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NAVDEEP SINGH

"It's important to always have new targets. New goals help you forget the old ones," says the Arjuna Awardee ahead of the Para Athletics World Championships in New Delhi

FROM YAMUNANAGAR TO ASIA'S SILVER PODIUM

Arjun Bakshi, 22, made history at the **20th Asian Roller Skating Championship in Jecheon, South Korea,** clinching a silver medal and ending India's nine-year medal drought at the continental level.

Raised in Yamunanagar and trained at Swami Vivekanand Public School, Sector 17, Arjun is India's youngest captain in roller hockey history. With six national golds to his name, he is inspiring kids across the country to chase their dreams fearlessly.

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EKTA BHYAN

"I enjoy winning, of course, but more than that, I love the training and the chance to be outdoors," says the World Para Athletics Championships club throw gold medallist

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HOKATO SEMA

"Beyond medals, sports has restored my confidence. I tell others with disabilities: never be shy of them. Turn them into strength, rise to the top, and make your country proud," says the ace shot-putter

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PRAVEEN KUMAR

"I've never won a World Championship medal. I want to stand on the podium in New Delhi," says the high jumper, a double Paralympic medallist

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PRANAV SOORMA

"Want the para sports movement to grow, to inspire more athletes, and to change more lives," says the Paralympic silver medallist in club throw

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YOGESH KATHUNIYA

"As long as I perform, no one can silence me," says the Paralympic silver medallist in discus

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OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

'RIGHT TO PLAY', NEED OF THE HOUR

India cannot build a **resilient** sporting economy without widening the base of participation.

The last decade has quietly redrawn the contours of Indian sport. Two Olympic cycles — Tokyo's seven medals and six from Paris — reaffirmed that Indian athletes, across disciplines, can now compete against the best on the world stage. Para-athletes, too, have commanded the nation's attention — 19 medals in Tokyo and 29 in Paris redefined boundaries once thought impossible. Fresh heroes have emerged elsewhere as well. D. Gukesh and Divya Deshmukh have captured world chess crowns, while Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty have reached the pinnacle of men's doubles badminton. The rise of franchise leagues in kabaddi, kho-kho, football, hockey, and beyond signals that India's sporting story is no longer a single-sport saga. Taken together, these milestones suggest a sporting economy on the cusp of something larger, but only if the foundations are truly strengthened.

Equally telling is the rise of the athlete economy. A para-athlete earning a seven-figure medal bonus, women's hockey players and boxers signing multi-year contracts with global brands, are signals of recognition and reward expanding into new spaces. Sport in India, for too long dominated by a single discipline, is finally becoming a more viable livelihood for many.

Franchise leagues are drawing in new capital and audiences, and the Union government has done its bit through Khelo India and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme to support budding and elite athletes. The recently passed Sports Governance Bill holds out the promise of reform and transparency — long absent from India's National Sports Federations. States, too, are beginning to invest, and corporates have started to take notice, though CSR spending on sport still accounts for less than two per cent.

Much of this gap, in recent years, has been bridged by fantasy and real-money gaming platforms, which were significant sponsors of non-cricket tournaments and State leagues. But with a ban now in place, that stream has vanished overnight, exposing once again just how fragile India's sports economy really is. Without a broader base — more industries investing, more States committing, and more citizens participating — growth will continue to remain uneven and vulnerable.

India cannot build a resilient sporting economy without widening the base of participation. Grassroots development is the foundation. While mega stadiums may serve ambition, progress begins with everyday access — football grounds in village schools, hockey turfs in district centres, badminton courts in municipal halls. If every block, panchayat, and municipality offered children a field of play, the pyramid would naturally broaden.

A "Right to Play", much like the Right to Education, can turn participation into performance, and performance into economic strength. It would not only democratise access to sport but also create a larger talent pool, healthier citizens, and a deeper fan economy. A child picking up a racket in Coorg, or a javelin in Sonipat, should have as much of a chance to grow as a cricketer in Mumbai. That breadth of participation is what will, in time, swell the ranks of elite athletes and create sustainable demand for leagues, media, and sponsorships.

In the end, the economics will follow the opportunity. Once sport is embedded in everyday Indian life, the sporting economy will grow not through subsidies or one-off windfalls but through organic demand. It will then be a self-sustaining cycle of participation, performance, and prosperity.

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WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT

« Still, even after giving everything to my country, I don't always get the training or coach that I truly need – Olympic medallist boxer Lovlina Borgohain expressing frustration over inadequate training opportunities after crashing out in the first round of the World Boxing Championships »

« It was a moment full of tension and frustration, but that doesn't justify my reaction. I made a mistake and I'm sincerely sorry – Luis Suarez apologising for his controversial spitting incident during Inter Miami's Leagues Cup Final loss to Seattle Sounders »

2:18:22

Olympic champion Sifan Hassan shattered the course record to win a historic Sydney Marathon, while Hailemaryam Kiros matched her feat in the men's race. Staged for the first time as part of the elite World Marathon Majors, the event saw Hassan dominate, clocking a blistering 2:18:22 to finish ahead of Kenya's former world record holder Brigid Kosgei (2:18:56). In the men's race, Kiros also set a new course record, completing the route in 2:06:06 — 10 seconds clear of fellow Ethiopian Addisu Gobena, the 20-year-old tipped as a star of the future.

3

Ukrainian Grandmaster Kirill Shevchenko has been handed a three-year ban by FIDE, chess' global governing body, after being found guilty of cheating under Article 11.7(e) of the FIDE Disciplinary Code by the Ethics & Disciplinary Commission. The sanction, effective from October 19, 2024, to October 18, 2027, includes a final year that is suspended. In addition, Shevchenko has been stripped of the Grandmaster title he earned in 2017.

CHAMPION STUFF

Celebration time: World No. 1 Shi Yuqi of China rallied to defeat defending champion Kunlavut Vitidsarn of Thailand 19-21, 21-10, 21-18 in the men's singles final of the Badminton World Championships. In the women's final, Japan's Akane Yamaguchi cruised past China's Chen Yufei 21-9, 21-13. AFP

French fury: Nassourdine Imavov (left) connects clean on Caio Borralho in their middleweight clash at UFC Paris, igniting the Accor Arena crowd. GETTY IMAGES

HOME HEROES RISE IN PARIS

Nassourdine Imavov outclassed Caio Borralho while Benoit Saint Denis shocked Mauricio Ruffy, as French fighters lit up UFC Paris with **statement wins.**

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

In a stunning display of skill and composure, French middleweight Nassourdine Imavov cemented his status as a top contender, defeating Caio Borralho in the main event of UFC Fight Night in Paris.

The unanimous decision — scored 50-45, 49-46, 49-46 — highlighted Imavov's calculated aggression and technical command. After a tentative opening round where Borralho found early success, Imavov adjusted his stance and controlled the rest of the fight with superior striking and ring generalship. By keeping the action on the feet, he landed the cleaner, heavier shots and thrilled the Parisian crowd with a composed yet dominant performance.

The win is Imavov's fifth straight and his second in a UFC main event. More than just another notch on his record, it positions him as a leading force in the middleweight division. His knockout of Israel Adesanya earlier this year, coupled with this commanding victory, has set him on a direct collision course with new champion Khamzat Chimaev. Imavov's ability to adapt mid-fight, his crisp striking, and his calmness under fire suggest he has the tools not just to contend, but to eventually hold the belt.

The co-main event produced one of the evening's biggest shocks. French lightweight Benoit Saint Denis submitted the highly regarded Mauricio Ruffy, a fighter many considered a rising force with an explosive style.

From the opening bell, Saint Denis imposed his will. His relentless pace and well-rounded game smothered Ruffy's offence and forced him backward. Midway through the second round, the pressure broke through. Saint Denis dragged the fight to the mat, swiftly took Ruffy's back, and locked in a rear-naked choke.

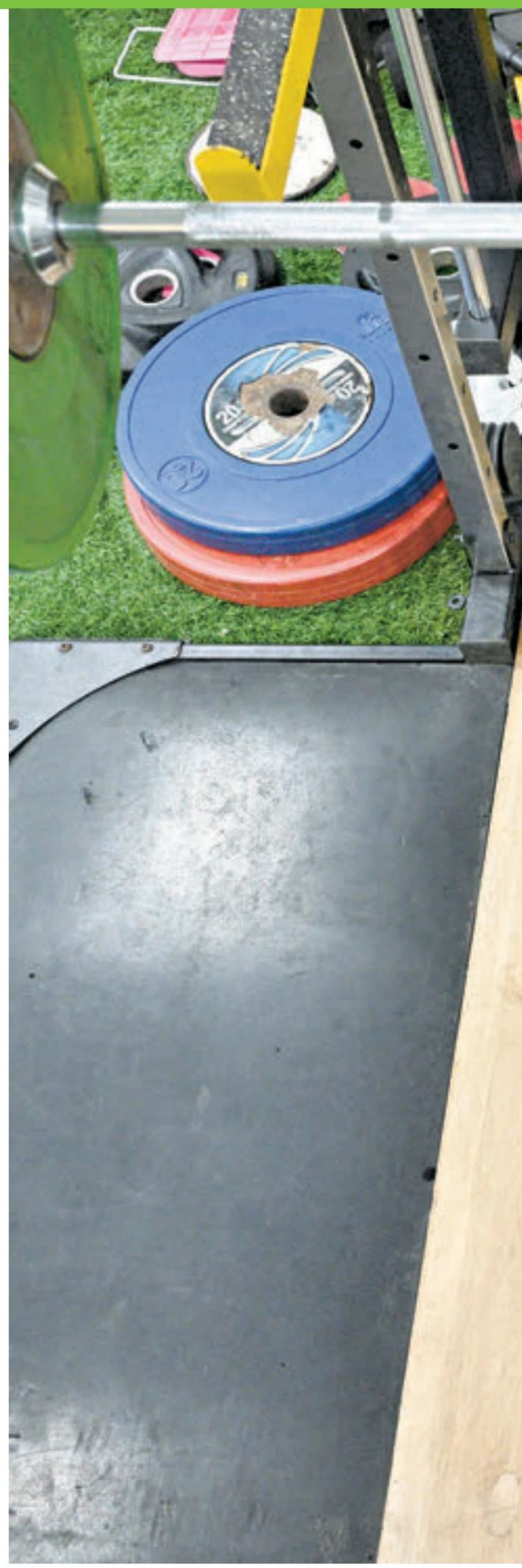
The tap came just before the three-minute mark of Round 2, handing Saint Denis his second consecutive submission win this year. Beyond protecting his place in the rankings, the performance burnished his reputation as one of the division's most dangerous all-around threats, and he did it in front of an ecstatic home crowd.

Did you know?

Anderson 'The Spider' Silva began his storied UFC career in 2006, making an immediate impact in the middleweight division. He defeated Rich Franklin to win the UFC Middleweight Championship, which he held for a staggering 2,457 days.

During his reign, Silva recorded a record-breaking 16-fight winning streak, showcasing his unmatched skills. He defended his title 10 times in succession, dismantling elite opponents with a blend of devastating knockouts and slick submissions.

This stretch cemented Silva as a legend of MMA and one of the greatest fighters in UFC history. His reign ended in 2013, and his career closed with three consecutive losses in 2020, the last against Jamaica's Uriah Hall. In 2023, Silva was inducted into the UFC Hall of Fame.



« I've never thought of myself as 'just' a para athlete. I want to inspire everyone »

PRAVEEN KUMAR

Winning gold in Men's high jump T64 at the Paris Paralympics changed my life. I cleared 2.08m, a personal best, and stood on top of the podium with the Indian flag. I'd won medals before, including a silver at the Tokyo Paralympics and gold at the Asian Para Games, but Paris felt different. It gave me a new sense of freedom. I don't worry about money the way I used to. If I want to shop, I shop. When Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium closed for World Championships renovations and I lost access to its gym, I bought my own weight set and installed it in the basement of my Delhi home. I've removed every excuse for not doing well.

Now, as the Para Athletics World Championships in New Delhi approach, my focus is sharper than ever. This is the one medal missing from my collection. I've been unlucky with injuries — twice, including at both the Tokyo and Paris Paralympics, I hurt my take-off foot. But I'm trying to stay healthy this time. This Championship is not only important for me but also for para sports in India.

More than 100 countries will be

On the street, people might see only a 'disabled' person. But in the gym or on the field, I show them something they never imagined. That moment, when their perception changes, is what I enjoy most.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

there, and I believe the crowds will be bigger than usual. People will see buses of athletes, flags from around the world, and the level of competition. That exposure can inspire young athletes and spread awareness of our sport.

In training, I'm adjusting for peak performance. Off-season, my weight work is about lifting heavy and slow. But as competition nears, I shift to speed. Because of my disability, it's never straightforward. My legs are different lengths, so I balance my left foot on two weight plates to even things out. Still, the pressure on my spine is constant, and balance remains tricky.

Right now, I'm doing snatch lifts of 60kg, bench presses of 85kg, and squats of 120kg — sometimes even

150kg. When people who know nothing about para athletes see me lifting, they can't believe it. On the street, they might see only a "disabled" person, but in the gym or on the field, I show them something they never imagined. That moment, when their perception changes, is what I enjoy most.

Jumping is my passion. At 165cm tall, I cleared 2.08m in Paris. That's a 43cm difference. The world record, whether for able-bodied or para athletes, is a 57cm gap. That's my dream target. If I can reach 2.09m or 2.10m in Delhi, I'll start believing I can chase that number.

People sometimes ask why I set my sights so high. I already have a Paralympic gold, after all. But I've never thought of myself as just a para athlete. I want to inspire everyone.

That mindset goes back to my childhood in Jewar. My teachers didn't want me to compete in high jump because they thought I'd hurt myself. I had one leg with a disability, but my other leg was springy. So I insisted. That stubbornness paid off. I became the best jumper in my school — and then the best in India. I even won gold at the CBSE school Nationals against able-bodied athletes. Some competitors resented losing to someone with a disability. At first, they didn't mind me joining in because they never believed I could beat them. Once I did, they wanted me moved to "my own" category.

> « I want them to leave thinking, 'I didn't know he could do that.' »

That's how I learned about para sports. I found my coach, Satyapal Singh sir, at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium. In my very first trial there, I cleared 1.80m. He called the other athletes and told them I was the kind of example he wanted. I've been training with him ever since.

Talent alone isn't enough — you need someone to believe in you. Satyapal sir has been that for me, especially during my lowest moment in 2019. At the Junior World Championships, I was classified into a tougher category than expected. I had prepared for a field where the record was 1.95m, but suddenly I was up against a record of 2.19m. I felt defeated and quit the sport for a few months. He kept persuading me to return, and eventually I did. That decision led me to Tokyo, where I won silver, and then to Paris, where I fulfilled my dream.

I've come far, but I know there's more to do. I've never won a World Championship medal. I want to stand on the podium in Delhi, not just for myself but for everyone who sees me jump. Many people in the stands may not even know my name. That's fine. I want them to leave thinking, "I didn't know he could do that."

As told to Jonathan Selvaraj

Golden leap: At just 22, Praveen Kumar has become a double Paralympic medallist, upgrading his Tokyo silver with a gold medal in the men's T64 high jump at Paris 2024.
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« Proud of winning Paralympic silver, but the true reward lies in never giving up, showing up each day, and living life as it's meant to be lived »

PRANAV SOORMA

People are always surprised when I tell them about my practice schedule. My day begins when most people are asleep. I wake up at 1 a.m. so I can reach the training ground by 3, where my coach, Naval Singh sir, is waiting.

I train at that time as a consequence of my spinal injury — my body doesn't sweat naturally. In summer, once the sun rises after 6 or 7, exercising and doing explosive movements becomes nearly impossible for me. So, I work from 3 a.m. to around 9 a.m., winding down just as other athletes are starting their sessions.

I've followed this routine since 2022, when I began training with Naval sir. It might sound strange, but it works. It brought me medals at the 2022 Asian Para Games and a silver at the Paris Paralympics, and I'm hoping it will help me again at the upcoming World Championships in New Delhi.

The challenge this time is the change in equipment. In club throw, our club weighs around 400 grams, but its weight distribution has now been altered. That makes it harder to throw as far, much like when the javelin's weight was changed and the world record dropped from over 100m to around 97m. I still think a winning throw in New Delhi will be close to 35m, and I believe I can reach that mark.

When I think about results, I won't lie — I want a gold medal. According to Naval sir, that's the only medal that counts. I feel I could have won gold at the Paris Paralympics too, but fate had other plans. At the Indian selection trials, I threw 37.23m. But three days before my event in Paris, I was struck by a severe fever and infection. I couldn't leave my bed for two days before competing.

Still, Naval sir kept me going. He told me, half-jokingly, that he wouldn't let me back into India without a medal. By God's blessing, I managed to summon enough strength to throw for a silver despite my condition.

This time, though, I want to

Destiny, too, plays its part. My surname, Soorma, means the ultimate fighter in Punjabi. I believe it's in my blood to fight till the end. That's why I brand my name everywhere — on my wheelchair, my T-shirt, even my caps. I want people to see it. And now, they do.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

perform not just for myself but for India. A strong showing at the Para Athletics World Championships would be a big step for our country. I want the para sports movement to grow, to inspire more athletes, and to change more lives — just as sports changed mine.

I was in Class 11, in 2011, when an accident damaged my spinal cord. At first, I couldn't move my hands, get up from bed, or even breathe without support. At 16, I thought my life was over. Just when I was supposed to take flight, my wings were broken.

It took time to accept that I had no movement below my chest. My parents were my pillars — they never let me dwell on what I'd lost. They told me I could still build a meaningful life, whether I chose to work, study, or pursue something else. They only wanted me to be happy and financially secure.

Ironically, I might never have entered sports without my injury. Before it, I hadn't dreamed of being an athlete. Even after the accident, I planned to study, get a stable job as an engineer or CA, and secure my future. But over time, I felt I wanted more. I didn't want to blend into the crowd. I wanted to do something distinctive.

I tried para sports in 2018 under coach Giriraj Singh sir at Faridabad stadium. That's where I discovered club throw. Because my fingers couldn't grip the club, I had to use gum to make it stick to my palm. It was tough, but within weeks I loved it. My life before sports felt like living in a cage. When I came to the stadium, I finally felt alive.

I won bronze at Nationals, then silver at my first international competition — the 2019 Beijing Grand Prix. But the reality was harsh. I wasn't earning anything.

My parents, not wealthy to begin with, took loans to fund my training and travel. I could only train on Sundays, when my father was free from work to take me. Despite working hard, I couldn't see a future in sport. So, in 2020, after I got a

Red-letter day: Pranav Soorma battled illness on the eve of competition but still hurled his way to silver in the men's club throw F51 at Paris 2024 — part of India's historic one-two finish in athletics. GETTY IMAGES

government bank job, I decided to leave athletics.

But God had other plans. In 2022, Giriraj sir persuaded me to give it another shot and introduced me to Naval sir. That meeting changed my life.

Naval sir had been coaching for 15 years and knew not only how to train but also how to map an athlete's entire journey: how to secure sponsors and how to fight the battles that mattered. After our first month together, he told me to bring a new diary. On the first page, he wrote: 'Pranav Soorma, Asian Para Games gold medal, Paralympic medal, Asian record holder, World record holder.'

I laughed and told him, "Sir, I've just started. Is this even possible?" He replied, "I know how to dream. I know how to show dreams. And I know how to fulfill them."

The only condition was belief. If he said night was day, I had to believe him. If he told me to train at 3 a.m., I had to do it. And he was right. I went on to win Asian Para Games gold with an Area record, and then a Paralympic silver in Club Throw F51.

I still write in that diary; my achievements, my goals, and my gratitude to God. When people ask who inspires me, I don't have to look anywhere else.

Destiny, too, plays its part. My surname, Soorma, means the ultimate fighter in Punjabi. I believe it's in my blood to fight till the end. That's why I brand my name everywhere — on my wheelchair, my T-shirt, even my caps. I want people to see it. And now, they do.

Since Paris, my life has changed. My medal brought happiness to my family and pride to my country. I received the Arjuna Award earlier this year. People who once doubted me, saying I would never amount to anything, that I was just dependent on my family — now ask to take pictures with me. I see the change in their eyes: This boy has done something.

The silver medal hangs framed on my wall. I look at it often. But I don't think it's my biggest achievement. The real achievement is that I never gave up. After my accident, I wanted to quit on life itself. I thought it had no meaning. But I kept moving forward.

Today, I am alive, competing, and winning. The Paralympic medal and Arjuna Award are rewards, but the greatest victory is showing up every day and living life as it's meant to be lived.

As told to Jonathan Selvaraj

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« The social media follower count can go up and down, but my achievements should not »

NAVDEEP SINGH

Someone told me recently that I'm the second most-followed Indian para-athlete on Instagram, with around 220,000 followers. It doesn't feel real to me because just a year ago, I had only about 10,000. It's strange when people say they wait to see what I'm posting.

All of that changed after the 2024 Paralympics, where I won gold in F41 Javelin. My social media went *pagal* (crazy). I got caught up in it too — thinking about what video to post next, what stories to share, checking who was following me, and whether someone famous had started following me.

Despite all the progress I had made, I never expected to throw 46 metres [the second throw was a then Personal Best of 46.39m] and win gold in Paris. The Chinese athlete had reached 48 metres, and the Iranian was throwing around 47. Realistically, I should have been aiming for bronze. But things happened differently. Suddenly, I was in silver position, and then I moved to gold. Even now, it's hard to believe. People still remind me of how I shouted all those gaalis (abuses) after the win; it's embarrassing. I really hope that if I win gold in New Delhi, I manage my emotions better, at least away from the TV cameras!

Even now, updates go up on my *Instagram* every few days, but I don't handle them anymore. I deleted the app from my phone three months ago and handed over my account to someone else. My reason is simple: I have a big target ahead — the Para Athletics World Championships in Delhi. This is the biggest competition for me since the Paris Olympics, and I want to give it my full focus.

I'm waiting for the medal designs of the Worlds to be released, because I plan to keep a picture of that medal as my phone wallpaper for motivation. Apart from gold, there's another number always in my mind: 47.32m. That's what I threw to win in Paris. I want to go beyond that. I may be a Paralympic champion, but in New Delhi, I want to achieve a Personal Best.

Right now, I'm training at SAI, Gandhinagar. I have a bad habit where my left arm drops too much during the throw, and I'm working hard to correct it. I'm aiming for technical perfection so that I don't make mistakes on the big day. I want that day to be truly special.

This year has already brought big

Life has changed a lot since Paris. Para-athletes are finally getting the recognition we never had before. Para sport is being promoted, and athletes like me, once treated as a joke, are now celebrated.

VIJAY SONEJI

Rising fame: From a Paralympic podium in Paris to a growing digital fan base , Navdeep's popularity has soared like his javelin. PTI

moments. In January, I went to Rashtrapati Bhavan to receive the Arjuna Award. As I waited to walk up to the stage with the President, I remembered my first visit back in 2012. My sports career had only just begun, and I was receiving the National Child Award for winning two medals at the Para Athletics Nationals. I was just 11, with no idea what path lay ahead — whether I'd return to Rashtrapati Bhavan again, or one day win an Arjuna Award.

At that time, all I knew was that I wanted to be a sportsperson and make my country proud. Sports had always interested me. I was the kind of student who studied just enough to avoid a beating. My father had been a wrestler, and my first love was wrestling too. But because of my disability, my back wasn't flexible. Any load led to injuries. I wrestled for a while, but eventually I had to stop. By then, I had already started para-athletics, so athletics became my focus. People often ask me if there was a single turning point when I chose athletics as a career. The truth is, there wasn't. It was a series of steps. Winning my first national medals in 2012 and being invited to Rashtrapati Bhavan gave me huge motivation, because I received so much support and recognition after that.

I think I've been fortunate to have more highs than lows in my career, though the lows were important too. In 2019, I wasn't sure where things were going. Then came the heartbreak of finishing fourth at the Tokyo Paralympics. I was devastated, but that result was crucial. It showed me how much I needed to improve. Tokyo was my first Paralympics; I had no experience. I didn't know how to throw in the rain or handle the pressure of elite competition. I learned all that in the next two to three years.

After Paris, I moved on quickly. It's important to always have new targets. New goals help you forget the old ones. After Tokyo, I started preparing for the Worlds and the 2024 Paralympics. After Paris, I took a month-and-a-half break, then started training again because the Worlds became my next focus.

