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OFF-SIDE

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A FORTRESS TESTED BY ITS OWN FOUNDATIONS

After New Zealand and South Africa **exposed the very home conditions** India thought it controlled, even that old certainty feels less secure.

India's cricketing identity has long rested on the shoulders of spin. Long before analytics and matchups entered dressing rooms, the quartet of Bishan Singh Bedi, Bhagwat Chandrasekhar, Erapalli Prasanna and S. Venkataraghavan shaped how India utilised home advantage. Between them, they claimed 468 Test wickets in India, delivering 14 wins across 51 home Tests in which at least one featured. Their craft defined a philosophy, creating a template for how India would win in its own conditions.

When India returned battered from Australia and South Africa in the early 1990s, Mohammad Azharuddin and Ajit Wadekar went back to that blueprint. A young Anil Kumble, Venkatapathy Raju and Rajesh Chauhan became the new axis of control as India dismantled Graham Gooch's England in 1992-93. India swept the series 3-0, with the trio taking 46 wickets.

Even as India developed a generation of dependable fast bowlers — Javagal Srinath, Venkatesh Prasad, Zaheer Khan, Ishant Sharma, S. Sreesanth — the core template remained constant. The 2001 Kolkata heist against Steve Waugh's Australia was not only about VVS Laxman and Rahul Dravid rewriting a follow-on; it was equally shaped by a teenage Harbhajan Singh, who picked 13 wickets, including a hat trick.

Between 1998 and 2008, the Kumble-Harbhajan partnership formed the backbone of India's home dominance, combining for 356 wickets in 34 home Tests that produced 14 wins. When the baton passed to R. Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja, the numbers became even more emphatic. Over 49 home Tests, they claimed 515 wickets and powered 35 victories, forming the most destructive partnership Indian cricket has produced.

From 1990 to 2024 (before the home series against Bangladesh), India turned home advantage into a fortress, winning 87 of 144 Tests. But since Gautam Gambhir took over, India has won four and lost four home Tests — a sharp departure from the stability of his predecessors. Kumble (10 wins, one loss in 13), Ravi Shastri (13-1-17) and Dravid (8-2-11) all maintained India's long-term dominance on familiar soil.

India has now been outspun twice in quick succession, first by New Zealand and then by South Africa. At Eden Gardens, a venue that usually offers a fair contest between bat and ball, the pitch broke up on Day 1, throwing up dust like a forgotten paperback pulled off a shelf. India mustered 282 runs across two innings and lost 12 of 18 wickets to spinners. Gambhir insisted India "got the wicket we wanted".

This overcorrection can be traced back to Delhi earlier in the season, where India's spinners struggled for long periods to bowl out West Indies on a flatter Kotla surface. In an era where World Test Championship points have made results paramount, stripping away the charm of a hard-fought draw, that inability to finish the job would have stayed with the team management.

The deeper concern, though, lies not with turn but with temperament. India's former No. 3s — Dravid (5598 runs, 13,207 balls in India), Laxman (3767 in 7710), Ajinkya Rahane (1644 in 3354), Cheteshwar Pujara (3839 in 7775) — were sculpted on challenging Ranji Trophy pitches, where technique is shaped over hours, not overs. Today's emerging batters — Sai Sudharsan (133 in 260 balls), Devdutt Padikkal (65 in 103), Washington Sundar (339 in 645), Karun Nair (374 in 506) — have barely faced the volume of balls that builds endurance.

Yet this generation is being thrust onto manufactured turners they were never trained for. The underlying arrogance of mistaking IPL adaptability for Test-match readiness has left India's batters caught between formats. Runs on 20-over surfaces do not translate into fourth-innings resilience.

At the Ranji Trophy level, we demand sporting surfaces from State associations and insist batters earn their runs. Yet at the highest level, India increasingly serves up undercooked wickets that reflect neither the domestic ladder nor the team's present skill set.

Which makes the question unavoidable: if your batters are no longer built for this, why insist on preparing exactly the pitches they are least prepared for?

Spin has always been India's ally. But overplaying the hand and misreading the moment is not strategy. It is a self-inflicted defeat.

Odisha: India's Emerging Global Sports Destination

Once known primarily for hockey, Odisha is evolving into a dynamic multi-sport hub, where world-class facilities, international competitions, and grassroots development converge to create a sustainable sporting ecosystem. The year 2025 has been one of remarkable milestones for Odisha's sporting calendar. The state hosted India's first-ever World Athletics Continental Tour Bronze 2025 at the Kalinga Stadium, drawing over 200 athletes from 19 countries. Adding to that momentum, the 28th ITTF-ATTU Asian Table Tennis Team Championships 2025 brought continental-level action indoors, with world champions and top paddlers from Asia competing in Bhubaneswar. The successful execution of back-to-back international meets reflected the state's growing expertise in hosting complex, multi-nation events.

Alongside global events, Odisha played host to several prestigious national tournaments this year. The 40th National Junior Athletics Championships 2025 saw the country's brightest young track and field talents competing at the Kalinga Stadium a vital platform for India's next generation of athletes. The All India Senior National Ranking Badminton Tournament drew top Indian shuttlers. The courts of Bhubaneswar buzzed with energy as national stars and rising players battled for ranking points and recognition. Meanwhile, the 78th Senior National Aquatic Championship 2025 transformed the state's world-class swimming facilities into a vibrant arena for competition with representation from all major swimming federations and aquatic disciplines. In Football, Kalinga Super Cup 2025 and ISL 2024-25 added consistency to the sporting calendar.

Looking ahead, Odisha's sports journey continues with renewed enthusiasm. The state will soon host the Odisha Masters 2025. (December 9–14, 2025), a marquee event on the BWF World Tour. Come 2026, Odisha will see the return of the Hockey India League and FIH Pro League which promises to reignite the passion of hockey fans across Bhubaneswar and Rourkela. Further, AFI has announced that India's first National Indoor Athletics Championships will be held at Kalinga Stadium in 2026, a quiet but significant addition to Odisha's growing sports story.

As the world turns its gaze toward the eastern coast of India, one truth stands out; Odisha isn't just hosting sport; it's building the future of Indian sport, one event at a time.

Rich haul for Indians at Asian Archery Championships

Paris Olympics archers B. Dhiraj and Ankita Bhakat **(pic above)** became the first Indian male and female recurve archers to win individual titles at the Asian Archery Championships.

Ankita stunned Korea's Paris Olympic silver-medallist Nam Suhyeon 7-3, while Dhiraj beat compatriot Rahul 6-2 in the final to claim gold.

In the recurve men's team event, Yashdeep Bhoge, Atanu Das and Rahul edged Korea's Seo Mingi, Kim Yechan and Jang Jiho in a shoot-off for a 5-4 win. The Indian contingent finished with 10 medals across recurve and compound events to top the standings.

« This isn't an AI simulation. This is Judgment Day – a professional heavyweight fight against an elite world champion in his prime. – YouTuber-turned boxer Jake Paul, who is set to fight former unified heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua on December 19 in Miami »

« This year, making four Grand Slam finals, coming here and winning, having this big streak at the end of the year, it's amazing. – Jannik Sinner said after beating Carlos Alcaraz to retain the ATP Finals title »

2:07.41

Less than a month after her 13th birthday, Chinese swimming sensation Yu Zidi claimed her first Asian record at the National Games in Shenzhen, winning the 200m individual medley. Her time of 2:07.41 bettered the Asian mark held by compatriot Ye Shiwen, who won the 2012 Olympic gold in 2:07.57 at age 16. Yu finished nearly a second ahead of 20-year-old runner-up Yu Yiting, the 2022 Asian Games champion. Only eight swimmers have ever gone faster in the event, led by Canadian Summer McIntosh, the current world record holder at 2:05.70.

88

Lenny Wilkens, a three-time inductee into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame and the second-to-last man to serve as a player-coach in the NBA, has died at 88. Widely regarded as one of the finest players and coaches in league history, Wilkens was a nine-time All-Star across 15 seasons. He entered the Hall of Fame as a player in 1989 and as a coach in 1998. He had coached Team USA to gold at the 1996 Atlanta Games.

RACE TO DUBAI

Rory McIlroy lost the week-long USD 10 million DP World Tour Championship in a playoff against Matt Fitzpatrick, but did enough to ensure he was crowned the winner of the season-long Race to Dubai title. "It's absolutely incredible. I knew I still had a bit of work to do to get over the line in the Race to Dubai," said McIlroy, who will remain World No. 2. McIlroy topped the European tour's season-ending rankings for a seventh time, and for the fourth season in a row. He broke a tie with Severiano Ballesteros and is one behind Colin Montgomerie, who achieved the feat eight times. AP

Making a mockery of weight classes

Islam Makhachev walked into the welterweight division without hesitation and spent five rounds showing why size matters far less than **timing, balance and intent.**

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UFC 322 was defined by dominant grappling performances in the championship bouts and electrifying knockouts across the main card. Islam Makhachev's move from lightweight to welterweight proved successful, while Valentina Shevchenko cemented her technical brilliance by defending her flyweight belt for the second time this year.

The main event showcased a clear tactical masterclass by the challenger, Makhachev, against reigning champion Jack Della Maddalena.

Makhachev's strategy was simple yet effective: negate Della Maddalena's dangerous boxing by immediately closing the distance and leaning on superior wrestling. The defining factor was the timing of his takedowns. Makhachev consistently initiated grappling exchanges before the champion, a pure striker, could establish his range or build any offensive rhythm.

Once on the canvas, Makhachev's top control and positional awareness were flawless. He demonstrated the Dagestani style of riding his opponent, denying Della Maddalena any room to create scrambles or attempt to stand. He mixed in ground and pound to maintain control and keep chipping away, resulting in a blowout on the scorecards (50-45 across the board).

Makhachev's dominance in the grappling exchanges nullified any lingering questions about his ability to transition and maintain control at 170 pounds.

Still the champ

The co-main event was a textbook display of technical brilliance by champion Shevchenko.

Shevchenko's game plan focused on mixing her disciplines to keep the aggressive Zhang Weili guessing. In the striking exchanges, "Bullet" used range control and counterstriking, tagging Zhang from the outside. The critical turning point in each round came

Dominant ascent: Islam Makhachev soaks in the moment after dismantling Jack Della Maddalena to claim the UFC welterweight crown at Madison Square Garden, a performance that underlined his seamless rise across weight classes. GETTY IMAGES

Controlled precision: Valentina Shevchenko (R) catches Zhang Weili with a sharp kick during their UFC 322 title clash at Madison Square Garden. GETTY IMAGES

through well-timed takedowns that shifted the fight to the mat. Once there, Shevchenko relied on her superior strength and technique to smother Zhang with top control.

Her ability to blend Muay Thai striking with judo and grappling meant Zhang could never commit to a single discipline. By consistently winning the grappling exchanges and maintaining top position for long stretches, Shevchenko neutralised Zhang's power and cruised to a dominant unanimous decision (50-45).

Breakout performance

This was arguably the most shocking and compelling finish on the card. Carlos Prates' knockout of the former champion was built on equal parts mental warfare and pinpoint accuracy.

In the first round, Leon Edwards employed the right approach. He used grappling to close the distance, ignored Prates' taunts, and controlled the fight against the fence and on the ground.

But in the second round, the Brazilian successfully lured Edwards into a striking battle by targeting his ego and forcing him to trade in the centre of the octagon.

The fight flipped in an instant when Prates' laser-targeted straight left hand found the chin of the former champion, resulting in the first knockout loss of Edwards' career. This finish highlighted Prates' elite striking power and knockout ability, marking a major statement in the welterweight division.

Meanwhile, the main card opened with a blistering knockout by Benoit Saint Denis against Beneil Dariush. The fight was decided in a split-second clinch exchange, where Saint Denis landed a clubbing left hand. The win was a statement of his heavy striking, proving he can end a fight against a top lightweight contender instantly and establishing him as a genuine threat in the 155-pound division.

Did you know?

Makhachev, with the welterweight title win, became the 11th fighter in the UFC to hold belts in multiple weight classes. He is tied with the legendary Anderson Silva for the longest winning streak in UFC history with 16 consecutive victories. His professional MMA record now stands at 28 wins and just 1 loss, a dominant win percentage of 94.4 per cent.

Conor McGregor was the first to achieve this feat when he defeated Jose Aldo to win the featherweight belt.

Amanda Nunes later became the first female fighter to win and hold championship belts in two different weight classes simultaneously (women's bantamweight and women's featherweight).

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

THE GIFT SHE PROMISED, THE GLORY SHE DELIVERED

How a childhood pledge, a lifetime of work and a **moment of redemption** converged in Deepti Sharma's defining World Cup performance.

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Deepti Sharma likes being feared. She relishes the fact that opponents worry when the ball is handed to her, wary not only of her smart off-spin but also of a potential non-striker run-out. She knows the rules of the game and lords over her opponents. A gun fielding arm is a bonus.

Over 11 years of international cricket, the now 28-year-old has amassed an enviable haul of accolades and records. But nothing, not yet at least, compares to her long-awaited triumph in the 2025 Women's ODI World Cup, where she finished as the Player of the Tournament.

It is clichéd to say the weeks since have been a blur for the victorious side, yet that is the reality Deepti is living. She has been home for barely a few days, pulled in every direction for felicitations, ad shoots, bureaucratic meetings, and endorsement deals.

"I've barely had time to process the win. Anyone and everyone is flocking home to meet me, and meetings have come up one after another," she tells *Sportstar* in the middle of an ad shoot that has brought her to Mumbai.

This isn't a new experience for the southpaw. A runner-up finish in the 2017 World Cup brought her exploits to enough people for the Sharma family to struggle for privacy in their home in Agra.

"People were sad we didn't win, but were very happy with how far we went. There was a time when I couldn't step out of the home without someone coming up to me for photographs or autographs for some time," she recalls.

This was a massive change from when neighbours and acquaintances once tried their best to dissuade her parents from considering cricket as a path for their daughter.

"No one ever told me this directly, but many people told my parents that cricket *ladkiyon ka khel nahin hai* (cricket is not a sport for women). They suggested my mom and dad should focus on educating me and getting me married. But my parents never bothered to lend an ear to anything like this. So many of those people are now patting my back and welcoming me after a World Cup win. Things have certainly changed a lot," she says with a big smile.

Adding to the satisfaction is the fact that the road leading to her residence is now named after her, *Arjuna Awardee Cricketer Deepti Sharma Marg.*

Years ago, on this very lane, Deepti's cricketing dreams slowly began sprouting wings.

"When I was in school, there were a couple of friends I used to play gully cricket with. Whenever we got a break, we used to play. On Sundays as well. I would call, and we would all head out to play. It's something I still remember very clearly."

Life took them all in different directions, but many of them were in attendance watching as a 10-kilometre-long roadshow welcomed their old buddy back to the historic city, wishing that they, too, had stuck with something that once seemed to have no future.

Imposter to superstar

It helped that her brother Sumit, who would eventually become the pillar supporting her career, also pursued cricket, even playing the C. K. Nayudu Trophy before moving on to a different profession. He would eventually quit

> « Our next goal is to win an Olympic medal and the T20 World Cup – Deepti Sharma »

Triumph sealed: Deepti Sharma fittingly sealed India's maiden Women's World Cup, claiming the final wicket of Nadine de Klerk.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

that to dedicate his time entirely to Deepti's career, opening an academy along the way.

"If I were the first in my family asking to be allowed to do sport, maybe things would have been very different," she reflects on a choice that was neither financially nor culturally popular back then.

Cricket, at first, meant sneaking into her brother's matches or training sessions before she convinced her father to let her go without resorting to clandestine means.

The story of her sitting on the sidelines at the Eklavya Sports Stadium and then throwing a ball about 50 metres to hit the stumps directly, leading to a chance discovery by India international Hemlata Kala, is now a famous one.

What few know is that the now ruthless Deepti once barely looked anyone in the eye.

A 15-year transformation from a diminutive, soft-spoken boy-cut sporting kid into a sought-after all-rounder on the international stage is something former India cricketer and Uttar Pradesh Cricket Association general manager Rita Dey has witnessed up close.

A medium pacer in her early days, Deepti showed a jerk in her bowling action, prompting Rita to push her towards off-spin, and a willing Deepti agreed immediately.

"This has been the case all through her career. She is not one to say no. She will agree and work on anything the team wants her to do. Open the batting, go down to number eight, open the bowling, field in tough positions, she will do it all. She is an incredibly hard-working and obedient girl," Rita recalls.

"She listened to everyone, her coach, me, her brother. And she would take that and think it over. She would then come back with questions, notes, or follow-ups. She got mature well before she needed to, cricket-wise."

Thirst for redemption

From being desperate to play, Deepti evolved into a triumph-hungry cricketer, with the 2017 World Cup becoming the turning point. Rita was consumed by joy when she saw her protege named in the squad. Consciously or not, she had pinned an unfulfilled desire of her own onto Deepti.

"I couldn't play the 1997 World Cup as my father passed away right before. Through Deepti, it was a chance to not just be a part of it, but we got so close to winning the cup."

Deepti still remembers sitting in the dugout as that final against England, one the Women in Blue would lose by nine runs, unfolded.

"Everything was going well; we had a decent partnership going and in no time, we lost," she reminisces, looking back at a shocking collapse that sent India spiralling from a position of advantage.

"Losing a match like that, so

closely, felt so much worse than a one-sided defeat. The most important thing is that we were all one as a team. We didn't sit and assign blame. Something similar happened during this campaign, too. We were just looking ahead."

Another heartbreak involving Deepti unfolded in the 2022 World Cup, in a must-win league clash against South Africa in Christchurch. Defending six runs in the final over, Deepti overstepped, handing Mignon du Preez a lifeline that eventually helped South Africa secure the win and a place in the semifinal.

The regret consumed her. "I remember, Jhulu di (Jhulan Goswami) and Mithali (Raj) were also playing probably their final game. That made me feel worse that I couldn't see the team through. I can't describe how bad I felt."

Watching such magnificent ODI careers end in a whimper kept her awake for a long time.

"A home World Cup, the occasion was not lost on us this time. We know we might never get a chance to script something as perfectly as this. Four years later, who knows where we will be?"

When the same team stood between India and glory again, Deepti did not miss. She scored a defiant run-a-ball 58 to help India reach 298, then took five wickets, including the prized scalp of Proteas captain and centurion Laura Wolvaardt, to help India finally cross the line in an ICC event.

"Memories of 2022 crossed my mind, but it was important to forget whatever happened before and go again. I was able to do what I missed the last time."

This campaign saw Deepti repeatedly thrown into sticky situations, asked to drag India out of quicksand, a job that came with its share of stumbles. She registered the most expensive bowling figures in a Women's World Cup knockout match when she conceded 73 runs in the semifinal against Australia. Yet nothing fazed her. She had promised her brother that *'is baar jeetke hi ayenge* (will win and come this time)'.

Historic symmetry: Deepti opened her tournament with a fifty and a three-wicket haul, and closed it with a fifty and a five-wicket masterclass, the first time any cricketer in any World Cup final, women's or men's, has done so.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

Everything else could wait.

"I'm not a big thinker," she says, a learned departure from the overthinking teenager she once was.

"I read the situation and play, which is quite difficult because you can't always execute what you want to do every time. When the team wins after you perform as an all-rounder, it's a different feeling."

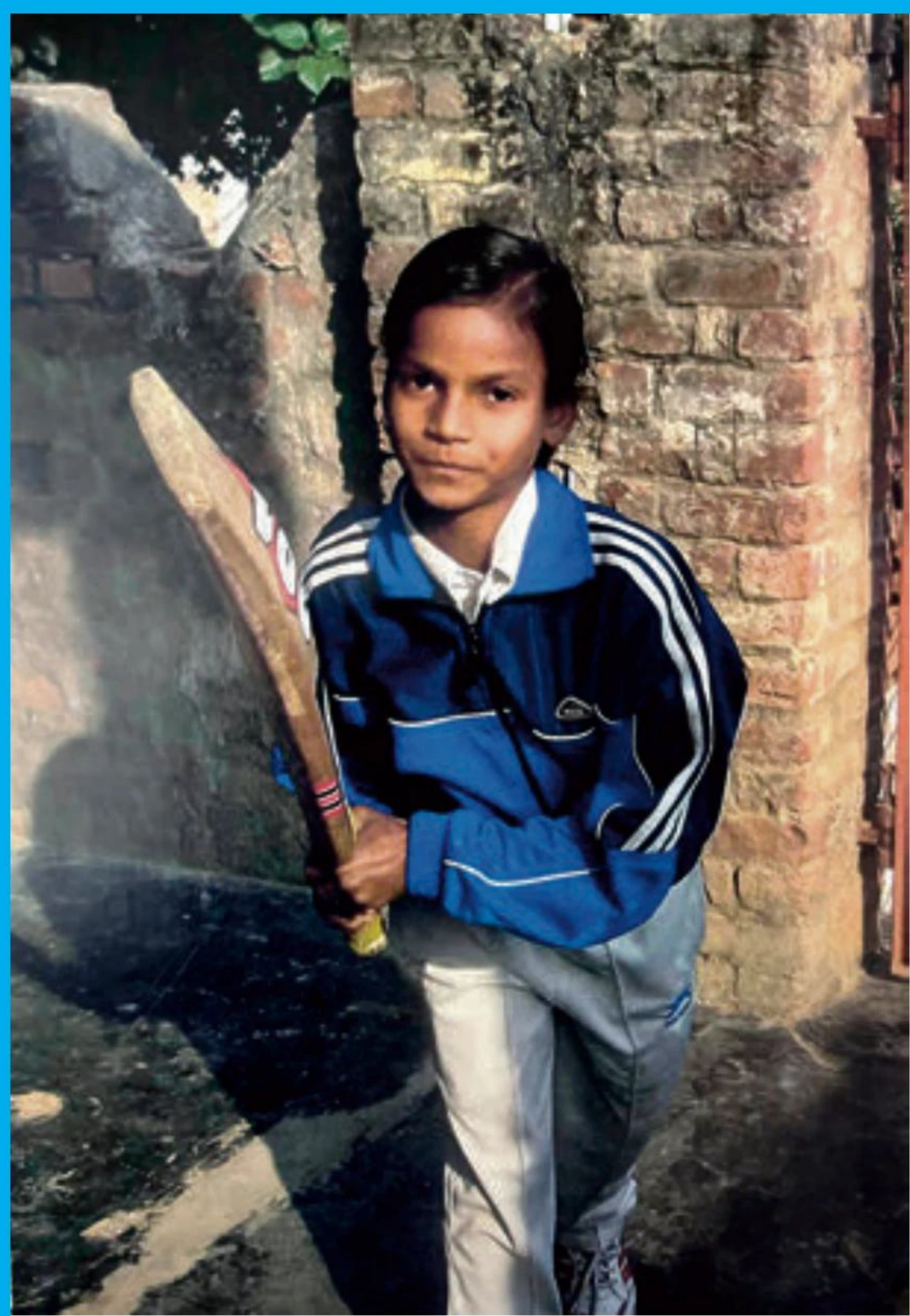
It's no surprise that coach Amol Muzumdar made it a habit to call Deepti *'Stokesy'* when he took over in 2023.

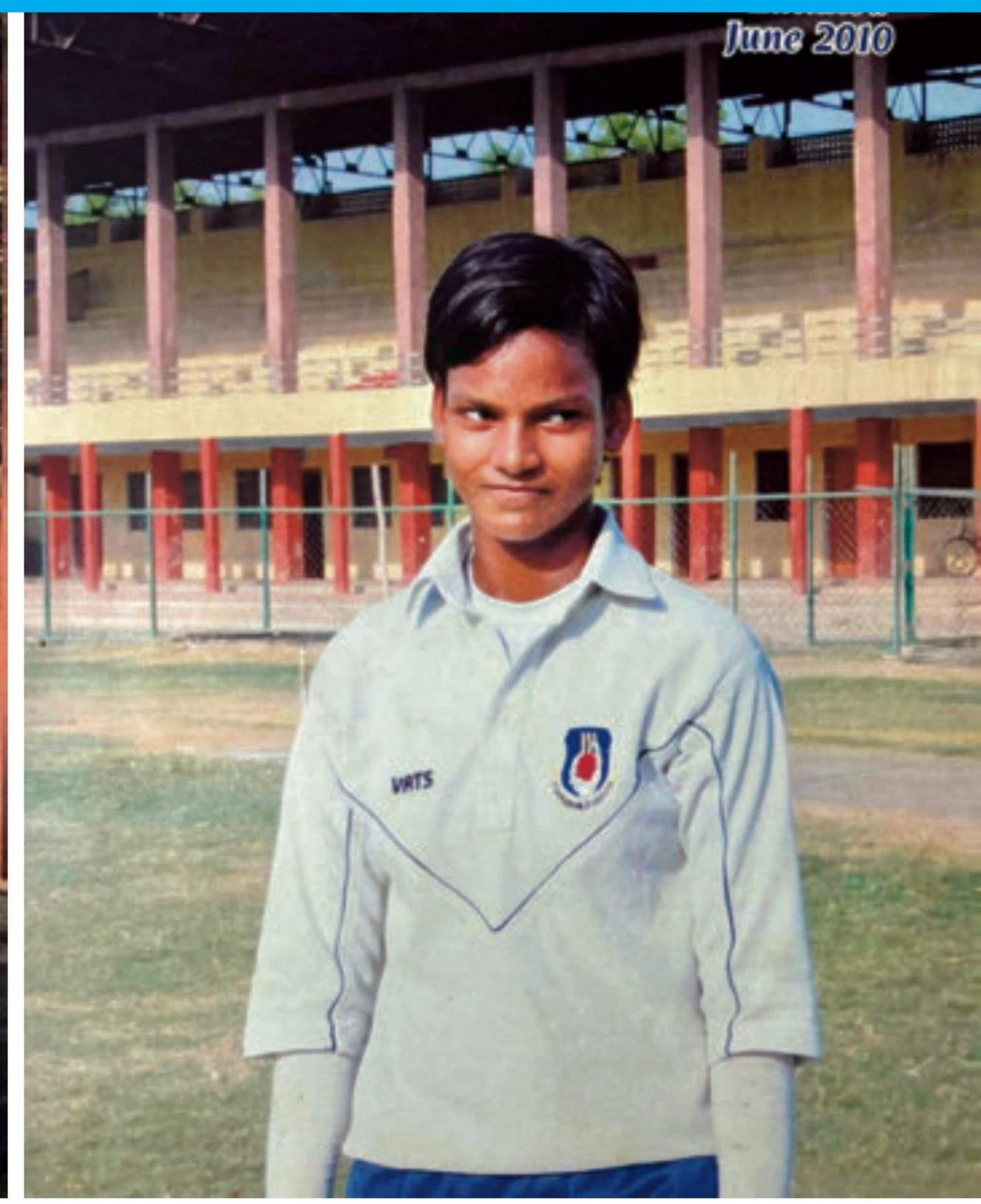
"He gave me that name because of the power I have in my arm. I like it. He used to call me that in the nets, meetings, or during drills. He would say, 'I don't need to tell her what to do. She'll handle it.' It gave me so much confidence. I kept talking to myself about the things I had given him faith about as a player."

