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**AUTOGRAPHED  
POSTER  
LEANDER PAES**

WTC FINAL

**Decoding  
the Indian  
debacle**

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

**Guardiola's  
Man City  
dream  
fulfilled**

# GAME, SET, G.O.A.T.

Djokovic's triumph at the French Open gave the Serb a record-breaking 23rd Grand Slam title, helping him steer clear of Rafael Nadal and perhaps settle the debate as to who the greatest men's player of all time is. «





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**— LEANDER PAES**

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## OFF-SIDE

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# AMERICA'S MESSI DREAM

Lionel Messi's move to Major League Soccer – three years ahead of the World Cup carnival's arrival to the North American shores – **possesses the potential to reshape** the very foundations of the sport.

The world of football has been left scratching its head as Lionel Messi defied the allure of a half-a-billion-dollar paycheck from Saudi Arabia, succumbing instead to the call of Miami's sun-drenched, tax-free haven.

The Argentine World Cup winner — a free agent at the end of a fruitful but acrimonious stay in the French capital — had suitors aplenty. A fairy-tale return to Barcelona was thought to be close, but the prodigal son was too costly for the Catalunya club, still reeling from years of financial mismanagement.

Yet, it is the move to Major League Soccer — three years ahead of the World Cup carnival's arrival on North American shores — that possesses the potential to reshape the very foundations of the sport, much like Pele's entry to the USA with the New York Cosmos in 1975.

"You come here, you win a country," Cosmos's general manager Clive Toye had told the three-time World Cup winner. And so Pele did, forever changing the landscape of soccer in the United States. The Brazilian's two-year stay heralded an era where stadiums brimmed with spectators, bearing witness to a metamorphosis that beckoned more illustrious names like Franz Beckenbauer, Johan Cruyff, and George Best to embark upon their American odyssey.

Now, Messi's arrival casts a similar enchantment, with rumours swirling of his former Barcelona comrades Jordi Alba and Sergio Busquets contemplating their own journeys across the Atlantic.

The anticipation is already high; Inter

Miami's forthcoming clash against Philadelphia on July 25 has ignited a frenzy, with tickets vanishing even though Messi can officially sign for the club only after June 30. The lowest price for a ticket to Inter Miami's League Cup opener against Mexican side Cruz Azul on July 21, widely touted to be Messi's American debut, is priced at USD 2600 (actual price: USD 29) in the secondary market, according to *Fortune* magazine.

One cannot overlook the commercial windfall that lies in wait. David Beckham, co-owner of Inter Miami, sold 300,000 LA Galaxy jerseys per season during his five-and-a-half-year stint, but MLS and Adidas are expecting Messi to outsell that number. Paris Saint-Germain sold 1.2 million Messi jerseys worldwide in 2022-23, earning USD139 million, and his Argentina No. 10 shirt was sold out across the globe midway through the 2022 World Cup.

Driven by such commercial and sporting potential, Apple, Adidas, Beckham, and the MLS have converged, conjuring a deal that promises to transform Messi into a part-owner of the club, granting him a share of the revenues his presence will command.

Yet, in the midst of much swirling disbelief, Messi wants to clear the air about his true motivation. "If it had been a matter of money, I'd have gone to Saudi Arabia or elsewhere. It seemed like a lot of money to me. The truth is that my final decision goes elsewhere and not because of money," he told Spanish newspaper *Mundo Deportivo*. "It's time to go to MLS to live football in a different way and enjoy my day-to-day life more."



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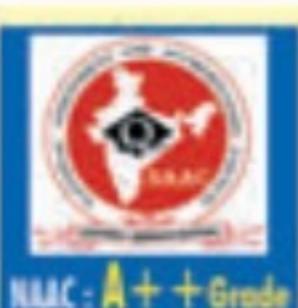
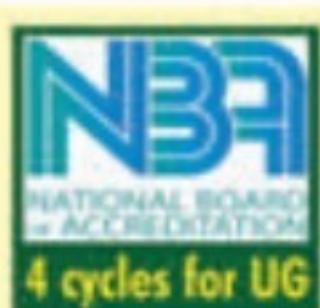
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## Spain wins Nations League

Dani Carvajal scored a Panenka penalty to win Spain the Nations League, with a 5-4 shoot-out victory over Croatia, after a tense match finished 0-0 following extra-time. Spain goalkeeper Unai Simon denied Lovro Mayer and Bruno Petkovic from the spot, before Carvajal cheekily chipped home to earn La Roja their first trophy since Euro 2012 and break Croatian hearts. Zlatko Dalic's side, runner-up at the World Cup in 2018 and third in 2022, has never won a major trophy and was hoping Nations League success would cap a glittering international career for captain Luka Modric. The victory is a confidence boost for new Spain coach Luis de la Fuente after heavy criticism in March following a defeat by Scotland in EURO 2024 qualifying. It also avenged their 2021 final defeat by France.



## SUPER CHARGED AT SUPER 1000 EVENT



**India's top men's doubles duo Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty beat reigning world champion Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik of Malaysia 21-17, 21-18 in the summit clash of the Indonesia Open badminton championship.**

This was Satwik-Chirag's maiden appearance in the final of a BWF World Tour Super 1000 event.

The men's doubles Asian Champion pair edged South Korea's Kang Min Hyuk and Seo Seung Jae 17-21, 21-19, 21-18 in the semifinal.

The Indians defeated the World Champion duo in 43 minutes, becoming the first doubles pair from the country to claim a Super 1000 event. AP

# Adios Nunes!

The UFC legend **bowed out in style** with a win over Irene Aldana.

Lalith Kalidas

Twitter @lal\_Kal

**O**n June 10, 2023, the world of MMA came to a standstill shortly after a gruelling five-round main event fight between the reigning women's bantamweight champion Amanda Nunes and her Mexican challenger Irene Aldana.

While Nunes, fighting in just her third bout in three years, was the clear favourite at the UFC 289 headliner in Vancouver, Aldana was on course for an upset before frittering away as the veteran Brazilian tightened her grip over a contest that lasted the distance. Julianna Pena, Nunes' biggest nemesis and first conqueror in seven years, was in attendance. Pena, who won the title by beating Nunes in 2021 and ceded it back to her at UFC 277 in July 2022, would have hoped Aldana would fumble so that she could find another title shot.

As the results went up in Nunes' favour for a UFC women's record

16th win, the 35-year-old gracefully paused and posed with her belts (bantamweight and featherweight) before placing them on the floor and tearfully kneeling over them in the Octagon.

The Lioness' timed her exit perfectly, announcing her retirement with flair and undisputable dominance over two divisions. There was nothing left to prove. "I decided right now that I'm still young enough to enjoy everything that I made. I've got to travel; I want to be with my family," Nunes announced.

While Pena was visibly dissatisfied with Nunes' decision to call it quits, the Brazilian maestro was competitive even with her final statement. "I'm going to have my belts at home with me. Whoever gets the belt now is just going to pretend to have it. I'm gone," Nunes added as she left an abrupt crevice in the women's UFC circuit after a decade of dominance.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS



- Most wins in UFC title fights amongst women — 11
- Most wins in UFC Women's history — 16
- Most finishes in UFC Women's history — 10
- Most consecutive wins in UFC Women's history — 12
- First woman in UFC to win, hold and defend two titles simultaneously (bantamweight and featherweight)
- First and only fighter to retire as multi-division champion in UFC history

**Final flourish:** 'The Lioness' timed her exit perfectly, announcing her retirement after undisputable dominance over two divisions.

GETTYIMAGES

# THE MAN WHO TURNED CITY INTO A WORLD BEATER

The Champions League may have brought **Manchester City and Pep Guardiola heartache in the past.** But all that hurt dissipated on that night in Istanbul.

**All-time great:** A third Champions League trophy has rubber-stamped Pep Guardiola's status as one of the managerial giants of modern football. GETTY IMAGES



## EPL UCL FA Cup

Matches	Matches	Matches
<b>38</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>
Points	Won	Won
<b>89</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>
Goals	Goals	Goals
<b>94</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>19</b>

## Top players

**Erling Haaland**

**52**

goals

**Kevin De Bruyne**

**28**

assists





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## GUARDIOLA ADAPTED HIS STYLE BY PLAYING TO HAALAND'S STRENGTHS – USING HIS HEIGHT AND STRENGTH, LAUNCHING LONG BALLS TOWARDS HIM, AND PLAYING THROUGH BALLS FOR THE STRIKER TO RUN ONTO

Aashin Prasad  
Twitter @aashin23

Long before the Abu Dhabi investment, Manchester City briefly enjoyed moderate success. The club from Maine Road was crowned the champion of England in 1968 for only the second time after it pipped city rival Manchester United. A few weeks later, though, United would rain on its parade by winning the European Cup for the first time.

In the following year, before its first-ever European Cup tie against Fenerbahce, City's assistant coach Malcolm Allison declared that the club 'would scare Europe to death'. However, in the first round, the Turkish side eliminated City, which wouldn't play in top-level European competition again until 2011, which is when the Arab money influx began.

There was a time when players used to denote 'Manchester', meaning United and not City. City splashed the cash to lure the best and even used billboards to let the world know there was a team in blue in Manchester. In response, the then-Manchester United manager, Alex Ferguson, famously dismissed the Citizens as 'noisy neighbours'. With blindingly obvious hindsight, they were making the right noises.

City would go on to scale England, with Europe as its next conquest.

But the Champions League is among the hardest competitions to win. It's not a given that the top dogs in the league will win the Cup. In the modern Champions League era until 2022, only 16 times has a team managed a League and a Champions League double, and only nine times has a continental treble been achieved since 1956.

While the competition, in its inception as the European Cup and its early avatars has thrown up several surprise champions since the turn of the century, it has become increasingly clear that the team with the biggest resources has the best chance of winning it.

The roll call of Champions League winners post-2010, namely Real Madrid (5 times), Barcelona (2), Bayern Munich (2), Chelsea (2), and Liverpool (1), meant that it was only a matter of time before Manchester City, boasting a valuation of \$4.99 billion, added its name to the illustrious list. And for City to be considered among the European 'Elite', it needed to win the Champions League.

To lead the club to the 'Holy Grail', City turned to Pep Guardiola, who had achieved two continental titles with Barcelona in four





**Proving a point:** Sir Alex Ferguson, who won 13 Premier League titles at Manchester United, once referred to City as 'noisy neighbours'. As it turned out, City and its fans were starting to make all the right noises. GETTYIMAGES

years, including the obliteration of United in the 2011 final. City made its advances towards the Spaniard in 2012. After a three-year layover in Munich, Guardiola finally signed with the club in the summer of 2016.

And apart from the trophies and the eye-catching football that followed in the Guardiola era, City has also found a protective shield in the Spaniard in the face of various allegations levelled against the club. First, with UEFA's charges and now the Premier League's financial breach charges levelled at the Citizens earlier this year, Guardiola was defiant in his support of the club.

Incidentally, the siege mentality

reinforced by Guardiola enabled City, in the aftermath of the PL charges, to go on an unbeaten 24-game run in all competitions as it won a third successive league title and reached the finals of the FA Cup and Champions League.

Not many expected Guardiola to go a decade without a Champions League crown, despite the sizeable backing in the transfer market in his first six years at City. Guardiola, who had made seven successive semifinals with Barcelona and Bayern Munich in his first seven years in top-flight management, failed to reach the last four stage in his first four seasons with City. He

came close, making the final in 2021 and the semifinal in 2022.

Much like City, another Petro dollar-fuelled football club that has floundered in its chase to land the coveted European crown is Qatar-owned Paris Saint-Germain.

But unlike at PSG, where the star status of players has repeatedly come in the way of team harmony, City has been wise in using its resources towards building the best possible team under Guardiola.

City passed the chance to sign Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi at 36 and 33, respectively, which would have adversely affected the team's high-intensity style on the

**« City learned from their past mistakes. They hung in there and persisted before landing the killer blow »**



pitch and bloated its wage structure off the pitch. United and PSG, who bit the bullet with Ronaldo and Messi, haven't looked anywhere near their best in the Champions League

**Guardiola and City, instead, hedged their bets on the burgeoning young talent of Erling Haaland. He is not your archetypal Guardiola forward: a 6'4" striker who won't press all over the pitch off the ball and involve himself in the build-up play. Haaland averaged nearly 24 touches per game in the Premier League this season. City goalkeeper Ederson Moraes averaged more, with 37. Ederson, though, recorded his most touches in a single campaign (1302) in his six years at City.** Guardiola adapted his style by playing to Haaland's (in pic) strengths by using his height and strength, launching long balls towards him, and playing through balls for the

striker to run onto. He repaid the faith with 52 goals in his first season.

Even though Guardiola would play down his failures in the Champions League, deep down, he would have wanted to prove his detractors wrong (Guardiola admitted to having a burner Twitter account after the 2023 Champions League final).



Despite the hiccups in his methods of management, the ever-thinking Guardiola has sought to evolve the game, and his 'City Machine' is no different. Amid the hundreds of goals per season and the stack of victories, there was also the 45-minute dismantling of former Champions League holder Real Madrid.

**It was a statement victory for Manchester City against a European elite, reaffirming the belief that 'it was their time' at last. The final against Internazionale wasn't as straightforward as many predicted, but Guardiola and City learned from their past mistakes. They hung in there, persisted before landing the killer blow. City matched the feat of its illustrious neighbour United, which is clinging to the glory days of yore, by winning a continental treble.**

And 54 years after he predicted it, Allison's infamous prophecy about Manchester City has come true. Europe will now fear them.

# HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Though the **Intercontinental Cup win is a sign of good things**, Stimac's real test comes later.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

Twitter @Neeladri\_27

The Intercontinental Cup — a friendly tournament that started in 2018 with India winning the inaugural title — had seen the Blue Tigers finish bottom in the last edition of the tournament, in 2019.

Four years later, India beat Lebanon for the first time in 46 years in the final of the same tournament, winning its second Intercontinental Cup title, at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar.

After a goalless first half, India struck early in the second half, with Lallianzuala Chhangte,



**It was the second silverware for Igor Stimac's side in three months as it gets ready for the big test, the AFC Asian Cup, set to be played in Qatar next year.**



**Lead by example:** Sunil Chhetri played a vital role once again with a fine performance capped with the opening goal. BISWARANJAN ROUT

Nikhil Poojary and Sunil Chhetri combining in an overlap, followed by a cross by Chhangte to Chhetri.

The 38-year-old Indian captain proved to be ageless yet again as he scored his 87th international goal, giving India the lead.

Five minutes after the hour mark, Chhetri was at it again, this time setting up Naorem Mahesh Singh for a shot, which was initially stopped by Lebanon's goalkeeper Ali Sabeh but was put in the net by Chhangte in the follow-up. It was the second silverware for Igor Stimac's side in three months as it gets ready for the big test, the AFC Asian Cup, set to be played in Qatar next year.

After the 10-day tournament in the Odisha capital, Stimac will have plenty to be happy about the performance while some things will have to stand the test of time.

#### A solid blue wall at last

When India stepped into the field for the final, it was not just the 46-year-old record it was looking to break.

There was an older record of six consecutive clean sheets in 1952, under legendary former Indian coach Syed Abdul Raheem.

On June 18, India got level to six clean sheets in a row — three each in this tournament and three in the Tri-Nations Tournament, which India won in March.

Two of the most important men behind the success have been Sandesh Jhingan and Anwar Ali. Coming from the land of Jarnail Singh, one of India's best defenders of all time, they have become an effective close-knit combination for the Blue Tigers.

In the Intercontinental Cup, they distributed their responsibilities really well — Anwar became the ball-playing centre-back while Jhingan became the pillar in the box.

When India scored its first goal in this tournament, it was Anwar's key pass — crossed by Anirudh Thapa from the left flank — which was ultimately shot into the net by Sahal Abdul Samad just two minutes into the match.

Jhingan, on the other hand, proves to be an attack through set-pieces — something that saw him score in the final of the Tri-Nations Tournament, three months ago.

But their most important achievement has been securing clean sheets, much to the delight of Stimac. "More importantly, other than the win, we got the clean sheet," he said after full-time.

#### ISL finally bearing fruits

The Intercontinental Cup has been a revelation for two boys — Akash Mishra and Nikhil Poojary.

Poojary's gorgeous back-heal in the final, earning him the nickname 'back-heal Poojary', as well as Akash's runs along the flanks, have made sure India has plenty of options beyond Pritam Kotal and Subhasish Bose — the conventional full-backs under Stimac.



Both Mishra and Poojary had honed their skills under Manolo Marquez during his time as head coach of Hyderabad FC, which won the ISL title in 2022.

This, in turn, hints at the narrative that the dream of



having quality players in India through a franchise league — which has now become India's premier division — is finally taking shapee.

Mahesh Singh is another example. The 24-year-old was one of the most promising talents in an otherwise lacklustre East Bengal side last season. For Stimac, he has been brilliant, making an instant impact coming off the bench.

**He did so on multiple occasions against Vanuatu in the second game on June 12 and in the final,** Chhangte's goal in the final had come after his shot was saved.

As the ISL expands to more teams with the promotion model starting next season, it will be interesting to see how many more players can come out of the system to become another 'back-heel Poojary' for India.

#### **Who after Sunil Chhetri?**

One of the most pertinent questions for over a decade in Indian football has been who will fill in for Sunil Chhetri as striker when he decides to hang up his boots.

The Indian captain was the difference against Vanuatu as India won that game 1-0, securing its spot

in the final. And it was Chhetri again who gave India the lead against Lebanon in the final.

Having made his debut against Pakistan in 2005, Chhetri was one of the only two strikers (the other being Rahim Ali) in the squad for the tournament, with Ishan Pandita ruled out with a hamstring injury before the first game of the Intercontinental Cup, against Mongolia.

Rahim, however, has failed to capitalise on key chances throughout the tournament, with the Blue Tigers falling back to the Indian veteran, Chhetri, for goals.

Stimac, though, has asked for more support for the forwards. "Let's be more supportive. Please get behind these boys. They deserve it. Your support will make them more secure in front of the goal," he told the reporters.

**Jubilant scenes:** By beating Lebanon for the first time in 46 years, the Indian football team also secured six consecutive clean sheets.

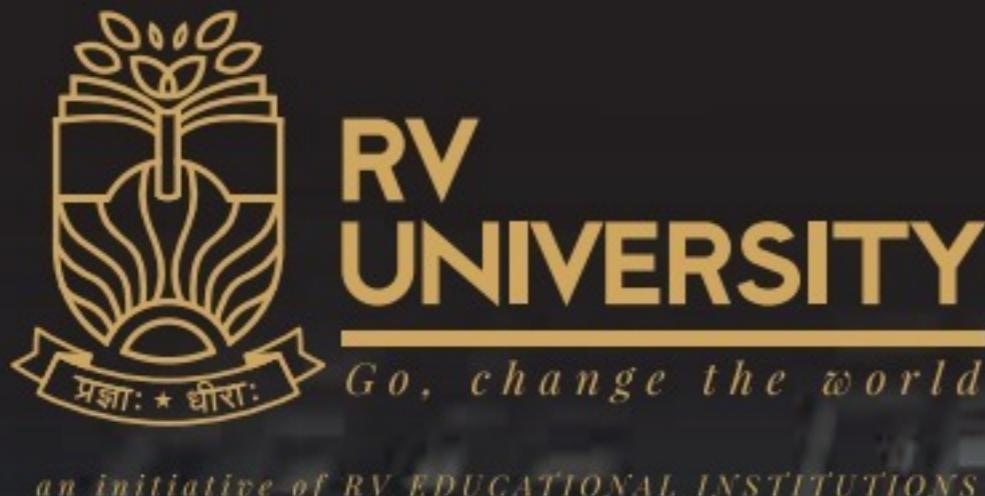
BISWARANJAN ROUT

India's next challenge will be in the SAFF Championship — a tournament it will enter as the defending champion and it will be without Pandita, who is still recovering from his injury.

**The Blue Tigers will then play in the King's Cup in Thailand, the Merdeka Cup in Singapore, the Asian Games and then the FIFA World Cup qualifiers before the Asian Cup.**

The real test for Stimac's side begins here — how the team, having won two trophies in three months, avoids complacency and whether it can have enough options in front to look for goals in important matches.

**« Let's be more supportive. Please get behind these boys. They deserve it. Your support will make them more secure in front of the goal — Igor Stimac »**



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# DJOKOVIC

## DELIVERS NO. 23 TO MAKE HISTORY

Novak Djokovic, who has always confidently talked about his burning desire to break records and make history, did both with his **23rd Grand Slam singles title** at Roland Garros.

Paul Fein

*"The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be."* — Ralph Waldo Emerson

**W**hen he was an adorable seven-year-old, Novak Djokovic did his first interview on a Serbian TV station. With his cap turned backward and his racquet spinning, Djokovic was asked if he considered tennis a game or an obligation. He declared, "Tennis, for me, is an obligation. My goal is to become a tennis champion."

From an early age, Djokovic pursued that goal with as much ambition and single-mindedness as any superstar in any field ever has. He left no stone unturned, from his hyper-nutritious diet to his supreme physical fitness — his wife Jelena says at home he's frequently stretching — to using the latest restorative devices, such as a

hyperbaric chamber and the cow patch he wore in Paris on his chest that supposedly combines acupuncture with light heat.

After outclassing world No. 4 Casper Ruud 7-6(1), 6-3, 7-5 in the French Open final, Djokovic spoke with the same passion, poise, and precision to the admiring 15,000 Court Philippe-Chatrier spectators. "I'd like to send a message to every young person out there — tennis, sports, or anything else. I was a seven-year-old dreaming about winning Wimbledon. I'm beyond grateful to be standing here," said Djokovic, wearing a jacket with the

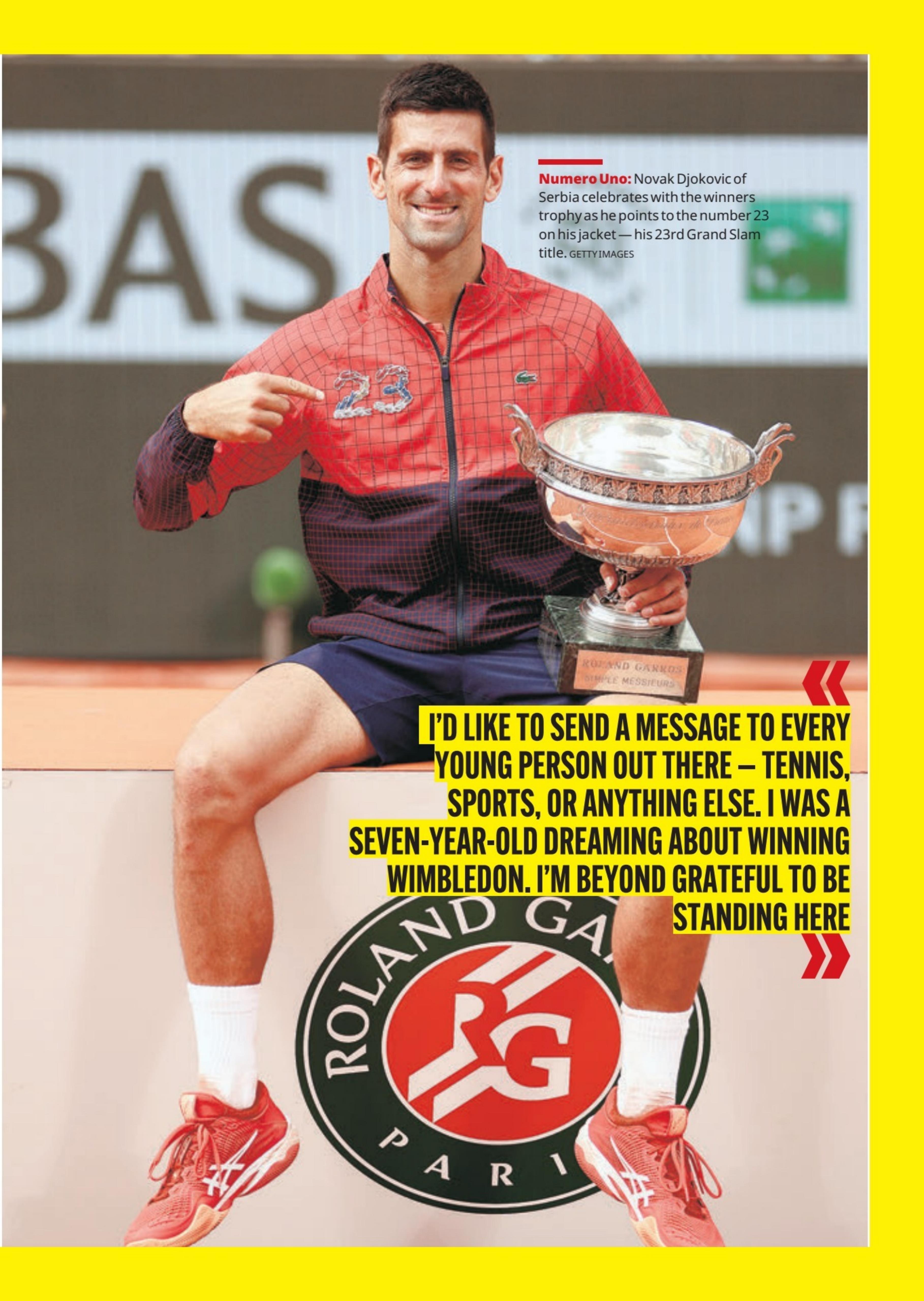
symbolic "23" boldly emblazoned on it.