Another reason I got serious again was weight. I normally weigh around 57 kg, but I had gained three extra kilos. That was my wake-up call.

Since then, I've competed in two tournaments — the National Championships in Chennai and one in Germany. At the Nationals, I managed only 39 metres (39.93), but in Germany I improved to 43. I know I can do better, and I'm saving my best for Delhi.

Life has changed a lot since Paris. Para-athletes are finally getting the recognition we never had before. Para sport is being promoted, and athletes like me, once treated as a joke, are now celebrated. People recognise me, call me by name, and want pictures. Instead of laughter, I hear claps. After the Paralympics, appreciation poured in. I was invited to *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC), then *The Great Indian Kapil Show*. Instagram followers kept shooting up.

For a while, it was exciting. But I knew all this was temporary. Followers are temporary. Achievements are permanent. That's why I deleted the app. As long as I keep winning for my country, I'll have people's love. The social media follower count can go up and down, but my achievements should not.

As told to Jonathan Selvaraj

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« Too often, para athletes are met with sympathy instead of empathy »

YOGESH KATHUNIYA

It's going to be special to compete at a World Championships in New Delhi. What excites me most about playing at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium is that my family will finally see me at a live international event. No one in my family has witnessed me competing at this level before. That alone gives me great motivation.

At the same time, I can't let it overwhelm me. My parents may be in the stands, but they can't throw for me. I need to stay focused on what I have to do.

Hosting the World Championships in India is important. It means more people will learn about para sports. With the country also bidding for the Commonwealth Games and the Olympics, organising high-profile events like this is vital. But the benefits don't stop there. When such tournaments are staged, athletes gain access to better facilities and equipment. Training schemes are launched, and younger athletes see role models up close. That kind of exposure can inspire the next generation.

I know, because I was once that child looking for inspiration.

My life really changed after the Tokyo Paralympics. Until then, not many people knew who I was. In the Men's Discus Throw F56 final, I thought I had underperformed because I missed out on gold by just half a metre. Yet when I checked my phone afterwards, I had over 1,000 missed calls. I couldn't believe I had suddenly become so important. I still get goosebumps thinking about it.

At the 2024 Paralympics in Paris, I won another silver. Again, the love and recognition I received made up for missing gold. Those moments have shown me how much sport can give, and they motivate me to aim even higher.

But my journey into sports was far from straightforward.

I grew up in Bahadurgarh, just outside Delhi. At nine, I suffered from Guillain-Barre syndrome, a neurological disease that attacked my lower limbs. At first, doctors thought I had polio. My mother even learned physiotherapy to help speed up my recovery. For a long time, I

Everything changed in 2015 when my calipers broke. Suddenly, my limp was obvious. I felt embarrassed, but one of my seniors, Sachin Yadav, noticed. He asked me about my condition and introduced me to para sports.

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hoped I'd be able to run and play again like the other kids. Eventually, I had to accept that my legs would never be as strong.

In my village, I was bullied constantly. I wore calipers that helped me walk, but that didn't stop people from targeting me. To regain some confidence, I started going to the gym. It became a kind of therapy. By the time I got to Kirori Mal College, I had 17-inch biceps and six-pack abs. Still, I never imagined becoming a sportsperson. I didn't even know para sports existed. I was focused on my studies and preparing for my Chartered Accountancy exams.

Everything changed in 2015 when my calipers broke. Suddenly, my limp was obvious. I felt embarrassed, but one of my seniors, Sachin Yadav, noticed. He asked me about my condition and introduced me to para sports. I resisted at first, but he persisted and took me to the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium — by coincidence, the Delhi State Para Athletics Championships were on. I was instantly hooked.

Before I could overthink, Sachin *bhaiyya* helped me fill out a form for the Haryana State Paralympic Championships. I competed in javelin, shot put, and discus, finishing last in all three. Still, I loved

Silver lining: India's Yogesh Kathuniya celebrates his silver medal in the men's F56 discus at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics in Japan. GETTY IMAGES

it. That was the day I decided I wanted to be an athlete. Even then, I was torn between sport and a career as a CA. It wasn't until I watched the 2016 Rio Paralympics that I knew I needed a proper coach. I found one in Satyapal Singh at JLN Stadium.

My days became intense: leaving home at 4 a.m., taking a bus to the stadium, training for hours, heading to classes, then hitting the gym in the evening. Sometimes I travelled ticketless just to save money for my diet. I even gave tuition classes to cover expenses. People often asked why I, a disabled person, was working so hard. I'd just laugh and say, "Sports is my medicine."

Results didn't come immediately. It took a year before I won my first national titles — gold in discus, shot put, and javelin at the 2018 Nationals. That was a turning point.

I've had my share of recognition since then — the Arjuna Award after Tokyo, for instance. But I've also felt overlooked. After Paris, I wasn't given any award, even though I had scored more points than some athletes who were recognised. I don't begrudge Manu Bhaker the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna, but I couldn't help feeling treated differently. Too often, para athletes are met with sympathy instead of empathy. Some people don't like that I speak about it, but I will never stop telling the truth.

As long as I perform, no one can silence me. My goals have grown since I first started. In 2022, I set a world record of 48.34m. Now, I want to go beyond 50m before I retire. If I can do it in New Delhi, in front of my family, there would be nothing like it.

As told to Jonathan Selvaraj

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« Sports has given me a chance to serve India again, something I thought I had lost after my injury in the Army »

HOKATO HOTOZHE SEMA

Winning a bronze medal in Men's Shot Put F57 at the Paris Paralympics was the most important moment of my life. But some of the hardest lessons came afterwards.

What makes that medal even more special is how close I came to missing it. Just before the Games, I suffered a bout of dengue. As soon as I recovered, I caught chicken pox three days before flying out to Paris. I was so ill I couldn't train at all after landing.

Honestly, I didn't believe I would win a medal until the moment I stepped onto the field. Then, something shifted inside me — a voice told me I wasn't going home without one. Despite being far from my best, I threw a Personal Best of 14.66m. That bronze medal proved to me that I could overcome physical limitations and still make my country proud.

When I returned from Paris, everything changed. Suddenly, I was being recognised everywhere, invited to events and honoured with the Arjuna Award. As the first athlete

After losing my leg, I used to cover up my stump because I was ashamed. Now I wear shorts everywhere. If people stare, I let them. I tell others with disabilities: never be shy of them. Turn them into strength.

Focussed force: Nagaland's Hokato Sema in action during the men's F-57 shot put at the 23rd National Para Athletics Championships in Chennai.
B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

from Nagaland to win a Paralympic medal, the support was overwhelming. I'm a soldier in the Army, so my training expenses are taken care of, but otherwise I'm a middle-class person. The attention was new to me — and it came at a cost.

I wasn't training enough, and it showed. At the Khelo India Paralympic Games this year, I finished third in the men's shot put F57 category. People asked how someone who had medalled at the Paralympics could lose at home. That defeat lit a fire in me. I went back to training seriously, and at the India Open Para Athletics Championships, I won gold with a new personal best of 14.88m. But I haven't forgotten that early setback. Now, I'm training harder than ever for the World Para Athletics Championships in Delhi. I've competed there twice before without a medal — it's time to change that.

Sports has given me a chance to serve India again, something I thought I had lost after my injury in the Army. Growing up in Nagaland, I enjoyed playing sports, but my real ambition was to join the Army. The film *Border* inspired me, and as someone from a tribe once known as headhunters, I dreamed of becoming an elite soldier in the Special Forces. I couldn't join the Special Forces directly, of course.

I was recruited into the Assam Regiment, trained for a year in Jammu and Kashmir, and was just three days away from joining the Special Forces when I went on one last patrol with my old unit. I stepped on a mine.

When I woke up in the hospital, part of my leg was gone. After treatment in Srinagar, I was sent to Pune for an artificial limb.

I returned to my unit but was limited to administrative duties — canteen work, back office tasks. It wasn't why I had joined the Army, and the disappointment weighed on me. To fight the boredom, I spent time in the gym, bench-pressing 120kg, but I had no direction toward sports.

That changed almost 15 years later, when I was planning to retire. I went to Pune to get a new artificial limb and happened to meet Col. Gaurav Dutta. He encouraged me to try para sports before making my final decision. It was a chance encounter that changed everything. He explained how to get started, and I began watching training videos on *YouTube*.

I started athletics in October 2016 and competed in my first National Championships in April 2017 in Jaipur, winning gold in shot put. Even with limited preparation, I loved the feeling of victory. Initially I competed in the standing throws, but when that category was removed in 2018, I had to switch to wheelchair throws. Because of COVID, my reclassification was delayed, and I missed the Tokyo Paralympics. That was the lowest point of my career. I had trained for two years and didn't even get a chance to compete. For a time, I thought about quitting, but eventually I realised that nothing good comes from negative thoughts.

Once reclassified, I returned to competition, winning bronze at the Hangzhou Para Asian Games in 2023 and then preparing for Paris. That medal in Paris remains the happiest moment of my life.

Beyond medals, sports has restored my confidence. After losing my leg, I used to cover up my stump because I was ashamed. Now I wear shorts everywhere. If people stare, I let them. I tell others with disabilities: never be shy of them. Turn them into strength, rise to the top, and make your country proud.

I'm not satisfied with just a Paralympic bronze. My goal is to keep pushing myself, and I want to give my best at the Los Angeles Games in 2028.

As told to Jonathan Selvaraj

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ARJUN BAKSHI SKATING INDIA INTO A NEW ERA

*From **Yamunanagar's Swami Vivekanand Public School** to a silver at the **20th Asian Roller Skating Championship in Jecheon,** Arjun Bakshi inspires India's next generation.*

Fresh off a historic silver medal in **Jecheon, South Korea, Arjun Bakshi** is being hailed as one of India's brightest roller hockey talents. For him, the victory was more than just a podium finish, it marked the culmination of years of dedication and the fulfilment of a family legacy. His father, **Vishal Bakshi,** represented India at the Asian Championship in 1995 but narrowly missed a medal. Nearly two decades later, Arjun carried forward that dream and brought home the honor his father once pursued.

A six-time national gold medallist, Arjun's journey began in the classrooms and skating tracks of Swami Vivekanand Public School, Yamunanagar, Sector 17. With early encouragement from his school and family, he transformed his childhood passion into national pride. *"Without the support that my school, **Swami Vivekanand Public School, Sector 17, Jagadhri,** offered me throughout my schooling, I wouldn't have been able to achieve such great success,"* Arjun said.

He was equally quick to credit his teammates. *"I received support and guidance from the players of the team, who helped me a lot throughout this championship,"* said Arjun, an alumnus of Swami Vivekanand Public School, Sector 17, Jagadhri, where he has been training in the sport from an early age.

His leadership skills and scoring ability also shone at the World Roller Games 2024 in Novara, Italy, where he emerged as India's top scorer.

What makes Arjun's story truly inspiring is his role as the youngest-ever captain of the senior Indian roller hockey team. At an age when most athletes are still finding their feet, he carried the hopes of an entire nation and proved that belief, hard work, and resilience can lead to greatness.

« Sport matters because it allows us to be visible in a country where public spaces remain largely inaccessible »

EKTA BHYAN

Everyone has their own motivation for performing at the Para Athletics World Championships in New Delhi.

For me, one reason is deeply personal: it's my first chance to compete at a World Championships in India. I've already been to four editions abroad, but this one feels different.

It's one thing to do well overseas and another to do well at home, with family and friends cheering — in Hindi, no less!

But my journey to this stage didn't begin with sport.

I was paralysed in a car accident at 18. After the injury, my first priority was academics. I wanted financial independence. In 2014, I cleared the Haryana State civil services exam, a turning point in my life. It challenged many perceptions — I proved that women with disabilities could be independent, earn a living, and support themselves.

That was when Amit Saroha, one of the pioneers of para sport in India, noticed me through a newspaper interview. He introduced me to athletics. At first, I doubted myself, but my parents convinced me to give it a try. Their reasoning was simple: I already had a job, so there was nothing to lose. Sport could at least help me focus on my health. Once I began winning medals, there was no looking back.

I enjoy winning, of course, but more than that, I love the training and the chance to be outdoors. For most persons with disabilities in India, public spaces remain inaccessible. Often, we are confined to our homes. Sport gives us a rare opportunity to step outside, breathe fresh air, and be visible in a society that too often hides us away. That's why the accessibility upgrades at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium matter so much, even if there is still a long way to go.

My first big stage was the Tokyo Paralympics, though I couldn't perform to my potential there. I looked forward to Paris 2024, but my

The hardest struggle is not training — it's changing mindsets. People with disabilities are still not seen as part of the mainstream.

R. RAGU

Homecoming goal: Ekta Bhyan in action during the Women's Club Throw F-51 final at the World Para Athletics Championships in Kobe in May 2024. She won gold, and now carries that momentum into her first Worlds on home soil in New Delhi. GETTY IMAGES

event, the F51 Women's Club Throw, was dropped from the programme in 2022. That was disappointing. Still, sport teaches you to reset. I reminded myself that every competition matters, whether it's the Asian Games or the World Championships. My category will return at the Los Angeles Paralympics in 2028, and I'm determined to win a medal there.

Over the past four years, I've stayed consistent: gold medals at the National Championships, a bronze at the Asian Para Games, and medals at the World Championships, including gold and bronze in Paris in 2023. This season, I won gold at the Indian Open Paralympic Championships and followed up with silver at the India Open.

Now, in Delhi, I have a number in my mind — one I keep visualising every time I train. My personal best is 21.5m, and I'm intent on improving that. For three years, I haven't missed a single day of training. Mornings are for the gym, evenings for outdoor practice, carefully scheduled because thermoregulation is a big challenge after a spinal injury. With only 40 per cent lung capacity and limited use of my muscles, every session requires careful management. My shoulders are my strongest asset; my biceps are okay but my triceps, forearms and wrists are very weak, and my fingers have no strength at all. But I work with what I have.

It hasn't been easy. I always need two people to help me with daily routines — transferring from wheelchair to car, reaching the ground, managing travel. Public transport is out of the question, and a car has to accommodate me, my wheelchair, and my assistants. That means bearing the expense of three people, not one.

The harder struggle, though, is mindsets. People with disabilities are still not seen as part of the mainstream.

Accessibility remains the biggest barrier to education, work, and independence. When we travel overseas, public spaces and transport are usually wheelchair accessible.

That's not the case in India. I can't imagine myself travelling by bus or train. Because of this lack of accessibility, people with disabilities are denied opportunities to be independent — to continue their education, find employment, or pursue sport. It remains one of the biggest barriers we face.

That is why visibility in sport is so powerful. After Rio, Tokyo, and Paris, I've seen how Paralympic sport is gaining recognition.

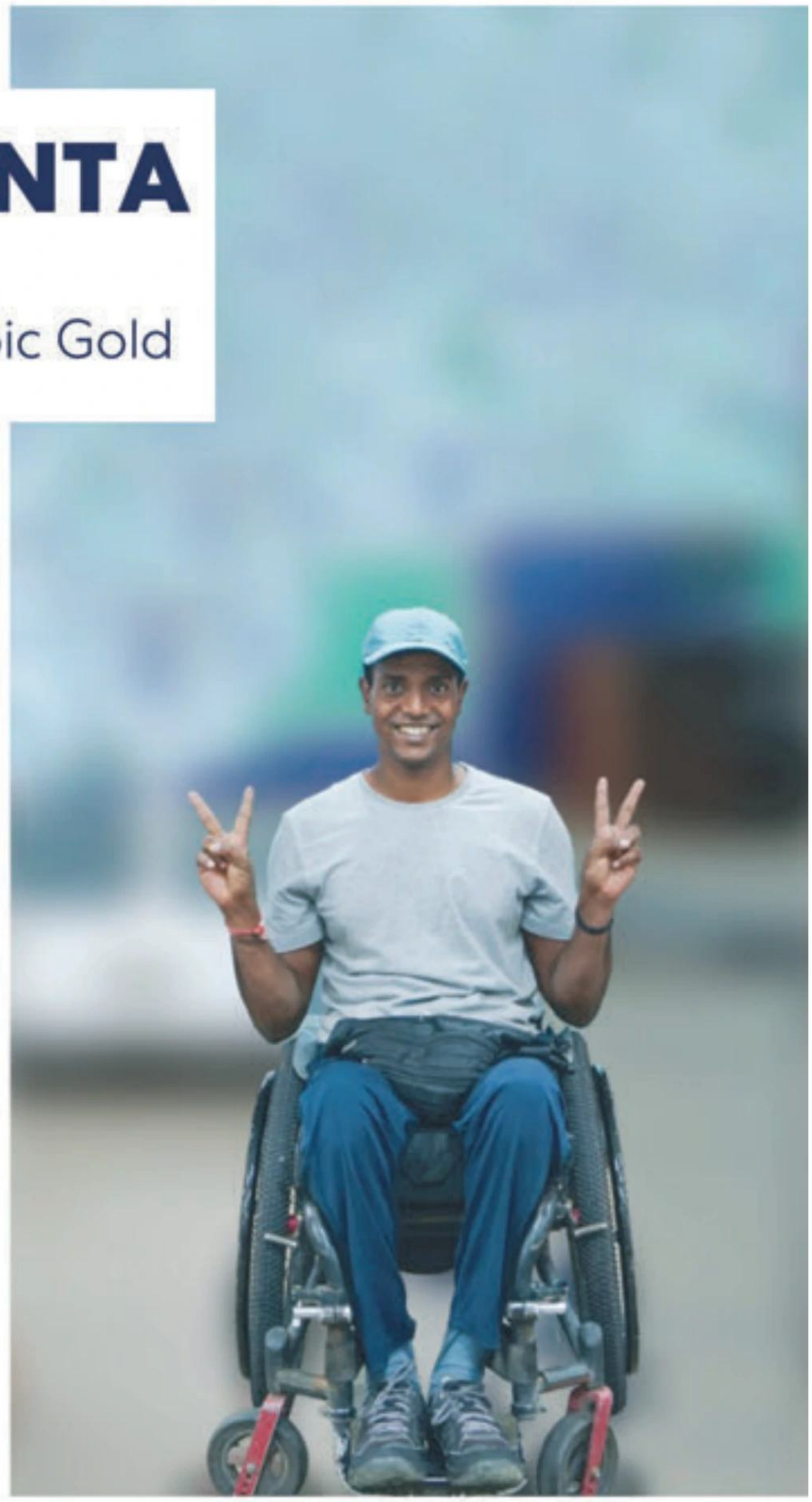
The World Championships in Delhi will be another step forward; not just for me, but for thousands of para athletes who will finally be celebrated for their effort.

I am, of course, aiming for a medal. But more than that, I am looking forward to a celebration of inclusion.

As told to Jonathan Selvaraj

KAMAL KANTA

Racing Beyond Limits, Dreaming of Paralympic Gold



On a cold December evening in 2014, a volleyball game in Odisha turned tragic when 22-year-old Kamal Kanta Nayak fell and fractured his spine. Paralysed from the waist down, doctors told him he would never walk again. For a year, despair loomed—until his mother's words sparked a turnaround: "If sports became the reason for your fall, let it also become the reason for your triumph."

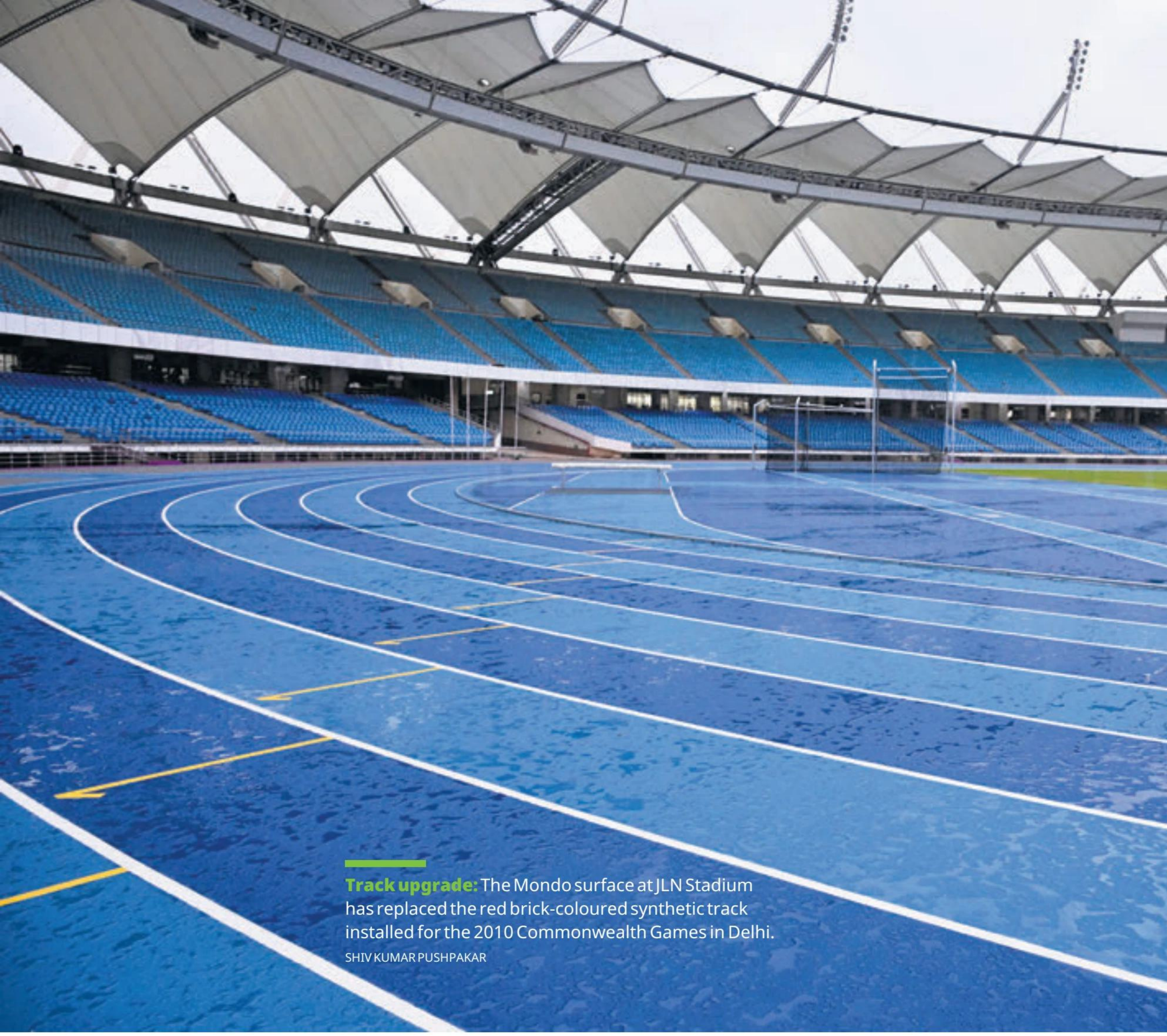
Born in Niajpur, Puri district, to a farmer father and homemaker mother, Kamal grew up with two sisters and a passion for sports. In 2016, persuaded by his elder sister, he reluctantly entered a wheelchair marathon in Bhubaneswar—and won. The wheelchair was no longer a cage; it became his wings.

From there, he turned survivor into mentor. As a Peer Mentor at SVNIRTAR, he has guided over 1,000 people with spinal cord injuries. Through Enable India, he helped establish wheelchair basketball, rugby, and marathon teams in Odisha, inspiring more than 25 para-athletes to compete nationally.

Then came history. India's first ultra-wheelchair marathoner, Kamal completed over 100 races and in 2022 set a Guinness World Record by covering 213 km in 24 hours on a manual wheelchair, eclipsing the previous 182 km mark. His medal tally is equally inspiring—gold medals and a national record in swimming (2023–24), two more golds and a silver at the 2024–25 Nationals, plus podiums in 5000m and javelin throw. He has also represented India at the 2025 World Para Grand Prix in Delhi and the Indian Open Para Athletics International in Bengaluru.

Global recognition followed with the Discovery Award 2023 from the UN Office in Vienna. Yet Kamal's eyes are firmly on the 2028 Paralympics. The Odisha Sports & Youth Services Department has backed his journey with cash awards and full support. Training at the ABTP Sports Science Centre, Kalinga Stadium, Kamal continues to set an inspiring example of resilience and discipline.

Kamal Kanta Nayak is not just racing for medals—he is racing against fate itself, proving that destiny can wound, but determination always heals.