Forged in fire

Deepti will be the first to insist that her on-field aggression is not anger. She considers herself calm and industrious once she steps past the boundary rope.

"There's a maturity to her now,





Guiding bond: From a girl holding a bat in Agra, learning to believe in what might be, to the easy laughter she now shares with Rita (facing page), the mentor who became family, these moments trace the making of Deepti Sharma.

PICS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

but it's come the hard way. In 2018, during a series against England, Deepti's brother Sumit called me in the middle of a workday at All India Radio, saying he was worried about how Deepti would fare. I reached out, and she called me to discuss her grievances, including some issues she was having with a certain shot. That eventually ended with her crying. We spoke for a long time about how that was not going to help. Shots were analysed, variations discussed, and Deepti went and won Player of the Match in the next match, the third ODI in Nagpur," Rita says.

Rita remembers that year and how its experiences created confusion for Deepti. She insisted on moving to Bengal in the domestic circuit to work alongside Jhulan. UPCA, with the help of veteran administrator Rajiv Shukla, finally brought her back in 2022.

The 2017 World Cup marked a shift in how the world viewed Deepti. Alongside Smriti Mandhana and Harmanpreet Kaur, the all-rounder became a sought-after name in the franchise circuit, heading first to the now-defunct Kia Super League before finding takers in the Women's Big Bash League and The Hundred. From 2023, she also had access to high-quality T20 cricket at home with the Women's Premier League.

An accumulator as a batter until then, these franchise stints forced Deepti to unlock pace and intent in a game increasingly favouring the fast and the brave. Winning the Most Valuable Player Award in the 2024 edition of the WPL underlined her evolution, a season in which she scored 295 runs at an average of 98.33, striking at 136.57.

The sweep shot is Deepti's go-to

* **Deepti Sharma** is the first player with a fifty and a five-for in a women's World Cup match.

* **Her 22 wickets** are the joint second-highest in a Women's World Cup.

* **Deepti is also the first player** to do the double of 200-plus runs and 20-plus wickets in a World Cup, having scored 215 runs, including three fifties, and taken two four-plus wicket hauls.

option, especially on challenging pitches. Just as often, that same sweep becomes her undoing, with teams planning for it.

"She took those failures back to her brother and worked it out in training. She never abandoned her natural ability to sweep, but added shotmaking all around the ground instead. She worked on her fitness to run the hard singles and twos," Rita points out.

True to her roots

Staying true to what comes naturally while also reinventing herself is a mantra that extends to her life off the field.

Rita describes Deepti as someone who sits in the middle of the introvert-extrovert spectrum. She is happy in her own world and communicates in a way tailored to what the situation demands. Rita calls her an atypical figure in Agra's cultural fabric, where families often ensured girls were supervised everywhere for safety.

"She was not the type to go eat burgers, pizzas, or lose control over her fitness. It took a lot of convincing to get her to start eating eggs for extra protein; otherwise, she was absolutely fine to manage on homemade daal, chawal, paneer, vegetables, and such. Once her family saw her single-mindedly focused on success here, it eased their nerves, too. It's a lesson for this generation to learn. They need to be supported, but must guard against losing their way and getting distracted.

"I still remember the young teenager who called me from Shopper's Stop asking which pants she should pick with a certain shirt. I remember her asking me if getting an Android phone was the right move for her in 2015, when she saw everyone else already having one. She had small wishes like this from time to time, but never lost track."

Ever curious, she would constantly ask questions about her game, what coaches told her, and why certain ploys did not work the way she intended. Her father, Bhagwan, who worked for the Railways, and her mother, Sushila, who retired as a government school principal, prioritised education, and Deepti balanced cricket with her studies. Rita encouraged her to work on her English as well.

"'Why don't you give Rapidex a shot? How will you do your interviews as an Indian cricketer,' I would ask her. She would take it as a joke and say, *'Meri matrubhasha Hindi hai. Main wahi bolungi* (Hindi is my mother tongue and I will speak Hindi)'. She has picked it up perfectly now, but has not lost her earthiness one bit even today."

To see more girls in sports

When Deepti sat garlanded in the open jeep during her roadshow home, not a tear was visible. The years of crying were behind her, as were the years of overthinking. She had finally brought home the *Raksha Bandhan* gift she had promised her brother eight years earlier. Yet what thrilled her more was bringing home the gift of possibility for countless girls in her hometown, girls who once saw no viable future in sport.

Agra was always famous for the Taj Mahal. Now, it had another wonder, one who exceeded expectations while staying cheekily quiet and endearing.

"Our next goal is to win an Olympic medal and the T20 World Cup," she proudly declared then.

Ask her about legacy, and a probably rehearsed but sincere answer follows. "As many wins for India as I can manage. But I also want to see a boom in participation. I want girls to not just take up sport, but stick with it. Whenever anyone goes to an academy, we should now see them packed with girls."

Rita, meanwhile, is waiting for her frenemy to soak in the adulation, the appearances as Deputy Superintendent of Police, and the invitations from governments and institutions, before calling her home for their usual combination of good food and long conversations.

LISTEN TO THE INTERVIEW

Pratika Rawal and the science of staying unshakeable

The 25-year-old has built her career in **quiet defiance,** refusing to follow the path laid out for her. From quitting basketball at 16 to walking off a field with a fractured ankle because she would not take a stretcher, her story is one of decisions made on her own terms.

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Pratika Rawal has been the author of her own destiny for as long as she can remember.

From choosing cricket over basketball at 16 to carving her niche as an opening batter for India, the 25-year-old loves to be in control of things around her, right down to the last detail.

Since making her international debut against West Indies last December, Pratika has smashed her way into the record books, amassing 1000 ODI runs in no time, the joint-fastest to reach the mark in the women's game (23 innings, tied with Australia's Lindsay Reeler).

The Pratika-Smriti Mandhana pairing at the top has been an imperious one in the 50-over format, becoming the fifth most successful duo in the women's game with 1799 runs in just 23 innings. Among the top five, which includes remarkable pairs like South Africa's Laura Wolvaardt-Lizelle Lee and Australia's Rachael Haynes-Alyssa Healy, the Indian combination has the best average: a striking 78.21.

Up and up

The World Cup was lukewarm by their standards, with Pratika left shouldering responsibility after Smriti fell in five of the six batting innings she was involved in, even taking some brickbats for a slow strike rate. But it all came together in an incredible match-winning 122 against New Zealand, which sealed India's place in the knockouts. It was a 170-minute masterclass that received the cinematic treatment it deserved from the ICC digital team in the reels and highlight clips that followed.

Life was moving at a great pace before it suddenly screeched to a halt. A horrifying slip on a wet outfield in Navi Mumbai in India's last league match left her with a fractured ankle. "I am not a person who shows much emotion," Pratika tells *Sportstar*, with a foot protected by a moon boot and elevated on the bed at home in New Delhi. "I screamed. Harleen Deol, who was at long-on, knew something was wrong as I do not usually show pain. I stood up because I don't like going out on a stretcher, that's just me. I walked into the dressing room, and my only concern was when I could go to bat!"

She wouldn't for the rest of the World Cup; her dream of seeing India through to the podium was left incomplete.

"These things can happen to any player. It's a part of sport. This isn't in my control. The only thing I could do was nurse my ankle properly. I began calculating how long it would take me to get back on the field. It was all about what to do next. All the emotions I didn't show, my dad did. I ended up having to calm him down then."

When India eventually beat South Africa to lift its maiden World Cup trophy, Smriti ensured Pratika was front and centre of the celebrations. She was wheeled into the middle of the dancing, even helped onto her

feet for some *bhangra*. Her family, some with her in Navi Mumbai and some back home in Delhi, couldn't help but tear up. It would be natural to assume there might be a small drop of regret somewhere in Pratika's bloodstream for not being an active part of that thrilling summit clash.

"I've taken after my mother (Rajni). I am practical. My coach, Deepti Dhyani, is the same, too. They keep telling me that God has his own ways. Whatever happens, happens for good. When you keep hearing that, you don't feel like you're missing out on anything. When the time comes, I'm going to get much more." That foresight comes from the toil and hard choices she had to make early on.

Lessons from early rebellion

She was the first girl to enrol for cricket coaching under Shravan Kumar at Rohtak Road Gymkhana. She has always been a sporty kid, dabbling in athletics before juggling basketball and cricket alongside her academics. She has been in the Under-19 setup since 12. Pratika piled on runs at the age-group and domestic levels. But there came a time when taking on so much started to affect performance.

"I had practice in the morning for basketball and then training in the evening for cricket, which I balanced with tuitions. I remember there was this U-19 domestic season where I didn't score too many runs. We were playing a match in Guntur in Andhra, and I got out for a duck. We won that game nevertheless, but I remember thinking to myself when I was fielding then, 'Prats, if you want to play this sport at the highest level, this is not going to work.' I was 16 then when I made that choice, and it was mine to make."

While practical and fairly wise now, thanks largely to the conditioning her support system provided, she was once a tantrum-throwing *shaitaan* (devil), as her mother describes. Pratika calls her phase of teenage rebellion her lowest point.

"Teenagers love to defy and not listen to their parents. Same here. I was in the worst possible shape as an athlete. I was eating a lot of junk, going late for practice, and not studying well. I love to be in control, usually, but I had lost that control over my life.

"There was another instance when I was 14. I was not selected for one of the National teams in basketball despite playing well. It broke my heart. I threw a tantrum with my mom, saying I deserved it, and maybe I didn't get selected

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

I REMEMBER MY MOM CALLING ME. SHE CAN'T STAY UP LATE, BUT SHE DID THAT DAY. DAD ASKED HER WHY SHE WAS STILL AWAKE, AND SHE SAID, 'MY DAUGHTER HAS WON THE COUNTRY A WORLD CUP. HOW CAN I SLEEP?'

Elite company: Pratika finished fourth on the 2025 ODI World Cup run charts with 308, behind Laura Wolvaardt, Smriti Mandhana and Ashleigh Gardner. EMMANUAL YOGINI

because they didn't like who I am. Every insecurity for a 14-year-old came bubbling up. My parents quickly addressed that, saying it's all about perspective. The world has a lot to offer. One just has to ask. I live by those words.

"Now you're going to say, *'Isme bhi positive dekh rahi hai' (laughs)*, but I am glad that happened early in my life. I don't ever have to go through that again. Everything happens for a reason."

Pratika has never been one to shy away from hard work and had her father, Pradeep, to fuel that fire.

In nets set up on their terrace, the duo trained endlessly during the pandemic, hitting close to 500 balls a day. The pair had their fun too. "We used to bowl to each other from the beginning. We had bets to see if he could dismiss me or vice versa. He used to get me out a lot, but times have thankfully changed," she quips.

Her ambitions took flight when Indian women's cricket sprouted wings of its own. The 2017 World Cup doubled her family's belief in their daughter having a future in a sport she was already so good at. Seven years later, when she broke into the dressing room, standing shoulder to shoulder with names she grew up idolising, Pratika, in her zeal to do things the right way, didn't know the correct protocol.

"I thought you had to behave a certain way here. You had to say good morning to everyone whenever you saw them. Turns out it was all in my head. I could be myself. If I didn't want to talk that day, it was fine. There were no obligations to do anything. It was such a comforting environment."

Blinkers on

As her numbers suggest, she thrived. There was the shadow of Shafali Verma's flamboyance hanging around that position, but Pratika was clear about doing things her way, something the dugout and her partner, Smriti, encouraged.

"When I play, I don't think about anything else. It's just me, the ball, the bowler, and the fielders I have to pierce. My parents always told me that my only focus should be the game; everything else is a distraction. I don't have things running at the back of my mind. If anything, there are a lot of goals there that constantly swirl around, things I need to get done."

An academic curiosity about psychology helped that

Support system: Pratika with her parents, Pradeep and Rajni, at their West Patel Nagar home in New Delhi. The family that steadied her through injury now shares the joy of India's World Cup triumph. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

compartmentalisation. It began when she was young and idealistic, trying to understand why criminals and serial killers behave the way they do, so she could prevent them from committing harm and save society. As she evolved as an athlete, that curiosity helped her more internally.

"Psychology deals with human behaviour and emotions. I wanted to get a hold of that, know how to alter emotions, because they can get you in a lot of trouble when it is not going your way. Mom always used to tell me stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharat, and I remember one where Krishna ji tells Arjun that your mind can be your best friend and worst enemy.

"I love reading about disorders. I got so obsessed with it that my mom had to intervene and say, '*Disorders hi kyun padh rahi hai? Kuch aur padh le* (Why are you only reading about disorders? Read something else)'.

"I learnt about different types of stress: eustress (good) and distress (bad). It helped me figure out management techniques, what I should and shouldn't do in heated situations, and more."

All that composure and space-making for the self will be needed now more than ever as she navigates the difficulty of a life of stillness. "I am not worried about failure, I am about stagnation," she says.

Room to celebrate

A person whose vacations involve making to-do lists and tweaking exercise regimes has now been forced to pause and look around, and smell the flowers. Despite being in a wheelchair and needing crutches to walk, Pratika's days have been anything but relaxed, with countless media engagements, VIP visits, shoots, and felicitations coming her way. But what she remembers most is the sweep of emotions when India became world champion at the stroke of midnight and her own little part in that historic moment.

"My dad couldn't control his emotions when the team came to escort me to the ground. He was screaming. A lot of raw emotions. But I remember my mom calling me. She is someone who sleeps early. She can't stay up late, but she did that day. Dad asked her why she was still awake, and she said, 'My daughter has won the country a World Cup. How can I sleep?' She was so happy. My brother never posts on Instagram, and he put up a story saying he was proud of me."

Her circle has also kept her humble through the ups and downs of a life in cricket. "My coach always says, look to the sky but keep your feet on the ground. She always reminds me of things I still have to do. We keep being told not to dwell on the past when things go wrong. It should apply when successes come too. After all, we have to start from scratch the next time we take to the field."

Pratika is not one for big celebrations or even tattooing the World Cup trophy on her body. For someone who walked off a cricket field with a broken ankle, she is petrified of needles.

"Maybe that's my disorder," she says cheekily. But she does maintain a diary she calls the *Record Book.*

"I keep a lot of goals and milestones written there. Winning the World Cup was one of them." A very satisfying strike awaits this dreamer as she gets started with her pursuit of greatness.

FOR MORE STORIES

After years of scraping by, a harvest arrives

For generations, women's cricket in India survived on goodwill, side hustles and improvised support. Now, after the World Cup win and the rise of the WPL, the game is living through an **unprecedented commercial bloom** that once felt unimaginable.

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Shubhangi Kulkarni was the bonafide star through the 1970s and 1980s, with locals flocking to cricket grounds to watch her take opponents to the cleaners. Long before she occupied crucial decision-making positions within the BCCI, Shubhangi, even as a player, was tasked with finding sponsors for the very team she represented.

"It was really tough. We relied mostly on our contacts and not anyone's big vision for women's cricket," she tells *Sportstar*.

"I remember playing a match in Jalandhar in the 80s, which was a big export hub for cricketing equipment then. My family is into business and manufacturing, so I had an interest. I visited one of the factories and got the idea to open Sunny Sports Boutique, which I currently run.

"The Sunny brand brought out apparel which four top cricketers in the side — Shantha Rangaswamy, Sudha Shah, Sandhya Agarwal, and I — used."

This was around the time SG began sponsoring top men's players like Sunil Gavaskar. When the company expanded to include women, it was primarily to make kits available for free, a welcome relief to players operating in an era with no allowances or match fees.

Shubhangi's monetary struggles only deepened once she crossed into administration after retiring in 1991. India played Tests against Australia, New Zealand and others, albeit sporadically, in the following years. While acquaintances obliged her early requests as secretary of the Women's Cricket Association of India, funding for foreign tours and camps soon dried up, forcing Shubhangi to consider breaking some of her fixed deposits. Players often pooled in their own money, as former India captain Mithali Raj revealed later, to fund their international tours. The team also relied on help from NRI families in New Zealand as a last-ditch stay option during the 1995 tour, Nutan Gavaskar (Sunil's sister) and long-standing secretariat of the WCAI told media ahead of the final in Mumbai.

Names like Sahara eventually entered the fray, sponsoring the women's team in 2002. Broadcaster and actor Mandira Bedi took up the team's cause a few years later, funneling her advertising income into the women's side as its ambassador ahead of the 2005 World Cup.

In 2006, the WCAI merged with the BCCI after the International Women's Cricket Council united with the International Cricket Council.

In the two decades since, three major inflection points helped pull Indian women's cricket out of a prolonged monetary wilderness: the 2017 Women's World Cup, the launch of the Women's Premier League in 2023, and India's triumph in the 2025 Women's ODI World Cup.

The sleeping giant poked

The 2017 ODI showpiece was the first edition where every game was broadcast. It brought a fresh viewer base to the women's game, rewarded by one of the sport's biggest upsets when India cast Australia aside to reach the final. India fell short of a maiden ICC trophy by just nine runs, but India Inc. woke up. An estimated

Aspirational surge: A world title behind her, Harmanpreet Kaur stands before schoolchildren who no longer have to imagine what a women's cricket hero looks like. B. VELANKANNI RAJ

180 million people globally followed the tournament, creating fertile ground for advertisers. In India alone, 156 million watched the event, including 80 million from rural areas, and the final drew 126 million viewers. India's performances contributed to a fivefold increase in viewing hours. The ICC reported a threefold jump compared to the 2013 edition.

Advertising gigs, sponsorship deals and endorsements followed. Meanwhile, marketing and licensing companies like Baseline Ventures began tapping the potential of female athletes in brand spaces.

"When I co-founded Baseline, we wanted to look at sports beyond men's cricket, which was the low-hanging fruit because everyone was in that space. So we started looking at a lot of non-cricket, non-men's cricket sports," says Tuhin Mishra, CEO of Baseline ventures.

Double Olympic medallist P. V. Sindhu was one of the company's first signings around 2015, long before she amassed her biggest accolades.

"Nearly 70 per cent of our representation roster is female. Even within cricket, we understood that women's cricket needs to be seen as its own entity, or its true value can never be unlocked. The vertical and the athletes need to stand on their own," Tuhin adds.

Baseline signed Smriti Mandhana after the 2017 World Cup, seeing in the then 21-year-old the potential to become one of the most recognisable faces in global cricket in the decade ahead.

"She broke the glass ceiling not just on the field, but also in entering categories that were deemed to be male-dominated, and much of this was set in motion before the World Cup. She had ended up with long-term deals with Gulf Oil (which had M. S. Dhoni as its face), SBI Bank, Herbalife, and PNB MetLife — all predominantly carrying a male star's brand value until then.

"Most brands come in on a transactional basis, when big events happen or when a World Cup like this comes along. People need to realise that this game is like the stock market. You need to be in it for the long haul to truly draw out the real value."

In 2024, SportsPro featured only two cricketers among its 150 most marketable global faces: Virat Kohli and Smriti, a significant endorsement of women's cricket in the branding space.

Cash cow

The Women's Premier League cemented the sport's commercial viability. The BCCI received a record Rs. 4,669.99 crore (USD 575 million) from auctioning the league's five franchises to the Adani Group, Reliance, Diageo India, the JSW GMR joint venture, and Capri Global. By

Star support: Between 2003 and 2005, Mandira Bedi used her celebrity pull to lift Indian women's cricket, landing sponsors and diverting her endorsement fees to support the squad. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

comparison, the IPL's eight teams fetched USD 723.59 million in 2008.

Reliance-owned Viacom 18 won the WPL media rights for five years, valued at Rs. 951 crore, translating to a per-match value of Rs. 7.09 crore (USD 866,000). In comparison, the consortium of Sony Television Network and Singapore-based World Sports Group secured IPL's media rights for the first 10 years at a cost of more than USD one billion (USD 908 million going towards telecast rights and 108 million towards tournament promotion). This is roughly Rs. 8,200 crore.

The WPL introduced hordes of new fans to the women's game. Matches were regularly staged in traditional hubs like Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru, with Lucknow and Vadodara joining the roster this year. Women's matches, bilateral or otherwise, had long been free-to-watch events played before sparse crowds. Ticketed fixtures in the WPL, priced mostly in the Rs. 150 to Rs. 200 range, changed that.

During the 2013 World Cup, invitations were issued to 50 schools in Mumbai for the opening game at the Brabourne Stadium. Fewer than 2,000 seats were filled. Images of empty stands from that tournament still circulate online. A decade later, both Brabourne and D. Y. Patil Stadium went houseful for several fixtures. Crowds of more than 30,000 attended big matches and weekday games still drew around 10,000 spectators. Its predecessor, the exhibition-style Women's T20 Challenge, was essentially a filler for the IPL. The WPL created a stage of its own, and the women's game took ownership of it.

D. Y. Patil Stadium's emergence as a premier venue was also driven by the WPL. Its batting-friendly pitch and experience at hosting high-profile matches strengthened its case for inclusion, even though it was a privately owned venue, for the home World Cup.

India's commercial allure, long respected and feared in men's cricket, extended naturally to the women's game, drawing top international players eager for contracts worth up to USD 400,000.

Brands embraced the league's visibility. RCB's Ellyse Perry famously broke the window of a Tata Punch EV parked at the sponsor podium. Beyond the instant publicity, Tata pledged a donation of Rs. 5 lakh every time a ball hit the sponsor car during the 2025 season.

Social welfare initiatives also found space. Weeks before the World Cup, the Indian women's team wore a pink jersey through a collaboration with SBI Life to promote breast cancer awareness. UP Warriorz partnered with the United Nations on women empowerment programmes.

"The commercial and cultural changes are there for all to see over three seasons.

We saw a significant rise in interest from brands in new categories, especially women-centric and lifestyle-driven sectors, which saw clear alignment with their audiences. It is no longer viewed as an emerging property. It is now a key platform," Sanjay Adesara, CBO of Adani Sportsline, which owns Gujarat Giants, says.

Across teams, sponsor portfolios have diversified. The Giants have maintained steady backers in Ambuja Cements and Tata Capital while also adding FMCG brands like Himalaya, Patanjali, Hindustan Unilever Ltd., and Amul. Women-centric industries like beauty and jewellery have entered the ecosystem. Mia by Tanishq and make-up brands like Kay by Katrina Kaif have integrated themselves with franchises.

There have been hurdles too, notably the ban on real money gaming. D and P Advisory's valuation report noted that the IPL ecosystem's value fell from Rs. 82,700 crore to Rs. 76,100 crore, while the WPL dipped from Rs. 1,350 crore to Rs. 1,275 crore. Another contributor was the merger of Disney Star and Viacom 18 into JioStar, which consolidated IPL and WPL rights under one roof, removing the two horse bidding battles that previously fuelled rights inflation.

A World Cup win arrived at an ideal moment for a property like the WPL. When the women's IPL was still an idea, many within the system doubted India's depth to sustain a competitive league. Now, the ecosystem is overflowing with talent and there is increasing demand for more teams each season.

"Honestly, the success of the first season is not surprising as a lot of research had gone into it. We had done our groundwork. We spent Rs. 55 crore on brand-building and marketing to showcase a product we believed in and the results are there for everyone to see. If you look at the scale at which BCCI operates, we were very clear that WPL has to be the biggest women's cricket league in

the world and it did. I am really glad that everyone invested in the concept," former BCCI secretary and incumbent ICC chair Jay Shah said in 2023. Expansion will take time, but individual players have already benefited immensely from the league's visibility. JSW Sports, which manages Jemimah Rodrigues and Shafali Verma in addition to representing the Delhi Capitals franchise, says Jemimah's brand value has risen from Rs. 60 lakh to Rs. 1.5 crore, while Shafali's has climbed from Rs. 40 lakh to Rs. 1 crore. Beyond commercial gains, the WPL has offered an alternative path for players. Like the Women's Big Bash League, the now-defunct Kia Super League and The Hundred, it provides a platform for careers even without the India shirt.

With the auction set to take place weeks after the World Cup and many World Cup winners back in the pool, bidding dynamics may shift too.

Watershed moment

India's famous triumph in Navi Mumbai to clinch its first ICC women's trophy triggered a commercial surge in the weeks that followed. Beyond significant cash awards and personal incentives, a wave of endorsements arrived. Harleen Deol landed a campaign with Lakme, integrating it with the conversation she had with the Prime Minister at his residence. Renuka Singh Thakur and Jemimah shot an ad for fast-food giant KFC the very next day. Surf Excel capitalised on Jemimah's muddied semifinal jersey **(pic, right)** with a full-page ad using its *"Daag achhe hain"* tagline. Hours after the final, skipper Harmanpreet Kaur was announced as ambassador for real estate enterprise Omaxe.

"It's become pretty close to a dangerous position where cricket is almost a product rather than an event," image guru Dilip Cherian tells *Sportstar*.

"Men's cricket is sliced and diced in so many ways. The women's game is just entering that arena, thanks to three key developments: a big win in front of high-energy crowds, consumers' ability to identify favourites by name, and the backing of funds by the system itself, like prize money, which we saw in this World Cup," he adds.

Alongside marquee names like Smriti, Harmanpreet and Jemimah, the World Cup win thrust others into the spotlight. From Shafali and Deepti Sharma to Sneh Rana and Pratika Rawal, players have received endorsement deals, speaking engagements and television appearances.

"The huge advantage now is that a new batch of female heroes has entered the market at price points that are more affordable as well. The temptation to experiment at reasonable costs will be acted on by brands. I only hope players and industry players don't fall for the easy route of sticking with cosmetics and household appliances," says Cherian.

Across advertising, public relations and even journalistic spaces, target audiences are shifting. Women's sports and female icons are no longer perceived as relevant only to women, and Cherian sees the industry recognising this change.

"It was not an all-female crowd at the D. Y. Patil Stadium on November 2. A crowd, largely male, came to watch their heroes do something incredible. Viewership numbers also suggest the same."

GETTY IMAGES

Building bridges

The final between India and South Africa attracted 185 million users on *JioHotstar*, drawing a peak concurrency of 21 million viewers. This matched the viewership of the Men's T20 World Cup 2024 final between the same nations and exceeded the average daily reach of the Indian Premier League.

The tournament recorded a reach of 446 million, the highest ever for women's cricket and more than the combined total of the previous three Women's World Cups. Ninety-two million watched the historic clash on connected TV, matching the connected TV viewership of the Men's T20 World Cup 2024 final and the Men's ODI World Cup 2023 final.

It is no surprise, then, that several WPL teams anticipate a 40 to 60 per cent rise in player valuations, particularly for top performers.

While commercial gains have brightened the ecosystem's surface, Nandan Kamath, co-founder and managing trustee of the GoSports Foundation, stresses the importance of strengthening its foundations.

"Success is such an important driver of a belief system, right? And the highest value is not just in spectatorship or commercials, but what it does for the micro conversations that happen around sports," he tells *Sportstar*.

"That includes young girls speaking to their parents about sport, an academy owner deciding whether to accommodate girls in his establishment. Academies are often set up with low infrastructure and can be quite unfriendly to girls in aspects like washrooms, safety, etc. Kit producers can now think of tuning equipment for women better. Success can make discussions that were marginal more mainstream."

