tennis during your 55-year tennis career?

I guess it shouldn't be a surprise, really — the sport has gone from three grass court Majors to one — but the switch made a lasting, unfortunate impact on serve-and-volley tennis. So many players now play exactly the same way, mostly from the baseline, with power and spin that did not exist when I began to play this sport. More than anything, power is the coin of the realm.

Wooden racket tennis could not produce the tennis that is now commonplace. String technology has helped create shots that did not exist when I began my tennis. And facing two-handed backhands was a daunting and enormous change to serve and volleyers like me. My plan of attack had been simple — serve to the backhand, come in and knock off a volley. Mr. Hopman used to say to us, "On a big point, what would you rather do — hit a volley or come up with a passing shot?" Volley. It made sense. But two hands on the backhand made that easy equation

go away. There was no longer any good place to safely hit into.

Now I would teach a one-handed backhand only as a change-up Martina and Pete Sampras still think serve-and-volley is the way to go, but that has become a change-up, too. And would it really have been wise to consistently serve and volley to hitters and movers like Serena and Venus?

That's why when a player like Carlos Alcaraz comes along and wants to use every inch of the court, play each point differently, and surprise us with his imagination, he breathes life into the game and its possibilities.

You coined the phrase 'Big Babe Tennis' when young superstars Monica Seles and Steffi Graf slugged it out during the early 1990s. That stylistic description fits the *crème de la crème* of women's tennis now more than ever, with heavyweights Aryna Sabalenka, Iga Swiatek, Coco Gauff, Amanda Anisimova, and Elena Rybakina banging big serves and heavy groundstrokes as they vie for supremacy. What are your thoughts about women's tennis today and its future?

I think current women's tennis will look like this for a long time. When I was growing up, watching the women play, it was almost all serve and volley, as it was with the men. As I said earlier, power is the coin of the realm now. Most women's matches get decided on the baseline by big hitting and spinning, and a lot of the women have better return games than serve games. The first serve percentage and the quality of the second serve is what I look for at the start of almost all women's matches. Also, their footwork and foot speed. You must be so strong, fast, and fit to live on the court with the best women players now. The game is so much about physicality that the days of teen phenoms infiltrating tennis seem pretty much impossible, no?

Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner have collided to create the most spectacular battles in the tennis universe. What do you find most striking and appealing about their riveting rivalry?

Just about everything! How respectful they are of each other. How each makes the other want to be better, more complete, the very best version of themselves. How solid and stable the people around them are.

It reminds me of Roger Federer's choice in his team. How well they understand the court and its possibilities. How they know that the only way to stay in the rivalry is to rival the other's ambitions and talents. How humble they are. How dedicated they are to bringing tennis to heights the sport has never before reached.

How you watch them and wonder how any tennis player in the future can possibly build on this and get even better than Sinner and Alcaraz already are.

You'll be inducted into the Hall of Fame with Federer. What stands out most about him both as a player and an ambassador for tennis?

It's Roger's elegance, on and off the court, isn't it? He makes hard things look supremely simple. He had all the time in the world, on and off the court. He never seemed rushed and was rarely angry on the court, and in press conferences, usually in three languages, he answered the same damn questions over and over again with patience and grace. Grace. If I only had one word to explain Roger, it would be grace.

Schoolyard.

Celebrate the champions early.

Veeresh Vijay Bhagat of BGS Public School, Kengeri, won 500m silver and 1000m bronze at the CBSE Nationals, Gurugram, November 13-17, 2025.

Mehaa A.V, a Grade 5 student of Lisieux CMI Public School, made her school proud by winning first prize at the CBSE Nationals Skating Championship, held at HSV CBSE School, Haryana, on November 15, 2025.

Maanya Reddy is a Grade 11 student at Oakridge International School, Gachibowli, Hyderabad. A competitive sailor since age 11, she has won five national medals, gold at the 2025 Langkawi International Regatta featuring 150 sailors from 15+ countries, and represented India at the World Championships.