Track upgrade: The Mondo surface at JLN Stadium has replaced the red brick-coloured synthetic track installed for the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi.
SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

» COVER PACKAGE
GROUND REPORT

The house of games, rebuilt for everyone

Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium gets a **para-friendly makeover** with a blue Mondotrack and upgraded facilities ahead of the World Para Athletics Championships.

Final touches: Workers prepare the surface under a temporary scaffolding at JLN Stadium in Delhi as part of the ongoing arrangements for the Para World Athletics Championships, set to be hosted in India for the first time.
SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

When regulars walked into New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium late last month, they would have noticed a striking change. The dull, patchy orange track that had served since the 2010 Commonwealth Games has been replaced by a gleaming, two-toned Mondotrack in shades of blue. The new surface, inaugurated on August 27, is part of a larger refurbishment ahead of the World Para Athletics Championships beginning September 27.

The lanes of the track alternate between dark and light blue, a detail that is not just cosmetic. "The most important part of any athletics stadium is the surface because it directly affects performance. Every Olympic and Paralympic Games takes place on a Mondotrack. It can improve performance by around 10 per cent. That's why we recommended it to the Sports Ministry. Even though it was expensive — the track cost about Rs.50 crore as part of the Rs. 80 crore stadium refurbishment — they agreed," says Satyapal Singh, chief coach of the Indian Para Athletics team and director of Para Athletics World Championships. "We've never had one in India before, and now we will have two: one in the main stadium and another in the practice area."

The alternating hues serve a practical purpose too. "It looks distinctive to spectators in the stadium or on television, but it's also very helpful for partially visually impaired athletes. It makes it easier for them to identify their lanes," Singh explains.

This emphasis on accessibility runs through the JLN Stadium makeover. Built originally for the 1982 Asian Games, the venue has been reconfigured with para-athletes in mind: throwing and jumping areas modified, seating upgraded, ramps installed, lifts widened, and toilets redesigned. "The goal is to make the complex not just accessible to differently abled athletes but 'para-friendly'," says Devendra Jhajharia, president of the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI).

"I've been training athletes at JLN Stadium for 20 years. The change has been dramatic," says Singh. The jumping pits, for instance, have been widened from 3 to 3.5 metres to meet para-athlete requirements. Throwing circles have been fitted with anchor points for seated competitors. "Zero labelling has been done on the track so that any wheelchair athlete or visually impaired athlete doesn't face problems," Singh adds.

Accessibility begins even before athletes reach the stadium. With around 350 wheelchair competitors expected, including 200 who use wheelchairs daily, PCI officials had to secure hotel rooms that were genuinely accessible. "That means level floors, support handles, and extra-wide bathrooms. There aren't

Venue overhaul: A worker installs new seating as JLN Stadium undergoes a makeover ahead of the global para showpiece. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

many such rooms in Delhi, but we managed," Singh says.

Inside the stadium, 20 of the 40 washrooms have been made fully accessible, with the rest semi-accessible. Lifts are being installed for wheelchair users, and an entire first-floor gallery has been reserved for up to 500 wheelchair-bound athletes and coaches. "A wheelchair athlete can sit anywhere," Singh stresses.

The scale of para athletics also makes the task unique. "In able-bodied competition, there are 48 events. In para athletics, there are 186 — over four times as many. And technically speaking, it's 100 times more complex because for every event and every disability, the rules and regulations are different," Singh points out.

This complexity extends to officiating. Over the past year, nearly 180 technical officials have been trained, with 150 set to work at the World Championships. "For visually impaired athletes, for example, the length of the tether binding athlete to guide is strictly defined. Wheelchair racing has precise measurements. We've conducted six courses in the past six months, with national and international technical officers coming in to train our officials," Singh explains.

But the bigger question looms: will these improvements last beyond the Championships? Indian sports infrastructure has often struggled with upkeep once the spotlight fades. Singh insists this time will be different. "I've coached para athletes here for two decades. At least 25 per cent of those who train here are para athletes. After the Games, they will benefit from the same accessible gyms, toilets, and tracks. When people see these facilities, their perspective will change," he says.

For para-athletes like Asian Games and World Championships gold medallist Ekta Bhyan, the hope is that such changes spread nationwide. "It's a great start at JLN, but it's important that it doesn't stop there," she says.

Jhajharia echoes the sentiment. "This is just the beginning. When officials and administrators see how well JLN has been made accessible, they will ask, 'Why can't we do this too?'"

That, perhaps, will be the true legacy of the Para Athletics World Championships.

"Nehru Stadium has witnessed some of India's greatest sporting moments — the 1982 Asian Games, the Commonwealth Games. The Para Athletics World Championships will create new memories here," says Jhajharia.

Inclusive shift: "The change has been dramatic": Coach Satyapal Singh **(right)** on JLN Stadium's transformation for para athletes. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

International stars to watch

Aashin Prasad
aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

PICS: GETTY IMAGES

MARKUS REHM
(Germany)

Rehm, who will be entering his ninth World Championships, will be among the most decorated para athletes on the track. The German long jumper has seven long jump gold medals — three in F44 and four in T64 classifications — in the Championships.

The five-time Paralympic gold medallist is also the current record holder in T64 with a jump of 8.72 metres set in the 2023 edition.

Nicknamed the *'blade jumper'* due to his blade-type leg prosthesis, Rehm had his right leg amputated after a wakeboarding accident at the age of 14.

Rehm attempted to qualify for the 2016 Summer Olympics, but the International Association of Athletics Federations, now known as World Athletics, denied him admission because he failed to prove that his prosthesis would not give him an advantage over able-bodied athletes.

At 37, he is not quite done yet, with Mike Powell's world record long jump of 8.95m still in his sight.

PETRUCIO FERREIRA
(Brazil)

The three-time Paralympic champion in the 100m T47 classification will be keen to set the track on fire in New Delhi.

Ferreira lost his arm below the elbow at the age of two in an accident in his father's farm. The Brazilian began competing only in 2013. Barely 18 months into the sport, a 19-year-old Ferreira beat Paralympic and World champion Yohansson Nascimento in the 200m race at the Sao Paulo IPC Athletics Grand Prix while setting a new World record.

He made good on his promise by winning his first World gold in London 2017 in the 100m T47, before adding three more successive titles in 2019, 2023 and 2024. He will once again be the favourite to take home the title of 'sprint king' this year.

The 28-year-old currently holds the world records in the 100m T47 and 200m T47 with timings of 10.29s and 20.83s, respectively, both set on March 31, 2022, in Sao Paulo.

HANNAH COCKROFT

(Great Britain)

Wheelchair racer Hannah Cockroft will line up at her seventh World Championships, aiming to extend an already formidable haul of 16 world gold medals. Her dominance has been most evident in the 100m T34 (seven titles) and 800m T34 (five titles), while she has also claimed two apiece in the 200m and 400m T34, underlining her range across sprint and middle-distance events.

Shortly after her birth, Cockroft suffered two cardiac arrests, which resulted in brain damage and physical deformity in her feet, leaving her with weak hips. She was introduced to wheelchair sports at the age of 12 and took up wheelchair racing three years later. Inspired by Canadian Paralympic great Chantal Petitclerc, Cockroft has etched her name into para athletics history with her numerous medals and records.

The 33-year-old has four Paralympic gold medals in the 100m T34 to go with five more gold medals in the 200m, 400m and 800m across the years.

She currently holds the world records in the 100m, 200m, 400m, 800m and 1500m T34 events.

EZRA FRECH

(USA)

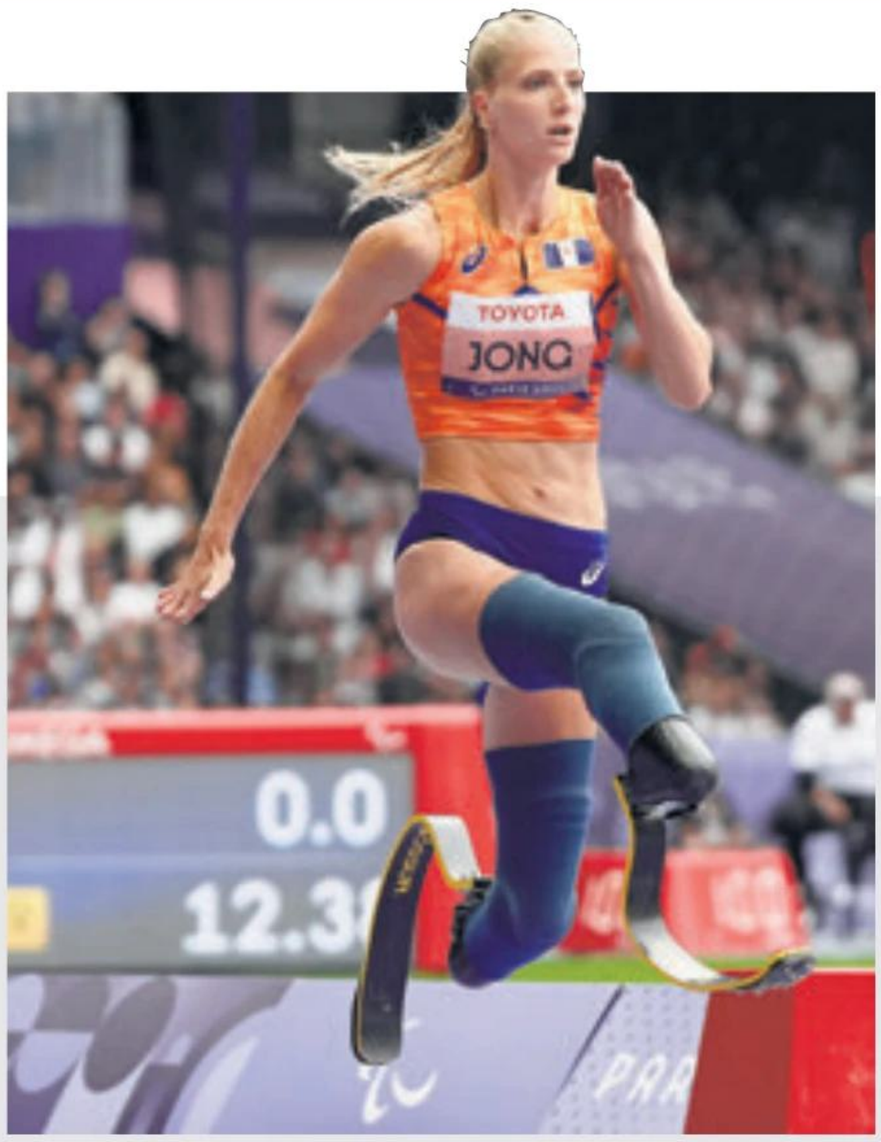
The USA track-and-field athlete might not yet have the resume as some of the illustrious names in the mix, but the 20-year-old is expected to hog the headlines in India.

Frech was born without most of his left leg, which was later amputated, and with only a finger on his left hand. He played multiple sports as a child before taking up athletics at the age of eight.

Frech competes in high jump and sprint events and will arrive at the Worlds with two Paralympic gold medals in the 100m T63 and high jump T63 in Paris last year.

He made his Worlds debut at 14 before going on to win gold in the high jump T63 in Paris in 2023, but finished only with a silver the following year.

The world record holder in his high jump event, Frech could be on the cusp of becoming the next big para athlete in track and field.



FLEUR JONG

(Netherlands)

Jong, a three-time Paralympic gold medallist, has been a consistent performer in both long jump and sprints.

She was dealt a cruel blow a few days before her 17th birthday when a bacterial infection caused blood flow to her toes and her fingers to stop, which led to the amputation of most of her fingers and legs.

Jong, 29, will be taking part in her sixth World Championships and will be primed to add to her four gold medals in the long jump T64 and 100m T64.

She has set multiple world records over the years, the latest coming in 2025 in both the 100m T62 and long jump T62 events.

SHI YITING

(China)

Shi Yiting is another dominant track-and-field para athlete across multiple Paralympics and World Championships.

She is classified under T-36 due to impaired muscle movement in her left arm and unequal leg lengths caused by cerebral palsy. The 27-year-old will have her eyes set on clinching a fifth straight gold medal in the 100m. She retained her crown in Kobe last year by shattering her own world record with a time of 13.35s.

She also has five Paralympic gold medals in the 100m T-36 and 200m T-36. Under the right conditions, Yiting will be tipped to win gold with another record-breaking time.

HISTORIC STRIDES

India's rise at the World Para Athletics Championships has been remarkable, with the medal tally growing steadily since the 2017 edition.

Rajdeep Saha
rajdeep.saha@thehindu.co.in

If the previous editions of the World Para Athletics Championships are anything to go by, India's performance at the 2025 edition – set to be hosted by New Delhi this month (September 27 to October 5) – is expected to improve further.

The 2011 and 2013 editions saw India bag just one medal each – Deepa Malik's silver in shot put and Devendra Jhajharia's historic gold in javelin throw respectively. The 2015 edition saw a slight rise in India's tally: two medals courtesy of Jhajharia and Amit Kumar Saroha (club throw), both clinching silvers. However, India's medal haul and position on the final standings have consistently improved since the 2017 edition, which was held in London. As a 73-member strong team prepares to make the most of the home support on offer, we look at the Indian contingent's performance in the last four editions of the World Para Athletics Championships.

2017

London, United Kingdom

1 gold, 2 silver, 2 bronze

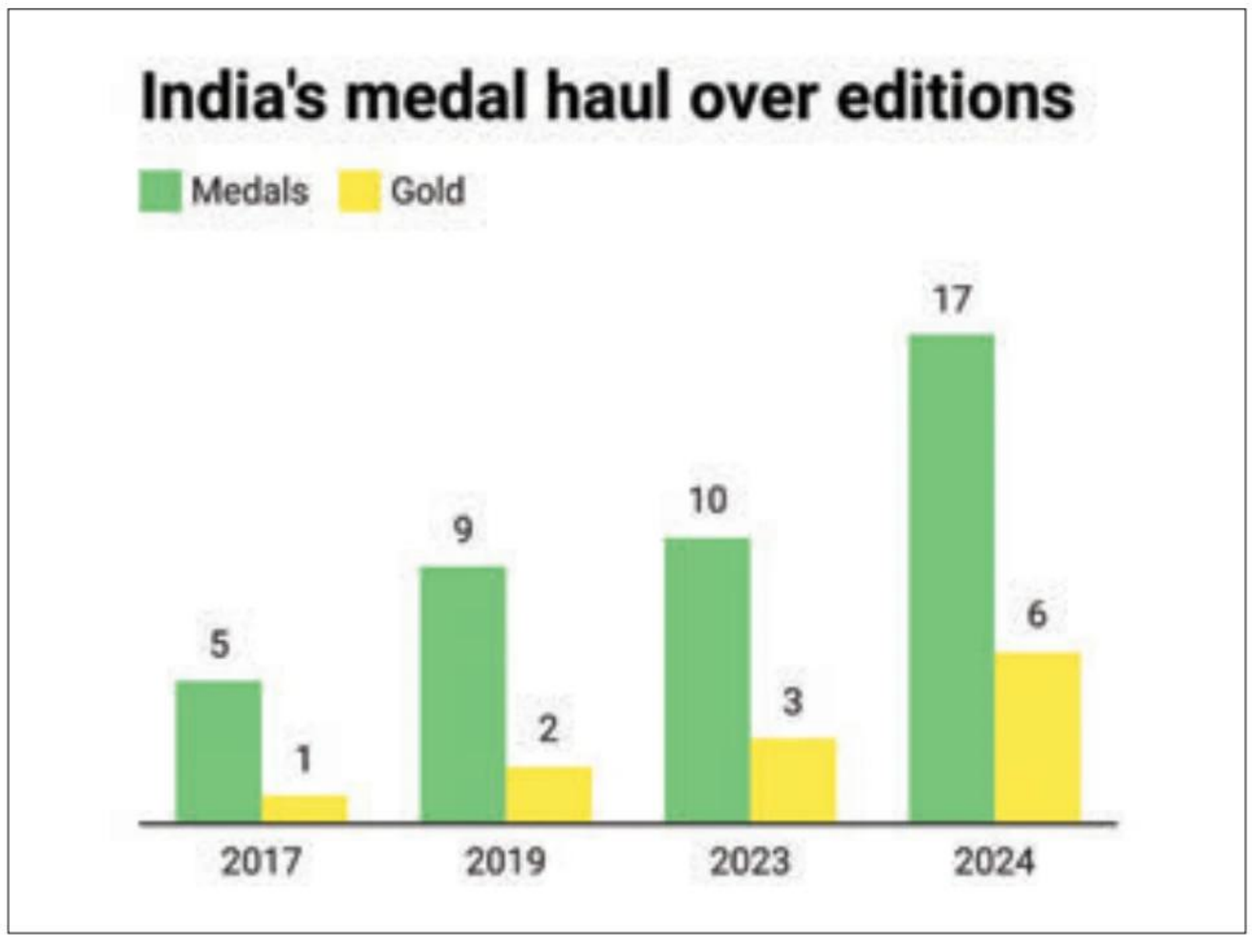
The Indian team arrived in England's capital, a year after bagging four medals at the Rio Paralympics, with hopes of bettering its total of two from the previous edition of the Worlds. And within a 10-day span in July, the athletes finished with five medals (1G, 2S, 2B) and ended 34th in the standings.

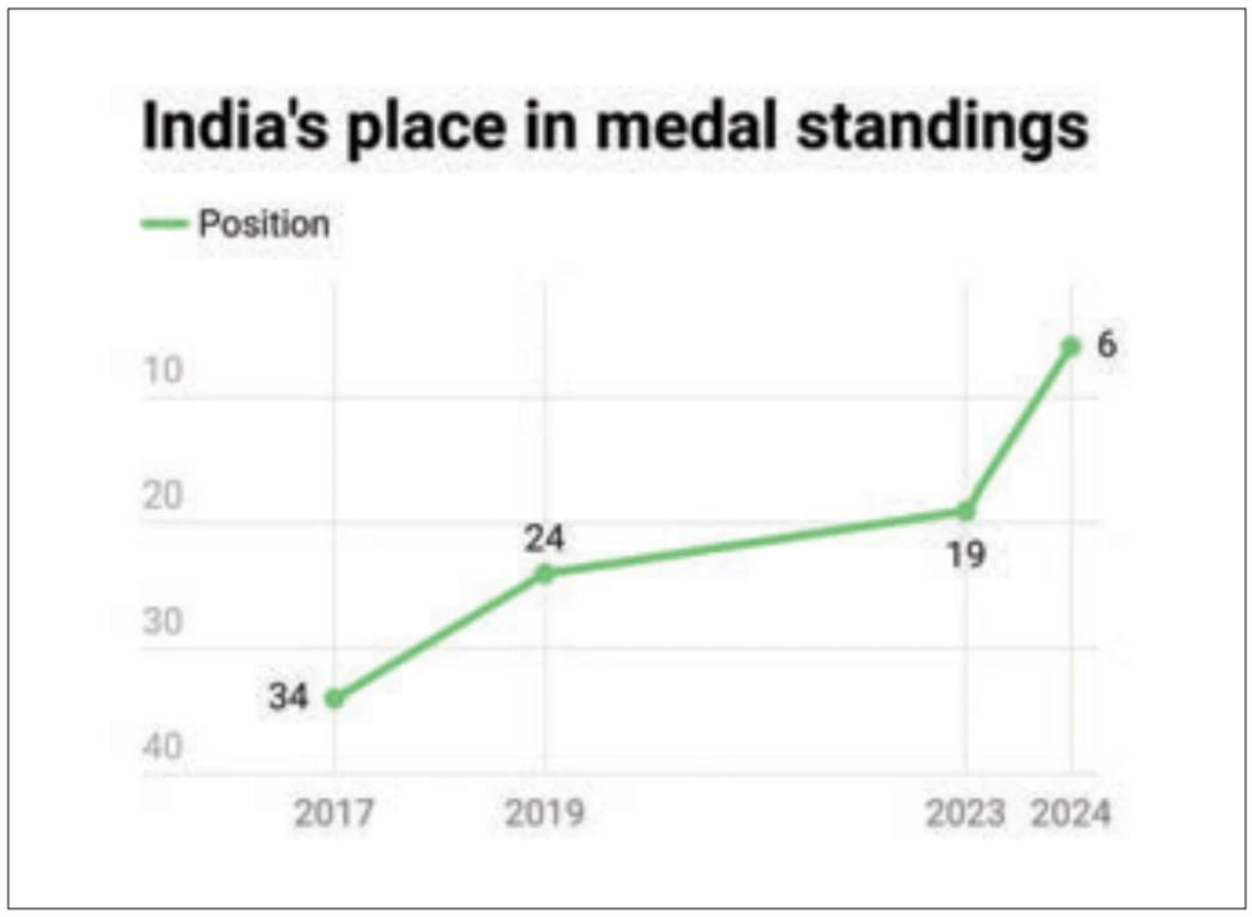
Sundar Singh Gurjar won India's sole gold of the edition after taking the top spot in the men's javelin throw F46 with a throw of 60.36m.

Saroha (men's club throw F51) and Sharad Kumar (men's high jump T42) accounted for India's silver medals. Saroha fell short of the gold by 1.74m but broke the Area Record with his best throw of 30.25m en route to a second-place finish.

Varun Singh Bhati (men's high jump T42) and Karamjyoti Dalal (women's discus throw F55) won bronze medals. Dalal's best throw of 19.02m had initially placed her fourth, but China's Yang Liwan getting disqualified meant the Indian was bumped up to third.

Pics: GETTY IMAGES





2019

Dubai, UAE

2 gold, 2 silver, 5 bronze

In September 2019, the Sports Ministry de-recognised the Paralympic Committee of India for violating the National Sports Code. Despite administrative instability, the Indian athletes moved 10 places up the standings to finish 24th in Dubai two months later with a record haul of nine medals (2G, 2S, 5B).

Both the gold medals were clinched by javelin throwers. Sandeep Chaudhary broke the F44 World Record with a best attempt of 66.18m to win the men's javelin throw F64 event, while Gurjar defended his title in the men's javelin throw F46 event.

Sumit Antil broke the F64 World Record with a 62.88m throw and bagged silver to ensure a 1-2 finish for India. The other silver medal was won by Sharad in the men's high jump T63 with a Season's Best attempt of 1.83m.

The bronze medals were won by Mariyappan Thangavelu (men's high jump T63), Yogesh Kathuniya (men's discus throw F56), Nishad Kumar (men's high jump T47), Ajeet Singh (men's javelin throw F46), and Vinay Kumar Lal (men's 400m T44).

2023

Paris, France

3 gold, 4 silver, 3 bronze

With a year left for the Paris Paralympics, the Indian track-and-field athletes laid down a marker by hitting double digits in medals (3G, 4S, 3B) for the first time and ensuring a top-20 finish (19th) in the standings.

Antil not only clinched gold in the men's javelin throw F64 event but also improved on his World Record with a throw of 70.83m. Sachin Sarjerao Khilari then broke the Area Record with a 16.21m throw in men's shot put F46 to win India's second gold medal of the event.

Ajeet also upgraded his bronze in Dubai with a Championship Record-breaking throw of 65.41m in men's javelin throw F46 to win India's third gold medal.

Both Kathuniya (men's discus throw F56) and Nishad (Area Record in men's high jump T47) won silver in their events, with Shailesh Kumar (Equalled Championship Record in men's high jump T63) and Rinku Hooda (men's javelin throw F46) completing the second-placed finishes for India.

The three bronze medals were won by Praveen Kumar (men's high jump T64), Ekta Bhyan (Area Record in women's club throw F51), and Pooja (women's javelin throw F54).

2024

Kobe, Japan

6 gold, 5 silver, 6 bronze

India continued to improve its tally and finished with a record 17 medals (6G, 5S, 6B), securing a sixth-placed finish in the standings. Moreover, this edition also saw a rise in medals from track events.

Antil clinched a second Worlds gold medal in the men's javelin throw F64 event with a 69.50m throw, while Khilari defended his men's shot put F46 title by breaking the Area Record with his 16.30m throw. However, it was Deepthi Jeevanji who began India's golden streak with a World Record-breaking time of 55.07s in the women's 400m T20. Another gold came from the track as Simran Sharma clocked a Personal Best of 24.95s to win the women's 200m T12.

The other two gold medals were won by Mariyappan (Championship Record in men's high jump T63) and Ekta (women's club throw F51).

Javelin throwers Rinku and Ajeet clinched silver and bronze, respectively, in the men's F46 event after winning a protest against Sri Lanka's Dinesh Priyantha Herath, who was later deemed ineligible due to incorrect classification and disqualified. Initially, Rinku and Ajeet had finished third and fourth, respectively, with Herath in second.