A tier up, the BCCI's age group tournaments for women have also become more regular in the years since the pandemic. A U-19 World Cup held every two years, which India has already won twice, helps keep boards alert and provides a clear incentive to maintain a steady talent pipeline.

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Growth at the centre, strain at the edges

Women's cricket is booming after India's World Cup win. **The surge is real.** So is the question it raises. Where does this leave the rest of India's women athletes?

India's women's ODI World Cup win has underlined the explosive growth of the sport in recent years. With non-cricket men's sport long in the shadow of cricket, does a similar fate await non-cricket women's sport in India?

On the morning of November 3, as always, Pritam Rani Siwach began the warm-up session at the hockey academy she founded in Sonipat. Several members of the Indian women's hockey team learned their trade here, and the academy enjoys a well-earned reputation as one of the country's finest for women's hockey.

Yet, as Pritam, a former Commonwealth Games gold medallist turned Dronacharya Award-winning coach, soon realised, hockey was not on top of her trainees' minds.

"I asked them, how many of you watched the match yesterday? And all the girls put their hands up. I'd myself been watching the match the previous evening, and so we talked about it and what a big thing it was for women in India," Pritam tells *Sportstar*.

The match she referred to was the final of the Women's Cricket World Cup between India and South Africa in Navi Mumbai, which the host won to claim its first-ever world title. Coach Pritam and her pupils were far from the only ones who watched it. About 185 million viewers streamed the final, and another 92 million watched it on TV. That is roughly the same number who tuned in for the 2024 men's T20 World Cup.

These are remarkable numbers. In Indian sport, it has long been accepted that no sport draws eyeballs like men's cricket. Those

eyeballs translate into advertiser interest and a commercial windfall. According to a KPMG report, cricket accounted for 85 per cent of all revenue in the Indian sports sponsorship market in 2025, with men's cricket drawing the lion's share.

If viewership is directly proportional to sponsorship, the direction in which women's cricket in India is heading is clear.

That is what Tuhin Mishra, CEO of Baseline Ventures, which manages several top Indian athletes across sports, believes.

Tuhin adds that while the Women's Cricket World Cup was historic, it only reinforced an already established trend. "There's no two ways about it. If men's cricket is the biggest sport in the country, women's cricket is clearly the second biggest sport in India. I don't think it was a matter of India winning the World Cup to make this point. I think it's already happened a while back," he says.

The numbers back him. According to KPMG, the media rights valuation for the first cycle of the Women's Premier League, the women's counterpart to the IPL, is 951 crore, with the BCCI stating that it earned 377 crore from the WPL in its first season in 2023. Even by itself, the WPL accounts for about three per cent of the revenue of the entire Indian sports market, making it the richest league in India outside the IPL.

According to Tuhin, women's cricket already has the highest-paid women sportspersons in the country. "We have been managing Smriti Mandhana for the last eight years, and I can say that for the last three, she has been the highest-paid female athlete in the country. This is from before the World Cup. She might endorse a few more now, but she was already endorsing 16 brands before the World Cup win," he says.

With money and fame flowing in, the future of women's cricket in India looks bright. The outlook is less certain for non-cricket women's sport. In recent years, women athletes in what were traditionally termed Olympic sports (a label now blurred by cricket's inclusion in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics) have contributed significantly to India's performance at the highest levels. Since 2012, women have won nine of India's 21 Olympic medals while forming nearly 40 per cent (175 of 429) of the contingent. But while their numbers have grown, doubts remain about whether non-cricket sports can compete, both financially and in attracting talent.

Transformative triumph: India's World Cup-winning squad celebrates in Navi Mumbai, its breakthrough victory sending ripples far beyond cricket. GETTY IMAGES

Uncertain future

The general sentiment is that women's sport in India is likely to be dominated by women's cricket, with other sports appearing less promising to prospective talent.

"I think this World Cup win will be a pivotal moment for women's sport and of course it will be dominated by women's cricket," says Divyanshu Singh, CEO of JSW Sports, which owns a WPL team (Delhi Capitals) and a women's hockey team (Soorma Hockey Club), and also operates the Inspire Institute of Sport that trains male and female athletes in Olympic disciplines such as track and field, boxing, wrestling and judo.

"It's brilliant that India have a World Cup champion in women's cricket. But even before that, we have had World Champions in women's sport," Singh says. "I was looking at the numbers and we have had 23 women's World Champions across boxing (Nikhat Zareen, Lovlina Borgohain, Mary Kom), weightlifting (Karnam Malleswari, Mirabai Chanu, Bindyarani Devi), shooting (Tejaswini Sawant), and badminton (P.V. Sindhu). In some of these sports, the global level of competition is certainly a lot tougher than it is in cricket, which only a few countries play competitively. But relatively few of these world champions are household names," he says.

The reason comes down to visibility. "When you look at what we call Olympic sports, the only real time these get visibility is during the Olympics and to a smaller extent, the Asian and Commonwealth Games. They often aren't on TV at all. Some of them don't compete through the season or don't have regular high-profile competition like the WPL for women cricketers," says Tuhin.

Lower visibility leads to lower commercial prospects and, potentially, lower participation.

Women's cricket coach Ashwani Singh has seen such shifts before. "When I was a young boy in the 1970s and 1980s, cricket was just one of many sports that kids played. Football was popular, and field hockey was considered the national game. Then we won the World Cup in 1983, and slowly cricket started gaining popularity. It took off completely in 2003 when money started coming into the sport. Now compare where men's cricket and men's hockey are. Cricket is everywhere and men's hockey is struggling," says Ashwani, coach of

Underlit greatness: The success stories of boxers Nikhat Zareen and Lovlina Borgohain highlight a truth the numbers often miss. Women's excellence in India runs far beyond cricket, yet the reason it feels otherwise is simple. These sports rarely get the visibility that cricket does. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Shafali Verma, who scored 87 and took two wickets in the World Cup final.

When Ashwani first opened his cricket academy in Rohtak for women in 2008, he had to visit homes to convince parents to let their daughters play. "At that time, women's cricket was still in its early years. Parents weren't even keen to let their daughters join my academy because they didn't feel comfortable that they would be playing alongside boys. I actually had to go to different states to scout players in that first year," he recalls.

Today, things are very different. "Every day, I have girls who want to join and play. I can't keep up right now because we are in the middle of the domestic season. We will only start taking children next year, and that's when you are going to see the real numbers."

This boom, Ashwani admits, will come at the expense of girls who might otherwise have chosen another sport. "Right now in India, we aren't at that stage where kids pick up sports because they enjoy it. A lot depends on what their parents choose. Like it or not, cricket is a far more glamorous sport than others. Parents can see that even the top 40 or 50 players in India will play the WPL, and they will be taken care of financially. How many other sports in India can say that their top 40 players have a future in the sport?

"Right now, when you see the money in cricket, the visibility, the fact that at least in Haryana this is a sport considered safe for girls, and the clear pathways for success, you can understand why parents want to put their daughters in cricket. Why would you want to see your child compete in a sport where the rewards don't match the struggle?" he says.

Indian women's cricket has already seen players switch from other sports (Jemimah Rodrigues represented Maharashtra's Under-17 hockey team and N. Shree Charani played badminton and ran track before taking up cricket), but none go the other way.

Not the end of the world

Not everyone believes the trend is inevitable. "I don't agree that money or career prospects are what motivate girls to choose a sport. When parents, especially in rural India, want to put their daughter in a sport, they usually pick something they have some connection to. If you have some attachment to wrestling, then chances are you would first want your child to wrestle as well," says Olympic bronze medallist Sakshi Malik, now a coach and mother of a one-year-old daughter. "Apart from this, you will also see what sports facilities are near your home. If you are from a village in Haryana, chances are you will pick an akhara because that is what is accessible," she says.

Former table tennis Olympian Neha Aggarwal agrees. "Sport in India is extremely geographically coded. In the North East, kids will pick up boxing or football, or weightlifting. In rural Haryana, they will pick up wrestling or kabaddi. These sports are extremely popular at a local level.

"Moreover, I think India is big enough. We have 1.5 billion people. Women's cricket has been popular for a while now, but our girls have been improving their performance across sports steadily. We aren't stagnating. That shows that our population is more than enough to find talent. Everyone isn't going to go into cricket," says Aggarwal, who is also head of partnerships at Olympic Gold Quest.

Even if much of the talent gravitates towards cricket, hockey coach Pritam is not worried. "If you speak to a lot of male non-cricket athletes, they seem to carry a huge grudge against cricket because they feel they aren't being given their due, because cricket gets all the support. Maybe if I were a man, I might feel the same way, but I'm not. I don't think you will find many women sportspersons who are jealous of women's cricket. I'm very happy they are doing so well.

"When I hear about parents wanting to put their daughters into cricket, I don't see it as a loss for hockey. I see it as one more girl getting the chance to play any sport. Even now, there are so few girls who play sport in India. When it starts becoming normal for a girl to play sport, that is a win for me. Once women's sport is accepted in society, I am sure enough girls will choose other sports as well," she says.

1st

Washed out: The opening match of the five-match T20I series in Canberra was called off after just 9.4 overs of play. India reached 97 for one after being asked to bat by Australia. AFP

2nd

Lone act: Abhishek Sharma's 37-ball 68 was the only positive in an otherwise lacklustre performance by Indian batters. Abhishek and Harshit Rana (35) were the only two batters to cross double digits as India was bundled out for 125 in the second T20I in Melbourne. AFP

3rd

Meticulous: Josh Hazlewood was at his accurate best, dismantling India's batting lineup with the wickets of Shubman Gill, Suryakumar Yadav, and Tilak Varma, finishing with figures of three for 13. His spell set up Australia's four-wicket win in the second T20I. AFP

4th

Early Impact: Taking the new ball, Arshdeep Singh swung it skillfully to remove Travis Head and Josh Inglis before returning late to dismiss Marcus Stoinis. He finished with figures of three for 35 as India restricted Australia to 186 for six in the third T20I in Hobart. AFP

5th

Mayhem: Batting at number four, Tim David smashed eight fours and five sixes in a blistering 74 off 38 balls to lift Australia to a competitive total after India opted to bowl. AFP

6th

SLAM-BANG: WASHINGTON SUNDAR SHOWCASED HIS CLEAN-HITTING RANGE, SMASHING FOUR SIXES AND THREE FOURS IN AN UNBEATEN 49 OFF 23 BALLS TO TAKE INDIA HOME WITH NINE BALLS TO SPARE AND LEVEL THE SERIES 1-1.

7th

Anchor: With wickets tumbling at the other end, Shubman Gill's 46 off 39 balls guided India to a competitive 167 for eight after being put in to bat by Australia in the fourth T20I in Carrara. AP

8th

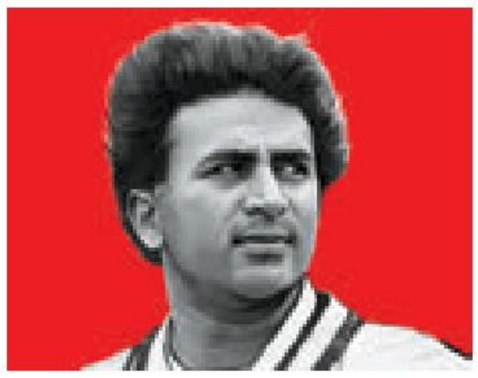
On the money: Axar Patel displayed precision and control in his spell of two for 20, helping India bowl out Australia for just 119 to take a 2-1 lead after the fourth T20I. AP

9th

Abandoned: India could bat only 4.5 overs before rain once again played spoilsport in the fifth T20I. With the match called off after more than two hours of delay, India was confirmed as the winner of the five-match series. PTI

10th

Trophy collectors: The Suryakumar Yadav-led side defeated Australia 2-1 to claim yet another piece of silverware. It was also India's seventh consecutive bilateral series win, a run that began in 2023. PTI



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

INDIA NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TEST AND A LIMITED-OVERS ALL-ROUNDER

Picking someone who cannot find a place simply as a batter or purely as a bowler may work in the short term, but it **does not add value** to the team.

Not for nothing are the South Africans the holders of the World Test Championship trophy. The way they have prepared for subcontinent tours is worth emulating. They went to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka earlier in the year and took a team that included spinners who could exploit the slow pitches of these parts. When they performed well and earned valuable points, the old-power media complained that they had not beaten top teams to reach the WTC final. This was rich, given that those very teams have failed to beat these so-called lesser opponents on several tours there. All that they have done is moan and whinge about the pitches and conditions every time they have lost.

Even for this Test match at the Eden Gardens, one of Ben Stokes's has-beens has got vocal about the pitch simply because 15 wickets fell on day two. I have been a has-been longer than this has-been, but I can say with conviction that the pitch was tough, not impossible to bat on. Temba Bavuma showed that with his short back-lift and soft hands, keeping his bat speed just slow enough so that even if the ball took the edge, it would not carry to the close-in fielder. He also showed admirable patience and great temperament, even when the ball went past the outside edge. In essence, it was proper Test match batting and not what modern batters do the moment they find it is not a flat pitch and the ball is doing something off it. They think that going for the big shots will get them out of trouble. If anything, it gets them back in the pavilion. There are far too many who will tell them that there will be a delivery with their wicket on it, so better to go down trying to play big shots than fight it out with technique and temperament. They forget that red-ball behaviour differs from white-ball cricket, and that playing proper cricketing shots is the better option. They also overlook that Test cricket gives you the time to leave deliveries, unlike limited-overs cricket, where every ball counts.

By the way, when India toured Australia last year, 17 wickets fell on day one in Perth. In Adelaide, 11 fell on the first day and 14 on the second.

In Sydney, 11 wickets fell on day one and 15 on day two. Did the has-been have any complaints or caustic comments about those pitches? Absolutely not. Ten wickets on day two at Leeds. In Birmingham, eight wickets fell on the second, third and fourth days.

At The Oval, 15 wickets fell on the second day, but of course, unsurprisingly, not a word of criticism about the pitches in Australia and England. Lots of wickets fall in a day in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, but nary a word of sarcasm. That is left for India and Indian pitches. So predictable this haranguing about Indian pitches and finding fault with everything about Indian cricket.

Adaptability: Temba Bavuma showed how to bat on the Eden Gardens pitch with his short back-lift and soft hands. PTI

Anyway, the defeat to South Africa will hopefully open the eyes of those who matter to look at the heavy scorers in domestic cricket, who are used to playing on pitches where the ball spins and keeps low. The international players are so busy playing overseas that they do not have practice playing on domestic pitches, and so are found wanting.

Test batting demands patience and, more importantly, the willingness to leave your ego in the changing room. It does not matter if you get beaten and rapped on the leg guards. You do not have to try and tonk the ball out of the ground to show who is the boss. The only boss is the one who stays humble and accepts that at this level, the bowler will beat you, and so waits a bit till the scoreable ball comes along.

India also needs to understand the difference between a Test all-rounder and a limited-overs all-rounder. A genuine Test all-rounder is someone who could make the eleven solely as a batter or as a bowler. A player who only offers a few overs or a few runs is not what Test cricket demands. A proper batter who can chip in with the ball is fine, just as a regular bowler who can hold up an end with the bat is valuable. But selecting a player who would not make the side purely as a batter or as a bowler might work in the short term, yet it does not add real value.

After this South Africa series, India will not play a home Test for over a year. All the more reason that there is clarity about the difference between Tests and limited-overs games, and about the requirements for the different formats.

If not, India could miss the World Test Championship final again, just as they did this June.

When India toured Australia last year, 17 wickets fell on day one in Perth. In Adelaide, 11 fell on the first day and 14 on the second. In Sydney, 11 wickets fell on day one and 15 on day two. Did the has-been have any complaints or caustic comments about those pitches? Absolutely not.

1st

Ruthless precision: Jasprit Bumrah ripped through South Africa with a searing five-wicket burst in Kolkata, his 16th in Tests, as he surged past Mohammed Shami's Test-wickets (229) tally on the all-time list. No bowler with more than 200 Test wickets has a better average (19.54), a reminder of the rare air he now occupies. K. R. DEEPAK

2nd

Notable landmark: India opener K. L. Rahul was his side's top scorer across both innings with 39, and along the way crossed 4,000 Test runs. The right-hander became the 18th Indian to reach the milestone. K.R. DEEPAK

3rd

Rock solid: At one point, South Africa was 93 for 7 in its second innings, with only a 63-run cushion. Yet skipper Temba Bavuma held the innings together with a gritty 55 from 136 balls, the lone score beyond 40 in the match. With Corbin Bosch landing a few heavy blows for 25, Bavuma steered the tail to a more respectable 153. K. R. DEEPAK

4th

Wreaking havoc: Veteran spinner Simon Harmer wrecked India with four wickets in each innings for superb match figures of 8 for 51. Along with Keshav Maharaj's 2 for 37, he tore through the middle order as India lost its final five wickets inside eight overs.

K. R. DEEPAK

5th

History at Eden: Washington Sundar held out for 31 from 92 balls before Aiden Markram's part-time spin finally prised him out. South Africa then closed out its first Test win in India since 2010, sealing a low-scoring contest inside three days at the Eden Gardens.

K. R. DEEPAK

Landmark moment: Officials at the Arun Jaitley Stadium released a souvenir to mark the 300-match milestone. R. V. MOORTHY

Three hundred tales

Sportstar correspondents bring you the **untold tales** that live in the corners of practice grounds, in the pauses between sessions, and in the quiet rituals of players and the people who move around them.

The Arun Jaitley Stadium, formerly known as the Feroz Shah Kotla, reached a historic milestone earlier this season, hosting its 300th First-Class match when Delhi played Himachal Pradesh in the Ranji Trophy from October 25 to 28.

As India's second-oldest active cricket venue after Kolkata's Eden Gardens, it became only the second in the country to reach this landmark.

To mark the occasion, the Delhi and District Cricket Association released a special souvenir during the tea break on day two of Delhi's match against Jammu and Kashmir. Among those present was BCCI president Mithun Manhas, a former Delhi stalwart who ended his playing career with Jammu and Kashmir. He was also

felicitated for his elevation to Indian cricket's top administrative post.

Vivek Krishnan

Whispers beneath the afternoon sun

"But where's the story in that?" Diary, still wet behind the ears in 2021, had asked a veteran journalist.

The old hand had smiled. "Every subject has a story. You just have to listen long enough."

The line resurfaced years later on a hot afternoon in Surat.

Bengal and Railways were grinding through their afternoon nets at the Lalbhai Contractor Stadium. Amid the metronomic thud of leather on turf, Diary noticed a man, perhaps in his fifties, quietly observing the session from behind a fence.

A wrinkled shirt clung to his wiry frame. His trousers had clearly seen better days. Thick glasses magnified the fatigue around his eyes, yet his gaze never shifted from the boy charging in at Railways skipper Pratham Singh.

"Fan?" Diary ventured, more instinct than question.

"Coach," came the quiet reply.

When the bowler walked back to his mark, the resemblance was too striking to ignore. "You must be the father," Diary guessed.

"Not on the cricket field," the man said without hesitation.

The speedster's action offered clues about who he took after. His load-up carried a hint of Brett Lee, the release had shades of Dale Steyn. The pace felt around 120 clicks to the naked eye, but it was the intent and repeatability that drew attention.

He had piqued visiting coach Laxmi Ratan Shukla's interest too. After a long chat, Shukla asked him to bowl at Vishal Bhati. The batter was beaten comprehensively first ball.

Eventually, the father shared the boy's name, though not for print. "Not yet. I will share my number. But we will tell our story only when he has played for India. At least India A," he said.

He returned to watching his son bowl.

Diary, who stayed rooted, caught between admiration and surprise, had met plenty of young cricketers and plenty more parents before who chase attention. But this man was different. He guarded his son's story like treasured china, brought out only for the right occasion.

Everyone has a story to tell. Some simply wait for the moment the world finally sees what they already do.

Santadeep Dey

Quiet watcher: Behind the rusted mesh, a quiet observer follows every ball as if it carries a future he already believes in. SANTADEEP DEY

Reset mode

Rohit Sharma tuned up for the ODI series against South Africa with a training session at the MCA-BKC ground.

Arriving for light work, Rohit exchanged quick chats with Mumbai cricketers bowling in the nets and met Dhaval Kulkarni and Atul Ranade. While cameras and fans gathered, he spent around 30 minutes doing sprints and fitness drills. He did not bat.

Getting back into the groove: Rohit Sharma returns to training in Mumbai with a light session at BKC. SHAYAN ACHARYA

Rohit recently played the ODI series against Australia and scored a century in the final game. Having retired from Tests and T20Is, he now features only in ODIs. As he aims to continue until the 2027 World Cup, it remains to be seen whether he makes himself available for Mumbai in the Vijay Hazare Trophy.

His last appearance for Mumbai came in a Ranji Trophy match against Jammu and Kashmir last year. Earlier this year, he guided India to a Champions Trophy win, before announcing his retirement from Test cricket in May.

Speculation continues over whether Rohit and Virat Kohli fit into the plans for 2027, but selection committee chairman Ajit Agarkar has stated that it would be unfair to subject the duo to constant scrutiny.

Shayan Acharya

Clash of eras: Australia's 15-member squad for the first Test, which skipper Pat Cummins (right) will miss due to injury, includes 14 players over 30. Meanwhile, England's 16-man roster, led by Ben Stokes (left), has nine players yet to turn 30, and 11 who still haven't played a Test in Australia. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

THE ASHES DOWN UNDER COMES AT A TIME WHEN THE RIVALS, THOUGH FROM DIFFERENT HEMISPHERES AND SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT, ARE AT A CROSSROADS

A GENERATIONAL BATTLE

A youthful English squad goes up against an ageing Australian unit determined to defend its turf **one last time.**

Dhruva Prasad
dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in

Off-the-field banter enlivens professional sport, lending context and raising the stakes. It sets up a narrative, leaving it to the players to validate or undo it. Even cricket's oldest rivalry needs the needle of the customary argy-bargy between player-turned-pundits and fans every time Australia and England face off in the biennial Ashes.

But criticism hits close to home when it originates from one's own, prompting introspection and honest self-reckoning. The Ashes down under comes at a time when the rivals, though from different hemispheres and schools of thought, are at a crossroads.

Australia's greying squad, with an average age of 33, is deemed inconducive to a smooth transition. By contrast, England's marauding Bazballers, averaging just 28, need to prove back home that their revolution is bearing fruit.

Five long summers separate the two teams, and almost as much time has elapsed since England's last port of call on balmy Australian shores, in January 2022, when a hopelessly timid visiting team was handed a 0-4 hiding.

It is charmingly poetic that England, under the new captain-coach combination of Ben Stokes and Brendon McCullum, rose like a phoenix from that very Ashes drubbing and the subsequent loss of face in the Caribbean.

The only salvation it could retrieve from the wreckage of that Australian tour — a draw, and a defiant one, in Sydney — is now sacrilege for

Run machines: In the batting department, England will rely on openers Zak Crawley and Ben Duckett, backed up by Harry Brook and the ever-reliable Joe Root (below).

Stokes' men, a result that mustn't be spoken of even in hushed tones. Armed with clarity of the binary world of winning or losing, England is unrecognisable, in spirit and in letter. Only five members of England's last Test down under, in Hobart, have made the journey this time. Meanwhile, 10 Australians from that game are likely to feature in this Ashes, and nine of them are set to play the opener in Perth.

It is a generational battle of sorts. Australia's 15-member squad for the first Test, which skipper Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood will miss due to injury, includes 14 players over 30, with all-rounder Cameron Green the lone exception. England's 16-man roster has nine players yet to turn 30, and 11 who still haven't played a Test in Australia. The baggage of 13 defeats and two draws in England's last 15 Tests in Australia since its last triumph in 2011 is unlikely to weigh heavily on a young brigade bracing for its toughest challenge.

But forewarned is forearmed. This may be the last Ashes hurrah at home for the likes of Steve Smith, Usman Khawaja, Scott Boland, Hazlewood, Nathan Lyon and Mitchell Starc, members of Australia's old guard who will once again be at the vanguard of protecting the fortress and the urn, which has been in its possession since 2018.

However, some challenges confront the host, and they start from the very top. Khawaja, who hasn't scored a fifty in his last 10 Test innings, has had five different opening partners since David Warner retired from the format last year. He could get a sixth if 31-year-old left-hander Jake Weatherald is handed a cap after a prolific run for Tasmania and Australia A over the past year.

Weatherald's debut could pave the way for Marnus Labuschagne's return to his preferred No. 3 spot, from which he has cracked five centuries in eight innings across the Sheffield Shield and One-Day Cup to force a recall after being dropped for the West Indies tour. But fielding both Weatherald and Labuschagne leaves Australia with the headache of choosing only one between all-rounders Green and Beau Webster. In sharp contrast, England's opening pair stands tall above their contemporaries. Ben Duckett and Zak Crawley's partnership has yielded 2,511 runs since 2022, and despite their alliance coinciding with England's high-risk Bazball, their average of 46.50 is the highest among the top seven most prolific opening pairs in the corresponding period.

Though confusion persists in Australia's top three, the engine room of Steve Smith and Travis Head, at Nos. 4 and 5, lends assurance. They have been Australia's highest run-getters in Tests since January last year, with strike rates of 55 and 80.85, respectively. But they meet their match in Joe Root and Harry Brook, who hold the same positions and significance in the England line-up. Root's stunning late-career surge has seen him amass 2,127 runs at an average of 57.48, with nine tons and six half-centuries in 23 matches since January 2024.

With the 34-year-old now within touching distance of Sachin Tendulkar's record run tally in the format, it is an opportune

Schedule

First test
November 21-25, Perth

Second test
December 4-8, Brisbane

Third test
December 17-21, Adelaide

Fourth test
December 26-30, Melbourne

Fifth test
January 4-8, Sydney

Last hurrah: This may be the last Ashes for Australia's old guard, consisting of the likes of Josh Hazlewood, Mitchell Starc and Nathan Lyon.

time for Root to snap his century jinx on his fourth Test tour down under.