"I had the power to create my own destiny. I visualise everything in my life and feel it with every cell in my body. Forget about what happened in the past, and if you want a better future, you create it."

From Djokovic's first Grand Slam title at the 2008 Australian Open at age 20 to this Roland Garros masterclass at age 36, his toughest opponent beside Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer — the other greats in the legendary Big Three — has occasionally been himself. The first to acknowledge "I've made a lot of mistakes," the stubborn Serb would likely have captured even more majors had he not refused to be vaccinated for COVID-19, thus preventing him from playing at the Australian Open and U.S. Open last year.

The historic No. 23 in 2023 also gave Djokovic his third French Open crown. That made him the only man to win at least three titles at all four majors. It tied him with Serena

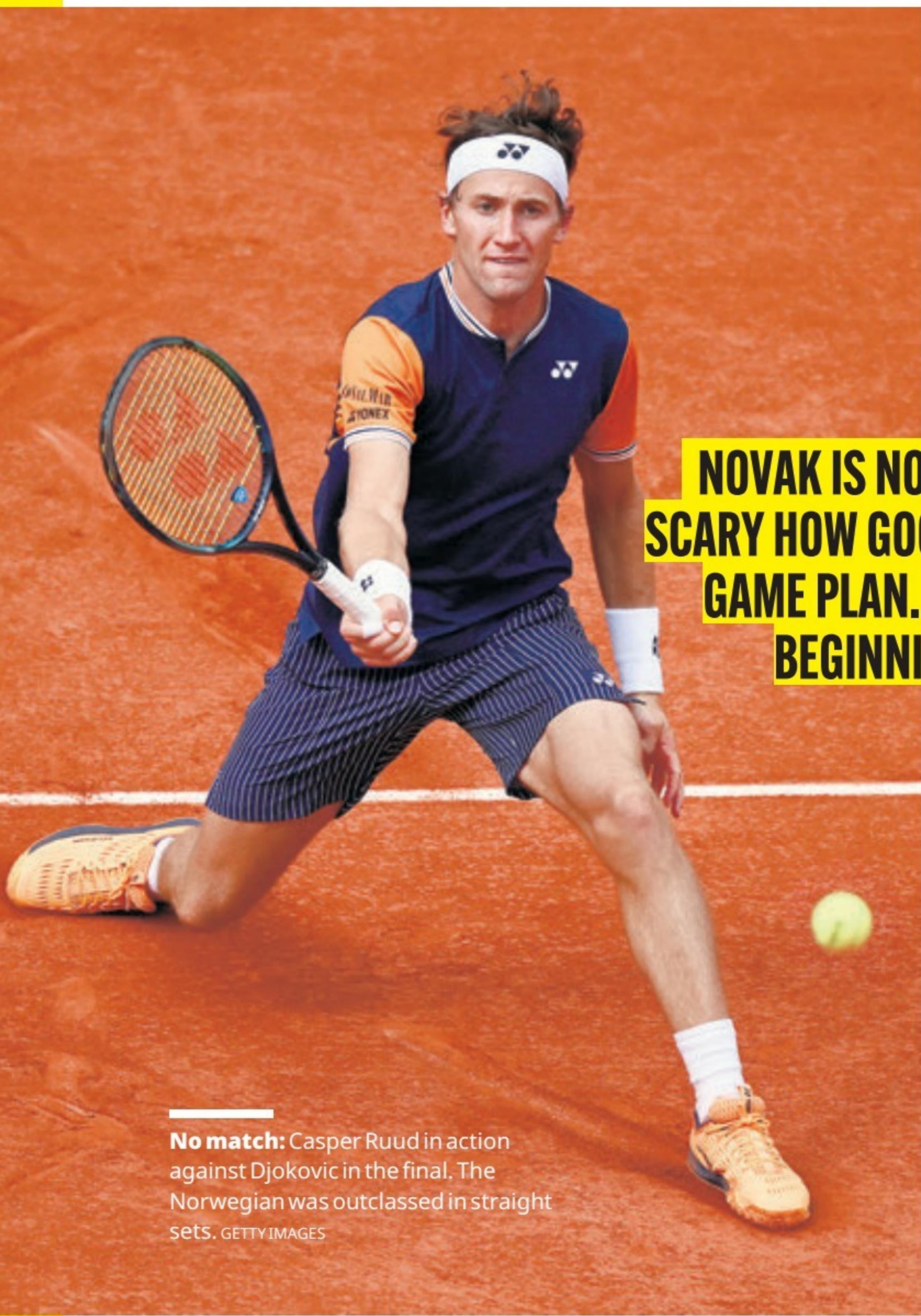




**Numero Uno:** Novak Djokovic of Serbia celebrates with the winners trophy as he points to the number 23 on his jacket — his 23rd Grand Slam title. GETTY IMAGES

I'D LIKE TO SEND A MESSAGE TO EVERY YOUNG PERSON OUT THERE – TENNIS, SPORTS, OR ANYTHING ELSE. I WAS A SEVEN-YEAR-OLD DREAMING ABOUT WINNING WIMBLEDON. I'M BEYOND GRATEFUL TO BE STANDING HERE





**No match:** Casper Ruud in action against Djokovic in the final. The Norwegian was outclassed in straight sets. GETTY IMAGES

Williams at 23, one behind Margaret Court's 24. It would surprise a few tennis cognoscenti if he surpassed both of these lady legends, but it'll be tougher for The Djoker to equal Steffi Graf's record of four or more titles at every major.

A co-favourite to win this French Open, No. 3 Djokovic ended up in the same half of the draw as No. 1 Carlos Alcaraz. With a career record on clay vastly superior to that of No. 2 Medvedev, who had a poor 7-6 mark at Roland Garros, Djokovic clearly

earned at least the No. 2 seed. Instead, draw-watchers eagerly anticipated the Djokovic-Alcaraz semifinal rather than a New Gen vs. Old Gen final.

At Roland Garros, Alcaraz looked almost invincible before the semifinals. With his precocious mixture of ferocious power and finesse, exceptional speed, and (Rafael) Nadal-like competitiveness, he crushed all five opponents going into the semifinals, most notably No. 5 Stefanos Tsitsipas, No. 17 Lorenzo

Musetti, and No. 26 Denis Shapovalov. All of these young standouts, while talented shotmakers, used one-handed backhands that Alcaraz punished ruthlessly. Meanwhile, Djokovic's sternest test came in the quarterfinals against No. 11 seed Karen Khachanov, who had reached the semis at the past two majors. He prevailed against the 27-year-old

NOVAK IS NOT HUMAN AT TIMES. IT'S SCARY HOW GOOD HE CAN PLAY. I HAD A GAME PLAN. IT WORKED WELL IN THE BEGINNING. BUT HE HAD ALL THE ANSWERS

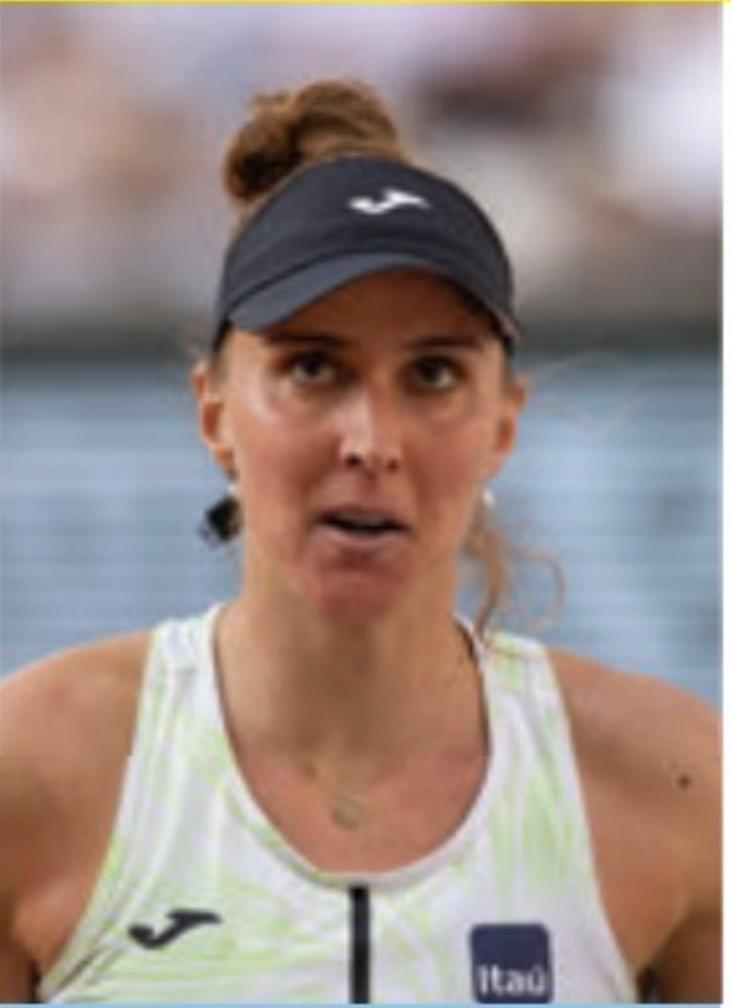
Russian 4-6, 7-6(1), 6-2, 6-4.

"The Battle of the Ages" — the 16-year age gap was the largest since Jim Courier whipped Jimmy Connors at the 1991 U.S. Open — sizzled for two sets. After Alcaraz broke Djokovic's serve at love to take the second set 7-5 to even the match, he casually chatted with his team in the player's box.

Then cramps wracked the 20-year-old Spanish phenom after two hours and 11 minutes of hard-hitting and fast-running tennis. What happened?

The consistently penetrating shots of Djokovic, along with the 87-degree heat and especially the mental pressure of facing the sport's new GOAT, did in the flashy but sometimes erratic Alcaraz.

After his disappointing 6-3, 5-7, 6-1, 6-1 loss, Alcaraz, seeded No. 1 at a major for the first time, explained his predicament. "If someone says that he [goes on] court with no nerves playing against Djokovic, he lies. At the beginning of the third set, I started to cramp every part of my body, not only the legs. The arms, as well as every part of the legs. I



**1** Beatriz Haddad Maia became the first-ever Brazilian woman to reach the semifinals of the French Open in the Open era.

**2** For only the second time in the Open era, no French man or woman reached the third round at Roland Garros with 2021 being the only other instance.

**23**

Daniil Medvedev became the first second-seeded man in 23 years (Pete Sampras, 2000) to exit French Open in the opening round.

**29**

Juan Pablo Varillas became the first Peruvian in 29 years (Jamie Yzaga, 1994) to reach the fourth round at the French Open.

## SLAM STATS

**94**

**Novak Djokovic** clinched the 94th singles title of his career at this year's French Open. With it, he joined Ivan Lendl at the third spot in the all-time list and is only behind Federer (103) and Connors (109).

**34**

**Novak Djokovic** has played in 34 Grand Slam finals, the joint-most along with Chris Evert among men and women in the Open era.

**3 hours 51 minutes**



The fourth-round match between Brazil's Haddad Maia and Spain's **Sara Sorribes Tormo**, which finished with a 6-7(3), 6-3, 7-5 scoreline in the Brazilian's favour, went on for 3 hours 51 minutes – the third-longest women's match ever played at Roland Garros.



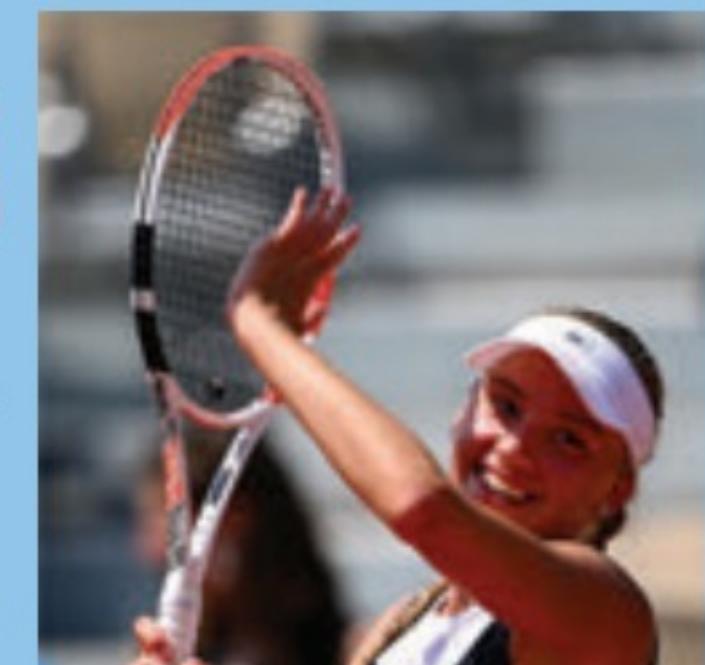
**17 years 34 days**



**21** The opening round in men's singles at this year's **French Open** had 21 matches that went to the fifth set – breaking the previous record of the 1992 French Open for most five set matches in the first round at a single Grand Slam in the Open era.

**16**

**Iga Swiatek** is the first woman in 16 years (Justine Henin 2005-07) to win consecutive French Open titles.

**33**

Russia's **Alina Kornieva** is the first girl to win junior Australian Open and junior Roland Garros in the same year in 33 years (Magdalena Maleeva, 1990)

started the match really nervous. The tension of the first set and the second set... it was really intense two sets as well. Really good rallies, tough rallies, you know, drop shots, sprints, rallies. It's a combination of a lot of things. But, you know, the main thing was the tension that I had in the first two sets."

History was on the line for Ruud, too. He coveted his first Grand Slam title after Nadal overwhelmed him in the 2022 Roland Garros final, and Alcaraz defeated him in the U.S. Open final three months later. He didn't want the "bridesmaid" label attached, similarly to Ivan Lendl and Andy Murray, after losing their first four major finals.

The mild-mannered Norwegian had a modest 22-11 match record entering Roland Garros. But Ruud quickly regained his 2022 form on the terre battue ("beaten earth") he relishes. He dropped a set to Italian qualifier Giulio Zeppieri and hard-hitting Chinese Zhang Zhizhen, defeated a much-improved Chilean Nicolas Jarry in straight sets, and then fast-rising No. 6 seed Holger Rune in an all-Scandinavian quarterfinal. Seemingly worn out from his gruelling five-set victory over Francisco Cerundolo, Rune meekly succumbed 6-1, 6-2, 3-6, 6-3.

Against Djokovic in the final, Ruud's strategy was to hit high-trajectory, high-bouncing topspin groundstrokes to frustrate the Serb and then attack short balls with his trademark high-velocity forehand. It worked — for a while, at least. Ruud, who had lost their four previous matches in straight sets, put Djokovic on the defensive and surged to leads of 3-0 and 4-1. But serving at 4-2, Ruud hit an overhead into the net and lost his serve. When Djokovic came back from love-30 to hold serve for 5-all, chants of "Nole! Nole! Nole!"—his nickname—reverberated around Court Philippe-Chatrier.

A nifty Djokovic backhand drop shot winner made it 6-all. Tiebreaker Time. No champion — male or female — plays tiebreakers better than the skillful Serb. His 14-4 overall tiebreaker record this year featured

**Hard luck:** Carlos Alcaraz of Spain receives treatment during the men's semifinals. Cramps wracked the 20-year-old Spanish phenom after two hours and 11 minutes of hard-hitting and fast-running tennis against Novak Djokovic. GETTYIMAGES

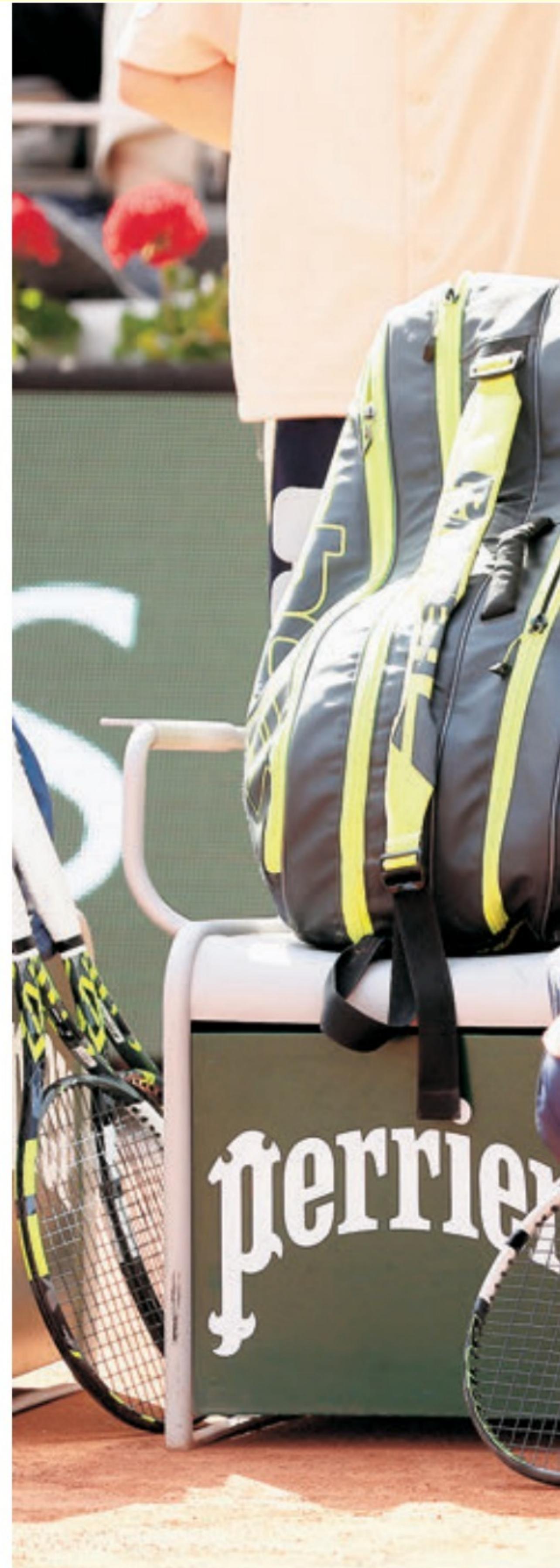
a perfect 5-0 at Roland Garros, where he won 35 of 47 tiebreaker points and committed no unforced errors. This time, Djokovic started the tiebreaker with a sensational forehand winner on the dead run and ended the 7-1 tiebreaker with another forehand winner.

Then Djokovic, who looked tired in the first set, streaked to a 3-0 lead in the second set. "You can't hit the ball cleaner than Djokovic is doing now," said NBC analyst McEnroe.

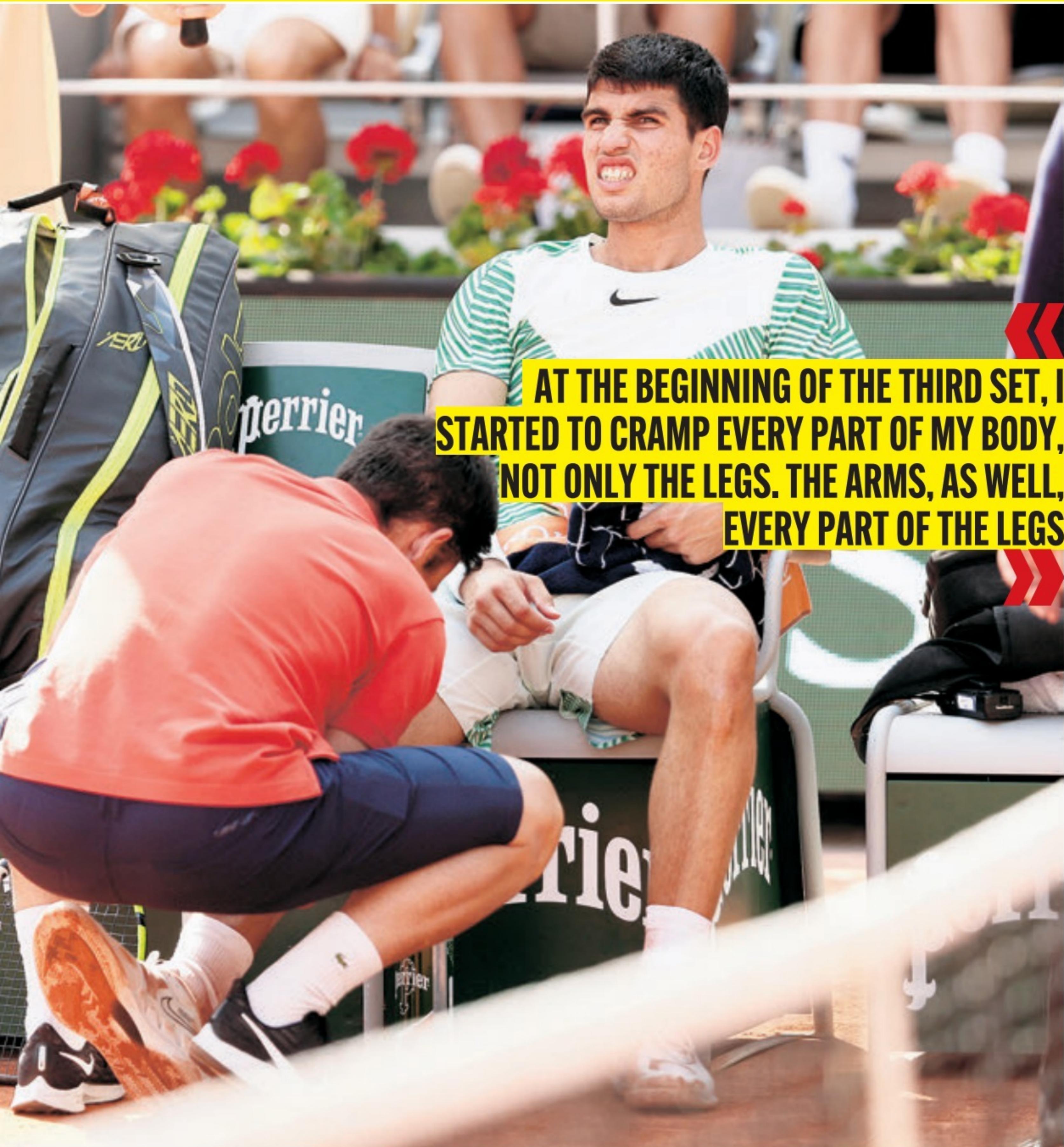
Djokovic clinched the second set, 6-3, holding serve at love. On set point, a wicked kick serve wide to Ruud's vulnerable backhand elicited a weak return. Djokovic put it away with a backhand down-the-line winner.

