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The IPL final highlighted the increasing significance of bowling prowess in a batter-friendly format

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OFF-SIDE

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RETIREMENT ISN'T A WALK IN THE PARK

It is hard for professional athletes. Their lives revolve around discipline and the pursuit of excellence. Letting go of that intensity **feels like** losing a part of yourself.

"We all came in when the sun was shining and we played through a long sunset," Leander Paes, familiar with the trials of an extended career, told journalists at the *Sportstar/The Hindu* office while reflecting on Rafael Nadal's first-round loss in the French Open.

"I played with Nadal in doubles at Paris Bercy [Masters]. To see a 14-time champion be unseeded and lose in the first round, I understand that feeling all too well," the 18-time Grand Slam winner added.

Nadal, record winner of 14 Roland Garros titles, started the 2024 edition unseeded against Alexander Zverev, the fourth seed. Once the undisputed king of clay, he bowed out without much of a fight, losing in straight sets.

Though his passion for the game remains fierce, at 38, Nadal's body, battered by more than two decades in the circuit, is no longer in sync with his indomitable spirit or his ambition — the allure of Grand Slam No. 23.

Always relentless, chasing every ball and covering every inch of the court in his prime, today's Nadal is slower, struggling to endure the punishing rallies that once defined his game. Yet, he hasn't given up, hasn't made that dreaded decision to retire that every athlete fears to take.

"I don't know if it's gonna be the last time here in front of all of you. I'm not sure. But if it's the last time, I enjoyed it," he said in the post-match press conference. "I enjoy playing a lot and travelling with my family. The body is feeling better than two months ago. Maybe in two months I say it's enough. But it's something I don't feel yet. I hope to be back on this court for the Olympics. That motivates me. That's going to be another chance."

Retirement isn't a walk in the park. We're all creatures of habit, clinging to routines, and letting go of something that structured our days for so long is never simple. Without a fixed routine, we find ourselves floundering, wondering whether to start a jigsaw puzzle or pick up knitting.

It is even harder for professional athletes. Their lives revolve around discipline and the pursuit of excellence. Letting go of that intensity feels like losing a part of yourself.

Mitchell Johnson, who picked 313 wickets in 73 Test matches for Australia, spoke about his post-retirement struggles on *Channel 7's SAS Australia*. "I've found it tougher since retiring from cricket. All of a sudden, you're not doing as much. You sort of lose your purpose a little bit," he admitted.

And he's not alone. Fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar and Michael Phelps, winner of 23 Olympic golds, have all grappled with the quiet that follows the peak of their careers.

That lurking fear of the unknown often nudges athletes to hang on a bit longer, stretching their careers past their prime. Accustomed to the rhythm of training and competition and the adrenaline rush, they define their worth on the playing field. At the end of each gruelling season, burdened with fresh aches and heartbreaks, many contemplate retirement. But, yet, as the new season rolls on, most come back, perhaps each time promising it will be the last.

Mastering the perfect exit is a rare feat, like Sunil Gavaskar's final Test knock of 96 in Bangalore or Toni Kroos bowing out after the recent Champions League victory. But for every Gavaskar, there's a Tendulkar or a Dev, who continued even as their performances waned.

For Nadal and his fans, an Olympic gold in Roland Garros on August 4 would be the perfect farewell, the last rays of a glorious sunset.

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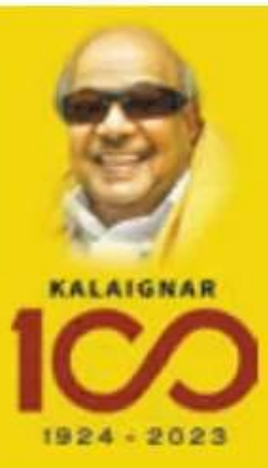

TAMIL NADU CHAMPIONS FOUNDATION:

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During the Budget session for the year 2023-24, the Honourable Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development, Thiru Udhayanidhi Stalin made an announcement on the floor of the assembly to establish the Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation to develop the sports ecosystem in the State. Consequently, the Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation was launched by the Honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Thiru M.K.Stalin in a grand ceremony on May 8 2023, less than a month after it was announced.

The Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation is an initiative to partner with citizens and corporates to reimagine, rejuvenate and reinvigorate the sports ecosystem in Tamil Nadu. The initiative brings together the public and private sectors, creating a platform for sustainable sports development and community engagement.

This game-changing foundation is all set to leverage CSR funds from corporate entities to supercharge sports development across the state. With a clear goal to channel corporate contributions towards initiatives that promote sports at all levels, from grassroots to professional, the Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation is rewriting the rulebook of sports development.

MISSION

- To put in place state-of-the-art sports infrastructure and sporting amenities
- To identify, nurture and support sportspersons across the spectrum
- To provide world-class training/coaching to the sportspersons
- To promote diverse disciplines of sports including traditional sports
- To promote research and development in the field of sports science
- To promote sports in its various forms - lifestyle, recreational, etc.
- To make sports an accessible, equitable and universal phenomenon

Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation has been registered under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975 (Tamil Nadu Act 27 of 1975) on April 22, 2023. It is a Section 8 Company under the Companies Act, 2013.
Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation is governed by a Board of Directors headed by the Honourable Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development.
The Executive Committee is headed by the Additional Chief Secretary to Government, Youth Welfare and Sports Development Department while the District-level Committees are headed by the respective District Collectors.

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In a year since its establishment, over 350 deserving sportspersons have been given assistance through the Foundation.
The Beneficiaries from the Foundation have won 145 medals in different national and international competitions.

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- Awareness creation activities regarding sports - demand creation, career guidance, career progression support, availability of support mechanisms, positive benefits of sports and breaking misconceptions.

HOW TO CONTRIBUTE

The Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation web portal (www.tnchampions.sdat.in) is fully operational with a secure and efficient payment gateway. Contributions can be made either through online mode or physical mode through Cheque/DD drawn in favour of "TN CHAMPIONS FOUNDATION."

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« That was a sprint-off. Every day I feel better and better. And defending the titles at the Europeans and Olympics? I think yes. – Jakob Ingebrigtsen after hurling himself over the line to snatch victory in the men's 1500m at the Oslo Diamond League »

« The amount of energy... It's difficult for me to talk. I don't know if it's gonna be the last time here in front of all of you. I'm not sure. But if it's the last time I enjoyed it. – Rafael Nadal after being knocked out of the French Open by Alexander Zverev in the first round »

9th

Gymnastics superstar Simone Biles won her ninth U.S. Championship recently, leaving little doubt that at 27 and a decade-plus into her run atop the sport, she is as good as ever.
Biles posted a two-day all-around total of 119.750, nearly six points clear of runner-up Skye Blakely and leaving little doubt that she appears ready to add a second all-around Olympic gold to go with the one she captured in 2016.
Biles finished with the highest two-day score on all four events — something she'd done only once before at nationals (2018) — to build plenty of momentum ahead of the Olympic trials later in June in Minneapolis.

52.70s

Olympic champion Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone ramped up preparations for a title defence at this year's Paris Games by running a world-leading time of 52.70 seconds in her first 400 metres hurdles race in over a year. The 24-year-old displayed no signs of rust at the Edwin Moses Classic in Atlanta, as she effortlessly surged past her competitors to better Jamaican Rushell Clayton's previous season-leading mark of 53.72 by over a second.

CONTINUES TO IMPRESS

Sweden's Armand Duplantis failed in another attempt to break his pole vault world record but continued to impress ahead of the Paris Olympics at the Diamond League meet at Stockholm's Olympic Stadium. The Olympic and world champion broke his record for the eighth time with a vault of 6.24 metres in April, and after easing to victory with his first attempt at 6.00m, he had the home crowd behind him as he attempted to go even better. AP

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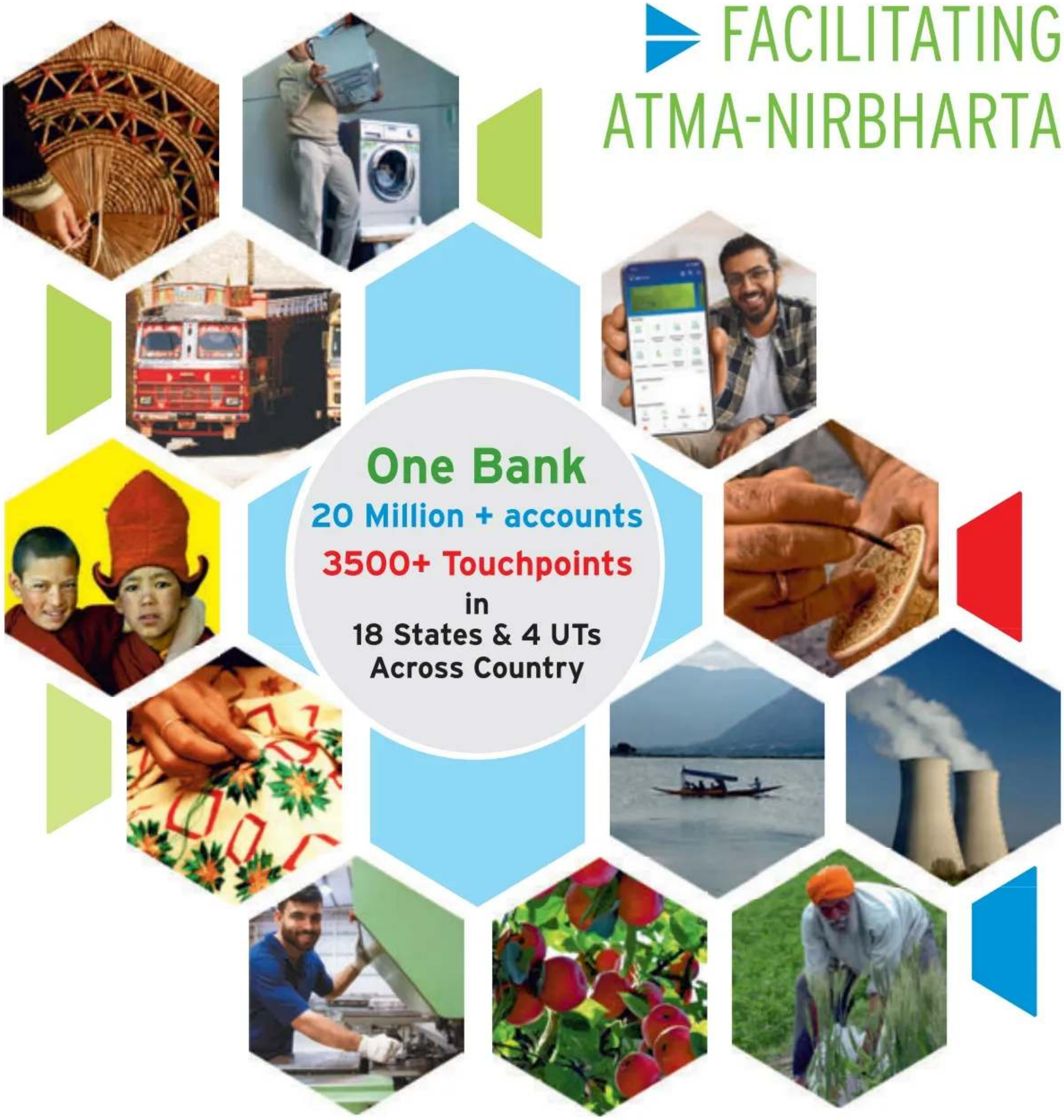

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SUNRISERS ECLIPSED BY RUTHLESS KNIGHT RIDERS

Kolkata Knight Riders' dominant eight-wicket victory over Sunrisers Hyderabad in the IPL final highlighted the **increasing significance of bowling prowess** in a batter-friendly format.

Dhruva Prasad
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There is an overwhelming sense of emptiness when an event that many feverishly awaited ends. This sentiment was even more pronounced at the end of this year's Indian Premier League (IPL).

After matching each other stroke for stroke to become two of the league's fastest-scoring teams, Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) and Sunrisers Hyderabad (SRH) delivered the most lopsided final in the tournament's history.

KKR galloped to an eight-wicket win, overcoming SRH's 113 inside 11 overs to end the contest almost an hour ahead of schedule. Pat Cummins' trophy-winning spree on the international circuit had finally been curtailed by the crash-bang-wallop of T20 cricket's cash cow.

Perhaps the only consolation for the Australian Test and ODI skipper was that cricket's oft-quoted and overused truism — 'Batsmen win you games, bowlers win you tournaments' — had been vindicated.

That his Aussie teammate and bowling partner Mitchell Starc emerged as the most ardent proponent of that adage would have felt bittersweet.

When the left-arm pacer's classical delivery to knock the top of Abhishek Sharma's off-stump in the first over set the tone, Cummins' instinct in the longest format may have kicked in —

Flawless performance: KKR registered a clinical win in the final after its bowlers restricted SRH's strong batting line-up to a below-par score. This is the former's third IPL title. K. R. DEEPAK

Roar of a champion: Mitchell Starc (left) was merciless with the ball, picking up two wickets for just 14 runs in three overs. He was adjudged Man of the Match. R. RAGU

that of riding out the initial phase in swing-friendly conditions.

But for a leader who had seen his team start off like the clappers, rewrite batting records, spawn conversations about what wretched fate awaited bowlers, and succeed in high-risk methods, there was no turning back. It was boom or bust, and the latter would eventually run its course.

But to dilate on the league's most expensive players would be reductionist. Though Starc found his stride late in the tournament and peaked in the playoffs, it was the Knight Riders' Indian bowling group — Harshit Rana, Vaibhav Arora, and Varun Chakravarthy — that was pivotal in its dominant run.

In the final, Arora accounted for Travis Head in the PowerPlay, Rana served a masterclass in deception in the middle overs by nabbing Nitish Kumar Reddy and Heinrich Klaasen, and Chakravarthy was at his economical best.

The three had their roles perfectly assigned. In the Knight Riders' campaign opener, also against SRH, Rana proved his credentials as someone who could deliver under pressure when he defended 12 runs against a high-flying Klaasen breathing down his neck.

Arora, introduced later in the tournament, was a revelation with his ability to get breakthroughs with the new ball — nine of his 11 wickets this season came in the PowerPlay. This allowed Rana to shift focus to the middle overs when his variations

Though not many fancied KKR's chances, it had all its bases covered, largely thanks to an unfancied Indian core and an in-form overseas unit.

and ability to bowl into the pitch made him a force to reckon with.

Andre Russell, Chakravarthy, and Sunil Narine combined to make KKR the tournament's most economical side in the middle overs with the best average (20.17). KKR was the only side to have six bowlers in the squad who picked 10 or more wickets in the season, three of whom were Rana, Arora, and Chakravarthy.

On the batting front, the Iyers (Shreyas and Venkatesh) and the Singhs (Rinku and Ramandeep) chipped in with handy contributions to prop up the blazing starts provided by overseas openers Narine and Phil Salt. Though not many fancied KKR's chances, it had all its bases covered, largely thanks to an unfancied Indian core and an in-form overseas unit.

Behind the scenes, the backroom staff comprising mentor Gautam Gambhir, head coach Chandrakant Pandit, and assistant coach Abhishek Nayar embodied the value of experience, grooming domestic talent, and being acquainted with the ethos of a franchise. After guiding KKR as captain to two title triumphs in 2012 and 2014, Gambhir returned to the franchise with an uncompromising winning mentality.

"Gautam *bhai* has immense knowledge about how the game is played. He has won two titles with KKR, and his strategies have been spot-on. He adds a lot of cream to the team," captain Iyer had said ahead of the final.

Meanwhile, Pandit's purported disciplinarian approach yielded

FOR MORE STORIES

ANDRE RUSSELL, VARUN CHAKRAVARTHY (right, below) AND SUNIL NARINE COMBINED TO MAKE KKR THE TOURNAMENT'S MOST ECONOMICAL SIDE IN THE MIDDLE OVERS

dividends as he added an IPL title to his rich haul of Ranji Trophy wins. Nayar, who has been with the franchise since 2018 and worked extensively with Venkatesh, Rinku, and 18-year-old Angkrish Raghuvanshi, was hailed as KKR's unsung hero.

"All I can think right now is of the person who built this Indian core: Abhishek Nayar," Chakravarthy said after winning the final in Chennai.

Raghuvanshi, who shone briefly but brightly and turned heads with a brisk fifty in his debut innings in the league, also termed Nayar his 'guru' and credited the former India international for helping him with his game, training, and diet.

"The youngsters are fearless in their approach and their attitude is headstrong. A lot of them are versatile in terms of their approach and proactive. When you give them freedom and back them during tough times, that's when they deliver the best. When these guys step up at the right time, they see to it that they win matches," Iyer had said, summing up the contributions made by his Indian talent group.

On the ball: KKR was the only side to have six bowlers in the squad who picked 10 or more wickets in the season, three of whom were Harshit Rana (above, right), Vaibhav Arora and Chakravarthy. K. R. DEEPAK

SRH too had its fair share of domestic players who made their presence felt. Nitish, the Emerging Player of the Season, had a stabilising influence in the middle-order, scoring 303 runs at a strike rate of over 140. He demonstrated the potential to be groomed as a seam-bowling all-rounder — a commodity in short supply in the Indian market.

The opening duo of Abhishek and

Valiant effort: SRH can be proud of its performance this IPL, especially that of its domestic players who made their presence felt in the tournament.

M. VEDHAN

Head **(right)** redefined T20 batting, while T. Natarajan, SRH's top wicket-taker (19), added the slower bouncer to his already-potent yorker, making good use of the newly introduced two-bouncer rule. However, Washington Sundar, Abhishek's left-arm spin, and Shahbaz Ahmed were not fully utilised, largely due to the Impact Player provision.

In Qualifier 2 against Rajasthan Royals, Cummins, faced with a lack of a specialist spinner, was forced to turn to Abhishek and Shahbaz. They effectively wrecked the opposition's middle-order in the defence of a 176-run target.

The Royals also thrived with the re-emergence of Avesh Khan and Sandeep Sharma, who bagged 19 and 13 wickets, respectively, and were particularly impressive in the death overs, complementing Trent Boult's wicket-taking form in the PowerPlay. As a result, it was the most economical unit in the last four overs of the innings.

The leap of faith the management took in backing Riyan Parag through thick and thin over the years also paid off, as the 22-year-old emerged as the Royals' top run-scorer (573) after being promoted to the No. 4 spot. Meanwhile, Royal Challengers Bengaluru's (RCB) gamble with Yash Dayal not only bore dividends but provided the tournament with a heartening redemption arc. With an on-song MS Dhoni on strike, the left-armer shook off the ghosts of that five-sixes-in-a-row horror of last year by defending 16 runs in the final over, securing RCB's sixth consecutive win and a miraculous playoffs qualification. Persisting with Rajat Patidar in the middle order, despite his indifferent start to the tournament, was also pivotal in turning RCB's fortunes around.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

This year's edition was the fastest-scoring one in the history of the tournament, registering eight of the ten highest team totals in the IPL, and yet all the playoffs went in favour of the team that bowled better.

With T20 batting expected to increasingly go into overdrive and the gaps in teams' power-hitting abilities shrinking, the razzmatazz of the shortest format may hinge more on the subtle art of bowling.

1st

Wrecker-in-chief: Mitchell Starc picked up three top-order wickets, including Travis Head's, to reduce Sunrisers Hyderabad to 39/4 inside the PowerPlay. SRH was eventually bowled out for 159. VIJAY SONEJI

FOR MORE IMAGES

2nd

Walk in the park: Fifties by Venkatesh Iyer and Shreyas Iyer — the pair added 97 in 44 balls for the third wicket — helped Kolkata Knight Riders qualify for the final with 38 balls to spare and eight wickets in hand. VIJAY SONEJI

3rd

The set up: Ravichandran Ashwin (2) and Avesh Khan (3) picked five wickets between them to restrict Royal Challengers Bengaluru to a modest 172/8 in the first innings.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

4th

Done and dusted: Rovman Powell's cameo of eight-ball-16 gave the finishing touch to Rajasthan Royals' successful chase with an over remaining.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

5th

Intent machine: Rahul Tripathi's 37 off 15 balls gave Sunrisers Hyderabad a powerful start. SRH ultimately managed to score 175/9 in the first innings. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

6th

Making an impact: Shahbaz Ahmed came in as an Impact sub, scored 18 runs, and picked up three Rajasthan Royals' wickets to help Sunrisers defend the total comfortably by 36 runs. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

7th

Losing the plot: Abhishek Sharma's stumps were rattled by Mitchell Starc in the first over of the game, and Sunrisers Hyderabad couldn't recover from the early jolt. K. R. DEEPAK

8th

Jump-up: Andre Russell picked up three wickets as Kolkata Knight Riders bowled out Sunrisers for a mere 113 in the first innings.

K. R. DEEPAK

9th

Party begins: Venkatesh Iyer set up the run chase with his 26-ball 52 as Kolkata Knight Riders finished the game inside 11 overs to win the final by eight wickets.

K. R. DEEPAK

10th

Knight of the champions: Kolkata Knight Riders secured its third Indian Premier League title, marking its first championship victory since 2014 after a decade-long wait. K. R. DEEPAK

WHY THE WORLD IS FALLING BEHIND T20 LEAGUES

INTERNATIONAL T20 CRICKET, ESPECIALLY WORLD CUPS, MAY BE LAGGING BEHIND **THE HIGH STANDARDS SET** BY FRANCHISE LEAGUES. HERE'S WHY.

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The recently concluded edition of the Indian Premier League (IPL) spawned conversations about the direction in which T20 cricket was headed as teams posted scarcely believable scores, and some even chased them down in the same contest. With the 2024 IPL season logging a staggering average tournament strike rate of 150.58 — the highest ever in its history by a distance — the ensuing conversations were inevitably about the evolving nature of the game and the need to adapt to it.

The consensus was that there would be some at the forefront of the revolution, while the reactionaries would be left to fend for themselves.

With a T20 World Cup dawning and national squads being announced during the course of the IPL, there were polarising opinions of certain inclusions and omissions, with the recency bias of the aggressive brand of cricket on display coming into play. But cricketers are creatures of circumstance as much as of instinct, and the former seems to supersede the latter when the stakes are high.

Quite counter-intuitively, the last two editions of the T20 World Cup have been the slowest scoring in terms of tournament strike rates, and the most attacking batters in franchise cricket seem to curb their instincts when they turn out in national colours on the global stage.

MOST ATTACKING BATTERS IN FRANCHISE CRICKET SEEM TO CURB THEIR INSTINCTS WHEN THEY TURN OUT IN NATIONAL COLOURS ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

On the speed dial: Travis Head provided blazing starts for Sunrisers Hyderabad in IPL 2024, even though his form dipped towards the business end of the tournament. It will be interesting to see whether he will go for the kill right from the get-go this T20 World Cup. EMMANUAL YOGINI

From rule innovations to conditions and reduced margin for errors, here is a deep dive into how and why international T20 cricket, particularly World Cups, may not be keeping pace with the stratospheric standards set by franchise leagues and that there may still be a place under the sun for style and finesse.

What do the data tell us?

There has been a stark contrast in the strike rates of batters across the IPL and the T20 World Cup **(See Graph 1 on page 22)**. In the IPL, the strike rates have generally shown an upward trend over the years, with occasional fluctuations. One major dip in strike rate was during the 2009 edition, which was moved to South Africa due to a clash with the Indian general elections.

The second drop from the trend was during the 2021 season, which was held in the United Arab Emirates following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the previous year.

Conversely, in T20 World Cups, the strike rates have shown more variability, with no consistent upward or downward trend.

The lowest strike rate recorded during the T20 World Cup was in the 2021 edition held in the UAE. Since the IPL held here in the same year shows a drop in tournament strike rate too, the conditions at the venues could have been the major factor

affecting the rate of scoring.

Another example of the conditions defining the scoring rate is the year 2016. The T20 World Cup was held in India for the first time that year, showing a spike in strike rates due to the flat pitches on offer.

Graph 2 (on page 23) indicates the strike rates of Indian batters across T20 World Cups.

The inaugural edition of the World Cup in 2007 was an anomaly, with the team mainly comprising younger players who were still adjusting to the new format.