The storm tried to stop us — but our spirit only grew stronger.

As principal of Air Force School, Jamnagar, last year, I had the privilege of hosting our annual Interschool Sports Championship.

We welcomed six sister schools: Jaipur, Pune, Jodhpur, Bhuj, Gandhinagar, and Jaisalmer, along with our own team. There were nearly 400 outstation students on our campus for a week of sport and camaraderie. Every detail had been meticulously arranged and rehearsed. These included separate accommodations for girls and boys, three meals a day and snacks, a medical team for emergencies, scheduling the venue and event logistics. All plans were perfectly in place.

But shortly after the teams' arrival, heavy incessant rains lashed the city. This was due to a depression over the Arabian sea hitting Jamnagar. Flood-like conditions engulfed the city, and for a moment it seemed the championship might have to be called off. Cancelling was simply not an option, as the out-station teams were already settled in and our students had trained for months; we did not want their enthusiasm and hard work to be in vain.

What followed was truly extraordinary. They say students learn by observation and behavior of their mentors and not by long moral lectures given to them in classrooms or corridors. In that case, they learned plenty that week. Teachers, students, and staff braved water-logged roads and harsh conditions to reach the campus, determined not to let the rain dampen their spirit. Together, we completely reimagined the event: classrooms and halls became indoor arenas, schedules were reshuffled overnight, and we ensured that every participant had the chance to compete. Because of the large number of out-of-station students, our entire team worked from dawn to late night all week. Yet none of us felt exhaustion — thanks to the strong, positive, and inspiring team.

Several of our own team members had their homes submerged by the floods.Yet none requested leave. Had they requested it, it would have been granted without hesitation.

The spirit of teamwork, positivity and a never-give-up attitude filled our campus that week.

Every game was rescheduled and played, despite obstacles.

When Air Force School Jamnagar won overall championship, it wasn't a mere trophy. The win was more than just athletics; it was a collective win of camaraderie and resilience-both emotional and physical.

— ***Neethu Thomas, Air Force School, Jamnagar***

1. Presidency School Bangalore South celebrated Sports Day 2025 **(above)** under the theme 'Viksit Bharat – Pride in Every Heart.' Operation Sindoor was the main theme of the programme, with other themes such as The Mystery of Shiva, Lotus Formation, and the Butterfly Display. Fun games for parents and grandparents added to the festive atmosphere.

2. The Oxford Trophy Season-2 (2025) concluded at The Oxford School, Kollam, after a four-day football tournament held from November 4-7 with 32 CBSE/ICSE schools participating. Stratford Public School emerged champions while the host finished runner-up. Individual honours went to Devadarshan (Player of the Tournament, Stratford Public School), Rizwan (Best Goalkeeper, The Oxford School), Hritvik Narayanan (Best Defender, The Oxford School), Jordan (Top Scorer, Siddhartha Central School), and Lukman (Emerging Player, Stratford).

3. The 11th Sub-Junior Tamil Nadu State Level Softball Championship for boys and girls was held from November 21 to 23, 2025, at St. Antony's Higher Secondary School, Manaparai, Manjampatti, Trichy. In the boys' category, Trichy District emerged champions, followed by Salem District and Perambalur District, while in the girls' category, Trichy District won the title, with Ranipet District finishing second and Coimbatore District third.

4. GR Cricket Academy will conduct an U-19 inter-school and academy tournament from December 22.

5. The DCAC-CSK cricket tournament for schools in Chengalpattu district will be held in January 2026. Entries close on December 28.

10.68s

R. Neil Samraj of SBOA Matric and Higher Secondary School, Coimbatore, is a sprinter who has excelled at state and national levels, winning gold in the 100m and 200m at the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's Trophy, setting a 100m meet record (10.68s) at the Tamil Nadu Inter-State Championship, claiming gold at the South Zone Junior Championships, and securing bronze in the 4x100m relay at the Khelo India Youth Games.

