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# MIRABAI CHANU WEIGHING HER CHANCES ONE LIFT AT A TIME



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South Asian-origin players taking USA cricket to greater heights

Cover: Saurabh Netravalkar  
(K. R. Deepak)

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## OFF-SIDE

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# WHO NEXT, BETTER CHOOSE THE BEST

With the All India Football Federation finally bringing an end to coach Igor Stimac's reign, the **attention shifts** to finding his replacement.

India's FIFA World Cup qualifiers started off with a spark, an away win over Kuwait. But that spark fizzled out soon, leaving tears in its wake. Igor Stimac's team, despite the initial promise, missed out on advancing to the final qualifying round of the Asian Zone after a rather contentious 1-2 defeat to Qatar in Doha.

The last eight months of Stimac's five-year tenure was marred with subpar performances as a hapless India stuttered from one ignominy to another. Since the triumphant evening at the Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium in Kuwait City, India lost six of its eight fixtures, conceding 13 goals while scoring just two. After finishing bottom of the group in the AFC Asian Cup with zero points and zero goals, the team lost to Afghanistan, ranked 41 places below, at home and then drew with Kuwait — jeopardising its chances of progressing to the third round.

Stimac, a World Cup semifinalist with Croatia, came to India in 2019 amidst much hullabaloo, promising to rescue the team from the doldrums of defensive, long-ball football. He shook up the squad, bringing in fresh faces like Anwar Ali, Jeakson Singh, and Lalengmawia Ralte from India's 2017 under-17 World Cup team. "I love great challenges and as far as I can see, football in your wonderful country is a sleeping giant. I have seen most of India's AFC (Asian Football Confederation) games on Arena Sports TV channel and after my candidacy, I have done serious research on the ISL (Indian Super League) and I-League," the coach said ahead of his first game with the Indian national team.

Ironically, over the years, Stimac was seldom spotted

at Indian Super League or I-League matches, preferring to monitor the leagues from his home in Zagreb.

Three back-to-back titles in 2023 had brought in a sense of feel good that generally eludes Indian football. But Stimac and his team failed to carry forward that confidence and form against the better teams of the continent. His tenure ends with a 35.8 win per cent rate in 53 matches, with just two victories over higher-ranked opponents.

As the losses piled up, Stimac became adept at dodging responsibility, pointing fingers at the players, the league, the referees, or the limited time he had with the team. An extended camp, which he touted as the elixir to all the ills of the national team, failed to have the desired impact as India drew with Kuwait and then lost to Qatar.

With the All India Football Federation finally bringing an end to his reign, the attention shifts to finding his replacement. It might be wise for Indian football officials to resist the temptation of chasing another high-profile name and instead focus on someone with first-hand experience in Indian club football. With aspirations of breaking into the top-10 in Asia, they can also consider someone like Park Hang-seo, who has enjoyed success at the continental level. The Korean coach, a former assistant to Guus Hiddink, was instrumental in guiding Vietnam to the semifinals of the 2018 Asian Games and the quarterfinals of the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

Indian football's success can only come from the bottom up. The Federation's main aim should be a youth programme that gets us into the FIFA under-17 World Cup every year.



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## LAUNCH OF HALT SPORTS INJURIES





« I thought I played well enough to be up there in contention. It just didn't work out. As far as my last Open Championship or U.S. Open Championship, I don't know what that is. It may or may not be.”  
— Tiger Woods, after exiting from U.S. Open »

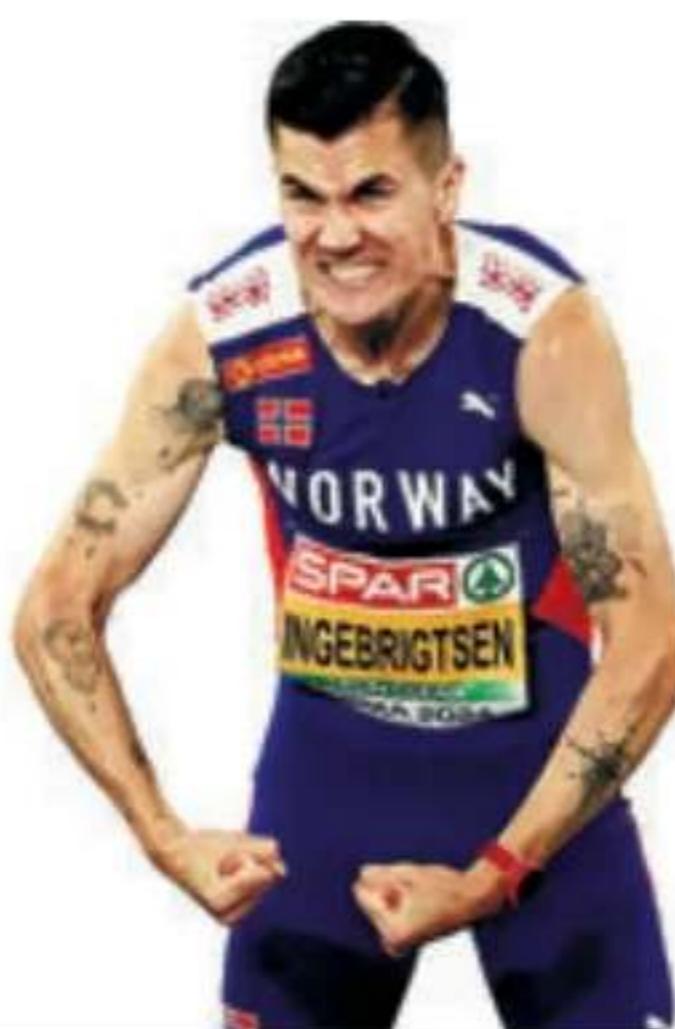


« It will be history to win the 1500m for the third time and to focus on the 5,000m. I know it wouldn't be easy but I am going to try and see what's possible.” — Kenyan middle-distance superstar Faith Kipyegon as she booked her ticket to the Paris Olympics »

## 1500m

Norway's Olympic champion Jakob Ingebrigtsen etched his name in European history in Rome, his victory in the 1500m making him the most successful male athlete on the continent. Ingebrigtsen, still only 23, has now won the 1500/5,000m double three times: at these Rome championships as well as editions in Berlin in 2018 and Munich in 2022. Britons Mo Farah and Roger Black and then-West Germany's Harald Schmid all also won six European

medals, but their tallies included five golds and a silver. France's Azeddine Habz hit second down the home straight, but no one came close to Ingebrigtsen, winner in a championship record of 3min 31.95secs.



## 86

Jerry West, who was selected to the Basketball Hall of Fame three times in a storied career as a player and executive and whose silhouette is considered to be the basis of the NBA logo, died aged 86. West, nicknamed “Mr. Clutch” for his late-game exploits as a player, went into the Hall of Fame as a player in 1980 and again as a member of the 1960 U.S. Olympic Team in 2010. He will be enshrined for a third time later this year as a contributor.

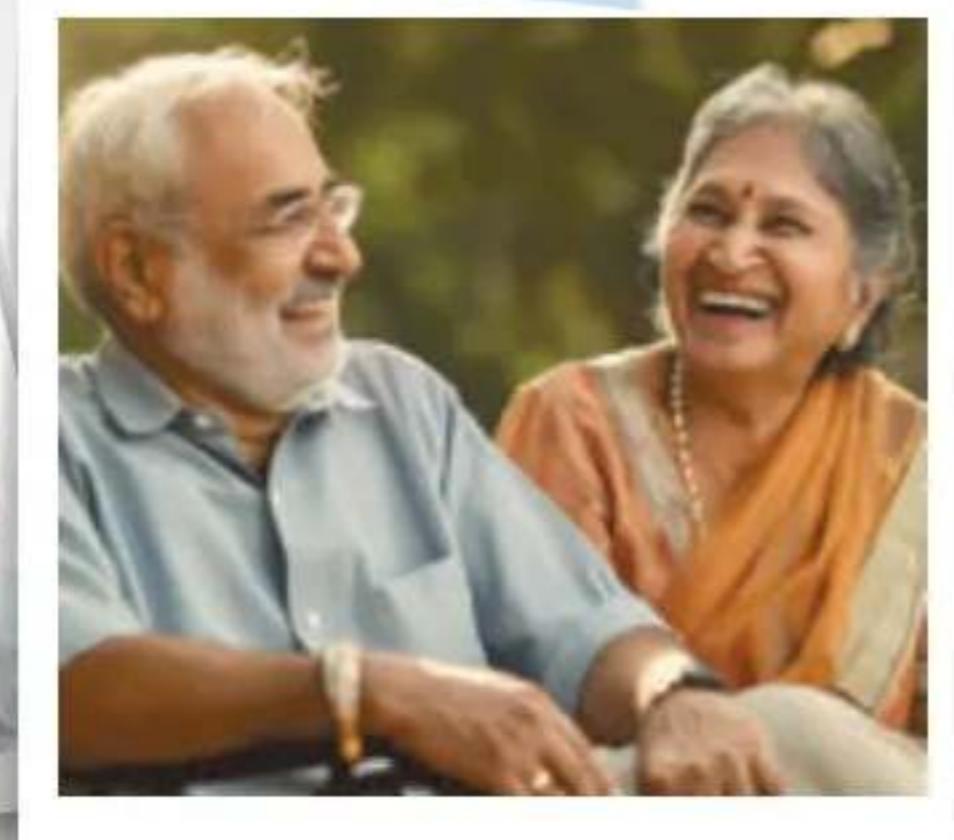
## PAIRING UP FOR THE GAMES



Rafael Nadal and Carlos Alcaraz will play doubles together for Spain at the upcoming Paris Olympics, the Spanish tennis federation said. The announcement comes three days after the 21-year-old Alcaraz won the French Open for the first time — earning his third Grand Slam trophy. Alcaraz is widely seen as the heir to Nadal in Spanish tennis and has frequently remarked that Nadal was his childhood hero. The 38-year-old Nadal already owns Olympic gold medals in singles (2008) and doubles (2016 with Marc Lopez) alongside his 22 Grand Slam titles. AFP

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# BRUTE OF THE MATTER

The upcoming middleweight duel between former champion Robert Whittaker and rising star Ikram Aliskerov promises to be an **electrifying showdown.**

Nigamanth P

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With a middleweight main event that might have title ramifications and interesting supporting acts all around, the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) Fight Night on June 23 promises to be a blockbuster.

Restructured only last week, the main event between Robert Whittaker and Ikram Aliskerov is an engrossing pairing of a former champion and a rising star.

Whittaker, who was initially scheduled to fight Khamzat Chimaev, defeated Paulo Costa via unanimous decision earlier this year to bounce back from his defeat to current champion Dricus Du Plessis at UFC 290.

Aliskerov was a couple of days away from stepping in with newcomer Antonio Trocoli in Las Vegas before he was selected to fill in opposite Whittaker.

The 31-year-old from Dana White's Contender Series has blown through his first two UFC opponents without much trouble and is gearing up to face his biggest test yet.

Aliskerov, another talented grappler from Dagestan, although just two fights into his UFC career, has showcased top-notch

**Power moves:** Robert Whittaker's (R) experience, coupled with powerful striking and movement, gives him an edge over Ikram Aliskerov. AFP

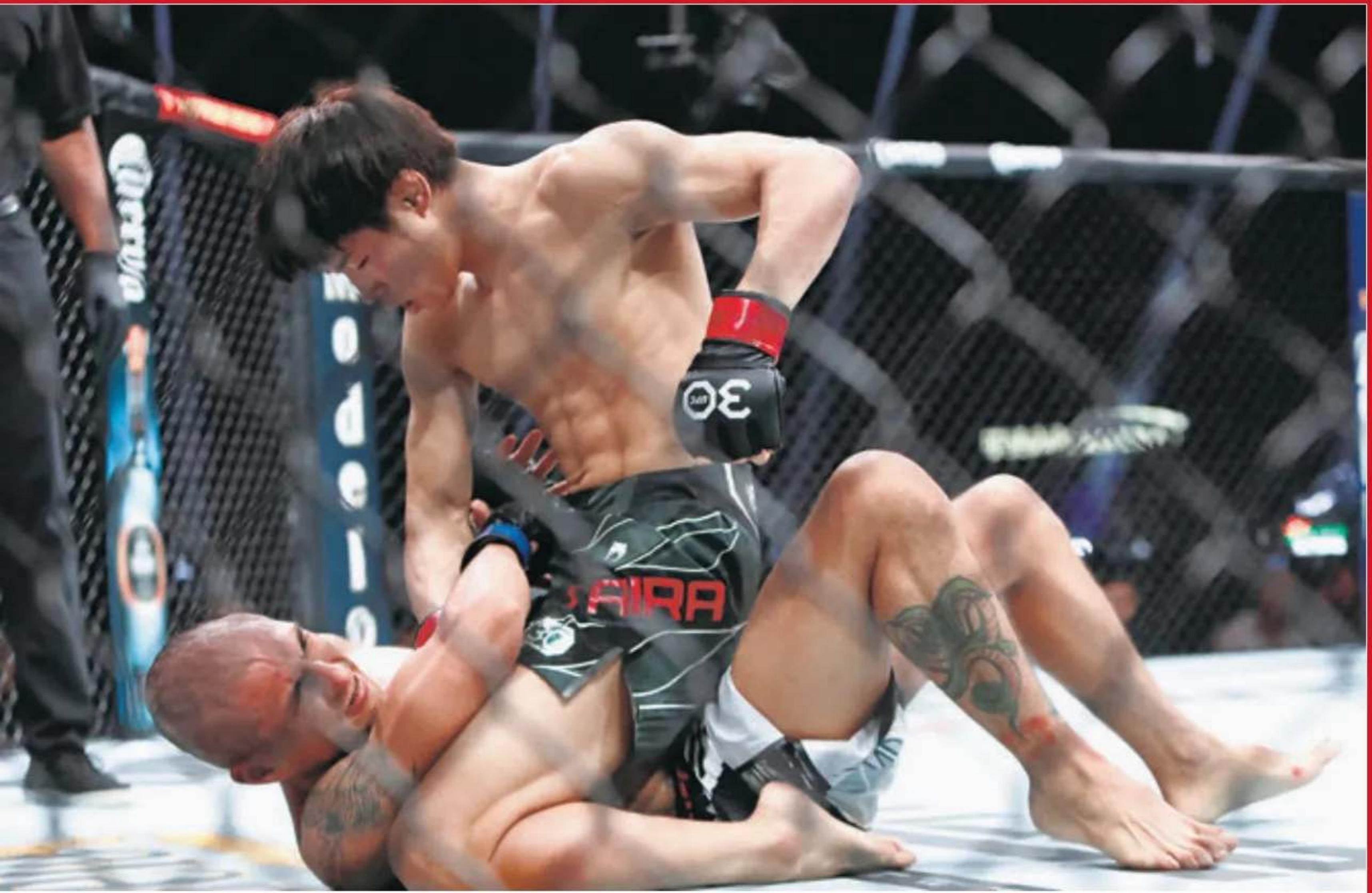
wrestling and submission skills that allow him to control his opponents on the ground.

However, Whittaker poses a different threat than Aliskerov's other two opponents. His experience, coupled with powerful striking and movement, gives Whittaker an edge.

The Australian also possesses excellent takedown defence and can potentially shut down any advances from Aliskerov.

Meanwhile, Sergei Pavlovich and Alexander Volkov meet in a matchup of Russian heavyweight finishers and occasional training partners.

Pavlovich competes for the first time since being forced into an interim title fight against Tom Aspinall at Madison Square Garden in November.



The setback snapped his six-fight run of first-round finishes but did little to diminish his standing in the heavyweight ranks, as he troubled Aspinall in the early moments of the bout and remains one of the most feared knockout threats in the division.

Volkov, 35, has evolved since his loss to Aspinall back in March 2022, winning three straight stoppage fights to reclaim title contention.

Volkov used strikes to defeat Jairzinho Rozenstruik and Alexandre Romanov in the first round before showcasing his submission skills in the second round, ending Tai Tuivasa with an Ezekiel choke.

#### Taira continues his dream

The main event

fight between Tatsuro Taira and Alex Perez on June 16 ended unexpectedly, with the former collecting a second-round stoppage win when Perez suffered a knee injury after being forced into the canvas.

Following a tight first round and the initial part of the second, Taira launched a takedown, quickly gaining the upper hand, locking in the body triangle, and attempting to find a chokehold.

Halfway through the second round, the undefeated 24-year-old tripped Perez, and as the former title challenger fell to the canvas, something in his knee popped, bringing the fight to an immediate halt.

The promising standout from Okinawa now has six

**Rising star:** Tatsuro Taira now has six straight wins in the UFC and 16 victories overall, continuing to establish himself as one of the best emerging talents. AFP

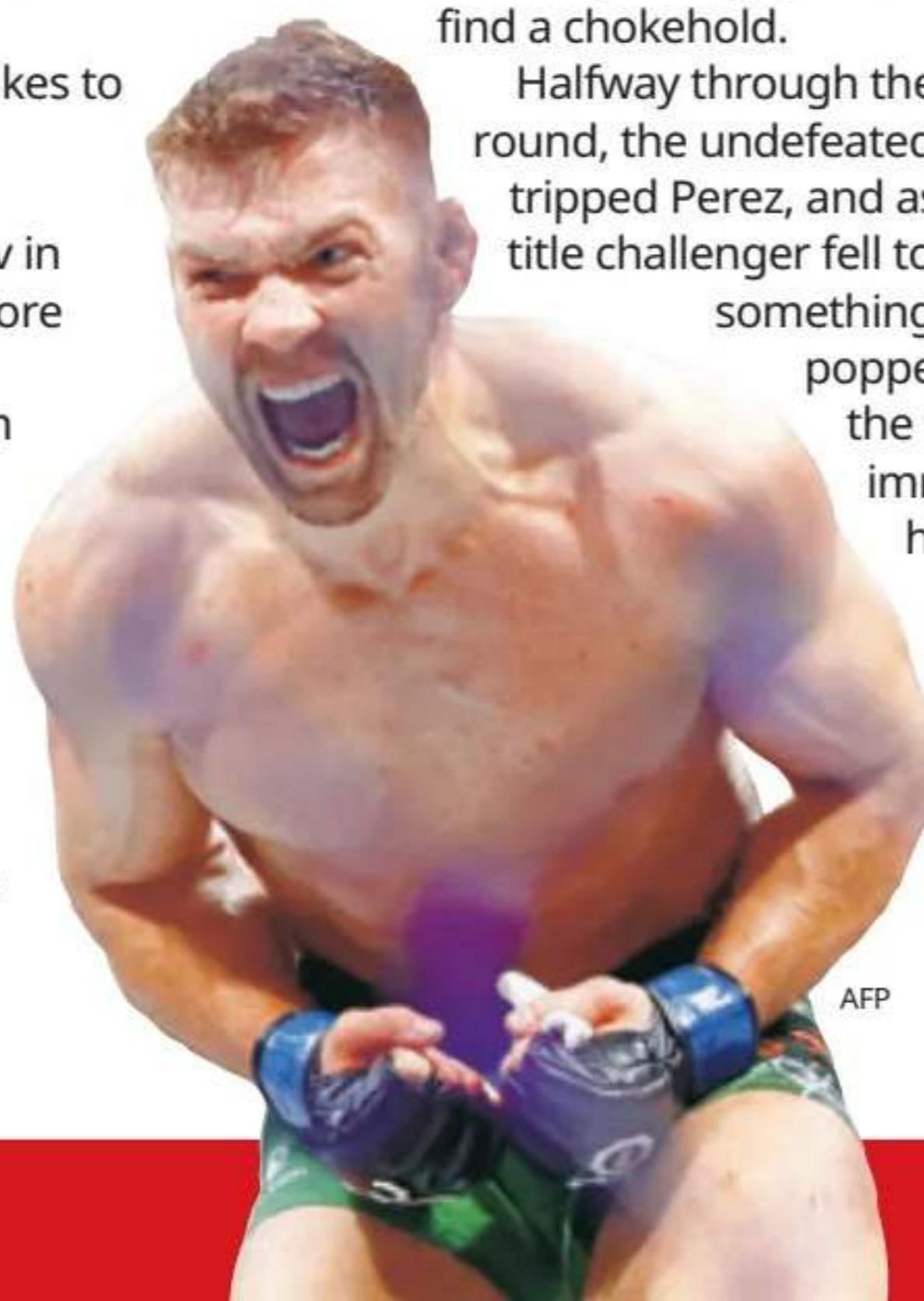
straight wins in the UFC and 16 victories overall, continuing to establish himself as one of the best emerging talents.

#### Du Plessis vs Adesanya, finally!

UFC CEO Dana White confirmed that the middleweight title will be on the line at UFC 305 in Perth, Australia, when champion Dricus Du Plessis (left) takes on former champion Israel Adesanya. The fight is scheduled to take place on August 17.

Du Plessis will make his first defence of the title after claiming the belt from Sean Strickland at UFC 297 in Toronto last January.

Adesanya will attempt to become the first fighter since Randy Couture to own three separate title reigns in the same division.



AFP



# A SECOND COMING FOR THEIR SECOND HOME

THE SOUTH ASIAN-ORIGIN CRICKETERS IN THE USA NATIONAL TEAM MAY NOT HAVE MADE THE HIGHEST GRADE AT HOME, BUT THEY ARE PROOF THAT LIFE PROVIDES A CHANCE AT A FRESH START.



## AT 17, HARMEET SINGH (RIGHT) MADE HIS FIRST-CLASS DEBUT FOR MUMBAI

The minnows are the toast of the tournament — a most unexpected success story made possible by immigrant dreams that has captured the attention of mainstream media and the public in the country. The average American has every reason to be proud. The squad has a distinct *desi* flavour — no less than seven members have their roots in India.

The rest of the team has cricketers from Pakistan (Ali Khan) and the West Indies. Ali, especially, has made a remarkable impact, taking crucial wickets in this tournament. He was also instrumental in the team's series win against Bangladesh prior to the World Cup.

Among the Indian-origin cricketers, a true star has emerged. Saurabh Netravalkar captured headlines back home when he bowled a tight Super Over to stun Pakistan in a group stage match in Grand Prairie (Texas). The win over Pakistan shocked the world and contributed significantly to the two-time World T20 champion's early exit from the tournament.

**Dual impact:** Besides his World Cup heroics, Saurabh Netravalkar still holds a steady job at Oracle, making his story all the more relatable for those in the corporate world. K. R. DEEPAK

**Ashwin Achal**  
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It was a nervous wait for the USA cricket team. The start of a crucial Group A match against Ireland at Lauderhill was delayed due to a wet outfield. Then the rain came down hard, bringing relief and joy. The washed-out encounter was enough to give co-host USA a spot in the Super 8 stage of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup.

Like many others in the USA team, Netravalkar earned his cricket stripes in India. The left-arm fast bowler from Mumbai represented India in the 2010 Under-19 World Cup, playing alongside K.L. Rahul and Mayank Agarwal. However, gaining a spot in the Mumbai team proved to be a tough task. The strong Mumbai unit had stalwarts like Zaheer Khan, Dhawal Kulkarni, and Ajit Agarkar, which meant that Netravalkar could manage just one First-Class cap.

