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OFF-SIDE

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FAMILIES BEFORE FANTASY

The **Online Gaming Act** forces Dream11 and MPL to exit, leaving Indian sport poorer but sparing families from the costs of compulsive play.

The Indian government's sweeping ban on real-money online gaming, outlined in the Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act, 2025, has redrawn the country's sports economy. The new law outlaws money-based games, forcing companies such as Dream11 and MPL — two of the world's biggest fantasy sports operators and lead sponsors of the national cricket team and the Indian Premier League — to halt cash games and unwind contracts.

The Premier League in England had carried gambling logos on jerseys for over two decades before a 2023 vote to phase them out by 2026/27, bowing to irrefutable evidence of addiction and social harm. More than half of its 20 clubs had gambling sponsors — worth around £100 million a season — but the moral case prevailed. Fans' lives, argued regulators, outweighed balance sheets.

India has reached this conclusion more quickly, with the government opting for an outright ban rather than regulation.

The government's justification is rooted in public health. Parliament was informed that "between 2022 and June 2025, 1,524 betting and gambling websites and mobile apps were blocked" by the Centre. While the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) does not yet maintain a national category for suicides linked to online gaming, State-level data are troubling. Karnataka officials have acknowledged multiple suicides tied to online rummy and betting since 2023, while Tamil Nadu's Additional Public Prosecutor, E. Raj Thilak, representing the Director General of Police in June 2025, told a Division Bench of the Madras High Court that between 2019 and 2024 there were as many as 47 deaths by suicide due to addiction to online games.

A government source told *PTI*: "There is a rough estimate that 45 crore people lose money every year. The total impact of the loss is estimated to be tentatively around ₹20,000 crore."

Lives lost to compulsive play could no longer be justified as collateral for sponsorship.

The decision, however, rips a gaping hole in Indian sports. Dream11 was not only the main sponsor of the national cricket team through a ₹358-crore, three-year jersey deal signed in 2023, it also bankrolled IPL franchises, domestic tournaments and dozens of athletes. Through its Dream Sports Foundation, the company backed Olympians such as sailor Nethra Kumanan and table tennis player Sreeja Akula, staged an Under-17 football championship, and funded grassroots school programmes. In terms of sheer visibility, very few private players have put more money into Indian sports over the past decade.

GroupM-ESP pegged India's 2024 sports market at ₹16,633 crore (sponsorships, endorsements, media), while according to TAM Media Research, Ecom-Gaming accounted for 6.84 per cent of advertising spend during IPL 2025. The abrupt loss of a category leader could result in a reduction of ₹500–₹1,000 crore in the sports market, with smaller leagues feeling the impact most acutely.

In England, analysts forecast that clubs outside the Premier League's "Big Six" could see shirt sponsorship values halved when gambling logos disappear.

But sport cannot claim to inspire communities while being propped up by industries that destabilise those same communities. Jerseys can live without gaming and gambling money, but families cannot live without loved ones.

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REUTERS

From foes to friends

Serena Williams made a surprise appearance at the International Tennis Hall of Fame, emerging from behind the stage to introduce "former rival, former fan and forever friend" Maria Sharapova for her induction. The first Russian woman ever to reach No. 1 in the rankings and one of 10 women to complete the career Grand Slam, Sharapova was joined in the Class of 2025 by dominating doubles team Mike and Bob Bryan.

First, I must be clear that I have the utmost respect for the U.S. swimmers that competed at the World Championships. My criticism is in no way directed at them. – 23-time Olympic gold medallist Michael Phelps launched a scathing attack on USA Swimming's leadership.

I'm super excited because I'm seeing the progression. I know something great is going to happen. My body is showing that it's adjusting to the speed." – Noah Lyles, looking forward to defending his 100m and 200m titles at the 2025 Worlds in Japan

New Chair

Tiger Woods was named the Chair of the PGA Tour's new future competition committee by CEO Brian Rolapp, who is tasking the nine-person panel to bring "significant change" to the current model for Tournament golf competition. Rolapp said the goal is to optimise the game for players, fans and Tour partners as Woods was told to apply a "clean sheet" mentality and invite input from players, fans, sponsors and partners.

No crisis

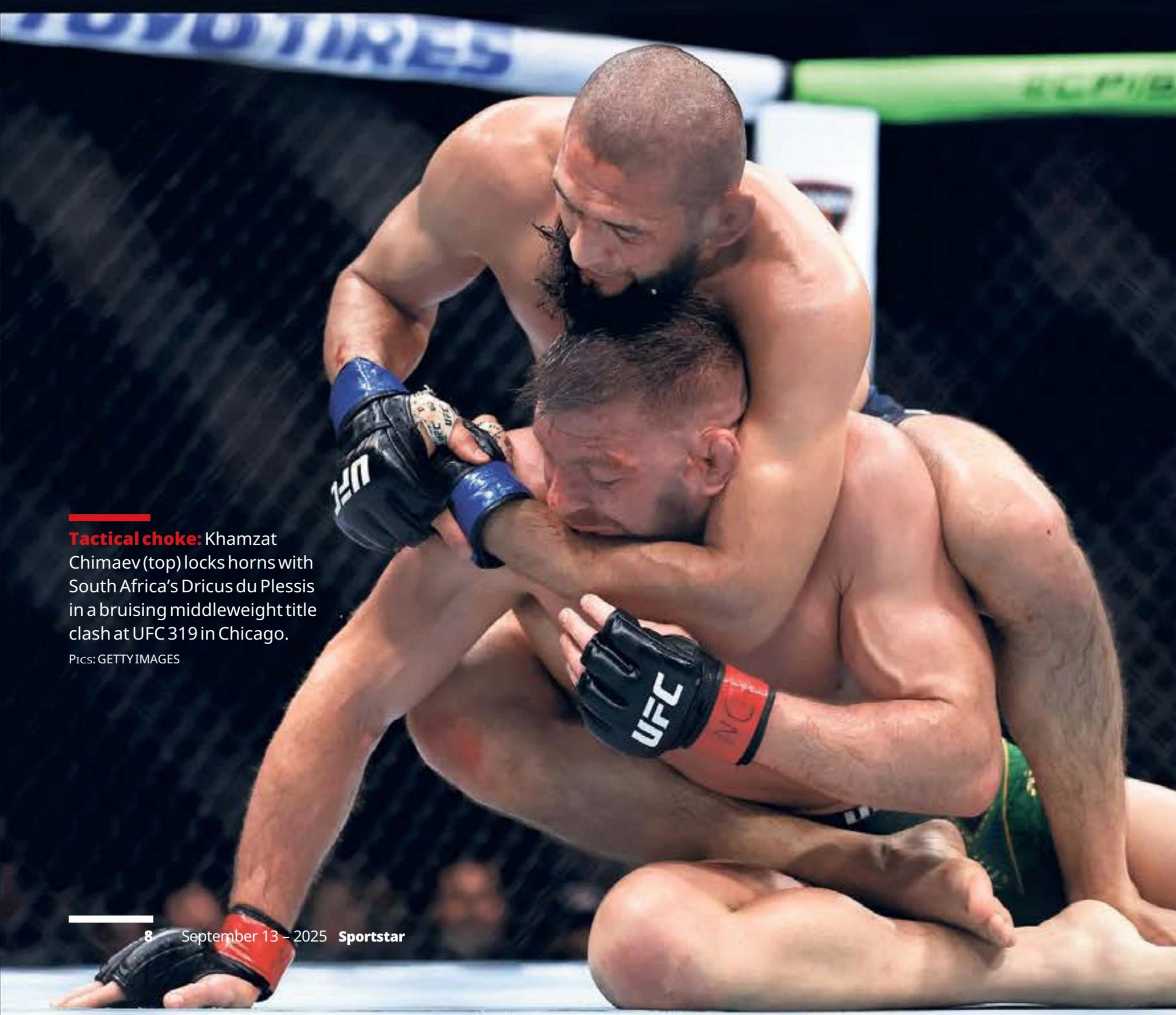
Badminton World Federation (BWF) Secretary-General Thomas Lund said the ongoing shuttlecock shortage has not yet reached a "crisis level", but stressed that manufacturers must resolve supply chain issues and accelerate the roll out of advanced synthetic options for players worldwide. Prices of imported feather shuttles have more than doubled in the past year due to a raw material crunch in China.

TESTING TIMES

Taiwanese Olympic champion boxer Lin Yu-ting will undergo compulsory gender testing ahead of the world championships in Liverpool. Lin and Algerian boxer Imane Khelif were embroiled in a gender row at the 2024 Paris Olympics, where they both won gold medals in different weight classes. World Boxing has said that women wanting to compete at the World Boxing Championships would have to undergo "mandatory sex testing" under its new policy. AFP

RESPECT AFTER RUIN

Dominant on the mat, **gracious** after the bell — Chimaev dethroned Du Plessis at UFC 319 and embraced him in respect.



Tactical choke: Khamzat Chimaev (top) locks horns with South Africa's Dricus du Plessis in a bruising middleweight title clash at UFC 319 in Chicago.

PICS: GETTY IMAGES

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The main event of UFC 319 was billed as a clash of titans, but what unfolded was a masterclass in strategic domination.

The highly anticipated bout between Dricus Du Plessis and Khamzat Chimaev was a stark reminder that in mixed martial arts, patience and positioning can neutralise even the most versatile of champions. From the opening bell, the narrative was set: this would be a wrestling match, and Chimaev was the undeniable architect.

In the first round, 'Borz' wasted no time, dragging Du Plessis to the mat within 15 seconds. This wasn't just a takedown — it was a statement.

Chimaev's grappling, an extraordinary mix of speed, technical precision, and brute power, smothered Du Plessis's offence. Takedowns are Chimaev's signature, and his numbers back it up: 26 successful takedowns and a flawless defensive record.

For the first three rounds, the pattern was suffocating. Du Plessis, usually defined by pace and unorthodox striking, was reduced to survival mode, constantly fending off takedowns and unable to unleash his heavy hands.

Although Du Plessis showed grit in the later rounds, repelling some advances, the damage was irreversible. The unanimous decision for Chimaev was never in doubt, with all three judges siding with him. The victory crowned Chimaev the new middleweight champion and reinforced his standing as one of the most fearsome grapplers in MMA history.

Yet the true story emerged after the final bell. In a sport often fuelled by animosity, mutual respect took centre stage. Chimaev was seen encouraging Du Plessis's corner mid-fight, and post-bout, both fighters exchanged words of admiration. Du Plessis later wrote on social media: "I have absolutely no excuses for my performance; I was beaten by a better fighter on the night. Congratulations to my opponent, and thank you for the honour of sharing the Octagon with you."

That spirit of sportsmanship offered a dignified conclusion to a one-sided but compelling title fight.

On a new path

For Aljamain Sterling, the former bantamweight champion, stepping into the featherweight division was a calculated gamble. At UFC Fight Night, his performance against Brian Ortega showed both the wisdom of the move and his determination to reclaim elite status. Sterling claimed a dominant unanimous decision, with all three scorecards reading 50-45 — a masterclass in controlled aggression and tactical precision.

His strategy revolved around a sharp, persistent jab. More than just a range-finder, it dictated distance, disrupted Ortega's rhythm, and created openings for combinations. Sterling's footwork complemented his striking, allowing him to land cleanly before slipping out of range and denying Ortega the chance to build sustained offence.

This measured approach defied expectations of a slugfest but underlined Sterling's evolution. He no longer needed to prove himself in a brawl; he could dismantle an opponent with patience and precision.

After losing his bantamweight crown, Sterling now faces the uphill climb of a new division. Defeating a top-tier opponent like Ortega is a crucial first step, cementing his place in the featherweight rankings and sending a clear message: the 'Funk Master' is back, and he is a serious contender.

Precision strike: Aljamain Sterling (left) lands a stinging shot on Brian Ortega in their 153-pound catchweight showdown at UFC Fight Night in Shanghai.

A WORLD CUP TICKET ON OFFER, A REPUTATION TO REBUILD

After a disappointing Pro League run, India faces its **biggest test** of the year: the Asia Cup 2025, a path to the World Cup and a shot at redemption.

Saikat Chakraborty
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The Indian men's hockey team stumbled in its first attempt to secure a spot at the 2026 World Cup, dropping to seventh in the world after a dismal European leg of the FIH Pro League 2024-25. One win from eight matches and a record seven-game losing streak — the longest in India's history — turned a side once seen as title contender into one relieved to cling to its top-tier status.

Now, as Craig Fulton's men shift focus to the Asia Cup in Rajgir, Bihar, a World Cup qualifier and, in the coach's words, the "most important tournament of the year" — the question is whether the Pro League collapse was an aberration or a symptom of deeper problems.

The burden of expectations

India enters the tournament as a three-time champion, the highest-ranked side, and Asia's flag-bearer in world hockey. That pedigree brings both opportunity and pressure: the need to reassert dominance on the continental stage while silencing doubts about its recent slide.

Defensive frailties

Fulton's "defend-to-attack" philosophy, built on fitness and quick transitions, fell apart in Europe. India conceded 26 goals across eight games, undone by slack clearances, mistimed tackles, and poor positioning inside the defensive 'D'. Six of those seven defeats came by a single goal, five of them in the final quarter.

Yet Fulton remains optimistic. "Over the last 18 months, we've been on the up," he told *Sportstar*. "Yes, we had a bit of a [bad] phase, but it

Indian squad for men's Asia Cup 2025

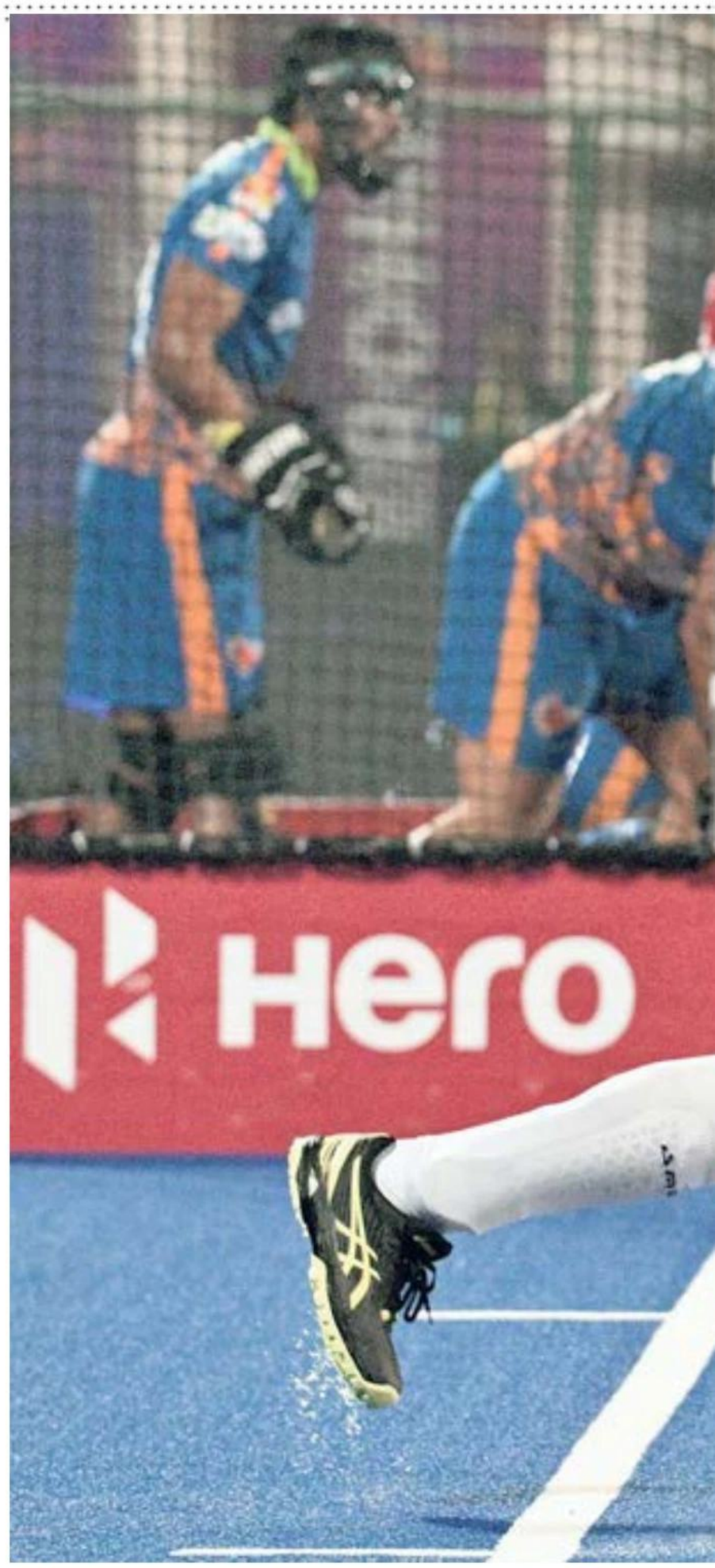
GOALKEEPERS: Krishan B Pathak, Suraj Karkera
DEFENDERS: Sumit, Jarmanpreet Singh, Sanjay, Harmanpreet Singh, Amit Rohidas, Jugraj Singh
MIDFIELDERS: Rajinder Singh, Raj Kumar Pal, Hardik Singh, Manpreet Singh, Vivek Sagar Prasad.
FORWARDS: Mandeep Singh, Shilanand Lakra, Abhishek, Sukhjeet Singh, Dilpreet Singh
ALTERNATES: Nilam Sanjeep Xess, Selvam Karthi

K. MURALI KUMAR

GETTY IMAGES

Groups

Pool A
India
Japan
China
Kazakhstan
Pool B
Malaysia
Korea
Bangladesh
Chinese Taipei



Rankings

Country	World	Asia
India	7	1
Malaysia	12	2
Republic of Korea	13	3
Japan	18	5
China	23	6
Bangladesh	29	9
Chinese Taipei	38	13
Kazakhstan	81	16

happened in the five games we played against Australia before the Olympics, and we defeated them in Paris. There is a reason we play the best teams so that we can become better."

Experience under strain

India had one of the most seasoned squads in the Pro League: only three of 24 players had fewer than 50 caps, while 14 had over 100. That such a unit buckled under pressure and lost decision-making sharpness was concerning. Tactical tweaks unsettled the balance, exposing defensive gaps against top-tier opponents. "We struggled to hold a consistent defensive shape, particularly when we committed players forward on the attack. We took some risks with new strategies; they didn't always pay off, but the lessons we learned will be crucial for the tournament ahead," admitted captain Harmanpreet Singh, who missed five matches with a finger injury.

Penalty corner puzzle

Harmanpreet's **(pic, above)** absence cost India more than its best defender; it also robbed the team of its most lethal drag-flicker. Though he still managed six Pro League goals to

SHASHI SHEKAR KASHYAP

Player to watch out for

ABHISHEK

The 26-year-old from Haryana has been on fire for India over the past 18 months, emerging as the undisputed spearhead of the attack. Among Asia's quickest players, this Sonipat speedster blends raw pace with flair, a nightmare combination for any defender. Even during India's faltering Pro League campaign, Abhishek stood out as a beacon of hope — his numbers tell the story: 42 goals in just 106 appearances. With Lalit Upadhyay's retirement, the burden on his shoulders has grown heavier, but he seems more than ready. A natural poacher with a sharp sense of positioning, Abhishek has an uncanny ability to turn the smallest of openings into match-winning opportunities.

share top-scorer honours with Abhishek, injuries since the Paris Olympics have hampered him. With Amit Rohidas, Jugraj Singh, and Sanjay unable to replicate his threat, India faces hard questions about set-piece strategy.

"When Harmanpreet isn't on the field, do we need to re-examine our penalty corner routines? Can more variations ease the pressure on him and the rest of the team?" the piece asks. Fulton insists patience is key. "We get an average of 5-6 penalty corners a game, sometimes even more. We have a few other drag-flickers who are still learning and need more exposure to convert those chances. We always practice variations; it is all about how we use them."

Goalkeeping concerns

The Pro League also exposed frailties in goal. Krishan Pathak struggled with aerial balls, a weakness ruthlessly exploited by tall European forwards. Suraj Karkera looked sharper but faltered in pressure moments. With defensive lapses leaving them exposed, forwards were forced to shoulder more responsibility.

"Forwards are the first line of defence," explained Abhishek. "I've had to become much more switched on when we don't have the ball. It's all about giving our defenders more cover and perfectly executing our man-to-man strategy."

Course correction

India has since regrouped with a four-week camp at the Sports

India's Asia Cup record

Titles: 3 (2003, 2007, 2017)
Runner-up: 5 (1982, 1985, 1989, 1994, 2013)
Third place: 2 (1999, 2022)
India has won 43 out of 56 matches in the Asia Cup and holds the record for most wins in the competition.

Warming up: Craig Fulton, chief coach of the Indian men's hockey team, oversees a training session at the Sports Authority of India's Southern Centre in Bengaluru's Jnanabharathi campus. K. MURALI KUMAR

Men's schedule

Friday, 29 August 2025
M01 - 09:00 - Pool B - Malaysia v Bangladesh
M02 - 11:00 - Pool B - Korea v Chinese Taipei
M03 - 13:00 - Pool A - Japan v Kazakhstan
M04 - 15:00 - Pool A - India v China
Saturday, 30 August 2025
M05 - 13:00 - Pool B - Bangladesh v Chinese Taipei
M06 - 15:00 - Pool B - Korea v Malaysia
Sunday, 31 August 2025
M07 - 13:00 - Pool A - China v Kazakhstan
M08 - 15:00 - Pool A - Japan v India
Monday, 1 September 2025
M09 - 13:30 - Pool B - Bangladesh v Korea
M10 - 15:30 - Pool B - Malaysia v Chinese Taipei
M11 - 17:30 - Pool A China v Japan
M12 - 19:30 - Pool A - India v Kazakhstan
Wednesday, 3 September 2025
M13 - 14:30 - 5/8th Place - 3rd Pool A v 4th Pool B
M14 - 17:00 - Super4s Pool - TBC v TBC
M18 - 19:30 - Super4s Pool - TBC v TBC
Saturday, 6 September 2025
M19 - 14:30 - 7/8th Place - Loser M13 v Loser M16
M20 - 17:00 - Super4s Pool - TBC v TBC
M21 - 19:30 - Super4s Pool - TBC v TBC
Sunday, 7 September 2025
M22 - 14:30 - 5/6th Place - Winner M13 v Winner M16
M23 - 17:00 - 3/4th Place - 3rd Super4s Pool v 4th Super4s Pool
M24 - 19:30 - Final - 1st Super4s Pool v 2nd Super4s Pool

Authority of India (SAI), Bengaluru, before a preparatory tour in Western Australia. "We're in a good position now going into this tournament," Fulton said. "I think we've had a real focus on our physical conditioning. We've upped it in terms of being better prepared tactically."

