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Saturday, March 1, 2025
FOR THE FORTNIGHT FEBRUARY 16-MARCH 1, 2025

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Poster: Abhishek Sharma (Emmanual Yogini); Pages 43-50

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

Editor: Ayon Sengupta (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRP Act).
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OFF-SIDE

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GOVERNING SPORTS IN THE AGE OF SUPERSTARS

From Ali to Carlsen, athletes have defied authorities, reshaping sport. Carlsen's standoff with FIDE, however, **blurs rebellion with ego.**

Sport has always been a battleground, and not just on the pitch or in the ring. From the moment someone decided to organise it — write rules, sell tickets, make a bit of money — there have been constant battles between its non-playing custodians — governments, associations, men in suits — and the players, on whose work (or in this case, play) the edifice of the game stands.

Muhammad Ali said no to the Vietnam War and lost his titles. Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists on the Olympic podium, while Rosie Casals, Billie Jean King and 60 other women players defied a deeply sexist regime to form the WTA in 1973, forcing tennis to acknowledge that women should be paid the same as men.

The US Open introduced equal pay in 1973, but Wimbledon took its time —another 34 years.

Not every revolution in sport, however, has been about fairness. In 1977, Kerry Packer threw money at cricket, and the whole sport found a new set of priorities.

In the 1980s, the Rebel Tour took players where they weren't supposed to go — apartheid South Africa, a country systematically crushing its Black population with astonishing brutality.

In this scheme of things, is Magnus Carlsen's ongoing battle with FIDE a noble fight for fairness, or is this a man who now thinks he is bigger than the game?

Carlsen, 'bored of classical chess', gave up his world title without a fight in 2022. Since then, he has been in a near-constant standoff with FIDE, launching his own almost rebellious Freestyle Chess Grand Slam Tour and declaring that "they (FIDE) need me more than I need them."

After failing to adhere to the agreed dress code during the World Rapid and Blitz Championship in New York last year, he made not-so-kind, personal remarks against fellow five-time champion and now FIDE vice-president Viswanathan Anand.

Then, when his sudden-death Blitz final play-off against Russian Ian Nepomniachtchi failed to produce a winner after three games, he decided to share the title, despite tournament rules stating that play continues until someone wins a game. FIDE, wary of taking on the most powerful player in chess, allowed him to have his way.

Protracted negotiations followed over naming the freestyle tour a World Championship. Could Carlsen decide that too?

Allegations flew, private messages were leaked by Carlsen's German business partner, and a game as dignified as chess became riddled with pettiness and politics. This was no longer a battle for justice but a bruised ego contest.

Despite the breach of trust, FIDE reached a compromise, allowing players, including the current classical world champion, to compete in the first Freestyle Grand Slam in Weissenhaus, Germany, without any restrictions. Carlsen, however, refuses to back down and has indicated that he will no longer participate in FIDE tournaments.

Chess, of course, will survive. Carlsen is not the game, even if his behaviour suggests otherwise. But as for the pliable FIDE? We're not so sure.

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THE ART OF FAST BOWLING

For the average Indian, cricket is no mere sport but a way of life. We are captivated by every aspect of the game right from the towering sixes driven by sheer power, the delicate touch of an elegant cover drive, the spectacular catch at cover, the satisfying thud of the ball hitting the stumps, and even the cunning deception of a well-disguised googly.

For many, however, it's the raw intensity of fast bowling that truly mesmerises. The satisfying crack of the ball against the bat, the heart-stopping moment when it narrowly misses the edge, and the unpredictable bounce off the pitch collectively contributes to the thrill

Fast bowling, the very spearhead of cricket, also accounts for a disproportionate share of injuries, necessitating both flawless technique and robust physical conditioning to reduce injury risk. These techniques can be broadly classified into three categories, distinguished by their action and the bowler's use of their hips.

Side-on: This relies heavily on hip rotation to generate power. While efficient, this forceful twisting motion places significant stress on the lower back. The shoulder also endures considerable strain from the rapid arm rotation and high forces involved.

Front-on: This action emphasizes linear momentum, relying more on shoulder and arm speed, with the torso facing the batsman at delivery. The front leg absorbs a tremendous impact upon landing, bearing the brunt of the force.

Mixed/Semi-open: The semi-open bowling action blends the power-generating lower body mechanics of a side-on style (emphasizing hip rotation) with the more linear, shoulder-driven upper body of a front-on approach. This combination results in complex, often asymmetrical movements, placing inconsistent loads on the body and increasing the potential for injury.

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Shapovalov completes giant-killing run with win over Ruud to clinch Dallas title

Canada's Denis Shapovalov completed a giant-killing run to the Dallas Open title, defeating Norway's fifth-ranked Casper Ruud 7-6 (5), 6-3 for his third career ATP crown.

Unseeded Shapovalov became only the fifth player since 2020 to knock out the three top seeds on the way to an ATP title and just the fourth player since 2009 to beat three top-10 rivals en route to a 250 or 500-level title.

Shapovalov ousted two home-soil favourites earlier, dispatching world No. 4 Taylor Fritz in the second round and eliminating ninth-ranked defending champion Tommy Paul in the semifinals.

The 500-level trophy was the biggest of Shapovalov's career, following victories in Stockholm in 2018 and last November in Belgrade. It also marks a triumphant comeback after battling injury since mid-2023.

« I've been able to use every experience and learn from it to pursue my own greatness. – Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts after his team defeated Kansas City Chiefs to become the first NFL team to win three consecutive Super Bowls with a thumping 40-22 victory »

« This one was the toughest one. I think for a week I was still thinking about that match. – World number one Aryna Sabalenka says she has put her Australian Open final defeat to Madison Keys behind her »

3x15

With the aim of attracting a new audience to the sport and making matches shorter, the Badminton World Federation (BWF) is set to trial a new 3x15 scoring system in selected competitions for at least six months, starting in April this year. The existing format features 21-point, best-of-three-game matches (3x21).

The BWF Council, the decision-making body of the world governing body, endorsed the 3x15 scoring system — which is already part of the Alternative Laws of Badminton — to replace the current scoring system during its meeting in Kuala Lumpur in November.

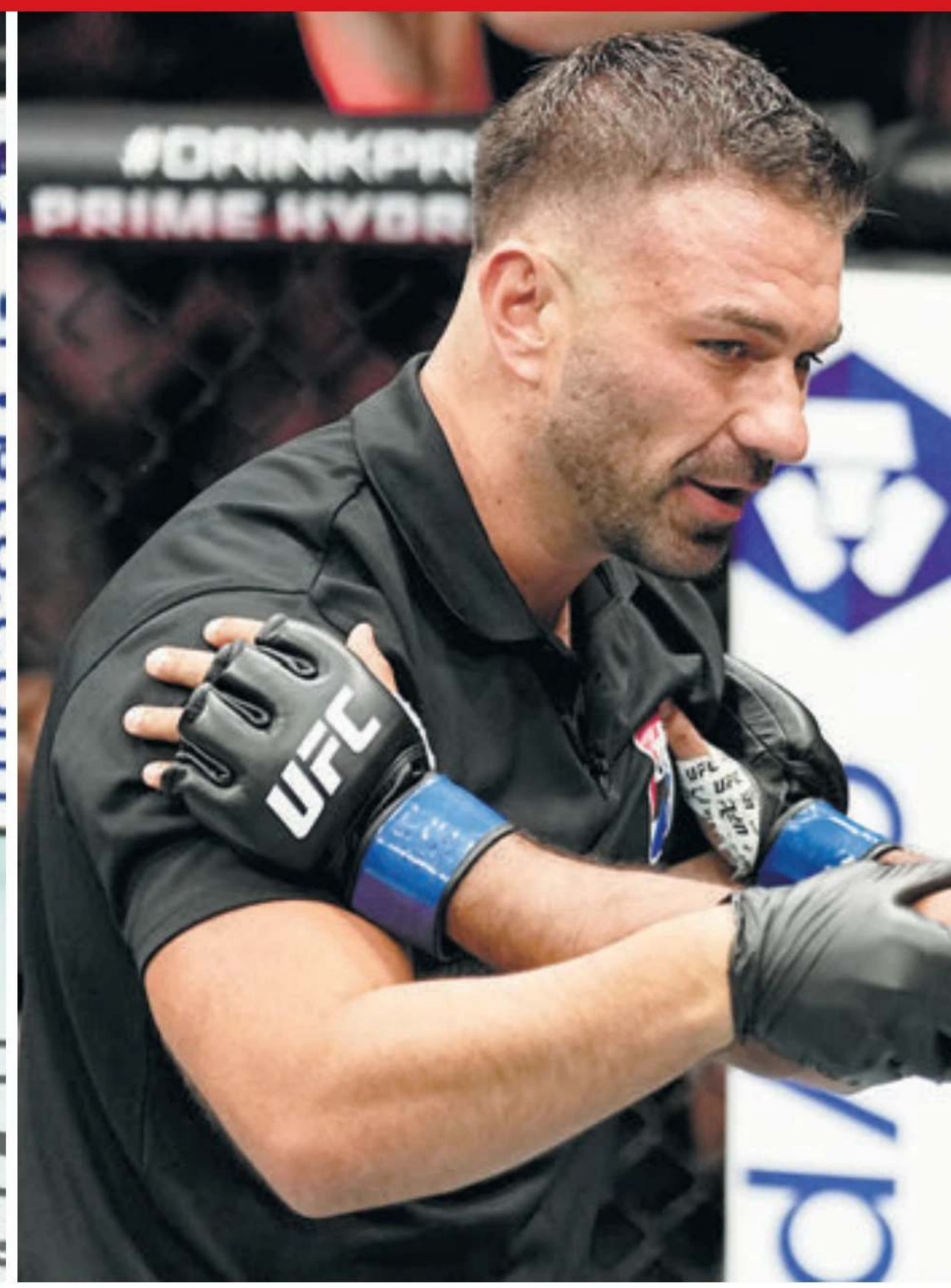
The BWF added that "a proposal could go forward to the BWF Annual General Meeting in April 2026 for a decision, pending the outcome of testing and stakeholder surveying this year."

2028

President Donald Trump is ready to take his fight against transgender athletes to the International Olympic Committee. Trump said, during a signing ceremony for an executive order aimed at banning transgender athletes from women's sports, that his administration wants the IOC to "change everything having to do with the Olympics and this absolutely ridiculous subject" ahead of the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

CHAMPION STUFF

American Grant Fisher smashed the world indoor 3000m record at the Millrose Games in New York, in a thrilling duel with Olympic 1500m champion Cole Hocker. Fisher and Hocker were locked in battle throughout the race before Fisher passed his fellow American off the final turn to clock 7 minutes 22.91 seconds, lowering Ethiopian Lamecha Girma's world mark of 7:23.81 set in 2023. AFP



EARLY BLUNDER OR EARLY STOPPAGE?

The referee's decision to stop the fight sparked a **widespread debate,** as Anshul was still conscious and had a firm hold on Salkilld's ankles.

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India's Anshul Jubli had one of the shortest stays inside an Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) cage at UFC 312.

Facing debutant Quillan Salkilld, Anshul had the advantage in terms of UFC experience. However, Salkilld, in front of a home crowd, showed the world that he is here to stay with a stunning 19-second knockout win.

Anshul initiated a left hook and lowered his guard in the process, allowing Salkilld to capitalise on the opening.

All it took for the Australian was a single, powerful right hook to stagger Anshul, who collapsed immediately after. The official rushed in at once and ended the contest, making it one of the shortest lightweight bouts in UFC history.

To the layman, the referee's intervention might have seemed precautionary. However, the decision sparked widespread debate, as Anshul was still conscious and had a firm hold on Salkilld's ankles.

An early stoppage occurs when

the referee halts a fight before its natural conclusion due to concerns for the safety of one or both fighters.

Anshul also protested inside the ring immediately after the decision was announced.

Fellow lightweight fighter Renato Moicano, ranked 10th in the division, was the first to put out a critical take on the fight. "20 years to have an Indian in UFC, and the referee does that," read his post on the social media platform *X*.

Similarly, bantamweight titleholder Merab Dvalishvili said, "It was early. Early stoppage," in featherweight champion Ilia Topuria's *Instagram* live video.

Anshul posted a video on his social media handle shortly after the fight, echoing the sentiments of Moicano and Dvalishvili.

"I believe that was an early stoppage. Yes, I was hit by a good shot and dropped, but I was defending myself smartly even as I fell," he said.

Heartbreak: Anshul protested the decision inside the ring immediately after the decision was announced, as Salkilld celebrated the contentious win. Pics: GETTY IMAGES

Social media discourse aside had Ansul not let his guard down, Salkilld wouldn't have found the opening to capitalise.

But Indian MMA fans have something to look forward to in the UFC circuit. Puja Tomar will travel to London on March 23 to face fellow newcomer Shauna Bannon of Ireland.

'Stillknocks' is still the king

Dricus Du Plessis **(below, right)** defended his middleweight belt with a dominant unanimous decision victory over a bloodied Sean Strickland **(below, left)** at UFC 312.

Since his UFC debut in 2020, this is only the third time a fight involving Du Plessis has gone the full distance — whether three or five rounds — including the first time he was crowned champion in 2022. Interestingly, he had defeated the same opponent back then via split decision, although this time, he barely broke a sweat.

The earlier rounds belonged to Du Plessis, as his low kicks took a toll on Strickland's legs, while the American used his jab in an attempt to find a chink in the South African's defence.

The pivotal moment in an otherwise laid-back fight occurred early in the fourth round when a powerful right hand from the South African connected with Strickland's defences, breaking the American's nose.

With blood flowing profusely from his nose, Strickland attempted to survive the round without sustaining any further devastating blows, but Du Plessis pressed forward, seeking a stoppage. Strickland managed to last until the bell, but the damage was significant, and Du Plessis did enough in the final round to ensure a comfortable victory. This marked his second successful title defence, following his fourth-round submission victory over Israel Adesanya in August in Perth, Australia.

In the co-main event, China's Zhang Weili retained her strawweight championship with a unanimous decision victory over the No. 1-ranked Tatiana Suarez.

Zhang dominated the fight, while Suarez struggled with a deep knee cut from the octagon fence.

With four straight title defences — three by unanimous decision and one by submission — Zhang's reign remains unchallenged.

A TOURNAMENT TO CELEBRATE, A TEST TO PASS

FOR MORE STORIES

THE 50-OVER CHAMPIONS TROPHY MARKS **PAKISTAN'S FIRST GLOBAL EVENT SINCE 1996** – A MOMENT OF CELEBRATION FOR FANS AND A STERN TEST OF THE COUNTRY'S PREPAREDNESS.

Shayan Acharya
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The last time Pakistan hosted an International Cricket Council (ICC) event, the internet was virtually unheard of, social media and smartphones did not exist, and Babar Azam was just two years old. It has been that long, indeed!

When Sri Lanka captain Arjuna Ranatunga lifted the World Cup trophy to rapturous applause at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium on March 17 1996, few could have imagined it would take Pakistan nearly 30 years to host another major cricket tournament.

While Pakistan was initially announced as a co-host for the 2011 World Cup alongside India and Sri Lanka, it was stripped of the opportunity by the ICC following the terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team bus in Lahore in 2009. That incident had a lasting impact on cricket in the country. With international teams unwilling to travel, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) had to make significant efforts to keep the game alive.

For more than five years, Pakistan shifted its base to the United Arab Emirates for international fixtures before gradually inviting teams back for bilateral series. Although India continues to refuse to send its team across the border, the PCB successfully hosted one leg of the 2023 Asia Cup at home, gaining some confidence from other nations.

However, the Champions Trophy will be its biggest litmus test yet.

Three years ago, when Pakistan was awarded the tournament, Ramiz Raja was chairman of the PCB. He believes this will boost the country's confidence. "When you host a tournament after 29 years, it is a big deal. It builds your confidence and boosts the psyche of the fans and the public that there's lots to look forward to," Ramiz told *Sportstar*. "There is an air of happiness among the fans, and there's a lot to look forward to. However, it entails huge security provisions to ensure the tournament goes smoothly..."

Although Pakistan will play India at a neutral venue in Dubai, the country will host a significant portion of the tournament — including the semifinal and final (unless India qualifies for the latter) — across three venues: Lahore, Karachi, and Rawalpindi.

The PCB has faced major challenges in preparing the venues within just over 100 days, despite investing approximately PKR 12 billion in renovations. While the grounds were in reasonable shape, last-minute renovation work at Gaddafi Stadium and the National Stadium continued until the deadline, with more than 250 workers toiling day and night to complete the project.

The PCB ultimately unveiled the renovated Gaddafi Stadium during a tri-series involving Pakistan, New Zealand, and South Africa. "It was a

Memorable win: Pakistan dominated arch-rival India with a stunning 2017 Champions Trophy victory at The Oval, fuelled by Fakhar Zaman's brilliant century. GETTY IMAGES

challenging project because many doubted it would be completed," said Mohsin Naqvi, the PCB chairman. "Everyone will be remembered because it was due to your untiring effort and the help of God Almighty that this project is completed," he said as the stadium was officially reopened.

While the PCB is confident of hosting a successful event, questions remain about whether the tournament will capture enough interest in Pakistan, given that the much-anticipated India-Pakistan clash will be played elsewhere.

Ehsan Mani, a former ICC chairman and former chief of the PCB, has expressed disappointment with how the global body handled the situation. He believes the ICC should have engaged with representatives from the BCCI and PCB much earlier rather than leaving it until the last minute.

"When the tournament was awarded three years ago, and the political situation between the two countries remained tense, it was important for the ICC to plan things better and come up with a solution much earlier," Mani told this publication. With the event split into two legs, teams are also concerned about the extensive travel involved. As one administrator pointed out, "It would certainly be a challenge for the teams to crisscross from one country to another and then play back-to-back games."

Ramiz, however, does not see this as a significant issue. Drawing on his experience from the 1989 Nehru Cup, he recalled, "I remember travelling several thousand kilometres (six cities) in about 10 days during the tournament, and even then, we went on to win. Only three venues will be hosting matches this time, so travel won't be excessive. Dubai is just a couple of hours away, and teams are used to such journeys. So, it should not matter much..."

The ICC has scrapped its usual pre-tournament captains' photoshoot and mandatory press conference to minimise travel disruptions.

Another notable aspect is the absence of Indian officials from the list of 12 umpires and match referees appointed by the ICC. Javagal Srinath, the only Indian in the ICC Elite Panel of Match Referees, and Nitin Menon, India's sole representative in the ICC Elite Panel of Umpires, have opted out, citing 'personal reasons'.

Despite the event's global status, it is unlikely that Indian fans will be permitted to travel to Pakistan for matches, mirroring the situation during the 2023 ODI World Cup, when Pakistani fans were denied visas. Even Pakistani media representatives were granted limited

United front: Ehsan Mani recalls how Jagmohan Dalmiya led PILCOM to successfully organise the 1996 World Cup, symbolising unity and cooperation.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

visas after prolonged deliberation. It remains uncertain whether Indian journalists will be allowed to cover the tournament in Pakistan.
Local reports suggest ticket sales for Pakistan's home matches have been strong, with seats for the marquee India-Pakistan clash already sold out.
Until recently, doubts loomed over whether the tournament would proceed in Pakistan. But Mani remembers a time when the late Jagmohan Dalmiya led a Pakistan-India-Sri Lanka Organising Committee (PILCOM) to organise the 1996 World Cup in the subcontinent.
"We worked as a team. We spoke regularly and ensured that things went ahead smoothly. We all had a common goal: *cricket hoga*, and it will be a success for Asia. Mr Dalmiya, Mr I.S. Bindra, myself, and others regularly interacted to ensure we got the tournament in shape, Mani said.
Ramiz believes the event will be crucial in changing perceptions about Pakistan, which enters the tournament as the defending champion.
"When you grab those centre spreads in the newspaper regularly for all the right cricketing reasons and become the centre of attraction, it not only fulfils your expectations but also allows you to dream ahead..." Ramiz said.
Mani, however, believes that frequent visits by top teams have already helped to create a positive image of Pakistan. "During my time at the PCB, from 2018 to 2021, we ensured that teams started travelling to Pakistan. Over the last few years, image-building has been done successfully, as a result of which top teams are coming in. During my time, I never heard visiting teams complain about security. They would often tell us to relax things a bit so that players could step out and enjoy themselves," Mani said, adding: "With security taken care of, teams are now comfortable travelling to the country, and hopefully, the Champions Trophy will only make things better..."
After three decades of waiting, Pakistan's fans finally have something to celebrate.

THE SCHEDULE

Feb 19: Pak vs. NZ – Karachi
Feb 20: Ban vs. Ind – Dubai
Feb 21: Afg vs. SA – Karachi
Feb 22: Aus vs. Eng – Lahore
Feb 23: Pak vs. Ind – Dubai
Feb 24: Ban vs. NZ – Rawalpindi
Feb 25: Aus vs. SA – Rawalpindi
Feb 26: Afg vs. Eng – Lahore
Feb 27: Pak vs. Ban – Rawalpindi
Feb 28: Afg vs. Aus – Lahore
Mar 1: SA vs. Eng – Karachi
Mar 2: NZ vs. Ind – Dubai
Mar 4: Semifinal (A1 vs. B2) – Dubai
Mar 5: Semifinal (B1 vs. A2) – Lahore
Mar 9: Final – Lahore/Dubai
Matches to start at 2:30 PM IST. (All squads in team previews as of February 11)

On the back foot: Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli have been under scrutiny for their lean returns in recent months.
K. R. DEEPAK

All-round depth, spin heft and lefty firepower in focus

Shubman Gill retaining the **vice-captaincy over senior players** in the Champions Trophy squad signals a strong endorsement for his future as captain.