A disappointed Netravalkar gave up on his cricket dreams and moved to the USA to pursue a Master's degree. But at a local match, he caught the attention of Pubudu Dassanayake, the USA's national team coach. This was a turning point, as Netravalkar worked his way into the USA team. Now, on the grand stage of the World Cup, he is making the most of his second innings. Netravalkar still holds a steady job at Oracle, making his story all the more



K. R. DEEPAK

relatable for those in the corporate world.

After his heroics against Pakistan, Netravalkar got the chance to face-off against some of his old friends in the Indian team. He made the perfect start, nicking off Virat Kohli for a golden duck. Rohit Sharma, his senior at Mumbai, was his next victim. USA lost, but the cult status of Netravalkar grew.

"It is all happening very fast. I'm still digesting it. I'm glad we have done well," Netravalkar said. "Personally, I love doing both. I love my job at Oracle, and I love this sport. I am blessed that I can do what I love for most of the day," Netravalkar said.

After the India match, the 32-year-old caught up with Rohit and Suryakumar Yadav. "We joked around like the old days," the soft-spoken Netravalkar said.

The redemption song continues with another Mumbai cricketer, Harmeet Singh. The left-arm spinner was considered the next big thing when he turned heads with his classical bowling in the India under-19 setup. He made his First-Class debut for Mumbai at the age of 17, playing with Rohit, Ajit Agarkar, Wasim Jaffer, and Ajinkya Rahane.

Harmeet also featured for Rajasthan Royals under the leadership of Rahul Dravid. Off-the-field issues, however, stopped his progress. Harmeet was dragged into the IPL spot-fixing controversy, even though there was no evidence pointing to his involvement.

In 2017, he faced trouble after driving his car onto the Andheri railway station platform. Harmeet said that he mistook the route as the way to his home — a





**Unity in diversity:** The USA cricket team, led by Monank Patel (left), is the toast of the tournament—a most unexpected success story made possible by immigrant dreams.

K. R. DEEPAK

version that was accepted by the police. On the field, his performances suffered. He lost his spot in the Mumbai team and opted to turn up for Tripura. In 2020, he accepted an offer from USA Cricket, which was

looking to recruit overseas cricketers. The 31-year-old has gone from strength to strength since, playing a crucial role in the USA's recent wins over Canada and Bangladesh.

Take the case of Nosthush Kenjige (**right**), who did his schooling in Ooty before moving to Bengaluru to further his cricket ambitions. Noshtush only made it to the KSCA first division league, so he thought it best to move to the USA and find work. "But cricket took me back," Kenjige said in



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**A different path:** Milind Kumar plied his trade for Delhi and Sikkim in the domestic circuit and was also part of the Royal Challengers Bangalore and Delhi Daredevils squad.

GETTYIMAGES

a media interaction in Bengaluru, where he trained before leaving for World Cup duty. From leaving India without a First-Class cap, Kenjige struck gold in the Pakistan outing with three big wickets.

Then there is the captain, Monank Patel. Born in Anand (Gujarat), Monank represented the state in junior cricket. He later settled in New Jersey and made his debut for the USA in 2019. Monank will be disappointed that an untimely injury forced him to sit out of a World Cup game against India.

Milind Kumar is also waiting in the wings. The experienced batter plied his trade for Delhi and Sikkim in the domestic circuit and was also part of the Royal Challengers Bangalore and

Delhi Daredevils squad. The batter was unable to get a game in the IPL. Milind is a class act in the USA side but has not been able to find a place in the eleven so far.

These men may not have made the highest grade at home, but they are proof that life offers a second chance. Netravalkar said it best when asked to describe his journey.

"If you love doing something, plant the seed and water it. It might

bloom late, but if you are on the right track, it will happen. True hard work never goes to waste," Netravalkar said.

The American dream is alive and well. Now it is time for this group to go even higher with a few standout shows in the Super 8 stage. It will not be easy, as the USA is slotted with England, South Africa and the West Indies. But again, this side has already shown that it is no pushover.

**← The American dream is alive and well. Now it is time for this group to go even higher →**



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**Chasing history:** West Indies can become the first host to win the T20 World Cup. PTI

**Below:** A poster of Sir Garry Sobers at the Grantley Adams International Airport in Barbados. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



# A HAPPY COMMUNION OF PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

No team has ever won the T20 World Cup on home soil before, but Rovman Powell's men seem **determined to break that hoochoo.**



**Ayan Acharya**

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**A**fter an exhausting 24-hour flight from Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi, with a stopover at London Heathrow, the Diary finally landed at Grantley Adams International Airport in Barbados. Beyond competitive cricket, the Caribbean tour has already proven to be an unforgettable journey — one that the Diary once thought would remain a distant dream. The island's stunning beaches, welcoming people, warm hospitality, and fervent passion for cricket have left an indelible mark. The Diary eagerly anticipates a return, hopefully in the not-too-distant future.

Barbadians speak a rich, melodious version of English, shaped by the dialects of early settlers from the English Midlands. This unique speech, peppered with charming local idioms, initially felt foreign, but by the end of the week, the Diary had embraced its distinctive

allure.

According to the locals, Barbados is the finest island in the Caribbean — a claim that sparks lively debate among residents of Trinidad, St. Lucia, and beyond. The tiny island, 21 miles long and 15 miles wide, is abuzz as English fans pour into the Kensington Oval for a pivotal Group B showdown against their arch-rival, Australia. The stands are a vibrant sea of red, white, and blue. The venue is just a few typos away from being the Kennington Oval!

The Diary has often observed that the knowledge of taxi drivers offers a unique glimpse into a region's passion for cricket, particularly in the sport's traditional strongholds. "That passion is still there," remarks Marc St. John, a cab driver in Bridgetown. "But I think the people here struggle to accept this West Indies team."

As the conversation wore on, Marc's tone grew increasingly despondent, though he hadn't lost all hope. "I don't think the glory days of Holding, Marshall, and Richards are coming back... naah, brother, that's not happening," he lamented. "But I feel we get so caught up in our past that we fail to appreciate the current side for its title wins."

A glowing example of Barbados' enduring love affair with cricket is the 5-dollar note issued by the Central Bank of Barbados in 2018. The obverse of the green note features the Barbadian coat of arms, a map of Barbados, and a portrait of the legendary cricketer Frank Worrell. On the reverse, the note depicts the 3Ws (Frank Worrell, Everton Weekes, and Clyde Walcott) and the Oval cricket facility located at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus.

Over at the Oval, the Diary encounters John, a local keymaker, and inquires about his allegiance. His response is surprising. He hopes England or India makes it to the finals, not the West Indies. "If we

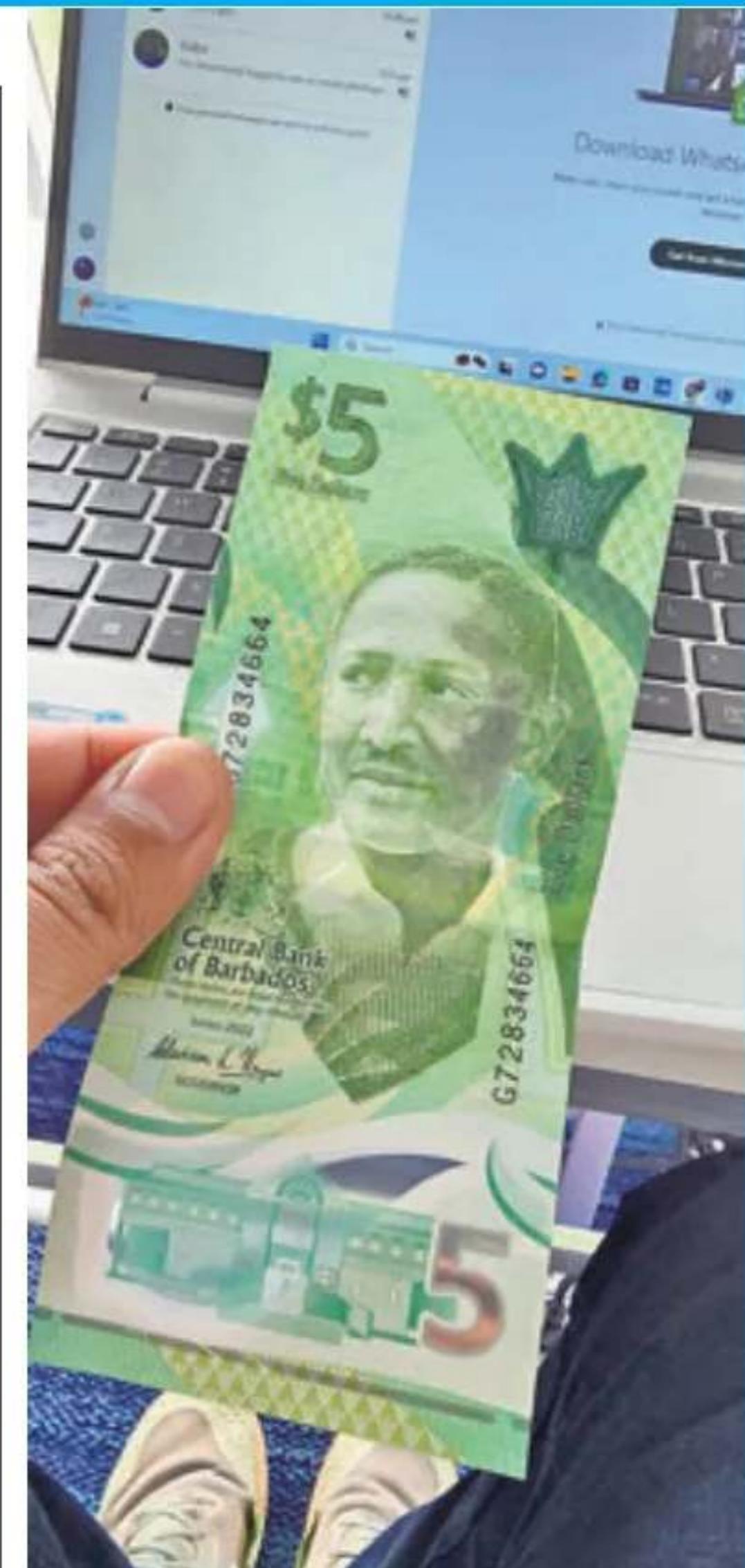
**Renewed hope:** Fans in the Caribbean truly believe that this is the year their team wins a record third T20 World Cup title. GETTY IMAGES

reach the final, it's just going to be home fans. We need visitors to kick up the business. It's been tough after COVID-19," he explains.

One can't help but feel the weight of those words. The heart of Caribbean cricket, once beating with unyielding pride, now grapples with the harsh realities of modern economics. Meanwhile, Australia delivered a clinical performance on the field, with its trio of fast bowlers and leg-spinner Adam Zampa dismantling England and spoiling the homecoming of local hero Jofra Archer.

Next stop? The kingdom of the cricketing prince, Brian Charles Lara. The Diary arrives at Piarco International Airport in Trinidad after a swift hour-long flight from Barbados, greeted by a persistent drizzle and cool winds — a refreshing reprieve from the relentless heat and humidity endured back home over the past four months.

It is the start of the rainy season in the Caribbean and the weather department issued thunderstorm warnings ahead of what was West Indies' first men's World Cup match at the Brian Lara Stadium in Trinidad. But luckily, the rain clouds steered clear and the atmosphere remained festive as, in front of a packed house, the West Indies qualified for Super



**Note-worthy:** The 5-dollar note issued by the Central Bank of Barbados in 2018 features a map of the island, its coat of arms, and a portrait of the legendary cricketer Frank Worrell. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT





Eight and knocked New Zealand out. The fans were serenaded before the start of play as Calypso legend David Rudder sang Rally, Rally 'Round the West Indies. The stirring anthem was released in 1987 but adopted as the team's 'national' anthem in 1999, coinciding with the onset of a downward spiral that would afflict the West Indies for a decade.

The Diary can say from first-hand experience that despite the concern of many about the state of West Indian cricket, the fans in the Caribbean truly believe that this is the year their team wins a record third T20 World Cup title.

West Indies skipper Rovman Powell talked about it before the tournament began. "It's very special, to be honest, not just for me but for the other players and for the people of the Caribbean — the possibility of winning a third World Cup title in front of our own people in the Caribbean is something very, very special," he said at a press

interaction. "For us as players, it's a legacy. It's something that, after we finish playing, we can sit down and tell our kids and grandkids, our family, and just replay those memories of 2024.

"Also, from a financial standpoint, we know the standard of West Indies cricket, and it would be a massive boost for us to win the World Cup. So all that money that comes with winning the World Cup can be filtered down into our youth programme and help benefit West Indies cricket."

No team has ever won the T20 World Cup on home soil before, but Powell's men seem determined to break that hoodoo. The final will be played in Barbados on June 29, the land of Worrell, Weekes and Walcott, at a ground with stands named after Desmond Haynes and Gordon Greenidge. A happy communion of past, present and future would be the perfect ode to West Indies cricket.

**« For us as players, it's a legacy. It's something that, after we finish playing, we can sit down and tell our kids and grandkids, our family, and just replay those memories of 2024. Also, from a financial standpoint, it would be a massive boost for us to win the World Cup – Rovman Powell, West Indies captain »**

**Den of the king:** Scenes from the stadium in Trinidad and Tobago, the kingdom of the cricketing prince, Brian Charles Lara. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



» T20 WORLD CUP  
PHOTOLINE (MATCH No. 6-40)



FOR MORE  
IMAGES



1st

**Abandoned:** England's opening match against Scotland didn't come to any conclusion as rain had the final say in Bridgetown.

GETTY IMAGES



2nd

**Floored:** The Netherlands had a dominating outing in Dallas as it bowled out Nepal for 106 and then chased down the target comfortably with six wickets in hand. AFP



## 3rd

**Too hot to handle:** Indian pacers were on a roll as they picked up eight wickets among themselves to skittle out Ireland for 96. India completed the chase with 46 balls to spare, losing just two wickets, to begin its World Cup campaign with a win. K. R. DEEPAK

## 4th

**Maiden win:** On a tricky pitch in Guyana, Riazat Ali Shah's 33 off 56 balls helped Uganda clinch its first T20 World Cup victory. Papua New Guinea got bowled out for 77 but Uganda only managed to chase the target in the 19th over, after losing seven wickets. AP



# 5th

**Top gun:** Marcus Stoinis' all-round performance helped Australia defeat Oman in a one-sided affair. Australia scored 164/5 and restricted Oman to 125/9. AP



# 6th

**Stunned:** Saurabh Netravalkar bowled a perfect super over as USA outclassed Pakistan in New York. The teams were tied at 159 at the end of two innings before United States scored 18 in the super over and defended it. GETTY IMAGES

# 7th

**Launched:** Michael Leask's 35 off 17 balls and a wicket played a key role in Scotland's first-ever T20I win over Namibia. The Scots comfortably chased down the 156-run target with nine balls to spare. AP



## 8th

**First-off:** Canada registered its first-ever T20 World Cup victory and that too against full-member Ireland. Nicholas Kirton set up the win with his 49 off 35 balls, taking his side to a decent 137/7, before the bowlers did their job. Canada won by 12 runs. AFP



## 9th

**Future is now:** In a stunning collapse, New Zealand got bundled out for 75 chasing Afghanistan's 160-run target. Fazalhaq Farooqi and Rashid Khan picked four wickets each after Rahmanullah Gurbaz scored 80. AP

## 10th

**Tug-of-war:** Sri Lanka and Bangladesh stayed true to their understated rivalry as the 'Tigers' defeated the 'Lions' with two wickets in hand. Bangladesh chased down Sri Lanka's 125-run target in 19 overs. AP



## 11th

**Killer Miller:** David Miller rescued South Africa after a top-order collapse saw the team reduced to 12/4. Miller's unbeaten fifty helped South Africa breach Netherlands' 104-run target with seven balls to spare. GETTY IMAGES



## 12th

**Zampastic:** England had no answers to Adam Zampa's leg spin as Australia defended its 201/7 comfortably by 36 runs in Bridgetown. AP

## 13th

**Blown away:** Akeal Hosein's left-arm spin dismantled Uganda to joint-lowest total in T20 World Cup history—39—as West Indies won by 134 runs—the second biggest win by margin of runs. AP



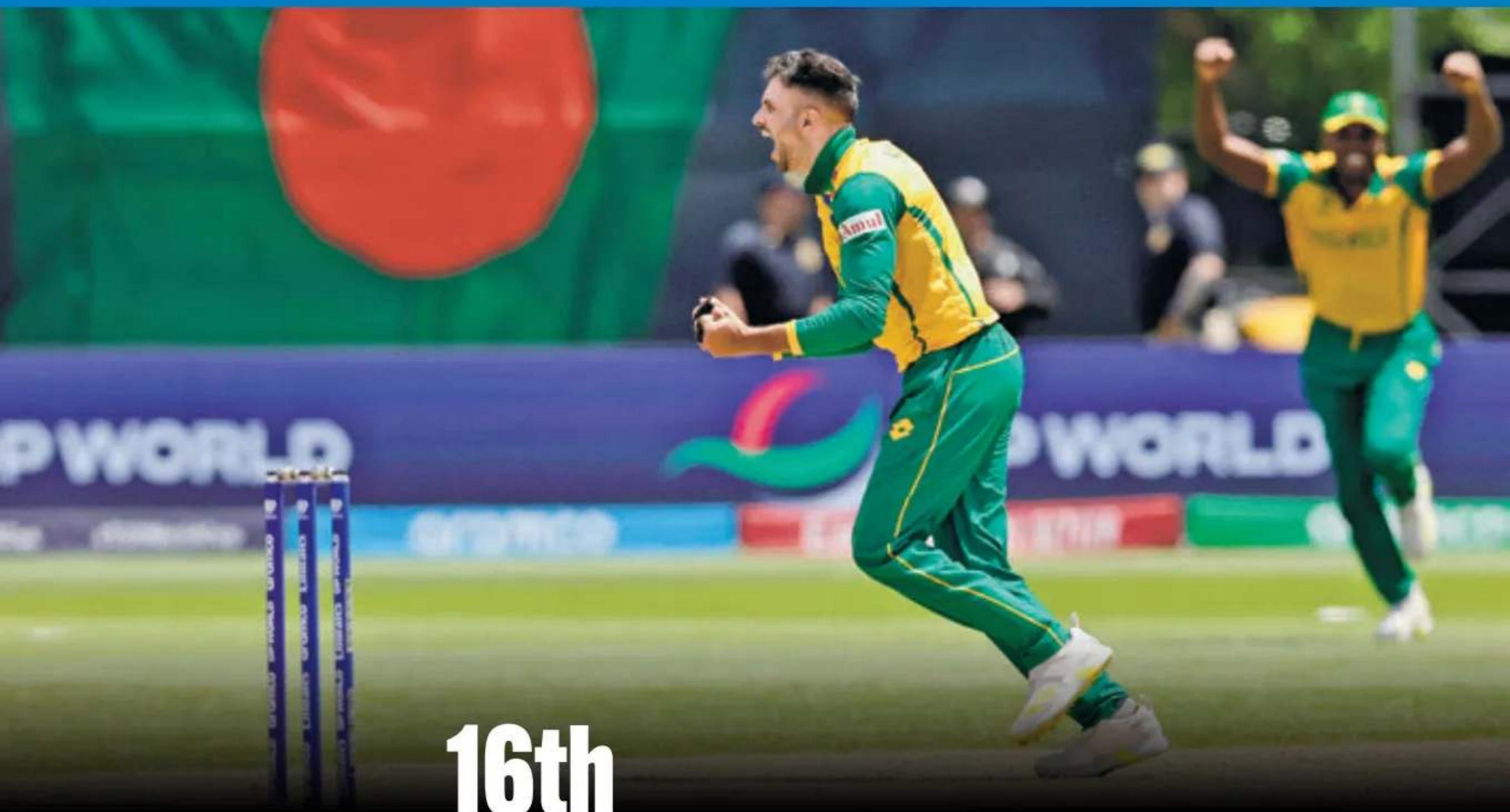
## 14th

**Boom Boom Bumrah:** Jasprit Bumrah spearheaded India to a thrilling six-run win over Pakistan. India, which was bowled out for 119, restricted its arch-rival to 113/7 in New York to make it two-wins-in-a-row. K. R. DEEPAK



## 15th

**Feisty:** Brandon McMullen's (left) quickfire 61 off 31 balls gave Scotland's Net Run Rate a big boost as it chased down Oman's 151-run target with 41 balls to spare. AP



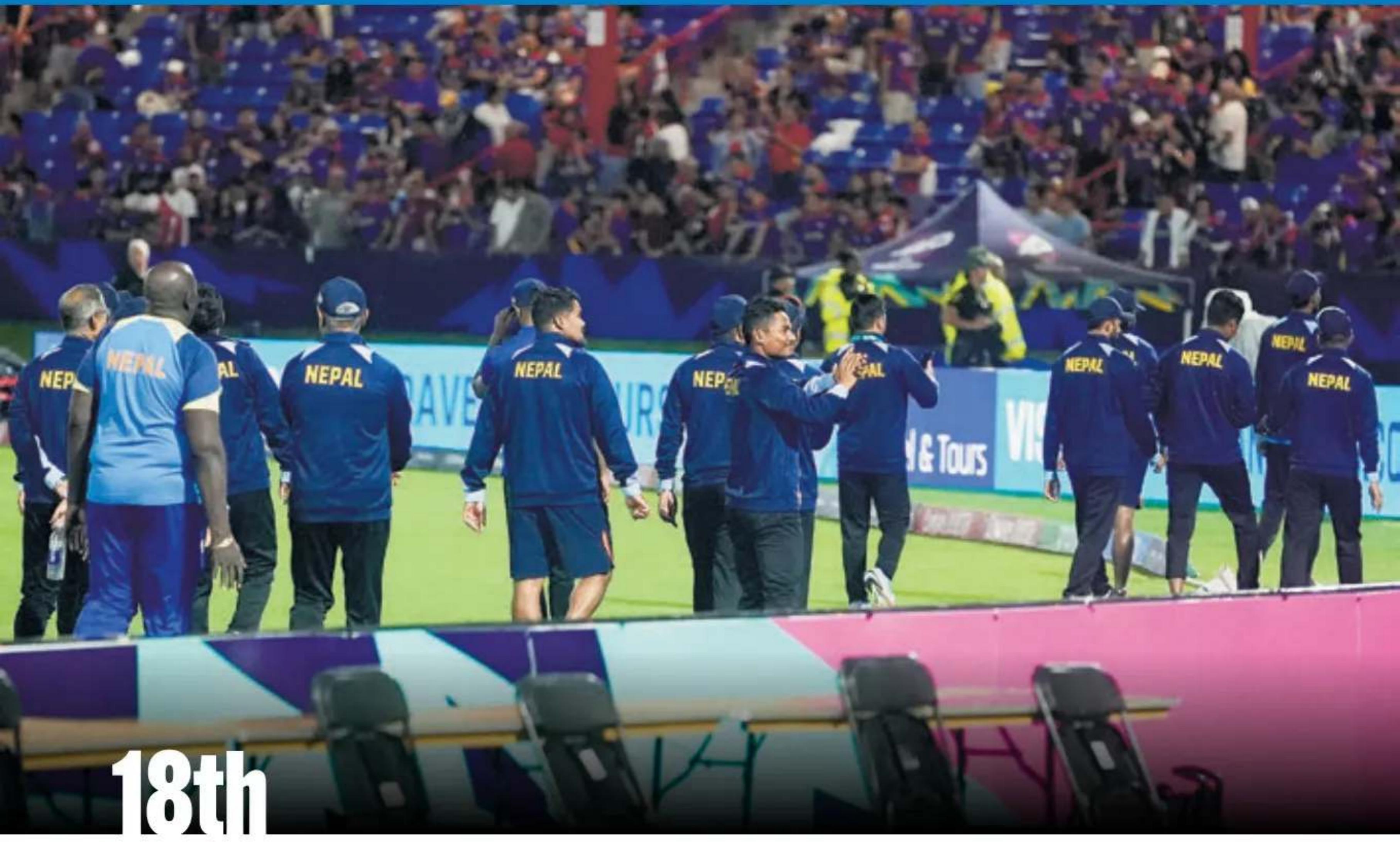
## 16th

**Spin it to win it:** Keshav Maharaj defended 11 runs in the last over as Bangladesh fell short by four runs of South Africa's 114-run target in New York. AP