Sprinter Preethi Pal became the first-ever Indian to win two medals in the same edition after she took bronze in both the women's 100m T35 and 200m T35.

The other medallists included Kathuniya (silver in men's discus throw F56), Nishad (silver in men's high jump T47), Kashish Lakra (silver in women's club throw F51), Bhagyashri Jadhav (silver in women's shot put F34), Dharambir Nain (Area Record; bronze in men's club throw F51), Navdeep Singh (bronze in men's javelin throw F41), and Sandeep (bronze in men's javelin throw F64).

Hurdles beyond the field: The use of prosthetic limbs in track events in para-athletics is a fairly common sight, but for Indian athletes like Pranav Desai getting to that starting line is not easy. INSTAGRAM @PRAANAVV_21

» COVER PACKAGE
EQUIPMENT

Blade, wheels, and grit

From racing on borrowed wheels to running on costly blades, a section of the Indian parathletes continues to face financial and **infrastructural hurdles** to pursue their passion.

Nihit Sachdeva
nihit.s@thehindu.co.in

"*Bachpan se hi racing ka shaunk raha hai* (I have loved racing since childhood)," says Ankur Sagar.

He positions himself in a low, streamlined, kneeling stance on the seat. The structure, made of lightweight materials, has a three-wheeled design: two oversized rear wheels angled outwards for stability, and one smaller front wheel for steering. He propels himself by gripping the hand rims on the large rear wheels.

Ankur, who suffered a spinal cord injury in a car accident in 2015, has been a wheelchair racer for the past five years. While most athletics events in para sport are similar to those in which able-bodied athletes compete, disciplines such as wheelchair racing and club throw are unique and exclusive to athletes with disabilities.

Club throw requires participants to sit in a throwing frame within a marked circle and throw wooden clubs. Pranav Soorma, a silver medallist in the men's club throw F51 event at the Paris Paralympics, shares: "A throwing frame costs around INR 50,000 depending on the specific modifications required by the parathlete."

Before receiving government backing under the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) prior to the Asian Games in 2023, Pranav used to have his throwing frames made at local welding shops.

For clubs, even though each may cost around INR 10,000, he could not do the same. "Clubs are usually bought from overseas since the dimensions and weight requirements need to be very accurate and I haven't found such manufacturers in India so far," he says.

Parathletes can use the clubs provided by event organisers, but since the grip changes according to the disability of the thrower, they prefer to carry their own equipment,

which must be approved by the technical committee.

Costly affair

As far as wheelchair racing is concerned, the expenses are enormous, which is a major reason it has struggled to join the growing wave of para athletics in the country.

The cost of a decent racing wheelchair may start from Rs. 4 lakh, according to Ankur. He doesn't own one yet. "I share it with someone. For example, when the owner is competing in the 100m, I might race in the 400m," says the 33-year-old.

Anil Kadian

took a different route before ending up in wheelchair racing. Affected by polio at a very young age, Anil discovered wheelchair racing during his college days at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, when he randomly came across a video of Great Britain's David Weir competing at the London Paralympics 2012.

When Anil expressed his desire to compete in wheelchair racing to a coach at a marathon in 2016, he was told: "It is an expensive sport. You have to take care of a lot of things and there is no such facility in India. You can try something else since you have the power and stamina."

He tried his hand at discus throw before fate connected him with someone from Switzerland, who told him about an annual camp for wheelchair racing in 2019. "Switzerland's Marcel Hug, multiple-time world record holder, gave me one of his used chairs there. I bought it for Rs. 3.5 lakh," says the 34-year-old. From his savings as a freelance designer and the major support of a sponsor, Anil recently bought a new wheelchair from the U.S. at a cost of around Rs. 9.5 lakh.

"There isn't even a single part available for these wheelchairs. Maybe that's why people in India don't want to get into this. We had so many hard-working people who left due to lack of funding. I am still pursuing it because for me, it is like an escape from all the hardships I have faced in life," he says.

Meanwhile, in track events in para athletics the use of prosthetic limbs is a fairly common sight, but for Indian athletes, getting to that starting line is not easy. Pranav Desai, born with a premature right leg, was using a prosthesis from a German brand. The same company organised a running camp in Mumbai in 2015, where Desai first learnt about blades. "At that camp, German sprinter

Heinrich Popow, London Paralympics gold medallist in the 100m T42, taught us how to use blades. We also got one piece free from that running clinic," says the 25-year-old.

When that blade became soft after considerable use, his father, an insurance agent, had to take a loan to buy a new one, as a piece cost around Rs. 4.5 lakh.

In such a scenario, he could not afford to have more than one blade even when travelling for competitions, and if it malfunctioned, there was no scope for replacement. "When I travel with a blade, I have trained on it for a longer time. So, we hope that nothing happens to the blade. But at the World Junior Championships in 2019 in Dubai, the nut and bolt of the blade, which connects to the socket, got loose and it started to move a little from the socket. I couldn't do anything since it was a major issue," he says.

Since last year, Desai has been a beneficiary of the Khelo India scheme, receiving support from organisations such as GoSports Foundation and AMM Foundation with regards to his training, equipment and other needs.

Money matters: In wheelchair racing the expenses are enormous, a major reason it has struggled to join the growing wave of para-athletics in India. According to Ankur Sagar, the cost of a decent racing wheelchair may start from Rs. 4 lakh. Meanwhile, in club throw **(below, right)**, participants are required to sit in a throwing frame within a marked circle and throw wooden clubs. Pranav Soorma reveals a throwing frame can cost around Rs. 50,000.

GETTY IMAGES/REPRESENTATIVE IMAGES

Impact of both kinds

World Para Athletics revisited classification and introduced new categories after bringing in a new formula in 2018, which significantly reduced the maximum allowable standing height for double-leg amputees.

It affected athletes such as Shalini Saraswathi, who represented India in the women's 100m T64 event at the Hangzhou Asian Games. "In 2019, I went to China but wasn't allowed to compete since the blades I had were significantly taller and didn't pass the new rules. I wasn't allowed to race and had to come back to get the blades changed," she says.

Twenty-seven sportspersons from para athletics are part of the TOPS Core Group. They receive INR 50,000 per month as out-of-pocket allowance, plus full funding for their training plans from the government as they prepare for major events such as the Asian Games and the Paralympic Games.

The number of parathletes receiving assistance under the Khelo India Scheme is around 40. These athletes get Rs. 10,000 per month as out-of-pocket allowance and further support through accredited Khelo India Centres with access to training facilities.

Scope for improvement

While the World Championships in New Delhi is a momentous occasion to showcase the country's potential as the organiser of a major event, it also offers an opportunity for domestic brands to learn and adapt to the needs of Indian parathletes in terms of equipment manufacturing, by observing the gear used by athletes from around the world.

> « At the World Championships in New Delhi domestic brands can learn and adapt to the needs of Indian para-athletes in terms of equipment manufacturing »

« Expect India to win over 20 medals at the World Para Athletics Championships »

DEVENDRA JHAJHARIA

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.coi.in

India will mark a major milestone in para sport when it hosts the World Para Athletics Championships for the first time in New Delhi from September 27. PCI president Devendra Jhajharia expects the home contingent to win more than 20 medals and says the event will cement India's status as a capable host of global events.

How important is it for you that the World Championships are taking place in India?

Twenty years ago, I won gold with a world record at the 2004 Paralympics. When I returned, I told the Sports Minister I had funded my preparation because the government hadn't given me a single rupee. All I wanted was for Indian athletes not to go abroad to train and compete. As a player, it was my dream to compete in a big tournament at home. I couldn't, but as PCI president, I'm proud we've brought one here. For someone who struggled yet won three Paralympic medals and the country's top awards, the Arjuna Award, Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna, Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, it's heartening that others won't face the same challenges.

What do you hope this tournament will achieve?

I'll be happy to see the size of the delegations — more than 1,500 athletes from 107 countries. The world will see not just our performances but also our systems. It's historic both because we're hosting it and because of the results we expect. We won 17 medals at the last World Championships in Kobe; this time, I expect over 20. I also hope visiting teams go back with good things to say about India.

How did India secure the opportunity to host the World Championships?

It took about a year and a half for us to get this chance. There is a long process before the right to host a world championship is given. The first step is simply having the will to host such an event. This happened because the government told me we had to organise a major event.

We had a meeting during the Paris Paralympics where the sports secretary and I were present, and we said we would bid for a World Championship. It was the first time India had even requested the chance to host an event of this scale. It helped a lot that India won 29 medals at the Paris Paralympics, 17 of them in athletics. The International Paralympic Committee and World Para Athletics saw how much we had grown in athletics. I think that's also why they chose us.

What were the challenges of hosting a tournament like this for the first time?

I wouldn't say it was difficult. Having competed in several World Championships, I knew what is needed — smooth travel, proper hotels, training and competition venues. It was just about implementing that.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

What is different about this World Championships compared to previous ones?

We are proud to have a Mondotrack not just in the competition area but also the warm-up area — something no World Championships has had before. Another major step was ensuring that the stadium, not just the playing field, is para-friendly. There are para-athletes with different levels of disability, including some who are permanently in wheelchairs. We have had most of the toilets at JLN adapted for wheelchair users. I can say that Nehru Stadium is becoming a 100% para-friendly venue.

What about spectators — are there any arrangements for fans?

We have been lucky because whatever the PCI suggested was accepted by the Ministry of Sport. We expect a few hundred wheelchair users to come and watch the competition. A dedicated zone has been made for them. It's important to look out for differently abled spectators. Many people will come and watch the competition and think, 'We can do this as well.' A lot of them might have only seen para sport on social media, so we had to make proper arrangements for them.

This is just for Nehru Stadium. What about facilities at other venues?

This is only the beginning. This competition will be like a festival, and many administrators will come to see it. When they see how accessible JLN Stadium has become for para-athletes, they will think, 'Why can't we do this as well?'

We are already seeing other venues built with para sports in mind. If you visit the Sports Authority of India complex in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, you will see it is a para-friendly training centre, purpose-built for para-athletes. Training centres are also being developed in Sonepat and Bengaluru, and those too are para-friendly.

I also think it's important that TOPS funding has increased for para-athletes. The scheme provides not just financial support but also freedom. If a player says, 'I want to train with this coach, or I need this physiotherapist, or I want to train abroad,' they have that freedom. The player is the hero. There's also a kind of mental freedom. Even if a player receives ₹50,000 as pocket money, they feel mentally secure.

What do you hope the conclusion of this competition will show?

When I used to go to the ground, people used to make fun of me. They'd ask what I hoped to achieve. Tomorrow, when 107 countries come to compete here, what bigger statement could there be about how far we have progressed? This is a big thing for the country and certainly for me. I never thought in my life that there would be so much change in India. With India bidding for the 2030 Commonwealth Games and the 2036 Olympics, I hope these World Championships will show that we can host major tournaments.

What about after the World Championships? India has a problem where facilities often aren't maintained.

The track and facilities at JLN aren't just for these Games. Our real target is Los Angeles 2028. Earlier, athletes had to train abroad on a Mondo track. Now they can prepare here. This is a long-term plan, not just a one-off.

World Para Athletics Championships 2025 – Key Facts

Edition: 12th World Para Athletics Championships

Flag bearers: Dharambir Nain (club throw gold, Paris 2024) & Preethi Pal (double bronze, sprint, Paris 2024)

Indian squad: 73 athletes in total, including 19 women

Asia hosts so far: Doha 2015, Dubai 2019, Kobe 2024, New Delhi 2025

India's best finish: Top six for the first time in Kobe 2024

A turning point

With classification slots now available domestically, India's para sport ecosystem has gained the fillip it needs for **long-term growth.**

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

For para athletes, the road to competition does not begin on the track or field, but in a quiet room where a panel of experts decides which classification an athlete belongs to.

Until recently, India's parathletes had little choice but to travel abroad for classification, shutting the door on many who could not afford it. That changed earlier this year when India hosted its first-ever World Para Athletics Grand Prix in New Delhi.

For the first time, dozens of Indian athletes were able to undergo classification at home — a shift that not only saves money and expands opportunity but could also reshape the country's entire para sport system. "Hosting a Grand Prix in India was nothing short of a lifeline," said Manish Rana, Director of Sports Development and Performance with the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI).

Classification is the foundation that determines fairness and eligibility in every para sport. "It is the building unit of the entire Paralympic ecosystem," Rana explained. "Just imagine an athlete training for two years, believing they belong in one category, only to discover they're in another. Getting classification early helps them train with clarity."

Why it matters

Classifying para athletes is not a simple tick-box exercise but an extensive process overseen by trained international experts. A two-member team can classify only eight or nine athletes in a day, which means slots are scarce. India often had to fight for space at overseas events, typically managing only a handful of slots. Thus many athletes missed their chance entirely.

The financial burden, too, was crushing. "A single trip abroad could cost Rs. 2.5-3 lakh for an athlete, with expenses doubling if an escort is required," said Rana.

The Delhi Grand Prix, however, changed that equation overnight. India secured 61 classification slots out of 120 available — a scale unimaginable until then. "Beyond cost savings, this was about building a culture of access," Rana said. "We even got the IPC to dedicate the first day entirely to Indian athletes."

The event set the tone for the future, with India having already been awarded the rights to host three more Grand Prix events in the next three years. "If we consistently get 50-60 slots each year, we could classify 200 athletes domestically over the Paralympic cycle," he said. "That's a game-changer."

Another crucial outcome of hosting the Grand Prix was the training and certification of a new cadre of National Technical Officers (NTOs), the backbone of para sport competitions.

NTOs ensure rules are followed, classifications are implemented correctly, and events are conducted smoothly. "If you don't have technical officials, classifiers, competition managers — the whole ecosystem suffers. That's why we invested in NTO training. Hosting events here means they all get to see how the system works first-hand," said Rana.

For India, this represents a crucial shift away from dependence on outside expertise. "Earlier, we had to rely on foreign officials or wait for opportunities abroad. Now, we are creating a pool of our own." The pool is now part of a larger ecosystem that is finally taking shape.

Core of the sport: Classification is the foundation that determines fairness and eligibility in every para sport. It is not a simple tick-box exercise but an extensive process overseen by trained international experts. GETTY IMAGES

Building systems

While the Grand Prix has had a massive impact for athletes, its long-term value lies in creating a system that can sustain itself. With classifications now more accessible, athletes from smaller towns and rural regions can begin entering the system, steadily broadening the national talent base.

"Parathletes in all of Europe, including the UK, are fewer than the disabled population of just one Indian state. So, the potential is massive," he said.

However, that kind of scale can only be tapped if opportunities reach beyond metros.

Domestic classification and trained officials can help open doors at the grassroot level. "It doesn't make sense to have classifiers and officials concentrated only in big cities. We need to spread them across the country to give every promising athlete a chance," Rana emphasised.

If the system continues to align — with more slots, stronger technical expertise, and wider grassroots access — India's para sport ecosystem can enter a phase of self-reliance and sustained growth. For athletes, it will mean fewer barriers, clearer pathways, and the confidence to train knowing that the system will support them.

The upcoming World Para Athletics Championships in New Delhi, where India expects its largest-ever contingent (73 athletes) to compete, could prove to be a watershed moment.

But beyond the numbers, it signals permanence — that para sport in India is no longer dependent on others to take its first steps but beginning to chart its own future.

Fact file

A classified athlete is given a number along with a prefix: a 'T', which stands for 'track', or an 'F' for 'field'. The number also represents the level of impairment; the lower the number within each impairment type, the more severe the impairment. There are ten eligible impairment types, further divided into classes specific to each sport.

Running and jumping (16 classes)

T11-13 — Visual impairment
T20 — Intellectual impairment
T35-38 — Co-ordination impairments
T40-41 — Short stature
T42-44 — Lower limb affected by limb deficiency, leg length difference, impaired muscle power or impaired range of movement
T45-47 — Upper limbs affected by limb deficiency, impaired muscle power or impaired range of movement

Wheelchair racing (seven classes)

T32-34 — Co-ordination impairments
T51-54 — Limb deficiency, leg length difference, impaired muscle power or impaired range of movement

Standing throws (15 classes)

F11-13 — Visual impairment
F20 — Intellectual impairment
F35-38 — Co-ordination impairments
F40-41 — Short stature
F42-44 — Lower limb affected by limb deficiency, leg length difference, impaired muscle power or impaired range of movement
F45-46 — Upper limb/s affected by limb deficiency, impaired muscle power or impaired range of movement

Seated throws (11 classes)

F31-34 — Coordination impairments
F51-57 — Limb deficiency, leg length difference, impaired muscle power or impaired range of movement
Source: www.paralympic.org

Fuelling a revolution

Behind India's para sport success lies a **growing network** of corporate sponsorships.

Santadeep Dey
santadeep.dey@thehindu.co.in

Anukool Bharadwaj, currently heading the para sports wing at Olympic Gold Quest (OGQ), vividly remembers the 2019 World Para Athletics Championships in Dubai. And no, it isn't just because of the twin world-record throws by javelin superstars Sandeep Chaudhary (F44) and Sumit Antil (F64) on November 8.

High jumper Nishad Kumar (T47), now a double Paralympic silver medallist, was an unheralded figure back then. He had made the cut for the showpiece event in the City of Gold, but didn't meet the set criteria for the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI) to cover the expenses of his trip. Unable to afford the cost of participation himself, Nishad knocked on the doors of OGQ, who were quick to act.

"OGQ funded his entire trip. If that hadn't happened, an important moment in Nishad's career wouldn't have come through," says a proud Anukool.

Nishad repaid the favour on November 13 by not only bagging a bronze medal and recording his personal best (2.00m) but also securing a berth at the Tokyo Paralympics.

As clichéd as it may sound, the rest, as they say, is history. He went on to win silver in the Japanese capital, gold at the Hangzhou Para Asian Games in 2022, before finishing second once again at the 2024 Summer Para Games. He also won back-to-back silver medals at the World Championships in 2023 and 2024. OGQ is presently helping Nishad train in the US with renowned track-and-field coach Jeremy Fischer.

To be sure, Nandan Kamath, managing trustee at the GoSports Foundation, could relate to Anukool when Sumit recently tested his limits at an able-bodied meet in Geneva. "That's an incredible transition within a 10-year period, isn't it? From being unsupported in 2015 to showing up at Atleticageneve — EAP (a bronze-tier meet on the World Athletics calendar) in 2025... And that itself tells you how far we have come," Kamath tells *Sportstar*.

Sumit, the current F64 world-record holder, may have hurled the javelin only 68.58m, a far cry from his best of 73.29m, but the fact that he chose to break down the proverbial barrier and compete in the open category is a feat that will be talked about for years to come.

OGQ, GoSports, and IndianOil have countless such anecdotes to share, if someone's listening.

The para-athlete support system works in very different ways across these three organisations. OGQ and GoSports, both non-profit ventures, thrive on CSR partnerships and donations. IndianOil, on the other hand, is a Public Sector Undertaking (PSU) that doles out an exclusive scholarship scheme called *Divyashakti* for para-athletes.

"*Divyashakti* offers 100 scholarships to para-athletes. Out of that, 50 per cent are for women. And that's a first. It includes a stipend of ₹15,000-30,000 per month and reimbursement of tournament and kit expenses. Additionally, a one-time allowance of ₹60,000 is handed out per year," says Manjusha Kanwar, DGM-Sports Coordination at IndianOil.

IndianOil, which had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI) to support differently-abled athletes ahead of

« IOC's Divyashakti offers 100 scholarships to para-athletes. Out of that, 50 per cent are for women. It includes a stipend of ₹15,000-30,000 per month and reimbursement of tournament and kit expenses. Additionally, a one-time allowance of ₹60,000 is handed out per year – Manjusha Kanwar, DGM-Sports Coordination at IndianOil »

Eye for talent: OGQ's timely support for high jumper Nishad Kumar (above) laid the foundation for successes on the international stage, like his bronze at the Tokyo Paralympics.

PICS: GETTY IMAGES & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Paris 2024, also happens to be the main sponsor of the upcoming World Para Athletics Championships in New Delhi. This is a step in the right direction, Manjusha feels.

"China and the US have a huge number of para-athletes. We still have a long way to go. But with India hosting, it gives us a few extra entries. It helps...you can be there and find out how they (other countries) are training. There are a lot of things you need to ensure before hosting any para championship. There needs to be better accessibility at all stadiums. If that movement starts with this championship, that will be very nice."

Anukool **(above right)** calls this 'movement' the Paralympic revolution and believes we are slowly yet steadily moving towards a more inclusive sporting ecosystem.

"Conversations about para-sports are becoming much more mainstream. Inclusivity is not just spoken about in boardrooms. It is being discussed when policy matters are being formulated. So, I definitely see a change in that point of view. I think the performances at the Paralympics have inspired a lot of young para-athletes to take up sport. There's been a positive change."

And with CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) partners like IndusInd Bank, AT&T India, Hyundai (that sowed the seeds of the *Samarth* initiative to create a more aware and inclusive society for people with disabilities), and Gameskraft stepping in from time to time to strengthen GoSports' Para Champions programme, there isn't much to worry about.

Kamath **(below)**, who will have 13 of his athletes competing at Delhi's Athletics Worlds soon, says: "The Para Champions programme was started in 2015 in the build-up to the Rio Games. Eventually, three (Devendra Jhajaria, Deepa Malik, and Varun Bhati) out of the four medallists were from this programme. That was the first systematic foray into promoting para sports. We already had medallists, we had won gold many years ago, but there was very little awareness and certainly very close to zero systematic support. Athletes even had to cover not only their own flights but also their coaches'."

"Now the support we provide is way more sophisticated. A part of it is adapted equipment — making sure the prosthetics fit well. Almost all of this equipment is of American or German make. It is not just about trying to get access to the best wheelchairs or blades; it's also about how you fit them. A lot of work now goes into the science of para sport. There is deep personalisation. For some of these athletes, their economic status is actually very limited. So, we also provide livelihood grants. Some just need monthly support... if they are at the top of their sport, it doesn't mean they're making money off it."

Come September 26, every leap, throw, and stride will carry the silent strength of these supporters, who have managed to throw the doors wide open when the world kept them shut.

FROM ONE TO MANY: INDIA'S PARALYMPIC ODYSSEY

From Murlikant Petkar's lone gold in 1972 to **a record 29 medals** at Paris 2024, India's Paralympic journey is a story of grit, growth, and a sporting revolution.

Aditya Padinjat
aditya.p@the hindu.co.in

1968

From Lone Swimmer to Record Haul: The Rise of Indian Parasport

When 10 Indians turned up in Tel Aviv for the 1968 Paralympics, they carried little more than determination. There were no systems, no sponsors, and no real blueprint for success. They returned without medals, but with the first tentative steps in a journey that would one day transform India's place in global parasport. Fast forward to Paris 2024: an 84-member contingent delivered a record 29 medals. The distance between those two moments captures the remarkable evolution of Indian parasport.

1968-1984

The Lonely Pioneers

India's first Paralympic appearance came in 1968, but medals would have to wait. Four years later, one man changed that. Murlikant Petkar, who had travelled to Tel Aviv as a table tennis player, returned in Heidelberg as a swimmer and scripted history. His gold in the 50m freestyle, achieved with a world record of 37.33 seconds, made him India's first Paralympic medallist.

Yet Petkar remained a solitary beacon. India skipped the 1976 and 1980 Games, returning only in 1984 — when Joginder Singh Bedi made history with three medals, across shot put, javelin, and discus, becoming the first Indian para-athlete to win multiple medals at a single edition. Bhimrao Kesarkar added another. For a moment, it seemed a corner had been turned. Instead, the next two decades yielded only drought.

PTI

1988-2000

Flickers of Progress

Through the late 20th century, India's Paralympic presence was modest but persistent. From two athletes in Seoul 1988 to a high of nine in Barcelona and Atlanta, before shrinking to four in Sydney 2000, the teams returned without medals — yet in those years, participation itself was the small victory that kept the flame alive.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

2004-2012

Medal Glut

That breakthrough came in Athens 2004. Devendra Jhajharia hurled the javelin into history with a gold in the F44/46 category, while Rajinder Singh Rahelu took bronze in powerlifting. Eight years later in London, H.N. Girisha's high jump silver reinforced the sense that Indian para-athletes could consistently stand on the podium.