The following five World Cups saw a drop in strike rates before a change in approach in how India plays T20 cricket resulted in teams attacking a lot more over the last two editions.

When comparing the individual strike rates of batters who have scored the most runs in T20 World Cups with their corresponding numbers in the IPL, we see a similar trajectory **(See Graph 3 on page 24)**.

Only the Sri Lankan duo of Mahela Jayawardene and Tillakaratne Dilshan have had better strike rates in T20 World Cups compared to the IPL.

In the case of batters known for their aggressive hitting ability — Chris Gayle, Jos Buttler and AB de Villiers — there is a clear indication that their strike rates drop considerably during the international cup competition.

A longer tournament like the IPL with a round-robin format allows teams to play a far more aggressive brand of cricket, as the law of averages will eventually come to their rescue.

So, why is the IPL quicker?

Biggers stakes

For all the pride and prestige carried by the IPL, the World Cup is a far bigger stage with a greater prize at stake. The value is also compounded due to its irregular frequency, which contrasts with the yearly affair that is the IPL.

Also at play at the World Cup stage is a sense of national pride, meaning teams and their batters naturally have a propensity to play it safer.

The best example of this is the variance of India's batting strike rate at T20 World Cups, and a parallel can be drawn from another sport, football. Since the turn of the century, the quadrennial FIFA World Cup — a snappier version, similar to the T20 World Cup — has always been a lower-scoring event than the Premier League, arguably the most popular football competition in the world.

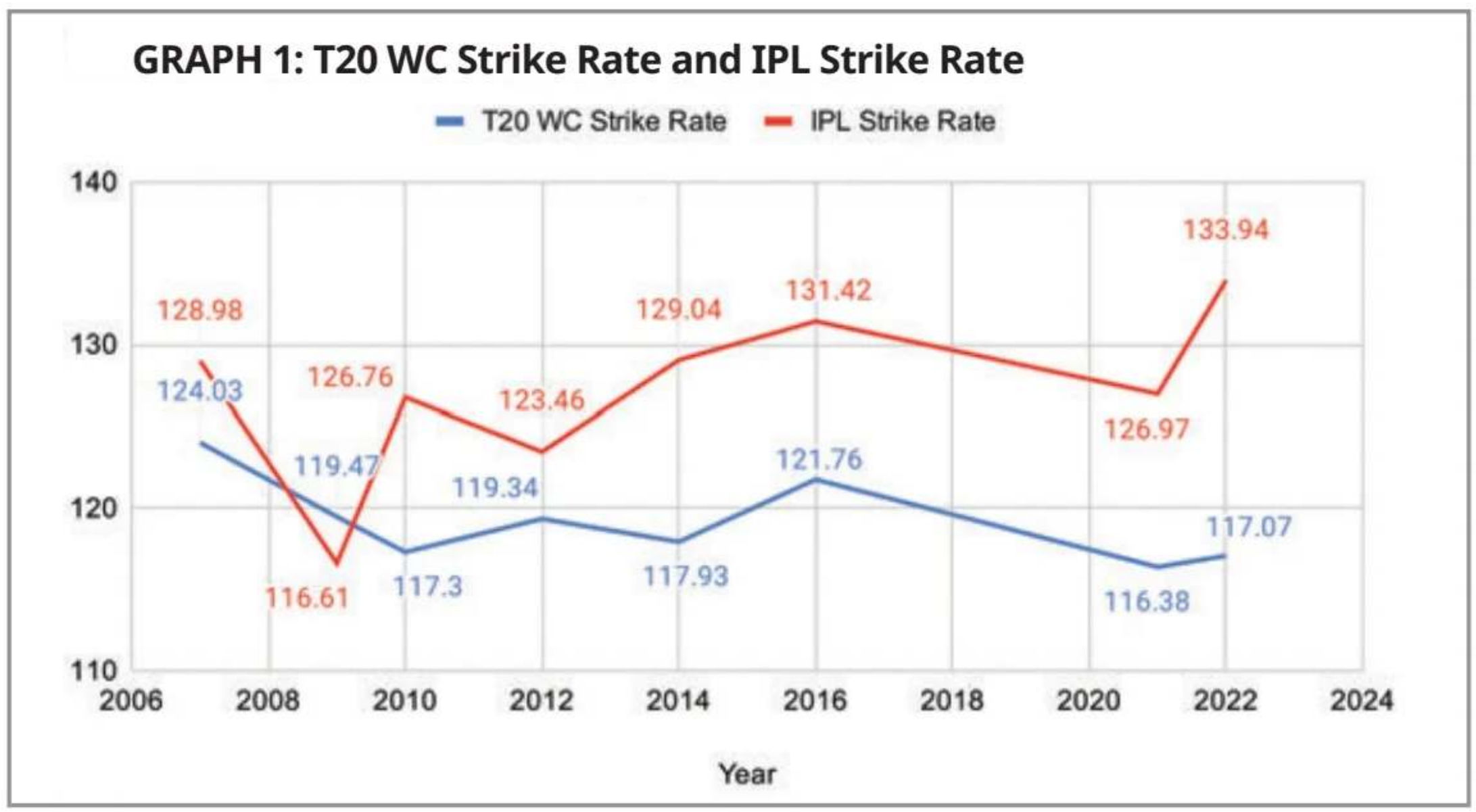
Graph 4 (on page 25) shows a clear trend in Premier League matches, with many more goals scored in comparison to the quadrennial FIFA World Cup.

While the gap between the two competitions has reduced over time, there remains a sizeable difference in the goals-per-match ratio between the two events.

Therefore, national pride and increased jeopardy in international competitions are major factors defining performances across multiple sporting disciplines.

Length of the tournament

The recently concluded IPL season had 74 matches, with each team playing a minimum of 14 games. The 2024 T20 World Cup has just 55 games, with teams assured of only



four opening group games.

A longer tournament with a round-robin format allows teams to play a far more aggressive brand of cricket, as the law of averages will eventually come to their rescue.

But in a shorter tournament, that wouldn't necessarily be the case, as one misstep could potentially spell doom for a team.

Consistent conditions

In the IPL, batters are up against consistently familiar conditions since the tournament is almost always hosted in India.

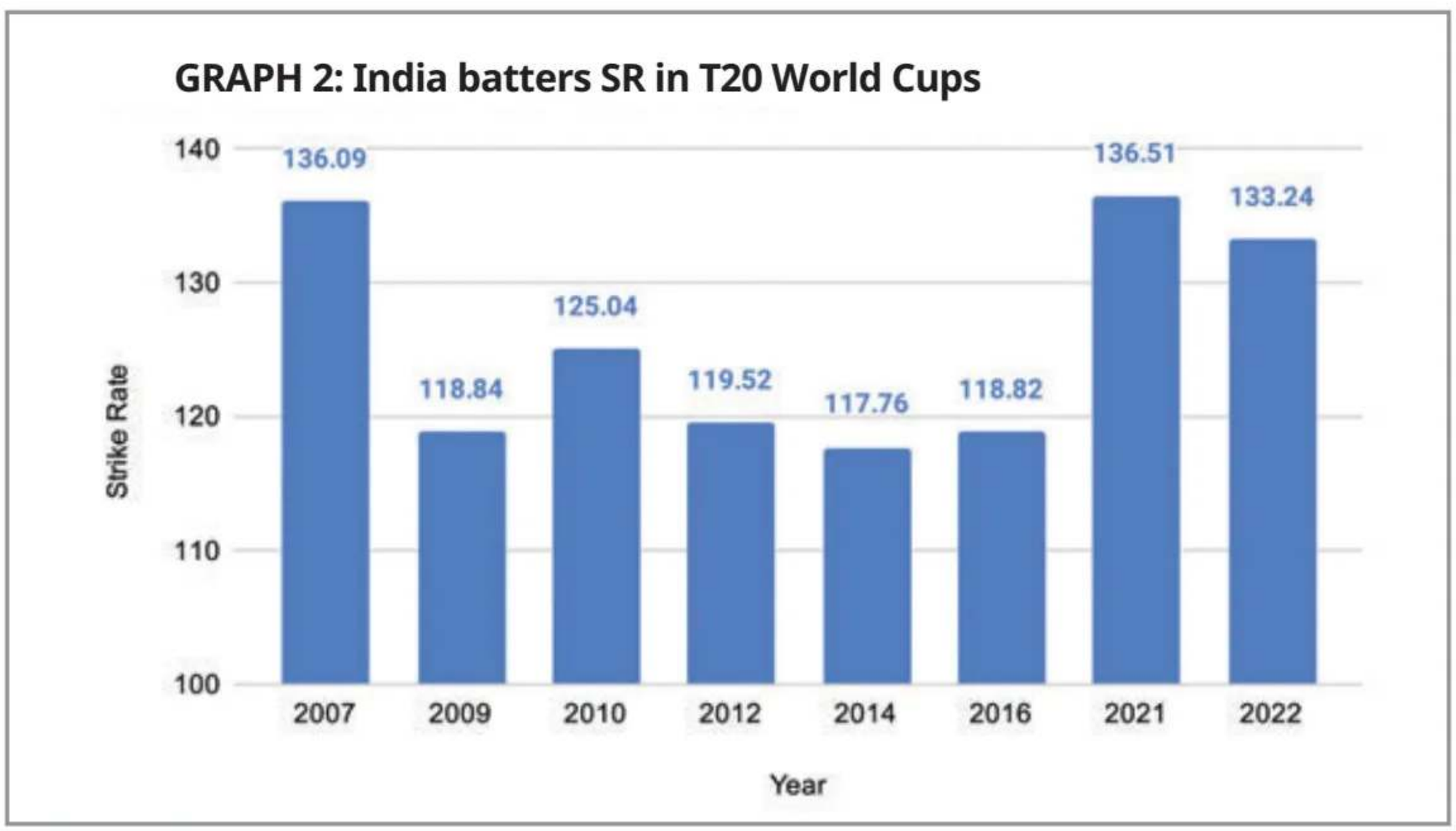
This familiarity with grounds, weather conditions, and even bowling attacks provides batters with regularity, which in turn helps in easier run scoring.

But, with the T20 World Cup being hosted in turns by different countries, batters are often forced to adapt to varying conditions within a short period, resulting in reduced risk-taking and lower strike rates.

Home advantage

IPL also provides teams and batters with the advantage of a

Adaptability is the key: With the T20 World Cup being hosted in turns by different countries, batters like Nicholas Pooran are often forced to adapt to varying conditions within a short period, resulting in reduced risk-taking and lower strike rates. GETTY IMAGES



Determined to succeed: Virat Kohli has repeatedly faced criticism for his strike-rate in T20s, despite delivering high scores. However, changes in -batting strategy — such as the slog-sweep against spinners — bore fruit during Royal Challengers Bengaluru's late resurgence this IPL.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

home venue, often fine-tuned to their benefit. In the latest edition of the IPL, teams like Sunrisers Hyderabad, Delhi Capitals and Kolkata Knight Riders maximise their run-scoring ability at their home venues by setting up shorter boundaries and flatter pitches.

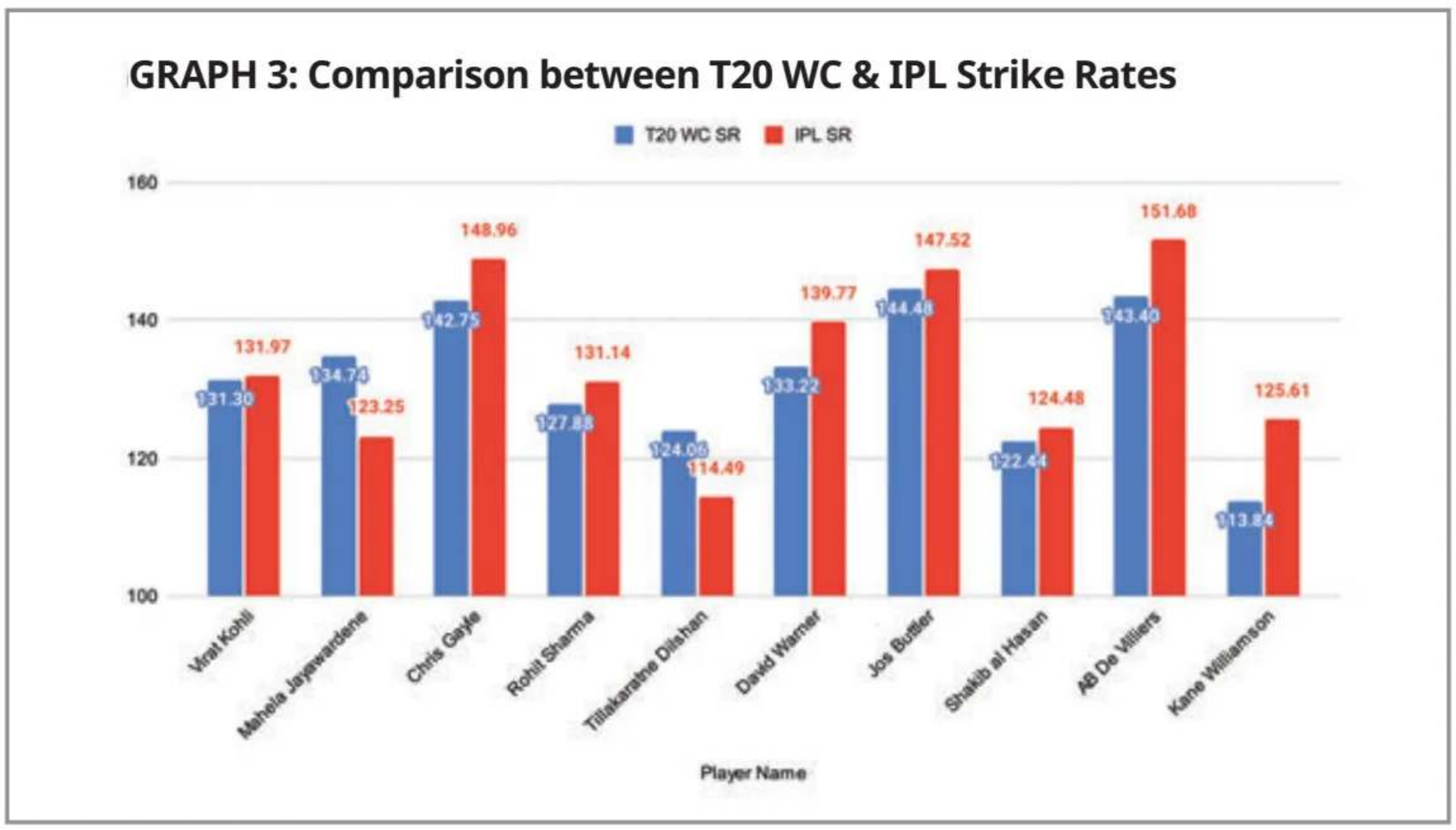
But in the T20 World Cup, hosted

WITH THE WORLD CUP HAVING NO RESTRICTIONS LIKE IPL'S 'MAXIMIUM FOUR OVERSEAS PLAYERS' TEAMS ARE EQUIPPED WITH MORE POTENT BOWLING ATTACKS

by a single nation, barring the host, every other team will play their games at a neutral venue, which may or may not suit the team's and its batters' strengths.

Uncapped players

Though the IPL is blessed with the presence of almost all the global T20 superstars, the nature of the



Game on: Brisbane Heat celebrates winning the KFC Big Bash League 13 title after beating the Sydney Sixers by 54 runs at the Sydney Cricket Ground.
GETTY IMAGES

tournament rules — a maximum of four overseas players — means that every team has to rely on a string of uncapped players to fill their ranks.

Thus, in the IPL, batters have a chance to make merry against bowlers who are not too experienced. In T20 World Cups, no such restrictions are imposed on teams, resulting in better and more potent bowling attacks.

Rule innovations

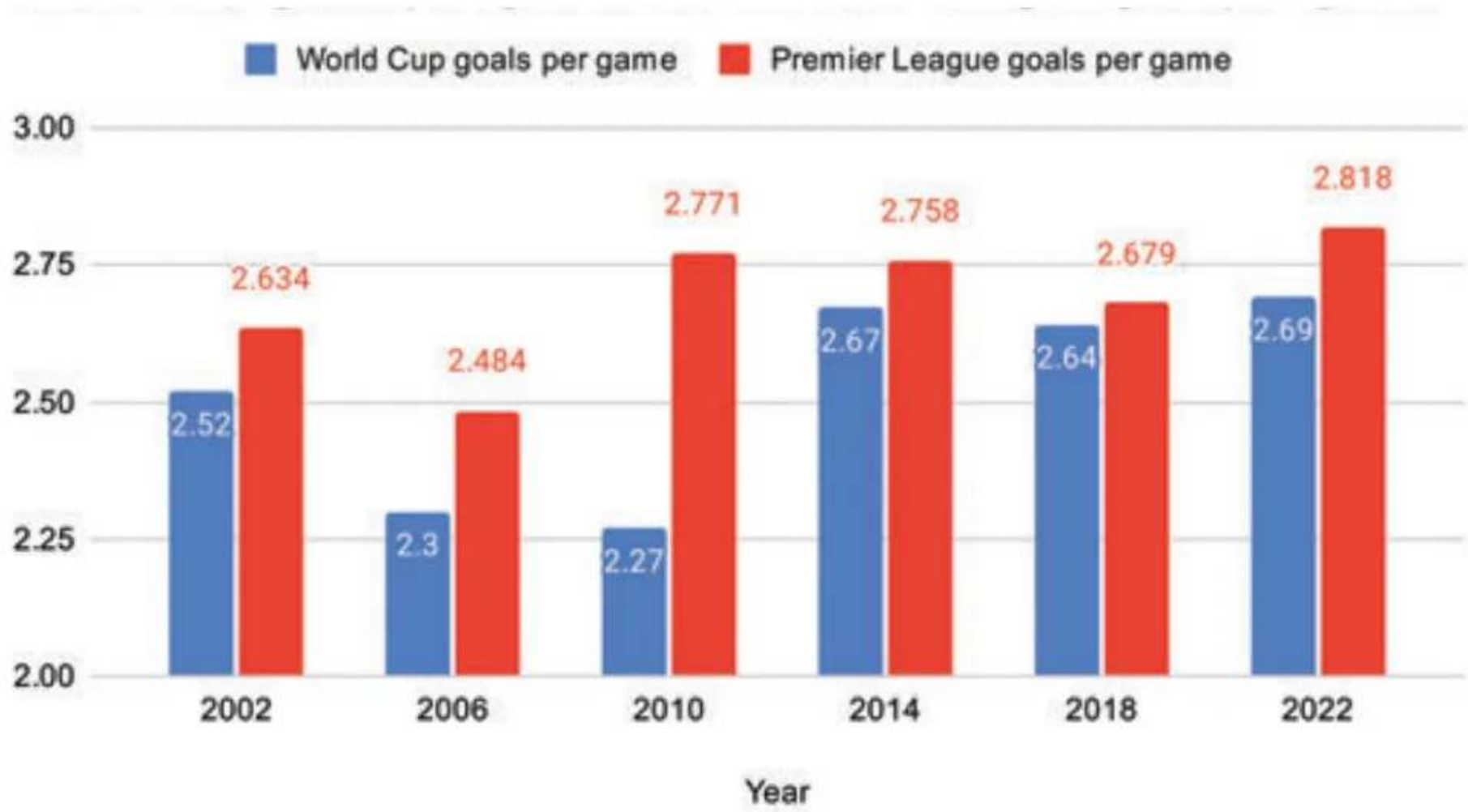
The spike in run-scoring in the last two editions of the IPL is partly down to the introduction of the 'Impact Player' rule.

The provision of an impact player has allowed teams to press harder with the bat as it provides the safety net of an extra batter in case a collapse ensues up the order.

The Big Bash, too, has had a spate of such tinkering, aiming to provide innovation to the sport.

This included a floating two-over PowerPlay, called Power Surge, and the X-factor substitution, which is a variant of the Impact Player.

GRAPH 4: World Cup goals per game and Premier League goals per game



Sai Sudharsan fastest Indian to 1000 runs in IPL

25 } The number of innings Sai Sudharsan needed to reach a career milestone of 1000 runs in IPL cricket. During his maiden century against CSK in Ahmedabad on 10 May 2024, he became the joint third-quickest batter to achieve this. His feat, however, is the fastest by an Indian player in IPL cricket.

Fewest innings to reach 1000 career runs in IPL cricket

Inn	M	Batter	Runs	Ave.	HS	100	50
21	22	S. Marsh	1008	56.00	115	1	10
23	23	L. Simmons	1008	48.00	100*	1	10
25	25	M. Hayden	1022	44.43	93	0	8
25	25	S. Sudharsan	1034	47.00	103	1	6
26	26	J. Bairstow	1001	43.52	114	1	7

Fewest innings to reach 1000 runs in IPL cricket (among Indian players)

Inns	M	Batter	Runs	Ave.	HS	100	50
25	25	S. Sudharsan	1034	47.00	103	1	6
31	31	S. Tendulkar	1064	40.92	89*	0	8
31	31	R. Gaikwad	1076	39.85	101*	1	9

Gujarat Titans' Sai Sudharsan. VIJAY SONEJI

9000 } The T20 runs aggregated by Virat Kohli on Indian soil. His run aggregate is now the most by any batter in a particular country in T20 cricket history. During his knock of 47 against CSK in Bengaluru on 18 May 2024, Kohli became the first to cross 9000 runs in a single country. A day earlier, on 17 May at the Wankhede, Mumbai, Rohit Sharma became the second batter to cross 8000 T20 runs at home. The table below lists the top five players to make the most runs in a single country in T20 history — all incidentally were made on Indian soil. For the record, the most career runs aggregated other than in India is 6155 runs by James Vince on English soil.

Batters aggregating maximum T20 career runs in a country

Runs	Batter (for)	M	Inn	Ave.	100	50	HS	Span	Country
9047	**V. Kohli** (Ind/Del/RCB)	269	263	41.69	8	66	113*	2007-2024	India
8008	**R. Sharma** (Ind/Mum/DCh/MI)	300	294	30.91	7	46	121*	2007-2024	India
7626	**S. Dhawan** (Ind/Dch/Del/DC/MI/SRH/PK)	253	252	34.35	0	59	99*	2007-2024	India
6553	**S. Raina** (Ind/UP/CSK/GL)	244	237	32.92	3	43	126*	2008-2021	India
6434	**R. Uthappa** (Ind/Kar/Ker/Sau/CSK/KKR/MI/PWI/RCB)	239	233	30.06	0	38	92	2007-2022	India

8004 } On May 22, 2024, during the Eliminator match in Ahmedabad against Rajasthan, playing for Bengaluru, Kohli became the first player in IPL history to score over 8000 runs. Notably, Kohli is also the first to reach the milestones of 4000, 6000, 7000, and 8000 runs in IPL cricket. Shikhar Dhawan is next with 6769 runs, the second highest aggregate in IPL.

First to reach the run landmarks in IPL history

Runs	Batter	For+	M	Inn	Achieved on	No. of batters
1000	A. Gilchrist	DChg	32	32	14 March 2010	96
2000	S. Raina	CSK	72	69	30 April 2012	52
3000	S. Raina	CSK	107	103	7 May 2014	26
4000	V. Kohli	RCB	136	128	18 May 2016	16
5000	S. Raina	CSK	177	173	23 Mar 2019	7
6000	V. Kohli	RCB	196	188	22 April 2021	4
7000	V. Kohli	RCB	233	225	6 May 2023	1
8000	V. Kohli	RCB	252	244	22 May 2024	1

+ while playing for that team

24 } Shubman Gill's age when he recorded his first century as an IPL captain — becoming the youngest captain to register a three-figure score.

Youngest to register maiden IPL century as captain

Age	Captain (Runs)	For	Opp
24y-245d	S. Gill (104)	GT	CSK
26y-152d	S. Samson (119)	RR	PK
27y-83d	R. Gaikwad (108*)	CSK	LSG
27y-171d	V. Kohli (100*)	RCB	GL
28-159d	K. L. Rahul (132*)	PK	RCB

3 The number of occasions when two batters registered centuries in the same innings of an IPL match. The latest to join this exclusive group are Gujarat Titans openers Sai Sudharsan and Shubman Gill, who registered three-figure scores in the same innings in Ahmedabad on 10 May 2024.

