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CSK'S GOLDEN MOMENT

LORD OF THE KINGS

How a 41-year-old braved knee injury and rustiness to lead Chennai Super Kings to a record-equalling fifth IPL title.

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With its fifth IPL title, CSK continues to set the bar high. Cover Image (Sportzpics/IPL)

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OFF-SIDE

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TRANSFORMING RAW TALENT INTO PURE GOLD

What distinguishes **Chennai Super Kings from their counterparts is their faith in nurturing talent,** cherishing the uncut diamonds that adorn their roster.

In the vast expanse of the Indian Premier League, amidst the vibrant tapestry of teams, one franchise emanates a distinctive aura that transcends the boundaries of just another club team. Chennai Super Kings, like an enigmatic chapter from a mythological epic, possess an intangible quality that sets them apart. To comprehend their essence, one must delve into the depths of their ethos, their unwavering commitment to tradition, and their undying spirit.

At the core of CSK lies an unwritten code of loyalty, woven with the threads of 131 victories from 225 games and countless battles fought together. Led by Mahendra Singh Dhoni, CSK have not merely been a collection of players; they have embodied the spirit of a family. With Dhoni as their talisman, they have become a band of brothers, united by a shared purpose and an indomitable will to conquer.

What distinguishes CSK from their counterparts is their faith in nurturing talent and cherishing the uncut diamonds that adorn their roster.

While other teams may clamour for star-studded acquisitions, CSK have discovered an alchemical formula that transforms raw talent into pure gold.

This season, too, the CSK management benefited from backing three unknown youngsters — Tushar Deshpande (21 wickets), Matheesha Pathirana (19), and Maheesh Theekshana (11) — to spearhead the bowling unit. Deshpande conceded 56 runs in a high-scoring final but was CSK's leading wicket-taker of the season, while Pathirana and Theekshana were third and fifth on the list. Deshpande reflects on the atmosphere in the CSK dressing room: "No one berates you for a one-off bad day in the field. The team management understands that a player knows what's going wrong, and they simply instill confidence in you, making you feel like you belong at this level."

The resurgence of Ajinkya Rahane as a short-format batter and the timely contributions by battle-hardened soldiers like Ambati Rayudu and Ravindra Jadeja — including in the final — ensured a remarkable turnaround for a team that had finished ninth last season.

The Super Kings' success is also deeply intertwined with the passion of their ardent fan base, whose unwavering support echoes through the M. A. Chidambaram Stadium and in venues away from home. The *Whistle Podu* brigade — a vibrant sea of yellow — injects an electrifying energy into every contest, transforming stadiums into a cauldron of unbridled fervour. This symbiotic bond between the team and their fans distils into the very soul of this remarkable team, creating an unassailable force that fuels their spirit.

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SCAN ME

« This is a difficult moment for me. It's so hard to say goodbye. At this special moment, I'm really full of emotion," – Chinese badminton great Chen Long as he announced his retirement. »

23.56m

Two-time Olympic champion Ryan Crouser demolished his own shot put world record, throwing for 23.56 metres at the Los Angeles Grand Prix. The American surpassed his previous mark of 23.37 metres, which he achieved at the US Olympic Trials in Eugene, Oregon in June 2021. Crouser is the only man ever to throw further than 23.50 metres and he punched the air as he sent one ricocheting off the back barrier, reaching the milestone on his fourth attempt at the Continental Tour Gold event.

He put the field on notice with opening attempts of 23.23 and 23.31 metres, which would both count among the top six farthest attempts produced in the event.

3:49.11

Kenya's Faith Kipyegon set a women's 1,500 metres world record by clocking 3:49.11 at the third Diamond League meeting of the season. Kipyegon shaved almost an entire second off the previous mark of 3:50.07 set by Ethiopia's Genzebe Dibaba in 2015. The world record completes her collection of feats, adding to her two Olympic 1,500m golds and the 2017 and 2022 world titles, CWG gold medal from 2014 and three Diamond League titles.

« I always call him my uncle of Rome. He knows how to drive me. He knows how to get under my skin. Even if I'm playing the best football of my career, he would tell me I still need to do more. – Tammy Abraham on Jose Mourinho. »

JUNIORS' MOMENT OF GLORY

Reigning supreme: The Indian junior men's hockey team reigned supreme as it beat nemesis Pakistan 2-1 in a thrilling final match of the Men's Junior Asia Cup 2023 in Salalah, Oman. With this victory, India has created a new record of winning the maximum titles (4) at the Men's Junior Asia Cup. The team had previously won the title in 2004, 2008 and 2015 while Pakistan has won the tournament in 1988, 1992, 1996.

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SCAN TO READ MORE

LONG LIVE THE KINGS

With its fifth IPL title, **CSK continues to set the bar high.**

Ayan Acharya
Twitter @ayan_acharya13

The IPL 2023 final, midway through the Chennai Super Kings' run chase, did not seem destined to be a classic. For most of the second half, it appeared the occasion might serve simply as a coronation for Hardik Pandya, as the Gujarat Titans tightened the screws with wickets at regular intervals. But suddenly, in the last leg of the final, which was spread over three days due to intermittent rain delays, both teams swung at each other as if they were exhausted boxers in the final rounds of a championship bout. Then at 1:35 am, Mohit Sharma missed two attempted yorkers by inches. Ravindra Jadeja dismissed the first for a six and the second for a four to seal a record-equalling and emotional fifth title for CSK.

The fact that the winning runs came off the bat of Jadeja, who had stormed off midway through last year's IPL, apparently upset by Dhoni's remarks against his captaincy, made the moment sweeter. Jadeja, in fact, was one of the pillars of CSK's comeback title win after a disappointing ninth-place finish last season. The all-rounder was Dhoni's crisis man with the ball, especially while playing at home. Jadeja snapped up 11 wickets at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium at an average of 16.45 and an economy rate of 6.7, and in the process glossed over whatever challenges CSK's main spinner, Maheesh Theekshana, faced in a middling season.

Jadeja's favourable matchup against right-handers meant he got rid of them 12 times at an average of 16.91 and an economy rate of 6.65. He also dismissed left-handers eight times at an average of under 30 and an economy of 8.60. While he had a relatively quiet season with the bat, Jadeja's six-ball 15 in the final ultimately proved to be the difference between ecstasy and despair for CSK.

The perfect team: The story of CSK's metamorphosis this season contains several key characters and a combination of small, key moments that together have enabled Dhoni's men to embrace free-spirited cricket.

K. R. DEEPAK

THREE YEARS AGO, DHONI HAD POINTED OUT THE NEED FOR A SQUAD OVERHAUL. THE FOLLOWING SEASON SAW THE EMERGENCE OF RUTURAJ GAIKWAD

That said, the story of CSK's metamorphosis this season contains several key characters and a combination of small, key moments that together have enabled Dhoni's men to embrace free-spirited cricket. Ajinkya Rahane and Shivam Dube formed the spine of CSK's middle order. Rahane struck at a mind-boggling 232.39 against pace bowlers in this IPL, smashing 165 off just 71 balls while being dismissed only twice. Rahane's 27-ball 61 against the Mumbai Indians at the Wankhede Stadium early in the season ended a wretched spell that had seen the right-hander go without an IPL fifty since 2020 and without a Test in over 12 months.

On the other hand, Shivam Dube was used as a spin-hitter, striking at 176.47 and smashing 22 sixes. The left-hander was instrumental in taking down the Titans' key wicket-taker, Rashid Khan, in the final, smashing him for two consecutive sixes to bring CSK back into the game. Head coach Stephen Fleming had weighed in on Dube's promotion in the batting order. "To bring Dube up and use him in an aggressive role took a few games," Fleming said. "We were unsure, but he played a defining innings against RCB [in Bengaluru, where he scored 52 off 27], where he really stamped his authority, and from there, he was sort of a catalyst for us through those middle overs. With the Impact Player, that's what was needed."

On the bowling front, CSK initially struggled due to an injury to its pace spearhead, Deepak Chahar. It began the season without Dwayne Bravo, who had been a death-overs specialist for the team since 2011 and was the highest wicket-taker in the IPL until recently. But Dhoni's backing of young Sri Lankan quick Matheesha Pathirana turned out to

Crisis man: Jadeja was one of the pillars of CSK's comeback title win after a disappointing ninth-place finish last season. K. R. DEEPAK

> « To play high-tempo, high-risk cricket, you also need a management group that backs you 100 per cent. Process and trust are the buzzwords the CSK brains trust operates on. »

be a masterstroke. Pathirana, with his unusual round-arm action, bowled consistently at the death, picking up 18 wickets at an economy rate of 8.01. The 21-year-old coupled his pacy yorkers with dipping slower balls to deceive the batters.

To play high-tempo, high-risk cricket, you also need a management group that backs you 100 per cent. And process and trust are the buzzwords the CSK brains trust operates on. "A part of it is to do with how we finish a bad season. We're always looking for the positives, giving players opportunities that we can work into the following year; we don't write it off. There are a lot of things to learn when a season goes well, but equally, there are a lot more things to learn when it doesn't. So, we're always looking to get better," Fleming had said ahead of this year's final.

And tying all this together was the talismanic skipper, Dhoni. Crushing disappointment makes you stronger. Dhoni had been there before. Three years ago, the then three-time champion had become the first team to be eliminated from the playoff race. Dhoni, the batter, also had his worst IPL that year as he managed just 200 runs in 12 innings at a strike rate of 116. Dhoni had then pointed out the need for an overhaul of the squad, including building a new core group of players.

The following season saw the emergence of Ruturaj Gaikwad, who played his first full season for CSK and won the Orange Cap, amassing 635 runs in 16 innings with four fifties and a hundred. The Super Kings eventually won their fourth title in 2021, and in Gaikwad, they found an opener who married technique with power.

The Maharashtra batter formed a fruitful alliance with Devon Conway this year, racking up 849 runs in 15 innings to be the second-most successful opening pair of the IPL 2023.

This is not to say there were no questions about these players. But in the few decisive games, they overcame concerns and delivered what was required. CSK's selection strategy — taking the laissez-faire route and making as few changes as possible — paid off in the end and handed the side its seventh title in all T20 tournaments (5 IPL and 2 Champions League).

History makers: CSK's strategy of making very few team changes paid off. K. R. DEEPAK

DECRYPTING AN ENIGMA

Dhoni's CSK is and isn't built around him. Therin lies his genius.

Ayan Acharya
Twitter @ayan_acharya13

Former Australian leg-spinner Richie Benaud's pause was one of his greatest gifts to commentary. The best of sports allows for that pause, as it did for MS Dhoni moments after Ravindra Jadeja hit the winning runs in the IPL 2023 final against the Gujarat Titans in Ahmedabad. As his teammates scurried to the centre, Dhoni paused briefly in the dugout before breaking into a relieved smile, which bookended a memorable IPL season for CSK.

Keeping your eyes fixed on Dhoni throughout a match can be spellbinding and deadly dull; his mastery of impassiveness and indifference makes you wonder what goes on in his head. But it says something about his captivating allure that fans continue to be bewildered and charmed by it.

However, this season was different. There was an almost childlike eagerness to win. One of the indelible images of CSK's final triumph was when Jadeja sprinted towards Dhoni, who screamed in delight as he lifted him in one motion, visibly overcome by emotions. It was a bit overwhelming for those watching — a moment of genuine release and vulnerability, reinstating the belief that Dhoni is human and that his celebrity status and success do not insulate him from raw emotions.

In his heyday, it was difficult to imagine Dhoni growing old. His speed while running between the wickets made it look like he was playing the game at a different level.

But now there was a desperation in his movements. Yet Dhoni's most telling impact on the team this season may be found in his least dramatic, least kinetic activity on the field: his meandering movements behind the stumps, where he spent much of the time simply observing and thinking.

His greatest accomplishment was how he made room for the bullish attacking play of the old and experienced Ambati Rayudu and Ajinkya Rahane on one hand and a previously middling Shivam Dube, who is trying to reinvent himself, on the other. The team both is and isn't built around Dhoni; therein lies his genius.

Dhoni himself has always seen cricket as his deliverance. When asked about the rousing reception he got at each venue this year, he said, "I think they [fans] love me for who I am," he said. "Being grounded is something they like in me. Also, because of the kind of cricket I play, everyone in the stadium feels they can play that kind of cricket because there's nothing orthodox about it. I feel they can relate to me more than anyone else."

Dhoni's name has already attained cult status in Chennai, the port city he made his second home during the glorious years at the peak of his career.

But his embrace of emotions this season laid credence to an eloquent assertion of a grandeur that is now greater than any club rivalry or an increasingly aggressive parochial fandom.

ILLUSTRATION: R RAJESH

THE EASY THING FOR ME TO SAY IS THANK YOU AND RETIRE. BUT THE HARD THING TO DO IS TO WORK HARD FOR NINE MONTHS AND TRY TO PLAY ONE MORE IPL SEASON. THE BODY HAS TO HOLD UP. BUT THE AMOUNT OF LOVE I HAVE RECEIVED FROM CSK FANS, IT WOULD BE A GIFT FOR THEM TO PLAY ONE MORE SEASON

WHAT MAKES CSK SPECIAL

After **M.S. Dhoni led Chennai Super Kings to a record-equalling fifth IPL title,** seamers Tushar Deshpande and Akash Singh reveal what makes the franchise so special.

Shayan Acharya
Twitter @ShayanAcharya

Tushar Deshpande is not new to the world of the Indian Premier League. The Mumbai fast bowler was part of the Delhi Capitals in 2020 before moving to the Chennai Super Kings (CSK) last season at his base price of Rs 20 lakh.

While he had an average outing in 2022, picking up just three wickets for the Chennai outfit, Deshpande emerged as the team's highest wicket-taker this year with 21 scalps from 14 outings.

As Deepak Chahar missed out on a large part of the tournament due to injury, Deshpande spearheaded the CSK bowling attack and provided the team with breakthroughs at crucial junctures.

Over the last few domestic seasons, he has been Mumbai's fast-bowling mainstay, and now, with backing from none other than Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Deshpande has been able to replicate his Mumbai success story at CSK.

In a conversation with *Sportstar*, the 28-year-old explains what makes CSK unique as a franchise.

Clarity of role

CSK brings the best out of us because we have role clarity and enough freedom to express ourselves. The team management does not believe in overburdening players with inputs. The idea is always to ensure players execute the plan under pressure.

Of flexibility and Mahi *bhai*

For every player to perform at this level, you need flexibility to practise the way you want. Having spent two seasons at the franchise, I can say that at CSK, the aim is to ensure that every player with them becomes a better player when they leave the camp. Everyone follows that model. It is also a privilege to play under the leadership of MS Dhoni. When a captain of his stature trusts you, you need to back yourself. You need to realise that you're good, and that's why Mahi bhai trusts you.

Backing in tough times

No one pulls you up when you have a one-off bad day in the field. The team management understands that a player knows what's going wrong, and they just give you the confidence that you belong at this level. The bowling coaches, Eric Simmons and Dwayne Bravo, are

Owning the limelight: Tushar Deshpane starred with the new ball as well as at the death for the Chennai Super Kings this year. Although he proved to be expensive towards the business end, his happy knack of picking wickets benefitted CSK. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

very positive. In this IPL, teams were scoring 200-plus totals with ease, so, for bowlers, it was about keeping calm in the middle.

Though this was my second season at CSK, it was my first time donning the yellow jersey at the Chepauk, and it was a great honour to play in front of the knowledgeable and loving Chennai crowd. Everywhere we went, the fans backed CSK because of Mahi *bhai.* Fans are the backbone of any team, and those huge cheers always motivated me to do even better.

How Akash sees it

When Akash Singh travelled to Chennai in the last week of March, little did he know that he would make his CSK debut this season. The young fast bowler from Bharatpur, Rajasthan, was part of the tournament earlier and played a solitary match for the Rajasthan Royals a couple of years ago. Once he was released by the Royals, none of the franchises showed interest in him in the auctions.

But one phone call from Deepak Chahar changed his life. With Mukesh Choudhary out of action, CSK needed a young fast bowler, and having known Akash since his

> « It was a great honour to play in front of the knowledgeable and loving Chennai crowd »

formative years, Chahar recommended his name to the Super Kings management. Akash was then asked to fly to Chennai and play in a few practice games. He had a memorable outing, claiming five wickets from six games. While it was a learning experience for the young gun, Akash is elated to be part of a 'super cool' Super Kings franchise. So, according to him, what makes CSK so unique?