Battleground Asia

For India, the Asia Cup has always been more than just another tournament — once a stage of near-misses, later a showcase of dominance, and now a proving ground with a World Cup spot at stake. Fulton must walk a tightrope: chasing gold, testing tactical innovations, and still keeping cards in hand for bigger battles ahead.

India's record against Asian rivals in recent years is daunting. The team scored 94 goals in 14 matches across the 2023 Asian Games and 2024 Asian Champions Trophy. But history warns against complacency. The bronze at the 2022 Asia Cup was a sobering reminder that form can dip sharply after peaks.

No Pakistan, less sparkle

The absence of Pakistan dims the tournament's lustre. The rivalry remains the region's marquee attraction, even when the teams are unevenly matched. Following the Pahalgam terror attack and heightened military tensions, Pakistan declined its invitation, despite India's promise of visas, citing security concerns. The Asian Hockey Federation turned to Bangladesh to fill the void. India now faces China, Japan, and Kazakhstan (a late replacement for Oman) in Pool A. Pool B features Malaysia, Korea, Chinese Taipei, and Bangladesh. The tournament opens on August 29, with Malaysia facing Bangladesh, followed by defending champion Korea against Chinese Taipei, before India launches its campaign against China.

Host factor

The Asia Cup also marks the men's first major outing in Bihar. After Rajgir's successful staging of the Women's Asian Champions Trophy, excitement is palpable.

"We're absolutely thrilled to be playing in Rajgir," said veteran midfielder Manpreet Singh. "It's fantastic to see more states building world-class infrastructure for international hockey. The girls told us all about the incredible local support they received during the ACT. We can't wait to get out there and give them our best game."

With a World Cup berth and continental supremacy on the line, India has little margin for error. Anything less than victory could trigger uncomfortable questions about both strategy and leadership.

Standing tall: Bright spark in Europe, India's Mumbai-born goalkeeper, Suraj Karkera, now eyes redemption at the Hockey Asia Cup in Rajgir.
INSTAGRAM/ @SURAJKARKERA7

From the waiting bench to the watchtower of Indian hockey

Hockey goalkeeper **Suraj Karkera** spent nearly a decade waiting for his chance. With Sreejesh retired, he is now eager to seize the mantle with grit and consistency.

Saikat Chakraborty
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A tattoo etched on his torso reads: "For those I love, I will sacrifice." A single glance at Suraj Karkera's career shows this is more than a motto. It is the very essence of the national hockey goalkeeper. After eight years of battling on the fringes, he has finally secured his place in the Indian men's team — a testament to his tenacity and the sacrifices that defined his journey.

It has not been easy for the 29-year-old. Despite being part of the

core group for much of the past decade, he was third in line behind the legendary P. R. Sreejesh and Krishan Pathak. With only two goalkeeper spots in an 18-member international squad — and just one at the Olympics — Karkera was often sidelined during major tournaments. His rare opportunities came only when Sreejesh was injured or rested.

"The waiting period has been hard," Karkera tells *Sportstar*. "Not being able to play, when all I've ever dreamt of is playing for my country and winning medals. It really puts your character to the test. You find out what you're made of when things aren't going your way. These are testing times, and you have to rely on patience and resilience to get through them."

When Sreejesh retired after the Paris Olympics, most assumed Pathak would inherit the mantle. Instead, it was Karkera who seized the moment, rising to prominence during the 2024–25 FIH Pro League.

On a disappointing European tour where India managed just one win in eight matches, his performances stood out. Questions lingered over the goalkeeping unit's handling of aerial balls, but the Mumbai-born custodian was among the few bright spots. Now, as he prepares for the Hockey Asia Cup in Rajgir, he is focused on the future.

"There are no grey areas; it is either black or white. Hockey is a result-oriented game, and we fell short. Yes, we are aware of our mistakes, and we are working hard to improve," he says.

PIC: HOCKEY INDIA

Goalkeeper rivalries: A myth?

For many, goalkeeping is seen as a cutthroat rivalry, with teammates fighting for the coveted top spot. Karkera insists the reality is different. He describes the unit, now comprising Pathak, Pawan Malik, and himself, as a close-knit group built on camaraderie and healthy competition.

"From outside it may look different, but from where we are, it [competition for the place] is what makes us so strong," he explains. "We push each other to become better, which ultimately makes the team stronger."

In modern hockey, he points out, a goalkeeper's role extends far beyond stopping shots. Agility, quick decision-making, and penalty corner defence are crucial. With shootouts now common, adaptability is vital.

For Karkera, the goalkeeper is more than a last line of defence. Positioned to see the entire field, he becomes the conductor of the defensive orchestra, directing play and organising during counterattacks. As he puts it, "the priority is always clear: control the defence, control the game."

Finding inspirations and influences

Ironically, his path to hockey began not with the stick and ball but with the imposing gear of a goalkeeper. At his school, Children's Academy in Malad, he was drawn to the pads rather than the field players' flair. The fascination quickly turned into commitment, nurtured by legendary Mumbai coach Merzban 'Bawa' Patel and shaped further by

TITLES WON
Asia Cup
2022 Jakarta — Bronze
Asian Champions Trophy
2024 Hulunbuir — Gold
2021 Dhaka — Bronze
Individual Award
Goalkeeper of the Tournament — Asian Champions Trophy 2021

STATS
Senior International Caps — 66
First match — 09/08/2017
Latest match — 22/06/2025

Pic: HOCKEY INDIA

WHEN SREEJESH RETIRED POST-PARIS, MANY TIPPED KRISHAN PATHAK AS SUCCESSOR, BUT SURAJ KARKERA SEIZED THE CHANCE, SHINING IN THE 2024-25 FIH PRO LEAGUE

former India goalkeeper Dipika Murthy.

But Karkera's identity extends beyond sport. A Naib Subedar with the Bombay Sappers, he carries as much pride in protecting the nation as in defending the goal. Military life sharpened his discipline and outlook.

His inspirations come from military biographies. A chance reading of 1971 war hero (Retd) Major General Ian Cardozo's memoir left a deep impression, prompting him to seek out the veteran in person. "I mostly read military biographies. I try to understand how they coped with pressure situations. I'm also very inspired by the tales of Field Marshal William Slim."

The time is now

Since his senior debut in 2017 against Belgium, Karkera has made just 39 appearances in seven years. Yet, he made those count, including a 'goalkeeper of the tournament' award at the 2021 Asian Champions Trophy.

Now, with experience and a fresh opportunity, he has become indispensable, featuring in every match since India's bronze medal playoff at the Paris Games. With the 2026 World Cup, Asian Games, and the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics on the horizon, Karkera is determined to make up for lost time.

Rapid-fire

If you weren't a hockey player, what would you be?
I'm in the Army, so a soldier.

Last movie you watched?
The Accountant.

One rule change you want in Hockey?
Have a particular rule about the aerial balls.

If you could get a superpower for a day, what would it be? And what would you do with it?
I would like to watch the Olympic final and play in that.

What is your favourite cheat meal?
Donne Biryani.

Who is your favourite music artist, and which song from them do you love the most?
Piyush Mishra. Aarambh (song title)

Get an outright win in regulation time or a win through a penalty shootout?
Shootout.

If you were stuck on an island, which teammate do you think has the best survival skills to get you out?
Nilakanta Sharma because he's a good cook.

World ends tomorrow, what are you doing today?
Call my family members.

Who's the GOAT of hockey?
Dhanraj Pillay. He's the one who has put Indian hockey on the map.

Best player you have played with or against?
Tobias Hauke of Germany.

FIXING THE LEAKS, FINDING THE GOALS

From leaky defence to goal droughts, India women's hockey **faces a stern** Asia Cup test as it targets a World Cup return.

Rajdeep Saha
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A muggy Bengaluru afternoon had given way to a cool evening, a light drizzle speckling the azure blue turf at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) centre. The Indian women's hockey players were split into two different-coloured vests, simulating match scenarios in an intra-squad game devised by analytical coach Dave Smolenaars and head coach Harendra Singh.

"If I speak about today's session, we were working on transitions. When we retrieve the ball, we are practising

K. MURALI KUMAR

how to go forward. And when we go forward, we need to know how to keep the ball," a weary Udita explained to *Sportstar* after the demanding training run.

The women's national team is in transition. Four years ago, it was celebrating a historic fourth-place finish at the Tokyo Olympics. Today, it is reeling from relegation in the 2024-25 FIH Pro League and the failure to qualify for Paris 2024. The mood has dipped, and before turning attention to the Asia Cup in China — with a World Cup berth at stake — the side has had to confront its shortcomings.

Coming to terms

At 19, Salima Tete played in the Tokyo bronze-medal playoff against Great Britain. Now 23 and captain, she is expected to steady the group after a disastrous campaign. Yet Salima insists the leadership load is shared.

"There are a lot of seniors in the dressing room, like Savita [Punia] di. It's not like I'm the captain and only I'll have to speak when it's needed. We keep discussing and exchanging notes on where we can improve in a match, especially at half-time. If I make a mistake, they come and give me feedback."

Savita Punia, once a wide-eyed debutant 16 years ago, is now the team's anchor in turbulent times.

"When everything's rosy, everyone will feel good. When Tokyo happened, we didn't have to motivate anyone because we were getting a lot of love from outside. Then, we didn't qualify for the Olympics. There was a very short turnaround time and then the Pro League. I was the captain then, and as a senior, you have to keep your emotions aside and support the

India's Asia Cup record

Titles: 2 (2004, 2017)
Runner-up: 2 (1999, 2009)
Third place: 3 (1993, 2013, 2022)
India has won 26 out of 47 matches in the Asia Cup.

Groups

Pool A	Pool B
China	India
South Korea	Japan
Malaysia	Thailand
Chinese Taipei	Singapore

team in any way possible. Even Sushila [Chanu] called me and said, 'Savi, you have to motivate the group and speak to them'."

To ease the mental burden, Hockey India enlisted Bengaluru-based Behavioural Foresight, a performance science group that has worked with Indian Premier League side Rajasthan Royals and shuttler H.S. Prannoy. "Two to three times a week, they are taking classes as a group and individually also. This is important because when you are young, you tend to focus and think about a lot of things. They are helping them master the art of focusing on one or two things at a time. And the results are evident, I can see it on the pitch," Harendra said.

Even without Savita, sidelined with a foot injury, there is optimism. "Before the Tokyo Olympics, we weren't in the Pro League either. We had unity, and that's why we did well," Savita reflected.

Fixing the leak with experience

India's defence has been porous. Across 16 Pro League matches, it conceded more than 100 penalty corners, including 17 in a single game against Belgium. Of the 43 goals allowed, 23 came from penalty corners. Much of the blame has fallen on an inexperienced backline.

"We are working on the regaining part of the game. Experience is needed, especially while slowing down counter-attacks from European sides, which can be very quick. We are working on that now with the youngsters," said Udita, who managed only four League matches due to fitness issues.

Jyoti, a forward-turned-defender, was thrust into greater responsibility in the absence of seniors like Sushila, Udita, and Nikki Pradhan. "Many of us were new. Experienced players know what needs to be done in every situation, but one mistake from an inexperienced defender can result in a goal," the 25-year-old admitted.

Harendra explained that young defenders, eager to win the ball, often dived in and gave away soft penalty corners. "In hockey and even in football, the central defender acts like the pivot. If they know their job, 50 per cent of your defence is sorted. My three centre defenders were out for the majority of the Pro League. The adjustments included pulling midfielders like Manisha and Vaishnavi [Phalke] back into defence, and giving more responsibility to Jyoti. One player cannot last the whole season as the main centre defender."

The solution, he said, lies in structure: "The diamond formation helps protect the centre. There should be at least four players present to prevent counterattacks. That's something we are working on."

With Udita and Nikki back in the squad, Harendra expects a

Rankings

Country	World	Asia
China	4	1
India	9	2
Japan	12	3
South Korea	16	4
Malaysia	25	5
Thailand	30	6
Singapore	31	7
Chinese Taipei	40	10

R. V. MOORTHY

Player to watch out for
DEEPIKA

The 21-year-old forward from Haryana will be India's chief attacking threat. Six of her seven Pro League goals came from penalty corners, but Deepika underlined her versatility by winning FIH's Poligras Magic Skill Award for a solo effort against the Netherlands in the 2024-25 FIH Pro League. With 31 goals in 64 appearances for India, she has built an enviable record against Asian rivals, scoring 12 times in 17 matches against Thailand, China, and Japan.

Mental conditioning: Head coach Harendra Singh revealed that Hockey India has partnered with Bengaluru-based Behavioural Foresight, a performance science firm that helps athletes handle pressure: **Below:** Skipper Salima insists the leadership load is shared. PICS: HOCKEY INDIA

steadier defence and, with it, calmer teammates.

Hitting the mark

If defence is a concern, attack is equally so. Drag-flicker Deepika finished as India's top scorer with seven goals, six from penalty corners. That reliance could place unnecessary pressure on the forward.

"When we go to take a PC, of course, there'll be pressure. But inside that circle, if my teammates tell me, 'Do whatever you can, we are here to back you,' then I only need to focus on the goal," she smiled.

Before the European leg of the League, Deepika and Manisha Chauhan trained under drag-flick coach Toon Siepman. "Changing my body position during pick-up, correcting my footing, and tweaking the follow-through to increase the speed of the ball – these were the areas of focus," Deepika recalled.

India, however, struggled in front of goal: 22 strikes all season, the second-lowest tally (ahead of England's 20). Ten were field goals, 11 from penalty corners, and just one from penalty stroke. It also ranked last in circle penetrations (210).

"Where we fail is in the number of shots on goal. Look at penalty corners, we won them as many as the Netherlands and Belgium, but our conversion rate was low (13.75). In modern hockey, you try to hit that sweet spot of 24-28 per cent in a match," Harendra observed.

Back where it began

For Harendra, the Asia Cup is personal. It was his first assignment when he took over the women's team in 2017 — and he won the title.

"When I took charge of India on October 8, 2017, that was the first time that I took the job of a women's team. I had to fly to Japan on the 24th, so the preparation time was less, but many of the players were mature in that group," he remembered.

Between stints with India, Harendra led the U.S. men's team in 2021. "There, I got to learn a lot about the other aspects of hockey, the ones not related to the game on the turf. Mental toughness, decision-making, psychology, and well-being – they emphasise a lot on these things. Now that I'm back here, I try to do the same."

The 2017 team had established stars like Rani Rampal and Vandana Katariya. The current side is younger, but Harendra believes in its long-term trajectory. It is, in his words, "Mission 2028" — with the World Cup and Asian Games as stepping stones towards a Los Angeles Olympic medal.

"We know that if we win the Asia Cup, we will go to the World Cup. So there's no compromise on that. There's no ifs and buts. We have to win. Of course, there's another chance to qualify after this, but why wait?" Harendra, who still swears by his philosophy of "Indian masala hockey," concluded.

India's squad for women's Asia Cup 2025

GOALKEEPERS: Bansari Solanki, Bichu Devi Kharibam
DEFENDERS: Manisha Chauhan, Udita, Jyoti, Suman Devi Thoudam, Nikki Pradhan, Ishika Chaudhary
MIDFIELDERS: Neha, Vaishnavi Vitthal Phalke, Salima Tete, Sharmila Devi, Lalremsiami, Sunelita Toppo
FORWARDS: Navneet Kaur, Rutaja Dadaso Pisal, Beauty Dungdung, Mumtaz Khan, Deepika, Sangita Kumari

India women's schedule

India vs Thailand (September 5)
Japan vs India (September 6)
India vs Singapore (September 8)

« Spectator engagement arrangements have been increased manifold »

RAVEENDRAN SANKARAN

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Relegated to the margins of Indian sports for decades, Bihar is determined to make up for lost years in quick time. The state kicked off its first-ever major international competition with the women's hockey Asian Champions Trophy in 2024, followed by the Sepak Takraw World Cup earlier this year and then the Under-20 Asian Rugby. Up next is the all-important men's hockey Asia Cup at the massive Rajgir Sports Complex — the 90-acre project Bihar hopes will serve both as a nursery of talent and a symbol of its organisational abilities.

Leading the state's ambitions is Raveendran Sankaran, Director General of the Bihar State Sports Authority (BSSA) and the driving vision behind the transformation of the state's sporting landscape. He spoke to *Sportstar* on the BSSA's preparations for the Asia Cup and its long-term plans. Excerpts:

Can you give an idea of the planning, preparations and arrangements for the Asia Cup?

There are quite a few things, especially after the ACT last year. One, we now have a second turf — it's ready and already in use — so we now have two floodlit turfs inside the same campus.

Two, we have upgraded all our athletes' and coaches' hostels, transit hostels and dining halls, and they are all now completely air-conditioned. Most of the technical officials, broadcasting teams and volunteers will be accommodated inside the complex itself.

Three, all the teams are being accommodated in Rajgir itself, within a maximum of 10–15 minutes' travel. Last time, as you know, the teams were put up in Gaya and had to travel every day. That won't happen now.

In fact, we had originally planned to host the teams inside the campus too, but the Indian junior men's team is there, as is the Indian Navy team. Plus, we don't yet have specialised chefs or separate dining halls for visiting countries. But wherever the teams are accommodated, we have instructed hoteliers to arrange chefs as required.

Four, every team has been provided with the best facilities — a translator, security officer, liaison officer. Also, we have the Bihar Police Academy right across the road from the Sports Complex with a world-class gym and swimming pool, which will be open for them to use for workouts, swimming, rehab — whatever they need.

How easy or difficult was it to get it all done in less than a year? Last time when the women's ACT was held, things were still in process.

Not difficult at all. This was decided on the final day of the ACT and the Bihar government was very clear about meeting deadlines. We started work immediately, funds were provided and, most importantly, we had the Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG) in May. That not only helped us upgrade everything in time but also test the infrastructure and preparations on a massive scale.

What are the plans for the public in terms of facilities and arrangements?

Spectator engagement arrangements have been increased

manifold. The food court and related areas will be bigger and better. The number of toilets, washrooms, water points — everything will be a lot more to ensure clean and hygienic facilities along with medical assistance.

Apart from this, we want everyone in Bihar to be able to watch the matches, so we will be setting up fan parks in every district across the state. There will be huge LED screens with food stalls in every district headquarters to make it a public occasion.

One of the things we wanted to do was put up temporary stands with scaffoldings, like at the Paris Olympics, to further increase spectator capacity.

But the feasibility study — conducted by the BSSA with the disaster management authorities and fire department — made it clear that in case of any emergency, evacuation would become an issue. So we dropped the idea because safety comes first.

What were the learnings from the ACT and how have you handled those this time?

To be honest, there wasn't much of a challenge even last year, but yes, some things we have improved this time. The biggest challenge was transporting teams from Bodh Gaya and back, which is now taken care of.

Secondly, crowd management was tricky because although entry was free, people had to book tickets online. What happened was, someone would book a ticket, then share the QR code with friends and family, and all of them would insist on entering with that single code on their respective phones.

This time, we have devised the software in such a way that they cannot forward a ticket to anybody. It is still free, but you will have to book it yourself. That will ensure proper crowd management.

Another challenge was the large swarm of insects under the lights, flooding the entire area including the turf. That was a major nightmare. Now we know what to expect and what to do — the respective agencies have been alerted to control them beforehand.

Apart from hockey, what is the status of the other halls and venues inside the complex?

The indoor halls are all completely ready. As I mentioned, the KIYG really galvanised the process of finishing the work. Kabaddi, fencing, weightlifting, table tennis and others were conducted in those newly constructed halls. Even the athletics track and football ground are ready.

The two biggest structures are the velodrome — that will take some more time — and the cricket stadium. As for cricket, the pitch is laid and ready because it was done by the BCCI itself. We can perhaps host a small local match there. One major pavilion, the VIP block, is almost ready and if all goes well, the completed stadium will be inaugurated by the Hon. Chief Minister by September-end.

What is the long-term plan for the Rajgir Sports Complex?

The plans are already being implemented on the ground.

We have training camps for junior boys and girls in weightlifting, wrestling, athletics and hockey, with athletes staying in hostels and practising under qualified coaches.

The academies are operational, the facilities are being utilised. We are soon going to start the national women's football camp as well.

As for major events, the Asia Cup will be the last one for now — anything else will happen only in 2026 after the Assembly elections.

R. V. MOORTHY

'SO LONG, DOC. YOU WILL BE MISSED'

Indian sport lost a **precious gem** with the passing of Dr. Vece Paes.

My first meeting with Doc was in 1981, on the eve of the match in Calcutta during the India-Pakistan Test series. He had come over to our team hotel with his little son to wish us the best. In the middle of our banter and conversation, Doc realised he had to make a visit to some of his patients. "I'm leaving Leander with you chaps. Give him a feel of what it is like to be part of an Indian team. Will come by to pick him up later in the day," said Doc, and he zoomed off.

M. M. Somaya

It was a fun day for Leander as we took him along through our daily drill. Doc's friendly demeanour despite his seniority, and Leander's interest to learn, struck a chord. It was the beginning of a special friendship with father and son.

The very next year, in 1982, I was representing my then employers Mahindra & Mahindra in the Aga Khan tournament in Bombay. In the semifinals we were up against the formidable Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), comprising almost their entire national team that had won the World Cup earlier that year.

After going toe-to-toe with them in a high-paced match, we lost 1-2 due to a late goal. As we trudged back into the Bombay Gymkhana dressing room, a disheartened lot, we noticed a gift-wrapped parcel for the team. It turned out to be a crate of canned beer with a congratulatory note from Doc Paes. It certainly lifted our spirits! The empathy shown for the losing team by a senior pro, who just happened to be a spectator that day, further enhanced my respect for the man.

After my playing career, in 1989, I was appointed to the National Selection Committee that comprised Doc Paes among other stalwarts. His clarity of thought, without an iota of bias, positively influenced decision-making. I got to know him better, and we hung out some evenings together. He spoke about Leander's passion to excel in tennis at the highest level.

Sponsorship by corporate houses for individual athletes did not exist back then. Doc decided to sacrifice his medical practice for some years to manage Leander's career and tap every possible source to generate finances. He had identified Gene Mayer in the USA, a top-rung coach, to fine-tune Leander's technical skills. Mayer charged a then-hefty fee of 1,000 USD for a single session. Doc somehow scrambled together the resources to make it happen. Looking back, critical interventions like these set Leander up, ultimately earning him a place in the International Tennis Hall of Fame.

In time, Doc Paes became the face of sports medicine in India. His deep knowledge enabled him to add scientific temper to training, fitness, and recovery. Besides hockey, his expertise was sought in a wide range of games, including cricket, football, and rugby. He played a key role in setting protocols to detect age fraud and deter those taking performance-enhancing substances.

