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awaits
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POSTER
**DAVID
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PEOPLE'S CHAMPION

Olympic medallist and multiple Grand Slam champion Leander Paes reflects on his testing but gratifying journey to the Hall of Fame





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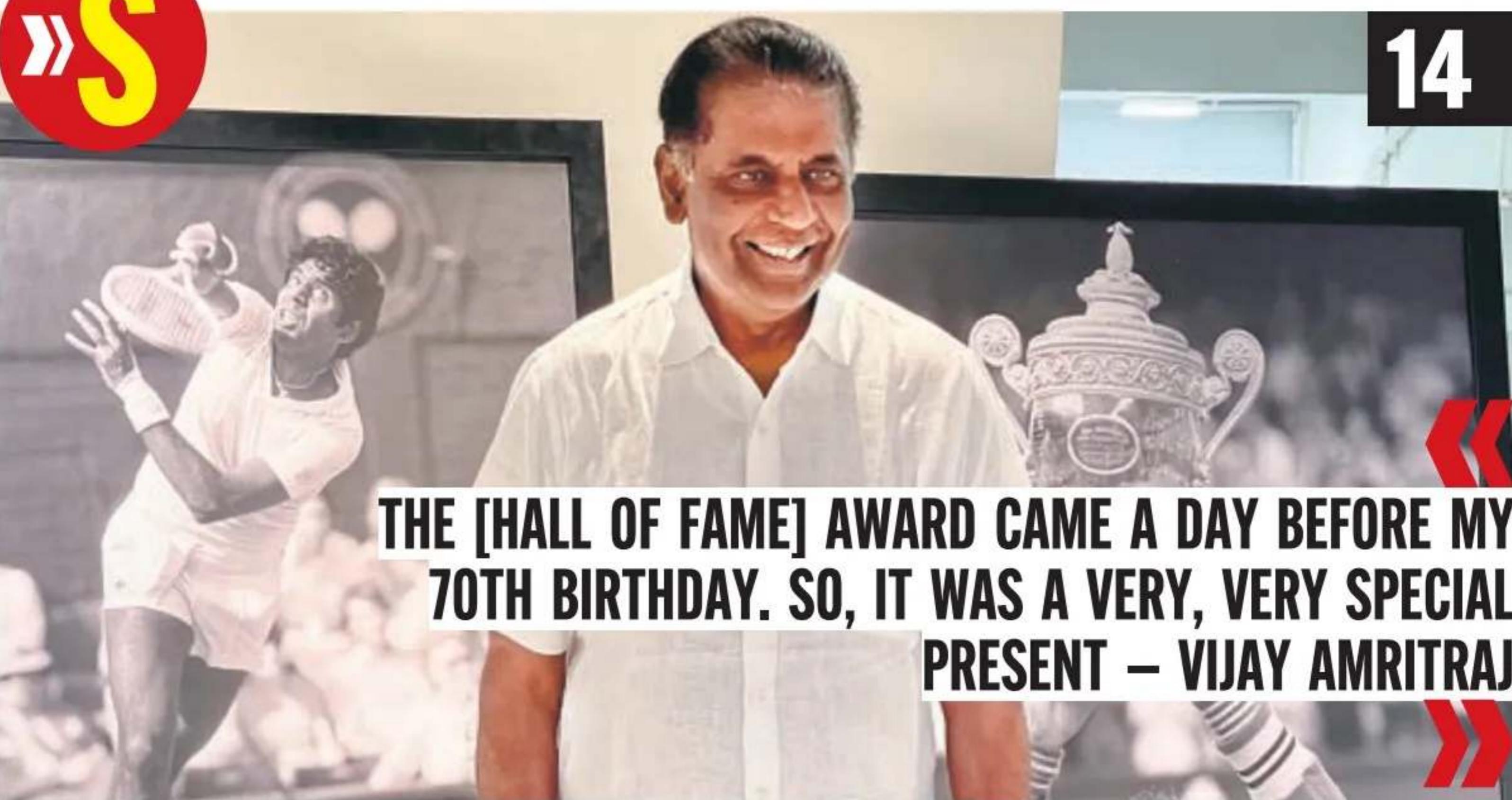
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**HAMARA SANKALP
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THE [HALL OF FAME] AWARD CAME A DAY BEFORE MY 70TH BIRTHDAY. SO, IT WAS A VERY, VERY SPECIAL PRESENT – VIJAY AMRITRAJ

» Cricket

- 26 **Photoline**
India vs South Africa, first Test in Centurion
- 34 **Women's ODIs**
Test queens get harsh white-ball reality check
- 51 **Domestic season**
Can Ranji Trophy pass the test of time?



08

Cover Story

Leander Paes

“My parents’ encouragement and constant love are the reasons I could achieve it all,” says the legend in a candid chat.
Cover: Leander Paes
(Pic: Debasish Bhaduri/Location: Gleburn Penthouse)

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» Read more...

- 62 **Hockey**
Preview of the Women’s Olympic qualifiers
- 65 **Javelin Throw**
Who will be India’s lucky No. 3?
- 74 **Football**
India has a daunting task in the Asian Cup

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OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta

sportstar@thehindu.co.in



A HERCULEAN TASK

India (ranked 102) will play against Asian heavyweights Australia, Uzbekistan, and Syria, making it **near impossible** for it to progress into the knockouts.

The chances of Croatia's Igor Stimac matching the exploits of little-known Englishman Harry Wright, who coached India to its best finish in the AFC Asian Cup, look remote as India gears up for its first consecutive appearances in the Continental event.

Wright took over the Indian national team right ahead of the 1964 tournament, following the untimely death of India's longest-serving national coach, Syed Abdul Rahim, a year earlier. Wright's India — or perhaps more fittingly, Rahim's India, with 10 players from his victorious 1962 Asian Games side — won two games and lost one to finish runner-up to host Israel in the quadrangular tournament, where all matches were 80-minute affairs.

The Golden Age of Indian football coincided with Rahim's reign as the national coach from 1950 to 1963, with India winning two Asian Games golds (1951 and '62) while finishing fourth at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.

India's tryst with the quadrennial Cup since then has been fraught with heartbreak, with the country managing qualification only three times: in 1984, 2011, and 2019. It, however, failed to move past the group phase on every occasion. Its only win in 10 matches came against Thailand (4-1) in the last edition.

Under Stimac, India has won 19 of its 46 games, but many of those have come against teams on the lower rungs of the ranking ladder. In Qatar, which generously stepped in after China pulled out of its hosting duties, India will find itself in a David-versus-Goliath battle.

Ranked 102, the national team is set to play

against Asian football heavyweights Australia (25), Uzbekistan (68), and Syria (91) in the group stage, making it near impossible for Stimac's men, at least on paper, to progress into the knockouts. "We are rank outsiders in our group. Australia are one of the favourites. Uzbekistan are the dark horses with some excellent recent results," a realistic Stimac said after the team made an early touchdown in Doha.

Despite 10 seasons of professional football, the Indian team continues to be plagued by the absence of a proven goal scorer, forcing 39-year-old Sunil Chhetri to still lead the line. Chhetri scored nine of India's 21 goals in 16 matches in 2023. The six forwards in Stimac's 26 have managed just eight goals among themselves in the ongoing Indian Super League. Chhetri (3 goals) has played the most, with 860 minutes for Bengaluru FC, while Kerala Blasters' Ishan Pandita has just played 77 minutes. An overseas import has won the Golden Boot in every edition of the ISL, and no Indians feature in the top-10 list of scorers for the ongoing season.

Injuries to key personnel Anwar Ali (ankle) and Ashique Kuruniyan (ACL) have added to the coach's challenges. Stimac's plea for a longer training window to counter the lack of playing time among his squad clashed with the interests of the ISL clubs and was hence rejected.

As the odds pile up against his wards and the clubs win the perennial club-versus-country tussle, Stimac has rightly cautioned fans of Indian football to refrain from harbouring dreams of miracles.

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KHELO INDIA GAMES – LEGACY

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New Delhi TP-6406, SD-16(7), U-17

Khelo India Youth Games 2019,
Maharashtra TP-8935, SD-18 (9), U-17&21

Khelo India Youth Games 2020,
Assam TP-10055, SD-20 (11), U-17&21

Khelo India University Games 2020,
Odisha TP-5672, SD-17 (9), U-25

Khelo India University Games 2021,
Karnataka TP-6731, SD-20 (12), U-26

Khelo India Youth Games 2021,
Haryana TP-8234, SD-25 (14), U-18

Khelo India University Games 2022,
Uttar Pradesh TP-7001, SD-21 (19), U-27

Khelo India Youth Games 2022,
Madhya Pradesh TP-9699, SD-27 (11), U-18

TP - Total Participation
SD - Sports Discipline



(Official Logo)

VEERA MANGAI

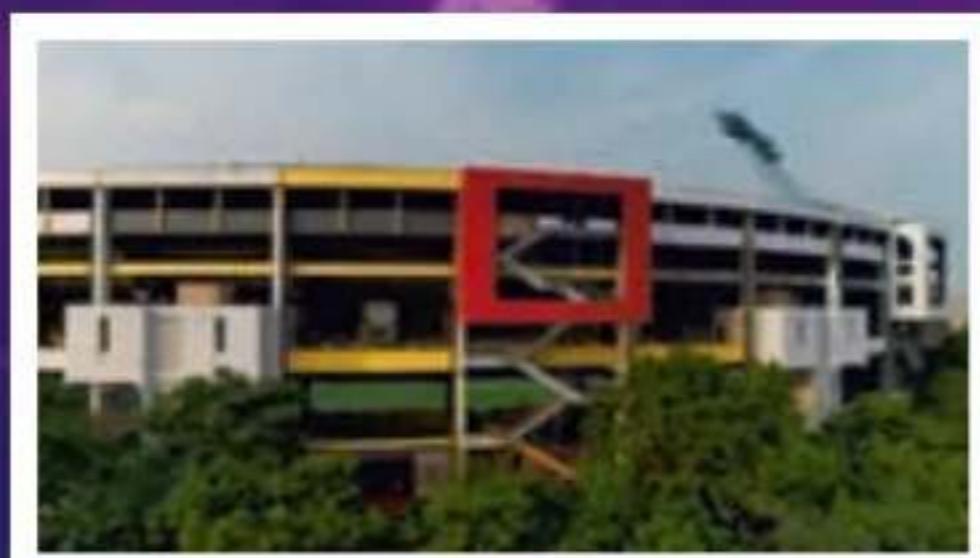
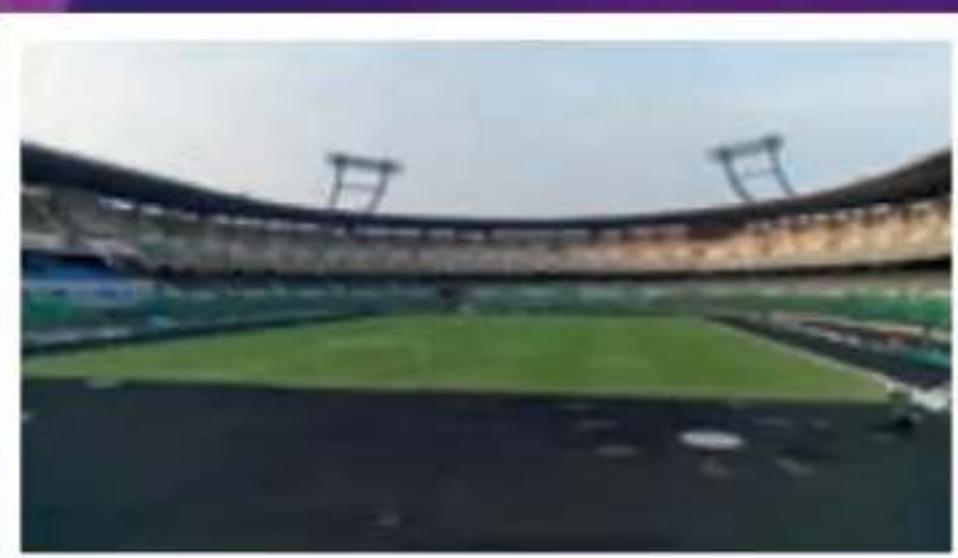
(The Official Mascot)



Tamil Nadu has been the favoured destination for marquee sports events at the national and international levels.

Following the same tradition, the 6th Khelo India Youth Games 2023 will be held in Tamil Nadu from 19th January to 31st January 2024, which will witness 5000+ Athletes from all over the country in under 18 age group vying for the top spot in 26 sporting disciplines + 1 demo sport.

Objectives of Khelo India Games



The iconic Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium getting a facelift for Khelo India Youth Games 2023

KHELO INDIA

5000+ Athletes	26+1 (DEMO) Sports	36 State & UTs	13 Days	1600+ Support Staff	4 Cities	1500+ Volunteers	15 Venues

OPENING CEREMONY: JAWAHARLAL NEHRU STADIUM ON 19TH JAN 2024
CLOSING CEREMONY: JAWAHARLAL NEHRU INDOOR STADIUM ON 31ST JAN 2024

City	Discipline	Location	Dates
Chennai	Athletics	Main Ground, Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium	23rd-25th Jan 2024
	Football (Boys)	Madras University Ground B Ground, Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium	22nd-31st Jan 2024 (Girls) 22nd-31st Jan 2024 (Boys)
	Football (Girls)	Main Ground, Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium	22nd-31st Jan 2024 Position Matches
	Kabaddi	Indoor Hall, Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium	18th-22nd Jan 2024
	Volleyball	Indoor Hall, Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium	24th-28th Jan 2024
	Judo	Outer Ground, Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium	20th-23rd Jan 2024
	Weightlifting	Outer Ground, Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium	26th-30th Jan 2024
	Squash	Squash Courts, Nehru Park Sports Complex	20th-24th Jan 2024
	Archery	Football Field, Nehru Park Sports Complex	27th-30th Jan 2024
	Boxing	Badminton Hall, Tamil Nadu Physical Edu & Sports Univ	20th-24th Jan 2024
	Badminton	Badminton Hall, Tamil Nadu Physical Edu & Sports Univ	27th-30th Jan 2024
	Fencing	Table Tennis Hall, Tamil Nadu Physical Edu & Sports Univ	20th-24th Jan 2024
	Table Tennis	Table Tennis Hall, Tamil Nadu Physical Edu & Sports Univ	27th-31st Jan 2024
	Cycling	Cycling Velodrome, Tamil Nadu Physical Edu & Sports Univ	22nd-24th Jan 2024 (Track)
	Road Cycling	East Coast Road ECR (Mahabalipuram-Kovalam)	27th-28th Jan 2024 (Road)
	Gymnastics	Gymnastics Halls, SDAT Aquatic Complex	20th-24th Jan 2024
	Swimming	SDAT Aquatic Complex	27th-31st Jan 2024
	Hockey	Major Radhakrishnan Hockey Stadium (Boys & Girls)	21st-27th Jan 2024
	Tennis	SDAT Tennis Stadium	27th-31st Jan 2024
	Yogasana	Rajarathinam Stadium	20th-23rd Jan 2024
	Wrestling	Rajarathinam Stadium	26th-30th Jan 2024
Trichy	Shooting (Air Rifle) (Trap & Skeet)	Shooting Range, Guru Nanak College Sivanthi Adithyan Shooting Range, Alamadi	23rd-28th Jan 2024 23rd-30th Jan 2024
	Mallakhamb	Indoor Stadium, District Sports Complex	21st-24th Jan 2024
Coimbatore	Kalarippayattu	Indoor Stadium, District Sports Complex	27th-29th Jan 2024
	Basketball	PSG Medical College Stadium	21st-25th Jan 2024
Madurai	Thang-Ta	PSG Medical College Stadium	28th-30th Jan 2024
	Gatka	SDAT District Sports Complex	21st-23rd Jan 2024
	Kho-Kho	SDAT District Sports Complex	26th-30th Jan 2024



The Mascot, Jersey, Torch, and Theme Song were launched during the launch ceremony held on 22nd Dec 2023

« My parents' encouragement and constant love are the reasons I could achieve it all »

LEANDER PAES

Shayan Acharya & Amitabha Das Sharma

shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in, amitabhadas.sharma@thehindu.co.in

Leander Paes reflects as the winter sun fades in Kolkata, the city where his childhood aspirations of tennis greatness took root. From the penthouse of an iconic building, he gazes over the vast green expanse known as the Maidan, lost in a flood of memories. The Maidan, home to major city clubs, holds a special place in Leander's heart, where he accompanied his accomplished athlete parents and found the inspiration to become a champion himself.

Leander shared with *Sportstar* the significance of being the first male player from Asia to be inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame

(player category). He dedicated this prestigious award to his greatest motivators — his parents — and the millions of Indians who supported him.

What does this Hall of Fame mean to Indian tennis?

I always like to lead by example, and this, I hope, inspires all the youth in our country and shows them that from playing gully cricket or playing gully football barefoot, I could come so far. So, if they have enough passion and can work hard, they,

too, can get into the Hall of Fame. It's about telling them that if you believe in yourself and put in the hard work, it is possible to fulfil your dreams.

Being the first Asian male to be nominated in the player's category, it's a tribute that I would like to give to my parents. Their encouragement and constant love are the reasons I could achieve it all. They allowed an 11-year-old boy to leave home and pursue his dreams. That's not common in Indian culture, and that too in a sport like tennis, where India has never had a Grand Slam winner before me. The sport did not have an Olympic champion before me, so it was not easy for them to allow me to chase my dreams. Allowing your child to pursue disciplines like cricket



Tennis is one of the toughest sports on the planet. As a sport, it is demanding, and it's also hard physically, mentally, and financially.

or hockey was one thing, but allowing him to pursue a global sport like tennis, where the risks are so high, was not easy. I appreciate my parents for their love, unconditional support, and belief in what I was trying to achieve. I dedicate this to them.

Please share your thoughts on how the success of your parents as sportspeople influenced your

career in tennis.

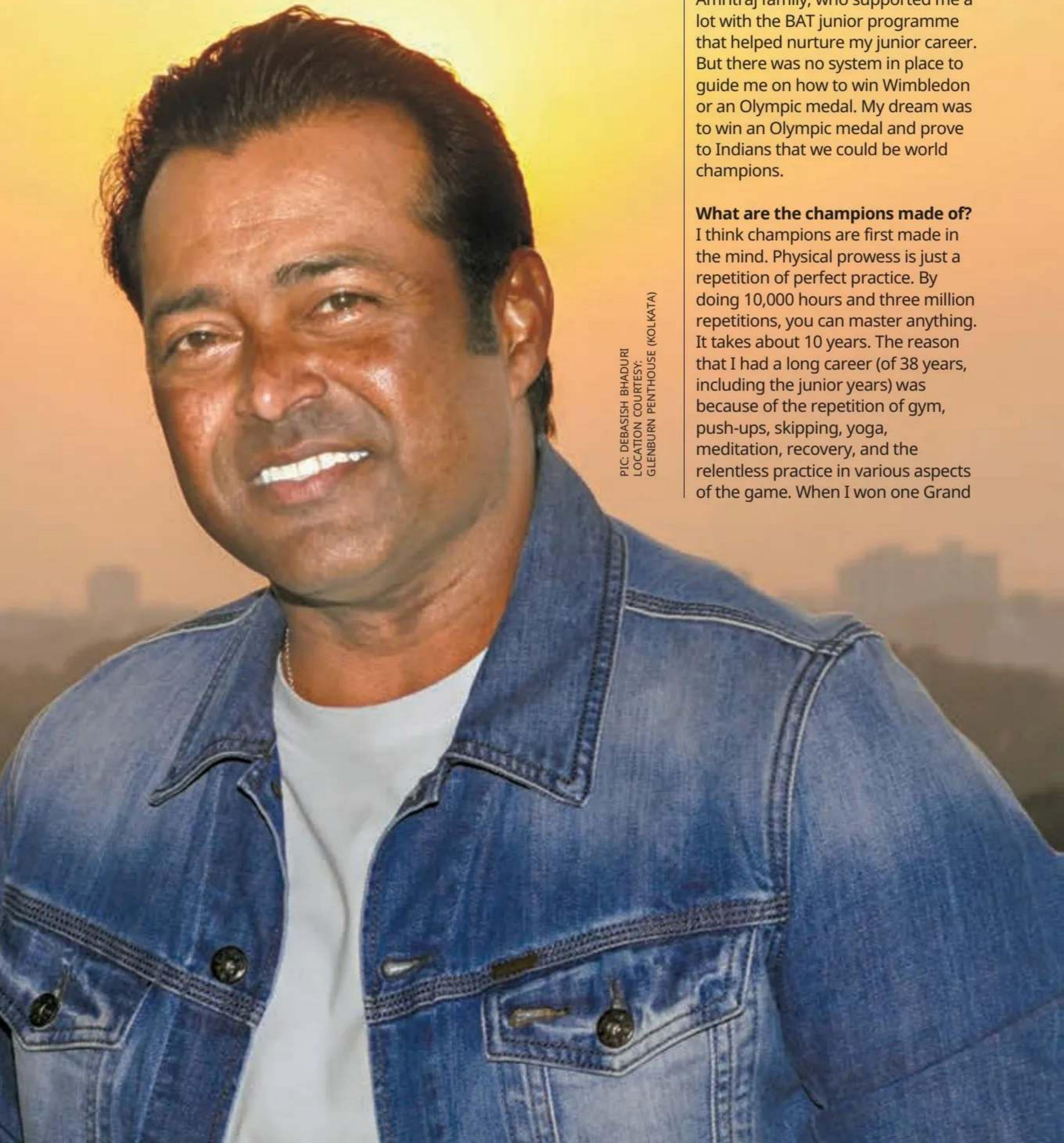
Being born into a legacy is a great responsibility. I could understand, at a very young age, what that responsibility meant. It was more about playing for my family and trying to emulate what my father had achieved (Vece Paes won the 1972 Olympic bronze in hockey). It was also about representing my school, city, and the wishes of more than a billion people in my country.

The responsibility became even bigger as I had to achieve excellence in a sport that did not have the infrastructure when I was growing up in the 1980s. There were no Grand Slam champions or even Asian champions to pave the path for me. Yes, there were a lot of good players like Ramanathan Krishnan, who served as a good role model, and I was lucky to travel with his son Ramesh. I am also grateful to the Amritraj family, who supported me a lot with the BAT junior programme that helped nurture my junior career. But there was no system in place to guide me on how to win Wimbledon or an Olympic medal. My dream was to win an Olympic medal and prove to Indians that we could be world champions.

What are the champions made of?

I think champions are first made in the mind. Physical prowess is just a repetition of perfect practice. By doing 10,000 hours and three million repetitions, you can master anything. It takes about 10 years. The reason that I had a long career (of 38 years, including the junior years) was because of the repetition of gym, push-ups, skipping, yoga, meditation, recovery, and the relentless practice in various aspects of the game. When I won one Grand

PIC: DEBASISH BHADURI
LOCATION COURTESY:
GLENBURN PENTHOUSE (KOLKATA)





For the people, of the people: "For me, it was about representing my school, city, and the wishes of more than a billion people in my country," says Paes. DEBASISH BHADURI

Slam, people said it was a fluke. Then I did it the second time, and they called it a fluke again. I won the four slams on all the surfaces after that, and it continued, and now I am sitting on 20 Slam titles. It was a humbling experience, and it was the determination to prove myself again and again that got me to the position where I stand now.

Champions are made of intelligence, grit, passion to live out big dreams, and the ability to stand up every time you fall. Champions are made of special stuff, and it is all out there in the mind. The ability to make a simple decision under pressure is what separates

champions from normal sportspersons. You can get lucky once, but repeating that success over and over again is what makes a champion.

By the time you travelled to Chennai at the age of 11, India had won a cricket World Cup in 1983 and Olympic medals in hockey. But what inspired you to take up tennis, which was then considered a niche sport?

I had a simple and single-minded dream, and that was to prove to the world that, as Indians, we could win Olympic medals in individual sports. We had medals in field hockey, but in individual sporting events, it was a long wait since KD Jadhav's bronze medal in 1952. There were no guidelines that could teach us how to win and be successful in an individual sport like tennis. So, becoming a pioneer in that field took great

hardships. I hitch-hiked through Europe, and I had to sleep in locker rooms as there was no money to book a hotel room. I was even mugged in New York, but those things only kept me going. It was a journey to be the only Indian on tour for a large part because, by then, Ramanathan Krishnan had retired, as had Vijay (Amritraj) and Ramesh (Krishnan). Before I picked Mahesh (Bhupathi) for doubles, there were no other Indians, so travelling alone on ATP tours was not easy.

That mugging episode in New York also left a scar on your chest. So, when things got difficult or lonely, did that scar remind you of your dream and ensure you did not give up?

Hundred per cent! I see that scar every single time I put on a match shirt. Every single night I went to bed, missing home, I reminded myself of

the years of sacrifice and the hard work I had already put in. There was no other option for me but to be successful. I grew up in a generation where Indian athletes were perceived to be submissive and a bit soft, and that's one of the reasons why I became so rugged. That's one of the reasons why I could come back from losing matches or get through the hard years of missing home. It was not easy to be far away from home and miss out on several festivals and occasions, be it birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, New Year's, or Diwali. I gave up my whole youth and a lot of family life for 38 years and dedicated everything to my sport and craft. Everything was dedicated to my country and our people.

Does it hurt to see that nobody has carried forward your legacy?

What's ailing Indian tennis today?

I feel sad right now, looking at the state of Indian tennis. It's sad to see that the tradition has not been continued. That being said, I have tremendous respect for the players who, without funding, a support system, or any real guidance, are still out there, persevering to pursue a professional tennis career, even though there are so many other options that are out there that are even better or safer.