That "something" was a bunch of all-time records. The immortality Djokovic yearned for was only a set away. The evenly divided and often fickle French spectators wanted another set. When Djokovic fell behind love-30 in the eighth game, they shouted "Ruuuuuuuud! Ruuuuuuuuud!" which sounded like they were booing, but they weren't. Djokovic held serve anyway, for 4-all.

At 4-5, Djokovic made the world No. 4 appear like a mere foil to display his greatness. Like Michael Jordan scoring at will in the NBA Finals or Tom Brady (who was sitting next to Djokovic's wife) throwing touchdown passes late in a Super Bowl game, Djokovic smacked seven winners to grab 12 of the last 13



**The mental pressure of facing the sport's new GOAT, Novak Djokovic, did in the flashy but sometimes erratic Carlos Alcaraz.**



AT THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD SET, I STARTED TO CRAMP EVERY PART OF MY BODY, NOT ONLY THE LEGS. THE ARMS, AS WELL, EVERY PART OF THE LEGS

points.

The result was predictable, and probably even the decisive 7-6(1), 6-3, 7-5 score.

Minutes later in an NBC interview, Ruud said, "Novak is not human at times. It's scary how good he can play. I had a game plan. It worked well in the beginning. But he had all

the answers. Twenty-three [major titles] is a ridiculous number."

#### Queen of Clay reigns again at Roland Garros

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." — William Shakespeare

The young queen had ruled with an iron fist. In seizing three Grand Slam titles, Iga Swiatek had never

lost a set in the final. This time, Her Majesty dominated Karolina Muchova 6-2, 3-0, and her reign seemed assured.

Swiatek, 22, was steamrolling the four-years-older but less-experienced Czech. Much like the legendary Graf, the 5'9" Pole combines a sledgehammer forehand

# « This was so close, but yet so far. That happens when you play one of the best, said Muchova »

with a solid backhand, blazing speed, and the intense focus of a diamond cutter.

But Muchova, whose No. 43 ranking belies her natural athleticism and versatile game, has always believed she was destined for stardom. A string of injuries has derailed her career ever since a huge growth spurt at age 16 damaged her knees and back. Sidelined by an abdominal injury for seven months in 2021, she missed the 2022 Australian Open. Karolina was in such bad health that she recalled, "Some doctors told me, maybe you'll not do sports any more." Her positivity and perseverance were tested again a year ago at Roland Garros, when the hard-luck Czech left the court in a wheelchair and in tears after spraining an ankle during a third-round match.

Now Muchova, in her first major final, would have to summon all her positivity and perseverance.

Could Muchova somehow conjure another miracle comeback after rallying to stun No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka 7-6(5), 6-7(5), 7-5 in a semifinal thriller? Down 5-2 in the deciding set, she fended off a match point and reeled off 20 of the last 24 points.

The pressure finally got to Swiatek. Serving at 4-all, 30-40, she timidly double faulted in the net to get broken. But nerves also betrayed Muchova when she served to win the set, making four unforced errors to lose serve for

5-all. After yet another break, Muchova again served for the set at 6-5.

At 40-all, the elite athletes fashioned the most spectacular point of the high-quality match. The Czech's extremely angled forehand volley sent the Pole sprinting outside the alley. There, she somehow scraped the ball up and sent it along the sideline. Muchova lunged mightily and managed to hit a backhand crosscourt volley that even the speedy Swiatek couldn't reach. A point later, the heavy underdog won the 7-5 set when Swiatek's serve return sailed deep.

Capitalising on her momentum to start the deciding set, Muchova grabbed eight straight points! The last two came on her fourth and fifth aces. In full flight, Muchova evoked memories of another gifted and graceful, all-court Czech star, Hana Mandlikova, who captured four majors in the 1980s. "Muchova plays a game that no one else on the WTA Tour plays now," said *Tennis Channel* analyst Lindsay Davenport. "That has rattled Swiatek."

Suddenly, unpredictably, the momentum shifted again. The re-energised, more disciplined Swiatek then took 12 of the next 14 points to pull ahead 3-2. The Pole couldn't stand prosperity, though, and lost her serve to fall behind 4-3. In yet another turnabout, Swiatek broke serve for 4-all, thanks to



a clutch backhand volley winner to earn break point and a dreadful tactical blunder by Muchova — a forehand drop shot that plopped into the middle of the net. "Wrong shot at the wrong time from the wrong place," said Davenport.

When Swiatek fell behind love-30, she responded with a booming, 94-mph forehand winner.

The crowd reacted with chants of "Iga! Iga! Iga!" The Pole held serve for 5-4. Succumbing to nerves, the





**Superb show:** Iga Swiatek of Poland celebrates with the trophy after defeating Karolina Muchova of Czech Republic in the women's singles final.

GETTYIMAGES

'#4. SURREAL. THANK YOU, PARIS' – WROTE SWIATEK ON THE COURTSIDE CAMERA LENS. SHE THUS JOINED MONICA SELES, ROGER FEDERER, AND NAOMI OSAKA AS THE ONLY PLAYERS TO WIN THEIR FIRST FOUR GRAND SLAM FINALS IN THE OPEN ERA



valiant but now-erratic Czech faltered in the last game, sadly double-faulting on Championship point. The winner, and still Queen of Clay, bent down on her knees and cried tears of joy and relief.

Swiatek's 6-2, 5-7, 6-4 triumph lasted two hours and 46 minutes, the longest match in her illustrious French Open career.

On the courtside camera lens, Swiatek wrote: "#4. Surreal. Thank you, Paris."

Swiatek thus joined Monica Seles, Roger Federer, and Naomi Osaka as the only players to win their first four Grand Slam finals in the Open Era. Swiatek also became the youngest player to capture four majors since Serena Williams in 2002.

The runner-up also wept in her chair as the crowd cheered for both players and then again before she spoke during the trophy ceremony. On the bittersweet result, Muchova said, "This was so close, but yet so

far. That happens when you play one of the best: Iga." She added, "I'm very exhausted but I'm happy. I learned I can make it to the final at a Grand Slam. It's very motivational for me."

Roland Garros spectators were treated to a video of the career highlights of 1970s-'80s superstar Chris Evert, who like Navratilova, her longtime friend and rival, is a cancer survivor. On the podium, Evert chatted with her potential heir-apparent.

**Overcoming odds:** Leander Paes's Olympic debut, at Barcelona 1992, had ended in disappointment. But he used the experience as a springboard for greater success in the years to come.

EMMANUEL YOGINI



**DAUGHTERS ARE THE BIGGEST BLESSINGS,  
ESPECIALLY DAUGHTERS LIKE AIYANA, WHO  
ARE SO WONDERFULLY BONDED AND GIFTED IN  
SO MANY WAYS**



« The first 50 years have given me a great platform and stage to be able to support the dreams of my next 50 years »

# LEANDER PAES

Shayan Acharya

Twitter @ShayanAcharya

In his tennis career, spanning over three decades, Leander Paes has inspired quite a few generations. From being the country's only Olympic medallist in tennis to clinching 18 Grand Slam titles, Paes has achieved unparalleled success.

As he turned 50, Paes sat down for a chat with *Sportstar* and revealed how he overcame the 'darkest phases' of his life and went on to chase his dreams.

#### As you turn 50, how do you look at the journey?

I have lived a very blessed life, looking at a young Leander growing up in Kolkata with a dream in mind to become an Olympic champion and play for India in the Davis Cup or the Asian Games. Looking back now, my showcase is full, and at the same time, the biggest thrill of my life was playing seven world-record Olympics for our country. I feel blessed and humble, and I am also inspired to share those journeys with the youth so that even they can become champions.

We have seen pictures and heard stories of how birthdays were

celebrated at home, at BeckBagan Row in Kolkata. Throughout your tennis career, most birthdays were spent outside your home, outside the country. The first 50 years have given me a great platform and stage to be able to support the dreams of my next 50 years, which are to spend quality time with my family and the people who matter in my life to just share our bond and celebrate those friendships. Also, taking the knowledge of 60 years of my father and 40 years of mine — taking those 100 years of knowledge and sharing it with the youth of the country — to teach them the physical and mental fitness skills and tools that two generations of Olympic champions in our family have learned.

The aim is to help youngsters achieve their dreams, no matter what they want to become in life.

#### What are the defining moments of this long and eventful journey?

Growing up with my parents in Calcutta, I played sports with my father in the Maidans. I was lucky to have played rugby and football at the CC&FC and learned the importance of teamwork and camaraderie.

I was privileged to attend La Martiniere for Boys Schools, and even now, some of those friends from school are my best friends. There were also a few tough moments when a few teachers or a principal told me to concentrate on my

studies because they thought I would never be anything. It was not easy to come so far, especially after being diagnosed with Mitral Valve Prolapse, where doctors thought that I would never be able to play any body-contact sport or become a professional athlete.

But I listened to my heart and





**Trendsetter:** Leander Paes, the 1996 Olympics bronze medal winner, has represented India in a record seven Olympic Games. EMMANUEL YOGINI

shifted to Chennai to join the Britannia-Amritraj Academy. Those days in Chennai taught me about skills, mindset, and living away from your home, parents, and loved ones. It was never going to be easy, but I knew I had to do it all. From there, I went on to win Junior Wimbledon, and that gave me a strong foothold that I belong on the big stage and I can do it.

It was tough leaving the academy in 1990, but I told myself that I needed to chase my dreams. The Davis Cup debut for India in

Chandigarh boosted my confidence.

**Each of those moments taught you a thing or two...**

Absolutely. The winters of 1991 and 1992 were hard, as I had to sleep in locker rooms as I did not have the means to travel on to the Pro Tours. I was not winning matches in that period, so obviously, I had nothing to show the world.

But things changed in 1993 during the Davis Cup in Fréjus, where we won against the French. That was a turnaround in my career,

and it gave me immense confidence. Much before the 1996 Atlanta Olympics happened, I was slowly winning tournaments and even went on to make my debut at the 1992 Barcelona Games. It was a huge landmark to have made it to the Olympics, and then attending the opening ceremony was a huge deal for me.

And then, four years later, I was on the podium in Atlanta with that bronze medal hanging around my neck. As they played the national anthem, it was an incredible



**I WANT TO INSPIRE YOUNGSTERS ALL OVER THE WORLD AND SAY, "IF LEANDER CAN BE A CHAMPION, SO CAN YOU"**

experience. It was a dream come true and the result of hard work, sacrifice, and planning.

**There hasn't been any looking back since...**

In 1999, I won two out of four Grand Slams and enjoyed tremendous success in doubles. We proved that Indians can also win Grand Slams and emerge as world beaters. Wimbledon 1999 was special because we won the doubles and the mixed doubles. So, it was a huge landmark.

Even in 2001 and 2003, I enjoyed success, having paired with Martina Navratilova. And then came the toughest phase: being diagnosed with a tumour in my brain. Those few weeks were really hard at the cancer centre, but later they found out that it was not as life-threatening as they initially thought.

## How challenging was it to come back to the circuit after that phase?

Life has thrown many challenges at us, and when we look back at those

challenges, we always try to find a way to navigate through them. Despite the challenges, I have been a blessed Indian man who believes in superpowers. The Almighty has always helped me overcome challenges, and the strong family bonding has been a huge support for me. My dad has always been a guiding light, and then there's Aiyana, my daughter. I have an unconditional bond with her, and that's a huge blessing.

Overcoming the tough phase of 2003, I played my fourth Olympics in Athens in 2004 and came very close to winning another title—in the doubles. Losing that game by such a narrow margin is something I will never forget. That's also a landmark for me. Landmarks aren't always pleasant and fabulous; they're about unaccomplished things. The 2004 Olympics was one such event where we came so close!

**Do you think you have not received the recognition you deserve?**

I am a guy who doesn't just look at the cup half-full. I am grateful to even have a cup. The amount of reverence I get from people around the world is just incredible. From Park Street in Calcutta to any other place around the world — even today — people come to me and say, "You know, I watched this match, and you've inspired me to become what I've become". They say they would set an alarm or just stay awake all night just to watch me win, or how they've gone to a university in another country and found the courage to take on the challenge because I could. So, to be that person who inspires generations around the world is a huge blessing and responsibility. I am grateful not just for my cup being so full but for even having one.

**Between 2012 and 2016, things turned sour for Indian tennis over your selection, especially before the Olympics.**

*(Takes a pause)* Like I was saying, the amount of reverence I get from people around the world is just



»  
**I WAS ON THE PODIUM IN ATLANTA WITH THAT BRONZE MEDAL HANGING AROUND MY NECK. AS THEY PLAYED THE NATIONAL ANTHEM, IT WAS AN INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCE**  
«

**Carving a niche:** Leander Paes winning the bronze medal in men's singles at the Atlanta Games in 1996 was a watershed moment in Indian Olympic history. Paes was the first Indian, and Asian, tennis player to win an Olympic medal.

GETTY IMAGES

incredible. And in that, I bow my head to the superpower in gratitude and also thrive on sharing all my victories with every Indian out there who has supported me and been the wind beneath my wings.

They helped me soar higher. I never saw myself playing singles for myself. I saw myself playing for my partners, my family, India, the blue, or our people. My biggest driving factor was to prove that we Indians are world-beaters. Whether it's on the Davis Cup stage, Olympic stage, or Grand Slam stage, to be one of only three men on this planet who have won all four Grand Slam titles in men's doubles and mixed doubles alongside (Mark) Woodforde and (Todd) Woodbridge. It's a huge world record.

**Perhaps you also forgot one very important milestone: India vs. Pakistan Davis Cup match at the CCI courts in Mumbai in 2006. Any memories you have of that game?** You know that week is a huge milestone in my head because not only did we play the Davis Cup in Mumbai on grass, but my daughter was born that week. As much as I have never been married in my life, I came out of a cancer hospital, and the doctors said I wouldn't have a kid. But Aiyana was born on April 3, 2006, on the Monday of the week, and later that week, I went on to win the fifth decisive match over Pakistan. Lord knows what would have happened if I had not won. We can see in the latest Grand Slam that the world's No. 1 men's tennis player, Carlos Alcaraz, had to cede space and struggle against Novak Djokovic, the greatest of all time. With Djokovic going for his 23rd title, Alcaraz was hurting with those full-body cramps and eventually couldn't continue properly. So, who knows how history would have turned if we hadn't found a way physically and mentally to get over the cramps in that match? This was 16-17 years ago.

Alcaraz lost a Grand Slam title because of it. It's not about getting cramps; it's about having the mental attitude and the team around you to

navigate such obstacles in life.

So, for Aiyana to be born that week, sleeping on the couch in the hospital, coming to CCI for practice and training with the team, sitting on the bench that weekend, playing the doubles rubber, and then stepping in for a player who decided not to play that fifth game, Rohan Bopanna. Long story short, that was as much of a pit to fall into. But it was an opportunity to take it and win it for India. But that's what I've always done whenever I've had challenges that seem insurmountable: I just undertook them, took them a step at a time, did the best I could, and once again created history for India that weekend, beating Pakistan in that fifth game after overcoming full-body cramps in the third and fourth sets.

#### **And in sweltering conditions...**

Yeah, it was 100% humidity at the CCI. There was no shade, no tree, absolutely nothing, and imagine playing in that blistering Mumbai sun!

There are a lot of pressures when you play in heightened situations like that. But at the end of the day, you're just another man trying to be the best you can be.

So yes, it was a huge milestone for me in my career and in my life with my daughter's birth. 2006 was a big one. And then, there have been so many moments in my life, whether it was in 2012 when I completed the career Grand Slam in men's doubles at the Australian Open, or winning the French Open mixed doubles in 2016, after losing so many mixed doubles finals and semifinals, and then completing the mixed doubles career grand slam with Martina Hingis.

Having played with 164 approximate men's doubles partners and similar mixed doubles partners says it all. It takes a bit of work to be able to play for 31 years and stay away from any major injuries. I have huge gratitude to my parents and

my father, especially for guiding me and being the first one there when I lose and the last one there when I win. Along with my parents, I have to thank Sanjay Singh for dedicating his life, Tedd Murphy, Martin Damn, Jean Mayer, and Tony Roach. When you look at all the people on my team over the years, they are all huge landmark relationships in my life. These are people who have given selflessly to me and my career and helped me become who I've become.

I always say that every one of my trophies has their names on it. The Indian fans who stay up late at night, set an alarm to watch me on TV, or come out to the stadium for hours and hours under the sun—their names are on it. I have always been motivated and driven to play for the people, and I take a lot of pride in those bonds.

#### **On the personal front, were there any special moments that you always cherish?**

The birth of Aiyana. She was born on April 3, 2006, and that was a huge landmark in my life. She has made my life happier for good. Daughters are the biggest blessings, especially daughters like Aiyana, who are so





**In the thick of the action:** India's Leander Paes and Vishal Uppal in action during their doubles match against South Korea's Yoon Yong-II and Lee Hyung Talk in the Davis Cup tie in New Delhi on April 08, 2000.

V.V. KRISHNAN

wonderfully bonded and gifted in so many ways. She teaches me new things every day. I am so lucky to have her in my life.

When we won the US Open in 2006 for the first time, I always thought that Aiyana was my good luck charm and had brought great luck into my life. The US Open victory in the men's doubles with Martin Damm was one I fought for my whole career but hadn't done till then. And soon after Aiyana came into my life, I won that coveted title!

#### **How did you celebrate your milestone birthday?**

It was crazy! We had friends and family joining us for a gathering. It was fun catching up with all of them. My phone did not stop buzzing for the last couple of days and as we speak, I am still receiving messages from friends, family, and fans around the world.

We were just roughly calculating that so far, I have received about 1,119 messages and it would take me at least the next few weeks to

reply to all of them. Once I settle in, I will start sending 'Thank You' notes to all. (laughs)

#### **How has life been after retirement?**

I have been very passionate about my quality of life and my work. Hence, looking after my father, parents and family has been the top-most priority. At the same time, my passion to share the knowledge of my father and myself with the youngsters drives me tremendously. To balance both these things means it's a busy life. I was hoping that my travel would reduce post-retirement, but it just seems to be at par. Once you start looking to do good work and enhance the quality of life of others, and India being a large country geographically, the travel is just quite hectic.

#### **Do you see yourself running Indian tennis anytime soon, following in the footsteps of your old friend and another famous**

#### **Kolkatan Sourav Ganguly, who headed the BCCI for three years?**

As much as that offer has been on the table, the timing was not right. I also feel that life throws many opportunities but being someone who's very focused on the quality and the excellence in whatever I do, I don't like taking on too many things and then being mediocre in it. I want to focus on a few things and do them with tremendous excellence. That's been my style of operating.

#### **So, are you open to entering tennis administration whenever the time is right?**

One is open to all ideas and opportunities. But I am systematic, and I do my homework with what is a good brand fit to what I am good at, and at the same time, to maintain the legacy that my family has. Legacy and brand fit are the two driving factors for me to take up something. If I can make a difference to enhance someone's life, I will do it. If not, then I won't.

**« I have always been motivated and driven to play for the people, and I take a lot of pride in those bonds »**

# From a legend to another

**Dear Leander,**

As you turn 50, I wanted to take this opportunity to celebrate your incredible journey and the profound impact you have had on the world of sports. Your unwavering resilience, sense of duty to serve India, and indomitable spirit have inspired millions of athletes, including myself, throughout the nation.

I still remember the day you stood on the podium at the Atlanta Olympics, clutching the bronze medal with pride. It was a historic moment that reverberated across the country and ignited a flame of hope in the hearts of aspiring athletes. As I was just starting my own journey in sports, your achievement served as a powerful inspiration, showcasing that dreams can be realised with unwavering determination and unwavering spirit.

Your fighting spirit, Leander, has always been a powerful reminder to every athlete to never give up, regardless of the challenges faced along the way. Your ability to rise above adversity, push boundaries, and continuously reinvent yourself has been awe-inspiring. You have taught us that success is not solely measured by the number of victories but by the strength of character and resilience displayed in the face of setbacks.

Beyond your individual achievements, it is your unwavering sense of duty to represent our nation that truly sets you apart. You have carried the tricolour with immense pride, representing India on the global stage and bringing honour to our land. Your commitment to the sport and dedication to excellence have made you a true ambassador, not just for tennis but for the spirit of Indian sportsmanship.

Leander, on this momentous occasion, I want to express my deepest gratitude for the immense inspiration you have been to me and countless athletes across India. Your journey embodies the spirit of perseverance, and your achievements have paved the way for future generations to dream big and strive for greatness.

As you celebrate your 50th birthday, may this milestone be a time of reflection, joy, and fulfillment. May you continue to inspire, empower, and uplift those around you with your infectious energy and unwavering passion. Thank you for being a shining example of resilience and an extraordinary role model.

***Happy 50th birthday, dear Leander!***

**With heartfelt wishes,**  
Abhinav Bindra



Abhinav Bindra and LEander Paes the Sportstar Aces Awards in Mumbai.

K.R. DEEPAK

# RAISING THE BAR



High Jumper Pooja, 16, rises from humble beginnings with rudimentary equipment to make her mark. **Fascinated with flights,** she aspires to get her parents on a plane.

# POOJA IS BEING SEEN BY SOME AS HAVING A CHANCE TO THREATEN SAHANA KUMARI'S NATIONAL RECORD OF 1.92M SET IN THE U-20 CATEGORY IN 2012

Jonathan Selvaraj  
Twitter @jon\_selvaraj

Like many parents of kids who play sports, Hansraj Singh took a break from work to watch his daughter Pooja compete recently. He was in Haryana; her playground was in South Korea.

On the screen of a mobile phone, he watched his 16-year-old daughter clear a height of 1.82m to win silver with a new Indian junior record in the women's high jump at the Asian Junior Championships in Yecheon on June 6.

After the competition, he accepted the congratulations of his co-workers. A few of them spoke of getting their own children into sports. Hansraj got back to work, mixing cement and lining up bricks

to build a staircase at a construction site he works at these days as a *rajmistri* (senior mason).

As a mason, Hansraj is a man of modest means, but he hasn't allowed that to come in Pooja's way. Without the wherewithal, the athlete's beginnings were, of course, humble. For instance, Pooja learned her sport over a bamboo pole with sacks of rice husk as a landing mat. Now, she is seen as potentially becoming one of India's best high jumpers.

Considering her event, it is perhaps apt that Pooja loves flying. She vividly remembers every single flight she has taken this year. "Iss saal aath baar chali hun plane mein (I've travelled by plane eight times this year)," she says. This includes flights from Delhi to Bangalore for the national athletics camp and to Tashkent for the Asian U-18 championships. The last of her plane journeys was very recent. It brought her back to India from South Korea.

At Yecheon, Pooja showed glimpses of going even higher. She nearly managed a clearance at 1.84m on her final attempt, only clipping the bar with her heel even as the rest of her body had crossed over cleanly. Her mark of 1.82m improves on Rubina Yadav's junior record of 1.81m set five years ago, and is the third best in the U-18 category in the world this year. Her jump is also the best by any Indian woman this year.

With nearly four years still in the under-20 category, Pooja is being seen by some as having a chance to threaten Sahana Kumari's national record of 1.92m set in 2012.