Vivek Krishnan
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Since winning the T20 World Cup in the Caribbean in June 2024, India has endured an underwhelming run of results. This has mounted pressure on coach Gautam Gambhir, who took over from Rahul Dravid after the World Cup, and skipper Rohit Sharma heading into the ICC Champions Trophy.

Can India's players get their act together and reinforce their supremacy by winning this eight-team event?

While Rohit and Virat Kohli have been under scrutiny for their lean returns in recent months, the 50-over format may provide a conducive setting for the two stalwarts to free up and return to their best. If they hit their stride, along with Shubman Gill in the top three, India could dominate this tournament just as it did when hosting the 2023 ODI World Cup — until running into Australia in the final. There is also plenty of firepower in the middle order, with Shreyas Iyer, Rishabh Pant, K.L. Rahul and Hardik Pandya all possessing the requisite skill to win matches with the bat.

Jasprit Bumrah's absence from the Champions Trophy is a major blow to India's chances. The 31-year-old, widely regarded as the best bowler in the world, has been ruled out due to a back injury. His presence would have given India a significant edge over its rivals. His ability to deliver in the

Player to watch
SHUBMAN GILL

By naming Gill as vice-captain for the Champions Trophy, the Indian selectors have trusted the graceful right-handed batter from Punjab. With Yashasvi Jaiswal breathing down the neck of the top order, there may have been some uncertainty about Gill's place in the playing eleven had he not been appointed as Rohit's deputy.

Now, it is up to the 25-year-old opener to prove with his performances that he deserves superstar status. He has had his ups and downs, particularly in Tests, where an average of 35.05 does not reflect his enormous talent. To be fair to Gill, he has been exceptional in the 50-over format for India, racking up 2,328 runs in 47 ODIs at an average of 58.2 and a strike rate of 101.74 (before the ODI series against England). However, to indeed follow in the footsteps of Rohit and Kohli, he will need to deliver match-winning knocks in a marquee event. The Champions Trophy could be that stage.

K. R. DEEPAK

PowerPlay, the middle overs, and at the death made him an indispensable asset for the team. Harshit Rana has been named as his replacement.

The onus now falls on Mohammed Shami to lead the pace attack. Shami is returning from a lengthy layoff and may need some time to find his rhythm. In the spin department, Kuldeep Yadav has also been short of game time lately, having undergone groin surgery after the Test series against New Zealand in November. The calibre of these bowlers is not in question, but the fact that they are returning from injuries is far from ideal in a major tournament.

Unlike the other teams that have matches at different venues, India will be based in Dubai for the entirety of the tournament. Once the Indian players acclimatise to the conditions, familiarity with the pitches and ground dimensions could work to their advantage. India's decision to include four spin-bowling options in its squad suggests that the Dubai International Cricket Stadium pitches are likely to aid spin. If so, India has enough variety in this department to capitalise.

The format of the Champions Trophy is such that one bad game could push a team to the brink of a group-stage exit. The pressure to perform for India is all the more significant, as its unforgiving fans would perceive anything less than lifting the trophy as a failure. While the clash against Pakistan has high stakes riding on it, the battle with New Zealand may be just as nerve-racking, given that the Kiwis pulled off a clean sweep in a three-match Test series in India a few months ago. As the Black Caps have demonstrated in recent years, they relish the prospect of tormenting India in conditions perceived to be in the latter's favour.

SQUAD

Rohit Sharma (c), Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul, Hardik Pandya, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav, Harshit Rana, Mohammed Shami, Arshdeep Singh, Varun Chakaravarthy, Rishabh Pant, Ravindra Jadeja

Engine room: Mohammad Rizwan and Babar Azam will once again be in the spotlight during the Champions Trophy. AFP

Injuries and form a big worry

Fakhar Zaman's return after a fallout with the PCB in 2024 is a **big positive** and adds depth to the batting.

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The last time the Champions Trophy was played in 2017, Pakistan clinched the title by defeating India in the final. Few expected it to go all the way, but the team rode on fine performances and *jigar* (sheer determination) – as the then captain Sarfaraz Ahmed later highlighted – to create history.

Eight years on, Pakistan returns as defending champion and host. However, it will not enjoy a complete home advantage, as its marquee fixture against India will be played at a neutral venue in Dubai.

Pakistan has named a strong squad on paper, but Saim Ayub's injury has unsettled the team combination, shifting focus back to Babar Azam and captain Mohammad Rizwan. While their recent form has raised concerns, the 50-over format could provide the platform to regain rhythm and consistency.

Fakhar Zaman's return after a fallout with the PCB in 2024 adds depth to the batting. Asad Shafiq, a selection committee member, suggested either Babar or Saud Shakeel could open with Fakhar, depending on conditions, opposition, and strategy. "Both are capable, with Babar experienced in the role, having opened in T20Is and impressed in the Cape Town Test with two

AFP

Player to watch
FAKHAR ZAMAN

Returning after a hiatus, Fakhar Zaman will be key. Drawing on experience, he will aim to provide strong starts and capitalise on familiar conditions. His gritty 84 in the tri-series opener against New Zealand was a confidence booster. Although he has played just one ODI since the last World Cup, the tri-series should serve as valuable preparation.

half-centuries in Ayub's absence," he said.

The recall of Khushdil Shah and Faheem Ashraf has drawn criticism. Ashraf averages 10 with the bat and 47 with the ball in 34 ODIs, last played in September 2023, while Shah, with 10 ODIs, has been absent since August 2022. Despite PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi's defence of their inclusion, their impact remains uncertain.

A home tri-series against New Zealand and South Africa has provided preparation, though Haris Rauf's ankle injury, picked up during the series, is a concern. Pakistan's pace attack, key to three successive away ODI series wins last year, will be led by Shaheen Shah Afridi, Naseem Shah, and Mohammad Hasnain, with Abrar Ahmed the sole spinner.

The absence of Sufiyan Muqeem and Shadab Khan raises questions about the lack of an additional spinner. How the team management navigates this challenge will be crucial.

Pakistan must raise its game after a disappointing 2023 ODI World Cup campaign. Hosting an ICC event after nearly three decades, expectations are high among fans. Now, it is up to the players to deliver.

SQUAD

Mohammad Rizwan (c), Fakhar Zaman, Babar Azam, Kamran Ghulam, Saud Shakeel, Tayyab Tahir, Faheem Ashraf, Khushdil Shah, Salman Agha, Usman Khan, Abrar Ahmed, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Mohammad Hasnain, Haris Rauf, Naseem Shah

EMMANUAL YOGINI

World champion faces Starc reality

The absence of Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood leaves Mitchell Starc as the **lone senior fast bowler,** placing additional pressure on Australia's back-up pacers.

Ayan Acharya
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Few teams boast a legacy in global tournaments as formidable as Australia's. Heading into the 2025 ICC Champions Trophy, the reigning ODI World Cup holder arrives with a squad facing significant challenges. The absence of several key players due to injuries and retirement has forced a reshuffle, leaving Australia with a vastly different line-up from the one that lifted the World Cup trophy in 2023.

Australia's pace attack has long been its greatest strength, spearheaded by Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood, and Mitchell Starc. Between them, they have won two ODI World Cups, a T20 World Cup, and a World Test Championship, and have retained the Ashes. However, two of the three — Cummins and Hazlewood — are sidelined with injuries. Their absence leaves Starc **(above)** as the lone senior fast bowler, placing additional pressure on Australia's back-up pacers to step up in high-pressure situations. The task becomes even more daunting since Australia will play all its group-stage matches on the flat pitches of Rawalpindi and Lahore.

Australia's lack of credible spin-bowling options adds another layer of complexity. Tanveer Sangha,

Player to watch
TRAVIS HEAD

The left-handed opener has been a key figure for Australia at the top of the order over the past 24 months. He has consistently looked to take the attack to the bowlers, defying conditions with his aggressive approach from the outset. His return to fitness during the 2023 World Cup proved pivotal, revitalising Australia's campaign and culminating in his match-winning 137 against India in the final.

While Head has, at times, appeared vulnerable to the short ball, his ability to counterattack remains a defining trait. With Australia placed in Group B alongside Afghanistan, England, and South Africa — all boasting pace attacks capable of exploiting this weakness — his battles against high-quality fast bowling promise to be enthralling.

Adding to the intrigue is Australia's round-robin fixture in Rawalpindi, a venue that, not long ago, produced a record-breaking 1,768 runs in a single Test match between England and Pakistan. Given the potential for a high-scoring encounter, Head will relish the opportunity to capitalise on favourable batting conditions.

K. R. DEEPAK

Todd Murphy, Matt Kuhnemann, and Mitchell Swepson have talent but lack significant ODI experience, making their inclusion a calculated risk. In conditions where spin could play a pivotal role, will the Aussies back one of their young spinners or rely on part-time options such as Glenn Maxwell to supplement Adam Zampa? Either way, the lack of a seasoned second spinner is a glaring issue.

A broader problem facing several teams, including Australia, is the lack of ODI cricket leading into this tournament. Since lifting the World Cup trophy in India in November 2023, Australia has played only 12 ODIs.

It will play a two-match ODI series in Sri Lanka, where Sean Abbott and Cooper Connolly, along with domestic stars Jake Fraser-McGurk, Ben Dwarshuis, Spencer Johnson, and Sangha, have been added to the squad. Sangha could be a reserve player in Pakistan, as he was for the ODI World Cup in India in 2023.

Meanwhile, Steve Smith appears set to take captaincy. This overhaul is perhaps the most significant talking point. Apart from Cummins and Hazlewood, Australia has also lost all-rounder Mitch Marsh, who was ruled out in late January due to a back injury. Adding to the upheaval, Marcus Stoinis retired from the format in early February, removing a seasoned all-round option from the mix.

The batting order will also look different. David Warner has retired, while Cameron Green is unavailable following a back surgery. These absences mean Australia will need to find new solutions at the top of the order and in the middle overs, areas that were previously anchored by experienced campaigners.

SQUAD

Alex Carey, Nathan Ellis, Aaron Hardie, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Marnus Labuschagne, Glenn Maxwell, Matt Short, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc, Adam Zampa. [Four players to be added]

Makeover time: Test coach Brendon McCullum took over the reins of the white-ball teams from Matthew Mott and is expected to implement a Bazball-style reset. AFP

Selection conundrum looms as another white-ball reset beckons

England has **won just four of 13 ODIs since** its 2023 World Cup exit and enters the Champions Trophy after four straight series defeats.

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Once the reigning world champion in both white-ball formats, England bungled two World Cup defences, in 2023 and 2024, leading to changes in the coaching staff and player personnel.

However, resisting any knee-jerk reaction regarding captaincy, the team has persisted with Jos Buttler through troubled times, and it will hope the 34-year-old repays the faith by reversing England's fortunes in the ICC Champions Trophy.

Test coach Brendon McCullum took over the reins of the white-ball teams from Matthew Mott and is expected to effect a Bazball-like reset that has come to define his coaching tenure in the longest format.

However, England's lead-up to the

ICC event hit an ironic note when 34-year-old Joe Root, who hadn't featured in a single ODI since the 2023 World Cup ahead of the India series, was named in the squad. To his credit, Root showed little signs of rust with a fine half-century in the second ODI. He was immediately talked up as pivotal to England's prospects on Pakistani pitches that could aid spin bowling.

Root will help paper over England's ineptness against spinners, which was on display during the 2-3 series defeat at home against Australia last year. That Root has also found a faster gear to his batting should help his seamless integration into a side that has been the fastest-scoring team (6.01 runs per over) in one-dayers since the ODI World Cup in 2023.

With openers Ben Duckett and Phil Salt setting the pace, Root is more than capable of maintaining the tempo or dropping anchor before a power-packed middle-order, comprising Harry Brook, Liam Livingstone and Buttler, takes over. But England will want its bowling to gel into a cohesive unit more than its batting. If its batters have led the charts with their high-risk approach, England's bowlers have leaked 6.24 runs an over on average — the most by any team since the World Cup in 2023.

With injury-prone Jofra Archer and Mark Wood leading the attack, England was forced to include six seamers in its squad, leaving room for just one frontline spinner in Adil Rashid. The spin-bowling duties will thus also have to be shouldered by Root and Livingstone in the absence of budding all-rounder Jacob Bethell, who was ruled out due to an injury suffered in the series against India.

England will also be without Ben Stokes and Sam Curran — its heroes of ICC title wins in 2019 and 2022 — and will need seam-bowling all-rounders Brydon Carse and Jamie Overton to step up with both bat and ball. While Stokes is managing his injury to be fit in time for The Ashes later this year, Curran's dwindling stocks with the ball have seen him being left out. Stokes and Curran's absences leave England without a left-handed option in the middle-order and a left-arm seamer in the bowling ranks, respectively.

England has won just four of the 13 ODIs it has played since its exit at the 2023 ODI World Cup and will head into the marquee event on the back of four consecutive series defeats — against India and two against West Indies away, and one against Australia at home. However, during this period, it has also had to contend with a spate of injuries to key players, including skipper Buttler. If those returning from injury and a prolonged absence from the format can shake off the lack of game time, England has the firepower to bid for a maiden Champions Trophy title.

REUTERS

Player to watch
BRYDON CARSE

Though he is 29, Brydon Carse is still taking baby steps in international cricket, and the Champions Trophy will present him with the perfect opportunity to cement his place as England's premier seam-bowling all-rounder. A hit-the-deck bowler who has a penchant for picking wickets, Carse can be a handful on flat decks in Lahore and Karachi — England's venues for its group-stage games against Australia, Afghanistan and South Africa. He can also contribute with lower-order runs, most recently seen during his 17-ball 31 in the T20I against India at the M. A. Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai.

SQUAD

Jos Buttler (c), Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Joe Root, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood

New era, new zeal: Mitchell Santner replaced Kane Williamson as New Zealand's white-ball captain late last year. AP

Can the pursuit of consistency finally lead to a title win?

Since 2011, the 2013 and 2017 Champions **Trophy editions** are the only 50-over ICC tournaments where New Zealand missed the semifinals.

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New Zealand's change of guard in One-Day Internationals (ODIs) had a lacklustre initiation with a 0-2 series loss to Sri Lanka in November, but the pieces are falling into place for the Kiwis as they head into the ICC Champions Trophy.

Since being named full-time captain, Mitchell Santner has overseen a 2-1 series win over Sri Lanka at home in January, followed by comprehensive victories over host Pakistan and South Africa in the tri-nation series.

The wins in Pakistan will boost morale for a side that has lost 19 out of its 34 ODIs away from home since 2022.

The urgency with the willow has been the standout change under Santner. The team has scored at 6.38 runs per over in 2025, the fastest it has ever batted in ODIs.

Whether New Zealand can sustain this approach in the ICC Champions Trophy will depend on Glenn Phillips and Michael Bracewell in the lower-middle order. The

Player to watch
RACHIN RAVINDRA

New Zealand will hope Rachin Ravindra can emulate his performances from the 2023 ODI World Cup in India, where he amassed 578 runs in 10 innings, including three centuries.

Rachin was in form throughout 2023, averaging 41 in the 25 matches he played that year.

This ICC Champions Trophy presents an opportunity for him to improve his record in Pakistan. In four ODIs in the country, Rachin has managed just 62 runs — a tally well below his calibre.

AFP

former showed his pyrotechnics in the tri-nation series, scoring an unbeaten 106 off just 74 deliveries against Pakistan, while Bracewell chipped in with a 23-ball 31. Kane Williamson, Daryl Mitchell, and Tom Latham, who are expected to bat at numbers three, four, and five, respectively, can play the perfect foil to the two hitters by setting up platforms. However, to maximise the batter-friendly wickets in Pakistan, where New Zealand plays Bangladesh and the host, Latham could make way for Mark Chapman, who boasts a strike rate of 105.14.

But the biggest change for New Zealand has come right at the top, where Will Young has been preferred over Devon Conway as Rachin Ravindra's opening partner. Conway impressed during the 2023 ODI World Cup, amassing 372 runs in 10 innings. However, the southpaw suffered an injury in 2024 and played his first 50-over match since the World Cup semifinal during the tri-nation series.

New Zealand will have to choose between Conway and Young, given the need to improve its PowerPlay (1-10) run rate, which stands at 5.36 in 2025. While most boxes are ticked in the batting department, New Zealand will be desperate to settle on a bowling combination.

For the first time since 2010, the Kiwi pace battery will enter an ICC competition without Tim Southee and Trent Boult. Its lead pacers — Lockie Ferguson and Matt Henry — have considerable experience, but an injury scare for the former on the cusp of the tournament may leave the unit shorthanded.

The backups — Ben Sears, Nathan Smith, and Will O'Rourke — have only 15 ODI appearances between them and remain untested in ICC events.

As a result, New Zealand will relish playing two of its group-stage matches in Karachi (against Bangladesh) and Dubai (against India), venues that favour spinners. Even though Santner is the only full-time spinner in the squad, the Kiwis boast a plethora of all-rounders who can contribute with the ball.

Since 2006, the 2013 and 2017 Champions Trophy editions are the only 50-over ICC tournaments where New Zealand missed the semifinals. The two favourable venues might just provide the stroke of fortune the Kiwis need to clear this hurdle.

SQUAD

Mitchell Santner (c), Devon Conway (wk), Tom Latham (wk), Kane Williamson, Will Young, Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Rachin Ravindra, Daryl Mitchell, Glenn Phillips, Nathan Smith, Lockie Ferguson, Matt Henry, Will O'Rourke, Ben Sears

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Will heartbreaks of past haunt quest for future again?

The 2025 Champions Trophy presents South Africa with another opportunity to finally shed the cursed **'choker'** tag.

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South Africa's performances in multi-nation tournaments have often followed a familiar pattern — strong starts in the early stages, only to fall short when the stakes are highest. This recurring trend has led to persistent discussions about its ability to handle pressure in knockout matches, shaping the narrative around its tournament history.

Less than a year ago, South Africa repeated the pattern, losing the T20 World Cup final to India from a seemingly unlosable position. The 2025 Champions Trophy presents the Proteas with another opportunity to finally shed the cursed 'choker' tag.

South Africa will look to capitalise on the momentum gained from its maiden World Test Championship final qualification earlier this year.

The Rainbow Nation boasts a well-balanced squad, largely free of glaring weaknesses. The Proteas' batting unit is versatile and

Player to watch
MARCO JANSEN

Jansen's presence as a world-class all-rounder will be key to South Africa's balance. Since making his ODI debut, he is one of only three fast-bowling all-rounders to have scored at least 400 runs and taken more than 40 wickets — the others being Bas de Leede of the Netherlands and Sompal Kami of Nepal.

The left-arm pacer will take confidence from his impressive performance in the 2023 ODI World Cup, where he played a vital role in South Africa's semifinal run. Now 24, Jansen has firmly established himself as a mainstay across formats. His reliability as a seam-bowling option will also enable South Africa to field two frontline spinners, likely Tabraiz Shamsi and Keshav Maharaj.

AP

formidable, equally adept at consolidation and acceleration. Skipper Temba Bavuma **(above)**, Tony de Zorzi, Rassie van der Dussen, and Aiden Markram will anchor the top order.

In Heinrich Klaasen and David Miller, South Africa possesses two of the finest six-hitters in the game, capable of providing a powerful final flourish. Additionally, Tristan Stubbs — whose reputation as a finisher continues to rise in T20 franchise leagues — offers further firepower in the middle order.

Kagiso Rabada, one of the world's top pacers, will lead the bowling attack, bringing a skillset that can dominate all game phases. However, South Africa will be without pace duo Anrich Nortje and Gerald Coetzee, both sidelined due to injury. The Proteas have named 30-year-old Corbin Bosch, who debuted last December, as Nortje's replacement. He has featured in just one ODI and one Test.

One of South Africa's most significant challenges will be adapting to the unfamiliar conditions in Pakistan. The Proteas last played an ODI in the country in 2007, and their most recent tour, in 2021, featured three T20Is and two Tests.

Pakistan's low-bounce surfaces may neutralise South Africa's traditionally potent pace attack, while its batters must adjust to spin-friendly conditions. To add to their concerns, the Proteas are currently on a four-match losing streak in ODIs, with their last three defeats coming at home against Pakistan.

South Africa will rely on the upcoming Tri-Series against Pakistan and New Zealand to acclimatise to subcontinental conditions ahead of the tournament.

The Proteas are in a tricky Group B alongside Afghanistan, Australia, and England. Their campaign will begin and conclude in Karachi — against Afghanistan and England, respectively — while Rawalpindi will host their crucial encounter against Australia.

Over the years, South Africa's tendency to falter at pivotal moments has been a defining narrative. However, it is worth remembering that it was the inaugural winner of the Champions Trophy in its original iteration, the ICC Knockouts, in 1998. A repeat triumph would go a long way in dispelling a stereotype of its own making.

SQUAD

Temba Bavuma (c), Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Kagiso Rabada, Corbin Bosch, Ryan Rickelton, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Rassie van der Dussen

Hot seat: In the absence of senior players Shakib Al Hasan and Litton Das, much will depend on captain Najmul Hossain Shanto's form. PTI

Battle of grit over firepower

Bangladesh seems like a team built to score 300 but destined to concede 320, a side of accumulators **lacking the firepower** to tip the equation in their favour.

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Bangladesh's squad for the ICC Champions Trophy 2025 can best be described as a team of accumulators, lacking significant firepower.