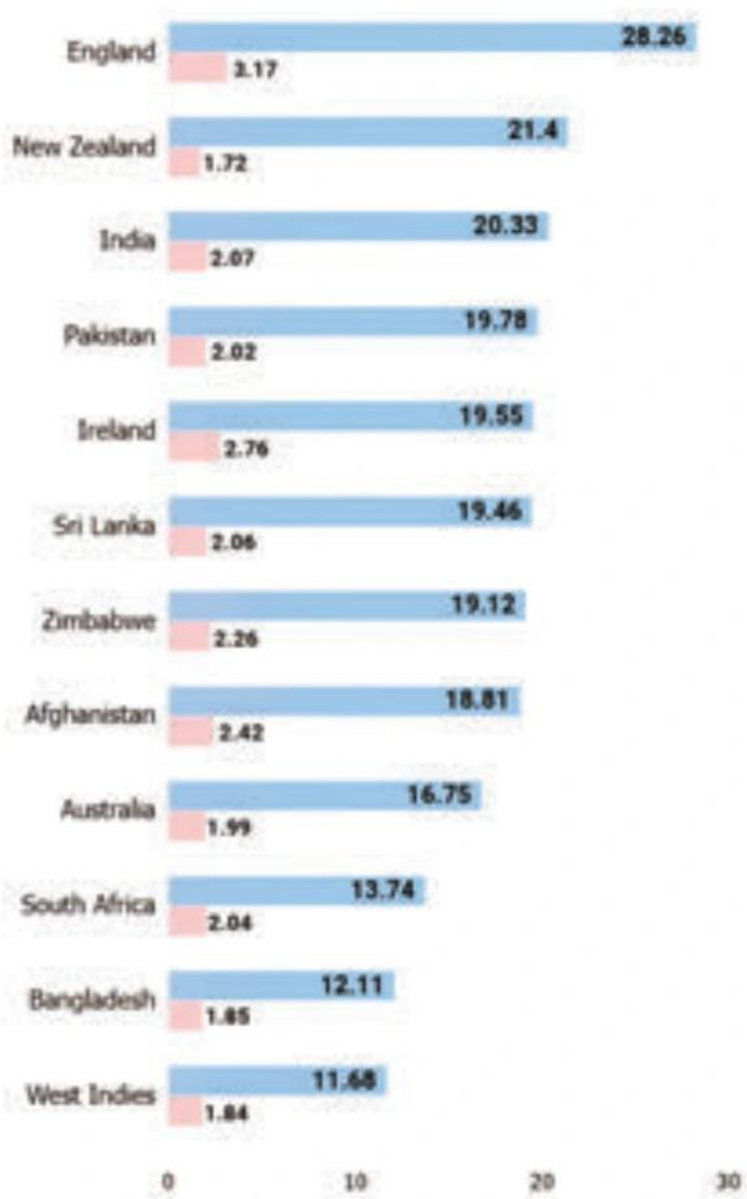
Flatter pitches back home have been central to England's ability to liberate its batters, and Australia's increasingly livelier surfaces will present a litmus test for Bazball. Batting averages here have dipped to 28.63 in the last five years, down from 36.49 between 2015 and 2019.

Throw the pace quartet of Starc, Hazlewood, Boland and Cummins into the mix, and it is a perfect storm for England's top seven, three of whom — Duckett, Brook and Jamie Smith — are on their first tour down under. The lack of experience in Australian climes percolates to the touring party's bowling unit, too, with Mark Wood being the exception. The express pacer's 17 wickets at 26.64 in the last Ashes in Australia were England's silver lining in 2021-22, but his proclivity for injury will worry Stokes, whose bowling will also be vital. Jofra Archer's ability to conjure easy hostility could be a point of difference.

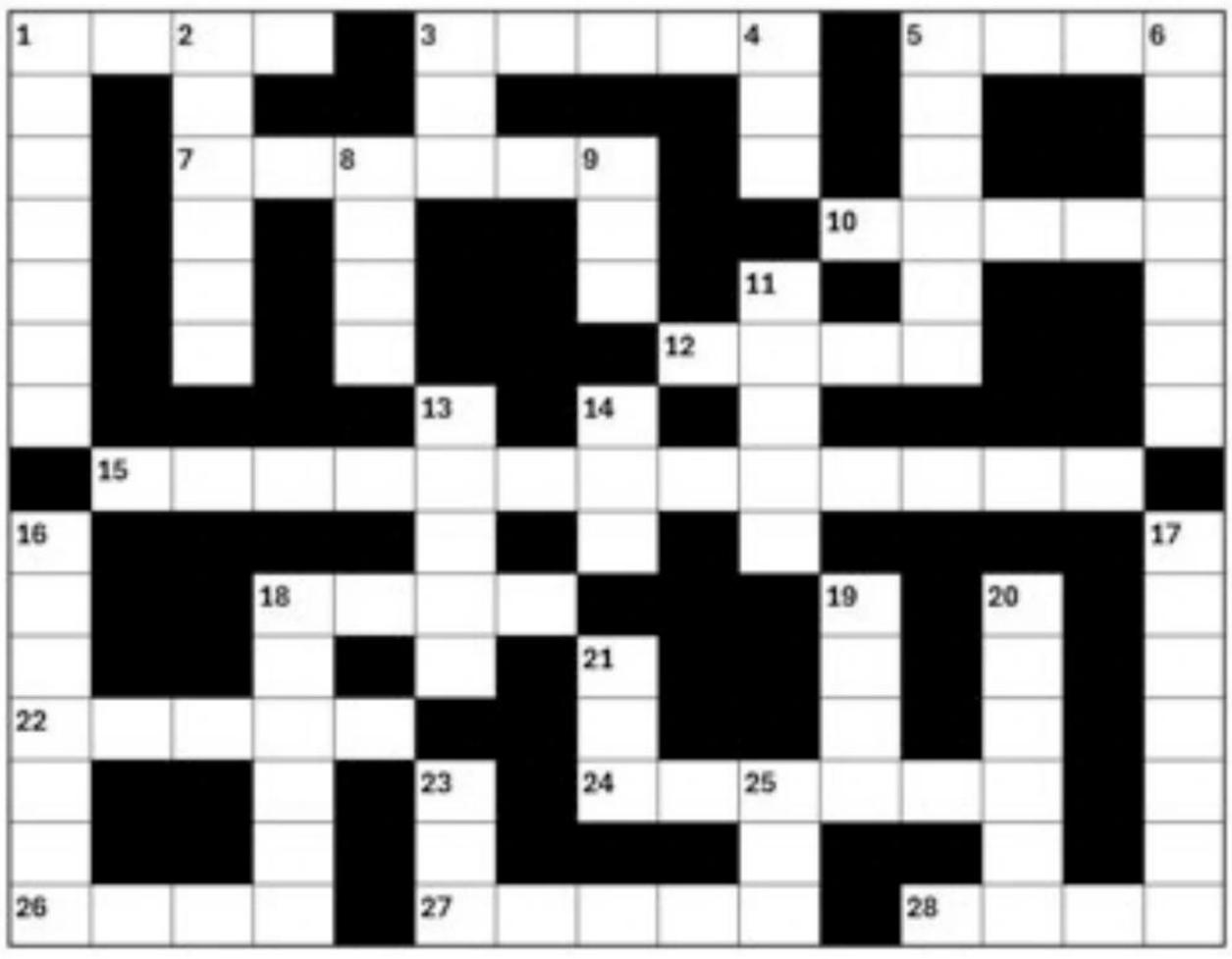
England and Australia are the pacesetters in the Bazball era. They lead the world's run-rate charts in Test cricket, though they themselves are almost a whole run apart. The devil is in the details. England has upended one of Test cricket's oldest doctrines — respecting the 'good' balls — with stunning consistency. The Bazball upheaval has seen English batters average 28.26 and score at 3.17 runs per over against the good-length deliveries by fast bowlers on a probing off-stump line or just outside it, blazing ahead in both metrics amongst their contemporaries.

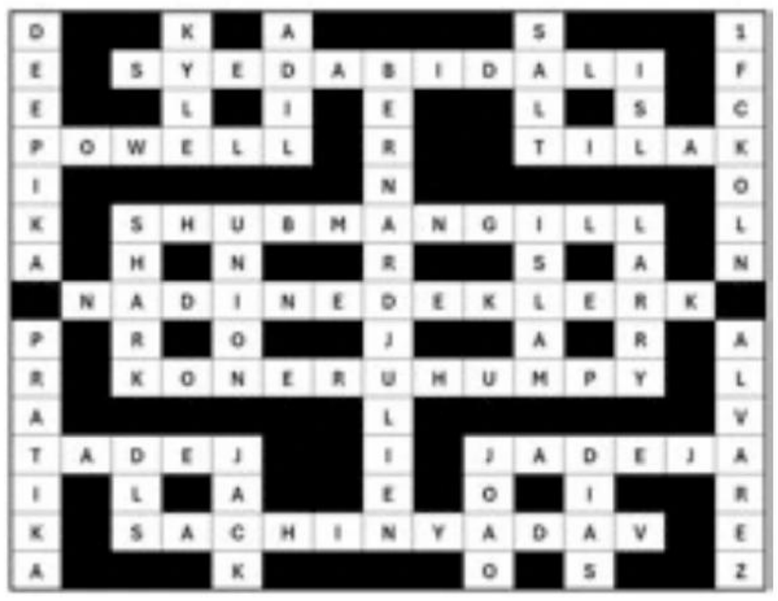
The drawn 2-2 Ashes stalemate in 2023 was proof that Stokes' men won't relent, though the recent deadlock against India betrayed a refinement of aggression. An Ashes win, almost 15 years in the making, would be the ultimate vindication.

Test batting averages and run rates against good-length deliveries on and outside off stump by fast bowlers in the Bazball era (since 2022)



CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

Ashes special

ACROSS

1 Identify the first name of this Australian opener who scored more than 800 runs in his very first Ashes series in 1989. (4)

3 & 10 Who has scored most runs for England in Ashes Tests post-World War II? (5,5)

5 & Down 20 Who took 39 wickets in the 1953 series which was a record for most wickets for an Ashes series at that time? (4,6)

7 & Down 18 Which Australian fast bowling great took 39 wickets in the 1981 Ashes series? (6,6)

12 What is the surname of this fast bowler from Australia who debuted in the Trent Bridge Test of 2005 Ashes, who was known for a sling style bowling action resembling Jeff Thomson? (4)

15 Who is the only bowler in Ashes history to pick more than 40 wickets in a series twice? (5,8)

18 Identify the surname of this player who is the only bowler to have picked more than 100 wickets in Ashes Tests among the current squad of players from both England and Australia. (4)

22 & Down 1 Identify this player who became the second one to play Tests for both Australia and England. (5,7)

26 Identify the surname of this English all-rounder who set the then record for most wickets in an Ashes series more than 100 years back (1924-25 series) with 38 wickets. (4)

27 Identify the first name of this player who had set the then record of most wickets in a single Ashes Test (13), at the MCG in January 1902. (5)

28 Identify the first name of this keeper who holds the record for most dismissals in a single Ashes series. (4)

DOWN

2 Identify the first name of this Aussie bowler who took more than 40 wickets in his very first Test series in 1978-79 that happened to be an Ashes series as well. (6)

3 Identify the first name of this cricketer who features in the highest partnership for each wicket from 2nd to 6th wickets in Ashes history. (3)

4 Identify the initials of this English player who not only scored more than 1800 runs in Ashes history but also played for Arsenal in English Football. (1,1,1)

5 Identify the surname of this English pace bowler who debuted in the 1981 Ashes series and played his last Test in the 1985 Ashes — both at Old Trafford. (6)

6 Who is this New Zealand born Aussie who is credited as a developer of the flipper? (7)

8 Identify the first name of this cricketer who took most wickets (12) for England in the 1989 Ashes though he played just three of the six Tests. (4)

9 & Across 24 Who shares the highest-ever partnership for the fifth wicket with Don Bradman which was made at the SCG in the 1946-47 Ashes series? (3,6)

14 Identify the surname of this English pace bowler who opened the bowling in the one-off England's Centenary Test at Lord's in 1980 and was the highest wicket-taker, with three wickets in each innings. (3)

16 Identify the first name of this batter — with minimum 1000 runs — who has the best average among English cricketers in Ashes series. (7)

17 Identify the surname of this English batter who was the joint-highest scorer in the (in)famous Bodyline series. (7)

19 & 13 Who top-scored for Australia in both innings in the Test held at Headingley, Leeds in the 1981 Ashes series when Australia lost that Test after enforcing the follow-on? (4,5)

21 Identify the first name of this player who took 16 wickets on his Test debut at Lord's, which was in the Ashes series, in June 1972? (3)

23 & 11 Who holds the world record of having taken the most wickets in a Test match that happened at Old Trafford, Manchester in the 1956 Ashes series? (3,5)

25 Identify the first name of this Aussie fast bowler who modelled his bowling action on English fast bowler Harold Larwood and took 114 wickets in Ashes Tests. (3)

Combination of themes

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Zagoruyko features changed mates after at least two black defences over at least three phases involving set, tries and key.The first two problems presented below are from 'The Problemist' by leading exponents of the two-mover which combine zagoruyko with modern themes.

Vasyl Dyachuk
I Pr,The Problemist 2019

Mate in two moves

Try:1.d8Q? (2.Nf2 **A** Nf6 **B**) 1..Kxe4 2.Bh7 **C** 1…Rxe4 2.Qf6 But 1…Be7! Try:1.Nf7? (2.Bh7 **C**) 1…Kxe4 2.Nf6 **B** (Nf2?) 1.Rxe4 2.Nfxh6 but Rc6!**Key 1.Nf3!** (2.Bh7 **C**) 1…Kxe4 2.Nf2 **A**(Nf6?)1..Rxe4 2.Nh4 1..Rc6 2.Rf4; 1…Ra6 2.Re5

Burmistrov combination masterfully combined with zagoruyko on the same square.A very impressive record breaking thematic content is shown with excellent economy.The strategy of the second try and key phase is identical.cutting a line to either d5 or d3 thus ensuring a unique mate after 1…Kxe4 (Judge Anatoly Sesaranko)

The second problem presents synthesis of Erokhin theme and zagoruyko with extra phase and Dombrovskis effect.

Pavel Murashev
3 Pr, The Problemist 2019

Mate in two moves

Try:1.Qg5? (2.Ne5 **A**) Bxg1 2.Qg3. 1…Bxf4 2.Qxf4 but 1…Nxd3!
Try:1.Qb2? (2.Qf2) Bxg1 2.Rg3 1…Nxd3 2.Qe2 but 1….Nc2!
Try:1.Nd5 **B**? (2.Rf2) Bxg1 2.Ne5 **A** 1….Nxd3 2.Qxd3 but 1..Bg3!
Key 1.Qf5! (2.Ne5 **A**) Bxg1 2.Nd5 **B** 1…Nxd3 2.Rxd3;1…Re5 2.Qxh5
Now a solver's problem where changed mates occur after defences on f4.Which knight makes the key?

Kabe Moen
1 Hon.Men,The Problemist 2019

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article'Double Mate Correction'; set play: 1...Qd5 2.Sxf4 1.Rxd4? (2.Rxe4) 1...Qd5+/Qg6/Qxe2/Qe3 2.Qd5; 1...Qxc6 2.Sxf4 1...Qf5 2.Qe8 1...Qxd4 2.Sexd4 but: 1...Qe5! Key 1.Rxf4! (2.Rxe4) 1...Qd5 2.Qe8

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

Selection pressure turns a routine season into meaningful audit

With senior players away on national duty, the tournament becomes less a showcase of star power and more a **scrutiny** of India's bench strength, from seam bowling all rounders to power hitters.

Dhruva Prasad
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The Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy (SMAT) domestic T20 competition has closely mirrored the evolution and demands of its more glamorous cousin, the Indian Premier League (IPL). Its latest iteration, beginning on November 26, will also serve as a timely audition for the IPL auction scheduled for December 16. By that time, teams progressing out of the group stage and into the Super League would have played nine matches, giving scouts ample game time to assess players, unlike last year when the IPL auction took place after just one round of SMAT.

"SMAT definitely has a place in the auction. Any IPL will be won by a team that has a strong Indian core," renowned coach and Kolkata Knight Riders scout, Biju George, tells Sportstar.

The Indian domestic cricket schedule now reflects the rigours of international cricket. After five rounds of gruelling four-day Ranji Trophy cricket, players will have just a week to brace for high-tempo T20 action. Like the Ranji Trophy, the Elite (32 teams) and Plate (six teams) divisions have been introduced

Selection heat: For Riyan Parag, the SMAT is another chance to push his upward arc. His power-hitting and growing all-round value keep him firmly in the conversation for franchises and national selectors.
VIJAY SONEJI

for SMAT this season to enhance competition and establish parity, which means there will not be any easy games. For the Elite division, the knockout rounds have been replaced with an eight-team round-robin Super League phase followed directly by the final on December 18.

The dollop of star dust from last season will be reduced to a sprinkling this time, with India's white-ball series against South Africa at home coinciding with SMAT. India T20I captain Suryakumar Yadav and all-rounder Shivam Dube were part of Mumbai's victorious campaign, while Hardik Pandya (Baroda), Sanju Samson (Kerala), Axar Patel (Gujarat) and Varun Chakaravarthy (Tamil Nadu) were among those who played significant roles for their teams last season. With the T20Is against the Proteas starting on December 9, most of them will miss the Super League phase at least.

The absence of India stars will turn the spotlight on those sidelined or on the fringes, including Riyan Parag (Assam) and Venkatesh Iyer (Madhya Pradesh).

Proven IPL performers released by their franchises will also have an opportunity to reassert themselves. Among them, Deepak Hooda (Rajasthan), Ravi Bishnoi (Gujarat), Vijay Shankar (Tripura), Mayank Agarwal (Karnataka), Rahul Tripathi (Maharashtra) and Prithvi Shaw (Maharashtra) will be keen to make a statement and compete for the 44 vacancies for Indian players at the auction.

National reckoning

The current Indian T20I setup looks settled, but the search for a reliable seam bowling all-rounder as backup to Hardik continues. Although the Impact Player rule in the IPL has hindered the development of all-rounders, SMAT did unearth a few last season. In 2023-24, when the Impact Player provision was applied to SMAT, only two players, Parag and Krunal Pandya, achieved the double of scoring 200 runs or more and taking at least five wickets. Last season, that number rose to seven, with Prerak Mankad (Saurashtra), Venkatesh, Mohit Jangra (Mizoram), Abhishek Sharma (Punjab), Karan Lal (Bengal), Hardik and Shahbaz Ahmed (Bengal) accomplishing the feat.

Rebuilding stakes: Venkatesh Iyer, once fast-tracked to India after a breakout IPL season with KKR, enters SMAT as a released player looking to restate his case after a modest 2024 campaign. K.R. DEEPAK

Identifying a second line of white-ball fast bowlers should also be high on the Indian team management's agenda. While Arshdeep Singh is a potent spearhead, the phasing out of Mohammad Shami, along with careful workload management for Mohammed Siraj and Jasprit Bumrah, has made India's pace resources appear thin. The likes of Khaleel Ahmed and Avesh Khan are IPL regulars, but their potential has not translated into sustained international success. If Jammu and Kashmir pacer Auqib Nabi can carry his Ranji Trophy success into the white-ball formats, both the IPL and Indian cricket will benefit.

Paradigm shift

The shifting dynamics of T20 cricket, reflected in the ever-rising run rates in the IPL, have trickled down to domestic cricket. Despite the scrapping of the Impact Player rule in SMAT last season, the tournament registered its highest ever aggregate run rate of 8.57. Power hitting will remain a top priority for franchises, and the IPL breakthroughs of Priyansh Arya (Delhi) and Urvil Patel (Gujarat) underline that trend. Priyansh struck at 176.63 and Urvil at a staggering 229.92 in SMAT last season, prompting Punjab Kings and Chennai Super Kings to sign them. Both were retained ahead of this year's auction.

George said that a strike rate between 150 and 170 is what most IPL franchises seek, while those in the anchor mould should still be able to score at more than 140.

Despite the emphasis on stats and data, traits discernible only to the human eye remain vital. "I personally would like to see some practice sessions also. I will get to know how much he is involved in the pre-match stuff. Then, we look for attitude in the game and what he does in a tough situation," George explained.

As many as 125 Elite division matches will be held in just over 20 days, but the competition will still have everyone's attention. "We watch every match. There are eight to nine people scouting for every franchise. Every single ball is being watched," George assured.

VIJAY SONEJI

India A clinches ODI series against South Africa A

1 Ruturaj Gaikwad **dominated** the batting with a composed hundred in the opener and an unbeaten 68 in the second game

India A wrapped up the three-match series with a game to spare after its bowlers combined to bowl South Africa A out for 132 inside 31 overs in the second unofficial One-Dayer in Rajkot.

Ruturaj Gaikwad then anchored the chase with an unbeaten 68, sealing a dominant nine-wicket win. In the opener, Gaikwad had set the tone with a composed hundred in the pursuit of 286.

He struck 12 fours, added 64 with Abhishek Sharma, and put together an important 89-run stand with Tilak Varma as India A completed a four-wicket victory with three balls left.

2

AP

Pakistan sealed a 3-0 sweep against Sri Lanka with a composed chase of 212 in the third ODI, built on Fakhar Zaman's brisk start and a calm partnership between Mohammad Rizwan and Hussain Talat. Earlier in the series, Babar Azam's first international hundred in over two years underpinned a comfortable pursuit of 289 in the second ODI, after Sri Lanka's wayward new-ball spell let the game slip. The opener had been the tightest contest, Pakistan edging a six-run win despite Wanindu Hasaranga's spirited all-round effort.

3

PTI

Kumar Sangakkara has returned as Rajasthan Royals' head coach for IPL 2026 while continuing as Director of Cricket, the franchise has confirmed. He previously held the coaching role from 2021 to 2024, a period in which the Royals reached the 2022 final and made the IPL 2024 playoffs, before Rahul Dravid stepped in for the 2025 season. Meanwhile, Vikram Rathore has been elevated to the position of lead assistant coach while Shane Bond will continue as the bowling coach.

4

VIJAY SONEJI

The 2026 IPL auction will be held on December 16 in Abu Dhabi, marking the league's third straight overseas auction. The IPL first moved the event abroad in 2024 with the Dubai auction, followed by the two-day mega auction in Jeddah for the 2025 season. Like all mini auctions, the 2026 edition, too, will be a day-long exercise.

5

K. R. DEEPAK

Afghanistan will host West Indies for a three-match T20I series in the UAE from January 19 to 22 next year, the Afghanistan Cricket Board has confirmed. The games are scheduled for January 19, 21 and 22. With the 2026 Men's T20 World Cup to be held in India and Sri Lanka, the series offers timely match practice and a chance to fine-tune combinations ahead of a busy buildup.

Rohit on a roll

3 The number of batters, incidentally all being Indians, to register 33 or more ODI centuries during their career. Rohit Sharma is now the latest to join this exclusive group, with his unbeaten 121 against Australia in Sydney on 25 October 2025. This century was his ninth against Australia, tying him with Sachin Tendulkar for most ODI centuries against this opponent. Among players with the highest number of centuries against a single opponent, only Virat Kohli has more, with 10 centuries against Sri Lanka. Both tables provide further details.

Quickest to 33 ODI centuries

Inns	M	Batter	Score	Opp	Venue	33rd 100 came on	Age	Span	50s	Runs	Avg
195	203	**Virat Kohli**	112	SA	Durban	1 Feb 2018	29y-88d	9y-167d	45	9142	56.09
268	276	**Rohit Sharma**	121*	Aus	Sydney	25 Oct 2025	38-178d	18y-124d	59	13370	49.22
286	294	**Sachin Tendulkar**	113	SL	Bristol	11 Jul 2002	29y-78d	12y-205d	56	11491	44.54

Note: all the three matches listed above were won by India

6 The oldest batters to score an ODI century against a Test-playing opponent. Rohit joined five other veteran cricketers in this achievement during the Sydney ODI, as shown in the table below. Former teammate Sachin Tendulkar was older to Rohit by five months.

Most ODI centuries against a single opponent

100s	Batter (for)	Opp	M	Inns	50s	HS	From	To
10	**V. Kohli (Ind)**	**SL**	56	54	12	166*	2008	2024
9	**S. Tendulkar (Ind)**	**Aus**	71	70	15	175	1991	2012
9	**V. Kohli (Ind)**	**WI**	43	41	11	157*	2009	2023
9	**R. Sharma (Ind)**	**Aus**	49	49	10	209	2007	2025
8	**S. Tendulkar (Ind)**	**SL**	84	80	17	138	1990	2012
8	**V. Kohli (Ind)**	**Aus**	53	51	16	123	2009	2025
7	**S. Anwar (Pak)**	**SL**	52	52	13	126	1989	2002
7	**S. Jayasuriya (SL)**	**Ind**	89	85	14	189	1990	2009
7	**A. Finch (Aus)**	**Eng**	30	29	5	135	2013	2020

Oldest to register an ODI century against a Test playing opponent

Age	Batter (score)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
39y-212d	**S. Jayasuriya** (107)	SL	Ind	Dambulla	28 Jan 2009	Lost
39y-159d	**C. Gayle** (162)	WI	Eng	Grenada	27 Feb 2019	Lost
39y-51d	**G. Boycott** (105)	Eng	Aus	Sydney	11 Dec 1979	Won
38y-339d	**M. Nabi** (136)	Afg	SL	Pallekele	9 Feb 2024	Lost
38y-327d	**S. Tendulkar** (114)	Ind	Ban	Mirpur	16 Mar 2012	Lost
38y-178d	**R. Sharma** (121*)	Ind	Aus	Sydney	25 Oct 2025	Won

Note:
** Only the players' recent three-figure scores have been considered for the above list*
** Except for Mohd Nabi, the rest listed above were opening the batting*

10 The number of cricketers who have achieved the milestone of scoring 50 or more centuries in international cricket (including Tests, ODIs, and T20Is combined). Rohit Sharma became the latest player to join this exclusive group in Sydney. The first player to reach this milestone was his former teammate, Sachin Tendulkar, in 2000.

Players with 50 or more international 100-plus scores

100s	Player	Span	M	Inns	NO	Runs	HS	Avg	50
100	**S. Tendulkar** (Ind)	1989-2013	664	782	74	34357	248*	48.52	164
82	**V. Kohli** (Ind)	2008-2025	553	620	90	27673	254*	52.21	144
71	**R. Ponting** (Aus/WXI)	1995-2012	560	668	70	27483	257	45.95	146
63	**K. Sangakkara** (SL/Asia/WXI)	2000-2015	594	666	67	28016	319	46.77	153
62	**J. Kallis** (SA/Afr/WXI)	1995-2014	519	617	97	25534	224	49.10	149
58	**J. Root** (Eng)	2012-2025	376	493	53	21766	262	49.46	114
55	**H. Amla** (SA/WXI)	2004-2019	349	437	36	18672	311*	46.56	88
54	**M. Jayawardene** (SL/Asia)	1997-2015	652	725	62	25957	374	39.15	136
53	**B. Lara** (WI/WXI)	1990-2007	430	521	38	22358	400*	46.28	111
50	**R. Sharma** (Ind)	2007-2025	502	535	66	19902	264	42.43	109

Where and when these batters registered their 50th international three-figure score (listed chronologically)

Batter (for)	On	Format	Opp	Venue	Score	M	Inns
S. Tendulkar (Ind)	26 Nov 2000	Test	Zim	Nagpur1	201*	**337**	**376**
B. Lara (WI)	25 Nov 2005	Test	Aus	Adelaide	226	**380**	**465**
R. Ponting (Aus)	27 Mar 2006	Test	SA	Durban	116	**356**	**418**
J. Kallis (SA)	6 Feb 2010	Test	Ind	Nagpur2	173	**441**	**520**
M. Jayawardene (SL)	27 Jan 2014	Test	Ban	Dhaka	203*	**598**	**667**
K. Sangakkara (SL)	4 Feb 2014	Test	Ban	Chattogram	319	**532**	**593**
H. Amla (SA)	10 Feb 2017	ODI	SL	Centurion	154	**282**	**348**
V. Kohli (Ind)	20 Nov 2017	Test	SL	Kolkata	104*	**318**	**348**
J. Root (Eng)	31 Aug 2024	Test	SL	Lord's	143	**348**	**455**
R. Sharma (Ind)	25 Oct 2025	ODI	Aus	Sydney	121*	**502**	**535**

Note: the last two columns indicate the number of matches and innings taken to reach their respective 50th international century

28 } The number of innings Abhishek Sharma needed to aggregate 1000 runs in his T20I career for India. He is now the second-quickest for India, after Kohli, who did it in 27 innings. Overall, Abhishek is the fifth quickest among batters from a Test-playing nation. However, Abhishek is now the fastest to reach this milestone while facing fewer number of balls in his T20I career.