7

Santhosha Vidhyalaya ran riot in the final, thrashing Bell MHSS 7–0 to lift the Bell Pins Rolling Trophy at the TDFA inter-school football championship in Tirunelveli on Wednesday. Apoorv led the scoring with five goals, while Snehasish Pani and Binobin Samuel added one each.

Vladimirov three-movers

By C.G.S.Narayanan

If there is one genre in chess problems which can express more complex themes with clarity and ease it is undoubtedly the three-mover. Great Russian composers like Loshinski, Valentin Rudenko,,Viktor Chepizni and Yakov Vladimirov have explored this fertile field with huge success.In this article I present three of Vladimirov's three-movers which are worth studying.

Y.Vladimirov
2 pr, lympic Competition 1969

Mate in three moves

Key 1.Nd1! any 2.Re3! Rxe3 3.Rd4#, 2…Bxe3 3.Nc3;1…Ba7 2.Rb6! Rxb6 3.Rd4; 2…Bxb6 3.Qxd6;1…Rxb3 2.Ne3! Rxe3 3.Rd4;2…Bxe3 3.Bf3.Defending against the threatening blockade of Novotny, the black pieces make anti-critical moves, which turn out to be critical for the execution of two other combinations of Novotny.There are also two more variations with the Novotny theme: 1… Nxb3 2.d3! Rxd3 3.Qc4, 2… Bxd3 3.Nc3.

In the second diagram as is customary for blocks, the answers to any black move is ready.

1...bxc2 2.Nxc2 c4 3.Nxe3
1...c4 2.Nd5 ~ 3.Nxe3
1...cxd4 2.Nd3 bxc2 3.Rb5
1...cxb4 2.Rxb3 bxa3 3.Rb5

The close thematic tries are:1.Nc6? bxc2!; 1.a4? cxb4!1.Nd3? c4!;1.Nd5? cxd4! After the absolutely unpredictable first move **1.Na2!** the whole game changes:

1...bxc2 2.Nc1 c4 3.Rb5
1...c4 2.Nc3 bxc2 3.Rb5
1...cxd4 2.Bd3 bxa2 3.Rb5
1...bxa2 2.Rb5 any 3.Rxc5

In general, three-move blocks are not so often encountered, and Vladimirov considers this task one of his best blocks (kuzovkov).

Y. Vladimirov, I prize
"Bulletin of the Central Chess Club of the USSR", 1964

Mate in three moves
Yet another three-mover to solve
Y.Vladimirov
I place 3rd team championship of the USSR, 1961

Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving by in the article 'Vladimirov turns 90': Key **1.Qb7?** any 2.Qxc7;1...Bxd5 2.Qxd5; 1...Bxd4!; 1.Rh7? any 2.Re7 Qxd4

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

Ojas bags men's individual compound gold

Maharashtra's Ojas Pravin Deotale brought his A game to the Senior National Archery Championship at the Hyderabad Public School, beating Delhi's Abhishek Verma to win gold in the men's individual compound event.

The ever-chirpy Ojas stayed focused throughout his battle with veteran Abhishek, the pair going toe-to-toe every step of the way. Cheered on by fellow archers and coaches from all teams, they did not drop a single point after five rounds, finishing with 150 points apiece.

In the shootout, Abhishek faltered by the smallest of margins — 28 points to Ojas' 30 — to miss the podium top step.

In the bronze medal clash, Sahil Rajesh Jadhav (RPSB) beat Mohit Dagar (Haryana) 149-145.

In the women's individual compound event, Aditi Swami (Maharashtra) and Sakshi Chaudhary (Uttar Pradesh) were locked in a closely fought battle for the gold.

Each managed 29 points in the final round, with Aditi relieved to come out on top (146-145).

Madhura Dhamangaonkar (Maharashtra) defeated Swati Dudhwal (Rajasthan) 148-146 to secure bronze.

ANIRUDH VELAMURI

SPORTOON

1 Top seed Unnati Hooda and Kiran George delivered commanding performances to clinch the women's and men's singles titles, respectively, in the Odisha Masters Super 100 badminton tournament in Cuttack. Hooda defeated compatriot Isharani Baruah 21-17, 21-10 in just over half an hour. In the men's singles final George prevailed over Indonesia's Muhamad Yusuf 21-14, 13-21, 21-16.