Opening its campaign against a formidable India in Dubai, UAE, before travelling to Rawalpindi for its remaining Group A fixtures against New Zealand and host Pakistan, Bangladesh appears to be a side built to score 300 but concede 320 — an unfavourable equation. The omission of Shakib Al Hasan and the retirement of Tamim Iqbal mark a significant transition, as this will be the first ICC tournament since 2007 that Bangladesh will contest without these two stalwarts.

The selectors have named Soumya Sarkar and Tanzid Hasan as the team's openers, opting to leave out the experienced Litton Das due to his prolonged poor form. Explaining the decision, Bangladesh's chief selector, Gazi Ashraf Hossain,

R. RAGU

Player to watch
NAHID RANA

The 21-year-old Rana burst onto the scene in early 2024, earning a spot in Bangladesh's Test squad and immediately making an impact with his express pace. Consistently clocking over 140 km/h, and at times threatening to breach the 150 km/h mark, he quickly gained a reputation as a genuine fast bowler.

His standout performance came during Bangladesh's historic 2-0 Test series victory against Pakistan — in the second test in Rawalpindi where his four-wicket haul dismantled Pakistan's middle order. He has also troubled Indian batters on their home soil with his wobble-seam deliveries.

Rana's ability to hit hard lengths at pace has made him a difficult proposition for batters. His presence could be instrumental for Bangladesh in controlling the middle overs, forcing opponents into false shots and keeping the scoring rate in check.

stated that the priority was to include in-form batters capable of putting up high totals on flat wickets.

"It became difficult to have confidence in Litton when he failed to score runs in West Indies, where the rest of the batters managed to post big totals. We will be playing on good batting wickets in Rawalpindi. New Zealand lost there despite scoring 336, so we need top-order batters in form."

However, a closer look at the recent Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) suggests that Ashraf's concerns remain valid. Apart from Tanzid, who made 485 runs — the second-highest in the tournament — none of the batters demonstrated consistent form. The next-best performer, all-rounder Mehidy Hasan Miraz, managed 355 runs at an average of 27.30.

In Bangladesh's most recent ODI series, a 0-3 defeat to West Indies in December, Mahmudullah emerged as the team's top scorer. Without Shakib, much of the burden will fall on Mahmudullah and Mushfiqur Rahim to keep Bangladesh competitive. One bright spot is Jaker Ali, who has shown promise as a clean hitter. His unbeaten 62 off 57 balls in the third ODI against West Indies provided a glimpse of his ability. In five ODIs so far, Ali has scored 151 runs at an average of 50.33, striking at over 111.

The bowling unit will rely on familiar names — Mustafizur Rahman and Taskin Ahmed — alongside young pace sensation Nahid Rana, who impressed against West Indies with his ability to generate extra bounce and pace. Mustafizur's death-over expertise, Taskin's new-ball skills, and Mehidy Hasan's off-spin will be crucial in Bangladesh's attempts to apply pressure on the opposition.

SQUAD

Nazmul Hossain Shanto (c), Soumya Sarkar, Tanzid Hasan, Tawhid Hridoy, Mushfiqur Rahim, MD Mahmud Ullah, Jaker Ali Anik, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Rishad Hossain, Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman, Parvez Hossai Emon, Nasum Ahmed, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Nahid Rana

Spin wiz: Afghanistan's ace up its sleeve has been its spin bowling attack, led by the maverick Rashid Khan. GETTY IMAGES

Ready to fire the opening salvo

Afghanistan's success in limited-overs cricket has been **largely due to** the success of its openers and spinners.

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The 2024 T20 World Cup in the West Indies and USA demonstrated that Afghanistan is no longer just making up the numbers.

The incredible talent pool in the country's reserves, coupled with the experience they have gained by playing cricket in leagues around the world, has made the team a serious contender to go deep into ICC tournaments.

The Hashmatullah Shahidi-led team has performed exceptionally well since the 50-over World Cup in India in 2023, where it earned wins against England and Pakistan and took Australia to the brink, only to end up facing the wrath of a certain Glenn Maxwell.

In five bilateral series since the ODI World Cup, Afghanistan has won four, including one against South Africa in the UAE.

The Afghan Atalan's only loss came in an away tour against Sri Lanka, where they were batted out of contention by Pathum Nissanka.

Afghanistan's success in limited-overs cricket has been built on the platform provided by its openers, Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ibrahim Zadran.

The two right-handers have combined for 1,514 runs in 31 ODI matches, averaging a partnership of 48.83 per game.

The duo is placed second on the all-time partnership list for the country, behind Rahmat Shah and Shahidi, who will bat at three and four — indicating the consistency the top order possesses.

There is no shortage of power-hitting in the middle order as well. Gulbadin Naib is entering the competition on the back of a stupendous return in the International League T20, where he scored 381 runs at an average of 45 and a strike rate of nearly 160.

Afghanistan's ace up its sleeve has been its spin bowling attack, led by the maverick Rashid Khan. Shahidi has quite a few options to tinker with in this department.

The overload of spin-bowling talent means Mujeeb-ur-Rahman, who impressed in the recently concluded SA20 tournament, doesn't find a place in the squad.

Noor Ahmad and Allah Ghazanfar will vie for a place in the playing eleven, partnering Rashid and veteran Mohammad Nabi, who could be playing his last 50-over international tournament for his country.

Ghazanfar has had a brilliant start to his international career, picking up 21 wickets in 11 ODIs in 2024, while Noor continues to be efficient in his performances across the

GETTY IMAGES

Player to watch

RAHMANULLAH GURBAZ

At 23 years old, Rahmanullah Gurbaz has become a constant fixture in the Afghanistan white-ball setup and T20 franchise teams across the globe. In 46 ODIs so far, the opener has scored 1,769 runs at an average of 39.31 and a healthy strike rate of 88.49.

The keeper-batter's fast starts in the PowerPlay and his partnership with Ibrahim Zadran helped Afghanistan reach the T20 World Cup semifinals last year. The team will be hoping for more of the same this time round.

franchise teams he represents.

Afghanistan's fast bowling resources display a variety that makes them potent too. Azmatullah Omarzai's proficiency with the new ball will help the team make early inroads in the PowerPlay, while Fazalhaq Farooqi, who finished as the highest wicket-taker in the 2024 T20 World Cup, will come into play during both extremities of the game.

The left-arm seamer can swing the ball early on and also vary the pace towards the back end of the innings to prise out wickets.

Afghanistan's only possible weakness could be its inability to put up totals higher than 300 on the board, especially during a chase. The team has managed to win only one of ten matches where it was required to chase down a 300-plus total.

Afghanistan will take on South Africa, England, and Australia in Group B, with its matches taking place in Karachi and Lahore.

If the team is welcomed by its neighbour with flat pitches, the onus will fall on the batting core to rise to the occasion.

However, if there is a hint of turn on offer, expect Afghanistan to give the other three teams a run for their money.

SQUAD

Hashmatullah Shahidi (c), Ibrahim Zadran, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Sediqullah Atal, Rahmat Shah, Ikram Alikhil, Gulbadin Naib, Azmatullah Omarzai, Mohammad Nabi, Rashid Khan, AM Ghazanfar, Noor Ahmad, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Farid Malik, Naveed Zadran

Rusty build-up: India captain Rohit Sharma faces a tricky selection dilemma as most of the squad lacks substantial game-time in ODIs. K. R. DEEPAK

Title favourite, yes, but battle-hardened? Not so much

India has played just nine ODIs since the 2023 World Cup final. Do these numbers suggest **enough preparation** for the Champions Trophy? Let's take a closer look.

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India will head into the 2025 Champions Trophy on the back of one of the leanest build-ups it has ever had for a multi-team event in recent years.

Since its defeat in the 2023 World Cup final to Australia, India has played just nine ODIs — the fewest of any team set to take part in the Champions Trophy and the second-lowest overall, behind Ireland.

To put it into context, India had played more ODIs (30) than any other team in the 12 months leading up to the previous ODI World Cup. This allowed the team to zero in on the right playing combination, enabling it to embark on a near-spotless run in the tournament.

However, that has not been the case for the upcoming Champions Trophy. Despite playing just nine games, India has used 27 players in ODIs since November 19, 2023 — the third-most by any team.

The lack of selection clarity was evident in the first ODI against England. It began with India's decision to select Harshit Rana over Arshdeep Singh in the playing XI, despite the former not being picked for the Champions Trophy and the

latter being included.

Then came the comment from Shreyas Iyer — who scored a match-winning fifty — after the game, stating that he was not supposed to play in Nagpur but was drafted in due to Virat Kohli's injury. This indicated India's intention to break its battle-hardened ODI batting spine and introduce Yashasvi Jaiswal as Rohit Sharma's opening partner, pushing Shubman Gill and Kohli down the order.

Also in the spotlight was the surprise inclusion of mystery spinner Varun Chakaravarthy in the ODI squad for the England series. Indian skipper Rohit Sharma hinted ahead of the opening game that the Tamil Nadu tweaker could make a late dash for the Champions Trophy squad, depending on his performances against England.

Varun's last-minute introduction into the mix came on the back of his impressive performances in T20Is, which has been India's primary focus in recent times.

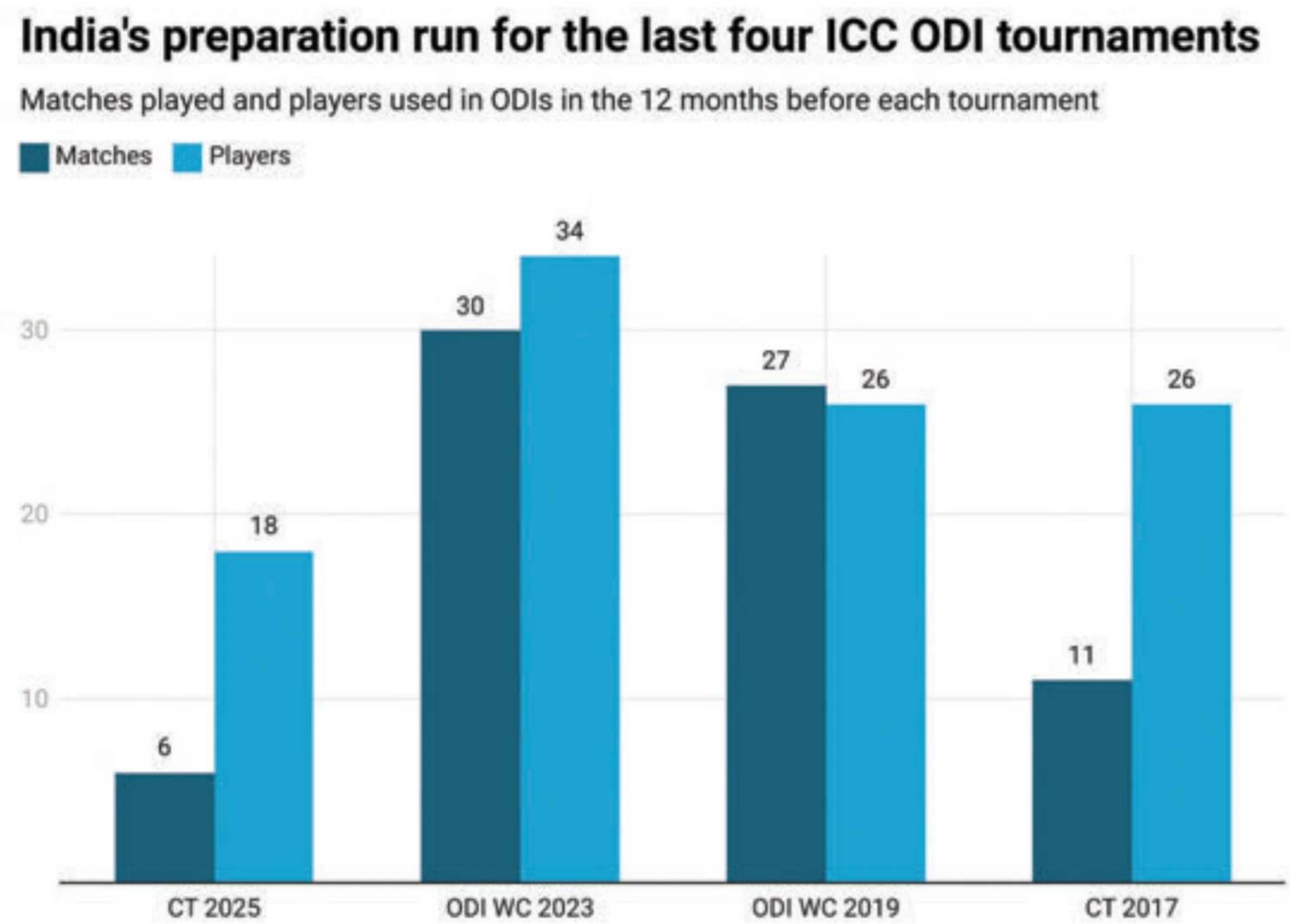
Since the last ODI World Cup final, India has played 38 T20Is — the second-most in the world. Interestingly, 20 of them have come after India's T20 World Cup win in June. This is despite the fact that the next edition of the 20-over World Cup is over a year away.

To top it off, India has also played 17 Tests in the last 14 months — only England has played as many red-ball games in this period.

India's lackadaisical approach to its preparation for the Champions Trophy is not just detrimental to its prospects in the tournament.

With T20 franchise leagues popping up like mushrooms and Test cricket experiencing a roaring revival, the ODI format is fighting a losing battle to stay relevant. Any sign of disinterest from India, the financial powerhouse of world cricket, could be the death knell for the 50-over game.

All numbers up to Feb12, 2025



1998: Originally called the ICC Knockout Trophy, its first edition took place in Bangladesh in 1998. Designed to promote cricket among non-Test-playing nations it also aimed at generating funds between World Cups. After defeating India in the semifinal, West Indies faced South Africa in the final. Despite a fighting century from opener Philo Wallace, the tournament's leading run-scorer, West Indies fell short. South Africa emerged victorious, securing its first-ever ICC trophy. GETTY IMAGES

2000: The 2000 final in Nairobi was defined by two standout centuries — one from Sourav Ganguly and the other from Chris Cairns **(in pic)**. In a thrilling contest, New Zealand edged past India by four wickets with just two balls to spare. India got off to a strong start with a 141-run opening partnership between Ganguly and Sachin Tendulkar but could only post 264. During the chase, New Zealand found themselves in trouble at 132/5, until the rescue act by Cairns took them home. Ganguly finished as the tournament's top run-scorer, while Venkatesh Prasad claimed the most wickets. GETTY IMAGES

2002: Rechristened the ICC Champions Trophy, the 2002 final in Colombo was twice disrupted by rain, preventing a conclusive result. Originally scheduled for September 29, the final featured India and Sri Lanka. Batting first, Sri Lanka posted 244/5 in 50 overs, but India managed only two overs before rain forced a halt to play. A reserve day on September 30 saw Sri Lanka bat first again, this time scoring 222/7. However, with India at 38/1 in 8.4 overs, the match was once again abandoned due to rain. As a result, no Man of the Match or Man of the Series awards were given, and both teams were declared joint winners. GETTY IMAGES

2004: England seemed poised for a fairytale ending, but West Indies had other plans. In the final at The Oval, London, opener Marcus Trescothick scored a fine century despite wickets falling regularly at the other end. Although England managed only 217, Darren Gough's five-wicket haul kept the host in the hunt, reducing the Windies to 147/8. However, Courtney Browne and Ian Bradshaw **(both in pic)** held the fort, guiding the visiting team to its first Champions Trophy title. GETTY IMAGES

2006: It was only fitting that Australia's golden generation won the nation's first Champions Trophy title. Facing defending champion West Indies in the final in Mumbai, Ricky Ponting's side delivered a clinical bowling performance, restricting Brian Lara's team to just 138. During the chase, Shane Watson's composed fifty guided Australia to a comfortable victory. GETTY IMAGES

2009: Watson was the star once again, smashing back-to-back centuries in both the semifinal and final as Australia defended its title in dominant fashion. In the semifinal, Watson and Ricky Ponting shared a record 252-run partnership off 242 balls, then the highest for Australia in ODIs. In the summit clash at the Centurion, Watson remained unbeaten on 105 as Australia chased down New Zealand's 200. GETTY IMAGES

2013: With the final at Edgbaston reduced to 20 overs due to rain, India posted a modest total of 129. England appeared to be in control at 110/4 in the 18th over, but the Indian bowlers produced a death-bowling masterclass to secure a thrilling five-run victory. MS Dhoni made history as the first captain to win the T20 World Cup, ODI World Cup, and Champions Trophy.
GETTY IMAGES

2017: What promised to be a blockbuster match at The Oval turned into a nightmare for defending champion India. Facing Pakistan at The Oval, it had no answer to Fakhar Zaman's brilliance, as the opener smashed a stunning century to propel his team to 338. In reply, India crumbled to 72/6, with Mohammad Amir **(in pic)** wreaking havoc by dismissing Rohit Sharma, Shikhar Dhawan, and Virat Kohli within the first ten overs. India never recovered, enabling Pakistan to win its first ICC trophy in the 50-over format since the 1992 World Cup. GETTY IMAGES

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Champions Trophy — statistical survey

Winner/Runner-up

#	Month, Year	Final venue	Host country	Winner	Runner-up	Semi-finalists	Total Matches	Total teams
1	Oct-Nov 1998	Dhaka	Ban	SA	WI	SL, Ind	8	9
2	Oct 2000	Nairobi Gym	Ken	NZ	Ind	Pak, SA	10	11
3	Sept 2002	Colombo, RP	SL	Ind/SL+	–	SA, Aus	16#	12
4	Sept 2004	The Oval	Eng	WI	Eng	Aus, Pak	15	12
5	Oct-Nov 2006	Mumbai, BS	Ind	Aus	WI	NZ, SA	21	10
6	Sept-Oct 2009	Centurion	SA	Aus	NZ	Eng, Pak	15	8
7	June 2013	Birmingham	Eng	Ind	Eng	SA, SL	15	8
8	June 2017	The Oval	Eng	Pak	Ind	Eng, Ban	15	8

+ joint winners # matches include a replayed final
In 1998 and 2000 it was played as ICC Knockout
Notes:** Australia is the only team to win it twice outright. India also won twice — once shared and once outright.
** In all 13 international sides have participated in this tournament, including three (Kenya, Netherlands & USA) non-Test playing nations.

Highest team totals

Total	Overs	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
347-4	50	NZ	USA	The Oval	10-09-2004	Won
338-4	50	Pak	Ind	The Oval	18-06-2017	Won
331-7	50	Ind	SA	Cardiff	6-06-2013	Won
323-8	50	Eng	SA	Centurion	27-09-2009	Won
322-3	48.4	SL	Ind	The Oval	8-06-2017	Won
321-6	50	Ind	SL	The Oval	8-06-2017	Lost
319-3	50	Ind	Pak	Birmingham	4-06-2017	Won
319-8	50	SL	SA	Centurion	22-09-2009	Won
316-5	50	SA	Ken	Colombo, RP	20-09-2002	Won
315-7	50	NZ	SL	Johannesburg	27-09-2009	Won

Note: Sri Lanka's 322/3 against India at the Oval in 2017 is the highest successful run chase

Highest individual scores

Runs	Batter	Opp	Venue	Date
145*	N. Astle (NZ)	USA	The Oval	10-09-2004
145	A. Flower (Zim)	Ind	Colombo, RP	14-09-2002
141*	S. Ganguly (Ind)	SA	Nairobi	13-10-2000
141	S. Tendulkar (Ind)	Aus	Dhaka	28-10-1998
141	G. Smith (SA)	Eng	Centurion	27-09-2010
136*	S. Watson (Aus)	Eng	Centurion	2-10-2009
134*	K. Sangakkara (SL)	Eng	The Oval	13-06-2013
133*	C. Gayle (WI)	SA	Jaipur	2-11-2006
133*	J. Root (Eng)	Ban	The Oval	1-06-2017
132	A. Gunawardene (SL)	WI	Nairobi	4-10-2000

Lowest team totals

Total	Overs	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
65-10	24.0	USA	Aus	Southampton	13-09-2004	Lost
77-10	19.3	Ban	NZ	Colombo, SSC	23-09-2002	Lost
80-10	30.4	WI	SL	Mumbai, BS	14-01-2006	Lost
85-10	30.1	Zim	WI	Ahmedabad	08-10-2006	Lost
86-10	29.3	Neth	SL	Colombo, RP	16-09-2002	Lost
89-10	25.0	Pak	SA	Mohali	27-10-2006	Lost

Note: 169/10 (23.3 ov) by England vs New Zealand (159/8) in Cardiff, 16-6-2013, the lowest winning total and is also the lowest total successfully defended in the tournament

Fastest 100

Balls	Batter	Runs	Opp	Venue	Date
77	V. Sehwag (Ind)	126	Eng	Colombo, RP	21-09-2002
80	S. Dhawan (Ind)	114	SA	Cardiff	6-06-2013
87	T. Dilshan (SL)	106	SA	Centurion	22-09-2009
89	M. Trescothick (Eng)	119	Zim	Colombo, RP	18-09-2002
89	A. Flintoff (Eng)	104	SL	Southampton	18-9-2004
92	F. Zaman (Pak)	114	Ind	The Oval	18-06-2017
91	J. Kallis (SA)	113*	SL	Dhaka	30-10-1998
95	S. Tendulkar (Ind)	141	Aus	Dhaka	28-10-1998
96	K. Williamson (NZ)	100	Aus	Birmingham	02-06-2017

