

» SPORTSTAR

POSTER

INDIAN
HOCKEY TEAM

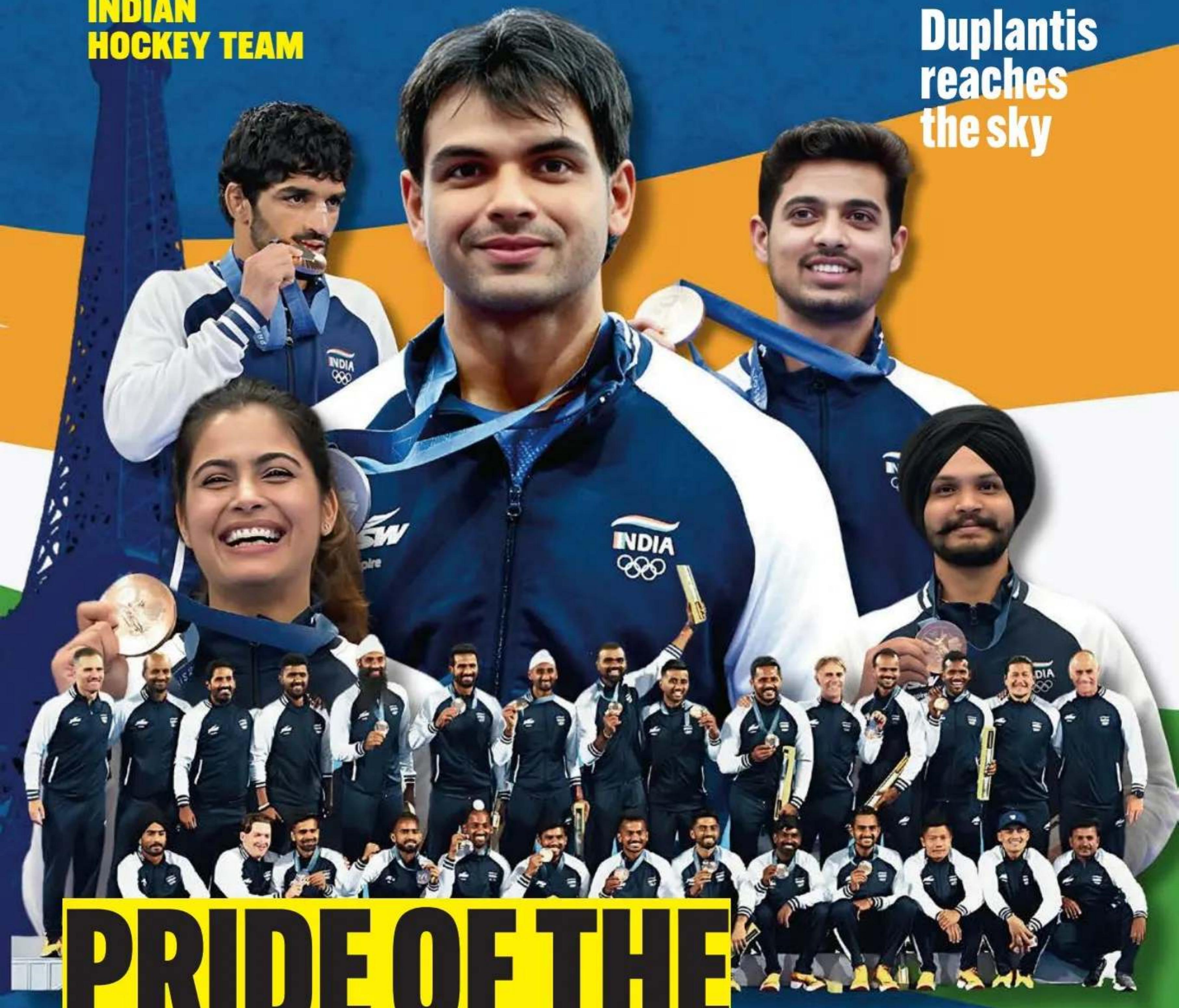
SATURDAY,
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ATHLETICS

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PRIDE OF THE NATION

India finished its Paris Olympics campaign with six medals, including one silver





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NEERAJ CHOPRA AT PEACE WITH PARIS SILVER

» Paris Olympics

14 P.R. Sreejesh

The man who brought us saves, memories and tears

17 Aman Sehrawat

After a bronze medal in Paris, the young wrestler has his sights set on the gold in Los Angeles

20 Swapnil Kusale

The shooter's success mantra does the trick



36

Appreciation

Vinesh Phogat had the highest of highs and the lowest of lows at the Paris Olympics

» Read more...

24 Shooting

Off few historic firsts and many what-ifs

28 Athletics

Season records fail to convert to medals

34 Wrestling

A legacy upheld and a heartbreak

52 Hockey

History repeats itself as coach Fulton's philosophy is vindicated

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OFF-SIDE

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INDIA'S PARIS MEDAL TALLY PAINTS A BLEAK PICTURE

The glaring lack of a strong presence in sports like swimming (37 golds) and athletics (48), which account for the most medals, indicates that India put all its eggs in a few very fragile baskets.

India's performance at the Paris Olympics was a bit like expecting a grand feast that ended with a lukewarm cup of tea and some stale biscuits. Experts and national sports federations had confidently predicted that the country would finally breach the double-digit medal mark for the first time in history. There was a buzz in the air, as everyone expected an early Diwali.

Yet, as the Games wrapped up, India just had six medals, one shy of the seven won in Tokyo 2021. The absence of gold and a solitary silver medal landed the country in the 71st position on the final table.

The campaign had a promising start. Manu Bhaker nabbed back-to-back bronze medals in air pistol within the first five days, and it felt like the beginning of a triumphant story. But soon, the narrative shifted to a series of letdowns, as many medal hopefuls failed to live up to their promise despite years of support from the government and various organisations.

There were other heroes, though: Sarabjot Singh and Swapnil Kusale, with their sharp shooting, and the relentless Aman Sehrawat, who became India's youngest Olympic medallist at 21. They spattered the disappointing days with smidges of joy.

The men's hockey team, despite being in the "group of death" with Belgium, Australia, and Argentina, glided into the knockouts as the second-placed team after a historic, long-awaited win over the Aussies. And even with a man down — after an early red card to Amit Rohidas in the quarterfinals — the team prevailed over Great Britain in a dramatic shootout. However, its penalty corner conversion rate — an abysmal two out of 11 — proved to be the Achilles' heel in the semifinal against Germany. PR Sreejesh, the wall from Tokyo, stood firm once more, ensuring India won consecutive Olympic bronze medals with a 2-1 win over Spain.

Neeraj Chopra, our silver lining, threw further than his Tokyo gold-winning mark but had to settle for second place as Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem set an Olympic record with a 92.97m throw.

Six fourth-place finishes might suggest that the future looks promising — a lull before the storm of success. But these results raise more questions about the athletes' mental toughness and dedication rather than indicating significant progress.

Prakash Padukone, who had slayed many Chinese and Danes on his own in the badminton court, didn't mince words in his sharp critique. "The players need to introspect and not just keep asking for more from the federations. They need to ask themselves whether they are working hard enough, because all these players have their own physios and all the facilities. I don't think any other country, including the US, has so many facilities," the former All England champion said.

The unfortunate disqualification of Vinesh Phogat for exceeding the weight limit ahead of the women's 50kg freestyle wrestling final, along with other tales of drastic weight cuts by athletes like Nikhat Zareen and Antim Panghal, also casts a shadow over the professional aptitudes of the extensive entourages that accompanied these athletes to Paris.

The glaring lack of a strong presence in sports like swimming (37 golds) and athletics (48), which account for the most medals, indicates that India put all its eggs in a few very fragile baskets.

There is an urgent need to broaden the horizon, a call to arms (and legs) for wider participation, and a more thoughtful spreading of funds across all age groups. India needs a nationwide initiative to find and nurture talent from an early stage.

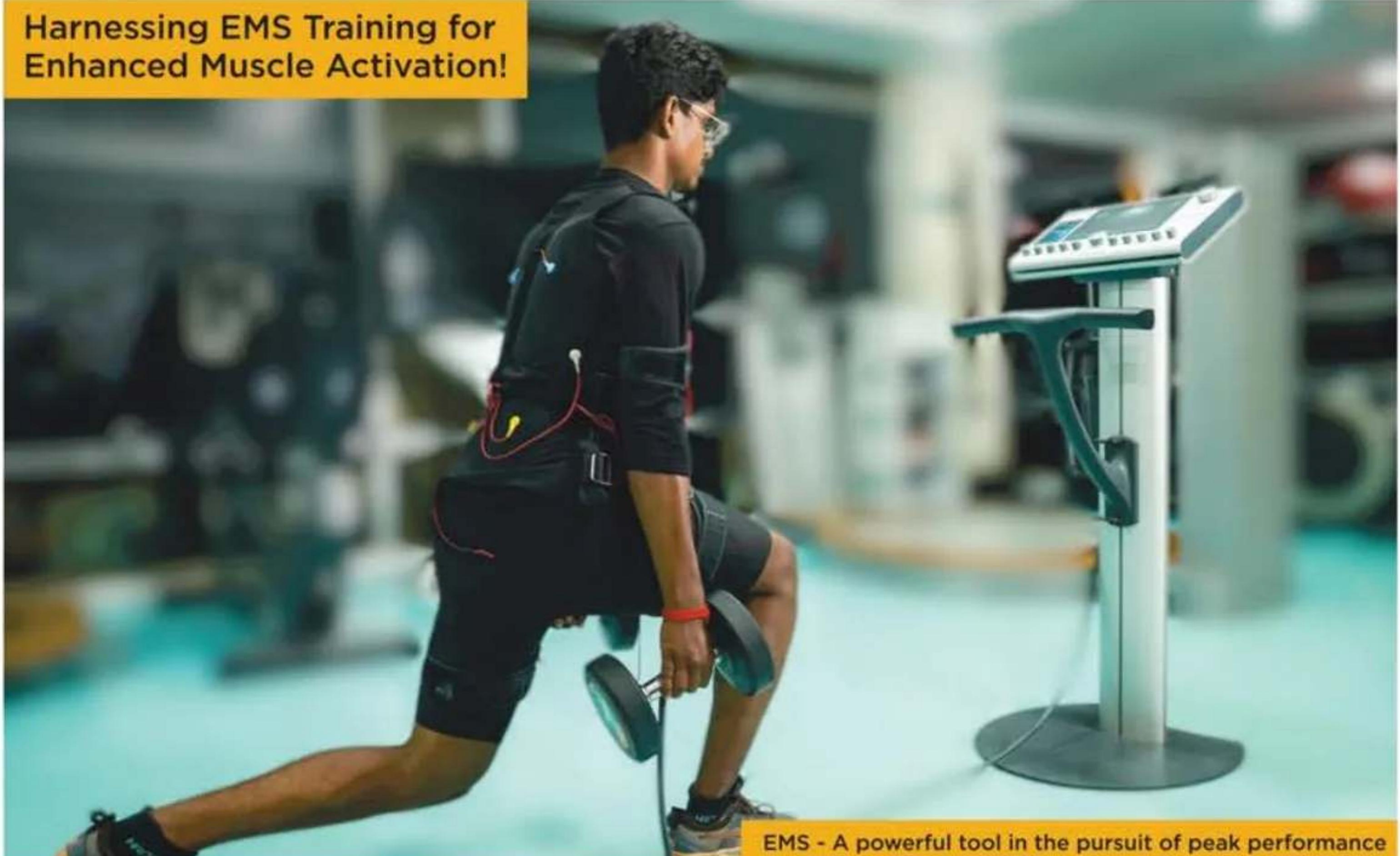
You can't just water a few plants and expect a lush, vibrant garden.

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» FROM THE WORLD OF SPORT



« It is with a heavy heart that I inform you that my cooperation with my father as a coach has come to an end. I prefer to keep my father in his role as a father, and only as a father. – Stefanos Tsitsipas after ending his collaboration with his father Apostolos as his coach »



« Historic. A rollercoaster of emotions and a lot of pastries. I ate a lot of pastries. – Canada's B-Boy Phil Wizard, the first Olympic gold medallist in men's breaking »

2036 & 2040

Egypt will bid to host the 2036 and 2040 Summer Olympics, with the country's improving infrastructure and sports facilities key for a successful African bid, said the head of the African National Olympic Committee Association (ANOCA).

The continent has never staged an Olympic Games. Cairo last made an unsuccessful bid for the 2008 Olympics. The most populous country in the Arab world, Egypt has spent billions of dollars building facilities, stadiums and

sports complexes in recent years as part of its plans to modernise the country.

"Egypt will bid for 2036 and 2040," Mustapha Berraf (**in pic**), head of ANOCA told a press conference on the day of the closing ceremony of the Paris Olympics.



\$75m

The prize money pool for this year's U.S. Open has been increased by 15% to \$75 million, making it the largest purse in tennis history, the United States Tennis Association announced. The men's and women's singles champions at the year's final Grand Slam will both earn \$3.6 million, a 20% jump from last year's payout. All rounds in all events of the main draw and qualifying tournament this year will see an increase in prize money from 2023, with an emphasis placed on early-round increases.

SUSPENDED!



Congolese sprinter Dominique Lasconi Mulamba (right) has been provisionally suspended after testing positive for a banned substance, the International Testing Agency said, days after he competed in the 100m at Paris 2024 Olympics. Mulamba got through the preliminaries with a time of 10.54 but went out in round one when he finished seventh in 10.53. The positive sample was collected a day later in Paris, according to the ITA. GETTYIMAGES

The MAHA KUMBH Mela: A Spiritual Spectacle of Unity

Today, the deep spiritual and cultural significance of the largest congregation, the Makaumbh Mela, captivates millions of people worldwide. Centuries after his death, the Mahakumbh's historical significance still draws people from all walks of life that are pursuing the path of consciousness, enlightenment, and the blessings of the three holy rivers at Sangam.

The Kumbh Mela, which is celebrated every six years, is a major occasion that has its origins in the stories of Vishnu dropping drops of amrit (nectar) at four holy Tirthas. The four Tirthas of Prayagraj, Haridwar, Nasik, and Ujjain alternately host the celebration; the largest assembly, known as Thirthraj, takes place in the Sangam once every twelve years, also known as the Mahakumbh.

At the Mahakumbh-2025 at Prayagraj, the mega event will host nine 'snans' baths, of which three 'shahi snans' will also take place. Starting with Paush Purnima snan on January 13th, the first 'Shahi snan' will be on January 14th, the day of Makar Sankranti. The third snan will be observed on January 21, the Ekadashi snan, followed by the second 'shahi snan' of Mauni Amawasya on January 29th, Basant Panchami snan on February 3rd, Ratha Saptami snan on February 4th, and Bhishma Ekadashi snan on February 7th, Maghi Purnima snan on February 12 and Mahashivratri snan on February 26 will be last snan at the Mahakumbh.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Moreover, significant improvements in infrastructure promise to elevate the overall experience for attendees. Enhanced accommodation facilities, improved public transportation, and upgraded road networks are set to provide greater convenience and accessibility. Furthermore, special provisions for the elderly and differently-abled individuals underscore a commitment to inclusivity and care for all participants.

ECO-FRIENDLY

Recognizing the importance of sustainability, the 2025 Kumbh Mela will embrace eco-friendly measures aimed at environmental conservation and preservation. Initiatives such as comprehensive waste management, water purification processes, river cleanliness drives, the use of biodegradable materials, and the implementation of solar-powered lighting reflect a conscientious effort to minimize the ecological footprint of this monumental event.

CULTURAL AMALGAMATION

Cultural enthusiasts and spiritual seekers will find themselves immersed in a myriad of cultural programs and events at the Kumbh Mela in 2025. From yoga camps and spiritual discourses to

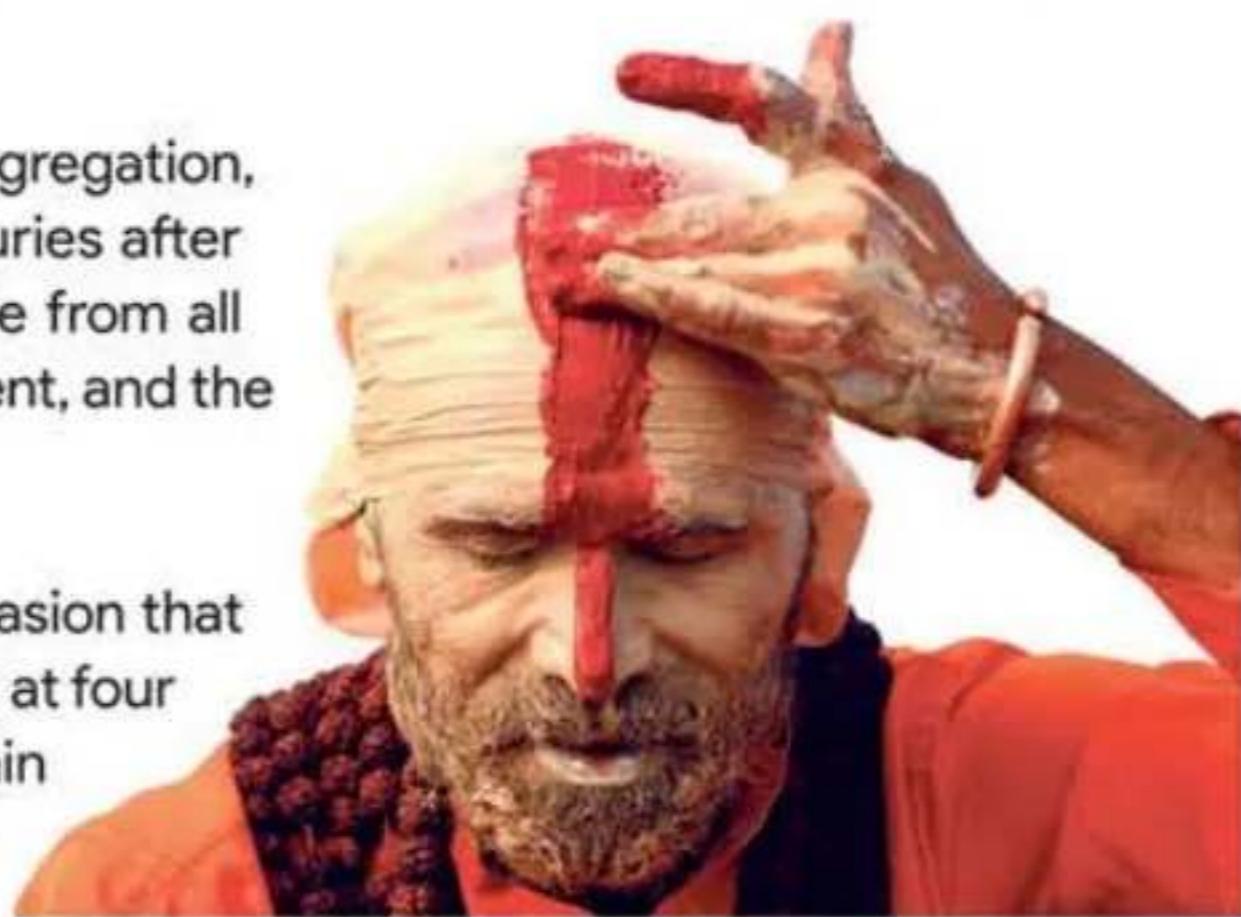
devotional lectures and captivating showcases of India's religious saints and spiritual heritage, the cultural richness of the Mela promises to offer a profound experience to all participants.

SAFETY & SECURITY

In light of the evolving global landscape, security remains a top priority for the organizers of the Kumbh Mela. Enhanced security measures, including increased CCTV monitoring and drone surveillance and the deployment of specialized disaster and medical response teams, underscore a commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of all attendees. Collaboration with international security experts further reinforces the comprehensive approach to security at the Mela.

As we eagerly anticipate the grandeur of the Maha Kumbh Mela in 2025, these developments signify a progressive and inclusive approach to fostering a deeply enriching and spiritually uplifting experience for all participants. The convergence of ancient traditions and modern innovations promises to make the 2025 Kumbh Mela a testament to unity, spirituality, and cultural preservation, offering an unparalleled journey of self-discovery and enlightenment for all who partake in this extraordinary event.

Uttar Pradesh
UTTAR PRADESH TOURISM





SWEET REVENGE

Serghei Spivac avenged his earlier loss to Marcin Tybura and put himself back on track for a shot at the **championship belt**.

Nigamanth P

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In the recently concluded UFC Fight Night, Serghei Spivac sought redemption in his rematch against Marcin Tybura, securing a first-round submission victory with a precise armbar less than two minutes into their headliner.

Spivac wasted little time levelling the score in

High road to success:

The 29-year-old from Moldova is now 7-2 since his first meeting with Tybura back in 2020. GETTY IMAGES

his heavyweight series with Tybura, collecting the first-round submission win to close out the fight card.

'The Polar Bear' came right at Tybura at the start of the contest, landing a clean shot in the first exchange that allowed him to close the distance and initiate a grappling entanglement.

After Tybura reversed to the top position and looked to capitalise, Spivac quickly latched onto an armbar, rolling the Polish veteran through, extending the arm, and drawing a verbal tap from Tybura.

With the win, Spivac avenged his earlier loss to Tybura and put himself back on track for a shot at the championship belt.

The 29-year-old from Moldova is now 7-2 since that first meeting with Tybura back in 2020, with his only losses coming against interim champ Tom Aspinall and former interim champion Ciryl Gane.

In the co-main event, the featherweight bout between Chepe Mariscal and Damon Jackson was every bit as action-packed and entertaining as anticipated, with 'Machine Gun' Mariscal registering a dominant unanimous decision win. Over the opening five minutes, both fighters traded attacks in all phases, with neither gaining a decisive advantage.

Mariscal took control of the action in the second half of the middle stanza, peppering Jackson with hard shots on the ground as he started to fade, using superior energy reserves to outwork him in the third and secure the victory.

Mariscal's recent history continues to be one of the best storylines of the last couple of years. He picked up his fourth straight victory since getting called up to the big leagues after a long run as a regional circuit standout.

The 31-year-old is as game as they come, and while his weight miss slightly detracts from this effort, he continues to make positive strides in the talent-rich featherweight ranks with each outing.

Meanwhile, bantamweight mainstay Chris Gutierrez successfully navigated a tricky short-notice matchup with Quang Le midway through the main card, collecting a unanimous decision win fuelled by his signature low kicks.

'El Guapo' opened up by attacking the lead leg of the Chinese newcomer. While Le kept it close and competitive, Gutierrez's constant kicks were the difference-maker in the final frame, as he walked away with the win.

The victory got Gutierrez back into the win column after losing a decision to Song Yadong to close out 2023 in December.

Embark on the Path of Enlightenment through **BUDDHIST Circuit** of Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh is the cradle of early Buddhism in India where Lord Buddha spent a substantial part of his life, traveling and preaching to the world the path of righteousness and nirvana. Offering a glimpse into the spiritual evolution of Lord Buddha and the birth of his teachings is the Buddhist Circuit in Uttar Pradesh, which includes sacred sites where he grew up, preached, and attained Mahaparinirvana. This circuit spans across Uttar Pradesh, inviting pilgrims to explore the essence of Buddhism through temples and monasteries of profound significance.

KAPILVASTU

Once the capital of the Shakya clan, Kapilavastu is where Prince Siddhartha spent his first twenty-nine years before pursuing enlightenment. Key sites include King Suddhodhana's palace, Pipra-hwa Stupa, Ganvaria, and Wat Thai Temple.



SARNATH

Located near Varanasi, Sarnath is where Buddha delivered his first sermon. Significant sites include Dhamek Stupa, Chaukhandi Stupa, Mulagandha Kuti Vihar, and the Sarnath museum, alongside various temples and monasteries.



SHRAVASTI

The capital of the Kosala Kingdom, Shravasti, was Buddha's favorite retreat, where he spent twenty-five rainy seasons and performed his first miracle. Important sites are Jetavana Vihara, Anand Bodhi tree, Angulimala Stupa, and Anathapindika House.



SANKISA

Sankisa is where Buddha descended from the heavens. The site is marked by an elephant pillar.



KAUSHAMBI

Near Prayagraj, Kaushambi showcases Buddha's efforts to spread his teachings. It features ancient

monasteries and fortifications, including Ghositarama Monastery, stupas, and sculptures.

Kushinagar

In the Gorakhpur district, Kushinagar is where Buddha attained Mahaparinirvana. Key sites include the reclining Buddha statue, Mahaparinirvana Temple, and Mahaparinirvana Stupa.