Fascinating environment

Once I landed in Chennai, I played a couple of practice games and spent some time in the nets. Mahi bhai was around, along with our bowling coach, Simmons. They took my selection trial the next day, and once they were confident about me, head coach Stephen Fleming told me they would sign me for the season. It was an incredible feeling because I finally got to be associated with one of the most successful teams.

The other reason to be happy was that I would get the opportunity to play with Mahi *bhai*. He's the coolest captain I have played under, and throughout the season, he guided me and kept my motivation high. I would say that the environment within the team is fascinating.

We always look at the success of a team, but the real character of a team is reflected in tricky situations. I heard from senior players who were part of the CSK team that when we finished ninth (in 2022), nothing changed in the dressing room. The *mahaul* (environment) still remains the same.

Backing the process

Mahi *bhai* always talks about the process. Mahi *bhai* and Fleming have been able to create a good team environment and give equal importance to everyone. Fleming, just like Mahi *bhai*, believes in following a process, and when the captain and the coach are on the same page, it automatically allows the team to play freely.

Looking forward

Normally, when a team suffers a defeat, everyone focuses on analysing what went wrong, but that's not the case in CSK. Here, no one dwells on the past. Once the match is over, the team management believes in moving forward. When you have such an approach, it helps you take things in stride. They know how to bounce back irrespective of the situation.

Picture perfect: Akash Singh is all smiles in the company of CSK skipper M.S. Dhoni. Akash made his CSK debut in IPL 2023. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The Mahi *bhai* factor

At times, it can be a challenge to play alongside so many legends. Unlike other franchises, in CSK, the seniors are very welcoming. Mahi *bhai* speaks less, but whenever we spoke, he guided me on how to improve my game. Never once did it feel like I was interacting with MS Dhoni. He listened to whatever I said and advised me on how to handle things — both on and off the field.

Mahi *bhai* is the coolest captain I have played under, and throughout the season, he guided me and kept my motivation high.

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HARDIK PANDYA

BACK FROM THE BRINK AND HOW!

The 16th edition of IPL will be remembered as much for **Hardik Pandya's cunning captaincy and sparkling success** as for CSK's fifth title.

Amol Karhadkar
Twitter @karhacter

He may have erred in having that prolonged, perhaps unwarranted, discussion with Mohit Sharma in the last over of the Indian Premier League 2023 final. It may have resulted in him being left short of joining Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Rohit Sharma as the only other captains to have lifted the coveted Indian Premier League trophy for two years in a row.

Still, the 16th edition of the tournament will be remembered as much for Hardik Pandya's cunning captaincy and sparkling success as for the men in yellow.

Riding on Hardik's near-perfect captaincy, the Gujarat Titans featured in its second IPL final in as many outings in the tournament. More importantly, the 2023 season — the Titans' first at their sprawling home ground — also justified Hardik's elevation as the master strategist who could end India's never-ending wait for a second T20 World Cup crown next year since Dhoni's men achieved the feat in the

inaugural edition in South Africa in 2007.

Despite having proven himself as India's best pace-bowling allrounder and even the best finisher in T20Is, when the Titans announced Hardik as the captain in their maiden season in 2022, not many initially supported the idea. They wondered whether a flamboyant and injury-prone character who seemed to have lost his mojo in the preceding year could last a full season of the IPL, let alone lead a team.

Not to mention the fact that Hardik had seldom led a team — even in club cricket in his hometown of Vadodara, less than a couple of hours' drive from Ahmedabad —

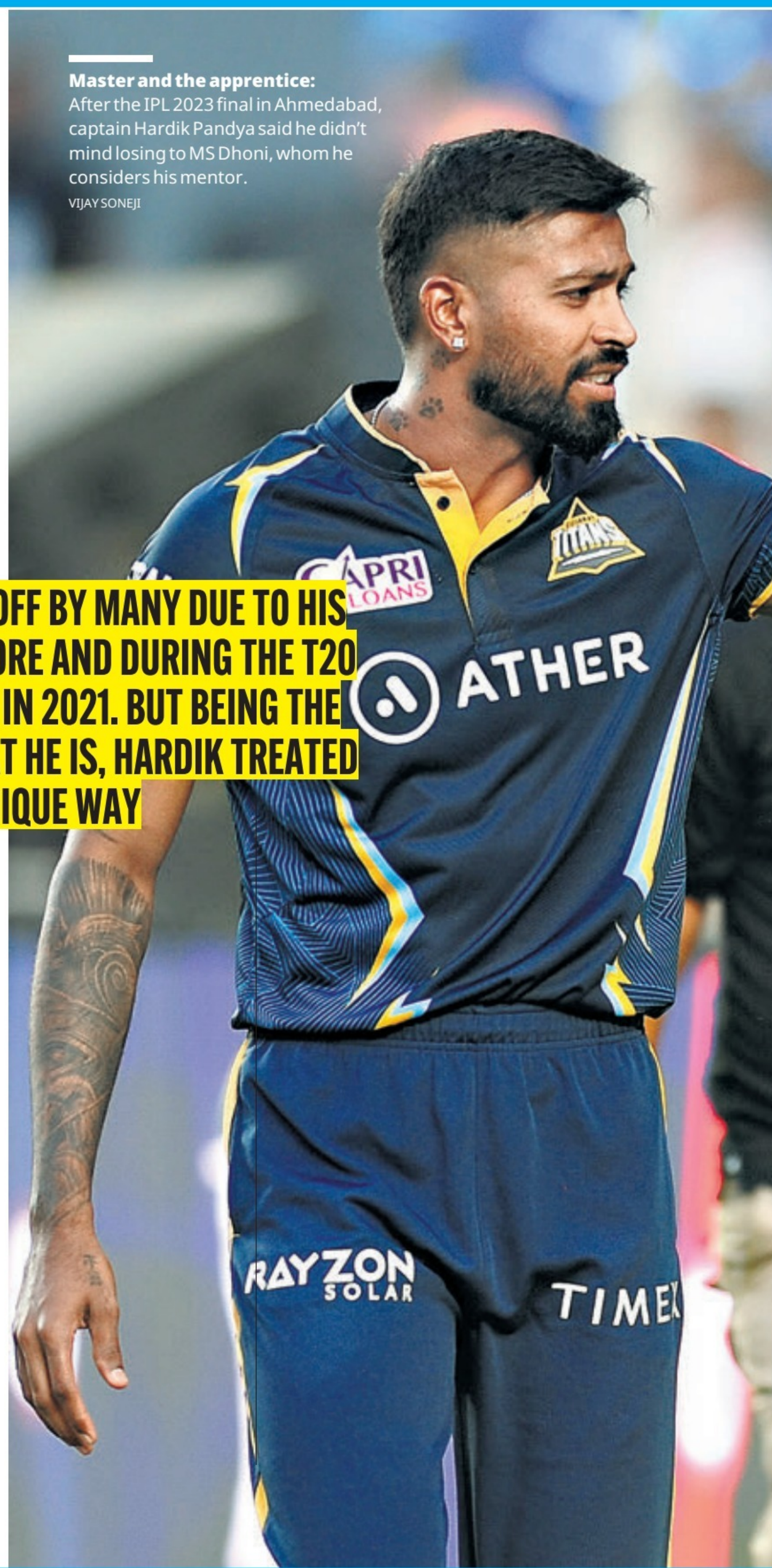
HARDIK WAS WRITTEN OFF BY MANY DUE TO HIS DOWNWARD SLIDE BEFORE AND DURING THE T20 WORLD CUP IN THE UAE IN 2021. BUT BEING THE ETERNAL OPTIMIST THAT HE IS, HARDIK TREATED FAILURE IN HIS OWN UNIQUE WAY

before he was handed the job.

Despite his cautious approach, Hardik was confident about his leadership abilities. "Gradually, through my career, I realised my hidden skill of being a leader. I have always tried to contribute in a leadership role since the first season, with my performance, inputs, and looking after the team," Hardik told *Sportstar* in a chat mid-way through IPL 2023.

"Now, at Gujarat Titans, I have a clean slate to work with, with an inspired team, support staff, and management to build a team and take it to different heights. It has certainly catalysed my evolution as an individual and also allowed me to encourage and nurture youngsters."

Giving opportunity and nurturing youngsters has been the IPL's motto ever since it took the world by storm



Master and the apprentice: After the IPL 2023 final in Ahmedabad, captain Hardik Pandya said he didn't mind losing to MS Dhoni, whom he considers his mentor.
VIJAY SONEJI

GRADUALLY, THROUGH MY CAREER, I REALISED MY HIDDEN SKILL OF BEING A LEADER. I HAVE ALWAYS TRIED TO CONTRIBUTE IN A LEADERSHIP ROLE SINCE THE FIRST SEASON, WITH MY PERFORMANCE, INPUTS, AND LOOKING AFTER THE TEAM

in 2008. Hardik himself is the product of a promising career that skyrocketed thanks to the IPL.

Had John Wright, one of the Mumbai Indians' sensational sets of scouts, not watched Hardik take Mumbai's Zaheer Khan and Co. to the cleaners in a Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy game at the Wankhede Stadium, Hardik may have remained unsold ahead of what ended up being his dream debut season.

"I was fortunate to be associated with Mumbai Indians, who gave me the platform, confidence, and belief to go out there and express myself. With the Gujarat Titans, I have been able to take this to the next level and explore a different facet of my personality as a leader."

From 2015 to 2023, Hardik, the cricketer, has seen a topsy-turvy career peak. From being a genuine allrounder who, like every pace-bowling allrounder, had to live up to being compared with the great Kapil Dev, to being a controversial character off the field and being in danger of ending his career without fulfilling his potential following a severe back injury he suffered in 2018, Hardik had seen plenty of ups and downs.

In fact, Hardik was written off by many due to his downward slide before and during the T20 World Cup in the UAE in 2021. But being the eternal optimist, Hardik treated failure in his own unique way.

"I look at failures differently. Yes, each time you take the field, you want to win, but I believe there's always something to learn from failures too, and that is what is unique to it," he said. "I never get bogged down or get hurt with results; yes, you do get disappointed at times, but if you know you have given it your all with the correct intent and are open to learning, then the next day offers something better." Perhaps his trait of staying in the present has led to him being equated with Dhoni in terms of his leadership abilities. The Titans' consecutive seasons, coupled with sparse India captaincy assignments in between, have underlined Hardik's growing stature.

He came into IPL 2022 after an extensive rehab following a sorry show in the 2021 T20 World Cup, as documented in the same pages exactly a year ago. The two months in Maharashtra put Hardik's career back on track and gave his franchise, the Gujarat Titans, the much-needed fillip to begin its IPL sojourn on a winning note.

"Creating our own space under the sun along with another new entrant was a big challenge. It was more in the manner of how we showcased ourselves last year. A lot of it had to do with the way the team was performing on the field and becoming champions in the first year. But how they did it helped us a lot," admits (retd.) Col. Arvinder Singh, the Titans chief operating officer. Hardik echoed Arvinder's sentiments. While responding to a query about his most memorable IPL season so far, Hardik said, "I think

2022 was a special year for me. Again, I was leading a team for the first time; it came at an interesting phase of my career when I was coming back after a break and was trusted with the responsibility of captaining the Gujarat Titans. The fact that we won the title was the cherry on top.

"My first season in 2015 would be very special because I came in as a player who was unknown to the world, and the fact that we won the title the same year, too, made it more special.

Flying start: Hardik Pandya's all-round display ensured Gujarat Titans won the IPL in its first season with a victory over Rajasthan Royals. PTI

"I think it'll be unfair for me to pick out one season because each season has contributed to my growth and evolution as a player and individual." Hardik may not have been able to secure an encore this time, but rest assured, he will have many more opportunities to add to his trophy cabinet. After all, the *shishya* is being touted as the successor!

Rinku Rocket takes off

From chants of *'Rinku, Rinku'* in a packed Eden Gardens to cricket pundits **batting for his inclusion in the Indian team,** life has changed for the 25-year-old.

AFTER A FASCINATING IPL CAMPAIGN—AMASSING 474 RUNS AT AN AVERAGE OF 59.25 AND BECOMING THE HIGHEST-SCORER FOR KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS—RINKU HAS BECOME A HOUSEHOLD NAME

Shayan Acharya
Twitter @ShayanAcharya

It's incredibly challenging to reach Rinku Singh during the off-season. His phone keeps ringing, messages remain unread on WhatsApp, and he rarely responds to text messages.

But at the Aligarh Sports Association Cricket Ground, you'll find Rinku in the nets. Batting in the sweltering heat, he goes on for hours and shares a few tips with the young net bowlers. That's his routine. Over the last few years, after returning home from the Indian Premier League, Rinku has rested for a few days before starting his preparation for the domestic season.

Things, however, have been a bit different this time.

After a fascinating IPL campaign—amassing 474 runs at an average of 59.25 and becoming the highest-scorer for Kolkata Knight Riders—Rinku has become a household name. He has also become the face of the Aligarh Premier League, a tournament on the lines of the IPL, under the Khelo India campaign.

Amid the fanfare, Rinku, however, has not neglected his game. With the domestic season scheduled to start early this time —the Duleep Trophy in June — Rinku says, "I will just continue my routine — practice and gym."

Ahead of every IPL season, he works on his power-hitting with his long-time coach, Masood Amini. "That's how I keep myself ready," he says, adding that ahead of the 2023 edition, he tweaked his batting technique a bit while training at the KKR Academy in Mumbai.

Rinku shot to the limelight in IPL 2023 when he whacked five sixes off Yash Dayal to pull off a last-ball win against Gujarat Titans in a group league fixture. Rinku tries to "keep calm as much as possible" while batting in tricky situations. "Last year, people came to know about me through my cameos. But those five sixes this year have helped me gain respect. Many people now know me."

Rinku, who idolises Suresh Raina, has endured tough times. His father, Khanchand Singh, was a distributor of LPG cylinders at a local gas agency in Aligarh. Rinku, the third of five siblings, grew up in a cramped two-room quarter. As the family struggled to make ends meet, Rinku nearly became a sweeper to financially contribute to the family. But he never stopped dreaming of competing with the best. "I never gave up on my cricket and always had time for it. I would watch the game and always knew that someday I would become a cricketer," Rinku had told *Sportstar* in 2018, shortly after he was roped in by KKR in the auction for Rs 80 lakh.

Before that, he warmed the bench at Kings XI Punjab (now Punjab Kings) for a year after being roped in for Rs 20 lakh. So, when the KKR team management signed him for a relatively higher price, a section of the fans, still unaware of Rinku's abilities, slammed the Kolkata franchise for investing in a rookie talent. However, Rinku showed promise in the limited opportunities that came his way.