So, it almost seems like it has come back to square one. I played across three decades, but now we are back to a phase where individuals are trying to muster up the courage, the finances, the knowledge, and the support system to be even out there. Individual tennis players have come out and said, 'I need funding' and that's a sad realisation.

Tennis is one of the toughest sports on the planet. As a sport, it is demanding, and it's also hard physically, mentally, and financially.

A lot of sports are moving to crowd-funding models these days. Is that the way forward for Indian tennis as well?

When you are looking at any form of funding, people are looking for returns on that funding. They're not running a charity. They're looking for

some sort of marketing behind it, some sort of publicity behind it, and some sort of return on the money that they spend on it. Otherwise, they would rather put it in the equity market, where they get a solid return. So, in that sense, it's also an ecosystem that needs to be created, not just for tennis but for all Olympic sports. The BCCI is doing a phenomenal job with the system that they've created to not just look after their past champions and their past cricketers, but to also nurture the present athletes and, more importantly, to create over 100,000 cricket clubs around the country. Today, I would be surprised if there were even 100,000 tennis players in the country!

And here, you have 100,000 cricket clubs, so a minimum of 11 in each club. So, you see the numbers that are being churned and produced. Very much like tennis, cricket is not a cheap sport; you need a kit, and then there are coaching, diet, and transportation costs. BCCI's model can be replicated by the governing bodies of other sports.

Do you think that at a time when Indian tennis is at a crossroads, a legend like you should perhaps get into administration and try to get the house in order?

My expertise lies in the nurturing of talent and sports education. So, I have a business model where I am taking my father's (Dr Vece Paes) sixty years of sports science, my Olympic-winning mentality knowledge, and clubbing knowledge and spreading it to the youth of the entire country through sports education in schools, colleges, tier-2 and tier-3 centres, and in rural areas.

I think our real sporting talent lies in those rural areas.

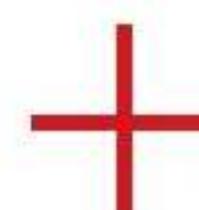
In the metros, the kids have more options — eSports or gaming — but the options are still limited in rural areas. So, that's where I want to cater. I want to go out there, recognise talents, test those talents, nurture them, and ensure that they are injury-free with the help of sports science. It's a long process, as you are picking kids when they are young, and it takes hours and hours to create champions out of them.

But then, if Leander Paes can mentor Stefanos Tsitsipas, why can't he work more closely with the current Indian players? Do they not approach you?

(Laughs) I get calls from Prajesh (Gunneswaran), and he would ask about his equipment or from Arjun Kadhe, who talks about his fitness regime. I get calls from a lot of youngsters who ask about their physical fitness, mental fitness, or diet, but it's just that we don't speak about it. That's personal friendship. Tsitsipas' manager called me to work with him, and it was a learning experience.

But at the end of the day, my work involves the masses, and it's about going out there and nurturing talents. One has lived at the top of the pyramid for three decades, so he knows how to pick athletes as and when they develop and create a winning atmosphere for them. So, whether it was speaking to RVS Rathore at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics about the mental side of things or when he finally won his medal, he said, 'Hey Lee, thanks so much...', so those are the things you do out of friendship.

You are asking me, What's wrong



I can't expect people to understand what my journey was. I felt it was better to lead by example than waste time explaining it



Deadly duo: Leander Paes (right) and Mahesh Bhupathi celebrate after beating Brazil's Marcelo Melo and Bruno Soares during the Davis Cup World Group play-off in Chennai on September 18, 2010. R.RAGU

with tennis today? Where's the feeder system? In football, hockey, and javelin, where's the feeder system? In such a huge country, how many have access to world-class tennis facilities? I am not talking about the infrastructure needed to play sports; I am not talking about the maidans. I am talking about the systematic training academy or high-performance centres that would

pick talents at the age of 10 or 12 and tell that person that they will stick with them for the next 20 years and make them a champion.

You look at countries like England, Spain, and Holland and their approaches to football. Or look at Australia and how they excel in every Olympic sport — the reason they have won six cricket World Cups is because there's a tradition there. Sport is a big part of their education curriculum, but that's not the case here.

Do you think the AITA needs a fresh approach and restructure its domestic tournaments?

The infrastructure of sports has

developed a lot in our country. The synthetic turfs have been introduced, we have floodlights, and the gyms are being used a lot more. But I think it's one thing to go to the gym to become a professional athlete and a world champion, and it's completely different to play the sport at an amateur level. However, that differentiation is not being recognised. There's a huge difference between the two, and we need to understand that.

When you partnered with Bhupathi and focused on doubles, many in the fraternity believed it was a wrong move to shift away from singles, which earned you an Olympic medal. But three decades later, do you feel it was an emotional decision, or was it the correct choice?

My realisation as a young boy was to achieve an Olympic medal in an individual sport. Not many people understood it, let alone wanted to realise that achievement for themselves. Not many people were willing to put in those hard yards or go through the lifestyle it takes to compete at seven Olympics.

People didn't understand it, so obviously people misunderstood me. The purpose that I had was basically to rewrite history books. Ironically, we're having this conversation when I'm being inducted into the Hall of Fame.

I can't expect people to understand what my journey was. I felt it was better to lead by example than waste time explaining it. I lived my life the best I could, and when I decided to shift to doubles and mixed doubles after enjoying success in singles, it came with the belief that we could win Grand Slams. And today, sitting here having won two junior singles Grand Slams and 18 senior doubles Grand Slams is a satisfying feeling. I have been very blessed to have had a phenomenal career, and I dedicate it to my team, which has been with me through thick and thin. In times like these, where everyone is busy projecting an image, on social media or in public, I just let my racquet do the talking.



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'A VERY, VERY SPECIAL PRESENT'

The legendary **Vijay Amritraj** who was inducted into the Tennis Hall of Fame shares his thoughts.

N. Sudarshan

sudarshan.narayanan@thehindu.co.in

Vijay Amritraj is a man of many talents. A successful player, broadcaster, commentator, administrator — the list is endless. It then came as no surprise when the Indian great was inducted into the Tennis Hall of Fame (contributor category) in December 2023. In an interview with *Sportstar*, the 70-year-old speaks about a recognition that "highlights his career from the time he was 7 to 70."

What does the award mean to you?

First and foremost, the fact is that I played this game for a long time. I've been very blessed to have played the Davis Cup for 20 years, at the highest level, singles and doubles, and led India to two Davis Cup finals (1974 and 1987). I have played with a fever and injuries after surgery too... The adrenaline kind of gets you to do all these things. More so when you had a very, very strong connection to the Davis Cup and Wimbledon and how Indians felt about these two [competitions]. On court, you're always an Indian, and that Tricolour is going to come out, and the anthem is going to be played. To me, that mattered just as much as

winning. And I carried that [feeling] post my playing career as well.

In 2022, I was awarded the Golden Achievement Award (for 2021) by the International Tennis Federation (ITF) and the International Tennis Hall of Fame (ITHF). It was for those who contributed to the sport [in administration, promotion, education, etc.]. That was a big occasion, and I don't think a player had won that before. And there were a lot of people who felt that I should have been in the Hall of Fame earlier. But it doesn't quite work that way. It's more a question of how your peers, past players, writers, journalists, and administrators who vote feel. If you have made a difference to the sport, represented your country and the sport with integrity, doing things for the game worldwide. The [Hall of Fame] award kind of highlights that, and it came a day before my 70th birthday. So, it was a very, very special present.

You have joined the likes of John Barrett (former player and Wimbledon commentator), Nick Bollettieri (celebrated coach), and other illustrious names. How does that feel?

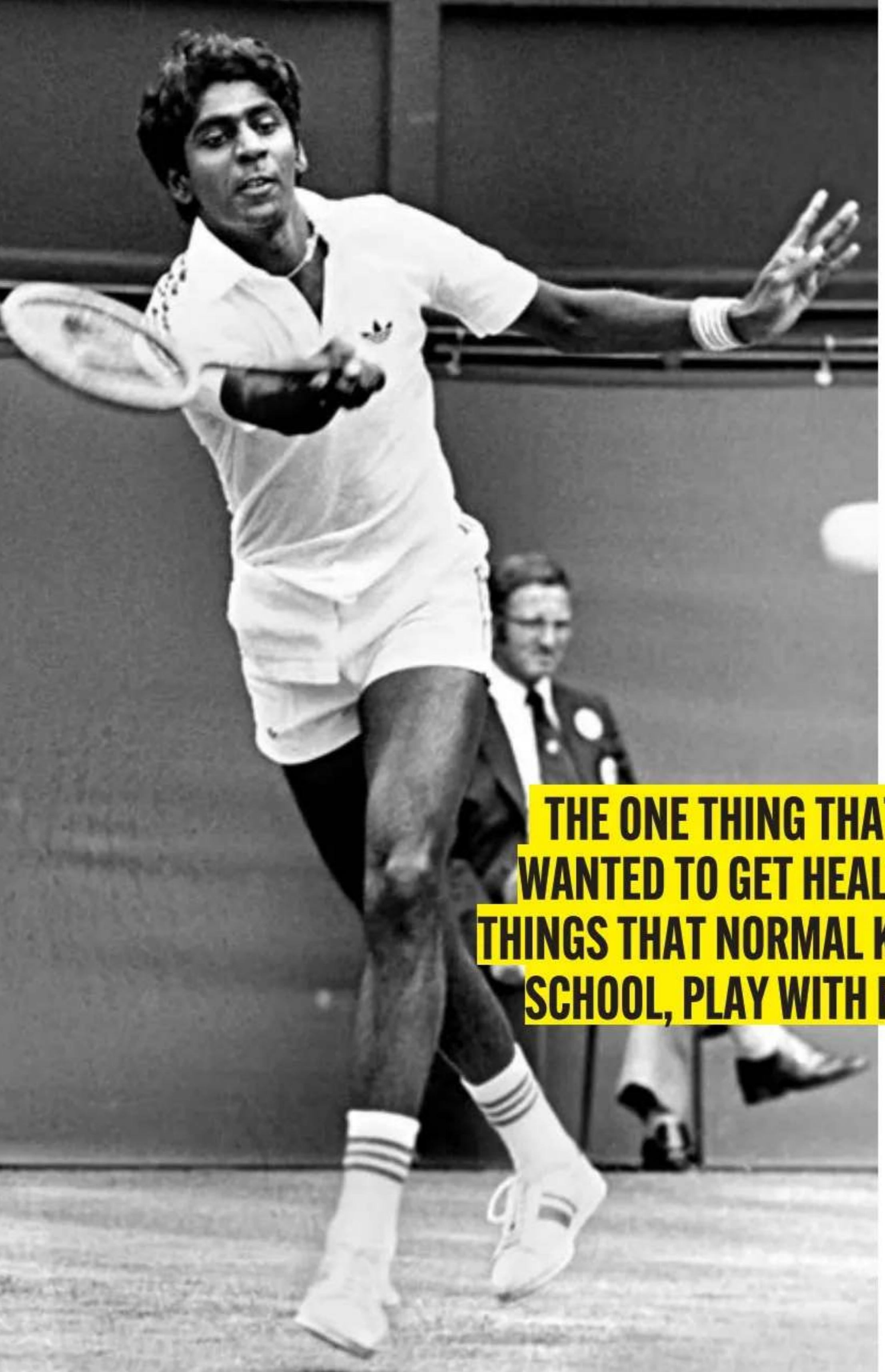
The contributor category is very, very special to me. It is not easily given. You have to be in this for a long time and earn your right by making a difference to the sport by either writing about it, being on television or in administration, and so forth. Needless to say, my tennis career was the first part of it, and my contribution continued thereafter. But all of it together is what enhances the package. From the time I played for the first time overseas, there was no Indian professional athlete at that time. So, the things that I did reflected on all Indians. I came from a unique place because tennis was a sport of the West at the time. So, all those things mattered.

Looking back at your playing career, you reached two Davis Cup finals, made singles quarters at Slams, won more than a dozen titles on the Tour, and were in the top-20. When you started as a child, did you ever imagine achieving any of these?

Oh, my goodness! Far from it. The dream was to be able to get healthy and go to school. I was not healthy and was a bad student. My mother sat in class for me to take notes and



GETTY IMAGES



Sepia-tinted in memory: Vijay Amritraj competing against the defending champion, Bjorn Borg of Sweden, in the men's singles second round match at Wimbledon, in London, on June 26, 1979. GETTY IMAGES

would do — go to school, play with friends, fly kites, and all of that. But it was interesting to see what drove my parents, especially my mother. They could have decided, 'Listen, let's make him good enough to just go to school, pass his exam, and eventually get a job'. But that wasn't the case. They wanted to also not leave me behind because Anand [Amritraj], the older boy, was healthy, first in class, and he won the junior [tennis] championships pretty early. So, they didn't want me to be

THE ONE THING THAT DROVE ME WAS THAT I WANTED TO GET HEALTHY ENOUGH TO DO THE THINGS THAT NORMAL KIDS WOULD DO – GO TO SCHOOL, PLAY WITH FRIENDS, AND FLY KITES

teach me in the hospital. It was a great challenge for my parents. Let me put it this way: I always told them, 'If you didn't have me, you would have thought parenting was easy.' The aspect of a dream came through only after I started to believe that I could win. I won my first tournament as a schoolboy at 13 and a half, and then I won the National Championships, beating [Ramanathan] Krishnan in the final

(1972). Those were two landmark matches that made me believe. One year later, I was in the top-10 at 19, beating [Rod] Laver and [Jimmy] Connors. So, it all rapidly came about.

What drove you to be the player you were and the person you are? The one thing that drove me was that I wanted to get healthy enough to do the things that normal kids

left behind.

And as talent or luck would have it, I won the Nationals and the Asian Championships and reached the quarterfinals at Wimbledon and then the US Open back-to-back (1973). I ended up beating Laver at the [U.S.] Open, which put India firmly on the global tennis map. That was the big one in the Open Era (1968 onwards). This also made the West believe I was a force to be reckoned with. I did reach four quarterfinals at the Grand Slams, two at Wimbledon, and two at the [U.S.] Open. I made two Davis Cup finals; the only occasions India has been there in the Open Era. All these things mattered a lot to me.

The other hats you have donned... like helming the Vijay Amritraj Foundation (VAF), the Britannia



Good friends: Bjorn Borg and Vijay Amritraj exchange pleasantries on the sidelines of the Bengaluru Open ATP Challenger event in 2023.

K. MURALIKUMAR

Amritraj Tennis (BAT) academy, being the president of the ATP Player Council (1989–93), a tournament director, commentator, and now the president of the Tamil Nadu Tennis Association (TNTA)... How did you manage all of these, and where does the energy come from?

When I finished my last Wimbledon (1990), I started doing television right away when tennis broadcasts started in India. It was a new challenge to be able to feed an audience that hadn't seen it before and to be able to share with them my thoughts and what the feelings were of a tennis player at Wimbledon. But at the same time, keep it entertaining so that [even] people who didn't like tennis would want to watch. I used the Dan Maskell phrase 'less is more' and didn't go on talking because it was a

visual and not like radio. That went on for 25 years.

I also wanted to replicate what my parents did for me [by helping] when I was young. And so when the United Nations (UN) asked me to serve as a Messenger of Peace, I served just under seven years for Secretary General Kofi Annan.

That opened my eyes further to what the world was and what the UN agencies did. I went to places I never thought I would visit because they weren't in Paris, London, or New York all the time. When my term at the UN ended, I started my foundation [VAF] to be able to help the needy in India.

In the meantime, I served as president [ATP Player Council] when we were building the ATP Tour as we know it today. Myself, Larry Scott, Tim Mayotte, Mark Miles, and all of us. These gave me a feeling of serving the sport that had given me so much, starting with my health.

About the BAT academy in Chennai....

Let me tell you how that got started. A very dear friend of mine was the

late Rajan Pillai, who was chairman of Britannia. I was on the board of Britannia because of him. Whenever I had a good year [results-wise], we didn't talk about the future of tennis in India.

When I had a bad year, Rajan would be like, 'Hey, what are we going to do after you?' He was a great lover of the game. One fine day, he said, 'Why don't Britannia and you get together and let's start something that is only an excellence programme? You design it and pick the guys; Britannia will fund it fully'. I said I could only do it if my mother agreed to be in charge. Mom said she would, and that's how we started in 1985.

And in that first set of eight kids was Leander Paes. It's amazing that as we sit today, Leander is in the player category at the Hall of Fame. It is like doubling the joy for me because he came out of a programme I helped start. For five years, he was with us [at BAT]. He won junior Wimbledon when he was with us. So, I feel even more bullish about what we've achieved this year at the Hall of Fame.



FOR MORE
STORIES

Top of the pile: By winning three of the four majors in 2023, Novak Djokovic set several records. GETTY IMAGES



VINTAGE 2023

Let's look back at the highlights of a memorable and often surprising year in tennis.

Paul Fein

BEST MEN'S PLAYER

No contest here. By winning three of the four majors in 2023, Novak Djokovic set several records. The most popular and important one is his total of 24 Grand Slam titles, two more than Rafael Nadal and the same as Margaret Court, the women's leader. Three other records attest to his greatness, consistency, and longevity. The 36-year-old Serb has captured 24 of 72 career majors he's played — an astounding 33.3% — has reached the final in 36 of 72 majors played (50.0%), and the semifinals in 47 of 72 majors played (65.3%). Novak

also won a record seventh ATP Finals along with Masters 1000 tournaments at Cincinnati and Paris to extend his career record to 40.

BEST WOMEN'S PLAYER

Four players divvied up the prestigious Grand Slam tournaments: Aryna Sabalenka (Australian Open), Iga Świątek (Roland Garros), Markéta Vondroušová (Wimbledon), and Coco

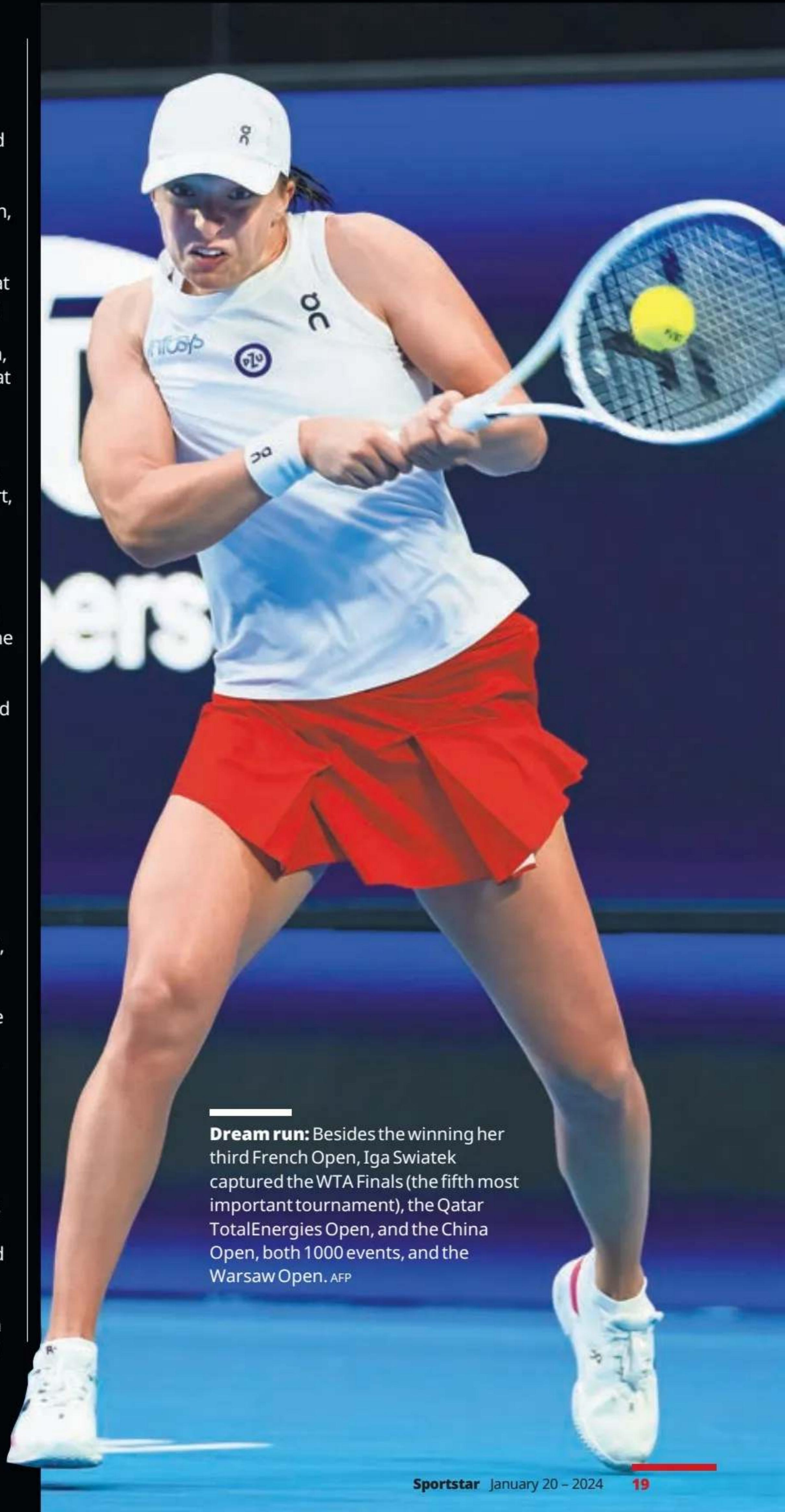
Gauff (US Open). Despite this seeming parity, Świątek deserves this accolade over Sabalenka. Besides winning her third French Open, the 22-year-old Pole captured the WTA Finals (the fifth most important tournament), the Qatar TotalEnergies Open, the China Open, both 1000 events, and the Warsaw Open. Showing a high level of consistency, Iga reached the finals at Madrid, Dubai, and Stuttgart, along with the semifinals at Indian Wells, Montreal, and Cincinnati. Sabalenka, who finally overcame the nerves that plagued her shaky serve, finished a strong second. The power-hitting Belarusian captured her first major at Melbourne, made the final at the US Open, Indian Wells, and Stuttgart, and also grabbed titles at Madrid and Adelaide.

BEST MEN'S MATCH

Revenge was on Djokovic's mind when he faced his biggest rival of the present era, World No. 1 Carlos Alcaraz, in the Cincinnati final, five weeks after the sensational Spaniard dethroned him at Wimbledon. In a match where experience barely prevailed over youth, Djokovic, 36, had to stave off a match point to surmount Alcaraz, 20, in a thriller that lasted 3 hours, 49 minutes in sweltering conditions that touched 90° F. This was also the longest best-of-three-set final in ATP tour history, since 1990, and finished 5-7, 7-6 (7), 7-6 (4). "This was one of the most exciting matches I've ever played in any tournament. It felt like a Grand Slam," said an ecstatic Djokovic, who ripped off his shirt to celebrate, a gesture he typically reserves for a major final.

BEST WOMEN'S MATCH

The Australian Open final resembled a heavyweight title fight, with two sluggers trading heavy punches for 12 rounds. Fifth-seeded Sabalenka exorcised the ghosts of AO 2022 — when she averaged more than 12 double faults a match and was ousted in the fourth round — to overcome reigning Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina 4-6, 6-3, 6-4. The



Dream run: Besides the winning her third French Open, Iga Świątek captured the WTA Finals (the fifth most important tournament), the Qatar TotalEnergies Open, and the China Open, both 1000 events, and the Warsaw Open. AFP



Too good: The relentlessly aggressive Aryna Sabalenka whacked an astounding 51 winners, an Open Era record, during the two-hour, 28-minute battle against Elena Rybakina in the Australian Open final.

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After seizing her first Grand Slam crown on her fourth championship point, an ecstatic Sabalenka said, “[It] is the best day of my life right now.”



relentlessly aggressive 24-year-old Belarusian whacked an astounding 51 winners, an Open Era record, during the two-hour, 28-minute battle. After seizing her first Grand Slam crown on her fourth championship point, an ecstatic Sabalenka said, “[It] is the best day of my life right now. I’m super happy that I was able to handle all those emotions and win this one.”