Institutions Take Root

Change was brewing elsewhere. In 1992, M. Mahadeva and his colleagues in Bengaluru founded the Physically Handicapped Sports Federation of India — later renamed the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI). It became the governing body for parasport, though formal government recognition only arrived in 2016. The groundwork was being laid for a breakthrough.

AP

B. VELANKANNI RAJ

AP

2016-2024

Acceleration

Rio 2016 marked a new dawn. India sent its largest contingent — 19 athletes — and returned with four medals. Jhajharia struck gold again with a world record. Mariyappan Thangavelu soared to high jump glory, while Varun Singh Bhati joined him on the podium with a bronze in the same event. Deepa Malik, with her shot put silver, became the first Indian woman to medal at the Paralympics. Then came the explosion. At Tokyo 2021, 54 athletes delivered 19 medals across athletics, shooting, badminton, archery, and table tennis. Three years later, Paris raised the bar even higher: 84 athletes, 29 medals, seven of them gold. India was no longer an outsider; it was a Paralympic power. Behind the medals lies a different story — of systems finally catching up with athletes' ambition. The Sports Authority of India upgraded facilities, TOPS funding allowed para-athletes to train as full-time professionals, corporate sponsorship began to flow in, and the launch of the Khelo India Para Games in 2023 widened the pipeline..

Worlds bronze shows Satwik-Chirag's growth, and what's missing

Bronze in Paris brings **redemption** for Satwik-Chirag, yet their struggles with pressure reveal the next hurdle in their journey.

Rajdeep Saha
rajdeep.saha@thehindu.co.in

Since their Paris Olympics heartbreak last August, the Indian men's doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty have lived through a year of near-misses. Twelve tournaments, six semifinal exits. The Asian Games gold medallists couldn't convert deep runs into titles – their last triumph was the 2024 Thailand Open – as they battled through personal tragedy and persistent injuries: Rankireddy's stubborn shoulder and Shetty's troubled back. But the long wait for a podium finish finally ended, fittingly, in the French capital.

At the 2025 BWF World Championships quarterfinals, Rankireddy and Shetty defeated Malaysia's Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik 21-12, 21-19 to secure a bronze medal – their second at the Worlds. It was particularly sweet, as Chia and Soh had crushed their medal hopes at the Paris Games. Heading into the clash, the Indians trailed the

Malaysians 3-11 in head-to-heads, but after heeding coach B. Sumeeth Reddy's advice to "be daring", they stormed through the opening game. The Malaysians fought back to 19-19 in the second, only for the Indians to close out the next two points. Both dropped their racquets, Rankireddy stood in disbelief at the Adidas Arena, and Shetty kissed the Indian badge on his shirt – a moment of 'redemption'.

"When the draw was out, I knew it wasn't going to be easy. We watched videos and analysed the main issues. After beating the Chinese pair (Liang Wei Keng-Wang Chang), the players' confidence went up. It was a lot of motivational talk, getting them ready mentally. I told them that we must get them this time," Malaysian coach Tan Kim Her, credited with pairing up the two shuttlers almost a decade ago, told Sportstar.

Nerves that linger

Bronze was assured, but the chance to go further slipped away in the semifinals. Against China's relatively unknown duo Li Yiu and Bo Yang Chen, opponents they had faced only once before, the Indians faltered 19-21, 21-18, 12-21.

"We were leading well at 11-5. Suddenly, the Chinese were playing freely; they had nothing to lose. Their service game was really good, and our boys were getting confused. Sometimes they were serving low, sometimes playing it up. Moreover, I think our boys started losing patience. They were too eager to finish the point quickly," Tan analysed.

Nerves, especially after gaining the lead, have haunted Rankireddy and Shetty before. It is a recurring subject in the Indian camp. "Individuals have different ways of dealing with it. Based on my experience from when I used to play, I told them that I would talk to myself. I wouldn't think about finishing. If you keep thinking, 'Okay, we have two more points to go,' you'll be more tense if the opponent starts catching up. They tell me a few ideas on how to deal with this pressure. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But at least we don't hold back when we play. We have to play freely. If you play too safe, chances of losing are high. We must dare to take the risk," Tan said.

Missed chances: It was Satwik-Chirag's fifth semifinal exit of the year after the India, Singapore, Malaysia and China Opens. PICS: AFP

Second stint, new methods

Tan, the 53-year-old former doubles player, had left the Indian setup in 2019. He returned five years later, shortly after Mathias Boe stepped down following the Olympic debacle. Reunited with his proteges, Tan was startled by their condition.

"I didn't know that there were so many injuries. That's not where I wanted them physically. I cannot overexert them either because I need their bodies to recover. We began slowly, but we now try to increase the intensity gradually. I even inform them that 'This week, I'm going to do this.'"

In his first stint, Tan's main task was to build trust between two promising youngsters, identifying their height and attacking instincts as natural assets. Now, the approach is different: solution-orientated, with defeats analysed and training tailored to eliminate weaknesses and amplify strengths.

Tournament scheduling, too, is more selective. "When I came back, I told them the few major tournaments that were my target for them. One was All England, which was right after Satwik's father passed away, and then Chirag got injured. The other target was the Worlds; now the World Tour Finals is the major event left this year," Tan said.

The pair's world rankings slipped to 18th in May but bounced back into the top 10 after a semifinal finish at the China Open. "They have taken the standard of Indian doubles to a different level. I think people forget that. They never complain, but a lot of people take them for granted. If they were not there, Indian doubles would have been a funny case," said Sumeeth, now overseeing India's women's doubles programme.

Currently ranked sixth in the World Tour standings, with the top eight pairs qualifying for the year-end Finals, Rankireddy and Shetty will next play the Super 500 Hong Kong Open, aiming to consolidate their position.

INDIANS SET FOR GLOBAL TEST IN JAPAN

Neeraj Chopra spearheads a **19-member** Indian squad as the world's best athletes compete for top honours at the World Athletics Championships.

Leading the way: Along with Neeraj Chopra, three more Indians — Sachin Yadav, Yash Vir Singh and Rohit Yadav — will compete in the men's javelin throw. K. MURALI KUMAR

Nihit Sachdeva
nihit.s@thehindu.co.in

The Japan National Stadium in Tokyo has a special place in the history of Indian athletics. In 2021, Neeraj Chopra won the country's first Olympic gold medal in track and field when he hurled his javelin to a distance of 87.58m at the multipurpose venue. Unfortunately, Neeraj could celebrate the moment only with members of the Indian contingent and a select group of journalists, as the arena bore a sorry look due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Four years later, Neeraj, along with 18 other Indian athletes, returns to the same stadium, which will host the World Athletics Championships from September 13 to 21.

The 27-year-old Neeraj has already won everything there is to be won — an achievement unfathomable for Indian athletics not so long ago.

And now, he is at it again.

While he could not defend his title at the Paris Olympics, the reigning world champion will hope that his spear soars the farthest in the Japanese capital, just as it did in 2021.

No other Indian has gone past Neeraj's Olympic gold-winning mark of 87.58m, but the man himself has 22 throws better than that. After years of being nagged by sections of the media and fans, the Haryana lad finally entered the 90m club this year at the Doha Diamond League with a 90.23m effort, which shows he has stepped up under the guidance of the legendary Jan Zelezny.

At the same time, so has the rest of the world.

Fight to the finish: Animesh Kujur (above) will be the first Indian male sprinter to compete at the World Championships, while triple jumper Praveen Chithravel (right) enters the event with a season's best of 17.37m.
NIRMAL HARINDRAN and NITHIN KRISHNAN

Germany's Julian Weber, the world leader at 91.51m, and Brazilian Luiz Mauricio da Silva (PB/SB: 91m) have emerged as new challengers for Neeraj's throne. In Tokyo, he will also have a familiar rival in Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem, who beat him to the gold at last year's Summer Games with an Olympic record of 92.97m. Since Paris 2024, Arshad has only competed at the Asian Championships, where he won with an 86.40m throw, and underwent a calf muscle surgery in July.

Ready to enthrall: (left to right) **1.** Germany's Julian Weber is the world leader in javelin throw at 91.51m. **2.** Parul Chaudhary met the automatic qualification mark for the Worlds with a new national record of 9:12.46s. **3.** Norway's Karsten Warholm, who shattered the 46-second barrier in the Tokyo Olympic 400m hurdles final, will reunite with USA's Rai Benjamin and Brazil's Alison dos Santos for another epic showdown. REUTERS, GETTY IMAGES and AFP

Along with Neeraj, three more Indians — Sachin Yadav, Yash Vir Singh and Rohit Yadav — will compete in the men's javelin throw in Tokyo. None of the three could achieve the automatic qualifying mark of 85.50m for Tokyo — Sachin came close with his silver-winning throw of 85.16m at the Asian Championships — and had to rely on the world rankings route. But the presence of four Indians in a 36-man field is proof of the country's increasing depth in the discipline.

In the women's javelin event, national record holder Annu Rani will make her fifth appearance at the World Championships. Her season's best is 62.59m but she might need more to better her seventh-place finish from Oregon 2022.

Another interesting storyline to follow is what lies ahead in long jumper Murali Sreeshankar's inspired comeback story — returning from a year-long absence due to a serious knee injury to make a late charge and qualify for the World Championships.

Triple jumper Praveen Chithravel enters the event with a season's best of 17.37m, the eighth-best jump in the world this year. Abdulla Aboobacker will be the other Indian triple jumper in the 36-strong field.

On the track, the major Indians in focus will be middle-distance runner Gulveer Singh, steeplechaser Parul Chaudhary, and sprinter Animesh Kujur.

Gulveer, who set new national records in the 5000m and 10,000m this year, is set to compete in both events. The army man has impressed with consistent performances, showing steady improvement throughout the season.

Parul hasn't raced since she finished second at the Asian Championships in May, where she met the automatic qualification mark for the Worlds with a new national record of 9:12.46s. While a podium finish in Tokyo is unrealistic, her target will be to better her own personal best (NR).

Animesh is set to become the first-ever Indian male sprinter to compete at the World Championships after qualifying for the 200m through the rankings. For the 22-year-old, it will be an invaluable experience to race alongside world champion Noah Lyles, Olympic champion Letsile Tebogo, and Australian teen sensation Gout Gout. The country's squad could have been bigger had steeplechaser Avinash Sable, heptathlete Nandini Agasara, and race walker Akshdeep Singh not been ruled out for medical reasons.

The failure of the relay squads to book a spot for the worlds is another reason behind the slightly reduced strength compared to Budapest 2023, where the men's 4x400m quartet secured a stunning fifth-place finish.

Among the international stars, the biggest name to keep an eye on is Swedish pole vaulter Armand 'Mondo' Duplantis. Mondo has broken the world record 13 times and there is every reason to believe he can clear the bar set at 6.30m to take the tally to 14.

Lyles and Jamaican Kishane Thompson will renew their rivalry for the men's 100m title. In the women's 100m, Julien Alfred would love a repeat of her Paris Olympics upset of Sha'Carri Richardson. For 'Pocket Rocket' Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, it will be an emotional occasion, as the five-time world champion from Jamaica has announced that she will retire after the event.

The Tokyo Olympics produced the greatest men's 400m hurdles race in history, with Norway's Karsten

Top draw: (clockwise from above) All eyes will be on Armand Duplantis, who has broken the world record 13 times in pole vault, 100 and 200m world champion Noah Lyles and Femke Bol, the favourite in 400m hurdles. AP and AFP

Warholm becoming the first-ever man to break the 46-second barrier to beat the USA's Rai Benjamin and Brazil's Alison dos Santos. The trio will reunite on the same track, raising hopes of another epic showdown. Dutchwoman Femke Bol will be the overwhelming favourite in the women's 400m hurdles, as world record holder Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone has opted to compete in the 400m flat, where she will challenge the likes of Salwa Eid Naser and Marileidy Paulino.

Portuguese race walker Joao Vieira and French discus thrower Melina Robert-Michon are on the cusp of achieving major milestones. The 49-year-old Vieira, listed to compete in the 35km race walk, will set a new men's record of 14 World Championships appearances, while the 46-year-old Robert-Michon will equal the record of World Championships appearances by a woman (11).

India squad

Men

Neeraj Chopra (javelin throw), Sachin Yadav (javelin throw), Yash Vir Singh (javelin throw), Rohit Yadav (javelin throw), Gulveer Singh (5000m, 10000m), Praveen Chithravel (triple jump), Abdulla Aboobacker (triple jump), Murali Sreeshankar (long jump), Sarvesh Kushare (high jump), Animesh Kujur (200m), Tejas Shirse (110m hurdles), Servin Sebastian (20km race walk), Ram Baboo (35km race walk), Sandeep Kumar (35km race walk)

Women

Annu Rani (javelin throw), Parul Chaudhary (3000m steeplechase), Ankita Dhyani (3000m steeplechase), Pooja (800m, 1500m), Priyanka Goswami (35km race walk)

FOR MORE STORIES

GLORIOUS REDEMPTION

Carlos Alcaraz and Aryna Sabalenka **stamp their class** in commanding U. S. Open triumphs.

Class apart: The 15th edition of the Sincaraz rivalry will be remembered as a showcase for the genius of Alcaraz. GETTY IMAGES

Paul Fein

Sincaraz, shorthand for the new Big Two — Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner — have combined to capture the last eight Major titles (two apiece during 2024 and 2025) and rapidly pulled ahead of the so-called contenders on the ATP Tour. This marks the longest such streak since Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal compiled 11 straight Major titles from 2005-2007. The legendary Big Three seem like a distant memory now, as does Novak Djokovic's domination in 2023 when he won three Majors.

Some among the tennis cognoscenti, such as *ESPN* analyst Patrick McEnroe, recognised the extraordinary talents of Sincaraz when they first traded explosive shots at the 2021 Paris Masters, with Alcaraz prevailing 7-6 (1), 7-5. "They literally changed the game," said Patrick, John McEnroe's younger brother. "They've separated themselves even more from the rest [in the last two years]. Even Djokovic conceded he can't beat these guys. The only guy who can beat them is the other guy on the other side of the net when they play [each other]."

Sam Querrey, a former No. 11 and now an *ESPN* analyst, said, "It seems like the days of playing defence are gone" — because of the otherworldly offences of Sincaraz. The hyper-athletic Spaniard can hit every shot in the book and then some he's invented. He boasts the best net game in tennis history because of his impeccable volleying and half-volleying technique, plus dazzling speed, agility, reflexes, balance, and touch. Against Sinner's ferocious groundstrokes, he won 74 per cent of net points (20 of 27). His vast array of serves with varying amounts of spin and power makes him one of the top servers today. Against Sinner, considered the best serve returner along with Djokovic, Carlitos belted 10 aces with no double faults, won 83 per cent of his first-serve points (45 of 54), and lost his serve just once. His versatile and high-octane forehand ranks among the most lethal in any era. And as John McEnroe, the 1980s superstar, said, "Has anyone ever seen a faster player?"

Alcaraz's 6-1, 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 U.S. Open triumph doesn't rank as one of the greatest matches of all time like his epic 4-6, 6-7(4), 6-4, 7-6(3), 7-6(2) French Open final against Sinner. Nor does it match the Italian's 4-6, 6-4, 6-4, 6-4 high-calibre Wimbledon final victory, where Sinner's relentless aggression and improved net skills — winning 30 of 40 points (75 per cent) — didn't allow Alcaraz to play his all-court game effectively.

« THE GULF BETWEEN SINCARAZ AND THE REST OF THE FIELD IS LARGE AND GROWING SIGNIFICANTLY »

The 15th edition of the Sincaraz rivalry will be remembered as a showcase for the genius of Alcaraz. "Today, I was just brilliant, to be honest. If I want to beat Jannik on the biggest stage, I have to be brilliant, which I'm really happy about," crowed the normally modest Spaniard.

President Donald Trump, a former recreational player and long-time tennis fan, attended the final along with celebrities Bruce Springsteen, Ben Stiller, and Christine Taylor, plus star athletes Steph Curry, Lindsey Vonn, and Sergio Garcia (Alcaraz's golf buddy), and tennis legends Bjorn Borg, Jimmy Connors, and Ivan Lendl, who presented the winner's trophy to Alcaraz.

The 2 p.m. starting time was pushed back to 2.45 p.m. due to additional security measures for Trump, to allow the more than 23,000 spectators to reach their seats. While the fans were slow to file in, Alcaraz got off to a fast start, converting his third break point for a quick 1-0 lead.

The 22-year-old Spaniard, clad in purple shorts and shoes and a plum sleeveless shirt that flaunted his muscular physique, broke again for a 5-2 lead and held serve at love to take the opening set 6-2.

In the second set, Sinner got some help from an unexpected source: Alcaraz himself. Throughout the tournament, Carlitos found the right balance between controlled aggression and entertaining shot-making, seldom getting reckless or toying with his opponents. Whether from overconfidence or lack of concentration, he lost the plot with Sinner serving at 1-all, love-15 in the second set. Alcaraz had just struck a backhand volley winner, causing Sinner to shake his head in frustration. Alcaraz then, strangely, started playing around, as he occasionally does, hitting soft slices that Sinner pummeled. "If I were Alcaraz, I'd keep going big to keep Sinner rattled," advised the elder

Relentless: Novak Djokovic managed to reach yet another semifinal, only to be stopped by Alcaraz. AFP

McEnroe. The moral: never change a winning game. An energised Sinner held serve and broke Alcaraz's serve at love in the next game for a 3-1 lead. After Sinner grabbed the set 6-3, John McEnroe said, "Alcaraz had let him off the hook early, and Sinner got back on track." The telling stat: Carlitos had no forehand winners in the second set.

Alcaraz learned his lesson and quickly re-established his power game and momentum in the pivotal third set. Notching two service breaks, he raced to a 5-0 lead and took the set 6-1.

Although Sinner had never beaten Alcaraz in a five-set match, the Spaniard went all-out to close out the final in four sets. The Italian, sensing defeat was near, started hitting harder and closer to the lines. That backfired when Sinner committed two unforced forehand errors and a double fault to lose his serve and give Alcaraz a 3-2 lead.

Sinner ran out of time and answers. The crowd roared during the changeover at 5-4 Alcaraz. But a fifth set was not to be. At 40-all, Alcaraz whacked an overhead winner and smiled. Then, on his third championship point, he fired an ace to prevail.

During the trophy presentation, Alcaraz looked at Sinner and quipped, "I'm seeing you more than my family."

Always gracious in victory or defeat, he said, "I think physically he has improved a lot. He has spoken about the physical conditions that he had to improve, and I think in the last year or two, he has improved a lot. His matches are really demanding physically, that he's able to play at 100 per cent during two, three, four hours. I think that's the biggest improvement he has made."

The gulf between Sincaraz and the rest of the field is large and seemingly growing. Djokovic, in the late twilight of his glorious career, still managed to reach the semifinals at every Major this season, defeating No. 4 Taylor Fritz, the 2024 finalist here, 6-3, 7-5, 3-6, 6-4.

Auger-Aliassime, a mild-mannered, 25-year-old Canadian with a big serve and dangerous forehand, upset three veteran contenders with different playing styles — No. 3 Alexander Zverev, No. 15 Andrey Rublev, and No. 8 Alex de Minaur.

What about world No. 10 Lorenzo Musetti? After Sinner, his compatriot and friend, overpowered him 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 in the quarterfinals, he acknowledged, "I never played someone who put me in this kind of rush in the rally. I didn't have many chances in the rally, and he was always leading the rally."

Holger Rune, the gifted but at-times immature Dane who reached a career-high No. 4 two years ago, lost to 35-year-old journeyman Jan-Lennard Struff. Ben Shelton, playing his first Major as a top 10 player, was forced to retire after splitting four sets with an injured shoulder against 37-year-old Adrian Mannarino. "It was the worst pain I've ever felt in my life," said the American. Joao Fonseca, a highly touted 19-year-old Brazilian who regularly hammers forehands over 100 mph, was ousted in straight sets by 21st-seeded Tomas Machac. No. 5 Jack Draper, a heavy-hitting lefty, part-time model, and British heartthrob, had to default in the second round due to a left arm injury.

Mary Joe Fernandez predicts the Sincaraz rivalry "is going to keep going back and forth, and they're going to make each other better."

Sinner said he'll reach his peak in four years at age 28. How much better can this superstar get?

Alcaraz doesn't appear worried. "I

feel I can do everything on court, to be honest: slices, drop shots, topspin, flat," he confidently declared.

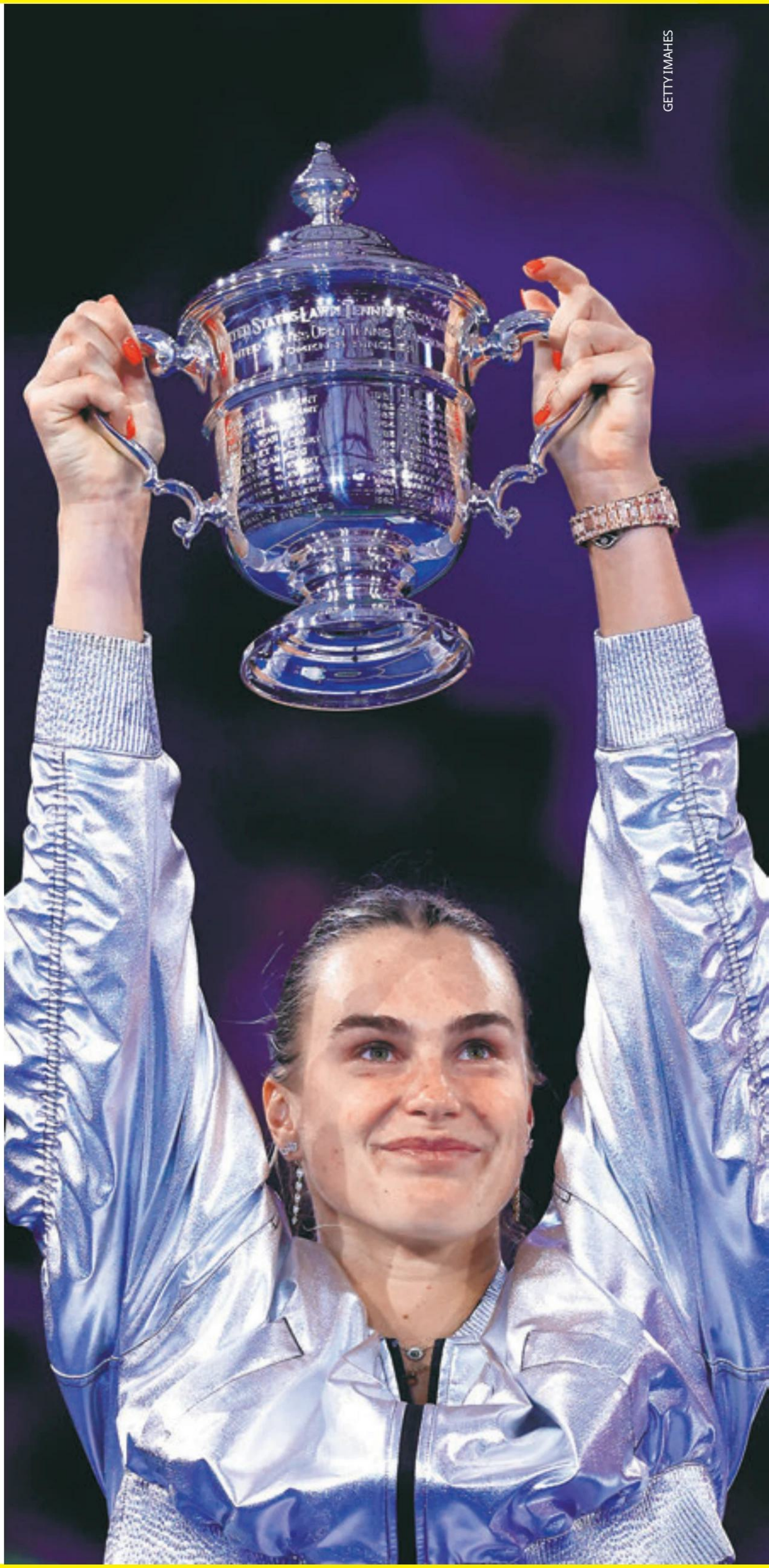
SABALENKA STOPS ANISIMOVA FOR SECOND U.S. OPEN TITLE

A split second after Amanda Anisimova's return of serve sailed out on championship point, Aryna Sabalenka **(right)** went down on her knees, covered her eyes, and shed a few tears. The Queen of Hard Courts had defended her crown.