RINKU IN 2023

IPL
Matches: 14
Innings: 14
Runs: 474
Average: 59.25
Strike Rate: 149.52
Fifties: 4
Highest: 67 not out

Ranji Trophy
Matches: 7
Runs: 442
Average: 63.14
Fifties: 2
Hundreds: 2
Highest: 127 not out

Duleep Trophy (for Central Zone)
Match: 1
Innings: 2
Runs: 73
Average: 36.50
Fifties: 1
Highest: 65

Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy
Matches: 7
Runs: 139
Average: 46.33
Strike rate: 132.38
Fifties: 1
Highest: 79

Vijay Hazare Trophy
Matches: 9
Innings: 7
Runs: 335
Average: 67.00
Fifties: 4
Highest: 82

Rinku's run-glut: Rinku racked up 474 runs in one season — the most in IPL history by a batter coming in at No. 5 or below — at an average of 59.25 and a strike-rate of nearly 150. K. R. DEEPAK

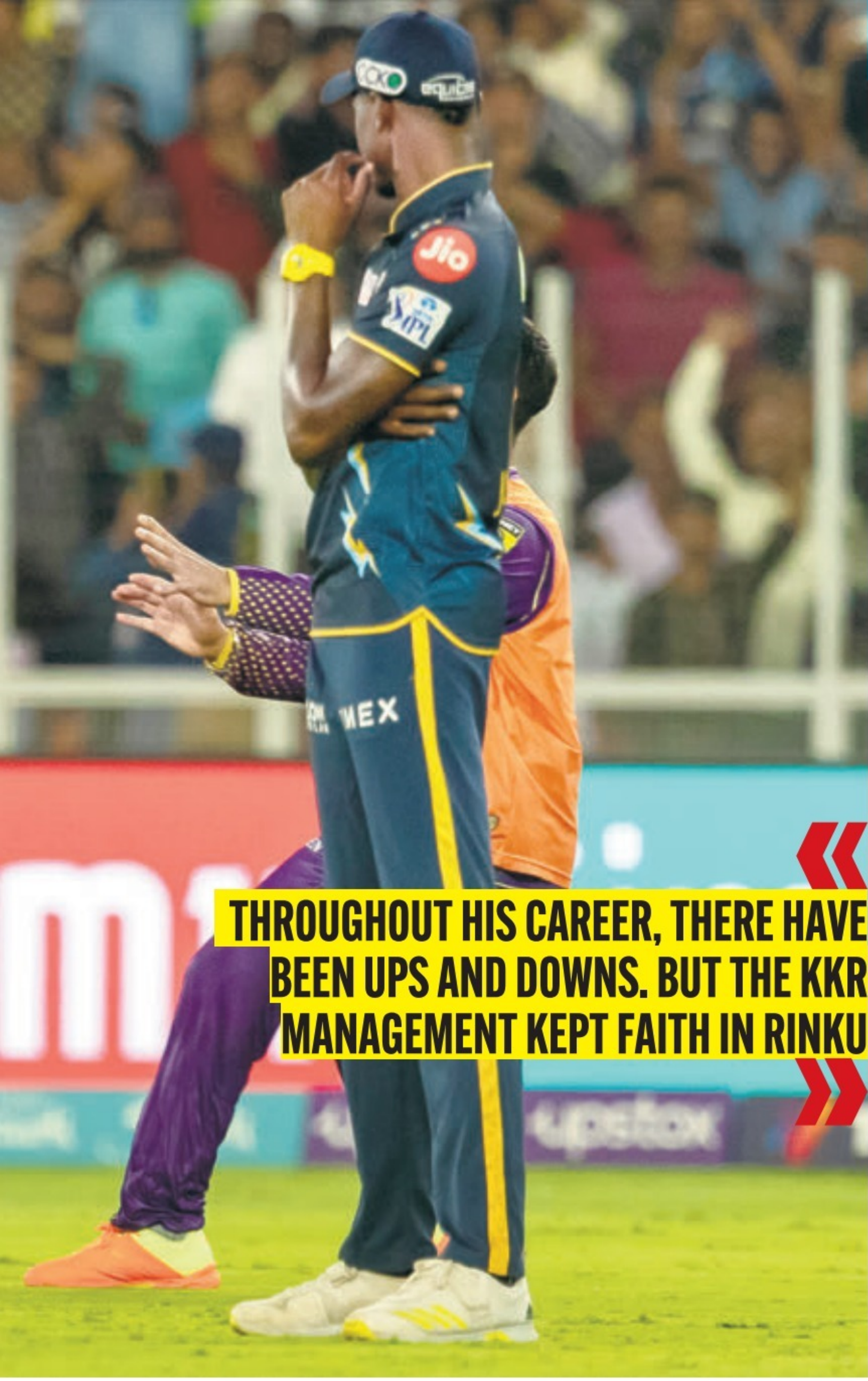
Jubilant scenes: Kolkata Knight Riders' players celebrated on the pitch with Rinku Singh after his five sixes. SPORTZPICS / IPL

Rinku admits the formative years made him mentally stronger. When he was 12, Rinku turned up at the Jadon Riders Club, a local cricket academy, one day and eventually convinced his family to allow him to play the sport. There has been no looking back since.

From being just another local rookie cricketer, Rinku slowly climbed the ladder and made it to Uttar Pradesh's white-ball team in 2014.

Former Indian cricketer Mohammad Kaif had a ringside view of Rinku's stellar debut in List A cricket. Rinku forged a 127-run stand with Kaif for the third wicket in a Vijay Hazare Trophy fixture against Vidarbha.

In Jaipur that morning, Uttar Pradesh was reeling at 48 for 2 with Kaif, the architect of India's Natwest Trophy win in 2002, at the crease. UP needed a big partnership to get back into the game when 16-year-old Rinku walked out to bat. He showed no signs of nerves and ended up scoring 83 off 87 balls. Kaif made an 80-ball 74 as UP put on a competitive total of 268 for 6. Though Vidarbha chased down the target, Kaif was impressed with the way Rinku batted. "He was quite quick in running between the wickets, and that's the first thing that impressed



THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER, THERE HAVE BEEN UPS AND DOWNS. BUT THE KKR MANAGEMENT KEPT FAITH IN RINKU

me," Kaif tells *Sportstar*.

"He batted with grit and was able to handle his nerves in crunch situations. It's not easy for a youngster to play with so much dominance on their debut, but Rinku had that ability. Throughout the innings, we backed each other, and I was really happy to see him handle things so well," Kaif says.

Under Kaif's captaincy, Uttar Pradesh bagged the Ranji Trophy for the first time in the 2005–06 season. Having seen several youngsters emerge from the state over the years, Kaif says, "More than his IPL form, I judge a cricketer based on how he has fared in four-day games in the last five years, and Rinku has been fairly consistent in his job, despite such cut-throat competition for a spot," says Kaif.

In 40 first-class outings, Rinku has 2,875 runs at an average of 59.89 with seven centuries and 19 fifties in 59 innings, with a career-best score of 163 not out. The numbers are equally impressive in List A cricket, with 1,749 runs in 50 matches at an average of 53, one century and 16 fifties in 46 innings, and the best score of 104.

"The competition is so intense in the UP team that if one season goes bad, you tend to lose your spot. He has not only handled the pressure but has gone on improving his game and has emerged as a consistent match-winner," Kaif says.

"The last domestic season was one of his best. He had consistent scores in the 60s and 70s. In every game, he stamped his class with temperament, attitude, and indomitable spirit. There have been times when UP struggled, but Rinku stood firm, and the batting would revolve around him."

In the seven outings in the 2022–23 edition of the Ranji Trophy, Rinku amassed 442 runs at an average of 63.14. He slammed two centuries and as many fifties, often bailing the team out of the woods.

"Initially, I thought playing on the leg side was his strength, but this time around, I was convinced that he is competent in all the areas.

He thinks realistically and knows that no matter how much he scores in one match, he will still have to start from scratch in the next outing," Kaif says.

Throughout his career, there have been ups and downs. Shortly after the IPL in 2019, Rinku was suspended by the BCCI for three months for featuring in an unauthorised tournament in Abu Dhabi. But the KKR management kept faith in Rinku. Upon his return to domestic cricket, he cemented his place in the Uttar Pradesh side as well. There hasn't been any looking back since.

From chants of *'Rinku, Rinku'* in a packed Eden Gardens to cricket pundits batting for his inclusion in the Indian team, life has changed for the 25-year-old. *'Rockstar Rinku'*, as some of his teammates often fondly call him, is enjoying every bit of it!

BREAKOUT STARS

Every season, the IPL showcases emerging Indian talent, and the 2023 season was no different. Here's a look at some of the uncapped breakout stars of this edition.

Lalith Kalidas
Twitter @lal__kal

TUSHAR DESHPANDE

Chennai Super Kings

In an exhilarating season where the Chennai Super Kings secured a record-equalling fifth title, seamer Tushar Deshpande played an unlikely role in the lead cast. With his key pacer, Deepak Chahar, struck down in the first half due to injuries, captain MS Dhoni used Deshpande as a new-ball bowler and also as a death-bowling option, a move that fetched him 21 wickets from 16 matches, albeit at a cost.

In his first outing as the IPL's maiden Impact Substitute, Deshpande conceded 51 for a solitary wicket against Gujarat Titans. He would end up with similar figures in the final—none for 56 in four overs. Deshpande also holds the dubious record for conceding the most runs in an IPL season (564). Nevertheless, the 28-year-old improved his economy rate in the closing half of the tournament with better returns in death overs.

Deshpande's seaming-in delivery to clean bowl India and Mumbai Indians skipper Rohit Sharma early on in the league was a testament to his calibre, a bead of strength that may have tempted Dhoni to give the Mumbaikar a longer rope.

Stats in IPL 2023
Matches: 16
Wickets: 21
BBI: 3/45
Average: 26.85
Economy: 9.92
Strike Rate: 16.23.
Auction Price: Bought for the base price of Rs 20 lakh in 2022 and retained by CSK before the IPL 2023 auction.

K. R. DEEPAK

Stats in IPL 2023
Matches: 8
Runs: 362
HS: 96
Average: 51.71
Strike Rate: 141.40
50:3
4s: 33
6s: 12.
Auction Price: Bought for base price of Rs 20 lakh in IPL 2023 auction.

SAI SUDHARSAN

Gujarat Titans

When Sai Sudharsan went airborne and uppercut Delhi Capitals quick Anrich Nortje over the wicketkeeper to reach his fifty in just his second outing of the season, the Tamil Nadu youngster announced his arrival in the IPL in brutal style.

If not for Kane Williamson's agonising misfortune—an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury while diving in the Gujarat Titans' opening match—Sudharsan would not have found an easy way in as GT's top-order anchor. The left-hander backed up his regal 62 not out against Delhi with another fifty against the Kolkata Knight Riders. However, just five games in, Sudharsan was dropped by the Titans for a more aggressive batting formation.

Fitting in again is always a strenuous task. Brought back into the XI for the final stretch, the 21-year-old would have had doubts seeping in when he was forced to retire out on 43 against Mumbai Indians in the high-pressure Qualifier 2 match in Ahmedabad. Sudharsan reserved his riposte for the summit clash against the Chennai Super Kings. With a touch of old-school panache, Sudharsan cut and drove before exemplifying his slog-sweep range. He peaked with a magnificent 47-ball 96, the highest score by an uncapped player in an IPL final.

R. V. MOORTHY

R. V. MOORTHY

JITESH SHARMA

Punjab Kings

Jitesh Sharma, Punjab Kings' wicketkeeper-batter, may not have had a prolific run tally this season. However, the 29-year-old, who came close to an India T20I cap in early 2023, continued his aggressive batting with impressive efficacy in his second stint with PBKS.

Slotted as one of Punjab's key finishers, Jitesh clobbered 21 sixes in 14 outings to notch up 309 runs at a strike rate of 156.09. He has not crossed the half-century mark, and his contributions may go under the radar if judged solely on numbers.

However, Jitesh crossed the 20-run checkpoint 10 times with three 40-plus knocks at strike rates over 150. Jitesh's ability to clean the ropes from the get-go makes him a rare asset, one worth the investment in India's lead-up to the 2024 T20 World Cup.

Stats in IPL 2023
Matches: 14
Runs: 309
HS: 49*
Average: 23.76
Strike Rate: 156.06
4s: 22
6s: 21.
Auction Price: Bought for base price of Rs 20 lakh in 2022 and retained by PBKS before IPL 2023 auction.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

Stats in IPL 2023
Matches: 14
Runs: 241
HS: 64
Average: 26.77
Strike Rate: 145.18
50: 2
4s: 23
6s:12.
Auction Price: Bought for base price of Rs 20 lakh in IPL 2023 auction.

NEHAL WADHERA

Mumbai Indians

Nehal Wadhera has had a memorable 2023 so far. The 22-year-old scored a century on his Ranji Trophy debut for Punjab in early January after being snapped up by Mumbai Indians in the IPL auction for his base price of Rs 20 lakh.

Making his T20 debut with the IPL, Wadhera was quick to attract eyeballs with a sprightly 12-ball 21 against RCB at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru. With an injury sidelining Tilak Varma briefly, Wadhera moved to the frontline, impressing with successive fifties on contrasting turfs in the middle order in Chennai (64 versus CSK) and Mumbai (52 versus RCB).

For a rookie, the southpaw's 241 runs from 10 innings with a 145-plus strike rate make for decent reading, and it will be worth watching what the sturdy kid has in store next season.

AKASH MADHWAL

Mumbai Indians

Mumbai Indians' frantic search for injured Jasprit Bumrah's replacement ended briefly with the rise of Uttarakhand seamer Akash Madhwal in the second half of the league stage. The memories of a Shubman Gill onslaught in Qualifier 2, where he ended up with figures of one for 52 in four overs, may linger for a while. However, Madhwal's sizzling burst in the lead-up made the headlines.

With shades of a sling in his high-arm action, Madhwal bulldozed through the Lucknow Super Giants top-order in the Eliminator, recording a sensational five for five in 3.3 overs—the joint-best bowling figures by an Indian and the most economical five-wicket haul in the IPL. It was preceded by a four-wicket haul in a must-win game against Sunrisers Hyderabad and a three-wicket charge against Gujarat Titans in the league stage.

Despite playing only eight matches, Madhwal was the joint-second-highest wicket-taker for MI with 14 victims. Madhwal has drawn confidence from his maiden white-ball captaincy stint in domestic cricket and prospered at the death under Rohit Sharma. He could emerge as an able ally for Bumrah and Co. in 2024.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

Stats in IPL 2023
Matches: 8
Wickets: 14
BBI: 5/5
Average: 15.64
Economy: 8.58
Strike Rate: 10.92.
Auction Price: Signed as a replacement player for Rs 20 lakh in IPL 2022 and retained by MI before IPL 2023 auction.

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1st

Rutu rules: On a tricky pitch where most of his team-mates struggled to get going, Ruturaj Gaikwad compiled a classy 44-ball 60 to lead Chennai Super Kings to a challenging total against Gujarat Titans in the first qualifier. Gaikwad and Devon Conway continued their prolific run as opening pair with an 87-run partnership even though the latter struggled to time the ball. R. RAGU

2nd

Deepak dazzles: After missing six matches due to a hamstring injury, Deepak Chahar turned CSK's PowerPlay fortunes around by picking 12 wickets in the next five games. Chahar dented Titans early with the wicket of Wriddhiman Saha and looked to the heavens with delight after deceiving dangerman Shubman Gill. R. RAGU

3rd

Going down fighting: With GT losing six wickets for less than 100 runs, Rashid Khan swung for the fences in a brisk but brief 16-ball 30 before his dismissal sounded the death knell for the defending champion as CSK sailed into its 10th IPL final. R. RAGU

Rub of the Green: Mumbai Indians lost openers Rohit Sharma and Ishan Kishan in the PowerPlay before the explosive duo of Cameron Green and Suryakumar Yadav took over and flayed the Lucknow Super Giants attack with a partnership that yielded 66 runs in 38 balls. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Helter-skelter: LSG's woes with the bat were compounded by three of its batters getting run out. Rohit Sharma made the most their lack of communication with a brilliant direct hit at the wicketkeeper's end to dismiss Krishnappa Gowtham. GETTY IMAGES

SHUBMAN GILL'S SCORE AGAINST MUMBAI INDIANS WAS THE HIGHEST BY A BATTER IN THE IPL PLAYOFFS, BETTERING VIRENDER SEHWAG'S 122 FOR KINGS XI PUNJAB (NOW PUNJAB KINGS) AGAINST CHENNAI SUPER KINGS IN 2014

6th

Gilling it: Shubman Gill's unflinching blade once again did the talking when he single-handedly took down the mighty Mumbai Indians in Qualifier 2 in Ahmedabad. Gill notched up the highest individual score in the Playoffs — a jaw-dropping 129 off 60 balls with 10 sixes and seven fours. VIJAY SONEJI

7th

Five's the charm: Akash Madhwal picked 5/5 to equal Anil Kumble's IPL record of conceding the least number of runs for a fifer and help MI defend a 182 against a power-packed LSG line-up. His wickets of Ayush Badoni and Nicholas Pooran off consecutive balls were the turning point of the Eliminator.

SPORTZPICS / IPL

8th

Lights out: Suryakumar Yadav's countercharge helped Mumbai Indians keep its hopes up despite a top-order wobble in a daunting 234-run chase. The world came crashing down on MI when Titans seamer uprooted the star batter's leg-stump on 61 to effectively seal a second successive final berth.