Two three-figure scores in the same innings of an IPL match

Batter1 (Bat#)	Runs	Batter2 (Bat#)	Runs	For	Opp
V. Kohli (#3)	109	**A. B. de Villiers** (#4)	129*	RCB (248/3)	GL
J. Bairstow (#1)	114	**D. Warner** (#2)	100*	SRH (231/2)	RCB
S. Sudharsan (#1)	103	**S. Gill** (#2)	104	GT (231/3)	CSK

5 The number of batters who have amassed 1500 IPL runs at a single ground. Among these players, Virat Kohli stands tall. His IPL home ground, M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, Bengaluru, has witnessed his cricketing prowess as he has now accumulated a staggering 3040 runs in 86 innings since his debut IPL game on 18 April 2008. In the match against CSK on 18 May 2024, his knock of 47 propelled his run aggregate to over 3000 runs in Bengaluru, a feat no other batter has achieved. His Team India colleague, Rohit Sharma, is a distant second in the ground-aggregate with 2295 runs at the Wankhede Stadium.

Batters aggregating maximum IPL career runs at a single ground

Runs	Batter (for)	Ground	M	Inn	Ave.	100	50	HS	Span
3040	**V. Kohli** (RCB)	Bengaluru	89	86	40.53	4	22	113	2008-2024
2295	**R. Sharma** (MI)	Mumbai WS	80	79	34.25	1	16	105*	2011-2024
1960	**A. B. de Villiers** (DC/RCB)	Bengaluru	61	58	43.56	1	15	129*	2008-2019
1623	**D. Warner** (DC/SRH)	Hyderabad	32	32	64.92	3	15	126	2012-2023
1561	**C. Gayle** (KKR/RCB/PK)	Bengaluru	45	44	41.08	3	8	175*	2010-2019

2 The number of batters who have registered three or more consecutive fifties during the IPL playoff stage. KKR's Venkatesh Iyer has set a new record by becoming the first IPL batter to achieve four successive fifty-plus scores during the playoffs.

Batters with three or more consecutive fifty-plus scores during the playoff stage

4 Venkatesh Iyer (for KKR)

Runs	Opp	Venue	Date	Result	Playoff Stage
55	DC	Sharjah	13 Oct 2021	Won	Qualifier1
50	CSK	Dubai	15 Oct 2021	Lost	Final
51*	SRH	Ahmedabad	21 May 2024	Won	Qualifier1
52*	SRH	Chennai	26 May 2024	Won	Grand Final

3 Lendl Simmons (for MI)

Runs	Opp	Venue	Date	Result	Playoff Stage
67	CSK	Mumbai BS	28 May 2014	Lost	Eliminator
65	CSK	Mumbai WS	19 May 2015	Won	Qualifer1
68	CSK	Kolkata	24 May 2015	Won	Grand Final

Kolkata Knight Riders' Venkatesh Iyer. VIJAY SONEJI

5 The number of batters to have registered four or more fifty-plus scores during the IPL playoff stage. KKR's Venkatesh Iyer became the latest to achieve this in this year's IPL playoffs. His 50-plus run at the playoff stage began way back in October 2021. Meanwhile, Suresh Raina is the only one in the list below with a maximum of seven fifty-plus scores during the playoff stage.

Batters with four or more fifty-plus scores during the playoff stage in their career

50+	Batter	For	From	To	Fifty-plus scores
7	**S. Raina**	CSK	31 May 2008	12 May 2019	*55* (2008), 57* (2010), 73* (2011), 73 (2012), 82* (2013), 54* (2014), 87 (2014)*
4	**M. Hussey**	CSK	24 May 2011	24 May 2015	*63 (2011), 54 (2012), 86* (2013), 56 (2015)*
4	**D'yne Smith**	MI/CSK/GL	24 Apr 2010	27 May 2016	*68 (2013), 62 (2013), 57 (2015), 73 (2016)*
4	**S. Watson**	RR/CSK	30 May 2008	12 May 2019	*52 (2008), 117* (2018), 50 (2019), 80 (2019)*
4	**V. Iyer**	KKR	11 Oct 2021	26 May 2024	*55 (2021), 50 (2021), 51* (2024), 52* (2024)*

All records are correct and updated until 1 June 2024

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

DRS FOR WIDES AND BOUNCERS IN IPL MATCHES SHOULD BE DONE AWAY WITH

The **referrals** for wides and bouncers upset the rhythm and flow of the game. Its removal is a must.

The damp squib of a final was a disappointing end to an enthralling IPL. Every year, the bar is raised higher, and this time too, it was with the (Sunrisers) Hyderabad team showing the way to take advantage of the field restrictions in the first six overs and blasting the ball away to all corners of the ground. They set a new template for opening batters to try and emulate. It was like what Sanath Jayasuriya and Romesh Kaluwitharana had done with opening the batting in the 50-over format. No wonder there were several 200+ scores in this year's tournament, and there was that thrilling chase by (Royal Challengers Bengaluru) Bangalore, where with a bit of luck they could have overhauled the 270+ score that the Hyderabad team had put up. The bowlers had it tough, with the pitches being very good for batting. Yet they showed big hearts and came back again and again.

The Kolkata (Knight Riders) team were deserving champions as they played the most consistent cricket in the tournament. The Rajasthan (Royals) team perhaps had the best bowling attack, but when it came to crunch time, their batters let them down. The champions are those who can combine attack and defence judiciously and not get carried away. While the net run rate is important to keep in mind at all times, it should not be at the cost of the match, but many teams lost matches they should have won in looking to up the net run rate and losing wickets in the process.

This tournament once again showed how performances in local and state leagues don't matter at all. The gap in standard is seen when the stars of these state leagues are batting or bowling against international-quality players. They are seen to be totally out of their depth.

There was a lot of talk about the Impact Player rule. While it reduced the role of the all-rounder, it also gave two players who otherwise wouldn't have played in the eleven a chance to show their skills. That said, cricket is

Change of rule: Until 2022, players could only review on-field decisions for dismissal, but that has not been the case in the IPL since 2023 with teams now reviewing wides and bouncers. SPORTZPICS / IPL

a game played between 11 players who are decided before the toss is made. The referrals for wides and bouncers should be done away with because they upset the rhythm and flow of the game. It is never going to have an impact on the game, like a wrong decision for out or not out can. So, its removal is a must. The countdown for 60 seconds between overs is excellent, and it meant most matches finished well within accepted delays. Those captains who couldn't make up their minds suffered not just fines but also the penalty of having one fielder less outside the 30-metre circle for the last over.

It was a very riveting two months of cricket, and just when people were wondering how to pass their evenings after the IPL ended, the ICC T20 World Cup started and promises to be another exciting contest.

India look good, and if they have a bit of luck, the trophy could be back in the real home of cricket, India.

The IPL once again showed how performances in local and state leagues don't matter at all. The gap in standard is seen when the stars of these state leagues are batting or bowling against international-quality players.

1st

Set the ball rolling: Raring to go — the 34,000-seat stadium in Eisenhower Park in Nassau County, east of Manhattan, is all set as USA hosts its first men's T20 World Cup. K. R. DEEPAK

2nd

Winning start: Aaron Jones' unbeaten 94-run rampage powered the USA to a dominant seven-wicket victory over Canada in a thrilling T20 World Cup opening match in Texas. AFP

3rd

Leading the chase: Co-host West Indies won its T20 World Cup opener by five wickets in Guyana, with Roston Chase's unbeaten 42 leading the way. AP

4th

Cliffhanger: Namibia edged out Oman in a T20 World Cup thriller thanks to David Wiese's all-around heroics. The veteran smashed 13 runs in the Super Over and then stifled Oman's batting with the ball, securing a dramatic victory in Bridgetown.

GETTY IMAGES

5th

Sticky wicket: South Africa started strong with a win as Sri Lanka choked on a tricky New York pitch, posting its worst ever T20 total (77). Questions swirl about the pitch quality. GETTY IMAGES

6th

Thumping victory: Afghanistan opened its T20 World Cup campaign with a convincing 125-run win over Uganda in Guyana. Fazalhaq Farooqi was the star with figures of 5 for 9, the fourth-best bowling figures at a men's T20 World Cup. GETTY IMAGES

REUTERS

England international Brydon Carse was suspended for three months for placing 303 bets on various cricket matches between 2017 and 2019, although he did not bet on matches in which he participated. Carse was given a 16-month ban, 13 of which were suspended for two years. He is banned until August 28. The right-arm fast bowler has played 14 ODIs and three T20 Internationals for England.

AFP

West Indies completed a clean sweep in a three-match T20I series against South Africa at home. The host won the first two games by 28 and 16 runs, respectively. In the final match, South Africa's total of 163 was chased down by West Indies with 6.1 overs to spare. Obed McCoy, who was recently added to the T20 World Cup squad in place of the injured Jason Holder, picked up three wickets, while Johnson Charles was the top-scorer with a 26-ball 69.

@USACRICKET

USA recorded a historic series win against Bangladesh in a three-match T20I series. It got off to a spectacular start with a five-wicket victory, its second win against a Full Member in T20Is. USA was guaranteed a series win after it bowled out Bangladesh in the second game.
Bangladesh hit back in the final match to claim a 10-wicket victory, with Mustafizur Rahman recording his career-best figures (4-1-10-6). Tanzid Hasan and Soumya Sarkar's partnership of 108 runs helped Bangladesh get a consolation win.

AFP

After two of four games were washed out in the T20I series between England and Pakistan, the former won the remaining matches against the visitor to claim a 2-0 series win.
The opening game was abandoned without a ball bowled, while the second game witnessed a 51-ball 84 from captain Jos Buttler to help England win by 23 runs.
With the third game also being foiled due to the rains, Pakistan couldn't level the series, and the host went on to win the fourth match by seven wickets to secure the series.

Invincible: Real Madrid remained unbeaten in this year's UEFA Champions League, scoring 28 goals along the way. This is its sixth title in the last 10 seasons. AFP

AURA OF INEVITABILITY

Real Madrid claimed its **15th European title** after goals by Dani Carvajal and Vinicius Jr. ensured a 2-0 victory against Borussia Dortmund in the final.

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Prior to its summit clash against Borussia Dortmund at Wembley Stadium, Real Madrid boasted a perfect record in UEFA Champions League finals, having never been defeated in any of the eight summit clashes it reached since the competition was rebranded from the European Cup in 1992.

But in this year's final, for a good 72 minutes, Dortmund, backed by the travelling Yellow Wall, appeared to be on the verge of loosening Real's grip on its beloved trophy with a dominant display of attacking football.

However, it was Dani Carvajal who first thrust the dagger of inevitability into the hearts of Dortmund fans with his perfectly guided header into the back of the net following a corner.

Minutes later, Brazilian wonderkid Vinicius Jr doubled the lead, ensuring his side would claim a record-extending 15th European title, achieving *La Decimoquinta*.

Toni Kroos, competing in his final game before the Madridistas, joined Luka Modric, Nacho, Carvajal, and former player Paco Gento as the only players in history to win six European titles.

This victory marked Carlo Ancelotti's fifth UCL title as a manager and his third in two spells with Los Blancos. After crashing out in the semifinal against Manchester

Leap of faith: A perfect header by Dani Carvajal (third from right) in the second half, assisted by a precise corner kick from Toni Kroos, broke the deadlock. AFP

City the previous year, Ancelotti placed his faith in youngsters Rodrygo, Vinícius Jr, and new signing Jude Bellingham, a gamble that paid off in the club's run to UCL glory.

Drama from the get-go

Real Madrid and defending champion Manchester City were the only teams to complete the group stage with perfect records of six wins in six.

Erik ten Hag's Manchester United provided the biggest shock of the stage by failing to qualify from a group that included Bayern Munich, FC Copenhagen and Galatasaray, setting a record for the most goals conceded (15) by a Premier League side in a UCL group stage.

Adding to their woes, United managed only one win and became the first English team to finish bottom of a Champions League group twice, having previously done so in 2005/06.

Arsenal made the most of its return to the Champions League after seven years, topping its group by netting 16 times in six games. Europa League specialist Sevilla failed to win a single group stage game, ending its season without an entry into the second-tier competition of European club football.

This victory marked coach Carlo Ancelotti's fifth UCL title as a manager and his third in two spells with Los Blancos.

FC Barcelona made it past the group stage for the first time since Lionel Messi's departure in 2021. However, Xavi's men showed signs of inconsistency with losses against Shakhtar Donetsk and Royal Antwerp F.C. in the group stage.

Runner-up Borussia Dortmund emerged victorious from the 'group of death' that included Paris Saint-Germain, AC Milan, and Newcastle United.

Eddie Howe's Newcastle United had a memorable start to its first Champions League campaign in 20 years with an emphatic 4-1 victory against Paris Saint-Germain at St James' Park.

But three losses and two draws in the remaining games left it finishing last, with AC Milan dropping to the Europa League.

Charge of the young brigade: Carlo Ancelotti placed his faith in Rodrygo, Vinícius Jr. (below), and new signing Jude Bellingham (in pic, left), a gamble that paid off. AFP

No room for errors in knockouts

The Champions League saw its first penalty shootout since the 2015-16 final between Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid when Arsenal faced Porto in the round of 16. The Gunners reached the final eight for the first time in 14 years after beating the Portuguese giants 4-2 in the shootout. However, Mikel Arteta's men could not escape the ghosts of their previous round-of-16 thrashing at the hands of Bayern Munich in 2016-17, faltering against the Bavarians in the quarterfinals this season.

Title holder Manchester City and competition royalty Real Madrid played an enthralling quarterfinal first leg, which ended 3-3 at the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium in Madrid. At the Etihad Stadium, where it was eliminated the previous year, Ancelotti's side was better prepared and forced Pep Guardiola's men into their first-ever penalty shootout in the competition. Ukrainian Andriy Lunin's heroics in the shootout ended City's quest for a second successive crown.

Barcelona squandered its advantage from the first leg of its quarterfinal against PSG as former Barca winger Ousmane Dembele and marquee player Kylian Mbappe inspired the Parisians to stage a comeback in the reverse fixture. As a result, Luis Enrique became the first ex-Barcelona manager to eliminate the 'Culers' from a Champions League knockout stage.

Dortmund came back from a goal down in the first leg against Atletico Madrid to win the tie, which kept flipping until Marcel Sabitzer's magical three-minute spell in the second leg sent 'The Black and Yellow' into the final four.

Veteran Mats Hummels stood out in a team lacking big names, inspiring Dortmund to continue its dream run after beating PSG both home and away in the semifinal, ending Mbappe's seven-year tenure in the French capital without a taste of the UCL trophy.

In the other semifinal, after drawing the first leg 2-2 in Germany, Real Madrid found an unlikely

AFP

Last hurrah: Toni Kroos, competing in his final game before the Madridistas, joined Luka Modric, Nacho, Carvajal, and former player Paco Gento as the only players in history to win six European titles. AFP

hero in substitute Joselu, who scored twice in three minutes to stage a comeback against Bayern Munich. Bayern had been leading the tie until the 87th minute when Alphonso Davies smashed the ball past Lunin earlier in the second leg.

Emergence of a new era

While Marco Reus' **(right)** last dance did not have a fairytale ending, Edin Terzic's side will be proud of the way it approached the final, as actual contenders rather than underdogs.

Despite a disappointing domestic season, Dortmund pressured Real Madrid for most of the final, much like it did to teams throughout the tournament.

However, in the end, it succumbed to Madrid's extraordinary narrative, just as many other sides have in the past.

With the revamped Champions League featuring 36 teams starting next season in an attempt to produce more 'competitive matches', football fans will eagerly await to see if it increases the disparity between European heavyweights and lower-ranked teams. They will also be keen to find out if it brings more jeopardy in qualification to the knockouts.

> « In the end, Dortmund succumbed to Madrid's extraordinary narrative, just as many other sides have in the past »

GETTY IMAGES

INDIAN FOOTBALL GRAPPLING WITH A MIDFIELD CONUNDRUM

Foreign midfielders wield considerable influence for many teams in the Indian Super League, **while their Indian counterparts struggle** with a shortage of opportunities and less-than-ideal playing positions, adding to the challenges for national coach Igor Stimac.

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During the Indian Super League (ISL) knockout match between Odisha FC and Kerala Blasters in April this year, Ahmed Jahouh executed a pass few would dare to attempt at 1-1 in extra time.

The deep-lying midfielder of Odisha arrowed in a straight first-time no-look pass over the Blasters' defence and found Roy Krishna, whose well-timed run behind a flat-footed opposition backline allowed him to set up Isak Ralte for the match-winner.

Even at 35, Jahouh's mastery over the ball continues to leave many spellbound. He can dictate the pace of play — deciding when to speed up proceedings or slow it down to provide control in possession — and when to switch play with his range of passing capabilities. A midfielder like him can have a transformative effect on a football team, as Odisha discovered by bringing the pass master from Mumbai City FC.

Since 2017, he has had the highest number of passes among midfielders in five seasons. This year was no different, as he registered 1367 successful passes, 369 more than the next best, while playing two games fewer.

Even though Odisha did not win the ISL Shield or the ISL title with Jahouh in its fold, the Juggernauts were legitimate contenders, leading the points table during the season and reaching the semifinals for the first time. It also reached the AFC Cup Inter-Zone semifinals and narrowly lost the Super Cup final.

ISL'S FOREIGNER RULES HAVE PROMPTED TEAMS TO LOOK ABROAD FOR RESOURCES WHO CAN RAISE THE TECHNICAL LEVEL OF THEIR SIDE

But one wonders if there is an Indian midfielder who can replicate or surpass Jahouh's abilities on the ball.

FC Goa's Brandon Fernandes is perhaps the only one who possesses a technique comparable to Jahouh's. However, unlike the latter, Brandon is an attacking midfielder.

When Igor Stimac took over as the national team coach in 2019, he emphasised moving away from a long ball-oriented approach to a possession-based one, building attacks by passing from the back.

His preferred system is either 4-2-3-1 or 4-4-2, both of which require two central midfielders to play an integral role in breaking up play while funnelling possession from the backline and circulating it towards the attacking third of the pitch.

"We have improved our passing accuracy and possession; we have become more technical," Stimac noted in 2021. Luckily for him, his tenure coincided with ISL teams adopting a possession-heavy style, with coaches from Spain, Germany, and the UK implementing this approach.

But does India have enough midfielders who can implement this style? The ISL's 3+1 foreigner rule

Powerhouse of promise: Brandon Fernandes (left) is perhaps the only one who possesses a technique comparable to that of Ahmed Jahouh, ISL's best midfielder. PTI

In his seven ISL seasons, the Moroccan has made a significant impact across three teams: FC Goa and Mumbai City FC (both of which won the ISL Shield and multiple ISL championships with him pulling strings in the midfield), and Odisha FC, the latest beneficiary of his arrival on the east coast.

Old is gold: Even at 35, Janouh's (yellow) mastery continues to leave many spellbound. K. MURALI KUMAR

SAHAL ABDUL SAMAD, WHO HAS LONG BEEN ADMIRED FOR HIS DRIBBLING AND CLOSE CONTROL, NEVER REALLY FOUND A REGULAR RUN AS A NO. 10 PLAYER AT KERALA BLASTERS

Pic: RITU RAJ KONWAR

and five-foreigner rule (2014 to 2020) prompted teams to look abroad for players who could raise the technical level of their side. This over-reliance on foreigners was not only for centre-forward and attacking midfield roles but also central midfield.

Historically, ISL teams have either deployed experienced foreigners in a two-man pivot in the midfield or paired a foreigner with an up-and-coming Indian in front of the back four.

The average age of an Indian midfielder in the league is 23.96, while for an overseas midfielder, it is close to 32. Therefore, the latter tends to dictate proceedings as the central figure while the domestic midfielder plays a supporting role.

In recent years, successful teams in the ISL have followed this trend, such as: Mumbai City ('23-'24) — Lalengmawia Ralte-Yoell van Nieff/Alberto Noguera, ATK Mohun Bagan (now called Mohun Bagan Super Giant) ('22-'23) — Carl McHugh-Glan Martins/Puitea, Hyderabad FC ('21-'22) — Joao Victor-Souvik Chakrabarti/Hitesh Sharma/Sahil Tavora and Mumbai City ('20-'21) — Jahouh-Raynier Fernandes/Rowllin Borges.

However, success with an all-Indian double pivot is very rare. In the 2021-22 season, Scotsman Owen Coyle took Jamshedpur FC to the ISL Shield title with the pairing of Pronay Halder and Jitendra Singh. And with Chennaiyin FC in 2019-20, when it finished runner-up, Coyle preferred Anirudh Thapa to be partnered

with either Edwin Sydney Vanspaul or Germanpreet Singh.

While the lack of centre-forwards in the national team besides Sunil Chhetri due to inadequate playing time in the ISL has been a long-standing issue, there are also concerns over attacking midfielders being played out of position. If Indian forwards are shifted to the wings to accommodate overseas exports, the central attacking midfielders will then have to fight it out with these Indian forwards for a place in the wings.

Due to the high-stakes environment of the top division league, coaches prefer overseas players over Indians in attacking midfield positions to maximise the threat upfront and minimise risks on the ball.

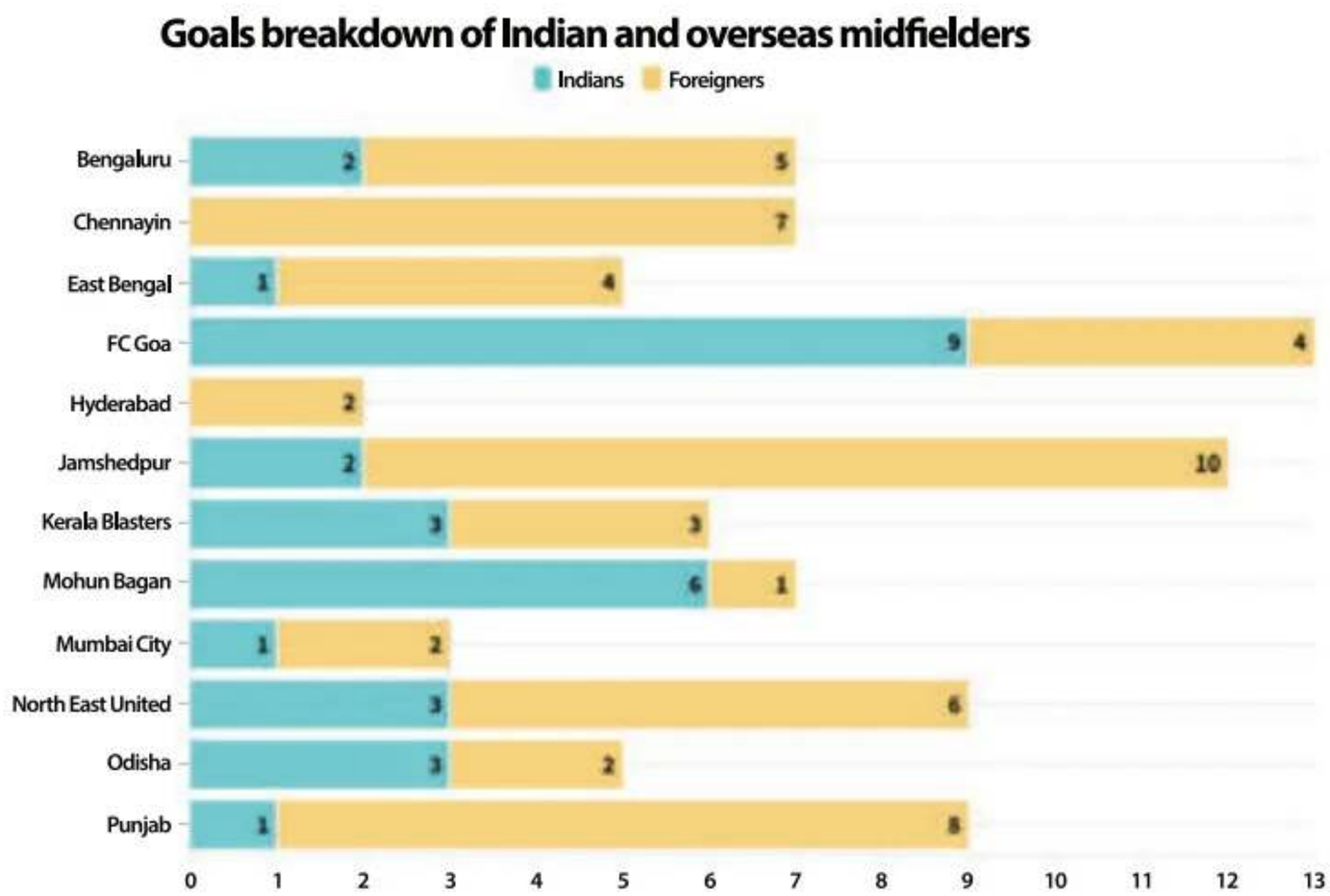
One of the Indian attacking midfielders, Sahal Abdul Samad, who has long been admired for his dribbling and close control, never really found a regular run as a No. 10 player during his time at Kerala Blasters. There was a perceived risk of him or any other inexperienced Indian losing the ball in the central areas of the pitch and exposing the team to counterattacks.