The poignant reaction spelled relief — as much as redemption and revenge — following her heartbreaking, three-set losses to Americans in the previous three Majors. In the Australian Open final, 22-1 long shot Madison Keys played lights-out power tennis to dethrone Sabalenka. Ghosts of past self-inflicted calamities reappeared in the Roland Garros final. Once again, Sabalenka couldn't control her shots or emotions, committing an ungodly 70 unforced errors, and succumbing to an inspired Coco Gauff. At Wimbledon, Anisimova, who had lost in the qualifying event a year ago, proved braver on the big points — Sabalenka converted just 3 of 14 break points — in a semifinal shocker.

"I want to prove to myself I learned tough lessons," Sabalenka said before the U.S. Open final. Win or lose, she would stay No. 1, but the measure of greatness is Grand Slam titles and Olympic gold medals, not elite-level consistency and season-ending rankings. The Belarusian superstar had a score to settle against the American who boasted a 6-3 head-to-head edge in their budding rivalry. And if Sabalenka needed any more incentive, the winner would collect a cool $5 million, the largest payday in Grand Slam history.

Before their riveting semifinals, Sabalenka had the easier draw. She faced only one seed, No. 31 Leylah Fernandez, the undersized (5'4") Canadian lefty who upset her in the 2021 U.S. Open semis. This time Sabalenka prevailed 6-3, 7-6(2). Sabalenka lucked out when she reached the quarterfinals thanks to a


GETTY IMAHES

Giant killer: Amanda Anisimova beat Iga Swiatek and Naomi Osaka in back-to-back matches to reach the final. REUTERS

walkover from Marketa Vondrousova, the talented Czech lefty and 2023 Wimbledon champion. Vondrousova left the site in tears, citing a knee injury, but not before knocking out No. 7 Jasmine Paolini, a breakout star last year, 7-6(4), 6-1, and heavy-hitting Elena Rybakina 6-4, 5-7, 6-2.

The most heartwarming story of the fortnight came in a quarterfinal rematch of the Wimbledon final. Iga Swiatek made history with a 6-0, 6-0 demolition of Anisimova, the first double-bagel singles final there in the Open Era. Anisimova turned the tables at Flushing Meadows, though, making auspicious history herself: she became the first such victim to reach the final of the next Grand Slam event.

But Anisimova, like Sabalenka, learned from her bitter defeat. On her Wimbledon debacle, she said, "It gave me a better perspective on how I should be handling my nerves." Embarrassingly slow in the Wimbledon final, Anisimova imposed her powerful groundstrokes on Swiatek, attacked her second serve, and kept the speedy Polish superstar on the run throughout the impressive 6-4, 6-3 quarterfinal upset. "Today proved everything for me," said the resilient Anisimova. "It proved I can do it."

Anisimova would have to prove her prowess and poise again in the semifinals against the resurgent Naomi Osaka. The Japanese veteran had finally regained the form that brought her two Australian Open and two U.S. Open titles from 2018 to 2021. After giving birth to a girl in 2023, she struggled and occasionally seemed to sour on the sport, only to regain her passion this summer.

The most intriguing fourth-round match pitted Gauff — seeded No. 3 but mired in a deep slump since winning her second Major at the French Open — against Osaka. Double faults were Gauff's exasperating *bete noire*, as she was then averaging 11 per match. Gauff made the rare and controversial decision to revamp her flawed serve technique in the short span of a week, and even more questionably, just before the U.S. Open. Biomechanics guru Gavin MacMillan, whom Sabalenka credited with correcting her service woes, instructed Gauff to keep her head and tossing arm up longer, use a more closed shoulder rotation, and toss the ball farther over her left shoulder. Gauff notched good wins over Ajla Tomljanovic (who defeated Serena Williams in her 2022 farewell here), Olympic silver medallist Donna Vekic, and 28th-seed Magdalena Frech. But could her new serve, and the hastily instilled muscle memory required, hold up against the revitalised Osaka?

Ironically, it was Gauff's technically flawed Western forehand and not her serve that broke down against Osaka. Of Gauff's 33 unforced errors, 20 came from the suspect forehand and only five from double faults. Sensing her opponent's anxiety, Osaka targeted the vulnerable forehand and surged to a 6-3, 6-2 victory.

The 27-year-old Japanese, who resides in Los Angeles, had never lost a Major quarterfinal, and that success continued when she matched spectacular shots with Karolina Muchova. Sporting a purple, sparkling, double-hemmed dress against Muchova, Osaka said, "I'm not thinking about winning at all. I'm just trying to have fun." The formula worked as she tempered her ferocious power with just enough consistency to prevail 6-4, 7-6 (3). "My dream is coming true," Osaka exulted afterward.

But that dream ended in her semifinal slugfest with Anisimova.

Like two heavyweight boxers punching and counter-punching violently, Osaka and Anisimova pounded away in the opening set, each breaking serve twice. Points were shorter than in most men's

Battle ready: Osaka displayed the form that brought her two Australian Open and two U.S. Open titles from 2018 to 2021. REUTERS

matches and often ended with winners or forced errors. Anisimova smacked forehand return winners on break points to level at 2-all and again at 5-all. But Osaka built an insurmountable 6-1 lead and seized the tie-break 7-4. At 4-all in the second set, *ESPN* analyst Chris Evert said, "Who is going to be more fearless and take control?"

Both competitors blasted shots fearlessly, yet they lacked self-confidence in another telling respect. During the taut second set, Tomasz Wiktorowski used in-match coaching to advise Osaka to serve wide and go more to her opponent's backhand. On the other end, coach Rick Vleeshouwers reminded Anisimova to calm down.

In the deciding set, Anisimova got the only break she needed to pull ahead 3-1. Winners were coming from everywhere, more so from the American. She blasted winners with a swinging volley, an ace, and a forehand to hold for 4-1. Both players fought desperately when Anisimova served for the title at 5-3. Osaka staved off three championship points and Anisimova two break points.

Fittingly, the unrelenting Anisimova closed out the 6-7(4), 7-6(3), 6-3 battle with a backhand winner, her 50th overall, and potent forehands that forced Osaka to err, ending the enthralling duel at 12:55 a.m. On reaching her first U.S. Open final, Anisimova said, "It means the world. It's just absolutely a dream come true."

Sabalenka felt the same way. She enlivened the usually perfunctory and short pre-match interview when she told *ESPN's* Mary Joe Fernandez, "It's a dream. I'm living a dream life."

Although the Belarusian Basher had not suffered a straight-sets loss in 104 matches — a little-known stat second only to Martina Navratilova's record of 143 and a testament to her elite-level consistency — the streak seemed in jeopardy in her semifinal against the redoubtable Jessica Pegula **(right)**. Although the world No. 4 hadn't lost a set, she hadn't played a seeded opponent either.

The defending finalist — she lost 7-5, 7-5 to Sabalenka a year ago — grabbed 16 of the last 20 points to take the opening set against Sabalenka in the semis. But the momentum abruptly switched as Sabalenka's power and versatility more than offset Jessica's solid, precise shots and wonderful anticipation. The only drama came at 3-2 in the deciding set when Sabalenka fought off two break points and in the final game, lasting 10 points, when she served for the match at 5-4. After Sabalenka belted a forehand winner to wrap up the 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 victory, she shrieked in ecstasy.

The oddsmakers made Sabalenka a -200 favourite with Anisimova at +170, but Anisimova, the youngest woman at 24 to reach the Wimbledon and U.S. Open finals in the same year since Serena and Venus Williams in 2002, had more than a puncher's chance.

Had Anisimova, who just two years ago was taking online classes during her mental health break from the tour, expended so much emotional energy that she had little left for the title round? When she lost her serve twice to trail 5-3, Mary Joe Fernandez said, "I think she's feeling the occasion more than Sabalenka. I saw her in the gym working out [before the match]."

The American received a standing ovation from the partisan crowd when she broke serve to make it 5-all just after Sabalenka was two points from victory. Sabalenka dumped a routine overhead into the net at 30-all. Some wondered if her nerves would hold up, but the new, calmer Sabalenka brushed it off with a wry smile.

Not surprisingly, the Belarusian took the tie-break 7-3. After all, she had won an astounding 19 tie-breaks in a row, an Open Era record.

The 6-3, 7-6 (3) triumph reaffirmed her reign as the Queen of Hard Courts.

AFP

Relief, not jubilation: What India's Asia Cup win really means

India clinched the Asia Cup and **sealed its World Cup berth**, but the victory felt more like relief than triumph. A closer look at what the win says about Indian hockey and the state of the game in Asia.

Saikat Chakraborty
saikat.chakraborty@thehindu.co.in

The Indian men's hockey team arrived at the Asia Cup 2025 with one clear goal: to secure its berth at the 2026 World Cup. By the end of the tournament, it not only punched its ticket to Belgium and the Netherlands but also reclaimed its throne as Asia's best, winning the continental crown after an eight-year wait.

Seven matches in 10 sweltering days in Rajgir tested Craig Fulton's men, but after a slow start they hit stride when it mattered most. The victory brings relief as much as joy, coming on the heels of a disastrous European leg of the Pro League 2024-25, where India lost seven straight matches.

For a team widely regarded as Asia's benchmark, this was less a breakthrough than a necessary restoration of aura.

With an average of more than 5.5 goals per game, India sparkled in what Fulton had called the "most important tournament of the year."

It all began under the scorching August sun on Major Dhyan Chand's birth anniversary, celebrated as National Sports Day.

The heat was so fierce that volunteers carried buckets of water to the turf during quarter breaks, stretching them from two minutes to four.

Players shed up to three

R. V. MOORTHY

kilograms in a match, with some even falling ill.

India looked weary in its first two afternoon games against China and Japan. Composure was missing in both circles, and narrow one-goal wins came only through Harmanpreet Singh's drag-flicking brilliance. Opponents' low defensive blocks caused headaches, and India was vulnerable to counterattacks.

The breakthrough came in the third game against Kazakhstan. India's 15–0 rout saw the entire team egging on Dilpreet Singh to score, which he eventually did. That moment proved symbolic: in the final, it was Dilpreet's brace that sealed India's fourth Asia Cup.

New faces, new roles

The tournament became a coming-of-age platform for several players. Rajinder Singh, Shilanand Lakra, Vivek Sagar Prasad, and Suraj Karkera showed they were ready to take the baton in this new Olympic cycle, especially with Hockey India already talking of rebuilding the squad.

Meanwhile, skipper Harmanpreet stepped into a reinvented role. Usually the defensive anchor, the 29-year-old, still working back to full fitness after injuries, adopted a quarterback-like presence, launching 60-yard aerial passes to open new attacking avenues. Though not at his sharpest from short corners late in the tournament, he remained India's

Drawing first blood: India's Shailand Lakra (99) fires the opener against China in the Hero Asia Cup men's hockey clash in Rajgir. R. V. MOORTHY

decisive force.

Right-back Jarmanpreet Singh emerged as another unexpected attacking engine, his overlapping runs and deft first touch setting up teammates like Sukhjeet Singh, Abhishek, Manpreet Singh, Dilpreet, and Shilanand.

India finished with a staggering 39 goals, the highest by any team, though the overall lack of quality opposition undoubtedly helped inflate the tally.

State of Asian Hockey

The tournament also laid bare the gulf in Asian hockey. China showed flashes of ambition, while Malaysia, Korea, and Japan pushed hard, but the gap to India was obvious.

"While teams like Malaysia, Korea, Japan, and China are capable of winning on a given day, India is a level above all of them," observed Malaysia coach Sarjit Kundan.

Without Pro League exposure, Asian teams rarely face the world's best. For lower-ranked sides such as Bangladesh, Chinese Taipei, and Kazakhstan, the problem is worse; they last played in April at the AFH Cup 2025.

"If we could have leagues in Asia, like the European Championships, where there are different tiers, the weaker teams could play among themselves and then get promoted to the top tier. It would be hugely beneficial for smaller teams like us,"

The victory brings relief after a disastrous European leg of the Pro League 2024-25. With an average of more than 5.5 goals per game, India sparkled in what head coach Craig Fulton had called the "most important tournament of the year."

Early break: Norsyafiq Sumantri gives Malaysia the lead with the opening goal against China. R.V. MOORTHY

explained Bangladesh coach Mosiur Rahman Biplob.

City of Kings

Rajgir, the ancient town in Bihar, proved a fortuitous host. Following the women's continental triumph earlier, the men too found success here.

For visiting teams like Japan, China, and Chinese Taipei, the trip was more than sport; it was a pilgrimage to a place steeped in Buddhist history. The Rajgir Sports Complex Hockey Stadium became both a stage for top-level competition and a classroom for its academy players, who not only watched the action from close quarters but also interacted with stars after the final.

If the organisation was efficient, the 4,000–5,000-seat capacity proved inadequate. Spectators braved not just the heat but also cramped stands to cheer.

Big fish in a small pond?

Coach Fulton had set the tone before the tournament: "We intend to be the number one team in Asia always." His squad backed him up, extending his impressive tenure of three golds and a bronze in four events. His contract runs at least until the 2026 World Cup and Asian Games, with Hockey India firmly behind him.

The South African's blueprint is clear: use Asian competitions to build depth and cohesion while preparing to face Australia and European giants. Yet the question lingers — against a shallow continental pool, how much does India really learn?

Statistics

Goals scored: 164

Penalty Corner goals: 59

Top goal-scoring team: India (39)

Least goal-conceding team: Japan (6)

Individual Stats

Top-scorer: Akhimullah Anuar (Malaysia) — 12

Top-scorer for India: Harmanpreet Singh — 7

Most Penalty Corners scored: Harmanpreet Singh (India) — 6

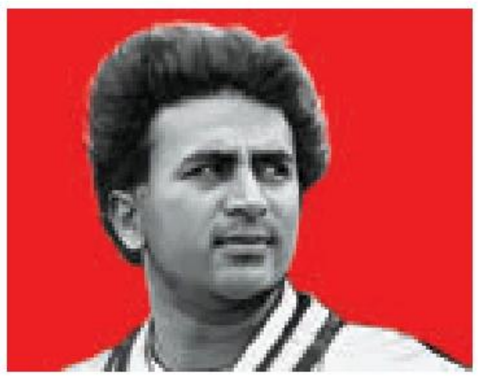
Individual Awards

Promising Goalkeeper: Caiyu Wang (China)

Rising Star of the Tournament: Andywalfian Jeffrynus (Malaysia)

AHF Best Goalkeeper: Jaehan Kim (Korea)

Player of the Tournament: Abhishek (India)



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

YOU CAN'T SELECT THE NATIONAL TEAM BASED ON JUST THE BRONCO TEST

There has to be **consideration** given to the player's speciality and allowances made for that.

The Asia Cup is back where it began in 1984. That year, it was played in Sharjah, then the only Emirate with a turf pitch. The success of that event, along with the rise of other cricketing nations, has made the Cup far more inclusive than it was over 40 years ago. Today, the UAE has more turf pitches than ever before and a robust cricketing ecosystem that hosts numerous tournaments and provides employment opportunities for several Asian cricketers.

It's wonderful to see the desert bloom with cricket pitches and to witness Abdul Rehman Bukhatir's dream of bringing top-class cricket to the region come true. Bukhatir spent his own money to get the Sharjah stadium up and running, sowing the seeds of big cricket in the UAE. The magnificent stadiums in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and other Emirates exist today thanks to his untiring efforts to establish the game in the desert.

Sadly, there is hardly any recognition of his services to the game. Not even the Sharjah stadium is named after him, nor is there any trophy or award to honour his contributions to the game in the UAE.

As the new season unfolds in India, a new fitness test has been introduced that players must pass before being considered for selection to the national team. It is not known who takes these decisions, as there is no longer a cricket committee in the BCCI. Earlier, before the Justice Lodha panel's recommendations, a Technical Committee used to make decisions on cricketing matters, which, of course, had to be ratified by the all-powerful working committee and then approved at the Annual General Meeting. The Technical Committee invariably comprised former cricketers, umpires, and Board officials. Now, to the best of knowledge, there doesn't seem to be a committee like that, so one wonders who takes the decisions related to cricket.

The decision to have the Duleep Trophy on a zonal basis again is a good one, as it opens the doors to many players who, in earlier seasons,

Individual needs: According to the author, every cricketer's body is different, so applying one fitness standard to all is nearly impossible. GETTY IMAGES

gave their hearts and souls in extreme weather conditions, often playing in front of empty stadiums and on pitches that were not the greatest. Being selected for the zonal teams and having their performances noticed not just by the general public but also by the selectors is a significant boost for these hardy cricketers, most of whom don't feature in IPL teams. The BCCI must be lauded for doing this, and the Duleep Trophy should always be a zonal teams' competition as it was envisaged when it first started.

Another decision to introduce a fitness test, called the Bronco Test, is a new feature. While it is fine to have these tests to get a general idea of where a player needs to strengthen their body, having them decide selection to the national team is a tad too much. Every person's body is different, so having one standard for everybody in the squad is well-nigh impossible. There has to be consideration given to the player's speciality and allowances made for that. For example, a wicketkeeper, who is constantly on the move the whole day, requires a different fitness level than the others. The fast bowlers will be different from the spinners, though the spinners will invariably bowl as many, if not more, overs in the day than them. The batters will need a different kind of fitness. As you can see, there is no such thing as a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. As long as this is taken into account and the strict parameters of the new test are not followed rigidly, then it is fine.

The most important test for playing at the highest level for your country cannot be measured, as it's between the two ears. And the clincher for me is when the heart is opened, it should have only two words, 'Indian cricket', and nothing else.

The decision to have the Duleep Trophy on a zonal basis again is a good one, as it opens the doors to many players who, in earlier seasons, gave their hearts and souls in extreme weather conditions, often playing in front of empty stadiums and on pitches that were not the greatest.

Highs and lows of the men's T20 Asia Cup

The first men's Asia Cup cricket tournament was played in April 1984 in Sharjah, UAE. Since then, cricket fans have enjoyed 16 exciting editions of this tournament. Fourteen of these were played in the ODI format, while the 2016 and 2022 editions were in the T20 format, building excitement for the upcoming T20 World Cups. With the 2026 T20 World Cup just around the corner in India, the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) decided to shake things up and switch from the usual 50-over format to the faster-paced T20. The 2016 men's Asia Cup, held between February 19 and March 6 in Bangladesh, brought together eight talented teams across 17 matches played in Fatullah and Mirpur.

The qualifying round saw the UAE, Afghanistan, Oman, and Hong Kong battling it out for a spot in the main event. The UAE came out on top to join India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka in the main tournament. The competition was fierce, but it was India which triumphed, defeating Bangladesh by eight wickets with seven balls to spare in a thrilling final in Mirpur. Shikhar Dhawan was named the Player of the final for his impressive 60-run contribution — the only fifty-plus score in the match.

As the cricket world buzzed with anticipation for the 2022 T20 World Cup in Australia, the Asia Cup returned to the T20 format to thrill fans once more. From August 20 to September 11, 2022, the tournament featured 19 action-packed T20 matches, spread across Al Amerat in Oman, as well as Dubai and Sharjah in the UAE.

The qualifying round was filled with excitement, as Hong Kong, Kuwait, the UAE, and Singapore all vied for a coveted spot. Hong Kong emerged as the top contender and joined the main event. In a memorable final in Dubai, Sri Lanka shone brightly, defeating Pakistan by 23 runs. Bhanuka Rajapaksa's unbeaten 71 made him the Player of the final, the perfect ending to a fantastic tournament.

An overview of the performance of teams and players during the first two Asia Cup T20 tournaments.

Title winners

No	Period	Host	Result in the final	Result	Venue	Player of the tournament
1	Feb-Mar 2016	Bangladesh	India beat Bangladesh	by 8 wkts (7 balls to spare)	Mirpur	Sabbir Rahman (Ban)
2	Aug-Sep 2022	Oman/UAE	Sri Lanka beat Pakistan	by 23 runs	Dubai	Wanindu Hasaranga (SL)

Match result summary of the eight participating sides in 2025

Team	Period	M	W	L	Win%	Titles won	Runner-up
India	2016-2022	10	8	2	80.00	1	–
Sri Lanka	2016-2022	10	6	4	60.00	1	–
Afghanistan	2016-2022	8	4	4	50.00	–	–
Pakistan	2016-2022	10	5	5	50.00	–	1
Bangladesh	2016-2022	7	3	4	42.86	–	1
UAE	2016-2022	10	4	6	40.00	–	–
Hong Kong	2016-2022	8	3	5	37.50	–	–
Oman	2022-	3	1	2	33.33	–	–

Note: Kuwait (won 2, lost 1) and Singapore (lost all three) are the other sides to participate in the tournament in 2022.

Highest totals

Total	(ov)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
212/2	(20)	Ind	Afg	Dubai	8-9-2022	Won
193/2	(20)	Pak	HK	Sharjah	2-9-2022	Won
192/2	(20)	Ind	HK	Dubai	31-8-2022	Won

Lowest totals

Total	(ov)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
38/10	(10.4)	HK	Pak	Sharjah	2-9-2022	Lost
81/9	(20)	UAE	Ind	Mirpur	3-3-2016	Lost
82/10	(17.4)	UAE	Ban	Mirpur	26-2-2016	Lost

Big victories

By runs	Winner	Loser	Venue	Date
155	Pak	HK	Sharah	2-9-2022
101	Ind	Afg	Dubai	8-9-2022
By wickets	**Winner**	**Loser**	**Venue**	**Date**
9	Ind	UAE	Mirpur	3-3-2016

Narrow victories

By runs	Winner	Loser	Venue	Date
5	Oman	HK	Fatullah	19-2-2016
8	HK	Sing	Al Amerat	8-9-2022
By wickets	**Winner**	**Loser**	**Venue**	**Date**
1	Kuw	UAE	Al Amerat	21-8-2022
1	Pak	Afg	Sharjah	7-9-2022

Lowest totals successfully defended

Total	(ov)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
129/8	(20)	SL	UAE (115/9)	Mirpur	25-2-2016	won by 14 runs
133/8	(20)	Ban	UAE (82/10)	Mirpur	26-2-2016	won by 51 runs
147/7	(20)	Ban	SL (124/8)	Mirpur	28-2-2016	won by 23 runs

Highest match aggregates

Total	(ov)	Team1	Team2	Venue	Date
367/15	(39.2)	Ban (183/7)	SL (184/8)	Dubai	1-9-2022
363/12	(39.5)	Ind (181/7)	Pak (182/5)	Dubai	4-9-2022
355/12	(40.0)	Oman (180/5)	HK (175/7)	Fatullah	19-2-2016

Highest totals batting second

Total	(ov)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
184/8	(19.2)	SL	Ban (183/7)	Dubai	1-9-2022	Won
182/5	(19.5)	Pak	Ind (181/7)	Dubai	4-9-2022	Won
179/6	(19.1)	SL	Afg (175/6)	Sharjah	3-9-2022	Won

Highest career batting strike-rates (min 150 runs)

S/R	Batter (for)	M	Inn	Runs	Ave.	Balls
163.44	R. Gurbaz (Afg)	5	5	152	30.40	93
157.14	N. Zadran (Afg)	8	8	176	35.20	112
156.57	K. Mendis (SL)	6	6	155	25.83	99
150.23	B. Hayat (HK)	8	8	332	55.33	221

Highest individual scores

Runs	(Balls)	Batter	For	Opp	Venue	Date
122*	(61)	V. Kohli	Ind	Afg	Dubai	8-9-2022
122	(60)	B. Hayat	HK	Oman	Fatullah	19-2-2016
88	(61)	C. Suri	UAE	Kuw	Al Amerat	21-8-2022
84	(45)	R. Gurbaz	Afg	SL	Sharjah	3-9-2022
83	(55)	R. Sharma	Ind	Ban	Mirpur	24-2-2016
80	(54)	S. Rahman	Ban	SL	Mirpur	28-2-2016

Leading run-getters during a career

Runs	Batter	For	M	Inn	S/R	Career Span
429	V. Kohli	Ind	10	9	132.00	2016-2022
332	B. Hayat	HK	8	8	150.23	2016-2022
281	Md. Rizwan	Pak	6	6	117.57	2022-
271	R. Sharma	Ind	9	9	141.15	2016-2022
196	I. Zadran	Afg	5	5	104.26	2022-
191	B. Rajapaksa	SL	6	6	149.22	2022-

Fastest knocks of 40 runs or more in a match

S/R	Batter (for)	Runs (balls)	Opp	Venue	Date
261.54	S. Yadav (Ind)	58* (26)	HK	Dubai	31-8-2022
252.94	N. Zadran (Afg)	43* (17)	Ban	Sharjah	30-8-2022
222.22	R. Gurbaz (Afg)	40 (18)	SL	Dubai	27-8-2022
210.00	Md. Nawaz (Pak)	42 (20)	Ind	Dubai	4-9-2022
209.09	Md. Usman (UAE)	46 (22)	Oman	Mirpur	22-2-2016

Note: Suryakumar Yadav **(table, left)** reached his 50 in 22 balls, the quickest by a batter in the Asia Cup. This was later equalled by Afghanistan's Rahmanullah Gurbaz (84 in 45 balls) a few days later against Sri Lanka in Sharjah on 3 September 2022.