Despite his many accomplishments in sport and in the

Deep mind: Doc Paes became the face of sports medicine in India. His deep knowledge enabled him to add scientific temper to training, fitness, and recovery.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

medical profession, Doc remained accessible and fun-loving. After he moved from Kolkata to Mumbai, there were more occasions for us to meet. The chemistry he shared with Leander was not confined to the tennis court — he was always on hand to guide and mentor his son through life's challenges.

While I used to meet Doc off and on, I had not met Leander since he had embarked on his quest for excellence. Then, a decade and a half ago, an exhibition football match in Mumbai saw Leander and me in the same team. I was meeting him after many years and post his meteoric career.

I was relieved that he remembered me! In fact, I was disarmed by his humility and genuineness. Over the years, I have met him more often and observed that he is a chip off the old block — charming and extremely respectful to people from every walk of life. Precisely the values that endeared Doc Paes to one and all. I am thankful to him for giving India a world champion in Leander and instilling in him a strong set of values. And just as importantly, grateful for his immense contribution to Indian sport in a multitude of ways.

M. M. Somaya was a member of India's gold medal-winning hockey team at the 1980 Moscow Olympics and later captained the side at the 1988 Seoul Games.

BETWEEN ZONAL PRIDE AND NATIONAL AMBITION

The Duleep Trophy goes back to basics with zonal teams, high-profile names, and a knockout format that could **shape India's Test future.**

Schedule

Quarterfinal 1: August 28-31, 2025: North Zone vs East Zone
Quarterfinal 2: August 28-31, 2025: Central Zone vs NorthEast Zone
Semifinal 1: September 4-7, 2025: South Zone vs Winner QF1
Semifinal 2: September 4-7, 2025: West Zone vs Winner QF2
Final: September 11-15, 2025: Winner SF 1 vs Winner SF 2

Waiting game: After a bright Test start with fifties on debut against England and a 150 versus New Zealand in Bengaluru, Sarfaraz Khan was left out of the England tour for Karun Nair. He now lines up for West Zone in the Duleep Trophy. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

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The Duleep Trophy returns to its traditional zonal structure after last year's experiment with a four-team all-star format, bringing with it renewed regional pride and high stakes for players eager to impress national selectors. Long seen as a bridge between domestic cricket and India A selection, the tournament has always been a litmus test for both emerging talent and seasoned performers.

When the competition gets underway on August 28 at the BCCI's new Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Bengaluru, players from the six zones — North, South, East, West, Central, and North-East — will have plenty to play for. With the domestic season looming and two India A Tests against Australia A on the horizon, this edition promises to be both competitive and consequential.

Back to basics

The BCCI has mandated that India's Test players feature in domestic tournaments whenever available, and this year's squads are packed with familiar names.

North Zone named India's Test captain Shubman Gill as skipper, though doubts remain over his participation as he has been unwell. Even if Gill pulls out, the squad boasts quality with left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh and promising pacers Harshit Rana and Anshul Kamboj.

West Zone looks equally formidable, with Shreyas Iyer, Sarfaraz Khan, Ruturaj Gaikwad, and Yashasvi Jaiswal forming a heavyweight batting order under the leadership of Shardul Thakur.

East Zone has plenty of firepower too. Mohammed Shami, Mukesh Kumar, and Riyan Parag provide depth across departments, while Abhimanyu Easwaran will lead until Ishan Kishan joins later in the campaign.

Central Zone could emerge as the dark horse. Dhruv Jurel captains with Rajat Patidar as deputy, while Kuldeep Yadav, Khaleel Ahmed, and Deepak Chahar lead a varied attack.

For the North-East Zone, led by Nagaland's Rongsen Jonathan, the tournament represents a rare but vital opportunity to test itself against higher-quality opposition.

Not all squads, however, have complied with the BCCI's directive. The board expressed disappointment with South Zone for leaving out K.L. Rahul, Mohammed Siraj, Washington Sundar, Sai Sudharsan, and Prasidh Krishna from its initial squad. Tilak

Comeback trail: Mohammed Shami returns to first-class cricket with a place in the East Zone squad for the 2025-26 Duleep Trophy, his first outing since November 2024. PTI

Unfinished quest: With 7,500-plus First-Class runs at nearly 50, Abhimanyu Easwaran is still waiting for an India cap — and will keep pressing his case with East Zone. SANDEEP SAXENA

Varma leads the side, but late additions remain possible.

Availability is fluid across the board. Several marquee names, including Gill, Arshdeep, Rana, Kuldeep, and Tilak, are expected to leave for the Asia Cup beginning September 9 in the UAE, potentially changing the complexion of the later rounds.

A return to tradition

This year's tournament reverts to a knockout format, with 2023 finalists South and West Zones receiving direct entry into the semifinals. It's a departure from last season's round-robin, when selectors, led by Ajit Agarkar, assembled four composite teams — India A, B, C, and D — on the recommendation of a panel that included then India head coach Rahul Dravid, NCA chief V.V.S. Laxman, Agarkar, and BCCI domestic chief Abey Kuruvilla.

Feedback from State associations and stakeholders pushed the board to restore the zonal structure.

"It's a very good change," says Bengal head coach Laxmi Ratan Shukla. "The competition will increase, and there's a different kind of fun when zones play each other. This was needed; everyone wanted it. We requested the BCCI to make the switch, and it's a good thing that the traditional format has returned."

Former India international and ex-selector Saba Karim believes the move, combined with the return of zonal selection committees, will help maintain continuity in identifying talent.

"The Duleep Trophy needs to work as a step forward towards India A selection," Karim says. "So first you have the Ranji Trophy, then the Duleep Trophy, the next step is India A, and then eventually the national side. That is the kind of ladder you are supposed to make. So once you have this in mind, it becomes automatic that you pick such players who you feel are capable of representing the nation some years later."

He adds: "Instead of going back to the old system of mandatorily picking

HIGHEST TEAM SCORE

868

all out by North Zone vs West Zone in 1987, Bhilai

HIGHEST INDIVIDUAL SCORE – RAMAN LAMBA

320

for North Zone vs West Zone in 1987, Bhilai

BEST INDIVIDUAL BOWLING FIGURES – DEBASIS MOHANTY

10/46

for East Zone vs South Zone in 2001, Agartala

players from each State whether they have performed or not, having a national selector in the committee helps in picking the best possible 15 who have performed at the Ranji level and whom the selectors feel can move up."

Pace bench strength

Another storyline this season is India's search for reliable Test pacers. Injuries and inconsistency have left the bench exposed. Kamboj was handed a debut in England but struggled in Manchester, while Arshdeep has flirted with selection without breaking through.

For bowlers like Shami, Mukesh, Rana and Kamboj the Duleep Trophy doubles as an audition to strengthen or reclaim their spots. Selectors will also be monitoring left-arm options closely, with Khaleel hoping to push his case against Arshdeep for a long-format role.

As the CoE prepares to host its first major tournament since opening last year, the pitch is expected to offer early assistance to fast bowlers. Those familiar with the venue, however, suggest that conditions tend to ease out as matches progress, bringing batters into the contest. Spectators, however, may be left disappointed. The CoE, located inside a residential complex on the outskirts of Bengaluru, is unlikely to allow public entry due to security concerns.

High stakes

The knockout structure leaves no room for slow starts. The mix of internationals and fringe hopefuls ensures that every match carries weight. For selectors, these five fixtures will sharpen the picture of depth across positions.

HIGHEST RUN-SCORER – WASIM JAFFER

2545

runs for West Zone and Elite Group B in 30 matches; average 55.32; best score 173 not out

HIGHEST WICKET-TAKER – NARENDRA HIRWANI

126

wickets for Central Zone and Plate Group B in 29 matches, average 34.12; best figures 7/129

Dual call-up: Left-arm pacer Arshdeep Singh has been named in the North Zone squad for the Duleep Trophy. But with Asia Cup duty beginning September 9, he is unlikely to feature through the tournament. PTI

Former India international and Kerala coach Amay Khurasiya, who has worked closely with domestic teams, believes the switch away from a league phase benefits fast bowlers in particular.

"In the yesteryear, there were not too many games in the Ranji Trophy. But now, teams get seven matches, followed by knockouts, so that already makes the season long. If you add a round-robin Duleep on top of that, it could get hectic. Players need time to regroup and recover, especially fast bowlers. So, this move works well for them," Khurasiya says.

As the domestic calendar unfolds, the Duleep Trophy will not only showcase talent but also serve as a critical milestone in the journey of cricketers aiming for the national spotlight.

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

SELECTION OF THE INDIAN TEAM IS OUR BUSINESS, NOT THEIRS

Hopefully, this seeking out of overseas opinion about India team selections **will cease** sooner rather than later, and we won't feel the need to canvass foreign opinion to boost our confidence.

The announcement of the Indian cricket team for the Asia Cup has, as usual, created a debate, as Indian cricket team selections invariably do. In a game as popular as cricket in India, this is totally understandable, and frankly, it would be a little disappointing if there were no debate about the team selected. In fact, seldom has there been a situation where there has been total acceptance of what the team should be. In a country as big as ours, with its different languages, cultures and, more importantly, the available talent pool, such debates, discussions and variety of opinions are perfectly in sync with what life is like in India, where there's a debate and argument just about everything. All this is, as they say in golfing parlance, par for the course.

What is baffling, though, is that foreigners with no stake in Indian cricket and little knowledge about it wade into the debate, adding fuel to the fire. However great they may be as players and however many times they may have been to India, the selection of the Indian team is strictly none of their business. They should focus on their country's cricket and let us Indians worry about our cricket. Amazingly, when their country's teams are selected, there's hardly anything, if ever, heard from them about the selection. It's almost as if the selection is perfect and they have no comments to make. So why butt your nose into the selection of the Indian team? Have you ever heard Indian ex-cricketers talk about the selection of other countries' teams? No, we mind our own business and seriously couldn't be bothered by who they choose or who they don't select.

Today, in the days of public media, where getting views and followers is the theme, one of the fastest ways to increase the numbers is by commenting on matters Indian. And mostly, they do it negatively, so there is a huge reaction from Indian keyboard users, which in turn boosts their follower count. If you have a thick skin, then all the better. That's why so many

overseas cricketers have made a living by needling the Indian cricket lovers with their mostly negative comments about Indian cricket and cricketers. To an extent, the Indian media is also responsible, as they go to overseas cricketers and ask them about Indian cricket. How often, on overseas tours, do we see members of the Indian media chasing former players from the host country — players whom even their own nation has almost forgotten — for an interview? It's almost as if validation about Indian cricket and its cricketers has to be obtained from overseas players.

While it may be unfair to comment on earlier generations, one can say with confidence that the post-Independence generation of Indian cricketers had no inferiority complex and were prepared to stand toe to toe with the opposition when playing overseas. Yes, the results may not have been great, but how many touring teams win abroad even today?

Hopefully, this seeking out of overseas opinion about India will cease sooner rather than later, and we won't feel the need to canvass foreign opinion to boost our confidence.

Selection shock: Shreyas Iyer, fresh from an impressive domestic season and having led Punjab Kings to the IPL 2025 final, missed out on the 15-member Asia Cup squad. AP

Today, in the days of public media, where getting views and followers is the theme, one of the fastest ways to increase the numbers is by commenting on matters Indian.

Shubman Gill in elite list

754 } The number of runs Shubman Gill made in the five-match Test series against England. This is the second-highest by any captain in Test cricket history. Only Australian Don Bradman, like Gill, also appeared in the maiden Test series as captain in the Ashes series of 1936-37, and made more runs — 810. The fourth captain listed in the table below, Sunil Gavaskar, too, was in his first series as a full-time captain. However, Gill's aggregate is now the highest in a Test series by any visiting captain. Meanwhile, Gill became only the third captain in Tests to register four centuries in a series after Bradman (v India in 1947-48) and Gavaskar (v West Indies in 1978/79).

Most runs as captain in a Test series

Runs	Captain (for)	Opp	Series	M	Inns	NO	Ave.	HS	100/50	Series result
810	Don Bradman (Aus)	Eng	1936-37	5	9	0	90.00	270	3/1	Aus won 3-2
754	Shubman Gill (Ind)	Eng	2025+	5	10	0	75.40	269	4/0	Series drawn 2-2
752	Graham Gooch (Eng)	Ind	1990	3	6	0	125.33	333	3/2	Eng won 1-0
732	Sunil Gavaskar (Ind)	WI	1978-79	6	9	1	91.50	205	4/1	Ind won 1-0
732	David Gower (Eng)	Aus	1985	6	9	0	81.33	215	3/1	Eng won 3-1

+ away series

Most runs by a visiting captain in a Test series

Runs	Captain (for)	in	Series	M	Inns	NO	Ave.	HS	100/50	Series result
754	Shubman Gill (Ind)+	Eng	2025	5	10	0	75.40	269	4/0	Series drawn 2-2
722	Garry Sobers (WI)	Eng	1966	5	8	1	103.14	174	3/2	WI won 3-1
714	Graeme Smith (SA)	Eng	2003	5	9	0	79.33	277	2/1	Series drawn 2-2
677	Len Hutton (Eng)	WI	1953-54	5	8	1	96.71	205	2/3	Series drawn 2-2
636	Clive Lloyd (WI)+	Ind	1974-75	5	9	1	79.50	242*	2/1	WI won 3-2

+ first series as captain

Gill (754 runs) becomes the 16th batter to aggregate 750+ runs in a Test series, and overall, he provided the 21st such instance in all Test cricket, with Don Bradman doing it four times, while Brian Lara and Steve Smith did it twice. Among Indians, only Gavaskar (774 in WI in 1971 in four Tests) has achieved this in a Test series.

4 } The number of Test centuries for Yashasvi Jaiswal against England before reaching the age of 24 years. Jaiswal joins a special group led by Don Bradman, who has six centuries, while joining George Headley and Sachin Tendulkar, who have each scored four centuries against England before the age of 24. For the record, Garry Sobers and Mohd. Azharuddin have three centuries against this opponent before the age of 24. Meanwhile, Jaiswal (1123) is only the third batter to aggregate 1000 Test runs against England before the age of 24. Only Bradman (1442) has more runs, while Sobers has 1069 runs. The second table has the details.

Most Test centuries against England before the age of 24 years

100s	Batter (for)	Period	Remarks
6	Don Bradman (Aus)	Jan 1929-Aug 1930	all six centuries came before 22
4	George Headley (WI)	Jan-Apr 1930	all four centuries came before 21
4	Sachin Tendulkar (Ind)	Aug 1990-Jul 1996	all four centuries came before 24
4	Yashasvi Jaiswal (Ind)	Feb 1924-Aug 2025	all four centuries came before 24
3	Garry Sobers (WI)	Jan-Mar 1960	all three centuries came before 24
3	Mohd Azharuddin (Ind)	Jan-Feb 1985	all three centuries came before 22

Most Test runs against England before the age of 24 years

Runs	Batter (for)	M	Inns	NO	Ave.	HS	100/50
1442	Don Bradman (Aus)	9	15	1	103.00	334	6/2
1123	Yashasvi Jaiswal (Ind)	10	19	1	62.39	214*	4/5
1069	Garry Sobers (WI)	11	20	2	59.39	226	3/3
983	Graeme Smith (SA)	10	19	1	54.61	277	2/4
975	Sachin Tendulkar (Ind)	9	14	2	81.25	177	4/4

3 The number of Indian nightwatchmen to register a fifty-plus score in Test cricket. Akash Deep's 66 against England while batting at the #4 position after coming in just before close on the second day of the fifth Test is the second-highest score by an Indian nightwatchman. Two others, Chetan Sharma (54) and Amit Mishra, twice (50 and 84) have done this for India.

Fifty-plus scores by Indian nightwatchmen in Tests

Runs	Nightwatchman	Against	Venue	Achieved on	Result	Batg#	Close of play	M Inns
84	Amit Mishra	England	The Oval	22 Aug 2011	Lost	5	8* (day-4)	3+
66	Akash Deep	England	The Oval	2 Aug 2025	Won	4	4* (day-2)	3
54	Chetan Sharma	Australia	Adelaide	15 Dec 1985	Drawn	3	1* (day-2)	2
50	Amit Mishra	Bangladesh	Chittagong Dvn	20 Aug 2010	Won	3	24*	3

+ India was made to follow on
Note: *Batting/bowling all-rounders and wicket-keepers have been excluded from the list*

6 The number of lower-order Test players, from batting positions six and lower, to aggregate 500-plus runs in a Test series. Ravindra Jadeja, in the recent series in England, became the latest to achieve this rare feat. He is the first Indian and the second from Asia to do so.

Batters from positions six and lower aggregating 500-plus runs in a Test series

Runs	Batter (for)	Opp	Venue	Series	M	Inn	NO	Ave.	HS	100/50	Series result
722	Garry Sobers (WI)	Eng	Away	1966	5	8	1	103.14	174	3/2	WI won 3-1
606	Denis Lindsay (SA)	Aus	Home	1966-67	5	7	0	86.57	182	3/2	SA won 3-1
562	Shiv Chanderpaul (WI)	Ind	Home	2002	5	7	3	140.50	140	3/3	WI won 2-1
517	Wasim Raja (Pak)	WI	Away	1976-77	5	10	1	57.44	117*	1/5	WI won 2-1
516	Ravindra Jadeja (Ind)	Eng	Away	2025	5	10	4	86.00	107*	1/5	Drawn 2-2
506	Steve Waugh (Aus)	Eng	Away	1989	6	8	4	126.50	177*	2/1	Aus won 4-0

8 The number of occasions, India was able to cross totals of 350+ in the recent series in England. This tally is now the most by any Test side in a series. The previous record was held by Australia, when it crossed these totals six times in a series on three separate occasions. Additionally, the just-concluded series has also seen 14 occasions where totals of 350-plus have been breached by both sides. This is a new Test record, surpassing the previous record of 10 set twice during the Ashes series of 1928/29 and 1948. India, meanwhile, became the fourth side in Test cricket to register eight totals of 300-plus. The feat, achieved in the recent series against England, equals the Test record held by Australia (v SA, 1910/11), England (v Aus, 1928/29), and Australia (v WI, 1975/76) — all in Australia.

350-plus totals by a side in a Test series

350+	Team	Opp	H/A	Series	M	Result
8	Ind	Eng	Away	2025	5	Drawn 2-2
6	Aus	Eng	Home	1920/21	5	Aus won 5-0
6	Aus	Eng	Away	1948	5	Aus won 4-0
6	Aus	Eng	Away	1989	6	Aus won 4-0
6	Eng	Ind	Home	2025	5	Drawn 2-2

350-plus totals by both sides in a Test series

350+	Team1	Team2	in	Series	M	Result
14	Ind (8)	Eng (6)	Eng	2025	5	Drawn 2-2
10	Aus (5)	Eng (5)	Aus	1928/29	5	Eng won 4-1
10	Aus (6)	Eng (4)	Aus	1948	5	Aus won 4-0

All records are correct and updated until 23 August 2025.

9 The number of batters from both sides to aggregate 400 or more runs during the recently concluded series in England, thus setting a new record for a Test series. The previous record, which was eight, was achieved twice before in 1975/76 and 1993, as shown in the second table below. This is the first time three Indian batters (Gill 754, K. L. Rahul 532, Jadeja 516) have managed to cross 500-plus runs in a Test series, which equals the record for the most 500+ aggregates for a Test side in a series, as shown in the third table.

400-plus aggregates by batters for a side in a Test series

400+	Team	Opp	H/A	Series	M	Result
6	Aus	Eng	Away	1993	6	Aus won 4-1
5	SA	Eng	Home	1964/65	5	Eng won 1-0
5	Aus	Eng	Away	1989	6	Aus won 4-0
5	Ind	Eng	Away	2025	5	Drawn 2-2

400-plus aggregates by batters from both sides in a Test series

400+	Team1	Team2	H/A	Series	M	Result
9	Ind (5)	Eng (4)	Eng	2025	5	Drawn 2-2
8	Aus (4)	WI (4)	Aus	1975/76	6	Aus won 5-1
8	Aus (6)	Eng (2)	Eng	1993	6	Aus won 4-1
7	Eng (4)	Aus (3)	Eng	1985	6	Eng won 3-1

500-plus aggregates by batters for a side in a Test series

500+	Team	Opp	H/A	Series	M	Result
3	SA	Eng	Eng	1947	5	Eng won 3-0
3	Aus	WI	Aus	1968/69	5	Aus won 3-1
3	WI	Eng	Eng	1976	5	WI won 3-0
3	Pak	Ind	Pak	1982/83	6	Pak won 3-0
3	Aus	Eng	Eng	1989	6	Aus won 4-0
3	Ind	Eng	Eng	2025	5	Drawn 2-2

Middle-order pivot: The skipper, Suryakumar Yadav, has dropped to No. 4, making space for Tilak Varma's at No. 3. GETTY IMAGES

A new generation, but familiar questions remain

India names a **fresh-look squad** for the Asia Cup, with Shubman Gill as vice-captain. Big calls see Shreyas Iyer and Yashasvi Jaiswal miss out.

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Such is the glut of T20 talent in India that the absence of Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli, the country's two most prolific batters in the format, barely registers as the Men in Blue prepare for their first multi-team white-ball tournament since the retirement of these stalwarts.

The supply line is so crowded that even proven performers, Shreyas Iyer and Yashasvi Jaiswal, have been nudged out of India's 15-member squad for the Asia Cup in the United Arab Emirates.

The competition is fiercest at the top of the order, where Rohit and Kohli thrived for more than a decade. That battle intensified once Shubman Gill **(facing page, right)**, fresh from a prolific Test tour of England as captain, was parachuted back into the squad despite more than a year away. The Ajit Agarkar-led panel has backed him as a future all-format leader and named him vice-captain, making his place a certainty. His inclusion almost certainly breaks up the Abhishek Sharma–Sanju Samson opening pairing that powered India through the past year. Gill will likely partner Abhishek, the top-ranked T20I batter, leaving Samson displaced and vulnerable — not just as an opener but also as wicketkeeper, with Jitesh Sharma waiting as a proven finisher.

Gill's T20I strike rate of 139.27,

FOR MORE STORIES

Shubman Gill gives India a right-left balance with Abhishek Sharma at the top, and as Test captain, he's well-placed to grow into an even bigger leadership role when the time comes

K. R. DEEPAK

though, will need to evolve if he is to fit India's increasingly high-risk approach. Since its T20 World Cup triumph last year, India has floored the accelerator, scoring at 9.90 runs per over — second only to Australia's 10.11. During this period, Abhishek and Samson opened 12 times, striking at 193.84 and 171.47 respectively, and combining for five centuries. Jaiswal, too, pressed his claim with a strike rate of 170, but he has been pushed into the reserves.