That trend would further add to Stimac's frustration, who urged ISL clubs to play Indians in both centre-forward and attacking midfield positions. "This is the only way," he said in an interview with Hindustan Times in 2023.

Even Brandon had to be shunted to the left flank in favour of overseas attacking midfielders. Thapa, who Coyle described as the 'best Indian midfielder'," was played out of position after his move to Mohun Bagan at the start of last season.

Injuries to defensive midfielders meant that Juan Ferrando, former head coach of the Mariners, played Thapa — a box-to-box midfielder — as a lone defensive midfielder, which didn't work out too well.

The difference in playing time for Indian and overseas midfield players is quite lopsided. Among the 64 Indian midfielders who played in the 2023/24 ISL, only 26 completed 800 minutes or more. But among the 24 overseas midfielders, 22 played over 800 minutes.



The overseas midfielders bring valuable experience and technical prowess, significantly enhancing goal-scoring output in the final third (**see graph**). The foreigners have a hand in 105 goals (54 goals and 51 assists), dwarfing the Indians' tally of 66 (31 goals and 35 assists).

At Chennaiyin, a 35-year-old Rafael Crivellaro, who had been out of action through injuries for the better part of 2021 and 2022, finished with four goals and seven assists this season while not even being at his best.

Every ISL team, except perhaps FC Goa, has a key overseas midfielder as the central hub, with an Indian player in a supporting role. The base of Goa's midfield saw Carl McHugh being an ever-present fixture along with Rowllin Borges, Raynier Fernandes, and Ayush Chhetri as his midfield partners, while Brandon was the creative fulcrum in the No. 10 role. At FC Goa, the Indian midfielders outperformed the overseas midfielders in both goals and assists.

In the last seven ISL seasons, as the duration of the league expanded beyond three months, several midfielders have shown promise, but none have secured a central or attacking midfield position in the national team.

Midfielders like Anirudh Thapa **(below)**, Sahal, Brandon, Lalengmawia, Rowllin, Deepak Tangri, Amarjit Singh Kiyam, Jeakson Singh, and Suresh Singh Wangjam have all been regular faces with the Blue Tigers but with mixed results.

Thapa has been played as a No. 6, a No. 8, and a No. 10 without nailing down a specific position. Sahal, as an attacking midfielder in the No. 10 role, has been influential in the last year, but his output has been underwhelming with just two assists. Amarjit, who was Stimac's preferred central midfielder in 2019, has had his progress derailed by injuries.

Brandon's injuries had kept him out for over 18 months until his return to the national team earlier this year. Tangri, too, has had spells out with injuries, while Lalengmawia fell foul of Stimac last year but has since made a comeback. Suresh, on the other hand, has been woefully out of sorts in recent years.

Among them, Lalengmawia is the only player who possesses a well-rounded game both on and off the ball and can play both as a defensive midfielder and a box-to-box midfielder. At 23, his best years are yet

K. MURALI KUMAR

Searching for a solution: Igor Stimac (left) faces numerous challenges in improving the Indian midfield, including the scarcity of center-forwards apart from Sunil Chhetri (right). RITU RAJ KONWAR

to come. As for Brandon, his recent form in the ISL bodes well for the national team ahead of the World Cup qualifiers in June.

For the 41-man probables list, Stimac had rewarded Kerala Blasters' Vibin Mohanan with a call-up after his excellent breakout campaign, but he was ultimately trimmed from the final squad. One player Stimac seemed to have overlooked recently is Lalthathanga Khawlhring, also known as Puitea. Playing alongside someone of the quality of Jahouh has helped revitalise the diminutive central midfielder, who moved from Mohun Bagan to Odisha this summer. He was the best passing Indian midfielder this season with 919 completed passes, 683 more than his previous season's count with the Mariners, having played nine additional matches.

Passing isn't the only metric that determines the quality of a midfielder. To become a complete midfielder, one should also excel in positioning, tackling, aerial duels, and interceptions. Puitea, with a dribbling ability that's unique among Indian deep-lying midfielders, has had his best campaign this year. However, he is yet to earn a senior India cap. His only call-up in the last 12 months was in March ahead of the Afghanistan World Cup qualifier. He was included in the probables list, but the 26-year-old was cut from the eventual squad.

Often, when pitted against higher-ranked opponents, India has come unstuck due to its inability to progress the ball from the back to the front or control phases of play. Central midfielders with a wide passing range, who can play themselves out of tight spaces, could solve some of these problems.

If India hopes to secure any points in the upcoming qualifiers and aims to achieve World Cup third-round qualification, it could utilise Puitea alongside Lalengmawia in the double pivot role. But Stimac's preference for aerial strength in the form of Jeakson seems to go against the Odisha midfielder.

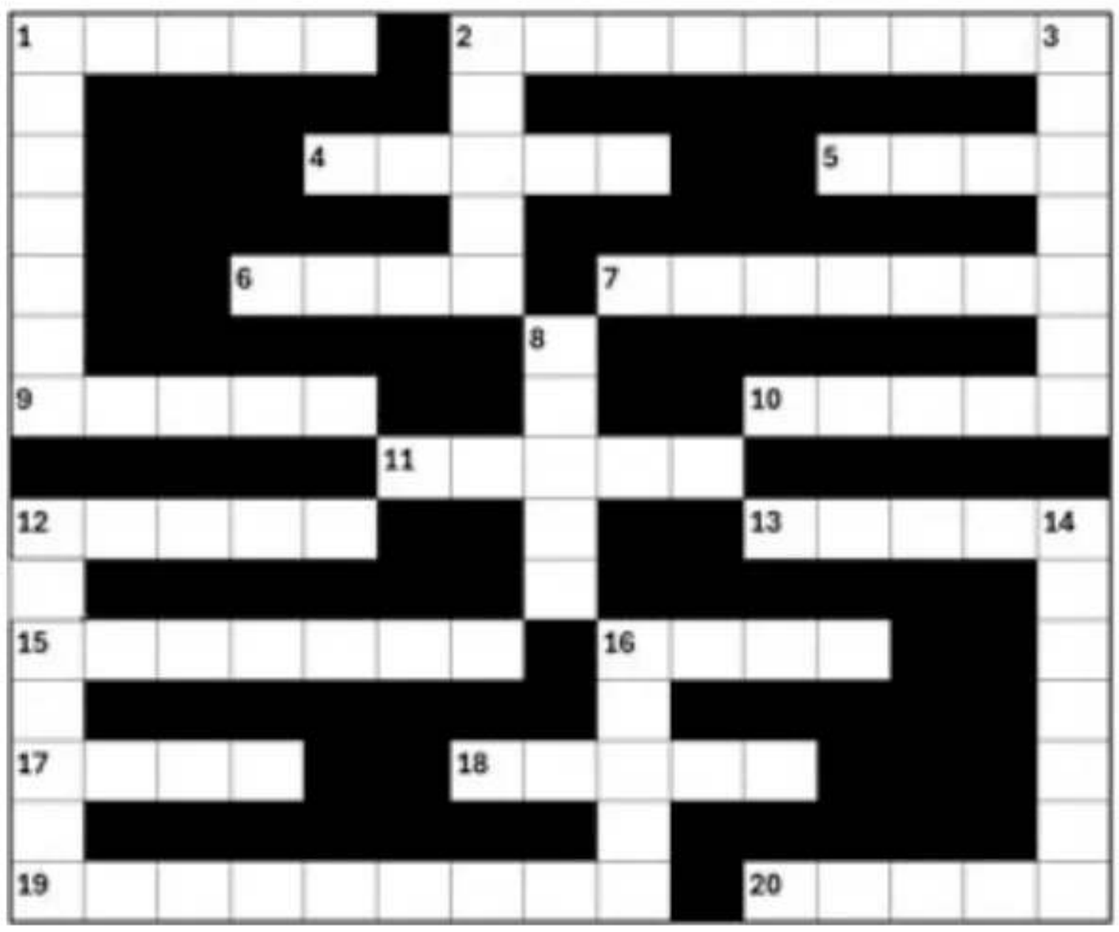
Apart from them, youngsters like Jiteshwor Singh and Ayush Adhikari (Chennaiyin), Nikhil Prabhu (Punjab FC), Mark Zothanpuia and Lalchhanhima Sailo (Hyderabad), Harsh Patre (Bengaluru), Abhishek Suryavanshi (Mohun Bagan) — all of whom are aged under 24 and have played over 800 minutes — have impressed, but most of them play for clubs that finished in the bottom half of the table.

The youthful profile of an Indian midfielder and the limited playing time in midfield positions in the top division doesn't augur well for Stimac and the national team.

Mumbai City's title-winning coach Petr Kratky said after winning the ISL trophy, "I was talking to our sports director and said I would want to win the ISL trophy with only Indian players. But there is no denying that foreign players bring quality and experience that Indians can learn from."

While foreigners like Jahouh and Noguera rightly bring in the know-how to help Indian midfielders, the reason for the league's existence will become moot if Indians don't get the space to develop their game and reach greater heights.

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

IPL SPECIAL

ACROSS

2 & 5: Name the player who scored two consecutive fifties in the IPL Playoffs this year. (9,4)

7 & 6: Who effected the most number of stumpings in IPL 2024? (7,4)

9: Which player jointly holds the record for scoring the most number of fifties despite not crossing 400 runs in aggregate ? (5)

10: Who is the only fielder to take five catches in an innings, the most by any player? (5)

11: Who conceded the most number of runs in an innings which turned out to be the most in IPL history too? (5)

12: Before the start of the 2024 edition, this player had won the player of the series award twice, scored more than 1000 runs and taken more than 160 wickets, including a hat-trick. This year he scored another hundred and went on to win the player of the series award for the record third time. Name the player. (5)

13: This player completed his fifty at 6.41 p.m. and quickly went to his hundred at 6.47 p.m. (5)

15: Which player was formally announced as captain of his franchise just one day before the start of the tournament? He also went on to score more than 500 runs, including a century. (7)

17: Who is the only uncapped bowler to take five wickets in an innings? (4)

18 & 1: Which player took the most number of wickets during the PowerPlay? (5,5)

19: This player not only scored the most number of runs for his team but was also involved in the only double century partnership registered in the 2024 edition. (9)

20 & 4: In his sixth consecutive season for the same IPL team, this player scored close to 600 runs in this edition. (5,5)

DOWN

1: Who scored two centuries in this edition, most by any batter? (7)

2 & 8: Name the player who scored more than 500 runs in this edition, registered this feat for the seventh time across all IPL editions, and is the only Indian and second in IPL history to do so. (5,5)

3: By winning the Purple cap in this edition, he became the second Indian to do so twice in IPL history. (7)

12: Who became the first player in IPL history to have led two different teams in the final? (7)

14 & Across 16: The other player involved in the double century partnership with Across-19 above. (7,4)

16: Scoring the most ducks in this edition, he also became the joint-holder of this unwanted record in IPL history. Name the player. (5)

CAN GERMANY TAKE THE HOME ADVANTAGE?

Germany will be keen to put behind its recent tournament disappointments and give Toni Kroos **the perfect goodbye** by winning Euro 2024 at home.

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With one of the most renowned legacies in international football, Germany will enter Euro 2024 aiming to overcome its recent record of early exits from major tournaments and lift the trophy on home soil for a record fourth time.

After experiencing success during Joachim Löw's 15-year reign — including the resounding 2014 FIFA World Cup win — Germany crashed out of the 2018 World Cup at the first hurdle, and in the round of 16 during Euro 2020.

Hansi Flick, who replaced Low in 2021, failed to lead his side past the group stage of the 2022 World Cup and was promptly replaced by Julian Nagelsmann, who began his tenure with losses in friendlies against Turkey and Austria.

However, the return of midfield maestro Toni Kroos from retirement, combined with the emergence of young players from the Bundesliga, will aid Nagelsmann's task. Wins over heavyweights France and the Netherlands in friendlies have further renewed German fans'

GETTY IMAGES

Strong contender: Amidst a wealth of talent, Thomas Müller and Toni Kroos remain the key players for host Germany. GETTY IMAGES

faith.

Drawn with Switzerland, Hungary, and Scotland in Group A, it will hope for a victory in its first match — against the Scots — something it has failed to achieve in its last three major tournaments.

With Leon Goretzka missing out, Nagelsmann is likely to opt for a 4-2-3-1 formation with Kroos and Bayer Leverkusen's Robert Andrich supporting captain Ilkay Gundogan in midfield.

Die Mannschaft will rely on the talents of Jamal Musiala and Florian Wirtz to add creativity and liveliness up front.

After a confidence-boosting season with Arsenal, Kai Havertz looks likely to lead the line, with Niclas Fullkrug and Thomas Muller available as reliable backups.

More of the same for Switzerland?

Switzerland hopes to improve on its dream run in the previous edition, where it narrowly missed out on a spot in the semifinal after losing to Spain on penalties.

It produced the biggest shock of the tournament when it trumped France in the round of 16, coming back from two goals down to eventually win in the shootout.

While Murat Yakin's men were below par in the Euro 2024 qualifiers with four wins, five draws, and one loss, they will hope that the experienced squad can perform when it matters.

With veteran Yann Sommer in goal, Yakin is expected to field a back three comprising Manuel Akanji, Nico Elvedi, and the experienced Ricardo Rodriguez.

Captain Granit Xhaka **(left; in red)**, the most capped player in the squad, will take charge in central midfield, most likely alongside Remo Freuler. Former Arsenal man Xhaka has found a second wind this season, helping Bayer Leverkusen to its maiden Bundesliga triumph.

Xherdan Shaqiri brings a wealth of quality to the side with his goalscoring and playmaking prowess, alongside AC Milan youngster Noah Okafor, who is expected to lead the attack.

Can the underdogs spark a surprise?

Scotland will look for a change in fortune in Euro 2024, having never made it past the group stage in its previous three appearances.

However, Steve Clarke's side will be cautiously optimistic about its chances of reaching the knockouts after an impressive qualifying run, which included a 2-0 victory against Spain.

Scott McTominay has been the standout performer during this period, scoring seven times in eight games, and will be the driving force in midfield alongside Aston Villa's John McGinn.

Captain Andrew Robertson will take the left-back role, leaving Kieran Tierney to act as a left-sided central defender.

Up front, the Scots will depend on Southampton striker Che Adams to fire, after playing an integral part in his side's promotion to the Premier League.

Hungary, once a dominant force in Europe, will look to reclaim its glory days after sealing a spot in the tournament by going unbeaten in the qualifiers.

After missing out on a spot in the 2022 World Cup, manager Marco Rossi inspired his side to notable wins against giants Germany and England in the 2022-23 UEFA Nations League.

Led by Liverpool's Dominik Szoboszlai, Hungary will rely on an experienced back three of Willi Orban, Attila Szalai, and Adam Lang to handle the pressure of the big stage. Winger Roland Sallai, currently tied with Szoboszlai as the top scorer in the team, will be expected to steer the attack.

Knockouts prediction:

Home side Germany is the clear favourite to top the group, while the battle for the second spot is up in the air.

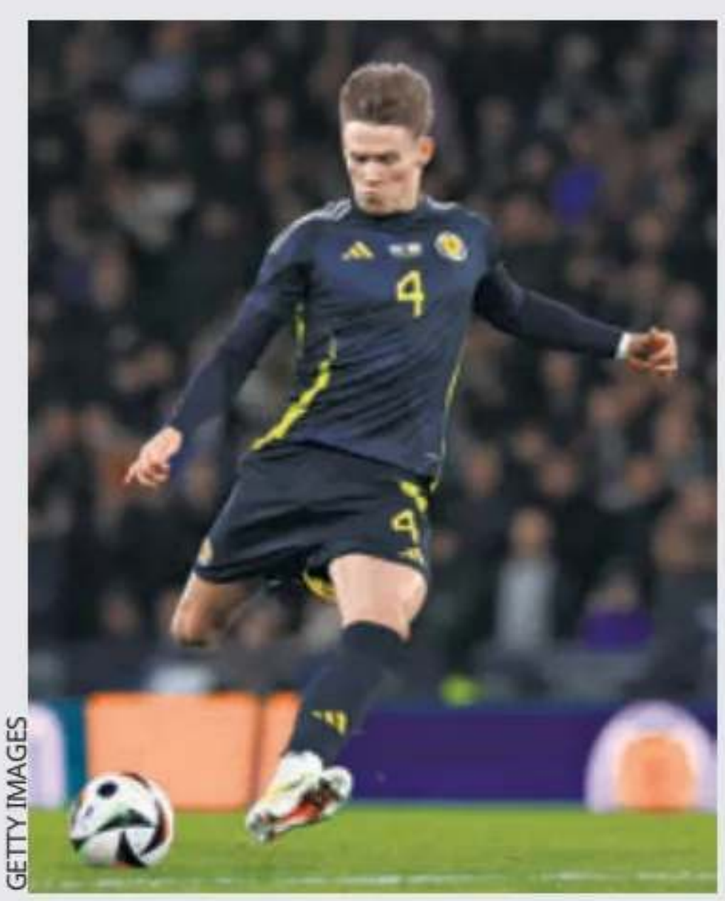
Scotland and Hungary will look to continue their form from the qualifiers, while Switzerland will hope that the experience in its squad can get them over the first hurdle.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

GETTY IMAGES

JAMAL MUSIALA

Despite going trophyless with Bayern Munich this season, the 21-year-old scored 12 goals and assisted eight in 38 appearances. His ability on the wings to weave through defences while also assuming a more central position makes him a threat to the opposition.



GETTY IMAGES

SCOTT McTOMINAY

He will try to continue his hot streak after winning the FA Cup with Manchester United in his final game of the season. If his goalscoring run in the qualifiers is any indication of what is to come, Scotland will fancy its chances of making it past the group stage for the first time.

CAN ITALY DO IT AGAIN?

Defending champion Italy **aims for glory once again** while Spain, rejuvenated under Luis de la Fuente, looks strong with fresh talent.

Searching for stability: Under new coach Luciano Spalletti, Italy will look to shore up its squad in time for its title defence. GETTY IMAGES

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Italy's journey has been unusual. After failing to qualify for the 2018 World Cup, it went on a 37-game unbeaten run under Roberto Mancini and won Euro 2020. However, it failed to qualify for the World Cup again in 2022 in Qatar.

As the defending champion, Italy should feel inspired. Luciano Spalletti, who took over after Mancini's resignation, is at the helm. With Spalletti preferring the 4-3-3 formation, Italy will look for a solid back four, supported by a defensive midfielder, making Jorginho crucial.

In defence, Destiny Udogie's injury is unfortunate, but uncapped Andrea Cambiaso has a chance to impress. Inter Milan's Federico Dimarco and Alessandro Bastoni are almost certain to start.

Italy's attack is a concern, with Spalletti lacking a world-class No. 9. Europa League winner Gianluca Scamacca has just one goal in 15 appearances while Federico Chiesa will hope to find his Euro 2020 form.

Dark horses no more

The phrases 'Dark Horse' and 'Giant Killer' were often associated with Croatia, but it has moved past the underdog trope. Croatia's 'Golden Generation' is ageing, and several players have retired from international football, but its consistency makes it difficult to count it out on the big stage.

Midfield is Croatia's strongest department, featuring Luka Modrić (left; in blue), Mateo Kovačić, and Marcelo Brozovic. However, at 38, Modrić's match time needs to be managed properly by Zlatko Dalic to get the best out of the Croatia captain.

GETTY IMAGES

Dominik Livaković is the preferred choice in goal. In front of him, he will have a solid balance of experience in Domagoj Vida and youth in Joško Gvardiol. Josip Stanišić and Josip Juranović should be the preferred fullbacks.

Veteran Ivan Perišić will, as usual, pose a threat in the forward line and will be expected to support the likes of Andrej Kramarić and Bruno Petković, while Kramarić has the best statistics among the available forwards.

With Croatia's best finishes in this tournament being quarterfinal appearances in 1996 and 2008, head coach Dalić knows that Euro 2024 is the last chance to win a trophy with the remaining members of this generation.

The next chapter for La Roja

After Spain's 'Golden Generation', it can write a new chapter with the enviable talent in its ranks. Winner of the Nations League under new manager Luis de la Fuente, Spain has a refreshed look, making it a title contender.

Unai Simon should be the preferred choice between the sticks. In front of him, centre-back Aymeric Laporte will partner with Robin Le Normand. Alejandro Grimaldo as left fullback is almost a certainty after winning the title with Bayer Leverkusen.

In midfield, Spain has Rodri — arguably the best defensive midfielder in world football. Pedri's vision to unlock defences should be crucial for Spain, but his fitness will be a crucial factor. His Barcelona teammate Gavi, who will miss out due to injury, is a big loss for La Roja.

Lamine Yamal has grabbed headlines as the 'next big thing' and should be one of the first names in the Spain attack. However, at 16, Yamal will need to be managed by De La Fuente carefully to prevent injuries or fatigue. Alvaro Morata looks likely to play the No. 9 role.

For the wingers, Dani Olmo, Nico Williams, and Ferran Torres are likely contenders. The coach needs to select his wingers carefully, as his preferred 4-3-3 formation will depend heavily on how the wingers service the centre-forward.

The odd one out

Albania finds itself out of place in a group of heavyweights, and coach Sylvinho will need a miraculous effort to achieve a positive result from the group.

Despite having experienced players like Ivan Balliu and Elseid Hysaj in defence, Nedim Bajrami in midfield, and Armando Broja in attack, Albania's squad is vastly inferior on paper compared to Italy, Spain, and Croatia.

However, having secured a top-two position in its qualifying group to advance directly, it will take inspiration from all the underdogs who have beaten stronger teams before.

Knockouts prediction:

With three strong teams, it will be daring to assume which teams would qualify. However, Italy and Spain look likely to advance from Group B.

Croatia is also a strong contender, but an ageing squad might prevent it from replicating its consistent performance on the international stage.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

GETTY IMAGES

RODRI

Replacing a player like Sergio Busquets is no easy feat. His composure and skill on the ball gave Spain stability in midfield. But in Rodri, La Roja finally has an able central defender who can pull the strings from midfield. Despite having a different profile than Busquets, Rodri's presence in midfield and his balance between his astute defensive and attacking capabilities make him a player to watch out for in the Euros.

GETTY IMAGES

GIANLUCA SCAMACCA

Despite having poor statistics in national colours, it cannot be negated that Scamacca had an excellent season with Atalanta (19 goals and eight assists), winning the Europa League. With Italy lacking a proven No. 9, Scamacca will be eager to step up in his country's title defence.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH IN LAST DANCE

In what could be his last tournament, England manager Gareth Southgate, with a **youthful squad led by Jude Bellingham**, faces strong challenges from Denmark, Serbia, and Slovenia in its group.

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England manager Gareth Southgate **(right)** came closest to Sir Alf Ramsey in guiding the Three Lions to a major trophy, as his side reached the final of the Euros three years ago.

At the time of writing, Southgate has chosen a young provisional squad before the tournament, with James Trafford, Jarrad Branthwaite, Jarell Quansah, Curtis Jones and Adam Wharton getting their maiden England call-ups.

