SPORTSTAR

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2025
₹125

FOLLOW US:
SPORTSTARWEB

POSTER
TRAVIS HEAD

INTERVIEW

Shikha Pandey on exile, excellence, endurance

HARMERED AT HOME

South Africa, led by spinner Simon Harmer, gave India a taste of its own medicine as it scripted history by completing a whitewash in the Test series

MATCH SCHEDULE

MADURAI

POOL A	POOL D	POOL E
GERMANY	SPAIN	NETHERLANDS
CANADA	BELGIUM	MALAYSIA
SOUTH AFRICA	EGYPT	ENGLAND
IRELAND	NAMIBIA	AUSTRIA

DATE	POOL	TIME	MATCH		
FRI 28 NOV	A	09:00	GERMANY	VS	SOUTH AFRICA
	A	11:15	CANADA	VS	IRELAND
	D	13:30	SPAIN	VS	EGYPT
	D	15:45	BELGIUM	VS	NAMIBIA
SAT 29 NOV	E	09:00	NETHERLANDS	VS	ENGLAND
	E	11:15	MALAYSIA	VS	AUSTRIA
	A	13:30	SOUTH AFRICA	VS	IRELAND
	A	15:45	CANADA	VS	GERMANY
SUN 30 NOV	D	09:00	EGYPT	VS	NAMIBIA
	D	11:15	BELGIUM	VS	SPAIN
	E	13:30	ENGLAND	VS	AUSTRIA
	E	15:45	MALAYSIA	VS	NETHERLANDS
MON 1 DEC	A	13:30	GERMANY	VS	IRELAND
	A	15:45	SOUTH AFRICA	VS	CANADA
TUE 2 DEC	D	11:00	SPAIN	VS	NAMIBIA
	D	13:15	EGYPT	VS	BELGIUM
	E	15:30	NETHERLANDS	VS	AUSTRIA
	E	17:45	ENGLAND	VS	MALAYSIA
	B	20:00	INDIA	VS	SWITZERLAND
WED 3 DEC		REST DAY			REST DAY
THUR 4 DEC	17/24	09:00	POSITION 17	VS	POSITION 24
	17/24	11:30	POSITION 18	VS	POSITION 23
	17/24	14:00	POSITION 19	VS	POSITION 22
	17/24	16:30	POSITION 20	VS	POSITION 21
SAT 6 DEC	21/24	09:00	LOSER M37	VS	LOSER M40
	21/24	11:30	LOSER M38	VS	LOSER M39
	17/20	14:00	WINNER M37	VS	WINNER M40
	17/20	16:30	WINNER M38	VS	WINNER M39
MON 8 DEC	23/24	09:00	LOSER M49	VS	LOSER M50
	21/22	11:30	WINNER M49	VS	WINNER M50
	19/20	14:00	LOSER M51	VS	LOSER M52
	17/18	16:30	WINNER M51	VS	WINNER M52

CHENNAI

POOL B	POOL C	POO
INDIA	ARGENTINA	FRA
OMAN	NEW ZEALAND	AUS
CHILE	JAPAN	KOR
SWITZERLAND	CHINA	BAN

DATE	POOL	TIME	MATCH		
FRI 28 NOV	C	13:15	ARGENTINA	VS	JAP
	C	15:30	NEW ZEALAND	VS	CHI
	B	17:45	OMAN	VS	SWI
	B	20:30	INDIA	VS	CHI
SAT 29 NOV	F	13:15	FRANCE	VS	KOR
	F	15:30	AUSTRALIA	VS	BAN
	B	17:45	CHILE	VS	SWI
	B	20:00	OMAN	VS	IND
SUN 30 NOV	C	13:15	JAPAN	VS	CHI
	C	15:30	NEW ZEALAND	VS	ARG
	F	17:45	KOREA	VS	BAN
	F	20:00	AUSTRALIA	VS	FRA
MON 1 DEC	C	17:45	JAPAN	VS	NEW
	C	20:00	ARGENTINA	VS	CHI
TUE 2 DEC	B	13:30	CHILE	VS	OMA
	F	15:45	FRANCE	VS	BAN
	F	18:00	KOREA	VS	AUS
WED 3 DEC		REST DAY			REST D
THUR 4 DEC	9/16	12:30	POSITION 9	VS	POS
	9/16	15:00	POSITION 10	VS	POS
	9/16	17:30	POSITION 11	VS	POS
	9/16	20:00	POSITION 12	VS	POS
FRI 5 DEC	QF²	12:30	POSITION 1	VS	POS
	QF²	15:00	POSITION 2	VS	POS
	QF²	17:30	POSITION 3	VS	POS
	QF²	20:00	POSITION 4	VS	POS
SAT 6 DEC	13/16	12:30	LOSER M41	VS	LOS
	13/16	15:00	LOSER M42	VS	LOS
	9/12	17:30	WINNER M41	VS	WIN
	9/12	20:00	WINNER M42	VS	WIN
SUN 7 DEC	5/8	12:30	LOSER M45	VS	LOS
	5/8	15:00	LOSER M46	VS	LOS
	SF	17:30	WINNER M45	VS	WIN
	SF	20:00	WINNER M46	VS	WIN
TUE 9 DEC	15/16	12:30	LOSER M53	VS	LOS
	13/14	15:00	WINNER M53	VS	WIN
	11/12	17:30	LOSER M55	VS	LOS
	9/10	20:00	WINNER M55	VS	WIN
WED 10 DEC	7/8	12:30	LOSER M57	VS	LOS
	5/6	15:00	WINNER M57	VS	WIN
	BRONZE	17:30	LOSER M59	VS	LOS
	GOLD	20:00	WINNER M59	VS	WIN

SEERI VARUM HOCKEY!

DL F
LNCE
STRALIA
REA
NGLADESH

AN
NA
TZERLAND
LE

REA
IGLADESH
TZERLAND
IA

NA
GENTINA
IGLADESH
NCE

W ZEALAND
NA

AN
IGLADESH
STRALIA

AY
ITION 16
ITION 15
ITION 14
ITION 13

ITION 8
ITION 7
ITION 6
ITION 5

ER M44
ER M43
INER M44
INER M43

ER M48
ER M47
INER M48
INER M47

ER M54
INER M54
ER M56
INER M56

ER M58
INER M58
ER M60
INER M60

SPORTS DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY OF TAMIL NADU

proudly presents

FIH HOCKEY MEN'S JUNIOR WORLD CUP

TAMIL NADU 2025

28TH NOVEMBER - 10TH DECEMBER 2025

Mayor Radhakrishnan Hockey Stadium
Egmore, Chennai

Madurai International Hockey Stadium
Race Course Road, Madurai

WORLD'S BIGGEST HOCKEY EXTRAVAGANZA

KANGEYAN WELCOMES YOU

LET'S HOCKEY

PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES

BOOK YOUR TICKETS ON **ticketgenie**

SUPERSTAR HAI YEH!

• 6.3 gms of protein • 13 essential vitamins
• Minerals like calcium, iron and potassium
• Contains Omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants
• Good for brain and eyes • Good source of folate

This cool superstar makes
your body strong,
tough and builds immunity.
So have an egg every day.

NECC

NATIONAL
EGG CO-ORDINATION
COMMITTEE

(Non-Government Public Charitable Trust)

SUNDAY HO YA MONDAY
ROZ KHAO ANDE.

CONTENTS

Follow us: sportstarweb

Saturday, December 20, 2025
FOR THE FORTNIGHT DECEMBER 7-20, 2025

Volume 48 Number 26 ISSN 0971 359x 94 Pages

86

I'M LOOKING FOR AN OLYMPIC MEDAL FOR INDIA IN GOLF – KAPIL DEV

Cricket

20 **Through the lens**
South Africa thumps India in Guwahati

24 **Big money, bold moves**
A fierce bidding battle, with record retentions and shock omissions in the Women's Premier League auction

38 **Ranji Trophy**
Out of sync with the demands of India's red-ball future

10
Cover Story
India-SA Test series

In whitewashing the Indians, Proteas solved a puzzle that had held for more than a decade

Cover Image: PTI

Read more...

62 **FIFA World Cup qualification**
The 2026 edition promises the broadest canvas yet for the game's universal dream

70 **World Boxing Cup Finals**
India's medal surge, but celebrations must be tempered with caution

78 **Big Interview**
Superstar Saina Nehwal on the challenges of being a pioneer in Indian women's badminton

Poster: Travis Head (Getty Images); Pages 45-52

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

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

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

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

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

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

For Advertisement
National Sales Head
Satish K Mendon
Satish.mendon@thehindu.co.in
Region
Delhi – Antesh Kumar Verma
+91 9818798519
Bengaluru – Gurunatha Reddy
+91 9845529981
Chennai – R. Ganesh
+91 9841290799

OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

WHEN BELIEF BECOMES THE FIRST CASUALTY

India's Test series defeat to South Africa was not the noble failure sport so often forgives, but an **abdication** in plain sight.

There is a particular kind of heartbreak reserved for sports fans that lingers long after the players have left and the studio debates have died down. It is the grief that clings on after a loss without a fight. India's recent Test defeat to South Africa was not just a loss; it was an abdication. Not the heroic failure we romanticise, but a surrender without resistance.

A top-order collapse that felt inevitable, a bowling effort that never threatened, a performance that made you ask yourself: Why did you believe? Why did you let them in?

It is astonishing how personal it feels. Sitting on your couch, or in a press box, or in the cheap seats at Eden Gardens, the weight of the team's capitulation settles on your chest. There is a strange intimacy to that disappointment, the same sting, almost, as a teenage heartbreak. The way a naive 15-year-old mistakes eye contact for destiny. And that same boy feels a hollow in his chest the day the girl he adored walks past him without a glance.

Sport repeats that lesson every few years. Just when you think you have outgrown such naivety, a team you trust reminds you how fragile optimism is. It pulls you in with promise and leaves you with disappointment.

It becomes a shared bruise spreading across living rooms, press boxes, and WhatsApp groups. By evening, a meme-fest sweeps through social media. The players and coaches are easy punchlines for fans trying to laugh away a loss that sits heavy beneath the humour.

A defeat like this turns into a collective wound, felt by millions but processed, inevitably, alone.

All the wins that come later cannot fully embalm that one scarring defeat, just as all the affection that arrives afterwards cannot replace the heartbreak of the first love that a foolish boy once believed would last happily ever after.

And other questions begin to itch. How will your middle order recover from the morale-sapping humiliation? How will Salah find his scoring boots again? These keep a 40-something awake longer than the worries of EMIs for the house he knew he could never afford, because this helplessness feels more urgent and intimate.

Tomorrow, of course, we will watch again. We always do. But today, after another timid loss, it is impossible to escape the truth that some hurts stay longer than they should.

THE HINDU GROUP

Every lunch break has a hero.

In every school, there is a child who runs a little faster, aims a little truer, and keeps going long after the bell rings. That is where greatness quietly begins. Across campuses everywhere, small sparks of talent are taking shape. These stories deserve to be seen and celebrated.

Schoolyard, a special section by Sportstar is here to shine a light on them, and on the schools that give young athletes the space to grow.

Because sometimes, all it takes to create a champion is a teacher who smiles and says, "Go play."

SPORTSTAR

Schoolyard.

Celebrate the champions early.

SHARE YOUR SCHOOL'S SPORTING STORIES AT
schoolyard.sportstar@thehindu.co.in

« These two continue to push each other to new levels. Their serves improve, their forehands improve, their movement improves and their mentality improves. – International Tennis Federation CEO Ross Hutchins on the ever-growing 'Sincaraz' rivalry »

« I hope to keep pushing it. I hope to keep irritating everyone who has to vote for me for years to come. It's really important for me to win this for the field eventers. – Sweden's Armand Duplantis who was named World Athlete of the Year by World Athletics »

1st

Ayub Bliev became the first Russian judoka in more than two years to win a title under his national flag when he triumphed at the Abu Dhabi Grand Slam tournament. Bliev, 28, beat Mongolia's Ariunbold Enkhtaivan in the 60kg final and received his gold medal with his national flag being raised and the Russian anthem played. Bliev and his compatriots had their neutral athlete status lifted by the International Judo Federation (IJF), which had been in place since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

3rd

Italy captured a remarkable third consecutive Davis Cup title with Matteo Berrettini and Flavio Cobolli winning their singles matches for a 2-0 triumph over Spain in the best-of-three tie in Bologna. Berrettini dispatched Pablo Carreno Busta 6-3, 6-4 in the opening match before Cobolli overcame Jaume Munar 1-6, 7-6[5], 7-5 to seal the triumph for Filippo Volandri's team.

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

India clinched the Women's Kabaddi World Cup in Dhaka, defeating Chinese Taipei 35-28 in the final to secure a second straight title. India maintained an unbeaten run through the tournament and beat Iran 33–21 in the semifinal. Chinese Taipei also entered the final without a loss, overcoming host Bangladesh 25–18 in the last four. ANI

Costly error: Former interim champion Ciryl Gane apologised after his eye poke, which appeared to clip both of Aspinall's eyes, though the right eye bore the brunt of the damage. AP

» FIGHT CLUB

A title on ice, a night out of control

The **Aspinall-Gane bout** was the first UFC title fight to end in a no-contest due to an accidental foul.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

UFC heavyweight champion Tom Aspinall's first title defence against Ciryl Gane in October ended prematurely in a no-contest due to an accidental eye poke.

Following the incident, the 32-year-old British fighter announced that he had been diagnosed with Brown's syndrome in both eyes, a rare condition that restricts upward eye movement.

A medical report shared by Aspinall on *Instagram* detailed that he is currently experiencing double vision, reduced eye movement and function, and significant loss of visual field.

The report also noted that if his symptoms do not resolve naturally, he may require targeted steroid injections or surgical intervention.

Aspinall stated that he is currently barred from fighting and MMA training as he follows doctors' orders. He also expressed a strong desire for a rematch with Gane once he is declared "100% right" and medically fit to return to the cage.

However, the diagnosis presents a significant setback for Aspinall, who only recently captured the UFC heavyweight title.

As a new champion, Aspinall's immediate priority would have been to establish his dominance and legitimacy.

The need for potential treatment, whether through steroid injections or surgery, coupled with subsequent recovery and healing time, means his return could be protracted.

This puts a pause on the trajectory of his reign just as it was beginning, preventing him from defending his belt and potentially pushing the heavyweight division into a period of relative stagnation at the top.

The UFC may even need to consider creating an interim title if his absence is expected to be lengthy.

The Madison Square brawl

Minutes before the main card of UFC 322 in New York last month, chaos erupted cageside as the bitter, years-long feud between Dillon Danis and the Dagestani camp, led by Islam Makhachev, finally boiled over.

Danis, who was allegedly provoking Makhachev's team with offensive content on his phone, was violently confronted by multiple members of the group, including Dana White Series contender Magomed "Chanco" Zaynukov. The resulting melee saw punches thrown, barricades crash down, and security scrambling to separate those involved.

UFC CEO Dana White, who admitted he miscalculated by allowing Danis near the opposing camp, immediately issued a lifetime ban against Danis from all future UFC events.

However, the controversy did not end there. The violence was deemed "unacceptable" by New York City Mayor Eric Adams, who ordered the NYPD to launch a full criminal investigation, meaning legal consequences may still follow for everyone involved.

Did you know?

Aspinall holds the official UFC record for the shortest average fight time across the entire organisation, with an astonishing average of just two minutes and 18 seconds.

Out of his eight UFC victories, six have ended before the first round is halfway over, showcasing his explosive power and clinical finishing ability, whether by knockout or submission.

While other big men might settle for a slow, grinding battle, Aspinall is always looking for the finish, making his fights some of the most anticipated and brief spectacles in the sport.

THE SLOW MECHANICS BEHIND INDIA'S HOME DECLINE

South Africa did not just win a series in India; it solved a puzzle that had held for more than a decade. Simon Harmer was the executioner, but the real story lies in India's spin, its pitches and priorities.

Pranay Rajiv
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

As Simon Harmer continued to spin his web around the Indian batters in Guwahati during the second Test, broadcasters kept highlighting how much slower the South African spinners were operating compared to their Indian counterparts.

A few minutes after he closed off the game and the series with a six-wicket haul, Harmer revealed that slowing down was a deliberate ploy, tailored to the red-soil pitch in Guwahati.

"Coming here, we spoke about it and with the red soil pitch being a bouncier, quicker turn sort of wicket, we felt that the slower pace would be better," said Harmer at the post-match press conference.

It was also, in effect, an inadvertent double bluff.

In the Kolkata Test, played on a diabolically unpredictable surface, Harmer and Co. were quicker through the air. It was a trick lifted directly from the Indian spin playbook, and it delivered spectacular results. Harmer, Keshav Maharaj and Aiden Markram combined for seven of the nine wickets to fall in India's doomed 124-run chase.

"If you look at the Indian finger spinners, they're extremely accurate. On surfaces that assist spin, it becomes very difficult because at that pace, you force a batter to commit very early. Slower pace allows the batter to adjust once the ball is bounced," explains Harmer.

As it turned out, the Indian tweakers amped up their speed in Guwahati, only to discover that the South Africans had gone the other way.

"I don't know if they got caught up in what happened in the first Test

Lost assurance: A wicket that felt inevitable. K.L. Rahul undone as India's long-held certainties against spin continued to slip. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Footwork wins: Senuran Muthusamy rocks onto the back foot with quiet certainty. It was this simple geometry of movement, once instinctive to Indian batters, that South Africa applied better on turning pitches. AFP

because I think the comparison was that our speeds were a little bit quicker than theirs, that they felt that maybe they needed to be quicker," said Harmer.

The variance in delivery speed offers a snapshot of how South African spinners outthought their counterparts to help their side reign supreme.

Spin leadership

The current Indian spin attack, comprising Ravindra Jadeja, Kuldeep Yadav, Washington Sundar and Axar Patel (only in Kolkata), lacks a lead bowler in the manner R. Ashwin once conducted proceedings in home Tests.

There was also a lack of coherence in the game plan on display. In Guwahati, despite realising that the pitch was not working in their favour, the Indian spinners persisted with their flatter trajectories, with only Kuldeep making a consistent effort to beat batters in the air with drift and dip.

Blunting their wicket-taking potency further were India's conservative field set-ups. For example, in Guwahati, Indian skipper Rishabh Pant had just one close-in catcher for the spinners for most of the morning session on Day 2, despite South Africa being six down. The visiting side's lower order ticked off easy singles as it saw off a tricky phase to set up a massive first-innings total.

Pitch volatility

The current Indian spin quartet has also been forced to bowl in drastically different conditions, thanks to the team management's oscillating pitch choices.

In the West Indies series in October, India played on truer surfaces that held together longer into the Tests.

But after witnessing Indian bowlers being pushed back by Caribbean batters in the second Test in Delhi, the team management pivoted to a dry surface in Kolkata, which bounced unpredictably right from Day 1.

It proved to be a fatal call, as India lost the toss and had to bat last on a devious pitch, resulting in a collapse and a 30-run defeat.

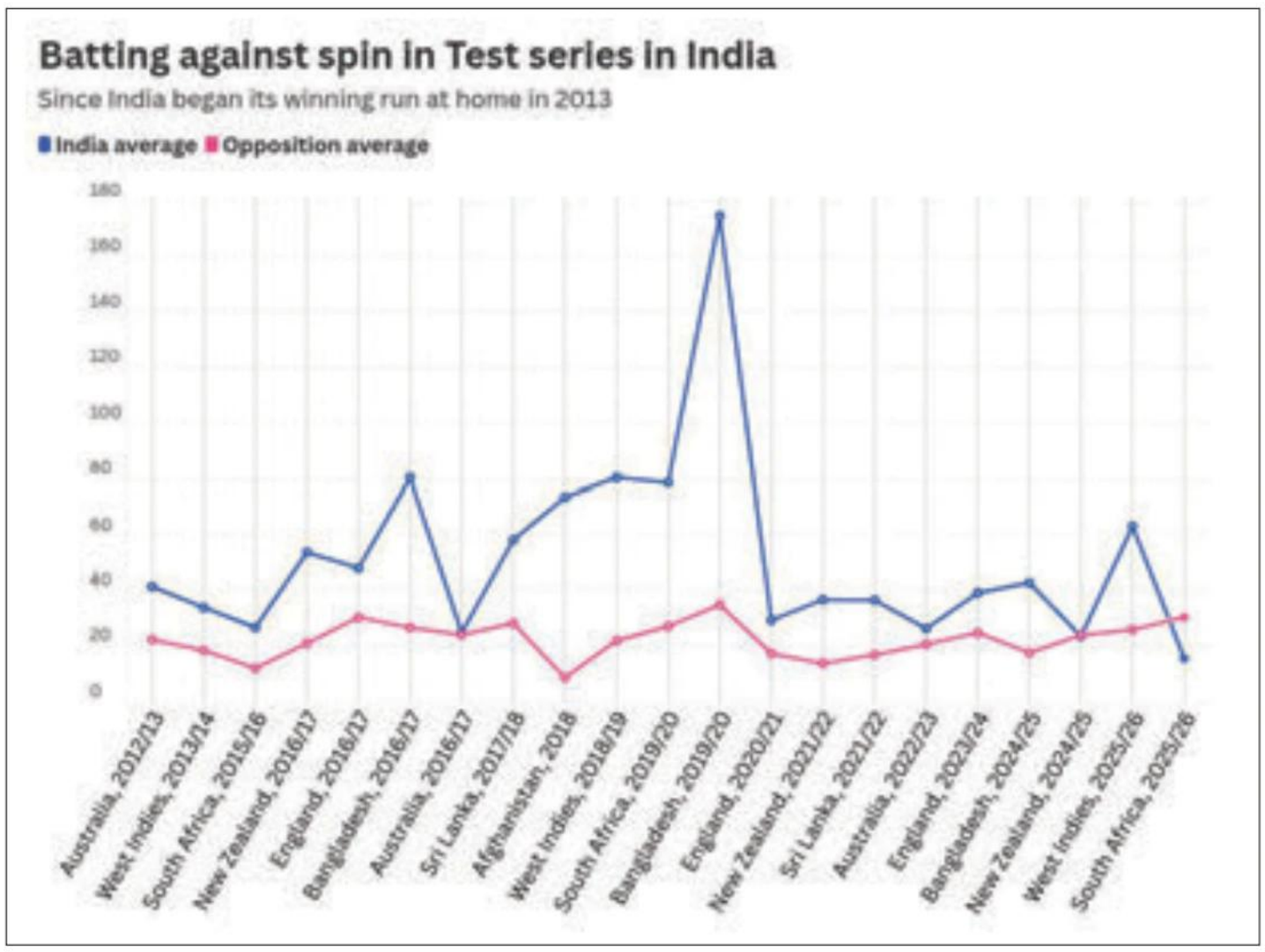
The Indian think-tank backtracked immediately and opted for a flatter track in Guwahati. But the side lost the toss again and watched South Africa bat it out of the game, with its spinners proving ineffective on unfavourable conditions.

Driving the failure was a lack of adaptability, which proved to be the biggest difference between the two sets of spinners, as suggested by Proteas skipper Temba Bavuma.

Harmer and his spin colleagues averaged just 15.48 in the series, while the Indian tweakers nearly doubled that at 30.33. It was a dramatic flip from the way Tests had unfolded in India over the last decade.

Golden era

India's supremacy at home, which lasted from 2012 to 2024, was



Old grammar: Cheteshwar Pujara steps out with the calm assurance that once defined India's mastery of spin. In a series that exposed how far that certainty has faded, his method now feels like a relic from a more assured age. K. R. DEEPAK

founded on the margin of difference the side created with spin, with both bat and ball.

This era of dominance sprang into existence in the aftermath of a startling defeat to England in 2012.

English spinners Graeme Swann and Monty Panesar combined for 37 wickets in the four-match series. The duo unsettled the Indian batting line-up, barring Cheteshwar Pujara, as England secured a 2-1 win.

England's spinners averaged 28.61 in the series, while the home tweakers went at 40.62, a key divergence that determined the fate of the contest. The away side's batting charge was led by opener Alistair Cook, who amassed three centuries on the way to 562 runs from eight innings. Kevin Pietersen had a strong tour too, scoring 338 runs, including a stunning 186 at the Wankhede.

The ruins of this defeat pushed India into a forced transition, in which it found the pieces to build the winning machine it would eventually become.

Ashwin, who was part of that series, was soon joined by Ravindra Jadeja, and they quickly formed one of the most devastating spin duos in the history of Test cricket.