VIJAY SONEJI

9th

Speed dial: A manic M. S. Dhoni stumping off a Ravindra Jadeja ripper helped Chennai Super Kings see the back of a menacing Shubman Gill early in the final. K. R. DEEPAK

10th

Sai dash: Making amends for his sluggish innings in the previous match, Sai Sudharsan orchestrated the Titans' attack with a spellbinding 47-ball 96 — the third-highest individual score in the final — against CSK. VIJAY SONEJI

11th

Au revoir, Ambati: In his final IPL innings before retirement, Ambati Rayudu chipped in with an eye-catching eight-ball 19 cameo to keep CSK afloat in a rain-curtailed chase. K. R. DEEPAK

12th

Saurashtrian swashbuckler: After being subjected to a yorker schooling from Mohit Sharma, Ravindra Jadeja pulled off one of the greatest IPL final heists. With 10 required off two balls, Jadeja sent Mohit to the fence for a six and four to script an epic CSK jailbreak for its record-equalling fifth title.

K. R. DEEPAK

13th

One for the fans: Shedding his reticent nature for once after winning his fifth IPL title, Dhoni vowed that he is game to stretch his career for one more season, provided his body holds up well in the next six-seven months. K. R. DEEPAK

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FOR THE LOVE OF SPORT

Worth the wait: Intermittent rain delays and exorbitant ticket rates tested the patience of the fans but in the end, a last-ball win for CSK made their journey memorable. K. R. DEEPAK

Cricket fans in India go to incredible lengths to procure match tickets. From standing in queues outside stadia overnight to paying more than triple the actual cost in the 'black market', supporters leave no option unexplored. For the IPL final between Chennai Super Kings (CSK) and Gujarat Titans, a few CSK fans whom the diary met said they paid thousands for 'complimentary' tickets. It is a fact that in India, a chunk of tickets is allotted to various clubs and members free of charge. With the demand high, a few generous but immoral souls appeared to have 'sold' a few of them to make a quick buck. So far, so good. But it was not until late on that fateful Sunday night in Ahmedabad, when the final was washed out and postponed to the reserve day, that the fans realised that they were in a pickle. Another day of no cricket will mean a huge hole in the pocket, for no cricket body will compensate for a complimentary ticket! In the end, a last-ball win for CSK made their journey memorable. But imagine a situation where you spend thousands on travel, accommodation, and tickets and, in the end, return empty-handed and without a refund.

Lucky escape: The delay in resumption meant CSK had to endure the in-match penalty for having started the final over after the cut-off time. However, the franchise escaped a financial penalty. R. RAGU

FLIRTING WITH SPIRIT OF CRICKET?

If one ever needed a reiteration that Chepauk represents the land of MS Dhoni, the outpouring of love from the stands after the Chennai Super Kings' final home game would do due justice. A gleaming Dhoni savoured the victory lap with a heavily strapped left knee. He even took a moment to pause and sign an autograph for the legendary Sunil Gavaskar on his shirt.

Nine days later, the Super Kings were back in the all-important Qualifier 1 against the defending champion Gujarat Titans in their spin cauldron at the M. A. Chidambaram Stadium. If the pitch was not intimidating enough for a visitor, the sea of yellow certainly was.

The manic atmosphere and the aura of Dhoni in his kingdom work their charm. It is, however, questionable when officials fall into the trap of his shrewdness. When Matheesha Pathirana, Dhoni's lynchpin in the death overs, was not allowed to bowl after leaving the field for nine minutes, the CSK captain pulled a rare card out to freeze the umpires. Pathirana, back in the field for four minutes, had to wait another five minutes before he could bowl again. With the Titans' chase testing CSK's verve, Dhoni could not afford another bowler at this stage. Instead, the captain and his boys rallied around and engaged the umpires in a discussion as the clock kept ticking. Biting the bullet of one penalty minute, Pathirana was restored to bowl. The act will receive its share of applause from the faithful, but whether the CSK maverick pulled off a trick too many—one that brushes the line of the Spirit of Cricket—is a question that will linger on.

N. Sudarshan & Lalith Kalidas

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

SCAN TO READ MORE

WTC FINAL VENUE SHOULD NOT BE RESTRICTED TO ENGLAND

There are many countries where the **weather is good at this time of the year,** and the final can be played there.

Chennai winning the IPL once again was no real surprise, but they will feel this win was sweeter because they not only overcame the odds but also beat the best all-round team and defending champions Gujarat in the finals. The spin of the coin can be crucial, especially in games where the dew factor kicks in, but it is even more so where there is a prospect of rain interrupting the play and reducing the overs, and the target gets adjusted accordingly. Gujarat may feel that the target should have been a few runs higher than what it was calculated under the internationally accepted system, and it would be interesting to know what the target would have been under the V. JAYADEVAN method, which is used in the domestic Syed Mushtaq Ali and Vijay Hazare competitions.

Be that as it may, the vastly experienced MS Dhoni opted to field first in anticipation of exactly the same situation where rain came in and the overs and the target got reduced. Gujarat were by far the best team in the competition, as could be seen by the ease with which they topped the table, with three points separating them from the number two team, which was Chennai. The two best teams qualified for the finals, and that's why it was such an enthralling and thrilling one with a fairy tale-like, nail-biting last-ball finish.

Now the focus will shift to the World Test Championship final, and again, the two best teams over the last couple of years will be vying for the trophy. Last time around, it should have been Australia in the final, but they lost out on points because of a slow overrate and were displaced from the top-two position.

India and Australia only a couple months ago finished a Test series in which India won 2-1. In fact, India has beaten Australia in the last four series they have played against each other, two at home and two in Australia. What that tells you is how consistent the Indian team has been over the years and how thoroughly they deserve to be in the final once again. Hopefully the weather will be fine in England so that there's good cricket that can be seen by cricket lovers between two competitive teams whose rivalry has grown over the years to make it the most-awaited series in the game.

What's been amusing is to read in the Indian papers former Australian players giving their views on what the composition of the Indian team should be. India loves its cricket, and so any news about the Indian cricket team

First-of-its-kind: This will be the first time that The Oval will be hosting a Test match in June. The earliest a Test started there during the English summer was on July 8 in 1982. BCCI TWITTER

will make headlines, but hopefully those who matter will realise that at the end of the day, the Aussies want their team to win, so it would be sensible not to get swayed by what they are suggesting. Remember how it was mainly the Aussie commentators going on about the 3D player that went a long way to him getting picked ahead of the experienced Ambati Rayudu. We haven't read what their views are on what should be the Australian final eleven, nor have we read about any former Indian player suggesting the playing eleven for the Australians.

The World Test Championship final is a great idea to make every Test match relevant, but for it to really be called the World Test Final, the venue needs to be around the world and not just one country, which does not even figure in the final. There are many countries where the weather is good at this time of the year, and the final can be played there.

Let's hope the final lives up to its expectations and gives us a finish, as we recently saw in the IPL.

The two best teams over the last couple of years will be vying for the trophy in the World Test Championship final. Last time around, it should have been Australia in the final, but they lost out on points because of a slow overrate and were displaced from the top-two position.

King Kohli on top

3 } The number of batters who held the record for registering the maximum number of centuries during their IPL career. Virat Kohli, the latest entrant, passed Chris Gayle's long-standing tally of six IPL centuries in the Bengaluru IPL match on 21 May 2023. Gayle held the previous records from two to six 100+ scores since 6 May 2011, i.e., for 12 years and 16 days. Kohli's eight T20 centuries is the most by an Indian batter in this format going past the tally of six by Rohit Sharma and K. L. Rahul.

First batter to register maximum number of IPL centuries in a career

100#	Runs	Batter	For	Agst	Venue	Date	Result	IPL#
1	158*	**Brendon McCullum**	KKR	RCB	Bengaluru	18 Apr 2008	Won	1
2	107	**Chris Gayle**	RCB	PBKS	Bengaluru	6 May 2011	Won	221
3	128*	**Chris Gayle**	RCB	DC	Delhi	17 May 2012	Won	314
4	175*	**Chris Gayle**	RCB	PWI	Bengaluru	23 Apr 2013	Won	354
5	117	**Chris Gayle**	RCB	PBKS	Bengaluru	6 May 2015	Won	498
6	104*	**Chris Gayle**	PBKS	SRH	Mohali	19 Apr 2018	Won	653
7	101*	**Virat Kohli**	RCB	GT	Bengaluru	21 May 2023	Lost	1021

Virat Kohli

Notes: ** Before Gayle made his second IPL century, 15 other batters jointly held the record with McCullum.
** Before Gayle made his third IPL century on 17 May 2012, two other batters (Adam Gilchrist since 17 May 2011 and David Warner since 10 May 2012) jointly held the record with Gayle.
** Before Kohli made his record seventh IPL century on 21 May 2023, he jointly held the record of six centuries with Gayle since 18 May 2023.

38 } Wriddhiman Saha's age while making 54 against Chennai in the IPL final in Ahmedabad on 29 May 2023. This makes him the second oldest batter to register a score of 50+ in an IPL playoff and the oldest in a final. CSK's Mike Hussey still remains the oldest at 39, during his knock of 56 in the Qualifier 2 match in 2015 in Ranchi.

Oldest to register a 50+ score during the IPL playoffs

Age	Batter	Runs	For	Agst	Venue	Date	Result	Round
39y-360d	**Mike Hussey**	56	CSK	RCB	Ranchi	22 May 2015	Won	Qualifier 2
38y-216d	**Wriddhiman Saha**	54	GT	CSK	Ahmedabad	29 May 2023	Lost	Final
38y-144d	**Brad Hodge**	54*	RR	SRH	Delhi	22 May 2013	Won	Eliminator

Wriddhiman Saha

Note: the previous oldest in an IPL final was Shane Watson (80 runs) at 37y-329d for CSK v MI at Hyderabad in 2019.

21 } Sai Sudharsan's age during his knock of 96 against Chennai in the IPL final in Ahmedabad on 29 May 2023. This makes him the youngest to register a score of 70+ in an IPL playoff. The previous youngest was Virat Kohli, then 23 when he made the unbeaten 70 in the Qualifier 1 match in 2011.

Youngest to register a 70+ score during the IPL playoffs

Age	Batter	Runs	For	Agst	Venue	Date	Result	Round
21y-225d	**Sai Sudharsan**	96	GT	CSK	Ahmedabad	29 May 2023	Lost	Final
22y-200d	**Virat Kohli**	70*	RCB	CSK	Mumbai WS	24 May 2011	Lost	Qualifier 1
23y-260d	**Shubman Gill**	129	GT	MI	Ahmedabad	26 May 2023	Won	Qualifier 2
24y-178d	**Suresh Raina**	73*	CSK	RCB	Mumbai WS	24 May 2011	Won	Qualifier 1
24y-252d	**Ruturaj Gaikwad**	70	CSK	DC	Dubai	10 Oct 2021	Won	Qualifier 1

Sai Sudharsan

Note: The previous youngest in an IPL final was Manish Pandey (94 runs) at 24y-264d for KKR v PBKS in Bengaluru in 2014.

4 The number of instances when IPL batters could manage just a solitary six while registering a three-figure score. In a matter of just seven days, this occurred on two occasions. First, Shubman Gill during his 101 against SRH in Ahmedabad on 15 May 2023 and then Virat Kohli while making his record seventh IPL century in Bengaluru on 21 May 2023. As seen in the table below, Kohli has done this twice. The highest individual score in the IPL without a six is the unbeaten 77 by Mandeep Singh (7 fours) for PBKS against Pune Warriors in Mohali on 21 Apr 2013.

Three-figure scores by IPL batters with just one six in the innings

Runs	Batter	4s/6s	For	Agst	Venue	Date	Result
100*	Virat Kohli	11/1	RCB	GL	Rajkot	24 Apr 2016	Lost
101*	Shikhar Dhawan	14/1	DC	CSK	Sharjah	17 Oct 2020	Won
101	Shubman Gill	13/1	GT	SRH	Ahmedabad	15 May 2023	Won
101*	Virat Kohli	13/1	RCB	GT	Bengaluru	21 May 2023	Lost

6 The number of bowlers who have the distinction of claiming four-wicket hauls in two successive IPL games. Akash Madhwal of Mumbai Indians became the latest entrant to achieve this feat in IPL cricket when he claimed 5/5 against Lucknow in Chennai on 24 May 2023. This is the joint-best (along with Anil Kumble) figures by an Indian bowler. Madhwal had claimed 4/37 in his previous game against Hyderabad in Mumbai on 21 May 2023.

Bowlers claiming four-wicket hauls in successive IPL games

Bowling	Bowler	For	Agst	Venue	Date	Result
4/24 (4)	Shadab Jakati	CSK	DC	Johannesburg	2 May 2009	Won
4/22 (4)		CSK	DecChr	East London	4 May 2009	Won
4/20 (4)	Munaf Patel	MI	DecChr	Visakhapatnam	9 Apr 2012	Won
4/28 (3.4)		MI	RR	Mumbai WS	11 Apr 2012	Won
4/34 (4)	Andrew Tye	PBKS	RR	Jaipur	8 May 2018	Lost
4/41 (4)		PBKS	KKR	Indore	12 May 2018	Lost
4/38 (4)	Kagiso Rabada	PBKS	LSG	Pune	29 Apr 2022	Lost
4/33 (4)		PBKS	GT	Mumbai DYP	3 May 2022	Won
4/29 (4)	Yuzvendra Chahal	RR	SRH	Jaipur	7 May 2023	Lost
4/25 (4)		RR	KKR	Kolkata	11 May 2023	Won
4/37 (4)	Akash Madhwal	MI	SRH	Mumbai WS	21 May 2023	Won
5/5 (3.3)		MI	LSG	Chennai	24 May 2023	Won

Akash Madhwal

Note: Madhwal became the first bowler to claim a total of nine wickets in two successive IPL games.

2 The number of players involved with a successful IPL franchise by being part of a winning side on six occasions. Ambati Rayudu, this season, became the latest after Rohit Sharma to be engaged in six successful IPL finals.

Players being a part of successful IPL sides on most occasions

	Player	IPL Franchise / Season
6	Rohit Sharma	DecChr 2009, MI 2013, MI 2015, MI 2017, MI 2019, MI 2020
6	Ambati Rayudu	MI 2013, MI 2015, MI 2017, CSK 2018, CSK 2021
5	Kieron Pollard	MI 2013, MI 2015, MI 2017, MI 2019, MI 2020
5	Jasprit Bumrah	MI 2013+, MI 2015+, MI 2017, MI 2019, MI 2020
5	Hardik Pandya	MI 2015, MI 2017, MI 2019, MI 2020, GT2022
5	M. S. Dhoni	CSK 2010, CSK 2011, CSK 2018, CSK 2021, CSK 2023

Ambati Rayudu

+ indicates played during the season but was not a part of the playing XI in the final.

All records are correct and updated until 30 May 2023

200-plus totals, impact of Impact Player, and rise of Indian finishers

With the IPL 2023 coming to an end, **we look at the major trends** that have stood out this season.

N. Sudarshan
Twitter @sudunarayan

The Indian Premier League may not necessarily be at the forefront of the T20 revolution, but it is without doubt the biggest stage where the best of the latest trends are flaunted. With IPL 2023 winding to a close, here's a look at how the season transpired, the myths it busted, the new strategic shifts it showcased, and the stars it catapulted.

Impact Player and giant totals

When the IPL introduced the Impact Player rule, there was a lot of intrigue. The option to summon an extra batter or a bowler, depending on the game situation, provided teams with greater ammunition. This was reflected both in the number of giant totals that were put up and in the number of occasions on which chasing teams didn't win. This edition, franchises made 200 or more a whopping 37 times. The previous record was 18, set last year. Also, sides batting first won 40 of the 73 full matches, going against the conventional chasing culture in T20s.

Scoring rates and the English template

With the option of including an extra batter, thanks to the Impact Player rule, teams wielded the willow with more freedom. And with that, scoring rates went north. Overall, runs were collected at nearly nine an over (8.99). The previous best was 8.64 in the 2018 edition. Even Virat Kohli, not necessarily known for breakneck batting, made back-to-back hundreds off just 60-odd balls towards the end of the season. Though new to the IPL, this trend of all-out attacking was first patented by England, which won the 2022 ICC Men's T20 World Cup. Middling strike-rates and totals in the range of 170 to 200 are considered a thing of the past. If ever the Impact Player tweak is introduced in international cricket, it will be interesting to see how much further England will take its approach.