BEST MEN’S CAREER COMEBACK

Alexander Zverev overcame a horrific ankle injury that tore three ligaments and left him writhing in pain during his 2022 French Open semifinal against Nadal. The mishap ended the former world No. 2’s season that year. Until the spring of 2023, Zverev, still in pain and unable

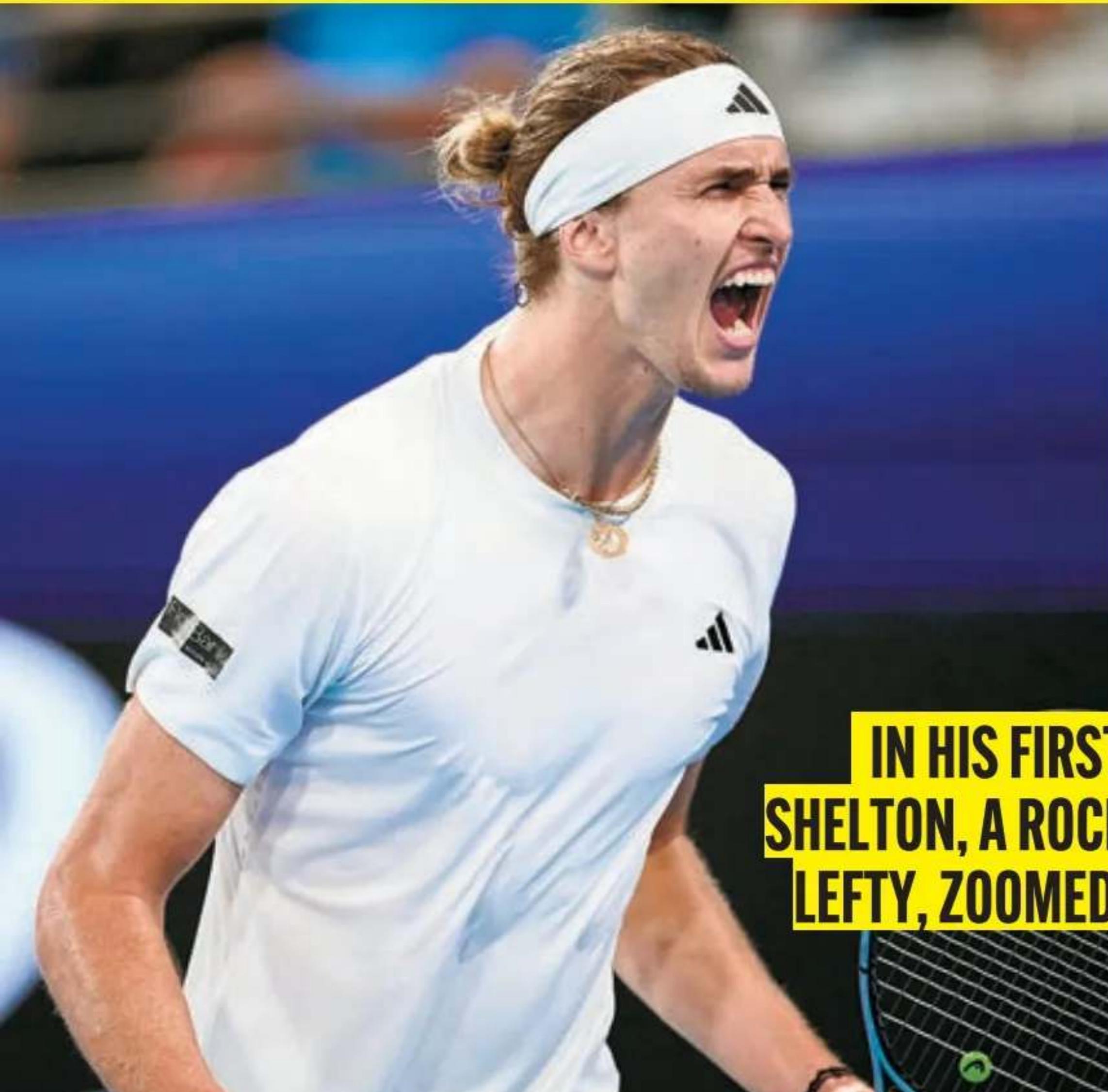
Chaos in Cincinnati: In a match where experience barely prevailed over youth. Djokovic, 36, had to stave off a match point to surmount Carlos Alcaraz, 20, in a thriller that lasted 3 hours, 49 minutes. GETTY IMAGES

to move the way he used to, won only three of his first nine matches and lost his first seven encounters with top-10 opponents. But he exorcised any demons at Roland Garros 2023 by making the semifinals for a third straight year — despite not being allowed to give himself a diabetes insulin injection on court and having to take a bathroom break for it. The 6’6” rocket server capped his impressive comeback when he qualified for the

Nitto ATP Finals, where he notched big wins over Alcaraz and Andrey Rublev to finish the year ranked No. 7.

BEST WOMEN’S CAREER COMEBACK

Neither giving birth to her first child in 2022 nor the anguish of her homeland’s war against Russia’s unprovoked invasion slowed the determined comeback of Elina Svitolina. Starting the season in April ranked 1,344, the 29-year-old Ukrainian won a 500 event in Strasbourg and, hitting harder than ever, made the Roland Garros quarterfinals and Wimbledon semifinals, pulling off a big 7-5, 6-7, 6-2 quarterfinal upset over No. 1 Iga Swiatek to finish No. 25. Hats (or



Grit and grind: Alexander Zverev overcame a horrific ankle injury that tore three ligaments and left him writhing in pain during his 2022 French Open semifinal against Rafael Nadal.

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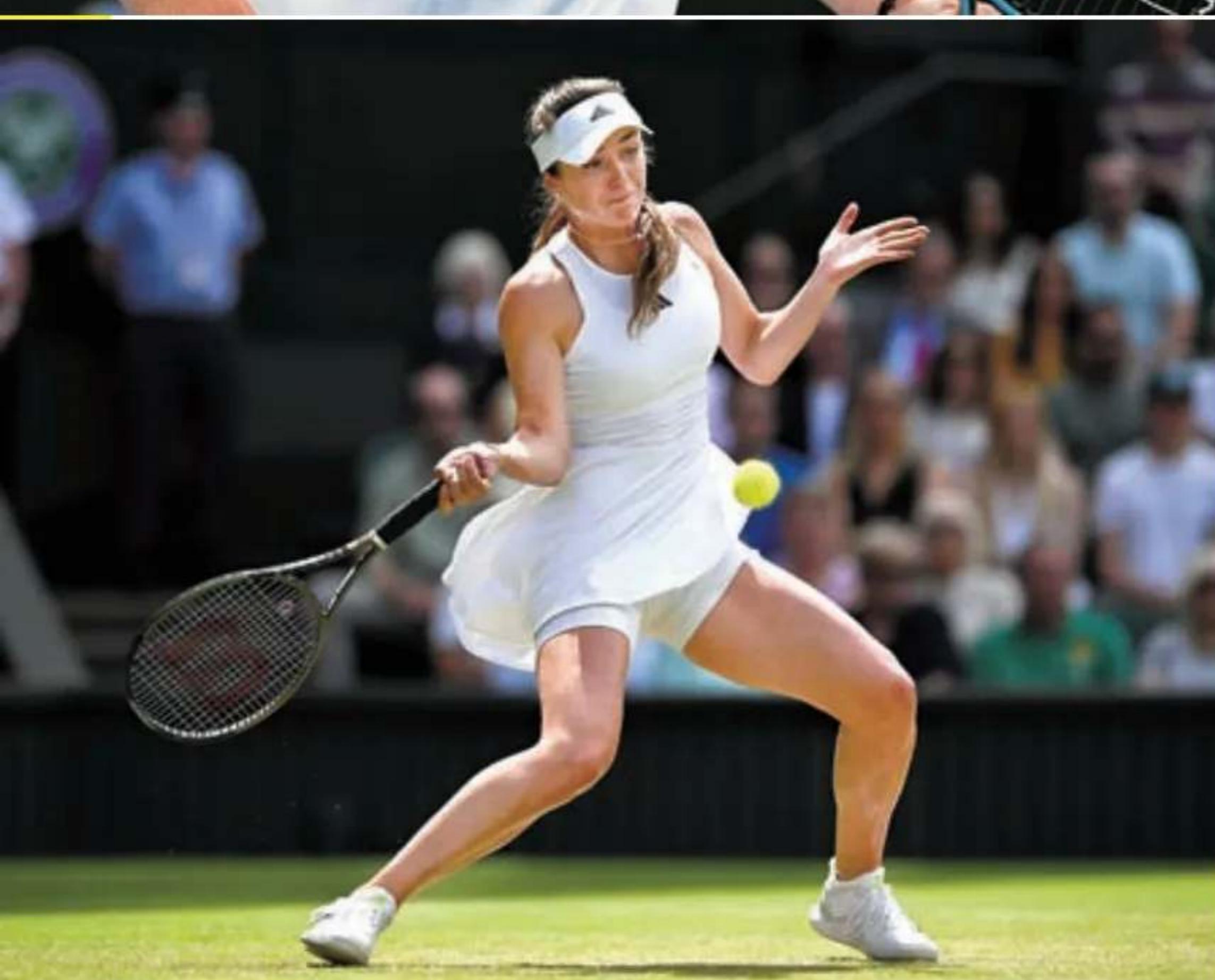
rather visors) off also to Sofia Kenin. The Russian-born American slumped badly after winning the Australian Open and making the French Open final in 2020 but rebounded in 2023 by upsetting Gauff at Wimbledon and ascending from No. 227 to No. 33.

MOST IMPROVED MEN'S PLAYER

A late-season surge gave Jannik Sinner a slight edge over Ben Shelton. With an improved net game and touch shots complementing Sinner's tremendous power, the 22-year-old led Italy to the Davis Cup title and reached the final at the Nitto ATP Finals. Sinner climbed from No. 15 to a career-high No. 4 by capturing four titles, including his first Masters 1000 in Toronto, and making his first major semifinal at Wimbledon. In his first full pro season, Shelton, a rocket-serving American lefty, zoomed from No. 287 to No. 17, thanks mostly to reaching the US Open semifinals — with wins over 10th-seeded Frances Tiafoe and No. 14 Tommy Paul — and the Australian Open quarterfinals.

MOST IMPROVED WOMEN'S PLAYER

My vote goes to Jasmine Paolini. The undersized (5'4") but highly consistent Italian had a modest ranking rise from No. 62 to No. 34, which didn't reflect her excellent season. Paolini reached 250 event finals at Jasmin Open Monastir and



Mixed emotions: Neither giving birth to her first child in 2022 nor the anguish of her homeland's war against Russia's unprovoked invasion slowed the determined comeback of Elina Svitolina. GETTYIMAGES

Surprise package: Jasmine Paolini reached 250 event finals at Jasmin Open Monastir and Palermo Ladies Open, won a 125 tournament at Firenze Ladies Open, and notched excellent wins over No. 4 Elena Rybakina, No. 10 Caroline Garcia, No. 11 Daria Kasatkina, and No. 15 Madison Keys. AFP

Palermo Ladies Open, won a 125 tournament at Firenze Ladies Open, and notched up excellent wins over No. 4 Rybakina, No. 10 Caroline Garcia, No. 11 Daria Kasatkina, and No. 15 Madison Keys. In second place, late-blooming (29) Chinese Zhu Lin climbed from No. 84 to No. 37, captured the Thailand Open (250), made the final at the Japan Open (250), and upset No. 6 Maria Sakkari and Garcia.

BEST MEN'S UPSET

"I have watched Daniil play for my entire junior career. I've always dreamed of playing on this court and with these kinds of players. In my best dreams, I've beaten them. So, it's a dream come true," said Thiago Seyboth Wild in his on-court interview after he knocked out No. 2 seed Daniil Medvedev 7-6 (5), 6-7 (6), 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 in a first round shocker at the French Open. The 172nd-ranked qualifier from Brazil outhit Medvedev by 69 winners to 45, including 47-15 on the forehand, belting a forehand winner on match point. Seyboth Wild, who hadn't even played a tour-level main-draw match at all in 2023, instead competing on the lower-level ATP Challenger Tour, called it "the happiest day of my life."

BEST WOMEN'S UPSET

Barbora Krejcikova, searching for the form that won the 2021 French Open, hadn't defeated a Top 10 player in over a year. At the Dubai Open, the versatile No. 30-ranked Czech successively stunned No. 2 Sabalenka, No. 3 Jessica Pegula, and No. 1 Swiatek to become only the third player to vanquish the reigning Top 3 to capture a title. All these upsets deserve consideration, but Krejcikova's 6-4, 6-2 clinic against Swiatek gets the award. Second place goes to Sofia Kenin, who



Bright future: With an improved net game and touch shots complementing his tremendous power, the 22-year-old Jannik Sinner led Italy to the Davis Cup title and reached the final at the Nitto ATP Finals. AP



Winners galore: Thiago Seyboth Wild from Brazil outhit Daniil Medvedev by 69 winners to 45, including 47-15 on the forehand during their first round match at the French Open. GETTYIMAGES

plummeted to No. 128 and had to qualify at Wimbledon. The determined American displayed rock-solid groundstrokes to upset No. 7 Gauff 6-4, 4-6, 6-2 in the first round. Kenin, the 2020 Australian

TOKITO ODA BECAME THE YOUNGEST GENTLEMEN'S CHAMPION IN WIMBLEDON HISTORY AND GAINED POPULARITY WITH HIS DYNAMIC SHOT MAKING AND PASSIONATE CELEBRATIONS

Open champion and former No. 4, said, "I know where I was and where I should be."

BEST WHEELCHAIR TEEN PHENOM

Tokito Oda, a 17-year-old Japanese, became the youngest men's wheelchair world No. 1 in history by dethroning Great Britain's Alfie Hewett 6-1, 6-4 in the French Open final.

"I am feeling like it is the happiest day of my life," Oda, a guitar-playing, martial arts fan, said. "I was really happy to get my two dreams on one day: to be the youngest player as the No. 1 in the world and to win my first Grand Slam title."

Oda's outstanding backhand proved vital throughout an entertaining final, with none better than a superb winner to break serve at 5-4 in the second set. Six weeks later, the charismatic Oda became the youngest gentlemen's champion in Wimbledon history and gained popularity with his dynamic shot-making and passionate celebrations.



Top gear: At the Dubai Open, Barbora Krejcikova stunned No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka, No. 3 Jessica Pegula, and No. 1 Iga Swiatek to become only the third player to vanquish the reigning Top 3 to capture a title. GETTY IMAGES

BEST WHEELCHAIR TENNIS QUEEN
In the first wheelchair final on Court Philippe Chatrier, World No. 1 Diede de Groot sparkled with a 6-4, 6-1 victory over perennial rival Yui Kamiji. It was her seventh successive Grand Slam wheelchair singles title and 14th overall, second only to her legendary Dutch compatriot Esther Vergeer's record of 21.

"I think what motivates me in finding a new way is that I know that my rivals are doing the same thing for me," said de Groot after earning her third Roland-Garros title. "I know that they are trying to keep improving themselves to basically chase me or beat me, and I have to do the same in order to stay on top. I can't sit still, because that's when they pass me. Yeah, I need to keep working."



Standard procedure: In the first wheelchair final on Court Philippe Chatrier, World No. 1 Diede de Groot sparkled with a 6-4, 6-1 victory over perennial rival Yui Kamiji. It was her seventh successive Grand Slam wheelchair singles title and 14th overall. GETTY IMAGES



Slice of history: Tokito Oda, a 17-year-old Japanese, became the youngest men's wheelchair world No. 1 in history by dethroning Great Britain's Alfie Hewett 6-1, 6-4 in the French Open final. GETTY IMAGES

» CENTURION TEST PHOTOLINE
INDIA-SOUTH AFRICA



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1st

Lone warrior:

India's first innings was propped up by a valiant hundred from K. L. Rahul, who became the first overseas batter to score two centuries in Centurion. REUTERS



2nd

Unerring: Kagiso Rabada was at his imperial best, getting a five-for in the first innings and nabbing the prized wicket of Indian skipper Rohit Sharma in both essays. GETTY IMAGES



3rd

Resolute: Playing his farewell series, Dean Elgar batted India out of the game with a patient 185 in the first innings at his home ground. AFP



4th

Back in whites: Jasprit Bumrah marked his return to Test cricket with a four-wicket haul. The right-arm pacer was the only Indian bowler who troubled the South African batters. AP



5th

Destructive: Debutant Nandre Burger proved to be a menacing presence for the Indian batters. The tall left-arm quick ended with seven wickets from the Test.

GETTY IMAGES



6th

Fighting a losing battle: Virat Kohli waged a lonely battle in the second innings, scoring a fluent 76, while the rest of the team collapsed around him.

PTI



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



INDIA MUST PLAY MORE FIRST-CLASS MATCHES IN PREPARATION FOR OVERSEAS SERIES

The first Test defeat against South Africa is **pretty much** a pattern for Indian teams touring the SENA countries, where they lose the first Test of the series and then play catch-up.

India's defeat in the first Test match against South Africa in Centurion came as a bit of a shock. It was a shock simply because when you looked at the two squads, you found that not only were the Indians more experienced, but they also looked a lot classier in terms of sheer talent. However, what the Test match showed us once again was that temperament is what separated the two teams. The ordinary can do great things if he has the determination to do so, and that's what we saw from almost all the Proteas players.

Not only did Dean Elgar, playing in his last series, show his usual 'khadoos' attitude, but he also shepherded debutant David Bedingham and later Marco Jansen, with whom he had huge partnerships that demoralised the Indians and took the game away. If there was hope that the Indians would learn from Elgar's example, that was extinguished pretty quickly after the Indian skipper, Rohit Sharma, got a beauty from Kagiso Rabada and young Yashasvi Jaiswal a

snorter from Nandre Burger. Though Virat Kohli fought bravely, the others capitulated tamely without much resistance, and that added to the feeling of frustration.

The defeat is pretty much a pattern for Indian teams touring the SENA countries, where they lose the first Test of the series and then play catch-up for the remainder of the series.

The next big series overseas is exactly a year away in Australia, and if India need to keep the winning momentum of the previous two tours there, then the planning must start now. The FTP suggests that India is playing two Tests against Bangladesh and three Tests against New Zealand at home from the end of September to early November.

The first Test of a five-match series in Australia will likely start in early December, so it does give the Indians time to play a couple, if not more, first-class games before the series. Rohit said after the loss in Centurion that these games are no good because the host countries put up second-rate teams, and they get to play



Humbling defeat: India was thrashed by an innings and 32 runs by South Africa in the first Test in Centurion. GETTY IMAGES

on slow pitches. Even if that is true, isn't it better to get into a rhythm against such opposition than stay at home? Not only the batters can get some runs under their belts, but the bowlers can also go flat out and test themselves.

With the relations between the two boards being good, it would make sense if the Indian cricket board wrote to its counterpart and asked for matches against their national champions or the 'A' team before the first Test. Then, in the week or so gap between the

second and third Tests and between the fourth and fifth Tests, there could be another game so that the reserve players get to show their mettle. Those who haven't gotten wickets or tons in the earlier Tests will also have an opportunity to get their form and rhythm back for the Tests to follow. The time to give in to what the seniors want is gone, for there have been no positive results. It's time to simply think of the best for Indian cricket and not what suits a few individuals, however great they may be.



The time to give in to what the seniors want is gone, for there have been no positive results, as has been seen.

» PHOTOLINE
INDIA-SOUTH AFRICA ODIs



1st

Setting the 'pace': Indian seamer Arshdeep Singh picked up five wickets for 37 runs in his 10 overs, while Avesh Khan snapped up four for 27 in eight overs as South Africa was bowled out for 116 in the first one-day international at The Wanderers. AP



2nd

Memorable start: Left-handed opener Sai Sudharsan scored an unbeaten 55 in 43 balls on his debut. He was supported by Shreyas Iyer, who made 52 from 45 balls as India waltzed to an eight-wicket victory to go 1-0 up in the series. AP



3rd

Blown away: Nandre Burger took three for 30 to help bundle out India for just 211 in 46.2 overs. Sai Sudharsan top-scored for India with 62 off 83 balls, two days after his unbeaten 55 on debut. AFP

4th

Shepherding the chase: South Africa opener Tony de Zorzi notched up his maiden ODI hundred, racking up 119 from 122 balls, to guide South Africa to an eight-wicket win over India and draw the three-match series 1-1 in Gqeberha. AFP



5th

One for the album: Sanju Samson struck 108 from 114 balls at Boland Park for his maiden ODI hundred as India posted 296-8 in 50 overs after being sent into bat. Samson put on 116 for the fourth wicket with Tilak Varma (52). GETTYIMAGES



6th

Emphatic victory: India sealed a 78-run win over South Africa to secure a 2-1 victory in the ODI series. It is only the second time India has won an ODI series in the Rainbow Nation. GETTYIMAGES



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» WOMEN'S ODIs
INDIA-AUSTRALIA

TEST QUEENS GET HARSH WHITE-BALL REALITY CHECK

For India, there are still **plenty** of questions to answer before it hosts the ICC ODI World Cup in 2025.

Listless form: Harmanpreet Kaur's scores of 9, 5, and 3 in the three ODIs against Australia compounded India's woes. SPORTZPICS/BCCI

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

lavanya.ln@thehindu.co.in

India's fortnight of basking in red ball glory was bookended by two crucial and thought-provoking white ball series: the T20Is against Heather Knight's England and the ODIs against Alyssa Healy's Australia, with both ending in defeats.

These two results assume significance when one switches to the big picture, with two ICC tournaments coming up in 18 months, one in each format. However, that conversation took a back seat when India excelled emphatically in the longest format of the game, coming good with bat, ball, and on the field.

It's easy to see why the Indians like Tests. As Deepti Sharma put it during the one-off Test against England,

"The format allows the player time to stage a comeback should they lose their way slightly." The luxury of time is what India did not have in its 0-3 drubbing at the hands of Australia in the latter's favourite format, the ODIs, with notes aplenty for the host nation as it works towards building a framework for the home One-Day World Cup.

Litmus test for debutants

India entered the ODI series with four uncapped players: Saika Ishaque, Titas Sadhu, Shreyanka Patil, and Mannat Kashyap, of whom three got their maiden ODI caps. Shreyanka's impressive run in the England T20Is continued against the Aussies. In two ODIs, she claimed four wickets but stood out for her ability to improvise and control the line and length. Her 91-kmph yorker

to dismiss Ashleigh Gardner in the third ODI was particularly satisfying to watch. Despite being in the opposite dugout, this would have made her Royal Challengers Bangalore teammate, Ellyse Perry, proud.

Saika and Mannat did not encounter such luck, with Saika conceding 48 runs in the six overs she got in the first game and Mannat conceding 30 runs in the three overs in the third ODI. Both bowlers were lacklustre on the field too. Against this background, one feels bad for the one uncapped player who missed out—Titas. The Under-19 World Cup winner has easily had the most facetime with bowling coach Troy Cooley and is often there in the Indian nets from start to finish. India's policy to tilt its combination in



FOR MORE STORIES



Dominant force: Phoebe Litchfield (above) finished the ODI series with 260 runs at 86.66, becoming the first woman to hit three 50-plus scores in a three-game ODI series both against and in India. Right: Off-spinner Shreyanka Patil provided a silver lining amidst the gloom for India.

EMMANUAL YOGINI & GETTY IMAGES

favour of its spin arsenal might have cost (for now) a talented player an opportunity to prove her worth against the best side in the world.

Age-old fault lines

"We've not played to our highest potential, especially in the fielding department. It's not up to the standard expected from the Indian women's team. I can assure you that we will work on it and come back stronger." This is what Jemimah Rodrigues had to say after the series defeat, which was sealed with a shocking 190-run mauling at the hands of the Aussies. Incidentally, head coach Amol Muzumdar, in one

of his earliest interactions with the press, cited fitness and fielding as priorities with the women's side. Add another 'F-form' to the mix.

Shafali Verma was dropped for the last two ODIs for her subpar run in the top order. However, does this conversation accommodate the stutters of captain Harmanpreet Kaur and Smriti Mandhana as well? Throughout this ODI series, the burden of constructing an innings or saving the chase came down to the middle and lower middle order.

Harmanpreet's scores of 9, 5, and 3 against Australia add to a few years of inconsistency with the bat. Mandhana, too, has been unable to convert her starts into big scores.

The team's decision to send Deepti Sharma over the explosive Pooja Vastrakar when the Indian chase in the second ODI needed to go at a brisk pace left fans and pundits flummoxed. Richa's elevation to number 3 is also puzzling, given that it not only puts her own aggressive game on the line but also makes a player like Jemimah, who is willing to become a floater in the batting order, collateral damage.

Communication is another issue. While the players and coach have visibly been working on encouraging honest conversations among the playing group, the selectors of the women's setup are insulated from queries and criticism. The committee, constituted by former India cricketers Neetu David, Renu Margrate, Arati Vaidya, Kalpana





Clean sweep: Australia thrashed India by 190 runs in an emphatic all-round display to seal a 3-0 ODI series win. EMMANUEL YOGINI

Venkatacha, and Shyama Dey Shaw, has never been mandated to address the media to explain team choices and omissions like the MSK Prasads, Chetan Sharma, and Ajit Agarkars have had to. Where are Shikha Pandey and Radha Yadav? What format is right-arm seamer Meghna Singh being kept aside for? What happens to players sidelined from playing contingents, and how are they motivated? Questions like these and more about several players who have fallen off the radar remain unanswered consequently.

The Aussie template

'Perform or perish' goes the

modus operandi of the Australian side.

There are several suitors for one position, but in the end, only one wins, with the others constantly snapping at the heels of the player who nudged ahead.

No one knows the art of winning World Cups better than Australia. In this ODI series in Mumbai, Australia worked on its weaknesses with the aim of either testing potential

replacements or giving players time to rework their strategy and return.

Healy, opting to bat in the third ODI, worked herself out of the slump that comes with long injuries to register an 85-ball 82.

In the second ODI, when Richa was inching close to what would have been a memorable ton, Australia looked out of the game entirely, with the bowlers unable to find a breakthrough. Healy brought

Another World Cup cycle paired with the same old problems isn't great news for India or its newly formed think tank



in Annabel Sutherland, and her three strikes turned the game on its head. She defended 16 runs off the last over, aided by Deepti's inability to time or position the ball in the gaps.

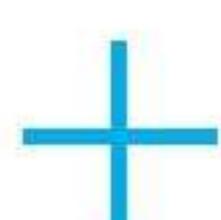
"Something about Australian sporting teams... we hang in there. We still believed we could win until the last ball, and that's what made us successful," Healy said after the game.

Another World Cup cycle paired with the same old problems isn't great news for India or its newly formed think tank, especially when the quadrennial event is being held at home.

Performing under pressure warrants more match practice and conditioning camps. Logical ruthlessness in the selection process

might not be a bad way to go. Red-ball cricket seemed to be Muzumdar's wheelhouse, but the white-ball game will test the coach-captain duo, especially with the gap narrowing between India and many other sides outside the holy three in the game.

Life in international women's cricket gives you very few instances where Australia doesn't enter a fixture as the automatic favourite. When you're a side that has, in the recent past, been a thorn in the side of a champion side, the possibilities against a transitioning unit were manifold, and India should not control+alt+delete (fielding coach Munish Bali's suggestion after the first ODI) how it squandered a fine chance to give the Aussies a taste of their own medicine.