During India's winning run at home, Ashwin and Jadeja collected a combined 539 wickets at just 20.18 runs apiece.

With time, the pair refined their batting to the point that they came to be regarded as genuine all-rounders, offering significant steel to the Indian lower middle order.

Meanwhile, Ajinkya Rahane joined Virat Kohli and Pujara to form a middle-order trio that provided India with substantial stability.

Their aptitude in negotiating spin, along with Ashwin and Jadeja's sharpness with the ball, allowed India to keep visiting sides at arm's length in home Tests.

Australia, in 2016/17, was the only team to come close to bridging this gap in the period, running India close in an intense series that finished 2-1.

BATTING AGAINST SPIN FROM JAN 2013 TO SEP 2024

Virat Kohli
5905 runs (58.89 average)

Cheteshwar Pujara
3055 (66.41)

Ajinkya Rahane
2263 (41.90)

Narrowing gap

The arrival of the World Test Championship in 2021 brought with it a need for more decisive results, prompting India to dial up its home advantage through pitches that began to spin square from Day 1.

What this did, unwittingly, was minimise the gap in skill between Indian spinners and visiting ones. This, in turn, made life harder for Indian batters, allowing away teams a stronger foothold in contests.

After losing just once in 34 Tests from 2013 to 2019, India went on to lose three of its next 19. Despite these stutters, India maintained its strong home record, pipping England and Australia following stiff battles.

However, the fault lines were evident and were eventually exploited by New Zealand late in 2024. The Kiwis became the first team in 12 years to overturn the spin gap, as they claimed a 3-0 series

Uneasy succession: R. Ashwin's certainty forged India's home dominance. Washington Sundar lacks the craft Ashwin had at a similar stage of his career. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

sweep no one saw coming.

The away spinners matched their Indian opponents in all regards, effectively negating the home side's advantage. While Mitchell Santner dazzled in the second Test in Pune with a 13-wicket haul, Ajaz Patel stepped up at the Wankhede with 11 wickets.

A new-look Indian batting line-up, bereft of the experience of Pujara and Rahane, laboured futilely on sharp-spinning black-soil surfaces.

It also did not help India's cause that its senior batters, Rohit Sharma and Kohli, endured a chastening series. While the former averaged 15.16, the latter did only fractionally better at 15.50. This is the lowest both have averaged in a home series in which they played at least six innings.

In totality, the seemingly unstoppable Indian ship of home Test superiority had its mast sliced by New Zealand.

South Africa, though, went one step further and overturned the vessel. At the centre of it all was Harmer.

Of the 25 wickets claimed by South African spinners in the series, 17 were Harmer's.

The 36-year-old off-spinner had the ball on a string throughout, toying with Indian batters through his mastery over flight, pace and length, control earned across a long, winding and tumultuous career.

Experience edge

Thanks to a long stint with Essex in the English county system, Harmer has featured in 236 First-Class games and taken 1,017 wickets. The four Indian spinners combined have only 1,060 FC wickets, with nearly half belonging to Jadeja.

Washington presents the most interesting case of the four. He shares many traits with Ashwin: both hail from the same State, bowl off-spin and possess dogged batting styles. But in terms of off-spin acumen, Washington lacks the craft Ashwin had at a similar stage of his career.

That contrast is natural, considering Washington made his Test debut with a bank of just 12 First-Class matches, yielding 30 wickets. Ashwin, by comparison, had played 34 games and collected 157 wickets before his first Test.

What has worked in Washington's favour is his ability with the bat. From 17 Tests, he has scored 885 runs at an average of 42.14. But his bowling average stands at 32.97. Against South Africa, Washington managed just a solitary wicket, not the output expected from a lead off-spinner.

It is clear that India's selection policy for spinners, and bowlers by extension, heavily factors in their batting. In the away series against England, India benched Kuldeep throughout the five matches.

This stood in contrast to the weight of experience Harmer carried into the series, which included a near-career-ending tour to India in 2015. It can be no coincidence that Harmer, Maharaj and Ajaz all carried bruising memories of touring India in the past. With failure came experience, and with that, a blueprint for success.

Without taking anything away from him, it would be fair to say that Harmer's imperiousness was magnified by the Indian batters' glaring inability to handle the turning ball.

Batting rigidities

Since 2020, Indian batters have averaged just 35.26 against spin in

Test cricket, the lowest in any decade since the 1960s.

Central to this struggle has been a growing rigidity in approach. This includes a reluctance to sweep and a curtailment of down-the-track footwork as a defensive option.

Indian batters since the turn of the decade have used the slog, reverse and conventional sweeps against only 3.6 per cent of all spin deliveries faced in Tests. Only Afghanistan fares worse on this metric.

When it comes to stepping down the pitch, there has been a dramatic shift in India's approach post-Pujara. The former No.3 was a master of using his feet to defend and rotate strike against spin.

Pujara stepped out of his crease against 21.5 per cent of all spin deliveries he faced in Tests. Only 33.7 per cent of those resulted in attacking shots. But since his last Test in 2023, India has embraced a brasher tone: 69.4 per cent of all down-the-track shots played against spin have been aggressive.

The value of adding a defensive tint to this technique was visible in the batting of Tristan Stubbs, the highest scorer of the series.

Stubbs used his reach to good effect, constantly jumping out of his crease to block the spinners or nudge them for singles. This allowed him to work the field more effectively while disrupting line and length.

This was part of a broader judiciousness in footwork that South Africa displayed through the series.

South Africa played 32.3 per cent of all spin deliveries off the back foot, compared to India's 29.6. When the Proteas batters went back, they averaged 66.66, as against 23.87 when coming forward.

Indian batters were far more tentative in their footwork, often getting caught in between, particularly when dip and drift came into play. They averaged just 14.25 off the front foot against spin, while the back-foot average was 13.87.

Selection bias

Adding to the fragility of the current Indian batting line-up has been head coach Gautam Gambhir's fixation with all-rounders.

Gambhir has often gone out of his way to accommodate all-rounders in his Test XIs, sometimes at the cost of specialist batters. In both Tests against South Africa, India picked three all-rounders along with two keeper-batters in Pant and Dhruv Jurel.

In Kolkata, India even promoted spin all-rounder Washington to No.3 at the expense of B. Sai Sudharsan.

In Guwahati, Sai Sudharsan returned to the XI along with pace all-rounder Nitish Kumar Reddy, who failed to make an impact with either bat or ball.

The self-inflicted damage extends to India's batting pool. Sarfaraz Khan, who forced his way into the Test team with stellar domestic form, has fallen out of favour. Another in-form domestic batter, Karun Nair, received only a handful of opportunities in England before being sidelined.

Despite a recent dip in form, Sarfaraz still owns a First-Class average of 63.15. Karun has continued to pile on runs in domestic cricket, scoring 602 from just five matches in the ongoing Ranji Trophy season.

The India A side, long an established route into Test cricket, is now being used largely to provide match time to fringe players from the main squad. India A's playing XI for its second match against South Africa in the lead-up to the Test series had nine Test regulars.

Structural drift

While it would be difficult to isolate a single root cause for India's dual decline against spin, batting coach Sitanshu Kotak suggested it could be an outcome of the country's recent fascination with fast bowling.

"This is one thing I have observed in the last five years, happening all over India. It is that we have been playing more First-Class cricket on green wickets, trying to bring the fast bowlers into the game for the first two days," said Kotak ahead of the Guwahati Test.

"Spin comes into play, maybe on the third day. Because of this, there has been an increase in the role of the fast bowlers. If you keep the grass [like that], the ball will not spin as much as you expect," he added.

With domestic pitches tilting towards pacers in recent years, a simultaneous decline in both the quality of spin bowling and the ability to bat against spin was perhaps inevitable.

The one thing in India's favour is time. The side's next home Test assignment is not until early 2027, against Australia. It is now up to the team management to find solutions.

India's home series defeats

Team/Series	Matches	Won	Lost	Draw
England in India Test Series, 1933/34	3	0	2	1
Australia in India Test Series, 1956/57	3	0	2	1
West Indies in India Test Series, 1958/59	5	0	3	2
Australia in India Test Series, 1959/60	5	1	2	2
West Indies in India Test Series, 1966/67	3	0	2	1
Australia in India Test Series, 1969/70	5	1	3	1
West Indies in India Test Series, 1974/75	5	2	3	0
England in India Test Series, 1976/77	5	1	3	1
Golden Jubilee Test (England in India), 1979/80	1	0	1	0
West Indies in India Test Series, 1983/84	6	0	3	3
England in India Test Series, 1984/85	5	1	2	2
Pakistan in India Test Series, 1986/87	5	0	1	4
South Africa in India Test Series, 1999/00	2	0	2	0
Border-Gavaskar Trophy (Australia in India), 2004/05	4	1	2	1
England in India Test Series, 2012/13	4	1	2	1
New Zealand in India Test Series, 2024/25	3	0	3	0
Freedom Trophy (South Africa in India), 2025/26	2	0	2	0

Symbol of the slump: Rishabh Pant's impulsive strokeplay stood in for India's brittle batting as the side breached 200 only once in four innings against the Proteas. RITU RAJ KONWAR

THE ILLUSION OF HOME: INDIA FORCED TO FACE THE MIRROR

India's 2-0 Test series defeat to South Africa all but confirms that its capitulation to New Zealand last year was **not an aberration.**

On a roll: South Africa's series win, its first in India in 25 years, is the strongest stamp of validation it has received since its coronation as World Test Champion earlier this year. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Pranay Rajiv
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

The point of denial is over.

India's 2-0 Test series defeat to South Africa at home all but confirms that its capitulation to New Zealand last year was not an aberration.

This was a stark assertion of the flaws that run through the current Indian Test team, marking an end to a long-standing era of home dominance.

If we were to be generous, we could partly attribute India's defeat in Kolkata to the unfortunate injury Shubman Gill suffered early in the Test. South Africa's 30-run margin could have been overturned if the Indian skipper had batted through.

India's surrender in the second Test, though, was as abject as it comes. Except for the opening day, when the game hung in the balance, India was outplayed on every single day, on every single front.

At the post-match press conference in Guwahati, Indian coach Gautam Gambhir cited his squad's lack of experience as a defence for its performance against the Proteas.

The transition excuse, though, is a disservice to the quality of players at Gambhir's disposal. In Jasprit Bumrah, Ravindra Jadeja and Rishabh Pant, he has three experienced Test players. Add to that Kuldeep Yadav, who is arguably the best left-arm wrist-spinner in Test history.

Lesser teams, with fewer generational players, have managed to present a more credible face in Test cricket, at least at home.

Central to India's downfall was its brittle batting line-up — across four innings against the Proteas, the side crossed 200 just once.

The Indian batters exhibited a particular sense of dread while facing off-spinner Simon Harmer **(below)**. The 36-year-old bagged 17 wickets in the series at an incredible average of 8.94.

It was not just spin that troubled them. In Guwahati, India's short-ball frailties were exposed by Marco Jansen, who delivered a devastating spell of pace bowling in the first innings, determining the fate of the Test.

The home team also went out of its way to

K. R. DEEPAK

Flawed approach: India's persistence with Nitish Reddy is symptomatic of Gambhir's obsession with all-rounders, an idea he has carried over from white-ball cricket. PTI

undercut itself by destabilising its batting order. After projecting B. Sai Sudharsan as its future No. 3, the Indian management dropped him for the first Test and promoted Washington Sundar to that role.

Washington, to his credit, was the most stable-looking Indian batter in Kolkata. He faced more deliveries than any other batter on the minefield that was the Eden Gardens pitch. Gill's injury then forced a reshuffle in Guwahati — Sai Sudharsan returned to his No. 3 position, while Washington was 'rewarded' for his assured batting with a demotion to No. 8.

India's batting line-up was also weakened by an over-representation of southpaws. It was an issue the team failed to identify until Harmer exposed it in Kolkata.

Even after Gill succumbed to injury, the home team did not add a specialist right-handed batter and instead went into the second Test with all-rounder Nitish Kumar Reddy.

India's persistence with Nitish is symptomatic of Gambhir's obsession with all-rounders, an idea he has carried over from white-ball cricket.

There is no denying that great all-rounders are an incredibly valuable asset to any team, in any format. But Gambhir appears to have overestimated their value in Test cricket, where specialised abilities still retain merit.

The Nitish conundrum is a fine example. Despite earmarking the 22-year-old as a pace-bowling option, the team was hesitant to hand him the ball. India bowled a whopping 229.4 overs in Guwahati, with Nitish delivering just 10 of them. In fact, in the second innings, part-time leggie Yashasvi Jaiswal **(below)** bowled an over before him. Nitish struggled to make an impact with the bat as well. Jansen bounced him out in the first innings and he was caught behind off Harmer in the second.

If India desires to mould Nitish into a genuine pace all-rounder, force-fitting him into the Test side for the sake of experience and then underusing him is certainly not the way to do it.

This brings us back to the selection question — would India have been better served by a specialist batter in Guwahati? Say, a Karun Nair, Sarfaraz Khan, or even a Ruturaj Gaikwad?

It was only natural that India's undercooked pre-game planning spilt onto the field. In Kolkata, despite having watched South African skipper Temba Bavuma bat his way out of trouble, the Indian batters, except for Washington, struggled to apply themselves, eventually strangling their chase of 124.

In Guwahati, India allowed the game to slip away in the morning session of Day 2. Having reduced South Africa to 246 for six on Day 1, many would have expected India to swoop in for the kill.

But stand-in skipper Rishabh Pant afforded Senuran Muthusamy and Kyle Verreynne breathing room with overtly defensive field set-ups. South Africa batted through the session before Jansen launched the innings out of orbit with a furious assault.

Having seen the merits of playing out the tricky morning

PTI

session, one would have expected the Indian batters to exhibit the sort of restraint Muthusamy and Verreynne showed.

Instead, they went the other way, sabotaging their chances of levelling the series with miscalculated shot-making early on Day 3, as India collapsed from 95 for one to 122 for seven in the space of 68 deliveries.

The blinding inability to adapt was also evident at the individual level. Take the case of Jaiswal.

Despite knowing that his tendency to cut at rising deliveries angling away from him has become a well-identified weakness, the left-handed opener failed to deny himself the temptation. Three of his four dismissals in the series came against Jansen, all from ill-advised cut shots.

For all one could harp on India's shortcomings, it was also a case of being bettered by a South African side that appears close to its zenith under coach Shukri Conrad.

This series win, its first in India in 25 years, is the strongest stamp of validation South Africa has received since its coronation as World Test Champion earlier this year.

One could argue that the team benefited from several crucial moments going its way, such as Gill's injury and winning both tosses.

But to reduce this win to those instances would be to discredit South Africa's precision in planning, clarity in approach and ruthlessness in execution.

Over the last decade, South Africa's tours of India were characterised by the domination of Indian spinners.

But this time, there was a reversal of roles. Proteas spinners, led by the uncontainable Harmer, outbowled their Indian counterparts.

South Africa also made a few surprising selection choices that delivered immediate dividends — for instance, opting for Corbin Bosch in Kolkata and bringing back Muthusamy in Guwahati. Both delivered the goods with the bat while also chipping in with wickets.

To top it off, South Africa won the contest despite a significant handicap — its biggest star, pacer Kagiso Rabada, missed the series due to a rib injury. It is another matter that the visiting team sealed its landmark triumph in front of near-empty stands, a continuation of Guwahati's lukewarm response to its first-ever Test match.

Talent aplenty: The transition excuse is a disservice to the quality of players at Gautam Gambhir's disposal.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

Even at its best, on Day 2, a Sunday, the Barsapara Stadium was far from full. As India's fortunes dwindled in the Test, so did the enthusiasm in the stands.

More importantly, India struggled to adapt to Guwahati's conditions, having almost no red-ball experience at this venue. Taking Test cricket to newer venues like Guwahati definitely expands the horizon of red-ball cricket in the country. However, if it comes at the cost of India squandering its home advantage, is it worth it?

But, again, is this Indian team capable of capitalising on any such benefit?

GUWAHATI TEST PHOTOLINE
INDIA-SOUTH AFRICA

1st

Meditative: Amid the fall of partners, Senuran Muthusamy, batting at No. 7, stood firm with a captivating rearguard, his maiden Test hundred, 109 off 206 balls, carrying South Africa to a commanding 489 in the first innings. PICS: RITU RAJ KONWAR

2nd

Rare dominion: Marco Jansen towered over the Test with bat and ball, his 93 in South Africa's first innings followed by a devastating 6 for 48 in India's reply, a rare all-round double last achieved by a South African more than a century ago.

3rd

Body blow: Marco Jansen all but sealed a rare series win in India for the world Test champions South Africa, tearing through the hosts for 201 to hand them a commanding first-innings lead of 288 on day three. On a surface still offering little to the bowlers, India imploded from 95 for 1 to 122 for 7, watching its hopes of a comeback seep away.

4th

Biding time: Tristan Stubbs batted like a monk, scoring 94 off 180 as South Africa ground out enough time to subdue India's hopes of a win with a 548-run lead.

5th

Lone fight: Ravindra Jadeja stood tall amid the collapse, top-scoring for India with a 54 off 87 balls as wickets tumbled around him. The defining thread of his resistance was the sweep, a shot he had once scarcely used but now wielded with growing assurance.

6th

Man of the moment: Simon Harmer spun his web around the Indian batters once more with a six-wicket haul as South Africa skittled India for 140 to seal the Guwahati Test by 408 runs, his 17-wicket series starring role powering a commanding 2-0 clean sweep.

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

IF YOU DON'T SCORE ON TURNING PITCHES, YOU ARE NOT A GREAT BATTER

Batting against pace requires just two movements, forward or back. To counter spin, it is not just about playing forward or back, but also about **going down the pitch** to smother the turn and attack the ball.

Ranjan Madugalle has been the chief match referee of the ICC referees panel for over two decades. The former stylish middle-order batter from Sri Lanka is always smiling and has a lovely, cheeky sense of humour. He is the first pick of the ICC for the big-ticket series and the finals of ICC events. He is fair and firm without being imposing or intimidating, and, having played cricket at the highest level, understands the pressures and psyche of cricketers. That is why he allows some things to go by that other referees may pull players up for. This, as well as his pleasant demeanour, makes him extremely popular with the players of just about every cricket team whose games he has officiated in. So, if he has rated the Perth pitch as very good, then not too many from the cricketing world would quibble with that.

There's one person who differs with that rating and, unlike many of the incensed voices from the sub-continent who were not even there, he actually played in the match. Usman Khawaja called the pitch a 'piece of shit'. He explained that 19 wickets falling on day one and about 20 players getting hit says what the pitch was like. He also explained that watching Steve Smith, who he considers the best cricketer he's ever played with, miss the ball and get hit on the elbow made him call the wicket on day one colourfully. By the way, Smith didn't get hit on the front elbow but the back elbow, which explains the uneven and steep bounce of the pitch. Khawaja tempered his remarks by saying the pitch tends to play a bit better over the next couple of days. That still doesn't excuse the behaviour of the pitch on day one this time, as well as last year when India played, where 17 wickets fell on day one.

Khawaja seems to have escaped censure from Cricket Australia, but if he doesn't score runs in the Gabba Test, it won't be a surprise if he is left out of the team. Australia now has another opener in Travis Head, whose unorthodox century delivered an easy win. Mind you, 13 wickets fell on day two also, but that century took away any chance of the pitch being rated 'shit' by anybody else. That century wasn't always with what you would call Test match strokes and was more like white-ball cricket shots, but hey, who is complaining? Not the old powers, for sure.

Their narrative that a pitch with bounce and danger to life and limb is never bad, but that a pitch where the ball turns and keeps low is a

Brutal bounce: Steve Smith cops one on the back elbow as the Perth pitch bares its teeth. GETTY IMAGES

disgrace, is sadly still believed even by the complexed ones in the sub-continent. They will rate a batter only if he scores tons on pacy, bouncy pitches, but if a batter from their part of the world doesn't get a century in the sub-continent, he will still be called great.

Having played a bit of cricket myself, I can say that batting against pace requires just two movements, forward or back. To counter spin, it is not just about playing forward or back, but also about going down the pitch to smother the turn and attack the ball. That's where skill comes in. Yes, I am well aware that today some batters do advance down the pitch to the quicks, but it's more a desperate, premeditated measure than a reflex technical move. It can come off, just as it does when batters move away from the stumps or across them to play limited-overs shots. More than skill, it is luck that makes it come off, but never on a consistent basis.

So, for me, playing on a turning pitch requires more talent and footwork than playing pace. That is why, if you don't score runs on such surfaces, you are not a great batter. Since top-quality spin is seldom, if ever, seen in these countries and their pitches, the moment they see spin in the sub-continent, they get uncomfortable and question the quality of the pitch. That's typical, but unless you score in foreign conditions, how can a batter be called great?

Similarly, even if their quicks didn't get wickets on the sub-continent on pitches not conducive to pace, they would still be called great. But sub-continent spinners who failed to take five-fors on their pacy pitches, or batters who didn't score hundreds there, would not. The double standards are so glaring that they are now simply amusing.

The second Test is a few days away, and it's at the Gabba, which is considered one of the fastest pitches in Australia. Remember a Test against South Africa a few years back at the Gabba that also finished in a couple of days, with the ball flying off a length and bouncing over the keeper's head for byes. It was sheer luck that no player got seriously injured. The excuse?

The curator got it wrong by leaving a bit more grass on it, or so the world was told. Did the pitch get a poor rating? No, sir, those are reserved only for the pitches in the sub-continent.

Smith didn't get hit on the front elbow but the back elbow, which explains the uneven and steep bounce of the pitch. Khawaja tempered his remarks by saying the pitch tends to play a bit better over the next couple of days. That still doesn't excuse the behaviour of the pitch on day one this time.

Shake-up: (Clockwise from left) Mumbai Indians, Gujarat Giants, Delhi Capitals, Royal Challengers Bengaluru, and UP Warriorz (facing page) reshaped the playing field for the 2026 season with record retentions and shock omissions.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

BIG MONEY, BOLD MOVES

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan
lavanya.ln@thehindu.co.in

In the run-up to the mega auction for the Women's Premier League, you would hear mixed reactions to the prospect of a major rejig, depending on which unit you spoke to.

Big auctions in sport can be tricky beasts. While they present opportunities to wipe the slate clean and start afresh — which is what sides like Gujarat Giants and UP Warriorz were aiming for — others worried about losing stability and identity along the way.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru (champion in 2024), Mumbai Indians (champion in 2023 and 2025), and Delhi Capitals (runner-up in every edition so far) were keen to delay the inevitable for as long as possible. These sides had settled playing squads and brand and messaging value attached to the teams they had crafted in 2023.

These undercurrents predictably dictated how outfits went about their purchases at the auction in New Delhi in November.

Up to the markets

A total of ₹40.80 crore was spent to sign 67 players. To put that in perspective, ₹59.50 crore was spent in the inaugural WPL auction to sign 87 players.

The amounts spent in the next two mini auctions were ₹12.75 crore and ₹9.05 crore, respectively.

Some arrived with their hands tied courtesy of a restricted purse. Mumbai Indians, having filled all five retention slots, had only ₹5.75 crore to work with.

"We won the league last season. See the eleven we have assembled — they are almost the same we had last season when we lifted the trophy. We have managed to maintain our core, and it was a challenge to see that through," MI mentor and bowling coach Jhulan

Goswami said, explaining her side's 'why fix what isn't broken' approach.

UP Warriorz was among the top spenders this time, splashing out ₹14.15 crore in rebuilding its squad. The WPL borrowed from the IPL in allowing teams the Right to Match option for the first time — a provision that allows a team to retain a player by matching the highest bid made for them by another franchise. The Warriorz used their RTM cards to piece its core back together, alongside making smart purchases to assemble what appears to be the strongest unit on paper ahead of the new season, which gets underway in January.

"Sometimes you want the market to decide the value of a player, and for us, we felt we wanted to come into the auction with the option of having money. I think when you sit in any auction, you want to start with having a lot of money, and if you look at it, we saved ₹30 lakh, so every money saved is money earned," new UP Warriorz coach Abhishek Nayar told reporters after the auction.

That pesky thing called the 'market' played quite a bit of havoc with pre-auction predictions. Australian keeper-batter Alyssa Healy going unsold stunned one and all, while Sophie Ecclestone — earlier acquired by UP Warriorz for ₹1.8 crore — was brought back to her old side for just ₹85 lakh. Nayar expected the tussle for her to be worth at least ₹1.5 crore.