MAHARAJGANJ

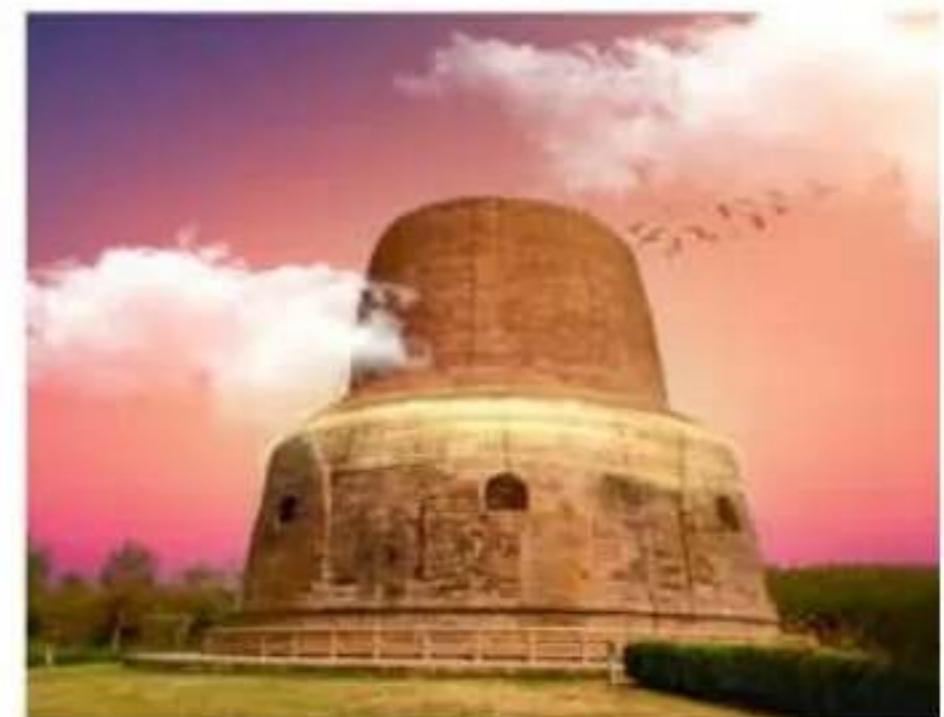
Sharing borders with Nepal and Bihar, Maharajganj is historically significant with Buddhist ruins. Devadaha, identified as the maternal home of Queen Mayadevi, holds historical value with connections to Buddha's life. Other than that, the Ramgram Stupa in Ramgram contains Buddha's relics, untouched by Emperor Ashoka's efforts to relocate them.

Atranji Khera (Etah)

Located in Etah district, this prominent Buddhist site is known for its archaeological treasures that provide insights into ancient Buddhist civilization.

The Buddhist Circuit is more than a physical journey; it is a path to inner peace, enlightenment, and serenity, offering a transformative experience amidst the chaos of modern life. Realising its importance, the government has taken up several reformations and developments. The Buddhist circuit has been connected seamlessly through air and road. Besides which tourist facilities have been enhanced and modern infrastructure development has also taken place in order to provide a comfortable and enriched experience to tourists from around the globe. Furthermore, ongoing developments continue to improve and expand the amenities and accessibility of these sacred sites.

Uttar Pradesh
UTTAR PRADESH TOURISM



NEERAJ CHOPRA AT PEACE WITH PARIS SILVER

WITH A GROIN INJURY PLAYING SPOILSPORT, INDIA'S MOST CELEBRATED TRACK AND FIELD ATHLETE CAME SECOND WITH A THROW OF **89.45M**, JUST A TAD SHORT OF ARSHAD NADEEM'S RECORD-BREAKING 92.97.

Jonathan Selvaraj

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FOR MORE STORIES

It's 12.35 in the morning. Neeraj Chopra has finally stepped outside the security gates of the Stade de France. The 26-year-old is exhausted. He has been on his feet since early that evening when he was competing in the men's javelin throw competition.

Perhaps if the outcome had been different, the adrenaline would have still been carrying him.

But it wasn't. Neeraj has just been dethroned as the Olympic champion, and he looked tired.

He answered questions in the mixed zone and at a press conference where seven of the ten questions were directed at him, not the actual winner of the competition, Arshad Nadeem of Pakistan.

He then went through the process of dope control before exiting the stadium to answer questions from TV reporters on video. He was out there talking until nearly 2.45 am.

There was a mad rush to be the first to get a camera in his face. Reporters jostled against each other and



NEERAJ CHOPRA

THE 26-YEAR-OLD CAME THROUGH ONE
OF THE TOUGHEST FIELDS TO PLACE
HIMSELF ON THE PODIUM

bargained for his time — three minutes per person, then down to two. It was all a bit chaotic. A volunteer looked aghast. But this was Neeraj Chopra, and everyone wanted a moment with him.

The 26-year-old came through one of the toughest fields to place himself on the podium.

"This is the greatest competition I've been a part of," he says at the press conference, and this is probably true. Fifth place here would have won gold in Tokyo. If Arshad's winning throw was an Olympic record, Neeraj's 89.45m is the biggest throw ever to have won an Olympic silver.

This medal is yet another point in favour of the argument that he is among the greatest of Indian sports. He has been on the podium of every competition he competed in over the last six years.

His medal is also the best result for an Indian at these Games; the other five medals won have all been bronze. Just like at the Tokyo Games, Neeraj has been the high point of the Indian performance in Paris. His silver medal is where the Indian campaign peaked. It was a remarkable achievement.

Anyone would have been happy. But not Neeraj.

He is the country's only Olympic champion in athletics. He's also the reigning world champion. Throughout his career, he has made achieving excellence look effortless and normal, rather than a rare feat that only a once-in-a-generation athlete can accomplish.

At his press conference, and earlier in the mixed zone, he expressed praise for his rival from Pakistan. He spoke about how God was with him for the previous ten encounters between the two, but how, on the biggest stage on earth, Arshad's talent and hard work made the difference.

He cracked a few self-deprecating jokes about his inability to translate his words accurately into English — a language he has become remarkably proficient in over the last three years — and about how he could make only one legitimate attempt (all his other throws were fouls). He even mentioned that the third-place finisher has the same set of injuries as he does.

He took time to give context to India's performance at the Games and shared his thoughts about wrestler Vinesh Phogat, who herself was in contention for a gold medal

but was disqualified after turning up 100 grams over the weight limit.

He credited her courage and mental strength. Everyone had their opinion on the matter, but Neeraj's was the one that mattered.

Everyone wanted to know what he thought about this issue. Just as they did in the early morning outside the Stade de France, everyone wanted a piece of him.

Neeraj has been giving away pieces of himself for a while now.

He has a silver medal but admits he is hurt because he hasn't been able to perform as well as he wanted.

He revealed that he has been carrying a groin injury for the last seven years — one year longer than his remarkable run of always finishing among the medals.

It's an injury that preys on his mind. He will go several months in the best shape of his career before



Throughout his career, Neeraj has made excellence seem like the default.





Close encounter: Neeraj with gold medallist Arshad Nadeem and bronze medallist Anderson Peters. GETTY IMAGES

he feels the dread of a sudden twinge inside his inner thigh. He constantly thinks about his injury.

When he throws, he says 70 per cent of his thoughts are about whether he will get injured. His runway approach was once characterised by speed; now, he's slowed down considerably.

He compensates for the lack of speed by using his arm even more. Compared to the massive muscles of the leg, Neeraj's far smaller right shoulder and arm now do all the work.

Compared to other athletes who are throwing 40 to 50 times each session, Neeraj says he is only able to have one throwing session every couple of weeks.

He almost did it. Even after Arshad threw a massive 92.97m, Neeraj didn't think he was done. Slow off the runway, using almost exclusively his arm to propel the javelin, he nearly reached 90m himself.

At the Olympic finals, though, his

groin wasn't cooperating. His fouls were a consequence of his overthinking about a potential injury — a vicious cycle.

He thinks about a possible injury during a run-up, which leads to a poor one and consequently an 'X' against his name when he can't avoid the foul line. It's a sequence that, he says, mentally breaks him.

You can tell Neeraj is hurting after the event. He has spoken before about the reason he got into javelin. He does it because he loves it — he loves to throw. But throwing is hard for him right now.

He is doing it with a handicap. He'd love to throw freely. The fact that he has been this consistent is entirely due to hard work and injury management. His coaches say he can add three to four metres if he finally gets his groin treated.

That's what Neeraj wants too.

"There is a big throw inside me, but I'm not able to do it. Medals are one thing. But I want to get the distance I had in 2018 when I first threw 88m at the Asian Games. I feel I have a lot of good throws in me. I will not be at peace until I get that," he says.

Neeraj has been considering

surgery to treat his groin for several years now. However, the procedure is complex, and recovery will take several months. While Neeraj might have the time, India does not.

"My doctor told me to do the surgery before the last World Championships, but I didn't have time to decide because it takes a lot of time to prepare for the Olympics," he says.

"Khainch ke chal raha hoon," Neeraj says. He's been dragging himself to this finish line.

Now that he has reached it and given his country another Olympic medal, Neeraj can do what he really needs to do — talk to his doctors and decide when to do the surgery.

But not on the day of the final.

That day, Neeraj had one solitary goal. While he fell just short of the step he had hoped to stand on the podium, he's done more than everyone before him.

He wants to make sure of that too. When he came into the mixed zone, that's what he wanted to know as well. "You guys are satisfied, right?" he asked.

Only when everyone said they were did he finally head back to the Olympic Village.

FAREWELL SREEJESH, THE MAN WHO BROUGHT US SAVES, MEMORIES AND TEARS

Fans who cheered **"Sreejesh, Sreejesh"** for years will miss the tall, masked guardian in goal.

Y. B. Sarangi

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Put it down to the luck of the Indians. Specifically, the bad luck. Pitted against an aggressive Great Britain in the quarterfinals of the men's hockey competition at the Paris Olympics, the odds were stacked against Harmanpreet Singh's men. This was compounded by the red card shown to their key defender and first rusher, Amit Rohidas, in the 17th minute for raising his stick and hitting the face of William Calnan.

Despite this, God smiled on India, the sides level at one goal apiece at full-time. GB had pressed and probed, smelling blood. However, it failed to break the deadlock; a visibly exhausted but watertight Indian rearguard somehow keeping it at bay.

A thoroughbred surrounded by warriors, the "Great

Wall of Indian Hockey," goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh, had kept his team in the game with a series of fine saves in regulation time before saving Phillip Roper's attempt in the penalty shootout and catapulting his team into the second consecutive semifinals at the quadrennial games.

India and Sreejesh would eventually win a second consecutive bronze medal and with it, the latter's name engraved into the annals of Indian hockey history.

However, when the team next takes the pitch, goalkeeper Sreejesh, who had announced his international retirement before the Paris Olympics, will be notably absent.

After an illustrious two-decade-long career — decorated with two Olympic bronzes, two Champions Trophy silvers, a World League bronze, three Asian Games medals (including two gold medals), and two Commonwealth Games silver medals — it will be difficult for Sreejesh to watch from the sidelines after donning India's colours in 336 matches, including four Olympics and as many World Cups.



If the new crop of players imbibes even a part of Sreejesh's steely resolve and never-say-die attitude, Indian hockey will be better for it.



Doyen of the sport: P. R. Sreejesh, who has played over 300 international matches, has been one of India's most consistent players. He has helped India win several tournaments, including the Olympic bronze medals at the Tokyo and Paris Olympics.

RITURAJ KONWAR

For years, fans have rallied behind Sreejesh, chanting his name and marvelling at his heroic saves. Now, they'll struggle to adjust to his absence, missing the familiar sight of the tall, masked goalkeeper standing guard in India's net.

Life, however, moves on.

His teammates will eventually adapt to the silence, no longer hearing the sharp, commanding

words that Sreejesh, with his experience, used to rally them into the right positions and tighten the defence — words he humorously referred to as "songs" rather than the abuses they sometimes were.

They all understood that it was all for the team, with nothing personal against anyone.

Hailing from Kerala, a non-traditional hockey state, 36-year-old Sreejesh has seen it all — from India's failure to qualify for the Olympics in 2008, to not winning a single match in 2012, to reaching the quarterfinals in 2016, and finally securing bronze medals in both 2020 and 2024. He poured his heart and soul into the sport.

As he walked up to the post for the last time in the bronze medal

match against Spain at the historic Yves du Manoir Stadium in Paris, his mind flashed back through his journey.

"I just wanted to have my own moment, to recall all the memories from the day I first stepped onto the hockey field, the first time I put on the pads, and the day I got into the Indian camp for the first time back in 2002. My first international match. I just went through it all, revisiting those moments," said an emotional Sreejesh.

For his astonishing saves against Great Britain, playing a key role in a 10-man India's victory in the quarterfinals, former India captain and Hockey India (HI) president Dilip Tirkey hailed Sreejesh as the "God of Indian hockey."



Evergreen presence: P. R. Sreejesh's reassuring presence in the goalpost has been a sight for the sore eyes.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

Sreejesh was the saviour in the third-place match against Germany in Tokyo, where India secured an Olympic medal after 41 years. Three years later, he thwarted Spain's late charge to secure another bronze in Paris. A player who continuously evolved throughout his career, Sreejesh urged the younger generation to learn from the struggles of past hockey players and to appreciate the current success.

"We fought, faced obstacles, and overcame countless hurdles. Now, we have victory. For young kids, this is a lesson. You can't become an Olympian overnight. You can't become an Olympic medalist overnight. It took me nearly 21 years to stand on that podium. For many of them, they achieved it on their

first attempt. I want to tell them to be patient, keep working hard, and believe in the process. In the end, you will find yourself on the podium."

This golden advice stems from his deep passion and love for the sport. The way he prostrated before the goalpost and then perched on it, as he did in Tokyo, painted the picture of a king with his throne.

The goalpost, his good friend and emotional anchor, symbolizes Sreejesh's journey through a match. "You need to let go of your frustration. So, when you talk to the goalposts, when you're abusive, when you control every emotion, it helps you get back to normal. Sometimes, I even sing to my

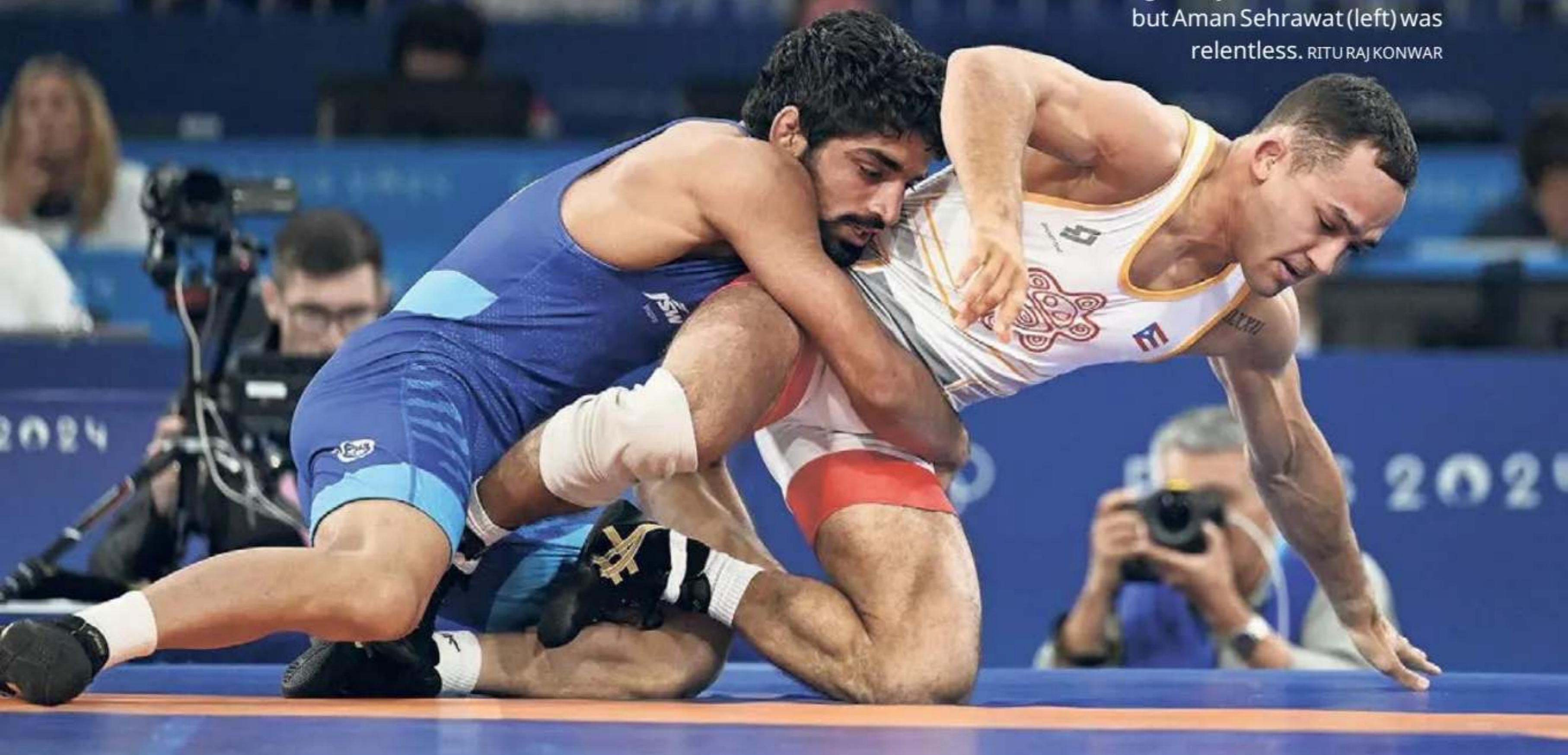
goalposts."

As Indian hockey's beloved goalkeeper Sreejesh calls it a day, Hockey India has decided to retire his iconic No. 16 jersey while also tapping into his vast expertise. He has been appointed head coach of the junior men's team, where he will mentor the next generation of players, ensuring a smooth transition and laying a strong foundation for the national team's success in upcoming tournaments like the 2026 World Cup and the 2028 Olympics.

If the new crop of players imbibes even a part of Sreejesh's steely resolve and never-say-die attitude, Indian hockey will be better for it.

◁ Sreejesh is likely to be tasked with mentoring the next generation of goalkeepers ▷

Intense: Darian Toi Cruz put up a challenge early on and even led 3-2, but Aman Sehrawat (left) was relentless. RITURAJ KONWAR



PARIS BRONZE NOT ENOUGH, LA GOLD NEXT IN SIGHTS

Aman Sehrawat is a **no-fuss wrestler** who knows his process and follows it religiously. A bronze medal at the Paris Olympics changes nothing as he has his sights set on the gold at the Los Angeles Games.

Jonathan Selvaraj

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Aman Sehrawat didn't brood. On Thursday evening, up against former Olympic silver medallist Rei Higuchi in the semifinals, he barely lasted a round. The Japanese wrestler, a multiple-time world medallist, quickly took Aman down, grabbed hold of his waist, and turned him with ease. In no time, Aman

trailed 0-10, and the bout was stopped, with the Japanese declared the winner by technical superiority.

It was always going to be a tough match-up, but Aman had reason to hope. He had defeated a former European champion and a former world champion in his first couple of bouts. Had he somehow managed to get the better of

Higuchi, he would have reached the finals of the men's 57kg category and been assured of a medal. Instead, he was ragdolled into submission.

There was no time for self-pity. The 21-year-old rushed out of the competition arena and began his weight-control regime. He had five kilos to lose before his weigh-in the next morning. By reaching the semifinal round, he had earned the right to wrestle for bronze through repechage. But to compete the next day, he needed to make weight.

Making weight can be harder than wrestling itself. The 'cut' had already taken a toll on the men's 57kg category. On the first day of competition, Iran's Alireza Sarlak, a former world silver medallist and medal contender, failed to make weight and was scratched from the competition.

Russian-turned-Albanian Zelimkhan Abakarov, a former world champion, barely managed to make weight. He struggled even to step on the mat. He had beaten Aman 10-0 the last time they met at the World Championships, but drained of energy, he lost 0-12 to the Indian in the quarterfinals in Paris. However, what probably hit closest to home was when Aman's compatriot, Vinesh Phogat, had an assured medal snatched from her just a few days ago after she was disqualified from the final of the women's 50kg competition.

Aman wasn't taking any chances. He pulled on his black sweatsuit and headed to the mat in the training hall. He shadow-practised by himself for the next hour and a half, then hit the gym and worked out some more. When he stood on the scales three hours later, he saw what he was looking for: 56.80 kg. It took three sessions and three checks for Aman to rest easy.

Not a drop of water or a morsel of food was consumed. Hungry and thirsty, but mostly relieved, he went to bed.

Hours later, Aman felt a bit uneasy as he approached the scales. Thankfully, he was still under. At 7:30 am, he walked into the weigh-in room and made weight.

"It was hard, but not anything more than what he can do. This is what we do," coach Virender Singh said later about how much a part of the routine is cutting weight.

Only after passing his weigh-in did Aman finally allow himself to drink something. By the evening, he was ready to go.

That spelled trouble for his opponent, Darian Toi Cruz of Puerto Rico. A former collegiate champion in the USA, he has also represented the USA in international competitions before switching to his current team. He is good, but the Indian had a hunger that would not be satiated by food.

Cruz put up a challenge early on and even led 3-2, but Aman was relentless like a pit bull. He kept hand-fighting, snapping Cruz's neck down, and sapping his energy. As the fight wore on, the Indian's pace took a toll. A close fight at 6-5 became a blowout as Aman racked up takedown after takedown. He won 13-5. By winning bronze, Aman joined an elite list of Indian men's Olympic wrestling medallists. This list includes two-time Olympic medallist Sushil Kumar, 2012 bronze medallist Yogeshwar Dutt, Tokyo silver medallist Ravi Dahiya, and Bajrang Punia, who won bronze in the same edition.

All of them have emerged from an *akhara* that is as important to Indian wrestling as La Masia is to Spanish football.

There are no easy days at Chhatrasal *akhara* in New Delhi's Model Town neighbourhood. It is an all-male boot camp, where boys live cramped in a room of five or more. The electricity doesn't always work. In the winter, you shiver. In the summer, you sweat. The place constantly smells of sweat. Chhatrasal teaches not just wrestling but pain tolerance — the willingness to undergo suffering for the promise of success. There's no place for weakness or softness here. If you think you are special, you will be quickly cut down to size. There's always someone as hungry as you, willing to do more than you. You do what you have to do, or you go

home. Despite its reputation, every other day, young boys come here on their own or are brought here from all over Haryana with dreams of becoming great wrestlers. If there is one place where dreams of becoming champion wrestlers are realised, it is at the Chhatrasal *akhara*.

But Chhatrasal isn't just an academy for Aman. It's also home. When he was 11 years old, then a scrawny and shy boy, he was brought here by his uncle. Although he had wrestled at an *akhara* in the village of Birohar, in Haryana's Jhajjar district, that wasn't the only reason he was brought here. He was brought in because he had nowhere else to go.

Aman doesn't like to talk much about his early life. He has a painful past. When he was just 10, his mother died by suicide. His father, grief-stricken, died the same way a year later. His family wasn't rich. An uncle brought him to Chhatrasal soon after — if not to be a wrestler, then at least to get three meals a day while helping out some of the more established players.

Many of the boys at Chhatrasal are homesick. That's never been an option for Aman. Since he arrived at Chhatrasal, Aman's life has revolved around training and competition.

"He has almost no distractions. He has a singular-minded focus on training," says coach Praveen Kumar, one of the coaches at Chhatrasal *akhara*. "Chhatrasal Stadium is my home. The wrestlers here are my family. If someone asks me to go somewhere for Diwali, I don't agree. I make it clear that I'm not leaving



Origin of a champion: Aman is a product of the Chhatrasal akhara, a training centre as important to Indian wrestling as La Masia is to Spanish football. REUTERS

here. Now people also know that this is my mentality. I don't like roaming around or going around Delhi either," Aman says.

As the years passed in Chhatrasal, Aman slowly made a name for himself, even in this school of champions. He made his way through the nationals, winning gold in 2022. He even started making a mark at the international level, becoming India's first U-23 World Champion in 2022 and then winning an Asian Championship gold in 2023.

His exploits earned him the only real concession Chhatrasal provides its best athletes — a prefabricated room that he only has to share with two others. It has its own AC, though. On one of the walls, Aman has put up a hand-painted poster of the Olympic rings. Below it — in English — are the words, 'If it was easy, everyone would do it'.

