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OFF-SIDE

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BENGALURU'S TRAGEDY WASN'T A CROWD PROBLEM, IT WAS A SYSTEM FAILURE

The **machinery of celebration** — the optics, the commerce, the branding — often moves faster than common sense.

It was supposed to be a celebration. But Bengaluru will forever remember that 11 people didn't come home that day.

They had gathered outside the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium to celebrate Royal Challengers Bengaluru's first-ever IPL title win. They had waited 17 years for this day. It was meant to be a day of celebration, where strangers laughed together, where parents hoisted their children a little higher to help them see something worth remembering.

Sporting triumphs offer a collective meaning that makes even personal milestones feel small in comparison. But this shared joy quickly turned into despair — into a tragedy — on that fateful day.

"While the stadium's seating capacity is around 32,000, the number of fans who gathered crossed 2.5 lakh, according to police estimates. There were only 1,318 police personnel at the stadium, the government's affidavit submitted to the High Court later reveals. The affidavit also shows that the usual deployment for a match at the stadium is 789," *The Hindu* reported on June 14.

The city police had stated that the location and time were not suitable for a parade. They had raised concerns and asked for more time to prepare. But the machinery of celebration — the optics, the commerce, the branding — moved faster than common sense.

India has a long, unhealed memory of moments like this. The 1980 Kolkata derby at Eden Gardens claimed the lives of 16 fans. The stampede at the Kumbh Mela earlier this year — 30 dead — or Hathras last year, where 116 lost their lives. These are different events in different places. But the reasons always feel the same: too many people, not enough planning, and too little accountability.

Even in Mumbai last year, during the T20 World Cup celebrations, it almost tipped over. The sea of people at the Wankhede Stadium had that same terrifying potential.

Crowds never behave like people. They behave like water. Pour too many into one place, and they rise, they surge, they fill every available gap, and they break through whatever holds them. Unless there's somewhere safe to go — a funnel, a channel, a system — the crowd turns on itself, drowning in its power and energy.

And the world has learned this the hard way.

It took 96 deaths at Hillsborough in 1989 for England to course-correct. At Sheffield's Hillsborough Stadium, during an FA Cup semifinal, thousands of Liverpool fans were funnelled into already-full pens. Poor signage, inadequate policing, and locked gates resulted in a horrific crush. After a public inquiry, the Taylor Report, published in January 1990, recommended sweeping changes.

It was not the crowd's fault; it was the system's.

Standing terraces were replaced by all-seaters in English stadiums. Ticketing became digitised. Policing and stewarding systems were overhauled. Emergency access was legislated. Crowd science became a real discipline.

Fans were no longer treated as a mob but as people with rights and vulnerabilities — with home and family to return to.

In India, we are still waiting for that moment.

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« I've had enough, stay away from me. Please don't come to Germany for the next two or three years – Alexander Zverev to Taylor Fritz after losing the Stuttgart Open final »

« To be 18 years old and to be swimming that incredibly off the back of the Olympic Games, she's an absolute phenomenon. To smash the world record like that, who knows how far she's going to go – Ariarne Titmus praising Summer McIntosh after the teen broke her senior's 400m freestyle record with a time of 3:54.18 »

18th

J. J. Spaun sank an improbable 64-1/2 foot birdie putt at the 18th hole to cap his stunning first major victory, emerging from the pack in the wild, waterlogged final round of the U.S. Open, the year's third golf major, at the Oakmont Country Club. The 34-year-old had just one prior victory on the PGA Tour.

WTA 500

Tatjana Maria completed her fairytale run at Queen's Club as the German qualifier beat American Amanda Anisimova 6-3, 6-4 in the final to become the oldest winner of a WTA 500 event. Over at the Libema Open, Belgian third seed Elise Mertens beat Elena-Gabriela Ruse 6-3, 7-6(4) in the final to claim her second WTA Tour title of the year, while Canadian Gabriel Diallo won his maiden ATP title with a victory over Belgium's Zizou Bergs in the men's final.

SOARING HIGH

Sweden's Armand Duplantis broke the men's pole vault world record for the 12th time after he soared 6.28 metres at the Stockholm Diamond League event. The American-born double Olympic champion improved on his previous record, set in February, by one centimetre on his first attempt, making the most of the perfect conditions to delight the home crowd. AFP

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EVERY FALL IS FUEL

After two straight knockout losses, Jamahal Hill is back. The former champ eyes **redemption** with a statement win over Khalil Rountree Jr.

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Two and a half years ago, Jamahal Hill made UFC history.

He became the first graduate of Dana White's Contender Series (DWCS) to win a championship, claiming a unanimous decision victory over veteran Glover Teixeira. Hill, who debuted in the UFC in 2020, quickly built a reputation as a knockout artist. Before earning his maiden title shot, he delivered four first-round knockouts in five fights, showcasing his raw power and ruthless finishing ability.

"The first time I won the title; it was like a dream come true. To be a part of the UFC in itself was a dream, but to go in and get the job done is a different feeling. It was the result of years of hard work I put in," Hill tells *Sportstar*.

"The Dana White Contender Series is a good initiative. You get picked up if you're a top prospect based on your recent form. If you show up and perform, you get a platform to showcase what you're capable of," he adds.

But his reign was short-lived.

In his first title defence, Hill faced Alex Pereira and suffered a brutal first-round knockout. Pereira needed just one perfectly-timed left hook to end the bout and strip Hill of the belt.

Things didn't improve. A knee injury forced Hill to pull out of UFC 303, and on his return earlier this year, he was knocked out again — this time by Jiri Prochazka.

Still, Hill remains unfazed.

"Everything is part and parcel of the game. You win some, you lose some. If a fight doesn't go my way, I keep my head down and train to get better. I know what I'm capable of achieving. You just have to learn from your mistakes and grow," said Hill.

Now, he has a clear target in mind: redemption.

A dominant win over Khalil Rountree Jr. on June 22 could put him right back in the title mix. That's all he's focused on. "Right now, my only assignment is to go there and defeat Rountree. I want to go and express myself, and I believe everything else will follow accordingly. I feel I've had a pretty good build-up to the fight, and I want to dominate," concluded Hill.

Sony is the official broadcaster of UFC in India.

Power puncher: Jamahal Hill, who debuted in the UFC in 2020, quickly built a reputation as a knockout artist with his explosive finishes. GETTY IMAGES

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FROM BALL BOY TO BEACON

From idolising Sardar to injecting for Harmanpreet, India's vice-captain Hardik Singh is **chasing more than just medals.**

Jonathan Selvaraj
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As vice-captain and one of the mainstays of the Indian men's hockey team over the last two Olympic cycles, Hardik Singh might appear most at ease on hockey fields across the world. But it's in one corner of Jalandhar where he truly feels at home.

"I only get to spend a few months every year here. But if there's one place that I long to visit, it's right here," he said when he met *Sportstar* just before the European leg of the Pro League.

With Olympic rings mounted in metal on its façade, it's hard to miss the 26-year-old's newly constructed two-storey home just outside the village of Khusropur. But this wasn't always the case.

"I've grown up in this exact place. This is my childhood home, but after the 2020 Olympics, I was thinking of renovating a couple of rooms. But after I got a bit of money, I decided to demolish and rebuild the same thing. A lot of people suggested that I build a home in Chandigarh, but I never had any other thought than to make my home right here. I don't think I get the same kind of peace anywhere else," he says.

Hardik is a self-confessed hockey nerd. When he plays fetch on the lawn with his German Shepherd, *Marshal*, it's often with a hockey ball that he strikes using a hockey stick. Inside his home, behind glass, are framed kits of Harmanpreet Singh and Manpreet Singh — two of India's top players — with plans to add more.

His two Olympic bronze medals from the Tokyo and Paris Games aren't kept under lock and key, though.

"When I'm around, people always want to see them. So I bring them out and let people hold them. The medal from Paris has got a little dirty, but I don't mind. The point of these medals is for people to see them," he says.

While two Olympic bronze medals might seem like a major achievement across much of India, Hardik insists that's not quite the case in his part of Punjab. His house is a short walk from Khusropur, the ancestral village of his paternal family.

"Khusropur has had a huge part to play in the history of hockey in India. There are so many players from here who have played for India. If you include mine, people from my village have won a total of seven Olympic medals," he says.

Family tradition

Hardik's family also has a rich history with the sport. His grandfather coached the Navy team, where his uncle Jugraj and aunt Rajbir both represented India. His father, too, made it to the national camp before giving up his career to support the family.

Perhaps the most celebrated of his relatives is his father's uncle, Gurmail Singh, who won gold at the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

"Even now, when we sit together, my uncle will keep saying how his generation of players were the greatest ever. And my dad says no: hockey has changed so much. There are things like zonal structure which weren't always there. But at the end of the day, my *chacha* has the Olympic gold! I can't show off just yet. I have a bronze, but a gold is something different. I'd grown up hearing stories of my *chacha's*

Olympic gold and I remember the first time I saw it in his showcase. I remember going, 'Wow! So that's what an Olympic medal looks like.' I thought, 'That's what it must be to complete hockey,'" he says.

Given his background, it was almost inevitable that Hardik would take up hockey too.

"I think hockey chose me. I was from a hockey family. We had a field too in the village where my grandfather coached. Even when I was a kid there were at least 100 kids who were training there. One of my earliest memories is when Guru Nanak Dev University was hosting a match between India and Pakistan in Amritsar, and at half-time, my uncle took me to the centre of the field and I hit a few balls," he says.

Still, it was his grandfather who played the biggest role in nurturing his love for the sport.

"Every evening at 4 p.m., he would take me on the back of his scooter to the practice ground and I'd play until 7 p.m. Just to encourage me, he'd give me a little bit of pocket money every day. It was just 10 rupees. I'd buy a packet of Lay's chips or a bottle of Coke. I think I was bribed into liking hockey, but I did enjoy it," Hardik says.

It wasn't just daily practice — his grandfather also took him to trials and tournaments in the village.

"Whenever there was a tournament, he'd seat me on the back of his Activa and off we'd go. As a kid, I've seen so many international players. Even at that age, I'd be really fascinated," he says.

Even after moving to academies in Jalandhar and later Mohali, Hardik would frequently return to Khusropur and even the neighbouring village of Sansarpur for tournaments.

"I remember once competing at a competition in Sansarpur and I saw

R. V. MOORTHY

Training ground: Indian hockey midfielder Hardik Singh during a training session at the Sports Authority of India's Southern Centre in Bengaluru, located within the Jnanabharathi campus. K. MURALI KUMAR

Harmanpreet for the first time. He was a junior India player then. I would just stare at him thinking this is what an international player looks like," he says.

Competitive streak

Though his own village boasted significant hockey pedigree, Hardik says he often looked beyond it for inspiration.

"There were many people from my village who had competed in the Olympics, but there had been a long gap since the last Olympian and Olympic medal. I think there is another kind of motivation I got from seeing players closer to my own age compete at that level," he says.

"A player like Harmanpreet was already in the Indian junior team at the time that I was in the hockey academy. When he would come back from tours, he'd sometimes play along with us academy players. Seeing him play, I'd think, this is how I have to play as well. Every day was a battle for me just to show what I was capable of. If I was marking someone in training, I'd push myself, saying I had to steal the ball from him. I had to catch him if I wanted to be better than him," he says.

Hardik says this kind of competitiveness was essential. "That envy is what it takes to probably get to the team. I wanted really badly to share the field and dressing room with those senior players. And to do that, I had to be better than them," he says.

He pushed himself to the limit. "My first hostel in Jalandhar was just a 20-minute drive from my home. Despite that, I didn't come home on weekends. I would wake up at 4 a.m., just so that I could do some extra training before the actual day started. If my evening training began at 4.30, I'd come in at 3.30 and leave an hour later just so I could get an extra edge," he says.

This came naturally to him.

"Some people wonder if I was pushed into hockey because I have so many generations who are hockey players, but I have no regret over the path my life took. Most people spend a lot of time searching for what their life's goal is. I think I am very thankful that I knew from the beginning of my life that I wanted to be a hockey player. It's not that it wasn't my grandfather's dream. He always hoped that I would make it to the Indian team some day, but the choice was mine. No one was forcing me to do this. And to make it to the Indian team, I had to outwork everyone," he says.

Unlike some of his teammates, Hardik didn't have a rapid rise through the ranks.

"Although I made it to the Indian junior team, I didn't make that kind of immediate jump into the seniors that players like Harmanpreet did. He was already in the Indian Olympic team (in 2016) while still a junior. I had to wait for my opportunity. There was a time when I was seriously thinking I should try to play club hockey in the Netherlands in order to get myself ready for the senior level," he says.

His senior international debut eventually came at the 2018 Asian Champions Trophy. That tournament remains special for another reason too.

"I remember just after our training session, a message went out to the team WhatsApp group asking the players who had just been announced as part of the Indian squad to choose their jersey numbers. There were a few numbers that had already been chosen. Harmanpreet has 13, Manpreet has 7, and Mandeep had 11. I always wanted jersey number 8. I was hoping no one had claimed it and luckily I was able to get it," he says.

Special jersey

Jersey number 8 was special for Hardik because it had previously been worn by former Indian skipper Sardar Singh.

"I think the first hockey player I was really a fan of was Sardar *bhai*. Back when I was a kid, I'd send messages to his *Facebook* account and hope he responded to me. Then, in 2014, when I got the chance to be a ball boy in the Hockey India League, I got to see him in real life when he was playing for Delhi Waveriders. He was this muscular guy, walking while holding his hockey stick in one hand and using a phone with the other. There were two people who were following him everywhere. When he was at the airport, people would clear out a way for him. He would hang out with all the actors and celebrities. And then he had that name — Sardar (which means leader). What could I say but that he had an aura? I was like, wow!"

he says.

It wasn't just a superficial influence. Hardik says he tried to emulate every aspect of Sardar's attitude.

"When I got the chance to see him and later play with him for the same team in 2016, I learnt a lot. I understood how important the work one did off the field was. I saw how careful he was with his diet, sleeping pattern and hydration. He looked at every small detail that made him a better player. Sardar *bhai* retired just as I was getting into the Indian team, so when I got the chance to wear his jersey, of course, I took it. I think the No. 8 jersey has a lot of importance in the Indian team because Sardar has set a very good example. I hope I'm living up to that example. So, I want this number to inspire the next set of youngsters — because that was the same number that inspired me," says Hardik.

While Hardik did get to be a part of the Indian team with the jersey he wanted, in the same central position as Sardar, it took a while for him to truly own his idol's number.

"It wasn't that I wasn't working hard. It was just that the results were not coming right away. It was only after the Tokyo Olympics that I actually started earning a name, but it's all the work that I put in starting in 2018 when I made my debut, and 2021 when I actually got the chance to put everything together. Everyone only sees that in 2021, but it's the invisible hard work that actually made it possible," he says.

Having done the hard work himself, Hardik has a clear idea of what it takes to be part of the Indian team.

"There are two ways you can make your place in the Indian team," says Hardik. "You can either be really versatile, like someone like Sumit. He can play every side — on the right, in the attack, or in midfield. You can put him in any position and he will fit right in. The other way you can be part of the team is if you are irreplaceable in any one position. Amit (Rohidas) is the best first rusher we have when we are defending penalty corners, so he always has a place. We know Harmanpreet is the best drag-flicker, so we will always need him. With Harman, I have to inject the ball. So that's one of the roles that I try to be strong in," he says.

Olympic pride: Indian hockey team vice-captain Hardik Singh shares a proud moment with his parents at their Jalandhar home, as they hold his back-to-back Olympic bronze medals from Tokyo and Paris — a symbol of grit, legacy, and dreams fulfilled.

R. V. MOORTHY

Unique role

Injecting the ball to the drag-flicker isn't the most glamorous role, but Hardik says he enjoys it.

"I actually wanted to be a drag-flicker like my uncle (Jugraj Singh), but I found out very quickly that I'm not good at that. As a junior, I started injecting the ball and, since Sardar Singh used to inject the ball also, it was even more of a skill I wanted to be good at. I really started focusing on it in my junior year and once I got into the senior team, I formed a really good partnership with Harmanpreet," he says.

That pairing has combined to score many goals for India, but Hardik admits he was the weak link early on.

"When I think about the Tokyo Olympics, I feel really bad because I sent so many really bumpy balls to Harman in the penalty corners. Despite that, he really managed to convert so many of them. I'll always be grateful for that," he says.

Winning bronze at Tokyo might have been the professional turning point of the then 22-year-old's career, but he tries to view it objectively.

"I played in the Olympics when I was really young, but in our team there was Shamsher (Singh), who had just four caps when he came into the Olympic team, and there was Sreejesh, who had over 300 caps before he got his medal. Everyone's journey is different, but the only thing that matters is whether you enjoy every bit of preparing for the actual game," he says.

Indeed, after the initial excitement of winning the medal faded, Hardik says he realised he was still unsatisfied.

"We didn't have any medal for 41 years, so at first I was just really happy when we beat Germany and got the bronze. But then I saw the final between Australia and Belgium. And then I saw just how the Belgian team celebrated when they won. It

was as if they had accomplished this incredible dream. That's when I realised that I may have won the bronze, but I wanted the kind of happiness that the Belgian team had. A part of us probably felt satisfied with what we had accomplished. But when I saw the final, I saw just how the Belgian players were hugging each other. They had worked so hard for so many years. That's when I realised gold is something else. That's where I want to go. That's where I want the team to go," he says.

It was in chasing this goal that Hardik says he pushed himself too hard. "After the Olympics, I was made vice-captain of the team and I started taking that responsibility in an unhealthy way. I was really being hard on myself. After training sessions, I wouldn't talk to anyone and just go quietly to my room. I was getting really tired of playing hockey at that point. I was always angry with myself, thinking, 'Is this how an Olympic medallist plays?'" he says.

It was around then that Paddy Upton, who had been appointed as a mental conditioning coach with the Indian team, helped him out. "Paddy Upton changed my mindset and taught me that it's okay to make mistakes, even if you are an elite athlete. He gave me the example of Virat Kohli, who was also hard on himself and doing some of the other things I was doing to myself. Paddy told me that my personality is also similar to that of Virat. At that time, I didn't really think much of cricket. It wasn't jealousy, but I always felt they were rewarded for not doing half the work we hockey players did. But I slowly learnt to appreciate what Virat was doing. He is someone who doesn't need appreciation or care what others think. He knows how good he is. I thought, *Baat sahi keh raha hai.* (He's saying the right thing.) I know my capability. I don't need anyone's appreciation. I know I am a game changer. If I can't perform in one match, it's fine. I'll perform in the other match," he says.

If Upton changed his mindset, it was coach Craig Fulton who, Hardik says, changed the way he thought about the game.

"I don't think I changed a lot technically, but tactically I'm a very different player compared to a few years back. I used to have a very one-dimensional, locked game. But coach Fulton opened my style. He got me to start thinking not just about the play I had to make but also about different plans. He's also someone who knows what to say at the right time. At the Paris Olympics, I had two *bakwas* (terrible) matches. I think it was because I was trying too hard. He told me, 'Don't look for the fire. It's already inside you,'" he says.

What followed was the match against Australia, where India picked up its first Olympic win in over 52 years against that formidable opponent. For Hardik, though, that victory wasn't the shock others made it out to be.

"We just knew *ki Australia ko thokna hai* (we had to smash Australia). We had played a series against them and lost every one of five games. And at the end of the tour, we had a team meeting and the coach asked if we thought we could beat Australia. And everyone said yes! Even after that 5–0 defeat, everyone believed in this Indian team," he says.

Unsatisfied with bronze

But while India would go on to win its second consecutive Olympic bronze, Hardik says that familiar feeling of dissatisfaction still lingered.

"It's strange because I had a much better tournament in Paris than in Tokyo, but I actually felt worse at the end of it. In 2021, I knew Belgium were better than us. But this time I knew we were at the same level, if not better, than everyone. We were going toe to toe with Germany. We knew that if we went for a shootout, we could have won — and our record with the Netherlands wasn't bad," he says.

Once again, though, he's found ways to live with the result.

"We lost in the semis in both the Olympics that we have played. Very often I'll think how I came really close on both occasions to making it to the Olympic final and maybe even winning, but wasn't able to make it count. But then I also think there is a reason. Germany lost to us in 2021 and then they won the World Cup the next year and got silver in the next Olympics. So maybe something like that might happen to us," he says.

For now, Hardik has memorialised the incompleteness of his twin Olympic experience with a tattoo on his arm. Around his bicep are the four Olympic rings, with the topmost ones only partially inked.

"The Olympics are unfinished for me. I am thankful for whatever we achieved, but at the same time there's something left to be achieved. It's only when I win that Olympic gold that I'll fill that gap," he says.

There's a long way to go before the Los Angeles Games in 2028. There are the Asian Games and the World Championships next year. There's also the 2025–26 Pro League, which started strongly but hasn't gone the way India would have hoped, with multiple defeats in Europe over the past few weeks.

While recent results haven't been encouraging, Hardik speaks of seeing them in perspective.

"I think one of the challenges of the Pro League is figuring out which combination is best for the Indian team. It's different between us and teams in Europe simply because of the nature of our squads. In India, the squad usually starts out with 33 people. That means eventually you have to give chances to all of them. In Europe, the squads are usually smaller. A lot of the reason for that is simply that we are a much bigger country," he says.

Special team

Bigger doesn't always mean better and, indeed, Hardik says there are often challenges in getting the Indian squad to work as one.

"Indian hockey is an all-India sport. Most of India's wrestlers are from Haryana, most badminton players are from Telangana. Hockey is a game where North, East, West, South, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, North East, UP, Punjab — all produce players. Sometimes it's difficult to get all these players to gel together. Some are shy, and others from the

Playful bond: Hardik Singh brings the game home, playing fetch with his German Shepherd, Marshal — a hockey ball and stick still in play.
R. V. MOORTHY

northern states are very talkative. In some states, the ultimate goal is simply to make the Indian team, while others who have more representation are thinking of the Olympic medal. So, we have to find a balance when we are in the team. I think people really underestimate how big India is and how hard it is to make a team," he says.

However, it's that knowledge of how special being part of an Indian team is — and all it represents — that keeps Hardik motivated.

"I didn't choose hockey because I wanted fame or money. I chose it because I enjoyed it. It helped that I was from a hockey family and that I had that in my mind from a very young age. Even when there was the lockdown [due to Covid-19], there would be talk that other sports have so much money, but when I saw how Indians celebrated India's win at the Olympics, that boosted my passion even more. Even when I was thinking that I wish I had won a gold, I know the value of this bronze. After we won in Tokyo, I had a friend of mine who said one senior relative of his wanted to speak to me. When uncle came on the call, he told me, '*Beta, humari ek generation chali gayi, humne medal nahi dekha*. (We had gone one generation without seeing an Olympic medal.) Thanks to you, I have seen India stand on the Olympic podium once before I passed.' That's when it really hit home that people love this medal and value it so much. That a person was crying on the phone while speaking to me," he says.

But while he might have already inspired many, Hardik says his task won't be completed until he actually wins an Olympic gold for India.

"No matter what we achieved, we haven't achieved what those teams from the 1975 World Championships or the 1980 Olympics have done. I feel proud that I've inspired people, but I don't think we have done enough. We have won two medals, but still we didn't win the Olympic gold and we were not world champions. That's my ambition. I want to take India to a place where it once was. And just like how others inspired me, if I can inspire five or six other players, that would be special," he says.

CHIEF MINISTER NITISH KUMAR'S LEADERSHIP SHINES IN KHELO INDIA YOUTH GAMES 2025

Spanning 12 days, the Khelo India Youth Games 2025 brought together over 6000 athletes from across 36 states and union territories. The magnitude of the event was **unprecedented** in Bihar's history.

In a remarkable moment that has elevated Bihar's position on India's sporting map, the 7th edition of the Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG) was successfully hosted in the state in May 2025. The event marked a significant achievement not just in terms of sports participation and infrastructure development, but also in terms of the transformative leadership of Bihar's Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar. Under his direct supervision and persistent vision, Bihar emerged not only as a host but as a bold claimant to future leadership in India's evolving sporting ecosystem.

Grand Inauguration

The opening ceremony of KIYG 2025 set a grand precedent for the rest of the event. Held at the Patliputra Sports Complex in Patna, the inauguration featured a special video address by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who acknowledged Bihar's rapid transformation into a sporting hub and praised the efforts taken by the state government. The Prime Minister's words echoed the aspirations of thousands of young athletes and were a testament to the immense organisational strides taken under Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's guidance. Nitish Kumar, present at the venue, called the moment a proud milestone for the people of Bihar and an opportunity to present the new, confident face of the state.

28 Sports, 5 Districts, 6000 athletes

The magnitude of the event was unprecedented in Bihar's history. Spanning 12 days, the Khelo India Youth Games 2025 brought together over 6000 athletes from across 36 states and union territories. These participants competed across 28 disciplines ranging from athletics, boxing, and wrestling to indigenous sports like kho-kho, kabaddi, and thang-ta. The Games were spread across five cities — Patna, Rajgir, Gaya, Bhagalpur, and Begusarai — each hosting multiple disciplines and welcoming waves of enthusiastic participants, officials, and spectators. Hosting an event of this scale demanded enormous logistical coordination, which was efficiently orchestrated by the state under the leadership of Nitish Kumar.

Growing Sports Ecosystem

Central to the success of KIYG 2025 was Bihar's renewed focus on sports infrastructure — an area historically underdeveloped in the state. Recognising that world-class events demand world-class facilities, Nitish Kumar personally oversaw massive infrastructure upgrades, particularly at the Patliputra Sports Complex in Patna, which became the central hub for the Games. The

venue underwent major renovations to accommodate both indoor and outdoor events at a professional standard. Across the state, new sports facilities were launched or refurbished — such as the indoor basketball, handball, and volleyball courts in Rajgir, and the expansive new hockey turf. Nitish Kumar personally inspected many of these sites, emphasising quality and athlete comfort. This wasn't just about hosting the Games — it was about building a legacy.

At the Rajgir Sports Academy, Nitish Kumar inaugurated new infrastructure while interacting with young athletes. He ensured hostels for boys and girls were well-equipped and comfortable. His visits were not perfunctory photo-ops; they reflected a hands-on approach to leadership. In Bhagalpur, he was seen attending indoor matches at the Sandis Compound Stadium, cheering for athletes and speaking with coaches. In Begusarai, he stood in the stands watching a football match at the Yamuna Bhagat Stadium, again personally engaging with the sports community. His presence at these events uplifted morale and gave the clear message that sports, under his government, had become a priority.