A ₹15 crore purse is a luxury and a restriction in equal measure. Teams need to guard against spending too much too soon, but also need to plan and back their bids for star players who can often define the character of a side. In the eight-player marquee set that kicked off the auction, bids were conservative for the likes of Ecclestone and Renuka Singh, who drew only ₹60 lakh, eventually going to the Giants. Specialist batters in imperious form — such as Meg Lanning and Laura Wolvaardt (first roped in by Gujarat Giants as an injury replacement for Beth Mooney in the first season) — drew big bucks: ₹1.90 crore (a jump from the ₹1.10 crore she got in 2023) and ₹1.10 crore, respectively. These

players bring leadership skills and superior tactical acumen to any side they feature in. Both are opening batters who can accelerate at will, but what singles them out is consistency — a priceless combination in the slam-bang world of T20 cricket.

Money's worth

Cricket globally has pivoted towards all-rounders. Having a second skill makes a player significantly more 'value for money' for a franchise. The retention exercise restructured the top-earners' bracket as well. Currently, five players are in the ₹3 crore-and-above category. Mumbai Indians' Nat Sciver-Brunt (retained for a higher price than skipper Harmanpreet Kaur at ₹3.2 crore) is a frontline new-ball bowler besides being one of the most solid batters across formats. Alongside Gujarat Giants' off-spin-bowling explosive batter Ashleigh Gardner, the pair commanded the highest retention fee of ₹3.5 crore.

Deepti Sharma, acquired by the Warriorz for ₹2.6 crore in 2023, drew ₹60 lakh more this time. The WPL unlocked a new gear in her already solid batting abilities, pairing nicely with her effective off-spin. New Zealand all-rounder Amelia Kerr, known for her sublime strokeplay and lethal googlies, rounds off the list with a ₹3 crore tag — a threefold appreciation from her ₹1 crore price tag with Mumbai Indians in 2023. The White Ferns' T20 World Cup-winning captain Sophie Devine also commanded a ₹2 crore price tag for her utility with bat and ball.

The 2026 auction also showed how no parts of the jungle in the women's game remain unexplored. Scouts and coaches have their eyes and ears open in an almost entirely data-driven ecosystem, on the lookout for new talent

Priced catch: Deepti Sharma, acquired by UP Warriorz for ₹2.6 crore in 2023, drew ₹60 lakh more this time.
SANDEEP SAXENA

and the utility of the established pool available. One wonders whether Healy's recent injury frequency went against her in the auction, particularly since the four overseas slots require efficacy and full fitness to pay maximum dividends.

That may also explain why someone like Lizelle Lee, a South African keeper-batter who now permanently resides in Australia, found favour. She has registered remarkable returns in the WBBL and 50-over domestic competitions Down Under, and her naturally explosive style prompted Delhi Capitals to potentially reunite her at the top of the order with her former opening partner Wolvaardt.

Another player who went shockingly unsold was Alana King, whose imperious run in the World Cup (remember that seven-wicket haul against South Africa?) more than validated her credentials. While restricted overseas slots play a role, it is astounding that no franchise saw value in her leg-spin and mean hitting ability late in an innings.

Balancing pragmatism with faith

The flip side is the responsibility franchises have to not use and discard players due to myopic visions for their setups. RCB's faith in Shreyanka Patil, shown when it retained her for ₹60 lakh, reduced her to tears.

Similarly, Pratika Rawal, who fractured her ankle during India's World Cup campaign, managed to secure the faith of the Warriorz regardless of whether she will be cleared to play in the upcoming season, which is just a few weeks away. "We all know she's a superstar, we all know that," Nayar said about India's promising ODI opener. "Even though she's injured today, in the future she's going to be a star. One of the thought processes for me was to have a lot of Indian players who are superstars and can take this franchise forward and be the face of the franchise."

Delhi Capitals did something similar by retaining three Indian players — Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, and Niki Prasad. Despite acquiring Wolvaardt, who also carries leadership pedigree, co-owner Parth Jindal was quick to underline that DC will have an Indian captain. Niki's retention is also a strong statement of belief. The U-19 World Cup-winning captain is a steady batter with ice in her veins in pressure situations. A talent to watch out for in the future, the Capitals have ensured that she blossoms under their wings.

Left-arm spinner Sree Charani, who impressed in the World Cup, was blooded into the senior side after showing refreshing aggression and a knack for taking wickets in just two games for DC. The franchise sealed her services with a hefty ₹1.30 crore tag.

The auction was also a moment of recognition for many players toiling hard in the domestic circuit. Bharti Fulmali, a prolific accelerator for Vidarbha, is heading back to the Giants for ₹70 lakh after growing in that setup for the past few seasons. Maharashtra's Gautami Naik and

The crore club

Deepti Sharma
₹3.20 crore (UP Warriorz)
Amelia Kerr
₹3.00 crore (Mumbai Indians)
Shikha Pandey
₹2.40 crore (UP Warriorz)
Sophie Devine
₹2.00 crore (Gujarat Giants)
Meg Lanning
₹1.90 crore (UP Warriorz)
Chinelle Henry
₹1.30 crore (Delhi Capitals)
Shree Charani
₹1.30 crore (Delhi Capitals)
Phoebe Litchfield
₹1.20 crore (UP Warriorz)
Laura Wolvaardt
₹1.10 crore (Delhi Capitals)
Asha Sobhana
₹1.10 crore (UP Warriorz)
Georgia Wareham
₹1.00 crore (Gujarat Giants)

₹3.4 crore

The costliest signing in WPL history: **Smriti Mandhana** for Royal Challengers Bengaluru in 2023

Haryana's Deeya Yadav — both just 16 years old — also found 'market' interest.

But the biggest redemption arc was reserved for veteran Indian pacer Shikha Pandey. Puppeteered in and out of the national setup, the 36-year-old never abandoned the grind, putting in the hard yards in the domestic scene and in franchise leagues around the world.

"It is nice to know I am valued," she told every media house flooding her phone with calls. The story is similar for Arundhati Reddy, who, despite being one of the best in the domestic scene and producing heartening performances against Australia late last year, found herself relegated to the bench.

Asha Sobhana **(above, left)** — who drew ₹1.30 crore from the Warriorz — had struggled with the physical and mental toll of injury, which saw her miss the entire 2025 season. As the 34-year-old stacked up runs and wickets for Kerala, she had the backing of her old franchise RCB and eventually the monetary faith of a new team to keep her going.

Unsold: Australian keeper-batter Alyssa Healy's recent injury frequency may have gone against her in the auction. She last played for UP Warriorz in the 2024 edition.

K. MURALI KUMAR

The assurances are not just internal. A World Cup victory means more eyeballs for the sport; ergo, more commercial interest. Hours before the auction began, the BCCI announced the onboarding of three new sponsors until 2027 — ChatGPT, Bisleri, and Kingfisher — for a cumulative sum of ₹48 crore. With existing franchise owners predicting, and even welcoming, the idea of more teams entering the fray, the only way for the WPL — and the players who make it the competitive force it is — is upwards.

2026 auction trivia

- RCB was the only franchise not to spend a crore or more for a player
- Only three Indians drew a price tag of a crore or more this time; all three are primary bowlers
- UP Warriorz reassembled its core using the Right to Match option (featuring in the WPL for the first time), bringing four players back with the tool — Deepti Sharma, Sophie Ecclestone, Kiran Navgire and Kranti Gaud
- Uma Chetry is the only member of the victorious ODI World Cup-winning side who did not find a team in WPL 2026

THE OFF-SEASON THAT NEVER ENDS

PICS: GETTY IMAGES

For some cricketers, the off-season arrives between tours. For **Shikha Pandey,** it has stretched across years, interrupted only by short returns and longer silences. Yet the work never stopped, only the noise did.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan
lavanya.ln@thehindu.co.in

If you have followed Shikha Pandey's career over the years, you know that introspection comes tightly woven with excellence for the pace bowling veteran.

A voracious reader and one of the most curious minds in the game, Shikha is constantly searching for things, anecdotes, moments, and people who can inspire her and widen her horizons as both a player and a person. Many of those thoughts and learnings found their way into a diary and, eventually, into a blog named *'Accidentally Cheeku'*.

Her posts list several quotes and literary verses she draws strength from. But this one best epitomises Shikha's spirit itself: Aut Viam Inventam Aut Faciam, Latin for "I shall either find a way or make one".

Exiled from the national setup for reasons best known to those who chose to exclude her, the country's strongest pacer, physically and tactically, was left to make her own way on the fringes.

After a summer in which she bowled an all-time great delivery to dismiss Alyssa Healy in a T20I at the Gold Coast in 2021, Shikha was stunningly dropped in the run-up to the 2022 ODI World Cup, where India failed to advance to the knockouts.

Selectors went back to her for the 2023 T20

World Cup, where the side fell to Australia in the semifinal. After a frustrating Schrödinger's Cat-like situation, the national call-ups dried up, and a fast bowler once viewed as a bridge between the Jhulan Goswami era and a new generation of pace development suddenly vanished from the scene.

Life of a cricket nomad

For Shikha, cricket is cricket, no matter the level at which it is played. She plunged into the life of a cricket nomad, playing in the Women's Big Bash League in Australia, the Super Smash in New Zealand with the Canterbury Magicians, and the Women's Caribbean Premier League. In the 2025 edition, she topped the wicket charts for Trinbago Knight Riders with five wickets in four games at an economy of 6.73. She was joint third overall.

Apart from her solid stewardship of the Goan women's team in the past and for Baroda now in the domestic circuit, where Shikha consistently impressed with bat and ball, she is also the most successful Indian pacer in the WPL, taking 30 wickets in 27 games at an economy rate of 6.96 for the Delhi Capitals. Overall, Mumbai Indians' Nat Sciver-Brunt tops the list with 32 scalps. The next best Indian quick is Arundhati Reddy with 14 wickets from 20 matches.

For anyone else, those numbers would be contract-clinching. But Shikha decided to attend trials ahead of the WPL 2026 Mega Auction, trying out for her native State's franchise, the UP Warriorz.

"I had never attended a trial before, and I was excited about it, having heard so much from my Goa teammates. I would always ask players how their trials went. DC once held trials, and I asked Coach Jonathan Batty if I could participate and practise there since it was raining in Goa. I got to go to Bengaluru, it was just open nets then. I've never been on the receiving end, but I got a chance with UP Warriorz in Mumbai," Shikha tells *Sportstar*.

"A lot of people specifically say the first day of trials is bad, and I got to experience that. We had simulation games, and I was captain of my side on both days. Abhishek (Nayar) goes into so much detail. Sneh Rana was there too, and she's just won the World Cup," she adds.

The Warriorz clearly liked what they saw, given that they bid a hefty Rs. 2.4 crore for the medium pacer.

"She is an experienced player, and we wanted her experience of having played in high-pressure tournaments. Her numbers in the WPL are the best among Indian pace bowlers in the last three years, be it in the powerplay or death overs. We wanted experience in those aspects," head coach Nayar explained.

"I wasn't following the auction too intensely, but I had to when my mom spotted my name. I genuinely don't care about price tags; people won't believe it. I am just happy that I am valued and that there was a bidding war for my services between RCB and UP," she remembers.

It helps that Shikha is also a solid bat. In the domestic circuit, she is known for her grind in the middle. Internationally, too, she has been part of several crucial batting efforts since the early 2010s.

"I love batting. For my State, I would bat at four, middle order. Unless you're, I guess, Jasprit Bumrah, it would be hard for someone in this age to be a pure bowler and survive. W.V. Raman sir always used to say that the runs bowlers get you are the ones that will win you games. If I am just a bowler, someone else who can contribute 15+ runs more than I can will get importance. It's not sad, it's how competitive cricket has rightly gotten."

At the Delhi Capitals in particular, Shikha had the pick of some of the world's best to bounce ideas off, from Meg Lanning, who will join her at the Warriorz, and Annabel Sutherland, to Jemimah Rodrigues.

"As a bowler, it's really nice to understand what the batter is thinking. In the nets, you bowl and get feedback about whether they could see my slower ball coming out of my hand, or if they were able to counter me easily. Helped me go back and work on tweaks. Having such solid batting stock to bowl to in

the nets makes you a better bowler tactically.

Thinking like a batter will help in the long run because you're anticipating outcomes from their perspective and guarding against them. Maybe that's why Shafali Verma could come in and take those two wickets in the World Cup final (laughs)."

The joy of cricket in whatever form

Nothing compares to donning the India blue for Shikha, who is also a retired squadron leader in the Indian Air Force. But the joy of playing and consuming the game is the same, no matter the level . In a sense, that cushioned her World Cup-watching experience as India ticked off one of her biggest career ambitions: winning the World Cup.

"It hurts that you don't make the team. And sometimes it is even difficult to watch the games. But then, we need to realise that the situations that we are put in are not in our hands, but our reactions to them are." This is something a longstanding mentorship with Australian legend Belinda Clark taught Shikha.

Shikha's struggles were not all internal. Her parents and sister also witnessed the uncertainties and mental toll of rejection.

"Three years ago, my sister Vibha, who works for Oracle as a project lead, told me she would be supportive if I decided to walk away. She said, 'You're good enough, you'll get a job anywhere based on your academics (Shikha is an engineering graduate). She still asks me why I continue to play this game. This is from someone who is the reason I am still playing this sport."

A network that matches her never-say-die attitude has played a major role in keeping her going. She credits her family, coach Nitin Vernekar, former India team physio Tracy Fernandes and Naresh Ramadoss (who run a High-Performance athlete-centred fitness centre called *Athleap* in Goa) and Nasiruddin Thameesdeen and Nooruddin S. at Just Cricket in Karnataka (where she regularly trains) among others for keeping her afloat, giving her more than just shoulders to cry on. Her network has facilitated training spaces, cricketing help, and moral support in a growingly cut-throat world.

Unbroken thread — Jemimah and Shikha... Careers drift, dressing rooms change, but some cricketing relationships survive the churn untouched.

Her own interest in the science behind an athlete's life has also been crucial.

"As a science graduate, I was also interested in ways to train better. I bought *Whoop* (a performance-tracking app) in 2022, when few had it. I have a *Garmin* (sports wearable) when training. I have always been interested in metrics. Once I got a niggle and went back and checked the data about my left leg's contact point and whatnot. Tracy ma'am had to stop me sternly.

"I carry my own compression boots. I know I am not a 16-year-old anymore. I am blessed. Despite not being in the national setup, I have the resources to have a nutritionist - Tenzin."

Ray of hope

A World Cup win, Shikha hopes, will bring those systemic changes.

"The (wish) list is so long. For starters, proper domestic contracts for cricketers, not exaggerated amounts, but just start somewhere if a woman cricketer needs a good kit, a nutritionist, and other support. That's why WPL comes. If you have more teams added, a lot more domestic players will get in. For long, we've had one solid employer in the women's game (Railways), so those avenues need to improve for players."

She also credits the BCCI's age-group tournaments for being the stepping stone the women's game long needed.

"I've had teammates who left the ecosystem after the Under-19 level because they weren't good enough to make the senior level yet. Now you have the U-23 tier, there's the U-16s as well. Whole batches of players were wiped out because such levels didn't exist before. There's so much more to be done.

The media attention that's come post the win might help push all this along."

All about the inside

Time away from the main stage has also prompted a rethink of how she interacts with spaces like social media.

The blog has not been updated since 2021, something Shikha intends to change, but other networking apps have taught her a certain indifference that mirrors how she deals with naysayers in real life.

"I remember in 2022, when I had a very good season, I put up videos. I did that for myself because I was really happy with my performance. Now you hear people say, if you're good, put your videos on social media so someone sees and gives you an opportunity. I am not saying it's a bad thing, but I am so glad we're at a place where that's not the only option. Franchise scouts are everywhere, watching everything."

The same social media has also told her to go back to the kitchen after a bad day in the field.

"It's nothing new. I have simply said once that I am heading back to the kitchen to make dinner. The trolls haven't changed. My response to them has. Even recently, I am from UP. We are from Purvanchal, and we speak Bhojpuri. When I got into UP Warriorz, my mum had an idea to write something in *Bhojpuri*, being the local team and all. Then came the comments questioning that choice, demanding a caption in Awadhi and stuff. I, in the past, would have restricted comments.

QUICK BYTES

 # Who is the one person you would mute on the team WhatsApp group if you could?

Jemi! I don't know where she gets the energy from!

 # Pre-game superstition?

I do have a routine that I follow. If anything doesn't go to plan, I get fidgety. I prepare my own drinks. I have my diary. There's a whole list of things I need to do in a certain order.

 # One non-cricket thing in your kit bag?

For a long time, I used to carry a book in which I had noted down quotes from a lot of people. Things that kept me grounded. I also used to write four-liners in it. It was always in my kit bag, but I don't think I am carrying it now.

 # What is one skill you wish you could swap with a teammate?

Poker face. So many of them have it. If I am not happy about something, you'll see it on my face.

Now I've just muted the conversation. It's my post. I wanted to be happy about my native language. But there's always someone ready to fight over everything."

One season, steady returns: In 12 games for Brisbane Heat (2024-25) in WBBL, Shikha Pandey claimed 12 wickets at 6.90 an over, her best 2 for 14, while adding 25 runs from four innings.

Shikha has enough of those battles playing out inside to spend time on anything else. For her, a video her sister put together of all her good balls was a life-changer.

"In 2021, the Australia tour was very difficult. I kept playing that video, a short one of about 50 seconds, about 50 times between the hotel and the stadium. When things aren't going well, visualisation helps, and that video was really helpful."

Crossing the line

After several near misses, coming close to glory and falling short, Shikha hopes the cricketing gods have another script for her.

"Losing is difficult. If you don't have control over your mind, you'll go hunting for negatives. I always want to get better and help the team win. If we do win, I don't know how winning would feel. Maybe you feel good for a day or two, and then it becomes about the bigger picture. It will be a good story for you to write, but the bigger win is if one kid from UP, or anywhere for that matter, watches the game, a girl, and takes up the sport. That is why we play."

At 36, Shikha is not stopping anytime soon but knows she is closer to the finish line than she has ever been. There were many things she could have been and many more accolades and records she could have amassed if life had gone another way, but for her, being known as a good teammate trumps it all.

"I don't think I'd remember my teammates for the 100s they've scored or the fifers they've taken. I will remember those who were there for me, as a shoulder to cry on. I am not a gifted athlete; I am a hard worker, probably the hardest. It's something I take pride in. I want to keep at that and be a good teammate and human.

"After the auction, I got a warm note from Kappie (Marizanne Kapp). She's a legend. That's more valuable than any price tag in the world!"

 # If you could add one rule to cricket, what would it be?
Maybe be able to get two people out on the same ball! And maybe two bouncers in a row in T20s. People come at you when you bowl one because they know you won't be repeating that ball in that over. It would be nice if that changed.

 # Most expensive thing you have lost or broken?
Not expensive, but last year, during the WPL final, I lost a bag I always carry with me, which has my energy gels, sweatbands, and my salt tablets. My mom makes handkerchiefs for me because I sweat a lot. All of it is in one bag, so it becomes easier for the 12th to bring it to me. I left it on the ground last year after the final, only to realise it the next morning. I went back to the ground, but it was gone!

 # If you could spend a day with any celebrity, who would it be?
Roger Federer. I was a big lawn tennis fan, which has tapered down after his retirement. Love the way he carries himself and how humble he is. Singer Adam Young is another.

 # Who is the best sledger you've seen in the women's game?
Alyssa Healy. She's not a sledger. She's very cheeky. It's how she is. She's not offensive, but she knows how to hit the right buttons.

FOR MORE IMAGES

1st

Bend it like Starc: Australia began the Ashes in roaring fashion as Mitchell Starc claimed seven for 58 – his best figures in Tests. Starc castled Ben Stokes, dismissing him for the 10th time in Tests, as England was bundled out for 172 inside the first two sessions of the series. AFP

2nd

Sensational response: Ben Stokes led England's fightback with a five-wicket haul, becoming only the fifth captain from the country to achieve this feat. Australia was bowled out for 132, conceding a 40-run deficit. REUTERS

3rd

Breaking the back: Scott Boland was the wrecker-in-chief as he claimed four for 33, including wickets of Ben Duckett, Ollie Pope, Harry Brook, and Gus Atkinson, to bowl England out for 164 inside 35 overs. REUTERS

4th

Cut the mustard: Chasing 205, Travis Head was in his usual beast mode opening the innings as he slammed a century in 69 balls — second fastest Ashes century — helping Australia finish the game inside two days and take a 1-0 lead. REUTERS

Jadeja in elite club

4 The number of players to aggregate 4000-plus runs and 300-plus wickets during their Test career. Ravindra Jadeja in Kolkata on 15 November 2025, became the latest to join an exclusive group of players. From the tables given below, Jadeja's average difference between his batting and bowling averages is quite outstanding, which puts him high on the list. However, Ian Botham, who was the first to reach this milestone in 1984, is the quickest, having done so in fewer number of Tests (69).

Test all-rounders with 4000-plus runs and 300-plus wickets (listed average_differencewise for career batting and bowling)

Player (For)	Ave_diff	M	I	Runs	Bat_avg.	HS	100/50	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Bowl_avg.	5/10	Best
Ravindra Jadeja (Ind)	13.15	89	133	4095	38.27	175*	6/28	20241	8741	348	25.12	15/3	7/42
Ian Botham (Eng)	5.15	102	161	5200	33.55	208	14/22	21815	10878	383	28.40	27/4	8/34
Kapil Dev (Ind)	1.41	131	184	5248	31.05	163	8/27	27740	12867	434	29.65	23/2	9/83
Daniel Vettori (NZ)	-4.36	113	174	4531	30.01	140	6/23	28814	12441	362	34.37	20/3	7/87

Note: Kapil Dev is the only player to aggregate 5000-plus runs and 400-plus wickets in a Test career.

Quickest (in fewer number of Tests) to achieve the all-rounders double of 4000 runs and 300 wickets in a Test career

M	Player (for)	Runs	Wkts	Agst	Venue	Achieved on
69	Ian Botham (Eng)	4085	302	WI	The Oval	9 Aug 1984
88	Ravindra Jadeja (Ind)	4017	338	SA	Kolkata	15 Nov 2025
97	Kapil Dev (Ind)	4030	331	WI	Bridgetown	7 Apr 1989
101	Daniel Vettori (NZ)	4003	329	Ind	Ahmedabad	7 Nov 2010

6 The number of left-handed batters in the Indian playing XI in Kolkata and Guwahati. This is the first time in Indian Test history that this many left-handers have appeared in a match for India.

Most number of left-handed batters used by India in a Test match

LHB	Against	Venue	Dates	Result
6	South Africa	Kolkata	14-16 Nov 2025	Lost
(Yashasvi Jaiswal, Washington Sundar, Rishabh Pant+, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav)				
6	South Africa	Guwahati	22-26 Nov 2025	Lost
(Yashasvi Jaiswal, Sai Sudharsan, Rishabh Pant*+, Ravindra Jadeja, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav)				
5	West Indies	Manchester	23-27 Jul 2025	Drawn
(Yashasvi Jaiswal, Sai Sudharsan, Rishabh Pant+, Ravindra Jadeja, Washington Sundar)				
5	West Indies	Ahmedabad	2-4 Oct 2025	Won
(Yashasvi Jaiswal, Sai Sudharsan, Ravindra Jadeja, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav)				
5	West Indies	New Delhi	10-14 Oct 2025	Won
(Yashasvi Jaiswal, Sai Sudharsan, Ravindra Jadeja, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav)				

94 The number of sixes hit by Rishabh Pant in his Test career. In Kolkata, Pant became the batter with the maximum number of sixes for India in Tests. He went ahead of Virender Sehwag's tally of 91, including 90 sixes for India and one for the World XI. Pant joins two other Asian batters with 90-plus sixes — Sehwag (91) and Sri Lanka's Angelo Mathews (90).

Leading six hitters in a Test career

6s	Balls/6	Batter (for)	Career span	M	Inns	Runs	Avg.	Balls	S/R	4s
136	87.26	B. Stokes (Eng)	2013-2025	116	208	7040	35.37	11868	59.31	810
107	93.36	B. McCullum (NZ)	2004-2016	101	176	6453	38.64	9989	64.60	776
100	67.96	A. Gilchrist (Aus)	1999-2008	96	137	5570	47.60	6796	81.95	677
98	27.70	T. Southee (NZ)	2008-2024	107	156	2245	15.48	2715	82.68	215
98	122.14	C. Gayle (WI)	2000-2014	103	182	7214	42.18	11970	60.26	1046
97	297.97	J. Kallis (SA/WXI)	1995-2013	166	280	13289	55.37	28903	45.97	1488
94	49.81	R. Pant (Ind)	2018-2025	49	86	3476	42.91	4682	74.24	372
91	114.74	V. Sehwag (Ind/WXI)	2001-2013	104	180	8586	49.34	10441	82.23	1233
90	188.56	A. Mathews (SL)	2009-2025	119	212	8214	44.40	16970	48.40	835

Note: Sehwag's tally includes one six for the ICC World XI

20 } The number of innings Temba Bavuma needed to reach 1000 runs as a South African captain, which makes him the joint fastest to achieve this for South Africa in Tests.