It's a move he is desperate to get right, given that Euro 2024 might be his last dance as manager.

The Three Lions, drawn with Denmark, Slovenia, and Serbia in Group C, will look to Jude Bellingham — the La Liga Player of the Year — as a perennial source of attack behind Kane, along with Phil Foden and Bukayo Saka.

Having made his Euro debut at 17 years and 349 days in Euro 2020, Bellingham (26 goals, 15 assists for club and national team in the 2023-24 season) is now one of the best players in Europe.

England has opted for a set-piece approach against counter-attacking sides (Brazil, Belgium) and chosen grounded passes against physically imposing sides (Italy, North Macedonia).

With Southgate experimenting with 4-2-3-1 and 4-3-3, the latter would come in handy against Serbia and Slovenia, whose defenders have an average height of over 180 cm.

The former, on the other hand, can offer a panacea against Denmark, which will have Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg working as a pivot to set the course of counterattacks behind Christian Eriksen and Rasmus Hojlund.

England's biggest problem in defence has been leaking goals while playing a high line — something that has kept it winless since last November — with a loss to Brazil and a draw each with Belgium and Macedonia.

REUTERS

Strike force: Harry Kane (left) and Jude Bellingham, along with Bukayo Saka and Phil Foden (both in front) will prove to be a potent attacking force .
GETTY IMAGES

Chasing the Danish dream

Denmark, the 1992 European champion, had its continental dreams broken by Kane in the last edition of the tournament, losing 1-2 in extra time in the semifinals — its best-ever finish since the title.

It will look to avenge that early on, coming into the tournament after topping its qualification group with 19 goals, with Hojlund leading the scoring charts (seven strikes), including a hat-trick in his first start.

In 2021, Mikkel Damsgaard had turned heads, scoring with an outrageous free-kick in the semifinal. This season, that responsibility would lay on the shoulders of Hojlund, who started the tournament after winning the FA Cup in his maiden season at Old Trafford.

Hojlund's Carrington days with Eriksen and the chemistry of Brentford teammates Mathias Jensen and Damsgaard — two avenues for forward progression of the ball along the flanks — would be Denmark's point of action.

But its biggest woes lie in defence. It was the second team across all groups in the European qualifiers (after Turkey in Group C) to top its own group and still concede more goals than the second-placed side (Slovenia) — something it will look to improve in this tournament.

Andreas Christensen, who missed the March friendlies after recuperating from an Achilles tendon irritation, will be Denmark's best bet at the back.

Captain Simon Kjaer, also a defender, is 35 now and injury-prone, while Kasper Schmeichel — whose father won the championship in 1992 — will look to fill in his boots in national team colours.

Both Simon and Kasper are likely to play their last European Championship this year.

Hopes from Eastern Europe

Serbia, which features Sergej Milinkovic-Savic along with Dusan Vlahovic and Aleksandar Mitrovic (who have scored a combined 58 club goals this season), can be a dark horse as it participates in the tournament for the first time as an independent country.

While Mitrovic, over the years in England with Fulham, specialises in striking through set-pieces and drawing opponents towards him to release the other striker, Vlahovic relishes scoring with long-range shots, making their combination a lethal one.

With a defence containing players with a minimum height of 184 cm (six feet), using long balls in attack will be like running into the Berlin Wall of Serbia and getting killed in the process.

Slovenia, on the other hand, will have a pillar between the sticks in Jan Oblak, the most successful active goalkeeper in La Liga, with five Zamora (best goalkeeper) trophies as Atletico Madrid's goalie.

Matjaz Kek, who took the side to the 2010 World Cup, emulated former manager Srecko Katanec's feat by taking it to the Euros. He has found a new goalscorer in Benjamin Sesko, who at 21, has already become the seventh-highest goalscorer for his country.

With five goals in Euro qualifying, he was second only to Hojlund and was one of the scorers against Kazakhstan when his side qualified for the tournament after 24 years.

Though veteran Josip Ilicic has returned to the squad after two years, it might be a stretch to expect too much from the 36-year-old who is well past his prime.

Knockouts prediction:

England and Denmark, on paper, look like clear favourites to qualify for the round of 16, but the remaining two will carry the responsibility to keep the potpourri interesting in the group stage.

With four of the best third-placed teams set to qualify for knockouts, both will look to advance beyond the group stages for the first time.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

GETTY IMAGES

JUDE BELLINGHAM

In his first season with Madrid, Bellingham has scored 23 goals – his stoppage-time winner in El Clasico proved him to be clutch too. Additionally, his stint at Borussia Dortmund could aid England further in Germany.

GETTY IMAGES

RASMUS HOJLUND

Hojlund, known for his quick-firing ability – he became the fastest Premier League goalscorer for Manchester United away (37 seconds) – scored 16 times in all competitions for his club, while using his blistering pace often against the run of play.

ALL EYES ON MBAPPE AND CO.

With a stellar squad, France hopes to **win its first Euro title since 2000**, while the Netherlands, Poland, and Austria try to overcome concerns with injury and form.

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After narrowly missing out on consecutive World Cup victories, France will aim to establish itself as a dominant force in Europe.

Antoine Griezmann stressed that 'defence wins championships', but France will need to settle in on a back five when it begins its campaign on June 17. Didier Deschamps has repeatedly reshuffled his backline over the last 18 months following the high-profile retirements of goalkeeper Hugo Lloris and centre-back Raphael Varane.

Brice Samba is the favourite to don the gloves, while France hopes William Saliba can replicate his Arsenal form in the Les Bleus shirt.

France's 26-man squad will be the envy of its European rivals, boasting strong options in each position. Deschamps also made the surprise decision to include 33-year-old N'Golo Kante, who returned after a two-year absence despite moving to the Saudi Pro League last summer.

Kylian Mbappe, who replaced Lloris as skipper, was the top scorer in the European qualification with nine goals as France breezed through to the finals. The attack will be further strengthened by exciting additions like Ousmane Dembele, Marcus Thuram, Kingsley Coman, and Bradley Barcola. France has all the attributes to go all the way and win its first Euro title since 2000.

Football royalty: France's 26-man squad, coached by Didier Deschamps (in white), boasts strong options in each position, led by captain Kylian Mbappe. GETTY IMAGES

Finding the Dutch flair

Ronald Koeman will have the opportunity to continue his work with the national team after returning for a second spell at the beginning of last year. He previously left the role after securing Euro 2020 qualification to take on the Barcelona job.

It hasn't been a smooth return, with the Netherlands losing to European heavyweights France, Italy, Croatia, and Germany — the latter three ranked below the Dutch.

Of the 26 players who featured in Qatar, only 15 will be heading to Germany. The midfield and goalkeeping departments have seen significant changes in the short

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turnaround. While the Dutch will be bolstered by the return of Georginio Wijnaldum, who moved to Saudi Arabia last September, the availability of midfielder Frenkie de Jong remains doubtful.

De Jong suffered his third ankle injury of the season in April, which could be a huge blow to the team's chances if he misses out.

Koeman, known for his pragmatic style, will hope the team's defensive core can come good in a tough group stage. The attack will hinge on the creativity of Cody Gakpo and Xavi Simons, who had an impressive season on loan at RB Leipzig. Wout Weghorst (above; No. 9) , who had an underwhelming season in the Bundesliga, is the main striker alongside Memphis Depay.

Injuries play spoilsport

Poland also underwent a managerial change, with Fernando Santos taking over before poor results and criticism of the team's playing style led to his swift exit in September. Michal Probierz was promoted from the U-21 setup, and he led the side into the finals via the playoffs in March.

While Robert Lewandowski is coming off another high-scoring season, as seen in previous major tournaments, the striker often finds himself isolated and has to feed off scraps for service. At 36, this could be his last chance to make an impact on the international stage.

Piotr Zielinski's creativity in the midfield will be key to unlocking Lewandowski's goal-scoring potential. Unfortunately, right-back Matty Cash misses out due to injury for Poland, which is ranked lowest in the group.

Austria enters the tournament as a dark horse, which could potentially rock the boat of the traditional favourites.

The team has achieved strong results over the last two years under Ralf Rangnick, including wins over Italy and Germany, and holding Belgium to a draw away from home.

However, injuries to captain David Alaba, goalkeeper Alexander Schlager, defender Philipp Leinhart, and central midfielder Xaver Schlager could jeopardise Das Team's chances.

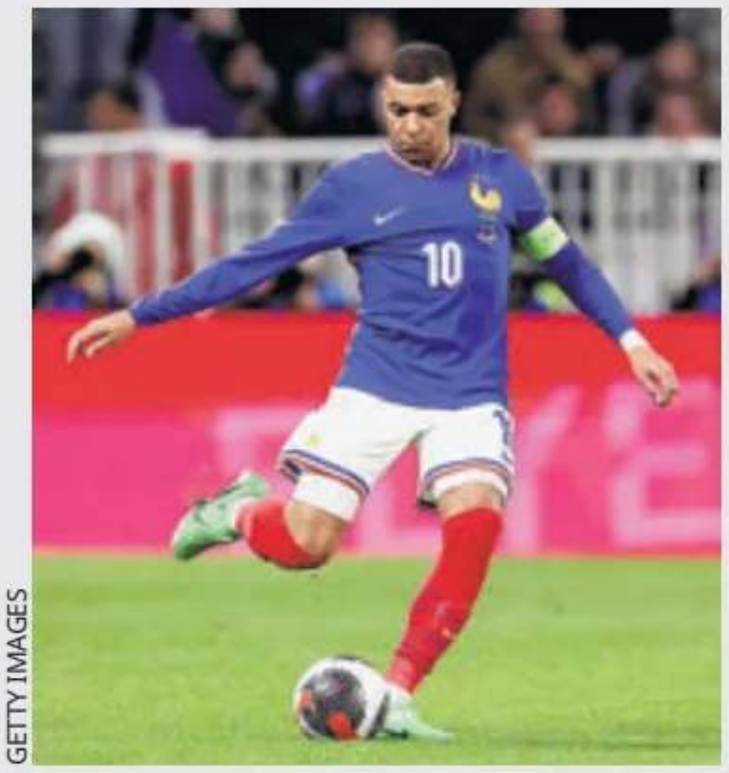
The form of wingers Konrad Laimer and Marcel Sabitzer, and the goal-scoring ability of Christoph Baumgartner will be key to Austria's hopes.

Knockouts prediction:

France is the favourite to qualify for the knockouts, but there could be a three-way tussle between the rest of the pack for the second spot.

While defensive solidity is crucial in tournament football, teams will need to find ways to score goals to stay in contention to progress as one of the best third-placed teams.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR



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KYLIAN MBAPPE

It's hard to overlook Mbappe, who will be itching to open his European championship tally after failing to score in the previous edition, where his penalty miss in the shootout proved costly. Three years on, at 25, the impactful forward will want to make his mark as skipper.

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XAVI SIMONS

The PSG winger had an outstanding season in the Bundesliga during his loan spell with RB Leipzig. Xavi is an exciting attacking midfielder with excellent close control and dribbling abilities. The Dutch will count on his creativity to bail them out of the group stages.

Fresh start: With a relatively young squad, Belgium looks to rebuild on the backbone of experienced players like Romelu Lukaku and Kevin De Bruyne. GETTY IMAGES

A REVAMPED SIDE COULD DO THE TRICK

A **new-look Belgium** seeks a strong run under Domenico Tedesco, with Ukraine posing the biggest challenge.

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Over the last decade, Belgium enjoyed the fruits of its 'Golden Generation' with some of the world's best players at the top of their game in the squad. Despite being one of the top-ranked teams by FIFA, the closest the 'Red Devils' ever came to a trophy was in the 2018 World Cup when they finished third.

As the older generation fades away, new coach Domenico Tedesco has named a relatively young squad for Euro 2024 as he looks to rebuild on the backbone of experienced players like Kevin De Bruyne, Jan Vertonghen, Axel Witsel, and Romelu Lukaku.

Belgium will face Slovakia, Romania, and Ukraine in Group E. Although they look fairly strong on paper, there are some underlying problems, especially at the back.

Belgium plays in a 4-3-3 formation, with its most capped player, 37-year-old Vertonghen, leading the backline. Alongside him will be either Wout Faes or Arthur Theate, who, having only joined the senior team in 2022, lack experience on the international stage.

Even star goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois has been left out of the squad due to injury concerns and a spat with Tedesco.

On the other hand, Belgium should be confident about its offence with the inclusion of exciting young players in its ranks.

Jeremy Doku (22), Johan Bakayoko (21), and Charles De Ketelaere (23) will bring pace and flair up front. With Eden Hazard retired, Leandro Trossard will be the first-choice left winger, coming off an excellent season with Arsenal.

De Bruyne will be the midfield general orchestrating the attacks, and at the front will be Lukaku, who was the top scorer (14) in the qualifying rounds.

Belgium's biggest threat in the group stage would be Ukraine, which could be the biggest dark horse of the tournament.

Ukraine playing for national pride

Ukraine was grouped with heavyweights England and Italy during qualifying, and although it gave a tough fight, it missed out on

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the top-two spot due to the Azzurri's superior goal difference.

Ukraine fought its way back through the playoff rounds, beating Bosnia and Herzegovina and Iceland with late goals to make it to the Euros for the fourth consecutive edition.

It has only one loss in its last ten games, which came against England in March 2023, and has won four out of its last five games.

Ukraine has been in an unfortunate war-torn state since the invasion by Russia, and this Euros is much more than just a tournament for its players.

With the devastating conditions at home, Ukraine will play for national pride and hope to give its fans a memorable run in the tournament. This patriotic feeling will act as a catalyst for its solid form.

Ukraine plays in a 4-2-3-1 formation with its prolific goal-scorer Artem Dovbyk leading the charge up front. Other notable players in the outfield are Arsenal's Oleksandr Zinchenko (above; right), controlling the game as the central defensive midfielder, and Chelsea winger Mykhailo Mudryk (above; left) running down the left flank.

The performance of Andriy Lunin between the sticks, who has been exceptional for Real Madrid, will also determine Ukraine's chances of progressing to the knockout stages.

Slovakia and Romania might struggle

Slovakia and Romania are the weaker of the four teams in their group, making the clash between them crucial for both sides.

The Slovaks ended the qualifying round second in its group behind Portugal and look a bit stronger with a few notable names in its ranks. Napoli midfielder Stanislav Labotka will be the key player controlling the game for the Falcons, and PSG's centre-back Milan Skriniar will command the backline.

Unlike Slovakia, Romania lacks star power in its squad but surprised everyone by topping its qualification group ahead of Switzerland.

The 22-year-old Spurs centre-back Radu Dragusin is the most important name in its young squad. Captain Nicolae Stanciu has 14 goals for his country and will be the key attacking threat for his side.

Knockouts prediction:

Belgium and Ukraine should be the clear favourites to go through to the knockouts based on both teams' strength on paper and current form.

With four of the best third-placed teams set to qualify for the knockouts, both Romania and Slovakia could make it beyond the group stages, with the latter having a better chance.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

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JEREMY DOKU

Doku has seven goals and nine assists for Manchester City this season and has been influential on the flanks. His dribbling prowess and ability to create scoring chances from wide areas make him a crucial player for Belgium.

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ARTEM DOVBYK

Dovbyk ended the La Liga season as its top-scorer (24). He helped Girona finish third and qualify for the Champions League for the first time in the club's history. Although Dovbyk has only scored two goals for Ukraine in the qualifiers, he has the potential to be one of the highest scorers of Euro 2024.

A FITTING FAREWELL ON THE CARDS

Portugal, with sights set on a **triumphant sendoff** for Cristiano Ronaldo, leads a competitive group featuring Czechia, Turkey, and debutant Georgia.

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The sixth and final group of this year's Euro has a perfect mix of established powerhouses and emerging contenders. The 2016 champion Portugal is grouped alongside the 1976 title-winner Czechia, Turkey, and Georgia.

In what might be Cristiano Ronaldo's final big-ticket tournament, Roberto Martínez's men will look to give him the perfect sendoff.

The Martínez era has seen a significant shift from Fernando Santos' pragmatic approach. This is a team capable of scoring four or five goals on any given day, as well as defending against an opponent's late pushes in a close game.

The side enjoyed the best qualification stage in Portugal's history, winning all 10 matches. There's a growing sense that this squad is primed for a special run.

Martínez has predominantly stuck to the back-four formula, which has not only allowed attacking fluidity but also provided a compact defence.

As proof of the squad's versatility, Ronaldo may start the game in any of the three attacking positions, which allows Goncalo Ramos to replace him and offer fresh legs later in the second half. Rafael Leão appears to be the most stable of the three, but there is still room for rotation during the competition.

Leão will likely start on the left side of the pitch, moving Ronaldo to the No. 9 role while placing Bernardo Silva on the right. Alternatively, Ronaldo might be on the right side, with Ramos or Joao Felix in the centre.

Genuine threat: Portugal has a team capable of scoring four or five goals on any given day, as well as defending against an opponent's late pushes in a close game. GETTY IMAGES

Leão wide on the left is the only permanent positional duty, so expect a fairly flexible approach from Martínez's starting lineup. Portugal's central midfield role is undecided. There are a few options: Bernardo Silva moving back from attack, Otávio playing a more box-to-box role, opening a chance to young Joao Neves, or using Ruben Neves alongside another midfielder for a more defensive setup.

Its defence, though, is more settled. Diogo Costa will likely start in goal, with Ruben Dias and Pepe in the centre of defence. The fullback positions are more flexible, allowing the coach to choose players based on the opponent and fatigue levels.

Consistent returns

Meanwhile, making its eighth consecutive Euro appearance, Czechia is placed 36th in the current men's FIFA rankings. Having reached the quarterfinals in the last two editions, the Lokomotiva will look to advance further this time around.

For the first time since 2018, the Czechs will have a new coach, Ivan Hasek. Jaroslav Silhavy departed from the position in November last year, having led the team for five years and 56 games.

Silhavy oversaw much of the Czech Republic's qualification campaign, putting them in unfamiliar territory coming into the tournament. The previous head coach led them to four victories and one defeat in eight qualifiers, finishing second in Group E, level on points with top-ranked Albania, and qualifying for the group stages.

Unknowns look to make a mark

The other team in the group, Turkey, topped a qualifying group with Croatia and Wales in it. However, it lost 1-0 to Hungary and 6-1 to Austria in friendlies in March. Its squad is certainly an unknown quantity heading into the summer. There's a lot of talent in this team, but how it comes together is a question waiting to be answered.

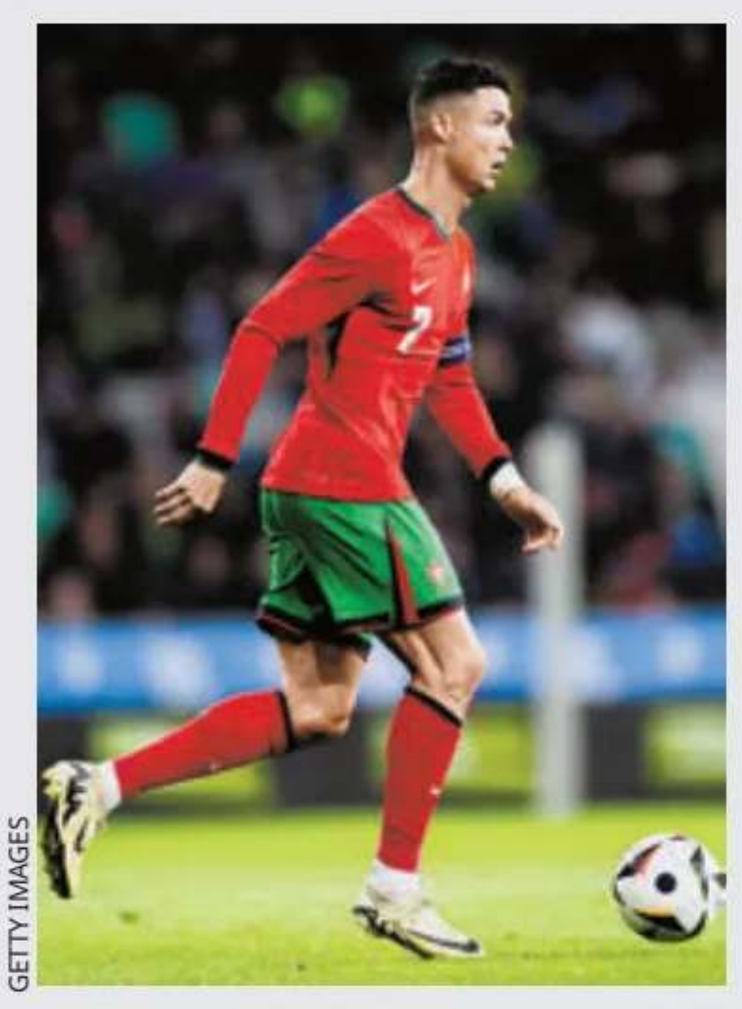
It reached its third consecutive Euro finals after posting a 4-0 victory at home to Latvia on October 15. It was unable to go past the group stages in its previous two appearances but memorably made it to the semifinals in 2008, where it lost 3-2 to Germany in a thriller.

Georgia made history during the Euro qualifying rounds and reached a major football tournament for the first time. This was the eighth time it attempted to qualify for the tournament as an independent nation. The team will be skippered by Napoli forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and will look to spring surprises in the tournament.

Knockouts predictions:

Besides clear favourite Portugal, one can expect a tight contest between Czechia and Turkey. Both sides have a similar record in 2024, but Vincenzo Montella's Turkey, brimming with bright talents, has the potential to take the cake.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR



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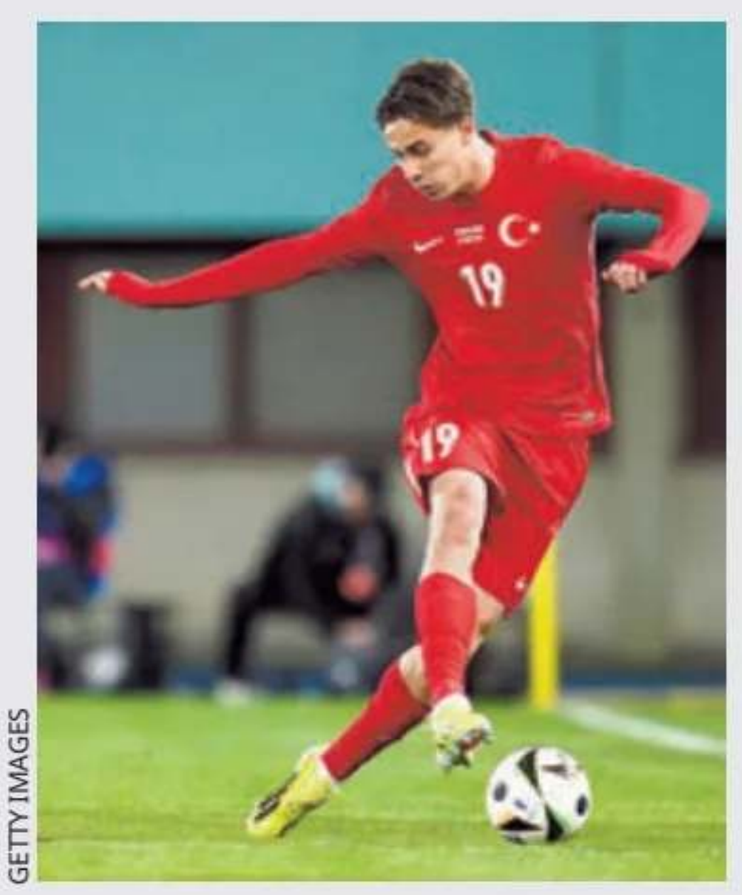
CRISTIANO RONALDO

Cristiano Ronaldo needs no introduction. Even at the age of 39, his name is still synonymous with top-of-the-line football. The former Real Madrid and Juventus star is making waves in the Saudi Pro League (SPL). Ronaldo has scored 64 goals in 69 games for Al-Nassr in all competitions since joining on a free transfer in January 2023 after leaving Manchester United. He recently broke the SPL record for most goals (35) in a season.