While he was dreaming of the Olympics, he had to get through his biggest challenge yet: fellow Chhatrasal trainee Ravi, the Tokyo silver medallist. After two losses, Aman finally beat his senior rival at the Olympic selection trials in March this year.

Then came the Asian Olympic qualifiers. But he missed out on the quota there, and there was no point in sulking. He dove into preparation for the World Olympic qualifiers, won the quota, and thereafter, the right to compete in Paris.

At the Olympics, Aman was placed

in a tough group. However, he once again did what he knew he must do on the mat and off it. By the time he was done, he had, as a memento, a raw cut on the bridge of his nose to go with the bronze medal around his neck.

The cut will heal, but the medal, Aman says, will not satisfy him.

Life will not change that much. He says he'll go back to the same room he shares with two other athletes. He'll continue to train as he's always done. The only change is his dreams.

"I'm going to win a gold medal next time," he says.

AMAN JOINED AN ELITE LIST OF INDIAN MEN'S OLYMPIC WRESTLING MEDALLISTS, WHICH INCLUDES SUSHIL KUMAR, YOGESHWAR DUTT, RAVI DAHIYA AND BAJRANG PUNIA



SWAPNIL KUSALE'S SUCCESS MANTRA DOES THE TRICK

The Maharashtrian has **elevated himself** above the rest of India's sporting firmament and into legend after winning the Olympic bronze in the 50m men's three-position event.

Jonathan Selvaraj

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*om tryāmbakam yajāmahe sugandhīm puṣṭi-vardhānam
urvārukam īva bandhānān mr̄tyor mukṣīya mā 'mr̄tāt*

About a year ago, Swapnil Kusale had this Rig Vedic verse tattooed down his spine. These Sanskrit words are recited during times of great stress and are believed to bestow longevity. Originally, the verse — a *moksha* mantra — was intended to ease the transition from the world of mortals.

This tattoo isn't the only one Kusale has; he also sports an image of Arjuna, the Indian archer prince, on his arm. While Arjuna is synonymous with marksmanship in India, it's the tattoo on Kusale's back that truly symbolises what the 25-year-old has achieved.

Now, Kusale has elevated himself above the rest of India's sporting firmament and into legend after winning an Olympic bronze in the 50m men's three-position event at the Olympic shooting centre in Châteauroux.

His medal was India's third at the 2024 Olympics and the first ever in the 50m three-position event. It's also the first individual medal for an athlete from the state of Maharashtra since K. D. Jadhav won one for wrestling in 1952.

A year ago, Kusale got the verse tattooed for spiritual support at a

RITU RAJ KONWAR





crucial juncture in his life. He had been seen as a promising shooter but hadn't quite broken into the world's elite. At 25, he was still striving for that one defining medal. He had finished fourth on two of the biggest occasions of his career — at the 2022 World Championships and the Asian Games. The latter finish was particularly devastating. He had set an Asian record in qualifying and was leading comfortably when he shot a 7.6, leaving him agonisingly short of a podium finish.

Kusale's talent was undeniable. The son of a schoolteacher from the village of Kambalwadi near

Kolhapur, he was handed a rifle at 14 as part of *Kreeda Probodhini*, Maharashtra's sports promotion initiative.

Coaches soon recognised his potential, and his father believed in him too. A village schoolteacher of meagre means, he bought Kusale's first air rifle on loan with a high interest rate and continued to pay off the debt until four years ago.

Despite his family's trust, Kusale felt he wasn't living up to their expectations. In 2018, after failing to make the Indian squad for the Asian Games, he got his first tattoo with the words 'I promise' on his right

forearm. "I did that because I felt I wasn't justifying my talent. I believed in my goals and couldn't afford to be casual or lazy. I had to make that promise to myself," he says.

Kusale's coaches, especially his personal coach Deepali Deshpande, who he calls his second mother, continued to believe in him. Joydeep Karmakar, a fourth-place finisher at the 2012 Olympics and national team coach between 2021 and 2022, also saw his potential.

"He is the closest in temperament to Gagan Narang. In terms of aggressiveness, he is like a 20-tonne truck when he finds his momentum.



He will keep going for his shots. When he's in flow, he's just impossible to stop," Karmakar had told *Sportstar* a day before the final. But all that aggressiveness had its downside as well. "Just like you can't control a truck at high speed, it's hard for Kusale to control himself when things go wrong. But he's become more mature now and knows how to rein himself in," Karmakar said.

The version of Kusale who took the firing lane on the day of the final was exactly the one Karmakar had hoped to see. He was aggressive when necessary and restrained when he had to be, delivering a performance that made it hard to believe he was competing in his maiden Olympic Games — against the world's elite shooters.

Kusale was undoubtedly nervous. He began with a 9.6 in his first shot in the kneeling position of the final. In this event, shooters take 15 shots while kneeling, followed by 15 shots in the prone position, before transitioning to the standing position.

The first of two shooters are

eliminated after the initial two series of 10 shots in the standing position, with the next lowest-ranked shooter being eliminated after each subsequent shot. The occasion seemed overwhelming for Kusale, but he managed to maintain his composure.

At the end of the first two stages, he was in fifth place, 0.9 points behind fourth, and a full point away from the medals — a significant gap in a sport where matters are decided in decimals. Kusale said he wasn't paying attention to the gap. "I was just focusing on my breath and my body to calm myself," he said after the match.

Although he was trailing, the standing position — where shooters have the least stability while aiming at a target 50 metres away — is where matters are truly settled. And this is where Kusale really shone. Knowing he needed to make up that gap, he stayed aggressive.

Despite starting poorly with a 9.5 in his opening shot, he shot four more in the ten-ring to maintain his position. In his second series of five shots, a 9.1 was evened out by four

more tens.

As Kusale kept his nerve, those around him faltered. 2023 World silver medallist and European champion Jiří Přívratský of the Czech Republic, who was in fourth place, and 2022 World Championships gold medallist Jon-Hermann Hegg of Norway, who was in the lead at the start of the standing series, shot several nines, vaulting Kusale into the bronze medal position. The Indian never relinquished it, eventually opening up a 2.2-point gap that Přívratský couldn't close.

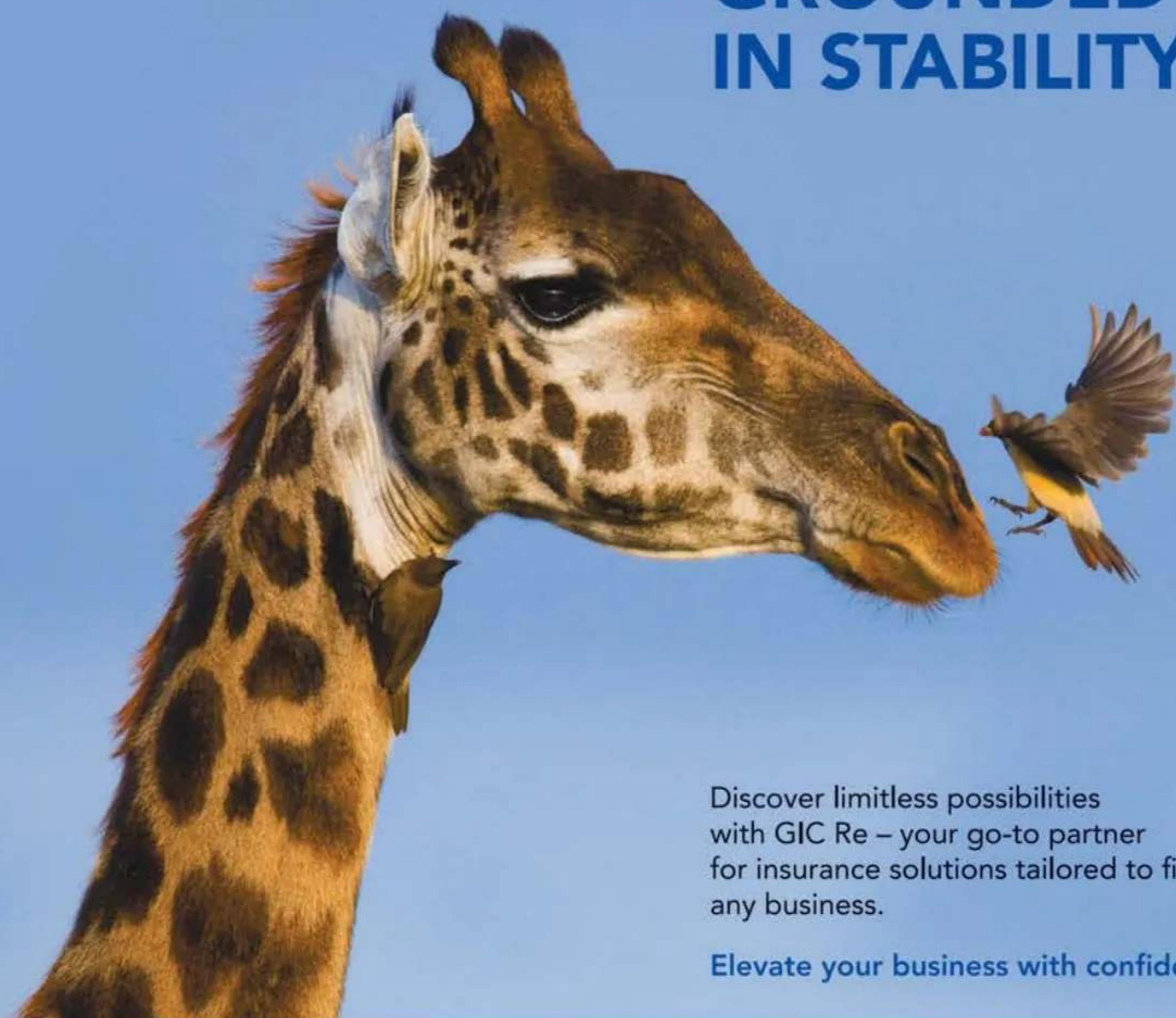
Kusale even had a chance to finish in second place but conceded that to Ukraine's Serhiy Kulish, eventually settling for bronze, a feat that brought a big smile to his face as he stood on the podium. He later said he still has more to achieve. "There's still a promise that I have left to fulfil," he says.

But that's for another day.

On the day he medalled, Kusale carried not just a mantra on his skin and the word 'Bharat' on his gun, but also the national flag on his back, looking every bit an icon of Indian sports.



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OF FEW HISTORIC FIRSTS AND MANY WHAT-IFS

Following the three historic shooting medals, the present is a happy place, worth celebrating, but it's hard not to dwell on the many frustrating "what-could-have-beens."

Santadeep Dey

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If one can look beyond the many clichés in *O Vencedor está Só*, penned by Paulo Coelho in 2008, there exists a line that is likely to stay with you: "People are never satisfied. If they have a little, they want more. If they have a lot, they still want more."

The human heart is a funny place. It never stops yearning. There are moments when you may feel your heart is full. However, before the dust can settle, you will be chasing another canon event.

This eternal pursuit of happiness gives birth to dreams that could eventually make or break you. When Manu Bhaker became India's first shooter and female athlete to strike gold at the Youth Olympic Games in 2018, the podium would have felt like home, where she belonged. As the euphoria began to subside, something inside her would have screamed in protest.

And thus started a long and arduous journey to reach the pinnacle of an Olympic sport — winning one of those hallowed discoid chunks of metal they call medals in the Summer Games.

Tokyo naturally became the first pit stop in 2020, later deferred to the following year after the coronavirus pandemic left the world in limbo. Manu and her mixed-team partner Saurabh Chaudhary entered the competition as favourites to win gold in their events, having displayed unwavering focus in ISSF (International Shooting Sport Federation) events preceding the

Olympics. But in a shocking turn of events, the Indian contingent failed to win a single medal, let alone gold.

The shockwaves left behind in the wake of the disaster had telling effects. For starters, New Zealand cricketer Jimmy Neesham's 2019 social media post saying, "Kids, don't take up sport. Take up baking or something. Die at 60 really fat and happy," went viral again. Then, Manu went into depression, Saurabh never got his form back, some shooters disappeared from the circuit, and one even went on a pilgrimage!

The Manu of yore, who once used to win medals for fun, took a lot of

India, which had failed to open its account in Tokyo 2020, finished 14th on the shooting medal tally. Going purely by count, India will take fifth place.



A double whammy: Manu Bhaker followed up her bronze in women's 10m air pistol with a second medal as she combined with Sarabjot Singh to win bronze in the 10m air pistol mixed team. RITU RAJ KONWAR

time to get the monkey off her back. It was 604 days later, to be precise, when she won her first ISSF World Cup medal since the Tokyo disaster.

Another significant milestone was

breached three months later when Manu and her former coach Jaspal Rana, under whose tutelage she had bagged 10 senior World Cup medals and a Commonwealth Games gold, decided to bury the hatchet after having a public fallout in 2021.

The results were for all to see a year later when Manu topped the Olympic Selection Trials in both 10m air pistol and 25m sports pistol, thus making it impossible for selectors to ignore her in either category.

The 22-year-old made sure she repaid the faith with generous interest in Paris. On July 27, Manu's dominant show in 10m air pistol qualification saw her become the first Indian woman to make an Olympic shooting final in 20 years. But aware that the job was only half done, Manu slipped out of the range quietly to focus on what was to follow the day after.

In the final, Manu picked up right from where she left. Not even once



Trailblazer: Swapnil Kusale secured India's first Olympic medal in the 50m 3 Positions, winning bronze after a stunning performance in the final.

RITURAJ KONWAR

did she fall out of the top three places during the entire length of the competition. She eventually finished with 221.7 points and a bronze to hand India its first medal in the French capital.

Notably, she was only 0.1 points short of an assured silver medal! While that would have left many frustrated and disappointed, Manu had a big smile pasted on her lips when she waved to the crowd. She knew that the drought was finally over. It had taken India 12 years to bag a medal in the sport again after Vijay Kumar's silver in the men's 25m rapid fire pistol in London.

On July 29, she was at it again, trying to make the top four in the 10m air pistol mixed team event with Sarabjot Singh. Although Sarabjot dropped 11 points in his three series, a 291 from Manu was enough to see

the duo through to a bronze medal match against South Korea's Oh Ye Jin, an Asian Championship gold medallist, and Asian Games silver medallist Lee Wonho.

Lee and Ye Jin ended up shooting a lot of 9s in the final contest to concede a 16-10 defeat.

This victory saw Sarabjot heave a sigh of relief, with the shooter having missed out on a place in the 10m air pistol final three days prior after he shot one 'x' less than eighth-placed Robin Walter of Germany. This means Walter had hit an extra bullet in the inner-10 ring, the diameter of which is merely 5 mm. To put matters into perspective, the diameter of the graphite tip of a new wooden pencil, before being sharpened, is roughly the same!

With two medals in her bag, Manu had already entered her name in the history books. She became Independent India's first athlete to win two medals in a single edition of the Olympic Games. She also became only the second Indian female athlete to bag multiple Olympic medals after badminton sensation P.V. Sindhu.

Yet her undying passion for the sport would have told her she could push for the extra mile. Thus, with two of her events out of the way, Manu began preparations for the 25m sports pistol, which was still three days away.

On August 2, Manu proved difficult to catch as she raced away with the points in the Precision stage. By the time the curtains fell on Rapid,

Swapnil Kusale's bronze in the smallbore event ensured India finished with most shooting medals from a single Olympics

Gut-wrenching miss: Arjun Babuta finished fourth in the men's air rifle final at the Paris Olympics, despite being in medal contention throughout. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Manu was second in the standings, with only Veronika Major of Hungary having bested her by equalling the Qualification Olympic Record (592).

Manu got off to a nervy start in the final, missing three of her first five shots on target. However, she bounced back to avoid getting eliminated until the eighth series, when she tied for third place with Major. The bronze-medal place eventually had to be decided via shoot-off, which saw Major register one extra hit (10.2-plus shots are considered hits) over Manu.

For a while, Manu stood transfixed at her firing point, refusing to believe what had just transpired. When the audience broke the deathly silence, applauding her for the creditable fourth-place finish, she switched her weapon into safety mode and returned to the seating area a few metres away from where the eventual medal ceremony would take place. Ironically, though, Manu was only a few millimetres away from that podium.

She is not the only shooter, though, to have missed the podium by the barest of margins. Arjun Babuta put up a brave fight against the likes of four-time Worlds medallist and world record holder Sheng Lihao and 2023 world champion Victor Lindgren. Still, he ended up losing the bronze medal to Croatia's Miran Maricic after giving in to the pressure and shooting a rare 9.5 off his final shot. Maricic was only 0.2 ahead of Babuta until the deciding shot was fired.

The curious case of the one missed target came back to haunt the Indian contingent once again, albeit this time in the shotgun arena. A surprise fourth-place finish from Anant Jeet Singh Naruka and Maheshwari Chauhan in the skeet mixed team qualification saw the duo lock horns with China in the bronze medal match. Jiang Yiting and Lyu Jianlin eventually won the



contest 44-43, with the latter registering a perfect series!

Like shotgun, 50m rifle 3 positions is an event not many would want to hedge their bets on. No Indian had ever made the final of the said discipline in the Olympics. Who would have known that a ticket collector from the little-known village of Kambalwadi in Maharashtra would not only finally break the jinx but also go on to medal in the category?

Swapnil Kusale ensured India finished its shooting campaign at Châteauroux with the highest number of medals from a single edition of the Olympics, bagging a bronze in the smallbore event.

Although he just managed to make the cut at seventh place during qualifying, he consistently fired at the 10-ring in 'Standing' in the final to ensure another medal for the country.

India, which had failed to open its account in Tokyo 2020, finished 14th on the shooting medal tally. Going purely by count, India will take fifth place, having won one medal more

than Great Britain, Guatemala and Switzerland.

China maintained its position from 2020, finishing top with 10 medals (five gold, two silver and three bronze). Meanwhile, South Korea (three gold, three silver) displaced the USA (one gold, three silver, one bronze) from the second spot.

The present, to be sure, is a happy place to be in, and celebrations should be in order, but one cannot help but think about the sheer number of frustrating 'what-could-have-beens'. While a number of Indian athletes are taking positive steps towards that one line beyond which glory awaits, the occasion tends to get big on a few who aren't able to get over it.

What if Manu had that extra hit? What if Babuta had shot a high-10? What if Sarabjot had made the final in the individual event? What if one of Maheshwari and Naruka had missed one less clay pigeon?

The questions are never-ending, but it is good to have one's sensibilities tickled for Los Angeles.



» PARIS OLYMPICS
ATHLETICS

SEASON RECORDS FAIL TO CONVERT TO MEDALS



RITU RAJ KONWAR

Of the 28 Indian track and field athletes who qualified for the Olympics, only one other Indian, apart from Neeraj – Avinash Sable in the men's 3000m steeplechase – managed **to reach the final** of his event.

Jonathan Selvaraj

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It's a testament to the insanely high standards Neeraj Chopra (**left**) sets for himself that an Olympic silver medal — the best-ever result for India at the 2024 Summer Olympics — was a cause for some disappointment to the man himself. "It would have been nice if the national anthem could have also played," Neeraj said after the medal ceremony of the event, won by Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem.

Neeraj, however, had nothing to be disappointed about. It took an all-time

Not fast enough: Despite going into the lead early on, Sable (white) was quickly caught by the rest of the group, eventually finishing 11th. RITU RAJ KONWAR

great performance from Nadeem, with two throws surpassing the previous Olympic record, to get the better of Neeraj — an athlete who had never been beaten by Nadeem in any competition since they first competed at the South Asian Games in 2016.

On another day, Neeraj might have been able to follow the Pakistani thrower into the 90-metre zone. Neeraj mentioned that, far from being discouraged when Nadeem threw the spear 92.97m in his second attempt, he was actually confident of overtaking him.

Unfortunately, Neeraj was not near his best — the groin injury he's been battling since 2017 didn't allow him to gain any speed on his runway approach.

The uncertainty over the injury also led to five fouls in six attempts. However, in his lone legitimate attempt, he still managed his second-best throw of all time, hitting a mark of 89.45m. That was enough to secure the silver in one of the toughest javelin throw competitions — the fifth-place finisher in Paris would have taken gold in Tokyo.

Neeraj's competition was easily the high point of the Indian track and field performance. Of the 28 athletes India had qualified for the Olympics, only one other Indian, apart from Neeraj — Avinash Sable in the men's 3000m steeplechase — managed to reach the final.

Sable's first goal was to advance out of the heats — something he wasn't able to do despite setting a national record at the Tokyo Olympics. He managed to do this successfully and was raring to go before the final, even believing he had a chance to fight for a medal.

However, despite going into the lead early on, he was quickly caught by the rest of the group, became

trapped in the middle of the pack, and struggled to break out. He eventually finished 11th with a time of 8:14.18. Even if he had come close to his personal best of 8:09.94, he still wouldn't have medalled, but he would have finished inside the top eight.

While none of the Indians competing made a personal best attempt, four season's best attempts were recorded — by Parul Chaudhary in the women's 5000m and 3000m steeplechase events, by Neeraj in the qualification round (89.34m) and in the final (89.45m), and finally by the Indian men's relay team, who clocked a time of 3:00.58 to finish fourth in their heat.

However, with the exception of Neeraj, who qualified for the final with his first throw in qualification (a then-season's best of 89.34m), none of the other season's bests translated into good positions.

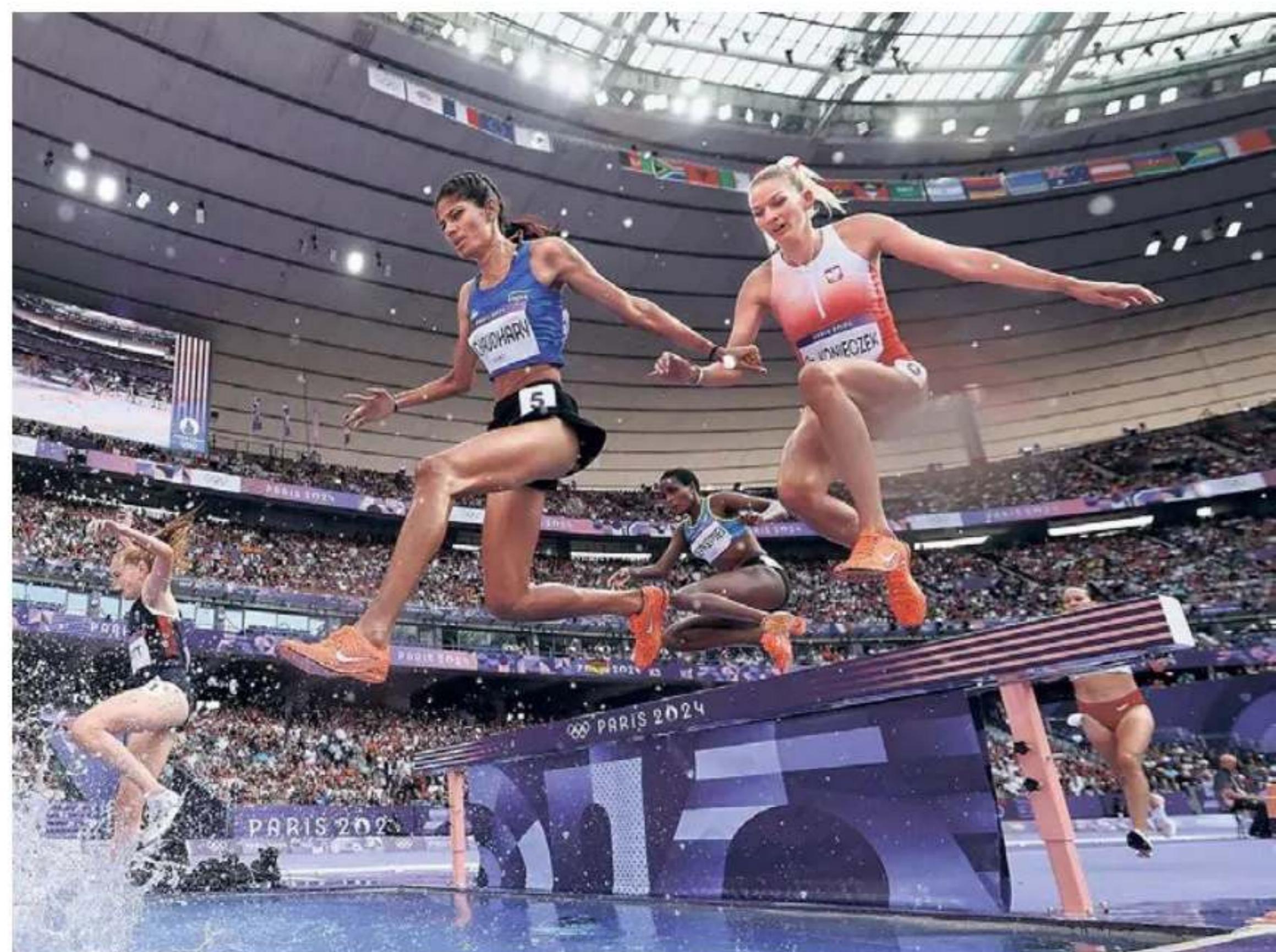
Parul finished eighth among 12 runners in her heats in the 3000m steeplechase — she needed not just a season's best but a big personal best to advance to the final. The fifth

place, an automatic qualifier, went at 9:10.73. Her time wouldn't have been enough even had she competed in the slowest heat — the slowest qualifier for the final was Irene Sánchez-Escribano of Spain with 9:17.39.