Quickest to reach 1000 T20I runs – fewer innings

Inns	M	Batter (For)	Achieved on	Runs	Avg	HS	100/50
24	24	**Dawid Malan** (Eng)	20 Mar 2021	1003	50.15	103*	1/10
26	26	**Babar Azam** (Pak)	4 Nov 2018	1031	54.26	97*	0/8
26	29	**Devon Conway** (NZ)	22 Oct 2022	1033	57.39	99*	0/7
27	29	**Virat Kohli** (Ind)	2 Oct 2015	1015	46.14	78*	0/9
28	29	**Abhishek Sharma** (Ind)	8 Nov 2025	1012	37.48	135	2/6

Quickest to reach 1000 T20I runs – fewer days

Days	Batter (for)	Achieved on	Against	Venue	Result	Score
490	**Abhishek Sharma** (Ind)	8 Nov 2025	Australia	Brisbane	NR	23*
546	**Tanzid Hasan** (Ban)	31 Oct 2025	West Indies	Chattogram Dvn	Lost	89
567	**Suryakumar Yadav** (Ind)	2 Oct 2022	South Africa	Guwahati2	Won	61*
612	**Pathum Nissanka** (SL)	5 Nov 2022	England	Sydney	Lost	67
648	**Brian Bennett** (Zim)	15 Sep 2025	Namibia	Bulawayo	Won	94

Reaching 1000 T20I career runs in less than 600 balls

Balls	Batter (for)	Achieved on	Against	Venue	Result	Score
528	**Abhishek Sharma** (Ind)	8 Nov 2025	Australia	Brisbane	NR	23*
569	**Tim David** (Aus+)	2 Nov 2025	India	Hobart	Lost	74
573	**Suryakumar Yadav** (Ind)	2 Oct 2022	South Africa	Guwahati2	Won	61*
599	**Phil Salt** (Eng)	9 Nov 2024	West Indies	Bridgetown	Won	103*

Note: + Tim David's career figures (above) are for Australia only and does not include his stint with Singapore

All records are correct and updated until 8 November 2025.

Destined to deliver: Hardik was a key figure in the Indian teams that won bronze medals at both the Tokyo and Paris Olympics. GETTY IMAGES

KEEPING UP A LEGACY

India's hockey story is not just about medals but also about families who carried the game forward. From Dhyan Chand, his brother Roop Singh and son Ashok Kumar, to Lawrie Fernandes and his daughter Lorraine, generations have worn the Indian jersey with pride. The latest link is **Hardik Singh,** whose uncle and aunt once did the same.

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One of Hardik Singh's foundational memories as vice-captain of the Indian men's team dates back to 2004, when India played Pakistan in the Amritsar leg of the 'Dosti Series' — a seven-match competition between the two nations.

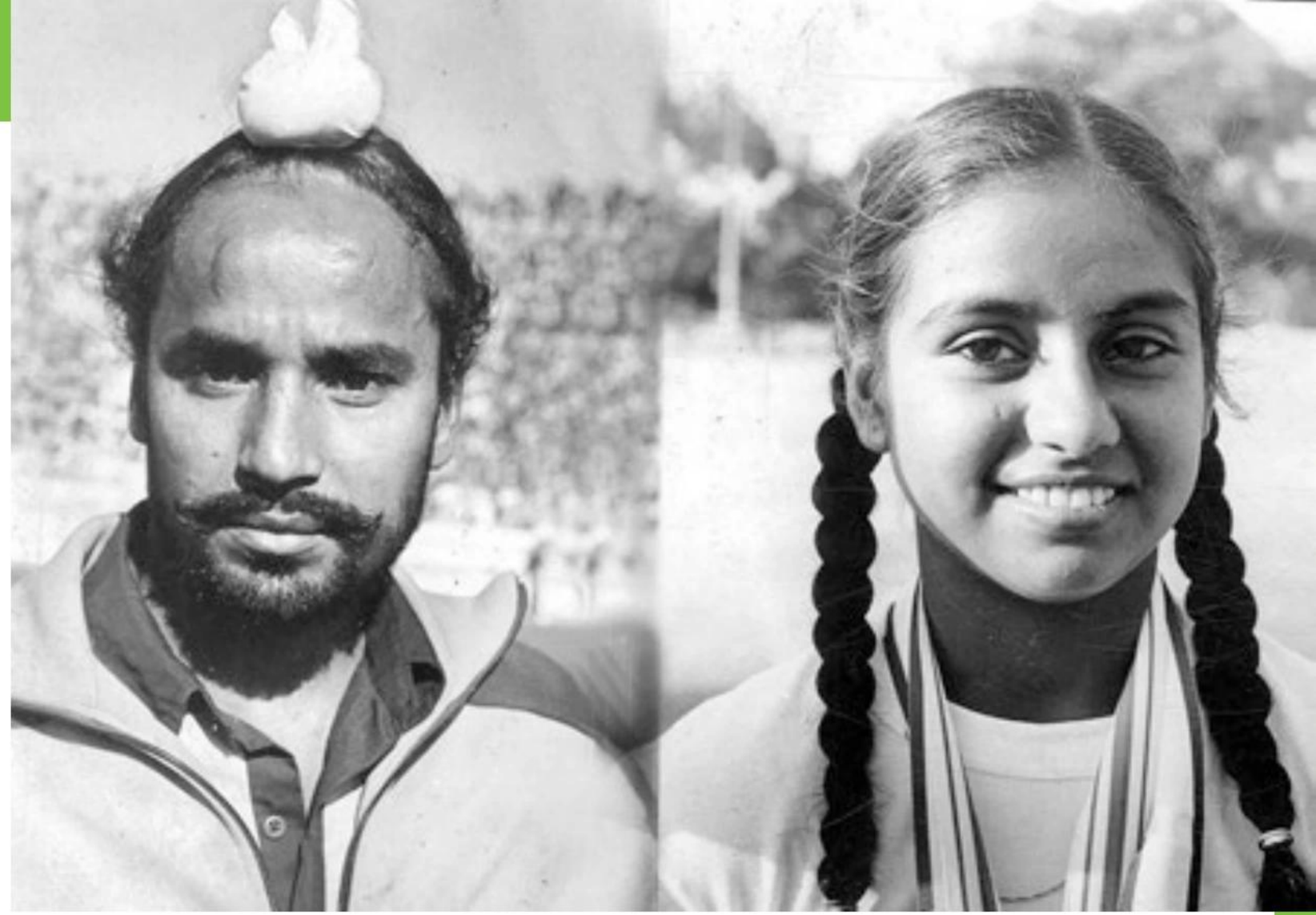
What stands out for Hardik is not watching from the stands of the Guru Nanak Dev Stadium but how close he got to the action. "What I remember is that at half-time, my *chacha* took me down to the

centre of the field and I went and hit a few balls," recalls Hardik.

He was able to step onto the pitch in one of the highest-profile matches played in India because of the reputation his *chacha*, Gurmail Singh, enjoyed. Gurmail was not only an officer with the Punjab Police but also a member of the last Indian team to win Olympic hockey gold — at the 1980 Moscow Games.

While Hardik would later win two Olympic medals himself — bronze at both the Tokyo and Paris Games — he remembers being in awe of his uncle.

"I'd grown up hearing stories about his Olympic gold, and I always wondered what it would be like to have one of my own. But the funny thing is I never got to see his medal because he never had it up for display, and I was too shy to ask him," he says.



A family of excellence: Hardik's family comes from a village known for its hockey heritage. While his grand uncle Gurmail Singh was a member of the last Indian team to win Olympic hockey gold at the 1980 Moscow Games, Gurmail's wife Rajbir Kaur, was part of the Indian women's team that won gold at the 1982 Asian Games. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

No shortage of inspiration

Gurmail's Olympic medal was one of five won by players from Khusropur, near Jalandhar in Punjab. "This is a village known for hockey. The saying used to be that when a child was born in Khusropur, they would place a hockey stick next to him," says Gurmail.

Even within Khusropur, the family's association with the sport stands out. Gurmail is the youngest brother of Hardik's grandfather Preetam, who coached the Indian Navy team. Gurmail's wife, Rajbir Kaur, was part of the Indian women's team that won gold at the 1982 Asian Games. Hardik's father, too, had been part of the national camp.

Their connection with the sport goes back even further. "My grandfather, Jagat Singh Rai, was originally from Pakistan. He wasn't a hockey player but a wrestler. He was in the Army, and his son — my father, Gurdayal Rai — joined the 2 Sikh Light Infantry. He learnt hockey in the Army and that's where our family's connection to the sport began," says Gurmail.

All six of Gurmail's brothers played hockey, including Hardik's grandfather. "When I was in 7th class my father became seriously ill. Before he passed away, he asked my eldest brother [Hardik's grandfather] to help me become a good player. After he passed away, I was the one who was given the most support," he recalls.

It was perhaps natural, then, that Gurmail would return the favour with Hardik. "When I was a child, my *chacha* would take me to Jalandhar to watch matches at the Surjit Singh Hockey Tournament. I'd watch those matches and think I'd be playing like them some day. He also told me stories about domestic and international players who had played in India. He once told me about Sohail Abbas, the Pakistani drag-flicker, who hit a shot so hard it tore the net," recalls Hardik.

Different eras

Hardik relished these conversations. "Sometimes I'd wonder what it would be like if I played in previous eras like my *chacha's*. I wondered if I would be as good. But things were so different that it's hard to say. Back then you had to be on the field for 70 minutes with no rolling substitutions, so the pace was much slower. You could also take drag-flicks from inside the circle, so those were really hard to stop," he says.

Gurmail agrees the game has changed, and not just at the elite level. "The facilities available now are far better than anything we had. We mostly played on grass and sometimes even that wasn't there. But I can say with confidence that the level of competition was much higher simply because hockey was a mass sport then. Now it is mostly played in academies. It isn't played as much at school or college levels," he says.

Despite minor disagreements about the sport's evolution, the bond between Hardik and Gurmail has always been defined by support and respect. When Hardik broke into the senior Indian team, Gurmail offered him advice.

"I told him what I had learnt. I advised him not to get into controversy. Respect everyone and work hard. Come first and leave last," says Gurmail.

Supportive cousin

While Hardik respects and admires his grand uncle, the difference in age and seniority creates a natural distance, a gap that doesn't exist with Gurmail's son, Shubh.

"It's strange because for a long time I didn't think I was going to be the best player in the family. It was Shubh who I felt was really good. Everyone else thought so, too. After

GETTY IMAGES

all he was the son of an Olympic gold medallist and an Asian champion in Rajbir aunty. I remember when we played tournaments at the academy or in the village, he would always be scoring goals.

"Unfortunately, he suffered a serious calf injury and stopped playing in 2020. Despite that, there's never been a hint of jealousy. He's been one of my biggest supporters. I'm lucky to have someone like him on my side.

"He was one of the first people I called after I won bronze in Tokyo. When I came back from the Olympics, he was at the airport, and he was in the jeep with me during our ride of honour around the city," says Hardik.

When Hardik **(above)** comes home, he often walks over to Gurmail's house a few minutes away to spend time with Shubh or play video games. There he sees the Olympic gold medal that Gurmail finally mounted a few years ago. Even now, Hardik has never asked to hold it.

"There are too many emotions associated with that medal. I don't think it would be fair or right for me to hold it. That's the ultimate prize in hockey. I might have two bronze medals, but an Olympic gold is an Olympic gold. I have to win my own," he says.

A few other Indian hockey families

Dhyan Chand (Olympic gold) — Brother: Roop Singh (Olympic gold), Son: Ashok Kumar (World Cup gold)
Idris Ahmed (international) — Son: Atif Idris (international), Maternal grandsons: Danish Mujtaba (Olympics appearance), Hamza Mujtaba (international)
Khuda Dad (international) — Sons: Mohammed Yousuf (international), Sameer Dad (Olympics appearance), Grandson: Affan Yousuf (international)
Lawrie Fernandes (Olympics gold) — Daughter: Lorraine Fernandes (Olympics appearance)
Ahmed Sher Khan (Olympic gold) — Son: Aslam Sher Khan (World Cup gold)
Harbinder Singh (Olympic medallist) — Brother: HJS Chimni (World Cup gold)
Harmik Singh (Olympic medallist) — Brother: Ajit Singh (World Cup silver), Nephew: Gagan Ajit Singh (Asian Games silver)
Ignace Tirkey (international) — Brother: Prabodh Tirkey (international)
Baboo Nimal (Olympic gold) — Brother: Hiranna Nimal (Asiad silver)
Baljit Singh Saini (international) — Brother: Balwinder Singh Saini (international)
Yuvraj Walmiki (international) — Brother: Devender Walmiki (international)
Anupa Barla (international) — Niece: Sunelita Toppo (international)
Pritam Siwach (international) — Son: Yashdeep Siwach (international), Daughter: Kanika Siwach (international)
Mandeep Singh (Olympic bronze) — Wife: Udita Duhan (international)

A mother's medal, a daughter's dream: Inside the Siwach hockey story

Dronacharya Award winner Pritam Siwach built her career fighting odds to play for India. Now, her daughter Kanika carries that legacy forward, **balancing love, discipline and the burden of a famous name** as she chases her own place in hockey history.

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THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Twenty-year-old centre forward Kanika Siwach is one of the mainstays of the Indian junior hockey team, just as her mother, Pritam Siwach **(left)**, was for the Indian team of the 1990s and 2000s. But if Pritam has her way, there will be more generations of Siwaches playing hockey for India.

When she joined the Indian junior women's hockey camp in Bengaluru, Kanika decorated the wall of her hostel room with a collage of posters. That in itself isn't unusual, since many of her teammates have pictures of players they admire and hope to emulate. But Kanika didn't have to look far for motivation. The photographs and magazine pull-outs on her wall are of her own mother, former India international and 2002 Commonwealth Games gold medallist Pritam.

"I put it up so that I can get inspired by them whenever I see it. I get inspired every day. If I'm feeling low, I remember whose daughter I am and whose blood flows in me. If she could do it, so can I," says Kanika, who is preparing for the Junior Women's Hockey World Cup in December this year.

And if the pictures aren't enough, Pritam is only a phone call away. "We speak every night. Sometimes we discuss hockey, but at other times we simply share our thoughts. We have always been very close. Kanika was born when I was 30, and I was playing international hockey until I was 32, and departmental hockey until much later. When she was very young, I would take her everywhere I went," says Pritam.

With a mother who was a decorated international and is now one of India's most successful coaches (three members of the Indian women's squad that played at the Paris Olympics were trained by Pritam, a Dronacharya Award winner, at her academy in Sonipat), it might have seemed inevitable that Kanika would take up hockey.

But that wasn't a given.

India indeed has its share of multi-generational hockey families. Pritam's son, Yashdeep, has already represented the country internationally. But Pritam and Kanika are among the rare mother-daughter duos to have represented India at any level. Should Kanika eventually earn a senior cap, as many expect, they would become the first mother and daughter to play for the senior national team.

Unbreakable bond: Kanika Siwach, a promising centre forward, with her mother, Pritam, who has been her mentor, coach, and constant source of strength on and off the field. **Right:** Kanika playing for Odisha Warriors at the Women 's Hockey India League. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & SHAHSHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

A lot of that has to do with culture, says Pritam. "I think the difference, why there are next to no mother-daughter generations in Indian hockey, is that many women raise their children, especially their daughters, very protectively. They think of all the struggles they had to go through and don't want their daughters to face the same," she says. "It comes down to how brave you are and how much trust and confidence you have in your daughter. It's not easy in India. If you've been an elite player, chances are you could provide an easier path for your children. You might think, 'Okay, I'll make them study, get them married well, and ensure a good job in the private sector.'"

That, Pritam feels, limits what girls can achieve. "In choosing this safer path, we forget that our daughters have to be happy. I always wanted my daughter to play. Sport made me happy. I want my daughter to experience that as well," she says.

Kanika says she was never pressured into the sport. "I grew up playing everything. Initially, I didn't even care much about hockey. At home, everyone played hockey — my father, mother and brother. During dinner, everyone would constantly talk about it. At that time, I didn't like it because I couldn't understand what they were talking about. But eventually I started playing and found out that I liked it," she says.

Although her mother was a respected player and coach, Kanika insists she didn't get any special treatment. "Nothing was made easy for me. In fact, I felt my mother was extra strict with me because she never wanted to be accused of favouritism. When I was in Class 6, I went for my first competition outside Sonipat. We stayed in a government school where we slept on the bare floor on bedsheets. The washrooms were dirty. I had never experienced anything like that, so I called my mother and asked how I could stay there. She told me, 'Stay like the rest of your teammates are,'" Kanika says.

Pritam remembers that moment vividly. "I knew those were the facilities you get playing hockey in India. If I tried to protect her, then she would never learn to accept it. She wouldn't get the toughness she needed to survive as an Indian

Inspiring legacy: On her hostel wall, Kanika has pasted pictures of her mother, whose journey in Indian hockey keeps her inspired every day.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

hockey player," she says.

High standards

The tough love, Kanika admits, may have been necessary. "Everyone thinks it's easy for me because everything was charted out for me. But it's hard growing up with a lot of eyes on you. There's constant pressure and expectation. I always feel I have to perform twice as well to justify my place," she says.

Those high standards haven't faded even though Kanika is now one of the pillars of the junior team. "She's proud of me but keeps telling me I need to work harder. She says it's not enough to just be part of the team or go to a World Cup — I have to win a medal too. She keeps pushing me," Kanika says.

Try as she might, Pritam admits it's hard for Kanika to develop the same mindset she once had. "I can't expect Kanika to be as mentally tough as I was. We're playing in two very different generations. When I started, there was little media support or exposure. We had to fight not just on the field, but at home and in the village for the chance to play. I got married very young and had both my children during my career. Now things are far more professional. There are leagues, and players are better off financially. I sometimes tell her that no matter how bad things get for her, players from my time had to pick up women's hockey from zero," she says.

Kanika, Pritam says with a smile, is a lot softer. "Kanika plays the same centre-forward position I did, so I can compare us. She's physically stronger than I was at her age and uses that strength well. She's quick with the ball and always looking for chances to score. I used to keep my head down too much. But for all her skill, she isn't as tough mentally. She cries quickly! Her heart is a little weak. I was more of a fighter because I had no choice. If I'd been even a little weaker, I wouldn't have gone anywhere," she says.

Harder workers

Pritam believes players of her generation valued opportunity differently. "Getting a chance to play was a blessing, so we took it more seriously. Players today get more exposure and better facilities, which is great. But maybe we were more dedicated. We constantly worked on our personal technique. What I notice as a coach now is that players rarely do anything beyond their regular training sessions," she says.

Kanika agrees but says her mother's discipline drives her. "I don't think I've seen anyone as dedicated to hockey as her. Even after retiring from international hockey, she played departmental matches for years. One day, a friend called to say, 'Do you know your mom just made a full-length dive and scored a goal?' I was shocked! I'd heard stories of her comeback after having me — when people thought she'd slowed down, she challenged the fastest girl in the team to a race and beat her. Even now, when we play each other, she's really tough to beat. That's the fighting spirit I want," says Kanika.

Bigger dreams

Mother and daughter differ not only in temperament but also in ambition. Kanika's dream is to play in the Los Angeles Olympics three years from now. For Pritam, the Olympics remained a dream unfulfilled.

"It's always the case that every new generation builds on the previous one. For me, the Olympics were something I could never compete in. When I was young, I didn't even know about them. My goal was simply to play for India. For Kanika, the Olympics feel possible. She'll have to work very hard, but I'm happy she's aiming that high," she says. That sense of continuity is how Pritam sees her own mother's role, too.

"When I was young, it was seen as a scandal that I was being allowed to play. My father, uncle, and the people in our village wanted me to be married early. It was my mother, an uneducated woman who had never left the village, who stood up for me. She never played hockey herself, but if it wasn't for her, neither Kanika nor I would have been hockey players," she says.

Having come this far, Pritam is clear she doesn't want the Siwach hockey line to end with Kanika. "I've already told my son that I expect him to get married in three years. I want a grandchild I can start teaching hockey to! By then, I hope I'll have less work at my academy and can focus all my attention on that child!" she laughs.

« Indian hockey is alive because of heritage tournaments »

DILIP TIRKEY

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As Indian hockey marks a century since the formation of the Indian Hockey Federation (IHF) in 1925, Hockey India (HI) — which later succeeded the IHF — is reflecting not only on the sport's illustrious past but also on new ways to elevate its standard in the country.

Coincidentally, as Indian hockey reaches this milestone, the federation is headed by three-time Olympian and former India captain Dilip Tirkey. *Sportstar* spoke to Tirkey — who also served as president when India retained its bronze medal at the Paris 2024 Olympics — to discuss the challenges ahead and HI's vision for the future.

Indian hockey is celebrating its 100-year journey. How do you see this?

A lot of effort went into the formation of the IHF in the 1920s. Over the last century, Indian hockey has given a lot to the country. Our national teams have won gold medals at the 1928, 1932, 1936, 1948, 1952, 1956, 1964 and 1980 Olympics.

They have also won medals in other important events such as the World Cup, the Asian Games, the Commonwealth Games and the Asia Cup.

Post 1980, our performance declined — we couldn't even qualify for the 2008 Olympics. But in 2020 and 2024, we won Olympic bronze medals.

How do you envision the future of HI?

We need to keep global developments in hockey in mind and move forward with our plans. Around 15–20 years ago, Holland, Germany and Australia were among the top teams. Now, countries like Belgium and Spain are doing well. We need to lift our coaching standards and strengthen the Hockey India League (HIL), which has been a great platform for young players.

We also need to identify good coaches. In our country, good players do not want to become coaches.

We want professional coaches to take up the responsibility, especially Indians who can handle the national team so that we don't have to rely on foreigners.

There was a plan to send Indian coaches abroad.

Yes, we plan to send them abroad so that they can watch and learn. We've submitted a proposal to the government.

Do you think team owners withdrawing from the HIL is a challenge?

Of course. HIL is a commercial venture, and everyone wants it to be like the Indian Premier League (IPL). It's still in its early stages, but the response so far has been good. For the first two or three years, the teams may not make a profit, which will happen slowly. We're also planning a better league model that eases the financial burden on franchises.

Women's hockey was doing well earlier but has dipped in performance lately. What are your plans for them?

We need to strengthen our grassroots programmes for both men and women. To build strong national teams, we must nurture players at the U-15, U-17 and U-19 levels. The coaching programme needs to be improved to give them better exposure; only then will we get quality players.

We're developing one where the U-17 and U-19 core groups will train together.

There will also be U-21 and India A teams. All players cannot be part of the Indian team, so there will be a chain.

We have a lot of heritage tournaments such as the Beighton Cup and the Aga Khan Cup. How can we use these to benefit our players?

Indian hockey is alive because of such tournaments. I don't think there are so many tournaments in any other country. We need renowned players to participate in these events to attract spectators. There are so many tournaments that national players can't feature in all of them, such as the National Championships. We've tried to make it compulsory for players to take part in the Nationals to maintain the standard of quality, and we'll continue to do so.

Key to success: "To build strong national teams, we must nurture players at the U-15, U-17 and U-19 levels," said Dilip Tirkey. R. V. MOOTHY

How is HI preparing for upcoming major tournaments?

Next year, both the World Cup and the Asian Games are crucial. We're talking to the chief coach and working on a plan.

India has expressed interest in hosting the 2036 Olympics. Have you begun planning with that in mind?

Yes, absolutely. Hockey fans will expect a strong performance. With the 2032 and 2036 Olympics coming up, we need to start work accordingly.

Before the leap, the crucible

India's junior men's hockey squad enters a home World Cup with clear strengths, known weaknesses, and little margin for error. The tournament will indicate whether two years of structured preparation can **withstand elite pressure.**

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The stage is set in Chennai and Madurai for the FIH Men's Junior World Cup, placing the weight of a billion hopes on India's young brigade. Led by defender Rohit and guided by the legendary P.R. Sreejesh, this two-time champion team is not just participating. It is aiming to reclaim the crown last won on home soil in 2016.

Fresh off a silver medal at the Sultan of Johor Cup, the India colts enter with momentum and the distinct advantage of a passionate home crowd. The injury to talismanic forward Araijeet Singh Hundal poses a setback, but it also offers the squad a chance to rise beyond dependence on star power.

Earlier this year, the junior side competed against top international opponents at the Four Nations

HOCKEY INDIA

INDIAN SQUAD

Goalkeepers
Bikramjit Singh, Princedeep Singh
Defenders
Rohit (c), Talem Priyobarta, Anmol Ekka, Amir Ali, Sunil Palakshappa Bennur, Shardanand Tiwari
Midfielders
Ankit Pal, Thounaojam Ingalemba Luwang, Adrohit Ekka, Rosan Kujur, Manmeet Singh, Gurjot Singh
Forwards
Arshdeep Singh, Sourabh Anand Kushwaha, Ajeet Yadav, Dilraj Singh
Reserve players
Ravneet Singh, Rohit Kullu

Tournament in Berlin, followed by a European tour across Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands before the Sultan of Johor Cup. Since then, the squad has undergone intensive training at its SAI Bengaluru camp, which included practice matches against the senior team.

The six-nation event in Malaysia exposed a clear concern: Penalty Corner conversion. Across seven matches, India managed only eight goals from 53 attempts. While ground conditions have been discussed at length, the issue remains significant heading into the World Cup.

"We have addressed the issue in the camp. We have put extra emphasis on both PC and PC defence. We have good drag flickers, who are flicking 200-300 a day. They have gained experience from the tournament and are now better equipped," said Sreejesh.

Skipper Rohit will be central during short corners. The drag flick specialist was India's top scorer in the previous edition (3), and in Hundal's absence, the Chandigarh-born defender is determined to lead from the front. "We are very excited to play in front of our people. This is a big tournament, and we understand its importance. We have trained hard for the last two years, and now it is all about executing those during matches," said Rohit.

As Sreejesh takes on his first major coaching assignment, he will inevitably draw attention. His focus, however, lies beyond immediate headlines. He views this campaign as part of a larger effort to secure the future of Indian hockey.

The four-time Olympian emphasised that while winning remains the primary goal, the tournament also serves as a platform to prepare players for the long road ahead.

"One thing I always tell the boys is to dream big. They will not be playing in the junior team forever. Their dream should be to play in Los Angeles 2028 or Brisbane 2032. It is

Guiding transition: Indian hockey great P.R. Sreejesh oversees his first major assignment as junior coach, using the World Cup to test both results and the development pathway. HOCKEY INDIA

important for them to have a long vision about their career," the two-time Olympic bronze medallist explained. "This is a place where they gain experience, playing in front of a huge crowd. They will learn to control themselves and execute the simple, basic things under pressure."