Fastest 50

Balls	Batter	Runs	Opp	Venue	Date
18	S. Afridi (Pak)	55*	Neth	Colombo, SSC	21-09-2002
21	C. McMillan (NZ)	64*	USA	The Oval	10-09-2004
26	E. Morgan (Eng)	67	SA	Centurion	27-09-2009
28	J. Ryder (NZ)	74	SL	Johannesburg	27-09-2009
29	Yuvraj Singh (Ind)	53	Pak	Birmingham	04-06-2017
30	N. Kulasekara (SL)	58*	Eng	The Oval	13-06-2013

Hat-tricks (1)

Bowler	Bowl	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
Jermome Taylor (WI)	4/49	Aus	MumbaiBS	18-10-2006	Won

Total individual 100s: 50 by 38 batters

Country	100s	Highest	Batter
Ind	10	141*	S. Ganguly
SL	7	134*	K. Sangakkara
WI	6	133*	C. Gayle
SA	6	141	G. Smith
Aus	3	136*	S. Watson
Eng	5	133*	J. Root
Pak	4	128	S. Malik
NZ	3	145*	N. Astle
Zim	2	145	A. Flower
Ban	4	128	T. Iqbal

Leading run-getters

Runs	Batter	M	Inn	NO	Ave.	HS	100/50	S/R
791	C. Gayle (WI)	17	17	2	52.73	133*	3/1	88.78
742	M. Jayawardene (SL)	22	21	3	41.22	84*	0/5	84.80
701	S. Dhawan (Ind)	10	10	1	77.89	125	3/3	101.59
683	K. Sangakkara (SL)	22	21	3	37.94	134*	1/4	71.37
665	S. Ganguly (Ind)	13	11	2	73.89	141*	3/3	83.13
653	J. Kallis (SA)	17	17	3	46.64	113*	1/3	77.46
627	R. Dravid (Ind)	19	15	2	48.23	76	0/6	73.33
593	R. Ponting (Aus)	18	18	3	39.53	111*	1/4	76.52
587	S. Chanderpaul (WI)	16	16	5	53.36	74	0/5	67.94
536	S. Jayasuriya (SL)	20	20	2	29.78	102*	1/1	88.01
529	V. Kohli (Ind)	13	12	6	88.17	96*	0/5	92.32

Most individual 100s: 3 each from Sourav Ganguly, Chris Gayle, Herschelle Gibbs & Shikhar Dhawan

Best bowling

Figures	Bowler	Opp	Venue
6/14	F. Maharoof (SL)	WI	Mumbai, BS
6/52	J. Hazlewood (Aus)	NZ	Birmingham
5/11	S. Afridi (Pak)	Ken	Birmimgham
5/21	M. Ntini (SA)	Pak	Mohali
5/29	M. Dillon (WI)	Ban	Southampton
5/30	J. Kallis (SA)	WI	Dhaka
5/36	J. Oram (NZ)	USA	The Oval
5/36	R. Jadeja (Ind)	WI	The Oval
5/37	G. McGrath (Aus)	NZ	Colombo SSC
5/46	S. O'Connor (NZ)	Pak	Nairobi Gym
5/57	W. Parnell (SA)	NZ	Centurion

Leading wicket-takers

Wkts	Bowler	M	Balls	Runs	Ave.	S/R	R/O	Best
28	K. Mills (NZ)	15	675	483	17.25	24.11	4.29	4/30
25	L. Malinga (SL)	16	864	766	30.64	34.56	5.32	4/34
24	M. Muralitharan (SL)	17	805	484	20.17	33.54	3.61	4/15
22	B. Lee (Aus)	16	739	591	26.86	33.59	4.80	3/38
21	G. McGrath (Aus)	12	612	412	19.62	29.14	4.04	5/37
21	J. Anderson (Eng)	12	608	457	21.76	28.95	4.51	3/20
20	J. Kallis (SA)	17	639	525	26.25	31.95	4.93	5/30

Notes: * On 11 occasions five-wicket hauls have been claimed by bowlers. No bowler has done it twice
* West Indian Gavis Tonge's 4/25 vs Pakistan in Johannesburg on 23-9-2009 is the best bowling figures in a losing cause.

Most catches by a fielder

Cts	M	Fielder
15	22	M. Jayawardene (SL)
12	11	R. Taylor (NZ)
12	13	S. Ganguly (Ind)
12	15	D'yne Bravo (WI)

Most dismissals by a wicket-keeper

Dism	Cts	Sts	M	Wicket-keeper
33	28	5	20	K. Sangakkara (SL)
25	23	2	13	A. Gilchrist (Aus)
19	15	4	16	M. S. Dhoni (Ind)
19	17	2	17	M. Boucher (SA)
15	14	1	11	B. McCullum (NZ)

Most matches

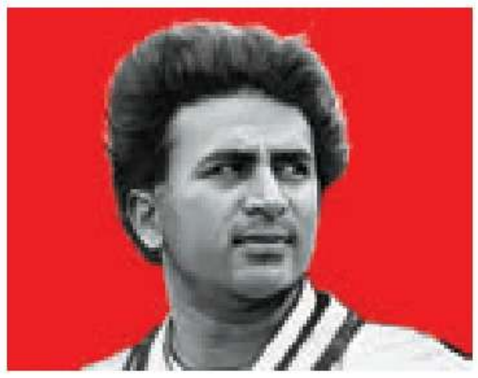
M	Player	From	To
22	M. Jayawardene (SL)	2000	2013
22	K. Sangakkara (SL)	2000	2013
20	S. Jayasuriya (SL)	1998	2009
20	S. Malik (Pak)	2002	2017
19	R. Dravid (Ind)	1998	2009
18	B. Lara (WI)	1998	2006
18	R. Ponting (Aus)	1998	2009
18	Yuvraj Singh (Ind)	2000	2017

Best all-round performance in a match (50 runs and three-wicket haul)

Player	Runs	Wkts	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
S Tendulkar (Ind)	141	4/38	Aus	Dhaka	28-10-1998	Won
C. Gayle (WI)	101	3/31	Eng	Ahmedabad	28-10-2006	Lost
R. McLaren (SA)	71*	3/70	Ind	Cardiff	06-06-2013	Lost
V. Sehwag (Ind)	59	3/25	SA	Colombo RPS	25-09-2002	Won
E. Chigumbura (Zim)	57	3/37	SL	The Oval	14-09-2004	Lost
S. Afridi (Pak)	55*	3/18	Neth	Colombo SSC	21-09-2002	Won

Best all-round performance in the tournament (250 runs & 15 wickets)

Player	M	Runs	Ave.	Wkts	Ave.
J. Kallis (SA)	17	653	46.64	20	26.25
C. Gayle (WI)	17	791	52.73	17	22.35
S. Watson (Aus)	17	453	41.18	17	23.29
D. Vettori (NZ)	17	299	37.38	18	29.00



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

ALL QUESTIONS ABOUT ROHIT SHARMA'S PLACE IN THE TEAM HAVE BEEN HIT FOR A MASSIVE SIX

There are only a **couple of loose ends** to be tied up, and that is Jasprit Bumrah's availability for the Champions Trophy and Virat Kohli getting back among the hundreds.

The Indian skipper, Rohit Sharma, hitting a sparkling century was perhaps even more reason for celebration than India winning the match and, with it, another one-day series against England. Cricket is a team game, but it's also important, especially ahead of a world tournament like the ICC Champions Trophy, for the lead actors to show that they are in good form and raring to go.

Rohit is perhaps the most destructive opening batter in the one-day game, and his striking form is a vital ingredient if India are hoping to regain the Trophy that they won way back in 2013. Not many batters have hit multiple double-hundreds in this format, and Rohit is one of those rare batters who has done so. It is also crucial for the captain to be in form because he can make good decisions while under pressure. Tough situations require bold calls, and if a captain is doing well personally, he is not thinking of the ramifications of a bold tactical move going wrong. The move works because when a captain is in great touch, the gut feel, which is an important part of taking the decision, turns right more often than not.

Look at Suryakumar Yadav's calls last year in Sri Lanka while he was captaining the team. When the Lankans were cruising to a win, he brought on Rinku Singh and himself, and both picked wickets and won the game for India. Both hardly ever bowl when they are playing under other captains, but SKY, with his flair for doing the unusual with the bat, also brought out that aspect in his tactical approach since he was full of confidence, and it worked.

In a competition like the Champions Trophy, where only the top ICC-ranked teams participate, there is less likelihood of an easy

Bouncing back: Rohit Sharma returned to form with a majestic 119 from 90 balls to power India towards victory in the second ODI against England in Cuttack. K. R. DEEPAK

game and more chances of tight finishes. For these situations, a captain needs to be mentally sharp. Rohit has often shown that he leads by instinct, which has worked very well for him, and now that all the questions about his place in the team have been hit for a massive six with that magnificent century, he will also lead with the weight of worrying for a place in the team off his shoulders.

The wins in the T20 series and the ODI series put India in a great place as far as confidence is concerned. There are only a couple of loose ends to be tied up, and that is Jasprit Bumrah's availability for the Champions Trophy and Virat Kohli getting back among the hundreds, as Rohit has done. Kohli is a big-match player, and nothing will motivate him more than the opportunity to score runs and win the Champions Trophy for India. After the last Champions Trophy win in 2013, he celebrated with the Gangnam dance, which was the rage way back then. If he helps India win this time, we could be in for another unique celebration from him.

It's been just over a month since Bumrah had his back issue in Sydney, and hopefully, he will be fit for the tournament. His presence almost guarantees wickets at the start and also in the final overs, apart from his miserly allowance of runs to the opposition batters. The pitch in Dubai will certainly be a little bouncier and, with it, have more carry than the ones India has played on in the recent series. That's why his presence is so vital for India's chances. Mohammed Shami's return to the team has also been most encouraging, and one can see that he is regaining his rhythm and pace.

The other heartening aspect of India's cricket in the series has been the outstanding catches taken by the fielders. Yes, there have been some simple catches floored too, but overall, the fielding has been top-class, with maybe just one fielder to hide. That, though, is a situation for all the teams in the world, where one of their bowlers is a weak link in the fielding unit. Good captains will see who is bowling and hide those fielders in positions where the ball is less likely to go.

The spirit in the team is very good, as could be seen by their enthusiastic cheering of their teammates who won individual awards at the recent annual BCCI awards function.

A team that is laughing with each other is a happy team that will invariably try and play for each other. That's why India, apart from the talent that they have, will start as the firm favourites to win the ICC Champions Trophy once again.

Virat Kohli is a big-match player, and nothing will motivate him more than the opportunity to score runs and win the Champions Trophy for India.

AFP

Australia completes clean sweep against Sri Lanka

1 With the series victory, the Aussies **finished second** in the World Test Championship (WTC) table.

Australia completed a clean sweep in the two-match Test series against Sri Lanka to finish second in the World Test Championship (WTC) table.

The first Test saw Josh Inglis and Steve Smith score hundreds, with the latter also crossing the 10,000-run mark in the format. However, the spotlight was on Usman Khawaja's double century as Australia piled on the runs and declared on 654 for six to beat the host Lanka by an innings and 242 runs.

Nathan Lyon and Matthew Kuhnemann dominated with the ball, accounting for 16 of the 20 wickets that fell.

Smith and Alex Carey were the top scorers for Australia in the second Test, while Lyon and Kuhnemann took 14 scalps between them to secure a nine-wicket win.

2

GETTY IMAGES

Ireland beat Zimbabwe by 63 runs in the one-off Test to secure its third consecutive win in the format. After Ireland was restricted to 260 in the first innings, courtesy of Blessing Muzarabani's seven-for, Nick Welch's 90 and Muzarabani's hard-fought 47 helped the host take a slim lead of seven runs. Fifties from Andy Balbirnie and Lorcan Tucker powered Ireland to 298, setting a target of 292. Though Wessly Madhevere battled through 195 balls for his 84, left-arm spinner Matthew Humphrey's **(above)** six for 57 proved too hot to handle.

3

AP

Australia dominated the Women's Ashes series against England and won the only Test to clinch a 16-0 win. Alana King spun a web around England to help the host win by an innings and 122 runs, completing a historic whitewash for the first time in the multi-format era. After King's four-wicket haul restricted the visitor to 170, centuries from Annabel Sutherland and Beth Mooney helped Australia secure a 270-run first-innings lead. The 29-year-old spinner went on to take her maiden Test five-for and received ample support from Ashleigh Gardner to bundle England out in three days.

4

COURTESEY: MI

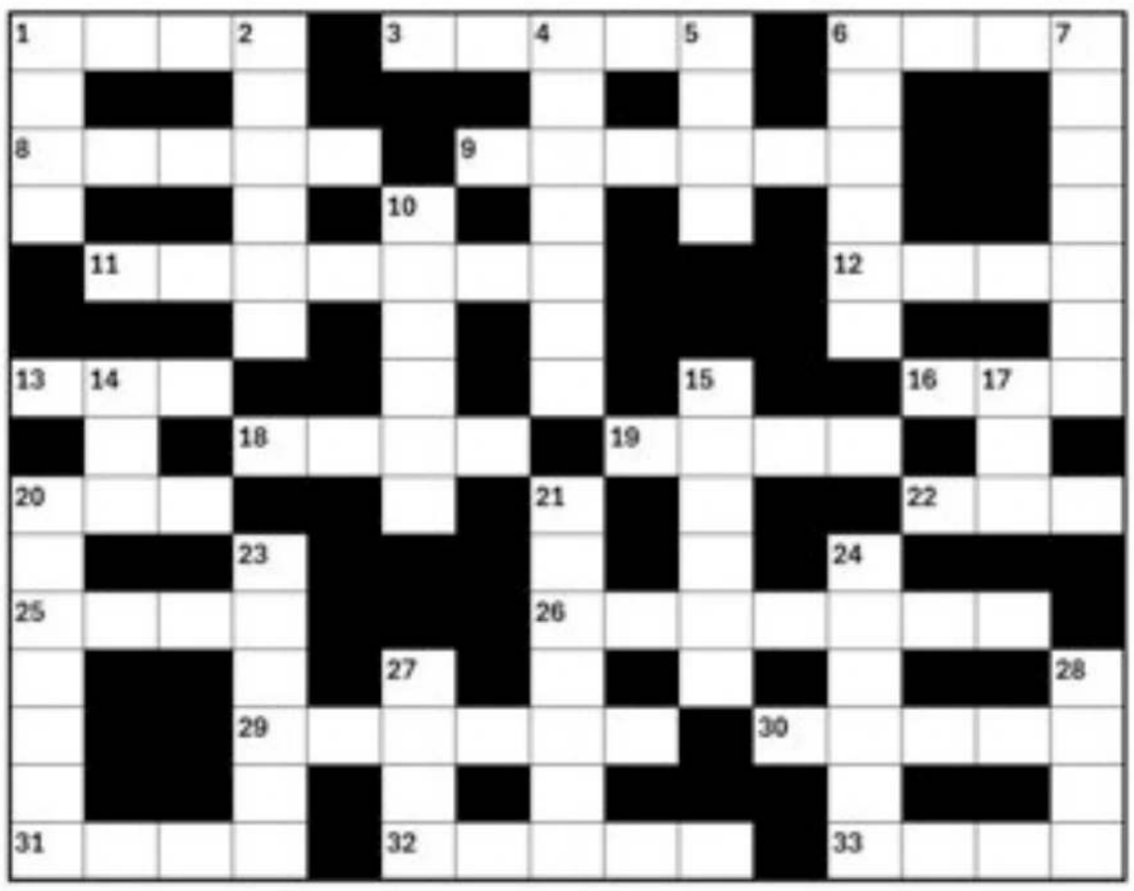
MI Cape Town lifted its maiden SA20 title after defeating defending champion Sunrisers Eastern Cape by 76 runs. After finishing last in the previous two seasons, the Rashid Khan-led MI Cape Town hardly put a foot wrong in the third season. Kagiso Rabada produced a spell of four for 25 in 3.4 overs and was backed by Player of the Match Trent Boult, who took two wickets for nine runs in his four-over spell. The bowling unit helped dismiss Sunrisers Eastern Cape for 105 in response to MI Cape Town's 181 for eight. The second-highest total in an SA20 final came on the back of powerful cameos, with three Cape Town batters scoring more than 30.

5

COURTESY: ILT20

Dubai Capitals (DC) was crowned ILT20 champion after edging Desert Vipers (DV) by four wickets in the final. Half-centuries from Sam Curran and Max Holden guided the Vipers to a competitive total of 189 for five. DC was in trouble early in the chase, with David Warner, Gulbadin Naib and Sam Billings falling cheaply. Rovman Powell, who got a second life after a wicketkeeping error by Azam Khan, hammered 63 off 48 balls, while Shai Hope and Sikandar Raza made key contributions to help the Capitals chase the target with four balls to spare.

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Which former Indian badminton player has been signed by Singapore Badminton Association as an additional singles coach? (4)

3 Who won the men's singles crown at the National badminton championship recently? (5)

6 Name the oldest Olympic gold medallist who passed away on January 25, 2025? (4)

8 & 11 Which Australian scored a brilliant double hundred in the first Test against Sri Lanka (5,7)

9 Who won the player of the series award in the recently-concluded Plate division of Ranji Trophy 2024-25 season? (6)

12 Who won the 100m race in the World Athletics Championships and also the Paris Olympics? (4)

13 Which 19-year-old Australian made his Test debut on the Boxing Day against India? (3)

16 The governing body of Formula 1 Championships is ... (1,1,1)

18 & Down 2 Who was the captain of the U-19 women's T20 World Cup-winning Indian team? (4,6)

19 Which woman athlete won the Khel Ratna Award for 2024? (4)

20 Identify this governing body of the unarmed martial art for which Retired Justice Pankaj Naqvi is the president in India? (1,1,1)

22 Name the former Australian who passed away in December 2024 and was called with nicknames "Gandhi" & "Redders"? (3)

25 What is the national sport of Japan? (4)

26 Who is appointed captain of LSG for the IPL 2025? (7)

31 Which American qualifier caused a big upset in the second round of the Australian Open by beating fifth seed Medvedev? (4)

32 In which city was the second leg of PKL 2024 played? (5)

33 Who, recently, became the oldest champion on the ATP tour? (4)

DOWN

1 Who was made the Ombudsman of the BCCI, recently? (4)

4 What is the first name of the player who scored the first-ever century in the under-19 women's T20 World Cup history? (7)

5 Who is the president of the Indian Olympic Association? (4)

6 Who recently took 10 wickets in the fifth Test between Australia and India and won the player of the match award, too? (6)

7 Who won the men's singles title at the prestigious Syed Modi International badminton championships 2024? (7)

10 & Across 30 Which Indian table tennis player was part of the Asian team which defeated the World team to win the inaugural Waldner Cup recently? (6,5)

14 The international governing body of association football, futsal and beach soccer in Southeast Asia is ... (1,1,1)

15 Who won the men's singles title at the 86th senior National table tennis championships 2024? (6)

17 Which is the governing body for the Olympic Movement and the Commonwealth Games in India? (1,1,1)

20 & Across 29 Who won the ICC men's Test Cricketer of the Year award for 2024? (7,6)

21 Which Arjuna awardee clinched gold in the 60m hurdles event at the Elite Indoor Meet in Nantes with a National record? (7)

23 Identify this rookie all-rounder and son of a former South African cricketer who made an impressive debut against Pakistan recently. (6)

24 Which team finished in the second spot after the league phase of the recently-concluded Pro Kabbadi League? (6)

27 Which Indian wrestler won a bronze medal for India at the Paris Olympics in 2024? (4)

28 This former Indian cricketer, who took most wickets in the under-19 World Cup tournament in 2008, announced his retirement in December 2024. (4)

A striking visual theme

C.G.S.Narayanan

There are many ways of forcing a duel in which white counters black's move by moving his own piece in analogous way adjacent to black as in Loshinski's masterpiece magnet theme. One way is to chase down the black move by white in the same direction and another is to move away imitating black's move in the opposite direction. The first two diagams show the latter.

C.G.S.Narayanan
3rd pr.1st World Cup 2010

Mate in three moves

1.Bf4! threatens 2.exd4+ Kxd4 3.Be3 and black defends by moving the rook.
After 1…RdBxe6 2.Rd6 exploits the self block to threaten two mates 2.Rc6 and 3.Na6 leaving black two defences 1…Bxe6 2.Nxe6 and 1…Rd6 2.Bxd6 (not 2.Rxe4? Re5)!
After 1…Rd6 white again exploits the self block with 2.Re5+ Rd5 3.Rxd5
After 1…Rxd7 2.Rxe4 threatens 3 Rxc4, leaving 2…Bxe4 or Be6 3.Ne6 and 2..Rd4 3.exd4(not 2…Re6? Rf6!)
As the black ascends so the white rook descends. 'Very striking' wrote Mcdowell in the Problemisl.

In the second example below where four thematic moves of black bishop are unblocks and interferences and four second moves are by white bishop.