The Indian men's relay team could count itself unlucky to have finished fourth in its heats — only the top three would advance to the final. India also failed to be among the two fastest non-automatic qualifiers (Japan would go through from the first group). The Indian team then had to watch the Japanese erase their continental record (2:59.05) set at the Budapest World Championships with a new mark of 2:58.33 in the final.

Most of the other Indians, however, would disappoint. Kiran Pahal, who clocked a time of 50.92s at the National Inter-State Athletics

Off-track: Parul (blue) finished eighth among 12 runners in her heats in the 3000m steeplechase. GETTY IMAGES





JYOTHI YARRAJI (ABOVE) CLOCKED 13.16 IN HER HEATS TO FINISH LAST AND THEN FINISHED FOURTH IN REPECHAGE. KIRAN PAHAL (BELOW) FINISHED SEVENTH IN HEATS AND LAST IN REPECHAGE

competition in Panchkula a little over a month ago, was close to two seconds off that pace in both the heats (52.51), where she finished seventh, and in the repechage competition (52.59), where she finished last.

Jyothi Yarraj, who had regularly clocked sub-13-second timings over the last couple of years, fell outside that 13-second barrier in Paris. She clocked 13.16 in her heats to finish last and then finished fourth in her repechage heat. Had she matched her personal best (12.78) in either race, she would have qualified for the next round.

These sub-par performances will leave the Indian federation with plenty to think about.

Following his competition, Neeraj said he will likely undergo surgery to treat the groin condition that has been bothering him.

For now, it seems India's hopes and dreams for the 2028 Olympics will depend on the success of the procedure.



CITIUS, ALTIUS, FORTIUS

The original Olympics motto is made up of **three Latin words:** Citius, Altius, Fortius. These words mean Faster, Higher and Stronger, respectively.

Jonathan Selvaraj

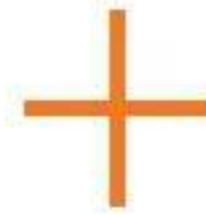
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There was no one who ran faster at the Olympics than Noah Lyles. There was no one who jumped higher than Mondo Duplantis. There was no one who was stronger than Lasha Talakhadze.

Lyles seems a bit of a braggart. When he comes into the Olympics, the reigning world champion in the 100m says he's the fastest man even when Kishane Thompson of Jamaica has actually run the quickest time in the world. When he talks, part of you can't help but wonder if he can actually back it up.

An overwhelming majority of the global athletics community wants to see him fail just because he's so arrogant. Lyles though doesn't fade.

Despite starting slower than everyone else in one of the fastest 100m races of all time in the Olympic final, he finds the extra gear that champions have and overhauls the rest of the field at the finish line. He may have issued cheques with his mouth but he surely cashed them with his feet.



Despite starting slower than everyone else in one of the fastest 100m races of all time in the Olympic final, Lyles finds the extra gear that champions have and overhauls the rest of the field at the finish line. He may have issued cheques with his mouth but he surely cashed them with his feet.

Mondo seems to have a penchant for theatrics as much as Lyles does. His work wasn't done behind a microphone but on the field. When he had the height of the pole vault bar set at 6.25m – 1cm more than his own world record – he had the entire crowd of 69,000 cheering him on. The adoration of the crowd was anyway a given. He also had his competitors, those who might have once wanted to beat him, asking the crowd to get behind him.

When he did clear that height, there was almost a sense of inevitability to it.

While Lyles' race is close, Mondo competes, not against others, but himself. Regardless of how they won their gold medals, the fact is when you watch the two of them you see two athletes at the peak of their athletic careers. They are young — Lyles is 27, Mondo is 24 and both have many years of peak performance left in front of them.

That's not true for Lasha. Anymore that is. He's competing at his third Olympics. At any of his previous two, the notion of Lasha not placing on the top of the podium wouldn't even have been entertained.

Mondo took a surprising fourth-place finish at the Monaco Diamond League last year. Lyles has been beaten multiple times in 2024 itself including in the semifinals of the 100m at the Olympics.

Not Lasha though. For the last nine years — dating back to the 2015 World Championships, he has been unbeaten in international



+

Fastest, Highest, Strongest: (From L-R) Sprinter Noah Lyles, pole vaulter Armand Duplantis and weightlifter Lasha Talakhadze celebrate their respective victories at the Paris Olympics

competition. At the Tokyo Olympic Games, Lasha smashed three of (his own) world records to win gold. He lifted a total of 488kg – 47 kilos more than his nearest rival. No one across measurable events comes close to that sort of dominance.

When he competed, no one doubted he would win. There would just be this sense of awe as Lasha waited until everyone else in the competition was done. Then he would begin to lift. He would make three clean lifts first in the snatch, then retreat to the private zone in the warm-up hall.

He would then wait for the other lifters to be done with their clean and jerk and fight between themselves for the minor medals before he would swagger out having posted what would seem like impossible numbers. He would load the bar with an unreasonable amount of red, yellow and green iron discs – unreasonable to all but him. Then with no fuss, he'd lift that weight like Atlas over his head. The question for his competitors wasn't whether he'd beat them. It was how much he

would beat them by.

That was Lasha at his best. He was at his best for a very long time. He's still very good. But Lasha is 30 now – coming close to the age where explosiveness and speed begin to decline. When he came to Paris though, there was this strange sense of mortality about him. A couple of years ago, he very nearly died on the operation table after going into a coma following an adverse reaction to anaesthesia for a routine procedure to treat nasal polyps.

He came back from that to win another World Championship gold in 2023 but wear and tear have taken their toll. He injured his knees, which forced him to miss the 2024 European Championships. He was still the gold medal favourite for the Paris Games, but no one expected him to lift a total of 500 kilos – an impossible target no one but Lasha could have even dreamed of lifting.

When Lasha made his appearance on the weightlifting stage for the first time on the evening of August 10, the Georgian Colossus stood out even among a pack of some of the

biggest and strongest men on the planet. At 6-foot-6-inches – head and shoulders above his rivals – he is listed as weighing 171kg.

Like most years, Lasha waited until most of the competition was done with snatch. He was to start at 210kg – the most he has ever started an Olympic competition with. This seemed like the old Lasha. But then suddenly both old rivals Gor Minasyan and Varazdat Lalayan put up identical lifts. All three made their lifts. Lasha increased the weight on the bar to 215 kilos. He made it but once again Lalayan followed. Minasyan went a step further. He loaded a total of 216 kilos on the bar and made it. For the first time in nearly a decade, Lasha wasn't in the lead at a weightlifting competition.

Then the unthinkable happened. Lasha posted a mark of 220kg. And for the first time in what seemed like forever, his arms buckled. The weight fell. The crowd gasped. Lasha slinked backstage. Minasyan attempted the same. He could have potentially gone five kilos clear at the top. But he failed too. He still had the



lead though. It was something few could claim against Lasha.

The gold was no longer a certainty. To be sure, one would think Lasha would pull ahead in the clean and jerk but then one couldn't be so sure. It was a three-way fight for gold between Lasha, Lalayan and Minasyan.

Once the lesser placings were done in the clean and jerk section – where weightlifters could pull the bar up to their chest before pushing it over the head, Minasyan was the first to come out. He put 245kg on the bar and lifted it. Lasha had to go bigger. He posted 247 kg -- the most he's started a clean-and-jerk competition at the Olympics with. Although he made it, it was clearly a lot more of a struggle than in previous years. But Lalayan, the 25-year-old Armenian, did it too.

He had been matching Lasha lift for lift but now Lalayan began to reach his limit too. He loaded 252 kilos on the bar -- and made the lift. He had made a new personal best.

It was time for Lasha to step up. He loaded 255 kilos on the bar.

Lasha usually crossed himself in orthodox fashion when he stepped up onto the weightlifting platform, but this time he made the religious gesture multiple times.

When he began the lift, you could see just why he needed all the divine intervention he could get. This was the hardest anyone had seen Lasha work under the bar. It moved almost in slow motion to his chest. When he threw the bar overhead, it was clear he could barely control it. The momentum of the weight dragged the 171-kilo man with it. By the time he could bring a stop to its movement, he was almost standing perpendicular to the judges out in front of the platform. It was sheer heart and brute strength that allowed him to lock his arms out with weight overhead. His body shook uncontrollably. One of the judges ruled it a foul but the other two let it stand.

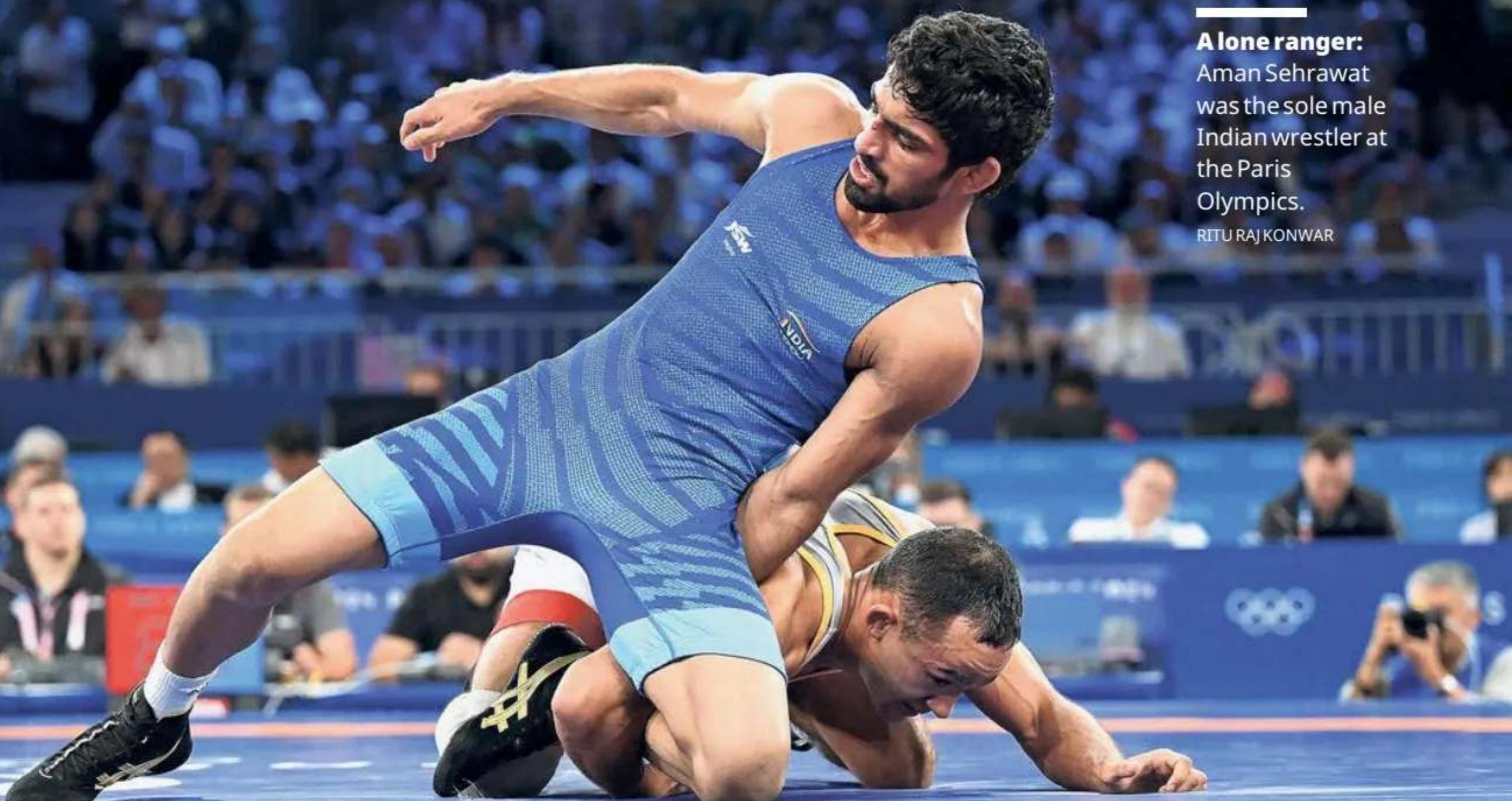
Lasha barely could. The effort had taken almost everything from him. His coaches, including former Olympic champion Giorgi Asanidze, had to physically hold him up as he

went backstage. It was the most anyone had seen Lasha struggle on the international stage in a decade but it was enough. Minasyan twice failed a lift at 255 kilos which would have given him the lead. Lalayan attempted but failed a lift at 256kg.

Though it meant Lasha had won, he still had a lift left in the bank. This is normally when lifters make a 'glory lift' and attempt a near-impossible weight with nothing to lose. Lasha though was spent. He sat on his seat backstage and didn't make an attempt – once again for the first time in a decade. His winning total was 470kg – just three kilos more than Lalayan. It was the narrowest of his career.

Lasha would later go on to say this was the most valuable medal of his sports career. He says he would go for a fourth. It is uncertain if that will be the case.

His performance at the Paris Olympics reminds one of the old saying: "Father Time is undefeated." But for at least one last Olympics, Lasha has managed to prove he's still stronger than him.



Alone ranger:
Aman Sehrawat
was the sole male
Indian wrestler at
the Paris
Olympics.
RITU RAJ KONWAR

A LEGACY UPHELD AND A HEARTBREAK

Aman Sehrawat's bronze in the 57kg category extended India's wrestling legacy at the Games, but Vinesh Phogat's **disqualification from the final** for missing weight by 100 grams left a bitter aftertaste.

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Aman Sehrawat extended India's wrestling medal streak at the Olympics, which began at the Beijing Games in 2008, by winning a bronze in the 57kg category at the Paris Olympics. At 21, Aman became the youngest Indian to win an

individual Olympic medal. He joins the ranks as the country's sixth wrestler and fifth from the Chhatrasal stable (after Sushil Kumar, Yogeshwar Dutt, Ravi Dahiya, and Bajrang Punia) to achieve this rare feat.

Alongside Aman, Vinesh Phogat reached the women's 50kg final but was disqualified after weighing 100 grams over the limit before her gold medal match. Despite a strong lineup,

other Indian wrestlers faltered for various reasons.

Aman, a 2023 Asian champion, Asian Games bronze medalist, and 2022 World Under-23 champion, showcased his potential at the Olympics. Having already defeated Tokyo Olympic silver medalist and fellow akhara mate Ravi in the selection trials, Aman delivered on his debut, aided by a bit of luck.



Aman outperformed North Macedonia's 2022 European champion Vladimir Egorov and upset Albanian wrestler and 2022 World champion Zelimkhan Abakarov, who reportedly struggled with weight-cutting issues, by technical superiority. However, he was overpowered by eventual champion Rei Higuchi of Japan in the semifinals.

As Iranian Worlds silver medallist Alireza Sarlak did not make weight, Aman, who worked hard to shed 4.6 kg in 10 hours, avoided a potentially strong rival in the repechage round and easily defeated Puerto Rico's Darian Cruz in the bronze medal match, making history at the Champ de Mars arena.

"Since I have won a bronze medal, I will try to win a gold next time," said Aman, who idolises Sushil.

Aman managed to speak with Sushil and received valuable tips ahead of his bronze medal match.

"After seeing Sushil Pehelwan for the first time some years ago, I thought, 'If he can win two Olympic medals, why can't I win one?' I spoke to him. He said I fought well in the quarterfinals but gave away too much space in the semifinals. He advised me to forget the past and give my

best in the bronze medal match," Aman shared.

Vinesh, the Outlier

Earlier, a determined and focussed Vinesh — one of the leading voices in the wrestlers' protest last year — dropped down to the 50kg weight category due to uncertainty about her ability to challenge quota place winner Antim Panghal for the 53kg slot, especially in the absence of a properly functioning Wrestling Federation of India (WFI).

The two-time World bronze medallist stunned World and Olympic champion Yui Susaki in the opening round, advancing to the final. However, the next morning took an unexpected turn when Vinesh was disqualified. Heartbroken, she announced her retirement soon after.

With Vinesh taking her case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), uncertainty surrounding her future lingered beyond the Games.

India, which had secured two wrestling medals in Tokyo, faced further setbacks. Nisha Dahiya suffered an injury during her 68kg quarterfinal bout, leading to her elimination.

World bronze medallist Antim

Disappointing start: Antim Panghal's much-awaited Olympic debut at Paris 2024 ended with a first-round defeat in the women's 53kg wrestling event at the Champ-de-Mars Arena. AP

(53kg) also struggled with weight management and suffered a surprising loss to Turkey's double European bronze medallist Zeynep Yetgil. Anshu Malik (57kg), a 2021 World Championships silver medallist, had sustained a shoulder injury before the Games and was eliminated by former Olympic champion Helen Maroulis of the USA.

Reetika Hooda, the World U-23 champion in the 76kg category, defeated two-time European bronze medallist Bernadett Nagy before falling to Kyrgyzstan's top-seeded Aiperi Medet Kyzy, a World silver medallist.

The WFI must acknowledge the wrestlers' performance in the Paris Olympics and initiate efforts to elevate the sport's standards. It is crucial to restore trust between the federation and the wrestlers while devising solid plans to get Indian wrestling back on track with the 2028 Olympics in mind.

IRREPRESSIBLE, IMPACTFUL, INSPIRATIONAL

We are all richer for having **experienced Vinesh Phogat** as long as we did. There weren't many like her, and there won't be many like her.

Jonathan Selvaraj

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On August 9, Vinesh Phogat announced her retirement from the sport of wrestling in a post on X. After the previous day's incidents, it was a message that many had been expecting.

Vinesh experienced the highest of highs at the Paris Olympics. She defeated an unbeaten Olympic champion wrestler who was considered not just the favourite in her weight division but across every weight division at the quadrennial event. She became the first Indian woman wrestler to reach an Olympic final. However, Vinesh also faced the lowest of lows at the Olympics. No one had ever reached an Olympic final only to be denied the chance to compete because they had failed to make weight on the day of the competition.

Vinesh had taken her case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, seeking at least to be awarded a silver medal by virtue of reaching the final. If she had succeeded, she would have set a precedent, but, much to the

disappointment of the nation, her appeal was turned down by the sole arbitrator, Annabelle Bennett.

The medal ceremony may be over, and the Olympics might be done, but Vinesh has still not admitted defeat.

It had to be Vinesh Phogat.

No one apart from her could whiplash from the extreme jubilation to the pits of despair overnight in a manner that would captivate the entire country. And who else but her could initiate a battle that could change the way sports are governed?

Vinesh has always been a fighter. Tragedy has followed her, yet somehow, against the odds, she has emerged victorious.

When she was nine, her father was shot dead by someone in her village, believed to be a mentally

disturbed relative, just outside their front door. Her mother, a young widow, refused the custom of marrying her husband's brother. She battled cancer single-handedly. Through it all, she raised a firebrand daughter, who refused to back down.

Her cousins, who grew up near her home, were the more famous girls of the family. Geeta and Babita were among the first to win gold at the Commonwealth Games. They had a movie made about them, which made the 'Phogat sisters' iconic in Indian sports.

Vinesh didn't feature in that movie. The events described in it took place too early in her career. But

she wouldn't be satisfied with being one of the Phogat sisters — she would become 'The Phogat' sister.

Talk to any of her peers — and even some of her rivals in Indian wrestling — and there is, in some cases, grudging, genuine respect. She is considered the most instinctive and natural wrestler India has ever produced in women's freestyle wrestling.

Her career is as much a highlight reel as anything out of a movie. No one in women's wrestling compares. No Indian woman wrestler has won three Commonwealth gold medals as she did in 2014, 2018, and 2022. No one has won an Asian Games gold medal as she did in 2018. No

one has won two World Championships medals as she did in 2019 and 2022.

The one medal missing from her collection is the Olympic medal — which she fought bitterly for.

Vinesh has had terrible luck at the Olympics — the only competition that seems to matter to Indians. In 2016, she was one of the favourites in the Indian team before her knee was bent out of shape in the quarterfinals. In 2020, she was one of the world's favourites to medal in the women's 53kg weight class. Then, suddenly, a freak weight cut left her physically and psychologically broken, unable to coordinate her movements on the mat. She lost to a

PERHAPS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT FIGHT VINESH HAS FOUGHT HAS BEEN FOR THE SAFETY OF YOUNG GIRLS IN THE SPORT. IN PURSUING THIS FIGHT, SHE TOOK ON ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL MEN IN INDIAN SPORTS
- BRIJ BHUSHAN SHARAN SINGH

REUTERS





Historic: Vinesh Phogat took down defending champion Yui Susaki in her opening bout at the Paris Olympics. The Japanese wrestler had not lost an international bout in her professional career. REUTERS

wrestler she had beaten comfortably just a month before. Now, in Paris, another poor weight cut left her at the lowest point of her wrestling career.

Her battles, though, haven't been restricted to the mat. Perhaps the most significant one Vinesh has fought has been for the safety of

young girls in the sport. In pursuing this fight, she took on one of the most powerful men in Indian sports — Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh.

When her rivals were preparing for the Olympics, Vinesh was fighting on the streets of New Delhi, where she, and few other fellow wrestlers,

accused Brij Bhushan, a five-time member of parliament and the long-time president of the Wrestling Federation, of sexual harassment.

The longer she stayed on the streets, the slimmer her chances on the mat became. Yet, she continued to prioritise what she felt was right.

Vinesh has stood firm, challenging the system without regard for the consequences



In doing so, Vinesh showed the kind of courage almost uniformly lacking in most sportspersons in India. Most of them, as the saying goes, "crawl when asked to bend." Vinesh's spine has been ramrod straight. She had the courage to take on the system without caring about the consequences. She displayed it even though it cost her what she loved the most — the chance to wrestle.

Only when her protest was forced off the streets and entered the court did Vinesh finally get a chance to compete.

She had been dismissed as a '*khota sikka*' (worthless coin) by Brij

Bhushan. His mockery only strengthened her resolve. It acted as bellows to a fire that always glowed inside her but now burned white hot. Her motivation for the Olympics was as straightforward as they come. She would win a medal just to see the look on the faces of all those who criticised her. She did nearly all that she needed to do. She did something no one ever thought was possible.

Vinesh beat someone who was considered unbeatable. She made her way into a territory no Indian woman had gone before. Her career might not have ended with the grandstand finish she truly deserved,

Showing spine: Months before her flight to Paris, Vinesh led a protest alongside fellow wrestlers, Bajrang Punia and Sakshi Malik, against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, the former president of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), who faced accusations of sexual harassment. AFP

and she may well return to the sport and win a few more medals.

Regardless of her choice, we are all richer for having experienced Vinesh Phogat as long as we did. There weren't many like her, and there won't be many like her.

LAKSHYA PROVIDES SAVING GRACE IN AN OTHERWISE LACKLUSTRE CAMPAIGN

Indian supporters were left praising Lakshya's fourth-place finish. The exit of Satwik and Chirag **proved to be the biggest shocker.** The elimination of Sindhu, Prannoy and the women's doubles pair was in keeping with their form, rather the lack of it.

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Paris 2024 is the first time in three editions of the Olympics that India failed to add a medal from badminton to its tally.

Notwithstanding Lakshya Sen's fourth-place finish and the surprise defeat of Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy, the overall performance provided a crude reminder of how empty the Indian cabinet is.

In short, Lakshya's run partly made up for the shocking loss of Satwik-Chirag. The rest of the performances were as anticipated.

After all, barring Satwik and Chirag, no Indian badminton player had made news at this year's BWF Tour.