HIGHLIGHTS

Australia won the 1st ODI by six wickets

Australia won the 2nd ODI by three runs

Australia won the 3rd ODI - by 190 runs

Phoebe Litchfield won the Player of the Series for scoring 260 runs and taking two stunning catches

Deepti Sharma got to 100 ODI wickets

Jemimah Rodrigues finished as India's highest run-scorer

Hunting in pairs

122}

The eighth-wicket partnership between Deepti Sharma and Pooja Vastrakar at the Wankhede Stadium in the first innings is the highest for any wicket from eight to 10 by any side against Australia in Women's Test cricket. It was only the second 100-plus stand against Australian women in a Test by a lower-order pair.

Highest partnership for wickets 8 to 10 against Australia in Women Tests

Runs	Wkt	Pair	For	Venue	Month, Year	Result
122	8th	Deepti Sharma & Pooja Vastrakar	Ind	Mumbai WS	Dec 2023	Won
100	9th	Heather Knight & Sophie Ecclestone	Eng	Canberra	Jan 2022	Drawn
87	8th	Carol Maret & Jill Saulbrey	NZ	Wellington	Mar 1975	Drawn
85	10th	Katherine Sciver-Brunt & Isha Guha	Eng	Worcester	Aug 2005	Won

Note: Only one other partnership of 156 runs, but for the seventh wicket between England's Heather Knight and Laura Marsh in Wormsley in August 2013 (drawn), has exceeded the Deepti-Pooja effort for a lower-order pair.



India's Deepti Sharma
(left) and Pooja Vastrakar. PTI

2}

The number of women batters to register a score of fifty-plus in each of their first four Test matches. Deepti Sharma, in the only Women's Test match against Australia at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai, emulated Australian Denise Alderman (sister of former Aussie pacer Terry Alderman) during her career-best knock of 78 in the first innings on 22 December 2023. A fifty in her next Test match will mean that Deepti will keep this record all to herself.

Women batters scoring a fifty in each of their first four Test matches of their careers

Denise Alderman (Australia)				
Scores	Opp	Venue	Month, Year	Result
84 & 20	Eng	Perth	Dec 1984	Drawn
121 & 1	Eng	Adelaide	Dec 1984	Lost
84	Eng	Brisbane	Jan 1985	Drawn
58 & 19	Eng	Gosford	Jan 1985	Won

Deepti Sharma (India)				
Scores	Opp	Venue	Month, Year	Result
29* & 54	Eng	Bristol	Jun 2021	Drawn
66 & 3*	Aus	Carrara	Sep 2021	Drawn
67 & 20	Eng	Navi Mumbai	Dec 2023	Won
78	Aus	Mumbai WS	Dec 2023	Won

Note: in her next Test match Denise Alderman made 43 & 23 in Bendigo in January 1985

187}

The first-innings lead for India Women in the Mumbai Test is now the highest conceded by Australia Women in Tests. Thus, this lead is India Women's fourth-highest gain in Tests. In the previous Test against England in Navi Mumbai, India achieved its biggest first-innings lead in Women's Test matches, as shown in the second table.

Biggest first innings lead conceded by Australia Women in Tests

Runs	Team1 (totals)	Team2 (totals)	Venue	Month, year	Result (for Aus)
187	Aus (219 & 261)	Ind (406 & 75/2)	Mumbai WS	Dec 2023	Lost by 8 wkts
158	Aus (131 & 232)	Eng (289 & 75/4)	Worcester	Aug 2005	Lost by 6 wkts
148	Aus (129 & 311)	NZ (277 & 88/8)	St. Kilda, Melbourne	Jan 1979	Match drawn

Biggest first innings lead gained by India Women in Tests

Runs	Team1 (totals)	Team2 (totals)	Venue	Month, year	Result (for Ind)
292	Ind (428 & 186/6d)	Eng (136 & 131)	Navi Mumbai	Dec 2023	Won by 347 runs
254	Ind (404/9d & 13/0)	SA (150 & 266)	Paarl	Mar 2002	Won by 10 wkts
208	Ind (307 & 98/5)	Eng (99 & 305)	Taunton	Aug 2006	Won by 5 wkts
187	Aus (219 & 261)	Ind (406 & 75/2)	Mumbai WS	Dec 2023	Won by 8 wkts

78} The career-best score for Deepti Sharma in Women's Test cricket at the Wankhede Stadium is now the highest individual score by any opponent batter while coming in at a batting position below five against Australia. However, Deepti missed registering the highest Test score by an Indian batter from positions 8 to 11 by two runs. While on debut, Sneh Rana's unbeaten 80 against England in Bristol in June 2021 is still the Indian record by a number eight.

Highest individual Test scores by batters from batting position 6 to 11 against Australia Women

Runs	Bat#	Batter	For	Venue	Month, Year	Result
78	8th	Deepti Sharma	Ind	Mumbai WS	Dec 2023	Won
70	6th	Chris Watmough	Eng	Adelaide	Dec 1984	Won
66	6th	Ruth Westbrook	Eng	Adelaide	Mar 1958	Drawn
66	6th	Deepti Sharma	Ind	Carrara	Sep 2021	Drawn
64	7th	Karen Smithies	Eng	Hove	Aug 1987	Drawn



India's Sneh Rana. GETTYIMAGES

Highest individual scores by Indian batters from batting position 8 to 11 in Women's Test cricket

Runs	Bat#	Batter	Opp	Venue	Month, Year	Result
80*	8th	Sneh Rana	Eng	Bristol	Jun 2021	Drawn
78	8th	Deepti Sharma	Aus	Mumbai WS	Dec 2023	Won
66	8th	Shyama Shaw	Eng	Hyderabad	Dec 1995	Drawn

3} The number of occasions when opponent sides have registered 400-plus totals against Australia Women in Tests. India Women, at the Wankhede Stadium, became the latest side to emulate England, who have achieved these totals on two separate occasions.

400-plus totals achieved by opponents against Australia in Women's Tests

Total	Opponent	Venue	Month, year	Result for opponent
463/10	England	Nottingham	June 2023	Lost by 89 runs
414/10	England	Guildford	August 1998	Drawn
406/10	India	Mumbai WS	December 2023	Won by 8 wickets

7} The number of victories achieved by India Women in Test cricket. Their latest win at the Wankhede Stadium was their first against Australia. India has defeated all Women's Test opponents except New Zealand. The second table below summarises India's results against all five opponents.

India Women's seven Test victories

#	Victory date	Ground/Stadium, City	Opponent	Victory	India's Test Number
1.	19 Nov 1976	Moinul Haque Stadium, Patna	West Indies	by 5 wickets	4
2.	22 Mar 2002	Boland Bank Park, Paarl	South Africa	by 10 wickets	28
3.	1 Sep 2006	County Ground, Taunton	England	by 5 wickets	34
4.	16 Aug 2014	Sir Paul Getty's Ground, Wormsley	England	by 6 wickets	35
5.	19 Nov 2014	Raja Wadeyar Ground, Mysore	South Africa	by an inns & 34 runs	36
6.	16 Dec 2023	DY Patil Stadium, Navi Mumbai	England	by 347 runs	39
7.	24 Dec 2023	Wankhede Stadium, Mumbai	Australia	by 8 wickets	40

Note: India Women's last five Test wins have come in their last seven matches (the other two being drawn)

India Women in Test cricket - summary of results against all opponents

Opponent	Span	Tests	Won	Lost	Draw	%Win
West Indies	Oct 1976 to Nov 1976	6	1	1	4	16.67
New Zealand	Jan 1977 to Nov 2003	6	0	0	6	0.00
Australia	Jan 1977 to Dec 2023	11	1	4	6	9.09
England	Jun 1986 to Dec 2023	15	3	1	11	20.00
South Africa	Mar 2002 to Nov 2014	2	2	0	0	100.00
Total		40	7	6	27	17.50

All records are correct and updated until 24 December 2023

» WOMEN'S TEST
INDIA-AUSTRALIA



'AUS-SOME' WIN, BUT ROCKY ROAD AHEAD

India's victory was its second in Tests this month, having thrashed England by 347 runs in Mumbai. But its **future** in red-ball cricket is still in a limbo.

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Mithali Raj had shared a noteworthy insight before India Women's solitary Tests against England and Australia. The former captain emphasised the significance of increasing the number of multi-day red-ball games at the domestic level to provide the players with ample experience before participating in Test matches.

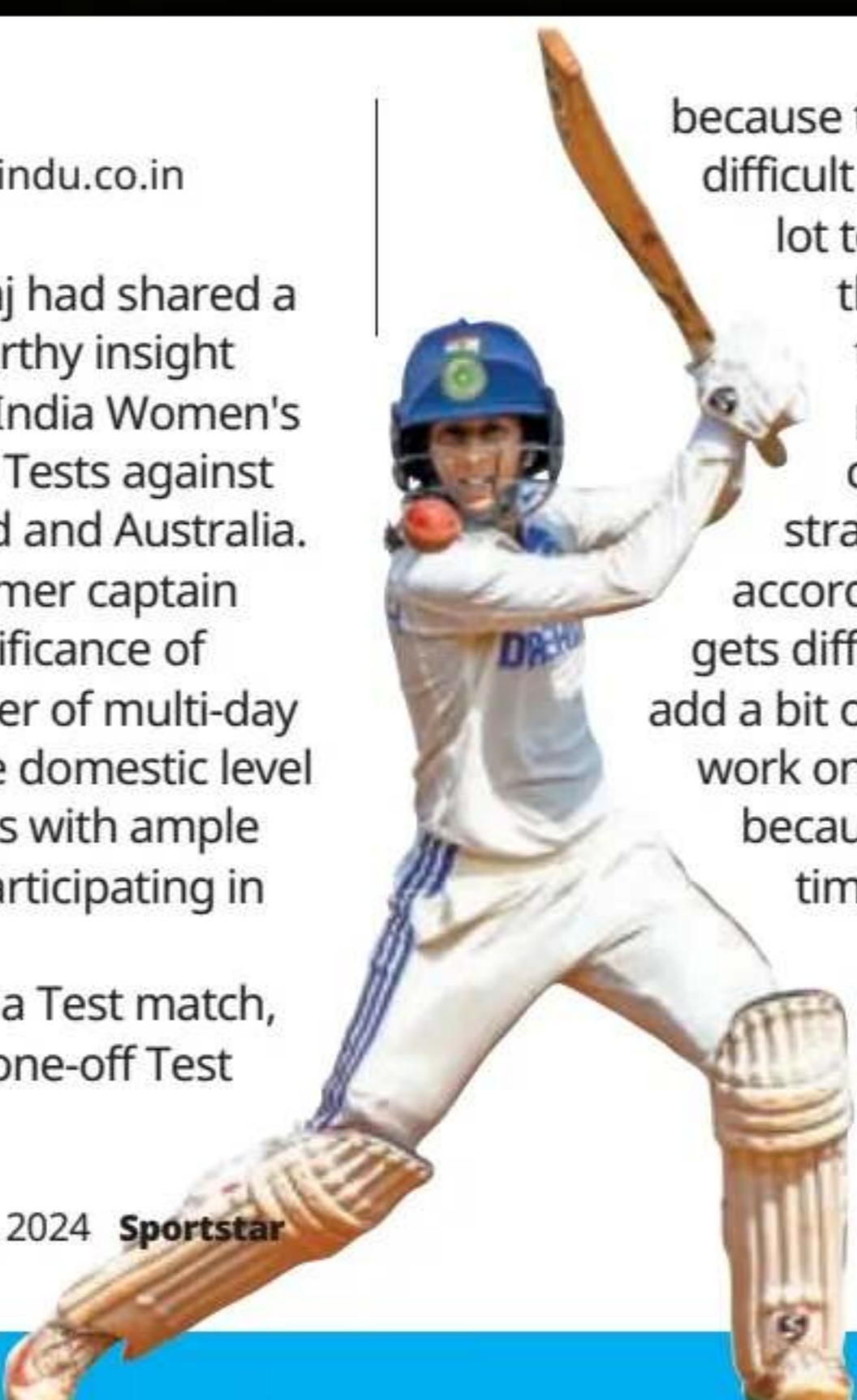
"If you are having a Test match, it should never be a one-off Test

because then it gets very difficult for the current lot to learn about the format, how the format is played, and change the strategy or the skill according to that. It gets difficult for them to add a bit of dimension or work on the variation because it takes time," she told *Sportstar*.

But for India, which

was playing Australia in a Test at home for the first time in close to 40 years, a lack of Test experience did not manifest in its performance. Instead, it dominated all departments, securing an eight-wicket win, the team's first against Australia in this format.

Securing consecutive Test victories within a week posed a significant challenge. But on a spin-friendly surface, India relied on the experienced duo of Sneh Rana and Rajeshwari Gayakwad to dismantle the touring side. This triumph was iconic for several reasons — it reaffirmed the women's team's





**INDIA'S WIN AGAINST AUSTRALIA
REAFFIRMED THE WOMEN'S TEAM'S
READINESS FOR THE LONGER FORMAT AND
UNDERScored THE NEED TO INCORPORATE
MORE TESTS IN BILATERAL TOURNAMENTS**



Picture-perfect: India's win is its first in 11 women's Tests against No. 1-ranked Australia since the sides first played in 1977. There were notable performances from Jemimah Rodrigues (facing page) and Richa Ghosh (right). EMMANUEL YOGINI

readiness for the longer format and underscored the need to incorporate more Tests in bilateral tournaments.

According to the ICC's Future Tours Programme for 2022–2025, India women won't play any Tests till March 2025. There will be a Women's Premier League (WPL), a T20 World

Cup, and three bilateral series — an away outing against Australia in December next year, followed by home assignments against the West Indies and Ireland — in between. "The girls certainly need more Test matches and not one-off assignments," said former India captain and coach Sudha Shah. "Ideally, it should be a three-match series."

Sudha was part of the Indian team that played its first-ever Test against Australia in Perth

in 1977 under the leadership of Shantha Rangaswamy. Against an experienced Australian team, the Indians lost by 147 runs. Sudha believes the current crop needs to ride on the momentum and play as many Tests as possible. "The girls now know they can beat stronger teams. That certainly gives them confidence. It's a good thing for the





Damp squib: It was a disappointing start to Alyssa Healy's reign as captain, having been appointed Meg Lanning's successor across all formats in early December. EMMANUAL YOGINI

game," Sudha said, hoping these victories pave the way for longer format fixtures.

The Indian players would hope so too. Otherwise, the noteworthy achievements, such as Richa Ghosh's fifty on debut, Sneh's seven-wicket haul, and Jemimah Rodrigues' back-to-back fifties, might not contribute much to India's progress. Instead, they would merely be footnotes in the history of the game.

In recent years, the BCCI has reiterated its commitment to women's cricket. It has ensured pay parity between male and female cricketers, introduced the WPL, and, notably, scheduled four Tests for the team since 2021 — two at home and two away.

However, despite these initiatives, there is still much work to be done. Aligning with Mithali's suggestion, reinstating multi-day games at the domestic level, reminiscent of earlier times, would facilitate a smoother transition for players from white-ball cricket to Tests.

For seasoned campaigners like Sneh, the shift hasn't been a concern. "Earlier, our domestic tournaments were played with the red ball, so we

have that experience. White-ball came in much later. But for me, it's just about a change in the colour of the ball; everything else remains the same," Sneh said, adding, "It's a game of the mind."

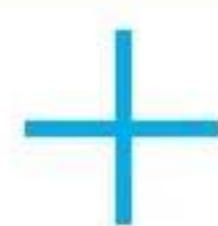
It, indeed, is. The hundred or so spectators cheering for the home team at Wankhede Stadium witnessed an intense rivalry between captains Harmanpreet Kaur and Alyssa Healy. The match featured nervous moments, displays of attitude, and appeals for obstructing the field. "That's the beauty of Test cricket; it brings the best out of the players," said Richa, who made her debut against the Aussies.

The 20-year-old from Siliguri had to warm the bench for the game against England.

However, an injury to Shubha Sateesh opened doors for her. Her crucial partnership with Jemimah in the first innings brought India back into the game after Smriti Mandhana was run out.

"The fact that you have to take things session by session itself is a huge learning experience for India's youngsters. They seemed to be in no hurry to score runs, nor did they press the panic button when there were no breakthroughs. They handled things according to the situation. That was a very impressive thing," said Sudha.

The team, under new head coach Amol Muzumdar, had extended



India's international assignments in 2024

January: ODI and three-match T20I series against Australia

September-October: T20 World Cup in Bangladesh

December: Three ODIs in Australia

December-January: Three ODIs and T20Is against the West Indies and Ireland

Source: Women's Future Tours Programme (2022-2025)

preparation at the National Cricket Academy, including a multi-day side game, which reflected in its organised performance under Harmanpreet's leadership.

While the result was undoubtedly gratifying, the broader question revolves around whether India intends to increase the number of Tests in its schedule. Does it have the necessary time and capacity? The players and visiting teams maintain an optimistic outlook.

"We would love to see more and more Tests, and I think it would create a real contest over three games. But the nature of the female game at the moment is that it's very white-ball dominant, and trying to fit it all into the calendar, and fit all the white-ball games in particular, seems to take precedence. You take three one-day games out, and we could probably play two more Test matches," stated Australia captain Healy.

She, surely, would have the support of the Indian players. Ahead of the Test against England, Mandhana had wished to be part of the World Test Championship someday.

And the two wins against England and Australia would only bolster her hopes of Tests gaining more dominance in women's cricket in the near future.



Old warhorses: Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane have fallen out of favour with the national selectors in recent times. GETTY IMAGES

CAN RANJI TROPHY PASS THE TEST OF TIME?

In recent years, excelling in the IPL has generally expedited a player's inclusion in the Indian team, often surpassing those who **diligently contribute** in the domestic season.

Shayan Acharya

shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

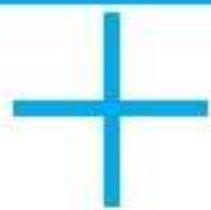
It's that time of the year again when India's domestic talents don the whites and gear up for three months of red-ball cricket. The conditions would vary, the challenges would be different, and the competition would be intense.

In the current era, white-ball cricket often overshadows the longer

format, prompting ongoing debates about the significance of the Ranji Trophy, India's premier tournament. The tournament faces challenges as it coincides with the international cricket calendar, leading to the absence of many star players. This trend is likely to persist this time, even with a two-week gap between India's Test series against South

Africa and the subsequent home series against England. Despite this, over a thousand cricketers from various regions will aspire to showcase their skills, recognising that consistent performances may still not guarantee a spot in Team India.

In recent years, excelling in the Indian Premier League (IPL) has generally expedited a player's



Total teams: 38

Total matches: 138

GROUPS

Elite A: Saurashtra, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Vidarbha, Haryana, Services, Manipur

Elite B: Bengal, Andhra, Mumbai, Kerala, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Bihar

Elite C: Karnataka, Punjab, Railways, Tamilnadu, Goa, Gujarat, Tripura, Chandigarh

Elite D: Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Baroda, Delhi, Odisha, Pondicherry, JKCA

Plate: Nagaland, Hyderabad, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh

MOST SUCCESSFUL TEAMS

Mumbai - 41 times

Karnataka - 8 times

Delhi - 7 times

Holkar/MP - 5 times

Baroda - 5 times



Long wait: Mumbai batter Sarfaraz Khan is yet to win an India call-up despite consistent performances in domestic cricket.

R.V. MOORTHY

inclusion in the Indian team, often surpassing those who diligently contribute in the domestic season. A noteworthy example is Yashasvi Jaiswal, who earned a Test cap shortly after an outstanding season with the Rajasthan Royals in IPL 2023. In contrast, some of his Mumbai teammates, like Sarfaraz Khan, await their opportunity despite consistent performances in domestic cricket for multiple seasons. The criteria for selection and the benchmarks appear to be in constant flux.

Although the experienced players, 39-year-old Wriddhiman Saha and 38-year-olds Manoj Tiwary and Faiz Fazal, will be aiming to lead their respective teams to victory and retire on a high, Shubham Dubey from Vidarbha will be making his first-class debut and hoping to make it memorable. Dubey, who hails from Nagpur, was recently selected by Rajasthan Royals for a whopping Rs 5.80 crore after his impressive performance in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, where he scored 222 runs in seven matches at a strike

rate of 187.28. While he looks forward to the upcoming IPL, the 29-year-old emphasises that his current priority is the Ranji Trophy.

"Red ball cricket is the ultimate in a player's career, and it's an immense pride to call yourself a Ranji Trophy cricketer," says Dubey. "As a kid, I would watch four-day cricket, and since then, I have always wanted to be a first-class cricketer and play the Ranji Trophy someday. Only good performance in domestic cricket can take you far."

Dubey believes that the Ranji Trophy prepares a cricketer for every situation. "No other tournament tests your skill as much as the Ranji Trophy. While you need to stay in the present for four days, it tests your competency level and how you can approach different situations," Dubey says.

Missing star factor

Not long ago, top Indian cricketers would feature in the Ranji Trophy regularly. But things have changed drastically over the last few years, with several senior team regulars staying away from the

tournament on the pretext of workload management.

"All these players featured in the Ranji Trophy before they became stars, but now they seem to have forgotten that baby," former India international and erstwhile national selector Sunil Joshi tells Sportstar.

"They should come and play the Ranji Trophy because every cricketer gets to share experiences and knowledge if an Indian player features in a domestic game. Don't the Australian players feature in their Sheffield Shield, or don't the England cricketers play in the county leagues? I understand our players need a break, but since they are professionals, they should also make themselves available for the Ranji Trophy," Joshi says. "I have nothing against anyone, but these cricketers have not missed a single IPL game, so why do you need a rest only when the Ranji Trophy is being played? They cannot pick and choose when it comes to domestic cricket."

Pay parity

Tiwary, a key figure in Bengal



Great servant: Bengal veteran Manoj Tiwary has so far played 141 first-class matches, scoring 9908 runs at an average of 48.56 with 29 centuries and 45 half-centuries. K. MURALIKUMAR

cricket, acknowledges that the Ranji Trophy remains unmatched in testing skills. However, he admits that unless there's a rise in financial rewards, upcoming generations may choose to opt out of the demanding competition.

"With so many leagues cropping up, the younger players have a lot of options these days, as compared to our times. If the Ranji Trophy has to stay pertinent, the money needs to increase," says Tiwary, who will lead Bengal in his final season. "The youngsters now know that you don't need a Ranji Trophy to earn money. There are shorter format tournaments that can help them make equal amounts of money, so if you want the brightest of talents to hang in there, the money has to improve."

In 2021, the BCCI revised the match-fee structure to Rs 40,000 per

match-day (1 to 20 matches), Rs 50,000 per match-day (21 to 40 matches), and Rs 60,000 per match-day (40+ matches) for first-class cricket. But there's still a huge pay disparity between first-class cricket and an IPL contract.

Faiz has led Vidarbha to two consecutive Ranji Trophy and an Irani Cup title. Now at the fag end of his career, he believes that the contract system is the way forward if the tournament hopes to survive the test of time. "Everyone is a professional, and at the end of the day, everyone wants a good life. The game requires a lot of sacrifices, and in today's time, if a cricketer has to play first-class cricket, he needs to sacrifice his studies and dedicate a huge amount of time to the game, and even then, there's no guarantee that he will have a long career," Faiz says.

"So, a central contract is the way to go. That way, the players will have security and can concentrate on their game seriously without constantly thinking about what would happen if they got dropped

after one match. It is the need of the hour," he says.

This time, international cricketers like Ajinkya Rahane, Cheteshwar Pujara, Vijay Shankar, and Mayank Agarwal, who are currently not part of the national team, will be representing their respective state sides. Defending champion Saurashtra sees this as an opportunity and a challenge to increase its title count. As in previous seasons, the team relies on experienced players, led by Jaydev Unadkat, for a solid start. In recent years, teams have shifted towards a more aggressive style of play, opting for thrilling contests rather than settling for first-innings leads.

Faiz believes the tournament needs to be marketed better, and there should be more live coverage. "That could eventually open up windows for the teams. It would be perfect if companies came up and sponsored even state teams and spread the game across centres; that would be a step in the right direction," he says.

Is anyone listening?



AP

Warner calls time on his One-Day International career

1

However, the **37-year-old** said he could return for the 2025 Champions Trophy if Australia needed him.

David Warner called time on his One-Day International career on New Year's Day ahead of his farewell Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground against Pakistan. However, the 37-year-old said he could return for the 2025

Champions Trophy if Australia needed him. "I know there's a Champions Trophy coming up. If I'm playing decent cricket in two years' time and I'm around and they need someone, I'm going to be

available," he said. If Warner doesn't play another One-Day International, he will end up as the sixth-highest run-getter (6,932 runs) and second-most prolific century-maker (22) for Australia in the format.



2

Former West Indies skipper Kieron Pollard was named England's assistant coach, specifically for the T20 World Cup, to be held in June 2024 in the Caribbean and the USA. The 36-year-old, who retired from international cricket in April 2022, led the West Indies in the 2021 T20 World Cup and was part of the team that won the 2012 tournament. Armed with the experience of having played more than 600 T20 matches, Pollard is expected to 'provide expertise of local conditions' in England's title defence.



3

Bangladesh stunned New Zealand by five wickets in the first T20I of a three-match series to complete the treble of beating the Kiwis in their den at least once in every format. Earlier, on the same tour, the Tigers thrashed the Black Caps by nine wickets in the third One-Day International to register their first win against them in the format in New Zealand. In January last year, Bangladesh earned its first Test win in the island nation when it beat the Tom Latham-led side by eight wickets at Mount Maunganui.