But Nitish Kumar's commitment to sports was not limited to the KIYG. Over the past few years, he has laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and expansive sporting environment. Under his leadership, the state began constructing stadiums at the block level — 252 already complete, with many more underway. The vision is simple but powerful: bring sports facilities closer to rural youth, where raw talent often goes unnoticed due to lack of opportunity. Additionally, plans for a state-of-the-art Sports City on the Patna-Gaya Highway are underway. This facility is designed not only to serve as a training hub for national and international athletes but also to host global tournaments, further cementing Bihar's position on the international sports calendar.

Visionary: Under Chief Minister's Nitish Kumar's direct supervision and persistent vision, Bihar emerged not only as a host but as a bold claimant to future leadership in India's evolving sporting ecosystem.

Hosting International Sports events

The success of the Khelo India Youth Games 2025 also rejuvenated Bihar's sporting aspirations for the future. The state is now confirmed to host several prestigious tournaments, including the U-20 Rugby Sevens Asian Championship, and the Hero Men's Asia Cup Hockey. These events are not just symbolic achievements — they

Star-studded: The opening ceremony of KIYG 2025 was held at the Patliputra Sports Complex in Patna, which featured a special video address by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who acknowledged Bihar's rapid transformation into a sporting hub and praised the efforts taken by the state government.

reflect the trust that national and international sports federations have begun placing in Bihar's capabilities. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has made it clear that KIYG 2025 is not the end but rather the beginning of a new chapter in the state's sports development journey.

While athletes from across India dazzled spectators, Bihar's own young sports stars began to emerge in the spotlight. The host state earned 36 medals, including several in disciplines like rugby, athletics, and traditional martial arts. This marked a substantial improvement from previous editions and validated the investments made in training, nutrition, and coaching. The story of Samuel Zadeng, a boxer from Mizoram who won his state's first KIYG gold medal in Patna, added to the emotional texture of the Games. For many young athletes like him, Bihar became the place where dreams met opportunity — fuelled by a government that chose to invest in hope.

A promising future

Nitish Kumar's leadership throughout this entire journey has been marked by a quiet determination and results-driven action. Unlike the flamboyant public relations campaigns seen in other parts of the country, Bihar's transformation has been more grounded and sustainable. By empowering local sports officers, involving district administrations, and directly overseeing the planning stages, Kumar ensured accountability at every level. His government's partnership with central agencies, sports federations, and private stakeholders like the Simply Sport Foundation demonstrated his belief in collaboration over politics.

The CM also ensured that sports were viewed not just as a competitive endeavour but as a public good. His vision of sports includes youth empowerment, community building, and even tourism.

KIYG 2025 served as a blueprint for how states can harness sports for economic growth, urban development, and public health. With hotels, restaurants, and transport sectors all benefiting from the Games, the local economy received a much-needed boost, especially in tier-2 cities like Bhagalpur and Begusarai.

Bihar's Sporting Renaissance

As the curtain falls on the 2025 edition of the Khelo India Youth Games, Bihar's narrative has changed irrevocably. Once

Local flavour: While athletes from across India dazzled spectators, Bihar's own young sports stars began to emerge in the spotlight.

Impactful: The event served as a blueprint for how states can harness sports for economic growth, urban development, and public health. With hotels, restaurants, and transport sectors all benefiting from the Games, the local economy received a much-needed boost, especially in tier-2 cities like Bhagalpur and Begusarai.

considered an unlikely host due to infrastructural and logistical concerns, the state now stands tall, having delivered an event praised nationally for its organisation, inclusivity, and impact. The transformation has been swift but deliberate, and at the heart of it all is Chief Minister Nitish Kumar — whose unwavering belief in Bihar's potential and his strategic investments in sports have rewritten the script for the state's youth.

Going forward, Bihar seems poised to become not just a venue but a vibrant contributor to India's sporting future. And if KIYG 2025 is remembered as the turning point, then history will rightfully place Nitish Kumar as the architect of that turning point — a leader who saw the power of sports not just in medals and trophies, but in the transformation of people, places, and possibilities.

BIHAR IN KIYG 2025

GOLD	SILVER	BRONZE
7	11	18

Future bright: Bihar is now confirmed to host several prestigious tournaments, including the U-20 Rugby Sevens Asian Championship, and the Hero Men's Asia Cup Hockey.

Gill's reign: Shubman Gill takes charge as India's new Test captain after Rohit Sharma's retirement, with a daunting first task — leading a transitional squad in a five-match series in England, starting June 20. K. R. DEEPAK

THE HARD RESET

WATCH THE VIDEO

India begins its **new WTC cycle** not with stability, but a clean slate. Five Tests in England — with a young squad and no recent series win there — could shape how far it gets this time.

Shayan Acharya
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India begins its toughest Test transition in years with a five-match tour of England. With Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, and R. Ashwin moving on, a new World Test Championship cycle kicks off under Shubman Gill — a young captain leading an even younger squad into one of the most unforgiving environments in world cricket.

The challenge is clear. India hasn't won a Test series in England since 2007. And this time, the team must make do without any of its senior batting pillars.

Light on experience

Only Rishabh Pant and K.L. Rahul bring substantial experience in English conditions. Captain Gill has played three Tests in England (two WTC finals and the rescheduled Birmingham Test), scoring just 88 runs at an average of 14.66. For others like Yashasvi Jaiswal, Karun Nair, and Sai Sudharsan, this will be a first taste of Test cricket in England.

Nair and Sudharsan arrive with strong domestic numbers. But Test cricket in England demands more than form — it demands adaptability.

Sudharsan earned the Orange Cap in the IPL this season, and his experience of playing county cricket for Surrey will certainly help him assess the English conditions better.

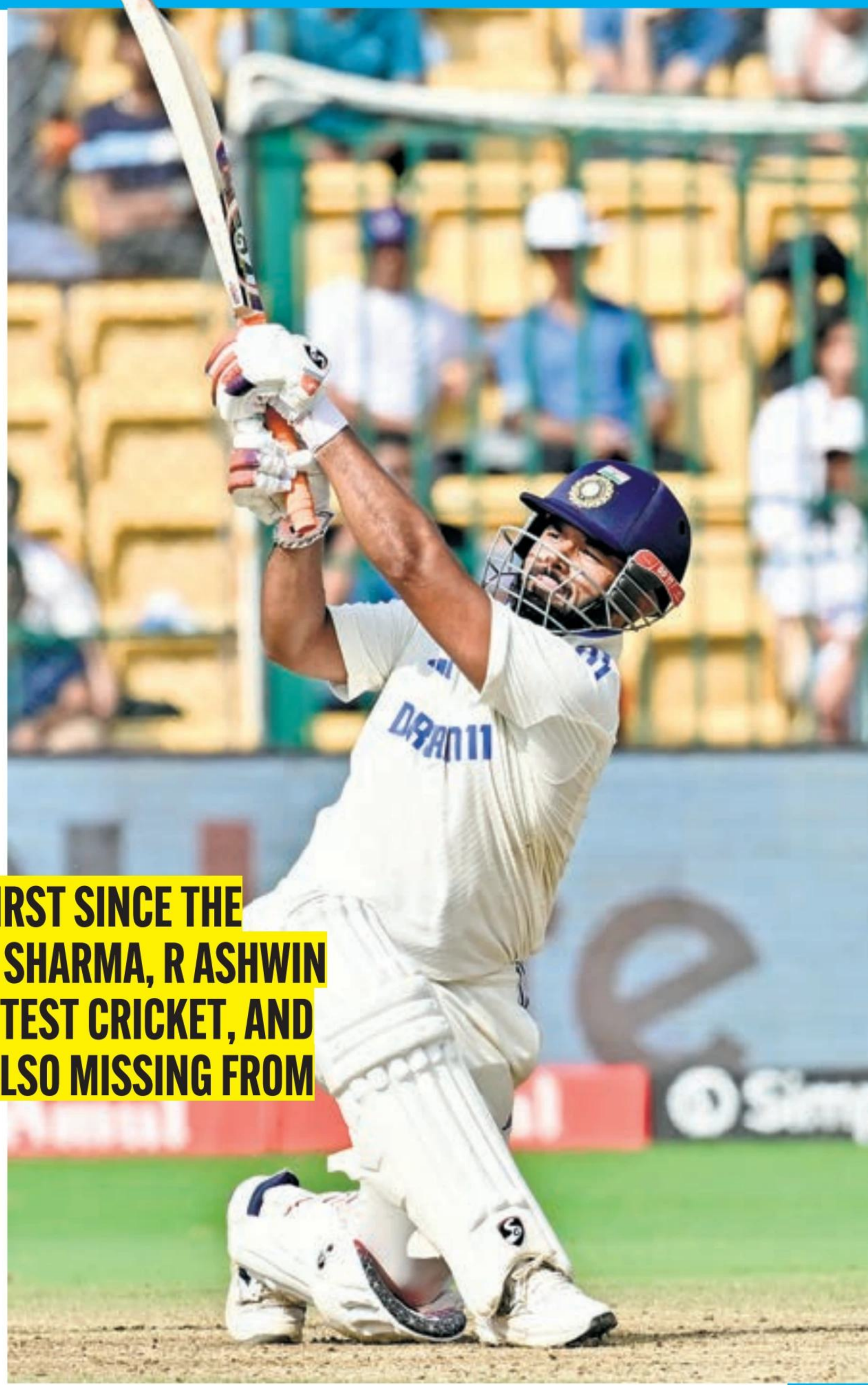
In 2023, Sudharsan scored 116 runs from two matches at an average of 38.66. Last year, the southpaw racked up 165 runs from three games with a century against Nottinghamshire at Trent Bridge in Nottingham.

Meanwhile, Nair, back in the Indian team after seven years, began with a double century for India A against England Lions. A consistent performer for Vidarbha, he scored 863 runs in nine Ranji games in the 2024-25 season, and 779 in eight Vijay Hazare matches, with nine centuries across formats.

The composure Nair showed against the England Lions wasn't accidental. It reflected the seasoning that comes from a proper County grind. Across two seasons with Northamptonshire (2023–24), Nair played 10 Championship matches and averaged 56.61.

Still, the real test is whether this domestic and A-team form can translate into performances in a long, high-stakes series abroad.

THE SERIES IS INDIA'S FIRST SINCE THE RETIREMENTS OF ROHIT SHARMA, R ASHWIN AND VIRAT KOHLI FROM TEST CRICKET, AND MOHAMMED SHAMI IS ALSO MISSING FROM THE SQUAD



Elevated: Rishabh Pant has been named vice-captain of the 18-member squad for the England Tests — a nod to his red-ball experience in English conditions and growing leadership stature. K. MURALI KUMAR

Recent red-ball struggles

India's recent form in Tests has been patchy. A shock whitewash at home against New Zealand was followed by a 1-3 defeat in Australia.

While Kohli and Rohit struggled across both series, others didn't step up either.

Pant was India's top scorer against New Zealand with 261 runs at 43.50. Jaiswal managed 190 at 31.66; Sarfaraz Khan, 171 at 28.50.

India's tour of Australia offered flashes of promise — Jaiswal's 391 runs, centuries from Rahul and Nitish Kumar Reddy — but the batting unit failed to sustain pressure or seize key moments. Pant had a quiet outing and a poor IPL as LSG captain. Yet, as vice-captain, he is likely to start. But there's competition. Dhruv Jurel, who has proven his mettle with 227 runs from four innings for India A against England Lions.

Managed firepower: Before departure, head coach Gautam Gambhir indicated that Jasprit Bumrah is likely to feature in only three of the five Tests, with his workload carefully managed to preserve peak effectiveness. K. R. DEEPAK

Leadership vacuum

India came close to winning in England last time, leading 2-1 before the COVID-delayed fifth Test ended in defeat. In that series, Rohit led the charts with 368 runs, including a century and two fifties, followed by Rahul (315), Cheteshwar Pujara (306), Ravindra Jadeja (287), and Kohli (249). India may not have sealed the series, but its batting unit delivered a performance full of grit and intent.

Now, the captain is young and under pressure. So is the squad.

"There are two ways of looking at this tour. One is we are without our three most experienced players or we got this phenomenal opportunity to do something special for the country," Gambhir was quoted as saying by *bcci.tv*. That decision-making begins with Gill's own batting position. He's been used at No.3 recently, but given his struggles in England, a move to No.4 could shield him from the new ball and help him settle into leadership.

"I think Sudharshan and Jaiswal will open the batting (in England) as Sudharshan just looks like a class player to me and technically I think he could do well at Test level," Ponting said on *ICC Review*, adding: "They'll have two pretty young opening batters, so they might look to go for someone that's got a bit more experience at No. 3."

That raises a straight contest between Nair and Rahul for the No.3 spot. "Shubman might end up being that No.4 player, which will probably make life for him a little bit easier as a captain as well. Not having to be opening or batting at No.3 as a young captain might make it easier," Ponting said.

Bumrah watch

India's challenges aren't limited to batting. Jasprit Bumrah is expected to feature in only three of the five Tests as part of workload management.

That puts pressure on the rest of the pace unit: Mohammed Siraj, Arshdeep Singh, Prasidh Krishna, Akash Deep — none of whom has led an attack in England. All-rounders Shardul Thakur and Nitish Kumar Reddy offer backup, but both looked undercooked in the India A matches.

"The guys have stepped up by

> « India's recent Test form dipped with a home whitewash to New Zealand and a 1-3 loss in Australia »

Pace cover: India head coach Gautam Gambhir trusts India's fast-bowling depth to handle Jasprit Bumrah's possible absence from a few games. AFP

themselves, they have taken the ownership and responsibility, they've realised it's going to be a tough tour. That's the pleasing thing for us as coaches, to see guys taking that leadership and ownership at practice," India's bowling coach Morne Morkel said, adding: "England - the brand of cricket they play, we need to be on top of our game. We can't afford to find our feet in this series." The coaching staff is optimistic, but performances will need to match that belief — especially in Bumrah's absence.

The venue spread adds another layer of complexity:

India has never won at Edgbaston (7 losses, 1 draw).

At Lord's, it's three wins in 19 Tests.

Old Trafford has been tough: four losses, five draws.

At The Oval, India has won twice — the last time in 2021.

"The bowling unit looks settled, but then, some of them have not much experience in Test cricket, so it might not be easy to claim 20 wickets in every game, and it will be important to identify that bowler who would anchor the bowling department whenever Bumrah isn't around," former India fast bowler Ghavri said.

Conditions vary, too. Lord's has a 2.5-metre slope from one side to the other, which can significantly influence swing and seam. At The Oval, spin comes into play.

"In conditions where the ball swings and seams, you cannot be erratic. And it's important to be consistent in bowling in the right areas," Ghavri said.

Kuldeep Yadav or Washington Sundar could be surprise options at The Oval alongside Jadeja. But for the bowlers to have an impact, the batters need to put up scores.

"Our bowlers can get those wickets, but before that, we also need to put up at least 400 odd runs. Now, the question remains, who's going to do it?" Ghavri wondered.

India has scored 400+ just twice in its last eight Tests — once against New Zealand, once in Perth.

And this time, there's no safety net of experience.

India's records in England since 1932 (by venue)

HEADINGLEY
Matches: 6
England: 3
India: 2
Drawn: 1

EDGBASTON
Matches: 8
England: 7
India: 0
Drawn: 1

LORD'S
Matches: 19
England: 12
India: 3
Drawn: 4

OLD TRAFFORD
Matches: 9
England: 4
India: 0
Drawn: 5

THE OVAL
Matches: 15*
England: 5
India: 2
Drawn: 7

**India also played the WTC final here against Australia in 2023, where it lost*
*** India has also played three Tests at Rose Bowl in Southampton (two against England in 2014 and 2018 and against New Zealand in the final of the WTC in 2021) and lost all three.*

"Shubman has the temperament, but it needs to be seen whether he can hang in there and score those runs. Most of these players are very comfortable in T20 cricket, so it's not easy to switch formats. In such a crucial tour, Shubman, Rahul, (Yashasvi) Jaiswal and Sai Sudharsan need to step up and steady the batting order."

On paper, the squad has talent. But it must win critical moments. That, more than match-ups or averages, will define this tour.

The TV promo is bold: *"Sikhne nahi, seekhane aaye hain..."*

Now they'll need to prove it — not just with intent, but with execution.

INDIA'S ROAD TO REDEMPTION RUNS THROUGH THE BOWLING CREASE

No Shami. Limited Bumrah. A raw **pace pack.** Yet India's hopes in England rest on one simple truth — bowl better, win more.

Dhruva Prasad
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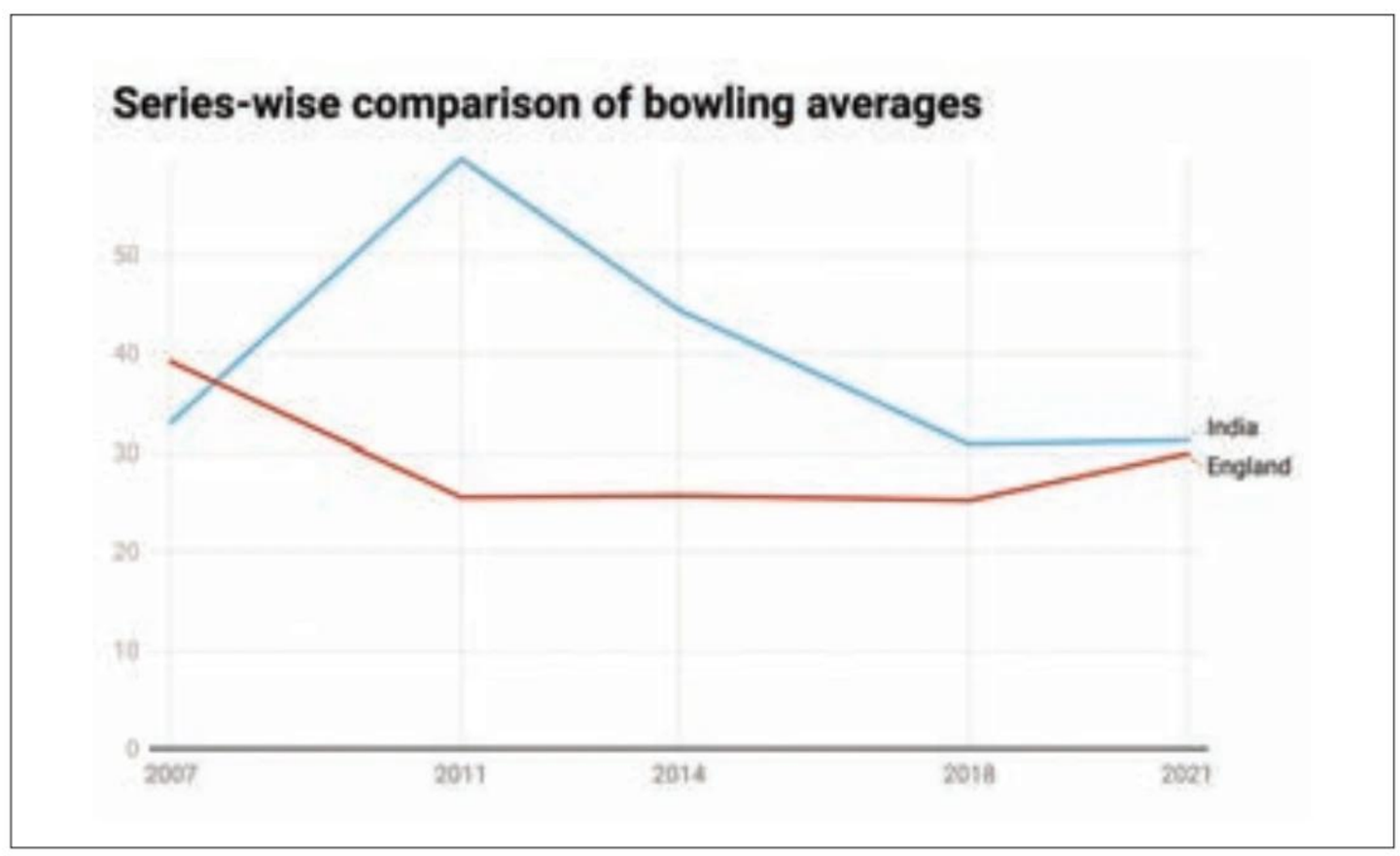
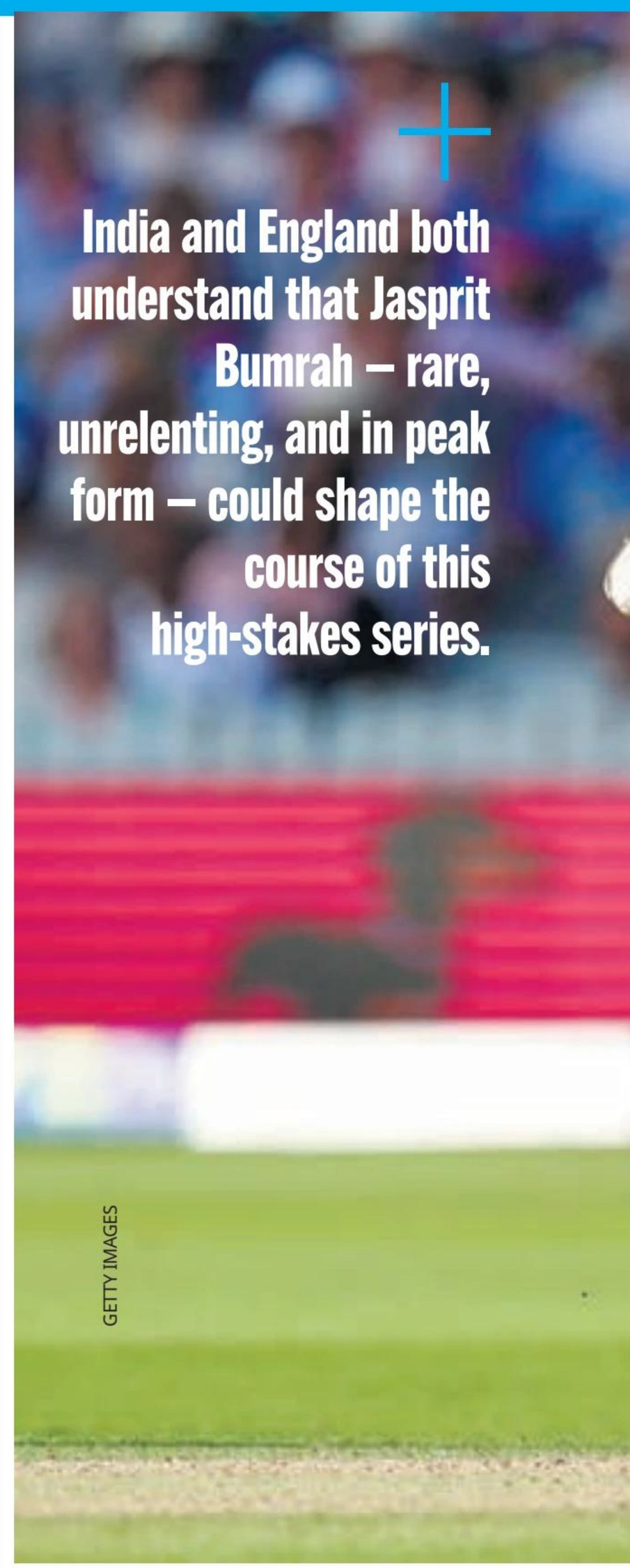
FOR MORE STORIES

The formula of India's recent resurgence in Tests overseas is simple — bowl better than your opposition. As India kickstarts its next World Test Championship (WTC) cycle with a five-match series in England under newly appointed skipper Shubman Gill, the adage rings truer than ever.

Over three English summers in the 2010s, the Indians failed abjectly in this endeavour, with the gulf between the two attacks widening. India finally closed the gap during the tour of 2021, drawing the five-match series 2-2, and Jasprit Bumrah was the point of difference.

Bumrah's bowling average of 26.27 is the best for any Indian bowler who has played at least five Tests in England, and he will do the heavy lifting again.




India and England both understand that Jasprit Bumrah — rare, unrelenting, and in peak form — could shape the course of this high-stakes series.
GETTY IMAGES

On the tour of 2021, he led the wickets chart with 21 scalps at an average of 22.47, and left India's second-best bowler — Mohammed Siraj, who averaged 33 for his 18 wickets — far behind in terms of control and discipline. That difference in quality and incisiveness vis-à-vis his peers, and not so much the opposition, is a chink the visitor will want to address.

With resources and experience in short supply, the task will be doubly hard. Bumrah can only feature in

three Tests to manage his workload, Siraj is coming off a limited-overs snub, Mohammad Shami's persistent fitness issues have ruled him out, and Prasidh Krishna, Akash Deep and Arshdeep Singh have never played a Test in England. But optimising scarce resources is the name of the game, and for starters, the Indian team management will want to nail down the three matches it wants Bumrah to feature in.

The blueprint of the 2021 series in England offers an intriguing insight. Bumrah outshone his bowling partners in the three matches India failed to win — at Nottingham, Leeds and Edgbaston — averaging 19.43 for his 16 wickets, as compared to his peers' 26 wickets at 48.80. However, in the victories at Lord's and The Oval, Bumrah's bowling average of 29.42 paled in comparison to his teammates' 24.63.

Bumrah's ability to take the pitch and conditions out of the equation owing to his unique skills, facilitated by his even more unique bowling action, makes him an ideal candidate for venues where his teammates could struggle.

Among the five venues for the upcoming series, The Oval (fifth Test), Manchester (fourth Test), and Leeds (first Test) have produced the least amount of swing since 2021. Given Bumrah's ability to transcend conditions, playing him at these venues could help India optimise his availability.

In the absence of Shami, India will need to identify a new-ball bowler to partner Bumrah. While Siraj seems to be an obvious choice, his skills are best utilised with a semi-old ball (30–59 overs old). His average dropped to 27.8 from 36.50 when operating with an older ball during

Selection tilt: Shardul Thakur may have scored a century in the intra-squad game, but Nitish Kumar Reddy is still favoured to take the seam-bowling all-rounder's spot in the XI. GETTY IMAGES

New-ball test: With Prasidh Krishna in the XI, Mohammed Siraj may have to take on more new-ball duties — an area that hasn't always played to his strengths. GETTY IMAGES

the 2021 tour, and the 31-year-old is better suited to do the job as a first-change bowler.