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KENAN YILDIZ

Representing Turkey, Kenan Yildiz brings his talents to the international arena from his club career at Juventus. Despite being a newcomer with only three caps for the senior team, where he scored just once, Yildiz's performance as a second striker has been noteworthy.

UEFA Euro 2024 match schedule

Top two from each group plus four best third-placed teams progress to knockout stage

GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D	GROUP E	GROUP F
Germany	Spain	Slovenia	Poland	Belgium	Turkey
Scotland	Croatia	Denmark	Netherlands	Slovakia	Georgia
Hungary	Italy	Serbia	Austria	Romania	Portugal
Switzerland	Albania	England	France	Ukraine	Czech Rep.

Group stage

All dates: June

All kick-off times local CEST (GMT+2)

14	Germany - Scotland	21:00						
15	Hungary - Switz.	15:00	Spain - Croatia	18:00	Italy - Albania	21:00		
16	Serbia - England	21:00	Slovenia - Denmark	18:00	Poland - Netherlands	15:00		
17	Austria - France	21:00	Belgium - Slovakia	18:00	Romania - Ukraine	15:00		
18	Turkey - Georgia	18:00	Portugal - Czech Rep.	21:00				
19	Scotland - Switz.	21:00	Germany - Hungary	18:00	Croatia - Albania	15:00		
20	Spain - Italy	21:00	Denmark - England	18:00	Slovenia - Serbia	15:00		
21	Poland - Austria	18:00	Netherlands - France	21:00	Slovakia - Ukraine	15:00		
22	Belgium - Romania	21:00	Turkey - Portugal	18:00	Georgia - Czech Rep.	15:00		
23	Switz. - Germany	21:00	Scotland - Hungary	21:00				
24	Albania - Spain	21:00	Croatia - Italy	21:00				
25	England - Slovenia	21:00	Denmark - Serbia	21:00	Netherlands - Austria	18:00	France - Poland	18:00
26	Slovakia - Romania	18:00	Ukraine - Belgium	18:00	Georgia - Portugal	21:00	Czech Rep. - Turkey	21:00

UEFA EURO2024 GERMANY

Knockout stages

If scores level after 90 mins plus 30 mins of extra-time, match is decided on penalties

Round of 16

- 3: 1B / 3A/D/E/F — Jun 30
- 1: 1A / 2C — Jun 29
- 5: 1F / 3A/B/C — Jul 1
- 6: 2D / 2E — Jul 1
- 7: 1E / 3A/B/C/D — Jul 2
- 8: 1D / 2F — Jul 2
- 4: 1C / 3D/E/F — Jun 30
- 2: 2A / 2B — Jun 29

Quarter-finals

- A: Winner 3 / Winner 1 — Jul 5
- B: Winner 5 / Winner 6 — Jul 5
- C: Winner 7 / Winner 8 — Jul 6
- D: Winner 4 / Winner 2 — Jul 6

Semi-finals

- 1: Winner A / Winner B — Jul 9
- 2: Winner C / Winner D — Jul 10

Euro 2024 final
Sunday, July 14

Germany set to host first major tournament since World Cup 2006

Source: UEFA

Picture: Getty Images

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UEFA Euro 2024 team records

	Tournaments (inc. 2024)	Titles	Wins	Draws	Losses
Germany*	14		27	13	13
Spain	12		21	15	10
Italy	11		21	18	6
France	11		21	12	10
Netherlands	11		20	8	11
Portugal	9		19	10	10
England	11		15	13	10
Czech Rep.†	11		15	7	15
Denmark	10		10	6	17
Belgium	7		11	2	9
Croatia	7		9	6	7
Turkey	6		4	2	12
Switzerland	6		3	8	7
Romania	6		1	5	10
Slovakia†	6		5	4	6
Serbia‡	6		3	2	9
Poland	5		2	7	5
Ukraine	4		3	0	8
Hungary	5		2	4	5
Austria	4		2	2	6
Scotland	4		2	2	5
Albania	2		1	0	2
Slovenia	2		0	2	1

Records for 2024 teams only

Georgia makes tournament debut – 36th different nation to compete

Host nation Germany has best overall record – most match wins (27) and most goals scored (78)

DEBUTANT	Qualifying record		
Georgia	3	3	4

Oliver Bierhoff

Germany last won title at UEFA Euro 1996

UEFA euro 96 England

* inc. West Germany
† inc. Czechoslovakia (shared)
‡ inc. Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro

Source: UEFA
Picture: Getty Images

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GEARING UP FOR A SHOT AT OLYMPIC GLORY

Guided by her coach and her own resilience, Manu Bhaker's journey back to form culminates in a **remarkable return to the top of her game,** as she sets sights on Paris Olympics with renewed determination.

Jonathan Selvaraj
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SCAN TO WATCH

It's easy to understand why Indian shooters in the women's 25m pistol event were a bundle of nerves a day before the start of the third Olympic trials at the MP Shooting Academy in Bhopal last month. With a spot in the national Olympic team on the line, there was much at stake. Therefore, while some were meditating in preparation for the event, others were revising their dry firing techniques.

But Manu Bhaker wasn't doing any of that. In her hotel room in Bhopal, she pulled out a violin (a birthday gift from her brother), scrunched her face in concentration, and started playing the Indian national anthem, practising to get the notes just right.

As far as musical instruments go, the violin — which, unlike the guitar, has no guides on its bridge for finger placement — is considered one of the hardest to learn. But, Manu took her first music class just four months before the Olympics. She makes a valiant attempt to play her first song. It's fair to say she loves it, although not everyone is as enthused.

"*Baaki sab match ki taiyari kar rahe hain aur Manu violin baja rahi thi* (Everyone else is preparing for the match, and Manu is playing the violin)," her coach Jaspal Rana later said in mock exasperation.

Call it bravado or supreme self-confidence, but the fact is Manu is at the top of her game. She gets her rendition of the song she is practising as well as her shooting, nearly perfect. At the Olympic selection trials, she came out on top in both the 10m pistol and 25m pistol events, averaging 579.53 in the former and 586.47 in the latter.

She also improved on the finals world record twice in the 25m pistol event.

Still only 22, Manu will be India's youngest two-time Olympian. She will likely take part in three separate events in Paris, more than any other Indian competitor. While she took part in three events in Tokyo as well, this version of Manu Bhaker is older, wiser, and likely better prepared. But it's the kind of progress that hasn't happened seamlessly.

A little less than a year ago, Manu was done with the sport. It wasn't as if she was shooting badly. She was still a part of the Indian team and posted strong scores. But that was

RITU RAJ KONWAR

At the Olympic selection trials, she came out on top in both the 10m pistol and 25m pistol events, averaging 579.53 in the former and 586.47 in the latter.

no longer enough. "It had become a chore. I thought to myself I'd somehow get to the 2024 Olympics. If I qualified, great. If I didn't, that was also fine. Whatever happened, I was done with shooting. I wasn't going to step into the shooting range ever again," she says.

The fun had gone out of the sport. "For someone on the outside, it looked as if I was doing fine. I was still part of the Indian team and shooting decent scores. But I was not happy inside. I didn't like shooting. There was this constant feeling *ki nahi ho raha hai* (that it's not happening). Shooting was becoming more like a job for me. Every single day it felt as if I was doing the same thing. I just didn't like the monotony," she says.

Manu had felt this way many years before. Before she took up shooting at 16, she had been a boxer. "Boxing was the first sport I really loved, but I left it because the schedule had just become really monotonous. I was just doing the same thing every day. I left that sport despite really loving it. It had become more of a job for me. It was the same for shooting. It just didn't excite me. On the other hand, it just made me really nervous. It just drove me crazy, and then I was like, 'I can't shoot like that anymore'," she says.

Quitting the sport was an idea she'd been flirting with for a few months already, but last June was when she actually started making plans for what life would look like once she put down her pistols for the last time.

"I started thinking about giving the Civil Services exams. I was good in studies, of course, but I was also fascinated by how there were all these students who would give up years of their life to chase a single goal. I didn't know if I could give another Olympic cycle's worth of effort to it, but if only for one year, I wouldn't mind feeling that same emotion as they seemed to be," she says.

Before she decided to call it a day, though, Manu felt there was one last chance to be taken. She took out her phone and made a call to a person who, in the public imagination, might have been considered the trigger for one of the lowest periods in her career.

On the other end of the line was Jaspal Rana.

"Yes, Manu, what can I do for you?"

'I would like you to coach me once again.'

It would be an understatement to say that Rana was taken aback by the call. He says he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw who the call was from. Two years had passed since a very public falling out between the two.

« AT 16, MANU BECAME THE YOUNGEST INDIAN TO WIN GOLD AT THE ISSF SHOOTING WORLD CUP »

Most of Manu's life has been lived in the public eye ever since she broke into the sports media news circle for the first time in 2018, when she became the youngest Indian to win gold at the ISSF shooting World Cup at just 16 years old.

Over the years, Manu's life seemed to be synonymous with shooting. "I think a lot of athletes would relate to this. Every aspect of my life was associated with shooting somewhere. I still remember my age based on the tournaments I competed in and won. When I was 16, I won the Commonwealth Games. When I was 17, I won the Olympic quota. When I was 19, I made my debut at the Olympics," she says.

But if her impressive highs marked her out as one of the most prodigious Indian shooting talents, her lows — equally spectacular in their own way — had also been on full display.

Just months before the Tokyo Olympics, Rana, a former two-time Olympian and one of the country's top pistol shooters in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium, had helmed a highly successful Indian junior program. He had been Manu's coach ever since she made her international debut in 2018.

Manu had been training with him when she qualified in both the 10m pistol and 25m pistol events for the Olympics. The Federation wanted to send her in both events. But Rana wanted another talented protege of his — Chinki Yadav — to compete in the 25m pistol so that Manu could focus on the 10m pistol event and the 10m pistol mixed team event with Saurabh Chaudhary.

Rana still stands by his decision. "Manu wasn't ready to compete in three different events at such a young age. It's hugely taxing on the body. You can compete in all three, but there's always a compromise to be made. If you train for the 25m pistol events, it always has a negative impact on your 10m pistol chances. We had the chance for an assured

The right guide: It wasn't just his physical presence but also a wealth of technical knowledge that Rana (right) brought to the table for Manu.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

gold medal in the 10m mixed team event. Unfortunately, Manu was told that I wanted Chinki in the squad but not the reason for it. That led to a lot of unpleasantness. Manu is a very volatile personality. When she gets an idea stuck in her head, she can be very intense. And it's the same for me," he says.

The rift boiled over at the New Delhi World Cup just a few months before the Olympics, when Chinki beat Manu to a gold in the 25m pistol event. A message would go out to Rana's phone from Manu's, stating "*Shanti mil gayi?* (Are you at peace?)." Unwilling to back down himself, he got the message written on his t-shirt and wore it at the range, where it became the talking point of the fraternity.

Even though Manu was given the chance to compete in three separate events in Tokyo, it was soon very apparent that she seemed out of her depth. She didn't make the Olympic final in either the 10m air pistol or the 25m pistol events. Paired with Saurabh Chaudhary, she struggled in the mixed team event before going out in the semifinals. Her Olympic campaign was symbolised by an equipment failure in the 10m pistol event and a picture of Indian coach Ronak Pandit putting his arm around her shoulder to console her after yet another missed qualification round.

When she looks back at her Olympic campaign, Manu admits being completely overwhelmed by the experience of competing in Tokyo. "I was just not brave enough. I was just really afraid of everything. I just couldn't focus on myself. I was aware that the Olympics were special, but I had this sense of nervousness that was unlike any other tournament I had competed in previously. I never felt it at the Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, or Youth Olympic Games.

"At the Olympic Games, you see so many established athletes who are already doing so well. Many of them might have just won a medal. And you see them just hanging around in the Games village and the dining hall, and I just felt I didn't belong among them. I was a kid among all these athletes who were way, way better than me. They might not even have been in the same sport as me. There were basketball players, track and field athletes, and swimmers. I was comparing myself to them. That was very stupid on my part, but it's what I felt at that time," she says.

A maiden Olympics, which should have been a career highlight, now elicits distaste. "Honestly, I have very bitter memories from the Tokyo Olympics. I wondered why this happened to me. What did I do wrong?," she says.

It took her a long time to come to terms with how everything had played out. "I think we all have to make our peace with some situations, especially when it's no longer in our hands. We can't change the past. What happened was unpleasant, but I had to find a way to move on with my life," she says.

Despite what happened both in the run-up and during the Olympics, Manu doesn't see herself as a victim. "It's a tough memory, but it's not traumatic or anything. It's like a difficult set of thoughts that will always be in my head. I cannot flush them out. But when I look back now and see how I was in 2021, I don't think I was mentally ready to compete in an event like the Olympics," she says.

It's the sort of critical self-assessment that's rare in athletes many times her age, let alone someone just out of their teens. "I think it's just that I've grown since what happened in Tokyo. I now look at that experience as a lesson. Starting in 2023, I started to connect the dots of what went wrong and what I could have done so that the

On the right track: Manu shot her highest score since the 2018 Asian Games at the 2023 Asian Championships in Changwon, scoring 591 in the qualification round of the 25m pistol event and securing a quota for the Paris Olympics.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

results would have been better. And I think I am just not willing to make those mistakes again ever," she says.

To correct what she felt was one of the big mistakes of the Tokyo Olympics build-up, she called up Rana.

"I think the turning point for me in this Olympic cycle has been when I started working with Jaspal sir once again. I called him up on the 14th of June last year, but I had been thinking about it for at least six months prior. Every time I thought about reaching out, I banished those thoughts because I felt I might just be trying to find excuses to justify my reality — which was that I didn't enjoy shooting. I knew what was missing in my shooting was having Jaspal sir coaching me, but I didn't have the courage to reach out to him. After everything that had happened in the past, I didn't know whether it would work out or not. Finally, though, I had enough. I was so sick of shooting, and I felt I just needed to call him. I had no idea whether it would work or whether it would be a terrible decision. But I needed to give it a shot," she says.

Rana says he felt compelled to accept her request. "I can't think how much courage she must have had to call me and ask for my help. If I was in her place, I wouldn't have called me. What happened between us was not my fault, but it wasn't her fault either. It's hard to be the first person to reach out even when you are at fault. In Manu's case, she wasn't to blame. She was misinformed about my intentions. If she could find it in her to overcome whatever ego she might have felt, how could I have refused to work with her?" he says.

The early days of their re-partnership weren't easy. "After what happened before the Olympics, I just stopped coming to the Karni Singh range (in Delhi). It was just really uncomfortable. I had my own businesses to run in Dehradun, and I had restarted my political career in Uttarakhand. But I knew I had to go back to Delhi to work with Manu," he says.

> « Weapon troubles are now a thing of the past for Manu as Rana makes sure her pistol is thoroughly checked »

It wasn't just his physical presence but also a wealth of technical knowledge that Rana brought to the table. At the selection trials in Bhopal, Rana meticulously notes down every one of Manu's shots on a custom-made app. He also keeps a writing pad where he draws out maps of her shooting pattern, which looks like a cross between a doctor's prescription and a wizard's incantation.

He's as demanding as he ever was. "There are times during trials where I've almost given up and started to release shots without going through my process of aiming, just to get the series over with. But Jaspal sir always catches on. And he'll be furious. He doesn't mind a bad series, but he hates nothing more than a shooter giving less than 100 percent," she says.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

While her coach might be stern, weapon troubles are now a thing of the past. "I was having malfunctions with my pistol not just at the Olympics but even after it. I even had trouble with my pistol in the first and second shooting trials in Bhopal last year. I was always wondering what was going wrong. My pistol was fine, my ammunition was brand new as were my magazines. I was completely clueless on what was going on. Ever since I've started working with Jaspal sir once again, I've stopped having any issues. He usually just cleans my pistol once every six months. He's a lot more knowledgeable than a lot of coaches. He checks everything in the pistol — all the parts and spares. He makes sure that nothing can go wrong. He makes sure that I have three or four spare pistol grips, not just two. I've not had any issues with my equipment ever since," she says.

Rana and Manu changed up her training pattern as well. "I think the main reason I really considered giving up shooting was that for a long time I was working like a *gadha* (donkey). Jaspal sir tells me I was working like a *khacchar* (mule) instead of actually working like a *ghoda* (horse). I was doing just brainless hard work. And I needed to know the difference," she says.

"Jaspal sir encourages me to try different things. His only requirement is that I don't do it at the expense of my shooting or practise it throughout the day. So he encourages me to try different

sports or activities, which is a good thing. As long as it doesn't involve my hand, my arm, and something that can lead to injuries, he is fine with it," she says.

And that's what she's doing. The violin is a recent addition to her range of interests. She's also been taking classes in *kathak,* as well as lessons in horse riding. She's also become a regular gym-goer. "I think shooting is shooting, but you have to be mentally sound as well. It's not always going to help you to be (just) physically and technically sound; you have to be mentally balanced too. So if you are balanced in all three or four ways, if you have a sound mind and sound body, you will be able to perform a lot better," she says.

That's certainly showing in her scores. At the 2023 Asian Championships in Changwon, where she won a quota in the 25m pistol event, Manu shot a 591 in qualification — her highest score since the 2018 Asian Games. Her consistency over 16 matches in the 10m and 25m pistol events in the space of a month at the Olympic selection trials further added substance to Rana's belief that while she might not have been ready to compete in three events at the Tokyo Games, she certainly is capable of dealing with the same workload in Paris.

But while her shooting is once more speaking for itself, Manu says she's also learning to not make it her central identity. "I got into shooting when I was 16 years old. Because I was so successful in it at such a young age, I never really got the chance to do anything else. I never really had a childhood away from shooting. "All my interactions and friendships were with other shooters. I had no social life. If I could, I'd go back and tell my 16-year-old self to go out and explore a little. I went to my first World Cup in Rio when I was 16 and after winning gold, I just went back to my hotel room and slept! I

Beyond the range: The violin is a recent addition to Manu's range of interests. She's also been taking classes in *kathak* and horse riding.
RITU RAJ KONWAR

Her consistency in the 10m and 25m pistol events at the Olympic selection trials further added substance to Rana's belief in her prospects for Paris.

went to so many countries and did not even go out of my room and the shooting range. I should have tried to enjoy different countries, cultures, and atmospheres," she says.

She does that more consciously now. "My last international competition was at the ISSF World Cup in Granada. The day after my competition ended was my birthday. I didn't really have any friends with me, so I just decided to roam around the city by myself. I went to the castle and saw the flamenco dancers. I watched a movie in Spanish without any subtitles. I didn't understand anything, but it was fun," she says.

While Manu is more balanced, matured, and has regained her passion for the sport, some of the anger Rana remembers has not completely disappeared. Manu says, "Sometimes I'll just punch things, throw things, break things. But things like that will happen much more rarely now. But it's spectacular when it does happen. Just about a month ago, I was really disappointed after a training session that just didn't go well. It was just not a good day.

"So many things piled up one on top of the other that I just couldn't take it. And I punched a wall at the range. Luckily I didn't break a knuckle, but it still turned bright red. I didn't tell Jaspal sir for many days, and then finally when he saw that red mark on my knuckle, he asked me what was going on. I pretended I had this pain in my wrist or my hand. Now he'll tease me about it. If I ever start to get angry, he'll ask me if I plan on punching a wall."

As she heads to the Paris Olympics, Manu knows just how easy it would have been for her to not be a part of the Indian team. Tokyo claimed several of India's most talented shooters. Apurvi Chandela, who set a world record in the build-up to Tokyo, has disappeared from the scheme of things; as has Asian Games medallist Abhishek Verma.

Perhaps the biggest loss has been that of Saurabh Choudhary, who broke the world record in the qualification round of the Olympics but then crashed out early in the finals. While Manu had worn her misery on her sleeve, Saurabh had seemed the more composed shooter and the one who was more likely to return to the Olympics in three years' time. Instead, he could barely find a place in the national team. A bitter dispute with his long-term coach Amit Sheoran has still not been resolved. He failed to qualify for the World Championships, Asian Games, and even the Olympic qualifiers in Bhopal. A brief return to the World Cup at Rio last year saw him fail to make even the finals.

As someone who herself came close to the brink, Manu empathises with her former teammate. "Saurabh, according to me, was the finest shooter I have ever seen in my life. It was a shocker that he hasn't even been able to make it to the Olympic trials. I think that he should have been given another chance. Maybe he might still come back. But if you don't give him a chance, he will be lost," she says.

For now, though, she will have to focus on herself. All her learning, improvement, and maturity will pay off in two months at Châteauroux. Manu knows this as well. "The goal is not to become the youngest two-time Olympian. The goal is something bigger — the Olympic gold. That's what every shooter is going for. I just look at it as an opportunity. I'm going to the Games, I'm representing my country, and I have to be ready and do my best. I think things will be different this time. I don't think I'll be intimidated as much," she says.

As the clock ticks down to the start of the Olympic Games, Manu is looking to wrap up another accomplishment — a pitch-perfect rendition of *Jana Gana Mana*.

The hope for the rest of the nation, though, is that in the shooting range at Châteauroux, it will be the stadium speakers instead that will play the Indian national anthem.

GOLDEN MEMORIES

Meet four Olympic champions who **redefined greatness** and left an indelible mark on sports history. These athletes not only clinched gold but also inspired millions with their incredible feats.

Team Sportstar

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PAAVO NURMI

Finland's mastery of 1,500m, the 5,000m, the 10,000m, the cross-country races (which were then part of the competition schedule) and the 3,000m steeplechase, which continued until Moscow 1980, was cemented by the great Paavo Nurmi. After the 1916 Olympics was cancelled due to World War 1, Nurmi was successful in winning the 10,000m and the individual and team cross-country gold medals after a silver in the 5,000m at Antwerp in 1920. At Paris 1924, Nurmi won five gold medals in six days, with those in the 1,500m and 5,000m coming within an hour of each other. He subsequently won the cross-country (both individual and team) and 3,000m team races, but the Finnish authorities would not allow him to take part in any further events, though Nurmi did make several pleas that he be allowed to run the 10,000m. An angered Nurmi ran the distance on another track outside the Olympic venue, clocking a much better time than the official winner. At Amsterdam 1928, Nurmi took the 10,000m gold while finishing second in the 5,000m and the 3,000m. Nurmi wanted to win a 10th Olympic gold medal and continued training to take part in the marathon in Los Angeles in 1932. However, just before the Games, he was banned by the International Amateur Athletics Federation based on a complaint filed by the Swedish federation, citing that he was no longer an amateur. However, Nurmi was given the honour of lighting the Games Flame in Helsinki in 1952.

AFP

STEVE REDGRAVE

Winning a medal at the Olympics is the dream of any athlete. But to sustain that interest over 20 years is not something most are capable of. Steve Redgrave defied age and diabetes to place himself at the top of the pantheon of Olympic champions with a fifth straight one. Starting with Los Angeles 1984 through to Sydney 2000, he rowed his way to glory, his final win coming after he had announced his retirement following his fourth gold: "If anyone sees me going anywhere near a boat again, they have my permission to shoot me!" The Briton's tryst with Olympic stardom got off to a start in Los Angeles as part of the winning coxed fours before getting to Seoul 1988, where Redgrave, in the company of Andy Holmes, took gold in the coxless pairs and bronze in the coxed pairs. By the time he got to Barcelona in 1992, Redgrave knew very well when to dominate the rival crews and when to hold back. This helped him and his new partner, Matthew Pinset, take pole position and repeat the feat at Atlanta 1996, where Redgrave was the British flagbearer as well. In Sydney, he was seen in action in the coxed fours, which Britain won, giving Redgrave his fifth consecutive gold medal.

HAILE GEBRSELASSIE

Haile Gebrselassie had a late kick that he employed in races, coming from nowhere to win. Geb, as he came to be called affectionately, was a master craftsman in long-distance running, finishing his career with two Olympic gold medals, four World Championships titles, and 26 world records in the 10,000m. A 20km run to school—10 km either way carrying books—shaped the ace athlete. Gebrselassie marked his arrival at the 1992 Seoul World Juniors with a hurried finish and gained a double with wins in the 5,000m and 10,000m, the latter coming in true Geb style. He trailed Josephat Machuka for most of the race until he shifted gears and overtook the Kenyan, who had thought he had the title in his kitty. As the Ethiopian came from behind, Machuka was so enraged that he threw a fist at the overtaking Geb, inviting his disqualification.