The gravity of India's poor showing could be gauged from Prakash Padukone's reaction soon after Lakshya lost the bronze medal match. The legendary shuttler, known for his now-characteristic soft responses whenever asked for his views on Indian badminton, spoke from the heart and asked players to take up more responsibility.

Travelling for the first time to the Summer Games as part of the support staff, Prakash did not hide his

disappointment. This came after his trainee Lakshya let eventual double Olympic gold medallist Denmark's Viktor Axelsen escape with deficits of 17-20 in the first game and 0-7 in the second game of the semifinals.

Even in the bronze medal match, Lakshya moved close to victory before faltering dramatically. He won the first game comfortably and led 8-3 in the second against Malaysia's Lee Zii Jia before squandering nine points in succession and thereafter the match.

Sindhu's periodic defeats, most of those to lower-ranked players, were an indication of her lack of form. In fact, since suffering a stress fracture on the left ankle during her 2022 Commonwealth Games gold-winning campaign, Sindhu's comeback after a five-month layoff has been far from impressive.

Here, 13th-ranked Sindhu lost, in the pre-quarterfinals, to the first higher-rated player she faced. The



straight-game defeat to China's eventual finalist He Bing Jiao did not come as a surprise. But it may be recalled that Sindhu defeated the same opponent to clinch the bronze in Tokyo.

A quick look at the last three Olympics reveals a medal from each edition in women's singles. Saina Nehwal (bronze in 2012 Olympics) and P. V. Sindhu (silver in 2016 and bronze in 2021) kept the Indians interested longer than their male counterparts.

Though Sindhu was around without promising much in Paris, the duo of Satwik-Chirag was considered a medal favourite.

They warmed up for the battles ahead with easy wins in the league stage to move to the quarterfinals. Seeded to be on the podium, the third seed ran into the unpredictable

and experienced duo of Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik.

The Indians played to their form in the first game to close it at 13 in just 17 minutes. There was a twist in the tale in the second when the Malaysians bounced back from 0-4 to win five successive points. This spell injected an immense self-belief in the unseeded pair. The Indians tried to catch up, but in vain. In the decider, Satwik and Chirag looked in control at 11-8 and 14-11 to lead until 16-15.

Thereafter, in a dramatic turnaround, the Indians' defence fell to pieces and the relentless Malaysians raced away with the final six points in a flash to leave their opponents stunned.

The performance of Ashwini Ponnappa and her younger rival Tanisha Crasto was on expected lines. This pair lost all three group

Maximum effort: Lakshya Sen came the closest to handing India another medal in badminton. RITU RAJ KONWAR

matches in straight games.

On the brighter side, a touch of saving grace came from an unexpected quarter. Lakshya, World No. 22, kept punching above his weight, eventually reaching the semifinals.

Lakshya started his maiden Olympic campaign with a straight-game victory over Guatemala's Kevin Cordon. However, Cordon withdrew after this match and thus the result stood nullified. Lakshya went on to beat Belgium's Julien Carragi, also in straight games, to set up the match to decide the qualifier from this group to the pre-quarterfinals.

Indonesia's Jonatan Christie, seeded 16 – against Lakshya's 19 – started as the ranking favourite. But Lakshya settled down early, played some amazing strokes, and kept the rallies going when on the defensive and produced some clinical finishing shots to win 21-18, 21-12 in just 50 minutes.

In this match, Lakshay trailed 2-8 and 16-18 before reeling off the last five points in a hurry to claim the first game. After the early exchanges in the second game, Lakshya repeatedly pounded his rival with measured jump smashes on either flank, kept his net-play consistent and broke Christie's belief to win much before the match reached the home stretch.

The 39-minute victory over Prannoy, the scoreline being 21-12, 21-6 ensured that Lakshya was not stretched before the quarterfinal clash against Chinese Taipei's Chou Tien-chen, seeded 12.

Having taken out the third-seeded Christie in the group stage, Lakshya was not expected to meet a player any higher till the semifinals.

Against Chou, Lakshya kept his cool despite dropping the close first game at 19. He believed his game was getting better and proved it for a vociferous group of Indian support in the arena over the next two games.



He returned the favour by clinching the second game at 15 and raced away with the decider at 12. During these 49 minutes of the 75-minute clash, Lakshya was dominant. He showed no hurry to construct the points, used his energy effectively and progressively finished the rallies at the first available opportunity.

His percentage of errors dropped and Chou looked resigned in the second half of the decider. Lakshya sealed a place in the semifinals and needed at least one more win to ensure a medal.

The encounter against Axelsen was never going to be easy. The second-seeded reigning champion, who did not drop a game in the competition, found Lakshya too hot to handle in the first game.

Axelsen, who invited Lakshya to train with him in Dubai more than once, struggled to match the young Indian at the net. Some desperate shots from Axelsen did not help his cause. Lakshya grew in confidence to

enlarge his lead to 15-9 before the Dane closed the gap to 17-18. Lakshya held his nerves to hold three game points at 20-17 but couldn't find the finishing touch. Five straight points and Axelsen was a game ahead.

In the second, Lakshya jumped to 7-0 in quick time but once more, Axelsen was not to be denied a game. He caught up at 10-10 and moved ahead at 13-12 and allowed the struggling Indian just two more points of the last 10.

Once the lanky Dane began dictating terms, Lakshya looked completely out of ideas. The meltdown was dramatic but given the class of Axelsen, the youngster could be excused.

However, the way Lakshya let Lee Zii Jia snatch the bronze from his grasp was hard to explain. A dominating first game saw Lakshya close the opener at 13 in just 20 minutes. A lead of 8-3 in the second was almost like the beginning of the

There's always a next time: The early exit of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty from the men's doubles competition was the biggest shocker. PTI

end for the Malaysian who appeared to have been struggling to even settle down.

No doubt, the drift in the playing hall played its part but then, it was equal for both players. In the second game, when Lakshya played with the drift, he found it increasingly difficult to control the shuttle and often hit long. The loss of this game at 16 meant the momentum shifted to Lee. In quick time, he jumped to 9-2 and stayed comfortably ahead for the duration of the decider which went on for 26 minutes, the same as the second game.

Surprisingly, Lakshya's judgement faltered with alarming consistency. He failed to read the length of Lee's returns when the Malaysian was hitting with the drift. When the players changed sides after the mid-game break, Lakshya began missing the lines. This meltdown, in two successive matches – probably the biggest of Lakshya's young career – made Prakash call a spade a spade when talking to the media.

Prannoy did just what was expected of him and no more. He defeated two lesser-ranked players in the group stage of the competition. Looking unfit in the key clash against Lakshya, he surrendered rather tamely.

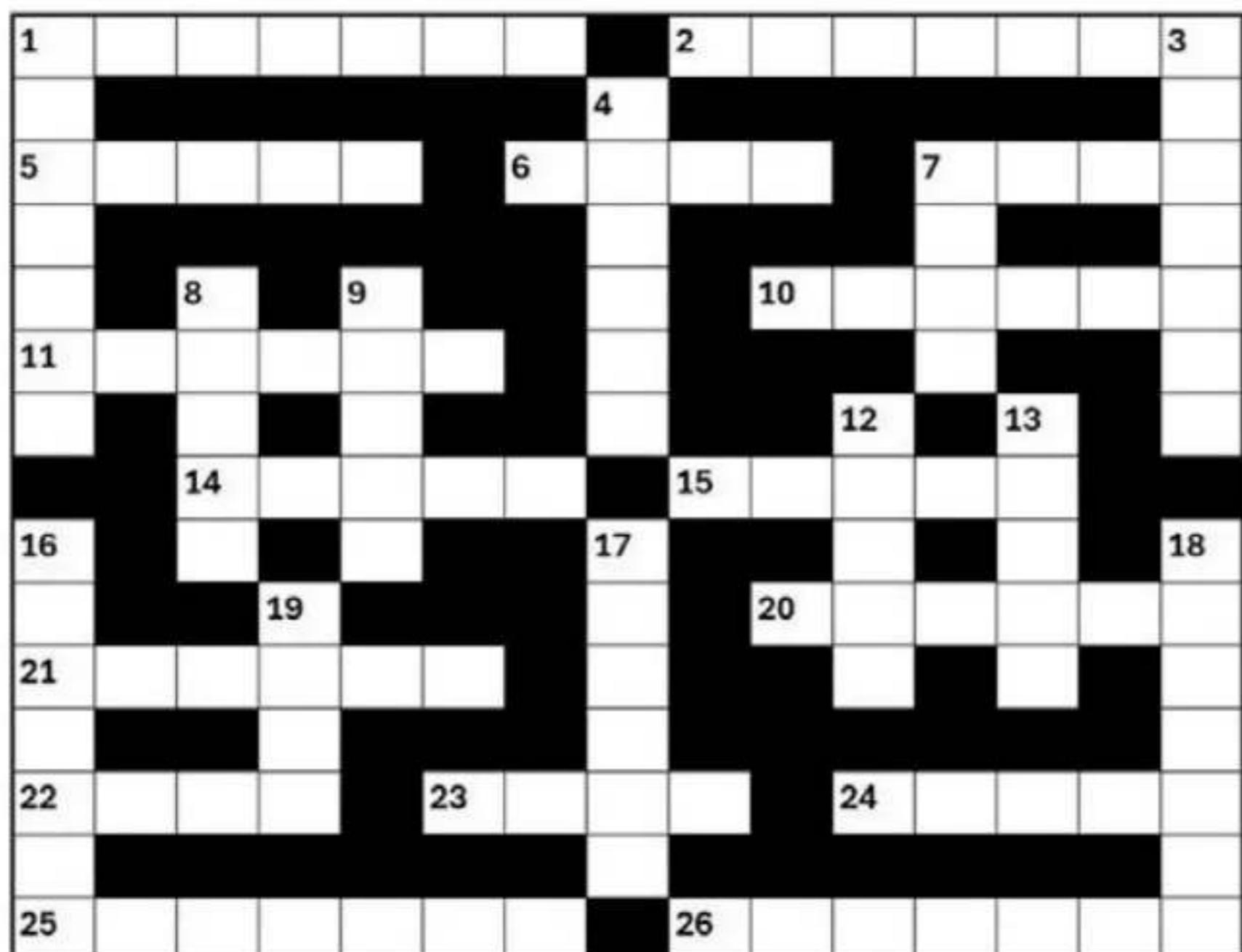
Overall, Indian supporters were left praising Lakshya's fourth-place finish. The exit of Satwik and Chirag proved to be the biggest shocker. The elimination of Sindhu, Prannoy and the women's doubles pair was in keeping with their form, rather the lack of it.

It is time for Indian badminton to see beyond the gloss provided by Saina and Sindhu for long. The rise of Satwik and Chirag, coupled with the unpredictable showings of Lakshya, hold some promise for the 2028 Los Angeles Games.

Truly, it is futile to look too far ahead at this point.

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SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1** Who won the player of the series award in the recently concluded Women's Asia Cup? (7)
- 2** Who took two hat-tricks in the 2024 Men's T20 World Cup cricket? (7)
- 5 & 7** Who won the man of the match award in the second cricket Test held between England and the West Indies? (5,4)
- 6 & 20** Who became the oldest player to score a goal in the European Championship history during EURO 2024? (4,6)
- 10** Who was the captain of EURO 2024 champion, Spain? (6)
- 11** Identify this tennis player from USA who won the women's doubles event at Wimbledon recently? (6)
- 14** Who won the player of the tournament award in EURO 2024? (5)
- 15** Which country won the gold in which India's Swapnil Kusale won bronze? (5)

21 Who scored the most runs for South Africa in the women's T20 series against India? (6)

22 & Down 18 Which Slovakian footballer ended EURO 2024 as one of the joint top-scorers? (4,7)

23 & Down 8 Who scored the most runs for Zimbabwe in the five-match T20 International series against India? (4,5)

25 Who was the only player to make two 50+ scores in the Zimbabwe vs India T20I series? (7)

DOWN

1 Who set the record for scoring the latest regulation time goal in the European Championship history in EURO 2024? (7)

3 & Across 24 Who reached 200 with a six in the one-off Test held between India and South Africa in Chennai recently? (7,5)

4 Whose goal scored in EURO 2024 was chosen as the best of the tournament by the fans? (6)

7 The city of Paris was awarded the hosting rights for the 2024

Olympic Games in the 131st IOC session held in which country? (4)

9 Gus Atkinson made his Test debut for England, took 12 wickets and won the player of the match award as well at this ground. (5)

12 Who was the goalkeeper of the Spanish team in EURO 2024? (5)

13 Who ended EURO 2024 as one of the joint top-scorers and also scored England's winner in extra-time in the round of 16 match against Slovakia? (5)

16 Who scored England's winner in the EURO 2024 semifinal against the Netherlands? (7)

17 & Across 26 Who is the youngest man and first male teenager in the Open Era to attain the World No. 1 spot in the ATP rankings? (6,7)

19 Which country overlooking the mouth of the Persian Gulf just participated in its 11th consecutive summer Olympics since making its debut in the Games in 1984? (4)



HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF AS FULTON'S PHILOSOPHY IS VINDICATED

For the first time since 1972, the Indian men's hockey team **won consecutive Olympic medals**, validating head coach Craig Fulton's 'defend to win' philosophy.



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Winning back-to-back Olympic medals is the stuff of dreams in Indian sports. So parched of success and excellence on the biggest stage are we as a nation that while China and the USA battle it out for the top spot in a race for gold medals, we celebrate bronze medals as an achievement. Some bronze medals, however, do feel special.

The Indian men's hockey team did the unthinkable in Paris, becoming the only team to retain its spot on

the podium from three years ago in Tokyo. It was also the first time since 1972 that the team returned with a medal from consecutive editions. To put things in perspective, that was the last time international hockey was played on natural grass before moving permanently to artificial turf.

It was also a vindication of the processes put in place by head coach Craig Fulton, who had 15 months to take the team from the heartbreak of an early World Cup exit at home to competing as a contender in Paris. Not too many were enamoured with his 'defend to win' philosophy, terming it a 'European thing' and cking play. The fact that the players

Slice of history: This was India's 13th Olympic hockey medal and its fourth bronze. It was also the first time since 1972 that India won consecutive Olympic hockey medals. GETTYIMAGES

not only bought into it but stuck to it through the Olympics is a testament to the trust within the group.

If sources are to be believed, the authorities had low expectations for the hockey team's chances of winning a medal. India's early performance suggested it was still finding its footing. Fortunately, the schedule was in its favour, starting with matches against New Zealand,



Monumental feat: The 3-2 win against Australia was the Indian men's first win against the Aussies at the Olympics since a 3-1 win at the Munich Olympics in 1972. AP

Argentina, and Ireland — teams that can be unpredictable under pressure. Notably, New Zealand had knocked India out of the 2023 World Cup in the group stages through a shootout, but it wasn't unbeatable.

Compared to the later stages, it was easier for the team to bounce back from mistakes, regroup, iron out chinks and work out individual roles for the players. By the time India faced Belgium, it was already well-positioned to advance to the quarterfinals, having checked off the first goal on its list. The team was in sync, ready for a smooth progression.

Although India lost, it was its best performance till then. Less than 24 hours later, the players took to the field again, against perennial

nightmare Australia. That game, in more ways than one, was the ideal marker of the Indian team's real potential and possible finish in the Olympics.

The challenge was physical — back-to-back games against two of the fastest and toughest teams? Check. It was a mental test — could the team rebound from a narrow defeat? Check. Emotionally, it was a challenge too — would the players stay composed when facing the yellow-green spectre? A team that had crushed India 5-0 in a test series just three months earlier? Check. Tactically too, it was a test — could the team stick to its plan, resisting the lure of open spaces and the urge to revert to its natural attacking style? Check. Securing full points and a win against the Aussies felt like breaking a curse — India hadn't beaten them at the Olympics since 1972!

The game against Australia was the first sign that, despite its ranking (India was seventh before the Paris

Games), form, or expert opinions, this team had different plans. The momentum it built hinted that India might go all the way to the final, aiming for its first shot at gold since 1980. Even a contentious but legally correct red card, forcing it to play with 10 men for nearly 42 minutes against a fast-paced Great Britain in the quarterfinal, was just a minor setback.

"The red card revitalised us like nothing else. We decided we were not going to lose that game, come what may. We regrouped, defined our roles, worked out our plans, and just stuck to them. Any other game, not that one," was the chorus from the Indians after the famous shootout win.

A big criticism of the team at the World Cup was its visibly lower fitness level compared to Tokyo. Paris ended those doubts. It was also the game that brought the focus right back on Paddy Upton and Mike Horn, the duo credited with bringing in crucial mental toughness among



Sustained dominance: The Netherlands narrowly escaped defeat to defend its Olympic title in women's hockey, securing victory over China in a penalty shootout in the final.

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the players. That Upton was by the team's side throughout the Games was an added help.

It is a measure of the team's growth through the competition that, from rank outsiders to even advancing to the last four, the loss to reigning world champion Germany in the semifinal was considered a disaster, a chance squandered. To then come back from it and retain the bronze was impressive. There were, in fact, quite a few things in common with the 1972 outing.

As then captain Ajitpal Singh wrote about the 1972 Munich Olympics in his piece on *Sportstar*, India had a team to win gold but messed up. It missed penalty corners and open chances by the dozen in the semis. It did not have a second

THE NETHERLANDS BECAME THE FIRST COUNTRY TO SWEEP THE FIELD HOCKEY MEDALS AT THE GAMES SINCE THE WOMEN'S TOURNAMENT WAS ADDED IN 1980

drag-flicker. And it was the beginning of world hockey truly going international, with new teams staking claims. Things that held true in 1972 and in 2024.

But if Paris 2024 threw up surprise results — like Spain defeating Belgium, South Africa pushing the Netherlands hard, or Belgium thrashing Australia — it also stuck to the pre-event form book with the Dutch taking gold.

As the top-ranked side in the competition and with an enviable record — just seven losses in 52 games over the last two years — it was the team to beat, and it remained that, barring a 1-0 blip to Germany in the pool stage. The Dutch women made it a double

delight, the first time ever in Olympic history. Having missed the semifinals for the second straight edition, it also led to questions on whether the famed Australian hockey team needed a hard reset to stay competitive.

Among the women, China's silver was the bright spot, standing out in the usual list of European powerhouses. It was also a measure of how much the presence of good management matters: Alyson Annan, Ric Charlesworth, and Taeke Taekema are names not to be taken lightly, and the result should be a lesson for Hockey India on how a team that it consistently beat till 2022 suddenly turned things around in the last two years.



ASLIVER OF HOPE

Despite being far from the podium, it turned out to be **India's most successful Olympic** table tennis outing, primarily thanks to its female paddlers.

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Gender-equal Olympics. That was the motto of Paris 2024. For India's table tennis contingent, that equality was merely quantitative. When it came to performance, the three women paddlers outdid their male counterparts by a fair margin.

Manika Batra and Sreeja Akula started off the dream fortnight by making it to the singles

pre-quarterfinal, a first for Indian table tennis. Later in the team championship, where India's men and women featured for the very first time, Archana Kamath joined the party as the women went one step further.

A place in an Olympic quarterfinal for an Indian was something that even an ardent table tennis fan would have found hard to believe until recently. India's female outfit

took advantage of a favourable draw to stun fourth-seed Romania and then stretch Germany before exiting in the quarterfinals.

The men, on the other hand, had to be content with either faring below par or living up to their billing. Achanta Sharath Kamal, the old warhorse, was the talk of the town heading into the quadrennial extravaganza. Not only was he featuring in his fifth Olympics —

Unwavering focus:

Batra of India in action against Miu Hirano of Japan in the women's pre-quarterfinal match on July 31. RITURAJ KONWAR

A place in an Olympic quarterfinal for an Indian was something that even an ardent table tennis fan would have found hard to believe until recently.

another feather in his string of records — but he was also India's flagbearer at the opening ceremony.

The 42-year-old couldn't translate it into a memorable outing on the table, losing in the round of 64 in his maiden singles match. More than the premature exit, the manner in which the 24th seed was found wanting against Slovenia's Deni Kožul, placed 86 places below Sharath in the world rankings, was disappointing.

Harmeet Desai, the other male singles paddler, had a respectable outing on his Olympic debut. He asked a few questions of eventual bronze medallist Felix LeBrun of France before bowing out in the

second round. Contrary to women, who had a favourable draw, India's men were pitted against mighty China first up in the team championship. But Sharath left his mark on his last Olympic hurrah by snatching a game from singles gold medallist Fan Zhendong. Even Harmeet and Manav Thakkar in doubles and the latter in his singles outing demonstrated that Indian table tennis has indeed come a long way from merely taking pride in representing India at the Olympics.

But the fortnight belonged to India's women, especially the duo of Manika and Sreeja. They may appear in stark contrast to each other. While Manika is among the tallest female paddlers on the world circuit, Sreeja is on the shorter side. But the Indian duo bears a resemblance in effectively using their long-pimpled rubber on the backhand. Moreover, both of them have mastered the trickery of flipping the rubber between the points to bamboozle the majority of their opponents.

No wonder then that Sreeja, having overtaken Manika in the world rankings weeks before the Olympics, was handed the 16th seed, with Manika not too far behind.

Naturally, Manika faced the first big test before Sreeja, as she was up against local sensation Prithika Pavade. The southpaw not only enjoyed the French crowd support but also rode high on the confidence of being the star of France's bronze medal-winning run in the World Championship. But Manika, who had controversially played without a coach behind her in Tokyo three years ago, along with national coach Massimo Costantini's timely guidance, ensured she didn't let a boisterous crowd get to her by running away with a 4-0 win. The only time Manika stuttered was when Prithika saved three match points in the fourth game.

Up next was the eighth seed, Miu Hirano, but the Japanese edged past Manika to halt her run. Despite losing in the pre-quarterfinals, Manika's third Olympic appearance — a first for an Indian female paddler — was her most successful



Women take a W: Manika Batra celebrates with her teammates after winning the singles match against Romania at the South Paris Arena. AFP

outing.

Sreeja, on the other hand, not only soaked up the atmosphere on her Olympic debut but also justified her billing. After an easy opening round, Sreeja was hardly troubled by seasoned Christina Kallberg of Sweden in the round of 64. Then she beat 31st seed, Singapore's Zeng Jian to set a clash with top seed, Sun Yingsha of China. The scoreline may end up reading 4-0 in favour of the eventual silver medallist, but had Sreeja been able to convert at least one of the nine game points she enjoyed over the first two games combined, she may have scripted history by ousting a Chinese paddler, a rarity in Olympic table tennis. But the duo delivered along with Archana as India overcame fancied Romania in the women's team championship pre-quarterfinal 3-2. While Manika won both her singles, the other two paired to snatch the doubles.

Annett Kaufmann, the teenage southpaw, then wielded her magic in the quarterfinal to end India's hopes of featuring in a medal match for the first time in the Olympics.

Nevertheless, despite being far from the podium, it turned out to be India's most successful Olympic table tennis outing, primarily thanks to its female paddlers.



>> PARIS OLYMPICS BOXING

Forgettable display: Indian boxers' below-par performance in Paris raised several pointed questions for the BFI to answer. RITU RAJ KONWAR

A DEVASTATING PUNCH IN THE GUT

It's time for introspection and brainstorming for the Boxing Federation of India (BFI) after the country drew a blank in the Paris Olympics, despite fielding a **solid team** that included two World champions and as many Worlds medallists.

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If Lovlina Borgohain's bronze in the 69kg category in Tokyo ended a medal drought from the previous two Games, the Indian boxers' below-par performance in Paris raised several pointed questions for the BFI to answer.

The campaign went off-track during the qualification phase itself. After securing four women's quota places in the Asian Games, India

could not achieve a single slot in the first World Olympic qualifying event in Busto Arsizio.

The exit of Irish high-performance director Bernard Dunne was a distraction, but the remaining coaching staff, including foreign coach Dmitri Dmitruk, who was brought into the system by Dunne, tweaked the training method — from short-duration sessions to giving additional time for boxers to work on their game individually — to put the preparation back on track.

Following some changes in the team, India managed to secure three more quota places, including reclaiming the 57kg spot that the country had lost following Parveen Hooda's whereabouts failure, in the second World qualifier in Bangkok.

The BFI, with backing from the Sports Authority of India (SAI), provided all sorts of support, including hiring a psychologist and a chef (to serve Indian food to the boxers) and sending the boxers for training camps abroad during the preparatory phase.

In Paris, two boxers, Nishant Dev (71kg; **below**) and Lovlina Borgohain (75kg; **left**), lost in the quarterfinals, just one step away from securing a medal, while four others, including World champion Nikhat Zareen (50kg; **right**), were ousted earlier.