## Factfile

**Age:** 16

**State, village:** Bosti village, Fatehabad, Haryana

### Career highlights

- National junior record holder in women's high jump with 1.82m
- Silver 2023 Asian U-20 Championships Yeonchan
- Gold 2023 Asian U-18 Championships Tashkent
- Gold 2023 Indian U-18 Youth championships

**Making a mark:** Pooja won a silver at the recent Asian U-20 championship and is favourite to rewrite the national record.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR





## “IT’S NOT EASY. THERE ARE EXPENSES OF HER DIET, TRAVEL, AND SHOES. WHEN HANSRAJ CAN’T FIND THE MONEY, I CONTRIBUTE WHAT I CAN – COACH BALWAN

**Watchful eyes:** Pooja during a yoga practice session under the supervision of her coach Balwan. Middle: Pooja with her glut of medals and trophies. The teenager from Haryana's Fatehabad district is being touted as the next big thing in Indian athletics. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Pooja is the only one from her family who has ever flown. Air travel wasn't in the picture for any of them, neither were national records, high jump, or sport for that matter. Those are the sort of dreams that don't get very far in Bosti.

It takes about four hours by road from Delhi to reach this village set amid fields of cotton, rice and millets in Haryana's Fatehabad district. There's nothing remarkable about Bosti except that one of India's most promising junior athletes lives here.

**It's easy to identify Pooja's house. It's the one with all the blue India jerseys drying on a clothesline after having been washed by her mother, Kiran.** The three-room house is modest. Outside is a storehouse for fodder and space for the family's three cattle.

There is no background of sports in the family. Hansraj is a quiet, practical man. Apart from laying brick and cement on construction sites in Bosti and surrounding villages, he has built the family home himself as well. He built only three

rooms because that's what he could afford by way of materials from the Rs 15,000 or so he makes each month. "You shouldn't spend more than what you have," he says.

**Hansraj didn't always want to be a mason. He took up the job after he got married.** What he wanted was to be a sportsperson. "I used to play kabaddi when I was in school. But I never knew how to take it forward."

He had no big dreams for Pooja either. "As a child she was very strong and flexible. She would jump up on a charpoy and twist through its ropes with ease. But I never thought if I put her in sports, she would achieve so much," he admits. He didn't even consider athletics at first. After a display of yoga at a village programme, Pooja told her father she wanted to take it up. Hansraj took Pooja, then 10, to neighbouring Parta village where a coach, Balwan Singh, taught yoga as well as other sports. The venue — Parta Sports Academy.

Pooja started out learning yoga, but coach Balwan felt she had the



## AFTER A DISPLAY OF YOGA AT A VILLAGE PROGRAMME, POOJA TOLD HER FATHER SHE WANTED TO TAKE UP SPORT

potential to be more. "After about a year, I tried to see if she had the ability to do anything else. She was very flexible already because she was doing *chakrasana* and *dhanurasana* (yoga poses in which the body is arched to resemble a wheel and a bow, respectively). I felt she had a lot of spring in her step, so, I thought I would test her in the high jump," he says.

**It took a few tries using the side straddle – scissors technique – and Pooja cleared a height of 60cm. "Itna bhi height nahin tha (It wasn't much). But once I cleared that height, I started really liking it,"** she says of her start as a high jumper.

While she had the aptitude for the event, there was a problem. Parta Sports Academy had a high jump facility only in the loosest sense of the term. There's not much by way of equipment here. "Pura jugaad se chalta hai yahaan (Everything runs on make do here)," laughs coach Balwan.

There wasn't a high jump pit for instance. Pooja started off landing on

a judo mat. When coach Balwan started teaching her the Fosbury flop technique, in which athletes land on their neck and shoulders, the mat was upgraded with sacks of rice husk to cushion the impact at landing.

It was only well after a year of Pooja starting the sport that a government official procured a proper landing mat. That too is splitting at the seams. Coach Balwan stuffs it with thermocol to extend its life. Instead of a springboard to master the takeoff technique, the children at the academy use an old rubber tyre.

What she might have lacked by way of equipment, was made up for in innate talent. "Within a few months she was winning block-level, district-level and state-level competitions," says coach Balwan.

Talent aside, there was family support. "There are some parents who support 10 per cent; Hansraj supported Pooja 110 per cent. When he got time off work, he would come to watch her training sessions," he says.

**Standing out:** It's easy to identify Pooja's house. It's the one with all the blue jerseys drying on a clothesline after they have been washed by her mother Kiran. JONATHAN SELVARAJ





»  
**THERE ARE SOME PARENTS WHO SUPPORT 10 PER CENT; HANSRAJ SUPPORTED POOJA 110 PER CENT. WHEN HE GOT TIME OFF WORK, HE WOULD COME TO WATCH HER TRAINING SESSIONS**  
«

Indeed, while all plane journeys are special for Pooja, the one that stands out for her is the first one she took – in 2021 when she competed at the junior national championships in Guwahati. “That was the first time I went on a plane. I was so excited to see the clouds. I took pictures. I made video calls from the airport. Ghar me sabko dikhaya. Kisi aur ne plane dekha tak nahin (I showed the pictures and scenes to everyone in my family. None of them had even seen a plane up close),” says a beaming Pooja.

Hansraj remembers that first flight well too. “Before the competition, coach told me Pooja had a very good chance to win. But if she took a train, it would be a two-day journey and she would be very tired and wouldn’t be able to perform well. He suggested she go by air,” recalls Hansraj.

The cost for the one-way trip came to Rs 12,000 – nearly as much as he makes each month. For Hansraj, it was an easy decision. “I had to borrow money from people but it wasn’t a problem. Maybe she

**From modest means:** Pooja’s father Hansraj Singh works as a mason and has had to endure financial challenges. But he never let that get in the way of his daughter’s dreams.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

wouldn’t have won, but I wanted to give her the best chance I could. There are some things you should budget for. But there are some things for which you shouldn’t,” he says with a smile.

Pooja would win gold in the U-14 girls’ category with a jump of 1.41m. But even that moment of triumph was short-lived as soon after she picked up an injury to her quadriceps. It kept her out of competition for the next 15 months as she focused on healing and getting stronger. Hansraj paid for expensive physiotherapy in New Delhi and also bought a scooter so that Pooja wouldn’t have to cycle to the sports academy.

Pooja returned to action with a bang, winning a gold medal in the U-16 girls’ category at the 2022 junior



nationals with a new national record of 1.76m. She followed that up with another gold in the U-18 category at the 2022 youth national championships.

Despite those efforts, that were head and shoulders above the rest of the field, Pooja was inexplicably not included in competitions such as the Khelo India Youth Games at the start of this year. Apart from a near assured medal, not competing in the Khelo India Youth Games meant Pooja wouldn't have a shot at the scholarship given to winners at the event.

In its absence, it is left to Pooja's father and her coach to keep supporting her. "It's not easy. There are expenses of her diet, travel, and shoes. When Hansraj can't find the money, I contribute what I can," says coach Balwan.

It's a price the two are willing to pay. Hansraj is already thinking of adding an extension to the family home. "Right now, there's no room for Pooja's medals. They are just hanging on nails now. I think I'll build another room where she can keep

them," he says.

There are bound to be a few medals as Pooja has multiple competitions lined up for the season. She is already looking forward to her next few flights. There's one to Trinidad for the Commonwealth Youth Games for which she's already made the team. There is also, potentially, one to Pattaya, Thailand, for the Asian Championships – whose qualifying standard she met at Yecheon. But there is another flight Pooja really hopes to make. "I've been on so many flights but my parents have never been on one. My dream is, one day, I will take my parents on a plane," she says.

**Learning the ropes:** Pooja learned her sport over a bamboo pole with sacks of rice husk as a landing mat.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

◀ Pooja's father Hansraj bought a scooter so that his daughter wouldn't have to cycle to the sports academy ▶



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TAJINDERPAL SINGH TOOR'S 21.77M THROW  
HELPED HIM BREAK HIS PREVIOUS NATIONAL  
AND ASIAN SHOT PUT RECORD OF 21.49M SET  
TWO YEARS AGO

3 823  
21.77

AASHIN PRASAD

# MERCURY SOARS, ATHLETES SOAR HIGHER

Aashin Prasad  
Twitter @aashin23

**T**ejaswin Shankar best described it when he said getting in his car and driving to the ground was enough for a warm-up in the ragingly hot and humid conditions in Bhubaneswar.

For all the excitement surrounding the National Inter-State Senior Athletics Championships, much of the first half of the meet was dominated by talk about the weather. With Odisha reeling under a heatwave, athletes were running through multiple shirts and bottles of water to keep

themselves hydrated. And temperatures as high as 50°C only compounded their woes.

The Championships, a dual World Championships and Asian Games qualifier, were meant to bring together the country's best athletes—excluding Neeraj Chopra and Avinash Sable—and showcase India's improving performances and talent pool in athletics.



Out of close to 1000 athletes competing at the Inter-State Athletics Championships in the hot and sultry Bhubaneswar, 65 achieved the Asian Games qualification mark.

The Athletics Federation of India (AFI), earlier this year, through a circular, made it mandatory for all athletes to compete in the final selection trial for the Hangzhou Asian Games, starting in late September. In the end, over five days, close to 1000 athletes gave it their all, of whom 65 achieved the Asian Games qualification mark across 27 disciplines. World javelin

## ◀ Sreeshankar (below) took home gold for a fourth successive year with a best mark of 8.29m in the final ▶

champion Neeraj and steeple chase national record holder Avinash will gain automatic berths after they were granted exemption from participating here by the AFI.

**It's now up to the selection committee to come up with the two names per discipline,** which will be submitted to the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) next month. The selection committee will receive the full list from Indian athletics chief coach Radhakrishnan Nair, including their recent performances, which will enable them to narrow down who they think will be the best medal hopefuls.

The AFI chief, Adille Sumariwalla, brushed over criticism regarding the scheduling, stating the federation's hands were tied by the OCA, which insisted on handing over the squad list for the Hangzhou Games by July 15.

"We had to change the dates [from July to June] because the Asian Games changed the dates. Normally the last date for entries is 15 days before [the competition], but it's 45 days before (sic) for the Asian Championships and 75 days before [for the Asian Games], which has been unheard of. It's ridiculous!"

"The Asian countries have their final trials now, whether it's Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or the UAE. If the athletes don't get accustomed to these conditions, how will they perform in the Asian championships in Bangkok in July?" he shot back.

In these trying conditions, Tejaswin's remarkable feat in what was his first decathlon in India stands tall. He was bleeding from his nose due to

the heat before the start of the first event, the 100m race, and fell behind on the first day, which comprised his favourite disciplines. But he bounced back with personal best records in the high jump, discus throw, pole vault, and javelin to earn a gold medal and achieve the Asiad qualification mark.

Tejaswin's fight and spirit, along with those of his fellow decathletes, brought a fresh spotlight to the event, which was largely a sideshow in Indian athletics.

**The men's long jump finals had all the makings of an exciting clash between two of the world's best,** national record holder Jeswin Aldrin and Murali Sreeshankar, but failed to deliver on the final day. Sreeshankar, who achieved a personal best of 8.41m —1 cm short of Aldrin's record—in the qualifiers, took home gold for a fourth successive year with a best mark of 8.29m in the final. Jeswin, who had four foul jumps, made the Asian Games cutoff with a jump of 7.98m.

But the women's long jump battle between Ancy Sojan and Shaili Singh lived up to the billing, with the race for gold going down to the wire.

After a slow start, Ancy jumped 6.51m in her fifth attempt to take first place away from Shaili after she had led for much of the contest. Both Ancy and Shaili breached the qualification mark.

There were no surprises in the men's triple jump, with the trio of Praveen Chithravel, Abdulla Aboobacker, and Eldhose Paul taking the 1-2-3 on the podium and going past





WHILE SHE WAS DISAPPOINTED ABOUT NOT BREAKING HER NATIONAL RECORD, JYOTHI YARRAJI PROMISED THERE WAS MORE TO COME FROM HER

the Asiad mark with their jumps.

Jyothi Yarraj continued her excellent run in 2023 with her sixth sub-13 race in 100m hurdles and booked her ticket to Hangzhou.

While she was disappointed about not breaking her national record, she promised there was more to come from her.

Jyothi also won the 100m gold. Vithya Ramraj retained her gold in the 400m hurdles with a personal best timing of 56.01s after she had made the cut-off in the 400m race with another personal best (52.49s).

KM Deeksha surprised 2021 and 2022 champions Harmilan Bains and Chanda to take gold in

the women's 1500m. Harmilan, who is participating in her first national event after a year-long layoff, led for much of the race before Deeksha overtook her in the final 100m and closed out the win. The trio also made the podium and the cut-off in the 800m, with Chanda clinching gold.

Rohit Yadav made his case to take the remaining spot in the men's javelin quota alongside Neeraj by winning gold with his second-best throw (83.28m) of the season.

This was his third recorded throw of 80m+ this year and ninth in the last 18 months. Shivpal Singh, who made a return after a suspended

**Purple patch:** Jyothi Yarraj's latest sub-13s race came a day after she beat veteran sprinter Srabani Nanda for gold in the 100m. Left: Shaili Singh breached the qualification mark in women's long jump.

RITU RAJ KONWAR & GETTY IMAGES





sentence for doping this year, clinched the bronze with a throw of 81.96m.

Anjali Devi surprised many by claiming gold in the 400m with a personal best timing of 51.48s in what was her first 400m race in over four years.

It was not too long ago that Swapna Barman was contemplating retirement after a spate of injuries, but the heptathlete will have a chance to defend her Asiad gold.

The best was saved for the last, as Tajinderpal Singh Toor shattered his own national and Asian shot put records with a throw of 21.77m. Tajinder's was the only national record broken at the meet.

He has endured a tough two years with injuries and personal tragedies, including the loss of his

first unborn child a few months ago and the passing of his grandmother last week. Despite the setbacks, the 28-year-old looks primed to defend his Asian Games gold. He has also qualified for the World Athletics Championships, which will be held in Budapest from August 19.

Now that the dust has settled on the field, it's time for the selection committee to put their thinking caps on.

#### Braving heatwave:

Tejaswin Shankar achieved personal bests in three decathlon events—high jump (2.20m), pole vault (4.00m) and javelin (52.32m) in draining conditions to bag the gold medal at the 62nd National Inter-State Athletics Championship in Bhubaneswar and qualify for the Asian Games. AASHIN PRASAD

**Jyothi Yarraji continued her excellent run in 2023 with her sixth sub-13 race in 100m hurdles and booked her ticket to Hangzhou.**



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## Artistic Albino

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Albino is defined in the 'Encyclopedia of chess problems' by Milan velimirovic and Karl Valtonen, as a problem in which at some point in the solution a white pawn on its starting square makes each of its four possible moves. The albino can be in the tries of a two-mover, as mates on the second move or as second move continuations of a three-mover. The first diagram below is a task two-mover showing two complete sets of albino tries of which one solves the problem.

H.Bartolovic and N Petrovic  
I prize, Problemas 1963



Mate in two moves

Tries:  
 1.d3? (2.Qxg4)  
 1.dxc3? (2.Qxg4) b3!  
 1.dxe3?(2.Qxg4) N(4)any!  
 1.f3? (Qc4) exd5!  
 1.fxe3? (2.Qc4) N(4)e5!  
 1.fxg3?(2.Qc4) Bxg3+!  
 1.f4? (2.Qc4) N(6)e5!  
**Key 1.d4! (2.Qxg4)**

Here is a masterpiece, taken from the BCPS website, whose unified variations may repay close study. The four captures on e5 are met by the four moves of the d2 pawn. After the key square d6 is blocked and twice guarded, yet becomes a flight after the defence removes one guard, the threat continuation decoys

the blocking down and the threat mate removes the second guard.

Yakov Vladimirov & Lev Loshinski  
I prize Vechemy Leningrad 1967



Mate in three moves

**Key:1.Na6!**(2.Rc5+d/Nxc5 .Nc7)  
 1...Bxe5 2.d3 3.dxc4;2...cxsd3  
 Bb3;2...Nc6 3.Nc7  
 1...Rxe5 2.d4 3.Nc7;2...cxsd3 ep  
 3.Bb3

1....Nxe5 2.dxe3 3.e4;2...Nc5 3.Nc7  
 1...dxe5 2.dxc3 3.Nxe3.

It is an interesting exercise to determine why each time only one of the d2 pawns' moves will work.

In the problem for solving below there are four battery mates from the albino

L.Hermet Rudolf  
I prize, New York Chess Journal 1894



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Hamburg theme':  
**Key 1.Bg7!**  
 (2.Bh6) 1...b5 2.Kh3 (3.Nd5) Rd6  
 3.Be5 mate

Readers may send in their queries to  
[cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com](mailto:cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com)

# THE BUBBLE BURSTS AGAIN

It was **billed as a match between equals.** But, in the end, the Ultimate Test turned out to be a no-contest.

**Ashwin Achal**

Twitter @AshwinAchal

India captain Rohit Sharma smiled when he was asked at the post-match press conference if he would include himself in the list of experienced batters who failed to live up to expectations in the ICC World Test Championship final against Australia.

Having made 15 and 43 in a losing cause, the answer was obvious to Rohit, even if he did not spell out his thoughts.

It was not just Rohit but the entire batting line-up that let India down. The middle order, barring Ajinkya Rahane, did not deliver.

Rohit's partner Shubman Gill, who entered the fixture as the world's most exciting young talent, was found out of place. With a leave to a ball that crashed into the stumps in the first innings, it was apparent that Gill has some way to go before he can be viewed as a true match-winner in all conditions.

Wicketkeeper-batter K.S. Bharat, playing his first Test outside India, did not look at ease with the bat. He was tentative, unsure of how the ball would behave on a seamer-friendly track.

With the new WTC cycle underway, serious questions must be asked about the selection policy. The likes of Ruturaj Gaikwad, Sarfaraz Khan, and Rajat Patidar — all of whom have scored mountains of runs in domestic cricket — must be given the chance to show their wares in the India whites.

Things were not much better on the tactical front. If

Australia came in with plans for every scenario, India took a 'fly by the seat of your pants' approach.

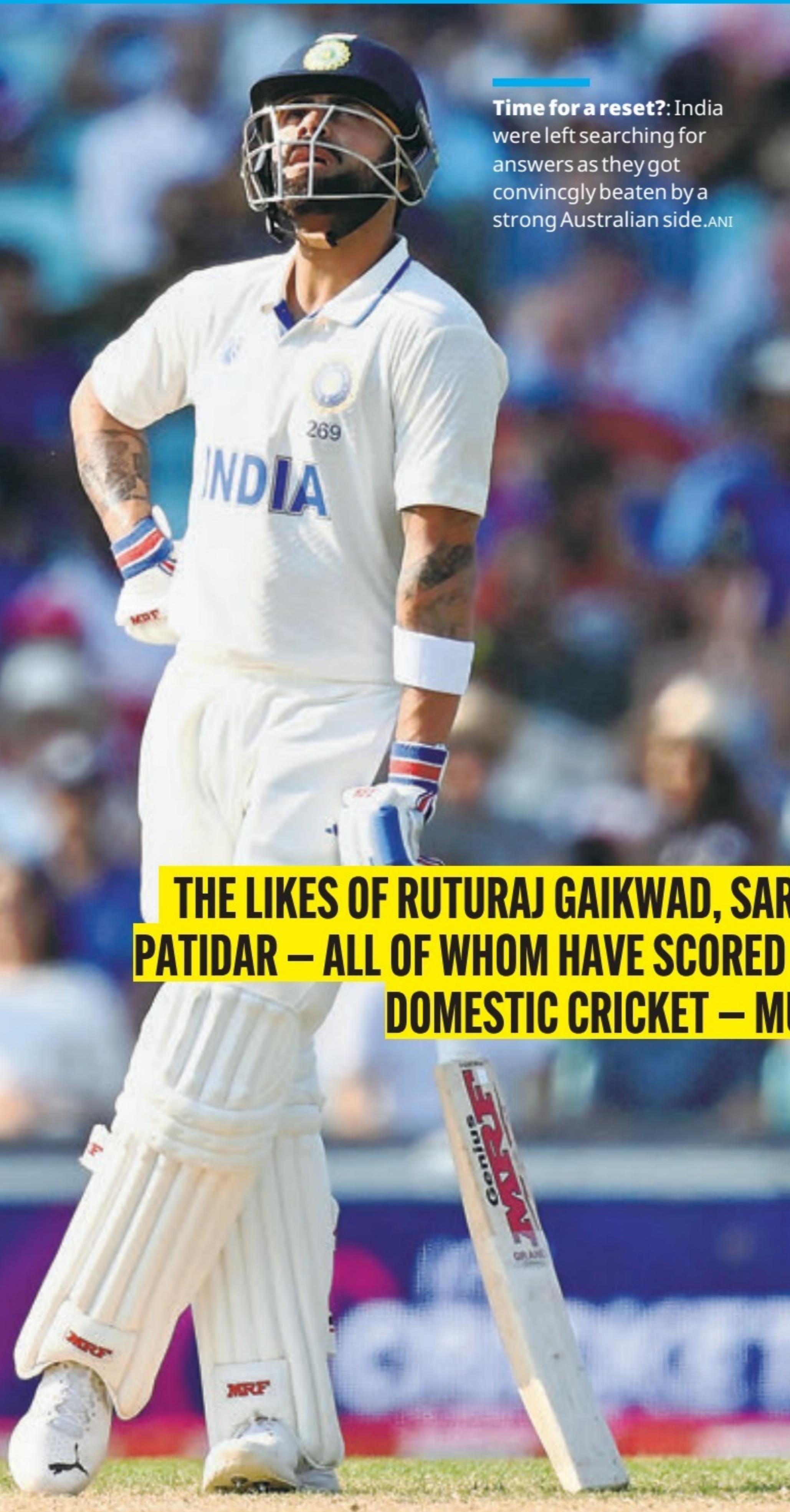
This was apparent on the morning of the match, when Rohit won the toss and chose to field. The justification given for this, which forced India to tackle a worn pitch when batting fourth, was the overcast skies above. A little research would have revealed that the fickle weather in England would have given way to bright sunshine in just a couple of hours.

The team management also made the contentious decision to drop R. Ashwin. The offspinner, the best bowler in the world as per the ICC rankings, was deemed superfluous in these conditions. It was a short-sighted decision, taken on the basis of how the skies appeared for that brief period.

Ashwin could have proved a handful when the pitch started to crack up later on the first day. There was an awkward bounce on offer — a gift that the wily Ashwin would have gladly accepted. The Tamil



FOR MORE CRICKET



**Time for a reset?**: India were left searching for answers as they got convincingly beaten by a strong Australian side. ANI

**THE LIKES OF RUTURAJ GAIKWAD, SARFARAZ KHAN AND RAJAT PATIDAR – ALL OF WHOM HAVE SCORED MOUNTAINS OF RUNS IN DOMESTIC CRICKET – MUST BE GIVEN A CHANCE.**

Nadu cricketer would have also posed serious questions to the four southpaws in the Australia batting unit. India went in with the lone spinner in Ravindra Jadeja,

presumably picked for his superior batting abilities. Ashwin, a reliable batter himself, could have found a spot in place of Umesh Yadav. Umesh was wayward — relegated to

## BRIEF SCORES

**Australia — 1st innings:**

**469 all out**

(D. Warner 43, M. Labuschagne 26, S. Smith 121, T. Head 163, A. Carey 48, M. Siraj 4/108)

**India — 1st innings:**

**296 all out**

(A. Rahane 89, R. Jadeja 48, S. Thakur 51, P. Cummins 3/83)

**Australia — 2nd innings:**

**270/8 d.**

(M. Labuschagne 41, S. Smith 34, C. Green 25, A. Carey 66\*, M. Starc 41, R. Jadeja 3/58)

**India — 2nd innings:**

**234 all out**

(R. Sharma 43, C. Pujara 27, V. Kohli 49, A. Rahane 46, N. Lyon 4/41)



a one-trick pony, who at times got it right by landing it on the middle and taking it away from the left-handers.