## 17th

**Watchful:** Mohammad Rizwan scored an unbeaten 53 off 53 balls to guide Pakistan to a seven-wicket win over Canada. AP





## 18th

**Gratitude:** Members of the Nepal squad did a lap around the Central Broward Stadium in Lauderhill to thank fans after its match against Sri Lanka was abandoned without a ball bowled. AP



## 19th

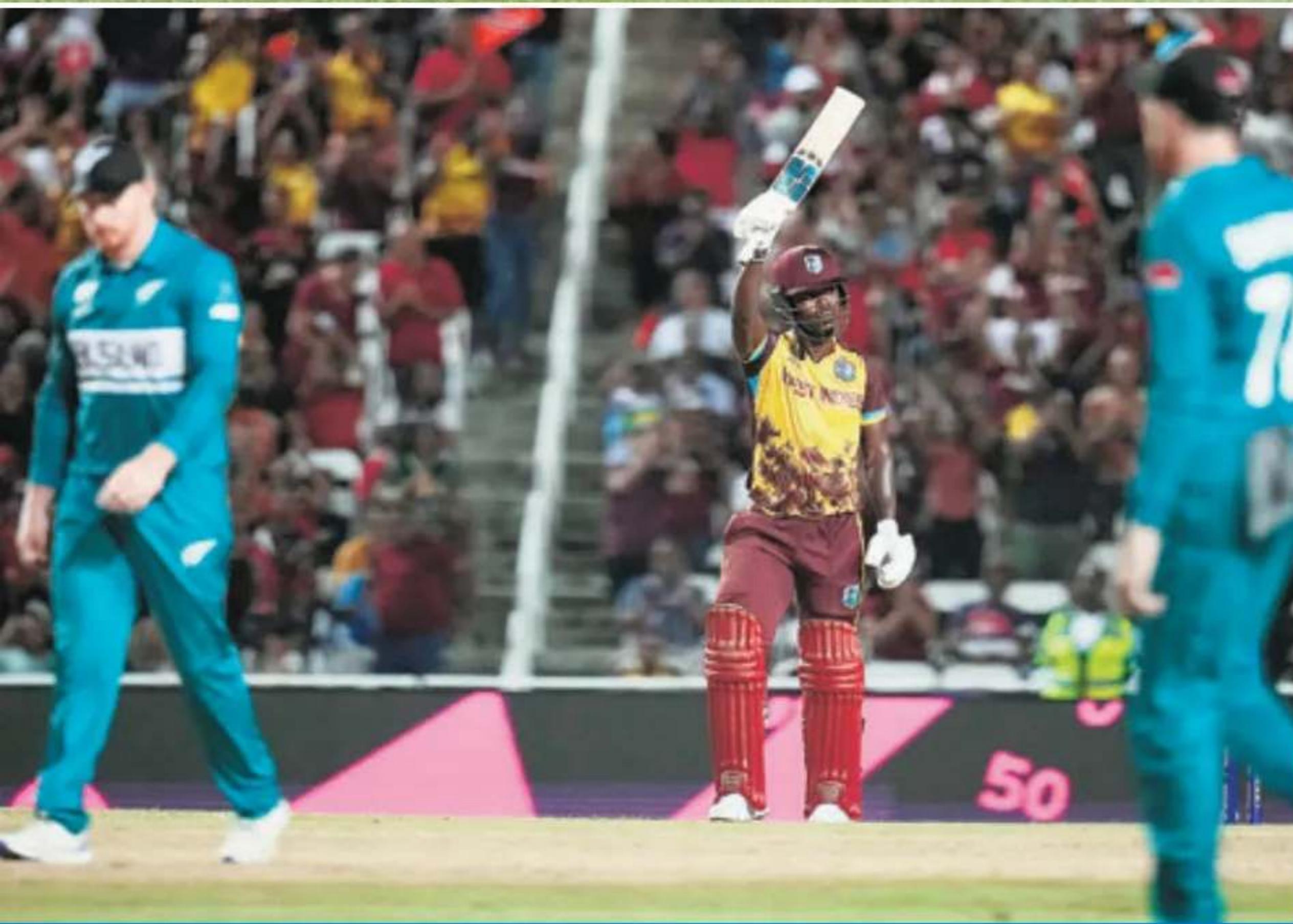
**No match:** Adam Zampa completed 100 T20I wickets during his miserly spell of 4/12 as Australia bowled out Namibia for 72 and completed the chase inside the Power Play. AFP



## 20th

**Flying high:** Arshdeep Singh not only struck on the first ball of the match but also finished with his best T20I figures (4/9) to set up India's comfortable seven-wicket win over co-host USA.

K. R. DEEPAK



## 21st

**Heroic:** Sherfane Rutherford's 68 off 39 balls rescued the West Indies after a top-order collapse and took the team to 149/9 that eventually proved enough against New Zealand, which lost by 13 runs. AP



## 22nd

**Routine stuff:** Shakib Al Hasan scored an unbeaten 64 off 46 balls as Bangladesh scored 159/5 and defended it comfortably against the Netherlands. GETTY IMAGES

## 23rd

**Easy-breezy:** Adil Rashid picked up 4/11 as England bowled out Oman for a mere 47 before chasing it down in just 3.1 overs, making it the fastest chase in T20 World Cup history.

GETTY IMAGES





## 24th

**New ball, old game:** Fazalhaq Farooqi swung the new ball well and triggered a top-order collapse from which PNG never recovered. Farooqi ended with 3/16 as Afghanistan won by seven wickets. GETTY IMAGES

## 25th

**Murky:** There wasn't much the two teams could do as poor outfield conditions owing to heavy rains led to the abandonment of the match between the USA and Ireland in Florida. AFP





## 26th

**So close, yet so far:** Nepal was knocked out of the race to the Super Eights as South Africa held its nerves to defend the 116-run target by one run. GETTY IMAGES



## 27th

**Authoritative:** Tim Southee finished with three wickets for four runs as New Zealand romped through Uganda's batting order, bowling it out for just 40 before chasing it inside the PowerPlay. AP



## 28th

**Unfit for play:** The India vs. Canada game was called off as outfield conditions in Central Broward Stadium, Lauderhill weren't ideal to conduct a match. K.R. DEEPAK



## 29th

**Breaking open:** Harry Brook smacked 47 off 20 balls as England scored 122/5 in 10 overs against Namibia in a rain-affected match. Namibia, in reply, made 84/3 in 10 overs and England won by 41 runs (DLS method). AP



## 30th

**Dual assault:** Marcus Stoinis (59) and Travis Head (68) added 80 runs in 44 balls for the fourth wicket to guide Australia's successful 181-run chase against Scotland. AFP



## 31st

**Over the line:** Shaheen Shah Afridi ended Pakistan's otherwise dismal T20 World Cup campaign with a six, chasing down Ireland's 107-run target with seven balls to spare. K. R. DEEPAK



## 32nd

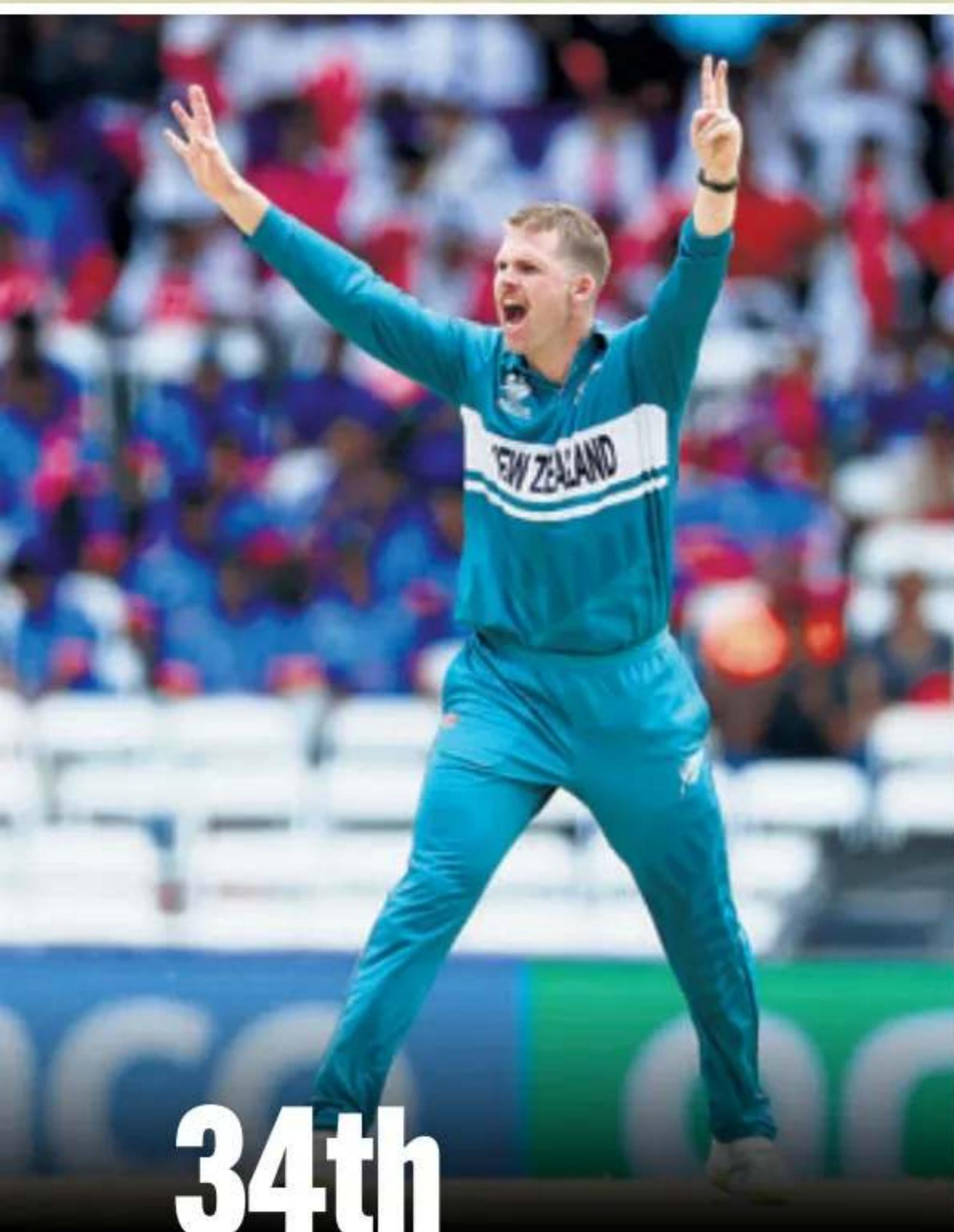
**Scythed:** Tanzim Hasan Sakib ran through Nepal's middle-order as Bangladesh defended 106 runs. Nepal was bowled out for 85. The win also confirmed Bangladesh's berth in the Super Eights.

GETTYIMAGES



## 33rd

**Signing off:** Sri Lanka finished its World Cup campaign with a thumping win over the Netherlands set up by its batters. The Lions scored 201/6 and won the match by 83 runs. AP



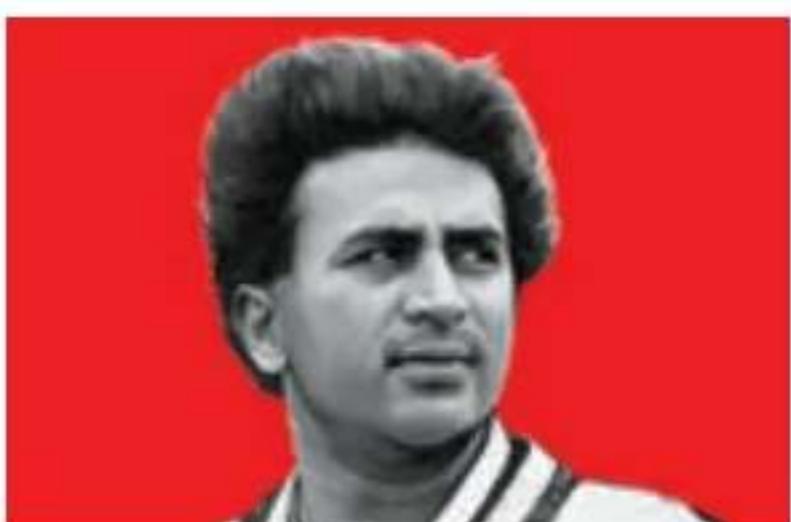
## 34th

**Once in a lifetime:** Lockie Ferguson recorded unbelievable figures of 4-4-0-3, becoming only the second bowler in T20Is to bowl four maidens. New Zealand dominated PNG and bowled it out for 78. The Kiwis chased down the target with 46 balls to spare and ended their World Cup campaign with a win. GETTY IMAGES



## 35th

**Six machine:** Nicholas Pooran's rapid knock of 98 from 53 balls including eight maximums turned out to be the difference between the two sides as West Indies scored 218/5 and bowled out Afghanistan for 114. AP



## ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



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STORIES

# Dead ball should not be part of referrals

Referrals should be only for dismissals given or not given, otherwise the **rhythm and flow** of the game will be upset considerably.

The ICC men's T20 World Cup has been of some ups and downs. While the ICC must be commended for bringing more Associate Member countries into the fold, it was clear that some were just not ready for the contests at this level. Teams getting bowled out under 50 and that score being chased down in under four overs tells of the vast gulf in the standards between the Full Member and the Associate Member teams.

On the other hand there is the story of USA, who not only beat the 2022 runners-up Pakistan but also gave India a tough time in their clash. The manner in which they chased down a near-200 score put up by Canada also showed that they were not fazed by the enormity of the event and had plenty of self belief. Yes, the USA side comprised mostly of expats from different parts of the world and not from those born in the USA, but that should not take anything away from their performance. They will be looking forward to the Super 8 part of the tournament where they get to play three other teams and show the world they are ready for sterner battles.

How can there be a World Cup and there isn't a controversy? That's the nature of any World Cup event in any sport. So there was the debate about the dead ball given in the match between South Africa and Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi batter Mahmudullah was given out LBW and the ball went off his leg-guards for a boundary. The batter asked for a review of the decision and the referral showed that he

was not out and the umpire thus had to reverse his earlier decision. However, since the batter was given out, the ball became dead and so while Mahmudullah survived, no leg byes were given to his team. The debate, therefore, was whether the four leg byes should have been credited or not. Eventually, Bangladesh lost by just four runs, so the debate only got heated. One must remember that as soon as the batter is given out the fielders relax and don't bother about the ball so the boundary fielders who otherwise would have tried to stop the ball would have rushed to celebrate the wicket than chase the ball. So the dead ball is the correct decision. If the margin of defeat wasn't four runs, then it wouldn't have mattered, but there you are.

Speaking of dead balls, I remember how when we were chasing the target of 438 set by England at The Oval in 1979 there were at least three occasions when a dead ball for not offering a stroke was called after we had taken three runs each time. I inquired of the umpire why was he making us run, on a hot day too, when he could have called a dead ball straightaway. He said because there was a chance of a run out. I countered by saying how could there be a dismissal if the ball was dead. He replied something to the effect that he doesn't make the rules but simply applies them. All those leg byes should have been given because there was no last second attempt on my part to leave the ball, but the umpire chose to think there was and in the end we were short of the target by eight runs.



**Debatable:** Ottiel Baartman of South Africa celebrates after dismissing Mahmudullah Riyad of Bangladesh which was later given not out on review, but the ball went off his leg-guards for a boundary. While Mahmudullah survived, no leg byes were given to his team. The debate, therefore, was whether the four leg byes should have been credited or not. Eventually, Bangladesh lost by just four runs, so the debate only got heated. AFP

There were no reviews for any decision those days, but be that as it may, if dead ball starts to be part of the referrals for batters and the fielding side, the rhythm and flow of the game will be upset considerably. I strongly believe that referrals should be only for dismissals given or not given. These have a huge impact on the result of the game and not reviews for wide balls or no balls. They only

waste time and lengthen the game.

India will play Australia in their final game of the Super Eight and that could well decide who gets to the semifinals. In all the ICC events in recent times, India has played well but have slipped just when the trophy is within reach. It's like a batter who has got into the nineties but can't get to the coveted century mark. Will this time be different? Let's pray that it will be so.



**Speaking of dead balls, I remember how when we were chasing the target of 438 set by England at The Oval in 1979 there were at least three occasions when a dead ball for not offering a stroke was called after we had taken three runs each time.**

# Big-hitting Aaron

**94}** The number of runs registered by USA's Aaron Jones against Canada in the opening match of the ninth edition of the T20 World Cup in Dallas. This is now the second highest by a batter playing his first T20WC match. West Indian Chris Gayle still holds the record of 117 runs in the 2007 T20WC. Gayle's knock at the Wanderers on 11 September 2007 was incidentally the inaugural game of T20WC. Meanwhile, Aaron's score is now the highest in a T20WC match by a batter from an ICC associate member nation.

## Highest individual scores on T20 World Cup debut

| Runs | Batter            | For          | Against      | Venue        | Date        | Result |
|------|-------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------|
| 117  | Chris Gayle       | West Indies  | South Africa | Johannesburg | 11 Sep 2007 | Lost   |
| 94*  | Aaron Jones       | USA          | Canada       | Dallas       | 1 June 2024 | Won    |
| 90*  | Herschelle Gibbs  | South Africa | West Indies  | Johannesburg | 11 Sep 2007 | Won    |
| 88   | Sanath Jayasuriya | Sri Lanka    | Kenya        | Johannesburg | 14 Sep 2007 | Won    |
| 79*  | Mohd Rizwan       | Pakistan     | India        | Dubai        | 24 Oct 2021 | Won    |

**Note:** Gayle and Jayasuriya's efforts came in the match's first innings. Jones made his runs batting at #4, while the rest came when opening the batting.

## Highest individual scores in T20 World Cup by players from ICC associate nations

| Runs | Batter         | For         | Against   | Venue       | Date        | Result |
|------|----------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|--------|
| 94*  | Aaron Jones    | USA         | Canada    | Dallas      | 1 June 2024 | Won    |
| 86   | Michael Jones  | Scotland    | Ireland   | Hobart (BO) | 19 Oct 2022 | Lost   |
| 73*  | Jatinder Singh | Oman        | PNG       | Al Amerat   | 17 Oct 2021 | Won    |
| 72*  | Tom Cooper     | Netherlands | Zimbabwe  | Sylhet      | 19 Mar 2014 | Lost   |
| 71*  | Max O'Dowd     | Netherlands | Sri Lanka | Geelong     | 20 Oct 2022 | Lost   |



USA's Aaron Jones. K.R. DEEPAK

**10}** The number of sixes hit by USA's Aaron Jones during his match-winning knock of 94 against Canada in Dallas. This is now the joint-second most hit by a player in a T20WC match, a feat that only the legendary West Indian Chris Gayle has surpassed. This is a significant milestone for the U.S. team, as no U.S. batter has hit more than five sixes in a T20 match before this. Jones bettered Netherlands' Stephan Myburgh's seven sixes against Ireland in Sylhet on 21 March 2014, the previous record for the maximum sixes hit by an associate batter in T20WC.

## Most sixes by a batter in a T20WC match

| 6s | Batter (score)      | For          | Against      | Venue        | Date        | Result |
|----|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------|
| 11 | Chris Gayle (100*)  | West Indies  | England      | Mumbai WS    | 16 Mar 2016 | Won    |
| 10 | Chris Gayle (117)   | West Indies  | South Africa | Johannesburg | 11 Sep 2007 | Lost   |
| 10 | Aaron Jones (94*)   | USA          | Canada       | Dallas       | 1 June 2024 | Won    |
| 8  | Rilee Rossouw (109) | South Africa | Bangladesh   | Sydney       | 27 Oct 2022 | Won    |

**238}** The batting strike-rate during the match-winning third wicket partnership of 131 runs in 55 balls between USA's Andries Gous and Aaron Jones against Canada in Dallas on 1 June 2024. This is the quickest 100-plus stand for any wicket in the history of T20WC since September 2007.

## Fastest 100-plus partnerships for any wicket in T20WC

| SR+ | Runs | Balls | Wkt | Pair                             | For          | Against     | Venue   | Date        | Result |
|-----|------|-------|-----|----------------------------------|--------------|-------------|---------|-------------|--------|
| 238 | 131  | 55    | 3rd | Andries Gous & Aaron Jones       | USA          | Canada      | Dallas  | 1 June 2024 | Won    |
| 224 | 101  | 45    | 4th | Andrew Poynter & Kevin O'Brien   | Ireland      | Netherlands | Sylhet  | 21 Mar 2014 | Lost   |
| 211 | 120* | 57    | 3rd | Herschelle Gibbs & Justin Kemp   | South Africa | West Indies | Jo'burg | 11 Sep 2007 | Won    |
| 209 | 119* | 57    | 5th | Curtis Campher & George Dockrell | Ireland      | Scotland    | Hobart  | 19 Oct 2022 | Won    |
| 207 | 168  | 81    | 2nd | Quinton de Kock & Rilee Rossouw  | South Africa | Bangladesh  | Sydney  | 27 Oct 2022 | Won    |

+ SR is runs scored off 100 balls

**4}** The number of runs conceded by Uganda's 43-year-old off-spinner Franco Nsubuga against PNG in Providence, Guyana, on 5 June 2024. This is the fewest conceded by any bowler in a T20WC match. Nine days later, on 14 June, 35-year-old New Zealander Tim Southee equalled the record against Nsubuga's team Uganda in Tarouba in Trinidad and Tobago. Meanwhile, on 12 June 2024, Arshdeep Singh etched his name in the annals of Indian cricket history. In the match against the USA in New York, he became the first Indian bowler to concede less than 10 runs in a T20WC match. This achievement not only sets him apart but also places him in the esteemed company of Bhuvneshwar Kumar, R. Ashwin, and Ravindra Jadeja, who have also achieved this feat for India in a T20 international match.