Best bowling performance in a match

Bowl	(ov)	Bowler	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
5/4	(4.0)	B. Kumar	Ind	Afg	Dubai	8 Sep 2022	Won
4/8	(2.4)	S. Khan	Pak	HK	Sharjah	2 Sep 2022	Won
4/17	(4.0)	Md. Nabi	Afg	HK	Mirpur	22 Feb 2016	Won
4/22	(4.0)	Y. Patel	Kuw	Sing	Al Amerat	24 Aug 2022	Won
4/24	(4.0)	E. Khan	HK	UAE	Al Amerat	24 Aug 2022	Won
4/26	(4.0)	L. Malinga	SL	UAE	Mirpur	25 Feb 2016	Won
4/26	(4.0)	B. Kumar	Ind	Pak	Dubai	28 Aug 2022	Won
4/34	(4.0)	P. Madushan	SL	Pak	Dubai	11 Sep 2022	Won
4/36	(4.0)	A. Kaleem	Oman	UAE	Mirpur	22 Feb 2016	Lost

Leading wicket-takers during a career

Wkts	Bowler	For	M	E/R	Career Span
13	B. Kumar	Ind	6	5.35	2016-2022
12	A. Javed	UAE	7	7.35	2016-
11	Md. Naveed	UAE	7	5.24	2016-
11	R. Khan	Afg	8	6.52	2016-2022
11	E. Khan	HK	5	6.75	2022-
11	H. Pandya	Ind	8	7.02	2016-2022
11	A. Hossain	Ban	5	7.96	2016-

Most economical bowling in a match

R/O	Bowler (for)	Bowl (ov)	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
1.00	B. Kumar (Ind)	5/4 (4)	Afg	Dubai	8 Sep 2022	Won
1.50	Md. Aamer (Pak)	2/6 (4)	UAE	Mirpur	29 Feb 2016	Won
2.00	B. Kumar (Ind)	2/8 (4)	UAE	Mirpur	3 Mar 2016	Won

Most economical (runs/over) career bowling (min 90 balls)

R/O	Bowler (for)	M	Wkts	Ave.	Balls
5.06	M. Aamer (Pak)	4	7	11.57	96
5.22	J. Bumrah (Ind)	5	6	15.67	108
5.24	Md. Naveed (UAE)	7	11	13.18	166
5.35	B. Kumar (Ind)	6	13	9.46	138
5.44	Md. Irfan (Pak)	4	5	17.40	96

All records are correct and updated until 8 September 2025.

AFP

Big defeat for SA in last ODI after clinching series

FOR MORE STORIES

1 South Africa had won the opening game **against England** by seven wickets and edged the second by five runs

South Africa suffered the heaviest defeat in ODI history as England bowled it out for just 72 in a 342-run thrashing inspired by Jofra Archer's blistering spell and Jacob Bethell's maiden century.

Chasing 415 in Southampton, the Proteas collapsed inside 21 overs. It was the biggest margin of victory in ODIs when batting first, surpassing India's 317-run win over Sri Lanka in 2023.

Despite the humiliation, South Africa had already clinched the series 2–1, having won the opening game by seven wickets and edging the second by five runs.

2

AFP

Pakistan will host Sri Lanka for a three-match ODI series in November, their first home meeting since 2019. The sides last faced off at the 2023 ODI World Cup, where Pakistan won by six wickets. The ODI series will be followed by a home T20I tri-series also featuring Afghanistan, Pakistan's maiden tri-series on home soil. Its packed season also includes an all-format tour by South Africa beginning in October.

3

AP

New Zealand great Ross Taylor is set to come out of retirement to represent Samoa at the T20 World Cup qualifiers in Oman next month. Taylor, who retired in 2022, played more matches than any other New Zealander: 112 Tests, 236 ODIs and 102 T20Is. He is New Zealand's second-highest Test run-scorer (7,683) and century-maker (19), behind only Kane Williamson. Honouring his Samoan heritage through his mother Lote, Taylor will play under his given names and chiefly title, Leaupepe Luteru Ross Poutoa Lote Taylor.

4

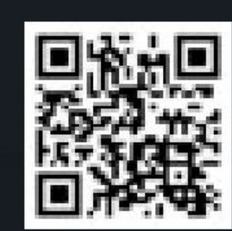
PTI

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) will hold its 95th Annual General Meeting on September 28 in Mumbai. As per procedure, notices have gone out to all affiliated members. Elections, if necessary, will be held the same day. The Board will continue to follow Lodha Committee guidelines, including the 70-year age cap for office bearers, with the National Sports Act yet to be formally implemented. The AGM agenda includes electing a new committee, along with constituting fresh IPL Governing Council and Women's Premier League panels.

5

AFP

Pakistan warmed up for the Asia Cup with a dominant win in the UAE tri-series final, beating Afghanistan by 75 runs in Sharjah. Mohammad Nawaz claimed a hat-trick on his way to career-best T20I figures of 5 for 19 as Afghanistan folded for 66 in 15.5 overs, chasing 142 on a tricky surface. Afghanistan's only win in the tournament came against Pakistan earlier, when Rashid Khan's side secured an 18-run victory with a collective bowling effort. Host UAE went winless.



FOR MORE STORIES

YOUNG STARS AND OLD LEGENDS SHINE

Liverpool and Arsenal delivered an anti-climactic duel while Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo impressed with **strong performances** in the World Cup qualifiers.

Aneesh Dey and Joan Mathew Jacob
aneesh.dey@thehindu.co.in, joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in

The Premier League witnessed an early clash between two teams heavily tipped to be in the title race at the end of the season. Arne Slot's Liverpool and Mikel Arteta's Arsenal battled it out in front of a boisterous Anfield crowd. With neutrals expecting a goal fest given the sharp attacking line-ups of both teams, the result was anti-climactic. Liverpool edged past Arsenal with a 1-0 win courtesy of a smooth free kick by Dominik Szoboszlai in the 83rd minute. The Gunners, who had 11 shots at goal but managed only one on target, garnered widespread criticism for their reserved approach.

Manchester United legend and former goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel, when asked to comment on the game, said: "I have never in my life, ever, wanted a team to win a game of football more than Liverpool today. Arsenal brings an ugly brand of football to our game. Arteta... let your team play football... You need two teams to give a good game of football, and there is only one team trying to play football, and that's Liverpool. I don't want to insult Arsenal, but their brand of football is so annoying to watch. It's designed to exploit opponents while watching for set pieces."

Liverpool's good fortune continued as the long-drawn transfer saga involving Alexander Isak came to an end, with the Swedish striker making a British-record £125m move to the

Heavyweight clash: Liverpool players celebrate with Dominik Szoboszlai whose last-gasp free kick sealed a crucial win against Arsenal. REUTERS

Reds ahead of transfer deadline day. Signing Marc Guehi would have been the cherry on the cake for Liverpool after a brilliant transfer window, but the deal collapsed at the last minute.

Manchester United, still reeling from a devastating loss to fourth-tier Grimsby Town in the League Cup, finally had some reason to celebrate as it clinched its first league win of the season after losing and drawing its opening two matches.

Up against a resolute newly promoted Burnley side, United scraped through after a late penalty from Bruno Fernandes gave it three points. Despite the win, United fans had to watch newly-signed Matheus Cunha go off injured, which will be a concern for Ruben Amorim.

The other Manchester team, however, could not catch a break. After losing to Tottenham Hotspur in its previous match, Pep Guardiola's men were keen to bounce back against Brighton & Hove Albion.

But the Seagulls thrilled their home fans with a second-half comeback, as James Milner scored a penalty against his former side before Brajan Gruda struck an 89th-minute winner.

For Chelsea, it was a good result as it beat Fulham 2-0, but the evening was not perfect for Enzo Maresca, with Liam Delap suffering a hamstring injury that is expected to keep him out for four to six weeks. For another London club, Tottenham, which had made a flying start to the season under new manager Thomas Frank, there was a harsh reality check at home as it lost 0-1 to Bournemouth.

At the end of Matchday 3, defending champion Liverpool tops the table with nine points, followed by Chelsea (7), Arsenal (6) and Tottenham (6) in second, third and fourth respectively. Manchester United is ninth with four points, while Manchester City sits 13th with three points.

Bundesliga

The biggest talking point in the Bundesliga was Bayer Leverkusen's sacking of Erik ten Hag **(right)** after just three matches in charge, the latest being a 3-3 draw against Werder Bremen. Reports suggested that the relationship between Ten Hag and the club had soured, and the players were unhappy with the atmosphere in the dressing room.

Defending champion Bayern Munich edged a 3-2 win against Augsburg, with Serge Gnabry, Luis Diaz, and Michael Olise finding the net for the Bavarians. Borussia Dortmund clinched a 3-0 win against Union Berlin, while RB Leipzig beat Heidenheim 2-0.

At the end of Matchday 2, Bayern Munich occupies the top spot with six points. Eintracht Frankfurt and FC Cologne are second and third with the same points, while Dortmund is fourth with four points.

Decisive shot: Bruno Fernandes's late penalty assured three points for Manchester United against newly-promoted Burnley. REUTERS

AP

Masterclass: A stunning hat-trick by Joao Neves (in pic, right) helped PSG overcome Toulouse in a 6-3 thriller. AFP

Fonseca's side overcame Olympique de Marseille 1-0 thanks to a late goal from Pavel Sulc.

Ligue 1

Paris Saint-Germain looked much more like its old self from last season when it thrashed Toulouse 6-3 to make it three wins in three. Joao Neves produced early contenders for the goal of the season, scoring two overhead kicks and a long-range strike to complete a stunning hat-trick. Meanwhile, Ousmane Dembele and Bradley Barcola also got on the scoresheet, with the former converting twice from the spot.

However, challenging times await the defending champion as it will miss the services of Dembele and Desire Doue for at least a month after both suffered injuries during the international break. To add to the woes, manager Luis Enrique is also sidelined with a collarbone fracture sustained in a cycling accident.

Olympique Lyonnais is the only other team with nine points heading into the international break. Paulo Fonseca's side overcame Olympique de Marseille 1-0 thanks to a late goal from Pavel Sulc.

Serie A

Reigning champion Napoli was made to work hard to maintain its perfect start to the season by Cagliari, eventually winning thanks to a stoppage-time strike from Frank Anguissa. Playing in front of their home crowd for the first time this season, Antonio Conte's men wasted chance after chance before Anguissa found himself unmarked in the box to coolly slot in a cross from Alessandro Buongiorno.

AC Milan managed to record its first win of the season after former Chelsea players Ruben Loftus-Cheek and Christian Pulisic found the back of the net against Lecce. However, its city rival Inter had contrasting fortunes. After thrashing Torino 5-0 in its opener, Cristian Chivu's side surrendered a one-goal lead to lose against Udinese.

Meanwhile, Dusan Vlahovic made it two goals in two games as he came off the bench to help Juventus edge past Genoa. The Bianconeri joined Napoli, Roma and promoted Cremonese as the only sides yet to drop points so far.

La Liga

In Spain, the two giants had contrasting game weeks. While Real Madrid clinched a narrow 2-1 win against Mallorca, Barcelona dropped points in a 1-1 draw with Rayo Vallecano.

Xabi Alonso defended his decision to bench Vinicius Jr **(left)** at the beginning of the season, stressing that no player will have an automatic place in the starting line-up. When the Spaniard decided to start the Brazilian against Mallorca, he showed why he deserves it, scoring the winner in the 38th minute, just a minute after Arda Guler had equalised Vedat Muriqi's opener for Mallorca in the 18th.

AP

Lamine Yamal opened the scoring for Barcelona against Rayo with a penalty in the 40th minute, but Hansi Flick's men could not defend their lead as Fran Perez equalised in the 67th.

Meanwhile, Atletico Madrid continued to struggle. After a 1-1 draw against Elche in its previous game week, Diego Simeone's side was held to another draw by Alaves, again 1-1.

Among the Basque clubs, Athletic had the better week, beating Real Betis 1-0, while Real Sociedad suffered a shock 0-1 loss to newly-promoted Oviedo.

For Sevilla, it was a simple day at office as it beat Girona 2-0.

At the end of Matchday 3, Real Madrid tops the table with nine points. Athletic is second with the same tally but an inferior goal difference. Villarreal and Barcelona occupy third and fourth respectively with seven points each, while Atletico Madrid, yet to win a match, languish in 17th with two points.

FIFA World Cup qualifiers

Football had dealt Lionel Messi a cruel hand for much of his career in Argentina's colours. But by the time he donned the blue and white shirt for possibly the last time on home soil, he was both continental and world champion.

Fans flocked to the capital to get one last look at their hero as Argentina hosted Venezuela in its final home qualifier for the 2026 FIFA World Cup. In true Messi fashion, he delivered, netting twice in a 3-0 win to give his faithful supporters the perfect parting gift.

Now, they await his decision on whether he will lead Argentina's World Cup defence next year.

Brazil enjoyed a bright start to its international window, easing past Chile 3-0 with Chelsea teenager Estevao scoring his first senior international goal. Uruguay, Colombia and Paraguay also booked their places, with Paraguay qualifying for the first time since 2010.

Meanwhile, Messi's ageless counterpart Cristiano Ronaldo also showed his class. The 40-year-old scored twice as Portugal thumped Armenia 5-0 in their qualifying fixture. The brace took his international goal tally to 140, while his career numbers rose to a staggering 942.

The most shocking result of the break came when Germany, succumbed to a 2-0 loss against Slovakia, its first-ever World Cup qualifier loss on the road. On the contrary, Euro 2024 finalists Spain and England both won comfortably, beating Bulgaria and Andorra respectively.

Notably, France captain Kylian Mbappe scored his 51st international goal in a 2-0 win over Ukraine, equalling Thierry Henry's tally and closing in on Olivier Giroud's all-time record of 57 international goals for France.

Meanwhile, 2022 World Cup semifinalist Morocco became the first African team to qualify for the global showpiece after thrashing Niger 5-0.

All results updated as of September 7

Road to 2026: Lionel Messi played his last home game in nationals colours, as Argentina beat Venezuela 3-0. **Below:** Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice in Portugal's 5-0 thumping of Armenia. AFP

VERSTAPPEN STRIKES BACK AT MONZA

Oscar Piastri continues to set the pace, but Max Verstappen's **record-breaking victory** at the Italian Grand Prix shows the title fight is not yet settled.

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

For Max Verstappen, his form in the 2025 season has been a stark contrast to the dominance he made routine in recent years. With just two wins from the first 14 races — compared to nine by the same stage in 2023 and seven in 2024 — the defending champion knew a fifth crown would not come easy.

McLaren, led by a resurgent Oscar Piastri, pulled clear of the field in commanding fashion, leaving Verstappen stranded in third and more than 100 points adrift of the papaya-clad Australian at the summer break. Still, if Formula 1 history has shown anything — as in the unforgettable 2021 Abu Dhabi finale — it's that counting Verstappen out is never wise.

At Zandvoort, a circuit draped in orange for its hometown hero, celebrations were expected to mirror past years. Instead, the Dutch faithful watched another McLaren once again spoil the party. But one week later at Monza, Verstappen struck back, intervening in the McLaren duel to take victory in front of the tifosi — a result that reminded the paddock of his undeniable racecraft.

The gap to the leading McLaren driver is a hefty 96 points, but if recent races are any indicators, Piastri will be aware of the lurking threat in Verstappen — one he had successfully thwarted at Zandvoort.

A dual dream

The Australian delivered a flawless weekend, starting with a commanding pole position before converting it into his ninth career win and seventh victory of the season. In doing so, he achieved a rare feat: leading every lap, securing the fastest lap, and sealing victory for Formula 1's coveted 'Grand Slam' — McLaren's first since Mika Häkkinen's triumph at the 1998 Monaco Grand Prix.

For much of the race, the papaya team looked set for a dream one-two. Lando Norris, chasing Piastri, was poised to pounce should the opportunity arise. Verstappen, lurking in third, remained a constant threat — the type of scenario Piastri has grown increasingly accustomed to this season.

A different tyre strategy put Verstappen on the attack early. He briefly got ahead of Norris, only to be reeled back in within a few laps. The Briton, mirroring his teammate's calm precision, then closed the gap to Piastri in decent time.

But the unpredictable nature of

Ahead of the pack: At the Italian Grand Prix, Max Verstappen crossed the line more than 19 seconds clear, claiming his third win of the season. AP

racing struct the second-placed McLaren cruelly. The Mercedes power unit in Norris's car gave way in the closing stages, with smoke spilling from the rear and with it, his chances of a podium finish. The 25-year-old slumped to the side of the track, visibly frustrated and heartbroken, having seen another optimistic result wither away.

Adding a wholesome element to the final classification was rookie Isack Hadjar, who converted his best-ever starting spot (fourth) into a maiden Formula 1 podium (third). The Racing Bulls driver, who had shown flashes of promise all season, finally pieced together a complete weekend and was duly rewarded.

Verstappen inherited second place, keeping his remarkable home record alive with a fifth consecutive Zandvoort podium — three wins followed by two runner-up finishes. One race into the second half of the season, Piastri had tightened his grip on the championship, while the holder kept himself in contention, with Monza next on the horizon.

Dutch drama: Oscar Piastri won from pole at the Dutch Grand Prix, while Verstappen secured his fifth consecutive home podium at the Zandvoort track. GETTY IMAGES

Whispers of revival

Referred to as 'The Temple of Speed' for its long straights and high-speed corners, the Italian Grand Prix bore witness to a historic race that redefined pace and prowess. In a tightly contested qualifying, Verstappen outshone the McLaren drivers and the Ferrari duo with a blistering final lap that set the tone for the weekend. His unbelievable last-gasp effort saw him beat Norris by 0.077s — setting a new lap record around the iconic Monza circuit and posting the fastest lap by average speed in F1 history. His lap time of 1m 18.792s meant an average speed of 264.681 km/h, quicker than the 264.362 km/h Lewis Hamilton set here during qualifying in 2020.

Verstappen had stolen the pole from McLaren, extracting every ounce from the underwhelming Red Bull. The achievement rekindled a determined fire in him, consistent with his aggressive style and never-give-up attitude. Adding more fuel was the fact that no one had won at Monza from pole in the last five Grand Prix, but he was primed for the challenge.

He was on the defensive right from the beginning, but his slow start compromised his position. Having fought a frenetic scrap in the opening laps — during which he lost and regained the lead — Verstappen made no error thereafter, steering clear of both McLaren drivers, who eventually found themselves in a tussle of their own. There was late drama as Norris had looked set to finish second until a slow pit stop six laps from the end allowed Piastri to jump ahead. With McLaren eager to protect both cars from Ferrari's Charles Leclerc behind, the team had given the third-placed driver the earlier stop, a move Norris had agreed to, only to see it backfire.

McLaren then ordered Piastri to hand back the position to protect his teammate's title momentum. The 24-year-old questioned the call on the team radio but complied two laps later, allowing Norris to pass in a contentious move. It trimmed his championship lead over Norris by three points to 31. In contrast with qualifying's razor-thin margins, Verstappen crossed the line more than 19 seconds clear, claiming his third win of the season. It was also the fastest race in F1 history, averaging 250.706 km/h — a fitting statistic for the Temple of Speed.

McLaren still secured a double podium, though strategy doubts lingered as both drivers pushed hard for the coveted prize. As for Verstappen, he had reminded the paddock that the fight for 2025 is far from over.

INDIA GETS ITS FIRST WORLD CHAMPION IN ESPORTS

Ved 'Beezleboy' Bamb **clinched** the 2025 Pokémon World Championship at the Anaheim Convention Centre in California

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

Esports in India has already had some remarkable chapters, from an Indian club partnering at the Esports World Cup to seeing the tricolour on the podium after Pavan Kampelli won bronze in eFootball at the Asian Esports Games.

Another chapter — a very significant one — was added to this legacy last month when 21-year-old Ved 'Beezleboy' Bamb clinched the 2025 Pokémon World Championship at the Anaheim Convention Centre in California. He became the country's first esports athlete to win a world championship, defeating Spain's Leo "P4T0M4N" Marín to script history.

The 'Beelzeboy' from Nagpur won the grand finals against P4T0M4N in a tight 3–2 series, earning USD 20,000, while P4T0M4N secured USD 15,000 as the runner-up. Brazil's LNDsRargef took third place with USD 13,000.

The youngster from Nagpur emerged from the Lower Bracket and faced P4T0M4N for the second time. To win the championship, Beelzeboy had to beat the Spanish player twice: first to reset the bracket and then again to claim the title.

Beezelboy started playing the game in 2016 when Pokémon Go arrived in India and had finished fourth in the last edition of the tournament. He joined the North American esports organisation LAGr Gaming in September 2024 and has since proved his mettle in the title. He won the national title, competing against 256 players without a single loss, and remains the only international Pokémon player on the current active roster.

MANCHESTER TO LEIPZIG, HERE WE GO!

The summer of 2025 may have seen a major transfer from Leipzig to Manchester—with Benjamin Sesko joining Manchester United from RB Leipzig for GBP 74 million—but in esports, there was a major transfer in almost the opposite direction.

Donovan 'Tekkz' Hunt joined Leipzig after a two-year stint at Manchester City. A FIFAe Club World Cup

VALORANT RANKINGS

ABHIRUP "LIGHTNINGFAST" CHOUDHURY

GANESH "SKROSSI" GANGADHAR

SHRAVANA "TECHNO" SAHOO

AMAN "HOAX" YADAV

SAGNIK "HELLFF" ROY

champion in 2019, Tekkz won consecutive ePremier League titles in 2024 and 2025 at City, establishing himself as one of the most prominent EA FC players in the current circuit.

At Leipzig, he replaced the 2024 EA FC World Cup winner, Anders Vejrgang, on the 2025-26 roster, with the latter leaving for Saudi Arabian heavyweight, Team Falcons.

"I decided to leave Manchester City and join RBLZ Gaming because I felt I needed a change. Leipzig clearly showed me their plan, and that was exciting. At this point in my career, it was the best step forward for me," Tekkz said.

"My main goal is still to win the FC Pro World Championship. It's been a good step forward recently, and I'm happy with my performance—but I know I can play much better. I need to close games more consistently when I'm leading. That will make the difference between finishing in the top 8 and winning the tournament."

SUBWAY SURFERS IN COMPETITIVE GAMING

Subway Surfers has been one of the most downloaded games in the history of mobile gaming. The first game on the Google Play Store to cross the one billion downloads threshold, Subway Surfers has its biggest market in India, with 38 million downloads in 2024, according to AppMagic.

Now, the famous game is looking to enter the competitive space by announcing a collaboration with the multiplayer game Brawl Stars. The new mode, called Showdown, will involve six players racing on signature railroad tracks in a Brawl Stars-themed map.

Along the way, players must find boosts to speed up while avoiding obstacles until they reach the finish line.

"A competitive game mode within Subway Surfers has been one of the most requested features from our community over the last 13 years," said Celia Zimmermann, Head of Player Experience at SYBO.

"We're excited to bring this collaboration to life and incorporate elements from Brawl Stars' beloved multiplayer-style gameplay into Subway Surfers for the very first time."

The mode will be live until October 5. However, the collaboration may be just the first step for the multi-million dollar enterprise to expand into competitive esports.

Niantic took a similar approach with Pokémon GO when it released PvP trainer battles in late 2018. This eventually led to the first-ever Pokémon GO Championship Series three years later.

FREE FIRE MAX INDIA CUP 2025 IN LUCKNOW

The Free Fire MAX India Cup (FFMIC) 2025, the first official esports event for the game since its ban was lifted in 2022, will hold its grand finals at the Ekana International Indoor Stadium in Lucknow on September 28.