The blossoming of spin combos

The prized skill in cricket's shortest format is not repeatability but constant disruption. Spin bowlers especially swear by this mantra. This edition, at least five teams have employed spin duos or trios to sow seeds of confusion among batting line-ups. Yuzvendra Chahal, R. Ashwin, and Adam Zampa at the Rajasthan Royals (RR); Varun Chakravarthy, Sunil Narine, and Suyash Sharma at the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR); Ravi Bishnoi, Krunal Pandya, and Amit Mishra at the Lucknow Super Giants (LSG); Maheesh Theekshana and Ravindra Jadeja at the Chennai Super Kings (CSK); Rashid Khan and Noor Ahmad

Passing the baton: Tilak Varma has shown the gumption and skill to become the mainstay of Mumbai Indians' middle-order in years to come.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

Seizing the moment: After his pyrotechnics in IPL 2020, Rahul Tewatia has set the benchmark for how an Indian domestic batter will be judged in the tournament. VIJAY SONEJI

THE RISE OF THE INDIAN FINISHERS WAS ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF IPL 2023. RAHUL TEWATIA AND RINKU SINGH WERE AMONG THE TOP PERFORMERS

at the Gujarat Titans (GT).

Glut of Indian openers

One of the IPL's primary roles is to help produce an assembly line of cricketers for the Indian national team. This campaign has unearthed three bona fide contenders for the openers' slot: Shubman Gill (890 runs at SR 157.80 that fetched the Orange Cap), Yashasvi Jaiswal (625 at 163.61), and Ruturaj Gaikwad (590 at 147.50). But the trouble here is that India already has Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, and KL Rahul, all of whom open for their respective franchises and have done it in internationals too. Until the ODI World Cup finishes in November, T20 cricket will take a backseat. But in the lead-up to the 2024 T20 World Cup, the buzzword will be transition, and it will require some big calls to be made.

Bring on the Indian finishers

Ever since Rahul Tewatia hit five sixes in an over to help RR chase 224 against Kings XI Punjab in 2020, he has set the benchmark for how an Indian domestic batter will be judged. In 2023, a handful of them passed the test. There was Rinku Singh, who hit his own version of five sixes to win a match (vs. Titans) and accumulated 474 runs for KKR; Jitesh Sharma, who excelled for Punjab Kings (PBKS) by scoring 309 runs; and Dhruv Jurel, whose 152 runs for RR came at a strike-rate of 172.72.

No country for old men? Think again

T20 was long considered a young man's game. But 2023 provided enough stories to cause a rethink. M.S. Dhoni, months shy of turning 42 and nursing a dodgy knee, led CSK to its fifth title; Piyush Chawla, whose career had seemingly ended, scalped 22 wickets for MI; Faf du Plessis, nearly 39, scored 730 runs and was seen throwing himself on the field like a boy in his early teens; Wriddhiman Saha, at 38, scored 371 runs and opened the batting in all 17 games for GT; Amit Mishra, the wily old leggie, had his moments under the sun too, aided as he was by the Impact Player rule because of which he didn't have to field much.

Mohammed Shami, turning heads

When India was zeroing in on a replacement for the injured Jasprit Bumrah ahead of the T20 World Cup in 2022, Shami was said to be in competition with Deepak Chahar and Mohammed Siraj before punching his ticket to Australia. The next time India plays a T20, Shami may well be

This edition, at least five teams have employed spin duos or trios to sow seeds of confusion among batting line-ups.

an automatic choice. With 28 wickets at an economy rate of 8.03, the Purple Cap holder played a key role in 2022 champion GT finishing a worthy runner-up. Shami has in fact been remarkably consistent over the last four campaigns: 20 wickets in 2020, 19 in 2021, and 20 in 2022. Shami hasn't played a T20I since the World Cup semifinal thrashing at the hands of England in November 2022. But if he remains fit, Shami should be back in the reckoning and be considered a genuine all-format bowler.

> « If he remains fit, Mohammed Shami should be considered a genuine all-format bowler »

Tilak Varma, one for the future

With Shikhar Dhawan being eased out of the national set-up and Rishabh Pant out for the foreseeable future, the Indian batting line-up is in need of left-handers. There are, of course, Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel, but they are more bowlers than batters. There is Ishan Kishan, but he is more of a floater. Enter Tilak Varma, MI's find of the season last time (397 runs), who proved that he was no flash in the pan (343 runs in 2023). The 21-year-old scores his runs in a pleasing, eye-catching fashion. But this year, he has improved his strike-rate remarkably, to 164.11 from 131.02 last year. As India looks ahead to important ODI and T20I World Cups, the Hyderabad batter will be very much in the selectors' thoughts.

(With inputs from Ayan Acharya)

Age is just a number: Faf du Plessis, nearly 39, scored 730 runs and was seen throwing himself on the field like a boy in his early teens.
R. V. MOORTHY

> « THE FAST-PACED NATURE OF T20 CRICKET DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN THE FORMAT IS A YOUNG MAN'S GAME, AS PLAYERS IN THEIR MID-TO-LATE 30S SHOWED DURING THIS IPL »

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England tastes Stoke-less success

1 England's **run rate of 6.33** in its first innings was the second-highest run rate in a total of 500 or more in Test cricket

Ben Stokes became the first skipper in Test history to oversee a victory without batting, bowling, or keeping wicket as England beat Ireland to win the one-off four-day Test at Lord's by 10 wickets. England's run rate of 6.33 in its first innings was the second-highest run rate in a total of 500 or more in Test cricket, behind the 6.5, also set by England, against Pakistan last December during its 657 all-out in Rawalpindi.

Meanwhile, Ollie Pope's 207-ball 200 was the fastest recorded double hundred in Test cricket in England, breaking Ian Botham's record, which came off 220 balls against India in the year 1982 at The Oval.

2

Josh Tongue's England Test debut at Lord's against Ireland earned £50,000 for his family friend, who placed a bet 14 years ago.
Tim Piper had wagered £100 at odds of 500-1 when Tongue was only 11 years old that he would go on to play a Test for England. Piper, 56, was a team-mate of Tongue's father Phil at Redditch Cricket Club in the 1990s.

3

The schedule for the 2023 ODI World Cup will be unveiled during the World Test Championship final at The Oval, BCCI secretary Jay Shah has said. The tournament is likely to start on October 5 and end on November 19. The final is set to be played at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad. Eleven other Indian cities are shortlisted as venues by BCCI.

4

Hampshire's James Vince became the leading run-scorer in T20 Blast history with an unbeaten 88 against Surrey at the Ageas Bowl. The 32-year-old became the second player to score 5,000 runs in the history of the tournament and, eventually surpassed Luke Wright's tally of 5,026. Vince followed up his 88 with a fifth T20 century in a game against Essex. Vince is now only behind Michael Klinger in Blast hundreds.

5

Shweta Sehrawat, who played a starring role in India's U-19 Women's World Cup title triumph in South Africa, was named captain of the India A team that will take part in the Emerging Women's Asia Cup in Hong Kong from June 12-21. The squad also includes her U-19 team-mates Soumya Tiwari, G. Trisha, Titas Sadhu, Parshavi Chopra and Mannat Kashyap. Former all-rounder Nooshin Al Khadeer will continue as head coach.

6

Jimmy Adams' time as director of West Indies cricket will come to an end when his contract expires at the end of June. Adams took over from Richard Pybus in January 2017. Adams previously worked as West Indies under-19s manager, before his stint in county cricket. CWI has set June 14 as the deadline for new applicants.

7

Former South Africa all-rounder Lance Klusener has signed as consultant with the Tripura Cricket Association (TCA) for India's upcoming domestic season. Timir Chanda, the vice president of TCA, said, Klusener will work for a total of 100 days in the season and not restrict himself to the Ranji Trophy squad.

« For these 2 seasons, IPL will have 74 games. In the 3rd we may go for 84 games, and subsequently, if time permits, 94 »

ARUN DHUMAL

Ayon Sengupta & Dhruva Prasad

As the league stage of the 16th edition of the Indian Premier League (IPL) was winding to a close on the foothills of the Himalayas in Dharamsala, *Sportstar* caught up with IPL Chairman and former BCCI Treasurer Arun Singh Dhumal to discuss the future of franchise cricket vis-a-vis the international calendar, the workload of Indian cricketers, and more.

As someone who is helming the IPL this season, do you have a lot of conversations with the franchises in terms of looking into the workload of Indian players?

That's a challenge that we need to work out as a team. A player like Virat Kohli, who has taken good care of his fitness, has been playing all the formats and the IPL for many years. There are so many newcomers who have just made it into the Indian team or are on the verge of making it and are having injuries. With the kind of talent we have, they also need to know when they should take a break. But the problem is that at times they wouldn't want to take a break because whoever takes their slot may fit into an extent where it becomes difficult for them to take back that slot. It is also very difficult for selectors to tell someone to take rest unless the player is also game for that. Workload management is very important. The players also need to understand that they need to take rest for the longevity of their careers, or they must have fitness.

What are your thoughts on IPL franchises investing in overseas leagues? Do you see that as a natural progression of where franchise cricket is headed?

I've been told that these franchises make money from the IPL and drain that money abroad. But we intend to make sure we create wealth for them. They are the ones who reposed faith in the BCCI when we launched the IPL, and subsequently, when we have allotted teams, they have come forward. We must make sure they get a good return on their investment. Where they are putting their investment is

Fitness the key: IPL Chairman and former BCCI Treasurer Arun Dhumal insists that the players ought to focus on workload management for the sake of career longevity.

R. V. MOORTHY

Trend setter: Mumbai Indians beat Delhi Capitals by seven wickets to win the inaugural Women's Premier League. The tournament is expected to catapult women cricketers into the public consciousness like never before. EMMANUAL YOGINI

their choice, and we would not want to advise them. Even if they are making losses, ultimately it is helping some cricket board. If the BCCI is making a lot of money for the ICC and that money is being given to other cricket boards, so be it. If we are doing that as the BCCI and if they are doing that as franchises to further the cause of cricket, I'll be very happy with that.

Do you see the IPL expanding to a longer window going forward, and is it possible given how the international calendar is structured for the next five to six years?

With these 10 teams that we have, we can go at best to 94 games. For these two seasons in this five-year cycle (2023–27), we'll have 74 games. In the third season, we may go for 84 games, and subsequently, if time permits, we may go for 94 games.

How sustainable do you think a 10-team IPL is in terms of viewership, and do you see viewer fatigue setting in at any point?

The IPL has been growing with every season, and new audiences have been joining. There was hardly any interest in cricket among women, and older people thought that the Test or ODI was the best form of the game. Now that everybody has been glued to their television sets for these two months, the moment the IPL is over, they don't know what to do in life. You can take the example of the WPL (Women's Premier League) and the excitement surrounding it. I was there for the final in CCI, and I couldn't make out whether it was a men's or a women's tournament.

A part of the reason why WPL saw such a substantial fan turnout was free tickets. Will that continue going forward?

The idea behind WPL is not to make money. Gate money doesn't decide the fate of the tournament for us. The idea is to create heroes out of the women's cricketers who have done a phenomenal job over the last two to three years. Once you engage the fans and they connect with their stars, it will take the tournament to a different level. If you go to a CSK or RCB game, fans are there for (MS)

> « For our domestic cricketers, we have raised the Ranji Trophy match fee from Rs. 35,000 to Rs. 60,000 »

THE CURRENT IPL CHAIRMAN DISCUSSES THE FUTURE OF FRANCHISE CRICKET VIS-A-VIS THE INTERNATIONAL CALENDAR, THE WORKLOAD OF INDIAN CRICKETERS, AND MORE

Club vs Country debate: Jason Roy became the first England player to end his national contract in order to play franchise cricket. Roy will feature in the American Major League Cricket.
K. R. DEEPAK

Dhoni or Virat. So, we want that following for all these women's stars that we have, be it Harmanpreet Kaur, Smriti Mandhana, or Renuka Thakur. We want to create a fan base for all these stars.

A lot of uncapped players get lucrative contracts in the IPL, unlike those who are only playing the Indian domestic season and are not considered suitable for T20 cricket. Is bringing back the salary cap for Indian uncapped players a solution for bridging this disparity?

If somebody gets an opportunity, so be it. If he can't make the most of it, no franchise will keep investing in him and eventually let him go. If he gets an opportunity, he should be wise enough to make the most of it. For our domestic cricketers, we have already raised the Ranji Trophy match fee from Rs. 35,000 to Rs. 60,000. We have raised the match fee for U16, U19, and the senior level. A Ranji Trophy player also gets a good amount if he plays a full season. You have to look at it in contrast with what other sportspersons are earning. People make money overnight, not only in cricket but in business too. It is up to them what to do with that money and how to take care of it. It's the same in sports.

There are reports of overseas players signing long-term contracts with IPL franchises, which may lead to national cricket boards needing permission from these franchises so that these players can play for their countries. How true are these reports, and what is your take if such a scenario arises?

The player should give more importance to his board. It is unfortunate if this [prioritising club cricket] is happening because it is the board that is doing so much for these cricketers and running their domestic cricket. If they are getting an opportunity to make it to the Test, ODI, or T20I team, it is because of their board. You can play the IPL or any franchise league in any country, but the respect that you get when you wear the national colours is beyond any money you can make.

While the mega-auction that happens every four years creates a lot of drama, it also changes the nucleus of the team. Will we see fewer of these auctions in the future?

The teams can retain three or four players. They have to make a calculative call on who they want to retain. We have seen how not retaining Hardik Pandya, Faf du Plessis, and some other players has been a tough pill to swallow for some teams. But that is what is exciting about this tournament. A new guy comes in, takes over the reins of the team, and takes it to a different level. Who would have imagined that the Gujarat Titans would be champions in their inaugural season? This is the most interesting aspect of any sport. Till the last moment, you don't know who is going to win and who is going to lose.

Top gun: H.S. Prannoy is India's top men's singles badminton player.
NAGARA GOPAL

NO MORE JUST A GIANT KILLER

For a long time, H.S. Prannoy had the **reputation as the giant killer** but never a tournament winner. Not any more.

Jonathan Selvaraj
Twitter @jon_selvaraj

H. S. Prannoy may have broken a six-year title drought with his Malaysia Masters win, but his celebration was anticlimactically modest. There was no party or even a victory dinner. Instead, he spent the evening in his hotel room, alone with just the trophy and his thoughts for company. "The other Indian players had left in the morning itself for Thailand ahead of the Thailand Open, so I was just by myself," he said, still fresh from his final win over Weng Hongyang of China (21-19, 13-21, 21-18).

Indeed, Prannoy, the country's top men's singles player, was the last Indian remaining in the competition, a fact that only struck him a day earlier when he walked into the training hall at Kuala Lumpur's Axiata Arena, where the Malaysia Masters World Tour 500 tournament was being held. "It just felt very weird. I was discussing this with my coach (RMV Gurusaidutt), and I said the court looks so empty. And then we realised it was because I was the only Indian around. There were all these Korean and Japanese players, but I was the only Indian there. Everyone else had lost already. It was a really weird feeling, but at the same time, it felt good that I was still there. I don't always have that sort of experience," he says.

It had been a while since the 30-year-old had the experience of going deep into a tournament and actually winning it. The last tournament Prannoy had won was the USA Open, nearly six years ago. And it had been nearly a decade since Prannoy had won a tournament of the standard of the Malaysia Open — Rated World Tour 500 or higher — which he did when he won the Indonesia Masters in 2014 when he was 21.

« BADMINTON IS A VERY HECTIC SPORT AND I'M ONLY AS GOOD AS MY MOST RECENT RESULT. THERE ARE TONS OF TOURNAMENTS LINED UP. THE OLYMPIC QUALIFICATION CYCLE HAS STARTED, AND I CAN'T TAKE THINGS FOR GRANTED »

The fact that Prannoy had such a long winless streak would have seemed inexplicable to those who have followed his career. He was once India's most promising junior, winning a silver at the Youth Olympics. He had proved himself capable of beating the very best on his day, as his wins over Lin Dan (against whom he actually held a winning 3-2 record), Lee Chong Wei, Chen Long, Viktor Axelsesn, Kento Momota, and Taufik Hidayat would suggest. Even now, at World Number 9, Prannoy is the highest-ranked Indian men's singles player on the circuit.