Quickest to reach 1000 Test runs as captain for South Africa

Inns	M	Captain	Achieved on	Runs	HS	Avg.	100/50	Agst	Venue	Result
17	10	G. Smith	15 Dec 2003	1033	277	60.76	3/2	WI	Johannesburg	Won
20	11	D. Nourse	7 June 1951	1149	208	67.59	4/5	Eng	Nottingham	Won
20	12	T. Bavuma	22 Nov 2025	1010	172	56.11	3/6	Ind	Guwahati	Won
21	11	H. Taylor	19 Jan 1923	1073	176	51.10	2/6	Eng	Durban	Drawn
23	12	T. Goddard	27 Jan 1965	1018	112	50.90	1/8	Eng	Johannseburg	Drawn

7 } The number of sixes hit by Marco Jansen in Guwahati during his knock of 93. This equalled the tally of sixes hit by two other batters **(see table)** — the most recorded in a Test innings for South Africa. Jansen, meanwhile, equalled the tally of Pakistani Shahid Afridi, who had also hit seven sixes against India in a Test innings during his 103 in Lahore on 14 January 2006.

Most sixes in a Test innings for South Africa

6s	Batter	(score)	Agst	Venue	Date	Result	Inns	Bat#
7	A. B. de Villiers	(163)	Aus	Cape Town	21 Mar 2009	Won	2	5
7	Quinton de Kock	(141*)	WI	Gros Islet	11 Jun 2021	Won	2	6
7	Marco Jansen	(93)	Ind	Guwahati	23 Nov 2025	Won	1	9

Note: Jansen's seven sixes are now the maximum hit by a visiting batter in India. He went past the previous best of six sixes by West Indian Viv Richards (in New Delhi in December 1974) and Australian Matthew Hayden (in Chennai in March 2001).

4 } The number of visiting all-rounders to perform the double of 90-plus and five-wicket hauls in the same Test match in India. Marco Jansen, with his 93 and 6/48 in Guwahati, became the latest to achieve this.

All-round performances (90 runs and five-wicket hauls) by visiting players in India

Runs	Bowling	Player (For)	Venue	Month, Year	Result
100	5/90	C. Smith (WI)	Delhi	Feb 1959	Drawn
105	5/86	B. Taylor (NZ)	Kolkata	Mar 1965	Drawn
114	6/58 & 7/48	I. Botham (Eng)	Mumbai WS	Feb 1980	Won
93	6/48	M. Jansen (SA)	Guwahati	Nov 2025	Won

Note: Bruce Taylor is the only player in Test history to do the all-rounder's double on his debut

8 } The number of occasions when a side lost a Test match at home by a massive margin of 400 or more runs. India in Guwahati has become the latest to join this list. This result is also India's worst Test defeat by runs, surpassing its 342-run loss to Australia in Nagpur in October 2004.

Biggest Test victories (by 400-plus runs) for visiting sides

Runs	Winning side	Winning captain	Losing side	Losing captain	Venue	Date
675	England	Percy Chapman	Australia	Jack Ryder	Brisbane (Exb)	05-Dec-1928
562	Australia	Bill Woodfull	England	Bob Wyatt	The Oval	22-Aug-1934
465	Sri Lanka	Mahela Jayawardene	Bangladesh	Mohd Ashraful	Chittagong Dvn	06-Jan-2009
425	West Indies	Clive Lloyd	England	Tony Greig	Manchester	13-Jul-1976
409	Australia	Don Bradman	England	Norman Yardley	Lord's	29-Jun-1948
408	West Indies	Clive Lloyd	Australia	Greg Chappell	Adelaide	30-Jan-1980
408	South Africa	Temba Bavuma	India	Rishabh Pant	Guwahati	26-Nov-2025
405	Australia	Michael Clarke	England	Alastair Cook	Lord's	19-Jul-2015

All records are correct and updated until 26 November 2025.

» RANJI ROUND-UP

WHEN THE FEEDER BEGAN TO DRIFT FROM THE LINE

Flatter pitches, fractured schedules and confused pathways have left the Ranji Trophy increasingly **out of sync** with the demands of India's red-ball future.

Abhishek Saini and Shayan Acharya
abhishek.s@thehindu.co.in,
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

The Indian management's insistence on Test regulars plying their wares in the Ranji Trophy has lent some much-needed relevance to the country's premier First-Class tournament.

The marker was laid down last season when stalwarts Virat Kohli **(facing page, right)** and Rohit Sharma were required to turn up for their domestic teams following their dismal run in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, with Kohli managing 190 runs in five matches and Rohit just 31 in three. Shubman Gill, K.L. Rahul, and Ravindra Jadeja were among the others who returned to test themselves in the attrition of four-day First-Class cricket though there were no immediate Test matches at that time.

However, the spotlight has been away from the Ranji Trophy this season, courtesy of a packed international calendar. Back-to-back Test series against West Indies and

» RANJI ROUND-UP

WHEN THE FEEDER BEGAN TO DRIFT FROM THE LINE

Flatter pitches, fractured schedules and confused pathways have left the Ranji Trophy increasingly **out of sync** with the demands of India's red-ball future.

Abhishek Saini and Shayan Acharya
abhishek.s@thehindu.co.in,
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

The Indian management's insistence on Test regulars plying their wares in the Ranji Trophy has lent some much-needed relevance to the country's premier First-Class tournament.

The marker was laid down last season when stalwarts Virat Kohli **(facing page, right)** and Rohit Sharma were required to turn up for their domestic teams following their dismal run in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, with Kohli managing 190 runs in five matches and Rohit just 31 in three. Shubman Gill, K.L. Rahul, and Ravindra Jadeja were among the others who returned to test themselves in the attrition of four-day First-Class cricket though there were no immediate Test matches at that time.

However, the spotlight has been away from the Ranji Trophy this season, courtesy of a packed international calendar. Back-to-back Test series against West Indies and

Waiting game: Karun Nair's 602 runs in five matches for Karnataka this season, featuring both a century and a double hundred, have still failed to earn him a longer look from the Indian Test selectors. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

Andhra when he was omitted from the starting lineup for the first Test against South Africa in Kolkata. Similarly, Prasidh Krishna, a regular in the Test team, was taken away from the Ranji Trophy when picked for the limited-overs series against South Africa-A. Even the significance of Ranji Trophy performances has appeared to deteriorate.

Karun Nair charted a course back into the Indian side with the help of prolific seasons with Vidarbha in the Ranji Trophy.

However, he is out of favour again following a string of middling essays against England in the Anderson-Tendulkar Trophy. His 602 runs in five games this year for Karnataka, which include a century and a double century, have been insufficient in making a case for a slightly longer rope.

Mohammed Shami's attempts at winning another shot in the Indian team have been in vain, too. He has 20 wickets in four games at an average of 18 this season, but was not even considered for the A-side that played two multi-day games against South Africa-A. Mumbai all-rounder Shams Mulani has 28 wickets in five games, the third-highest this season. He has chipped in with the bat too and scored 285 runs at an average of 57. But his consistent performances have been overlooked, and he has found no place even in the India-A setup, let alone India.

India's drubbing at the hands of the Proteas has also brought into focus the disconnect between the Ranji Trophy and international cricket in terms of playing conditions.

This year, the pitches on offer have been flatter than usual, despite the BCCI advising the State units to produce livelier tracks. Till the fifth round of this season, bowlers' strike rate in the first two innings of a match stood at 66, the worst since 2017/18. Though the batters' average over the first two innings has increased only marginally, their dismissal rate (balls faced per wicket) has ticked past 64 deliveries this year. In Tests played in India, batters' dismissal rate has been 64 or more only twice (2016/17 and 2017/18) in the last 10 years.

The team scores are another gauge of the conditions. Teams have scaled 500 runs in 24 innings this season, just five short of last season's tally and on course to near the haul of 37 from 2012/13 — the highest since the turn of the millennium.

Batters lasting longer at the crease has reflected in the results too. Out of the 80 games in the Elite Groups, only 43 matches have culminated in a result. A result rate of 53 per cent in the Ranji Trophy is the lowest since 2016/17. It has been

> « Several captains and coaches have criticised the mid-season break, fearing it could sap the momentum »

Pitch paradox: India head coach Gautam Gambhir has repeatedly stressed the importance of domestic cricket, but flatter Ranji pitches this season have raised questions about how closely conditions mirror Test demands. AP

over 60 per cent for the last five seasons. The table-toppers at the mid-season interval — Karnataka, Bengal, Vidarbha, and Mumbai — have played out nine draws so far. Last season, the group winners had a cumulative total of nine draws after the final round. Yet, the relatively consistent conditions have bridged the gulf in skill between the traditional heavyweights and the rest, making this Ranji Trophy more evenly contested.

Jammu & Kashmir's (J&K) first win over seven-time champion Delhi has been the highlight of the season. The Paras Dogra-led side sits second in Group D with 20 points, and could have been top if not for its agonising 35-run reverse against Mumbai. J&K's success has rested on the strength of its pace unit, led by Auqib Nabi, who has 29 wickets in five games at an average of 13.67.

Similarly, Services, Jharkhand, and Haryana — sides devoid of international stars — have punched above their weight and are in contention for making the knockouts. On the other hand, Tamil Nadu finds itself languishing in the bottom half of its group.

The smaller units have proved stiff opponents for the bigger sides, even in instances where it might not be evident in terms of points won. Nagaland, which played in the Plate Group last season, nearly eked out a first-innings lead against Tamil Nadu courtesy of a century from Imliwati Lemtur.

Nagaland's fortunes this season pose a question for the Plate Group and its members. The side nearly pulled off a heist against a domestic giant but also fell to three innings defeats. Isolated from the tournament, Plate sides might gain better exposure from facing top-drawer teams in a couple of rounds every season.

However, this is not the only predicament the Ranji Trophy is confronted with. Multiple captains and head coaches have raised their displeasure with the mid-season interval, which holds the potential of running down their team's momentum accumulated through five rounds.

There are, however, voices in favour of the break. Mumbai captain Shardul Thakur, who was among the first few cricketers to raise questions over the packed scheduling of the Ranji Trophy, expressed his satisfaction over the new system, while Siddhesh Lad, too, believes that, keeping the larger interest in mind, this is the right move.

"I feel this is the right thing to do. Obviously, as a guy who is in form, it could break my momentum. But it is also about workload. In the last five games, we have fielded for 100–150 overs, and then batted, and as our coach Omkar Salvi says, the Ranji Trophy is like a marathon. Here, you need to keep going slowly. If you see the workload of the bowlers, it's a right thing to take a break, play T20, One-Dayers and then again get back to red-ball," Lad told *Sportstar*.

The switching of formats might mimic an international calendar, but for a tournament which is still, in essence, a supply line for the senior side, a sustained run in one go would arguably fetch the best performances.

Additionally, more support from the Ranji Trophy — in conditions and quality of players — at a time when the Indian team is transitioning to a new generation is a justified demand. But it is only one end of the bargain. Holding the feeder system relevant is down to the top tier, too.

Top batters after the first five rounds of matches

Name	Inn	Runs	Avg.	HS	100/50
Armaan Jaffer (Mizoram)	6	717	143.40	193	4/1
Abhinav Tejrana (Goa)	8	651	93	205	3/2
Sanat Sangwan (Delhi)	10	634	79.25	211*	2/3
Karun Nair (Karnataka)	10	602	100.33	233	2/2
R. Smaran (Karnataka)	7	595	119.00	227*	2/2

Top bowlers after the first five rounds of matches

Name	Inn	Wkts	Avg.	S/R	Best
Siddharth Desai (Gujarat)	10	35	15.34	40.47	5/61
Auqib Nabi (J&K)	9	29	13.27	31.37	7/24
Shams Mulani (Mumbai)	9	28	21.10	38.28	7/46
Mayank Mishra (Uttarakhand)	8	27	17.37	37.11	6/84
Shreyas Gopal (Karnataka)	9	27	17.51	40.55	8/110

FOR MORE STORIES

FROM BARAMULLA TO THE BIG LEAGUE

Auqib Nabi's ability to make the ball dance to his tunes in either direction has drawn everyone's attention. An IPL breakthrough now **beckons** him.

Anish Pathiyil
anish.p@thehindu.co.in

There was a period of play during Jammu & Kashmir's Ranji Trophy match against Delhi in early November that truly encapsulates what Auqib Nabi is capable of with the cherry in hand. In the 63rd over of Delhi's first innings, Nabi extracted a tinge of outward movement, enough to take the shoulder of the bat as Hrithik Shokeen pressed forward to defend with soft hands. One ball later, first-class debutant Manan Bharadwaj was welcomed with a booming in-swinging yorker, trapping him in front.

Just two overs prior, Nabi had forced an edge off Anuj Rawat with a ball moving away from the left-hander. This ability to make the ball dance to his tunes in either direction has drawn everyone's attention. Most domestic pacers are only potent in moving the ball one way, allowing batters to negotiate their threat to an extent. But Nabi manages to gain the upper hand in the mental battle by creating a seed of doubt in the opponent's mind.

"When I started, I only had the outswing. It used to come out well. When I managed to get some inswing, the outswing went away. This went on for a couple of years. I had to practise

Stellar form: No pacer has picked up as many wickets (73) in the Ranji Trophy since the start of 2024 as the J&K bowler. This season, with 29 scalps in five matches, he is placed second in the wicket charts. EMMANUAL YOGINI

a lot to excel in both aspects," Nabi told *Sportstar*. "*Pehle dil se start karna hai* (you have to start with the heart). You need to check how the ball is coming out. Then we start with a few steps and then practise hard with the full run-up; it is definitely possible," he added.

No pacer has picked up as many wickets (73) in the Ranji Trophy since the start of 2024 as the J&K bowler. This season, with 29 scalps in five matches — comfortably more than any other quick bowler — he is placed second in the wicket charts. "[This season] has been going really well. From the first match, the rhythm has been there. In every match, you don't think that you have to take five wickets. The process is the same. I have to put the ball in a good place. Sometimes you get the result, sometimes you don't," Nabi explained.

Participating in the Duleep Trophy ahead of the Ranji season allowed Nabi the opportunity to bowl in tandem with India internationals Arshdeep Singh, Harshit Rana and Anshul Kamboj. "I learnt quite a bit about the mental aspect. They are always relaxed, not thinking about the results. They just believe in themselves," he observed.

At 29, Nabi is already a good few years into his peak. A relatively late entry into professional cricket meant he was quite unpolished when he made his senior J&K debut in 2018. Born in Baramulla to a schoolteacher father, serious cricket was nowhere on the horizon for young Nabi. It was not until a friend convinced him to attend the state Under-19 trials that he even considered his experience of bowling in tennis-ball cricket might take him somewhere.

"We didn't have any facilities in Baramulla. The nearest cricket ground was in Srinagar, which was quite far away (54 km). I had no idea about trials until a friend told me. I tried for two to three years and eventually got in," Nabi said. "My father used to tell me to focus on studies because where we came from, there was no scope to play cricket. But when I saw players like Parvez Rasool and Abid Nabi, I thought I could do it too, if I worked hard."

Guiding right: After a few unexceptional seasons with the ball, Nabi was able to unlock more facets of his game after J&K enlisted P. Krishna Kumar as the bowling coach. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The lack of formal coaching during his formative years made it difficult for Nabi to refine his game on the big stage. Irfan Pathan, who served as coach-mentor for Jammu & Kashmir in 2018-19, was impressed by the young bowler and helped him settle into the senior side. "I received a lot of help from him [Irfan]. He liked my wrist position a lot and used to say I would be able to swing the ball both ways if I worked hard," Nabi said, recalling the advice the former India pacer shared. After a few unexceptional seasons with the ball, Nabi was able to unlock more facets of his game after J&K enlisted P. Krishna Kumar as the bowling coach. "We didn't have a bowling coach until two seasons ago. You can clearly see the improvement in my bowling since he has come in," Nabi remarked.

A criticism often levelled against swing bowlers of Nabi's ilk is the lack of searing pace to trouble batters. Many bowlers, past and present, have lost their control trying to find an extra yard of pace. Nabi, whose speed generally ranges from 125-132 kmph, says he will stay clear of making that mistake. "I will choose skill over speed," he exclaimed.

Coach Krishna Kumar, too, shared the same sentiment. "Speed cannot be a benchmark in selecting a player. Taking five wickets in the Ranji, Duleep and Irani should be the benchmark. If someone has the skill

Versatile player: Nabi's red-ball record over the last couple of seasons often resulted in him being labelled a long-format expert. But one glance at his limited-overs records shows he's no dud with the white ball either. EMMANUAL YOGINI

to pitch the ball in the right area and move the ball, he should be encouraged," he opined.

Nabi's red-ball record over the last couple of seasons often resulted in him being labelled a long-format expert. But one glance at his limited-overs records shows he's no dud with the white ball either.

He has picked up 42 wickets in 29 List A matches at an average of 28.88 and 28 T20 wickets in 27 games at 26.39. "In India, people say the white ball doesn't swing. The myth spreads easily. But I have seen Nabi swing the white ball, too," bowling coach Krishna Kumar said.

Despite attending multiple trials over the last few years, Nabi has yet to find an Indian Premier League gig.

The Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy 2025 will be another step in the audition ladder ahead of the upcoming iteration of the IPL auction. Krishna Kumar says he is confident Nabi will find a taker.

"He definitely has the quality to play. He has got a fantastic yorker and can bowl six of them on the trot. And the best part is, he is very calm in his mind. He doesn't take pressure. What else do you need from a bowler?" he said.

The IPL, often considered the closest to international cricket in terms of high-quality opposition and high-pressure environments, might be the final tick in the box that India's cricketing top-brass needs to be convinced of Nabi's aptitude to play at the highest level.

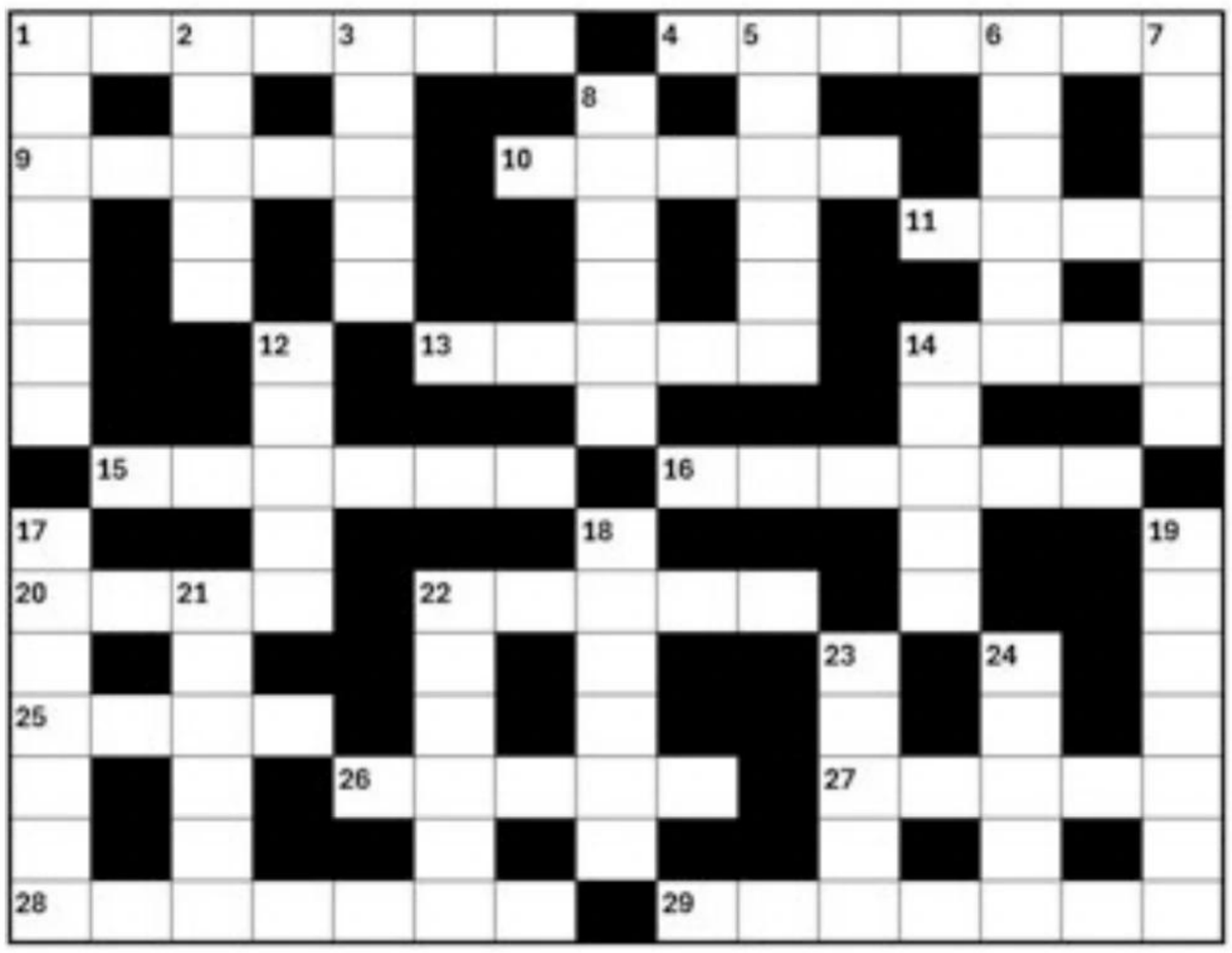
Auqib on fire

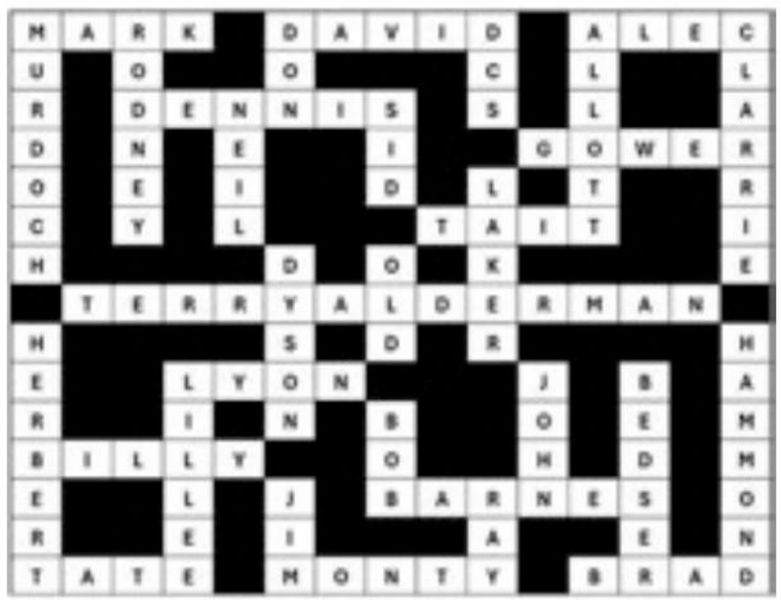
First-Class:
Matches: 36
Wickets: 125
Average: 19.98
Strike Rate: 41.2
5-wicket hauls: 12
10-wicket match hauls: 3

List-A:
Matches: 29
Wickets: 42
Average: 28.88
Strike Rate: 34.1
Economy Rate: 5.07

T20s:
Matches: 29
Wickets: 32
Average: 25.65
Strike Rate: 19.1
Economy Rate: 8.03

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Which Lancashire based club got promoted to Premier League for the current season? (7)

4 & Down 17 Who won the women's singles title at the Italian Open in May 2025? (7,7)

9 & 29 Which wicketkeeper effected most dismissals in a single match in the recently-concluded Women's World Cup? (5,7)

10 Identify the first name of the sportsperson who won the Women's World Cup Chess in July 2025. (5)

11 Identify the first name of this Kiwi who announced his retirement from T20 Internationals in November 2025. (4)

13 Identify the surname of this cricketer who won the player of the match for Kolkata Knight Riders coming in as an Impact Sub in IPL 2025. (5)

14 Identify the surname of this Indian cricketer who scored 35 in the second T20I vs Australia, coming in at 49 for 5. (4)

16 Who scored a hat-trick for Crystal Palace in the Premier League match against Bournemouth in October 2025? (6)

20 Identify the surname of the Pakistan cricket captain during the Asia Cup in September 2025. (4)

22 Identify the surname of the Australian cricket captain who resigned due to a controversy in November 2021. (5)

25 Identify the surname of this cricketer who holds the record for the highest score in an innings in Test matches played between Australia and the West Indies. (4)

26 Identify the surname of this Englishman, who took 10 wickets and scored a half-century on his Test debut at the Feroze Shah Kotla Stadium in 1976. (5)

27 Identify the first name of this cricketer who bowled the first-ever ball in the 50-over World Cup history. (5)

28 Identify the first name of this cricketer who won the player of the ODI series between Afghanistan and Bangladesh in UAE in October 2025. (7)

DOWN

1 Identify the surname of this Zimbabwean cricketer who scored a hundred in the one-off Test versus England in May 2025. (7)

2 & Across 15 Which Indian won the FIH Male Umpire of the year award in 2025? (5,6)

3 Which ground has hosted most Test matches as of November 2025? (5)

5 Identify the first name of this Australian who played a match-winning innings versus India at the group stage of the Women's World Cup held recently. (6)

6 Identify the surname of this athlete who led the Refugee Paralympic Team at the 2020 Summer Paralympics as Chef de Mission. (6)

7 Identify the first name of this footballer who scored a hat-trick for Rennes in the Ligue 1 game against Strasbourg in November 2025. (7)

8 Identify the first name of this player from Galatasaray who scored a hat-trick in the UEFA Champions League match versus Ajax in November 2025. (6)

12 Identify the first name of the player who registered the best bowling figures in an innings in the recently held Women's World Cup. (5)

14 Identify the first name of this South African batter who scored a century on ODI debut in 2018 and scored his maiden T20 hundred versus Pakistan in December 2024 but has not played any Test so far. (5)

19 Identify the surname of this Indian tennis doubles specialist who announced retirement recently. (7)

21 Identify the surname of the cricketer who won the player of the match award in the first Test match held between India and South Africa in Kolkata recently. (6)

22 Identify the first name of this franchise which finished as runner-up in the 12th season of the Pro Kabaddi League 2025. (6)

23 Identify the first name of this West Indies spinner who won the player of the series award in the two-Test series versus Pakistan held in January 2025. (5)

24 Which country finished in third place in the second edition of the CAFA Nations Cup for Football held in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in August and September 2025? (5)

K. R. DEEPAK

ICC Men's T20 World Cup from February 7, 2026

1 The **expanded 20-team tournament** will be co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka over 29 days across eight venues, five in India and three in Sri Lanka

The 10th edition of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup will get underway on February 7, 2026, with six teams in action on the opening day, including defending champion India **(pic, above)**. India will begin its campaign against the USA in Mumbai, aiming to become the first team to successfully defend a Men's T20 World Cup title. The expanded 20-team tournament will be co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka over 29 days across eight venues, five in India and three in Sri Lanka. The Indian venues are the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, M.A. Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai, Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi, Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai and Eden Gardens in Kolkata. Sri Lanka's matches will be hosted at the R. Premadasa Stadium and Sinhalese Sports Club Cricket Ground in Colombo, along with the Pallekele International Cricket Stadium in Kandy.