India's bid to identify its third pacer could be informed by its search for a new-ball bowler who can make the most of the conditions and the Dukes ball early on. While Akash has shown a penchant for making early inroads in his limited experience, he is yet to prove himself outside India and endured a tough tour of Australia, where he averaged 54 in two Tests. Arshdeep's new-ball prowess and left-arm angle could earn him a maiden Test cap, but his average of almost 42 during his five-match County Championship stint with Kent doesn't inspire confidence. Moreover, Arshdeep has a reputation for lacking consistency in managing the old ball and is ineffective once it loses its sheen. Still, with a 'Bazballing' England likely to field at least five right-handed batters in its top eight, Arshdeep can make a strong case for himself. Owing to his natural angle and ability to swing the ball both ways, his numbers against right-handers (bowling average 21.93) see a significant improvement

> « With Anderson and Broad retired, England faces a leadership void in its pace attack with no clear successor in sight »

when compared to his overall average of 30.37 in First-Class cricket.

Prasidh, on the other hand, can be a handful with the old ball with his height and ability to hit the deck hard. Though he is largely untested with the new ball, Prasidh's tearaway pace and scorching run in the recently concluded Indian Premier League could tip the scales in his favour. However, Prasidh's inclusion in the playing XI could force Siraj to operate largely with the new ball, which isn't his strongest suit.

Thus, while making its choice for the third seamer, India will have to make a trade-off between new-ball expertise and old-ball prowess — Arshdeep or Prasidh. Meanwhile, Akash could get a look-in when Bumrah doesn't play. In an ideal world, India would have wanted a well-rounded four-man pace attack to lead the charge, but its undercooked batting unit warrants the insurance of a seam-bowling all-rounder.

Shardul Thakur had a taste of English conditions during the tour in 2021, but Nitish Kumar Reddy appears to be the frontrunner, especially with bowling coach Morne Morkel admitting he wants to see the 22-year-old bowl more often in Tests.

Similarly, the selection of the lone spinner in the XI will be hostage to the extent of batting depth the team requires. Only one of Ravindra Jadeja and Washington Sundar is a likely starter, with the possibility of slotting in specialist spinner Kuldeep Yadav only arising in favourable conditions, such as those prevalent at The Oval.

Spin dilemma: India is likely to pick just one between Ravindra Jadeja and Washington Sundar, with Kuldeep Yadav an option only if conditions, like those at The Oval, favour spin.

GETTY IMAGES

Despite a lack of experience, pedigree, and Bumrah's limited availability, the Indian bowling attack has a golden opportunity to eclipse its counterpart.

The legendary duo of James Anderson and Stuart Broad has walked into the sunset, and a spearhead isn't on the horizon. Mark Wood, Jofra Archer and Gus Atkinson are battling injuries; Chris Woakes is on the mend, and a host of up-and-coming quicks are also contending with fitness issues.

In 2007 — the last time India won a Test series in England and much before the country showed signs of ushering in a pace-bowling renaissance — the trio of Zaheer Khan, R. P. Singh and S. Sreesanth, with some help from Sourav Ganguly's dibbly-dobblies and the inimitable Anil Kumble, outshone the hosts.

The crop that followed, comprising Ishant Sharma, Umesh Yadav and Shami, raised the pace quotient a notch up, but a win in England remained elusive for over a decade.

Now, with a generational genius in Bumrah showing the way, India's white-ball exponents will want their moment in the sun with the red cherry and to snap an 18-year wait.

Indian bowlers in last two Test series in England (sorted by bowling average)

Bowler	M	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	E/R
Hanuma Vihari	2	3	12.66	21.0	3.61
Umesh Yadav	2	9	23.55	40.8	3.45
Jasprit Bumrah	8	37	23.78	51.9	2.74
Hardik Pandya	4	10	24.70	38.5	3.84
Ishant Sharma	7	23	26.56	54.0	2.95
R. Ashwin	4	11	32.72	76.1	2.57
Mohd. Siraj	5	18	33.00	51.1	3.87
Shardul Thakur	3	8	33.37	50.2	3.98
Mohd. Shami	9	29	36.79	63.4	3.48
Ravindra Jadeja	6	13	45.76	101.8	2.69
Kuldeep Yadav	1	0	–	–	4.88

NUMBER CRUNCHING

BY THE DEGREE: HOW SWING IMPACTS INDIA'S TEST BATTERS IN ENGLAND

A fresh Indian side tours England, but the swing conditions remain **unforgiving.** Can this team adapt?

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A new era for Indian Test cricket begins on June 20, when the side starts its five-match series against England in Leeds.

For a new-look Indian batting order, now without the experience of the recently retired Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, English conditions will present a stern examination.

Newly appointed captain Shubman Gill and his fellow batters will have their techniques tested by the moving ball in England's swing-friendly environment.

Swing has long been a defining feature of Test cricket in England. This is enabled by the country's near-perpetual overcast skies, the generally lush and unabrasive outfields, and the firm nature of its pitches.

These factors combine to ensure that swing persists throughout a Test match and is more pronounced on average than in any other SENA (South Africa, England, New Zealand, and Australia) country.

Notably, swing in England tends to remain consistent regardless of ball age. The red cherry continues to move more in the air across innings than it typically does elsewhere in the SENA group.

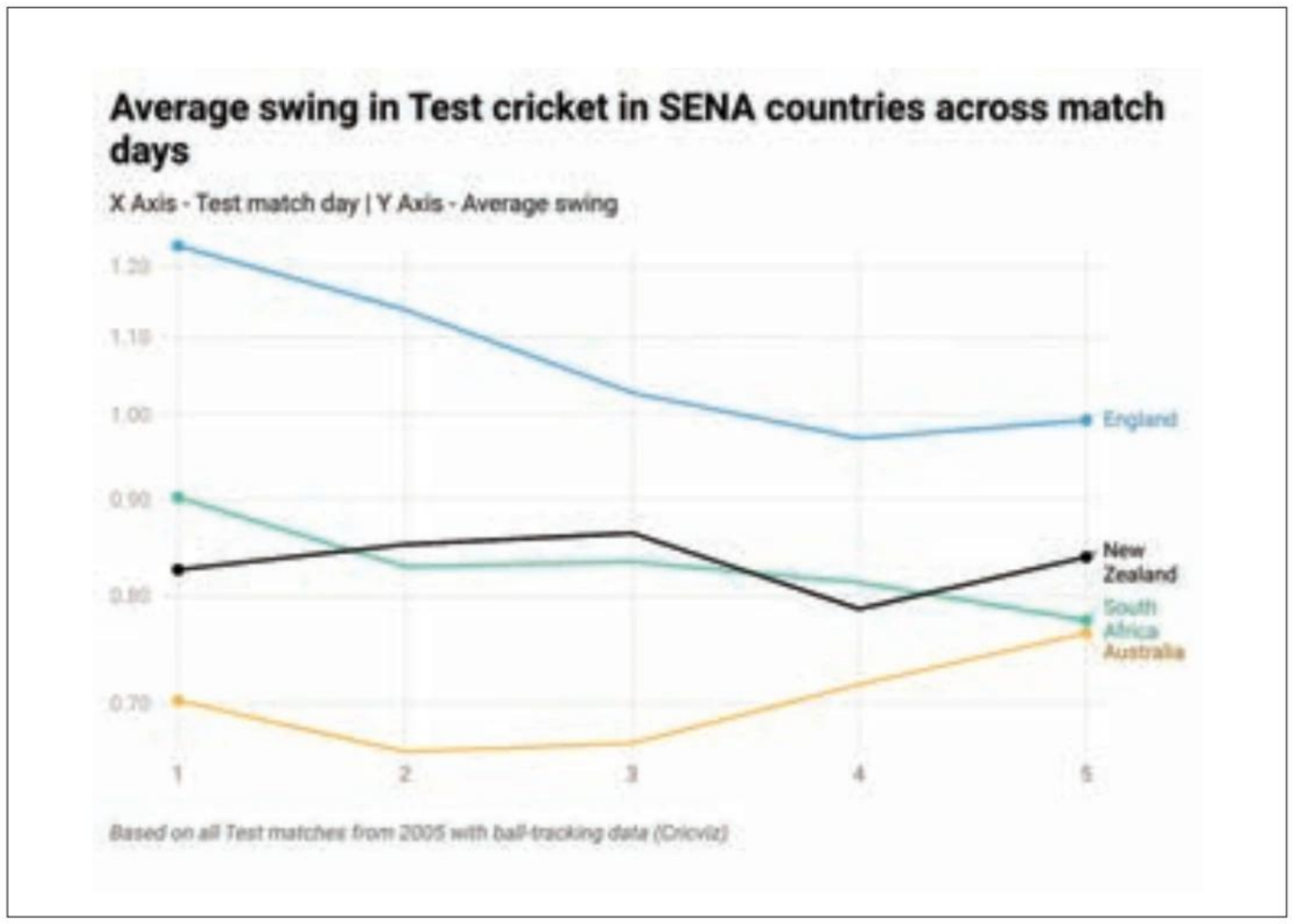
This phenomenon is further amplified by the use of the Dukes ball. Its pronounced seam and greater durability allow for more sustained and pronounced movement in the air.

Conversely, reverse swing is relatively rare in England. The milder weather and softer outfields reduce the chances of the ball scuffing up enough to reverse appreciably.

For Indian batters, who have grown up playing in conditions far less conducive to swing, the English

Swing test: Shubman Gill, bowled by Scott Boland at The Oval in 2023, faces another swing test as India readies for a five-match challenge in England.
GETTY IMAGES

Deadly duo: One small consolation for the visitor is the absence of England's legendary swing duo — James Anderson and Stuart Broad. K.R. DEEPAK

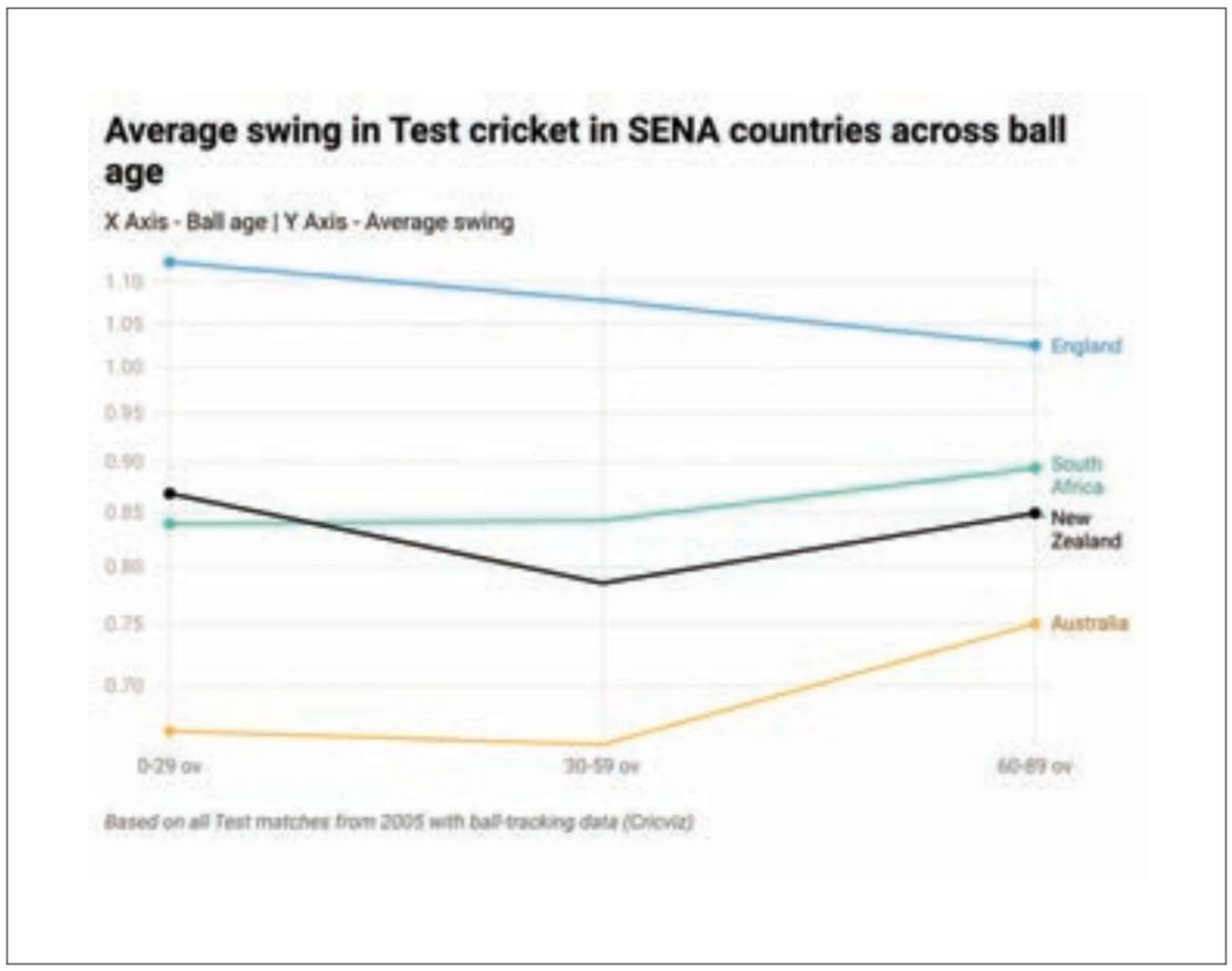


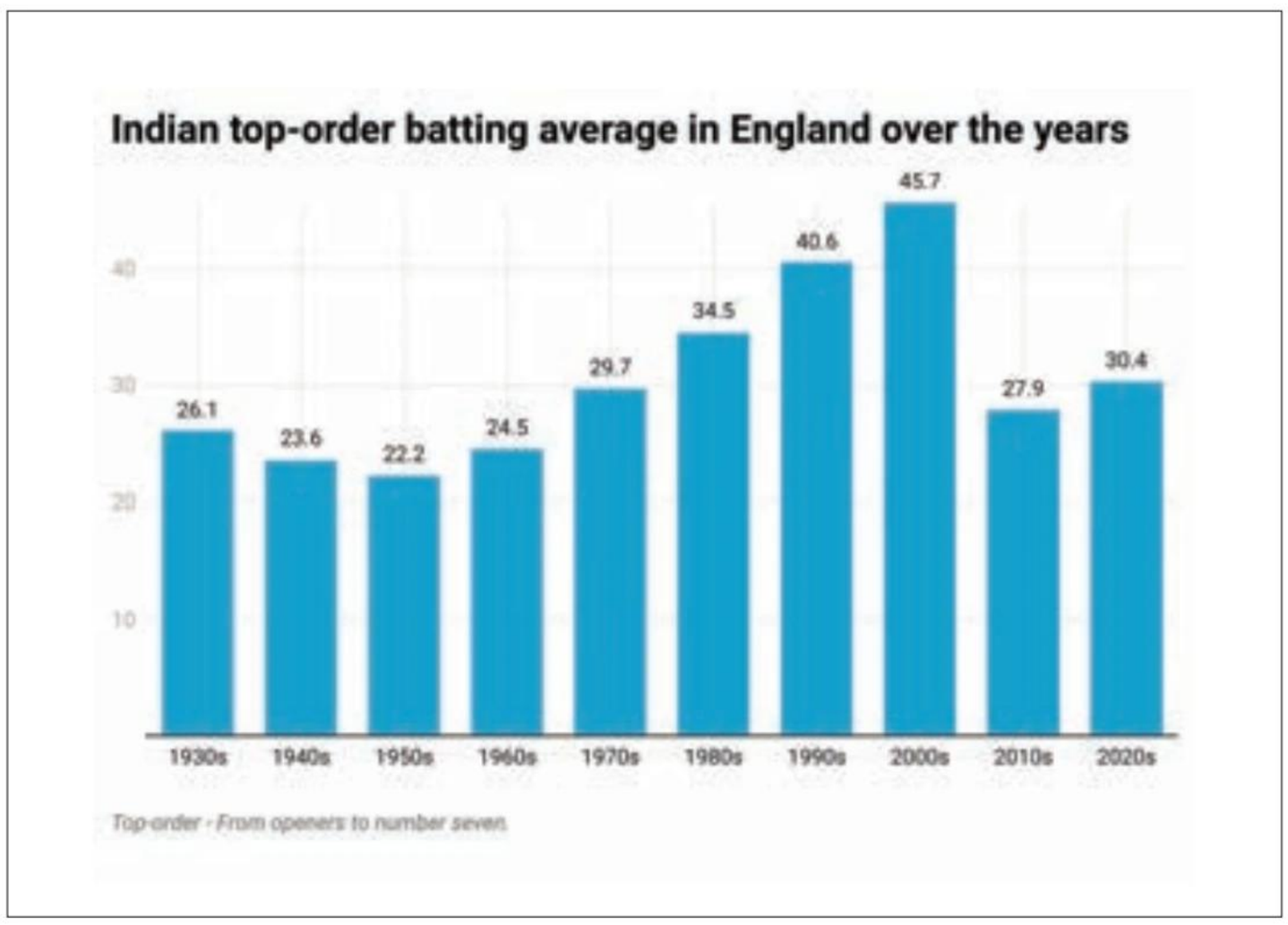
question has long been a perplexing one. India's top-order batters have averaged just 30.31 in England across 121 Tests since 1932 — their second-lowest return in any country, ahead of only South Africa (28.88).

While Indian batting began to improve in England in the 1970s and peaked in the 2000s, the trend has reversed in recent times.

Since 2010, India has played 23 Tests in England — across four bilateral series and two World Test Championship finals. In these matches, its top-order average has slumped to 28.69 — only four teams have fared worse in that span. It is also India's third-lowest average in any country during this period.

Interestingly, India's struggles are





Test teams' batting averages against different degrees of swing

Team	≤0.75°	0.75-1.50°	1.50-2.25°	2.25-3.00°	>3.00°
Australia	27	28.75	28.05	20.03	43.41
England	31.75	37.15	31.42	26.96	32.57
India	25.23	23.39	19.15	24.70	23.43
New Zealand	32.02	28.66	23.25	29.00	28.40
Pakistan	26.73	22.30	19.08	16.31	18.00
South Africa	30.07	28.16	19.44	49.25	11.00
Sri Lanka	27.44	23.07	25.20	18.00	34.66
West Indies	24.59	23.94	12.81	28.44	18.06

more pronounced when the ball swings less.

Since 2010, Indian top-seven batters in England average just 25.23 when the ball swings under 0.75° — only West Indies has done worse. India's averages remain subpar even in higher swing brackets (0.75–1.50° and 1.50–2.25°).

Virat Kohli summed up the challenge of batting in England during the 2021 series:

"You can never say in England that now you are set. You have to put your ego in your pocket. You need good decision-making because conditions in England are the toughest in the world, in my opinion." Kohli's own journey in England was marked by extremes. In 2014, he averaged just 13.40 across five Tests. Four years later, he bounced back with a superb 593-run series, including two centuries and three fifties.

That turnaround, Kohli said, came from understanding that batting in England demands sustained focus:

"The conditions are not like in other places where, once you reach 30 or 40, you can start picking balls to hit. In England, you have to bat the way you did for your first 30 runs and repeat the same template for as long as possible.

This discipline and patience are essential. If you're not patient in England, you can get out at any time — regardless of your experience or the number of runs you have."

While this advice is sound in theory, executing it is far from easy — especially for a largely inexperienced Indian line-up in 2025. Yashasvi Jaiswal, Karun Nair, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Sai Sudharsan, Dhruv Jurel, Abhimanyu Easwaran, and Washington Sundar are all yet to play a Test in England.

One small consolation for the visitor is the absence of England's legendary swing duo — James Anderson and Stuart Broad. The pair has taken a combined 169 wickets against India at home, at an average of just 23.41.

Even so, for Gill and company, this series promises to be as tough a baptism as Test cricket gets.

Assembly of champions: A 147-run partnership between captain Temba Bavuma (in pic) and Aiden Markram (right), along with a nine-wicket haul by Kagiso Rabada (right), proved pivotal in the victory.

GETTY IMAGES, REUTERS & AP

WORLD TEST CHAMPIONSHIP

DAY OF DELIVERANCE

Aiden Markram's masterclass and Kagiso Rabada's firepower help South Africa break a long-standing hoodoo and deliver its **finest moment** in Tests.

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At Lord's, on a Saturday heavy with history, South African players did what generations before them could not.

They held their nerve. They closed the door. They won.

They are the new World Test Champions.

This was not just a Test match. This was a trial of identity. Of how a team, long weighed down by the memory of collapses, could finally write its own ending.

Australia, seasoned and sharp, was the favourite. It was the defending champion and had arrived with a pace attack as incisive as any in modern cricket. But asked to pull off what was eventually the joint second-highest successful fourth-innings chase at Lord's, South Africa didn't flinch. Aiden Markram and Temba Bavuma added 147 for the third wicket, steering their side to a historic win.

Markram brought up his eighth — and perhaps most significant — Test hundred. Bavuma, composed and assured despite a hamstring strain, reached a vital half-century.

It was a day of tension, but of a different kind. The collapse and chaos of the first innings gave way to calculation and control.

Tactically, Cummins may have erred on the third afternoon. As Markram and Bavuma settled into their partnership, Australia's field placements grew increasingly defensive. With the field spread wide, the pair collected ones

Ultimate high: Kyle Verreynne celebrates with David Bedingham after hitting the winning runs. AFP

and twos with ease, building momentum without taking risks. The pressure valve was released too early.

To be fair, Cummins was also up against a shifting surface. After two days of dramatic, low-scoring chaos where 28 wickets had fallen, the Lord's pitch suddenly flattened under bright sunshine.

The lack of early turn and bounce blunted Lyon's effectiveness. Both Bavuma and Markram were quick to adjust, playing him comfortably off the back foot, especially through square. With Australia's main spinner neutralised and no reverse swing in sight, Cummins' options dwindled. But the choice to sit back rather than squeeze the batters might still go down as a misstep.

For Bavuma, the moment carried weight beyond the scoreboard. He was the first black South African to score a Test hundred, the first black South African to lead the national team in the format, and now, the captain who has taken his side to the summit of the World Test Championship.

Most importantly, South Africa has now won nine and lost none of Bavuma's completed Tests as captain — these speak to a leadership quality rooted in clarity, calm, and conviction.

Markram's innings will stand apart as well. On a pair, in the fourth innings of a final, he constructed, countered and ultimately conquered, eventually falling for 136. That this was his third fourth-innings Test century says enough. But context makes it richer: it came not in the calm of a bilateral dead rubber, but on the biggest stage his team has known in nearly three decades.

Yes, it had been 27 years. Since the late Hansie Cronje led the Rainbow Nation to the ICC KnockOut Trophy in Dhaka, South Africa's men's team had won nothing on the world stage. In the 18 global white-ball tournaments since, it reached just one final. That, too, ended in heartbreak — in Barbados last year, when it squandered a position of absolute dominance against India.

The numbers have been well-worn: 12 knockout games, 10 losses, countless post-mortems. The label — chokers — was lazy, but persistent. It became part of how the world described South African men's cricket.

But not anymore.

Pat Cummins threatened to derail its charge with a post-lunch burst on Day 2 — a spell of 4.1-1-4-4 that took him to 300 Test wickets — but the game belonged to Kagiso Rabada, whose nine wickets, including a five-for, across both innings proved decisive. It was a bowler's match, and South Africa's attack held firm when it mattered most.

Yes, its road to the final came through a softer draw — avoiding Australia and England, and playing West Indies, Bangladesh, and New Zealand. But none of that diminishes the quality of their cricket or the resolve they showed when it counted.

Still, this win comes at a strange time for South African Test cricket.

As things stand, the men's team will not host any Tests next summer — the first such break since readmission in 1992. CSA CEO

Bigger tests await: Pat Cummins' Australia won't have long to dwell on the loss, as the next men's Ashes begins in November. GETTY IMAGES

Pholetsi Moseki has clarified that the gap is not part of a shift away from Test cricket, but rather due to an unusually tight international window next season.

The men's white-ball sides will tour Australia and England in August and September, while the Test team is set to play two-match away series in Pakistan and India between November and December. Those outbound tours, according to CSA, have compressed the calendar and limited the possibility of hosting home Tests.

That context matters. But it also doesn't fully erase the deeper trend: Test cricket is being squeezed — not just in South Africa, but across the board.

The domestic T20 league, SA20, has claimed the prized Christmas window, with its next edition set to begin on Boxing Day 2025. That's a slot usually reserved for marquee home Tests. Now, white-ball cricket is front and centre.

This isn't an isolated story. The West Indies have long struggled to field full-strength red-ball squads. South African quick Anrich Nortje gave up a central contract to maintain control over the amount of international cricket he plays. So did Kane Williamson in New Zealand. These aren't just warning signs — they are the choices of elite players reacting to the sport's new economics.

Which is why this South African win matters beyond the trophy. It's a statement that relevance in Test cricket isn't reserved for the Big Three. And that the World Test Championship, despite its structural limitations, remains a necessary lifeline — one that offers meaning even when bilateral calendars falter.

Meanwhile, Australia won't have long to dwell on the loss. The next men's Ashes begins in November. After having won a one-off Test against Zimbabwe, England is now hosting India for five matches, while Australia travels to West Indies for three Tests. Then comes Perth.

Australia's attack remains formidable. Hazlewood, Starc, Cummins and Lyon are all expected to continue. Scott Boland pushes from the fringes, but the main quartet still deliver. Their numbers in this WTC cycle — Cummins (80 wickets at 23.48), Hazlewood (59 at 20.45), Starc (77 at 26.89), Lyon (66 at 25.18) — show no sign of decline.

The sting sustained at Lord's will linger. But it doesn't signal erosion.

South Africa's men will return to a packed 2026–27 summer, hosting both England and Australia for three-Test series. That's the year Test cricket turns 150. The next WTC final will be played then too. Whether that moment becomes a celebration or an imminent elegy may hinge on how many teams still treat the format as essential.

This final proved that excellence still exists in the format — but it's increasingly rare, and increasingly fragile. South Africa's title run was stirring. But in a system that doesn't reward consistency or guarantee regular fixtures, even a championship crown might not protect momentum from fading.

STATFILE

Highest run-getter
Joe Root (1968 runs)

Highest wicket-taker
Pat Cummins (80 wickets)

Highest team total
823/7d – ENG vs PAK, Multan, 2024

Lowest team total
42 – SL vs SA, Durban, 2024

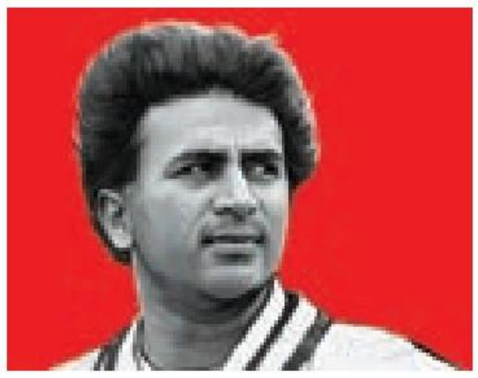
Highest target chased
282 – SA vs AUS, Lord's, 2025

Highest individual score
317 – Harry Brook vs PAK, Multan, 2024

Most five-wicket hauls
Pat Cummins (6)

Most runs in a series
712 – Yashasvi Jaiswal (England tour of India, 2024)

Most wickets in a series
32 – Jasprit Bumrah (BGT 2024-25)



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

ANY LINGERING DOUBTS ABOUT BAVUMA AS A PLAYER AND CAPTAIN WILL BE PUT TO REST AFTER WTC WIN

This loss would be a **bitter pill to swallow** for the Australians, as they usually win the final most times they play.