Like Samson, Shreyas was a casualty of top-order congestion. The Punjab Kings skipper was the only batter in the latest IPL to score more than 600 runs at a strike rate above 170, but most of that success came at No. 3. That slot now belongs to Tilak Varma, who has two centuries and a fifty in his last seven T20I innings, enough to force captain Suryakumar Yadav down to No. 4. The selectors see little value in using Shreyas outside the top four, even though he dominated the death overs (16–20) in IPL 2025 with a strike rate of 227.84. His and Jaiswal's omission, neither has played a T20I in over a year, signals the panel's horses-for-courses outlook, where IPL form carries only so much weight. Abhishek and Tilak, though quieter in the IPL, have delivered in India colours and thus hold sway.

Team balance has been another recurring theme. The management insists on batting depth until No. 8 and six bowling options, effectively mandating three all-rounders. Hardik Pandya and Axar Patel, though stripped of the vice-captaincy, remain automatic picks. But the third all-rounder slot is unsettled. Shivam Dube offers middle-order hitting but is rarely trusted to bowl. He has delivered just 10 overs in six T20Is since last year's World Cup, and across four seasons with Chennai Super Kings bowled only five. Harshit Rana can support Jasprit Bumrah as a second seamer, but he lacks batting credentials and has been expensive, going at more than 10 an over in IPL 2025. Dube, for his part, struggled against spin, striking at only 118.80 this year.

Washington Sundar, who featured in 11 of India's 20 T20Is since the World Cup, could have been a neat solution, but he finds himself only

among the reserves.

Bumrah's return for the first time since his World Cup final heroics is welcome, yet the pace cupboard looks bare. Arshdeep Singh has carried the attack in his absence, but if India fields both Varun Chakaravarthy and Kuldeep Yadav on slower tracks, Arshdeep could miss out. Abhishek's part-time left-arm spin may soften that blow, but not entirely.

Despite some selection dilemmas, most bases appear covered. Batters now have defined roles thanks to position-specific choices, while the bowling mix will hinge on India's all-rounder puzzle.

The Asia Cup, staged in T20 format for the third time, is being marketed as a dress rehearsal for next year's World Cup. That comparison is misleading. The last T20 Asia Cup, also held in the UAE in 2022, saw only one 200-plus total in 13 games. Indian pitches will be far less forgiving for bowlers in the World Cup.

India, which last played a T20I in February, enters short on match practice.

JASPRIT BUMRAH MAKES HIS RETURN TO INDIA'S WHITE-BALL SETUP FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE 2024 T20 WORLD CUP

K. R. DEEPAK

SCHEDULE

September 9: **Group B** — Afghanistan vs Hong Kong
September 10: **Group A** — India vs UAE
September 11: **Group B** — Bangladesh vs Hong Kong
September 12: **Group A** — Pakistan vs Oman
September 13: **Group B** — Bangladesh vs Sri Lanka
September 14: **Group A** — India vs Pakistan
September 15: **Group A** — UAE vs Oman
September 15: **Group B** — Sri Lanka vs Hong Kong
September 16: **Group B** — Bangladesh vs Afghanistan
September 17: **Group A** — Pakistan vs UAE
September 18: **Group B** — Sri Lanka vs Afghanistan
September 19: **Group A** — India vs Oman

SUPER 4

September 20: **B1 vs B2**
September 21: **A1 vs A2**
September 23: **A2 vs B1**
September 24: **A1 vs B2**
September 25: **A2 vs B2**
September 26: **A1 vs B1**
September 28: **Final**

Form without reward: Over 600 runs at a strike rate above 170 in IPL 2025 still weren't enough to earn Shreyas Iyer a recall.

K.R. DEEPAK

Group-stage outings against UAE and Oman, either side of a marquee clash with Pakistan, should provide valuable tune-up time. The Super Four will test them more, but as eight-time Asian champion, and winner of 17 of 20 games since its global triumph, India remains the clear favourite.

Sri Lanka, champion in 2022, is battling form after series defeats to New Zealand and Bangladesh. Pakistan, meanwhile, has reset by moving on from Babar Azam and Mohammad Rizwan, but remains untested. Bangladesh has beaten both Sri Lanka and Pakistan recently, but its fragile temperament in multi-team events lingers. Afghanistan is no longer just a plucky outsider — it has the firepower to push both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh for a Super Four berth.

For host UAE and neighbour Oman, the tournament is a chance to measure themselves against the elite before October's Asia/East Asia-Pacific World Cup qualifiers, where three slots are up for grabs. Hong Kong, winless in 11 Asia Cup matches since its 2004 debut, would cherish even a single victory — a first in over two decades.

HOW THEY ARE STACKED UP

Group A

India
Pakistan
UAE
Oman

Group B

Sri Lanka
Bangladesh
Afghanistan
Hong Kong

WATCH RAPID FIRE WITH SAI KISHORE

« Standard of playing spin without risk has come down in domestic cricket »

SAI KISHORE

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Sai Kishore walked in wearing a breezy, washed-print shirt that mirrored the balance he brings to the field — relaxed yet purposeful. Over the past few months, the left-arm finger-spinner has juggled roles with the same calm authority: leading IDream Tiruppur Tamizhans to its maiden Tamil Nadu Premier League (TNPL) crown, playing every game for Gujarat Titans in the Indian Premier League (IPL), and sharpening his red-ball craft with Surrey, where an 11-wicket haul across two matches underlined his pedigree. Now, as he recovers from an injury that has sidelined him from the Buchi Babu tournament, the Tamil Nadu captain sits down with *Sportstar* to discuss leadership, workload, evolving skills, and his team's Ranji Trophy ambitions.

You've played across three T20 ecosystems — IPL, Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy (SMAT), and TNPL. How does your mindset shift between them, and how much of it is skill versus psychology?

When you go to the IPL, all your senses switch on. There's a lot at stake because one good season can secure your career. In Mushtaq Ali or TNPL, the standard of cricket isn't very different, but the mindset is. You can't take it lightly — you still need the same seriousness while bowling. For me, it's largely psychological, treating all levels with equal importance. IPL is the one place where the pressure to perform is relentless.

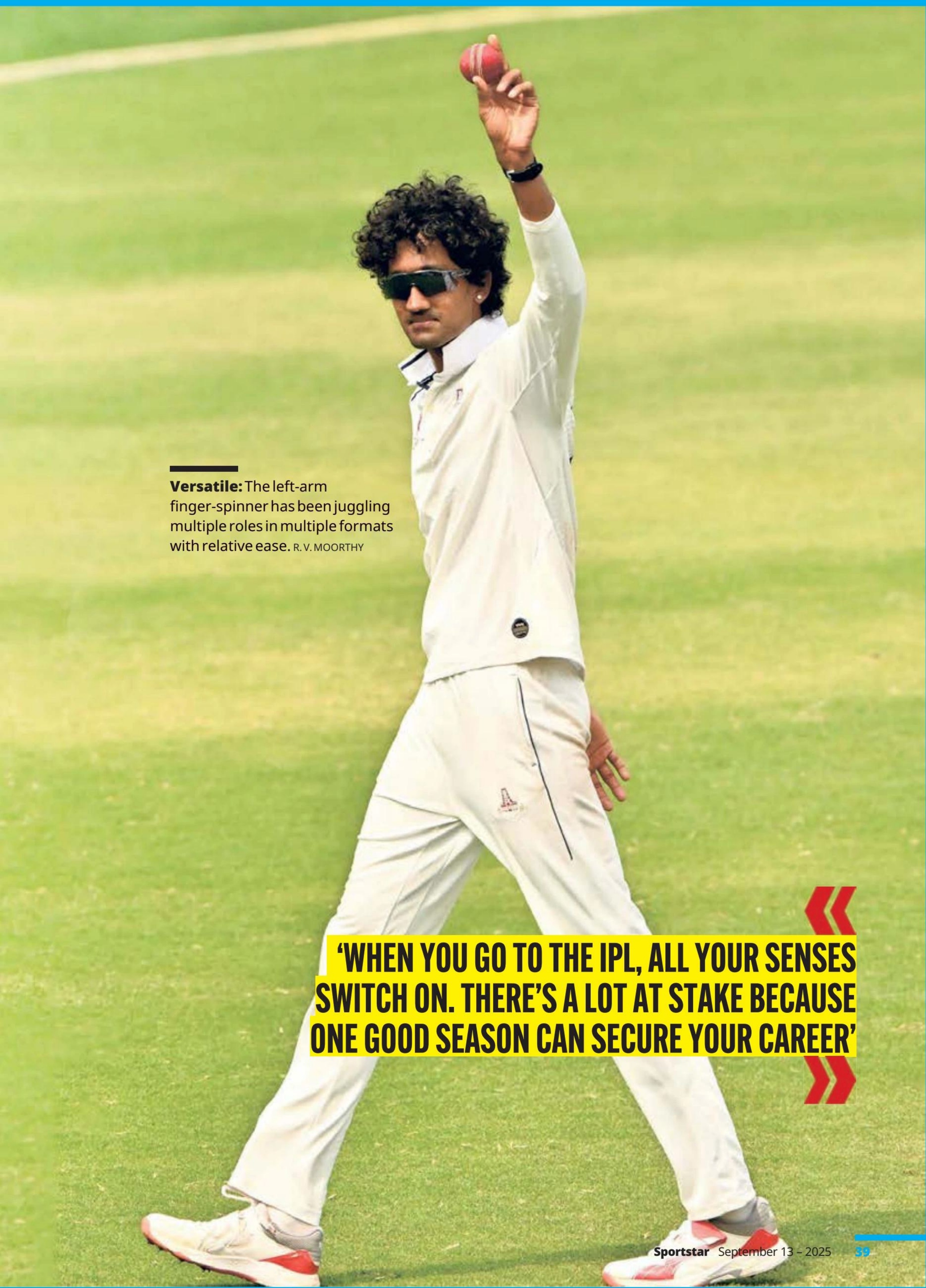
I see it like an artist. Take an A. R. Rahman concert — whether it's in Wembley, Chennai, or Mumbai, the quality has to remain the same. That's how I view my game: pure and true to myself, regardless of where I play.

In TNPL you play against familiar faces, while in IPL it's world-class opponents. Does that make TNPL easier or tougher because they know you well?

Skill-wise, IPL is tougher. But psychologically, TNPL can be more challenging. Complacency creeps in — you feel you've played the IPL and now you're back. Maintaining the same focus becomes the real test. In IPL, you're naturally driven; it's the event you prepare for all year. The challenge is to switch on with the same intensity for every other tournament.

Did you personally struggle with that switch when you first returned to TNPL after IPL?

Not really. I never had a



Versatile: The left-arm finger-spinner has been juggling multiple roles in multiple formats with relative ease. R. V. MOORTHY

‘WHEN YOU GO TO THE IPL, ALL YOUR SENSES SWITCH ON. THERE’S A LOT AT STAKE BECAUSE ONE GOOD SEASON CAN SECURE YOUR CAREER’

Leading from the front: Sai Kishore led IDream Tiruppur Tamizhans to its maiden TNPL crown this year.
KARTHIKEYAN G

breakthrough IPL season until this year, so every TNPL was another chance to prove myself. I had to keep making my case stronger. That mindset helped me stay relevant. If I wasn't getting enough opportunities in IPL, I treated TNPL or SMAT as the stage to showcase and upgrade my game.

And what changed this year after your successful IPL season?

It felt like a weight off my shoulders. I always believed I was good enough but hadn't had the chance to show it. After doing well this year, it was even more important to respect TNPL — because that's where I got my platform. If you play IPL and then return to TNPL without winning games, it doesn't make sense. I wanted to play with the same intensity I'd bring to an IPL match, and that really helped me.

Has TNPL grown into a feeder system for State and IPL cricket, or is it still more of a local tournament?

It's definitely a feeder for State cricket and, for bowlers, even the IPL. TNPL grounds are smaller, wickets turn more, and yet it's still tough on bowlers. That's why even established IPL players sometimes struggle here. If the league could replicate IPL-level fast bowling, it would be an even stronger feeder to international cricket.

But we've already seen players like Sai Sudharsan, Tushar Raheja, and Ajith Ram make the jump. I myself debuted for Tamil Nadu because of TNPL. So yes, it has been a proper feeder system.

How does workload management actually work? Fans often wonder why a bowler is rested or rotated. What should they understand?

For T20s, my match load is around 24 balls. So, in training, I make sure I bowl about 45–50 balls in a session. That way, my body is ready to handle a full T20 match load.

For red-ball cricket, I scale up. I try to mirror a match schedule. If I expect to bowl 45–60 overs in a game, I spread that out across the week. For example: 25 overs one day, 10 the next, a rest day, then 20 the following day. By the end of the week, I've hit that target.

Do you plan this on your own or with support staff?

Initially, I never bothered. I was old-school — just bowl until you drop. But after a neck injury, I realised I needed structure.

Darren Veness, the Strength & Conditioning Coach at Gujarat Titans, really helped me understand the science behind it.

Now, I keep it simple. If my maximum in a match is 60 overs — 30 in each innings — that's my benchmark. If I hit that in training, I

don't push further. I'll switch to batting or fitness work. Otherwise, you can overdo it — bowling 70 or 80 overs in practice just chasing a 'feel' that never comes. You might already have bowled enough but still feel unsatisfied.

T20 cricket is heavily driven by data now. In the IPL, you get all kinds of numbers — match-ups, sweeps, reverse sweeps, speeds. Has that trickled into the TNPL as well, or is it more about instinct and gut feel?

It's a merger of both. Gujarat Titans is a good example — they don't rely only on data. Personally, I enjoy data; I like watching videos. But I'd say the best balance is 30 per cent data, 70 per cent instinct.

In TNPL, it's mostly instinct. You've already seen most of the players over the years, and unlike IPL, you don't have Hawk-Eye or detailed numbers on speeds and deviations. So gut feel becomes more important.

And for you personally?

I used to depend a lot on data. Now, not so much. Because on a given day, anything can happen. Say, Suryakumar Yadav — the data shows he's strong over covers or that he sweeps a lot. But there could be a day when he doesn't sweep at all. If you're fixated on the data, you'll keep waiting for something that never comes. It blocks you.

Any examples where data helped you, or where it worked against you?

Plenty. Data helps calm you because it gives you a sense of control — you know a batter's weaknesses. But ultimately, you still need to execute. If you don't land the ball where you're supposed to, the data means nothing. This season, I realised my instinct is powerful. Whenever I backed it, it worked better.

Take Nicholas Pooran. He's probably the best player of spin right now. In the first game against him, I let the data mess with me. In the second game, yes, he hit me for a six and a four, but I trusted my instinct and came back strong. That was satisfying.

You sound like a collaborative leader by instinct. But were there moments where you had to be the disciplinarian – step in and say, this is the way we're doing it?

Yes, especially in my first full season as captain in 2023–24, when we made the semifinals. That team suited a more directive style. Tamil Nadu as a side has often thrived under that kind of leadership – Dinesh Karthik led like that, and it worked.

There was one game against Karnataka in Chennai where they took a 150-run lead. We had to decide: do we play it safe for one point, or do we chase 330 and go for an outright win? I wasn't dictatorial, but I was clear. I told the team, "Let's go for it. If we lose, fine, but let's not leave it here. Let's put pressure on them." That was a moment where I had to be decisive, and it brought everyone together.

Tamil Nadu last won the Ranji Trophy in 1987–88. It's been a long time. What do you think this comes down to?

You can point to many things, but if I had to reduce it to one, it would be oneness within the team. All teams that have punched above their weight — India in the 1983 World Cup, in 2007 T20 — had that togetherness. They believed they were stronger as a unit than as individuals.

Tamil Nadu has thrived whenever we've had that spirit. In 2016–17, we won both the Vijay Hazare and the Deodhar. It was a very young team. Apart from DK, no big India names. Just Vijay Shankar, Washi (Washington Sundar), myself, Aparajith, Indrajith, Aswin Crist, Kaushik Gandhi — all youngsters. What made the difference was that sense of unity. If we can recreate that, where every player believes the team's success matters more than individual milestones, Tamil Nadu will win. If Tamil Nadu wins the Ranji Trophy, individuals will naturally get picked for India.

In recent years, Indian batters have been criticised for struggling against spin, even at home. Has the standard of playing spin in domestic cricket declined?

The standard of playing spin without risk has come down. Counter-attacking is still there, and players are more comfortable with it

R. V. MOORTHY

« When you play six months of T20 cricket, singles lose their value. They're useful, yes, but they're not 'gold'. The real currency is fours and sixes
– Sai Kishore »

One captain on another: "Gill is supremely skilled and mentally very strong. That combination is dangerous," says Kishore. R. V. MOORTHY

than 10 years ago. Back then, batters wouldn't counter-attack. They would grind you all day, like Cheteshwar Pujara or others of that mould. Now, that grinding element has faded. The white-ball game has brought in more risk-taking.

It's not unfortunate — it was bound to happen. When you play six months of T20 cricket, singles lose their value. They're useful, yes, but they're not 'gold'. The real currency is fours and sixes.

So, a back-foot punch or a cover drive — low-risk, traditional shots — are less valued than a reverse sweep. Naturally, players would rather switch-hit because there's no third man, only a slip.

The problem is that if you don't practise those low-risk shots for six months, you can't suddenly produce them in a one-month red-ball tournament. That's why the skill has dipped. But at the same time, it can be a positive. England plays this high-risk style and succeeds. If someone here can adopt it fully, they can become a complete game-changer. You might get out first ball, but if it clicks, the match is over.

That's what I try to emphasise. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you'll suddenly become a traditional player in a month. Instead, double down on what you do best — be even more aggressive. If it fails, no problem, I'll back you to play the same way next game. But make sure the bowler feels you're coming after him. That mindset itself can tilt the contest.

What did you make of Shubman Gill's captaincy — especially the switch from IPL to Test cricket?

Shubman is a prodigy. I've known him since he was 16. The first time we played him in Under-19s, he scored 260 in Patiala. Later, in the Ranji Trophy, he got 270. Honestly, it took me four years to figure him out. I even went back to my coach, Ram Kumar, and said: There's this guy who's just smashing me around — what can I do? I had to change my trajectory and work on new things purely because of Shubman. I've told him this story too.

Credit goes to his father for shaping him. From childhood, he was made to play every shot mercilessly. He's supremely skilled, but what makes him exceptional is that he's also mentally very strong. That combination is dangerous. And he's taken to captaincy like a fish to water.

Remember, he had never even captained Punjab because he was always with India. But when the Indian team needed a leader, Shubman stepped in.

I'm very happy to see how naturally he's adapted. Hopefully, in the coming years, he'll grow into a proper leader.

THE LAST OF INDIA'S TEST PURISTS

For over a decade, Cheteshwar Pujara **stood tall** at No. 3 for India. He now departs as he batted — understated, steadfast, and oddly timeless.

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When Cheteshwar Pujara announced his retirement from all forms of the game, there was no great fanfare, no curated montage, no carefully scripted farewell. That was never his way. He departed as he batted — understated, steadfast, and oddly timeless. Yet, Indian cricket, and Test cricket itself, will feel the hollow left behind.

For over a decade, Pujara stood at No. 3 for India, the position once occupied by Rahul Dravid, and produced 7,195 runs in 103 Tests at an average of 43.60. That is the statistical summary, but it tells only part of the story. What endures is the manner in which those runs were made: the patience of a mason laying brick upon brick, the stubborn refusal to be hurried, the willingness to suffer on behalf of the team.

His journey began in December 2005 with a debut for Saurashtra in the Ranji Trophy. It ended this year in the same whites, a circle closing neatly, loyally. His Test debut arrived in Bengaluru in 2010 against Australia, the side that would define his legend. He was central to India's two historic series victories in Australia. In 2018–19, he scored three centuries and faced 1,258

Safeguard: Pujara produced 7,195 runs in 103 Tests at an average of 43.60. VIJAY SONEJI

PUJARA WAS NEVER A CREATURE OF THE AGE. WHEN CRICKET TILTED TOWARDS THE EPHEMERAL, HE OFFERED PERMANENCE. WHEN SPEED BECAME THE CURRENCY, HE TRADED IN SPAN

GETTY IMAGES

deliveries, as if chiselling India's name into the ledger of champions stroke by stroke, leave by leave.

A few weeks after that triumph, I visited his home in Rajkot for a cover story. He welcomed us with warmth, unhurried and generous with his time, speaking at length about cricket and its demands. When it came to the photoshoot, our photographer insisted on multiple changes of outfit — four or five at least. Most players would have bristled; Pujara obliged with a smile, each time disappearing to change and returning without complaint. It was a revealing glimpse of the man behind the batter: as patient in his living room as he had been against Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood, as unassuming in front of the camera as he was resolute in front of the stumps. The stoicism that defined him at the crease was no performance; it was his nature.

Yet, even as his reputation was built on defence, towards the twilight of his career he showed a different side. In Ranji Trophy games for Saurashtra, he could be seen

scoring almost at a run a ball, sweeping spinners, even stepping out to loft them over the infield.

One such moment came in February 2022, at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad. Mumbai was playing Saurashtra, Rahane squaring off against Pujara, both men under the selectors' gaze with a Test series against Sri Lanka looming.

Neither would make the cut. A day after his omission, Pujara answered with an 83-ball 91, laced with 16 fours and a six. He had been dismissed for a duck in the first innings, but his reply was a statement of defiance. Mumbai packed the close-in field; the ball was turning sharply, yet Pujara kept striding down the pitch. At one point, he danced out to off-spinner Tanush Kotian and lofted him, almost casually, over long-on. For a batter supposedly past his prime, there was nothing hesitant — only the old certainty of a man who still believed time was on his side.

His appetite for runs remained immense till the end. Across First-Class cricket — Tests, Ranji Trophy games, and county seasons — he faced 41,715 deliveries, an astonishing testament to stamina and stubbornness. Out of them, he carved 66 hundreds, many of them monumental in scale. His tally of double centuries places him fourth on the all-time list, behind only Don Bradman, Wally Hammond, and Patsy Hendren. Such company underlines what Pujara truly was: not merely a man who occupied the crease, but one who turned occupation into dominion, transforming hours into monuments of concentration.

At Brisbane in 2021, Pujara became less batter than barricade. Cummins and Hazlewood tested him with a storm of short balls, blows landing on helmet, ribs and fingers. One delivery reared awkwardly and struck his hand; for once, the pain showed as he winced and crouched for several minutes. Yet, he rose, as he always did, to resume the fight. India still needed nearly 200, and Pujara summoned a familiar creed — 'over my dead body'. His half-century took 196 balls, the slowest of his career, but every strike absorbed was another thread woven into India's escape. Even when a bouncer knocked the stem guard off his helmet, he carried on, stoic and immovable.

That resilience had deep roots. Discipline was instilled early by his father and first coach, Arvind. As a boy in Rajkot, Pujara was not allowed the indulgences of childhood festivals: no firecrackers at Diwali, no kites at Uttarayan.

"What if you burnt your hand or cut a finger? You cannot miss the nets for such things," Arvind would insist. Years later, at the Gabba, it was those lessons of denial and discipline that echoed in every block and bruise, turning a batter into a bulwark as India chased history.