#### Bowlers conceding less than 10 runs in a T20WC match in their full quota of four overs

| Bowling | E/R  | Bowler           | For          | Against   | Venue      | Date         | Result |
|---------|------|------------------|--------------|-----------|------------|--------------|--------|
| 4-2-4-2 | 1.00 | Franco Nsubuga   | Uganda       | PNG       | Providence | 5 June 2024  | Won    |
| 4-1-4-3 | 1.00 | Tim Southee      | New Zealand  | Uganda    | Tarouba    | 14 Jun 2024  | Won    |
| 4-0-7-4 | 1.75 | Anrich Nortje    | South Africa | Sri Lanka | New York   | 3 June 2024  | Won    |
| 4-1-7-2 | 1.75 | Trent Boult      | New Zealand  | Uganda    | Tarouba    | 14 Jun 2024  | Won    |
| 4-1-9-1 | 2.25 | Ottniel Baartman | South Africa | Sri Lanka | New York   | 3 June 2024  | Won    |
| 4-0-9-5 | 2.25 | Fazalhaq Farooqi | Afghanistan  | Uganda    | Providence | 3 June 2024  | Won    |
| 4-0-9-4 | 2.25 | Arshdeep Singh   | India        | USA       | New York   | 12 June 2024 | Won    |
| 4-0-9-1 | 2.25 | Lockie Ferguson  | New Zealand  | Uganda    | Tarouba    | 14 Jun 2024  | Won    |

**Note:** For the first time in a T20WC match, two bowlers from the same team conceded less than 10 runs in their full quota of four overs.

#### Indian bowlers conceding less than 10 runs in a T20I match in their full quota of four overs

| Bowling | E/R  | Bowler            | Against      | Venue              | Date         | Result |
|---------|------|-------------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|--------|
| 4-1-4-5 | 1.00 | Bhuvneshwar Kumar | Afghanistan  | Dubai              | 8 Sep 2022   | Won    |
| 4-1-8-4 | 2.00 | R. Ashwin         | Sri Lanka    | Visakhapatnam      | 14 Feb 2016  | Won    |
| 4-2-8-2 | 2.00 | Bhuvneshwar Kumar | UAE          | Mirpur             | 3 Mar 2016   | Won    |
| 4-1-8-0 | 2.00 | R. Ashwin         | South Africa | Thiruvananthapuram | 28 Sep 2022  | Won    |
| 4-1-9-1 | 2.25 | Ravindra Jadeja   | England      | Kolkata            | 29 Oct 2011  | Lost   |
| 4-0-9-3 | 2.25 | Bhuvneshwar Kumar | Pakistan     | Bengaluru          | 25 Dec 2012  | Lost   |
| 4-0-9-4 | 2.25 | Arshdeep Singh    | USA          | New York           | 12 June 2024 | Won    |

**Note:** Bhuvneshwar Kumar, in Bengaluru, was on his T20I debut.

**3}** The number of bowlers to claim a four-wicket haul while leading a side in the T20WC. Afghanistan's Rashid Khan became the latest to join this elite group of bowlers to claim a four-wicket haul as captain. Furthermore, the Afghan captain's figures (4/17) are now the best by a captain in T20WCs.

#### Captains claiming three or more wickets in a T20WC match

| Bowl | Overs | Bowler-captain  | For         | Against     | Venue        | Date        | Result |
|------|-------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------|
| 4/17 | 4     | Rashid Khan     | Afghanistan | New Zealand | Providence   | 7 Jun 2024  | Won    |
| 4/20 | 4     | Daniel Vettori  | New Zealand | India       | Johannesburg | 16 Sep 2007 | Won    |
| 4/20 | 4     | Zeeshan Maqsood | Oman        | PNG         | Al Amerat    | 17 Oct 2021 | Won    |
| 3/24 | 4     | Stuart Broad    | England     | Netherlands | Chittagong   | 31 Mar 2014 | Lost   |
| 3/32 | 4     | Stuart Broad    | England     | Sri Lanka   | Pallekele    | 1 Oct 2012  | Lost   |



Afghanistan's Rashid Khan. PTI

**3}** The number of instances when two bowlers have claimed a four-or-more wicket haul in the same innings of a T20WC match. Afghanistan bowlers now have the distinction of doing it twice. For the record, this has now occurred on 23 occasions in all T20 internationals.

#### Two four-or-more wickets hauls by bowlers in the same innings of a T20WC match

| Bowling side | Bowlers involved                        | Against     | Venue      | Date        | Result |
|--------------|---|-------------|------------|-------------|--------|
| Pakistan     | Umar Gul 4/25, Shahid Afridi 4/19       | Scotland    | Durban     | 12 Sep 2007 | Won    |
| Afghanistan  | Mujeeb Ur Rahman 5/20, Rashid Khan 4/9  | Scotland    | Sharjah    | 25 Oct 2021 | Won    |
| Afghanistan  | Fazalhaq Farooqi 4/17, Rashid Khan 4/17 | New Zealand | Providence | 7 Jun 2024  | Won    |

**Note:** All the above instances have come in the second innings

All records are correct and updated until 14 June 2024.

« Most of our cricket was played in the streets, trying to emulate the greats that we had been reading about in books »

# ROLAND BUTCHER

Ayan Acharya

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**F**orty-four years after his historic Test debut as England's first black cricketer, Roland Orlando Butcher continues to observe hurdles hindering players from diverse backgrounds in the sport.

His entry into Test cricket in March 1981 not only celebrated his exceptional batting skills but also signalled to the fervent cricket community, particularly the West Indian diaspora in England, that reaching the pinnacle of the game was achievable.

In this chat with *Sportstar*, Butcher talks at length about his early days in the Caribbean, how he got hooked to cricket and the myriad challenges along the way.

**Let's start with your childhood in Barbados. How did you get into cricket? Who were your heroes growing up? Where did you play?**  
I was born in East Point, St. Philip, Barbados, a very rural area close to the sea, right on the coast. As a kid, I got involved with cricket and fell in love with the sport at a very young age. By the time I was six, I was really hooked to the game. I played informally with the boys of my age and above, as there were no proper clubs nearby. Most of our cricket was played on the streets, trying to emulate the greats that we had been reading about in books. In those days, we didn't have television, so we had to read about the players in books or listen to the radio when

there was cricket going on. I remember lying in bed late at night, listening to the radio, when cricket was happening in Australia. I have a family connection to cricket as well; my family member, Basil Butcher, was a West Indies star player. His father originated from Barbados, but he was born in Guyana and played cricket for Guyana.

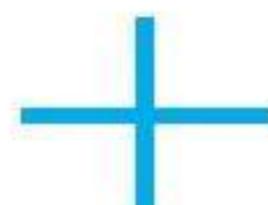
**Do you recall the first game you watched live?**

The first live cricket game I watched was in 1965, when the West Indies played Australia [in the second Test in Bridgetown]. My cousin, Monica Butcher, who has since passed away, took me to the game. It was a memorable match filled with runs. Bill Laurie and Bobby Simpson put on over 300 for the first wicket. Someone from the West Indies (Seymour Nurse) scored a double hundred, and somebody else (Rohan Kanhai) got a hundred. It was my first time watching a proper game of cricket and it really solidified my love for the sport. Growing up, I was

surrounded by females, as my father was in England. My grandmother and my aunt took care of me and my sister, while my other relatives were also mostly female. Despite the lack of male figures in the house, the women in the West Indies had a great love for cricket. It was unusual for a woman to take a boy to a cricket game, but I'm grateful that my cousin did. That experience meant a lot to me, and I'm thankful for it.

**Your parents moved to England, and you joined them later. The weather and culture are vastly different. How challenging was this transition for you?**

My parents had been in England since about 1955. I was born in 1953, and my mother joined my father a couple of years after that. I didn't actually come to England until 1967. It was very challenging. I arrived as a 13-year-old in May 1967, which should be the start of the summer, but for me, it was absolutely freezing. That was the first shock



**It was through football that I got into cricket. On weekends, kids from the area would go to the local park, make makeshift goals, and play football for hours.**



because in Barbados, you have sunshine 365 days a year. I arrived in the UK, stepped off the plane, and while breathing, this white stuff was coming out of my mouth, which was a shock.

When I got home, my parents had

four more children. I was reunited with two brothers and two sisters. My elder sister, Margaret, and I were the ones who came. Adjusting to the weather and the food in England, which was totally different from the Caribbean, was also an issue. In

Barbados, cricket was played on every street corner, but in Stevenage, England, a new town, cricket was not high on the agenda for kids. On every street corner, kids were playing football. I had never played football before, so that was



**Homecoming:** Roland Butcher displays the Union flag luggage label on his arrival at the Heathrow airport on January 15, 1981.

THE HINDU PHOTOLIBRARY

another adjustment. It took a while, but eventually, I adapted and developed a passion for football, even more so than cricket, because we were always playing football.

It was through football that I got into cricket. On weekends, kids from the area would go to the local park, make makeshift goals, and play football for hours. One Sunday, after playing football for three hours, some guys came onto the field to set up a cricket match. They were short on players and asked if any of us wanted to join. Initially, I was reluctant, but my best friend in the UK, who was English, persuaded me to play. I ran home, told my mother, and went back to the park to play. I didn't do anything fantastic — I scored about 12 runs and took a couple of catches — but to my surprise, they invited me to play the following week.

This was the local third XI for Stevenage. I thought they wanted me to play because they were short of players, but soon I moved up to the second XI, and, by age 15, I was playing in the first XI. My development in cricket started from there.

**Reflecting on your Test debut in 1981, what was the emotional experience of playing for a different country in Barbados like?** Going on that tour was a formidable challenge because the West Indies were by far the most dominant team in world cricket. It was a bigger challenge for me because I was a black West Indian returning to the West Indies to play against the West Indies. The first Test match was in Trinidad, but I didn't play there. The second Test match was in Guyana, and I was due to play, but then the Robin Jackman affair happened. Bob Willis got injured and was replaced by Robin Jackman, but his entry permit was revoked by the Guyanese government because of his prior visits to South Africa, which was under apartheid at the time.

This didn't sit well in the Caribbean. Jackman was asked to leave, and the British Foreign Office and the English Cricket Board decided that if he had to leave, the whole team would leave. So, the Test match was cancelled, and we moved on to Barbados, which was going to be the third Test but became the second.

I made my debut in Barbados, the place of my birth and where I had seen my very first Test match. On day two of my first Test match, our assistant manager Ken Barrington had a heart attack and passed away, making it more challenging to focus on the game while dealing with the loss of a team member. That first Test match went from excitement to sadness very quickly.

At the time, I didn't fully understand the significance because I was focused on fulfilling my ambition to play international cricket. Later in life, you get wiser and understand the political implications and historical significance of what happened. Being the first black player motivated others.

Suddenly, they felt that if they

worked hard enough, the possibility of playing for England existed.

### **Speaking of West Indies cricket today, is there a disconnect between the team and the interest among West Indian kids in Britain?**

Yeah, there's a big disconnect. When I was playing, our parents had come from the Caribbean with a very strong cricketing background. They loved the sport in the West Indies. They came to England but still had a love for the sport. They really looked forward to when the West Indies came to England to play cricket and followed the fortunes of the West Indies team, who were very dominant. Those people were empowered to feel proud of being black in a new society.

Now, what really happened with my brothers and sisters, and the brothers and sisters of thousands of others born in England, is that they didn't have the same feel for West Indies cricket because they didn't grow up with it. My mother and father grew up in Barbados, where cricket was everything. It was always there and part of the fabric of being a West Indian. But my siblings grew up in England, where there weren't many black people playing the game at a high level at that time. The only time they felt proud was when the West Indies came to England, and they were very strong then. They were beating the English, and their supporters felt good because they could go to work the next day, lift their heads up, and feel proud.

But the kids — their kids — were English, and their loyalty was really to football. They saw role models in the 1960s involved with football. Another factor was the decline of the West Indies team, which affected the love for cricket among people in England. People stopped associating themselves with West Indies cricket because there was nothing to be proud of anymore.

Also, during the last 15 to 20 years, we saw the rise of cricketers from fee-paying schools. State schools didn't have cricket programmes and struggled for



facilities. You may remember there was a period in the 1980s when successive governments in England, under the Conservatives, were selling off the playing fields of schools for housing developments. This reduced the space for kids to play sports. Most West Indian kids went to normal government schools, which had no facilities, no coaches, and no equipment. The love for cricket wasn't there anymore, and they weren't encouraged, so nothing happened with cricket for them.

On the other hand, private schools had fantastic facilities, full-time coaches, all the equipment, and they went on tours. They had everything. So, the players getting into the England team started coming from those big schools. Black cricketers or youngsters interested in cricket just disappeared.

Only recently has Jofra Archer played, but Archer cannot really be considered a British black player because he didn't grow up in England and didn't come through the system here. He was brought in, and that's how he made it. So, he's not a good example. You must look a long way back to players like Michael Carberry (in the 1980s), and

**Nostalgic:** England batsman Roland Butcher in action on his debut in the third Test match against West Indies in Bridgetown, Barbados — his place of birth — on March 14, 1981. GETTYIMAGES

that was years ago.

### **Tell us a bit about the African-Caribbean Engagement Programme (ACE).**

I'm a patron of ACE. It is a programme designed to give black players the opportunity to play cricket at the highest level. Developed by Ebony Rainford-Brent, a former England player and the Women's Director of Cricket in Surrey, ACE aims to nurture talent often overlooked. In fact, an open day for ACE saw about 100 kids attend, exceeding expectations. Trials revealed such high standards that Surrey signed five players immediately. Remarkably, these kids had no formal club or coach, having only played in the streets, showcasing raw talent. Realising its potential, Surrey decided to support ACE further. I believe that in the next five to 10 years, this programme will reignite opportunities for British-born black players.

## » FROM THE WORLD OF CRICKET



GETTY IMAGES

1

Sri Lanka started the three-match ODI series against West Indies with a win, beating it for the first time since 2015. Despite three-wicket hauls from Sugandika Kumari and Kavisha Dilhari, West Indies managed to set a target of 199. Sri Lanka got off to a strong start with the top five managing the chase perfectly, with four of them getting past 35. The host went on to win by 6 wickets with 95 balls remaining.



AUSTRIA CRICKET FACEBOOK PAGE

2

The Austria women's cricket team completed a clean sweep in a three-match T20I series against Czech Republic, which made its T20I debut. Austria set the targets in all three games and managed to win by more than 100 runs in all matches - 137, 134 and 106 runs respectively. The top wicket-taker was Czech's Sarka Kolcunava with five scalps in two games while the highest run-getter was Priya Sabu of Austria, scoring 146 runs in three games.



K. MURALI KUMAR

3

Smriti Mandhana scored her sixth ODI century during the first match between India and South Africa in the multi-format series. The left-handed batter notched up her second hundred against the Proteas since 2018 when she smashed 135 runs in South Africa. She surpassed former skipper Harmanpreet Kaur's tally of five, and is one behind former captain Mithali Raj. She also became the second Indian woman to cross 7000 international runs across all formats after Mithali (10868 runs).



GETTY IMAGES

4

New Zealand will require some time to regroup after its shock early exit from the T20 World Cup 2024, said skipper Kane Williamson, who was non-committal regarding his return for the 2026 edition of the marquee event.

New Zealand reached three finals with Williamson in the side — the 2015 and 2019 ODI World Cups, the 2021 T20 World Cup and the inaugural World Test Championship final, which they won. Williamson led the Black Caps in three of those four tournaments. "When asked if he'd return for the 2026 edition, Williamson said: "Oh, I don't know." New Zealand's campaign ended with a facile seven-wicket win over minnow Papua New Guinea. It finished outside of the semifinals for the first time in 10 years.

## » CROSSWORD

### N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

## EURO 2024 SPECIAL

### ACROSS

- 1** Who is the first player to score a hat-trick in European Championship history (In fact, he scored that hat-trick as a substitute)? (6)
- 2** Who is the only player to score two hat-tricks in EURO history? (7)
- 5** Who holds the record for scoring the most goals (14) in a single qualifying competition? (6)
- 6** Who is the first player to officially win the MVP of the tournament award? (6)
- 8** Identify this player who holds almost all individual records in the history of EURO — most goals in a tournament twice, played most tournaments (5), most matches (25), most minutes (2153), most matches as captain (16), most goals scored (14), etc.? (7)
- 10** Who was the winning coach of the Italian team in the last edition? (7)

**11** Who scored the most goals in the 1996 edition? (7)

**15** Who holds the unwanted record of being shown the most number of cards in the history of EURO? (7)

**16** Which country qualified for EURO 2004 after 24 years and went on to win the title? (6)

**17** Who became the third and last player to score two goals in the final? (6)

**18** Which country entered the fray in 1992 as a replacement to the banned Yugoslavia, after the draw was completed, and also went on to win the title? (7)

**19** Identify this double EURO champion who also scored most goals (jointly) in the 2012 edition? (6)

### DOWN

- 1** Who won the player of the tournament award in the last edition? (10)

**3** Who holds the goalkeeping record for the most consecutive minutes without conceding a goal (final tournament)? (4)

**4** Who holds the goalkeeping record for the most consecutive minutes without conceding a goal (qualifying)? (6)

**5** Identify this joint-Golden Boot award winner from the winning team of the 1992 edition? (6)

**7** Who won the player of the tournament award in the 2008 edition? (4)

**9** Who is the only player to win the EURO both as a player and coach? (5,5)

**12** Who holds the record for scoring the latest goal from kick-off in a final? (4)

**13 & 14** Who is the only player to appear in three consecutive finals? (6,6)

**16** Who became the first player to win the Golden Boot award both in the World Cup & EURO? (4)

» EURO 2024  
PHOTOLINE



1st

**Young gun:** Germany's 21-year-old midfielder Jamal Musiala celebrates after scoring his side's second goal against Scotland with an immaculate strike in the 19th minute. The host went on to thrash 10-man Scotland 5-1 in the first match of EURO 2024. REUTERS



2nd

**Hungary for more:** Switzerland's Kwadwo Duah scored his first-ever goal for the Swiss, in his first-ever appearance at a major international tournament, and only his second appearance for the country. Switzerland went on to comfortably dispatch Hungary 3-1. AFP



3rd

**The future is secure:** Lamine Yamal made history by being the youngest player to play at the EUROS when he featured for Spain in its 3-0 win against Croatia. The 16-year-old also assisted Dani Carvajal for Spain's third goal, making Dani the oldest player to score for Spain at the EUROS. GETTY IMAGES



## 4th

**No time to waste:** Nedim Bajrami of Albania scored the fastest goal in the history of the EUROS, scoring within 23 seconds of kick-off against defending champion Italy. The Azzurri however, managed to turn it around to win 2-1, thanks to goals from Alessandro Bastoni and Nicolo Barella. AP



## 5th

### Instant impact:

Goalscorers Cody Gakpo and Wout Weghorst embrace at full-time after helping the Netherlands beat Poland 2-1. Weghorst scored the winner in the 83rd minute with his first touch of the game, two minutes after coming off the bench. GETTY IMAGES



## 6th

**A return written in the stars:** Denmark's Christian Eriksen (foreground no. 10) scores the opening goal against Slovenia. It was Eriksen's first strike in a EURO game since collapsing on the pitch due to a cardiac arrest in Denmark's opening game against Finland in EURO 2020. Despite Eriksen's heroics, Slovenia managed to claw back with a 1-1 draw after Erik Janza found the back of the net with a thumping half-volley from just outside the penalty box. AP



## 7th

**Mask on:** Jude Bellingham and Trent Alexander-Arnold celebrate after the former scored the winner to help England beat Serbia 1-0. In a post-match conference, Bellingham explained that the celebration arose from a card game called 'Werewolf' played in the England camp, and was meant as a homage to the backroom staff supporting the players throughout the tournament. GETTY IMAGES



## 8th

**More than a game:** Ukraine's players lined up for their EURO 2024 match against Romania, with their country's flag wrapped around them. This is a practice the team has continued since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. The match ended with lower-ranked Romania pulling off a shock 3-0 win. AP



## 9th

**Tough luck:** The image shows the Video Assistant Referee's decision to overturn Belgian striker Romelu Lukaku's goal for a second time after checks confirmed that Lois Openda handled the ball during the build-up to the goal. Belgium failed to stage a comeback and lost 0-1 to Slovakia in a match where Lukaku became the first player to have two goals overturned by VAR in a single game in the EUROS. REUTERS



## 10th

**A bloody affair:** Kylian Mbappe came off late with a bloodied nose, after colliding with Austrian centre-back Kevin Danso in the 86th minute of France's 1-0 win. Captain Mbappe earned himself a yellow card for re-entering the pitch without the permission of referee, after receiving treatment. AP

# A LEGEND'S GOODBYE

Sunil Chhetri **ended a remarkable career** with an emotional farewell match at the Salt Lake Stadium but without the dream victory he and his fans had hoped for.

**Aashin Prasad**

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STORIES

**O**n the evening of June 6, 2024, over a cup of tea, a curious hotel manager walked up to a waiting customer and greeted him before asking, "If you don't mind... If I ask you to come up with two topics of interest to discuss, what would they be?"

The man at the table quickly replied, "Sunil Chhetri's retirement." He then asked, "Where is the hullabaloo about Chhetri's [India] retirement? If [Sachin] Tendulkar were playing his last game, would there be such little excitement?"

Hours before Chhetri's final game in India colours, several parallels could be drawn between his and Tendulkar's careers. Both are celebrated stars in their respective sports, having played at the highest level for over two decades. But that's where the comparison ends.

**Tendulkar was a larger-than-life personality who captured the imagination of over a billion people whenever he held a bat. Many times, Chhetri has scaled every blade of grass, putting in real effort for the national team, only to be met with apathy from nearly a billion people.**

But for his final game, Chhetri didn't need to make an impassioned plea for people to attend. The match, an important World Cup qualifier, was at the Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata. Leading up to the game, there was buzz about the strong 60,000+ crowd expected to make it a memorable night for Indian football.

Fans of all ages came from everywhere. Toshupta Bhattacharya travelled two hours from Kolaghat with his



young son. "Our hopes are very high for this game," he said. Chandradeep from Kolkata, watching his first India game live, reflected, "I am really emotional. My first India match will be his last match."

If the team had won, they would have sung into the night with Chhetri parading around the Salt Lake Stadium. His warm-up walkout was accompanied by the army band and a thunderous roar of "Chhetri! Chhetri!"

After the Indian national anthem, banners were unfurled around the stands. One read, "Thank you, Sunil

**Icon of the game:** With 151 caps and 94 international goals, Chhetri retired as one of India's greatest ever footballers. R.V. MOORTHY



Chhetri." Another one said, "GOAT of Indian football." A larger banner to its left had bright orange words that read, "Sonar [Golden] Sunil". But the two tifos in the north stand summed up Chhetri perfectly, depicting him carrying Indian football on his back on the global map, just as he had done on the field for over 19 years.

Tendulkar was also a lone ranger of sorts in the early 90s, often single-handedly sparing the Indian cricket team its blushes. So when he played in his final World Cup, the entire cricket team and the nation rallied behind the idea of winning the

## » HOURS BEFORE CHHETRI'S FINAL GAME IN INDIA COLOURS, SEVERAL PARALLELS COULD BE DRAWN BETWEEN HIS AND SACHIN TENDULKAR'S CAREERS

World Cup for him in 2011. And they got it done at Tendulkar's home ground, the Wankhede Stadium. He was then draped in an India flag and carried on the shoulders of Virat

Kohli and Yusuf Pathan.