Other results: Mixed doubles: Marwan Faza and Aisyah Pranata (INA) bt Dejan Ferdinansyah and Bernadine Wardana (INA) 21-15, 21-10.

Women's doubles: Gabriela and Stefani Stoeva (BUL) bt Ong Xin Yee and Carmen Ting (MAL) 21-19, 21-14.

Men's doubles: Ali Faathir Rayhan and Devin Artha Wahyudi (INA) bt Khang Khai Xing and Aaron Tai (MAL) 15-21, 21-12, 21-16.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 Manchester City and JAIN Sports have announced a new Manchester City Football School at JAIN Global Campus in Bengaluru.

This collaboration will deliver a football education programme that combines Manchester City's renowned playing philosophy to nurture India's emerging sports talent.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Travel nutrition guide: What to eat when your event is in a small town

Performance nutrition during travel is as **critical** as the training itself, especially in small towns, where food choices can be limited, cooking styles unpredictable, and access to specialised products inconsistent.

Athletes love the thrill of competing in different corners of India, but travel can become a hidden opponent that few prepare for. After working with athletes for two decades, across disciplines from boxing and athletics to cricket and shooting, I've learnt that performance nutrition during travel is as critical as the training itself. This is especially true in small towns, where food choices can be limited, cooking styles unpredictable, and access to specialised products inconsistent. Yet with the right strategy, athletes can thrive anywhere.

Travel days demand their own logic. Your gut, hydration, and energy levels are unusually vulnerable on the move. In India, travel often involves early morning flights, long train journeys, or road routes that swing between dusty highways and narrow town lanes. On these days, I advise every athlete to use a three-tier plan: secure, simple, safe. Secure your hydration by starting the day with clear fluids and oral rehydration. Keep meals simple by avoiding heavy *masalas* or street-fried foods. Choose safe foods you know you can tolerate, such as bananas, homemade rolls, pre-packed dry fruits, and your regular sports drink.

Several years ago, while accompanying young sprinters to a remote meet in northern Karnataka, I realised how easily travel companionship can derail discipline. One athlete once ate a harmless-looking plate of mixed street *chaat* during a travel halt. By race morning, hydration markers were poor, gut transit was sluggish, reaction time was slower, and race pace suffered. Since then, I make every athlete visualise the next day before choosing today's meal.

From then on, I have always guided my athletes with three simple steps to stay on track while travelling.

First stop after landing: Buy safe food & water

As soon as you exit the airport or railway station, buy clean drinking water from a sealed bottle or trusted source. Travel quietly dehydrates you. Pick easy fruits you can peel and eat yourself, like bananas, apples, oranges, guava and grapes. Add a small pack of nuts and a bar of dark chocolate for steady energy and healthy fats. If your room has a fridge, a small tub of plain curd supports digestion.

Scout food options within 500m of your stay

After check-in, take a short walk around your hotel to identify one or two clean, simple restaurants nearby. This prevents last-minute panic eating. Look for plain rice, *rotis*, light *dal*, soup, grilled chicken or fish, and lightly cooked vegetables. Simple food keeps your gut calm and your energy steady.

Make one friendly food ally

Have a polite word with the chef or headwaiter and explain that you are an athlete and need low-oil, mild-spice food. Most kitchens are happy to support this. Simple

Long ride: Travel days demand their own logic. Your gut, hydration, and energy levels are unusually vulnerable on the move. In India, travel often involves early morning flights, long train journeys, or road routes that swing between dusty highways and narrow town lanes. GETTY IMAGES

requests like 'grilled without *masala*' or 'less oil in the *dal*' can make a big difference to how you feel and perform the next day.