Yet for all his flashes of brilliance, Prannoy had struggled to string his upsets into something more significant. At the 2017 Indonesia Open, for instance, he beat three-time Olympic silver medallist Lee Chong Wei and Olympic champion Chen Long on successive days, but then after clearing the field, he went down to compatriot Kidambi Srikanth, who would go on to win the title.

It was something that would repeat itself time and time again. Prannoy got the reputation as the giant killer but was never the tournament winner. This wasn't to say that he didn't have anything to show for his years on the international circuit. He had played critical roles in the famous Indian wins at the 2022 Thomas Cup and the 2018 Commonwealth Games. But both those gold medals came as part of a team effort, while individual trophies were few and far between.

At some point, Prannoy admits it hurt.

Ahead of the 2022 World Championships, for instance, he had been in strong form reaching eight quarterfinals and two semifinals. At the Worlds, he beat two-time World Champion Kento Momota and then the previous year's silver medallist Lakshya Sen to make the quarterfinals. There, once again, he lost to the unheralded Zhao Zhunpeng of China in three games after winning the first. "That defeat at the Worlds was very emotional for me because I genuinely thought I had a chance to win a medal. I remember thinking that maybe it wasn't in my destiny to play for a bigger title. Maybe it just wasn't meant to be," he recalls thinking.

Prannoy admits he felt low for a few days but put those thoughts behind him. Even though he had gone several years at that point without a title he says he always felt a win was

Winning formula: It's been a while since the 30-year-old had the experience of going deep into a tournament and actually winning it. AFP

around the corner. "There were moments where I didn't feel great, but it never crossed me that I would never win. I always thought that I just needed five good days to win a tournament. It could happen anywhere. It could be at the All England, World Championships, Commonwealth Games, or whatever. I just need to find a way to be at my best for 5 days. I might have been playing terribly the previous week but as long as I could find five good days, I would get that win. I always had that belief. I knew I was having three good days, but I wasn't able to convert on the fourth day. I knew it was just a matter of getting one or two more good days. I knew I had to be lucky as well. And finally, everything came together in Malaysia," he says.

The luck Prannoy speaks of came early in the tournament itself. He almost withdrew from the competition after feeling a niggle in his right hip. "I've had more than a few injuries. So, I didn't want to take the risk of making things worse. I had almost decided to pull out. But when I got tests done in Malaysia, it turned out that it wasn't a serious issue as I originally thought. So that's when I made the decision to go ahead and play. There was a moment where I didn't really expect to play, and I ended up winning the whole tournament. I think because I wasn't really expecting anything to happen, I was able to play more freely," he says.

But even luck doesn't fully explain Prannoy's success. He feels that it was his performance over the past year that finally began to pay off this time around. "I might not have won any individual tournaments last year, but it helped a lot that I was consistently able to make the quarterfinals at least. Right now, the men's singles field is really

competitive. Players from the top 15 or 20 are all capable of making the finals. So, by playing as many matches as possible, I was able to get information about where I was, what I needed to do to get to the next stage, and what other players were doing. If you are losing in the first round every time, you aren't able to get that match awareness," he says.

A win early in the tournament, against World Number 6 Chou Tien Chen, gave him confidence that he was playing well, and from there, the wins just kept adding up. "My attitude was on point this tournament. There was no doubt or confusion on my part. I was confident about what I had to do. That showed on the court. That helped me push through three-setters. If my attitude was low, I would not have been able to dig deep when things got tough," he says.

That change in attitude is also something Prannoy has been working on for some time now."I had thought about this in the past—why I wasn't able to play consistently at a good level. And I figured out a few years ago that the reason was that I was thinking that how well you play is determined just by the time you spend on the court. In fact, I needed to be doing a lot of things off the court," he says.

Over the past couple of years, Prannoy has been consciously trying to step out of his comfort zone.

"I was uncomfortable doing a lot of things, but I had to do them because that's the sort of feeling you face when you are in a high-pressure situation in a match. I used to hate doing psychological sessions and half-hour sessions where I just focussed on breathing. But practising those feelings makes life on the court a lot easier. That has changed my career," he says.

Even all the work he had put in seemed to fade into the background during his final, when Hongyang pulled back from a 3-point deficit to tie the final game at 18-18. "There was a moment where I felt things were getting tight," he says.

Over the past couple of years, Prannoy has been consciously trying to step out of his comfort zone. Also, the fact that he's got a major win just a couple of months shy of turning 31 is another boost.

At that critical stage, when previous thoughts of his long victory drought and near losses could have swallowed him, Prannoy says he let go of his nervousness. "Maybe it's something that's come to me because I've had so much experience losing," he says.

While a World Tour Super 500 title might not be the biggest tournament to win —The Malaysia Masters are 9 World Tour Super 500 tournaments which are superseded by six World Tour Super 750 and four World Tour Super 1000 — it's hugely significant for Prannoy.

"The first call I had after the win was with Gopi sir (Pullela Gopichand). It was a good feeling. We have been working a lot for the last 12 months, and even when I wasn't getting the big wins initially, he was telling me to stay patient and saying that the wins would eventually come. He was the one giving me confidence all the time," says Prannoy.

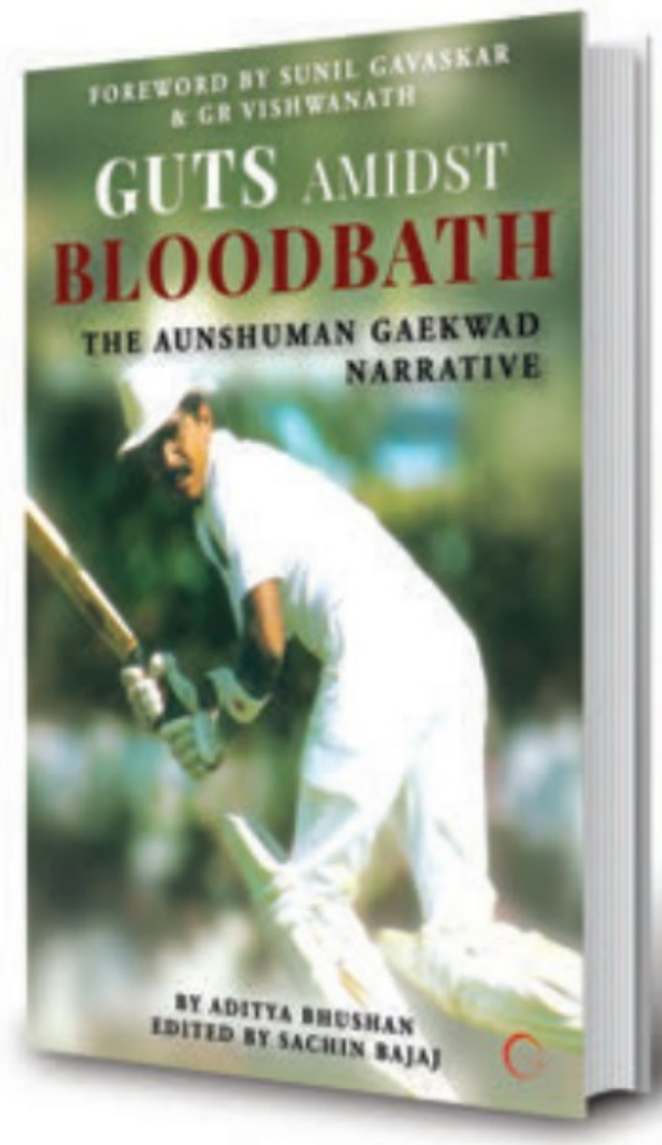
There is not going to be as much need for Gopichand to keep pumping up his players. "There's so much confidence you get from actually winning a tournament," he says.

The fact that he's got a major win just a couple of months shy of turning 31 is another boost. "I can't say I haven't thought about the fact that I'm not the youngest player around. But the fact that I got this win proves to me that the changes I'm making in my training are working. Maybe I could have tried them earlier in my career, but I guess it's better late than never. I beat players who I had a losing record against (Chou Tien Chen in the first round and Kenta Nishimoto in the quarterfinals). I also played four three-game matches that lasted over 75 minutes each. So, I know my body can play these long matches one after the other. But the most important thing is that I can finally say I'm a World Tour 500 winner," he says.

Apart from the confidence that comes with the win, Prannoy will quantitatively benefit from the fact that his win comes in the first month of the Olympic qualification cycle. But he's also careful not to make too much of his win just yet.

"It's great to have won. But nothing really changes. Badminton is a very hectic sport, and I'm only as good as my most recent result. The Olympic qualification cycle has started, and I can't take things for granted.," he says.

Fighting fire with fire



'Guts amidst Bloodbath' is a fitting collection of stories from Aunshuman Gaekwad.

Vijay Lokapally

For someone who was scared of fast bowlers as a teenager to have grown into one of the most resilient batters against the new ball was some feat by Aunshuman Gaekwad. He was made of rare grit and ambition to grind the attack even as the ball whizzed past his nose and sometimes struck him at various spots on the body. "Each blow made me more determined," he recalled. His stubbornness at the crease also made fast bowlers his greatest enemies. They looked to hit him and hurt him. He accepted the blows and grew into one of India's best batters against fast bowlers.

Gaekwad, whose father DK Gaekwad was a Test captain, built a career that transcended generations, starting as a player in 1969 and donning different roles — coach, selector, administrator, and broadcaster. He had to document his cricket journey, and he captured it all in a book form titled, most appropriately — *Guts Amidst Bloodbath*. Gaekwad and blood had a close connection indeed.

His debut, at 22, against the West Indies in Calcutta in 1974–75, came in exceptionally scary circumstances. Gaekwad walked in to replace a bleeding Tiger Pataudi, hit on the chin by a ferocious Andy Roberts. The ball was flying. When Gaekwad crossed Pataudi, he saw blood dripping onto his shirt. "It was disturbing." When he arrived at the crease, there was blood on the pitch to greet him. The man waiting for Gaekwad in the middle was G. R. Vishwanath, who said some soothing words: "There's nothing in the bowling. Don't worry."

The book is replete with anecdotes that highlight his personality and his association with other players, both seniors and juniors. Gaekwad is great friends with Gavaskar. The book tells us that they were both born in the same place — Dr. Purandare's Clinic on Marine Drive — three years apart. "We are also great friends because in all our partnerships we never got each other run out," Gavaskar said when launching the book at a function in Mumbai's Cricket Club of India. Gaekwad was rated one of the best openers in the country in the 1970s and 80s. "He was good both against the bouncing as well as the moving ball.

In my memory, he played Kapil Dev (who was in his prime) better than most," Ravi Shastri is quoted in the book.

Gaekwad shares his love for Sachin Tendulkar, who gave his best during his stint as a coach. The 1998 Sharjah triumph, the Anil Kumble 10-74 feat against Pakistan, and some incredible victories are written about fondly.

He also gives his views on match-fixing and reveals a team member carrying huge cash in his kit bag in the dressing room. Gaekwad had returned as a coach in 2000, when Kapil had relinquished the job and Indian cricket was ravaged by match-fixing allegations.

Written by Aditya Bhushan and edited by Sachin Bajaj of Global Cricket School, it is a fitting collection of stories to bring out Aunshuman Gaekwad, whose highest Test score of 201 (against Pakistan in Jalandhar) came nine years after his debut. Gaekwad played 40 Tests in his 11-year-old career. For his 56-year association with the game, the BCCI honoured him with the Col. CK Nayudu Lifetime Achievement Award.

The book also has a riveting chapter on Gaekwad finding Jyoti, his partner for life. They overcame obstacles, including from within the family, to take the path of joy.

Hamburg theme

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Hamburg is one of those decoy themes named after the birth place of famous German composer Palatz. The theme involves defence substitution idea in logical combination. In the diagram position, if white made a certain threat a black piece **A** would have an adequate defence. White therefore plays in such a way that black eliminates this defence by piece **B** allowing the replacement by a new defence by piece **A**. The first example below is a clear cut presentation of Hamburg.

F. Palitsch
Mindeutsche Schachbund 1914

Mate in three moves
Try 1.Nd7?(2.Nc5) Be3!
Key 1.d4! (2.d5)
1....exd4 2.Nd7 Bd6 3.Ng7
The new defence Bd6 which defends the same threat Nc5 self blocks on d6 leading to mate Ng7.

Palatz Franz K
Magyar Sakkvileg 1934

Mate in three moves

The second example combines Roman decoy with Hamburg 1.Nf5? (2.Ng7) Qa1 (Hamburg try)
1.Nd5?(2.Nxc7/Nf4)Qg3!(Roman try)
Key 1.Bc3! (Nd8) 1....Rxc3
2.Nf5(3.Nxg7)(Roman)1....Qxc3 2.Nd5 Qe5
3.Nd8 (Hamburg)

In the problem below the try 1.Re5 (2.Nf6) but 1....Rf1. The brilliant flight giving key, cross-check and model mate after king flight are additional features **Key 1.Re4** (2.Rh4) Bg1 2.Re5 Rh4+Bf4;1...Kg6 2.Rh4+ Kg7 3.Bf6 mate.

B.Sommer
I Pr, Die Schwalbe 1936

Mate in three moves

Finally a Hamburg to solve

A.Sutter
Parallele50 1950

Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Play around a single square':
Set:1....e6/Be6/Re6 2.Rxg4/Nc6/Nf5
Key 1.Nxg4 (2.Rc4) e6/Be6/Re6 2.Nxh6/Ba7/Ne5. Three changed interferences on one square-e6

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

Endgame heroes

From **ecstasy** for many to **heartbreak** for the rest, the European Leagues this season did not disappoint.

Aneesh Dey, Neeladri Battacharjee & Pranay Rajiv

Premier League

Another season and it was another masterclass performance by Manchester City, which saw the club clinch its third successive title and its fifth in six years. Pep Guardiola's men finished the league, having scored the highest number of goals (94) and the joint-best defensive record along with Newcastle United, with just 33 goals conceded.

It had faced stiff competition throughout the season from Mikel Arteta's Arsenal, and it looked like the Gunners would end their 19-year title drought, but they faltered at the fag end of the race allowing City to romp home.

Erik Ten Hag had his share of humiliating results with Manchester United in his first season, like the 4-0 loss to Brentford, the 6-3 defeat against City and the 7-0 drubbing against arch-rival Liverpool. But overall, the Dutchman ticked the main boxes in his first season with the Red Devils. They ended their six-year trophy drought by winning the Carabao Cup and finished third to qualify for the Champions League next season.

Eddie Howe and Newcastle United's journey is undoubtedly one of the major talking points across Europe's top-five leagues. Even with the backing of the cash-rich Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), securing a Champions League finish was an impressive feat by the Magpies.

Liverpool had a terrible start to its campaign but made a solid recovery and even looked like making a late entry in the UCL slots. But it wasn't to be for the Reds as Jurgen Klopp and his side would battle it out in the Europa League next season. The Reds would also bid goodbye to Roberto Firmino who confirmed his exit in the summer.

As far as other European slots are concerned, the Premier League saw the resurgence of teams like Roberto De Zerbi's Brighton and Hove Albion, and Unai Emery's Aston Villa, which qualified for the Europa League group stages and the Conference League qualifiers, respectively.

For Chelsea, 'torrid' would be the best way to describe its season. Despite heavy spending by its new owner Todd Boehly, the Blues never had things going for them in the season. From Thomas Tuchel's sacking, and Graham Potter's horrible run of results to a poor finish under Frank Lampard, it was a season to forget. It finished 12th — its lowest league standing since the 1993-94 season under Glenn Hoddle.

It was an underwhelming season for Tottenham Hotspur, which saw the sacking of head coach Antonio Conte. Harry Kane finished second in the Golden Boot

BARCELONA SECURED ITS FIRST LA LIGA TITLE SINCE LIONEL MESSI LEFT THE CLUB, AND THEIR 11TH OVERALL, OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGE OF DEFENDING CHAMPION REAL MADRID WITH SURPRISING EASE

AP

race, with 30 goals, but overall, it was a disappointing season for Spurs, as they finished eighth and won't play in any European competition next season.

In the relegation battle, Southampton was the first victim as it got relegated for the first time since the 2004-05 season. Leicester City, which created its own fairytale by winning the title in the 2015-16 season, also got relegated. Leeds United, which also saw an inspiring comeback to the Premier League season under Marcelo Bielsa in the 2020-21 season, was also sent back to the Championship.

La Liga

Barcelona secured its first La Liga title since Lionel Messi left the club, overcoming the challenge of defending champion Real Madrid with surprising ease.