C.G.S.Narayanan
7-8th place 9 WCCT 2012-13

Mate in three moves
Key 1.gxf5!!
(threat 2.Be6 Kc6 3.Bd5)
1….Bd6 2.Bd4 (3.Nf3 3.e4)
1…Be5 2.Bc5 (3.Ne3 3.e4
1…Bf4 2.Bb6(3.e4)Be3 3.Bb5
1…Bb6 2.Bf4(3.e4)Be3 3.Nxe3
1…Bb8 2.b5 (Bc5/Be6)
1….Ba5,Bxd8 2.b8Q(3.Qb5Qe5)

The problem for solving given below is a version by Andrei Lobusov where the rook chases down its counterpart on the file and rank on adjacent squares

Lev Loshinski
Shakmati v CCCP 1047(v)

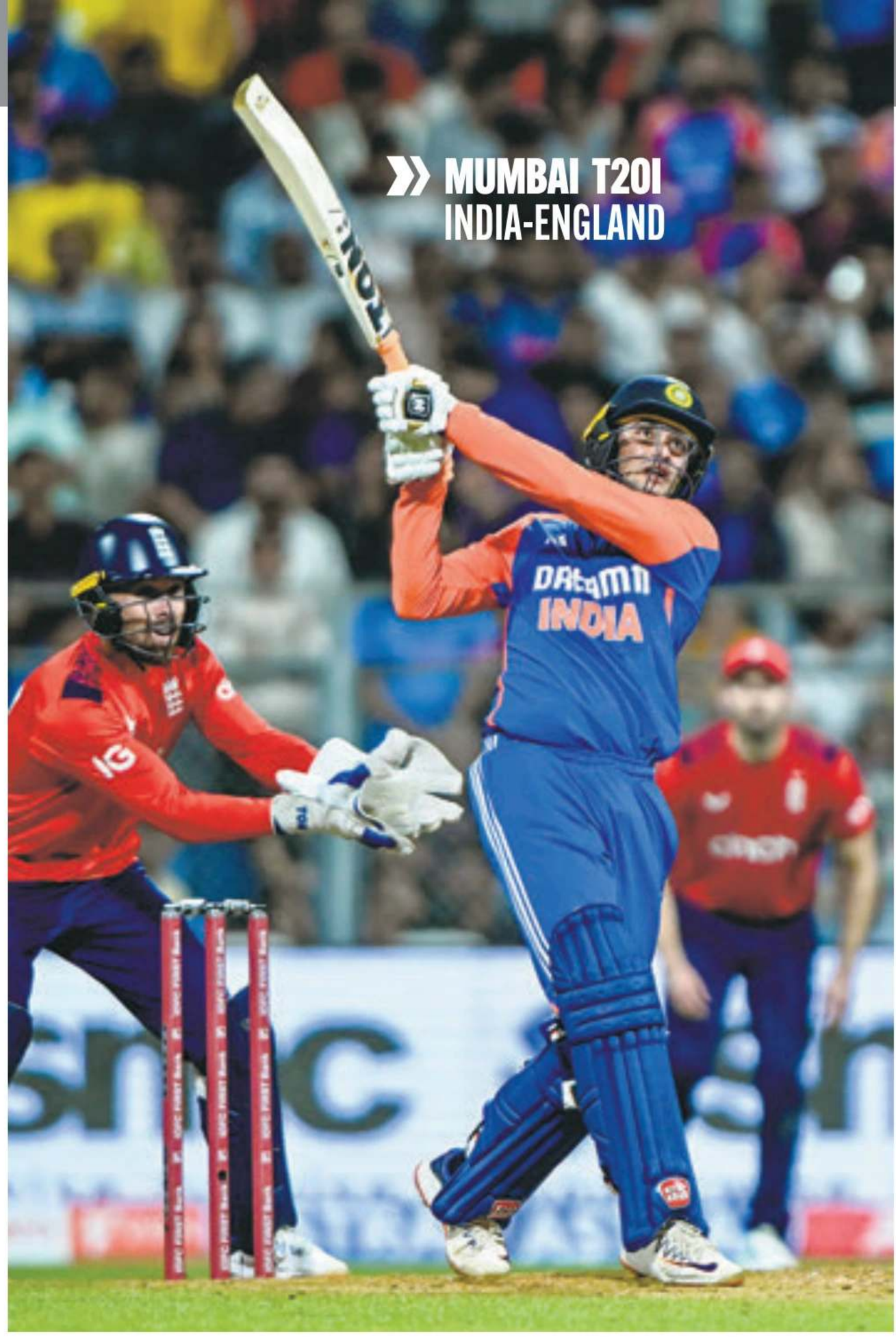
Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Correspondence in twoers':
Try 1.Rh1? (2.Rxg1) Rg3!
Try 1.Be8? (2.Bxd7)Bf5!
Key:1.Rf3!(2.Bh5)1..Rh1 2.Rg3;1…Be8 2.Bf5;1..Nxf3 2.Qe4

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

Swagster: After India found itself in trouble in the 11th over with the score reading 79 for five, Hardik Pandya and Shivam Dube stitched an 87-run partnership off 45 balls. While Pandya scored 53 off 30 balls, Dube made 53 in 34 deliveries to take India's score to 181/9. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Dream debut: Harshit Rana came in as a concussion substitute for Shivam Dube and made an immediate impact. His three for 33 helped India bowl England out for 166 and win the match by 15 runs. EMMANUAL YOGINI



Demolished: Abhishek Sharma shattered several records during his destructive innings of 135 off 54 balls — the highest T20I score by an Indian. His 37-ball century — second-fastest by an Indian after Rohit Sharma — took India's total to 247/9 in the first innings. EMMANUAL YOGINI

FOR MORE IMAGES

Domination continues: England couldn't come anywhere near India's total and got bundled out for 97 inside 11 overs, handing the host its second-biggest victory in T20Is — a win by 150 runs. India won the five-match series 4-1. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Feisty arrival: Harshit Rana announced himself on the ODI stage in style, making his debut against England in Nagpur with a fiery spell that rattled the visitor. Returning figures of three for 53, he played a pivotal role in restricting the Three Lions to 248 after they opted to bat. Rana dismissed the explosive Ben Duckett, the stylish Harry Brook, and the hard-hitting Liam Livingstone. K. R. DEEPAK

Regal knock: India found itself in early trouble at 19 for two, but Shubman Gill steadied the innings with a classy 87 off 96 balls, guiding his team to the cusp of victory. Gill's dismissal triggered a mini-collapse — three wickets falling for just 14 runs — but India held its nerve to seal the win with 68 balls to spare and go 1-0 up in the series. K. R. DEEPAK

Spinning a web: Across two matches against England, Ravindra Jadeja has been instrumental with the ball, claiming six wickets, including a standout three for 35 in Cuttack. His efforts were crucial in keeping England to 305, with one of his key breakthroughs being the dangerous Ben Duckett. The left-hander had raced to a fluent 65 off 56 balls, threatening to take the game away, but Jadeja had him caught just in time to prevent further damage. K. R. DEEPAK

Hitman show: England suffered another emphatic defeat in the second ODI in Cuttack, as India sealed the series with a game to spare. During the chase, Rohit Sharma spearheaded India's charge in style, striking a sublime 119 off just 90 balls, his 32nd hundred in ODIs. K. R. DEEPAK

Meet India's U-19 Women's World Cup-winning side

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India reigns supreme in the Under-19 ecosystem with two world titles in two editions. After Shafali Verma's squad lifted the inaugural title, Niki Prasad's team also went unbeaten to claim the second championship in Kuala Lumpur.

Niki Prasad (C)

After missing out on the 2023 World Cup squad, Niki turned disappointment into drive. Selected for the U-16 State team at nine, she led her team to the U-19 Women's T20 Trophy in 2022 and later captained India to U-19 Asia Cup and World Cup glory.

Though she had little to do with the bat, her tactical acumen — effective bowling rotations and attacking field settings — was crucial. She will play for Delhi Capitals in WPL 2025.

Sanika Chalke (VC)

From Mumbai's gullies to the World Cup final, Sanika's journey has been remarkable. Her solid one-down presence ensured stability, scoring 95 runs in seven matches at an average of 95.00.

V.J. Joshitha

Hailing from Wayanad, Joshitha's prodigious swing rattled batters, especially in overcast Kuala Lumpur. Her twin strikes against West Indies set the tone for India's dominance. While spinners thrived, her outswingers remained unplayable. With six wickets from six matches, she heads to Royal Challengers Bengaluru in WPL 2025.

G. Kamalini (wk)

Sixteen-year-old Kamalini, a left-hander from Madurai, scored 143 runs, including two fifties. A stellar wicketkeeper, she took six dismissals, including a breathtaking one-handed diving catch in the final. She will play for Mumbai Indians, who signed her for Rs 1.6 crore.

Shabnam Shakil

A two-time U-19 World Cup winner, Shabnam has honed her accuracy and pace.

Though she took only four wickets, her economy rate suffocated batters. Gujarat Giants' coach Michael Klinger has identified her as a future star, making her a player to watch.

Vaishnavi Sharma

India's spin attack was led by Vaishnavi, who finished as the tournament's highest wicket-taker (17). She claimed a record-breaking hat-trick in the opener against Malaysia and continued to strike consistently in the middle overs.

Aayushi Shukla

India's second-leading wicket-taker, Aayushi, built on her Asia Cup form, scalping 14 wickets in seven matches, including a four-fer against Scotland. A capable batter, she once struck a century in domestic cricket.

Parunika Sisodia

Parunika, 19, completed India's formidable left-arm spin trio, claiming 10 wickets. Her 2/6 in the

final derailed South Africa's chase. Inspired by Daniel Vettori, she has WPL experience with Gujarat Giants.

Gongadi Trisha

Trisha dominated this edition, scoring a tournament-high 309 runs at 77.25, including a century against Scotland.

She also contributed with seven wickets, including 3/6 in the final, earning Player of the Match and Player of the Series honours.

Mithila Vinod

A versatile all-rounder from Bengaluru, Mithila impressed with her aggressive batting, striking at 160.

While limited by India's dominance, she proved effective in crucial moments.

Top of the world: India clinched the ICC U-19 Women's T20 World Cup 2025 title with a dominant nine-wicket win over South Africa in the final at Bayuemas Oval, Kuala Lumpur.

GETTY IMAGES

Sonam Yadav

Sonam overcame familial opposition to pursue a career in cricket, becoming a two-time U19 World Cup winner. She had a stellar Asia Cup run, where her four-fer demolished Pakistan. The left-arm spinner's ability to flight the ball makes her a promising talent to watch. Off-spinner Drithi Kesari, pacer Anandita Kishor, batter Ishwari Awsare, and wicketkeeper Bhavika Ahire did not feature. Nandhana S, Ira Jadhav, and Anadi T were reserves.

Trisha... player of the tournament

Runs: 309, **Average:** 77.25, **Strike-rate:** 147.14, **Top score:** 100*

A SPECIAL WEEK IN VIRAT'S COMPANY

Our correspondents bring you the highlights and **intriguing moments,** both on and off the field, from the last round of Ranji Trophy group-stage fixtures.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

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For Delhi's Ranji Trophy players and support staff, the final group game from January 30 to February 1 at the Arun Jaitley Stadium will forever be etched in their memory. They secured an innings victory against Railways, but what made the match truly special — despite not making the knockouts — was the presence of Virat Kohli in the Delhi dressing room after more than 12 years.

Team manager Mahesh Bhati, who also managed Delhi's one-day squad when the 36-year-old last played for the State in 2012, shed light on what it was like to have Kohli in their midst.

"So many of the current players hadn't played with him. It was a great experience, particularly for them. (Navdeep) Saini has played with him for India, and (Ayush) Badoni has faced him in the IPL, but nobody would have got to spend so much time with him. It was very beneficial for all the boys. Inside the dressing room, Virat shared his experiences," said Bhati.

During the two days of practice before the game, Kohli was often seen chatting with Bhati, their association dating back to 2006 when Bhati was Delhi Under-19 coach and Kohli was rising through

Ending the hiatus: Virat Kohli made a rare appearance at the Ranji Trophy, his first since 2012, and shared his valuable experiences with the Delhi team and support staff. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

the ranks. "There is an old connection between us, and we were reminiscing about those memories. A few players asked Virat for advice on what it takes to play for India. His emphasis was on performance and fitness. He also made jokes and kept the atmosphere light. By the end, for the others, it didn't feel like it was Virat. Initially, a few of the boys were shy and nervous about his presence, but I had told them not to worry," Bhati added.

When the game finished, Kohli signed autographs, posed for photos, and gave away some of his bats and other equipment to whoever asked.

"He gave many of them something from his kit bag — some received bats, while one player got his helmet. A few had their bats signed by him," Bhati said.

Test of loyalties

The last two rounds of the Ranji Trophy group stage witnessed a remarkable surge in attendance at various venues, thanks to the return of several Indian first-team stars to the domestic circuit after years away.

The chants of *"Mumbaicha raja"* for Rohit Sharma at Mumbai's BKC Stadium and the seemingly endless queue outside the Kotla in the early hours to catch a glimpse of Kohli have been well documented.

Away from the frenzy of these metropolitan hubs, in the serene surroundings of the VCA Stadium in Civil Lines, Nagpur, a sizeable crowd had gathered to watch *Miya Bhai* Mohammed Siraj in action.

Over the four days of play, what unfolded in the stadium could reflect the average Indian cricket fan's paradoxical loyalties. Siraj, a perennial crowd favourite thanks to his charisma, was greeted with enthusiasm as he bowled a miserly eight-over spell, conceding just six runs in the first innings on day one.

The Nagpur crowd roared with cheers and whistles every time Siraj fielded near the boundary, right under the only stand open to spectators. Even his misfields were met with applause! Ever the entertainer, Siraj acknowledged the support with a few claps and took time to sign and return some memorabilia.

However, when all-rounder Harsh Dubey launched a counter-attack with wickets tumbling around him, the very same crowd swiftly switched allegiances, celebrating each boundary struck off their morning's hero without hesitation.

On the fourth morning, Siraj responded in kind, smashing a few sixes as Vidarbha dismantled the visitor's batting line-up. The moment he walked in, he gestured towards Vidarbha captain Akshay Wadkar to bring mid-on and mid-off up.

"When I walked in, Karun Nair remarked that I couldn't slog the ball. So, I asked them to push the field up so I could prove otherwise," Siraj revealed with a grin during the post-match chat. "Karun was my India A skipper, and we share a great understanding."

Fan-favourite: Mohammed Siraj was greeted with enthusiasm as he bowled a miserly eight-over spell, conceding just six runs. PTI

Resurgence of Hockey India League: A talent pipeline for the future

Crowning moment: The Hockey India League concluded with the Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers emerging as champion, defeating Hyderabad Toofans at Rourkela's Birsa Munda International Stadium. M. VRDHAN

The Hockey India League's return highlighted emerging talent, **tactical growth,** and intense competition. However, the tournament's success was somewhat marred by concerns over low attendance and scheduling issues.

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The much-anticipated return of the Hockey India League (HIL) lived up to expectations, providing a crucial platform for emerging talent. New stars made their mark, fresh faces found an opportunity to shine, and young players tested themselves alongside some of the world's best.

Under the watchful eye of India coach Craig Fulton, Jugraj Singh enjoyed a career-defining tournament, showcasing his powerful drag flicks, particularly in the final. Throughout the competition, Jugraj gained invaluable insights from India's premier drag-flicking exponent, Rupinder Pal Singh.

Fulton dubbed the HIL "Jugi's Olympics," hoping that the Rarh Bengal Tigers defender would now step up as a strong alternative to skipper Harmanpreet Singh in short-corner situations.

HIL'S FIVE-FOREIGNER RULE MAY HAVE HINDERED INDIA'S SEARCH FOR A LONG-TERM NO. 1 GOALKEEPER. SEVERAL INDIAN GOALKEEPERS WERE SUBSTITUTED FOR PENALTY STROKES AND SHOOTOUTS

Defying expectations

Before the tournament began, the Tigers were considered the weakest team due to their squad's age and profile. They did not top the charts for goals scored, goals conceded, circle penetrations, or penalty corner conversion rates. However, they defied expectations, finishing at the top of the group stage after 10 matches and ultimately triumphing over the Hyderabad Toofans —

Man of the moment: Jugraj Singh was the game-changer for the Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers in the HIL Final.
HOCKEY INDIA

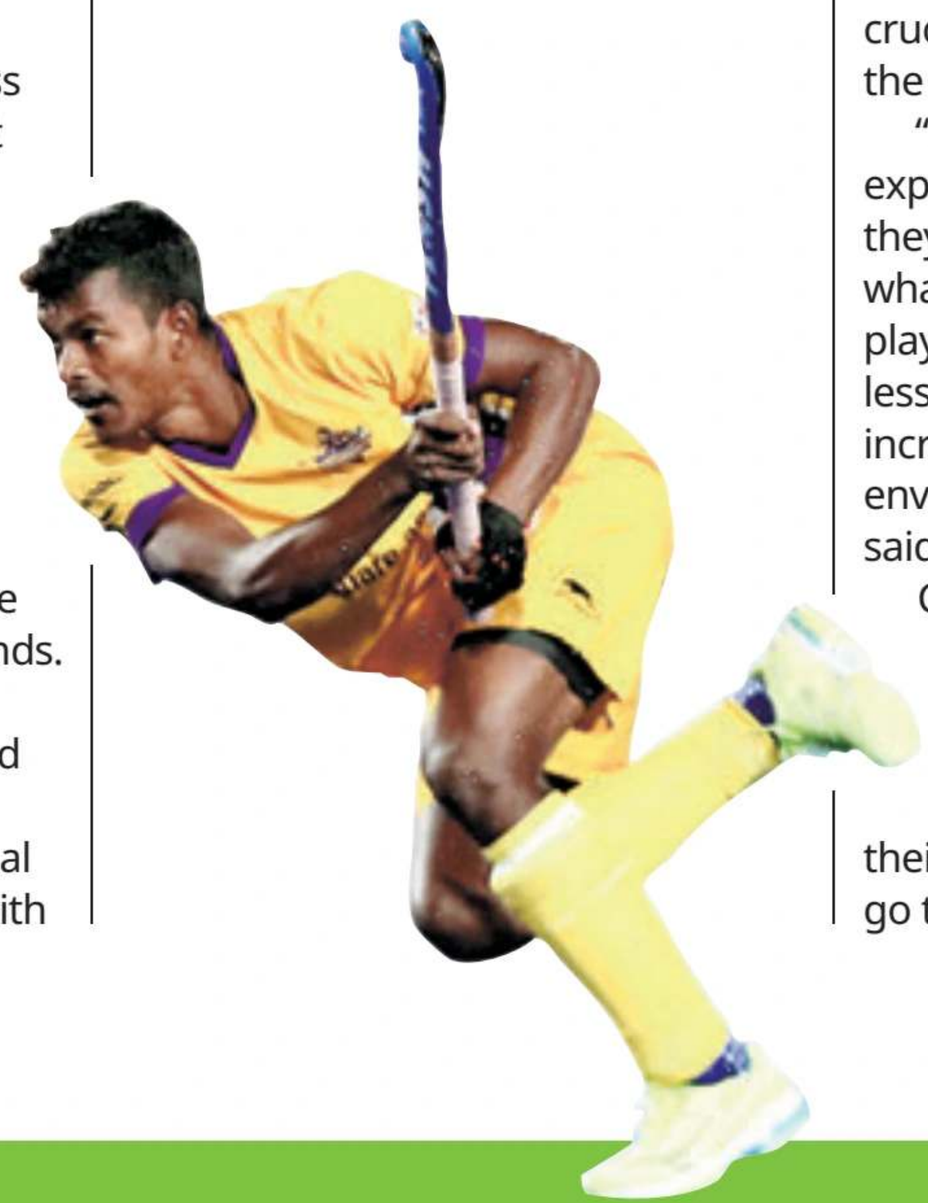
arguably the strongest team — in the final. "Our players were quite old, so most teams underrated us as the lowest-ranked side. It was all about working on the mental side of the game and behaving like Tigers. I told the players a lion has only one mentality: to go for the kill," said a proud Deepak Thakur, the Tigers' assistant coach.

The Toofans had remained unbeaten in regulation time across eight matches before the final but were undone by a hat-trick from Jugraj, who finished as the tournament's top scorer with 12 goals.

Rise of young stars

One of the biggest takeaways from HIL was the emergence of young talent. The Toofans' reliance on their youthful core paid dividends. Twenty-two-year-old defender Amandeep Lakra **(right)** flourished under the mentorship of Gonzalo Peillat, scoring in both the semifinal and final to finish the campaign with five goals. Lakra, who grew up near the Birsa Munda Hockey Stadium in Rourkela, thrilled the local crowd with his family in attendance. Meanwhile, the standout find of the tournament was Toofans' dynamic forward, Arshdeep Singh. His dazzling skills, direct play, and three-goal tally earned him a maiden call-up to the senior national team for the upcoming FIH Pro League.

The HIL also shone a spotlight on several domestic players who have long been toiling away, such as Mohammed Raheel and Affan Yousuf. Fulton, watching from the 'Tower' behind the goal, would have undoubtedly taken note of more names for his watchlist.



Tactical growth

All eight teams were led by overseas head coaches, bringing coaching expertise from Europe and Australia. This exposure provided domestic players — many without international experience — the opportunity to understand different tactical systems and styles of play, a crucial learning curve before making the next step in their careers.

"I think they gain plenty of experience from this. Then, when they go away, they need to reflect on what they've learned, talk to senior players and coaches, and absorb the lessons that way. They're exposed to incredible players — what an environment for them to grow in," said Tigers' Australian head coach Colin Batch after the final.

Toofans' head coach, Dutchman Pasha Gademan, highlighted how the HIL helped Indian players develop their tactical awareness. "If I were to go to Europe and build a new team,

Standing apart: The Pasha Gademan-coached Hyderabad Toofans was one of the most eye-catching of the eight teams in the HIL. HOCKEY INDIA

I'd find players more tactically aware but lacking some of the physical and technical attributes. Here, it's the opposite. They have the physicality, motivation, and technical skills, but they need to improve their tactical understanding — how to play zonal defence, how to react in different situations, and how to learn from repeated scenarios," he explained.