"He [Tendulkar] has carried the burden of the nation for 21 years. It is time we carried him on our shoulders," said a young Kohli. Two

years later, Tendulkar got his ideal send-off when he eventually pulled down the curtains, yet again, in Mumbai.

But on the night of June 6, for Chhetri, there was no one to share the burden of expectation. While all the Indian players spoke of wanting to give their skipper the perfect send-off, when the moment came, many seemed saddled by the occasion.

Heavy touches, mistimed passes, and lack of clarity with the ball cost India the fast start it usually craves. Sahal Abdul Samad, Anirudh Thapa, and Liston Colaco, all of whom have experienced high-pressure games at this venue, were unable to perform at their best.

"No, I wouldn't say so," disagreed Igor Stimac, with Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, looking shattered next to him, shaking his head in agreement. Gurpreet, who has played with Chhetri since 2011, did his part by keeping his side in the game with two brilliant saves.

Chhetri didn't want this game to be about himself and didn't mind if he didn't score. But as any striker would, he must have dreamt of having that moment one last time.

The ball was played over the

R. V. MOORTHY

**While all the Indian players spoke of wanting to give their skipper the perfect send-off, when the moment came, many seemed saddled by the occasion.**





R. V. MOORTHY

top to find his well-timed run, setting him through on goal and \*thud\*!

Except, it wasn't him, but Rahim Ali, who was on the end of the chance, which he missed. For Rahim, that could have been the beginning of his making. A goal on Chhetri's last day in an India shirt would have temporarily answered the 'Who after Chhetri?' question, but it wasn't to be.

On a personal note, it was a game to forget for Chhetri. He was peripheral in the first forty-five minutes as his teammates failed to release the ball early to meet his runs, leaving him to chase shadows. He played as a striker, as a No. 10, and as a striker again, but it seemed to be one of those days where no teammates could find him with the ball.

It's unfortunate that Chhetri's final stretch with the national team also coincided with the team's unwanted record of 645 minutes without a goal from open play.

When his teammates collapsed around him, Chhetri stood still near

## TWO TIFOS IN THE NORTH STAND SUMMED UP CHHETRI PERFECTLY, DEPICTING HIM CARRYING INDIAN FOOTBALL ON HIS BACK, JUST AS HE HAD DONE FOR 19 YEARS

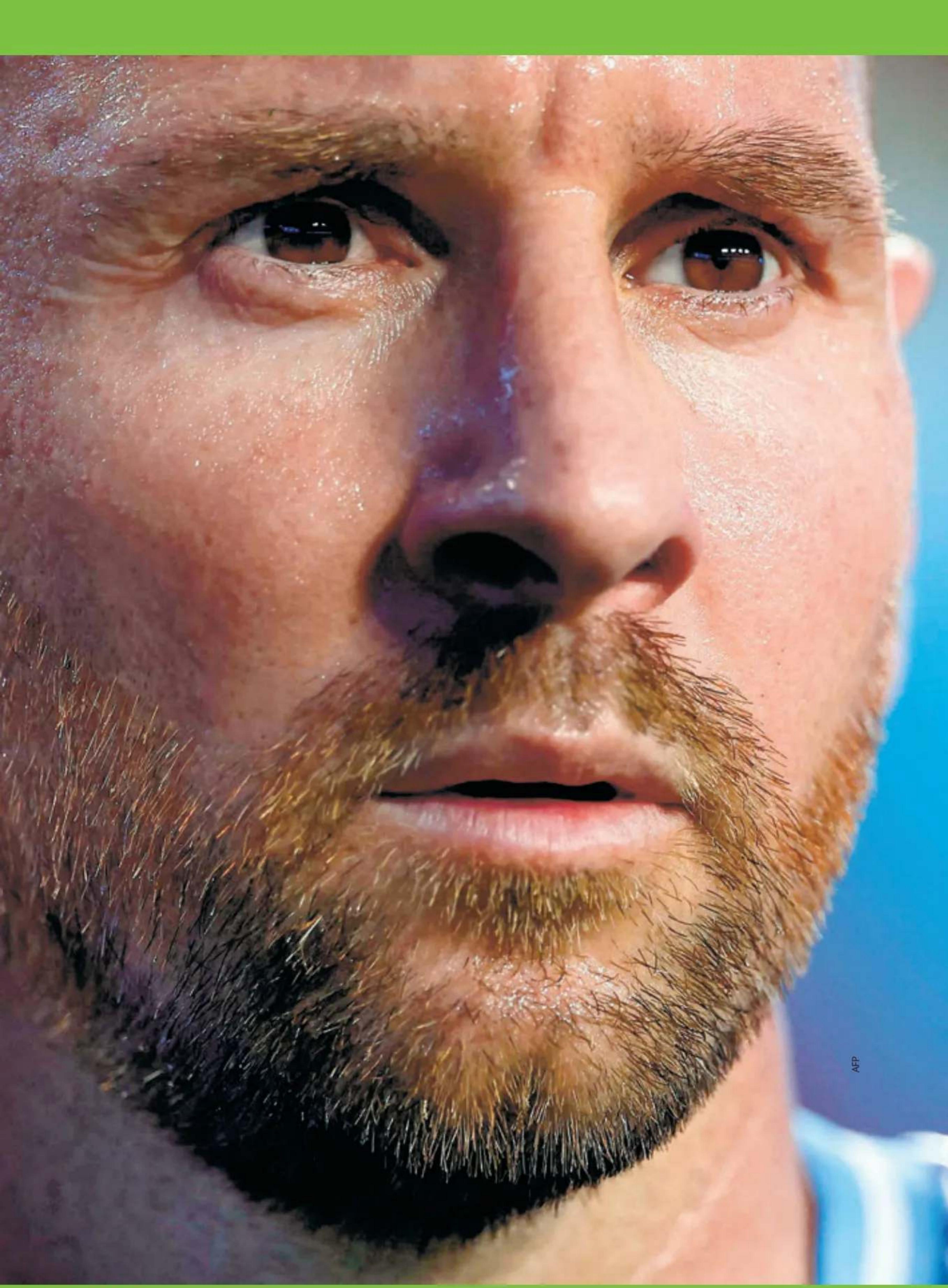
the centre circle, head bowed down. All he wanted was to get India close to the finish line of making the third round of the qualifiers in Kolkata, in front of the home fans. But in the end, there was no one to take India through to a win or carry Chhetri on their shoulders.

The veteran of 151 caps and 94 international goals, one of the greatest footballers India has ever produced, made a teary lap of honour around the stadium to applause from the faithful. Chhetri's mother, Sushila, looked on in tears next to his father, Kharga. There were tears everywhere.

The guard of honour hit home the hardest. His teammates lined up on

each side from the pitch towards the dressing room tunnel. As Chhetri stood at the start of the line, he sobbed inconsolably with his hands covering his face, knowing full well he would never again pull on an India shirt.

Till the very end, Chhetri was all heart, and his farewell speech was no different. "For everyone who came for the game, everyone who has watched me for 19 years, thank you. These 19 years would not have been possible without you all, and I genuinely mean it. I want to speak from my heart, *shobai bhalo thakben, khushi thakben* (everyone stay well, stay happy)," India's Sonar Sunil signed off.



AFP

# MESSI OUT TO FULFILL AMERICAN DREAM ONCE AGAIN

The legend will look to **extend his legacy** with his second Copa America title for Argentina, but Brazil and Uruguay pose formidable challenges.

**Neeladri Bhattacharjee**

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**S**ince the FIFA World Cup 2022, football in the Americas has found its centre of gravity in Lionel Messi, the sorcerer supreme around whom the game now revolves.

Messi, who led Argentina to World Cup glory in Qatar by defeating France in the final, moved to Major League Soccer side Inter Miami after the tournament, burgeoning the interest and business of soccer, or football as it's known globally, in the United States.

In June, the USA will host the Copa America — a tournament that marked Messi's rise from a wizard on foreign soil to a legend alongside Diego Maradona.

The boy from Rosario grew up in a cauldron of criticism for not winning an international trophy like the 1986 World Cup winner.

Messi came close on three occasions (2014 — World Cup, 2015 & 2016 — Copa America) but suffered heartbreaks in the finals, eventually announcing his retirement.

In the next five years, life came full circle for him as he lifted the 2021 Copa America trophy, beating Brazil in the summit clash — one that significantly boosted his confidence to go on and win the World Cup.

At 36, Messi has admitted that there's "less time left" for him on the field, and this Copa edition could see him shine the brightest before hanging up his boots.

Since it is no longer an elusive international trophy for Argentina, it now holds the potential to create a lasting legacy, not just for Messi, but for soccer in the USA.

The dynamics of the game in the country changed in 1975 with the arrival of Pele. While Messi's move to Miami opened a fresh chapter, winning the Copa in North and South America in consecutive editions would complete his coronation as the King of America in football.

## A familiar challenge

The crown, like every other, will not be easy for Argentina and Messi, as arch-rival Brazil looks to regain hegemony under new coach Dorival Junior.

Though it has had a rough ride in the FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers,

the surplus of young talent sets Brazil up for a new era of fluid, possession-based football, which saw Santos, São Paulo, and Flamengo clinch silverware under Dorival.

Brazil's best bet remains Vinicius Junior, who will lead the attack, having won the UEFA Champions League and La Liga title with Real Madrid this season.

While he typically plays along the left wing, the absence of captain Neymar and striker Richarlison — both out with injuries — might see him play more centrally, with Rodrygo and Raphinha on the flanks.

Brazil's assembly line of attack extends to its bench, with Endrick (17), Gabriel Martinelli (22), and Savio (20) — who directly contributed to five of Brazil's eight goals in friendlies before the Copa.

Dorival's boldest move has been excluding Casemiro, who also served as skipper of the national team at the FIFA World Cup 2022.

A perpetual pivot in the middle of the park, the Manchester United midfielder, struggling with form and consistency, was snubbed as younger options, Bruno Guimaraes and Douglas Luiz, rose in the pecking order.



The injury of Ederson before the tournament may not trouble Brazil's first-team plans — with Alisson set to start between the sticks. But the former's absence as the most reliable backup can make the team vulnerable if the Liverpool goalie picks up an injury.

Dorival's young boys will have an opportunity to set the stage for the 2026 World Cup, part of which will also be played in the USA. And a change of guard in Copa could be the perfect prelude to Samba, two years later.

#### Beyond the obvious

Though Brazil and Argentina remain the clear favourites, Messi's former coach Marcelo Bielsa will enter the tournament as Uruguay's coach, banking on a balanced mix of youth and experience to pack a punch in the USA.

While its highest-ever goalscorer Luis Suárez will play his fifth Copa, the side's engine room will be powered by Manuel Ugarte (right, in blue), Rodrigo Bentancur, and Federico Valverde — all of whom play their club football in Europe.

With Edinson Cavani retired, Darwin Nunez will look to step up, playing his first Copa America.

Though the tournament has seen

**Talented bunch:** Led by Vinicius Junior (third from right) Brazil's assembly line of attack extends to its bench, with Endrick (21), Gabriel Martinelli and Savio. REUTERS

the domination of the Big Three — Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay — upsets have not been rare. Whether it was Argentina's loss to the USA in 1995 or Peru beating Brazil in 2016, the tournament has maintained football's appetite for unpredictability.

This is where Colombia comes in as the dark horse, riding on a 22-game unbeaten streak since its last loss against Argentina in February 2022.

With an in-form No. 9 in Rafael Borre, who has four goals in his last five games for club and country, and James Rodriguez pulling strings in the midfield, Colombia has won seven consecutive matches going into the tournament.

Liverpool winger Luis Diaz on the left only adds further firepower to the side, which beat Brazil, Spain, and Germany within the last

year.

Though potential challengers like the USA, Chile, and Mexico exist, it remains highly unlikely, given the experience and squad depth of the conventional favourites, that they pose more than a faint possibility of winning.



GETTY IMAGES

# GOLDEN MEMORIES

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

Team Sportstar



## KRISTIN OTTO

Never before had a female athlete won more than four gold medals at a single Games. At Seoul 1988, Otto took part in six events and won all of them with the utmost ease. Born in Leipzig, Otto was drafted into a specialised sports school when she was around 11 and made steady strides before becoming part of the East German world record-breaking quartet in the 400m medley relay at the 1982 world championships.

Two years later, she was supposed to make it big in Los Angeles before the boycott of the Games by the East European bloc countries spoiled her intended party. Later that year, as ill-luck would have it, she injured a vertebra, which forced her to remain in a neck brace for the next nine months. The medical team attending her insisted that Otto give up swimming, but she would have none of it and was back in the pool soon after.

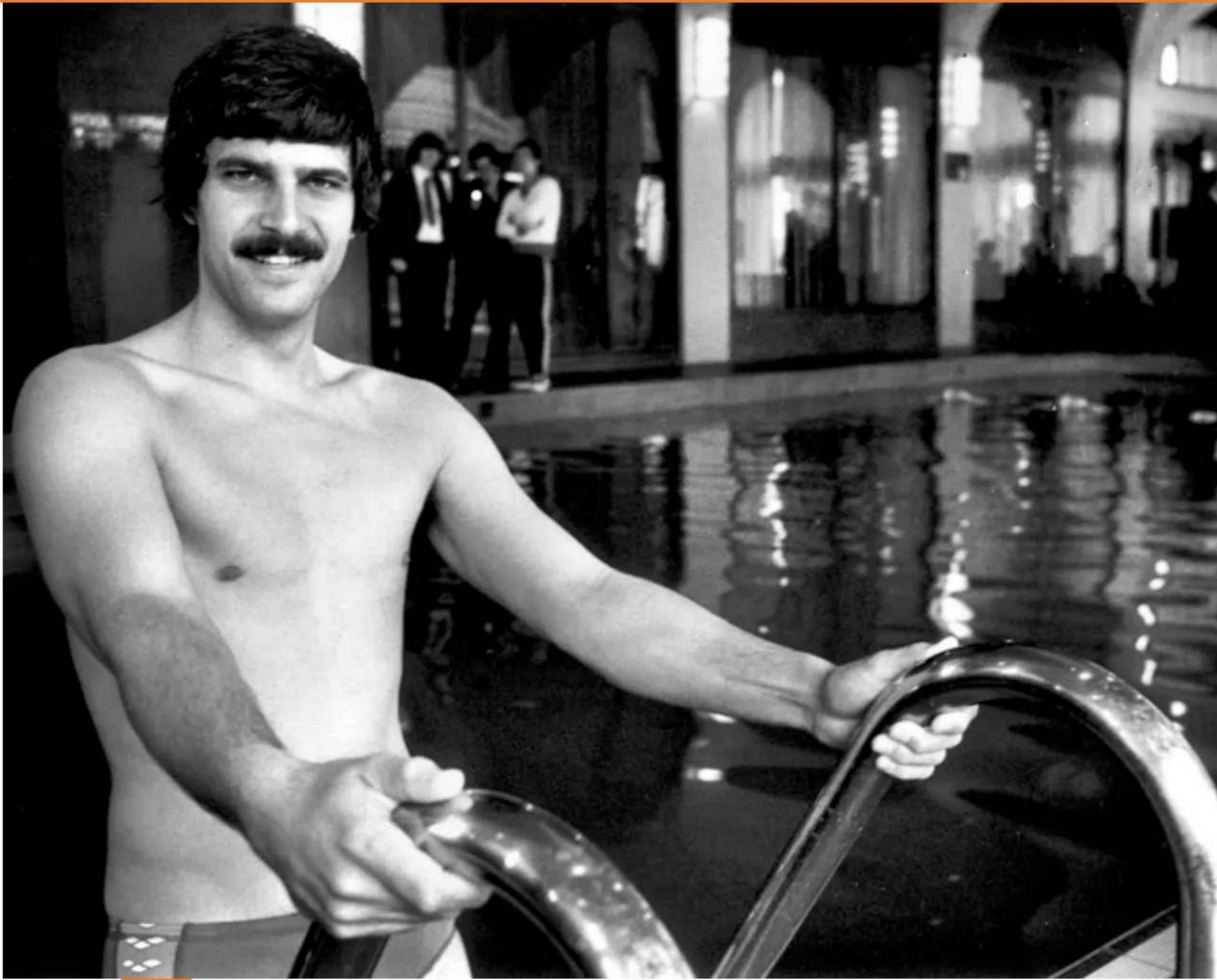
At the 1986 worlds, Otto's steely determination brought her four golds in a bag of six. The European Championships next year saw an encore with five gold medals, after she opted out of the 50m freestyle. In Seoul, she tasted success in three different categories, competing in the 50m, the 100m freestyle, the 100m backstroke and the 100m butterfly, beside the two relays, to seal one of the most historic achievements of the Games.

# CATHY FREEMAN

As she entered the Olympic stadium midway through the opening ceremony of Sydney 2000, the message was loud and clear. Cathy Freeman, an Aboriginal, was given pride of place in Australia's biggest sporting moment in the new millennium. Born in 1973, Freeman was more of a 100m runner at the junior level and only transitioned to the one-lap race as a senior. After failing to make an impression at Barcelona 1992 at the age of 19, she scribbled "48.60, Atlanta" on the back of an airsickness bag on the return flight home. Four years later, she did just that, clocking 48.63s as she took silver behind Frenchwoman Marie-Jose Perec after being engaged in a neck-to-neck battle until the very last. On her victory lap, Freeman carried both the Australian flag and the Aboriginal national pendent, which was strictly against Olympic rules. But even the often-stern International Olympic Committee seemed pleased to look the other way, in quiet admiration of the valiant effort of this young Australian. Four years later in Sydney, Freeman became her country's second athlete to win the 400m gold, which turned out to be Australia's all-time 100th at the Summer Games.

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GETTY IMAGES

# MARK SPITZ

Standing tall at 6 feet, 1 inch with a heavy build and a handsome face with a dripping moustache, Spitz was the quintessential macho man of the 1970s. But his claim to fame was as a stealth bomber in the pool. Munich 1972 was blemished by the Palestinian attack on the Israeli delegation and would have been buried but for the single-handed effort of Spitz, who won the maximum number of gold medals in a single Games until then – seven, each with a world record to boot — a record that would stand for 36 years. At just two, Spitz was taught the basics of swimming by his father, who

followed just one mantra — ‘swimming isn’t everything, winning is’. The early start gave Spitz an advantage, and he went on to clinch as many as 17 national age-group records when he was only 10. At 16, he gained the first of his 24 national Amateur Athletic Union titles, and with several records under his belt, Spitz was already seen as a prospective Olympic champion. All eyes were on Spitz at Mexico in 1968, but the 18-year-old could only win two golds, both in relays, besides an individual silver and a bronze. Spitz vowed he would return, which he did four years later with his superlative seven, with wins in the 100m and 200m freestyle, the butterfly events, the three relays, and the 400m and 800m freestyle and the 400m medley.



# MUNICH WAS A SCARY, HEARTBREAKING AND MOST UNFORTUNATE EVENT IN A MULTI-SPORT GAMES

The Olympics came to be known for its **Munich massacre**. I still get shivers thinking of that black day when some athletes fell victim to mindless acts of terrorism.

Harbinder Singh

**T**he dream of every athlete is to win a medal at the Olympics. I also dreamt and lived it in my first appearance at the Olympics in 1964. At 18, I was the squad's youngest member, and we regained the gold lost to Pakistan in Rome, in 1964. Tokyo was special. The next, in Mexico, saw us finish with bronze. The result was the same four years later in Munich, but the memories of the Olympics left a scar on the game.

Munich was a scary, heartbreak-  
ing and most unfortunate event in a multi-sport Games. The Olympics came to be known for its Munich massacre. I still get shivers thinking of that black day when some athletes fell victim to mindless acts of terrorism.

I should not have been in Munich. I had announced my retirement from international hockey before the Olympics because I wanted some youngsters to come up. I remember this camp at the Shivaji Stadium where KD Singh 'Babu' watched me play the trial matches as inside-right. 'Babu' saab told our Railways manager Kishan Lal to convince me

to return to the team. My retirement plans were put on hold, and I was on the plane to Europe to play some matches before the Olympics.

We played Pakistan in the semifinals at the Olympics, and some goalkeeping errors cost us dear. We lost 0-2. Both goals came in the first-half. (Former Olympian) Gurbux Singh was a journalist at the



**Eleven Israelis and five Palestinian attackers died after a gunfight. The competitions resumed after a day's mourning. We woke up to armymen taking over the Village and helicopters hovering in the sky.**



SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Olympics, and we received much help. We were a team worthy of winning the gold.

We had some tough matches in the competition. There was this classic match against Kenya that stayed in the minds of our fans. They had many who had migrated from India. Kenya took the lead twice before Mukhbain Singh equalised, and Harmik Singh hit the match-winner. It was one of the most exacting matches that I have played. We won the bronze medal with a hard-earned 2-1 win over the Netherlands. I can say today, the bronze medal had little value, considering our rich hockey legacy.

The final was a scrappy affair between Pakistan and West Germany. The Pakistanis kept protesting every decision and mocking the spirit of the game. Their fans came onto the field and forced a halt. Pakistan refused to accept the result, and 11 players from the team were banned for life when they showed their backs to the German flag at the medal ceremony. The punishment was later reduced to two years by the international hockey federation, but it was a blot on

Pakistan, which had won the 1968 Olympic gold in Mexico, the 1970 Asian Games and the 1971 World Cup. Pakistan showed an inferior spirit with their awful behaviour. There was history behind that bad blood between the teams from their 1968 encounter. The umpiring was very poor, and Pakistan felt cheated.

For us, what remained in memory was the attack by the Palestinian Black September group, who targeted members of the Israeli athletes at the Olympic Village. Eleven Israelis and five Palestinian attackers died after a gunfight. The competitions resumed after a day's mourning. We woke up to armymen taking over the Village and helicopters hovering in the sky. The terrorists, somebody told us, worked at the Village and knew the place inside out.

It took me back to the 1964 final match between India and Pakistan. It was contested bitterly with a lot of rough play. The first five minutes saw the players going for each other. The umpires stopped the play, called both teams and told us, "From now on, only the red card will be in use. Any

minor foul will fetch a red card." The teams played some outstanding hockey after that warning. Looking at the performances in Munich, Mark Spitz of America won seven gold medals in swimming and won the hearts of all of us. What an amazing athlete he was! Watching Lasse Viren of Finland was a privilege, as he won the 5000 and 10000 gold medals.

**Looking back I also have some pleasant memories of Munich. Sports help you understand each other.** The Games Village was like a festival. We would exchange gifts, lapel pins, and pocket flags. It was my final Olympics. I was happy to make it three-in-a-row.

I am excited that the team is preparing well for the Paris Olympics. My only issue is the need for more consistency. We have to give our best. Losing 5-0 to Australia can be worrisome, but we have time to recover. We have to be ready for Ireland and New Zealand. They play fearless hockey. We have to ensure that we don't slacken. Each match has to be treated as a final. My best wishes to the team to improve the third-place finish in Tokyo.

**As told to Vijay Lokapally**

# WE WERE ON THE 19TH FLOOR, AND I JUST DECIDED TO JUMP FROM THE BALCONY

We were locked with Australia in the league with the same number of points, and the replay was decided on penalty strokes. We had lost the first game 6-1 and the replay 5-4 on strokes. At the end of the first match, I made a **dreadful decision** to end my life. I thought I had let the team down.