What delicious, smile-inducing moments we have seen in the first fortnight of June. The first was when Royal Challengers Bengaluru won the IPL trophy after a long wait of 18 years. If that was a feel-good moment, then perhaps even more emotional was South Africa winning a world title after a wait of around 27 years by clinching the World Test Championship, beating Australia in the final.

That at the helm of this historic win was a player who was not widely accepted as a captain by many people from the other community makes this win an even more seminal moment in the history of South African cricket. After this win, where he had such a major role to play not only as a captain but as a top-order batter, any lingering doubts about him as a player and captain will be put to rest. By all accounts, Temba Bavuma is a popular captain in the dressing room and even the players from the other community like him. He isn't loud or demonstrative with his demeanour, actions or words, and that has made him a wonderful role model. In the way he walks out to bat and carries himself on the field, he is so much like that genius, Gundappa Viswanath. Of course, with no disrespect at all to the Proteas captain talent-wise, there's no comparison, as Vishy, being a genius, is incomparable.

This loss would be a bitter pill to swallow for the Australians, as they usually win the final most times they play. Pat Cummins was once again terrific with the ball, but tactically, he could have tried a few things differently. With the ball turning a fair bit on the third day itself, Nathan Lyon continued to bowl over the wicket to both the right-handers, Aiden Markram and Bavuma, during their long partnership. If he had gone round the wicket, he would have brought both the outside edge and inside edge of the bat into play, with the ball turning as well as going straight through.

The fast bowlers also hardly tried the short ball to cause any false shot or ruffle the batter. In fact, the bouncer is becoming more of a rarity in today's cricket, and that's why more and more batters have almost forgotten how to use the depth of the crease and play off the back foot. The scoring avenues that open up

Commanding start: Appointed ahead of the 2023–25 WTC cycle, Temba Bavuma has led South Africa to nine wins in his first 10 Tests as captain — a remarkable start to his leadership tenure. REUTERS

when a batter also uses the back foot are far greater than off the front foot, but apart from Steve Smith, most of the modern batters with their legs spread wide in the stance are unable to transfer the balance to their back foot and so miss out on more scoring opportunities.

While there would be questions asked about the fall of 32 wickets in the first three days, most had to do with the fallout of the T20 format and not much to do with the pitch. The T20 format makes a batter look to clear his front foot so he can swing his bat freely for the lofted shot. At the Test level though, and that too in England with the Dukes ball, it is crucial for the batter to get his front foot as close to the ball as possible to negate the movement. Most batters got out playing away from their body, possibly because of coming to the Test match after the IPL. Markram made the adjustment beautifully after his first-innings duck, where he too got out playing away from his leg guards. A wonderful century, and as he said, the most important runs he has ever scored for his country.

Those runs and the lion-hearted bowling of Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi helped South Africa to a long-awaited world title in cricket, and hopefully removed the chokers tag forever.

While there would be questions asked about the fall of 32 wickets in the first three days, most had to do with the fallout of the T20 format and not much to do with the pitch.

Surya's feat

16 } Consecutive scores of 25-plus for Suryakumar Yadav in the IPL 2025, the longest such streak for any batter in men's T20 cricket. Suryakumar passed Temba Bavuma's record on 26 May 2025 in MI's game against PBKS in Jaipur and extended his tally to two more. The South African had 13 successive scores of 25-plus runs between 2019 and 2020. Suryakumar, meanwhile, already holds the equivalent IPL record, having bettered Robin Uthappa's tally of 10 such consecutive scores made in 2014.

Batters with consecutive scores of 25+ during a T20 career

25-plus scores	Batter	From	To	For (teams)	HS	LS
16+	Suryakumar Yadav	23 Mar 2025	26 May 2025	Mumbai Indians	73*	26
13	Temba Bavuma	1 May 2019	16 Feb 2020	Lions/South Africa/JoziStars	104	27
11	Brad Hodge	22 Jun 2005	7 Jan 2007	Lancashire/Victoria/AusA	106	26
11	Jacques Rudolph	3 Jul 2014	12 Jun 2015	Glamorgan	101*	30
11	Kumar Sangakkara	15 May 2015	25 Nov 2015	Surrey/Dhaka Dynamites	58	25
11	Chris Lynn	22 Dec 2023	4 Feb 2024	Adelaide Strikers/Gulf Giants	83*	27
11	K. R. Mayers	17 Feb 2024	29 Aug 2024	Fortune Barisal/WI/StKitts	50	25

+ still in progress

Batters with consecutive scores of 25+ during an IPL career

25-plus scores	Batter	From	To	For (teams)	HS	LS
14+	Suryakumar Yadav	23 Mar 2025	26 May 2025	MI	73*	26
10	Robin Uthappa	2 May 2014	28 May 2014	KKR	83*	40
9	Steve Smith	24 Apr 2016	22 Apr 2017	RPS	101	26
9	Sai Sudharsan	15 May 2023	10 Apr 2024	GT	96	31
9	Virat Kohli	25 Apr 2024	28 Mar 2025	RCB	92	27

+ still in progress

717 } The aggregate runs by Mumbai Indians' Suryakumar Yadav in this edition of the IPL is the highest for a batter at positions #3 or lower in any men's T20 tournament. He bettered the aggregate of A. B. de Villiers, who made 687 runs in the 2016 edition of the IPL for RCB.

Highest run-aggregates in an IPL year by batters batting at positions from #3 or lower

Runs	Batter (for)	M	Inns	Ave.	HS	100/50	S/R	Year
717	Suryakumar Yadav (MI)	16	16	65.18	73*	0/5	167.91	2025
687	AB de Villiers (RCB)	16	16	52.84	129*	1/6	168.79	2016
684	Rishabh Pant (DC)	14	14	52.61	128*	1/5	173.70	2018
622	Kane Williamson (SRH)	14	14	56.54	83*	0/7	141.04	2018
605	Suryakumar Yadav (MI)	16	16	43.21	103*	1/5	181.13	2023
604	Shreyas Iyer (PBKS)	17	17	50.33	97*	0/6	175.07	2025

1 } The number of opponent sides successfully chasing targets of 200-plus set by Mumbai Indians in the IPL. This rare occasion occurred recently when Punjab Kings (207/5) successfully chased Mumbai's first innings total of 203/6 in the Eliminator game in Mullanpur on 1 June 2025. On 18 previous occasions, Mumbai had defended totals over 200-plus since IPL started in 2008.

Highest successful run chases against Mumbai Indians in the IPL

MI's total	Opponent	Ov	Venue	Date
203/6	PBKS 207/5	19	Mullanpur	1 Jun 2025
195/5	RR 196/2	18.2	Abu Dhabi	25 Oct 2020
194/7	DC 195/3	20	Mumbai WS	14 Apr 2018
187/5	RR 188/6	19.3	Mumbai WS	13 Apr 2019
184/8	RPS 187/3	19.5	Pune	6 Apr 2017
184/7	PBKS 187/3	18.3	Jaipur	26 May 2025

Note: *In successive games, Mumbai Indians could not defend totals of 180+ this season against Punjab Kings.*

8 } The number of teams/franchises to win the IPL Trophy. Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) in Ahmedabad on 3 June 2025 became the latest to join this elite group of franchises.

IPL winners from 2008 to 2025

Titles	Team/Franchise	(IPL title won in)
5	Chennai Super Kings	(2010, 2011, 2018, 2021, 2023)
5	Mumbai Indians	(2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020)
3	Kolkata Knight Riders	(2012, 2014, 2024)
1	Rajasthan Royals	(2008)
1	Deccan Chargers+	(2009)
1	Sunrisers Hyderabad	(2016)
1	Gujarat Titans	(2022)
1	Royal Challengers Bengaluru	(2025)

+ now defunct

60 The number of balls to spare in Royal Challengers Bengaluru's (RCB) victory over Punjab Kings (PK) in the first Qualifier in Mullanpur on 29 May 2025. This is the biggest such win in an IPL playoff/knockout game. After dismissing Punjab for 101, RCB reached its target in 10 overs.

Biggest margin of victories with 30 balls or more to spare in playoff/knockout games in the IPL

Balls/ov to spare	Winning side (batting 2nd)		Losing side (batting 1st)	Venue	Date	Result
60/10.0	RCB (106/2 in 10 overs)	beat	PBKS (101)	Mullanpur	29 May 2025	8 wickets
57/9.3	KKR (114/2 in 10.3 overs)	beat	SRH (113)	Chennai	26 May 2024	8 wickets
38/6.2	KKR (164/2 in 13.4 overs)	beat	SRH (159)	Ahmedabad	21 May 2024	8 wickets
37/6.1	RCB (86/1 in 13.5 overs)	beat	DecChg (82)	New Mumbai DYP	24 Apr 2010	9 wickets
33/5.3	MI (111/4 in 14.3 overs)	beat	KKR (107)	Bengaluru	19 May 2017	6 wickets
31/5.1	CSK (116/1 in 14.5 overs)	beat	PK (112/8)	Mumbai WS	31 May 2008	9 wickets

14.1 The number of overs faced by Punjab Kings batters when it was dismissed for 101 against RCB in Mullanpur on 29 May 2025. This is now the fewest overs faced by any IPL side after being dismissed while batting first.

IPL sides batting first and dismissed after facing the fewest number of overs

Overs	Team (batting first)	Opponent	Venue	Date	Result (for chasing side)
14.1	PBKS (101/10)	RCB (106/2)	Mullanpur	29 May 2025	8 wickets
15.0	RCB (70/10)	RR (71/4)	Abu Dhabi	26 Apr 2014	6 wickets
15.1	PBKS (88/10)	RCB (92/0)	Indore	14 May 2018	10 wickets
15.2	RR (81/10)	KKR (85/2)	Kolkata	17 Apr 2011	8 wickets
15.2	KKR (67/10)	MI (68/2)	MumbaiWS	16 May 2008	8 wickets

145 The total number of balls delivered in the RCB-PBKS game in Mullanpur on 29 May 2025. This is now the joint-third shortest completed game (in terms of balls delivered) in IPL history (excluding shortened/truncated games).

Shortest completed IPL games (excluding shortened/truncated games)

Balls	(Overs)	Team1 (Total)	Team2 (Total)	Venue	Date	Result for
125	(20.5)	KKR (67/10 in 15.2 ov)	MI (68/2 in 5.3 ov)	Mumbai WS	16 May 2008	MI won by 8 wkts/87 balls
140	(23.2)	PBKS (88/10 in 15.1 ov)	RCB (92/0 in 8.1 ov)	Indore	14 May 2018	RCB won by 10 wkts/71 balls
145	(24.1)	RCB (68/10 in 16.1 ov)	SRH (72/1 in 8 ov)	Mumbai BS	23 Apr 2022	SRH won by 9 wkts/72 balls
145	(24.1)	PBKS (101/10 in 14.1 ov)	RCB (106/2 in 10 ov)	Mullanpur	29 May 2025	RCB won by 8 wkts/60 balls
146	(24.2)	DC (143/7 in 20 ov)	SRH (44/2 in 4.2 ov)	Delhi	10 May 2014	SRH won by 8 wkts/4 balls (DL)

176 The batting strike-rate achieved by Phil Salt at the end of his unbeaten knock of 56 in 27 balls — also crossing the 1000-run mark of his IPL career while playing for RCB against PBKS in the 1st Qualifier at Mullanpur on 29 May 2025. This strike-rate is now the second-highest achieved by any IPL batter during the innings in which the player reached 1000 IPL runs. However, in terms of actual balls faced while reaching the respective 1000th run in IPL, Russell is by far the quickest with 545 balls, followed by Travis Head (575 balls) and Salt one more at 576 balls.

Batters with high batting strike-rates in the game they completed 1000 IPL career runs

S/R	Batter	while playing for	(opp)	Venue	Achieved	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	Balls faced
185.34	A. Russell	KKR	(DC)	Delhi	30 Mar 2019	42	42	1049	29.97	566
175.97	P. Salt	RCB	(PBKS)	Mullanpur	29 May 2025	33	33	1040	34.67	591
172.45	T. Head	SRH	(MI)	MumbaiWS	17 Apr 2025	32	32	1014	36.21	588
170.03	H. Klaasen	SRH	(RR)	Hyderabad	23 Mar 2025	33	33	1027	38.04	604
165.32	V. Sehwag	DC	(PWI)	New Mumbai	17 Apr 2011	42	42	1020	26.15	617

Note: *The figures are updated at the end of the innings, not when the 1000-run milestone is achieved.*

33 The number of sixes conceded by Gujarat Titans' leg-spinner Rashid Khan in this year's IPL. This is now the most conceded by any bowler in a single edition of the IPL.

Bowlers conceding most sixes in a single edition of the IPL

6s	Balls/6	Bowler (for)	Year	Inns	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Ave.	Eco	6s/inns
33	10.00	Rashid Khan (GT)	2025	15	330	514	9	57.11	9.35	2.20
31	9.87	Mohd Siraj (RCB)	2022	15	306	514	9	57.11	10.08	2.07
30	11.40	W. Hasaranga (RCB)	2022	16	342	430	26	16.54	7.54	1.88
30	11.60	Y. Chahal (RR)	2024	15	348	546	18	30.33	9.41	2.00
28	10.04	Y. Chahal (RCB)	2015	14	281	415	23	18.04	8.86	2.00
28	11.46	Dwayne Bravo (CSK)	2018	16	321	533	14	38.07	9.96	1.75
28	12.18	T. Deshpande (CSK)	2023	16	341	564	21	26.86	9.92	1.75

All records are correct and updated until 3 June 2025.

GETTY IMAGES

England thrashes the Windies 3-0 in ODI series

1 Jos Buttler starred with **vital contributions** in the first two matches

England men thrashed West Indies 3-0 in the T20I series. In the opener, Jos Buttler's 96 off 59 balls powered England to 188, before Liam Dawson's four-wicket haul sealed a 21-run victory. West Indies posted 197 in the second match, with vital contributions from Johnson Charles and captain Shai Hope. However, Buttler top-scored again with 47 as England chased the target with four wickets to spare. In the third T20I, Ben Duckett and Jamie Smith added 120 for the opening wicket to help England post 248. Rovman Powell hit a spirited 79 off 45, but West Indies fell short by 37 runs.

AFP

2

Mehidy Hasan Miraz has been named captain of the Bangladesh men's ODI team, replacing Najmul Hossain Shanto, the Bangladesh Cricket Board has confirmed. The 27-year-old all-rounder will begin his tenure during the upcoming three-match ODI series in Sri Lanka next month. With 1,617 runs and 110 wickets in 105 ODIs, Mehidy joins an elite group of Bangladeshi players – Mohammad Rafique, Mashrafe Mortaza, and Shakib Al Hasan – to achieve the 1,000 runs and 100 wickets milestone in the format.

REUTERS

3

England women completed a 3-0 whitewash over West Indies women in the ODI series, adding to their earlier clean sweep in the T20I series. Openers Tammy Beaumont and Amy Jones struck centuries in the first two matches, helping England post scores over 300 on both occasions. The visitor failed to mount a challenge, conceding 108- and 143-run defeats respectively. The rain-shortened final game, reduced to 21 overs, saw West Indies manage just 106 runs, which England chased down with nine wickets in hand.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

4

Former India pacer Siddharth Kaul has registered for the men's Big Bash League (BBL) draft, while 15 Indian players have entered the women's draft, according to Cricket Australia. Kaul, who featured in three ODIs and three T20Is for India before retiring from international cricket last November, is the only Indian male player to have signed up for the upcoming BBL draft.

REUTERS

5

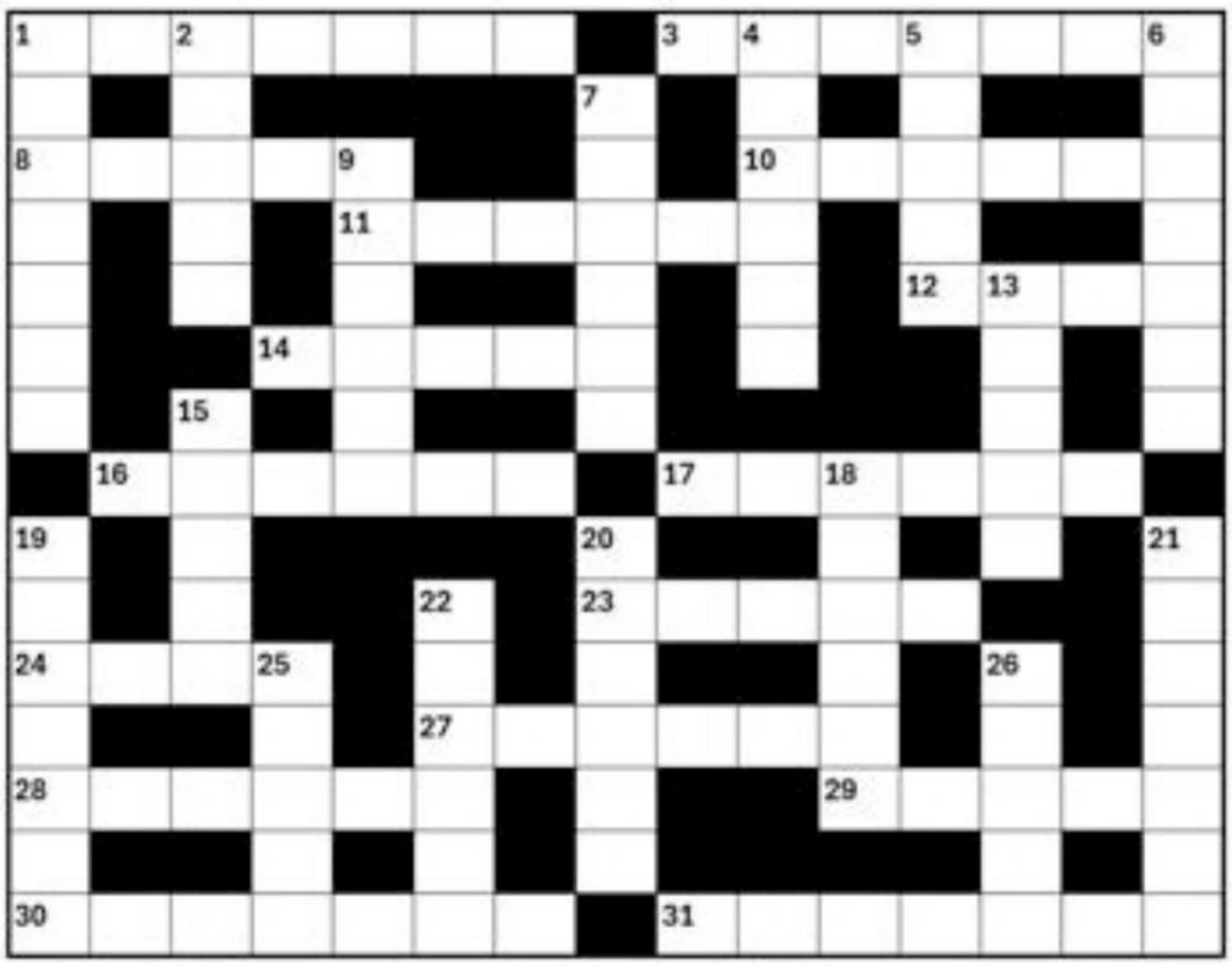
West Indies secured a 1-0 win in the three-match T20I series against Ireland after rain washed out the first two games. In the third match, the visitor, led by Evin Lewis (91, **in pic**) and Shai Hope (51), posted 256 for five – its second-highest T20I total. Ireland put up resistance with key knocks from Ross Adair and Harry Tector, along with a glut of extras from the West Indies bowlers. But spinner Akeal Hosein claimed three wickets to seal a 62-run win and break West Indies' winless streak.

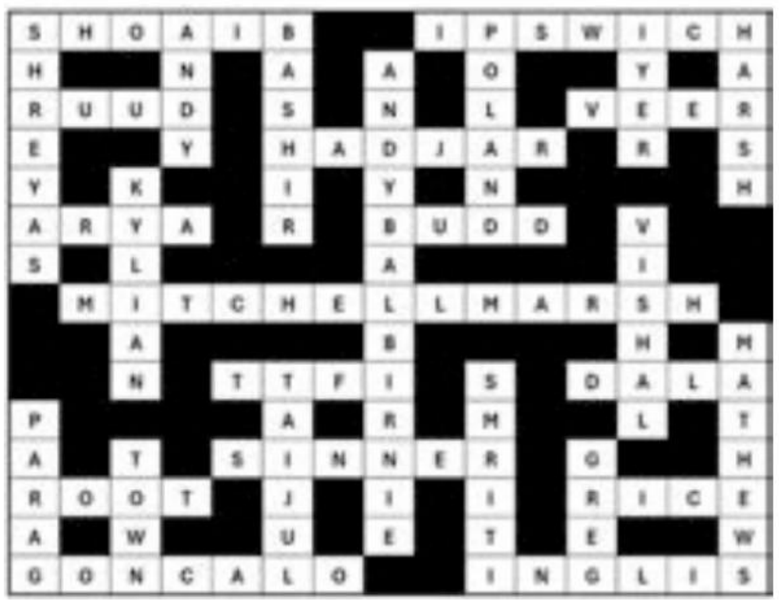
GETTY IMAGES

6

Cricket West Indies has confirmed a historic three-match T20I series against Nepal, set to begin on September 27 in Sharjah. Although hosted by the Cricket Association of Nepal (CAN), all matches will be played in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This will be the first-ever bilateral series between the two sides and serves as final preparation for Nepal ahead of the men's T20 World Cup Asia qualifier later in the year. The first two games will be played on consecutive days – September 27 and 28 – with the final match on September 30.

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 & 8 Which Indian won gold in both 5,000m and 10,000m events at the recent Asian Athletics Championships? (7,5)

3 Who won the heptathlon gold at the recent Asian Athletics Championships? (7)

10 Identify this up-and-coming Indian badminton player who reached the women's singles semifinals of the Taipei Open in May 2025 (6)

11 Identify this team which is one of the three clubs to be relegated from Serie A at the end of the current season (6)

12 What is the abbreviation of the forum which champions the inclusivity, accessibility, and opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in sports and physical activity? (1,1,1,1)

14 Name this Australian F1 driver who has won five out of the first nine races this season (5)

16 Who became the first to win the Player of the Final twice in IPL history? (6)

17 Which team won the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy for the 2024-25 season? (6)

23 Which Australian white-ball cricket specialist retired from ODIs recently? (5)

24 What is the abbreviation of the scheme run by the Sports Authority of India to identify, nurture sports talent in children aged 8-14 and focus on providing scientific training and competition exposure for the young athletes? (1,1,1,1)

27 Who won the men's doubles title at the 2025 Dubai Open tennis championships partnering India's Yuki Bhambri? (6)

28 Who is the captain of the TNPL team Dindigul Dragons? (6)

29 Identify this Spanish F1 driver who represents the Williams-Mercedes team (5)

30 Who ended as the leading run-scorer in the recently held women's ODI tri-series cricket tournament in Sri Lanka? (7)

31 Which 18-year-old girl won a bronze in the trap mixed team event at the ISSF World Cup for shotgun shooters held in May 2025 in Nicosia, Cyprus? (7)

DOWN

1 This French player who was given a wild card in the men's singles at the French Open 2025 eventually lost to the tournament runner-up in the second round (7)

2 Identify this Canadian F1 driver who represents Aston Martin team? (5)

5 The first corner of the Interlagos Circuit at Sau Paulo is named after ... (5)

6 Who won the men's 3,000m steeplechase gold at the Asian Athletics Championships? (7)

7 What is the surname of the Indian athlete who was recently conferred with the honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel of the Territorial Army? (6)

9 Who is appointed as the new white-ball coach of the Pakistan cricket team? (6)

13 Who won his fourth Premier League Golden Boot in the recently-concluded 2024-25 season? (5)

15 Who is the head coach of the Afghanistan cricket team? (5)

18 What is the surname of this cricketer whose stunner was adjudged as the best catch of IPL 2025? (6)

19 Which former Indian hockey player — with more than 300 appearances and scoring more than 150 goals — announced her retirement in April 2025? (7)

20 Which former Argentine footballer holds the record for scoring most hat-tricks in Premier League history so far? (6)

21 This is one of the three clubs to be relegated from Serie A at the end of the 2024-25 season (7)

22 Who is the president of FIFA? (6)

25 Identify this Kiwi, who stood as ICC Umpire in 22 Tests and 71 ODIs before retiring in 2005. He also worked for ICC as the manager for Umpires and Referees till 2008 (5)

26 & 4 Who scored a hat-trick for Marseille versus Brest in the Ligue 1 encounter on April 27, 2025? (5,6)

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Spin surge: Maxwell Swaminathan, the off-spin all-rounder from Ghatkopar, stood out with eight wickets in six T20 Mumbai League games. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Beyond the glare: India's other T20 stories

Local leagues, **real moments** – our team brings you both the action and what surrounds it.

The T20 Mumbai League returned after six years amid uncertainty. The build-up was shaky too, with the start delayed by a week due to the IPL, followed by torrential rain.

Yet, once the action began, it proved to be a vital platform for local cricketers to showcase their talent. Rain did interrupt play, but it didn't dampen the players' drive. Many pushed hard to impress IPL scouts, who were watching closely.

"Such tournaments always encourage players like us to prove our mettle and since they are broadcast live, it comes as a double motivation," said Sairaj Patil, one of Eagle Thane Strikers' top scorers. Patil, a domestic regular for Mumbai, has shared dressing rooms with top players. But for many, this was a rare opportunity.

"Leading up to the tournament, we got to spend a day with Kapil Dev and pick his brains. For the team, it was a huge opportunity to interact with the legend and get his suggestions," said SoBo Falcons' vice-captain Angkrish Raghuvanshi. His team, led by Shreyas Iyer,

Hidden gems: TNPL gave Rajalingam S — and many others — a stage to shine, far from the IPL's glare but no less intense. TNPL

reached the final but lost to Maratha Royals — a team without any international stars.