2

AFP

Bangladesh produced a ruthless all-round performance to steamroll Ireland in the final T20I, sealing the series 2-1 in emphatic fashion. After slipping in the opener, the host completed a strong comeback by first skittling Ireland for a paltry 117 and then chasing down the target inside 14 overs with consummate ease.

3

GETTY IMAGES

Thailand was crowned champion of the ICC Women's Emerging Nations Trophy 2025 in Bangkok after finishing top of the table on Net Run Rate in a closely-fought tournament. Thailand, UAE, Scotland and the Netherlands all ended on equal points, but the host sealed the title with a final-day win over Scotland. Natthakan Chantham topped the batting charts for Thailand with 144 runs, while Sunida Chaturongrattana led the bowling with 13 wickets.

4

AP

Sri Lanka's dramatic collapse of nine wickets for 30 runs paved the way for Pakistan's six-wicket victory in the tri-series final in Rawalpindi. After cruising to 81 for one in the first 10 overs, the visitor lost momentum completely, managing only 33 runs for its last nine wickets in the next 9.1 overs. Shaheen Afridi and Mohammad Nawaz led the charge with three wickets apiece. Pakistan then chased down the modest 115-run target with eight balls to spare.

5

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Faf du Plessis has brought the curtain down on his long IPL career after choosing not to enter the upcoming auction, marking the first time in 14 years he will miss the tournament. The 41-year-old South African announced on social media that he will instead feature in the 2026 Pakistan Super League. Meanwhile, Aussie all-rounder Glenn Maxwell has also pulled out of the auction.

6

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Andre Russell has announced his retirement from the IPL after Kolkata Knight Riders did not retain him ahead of the 2026 season, but he will remain with the franchise as part of the support staff in a newly created role of "power coach". The KKR legend said he chose to step away while still feeling competitive, preferring to "leave a legacy" rather than fade out.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Triumph in silence, heard everywhere

Away from the glare that follows most World Cups, India's women's visually impaired team **claimed history** in Colombo, lifting the inaugural Blind Women's T20 title.

Ashwin Achal
achal.ashwin@thehindu.co.in

Three weeks after the Indian women's team lifted its maiden ICC Women's World Cup title, their visually impaired counterparts scripted a triumph of equal heart and far greater hardship. On November 24 in Sri Lanka, the Indian women's visually impaired cricket team clinched the inaugural ICAB Blind World T20 title.

If the senior women's side had to break through decades of neglect and underestimation, the road travelled by this team was even more arduous, marked by limited resources, social invisibility and a relentless fight just to earn the right to represent India.

Captain T.C. Deepika, who hails from Tumkur in Karnataka, captured that struggle with unfiltered honesty. "All the people in my village always said that I did not do anything of use. Today, we have proved everyone wrong," said Deepika, a B3 (partially sighted) player.

The magnitude of that victory ensured the team's return home was anything but ordinary. Meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a moment etched in memory. The players presented him with an autographed bat and soaked in the rare spotlight that recognition finally brought.

India's campaign was dominant from start to finish. The team beat Sri Lanka, Australia, Nepal, the USA and Pakistan in the league stage before outclassing Australia in the semifinal. In the final at the P. Sara Oval in Colombo, India cruised to a seven-wicket win over Nepal to seal a historic title.

For many of these players, who grew up in households where even two square meals a day were uncertain, the title and the attention that followed became a validation of years of quiet perseverance.

"After the win, villagers and relatives are constantly visiting to congratulate my parents. The *sarpanch* also met them and said that I have made the whole village proud. This is a very emotional moment for me. Our hard work is finally paying off," said Sunita Sarathe, who finished the tournament with eight wickets, speaking to *The Print*.

Much of the team's journey has been shaped by the work of the Samarthanam Trust for the Disabled and its founder G.K. Mahantesh, who has championed blind cricket for decades. Through year-round tournaments and structured training programmes, Samarthanam has provided the framework that mainstream cricketing bodies have long denied.

"We had no practice facilities in our village. Some of us did not even have rice to eat. It is only the Cricket Association for the Blind in India (CABI) and Samarthanam Trust which has supported us," Deepika told Prasar Bharati Sports.

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced a cash reward of Rs. 10 lakh each and government jobs for players from Karnataka, along with Rs. 2 lakh each for players from other States.

Yet the larger battle remains unresolved. CABI chairman Mahantesh has renewed his call for official recognition from the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). India remains among the few cricketing nations where blind cricket operates without direct board backing, a major roadblock to the sport's growth.

As it stands, CABI and Samarthanam struggle to meet travel and operational costs, while players continue to earn little from the sport. The quest for BCCI recognition, Mahantesh said, remains in limbo.

"Support from the BCCI will make a huge difference. Additionally, it will be helpful if the International Cricket Council (ICC) advises all its member nations to support blind cricket globally. Yes, India is dominating now, but we want more countries to start playing," Mahantesh said.

"Governments from all States should provide facilities for all players, on par with what is provided for other sports. Lastly, if corporates can come on board and extend a helping hand in terms of sponsorship, blind cricket will grow and the players will benefit a great deal," Mahantesh said.

From Colombo's triumph to the corridors of power: Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets India's visually impaired world champions after their historic Blind T20 World Cup win. ANI

How blind cricket is played

The ball is larger than a regular cricket ball and contains ball bearings, producing a rattling sound to help batters locate it.
Teams are made up of three classifications:
B1: Fully visually impaired
B2: Partially visually impaired
B3: Partially sighted
Each team must field a balanced combination of all three categories.
Fielders rely heavily on verbal communication and sound cues.
The game follows most core cricket laws with modifications to ensure safety and accessibility.
A match in full flow stands as a powerful testament to human resilience and adaptability.

FOR MORE STORIES

CHAOS AND ECSTASY

A **whirlwind** week of football produced major swings in fortune, capped by Scotland's historic return to the World Cup.

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

All eyes were on London ahead of the Premier League's latest matchday as heavyweights Arsenal and Chelsea clashed at the latter's home ground, Stamford Bridge.

Considering Arsenal's enviable form in the Premier League, which has made the Gunners the title favourites, Mikel Arteta's side was considered the favourite ahead of the high-profile clash. And when Moises Caicedo was shown a red card in the 38th minute for a crunching tackle on Mikel Merino, the scales tipped further in Arsenal's favour.

However, it was Chelsea that elated the home fans right after half-time when Trevoh Chalobah's header broke the deadlock after captain Reece James sent in a sumptuous cross into the box. But holding the Gunners with 10 men was always going to be a challenge for Chelsea, and it finally conceded in the 59th minute after Bukayo Saka set up Merino for the equaliser.

With 10-man Chelsea playing out a 1-1 draw

against Arsenal, Enzo Maresca would have been the happier of the two managers, while Arteta would see it as two points dropped.

Manchester City was moments away from being held to a frustrating 2-2 draw against Leeds United, but ended up winning a five-goal thriller (3-2) after Phil Foden scored in the first minute of second-half added time to secure his brace.

City's rival, Manchester United, was on course for yet another disappointing gameweek after going down 0-1 against Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park. But Ruben Amorim's men clawed back into the match courtesy goals from Joshua Zirkzee and Mason Mount.

Defending champion Liverpool finally found some respite from its torrid form. After two league losses on the trot and a midweek Champions League defeat against PSV Eindhoven, the Reds bounced back with a 2-0 win against 10-man West Ham United.

British-record signing Alexander Isak scored his first Premier League goal for Liverpool, with Cody Gakpo also getting on the scoresheet.

It was a disappointing week for Tottenham Hotspur, which lost 0-2 to Fulham, while Brighton & Hove Albion and Sunderland won their respective matches against Nottingham Forest and Bournemouth.

After matchday 13, Arsenal (30) tops the table with Manchester City (25), Chelsea (24) and Aston Villa (24) in second, third and fourth, respectively. Brighton (22), Sunderland (22) and Manchester United (21) lie in fifth, sixth and seventh, while Liverpool (21) is eighth. Tottenham (18) is 12th in the league standings.

Bundesliga

It was a straightforward outing for defending champion Bayern Munich, which bounced back from its UCL loss against Arsenal with a 3-1 win against St Pauli, with Raphael Guerreiro, Luis Díaz and Nicolas Jackson finding the net for the Bavarians. Goals from Aaron Anselmino and Karim Adeyemi gave Borussia Dortmund a 2-1 win against Bayer Leverkusen.

RB Leipzig was held to a goalless draw against Borussia Monchengladbach. After matchday 12, Bayern (34) tops the table, with Leipzig (26), Dortmund (25) and Leverkusen (23) in second, third and fourth, respectively.

Serie A

Defending champion Napoli edged to a 1-0 win against Roma, which missed out on a chance to go top of the table. David Neres' goal proved to be the difference. Inter displayed an overall sluggish performance against Pisa, but Lautaro Martinez's brace was enough to guide it to a 2-0 win. Inter's local rival, AC Milan, beat Lazio 1-0 with Rafael Leao scoring the only goal of

Stalemate: Title favourite Arsenal faced a 10-man Chelsea side that struck first through Chalobah, but the Gunners kept pushing and eventually drew level in the 59th minute when Saka set up Merino for the equaliser (in pic).

REUTERS

the match. After matchday 13, Milan (28) is top of the league, with Napoli (28), Inter (27) and Roma (27) in second, third and fourth, respectively.

La Liga

Real Madrid failed to catch a break in its current league campaign. After frustrating draws against Rayo Vallecano and Elche, Xabi Alonso's men were once again held to a 1-1 stalemate against Girona. Azzedine Ounahi opened the scoring for Girona in the 45th minute, which was cancelled out by a second-half penalty from Kylian Mbappe **(below)**, who took his league goal tally to 14.

Defending champion Barcelona had a difficult start against Alaves after the visitor opened the scoring in the first minute through Pablo Ibanez. However, Lamine Yamal equalised after seven minutes, followed by a brace from Dani Olmo to guide the Catalans to a 3-1 win.

Atletico Madrid rode an Alexander Sorloth brace to take all three points against Oviedo.

Villarreal maintained its impressive league form with a 3-2 win against Real Sociedad, while the other Basque club, Athletic Bilbao, had a good week, winning 2-0 against Levante. After matchday 14, Barcelona (34) claimed top spot, with Real Madrid (33) dropping to second. Villarreal (32) and Atletico (31) sit third and fourth, respectively.

Ligue 1

The French top flight has a new leader in RC Lens, which capitalised on defending champion Paris Saint-Germain's shock loss to AS Monaco. Florian Thauvin's brace was enough for Lens to seal a 2-1 victory against Angers and climb to the top of the standings with 31 points, one ahead of PSG.

PSG, meanwhile, suffered only its second defeat of the league season. Former Liverpool player Takumi Minamino scored the only goal as Monaco snapped a three-match losing streak, in a game that also saw Paul Pogba make his second appearance since returning from a doping ban. He had earlier returned to the pitch for the first time in more than two years in Monaco's 4-1 defeat to Rennes in the previous gameweek. Unlike Lens, Olympique de Marseille failed to capitalise on PSG dropping points as it was held to a 2-2 draw by Toulouse. The result leaves Roberto De Zerbi's side third in the table, two points off the leader.

UEFA Champions League

European giants Arsenal and Bayern Munich have undeniably been the best teams in the Champions League this season. With their perfect records at stake, their matchup was destined to take centre stage in the fifth gameweek. The Gunners came into the match with a glittering record of having conceded zero goals in the campaign, while the Bavarians were unbeaten across all competitions (18 games). With both teams more or less confirmed to finish in the top eight, a win was more about making a statement than merely chasing points.

And on the night at the Emirates, it was the home side that held bragging rights, beating Bayern 3-1 courtesy of a dominant second-half display. Arsenal's set-piece prowess was on show as Jurrien Timber headed it in front just over 20 minutes into the first half before 17-year-old Lennart Karl bagged the equaliser for Bayern.

Arsenal flexed its squad depth in the second half, with substitute Noni Madueke firing it back ahead with his first goal since leaving Chelsea, before Gabriel Martinelli capitalised on Manuel Neuer's mistake to seal the game. Meanwhile, Inter Milan, the only other side with a perfect record coming into the gameweek, also saw its run end as it was edged 2-1 by Atletico Madrid.

Another marquee fixture of the gameweek was Barcelona's visit to Chelsea. While many may have assumed the Catalans would dominate, it was the Blues that turned up, thrashing their Spanish opponents 3-0. Jules Kounde's own goal and a red card for Ronald Araujo in the first half helped the home side seize control before second-half goals from youngsters Estevao and Liam Delap put the tie to bed. Notably, the last two Premier League champions, Liverpool and Manchester City, suffered shock defeats at the hands of PSV Eindhoven and Bayer Leverkusen, respectively, leaving both English clubs outside the top eight after five games.

Mbappe simply could not stop scoring as he put four past Olympiacos to secure a 4-3 win in a match where Los Blancos went behind in the eighth minute. Mbappe then took matters into his own hands, bagging a hat-trick inside seven minutes before adding a fourth in the second half. At the

AFP

Last hurrah: Scotland scored two goals in stoppage time against Denmark to secure a place in the 2026 FIFA World Cup. AP

end of matchday five, Arsenal tops the standings with a perfect record, while Paris Saint-Germain, Bayern, Inter and Real Madrid follow with 12 points each.

International

An overhead kick, a stoppage-time winner and a goal from the middle of the pitch — these were the moments of madness Scotland needed against Denmark to qualify for the FIFA World Cup for the first time since 1998. On a booming night in Glasgow, with a win required to qualify, Scott McTominay leapt high in the air and produced an outrageous acrobatic attempt in the third minute to send the supporters into ecstasy.

However, Denmark fought back, with Rasmus Hojlund converting from the spot in the second half. Scotland restored its lead through Lawrence Shankland, but it did not last long as Manchester United's Patrick Dorgu restored parity. With yet another heartbreak looming for Scotland, it was former Arsenal defender Kieran Tierney who took matters into his own hands in the third minute of stoppage time with a clinical curling strike from outside the box. Five minutes later, midfielder Kenny McLean slammed the final nail in the coffin with a shot from the halfway mark to catch Denmark goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel off his goal line, securing the Scots' place at next year's World Cup.

Elsewhere in Europe, the usual suspects — Spain, Belgium and Switzerland — also secured qualification after finishing top of their respective groups.

Meanwhile, in the CONCACAF qualifiers, some of the smallest nations made the biggest waves by booking their tickets to the premier tournament. The tiny Caribbean nation of Curacao, with a population of just over 156,000, became the smallest country ever to qualify after battling to a 0-0 draw with Jamaica to finish top of its group with 12 points from six games.

Curacao was joined by Haiti and Panama, which beat Nicaragua and El Salvador, respectively, to fill the final two spots.

(All results updated as of December 1)

A WORLD CUP REBORN

The 2026 edition promises the **broadest canvas** yet for football's universal dream.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

For nearly a century, the grand narrative of FIFA World Cup participation has been shaped most heavily by its two dominant continents, Europe and South America. Out of the eighty countries that have played in the World Cup so far, 34 have been from Europe and 10 from South America. This glass ceiling looks set to crack in the 2026 edition, where the number of participating teams has been expanded from 32 to 48. As a result, the combined share of European and South American teams will fall below 50 per cent for the first time ever in the history of the tournament.

"We're in the 21st century, and we have to shape the World Cup for the 21st century. We have to look at football as more than just Europe and South America," FIFA president Gianni Infantino had said.

A moment in the sun for Africa

Africa, one of the biggest beneficiaries of the expansion, had called the disparity in representation at the World Cup "pathetic" before boycotting the 1966 edition.

The single combined slot for Asia, Africa and Oceania in 1966 has now grown to a cumulative 18 in the 2026 edition, the largest yet. It could rise to 20 if Iraq, Congo or New Caledonia qualify through the inter-confederation play-offs.

Over the years, Africa has proved to be a potent contender in global football despite receiving limited World Cup slots, with Morocco finishing fourth in the most recent edition.

From North America, there will be at least nine teams, including debutant Cape Verde. A tiny archipelago off the coast of West Africa, it beat Eswatini to become the second-smallest country by land area and the third-least populous nation to qualify.

There could be another tale of renaissance from Africa — that of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Formerly known as Zaire, the country last appeared in the 1974 World Cup — a stint marred by player-bonus disputes and threats made to players after a poor showing in the finals.

Mini miracle: (Facing page) The tiny Caribbean island of Curacao became the least populous nation ever to qualify for the World Cup. AFP

It secured a place in the inter-confederation play-off for 2026 by beating African heavyweight Nigeria on penalties and could complete its redemption arc should it defeat New Caledonia or Suriname in the play-off final.

"These are proud moments for football in Africa. The main objective is for an African nation to win the World Cup," Patrice Motsepe, president of the Confederation of African Football, previously said.

"We are absolutely confident that the performance at the World Cup will serve as a significant stimulus and accelerator for the very good work taking place in increasing the quality and global competitiveness of African football."

Asia — an underrated chapter

Asia has been another overlooked presence in the World Cup, appearing in the knockouts just twice, with its best-ever performance — South Korea reaching the 2002 semifinals — becoming a footnote rather than a headline.

But the expansion has created room for success stories that would have otherwise slipped through the cracks of history.

Uzbekistan, which played its first international match post-independence in 1992, became the first Central Asian nation to qualify for the World Cup.

Meanwhile, Jordan, which had not even qualified for the Asian Cup until 2004, completed a dream run to the 2026 World Cup, beating Oman 3–0.

Beyond the usual suspects of Japan, Iran and South Korea, Qatar qualified on merit for the first time, while Iraq is one step away from its first World Cup appearance since 1986.

There are other success stories in the 2026 edition. The tiny Caribbean island of Curacao became the least populous nation ever to qualify for the World Cup. Haiti, infamous for gang violence, also made the tournament without playing a single qualifier on home soil.

The broader picture

The allure of playing at a World Cup also provides players with a chance to represent their native countries, which would otherwise not be possible with a smaller pool.

Axel Tuanzebe, a former England Under-21 international who has also captained Manchester United, failed to break into the Three Lions' senior squad. He eventually switched allegiance to DR Congo, his birth country, in 2023.

So did his United teammate Aaron Wan-Bissaka, who was also born to Congolese parents. Congo is on the brink of making it to the finals.

Mason Greenwood — once touted as one of England's best youth talents — switched to Jamaica after falling out of Thomas Tuchel's plans.

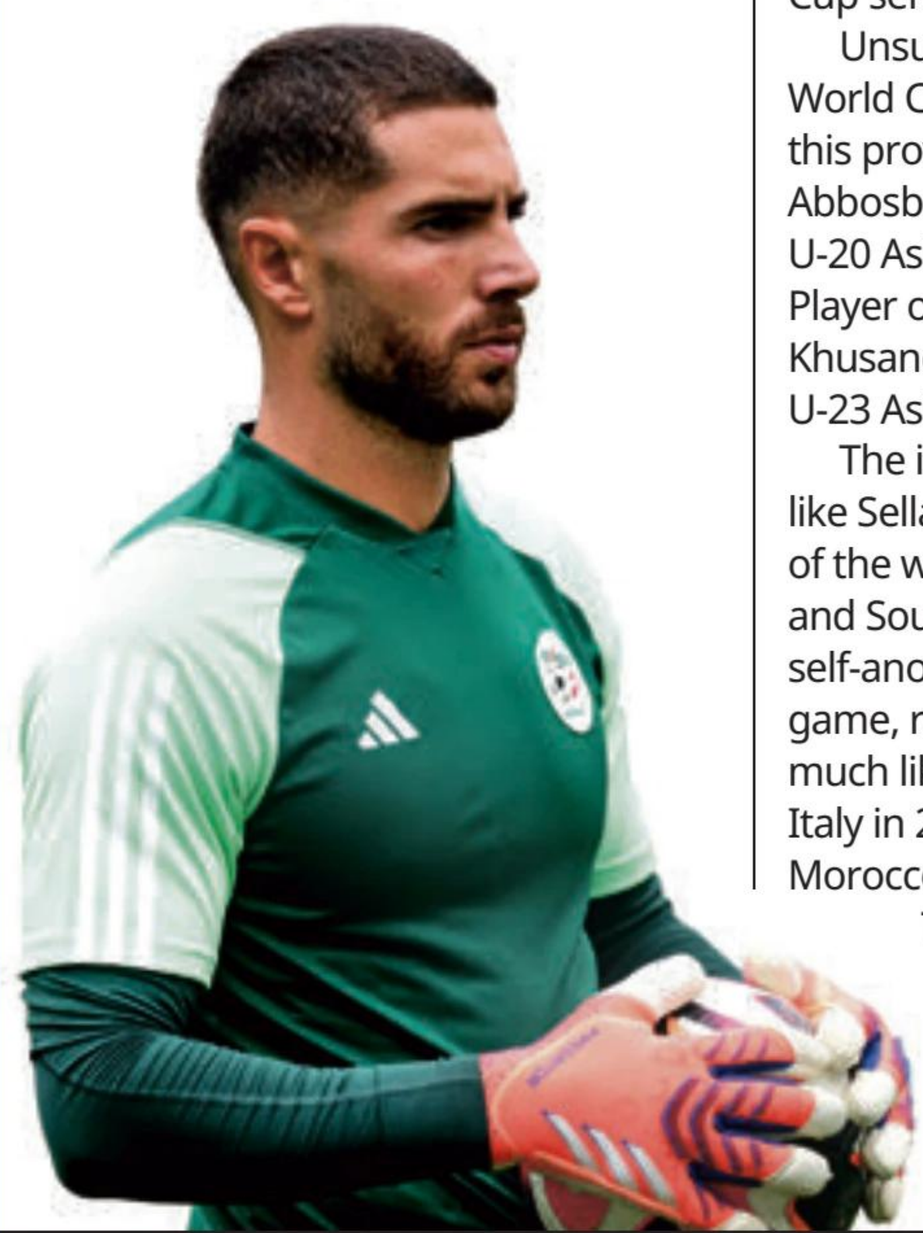
Historic debut: Uzbekistan, which played its first international match post independence in 1992, became the first Central Asian nation to qualify for the showpiece tournament. AFP

Giant leap: Fans of Cape Verde celebrate its World Cup qualification. The country will make its debut as the third-least populous nation and the second-smallest by land area. AFP

Luca Zidane **(below)**, son of France's 1998 World Cup hero Zinedine Zidane, chose to represent Algeria, which qualified for the World Cup after a decade — after he could not break into a deep French squad comprising Mike Maignan and Luke Chevalier.