Goalkeeping conundrum

The league's five-foreigner rule may have hindered India's search for a long-term No. 1 goalkeeper. Several Indian goalkeepers were substituted for penalty strokes and shootouts, with national team regulars Krishan Pathak and Suraj Karkera having to compete with Toby Reynold-Cotterill and Oliver Payne in their respective franchises. However, the presence of experienced goalkeepers like Dominic Dixon and David Harte would have benefited junior team 'keepers such as Bikramjit Singh (Toofans) and Prince Deep Singh (Tamil Nadu Dragons).

Missed opportunities

Alongside the Tigers and Toofans, Soorma Hockey Club and Tamil Nadu Dragons reached the semifinals. Soorma, spearheaded by veterans Harmanpreet and Vincent Vanasch, staged an impressive turnaround before falling to the Toofans.

The Dragons, meanwhile, were left ruing missed opportunities. Refereeing errors contributed to their downfall, but they ultimately fell short on the pitch. Despite leading the table for much of the tournament, they had to scramble to finish fourth. The team boasted the highest penalty corner conversion rate but couldn't provide prolific drag-flicker Jip Janssen with more opportunities in open play.

Lacklustre group stage, electrifying finale

While all teams were evenly matched, the tournament only ignited in its final week, with several group-stage fixtures proving lacklustre.

The Vedanta Kalinga Lancers and Delhi SG Pipers provided entertainment with high-scoring games, but their defensive frailties cost them a place in the final four. Meanwhile, Team Gonasika struggled with poor penalty corner execution.

Every night, David Guetta's 'Memories' echoed through the speakers in Rourkela, with Kid Cudi's line on loop: "It's getting late, but I don't mind." The locals, however, certainly did. Despite Hockey India offering free tickets for the entire tournament, the 21,000-capacity stadium remained largely empty until the final. Late 8:15 p.m. starts meant many supporters had to leave midway to secure transport home.

The stadium sold out only for the final, where actor Sara Ali Khan headlined the closing ceremony. However, poor ticket screening left it overcrowded, with some supporters attending solely for her performance, and 4,000 spectators (some with tickets) stranded outside an hour before kickoff. Restricting the tournament to just two venues — Rourkela and Ranchi — ensured sustainability, but dwindling attendance at the former cast a shadow over what was otherwise a successful venture for the federation.

« We still believe in the *guru-shishya* combination, but the philosophy has to change »

HARENDRA SINGH

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Harendra Singh's official designation may read 'Head Coach, India women's hockey team', but even the most astute observers could easily mistake his demeanour for that of a senior professor at a prestigious institute.

He carries himself with an air of solemn erudition, each of his measured movements steeped in an unspoken authority. His gaze, penetrating and unwavering from behind gold-rimmed spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose, scans the room as if in quiet expectation of an intellectual discourse.

When his eyes finally meet this reporter's at the far end of a hotel lobby, a flicker of warmth softens his steely features as he breaks into a wide smile.

It isn't long before the 55-year-old explains, in great detail, the current state of affairs as his team prepares to face the Netherlands, England, Spain, and Germany in the Bhubaneswar leg of the FIH Pro League 2024–25 at the Kalinga Hockey Stadium from February 15.

It has been 10 months since you took over the role of India women's coach again. How has the experience been thus far?

It's been fascinating. I took over the role on April 6 last year, with my first assignment being the Pro League (2023-24) in May. Unfortunately, it did not go as we would have liked (India finished eighth among nine teams). The biggest challenge for me was bringing the team up to international fitness standards. There were a lot of injuries in the camp, and I knew we wouldn't be able to perform at the level we wanted to.

When I took over, I had one-on-one and team meetings because the players were mentally broken after failing to qualify for the Olympics. My priority was to get them motivated for the future. In modern hockey, fitness translates to a lot of high-speed running—not just in terms of distance covered per second but also the strength exerted. The hard work paid off in the Asian Champions Trophy, where we remained unbeaten. We ended 2024 on a high, but this is just the beginning. The 2028 Olympics is the ultimate goal.

You have always stressed the importance of fitness. What should an up-and-coming hockey

The competition for the goalkeeper position is tight because, in other departments, a midfielder can double up as a defender or a defender can play as a striker. But we have only one goalkeeper, and only the best gets that role. For now, Savita is one of the best.

player keep in mind in this regard?

Many of our athletes only become aware of sports science and the requirements of a high-performance environment after entering the national set-up. Ideally, these aspects should be introduced by the time they turn 18. This is a basic requirement that we lack. I'm not saying players need expensive sports equipment—there are other products in the market that are just as effective.

We already place a strong emphasis on hockey skills, but skill is only one element of performance. There are several other crucial aspects — nutrition, digestion, and even recovery related to the menstrual cycle, which remains a taboo topic.

While we are on this subject, there have been a few players who admitted that it's difficult to be completely honest with the coach when it comes to discussing periods...

Yes, but this needs to change because a coach should know. It's a natural process. If I don't know when my players are going through their menstrual cycle and how much pain they're experiencing, how can I plan their training and recovery?

Many players endure severe pain during these five to six days. If I'm unaware of this and schedule a high-intensity session, the athlete is bound to break down at some point. That's not beneficial for either the individual or the team.

This awareness needs to start at the Under-14 or even Under-13 level, when the body undergoes significant biological changes. By the time players reach the national level, they shouldn't feel shy about discussing these things with the coach, and vice versa. To me, these girls are like my daughters.

What happens when a key player gets her period on an important matchday?

We track the date, cycle, and correlate the data. A "red session" is a training period designed to match the intensity of a real game. Over six to seven months, we monitor how much effort a player puts in while enduring 100 per cent pain from abdominal cramps. If the output isn't sufficient, I have to balance her time on and off the pitch effectively.

It's all about mindset. If a player can meet expectations during a red session, she can replicate the same performance in a match. This process not only builds confidence but also strengthens the trust between coach and player.

Is there anything that you have already implemented from your learnings in the USA, where you held your last job?

Yes, things like documentation and sharing of a lot of data. It's a cultural change because earlier, there were hardly any discussions, and the girls were kept in the dark regarding why they were being dropped or what they were lacking. I didn't learn much about hockey in the USA from the sport's point of view, but the entire ecosystem is so much better there.

I discussed this with Hockey India, and I am grateful to them and the Sports Authority of India because they immediately provided me with the things I wanted, such as the athlete monitoring system. It helps all athletes track their progress —'What have I done today? How

Calling the shots: Salima Tete, now at the helm of India's midfield, was appointed captain of the Indian women's team in May 2024. HOCKEY INDIA

much have I improved over the week, month, quarter or even the year? Which areas is the coach focusing on? Where am I not improving? Where do I stand in terms of nutrition, physiology, biomechanics, VO2 max, speed, and recovery?'

Once you develop this environment, the player feels like she is part of an ecosystem that is more conducive and supportive rather than stressful.

You have had a chance to not only cover the Hockey India League as a broadcaster but also observe many Indian girls who have performed well. Who has impressed you the most?

There were around six girls who were not in the core group but are knocking on the door. The selectors and I have to make a decision now. Once these girls are inducted into the national coaching set-up, we have to provide them with match experience.

If you look at the teams competing in the Olympics and World Cup, their players have a minimum of 50 caps. The HIL plays a role in providing that experience, helping us gauge how well they can gel with foreign and Indian players. There is the pressure of performance, the pressure of making the team, the pressure from the franchise, and the pressure of performing in front of an audience from over 150 countries. If a player can handle this pressure, it means she is ready to wear Indian colours.

Generally, I don't reveal names, but I can still say that Sonam, Annu, and Jyoti Singh are some players who have shown potential.

What was the idea behind making Salima Tete the captain as India women's hockey entered its rebuilding phase?

When I took over, Savita Punia was the captain. She is an amazing goalkeeper with an incredible personality. She has everything it takes to lead the team. But is it necessary to wear the armband to be a leader? I don't think so. A leader doesn't require a title.

(P. R.) Sreejesh, Savita, and Dhanraj Pillay are born leaders. It's not up to me to make them leaders — they already are. If something goes wrong in a game, the captain gets the yellow card. This is why I made Manpreet (Singh) the captain of the men's team instead of Sreejesh when I joined in 2018.

I had to convince Hockey India back then, and they eventually understood. If a player makes a mistake, I can afford Manpreet getting a yellow card and sitting out. But I cannot afford my second-choice goalkeeper being on the pitch for five, 10, or 25 minutes in place of my first-choice goalkeeper.

I also wanted someone who leads through performance on the pitch. If you are delivering what the team needs, you have every right to ask other players to step up. If that isn't the case, others will challenge your authority. Salima, with her performances over the last three to four years, has now taken on that

Making waves: Sonam, 19, was adjudged the 'Upcoming Player of the Tournament' in the Women's HIL after scoring four goals in three games, finishing as the highest-scoring Indian player. HOCKEY INDIA

role effectively.

We needed a leader in every area of the pitch. Navneet (Kaur) leads by example as a striker. Savita leads in defence. But we were missing a leader in midfield. Salima is the one who connects the midfield to both the strikers and defenders.

Who after Savita, the great wall of Indian hockey?

Old wine tastes better. Similarly, goalkeepers also mature later in their careers. Savita is at an age where she can offer more. If we are talking about a second line, the management, which includes me and my staff, has to develop that. It takes time.

If I start playing the second-line goalkeeper for a quarter in each Pro League game, she will also start feeling, 'Okay, I am a part of this journey, I am a part of this team. That's why I am being given equal responsibility.' Bichu (Devi Kharibam), (Bansari) Solanki, and Madhuri (Kindo) need to compete for the two slots. In the Olympics and Asian Games teams, there is only one goalkeeper.

The competition for the goalkeeper position is tight because, in other departments, a midfielder can double up as a defender or a defender can play as a striker. But we have only one goalkeeper, and only the best gets that role. For now, Savita is one of the best in the business.

The foreigners have praised the stickwork of Indian women. Do you think a bit of the said skill can be compromised to accommodate speed?

No, I don't agree. The Indians are faster. Not everyone, of course. But some of the players are faster than their European counterparts. Over the last seven years, we have become far better than most of the top five teams in terms of fitness.

The catch lies in decision-making. The Europeans take the right decisions because they have been subjected to such an environment right from their U-8, U-12, and U-13 days at their respective clubs.

We still believe in the *guru-shishya* combination: what the guru says, the shishya (student) has to follow. Coaching is not going to work like that. Coaching should be about the shishya asking questions of the guru. And the guru doesn't have to answer; he only has to ask the shishya to try and solve the problem. A guru should be a facilitator and not an executor. That's how you allow the player to be involved in the decision-making process. The philosophy has to change.

After the Pro League is over and before the LA Olympics, what are the intermediate targets that you have set for the team?

First, we need to put on a good show in the Pro League. If we finish somewhere in the top five, we will qualify for the World Cup. We'll get the ticket here itself, and there will be no pressure during the Asia Cup.

So that's an immediate target. A good performance in 2025 will lay the foundation for the 2026 World Cup and Asian Games. Playing in the World Cup semifinal should be a goal for our girls. By the end of February, I should have a core group of 24 players who I will be including in my World Cup plans.

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

INDIANS PASS THE TOGO TEST

A happy locker room atmosphere and the positive debuts of Rithvik and Singh were **major highlights** for India in its 4-0 domination of the African side.

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India's 2025 Davis Cup campaign began with a comfortable 4-0 win over lower-ranked and inexperienced Togo in a World Group I Play-Off at the DLTA complex in New Delhi on February 1-2. The victory over Togo was more or less assured when the draw was held in October. What followed in Delhi this month was a mere formality.

The African nation returned to the Davis Cup in 2022 after being absent for almost two decades and started its journey all the way from Group IV (Africa zone). It did well to reach the World Group I Play-Offs by winning 10 of its 11 ties in such a short span. However, it did not face any opponent even close to the level of the current Indian squad, which comprised S. Mukund (World No. 365), Ramkumar Ramanathan (World No. 406) and debutant Karan Singh (World No. 496) as options for singles rubbers. Olympian N. Sriram Balaji (World No. 64) and Rithvik Choudary Bollipalli (World No. 79), another debutant, were selected for doubles.

On the other hand, Togo had just one player with an ATP ranking — Thomas Setodji (World No. 1256), while Liova Ajavon, Hod'abalo Padio and M'lapa Akomlo were the other members, with Alisama Agnamba as the non-playing captain. The gulf in quality was evident. The Togolese simply did not have the level to challenge the host.

With temperatures in the low 20s, fleeting sunlight and barely any strong winds, around 2,000 spectators turned up each day to support the players. Mukund **(left)**, playing only his second Davis Cup tie since he cramped and hobbled off the court on his debut against Morocco in Lucknow in 2023, took down Ajavon 6-2, 6-1 before Ramkumar brushed aside Setodji 6-0, 6-2 to give the host a 2-0 lead on day one.

On day two, Rithvik and Balaji put the tie to bed as they took down Akomlo and Padio 6-2, 6-1. Singh and Padio faced each other in the first reverse singles, a dead rubber, and the Indian triumphed 6-2, 6-3. Two of the four rubbers finished in under an hour.

India will next compete in a World Group I tie in September, where a win against its opponent — which will either be one of the winners from the other World Group I Play-Offs or the defeated sides from the 2025 Qualifiers — will ensure a spot in next year's Qualifiers.

India's Davis Cup downfall

India has not reached the Davis Cup Qualifiers since its 1-3 defeat to Croatia in 2021, but the country's struggle to challenge the stronger

teams has lasted much longer. Multiple factors such as lack of sustained quality in singles, players' commitment, and missteps by the All India Tennis Association (AITA) have led to this situation.

India is a three-time Davis Cup finalist (1966, 1974 and 1987). In the past, players such as Ramanathan Krishnan, Ramesh Krishnan, Vijay Amritraj, Anand Amritraj, Leander Paes and Somdev Devvarman have punched above their weight to defy the odds and beat higher-ranked opponents in Davis Cup rubbers.

Ramanathan famously stunned Australian legend Rod Laver in four sets in the Inter-Zonal Final in 1959, a tie which India lost 1-4. A young Paes upset top clay courter Arnaud Boetsch as he and Ramesh went on to beat France 3-2 in the quarterfinals in 1993.

The current singles crop of Ramkumar, Mukund and India No. 1 Sumit Nagal has yet to prove its mettle against tougher opponents.

In terms of commitment as well, the Amritrajs (both played a total of 72 singles rubbers), the Krishnans (111 singles rubbers) and Paes (70 singles) never shied away from national duty.

The demands of modern-day tennis are understandably greater as the game has become more physical, but apart from injuries, in the recent past, players such as Nagal and Mukund have missed ties for other reasons as well. Nagal was infamously dropped from the 2017 tie against New Zealand due to disciplinary issues. He and Mukund also refused to travel to Pakistan last year.

A disastrous 0-4 loss away to Sweden in a World Group I tie in September 2024 only made things worse. Nagal pulled out of the Stockholm tie due to a back issue. However, AITA secretary Anil Dhupar insinuated that Nagal had deliberately missed the fixture and instead had asked for a large annual fee to play in the competition. Dhupar also said that Nagal was playing a tournament in China. The Indian was actually scheduled to play the Hangzhou Open, an ATP 250 event the week after the Davis Cup tie. He withdrew from the tournament hours before his first-round clash on September 19.

Job well done: Rithvik and Balaji defeated Akomlo and Padio 6-2, 6-1 to seal India's victory. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Yuki Bhambri, India's best doubles player after Rohan Bopanna, remained unavailable for unknown reasons. Mukund was suspended for two ties for opting out of the World Group I Play-Off against Pakistan.

Dhupar suggested that non-playing captain Rohit Rajpal made the effort to include him for the Sweden match despite the ban, provided he had made himself available, but Mukund revealed in a social media post that he had no clue about the ban in the first place.

Two weeks after that loss to Sweden, former Indian players Devvarman and Purav Raja filed a petition against AITA at the Delhi High Court, accusing the federation of violating the Sports Code. The duo also requested the court to stop AITA from holding elections.

While the court allowed the polls to go ahead, it ordered that the results could not be declared and had to be presented in a sealed envelope. The case is still ongoing. The AITA has been unable to nurture the few promising singles players that the country has produced over the last three decades. This is a worrying trend, since singles players do the bulk of the work in a Davis Cup tie.

On the contrary, at times it has come across as an anti-player federation with its administrative style. As a response, the players have been reluctant to join the Davis Cup team.

In 2013, eight players, including Mahesh Bhupathi, Devvarman and Bopanna, made themselves unavailable for the home tie against South Korea after revolting against the federation, demanding a better coach, remuneration, involvement in the choice of venue and a new non-playing captain in place of S.P. Misra.

An uncertain future

For unknown reasons, Nagal and Bhambri both missed the tie against Togo. Ramkumar and Mukund, who won their singles ties against the Togolese, had to be awarded main-draw wildcards for the Chennai Open ATP Challenger the following week since they could not make the cut on the basis of their rankings. Both lost in the first round.

With the uncertainty around the court case against AITA and what kind of changes it will bring in the Indian tennis ecosystem, there is no guarantee that things will get any better when the Indian Davis Cup team is in action in September.

ROOKIE RISING

The 2025 season will see multiple teams **looking to the future,** investing in young drivers who can get to grips with the top tier of motorsport racing.

Kavita Menon and Anish Pathiyil
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With just a year to go before the new regulations kick in, F1 in 2025 could be a lottery of sorts. With the focus firmly on maximising resources for 2026, any shortcomings that teams identify before and during the sporting year could well be neglected, irrespective of their position in the championship ladder.

The one-off season, therefore, has allowed multiple teams to look to the future, investing in rookie drivers who can get to grips with the top tier of motorsport racing before facing the unpredictable.

Among the six drivers who will race full-time this year, three have already had the opportunity to get behind the wheel at an F1 Grand Prix. With the advantage of some race weekend experience — be it only one — these rookies have gained invaluable experience ahead of their first full season.

While learning the ropes will still be the priority, strong performances amid the uncertainty will help them build for the future. Moreover, if they score a couple of points over the first few races, a lot of heads will turn.

Liam Lawson

The most experienced among the inexperienced drivers on the grid, with eleven race appearances under his belt, Liam Lawson **(below)** is set to take on possibly the biggest challenge in the sport — fighting four-time World Champion Max Verstappen in equal machinery.

The Red Bull Racing second seat has been a revolving door since Daniel Ricciardo's transfer to Renault in 2019. Pierre Gasly had a torrid time with the Red Bull car after making the step up from Toro Rosso (now called Racing Bulls). His successor, Alexander Albon, was overlooked when the chance to sign race winner Sergio Perez came up.

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

Perez's downward trajectory over the last two seasons prompted the think tank to replace him with Lawson. The Kiwi racer competed in the final six races of the 2024 season at Racing Bulls, replacing Ricciardo.

Lawson displayed flashes of brilliance during his short stint in F1, especially during his wheel-to-wheel battle with two-time World Champion Fernando Alonso in Austin. But the 22-year-old was overshadowed at the back end of last season by teammate Yuki Tsunoda, particularly in qualifying, where the Japanese driver enjoyed a 6-0 head-to-head record.

Tsunoda could yet be breathing down the New Zealander's neck, and if the latter fails to get going as quickly as the team expects, there could be another mid-season swap on the cards.

Oliver Bearman

Oliver Bearman **(above)** needs no introduction in the paddock. The 'Super Sub' of 2024 — a befitting term for the 19-year-old — was the one who initiated the rookie movement. And he could not have asked for a better place to start: the Ferrari garage. With team principal Fred Vasseur vouching for the young reserve driver, he got the prized opportunity to fill in for a recovering Carlos Sainz in Jeddah. With only one hour of on-track preparation, the last-minute substitute had a solid outing and finished a solid seventh on his debut.

Bearman would have hoped to take this newfound confidence into his F2 campaign with Prema Racing, but that wasn't the case. Considered one of the favourites to finish on top in his second F2 season, the British driver could secure only three wins. But, to his surprise, F1 came knocking on his door again.

He returned to take up his backup driver duties twice, both in place of Haas' Kevin Magnussen. Bearman managed to park the Haas in the final points place in Baku but couldn't get third-time lucky in Brazil. However, clean, damage-free drives and two top-10 finishes out of three were enough to guarantee him a seat in 2025.

The new Haas recruit will need to be wary of his tricky teammate Esteban Ocon, but it will be just another challenge for this statement driver.

Jack Doohan

Seeing the name Doohan among the sport's competitors may turn a few heads among older motorsport fans, but rest assured — Jack Doohan's father Mick, a five-time MotoGP World Champion, has not decided to take up four-wheeled racing.

The 21-year-old **(below)**, one of the first Alpine academy drivers to be promoted to F1, had a fairly decent time in the lower ranks (Top 3 in F2 and F3).

But a bold decision to move from Red Bull to Alpine gave him a better shot at racing among the best. He got his first feel of an F1 car in 2021 before being announced as the team's reserve driver in 2023.

As a major contributor to the testing and development of the car, his consistent performances impressed the French outfit, putting an F1 seat within arm's reach.

Esteban Ocon's exit came as a blessing in disguise, as Jack was announced as Alpine's 2025 driver. Little did he know that he would get his first race in the same year, taking part in the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

His promotion prompted Alpine to bring in three more drivers to fill the vacant reserve slot — including Franco Colapinto, the fill-in Williams driver who stunned the paddock with the underperforming car.

Though Alpine has confirmed that Doohan will get ample time to prove his skills on track, an entire season to himself is not guaranteed.

PICS: FSDL

SHILLONG FANS EMBRACE ISL

The local crowd stood out due to their sheer love for football, which is **deeply rooted** in the state.