Every small Indian town has its own rhythm. Some lean heavily on rice-based meals, others on wheat. Some cooks use generous oil and ghee, while others follow milder methods. When athletes stay in basic lodges or government guest houses, meals are often cooked for general taste rather than performance needs. In such spaces, portion control and timing become more important than the exact food. For example, *idli sambhar* in a southern town is usually reliable, and in central India, *poha* with curd can make an excellent breakfast if eaten early and in measured quantity.

Practice-day nutrition requires careful thought. This is the day your stomach must feel steady, glycogen-topped, and your mind calm about food availability. I typically plan three meals plus two snacks. Breakfast should emphasise familiar carbohydrates like *upma*, *idli*, bread, and fruit. Lunch should combine rice or *roti* with *dal* and a mild vegetable, adding *paneer* or eggs if available. Dinner should be lighter, because small-town hotels often intensify spices and oil in the evening. Snacks should travel with you: roasted *chana*, dates, peanut *chikki*, and electrolyte tablets. Avoid roadside fruit juices or shakes as vendors often add unpredictable ingredients.

During early years experimenting with travel routines for professional cyclists in a village near Sangli, I noticed the local jaggery was darker, slightly smoky, and richer in minerals. When used in controlled quantities before long practice sessions, it provided steady energy without the spikes typical of commercial sweets. That experience showed me the value of understanding and integrating regional foods. Even today, I allow measured local jaggery as part of carbohydrate strategy in sugar-producing regions. Small insights like this make Indian travel nutrition uniquely rewarding.

Competition day is sacred territory. No experiments, adventurous combinations, or heavy regional dishes. Eat early so the stomach is calm and digestion predictable. Choose foods that cause minimal gastrointestinal stress. Overeating out of anxiety is common in India, but a structured plate is best: one familiar carbohydrate source, a small amount of protein, and a hydrating element. Typical morning meals could be two *idlis* with a banana and a cup of tea, or in northern/western towns, two *phulkas* with boiled potato *sabzi* and fruit. Avoid *parathas* as they tend to be oil-heavy. For afternoon or evening events, keep the pre-event meal lighter, mostly carbohydrates: curd rice, *upma*, bread with peanut butter, or simple *dal khichdi*.

Hydration in small towns is complex. Water quality varies dramatically across districts. Always carry your own bottle and use only bottled or filtered water. Increase electrolyte intake in humid conditions or after long sessions. Avoid local sugary drinks sold near stadiums as the sugar concentration is often too high. Coconut water from a clean vendor is excellent for rehydration.

The reason I insist on structured planning is that travel nutrition is not one size fits all. Travel days demand protection, practice days demand stability, and competition days demand precision. Respecting these three phases allows even the most remote town to become an opportunity rather than a nutritional challenge. Athletes who master this rhythm can compete confidently anywhere in the world.