4

The Afghanistan Cricket Board extended head coach Jonathan Trott's contract after the former England batter brought remarkable success to the national team since his appointment in June 2022. During his tenure so far, Afghanistan impressed at the 2022 T20 Asia Cup, beat Pakistan in a T20I series, and beat Bangladesh in a bilateral ODI engagement before stunning England, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka at the 2023 World Cup. Under Trott, Afghanistan will next visit India later this month for a three-match T20I series.



5

Kusal Mendis and Wanindu Hasaranga were named as the new limited-overs captains of Sri Lanka, ending Dasun Shanaka's reign. The new selection committee announced Mendis as ODI captain while picking Hasaranga as T20I skipper. Mendis had replaced Shanaka as skipper during the 2023 ODI World Cup after the latter was ruled out of the tournament due to an injury he sustained in Sri Lanka's second match of the campaign, against Pakistan. The change in leadership comes in the wake of Shanaka's poor form, particularly with the bat. Dimuth Karunaratne will continue to lead in Tests.

K. MURALI KUMAR & GETTY IMAGES

Taking the next step: The 16-year-old Anmol Kharb—ranked No. 1 in both U-17 and U-19 in singles—will focus on the senior category next year.

RITU RAJ KONWAR



YOUNG GUNS MAKE THEIR MARK AND GIVE GLIMPSE OF BRIGHT FUTURE

There's a **concern** about the lack of successors in Indian women's badminton after Saina Nehwal and P. V. Sindhu. But the future looks tall.

K. Keerthivasan

keerthivasan.k@thehindu.co.in

In the 85th edition of the Senior National Badminton Championships at the Deshbhakta Tarun Ram Phukan Indoor Stadium in Guwahati, Anmol Kharb from Haryana grabbed the spotlight. At 16 years and 11 months old, she secured the women's national championship title by defeating 15-year-old Tanvi Sharma from Punjab 15-21, 21-17, 16-8 (retd.) in the final.

When Saina Nehwal clinched the Senior National Women's Singles title in 2006–07 in Patna, she was 16 years and 10 months old. When P.V. Sindhu bagged the women's crown in 2011–12 in Bengaluru, she was 16 years and six months old. In badminton circles, there's a concern

about the lack of successors in Indian women's badminton after Saina and Sindhu. Can Anmol and Tanvi follow in their footsteps internationally? With their talent and skills, they have the potential. The key lies in transitioning from juniors to seniors.

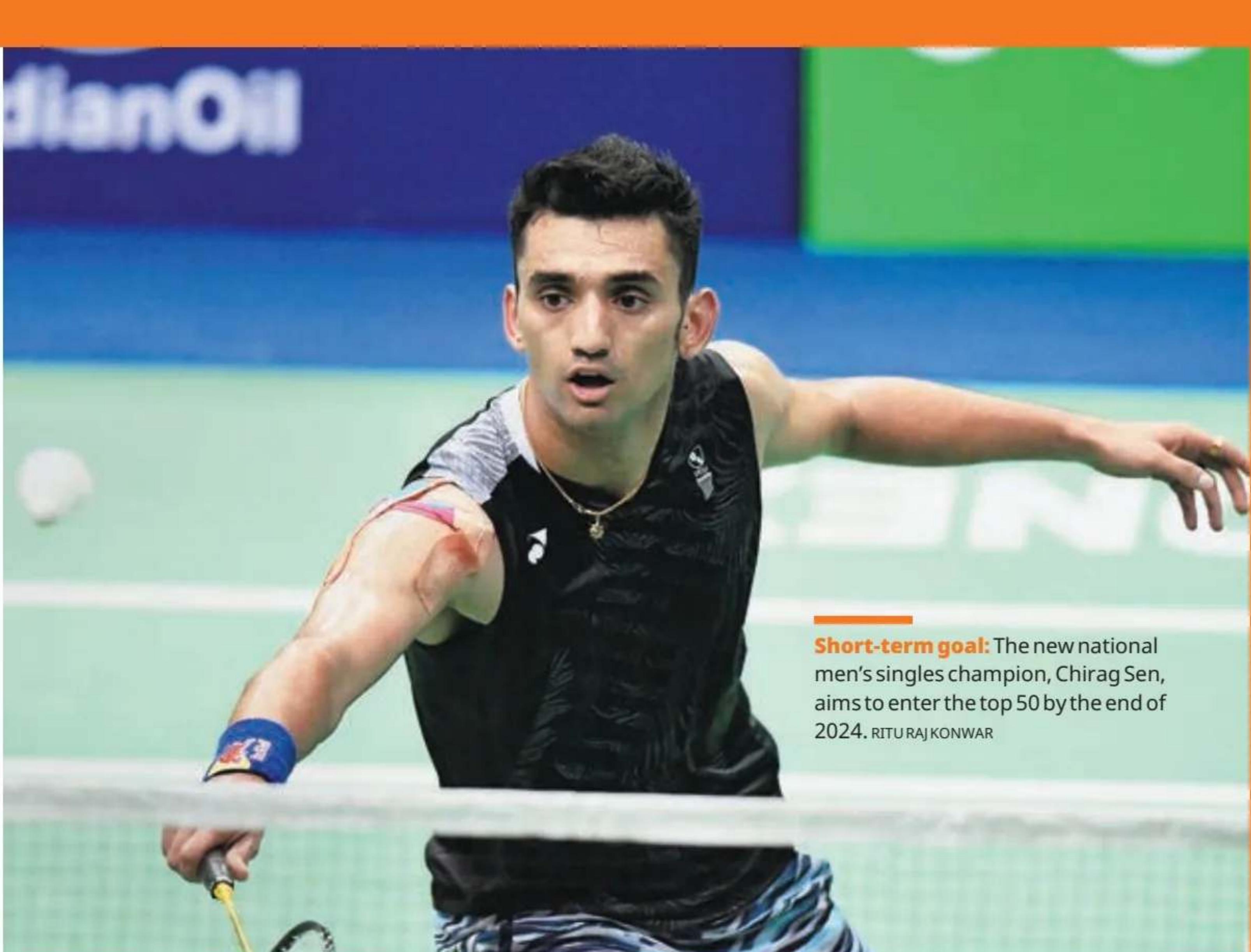
For perspective, Anmol and Tanvi are the best juniors in India in both Under-17 and Under-19. Tanvi is behind Anmol at No. 2 in both categories. On the other hand, Tanvi has done a tad better than Anmol at the international level. Tanvi bagged the silver medal in the Asian U-17 championships in October 2023, while Anmol lost in the first round of the same tournament.

As far as junior world rankings go, Tanvi stands at 112, while Anmol is at 121. In the BWF senior rankings, Anmol is 470 in women's singles and Tanvi is 586.

Anmol and Tanvi haven't featured

in too many international tournaments. Anmol just played the Chhattisgarh International Challenge in Raipur in 2023, where she reached the round of 16 after playing two qualifying rounds. Tanvi competed in a singles event and three doubles competitions. In the only singles tournament — the Chhattisgarh International Challenge in 2023 — Tanvi reached the round of 32. Tanvi paired with her elder sister Radhika Sharma in doubles at the Guwahati Masters (round of 16) and Syed Modi International, where the duo lost in the qualifying. It was in the Chhattisgarh International Challenge that the sister pair reached a creditable quarterfinal.

Sanjiv Sachdeva, a former India junior coach and current member of the Indian junior team selection committee, has observed Anmol's performance in the Krishna Khaitan



Short-term goal: The new national men's singles champion, Chirag Sen, aims to enter the top 50 by the end of 2024. RITURAJ KONWAR

Memorial tournament over the past few years. He unequivocally states that Saina and Sindhu outshine Anmol and Tanvi by a significant margin. However, he believes that Anmol has the potential to make a substantial impact on the international stage in the senior category within the next 2-3 years.

Analysing Anmol's game, Sanjiv said: "Physically and mentally, she is strong and a good fighter. She has good defence and attack but needs to improve her speed. The best part is that she is very focused, unlike a few girls who relax after winning one or two national titles. Her drops and net play need to improve. She will only get better." Sanjiv, who has travelled extensively with Saina as a junior coach, noted that the latter consistently put in extra effort to enhance her weaker areas. "In her early days, Saina had a weak backhand. Every day, she worked hard on her overhead forehand shots."

In fact, when Saina and Sindhu were in their teens, they took part in more international tournaments in the senior section than Anmol and Tanvi have done so far.

Take, for example, Saina. She had won the Asian Satellite Tournament at the age of 15, beating a much-senior player in Aparna Popat in straight games. At 16 years old, Saina became the first Indian to win a four-star event, the Philippines Open in 2006.

Meanwhile, Sindhu, at 14, had played in the India Open, and in February 2010, when she had not yet turned 16, Sindhu rose from 255 to world No. 168, jumping 87 places, after reaching the final of the Iran Fajr International Challenge. In 2011, Sindhu cracked the top 100, being ranked world No. 98.

At the domestic level, Saina and Sindhu didn't take part in many senior national ranking events, including senior nationals, as they were busy competing in international

tournaments across the globe.

Trupti Murgunde, a former India player and current national selector, is pleased that the two talented young girls competed in the final. She emphasised that there is a group of talented girls capable of challenging senior players.

"Badminton is looking up. It's not just Anmol and Tanvi; there is Unnati Hooda, Tara Shah, Isharani Baruah, Rakshitha Sree, and other young girls performing well at the national level. It is good that there is competition among them," she said.

"I am not belittling their [Anmol and Tanvi] achievements. What they have done is great. It's good that youngsters are doing well at the senior level. Let's give them some more time and not jump to conclusions based on one tournament. In the juniors, the depth is good, and there is healthy competition," remarked Trupti.

The 41-year-old, a former National Women's Singles Champion, said



Making a mark: Fifteen-year-old Tanvi Sharma from Punjab is yet another promising prospect in women's badminton. Top seed Lakshya Sen (above, right) was knocked out of the quarterfinals by Bharat Raghav of Haryana, who won 15-21, 21-15, 21-17 in 56 minutes. PICS: RITURAJ KONWAR

there have been different winners in the junior ranking tournaments this season. "The only thing is that the bunch of good players should not waste time and do well at the international level in seniors, which should be the benchmark to judge their potential."

According to Trupti, today's players have abundant resources and access to top-notch training, equipment, and tournaments. She highlighted the support from the Badminton Association of India and the Central Government. "One has to be balanced in the number of hours one trains and the number of tournaments in which one takes part. I would say, 'Be smart and don't overdo things'. Coaches and parents have a huge role to play here. It is more mental than physical. It is also important they do well in the international tournaments happening in India," she said.

Manjusha Kanwar, a multiple national champion in singles, said Saina and Sindhu have set the bar so high that it will be difficult for the youngsters to emulate them.

"We have some great talent and good depth. I hope they carry forward the legacy of Saina and Sindhu. We are waiting. Maybe with more exposure, they will do better," she said.

After her triumph, Anmol talked

about her rivalry with Tanvi. "We (Tanvi and I) have played in more than seven tournaments this year in U-17 and U-19. We have faced each other mostly in the finals. My motive was to get a medal. I am very happy that I got gold. My coaches, Kusum Singh and Ravinder, have been instrumental in my victory," she said.

Anmol is in class XI, pursuing legal studies. "My father (Devender Singh) is keen that I become a lawyer like him. But my priority is to become a top badminton player," she remarked. Anmol, India's No. 1 in both U-17 and U-19, said she will focus on the senior section next year. "My dream is to win gold in the Olympics, and my immediate target is to do well in the world junior championships," Anmol said.

On her idol, Saina, Anmol said, "Saina has inspired me a lot. She is also from Haryana. She won the senior national title at 16. I, too, won mine at 16. She is an aggressive player, and my game is similar to hers," said Anmol, who is the reigning National U-17 singles champion and runner-up in the National U-19 championships.

"It was shocking to see him (Lakshya Sen) lose, but that is sport," said his elder brother Chirag after winning the men's singles title, defeating M. Tharun of Telangana, seeded fourth, in the final.

Lakshya, world no. 16 and one of the top players from India to taste success at the global level, had prepared well for three weeks at the Prakash Padukone Badminton Academy in Bengaluru before arriving in Guwahati. However, his academy mate and training partner, Bharat Raghav of Haryana, defeated the top seed, Lakshya, in three tough games in the quarterfinals. Tharun then put it across Bharat in the semifinals.

The 25-year-old unseeded Chirag, known for his attacking style, gained a significant boost by securing the men's singles crown. He looks forward to facing upcoming tournaments with increased confidence. "After being in the senior circuit for four years, this is my first final," he said. "I was struggling with my game for a while. I am so happy to win. My best performance had been a quarterfinal appearance in the Senior Nationals. The key was the win over third seed Kartikey Gulshan Kumar in the second round, which gave me confidence. Since October 2023, I have been playing quite well, starting with the Infosys International Challenge in Bengaluru, where I reached the semifinals. It gave me confidence that I can play well at that level," added world no. 97 Chirag, keen to break into the top 50 by the end of 2024.



DIVIDED HOUSE BUT PERFORMANCES RAISE HOPE AND DREAMS

TTFI's old fault-lines remain but the year-ending National Championship offered a **glimpse** of the future of table tennis.

Rakesh Rao
rakesh.rao@thehindu.co.in

Before reflecting on the year-ending National Table Tennis Championship, it is important to know the background, dotted with the continued indifference of those trusted with running the Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI), after the turmoil in its administration in the recent past.

If 2023 was seen as a season of hope for Indian table tennis lovers, it sadly managed to reinforce the phrase, 'the more things change, the more they stay the same.' The elected members of the TTFI, whose responsibilities were assumed by a

COMING TO THE ON-TABLE ACTION, THERE WERE SOME PREDICTABLE OUTCOMES, LIKE THE PETROLEUM MEN AND THE RESERVE BANK OF INDIA WOMEN RETAINING THE TEAM TITLES

three-member Committee of Administrators appointed by the High Court from mid-February to early December 2022, did not meet the expectations of players and other stakeholders on various levels.

Headed by Meghna Ahlawat, wife of Haryana's Deputy Chief Minister Dushyant Chautala, with eight-time singles national champion Kamlesh Mehta as the secretary-general, the new-look TTFI took charge in December 2022 after a late-night compromise was reached between the opposing groups. Hours later, a farcical election took place in New Delhi, where the voters walked into

All smiles: Petroleum's Harmeet Desai and Poymantee Baisya (Railways) pose with their trophies and medals after winning the singles titles in the National Table Tennis Championship in Panchkula. RAKESH RAO



Champions again: Petroleum men and Reserve Bank of India women (facing page), and their coaches, proudly pose with the winners' trophies and gold medals after retaining the team titles. RAKESH RAO

the polling booth armed with a printed list of office-bearers they were asked to vote for.

In such a divided house, united by a mutual hunger for power, the friction between the two sides was hard to miss throughout 2023.

Ahlawat was almost inactive, while Kamlesh, with hardly any experience in administration at this level, could do little as the season's first national ranking tournament in Hyderabad proved an unmitigated logistical disaster.

On the brighter side, things improved with each of the five national ranking tournaments, ending with the one in Panchkula, Haryana, the home turf of the TTFI president. But playing four back-to-back tournaments culminating in the all-important national championship meant too much for the majority of players.

As Kamlesh explained, "We did so at the behest of the top players who wanted the TTFI to be done with the

senior circuit by December end so that they could focus on the upcoming WTT events leading to the World Team Championship. India, as a team, has a good chance to qualify in the men's section of the Paris Olympic Games. We understand the schedule for the rest of the players was tight, but we couldn't help it."

A day after the culmination of the last national ranking event, the national championship began at the same venue and proved to be a huge success. Haryana, known for its generous hospitality, once again left no stone unturned and organised the best event of the year.

Add to it a full field in the men's and women's singles, and the effort seemed all worth it. Though fancied names like Sharath Kamal and Manika Batra made premature exits, there was no dearth of thrilling action. In the end, Harmeet Desai claimed his second national singles title, while little-known Poymantee Baisya became the new women's singles winner.

Much like the All India Chess Federation (AICF), the TTFI, too, decided to allow the highly questionable 'pay-and-play' offer. This meant a player could pay Rs. 6,000 and play singles alongside the selected players from his or her state

or institutions and get a Certificate of Participation, whatever it's worth, from the TTFI.

This was done to attract more revenue for the host state and the TTFI, their share being 60:40. No wonder; a record number of entries were seen. While the TTFI, the host, and the players were happy, the hapless technical officials, umpires, etc. had to officiate from 8 a.m. to around midnight for the initial days.

With the main draws in singles getting over in just two days, G. Sathiyan pointed to the fact that the finalists could play as many as seven matches in two days. The scheduling of the quarterfinals, semifinals, and finals on the same day was not appreciated by the players.

Coming to the on-table action, there were some predictable outcomes, like the Petroleum men and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) women retaining the team titles. It was the 27th occasion for Petroleum and a second in succession for RBI. When you employ the most-performing names in Indian table tennis, such results are not difficult to guess.

With Petroleum women failing to qualify, the journey proved comfortable for RBI, relying on defending singles winner Sreeja



Akula, Ayhika Mukherjee, and a not-fully-fit Diya Chitale. The 3-0 triumph over Tamil Nadu underlined its supremacy.

Petroleum men, without Sharath, chose to rest an in-form Harmeet for the final and fielded a struggling duo of A. Amalraj and Manav Thakkar in the company of Sathiyan, whose only appearance came in the title clash against Delhi. The eventual 3-0 result was much anticipated.

In the open event, the acceptance of Manika's last-minute entry exposed the double standards of the TTFI. After the draw was made, Manika's call to Competition Manager N. Ganeshan, followed by an email from the Petroleum Sports Promotion Board, proved enough. Fearing pressure from those in authority in Indian sports, it was decided to quietly accommodate Manika and make necessary changes to the singles draw.

The players, coaches, and parents present, in private, questioned TTFI for flouting its own rules. However, they were all aware of the clout Manika wields after winning a legal battle and bringing TTFI to its knees in 2022. However, Manika was sent packing following her first outing. Manika, who had received a first-round bye, ran into Haryana's

Bengal import, Prithoki Chakraborty, this time and fell in just 33 minutes. Prithoki's 11-7, 4-11, 12-10, 8-11, 11-8 triumph remained the talking point of the evening, though men's second seed Manav Thakkar also made his exit.

Thakkar, who lost a couple of matches in the team championship, paid the price for his inconsistency against 15th seed Anirban Ghosh, who emerged as a surprise 11-6, 9-11, 11-3, 6-11, 11-5 winner.

Though upsets continued, how a scratchy Sharath survived Delhi youngster Yashansh Malik in the pre-quarterfinal was an indication of the 10-time winner not being anywhere close to his peak form.

The following morning, left-hander Manush Shah proved more than a handful for fourth-seeded Sharath. He chalked out an almost unbelievable scoreline of 11-9, 11-1, 11-4, 11-4 in what appeared to be the great champion's last appearance in the national championship.

Eventually, the much-anticipated final between Harmeet and Sathiyan proved to be a fitting finale. Both players gave it their all in seven pulsating games. Sathiyan, nursing a troubled back, took a medical time-out after trailing 2-3 and came

back to force the decider, but Harmeet was not to be denied another success.

In the women's section, Poymantee's amazing run will be recalled for a long time. Not among the top eight seeds, Poymantee took out former champion Archana Kamath in the quarterfinals, defending champion Sreeja in the semifinals, and then bounced back to trump Ayhika in the final.

Coming from a modest background, Poymantee showed how desperately she needed the national title. Poymantee's attitude, that of a gutsy street fighter, stood out on the big points. Coached by Abhishek Mukherjee, this 21-year-old Railway player showed tremendous fighting spirit and scant respect for reputations. One hopes Poymantee gets her due and more opportunities to polish her skill sets. Before signing off her campaign with the singles title, Poymantee collected the team bronze, won the doubles gold with Sutirtha Mukherjee, and finished runner-up in the mixed doubles final with Akash Pal. Notably, the Akash-Poymantee combination swept four national ranking titles this year. But the singles gold brought the biggest joy to Poymantee during a fantastic 2023.

The quest for Paris is on for Indian women's hockey

As the FIH Hockey Olympic qualifiers unfold in Ranchi, the **spotlight** is on the Indian women's team, which aims to secure a spot at the Summer Games in Paris.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers

Savita Punia (C)
Bichu Devi Kharibam

Defenders

Nikki Pradhan (VC)
Udita
Ishika Chaudhary
Monika

Midfielders

Nisha
Vaishnavi Vitthal Phalke
Neha
Navneet Kaur
Salima Tete
Sonika
Jyoti
Beauty Dungdung
Baljeet Kaur

Forwards

Lalremsiami
Sangita Kumari
Deepika

Nihit Sachdeva
nihit.s@thehindu.co.in

As the Olympic year kicks in, conversations about quotas, rankings, and qualification events across various disciplines will intensify.

Setting sights on securing a spot in the upcoming Summer Games in Paris from July 26 to August 11, the FIH Hockey Olympic qualifiers will be the first major event of 2024.

One of the two women's hockey qualification tournaments will be held at the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Stadium in Ranchi from January 13-19.

The event features eight teams in two groups — Group A comprises Germany, Japan, Chile, and the Czech Republic, while Group B features India, New Zealand, the USA, and Italy.

The top two sides from each group will progress to the semifinals. While the teams that reach the summit clash will automatically book a spot for the main event in Paris, the losing semifinalists will take on each other in a playoff to clinch the third and final spot.

Interestingly, this tournament was scheduled to take place in Changzhou, China, before the federations of both nations agreed to move it to India after The Snow Lotuses secured Asian Games gold and, with it, the ticket to Paris.

China, coached by Australian legend Alyson Annan, had beaten India 4-0 in the semifinals of the continental event in front of the home



crowd in Hangzhou in October last year.

Since that loss, the Savita Punia-led Indian team has shown good form. It dominated the Asian Champions Trophy, held at the same venue where the Olympic qualifiers will take place, and won the title three weeks after securing bronze at the Asian Games.

While it could only manage one win — 2-1 against Ireland — in the



Five Nations Tournament in Valencia in December, the performances against higher-ranked teams like Belgium (lost 2-1) and Germany (lost 3-1) meant coach Janneke Schopman could have some positive takeaways.

"In the Asian Games, we actually didn't perform the way we could, especially in the semifinal. That was disappointing for the girls, for me, and for our staff, because we know we can be better. The main focus

from that moment has been on how we can play to our strengths and potential and, basically, show up on the field with what we are able to bring. The Asian Champions Trophy showed that in a lot of ways," Schopman said.

"Unfortunately, we had some injuries in Spain. So, we had to improvise in terms of our lineups, which was a good thing, as we've seen some great developments in

Time to set the record straight:

After its Olympic debut in 1980, the Indian women's hockey team qualified for the Summer Games for the first time in 2016. However, the campaign in Rio de Janeiro ended with the side finishing last in the group stage.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



terms of people being able to play in different positions. We also got closer to the better teams in the world," the Dutchwoman added. After its Olympic debut in 1980, the Indian women's hockey team qualified for the Summer Games for the first time in 2016. However, that campaign in Rio de Janeiro ended with the team finishing last in the group stage.

Schopman joined the Indian team as the analytical coach in January 2020 and watched it achieve a historic fourth-place finish under compatriot Sjoerd Marijne's guidance at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. She took over as head coach after Marijne's departure and led India to its first medal at the Commonwealth Games in 16 years. The team also finished third in the 2021-22 Pro League and won the inaugural FIH Nations Cup.

Schopman is well aware of the shift in how others look at the current

Indian team. "We were the underdogs and a surprise four years ago. Unfortunately, we don't have that luck this time. All the other teams know who we are and that we can play some really good hockey. This presents a different challenge for us as a team and for me as a coach," she said.

Playing in front of home fans in Ranchi should act as a massive boost, but it also brings added pressure with it, something that Savita admits. This is where the side's mental fortitude will be tested.

"We are working on certain aspects, but of course, there will be

« We were the underdogs and a surprise four years ago. Unfortunately, we don't have that luck this time. All the other teams know who we are and that we can play some really good hockey. This presents a different challenge for us as a team and for me as a coach – Janneke Schopman, head coach »

Great impact: Schopman joined the Indian team as the analytical coach in January 2020 and watched it achieve a historic fourth-place finish under compatriot Sjoerd Marijne's guidance at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. She took over as head coach after Marijne's departure and led India to its first medal at the Commonwealth Games in 16 years. BISWARANJAN ROUT

pressure. How we can manage that pressure is something we have been working on because it is an event of huge significance," said Savita, who recently won a third consecutive FIH Women's Goalkeeper of the Year Award. Peter Harberl, appointed as the mental conditioning coach in October, will have an important role to play on the sidelines in Ranchi.

In the absence of Rani Rampal and Gurjit Kaur, a lot will depend on the experience of Savita, who'll lead young stars like Sangita Kumari and Salima Tete.

However, the team has suffered a minor setback as experienced forward Vandana Katariya, initially named vice-captain, has been ruled out of the tournament due to injury.