Ashok Diwan

Winning the 1975 World Cup with a classic triumph over Pakistan in the final in Kuala Lumpur was my most memorable moment on the field. It was epic, as hailed by many of the game's experts. Pakistan was a strong opponent, but we were a determined team with a champion player in each match rising to the occasion.

It was natural for the team to be excited about the Montreal Olympics. We were the world champions and the favourites, and we believed we had a strong team to win the gold. But things went awry when the authorities decided to play the game on artificial surfaces. It turned out to be a big blow to Indian hockey.

At the preparatory camp in Patiala, the Indian experts found a *desi* solution for us. Cow dung was

spread on the entire field, and we were told to practice once it had dried. That was our substitute for astro turf. I ended up with two broken teeth.

We visited Paris a month before the Olympics to get a feel of the astroturf. It was exciting, but some of us got injured due to the fast pace of the surface. One of our seniors had a collarbone injury, but he continued. From Paris, we went to Toronto where we beat New

Zealand in one of the trial matches. New Zealand went on to win the gold at the Olympics. There were some issues related to financial matters. The team officials had collected some money from the locals, but some of the players did not like the arrangement. A letter was drafted to complain to the hockey federation to step in and clear the matter. Some of the senior players were unhappy with the development.

**My colleague, Virender Singh, spoke to me and talked me out of the decision. No one knows about that incident. Not even my family. They will learn about it when they read this interview.**



We departed for Montreal and played some matches according to form. We were locked with Australia in the league with the same number of points, and the replay was decided on penalty strokes. We had lost the first game 6-1 and the replay 5-4 on strokes. At the end of the first match, I made a dreadful decision to end my life. I thought I had let the team down.

We were on the 19th floor, and I just decided to jump from the balcony. I was contemplating hard. Meanwhile, my colleague, Virender Singh, had been watching me and took me inside the room. He spoke to me and talked me out of the decision. I know I would have never been able to make my point had I jumped that day. No one knows about that incident. Not even my family. They will learn about it when they read this interview.

When we returned, there was an inquiry on the letter written to the federation. Some players chickened

out. I suffered because I spoke out against the managers. I was dropped from the team. I decided to prove them wrong. I was recalled for the 1981 World Cup in Bombay as a vice-captain of the team. After that World Cup, I announced my retirement, and I went to the United States to work there for two years.

The locals offered me a green card to enable me to play for the U.S. team in the 1984 Olympics. I could not because my mother forced me to return to India and fixed my marriage.

The astroturf proved a disaster for us. We did not even have helmets, and our protective equipment needed to be of better quality. Our officials were at fault. They needed to take proper measures.

When I came back from Montreal, I had a tough life. People would make fun of me for having conceded six goals. The stigma took time to be erased. It is not easy for a sportsman

in such times. You feel lonely and end up making it tough for yourself.

The Games Village was a unique experience. We had some fantastic athletes. I met Ric Charlesworth and Paul Litjens. Watching Sriram Singh, Srinath Singh, Hari Chand, and T. C. Yohannan was great. It was beautiful as we would meet for breakfast and dinner. We made friends. The boycott of the African nations, however, impacted the atmosphere at the Village. I was also friendly with the Pakistan players.

It took me time to recover from the significant loss to Australia in Montreal. Sometimes, I reflect on those times when goalkeepers were under tremendous pressure. You play well, and they all applaud. You make one mistake, and they savage you. But things improved. I went to the Asian Games as the women's team coach and was honoured with the Dhyanchand Award, the first to win in hockey. I have no regrets.

**As told to Vijay Lokapally**

# THE GOLD MEDAL WAS A RECOGNITION OF OUR DEDICATION AND HARD WORK

We believed in our potential and **playing to our strengths** against the USSR and Spain proved that we were on track.

**Mervyn Fernandes**

Sometimes it's nice to revisit the good old memories. Back in 1980, I embarked on my first Olympics as a 21-year-old. Naturally, I was excited to be in the Games village in Moscow and soak in every bit of it.

As we entered the village, we were awestruck. People cheered for us and with the presence of so many athletes from across the globe, it felt like a dream come true. **The atmosphere was exhilarating and I still remember every bit of it.** Of course, winning the gold medal for the country — after three not-so memorable editions in 1968, 1972 where India finished third and slumped to a seventh finish in 1976 — was the icing on the cake.

We believed in our potential, and playing to our strengths against the

USSR and Spain proved that we were on track. So eventually, clinching the gold medal was immensely validating.

Under the leadership of Vasudevan Baskaran, the team played as a unit. All of us backed each other through thick and thin and that was evident in our performance on the field. We would hang out together, have meals or

even go to discotheques to take the pressure off and being like a family helped us during those weeks.

Most of us were young with hardly any international experience. In fact, many of us — including myself, (MM) Somaya, (Mohammed) Shahid, Zafar (Iqbal) — were playing for the first time in the same team at the international level and the seasoned Baskaran ensured that the



**People often ask me how we handled pressure and to be honest, when you are young, you do not think about all those factors. You just train well and give your best and Baskaran advised us to play our natural game.**



team gelled well. We were taught about teamwork and discipline. Even though we did not have any match practice ahead of the Games, we did have a national camp in Bengaluru, where we had a session with field marshal Sam Manekshaw. It was an incredible experience.

**Initially, we could not even believe that the Sam Manekshaw was amongst us to talk about hockey.** He stressed on discipline. I also remember how a few senior players were not allowed in the camp as they did not come in time, so that was the level of discipline and strictness we had. Everyone was serious about the team and Manekshaw's visit made us proud that a man of his stature took time out to address us.

People often ask me how we handled pressure and, to be honest, when you are young, you do not think about all those factors. You just train well and want to give your best

and Baskaran advised us to play our natural game. That helped us handle diverse situations.

The only time the pressure got to me was on the eve of the final. I had a sleepless night and just thought about the fact that we will make history if we bagged that coveted gold medal, after 16 years. In a team meeting that followed, Baskaran and our coach cooled our nerves and motivated us to play to our potential.

I remember seniors like Bir Bahadur Chhetri told us to treat the final like any other game. Since we had performed well against Spain and the USSR previously, in the early games we just needed to ride on the momentum. Most importantly, we had some really good and talented players in all the positions who stepped up when it mattered the most.

It has been 44 years since that iconic victory, but every time I

remember those days, it makes me emotional. **As the national anthem played and we were handed the gold medals, I could remember the struggles my father had to face to make me a hockey player.** He, too, wanted to play the game but couldn't, so he left no stone unturned to help me fulfill my dreams.

Back then, we would stay in Ambernath, about 50 kms from Mumbai, but he always took me to watch international hockey fixtures and helped me realise my dream.

I also can't thank my school enough because, without their support, a 21-year-old wouldn't have been able to be part of history.

With the gold hanging around our neck, our eyes were moist. Those were the tears of joy and that medal was a recognition of our dedication and hard work!

***As told to Shayan Acharya***

# IT IS A BITTER-SWEET MEMORY, I NEARLY WON THE BRONZE

It was a great moment for Indian athletics, especially at a time when an Olympic medal seemed a distant dream. **But I was devastated** that I couldn't get a medal despite coming so close — I missed it by one hundredth of a second.

P. T. Usha

I have several fond memories from the four Olympics that I competed in and a few others that I have been to over the last four decades as a coach and then as an observer.

And now I am going to attend another Olympics as the president of the Indian Olympic Association. I am very much looking forward to Paris.

People still talk about my 400m hurdles final in Los Angeles in 1984. For me it is a bitter-sweet memory. I nearly won the bronze; I missed it by one hundredth of a second.

Yes, it was a great moment for Indian athletics, especially at a time when an Olympic medal seemed a distant dream. But I was devastated that I couldn't get a medal despite coming so close.

I was confident of my medal

chances, despite the fact that I had boarded the flight to the United States after running in just two 400m hurdles races. **I had done well in the heats and then the semifinals. India was expecting a lot from me, especially after the disappointment in hockey: we had failed to qualify for the semifinals.**

There was a lot of media focus on

me, but that didn't matter. When I run, I forget everything else.

I was also part of the 4x400m relay team, along with Shiny Wilson, M. D. Valsamma and Vandana Rao. We reached the final and came up with a fine show, too. I believe that was our finest ever relay team.

Right from my first Olympics in Moscow, when I was just 16, I have

**I began my Olympic journey in Moscow as a teenager whose only aim was not to finish last in her races, and I didn't. I consider myself fortunate that I could be part of so many Olympics.**



enjoyed the experience of staying in the Olympics village. I remember getting tense about finding my way back to my apartment, as all of them looked similar. And by the time I reached there, I often found that the Indian food was no longer available.

It was not just the Indians, athletes from other countries also would come to enjoy our food. So I would have to eat something that I was not used to and as a result I had an upset stomach on a few occasions. **The most abiding memory from the village at the Los Angeles Olympics also has got something to do with food.** My entry to the 400 hurdles final had attracted the attention of foreign athletes and coaches as well.

One of those coaches — I think he was French — came up to me

and asked me what the secret of my sprint was. I told him jokingly that the secret was the tender mango pickle that I had brought from home. So he ate the pickle along with some rice.

Being European, his stomach couldn't bear such Indian spice and I remember him running around the dining hall in great discomfort. He had to eat curd and icecream to lessen the effect of the pickle. After that, whenever we met, he would tell me that the secret of my sprint was indeed remarkable.

Another thing that I remember from Los Angeles is my surprising recovery from a knee injury. The hydrotherapy using a cycle suggested by a physiotherapist there proved miraculous for me. My pain — one that troubled me for a long time — was gone in just two

days. It was a big relief mentally, too: I felt free after the pain went away. That also made me realise the kind of facilities foreign athletes had. We had not even heard of something like that in India then.

**I consider myself fortunate that I could be part of so many Olympics. It is gratifying to note that I am going through the whole cycle as an athlete at the Olympics.**

I began my Olympic journey in Moscow as a teenager whose only aim was not to finish last in her races, and I didn't. I went as a coach, as an observer and now as an administrator. As the IOA president, I am happy that I have been able to make a difference to our athletes in their preparations. And I believe we can improve on our fine show in Tokyo.

**As told to P. K. Ajith Kumar**

# NEVER-SAY-DIE ATTITUDE

Over decades, several athletes have faced **numerous obstacles at the Olympic Games**, but their willpower to overcome setbacks through perseverance and sheer tenacity is what sets them apart from the rest. Here are three such athletes who managed to clinch gold despite the adversity, embodying resilience and determination.

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## Dmitry Bilozerchev

Dmitry Bilozerchev, one of the most accomplished gymnasts in history, represented the Soviet Union. He trained in Moscow at the Armed Forces Sports Society and was renowned for his impeccable form, style, and technique.

At the age of 16, he achieved a remarkable feat by winning four titles at the 1983 World Championships: all-around, pommel horse, rings, and bars. His all-around gold came with an impressive score of 59.85 out of a possible 60.

A year later, in 1984, he dominated at the Friendship Games, an alternative event for communist nations boycotting the Los Angeles Olympics. Bilozerchev secured five gold medals (team, all-around, pommel horse, rings, and bars) along with a bronze in the vault.

Following his stellar performance, disaster struck in 1985 when Bilozerchev was involved in a serious accident that shattered his leg in over 41 places. There was a possibility of amputation, but

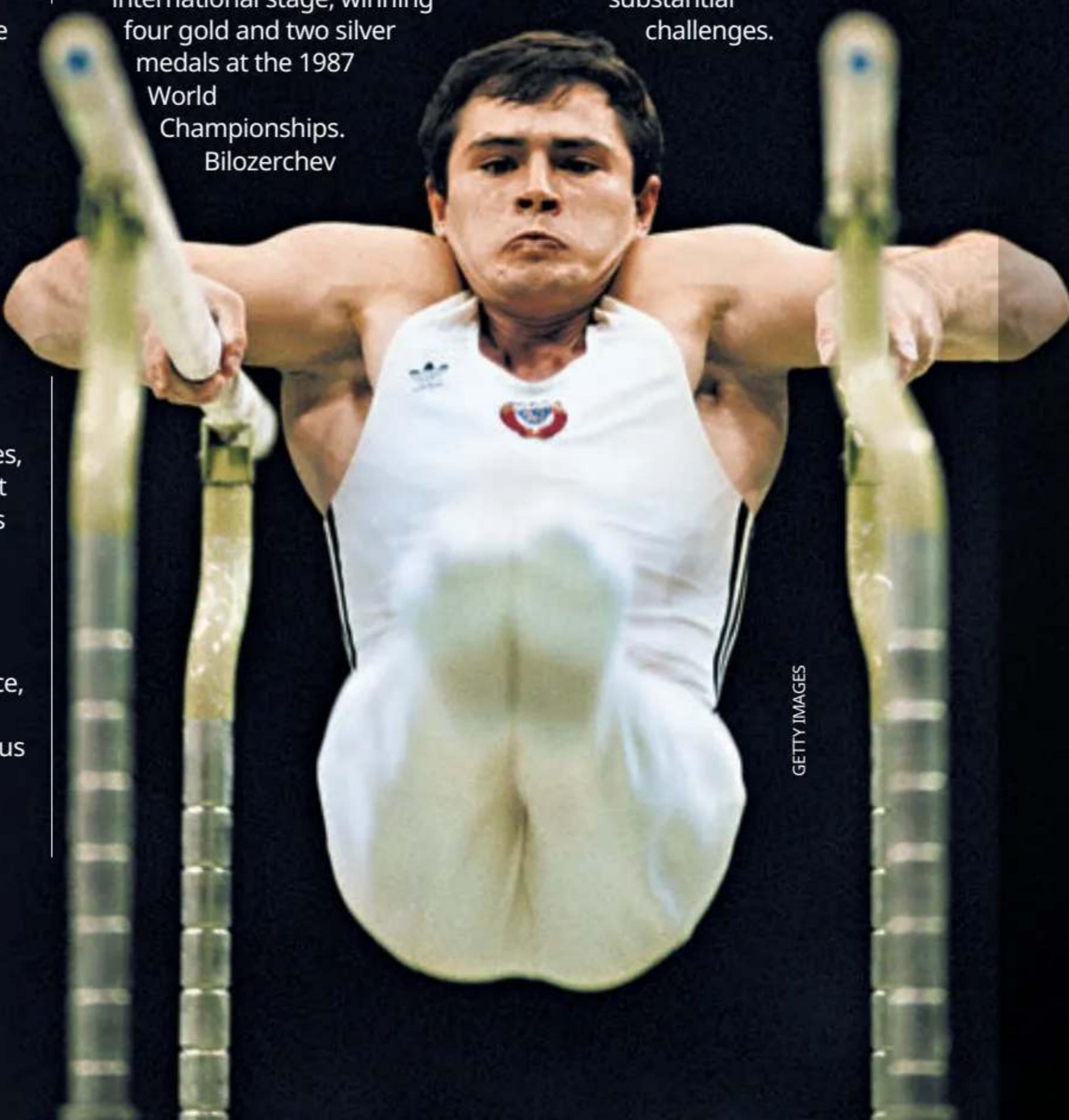
fortunately, he underwent successful surgery and embarked on a challenging road to recovery.

Despite his leg being permanently altered, he showed remarkable resilience.

After undergoing ankle surgery in 1986, Bilozerchev made a triumphant return to the international stage, winning four gold and two silver medals at the 1987 World Championships.

Bilozerchev

showcased his determination at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, where he claimed three gold medals in the pommel horse, still rings, and team events. Although a mistake on the horizontal bars cost him the all-around gold, he managed to secure the bronze, underscoring his ability to overcome substantial challenges.



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# Matthias Steiner

Born in Vienna, Austria, Matthias Steiner followed his father's footsteps into weightlifting despite being diagnosed with Type-1 diabetes. In 2004, he sought German citizenship after marrying Susann, a German woman. Tragedy struck a year before the 2008 Beijing Olympics when Susann died in a car accident, causing Steiner to lose around 7-8 kgs due to grief.

Despite this devastating loss, Steiner persevered, receiving German citizenship in early 2008 and intensifying his preparation for the Olympics.

Fast forward to the Games, where the retirement of world record holder Hossein Rezazadeh set the stage for a fierce competition between Steiner, Russian Evgeny Chigishev, and Latvian World Champion Viktors Scerbatihns. Steiner faltered in the snatch round, failing to

lift 207kg on his third attempt and landing fourth in the rankings with 203kg.

In the clean and jerk round, Chigishev and Scerbatihns surged ahead, with first attempts of 240kg and 242kg, respectively. Steiner faced the challenge of lifting 246kg, but despite his efforts, he failed.

However, Scerbatihns' subsequent failure opened a door for Steiner.

With the Russian leading, Steiner needed a 248kg lift to secure a podium spot, which he succeeded.

Fortune seemed to favour him as the Latvian faltered once more. With Chigishev's successful 250kg lift, Steiner knew he had to exceed his previous attempt by 10kg to clinch gold. He summoned all his strength and successfully lifted 258kg, totalling 461kg, 15kg more than his second-best total.

As Steiner stood on the podium, he proudly displayed Susann's photo, symbolising his triumph amidst adversity.

# Mo Farah

Great Britain's Mo Farah successfully staged a comeback after a dramatic mid-race fall to defend his men's 10,000m title at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

The British athlete fell after clipping the back of the heel of his training partner, Galen Rupp, who had won silver at the 2012 London Olympics. Despite the tumble, Farah quickly recovered and rejoined the leading pack. In a thrilling final lap, Paul Tanui tried to make a statement, but Farah, known for his strong finishes, outpaced the Kenyan to win gold, clocking 27:05.17.

Tamirat Tola of Ethiopia secured bronze.

Farah's 10,000m Olympic victory added another chapter to his illustrious career, which began with a gold in the London Games four years prior, followed by a double with a win in the 5,000m. However, his path to the 10,000m victory in Rio had challenges.

While an accidental collision with Rupp may not have significantly disrupted his rhythm, Tanui and Geoffrey Kamworor of Kenya attempted to set a fast pace to counter Farah's renowned finishes.

Kamworor's strategy backfired as he faded in the later stages, leaving Tanui to challenge Farah for the win.

Despite Tanui's efforts to break away on the last lap, Farah demonstrated resilience and surged ahead in the final 100m to claim gold again.

A week later, he successfully defended his title in the 5,000m to become the second man after Finland's Lasse Viren to win 5,000m and 10,000m gold at two Olympics.



AFP



**Shining beacon:** Having won a silver medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Mirabai Chanu will be one of India's biggest prospects in Paris. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

## WEIGHING HER CHANCES ONE LIFT AT A TIME

Mirabai Chanu has made an inspiring comeback from her Asian Games injury last year and is now **training fiercely** for the Paris Olympics under the watchful eyes of coach Vijay Sharma.

Jonathan Selvaraj

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**B**efore her training sessions at the National Institute of Sports in Patiala, Mirabai Chanu takes off her shoes and places them on a footwear rack next to the main entrance of the weightlifting hall, at the other end of which there is a multi-faith shrine where she prays to the idol of Hanuman — the Hindu patron deity of strength.

About a year ago, the idol was located at the other end of the hall where the rack now stands. It's something that Mirabai's coach, Vijay Sharma, often reminds her of. "We got the weightlifting hall renovated last year just before the Asian Games. That's when we moved the shrine to the other end of the hall, and where the shrine was, we replaced it with a shoe rack. I always tell Mira, one day

people will worship you, and the next day they'll treat you like a pair of shoes. **The only thing you can do is devote yourself to your work and leave the rest to God,**" he says.

Having won a silver medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the petite four-foot-eleven, 29-year-old from Manipur will be one of India's biggest prospects in Paris in about a month-and-a-half. A second Olympic

medal will place her among the best at the pinnacle of Indian sports history. She was the toast of the country after her Tokyo win, but she and her coach knew from experience just how fleeting all that adulation can be.

Less than a year ago, after competing in the 49kg category at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, Mirabai returned to India in a wheelchair. She had been dealing with pain in her right hip during warm-ups but had still opted to compete. It was clear she was nowhere near her best. After a snatch lift opener of 83kg, followed by two failed attempts, she registered a 108kg opener in the clean and jerk section. At that point, her total read 191kg, which placed her fourth behind Thailand's Thanyathon Sukcharoen, who had lifted 199kg.

Planning to overtake her, Mirabai loaded 117kg on the bar for another clean and jerk attempt. After her first lift failed, she went for it once again. As she spread her palms around the bar and squatted, lifting it onto her collarbones, she crumbled, falling down and lying on her side, the bar dropping in front of her. The broadcast cut to her competitors backstage, but behind them, one could see Mirabai being carried away by one of India's coaching staff.

It was one of the lowest moments in her career. Sharma says, "If we have to compare it to anything, I think it would have to be what happened at the 2016 Rio Olympics." That's when Mirabai, despite being one of the medal favourites, did not even post a total after failing all her lifts in the clean and jerk category. "That time we just finished without a medal; the scars were only in our mind. This time (Asian Games), Mira had an injury as well," says Sharma.

When she arrived at New Delhi airport, Mirabai was still in a wheelchair. Travelling along with her was the Indian shooting contingent, buoyed by a record medal haul. As the media surrounded them, Sharma wheeled her away to catch another flight to Mumbai, where she would meet Dr. Dinshaw Pardiwala, an

orthopaedic surgeon specialised in sports injuries.

Before that fateful lift, Sharma remembers asking Mirabai whether she should withdraw from the competition. For Mirabai, though, the answer was obvious. She'd won medals in every other competition she had taken part in — gold at the 2017 World Championships, silver in the Tokyo Olympics, gold at the Commonwealth Games, and a bronze at the 2020 Asian Championships. The only medal



## WHILE THEY COULDN'T DIAGNOSE THE ISSUE, MIRABAI WAS ADVISED REST AND TO REHABILITATE HER HIP UNTIL AT LEAST THE END OF THE YEAR



missing in her collection was the Asian Games; she'd missed out once before at the 2018 edition in Jakarta, where she had to withdraw because of a back injury.

"My dream was to win a medal in the Asian Games. I really wanted it. When I started my career, my coach told me that it is the biggest event in the sport because the best female weightlifters are all from Asia. After I got injured, I wondered if perhaps it was not my destiny to win this medal. I kept wondering — why did this happen? Of all competitions, why did it have to happen at the Asian Games?"

Sharma says he had similar questions as well. "We were in perfect shape. We had been training in the USA for several weeks, working with Aaron Horschig (a strength and conditioning expert). I was so confident that she would get a medal in Hangzhou," he recalls.

Now, though, with less than a year to go for the Paris Olympics, there wasn't even any assurance whether Mirabai would be able to compete again. "When I returned to India, I



couldn't even walk. There was so much pain inside my right hip that I couldn't put any weight on my foot. I had to be carried down the stairs by my coach. There was a lot of pain because it was inside my joint," she says.

Once the pain started to subside in a few days, Mirabai found some hope. "I honestly thought her career was finished when we went and met Dr. Pardiwala. She couldn't even put any weight on her right foot in Hangzhou, and she wasn't even able to walk when she first came to Mumbai. Within a couple of days, though, she was able to put weight on her foot. Once she started walking, we knew it wasn't nearly as



**On the comeback trail:** While losing six months of training might be a near-fatal career blow, Mirabai managed to recover almost entirely.