As his career blossomed, Gebrselassie used to train 13 times a week, taking off from his gruelling schedules only on Sunday afternoons, averaging anything between 110km and 190km. While he would be trotting out each kilometre at a leisurely pace of six minutes and 15 seconds during the off-season, it would peak up to 4:48 as competitions approached. His training at a high-altitude camp, set at more than 8,000 feet above sea level, only helped Geb measure up to his standards when he competed at sea level. Geb's bow at the Atlanta Games in 1996 also marked a great rivalry with Kenya's Paul Tergat, with the Ethiopian getting to the lead with only a mere 6m left for the finish. At Sydney 2000, as the two men engaged in a fierce battle, Geb confirmed his back-to-back titles quite sensationally on only his last stride.

AFP

GETTY IMAGES

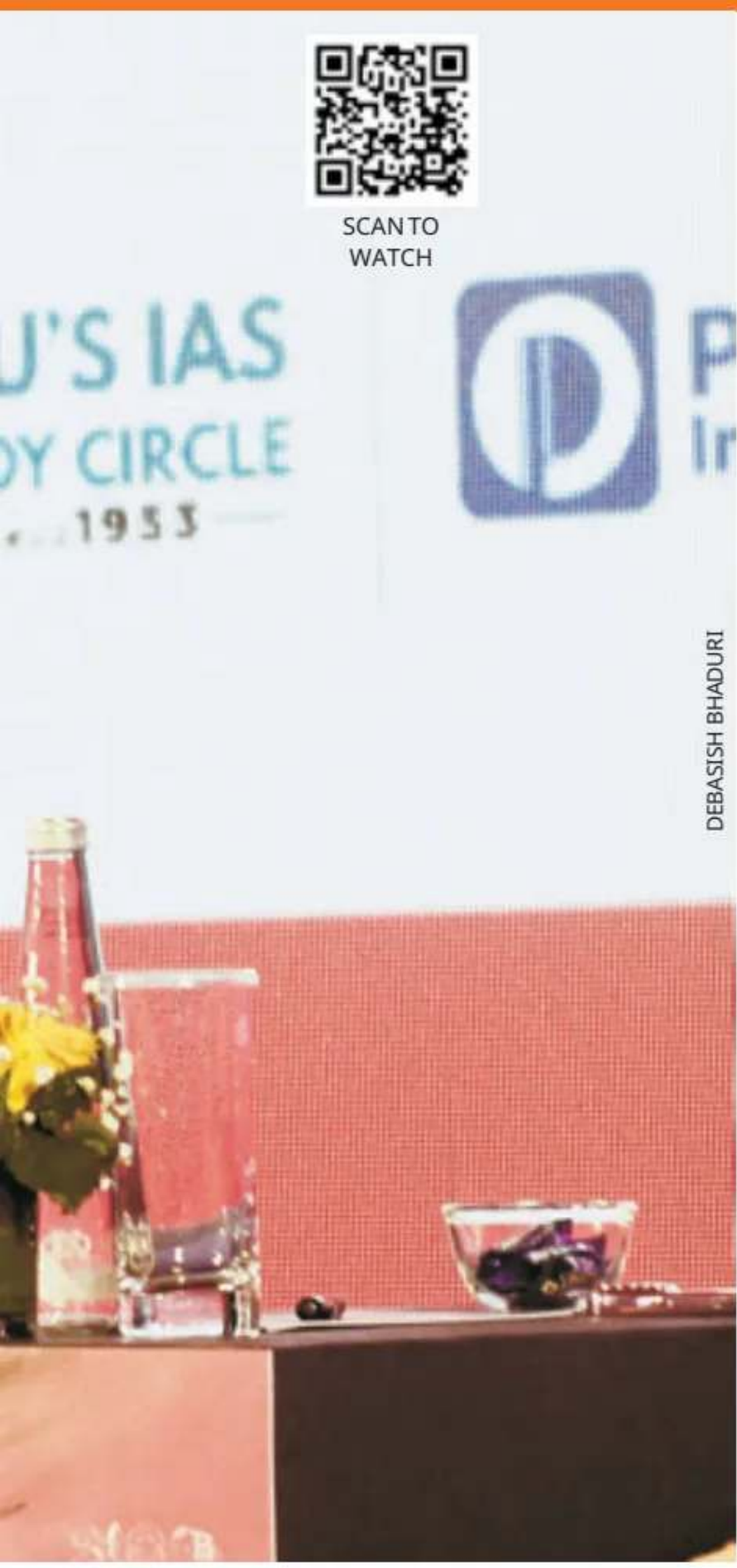
ZHANG YINING

China has produced several outstanding table tennis players who have dazzled with a superior craft that other nations have been unable to match. One such player was Zhang Yining, the two-time Olympic champion who held the No. 1 ranking for over six years between 2003 and 2009, with a break of only two months in between in 2008. Born in Beijing in 1981, Zhang came through the well-established Chinese system, making her debut with the national team at the 1999 World Championships and ending with silver. She was to again lose in the Worlds final two years later but was rarely defeated after that. Zhang ended her career with four Olympic and 10 World Championships gold medals, besides four World Cup wins. Like other formidable Chinese players, Zhang displayed the same ruthlessness both on the table and away. Her proficient skills and speed were a sight to behold as she mercilessly downed her opponents, delivering topspin forehands with consistency.

But what earned this player with the shakehand grip the moniker "Yellow Beast" was how she waylaid her rivals with her backhand. She could lay down a blizzard on the other end of the table, providing opponents with little chance to retrieve or forcing them to commit unforced errors.

INDIAN HOCKEY'S REDEMPTION SONG IN TOKYO

The Games Village in Tokyo had a **charming atmosphere** with cottages and bicycles for moving around



Gurbux Singh

The 1964 Tokyo Olympics was crucial for Indian hockey. After losing the gold medal in the 1960 Rome Olympics and the Asian Games golds in 1958 (Tokyo) and 1962 (Jakarta) to Pakistan, India aimed to reclaim its top position. To prepare, the team toured New Zealand before the Olympics. After visiting Malaysia, we travelled to Tokyo. In New Zealand, we lost the first test match, and I was moved to the left-half position, which I had played in 1961. We won the next two matches, and I remained a left-half for the Olympics. India had a shaky start, drawing against Germany and Spain, which threatened our semifinal chances. After the draw with Spain, the team and management decided to reshuffle player positions. That was the time when substitutions were not allowed during the match.

It was decided to move John Peter to the inside-right and Haripal Kaushik to inside-left. This strategy worked, and India won all its matches before facing Australia in the semifinal. Playing in great rhythm, we dominated Australia and won 3-1. Next, we aimed to reclaim the gold from Pakistan, which we had lost in 1960 (India had won gold in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics). Before the final, we held a long meeting, recalling Pakistan's rough play from the 1962 Asian Games, where two of our players were injured. We decided to retaliate if they played rough, with the resolve to hit back twice as hard.

The final was delayed due to the bronze medal match, which seemed to make Pakistan nervous. As expected, they played rough, and one player tried to hit our centre-forward Harbinder who retaliated and received a yellow card. Pakistan dominated the first 10 minutes with rough play, but after the Harbinder incident, we fought back and gained the upper hand.

We began creating chances, with Haripal Kaushik and Darshan Singh missing close opportunities. Then, a penalty corner taken by Prithipal Singh struck Pakistan's left-back Munir Dar's leg, earning us a penalty stroke. Mohinder Lal, an expert at penalty strokes, converted the chance, sending the ball high into the net. The Pakistan goalkeeper was short, and Mohinder used it to his advantage. We led early in the second half. Pakistan applied pressure towards the end, earning several penalty corners, but our goalkeeper, Shankar Lakshman, made crucial saves.

With only a minute or two left, I anxiously watched the clock, which seemed to move slowly. Defending our slender lead was nerve-wracking, but we held on and celebrated our golden triumph. Indian athletes like Raja Karni Singh, Milkha Singh, and Ashwini Kumar joined us on the field and started doing bhangra.

Raja Karni Singh even twisted his ankle in excitement but ignored the pain in the jubilation.

Given the fresh memories of Partition in 1947, there was intense on-field rivalry between India and Pakistan, but off the field, we maintained cordial relations. The Pakistanis jokingly called me "professor" because of my spectacles. Most players on both teams were Punjabis, making it a contest among players from the same region.

Beyond our victory, I remember American sprinter Bob Hayes winning the men's 100m in record time, an impressive feat as he was built like a wrestler. The Games Village in Tokyo had a charming atmosphere with cottages and bicycles for moving around, contrasting with the tall buildings we encountered at the 1968 Mexico Olympics. The courtesy of the hosts and volunteers in Tokyo was remarkable.

As told to
Amitabha Das Sharma

Given the fresh memories of Partition in 1947, there was intense on-field rivalry between India and Pakistan, but off the field, we maintained cordial relations. The Pakistanis jokingly called me "professor" because of my spectacles

SCAN TO WATCH

THE 'FOSBURY FLOP' IN MEXICO TRANSFORMED THE HIGH JUMP FOREVER

Randhir Singh

Every four years, the best athletes gather for this global event. There isn't a sporting spectacle more incredible than the Olympics. I have had the privilege of participating in five Olympic Games as a shooter. In 1964, I went as a reserve. Then, they took me in '68, '72, '76, '80 and '84.

You'll be amazed that I've been associated with the Olympic Council of Asia since 1991. We have run 27 Asian Games, including the summer, winter, beach games, Youth Games, and Asian martial arts indoor games. So, we saw a lot of games and a lot of sports.

It'd be interesting to know that at the 1951 Asian Games, I was there for the opening ceremony and saw some events. I was five years old. And then, I went to Helsinki with my father for the Olympic Games in 1952. I shot in the pre-Olympics in '63. In fact, on the 18th (October), I turned 18 at the 18th Olympic Games (1964).

I had a great coach and mentor in Karni Singh. It was a pleasure shooting with him. We shot from 63 to 82 at the Asian Games, when our team picked up a silver in the Delhi games.

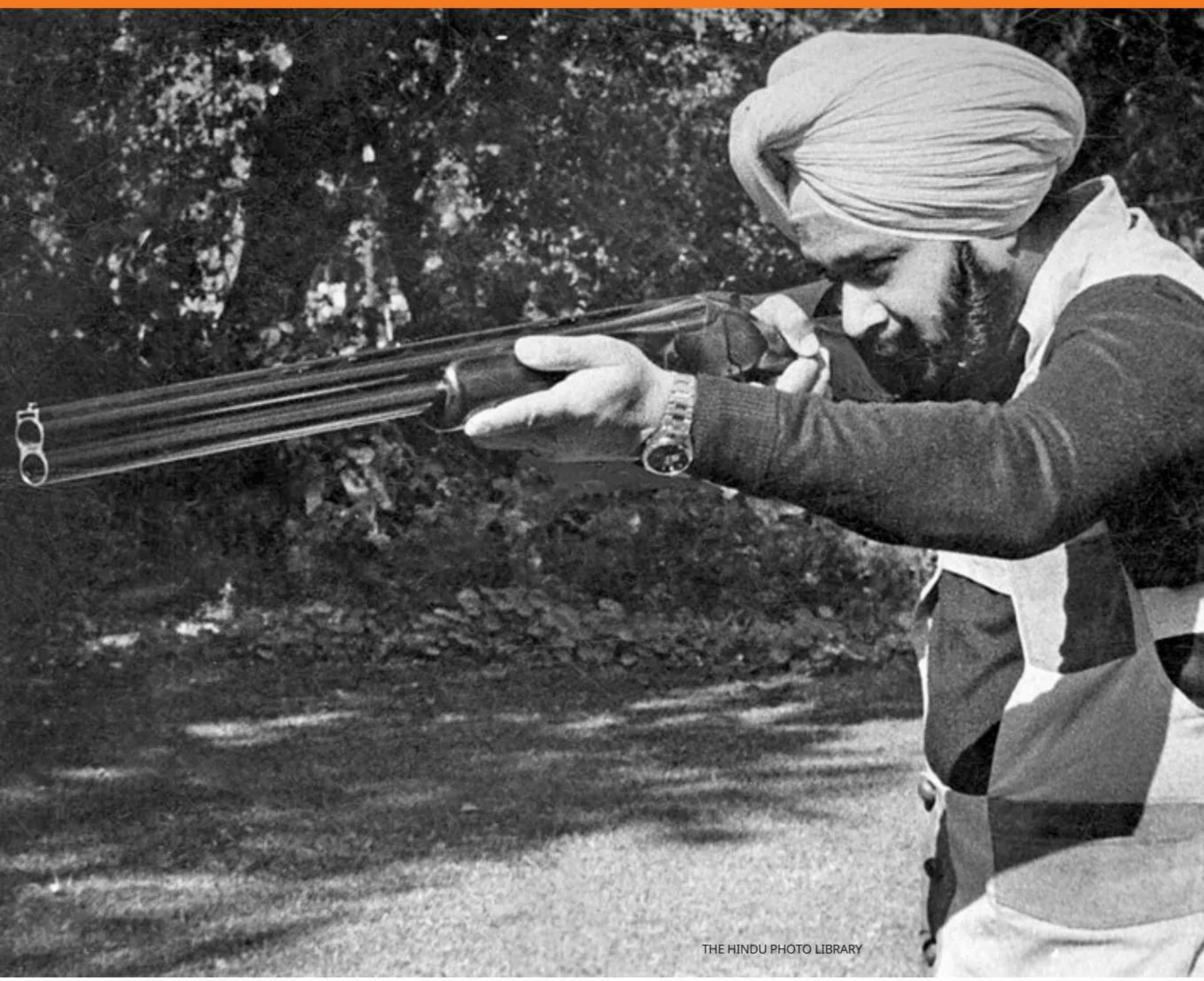
Returning to the 1968 Mexico Olympics, the world was going through a crisis. There was a lot of strife in Mexico. People were worried about whether the Games might happen or not. But when we went there, I thought we saw a great Olympics. We had so much fun. People were casual, loving, and very helpful. Some of the infrastructure was not ready. It was just about getting ready. But they managed to complete everything on time.

Since its inception, the Olympics has witnessed some unbelievable feats. We also saw fantastic performances in Mexico, like Bob Beamon's (long jump). I was there to watch him come up with that grand jump. Beamon almost jumped out of the pit. They didn't know at the venue that this had happened because the long jump pit was on one side of the stadium. The crowd was stunned when it appeared on the screen. He had cleared 8.90m, and his record stood for 23 years before Mike Powell (8.95m) broke it in 1991.

How can one forget the Dick Fosbury flop? His back-first jump was the most fantastic thing one had seen. I did a bit of high jump when I was in school, but to see somebody run up with this twisted body and go over the bar the other way around, I thought it was incredible. I have gotten to know Beamon well. I have met him and Fosbury quite a few times after the Mexico Olympics. We met as administrators. The boxing gold by George Foreman also stood out.

We were provided with a delightful Games village. It was a very welcoming place with people gathered around and athletes singing in every corner of the stadium. We also had a cultural centre there, which was a lot of fun. The food was excellent, and I found that Mexican cuisine is quite similar to Indian food, so we could enjoy it quite a lot. Overall, it was a fun experience. While I may have discovered some organizational loopholes, I didn't encounter any issues with the event itself. Playing in the Olympic Games was truly exhilarating. In the evenings, everyone would gather together and make new friends.

For an Indian, the medal that matters at the Olympics is hockey. The rich heritage that Indian hockey had acquired through the gold medals in '28, '32, '36, '48, '52, '56 and '64 was a matter of great pride. Losing the gold to Pakistan in '60 hurt the game in India, but there were high hopes we would win the gold in Mexico. Sadly, it did not



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happen. We began on a sour note, losing to New Zealand. It was a shocker. I remember the games against West Germany, Japan, East Germany and Mexico. The wins put us on the road to the semifinals after a hard-earned victory against Spain. There were murmurs of a rift in the team even as we watched the semifinal against Australia.

A win for Australia was heartbreaking. Losing the gold in hockey was nothing short of a catastrophe, and I must say I was crestfallen. The signs of losing our dominance in hockey were there for all to see. It was painful to see India take on West Germany for a bronze medal. We won that match, but not everything was good in Indian hockey. The rift in the team had cost dear. I am now looking forward to the Paris Olympics. There are great expectations from the shooting contingent and some other athletes as well.

Neeraj Chopra is looking good to retain his gold in the javelin throw. I will be in the stands to cheer on the hockey boys, who promise to better the bronze medal they won in Tokyo.

As told to Vijay Lokapally

We were provided with a delightful Games village. It was a very welcoming place with people gathered around and athletes singing in every corner of the stadium

Earnest attempt to document history

This is the story of how a teased overweight teenager in Khandra, Haryana, discovered a passion for javelin throw and **went on to become** India's first Olympic gold medal winner in athletics.

Nihit Sachdeva
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The Man Who Made History: The Neeraj Chopra Story by Norris Pritam encapsulates the fascinating journey of India's first-ever Olympic gold medallist in track and field.

It is the tale of a teenager in Khandra, a village in Haryana, who, teased by his peers for being overweight, begins working on his fitness and, in the process, discovers the discipline of javelin throw at Shivaji Stadium in Panipat. Pritam paints this picture for the reader through personal accounts from Neeraj's family, friends, former and current coaches, fellow athletes, rivals, and the subject himself.

The author makes it clear that Neeraj isn't the first Indian athlete with the potential to win a gold medal at the Summer Games. On some occasions, the prospect wasn't motivated and incentivised enough, while in other cases, a lack of foreign exposure and proper knowledge of injury management prevented the nation from standing on the top of the podium in athletics.

When it came to Neeraj, apart from the initial financial struggles, everything fell into place. Whether it was being scouted by JSW Group at the National Junior Athletics Championships in 2012 at the age of 15, support from the army — his employer — participation in international competitions under the guidance of local as well as foreign coaches, or surgery by Mumbai's renowned arthroscopy surgeon Dr. Dinshaw Pardiwala for an elbow injury before the Tokyo Olympics, the pieces of the puzzle were placed perfectly.

The book also presents a behind-the-scenes view of how things unfolded once Neeraj reached the Japanese capital and discusses in detail whether it was the Indian's luck or just poor execution from Germany's Johannes Vetter, a huge favourite for the gold medal, who could not even make it to the Top 8 in the final.

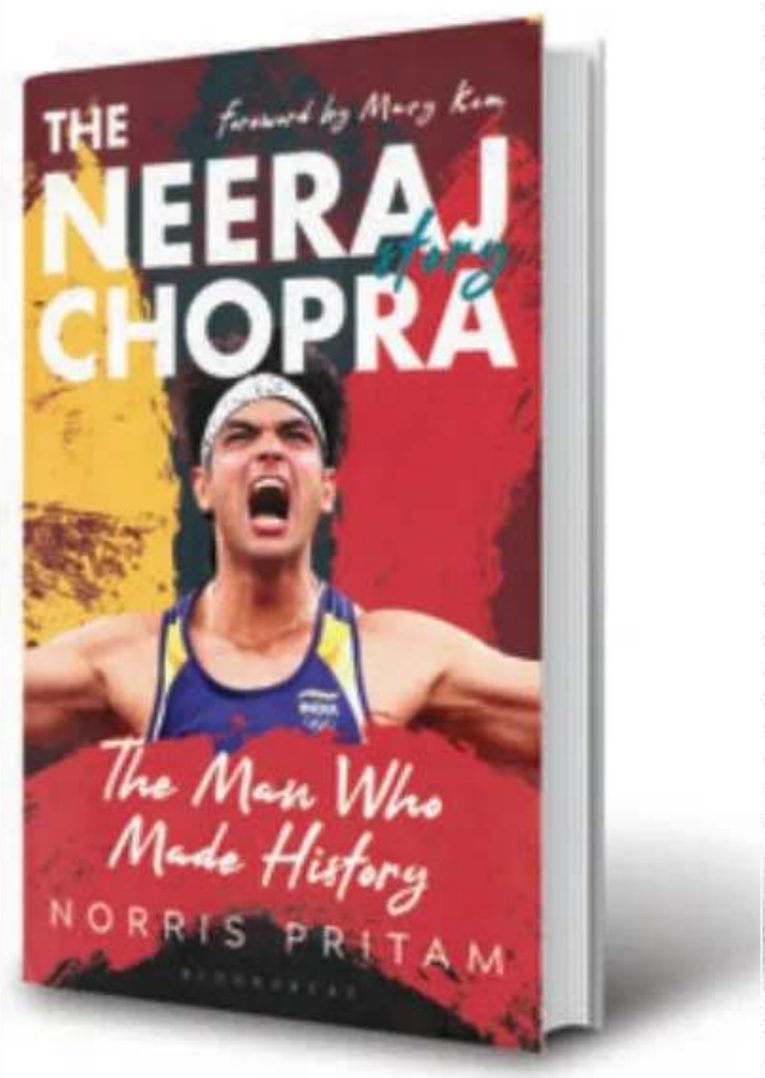
Despite Neeraj's historic achievement, the author stresses the need for better talent scouting and media coverage to further raise the profile of athletics in the country.

Factual errors

While the author does well to debunk wrong reporting on claims that Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem tampered with Neeraj's javelin during the final in Tokyo, he also makes two glaring factual errors in the book.

In chapter seven, he mentions that Neeraj won gold at the Doha Diamond League in 2023 before going on to correct himself in the next paragraph that athletes are awarded points and not medals in the Diamond League meetings.

In chapter 13, while listing Indian medallists in men's javelin throw at the Asian Games, Kishore Jena is said to have clinched a bronze medal at Hangzhou 2023, when in reality, the athlete from Odisha had won silver.



From the tome

As the country erupted in joy with Neeraj's golden performance in Tokyo, his teammate and roommate on several tours, Shivpal Singh, also deserved a big 'thank you'. Not many know that it was Shivpal who carried the winning javelin to Tokyo from India for his personal use but left it for Neeraj to use in the final. Once Shivpal was eliminated in the qualifying round, he had to vacate the room in the Games Village within twenty-four hours and return to India. But because the final was on August 7, Shivpal could not take his favourite Valhalla Javelin back from the organisers. So, he requested that Neeraj bring it back. Neeraj did so, after having a golden toss with it!

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THE PERFECT HOMECOMING

Charles Leclerc ended his Monaco Grand Prix curse with a **commanding home victory**, while Max Verstappen struggled with pace to settle for seventh position.

Dipak Ragav
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Every elite athlete across sports wants to be at their best on home soil. Most try to push that extra bit to raise their levels, egged on by a partisan audience. Some even reserve their best for their home event.

For Ferrari's Charles Leclerc, his home race is extra special. The Monaco Grand Prix is considered a crown jewel event on the F1 calendar, and every driver wants to win it mainly for two reasons.

One, it is a challenging track around the narrow streets of Monte Carlo, where the margin of error is so tiny that one small mistake could mean the driver hits the wall, which could spoil the whole weekend. Add to it the sheer razzmatazz surrounding the event, with opulent parties and celebrities from royalty to Hollywood stars adding sheen to the occasion.

For Leclerc, as the only Monegasque driver on the grid, there are sky-high expectations whenever the F1 circus visits the Principality. However, the 26-year-old has had a mixed record at the famed venue.

Despite taking two pole positions on a track where qualifying virtually decides the final finishing position, Leclerc hadn't even been on the podium.

In 2021, he couldn't start the race after a driveshaft broke just before the start of the race following his crash during qualifying. In 2022, a strategic blunder by Ferrari saw him go from leading the race to finishing fourth.

This time, Leclerc finally broke his home-race curse, converting his third pole position to a lights-to-flag victory to claim his sixth Grand Prix win and first since 2022.

Right from the free practice sessions on Friday, Leclerc and Ferrari looked mighty impressive on a weekend when Max Verstappen was surprisingly way off pace. The Red Bull struggled with

Local hero: Leclerc comfortably led Oscar Piastri and his teammate Carlos Sainz to a famous victory in his backyard. GETTY IMAGES

the bumps around the streets of Monte Carlo and had to increase the car's ride height, sacrificing lap time, as modern F1 cars perform better with a rear ride height closer to the track for maximum downforce.