Including two spinners in England is generally not the norm, but given the slim pickings in the pace department (Jasprit Bumrah was out injured), it would have been wise for India to stick to its best possible eleven. By this criteria, Ashwin would have been the leader of the attack.

The exclusion of Ashwin elicited criticism from Indian legend Sachin Tendulkar. He had tweeted — There were some good moments for Team India, but I fail to understand the exclusion of @ashwinravi99 in the



» IT WAS A GREAT TOSS TO LOSE FOR THE AUSTRALIANS, WHO MADE MERRY AFTER SEEING OFF THE MORNING SESSION. THEY WERE HELPED BY A WAYWARD SHOW BY THE INDIAN SEAMERS.

**Top of the world:** Pat Cummins, holding the winning mace, celebrates with his team after winning the ICC World Test Championship Final 2023. ANI

playing XI, who is currently the number one Test bowler in the world.

Like I had mentioned before the match, skillful spinners don't always rely on turning tracks, they use drift in the air and bounce off the surface to disguise their variations. Not to

forget, Australia had 5 left-handers out of their top 8 batters.'

It was a great toss to lose for the Australians, who made merry after seeing off the morning session. They were helped by a wayward show by the Indian seamers, who failed to go to the right lengths to fully exploit the helpful conditions.

Mohammed Shami was too short, while Umesh sprayed it around. Once the sun was out, Steve Smith and Travis Head took over.

Smith scored his 31st Test century, while Head made a 174-ball

163. Head, revelling in his new role as an attacking batter, played the best knock of the match. He took on all comers and demoralised the Indians.

Australia ended with 469, when 300 would have been a par score.

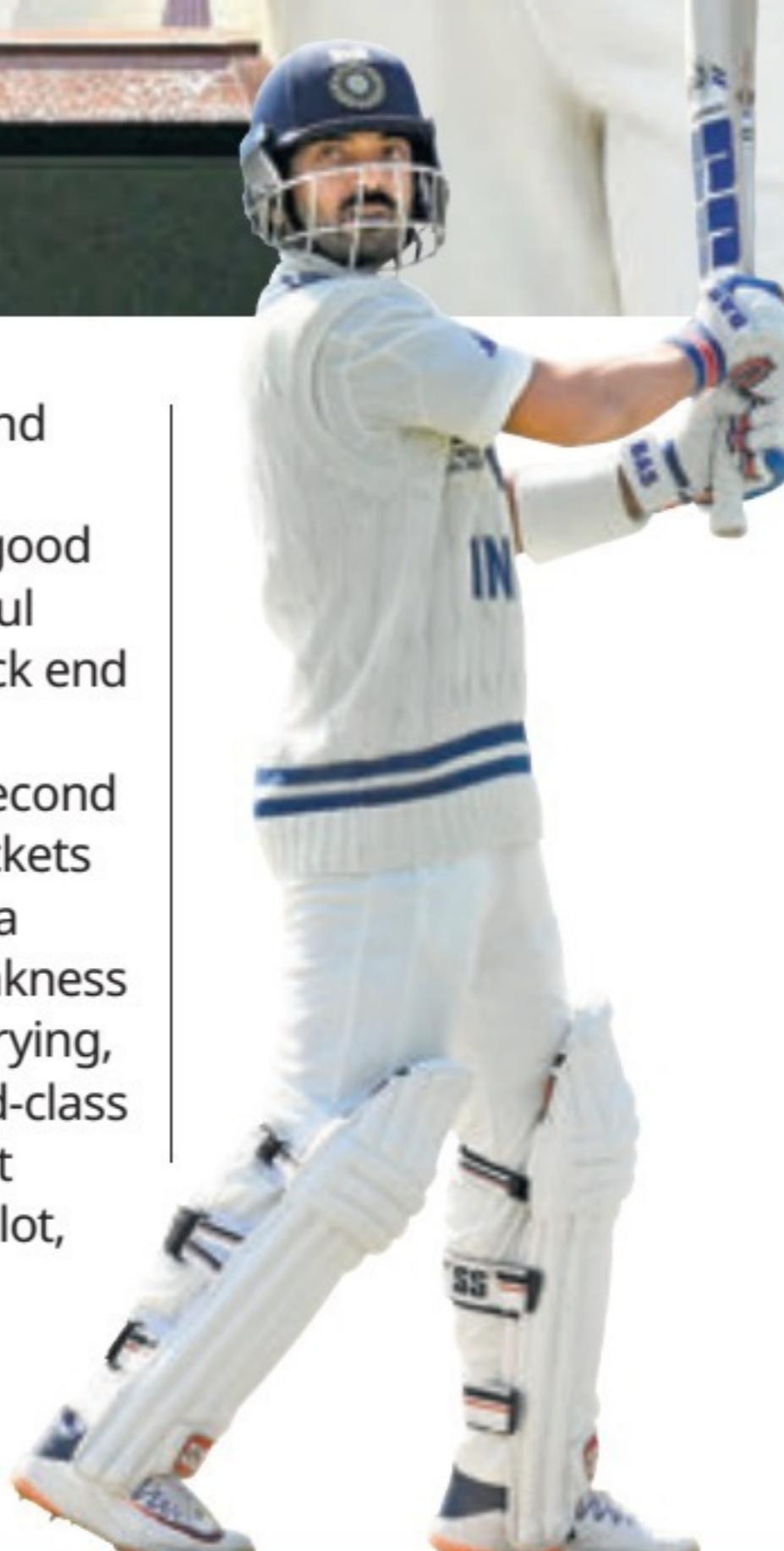
India had no way back after being reduced to 71 for four. Cheteshwar Pujara had ample time to prepare for this series, as he featured for Sussex in the County Championship. But his double failure in this match raises questions about his spot.

Comeback man Rahane provided



the silver lining, staying calm and composed with a storm raging around him. Rahane received good support from Jadeja and Shardul Thakur, which prevented a quick end to the match.

India had a shocker in the second innings. The side lost seven wickets for 70 runs — a capitulation in a single session. Virat Kohli's weakness outside the off-stump — a worrying, recurring basic fault for a world-class batter — was exploited by Scott Boland. Even Rahane lost the plot, chasing a ball he would have



**Lone ranger:** The middle-order, barring Ajinkya Rahane, did not deliver. ANI

normally left alone.

And thus India's search for an ICC title ended with a whimper. The Ultimate Test turned into a no-contest when it was billed as a fight between equals.

**For the Indian Test team to thrive, long term planning must start now.**

Taking tough decisions is the need of the hour.

# THE WINNER TAKES IT ALL

Australia captain **Pat Cummins reflects** on what it takes to be world champions.

**Chasing timber:**

Taking wickets consistently kept Australia ahead of the curve, according to Pat Cummins.ANI

**Ashwin Achal**

Twitter @AshwinAchal

**P**at Cummins stated that the ICC World Test Championship title win was a reflection of his team's consistent performance across the world. "To make it to the final you've got to win everywhere in the world. I think this cycle was 20 Test matches. We only lost three out of the 20. The boys were fantastic the whole way through. We adapted well and that's what makes it so satisfying," Cummins stated.

Cummins explained that he enjoyed the atmosphere at the Oval stadium, even if the crowd consisted primarily of India supporters.

"We've played India a lot and wherever you play India in the world they seem to have plenty of

fans that are very vocal. It was great to have a sellout every single day. That's what we want for a Test match final. It had a great feeling to it; it was a good buzz," Cummins said.

Taking wickets consistently kept Australia ahead of the curve, he said, "I think the new ball period was always going to be the one you had to watch out for. The rock hard ball can ping around the field a little bit. I think taking constant wickets made us feel like we were in control. Even on the final day morning, the wicket had a little bit for us quick bowlers," Cummins said. Contrary to Rohit Sharma's belief, Cummins stated that the World Test Championship should remain a one-off match, and





### Never give up:

"Sport is all about picking yourself up and getting ready for the next big event"—  
Rohit Sharma. AP

not a three-match series. "I think it's fine. I have no qualms (about the WTC final being one match). Ideally you'd have a 50-match series, but in the Olympics, it comes down to one race to win a gold medal. The AFL (Australian Football League), NRL (National Rugby League) seasons have finals. That's sport," Cummins said.

The skipper backed left-arm fast Mitchell Starc, who was expensive in the match. "I thought Starky (Starc) bowled well. I think I was probably the biggest culprit at times when it

came to being a little bit sloppy. Starc always contributes with the bat as well. He has got a huge tour ahead of him (the Ashes); he will play a huge role for us," Cummins said.

**On the contentious catch taken by Cameron Green to dismiss Shubman Gill in the second essay,** Cummins said, "I thought it was a fair catch. Green took an absolute screamer. We're out on the field so we leave it in the umpire's hands. He (TV umpire Richard Kettleborough) is probably the best umpire in the world — he knows the rule book, he's seen every

angle. I'd back his decision more so than emotional, passionate fans that are looking on a big screen from 100 meters away," Cummins said. Turning his attention to the upcoming Ashes series in England, Cummins said that a series win would be "legacy defining".

"Whether we like it or not, the Ashes tend to define eras and teams. Ashes are bloody hard to win. I think it's been 20 odd years since we won, so it's not going to be easy. If we win it, that is legacy defining stuff," Cummins said.

« It is disappointing to not come out on top, having given a shot in a couple of WTC finals (2021 and 2023). You get dejected. Everyone in the changing room is disappointed. But the sport is all about picking yourself up and getting ready for the next big event. For me, winning a championship is the most important thing rather than winning any series. But I've got to keep the guys motivated to make sure there's not too much negativity around in the changing room.

— Rohit Sharma »



» PHOTOLINE  
WTC FINAL



1st

**Castled:** Mohammad Shami rattles Marnus Labuschagne's stumps with a delivery that seamed in to put India in the driver's seat shortly after lunch on the first day. Australia lost three wickets for 76 after Rohit Sharma elected to field. GETTYIMAGES



2nd

**The Smithsonian:** Steve Smith reached his 31st Test ton with consecutive boundaries off Mohammed Siraj's half-volleys early on the second day. The Australian equalled Joe Root's record of most Test centuries against India (9) and continued his rich vein of form at The Oval with his third hundred in six innings at the venue.

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3rd

**Strong head:** Travis Head smacked a counter-attacking century to wrest the early advantage away from India. He also had a record 285-run partnership with Steve Smith — the highest for an Australian pair for the fourth wicket at the venue. Head also became the first century-maker in a WTC final. GETTYIMAGES



## 4th

**Fatal error:** After hardly putting a foot wrong in the IPL, Shubman Gill had a bumpy return to Test cricket. Shortly after Rohit Sharma was trapped in front by Pat Cummins, Gill shouldered arms to a delivery from Scott Boland that nipped in and went crashing onto his stumps. GETTY IMAGES



## 5th

**Jinks in the mix:** Playing his first Test since January 2022 and high on confidence after a stellar IPL season with CSK, Ajinkya Rahane steered India out of choppy waters with a 129-ball 89 and became the first Indian to score a half-century in a WTC final, reaching his fifty with a four and a six off Pat Cummins. GETTY IMAGES



## 6th

**In elite company:** Shardul Thakur braved a barrage of body blows before joining the likes of Don Bradman and Allan Border in scoring three consecutive half-centuries at The Oval. While he fell shortly after bringing up his fifty off 108 balls, Shardul's grit ensured India avoided the ignominy of following on. GETTY IMAGES



## 7th

**Carrying the team:** On a pitch that had started turning and troubling batters, Alex Carey frustrated the Indian attack with an unbeaten 66 and stitched a 93-run stand with Mitchell Starc to set India a record 444-run target. GETTYIMAGES



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## 8th

**Out or not out:** Cameron Green took a stunning reflex catch in the slips to dismiss Shubman Gill and dent India early in its record run-chase. The dismissal, however, triggered a controversy, with many, including Gill, believing that the ball had grazed the grass. GETTYIMAGES



## 9th

**Beginning of the end:** Any hope that India had of chasing 280 runs on the final day with seven wickets in hand evaporated when Steve Smith completed a stupendous catch at second slip to dismiss Virat Kohli for 49. India lost its remaining wickets for just 55 runs and capitulated to a 209-run defeat. GETTYIMAGES

## 10th

**On cloud nine:** Nathan Lyon claimed his fourth wicket with Mohammed Siraj's dismissal, which made Australia the first team to win all ICC titles. The World Test Championship crown is Australia's ninth world title. It has five ODI World Cup, one T20 World Cup and two Champions Trophy titles in its cabinet. GETTYIMAGES





# GETTING FUTURE-READY

With the WTC behind us, we look at **five steps that can be taken to improve India's red-ball fortunes.**

Ayan Acharya and Amol Karhadkar  
Twitter @ayan\_acharya13, @karhacter

**A**fter the latest World Test Championship final embarrassment, the time is now for changes, starting with a comprehensive introspection of how the red-ball game is run and played. India, despite its financial resources and playing pool, has failed to win the WTC mace for the second time in a row.

Here's how they could create a blueprint to address their shortcomings in red-ball cricket.

## 1. Creating a pool of red-ball specialists

The divide in players between red and white-ball cricket is now more pronounced than ever. Results this year suggest that rather than rotating multi-format players, India would

be better off ensuring that players are fresh for when they can make the best impact. One way of doing that is by identifying a pool of, say, 20 first-class players—seven specialist batters and bowlers each, and six all-rounders—so that the management is able to make the best use of the talents suited for a particular format. England has championed this concept. Jos Buttler is a marginal pick in the Test side but indispensable to England's prospects in white-ball cricket. A greater concentration of talent in Ranji Trophy would help bridge the gap to the international game. If the first-class pool widens and deepens, it may also help address a common problem: appointing Test captains who have scarcely done the job for their State teams. Players these days have



**Time to reflect:** The divide in players between red and white-ball cricket is now more pronounced than ever. GETTY IMAGES

scant time to captain their domestic first-class sides while also playing international cricket. It is time for the selectors to encourage all but the elite few to specialise in a format when it comes to international cricket.

#### 2. First-class priorities

In an age where the IPL has assumed greater significance in the landscape of Indian cricket, most first-choice Indian Test players, with the exceptions of Rahane and Pujara, tend to give Ranji Trophy cricket a miss, citing workload management as one of the chief reasons.

They should be encouraged to turn up for their respective State units when an opportunity presents itself. The selectors must also consider making it a rule for players, especially those returning from injury, to prove their fitness in domestic cricket before making an international comeback.

**A GREATER CONCENTRATION OF TALENT IN RANJI TROPHY WOULD HELP BRIDGE THE GAP TO THE INTERNATIONAL GAME. IF THE FIRST-CLASS POOL WIDENS AND DEEPENS, IT MAY ALSO HELP ADDRESS A COMMON PROBLEM: APPOINTING TEST CAPTAINS WHO HAVE SCARCELY DONE THE JOB FOR THEIR STATE TEAMS.**





**Failed strategy:** Soon after Rahul Dravid took over as the head coach, major changes in the team were implemented. REUTERS

### 3. Succession plan

Virat Kohli, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane, R. Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Mohammed Shami and Rohit Sharma. Eight of India's squad members who have formed the core of its Test side over the last decade are not getting younger. By the end of the next World Test Championship cycle, all of them would be in the 35-plus category. Add to that the topsy-turvy form of specialist batters and you will realise that it's time for

the succession cycle to kick in over the next year.

Soon after Rahul Dravid took over as the head coach, Ishant Sharma and Wriddhiman Saha were given an honourable exit from the Test set-up. Pujara and Rahane were dropped, having been given a long rope to turn their form around. The succession plan had been set in place.

But in the last few months, both Pujara and Rahane have made impressive comebacks to the team due to varied reasons. But where does that leave the likes of Hanuma Vihari, Shreyas Iyer and others once they are fit? It's time for the BCCI — with the selectors at the forefront —

to bell the cat and set the succession plan rolling.

### 4. Selectors' lack of vision

It's been more than four months since the BCCI's senior men's selection panel became headless, with Chetan Sharma forced to resign after being caught in a sting operation. Since then, Shiv Sundar Das — the one with the most Test caps among the other four selectors — has been acting as interim head.

With little security for his job and lack of stature — a must in Indian psyche in general, Indian cricket's ego-issues in particular — Das is unlikely to ring in huge changes on his own.

Let alone kicking in the succession plan, the appointment of a fifth selector is critical with an eye on the 2023 World Cup.

But the BCCI top brass and the team management seem to be happy with the status quo. For most of the last 18 months, the national selection committee has been managing with four members,

**« International players should be encouraged to turn up for their respective State units when an opportunity presents itself »**



**Bright spot:** Siraj has grown leaps and bounds over the last few years.

GETTY IMAGES

instead of the prescribed five. For the same Board that had vehemently opposed the Supreme Court-directed reforms cutting down the selection panel from five to three members not too long ago, it's been business as usual despite a selector's post lying vacant.

#### 5. Bringing the focus back to India A cricket

Youth development and sustained success for the first team go hand in hand, as evidenced by India's rapid turnaround in Test fortunes between 2018 and 2021. Mohammed Siraj has been one of the chief architects of that upswing. Siraj had played 16 first-class matches for India A, touring England, New Zealand, South Africa, and the West Indies before making his international debut.

No surprise then that he looked as sharp as a finished product in the

2020-21 Border-Gavaskar series against Australia. In fact, India used 20 players through that four-match series — the most any team had used in an away series in the history of Test cricket.

The India bowling attack in the fourth Test at the Gabba had a combined experience of four Tests. It was a testament to the bench strength, furthered by an India A structure that not only identified talents but also developed them with

targeted opportunities.

Between 2017 and 2019, India A played 24 unofficial Tests. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, they have played three unofficial Tests in South Africa in 2021 and two against Bangladesh and three against New Zealand in 2022. While there has understandably been a downward trend in the number of matches, making A-team cricket a priority once again will go a long way in bettering the red-ball future of India.

**Youth development and sustained success for the first team go hand in hand, as evidenced by India's rapid turnaround in Test fortunes between 2018 and 2021. Siraj has been one of the chief architects of that upswing**





## ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



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# INDIAN BATTERS CAN LEARN FROM DJOKOVIC'S RESILIENCE

While the **Indian batters struggled to bat** long and defy the Aussie challenge, Novak Djokovic dug deep in his reserves to win the French Open.

**T**here was great sporting excitement and anticipation two Sundays ago. In London, at The Oval in Kennington, the Indian team had the chance to win the World Test Championship final. In Paris at the Roland Garros courts, Novak Djokovic was looking to win the men's singles title at the French Open Tennis and become the first man to win 23 Majors, or "Slams," as they are now called. Even with the one-hour time difference between Paris and London, by the time Djokovic and his support staff had reached the change room to warm up at Roland Garros, the Indian challenge at The Oval had been snuffed out by some persistent bowling and forgettable shot selection by the Indian batters. The huge turnout of Indian supporters on a hot Sunday wasn't even in the mood to eat lunch after seeing the sad capitulation of the Indian batters.

A couple of hours after Australian captain Pat Cummins and his team lifted the ICC mace, Djokovic was lifting the trophy that signified he had won more men's singles titles in the Majors than anyone else in the history of tennis. That is truly a stupendous achievement

in a sport where there are so many youngsters waiting in the wings to take over from the so-called old guard. At the age of 36, Djokovic knows he is surrounded by eager beavers just waiting for him to slip up so that they can take his place, but the Serbian superstar is not going to let go easily. To read what his coach, Goran Ivanisevic, says about his preparation and practice routine is to understand why the man has won so many titles. Ivanisevic says he and his support staff get tired, but not Djokovic, who wants to practise a few more serves, a few more backhand slices, and a few more forehand drop shots.

While the physical conditioning aspect of a sport where at the Majors a match can go for five hours or more is undoubtedly crucial, what towers above that is the ability to dig deep into the mental reserves and pull yourself up even if you are two sets down and a couple of service breaks down in the third set. Djokovic has that mental strength, and that's why in a five-set match he is supreme. The young whipper-snappers can beat the big boys in tournaments that are best of three sets, but when it comes to the Majors, which are decided over five sets, the champions, with



**On top of the world:** Australia won the World Test Championship by dismantling India on the fifth day of the final at The Oval. GETTY IMAGES

their experience and mental strength, can do it round after round.

Going the distance was what was required of the Indian team too, but they were simply not up to it. The reason why the Gabba Test match is such a landmark win is because it was one of those rare occasions where an Indian team not only scored over 300 runs in the fourth innings but also showed the staying power to do so. Whether too much limited-overs cricket has taken away the ability to play the long innings required to chase big totals is something that can be debated all day long. Leave aside chasing, even trying to save a game by batting fourth has often been beyond the current generation of batters.

Now that there's been disappointment at the WTC, it's time to look ahead and plan for

the next big event, which is the World Cup in India in October and November. Those who have been playing nonstop over the past few months should be given a break to rest their bodies and come back fresh for the new season. Those who are certainties for the Indian team for the World Cup should be rested for the Test series against the West Indies so that they get a nice long month and a half break. Since the World Cup is a 50-over contest, they can come back for the white ball series against the West Indies, and after that, there's going to be white ball cricket right up until the World Cup.

Indian cricket lovers, including me, have vented at the disappointing result at the WTC, but now it's time to look forward and back our boys for the big season ahead.



**A couple of hours after Australian captain Pat Cummins and his team lifted the ICC mace, Novak Djokovic was lifting the French Open trophy that signified he had won more men's singles titles in the Majors than anyone else in the history of tennis.**

# Smith reaches a few milestones

**14}** The maximum number of international centuries, across formats, made against India by an opponent batter. Steve Smith's recent three-figure score in the WTC final at The Oval equalled this record held by former teammate Ricky Ponting. Smith, meanwhile, registered his ninth Test century against India, which equals the record tally held by England's Joe Root. The second table has the details.

Batters with most international centuries against India

100s	Batter	For	Mts	Inns	Runs	Ave.	HS	Tests	ODIs
14	Ricky Ponting	Aus	89	111	4795	47.00	257	8	6
14	Steve Smith	Aus	52	66	3345	56.69	192	9	5
12	Joe Root	Eng	53	70	3426	56.16	218	9	3
11	Viv Richards	WI	59	67	2924	49.55	192*	8	3
11	Kumar Sangakkara	SL	97	103	4287	44.19	219	5	6
10	Sanath Jayasuriya	SL	103	105	3927	40.07	340	3	7
10	Mahela Jayawardene	SL	110	117	4563	42.25	275	6	4

Batters with most Test centuries against India

100s	Batter	For	Mts	Inns	Runs	Ave.	HS
9	Joe Root	Eng	25	45	2526	63.15	218
9	Steve Smith	Aus	19	37	2042	65.87	192
8	Garry Sobers	WI	18	30	1920	83.48	198
8	Viv Richards	WI	28	41	1927	50.71	192*
8	Ricky Ponting	Aus	29	51	2555	54.36	257

**12}** The number of batters who have made 31 or more centuries during their Test career. In the recent Oval Test match, Steve Smith became the latest to do so. By reaching the 31st century in 170 innings, he has become the second quickest, behind India's Sachin Tendulkar, to get this landmark in fewest innings. However, Smith is the only batter to do so in less than 100 Test matches — in 97 Tests.