"We have an enviable pool of local talents," said Maratha Royals captain Siddhesh Lad. Several youngsters stood out under his leadership — including off-spin all-rounder Maxwell Swaminathan, who shares his name with the Australian star. Despite playing age-group cricket for Mumbai and being active at the club level, Swaminathan gained wider attention thanks to his eight wickets in six games. His improvement owes much to his time as a Mumbai Indians net bowler. "He (Suryakumar) faces me a lot in the nets and I keep asking him which is the area that I should try bowling at? He suggests a few things... and I just try to put those suggestions into practice," said Swaminathan, who hails from Ghatkopar. But had he met his famous namesake?

Maxwell smiled, "Yes, I did meet Glenn Maxwell once." A couple of years ago at a Mumbai Indians nets session, he bumped into the Aussie, took an autograph, and left with a memory. "He was surprised to know that we share the same name and that I'm also a spinner all-rounder," Swaminathan said.

Shayan Acharya

Stepping out of comfort zone

Four massive floodlight towers visible from over a kilometre away. Giant billboards outside the ground. A crowd trying to get in through a single gate.

The Ramakrishna Arts and Science College ground has hosted TNPL for four years, but this was the Diary's first live match experience in his hometown, Coimbatore.

With only the dressing rooms being permanent, the transformation of the venue was striking. Metal frames, wooden planks, makeshift enclosures for officials, media, and corporate guests — the familiar turf looked entirely new.

The city's cool evening breeze set the mood for a packed house, especially during Lyca Kovai Kings' matches.

TNPL continues to be a launchpad for little-known players. Early games in the 2025 season featured impressive debut outings from a few.

Playing under lights, in front of hundreds — sometimes thousands — with blaring music is outside many players' comfort zones. So is facing cameras and post-match interviews.

Siechem Madurai Panthers pacer Rajalingam S (3-0-27-0), fresh from a win on debut, entered the press room for the first time. Only three people were present, but he looked uneasy, especially with a mic in hand.

"*Kashtamana kelvi kepeengala na* (Will you ask tough questions)," he asked, sheepishly.

What followed was a disarmingly honest 10-minute chat — a refreshing break from the usual media-coached clichés.

"*Nalla pesunen ah?* (Did I speak well?)," he asked on his way out, drawing laughs from everyone in the room.

Anish Pathiyil

Breaking new ground on ice

Tara Prasad on pursuing her Olympic dreams while balancing her passions and promoting winter sports.

Rajdeep Saha
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LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

Tara Prasad was seven when she first stepped onto the ice. For the next decade, figure skating remained nothing more than a recreational pursuit. Today, at 25, she proudly represents India on the sport's biggest stages.

"There's obviously a more serious aspect now than when I was a kid. But sometimes, if I'm at an outdoor rink or it's just one of those random days, when I get on the ice and skate for fun, that same feeling is still there," Tara tells *Sportstar*, reflecting on her journey months after making her debut at the Winter Asian Games this year. She finished a creditable eighth out of 24 finalists in Harbin, China.

Tara comes from a family of athletes. Call it serendipity or not, her mother, Kavitha Ramasamy, was also seven when she first found her calling — in athletics. Kavitha, whose 87-year-old father, V. Ramasamy, still competes in Masters athletics events, admits she'd choose hurdling or long-distance running over putting on a pair of skates any day.

"Skating isn't just about going to the rink. There's nutrition, conditioning, massage therapy — it's the culmination of many sports," says Kavitha, who once trained alongside the legendary P. T. Usha at the 1990 Beijing Asian Games camp. "This is totally different from athletics. I've tried stepping onto the ice, and it's not easy for me."

Go-for-it girl

Born in Iowa, Tara chose to swap her American passport for an Indian one in 2019. The decision, however, wasn't driven by sporting ambitions — in fact, she had none at the time.

"At that point in my life, I wasn't serious about sports. The change was because I wanted to settle in India for good. I had no intention of getting on Team USA either — skating was just something I did for fun. It was only after I took a long sabbatical and came back to skating that I considered pursuing it seriously. By then, I already had an Indian passport," she recalls.

That break came between the ages of 16 and 20, when academics took priority over sports. Though she continued to follow the sport from a distance, it was the dream of competing in major championships — and believing she could — that eventually drew her back to the ice.

Her mother calls her a 'go-for-it girl'.

"If she decides to do something, she won't give up easily. She's very creative, and it's hard to understand her mind because it works so fast [laughs]," says Kavitha. Not stubborn — just determined, maybe. That determination shone through during one of Tara's toughest challenges: battling Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS).

"I was fainting a lot. It cost me a season. That's why, last year, I started competing later than everyone else — I had to take a long break," Tara says.

Since adopting Indian citizenship, Tara has earned considerable media coverage back home, including praise on social media from industrialist Anand Mahindra.

But fame brought its own set of challenges. "After the Asian Games and the Four Continents Championships, when I got a bit of public attention, there was also a rise in online

abuse. I'm not sure if it affected my personal visibility, but I do hope it brought more attention to winter sports," she shares. "It was just your average trolls — but you know how they can go to extremes. It ranged from mild insults to death threats." But Tara remained undeterred.

"I chose this path knowing the challenges. I won't give up," she wrote on *Instagram.* Above all, she just wants to skate.

Tara's many hats

Yet, the Computer Science and Machine Learning student at the University of Colorado is much more than just a figure skater.

If someone were to visit Tara's own website and navigate to the 'Fun Facts' section, they would find four aspirations standing out: help develop figure skating in India; travel and explore the world; own a business; climb the Diamond Face of Long's Peak.

"I hope my performances are helping to grow figure skating in India," she says. "The rest are just things I want to do in life. Climbing will have to wait until I'm done skating, because that's a tough challenge — especially that particular route — and it takes serious training. And yes, I'd love to own a business and be financially secure." Tara's entrepreneurial spirit shows in unexpected ways: she loves making hot sauces and is currently experimenting with a recipe that blends Indian flavours.

Beyond her main *Instagram* account, she runs two more — one dedicated to her beloved 1997 Mazda M-edition Miata, and another chronicling her climbing exploits.

"Climbing is kind of a weekly hobby for me. It's a way to make friends outside skating," she says. She also enjoys hiking, which doubles as cardio training.

As for skating, Tara creates her own routines and designs and sews her own costumes. In figure skating, she explains, choreography and costumes must complement the music's theme — a task she embraces with ease.

In the past, Tara has performed to Indian compositions like *Padmaavat's* soundtrack and A.R. Rahman's *Adheeraa*, and hopes to incorporate more Tamil music to her routines.

Recently, she's chosen personal favourites — which explains the recurring presence of Lord Huron's *The Night We Met*.

TARA CREATES HER OWN SKATING ROUTINES AND DESIGNS AND SEWS HER OWN COSTUMES

Poise and grace: Tara Prasad performs during the 2022 ISU Four Continents Figure Skating Championships at the Tondiraba Ice Hall in Tallinn. AFP

Bright start: Tara made her Winter Asian Games debut in Harbin, China, this year. She finished a creditable eighth out of 24 finalists. AFP

HER NEXT GOAL IS TO EARN INDIA A 2026 WINTER OLYMPICS QUOTA SPOT AT SEPTEMBER'S BEIJING QUALIFIER

'Best we've ever had'

A three-time national champion, Tara has witnessed a positive change first-hand during her trips to Gurugram's Ambience Mall for the nationals.

"A few years ago, when I'd walk in with my skates, the mall security had no idea why I was there. Now they know, and are like 'Okay, you're going to the rink'," she smiles.

While Tara clinched two silver medals last year at international tournaments in Iceland and Slovenia, her journey is far from complete. There's still much left for her to achieve. Former figure skater Ami Parekh once represented India at the World Championships twice — a benchmark Tara now hopes to surpass.

Yet, the secretary of the Ice Skating Association of India, Jagraj Singh Sahney, calls her "the best we've ever had". "The quality of her jumps and turns makes her untouchable."

Tara's next big target: securing India a quota spot for the 2026 Winter Olympics. The final chance will come at a qualifying event in Beijing this September. While she doesn't make promises of creating history, Tara remains committed to the sport. "Whatever happens in this qualification, I will definitely continue skating. I have personal goals that don't necessarily depend on the Olympics. There's so much more I want to explore."

Those personal goals include delving deeper into the artistic side of skating — the part she enjoys most. As Tara continues to scale a new peak nearly every week, she dreams of conquering the greatest one yet: becoming the first Indian figure skater to compete at the Winter Games.

Patterns in problems

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Chess problem in the early years of its evolution were mere puzzles with difficult and surprising keys. At the turn of last century these developed into single phase problems with good thematic content. The later part of the last century witnessed rapid development of multi-phase ideas with set play changed mates, tries and patterns. The search had always been on for greater economy of construction, profundity of ideas and clarity of expression. Reciprocal change, a basic pattern theme (presented in the last article) featured changed mates after two black defences. Cyclic shift presented in this article is yet another popular pattern theme involving three black defences.

A.Pituk,First prize
Bansika Bystrica Theme Ty 1958

Mate in two moves

In cyclic shift, in one phase,either in the set or try, three defences a,b,c are met by mates A,B,C and in the post key, you will be baffled to observe, that the mates for the same three defences appear in a different order B,C,A. The above problem, a constructional masterpiece, is the only cyclic shift, in mutate form in existence.

,Se play: 1….B any**(a)** 2.Bf6(**A**); 1…Kc5**(b)2.** Bxe3**(B)**;1…e5**(c)** 2.d4 **(C)**

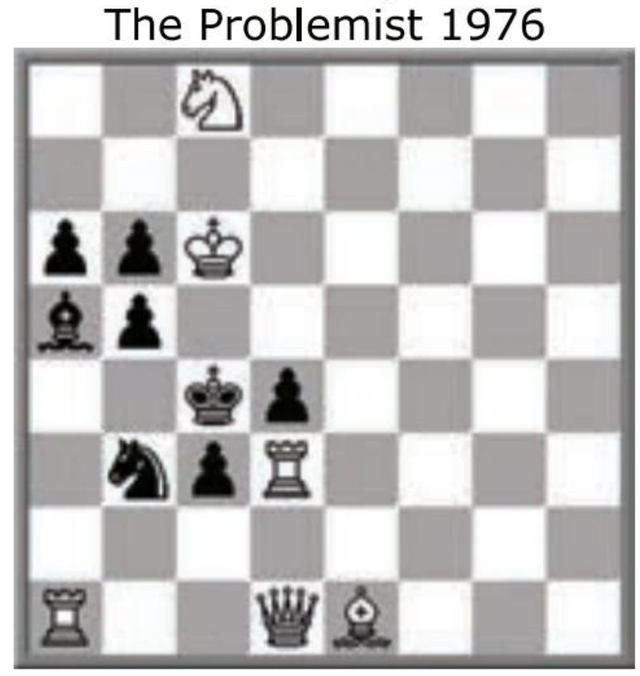
Key 1.Nd5! waiting
1…B any**(a)** 2.Bxe3**(B)**;1..Kc5 **(b)** 2.d4**(C)**;1…Ke5**(c)** 2.Bf6 **(A)**

Instead of mutate which poses lot of constraints in construction the same theme can be shown in try and key economically as below

R.E.Burger
I pr,American Chess Bulletin 1958

Mate in two moves
Try 1.Bb1? waiting
1….Kxc4 (a) 3.Qxa4 (A)
1…N random(b) 2.Qb5(B)
1…Ka3 (c) 2.Qe7(C)
Key 1.N(4)c3! Waiting
1…Kxc4 (a) 2.Qb5(B)
1…N random(b) 2.Qae7(C)
1…Ka3(c)2.QAxa4 (A)

A cyclic shift for solving
C.G.S.Narayanan
The Problemist 1976



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article' Reciprocal change of mates'
Set: 1….Ka6 2.Bxc4 (A) 1…axb4 2.Bxb7 (B) **Key 1.Qe4!** (2.Qxc4)
1…Ka6 2.Bxb7 (B) 1…axb4 2.Bxc4

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

ULTIMATE TABLE TENNIS
SEASON 6 REVIEW

Rising talent, better games — but the same old hurdles

Despite thrilling games and **breakout** Indian talent, UTT's sixth season faced familiar issues with attendance, timing, and team stability.

Maiden glory: U Mumba was crowned UTT Season 6 champion for the first time after defeating Jaipur Patriots in the final. VIJAY SONEJI

ATTRACTING MORE GLOBAL STARS AND TOP COACHES DOESN'T SEEM TO BE A CONCERN FOR UTT. INDIAN PADDLERS HAVE SHOWN MARKED IMPROVEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL RESULTS SINCE THE LEAGUE'S INCEPTION IN 2017

Nihit Sachdeva
nihit.s@thehindu.co.in

The broadcast equipment was boxed up. The chairs were covered and stacked. The centre of attention — the nine-feet-long, five-feet-wide, two-and-a-half-feet-high table — was disassembled. As the clock approached midnight on June 15, the indoor stadium at the EKA Arena in Ahmedabad was on the verge of complete dismantling.

For 16 days, the temporary venue had hosted the sixth season of the Ultimate Table Tennis (UTT) league, which ended with the crowning of a new champion, U Mumba, after its 8-4 win over Jaipur Patriots in a summit clash between two first-time finalists.

The franchise-based league, staged under the aegis of the Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI) and promoted by Niraj Bajaj and Vita Dani, had previously been held in Mumbai, Pune, New Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai. Ahmedabad's selection as the latest host served two purposes — reaching a new live audience and furthering the city's emergence as a hub for Olympic sports, particularly in the context of India's bid for the 2036 Summer Games.

In the previous season, held at the Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium in Chennai after the Paris Olympics, the majority of the 2,000 available seats were empty on most matchdays. In Ahmedabad, the capacity was halved for a more intimate setting. The cheapest ticket was priced at Rs 49, while premium hospitality ones went up to Rs 1,999.

Corporate tournaments were held as part of a pre-event local activation campaign, but as with UTT 5, there were days when the EKA Arena looked sparsely populated.

The recent tension between India and Pakistan, following the terror attack in Pahalgam, led to a rescheduling of the Indian Premier League (IPL) playoffs — one of the biggest events in Indian sport. The Eliminator (June 1) and the IPL Final (June 3), both held in Ahmedabad, clashed with two of the first four days of UTT 6. On both days, UTT hosted single ties starting at 5pm, two-and-a-half hours before the IPL matches — but the stands were nearly empty.

From June 4 to 7, a state-ranking

Standout players: World No. 12 Bernadette Szocs was one of the star attractions at this year's UTT. VIJAY SONEJI

tournament was being held in Bhavnagar, 170 km from Ahmedabad, which reduced the chances of local players and fans attending UTT in the opening phase.

However, fixtures involving tournament debutant Kolkata ThunderBlades had a vibrant atmosphere, thanks to an enthusiastic cheering squad and dholwalas supporting the baby-blue-clad team. The co-owners — Ketan Jain and Rajat Kumar, both former national-level players — set a fan engagement template later adopted by the Patriots.

The season ended on a relatively upbeat note, with around 500 spectators attending each of the two semifinals and a near-capacity crowd present for the final.

Also, with 20 million viewers tuning in across TV and OTT platforms last season, and a broadcast deal with JioStar running until 2027, the organisers may not be overly concerned about live audience numbers and might let that aspect evolve organically.

From a talent perspective, UTT 6 featured top international names like World No. 12 Bernadette Szocs, World No. 17 Adriana Díaz, World No. 25 Quadri Aruna, World No. 34 Ricardo Walther and World No. 42 Britt Eerland. For the first time since the inaugural edition in 2017, a Chinese player — Fan Siqi — participated. She was the most valuable player at UTT's first-ever auction in April.

For India, established players such as Harmeet Desai (Dempo Goa Challengers), Sreeja Akula (Jaipur Patriots), and G. Sathiyan (Dabang Delhi TTC) featured, but there were notable absentees. Ahmedabad SG Pipers' Manika Batra was ruled out two days before the tournament due to injury. Manav Thakkar and Manush Shah — the country's top two male paddlers and both Gujaratis — missed out due to commitments in foreign leagues. For a league built as a platform to boost Indian table tennis, their absence was a blow. At the same time, eight Indian players made their UTT debuts, with several putting in standout performances. U Mumba's Akash Pal, who didn't get a game in UTT 5, justified his retention by becoming the best Indian doubles player this season. P.B. Abhinandh, a 17-year-old from Chennai and a Mumbai franchise member, shocked Olympian Izaac Quek on debut, bagged a crucial game in the semifinal against the Challengers, and secured the title-winning point in the final. Youngsters Ankur Bhattacharjee, Yashaswini Ghorpade, and Diya Chitale also strengthened their claims as rising stars. A new Under-15 event titled Dream UTT Juniors, won by the ThunderBlades, was a welcome addition.

> « Top Indian paddlers Manav Thakkar and Manush Shah missed out due to overseas league commitments, hurting UTT's Indian focus »

High-octane: Dabang Delhi's Maria Xiao and G. Sathiyan in action against Goa Challengers' Zeng Jian and Harmeet Desai during UTT Season 6 in Ahmedabad. VIJAY SONEJI

The quality of play steadily improved. Both semifinals were tightly contested, with the second one decided on a Golden Point in the 15th and final game. In the league stage, 11 of 20 ties ended with either 8-7 or 9-6 scorelines. The semifinal qualification cut-off was 41 points — the highest in the last three seasons.

All eight teams fought fiercely for every point, and controversies naturally followed — over let calls, questionable service motions, and close edge-ball decisions that challenged even the keenest eyes.

"The review system was recently trialled at the ITTF World Cup and the ITTF World Championships but hasn't been implemented fully. Hopefully, once it becomes permanent on the WTT circuit, we may see it in upcoming UTT seasons too," said Desai.

Some coaches and players also advocated for the inclusion of one-minute timeouts, already standard on the international circuit.

John Murphy, coach of champion U Mumba, suggested a tweak to the tie format: "Instead of following the set sequence of men's singles, women's singles, mixed doubles, reverse men's singles and reverse women's singles, the team winning the toss should be allowed to choose whether to start with a male or female player. For a team like us with Bernadette Szocs, we'd want her to open the tie. It could also prevent the final singles from always being a women's match."

Jorg Bitzigeio, coach of the bottom-placed Stanley's Chennai Lions, called for an end to player retentions in future auctions. "Among Indian male players, two (Desai and Sathiyan) are strong in both singles and doubles, offering more tactical options. Others are either still developing in one format or the other. These two have always been retained [Sathiyan wasn't retained but stayed at Dabang]. It's better if there's no retention," he said.

Attracting more global stars and top coaches doesn't seem to be a concern for UTT.

Indian paddlers have shown marked improvement in international results since the league's inception in 2017 — winning 15 Commonwealth Games medals, three at the Asian Games, and seven at the Asian Championships.

But when it comes to the financial health of franchises, the picture is mixed. The league expanded from six to eight teams last year. For UTT 6, ThunderBlades replaced Bengaluru Smashers and Puneri Paltan rebranded as PBG Pune Jaguars.

"Goa have made money. Like that, if the franchises put in little effort, they'll all break even soon," said Dani on the morning of the final. "You may have noticed that many of these franchises now have started getting sponsors, reflected by their jerseys. That's a sign that people believe in our model, the game and the league as a property.

"Of course, it will take a little time but we are moving in the right direction and quickly. For us, as league owners, our ROI is in how Indian table tennis does more than financials because we are not here to only make money. It is more important that as a country, we do well."

Across six editions, there have been 16 franchises. Of these, only the Challengers have turned a profit — largely thanks to their back-to-back titles in 2023 and 2024.

MONTREAL LIGHTS SILVER SPARK

What George Russell needed was a clean, controlled weekend to fully show what he and the car were capable of. Canada provided **exactly that.**

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After several turbulent seasons that saw Mercedes slip down the pecking order — not to mention the departure of Lewis Hamilton, a monumental loss both on and off the track — the team entered the 2025 Formula One season with renewed confidence and improved pace. While still slightly off the benchmark set by the blistering McLaren duo and a relentless Max Verstappen, the Silver Arrows were firmly back in the mix, constantly grabbing points and staying in the fight, if not quite in the spotlight.The numbers paint a picture of a team on the rise. Mercedes has finished in the points in nearly every race this season, with just a handful of blemishes. The only clear blot came in Monaco, where strategic miscalculations left it out of position and scrambling to recover — a rare off-weekend in an otherwise decent campaign.

George Russell **(in pic, left)** has been the clear team leader, doing most of the heavy lifting while allowing his young and upcoming teammate, Kimi Antonelli **(in pic, right)**, to come up to speed with the complexities of F1. In the first nine rounds, the 27-year-old has notched eight top-10 finishes and missed the points just once. He's also brought home four podiums, including a strong second-place finish earlier in the year in Bahrain.

The pace has always been there; what Russell needed was a clean, controlled weekend to fully show what he and the car were capable of. Canada provided exactly that.

Making it count

Returning to a circuit where he'd made headlines a year ago — by taking pole over Verstappen with an identical lap time, simply by crossing the line first — Russell made sure there would be no such fine margins this time. He took pole with a dominant qualifying performance, clearly ousting Verstappen.

On race day, Russell backed it up with a commanding display from the front. He controlled the race from start to finish, keeping Verstappen at bay without ever needing to get defensive, thanks to clinical pace, tyre management, and a car that delivered under pressure when it truly mattered. A late-race Safety Carneutralised the field, but by then, the job was done. Russell, who had to settle for third a year ago, cruised to his fourth career win — his first since the Las Vegas Grand Prix in November 2024.

While Russell carried the bulk of the team's points, Mercedes also watched with pride

as Antonelli came into his own. Just 18 years old and in his debut season, he is quickly proving he belongs on this stage.

Starting from P4, Antonelli launched a fierce attack from the opening lap, managing to snatch third place from Oscar Piastri, the championship leader. For Antonelli, it wasn't just a shot at a podium finish but also the determination to end a string of poor results over the previous three rounds. When the chequered flag fell under the Safety Car, Antonelli secured his maiden Formula One podium, becoming the third-youngest driver to do so at 18 years and 294 days.

But while Mercedes had a near-perfect weekend, drama unfolded elsewhere — particularly within McLaren.

A costly collision

Heading into Montreal, the intra-team battle between Piastri and Lando Norris had been heating up. Just 10 points separated the pair, and McLaren had committed to the 'papaya rules', a 'let them race' approach, encouraging clean, respectful on-track competition without the interference of team orders. But it could carry serious implications for the championship.

It was on lap 67 that things took a turn. Piastri, chasing Antonelli for third, found himself closely followed by Norris. The Briton had already made one failed attempt to pass, and on his second try, down the start-finish straight, he misjudged his braking, approaching with too much speed and too little caution. Norris clipped the rear of Piastri's car and then hit the wall, suffering extensive damage and retiring on the spot.

It was a moment reminiscent of McLaren's own mishap at the same track — when Hamilton collided with Jenson Button in 2011. This incident, too, could carry long-term consequences. While Norris was quick to take full responsibility for the mistake, the incident was more than just an unfortunate racing moment.

It was a significant blow to his title challenge, especially in a season where his form has already been shaky. In contrast, Piastri escaped without damage, held onto fourth place, and extended his championship lead to 22 points — a major swing at a crucial juncture in the season.

Momentum shift

With the race finishing under the Safety Car, Russell and Verstappen, two drivers who have built a reputation for their sharp on- and off-track duels, did experience a bit of friction.

Off-track: Lando Norris exits his battered car after the collision. AP

Though there was a moment of dispute where they bickered over their driving behind the SC, they crossed the line in the same order they started: Russell first, Verstappen second. There were no last-lap fireworks this time, just a well-managed win for Mercedes and another strong result for Red Bull.

For Mercedes, though, this victory meant more than just 25 points. It was proof that its rebuild is bearing fruit. The car is getting quicker, and the blend of experience in Russell and promise in Antonelli is starting to deliver results. While they're still a step behind the absolute leaders, the Silver Arrows are closing the gap, setting themselves up for a more positive season.

THREE-PEAT FOR FERRARI AT LE MANS

Ferrari took victory at the 2025 24 Hours of Le Mans, securing a historic three-peat in the prestigious event. The #83 AF Corse was driven by former F1 driver Robert Kubica **(in pic)**, Yifei Ye and Phil Hanson, and it was the first outright privateer win at Le Mans since 2005. Along with being the third different Ferrari to win in as many years, it was the third different driver line-up. Kubica, the first Pole to win this event, produced the heroics, as the former Grand Prix-winner completed 43 per cent of the winning car's laps, while Ye became the first Chinese winner and Hanson, the 35th British victor.

VALIANT VALORANT

As the game completed five years, Riot Games **organised a campaign** named V5 to celebrate players from South Asia, who comprise over five million of VALORANT's gamer base.

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First-person shooting (FPS) games in India broke the ice with Counter-Strike 1.6. The navigation around Dust II and Inferno created a buzz like no other in the early 2000s.

Youngsters packed cybercafes, gaming parlours counted currency notes as the gaming industry ballooned in the country.

Eventually, PUBG [PlayerUnknown Battlegrounds] arrived, creating another avenue for battle royale games in the Indian market. Thanks to the 4G boom after 2016, serious gaming no longer remained sequestered on laptops, PCs and PlayStations, spiralling into mobile phones and tablets.

With over 17 million users in the esports industry, the obvious question was, what more can come out of this avenue?

It was then that Riot Games, the developer of League of Legends, came up with VALORANT in 2020 – an FPS that bridged the gap between the style of play of Counter-Strike (precision shooting) and Overwatch (arcade-based game with characters having unique abilities).

India at that time was reeling from a PUBG ban; the government had banned the game, citing security concerns.

The gap for gamers and esports enthusiasts was quickly filled by VALORANT, which revived PC gaming again. Cyber cafes, which were slowly getting emptier with the rise of mobile gaming, saw people get back together. The archetype of a gamer — a nerd sitting alone and playing with a controller – was shattered. Valorant became a game with the added flavour of community bonding.

"It's a great ecosystem. Riot is a great partner, and it's a very simple zero-to-hero story. The Challenger Series in India right now is the most-watched Challenger Series in the world," Akshat Rathee (right), the founder of NODWIN Gaming, tells

VALORANT INDIA RANKINGS

ABHIRUP "LIGHTNINGFAST" CHOUDHURY

VENKATESH "VENKA" SHARMA

YUVRAJ "YUVI" SINGH

RISHI "RVK" VIJAYAKUMAR

VISHWARATN "LILBOII" SRIVASTAV

Sportstar. "I think this will only get bigger. The constituent elements – from grassroots, local championships to the Asian championships and then a team at all these levels. That's what I call a full-stack tournament sector. "

"I think the opportunity is to see if we can go out and get a world championship to come to India. And our next pursuit would be to try to go over and get that done. Because if we can go out and get that done, again, that cycle starts happening where internationals will be coming to India. We've done this before when we wanted to go into ESL — one in Mumbai. We've gone and done this with all the big tournaments that NODWIN does at our level. It's a formula that works for us, and that's the next step for VALORANT," Rathee adds.