Pujara was never a creature of the age. When cricket tilted towards the ephemeral, he offered permanence. When speed became the currency, he traded in span. Five ODIs were scattered across his career, little more than anomalies; he belonged wholly to the long form and never pretended otherwise. In an impatient world, he held his ground, and in doing so reminded us of what Test cricket was built upon.

Watching him could test one's own patience. Crowds fidgeted, broadcasters despaired. Yet, those who stayed the course discovered something rare: the drama of attrition, the artistry of survival. Pujara changed not just games, but moods.

He never sought adoration, only the contest itself — man against ball, time against hope.

Now that he has walked away, the crease feels a little barer, the afternoons a little shorter. He leaves no slogans, no postures, only the memory of a batter who made time stand still. In Test cricket's long chronicle, that may be the most enduring monument of all.

Fact file

7,195 TEST RUNS

Eighth Indian to cross 7,000 after Tendulkar, Dravid, Gavaskar, Kohli, Laxman, Sehwag and Ganguly.

103 TESTS

One of only 14 Indians to reach the milestone.

6,529 RUNS AT NO. 3

Second only to Dravid for India; among the global greats at one-drop with Sangakkara, Ponting, Williamson and Amla.

11 WINS IN SENA COUNTRIES

More than any other Indian.

21,301 FIRST-CLASS RUNS WITH 66 CENTURIES

Behind only Gavaskar, Tendulkar and Dravid among Indians.

AFP

South Africa clinches series 2-1 despite big defeat in 3rd ODI

1 South Africa collapsed for 155 in just 24.5 overs, as all-rounder Cooper Connolly tore through the batting with figures of 5 for 22 in the final game.

Australia's top order produced a batting masterclass to hand South Africa its heaviest One-Day International defeat in the third and final match of the series. Travis Head (142), captain Mitchell Marsh (100) and Cameron Green (118 not out) powered the host to 431 for 2, Australia's second-highest total in ODIs. South Africa collapsed for 155 in just 24.5 overs, as all-rounder Cooper Connolly tore through the batting with figures of 5 for 22. Despite the 276-run defeat, South Africa won the ODI series 2-1. Australia had earlier clinched the T20I series by the same margin.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

2

The DY Patil Stadium in Navi Mumbai will host five matches of the ICC Women's World Cup 2025, replacing Bengaluru's M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, the ICC confirmed. The venue change follows the Karnataka State Cricket Association's failure to secure government clearance. Bengaluru's role in the tournament had already been in doubt after the tragic stampede earlier this year during celebrations of Royal Challengers Bengaluru's IPL triumph.

K. MURALI KUMAR

3

Harmanpreet Kaur will captain India at the ICC Women's ODI World Cup 2025, with Smriti Mandhana as vice-captain, the BCCI announced. This will be Harmanpreet's fifth World Cup appearance but her first as skipper. She and Mandhana will anchor a batting unit that also features Jemimah Rodrigues, while opener Shafali Verma has been left out. All-rounder Deepti Sharma and left-arm spinner Radha Yadav will spearhead the spin department, with Renuka Singh leading the pace attack. Richa Ghosh and Yastika Bhatia have been named as wicketkeeping options. India begins its campaign against Sri Lanka in Bengaluru on September 30, with the marquee clash against Pakistan set for October 5.

REUTERS

4

Former South Africa captain Dane van Niekerk could be set for an international comeback after being named in the training squad for the Women's ODI World Cup. Van Niekerk announced her retirement in March 2023, shortly after being left out of South Africa's home T20 World Cup for failing to meet fitness standards. Since then, she has been playing domestically for Western Province and recently made herself available for national selection. The 31-year-old last featured for South Africa in September 2021. An ankle injury kept her out of the 2022 ODI World Cup, and she was not considered for the 2023 T20 World Cup.

AFP

5

Afghanistan will host Bangladesh for six white-ball internationals in the UAE this October, soon after the conclusion of the Asia Cup on September 28. The series begins with T20Is in Sharjah on October 2, 3 and 5, followed by ODIs in Abu Dhabi on October 8, 11 and 14. This tour was initially scheduled as an all-format series in July 2024 in Greater Noida, India, but was postponed due to bad weather and Bangladesh's congested calendar. The rescheduled version now features only limited-overs cricket.

Season opener: PKL Season 12 kicks off in Visakhapatnam on August 29, with Telugu Titans clashing against Tamil Thalaivas in the opener. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The IPL-isation of Pro Kabaddi

With tied games discarded and **sweeping format changes** designed to sustain high-octane competition across the season, PKL's 12th edition is borrowing ideas from its cricketing cousin.

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Tightening a sport to the rhythms of broadcast demands often calls for innovation. The viewers — or perhaps more accurately, the viewership numbers — reign supreme, dictating the 'product.'

The Pro Kabaddi League is no exception. Now in its 12th chapter, the league already looks very different from the amateur global version of the sport. A sophisticated multi-camera setup and a steady stream of tweaks to balance raiders and defenders have reimagined a rustic, indigenous game for modern audiences.

The latest changes seem to draw heavily from cricket, particularly the IPL. Draws have been scrapped, replaced by a Super Over-style tiebreaker for the league stage. The knockout phase has also shifted: instead of the top two teams going straight to the semifinals, the IPL model of a qualifier ensures the losing side gets another chance to reach the final.

Points have been simplified, too. Gone is the system of five points for a win, three for a draw, and one for a close loss. In its place: a straightforward binary of two points for a win, none for a defeat.

"The long-drawn nature of the league meant a lot of teams were raising concerns about players tiring out. Injuries are also a major point of worry for the tournament as a whole. So we've made the league stage a bit shorter. This will also make proceedings more competitive," technical director E. Prasad Rao tells *Sportstar*.

The new format increases the incentive to finish higher on the table, rather than simply sneaking into the knockouts and coasting.

Fresh water flows

This season is also the first without any of PKL's original superstars. Pardeep Narwal's retirement marks the end of a golden generation and the beginning of a wide-open contest.

Iranian powerhouse: Mohammadreza Shadloui Chiyaneh, the Iranian allrounder and two-time PKL champion, now brings his match-winning edge to the Gujarat Giants. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Champion comeback: Back from injury, Aslam Inamdar — the skipper who powered Puneri Paltan to the PKL 10 title — is ready to lead from the front once again. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

"The old water is flowing away, making way for fresh water. Many youngsters are waiting to take over. We saw the likes of Devank and Ayan last season, but there are plenty more eager to prove themselves. We may see a few more of them own that stage this season," Rao says.

The auction has mirrored this generational shift. Teams could, for the first time, retain players for two seasons instead of one — a small but important nod to stability.

"Long-term contracts, trading windows, player policies, exit clauses for teams to also be secure should all be on the table," U Mumba CEO Suhail Chandokh had said after the last edition. The league appears to be moving that way."

Longevity is the best term to be used here. Players sticking with teams for a longer time is good for the league in the long run. Even now, there are thousands who associate Rahul Chaudhari with Telugu Titans. That bonding is required and advantageous for the player as much as it is for the team," Rao explains.

Coaching rosters have also been reshuffled. For the first time in PKL history, Randhir Singh Sehrawat — who led Bengaluru Bulls to the Season 6 title — finds himself without a team. Ram Mehar Singh, who masterminded Patna Pirates' early dominance, is also absent.

THE NEW FORMAT INCREASES THE INCENTIVE TO FINISH HIGHER ON THE TABLE, RATHER THAN SIMPLY SNEAKING INTO THE KNOCKOUTS AND COASTING

In their place, younger coaches and former greats have been entrusted: Ajay Thakur with Puneri Paltan, Anup Kumar at the Pirates, Anil Chaprana back with U Mumba, and Joginder Narwal continuing at Dabang Delhi.

Big picture

But while players and coaches come and go, the larger question is what all this means for kabaddi's long-term future. With India bidding to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games, where kabaddi could make its debut, the sport has a chance to clean up a messy ecosystem.

Outside the Asian Games and Asian Championships, there is little international activity to keep countries beyond India and Iran engaged. Vinod Tiwari, president of the International Kabaddi Federation, explains the paradox PKL creates.

"Given that the PKL happens every year, people watch it on TV and think everything is happening and is okay with the sport. But it is not. The ecosystem has been in limbo for the last eight-odd years. If you see the other countries, apart from Iran, where players participate in large numbers in the league, barely any other nationalities are there. A few here and there, maybe, but not too many people," he says.

At home, governance remains shaky. The Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India [AKFI] emerged from years of court-appointed oversight only to be immediately sidelined, triggering a ban that was hurriedly lifted before the women's team left for the Asian Championship in Iran.

PKL, meanwhile, positions itself as the sport's evangelist.

"Pro Kabaddi is not just a professional sport; it's also a promotion for the actual sport. PKL made kabaddi a sport of international standard. It standardised the sport, modernised it, and helped it align with scientific processes. While the 2036 Olympics is a big target for us as a community, the 2030 CWG gives us a solid chance," Rao says.

NEW FORMAT OF PKL 12

* League games reduced from 132 to 108
* Each team plays nine home and away games
* Drawn matches to now compulsorily have a tiebreak
* A win earns a team two points, a loss is worth no points; grace point for a loss within a 7-point margin done away with
* Top six teams made the playoffs previously; now teams played 7th and 8th will also join the bracket

Expanding horizons

Over the years, the league has tried spreading kabaddi's gospel through talent development, broader auctions, and even an exhibition game in Melbourne featuring retired Aussie rules players. Now, PKL and Mashal Sports are working with the AKFI to revive dormant federations abroad.

"We've been looking at the West Indies — Guyana, Tobago, and others like the Virgin Islands, which had good teams. If the Commonwealth Games falls in place as a platform and we can get these teams to participate, making a case for kabaddi at the Olympic level will be the easiest thing," Rao reveals.

That global push is mirrored domestically. The league returns this year to Visakhapatnam, a venue rich in kabaddi heritage but absent since 2018.

"Vizag had been part of the league's fabric since the inaugural season. Outside the PKL, this city also has a rich legacy in the sport. The Bharat Heavy Plate & Vessels Ltd. had a very good kabaddi team. The Port Trust also had a solid team with some international players. We're going back to one of the foundational venues of this league. We're confident of people turning up in large numbers, as they always have, and of sport getting a fillip consequently," Rao adds.

END OF A DREAM, BEGINNING OF ANOTHER

The Government of India introduced the **Online Gaming Bill** across both houses of parliament, eventually making it an Act.

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In the last decade, one of India's most promising industries has been online gaming: the internet became cheaper, so did smartphones, and a country of 1.4 billion people found a new favourite pastime.

And real-money gaming (RMG) took a prime spot in this ascend, creating an industry worth 20,000 crores, with companies like Dream11 and WinZO gaining over 500 million users (cumulative).

But the bubble burst in August 2025 when the Government of India introduced the Online Gaming Bill across both houses of parliament, eventually making it an Act. It prohibited real-money games in the country, leading to around 400 such companies winding down, affecting millions of users and nearly 2,00,000 employees.

"Obviously, we were shocked that we were being asked to shut down. The business model is going to shut down," Harsh Jain, the CEO of Dream 11, told *moneycontrol.com*. "We do believe regulation was the correct way forward, but we understand that this is not something that the government wants."

WHAT IS REAL-MONEY GAMING?

While the legality of RMG is a discussion for the country's executive, for a layman, it needs to be clarified what the term actually means and how that is different to conventional esports.

The Act defines an 'online money game' as any online game played by paying fees, depositing money, or other stakes with the "expectation of winning, which entails monetary and other enrichment".

Some of the most prominent games in this category were Dream11, PokerBaazi and WinZO, where a user had to deposit some money and depending on results or simulations – in real life (cricket, football) or

BGMI RANKINGS

JOEL "TRACEGOD" THOMAS

ANKIT "AK" SHUKLA

MOHAMMED "HUNTERZ" KHAN

TANISHK "ADMINO" SINGH

JONATHAN "JONATHAN" AMARAL

rummy/poker — they would get monetary rewards in return.

It is this that the government has banned, giving the following reasons: Addiction and financial ruin, mental health and suicides, fraud and money laundering, threat to national security and closing legal loopholes.

Ashwini Vaishnaw, the Minister for Electronics and Information Technology, said that according to an estimate, 45 crore people were negatively affected by these games and consequently suffered losses of more than Rs. 20,000 crores.

MOMENT UNDER THE SUN FOR ESPORTS

The shut door to RMG has also opened an opportunity for esports — an avenue where prize money comes through competitions, like any other conventional sporting event.

In the world's biggest mobile game market — with 8.45 Billion Downloads in FY 2024-25, according to Sensor Tower's India: Mobile Game Market Insights 2025 — that is almost a jackpot.

India ranked within the top 20 countries in the world in FIFAe in 2022. Danial Shakeel Patel reached the semifinals of the 2024 Esports World Cup, while Pavan Kampelli became the first Indian to win a medal — bronze– at the Asian Esports Games last year.

The government, too, has tread the path to encourage esports.

"The Central Government shall take steps as it considers necessary to recognise and register e-sports with the Authority or agency, as the case may be, as a legitimate form of competitive sport in India and to promote and develop e-sports," the Online Gaming Act states.

At the organisers' level, there has been progress too — S8UL became the first Indian club to become a partner at the 2025 Esports World Cup.

The Battlegrounds Mobile India Masters Series (BGMS) has attracted viewership of over 100 million, comparable to physical sports.

"In India, right now, in BGMI, we're the third-most watched sport on *Star Sports*, after cricket and Kabaddi. If you have such a high viewership, the world will notice," says Akshat Rathee **(left)**, the co-founder and managing director of NODWIN Gaming, which hosts the event.

He also adds that the continued success of the Esports World Cup will only add to the cause.

"The Esports World Cup just recently announced the Nations Cup, which is among countries (as units and not individual players) and in November 2026, while keeping the Esports World Cup in the summer season," he adds.

"I also think AI-enabled content creation, social media platforms around esports, travel around esports, hospitality, teams, education, training, athletes, gyms — so much of that industry is still unexplored."

While esports felt left out when it was excluded from the National Sports Governance Bill, it surely gets its moment in the sun now — to carve out a new path in a growing and promising market.

Did you know? Brazil and Real Madrid forward Vinicius Junior is a co-owner of Brazilian esports organisation, LOUD, which fields teams in League of Legends, Free Fire, and Valorant.

WHO AM I?

I started my BGMI career with Global Esports in 2022, and my professional journey has taken me to Revenant XSpark and back to Team SouL, establishing me as one of India's top BGMI talents. Who am I? The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Jeet "Swifty" Kundra

BUSINESS OF
ESPORTS

NODWIN Gaming became the majority shareholder of the longest-running fighting game event, Evo (Evolution Championship Series), after acquiring Sony Interactive Entertainment's stake for an undisclosed amount.

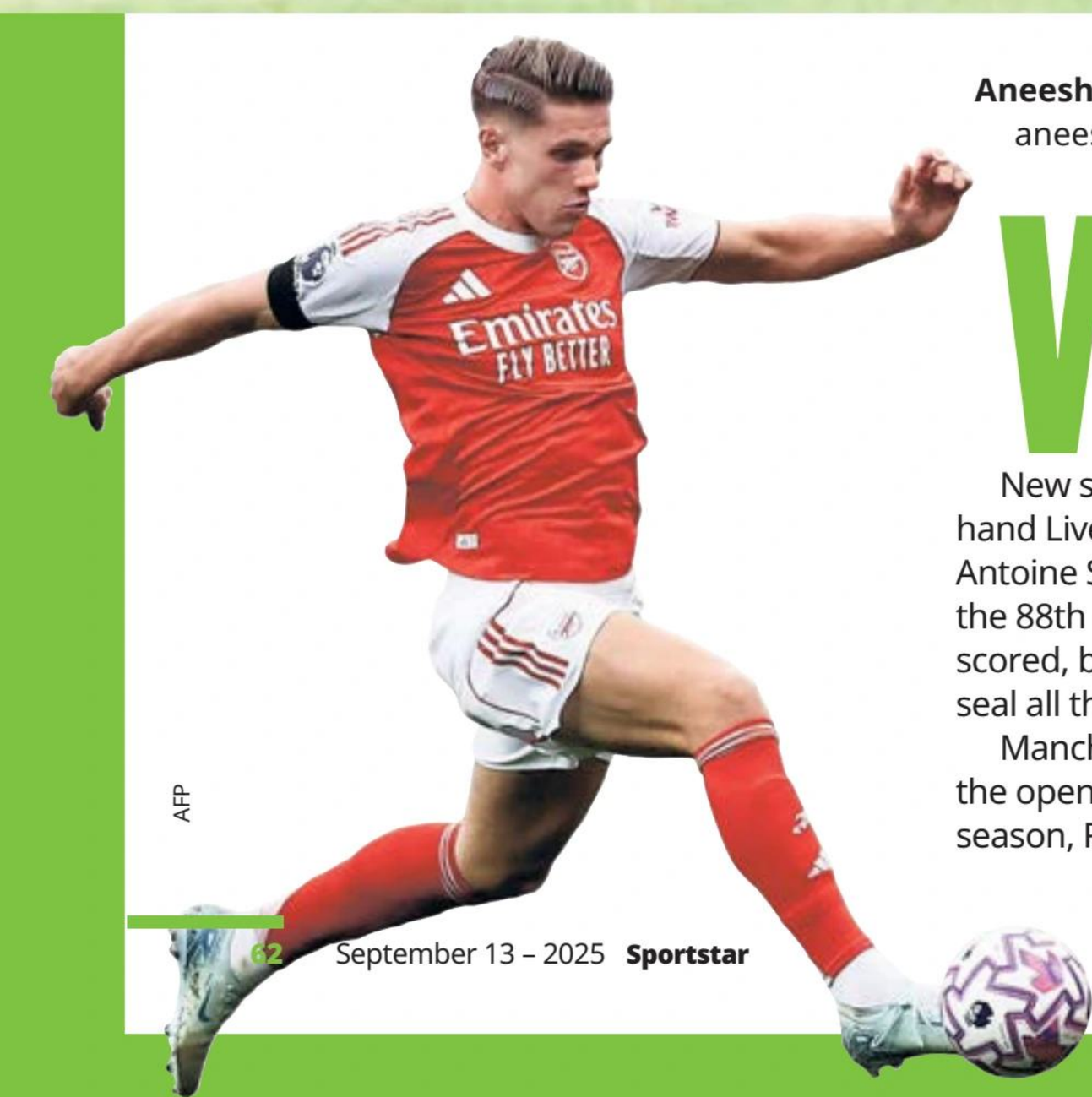
EASTER EGG
'CASTER'

Caster is the esports equivalent of a commentator in a normal sporting event. Usually, there are two casters for an esports event.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

FRESH CAMPAIGN, FAMILIAR SCRIPTS

Arsenal edged Manchester United in a cagey opener as Harry Kane marked the Bundesliga start with a **blistering** hat-trick for Bayern.



AFP

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With the summer break over, a brand-new Premier League campaign is back in all its grandeur. Defending champion Liverpool started with a home clash against Bournemouth, where the Reds were made to work hard to grab all three points.

New signing Hugo Ekitike and Cody Gakpo found the net to hand Liverpool a 2-0 advantage, but a second-half brace from Antoine Semenyo saw the Cherries draw level. It wasn't until the 88th minute that Anfield erupted when Federico Chiesa scored, before Mohamed Salah struck late in stoppage time to seal all three points.

Manchester United's clash with Arsenal was the highlight of the opening gameweek. After a dismal 15th-place finish last season, Ruben Amorim has been backed with several new

Big match theory: Manchester United's clash with Arsenal was the highlight of the opening gameweek. REUTERS

signings such as Matheus Cunha, Bryan Mbeumo, and Benjamin Sesko. And while early signs showed an improvement in United's football, the Red Devils lacked the finishing quality and were undone by an Arsenal corner converted by Riccardo Calafiori.

Arsenal followed the narrow win with a 5-0 triumph over newly-promoted Leeds United, with Viktor Gyokeres **(left)** scoring his first goal for the club after arriving in the summer. The Gunners also handed a debut to 15-year-old Max Dowman, who played his part by winning a late penalty, which Gyokeres converted.

United, desperate for its first win, could only manage a 1-1 draw against Fulham, leaving Amorim frustrated. The Portuguese admitted post the match that his side had failed to execute its attacking philosophy after conceding.

Pep Guardiola saw his Manchester City side begin with a 4-0 thrashing of Wolverhampton Wanderers, but it failed to carry that momentum into the next match, succumbing to a 0-2 loss against a rejuvenated Tottenham Hotspur under new manager Thomas Frank.

FIFA Club World Cup champion Chelsea had a frustrating start with a goalless draw against Crystal Palace, but quickly picked up pace with a 5-1 win over West Ham in its following outing.

Everton, welcoming the new season at its new home — the Hill Dickinson Stadium — won its first match at the venue, defeating Brighton & Hove Albion 2-0, after having earlier suffered a 1-0 defeat away to Leeds.

Among the promoted sides, Sunderland enjoyed a grand return to the English top-flight with a 3-0 win against West Ham, but was beaten 0-2 by Burnley, another newly-promoted side.

With two matches played, Arsenal leads the table with six points, followed by Tottenham Hotspur, also on six but with an inferior goal difference. Chelsea and Nottingham Forest occupy third and fourth, while Liverpool, having played a game less (at the time of writing), sits fifth, with City in sixth. United is 16th with one point from two games.

La Liga

La Liga has mostly been a two-team affair in recent times, with Barcelona and Real Madrid usually coming out on top and Atletico Madrid occasionally playing

Early surge: Kylian Mbappe followed up his penalty against Osasuna with a brace against Oviedo. REUTERS

Merciless: Bayern Munich's Harry Kane delivered a 14-minute hat-trick against RB Leipzig. REUTERS

spoilsport. Ahead of the new season, little suggests that narrative will change.

Defending champion Barcelona opened its campaign in style with a 3-0 win against Mallorca, with Raphinha, Ferran Torres and Lamine Yamal on target. In its second match against Levante, however, the Catalans were made to work much harder as they had to come from behind to pick up three points. Goals from Ivan Romero and Jose Luis Morales put Levante 2-0 up before the break, but Hansi Flick's half-time team talk worked wonders for the second half.

Pedri pulled one back in the 49th minute before Ferran equalised in the 52nd. With no further goals until the 90th minute, all signs pointed to a draw, but in a stroke of luck for Barca and misfortune for Levante, Unai Elgezabal scored an own goal in stoppage time to gift three points to Hansi Flick's side.

Real Madrid, under new manager Xabi Alonso, started on a positive note, beating Osasuna 1-0 courtesy of a Kylian Mbappe penalty.