Another major consequence of a larger pool of teams is that it leaves the door open for a fresh set of ideas — be it Jordan's fluid changes in formation or Uzbekistan's astute youth development infrastructure.

Jordan's change in manager — from Hussein Ammouta to Jamal Sellami — shifted the team's shape to a counter-attacking 3-4-2-1 in the World Cup qualifiers, transforming it from a composed low-block side to one firing on all cylinders. The architect, Sellami, and the result: 16 goals in six matches and a direct World Cup qualification.

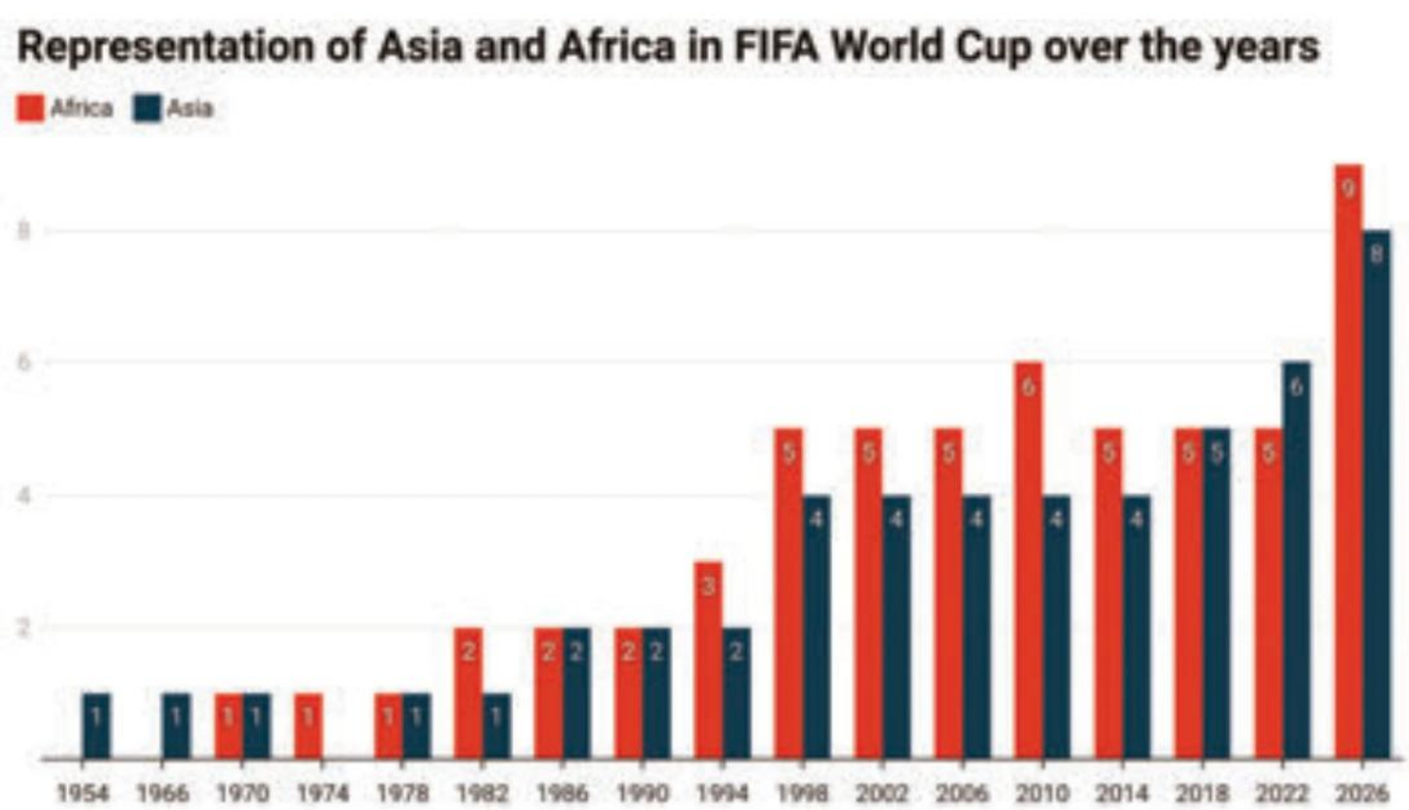


Uzbekistan, on the other hand, worked on building strong age-group teams, winning the U-20 Asian Cup (2023), consecutive U-23 Asian Cup finals (2022, 2024), an Olympic bronze medal, and reaching the U-17 Asian Cup semifinal in 2023.

Unsurprisingly, the success in the World Cup qualification came through this proven assembly line, including Abbosbek Fayzullaev, the 2023 AFC U-20 Asian Cup MVP and AFC Youth Player of the Year, and Abdukodir Khusanov, a U-20 Asian champion and U-23 Asian Cup runner-up.

The impressive show of coaches like Sellami from unassuming corners of the world is bound to make Europe and South America, the long self-anointed gatekeepers of the game, rethink old assumptions — much like South Korea's upset against Italy in 2002, or Walid Regragui's Morocco against Portugal in 2022.

The beautiful game has always promised universality. Next year, with its most inclusive canvas yet, the FIFA World Cup will finally deliver it.



The first FIFA World Cup to have representation from Asia or Africa was in 1954

Global representation

QUALIFIED

Europe
Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland, England

South America
Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay

North America
Canada, Curacao, Haiti, Mexico, Panama, United States of America

Africa
Algeria, Cape Verde, Egypt, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa, Tunisia

Asia
Australia, Iran, Japan, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Uzbekistan

Oceania
New Zealand

CAN QUALIFY

Europe
Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czechia, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, Wales

South America
Bolivia, Suriname

North America
Jamaica

Africa
Democratic Republic of the Congo

Asia
Iraq

Oceania
New Caledonia

Vladimirov turns 90

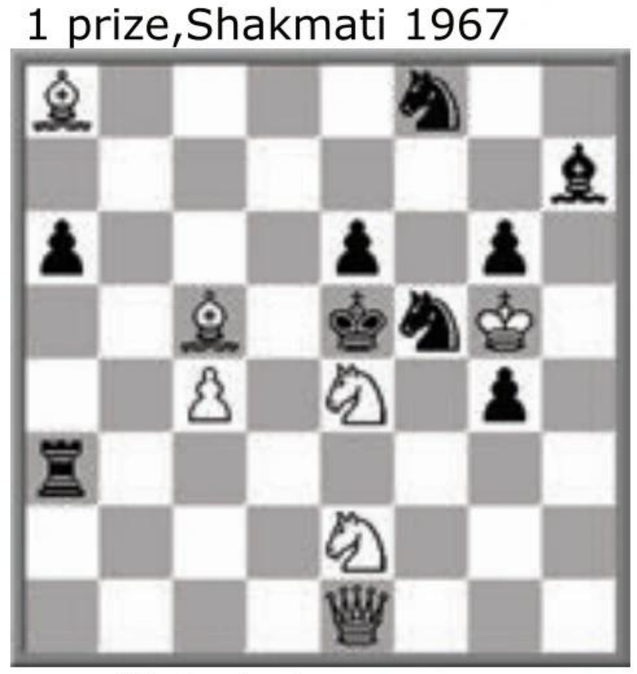
By C.G.S.Narayanan

In the August issue of Russian magazine '64-Chess review' Grandmaster Alexandr Kuzovkov wrote an excellent and exhaustive article on Russian composer Yacov G. Vladimirov, rightly considered one of the greats of chess composition who turned 90 on July 22. Kuzovkov writes" His first problem was published in 1955, and since then he has composed 820 compositions, many of which have been awarded prizes in various competitions. In the collections of the best problems in the world – FIDE Albums he has 232.5 points, which is one of the best results in the entire history of composition.

Vladimirov has received many chess awards and titles. He has been a grandmaster of the USSR since 1980 and an international grandmaster since 1986 for chess composition. He has been a world champion in composition in the individual category three times, won the title of world champion as part of the teams of the USSR and Russia eight times, and has won the USSR championship nine times. Vladimirov was an associate professor and lecturer at the Moscow Aviation Institute. He is a candidate of sciences and the author of many scientific works".

The first problem below is the famous Vladimirov theme which also contains a paradoxical plot and undoubtedly belongs to the golden era of chess composition. Looking at the position, one wants to somehow activate the white half-battery. We try 1.Nd6? ~ 2.Nf7#, 1... Nh6 2.Nc3#, 1...Nxd6 2.Bd4#. But this play is refuted by 1... Bg8! Let's try to attack with another knight: 1.Nd4? ~ 2.Nc6#, 1...Nxd4 2.Bd6#, 1...Ne3 2.Qg3#, 1...Ne7 2.Nc3. And again, failure due to 1...Re3! And suddenly, absolutely unexpectedly, like thunder in a clear sky, 1.Be3! ~ 2.Bf4, 1... Rxe3 2.Qa5, 1... Nxe3 2.Qg3. The paradoxical plot: it turns out that to win, one must destroy the white half-battery!"

Y.G.Vladimirov
1 prize,Shakmati 1967



Mate in two moves

The problem for solving below again a non-standard plot. Await the main place of work of this great composer -the three-movers and more-movers in the next article

Y.G.Vladimirov
I prize, Moscow Ty 1987

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving by Kabe Moen in the article 'Combination of themes':1.Nc4-d6! (2.Qf5) 1...Rxf4 2.Qxg8;1...Qxf4 2. Nxf2;1..Kxf4 2.Nxd2;1...Ne5 2.Nf6;1...Rg5 2.Qxg5;1...Rf8 2.Qg5

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

Big win: Champion Javokhir Sindarov defeated Wei Yi in the final, both securing places for the Candidates. MICHAL WALUSZA/FIDE

SINDAROV SUPREMACY

India's brightest stars falter as **Sindarov, Wei and Esipenko** win the three coveted tickets to the Candidates.

P. K. Ajith Kumar
ajithkumar.pk@thehindu.co.in

The road to Resort Rio is rustic, shaded generously by trees and lined with charming, old-style houses. Along the way, you will also come across bars and restaurants where elderly foreigners, most of them from the UK, enjoy drinks and fabulous food at their leisure. This is Goa, after all. Last month, however, the resort in the North Goan village of Arpora was abuzz with more than just tourists. As the venue for the FIDE Chess World Cup, it hosted over 200 participants from around the world, all vying for the top three spots that would secure direct tickets to the Candidates, the qualifying event that determines the challenger for the World Championship.

That is the tradition in chess: the reigning champion gets the opportunity to defend the crown without having to play any qualifying games. The challenger comes through the gruelling Candidates tournament, in which eight players take on each other in the double round-robin format.

As Loek van Wely (the Dutch Grandmaster who has worked as a second with World

Third party: Andrey Esipenko (right) beat Nodirbek Yakubboev (left) in the third-place play-off match.

MICHAL WALUSZA/FIDE

Champions Vladimir Kramnik and Veselin Topalov) told *Sportstar* in Goa, winning the Candidates was sometimes tougher than winning the World Championship itself.

There are several routes to the Candidates, but among the most straightforward ones is the World Cup. In the Goa edition, Javokhir Sindarov of Uzbekistan, Wei Yi of China, and Andrey Esipenko of Russia claimed the honours as the three qualifiers.

Sindarov was a deserving champion. At 19, he became the youngest winner in the history of the World Cup after beating Wei in the final. He belongs to a golden generation of Uzbek chess, a group of players who could give India the biggest fight in the coming years.

The champion himself said as much shortly after his triumph. "I think India and Uzbekistan will fight for the Chess Olympiad and many other titles in the next 10 years," he said. "India has some strong young players." But none of them lived up to expectations in Goa.

In fact, there was no Indian in the semifinals. Arjun Erigaisi reached the quarterfinals all right and always looked the best of the 24 home players, but he was knocked out by Wei. Their last-eight match was decided in the tie-breaks, after both their classical games were drawn. The 22-year-old from Warangal might have felt, in hindsight, that he could perhaps have pressed harder in the classical format.

He had begun his campaign in great style, after being seeded directly into the second round. He won his first three games back to back and had won all his matches without having to play the tie-breaks (1.5 points needed to be scored out of a possible two from the classical format) until he ran into former World No. 4 Peter Leko in the last 16.

The Hungarian took him to tie-breaks and then stayed on as a commentator for FIDE's official broadcast. Leko is one of the most loved commentators and was glad when people recognised him in Goa just because of his voice.

The defeat to Wei was a heartbreaking moment for Arjun: the World Cup was his only hope of making it to the Candidates. And he missed it yet again, after coming close in the past.

MICHAL WALUSZA/FIDE

MICHAL WALUSZA/FIDE

Tough luck: No. 2 and 3 seeds, Arjun Erigaisi (above, right) and R. Praggnanandhaa (left), had disappointing runs in the World Cup.
MICHAL WALUSZA/FIDE

Wei then made sure of his trip to Cyprus after winning his semifinal against Russia's Andrey Esipenko. That match produced the tournament's most dramatic moment.

The 23-year-old Russian was in a commanding position, but he made a terrible mistake: he overlooked his hanging rook while going for a pawn push on the other side of the board. Wei immediately grabbed the rook with his knight.

Esipenko realised his folly, resigned immediately and stared at the board for a few seconds before getting up and quickly walking out of the playing hall: he had just squandered a place in the World Cup final.

He, however, showed resilience, as he came back the following day for the third-place play-off against Uzbekistan's Nodirbek Yakubboev. Esipenko won it convincingly, without having to play the tie-breaks. His victory in the opening game was enough. A couple of dubious moves had put the Uzbek in an inferior position from early on, and there was no coming back for him.

The second game was drawn, and thus Esipenko, one of the rising young stars from Russia — which is no longer the dominant force it once was — clinched the last available slot for the Candidates. "It is the best performance of my career," he remarked.

The winning trio from Goa will be joined in Cyprus by Anish Giri and Matthias Bluebaum who had qualified for the Candidates by taking the two spots at the Grand Swiss tournament. There will also be Fabiano Caruana, the World No. 3 from the United States, who made it as the winner of the 2024 FIDE Circuit. World No. 2 Hikaru Nakamura, also from the USA, is most likely to qualify as the player with the highest average rating. Lastly, R. Praggnanandhaa is expected to complete the line-up as the winner of the 2025 FIDE Circuit.

Apart from Praggnanandhaa, Giri and Bluebaum were also in Goa for the World Cup, but they couldn't last long. Giri was actually the

Ready for a bigger test: D. Gukesh bowed out in the third round. He now awaits the challenger for his World Championship title defence. ETERI KUBLASHVILI/FIDE

highest-seeded overseas player in the tournament, at No. 4, with the top three seeds being Indians: D. Gukesh, Arjun and Praggnanandhaa.

Several other big seeds were all in for disappointments, such as Wesley So (No. 5), Vincent Keymer (6), Nodirbek Abdusattorov (8), Shakhriyar Mamedyarov (9), Hans Niemann (10), Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (11) and Ian Nepomniachtchi (12). Given the knockout format, the early exits of these stars weren't all that surprising, really.

Perhaps the most popular player to be eliminated before the event reached its business end was Levon Aronian, but he ran into an in-form, higher-ranked Arjun. The Armenia-born American is not just a brilliant player and one of the highest-rated in history, but a favourite with chess fans. He greets everyone with a smile and doesn't disappoint the autograph and selfie-hunters. He has a terrific sense of humour too.

He is also something of an Indophile: a huge admirer of Satyajit Ray's films and also loves classical Indian music. "I have been listening to Kishori Amonkar a lot lately," he told *Sportstar*, a day after his defeat to Arjun, someone he has great regard for.

Arjun's loss to Wei was a setback not just for India but for the tournament. The lack of an Indian presence in the final stages, it was feared, would diminish local interest. And that was the case. The security men, who had to ensure stars like Gukesh, Praggnanandhaa and Arjun were not disturbed while they entered or exited the playing hall, witnessed a drop in attendance for the semifinals and the final.

That India fell way short of expectations is true. But the World Cup is like that. Nobody expected Divya Deshmukh **(right)** to bring the women's World Cup to India, and yet she did, a few months ago. That is the nature of such tournaments and why they generate a lot of excitement among chess followers.

MICHAL WALUSZA/FIDE

Medal maelstrom: Nikhat Zareen (extreme right) and Jaismine Lamboria (extreme left) spearheaded India's gold rush as the women's boxers clinched seven of the 10 available gold medals. PTI

GOLD IN ABUNDANCE, QUESTIONS IN TOW

India's **20-medal surge** at the World Boxing Cup Finals in Greater Noida flatters the scoreboard, the fine print reveals why celebration must be tempered with caution ahead of LA28.

Y. B. Sarangi
sarangi.y@thehindu.co.in

Indian boxers winning medals in all 20 weight classes, including nine gold, six silver and five bronze, at the World Boxing Cup Finals in Greater Noida may seem enormous, but it warrants some perspective in the run-up to the 2026 Commonwealth Games and Asian Games, and the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

Amid the jubilation, Boxing Federation of India (BFI) president Ajay Singh rightly pointed out that there is a long way to go as India aspires to do well at the Asian Championships, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games and Youth Olympics in preparation for LA28.

The Indian boxers' unprecedented success, which will give them valuable ranking points and help them secure seeding in elite events next year, was the result of several factors.

There is no denying that last-minute pull-outs of several top-ranked boxers for the year-ending event left a depleted field, paving the way for easier draws and the participation of second-choice boxers from abroad.

With pugilists giving their best at the World Championships in Liverpool in September, it was not easy to push themselves again in November.

"Many boxers pulled out as it was difficult to attain one's peak within a short period of time. Some of them who came here witnessed a dip in their performance because of this," said a coach working at the national camp. According to Indian men's head coach Dharmendra Yadav, as the International Boxing Association (IBA) hosted another event offering big prize money around the same time, it lured top boxers from some countries that were affiliated to both old and new international federations, IBA and World Boxing (WB), respectively.

The field was further diminished, especially in the women's section. The maximum number of boxers competing in a women's weight was five, while the minimum was three, in 75kg and 80kg, where one boxer each, including Pooja Rani in 80kg, directly reached the final.

In the men's section, the maximum and minimum numbers of participants were eight and five, respectively.

The home advantage, including a familiar environment and the support of local spectators, also proved crucial for the Indians.

Taking nothing away from the Indian boxers' performance, a discernible section of the boxing fraternity present at the venue thought that dodgy judging favoured the home pugilists in some close bouts.

Nevertheless, the Indian contingent noted several encouraging moments.

The return of three promising women boxers, including Paris Olympian Preeti Pawar (54kg), 2022 World Championships bronze medallist and Asian champion Parveen Hooda (60kg), and former World youth champion Arundhati Choudhary (70kg), was significant ahead of important events in the next few years.

Preeti, who overcame her battle with Hepatitis-A before the Paris Olympics, made a commendable comeback as she toppled two accomplished rivals, Olympic medallist and triple World champion Hsiao Wen Huang of Chinese Taipei and two-time World Championships medallist Sirine Charaabi of Italy, to take gold.

Parveen, who struggled after being suspended for a whereabouts failure that resulted in the forfeiture of an Olympics berth, also went past two formidable opponents, World Championships silver medallist Aneta Rygielska of Poland and Japan's Ayaka Taguchi, to underline her potential. After recovering from wrist surgery, the brave Arundhati got the better of World Boxing Cup medallist German Leonie Muller and World Championships medallist

Strong will: World champion Jaismine Lamboria's (in blue) grit was on full display at the World Boxing Cup Finals as the southpaw clinched the 57kg title despite battling a left shoulder injury.
SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

All 20 Indian boxers competing at the five-day season-ender at the Shaheed Vijay Singh Pathik Sports Complex finished on the podium, with 15 reaching the finals of their respective categories.

Proving mettle: Sachin Siwach in action during his 60kg gold-winning campaign at the World Boxing Cup Finals in Greater Noida, his most assured performance at the elite level so far. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

Uzbek Aziza Zokirova to deliver a morale-boosting performance.

World champions Minakshi Hooda (48kg) and Jaismine Lamboria (57kg), who beat tough opponents despite nursing a left shoulder issue, and former World champion Nikhat Zareen (51kg), who ended her long wait for an international medal, pushing themselves to secure the yellow metal, was a heartening sign.

World Championships silver medallist Nupur Sheoran (80+kg) completed the list of seven Indian women gold medallists.

Women's head coach D. Chandralal, who has been replaced by former High Performance director Santiago Nieva due to the BFI's keenness to win Olympic medals, advocated a step-by-step approach from here, beginning with the Asian Championships before shifting focus to the Commonwealth Games and Asian Games.

Chandralal said that since most of the top Indian women were tall counter-punchers relying on hitting and moving, it would be necessary to strengthen their legs. "For long-range boxers, we should put loads on their legs. We put belts on their ankles and made them do more leg work. We made them do weight training like the athletes so that they got solid legs," said Chandralal.

"In boxing lingo, we say a boxer should have a horse's legs, not an elephant's legs."

Among the men, former World youth champion Sachin Siwach (60kg) posted convincing victories to win gold and record his best performance at the elite level so far.

Hitesh Gulia (70kg) stunned Japan's double World Championships medallist and Asian Games champion Sewon Okazawa and Kazakh pro boxer Nurbek Mursal on his way to the top honour.

Men's head coach Yadav, who is also set to get replaced by a foreigner, said he was happy that the boxers faced strong opponents in decent draws. He was delighted to see Sachin's improved footwork, which enabled the southpaw to avenge his defeat to Kyrgyzstan's Paris Olympics silver medallist Munarbek Seiitbek Uulu at the Olympic qualifier, in the WBCF title clash.

"In the Brazil World Cup, Sachin fought despite being sick, and I had to throw in the towel to save him. This performance will boost his confidence. Hitesh was the next best," said Yadav.

According to Yadav, silver medallists Jadumani Singh (50kg), Pawan Bartwal (55kg), Abhinash Jamwal (70kg) and debutant Ankush Panghal (80kg) had it in them to produce even better results.

Overall, Yadav said the boxers needed to raise their fitness levels and must be trained to tackle highly physical Central Asian boxers. "The Kazakh and Uzbek boxers tire the opposition out with their rough game. It's part of their training. We need to adopt a similar training pattern. The boxers must work hard; we can only take the horse to the water," he said.

Yadav also appealed to the BFI to host at least one international event every year so that Indian boxers would be motivated to give their best on home turf and draw encouragement from such performances.

After the Indian boxers returned from the Paris Olympics without a medal, the BFI is keen to make amends at LA28. With BFI chief Ajay Singh promising to leave no stone unturned, the federation is keen to rope in the best coaching staff to get the best out of the Indian boxers. The federation is clear about its approach for LA28. "We will focus on the weight categories where we are strong. Besides, we will try to prepare two to three boxers in each weight to encourage competitiveness and achieve bench strength," said BFI executive director Col. Arun Malik, who closely tracks the boxers' progress.

Despite facing challenges due to internal squabbles, the BFI, which is keen on prioritising women's boxing for LA28, would do well to stick to a concrete plan so that the boxers can make the country proud in the bigger events lined up over the next few years.

DOTA 2: THE MOST PROFITABLE TITLE IN ESPORTS

The classic MOBA, whose flagship event is The International, had a **record-breaking** $40 million prize pool in the 2021 edition, while its esports players earn the highest in the world

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

DOTA 2, one of the most popular esports titles in the world, is the most profitable title in the world, according to popular analytics firm Esports Charts.