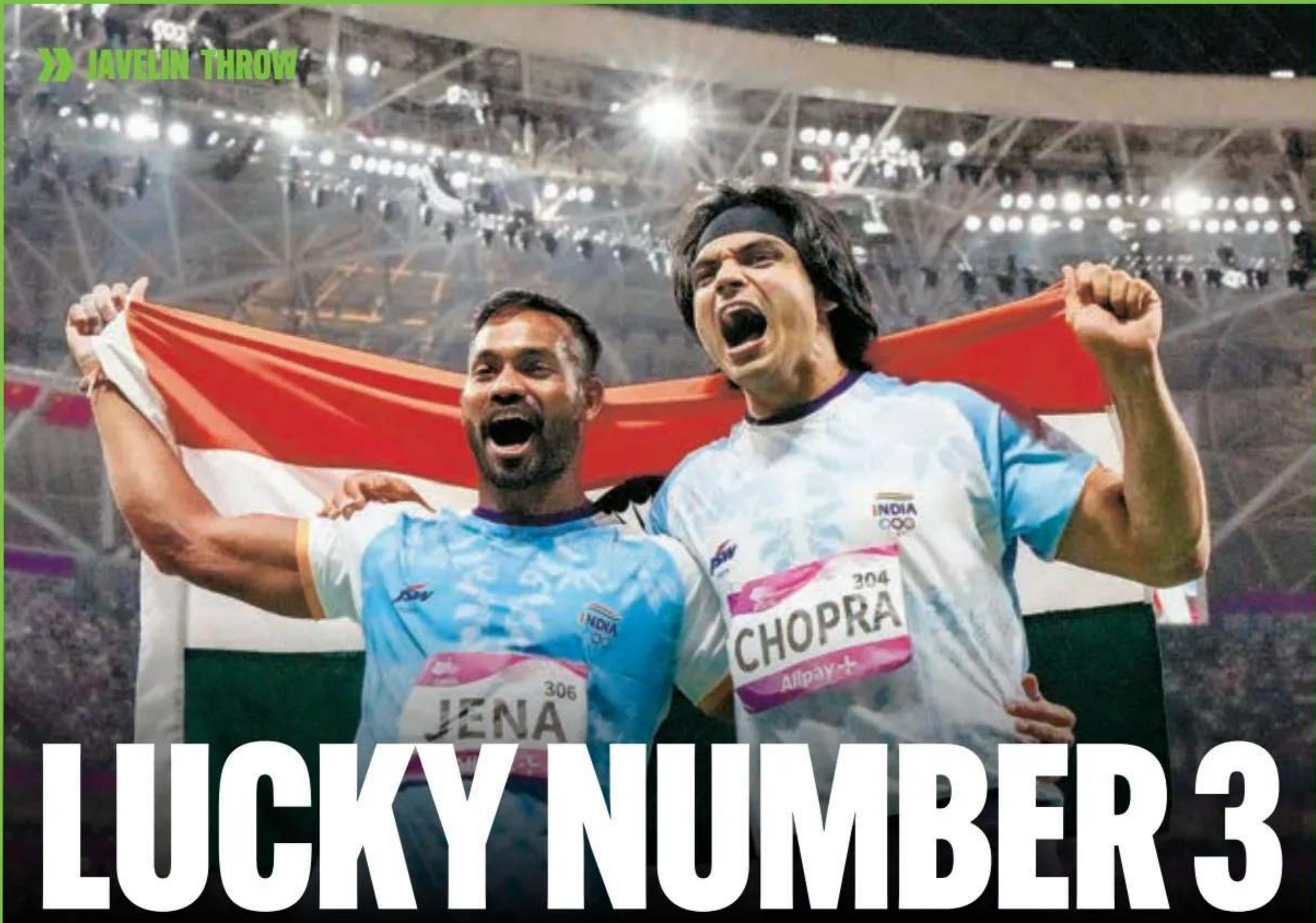
Schopman knows the different challenges her team will face in the group stage. "New Zealand is a hard-working team. They'll never give up. The USA is the same. Italy is a bit like Argentina, a team that won't go away. They're a little bit annoying," she said.

"Our penalty corners and defensive structure will be important. With our attacking skills, we should be able to create good opportunities and convert them as well."

Four years ago, Marijne's India beat Schopman's USA 6-5 in a thrilling two-match series to qualify for the Tokyo Olympics.

As fate would have it, India's Olympic dreams are once again directly linked to the Dutchwoman.

» JAVELIN THROW



LUCKY NUMBER 3

In the Olympic year it might take more than just the Olympic **standard** to join Neeraj and Jena in Paris.

Jonathan Selvaraj

jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

Finishing sixth in the final of the World Championships might be the kind of debut most athletes might only dream about. However, despite throwing his season's second best of 84.14m (the best being 84.33m), his performance at Worlds 2023 in Budapest left DP Manu unsatisfied.

During the Asian Games in Hangzhou, the 23-year-old from Karnataka was not part of the

« The qualification of three javelin throwers for the Olympics would be a landmark moment in Indian athletics »

Two to tango: Two Indians have directly qualified for the Paris Games already—Neeraj Chopra did so with his first throw at the World Championships while Kishore Jena followed suit at the Asian Games with a silver medal. PTI

Indian contingent. Therefore, from his base at the Army Sports Institute in Pune, he watched history unfold with Olympic and World champion Neeraj Chopra securing yet another gold medal and Kishore Kumar Jena, who had placed fifth at the Worlds, clinching a silver. This marked India's first ever 1-2 podium finish in javelin at the Asian Games.

Manu says it could have well been a 1-2-3 finish. "I know if I had competed I would also have made the podium. I was throwing well and in really good form. Plus Neeraj bhaiyya was there and when other Indians throw with him, our level also goes up," he says. Indeed the bronze medal at Hangzhou was won by Japan's Genki Dean Thomas, with a throw of 82.44m — a mark Manu had crossed thrice prior to the Asian Games.

Manu couldn't travel to the Asian Games because of the nature of the qualification system, which mandated that countries send only two representatives for each event. In



» AFTER THIS (NOT MAKING IT TO THE ASIAN GAMES), MY GOAL CHANGED. I WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT I GET A CHANCE IN THE PARIS OLYMPICS. THAT'S THE TARGET FOR ME NOW

— DP MANU

◀ Before Kishore's impressive breakout in 2023, it was Manu who was considered the next big thing in Indian javelin, having delivered the second-best throw after Neeraj ▶

javelin for India, one of them was always going to be Neeraj. For the second spot, Kishore was selected on the basis of his performance at the Inter State Championships in Bhubaneswar earlier in the year — a competition in which Manu had only finished fourth.

"The only way Manu could have gone to the Asian Games was if either Neeraj or Jena withdrew from the competition. When that didn't happen, he was of course very disappointed," recalls coach Kashinath Naik.

Manu soon got over it. "After this, my goal changed. I want to make sure that I get a chance in the Paris Olympics. That's the target for me now," he says.

Unlike in the Asian Games, India can send three participants to Paris. Throwers can qualify either by meeting the minimum standard — 85.50m — or by ranking among the top 32 throwers in the world at the end of the qualification cycle.

Two Indians have directly qualified for the Paris Games already — Neeraj Chopra did so with his first throw at the World Championships while Kishore followed suit at the Asian Games with his silver medal-winning effort. Ostensibly that leaves just one

Star in the making: Even though Manu is currently ranked among the top 32 athletes in the world, there's no guarantee that he will accompany Neeraj and Kishore to Paris in little over half a year. K. MURALIKUMAR

qualification slot open for an Indian athlete.

The qualification of three javelin throwers for the Olympics would be a landmark moment in Indian athletics. And as we head into the Olympic season, it seems all but certain that this will be the case. "At this stage I think we will see India fill all three possible slots in the javelin throw," says Adille Sumariwalla, the president of the Athletics Federation of India.

India has a history of filling up all available qualification slots at the Olympics. Sumariwalla says, "We have had multiple instances where we qualified with all available athletes. Even for Paris, we secured three slots in the men's race walk event. But racewalk isn't an event where we have achieved a lot of success at the World level. On the other hand, India is one of the strongest nations in men's javelin throw."

Even though Manu is currently ranked among the top 32 athletes in the world, there's no guarantee that he will accompany Neeraj and Kishore to Paris in little over half-a-year. "*Is baar Diwali lagega* (It will almost be like Diwali this time). There is a lot of competition and everyone will be working really hard," he says.

On the face of it, Manu can be considered the favourite to seal the Olympic quota. He has after all the third best throw by an Indian this season. Before Kishore's impressive breakout in 2023, it was Manu who was considered the next big thing in Indian javelin, having delivered the

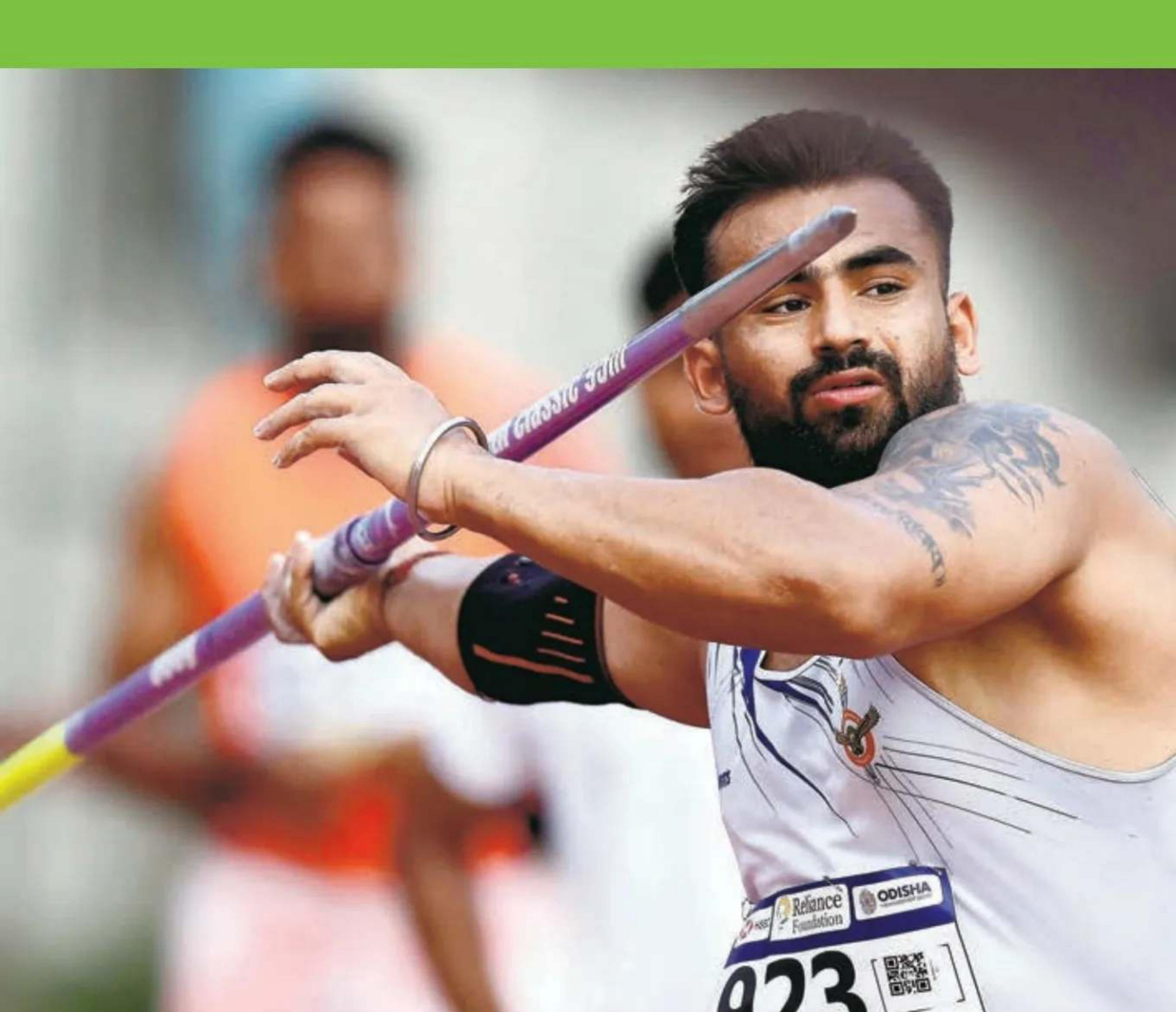
second-best throw after Neeraj.

That Manu is not able to seal the third spot with ease is testament to the surge in Indian talent in the sport. At the Inter State Championships in Bhubaneswar — the qualification event for the Asian Games — Manu finished fourth, behind eventual champion Rohit Yadav, a 22-year-old who threw 83.28m. Rohit finished ahead of Kishore as well, but the latter only went when Rohit picked up an elbow injury that required surgery.

Yadav is still rehabilitating from his surgery at Thiruvananthapuram. However, he admits that his recovery is taking longer than expected. While he plans on returning to competition in 2024, he's uncertain just how quickly he will be able to bounce back. Perhaps the biggest surprise in the Olympic qualification race is likely to come from Shivpal Singh, who was the undisputed No. 2 behind Neeraj Chopra in the Indian pecking order prior to the emergence of Manu, Rohit and Jena in the last couple of years. The 28-year-old had a personal best of 86.23m that's still the third best ever by an Indian.

But Shivpal started this season under the cloud of a four-year doping ban, uncertain whether he was ever going to be able to compete at any level. In the end, he was cleared of any wrongdoing and won gold at the National Games, beating Manu in the process.

After a disappointing Olympic campaign in Tokyo — where he finished 12th in his group during qualifying — all hopes of a comeback



Comeback loading: Shivpal Singh, who was the undisputed No. 2 behind Neeraj Chopra in the Indian pecking order prior to the emergence of Manu, Rohit and Jena in the last couple of years. RITU RAJ KONWAR

seemed to disappear after he was tested positive for a banned substance late in 2021.

"That ban was the toughest time for me. I was shocked how it happened. It changed the way people saw me. They would talk behind my back; I would find that out later. I fell into depression. I avoided meeting people. And no one wants to be around you at that time," Shivpal recalls. He would fight the case and

eventually prove that his positive result was caused by a tainted supplement. Although his suspension would be reduced to one year on appeal, it was only in 2023 that he would get the all-clear to return to competition.

While he had hoped to qualify for the Asian Games, Shivpal said the long layoff did take its toll. "Honestly, I didn't want to have anything much to do with sport for a long time. And when you take a long break from the sport, it has an effect on your body. I was in the best shape of my career at the Olympics; I was around 91kg then. By the time I returned to training, after I knew that the doping ban was removed, I was 105kg. When

I started to train again, I couldn't even run 400m on the track without catching my breath," he says.

Shivpal is realistic about his physical condition at the end of the 2023 season. "I was at my peak in 2021 before the Olympics. Right now I would say that I'm at about 60 percent of where I was. I'm still about 95kg. I still have some time to get back to my peak," he says.

Despite this, he isn't short of self belief. An unexpected bonus of his long layoff was the fact that his chronic back and shoulder injuries got the time to heal. Upon his return, he found himself throwing over 80 meters with ease. Him consistently throwing above 80m despite being



CONSISTENTLY THROWING ABOVE 80M DESPITE BEING FAR FROM HIS PERSONAL BEST INDICATES THAT SHIVPAL IS CAPABLE OF MUCH BIGGER THROWS

throw," he says.

Shivpal isn't even particularly concerned about the 85.50m qualification standard. "I've achieved that mark before so it's not something that I think will be hard to get. Even now it's just a matter of finding the right angle of release. I know that if I stay injury-free until the start of next season, I'll get it very quickly," he says.

stronger. I still have a slightly bent knee that I'm trying to correct but other than that I feel I'm getting a lot of power behind my throws. I've crossed 85m twice in training and am regularly in the 83m-84m range. So I know it's not going to be very difficult to make that throw in competition also."

If both Manu and Shivpal say they aren't looking at just touching the 85.50m magic mark, it's because neither thinks that just getting it would be enough to secure the Olympic berth. AFI president Sumariwalla has said as much. "It would be unfair to say what the selection criteria will be if multiple athletes secure the Olympic qualification standard because that's not happened just yet. But I can see it is going to be a bit of a challenging situation. With the exception of Neeraj I don't think we can say anyone is going to be guaranteed a spot. I think a lot will come down to current form as well," he says.

Manu agrees with that assessment. "I know I can't depend on just getting 85.50m and thinking that it will take me to the Olympics. There's no guarantee of that. I don't think qualification will come on the basis of ranking. And I also don't think there's any guarantee that just because someone does 85.50m, they will be going to the Olympics. I know Shivpal *bhai* is also very strong and capable of getting to 85.50m. Rohit is also coming back from injury, but he's also a very good thrower. All of us will have to try and throw as much above 85.50m as possible," he says.

That being said, both Manu and Shivpal are counting down to the first competition of the season. "The first competition of the season is the Indian Grand Prix on March 22. I think it will be important to hit the qualifying standard as early as possible because it will be a good confidence boost.

"After that we can prepare to increase that mark," says Shivpal. "The goal for any athlete isn't just to qualify for the Olympics. It's to prepare ourselves in such a way that we can make a big throw in Paris," he says.

far from his personal best indicates that he is capable of much bigger throws. This is evident from his 81.96m at Bhubaneswar and 81.11m gold-winning effort at the National Games in Goa.

"I was really unfit before I returned to competition in Bhubaneswar. In fact, just before the National Games, I hadn't even been training for a month because I was posted at Naliya Air Force Base (near the border with Pakistan in Gujarat's Sir Creek area). There isn't any training facility there apart from a general purpose gym. I just did basic training and came to Goa. Very honestly, if you give me enough warm-up time, I'll always be confident of at least making an 80m

If Shivpal isn't sweating about qualifying for the Olympics, Manu isn't either. Although he's fairly likely to qualify through the ranking system and is almost certain to rank higher than Shivpal because of his performance at the 2023 Worlds and Asian Championships, Manu believes he can qualify directly. "I am not merely thinking of just qualifying for the Olympics. I am thinking about how I can make a big throw — something close to 90m at the Olympics," he says.

"I actually thought I had a good season last year. Although, I had a better season's best in 2022 (84.35m), I was lot more consistent in 2023 (he crossed 80m in all but one competition). I actually thought I would qualify for the Olympics in 2023 itself. I had three competitions where I was feeling good and was throwing well — Indian Grand Prix (84.33m), World Championships (84.11) and Open Athletics Championships (82.06m) — but I made some basic errors in each of them. I got my best throw in these competitions from a release that was around 2 meters short of the foul line. It's a small technical error that I've been working on," says Manu.

"Compared to last year I'm a lot

» KABADDI

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



THE SULTAN AND HIS SUCCESSOR

Iranian powerhouses Fazel Atrachali and Mohammadreza Shadlou Chiyaneh might be at different ends of an athlete's sporting journey but are **powerful assurances** for the present and future of kabaddi.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

lavanya.In@thehindu.co.in

Team sport is a funny affair. On one side, it is camaraderie and cohesion; on the other, it is also an arena where you can see players striving hard for individual glory. You have opponents to trounce, of course, but you also have your teammates to outshine so you can rise above the rest.

A prime example of this is Iranian all-rounder Mohammadreza Shadlou Chiyaneh (**left**). His individual pursuit of glory in kabaddi has propped up every single team he has turned out for in his nascent career.

Into his third full season in the Pro Kabaddi League (after finishing among the top two defenders in both seasons prior), Shadlou is already among the most feared defenders, flying the Iranian brand of defence-heavy kabaddi high. However, where he steers clear from the rest is in his efforts to not confine his talents to a single department.

"I am a good raider and have the skillset for it. I promise you, if I come into PKL as a pure raider, I will finish somewhere in the top three. But I prefer defence because raiders are injury-prone. If I am required to raid, why not?" the towering Iranian tells *Sportstar*.

A lone wolf

Pro Kabaddi got a glowing example of this last season when he scored 19 points (16 in defence and three raid points) in a close 27-30 loss to Dabang Delhi. That Herculean effort saw him break the league record for most tackle points (16) and most super tackles (eight) in a single match.

"If you have a big heart and your mind and body are ready, you can do anything on the mat. It's all about your mind. I am always ready. Maybe in the next match, I'll score 18 points," Shadlou adds with a smirk. **This confidence from the 23-year-old can often be mistaken for arrogance. However, what sets Shadlou apart is his absolute unabashed acceptance of it.**

"This is my personality. Confidence comes naturally to me. Everyone has a bit of stress before the match or in big tournaments, but when I get onto the mat, my mind focuses on what is happening at that moment," he explains.

After a lull in international action triggered by a lack of consistent efforts from the powers that be and then the COVID-19 pandemic, kabaddi got two major tournaments in 2023 — the Asian Kabaddi Championships in Busan and the Asian Games in Hangzhou.

Iran coach Gholamreza Mazandarani made heads turn when he used Shadlou as a raider in Korea, something that carried into the Asiad in

Iron grip: Into his third full season in the Pro Kabaddi League, Shadlou (in pic, right) is already among the most feared defenders around.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

China. That potentially helped jack up his value at the PKL 10 auction. The ₹2.35 crore that Puneri Paltan doled out for him left even someone with Shadlou's heightened sense of self-worth gobsmacked.

Building a legacy

"We were on the flight back from China, so we couldn't watch the auction. When I found out how much I got, I couldn't believe it. Usually, defenders don't get so much money; it's the raiders who get the most money. This time, all teams have understood that defence is also important. If you have a good defence, then your raiders can do better," he explains.

"I want to make big records in PKL. After 10 years, everything should be in Shadlou's name, and those records should be unbeatable. I want my name to have a legend associated with it, and this is not hard for me to do. It might be hard for others, but not for me," he says.

Kabaddi royalty

It is clear that the Iranian setup sees Shadlou as the future, as evidenced by how he was handed the captain's armband in Busan — a tournament where the squad was packed with young up-and-comers.

However, Shadlou's usual position — the left corner — is one that has traditionally been occupied by a certain Fazel Atrachali (right), Iran's captain, for most of the last decade. Atrachali's success in international and league kabaddi spurred an interest in the sport in his country and among audiences in nations that took to the sport.

The 33-year-old is one of the most experienced players in the ecosystem, with four Asian Games campaigns under his belt from which he has won one gold and three silver medals. He has two Pro Kabaddi titles to his name, one with U Mumba in season two and the other with Patna Pirates in season four.

Atrachali holds the record for



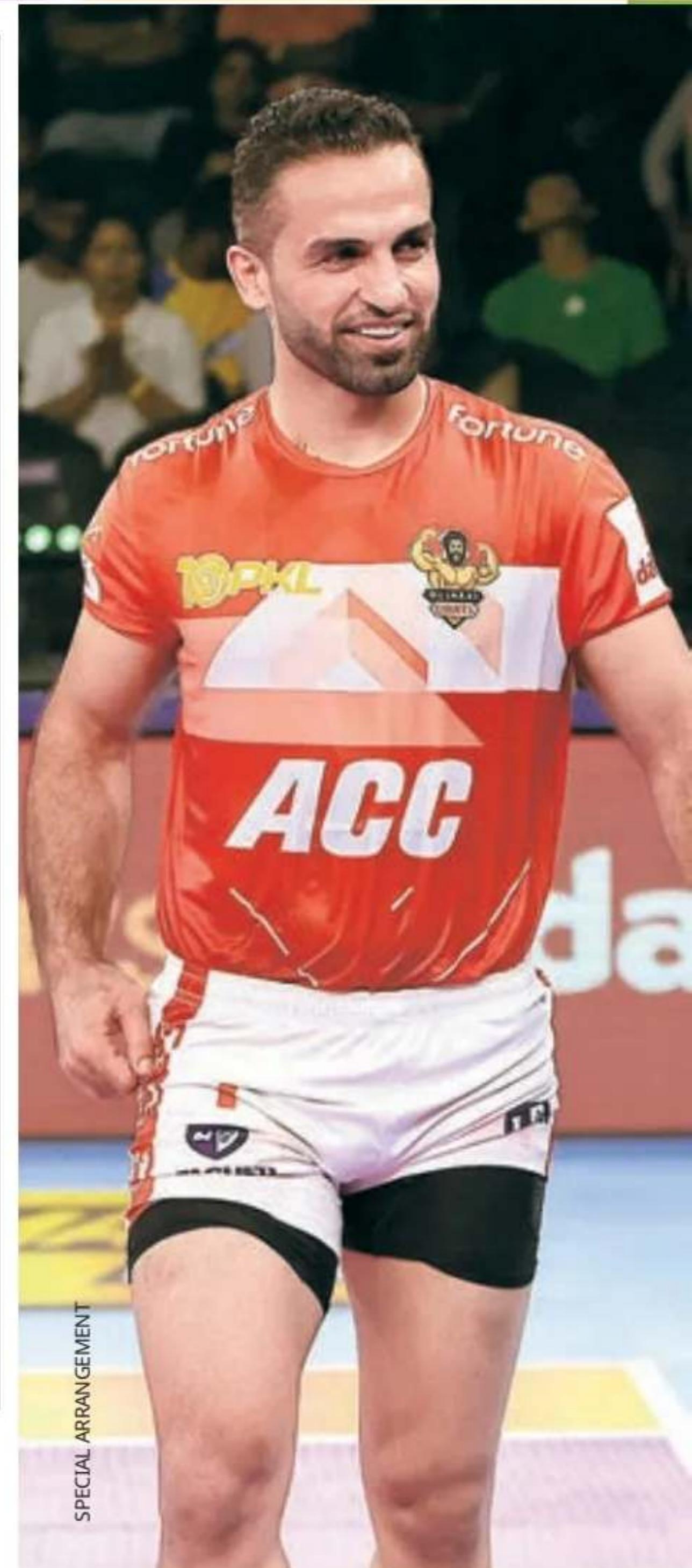
most successful tackles and tackle points (449, as of January 1, 2024). He also has the most wins as captain in PKL history (63 and counting). **He was the first foreign player to draw a ₹1 crore bid in the league and after being the most expensive player in the league for a few seasons in a row, finally ceded that spot to Shadlou,** coming second best this year with Gujarat Giants roping him in for ₹1.38 crore.

He came close to lifting his third PKL title last season with Puneri Paltan, but the side fell short in the final, a loss he deems more painful than the Asian Games defeat to India.