All 18 members of India's squad are part of Hockey India League teams, and many have already experienced packed stadiums. Still, performing in a franchise league and representing the country on home soil are entirely different challenges.

For India, success will hinge on the mental game and on transforming the weight of expectations and the crowd's energy into fuel for a deep run.

"The team is very confident with the way we have prepared for this tournament, and we will continue our training to ensure we are fully ready for the challenges ahead," said defender Amir Ali.

The 14th edition features a revamped structure, with 24 teams from six continents competing for the title.

India, drawn in Pool B, opens its campaign against Chile, followed by matches against Oman, which replaced Pakistan, and Switzerland.

The colts are widely expected to top their group and secure a clear path to the quarterfinals. Yet they must remain sharp from the outset, since one lapse can derail two years of preparation.

Performances in Malaysia highlighted vulnerabilities, particularly against fast counter-attacks. Losses to Australia, including the final, and a draw against Pakistan, illustrated how strong opponents offer few opportunities for recovery.

This sets up a strategic dilemma for Sreejesh: whether to lean on the traditional flair and skill that define Indian hockey or adopt a more structured, possession-oriented approach common in Europe. He prefers a pragmatic, situation-based method. "It will depend on the opposition. Against teams which will defend deep, we have to play in a certain way. Against teams which will employ zonal or man-to-man marking, we will have to adapt accordingly. I don't want the players to relinquish the Indian skill-based style, but also don't want to be boxed in one category," Sreejesh concluded.

India's real test is likely to emerge in the quarterfinals, when the squad encounters top-tier opponents.

As the senior national team navigates a transition, the spotlight now turns to the next generation. This is not just a chance for them to experience a major event. It is their defining moment, the opportunity to make the leap that places them at the heart of Indian hockey's future.

A quiet revival gathers pace

Two years after hosting the Asian Champions Trophy, Tamil Nadu is preparing for another premium event as the FIH Junior Men's World Cup 2025 brings global hockey back to the Coromandel coast for the first time in 17 years.

The Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium in Chennai will co-host the tournament with a newly built hockey complex at the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT) facility in Madurai.

"The Government of Tamil Nadu had a wonderful collaboration with FIH and Hockey India during the Champions Trophy. The idea [of hosting this World Cup] was to ensure the tournament reaches different parts of the State. Madurai already had a hockey turf and is adjacent to areas like Kovilpatti, Virudhunagar and Ramanathapuram, which are renowned for their hockey culture," said Meghanatha Reddy IAS, Member Secretary, SDAT.

"Hosting a global tournament helps spruce up the infrastructure in the area, which will serve the people for the next 20 years at least. Players from close to 12 teams will be playing in Madurai. This will be a huge inspiration for the budding talent who wish to take up the game," he added.

P.R. Sreejesh, double Olympic medallist and head coach of the men's junior team, echoed that sentiment, backing the push to take big-ticket events to "hearts of cities and villages".

"Conducting tournaments in the remote areas will help kids get a closer view of the sport, the intensity and the speed of play. When they dream about playing for our country, these experiences are going to show them the realistic way," the former India goalkeeper said.

The Tamil Nadu government has allocated Rs. 25 crore to build the new Madurai stadium, which includes a world-class pitch and upgraded lighting. Another Rs. 7 crore has gone into improving the Chennai venue with tensile roofing and new seating.

Gearing up with confidence and conviction

Backed by experience, improved defence and a favourable draw, the junior women enter the World Cup **believing** they can challenge anyone.

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HOCKEY INDIA

The National Stadium Sports Park in Santiago will play host as the Indian junior women's hockey team embarks upon an expedition to leave an indelible mark at the FIH 2025 Junior Hockey World Cup. The Chilean capital will organise the tournament for the second edition running, and India will hope to return with more than just a ninth-place finish to show.

In 2023, India faltered at the hands of Belgium and Germany in the group stage, though it managed to squeeze out the best possible outcome from that position with three consecutive wins in the classification rounds. This time around, the prospect of advancing appears more attainable after the competition's expansion from 16 to 24 teams.

In Pool C, India will face two lower-ranked teams — Ireland and Namibia. However, the presence of world No. 3 Germany makes topping the group an arduous task. The team will be confident of making the final eight as one of the two best second-placed teams in the preliminary stage.

Spearheading India's charge will be skipper Jyoti Singh, who will be keen to tap into her experience of partaking in the previous edition. Midfielders Sunelita Toppo and Sakshi Rana, along with forward Hina Bano, are the other squad members with prior know-how of the grandest stage.

"I'm very excited. As a captain, I have responsibilities, but I'm under no pressure because of the confidence I have in the team and the staff," Jyoti told *Sportstar*.

Head coach Tushar Khandker, who was also in charge in 2023, says the victorious Asia Cup campaign late last year, followed by trips to Argentina, Belgium, Germany and Australia, has been ideal preparation for the global event.

"In the last six or seven months, we have trained a lot, and we played really good, competitive matches. The girls have improved from what they were in December 2024 (Asia Cup)," Khandker said.

"We have taken a step forward defensively. We've also worked hard on other sectors, like the opponent's scoring area. Trying to net as many goals as possible is something we will work on until the last minute," he added. India suffered a reverse against China in the group stage of the continental tournament, but quickly returned to winning ways to force a rematch in the final. The neighbour was eventually dispelled in a shoot-out following a 1-1 draw, thanks to the heroics of goalkeeper Nidhi. "We had only one thing in mind," said Jyoti, reminiscing about that game. "No matter what is happening on the field, we just had to win that match."

This is the level of conviction Khandker will expect from his wards as they head into the biggest test in their blossoming careers.

"We have the confidence to beat any team in the world. We need to believe in our system, what we've practised in training and what we're learning on the pitch," the skipper asserted.

INDIAN SQUAD

Goalkeepers
Nidhi, Engil Harsha Rani Minz
Defenders
Manisha, Lalthanlualangi, Sakshi Shukla, Puja Sahoo, Nandini
Midfielders
Sakshi Rana, Ishika, Sunelita Toppo, Jyoti Singh, Khaidem Shileima Chanu, Binima Dhan
Forwards
Sonam, Purnima Yadav, Kanika Siwach, Hina Bano, Sukhveer Kaur
Reserve players
Priyanka Yadav, Parwati Topno

FOR MORE STORIES

THRILLER NIGHTS

REUTERS

AP

Manchester City celebrated Pep Guardiola's **historic** 1000th match with a commanding victory over title-rival Liverpool.

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The latest Premier League matchweek had most of the spotlight on Manchester City's home match against Liverpool, but it was not just any other clash. It was Pep Guardiola's **(left)** 1,000th match in his managerial career. And while his former rival Jurgen Klopp had sent a personal video message congratulating the Spaniard on the milestone, on the pitch he faced Klopp's successor, Arne Slot, beside him on the touchline.

In the end, the Men in Blue ensured Guardiola's historic night was not spoilt, sealing a 3-0 win over their rival. Erling Haaland **(above)**, Nico Gonzalez and a brilliant finish by Jeremy Doku delivered all three points to Man City.

Man City's win became even more important in the context of the title race because Arsenal ended up dropping points against Sunderland after a 2-2 draw. With goals from Bukayo Saka and Leandro Trossard keeping the Gunners ahead until late in the match, Brian Brobbey lit up the Stadium of Light with an equaliser in the fourth minute of second-half stoppage time.

Manchester United's 2-2 draw against Tottenham Hotspur turned out to be a thriller in its own right. Bryan Mbeumo's goal kept the Red Devils ahead for most of the match, but Mathys Tel (81) and Richarlison (90+1) scored two late goals, sending the home crowd into raptures as they seemed certain of three points. But Matthijs de Ligt had the last laugh,

Hero act: Manchester United's Matthijs de Ligt scored a late equaliser to salvage a 2-2 draw against Tottenham Hotspur. REUTERS

equalising for United from a corner in the sixth minute of stoppage time.

For Chelsea, it was an easy day at the office as the Blues cruised to a 3-0 win against Wolverhampton Wanderers. Elsewhere, Aston Villa and Brentford posted convincing wins against Bournemouth and Newcastle United, respectively.

At the end of matchday 11, Arsenal (26) tops the table, with Man City (22), Chelsea (20) and Sunderland (19) in second, third and fourth. Tottenham, Villa, Man United and Liverpool — all on 18 points — are fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth, respectively.

La Liga

It was a frustrating week for Real Madrid after Xabi Alonso's men played out a goalless draw against Rayo Vallecano.

The result became even more frustrating for Real because defending champion and arch-rival Barcelona beat Celta Vigo 4-2, with Robert Lewandowski scoring a hat-trick and Lamine Yamal and Frankie de Jong chipping in with one each. The evening almost turned out to be perfect for Hansi Flick's men but finished on an irritating note as Frenkie de Jong saw a red card in the fifth minute of second-half stoppage time. Atletico Madrid got the job done with a 3-1 win against Levante courtesy of an Antoine Griezmann brace and an own goal by Adrian de la Fuente.

It was contrasting fortunes for the two Basque clubs: Athletic Bilbao claimed three points with a 1-0 win against promoted Oviedo, while Real Sociedad played out a 1-1 draw with Elche. Villarreal beat Espanyol 2-0 to notch its third consecutive win and maintain a Champions League spot.

At the end of matchday 12, Real Madrid (31) leads the standings. Barcelona (28) is second, with Villarreal (26) and Atletico Madrid (25) in third and fourth.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich's winning streak finally came to a halt after Union Berlin held the defending champion to a 2-2 draw, stopping the Bavarian side from winning its 17th consecutive match in all competitions. Luis Diaz's goal put Bayern ahead, but Berlin mounted a comeback courtesy of a brace by Danilho Doekhi.

With a loss in sight, Harry Kane turned saviour for his team with a 90th-minute equaliser.

Elsewhere, Borussia Dortmund and Hamburger SV played out a 1-1 draw, while RB Leipzig suffered a shock 1-3 loss against Hoffenheim.

VfB Stuttgart played a five-goal thriller against Augsburg, winning 3-2. It was a fun outing for Bayer Leverkusen as it thrashed Heidenheim 6-0, including braces from Patrik Schick and Ibrahim Maza.

At the end of matchday 10, Bayern (28) leads the table, with RB Leipzig (22) second. Dortmund and Stuttgart — both on 21 points — occupy third

Mixed fortunes: Bayern Munich's Luis Diaz (extreme left) scored twice before being sent off for a bad challenge. REUTERS

and fourth, while Leverkusen (20) is fifth.

Serie A

The biggest news from matchday 11 of Italy's top flight was defending champion Napoli's 0-2 loss against Bologna, meaning Napoli dropped points for the second consecutive league game after drawing its previous one against Como.

Roma notched a 2-0 win against Udinese, while Inter beat Lazio by the same margin.

AC Milan and Juventus ended up dropping points after draws against Parma and Torino, respectively.

According to the latest standings, Inter (24) leads the Scudetto race, with Roma (24) second only by goal difference. Milan and Napoli — both on 22 — are third and fourth, while Juventus (19) is sixth.

Ligue 1

PSG and Lyon played out the game of the week in French top-flight football, with Luis Enrique's men winning 3-2 courtesy of a 90+5-minute winner by Joao Neves. Marseille had an easy day at the office, beating Brest 3-0.

Strasbourg and Lens won their respective matches against LOSC Lille and Monaco. At the end of matchday 12, PSG (27) leads the table, with Marseille (25), Lens (25) and Strasbourg (22) in second, third and fourth.

UEFA Champions League

English teams mostly dominated proceedings as the league phase of the UEFA Champions League reached its midway point. Arsenal, which is yet to concede in the competition, strengthened its position at the top of the table with a comfortable win against Slavia Praha, thanks to a penalty from Bukayo Saka and a double from Mikel Merino. The game also saw Max Dowman become the youngest player to feature in a Champions League game (15 years and 308 days), breaking Youssoufa Moukoko's 2020 record (16 years and 18 days) set while playing for Borussia Dortmund.

Manchester City also kept its unbeaten start intact with a dominant 4-1 win against German giant Borussia Dortmund. Erling Haaland scored against his former club, while Phil Foden netted two identical goals from outside the box to propel City to fourth in the standings.

Liverpool faced the toughest task among English teams this week as it hosted record champion Real Madrid. However, even with a recent dip in form, the Reds turned up on the night and repeatedly tested Thibaut Courtois, who made eight saves. In the end, Alexis Mac Allister's header from a Dominik Szoboszlai free kick proved decisive as Liverpool claimed all three points. Newcastle United and Tottenham Hotspur had easy outings against Copenhagen and Athletic Club, respectively, while Chelsea was the only English club to drop points — drawing 2-2 with Qarabag FK.

The marquee clash of the gameweek took place at Parc des Princes in Paris, where defending champion PSG hosted Bayern Munich. Bayern's Luis Diaz had a very eventful first half, scoring twice before being sent off for a bad challenge on Achraf Hakimi. Joao Neves halved the deficit for the Parisians, but could not find an equaliser as the home side fell to its first defeat in the competition since last season's quarterfinal second leg against Aston Villa.

Elsewhere, Barcelona dropped points after a 3-3 draw with Club Brugge. The Catalan side had to level the score three times, with Ferran Torres and Lamine Yamal netting one each before Christos Tzolis scored an own goal to help Barca escape with a point. Meanwhile, Inter Milan maintained its perfect start with a hard-fought 2-1 win against Kairat Almaty, thanks to goals from Lautaro Martinez and Carlos Augusto.

With four matchweeks left, only Bayern, Arsenal and Inter have perfect records with 12 points, while Man City sits fourth with 10. At the other end, Benfica and Ajax remain without a point after four matches.

World Cup qualifiers

"I swear that I'm going to try to be a good boy," said Cristiano Ronaldo **(facing page)** at the pre-match press conference for Portugal's FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifier against Ireland.

However, on the night, the 'good

boy' label lasted only an hour as he drove his elbow into Dara O'Shea's back before engaging in a gestured showdown with the Irish fans. To heighten the tension, the 40-year-old was shown marching orders for the first time in his international career before being jeered off the field by home supporters. Portugal ended up losing 2-0 and extending its qualification wait, while Ireland stayed in the fight thanks to a brace from Troy Parrott.

In its following game against Armenia, things seemed to be heading south for Portugal at 1-1, but Bruno Fernandes and Joao Neves stepped up with hat-tricks to make it 9-1 and send their side to the World Cup. Ireland, meanwhile, kept its fairytale going, coming from a goal down to beat Hungary 3-2 and seal a playoff spot. Parrott was at the heart of it, scoring all three goals, including a last-minute winner.

Meanwhile, Norway returned to the World Cup for the first time since 1998 after an unblemished qualifying campaign, capped by a 4-1 win against Italy. Although Italy needed to win by at least nine goals to take top spot, it was Norway instead that took its chances and powered through

AP

Leading from the front: Congo captain Chancel Mbemba celebrates his winning penalty in a shootout against Nigeria. REUTERS

Italy's defence with four second-half goals, including a brace for Erling Haaland, who now has 32 goals this season for club and country.

Italy will now have to go through the playoffs to avoid missing a third straight World Cup.

Joining Portugal and Norway at the tournament are Croatia and France. Kylian Mbappe led from the front with a brace as France beat Ukraine 4-0 to secure a spot, while Croatia overturned a one-goal deficit to beat Faroe Islands 3-1 and qualify.

While Europe's World Cup picture took shape, in Africa the race for the playoff spot threw up a couple of surprises. DR Congo stunned giants Cameroon and Nigeria to emerge as the continent's representative for FIFA's six-team Intercontinental Playoff tournament in March, which will send two teams to the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

(All results updated as of November 16)

THE VOICE THAT HELPED THEM FIND THEIRS

He arrived to a squad unsure of itself. **Joakim Alexandersson** has helped reshape it by steadying minds before systems.

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When Joakim Alexandersson first met the Indian women's Under-17 and U-20 teams at the start of the year, he immediately noticed how shy they were – talented, but overly cautious. As a coach beginning a new job, one of Joakim's priorities was to make sure the players did not feel intimidated by anything, least of all by him.

"I've worked a lot to make sure they understand they don't have to be afraid of me," says Joakim. "I'm just a human being, even if I don't have any hair or speak their language."

Ten months and two long-awaited Asian Cup qualifications later, Joakim's assessment of the group carried a very different tone. "It seems like nothing can stop them now."

A very good mindset

Joakim believes football is as much a mental game as it is a physical one. He does not compromise on discipline and expects a "fighting spirit" from every player.

"The hard work has to be there. I don't want to see casual players on the pitch," Joakim asserts.

"Players all around the world make mistakes, that's fine. It's more about behaviour. If you have a very good mindset to win the ball back after mistakes, if you can forget mistakes quickly, that's what I value," the 49-year-old adds.

This restlessness and ambition were evident throughout both teams' qualifying campaigns, particularly in the U-17 side. While the U-20 team secured its place with two wins, a draw, and no goals conceded, the younger group had a tougher path. After defeating the host Kyrgyzstan 2–1, India went into a decisive match against Uzbekistan, needing only a draw to qualify.

Uzbekistan, which has risen sharply in recent years, qualifying for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and winning the men's AFC U-17 Asian Cup in April, posed a formidable challenge.

On the day, India went a goal down before turning the tide, sparked by Joakim's early substitutions. After Uzbekistan scored in the 38th minute, Joakim reacted quickly and brought on Thandamoni Baskey with five minutes left in the first half. The midfielder scored the equaliser and later set up Anushka Kumari's winner.

Joakim says such decisions come from understanding exactly what he wants from each position.

"You see a problem on the pitch, you make the change then and there. That's why I decided to do some early substitutions in this latest game, because I needed to see some changes. We were struggling a lot, especially in how we created chances," Joakim explained.

"If I can't see these kinds of actions, then it's very simple: we have to make some changes," he adds.

Balancing dual roles

For Joakim, managing two different age groups has not been as demanding as it might seem. The

reason, he says, is simple: success.

"It hasn't been any problem so far because, of course, when you succeed at what you're doing, it's easier to work for sure," Joakim says with a smile.

"It's about showing the players that I want to work hard also, because if I show them that I want to work hard and work on small things in a long-term way, they can understand that this is what has to be done," he explains.

He adds that while the aggressive playing style is almost identical for both U-17 and U-20, he tends to experiment more with the older group.

"Some of these players are very young. They are only 14, 15, 16 years old. At those ages, it is more about behaviour. There is still time to develop skills. But with the U-20s, you can go into more tactical things," he says, adding, "It hasn't been too difficult because I also have some good assistant coaches who have been there to assist the other team when I have not been available."

Staying grounded

India's qualification across three women's age categories next year reflects how effective sound mentorship and structure can be. But Joakim says he warns his players not to get too comfortable.

He admits that compared to some of the best teams in Asia, India still has a limited talent pool, something he hopes will improve over the coming decade.

"The most important thing is to understand that we have had to work so hard for this. I've told both batches that when they go back to their home clubs, don't be satisfied being a star in your team," he tells.

"Try to utilise every training session to push yourself harder, to take more actions in both defending and attacking. That is the only way we can change things here."

With the tournaments also serving as qualifiers for their respective World Cups, Joakim plans to commit fully.

"Expectations are that hopefully we will be able to face good opponents in front of the Asian Cup and that we have some good exposures, a good time together," says Joakim.

"We have to progress with both teams to compete because we don't go in there only to participate. We really want to give it a chance," he adds.

While the U-17 squad is yet to learn its opponents, the senior side faces an imposing task against record winner Japan, as well as Australia and Chinese Taipei. For both teams, qualifying itself marks the end of a long wait. India last appeared in continental age-group competitions two decades ago: the U-17 side exited in the group stage in 2005, while the U-20 team met a similar fate in 2006 in what was then the AFC U-19 Women's Championship.

From urging players to speak up to instilling a winning culture, Joakim has helped create belief in Indian women's football. And in a period of uncertainty for the men's game, his impact suggests that Indian football's revival might well begin with its women.

AFC Under-20 Women's Asian Cup: April 1-18, 2026, Thailand
AFC Under-17 Women's Asian Cup: April 30 – May 17, 2026, China

AFP

STATEMENT WIN

Lando Norris **extended his lead** at the top with a solid win at the Brazilian Grand Prix.

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In the sacred land of Ayrton Senna, spectacular racing feels almost inevitable. Last year's Brazilian Grand Prix only strengthened that belief. In treacherous, rain-soaked conditions, Max Verstappen delivered a masterclass in control and conviction, charging from 17th on the grid to a commanding victory at Interlagos.

By the chequered flag, he had completed one of Formula One's great recoveries, which all but marked the end of Lando Norris' valiant title pursuit, as the reigning world champion once again proved untouchable when it mattered most.

A year later, the storied circuit was the perfect stage for an overtaking fest, some rewarding and some repenting. For Norris **(above)**, the inability to brave pressure situations had proven costly all too many times, but he showed the world that he can, and has, become a changed competitor.

Calm, composed, and perfectly in tune with his McLaren, he stayed clear of the high-octane action just behind. There was never the haunting sight of the Dutchman in his mirrors as Norris coasted to his 11th victory, grabbing the maximum 33 points available in the weekend.

The double triumph — in the sprint and main race — extended his lead over a struggling Oscar Piastri, whose difficult outing left him 24 points behind at the top and only 25 ahead of Verstappen in third.

Pitlane, puncture, podium

While Norris stood atop the podium, admiration flowed for the man on the third step — Verstappen. To rebound from his worst qualifying in years and complete a rare pitlane-to-podium drive was no small feat. Overcoming an early puncture, he mounted an unforgettable charge through the field, keeping himself firmly in title contention.

A disappointing 16th place in Saturday's qualifying had confirmed Red Bull's setup woes. The team seized the opportunity to implement radical changes and install a new engine, resulting in a compulsory pitlane start. But memories of his P17-to-P1 charge at this very circuit last year lingered. With that confidence and "nothing to lose", Verstappen attacked relentlessly, picking off rivals one by one until only two cars separated him from the lead.

Approaching in red-hot form, any driver would be wary of the imminent

Strong show: Max Verstappen (left) mounted an unforgettable charge through the field to finish third, keeping himself firmly in title contention. AP

threat they would be coming under, but not young Kimi Antonelli **(above, right)**. The Mercedes driver showed remarkable composure to fend off the Dutchman and secure a career-best second place. The tension between them melted away in a heartfelt post-race embrace.

For Antonelli, it was a defining result; for Verstappen, another testament to his fighting spirit. And for Norris, it was a statement win that all but reshaped the championship narrative, one that saw him playing catch-up a few weeks ago.

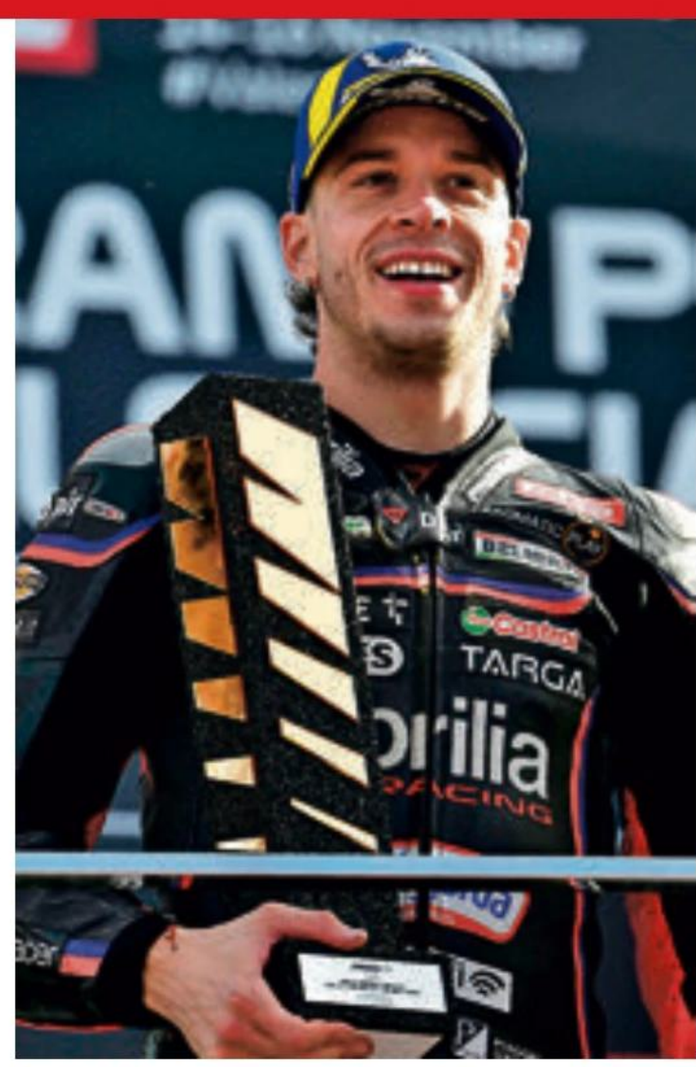
Uphill task

For Piastri, a bright start to the season has gradually faded since the weekend in Monza. The McLaren driver admitted that his mindset heading into Baku, the next event, wasn't ideal, shaped in part by the fallout from Italy, where team orders created friction within the garage.

Letting Norris through then has had lasting repercussions. Five races later, that decision seems to have snowballed into a string of frustrations. In Azerbaijan, an early crash compounded the pressure — the culmination of what Piastri described as a "perfect storm" that disrupted both his rhythm and confidence. Since then, he has struggled to fully recover.

Heading into Brazil, he trailed Norris by just a single point, but a costly mistake in the sprint changed that. After hitting the wall early in the session, the gap grew to nine points, leaving Sunday as a potential turning point. Starting fourth kept him in the mix, but during a Safety Car restart, Piastri took a bold lunge on Antonelli, and the move backfired. The two made contact, sending Antonelli into Charles Leclerc, who was attempting to pass around the outside. The collision ended the Ferrari driver's race and earned Piastri a debated 10-second penalty.

He recovered to finish fifth, having last stood on the podium five races ago. But Piastri knew that the result was nowhere near enough. With just three Grand Prix races and one sprint remaining, the 24-year-old needs to rediscover his early-season form and perhaps rely on a touch of fortune if he hopes to catch Norris and keep the championship fight alive.



REUTERS

MotoGP

Aprilia rider Marco Bezzecchi **(in pics)** closed out the 2025 MotoGP season with back-to-back statement wins to cap a fine end to his year.

At the concluding Valencia round, the 27-year-old sealed third place in the championship in the sprint and edged out Raul Fernandez in the main race to celebrate in style. Bezzecchi also triumphed the previous weekend in Portugal as Aprilia sealed back-to-back Grand Prix victories for the first time. The Italian's third place also gave Aprilia its first top-three championship finish.

While Marc Marquez had clinched his seventh world title with five events to spare in Japan in September, his brother Alex sealed second place overall in October, wrapping up a memorable year for Ducati and the Marquez family.