The classic MOBA, whose flagship event is The International, had a record-breaking $40 million prize pool in the 2021 edition, while its esports players earn the highest in the world. Johan 'n0tail' Sundstein is the top earner, with prize money going over $7.18 million.

Though the prize money of the International has fallen drastically in the last four years — from USD 40 million to USD 3,380,455 — primarily because Valve removed the game's Battle Pass, it continues to lead the charts.

MOST EXPENSIVE ESPORTS TITLES

- Fortnite: $202.9 million
- Counter-Strike 2: $162.8 million
- League of Legends: $122 million
- Arena of Valor: $111.5 million

ORANGUTAN'S RUN ENDS ON A SOUR NOTE

Indian esports team Orangutan had a rather anti-climactic end in the Player Unknown's Battlegrounds Mobile Global Championship 2025, finishing outside the top 11 and missing out on a spot in the Last Chance Qualifier (LCQ).

The Indian side, which had won Battlegrounds Mobile India Showdown (BMSD) 2025 to earn a spot in the Championship, impressed in the gauntlet stage, qualifying for the group phase.

The top three in the Championship directly qualified for the Grand Finals, and teams ranked fourth to 11th made it to the LCQ.

At the time of writing, Wolves Esports, InnerCircle Esports, Gen.G Esports, LOOPS Esports, AlterEgo, Team Falcons, Papara SuperMassive and 9z Team have qualified for the LCQ.

LATEST SEASON OF EPREMIER LEAGUE ANNOUNCED

The Premier League and Electronic Arts (EA) announced the latest season of the ePremier League, part of the EA Sports FC Pro circuit. In its eighth season, the competition boasts a £100,000 prize pool and guaranteed spots at the 2026 FC Pro World Championship.

The ePremier League will have three online Open Qualifiers running between November 26 and December 11, followed by playoffs from January 14 to 22. The competition will have a double-bracket elimination format, offering a direct pathway to the ePremier League's Group Stage.

The Group Stage of ePremier League runs from February 28 to March 1, where clubs will face off in one-versus-one matches before the Knockout Stage.

The final weekend of the season will have knockouts on March 28 and the finals on March 29.

COMO ENTERS ESPORTS SPACE

Italian top-flight club Como 1907 announced its entry into the esports scene with the launch of the Como Gaming Club. The club made headlines in recent times when Cesc Fabregas and Thierry Henry, both FIFA World Cup winners, became minority stakeholders of the club as it got promoted to Serie A last season.

In esports, it has now roped in FC Pro 24 World Champion Anders Vejrgang, looking for a similar fairytale off the field.

« We were not making fluke jumps. It wasn't about performing well on just one day or in one season »

JAVIER SOTOMAYOR

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

In a career that spanned three decades, Javier Sotomayor earned a place among the greatest high jumpers of all time, winning an Olympic gold, four World Championship titles, and setting the world record of 2.45m.

Speaking to *Sportstar* on the sidelines of the Ekamra Sports Literature Festival, the now 58-year-old reflected on taking up the high jump despite being afraid of heights, his never-ending chase for perfection, why his record still stands 32 years on, and why he is not sure he could break it if he were competing in the modern era.

You set your record in 1993. Thirty-two years later, it still stands. Why do you think that is?

I know how I broke the world record in 1993, but I can't explain why it has lasted so long. Competition played a role. I was fortunate to compete in what I believe was the best era of high jump. We were not making fluke jumps. It wasn't about performing well on just one day or in one season. We were jumping consistently at a high level over multiple seasons.

The world record is 2.45m, and I didn't reach it suddenly. It was an evolution, and that comes from competing regularly against strong athletes. I was lucky to get the chance to compete against champion athletes from the time I was 16.

That is what pushed me constantly, and it helped me achieve the maximum that I could.

You also had a very unique technique.

Compared to most other jumpers, I had a very long final take-off step. For most people, the last step just before the jump is short, but mine was long because I was trying to combine two techniques, almost two types of jumpers, within myself. One who depended on speed, and the other who depended on the force generated at take-off.

I did that because I wanted to produce as much force as possible at the moment of jumping, which meant I had to generate maximum speed. That demanded a great deal of preparation, training, and stretching. Along with that came physical therapy and constant jumping practice to ensure that my ankle stayed healthy. Even when I was off the track, I had to keep working on my ankle. Otherwise, I would have broken down quickly.

So I put a lot of effort into strengthening my ankles because there was always going to be heavy impact and a great deal of stress on that joint.

My technique was something I taught myself because it went against what the coaches expected. I stuck with it even when they wanted to change it. Theoretically, this was not the ideal way to jump, and initially, my trainer did not believe in it. But in the end, I convinced him that this was the way I wanted to jump.

Why do you think people haven't tried to duplicate your technique?

I think some people have tried to, but each athlete has to find the technique that works for him. Some depend on speed, while others generate a lot of force at the take-off point. My son also does the high jump. He is 17, but he is not competing at the highest level right now. I don't advise him to

Timeless record: Javier Sotomayor, the 1992 Olympic high jump champion and holder of the enduring 2.45m world record, said records are not built on any single formula.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

copy me either, but he still tries to.

You say your technique is very self-made. How much of your success is purely talent and how much is due to hard work?
I would say it was a balance of both. Some athletes worked just as hard as I did but were not able to jump as high. And I have also known athletes with enormous talent who did not work as hard, and as a result, did not achieve the same results.

Did you always want to be a high jumper?
When I was very young, I was actually afraid of jumping. I was afraid of heights. I started around 10 or 11, and at first, I did not want to do the high jump simply because of that fear.

I was a kid like everyone else. I played a lot and went to school. Around the age of 10, I became serious about sports. In Cuba, there is a lot of emphasis on physical education, and that helps. Many of us love baseball more than other sports, but from a young age, I wanted to be an athlete. The sports I really enjoyed were running and the hurdles. I also liked the triple jump a lot.

In Cuba, athletics education means you have to try different disciplines. It turned out that I was good at the high jump, and when I was around 14 or 15, I decided to specialise in it.

How hard is it to be an athlete in Cuba, given the number of sanctions on your country?
In the 1980s, when I started, there were sanctions on Cuba, just as there are even now. Back then, though, despite the challenges, they did not completely close the door on us. I was able to compete in the United States many times. Today, it is much more complicated for Cuban athletes because visas are often denied. In my time, I did not face that kind of refusal.

In those days, there was also much stronger government support because we had greater resources. Countries like Russia and East Germany used to extend significant support, including financial help. Now our economic conditions are such that sport cannot receive the same level of backing as it once did.

The international situation is also difficult for us. Our athletes across age groups get far less international exposure than before. Earlier, even youth athletes were able to travel and compete abroad. The positive change today is that athletes receive a larger share of the prize money they earn overseas or through sponsorships. The personal financial return is higher.

Despite all the challenges, Cuba has consistently performed better than most countries in world athletics for a nation of its size. Why do you think that is?
I think the results of Cuban sports infrastructure are there for everyone to see. There was talent scouting

Fear factor: "When I was very young, I was actually afraid of jumping. I was afraid of heights. I started around 10 or 11, and at first, I did not want to do the high jump simply because of that fear, says World-record holder Javier Sotomayor, seen here with his son. AP

among young children, and there were follow-ups after that.

First, you identified talent, and then you continued to nurture it. There were dedicated sports schools for teenagers where they could be closely monitored and supported. At that time, the sports infrastructure, facilities, training, support systems, and competition were all much better than they are today. We used to have coaching supervision almost every day of a child's life.

The coaches were at a very high level. Every coach who trained a high-performance athlete had to undergo formal training; without that, they were not allowed to coach. There was a great deal of accountability. There were people above the coaches who ensured that they were actually training and continually studying their profession. This multi-level supervisory system made a big difference.

Even though Cuba was a very strong sporting nation, you were one of its biggest stars. How much pressure was it being one of the country's top athletes in the 1990s?

It was challenging because we were already used to seeing people win. At the 1992 Olympics alone, we had 31 medallists. So, it was never enough just to medal. If I went to a World Championships, the expectation was to win. If I did not, people would look at me strangely. The expectation was always to win gold. If I ended up with silver, it was seen as a disappointment.

You won several World and Olympic medals, but also missed out on some major competitions. You might have won another Olympic medal if not for Cuba's boycott of the 1988 Games. Does that still bother you?

Not just the 1988 Olympics, I could also have competed at the 1984 Olympics as well [Cuba boycotted both the 1988 and 1984 Games]. But especially in 1988, I was in the best form of my life. It hurt that I could not compete. If I had gone in 1988, I would have definitely won a medal. That is why the 1992 Games were so important. The Olympics are the biggest tournament in anyone's career, and for me, it was a personal challenge. I had to take advantage of the opportunity I had lost.

It wasn't even that I had lost an opportunity. It was that I did not even go. The challenge I set for myself was that now that I had the opportunity, I had to seize it. I think it was one of the most important competitions of my career.

You won gold at the 1992 Olympics but faced disappointment in 1996. Could you reflect on that experience and how you came back from it?

I took part in three Olympic Games. In 1992, I won gold. In 1996, I had a knee injury, and then in 2000 I won a silver. I might have done better in 2000, but it was raining during that competition, and I never performed well in the rain. So even though I have two Olympic medals, the Olympics were actually not my best sporting moments. In 1996, my coaches did not want me to compete because my knee injury was very bad. I jumped 2.29m, but it was not one of my better competitions.

That year, I promised myself, my family, and my coaches that I would quit the sport if I did not win a gold medal at the next year's World Championships. I was clear that even if I won a silver or a bronze, I was going to quit. I had to win a gold.

Did you visualise yourself winning that gold medal at the 1997 World Championships?

I really started learning the art of visualisation in 1996, when I spent six months without making a single jump because of my injury. I had been doing visualisation earlier as well, but those six months were when I did it every day.

My psychologist and I mapped out the entire process precisely: the time to concentrate, the run-up, the impulse step, the final motion, the jump, the flight time. We traced all of that out with my fingers. When I jumped 2.45m, I had already visualised it in my mind. In my visualisation, I could see myself improving, going from 2.30m to 2.35m and then to 2.45m.

Would you visualise your technique during a competition, say at the top of your run-up?

At the start of my run-up, I always focused on my technique. I'd think, "What is the speed I'm going to run at?" I would think, "What's the power I'm going to generate?" I was always visualising the jump.

These days, the high jump is extremely data-driven, with a strong focus on biomechanics. In your time, how did you prepare for such a technical event?

In my time, the only thing we had were sequential photographs of the different stages of the jump. Sometimes there were live screenings of jumps from other competitions, but in Cuba, there was not even that. We had to depend only on the photos. At a later stage, we did get some technical tools, but nothing like what is available today.

They were very rudimentary.

It was difficult even to communicate with my family when I was away for a competition. I had to look for a telephone, and I could not even use the ones in the hotel because the charges were too expensive!

What do you think you might have achieved if you were competing today with all the available technology, specialised support, and modern equipment?

This is a hypothetical question. It is true that technology has advanced a lot now. The weight of just one of the shoes I jumped in would probably be more than that of a pair of jumping shoes that athletes use these days. There is also far more technical knowledge now in terms of medical support and muscle training. We had injuries that put us out for six months. These days, you can recover from those in maybe one month.

Back then, it wasn't easy to get knowledge. Today, you can just put somebody's name on *YouTube*, and the whole analysis of your competitors will come up. I remember that in the 1990s, I had to hand-crank a film player just to watch one minute of video footage. There was no slo-mo, no special cameras like today.

Today, my son is training in Spain, and I can help him from Cuba. I can look at his video and tell him where he has to do better.

But at the same time, I don't think you can compare the two eras.

If I had all those facilities, then maybe I wouldn't have been as mentally prepared, keyed in, and focused as I was back in the day. Additionally, I think what helped me was the kind of competition I had. It wasn't just the jumpers I was competing with, but also my teammates who were training with me in Cuba. They were very serious athletes, and we trained really hard with each other.

What, according to you, is a perfect jump?

It starts when I concentrate well. I start running at a good speed and, more importantly, develop a good rhythm. After that comes a powerful take-off and then the jump itself. Each position should come at the right moment. And finally, you need to enjoy your jump. When all of this comes together, you really get joy out of it. You feel as if you are flying!

National icon: Cuban President Fidel Castro honours Javier Sotomayor, the nation's most soaring symbol of excellence, whose world record of 2.45m was forged in an era when Cuban athletes were expected not just to medal, but to win.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Did you ever make a perfect jump?

I don't think I ever did a perfect jump, although I always dreamed about it. I was always chasing that jump. I think there were jumps where I did not clear 2.45m, but those were executed almost perfectly, according to what I was visualising.

That is why I think that, mentally, the high jump is the most difficult discipline. Your best effort might not be what you are truly capable of. For example, if you execute your most technically perfect jump but the bar is set at 2.30m, then only 2.30m will be recorded against your name, even if you feel you jumped well beyond that. And then, when you have to attempt 2.37m, you might not produce your best jump. Sometimes your medal-winning jump might not even be your best jump. That is very different from something like the javelin, where your technically best throw is usually also your longest.

Do you think you achieved what you wanted to?

Since I was 15, my goal has been to be the best in the world. At that age, my immediate target was to be the best in the youth category.

Once I achieved that, I thought, "Now I want to be the best in the world."

By then, someone had already jumped 2.42m, so I knew I had to do better than that.

But even after I became the best in the world, I always wanted to do better than myself. I kept setting the bar higher.

Even though I was never able to go beyond 2.45m, in my mind, that was always possible; that was always the target. I wanted to reach 2.46 or 2.47m. So by my own assessment, I fell short a little bit.

That is why I repeat that the most important thing is what is in the mind of the athlete, the desire to be better than yourself every single day.

« This generation is a lot smarter than we were, but at the same time, I feel they are a lot softer than we were »

SAINA NEHWAL

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

While she might have last played a competitive match in 2023 (at the Singapore Open), Saina Nehwal's never officially called time on her international career. Speaking to Sportstar magazine on the sidelines of the Legends Vision Legacy Tour, Saina addresses why she never felt the need to announce her retirement, the challenge of being a pioneer in Indian women's badminton, what she feels her legacy is, and what she thinks the future holds for Indian women's singles.

You never officially announced your retirement. Why is that?
I never saw the point in doing this. When I entered badminton, I didn't make any big announcement either. It's the same thing when you leave. Sometimes I'll have dreams that I might come back. It's been six months since I took cortisone injections in my knees. Then I'll remember just how badly they are damaged. I already have arthritis in them. The doctor told me that if it had just been an ACL injury, it could have been repaired, but this is cartilage degeneration that has built up over many years. Your body is just giving up. The cartilage is almost gone. So the joints are rubbing against each other, which is causing inflammation.

It's not that I don't want to play, but the option is not there. The body is a machine, and once the machine stops working, there's only so much you can do to keep getting it ready.

What does life after badminton look like?
It's challenging. You are looking for things to do. I do a lot of events and motivational talks. Right now, I'm part of the Legends Vision Legacy Tour, where we collect old badminton racquets and give them to underprivileged children to get them into the sport. I was a judge at the Miss Universe Pageant, which was pretty exciting as well. Coaching is always an option in the future. The good thing is that you have gone through so much stress and pressure for so many years, so you are looking to enjoy being a normal person for some time.

At the same time, I had been playing internationally since I was 13 or 14. Back then, I wanted to play forever. As a sportsperson, happiness for me came from winning.

That cycle of winning and losing is what motivated you to go through the same drill every day. It was a very simple, regimented life. I knew what time I had to sleep, what I had to eat, and what I shouldn't do on a Sunday. It seems restrictive, but I started liking it, especially when you stand on a podium with a medal.

But while your mind wants to do it forever, your body doesn't let you. You get slower. If you want to play at the highest level, your body needs to be able to handle 9–10 hours of training. But that was not possible for me. My knees started giving up,

REUTERS

and I had to walk away before it got even worse.

Since the time I was nine, I've been playing until I was 34. Even now, there are a few days when I think I have to go to train and then I realise that I don't need to do that anymore. Now I think, come on, live your life. So I'll eat something unhealthy. But even these days, that old guilt will come in when I do that, and I'll feel bad for a while.

Do you miss the training?

Just because I'm no longer playing doesn't mean I can stop training. The only thing is that I'm not preparing for a tournament. I'm just putting in the work so I can be pain-free now! If I don't train, my body will be in even more pain than it is!

How easy was it to switch off from competitive badminton?

I always thought that I wouldn't be able to switch off the mentality of being an athlete, but it happened. In the first year, it felt strange, but after the second and third years, it started feeling normal. When you aren't playing competitively, how long will that fire last? I was surprised when it happened to me as well. I talked to (Parupalli) Kashyap, and he told me, 'Yeah, that fire will go away. ' My parents told me the same thing. I didn't believe it was going to be possible. It might have been true for other people, but it wasn't for me.

But that's exactly how it was. After two years away from the sport, I'm okay.

Sometimes the past almost feels like a dream. The years went by so fast! When I see my matches, it

Red-letter day: On April 2, 2015, Saina Nehwal scripted history by becoming the first Indian female badminton player — and just the second overall after Prakash Padukone in 1980 — to be ranked World No. 1. PTI

almost feels like someone else was playing those matches. I see myself and think, 'That can't be me!'

Do you think other players go through the same thing?

I think it's different for everyone. I was playing at the very highest level, and my life was pretty sorted. I was being called for events, was taken care of and had enough money to be comfortable. When I was playing, I didn't think so much about what was going to happen in the future. I was thinking about how I could improve as a player and what I had to achieve. Life was actually busy around that. I never thought about what would happen if I stopped tomorrow.

But these days I'm seeing a lot of struggle among players who didn't make it to that highest level. Not all of them have jobs. So I can't tell players anymore that you just play and everything will fall into place. If you look at cricket, they have made a system where, if you are in the top 50, you really don't have to worry about finances. I think from 2021/2022 onwards, we saw a lot of badminton players who started realising that they couldn't just focus on their badminton. I saw a lot of them starting to put less focus on their badminton and focus on their studies. I also see that a lot of players, once they retire, start to go abroad as coaches. When Sai (Praneeth) went last year to the USA, he was making maybe seven or eight times more than what he would have made in India. I can't blame players. You have to do what makes sense to you.

Do you ever look back at matches and think I could have done this or won that?

Those wishes are never-ending. Sometimes I might think of the 2012 Olympic semis or when I was leading Carolina Marin during the opening game of the 2015 World Championships final. But I also look back and think I won 11 Super Series titles, a bronze medal at London, a bronze medal at the Asian Games, two World Championship medals, I was world number one, and a two-time gold medallist at the Commonwealth Games. Then it doesn't feel so bad.

It gets easier and easier to forget the difficult results. The only time I'll think about the All England loss to Marin is when someone asks me about it. And it will stay in my head for an hour. But I'll still get to sleep that night. Others have it worse. I was just dominating a single All England match. Imagine what Lee Chong Wei, with three Olympic silver medals, must go through. He won 46 Super Series titles, but never won a single major world title. He lost matches to Lin Dan even when he held the match point. I once asked him, 'Lee, do you get sleep at night when you think of all the silver medals?' And he said, 'I have three kids now. Life goes on, and you stop thinking about these things.'

At what point in your career did you realise that things were going to be different after this particular injury?

I think the injury that changed things for me was the bone spurs I developed just before the Rio Olympics. I think my career was never the same after that. Ideally, if I had a trainer when I was starting out, I might have done a lot of things to prevent it. They might have told me that my hips, shin bones, ankles and lower back all needed to be strong. If I had done these things from time to time, this extra bone growth wouldn't have come.

It came because I pushed myself so hard. When you are playing extra on the court, you get a lot of osteophytes in your body. But that came as a surprise to me. I'd had injuries before, but these were things that I was able to recover from in a week or two at most.

So when the bone growths started developing, and the pain began, I thought I would push through it. I used to think I was blessed because I never picked up any major injuries like knee and ankle twists, which are very common in badminton. I thought I couldn't get hurt. But then, when I had that bone growth diagnosed a week before the Olympics, I didn't want to believe it was as bad as it was because I was in really good form. As a player, we just want to do well, and I'd done so well the previous year when I won a silver at the World

Championships. I made a lot of finals and semis. I'd won the Australian Open just a month before. I was the second-seeded player at the Olympics. I was sure I would do better than the last time when I won bronze.

The doctor told me to take 3-4 days' rest and then assess it. But I had to travel to Rio as well. I took cortisone injections to lower the pain, and we taped the knee up tightly, but I knew in practice itself that there was something very wrong with my knee. I was constantly thinking about the pain. I don't even know how I played the two matches that I did.

I got my first surgery when I returned from the Olympics. I did win tournaments after I recovered from the surgery – the Malaysia Open, Denmark Open finals, the Indonesia Open and an Asian Games bronze – but I knew that I was not going to be the same as before.

Later, P.V. Sindhu followed you, but you were the first woman to do all that.

Being the first one to do all that was very hard. If we had had a World Champion before me, it would have been a little bit easier. A lot of the building blocks for Indian badminton weren't in place when I started. These days, players get physios and strength and conditioning experts when they are nine. I got them for the first time when I was 18. If all these things had been pre-planned, there would have been even better results.

Sindhu is also not in the peak days of her career anymore.

I think even with Sindhu, we just take it for granted that she will always be there. She's about 30. 30–31 is still a good age to play. If you are continuing to push after that, you need to have really good trainers and physios. I think she can still play and push herself.

What is the perspective you think people don't really have about your career?

It's not just me, but Sindhu as well. I think what people will realise, after my career and eventually Sindhu's, is the value of what we achieved. People would just think that these results are coming, but they should realise that this wasn't easy. You need to have a combination of a tough body, dedication, strength and power. You need to have the package of all of that to get results.

We were winning the Super Series every year, and it was taken for granted that we would win them.

Sometimes a player might have the right strokes, but the body doesn't have that kind of power. Sometimes the power is there, but the strokes are not. There are very few players now who have that complete package. But that's not just true in India. I think Malaysia had an all-round player like Lee Chong Wei, but I don't think anyone has come to that level after him. It's the same thing for China after Lin Dan. Among the men, they at least have Shi Yuqi, but among the women, they are a bit up and down.

You had a Sachin (Tendulkar) in cricket, and after that, you had a Virat (Kohli) and a Rohit (Sharma). But in my case, there wasn't any example. I remember the first time I talked about winning an Olympic medal, and my mother laughed. She said, 'She is talking about the Olympics when at every tournament it's China who is winning'. You had to be exceptional, I think, then. At first, I didn't believe I could be like one of those Chinese girls, but when I started winning, I began to think that maybe there was something exceptional in me.

Trailblazers in frame: Saina Nehwal and P.V. Sindhu, the twin pillars of India's women's singles rise. PTI

In a way, I think the system wasn't ready for someone like me. I was lucky I got a lot of sponsors early in my career, but I didn't have a proper physio until I was 18. Today's kids have a lot more knowledge than me. It was only after I won the Olympic medal that I got to understand how important nutrition is. Sometimes I think it's a miracle that I even reached where I did with so little knowledge.

Why do you think we aren't getting the results, especially in women's singles?

I think about this as well. Maybe it's just part of that up-down cycle. I can't say that today's girls are not good, but something is missing. There's one argument that maybe they need

Historic breakthrough: Saina announced her arrival on the senior circuit in 2006 with a title run at the Philippines Open, becoming the first Indian woman to lift a four-star tournament crown. K. MURALI KUMAR

more time to develop, but I think you should be playing at the elite level by the time you are 18. I played the Olympics by then. You should at least start seeing results by then and be competitive at the world level, even if you aren't winning all the matches.

How much of this do you think comes from the fact that these girls are all training separately?
I've worked in multiple academies. I think about 70 per cent of a player's ability is innate and about 30 per cent is what a coach can do. Gopi (Pullela Gopichand) sir got me to an excellent level, but it got harder for him to coach me when there were 30–40 other players to look after. With Vimal (Kumar) sir at the Prakash Padukone academy, I think I improved my speed. I was always a very good rally player and a hard hitter, but with Vimal sir, my movements got faster.

But at the same time, the quality of any academy depends on the kind of players who train there. And both Gopi's academy and the Padukone academy were lucky because they had a lot of very good players. Now, with the National Centre in Guwahati, you will see good players coming from there in the future. I think the important thing is to ensure you have enough sparring partners. If that is the case, you don't need everyone to train in the same place.