Quickest to reach 31st Test century in fewest innings

Inns	Mts	Batter	For	Runs	Ave.	50s	Achieved on
165	103	Sachin Tendulkar	Ind	8711	58.46	34	2 Nov 2002
170	97	Steve Smith	Aus	8913	60.22	37	8 Jun 2023
174	104	Ricky Ponting	Aus	8740	58.27	33	13 Apr 2006
184	103	Younis Khan	Pak	9071	54.32	30	25 Oct 2015
192	110	Sunil Gavaskar	Ind	9006	51.17	39	17 Dec 1985

**8}** The number of batters who have aggregated 2000 or more runs against India, during their Test career. In the Oval Test match, Steve Smith became the latest to do so. By reaching the 2000th run in 36 innings, he has become the second quickest, behind Pakistan's Javed Miandad, to get this landmark in fewest innings. However, Smith is the only batter to do so in less than 20 Test matches — in 19 Tests.

Quickest to aggregate 2000 Test runs against India in fewest innings

Inns	Mts	Batter	For	Runs	Ave	100s	50s	HS	Achieved on
35	25	Javed Miandad	Pak	2027	69.90	4	14	280*	15 Nov 1989
36	19	Steve Smith	Aus	2008	66.93	9	5	192	8 Jun 2023
39	25	Clive Lloyd	WI	2042	55.19	6	11	242*	12 Nov 1983
39	22	Joe Root	Eng	2142	61.20	7	10	218	13 Aug 2021
39	22	Michael Clarke	Aus	2042	55.19	7	6	329*	10 Dec 2014



Steve Smith

**1}** The number of batters to register a 150+ score in an ICC men's event final. Travis Head's 163 in the recent Oval Test is the highest in any ICC final across formats. Previously Adam Gilchrist made 149 in the CWC final in 2007.



Travis Head

#### Highest individual scores in a final at an ICC event

Runs	Batter	For	Agst	Venue	Date	Rslt	Event	Format
163	Travis Head	Aus	Ind	The Oval	8 June 2023	Won	WTC final	Test
149	Adam Gilchrist	Aus	SL	Bridgetown	28 Apr 2007	Won	CWC final	ODI
140*	Ricky Ponting	Aus	Ind	Johannesburg	23 Mar 2003	Won	CWC final	ODI
138*	Viv Richards	WI	Eng	Lord's	23 Jun 1979	Won	CWC final	ODI
121	Steve Smith	Aus	Ind	The Oval	8 June 2023	Won	WTC final	Test
117	Saurav Ganguly	Ind	NZ	Nairobi	15 Oct 2000	Lost	CT final	ODI

**2}** The number of occasions a three-figure score has been registered in a WTC final. In the recent Oval WTC final, Travis Head and Steve Smith did this for the first time. India's Ajinkya Rahane's 89 is now the third-highest score behind Head and Smith in a WTC final. The second table lists all the highest scores by Indians in a WTC final.

#### Highest individual scores (of 50 or more) in the WTC final

Runs	Batter	For	Agst	Venue	Month, year	Result
163	Travis Head	Aus	Ind	The Oval	June 2023	Won
121	Steve Smith	Aus	Ind	The Oval	June 2023	Won
89	Ajinkya Rahane	Ind	Aus	The Oval	June 2023	Lost
66*	Alex Carey	Aus	Ind	The Oval	June 2023	Won
54	Devon Conway	NZ	Ind	Southampton	June 2021	Won
52*	Kane Williamson	NZ	Ind	Southampton	June 2021	Won
51	Shardul Thakur	Ind	Aus	The Oval	June 2023	Lost

#### Highest scores for India in a WTC final

Runs	Batter	Agst	Venue	Month, year	Result
89	Ajinkya Rahane	Aus	The Oval	June 2023	Lost
51	Shardul Thakur	Aus	The Oval	June 2023	Lost
49	Ajinkya Rahane	NZ	Southampton	June 2021	Lost
49	Virat Kohli	Aus	The Oval	June 2023	Lost
48	Ravindra Jadeja	Aus	The Oval	June 2023	Lost

**41}** The number of fielders to claim 100 or more catches in Tests. India's Ajinkya Rahane became the latest and the seventh Indian to achieve this feat in Tests. In reaching this landmark in his 83rd match, Rahane is the 15th quickest to do so in the fewest Tests. Among Indians, only Rahul Dravid has done it quicker in 79 Tests.

#### Quickest to reach 100 Test catches in fewest matches for India

Tests to 100 catches	Fielder	Career catches	Achieved against	Venue	Month, year
79	Rahul Dravid	209	Aus	Bangalore	Oct 2004
83	Ajinkya Rahane	100	Aus	The Oval	June 2023
91	Mohd Azharuddin	105	Aus	Bangalore	Mar 1998
95	VVS Laxman	135	SL	Galle	Aug 2008
99	Virat Kohli	110	SAf	Cape Town	Jan 2022

**0}** The number of occasions a Test match was played at The Oval, London, before the month of July. The WTC final was thus the earliest start to a Test match at this venue since the first Test was played here in September 1880, 143 years ago. The earliest start before this Test was on 8 July 1982, when India played England. The Test ended in a draw. The table below summarises month-wise starts to the 105 Oval Tests.



Ajinkya Rahane

#### Monthwise start of the 105 Test matches at the Oval

Tests	Month
1	June (The 2023 WTC final on 7 June)
8	in July
88	in August
8	in September

All records are correct and updated until 17 June 2023

## » INTERVIEW

**Speaking his mind:** Ravichandran Ashwin looks back at his experiences on and off the field and how those challenges have made him the person he is. GETTY IMAGES



**« I think I am not at the stage in my career to think about what others are thinking of me. I know what I am capable of »**

# RAVICHANDRAN ASHWIN

S. Dipak Ragav

Twitter @dipakragav

**R**avichandran Ashwin, the No. 1 Test bowler in the world, was left out of India's XI for the World Test Championship final against Australia. Ashwin last played a Test in England in 2021, the first WTC final, against New Zealand in Southampton. He took two wickets in each innings to finish with match figures of four for 45 from 25 overs.

Now back in India, turning up for the Dindigul Dragons in the Tamil Nadu Premier League, TN's domestic T20 competition, Ashwin looks back at his experiences on and off the field and how those challenges have made him the person he is.

**You are the No. 1-ranked bowler in the world, but do you feel you are being judged on something apart from your primary skill-set?**

It's a hard question to answer because we are standing [here] right after the WTC Final. I would have loved to play because I played a part in us getting there. Even in the last final, I got four wickets and bowled really well.

Ever since 2018–19, my bowling overseas has been fantastic, and I have managed to win games for the

team. I am looking at it from the point of view of a captain or coach, and I am just talking in hindsight, in their defence. The last time we were in England, it was 2-2 with a drawn Test, and they would have felt four pacers and one spinner is the combination in England. That is what they might have thought going into the final.

The problem is that for a spinner to come into play, it must be in the fourth innings. The fourth innings is a very crucial aspect, and for us to be able to put up that amount of runs so the spinner can come into play, it's completely a mindset thing.

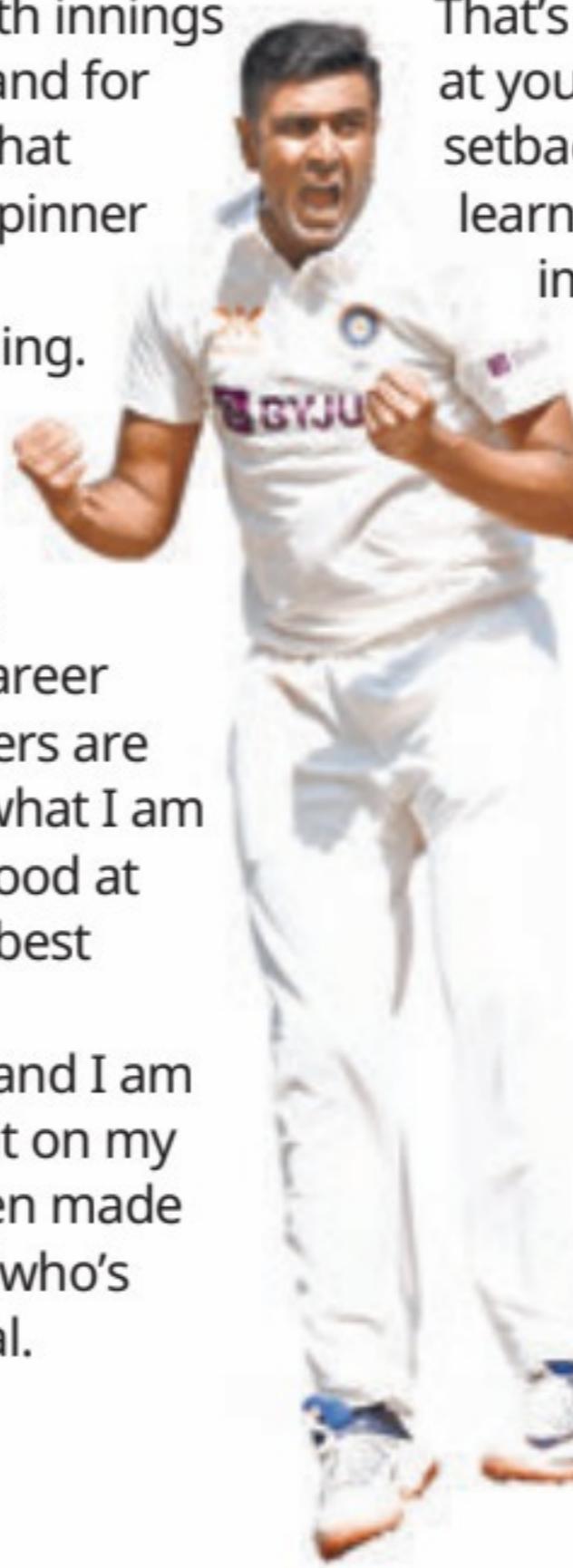
To look inward and say, 'okay, somebody is judging me is foolishness'. I think I am not at the stage in my career to think about what others are thinking of me. I know what I am capable of. If I am not good at something, I will be my best critic.

And I will work on it, and I am not someone who will sit on my laurels. I have never been made that way. So, to think of who's judging me is immaterial.

**Isn't it tough to deal with it considering that you are operating at your peak?**

For me, it's not a setback. It's just a stumbling block; I will move on because I have gone through that. When somebody knocks you down for the first time, you have a knee-jerk reaction. I think you should be knocked down once in a while in your life so that you are used to it and will know how to bounce back.

That's what life is. Whether you are at your peak or not, it is still a setback. The fact that you need to learn how to deal with it is very important.



**Sunil Gavaskar has asked whether the 'horses for courses' rule applies only to the bowlers...**

This is a true story, and I don't talk about something that's made up. One day, I was watching the India-Sri Lanka game, and India's bowling was in tatters. My favourite was Sachin Tendulkar, and whatever runs he used to make, we



**Spinning a web:** Ashwin is the second-highest wicket-taker for India in Test cricket and is currently the No. 1 bowler in Tests. He had replaced England's James Anderson as the No. 1 bowler in March this year after taking six wickets in the second Test of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy against Australia in Delhi. GETTY IMAGES



used to leak those runs with the ball. I used to think one day I must be a bowler. Can't I be better than the bowlers that are there currently? This is a very childish way to think, but that is how I thought, and that is why I started bowling off-spin. This is where it began.

However, when I hang up my boots tomorrow, the first thing I will regret is having been such a fine batter; I should have never become a bowler. This is a perception I have constantly tried to fight, but there are different

yardsticks for bowlers and batters. And there are different ways of treating [them]... I understand that for the batter, it is a one-ball game, and they require the opportunity.

I had this conversation with a stalwart of the game who once said it was because you can see a bowler struggling in a Test match for over 40 overs. But my argument is that you are seeing a batsman struggle in the match and nets, and the requirement for a batter doesn't change. It is still a one-ball game. I am not saying the batter shouldn't play. He should play, and similarly, the bowler must also play. They should be treated equally because I think at the end of the day, you're earning your stripes, and I definitely believe that through the ups and downs of my career, I have kept turning in and earning my stripes.

Some people will get 10 matches, some people will get 15, and some people will get 20. The day I wore the Indian colours, I knew I would get only two. I was prepared for it. It's not that it's some unfair treatment meted out to me. The only reason for my improvement or where I stand in how I play cricket right now is that I have accepted that I will get only two Test matches.

I don't want to go back home and say boss, 'he got 15 and I got two'. I don't want to do that because all I can control is who I am and what I can do.

#### How tough is it to keep going

#### when a sword is always hanging over your head?

I am a lot more chilled than I used to be. I am a lot more relaxed in my life than I ever have been. Sitting here today, I realised how much of a toll it had taken on me mentally, to the point where I was traumatised. But I am very glad to have come through that and discovered a new me.

A lot of people have marketed me and positioned me as an overthinker. A person who will get 15–20 matches on the go doesn't have to be mentally overthinking.

A person who knows that they will get only two games will be traumatised and will be overthinking because it's my job. It's my journey. So, this is what suits me.

If somebody is going to tell me, 'you're going to play 15 matches, you will be looked after; you are responsible for players; you are in the leadership role', I won't be overthinking. Why would I?

It's unfair to actually say somebody's an overthinker because that person's journey is his own. And nobody has the right or the business to do that.

#### Has it worked against you?

It was created to work against me, right? And as I said, there have been statements that people have made all along when leadership is a question that's come my way. There have been people who have been out there telling me my name is not the first name on the sheet when India tours abroad.

Whether that name is first on the sheet or not is something I can't control. If I earned it, it's got to be there, and that's my belief. As I said, I have no complaints; I have no time to sit back and throw punches or regret anything. I have no regrets about anyone.

The moment, the final finished I put out a tweet because I realised one thing: I need closure. The moment I get closure, I can move on. There is no time to hang around. I understand life a lot better now.

The more I see it, the more I realise how much trauma it causes my family. My father has a heart problem and other issues. Every single game, every single day, something happens, and he will call me. He is stressed. It's very easy for me to go out and play because it's still in my control. For my father, it is not, and he goes through twice what I do. So, looking at this in hindsight, everybody on the outside is irrelevant.

#### Can you elaborate on this? What do you mean when you say you want closure?

You need to be able to get up and move on. What I am trying to say is that I have learned to live life a lot better than I used to. Sometimes I look back and think I have taken on too much stress, but maybe if I hadn't, I might not have been playing cricket for so long. But looking at it, it's taken away my personality. It's taken away my character. It's taken away how I have lived life.

Whenever I came back from a tour, I used to go to my academy to bowl because I knew I had to keep up my skills. I have never taken a holiday. When I look back on the two years leading Kings XI Punjab and then the COVID years and my struggles, it's been the greatest learning of my life. When I went there as captain, I was this intense person because that was my journey. After I tried to get work done by a lot of other people, I realised my journey did not necessarily need to be somebody else's journey. It completely relaxed me.

**« I've learned to live life a lot better than I used to. Sometimes I look back and think I have taken too much stress »**

# ◀ I always believed I had great leadership qualities in me. It's not about leading on the field. It's leading men ▶

I have had no sympathy for my journey. It's very easy for me to go back and say, okay, this didn't happen for me, or something happened for him. I don't give myself one second of sympathy. That's why I put that tweet: I wanted closure. I hated the fact that people were giving me sympathy; I just couldn't take it anymore.

In this social media age, you don't play, and sometimes you are bigger than if you had played the game, right? People are talking; if he had played, we would have won. I am not sure if I had played, we would have won. I would have given my best, and I definitely think I gave myself the best opportunity to succeed there. I also think I earned my stripes. That's all I can do. But the moment it got done, I just wanted to move on and focus on the TNPL for the Dindigul Dragons.

## Was it comforting that some of the great cricketers came out in support of you?

I am 36 years old, and honestly, what triggers you and what gives you happiness changes. Yeah, every time I get a text message from some of the former senior cricketers, I always get excited and immediately respond. That's because of how I saw

them as a youngster. I felt happy that they thought I was good enough to play. But the fact of the matter is, I couldn't get an opportunity or the world title.

I knew I was going to be left out 48 hours before. My entire goal was to make sure I could contribute to the guys and help us win a title because I played a part in it (getting to the final).

The perception is that you

are so intense and focused. Do you feel you could have enjoyed a bit more outside of the game?

Enjoy it a little bit more? I would have then been sitting at home and not played 92 Tests. I have made peace with the facts about what I have done and what's happened to me. I am aware of what I have done and lost in my life because of what I had to do.

## Do you tap into other cricketers for help on the cricketing front or for a frank conversation?

It is a deep topic. This is an era where everybody is a colleague. Once upon a time, when cricket was played, all your teammates were friends. Now, they're colleagues. There's a big difference because here people are there to advance themselves and to stride ahead of another person sitting to your right or left. Nobody's got the time to say, 'okay, boss, what are you up to'?

I believe cricket gets better when you share it. It gets better when you understand another person's technique and another person's journey. But it doesn't happen anywhere close to how much it must happen. Nobody will come for your help. It's an isolated journey. Of course, you can reach any professional you want to, tap into some coach, you can pay and go, practise, try to feed off them, and all that. But sometimes we forget that cricket is a very self-taught sport.

**During the second COVID wave, your father was admitted to the hospital, as was your wife. You were in the IPL bubble and not able to reach any of them. You didn't know what was happening.**

## How much of that affected you?

I don't know. I mean, looking back at it, I don't know if that had an impact, but generally, I was not in a great



*I believe cricket gets better when you share it. It gets better when you understand another person's technique and another person's journey.*





#### All-round talent:

Ashwin has five Test hundreds to his name and has been a significant contributor with the bat as well, lower down the order.

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state physically and mentally. After the 2018 England tour, I didn't play in the 2019 World Cup; I wasn't even in contention. So, when I came out of it, I told myself it wasn't worth it. At one point in time, I wanted to be a three-format player. I always believed I had great leadership qualities in me. And always believed that I could be a good leader because it's not about leading on the field. It's leading men.

However, when that journey (leading Kings XI Punjab) came to an end, I figured I needed to work on my intrapersonal skills. It wasn't the greatest, but I had to go through that journey to understand it.

#### You have been part of different Indian teams over the past decade. What is the best memory you have of those?

I have forgotten everything. Before, when I used to go to sleep, maybe five-six years ago, I used to think of some great moments: getting a great wicket, a great ball, whatever it was. I can't remember anything now.

#### Is it because of too much cricket?

Maybe not. It's just your journey. Maybe because of things that are far more important. If tomorrow one of my players from Dindigul Dragons goes into the IPL, maybe that will be

a memory. That'll stick with me. My memories don't stick with me anymore. I mean, for a while—for about two or three days—that Bangladesh Test, where we played in Mirpur, stuck with me. If you go to sleep, sometimes you feel okay good. But it doesn't happen now.

#### They always say spinners evolve with age. Where is the 36-year-old Ashwin right now?

I am very proud of what I have done in my life, not just because of the wickets or runs but because of how consistently I have been able to reinvent myself. One thing that plagues cricketers or anybody as they grow older is insecurity: you want to hold on to something so tight that you eventually end up breaking your neck. When I came back from Bangladesh, I told my wife that the Australia series could become my last. I used to have some knee issues,

and I told her I was going to change my action because when I was landing, my knee was buckling a bit. To change my action would have been a ridiculous thing, considering I had been doing well in the last few years. But I decided to go back to the action that I used to bowl with, in 2013–14. I practised for three to four days in Nagpur and went into the Test without having played a game with that action.

On the first day, I didn't even feel like a bowler for three to four overs, but I was able to get on with it because of the awareness I have. That is probably one of the best series I have had and the best bowling performance I have had in the last four to five years. I feel so proud of having done that at 36. Looking back, if I can change my action and put my career at stake, I don't think there can be a greater challenge in life.

**I am very proud of what I have done in my life, not just because of the wickets or runs but because of how consistently I have been able to reinvent myself.**



# Prioritise domestic cricket to sustain India's talent pool

The burgeoning influence of the Indian Premier League has meant that the **domestic calendar in India has been shortchanged**, time and again.

**Amol Karhadkar**  
Twitter @karhacter

**T**he Indian Premier League window is never tinkered with, although it could get longer. So do the Indian team's international fixtures at home, depending on India's other bilateral commitments. Amidst all this, the men's domestic cricket calendar — supposedly the backbone of Indian cricket — ends up getting the shorter end of the stick time and again.

**How else can anyone explain the following?**

With the Ranji Trophy knockouts being played in June 2022, after the Omicron variant of COVID-19 shrank the premier domestic championship to three league games per team, 2021-22 saw a late end to a domestic season. The subsequent season ended with the Ranji Trophy final in February 2023.

With the beginning of the Duleep Trophy on June 28, the 2023-24 season will see an early start to the domestic calendar, which will once again take the backseat with the return of the ODI World Cup to India after well over a decade. Considering the need to hand over World Cup venues for a facelift ahead of the World Cup, set to start on October 5, the Board



of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) decided to begin the domestic season towards the end of June with the inter-zonal tournaments. As a result, the Duleep Trophy will be played in June-July, and the Prof. DB Deodhar Trophy, the inter-zonal one-day trophy, will commence on July 24.

While both of these tournaments returned last season in a tweaked knockout format, the fact that the BCCI is at least making an effort to ensure the legacy tournaments are organised should be acknowledged.

Moreover, with the IPL window



## IF THE TALENT FEEDER LINE HAS TO PERSIST, DOMESTIC CALENDAR MUST BE FRONT AND CENTRE OF INDIAN CRICKET AGAIN

likely to keep getting longer, the BCCI will have no option but to start the domestic season early before the onset of the monsoon all over the country. **It is understood that the ploy of staging inter-zonal tournaments is likely to persist for the next few years**, with the head coach Rahul Dravid and the National Cricket Academy chief V.V.S. Laxman at the forefront of planning.

Once the inter-zonal tournaments are held early, it can give ample time to avoid India-A fixtures, once they resume, clashing with the Ranji Trophy knockouts. Besides, the key

players returning from injuries can be tried out at the start of a new season. "I am absolutely in favour of starting the season early with the Duleep and the Deodhar Trophy. It ensures that all the tournaments are swiftly organised, and it spaces out the domestic programme well," says Kiran More, the former India wicketkeeper who, as a Mumbai Indians talent scout, watches domestic cricket from close quarters all year around.

While More doesn't find any issues with scheduling, "with an eye on India's international calendar," he

**Red-ball giants:** Saurashtra, under captain Jaydev Unadkat (pic, left) continued its stupendous form in red-ball cricket, beating Bengal in the final at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata to win the 2022-23 Ranji Trophy.

SUDHAKARAJAIN

hopes that the BCCI and the staging associations end up converting the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, the inter-state men's T20 championship, into a spectacle, starting with this year's edition that clashes with the World Cup.



**ODI World Cup returns:** India will host the 50-over World Cup in October and November this year. It last hosted the tournament, with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, in 2011, when the M.S. Dhoni-led India won the coveted title after an arduous wait of 28 years. AP

"Most of the time, even the Mushtaq Ali Trophy, featuring most of the players that go on to play in the IPL later in the season, sees not more than 50 of us watching it from the sidelines," More says.

"The onus is more on the state associations than the BCCI to create a buzz locally and draw spectators to the stadiums. The BCCI can create razzmatazz like the IPL with music playing, and the state associations should activate campaigns to get spectators to the ground.

It will not only bring domestic

cricket into the limelight but also allow the players to get a feel of a mini-IPL."

Over the last few years, the fact that the Mushtaq Ali Trophy has to be played ahead of the IPL Player Auction to facilitate the franchises' talent-scouting exercise has resulted in the Ranji Trophy being pushed back.

Over the last decade, the premier first-class championship has started in October, November, December, and even January at times due to various reasons.