As the game completed five years, Riot Games organised a campaign named V5 to celebrate players from South Asia, who comprise over five million of VALORANT's gamer base.

The campaign also involved a cheeky marketing jibe in Kota, the hub of students preparing for competitive exams.

On its official launch date, June 2, which also happened to be the day when the results of IIT-Joint Entrance Examinations (JEE-Advance) were announced.

Riot Games rolled out its own billboards, not for engineering aspirants but for 'VAL Toppers', the Radiant-ranked VALORANT players, honouring them with the same visual fanfare usually reserved for toppers in competitive exams.

"V5 is our 'Thank You' to a generation of players who made VALORANT their own," said Arun Rajappa, country manager, Riot Games India & South Asia. "Whether you're top-fragging in ranked matches or reminiscing over your first LAN, this campaign is about your story."

Did you know? Former Manchester United goalkeeper and two-time Europa League winner David de Gea is the owner of esports organisation Rebels Gaming.

RONALDO AND SON-HEUNG MIN CONTINUE ESPORTS PRESENCE OF PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALLERS

Portugal legend Cristiano Ronaldo may still be scoring goals and winning trophies at will, but his presence in esports continues to rise. Earlier this year, he was announced as a playable character in the popular Japanese fighting game Fatal Fury: City of the Wolves. On June 13, he was announced as the Global Ambassador of the inaugural Esports World Cup, set to be played in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, between July 8 to August 24.

South Korea and Tottenham Hotspur star Son Heung-Min is another footballer who looks to enter the esports scene through a collaboration with Fortnite.

WHO AM I?

Once one of the most popular pro Dota 2 players from India, I retired from the game in 2020 and pivoted to mobile MOBAs, becoming a top Pokémon UNITE player with Revenant XSpark.

The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Jonathan Jude Amaral

BUSINESS OF
ESPORTS

Riot Games secured a strategic partnership with marketing agency, T/SQUARED, to enhance sponsorship sales and business development for its key esports properties in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (EMEA).

EASTER EGG
'FRAG'

Frag refers to neutralising someone in a death match. Typically, it means killing a competitor virtually and temporarily in a gaming contest.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

A LASS IN VEGAS

Krishna Jayasankar is now the **first Indian** woman to compete in the NCAA finals.

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It's rare for a 23-year-old to stay away from social media for as long as she has, but a few weeks ago, Krishna Jayasankar Menon finally opened an *Instagram* account in her name. And, she's already receiving plenty of messages — for good reason.

On June 14, with her opening throw in the women's discus at the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Championships, the 23-year-old etched her name into Indian sporting history. Representing the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), she became the first Indian woman to compete in the final of the NCAA Track and Field Championships — the premier collegiate athletics competition in the United States and widely regarded as the highest level of college sport worldwide.

Another Indian, Sharvari Parulekar, also matched Krishna's milestone of competing in the NCAA finals and became the second Indian woman to do so. She took part in the women's triple jump in Oregon, just about half an hour after Krishna's event.

While the number of Indian athletes competing in the NCAA has been growing in recent years, there are still only a handful who have competed at its highest level. Krishna and Sharvari are just the fifth and sixth Indian track and field athletes ever to make the NCAA finals, following the likes of Mohinder Gill, Vikas Gowda, Tejaswin Shankar and Lokesh Sathyanathan.

As the clock ticked down to her event, Krishna was raring to go. "I

Giant strides: Competing in a strong field, Krishna made a throw of 52.99m to take 18th place in the NCAA finals.

Pics: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

had heard so much about Hayward Field. This is where the World Championships were held (in 2022). I wanted to show up and show how much work I've put in. It's a great honour to represent my country, India, my family and the entire UNLV University," said Krishna, who had qualified for the NCAA finals by finishing in the top 12 at the West First Rounds in Cushing, Texas, on May 31 with her career-best throw of 55.61m.

But while she was coming off her personal best, Krishna, the overall 12th-ranked thrower in the USA collegiate circuit, was aware that competition at Hayward Field was going be tough.

The field at the NCAA finals included Paris Olympian Jayden Ullrich who finished seventh with a throw of 60.25m, and Cierra Jackson, the eventual winner with a throw of 64.82m.

Krishna made a throw of 52.99m to take 18th place but says she is still going to count her blessings.

"It's a win just because I was competing in Eugene itself. This is a win not just for me but also for the 12-year-old girl who dreamt of going to the United States, who dreamt of living this life, and is actually living this life. I wanted to make that 12-year-old in me proud — that she made all the sacrifices she had to, overcame all the adversities and obstacles she faced, and broke all the barriers she did to become the woman she is today," says Krishna.

Trained to win: Standing at 5'10", Krishna is a powerfully-built athlete, with a 225kg quarter squat and a 100kg clean and jerk among her numbers in the weight room.

Body image issues

Growing up in Chennai, it was probably inevitable that Krishna, the daughter of Jayasankar Menon and his wife Prasanna — both of whom captained the Indian basketball team — would have potential as a sportsperson. While her father is 6'5", her mother is 5'9". Krishna has got the best of both sides of that gene pool. Standing a statuesque 5'10", she is a powerfully-built athlete, with a 225kg quarter squat and a 100kg clean and jerk among her numbers in the weight room.

However, the physique that has made her one of India's top throwers had her dealing with bullying and body image issues during her childhood. "I think there are a very few people who actually have the same body type as me. And because I didn't fit the perception of how an Indian woman looks, I was made fun of. I was fat-shamed by my classmates. I actually loved dancing — I was even part of the school dance team — but there were so many opportunities I was deprived of because I didn't fit the perfect realm of how an Indian woman looked," she says.

During her schooling in Chennai, Krishna was nudged into the throws event for the same reason. "I actually started throwing the shot put when I was in fifth grade because my PT teacher thought I was the right size and shape for it. She was just trying to look out for some people who were very tall and stocky. And I fell into that category because I was

taller than my entire fifth grade group. That's the perception people have — if you are tall and a little plump, you'll probably be good as a thrower," she says.

Although she hadn't organically chosen the event, Krishna would learn to love it. "I actually started with the shot put and I became fascinated by the way it left my hand and how I was able to make it fly with so much power. I liked how strong it made me feel. That's how I fell in love with track and field," she says.

It wasn't a wrong choice. Krishna would go on to compete and win medals in the shot put at the CBSE state level and break the CBSE national record. Eventually, with the intention of developing as an athlete, Krishna enrolled in the Tenvic Academy — the sports academy founded by former Indian cricketer Anil Kumble — in Guntur.

It was there that Krishna would first meet Jamaican throws coach Michael Vassell. "Until then I'd only ever thrown the shot. But he was the first one who suggested that I had a wide enough wingspan and could throw the discus too. That's when I really started competing in the discus," she says.

That wasn't the only thing Vassell suggested to Krishna. "He was the first coach who suggested that I could consider applying for a sports scholarship to compete in the NCAA. That was the first time I learned that it was even a possibility — that I could study in the USA. That was when the dream first came to me," says Krishna.

Jamaican journey

That dream persisted even after Tenvic shut down during the pandemic, and Krishna returned to Chennai. "At that time I was really desperate to compete in the NCAA, but I wasn't sure how that would happen. And then coach Vassell suggested I come and compete for some time in Jamaica," she says. Krishna's parents had taken their time to agree to her training in Guntur. Jamaica was all the way across the world. But Krishna was adamant. It was a decision that changed her life.

"Going to Jamaica gave me the kind of exposure I needed to make the move to the NCAA. Many US coaches, because of the proximity and the reputation of Jamaican track and field, are interested in working with Jamaican athletes. A lot of coaches come there personally to recruit athletes," she says.

It wasn't that there were no challenges. "Jamaica took some getting used to. I was an 18-year-old Indian girl. Jamaica is a beautiful country that I consider my second home, but there is the safety aspect I couldn't ignore. I was staying with coach Vassell at his home, and I'd travel an hour by public bus every day to go to school and train.

"As a kid in India, I was always pampered, and my parents were

All in the family: Krishna's parents — Jayasankar Menon and Prasanna — have been national basketball captains.

always there to help me if I had any challenges. But in Jamaica, I was almost on my own. I learned what independent life meant. I was a girl when I went to Jamaica but became a woman when I left, because I matured so much," she says.

Krishna competed in a number of national-level competitions in Jamaica and even managed to throw a then personal best of 48.27m at the Olympic Destiny Series 3 in Kingston. It was one of a number of performances in Jamaica that eventually helped Krishna earn a scholarship to the University of Texas in El Paso.

But just because she had accomplished her dream of studying and competing in the NCAA didn't mean everything that followed would be smooth sailing. After her first year, she transferred to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Just as she made the move, the then throws coach Dorian Scott — who had recruited her in the first place — was relieved of his duties.

For the next year, Krishna was without a coach. Matters worsened after she picked up multiple injuries that prevented her from competing at all. "2023 was very tough for me. There was a span of several months where I had no clarity as to who's going to coach me, what's going to work. Then I ended up fracturing my hand while doing a box jump. Before that, I'd also torn my shoulder when I was leaving the University of Texas at El Paso. It was very strange," she says.

That season, says Krishna, was one of the lowest periods of her athletic career. She worked on improving her mental health and, with sport not in the picture, attempted to focus on her studies — even making the dean's list that year.

While she eventually recovered from her injury and also started working with a new coach, things were slow to improve. Following a poor season, she lost part of her scholarship in 2024 and has had to take up a part-time job.

Currently, Krishna works at a sports stadium to cover some of her expenses while still maintaining her grade average and training routine. There are days when Krishna admits she questions what she's doing at all. "It's not easy. Some days I'll call my dad or my mother, my sister or my psychologist and I'll be crying. I didn't think I signed up for this. I had a really nice life in Chennai. I was safe, and my mother and father were always there to take care of me. But I always remind myself that I had to take this path. I wanted to be different. I've always felt that life really starts when you step outside your comfort zone," she says.

Turnaround season

Things have begun to turn around for Krishna this year. She's recorded personal bests in both the shot put and the discus — the latter breaking a 26-year-old school record with a throw of 55.22m.

"What helped my technique in both events was that I actually got very strong in the gym. I'm maximising the speed at which I'm making my lifts. That has really helped me. There are also a few technical corrections that Coach Jordan Roach and I have worked on. I'm trying to be as patient as I can when I enter the ring and rotate. I'm also focusing on how I land in the middle. I am trying to land at a particular angle. There were times I would extend myself to the left sector of the ring and foul most of my throws," she says.

That improvement in strength and technique has brought about an improvement in form that's come at exactly the right time. As an NCAA athlete, she was eligible for five years of competition, meaning the NCAA national finals will be the last outdoor competition of her collegiate career. While her NCAA outdoor season might have ended for now, Krishna has longer-term goals too.

"I definitely want to compete at the 2028 Olympics. I'm going to start my Masters in Sports Management at UNLV, but I will be taking the time to come to India to compete next year so I can make the Indian team for the 2026 Commonwealth and Asian Games. But what I really want to do is compete at the 2028 Olympics," she says.

While the big throws and medals are all great, perhaps what Krishna is most grateful for is the way she now perceives herself. "When I compare myself to who I was when I was 12 or 13 years old, I can't recognise myself. That young girl would constantly seek validation from people. I'd always think, 'Oh my God, should I buy this? Would this look good on me?' Those were constant mental challenges. "But ever since I've started college, I've met people who really envied the way I looked. They saw my achievements and saw my inner beauty as a person. That stood out more than just how my body looked," she says.

There are those from her past who notice her living her best life as well. "A lot of the same people who made fun of me and spoke badly about me are now commenting on my *Instagram* saying how I 'made it'. They've reached out and are saying great things about me. It shouldn't matter, but I smile when I see those messages. When your haters have to talk good about you — that's a W right there," she says.

Looking ahead: While her NCAA outdoor season might have ended for now, Krishna has longer-term goals too, like competing in the Commonwealth and Asian Games and the Olympics.

Unranked, undermined, undeterred

A team once outside the top 100 is now ranked 52 — India's volleyball players have **earned their moment,** even if the system has done little to help them get there.

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The Indian men's volleyball team deserves more credit than it has received in recent times — for what it has achieved despite a system that has offered little support.

Since the Sports Ministry formed an ad-hoc Committee for the Volleyball Federation of India in June 2023, there have been very few exposure trips for the national team.

Yet, against all odds, the team proved its critics wrong with a commendable performance at the 2023 Asian Games in September.

India topped Pool C, defeating Cambodia, three-time champion and 2018 silver medallist Korea, and 2018 bronze medallist Chinese Taipei, before falling to World No. 5 Japan in the quarterfinals.

Following the Asian Games, the ad-hoc Committee continued to function, but the national team saw little action in terms of competitive tournaments.

So when the Central Asian Volleyball Association (CAVA) Nations Men's League — moved from Islamabad to Fergana, Uzbekistan due to security concerns — came around, few gave India a chance. It was India's first appearance in the tournament, now in its third edition, and notably the first time world ranking points were allocated by the FIVB.

Defying expectations, India — featuring debutants K. Anand (libero) and M. C. Mujeeb (blocker) — exceeded predictions once again, reaching the final before losing to World No. 15 Iran.

This was a significant result for a team ranked 52 in the world, having languished outside the top 100 not long ago. Much of the credit goes to head coach Dragan Mihailovic, a FIVB Instructor and High-Performance coach from Serbia.

Senior players Ashwal Rai, A. Muthusamy, and Jerome Vinith, who played key roles in India's campaign, spoke highly of Mihailovic's methods.

"Their (foreigners') system is different compared to Indian coaches. The main thing is analysing. And they concentrate on every position such as outside hitter, opposite, blocker. They analyse everyone and show videos of opponents and our play," said blocker Ashwal Rai.

Setter A. Muthusamy echoed Ashwal's view.

"He was positive and though the Bengaluru camp was short (three weeks), we were positive. The competition within the team was tough as there was fight for each position. Dragan did a great job in getting the team together," he said.

Muthusamy also noted areas for improvement.

"Our blockers were brilliant and played a huge role in us doing well," he said. "But we need to improve in service and receiving."

Attacker Jerome Vinith highlighted the tactical leap under Mihailovic.

"Dragan added many new things. A lot of new techniques were introduced by the Serbian, not just in using power but how to use it skillfully. He taught us the way to reach international volleyball," said Jerome.

Placed in Pool A alongside Iran, host Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, India began with a 1-3 loss to Iran before securing wins over the remaining teams to finish second in the group.

Pakistan topped Pool B, followed by Kazakhstan.

Punching above weight: Defying expectations, India exceeded expectations once again, reaching the final before losing to World No. 15 Iran. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

In the crossover round, India defeated Pakistan 3-0 to book a place in the semifinals, while Iran overpowered Kazakhstan with the same margin.

The match against Pakistan was emotionally charged. After the win, several Indian players carried the national flag around the venue in celebration.

"A lot of emotions were there and against Pakistan, such emotions are always there. Because, you know about India-Pakistan and the recent issues between the two countries, we had to beat them and qualify for semifinals. The Indian fans were there and they supported us, by chanting *'Vande Mataram'*, Ashwal recalled.

Against Kazakhstan in the semifinals, India was visibly fatigued following the intense Pakistan clash the night before.

"Our match against Pakistan was in the evening and by the time we finished and reached the hotel it was pretty late in the night. We were a bit tired. We used our bench strength against Kazakhstan. And it worked. It was purely a team effort," said Jerome.

Head coach Dragan emphasised the need for structural support to close the gap with teams like Iran. He pointed out that Iran's B-team — composed of medal-winning youth, junior, and Under-21 players — participated in the CAVA League.

"The biggest difference is the international experience and the duration of the Iranian league. Their players play between 50 and 75 strong matches per year, for which we need another five to ten years!" he told *Sportstar*. On the road ahead, Dragan was clear.

"The recipe is very simple — to keep the team together for a longer time and give it the opportunity to play more friendly and official matches. We have the potential to be a top-25 team in the world."

The 62-year-old coach had one final note that spoke for the entire squad.

"All the 24 players (who were at the national camp in Bengaluru for the CAVA Men's Nations League) selected deserve better treatment."

INDIA RESULTS:

Gold medal match: Iran bt India 25-17, 25-20, 25-17; Bronze medal: Pakistan bt Kazakhstan 25-19, 23-25, 25-16, 25-22.

Pool 'A': Iran bt India 20-25, 25-19, 25-19, 25-22; India bt Uzbekistan 25-18, 25-16, 25-20; India bt Turkmenistan 27-29, 25-21, 25-19, 25-18;

Crossover round: India bt Pakistan 25-15, 25-19, 25-23; Semifinals: India bt Kazakhstan 26-24, 23-25, 25-21, 15-13.

FOR MORE STORIES

HOUDINI ACT

Carlos Alcaraz produced a **scintillating comeback,** rallying from two sets down to defeat World No. 1 Jannik Sinner in a French Open final for the ages.

Marathon madness: At 5 hours and 29 minutes, this was the second longest Grand Slam final. AP

Paul Fein

With Carlos Alcaraz undefeated 4-0 in Grand Slam finals and Jannik Sinner 3-0, the boxing catchphrase — 'Somebody's 0 has to go' — applied to the young heavyweight titans of tennis before their eagerly anticipated clash. That was just one of the dynamic elements that would make their spectacular 4-6, 6-7 (4), 6-4, 7-6 (3), 7-6 (2) duel the greatest ever at Roland Garros.

Staged at a Grand Slam event — where old reputations hang in the balance and new legends are born — the encounter was a battle between contrasting playing styles and personalities — the go-for-broke and entertaining shot-making of the charismatic Spaniard versus the relentless power of the poker-faced Italian. Although Alcaraz had won their last four matches and led their rivalry 7-4, Sinner had captured the previous two Majors, ranked No. 1 for 50 straight weeks, and hadn't dropped a set on the *terre battue* in six matches, including a semifinal win over Novak Djokovic, the sport's GOAT.

The 124th edition of Roland Garros began with a poignant ceremony honouring Rafael Nadal before 10,000 cheering fans, many wearing orange T-shirts with '*Merci*' emblazoned on them. Complementing the eye-catching 10-foot, stainless steel statue of the King of Clay were Nadal's footprint and the iconic '14' etched on the red clay of Court Chatrier. Players talented enough to compete on the marquee court can now find inspiration from Rafa's 14 French Open singles titles, a record that will surely never be broken.

Alcaraz, who, as a boy, idolised the Spanish legend, said, "Rafa has destroyed all the records here." With two RG titles and five overall at age 22, might this brilliant, dedicated athlete who excels on all surfaces someday challenge Nadal's 22 Grand Slam titles? After all, in the short term anyway, Alcaraz will likely have only one superstar rival to contend with, not two as the legendary Big Three had. Further, the gap between the new Big Two and the field keeps growing as Alcaraz and Sinner keep improving. In a nutshell, Alcaraz has become more consistent, and Sinner more versatile. They've divvied up the last six Grand Slam titles since Djokovic, now 38, claimed his 24th and last one at the 2023 US Open. And during these 15 days in Paris, no opponent seriously threatened either superstar.

Musetti no match for Alcaraz

Alcaraz, prone to occasional lapses in concentration and consistency, dropped sets in four-set victories over Fabian Marozsan, Damir Dzumhur, and 13th seed Ben Shelton before crushing Tommy Paul. The Spanish magician has produced plenty of astounding shots in his young career, but a winner against Shelton was too amazing to be true. Lunging for a backhand volley out of his reach for Shelton's passing shot, Alcaraz threw his racket, which contacted the ball and propelled it just over the net for a fluke winner. Alcaraz honourably informed the umpire what happened — which violated the rules — and she awarded the point to Shelton, giving the American a break point. He also called a serve 'in' that the linesperson had erroneously called otherwise, again resulting in a changed call favouring his opponent. These gestures earned Alcaraz the tournament sportsmanship award in my book.

In the semifinals, Alcaraz faced Musetti, whom he had decisively defeated in their last

« IF THERE HAD BEEN ANY LINGERING DOUBTS ABOUT THEIR TOTAL DOMINATION, THE NEW BIG TWO EMPHATICALLY DISPELLED THEM. THIS GRAND SLAM FINAL WOULD BE THEIR FIRST AGAINST EACH OTHER, AND IT PROVED TO BE HISTORIC »

Is this it?: Novak Djokovic hinted he may have played his last French Open this year. GETTY IMAGES

five matches. The immensely talented but relatively light-hitting Italian earned a bronze medal at the Paris Olympics on these courts and had racked up a career-best 19-3 record on the European clay court circuit, reaching the final at Monte Carlo and semis at Madrid and Rome.

"Alcaraz has such an MPH advantage in every stroke," all-time great and *Tennis Channel* analyst Martina Navratilova said. "On clay, a [backhand] one-hander has so much trouble against Alcaraz's power." As the inspired Italian easily held serve for 5-4, Jim Courier, the former No. 1 and *TNT Sports* analyst, said, "Musetti **(right)** can thump backhands and find angles with it. He has the best one-handed backhand now." Looking rattled, Alcaraz erred on three forehands — his signature weapon — and dropped the first set 6-4.

The momentum switched in the second set tie-break when Alcaraz pummelled and broke down Musetti's vulnerable backhand to take it 7-3. After the Spanish maestro held serve at love to go ahead 1-0 in the third set and whacked a forehand winner to start the next game, *TNT* guest analyst Andre Agassi said, "Vamos Man is finding the range. He's hitting the ball harder and earlier." Indeed, he was, and like a battered boxer, Musetti couldn't take much more punishment. Suffering from a painful hamstring injury, he lost 23 of the last 30 points and threw in the towel. The final score: 4-6, 7-6 (3), 6-0, 2-0 retired.

REUTERS

The other and more intriguing semifinal featured the best player in history against the best player now. Could Djokovic defy Father Time one more time against Sinner, a player with a strikingly similar game but 15 years younger?

Nerves of steel

Despite playing only his third tournament of the year due to a three-month drug suspension, Sinner had shown no signs of rust, except perhaps in shot selection during his 7-6 (5), 6-1 loss to Alcaraz in the Rome final three weeks earlier. The Sinner-Djokovic rivalry was

deadlocked at 4-4, but the Italian had, tellingly, won their last three matches. From the get-go, Sinner bludgeoned the ball so hard that Djokovic gave precious ground. His average hit point during groundstroke rallies of one foot behind the baseline during his six previous matches increased to 4.5 feet. During the Serb's storied career, he'd been the great adapter and the best at turning defence into offence. But overpowered and out-steadied, Djokovic dropped the opening set 6-4.

Chants of "Nole! Nole!" revitalised the gallant but ageing Serb. And he finally broke serve for 5-5, ending Sinner's amazing 45 straight holds against the greatest serve returner in tennis history. The breathtaking shot-making that both protagonists made look routine got even better in the critical 11th game, which ended with Sinner's dynamic swinging forehand volley winner. That service break put Sinner ahead 6-5.

During the changeover, Djokovic took a three-minute medical time-out, and the physio treated his left thigh. After Sinner held serve to wrap up the second set 7-5, Patrick McEnroe said, "Now we'll see what Djokovic has left. We know he has the heart. We know he has the will. But does he have the legs?"

Djokovic had rebounded from two sets down eight times before, but in the twilight of his 21-year career, this would prove his most daunting challenge. Never the crowd favourite when he faced Roger Federer anywhere and Nadal here, Djokovic became the sentimental favourite, as ageing champions often do. With Sinner serving at 4-5, Djokovic created three set points. The crowd roared after each of them. But Sinner calmly staved them all off. When Djokovic held serve for 6-5 with a 98-mph forehand winner and an ace, the crowd did the wave as a tribute to both competitors.

In the tie-break, two backhand errors and a shanked smash into the net gave Sinner a 3-0 lead. This time, chants of "Nole! Nole!" reverberating around the stadium could not lift the tiring Djokovic. Sinner seized the tie-break 7-3 and won the high-quality, 3-hour and 16-minute match 6-4, 7-5, 7-6 (3).

Djokovic smiled, acknowledged the prolonged applause with a tap to the heart, and thanked the crowd. The three-time French Open champion and four-time runner-up then knelt down and kissed the red clay. Was it a good-bye kiss? He said he didn't know.

Summit proportions

If there had been any lingering doubts about their total domination, the new Big Two emphatically dispelled them on June 8. This Grand Slam final would be their first against each other and the first between two men born in the 2000s. And it proved to be historic.

When Sinner saved his sixth break point in the opening set with a 105-mph forehand winner, an awed John McEnroe said, "Hitting forehands in triple digits was unheard of not long ago." Alcaraz countered with a rocket forehand winner to get another break point, which he converted. This was video game tennis on clay, as both players overpowered the sport's slowest surface and often their opponent in rapid-fire exchanges that pushed their racket skills, court speed, and athleticism to almost superhuman limits. The Spaniard lost his concentration in the 10th game, making four unforced errors, to give away the set, 6-4.

It was too soon for Alcaraz fans to panic as their hero had lost the first set in four of his last five matches, yet went on to win them all. But they had to worry when Sinner, like a speeding freight train, raced ahead 3-0 in the second set. Alcaraz — desperate for a service break and ignited by chants of "Carlos! Carlos!" — attacked furiously and forced three Sinner errors to break for 5-4 Sinner. Three more service holds made it 6-all and tiebreak time. Both had excelled in tiebreaks this season with Sinner 6-1 and Alcaraz 9-3. The Italian took this one 7-4 with a blazing cross-court forehand that overpowered Alcaraz's vaunted forehand.

Alcaraz was 0-8 after losing the first two sets at a Major. On the other hand, he was a brilliant 12-1 in five-set matches, losing only to Matteo Berrettini at the 2022 Australian Open, while Sinner was 1-5 in his previous six five-setters.

Alcaraz vented his frustration at his player box after losing his serve to start the third set. But the tide turned quickly as he broke Sinner's serve three times, the last at love. Alcaraz clinched the 6-4 set with an unreturnable forehand volley into the open court.

Back in business: Despite playing only his third tournament of the year due to a three-month drug suspension, Sinner had shown no signs of rust. GETTY IMAGES

Time after time, both unleashed haymakers. They had already hammered seven forehands each over 100 mph! Serving at 4-5 in the fourth set, Alcaraz self-destructed with backhand and forehand errors and a double fault. Suddenly, he was down Triple Championship Point!

He escaped the first with a strong, deep forehand cross-court that forced a Sinner forehand error. He saved the second when Sinner recklessly overhit a backhand service return past the baseline. And he got lucky on the third when Sinner underhit a mid-court forehand that he should have belted and netted the next forehand. At 40-all, Alcaraz hit an ace and a forehand winner on the dead run to hold serve. Disaster averted!