Los Blancos followed it up with a dominant 3-0 win against Oviedo, with Mbappe grabbing a brace and Vinícius Júnior adding a late third.

Diego Simeone endured a poor start as Atletico Madrid lost 1-2 against Espanyol in its opener and only managed a 1-1 draw against Elche in the following week.

The Basque clubs, Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad, avoided defeat in the opening round, with the former beating Sevilla 3-2 and the latter drawing 1-1 against Valencia.

Sociedad's wait for its first win continued as it was held 2-2 by Espanyol, while Athletic had yet to play its second game at the time of writing.

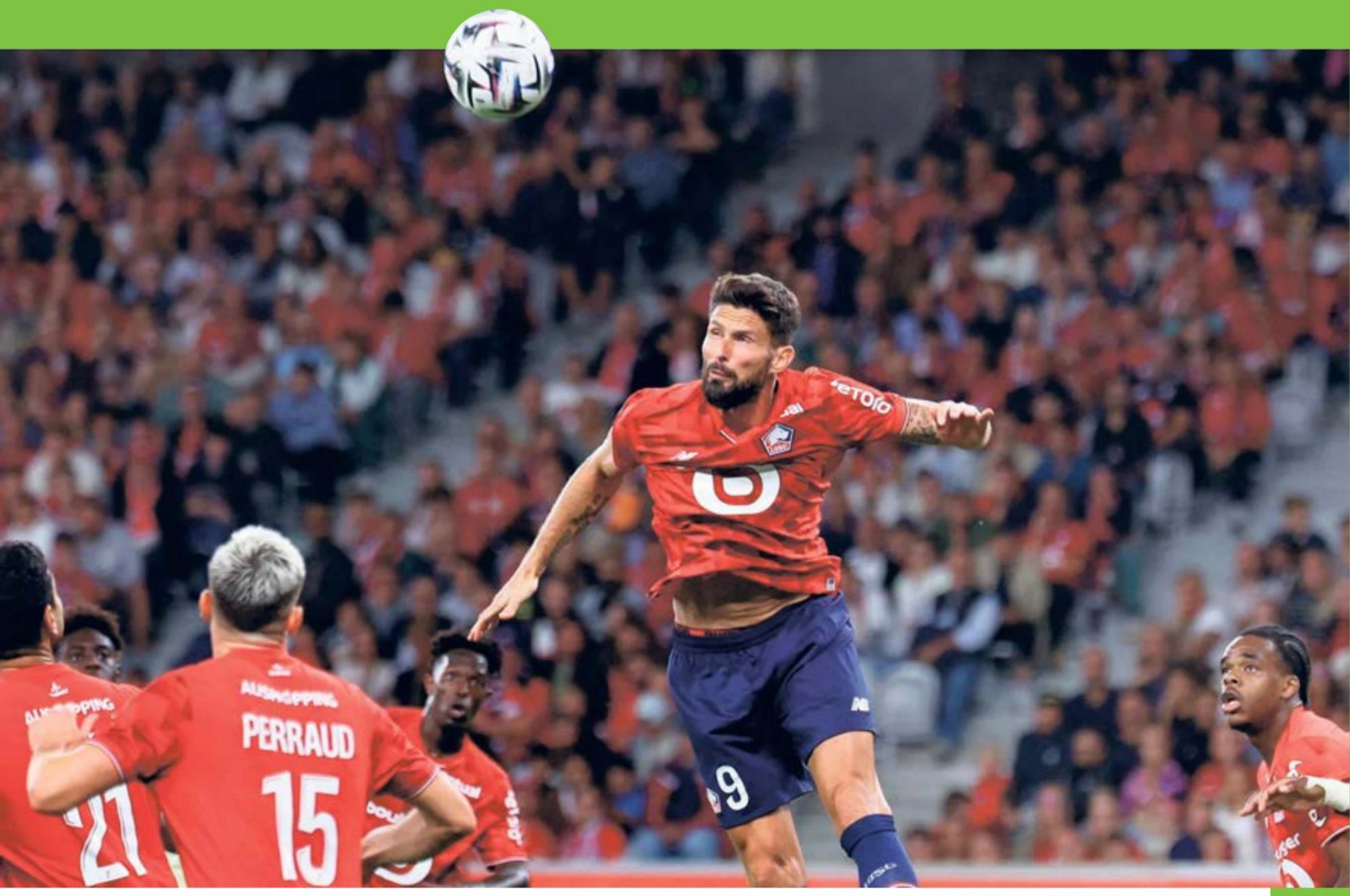
Villarreal currently leads the table with six points after wins against Oviedo and Girona. Barcelona and Real Madrid, also on six points, sit second and third on goal difference, with Espanyol fourth on four points from two games.

Bundesliga

German champion Bayern Munich picked up where it left off last season, thrashing RB Leipzig 6-0 in its season opener. Star striker Harry Kane bagged a 14-minute second-half hat-trick after a brace from Michael Olise and a debut goal from Luis Diaz had already given the Bavarians a healthy lead.

Former Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag had an underwhelming start to his tenure as Bayer Leverkusen boss, with his side falling to a shock 2-1 home defeat to Hoffenheim.

New signing Jarell Quansah gave the host an early lead, but Fisnik Asllani equalised midway through the first half before Tim Lemperle netted the winner seven minutes after the break.



On the prowl: LOSC Lille's Olivier Giroud became the club's oldest league scorer with a goal against Brest. AFP

Borussia Dortmund also faltered, throwing away a two-goal lead against St Pauli after the 85th minute. The Black and Yellow had led 3-1 through Serhou Guirassy, Waldemar Anton and Julian Brandt, while Andréas Hountondji got one back for the home side. However, with just five minutes of regulation time left, Filippo Mane was shown a straight red card for a foul inside the box, which was converted by Danel Sinani. St Pauli then completed a dramatic turnaround in the 89th minute with Eric Smith firing home from outside the box.

Serie A

Napoli did not appear to miss its injured striker, Romelu Lukaku, as it began its title defence with a 2-0 victory over promoted Sassuolo. Last season's Most Valuable Player, Scott McTominay, showed no signs of slowing down as he headed in the club's first goal of the league season. His former Manchester rival and league debutant, Kevin De Bruyne, then doubled the tally with a free-kick that bounced in untouched.

Veteran midfielder Luka Modric, meanwhile, had a contrasting start to his AC Milan career as his side fell to a shock 1-2 home defeat against newly-promoted Cremonese. The visitor took the lead through Federico Baschirotto, which was cancelled out just before half-time by Strahinja Pavlovic.

Cremonese restored its advantage just after the hour, with Federico Bonazzoli producing a stunning overhead kick to seal only its second-ever Serie A victory at San Siro. Record-winner Juventus began on a positive note with a tidy 2-0 win over Parma, secured by goals from debutant Jonathan David and Dusan Vlahovic.

Ligue 1

Despite being overwhelming favourites, Paris Saint-Germain began its campaign with scrappy wins in its first two matches.

A deflected strike from Vitinha was enough to edge past Nantes in an otherwise dull fixture. In the following game against Angers, Ballon d'Or front runner Ousmane Dembele skied a penalty before Fabian Ruiz spared his blushes with a close-range finish.

Meanwhile, Olivier Giroud is enjoying his return to Ligue 1 from Major League Soccer, scoring in both of LOSC Lille's matches so far. The 38-year-old became the club's oldest league scorer during a 3-3 draw with Brest, before bagging a stoppage-time winner against Monaco.

Four teams — Lyon, Toulouse FC, PSG and RC Strasbourg — share the lead on six points from two games, with Lyon leading the pack on goal difference.

(All results updated as of August 24)

Historic repeat: By retaining the crown, NorthEast United became the first team since East Bengal's three-peat from 1989 to 1991 to defend the Durand Cup. DEBASISH BHADURI

HIGHLANDERS HIT THE HIGH NOTE WITH RECORD DURAND CUP TRIUMPH

A dominant NorthEast United beat Diamond Harbour 6-1 in the Durand Cup final, securing **back-to-back titles** in historic fashion at Salt Lake Stadium.

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A group of Assam Regiment soldiers broke into their famous marching song, *"Badluram ka Badan,"* on the sidelines of the Salt Lake Stadium pitch, offering a melodious tribute to the champion of the 134th edition of the Durand Cup — NorthEast United FC. The performance engaged the small band of Highlanders supporters who had come to cheer their side, even as organisers prepared the victory podium at the centre of the ground. Only minutes earlier, the Guwahati-based team had completed a thumping 6-1 victory over Kolkata debutant Diamond Harbour FC, setting the stage for a colourful prize-distribution ceremony that felt like déjà vu for the NorthEast United fans. Their side had, after all, retained the crown it had won in the previous edition, when it beat another Kolkata powerhouse, Mohun Bagan Super Giant.

By pulling off this feat, NorthEast United matched the distinction of East Bengal, which was the last team to defend the Durand Cup, lifting it

three years in a row between 1989 and 1991. The fanfare around this year's win was amplified by another historic achievement: NorthEast became the first team in the post-Independence era of the 137-year-old tournament to win a final by such a commanding scoreline. The previous best had come back in 2001, when the now-defunct Mahindra United beat Churchill Brothers 5-0. For NorthEast United, the triumph carried extra weight; it had taken the franchise nearly a decade to win its first national-level silverware when it edged Mohun Bagan in penalties last year.

This time, it not only defended the title but did so in emphatic style, underlining its growth as a team. The joy was reflected in the reaction of its owner, Bollywood actor John Abraham, who celebrated each goal by congratulating the dignitaries in the VIP box before joining the players after full time. In true celluloid fashion, he led the squad to the stands to share the moment with fans, ensuring that the revelry stretched late into the night.

If the celebrations highlighted the occasion, the team's performance across the tournament justified it. NorthEast United looked the best-prepared side in the competition, sharper and fitter than most of its Indian Super League rivals — Mohun Bagan SG, Emami East Bengal, and Jamshedpur FC included — even though it had only begun pre-season a fortnight before the Durand. Much of the credit lay with coach Juan Pedro Benali, who assembled a balanced squad of Indian and foreign players and instilled a clear structure. The Highlanders went through the tournament unbeaten, the only stumble being a 2-2 draw against I-League 2 club Rangdajied United in the group stage. That match proved a timely wake-up call, as the team regrouped and powered through the quarterfinals and semifinals before turning the final into a one-sided affair. For Diamond Harbour FC, though, the tournament itself was a breakthrough.

Making its Durand Cup debut, the I-League Division 2 champion turned plenty of heads with its spirited run under Spanish coach Kibu Vicuña. Placed in a tough group that included ISL double winner Mohun Bagan SG, the three-year-old club still advanced as one of the two best runners-up — alongside Shillong Lajong — thanks to wins over Mohammedan Sporting and seven-time champion Border Security Force. With five teams locked on six points, Diamond Harbour's superior goal difference proved decisive.

From there, the fairy tale gathered momentum. In the quarterfinals, Diamond Harbour stunned Jamshedpur FC 2-0, before eliminating East Bengal 2-1 in the semifinals. That result carried special weight, as East Bengal had been widely tipped to take the trophy after its derby win against Mohun Bagan in the quarters. For a side that was barely three years old, to reach the final by beating established giants was an achievement in itself.

Had Diamond Harbour pulled off one more upset, the Durand Cup would have crowned another debutant champion, following in the footsteps of Gokulam Kerala in 2019 and FC Goa in 2021. But NorthEast United had other ideas. The defending champion held firm, and with a performance as ruthless as it was historic, gave fresh meaning to its place in the annals of Asia's oldest football tournament.

Roll of honour

INDIVIDUAL AWARDS

Golden ball (player of the tournament): Alaaeddine Ajaraie (NorthEast United FC)

Golden boot (highest goal scorer): Alaaeddine Ajaraie (8 goals)

Golden glove (best goalkeeper): Gurmeet Singh (NorthEast United)

TEAM PRIZES

Champion: Rs. 1.21 crore (40% of pool)

Runner-up: Rs. 60 lakh (20%)

Losing semifinalists: Rs. 25 lakh each (8.3%)

Losing quarterfinalists: Rs. 15 lakh each (5%)

Individual Awards: Golden Ball, Golden Boot and Golden Glove winners received Rs. 3 lakh each, plus a brand-new Mahindra XUV 3XO each.

Creative spark: Alaaeddine Ajaraie lit up the final, finishing with four assists and a goal in a dazzling all-round display. DURAND CUP MEDIA

THE JAMIL BLUEPRINT

The Indian men's football team, foundering in the doldrums of mediocrity for the last two years, gets its first **homegrown coach** in 13 years.

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On the evening of February 25, 2022, Khalid Jamil cut a solitary figure on the touchline. His NorthEast United FC side had just lost 2-3 to Jamshedpur FC — one of its 12 defeats that season, a stark contrast to the dream run of 10 unbeaten games he had guided it through in the previous campaign.

"One thing I want to say is that I always take the blame — we win or lose because of me," was one of Jamil's earliest reactions.

Accountability has been one of the biggest virtues of the 48-year-old, media-shy coach. As he embarks on his journey at the helm of the Indian men's national team, he demands it now more than ever, from himself and from his cadres.

"Firstly, it is great to work for the nation. Secondly, we have to take responsibility, and it is my pleasure to accept the challenge," Jamil tells Sportstar in an exclusive interview.

"It is a big one (the opportunity), and it is about the country. We must work together, and the players must also take responsibility for the team. We must work hard as a unit and for India," he adds.

In the last two years, the Indian men's football team has foundered in the doldrums of mediocrity.

It has changed two coaches, Igor Stimac and Manolo Marquez, both of whom were seen pushing the envelope of culpability towards the ecosystem or the players, the opposite of what Jamil has done over the years.

Perhaps that very disposition tipped the scales in his favour as the All India Football Federation (AIFF) anointed him, an indigenous son, over two experienced foreign contenders: Stephen Constantine, who had once helped India climb 76 spots in the FIFA rankings, and Stefan Tarkovic, under whom Slovakia played in the 2020 European Championship.

A keen eye

In his 16-year coaching career, Jamil has managed clubs across the three divisions of Indian men's football and remains the only coach from the country in the Indian Super League (ISL), the current men's top flight.

In his most recent assignment, he took Jamshedpur to the league semifinals and the Super Cup final.

"I think he is fantastic at reading the game because he knows everything about a player (his ability) and can bring 100 per cent out of an individual. Like, if I am not giving my all, he knows how to get that out of me," says Albino Gomes, an integral member of the Jamshedpur side and an I-League winner under Jamil at Aizawl. "In training sessions, he pushes everyone, even if a player thinks he is giving his 100 per cent. That way, that player is motivated to give more."

Jamil became the first Indian full-time coach of the men's senior team in 13 years and just

Right choice: Accountability has been one of the biggest virtues of the 48-year-old, media-shy coach. Pics: AIFF MEDIA

the third since 1993. One Indian has taken interim charge since — Armando Colaco — after the sacking of Bob Houghton.

"Indian coaches know the (team) atmosphere and everything about the players. That is an advantage, and their learning capacity is also very good. If they get a chance, they can do well," Jamil says.

Having played under some of the best gaffers in modern Indian football, from Dhyan Chand Awardee Sukhwinder Singh to Arjuna Awardee and former India captain Syed Nayeemuddin, Jamil has grown into a repository of accumulated wisdom.

"I have worked with many coaches, both foreign and Indian. All of them have been good and I have learnt many things from them," he adds.

An uphill battle

Jamil's first assignment will be a stern challenge — against Tajikistan (2023 Asian Cup quarterfinalist), Iran (a three-time Asian Cup winner) and Afghanistan (a side India has not beaten in over three years), at the 2025 CAFA Nations Cup.

"It is good for us to play against stronger teams. Everybody is motivated to participate," Jamil says. "There is no complaint at all. We must work hard. Looking at the opponents, yes, they are good teams, but we have to be prepared for that."

India's preliminary squad has been training under Jamil in Bengaluru since August 15, and will fly to Tajikistan for its group-stage matches.

The squad already has some surprise selections, with record goalscorer and captain Sunil Chhetri excluded and likely out of Jamil's plans for the impending Asian Cup qualifiers.

"Sunil (Chhetri) is a role model for Indian football, and the door is always open for him. He's not in the camp because we are playing a tournament that will essentially serve as preparation for our Asian Cup qualifiers, and I want to try out a few other players," Jamil had earlier clarified.

Moreover, Mohun Bagan Super Giant, the defending ISL champion, has declined to release its players as the tournament is outside the FIFA window and clashes with its AFC Champions League Two commitments in September.

On the other hand, the camp has welcomed four new personnel: defenders Sunil Benchamin (the first from the Indian Army Football Team in four decades), Alex Saji, Muhammed Uvais, and forward Manvir Singh.

"Everybody is working very hard, and their intention is very good — that is a good sign. We have very motivated players," Jamil reassures.

Dynamic approach

By his critics, Jamil might be pigeon-holed as a defensive coach — parking the bus, waiting for a chance to hit against the run of play. But over the years, his designs reveal a more pragmatic approach.

Against possession-dominating sides, he tends to go with a heavy mid and low block (4-4-1-1 against FC Goa in a 3-1 win last season), while against long-ball playing teams, he prefers fluid counters, preferably a 4-3-3 (like in NorthEast United's wins against Bagan and Kerala Blasters FC in the 2020-21 season).

Last season, Jamshedpur scored multiple goals in 16 games under Jamil, the joint-most for any manager in that campaign, alongside Bagan's Jose Molina. However, his side conceded the second-most goals (43) in the regular season.

So how can we expect the Blue Tigers to play under him? "According to situations, we must be careful and play as a team — that is the most important thing," Jamil says.

Jamil's penchant for forging a potent sense of unity within his teams is his biggest asset.

Squads assembled on shoestring budgets have overperformed under his tutelage, from Aizawl FC, which won the I-League in 2017, to NorthEast United and Jamshedpur, which reached the semifinals under him.

"He's the only Indian coach in the ISL for a reason. Though we weren't a big team, he ensured unity and took us deep into the tournament," adds VP Suhair, who played under Jamil at NorthEast and Jamshedpur.

"He gives players a lot of freedom. Even with a set plan, he allows us to express ourselves."

Though the CAFA Nations Cup will be his moment to break the ice, the real litmus test awaits later, when India plays Singapore home and away in the Asian Cup qualifiers. But Jamil is not looking too far ahead.

"We must go step by step. This (Nations Cup) is a big challenge for us. We must get a positive result here," he says.

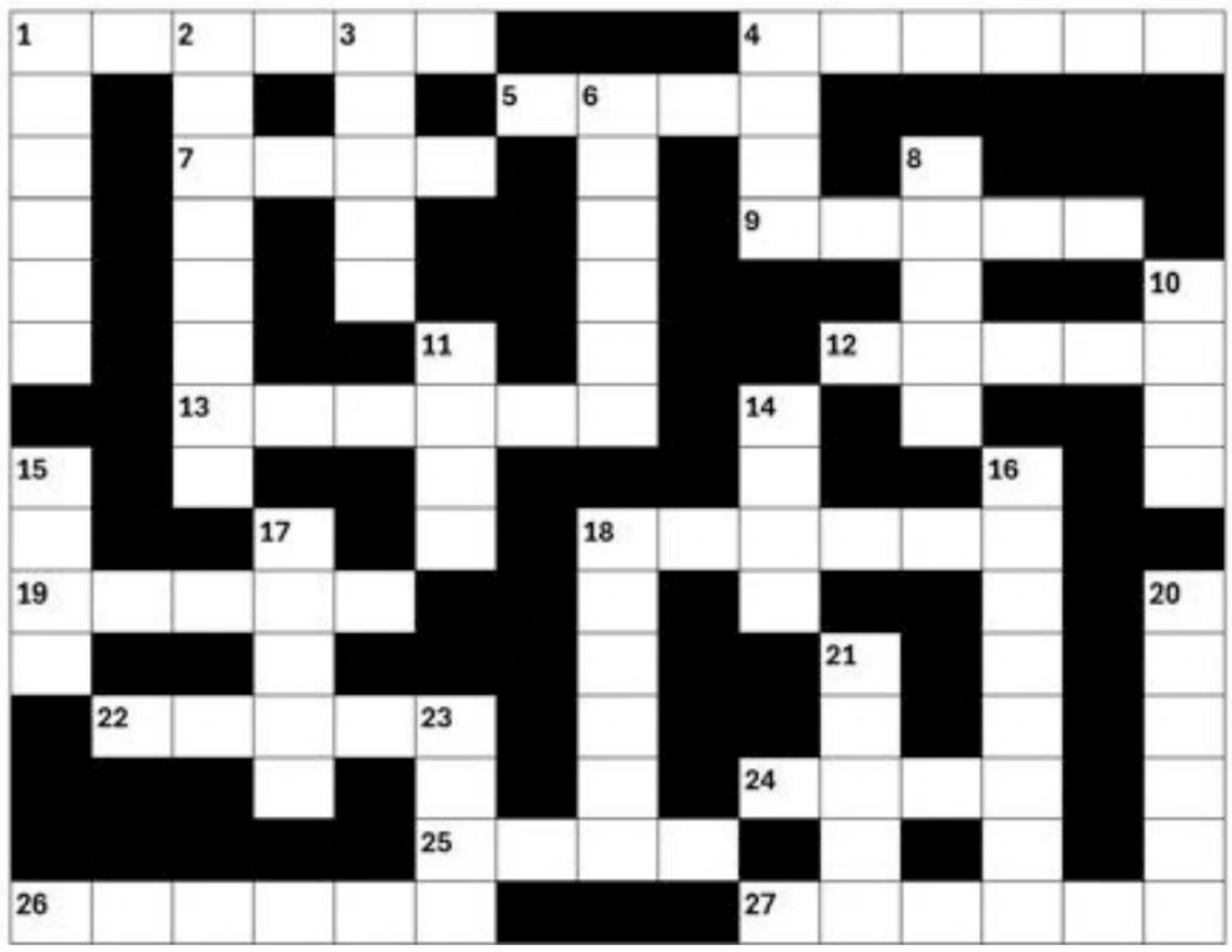
With a chunk of national team regulars out, Jamil finds himself in familiar territory — his back against the wall.

But he has, time and again, proven such predicaments to be his whetstone, and will hope to savour a similar challenge, clad in new robes, with the tricolour printed on them.

Straight into the fire: India's first assignments under Jamil will be against three strong teams — Tajikistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.