SHASHISHEKHAR KASHYAP

severe. That gave some hope that perhaps the injury wasn't nearly as bad as we first thought," says Sharma.

The injury remains a mystery. "At first, Dr. Pardiwala thought that Mira might need surgery, so he got every test done, including multiple MRIs and full-body scans. But no abnormality was detected. Even now, we can't tell what the issue was," says Sharma.

While they couldn't diagnose the

issue, Mirabai was advised rest and to rehabilitate her hip until at least the end of the year. She wasn't allowed to put any strain on her lower body and was only able to do bodyweight training on her upper half.

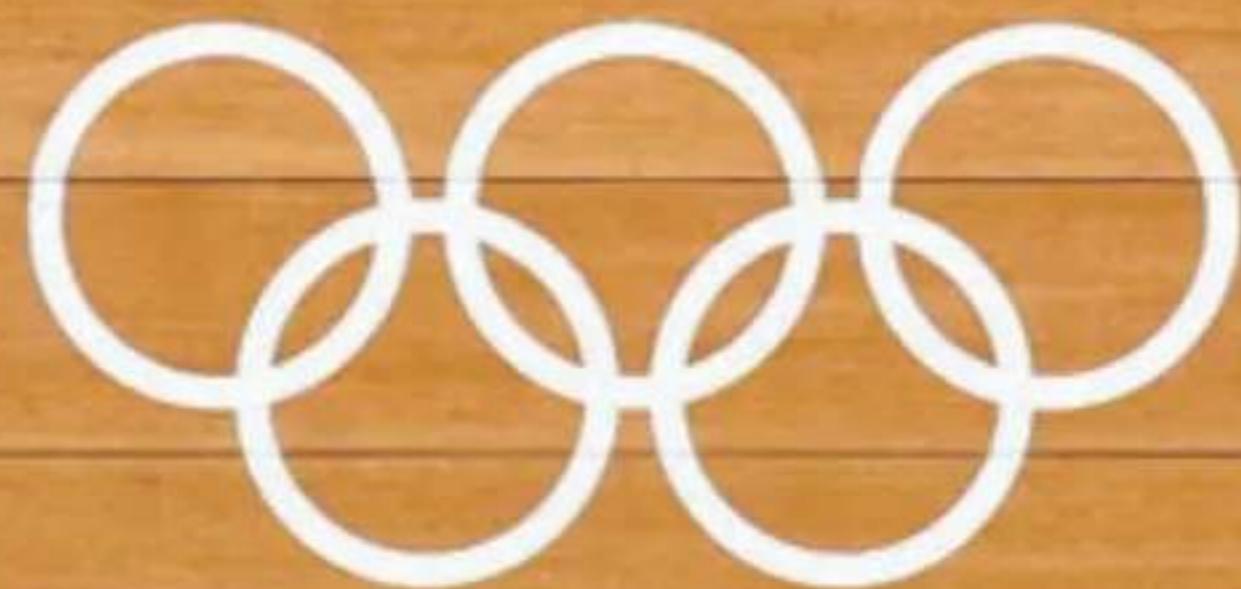
Mirabai says those five months until the start of 2024 were among the most stressful of her life. "It's a very big thing for a player to miss five months of training, that too when you don't know what the future will be. I didn't know whether my injury would actually get better after five months. But even if it did, in the best-case scenario, I knew that I would be starting from zero when I did restart my training," she says.

She had to call for backup. "I believe a lot in Hanuman ji. I prayed to him a lot in the last five months," she says. Mira also befriended the stray dogs that inhabit the campus at NIS Patiala. She's somewhat of an unofficial caretaker of Whitey, Blackie, Bhoora, and about half-a-dozen other Indie dogs for whom she provides meals and arranges regular shots and vet visits. "They don't care that I'm an Olympic medallist, or that I did badly at the Asian Games, or that I'm dealing with an injury. They are just happy to see me all the time."

Perhaps the greatest help came from her family. "The best thing that happened to me at that time was



TOKYO 2020



| WOMEN'S 49KG<br>VICTORY CEREMONY |                       |        |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|
| CHN                              | HOU Zhihui            | 210 KG |
| IND                              | MIRABAI Chanu Saikhom | 202 KG |
| INA                              | AISAH Windy Cantika   | 194 KG |

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**Centre of attention:** Mirabai was the toast of the country after her Tokyo win, but she and her coach knew from experience just how fleeting all that adulation can be. GETTYIMAGES

that my mother came to be with me in Patiala," she says. "At that point in time, I was feeling very low, but I also knew I had to stay there and continue my rehabilitation work. So I asked my mother if she could come and be with me. When your family is close, the mind feels a little relaxed. I felt I really needed her around me. I was so relaxed once she came."

Mirabai's mother, Saikhom Tombi Devi, came armed with a bucket of ingredients for Manipuri-style comfort food. "She made sure I ate home-cooked meals all the time. I have been at the national camp for more than a decade, and I have tried to make Manipuri-style food before.

But I never got the taste just right. I really missed Manipuri food. There is a dish called *erombi*, which has fish paste and is really spicy. I've tried to cook it myself, but it never tastes the same. But when my mother cooks for me and feeds me, it's a different feeling. It feels like everything is right in the world," she says.

Her emotional needs taken care of, her coach took charge of her physical improvements. "The one thing working in our favour was that Mira had already qualified for the Paris Olympics after winning a silver

at the 2022 World Championships. That meant we only had one mandatory competition to take part in (2024 World Cup). We could just focus on her recovery until then," he says.

"We knew that we couldn't train her lower body with weights. And you can't simulate Olympic-level weight training with bodyweight exercises. There's no substitute for the rod and weights. But we could use the time we had to work on strengthening all the small muscles — like the rotator cuffs in the

**« The best thing that happened to me at that time [during rehab] was that my mother came to be with me in Patiala. When your family is close, the mind feels a little relaxed. I felt I really needed her around me. I was so relaxed once she came – Mirabai Chanu »**



**Heartbreaking:** Mirabai's Asian Games tragedy was one of the lowest moments of her career. AP

shoulder — that we otherwise couldn't target. That way, we made the best use of the time that we had. What could have been a disadvantage became an advantage," he adds.

While Sharma looked at the bright side of things, Mirabai says it was often difficult to come to terms with the fact that she had so much work to do. "It was very hard to just accept that I had to do bodyweight squats. At that time, it seemed my goal was so far away. My plan was to do 120kg in the clean and jerk and 90kg in the snatch [her personal bests are 119kg and 88kg, respectively], and now I can't even do free squats. I couldn't even lift my body weight at the start of the rehabilitation period. A lot of negative thoughts come into the mind at that time. But I kept telling myself that whatever has happened, I need to recover smartly. I have to steadily recover," she says.

So, Mirabai did what she had to do when she resumed weightlifting. That meant the lifetime supply of free pizza that she'd been awarded by Domino's after winning the Tokyo

silver would go unclaimed. "I love pizza, but I had to make sure my body weight didn't increase at all. Even though my mother was cooking for me, I managed to make sure that I didn't eat more than I should. I managed to stay inside 51kg at all times. That way, I knew I wasn't going to have to work to reduce my weight once I started training with the weights at the end of my rehab period," she says.

While losing six months of training might be a near-fatal career blow, Mirabai managed to recover almost entirely. "I was able to put back the weight on the bar almost right after I finished my rehabilitation period. Right now I'm feeling as strong as I did before the Tokyo Olympics," she says. That belief isn't just wishful thinking. Two months ago, in March this year, Mirabai competed at the

IWF Weightlifting World Cup in Thailand. It had been just three months after she lifted a weight for the first time since the Asian Games. She made five successful lifts out of a total of six attempts — lifting a best of 81kg in snatch and 103kg in clean and jerk. Although her total of 184kg was her lowest in over six years of competition and only placed her 11th overall, it was a mark that her coach was more than happy with. "She was starting out with almost nothing. And within three months, we were just about 10 percent off her best lifts," he says.

Now, though, Mirabai is a lot closer to her personal best. Although he won't give exact figures for fear of tipping off the rest of the field, Sharma says he is a very confident man. Even in the one relatively light training session that Sportstar visited,



**In March this year, Mirabai competed at the IWF Weightlifting World Cup in Thailand, lifting a total of 184kg — her lowest in over six years of competition.**

**Support system:** Vijay Sharma believes that Mirabai is a once-in-a-generation weightlifter.

SHASHISHEKHAR KASHYAP

Mirabai was making three snatch repetitions of one of the weights she had lifted at the World Cup. "The medal isn't something that we are too worried about. We will be fighting for a medal in Paris. I don't know which colour it will be, though," he says.

**It's a bold prediction from Sharma, who admits the competition in Paris will be a lot harder than it was last time in Tokyo.** "At that time, the biggest hurdle for Mira wasn't the rest of the field but just her own fear after what had happened in Rio. The Chinese girl was very strong, but no one else was really competing with her. This time around, the Chinese girl (Hou Zhihui) is very strong, but there are also three very strong girls — from the USA (Jourdan Delacruz, personal best 200kg), Romania (Mihaela Cambei PB 200kg), and Thailand (either Surodchana Khambao or Thanyathon Sukhcharoen — both of whom have PBs of 200kg). It will most likely be four weightlifters competing for two medals," he says.

He has little doubt Mirabai will come through. "Her technique is much better than what it used to be even three years ago, and her strength is about the same. All these other weightlifters also have a personal best of 200kg. They will probably have to lift their personal best once again in Paris. On the other hand, Mirabai can get to 200kg even on an average day," he says.

What also helps, he says, is her unrelenting motivation. "She is no doubt a once-in-a-generation weightlifter. She has the passion to achieve something. Mira already had an Olympic medal. She didn't need to



struggle so much just to get ready for the Olympics.

"But she is someone who is never satisfied with anything. Even though she has a record of 119kg in clean and jerk, which no one in India has done to date, she is still not satisfied. She has also won a World Championship gold and an Olympic medal, which no other Indian has.

**Yet she is not satisfied. I think even if she wins another medal at the Olympics, she will still not be satisfied. She will keep pushing herself,** he says.

These are bold predictions, but he says neither he nor Mirabai is under any pressure. "Compared to the Tokyo Olympics, there's almost no stress this time. All the stress got slapped out of us after what happened at the Asian Games last year. We were so confident in our preparation, and then we were hit with a disaster. This time we are training with complete sincerity and going to leave the rest to God," he says.

**« Her technique is much better than what it used to be even three years ago, and her strength is about the same. We will be fighting for a medal in Paris. I don't know which colour it will be, though – Vijay Sharma »**

# DRAMA IN THE DELUGE

Max Verstappen prevailed at the Canadian Grand Prix and Ferrari emerged victorious at Le Mans during **two rain-soaked weekends** in motorsport.



Dipak Ragav

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In sports, unpredictability is often the key to coming up with an exciting show for the fans. The ever-changing variables keep everyone involved on their toes, and even the best of the lot can get tripped up by things outside their control.

This maxim is especially true in Formula One, where races in mixed weather conditions often spice up the competition. Some classic races have featured changing conditions, from dry to wet or vice versa, bringing the drivers' skills to the forefront.

Back in 2011 in Canada, McLaren's Jenson Button scored one of his most famous wins in what is widely regarded as one of the best races in recent memory. It lasted four hours and was punctuated by heavy rains, including a red flag. Button, who was at one point last in the race, won on the final lap when leader Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull Racing) ran wide on a damp part of the track.

This year's Canadian Grand Prix was eerily similar. It was another rain-affected race, with Red Bull's Max Verstappen and McLaren's Lando Norris fighting for the win in what turned out to be one of the most memorable races of the year so far. This time, however, the Red Bull prevailed.

After a disappointing sixth-place finish at the Monaco Grand Prix, Verstappen bounced back with his sixth win of the season. However, post the celebrations, the team must introspect; it was not a straightforward victory. Red Bull will feel it was lucky in Canada, thanks to rivals dropping the ball and aided by some exceptional driving from Verstappen, which masked the car's weaknesses.

Red Bull's cars are not well-suited to aggressive kerb-riding, a necessity at Circuit Gilles Villeneuve to get the best lap time. The upgraded Mercedes performed well on the Montreal track, with Lewis Hamilton topping the final practice session on Saturday

**Too close for comfort:** Red Bull will feel it was lucky in Canada, thanks to rivals like George Russell (right) dropping the ball and aided by some exceptional driving from Max Verstappen (left), which masked the car's weaknesses. REUTERS

morning.

In qualifying, it was nip-and-tuck between Red Bull and Mercedes. George Russell and Verstappen set identical lap times of 1:12.000, but the former took pole position because he set the time first. Though Verstappen put the car on the front row, the fact that his teammate Sergio Perez was only 16th showed how tricky the Red Bull is to drive. On Sunday, despite variable conditions, Verstappen hardly put a foot wrong and performed flawlessly, making fewer mistakes and securing his 60th career victory.

The race got underway while it was still raining, with Russell leading on intermediate tyres. However, the Mercedes driver made several errors, and after the first ten laps, Verstappen and the McLaren drivers began to pressure him with increased pace.



AP

The turning point came on lap 20 when Norris overtook Verstappen for second place and, a lap later, took the lead when Russell missed the final chicane and ran wide, dropping down to third behind Verstappen.

But on lap 26, the Safety Car (SC) was deployed following Logan Sargeant's crash. This pivotal moment allowed Verstappen to snatch the win. While Norris stayed out an extra lap, Verstappen, Russell and Oscar Piastri pitted immediately for new tyres. Norris's delayed pit stop cost him two positions while giving Verstappen the lead, but he soon found his rhythm in a McLaren that was the fastest car of the day.

While the top two pitted for dry weather tyres on lap 46, Norris stayed out longer to build a healthy lead, aiming to pit and still emerge ahead of others who stopped earlier. The plan almost worked, but Norris ran wide on cold tyres upon exiting the pits, allowing Verstappen to regain the lead.

Norris dropped another position to Russell while building up his tyre temperature, but the McLaren driver reclaimed it when Russell made another mistake a lap later.

By then, Verstappen (**below**) had built a substantial lead, staying ahead of Norris. A fortuitous SC during the Miami GP had helped Norris leapfrog his rivals during a pitstop and claim his first win. As it so often happens, things even out during a season — McLaren's indecision in Canada during the first SC period cost the team another victory.

Meanwhile, Ferrari, which had finished 1 & 3 at the previous race in Monaco, had a nightmare weekend in Canada with both drivers, Charles Leclerc and Carlos Sainz, retiring from the race.

## LE MANS



### Ferrari triumphs again

For the second consecutive year, Ferrari AF Corse (Ferrari 499P) won the prestigious 24 Hours of Le Mans. Last year, the team of Alessandro Pier Guidi, James Calado, and Antonio Giovinazzi took top honours. This year, the other Ferrari AF Corse of Antonio Fuoco, Miguel Molina and Nicklas Nielsen (**above**) came out on top ahead of Toyota Gazoo Racing.



AP



**No mercy:** Iga Swiatek overpowered the merely human Jasmine Paolini for a predictable 6-2, 6-1 triumph.

GETTY IMAGES

# SWIATEK STREAKS TO FOURTH TITLE AS ALCARAZ WINS HIS FIRST

Paul Fein

**C**asual tennis fans may not have even heard of the late-blooming 28-year-old Jasmine Paolini, who had never made it past the second round of a Major until this year, when the Italian reached the fourth round of the Australian Open.

She then showed it was no fluke by winning a WTA 1000 title in Dubai. Her breakthrough year peaked in Paris where she outlasted 2022 Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina in the quarterfinals and outclassed fast-rising 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva to meet Iga Swiatek in the final.

Although small in stature at 5'4", Paolini is big in the intangibles:

competitiveness, poise, and more recently, confidence. Unlike some players who have exuded a priori confidence like Jimmy Connors and Serena Williams before they achieved great results, Jasmine was bogged down by an inferiority complex since turning pro in 2011. It took career-changing success this season to change her mentality. After taking out Rybakina, she



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»  
**PAOLINI DIDN'T EVEN HAVE THE PROVERBIAL  
'PUNCHER'S CHANCE' FOR AN UPSET**  
«

Iga Swiatek maintained her dominance on clay at Roland Garros, while Carlos Alcaraz further solidified his status as Rafael Nadal's heir apparent.

confided, "Honestly, I don't know why I didn't believe in myself."

Alas, against Swiatek, Paolini didn't even have the proverbial 'puncher's chance' for an upset. Unlike highly athletic and versatile Karolina Muchova, who extended Swiatek to 6-2, 5-7, 6-4 in the thrilling final a year ago, the undersized Italian lacked the weapons.

Not even Jasmine's best shot, an aggressive, topspin forehand, matched up against Iga's forehand, the most devastating shot in women's tennis since the booming serve of Serena Williams.

The most glaring disparity was first serve speed where Swiatek increased her average from 102 mph last year to 111 mph this season. In

sharp contrast, Paolini averaged just 95 mph at Roland Garros.

The final started with a bang. Intense and focused, Swiatek pumped her fist after smacking a backhand passing shot for 30-15. She held serve for 1-0. Looking surprisingly calm for the biggest match of her life, Paolini raced to a 40-0 lead.

When Swiatek responded with four straight points, including three forehand winners, to earn a break point at 40-Ad, former World No. 1 and NBC analyst John McEnroe said, "This is about as good as Paolini can play, so it would be discouraging if she lost this game."

The hustling Italian hung on to hold serve and then broke serve for

**Coming into her own:** 2024 has been a breakthrough year for Paolini, winning the WTA 1000 title in Dubai and reaching the fourth round and final of the Australian Open and the French Open, respectively. AFP



a stunning 2-1 lead. The crowd chanted "Iga! Iga!" and she responded like a champion. With her wicked Western forehand bounding high over the diminutive Paolini's strike zone, Swiatek seized seven straight points, breaking serve and holding her own serve.



## IGA'S FIFTH GRAND SLAM SINGLES TITLE TIED HER WITH BOTH MARIA SHARAPOVA AND MARTINA HINGIS

At 2-all, the point of the match, a ferocious 25-shot power rally, ended when the stronger and faster Pole belted a crosscourt backhand into the open court. Paolini can play incredible defence, but these days, even on clay, excellent offence beats excellent defence.

After Świątek took the opening set 6-2, NBC analyst Mary Carillo posed a

timeless question. "How can Paolini get the greatest reward with the least risk?" There simply was no solution as the toughest challenge in the sport got even tougher in the second set.

With the ruthless efficiency of a fictional gynoid in a baseball cap, Świątek overpowered the merely human Paolini for a predictable 6-2, 6-1 triumph.

Iga's fifth Grand Slam singles title tied her with both Maria Sharapova and Martina Hingis and made her the heavy favorite to win her first gold medal at the Olympics in late July at Roland Garros.

The gap between the 5'9" Pole and the rest of the field on the Paris *terre battue* (clay) was highlighted when she demolished 2019 runner-up Marketa Vondrousova 6-0, 6-2 in the quarterfinals and took out 2022 finalist Coco Gauff 6-2, 6-4 in the penultimate round.

It takes a power hitter to stop the Świątek juggernaut as Rybakina (4-2 against her) and Sabalenka (3-8) have done. Naomi Osaka, with four Grand Slam titles on hard courts, possesses as much all-court power as anyone.

**Territorial advantage:** Świątek is now the favourite to win her first gold medal at the Olympics at Roland Garros late July. GETTY IMAGES



Just two problems: Osaka, now ranked 134, hadn't beaten a top-10 opponent since January 2020 and had never advanced past the third round at Roland Garros.

Since returning to the Tour in January after a 15-month hiatus due to maternity leave, the rusty, 26-year-old Japanese compiled a mediocre 13-9 match record. Osaka had to feel encouraged though by defeating No. 21 Caroline Garcia at Qatar, No. 15 Liudmila Samsonova at Indian Wells, and No. 17 Elina Svitolina at Miami — all in straight sets but on hard courts. Equally impressive, the former world No. 1 easily defeated No. 11 Daria Kasatkina and No. 20 Marta Kostyuk at the Italian Open on clay.

Osaka caught a break when her highly anticipated French Open second-round match against Swiatek was played under the roof due to the rain. And she took full advantage of it, never temporising just like during her 2018-21 prime. In the opening set, Naomi had a set point at 4-5, 30-40

but overhit a backhand deep and eventually lost a tiebreaker and the set, 7-6.

She overwhelmed Swiatek 6-1 in the second set, and when she surged to a 4-1 lead in the decider, *Tennis Channel* analyst Lindsay Davenport said, "Osaka has made this clay court look like a hard court. And that's not easy to do when you're playing the best clay-courter." When the Japanese went ahead 5-2, Davenport noted, "It's been remarkable to see Osaka play at this high level for more than two hours."

But could she sustain it?

Superb under pressure until then, Osaka finally succumbed to nerves as she served for the match at 5-3. On match point, Swiatek pounded a serve return that forced a backhand error. Osaka missed two more backhands to get broken.

"Osaka froze ever so slightly, and that was all Swiatek needed to turn it around," said Davenport. Swiatek won the last five games to complete the 7-6, 1-6, 7-5 triumph, one of the

**Battle of the giants:** Naomi Osaka put up a great fight against Swiatek in the second round, but lost the last five games of the deciding set. REUTERS

greatest comebacks in her career.

The Queen of Clay looks almost unbeatable at Roland Garros where she's now compared to her girlhood idol, The King of Clay — Rafael Nadal.

With characteristic modesty, Swiatek brushed off the comparison. "We'll see in 14 years if the journey is similar. I would never expect anybody to compare me to Rafa because for me he's above everybody, and he's a total legend. I'm proud of myself that I'm playing consistently here and that I'm mentioned in the same sentence as Rafa. That's cool."

A more realistic goal for the 23-year-old Pole is surpassing all-time great Chris Evert's seven Roland Garros titles. "I have the record, but she is the best clay court player, bar none," said Evert. "I have no doubt she'll break my record."



*"History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes"* — Mark Twain

How poignant and poetic that in what was likely Rafael Nadal's last Roland Garros, another swashbuckling Spaniard seized the mantle with his first title. When Carlos Alcaraz fell on his back to celebrate his five-set final victory over Alexander Zverev, it evoked indelible memories of Nadal.

The immortal King of Clay had rejoiced the same way after his record 14 titles. A touch of irony added to the broad sweep of history as Zverev beat the aging, fading Nadal in the first round only to have his compatriot successor stymie the German in the last round.

In the first French Open final without a member of the Big Three since 2004, Alcaraz became the youngest man, at 21, to capture a Grand Slam title on hard, clay, and grass courts, edging Nadal, who, at 22, completed the feat at the 2009 Australian Open.

This fortnight the Spanish sorcerer had to come back from being down

**Valiant in defeat:** Even though Alexander Zverev led their rivalry 5-4, Alcaraz was better in just about every other category, except perhaps Zverev's rock-solid backhand. AFP

two sets to one against Jannik Sinner in the semifinals and again in the dramatic final. Alcaraz must relish long matches as much to show off his repertoire of dazzling shots as his zeal for competition.

*"Alcaraz is the greatest shot-maker in tennis, but sometimes he plays more with his heart than his head," noted Carillo.*

That audacity has endeared Alcaraz to fans worldwide, but living dangerously also got him into trouble on occasion. Even so, *The Telegraph* (UK) made him a big betting favorite with 11-10 odds, while Zverev had 5-1 odds.