Riding that momentum and increasingly louder cries of "Carlos! Carlos!" the Spaniard broke for 5-all. "This is going to be a tall order for Sinner now, even though he's ahead," said McEnroe. That order became even taller when Alcaraz took the fourth-set tiebreak 7-3 on a forehand approach winner. McEnroe called the great escape "definitely a Houdini act."

Alcaraz served for the match at 5-4 in the fifth. This time it was Sinner who escaped from the jaws of defeat. He sprinted forward and scraped up a superb Alcaraz drop shot to conjure an even better drop shot that landed inches from the net. That made the score 15-40. The Italian converted the critical break point with a powerful backhand service return that forced a forehand error.

Fittingly, two games later, a 10-point Match Tiebreak would decide this epic match. Nobody is better than Alcaraz when he plays his A+ game. Going into lockdown mode and striking the ball better than ever, Alcaraz streaked to a 7-0 lead. The most spectacular and unusual shot came when Sinner struck a solid backhand approach down the line. Anticipating it and displaying the

COCO GAUFF'S SHOT VARIETY AND FOOT SPEED BROKE DOWN ARYNA SABALENKA'S POWER-BALL GAME AND POISE

extreme athleticism of a football wide receiver and a baseball shortstop, Alcaraz leapt laterally through no-man's-land, intercepted it, and created a jaw-dropping forehand cross-court volley winner. "He does the seemingly impossible on the court," John said.

The charismatic Spaniard clinched the match tiebreak 10-2 with yet another super shot — an unforgettable forehand winner à la Nadal — to finish one of the greatest comebacks in tennis history.

After 5 hours and 29 minutes — the second longest in time for a Grand Slam final — Sinner had won one more point, 193 to 192. But Alcaraz had performed better on the big points, most notably the three championship points. Ultimately, the difference was belief. "I just believe all the time," Alcaraz said. "I never have doubts about myself, even in those match points down. I thought just one point at a time."

GAUFF OUTDUELS SABALENKA TO WIN FIRST FRENCH OPEN

Although Coco Gauff's 6-7, 6-2, 6-4 victory over Aryna Sabalenka never matched the men's final in sustained excellence, it certainly did in closeness, unpredictability and excitement. Whether that was due to the windy conditions, nerves in their first Roland Garros final, or their even rivalry — 1-1 on clay and 5-5 overall — wild fluctuations turned this duel into an intriguing test of will as much as skill.

The first set alone saw eight service breaks. Sabalenka, who had won 19 of her last 20 Grand Slam matches, including her stunning 7-6(1), 4-6, 6-0 semifinal victory over four-time French champion Iga Swiatek, seemed like that same irresistible force when she broke Gauff's serve with a forehand volley winner for 2-1 and a vicious forehand serve return winner for 4-1.

When the 5'11" Belarusian power hitter raced to a 40-love lead in the next game, she looked like the same player who steamrolled Swiatek in the final set two days earlier. The same player about whom *Tennis Channel* analyst Prakash Amritraj said, "When she plays her best, another player can't beat her."

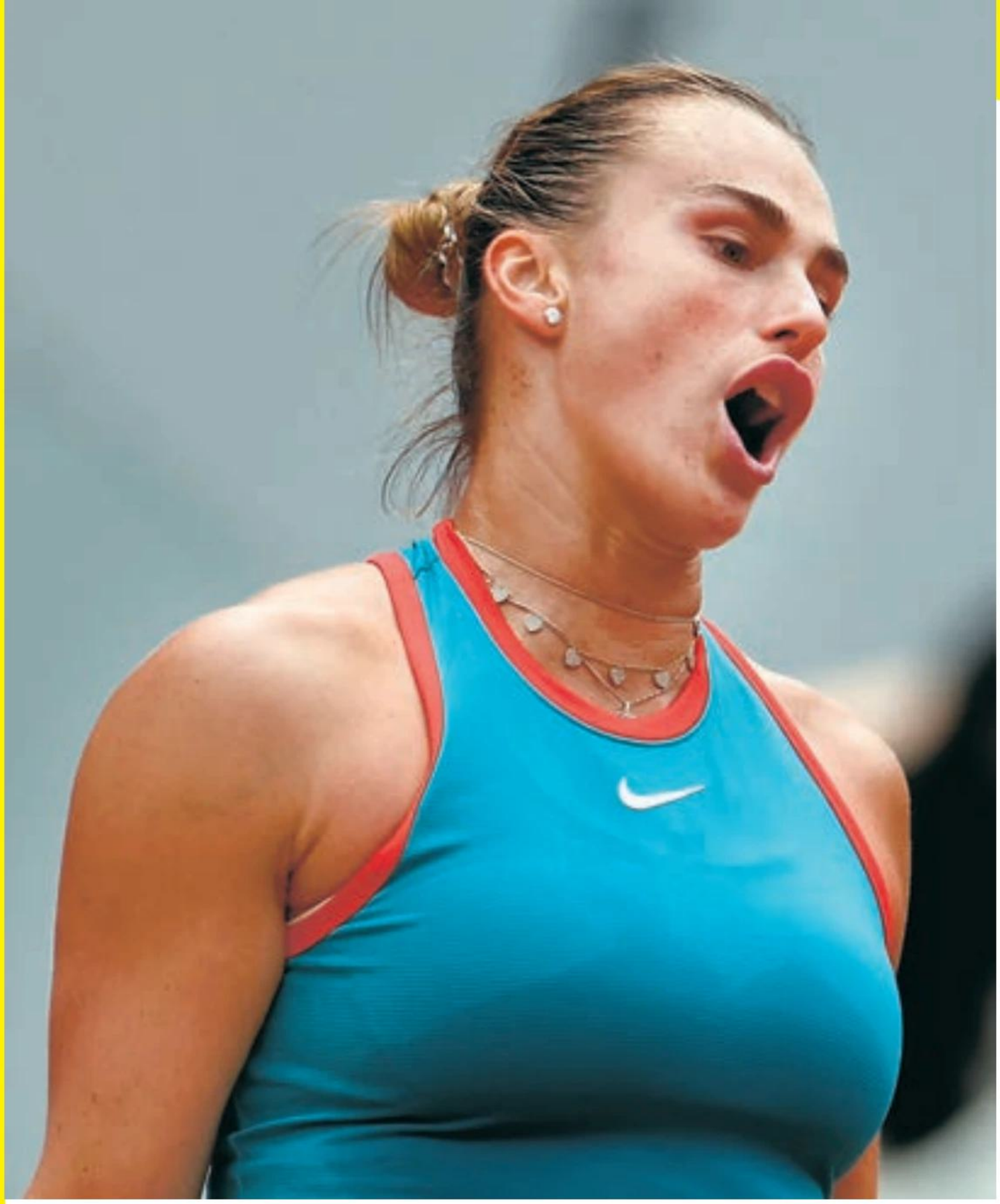
Unless the other player is Gauff. The resilient American reeled off five straight points to secure her first service break. Two games later, Gauff broke again on her fifth break point with a backhand passing shot that the rattled Sabalenka misjudged and let go by. During the huge momentum swing, Sabalenka swept 16 of the first 23 points, while Gauff grabbed 14 of the next 20.

Gauff's fighting spirit

With Sabalenka serving for the set at 5-4, Gauff escaped two set points and then broke serve on her fifth break point. "That's the fighting spirit we've known so well from Gauff," said Davenport. The topsy-turvy set had two more service breaks. Sabalenka raised her arms in exultation after a forehand volley winner put her briefly ahead 6-5. In the next game on break point, Gauff countered with the shot of the match. The Florida Flash sprinted to a Sabalenka overhead and drilled a sensational backhand down-the-line passing shot winner. No lead was safe. In the tie-break, Gauff raced to a 4-1 advantage highlighted by two backhand winners. Sabalenka responded, showing off her power and finesse to seize the last four points with winners. An 84-mph backhand service return made it 4-5, a ferocious down-the-line backhand 5-5, a cross-court forehand volley 6-5, and a feathery forehand drop volley 7-5.

But Gauff had seen this movie before. Even starred in it. She had lost the opening set in the 2023 US Open final against Sabalenka and pulled the match out in three thrilling sets for her first Grand Slam crown. Gauff knew that if she could once again find the right balance between high-percentage offence and point-prolonging defence, she could induce many more errors from Sabalenka. As Stephens colourfully put it before the final, "Coco needs to run for her life, Aryna needs to keep her head."

The momentum shifted again. Gauff's improved Western forehand delivered a cross-court winner for a service break and 1-0 lead. When she held serve at love for 2-0, Sabalenka started fuming and vented to her camp. Were the ghosts of heart-breaking three-set losses at Majors — such as that US Open final



Big setback: Sabalenka, who had beaten defending champion Iga Swiatek, was the favourite to win the final. AFP

and the Australian Open final in January to Madison Keys — haunting her now? Gauff's shot variety and foot speed were breaking down Sabalenka's power-ball game and poise. Sabalenka managed a service break but still trailed 4-2 in the second set. Then Gauff poured it on, taking eight straight points, the last on a put-away overhead, to wrap up the 6-2 set.

"Sabalenka has been all over the place," said Davenport. "Let's see if she can dominate play and look like the No. 1."

If history were any guide, Sabalenka had reason to worry. Before the final, she was a mediocre 17-17 in three-set matches at Majors compared to Gauff's splendid 17-6, In fact, Gauff was 10-2 since the start of 2023. Benefitting from in-match coaching, Gauff moved forward from four feet behind the baseline in the first set to two feet inside it thereafter to win eight of the next 11 games. The positional pressure worked. The Belarusian blinked first in the deciding set, double faulting to lose her serve and fall behind 2-1. Yelling in Russian at her camp seemed to help as she broke back for 3-all. But a boomerang break — at love! — put Gauff ahead for good at 4-3.

Minutes later, the discombobulated Sabalenka made three unforced errors to wind up Gauff's 6-7 (5), 6-2, 6-4 triumph. Gauff fell onto her back, hopped up to shake hands with Sabalenka, and shed tears of joy, relief and satisfaction on her chair. During the trophy presentation, Sabalenka, with tears flowing, tried to compose herself as she praised Gauff, thanked her team, and apologised, "I'm sorry for this terrible final."

"Coco stayed so calm and positive through so many twists and turns," summed up Davenport. In sharp contrast, noted Stephens, "Aryna did not control any emotions, and that lost her the match. It wasn't about tennis. She battled herself and Coco."

Despite the disappointing final, Sabalenka had much to be proud of during her best Roland-Garros performance. The Belarusian Basher powered through a draw much tougher than Gauff's with convincing wins over resurgent No. 16 Amanda Anisimova 7-5, 6-3, who had beaten Sabalenka in five of their previous seven matches, No. 8 and Olympic gold medallist Zheng Qinwen 7-6(3), 6-3, and the Queen of Clay, Swiatek **(left)**.

No stone unturned

Swiatek led Sabalenka in their rivalry, 8-4 and 5-1 on clay. But those stats were misleading because the 23-year-old Pole hadn't won a tournament since taking her fourth Roland-Garros title a year ago, and her ranking dropped to No. 5.

Swiatek changed coaches, hiring highly regarded Wim Fisette, but still played a predictable one-dimensional baseline game built around her superb forehand and foot speed. Conversely, Sabalenka left no stone unturned to add to

GETTY IMAGES

her intimidating power game. "She's incorporated drop shots, slices, she comes to the net more, she has more variety," noted seven-time French Open champion Chris Evert. "She also has a better attitude when she's in trouble," said Mary Joe Fernandez, a *TNT* analyst.

Sabalenka, who had broken Swiatek's serve just 10 times in their 12 previous matches, easily broke the Pole three straight times with a barrage of winners to surge ahead 4-1. Swiatek fought back with three service breaks to force a tie-break only to have Sabalenka crush her 7-1.

Flattening out her forehand from an average of 3,073 rpm in the first set to 2,360 in the second set and returning Sabalenka's big serves aggressively, Swiatek captured the second set 6-4. First-strike tennis paid off handsomely.

Alas, Swiatek couldn't slug it out anymore against a natural slugger during the deciding set. In the most dominating set of the year between elite players, Sabalenka overwhelmed and dethroned Swiatek 6-0, winning 24 of 30 points. "To win the set 6-0 against Iga on clay is something out of my mind," admitted Sabalenka, who ended Swiatek's 26-match winning streak at Roland-Garros and became the first player to defeat her twice on clay.

Stephens assessed the impressive triumph in more personal terms. "Sabalenka is a very vengeful person. She's going for blood, as she said against Zheng."

Keys, the surprise Australian Open champion, gave Gauff her toughest challenge before the final. Despite 41 unforced errors versus just 15 winners, Gauff prevailed 6-7 (6), 6-4, 6-1 by 'winning ugly', something her former coach Brad Gilbert used to take pride in. Her relentless determination and running game — a vacuum cleaner defence — induced many of Keys' 60 unforced errors.

"It's just I have always had that in me, and not just in tennis but in everything. I'm a very competitive person," explained Gauff. "My philosophy is if I can just leave it all out there, then the loss will hurt a lot less than regrets of maybe not giving it your all." Led by Gauff, Keys, and Frances Tiafoe in singles, an African American made the quarterfinals (or better) in all five of the professional events—men's singles, women's singles, men's doubles, women's doubles and mixed doubles—at a single Grand Slam tournament for the first time in tennis history.

Meanwhile, if you hadn't heard of Lois Boisson **(below)** before the French Open, you weren't the only one. A wild card ranked a lowly No. 361, Boisson made her Tour-level debut at Rouen in May and her Grand Slam debut in Paris. The 22-year-old Frenchwoman made the most of it by streaking all the way to the semifinals.

Her fairytale fortnight started in the first round when she upset 24th-seeded Belgian veteran Elise Mertens 6-4, 4-6, 6-3. Parlaying a devastating topspin forehand, blazing speed, deft volleys, and exceptional touch shots to offset a weak backhand, she then shocked a nervous No. 3 seed Jessica Pegula 3-6, 6-4, 6-4 and 18-year-old sensation and No. 6 Mirra Andreeva 7-6 (6), 6-3. The Russian became so frustrated at 3-all from the raucous hometown fans that she whacked a ball into the crowd, which rained her with a chorus of boos.

Boisson, a hidden talent with a style reminiscent of Samantha Stosur, the former US Open winner and French Open runner-up, was sidelined for nine months with a torn ACL. She returned to competition in April. Fearless in the big moments, the muscular, 5'9" Boisson became just the third woman — after teen phenoms Jennifer Capriati and Monica Seles — to make the semifinals in her debut Major.

"I think every kid who plays tennis has the dream to win a Slam," said Boisson. "More for French players to win Roland-Garros, for sure. So, yeah, it's a dream. For sure, I will go for the dream, because my dream is to win it, not to be in the semifinal."

Gauff ended her Cinderella story with an emphatic 6-1, 6-2 victory over the 500-1 pre-tournament long shot. Like a savvy veteran, she attacked Boisson's vulnerable backhand — an erratic two-hander and a soft slice one-hander — and blocked out the stentorian crowd. Gauff copied a trick Djokovic used when he played crowd favourites. "Actually, when you guys were chanting her name, I was saying to myself my name, just to psych myself out."

As Gauff has done ever since she burst on the scene as a precocious 15-year-old upsetting Venus Williams at Wimbledon to make the round of 16 in her Grand Slam main draw debut, she set more 'youngest records' at Roland-Garros.

Gauff became the youngest to win Major women's titles on multiple surfaces since Maria Sharapova at Wimbledon in 2004 and the US Open in 2006 as well as the youngest American to win the singles title at Roland-Garros since Serena Williams in 2002.

Evert, a teen queen who won 18 singles Majors during her 19-year career, believes 'Mrs Maturity', as Tiafoe calls her, "will win 10, 12, 14 Majors. She's so much more mature than a 21-year-old. She's more like 25, 26."

AFP

WELCOME TO THE CLUB

With thrilling matches, historic milestones, and record prize money, the world's oldest tennis tournament is set for **blockbuster entertainment** this year.

Nihit Sachdeva
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The 138th edition of Wimbledon is scheduled to be held from June 30 to July 13 at the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club (AELTC) in London, England.

The grass Major is the third Slam of the year. Having been held since 1877, it is the oldest tennis tournament in the world.

In men's singles, all eyes will be on two-time defending champion Carlos Alcaraz **(left)**. The Spaniard will arrive at the AELTC after beating World No. 1 Jannik Sinner in the longest-ever French Open final, which lasted five hours 29 minutes. Serbia's Novak Djokovic, who hasn't won a Slam since the US Open in 2023, will look to match Roger Federer's all-time men's record of eight Wimbledon titles in the Open Era (since 1968). Czechia's Barbora Krejcikova **(right)** will try to be the first woman since the USA's Serena Williams (2015-16) to defend her crown at Wimbledon. However, World No. 2 Coco Gauff, who beat World No. 1 Aryna Sabalenka in this year's Roland Garros final, will be the overwhelming title favourite.

Last year, Alcaraz had met Djokovic in the men's final for the second straight year. However, unlike the 2023 edition, which went to a deciding set, Alcaraz brushed aside Djokovic 6-2, 6-2, 7-6(4) to clinch his second Wimbledon and overall fourth Major title. In women's singles, Krejcikova took down Italy's Jasmine Paolini 6-2, 2-6, 6-4 to claim her maiden Wimbledon title and overall second Major after her French Open 2021 triumph. In Krejcikova, Wimbledon got a new women's champion for the seventh edition in a row.

The Finnish-British pair of Harri Heliovaara and Henry Patten won the men's doubles crown, while Czechia's Katerina Siniakova and the USA's Taylor Townsend emerged victorious in women's doubles.

Jan Zielinski of Poland and Hsieh Su-wei of Chinese Taipei clinched the mixed doubles title.

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

A new era

For the first time at Wimbledon, line judges will be replaced with electronic line-calling. The system is already in place at tournaments worldwide.

MOST TITLES IN THE OPEN ERA

Men's Singles:
Roger Federer (8)
Women's Singles:
Martina Navratilova (9)
Men's Doubles:
Todd Woodbridge (9)
Women's Doubles:
Martina Navratilova (7)
Mixed Doubles:
Martina Navratilova (4), Leander Paes (4)

TROPHIES

The women's singles winner is presented with the Venus Rosewater Dish, a circular dish with mythological designs. The men's singles winner is awarded a silver-gilt cup which has the inscription – 'All England Lawn Tennis Club Single Handed Championship of the World'. The actual trophies remain with the club, while three-inch smaller replicas are given to the winners to take with them. All the doubles trophies are silver cups. The Princess of Wales, who is also the Patron of the AELTC, presents the trophies.

PRIZE MONEY

The total prize money for the upcoming edition is £53.5 million, an increase of seven per cent from 2024. Both men's and women's singles champions will receive £3 million each, which is 11.1 per cent more than what Alcaraz and Krejcikova received last year.

WHERE TO WATCH?

In India, viewers will be able to watch the live telecast of Wimbledon 2025 on the Star Sports Network and stream the matches live on the JioHotstar app/website.

INDIAN CHAMPIONS

1928: **Mohammed Sleem** – Men's Singles (Wimbledon Plate)
1954: **Ramanathan Krishnan** – Boys' Singles
1979: **Ramesh Krishnan** – Boys' Singles
1990: **Leander Paes** – Boys' Singles
1999: **Leander Paes & Mahesh Bhupathi** – Men's Doubles
1999: **Leander Paes** (with USA's Lisa Raymond) – Mixed Doubles
2002: **Mahesh Bhupathi** (with Russia's Elena Likhovtseva) – Mixed Doubles
2003: **Leander Paes** (with USA's Martina Navratilova) – Mixed Doubles
2003: **Sania Mirza** (with Russia's Alisa Kleybanova) – Girls' Doubles
2005: **Mahesh Bhupathi** (with France's Mary Pierce) – Mixed Doubles
2010: **Leander Paes** (with Zimbabwe's Cara Black) – Mixed Doubles
2015: **Sania Mirza** (with Switzerland's Martina Hingis) – Women's Doubles
2015: **Leander Paes** (with Switzerland's Martina Hingis) – Mixed Doubles
2015: **Sumit Nagal** (with Vietnam's Ly Hoang Nam) – Boys' Doubles

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

BREAKING POINT

Indian football stands at a crossroads after yet another humiliating defeat, exposing deep-rooted failures in coaching, talent development, and governance. Can the Blue Tigers **rebuild** before their legacy fades completely?

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
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When the full-time whistle blew at the Kai Tak Stadium in Hong Kong, China, the Indian football team stood frozen — hapless and defeated.

A team that India had hammered for four goals without reply in their previous clash just beat the Blue Tigers 1–0 — another loss for India to a lower-ranked opponent (26 spots) and the first loss to Hong Kong in a competitive fixture since 1993.

The men's football team and the state of Indian football remain in tatters. India can no longer afford to put a foot wrong in its next four matches if it wants to qualify for the 2027 Asian Cup.

But where did it all go wrong for the national team? The lion's share of blame has typically fallen on head coach Manolo Marquez.

"When you are playing a new opponent — how they could play, whether they will attack or defend — these are things a coach should explain to his players well," Subrata Bhattacharya, former India defender, tells *Sportstar*. "I think that communication and general coordination among players were missing. As a result, every player played their individual game."

Marquez, who won the Indian Super League (ISL) — India's top flight — title with Hyderabad FC, took charge after Igor Stimac was shown the door in June last year, following a poor showing at the 2023 Asian Cup and an early exit from the World Cup qualifiers. But in the year since he took charge, India won just one match in eight — an international friendly against the Maldives.

"If you look at it, the entire team — on and off the ground — has been in a mess," Bhaichung Bhutia, former India striker and captain, says. "I think it is time for Kalyan Chaubey (president of the All India Football Federation [AIFF]) to step down. He bypassed the entire technical committee (to select the coach)."

"Then there have been three general secretaries (Shaji Prabhakaran, Anilkumar Prabhakaran and M. Satyanarayan) in two-and-a-half years under Chaubey. I think things are quite bad when you offer USD 50,000 for a win."

Not enough international games

Cash incentives have hardly led to encouraging results for the national team. In 2006, the men's team was promised one lakh rupees should it beat Japan, ranked 100 spots above it, and INR 50,000 for a draw.

Hong Kong, meanwhile, is a side ranked 26 spots below India. India lost on both occasions: 0–6 to Japan and 0–1 to Hong Kong. Could that money be invested to arrange more

Dismal: India's latest defeat was its first competitive loss to lower-ranked Hong Kong since 1993. PICS: AIFF MEDIA

international games? Perhaps.

"The main problem for our boys is that we don't play enough international matches. That helps in gauging the speed, technical ability and level of our players against international competitors, especially those from Asia," Subrata adds.

In the past year, Argentina, the best-ranked team and the world champion, played 18 games (graph in next page). India played just 10.

As for Marquez, the damage to the team's morale after the loss was evident, but he defended his boys despite the defeat.

"The dressing room is like a funeral, practically. They know that we are not in a good moment," Marquez told the press after the match.

"In terms of scores, it was difficult for us to score, but the team indeed played with more order than in other games. Unfortunately, we couldn't get any points here." Interestingly, when the two sides last met in 2022, India had opened the scoring in 55 seconds, winning the match 4–0.

Three years later, the tables have turned. This was less a humiliating defeat and more a consequence of systemic failures — poor decision-making and a fractured youth development pipeline.

The age-old striker problem

India's Achilles heel over the past decade has been the absence of an internationally proven striker.

In the last 15 years, successful forwards at the national level like Robin Singh (an I-League and Federation Cup winner with Bengaluru FC in 2014) and Manvir Singh — with eight national trophies — have failed to maintain consistency with the national team.

Robin scored more than one goal annually just once, while Manvir has not scored since November 2023, when India last won a competitive match.

The crisis got so dire that a 40-year-old Sunil Chhetri **(above)** was summoned out of international retirement.

Myopic scouting has compounded the issue — I-League-proven strikers have remained sidelined. Lalrinzuala Lalbiaknia, for example, scored 27 times times for Aizawl in the last two seasons while Edmund Lalrindika contributed to 10 goals last season.

Lalrinzuala has yet to play for the national team, while Edmund has played 45 minutes in eight games under Marquez **(right)**, with no game time this year so far.

On the other hand, India started Ashique Kuruniyan as a No. 9 — someone who played on the wings under former coach Stimac and primarily as a left wing-back for his club Mohun Bagan Super Giant last season. His pace was effective, but when it mattered most — a chance against the run of play and on goal at the goalkeeper's far post — he shot it wide.

Financial disparity

Indian football has also remained on the short end of the stick from the Centre for its unimpressive performances outside South Asia.

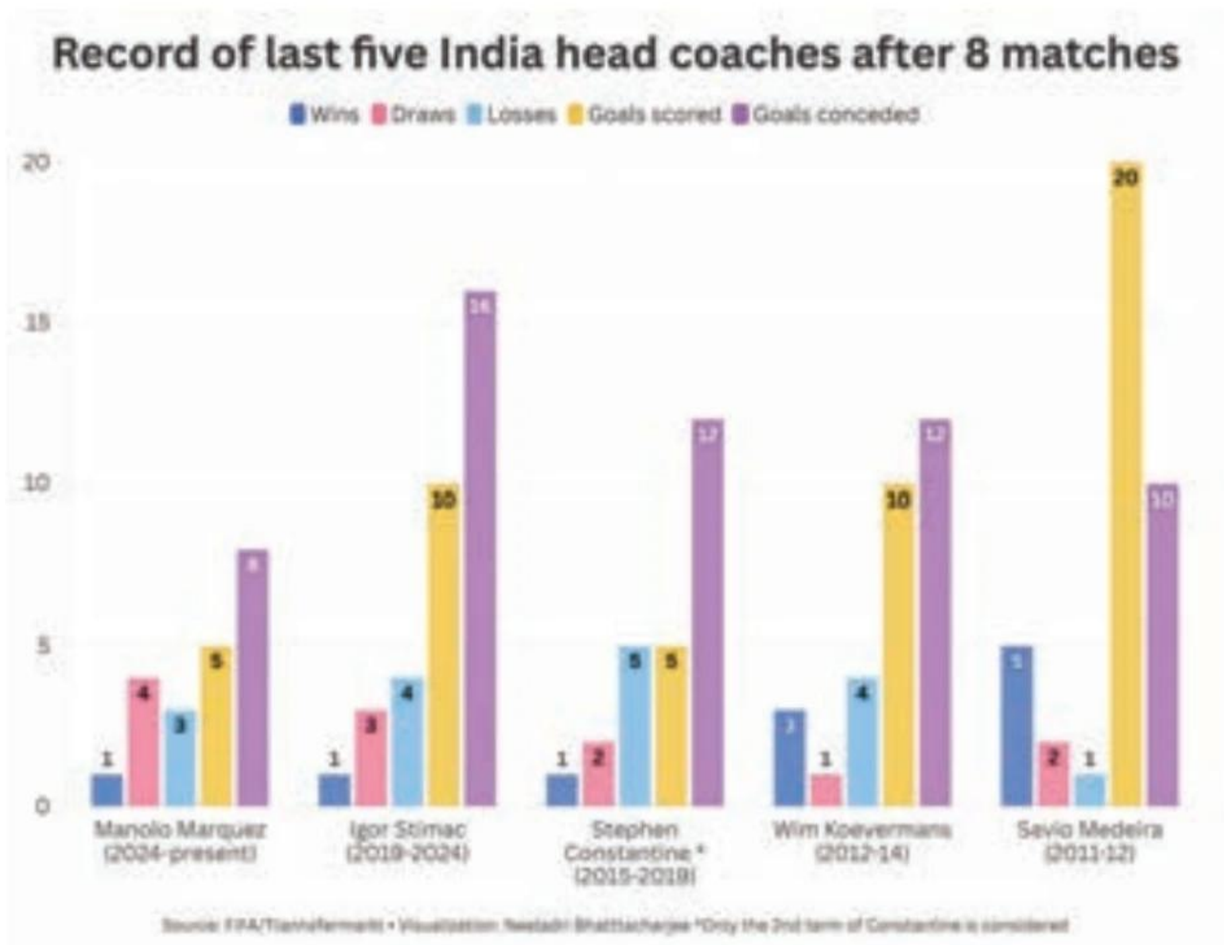
Though it won three trophies at home in 2023, its funding from the Central Government fell from INR 30 crore in 2019 to INR 7.38 crore in 2023.