Leclerc was fastest in FP2 on Friday evening and FP3 on Saturday morning. Although Oscar Piastri and McLaren gave Ferrari a good fight in qualifying, Leclerc eeked pole position by just under a tenth of a second faster than Piastri. Carlos Sainz and Lando Norris closed out the second row.

On Sunday, within moments of the race start, there was a massive crash involving Haas driver Kevin Magnussen and Red Bull's Sergio Perez when the latter tried to make a move on the opening lap. The collision also collected an innocent Nico Hulkenberg in the other Haas, forcing the race to be stopped.

It was the perfect gift for the other Ferrari of Sainz, who was involved in a minor scuffle with Piastri and the resulting contact, giving him a puncture. Though Sainz slumped down the order, the fact that Kick Sauber's Zhou Guanyu did not cross the first sector of the track meant the cars restarted the race in the original order.

During a red flag, mechanics are allowed to repair the cars, meaning Sainz got a new set of tyres and reclaimed his third place on the grid. Once the race restarted, it was the usual Monaco procession without many overtakes. The fact that most cars swapped tyres at the red flag meant they did not have to make another stop in the race, thus further reducing any scope for strategic variance.

Leclerc comfortably led Piastri (who got his first podium of the year) and his teammate Sainz to a famous home victory.

It was the first time in F1 history that the top ten drivers finished in the same position they started in, illustrating how difficult it is to make a pass.

Indy 500

On the same day as the Monaco GP, there was another historical race happening across the Atlantic with the 108th running of the Indianapolis 500. The iconic race saw Team Penske's Josef Newgarden take his second Indy500 win in as many years, becoming only the sixth driver to do so. Hélio Castroneves was the last driver to win the prestigious race back-to-back in 2001 and 2002.

In a thrilling end to the race, Newgarden lost the lead into turn one on the last lap of the race to Arrow McLaren's Pat O'Ward, but regained it a few corners later to take the honours at The Brickyard.

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AFP

Moto GP

Meanwhile, in the world of two-wheel racing, reigning champion Francesco Bagnaia (left) delivered two sublime weekends at the Catalan and Italian GPs, posting commanding wins to reduce his points deficit to championship leader Jorge Martin.

The first race of the double-header started on the wrong foot for Bagnaia. The Ducati factory team rider made a costly mistake in the Sprint Race at Barcelona, crashing from the lead and giving home hero Aleix Espargaro, who recently announced his retirement, the win. But Bagnaia made amends on Sunday in Barcelona by beating Martin in a straight fight, taking the lead with six laps left in the race to get his third win of the season.

At Mugello, the two-time champion put on a dominant display in both the Sprint and Grand Prix by doing the double relatively easily at his and Ducati's home race. It was his first sprint win of the season, and he drastically cut into Martin's lead, now 18 points, with 13 races left.

Meanwhile, on the Monday after the Italian GP, there was a shock move in the rider market when Martin announced he would join Aprilia Racing in 2025. The Prima Pramac rider has been with the satellite Ducati team since 2021. Having finished runner-up last year, Martin was hoping to take the second seat at the factory Ducati team alongside Bagnaia, and it seemed the deal was close to being signed. But in the eleventh hour, it seems to have fallen through. Martin's move has now opened the door for six-time champion Marc Marquez to take the coveted second factory Ducati seat.

Evolution of a theme

By C.G.S.Narayanan

'Changes do happen to a theme substantially over the years when a two move idea is extended to three-move field because of having one more move which allows many discoveries and unbelievable flights of fancy' observes grandmaster Milan Vukcevich whose ambitious ideas coupled with his astounding technical skills turned out veritable masterpieces. Bristol and reciprocal changes were two of his favourite themes both in the two-mover and three-movers.In this article I present a few of his three-movers featuring reciprocal changes and Bristol evolved during different periods.

Milan Vukcevich
2 prize, Problem TT 1961

Mate in three moves

In the diagram above set mates are
1….Ra3(a) 2.Bd5+(A)Kd3 3,Qf3
1….Ba3(b) 2.Ne5+(B) Kc5 3.Qf8
After **key 1.Qa1**! (2.Qxa4) the second moves of white are reciprocally changed.
1…Ra3(a) 2,Ne5+(B) Kc5 3.Qxa3
1…Ba3 (b) Bd5+(A)Kd3 3.Qxa3

Let us study the classic below which Milan considers as one of his best three movers. In three-movers his Bristols turned out as successful as his reciprocal changes.

After the **key 1.Qc7**!(2.Rc4+ Rxc4 3.Qxc4) Black defends with self pinning captures on d3.1….Rxd3 2.Rc2!Bxc2/Rxc2/exd1Q 3.Qc3/Rxd3/Qc4and1….Bxd3 2.Bg3!Rxg3/Bxg3/exd1Q.Qf4/Rxd3/Qe5

'These two variations each contain a self-pin, a Bristol, a Treffpunkt and an unpin. It came from the heart, unplanned as one huge mechanism with every gear fitting perfectly together'wrote Milan.

Mlan Vukcevich
I prize, Stosic MT, 1982

Mate in three-moves

The problem for solving below has an aesthetic addition to the reciprocal change theme.

Milan Vukcevich
I prize,Diagrammes 1999

Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Black correction'**: Key 1.Ra5!** 1…any 2.Rxa4+ Nb4 3.Rxb4;1..B any 2.Qc2+ Kb4/Kxd4 3.Rxa4/Nf5;1..Bc6 2.Nc8 (Qc2+?)Rb1 3.Be2;1…Be6!! 2.Nxe8 Nc5 3.Rxc5;1…Be4!!! 2.Be6+(Qc2+?)/Nc8/Nxe8) Bd5 3.Bxd5

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

Bajrang's provisional suspension revoked by disciplinary panel

A National Anti-Doping Disciplinary Panel has revoked wrestler Bajrang Punia's provisional suspension on technical grounds. Bajrang was handed a provisional suspension on April 23 for allegedly refusing to give his urine sample for dope testing at the selection trials for the Olympic qualifiers held at Sonipat on March 10. The Disciplinary Panel, comprising Sunny Choudhary, Dr. Rana Chengappa and Abantika Deka, on May 31 noted that "the notice of charge is yet to be issued to the athlete" and ordered "the provisional suspension of the athlete is revoked till NADA decides to issue the notice of charge to the athlete for the violation of anti-doping rules."

It is premature to go into the merits and demerits of the case, said the panel, adding if NADA decides to issue the notice of charge to the athlete then the matter will be listed for final hearing. Bajrang, who was previously approached by a NADA official for testing on December 13 with an expired kit, had submitted his explanation for refusing to give his sample because of his past experience and had said that he had not received any response to the email written by him to NADA over the issue.

Y. B. SARANGI

SPORTOON

1 Grandmaster Arjun Erigaisi's strong showing in the French Team Chess Championship has helped him reach the fifth spot in the FIDE standings, making him the highest ranked Indian by live rating. Arjun has so far added 8.7 points to his tally, and with an ELO rating of 2769.7, he is only behind Magnus Carlsen of Norway, USA's Hikaru Nakamura and Fabiano Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtchi of Russia. He had briefly reached a career-high live rating of 2771.2 recently and is the only Indian since Viswanathan Anand to do so.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 The Ultimate Table Tennis (UTT) is set for an exciting 2024 season following its Coach Draft event, where each of the eight franchises selected both a foreign and an Indian coach. This year, the league has expanded to eight teams with the addition of Ahmedabad SG Pipers and Jaipur Patriots. The upcoming season, scheduled in Chennai from August 22 to September 7, promises to be an exciting chapter in UTT's journey. The franchise-based league is promoted by Niraj Bajaj and Vita Dani under the auspices of the Table Tennis Federation of India.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Boost your sports performance this summer by eating right

With temperatures soaring above 50°C, hot summers like this endanger athletes' performance and health, underlining the **critical need for hydration** and electrolyte balance.

India is experiencing its hottest summer in recorded history, with temperatures soaring to unprecedented heights. This year, Delhi's Mungeshpur recorded a staggering 52.9°C, making it the hottest place in the country. Other places like Phalodi in Rajasthan and Sirsa in Haryana have also experienced extreme temperatures, with highs of 51°C and 50.3°C, respectively.

It's important to note that the northern part of the country, which is particularly affected by this scorching heat, has 40 per cent of India's athletes who are bearing the brunt of the rising temperatures.

Those involved in outdoor sports, especially, are particularly vulnerable. Sports such as cricket, football, athletics, and field hockey require extended hours of training under the sun, leading to significant loss of electrolytes and minerals through sweat. Now you may ask, why do we even need these electrolytes?

Our human body relies on a delicate balance of electrolytes and minerals to function optimally. Electrolytes like sodium, potassium, magnesium, and calcium play crucial roles in maintaining fluid balance, muscle function, and overall cellular health. During intense physical activity, especially in high temperatures, the body sweats to cool down. Sweat contains not only water but also these essential electrolytes.

Electrolytes do more than just regulate fluids. They have many important functions, including:

• Transmitting nerve signals from the heart, muscles, and nerve cells to other cells

• Building new tissue

• Supporting blood clotting

• Keeping your heart beating by electrically stimulating muscle contractions

• Maintaining the blood's pH level

•Regulating the fluid level in blood plasma

When the body loses a significant amount of electrolytes through sweat, it can lead to dehydration, muscle cramps, fatigue, and decreased performance. Sodium is the primary electrolyte lost in sweat, followed by potassium and magnesium. These electrolytes are vital for nerve function, muscle contraction, and maintaining blood pressure. Without adequate replenishment, you can experience severe decline in performance and even heat-related illnesses.

I've got these simple and effective additions to help you prevent electrolyte loss and ensure optimal performance during the summer months without making any changes to your diet.

Stay hydrated with cooling beverages

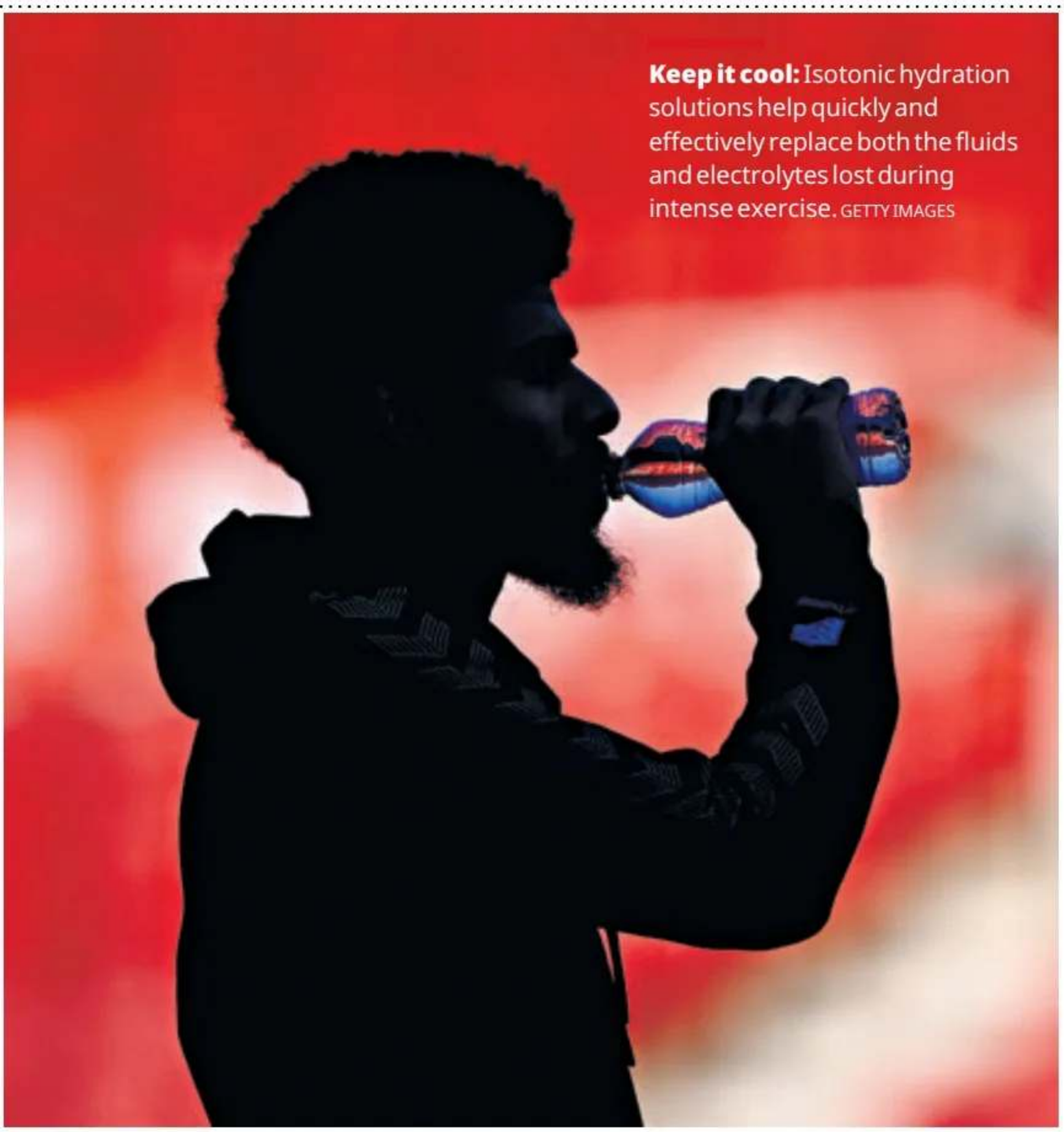
• Coconut water: Rich in potassium and other electrolytes, coconut water is a natural hydrator. It's an excellent alternative to sugary sports drinks. An average green coconut provides about 1/2–1 glass of coconut water. One glass (240 ml) contains only 60 calories. In fact, a 2014 study out of Brazil found that coconut water improved exercise capacity better than water or a sports drink during a very hot day.

• Buttermilk and curd: Traditional Indian drinks like buttermilk *(chaas)* and curd *(dahi)* are not only cooling but also packed with calcium and probiotics, which aid digestion and hydration.

• Infused water: Adding slices of fruits like lemon, cucumber, and mint to water can make it more refreshing and palatable, encouraging more frequent hydration.

Incorporate fruits into your diet

• Watermelon and melons: These fruits have high water content and are rich in vitamins and minerals, making them perfect for staying hydrated and replenishing lost



Keep it cool: Isotonic hydration solutions help quickly and effectively replace both the fluids and electrolytes lost during intense exercise. GETTY IMAGES

nutrients.

• Bananas: A great source of potassium, bananas help in maintaining electrolyte balance and preventing muscle cramps.

Using isotonic hydration powders

These are specially formulated mixes which, when combined with water, create a solution that matches the osmolarity of your body fluids. This means they help quickly and effectively replace both the fluids and electrolytes lost during intense exercise.

By drinking isotonic hydration solutions, you can rehydrate faster, maintain your electrolyte balance, and sustain your performance and endurance during your workouts or competitions. Isotonic drinks are specifically designed to replace the electrolytes lost through sweat. Consuming these during intense training sessions can help maintain performance and prevent dehydration.

Adding beetroot to diet

A study found that supplementing with beetroot juice at least six days prior to intense exercise or athletic events can significantly improve stamina and recovery. Beetroot is packed with nitrates, which help in reducing oxygen cost during exercise and improve overall efficiency. This means your muscles need less oxygen to perform the same amount of work. In simpler terms, eating beetroot can make your body more efficient during exercise, allowing you to train harder and recover faster, helping you get the most out of your workouts and competitions. Incorporating beetroot into your diet can make a noticeable difference in performance.

Here are five beetroot-based dishes, smoothies, and salads that can help boost your performance:

• Beetroot smoothie: Blend beetroot with bananas, yoghurt, and a dash of honey for a refreshing and nutrient-packed smoothie.

• Beetroot salad: Combine roasted beetroot with spinach, feta cheese, walnuts, and some vinegar for a delicious and healthy salad.

• Beetroot hummus: Blend cooked beetroot with chickpeas, tahini, garlic, and lemon juice. Serve with whole grain pita or fresh veggies.

• Beetroot and carrot juice: Mix fresh beetroot and carrot juice with a hint of ginger for a revitalising drink rich in vitamins and antioxidants.

• Beetroot *raita:* Grate beetroot and mix it with curd, cumin powder, and a pinch of salt. This cooling *raita* is perfect as a side dish with meals.

In addition to this, following these tips will prevent serious health issues. Here are some practical tips:

• Carry a water bottle: Keep a water bottle with you and sip regularly throughout the day. Don't wait until you are thirsty to drink water.

• Limit sugary drinks, caffeine, and alcohol: These can act as diuretics, increasing urine production and contributing to dehydration if not balanced with adequate water intake.

• Be cautious of spicy and high-sodium foods: Such foods can increase thirst and fluid loss, disrupting electrolyte balance if not balanced with water intake.

• Hydrate before training: Make it a habit to drink at least one or two glasses of water before starting your training or workout.

• Take regular breaks: Ensure regular breaks in shaded or cool areas during training to prevent overheating and allow the body to recover.

By adopting these simple dietary adjustments and staying vigilant about hydration, you can significantly improve your performance and safety during the hottest months of the year. Eating the right foods and maintaining electrolyte balance is not just about enhancing performance but also about safeguarding health in extreme conditions.

As a sports nutritionist, I cannot stress enough the importance of these practices. Let's stay healthy, hydrated, and high-performing this summer!

Human motivation is mysterious

Sport and suicide have a **long and depressing** connection. According to one estimate, 186 Olympic athletes have committed suicide.

Suresh Menon

"My story is not finished," said golfer Grayson Murray, "I think it's just the beginning." That was in January. In May, he took his own life. He was 30.

Suicide is devastating for loved ones. It is crushing even for those who don't know the person. Murray, one of the most talented juniors (he won the Junior world championship three times) and twice winner on the PGA Tour had wrestled with mental health and alcohol issues.

Sport and suicide have a long and depressing connection. According to one estimate, 186 Olympic athletes have committed suicide. It includes India's judoka Narinder Singh (Olympics 1992 and 1996), whose suspension as a police superintendent led to depression. He hanged himself in 2016.

A recent issue of the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* says the number of American college athletes dying by suicide doubled in the 20 years to 2022.

Shocking: Grayson Murray, 30, of the United States hits a tee shot on the 11th hole during the first round of the Charles Schwab Challenge at Colonial Country Club on May 23, 2024. On May 25, one day after he withdrew from the tournament, the two-time PGA Tour winner took his own life. AFP

In the Foreword to David Frith's book on suicides in cricket (*Silence of the Heart*) , Mike Brearley, England captain and practising psychoanalyst, after examining some of the reasons for a person to commit suicide, concludes, "Ultimately human motivation is mysterious."

All suicides are cautionary tales, but we must guard against glib explanations and pop rationalisations. The *British Journal of Sports Medicine* said that while "athletes are generally thought of as one of the healthiest populations in our society the pressures of school, internal and external performance expectations, time demands, injury, athletic identity and physical fatigue" can all contribute to depression and suicide.

To commit suicide mid-career like Murray or Robert Enke is rare; it means taking that extra step from merely nursing the thought. Michael Phelps, the great Olympic swimmer (23 gold medals), once said that after the 2012 Games, "I didn't want to be in the sport anymore. I didn't want to be alive. You do contemplate suicide."

In the *HBO* documentary, *The Weight of Gold*, of which he is narrator, Phelps talks about the mental health challenges of Olympic athletes. Many athletes speak of personal issues and how close they came to taking that final step. Bob sledding champion Steve Holcomb, who had written about an earlier attempt in his book, and was one of the athletes in the documentary, took his own life before it was released. He was 37. Figure skater Sasha Cohen gives a glimpse into the focus of an athlete who wishes to compete at the Olympics. "Everything else in life is an obstacle," she says. Another athlete says, "The system is set up for a high turnover." Today's champion is forgotten tomorrow. The hurdler Lolo Jones once watched reruns of her own Olympics races which were showing at her new place of work — making smoothies for customers.

In an earlier edition of Frith's book, Peter Roebuck wrote, "I believe a man must tackle those parts of his life which worry him most..." That was written in 1990. In 2011 Roebuck threw himself off the sixth floor of his hotel in Cape Town.

Ultimately human motivation is mysterious.

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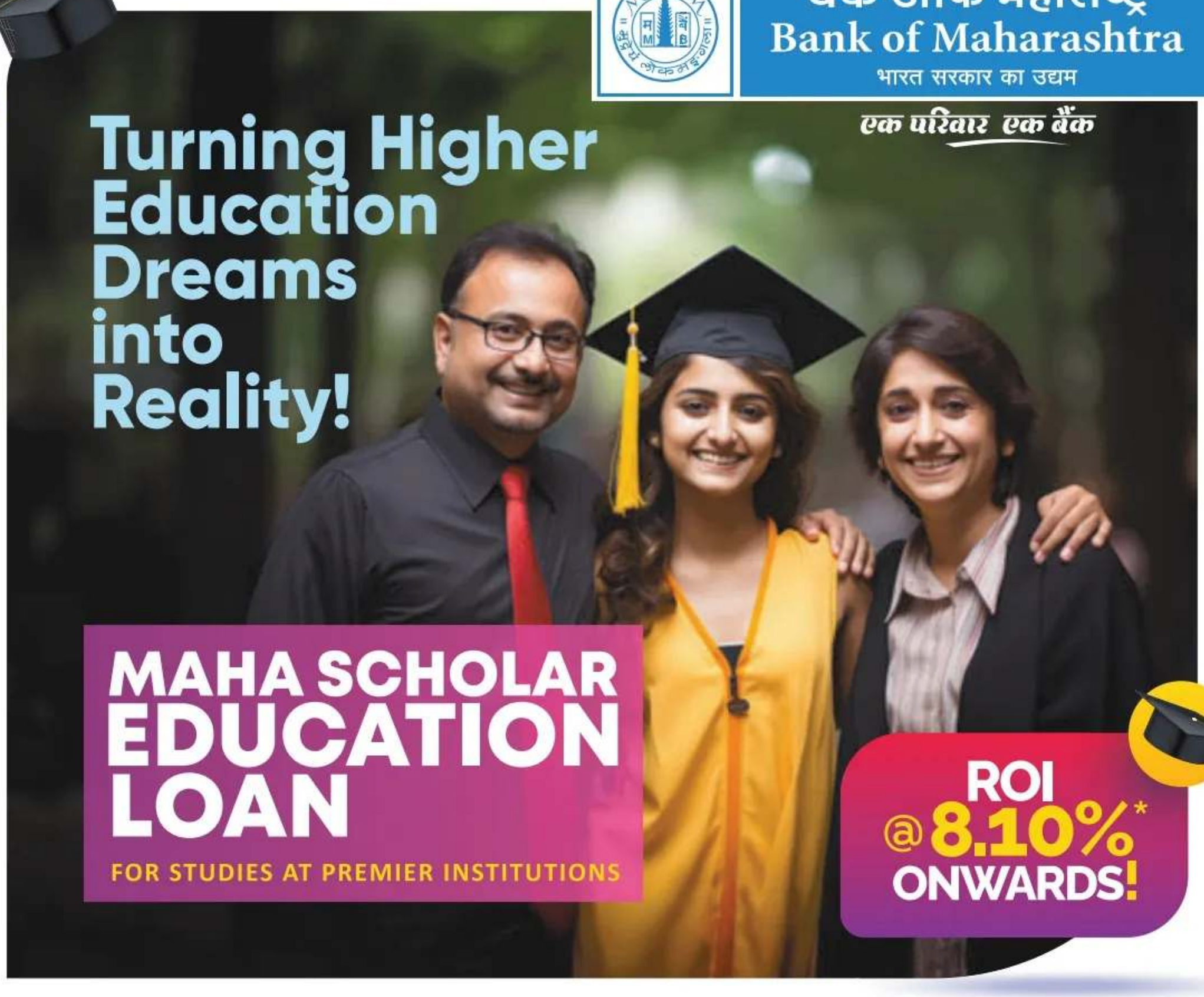

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