Xavi Hernandez, who took over the club in 2021, revived the club's fortunes with some astute signings, including that of Polish marksman Robert Lewandowski, who also claimed the Pichichi Trophy with 23 goals.

Barcelona's success was built on its stingy defence, which conceded just 20 goals in the league. Its shot-stopper Marc-Andre Ter Stegen had a superhuman season, with the German's save per cent of 83.9 the best in the league.

Real Madrid kept pace with the Catalonians for most of the season. But its inconsistency, marked by several defeats to lower-placed teams, meant Carlo Ancelotti's men failed to retain the league title.

The Los Blancos saw Karim Benzema announce his departure from the club as its joint-most decorated player alongside Marcelo with 25 titles. Eden Hazard, whose Madrid career has been dismal, to say the least, would also leave after his contract was terminated by mutual agreement.

Atletico Madrid found a late-season resurgence, which helped it to challenge its cross-city rival for the second spot and secure a Champions League spot in Diego Simeone's last season as manager.

Real Sociedad rounded up the top four, which secured its return to UCL after a decade.

Traditional top-tier teams like Valencia and Sevilla had a disappointing season, as they finished in the bottom half of the league, with the former briefly flirting with relegation before bouncing back to survive.

Ligue 1

Lionel Messi became the highest goalscorer in Europe, surpassing Cristiano Ronaldo with his 496th strike — coming

Breakout star: Haaland has been a revelation this season under Pep Guardiola, breaking multiple records on the way. AFP

Final flourish: Paris St Germains' Lionel Messi, Neymar, and Sergio Ramos celebrate with teammates after winning the Ligue 1. REUTERS

against Strasbourg — sealing the Ligue 1 title for Paris Saint-Germain.

The title — his 43rd trophy — made him the joint-most decorated footballer in the world, level with his former Barcelona teammate Dani Alves. Messi remained the centre of attraction even after the match as he parted ways with PSG at the end of the season.

Having joined the club on a free transfer from Barcelona in 2021, Messi ended his two-year stint at the French capital, amassing 32 goals and 35 assists, including the top assist provided in the 2022-23 season.

But his final game for the club saw him leave with an unceremonious loss to Clermont Foot along with boos and jeers from PSG fans.

For PSG, an 11th league title meant it was now the most successful club in France's first division, surpassing Saint-Etienne's tally of 10 titles in the top division. But the club saw the exit of two World Cup winners, Sergio Ramos (2010) and Messi (2022).

The most inspiring story in the league, however, was that of RC Lens. The club, which returned to the top division in 2020, was the first team to beat PSG this season and finished second, securing Champions League qualification for the third time in its history.

It conceded just 29 goals in Ligue 1 this season — the best in the league and the third best in Europe's top five leagues, behind Barcelona (20) and Napoli (28).

This season was also the last one in Ligue 1 with 20 teams, with the next season set to have 18. Metz and Le Havre have been promoted while Auxerre, Troyes, AC Ajaccio and Angers are the relegated sides.

LIONEL MESSI BECAME THE HIGHEST GOALSCORER IN EUROPE, SURPASSING CRISTIANO RONALDO WITH HIS 496TH STRIKE

Serie A

It had to wait patiently for 33 years, but that made the victory all the sweeter as Napoli won the Scudetto after a dominating Serie A campaign. It finished the season with 90 points — 16 ahead of second-placed Lazio.

It is safe to say that the league standings saw a lot of changes, owing to Juventus' point penalty. After initially being deducted 15 points, the Bianconeri were temporarily handed a lifeline when the penalty was revoked, which propelled the club to a Champions League spot.

However, lightning struck twice for Massimiliano Allegri and his men after a fresh deduction of 10 points was announced by the Italian federation for false

Premier League

	Team	Matches	Points	GD
1	Manchester City	38	89	61
2	Arsenal	38	84	45
3	Manchester United	38	75	15
4	Newcastle United	38	71	35
18	Leicester City	38	34	-17
19	Leeds United	38	31	-30
20	Southampton	38	25	-37

La Liga

	Team	Matches	Points	GD
1	Barcelona	38	88	50
2	Real Madrid	38	78	39
3	Atletico Madrid	38	77	37
4	Real Sociedad	38	71	16
18	Real Valladolid	38	40	-30
19	Espanyol	38	37	-17
20	Elche	38	25	-37

Bundesliga

	Team	Matches	Points	GD
1	Bayern Munich	34	71	54
2	Borussia Dortmund	34	71	39
3	RB Leipzig	34	66	23
4	Union Berlin	34	62	13
17	Schalke	34	31	-36
18	Hertha	34	29	-27

Ligue 1

	Team	Matches	Points	GD
1	PSG	38	85	49
2	Lens	38	84	39
17	Auxerre	38	35	-28
18	Troyes	38	26	-51
19	AC Ajaccio	38	24	-36
20	Angers	38	18	-48

Serie A

	Team	Matches	Points	GD
1	Napoli	38	90	49
2	Lazio	38	74	30
3	Inter Milan	38	72	29
4	AC Milan	38	70	21
18	Verona	38	31	-28
19	Cremonese	38	27	-33
20	Sampodria	38	19	-47

Teams that have qualified for the UCL and got relegated across top five European Leagues

AC Milan bid Zlatan Ibrahimovic goodbye after the Swede announced his retirement from professional football.

Last-gasp stretch: Bayern Munich overcame a last-mionute scare by Borussia Dortmund to win yet another Bundesliga title. AFP

accounting, which sent the club out of the top four again. It finished the season in seventh and will play the Conference League qualifiers.

Inter and AC Milan did not have the most consistent of seasons in the league but managed to clinch third and fourth place, respectively.

Milan also bid Zlatan Ibrahimovic goodbye after the Swede announced his retirement from professional football at the age of 41.

Jose Mourinho's Roma, which finished sixth, had the chance to secure UCL qualification by beating Sevilla in the Europa League final, but a loss on penalties meant that Mourinho would see his team battle in Europe's second-tier club competition in the next season as well.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich, like most of us, expected its decade-long monopoly of the Bundesliga to end heading into the final day of league action, with Borussia Dortmund holding a two-point advantage after a late surge in form.

But in the end, it was the Bavarians who would celebrate, yet again, after Dortmund stuttered to a 2-2 draw against Mainz at home, while Bayern beat FC Koln 2-1, with it securing the go-ahead goal only in the 89th minute through Jamal Musiala.

Bayern, which seemed to have shot itself in the foot with an unexpected mid-season sacking of Julian Nagelsmann, benefitted from Dortmund's inexperience. Nagelsmann's replacement Thomas Tuchel steered his side to a dominant win against its title rival to start his spell with Bayern.

But Tuchel would hit multiple roadblocks, including defeats to Mainz and RB Leipzig, before landing on its feet at the very last minute. Major reforms are brewing for the German champion within, which has already started with the departure of club CEO Oliver Kahn and sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic.

Leipzig continued to establish itself as a strong force in the league with a third-place finish while Union Berlin delivered the surprise element for the season, by finishing fourth and clinching a UCL spot, for the first time in club history.

Top scorers and keepers:

♦ Premier League

→ **Erling Haaland**

36 goals

→ **David De Gea**

17 clean sheets

♦ La Liga

→ **Robert Lewandowski**

23 goals

→ **Marc-Andre Ter Stegen**

26 clean sheets

♦ Ligue 1

→ **Kylian Mbappe**

29 goals

→ **Brice Samba**

15 clean sheets

♦ Bundesliga

→ **Niclas Fullkurg, Christopher Nkunku**

16 goals

→ **Mark Flekken**

13 clean sheets

♦ Serie A

→ **Victor Osimhen**

26 goals

→ **Ivan Provedel**

21 clean sheets

FA Cup glory for City and a chance for the treble: Manchester City got the better of rival Manchester United with a 2-1 win in the FA Cup final, where Ilkay Gundogan came clutch and scored a brace. Having equalled United's record of three successive Premier League titles, Man City also has the chance to equal United's record of winning the treble if it beats Inter in the Champions League final on June 10. AP

Sevilla's Europa League supremacy: Jose Luis Mendilibar's Sevilla reigned supreme in the Europa League final, beating Roma on penalties. With the win, the club clinched a record-extending seventh Europa League title. Sevilla finished its La Liga campaign in 12th position, which meant that if not for the Europa win that earned the club a place in the Champions League, the Andalusians wouldn't play in any European competition next season. AP

THREE TIMES

Gokulam Kerala continued its **domination of the Indian Women's League** with its third consecutive title.

Aashin Prasad
Twitter @aashin23

"Everyone was hungry to win it for a third successive time", says Anthony Andrews, the head coach of the Gokulam Kerala women's team. "The players, the coaching staff and the club. We were all working hand-in-hand." While Gokulam was the strongest team and the favourite to retain its Indian Women's League (IWL) crown, this year's win was the hardest.

The recent competition moved away from the league format to return to a league-cum-knockout setup with more strong teams in the pool of 16. Indian Super League (ISL) clubs Odisha FC and East Bengal were among the newest challengers.

In recent seasons, Gokulam has had the reputation of steamrolling opponents. In the last two years, it had won its 18 straight IWL matches in swaggering fashion, scoring a staggering 100 goals while conceding only eight.

Favourites all the way: Gokulam Kerala was the strongest team in the tournament. Below: Martina Thokchom (left) and Kritina Devi.

GKFC MEDIA

THE CHEER

Despite its dominance, club captain Dangmei Grace says this year's triumph wasn't a foregone conclusion. "We took things very seriously because it's difficult to win for the third straight time," says Grace. "Kickstart, Odisha FC, Sporting Union, and Sethu FC were all on the mark. It's not about showing up and winning the match. Since the last season, teams' levels had also gone up, so it was very difficult. So, we had to give our best."

And it had to do without its star players in Aditi Chauhan (moved to Lords FA), Manisha Kalyan (Apollon), Soumya Guguloth (Dinamo Zagreb) and Dalima Chhiber (Kickstart FC). The club reinforced the squad with the signings of national team regulars Indumathi Kathiresan, Sandhiya Ranganathan and Hemam Shilky Devi.

Gokulam, which also has a men's team in the second division I-League, has historically attracted the biggest Indian names and is also among the few teams to fill the overseas

FACTFILE

2019-20: 7 matches, 7 wins, 34 goals | Top scorer: Sabitra Bhandari (16 goals)

2021-22: 11 matches, 11 wins, 66 goals | Top scorer: Elshaddai Acheampong (20 goals)

2022-23: 10 matches, 8 wins, 64 goals | Top scorer: Sabitra Bhandari (29 goals)

New way forward: The proposed home-and-away league system promises to improve women's football.
GKFC MEDIA

players' quota. Nepal forward Sabitra Bhandari, who first joined the club in 2019, has been among the pillars of Gokulam's success. Bhandari was the top-scorer in the 2019-20 and 2022-23 campaigns with 16 and 29 goals, respectively. Last season, in Bhandari's absence, Ghana's Elshaddai Acheampong struck 20 to take the golden boot.

"Last season, we had a lot of good players — Aditi, Manisha, Soumya, Dalima — who were part of the team but weren't here this season. So it was more challenging for us. The pressure was on us to prove that we are the champions and be able to defend the title," says Grace.

And for the first time in three seasons, Gokulam was denied a win and blunted in front of goal in the league stage by Misaka United. "We were unable to score a goal, and we were frustrated," remembers Grace, but Gokulam still finished top of the group stage with 19 points to reach the quarterfinals, where it met newcomer Odisha FC.

Odisha, which put together a strong team in its maiden outing, took a surprise lead in the second minute. New signing Asem Roja Devi scored the equaliser to help Gokulam draw the game before winning on penalties. The Malabarians then put Eastern Sporting Union and Kickstart to the sword in the semifinals and the final to seal the title.

THE CLUB'S LONG-TERM VISION IS TO SEE MORE KERALA PLAYERS BREAK INTO THE NATIONAL TEAM. GOKULAM HAD SEVEN KERALA-BASED PLAYERS IN THE 2021-22 SQUAD, AND THAT NUMBER INCREASED TO 12 THIS SEASON, WITH SEVERAL HAVING A ROLE TO PLAY

SCAN TO READ MORE

Gokulam's success is commendable despite the uncertainty surrounding the women's football calendar each season and the unfavourable playing conditions offered in the IWL. The current version of the tournament is a little over a month-long, with matches scheduled at 8 a.m. and 4.30 p.m. The short duration doesn't allow the players to recover from possible injuries during the tournament.

The 2022–23 IWL season was played in Ahmedabad, with temperatures soaring over 42°C. And adding insult to injury, Gokulam's title celebrations were cut short and turned into a prize distribution ceremony for Gujarat SFA's Club Championship.

A home-and-away league system with eight teams has been proposed by the All India Football Federation (AIFF) for the next season, which will help move towards improving the standard of women's football. "I hope they can apply it in a good way for women's football. If the league system is good, then the performance of the players will be high, I hope. In foreign countries, the league is around 6-7 months, so there is a lot of gaps for recovery," says Grace.

President V.C. Praveen feels his club's investment would make sense with a longer league and better planning in the calendar. "The demands are very high, but the professional attitude is lacking. The [foreign] players demand one year's salary but spend only 30 or 45 days [IWL duration]. With the home and away format coming up, that should change. We will get more [time] from the players then. AIFF should also do it in a proper manner with a calendar. In the last three years, the Indian players we signed got released from the squad only one week or three days before the start of the tournament," says Praveen.

The club's long-term vision is to see more Kerala players break into the national team. Gokulam had seven Kerala-based players in the 2021–22 squad, and that number increased to 12 this season, with several having a role to play. Head coach Andrews and former technical director Priya PV, who coached the team to its first IWL title, played key roles in scouting these talents and bringing them through the Kerala Women's League and then into the IWL.

"In the under-17 team, we have Kerala girls in our teams. In two or three years, we can see Kerala girls also wearing Indian jerseys. In the I-League, we have 5–6 Kerala players in the starting XI. At the end of the day, we want Kerala's talents to come back into the mainstream. Our objective is to have football in a big way in Kerala, and in what way has the state benefited [is our objective]. The only way to produce talent is by contributing to the development of Kerala football. With deep pockets, anybody can win," says Praveen.

Grace, who has previously played for KRYPHSA and Sethu FC, feels Gokulam is the most professional club in the country. "The management is professional here. It's a professional club with a men's team as well. It's not at 100%, but I would say it's close to 90% [professionalism]. The staff and the environment are far better than the other clubs," she says.

"The dedication, passion, and hard work the president puts behind the club is commendable," says Andrews. That is very important for any club.

Supporting women's football is a bonus for any team. In terms of facilities, accommodation, food, etc., these small things really help the athletes give their best. The president asks us what we require, and he provides the best from his side."

After being deprived of the chance to play in the AFC Women's Club Championship last season, Andrews wants the team to make a mark this time. And with the three IWL titles in the bag, Gokulam only wants more. "And for the fourth year, we will try and keep this title with us," says Andrews.

Heat is on: Max Verstappen is now the clear favourite to win the F1 championship this year. GETTY IMAGES

MAX ON FURY

Dipak Ragav
Twitter @dipakragav

As the chequered flag fell at the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya, don't be surprised if people at No 8, Place de la Concorde in Paris (FIA headquarters) were inscribing Max Verstappen's name on the driver's champions trophy that will be handed out at the FIA's annual prize-giving gala later this year.

For fans of Formula One who had been clinging to a bit of hope of a competitive championship — at least between the Red Bull Racing teammates — the back-to-back races in Monaco and Barcelona should be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Verstappen, the reigning double world champion, added two more wins to his tally at the Monaco and Spanish Grand Prix, starting both races from pole position and winning in a commanding fashion that can demoralise the competitors. With only a third of the season done, it will be a long and dreary year for the sport.

Having taken five wins from seven races, including the last three, the Dutchman now leads his teammate Sergio Perez by 53 points. With Red Bull winning all seven races across various circuits, the sport will consider itself lucky if a driver other than two title contenders even wins a race this year.

Even as Verstappen dominated the streets of Monte Carlo, winning a rain-hit race by a whopping 28 seconds over second-place Fernando Alonso in the Aston Martin, there was a nagging feeling that the result could have been different had things taken a different turn.