The same year, FIFA allotted USD 469 million for football development to its member nations, with each country receiving a minimum of USD 2 million.

The funds for India's youth development trickled down to USD 0.43 million — a mere 21.5 per cent.

Meanwhile, the AIFF's budget ballooned by 54 per cent — from a budget of INR 87 crore for 2022–23, to INR 134 crore for the next financial year.

"I think the management, with Mr Chaubey in charge, is going to get even worse. He's got no clue about



how to get the entire structure in line and get football completely aligned with grassroots development," Bhutia says.

"All hope is not lost yet. We have to focus more and more on youth development, and a turnaround is still possible," an optimistic Subrata quips.

A notable example here would be Uzbekistan. Ranked just two spots above India in 2018, it invested heavily in youth football, spending about USD 1.4 million a year, allotted to it through the FIFA Forward Programme, between 2016 and 2021.

It won the U-23 AFC Asian Cup in 2018, the U-20 Asian Cup in 2023, and eventually qualified for its first-ever senior men's World Cup in 2025.

An alternative solution

Another remedy for quick-fire results would be the use of Indian-origin and naturalised players.

Qatar has championed this method, winning consecutive AFC Asian Cups with the help of naturalised personnel — most importantly Almoez Ali, its top scorer in the 2019 campaign, who was born in Sudan but was naturalised in 2013.

India's last opponent, Hong Kong, qualified for the 2023 AFC Asian Cup after 55 years using naturalised players. At the tournament, it had the joint-most number of naturalised players, 14, tied with Malaysia.

Of the 23 players in its squad for the India game, 11 were naturalised, having given up the passports of their native countries to switch nationalities and obtain naturalisation in Hong Kong. Six of them constituted the starting 11.

Thailand, on the other hand, aggressively scouted foreign players of Thai origin to qualify for consecutive knockouts in the Asian Cup for the first time.

Dual citizenship is not allowed in India under the Constitution and the Citizenship Act of 1955. So, Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) must surrender their foreign passports and stay in the country for at least 12 months to apply for an Indian passport.

"It is a huge handicap because there are many good players of Indian origin playing in the top leagues of Europe. So it could be a huge help if we speak about bigger achievements," Stimac had said during the AFC Asian Cup.

"The AIFF is in communication with 33 players who fall into the category of OCI," Chaubey said in a press conference on June 13. "We are committed to aligning with the laws of the land and the framework of the FIFA statutes for the inclusion of OCI players in India," he added in the presser.

The chaos is not just technical — it's cultural.

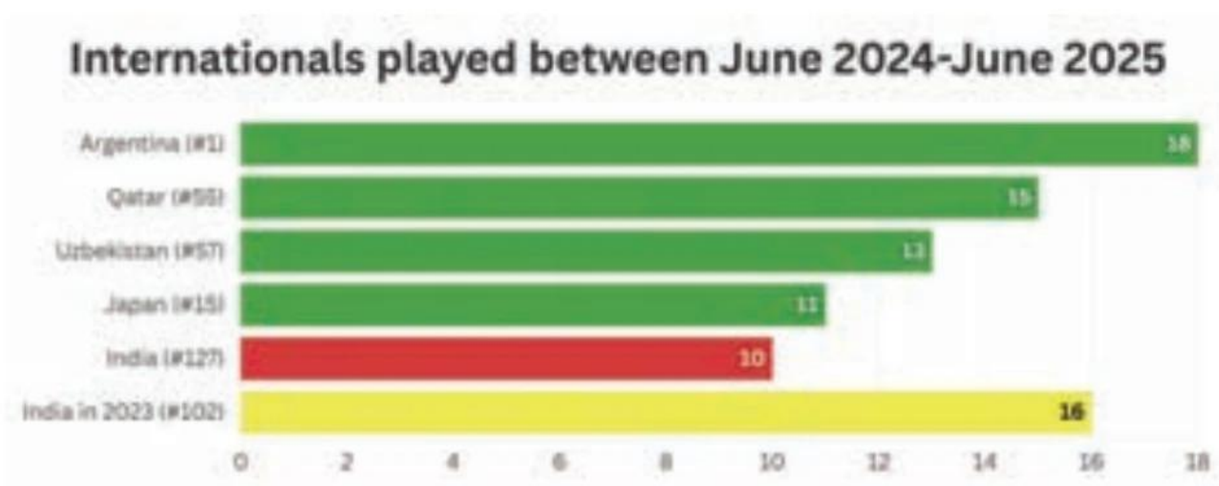
"We need stories for young generations to watch and get inspired. We got it from our previous generations and from very good coaches (like PK Banerjee, Amal Dutta)," Subrata says.

"Where are such stories now? How will the motivation come?"

At the 1952 Olympics, India lost 1–10 to Czechoslovakia. It was one of the chapters that was looked down on as 'Never Again!'

The Blue Tigers achieved their best-ever finish at the next Olympic Games, finishing fourth, and then clinched gold at the 1962 Asian Games, beating Japan and South Korea in the process.

Over half a century after its golden era, Indian football now faces its darkest hour. Unless it tears down the rot and rebuilds from ruin, Indian football's legacy will become its tombstone — like the shattered Parthenon, its ruins whispering of wasted potential.



GENERATIONAL CLASH

Swagger and style: Yamal and Ronaldo vie for the ball in the final. Porugal eventually won on penalties. AFP

It was the **first time** the 40-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo faced the 17-year-old Lamine Yamal.

Joan Mathew Jacob
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As European powerhouses Spain and Portugal prepared to face off in the UEFA Nations League final, the footballing world naturally took notice due to the sheer talent on show. But above all the stir, a particular narrative took centre stage. It was the first time the 40-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo faced the 17-year-old Lamine Yamal.

On paper, Spain, banking on the teenage sensation's unshakable swagger, seemed the favourite to lift the trophy. But at the end of the night, it was Ronaldo's towering presence that prevailed as he carried the trophy on his shoulder with a smirk on his face, just like he did six years ago.

A touch of class

While Spain began the game in its usual dominant fashion and took the lead through Martin Zubimendi, Portugal matched the tempo and quickly levelled courtesy of a clean, low shot from Nuno Mendes. Mikel Oyarzabal, who scored the match-winning goal in the Euro 2024 final, seemed like he was going to be the hero again as he restored Spain's lead on the stroke of half-time.

Portugal kept the pressure on Spain, and on the stroke of the hour, it was Ronaldo himself who produced yet another clutch moment. When Mendes' deflected cross looped into the Spanish penalty box, left-back Marc Cucurella looked poised to clear it away. However, lurking behind him was the Portuguese captain, who volleyed in from close range to score his 138th international goal and make it 2-2.

It was his first and only shot of the game, and that was all he needed.

The strike gave Portugal a shot of belief as the players slowly started to wrest control from Spain. Carrying his momentum from his Champions League triumph with Paris Saint-Germain, Mendes stood out as one of the best on the pitch as he dampened Yamal's spark for most of the time, giving the youngster no room to breathe.

While Ronaldo failed to feature past regulation time, his teammates piled on the pressure on their opponents and took the game to penalties. Portugal was flawless from the spot, while Spanish captain Alvaro Morata's attempt was saved by Diogo Costa.

Slice of history

As Ruben Neves buried the winning penalty into the back of the net, all eyes went to the touchline where Ronaldo fell to his knees with tears in his eyes. Winning has always been in his DNA, but this was extra special as Portugal became the first side to lift the Nations League title twice. "Winning for Portugal is always special. I have many titles with clubs, but nothing is better than winning for Portugal. It's tears. It's duty done and a lot of joy," Ronaldo said after the game.

On the other side, for Spain and Yamal, it was the end of an unbeaten run that stretched back to March 2023. And while the future may belong to the promising young star, he will have to wait his turn as the Portuguese talisman is yet to concede his crown.

FOR MORE STORIES

SAMBA AT THE WORLD CUP, AGAIN!

The five-time champion sealed a spot in the **next edition** of the quadrennial mega event.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
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Brazil had appointed Carlo Ancelotti at a time when its fate for the FIFA World Cup 2026 looked uncertain. Those fears were put to bed in only his second game in charge. Ancelotti's trusted general Vinicius Junior **(below)** scored the winner against Paraguay to seal a spot in the next World Cup for the five-time champion.

Though the Real Madrid forward had to limp off in the second half, his tap-in from a Matheus Cunha cross on the brink of half-time reassured the chemistry between him and the Italian manager, with the two having won 11 trophies together in the Spanish capital.

On the other hand, it was heartbreak for two-time Copa America champion Chile, which missed out on a spot in the World Cup for the third consecutive time.

Languishing at the bottom of the CONMEBOL qualification standings, Chile lost 0-2 to Bolivia, through goals by Miguel Terceros and Enzo Monteiro, bringing the curtain down on the major chunk of its Golden Generation that won the first of two consecutive Copa Americas a decade ago.

History for Asia

Uzbekistan, a nation of barely four crore people, scripted history when it qualified for the 2026 World Cup, set to be played in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

Having gained independence only in 1991, Uzbekistan's dedicated focus on youth development had already seen it win the AFC U-23 Asian Cup in 2018 and the U-20 Asian Cup in 2023.

As it drew 0-0 with the United Arab Emirates in the third round of World Cup qualifiers, it became the first Central Asian country to qualify for the World Cup.

Meanwhile, South Korea beat a 10-man Iraq 2-0 to earn a spot in the World Cup for the seventh consecutive time. Kim Jin-gyu and Oh Hyeon-gyu found the net for the Koreans, which not only triggered celebrations in their country but also in Jordan, which followed Korea into the quadrennial tournament.

Chaos and controversy

England had an international window to forget in June, with manager Thomas Tuchel left in choppy waters after a drab 1-0 win over minnows Andorra, followed by a 1-3 loss to Senegal.

Ismaila Sarr, Habib Diarra and Cheikh Sabaly struck for Senegal as it became the first African side to beat the Three Lions in 22 games.

Meanwhile, Poland's record goalscorer Robert Lewandowski and head coach Michał Probierz had a rift after the latter stripped the striker of his captaincy. Lewandowski boycotted the national team, which then lost 1-2 to Finland in the World Cup qualifiers. The saga ended with Probierz eventually stepping down.

Qualified teams so far:

North America (CONCACAF)
USA, Canada, Mexico

Asia (AFC)
Japan, Iran, South Korea, Australia, Jordan, Uzbekistan

Oceania (OFC)
New Zealand

South America (CONMEBOL)
Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador

AP

UP men, Kerala women triumph

Uttar Pradesh (men) and Kerala (women) emerged champions in the inaugural National Under-23 3x3 Basketball Championships at the Regional Sports Centre in Kochi.

Powered by three internationals, Uttar Pradesh overcame a late surge from host Kerala to win the men's final 21-14. In the women's final, Kerala registered a comfortable 19-11 victory over Karnataka.

Kushal Singh, who featured in the 3x3 Asia Cup in Singapore in March, starred for UP with 11 points, helping his team take an early lead. Kerala closed the gap to 14-17 with a minute and a half remaining, but UP pulled away to seal the win.

The women's final was a dominant team effort, with Akshaya Philip, Chinnu Koshy, and Ann Mary Zachariah standing out.

"They're good outside shooters, so we focused more on defence," said Kerala captain Akshaya.

Both winning teams received a cash prize of Rs 3 lakh.

The results:

Men's final: Uttar Pradesh 21 (Kushal Singh 11) bt Kerala 14 (Aaron Varghese 6). Third place: Tamil Nadu bt Telangana 16-15.

Semifinals: Kerala bt Tamil Nadu 21-10; Uttar Pradesh bt Telangana 19-17.

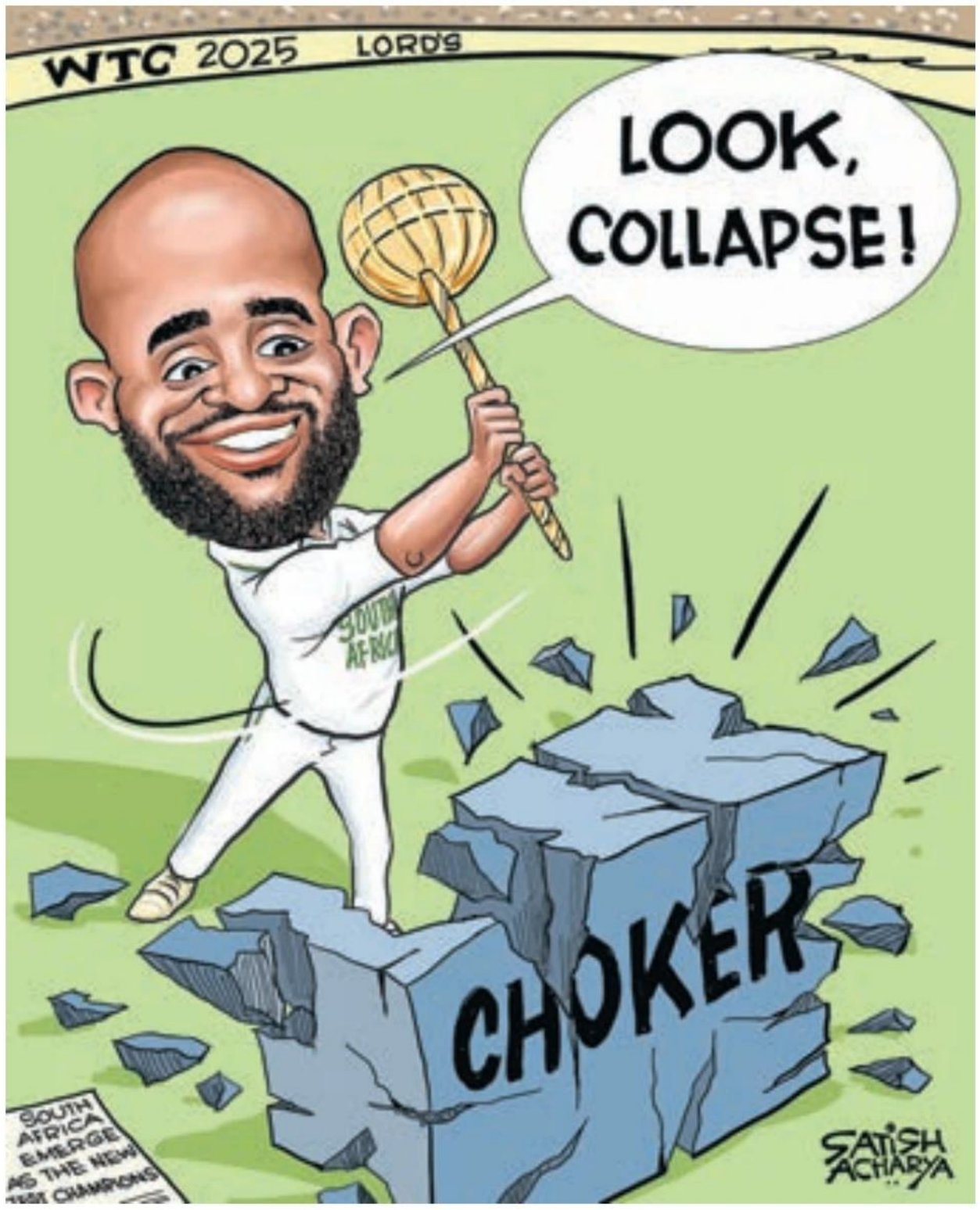
Women's final: Kerala 19 (Chinnu Koshy 6, Akshaya Philip 5, Ann Mary Zachariah 5) bt Karnataka 11. Third spot: Maharashtra bt Haryana 18-14.

Semifinals: Kerala bt Maharashtra 16-9; Karnataka bt Madhya Pradesh 21-19.

STAN RAYAN

UP men and Kerala women, the winners. R. K. NITHIN

SPORTOON



FITNESSWISE

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FOR MORE STORIES

IS SPORTS SCIENCE WORTH THE HYPE?

Sports science **represents the future,** and it is here to stay. But is it worth the investment?

Everything is theoretically impossible, until it is done" — Robert A. Heinlein

In the current global sporting scenario, especially in the Indian context, the buzzwords are High Performance Centre, Centre of Excellence, Peak Performance Centre, or even Sports Science Centre, among many others. There is little doubt that there exists hardly any high-performance team, elite athlete, or everyday sporting individual who does not employ sports science or its professionals in some form to enhance their performance.

There has been a huge transition in sports science since its inception. Version 1 started strong and taught us how to look at performance from a physiological perspective — how strength and conditioning work, how human adaptation functions, and how periodised regimes shape world-beaters. It was never perfect, but it was a bold beginning — a new and real start.

The next avatar

Version 2 followed, bringing in sports technology and cutting-edge tools, with an overwhelming stream of data flooding the domain. But somewhere along the way, we started getting lost. We are beginning to forget what matters most, becoming fixated on number-crunching. This version promises more, yet we are still learning how to harness it. So much is being measured, but so little is truly understood.

In today's scenario, where data analysis is essential to stay competitive, the soul of the sport is slowly being eroded. Human intervention remains the ultimate tool — planning with technology, tracking performance, and working together. Human wisdom and technology must work in tandem to create world-beaters. It's a concoction of science and belief — both necessary for true excellence.

Sports science and its domain represent the future, and it is here to stay. In India, the majority of us may still be unaware of what it truly is all about and its implications in the performance domain — how the entire system can be a game changer on the world sporting stage.

The truth is, it's all around us — we just aren't fully aware of it yet. You may just be a regular individual who engages in physical activity to stay fit, or you may be part of a sports team that follows a strict regime. Either way, sports science is fundamental to any training programme.

It's all in the data

While high-performance teams — or even state teams — implement advanced GPS equipment to monitor metrics such as distances covered, heart rates, and many other variables specific to each sport, skill, and even individual, you can now find similar equipment at your local sports store. This is a sign that sports science is becoming part of our daily lives.

The foundation of sports science lies in collecting data and monitoring performance — knowing where you started and what you've done to ensure your next performance improves progressively, backed by accurate data. There are world-class performance monitoring systems developed to take this data in and 'spit out' useful information tailored to

Perfect harmony: Human wisdom and technology must work in tandem to create world-beaters. It's a concoction of science and belief — both necessary for excellence. GETTY IMAGES

the needs of the individual or team.

Many of these gadgets may not be 100 per cent accurate, but they can provide everything you need to know in an understandable format.

Availability of the athletes

While many claim that sports scientists can reduce athlete injuries, the main aim of sports science is, in fact, to improve availability. Having precise information through load monitoring and its interpretation helps highlight injury risks and should allow for necessary modifications in training programmes.

One might need to step down or step up the intensity of their exercise regime — or even adjust specific skill sets (still debatable) — in order to prevent injuries and manage recovery in tandem with training. More studies are still needed in the fields of load management, injury prevention, and recovery. Hitting the right chord is crucial to eliminating recurring issues.

Time is money, money is time

In a high-performance environment, owners or clubs simply can't afford to have millions of dollars sitting on the sidelines. In this context, sports science plays a vital role — whether it's getting a player back into the game after injury, enhancing performance through specialised training, or understanding the needs of the team to design a winning concoction in tandem with the coaches and support staff.

Sports science helps in understanding the complete physiological and psychological domains through a scientific approach and validated methods. Many times, the information provided by the sports science team aids in making informed decisions about when players should be introduced into physically demanding situations.

Many sports scientists serve as the link between data and coaches. They inform high-performance teams about athletes who are at potential risk of injury and those who could be pushed a little harder. Watching these athletes sit on the sidelines with injuries, we often feel it could have been prevented — if only they had just listened. This is based on fact, not speculation. We could tell you how far an athlete had run, their heart rate variability at any point during training or a match, their maximum speeds, deceleration, propulsion, rotation, and overall wellness scores.

It is this information that creates a picture — and it is this picture that allows the sports science team to determine whether athletes are available to train and compete at every level.

Demand and supply

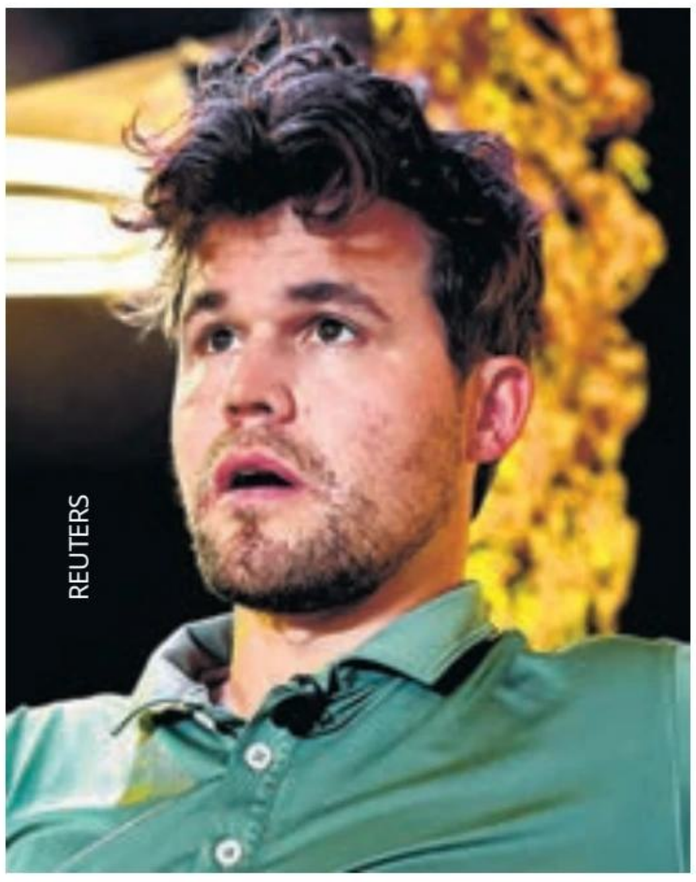
I personally believe that the hype around sports science reflects a genuine need of the hour in India, with many subject areas being introduced through technical and tactical collaboration to create our own bespoke model for the country. We need to step up — not only in terms of infrastructure, but also by bringing in the right people and software to run the system professionally and efficiently. Simply building the infrastructure without qualified personnel would be a white elephant in the long run. Winning and losing can be the difference between mediocrity and excellence. When millions are being spent, there must be a shift in the narrative on the big stage. Sports science can be the tool to reach that goal.

Wearing his heart on his sleeve

Asked after the recent Norway tournament about who he saw as the next great champion, Magnus Carlsen said, "There is no one. That's the honest answer..." **Self-obsession** can be forgiven in players of such exceptional talent! Geniuses are allowed a certain latitude.

Suresh Menon

I don't follow all sports in the same way. This is not unique, however. With some I follow the human stories, ignoring the technicalities. Formula One, for instance, where cars and circuits are of no particular interest, but the drivers often are. Chess is another, where I might be able to beat a casual seven-year-old but can't explain the various forms of defence and attack.


REUTERS

My fascination for chess began with the Bobby Fischer v Boris Spassky World Championship match when daily newspapers carried the moves of each game, and many like me replayed these without quite understanding them. There weren't enough experts — and frankly, at that age we soon moved on to other things. You can only get good at the game if you love chess, Fischer once said, a sentiment that holds for sports in general. Perhaps I didn't love chess that much.

But Fischer fascinated. His stunts shocked the world — he forfeited the second game after objecting to cameras in the room — but he is one of the great players and characters of the game. Chess champions tend not to be like other people (sometimes that 'other' seems a concession). Viswanathan Anand, the boy next door, might be an exception, but in the Fischer mould is Magnus Carlsen **(in pic)**, who wears his heart on his sleeve.

"Chess is war over the board," Fischer once declared, "The object is to crush the opponent's mind." Asked after the recent Norway tournament about who he saw as the next great champion, Carlsen said, "There is no one. That's the honest answer..." Self-obsession can be forgiven in players of such exceptional talent! Geniuses are allowed a certain latitude.

In Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, based on a Premchand short story, two noblemen continue playing chess even as their city falls to the invaders. The Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa tells a similar story but with the emphasis on a different aspect where two obsessives play chess even as their Persian city is being ravaged: *Whatever we take from this useless life,/ Be it glory or fame,/ Love, science, or life itself,/ It's worth no more/ Than the memory of a well-played game/ And a match won/ Against a better player.*

All sports strive for the right move; these have to be made within the rules — no wonder then that chess has been a favourite of philosophers and writers. "Life is like a game of chess", wrote Schopenhauer; "we draw up a plan; but it remains dependent on what in the game the opponent, and in life fate, see fit to do".

World champion Gukesh's calm, almost amused response to Carlsen's angry table-thumping response to losing to the Indian in Norway might suggest we have another Anand among champions. Asked at the end of the tournament what he would remember most, Gukesh replied: Beating Carlsen. When Carlsen was asked the same question he said, "The same as Gukesh." Aggression and a sense of humour. As a Grandmaster once said, "Every chess player gets to live many lives in one lifetime."

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