AFP

TEST OF ENDURANCE

With crowds lining the streets and athletes pushing their limits, **Ironman 70.3** delivered moments of grit, community, and quiet triumph.

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The bike stand in front of Miramar Beach is a busy place the day before the fifth edition of Ironman 70.3 in Goa. It is filled with athletes attempting the 1.9km swim, 90km bike, and 21.1km marathon, who come a day early to drop their bikes off ahead of the race.

Those returning might greet old faces or study the ideal placement for a fast transition the next day, while first-timers may be more skittish with excitement. All are preparing for what lies ahead.

To the uninitiated, the thought of attempting the course is imposing. However, that underlines something fundamental about Ironman: every person who attempts it is fuelled by passion, determination, even a touch of craziness. There is a personal story behind every single participant who lines up for an Ironman 70.3.

A way of life

Triathlon has become a way of life for Shilpa Dugar **(facing page: extreme right, top)**. An architect from Coimbatore, her childhood sports background provided an avenue into endurance sport, which soon became a passion. Shilpa performed impressively, finishing third in the 50–54 age category and qualifying for the World Championship for the second time.

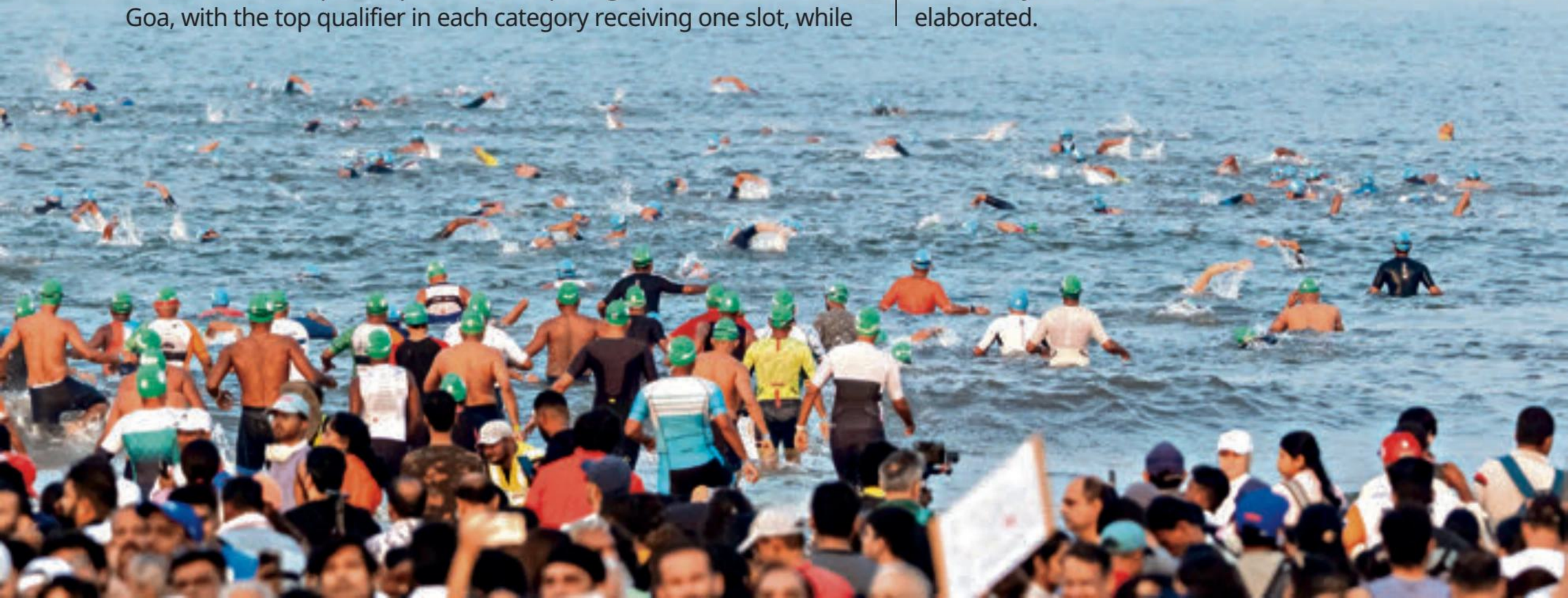
She came into the race open-minded. "I just wanted to do whatever best was possible in the event. It was not a hard and fast rule that I want this or I want that. "Just keep calm and focus on whatever you have trained for, and finish the race in a good way," she said, explaining how she dealt with tough conditions, including the heat and humidity that made the latter two legs especially difficult.

"You are only your competitor, you are not competing with someone else." She will head to the Ironman World Championship in Nice in 2026 after accepting a roll-down qualification position (a total of 50 World Championship slots were up for grabs at Ironman 70.3 Goa, with the top qualifier in each category receiving one slot, while the remainder were allocated based on a performance ranking adjusted for age category). "The World Championship experience is amazing, and I didn't want to miss out if I got a slot," she said. "You learn a lot when you see the world's best athletes over there."

Another person making a Goa return was Hardik Vaghela **(facing page: middle)**, taking part for the second time. The head of a VFX production house in Pune, he began endurance sport as a challenge to himself. "My goal was to do a full Ironman when I was 40. So I started at 37, I'm 40 now. In August this year, 2025, I did a full Ironman (140.6 miles in total) in Copenhagen," he said.

Goa provided more success, as Hardik got through the heat ("I was taking ice baths at the aid station") to better his 2024 time by 10 minutes. He celebrated by breaking out into the iconic Shah Rukh Khan pose, arms aloft as he crossed the finishing line.

For Hardik, endurance sport has become a lifestyle. "This is something which I think everyone should get into after you're 35, 40; you have to work towards becoming an athlete. It doesn't matter which sport it is, but I think everyone should," he elaborated.



United in spirit: Participants competed in the 21.1 km marathon (above), the 1.9 km swim (facing page), and the 90 km bike ride — a combined total of 113 km, or 70.3 miles. PICS: SPECIAL ARRANGMENT

First steps

Each year, Ironman sees a host of debutants, and among those making his bow was Sriram Venkitaraman **(below)**, an IAS officer from Kochi. Having started with cycling and running, he decided to take up the triathlon at the suggestion of his wife. "We come to Goa every year, and because it was happening here she was very keen that I do it," he said.

After training with coaches for cycling and swimming (he started swimming just three months before Ironman), he finished in just over six hours. "One of the greatest feelings I've had in recent years, mind-blowing," he said, describing the feeling of finishing the race. "To call yourself an Ironman is the greatest thing." Has the triathlon bug bitten him now? "Absolutely, I'm going to come back next year and better my time," he said.

Consistent crowd support throughout the race also stood out. Unperturbed by an early start, large crowds made their presence felt as the sun rose to help participants begin their swim leg. That support remained throughout, with spectators lining the biking and running routes as well.

The right vibe

Dr Jack Sequeira Road towards Dona Paula was a particularly impressive sight. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, it turned from an empty street into a thronging mass of people urging competitors through the second transition, and ultimately cheering them home as they completed their courses.

"Goan fans are the best," Sriram said of the crowds. "Especially during the run, when your legs are gone and you somehow have to cross the finish line, fans were the ones that kept us motivated. They were a big reason that I finished."

"The more people there are, the more fun it is," said Hardik. "I had a really great experience in Copenhagen, where it felt like the entire city had lined up back to back on the entire course, and it's similar here also in a lot of places."

An extra note of praise was reserved for the volunteers who dotted the course to assist participants. "It was super — the voluntary services, everything was very good everywhere. On the run route, on swim, on bike, things were beautifully organised," Shilpa said.

Sometime later, the roads would have cleared, and the bike racks on Miramar Beach would have disappeared. What will be left is a memory of a day when, armed with the support of that raucous local crowd, it became more than merely a race course. Under the sweltering sun, it became a canvas upon which hopes, dreams, and ambitions came to fruition across 70.3 miles.

REUTERS

SINCARAZ REBOOTED

With his second consecutive ATP Finals title, Jannik Sinner restored a hint of **renewed balance** against arch-rival Carlos Alcaraz.

FOR MORE STORIES

Paul Fein

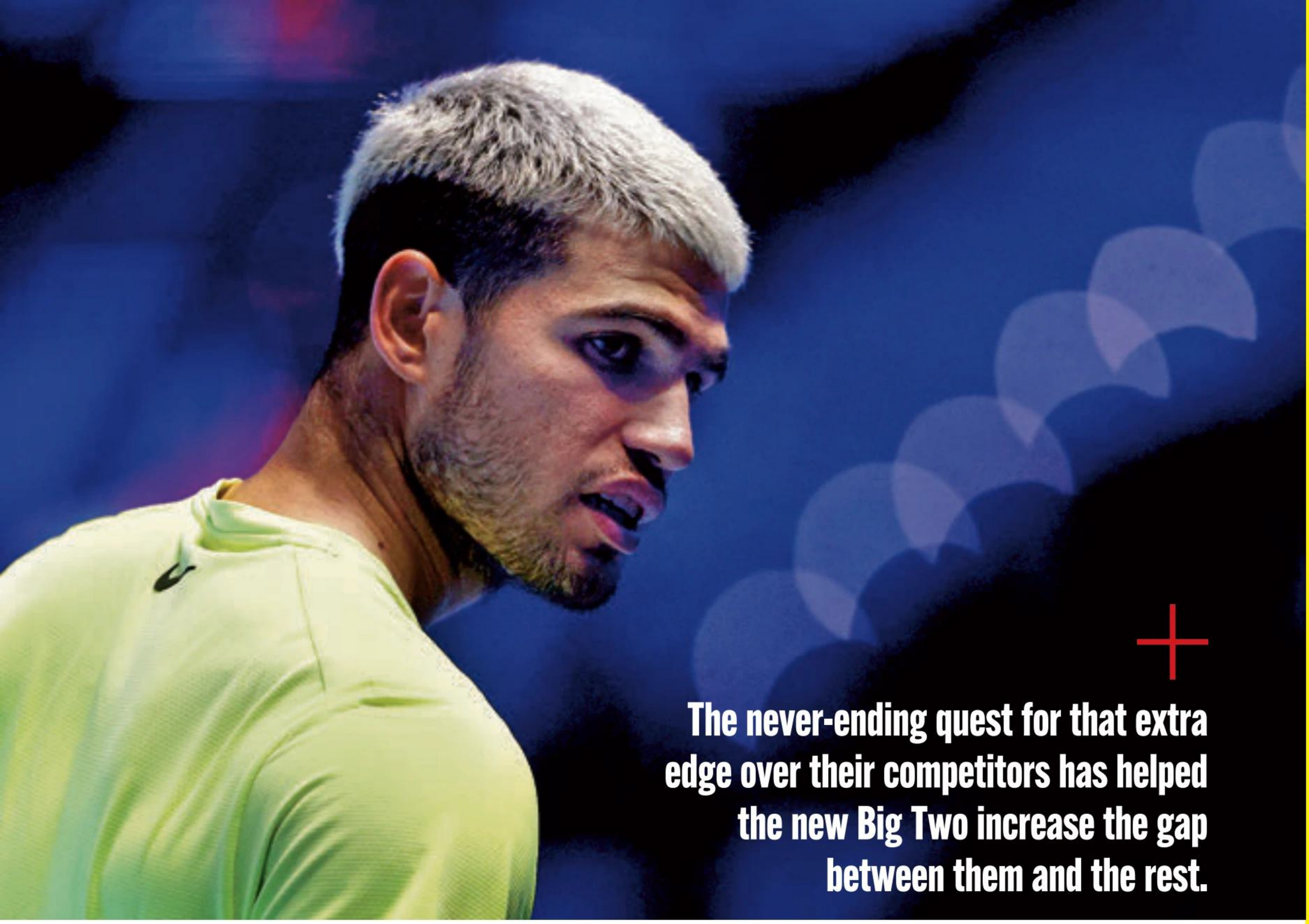
Rarely has a non-Grand Slam match in a generational rivalry between young superstars meant as much as this duel at the 2025 ATP Finals. Carlos Alcaraz had split the last eight Majors with Jannik Sinner **(left)**, while the latter had won the season-ending tournament last year. The Italian desperately needed to defend his title.

One statistic told the stark truth about this increasingly lopsided rivalry: since the start of 2024, Sinner dominated the rest of the ATP Tour with a gaudy 129-5 match record against everyone except Alcaraz. Against his kryptonite, he was an abysmal 1-7. "If Sinner loses this one, he thinks: I won two Majors [this year] and I'm this good, but I can't beat that guy," said former No. 1 Jim Courier. "That's why this match weighs so heavily on Sinner."

Sinner seems to thrive on pressure, though. We first learned about his sangfroid after he made his orange-clay 'carota' fans nervous wrecks before rallying from two sets down to beat Daniil Medvedev in the 2024 Australian Open final. "I like to dance in the pressure storm," he said afterwards. "I like it, because that's where most of the time I bring out my best tennis."

This was another critical time. His opponent, Alcaraz, was far superior to Medvedev, but so is the much-improved Sinner. The wiry-strong 6'3" Italian has honed his skills, expanded his repertoire, increased his strength and speed, and sharpened his tactics under the astute coaching of Darren Cahill and Simone Vagnozzi.

Riding a 30-match indoor winning streak, the 24-year-old Italian boasted a 20-1 record since losing the U.S Open final to his nemesis. The fervent 12,500 Inalpi Arena spectators in Turin would also cheer,



Technical evolution: After his Wimbledon final loss to Sinner this year, Alcaraz shortened his groundstroke backswings by six inches and added five grams to his racquet to increase power and add stability on serve returns. REUTERS

chant, and sing for their beloved folk hero. Alcaraz grinned when he mentioned that he hoped to have three or four fans rooting for him.

Following that disappointing four-set loss to Alcaraz at Flushing Meadows, Sinner acknowledged he was "too predictable." Just as Alcaraz had upgraded his tactics after Sinner whipped him in the Wimbledon final — shortened his groundstroke backswings by six inches and added five grams to his racquet to increase power and add stability on serve returns — Sinner had to make major changes to improve.

"Sinner is shadow boxing against Alcaraz," pointed out Courier on *Tennis Channel*, who noted that his own technique limitations prevented him from challenging superstar Pete Sampras 30 years ago.

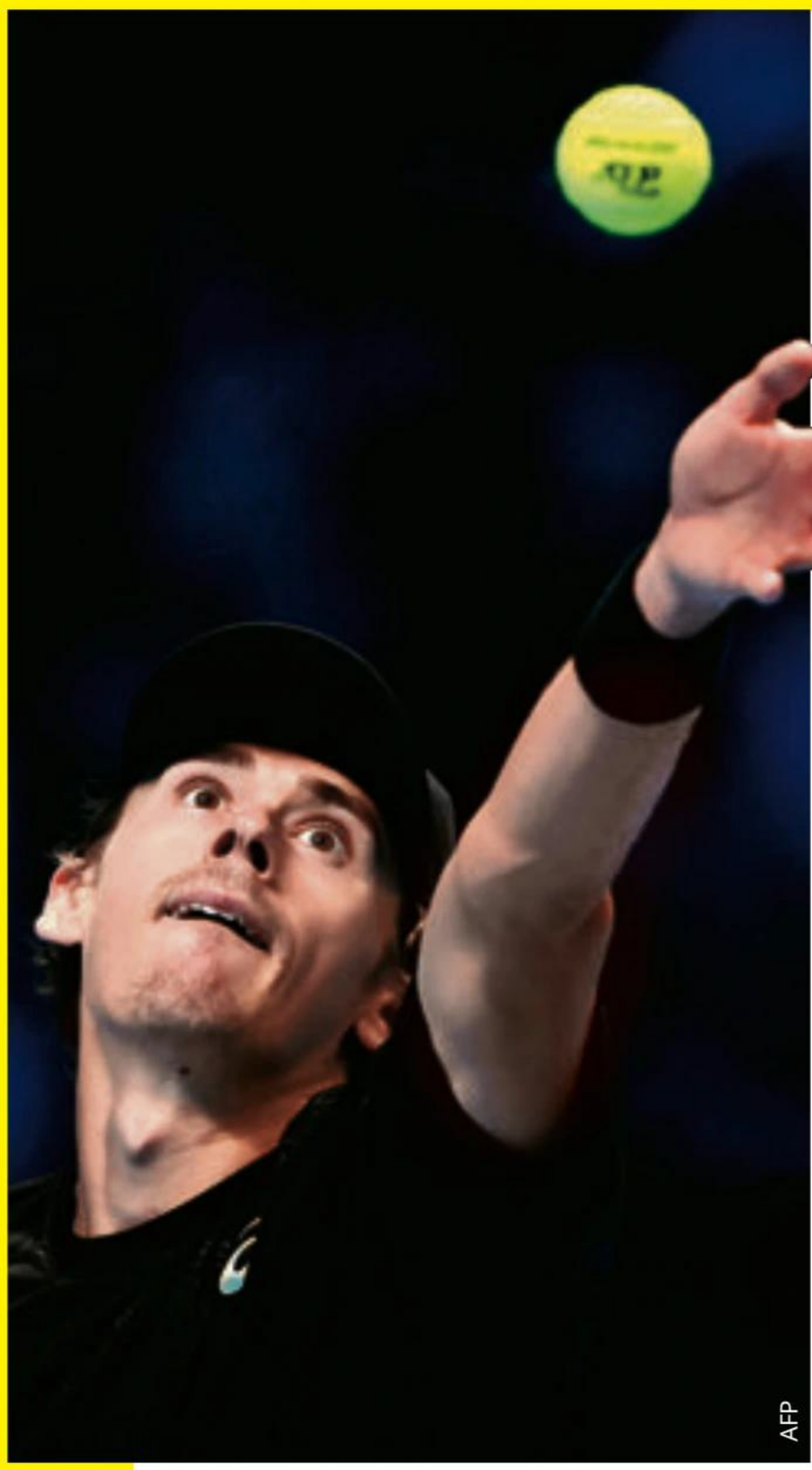
"Sinner changed his serve. The toss is further to the left and less forward, and he lands closer to the baseline. Now he serves more often towards the 'T' in the deuce court. It paid off as his first-serve percentage has shot up from 60 to 67," Courier said after Sinner outclassed Alexander Zverev 6-4, 6-3 in a round-robin win. "He uses drop shots, he hits more angles and attacks less linearly [straight ahead]. He goes to the net more on groundstrokes and serves and volleys, usually when he has a 30-love or 40-love lead."

It's doubtful Sinner will copy a controversial training method called ischaemic preconditioning that Alcaraz has used since 2023. Far more extreme than the hyperbaric chamber that 24-time Major champion Novak Djokovic used, Alcaraz temporarily cuts off his own blood supply with occlusion bands or blood-flow restriction (BFR) bands to strengthen his muscles and increase his stamina.

The never-ending quest for that extra edge over their competitors has helped the new Big Two increase the gap between them and the rest. But their superior technique was most evident when Sinner stopped fast-rising No. 5 Ben Shelton 6-3, 7-6(3). "In the backcourt rallies, Sinner's advantage is massive off both wings, especially when he hits it to Shelton's backhand," said Courier.

Big Ben, who blasts 140 mph lefty serves, also has stroke defects on the volley, which he chops down instead of punching forward, and on the forehand, which has an overly long backswing and is not grooved. Not surprisingly, Shelton has only two top-10 wins this year (against 10 losses) — over No. 4 Taylor Fritz and No. 8 Alex de Minaur at Toronto.

Similarly, Lorenzo Musetti, a splendid athlete with the best one-handed backhand in the world, was overpowered by defending


AFP

finalist Fritz, 6-3, 6-4, and Alcaraz, 6-4, 6-1. "It's tougher to have a one-handed backhand in an era when power is king, especially on return of serve," rightly said Courier.

What about No. 3 Zverev, the 2021 Tokyo Olympic gold medallist and ATP Finals champion in 2018 and 2021? The 6'6" German is a member of the 'lost '90s generation' that includes Grigor Dimitrov and the retired Dominic Thiem. The trio futilely chased the Big Three and now rarely beats Alcaraz and Sinner. Zverev has a big first serve and rock-solid backhand, but his downfall is more mental than technical, though his forehand lacks the wrist action to hit hard shots down the line.

"He can play great until the time comes when he needs to keep playing that way, and then he pulls back because of the pressure," said Courier. "The only way to get better is to hit out during matches. The practice court is not the same." Zverev failed to make the semifinals when the bolder-hitting Felix Auger-Aliassime defeated him 6-4, 7-6(4). That result extended FAA's terrific record in tiebreaks to 32-14 this year.

Nicknamed 'Demon' for his relentless competitiveness, De Minaur **(left)** blew a 5-3 third-set lead against Musetti in their 7-5, 3-6, 7-5 round-robin match. The undersized (6'0" and 160 pounds) Australian, who has suffered several close, heartbreaking defeats this year, confided, "I think it's probably a good thing I don't express my feelings right now because they're quite dark.... It's getting to a point where mentally it's killing me."

The 'Demon' exorcised his demons and redeemed himself with a rewarding 7-6(3), 6-3 victory over Fritz to make the semifinals for the first time. De Minaur, whose first serve averaged 125 mph, faster than usually rocket-serving Fritz's 124 mph, told *Tennis Channel*, "I was going to live or die by the sword and win or lose my way."

That leaves Fritz, who led the ATP Tour in aces, reached the Wimbledon semifinals, and ambushed Alcaraz 6-3, 6-2 at the Laver Cup in September. Alcaraz avenged that loss at the ATP Finals with a 6-7(2), 7-5, 6-3 win. The huge disparity was at the net, where the more athletic and skilful Spaniard won 23 of 26 points compared with only 12 of 30 for the American.

As Courier ruefully recalled, "In the era I played, if you were the No. 1 American [man], you were probably No. 1 in the world." How times have changed since Sampras, Andre Agassi, and Courier reigned! Andy Roddick was the last American to win a Major and rank No. 1, way back in 2003.

Sinner simply brought too much groundstroke power for even the speedy De Minaur to reach and return in their predictable 7-5, 6-2 semifinal. Sinner blasted a backhand down-the-line winner to break serve for 5-2, the floodgates opened, and that allowed Sinner to work on the new weapons in his game, such as 'crush and rush' to attack De Minaur's second serve.

De Minaur idolised two-time Major champ Lleyton Hewitt, a ferocious competitor he emulated. "You want juniors to watch De Minaur's effort," said *Tennis Channel* analyst Paul Annacone. "I don't think anyone tries harder." Sinner also earned praise from Courier, renowned for his fighting spirit. "Behind those eyes is a stone-cold assassin. Sinner reminds me of [eight-time Major winner Ivan] Lendl. He's absolutely out for blood."

Alcaraz, with dyed blond hair above his natural dark brown, faced a tough semifinal foe in Auger-Aliassime. The resurgent Canadian, now 25 and recently married to the equestrian Nina Ghaibi, whom he met seven years ago, owned the most indoor wins, 85, since 2020.

Alcaraz — who used a psychologist from 8 to 14 to focus on enjoyment rather than winning — admitted he suffered from nerves in his last match due to the pressure to clinch the No. 1 ranking.

Charlie, as his friends call him, showed no nerves as he showcased his entire repertoire of dazzling shots to overwhelm FAA with 13 winners (against only two unforced errors) in the 6-2 opening set. "It looked like something out of *The Matrix* or a video game," said the awed Annacone. The stunning performance also impressed Alcaraz. "This is the best match I've ever played on an indoor court — against someone like Felix."

That set up another Sincaraz dream final. Alcaraz had won four of the previous five this year, with their engrossing classic at Roland Garros by far the best match of the year and the greatest French Open match ever. In a dramatic smorgasbord of shot-making, Alcaraz fended off three championship points to overcome Sinner 4-6, 6-7(4), 6-4, 7-6(3), 7-6(2).

Before the eagerly anticipated showdown, *Tennis Channel's* Prakash Amritraj posed the question, "How do you rob Alcaraz of his offence? You can play exceptional defence, or you can play more

Elite performance: Elena Rybakina beat World No. 1 Aryna Sabalenka to win her maiden WTA Finals title. AFP

offence."

As it turned out, the increasingly versatile Sinner did both. He supplemented his vaunted power and precision with drop shots, serve-and-volleys, super angles, and opportunistic forays to the net to intercept floating returns. In other words, he played more like Alcaraz than ever before.

That new-found panache added to his crowd appeal. They sang in delight when their hero belted an ace to hold serve for 2-all. After Sinner won a 24-shot power point for 3-all, 40-30, he put his finger to his ear to encourage more applause. They rejoiced again when Sinner staved off a set point at 5-6, 30-40 with an audacious 116-mph second serve that Alcaraz couldn't return.

On to the tiebreak, where Sinner enjoyed a terrific 15-3 record this year compared with 16-9 for Alcaraz. But the Spaniard led 3-1 in their matches. Oddly enough, clever lobs by Sinner made much of the difference in winning the 7-4 tiebreak. He lofted a disguised lob that forced a weak counter-lob by Alcaraz, which Sinner smashed for a winner and a 5-3 lead.

Two points later, Sinner climaxed a 17-shot power rally with a beautiful forehand lob winner to go ahead 6-4. The crowd roared in appreciation. Alcaraz's forehand serve return landed deep to clinch the 7-6 set.

When the oddsmakers made Sinner an 89 per cent favourite to win the match before the second set, the prescient Courier said, "I guarantee you Sinner doesn't feel that confident."

Sinner double-faulted twice and erred on two forehands to suffer his first break in 47 service games in the tournament. Sinner broke back for 3-all, but it took a little luck. He mishit a vicious body serve, and the fluke floated and landed deep in the court. He then returned Alcaraz's shot with a super-angled forehand drop-shot winner.

Serving at 5-6, Alcaraz hit a forehand for 15-love and flashed his trademark smile. But at crunch time, 40-40, Alcaraz netted a low backhand volley and then stroked a backhand wide. Game, set, and title: Sinner 7-6(4), 7-5.

Sinner collapsed onto his back to celebrate his triumph, and then the good friends smiled as they embraced at the net. After scampering to his ecstatic Player Box to hug his team, Sinner graciously praised his arch-rival as the crowd cheered for both champions.

"Carlos, amazing season. Well-deserved for your No. 1 [ranking]. You really deserve it. Amazing, what you're doing with the whole team. You're definitely a player I look up to."

Alcaraz reciprocated, telling the crowd, "You were cheering for Sinner most of the time, but you were respectful. Thank you, Torino." The

Test of focus: For Sabalenka, the final was a mental battle as much as a physical one. AFP

appreciative spectators gave Alcaraz a long, loud ovation.

Both these young giants will no doubt come up with new tactics and tricks during the short off-season to prepare for the Australian circuit in January. The sporting world can hardly wait for the renewal of the most exciting, spectacular rivalry in tennis.

RESURGENT RYBAKINA OUTSLUGS SABALENKA FOR WTA FINALS TITLE

If you like surprise champions and contrasting personalities, this WTA Finals showdown was for you. It featured fiery Aryna Sabalenka, who sports a tiger tattoo on her forearm, versus icy Elena Rybakina, who wears no emotions on her countenance, save for an occasional enigmatic Mona Lisa smile.