On Saturday, Verstappen had to dig deep to produce a brilliant lap to take pole position, beating Alonso by

Podium ready: Verstappen won the Spanish Formula One Grand Prix, ahead of Hamilton and Russell. AFP

HAVING TAKEN FIVE WINS FROM SEVEN RACES, INCLUDING THE LAST THREE, THE DUTCHMAN NOW LEADS HIS TEAMMATE SERGIO PEREZ BY 53 POINTS

ROAD

Verstappen strengthens his **hold at the top** with a surge of back-to-back wins

less than a tenth of a second. In a circuit where overtaking is impossible, qualifying is all that matters, and the 25-year-old got it done on Saturday.

A brief spell of showers after lap 50 spiced up the race as drivers dived to the pits for intermediate and wet-weather tyres. At this point, Alonso and Aston Martin had a chance to go for a win. Just as the rain came, the Spaniard came to the pits for his first stop of the race.

Here, the team and the driver opted to play it safe and took another set of dry tyres as they felt the passing showers that hit only one section of the track would go away. But soon enough, the rain engulfed the whole area, and Alonso had to stop for inters again. Verstappen stopped a lap later for inters and kept his lead even as he struggled on a rapidly drenching track.

Had Alonso taken inters on his first stop, there was a slight chance he could have been in the race's lead and controlled proceedings when Verstappen crawled to the pits. Alas, it was not to be.

After the first four races, it was evident that the battle for the championship would be between the Red Bull drivers. Perez helped his cause by winning two out of the four, and there was genuine excitement that he could challenge for the title.

However, as Verstappen has stepped up over the last three rounds, the Mexican has buckled under pressure, committing huge unforced errors.

In Monaco and Spain, his costly mistakes in qualifying meant he was playing catch-up for the rest of the race.

With just 12 points from the last two rounds, he needs a miraculous turnaround in form to even keep the title race alive towards the end of the year.

America First at Indy 500

Meanwhile, hours after the prestigious Monaco GP, another crown jewel event on the motorsport calendar got underway across the Atlantic. At the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, the 107th running of the Indy 500 took place, and for the first time since 2016, an American, Josef Newgarden, won the prestigious event.

It was an exciting evening in which the lead — as it often does — kept changing through the nearly three-hour race before Newgarden passed last year's winner Marcus Ericsson on the final lap to take a famous win.

Gunther shines in Jakarta

In electric racing, German driver Maxmillian Gunther was the star of the Jakarta ePrix weekend in the FIA Formula E championship.

The Maserati MSG Racing driver was unstoppable through the double-header weekend in Indonesia, taking a win and third place from the two races. Gunther had one of the perfect weekends wherein he dominated all practice sessions and was in pole position for both races.

On Saturday, while he did not have the race pace to fight for the win and had to settle for third, he made amends in the second race, winning from pole position relatively comfortably.

255-member strong contingent for Special Olympics

India will be represented by a strong 255-member contingent at the Special Olympics World Summer Games to be held in Berlin, Germany from June 17 to 25.

The contingent includes 198 athletes, who will participate in 16 disciplines, unified partners and 57 coaches.

The Special Olympics World Games is the world's largest inclusive sporting event for people with intellectual disabilities.

A total of 700 athletes and unified partners across 190 countries will compete in 26 disciplines in Berlin.

Special Olympics Bharat will also organise a special send-off ceremony for the contingent at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium on Thursday, which will be attended by Sports Minister Anurag Thakur, Women and Child Development and Minority Affairs Minister Smriti Irani, Indian Olympic Association chief PT Usha, cricketer Yuvraj Singh and singer Sonu Nigam, among others.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

SPORTOON

1 **The third Khelo India University Games** were drawn to a close at the Indian Institute of Technology-Banaras Hindu University campus in Varanasi. Punjab University, Chandigarh (PUC) was declared the overall champion with a tally of 26 gold, 17 silver and 26 bronze medals, thereby regaining the mantle it had lost to Jain University in the second edition. Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (GNDU) finished second (24 gold, 27 silver,17 bronze) and Jain University, Karnataka (16 gold, 10 silver, 6 bronze) ended third.

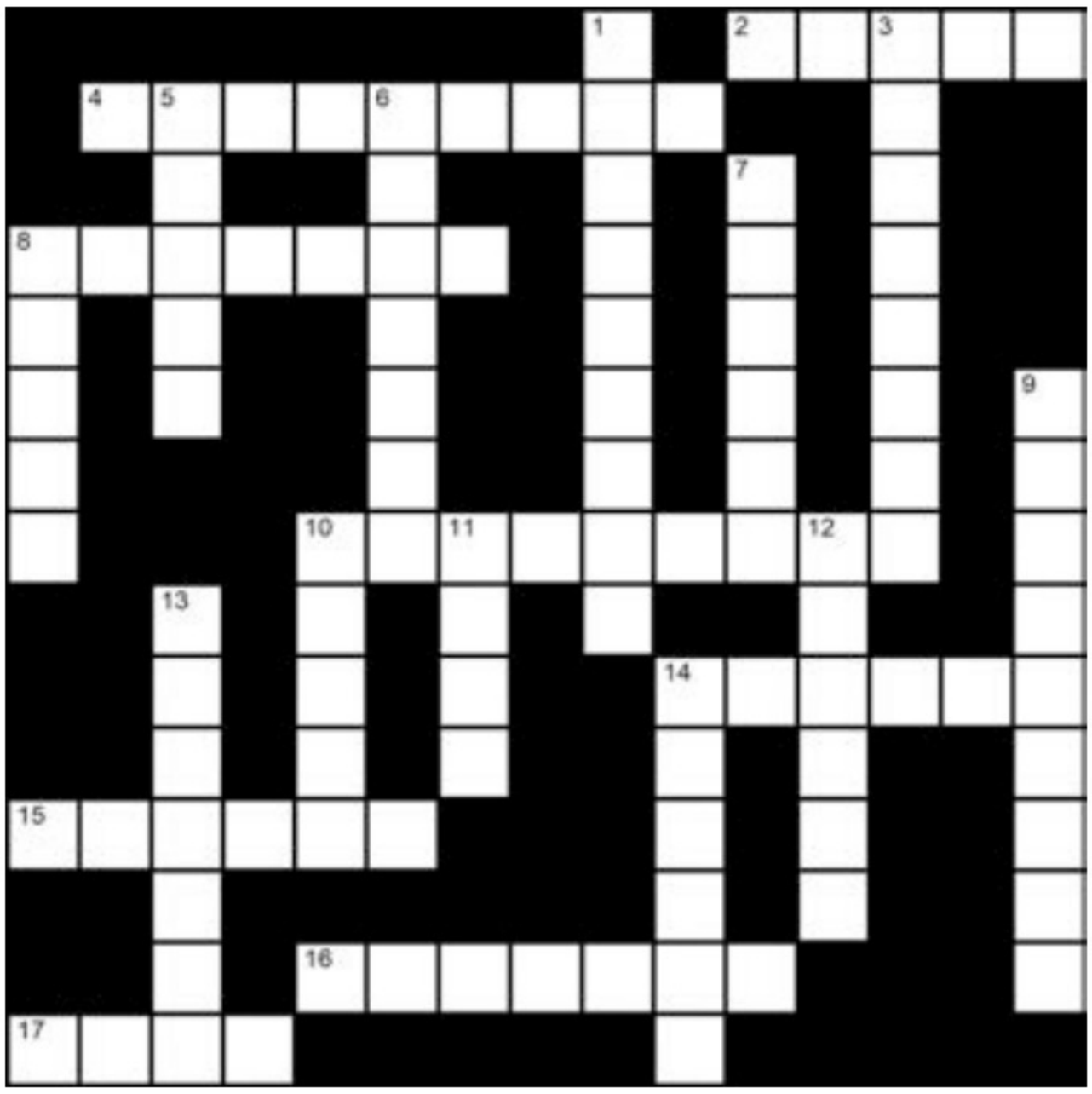
TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 **Rachit Singhal emerged champion of the 'Karting SuperSeries' finale,** featuring the four-stroke and the participating drivers (aged 14 and above), held in Hyderabad with Ojas Surve and Rishi Parekh finishing second and third respectively.

Akhil Reddy, CMD of Racing Promotions Pvt Ltd, said they were proud that the Super Series provided a perfect platform for the young talent and dream big. "RPPL is committed to nurturing the next generation of racing stars in India, and Mr. Rachit's victory is a testament to the potential and talent in our country," he said.

V. V. SUBRAHMANYAM

CROSSWORD
SRIRAM SRINIVASAN



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

2 An unplayable delivery. (5)

4 Saudi Pro League champions. (2-7)

8 NBA team Pistons are from here. (7)

10 'Baby Malinga.' (9)

14 Mexican player ... Vela, who captains Los Angeles FC. (6)

15 ... Sports, organisers of the Pro Kabaddi League. (6)

16 The Welsh football club owned by Hollywood stars Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney. (7)

17 Thiago Seyboth ..., who beat Daniil Medvedev in the first round of the French Open this year. (4)

DOWN

1 Ireland cricket captain. (9)

3 Iranian-born, French GM Alireza ... (8)

5 ... Town Football Club, based in Bedfordshire. (5)

6 Cricket association of a north-eastern state that has roped in Lance Kluesner as a consultant. (7)

7 French tennis star Caroline ... (6)

8 Portugal, Manchester United player Diogo ... (5)

9 The only time this team won Bundesliga was in 2008-09. (9)

10 French, Juventus player Paul Labile ... (5)

11 Australian off-spinner ... Murphy. (4)

12 Tennis player who was born in South Africa, plays for Britain, and is called Cameron ... (6)

13 Winner of IPL 2023's 'Emerging Player of the Season' award. (7)

14 Winner of the 'Player of the Match' award in the IPL 2023 finals. (6)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

10 ADVANTAGES OF A TRULY PERSONALISED DIET

Many **customised diets fail to consider the individual requirements** of athletes, thereby falling short of providing effective sports nutrition.

I have a growing concern about the authenticity of so-called 'customised' diet plans that athletes follow. Customising a diet can be claimed to be done. But are athletes being hoodwinked?

Many diet programmes that are advertised as 'personalised' usually have a limited scope and fall short of addressing the demands of individual athletes.

Athletes are inundated with a wide range of diet strategies today because of social media and celebrity sponsorships that promise amazing outcomes. These programmes are sometimes referred to as 'customised' to give the impression of personalised treatment.

However, it becomes clear upon closer inspection that many of these diet programmes are based on generic templates, with only minimal modifications made to accommodate the athletes' tastes or nutritional requirements.

Athletes participate in a variety of sports, undertake rigorous physical training, and have individual genetic profiles. These many aspects, which are essential for maximising performance, improving recovery, and maintaining long-term health, cannot be properly addressed by a one-size-fits-all meals plan.

So, what should you look for in a personalised diet plan?

A thorough and individualised approach to nutrition is essential to effectively optimise an athlete's performance, health, and longevity. This entails considering several aspects that affect an athlete's nutritional requirements, including:

1. Genetic Testing: By studying a person's genetic makeup, we may learn more about the specific physiological characteristics they possess, such as metabolism, nutrition absorption, and muscle recovery. The scope of genetic testing is in-depth and vast. At Qua Nutrition Clinics, where I practice, we do 20+ genetic testing panels, which give us a crystal ball gazing into the athletes' health and performance needs.

2. Microbiome Testing: Determining the precise bacterial balance in an athlete's digestive

SCAN TO READ MORE

Close watch: A thorough and individualised approach to nutrition is essential to effectively optimise an athlete's performance, health, and longevity. AFP

By matching the diet with athletes' workout schedules and fitness objectives, their performance will be maximised overall in terms of energy levels, muscle recovery, and general fitness.

tract can aid in improving nutrient absorption and general wellness.

Many question why a $200 test is needed and how it will change the outcome of the athletes' training plan.

3. Omega Balance Testing: Knowing an athlete's Omega-3 to Omega-6 fatty acid ratio helps us to promote cardiovascular health and optimise anti-inflammatory responses.

In fact, Omega-3 improves breathing ability as well as reducing DOMS (Delayed Onset of Muscle Soreness).

4. Blood Chemistry: Regular blood testing can help athletes make individualised dietary modifications by providing important information about their nutritional levels, hormonal balance, and general health indicators.

5. Body Composition/Muscle-Fat Ratio/Weight Category Management: Understanding an athlete's body composition is crucial for choosing the right macronutrient ratios and guaranteeing peak performance in their weight category.

6. Training/Fitness Plan: By matching the diet with athletes' workout schedules and fitness objectives, their performance will be maximised overall in terms of energy levels, muscle recovery, and general fitness.

7. Recovery Days: During recovery days, individualised diet helps restore glycogen levels, heal muscle damage, and lower the chance of injury.

8. Travelling Schedule: Tailoring the diet plan to athletes' travel schedules ensures that they receive required nutrition, get enough fluids, and perform at their best when competing.

9. Competition Timetable/Yearly Event Calendar: Adapting the diet strategy to athletes' competition calendar guarantees they will have enough energy, the right timing of nutrients, and effective recovery techniques during important events.

10. Injuries/Prevention: A diet plan that is specifically designed to address injury issues or enhance injury prevention can help with tissue healing, the decrease of inflammation, and overall recovery.

In my experience as a nutritionist who works directly with athletes, individualised nutrition has a profoundly positive effect on both their performance and general well-being

These days the support team influence athletes to introspect their diet. The start of the diet revolution has come. It will be bang on for the next generation of athletes. Those that are in their late 20s have lost a good part of the formative years in building a robust body based on sound nutrition. It's now that your body will begin to scream retirement. It's time to overhaul the way you eat.

Loyalty is about emotion

Loyalty has nothing to do with winning or losing. **Player loyalty leads to fan loyalty** (fans often switch loyalty when players move), and that leads to greater marketing opportunities for clubs who connect with fans beyond match days.

Suresh Menon

Loyalty is a concept in sport dearer to fans than players. Fans often expect players to remain loyal to their club regardless of the circumstances. They boo them when it is perceived that they changed clubs for a better pay-day. Football fans are notorious for this, booing home-side favourites as if they were expected to stick to one club all their life. No one, after all, expects any other professional to stay forever with the outfit they joined when just out of university.

Some fans believe players take the field only to entertain them and to foster a sense of belonging and to give them a modicum of reflected glory. And if their favourite player moves to another team, they feel divided and cheated.

No other professional changing jobs has to endure fans of his previous place of work lining up outside his room or cubicle and shouting at him. I started my career with a newspaper in Bengaluru and in about three years had moved to another in Chennai. It wasn't seen as a betrayal, merely as a youngster getting better opportunities.

Sportspeople whose careers are short and could get shorter through injury, indiscipline or politics, have the right to perform wherever their talents take them. They too have families to look after, a need to save for the future and play wherever they feel most comfortable doing so. Footballer Chuni Goswami played for just one club, Mohun Bagan, throughout his career, and was lauded for it. Yes, this is a special relationship, but his contemporaries who moved to other clubs were not traitors.

Star player: Footballer Chuni Goswami played for just one club, Mohun Bagan, throughout his career, and was lauded for it. Yes, this is a special relationship, but his contemporaries who moved to other clubs were not traitors.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Except for the period when Chennai Super Kings were banned, their captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni has been with them, winning five titles. That is an amazing record. Virat Kohli's stay at the Royal Challengers Bangalore hasn't been as productive, but has been longer. His greatest regret as another IPL season ends is that he has not finished on a title-winning side. Yet if these two modern giants were to change teams now, there would be an outcry from fans. Such is the nature of sport. Every time I see a journalist ask a sportsman why he switched clubs, I expect a retort along the lines of: "Have you never changed jobs? Why did you do it?" But sportsmen are trained to be bland and politically correct at press conferences, and they are exactly that.

Players often discover that loyalty is not a two-way street. Clubs aren't as loyal to them as they are expected to be to the clubs.

Loyalty, of course, has nothing to do with winning or losing. It is about emotion. Player loyalty leads to fan loyalty (fans often switch loyalty when players move), and that leads to greater marketing opportunities for clubs who connect with fans beyond match days.

Loyalty is rewarded in myriad ways that benefit the clubs, from merchandising their products to arranging for special 'fan days' where fans can meet their heroes. Loyalty drives revenue. Harnessing the devotion of fans is important for clubs.

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