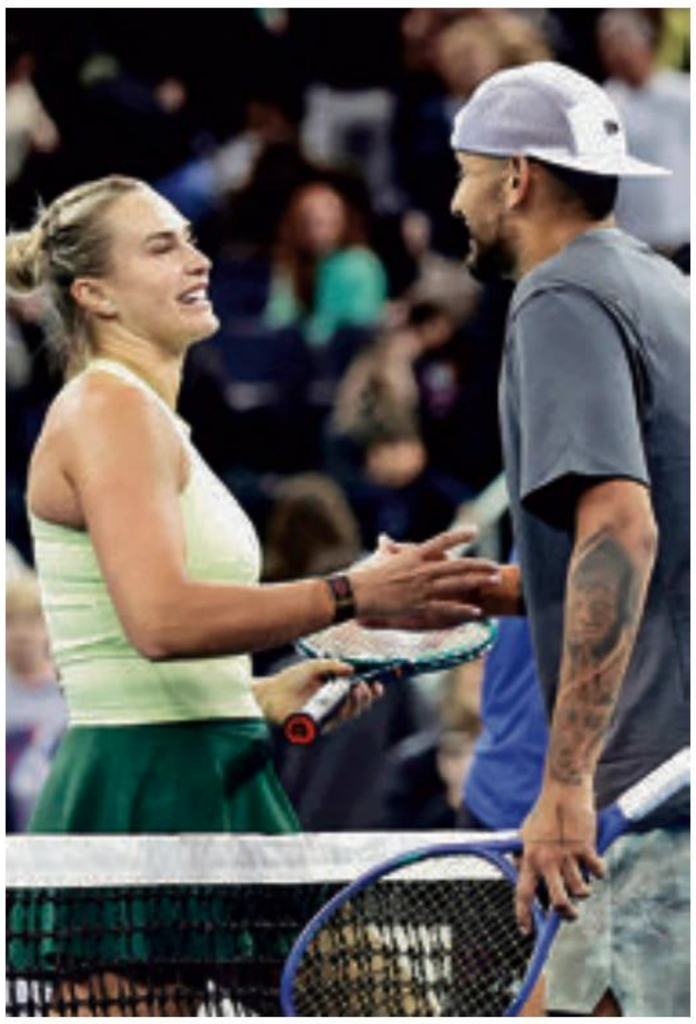
Battle of the Sexes

It would shock no one to learn that the **money on offer** for the match between Aryna Sabalenka and Nick Kyrgios might run into millions.

Suresh Menon

Sport has seen such battles as man vs machine (chess), and man vs animal (athletics), but for sheer pointlessness it is difficult to beat a man vs woman encounter. Especially in tennis, and especially today when the Grand Slams offer equal pay. As Chris Evert said when she was the reigning queen, "Even the 100th ranked men's player can beat me easily."

It would shock no one to learn that the money on offer for the so-called *Battle of the Sexes: Dubai Showdown* between Aryna Sabalenka and Nick Kyrgios might run into millions (they are keeping it a secret). The amount will tell us what the players charge to look ridiculous and make a mockery of the sport that has already earned them millions.



Money matters: The agency that represents both Aryna Sabalenka and Nick Kyrgios is promoting the showdown between them which makes the whole thing more laughable. GETTY IMAGES

In the 1970s, fresh from beating Margaret Court, the hustler Bobby Riggs took on Billie Jean King in the 'Battle of the Sexes' ($100,000, winner-take-all). Millions must have hoped the loud-mouth Riggs, 55, would get thrashed by King, 29. Riggs, like Jack Kramer, had nothing good to say about women's tennis, and plenty bad even if some of that had to do with attracting a television audience. Five decades later, Kyrgios is reprising Riggs.

King famously beat Riggs, and as she said, "launched the fight for parity into the worldwide limelight." That was a boost to the women's movement.

Now, the agency that represents both Sabalenka and Kyrgios is promoting the showdown between them which makes the whole thing more laughable. It will not do anything for women's tennis if Sabalenka wins. If she loses, the toxic masculinity of the likes of Kyrgios will fill social media posts with more hatred. Only the two players and their common agent will be laughing all the way to the bank.

The pointlessness of such encounters, however, didn't stop Jimmy Connors, 40, taking on Martina Navratilova, 35, at the *Battle of Champions* for a guarantee of $650,000 each and $500,000 for the winner.

Connors said later he had placed a million-dollar bet that he would lose no more than eight games. He won 7-5, 6-2. Seven decades earlier, Bill Tilden, 28, had beaten Suzanne Lenglen,21, in a single-set match. Years later Tilden is reported to have said, "Someone won 6–0, but I don't recall who it was." It was played in fun. Television hadn't been invented yet.

Top-ranked Sabalenka is 27 while Kyrgios 30, is ranked in the 660s. He is not a regular on the circuit, having played just five matches this year. He is frequently injured and increasingly getting better known for his vile sexism and the court case where he admitted to assaulting his ex-girlfriend.

Sabalenka's court will be nine per cent smaller because someone figured women move nine per cent slower. Gimmickry is at the heart of artificial contests in sport.

You can, of course, see this as harmless entertainment on live television, and forget the prize money, the betting, the fact that one agency is in charge of everything. Maybe you can, but I can't.

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