Worlds bronze medallist Nishant, who had a favourable draw, lost to Mexico's Marco Verde 4-1 after winning the first round. Amid the Indian fans' outcry over the decision being unfair, it was clear that Nishant, a smart boxer with a lot of power, could not give his best against a rough opponent whom he had tamed in the 2021 World Championships.

Nishant neither delivered his power punches nor kept himself safe, especially in the third round. His dipping endurance level also contributed to his loss.

Lovlina, who had a back issue during the run-up to the event, gave a strong challenge to Li Qian, the Asian Games champion. She could have done better in terms of boxing from a long range and using her right hand more effectively.

Nikhat also lost to a stronger Chinese opponent, another Asian Games champion Wu Yu, in the pre-quarterfinals. A tougher draw, due to the lack of seeding, may have impacted Nikhat's energy level. Wu's better execution of her plans was another apparent reason for halting the Indian's progress.

Former world no.1 Amit Panghal could not handle Patrick Chinyemba's tactical boxing and clean punches in the last 16 stage. Panghal had overcome a tough challenge from the Zambian in the Commonwealth Games semifinals on his way to winning the gold. In Paris, Chinyemba boxed at a different level.

Preeti Pawar, who was hospitalised during the

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camp in Germany, recovered in time to give her best before being beaten 3-2 in a close contest against Colombia's Yeni Castaneda in the pre-quarterfinals.

Jaismine Lamboria (57kg) was outsmarted by Tokyo silver medallist Nesthy Petecio in the opening round and could not make much of an impact.

Former Commonwealth Games champion Akhil Kumar said there should be a thorough analysis of the boxers' performance. "The SAI and the Sports Ministry provided everything. We had 11 support staff for a team of six boxers.

"There should be a proper review of what they did," said Akhil.

"Did the coaches tell our star boxers where they went wrong and where they should improve? Why didn't we see

power in the punches despite the presence of strength and conditioning personnel? I think we should stop relying on foreign coaches and start believing in our homegrown coaches," he added.

Without any prejudice, the BFI needs to take some hard measures as course correction so that Indian boxers achieve their potential at the biggest stage.

Even though the place of boxing in Los Angeles 2028 is still not confirmed, the preparation for it cannot be put on the back burner.

A training method that suits the Indian boxers' mentality and game, identification and grooming of talents for the future, and developing a sound domestic structure without any regional bias should be the priority areas going forward.

Akhil quoted the famous Hindi poet Neeraj, urging the boxers to get up and fight again for a brighter future: "*Kuchh sapno ke mar jaane se jivan mara nahi karta hai* (Life does not end just because some dreams die)."



RITU RAJ KONWAR



PA

NOAH LYLES SPRINTS THE TALK TO 100M GLORY



The marquee event of the Olympic Games **came down to the wire**, with Noah Lyles edging out Jamaica's Kishane Thompson by just 5/1000 of a second, setting a new personal best and creating history.

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In 9.79 seconds, it is all over.

N

Noah Lyles is the Olympic 100m champion.

The marquee event of the Olympic Games couldn't have been any closer. Lyles had to record a new personal best, and even then, it nearly wasn't enough. He got off to a disastrous start — the slowest off the blocks in



Need for speed: No running event is as raw as the 100m. It is the antithesis of complication — eight racers, their legs, and a straightforward test to see who can finish the fastest. GETTY IMAGES

the eight-man final. A hundred desperate metres later, he finished just 5/1000 of a second ahead of Kishane Thompson of Jamaica.

Tickets to watch that Sunday's evening session of the athletics competition at the Stade de France cost an eye-popping €980. If you were paying that kind of money, chances are you weren't doing it

solely for the pleasure of watching the women's high jump, the men's hammer throw, or the semifinals of the men's 1500m.

Running is perhaps the most basic athletic trait of humans and the one that matters the most. Sure, there are other running events, but none as raw as the 100m. It is the antithesis of complication — eight

racers, their legs, and a straightforward test to see who can finish the fastest.

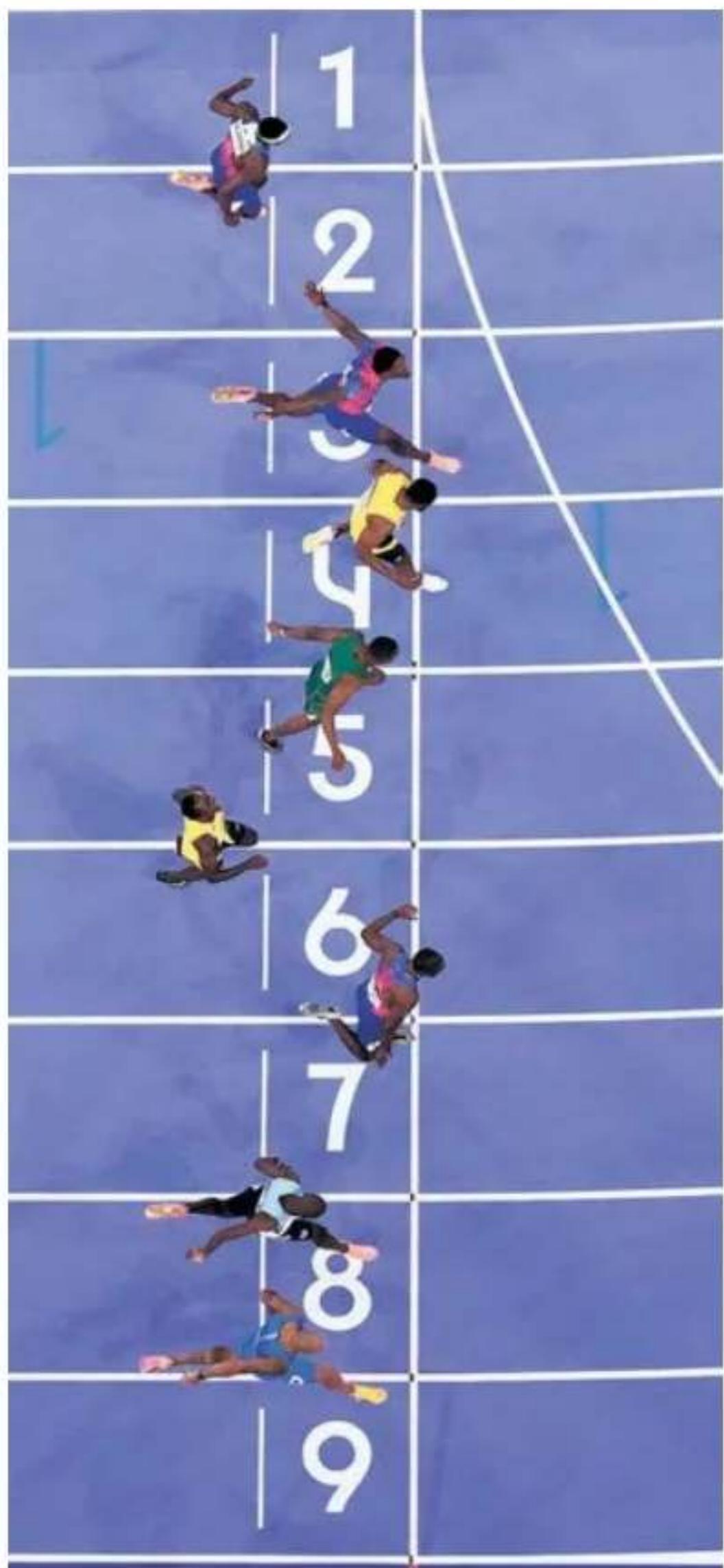
Who grew up wanting to be the world's best hammer thrower? Ethan Katzberg, probably — but not many others. Yet, who didn't dream of being the fastest runner in the world?

While most of us might have dreamt of it, only Noah Lyles gets to



say he is. At least in the Olympic final. In his semifinal heat, he was beaten to the finish by Jamaica's Oblique Seville — adding more drama to the event.

It's unlikely this was exactly what he had planned, but Lyles, who's part of a *Netflix* series *Sprint* — which he hopes will do for track and field what



Drive to Survive did for Formula 1 — is not particularly averse to drama. He's not short on hyperbole and self-promotion either. At a press conference before the Games, Lyles declared himself the fastest man alive. "It's me. It's always going to be me."

For all his bluster, the fact is that until he came to Paris, the 27-year-old didn't have the hardware to back it up. He only had a bronze in the 200m at Tokyo. He might have won three gold medals — 100m, 200m, and 4x100m — at the World Championships last year, but he wasn't the fastest this year. That title still belonged to Kishane Thompson.

A surprise loss to Jamaica's Seville in the semifinals, combined with being slower than Thompson, set the stage not for a crowning victory but for a very public comeuppance.

All his talk of being a star and revolutionising the sport had to start with a gold on the biggest stage, and even that didn't seem like a guarantee. Having talked the talk, it was time for him to walk the walk — or at least sprint the sprint. To Lyles' credit, he didn't betray any nerves as he took his place in the lineup in lane seven, just to the right of Seville.

The man who had said he had the 'mindset of a god' now just mouthed the words 'thank you god'. To his right, Seville made finger guns and

Photo finish: Lyles (centre) with silver medallist Kishane Thompson and bronze medallist Fred Kerly. AFP

mock-fired down the track.

By this point, the drama was at a fever pitch. The crowd, which had been buzzing, anxious, and making Mexican waves all evening, became deathly quiet as the runners took their stances. There's really nothing like an Olympic sprint final — the looming, intimidating knowledge that it's over almost as soon as it starts, with people working four years for a run of under 10 seconds.

As the race progressed, the stadium commentators squealed with excitement. The stadium itself was lit by tens of thousands of flashes as the finalists raced to the finish line.

Lyles, dead last at first, pulled himself into contention before stretching his torso ahead right at the finish line (**left; lane 7**). For a few more seconds, everyone looked on in disbelief at the giant screen, which showed a column of photo finishes before declaring Lyles the winner.

He ran all the way around the ground, then onto the grass. It was more a release of emotion than a lap of honour. The stadium celebrated with him as he asserted his right to take centre stage.



Leader of the pack: The Swede brought the roof down at the Stade de France, as he set a new world record of 6.25m. AFP

» **PARIS OLYMPICS**
POLE VAULT

THE NIGHT MONDO FULFILLED HIS CHILDHOOD FANTASY

It's hard not to marvel at how fitting his nickname Mondo was in this record-breaking moment. As the words *Record du Monde* (French for 'world record') lit up the stadium's big screen, Armand Duplantis' achievement felt almost destined.

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Armand 'Mondo' Duplantis would later say he had been preparing for this moment all his life. "Back when I was just a kid jumping in my backyard in Louisiana, I'd think about this all the time. I'd imagine I was jumping for an Olympic gold and also the world record," he said.

Many children have fantasies about era-defining sporting achievements. For most, it doesn't go much beyond that.

Not for Mondo. The 24-year-old won the Olympic gold medal, set the Olympic record, and then broke the world record — in that order. He also holds nine of the ten best vaults of all time.

As for the Olympic gold medal, it

Ethereal act: As Mondo sprinted down the runway, it indeed felt like he had God's hand behind him. REUTERS

first came in Tokyo — a competition Mondo would describe as a "high-pressure practice session".

At the Stade de France, when he had the height of the pole vault bar set at 6.25m — one centimetre more than his previous world record — he had the entire crowd of over 69,000 people cheering him on.

The King of Sweden was also present, along with other royalty, including former Ukrainian pole vaulter Sergey Bubka, whose tapes Mondo would watch obsessively as a child.

The adoration of the

crowd was a given. He also had his competitors, those who might have once wanted to beat him, asking the crowd to get even more behind him than it already was.

What sets the pole vault (and also the high jump) apart from other athletics events is that spectators already know, even before the task is attempted, exactly what is being accomplished. It builds up the drama like no other track and field event.

No one does suspense like Mondo. No one seems to do the pole vault like him either.



» WHAT SETS THE POLE VAULT APART FROM OTHER ATHLETICS EVENTS IS THAT SPECTATORS ALREADY KNOW, EVEN BEFORE THE TASK IS ATTEMPTED, EXACTLY WHAT IS BEING ACCOMPLISHED «

In the men's shot put, Ryan Crouser has Joe Kovacs pushing him all the way. Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone has Femke Bol in her rearview mirror in the women's 400m hurdles. Noah Lyles might call himself the "fastest man in the world", but the gap between him and last place in the men's 100m sprint was just 0.12 seconds.

Mondo, however, is in a league of his own.

With his first vault, Mondo officially registered a mark in the men's pole vault competition. With his third, he placed himself on the podium. With his fourth, he won an Olympic gold medal.

With his fifth, he broke the Olympic record, clearing 6.10m. For his sixth vault, he had the bar set at 6.25m, a new world record. These six vaults were spread out over three hours.

The rest of his competitors had been fighting their own battles. They had bunched up at 5.85m, trying desperately to break through into the 5.90m medal zone. While all this was happening, Mondo, a solitary figure in a bright yellow jersey, simply sat and observed.

As they squabbled amongst themselves for silver and bronze, he'd clap supportively at their attempts and watch the other races taking place on the purple track

around him.

Mondo knew his battle would come later. It wasn't with anyone else but himself.

He missed his first attempt at 6.25m. In his second, he seemed to have got the height right but not the distance — he landed almost on top of the bar rather than going over it. He did the calculations and discussed it with his coach in the stands. If Mondo was getting the height but not the horizontal distance in his jump, the solution was to bring the bar closer to him.

He adjusted the uprights that hold the bar in place, moving them forward horizontally, reducing the distance between him and the line where he planted the pole into the ground from 70cm to 62cm. His coach had wanted the bar brought even closer, to 60cm from the line.

Had the adjustment not been correct, Mondo would have landed on the bar yet again. But this is an athlete in supreme control of his body.

So, eight centimetres it was, which would be the difference between an already great day and one that can be counted among those defining Olympic moments that occur just a handful of times in each generation.

His competitors might have been hyping up the crowd, but as Mondo

lifted his pole at the start of his run-up, the crowd went silent.

Then, as he sprinted down the track, the stadium groaned in anticipation with each step.

Sam Kendricks, the two-time World Champion who also took silver in Paris, was later asked what makes Mondo special.

Kendricks said, "One, he's had a great coach for a long time and he's been training for a long time. He's got great equipment and understanding of the event. He's a fan of the sport. And (four) he's got God's hand on his back."

The American was referring to Mondo's incredible speed down the runway that allows him to put more energy into the pole than all the rest.

But he may have as well been referring to that mysterious force that separates the legendary athletes from the great ones.

As Mondo sprinted down the runway, it indeed felt like he had God's hand on him.

He bent the pole and went upside down as it thrust him skyward. The uprights being closer to him meant that when he bent his body, it curled perfectly over the bar. What seemed like an eternity later, he began his descent.

After breaking the record, he jumped up from the foam pit, ran towards the photographers, and made the pistol finger gesture — a callback to the Turkish shooter Yusuf Dikec, whose raw dog shooting style went viral in the first week of the Olympics.

Mondo too had his own viral moment. He had his childhood fantasy fulfilled. "If I go my entire life and never have another moment like this, I'll be happy," he said.

It's hard not to marvel at how fitting his nickname was in this moment. As the words *Record du Monde* (French for 'world record') lit up the stadium's big screen, Mondo's achievement felt almost destined.

A PARISIAN THROWBACK: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE NOT-SO-UGLY

The 33rd edition of the Summer Olympics, arguably the **greatest event** on the planet, concluded after a memorable closing ceremony at the Stade de France in Paris on August 11.



Prized 'Marchand'ise: France's Leon Marchand became the most decorated male Olympian at Paris 2024 with four gold and one bronze medals. AP

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The cauldron was extinguished and the Olympic flag was handed over to the next host.

The 33rd edition of the Summer Olympics, arguably the greatest event on the planet, concluded after a memorable closing ceremony at the Stade de France in Paris on August 11.

Exactly 100 years after hosting the Olympiad for the last time, the French capital got the opportunity to greet athletes from all around the world with "Enchanté". This time though, the number of participating nations was 206 (including Individual Neutral Athletes and the Refugee Olympic Team), almost five times more than the 1924 Games.

Therefore, France had the difficult task of maintaining the balance between helping the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in continuing the legacy of the quadrennial event in a responsible manner and also displaying its might as a sporting nation while competing against the rest of the world.



All smiles: Sifan Hassan during the medal ceremony of the women's marathon event.

REUTERS

Stars of the show

As far as its own performance is concerned, France finished fifth on the medal tally with 16 gold, 26 silver and 22 bronze medals. It is its second-best showing at a single edition.

French swimmer Leon Marchand became the toast of the nation as he bagged four out of those 16 gold medals. All four gold medals for the 22-year-old Marchand came with new Olympic Records, including an incredible double in 200m breaststroke and butterfly events on the same night.

The "Marchand Mania" had reached such a level where the news of his triumphs at the Paris La Defense Arena in Nanterre resulted in celebrations at other venues. Decathlon's 400m event at the Stade

de France could not begin on time due to the same reason. No wonder that Marchand, who lit a fire under the rest of the French contingent, was chosen to carry the Olympic flame during the closing ceremony.

For the US, which topped the medal table for the 19th time, two 27-year-olds stood out even as a bunch of new athletes also made their mark. Simone Biles had faced mental health issues and the "twisties" at the Tokyo Olympics but in Paris, the gymnast was back at her impressive best. She clinched two individual gold and one silver medals apart from the women's team gold. She is now the joint second-most decorated female gymnast of all time at the Olympics with 11 medals, tied with Věra Čáslavská, who participated for erstwhile Czechoslovakia, and

only behind Larisa Latynina of the Soviet Union, who won 18 medals. Katie Ledecky continued her dominance over 800m and 1500m freestyle while also bagging a silver and a bronze in Paris, becoming the most decorated female Olympic swimmer of all-time with a total medal haul of 14.

Sifan Hassan, an Ethiopian-born Dutch runner, defied the odds to potentially emerge as the biggest story from athletics. The 31-year-old middle/long-distance runner became only the second athlete in Olympic history after Emil Zatopek in 1952 to win medals in 5000m, 10,000m and the marathon. While Hassan bagged bronze in the first two events, her gold in marathon was particularly impressive as she set a new Olympic record after a sprint to the finish line with Ethiopia's Tigst Assefa chasing her. Novak Djokovic, bidding to become the fifth player after Steffi Graf, Andre Agassi, Rafael Nadal and Serena Williams to achieve the Career Golden Slam, finally found the missing piece of the puzzle. The 37-year-old Serbian, just three weeks after a demoralising defeat in the Wimbledon final to rising star Carlos Alcaraz, got redemption as he beat the Spaniard 7-6(3), 7-6(2) for the men's singles gold medal.

Upsets aplenty

An event that is held once every four years leaves plenty of scope for upsets and Paris 2024 was no different.

Host France shocked two-time men's Rugby Sevens champion Fiji 28-7 to win its first gold of the Games. Fiji had a 17-0 win-loss record at the Olympics coming into the final.

Both the women's 100m and men's 200m sprint events at Stade de France not only ended with first-ever gold medals for the winners as well as their countries but at the same time, it also left the spectators stunned at the manner in which the heavy favourites lost. Julien Alfred put Saint Lucia, a small island-nation, on the world map as she easily defeated USA's Sha'Carri Richardson to become the new 'Sprint Queen.' In men's 200m, it was Botswana's Letsile



Surging ahead: Julien Alfred of Saint Lucia leads the field before eventually winning the women's 100m final at the 2024 Summer Olympics. AP

Tebogo who stopped Noah Lyles from achieving the sprint double as he left the American well behind on his way to the finish line.

In men's 1500m, all the hype was about the battle between world champion Josh Kerr and reigning Olympic champion Jakob Ingebrigtsen but when it mattered, USA's Cole Hocker came out of nowhere to leave both behind and

take the gold.

However, the biggest upset came in wrestling when India's Vinesh Phogat added the first-ever international loss to the career of four-time world champion Yui Susaki. The Japanese wrestler had won all of her 82 bouts before coming up against Vinesh in the first round in women's 50kg freestyle. She was on her way to making it 83 wins when the Indian recorded a two-point move in the dying seconds of the contest to emerge victorious.

Some simply don't lose

While the Paris Olympics did have quite a few upsets, it also had some

unbeaten streaks carrying on.

The US men's basketball team, featuring living legends such as LeBron James, Stephen Curry and Kevin Durant, won its fifth straight and overall 17th Olympic gold medal after beating France 98-87 in the summit clash. The women's team raced to an eighth straight and overall 10th gold medal with a thrilling 67-66 victory over the host in the final. Diana Taurasi, who did not feature in the final, became the most decorated basketball player in Olympic history with her sixth gold medal.

Cuban Greco-Roman wrestler



Mijaín López rewrote history books as he became the first wrestler to win five successive Olympic gold medals in the same event after clinching the men's 130kg title.

China continued to dominate the men's and women's team events, first introduced in 2008, winning its fifth consecutive gold medals in both.

However, the mother of all streaks turned out to be the one of South Korean women's archery team as it bagged its 10th straight Olympic gold. No other country has won one.

Controversies

Just like any of the previous 32 editions, the Olympic Games in Paris had its fair share of controversies.

It all began with the concerns regarding the polluted river Seine. Despite Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo taking a dip to prove a point, the fact that the poor water quality disrupted the schedules of triathlon and marathon swimming events and also led to many swimmers falling ill meant that it was a mere publicity

stunt. Men's football tournament opener between Morocco and Argentina, which took place on July 24, involved VAR review ruling out a stoppage-time equaliser from Cristian Medina about two hours after the play was suspended due to pitch invasion. The teams were forced to finish the match in an empty stadium and Morocco, the eventual bronze medallist, held on for a 2-1 win.

Algeria's Imane Khelif and Chinese Taipei's Lin Yu-ting, who won gold medals in women's boxing, were

Upset for the ages: Not many would have expected Cole Hocker to cross the finish line ahead of world champion Josh Kerr and reigning Olympic champion Jakob Ingebrigtsen in the 1500m final. AP

subjected to a major gender controversy. The duo had been disqualified by the International Boxing Association during the Women's World Championships 2023 in New Delhi after it was claimed that they failed gender eligibility testing

Cuban Greco-Roman wrestler Mijaín López rewrote history books as he became the first wrestler to win five successive Olympic gold medals in the same event after clinching the men's 130kg title



Selfie time: Gold medallist Brittney Griner of the US takes a photo with her teammates during the women's basketball medal ceremony. GETTY IMAGES

but allowed by the IOC to compete in Paris.

Vinesh, who became the first Indian female wrestler to reach an Olympic final, was disqualified from the competition after she failed to make weight on the day of the gold medal bout.

The Indian filed an appeal in the Court of Arbitration of Sport (CAS), requesting to be awarded a joint-silver medal since she had won her bouts leading up to the final fair and square.

CAS also had to deal with the drone spying scandal of the Canadian

women's football team and the scoring error in the women's floor exercise final in gymnastics, involving US' Jordan Chiles, who won bronze, and fourth-placed Romanian Ana Bărbosu.

Au Revoir

The end of the 33rd edition of the Summer Games also brought down curtains on the careers of some of the biggest sporting icons.

Lopez, after winning his fifth wrestling gold, left his shoes on the mat, signalling that the 41-year-old had retired. Andy Murray and Angelique Kerber, three-time Grand Slam champions and former World No. 1 players, both said goodbye to the world of tennis.

Indian men's hockey team goalkeeper PR Sreejesh had

announced, just before the tournament started, that Paris Games were going to be the final event of the 36-year-old's career and he too bowed out after helping the team to win its second straight bronze medal.

Australian's swimming icon Emma McKeon, Brazilian women's football legend Marta, Jamaican sprint queen Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce and British diver Tom Daley were some of the other athletes who bid farewell to the sporting arena.

While Chinese table tennis great Ma Long and Spain's 22-time Grand Slam champion Nadal did not officially announce retirement, they confirmed that it was their final appearance at the Summer Games.

Over to you, Los Angeles 2028!