The Indian Super League's debut fixture in Shillong between NorthEast United and Mumbai City FC **(above)** created an unmissable buzz in the air, laden with promise.

After 10 seasons of endless anticipation, fans in the 'rock capital of India' finally got a glimpse of their favourite players, whom they were used to seeing only within the four corners of a screen.

Packed with 14,000 people, the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium illuminated the dark, foggy evening as it prepared to make history.

Compared to the few games the Diary has attended in the past year, the Shillong crowd stood out due to their sheer love for football, which is deeply rooted in the state.

Almost all the fans the Diary spoke to said they were most excited to see star signing Alaaeddine Ajaraie **(left)** and hometown hero Redeem Tlang in action. Across the stands from where the Diary stood, the Highlander Brigade (the supporters' club of NEUFC) sang in unison, urging their team on from warm-ups until the final kick of the ball.

The temperature dropping into single digits did not stop the crowd from growing increasingly boisterous as the match progressed.

"We want goals, we want goals..." rang across the stadium.

Despite the 2-0 loss for the home side, its faithful fans assembled outside the stadium to lift the players' spirits after a disappointing game.

As the Diary trudged through the horde towards the mixed zone to get a reaction from the players, Ajaraie was spotted gesturing to a couple of young fans, giving a thumbs up and placing his hand to his heart, promising to fulfil their wish of taking a picture with him.

He kept his word and then went around the crowd, skimming through phones, taking picture after picture until all were content.

In return, Ajaraie was comforted with words of encouragement. "Don't worry about today's result. We will be here to back you for the next two games as well," the fans said.

With a heartfelt smile, he disappeared into the team bus. After all, football is for the fans as much as it is for the players.

Joan Mathew Jacob

Manjappada mania

A derby is an eventful day in the football calendar. If it is a Southern Derby between Chennaiyin FC and Kerala Blasters, one can expect a feisty atmosphere not just inside the ground during the match but also outside, leading up to the clash.

As the Diary made way towards the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, fans adorned in Chennaiyin Blue and Blasters Yellow dominated the streets, and there was, of course, the banter that one would expect ahead of a derby. Extra police personnel were deployed to ensure that the verbal banter did not escalate.

As expected, the Manjappada presence was strong, and despite being the away team, they seemed to be the louder fan base going into the match. It wasn't long into the match before their cheers grew louder and the Chennaiyin crowd fell silent, as Jesus Jimenez opened the scoring in the third minute.

Korou Singh Thingujam and Kwame Peprah **(above, centre)** also found the net to complete the thrashing before Vincy Barretto pulled one back late in the match, with the contest finishing 3-1 in the Blasters' favour.

But the contest wasn't devoid of controversy. First, Wilmar Jordan Gil's red card in the 37th minute became a major talking point, with Chennaiyin head coach Owen Coyle calling the decision a "travesty" and engaging in a public dispute with commentator and former Indian footballer Robin Singh during the post-match presentation ceremony.

Blasters might have won the derby but finished the contest on a bitter note, as captain Adrian Luna got involved in a physical altercation with teammate Noah Sadaoui after the latter refused to pass the ball to him and went for goal himself.

However, that incident remained secondary to Kerala fans, who left the stadium with the boasting rights, and their chants directed towards their Chennaiyin counterparts were indication enough of the rivalry that exists between the teams.

Aneesh Dey

GIANTS IN ACTION

From Arsenal's thumping win against defending champion Manchester City to the Madrid neighbours playing out a frustrating draw, the world of football saw plenty of **high-octane performances.**

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FOR MORE STORIES

It might be too late for Arsenal to overtake Liverpool in the race for the Premier League title, and the Gunners may have to wait for their first league glory since 2003. However, a football season is not only about the destination but also the journey, and it was a joyous occasion for the red part of London on matchday 24.

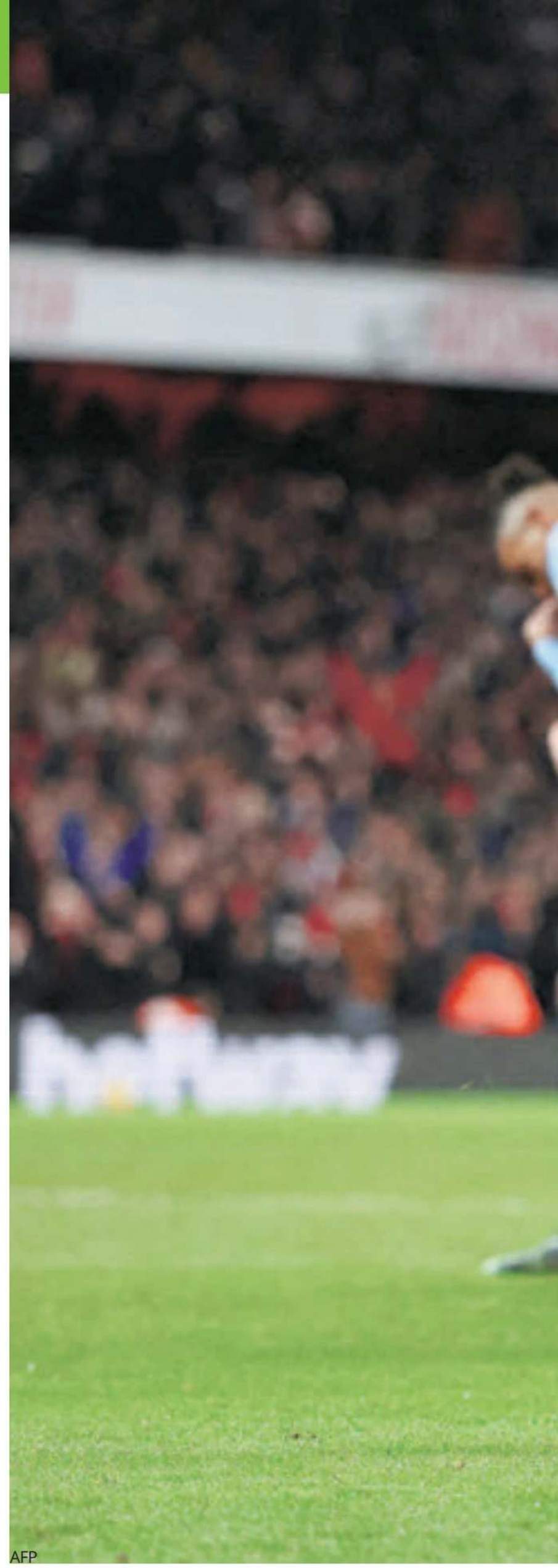
Mikel Arteta's men clinched a statement victory, thrashing Manchester City 5-1 at the Emirates Stadium — the defending champion's biggest loss under head coach Pep Guardiola.

The Gunners began the onslaught early, with Martin Odegaard finding the net in the second minute, which was the only goal of the first half. City looked for a response early in the second half and came back into the match courtesy of an excellent finish by Erling Haaland in the 55th minute. But City's joy was short-lived.

No sooner had a minute passed after Haaland's equaliser than the Emirates erupted into a booming cheer as Thomas Partey restored Arsenal's lead, with City's defence caught out by a well-crafted attack.

Myles Lewis-Skelley doubled Arsenal's lead in the 62nd minute and rubbed salt into the wounds of the City players and fans by mimicking Haaland's trademark celebration, sitting on the ground with his legs folded and eyes closed.

One might have thought this would spur the defending champion into action, but Kai Havertz struck in the 76th minute, and Ethan Nwaneri joined the party in additional time to complete City's humiliation.



AFP

"I only regret the last 20, 25 minutes. We forgot to do what we should do, what we had done through 65-70 minutes. It's a difficult game in that stadium against that team, giving up a goal that early, which has happened too much this season," said Guardiola after the clash.

Title favourite Liverpool faced a difficult trip to the Vitality Stadium against a Bournemouth side that has been flying high under manager

MYLES LEWIS-SKELLEY DOUBLED ARSENAL'S LEAD IN THE 62ND MINUTE AND RUBBED SALT INTO THE WOUNDS OF THE CITY PLAYERS BY MIMICKING HAALAND'S CELEBRATION

Andoni Iraola. The Cherries put up a good fight, but Mohamed Salah continued his excellent form in front of goal, bagging a brace to guide Arne Slot's men to victory.

Ruben Amorim's life at Old Trafford did not get any easier, with Manchester United succumbing to a 0-2 loss against Crystal Palace as Jean-Philippe Mateta scored a brace.

Enzo Maresca's Chelsea had to toil hard and enjoyed a stroke of luck in its 2-1 win against West Ham. Jarrod Bowen opened the scoring in the 42nd minute, which was cancelled out by Pedro Neto in the 64th minute. To the Hammers' dismay, an Aaron Wan-Bissaka own goal led the Blues to victory.

Ange Postecoglou's Tottenham Hotspur snapped its losing streak by beating Brentford 2-0 as Vitaly Janelt scored an own goal and Pape Matar Sarr added a second.

It was an excellent week for Nottingham Forest, which thrashed Brighton 7-0, but Newcastle had a

Fast and furious: The derby between Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid was the highlight of Spanish top-flight football on matchday 23. AFP

disappointing outing, losing 1-2 against Fulham.

After matchday 24, Liverpool led the standings with 56 points and a game in hand, with Arsenal, Nottingham Forest, and Chelsea occupying second, third, and fourth with 50, 47, and 43 points, respectively. City is fifth with 41 points while United languishes in 13th with 29 points.

La Liga

With Real Madrid playing against Atletico Madrid at the Santiago Bernabeu, Carlo Ancelotti's men would have hoped for a win against their arch-rival to extend their lead at the top of the standings but were held to a frustrating 1-1 draw by Diego Simeone's men.

Julian Alvarez drew first blood, putting his team ahead from the spot in the 35th minute. Atletico got the penalty after Aurelien Tchouameni brought down Samuel Lino inside the area. A VAR check confirmed the decision.

Real responded well after half-time as Kylian Mbappe scored the equaliser on the rebound following a well-constructed attack by the defending champion in the 50th minute.

It was another dominant day at the office for Hansi Flick's Barcelona, which secured a 4-1 away victory against Sevilla. Robert Lewandowski opened the scoring in the seventh minute, but Sevilla levelled a minute later courtesy of Ruben Vargas. However, second-half goals from Fermin Lopez, Raphinha, and Eric Garcia sealed the win for the Catalans. It was not a perfect outing for Barca, though, as it finished the match with 10 men after Fermin was shown a red card in the 62nd minute.

Athletic Bilbao cruised to a 3-0 win against Girona, while Villarreal edged past Las Palmas 2-1.

After matchday 23, Real Madrid continued to top the table with 50 points. Atletico is second with 49, and Barcelona occupies third with 48. Athletic sits in the final Champions League spot in fourth with 44 points.

Bayer Leverkusen played for half an hour with 10 men but managed to hold onto its lead and beat relegation-threatened Hoffenheim 3-1.

In form: Napoli's McTominay scored his sixth league goal of the season against Udinese. AP

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich survived a late comeback scare against Holstein Kiel but held onto its lead to win 4-3. Harry Kane scored on either side of half-time, while Jamal Musiala and Serge Gnabry chipped in to give the host a healthy cushion before the hour mark.

However, Finn Porath pulled one back, and Steven Skrzybski scored twice in stoppage time to pose a threat.

The following week, Kane brought his goal tally up to 21 in the league after converting twice from the spot in a 3-0 win against Werder Bremen. The results leave Bayern on top of the table with 54 points from 21 games.

Bayer Leverkusen played for half an hour with 10 men but managed to hold onto its lead and beat relegation-threatened Hoffenheim 3-1.

However, in its next fixture, Xabi Alonso equalled the late manager Udo Lattek's feat of 27 consecutive away games without defeat in Germany's top flight after being held to a frustrating 0-0 draw by VfL Wolfsburg. The defending champion is now eight points behind the leader, having played the same number of games.

Eintracht Frankfurt and RB Leipzig make up the top four, sitting third and fourth with 39 and 36 points, respectively.

Borussia Dortmund ended interim coach Mike Tullberg's short reign with a 2-1 win against Heidenheim, its first win in the league since December.

However, the new head coach Niko Kovac had a rough start to life in Dortmund after his side slumped to a 2-1 defeat against VfB Stuttgart.

With just 29 points in 21 games, the Yellow and Black are reeling in 11th in the table.

Serie A

League leader Napoli missed the chance to extend its lead after being held to a 1-1 draw by Roma, with Leonardo Spinazzola's opener cancelled out by Angelino in stoppage time.

Antonio Conte's men wasted another opportunity to gain an advantage at the top as it played out yet another 1-1 draw against Udinese.

Scott McTominay scored his sixth league goal of the season with a pinpoint header, while Jurgen Ekkelenkamp equalised with a swerving long-range shot that deceived Napoli goalkeeper Alex Meret. Despite the draws, Napoli leads the standings with 55 points from 24 games.

On the other hand, reigning champion Inter Milan failed to capitalise on Napoli slipping up, dropping five points in its last two games.

Stefan de Vrij scored in stoppage time for Inter to play out a 1-1 draw

On target: Greenwood (right) is now second in the Golden Boot race with 13 goals, three behind Dembele. AFP

in the Milan derby, while Moise Kean's brace and a Luca Ranieri header helped Fiorentina hand Simone Inzaghi's side its second league loss of the season. Inter is now four points behind Napoli, having played a game less.

Third-placed Atalanta also stuttered in its bid to overtake Inter after being held to a 1-1 draw by Torino but made amends by thrashing Verona 5-0 in its following game. The league's top scorer Mateo Retegui scored four goals as Atalanta sits one point behind Inter, having played a game more.

Randal Kolo Muani has had a bright start to his loan spell with Juventus from Paris Saint-Germain, scoring a brace in each of its wins against Empoli and Como. The Italian giant is now fifth in the table with 43 points, two behind Lazio, with both teams having played 24 games.

Ligue 1

Frenchman Ousmane Dembele continued his scoring spree and bagged a hat-trick, while Goncalo Ramos scored a late brace as Paris Saint-Germain routed Brest 5-2.

The following week, Dembele kept his golden touch going and found the back of the net twice in the 4-1 win against Monaco, a game which also witnessed new signing Khvicha Kvaratskhelia's first goal for PSG.

With the results, the unbeaten French giant tops the standings with 53 points from 21 games.

Second-placed Olympique Marseille maintained the 10-point gap with PSG after recording wins against Olympique Lyon and Angers, with Mason Greenwood, Adrien Rabiot and Neil Maupay all finding the net. Greenwood is now second in the Golden Boot race with 13 goals, three behind leader Dembele.

OGC Nice and Monaco complete the top four, both on 37 points, with the former sitting third due to a better goal difference.

Points tally and standings accurate as of 10.2.2025.

> « Paris Saint-Germain's Dembele continued his scoring spree and bagged a hat-trick against Brest »

WATCH THE INTERVIEW

FITNESS SHOULD BE ENJOYABLE

Actress Samantha backs **pickleball's growth** in India, highlighting its accessibility, inclusivity, and future through the World Pickleball League.

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India's growing passion for pickleball has seen it evolve from a leisure activity to a competitive sport. The latest milestone in its journey is the World Pickleball League, hosted at Mumbai's CCI-Brabourne Stadium. The league featured 48 players across six franchises, including international stars from Japan, Spain, South Korea, Australia, the USA, and the UK.

Among the franchise owners was actress Samantha Ruth Prabhu, who helms the Chennai Super Champs. In a conversation with *Sportstar*, she spoke about her decision to invest in the sport, its accessibility, and its future in India.

What drew you to pickleball as your first venture into sports entrepreneurship?

When I first met Gaurav Natekar, (WPBL promoter), I never planned to own a sports team. But fitness and well-being have always been priorities for me. Anything I associate with should have a broader impact.

Growing up, academics took precedence over sports. Now, when friends invite me to play, it doesn't come naturally. That's why I love pickleball — it's easy to pick up at any stage in life. You don't need years of training, just a court and a paddle. I want everyone, girls and older people, to take it up for a healthier life.

You've called pickleball a 'non-intimidating' sport. What makes it so accessible?

Unlike tennis, which requires rigorous training, pickleball is more like a social activity. There's no excessive physical strain, and even after playing for two hours, you don't feel drained. It's a great way to unwind with friends while staying active.

Chennai has seen a surge in pickleball courts. What does the future look like for the sport here?

Chennai has always embraced new sports. Who would have thought the city would take to surfing? But it did. From the Ironman Challenge to endurance races, Chennaiites are up for a challenge. They will welcome pickleball the same way.

Pickleball has near-equal participation between men and women. How significant is that?

Around 45% of players are women — that's remarkable. Most sports see men's competitions thrive first, but pickleball is different. It's also age-inclusive, with older players actively competing. The sense of community in this sport is special.

Your team's lone Indian player, Sonu, has a great story. How do you see this league helping him?

He's an inspiring kid who has worked incredibly hard to reach this stage. I'm proud of him. This league is just the beginning — we want to build a grassroots system for players like him. My involvement doesn't end with the tournament. We're committed to developing the sport further.

For those unfamiliar with pickleball, why should they try it?

Because sport is important. Fitness should be enjoyable, and pickleball is a perfect alternative if you dislike solo workouts. It's social, engaging, and, trust me, extremely addictive!

NIGAMANTH P

SPORTSTAR ACES AWARDS
WHAT THE JURY MEMBERS SAY

SCAN FOR MORE

2024 was a heartening year for sports in India. A World Cup win in cricket, medals galore at the Olympics and Paralympics and the emergence of a new generation of stars in the sporting world have made the year a memorable one. On the sidelines of the seventh annual **Sportstar Aces Awards,** members of the jury look back at their takeaways from 2024 and the happy headache of harder decision-making meetings as the years go by.

Sunil Gavaskar: Mainstream sports is no longer just about cricket and much credit for that goes to magazines and newspapers like Sportstar and The Hindu which are now covering more disciplines. There was a time when sports page real estate across newspapers was taken up mostly by cricket. It didn't have to be national cricket or international cricket; there was a lot of local club cricket which was covered at the expense of other international events which were happening in different sports. That's not the case now. The television medium has made a difference towards that end too, because now a lot of people who probably wouldn't have seen other sports are able to now see what other sports are, see what their demands and difficulties are and enjoy them.

MM Somaya: The discussions this time were so intense and it was hard to differentiate between nominees at several stages. I can't believe it but in a couple of categories, I didn't even initially recommend a hockey player. I was so fortunate that the others supported the nominees and eventually some of the very critical awards feature members from my sport.

I think that's the nature of the jury. We are very open in our decision-making process and are open to our decisions being overruled as well, if need be. When considerations get very close, the temperament of the person, consistency at the highest level, performance under pressure and how competitive their sport is have all been considered by the jury this year.

Abhinav Bindra: When I was competing for over two decades, my perspective was very narrow. But now that I've exited my investment and I look at things more dispassionately, I see many other areas and facets to sport, which perhaps I didn't pay enough value to or attention to while I was an athlete because my job as an athlete was simply to win.

On the other side, I see sport's larger role. I see the true power of sport towards nation building. We're at a time in our nation's history where we're either consuming or playing sport. At a time like that, we need to look at how platforms like the Aces Awards give us a chance to recognise what the nation's sporting culture looks like.

Viswanathan Anand: The chess ecosystem has steadily progressed and expanded, but at the same time, you have to specify that we are living in a special moment to have this kind of bench with so many talented youngsters, principally in the men's team, but also in the women's team.And challenging for the world title, breaking records in the rating list, the ranking list. This is a special moment. And I think chess is a sport which will be in the sports awards a lot over the next decade at least.

To those who have won, all I want to say is enjoy. This is a national recognition by a great sports institution. It is an acknowledgement by your peers and your fans of what you did.

Anjali Bhagwat: Shooting, as an ecosystem, took intelligent steps forward after Tokyo. The federation brought in local coaches to handle local shooters who weren't comfortable with foreign languages. It was an opportunity for our homegrown coaches to also upgrade their skills by working with foreign coaches. It was solid teamwork that got us to where we did in Paris.

That apart, this generation is very smart and the shooters know what they're doing and how to handle themselves. When I used to shoot, there was apprehension and a lack of confidence around international shooters. We used to go thinking 'Oh, the Chinese Team is there, the USA team is there.' Now the rest of the world thinks India is arriving. The Indian team is here now and has established that dominance for which our shooters have worked very hard.

Aparna Popat: The conversations that we've had over the years sort of come to fruition. To say that girls and women should play sport and discuss what sport does for them beyond the playing field and then see that translate to numbers entering the ecosystem is heartening. It's translating into medals too. We've got such brilliant role models in the female athletes coming through now and that then sets the stage for more girls to participate in sport and then hopefully we widen the scope of medals coming from women. It was the year of the gender-neutral Olympics as well. The fact that the competition field has been evened out and women are emerging as genuine contenders is a powerful change that needs to keep making its way across the country.

Indian shooting's golden boy destined for bigger targets

After clinching a **National Games gold** in men's 10m air pistol, India's latest shooting prodigy Jonathan Gavin Antony juggles animated series, board exams, and shooting trials.

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Late last month in Dehradun, after qualifying for his first-ever shooting final at the National Games, Jonathan Gavin Antony decided it was time to unwind, just the way most 15-year-olds would — indulging in a marathon animated feature session, watching *Naruto*, *Teen Titans Go*, and *Oggy and the Cockroaches*.

Indian shooting is no stranger to prodigies like him.

In fact, Jonathan secured his place in the final eight by edging past Saurabh Chaudhary, the Asian Games champion, Tokyo Olympian and multiple-time World Cup winner who was once regarded as a prodigy himself.