"Last season was very important for me. I wanted to finally lift the trophy as a captain. We were unlucky because in the final, we did not have the services of our main raiders, Aslam Inamdar and Mohit Goyat, who were out injured. At the time, I told myself, 'I tried; I did my best. That's all I can do'. Sometimes, you don't play well, and the team also doesn't. That is really hard. But when you do your best in a losing situation, at least there's something to console yourself with," Atrachali says.

Perils of leadership

There was a time when Atrachali was the obnoxious international



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Sunset beckons: Atrachali (third from right) doesn't shy away from admitting his career is heading towards its twilight phase, which explains why the need to succeed and to err minimally have become so crucial to his operation on the mat. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

player making life difficult for Indians in a sport they gave to the world.

With time, he has moved on from individual pursuits to finding solace in his pack, something he believes is the way an achiever naturally progresses in team sports.

"I am always thinking about where we can score or save points. Sometimes, I am constantly talking to players but no one is talking to me. When you are captain, no one cares about guiding you," he reveals.

"I do have phases where I am nervous about what will happen next for me in life or during a tournament. It helps to have Nabibakhsh, who is also my roommate here, with me. I tell him, 'If I don't know what to do sometimes, you tell me,' he says.

"Everyone is saying a lot of things about my leadership and my records. At the end of it all, though, I

am a player. I also make mistakes. The good thing about the coach is that he adds me to his instructions. He pushes me to try and not worry about the consequences. There will be games when Fazel might not be good, and then someone else needs to step up. If only one or two players are going to work, you are more of a weakness for your side than a strength," the veteran defender explains.

Atrachali recognises his career's twilight phase, emphasising the importance of success and minimal errors in his performance on the mat. Thinking for seven instead of one doesn't make that job any easier.

"Before this season, I met Pawan (Sehrawat) in Mumbai for a shoot. He noticed some white hair on my head and said, 'Fazel, you've become old; you're greying'. I said to him, 'You haven't been captain for too long, so

you don't understand'. This conversation happened over a month or so ago. A few days back, I met Pawan again, and the first thing he showed me was his own white hair, saying, 'Fazel look. I understand now'. Life is difficult as a captain."

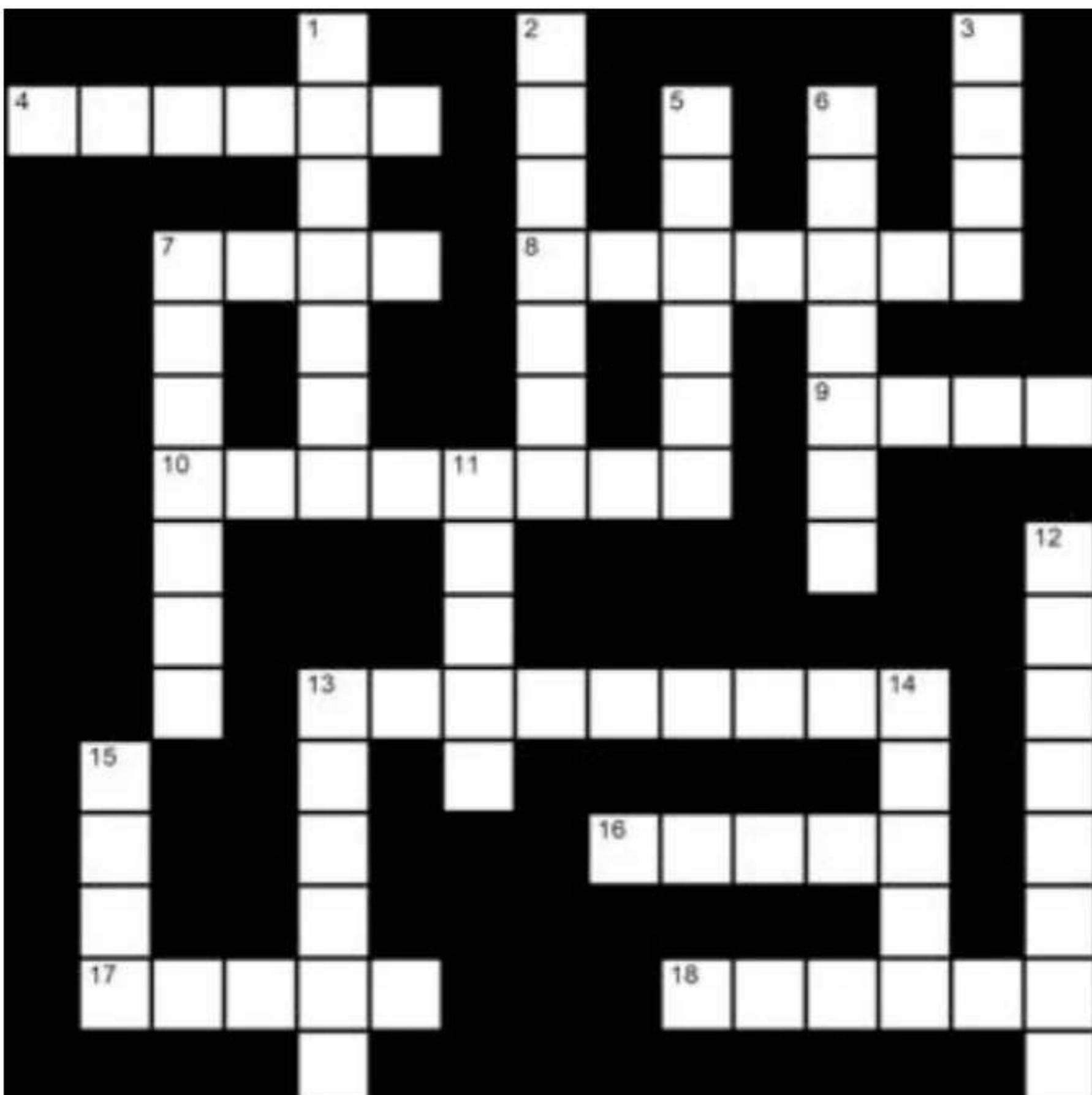
Two sides of a coin

Atrachali and Shadlou represent two ends of the same spectrum. Given the increasing calls to broaden kabaddi to more countries, the tremendous success of such personalities and how unafraid they are to show the highs and lows of the stardom that comes with it are as crucial to players as they are to fans consuming the sport.

The Sultan, as Atrachali's moniker in kabaddi goes, may have his successor in Shadlou, but that both still have plenty to give back to the sport means its present and future are well and truly secure.

CROSSWORD

SIRAM SRINIVASAN



ACROSS

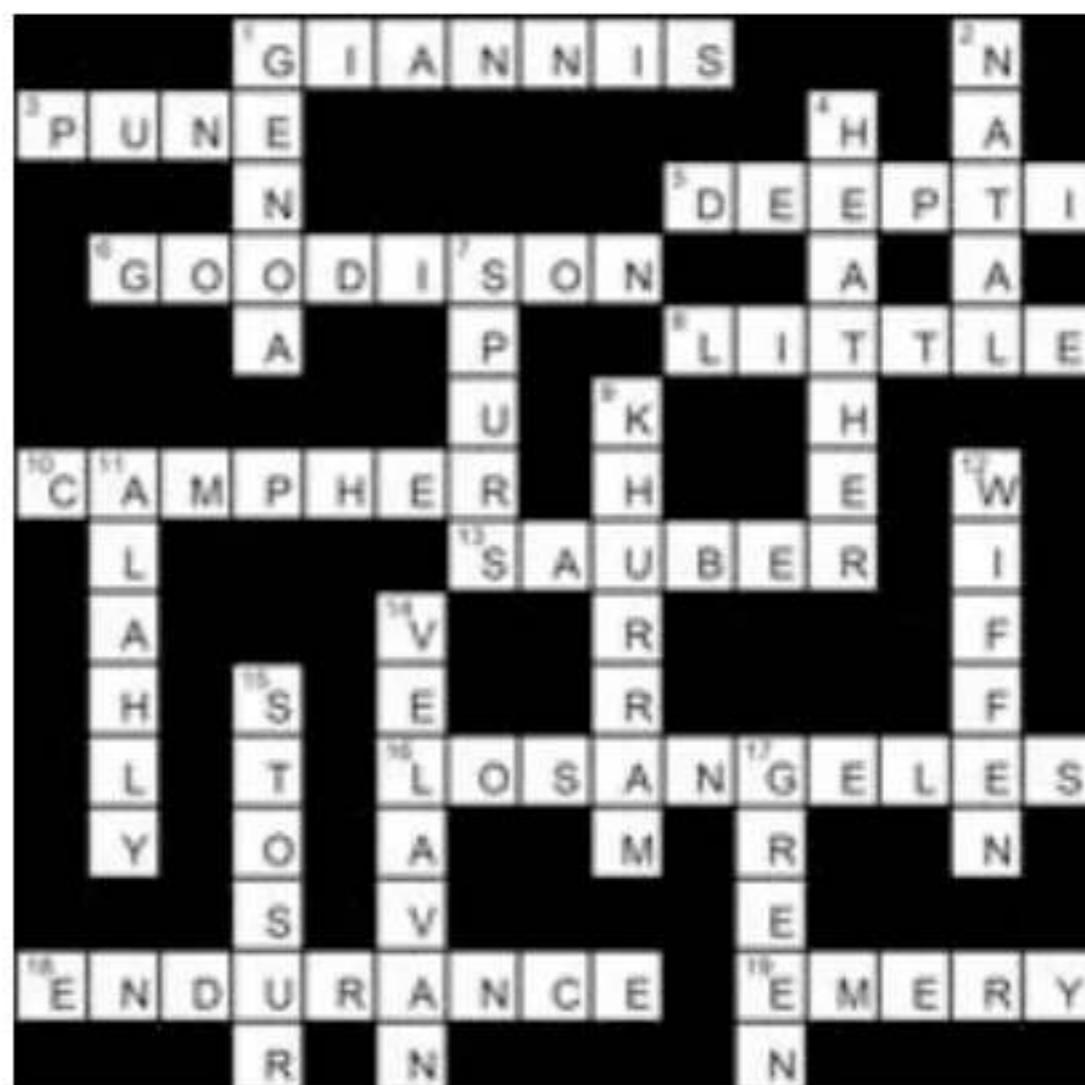
- 4 The common first name for Durasovic, Hovland, and Axelsen. (6)
- 7 Jorge Fossati has replaced Juan Reynoso as its national football coach. (4)
- 8 ... Nadarajan, the TN kabaddi star representing Puneri Paltan. (7)
- 9 South African cricketer ... de Zorzi. (4)
- 10 Djokovic wants to play beyond 40, emulating this NFL icon. (3,5)
- 13 Miriam Adelson and her family has acquired majority stake from Mark Cuban in the franchise Dallas ... (9)
- 16 Australian all-rounder who bowls leg spin, ... Maria King. (5)
- 17 In 2018, he became the second

batter after Haynes to carry his bat through an innings on three occasions in Tests. (5)

- 18 The first name common to Harris, Stoinis, Trescothick. (6)

DOWN

- 1 The big name from Spain who has recently joined LIV Golf. (3,4)
- 2 In NFL, the Falcons are from here. (7)
- 3 Australian opener ... Mooney. (4)
- 5 Bangladesh cricketer Towhid ... (6)
- 6 Sean Dyche is its manager. (7)
- 7 NBA team from Detroit. (7)
- 11 Sameer ..., most expensive uncapped player in the IPL 2024 auction. (5)



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

- 12 Chanderpaul's nationality. (8)
- 13 In the Ultimate Kho Kho league, the Khiladis represent this city. (6)
- 14 Most expensive buy in IPL history. (5)
- 15 South African wicket-keeper ... Verreyne. (4)



» AFC ASIAN CUP

Stern challenge: India has recently shown that it can go toe-to-toe against the better Asian sides but the AFC Asian Cup promises to be a different ball game. AIFF MEDIA

EXPECTATIONS TEMPERED BUT INDIA CAN TAKE FLIGHT IN QATAR

The Blue Tigers will **open their Asian Cup campaign** against the 2015 Asian champion, the Socceroos, one of the favourites to lift the title.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

Football has always embraced underdog stories warmly. Be it the rise of South Korea in 2002 or the recent fourth-place finish of Morocco in the FIFA World Cup, the element of surprise only adds magic to the beautiful game.

When India, the lowest-ranked team (102) in its group, takes the field in the AFC Asian Cup in Qatar, it will look to beat the odds under Croat Igor Stimac.

Though the team's quality, on paper, is well short of its group-stage opponents, Australia, Syria, and

Uzbekistan, all of whom are equally adept at making it to the knockouts, India's realistic target would be to avoid three defeats and, if at all, dare a win against the higher-ranked opponents.

The Blue Tigers will open their campaign against the 2015 Asian



champion, the Socceroos, the strongest contenders in the group and one of the title favourites.

Interestingly, the last time India played in the Asian Cup in Qatar, its first opponent was also Australia, and it lost 0-4. Though the Socceroos have changed three managers since, the current side, under head coach Graham Arnold, would be an even tougher nut to crack, having reached the round of 16 of the FIFA World Cup 2022.

India, on the other hand, will look to scrape the barrel, having lost three of its first-team regulars — center-back Anwar Ali, who is recuperating from an ankle injury; Ashique Kuruniyan, who is ruled out with a torn ACL (anterior cruciate ligament); and Jeakson Singh, who could not recover from shoulder surgery in time.

A better showing in Qatar

India returns to Qatar — moved from China due to Covid-19 challenges — for the Asian Cup after

a forgettable outing in 2011, when it failed to get a single point under head coach Bob Houghton, losing to Australia, Bahrain, and South Korea.

Goalkeeper Subrata Paul had then risen to hero's status against South Korea, making 15 saves and earning the nickname 'Spiderman'. This time, however, India, having risen 40 spots in the rankings since, will look to celebrate and relish team accolades against Asian heavyweights.

Only two players from the 2011 Asian Cup squad — Sunil Chhetri and Gurpreet Singh Sandhu — are part of the 2024 edition, and their leadership will play a crucial role in inspiring the team.

Stimac's boys showed a lot of promise in early 2023, winning the Tri-Nations Series, Intercontinental Cup, and SAFF Championship by July, but struggled to assert control over higher-ranked opponents later on, winning just once in their last five games. Their performance against

Home advantage: Qatar, on home soil, will be looking to successfully defend the AFC Asian Cup it won for the first time in 2019. GETTYIMAGES

Iraq in the King's Cup, playing a higher line with fluid passing in the final third along with quick set-pieces, will be the ace up their sleeves against three counter-attacking sides in the Asian Cup.

The head coach, however, has underlined the lack of preparation time. He has maintained that the country should not expect too much from a team with hardly two weeks in the national camp after Indian Super League duties.

"Let's stop talking about the Asian Cup. We didn't get what we wanted. I was very clear: if you give me time, I might provide results for you. Without time, do not ask about results or anything like that. Just forget it," Stimac said.



FOR MORE
STORIES

» ONLY TWO PLAYERS FROM THE 2011 ASIAN CUP SQUAD – SUNIL CHHETRI AND GURPREET SINGH SANDHU – ARE PART OF THE 2024 EDITION, AND THEIR LEADERSHIP WILL PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN INSPIRING THE TEAM

"We're going to do everything, but there is no time for us to work (enough) in the 12–13 days. It's nothing to prepare for the teams we're going to face."

Injury concerns

While India has experimented with formations throughout 2023, its most consistent shape has been 4-2-3-1, with a congested mid-block in front of a four-man backline to thwart counterattacks.

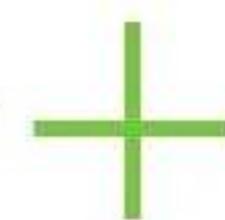
In defence, Anwar's absence will

Tough ask: Indian team head coach Igor Stimac has said he will be able to provide results if he gets the adequate amount of time to prepare with the players. AIFF MEDIA

be the biggest hole. The Mohun Bagan Super Giant defender was not only a left-footed centre-back but also a ball-playing one, creating pin-point long balls for counterattacks. Though Mumbai City FC captain Rahul Bheke is expected to partner Sandesh Jhingan, two defensive-minded centre-backs will not offer balance in Stimac's preferred shape.

"Injuries don't help. When you lose a couple of main players, never mind their age or experience, it is much more difficult because there is a reason why he is there in the starting eleven," Stimac said.

While Stimac has gone with the trio of Ashique, Sahal Abdul Samad, and Lallianzuala Chhangte — in



INDIA SQUAD FOR THE AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023

Goalkeepers: Amrinder Singh, Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Vishal Kaith.

Defenders: Akash Mishra, Lalchungnunga, Mehtab Singh, Nikhil Poojary, Pritam Kotal, Rahul Bheke, Sandesh Jhingan, Subhasish Bose.

Midfielders: Anirudh Thapa, Brandon Fernandes, Deepak Tangri, Lalengmawia Ralte, Liston Colaco, Naorem Mahesh Singh, Sahal Abdul Samad, Suresh Singh Wangjam, Udanta Singh.

Forwards: Ishan Pandita, Lallianzuala Chhangte, Manvir Singh, Rahul Kannoly Praveen, Sunil Chhetri, Vikram Partap Singh.

front of the double pivot in the midfield — for most of 2023, Ashique's injury will see Naorem Mahesh take up the spot along the left, with Sahal playing the No. 10 role.

Anirudh Thapa is expected to orchestrate attacks from the midfield, but India will have to dig deep to find options for the defensive midfield role, with Jeakson ruled out.

Though Lalengmawia Ralte and Suresh Singh will be the preferred options for Stimac, a narrow-attacking approach by a more physical team — which is the case with all three opponents — can leave India bitterly exposed when out of possession.

However, Stimac's biggest headache will be the No. 9.

While Chhetri, India's highest goalscorer of all time, has owned that position for the last decade, age will be a huge factor — he is 39 — against physical teams from India's group.

It is this position that might see a youngster find his own 'Subrata Paul moment' in the Asian Cup, filling in the boots of a legend.

Ishan Pandita and Manvir Singh, both of whom have played as No. 9 before, will have their trials by fire for this spot in Doha.

Asian Cup favourite

The AFC Asian Cup will be the perfect opportunity for host Qatar to recover from the wounds of the FIFA World Cup on home soil in 2022. The Asian champion became the worst-performing host in World Cup history after losing all its games, conceding seven goals, and getting knocked out.

It has changed two managers since and will hope to defend its crown under former Espanyol manager Tintin Marquez, with stern competition from Japan, Iran, South Korea, and Australia.

Qatar will look for goals from its most dependable forward, Almoez Ali, who has been equally adept in

front and along the wings.

Almoez, the Golden Boot winner in the last edition of the tournament, holds the record for most goals in a single edition of the Asian Cup (nine goals) and has become more threatening under former Paris Saint-Germain manager Christophe Galtier at Al Duhail.

Japan, the most successful team

Leading by example: India captain Sunil Chhetri, at 39, will once again be the key striker for his team at the AFC Asian Cup. AIFF MEDIA



in the competition (four titles), was the giant killer in the FIFA World Cup 2022, beating former world champions Germany and Spain. Winger Kaoru Mitoma, who had suffered an ankle injury, has made the cut and will be key for Japan, which enters the event as the highest-ranked Asian side.

South Korea, on the other hand, will look to make the most of the European experience of its players, with 12 out of 26 playing professionally in Europe. Tottenham's Son Heung-Min, who has been in fine goal-scoring touch in the Premier League, will hope to inspire South Korea, runner-up in 2015, to bag the top honour.

So India has its task cut out. It may lack depth, but so did Morocco, playing against then-World No. 2 Belgium, Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal, and the 2010 World Champion Spain — opponents it persevered against and won at the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Stimac's India would look to take a leaf out of the same book to pull off the perfect underdog success story.



Lax refereeing, tough President

Grave concern: East Bengal's coach, Carles Cuadrat, was visibly vexed at the lax supervision and rued that his side was the victim of "inconsistent refereeing" in their draw with Odisha FC. PTI

East Bengal head coach Carles Cuadrat could only despair at the glaring refereeing oversights when his team was denied two clear penalties against Odisha FC, which saw the match ending goalless and the Kolkata giant had to be satisfied with a point. Action replays showed that the Odisha defender Mourtada Fall had clearly handled the ball while trying to block East Bengal striker Javier Severio's shot. Minutes later Odisha's other defender, Jerry Lalrinzuala, brought down the East Bengal's attacker P. V. Vishnu by tugging the latter's jersey inside his own box. **It was a clear case of infringement that called for a penalty but referee S. Senthil Nathan failed to notice the foul and looked the other way.**

Cuadrat was visibly vexed at the lax supervision and rued that his side was the victim of "inconsistent refereeing". East Bengal's case was one among the

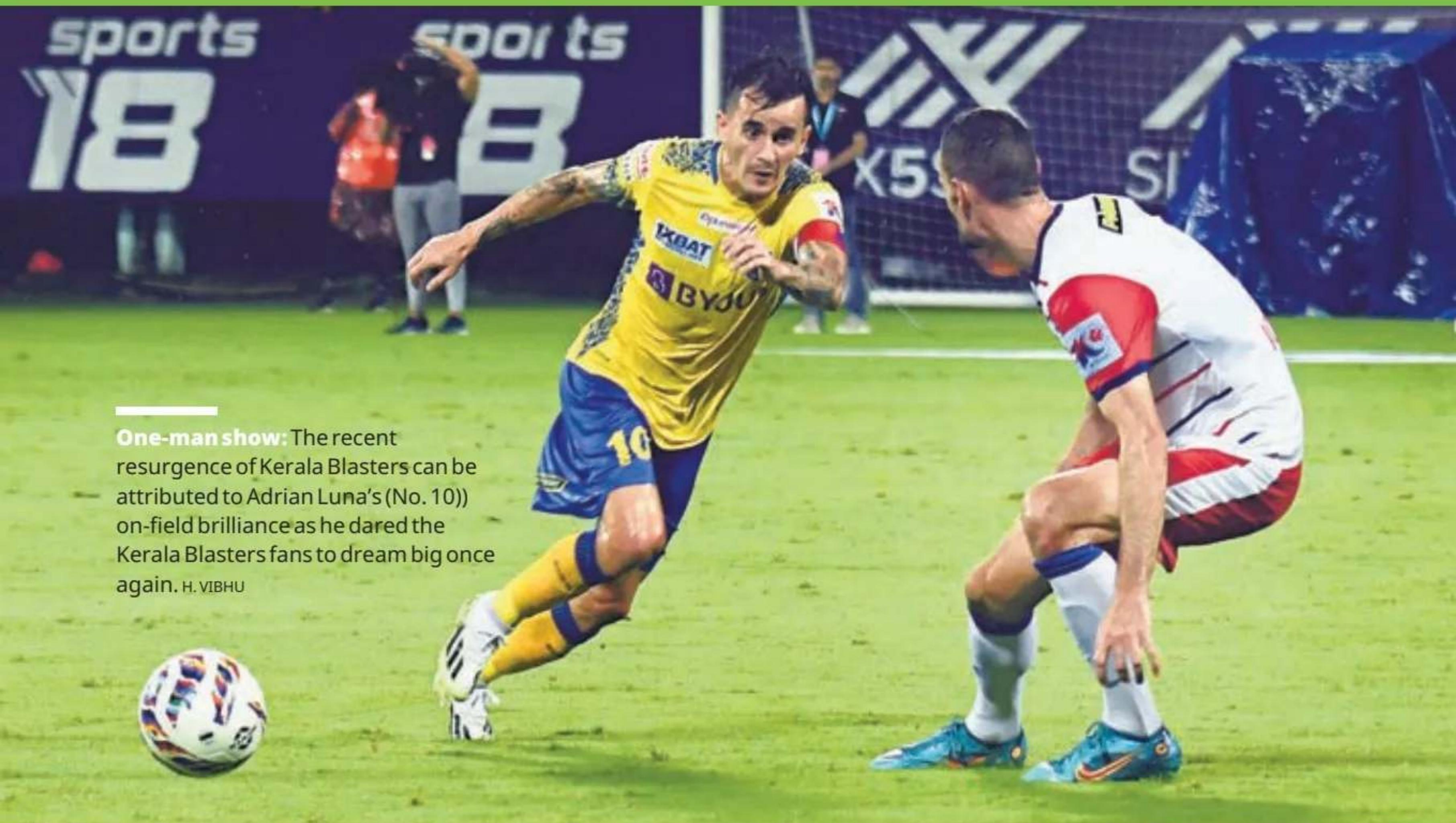
many instances of refereeing errors in the ongoing Indian Super League (ISL) that have been reported by the participating clubs. This prompted the All India Football Federation (AIFF) president, Kalyan Chaubey, to call for an urgent need for accountability on the part of the referee department. The AIFF president urged officials to take serious note of the continuous errors and mounting refereeing issues this season in India's top two leagues, the ISL and the I-League, during a 'Refereeing Review Meeting', held on New Year's eve.

The AIFF president, who is a former goalkeeper having represented a number of top flight clubs in the country, knew the bane of poor refereeing and "expressed concern over the mounting referee issues and deprivation of 'fair play' due to plain sight errors for participating clubs," said an AIFF report. The meeting, which lasted more than four hours,

found a total of 24 controversial 'Key Match Incidents' (KMI) from seven ISL and four I-League games. "Clubs have submitted hard evidence in the form of videos to back their claims. As officials and administrators, we have to work towards minimising these mistakes. We cannot hide behind the mask of the 'acceptable 15 per cent human error norm'. Most of these complaints are of plain sight errors falling under the 15 per cent norm, which hampers the clubs, players and leagues," Chaubey said.

AIFF had set up the Elite Development Referee Programme in January 2023 but it is yet to bear results. "Through the reviews of the videos we have a clear case of one club being at the receiving end of refereeing decisions that went against them twice in two games of the 10 played so far. In their argument, that's 20% of wrong decisions against them, ruining their prospects in the season

A storm is brewing in the country's top domestic football leagues, with a **string of refereeing errors** prompting the AIFF president to step in and take action.