WORLD RECORDS AT PARIS 2024

★ SWIMMING

Men's 100m freestyle - Pan Zhanle (China, **right**) - 46.40s
Mixed 4x100m medley relay - USA (Ryan Murphy, Nic Fink, Gretchen Walsh and Torri Huske) - 3:37.43s
Men's 1500m freestyle - Bobby Finke (USA) - 14:30.67s
Women's 4x100m medley relay - USA (Regan Smith, Lilly King, Gretchen Walsh and Torri Huske) - 3:49.63s

★ ATHLETICS

4x400m Mixed Relay - USA (Vernon Norwood, Shamier Little, Bryce Deadmon, Kaylyn Brown) - 3:07.41s
Men's Pole Vault - Armand Duplantis (Sweden) - pole vault - 6.25m
Women's 400m hurdles - Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone (USA) - 50.37s

★ ARCHERY

Women's Individual Ranking Round (72 arrows) - Lim Sihyeon (Republic of Korea) - 694

★ TRACK CYCLING

Women's Team Sprint - Great Britain - 45.186s
Men's Team Sprint - Netherlands - 40.949s
Men's Team Pursuit - Australia - 3:40.730s
Men's 200m Flying Start Qualifying - Harrie Lavreysen (Netherlands) - 9.088s
Women's 200m Flying Start Qualifying - Lea Friedrich (Germany) - 10.029s

★ SPORT CLIMBING

Women's Speed - Aleksandra Miroslaw (Poland) - 6.06s
Men's Speed - Sam Watson (USA) - 4.74s

★ WEIGHTLIFTING

Men's 89kg - Karlos Nasar (Bulgaria) - 224kg (clean and jerk)
Men's 89kg - Karlos Nasar (Bulgaria) - 404kg (total)

★ MODERN PENTATHLON

Women's Overall Points - Michelle Gulyas (Hungary) - 1461 points
Men's Overall Points - Ahmed Elgendi (Egypt) - 1555 points
Men's Laser Run - Emiliano Hernandez (Mexico) - 9:40.80s / 720 points

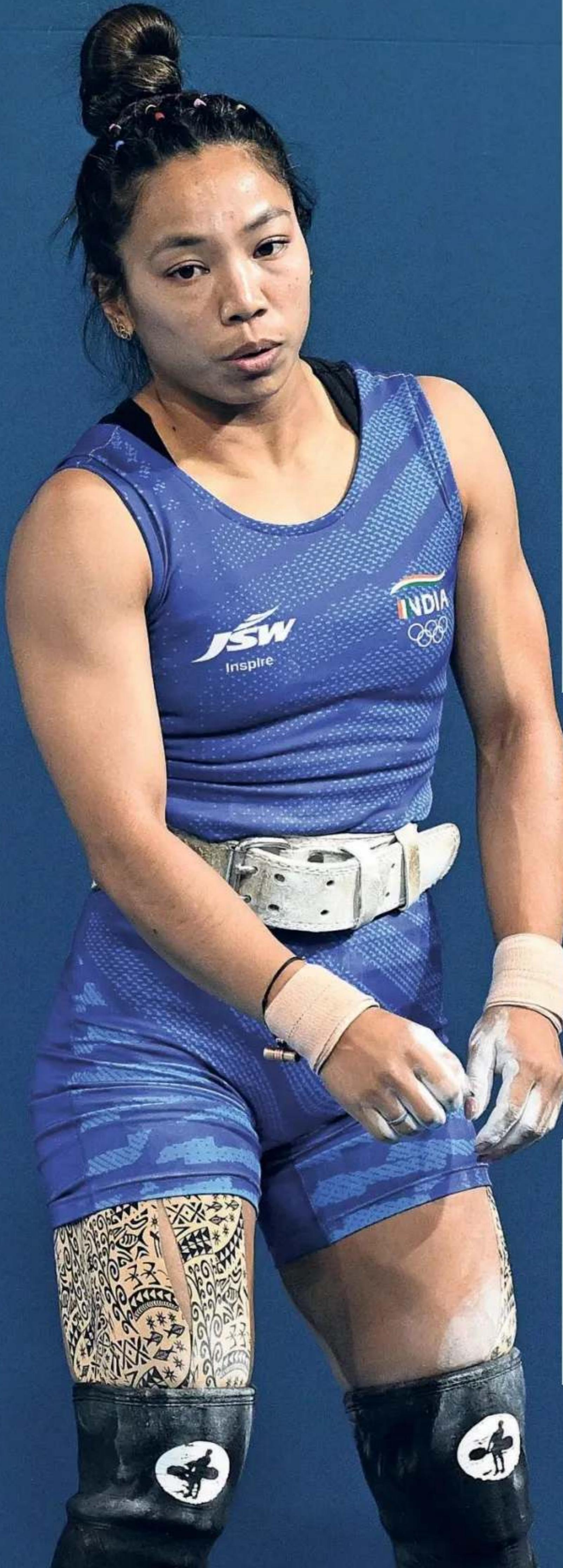


SO NEAR, YET SO FAR FOR MIRÁBALI, DHIRAJ AND BHAKAT

Finishing fourth proved to be a theme for India in Paris. **The agony** of it was experienced by the IOA president herself. Usha had missed a medal in the women's 400m hurdles at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984 by one-hundredth of a second.



So nearly there: Tokyo 2020 silver medallist Mirabai Chanu could only finish fourth this time. RITU RAJ KONWAR



P. K. Ajith Kumar

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After the highs of Tokyo, the Indian contingent had flown to Paris with great expectations. The Indian Olympic Association president P.T. Usha had said that India could even improve upon the seven medals it won in Tokyo.

That didn't quite happen.

India, represented by 117 competitors, had to be content with six medals, one less than the tally from the last Olympics. With Neeraj Chopra being upstaged by Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem, India failed to win a single gold, which meant it could finish only 71st on the medals table.

If the ace athlete had bagged the men's javelin gold, as he did in Tokyo, the country would have finished a lot higher. India was 48th at Tokyo, where it came up with its best Olympic show ever.

India's hopes were indeed mainly about Neeraj, the shooters, the men's hockey players, the wrestlers and shuttlers. Though badminton failed to give India a medal (for the first time in four Olympics), the shooters and the wrestlers did well. By winning the bronze, the men's hockey team provided much joy.

It was not just in its strong events that India sent its athletes to Paris. There were also participants in less popular events.

In equestrian, for instance. Anush Agarwalla became the first ever Indian to take part in the dressage event at the Olympics.

The 24-year-old from Kolkata, who had won a gold and bronze at the Hangzhou Asian Games a couple of years ago, however, failed in his quest to make it to the medal round. He finished ninth in his pool of ten, scoring 66.444%. Only the top two were guaranteed to advance.

Deepika Kumari fared a lot better in archery. But the Olympics proved a disappointment yet again for the much-decorated archer from Jharkhand. For the second edition in a row, the 30-year-old's campaign ended at the quarterfinal stage; she went down to South Korea's Nam Suhyeon.

Deepika has won a staggering number of medals in international events – the World Cup, the Asian Games, the Asian Championships, the Commonwealth Games and the World Championship. But, the Olympic medal continues to elude her.

Bhajan Kaur and Ankita Bhakat also took

Not again: An Olympic medal continues to elude Deepika Kumari. AP

part in the women's archery competitions in Paris. Bhajan made it to the round of 16, but Ankita was knocked out in the opening round.

The trio's performance in the team event wasn't satisfactory, either. They surrendered meekly in the quarterfinals to the Netherlands. The Indians had been seeded fourth, while the Dutch were seeded only 12th.

It was a similar story in the men's event, too. The team comprising Dhiraj Bommadevara, Tarundeep Rai and Pravin Jadhav was seeded third but beaten in the quarterfinals by sixth-seeded Turkey. In the individual competitions, Bommadevara reached the second round, while Tarundeep and Jadhav could not clear the first.

Dhiraj and Bhakat came close to the podium in the mixed team event, though. They finished fourth, losing to Brady Ellison and Casey Kaufhold of the United States in the bronze-medal match.

There was heartbreak in tennis, too. In the opening round of the men's singles, Sumit Nagal won the first set in his opening-round encounter against Frenchman Corentin Moutet, but he lost the second set and then the tie-breaker.

Also, the Indian doubles pair of Rohan Bopanna and Sriram Balaji found the French opposition daunting, going down to Gael Monfils and Edouard Roger-Vasselin in straight sets in the first round.

Tulika Maan also failed to go past the first round in judo. But not many expected her to beat Idalys Ortiz, the Cuban veteran who had arrived in Paris after winning a medal in each of her three previous Olympics.

The expectations were higher from Aditi Ashok, though. She had come close to winning a medal in golf at the last Olympics and her fourth place was one of the greatest Indian stories at Tokyo.

Aditi could only tie for 29th place at Le Golf National, where three other Indians were also in the fray.



Diksha Dagar tied for the 49th place among women, while Shubhankar Sharma and Gaganjeet Bhullar tied for the 40th and 45th places in the men's event.

There was only one entry from India in rowing. Balraj Panwar was placed fourth in the heats of the men's single sculls and made it to the quarterfinals through repechage. He, however, could only finish 23rd.

In sailing, India was represented by Vishnu Saravanan and Nethra Kumaran. Vishnu finished 18th in the men's ILCA 7, while Nethra was placed 21st in the women's ILCA 6.

In swimming too, India fielded a male and a female. Srihari Nataraj (men's 100m backstroke) and Dhinidhi Desinghu (women's 200m freestyle) were both knocked out after the heats at Paris La Defense Arena.

The 14-year-old Dhinidhi, the youngest Indian competitor at Paris, had won her heat, but that wasn't

good enough: she was ranked 23rd among the 30 contestants.

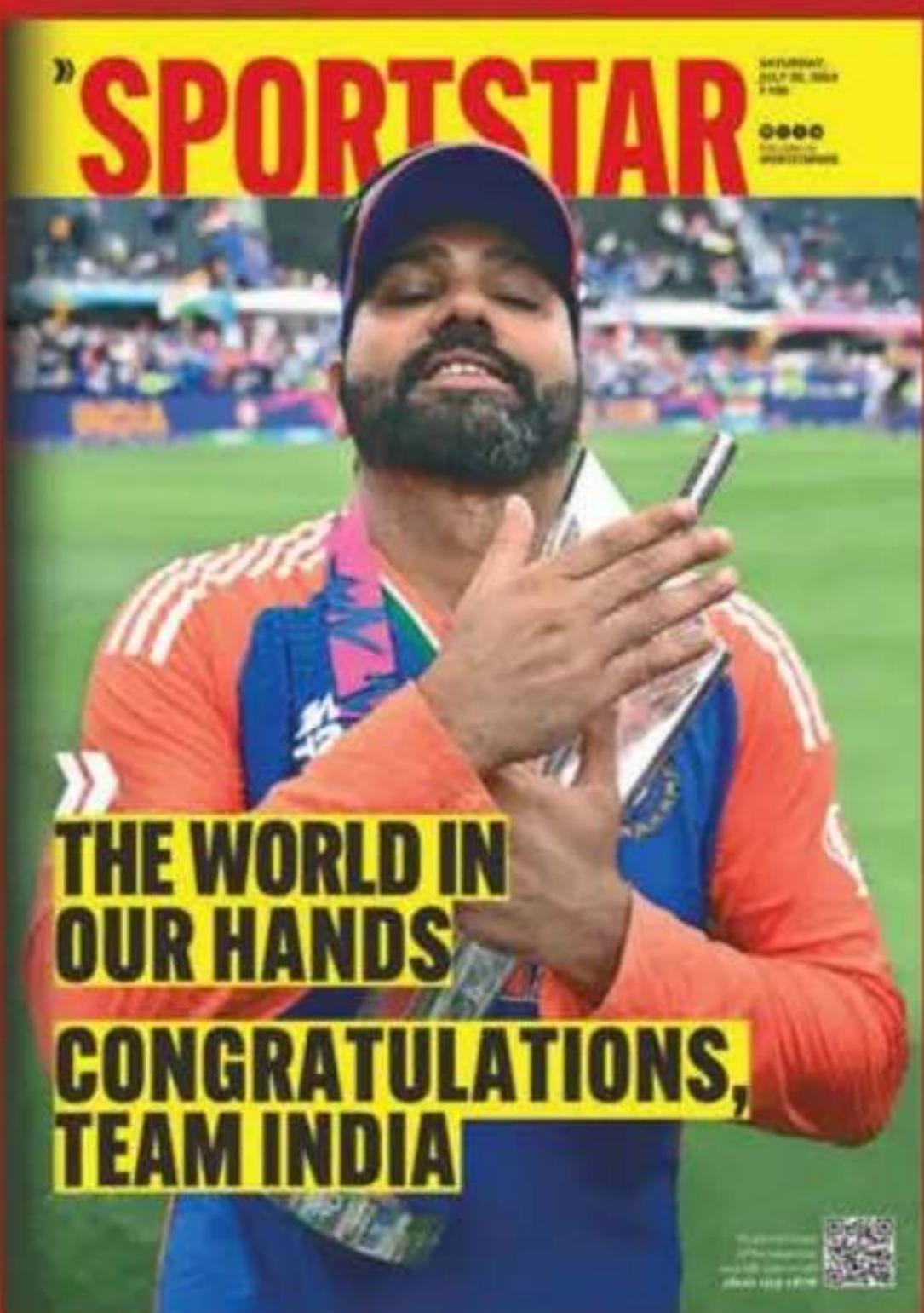
Unlike swimming, India could boast of some tradition in weightlifting. Back in 2000, Karnam Malleswari had lifted the bronze in the women's 69kg class in Sydney. She had thus become the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal.

Four years later, at Athens, Kunjarani Devi had finished fourth in the women's 48kg. At Tokyo in 2021, Mirabai Chanu won India its second medal in weightlifting, as she claimed silver in the women's 49kg.

She, however, failed to win another Olympic medal in Paris-. She finished fourth.

Finishing fourth, of course, proved to be a theme for India in Paris. The agony of it was experienced by the IOA president herself. Usha had missed a medal in the women's 400m hurdles at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984 by one-hundredth of a second.

India, represented by 117 competitors, had to be content with six medals, one less than its tally from Tokyo



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AN INDIAN IN FRANCE

Col. Kabilan Sai Ashok became the **youngest Indian referee** to officiate at the Olympics during Paris 2024.

Since 1904, only four Indian referees have officiated at the Olympics. Incidentally, Col. Ashok officiated one of the most anticipated and high-voltage bouts, involving Algeria's Imane Khelif and Hungary's Luca Anna Hamori. This match followed Italian Angela Carini's withdrawal from her fight with Imane, which triggered a gender row.

Col. Ashok, the only Indian to hold the coveted position of President of the World Military Boxing Council (CISM), has also conducted bouts at the World Championships.

He is also the only Indian referee to have been fast-tracked from two-star to three-star status. Before this, Kishen Narsi and Jay Kowli officiated at the London 2012 Olympics.

Feels like home

It is a beautiful experience to witness the Parisians' love for their

country's national teams, cutting across various sports disciplines. Apart from individual events, team competitions such as football, rugby, and basketball attract large numbers of spectators to the stadiums.

In a country that's mad about football, the craze for basketball is equally amazing. When France took on the USA in both the men's and women's finals during the last two days of the Games, big crowds gathered at restaurants, cafes, and bars across the city to support their teams.

The eatery owners installed big

Steely presence: Col. Ashok (centre, facing page) officiated the high-voltage clash between Algeria's Imane Khelif and Hungary's Luca Anna Hamori. GETTY IMAGES

screens to show live telecasts of the matches, and with the crowds reacting to every moment, the whole of Paris turned into a large stadium. Even though the USA showcased its dominance, it did not affect the French people's love for their teams.

Y. B. Sarangi

Winning by pin

One of the traditions of the Olympic Games is the collection and exchange of pins. Before the Games begin, representatives from all countries — athletes, coaches, administrators, and even journalists — are given official pins.

Wherever you go, there are almost always volunteers who collect and exchange the pins they already possess for those from countries that they don't already have.

They often stick these pins on the ribbons of their accreditation cards. By the end of the Games, the ribbons are adorned with pins from a wide variety of countries.

One pin that seems particularly hard to get is that of India. Many volunteers from the country say that they have requested pins from the Indian administrators who are part of the Indian contingent, but they have been told that none are available.

The few pins that this journalist collected were given by athletes and coaches and were then exchanged for pins from athletes and coaches of other countries.

Perhaps his most prized pin was one from Cuba. It was originally given to Manu Bhaker, but the 22-year-old has a tradition of not accepting any gifts before a competition.

Her coach, Jaspal Rana, passed the pin to this journalist. Manu went on to win two Olympic bronze medals — a more than suitable exchange policy.

Jonathan Selvaraj

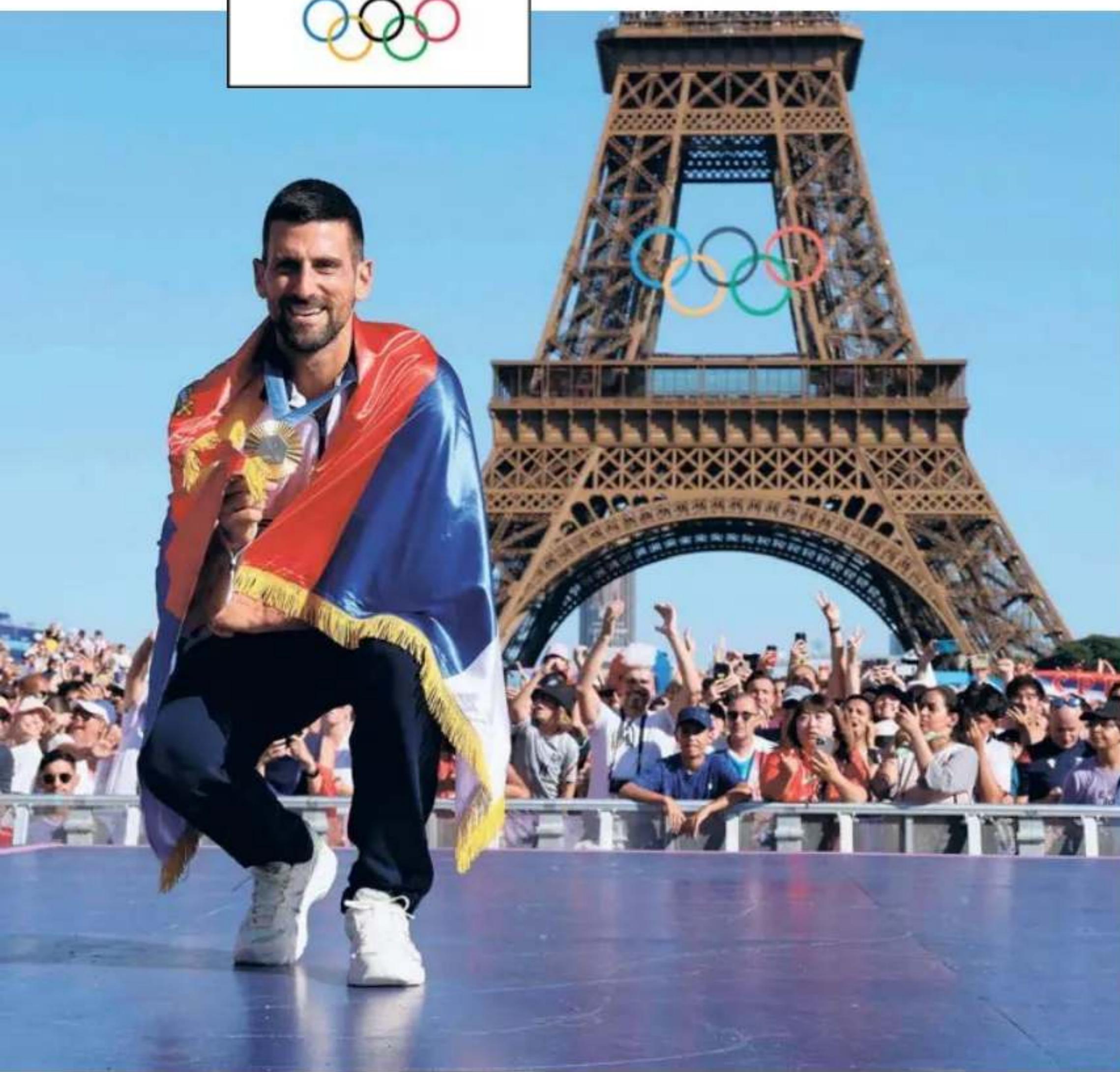


Local support on point: When France took on the USA in both the men's and women's finals during the last two days of the Games, big crowds gathered not only at the venues but also restaurants, cafes, and bars across the city to support their teams. GETTY IMAGES



Pin of fortune: Before the Games get underway, the representatives of all countries — athletes, coaches, administrators and even journalists — are given official pins. RITU RAJ KONWAR

» PARIS OLYMPICS
SNIPPETS



Elena Berta and Bruno Festa of Team Italy and Diogo Costa and Carolina Joao of Team Portugal compete in the Mixed Dinghy 470 class on day ten of the Olympic Games at Marseille Marina. The city of Marseille also hosted some of the Olympic football matches at the Stade Velodrome.

GETTY IMAGES

Novak Djokovic has competed in five Olympic Games, winning bronze at Beijing 2008 and the long-awaited gold on the iconic Court Philippe-Chatrier at Roland Garros. With 24 Grand Slam titles to his name and, at last, Olympic gold, Djokovic became the fifth player to complete a Golden Slam. AFP



Armand Duplantis of Sweden made history by setting a new world record of 6.25m in the men's pole vault, securing the gold medal and becoming the first athlete to successfully defend the title since Bob Richards in 1952 and 1956. This achievement marks the ninth time Duplantis has broken the world record, solidifying his position as a two-time world champion and a dominant force in the sport. REUTERS



The U.S. men's basketball team clinched its fifth straight Olympic gold medal, triumphing over host France 98-87 in Paris. With NBA stars LeBron James and Stephen Curry leading the charge, the American team delivered a dazzling performance in a thrilling match at the Bercy Arena. GETTY IMAGES



Letsile Tebogo of Botswana crosses the line to win gold in the men's 200m final, ahead of silver medallist Kenneth Bednarek of the United States. Tebogo set an African record time of 19.46 seconds and along with his teammates, also bagged silver in the men's 4x400m relay, boosting Botswana's total Olympic medal tally to four. REUTERS



Sha'Carri Richardson of the United States celebrates after winning gold in the women's 4x100m relay final. Richardson had arrived in Paris as the reigning world champion in the 100m only to fall to St. Lucia's Julien Alfred in the women's final. REUTERS



In a gripping men's high jump final, New Zealand's Hamish Kerr claimed the gold medal, narrowly defeating American Shelby McEwen. Both athletes were initially tied at 2.36m, leading to a tense jump-off. After both failed to clear the bar at 2.38m and 2.36m, Kerr finally broke the tie by clearing 2.34m, securing New Zealand's first-ever Olympic medal in the men's high jump. REUTERS