Both had shot a score of 578, one point higher than the qualifying mark for the previous year's Olympics, with the same number of inner 10s. However, Jonathan progressed based on a superior final series.

Reaching the final of a senior national competition just two years after first picking up a pistol is an achievement in itself, but Jonathan went even further.

Showing no signs of fatigue, he delivered a near-flawless performance in the final, defeating a field that included Olympic bronze medallist Sarabjot Singh to claim his first senior national gold medal.

He hadn't started the final particularly well, shooting a 9.1 with his first attempt. He admitted to feeling a bit nervous. "I saw all these senior players next to me. I was actually looking to see what they were doing, and in that moment, I shot my first shot badly. But after that, I started focusing on myself," Jonathan said.

With just three shots remaining, he had established a commanding 2.4-point lead over the rest of the field.

Early gains: Jonathan delivered a near-flawless performance, defeating a field that included Olympic bronze medallist Sarabjot Singh to claim his first senior national gold medal.
RITU RAJ KONWAR

Jonathan is a freestyle shooter, similar to Yusuf Dikec, the viral gold-medal-winning Turkish champion from the 2024 Olympics.

Mother's dreams

As the competition came to an end, he wore a sheepish grin, seemingly embarrassed by the attention, even as his seasoned rivals congratulated him on his achievement. Watching from the stands, beaming with pride, was Jonathan's mother, Ancy.

She could take much of the credit for his introduction to the sport. Growing up in Bengaluru, Jonathan had been an energetic child. "He just had so much energy. I had him try everything — gymnastics, dance, skating, even chess," Ancy recalled.

She had even enrolled him in a few classes of *silambam*, the traditional Tamil stick-fighting martial art. "I thought he should stay connected to his culture," she added.

But what Ancy truly hoped for was that her son would take an interest in shooting. She had been a college-level rifle shooter during her time in the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and had once aspired to join the Air Force — an ambition that was thwarted by her family's disapproval.

"Although I eventually took up a corporate job, I was determined to stay connected to the defence sector in some way. I married my husband, who works in the Intelligence Bureau, and I wanted my children to one day join the armed forces as well. I felt shooting would be the first step towards that," she said.

In March 2022, she took Jonathan, then 13, and his younger brother to his first class at Bengaluru's Hawkeye Shooting Academy. While she usually lets Jonathan choose his own activities, she admits she was more insistent this time.

"I told him, 'You are going to take this class, and you are going to complete it. Don't even think about quitting.'

"His younger brother was actually the more natural shooter, but at just eight years old, he was too young to compete — the minimum age for state-level competition in India is 10. Jonathan, however, was 13, so I was really hoping he would stick with it," she says.

He did. Coach K.Y. Sharandra at the Hawkeye Academy noticed Jonathan's passion immediately.

"He initially joined just for a foundation course, where students learn the basics of shooting. But I quickly realised that no matter how much I taught him, he just wanted to keep shooting more and more," Sharandra recalls.

When the coach cautiously increased Jonathan's training load, the youngster embraced it wholeheartedly.

Just three months after he started training, Jonathan competed in his first state-level competition, followed by his first nationals later that year. Though he didn't win an individual medal, Sharandra saw something special in him. Convinced of his potential, he personally approached Jonathan's school principal to request support for the young shooter's training.

"I promised him — and I still believe it — that Jonathan will be competing at the 2028 Olympics," he says.

Freestyle edge

Over the past year, Jonathan has been steadily pushing towards national recognition. He won a team gold at the Junior Nationals last year with a qualification score of 576, followed by a 582 at the Kumar Surendra Singh Shooting Championships.

He then posted a personal best of 587 at the 2024 Khelo India Games, where he won silver. He has recorded even higher qualification scores in practice, twice achieving 594. However, he knows there is still more to be done.

"I need to do it 10 times more in practice, and then perhaps I can shoot this in competition," he says.

His coach believes it is only a matter of time. According to him, Jonathan is a natural shooter. "There are shooters who follow a very precise routine every time they take a shot. Then there are freestyle shooters. Yusuf Dikec, the viral gold-medal-winning Turkish shooter from the 2024 Olympics, is that kind. Jonathan is similar. He just has to align the target with the sight and pull the trigger. He is very uncomplicated," says Sharandra.

Jonathan echoes this sentiment. "It's not difficult for me. I like shooting. I love hitting the bullseye the most," he says.

Despite winning gold at the National Games, Jonathan knows that shooting is becoming an increasingly competitive sport in India. In a few weeks, he will compete in the shooting trials in New Delhi, which will determine selection for the Indian squad for the upcoming World Cups. In his case, these trials will decide whether he secures a place in the Indian team for the Junior World Cup in September.

However, he is less concerned about the trials themselves and more about the challenges surrounding them. "My Class 10 board exams start on the 15th. I will write my first paper and then travel to Delhi for my trials. This month is going to be very tough for me," he says.

With both academics and sport being equally important, he will need to manage his time carefully. "I have to study, and I have to train. I won't have any time for cartoons this time," he adds with a smile.

Hitting the bullseye: Ravi Malik was a member of the Haryana team that won the Indian round archery competition at the National Games in Dehradun. JONATHAN SELVARAJ

With steep learning curve for Indian bow, archers look to graduate to recurve

It might be a medal event at the National Games, but most Indian archers **can't wait** to move on from the Indian bow.

Jonathan Selvaraj
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By any measure, Manish Singh of Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, has had a successful National Games, securing a gold and a silver medal in the Indian bow archery competition. Thanks to his State's generous sports reward policy, he can expect to earn approximately Rs 10 lakh — the Uttar Pradesh government has announced Rs 6 lakh for gold medal winners and Rs 4 lakh for silver.

Manish plans to use the money to pay off loans his father, a farmer, took to support his sporting career. Then, without hesitation, he intends to abandon the equipment that brought him his most significant medals and invest upwards of Rs 3 lakh in a sleek, modern recurve bow, thus starting his career from scratch.

Although the Indian round is a medal event at the National Games, and some advocates vouch for its roots in indigenous tradition, for

most archers, it is at best a stepping stone to recurve or compound archery — and at worst, a dead end.

Traditional look but recent origin

Unlike the sleek, high-tech metal and carbon-fibre recurve and compound bows used in global competitions such as the World Cups, continental tournaments, and the Olympics, the Indian bow appears rudimentary. It consists of two laminated bamboo limbs slotted into a hardwood grip and secured with metal screws.

Indian bow team gold medallist Ravi Malik of Haryana, who won men's team gold, appreciates its all-wood construction. "It's like the bow that Ram and Lakshman, and the warriors of the Mahabharata, used. This is part of our culture," says the 25-year-old, who has a sticker reading Jai Shri Shyam on his bow's grip.

However, despite its traditional aesthetic, the Indian bow is a relatively recent invention. Also called the Manipur bow, its origins date back to 1985, when Manipuri coach Chaoba Sharma — brother of Basanti Devi, the State's first international archer — designed it.

"Chaoba started an archery club in Manipur in the 1980s. There was a lot of interest in the sport, but recurve bows were too expensive," explains Premkumar Sharma, manager of the Manipur team. "After much trial and error, he attempted to replicate a recurve bow using bamboo. He made the first Indian bow in 1985 and even received a governor's award for his innovation. His aim was to create an affordable alternative. Gradually, it gained popularity, first in the Northeast, then Bengal, and eventually at the national level in the early 1990s."

Labour-intensive process

The process of making the Indian bow, which stands six feet tall, has changed little since the 1980s. "You need a very specific type of bamboo," says Premkumar. "The stem must be at least six years old and can only be harvested in November or December. If harvested at other times, weevils (a type of beetle) could infest it, causing the bow to snap. After harvesting, the bamboo must be soaked in water for a month and then smoked for another six months. Only then is it ready to be shaped into limbs."

Making the transition: At the National Games, four-time Olympian Deepika Kumari signed an application form for 14-year-old Madho Birua, Jharkhand's youngest archery medallist at this National Games, to receive his first recurve bow. JONATHAN SELVARAJ

The wooden grip, into which the bamboo limbs are slotted, is made from a dense hardwood sourced from Myanmar. The arrows are crafted from younger bamboo, typically less than a year old. "The bamboo shoots come from the Koubru Hills in Manipur," Premkumar explains. "They're usually not completely straight, so after harvesting, they are heated over a flame and manually straightened." The only non-natural components are the plastic fletches at one end of the arrows and the metal arrowheads at the other.

Cost vs performance

The primary advantage of the Indian bow is its affordability. Outfitting an archer with an Indian bow and a set of arrows costs around Rs 10,000, whereas a good-quality recurve bow costs nearly Rs 4 lakh. "Most archers come from modest backgrounds. If you're just starting, investing in an expensive bow doesn't make sense. In Haryana, for every archer using a recurve bow, there must be ten using the Indian bow," says Haryana coach Manjeet Malik, who trains archers across all three disciplines — recurve, compound, and Indian bow.

However, the low cost comes with

limitations. Since each bow is handmade, quality can be inconsistent. The limbs can crack in cold weather, and bowstrings occasionally snap mid-competition. At the National Games, a Manipur archer, Robinson Elangbom, saw his bowstring break during the team event, causing his team — the pre-tournament favourite — to crash out in the second round.

The bow's power is also significantly lower than a modern recurve. Indian bow competitions are held at a 50-metre distance, compared to the 70-metre standard in recurve events. "A recurve bow typically has a draw weight (the force required to pull the string) between 35 and 45 pounds. I have no idea what the draw weight of an Indian bow is, but it must be at least half of that," says four-time Olympian Deepika Kumari. The lightweight bamboo arrows, averaging just nine grams compared to the 30-gram Olympic-standard arrows, are highly susceptible to wind drift.

High margin for error

All these factors make the Indian bow, despite being a beginner's weapon, incredibly challenging to master. "It's much harder to shoot than a recurve bow," says Deepika. "A recurve bow is more powerful, and wind conditions don't affect it as much. The Indian bow's arrows are so light that their trajectory is much more curved, and even the slightest breeze impacts them. Indian bow *ke saath arrow daudta hai hawa ke saath!* (The Indian bow's arrow runs with the wind!)."

The handmade nature of the arrows also adds unpredictability. "One arrow might be lighter than the next, or slightly less straight. Once, while shooting, one arrow went to the top corner, another hit the centre, and a third landed at the bottom. On one occasion, my arrow drifted so much in the wind that it knocked someone's laundry off a clothesline! If anything you have to be very smart when you are shooting the Indian bow. You have to be very conscious of the arrow you are using and the wind that's blowing," she recalls.

Unsurprisingly, most young archers can't wait to move on. "It's incredibly difficult to master, and you can't compete beyond the national championships with an Indian bow. If you want to participate in World Cups, the Asian Games, or the Olympics, you have to switch to recurve or compound," she explains.

Quick transition for most

Indeed, nearly every medallist in the Indian bow event aims to upgrade to a recurve bow as soon as possible. At the National Games, Deepika signed an application form for Jharkhand's 14-year-old Madho Birua — the youngest archery medallist at the event— to receive his first recurve bow. "I won't shoot the Indian bow anymore. I want to compete at the Olympics, and for that, I need to shoot recurve," he says.

Most talented archers transition out of the Indian bow category in their teens. Manipur coach Bijendranath Singh considers himself unlucky for being forced to stick with it. Despite being a multiple-time national champion and a silver medallist at the 2015 National Games, his job with Assam Rifles prevented him from switching. "I won my first national championship in 2008, then got a job with Assam Rifles. I kept winning, so they didn't want me to switch to recurve. I even won a gold at the national games in 2015. I finally left Assam Rifles in 2019, but by then, it was too late for me to start over," he laments.

Few choose to stay with the Indian bow out of preference. One such exception is Ravi, who is among the older archers in this category.

"I started with the Indian bow before switching to recurve at 17. I shot recurve for five years but wanted to compete at the National Games. I knew recurve competition would be much tougher, so I returned to the Indian bow. Now that I've won gold, I'll probably switch back," he says.

For most, however, the Indian bow is a mere stepping stone — one they are eager to leave behind.

Indian bow team gold medallist Ravi Malik of Haryana, who won men's team gold, appreciates its all-wood construction. "It's like the bow that Ram and Lakshman, and the warriors of the *Mahabharata*, used. This is part of our culture," says the 25-year-old, who has a sticker reading 'Jai Shri Shyam' on his bow's grip.

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

KyrianJacquet claims Chennai Open title

Frenchman Kyrian Jacquet defeated Swede Elias Ymer 7-6(1), 6-4 in the final to clinch the Chennai Open ATP Challenger title. Jacquet put up an inspired performance driven by his strengths — slicing often to break his opponent's rhythm and rushing the net for the winners.

Jacquet won the first set tie-break 7-1, courtesy of Ymer's six unforced errors. The champion remarkably played a forehand cross-court pass to Ymer's drop from the net for his first point. Ymer won his sole point when Jacquet double-faulted.

From there, Ymer made at least 13 unforced errors, including a double fault, until he was down 1-4 in the second set. He caught up and made it 4-4 before making three unforced errors again to help his opponent hold serve without losing a point. He saved a match point in the next game but double-faulted immediately after for Jacquet to break serve and win the match.

"I would like to dedicate this title to my grandfather, who passed away in December," said Jacquet after the match.

S. PRASANNA VENKATESAN

SPORTOON

EMMANUAL YOGINI

In her stunning run at the WTA 125 event in Mumbai — from the qualifiers to the semifinals — Maaya Rajeshwaran has exuded confidence and displayed a fearless approach, which is rare for a 15-year-old playing just her fifth senior tournament. The WTA 125 is the second-highest level in professional women's tennis, just below the main WTA Tour. Awarded a qualifying wildcard by the Maharashtra State Lawn Tennis Association, Maaya made it to the main draw and eventually made her debut in the WTA rankings as World No. 646.

Maaya — who likes to be aggressive like Serena Williams and Aryna Sabalenka — showed maturity in constructing points, be it by opening up the court during a baseline rally or by rushing to the net. For further improvement in her game, Maaya has already earned the golden chance to train at the Rafa Nadal Academy, run by the 22-time Major champion. Maaya was invited for trials last October at the academy on the Spanish island of Mallorca. "It's not exactly a 'trial'. You just train normally with other people. There are no tests; you just train with others, and they take notice of what you do," recalled the teenager.

NIHIT SACHDEVA

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

The risks of increased oil consumption

While dietary fats are **essential for nutrient absorption,** hormone production, and brain function, too much oil — especially from the wrong sources — leads to inflammation, weight gain, and metabolic disorders.

In a country where deep-fried delicacies and rich curries are an intrinsic part of daily meals, the idea of cutting down on oil may seem impractical. However, when our Hon'ble Prime Minister speaks on the subject, it is more than just dietary advice — it becomes a national health movement.

At the 38th National Games in Dehradun on January 28, 2025, Shri Narendra Modi addressed an often-overlooked health issue: excessive oil consumption. He linked it to rising lifestyle disorders such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, urging people to reduce oil intake by just 10 per cent. His message aligns with the *Economic Survey 2023-24*, which warns of the economic burden of unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles.

The hidden impact of excessive oil consumption

Globally, India ranks among the highest in obesity and diabetes cases. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), obesity rates have surged due to high-calorie diets loaded with refined oils and processed foods. This issue is not just limited to the general population — it also affects athletes, where nutrition directly impacts performance.

As a nutritionist working with elite athletes and fitness enthusiasts, I have witnessed firsthand how excess oil affects endurance, agility, and recovery. While dietary fats are essential for nutrient absorption, hormone production, and brain function, too much oil — especially from the wrong sources — leads to inflammation, weight gain, and metabolic disorders.

Indian diets rely heavily on refined vegetable oils such as sunflower, soybean, and palm oil. These are high in Omega-6 fatty acids, which, in excess, create chronic inflammation and increase the risk of heart disease and joint issues. For athletes, excess oil slows muscle recovery, and for everyday individuals, it contributes to sluggish digestion, poor gut health, and higher LDL cholesterol.

Shri Modi's recommendation to cut back by just 10 per cent may seem small, but consistent reduction can significantly improve weight management, cardiovascular health, and metabolic function.

Can you reduce oil without losing flavour?

Yes! A major challenge in reducing oil intake is changing cooking habits. Indian cuisine is built around oil-heavy techniques, from deep-frying to heavy tempering *(tadka).* However, small, practical changes can help:

✪ Use non-stick cookware to minimise oil usage.

✪ Brush oil instead of pouring it to control portions.

✪ Air-fry instead of deep-frying to maintain crispness with less fat.

✪ Roast spices before tempering to release their natural flavours.

✪ Enhance flavours naturally with herbs, lemon juice, and dry-roasted spices.

Making these small tweaks allows flavourful cooking without compromising health.

Why this matters for fitness and health

For those aiming to maintain a leaner body composition, reducing oil intake can be a game-changer. Optimising power-to-weight ratio directly affects speed, endurance, and strength. Excess oil consumption leads to fat accumulation, disrupts insulin sensitivity, and makes blood sugar regulation harder — an alarming issue as diabetes cases rise among younger Indians.

The right oils matter more than quantity

Many believe "more oil = better taste," but shifting to cold-pressed, nutrient-dense oils makes a difference:

✪ Extra virgin olive oil: Rich in antioxidants and heart-healthy fats.

✪ Mustard oil: Traditionally used in Indian cooking, rich in Omega-3s.

✪ Coconut oil: Stable at high heat and beneficial for metabolism.

Additionally, incorporating whole food sources of healthy fats — such as nuts, seeds, and avocados — enhances nutrition without excessive oil use.

Tracking fat consumption: A smarter approach

Most people underestimate their oil intake. That is why I developed the Ryan Fernando App, a smart nutrition tool that helps users track fat consumption, personalise meal plans, and make healthier food choices. Often, just small portion adjustments lead to major health benefits.

By providing real-time tracking and personalised guidance, this app makes reducing excess oil intake easier and more effective.

A nation's health begins at home

The PM's call to cut oil by 10 per cent is not just about reducing obesity or preventing heart disease — it is about reshaping how India eats. If every household makes this small change, the impact on public health, sports performance, and even healthcare costs will be substantial.

A healthier population means:

✪ A more productive workforce with better energy levels.

✪ Lower healthcare costs associated with lifestyle diseases.

✪ Athletes with greater stamina, faster recovery, and improved performance.

Watch your food: Excess oil consumption leads to fat accumulation, disrupts insulin sensitivity, and makes blood sugar regulation harder — an alarming issue as diabetes cases rise among younger Indians. GETTY IMAGES

At the heart of this discussion is the belief that food is fuel. Whether you are an athlete, trying to lose weight, or simply looking to stay healthy, small, consistent improvements — like reducing oil slightly — can transform long-term health outcomes.

Are we ready to take the first step?

The question is not "Can we do this?" but rather, "Are we willing to start?"

Just like in sports, discipline and consistency bring results. This is not about a one-time resolution but a lifelong commitment to healthier choices. By making a conscious effort to reduce oil intake by 10 per cent, we move towards a healthier, stronger India — one meal at a time.

Booing, best way for fans to express emotions

Boos are of different textures. The one aimed at your **badly-performing** favourites is different from the one meant for the best player from the away team.

Suresh Menon

As a fan watching sports in India, never once did I boo or hiss from the stands. Not at the opposition, not at the home players nor indeed at the most boo-able of them all, the politicians who came to inaugurate a game and spoke till the last photographer had got the angle he wanted.

I have been in the media box when some of India's best-known players have been booed. Years ago Ravi Shastri couldn't take the field without the boos echoing around the stadium. "It helped me focus and challenged me to do better," said a young Shastri then.

Boos are of different textures. The one aimed at your badly-performing favourites is different from the one meant for the best player from the away team. Politicians copped a third type, while coaches and managers had a special one reserved for them.

A *New York Times* columnist wrote recently, "Fans have a right to boo. We can go so far as to say they have a responsibility to boo in that even today, in a world of ever-loudening social media spitfire, booing remains the best way for fans to express their emotions so long as it doesn't turn into something akin to angry, torch-bearing villagers chasing after Frankenstein's monster."

One player was quoted as saying "We've got to play better and if we play better, we don't have to hear that stuff." That's a remarkably mature way of looking at it.

Taking it in stride: Years ago Ravi Shastri couldn't take the field without the boos echoing around the stadium. "It helped me focus and challenged me to do better," said a young Shastri then. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

But a responsibility to boo? I remember sitting embarrassed in the media box as Sachin Tendulkar was booed in his home town during a match. It was upsetting. If only I had realised the fans were merely doing the responsible thing!

There is a certain logic to this. Booing is a safer way to release emotion than setting fire to the stands, for example, or throwing stones at the players or anybody passing by. One of the first cricket matches I saw was the one between the visiting Australians and South Zone in Bengaluru which my father had taken me to in 1969-70.

The great Erapalli Prasanna was running through the side (he had six for 11) as the visiting side was 53 for eight chasing 200. Then skipper Bill Lawry and No. 10 John Gleeson kept padding the ball away or holding up the game with flimsy excuses. A furious crowd began pelting stones and attempted to set a stand on fire as Australia finished with 90 for eight. My lasting memory of the day is running out of the stadium, my hand firmly in my father's grasp. Boos were certainly preferable that day.

I imagine most players would rather take a boo or two in the course of a match than be subjected to the kind of trolling — often obscene, usually pitiable — they are subjected to today.

You can always put down the boo to a spontaneous reaction to something happening on the field of play. But a social media message suggests a curse allowed to ripen with time.

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Published on alternate Sundays. RNP No: HQ/SD/505/2023-25, RNI No. 30513/1978.
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