Neither had ever won the prestigious, season-ending title in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Both were vying for the $5.235 million prize, the most lucrative payday in women's sporting history. Although Sabalenka ranked No. 1 throughout the year and would keep the top spot, win or lose, she wanted to finish with a flourish after losing heartbreaking three-setters in the Australian and French finals and Wimbledon semifinals. When Rybakina won the 2022 Wimbledon and made the 2023 Australian final, she looked like a sure-fire contender for Grand Slam titles for the rest of the decade. Instead, illnesses, injuries, and a coaching controversy reversed her momentum.

Rybakina failed to reach another Slam final, and this year did not even reach a Major quarterfinal. But these setbacks left the Russian-born Kazakhstani, who ranked a career-high No. 3 in January 2024, with a burning desire to regain her status as an elite player.

"We've been waiting for Elena to play her best tennis, seeing her healthy, happy, and calm on the court," said *Tennis Channel* analyst Lindsay Davenport after Rybakina, now 26 and in what should be the prime of her career, whipped four of the world's top five players to capture the WTA Finals.

Her career resurgence began at Cincinnati, where Rybakina defeated Sabalenka and Madison Keys, the Australian Open champion. She picked up steam when she won the Ningbo Open in China and made the Tokyo semis to become the last player to qualify for the WTA Finals.

A fortune reversal of this magnitude seemed improbable back in January. Although Rybakina consistently denied that Stefano Vukov, her coach, had psychologically abused her, she fired him anyway just before the 2024 US Open. She then hired Goran Ivanisevic, whose tenure lasted a month, and after that David Sanguinetti for another brief stint.

In February 2025, the WTA Tour suspended Vukov for one year for violating its code of conduct. In a confidential summary of the investigation obtained by *The Athletic*, WTA CEO Portia Archer found Vukov had been "engaging in abuse of authority and abusive conduct towards the WTA player." Vukov appealed the suspension in May, and it was lifted in August.

Vukov often shouted advice to Rybakina during her five victories at the WTA Finals. While that might seem a lot for any player to process, it apparently helped, particularly in Rybakina's comeback wins — over six-time Major titlist Iga Swiatek 3-6, 6-1, 6-0 and Jessica Pegula 4-6, 6-4, 6-3.

The Rybakina-Pegula semifinal matched the Tour's best server against one of the best returners. A 6-footer with impeccable serving technique, Rybakina led the Tour in aces — finishing with 516 — and a whopping 54 per cent of her first serves went unreturned going into the semifinals.

The late-blooming Pegula, who won three titles this year on three different surfaces, became the oldest semifinalist at 31 since 37-year-old Venus Williams in 2017. The faster conditions, particularly the 2,000-foot altitude and lighter regular-duty balls, favoured Rybakina.

Pegula, the runner-up at the 2023 WTA Finals, broke Rybakina's serve twice in the opening set to take it 6-4, thanks mostly to the Kazakh's 24 unforced errors, including 15 from her flat forehand.

Counterintuitively, in the second set, she hit forehands with much less net clearance — 23" compared to 37" in the first set — less spin and more

pace to win the second set 6-4, clinching it with a backhand crosscourt winner. Rybakina eventually overpowered the solid but less aggressive American and wound up with 36 winners, including 15 aces, to only nine winners for Pegula.

In the other semifinal, Sabalenka exacted still more revenge against Amanda Anisimova **(right)**, who upset her 6-4, 4-6, 6-4 in the Wimbledon semifinals. Sabalenka avenged that 6-3, 7-6(3) in the U.S. Open final and again at Riyadh with a 6-3, 3-6, 6-3 victory.

Anisimova, one of the Tour's most improved players, had eight top 10 wins before 2025 and notched 10 this year, including victories over Swiatek and Keys in round-robin matches at the WTA Finals.

Fitter and faster than ever, the 24-year-old American also improved her first serve power and precision. Sabalenka and Anisimova slugged it out for 2 hours and 21 minutes like two heavyweight boxers in a title bout. "This is first-strike tennis at its best," said *Tennis Channel* analyst Chanda Rubin.

The battle-tested Anisimova boasted a confidence-inspiring 15-4 record this season in three-set matches, but Sabalenka drew first blood in the deciding set with a ferocious backhand service winner to break for 4-3.

Sabalenka staved off a break point in the next game to hold for 5-3 and then broke serve again to wrap up the victory. "What a battle!" said Davenport. "Aryna had to dig deep in the third set." And what a year for Anisimova! She started the year ranked No. 36 and finished it No. 4.

Anisimova is finally fulfilling the potential she showed as a 15-year-old when she won the 2017 US Open junior title. Less than two years later as a pro, Amanda upset No. 3 and defending champion Simona Halep before making the Roland Garros semifinals to become the first player (man or woman) born in the 2000s to advance to this stage of a Major.

The Rybakina-Sabalenka final featured another battle of 'Big Babe Tennis', an expression coined by the esteemed broadcaster Mary Carillo. But this contest would prove as much mental as physical. "Aryna may be emotionally and physically fresher," said Rubin. "But she carries the huge burden of falling short in the first two Majors, and a lot of disappointment to get over early in the year, and the pressure of being No. 1."

Although Sabalenka has overcome the double-faulting woes that plagued her several years ago, she can still succumb to nerves. Serving at 2-3, she committed two unforced forehand errors and inexplicably hit a routine overhead into the net on break point.

But Rybakina's relentless power created a bigger problem. The Kazakh was hitting much harder, 11 mph faster on her picture-perfect backhand and 9 mph faster on her improved forehand.

While not known for her defence, Rybakina also scrambled and retrieved better than ever. Taking coach Vukov's advice, she retreated two feet behind the baseline to return Sabalenka's potent first serve, a tactic that worked.

After Rybakina took the opening set 6-3, with 16 winners to just five for Sabalenka, Davenport said, "Rybakina is playing fearlessly. Can she keep up this level?"

Rybakina did exactly that in the second set, holding serve easily in every game except the 10th when she escaped two break points. Faltering under pressure, Sabalenka committed two unforced forehand errors, and then on game point, missed an easy forehand off a smart, change-of-pace semi-moonball from Rybakina.

For her part, the Belarusian staved off two break points of her own in the third game and two more in the ninth game with clutch serving that produced three aces.

Based on her outstanding play, Rybakina looked like she had a slight edge going into the tiebreaker. But four-time Major champion Sabalenka evened the odds with a superb 22-2 tiebreaker record this year.

Rybakina delivered the knockout punch with a stunningly fast and

REUTERS

efficient 7-0 tiebreak, huge serves and returns along with nervous errors by Sabalenka doing the trick.

While Sabalenka cracked under the pressure in the tiebreaker, the far bigger story was Rybakina's all-court superiority and poise. She belted 13 aces and saved all five break points in the convincing 6-3, 7-6(0) triumph. "The serve was the big weapon, and she used it well under pressure," noted Rubin. "That forehand was the difference maker. She volleyed well and had the touch at net."

Sabalenka put it best during the trophy ceremony when she said, "You literally smashed me off the court."

With her coaching chaos resolved by the return of Vukov, Rybakina should join Sabalenka, Swiatek, Gauff, and Anisimova as the leaders of a new Big Five next season. Unless talented teenagers Mirra Andreeva, already No. 9, and Victoria Mboko, along with veterans Naomi Osaka and Karolina Muchova, challenge the quintet.

INDIA LOOKS FOR GLORY IN EFOOTBALL MOBILE

Saudi Arabia will host the FIFAe World Cup Finals at the SEF Arena in Riyadh from December 10 to 19.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
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Saudi Arabia, the host of consecutive Esports World Cups, might have had a setback regarding the Esports Olympics, but its stronghold in the domain continues to be one of the strongest in the world.

It will host the FIFAe World Cup Finals at the SEF Arena in Riyadh from December 10 to 19. In the qualifiers, India fielded teams in both console and mobile, with only Danial Patel making it to the final in the latter. On the console, India lost out on a playoff spot on goal difference, but Danial topped the regional qualifiers and secured a berth in the finals through the playoffs.

He will now represent the country in Riyadh.

eFootball Mobile Groups

- **Group A:** Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Brazil, Thailand, Egypt, Malaysia
- **Group B:** Türkiye, Japan, Morocco, India, Colombia, Greece

Three titles will be up for grabs at the FIFAe World Cup — Rocket League (December) 15–19), eFootball Console (December10-13), and eFootball Mobile (December 10-13).

Rocket League Groups

- **Group A:** Saudi Arabia, Oman, USA, Brazil, Chile, Germany, Italy, Norway
- **Group B:** Morocco, Australia, France, Malaysia, England, Belgium, South Africa, Netherlands

Saudi Arabia, the reigning Rocket League champion, will compete on home soil against teams from across the globe, including favourites such as the USA and France, last year's runner-up.

Indonesia will look to defend the crown in eFootball Console, while Malaysia faces strong competition from India, Brazil and Japan to retain the eFootball Mobile title.

eFootball Console Groups

- **Group A:** Saudi Arabia, Italy, Brazil, Chile, Thailand, Türkiye
- **Group B:** Morocco, Jordan, Japan, Poland, Indonesia, Mexico

Fans can follow the action live on FIFA.GG, as well as on FIFAe and co-streamer channels on Twitch and other platforms.

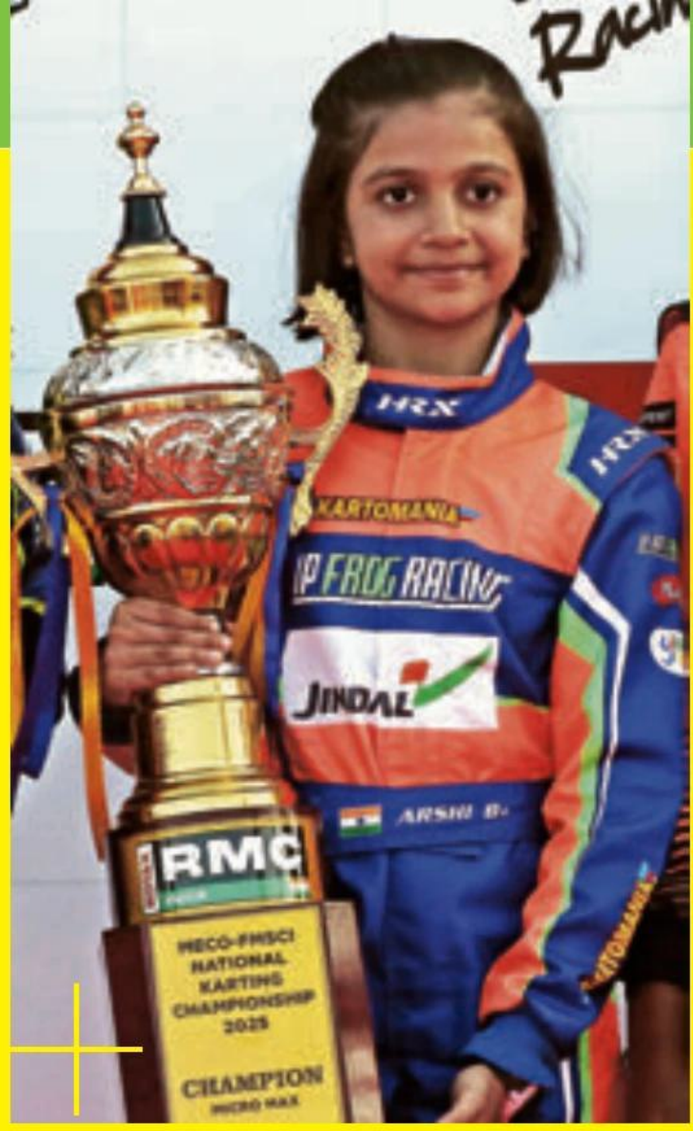
iQOO SouL wins BGMI title in Chennai Esports Global Championship

Team iQOO SouL, the Battlegrounds Mobile India (BGMI) division of Indian esports organisation S8UL, clinched the Chennai Esports Global Championship (CEGC) 2025 after an intense three-day Grand Finals, held from November 14 to 16, in Chennai.

Competing under the BGMI Smash Rule format, the team — comprising Nakul "NakuL" Sharma, Harsh "Goblin" Paudwal, Yash "LEGIT" Chaudhary, Khush "Jokerr" Singh and Aaryaman "Thunder" Seth — sealed victory with a decisive win in the 16th match of the finale.

iQOO SouL finished the tournament with 162 points, 4 impactful Chicken Dinners, and a total of 107 eliminations, earning a ₹21 lakh share from the tournament's ₹50 lakh prize pool.

"Goblin, LEGIT, Jokerr, and Thunder played with complete trust and confidence throughout the tournament. Winning CEGC 2025 in the final match and receiving the Best IGL award make this moment even more special," IGL of iQOO SouL, Nakul 'NakuL' Sharma, said.



Arshi races to victory

Nine-year-old Arshi Gupta of Delhi Public School, Faridabad, created history by winning the 2025 FMSCI Indian Rotax Max National karting championship, becoming the first girl to claim the title in the event's 21-year history.

Competing in the Micro Max class (8-12 years), Arshi clinched the championship at Bengaluru's Meco Kartopia circuit. Born on October 18, 2016, she races under Leapfrog Racing and achieved this feat in just her second season of competitive karting.

After stunning the paddock with a Round 3 win at the Madras International Karting Arena and a double in Coimbatore, Arshi sealed the National crown at the final round, winning both the pre-final and the final.

She made her National debut in early 2024 with the Meritus Cup before moving into the Rotax Nationals, becoming the youngest female to receive a National Karting License — a feat recognised by the India Book of Records. In September 2025, Arshi was selected by the FMSCI to represent Team India at the Asia Pacific Motorsports Championships in Sri Lanka, where she finished fourth in the mini category.

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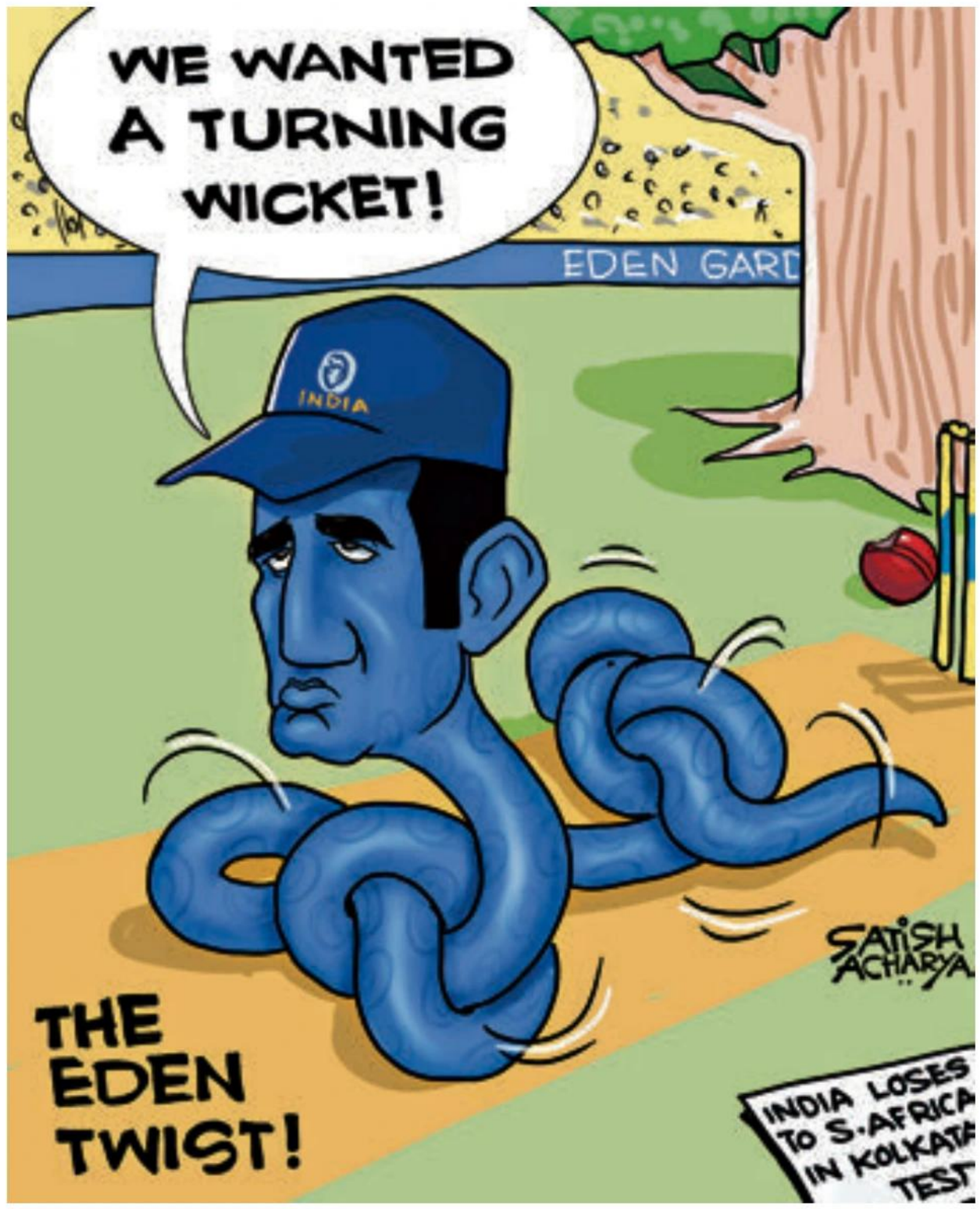
SPORTOON



1 Army defeated the Indian Air Force 2–0 in the final to win the Beighton Cup at the Vivekananda Hockey Stadium in Kolkata.

The results:
Final: Army 2 (Simrandeep Singh 38, Sagar Shingade 45) bt Indian Air Force 0.
Semifinals: Army 3 (Pratap Shinde, Masih Das Herenj, Jobanpreet Singh) bt Indian Navy 0; Indian Air Force 2 (Rahul Rajbhar, Nitesh Kiro) bt Canara Bank 0.

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2 The Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) revoked the suspension of Paris Olympics bronze medallist Aman Sehrawat and promising wrestler Neha Sangwan for jumping their weight limits and getting disqualified at the World Championships and World Under-20 Championships, respectively. The WFI took the decision after receiving apology letters from the two wrestlers and consulting the top coaches of the country. It has made both the wrestlers eligible to take part in different events, including the Asian Games next year. Neha (59kg) was overweight at the World U-20 championships in Bulgaria, while Aman (57kg) missed the weight stipulation at the World Championships in Croatia. Neha and Aman had been suspended for two years and one year, respectively.

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Why strong bones make stronger champions

While fitness levels among women athletes have soared, the **foundation** of true success still rests on strong, healthy bones.

When India lifted the women's ODI World Cup this year, it was not only a proud moment for the country but also a sign that the new generation of athletes is stronger and better prepared than ever before. Behind such successes are years of science-based nutrition, dedication and a commitment to understanding how to protect and strengthen the skeleton.

I have spent over 20 years working with some of India's finest female athletes, including Harmanpreet Kaur, Smriti Mandhana, P. V. Sindhu, Joshna Chinappa, Poorva Sawant and Aditi Dhumatkar. Across all these years, one subject has always remained at the centre of my work: bone health. It is the foundation that supports performance, endurance and long-term strength, especially for Indian women in sport.

Density dilemma

Indian women, in general, are more likely to have low bone mineral density, due to genetics, reduced sunlight exposure, lower protein intake and cultural dietary habits. Many skip milk because of intolerance or taste, avoid sunlight for fear of tanning, or simply do not eat enough nutritious food during their growing years.

By the time they enter competitive sport, their bones already carry a disadvantage. Once training intensifies and workloads rise, the risk of stress fractures and joint pain increases. Several promising athletes lose precious time because their bones were not prepared for the demands of elite sport. The good news is that with awareness and the right diet, this can be corrected.

Let's start with the basics — the composition of bone.

Bones are made up of about 60-70 per cent minerals (mainly calcium and phosphorus), 20-25 per cent collagen and around 10-15 per cent water. Collagen forms the framework that gives bones their flexibility and shock absorption, while minerals provide strength and rigidity. I have even seen the difference first-hand. One of my athletes once suffered a bone injury, and after we increased collagen intake, the recovery was noticeably faster than expected. It reinforced my belief in collagen's crucial role in bone repair and resilience.

The sunshine gap

Nearly 80 per cent of Indian athletes I have tested show low levels of Vitamin D. This is surprising in a country that has sunlight all year. The reason is simple: many players train indoors, travel in buses and cover their skin with clothing or sunscreen. Vitamin D is vital for calcium absorption and overall bone function.

I recommend natural sunlight exposure in the morning for at least 20 minutes without sunscreen. I also encourage including fortified foods in the diet. In some cases, I guide

supplementation under medical supervision.

Iron edge

Female athletes face additional challenges related to hormones and iron. Iron is needed to carry oxygen and maintain energy levels. When iron levels fall, energy and concentration drop. Low estrogen levels due to stress or diet can also reduce bone strength over time.

I make sure to understand how each athlete's nutrition and cycle affect energy and performance, and I adjust the plan accordingly. For younger players, I build diets rich in iron from leafy greens and lentils, and I combine these foods with Vitamin C for better absorption. Calcium and iron compete in the body, so timing is important. I often suggest keeping dairy products and iron-rich meals at least two hours apart.

Eat enough, not less

One of the most common but silent problems is low energy availability. When athletes burn more calories than they consume, the body begins to conserve energy by reducing reproductive hormone production. This condition, known as Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport, can lead to loss of bone mass and a higher risk of fractures.

Many young athletes mistakenly believe that eating less will make them faster or lighter. The opposite happens. The body weakens. Bones become fragile. Recovery slows. I always explain that eating adequately is not indulgence — it is part of training.

Traditional route

Indian food offers many natural ways to strengthen bones. I prefer using local ingredients because they are familiar and sustainable:

✪ *Ragi* or finger millet is one of the best plant sources of calcium.

✪ Sesame seeds or til provide calcium, magnesium and healthy fats.

✪ Curry leaves are rich in micronutrients that support bone metabolism.

✪ *Paneer* and curd offer calcium and probiotics for gut health.

Beneath the flesh: Behind sporting successes are years of science-based nutrition, dedication and a commitment to understanding how to protect and strengthen the skeleton.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

✪ Drumstick leaves and *methi* supply iron, calcium and fibre.

For vegetarian athletes, pairing pulses and grains — such as *dal* with rice or *khichdi* — provides a complete protein profile.

Tests are the best

Every athlete should monitor bone health regularly. I suggest DEXA scans for bone density, blood tests for Vitamin D and iron, and routine diet assessments. These tools help catch small issues before they turn serious. Nutrition today is highly personalised and data-driven. With regular testing, we can prevent many injuries that once seemed unavoidable.

Strong bones do not just build champions. They build confidence and the courage to push limits.

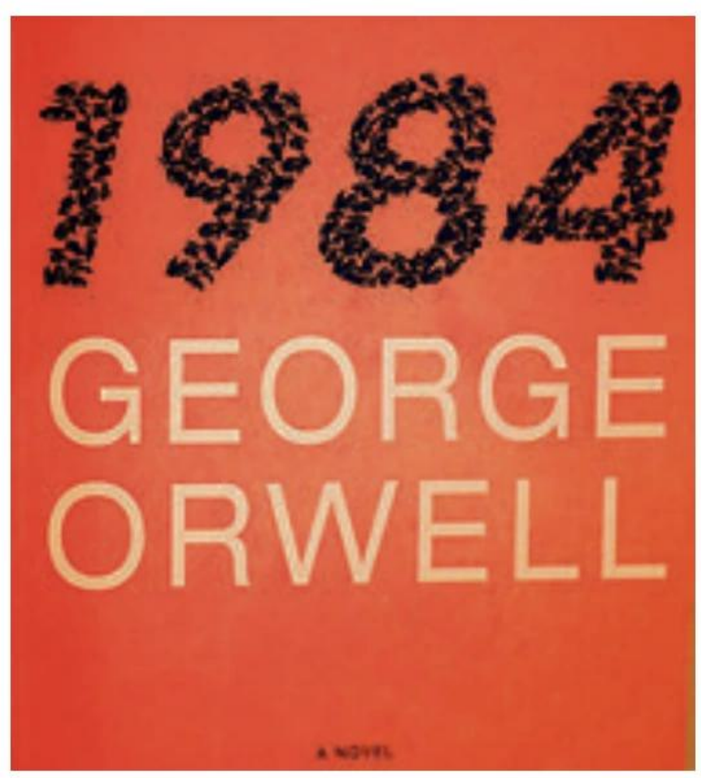
A durable tribute to self-love

A century from now, fans might struggle to remember the names of players who made history within the walls of a stadium, but the name of the politician after whom it is named **will remain.**

Suresh Menon

In *1984*, written a few decades before that year, George Orwell showed how the state's real genius lay in taking private joy and turning it into propaganda. The politician who names a stadium after himself is engaged in a similar act: the conversion of collective celebration into personal myth. Politicians hunger for 'legacy'. Where artists leave behind paintings and athletes records, they prefer concrete.

A century from now, fans might struggle to remember the names of players who made history within the walls of a stadium, but the name of the politician after whom it is named will remain. It's a durable tribute to self-love. Even Ozymandias (or Rameses II if you prefer), that ancient champion of vanity, had to rely on a poet to immortalise his ruins. Today's Ozymandias doesn't need a Shelley, he has the local public works department.



Words of wisdom: In his novel *1984*, George Orwell showed how the state's real genius lay in taking private joy and turning it into propaganda. AFP

It began with the ancient Roman emperors who loved putting their monograms on temples. Chances are that more sports stadiums around the world are named after politicians than athletes. In India we have stadiums named after Nehru, his daughter Indira, and her sons Rajiv and Sanjay. More recently the Narendra Modi Stadium was inaugurated by Narendra Modi himself.

So it should come as no surprise when we hear that Donald Trump is requesting that the Commanders NFL Stadium to be built in Washington (cost: 3.7 billion dollars) be named after him. As with all his requests, there is an "...or else" at the end of it. "It's what the President wants, and it will probably happen," a White House official was quoted as saying.

By the time the stadium opens in 2030, Trump will be out of office, so it will be interesting to see what happens.

You can't help but admire the audacity. Athletes have to perform, the politician buys immortality with a threat. The line between narcissism and branding disappears. *Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair*! Ozymandias could have picked up a pointer or two.

Indian politicians have a cover story: naming the stadium after myself was the public's wish. Or, I couldn't say 'no' to my partymen; that might be insulting them. The U.S. President can't be bothered with such niceties. I want, I get, and the rest of you can suck it up.

In 2011, India won the cricket World Cup at a stadium named after a Mumbai politician. Many fans who cheered for M. S. Dhoni's team then will have to look up the scorecards for details now. The image of Dhoni striking the winning six will remain for longer than the statistics of his score. But even that will fade with time and new generations. But the name of the venue, Wankhede Stadium, will be refreshed every time a match is played there.

In 1934, the governor of Bombay (as it was known then) laid the foundation stone for a stadium named after him. His name was Michael Knatchbull. Doesn't ring a bell? He was the fifth Baron Brabourne. Immortality!

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