"In an ideal world, everyone would want a set window for the Ranji Trophy, considering its importance. Understandably, there have been times when the domestic calendar is planned to be in sync with the international calendar, but the majority of other countries don't do it," says Surendra Bhave, the former domestic stalwart who has coached various teams over the last decade after serving as a national selector during India's triumphant 2011 World Cup campaign.

"If the Ranji Trophy is played in a

**KK The 2023-24 season will see the earliest start to the Indian domestic calendar >>**

set window, it will help the players much more to plan their annual training plan. I don't think tinkering with the calendar is deliberate. There are so many logistical and practical constraints, but if we can find a way to freeze the Ranji Trophy window, it will certainly help the domestic cricket fraternity."

Bhave's words may end up being prophetic since the BCCI's cricketing hierarchy has been contemplating a late start to the Ranji Trophy since the last season to exploit the additional window for the knockouts.

As a result, the Ranji Trophy, which is set to begin on January 5 next year this time around, may well see a mid-December to early January start in the future.

The rationale behind such a plan is to possibly clash the Ranji Trophy knockouts with the IPL preparation



**The brain trust:** India head coach Rahul Dravid and National Cricket Academy chief V.V.S. Laxman have been at the forefront when it comes to devising the schedule of domestic events in a manner that serves the larger interests of Indian cricket.

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window so that, barring the eight teams in the knockouts, players from other teams can join the pre-IPL camps.

The additional window may also help the BCCI give an additional day's break from the existing three-day gap between games, at least during the latter half of the league stage.

If the talent feeder line has to persist, domestic calendar must be front and centre of Indian cricket again.

## Domestic season

### Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy

**League stage:** October 16 to 27

**Venues:** Mohali, Mumbai, Ranchi, Jaipur, Dehradun

**Group A:** Mumbai, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Hyderabad, Baroda, Meghalaya, Jammu & Kashmir, Mizoram.

**Group B:** Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Services, Assam, Chandigarh, Odisha, Bihar, Sikkim.

**Group C:** Punjab, Saurashtra, Gujarat, Goa, Railways, Andhra, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh.

**Group D:** Vidarbha, Bengal, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Pondicherry.

**Group E:** Karnataka, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura, Nagaland.

**Knockouts:** October 31 to November 6

**Venue:** Mohali

### Vijay Hazare Trophy

**League stage:** November 23 to December 5

**Venues:** Thiruvananthapuram, Bengaluru, Jaipur, Chandigarh, Ahmedabad.

**Group A:** Saurashtra, Kerala, Mumbai, Railways, Tripura, Pondicherry, Odisha, Sikkim.

**Group B:** Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Hyderabad, Chhattisgarh, Vidarbha, Services, Meghalaya, Manipur.

**Group C:** Karnataka, Jammu & Kashmir, Chandigarh, Haryana, Delhi, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Mizoram.

**Group D:** Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh.

**Group E:** Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Bengal, Baroda, Goa, Nagaland.

**Knockouts:** December 9 to 16

**Venue:** Rajkot

### Ranji Trophy

**Elite League stage:** January 5 to February 19, 2024

**Plate League stage:** January 5 to February 5, 2024

**Elite knockout stage:** February 23 to March 14, 2024

**Plate knockout stage:** February 9 to 21, 2024

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

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

**Elite Group C:** Karnataka, Punjab, Railways, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Gujarat, Tripura, Chandigarh.

**Elite Group D:** Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Baroda, Delhi, Odisha, Pondicherry, Jammu & Kashmir.

**Plate Group:** Nagaland, Hyderabad, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh.



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# Aussies win a cliffhanger

1

Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon survived innumerable scares in the dying moments to stitch a 55-run partnership and **secure a two-wicket win** for Australia.

**Australia won a thrilling Ashes opener by two wickets at Edgbaston** as captain Pat Cummins' six-smashing 44 not out and Usman Khawaja's patient 65 combined to give England's "Bazball" cricket revolution a lesson from Down Under. Cummins hit two sixes and four fours, and he shared a match-winning ninth-wicket

partnership of 55 with Nathan Lyon (16 not out) in the last hour of the final day. Chasing 281 to win, Cummins hit the winning boundary off Ollie Robinson and Australia finished on 282-8 to disappoint a raucous crowd at Edgbaston. On the first day, England had got off to an aggressive start with the bat. As Joe Root starred with a century (118 not out), England, in

yet another unconventional move, declared at 393-8. In response, Khawaja ended his decade-long wait for a Test hundred in England with a well-compiled 141. However, struggles to adapt to the short ball saw the Baggy Green finish at 386. Later, Cummins and Lyon returned with four wickets apiece as England was bowled out for 273.



2

**Bangladesh entered the record books** with a massive 546-run win against Afghanistan in a one-off Test in Mirpur. It was the third biggest in the history of Test cricket. England defeated Australia by 675 runs in 1928 at the Gabba, the biggest win by runs in Tests. Bangladesh quicks took 14 wickets, the most for them in a Test match. Ebadot Hossain finished with five scalps.



3

**New Zealand all-rounder Michael Bracewell will miss the ODI World Cup in India** after rupturing his right Achilles in domestic T20 action in the U.K. Bracewell pulled up while batting for Worcestershire, retiring hurt on an unbeaten 11 in a T20 defeat to Yorkshire. Bracewell joins national skipper Kane Williamson on the team's injury list.



4

**In some good news for Indian cricket fans, Rishabh Pant is recovering faster than expected.** Pant recently started to walk without crutches and climb stairs without any support. Media reports suggest the BCCI is attempting to get Pant ready for the ODI World Cup this year. However, his recovery process could take longer. Pant last played during India's tour of Bangladesh in December 2022. Meanwhile, Jasprit Bumrah is targeting the upcoming Asia Cup for his return to international cricket. Bumrah, who suffered a recurring back injury, had surgery in New Zealand in March and has not played since the home T20Is against Australia last September.



5

**Australia has a one-two-three** at the top of the International Cricket Committee's Test rankings for batters, with Travis Head breaking into the top three, behind second-placed Steven Smith and Marnus Labuschagne at No. 1. Aussie skipper Pat Cummins remains at No. 3 on the bowler's list, behind India's Ravichandran Ashwin and England's James Anderson.



6

**Asia Cup 2023 will be held in a hybrid model** with four games in Pakistan and nine in Sri Lanka from August 31 to September 17. This will be the first time since 2008 that matches of a multi-nation tournament will be staged in Pakistan. The hybrid model was proposed because the BCCI had made it clear that it wouldn't send its team to Pakistan. Sri Lanka is the defending champion.



7

**Pakistan batter Nahida Khan announced her retirement** following a 14-year international career. Nahida made her international debut at 23 in 2009 against Sri Lanka. She played 66 ODIs and 54 T20Is, scoring 1410 runs at 23.50 and 604 runs at 13.13, respectively. Nahida has already moved into coaching, with experience in Pakistan domestic cricket as an assistant.



8

**West Indies will host India for a multi-format series,** with two Tests, three ODIs, and five T20Is set to be played between July 12 and August 13. Dominica will host the first Test, while the Queen's Park Oval in Trinidad will stage the second and final Test from July 20. These two Tests will also mark the beginning of India's 2023-2025 World Test Championship cycle.

» HOCKEY  
JUNIOR ASIA CUP

THIS WAS INDIA'S FOURTH  
JUNIOR MEN'S ASIA CUP  
HOCKEY TITLE, HAVING  
EARLIER WON THE  
TOURNAMENT IN 2004,  
2008 AND 2015

Making a point:  
"Challenging  
games educate  
us," says India  
skipper Uttam  
Singh.  
PICS: HOCKEY INDIA

# YOUTH POWER TO THE FORE

The junior men's team won the Asia Cup title for the fourth time, **beating arch-rival Pakistan**, while the women edged four-time winner Korea for their maiden trophy.



#### Shining star:

Arai Jeet Singh Hundal, one of India's brightest upcoming talents, was instrumental in India's 2-1 win over Pakistan in the final.

#### Santadeep Dey and Nihit Sachdeva

Twitter @SantadeepDey, @nihitsachdeva28

**M**anpreet Singh's Team India rekindled memories of the eccentric days of yore for Indian hockey when the men's team defeated Germany 5-4 to win the bronze medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. It was India's 12th hockey medal overall at the Olympics and the first in 41 years! The women's team also made history by reaching its maiden Olympic semifinals at the same Summer Games.

The trickle-down effect of these watershed achievements can already be seen at the grassroots level, with the junior men's and women's teams recently returning with the Asian crown.

While the men's team won the title for the fourth time, beating arch-rival Pakistan 2-1, it was a maiden title for Preeti and Co., who

edged four-time winner Korea by an identical scoreline.

*Sportstar* sat down for a conversation with junior men's team captain Uttam Singh, Neelam, who scored the winning goal for the women, and top-scorers of both sides, Arai Jeet Singh Hundal (8 goals) and (pic, below) Annu (9, also the highest in the tournament).

#### On their respective opponents in the final

Annu: Korea was a tough opponent. But our coach (Janneke Schopman) had done her homework, and during a team meeting, she briefed us about the weaknesses and strengths of each opponent. We followed her instructions to the letter.

Neelam: We had played a match against our senior team before leaving for Japan. We had conceded two goals in the first quarter. It was a tough match, and I felt so much

pressure that I could not decide where to pass the ball. I came off the pitch and told the coach I was unable to understand how to play. She said, "This is the game. This is what is going to happen there (at the Junior Asia Cup), and you'll be unable to understand where to pass the ball." Personally, I did not feel much pressure in the final. In the team meeting, we discussed the fact that we had nothing to lose. In the worst case, we would have finished second. Instead, if we put in some extra effort, we knew we would win the gold. Our strikers were pressing well. We had gotten better as the tournament progressed. When I was under the pump, I was asking my teammates to come closer and help. Emotionally, too, that was a big support. After we took a 2-1 lead, the coach told us to keep ball possession and not attack much. When we got a chance to counterattack, we did.

Arai Jeet: When you play against Pakistan, you get more limelight compared to the other teams, be it in cricket or any other sport. The public





**Stamping authority:** The Indian men's junior hockey team maintained its continental supremacy as it beat Pakistan 2-1 to win the Asia Cup for the fourth time.

has this notion that the two countries are rivals. While on the field it still makes sense to an extent, off the field we are all good friends. We often sit down for a chat in the hotel and sometimes hang out together. But yes, the pressure of a final is very high. When you play Pakistan, it adds to that. It becomes a must-win game.

**Uttam:** The public demand is very high if it is an India vs. Pakistan clash. Not only the fans, but we as players also enjoy playing these matches. The games are very fiercely contested. It is always challenging to play against them. But challenging games only educate us further.

**On the methods of Schopman, who has now added a Junior Asian title to a bronze medal with the senior team in Birmingham**



### 2022 and the Nations Cup

Neelam (in pic): Schopman's training methods are quite nice and unique. Having played a full tournament under her, you gradually get to know how she is thinking. Of course, on the field she manages us, but off the field she also ensures we stay together as a unit. She guides us on what to do when. On the field, she is a pro (laughs). She is a bit strict, but that is required. She is very disciplined, so she makes sure the whole team follows her routine. If she screams at us, it is for our own good. When somebody is on the ball, she doesn't bother, but when we are defending and have our backs against the wall, she goes all out. And that is the best part.

### It isn't always going to be a bed of roses... is it?

**Uttam:** Failure plays a big role in achieving our targets in life. Before the Junior Asia Cup, we went through a lot of struggles. We lost a few players to injuries. I was injured too. But it is cowardly to let go after trying once. The strongest people are those who

fall and only rise up again. Virat Kohli (Indian cricketer) was going through a very tough phase. But look at him now...

### Does it help to have the national federation run by a former player?

**Uttam:** Since he (Dilip Tirkey) is a former player himself, he knows exactly what kind of problems an athlete faces when he or she is starting out. He has been through all the stages that each player is going through. So, he knows precisely what to provide to us so that the success rate is higher. Tirkey sir has played more than 300 matches for India; it is heartening for us to have him as our 'boss'. Since he became Hockey India president, a lot of changes have been implemented. Good changes. Changes we are all happy with. Like after winning a tournament, we rush to check our phones to find out how much cash prize HI has announced (laughs). It wasn't always the case.

### On the changes in the set-up since the senior team's Tokyo 2020 success

**Uttam:** India won an Olympic medal—a bronze—after 41 years in Tokyo. The entire country had been waiting so long for this, and the senior team met those expectations.



Manpreet (Singh) bhai did a great job leading the team. India had established a legacy with six consecutive gold medals in men's hockey (at the Games between 1928 and 1956). Despite not being a free nation, we went abroad and won gold. India was recognised as a major force in world hockey. To keep that going, the senior team improved a lot, won the medal in Tokyo, and, at present, India is in the top five in the world rankings. Since then, the senior team has been getting a lot of exposure tournaments, and the junior team is also being taken care of. The Hockey India League might resume next year.

#### On dealing with newfound fame

Arajeet: We don't deal with it. We enjoy it. We celebrate it. It feels good that people are talking about our victory. It is happening for the first time in our lives. It is a proud moment.

Neelam: We did not have much network there, but once we returned to our hotel, we saw the reactions on social media, and it felt really nice because this was our first major tournament. We were not able to express our feelings because all of this was so new to us. (At the airport) we had no idea that we would be

receiving a grand welcome. When we stepped out of the plane and people congratulated us, I wondered, "Is all of this really happening for us?" We came out, and there was media everywhere. One camera here, one camera there. It was quite unbelievable. Bangalore SAI, too, treated us well.

Annu: My parents were not aware that I had won gold after the final, but my brother was. After he called and told them, they got a bit emotional. Now the villagers are waiting for me to arrive.

#### Message for youngsters who want to take up hockey as a profession

Uttam: The youngsters who are aspiring to be hockey players should be serious regarding their work.

**Trailblazers:** Before this title win, India's best-ever finish in the tournament was in 2012 when it entered the final for the first time, only to lose to China 2-5.

Whatever your senior players or coaches tell you, listen to them. Follow your parents' instructions too. Once you get a win and earn some prize money, you should not feel satisfied. This wasn't your ultimate dream. It is not the end. Sreejesh and Manpreet bhai played three times at the Olympics, finally won a medal, and still, I feel, they are working even harder than us. When we look at them, we feel motivated. Compared to them, our achievement is nothing.

**"(Janneke) Schopman's training methods are quite nice and unique. Having played a full tournament under her, you gradually get to know how she is thinking," says Neelam.**



» CHEQUERED FLAG



## » IN ELITE COMPANY

Red Bull becomes the 5th team ever to notch up **100 wins**, as Verstappen continues his blazing run of form.

S. Dipak Ragav  
Twitter @dipakragav

Ever since his debut, Max Verstappen was destined to rewrite the record books in Formula One. Though the two-time reigning champion had to wait until 2021 — six years after his debut in 2015 — to get his hands on a car that could win races regularly, the Dutchman has since then maximised the opportunities.

At the recently concluded Canadian GP, Verstappen got his 41st Grand Prix victory and is now level with the legendary Ayrton Senna on the all-time list for the most number of wins.

It was also Red Bull Racing's 100th victory as a constructor. It became the fifth team in F1 history to join an elite club, whose members include Ferrari (242 wins), McLaren (183), Mercedes (125), and Williams (114).

The energy-drink manufacturer has yet to lose a race this year, with Verstappen taking six and Sergio Perez winning the other two.

With this win, the reigning double-champion has extended his lead in the drivers' standings to 69 points over his teammate Perez.

In what has become a pattern this year, Fernando Alonso took his sixth race podium, finishing behind Verstappen in a heavily-upgraded Aston Martin.

Lewis Hamilton came home third in his Mercedes, while his teammate George Russell had a forgettable weekend when he hit the wall and retired after trying valiantly to drive with a damaged car.

Verstappen easily took pole position after struggling for pace during practice and converted it into another win, his fourth consecutive this year. Though Verstappen won with ease yet again, the race in Montreal was the closest he has been pushed this season, with Alonso finishing just nine seconds behind.

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**Unstoppable:** Max Verstappen celebrating his Canadian Grand Prix win in Montreal. AP

His only nominal rival is his teammate Perez, whose challenge has fizzled out over the last three weekends. The Mexican driver has messed it up in qualifying, been out of place at the start, and has had to fight back up the grid. With the most dominant car under his belt, Perez should be finishing second behind his teammate, even with a few tenths deficit to Verstappen.

But the fact that he has not even been on the podium over the last three rounds illustrates how poor a job he has been doing.

After winning two out of the first four races, Perez's form has nosedived, with Alonso now just nine points behind him in a car that has never threatened to win a race. A few more weekends like these and question marks will be raised over his race seat, especially with Daniel Ricciardo lurking in the background.

#### MotoGP

Unlike Formula One, MotoGP is readying for another season of an intriguing battle for the championship. In the recently concluded German GP, Jorge Martin produced a clinical performance winning both the Sprint and main race to get within 16 points of leader and defending champion Francesco Bagnaia.

Martin, driving a Ducati for the Prima Pramac Racing, got the better of the factory Ducati driver Bagnaia, who had to settle for second in both races. On Sunday, both riders traded the lead a few times before Martin prevailed over Bagnaia by just 0.064s to take his first win of the season. Marco Bezzecchi, the other contender for the title, had a poor outing in Germany that saw him slip to third in the standings.

However, the big story of the weekend was six-time champion Marc Marquez who crashed five times in his Honda, suffered another fracture, and had to pull out of the Sunday's race. Marquez has been the king of Sachsenring and has never lost a race in this circuit, winning eight times since his debut in the premier class in 2013.



**Leader of the pack:** Jorge Martin extended his lead at the top with a win at the German GP. AFP

## Ferrari makes a comeback



Even though Ferrari's challenge in Formula One is faltering, the Italian marque made a triumphant return to the world of endurance racing, winning the iconic 24 Hour of Le Mans.

The line-up of Alessandro Pier Guidi, James Calado and Antonio Giovinazzi, driving the Ferrari 499P, guided the AF Corse team to top honours at the 91st edition of the iconic race. A Ferrari last won this race back in 1965. Incidentally, the 2023 edition was the centenary year of the 24 Hours of Le Mans, which debuted in 1923. The race did not happen from 1940 to 1948 due to World War-2.



**« We would like to improve the sports infrastructure in the villages. If you have the infrastructure, you will produce champions. »**

# SHRIKANT VAIDYA

Vijay Lokapally

Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) has emerged as a huge promoter of sports in recent times, helmed by its chairman, Shrikant Madhav Vaidya, who has played a major role in launching some flagship programmes.

There are many ambitious initiatives launched at his behest, such as Parivartan — Prison to Pride, a rehab initiative for jail inmates in the country. The IOCL also provides coaching and kits to inmates in various sports, sparking a growth in interest among juveniles in recent times.

Mr. Vaidya spoke to *Sportstar* on various issues related to his interest in sports and the role played by IOCL in assisting the growth of sports by providing employment and scholarships to sportspersons.

**2022 was a great year for Indian sports and IOC had some flagship projects connected with the teams. How do you look at it?**

It indeed was a great year. Let me start with our business. We did some record refining, record pipeline transportation and record marketing of our projects — all-time high. And it goes well with sports also. 2022 was very satisfying with many firsts.

We had Parivartan. It is a project very close to my heart and it is now the buzz word in Indian Oil. We have covered nearly 17 jails and more than 2600 inmates. The best part of it was that every place we went they did not allow us to leave after the stipulated one-month period. We were requested to continue.

And then we did it for juveniles through Nayi Dishayen. This was a very heart touching experience for me because I see kids involved in crime because of social conditions. The area was full of negativity. Now, sports brings about positivity — I realised that when we did the Parivartan programme. The amount of positivity among the inmates and the jail authorities was something I can't describe. It was the most

satisfying phase for me.

The Thomas Cup triumph was a great moment for the nation and IOCL. That team was almost the IOCL team. We were the first corporates to have a women's hockey team. We have tried to encourage sportswomen.

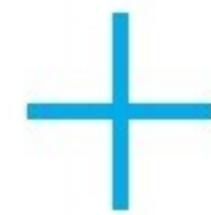
**IOC has over the years recruited many sportspersons in its ranks. What do these sportspersons bring to the organisation?**

Actually, these sportspersons need hand-rolling. Many a time we notice they come from humble backgrounds. Once a company like Indian Oil stands with them, their financial security is taken care of. They are able to concentrate on their job. We are the only corporate company doing this. Other corporates have stopped recruiting and that is very unfortunate. Having these sportspersons means they enhance the brand of the organisation. We contribute by giving them jobs, which is a huge

**All for sport:** Indian Oil Chairman, Shrikant Madhav Vaidya, is keen to continue developing the sports infrastructure of the country. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA



« I used to play cricket. I did well in 12th standard. My father was in LIC. He told me to be sure of what I had to be. I chose a career outside cricket, but I still play the game. I travel to watch matches. I took my father to Lord's. In 1979, I saw all the matches in the India-Pakistan series. I love the Wankhede Stadium. – Shrikant Vaidya »



contribution. In fact, P. Gopichand has gone on record to praise the IOC, which took care of his medical needs at the critical time. For us it is a win-win situation.

**What role can the IOC play to bridge the gap between athletes who are earning well as professionals and those who need funding at the junior level. How to bridge that gap?**

We are not trying to target school and college-level athletes. This is the area which will give us great results. We have already tied up with the Sports Authority of India and taken 30 girl athletes on scholarships for three years. We aim to increase the scholarship period to six years. I recently met Prakash Padukone who wants us to identify and encourage athletics and para sports. We will try to make some difference at the sub-junior level to create future champions.

**The Hon. Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has been steering a sporting revolution in the country through the Fit India and Khelo India movements. How can the IOC inculcate a sporting culture?**

Very recently, Rinku Singh, the IPL wonder, came to the fore. He is the son of a LPG delivery man from IOC. So, we treat them as a family. We are supporting them in the best possible way. A girl from Chennai qualified for IIT. She is the daughter of a pump attendant. We are a family of five lakh. We give the underprivileged people some financial security.

**What are your views on the success of the chess tournaments introduced in various prisons?**

Inmates from various jails across the world participate in this online chess tournament called Chess For Freedom. This is part of the Parivartan scheme. The Yerawada Jail won the bronze. There was a happy atmosphere at the jail. There was this realization that one move can make the difference — in chess and life. It impacts life. I saw that the women inmates have shown interest and we are going to do it for them.

**I do vigorous cycling for one hour and some stretching. I can make the organisation healthy only if I am fit. Even in times like COVID, we met our targets and visited all refineries with safety protocols.**

**Are there any long-term projects in the pipeline?**

A gold in athletics, but it can't be a quick fix. My vision is to target gold in athletics, two Olympics down the line. We are determined to do that and will go full hog to support para-athletics. Recently I saw their enthusiasm and was very impressed. They have immense talent and I want to support them.

**Is the IOC following the trend of signing winners as brand ambassadors?**

Not at all. We catch them young and develop them to become stars. Many of our athletes have become popular after joining us.

**Your friendships with sportsmen are well known. What have you learnt from your interactions with them?**

I have found them to be highly committed people. Success has not come to them easily. They have fought tooth and nail to be where they are. It is so inspiring. Nothing comes to you on a platter. They have also praised Indian Oil for promoting sports. It gives us motivation to work more.

**What about Sunil Gavaskar? You have a special rapport with him.**

Once I was in Bombay as a B-Grade officer. We had a shoot with Gavaskar. I volunteered to pick him up from his house (Sportsfield in Worli) I had to take him to BPCL Club I was told to report at 10 am but I reached at 8 am so that I could see all the stars coming out of that building — the 1971 cricket players. I took their autographs. I met Gavaskar a number of times

thereafter. Once in Qatar, we met at the airport, and I have always found him so humble and friendly. He is a master. I just love his analysis of the game. He was a great proponent of giving jobs to sportspersons. Like giving employment to domestic players and not just international stars.