> « Squads assembled on shoestring budgets have overperformed under Jamil's tutelage »

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

U.S. OPEN SPECIAL

ACROSS

1 Who won the men's singles title in 2024? (6)

4 Who finished as the runner-up in the women's singles in 2024? (6)

5 Who won the first title in the men's singles at the beginning of the Open Era in 1968? (4)

7 Who won the first title in the women's singles at the beginning of the Open Era in 1968? (4)

9 Identify this legendary American woman player who first set the record of winning most singles titles in the Open Era? (5)

12 Who won the women's singles title in 2024? (5)

13, Down 15 & Across 25: Which legendary American woman player's name is associated with the stadium complex which hosts the U.S. Open matches? (6,4,4)

18 Identify this modern legendary American who became the second woman player to win most titles in the Open Era. (6)

19 Who won the men's singles title in 1994 and 1999 besides ending up as a runner-up four times? (5)

22 Who is the only player from Pakistan to have reached any Grand Slam final — ended as runner-up in both men's & mixed doubles events in 2010? (5)

24 Who is the only male player from Norway to have reached the U.S. Open final and ended as runner-up in 2022? (4)

27 This Australian, winner of the singles title in 2011, reached a career high World No. 1 on February 6, 2006, and has also won the women's doubles title twice with a gap of 16 years between the first and the second? (6)

DOWN

1 Identify this Swede who is the only player to have done won all four Grand Slam boys' titles in the same year besides winning the men's singles title in two consecutive years. (6)

2 Who became the third player — in fact, all three Australians — to win the men's singles title in both Eras? (8)

3 Identify Rohan Bopanna's partner when the duo finished as runner-up in the men's doubles in 2023. (5)

4 Who became the second player to win the men's singles title most times (5) in the Open Era? (4)

6 Identify the surname of this American woman who won the mixed doubles twice in 1983 and 1990. (6)

8 Who won the men's singles title for seven straight years since U.S. Open began in 1881? (5)

10 This Indian, who, besides winning the boys' singles title in 1991, went on to reach seven men's doubles finals and five mixed doubles finals and won three and two titles respectively. (4)

11 On which surface was the U.S. Open played for a brief period from 1975 to 1977? (4)

14 On which surface is the U.S. Open being played from 1978? (4)

16 Identify this player who became the first from erstwhile Czechoslovakia to reach the U.S. Open final — twice. (3,5)

17 On which surface was the U.S. Open played from the beginning in 1881 till 1974? (5)

18 & Across 26 Which American reached a career high World No. 2 ranking on March 5, 2001, and has also won the men's doubles title in 1998? (6)

20 This German legend won his only men's singles title in 1989. (6)

21 Identify the surname of the second player to win the women's singles title in both Eras? (5)

23 Which American legend holds the record of winning the most number of men's doubles titles in the Open Era? (4)

FOR MORE STORIES

Bold gamble, mixed verdict

Italians Sara Errani and Andrea Vavassori won the **revamped** mixed doubles tournament at the U. S. Open, though the new format didn't win over everyone.

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In February, when the US Tennis Association announced a revamped mixed doubles competition for this year's US Open, its CEO Lewis Sherr said the idea was to get more participation from singles players and grow the fan base around the world.

A shortened competition with only 16 teams, compared to the usual 32, was scheduled on August 19-20 to allow prominent singles players to pair up and play in the iconic Arthur Ashe Stadium and Louis Armstrong Stadium without compromising their main event, which began the following week.

The scoring format until the final was best-of-three sets played to four games, with a deciding point at deuce. Tiebreakers came at 4-all — rather than 6-6 in a regular match — and a 10-point match tiebreak replaced a third set.

For the summit clash, it was best-of-three sets played to six games with no-ad scoring, tiebreakers at 6-all, and a 10-point match tiebreaker.

The result?

Sara Errani and Andrea Vavassori, two doubles specialists from Italy, defended their title comfortably, beating six-time singles Major winner Iga Swiatek and three-time singles Grand Slam finalist Casper Ruud 6-3, 5-7, [10-6] in the final. Errani and Vavassori also pocketed one million USD, more than twice the total prize money that mixed doubles champions at the other three Slams received this year.

A statement by the United States Tennis Association (USTA) said: "The 2025 US Open Mixed Doubles Championship drew unprecedented crowds for a mixed doubles competition, with 78,000 fans visiting the grounds over August 19 and 20."

Putting mixed doubles into the spotlight in such a manner was a bold move, and it did catch people's attention. The US Open is known for taking such calls. Historically, it was the first Slam to introduce a final-set tiebreak, a shot clock between points, and in-game coaching.

However, the scheduling, the scoring format, the quality of play, as well as the entry criteria need to be reviewed if it wants to continue with its objective of popularising mixed doubles next year.

The event began less than 24 hours after the Cincinnati Open final, a gruelling 12-day Masters 1000 event. Carlos Alcaraz and Swiatek, the singles champions in Cincinnati, made it to New York just in time. However, World No. 1 Jannik Sinner, who was forced to retire after 20 minutes of the summit clash against Alcaraz due to illness, understandably withdrew. As a result, his partner and doubles specialist Katerina Siniakova could compete neither in New York nor in either of the two WTA events taking place the same week.

Many other prominent singles players such as Aryna Sabalenka, Tommy Paul, and Emma Navarro, who had initially shown interest and were announced by the organisers as part of the lineup, also pulled out.

The scoring format was similar to the Next Gen ATP Finals, a season-ending exhibition tournament for the top eight men aged 20 and under. Should a Grand Slam, with a 144-year-old rich history and tradition, be treated like an exhibition event?

British No. 1 Jack Draper thought it was an exhibition. He paired up with USA's Jessica Pegula and beat the duos of Alcaraz and Emma Raducanu, and Daniil Medvedev and Mirra Andreeva to reach the semifinals on the first day. Later, in the press conference, Draper remarked, "Obviously, it is like a bit of an exhibition format," and Pegula, who could barely stop smiling, said, "You shouldn't be saying that, but that's okay."

A week before the event, Pegula had pointed out that the organisers did not take any feedback from the players regarding the change in format.

Coming to the list of 16 pairs, eight teams earned direct entry by their

All too easy?: Errani and Vavassori, both doubles specialists, defended their title comfortably. REUTERS

combined singles rankings while eight others were given wild cards. While the changed scoring format irked the purists, the entry system enraged the players. At other Slams, the combined doubles ranking of the two players is taken into consideration for mixed doubles, but since every Major is a separate entity, the entry criteria can be changed.

The USTA's decision effectively shut the door on most doubles specialists, for whom Grand Slams are financially a big deal. None of the Top 10 from the ATP doubles rankings made the cut, while from the WTA doubles Top 10, only No. 1 Taylor Townsend and No. 4 Errani could enter — and that too after receiving wild cards. Letting top singles players, who already earn well, take away a major chunk of the total prize money of USD 2.36 million didn't help either.

Having more doubles specialists, rather than just Errani and Vavassori, could have made the tournament more competitive despite the changed scoring system. Out of 15 matches, nine ended in less than 50 minutes. Only two fixtures, including the final, went to a 10-point match tiebreak. The tactics, the court positioning, and the overall chemistry required for doubles — most of the teams lacked them.

After Errani and Vavassori got the job done, they were 'congratulated' by fellow doubles specialists.

"Doubles on TOP! Statement made! Forza Italia! How about allowing more doubles specialists next time to spice it up? Let's not make it too easy for Vava and Sara!" wrote Poland's Jan Zielinski, who won two mixed doubles titles in 2024, on social media platform *X*. Rajeev Ram, a three-time US Open mixed doubles champion, posted, "Full credit to Errani and Vavassori. I'm sure it wasn't easy to be the overwhelming favourites in this event and then get the job done."

Will the Australian Open, French Open, and Wimbledon follow the US Open route and tinker with the format of mixed doubles — a category exclusively played at the Majors, team competitions, continental events, and the Olympics? Or rather, should they?

The line-up

Based on singles rankings
[1] Jack Draper (GBR)/Jessica Pegula (USA)
[2] Taylor Fritz (USA/Elena Rybakina (KAZ)
[3] Casper Ruud (NOR)/Iga Swiatek (POL)
[4] Holger Rune (DEN)/Amanda Anisimova (USA)
Daniil Medvedev/Mirra Andreeva
Frances Tiafoe (USA)/Madison Keys (USA)
Alexander Zverev (GER)/Belinda Bencic (SUI)
Andrey Rublev/Karolina Muchova (CZE)
[Alternates] Christian Harrison (USA)/Danielle Collins (USA)

Via wild cards
Carlos Alcaraz (ESP)/Emma Raducanu (GBR)
Novak Djokovic (SRB)/Olga Danilovic (SRB)
Reilly Opelka (USA)/Venus Williams (USA)
Andrea Vavassori (ITA)/Sara Errani (ITA)
Gael Monfils (FRA)/Naomi Osaka (JPN)
Ben Shelton (USA)/Taylor Townsend (USA)
Lorenzo Musetti (ITA)/Caty McNally (USA)

OF HIGH STAKES AND MIXED FORTUNES

At the Inter-State Championships, athletes were chasing not just medals, but a **spot at the Worlds** in Tokyo next month.

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Numbers told the real story at the 64th National Inter-State Senior Athletics Championships in Chennai, with every second, metre and ranking point shaping the fortunes of Indian athletes.

The domestic meet, held from August 20-24, was the last opportunity for Indian athletes to seal their spots at next month's World Championships (September 13-21) in Tokyo. There were two ways to do it: first, by meeting the entry standard for the showpiece event — clocking a certain time on the track, throwing or jumping a particular distance, or clearing the bar at a set height. Or second, by taking the complicated route of the World Rankings — checking the current standings and then calculating the required performance to gain enough points and secure a quota.

Neeraj Chopra (men's javelin throw), steeplechasers Parul Chaudhary and Avinash Sable (who is unlikely to compete at the Worlds due to injury), Gulveer Singh (men's 5000m), and triple jumper Praveen Chithravel were the only automatic Indian qualifiers before the Inter-State meet. After five days in Chennai, there were no additions to this list.

Those whose rankings were already high enough to qualify for Tokyo played it safe and avoided peaking too soon, while those on the borderline were left to wait anxiously for the final list to be released by World Athletics on August 27.

Javelin throwers aplenty

For the second World Championships in a row, India looks set to have solid representation in a field of 36 male javelin throwers. Sachin Yadav (22nd in World Rankings) and Yash Vir Singh (30th) were likely to join Neeraj, who had already booked his spot via a wildcard reserved for the defending champion, even before the meet in Chennai.

However, Rohit Yadav **(above)** threw his name into the hat as well, producing a personal best of 83.65m to pip Asian Championships silver medallist Sachin (83.20m) for the gold. Rohit, the 24-year-old from Uttar Pradesh, made his Worlds debut in 2022

before missing the last edition due to a ligament tear in his right elbow, which required surgery and kept him out of action for more than a year.

Annu Rani, the woman National Record (NR) holder, strengthened her bid for a fifth consecutive appearance at the World Championships. Placed 28th in the rankings, the 32-year-old continued her consistent season as no one could challenge her throw of 61.05m for gold. This was her third straight competition in August crossing the 61m mark. "I didn't want to peak today because then nothing would have been left for the World Championships," said Annu.

Touch-and-go

For long jumper Murali Sreeshankar **(right)**, the meet in Chennai ended with mixed feelings. The Asian Games silver medallist had been out of action since sustaining a tear in his patellar tendon in April last year, which forced him to miss the Paris Olympics. The 26-year-old from Kerala returned to competition this July and, commendably, competed in five events in six weeks to meet the criterion to enter the World Rankings. Not only that, he won all five while producing a best of 8.13m.

In Chennai, his target was to breach the automatic qualification mark of 8.27m, but he managed only 8.06m. According to the penultimate list, the athlete at the 36th and final qualification spot available through the world rankings had a score of 1195. Sreeshankar will enter the final list with 1196. Will he make it?

"I was trying to chase something which was supposed to be done in the span of a year," said a slightly disappointed Sreeshankar.

"If the World Championships qualification doesn't happen, I definitely need a break to unwind and get ready for the next season, which comprises the Commonwealth Games and the Asian Games."

Tejas Shirse, the National Record holder in the men's 110m hurdles, too, wasn't particularly pleased despite winning gold, as his 13.60s in wet, slippery conditions after a heavy downpour might not earn him enough ranking points to qualify for Tokyo.

Both Sreeshankar and Tejas could also have benefitted from tougher competition, as the second-placed finishers in their respective events jumped only 7.71m and clocked 14.03s.

On target: Annu Rani, the woman National Record holder, won gold in javelin with a throw of 61.05m. PICS: R. RAGU

Historic feat: Vishal T.K. clocked 45.12s to win 400m, setting a new National Record.

Rising stars

Animesh Kujur **(below)** cemented his status as the Indian sprinter to watch, all but qualifying for the World Championships in the 200m. Kujur will be the first-ever Indian male sprinter to compete at the highest level. The 22-year-old from Odisha skipped the 100m individual event in Chennai and focussed entirely on the 200m, where his chances of qualifying were strongest. In the final, he bettered his own meet record, clocking 20.63s.

In Kujur's absence, the men's 100m event produced a new star in Tamil Nadu's S. Tamilarasu, who won in 10.22s, the joint fourth-fastest time ever by an Indian. His performance also raised the question of whether he could have gone even faster had the organisers not scheduled the heats, semifinals, and final all on the same day.

The domestic meet had its biggest moment on the second day when local boy Vishal T.K. broke Kerala's Muhammed Anas' six-year-old National Record of 45.21s in the 400m with a time of 45.12s. A delighted Vishal removed his bib and displayed its other side, where he had written "For my coach Jason," referring to Jason Dawson, the Jamaican head coach of India's 4x400m men's national relay team.

While Dawson was extremely pleased with Vishal's performance, he also noted that he could produce more such results for the country if Indian coaches did not interfere in his programme. Later, addressing Dawson's complaint, Adille Sumariwalla, former president of the Athletics Federation of India, said, "This has been a topic of discussion for a long time. I don't want to get into the details, but there are issues, and we are resolving them."

Fine performances: Reegan G (above) and M. Gowtham (above, right) shared gold in pole vault. **Below:** Ankita Dhyani won the 3000m steeplechase.

In men's shot put, Samardeep Gill recorded a new personal best of 19.82m to beat two-time Olympian and National Record holder Tajinderpal Toor (19.41m) for gold. The 30-year-old Toor, impressed by Gill, six years his junior, told the scribes covering the event - "He is the future; talk to him." Ruchit Mori became only the eighth Indian man to go sub-50 seconds in the 400m hurdles, as the 23-year-old from Gujarat clocked 49.76s to win gold.

The defining image of the tournament was Tamil Nadu pole vaulters M. Gowtham and Reegan G. sharing the gold with a meet record of 5.20m.

Best athletes

Men
Vishal TK, 400m — 45.12s (gold)

Women
Ankita Dhyani, 3000m steeplechase — 9:44.83s (gold)

Team results

Men
1. Tamil Nadu (101 points)
2. Uttar Pradesh (58 points)

Women
1. Tamil Nadu (90 points)
2. Haryana (63 points)

Overall
1. Tamil Nadu (195 points)
2. Haryana (121 points)

All ears: Animesh Kujur with Martin Owens during a training session. The star athlete trains under Owens at the Odisha Reliance Foundation High Performance Centre. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Indian sprint on the surge despite administrative flip-flops

A **stellar season** has propelled Animesh Kujur to the brink of India's first men's sprint appearance at the World Championships, even as tough schedules and unclear selection routines prove to be significant hurdles for sprinters at home.

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It has been a painfully sweet year for India's short-distance runners in 2025. Animesh Kujur, India's latest sprint headline act, is on the cusp of becoming the first Indian male sprinter to participate in the World Championships, to be held in Tokyo next month.

The 21-year-old has battled through a long, arduous season in which he ran 41 races in seven months across nine countries, breaking both the 100m and 200m National Records (NR) in the process.

The Odisha sprinter was also part of the 'dream team', which also included Manikanta Hoblidhar, Gurindervir Singh and Amlan Borgohain, that tore down the 4x100m relay NR set during the Delhi Commonwealth Games in 2010.

Gurindervir shattered the 100m NR with a 10.20s at the Indian Grand Prix in Bengaluru in March, only for Animesh to better it in Greece in July with 10.18s. The 200m crown at the National Inter-State Championships in Chennai is the latest accolade Animesh has added to his collection this year. Sitting down for a chat with *Sportstar* after the event, he shed light on the gruelling year he has endured.

"This was the last competition before the World Championships, and the coach wanted me to just get it done with. He asked me to get away from the track after the Continental Tour Bronze event in Odisha. I warmed up for the first time in a week after arriving here," Animesh explained.

Manikanta had a similar tale. "I had no plan of participating in Inter-State. I had some pain in the adductor and missed the Continental Tour. I just did one session in Mumbai and flew here to participate," said the 24-year-old, who finished second in 100m. "The final didn't go to plan because I felt some tightness. God must have

Need for speed: Manikanta Hoblidar (centre) won silver in 100m at the Inter-State Championships in Chennai. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Teaming up: (L-R) Hillier, Animesh, Owens and Manikanta at the office of *The Hindu* post their conversation with *Sportstar*. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

thought I'll turn up without training next time," he joked.

Animesh, too, had struggled during the Continental Tour event in his home state, pulling out of the 100m heats to focus on the 200m, after being under the weather following his European sojourn.

The relentless set of engagements this year, however, is partly of his own making. The World University Games in Bochum, Germany, had been earmarked as the marquee event for him this year. But a NR of 20.40s at the Federation Cup in Kochi in April suddenly opened the doors to the Asian Championships, which in turn ate into his training time.

Animesh ran 20.45s at the UAE Athletics Grand Prix in Dubai and followed it up with 20.55s at the Indian Grand Prix in Trivandrum. At the Asian Championships in Gumi, South Korea, he broke his own NR in 200m with 20.32s in the final, bagging bronze. With each passing event, he gathered ranking points, making the Worlds in Tokyo a serious possibility.

"He's earned his right to be competing at this level [Worlds]," said James Hillier, Athletics Director, Reliance Foundation. "He's been developing very well and this hasn't happened overnight. He should view the Worlds as just another event and shouldn't view the athletes as better than him." Despite his achievements, Animesh has had to endure a fair share of setbacks this year. The Asian Championships ended in a damp squib for the 4x100m relay team after it was disqualified in the heats following a botched baton exchange.

"We had the relay medal in our hands and let it go. *Hum bas Gumi ghoomke aagaye bas* (We just went around Gumi and returned)," Manikanta joked.

Despite the amusement in hindsight, Hillier said the episode had a negative impact on the athletes, who were hoping to win their first continental medal. He was also miffed at the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) after Animesh and Gurindervir weren't chosen to run in the heats.

"It was tough on all of us. We put together a winning team that had good chemistry, but ultimately some decisions were taken which were beyond our control. I felt for these guys because this was an opportunity to get a medal," he said.

"Manikanta and Gurindervir had qualified for the individual 100m, but they weren't allowed to participate either. The selection policy wasn't followed, and this plays with athletes' minds. Manikanta really struggled in

Europe [after the Asian Championships] because of the mental toll. Gurindervir too lost form ahead of the University Games and was forced to sit out," Hillier added.

Hillier said he has pointed out several areas of discomfort preventing elite athletes from performing at their best. Most remain unaddressed. One such problem has been the daunting schedules during national events, which do not take into account recovery time. "Manikanta had three races on the same day [at the Inter-State]. First at 7:30 am, and then back by 5:30 pm for the semifinal and then the final. How can you expect an athlete to perform?" he asked.

Martin Owens, Head Coach at the Odisha Reliance Foundation High Performance Centre, under whom Animesh trains, highlighted the lack of clarity in turning national events into trials for major competitions. "Most federations lay down the qualifying criteria at the beginning of the year. Part of the problem here is that they're playing it on the fly all the time. There's always a meet to qualify for a meet, and a trial to qualify for another trial," he said.

Hillier also called out the lack of consistency in decision-making after rules were bent to allow lower-level athletes into the Inter-State roster. He expressed dismay at elite athletes having to run three rounds at national events due to the bloated participant list, which could result in overuse injuries.

"Athletes must be put first. In India, I see knee, thigh and hip flexor injuries. You don't get these injuries in athletics. There are too many high-intensity races to be able to sustain yourself," he added. Owens echoed Hillier's thoughts. He suggested that a preliminary round be held, as in the Worlds and Olympics, before ranked athletes enter. "I'm not saying all championships should just be geared to the elite and that lower-level shouldn't compete against the elite. Only when they do will they get inspired. But at the same time elite athletes shouldn't suffer," Owens said.

A major reason for the improvement of the short-distance runners has been the constant competition among themselves. Both coaches believe athlete-friendly events and a closely competitive talent pool will be key in helping athletes climb up the ladder. "Success breeds success. Once somebody breaks the record, the other person says, 'Why can't I do it?' That's the culture we need. Then the sub-10s, sub-20s and sub-45s will happen," Hillier said.

"Everyone needs to speak the same language — the coaches, the media, the federation. That's how we're going to make this happen," he added.

Start young, start right

Indian athletics' significant step forward over the last decade has been restricted to improving the performances of the country's top athletes rather than identifying more talent, reckoned Owens.

Neeraj Chopra's unprecedented international success has set the stage for greater interest in javelin throw. But role models alone cannot spur an athletics revolution, he said.

"There are plenty of competitions in India at the top end, but not enough at the grassroots. Kids need to compete," Owens said.

"It doesn't have to be electronic timing or synthetic tracks. It can just be in a field. We see plenty of kids play cricket but not everybody plays at Chepauk, do they? You need kids who want to get out there and be the next Manikanta Hoblidhar, Animesh Kujur or Tamil Arasu," he added.

Hillier also echoed Owens' sentiments, adding that "talent needs to find the system and not the other way round."

"There is an obsession with trying to find a story. 'We went to a village, where there's a six-year-old throwing a stick, and 20 years later he becomes another Neeraj.' It never works like that. You run competitions everywhere. That's your talent ID," he said.

"We are not teaching people the right things. You've got to teach movement skills, and then, by default, people will stick their heads up and say, 'I'm talented,'" Hillier added.

Owens and Hillier also bemoaned the lack of women's participation in athletics.

"Many athletes like Jyoti [Yarraji] and Rupal [Chaudhury] have been successful in spite of the system. These athletes had everything against them, yet somehow survived," Hillier said.

"It is very depressing that there are so many straight finals in the women's events. You cannot tell me that a population of 1.4 billion are all men. We need to encourage girls and women to do the sport, and that is vitally important," Owens remarked.

The coaches also cautioned against pushing young athletes too early into specialisation. Hillier explained a proposal he had put forward during his UK Athletics stint — a three-sport model for kids between seven and 13, where 50 per cent of the time is dedicated to athletics, followed by a two-sport model between 13 and 18.

The craving for early success is another issue plaguing the grassroots. Coaches are being judged on medals rather than on the improvement they bring about in athletes.

"Development coaches must be rewarded for getting athletes to move better. Instead, they're rewarded for medals. You don't have to be a high achiever at 16 or 17. Studies show there needs to be some exposure at 13, but things don't really start happening until the 20s," Hillier said.