What do you think is keeping us from producing another elite women's singles player?
I definitely think we have it in us to produce another very good women's singles player. I think one thing going for my generation is that our coaches were a lot stricter with us. This generation is a lot smarter than we were, but at the same time, I feel they are a lot softer than we were. It's not easy to scold them because they take things to heart a lot faster.

But for us, we took the coach's word as law. Whatever he or our parents said was right. We would follow it even if it hurt a little. We would push ourselves a little more because of that mentality. Obviously, if you hurt something, have a really bad day, or get seriously injured, then that is different. But if you can push yourself, then you need to do that.

What do you think is the difference between you at 18 and the current generation of Indian talent?
I think what probably separates me from a lot of the girls today is just my pain threshold. That's what determines how much you can train. I don't know if it doesn't exist now or if the players are just a lot more careful about their bodies, but I'm seeing a lot of injuries like shin injuries, damaged ACLs and meniscus tears. These are not easy injuries either. I don't know whether I was just lucky or whether my body was stronger.

When you get pain in these areas, you have to wait and see how the injury develops over 2–3 months. So you take time to recover, and your ranking drops.

I think we have four really strong contenders under 20. But at the same time, I think we need to start seeing results at the senior level by next year. They will have enough experience by then. I was 17 or 18 when I won my first super series, so they need to start pushing for the same results now.

They have everything in place. They have good strokes and movement.

I think one of the reasons it's taking longer to make a mark is that the game has become more of a defensive rally game now. Apart from An Se-Young, I think the girls are a little slower. It's a lot of high lifts. That overall game isn't the same, so maybe they will take longer to develop the physical strength that will give them success in today's game.

Out of Anmol (Kharb), Unnati (Hooda), Tanvi (Sharma) and Anupama (Upadhyaya), who do you think has the right tools to make it to the next level?
I think right now the four girls, Anmol, Unnati, Tanvi and Anupama, are at the same level. If you put them in a tournament, each of them can beat the other on her day. So if you are looking at which one of them can go to the next level, I can't say. I think if you want to be competitive at the world level, you need to see one player who can beat every other domestic player and really separate themselves from that group. That's how it was with Sindhu and me as well. I'm not seeing that yet. Right now, I see all of them stuck at the same place. But at the same time, they are still regularly reaching the second and third rounds of international tournaments, which is a good sign.

Yuvraj Sandhu clinches title in IndianOil SERVO Masters Golf 2025

The timeless greens of the Digboi Golf Links came alive as the silver jubilee edition of the IndianOil SERVO Masters golf tournament teed off on November 16, 2025.

What began 25 years ago as a modest stop on the national golf circuit has matured into one of India's most enduring and admired sporting traditions — and this year's opening day lived up to that reputation.

Ace golfer Yuvraj Sandhu produced a wire-to-wire masterclass to claim his third title. Describing the Digboi Golf Links as having "a close place in my heart" he sealed a seven-stroke victory on the final day of the tournament. The 28-year-old Sandhu shot three-under 69 in the final round to finish at 19-under 269 (65-69-66-69), bouncing back after two successive playoff losses earlier in the season.

Bangladesh's Jamal Hossain, last year's champion, fired the final day's lowest score of 65 to surge six spots from overnight tied eighth, finishing runner-up at 12-under 276 (68-73-70-65). In a proud moment for local golf, Deven Bhumij of Digboi, the only local professional to make the cut, completed the week in 54th place at 10-over 298.

A. S. Sahney, Chairman, IndianOil, celebrated this historic milestone in the presence of Kapil Dev, cricket legend and PGTI President, Amandeep Singh Johl, CEO, PGTI, and senior officials. Acknowledging the achievement, Sahney said, "The journey of improvement never stops. We will continue to make consistent enhancements to make the tournament bigger and more enjoyable for the players year after year. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the players for their participation and to PGTI for their continued support to the tournament."

Expressing his heartfelt gratitude to IndianOil, Kapil Dev remarked, "Very few tournaments in our country last for 25 years. On behalf of all the players, we thank IndianOil for the consistent support over the years."

Adding to the celebrations, the dignitaries unveiled 'Silver Saga Timeless Greens', a Coffee Table Book chronicling the tournament's remarkable journey at the historic Digboi Golf Links.

The Pro-Am title was claimed by the team led by professional Veer Ahlawat, joined by amateurs Arvind Kumar, Mukesh Ranjan Das, and Suryyadip Dihingiya, posting a nett score of 104.

The first runner-up team, led by Yuvraj Sandhu, scored 102, while the second runner-up group headed by Mani Ram finished with 99.

A. S. Sahney, Chairman, IndianOil, gives away the trophy to the winner Yuvraj Sandhu. Kapil Dev, cricket legend and PGTI President is at left.

SPORTOON

THE COMEBACK NO ONE SAW COMING

From 104 points down to within striking distance, defending champion Max Verstappen's relentless recovery leaves Abu Dhabi poised for a **dramatic finale.**

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

For the last few years, Formula One has almost felt predictable: one dominant driver at the front, heritage teams cycling through familiar patterns, and results that rarely surprised. The opening of 2025 looked only slightly different. A team on a redemption arc, past winners struggling, old midfield woes fading, and most races split between just two drivers. But F1 never stays still for long. In a sport defined by shifting dynamics and razor-thin margins, the moment you think you know the script is exactly when the story changes. Over the past few weekends, the series has given new, urgent meaning to the old phrase — it's never over until it's over. And the one driver who has etched those words into the minds of millions? Max Verstappen.

Just seven races — roughly three months — ago, the defending champion trailed Oscar Piastri by a seemingly unbridgeable 104 points. Yet an almost unthinkable sequence of events has seen him overhaul the Australian and stand just 12 points away from a fifth consecutive crown.

It has been an inconceivable comeback that few dared to imagine, and even fewer believed could actually unfold. But Verstappen did, as he always does. He is never a driver you can count out, and his hard-fought wins in Las Vegas and Qatar only reaffirmed his superiority.

And now, for the second time in his storied career, he arrives in Abu Dhabi — the final

Too good: Red Bull's pace and strategy proved flawless, as Verstappen won the Qatar Grand Prix. GETTY IMAGES

round — with the championship in his sights. This time, though, he faces a final sprint with both Lando Norris and Piastri alongside him — a showdown that wouldn't have existed had McLaren not let its advantage slip away.

The Vegas upheaval

At the Las Vegas Grand Prix — a star-studded spectacle that many drivers find too glamorous and bling-heavy for their liking — Norris arrived with the upper hand: a 24-point cushion over his teammate-rival, pole position on the street circuit, and a surge of confidence heading into the crucial triple-header.

Yet the threat of Verstappen starting from P2 was always potent. The Briton lost the lead on the opening lap and spent the rest of the race in pursuit. But Verstappen, who was 49 points behind, wasn't his 'closest' competitor, so a risky move was never considered.

He settled for second, with the comfort of knowing Piastri was not encroaching on his buffer. No one, however, expected a few sparks to ignite the wrong kind of fire. In the last few laps under the brightly lit Vegas strip, Norris' pace suddenly dropped. Excessive sparks had flickered from beneath his car, and he was asked to adjust his driving immediately. The Woking-based team seemed aware of the brewing problem, and that scrutineering would be unforgiving. After a long delay and detailed inspections, the FIA confirmed that both Norris and Piastri's MCL39s had exceeded the legal skid-wear limit — a crucial safety and performance measure preventing teams from running their cars too low.

Suddenly, McLaren had a Verstappen-sized problem at its garage door. The 28-year-old had clawed himself level with Piastri, and Norris now held only a 24-point advantage heading into the penultimate Qatar sprint and Grand Prix. Game on!

Close encounter: With Verstappen closing in, Norris still holds a marginal advantage as the three-way title battle enters its final chapter. REUTERS

Conundrum in Qatar

McLaren, the reigning constructors' champion, boasted the strongest car on the grid, brimming with performance and pace. Yet one area consistently eluded it: strategy — a weakness that proved costly in Qatar.

A reminder of Piastri's class arrived in the sprint, as he led from lights to flag at his most successful track. Norris finished third, Verstappen fourth, leaving the championship standings largely unchanged. Hours later, it was decided that the trio would line up first to third in the same order for Sunday's race.

A new rule was to complicate matters: Pirelli, concerned about tyre longevity, limited each compound to just 25 laps, requiring every car to pit twice over the 57-lap Doha circuit. Multiple strategies were possible if teams could react in time.

A Safety Car on lap seven, triggered by Nico Hulkenberg's crash, scrambled many plans. Almost all the drivers dived into the pits, with Verstappen leading the charge.

However, McLaren, caught off guard, missed the gamble entirely, unable to gain any edge from compound flexibility towards the closing stages.

Red Bull's pace and strategy proved flawless, right when it mattered most. Its lead driver crossed the line first, ahead of Piastri and Williams' Carlos Sainz. Norris had looked set for fifth but inherited fourth after Kimi Antonelli's last-lap error — crucial places saved but far from what was required.

For McLaren, it was a bitter blow. Piastri felt it most — once in command, now relegated to third due to a cruel mix of misfortune and missteps.

Norris still holds a marginal advantage as the three-way title battle enters its final chapter, but certainly with a dented spirit.

With countless permutations remaining, Norris holds the longer straw, and Yas Marina looms as the ultimate stage. The circuit that saw a dramatic, controversial finish in 2021 is now poised to deliver either a new champion or Verstappen his fifth title.

« I'm looking for an Olympic medal for India in golf »

KAPIL DEV

Rakesh Rao
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

From a humble beginning in rural Haryana to the pinnacle of world cricket, Kapil Dev has seen it all. But over nearly three decades, the captain of the 1983 World Cup-winning team has walked many miles to cover the distance from a curious golfer to the committed President of the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI).

In this one-of-a-kind interview with *Sportstar*, Kapil reflects on his love for golf and his vision for the future of Indian golfers.

Can you recall your first impression of golf?

I recall it was in the early 1990s, when Sir Gary Sobers visited India for business and told me he wanted to play golf. I didn't know anything about the sport, so I called a friend and told him that Gary wanted to play it in Delhi, and I didn't know whom to approach.

He said, "Don't worry, I'll just sign him in at the Delhi Golf Club." Since Sobers wasn't carrying his golf set, he needed one to play. At the Club he was asked whether he needed a set for a right-hander or a left-hander. Sobers said it didn't matter — any set would do. I was further confused.

Then they asked Sobers what his handicap was. He said it was two if he played right-handed and one if he played left-handed.

The man at the Club looked shocked! He thought he had heard it wrong. But soon the confusion was over.

On the appointed day, I took him to the Club and walked the course while he played. He was so good. I admired his skill sets. He was truly the finest cricketing hero of our time. No cricketer was bigger than Sir Gary. He was given a cart and he played with two members of the club.

After a few years, once I stopped playing cricket in late 1994, a friend of mine, Karan Dubey, who played Ranji Trophy with me, said, "Let's play golf."

I said, "I don't want to. It's for old people. I still feel young. I want to stay away from people — I want to have time to myself."

But he insisted. I said, "There are a lot of people."

He said, "Just come. There won't be anyone on the course."

I practised for a few days at the Army course near Dhaula Kuan, and then, for the first time, I came to play at the Delhi Golf Club.

Missed opportunity: 'Sometimes I feel that if I had played golf during my cricketing days, I would have ended my career with 2,000 more runs', says Kapil Dev.

NAGARA GOPAL

I took lessons from Vikramjit Singh and later Amit Luthra.

I remember around 100 people came to see me, and I looked at Karan and said, "You know I don't want to be here." He said the people would be there only on the first tee-box. "After that, only you, your friends and four caddies would be there. Nobody can walk with you," he said.

So I started hitting the ball and, as luck would have it, I was hitting long and hard. I guess my cricketing muscles come into play whenever I strike the ball hard. Yes, it (golf ball) used to drift right and more right, but in terms of distance it was long. And I started enjoying that.

Any particular reason why you loved the sport and continue to play even after close to three decades?

I love the game because in golf you don't depend on anyone. You are on your own — just me and my caddie, the two of us. We decide what to do. And the target is very small, which makes it more challenging. And, if you hit a bad shot, you don't have to criticise anyone; you can only blame yourself. At some point, I felt I was born to play golf.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Did anyone say you had some special talent for golf?

I remember the first time I played with Vikramjit Singh, he noticed I had better hand-eye coordination than people with more experience. Secondly, Amit Luthra told me to keep my head down while taking a shot and not look up to see where the ball was going.

These were the two people I listened to and that's how I got deep into golf. Thereafter, I played with some pros and continued learning from them. There was a time when they would play with me by giving me a few handicap strokes. But within three to five years of playing, I was the one giving them the strokes instead. I was so over the moon. I cannot express how it felt to start playing better than the people who gave you golf lessons. That was a huge high for me.

Sometimes I feel that if I had played golf during my cricketing days, I would have ended my career with 2,000 more runs.

Why do you feel that way?

Because the level of concentration in golf is a thousand times more than in cricket. So I always tell people — once in a while play other sports as well; it will help build your mind and focus, which is very important.

In my time, my friends and teammates never played anything other than cricket. I recall Sunil Gavaskar used to play badminton sometimes, but most of the players I played with didn't pursue any other sport.

But looking back, I feel that within me I had a touch of sports. Many people can only play one game, but I can pick up any game and it will not take much longer for me to get better at it.

Do you remember your first handicap?

I think within a year and a half I was playing to a handicap of eight. I was practising very hard. On the driving range, I wanted to hit for two hours in the morning and return to the club for another couple of hours of chipping and putting.

That was mainly because I didn't want to do anything else. I had so much spare time. Either I went for a run or exercised. So initially I spent two to four hours daily and really enjoyed it.

What kind of joy did golf bring you?

It's like flying a kite without a thread and still controlling it. I think that's what gave me a kick. I enjoyed it. I used to dream about it and I didn't mind getting up early because I was used to it due to cricket.

A lot of people who aren't good golfers don't play in the morning; they play in the afternoon.

How did you become a regular at the golf club?

I lived close to the Delhi Golf Club. During my cricketing days, my wife's grandfather filled up the membership form on my behalf. I don't remember what happened then, but when I started golf the Delhi Golf Club was kind enough to give me honorary membership. They said I didn't need to pay for being an honorary member.

But I said no — I want to pay and become a full member, which I am at present.

When did you become more ambitious as a golfer?

For two to three years, my handicap was between 10 and eight. But as time passed, it came down to two. Initially I didn't realise how it happened. But later, I noticed I had become more ambitious. Where I

was usually making a par, I wanted to chip in from around the green (for a birdie). Once you start thinking, 'Can I chip in from around the green?' you stop bothering about par. You're aiming higher.

I think in a span of a year or two, I went from six to four to three. Two was my best handicap. I did play scratch, but two was my best.

What were your best scores on some of the overseas courses you played in championship conditions?
I played at Dunhill, at St Andrews, and was two-under. That was around ten years ago.

How did the offer to head the PGTI come your way?
Honestly, I didn't want to be in the PGTI. When Mr Gautam Thapar headed the PGTI for a long time, I used to talk to the players. It came from my love for the game. I used to say, "You deserve a much better life than what you have."

I meant, five to seven crore rupees prize money for 300 people for the whole season? It's not enough. Perhaps the golfers felt my love for the game was deeper. They said I should be part of the PGTI Board. I said I knew nothing about how things worked, but they made me a member four years ago.

You have maintained that the corporate sector could be a source of more money into mainstream golf.
I still believe corporate golf in India is far bigger than professional golf. It has more regular tournaments all round the year. I always say that the people who organise corporate golf should bring that money into the main channel.

Your tenure has seen a huge rise in prize money. What is your vision before you step down as PGTI chief?
We have touched around ₹60 crore this season. I hope we reach ₹100 crore within a couple of years, God willing.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

I GUESS MY CRICKETING MUSCLES COME INTO PLAY WHENEVER I STRIKE THE GOLF BALL HARD

How long do you wish to continue in this role?
I don't want to continue after two terms. I believe nobody should remain in one seat longer than they are supposed to. Everyone should get a chance. Every president, every secretary has a job to do — don't overstay.

Do you plan to increase the number of tournaments or increase prize money?
Ideally, I see 20–22 weeks of golf for the top players. For the next line of emerging players, another 10–15 weeks. For second-tier players, they can move from playing in Delhi to smaller cities like Meerut.

Second-tier tournaments are very important. But all this requires money. And I don't want to go to the government. The government's job is to look after other aspects of sport. We don't want government funds. But if CSR funds can be used, given on this side, we'd be much happier.

What steps do you have in mind for the benefit of players?
At the PGTI, we want a tie-up with some airlines so our players can travel within India for tournaments at discounted fares. I want parity among players at all levels. At the moment we provide free food to all participants and their caddies during tournaments — a step we introduced recently.

Going forward, it will be more specific. Today we provide *roti,* rice, *dal, dahi* and *sabzi.* In future, we'll consult dieticians. There are restraints today and players lack awareness. As awareness grows, their diets will improve qualitatively.

Before I let you go, can you share one realistic wish for Indian golf?
If I said an Indian could be in the top 10 in Europe or America in a year or two, that would be very difficult. But realistically, I'm looking for an Olympic medal for India in golf.

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

Unlocking muscle performance with functional isometrics

Exploring the science, applications, and programming of one of **strength training's** most overlooked techniques.

The term functional isometrics refers to a training methodology that combines isometric and dynamic strength to improve athletic performance.

This approach, introduced by Bob Hoffman and developed by experts such as John Rusin, offers an alternative for those who want to develop strength, muscle mass, and mind–muscle connection in a targeted way.

Let's explore how to integrate them into training programmes, and the advantages and disadvantages of this technique in the sporting domain.

What are functional isometrics?

Functional isometrics are based on the use of isometric contractions (where the muscle generates tension without changing length) integrated with dynamic movements.

This technique focuses on a limited portion of the Range of Motion (ROM), often in the most difficult phases of an exercise, such as the 'low' part of a squat or the stall point on a flat bench press.

The approach involves the use of racks/benches with limiters, which restrict movement to a particular range. Athletes press against the limiters with maximum force for a set period of time, preceded by a dynamic phase.

This method allows the load to be directed to specific points of the movement, making it particularly useful for improving weaknesses or limitations in complex exercises.

How functional isometrics work?

The efficacy of functional isometrics lies in their ability to:

Increase maximum strength: By focusing on precise positions of the ROM, athletes can overload the muscular system in a targeted way, allowing them to develop greater overall lifting capacity.

Improve neuromuscular coordination: Isometric contractions allow greater recruitment of motor units, improving the efficiency of muscle fibre activation.

Overcome staleness: By working on crucial phases of movement, specific weaknesses can be improved, making the entire exercise more fluid.

Increase muscle control: The combination of isometric and dynamic contractions strengthens the mind–muscle connection, essential for athletes who require precision in movement.

Enable safer training: By focusing on limited portions of the ROM, the risk of compensatory movements or excessive loads across the full range of motion is reduced.

Training parameters

The integration of functional isometrics into training programmes requires careful planning and in-depth knowledge of the exercises involved. We analyse the key training parameters according to the data in the literature and the guidance of various coaching experts who use this method.

The recommended contraction interval typically ranges from 5-10 seconds. Most programmes suggest performing three to five sets of 3-5 repetitions. Load intensity is generally set at 70-90 per cent of the athlete's maximum, and 2-3 minutes of recovery are advised between sets.

These parameters may vary depending on the athlete's level of competence, professional demands, and the specific goals of the programme.

Core matter: Functional isometrics are based on the use of isometric contractions (where the muscle generates tension without changing length) integrated with dynamic movements. GETTY IMAGES

Basic examples of functional isometrics

Squat:

Rack stops placed halfway through the movement.

Perform a maximum isometric contraction for six seconds.

The contraction should be preceded by 3-4 dynamic repetitions.

Flat bench:

Stops positioned at the top of the movement.

Maximum contraction for 4-5 seconds.

The contraction should be preceded by 3-4 dynamic repetitions.

Block pulls:

Stopper positioned just above the knee.

Isometric contraction for 4-6 seconds.

The contraction should be preceded by 2-3 dynamic repetitions.

Practical applications

Functional isometrics can be used in a variety of contexts.

Advanced athletes: Ideal for improving near-maximal strength and neuromuscular proficiency.

Post-injury recovery: Strengthening specific areas without loading the entire ROM. For example: can be used to rehabilitate a shoulder, knee, or any joint by working on limited portions of the movement.

Sport-specific training: Sports such as weightlifting, athletics, or team sports can benefit from improvements in explosive force in crucial positions.

Periodisation: They can be included as specific training blocks to break plateaus or prepare for competitions.

Comparison with other methods

Isometric training: Focuses on developing static strength. Unlike functional isometrics, it does not include a dynamic component.

Dynamic training: Places force across the entire range of motion and does not specifically target sticking points or deadlocks, which functional isometrics are designed to address.

Progressive overload: Involves the gradual increase of load over time. It does not place particular emphasis on isometric contractions, which are central to functional isometrics.

Plyometrics: Develop explosive force and speed, but they do not concentrate on specific ranges of motion as functional isometrics do.

Functional isometrics do not constitute a 'revolution' in sports training. However, they have certain interesting characteristics compared to other methods. They represent an advanced strategy for athletes and S&C coaches who want to optimise strength and precision of movement. Structured application requires knowledge, planning, and careful supervision to minimise risks. Used correctly, they can offer significant benefits in terms of performance, injury prevention, and rehabilitation.

Swearing is not always an act of aggression

Swearing, scientists tell us, has a **positive impact** on physical performance. But we know that already don't we?

Suresh Menon

In the days when John McEnroe used colourful language on court, he often had to pay a fine while those who swore in languages other than English escaped punishment. McEnroe's contemporary Vijay Amritraj was not the cursing type, but had he used choice Tamil phrases, he might have got away with it.

Now all that is passe´. Thanks to AI, anyone can curse fluently in any language and be understood too. It is unlikely that South Africa's cricket captain Temba Bavuma remained mystified for long when Jasprit Bumrah **(in pic)** mocked him with a derisive epithet. You can imagine one of his entourage looking it up and informing him.

AP

There is no need to look up the most common swearword, the one that rhymes with — Ah! You know what I mean. For sheer linguistic versatility, nothing in the language matches this word whose variations can be used as any part of speech from noun to verb to interjection. The word that begins with a gentle fricative and culminates in a harsh guttural thrust is universally used, from pole to pole and from Alaska back again to Alaska.

Did Harbhajan Singh use a racial slur against Andrew Symonds in Australia or was he merely using a term for an unusual parental act that is common in everyday conversation in India? If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, should profanity remain in the ear of the listener?

There is something wonderfully democratic about swearing in sport. You may be the star striker with deals in millions of dollars, or the substitute whose greatest contribution is remembering the lyrics to the team song. But both are fluent in the same earthy vocabulary. There's nothing like a well-timed, unprintable exclamation.

The modern athlete is a finely tuned (and toned) professional. Nutrition plans, sports psychologists, cryotherapy chambers all work towards this. And yet, let a tennis player hit a forehand into the net, and centuries of culture, civilisation, and self-help advice are instantly abandoned in favour of a hearty phrase. It's reassuring, really. All the science in the world, and still the oldest coping mechanism survives.

Swearing, scientists tell us, has a positive impact on physical performance. But we know that already don't we? Can you lift a sofa to retrieve something that has rolled under it without a hearty swear? And what of stubbing your toe? A spontaneous expletive reduces the pain, or at least makes it more fun to bear.

Swearing is not always an act of aggression. Consider the badminton player who mutters a sharp syllable after losing a point. It is not directed at anyone but merely indicates that the universe has failed to align with his racquet. Then there is the question of intent. Players swear at teammates too — drop a catch off a fast bowler and you will regret not wearing ear plugs.

Mark Twain said it best: Under certain circumstances, profanity provides a relief denied to prayer. Sometimes the two are combined. Jeez! You didn't know that?

THE HINDU GROUP

GET A RINGSIDE VIEW TO THE WORLD OF SPORTS

SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM

SPORTSTAR

SUBSCRIPTION WITH DISCOUNT

Periodicity	Price
6 months	₹1299
1 Year	₹2299

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

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

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

Name:_____

Mailing Address:_____

_____ City: _____

Pin: _____ District: _____ State: _____

Landline: _____ Mobile: _____ E-mail: _____

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

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

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

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

Bank: .....

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

Published on alternate Sundays. RNP No: HQ/SD/505/2023-25, RNI No. 30513/1978.
Postal subn. copies : if undelivered please return to SPORTSTAR, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600002