The event features a prize pool of around INR 1 crore, and the following teams have qualified for the event:

GodLike Esports, Jonty Gaming, Total Gaming, Aerobotz Esports, Genesis Esports, Nightmare Esports, Reckoning Esports, Gods Reign, Team iNSANE, Vasista Esports, NG Silver Eagle, Team Hind, Revenant XSpark, Autobotz Esports, Nonstop Pros, Team Tycoons, S8UL, Kar98 Army

Did you know? World No. 4 tennis player Jessica Pegula is a Call of Duty enthusiast and has appeared in promotional videos as a transformed version of Sophia, a fan-favourite operator in the game.

WHO AM I?

I am known as "India's Aim God" in the FPS esports scene and was undefeated in CS:GO throughout 2019. I transitioned to Valorant in December 2020 and am currently playing for Revenant XSpark.

The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Khush "Jokerr" Singh

BUSINESS OF ESPORTS

The International Football Association and esports giant KONAMI have extended their partnership to promote the development of football esports worldwide through FIFAe competitions in 2025 and 2026.

EASTER EGG 'ANR'

ANR, short for Added and Ready, is used in Pokémon Go for remote raiding: a player will say they are ANR to signify they have added you as a friend and are ready for their raid invite.

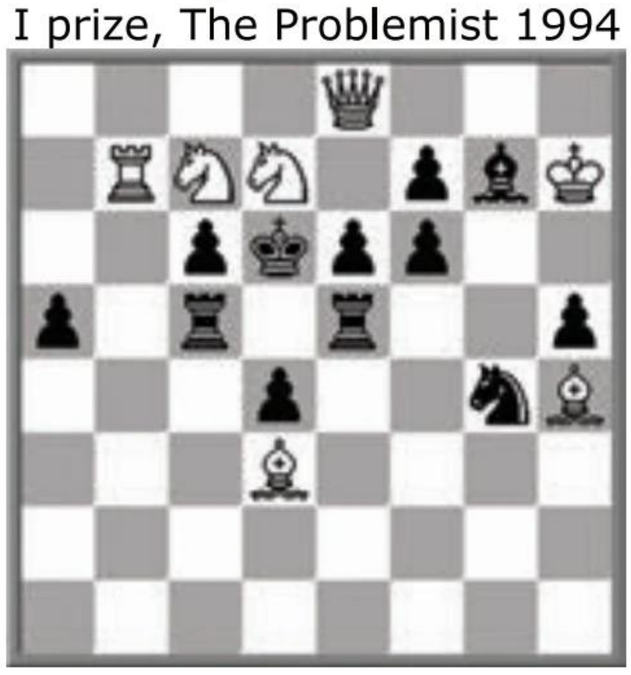
Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

Unique Umnov

By C.G.S.Narayanan

When white men occupy the squares just vacated by black piece, other than a pawn, as second move continuations in a three-mover we have an Umnov, a unique three-move theme known for its beauty and paradox. The black piece however keeps the possibility of going back to that square with a capture.In the first problem below for study the WNd7 can very well capture either of the BRs but the scheme works only after the WQ forms the white battery with an excellent key granting two flights d7and e7.After the **key 1.Qb8**! threatening 2.Nb5+ Kd7 The lateral battery on the seventh rank spring into action for the third move mate.

Robert Burger& Robin Matthews
I prize, The Problemist 1994



Mate in three moves

The subtle black defences 1…cRd5 and eRd5 try to disrupt the final mate.1..cRd5 2.Nc5 using the self-block at d5.If 2…Rxc5 3.Qd8 and 1…eRd5 2.Ne5 Rxe5 3.Qd8. The try move that leaps to the eye 1.Qf8? defeated by somewhat obvious refutation 1…Re3! and the extra variation is 2…Ke7 3.Nf8. A classic exposition of the theme with admirable white economy.

Viktor Lizunov& Andre Lobusov
2 Prize, Shakmaty v SSSR 1991

Mate in three moves

In successive Umnov at least twice in a row a move is played to the just vacated square. **Key 1.Qb4!** 2.Ne2+ fxe2 3.Qc3:.1…Nxd5 2.Rb6 Nc7 3.Rd5# 1….Nxc4 2.Rc5 Nd6 3.Rc4# (1….Nba4 2.Qxc4+)

In the problem for solving below the Umnov square can be easily spotted but the key and the threat are slightly difficult with lot of close tries.

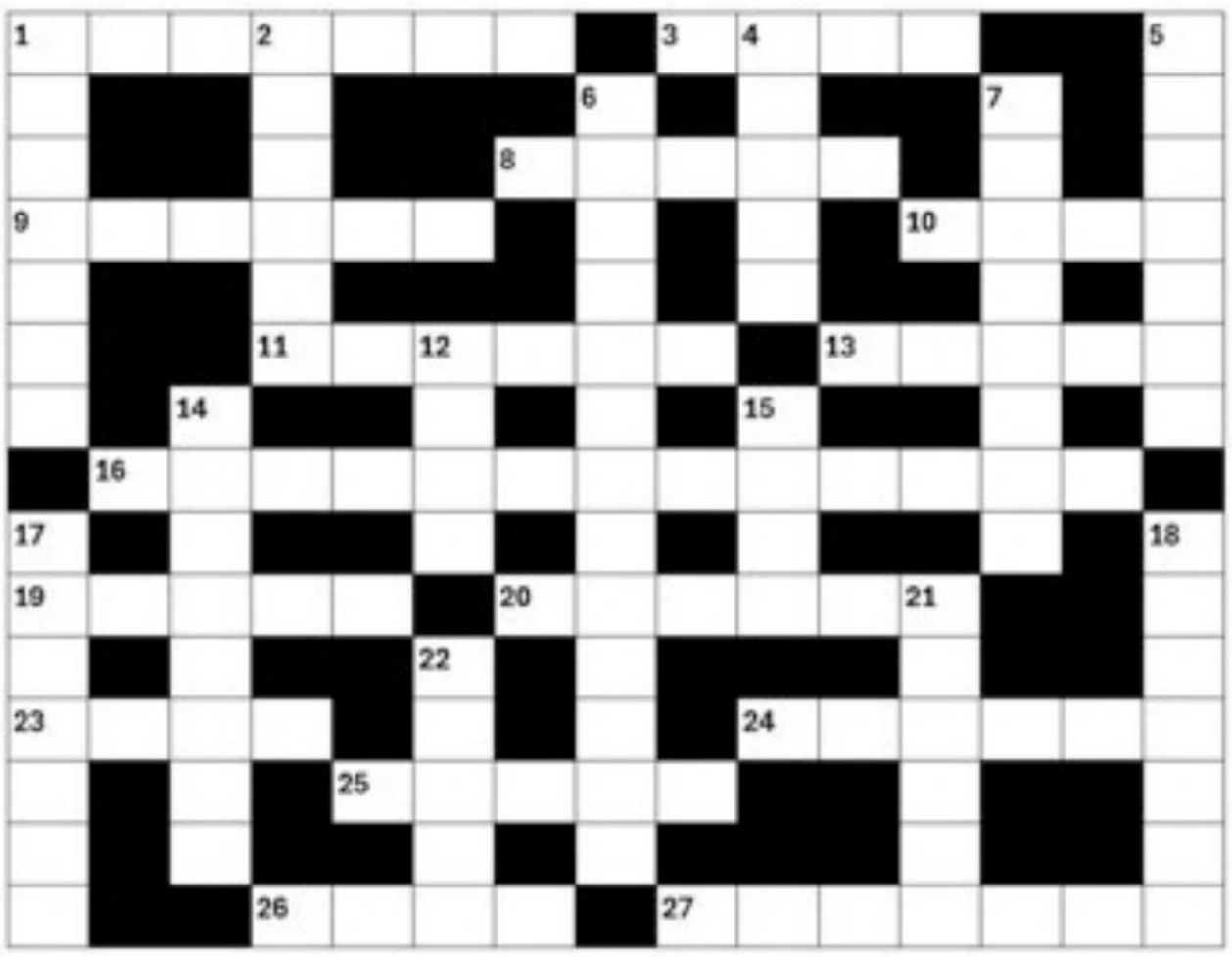
C.G.S.Narayanan
I prize,Macedonian Problemist 2002

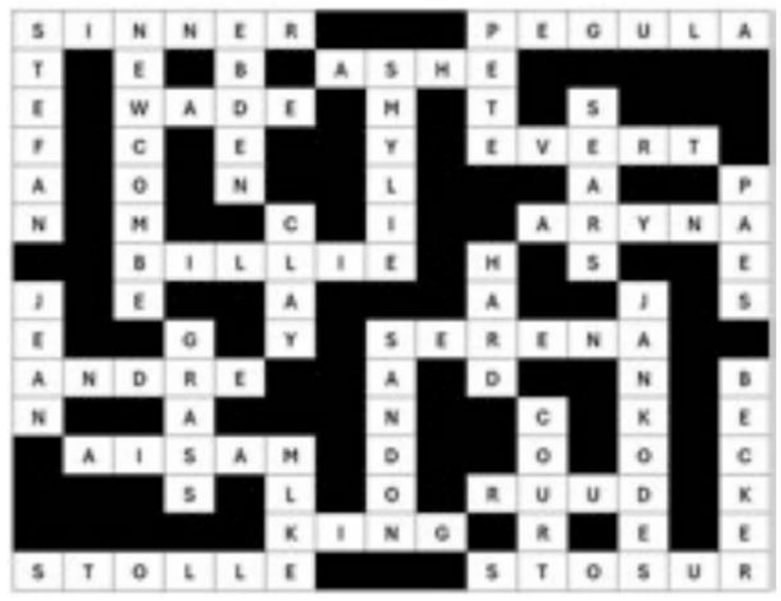
Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article' Reversal of mates': Set: 1….Kb1 2.Rd2 (A);1…cxb3 2.Rd1(B) Key 1.Qa5 (2.Qa2) 1….Kb1 2.Rd1(B); 1…cxb3 2.Rd2 (A) Mate reversal.The by-play 1…Ba4 2.Rh3 adds spice

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

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who was declared Player of the ISL League for the 2024-25 season and who also won the Golden Boot? (7)

3 & Down 12 Which former Indian hockey Olympic medallist and a sports physician passed away recently? (4,4)

8 Who is the new head coach of the Indian men's national football team? (5)

9 Who made his debut for India at the Old Trafford Test in the recently-concluded series versus England (6)

10 What is the first name of this cricketer who scored the only century in the three-match ODI series recently between the West Indies and Pakistan? (4)

11 In which city is the McLean Park cricket ground situated? (6)

13 Identify the surname of this South African fast bowler who took five wickets in the second innings of the first Test versus Zimbabwe in Bulawayo? (5)

16 Which German Grandmaster won the title at the Chennai Grand Masters chess tournament in August 2025? (7,6)

19 Which football club from the Spanish province of Alicante has been promoted to the La Liga for the ongoing 2025-26 season? (5)

20 Who won the Player of the Series award in the three-match ODI series recently between the West Indies and Pakistan? (6)

23 Who scored a hat-trick for Borussia Mönchengladbach in the La Liga encounter against Werder Bremen on March 15, 2025? (4)

24 Who is the only bowler to perform a hat-trick in IPL 2025? (6)

25 Who kept wickets for India after Rishabh Pant got injured in the fourth and fifth Tests of the Anderson-Tendulkar trophy recently? (5)

26 Who led Pakistan in the three-match T20I series against the West Indies? (4)

27 What is the first name of this F1 driver from Monaco who has been driving for Ferrari since 2019? (7)

DOWN

1 Who won the men's singles title at the Cincinnati Open in August 2025? (7)

2 What is the surname of the top-scorer for New Zealand in its only innings in the second Test versus Zimbabwe in Bulawayo in August 2025? (6)

4 Which Belgian won the women's doubles event at Wimbledon 2025? (5)

5 Identify this college student from Andhra Pradesh, who was part of the women's 4x400m relay team which made history by winning the gold medal at the 26th Asian Athletic Championship held in South Korea in March 2025. (7)

6 Who is the new CEO of Red Bull Racing F1 team? (7,6)

7 Who made the highest individual score in a match in IPL 2025? (8)

14 What is the first name of the Aussie who played his 100th Test match in Kingston in the three-match Test series which concluded in July 2025? (8)

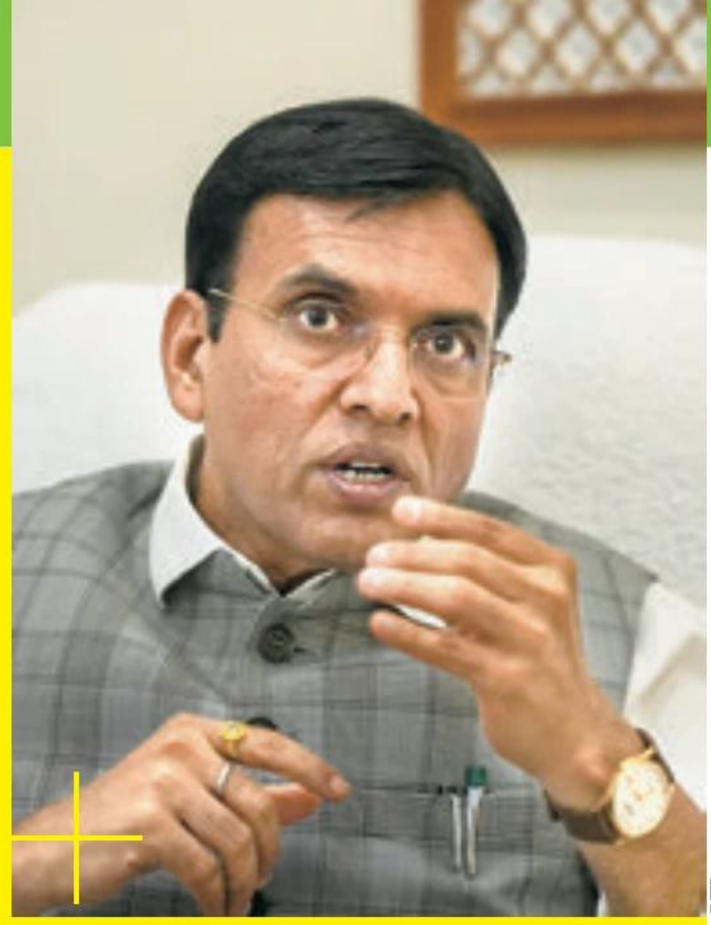
15 Which English batter was benefitted by the Spirit of Cricket exhibited by the Indian team during the second Test in Trent Bridge in the 2011 series? (4)

17 Who won the Poligras Magic Skill Award for the 2024-25 season for her sensational goal against the Netherlands in the FIH Pro League thus becoming first Indian player to receive this prestigious fan-voted award? (7)

18 Which debutant picked up nine wickets in the second Test between Zimbabwe and New Zealand in Bulawayo in August 2025? (7)

21 Who ended up with most wickets in the three-Test series between the West Indies and Australia recently? (6)

22 Which Indian won his maiden Badminton World Tour title with the U.S. Open win in June 2025? (5)



PTI

Sports Minister launches mascot, logo of Asian Aquatics Championship

Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya launched the mascot Jalveer and the logo for the upcoming 11th Asian Aquatics Championship, scheduled to be held in Ahmedabad from September 28 to October 11.

The tournament will also serve as a qualification meet for the 2026 Asian Games.

Mandaviya was joined at the launch by officials from the Swimming Federation of India (SFI). The championship will be staged at the newly built Veer Savarkar Sports Complex, designed to Olympic standards, and will see participation from over 30 nations across multiple disciplines.

With more than 1,000 participants expected in Gujarat later this month, the event offers Indian swimmers a chance to perform before a home crowd.

Speaking on the occasion, Mandaviya said: "This championship marks a historic milestone for Indian aquatics, offering our athletes the opportunity to showcase their talent against the finest in Asia."

TEAM SPORTSTAR

SPORTOON

1 India will host the 28th ITTF-ATTU Asian Table Tennis Team Championships at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar from October 11 to 15. The Table Tennis Federation of India announced that the event will bring Asia's top paddlers to the Odisha capital. While Odisha previously hosted the 2019 Commonwealth Table Tennis Championships in Cuttack, this will be its first Asian-level table tennis event. At last year's Asian Championships in Kazakhstan, the Indian men's and women's teams won bronze medals in their respective events. In addition, the pair of Ayhika Mukherjee and Sutirtha Mukherjee claimed a historic bronze in the women's doubles.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 Yusha Nafees and Rudra Singh emerged champions in the boys' and girls' Under-19 categories at the Indian Junior Open Squash Championships. Nafees, a member of India's bronze medal-winning squad at the Asian Junior Team Championships earlier this year, rallied to beat Rachit Shah in a five-game thriller to claim the title at the Rajasthan Squash Academy. In the girls' U-19 final, Rudra cruised past Vyomika Khandelwal in straight games.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

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FITNESWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

Power of one

How unilateral or **single-limb exercises** help athletes improve their stability and prevent injuries.

In the current landscape of modern physical preparation for team or individual sports, unilateral training has gained increasing attention from S&C coaches, athletic trainers, coaches and sports nutritionists. This approach, which focuses on performing exercises with a single limb at a time, contrasts with traditional bilateral training.

Unilateral training is characterised by exercises in which the load or resistance is applied to a single limb through its range of motion. This methodology aims to simulate specific motor actions that occur frequently in team sports, such as running, jumping, landing on one leg, changing direction, kicking and more.

Examples of unilateral exercises for the lower limbs include the Bulgarian squat or Rear Foot Elevated Split Squat (RFESS), Single-Leg Deadlift (SLDL), Single-Leg Countermovement Jump (SLCMJ), Single-Leg Drop Jump (SLDJ) and Single-Leg Broad Jump (SLBJ). In contrast, bilateral exercises involve both limbs simultaneously, such as the back squat, Countermovement Jump (CMJ), Drop Jump (DJ) and Standing Broad Jump (SBJ).

The distinction between these two approaches is not merely fashionable or a recent trend; it entails different neuromuscular challenges and potential physiological adaptations. By its very nature, unilateral training introduces greater variability, requiring increased activation of the stabilising muscles of the core and limbs. This facilitates the right movement execution while contributing to proprioception and motor control.

In many sports, unilateral actions are predominant. Running, for example, is a continuous sequence of single-leg supports, as well as many jumps and landings. Changes in direction — crucial in disciplines such as pace bowling in cricket, football, basketball, hockey and handball — require the ability to generate and absorb force effectively on a single leg. In this context, a physical preparation programme that integrates unilateral training can provide a more direct transfer to sport-specific motions, enhancing the skills required on the field.

Potential benefits of integrating unilateral training

Reduction of Bilateral Deficit (BLD): BLD occurs when the maximum force produced by both limbs simultaneously is less than the sum of the maximum force produced by each limb individually. Research suggests that unilateral training can help reduce this deficit, improving recruitment capacity and intermuscular coordination during bilateral actions. Gonzalo-Skok et al. reported greater improvements in BLD among young basketball players who trained unilaterally compared with those who trained bilaterally.

Enhancement of Change Of Direction (COD) competence: Changes of direction are fundamental in many team sports. Studies have shown a strong

correlation between unilateral strength/power (e.g. one-leg hop, CMJ) and speed and effectiveness in COD tests. Training that emphasises unilateral strength and power can therefore improve agility and evasive ability. Gonzalo-Skok et al. found that an Eccentric Overload Training (EOT) programme with unilateral and multidirectional movements led to more robust COD improvements than Bilateral-Vertical training.

Reduction of inter-limb asymmetries: Differences in strength and power between dominant and non-dominant limbs are common among athletes. Excessive imbalance can increase risk of injury. Unilateral training allows each limb to be targeted specifically, helping reduce asymmetries. Cao et al. showed that Unilateral Plyometric Training (UPT) reduced strength and power asymmetries in basketball players, whereas Bilateral Training (BT) increased them.

Improvement of postural and core stability: Single-limb exercises require greater engagement of the core stabiliser muscles to maintain balance and control movement. This can lead to improvements in postural stability, which are essential for the effective execution of specific skills and for injury prevention. Dafkou et al. demonstrated that integrating eccentric, balance and core exercises into football programmes improved postural strength and stability, particularly in the non-dominant leg.

Injury prevention and rehabilitation: Unilateral training can be particularly valuable in injury prevention and rehabilitation, allowing selective strengthening of one limb or muscle group without overloading the other. Macdonald et al. found that the single-leg Roman chair hold was more effective than the Nordic hamstring curl in improving the strength-resistance of hamstrings in Gaelic footballers with previous injuries.

Considerations and potential limitations

Despite the numerous advantages of unilateral training, some considerations must be kept in mind:

Reduced absolute loads: Absolute loads in unilateral exercises are generally lower than in bilateral ones, potentially limiting the development of maximum force in global muscle groups.

Higher stability and coordination demands: Proper execution requires good stability and coordination. An adaptation period thus becomes necessary for less experienced athletes.

Probable increase in training duration: Although the total volume may be matched, performing exercises separately on each limb can lengthen the overall duration of a training session.

Transfer to bilateral performance: While unilateral training is effective for improving unilateral performance, the transfer to bilateral actions (such as jumping or sprinting) can be less direct. Some studies (Bogdanis et al., Drouzas et al.) show bilateral gains from unilateral training, while Stern et al. observed greater improvements in the back squat following bilateral training.

Practical applications and programming

Effective integration of unilateral training into physical preparation programmes requires careful planning. Key guidelines include:

Exercise selection: Exercises should reflect the sport-specific demands and the individual needs of the athlete. It is important to include movements across different planes (sagittal, frontal, transverse) to prepare the athlete for varied stresses encountered on the field.

Volume and intensity: The volume and intensity of unilateral training should be adjusted according to objectives such as strength, power, endurance or balance. Initially, it may be useful to focus on mastering technique with moderate loads and adequate volumes.

Progression: Progression in unilateral exercises can be achieved by increasing load, reducing the support base, using unstable surfaces, or raising execution speed in plyometric drills. Progression should always be tailored to the sport, skill level and specific needs of the athlete.

Off-beat: Single-limb exercises require greater engagement of the core stabiliser muscles to maintain balance and control movement. GETTY IMAGES

Comparisons make no sense

Athletes don't get **paid only for their skill** on the field, but for the millions they bring into the sport and into the pockets of their sponsors.

Suresh Menon

With Liverpool paying 169 million dollars as transfer fee for the Swedish striker Alexander Isak **(in pic)**, the question that is always hanging on the edge of professional sport moves to the centre again. Are sports stars overpaid?

The economist's response usually is that a player receives what the market determines. The emotional fan's is more complicated, and brings in comparisons with teachers and doctors and soldiers who never see even a small percentage of such figures on their cheques.

REUTERS

There are, of course doctors and others who are overpaid; in fact, when I first became a sports editor all those years ago, I thought I was being overpaid! And doubtless even those who make over a million dollars at the IPL feel they are being underpaid. Rishabh Pant was bought by Lucknow Super Giants for just 3.21 million dollars, after all. Comparisons make no sense. In any case, Lionel Messi earning 135 million dollars (like he did last year) does not deprive the teachers and doctors of their salaries. It is not about relative value. They operate in different economies.

The argument about being paid a fortune for 'merely' kicking a ball or getting it through a hoop or beating someone to a pulp doesn't hold either. Athletes don't get paid only for their skill on the field, but for the millions they bring into the sport and into the pockets of their sponsors.

In the last financial year, Cristiano Ronaldo made 260 million dollars from his sport and endorsements. No one made more.

Two years ago, the LA Dodgers forked out 700 million dollars over 10 years for Shohei Ohtani. Will it make the Japanese baseballer a better player and will the Dodgers make a profit on the deal? The honest answers are 'maybe', and 'yes'. At any rate, someone thinks he is worth that much, and that's all that matters.

Careers are short, and injuries could make them shorter. Athletes, goes the counter argument, sacrifice a lot, lead disciplined lives and give up much in pursuit of their goals. This is true, but that could apply to any professional.

In our hurry to reconcile market realities with nostalgia ("in the 1960s, Indian cricketers were paid just 250 rupees a day for a Test match..."), we slip into one or the other side. But LeBron James doesn't just dunk; he practically runs a global media empire while dragging his team into playoff contention and headlines. These are not just athletes — they are industries in sneakers who bring in millions in television rights, merchandising and more. Salaries paid by clubs are investments.

There is an honesty to sport. The exposure is ruthless. You can't politick your way into scoring a World Cup goal or get into a Grand Slam tournament because you have an influential uncle who knows somebody. Sport as an activity might be one of the most meaningless things we do, but the pressures are real, tensions can destroy. Can you imagine the pressure on Isak from now on?

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