Plenty to ponder before the final push

As Formula One's summer break ends, several **sub-plots** are set to keep fans hooked through the final half of the season.

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The 2025 Formula One season saw 14 action-packed races leading into a well-deserved four-week summer break – the perfect reset for drivers and teams before the final 10 rounds of high-octane action.

As the second half fast approaches, there will be plenty to look forward to – from an intra-team championship fight and a midfield tussle, to looming questions over driver futures and much more.

McLaren's two-horse race

McLaren's revival has been steadily building for years, and last season it finally bore fruit with a long-awaited constructors' championship. Now, the focus shifts to the drivers' crown, a title the team has not claimed since Lewis Hamilton's triumph in 2008. That pursuit, however, brings its own dilemma: both its drivers, Lando Norris (front) and Oscar Piastri (back), are in a fierce duel for the crown.

Norris, the team's homegrown star, has come through ironing out past inconsistencies to keep himself within range of his teammate and rival. The Australian, who holds the championship lead, has showcased his prowess and a rare level of precision. Their battle reflects McLaren's dominance but also poses the classic test of intra-team rivalry: how to let both drivers flourish without fracturing unity. The question may shift from whether the team can deliver a champion to which of its two young stars will seize the moment.

REUTERS

Red Bull beyond Max Verstappen

Max Verstappen will remain in the Red Bull garage for 2026 — but for how much longer? The Milton Keynes-based outfit has already endured a wave of departures, including design mastermind Adrian Newey and long-serving team principal Christian Horner, among others. The reshuffle marks a new era for the team, yet it is the near future that raises the most pressing questions.

On track, reliability has been a persistent obstacle, undermining Verstappen's bid for a fifth successive title. He has produced two extraordinary victories, but the reigning champion has fallen adrift of the McLaren pair. Compounding matters, Yuki Tsunoda has yet to make a convincing case for promotion, leaving Red Bull without an able partner for Verstappen — let alone a clear successor. The Japanese driver will need to maximise his last 10 races to keep his seat safe. But the absence of a leader could become the team's greatest challenge.

GETTY IMAGES

Can Hamilton and Ferrari take off?

Ferrari remains stuck in the role of the relentless scrapper – fast enough to threaten, too flawed to dominate. The team is still racing uphill in 2025, despite boasting a line-up that includes seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton. The 40-year-old is yet to secure a podium for the Prancing Horse after 14 races, a frustrating run that boiled over before the summer break when he remarked: "The team has no problem. They probably need to change driver."

Ferrari, last year's runner-up in the constructors' standings, is once again holding second place, but McLaren has more than double its points. The second half of the season will be decisive, not just for the team's points haul, but for Hamilton as well. He will have to salvage something from a faltering debut year in red, giving himself the chance to reset and launch a fresh campaign for 2026.

GETTY IMAGES

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Rookie revelation

This season has ushered in a wave of rookies, with six drivers starting their first full campaign and one mid-season replacement. Mercedes' Kimi Antonelli **(left)** leads the rookie standings; despite a podium finish, consistency has slipped, but he remains one of the grid's brightest prospects. Racing Bulls' Isak Hadjar has impressed by regularly dragging the car into the qualifying top 10, which could soon earn him a senior-team call-up. His teammate, Liam Lawson, has found the RB better suited, scoring his first points this season.

F2 champion Gabriel Bortoleto has shown flashes of speed at Kick Sauber, including a sixth-place finish, a result that signalled his potential. Haas rookie Oliver Bearman opened his account early but has since faced tougher weekends. At Alpine, Jack Doohan was replaced by Franco Colapinto, yet neither managed to find rhythm. With a handful of races left, the rookie class faces its chance to prove who truly belongs.

Strategic juggle

Ahead of the 2025 season, much of the debate centred on whether teams should prioritise ironing out flaws in their current cars or shift resources towards the sweeping regulation changes of 2026. Yet, with the dynamic midfield and form swinging from weekend to weekend, every point haul and position carries added weight. Additionally, the arrival of an 11th team, Cadillac, in 2026 will further complicate the landscape.

For the chasing pack, momentum now matters as much as development in the bid to finalise seats for the future. The fight to be 'best of the rest' will intensify, while adapting to a 22-car grid will present a fresh challenge for all.

MotoGP

Unstoppable Marc Marquez

It has been a fairytale season for Ducati's Marc Marquez, who has been in a league of his own in the 2025 MotoGP season.

At the Austrian GP, the 1000th premier-class race in the sport's history, the Spaniard claimed his sixth consecutive sprint-race win. He followed it up with a stunning double victory at the Balton Park Circuit — the first Hungarian GP in 33 years — for his seventh win on the trot.

The double-header delight meant the six-time champion made it seven sprint-race wins in a row, stretching his championship lead to a commanding 175 points with only a handful of rounds to go.

REUTERS

Vincent finds the key to future greatness

With his title win at the Chennai Grand Masters 2025, at the same venue where Carlsen assumed his throne over a decade ago, Keymer has lined up the pieces for a parallel that **may not be too hard to trace.**

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German Grandmaster Vincent Keymer remembers following the 2013 World Chess Championship final as an eight-year-old. In that landmark clash, Magnus Carlsen dethroned reigning champion Viswanathan Anand to claim his first world title. "It really stuck with me as a memory," Keymer recalls.

Nearly 12 years later, Keymer found himself at the very site of Carlsen's coronation, competing at the Chennai Grand Masters 2025.

"I've been to India a few times. What's special this time is that we are playing in the same hotel [Hyatt Regency] where Vishy and Magnus played," says the 20-year-old, who stormed through the event to win by two points — a surprising margin in a Super GM tournament.

Keymer, who entered the tournament as the third seed, led from start to finish, subduing his opponents with relentless attacking play. He finished his campaign unbeaten, winning five of his nine games.

Dutch GM Anish Giri, joint second in Chennai, felt that freestyle chess has unlocked a more potent version of Keymer, who started the year with a remarkable win at the Weissenhaus Freestyle Grand Slam, where he toppled some of the world's best, including Carlsen.

"Freestyle will probably be remembered as the thing that turned Vincent into a monster. Because I feel he has realised that he was always very reliant on openings.

"So, in freestyle, he must have discovered that even without openings, he's very good. He now plays very differently and is no longer predictable. He won a lot of games with Black here," said Giri. Keymer's Chennai exploits earned him over 20 rating points, taking him into the world's top 10 (live rating) for the first time in his young career.

While he cruised to what he considers as his biggest win in a classical event, the Indian contingent mostly struggled to cope.

Top seed Arjun Erigaisi fell away after a strong start, hampered partly by an illness midway through the tournament. Nihal Sarin and Vidit Gujrathi showed glimpses of brilliance but lacked consistency.

Karthikeyan Murali, however, provided a silver lining. Drafted in as a last-minute replacement, the 26-year-old battled hard to finish joint second — with only Keymer managing to beat him.

"I think Karthikeyan was excellent. He showed a lot of ambition despite being thrust into the Masters section at the last minute. It was a very noteworthy performance," said Indian GM Srinath Narayanan, the tournament director.

For Srinath, Karthikeyan's performance underlined the central objective of the event.

"The fabric of the tournament is to provide an opportunity for those who wouldn't otherwise get it, and to be a stepping stone to much higher

Keymer's Chennai exploits earned him over 20 rating points, taking him into the world's top 10 (live rating) for the first time in his young career.

Rock solid: The 20-year-old Keymer won the tournament in dominant fashion. B. VELANKANNI RAJ

levels. We wanted to make a difference in the careers of certain players and provide that missing opportunity," he explained.

Satisfied with how the third edition unfolded, the 31-year-old suggested a desire to see the tournament get bigger in the future.

"I think we have improved on several aspects from the previous year. And similarly, we want to keep improving in every area — the field and playing hall, the spectator, media and broadcast experiences, every small and major thing. We want to keep making it better," he said.

One obvious way to scale up is to attract even bigger names, suggests leading Indian coach RB Ramesh.

"This tournament is already very good from the Indian perspective. Maybe the next step is to have mostly foreign players — like Magnus, Hikaru [Nakamura]. Out of ten, seven would be such players, and the rest, Indians. Even this time, if [R] Praggnanandhaa, [D] Gukesh, Arvind [Chidambaram] had played, it would have been amazing," said Ramesh.

Srinath confirmed that this is something they are considering for the next edition, while asserting that the present balance will be preserved.

"We will try to schedule it much earlier next year so that we get better player availability. [But] There is no intention to reduce the number of Indian players. We usually have four Indians and six foreigners, and we are definitely not reducing it to fewer than four. But we will try to have a stronger field," added Srinath.

In tune with its expansion plans, the Chennai Grand Masters 2025 drew a riveting response from local fans. Across the nine-day event, the commentary and viewing area was packed, with young, aspiring players eagerly engaging with commentators and participants, discussing moves and complex positions.

After each round, the Grandmasters were greeted with long serpentine queues of supporters waiting for autographs and photos.

As expected, Keymer was the star attraction in the fan zone. His allure only grew as the tournament progressed, as he enthralled everyone with a quality of chess that whispered world champion potential.

Back in 2023, Gukesh banked heavily on a win here at the inaugural edition of the Chennai Grand Masters to qualify for the Candidates. He would then go on to win the World Championship — with Keymer among his seconds.

Now, by winning the 2025 title at the same venue where Carlsen first assumed the throne, Keymer has lined up the pieces for a parallel that may not be too hard to trace.

Reversal of mates

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Reciprocal change of mates is a basic but ever appealing pattern theme which shows reversal of mates after two black defences from set or try play to post key. Hundreds of highly original two-movers featuring this theme have been composed over the past six decades but yet innovative composers use complex matrices to ring original changes. It is amazing that many of the problems on this theme still find their way into FIDE Albums, which is an authentic compilation of world's best chess compositions.In this article I present three Reciprocal changes from the latest FIDE Album. The first one by the World's best two-move composer at present, is a rare example featuring castling key.

Marjan Kovacevic
First prize, Igalo 2013

Mate in two

In the diagram position mates are set as 1...Qxa6 2.Qd4 **A**;1...Qxf4 2.Qe5 **B** The key **1.0-0-0!** with threat 2.Re1 forces the black defences 1...Qxa6 2.Qe5; **B** 1...Qxf4 2.Qd4 **A.** The castling key loses control of e2,f2 but gains guard of d3,d4 to effect the mate reversal.

Evgeni Bourd
2nd Prize,106 TT SuperProblem 2014

Mate in two

After try 1.Bd5? the threat is 2.Qc6 1...Nxd7 2.Rxe6 **A**;1...Nxd5 2.Nf5 **B** **Key 1.Ne5**!(2.Qb8) 1....Nd7 2.Nf5 **B** 1...Nd5 2.Rxe6 **A** This talented Israeli composer adds a nice touch by bringing back the threats as mates apart from the reversal of mates.After key 1....Bxc6 2.Qxc6 and after try 1.Bd5? 1...Bxd7 2.Qb8.

Finally one more Marjan's marvel, this time in Meredith, for solving.

Marjan Kovacevic
I prize, Uralski Problemist AT 20,2013

Mate in two

Solution to problem for solving in the article' on problem economy'

Key 1.Bxf7! zugzwang 1...c6 2.Bxd6;1...Rc6 2.Nb6;1...Bc6 2.Qa7; 1...Be6 2.h8Q;1....Re6 2.Nxf5.

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

INSTAGRAM: @ROUNAK_CHOUHAN27

Rounak Chouhan retains title

Top seed Rounak Chouhan edged out Gnana Dattu in a three-game final to retain his men's singles crown at the Kotak India Junior International Series in Hyderabad. After dropping the opening game 15-21, Rounak showed tremendous grit as he bounced back strongly to take the next two, completing a 15-21, 21-13, 21-13 win and repeating his title-winning run from last year.

In women's singles, third seed Shriyanshi Valishetty produced a dominant display to outclass Aikya Shetty 21-12, 21-8 and clinch the championship.

The men's doubles final delivered one of the day's biggest upsets, as the unseeded pair of Niranjaan G. Nandakumar and Yudhajith Reddy Padigepati prevailed over top seeds Bhavya Chhabra and C. Lalramsanga 21-17, 14-21, 23-21.

In women's doubles, Deepak Raj Aditi and Ponnamma B. V. Vriddhi defeated Keerthy Manchala and Varna Prabu Anand 21-13, 21-17 at the Kotak Pullela Gopichand Badminton Academy.

Vansh Dev and Shravani Walekar overcame the seeded duo of Mithileish P. Krishnan and Varna Prabu Anand 19-21, 21-16, 21-15 to win the mixed doubles crown.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

SPORTOON

1 The Inspire Institute of Sports (IIS) has stationed eight young judokas — boys and girls, mostly in the 18–20 age group — in Akhmeta, Georgia, for long-term high-performance training under head coach Mamuka Kizilashvili. The squad — Leishangthem Chanu, Linthoi Chanambam, Ishroop Narang, Yamini Mourya, Aditya Solanki, Arun Kumar, Sidharth Rawat, and Ningthoujam Sheetal Singh — is gaining exposure to a varied pool of training partners and opponents through regular club competitions. In addition, they will compete in international events from time to time.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 Arvind Iyer was crowned champion of the All India Chess Masters Mumbai FIDE Classical Tournament after he edged out Darsh Shetty in a strong competition. Arvind and Darsh finished with seven points each but the former won the championship on super Buchholz tie-breaks. International Master Vikramaditya Kulkarni finished third with 6.5 points. In women's category, Woman Candidate Master Kriti Mayur Patel was adjudged as the Best Player, followed by Reya Banker and Pradeepa Jayapal who took the second and third place respectively.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Smart success: In sport, every small edge matters. Getting nutrition right is not about more powders or expensive supplements. It is understanding the body, measuring needs, and building a plan. GETTY IMAGES

The energy equation every athlete must master

Protein is important, but it is not the magic solution. **Calories come first.** Without meeting calorie needs, protein cannot do its job. The real foundation is energy balance.

When I talk to athletes, whether they are cricketers, footballers, runners, weightlifters or swimmers, the first question they ask is almost always about protein. Everyone wants to know how many scoops of powder to take, how much chicken to eat, or whether they need another shake after training.

Protein has become the star of sports nutrition conversations. But in this loud talk about protein, one big factor is often ignored: calories.

Take this for example: a 65–70 kilo fighter who trains three times a day may need around 3,800 calories daily. If 20 per cent of that is protein, it works out to about 200 grams. That already crosses the recommended two grams per kilo of body weight. Yet many athletes still keep asking if they need more supplements.

The real question should be: are they eating enough total calories to match their training load?

Calories are the energy the body runs on. Without enough fuel, recovery slows, strength does not improve, and performance suffers.

If calorie intake is too low, even the protein that's eaten may get burned for energy instead of repairing muscles.

That is why any good sports nutrition plan begins with calories first, not protein.

To know calorie needs, we begin with something called Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR). This is the energy the body needs at rest for basic functions such as breathing, circulation and digestion.

On top of that, we add the energy cost of training and daily activity. This gives us the Total Energy Expenditure (TEE). Only when we know this number can we plan how much an athlete must eat every day.

Measuring energy needs

There are simple equations that give an estimate of BMR using age, weight and height. But serious athletes need more than guesswork. Advanced methods like indirect calorimetry measure oxygen and carbon dioxide while breathing to give accurate energy use.

Fitness trackers and smart wearables can track activity and help estimate calorie burn during training. Even something as basic as daily weighing, combined with a food diary, can show whether an athlete is under-eating or over-eating.

Each athlete is different. Genetics, training intensity and even mental stress change energy needs. That is why copy-pasting numbers from the internet or from another athlete does not work.

Getting this wrong can mean entering a match, a race or a training session tired and flat. Getting it right can mean stepping onto the field, court or track fully charged and ready.

The protein paradox

Once calories are sorted, protein comes next. Here is the paradox. In normal training, most athletes already eat more than enough protein from their regular diet. Eggs, chicken, fish, *daal*, *paneer* and milk add up quickly. When you are eating 3,800 calories, it is very easy to touch or cross 200 grams of protein without supplements. In such cases, powders are often unnecessary.

But during weight cuts, the story changes. When an athlete must drop weight before competition, calories from carbohydrates and fats are reduced. Protein intake is kept high to protect muscle. This phase is tricky. Reduce calories too much and energy drops. Cut protein and muscle is lost. The balance lies in dropping carbs and fats carefully while holding protein steady. This helps the athlete reach the right weight without losing strength.

Why a nutritionist is essential

This is why every serious athlete should work with a sports nutritionist. Nutrition is not about one fixed rule. It has to change with the training phase, competition schedule and the body's response. A nutritionist does not just look at protein but builds the whole equation: total calories, macronutrient split, hydration and recovery.

Think of it like game strategy. A cricket team does not play T20 the same way as in a Test match. A football team defends differently when leading and attacks differently when chasing. Nutrition is the same. In heavy training phases, the plan is to eat more calories for recovery. In weight-cut phases, the plan is to reduce calories but still protect muscle. Both depend on knowing the metabolism of the athlete.

So, it is time athletes in India asked better questions. Protein is important, but it is not the magic solution. Calories come first. Without meeting calorie needs, protein cannot do its job. The real foundation is energy balance. Once that is set, protein, carbohydrates and fats fall into place. So the next time you think about your diet, do not just ask — "Am I getting enough protein?" Also ask — "Am I eating enough calories for my training?" That one shift in mindset can change performance, recovery and even career longevity.

In sport, every small edge matters. Getting nutrition right is not about more powders or expensive supplements. It is understanding the body, measuring needs, and building a plan. As I remind every athlete I work with, victory does not start only on the pitch, court or track. It starts at the dining table, with calories first, protein second, and balance always.

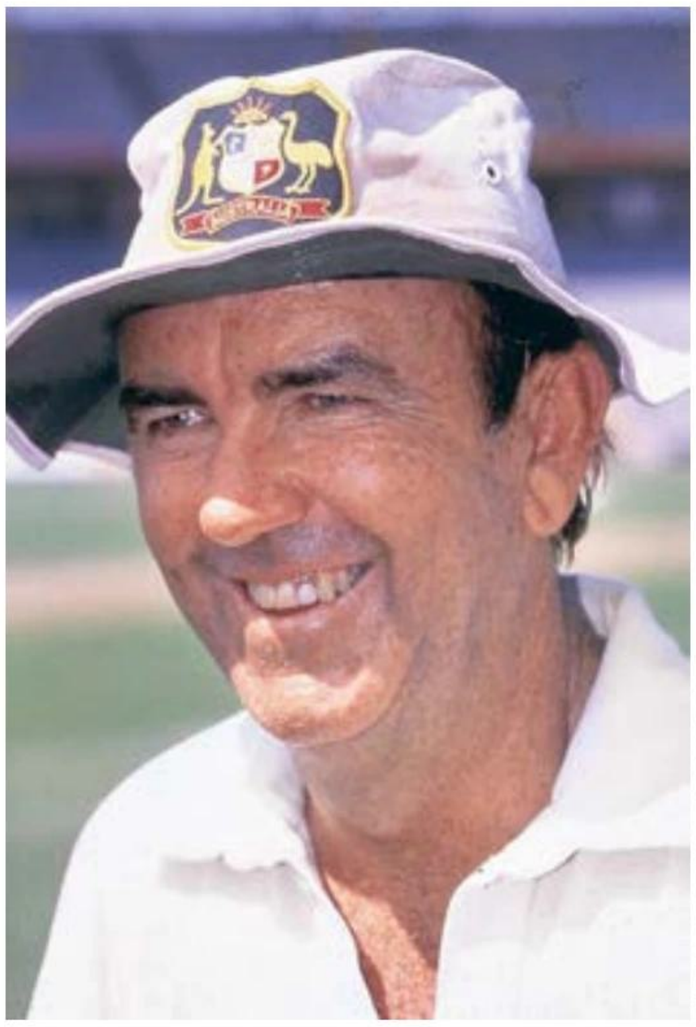
Mr. Cricket

Bobby Simpson played nearly every role in the game from player to administrator, missing out only on umpiring. He made his **First-Class debut at 16,** and for six decades was involved in the game in some capacity.

Suresh Menon

Over a career, one makes friends or enemies of those one writes about. Some remain in one of those categories lifelong, others move from one to the other. Some forget quickly, others maintain a lasting grudge. This is the nature of the profession, perhaps of human behaviour itself. Occasionally you inherit a rancour directed at someone else.

This is what happened with the late Bob Simpson, a boyhood hero I first met during the tied Test in Chennai. As soon as the match ended, I rushed to meet him for his unique take as the only man to have witnessed the only two tied Tests in history. In Brisbane in 1960-61, against the West Indies, he had made 92 before being bowled by Sonny Ramadhin. He also dismissed Joe Solomon twice with his leg-breaks.



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Over a quarter century later, Simpson was Australia's coach in Chennai, and may or may not have influenced skipper Alan Border to declare the score at the overnight 170 for five, setting India 348 to win on the final day. A colleague wrote that Simpson had indeed influenced Border — but for some reason, Simpson, the man who plotted the revival of Australian cricket from that period, was upset at this.

He told me so many years later in England, where he was now the consultant of the Indian team at the World Cup. I was reporting, and went up to him to say hello. I don't want to speak to you he said, because your newspaper said I had asked Border to declare in Chennai.

Two things impressed me. His memory for what was a minor incident, and his lack of humour. I wasn't surprised to read an Aussie obituary (by Gideon Haigh) which said "there aren't any funny stories about Simmo, leathery, insouciant and unregretful; he was a *hard* man."

That is an important lesson for Indian coaches who know which side their BCCI bread is buttered, and say 'yes' to their masters with as much vehemence as they say 'No' to anybody unlikely to advance their careers. But there are more important lessons from Simpson who was Mr. Cricket, playing nearly every role in the game from player to administrator, missing out only on umpiring. He made his First-Class debut at 16, and for six decades was involved in the game in some capacity.

When Australia lost players to Kerry Packer, he was a 41-year-old knight in shining armour, leading them to a win over India and scoring two centuries. When Australia went without a win in three years, he put on his armour again, now as coach and transformed a young side which went on to win the World Cup in 1987 and the Ashes two years later.

At the World Cup, he emphasised the importance of taking singles; common sense was his guide. Regarding the Chennai declaration, I never worked out whether he didn't want to claim credit for something he didn't do, or the blame for something that he did.

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HIV Infection Can Be Prevented

Say No to Drugs. Sharing needles among injecting drug users may transmit HIV.

Receive blood from registered Blood Centres only.

Donate blood regularly. Any healthy person can donate blood once in every 3 months from the age of 18 years.

Avoid unprotected sex. Use condoms correctly and consistently.

Get tested early – for free - visit ICTC
Get treated Early - For Free - visit ART centre
Continue ART - Get virally suppressed.

AIDS Helpline 1097
जानें समझें, जुग-जुग जीयें!

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