One-man show: The recent resurgence of Kerala Blasters can be attributed to Adrian Luna's (No. 10) on-field brilliance as he dared the Kerala Blasters fans to dream big once again. **H. VIBHU**

campaign," said the AIFF president, appearing to uphold East Bengal's complaint in this reference.

Amitabha Das Sharma

Luna love

In the past decade a couple of international players have managed to strike a chord with the Kerala Blasters faithfuls. Canadian Iain Hume, with his bald plate and boundless energy, was the first overseas star to make an impact with the Kochi crowd. Humettan, as he was called, left a lasting impression with the fans during his stay in Kochi.

However, after Hume, Kerala Blasters fans never had an overseas hero to look up to until Adrian Luna arrived in the 2021 season. The Uruguayan, with his sublime skills and scoring ability, quickly became the

toast of the Kochi crowd. The recent resurgence of the Kochi side could be attributed to his on-field brilliance as he dared the Kerala Blasters fans to dream big once again.

This season, the midfielder had seamlessly slipped into his role of influential creator as Kerala Blasters probably enjoyed its best start. However, Luna picked up an injury during training, which was initially thought to be minor one. But after undergoing surgery, it dawned on everyone that he would be unavailable for the rest of the season.

On Christmas eve, when Kerala Blasters played Mumbai City, the crowd at the Jawaharlal Nehru stadium was the biggest of the season. The Manjappada expressed their support and admiration for Luna by unveiling a massive tifo that read

'Recharge Luna We await your Magic'.

The Uruguayan appreciated the act of the fans and, in an emotional post on *Instagram*, paid tribute to the yellow loyalists. He said he could feel the atmosphere in the stadium while being in Mexico.

"Thank you guys, this means a lot. This motivates me to come back stronger than before. It was great to see boys giving out everything on the pitch and getting that deserved victory against MCFC."

The atmosphere in the stadium was electric. I could feel that from Mexico. Can't wait to be back, see you all." said Luna in post.

It seems, his team has coped to live without his absence as Kerala Blasters posted an impressive win to keep its home record intact.

M. R. Praveen Chandran



“Clubs have submitted hard evidence in the form of videos to back their claims (of inconsistent refereeing). As officials and administrators, we have to work towards minimising these mistakes. We cannot hide behind the mask of the ‘acceptable 15 per cent human error norm’. – Kalyan Chaubey, AIFF President

IN TOP GEAR

With a win over NEROCA, Mohammedan SC now **leads** the I-League table after slip-ups by close challengers, Real Kashmir and Sreenidi Deccan.

Aashin Prasad

aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

In the I-League, Mohammedan SC went into the New Year's break with a 2-1 win over NEROCA to open up a seven-point lead at the top of the table. The Kolkata giant is on course to play in the Indian top flight for the first time since 2014. David Lalhlansanga, who is the club's top-scorer this season, and Lalremsanga Fanai were among the goals as the Black Panthers capitalised on challengers Real Kashmir and Sreenidi Deccan slipping up.

After a run of five straight home games, Real Kashmir went down 0-1 in a closely fought encounter away to Delhi FC after a goal from Brazilian Hudson Dias, who made the most of an error from goalkeeper Shabir Khan. Real Kashmir faced another setback with

the unfortunate passing of the club's founder and owner, Sandeep Chattoo, on New Year's Eve.

Sreenidi was undone at home by a first-half blitz from Gokulam Kerala, led by Nili Perdomo and Alex Sanchez, as the Malabarians ended their six-game winless run with a 4-1 victory. The Deccan Warriors

will join Gokulam, Shillong Lajong, Inter Kashi, and Rajasthan United to participate in the Super Cup in January.

IWL

Kickstart FC maintained its 100 per cent record with a 2-1 win over Sports Odisha (left), with Karishma Shirvoikar continuing to be among the goals. The Goan forward, who won the IWL twice with Gokulam in 2019-20 and 2021-22, now has six goals from three matches to top the scoring charts.

In what was a big test, Odisha FC beat defending champion Gokulam 2-0 at home after strikes from Pyari Xaxa and Lynda Kom Serto. Sethu FC overcame East Bengal in a 4-2 thriller with Priyangka Naorem scoring a brace in the second half.

Hot pursuit:

Mohammedan SC's David Lalhlansanga, who is the club's top-scorer this season, and Lalremsanga Fanai were among the goals as the Black Panthers beat NEROCA 2-1.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

» MATCH OF THE
FORTNIGHT

United in hope

MANCHESTER
UNITED

3

Alejandro
Garnacho
59', 71'
Hojlund 82'

ASTON VILLA

2

McGinn 21'
Dendoncker 26'

Manchester United's stuttering season seemed to have reached its nadir when it slumped to a two-goal deficit inside 30 minutes to Aston Villa in a high-profile Boxing Day Premier League fixture at home.

As it stood, Unai Emery's Villa would have become an unlikely leader of the Premier League table, courtesy of goals from John McGinn and Leander Dendoncker — both goals stemmed from United's flat-footed defending from set pieces.

By the time the game cantered to the half-hour mark, United had clocked 400 goalless minutes across competitions, signalling a rot in performance that had put manager Erik ten Hag on the precipice of being unemployed going into the New Year.

But then, out of nowhere, the Red Devils remembered to be a top-level football team, again.

United's attacking unit, disjointed and dysfunctional for weeks, clicked in unison. Marcus Rashford, Rasmus Hojlund and Alejandro Garnacho — guided by the mercurial Bruno Fernandes — ravaged Villa's

Last gasp: Manchester United's Rasmus Hojlund (centre) celebrates after scoring the winner for the Red Devils. AP

Manchester United came back from **two goals down** to overcome an inspired Aston Villa.

defence, which had kept the offences of Manchester City and Arsenal at bay in previous matches.

However, a combination of inspired goalkeeping by Villa's Emiliano Martinez and tight offside calls ensured the visiting side retained its two-goal advantage at half-time.

Ten Hag's side continued in the same vein in the second half, stitching up coordinated attacks, targeting the high defensive line of Villa.

The pressure eventually bore fruit as Garnacho tapped in a grounded cross from Rashford in the left flank to put the home side back into the game.

The Argentinian winger soon levelled the score with a left-footed finish — which deflected off a Villa defender — from inside the box following a cross from the right wing.

United pressed on for a winner with vigour and found it following a melee in the penalty box after a corner was whipped in. Hojlund rifled in a volley to find the back of the net for the first time in his Premier League career to put the Red Devils ahead in the game finally.

This win could potentially reignite a flailing season for United, while Villa rued missing a glorious opportunity going into 2024 as the Premier League leader.





REUTERS

1

Final piece of the puzzle

Manchester City secured the final piece of the trophy jigsaw after securing the Club World Cup in Jeddah, defeating Brazilian team Fluminense 4-0 in the final. City is now the first English club to simultaneously hold the Premier League, FA Cup, UEFA Champions League, UEFA Super Cup and the FIFA Club World Cup.



2

Allegri at the wheel

Juventus, under Massimiliano Allegri, demonstrated its title credentials after a close 1-0 win over Jose Mourinho's Roma in the Serie A. After a tough three seasons in the league, with a highest-placed finish of fourth, the Bianconeri look set to challenge Inter Milan for the Scudetto, a trophy it won nine years in a row between 2011 and 2020.



3

Change at the top

A win at Turf Moor against Burnley and Arsenal's loss to West Ham United at home helped Liverpool leapfrog the Gunners to the top spot in the Premier League. While goals from Darwin Nunez and Diogo Jota helped the Reds win, Arsenal stumbled against the Hammers, failing to score despite having 77 touches in the penalty box.

GETTY IMAGES



GETTY IMAGES

4

Ruling the goal-scoring charts

Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo cemented his position as the top goal-scorer in 2023 after his goal against Al Taawoun in the Saudi Pro League. Ronaldo finished with 54 goals in the calendar year, finishing ahead of Kylian Mbappe, Erling Haaland and Harry Kane.



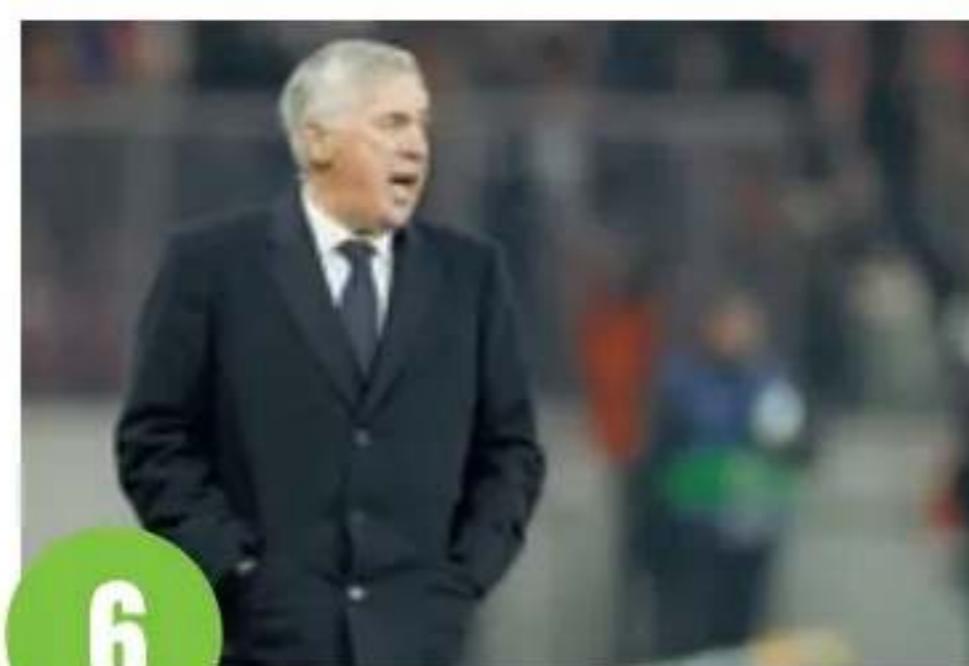
GETTY IMAGES

5

A new dawn for Man United?

British billionaire Sir Jim Ratcliffe struck a long-awaited deal to buy a 25 per cent stake in Manchester United with reports suggesting an incoming investment of \$300 million in the club.

Ratcliffe's INEOS group is set to take over management of the club's football operations, more than a year after the Glazer family announced its willingness to put the club up for sale.



AFP

6

Two more seasons at Madrid for Don Carlo

Spanish giants Real Madrid extended the contract of Italian manager Carlo Ancelotti until 2026, quashing the rumours of him taking up the top job at the Brazil national team at the end of the season. Ancelotti has won 10 titles with Madrid, including two Champions Leagues and one Spanish league.



AFP

7

Tinge of nostalgia

Lionel Messi will face his former club Newell's Old Boys in February 2024 after Inter Miami announced a preseason friendly fixture at the DRV PNK Stadium in Miami. Messi and manager Gerardo Martino both hail from the town of Rosario out of which the club is based. While Messi left after a productive youth career, Martino aggregated the most appearances of any player in the club's history.

Pranay Rajiv & Anish Pathiyil

India's Candidates windfall as Gukesh, Humpy make the cut

The Indian contingent constitutes over 30 per cent of participants in the **upcoming** Candidates Tournament in Canada.

Mayank

mayank.c@thehindu.co.in

In the final moments of the Candidates 2024 qualification window, chess players fiercely competed for the final two spots in the tournament, executing last-minute strategic moves. The Candidates offers the winner a chance to challenge the current world champion.

With Vidit Gujrathi and R. Praggnanandhaa already qualified, the race for the remaining spots included two more Indian youngsters, Arjun Erigaisi and D. Gukesh, along with Parham Maghsoodloo and Alireza Firouzja. Securing these spots required winning a high-rated tournament and boosting their FIDE circuit rating points.

Firouzja pursued rated events in France to enhance his chances, successfully accumulating the

required points to surpass the USA's Wesley So for a Candidates qualification through the rating spot. This mirrored the experience of the current world champion, China's Ding Liren.

Initially denied entry due to COVID-19 challenges, Ding secured a spot just in time when the Chinese Chess Association organised 26 classical games within a month. This allowed him to meet the eligibility criteria for the highest-rated player position.

In this context, the Chennai Grand Masters 2023, hosted at the Leela Palace from December 15 to 21, became a crucial battleground. But Firouzja's approach and the Chennai Grand Masters sparked global discussions, not for the on-the-board games but for perceived concerns about timing



and fairness. There were allegations that the scheduling was strategically designed to bolster certain players' chances of qualifying for the Candidates.

The organisers in India defended their stance, highlighting the absence of any explicit FIDE rule preventing a tournament from taking place if it adhered to the chess body's regulations. As the debate raged on, the chess world sought clarity, and it came from the five-time world champion and FIDE deputy president, Viswanathan Anand.

Anand explained, "Within the rules, if you organise a tournament... you do this, and I'm very happy with this system."

In fact, it produces more tournaments; that's good. So I don't see a problem with that at all, and I



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CHENNAI
GRAND
MASTERS
2023

15th - 21st Dec
Chennai, India



August field: (L-R) Pavel Eljanov, Parham Maghsoodloo, Sanan Sjugirov, Alexandre Panteleimonov, Levon Aronian, Pentala Harikrishna, D. Gukesh, Arjun Erigaisi at the inauguration function of Chennai Grand Masters Chess Championship 2023 in Chennai.

B. VELANKANNIRAJ

think it is one of the good things about the FIDE Circuit."

With an average rating of 2711, the Chennai Grand Masters was officially the strongest closed invitational tournament held in India, surpassing the previous record set at the AAI International Grandmasters Chess Tournament 2011, which had a rating of 2662.

The tournament's early stages featured surprising twists, with both top seeds, Maghsoodloo and

Erigaisi, stumbling in the inaugural round. Despite this, Erigaisi staged an impressive comeback, matching Gukesh's points at 4.5/7 after seven rounds but losing on tiebreaks.

Gukesh emerged as the winner, earning \$30,000 and a nearly assured spot in the Candidates after surpassing Dutch GM Anish Giri in the FIDE circuit leaderboards.

Giri needed a podium finish at the World Rapid & Blitz Championship 2023 to snatch the spot from Gukesh.

Over in Samarkand, chess maestro Magnus Carlsen asserted his dominance in the shorter time control games, clinching both the Rapid and Blitz titles, taking his overall tally to 17 major championships in a career spanning over two decades.

Gukesh's journey to Canada

became certain after Giri's admirable efforts could only land him in the top 30, way beyond a podium finish in both categories.

It was a double delight for Koneru Humpy, who secured a silver in the Rapid Championship while also qualifying for the Women's Candidates through the rating spot.

The formidable Indian lineup, featuring Gukesh, Vidit, and Praggnanandhaa in the men's section and R. Vaishali and Humpy in the women's category, will make up over 30 per cent of the participants in the upcoming Candidates Tournament in Canada.

This substantial representation highlights India's increasing presence on the global chess scene, foreshadowing a legacy in the making as these players pursue success on the grand stage.

The queen correction

By C.G.S.Narayanan

In white correction, a random try by a white piece is defeated by a single black defence and white's further attempts to either nullify or provide for this black defence are broadly termed corrections. But theoretically the random try has to induce a specific white weakness and the corrections must carry this weakness through while providing for the black defence. The corrections by white, apart from the key lead to further weaknesses which are exploited by black. Correction tries by minor white pieces are common place but strategic tries involving white queen are fewer. The problem for study (below) is unique in that correction moves by the white queen start carrying a weakness and try to provide changed mates for a particular defence. The WQ has to maintain guard on d3 while making the tries to cope with the defence 1...Ra5. For example a mere withdrawal try 1.Qxh7? retaining control of c2

Marjan Kovacevic

I prize, Diagrammes 1997



Mate in two moves

Now it is a question of not only providing for 1...Ra5 but also a new mate for 1...Qxa3 as the try loses control of c2 while changing axis in her attempts.

Try 1.Qxh7? (2.Rc5) 1...Qxa3 2.Qc2;

1...Ne6+ 2.Bxe6 1...Rf4+ 2.Rxf4 but 1...Ra5! 1.Qd7? 1.Qxa3 2.Nd2; 1..Ra5 2.Nxa5 but 1...Ne6+! 1.Qf3? 1...Qxa3 2.Qc3; 1...Ra5 2.Nb6 1...Rf4+!

These correction tries fail due to Holzhausen anti-Bristol effects seldom seen in two-movers. Surprisingly it is the innocuous WRg5) which makes the key **1.Rg3!** unlike in other problems..Real masterpiece in spite of checking refutations.

The second problem features white correction in complete form with set mates. WNf6 is the principal piece.

Pederson Egil

Skakbladet 1947



Mate in two moves

Set: 1...Nf3 2.hxg4

1.N any? Nf3!; 1.Nd7? 1...Nf3 2.Be4 but 1...e5!; 1.Nd5? Nf3 2.Qe4 but 1...Be2! 1.Ne4? Nf3 2.Ng4 but 1..Ke5! **Key 2.Nxg4!** Nf3 2.Be4

A tertiary white correction to solve

Marjan Kovacevic

I prize, Stosic Ty 1995-96



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Organ pipes' Key 1.Qa5!

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



Kerala State TT: Pranati, Harshitha triumph

A few minutes after her semifinal against the promising Tia Mundenkurian that went the distance, Pranati P. Nair was back to play Edwina Edward in the under-19 girls final of the Kerala State table tennis championships at the V.K. Krishna Menon indoor stadium in Kozhikode.

The final was close, and Pranati, the top-seeded woman in the meet, found herself level with Edwina midway through all the three games, but the 17-year-old from Thiruvananthapuram pulled herself out of trouble by attacking Edwina's backhand and keeping the ball short and retained the title with a 3-0 verdict.

"The semifinal and final were close, but that is okay. But I had a problem of a bulging nerve in my hand and that caused some discomfort," said Pranati after the victory.

Meanwhile, Palakkad's N.K. Harshitha brushed aside her district-mate S. Srisha in straight games to take the under-11 girls title, while twins Tisha and Tia Mundenkurian helped Thrissur win the under-15 girls inter-district team trophy.

Stan Rayan

» INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON



1

With the Race to Paris 2024 heading into its final stretch, Indian shuttlers will have an excellent opportunity to earn valuable points and stake claims to Olympic berths across categories at the Yonex-Sunrise India Open Super 750 to be held at the Indira Gandhi Stadium in New Delhi from January 16-21, 2024. Asian Games gold medallists Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty and bronze medallist H. S. Prannoy will aim to boost their position in the world ranking ahead of the Paris Olympics, while former World No. 1 Kidambi Srikanth, 2022 Commonwealth Games gold medallist Lakshya Sen, and the

up-and-coming Priyanshu Rajawat will be gunning for the second Indian spot at the Games. According to the Paris Olympics qualification rules, two Indian men's singles players can participate in the Games only if both of them are ranked among the Top-16 at the end of the qualification process that ends on April 30, 2024. The Yonex-Sunrise India Open, organised by the Badminton Association of India (BAI), was upgraded to the Super 750 category from the Super 500 last year, which means that the players can earn significantly higher ranking points in their quest for Olympic qualification.

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Ramji Srinivasan



FOR MORE
STORIES

Of style and (no) substance

With stringent anti-doping measures in place, athletes must navigate the **risky terrain of sports supplements** with extreme caution.

People have long been subjected to drug tests for supplements and drinks, and the situation is worsening over the years, with many athletes facing scrutiny for substance abuse. International competitions like the Olympics involves mandatory drug testing in most sports, such as weightlifting, boxing, tennis and athletics.

The global organisation responsible for drug testing in both Olympic and non-Olympic sports is the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). **WADA maintains a regularly updated list of banned substances, any of which, if found in an athlete's system, could lead to either a suspension or a lifetime ban.**

There are a few obvious items on this list, such as various forms of testosterone and narcotics. It's best for athletes to check this list on the WADA website to stay consistently informed about the supplements and substances that they use.

Most athletes take workout supplements such as protein powder, amino acids, or creatine, while others prefer pre-workout drinks before training. However, they may mistakenly believe that they are adhering to the rules, thinking that

these items are neither anabolic steroids nor amphetamines.

But the issue is that companies that produce these supplements and drinks often include banned substances, knowingly or unknowingly, to enhance its effectiveness. Such information may not be disclosed on the product label since these companies are not legally bound to list all ingredients. In another possible scenario, a supplement may be manufactured in the same facility and equipment that contain banned substances. It's a tricky situation for athletes, since they can unknowingly take contaminated supplements, leading to failed drug tests and suspensions.

Supplement companies want to maximise profits, and the best way to do that is by endorsing products through trainers, players, and celebrities. Due to lack of proper regulations, these companies can include whatever ingredients they want in their supplements and drinks; it's essentially an open playing field. Every competitive athlete needs to be aware of this reality. And, even if they conduct extensive research on a product, there are no guarantees of its cleanliness. Therefore, the responsibility ultimately falls on the

athletes. If they fail a drug test and plead with WADA, the response from the organisation will always be the same. Also, taking legal action against the supplement company may be challenging, as there is no legal basis to rely on.

WADA's website clearly states: "WADA is not involved in any certification process regarding supplements and therefore does not certify or endorse manufacturers or their products. WADA does not control the quality or the claims of the supplements industry, which may, from time to time, claim that their products have been approved or certified by WADA. If a company wishes to promote its products to the sport community, it is their responsibility as a manufacturer to ensure that the products do not lead to any anti-doping rule violation. Some third-party testers of supplements exist, and this may reduce the risk of contamination but not eliminate it."

If you are an athlete who is considering taking a supplement, my recommendation would be to check whether tested athletes who have used the exact product have not encountered any issues. Also, it's best to consult with a sports nutritionist, physiotherapist, and a



No mercy: Former world number one, Simona Halep, was banned by the International Tennis Integrity Agency for four-years due to a positive test for Roxadustat in 2022 (after the US Open). She is the most prominent tennis player to fail a drug test since Maria Sharapova in 2016. GETTY IMAGES

sports doctor before taking adding supplements into your regimen.

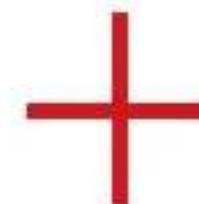
Currently, some strength and conditioning (S&C) coaches promote products without much knowledge of the intricate content, driven by a

desire for monetary gains and social media traction. Be smart and aware of these dubious products in order to safeguard yourself from potential bans in the sport you love.

Coaches, too, must be vigilant about this menace, since the athletes they train often get bombarded with information about various products. It's possible for one of them to fail a drug test for something they took without their knowledge, resulting in a potential ban for both player and coach, thus tarnishing their reputation permanently.

I have heard many coaches say, "This doesn't matter for me; I'll never get drug tested because I'm not a national-level player." While there's some truth to that, it's important to remember two things: 1) WADA or NADA now conduct drug tests at select local meets too. 2) In national competitions, one can be chosen for a random test even if he/she is not a top finisher.

Taking supplements or pre-workout drinks is essentially like playing Russian roulette. It's that simple — if you get caught, there's nowhere to run.



Due to lack of proper regulations, companies can include whatever ingredients they want in supplements and drinks; it's essentially an open playing field. Every competitive athlete needs to be aware of this reality.

Improving longevity is key

Whether age is a number or a word, top sportspeople are better aware of their bodies.

Suresh Menon

When someone says "age is only a number," you can be sure they are not in their twenties. Young people have no need for such consolation.

The received wisdom is that achievers in all fields are getting younger, an argument buttressed by the fact that Malala Yousufzai won the Nobel Prize at 17. It is easier to find young achievers in sport. The youngest participant in the Tokyo Olympics was Syrian Hand Zaza, 12, in table tennis. At the other end of the scale was the Australian Mary Hanna, who took part in the equestrian events at 66. Compatriot Andrew Hoy was 62 and in his eighth Olympics in the same event. Roger Federer played his last competitive tennis match at 41. But these are the outliers.

We age, we slow down, and we try to make up for the physical decline by using experience and game-cleverness as substitutes in sports. The surgeon and Alpine climber George Wherry put it best. He said, "After 40, a climber is in the old age of his youth and must not be reckless as to pace; his endurance and sure-footedness may be better, but his elasticity is less so." What you gain on the roundabouts, you lose on the swings.

Research on sport and ageing is interesting. According to a report published by the ARC Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research, since 1992, the average age of Olympians has gone up from 25 to 27. We are



Keeping fit: Roger Federer played his last competitive tennis match at the age of 41. AFP

competing better at a later (even if only slightly later) age. As all sportspeople tell themselves, it ain't over till it's over!

We live longer for much the same reason that we compete for longer. Naturally, there is a connection. In the latter case, improvements in medicine and sports science, innovations in equipment (those shoes!), and better organised training have all contributed to its longevity.

The average age of the top 100 tennis players has gone up from 26 to 28. Among women, it is now 26, compared to 24 three decades ago. The study states: "This may be attributed to a continued shift in racquet technology and game style. For example, tennis play has largely moved away from the explosive athleticism of a serve-and-volley strategy. Instead, the backcourt style has become popular, putting more emphasis on power that can be generated from better racquets and endurance, a domain of older athletes."

In chess, where Viswanathan Anand remains in the top 10 at the age of 54, a study of 24,000 games showed that players were at their best at about 40. Magnus Carlsen, the No. 1 player, is still only 33; it is up to him to keep his interest in the game alive!

Whether age is a number or a word, top sportspeople are better aware of their bodies. Governing bodies, too, are beginning to understand the need for rest, and rather than levying fines for missing tournaments, they often encourage early or mid-career breaks, thus improving longevity. Age is money, too.



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