**Which is your favourite Indian triumph?**

The 1983 World Cup. I was working in Panvel at the time when TV was new in the country. Few people owned TV sets and we would go from house to house to see the matches. I have some fond memories.

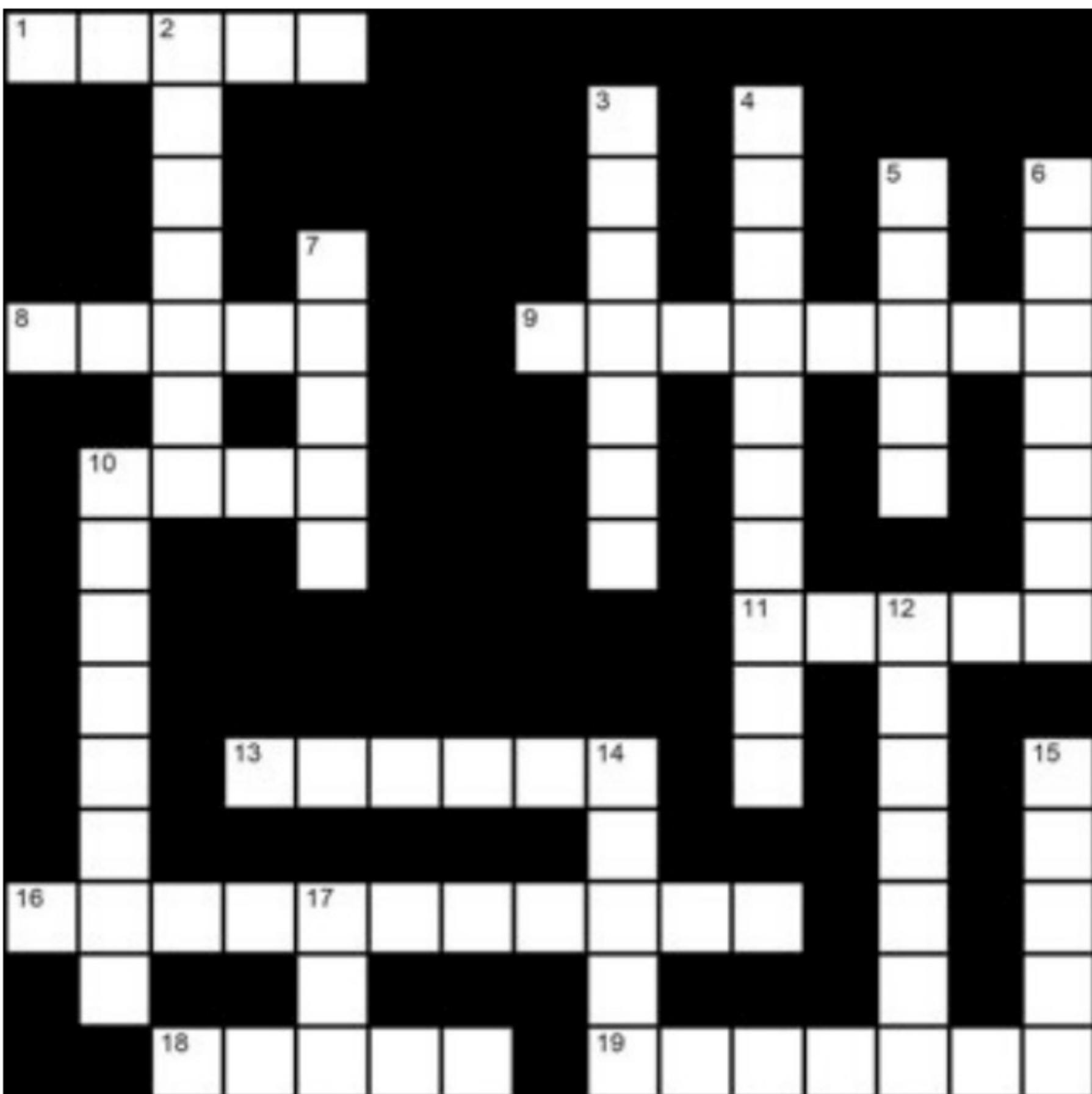
**If you had the authority, what's the one thing that you would implement or change?**

I would like to improve the infrastructure in the villages. If you have the infrastructure in place, you will produce champions. The mechanism to identify the talent at the grassroot level will be my priority.



## CROSSWORD

### SRIRAM SRINIVASAN



#### ACROSS

- 1 England women striker Alessia ... (5)
- 8 Former Iran coach Carlos Queiroz is now in charge of this country's football team. (5)
- 9 ... Jose Paixao de Oliveira Junior. (8)
- 10 Arshdeep Singh represents ... in County Championship matches. (4)
- 11 The 'Flying Finn.' (5)
- 13 ... Jokic, the man who got the NBA finals MVP trophy. (6)
- 16 They play their home matches at Elland Road. (5,6)

**18** Edouard Osoque ..., Senegal, Chelsea player. (5)

**19** The team from Denver that won its first NBA title recently. (7)

#### DOWN

- 2 In Major League Cricket, the Orcas are from here. (7)
- 3 Footballer who is nicknamed 'Captain America.' (7)
- 4 Only Indian in the ICC Elite Panel of umpires. (5,5)
- 5 Kenyan middle-distance runner ... Kipyegon. (5)
- 6 Lorenzo ..., Italian tennis player. (7)

**7** American tennis player Taylor Harry ... (5)

**10** Russian tennis player Aslan Kazbekovich ... (8)

**12** A type of bow, not compound. (7)

**14** Silverstone-based ... Martin. (5)

**15** The Super Kings are from here in Major League Cricket. (5)

**17** South Korean football player ... Heung-min. (3)



#### SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD



# A TRYST WITH HISTORY

Denver Nuggets' spectacular Finals win revolved around their star centre – the 2023 MVP, Nikola Jokic.

Abhishek Saini  
Twitter @abhisheksainiii

**D**enver's sporting heritage may not boast grandeur like Los Angeles or New York's do, but the city has had its trysts with success.

Its laurels, though, could be traced back to just two teams. The Broncos, who've won three Super Bowls, and the Avalanche, who've brought as many Stanley Cups to the Mile High City.

On June 12, the Nuggets wrote a new chapter for Denver. Led by Nikola Jokić, the Nuggets trumped the Miami Heat in the fifth game of the NBA Finals to end their 47-year wait for coronation as NBA

champions.

For a finale expected to peak towards the perfect crescendo — a seven-game thriller — the Nuggets' swift capping off with a gentleman's sweep (4-1 series win) rendered the result a far cry from expectations.

The Nuggets walked in as the favourites. On their way to the finals, they played like the top seeds in the Western Conference. Dominant. Unerring. Relentless. They started by mauling the Minnesota Timberwolves 4-1. In the semifinals, they doused any championship hopes that Kevin Durant brought to the Phoenix Suns before sweeping

LeBron James' Los Angeles Lakers to get a chance at the title.

It was the Heat, however, who were making headlines.

Having barely survived the scrimmage of the Play-In tournament, the expectations from Miami were modest. But they made heads turn in the first round by toppling the No. 1 seed Milwaukee Bucks. They powered through to a 4-2 victory in the semifinals against the New York Knicks. Going into the Eastern finals against the second-seeded Boston Celtics, the Heat were given a three-percent chance by ESPN Analytics. Coach Erik



**Giant expectations:** Jokic had a massive impact in the Finals, a seven-game thriller that saw the Nuggets achieve a gentleman's sweep (a 4-1 series win). REUTERS

Spoelstra's side needed the full quota of seven games, but they got the job done.

In the 77 years of the NBA's existence, the New York Knicks was the lone eighth seed to play in the finals. The Heat had not only emulated the feat but also shown promise to go one better. They were scripting the fairytale ending.

When ousted by the Celtics in the 2022 Eastern Conference finals, Jimmy Butler, with his trademark deadpan delivery, asserted, "We'll be back." The Heat kept their word, and it was Butler orchestrating the ascent with his swashbuckling performances.

The Heat had fallen agonisingly short of their fourth title in the 2020 finals when the Lakers beat them 4-2. The second shot arrived three years later.

A side comprising as many as nine undrafted players somehow found ways to win. Was anyone going to stop them?

The answer, in retrospect, of course, turned out to be Jokić. The towering Serbian, who gobbled up record after record in the playoffs, proved to be the game-changer against the Heat as well.

Having already bettered Wilt Chamberlain's 56-year-old record of seven triple-doubles in a single postseason during the West finals against the Lakers, the 27-year-old notched a record-extending ninth triple-double in the opening game. With 27 points, 14 rebounds, and 10 assists, — Jokić steered the Nuggets to a 104-93 win and a one-nil advantage in the best-of-seven series.

Game 2 was again at Denver's Ball Arena, and the Nuggets were undefeated at their home court in nine games. The odds were lopsided in Denver's favour.

In a desperate attempt to contain the Nuggets' offence, the Heat went with the frowned-upon zone defence in the second game. Coach Spoelstra's side was one of the few teams in the league to rely on the system during the regular season.

It worked. Despite Jokić hitting 41 points!

The Nuggets scoring juggernaut that produced a 53-29 regular season operated peculiarly. More than the centre's prolific shooting, the system was held together by his role as a provider.

The Heat jammed the fulcrum. They prevented Jokić from passing to his teammates, and the Nuggets' auxiliary offence collapsed. The result was a 111-108 road win for the Heat, which swayed the home-court advantage in its favour.

The underdog story was indeed unravelling. The Heat had stuck a foot in the door. They had already triumphed against the Eastern top seed. Could they pull another rabbit out of their hat?

The opportunity was there. And then it wasn't. The Nuggets reverted to the Heat's zone defence with its two-man pick-and-roll offence, which had been perfected by Jokić and Jamal Murray.

In their third meeting, the duo became the first pair of teammates to record triple-doubles in an NBA Finals. They combined for 66 points, 31 rebounds, and 20 assists and got back the home-court advantage their team had squandered earlier.

Unlike the regular season, which offers 82 chances for teams to work their combinations out, the NBA Finals offer minimal scope for error. The momentum that could hang in the balance perpetually over the seven games can also tip towards one team in the span of a single possession.

One block by LeBron James on Andre Igoudala's layup in the 2016 finals tipped off the Cleveland Cavaliers' comeback from a 3-1 deficit.

The fate of the 2023 finals was sealed on two occasions. First, the productive association between Murray and Jokic in game three. The second was Bruce Brown's points off the bench in the fourth.

The Nuggets played the fourth game with a slender 2-1 lead and kept ahead during the game as well. But Jokić ran into a new problem this time—foul trouble. With five personal fouls, the Nuggets' nucleus sat out for five minutes and 15

## The Nuggets trumped Miami Heat in the fifth game of the NBA Finals to end their 47-year wait for coronation as NBA champions.



**On the charge:** Denver Nuggets guard Jamal Murray produced an effective association with Jokic and proved to be quite a handful for Heat. AP



seconds in the last quarter. And the Heat, seeing the opportunity at hand, came within striking distance.

Brown, the 42nd pick by the Detroit Pistons in the 2018 draft, who was traded to the Brooklyn Nets, which then sent him into free agency before the Nuggets picked him up, came to save the day. With his 21 points, 11 of which came in the final period, Brown swept away any hope that the Heat had of pulling level.

Game five brought the first chance to close out the series and seal the title. The Nuggets had a few hiccups. Fluency abandoned them in the first half as their shooting efficiency went AWOL. But that provided another chance for Jokić to flex his superiority and bail the side out in the second half.

'The Joker', as he is called by his fans, collected 16 boards and 28 points in the title-clinching game. As expected, he won the Bill Russell NBA Finals MVP award.

For Miami, it was another 'so close yet so far' season. Butler's razzmatazz and Bam Adebayo's dogged, brute contributions in the paint proved insufficient. In Miami's run to the finals, Gabe Vincent

carved out an important place on the team's offence. Such was his influence that he lost the Eastern Conference Finals MVP award to Butler by a solitary vote. Vincent's streak of poor shooting outputs in the series was another deterrent for the team.

As the celebrations kicked off in Denver, the Nuggets' coach, Michael Malone, was quick reminded the raucous crowd, "We're not going to settle for one."

A majority of the Nuggets players have tangent deals in place. The front office would want to fine-tune a few in the postseason, but the overall lineup gives all the indications that Denver is in the nascent stages of a dynasty.

When the league returns for the new season, Ball Arena will have its first banner unfurled, where Jokić and his class of 23 will find a permanent place.

Irrespective of the team living up to the expectations of a dynasty, Jokić & Co. will always parallel Michael Jordan's Chicago Bulls in 1991 and Dirk Nowitzki's Dallas Mavericks in 2011—iconic teams who brought joy to a city.



## Jokic in playoffs

**Most triple-doubles in playoffs**

10

**Most assists by a center**

14

**Most assists on NBA Finals debut**

14

**First player to score**

500

points

200

rebounds

100

assists

**in a single playoff season**



## Egypt wins World squash title



Egypt, the top seed, won the SDAT-WSF Squash World Cup at the Express Avenue Mall in Chennai with a 2-1 (4-1 on points) win over Malaysia, seeded fourth, in the final.

Malaysia was brimming with confidence after the upset victory over host India earlier, but the defending champion came roaring back after losing the first match to win the remaining two.

The first match went in favour of Malaysia, with the left-hander Xin Ying Yee, ranked 79 in the world, putting it across Kenzy Ayman, ranked 56, in three straight games.

Top seed Aly Abou El Einen levelled the scores, defeating Darren Pragasam in three straight games.

Malaysia's 18-year-old Aira Azman took on Fayrouz Abouelkheir in the third match but looked deflated and not motivated enough.

Mohamed Elkeiy, the Egyptian coach, said the key was the team's meticulous planning and execution. "We beat them 3-1 in the group match. We knew it was going to be a fight. We were ready to win some matches that we lost earlier," he said.

K. KEERTHIVASAN

## » INDIAN PLAYGROUND

### SPORTOON



**1 Having initiated a grassroots development programme** within the federation with zonal competitions at junior age-group levels, Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey launched the One Step Ahead Grassroots Hockey Development Programme to provide facilities and training to tribal kids in an effort to further attract them to the sport. An initiative of the Dilip Tirkey Sports Research and Development Foundation, in association with the JSP Foundation, the event in Rourkela saw 5000 children from 215 villages in Sundergarh district provided with jerseys, hockey sticks and balls. The event also saw exhibition matches by tribal kids.

**2 Indian archer Aditi Gopichand Swamy scored 711/720** during the 72-arrow compound qualification round to break the Under-18 world record during the Archery World Cup Stage 3 in Colombia. Aditi bettered the previous best of 705/720 set by the USA's Liko Arreola. Swamy's score fell just two short of the senior record of 713 held by Colombian Sara Lopez. She also created an Asian record in the Women's 50m Compound Round Under 18 Category.

UTHRA GANESAN

TEAM SPORTSTAR



## FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan



# UNLOCKING POTENTIAL OF WOMEN ATHLETES

Recognising the **challenges that women athletes face while training** is key to developing a customised fitness regimen for them.

**M**otivation plays a crucial role in bringing out the best in women athletes, with the right environment able to help them achieve peak performance in any sport, regardless of the format.

Although much water has flown under the bridge over the years with regard to this, getting women athletes into the weight room for work on strength protocol remains a challenge due to a variety of factors, such as self-doubt and misconceptions.

Fostering a supportive environment thus becomes extremely important, as seen in the noticeable shift in the mindset of women athletes in recent years, indicating a growing willingness to embrace strength training.

Having worked with women athletes for two decades, I have identified two key factors in making them comfortable with weight training — demonstrating how it augments performance and then showing them how it affects their body composition and helps them prevent injuries. Motivation has never been an issue for them; it simply needs to be channelled aptly; else we will miss out on their potential.

To demonstrate how strength training makes better athletes, I often take the examples of professional women athletes who work hard in the weight room. There are a lot of them nowadays. Many women and girls



realise that to compete at a high level, they must use every available resource accessible to them, including strength training.

The stigma around body composition has also changed drastically over the years. Most women and girls now realise that they do not have adequate testosterone levels to bulk up the way guys do. Their focus instead is on developing an athletic and a strong build with



**Race to the top:** Many women and girls realise that to compete at a high level, they must use every available resource accessible to them, including strength training. Here we see Gabrielle Thomas of USA winning the 200m in the Diamond League. REUTERS

**Motivation has never been an issue for them; it needs to be channelled aptly, else we will miss out on their potential.**

strength training.

Here are a few points to consider when embarking on a specialised training regimen:

**Influencers:** Older athletes can have a positive and motivational influence on younger athletes in the weight room. Their presence as influencers can make the young ones more comfortable, leading to effective communication, fewer self-doubts and a smoother learning curve.

**Proper Form and Method:** Weight room sessions do not focus on how much weight you lift, but the way you lift, plus the appropriate exercises done for each sport and skill. Clear notes and definitions on weightlifting, strength training or power lifting processes need to be provided specific to each sport.

Teaching good form is more important than adding weight, the latter to be done after ensuring that the athletes are comfortable with their form and technique. Starting with basic movement patterns and gradually incorporating multi-angled approaches ensure a strong foundation for peak performance, long-term benefits, and injury prevention.

**Establishing a Welcome Culture:** Creating a conducive atmosphere for women athletes who are new to strength training is a must, especially if done in the presence of men. While over time, both men and women may work in tandem in the weight room, the latter must be made to feel comfortable all the way, until they start deriving motivation from the male athletes.

**Results Matter:** At the end of the day, what matters are the results on the field. Making them strong for strength's sake, without enhancing their skills or game, is of zilch value. Once women see the results coming through strength training, they will set their goals and embark on it themselves.

Reinforcement of hard work and dedication must be quantified and shouldn't lead to blunders in attempts to impress fellow athletes or peers. Embarking on fancy exercise patterns can be more harmful than beneficial, especially if the foundation is not strong enough. Ultimately, what one does in the weight room should translate into success on the field, otherwise there is something seriously erroneous in the protocols followed by the coach.

**Tailored Training:** I am a firm believer that women can do the same workouts as men. But certain principles need to be followed in accordance with the monthly cycles and hormonal changes of these athletes. This way, creating the right training culture can bring the best out of them.

# A new monopoly in golf

The PGA and LIV suddenly, without warning, have made up and merged into one entity to handle professional golf.

Suresh Menon

**R**emember when you were in school and always stood up for your friend against the school bully? It meant you got bullied too, but it made your friend happy that he had support. The lines were clearly drawn. Then one fine morning, the bully and your friend made up and became friends, and you were left licking your wounds, both physical and psychological.

Something like that has happened in the world of golf. The Saudi Public Investment Fund launched the rebel LIV Tour with 14 events and huge sign-on bonuses for players, all costing some two billion dollars. The establishment was quick to react, with the PGA banning players who had dared to take the money and turn their back on the sport. Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy became PGA evangelists, turning down millions to remain loyal to the PGA Tour.

**Others like Phil Mickelson copped criticism for betraying the Tour and signing up with the new kid on the block. The line was clearly drawn.**

The PGA and LIV sued each other, and then suddenly, without warning, they kissed, made up, and merged into one entity to handle professional golf. The PGA Tour Commissioner, Jay Monahan, thought morals and ethics (which he had spouted initially) were good, but money was better. Perhaps morality was overrated.

The Saudis have bought golf.

They already have their chequebooks dangling in football, cricket, and Formula One and might buy up these sports too if the fancy strikes. Clearly, golf does not



**Not at fault:** Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy had turned down millions to remain loyal to the PGA Tour. GETTYIMAGES

have a conscience. What is the guarantee other sports do?

**McIlroy has lost money and friends.** He stood up for Monahan in public while that worthy was preparing to negotiate with the Saudis behind his back.

The man who got all this right was, surprisingly, Donald Trump, who said a year ago, "All of those golfers who remain loyal to the very disloyal PGA, in all its different forms, will pay a big price when the inevitable merger with LIV comes, and when you get nothing but a big thank

you from PGA officials who are making millions of dollars a year. If you don't take the money now, you will get nothing after the merger takes place, and you will only say how smart the original signees were."

Anti-trust regulators might take a look at the new monopoly in golf, both in the U.S. and in Europe. But it's not what happened that's the only issue here; equally important is how it happened and how easily it happened.

There are lessons for other sports here. Cricket is already in the thrall of Indian businessmen, and footballer Gerard Pique's Kosmos, which bought the Davis Cup and changed its format, showed how it can be done, although the contract with the International Tennis Federation has now been cancelled.

At the time of the split, Greg Norman, the LIV CEO, was asked about Saudi Arabia's human rights record and the murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi. He said, "We've all made mistakes." No further comment is necessary.



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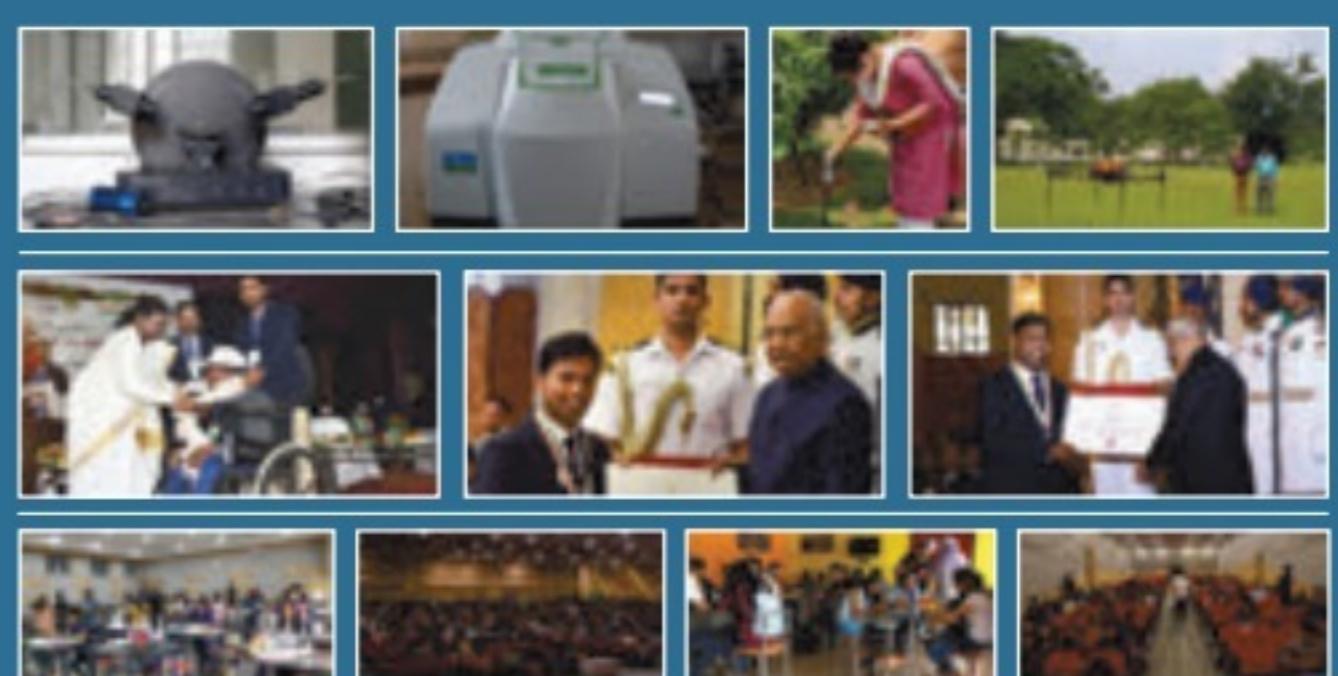
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