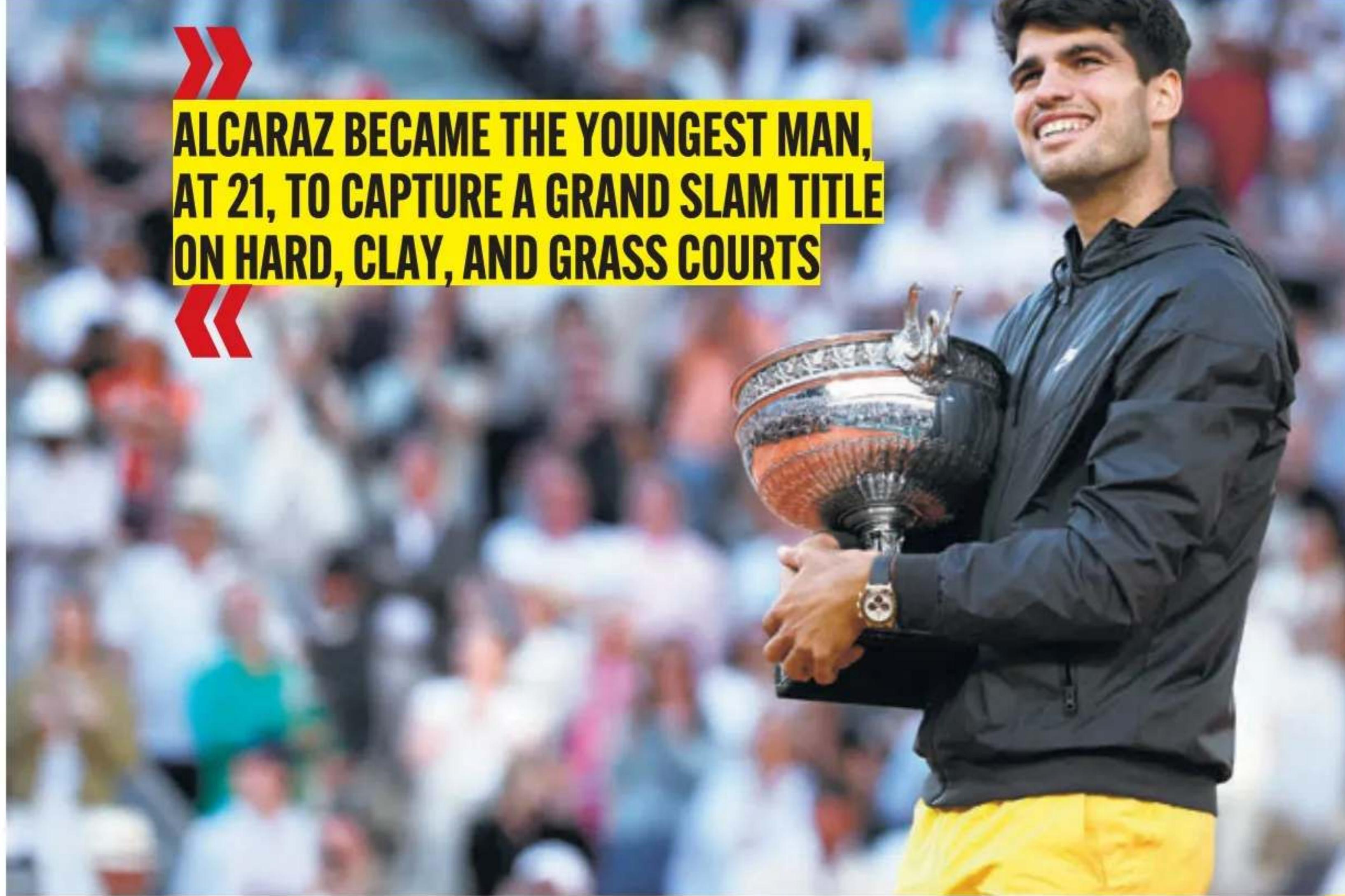
Even though both players were contesting their first French Open final, Alcaraz prevailed in his previous Grand Slam finals at the 2022 US Open and the 2023 Wimbledon, upsetting seven-time champion

Novak Djokovic. In sharp contrast, Zverev faltered after coming within two points of the title at the 2020 US Open against Dominic Thiem.

Before this final, the candid Zverev discussed the heartbreaking setback: "I've said it before and I'm going to say it now again: I was not ready. I was not ready to win my first Grand Slam final. I was not mature enough. I was maybe too much of a kid still. I didn't know what the occasion meant. And that's why I lost. I'm 27 years old now. So definitely not a kid anymore. Already getting older. If not now, then when?"

Not this time. Even though Zverev led their rivalry 5-4, rode an 11-match clay winning streak after taking the Rome Masters, and boasted the best first serve in tennis, Alcaraz was better in just about every other category, except perhaps Zverev's rock-solid backhand. *Alcaraz enjoyed big advantages on the forehand and serve, shot variety, athleticism, and the ability to handle pressure.*

Neither dealt well with the pressure to start the match. Zverev



»

## ALCARAZ BECAME THE YOUNGEST MAN, AT 21, TO CAPTURE A GRAND SLAM TITLE ON HARD, CLAY, AND GRASS COURTS

«

double faulted twice for love-30 and lost his serve when the opportunistic Alcaraz hit a terrific low volley winner and a forehand approach winner.

Perhaps the angst from Zverev's lingering domestic abuse case, which was settled out of court four days before, or the stress from surviving two five-setters had taken a toll.

Alcaraz also looked nervous when he committed three unforced groundstroke errors and a double fault to give away his serve in the next game.

By returning Sascha's massive first serve from 20 feet behind the baseline — a yard more than Daniil Medvedev's extremely deep position — Alcaraz blunted its power, which he failed to do at the Australian Open in January during his four-set loss. "That was one of the biggest serving exhibitions I've ever seen," said McEnroe. "And I've seen [Pete] Sampras and [Boris] Becker."

Alcaraz used the smart tactic to break serve twice more to grab the first set 6-3. A lunging backhand volley winner and an improvised

swinging forehand volley in the eighth game prompted Carillo to say, "Is there any shot this guy doesn't have?"

Zverev found his groove in the second set to turn the tide. He struck his forehand with more power and less loopy topspin, while Alcaraz lost concentration, energy, and consistency. Two serve breaks gave the 6'6" German the surprisingly decisive second set, 6-2.

To regain his energy, Carlos drank pickle juice during changeovers. He staved off three break points to take the (seemingly) pivotal seventh game for a 5-2 lead in the pivotal third set. But abruptly and unpredictably, Sascha reversed the momentum again.

Alcaraz played a terrible tactical game serving for the set at 5-3, missing a half volley in no-man's-land on the first point and rushing the net with a crosscourt approach to Zverev's strong backhand wing — a double mistake — on break point. At the 5-6 changeover, the Spaniard complained to the umpire, saying

there is no clay and it's playing like a hard court. Gusts blew the top dressing away and took the wind out of his sails. Zverev grabbed the last five games and the third set, 7-5.

Alcaraz quickly reset to reverse the momentum again in the roller coaster match. He reeled off three straight service breaks, the first clinched with a pinpoint forehand passing shot and the second with a cruel drop shot that Zverev didn't run for. The fickle French fans that chanted for Zverev to ignite his third-set comeback now chanted "Carlos! Carlos!" to boost him.

Ahead 4-0, Alcaraz called for a medical timeout. An ATP physio worked on his left leg while a physician gave him a painkiller.

When Alcaraz served for the set at 5-1 and fell behind 15-40, McEnroe said, "It's incredibly unpredictable right now." It didn't turn out that way as Alcaraz won four straight points to take the 6-1 set.

Alcaraz had the momentum now, but both players had reason to be confident. Alcaraz owned a



near-perfect 10-1 record in five-set matches in his young career. Sascha matched that with a 10-1 mark in five-setters at Roland Garros.

Sascha lost the mental game when he lost his serve and fell behind 2-1. Two bad volley errors, a double fault, and an unforced backhand error gave the game away.

Alcaraz, who admires Michael Jordan and tries to emulate the NBA superstar's clutch play, fought off three break points at 0-40. After he played great defence and then put away a smash on one break point, the crowd rewarded his super hustling with a standing ovation. When he held serve for 3-1 with a perfect drop shot, chants of "Carlos! Carlos!" reverberated around the stadium.

The phenom who, as a boy, idolised Nadal but modelled his game on Federer was now virtually unstoppable. Zverev was down 2-4, love-30 in a must-win game when Alcaraz hit the shot of the match, if not the tournament. After he sprinted across the length of the baseline, he improvised a crosscourt slice

**Young and hungry:** The clash between Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner was the youngest Grand Slam semifinal since Andy Murray defeated Rafael Nadal at the 2008 US Open. AFP

backhand passing shot winner with one hand. Zverev shot a long stare toward him that translated to "Did you really make that shot?"

Alcaraz broke serve with his trademark inside-out forehand winner and then routinely held serve for a 3-6, 6-2, 5-7, 6-1, 6-2 triumph and his third Grand Slam title.

After his on-court victory celebration, Alcaraz rushed to the player's box where his team, family, and friends hugged him. His parents shed tears of joy. His coach Juan Carlos Ferrero, who won Roland Garros in 2003, beamed with pride.

Zverev graciously showered the champion with praise. "He's a beast. He's an animal. The intensity he plays tennis at is different to other people. He played fantastic. He played better than me in the fourth and fifth set. It's

how it is. I felt like this Grand Slam final I did everything I could. At the [2020] US Open, I kind of gave it away myself. It's a bit different [here]."

Alcaraz pointed to his mental fortitude as the key to the deciding set. "You have to give your heart. In those moments, it's where the top players give their best tennis," he explained.

"I wanted to be one of the best tennis players in the world, so I have to give extra in those moments in the fifth set, I have to show the opponent that I am fresh, I'm [acting] like we are playing the first game of the match. That works pretty well if the opponents see me that I'm moving well, I'm hitting the good shots, I'm finding good solutions. And of course, mental strength plays a great part in that moment if you want to win the Slams."

As a reward for winning Slams, Alcaraz gets a tattoo with the date of the final and a symbol of the venue. "Another tattoo with the Eiffel Tower will be soon," Alcaraz said. "I wanted to win this tournament since I was a



little kid, watching since I was five or six years old. This is great for me and something I will enjoy with my people." The dramatic final overshadowed an even closer and higher-quality semifinal when Alcaraz overcame Sinner 2-6, 6-3, 3-6, 6-4, 6-3. It marked the youngest Grand Slam semifinal since Andy Murray defeated Nadal at the 2008 US Open.

The 22-year-old Sinner, the reigning Australian Open champion, was the Tour's biggest winner this year — 33-2 — and on June 10, took over the No. 1 ranking from Djokovic, who withdrew from Roland Garros due to a torn meniscus after beating Argentina's Francisco Cerundolo in a five-set quarterfinal.

During the 2020 pandemic, Ricardo Piatti, then Sinner's coach, used the break to educate him about the mentality of champions. He had Jannik watch two matches of the legendary Big Three — Djokovic, Nadal, and Federer — every day. Not their best matches, though. These were matches they didn't play well yet managed to win. The purpose was to

**Idol inspiration:** Echoing the philosophy of Nadal, Alcaraz viewed his gruelling 4-four, 9-minute victory in almost life-and-death terms. AFP

teach Sinner how to problem-solve during adversity.

Last year the wiry 6'3" Sinner added seven pounds of muscle to his legs, revamped his service motion, changed his stance from a platform to step-up, and under the tactical tutelage of Darren Cahill, added variety to his previously one-dimensional power game. Both players skipped the Rome Masters — Alcaraz had a forearm injury that required him to wear a long sleeve, and Sinner had a lingering hip injury.

Sinner's main advantage over the more athletic Alcaraz was on the backhand. Entering the semifinals, Sinner was plus 20 on winner to errors, while Alcaraz was minus 33.

After splitting the first two hard-hitting sets, both players suffered cramps in the third set: Alcaraz's right hand and Sinner's right forearm and left thigh. Alcaraz

learned from last year's semifinal loss to Djokovic when he was hobbled by full-body cramps that he had to stay calm and keep fighting. Alcaraz lost the third set 6-3 but converted his only break point with a backhand winner to take the fourth set, 6-4.

The broad-shouldered Spaniard got the only service break of the deciding set (6-3) in the second game thanks to a spectacular backhand passing shot on the dead run and a forehand winner.

As *Tennis Channel* analyst Martina Navratilova said, "Carlos played the big points better, was more aggressive and adventurous, had more gas left in his tank, and had more arrows in his quiver."

Echoing the philosophy of Nadal, Alcaraz viewed his gruelling 4-four, 9-minute victory in almost life-and-death terms. "You have to find the joy [while] suffering. That's the key — here at Roland Garros. Long rallies. Four-hour matches. Five sets. You have to fight. You have to suffer. But as I told my team many times, you have to enjoy suffering."

## Prevention of check

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Whether top-class three-movers are more difficult to construct than quality two-movers is a moot point but they certainly consume more working hours. According to Anderson in composing this joint three-mover below, its composers spent some three hundred hours of composing time between them. It is an exceptional masterpiece which requires elaborate study. Interferences and obstructions on the three potential 'bent lines' of black check allow the white knights and WPg5 to move off these lines.

V.L.Eaton & G.F.Anderson  
I prize,British Chess Magazine 1953



Mate in three moves

**Key move:** 1.Bb1! zugzwang

- 1....Bxa5 2.Nxd4 3.Ne6  
(2...Rd6 3.Rf5)
- 1...Nxa5 2.Nd6 3.Re4  
(2.Re4 3.Rf5)
- 1...Nc5 2.Nc3 3.NxR  
(2. d4xNc3 3.dxe3)
- 1....Bc5 2.Nc7 3.Nxd5,Nd6
- 1...Nd8 2.g5xh6 Rf5,Re4
- 1...Nd6 2.Nf8 3.Ne6,Ng6

These are the six main variations which are forced for a wide variety of tactics. Noteworthy is partial paralysis of black in Nc5 and Bc5.

Edgar Holladay commenting on this in 'American Chess Bulletin' called it

an object lesson to those composers who rush feverishly from one problem to the next in an effort to increase the quantity of their output and as a result produce very little of permanent value.

The second one below shows masked prevention of check.

Jan Hartong  
Tidskrift KNSB 1940(v)



Mate in three moves

Checks to the white king would arise from the removal of masking men. The logic of the thematic variations would be the same if black units alone masked the checking line and the WN and WP started from somewhere else.

**Key 1.Qe7!** threat 2.Qg7

1....Bg3 2.Nf3+ gxf3 3.c3

1....Nd3 2.c3+ Nxc3+ 3.Nf3

Now for a problem for solving

L.J.Richenberg,Observer 1960



Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Evolution of a theme'

Key 1.Qb1 ! threat:2.Qxg6 3.Qg4

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



## Divya Deshmukh wins World Junior Chess title



Divya Deshmukh added another significant title to her already impressive collection, recently. The 18-year-old from Nagpur won the World junior girls' chess championship after beating Bulgaria's Beloslava Krasteva in the final round at the Gift City Club.

The top-seeded Divya finished with 10 points, out of a possible 11, as she remained unbeaten, winning nine games and drawing two. The title in the open section was claimed by Kazakhstan's Kazybek Nogerbek, whose win in the last round against the sole overnight leader Mamikon Gharibyan of Armenia took him to 8.5 points.

Armenia's Emin Ohanyan had already scored 8.5 points, thanks to his victory against Daniel Quizon of the Philippines. A better tie-break score gave the title to Nogerbek, seeded ninth.

Luka Budisavljevic of Serbia finished third. Pranav Anand, who began as the third seed, was the best-placed Indian at 10th.

In the girls' section, Mariam Mkrtchyan took the runner-up spot after finishing half a point behind Divya. Azerbaijan's Ayan Allahverdiyeva was third.

P. K. AJITH KUMAR

## » INDIAN PLAYGROUND

### SPORTOON



**1** Neeru Pathak broke the girls' 400m under-18 National record of former Asian junior champion Rezoana Mallick Heena while winning the gold at the 19th National youth athletics championships in Bilaspur, on June 16. The 17-year-old from Delhi clocked 52.85s (old National youth record 52.98s) and also qualified for the under-20 Worlds (entry standard 55.40s) which will be held in Lima, Peru, in August. Punjab's Mannat Brar, the silver medallist (55.84), finished three seconds behind Neeru.

STAN RAYAN

**2** Kerala's unseeded Karan Thapa defeated Karnataka's third-seeded Kevin Titus Suresh 6-4, 6-4 and won the boys singles title in the AITA National Series under-18 tennis tournament in Bengaluru. Elsewhere, Riya Sachdeva saved two match points to beat top seed Aditi Rawat 2-6, 7-5, 6-4 in the final of the Rs.100,000 AITA women's tennis tournament at the Faridabad Tennis Academy. In the semifinals, the 17-year-old Riya had beaten Yashika Shokeen, a member of the Indian junior Billie Jean King Cup team. It was the third singles title in the women's circuit for Riya.

TEAM SPORTSTAR



## FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan



FOR MORE STORIES

# The science of injury versus load management

With advancements in sports medicine and data-driven training methods, India must **develop its own sports science ecosystem** to create a tailored process for data collection and load management.

In 1989, Stephen Covey published his highly acclaimed book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. This book, which has sold over 25 million copies, explores how individuals contribute to successful organisations by fostering interdependence among staff.

With the rapid growth of sports medicine teams, sport has become an 'arms race', with team owners often believing that the secret to developing a winning franchise lies in the quality of the backroom staff.

This topic will persist until all related doubts are progressively resolved, taking diverse variables into consideration at various time frames. A practical approach is key.

It's a battle of data versus application. Over the last two decades, research on the relationship between training load and injuries has grown exponentially.

In India, this trend has become prominent in the last four to six years, showing where the country stands in the practical application and data collection in sports science. As we gather more data, our understanding of training modules has improved. However, there is still a long way to go in collecting data relevant to Indian athletes. No data is wasted if it can be used to achieve peak performance with the goal of winning.

The entire thought process has gone through a paradigm shift in the last two decades. Earlier, injuries were directly related to training intensity, load, incorrect methods, and exercise choices. Now, injuries can be attributed to sudden spikes in training load when an athlete is accustomed to a certain load.

In this context, it appears that overuse

injuries may arise from athletes being underprepared for the load they are about to perform. A question of interest to both strength and conditioning (S&C) coaches/physios and researchers is why some athletes sustain injuries at low training loads, while others can tolerate much greater loads. What differences change the perspective in training protocols?

Incorporating a higher chronic training load, well-developed aerobic fitness, and good lower body strength appear to moderate the training-injury relationship and provide a shielding effect against spikes in load.

The training-performance conundrum is complex and dynamic, with multiple inputs to injury and performance at any given time. The challenge faced by sports science researchers is obtaining large enough longitudinal data sets to capture the time-varying nature of physiological and musculoskeletal capacities and training-load data to sufficiently inform injury-prevention efforts.

The training to performance enigma can be solved through





collaboration between researchers, support staff, and clinicians, as well as understanding that efficacy does not equate to effectiveness. To find an ideal pattern in training to performance domain, large amounts of data need to be collated over time, considering many variables from sport to sport, skill to skill, and individual to individual. The effectiveness of training modes can be derived through the correct inference of the data collected.

From an Indian perspective related to data collection and load management principles, we need to develop our own system with a foolproof process tailored to our athletes. Borrowing old data from other countries proves futile in the long run and detrimental to our sports science ecosystem. This hard and laborious process is necessary if we want to compete with the best. With the dedication and passion of the younger generation, future performance for India can improve, or else we will continue to face

enquiry commissions for our poor performance as we always have.

**Change can come from the younger generation passionate about sports science. Many self-proclaimed experts on social media seek financial security and brand building by currying favour with selected players.** These professionals can be dangerous for trusting sports persons. Proper due diligence is needed before involving them in mainstream sports science. Ultimately, what matters is creating history for India, rather than economics for individuals.

**Changing times:** Earlier, injuries were directly related to training intensity, load, incorrect methods, and exercise choices. Now, injuries can be attributed to sudden spikes in training load. GETTY IMAGES **Left:** Rishabh Pant had to undergo a gruelling 14-month rehab after his horrific accident. PTI

+

**Borrowing old data from other countries proves futile in the long run and detrimental to India's sports science ecosystem.**

# Fandom in sport

Fans still want to watch events live — technology **hasn't entirely** made it more attractive to stay at home and revel in an immersive experience.

Suresh Menon

**J**ust how much has technology changed fandom in sport? For one, most teams (and advertisers) ensure that fan engagement is a continuous round-the-year programme. Their money comes from our consistency.

With virtual, augmented and other forms of 'reality', fans could be following their favourites at one remove, meaning technology might actually be coming between fans and their favourite teams or players while enhancing the viewing experience.

I suspect we are in an in-between phase. Fans still want to watch events live — technology hasn't entirely made it more attractive to stay at home and revel in an immersive experience. When that becomes the way the majority enjoy their sport, our stadiums will have the genuine fan who doesn't need artificial aid to appreciate the action. Still, expressions of love can take many forms.

Traditionally, sports fans looked forward to future contests because when these happened, the past receded enough for them to change its colours.

Nostalgia is the natural ally of the sports fan, which is why we have lasting memories of events we weren't witness to, many of which took place before we were born.

On a tour of New Zealand years ago, I met Bruce Taylor, who made a century and claimed five wickets on his Test debut in Kolkata. I reminded him of some of the action and how he had finally been caught by Budhi Kunderan. Taylor was impressed I remembered so much.



**Live action:** Fans enjoying the Indian Premier League from the stadium. B.JOTHI RAMALINGAM

So was I, since I hadn't watched the match, and even if I had, I would have been far too small. Fandom creates false memories; it is one of its charms. As the paleontologist and baseball nut Stephen Gould wrote, "We sit in our unsatisfactory present, surrounded by two mythologies that exalt their respective conflicting ends — better futures by the fancy of progress, and rosier pasts by the fable of golden old days."

Fandom has been studied from various angles — a recent book by two

philosophers speaks of the connection between sports fandom and identity, and asks whether it is better to be a committed fan of a particular team or to appreciate the sport from a neutral perspective.

**There is, too, the individual fan and his mindset as opposed to a community of fans and that psychology.**

Football fan Nick Hornby has written in *Fever Pitch* about how fans feel players are their representatives and embody the community.

This might be placing too heavy a burden on the players, individuals who might not take kindly to groupthink, where the teams and their fans are expected to have the same political or religious beliefs.

In *My Life as a Fan*, the American writer Wilfrid Sheed gave us another perspective, one that some fans might identify with: "So there they sat for years, the hours spent mulling and brooding, living and dying over various sports, adding up to a monument the size of a small city to wasted time and attention."

*Monument to Wasted Time* might be an ironic title for a fan's memoir!



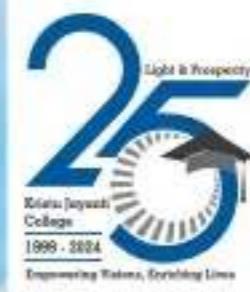
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