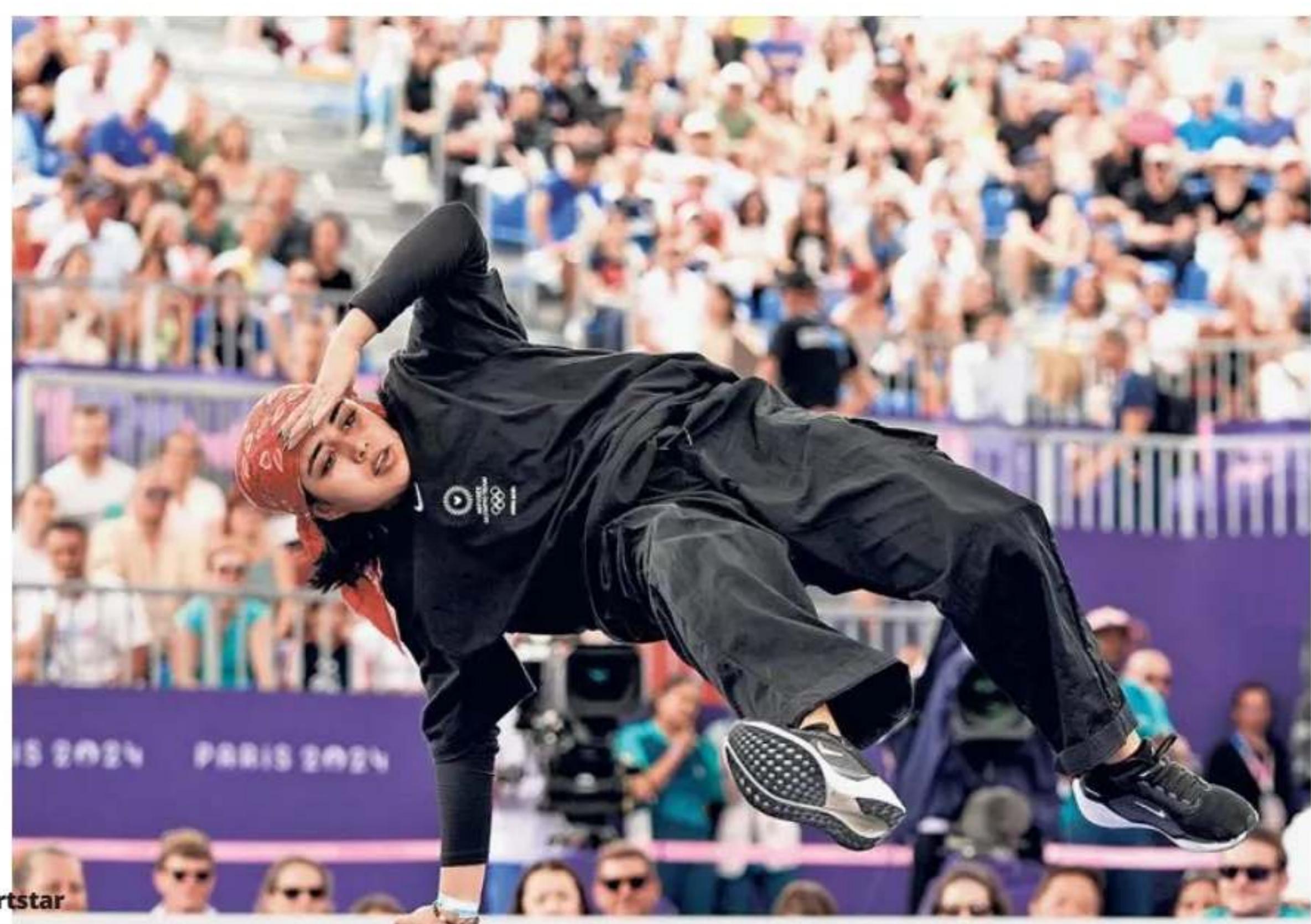
Silver medallist Simone Biles (left), of the United States, and bronze medallist Jordan Chiles, also of the United States (right), bow to gold medallist Rebeca Andrade, of Brazil, during the medal ceremony for the women's artistic gymnastics individual floor finals at the Bercy Arena. It was a moment that has since gone viral, but for Biles and Chiles, it was just, "The right thing to do." AP



Imane Khelif of Algeria beat Yang Liu of the People's Republic of China to win gold in women's boxing 66kg at the Stade Roland-Garros. Khelif previously competed at Tokyo 2020, where she became the first female boxer to represent Algeria at the Olympics. REUTERS



Refugee athlete Manizha Talash was disqualified from the Olympic breaking competition for displaying "Free Afghan women" on her outfit, violating the ban on political statements and slogans on the field of play. She competed for the Refugee Olympic Team as B-girl Talash. AP





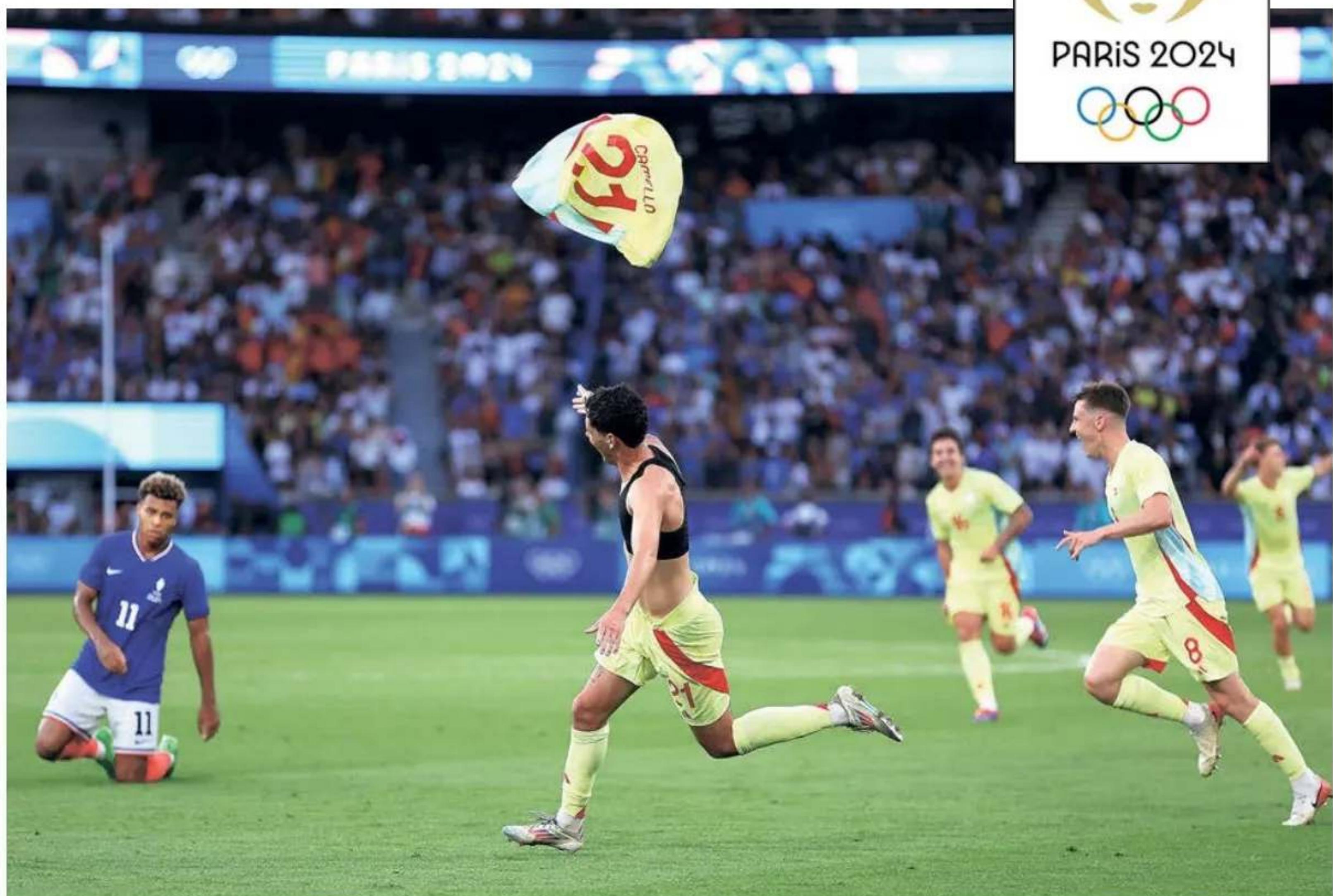
The Netherlands won its first men's hockey Olympic gold medal in 24 years by beating Germany in a shootout in a thrilling final. After a 1-1 draw across 60 minutes, Dutch keeper Pirmin Blaak starred as he saved three times in the 3-1 shootout success. GETTY IMAGES



Emma Hayes solidified her status as a top coach in women's football by leading the U.S. team to Olympic gold in her first tournament as the nation's head coach. Hayes took charge of the United States in May after a successful 12-year tenure at Chelsea, where she secured 14 trophies. GETTY IMAGES



Iran's Saeid Esmaeili Leivesi celebrates with his national flag after beating Ukraine's Parviz Nasibov in their men's Greco-Roman 67kg wrestling final. GETTY IMAGES



Spain won the Olympic gold after an eight-goal thriller in the men's football final against France. Thierry Henry's side had fought back from 3-1 down to force extra-time before Sergio Camello's double clinched a famous win. GETTY IMAGES



Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone made history at the Paris Olympics, shattering her own world record in the 400m hurdles with a blistering time of 50.37 seconds to win gold. Building on her previous record of 50.65 seconds set in June, McLaughlin-Levrone dominated the competition, securing her sixth global title in impressive fashion. GETTY IMAGES



At 11, Zheng Haohao was the youngest athlete at the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris and the youngest ever to represent the People's Republic of China. There was a 40-year age gap between her and the oldest skateboarder at the Games, Andy Macdonald (51).

REUTERS



Many Olympic events took place with some of Paris' world-famous monuments in the backdrop. Here, Anthony Jeanjean of Team France can be seen competing during the BMX Freestyle Men's Park Final, Round 2, at the Place de la Concorde. This landmark square is where Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, among hundreds of others, were guillotined in 1793 during the Reign of Terror. GETTY IMAGES



In a dramatic and action-packed moment, Tom Cruise made a thrilling entrance by rappelling down from the roof of the stadium to retrieve the Olympic flag before revving up a motorcycle and speeding off, symbolising the passing of the torch to the next host city, Los Angeles. AP



Rapper Snoop Dogg opened the Breaking event, lighting up the arena by performing the opening brigadier ceremony. Breaking featured at the Summer Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires in 2018. Breaking was added to the Paris 2024 Olympic programme as a new sport. REUTERS



Karen Bass, mayor of Los Angeles, waves the Olympic Flag while IOC president Thomas Bach and Anne Hidalgo, mayor of Paris, look on during the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games Paris 2024 at the Stade de France. The IOC awarded Los Angeles the right in 2017 to host the 2028 Games. It will be the third time LA will host the Games, after being the host city in 1932 and 1984. GETTY IMAGES



At the Paris Olympics closing ceremony, French singer Yseult delivered a stunning rendition of "My Way" at the Stade de France, set against a dazzling backdrop of fireworks that illuminated the night sky.

GETTY IMAGES



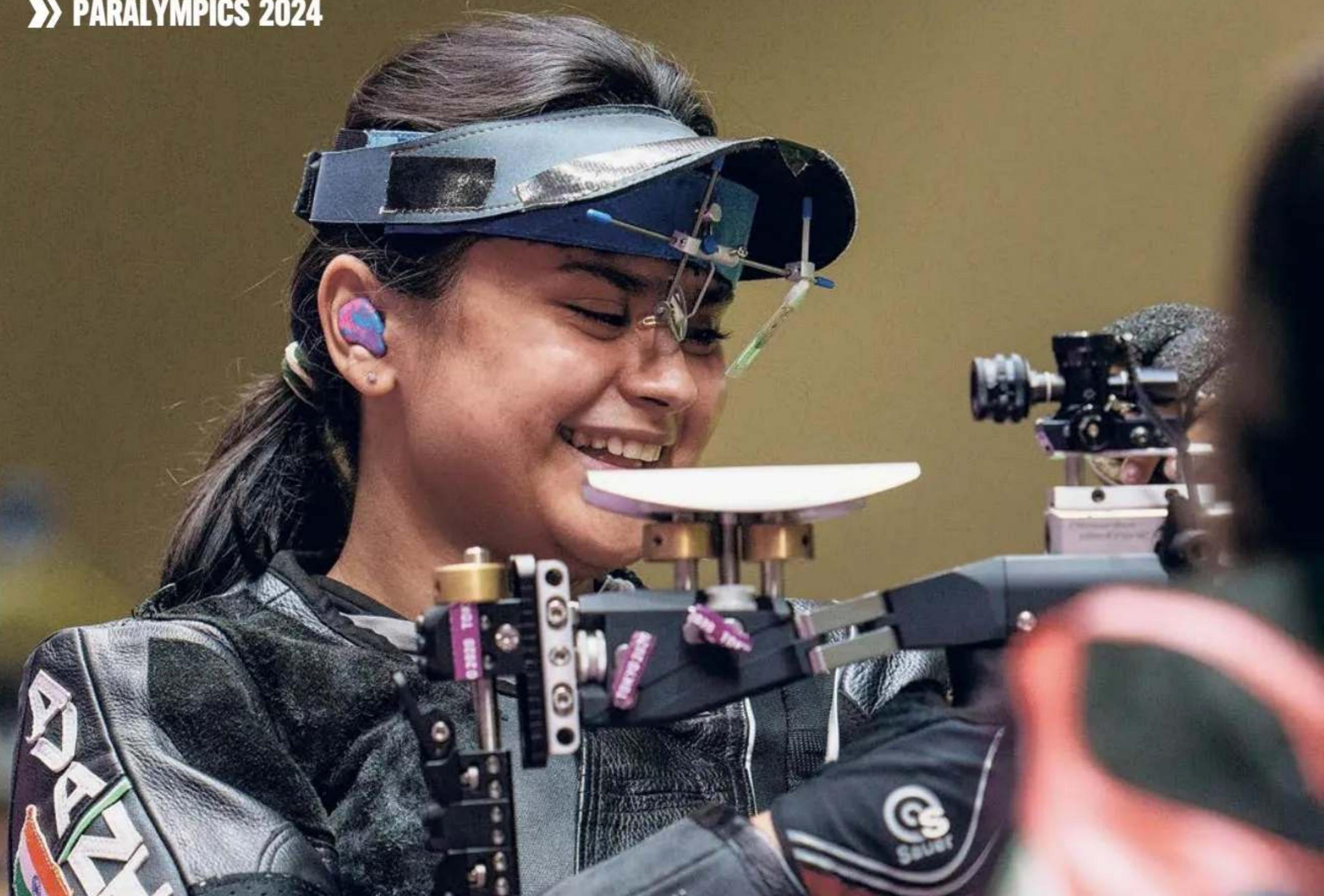
Tourists flocking to the Eiffel Tower usually train its coin-operated telescopes on Paris's timeless landmarks — the intricate details of the Arc de Triomphe or the spires of Notre-Dame. But lately, these monuments have played second fiddle to a new spectacle sweeping the city: the thrill of live sports. On a warm afternoon, visitors on the tower's second-floor platform trained their lenses on an intense beach volleyball match between Spain and the Netherlands. While most tickets quickly sold out, eager onlookers found inventive ways to catch a glimpse of the Games.

GETTY IMAGES

India's flag-bearers at the closing ceremony were Manu Bhaker and P. R. Sreejesh, both of whom had remarkable journeys in Paris. Manu made history by becoming the first Indian athlete to win two Olympic medals in a single edition since India's Independence. Meanwhile, Sreejesh secured two consecutive bronze medals, leaving a lasting legacy in hockey.

RITU RAJ KONWAR





INDIAN PARALYMPIANS POISED TO PROSPER AGAIN

With a mix of seasoned champions and promising newcomers, the Indian contingent at the upcoming Paralympics Games will strive to make a **significant impact**.

Netra V

netra.v@thehindu.co.in

As the exhilaration of the Paris Olympics begins to wane and the city starts to experience the inevitable withdrawal symptoms from the grandeur of the Games, Paris must shift gears in just 16 days to prepare for the upcoming Paralympics, which commences on August 28.

Meanwhile, India is poised to move beyond the mixed emotions of its Olympic journey with renewed optimism and determination, aiming to surpass its previous medal tally at the Paralympics.

After debuting at the Summer Paralympics in 1968, India has been a regular participant since 1984. The 2020 Tokyo edition marked India's most successful campaign to date, with the country finishing in 24th place with 19 medals — five gold, eight silver, and six bronze. Before this, India had accumulated just 12

Ready for the shot: Avani Lekhara will compete in three events: the women's 10m air rifle standing SH1, the mixed 10m air rifle prone SH1, and the women's 50m 3-position rifle SH1. AP

medals across all previous Paralympic appearances, with four of each colour.

India first-ever Paralympic medal came at the 1972 Games when Murlikant Petkar won the 50m freestyle event with a then-world record time of 37.331s.

This year, India is set to make a significant leap in its representation at the Paris Paralympics. In Tokyo, India sent 54 athletes, including just 14 women.

For Paris, the team has expanded to 84 athletes, with women making up 32 participants. Out of the 84 athletes, 50 of them feature in the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) core list.

However, not all familiar faces will be present. Reigning Paralympic and World champion Pramod Bhagat, who won gold in the men's singles SL3 category, has been excluded after being found guilty of breaching the Badminton World Federation's (BWF) anti-doping regulations due to three whereabouts failures within a 12-month period.

Ekta Bhyan, who finished eighth in the women's club throw F51 at the Tokyo Games and clinched gold in the same event at the World Para Athletics Championships 2024, did not make the list for Paris, as her event is not included in the Paralympic roster.

Additionally, double Paralympic medallist shooter Singhraj Adhana



misses out due to new competition rules from the International Paralympic Committee, which now allow only two shooters per event, as opposed to three in Tokyo.

At the Tokyo Games, the 42-year-old Adhana had won silver

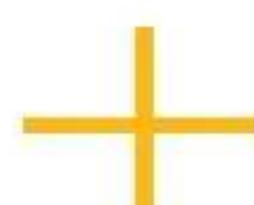
On target: Manish Narwal (in pic) and Nihal Singh will take the final quotas for the men's 10m air pistol SH1 and mixed 50m pistol SH1 events, respectively. PTI

in the mixed 50m pistol SH1 and bronze in the men's 10m air pistol SH1 categories.

In Paris, Rudransh Khandelwal will compete in the same events, while Manish Narwal and Nihal Singh will take the final quotas for the men's 10m air pistol SH1 and mixed 50m pistol SH1 events, respectively.

Despite these changes, four out of India's five defending Paralympic

For Paris, the team has expanded to 84 athletes, with women making up 32 participants. Out of the 84 athletes, 50 of them feature in the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) core list.



Sheetal Devi has made a name for herself with a silver medal at the 2023 World Para Archery Championships and two golds and a silver at the 2022 Asian Para Games.



champions will compete in Paris, including shooters Avani Lekhara and Narwal, badminton player Krishna Nagar, and javelin thrower Sumit Antil.

Three years ago, Lekhara made history as the only Indian woman to win Paralympic gold, scoring 249.6 points in the SH1 standing 10m air rifle event, setting a new Paralympic record and equalling the world record.

She also became the first Indian

woman to win multiple medals in a single edition, clinching bronze in the 50m 3-position rifle SH1.

At the Paris Paralympics, the 22-year-old shooter from Rajasthan will compete in three events: the women's 10m air rifle standing SH1, the mixed 10m air rifle prone SH1, and the women's 50m 3-position rifle SH1.

In 2024, Avani won bronze medals in the women's 10m air rifle standing SH1 event and R6 — mixed

50m rifle prone SH1 (with Sidhartha Babu and Deepak Saini) at the Para Shooting World Cup in New Delhi.

Her compatriot Mona Agarwal clinched the gold in the women's 10m air rifle standing SH1 ahead of China's Zhang Cuiping, who won silver. Both of them will compete at the Paris Games.

Narwal, ranked third in the world, will also defend his title. In Tokyo, he set a new Paralympic record with 218.2 points in the men's 10m air



pistol SH1 event and won gold.

Their impressive performances are expected to bolster the 10-member team's prospects.

Krishna Nagar will be the sole gold medallist among India's 13-member para-badminton contingent at the Paris Paralympics. The 4'5" Nagar won gold by outlasting Hong Kong's Chu Man Kai with a thrilling 21-17, 16-21, 21-17 victory in the men's singles final of the SH6 class.

Cynosure of attention: Sheetal Devi, India's first armless archer, will make her Paralympic debut, competing in the women's compound open and mixed team compound open events. AFP

Nagar's triumph marked India's second Paralympic gold in para-badminton, following Bhagat's win in Tokyo. Manoj Sarkar and Suhas Yathiraj also won medals at the Tokyo Games, with Sarkar claiming bronze in the men's singles SL3 and Yathiraj taking silver in the men's singles SL4.

In Paris, Yathiraj, the World No. 1 in men's singles SL4, and Sarkar, ranked fourth in men's singles SL3, will compete in the same events as in Tokyo. Additionally, Yathiraj will compete in the mixed doubles SL3-SU5 event.

Sumit Antil, the only Indian para-athlete to win gold in athletics at the Tokyo Games, shattered his world record in the men's javelin throw (F64) with a remarkable distance of 68.55m.

Since then, he has continued to excel, setting the current world record with a 73.29m throw at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games in October 2023. Antil will lead a 38-member track and field team for the Paris Paralympics.

Two-time Paralympic medallist Mariyappan Thangavelu will want to replicate his gold medal-winning performance from the Rio Games in the men's high jump T-42 event, where he cleared 1.89m.

In Tokyo, he finished second behind Sam Grewe in the men's high jump T-63. His teammate, Sharad Kumar, earned bronze in the same event.

In 2024, Thangavelu reclaimed his form by breaking the championship record with a jump of 1.88m in the men's high jump T-63 final at the World Para Athletics Championships, securing gold.

The Indian para table tennis campaign is led by two women: Bhavinaben Patel and Sonalben Patel. Bhavinaben, 37, won silver in the women's singles Class 4 at the Tokyo Paralympics and followed up with gold at the 2022 Commonwealth Games and bronze at the 2022 Asian Para Games. Partnering with her in the women's doubles WD 10 event is Sonalben, who also earned a CWG bronze in the women's singles — Classes 3-5.

In addition to these disciplines, India will compete in eight other sports at the Paris Paralympics: para canoeing, para-cycling, blind judo, para powerlifting, para-rowing, para-swimming, para taekwondo, and para archery.

All eyes will be on 17-year-old Sheetal Devi as she makes her Paralympic debut, competing in the women's compound open and mixed team compound open events.

The armless archer, part of the six-member archery squad for the Games, has already made a name for herself with a silver medal at the 2023 World Para Archery Championships and two golds and a silver at the 2022 Asian Para Games. Rising to World No. 1 in women's para compound archery in the open category, she was named World Archery's 'Best Women's Para Archer of 2023'.

In 2024, Sheetal added a silver medal at the Khelo India NTPC National Ranking archery meet and secured gold in the women's compound team event with Sarita at the Para Archery Ranking Series in Czechia.

The Indian contingent will showcase a mix of seasoned champions and promising newcomers, each striving to make a significant impact.

With the Paralympic Games just around the corner, all eyes will be on these athletes as they seek to achieve new milestones and etch their names into Paralympic history.

» NEXT GENERATION CUP



HEROES OF THE FUTURE

Indian football looks for a silver lining through the
Next Generation Cup 2024.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

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In recent months, Indian football has descended into the dungeons of disappointment, marked by a loss to lower-ranked Afghanistan, an exit from the FIFA World Cup 2026 race, and the retirement of its highest goalscorer, Sunil Chhetri.

The situation worsened when two Indian teams, the under-21 sides of East Bengal and Muthoot Football Academy, suffered damaging defeats in the Next Generation Cup 2024, conceding 32 goals and scoring only two goals across eight matches.

However, hope, like a phoenix, rose from the ashes of despair through the young players of Punjab FC. The under-21 side of the Indian Super League (ISL) outfit delivered a remarkable



PREMIER LEAGUE FOR INDIA



performance in the Next Generation Cup, defeating the academy teams of Aston Villa 2-0 and Everton 2-1 in consecutive games.

It finished above three of the four participating sides from England — Everton, Villa, and Crystal Palace — securing third place in the tournament, the highest achievement by an Indian team in five editions.

"I am very proud of these guys; they deserve it," said Punjab's head coach, Sankarlal Chakraborty (**left**), to *Sportstar*. "As an Indian side, we beat a European side, and I am very happy."

What worked for Punjab FC?

Punjab entered the tournament as the winner of the Reliance Foundation Development League, defeating East Bengal 3-2 in the final.

In London, it stuck to its plan of practising through small-sided games, focusing on 1v1 challenges

Strong statement: Punjab FC players celebrate their victory against Everton.
PREMIER LEAGUE FOR INDIA

and absorbing pressure. While the team narrowly lost 2-3 to Villa in its opener and 0-3 to Tottenham Hotspur next, it pulled off a Houdini act against Everton in the third game.

Trailing 0-1 against Everton (coached by club legend Leighton Baines), at halftime, Manglenthang Kipgen started the comeback, beating goalkeeper George Pickford at the far post. Usham Thoungamba Singh completed the turnaround eight minutes from time.

"This is not just a (Punjab) team here; it is carrying India's flag," an emotional Sankarlal said, adding, "This win will be a reference point for the upcoming generations and clubs for development through academies."

In its final match, it beat Villa 2-0 to conclude a historic campaign in the Next Gen Cup.

What set Punjab apart from the other two Indian teams, East Bengal and Muthoot Football Academy, was its strategy to continuously attack and try to regain possession as quickly as possible.

Though its speed in getting the ball was slower compared to the

English teams, Punjab appeared quicker and more sure-footed in possession.

"At the youth level, we also have the potential to fight. But, in my experience, I have seen them (youth sides) play very defensively, celebrating losses by smaller margins or even conceding fewer goals," said the coach, who idolises Pep Guardiola and Subhash Bhowmik.

"So, I took it as a challenge to go against it, remove the fear of losing and conceding, and to play more attacking football," he added.

For East Bengal, the repetition of the same mistakes remained a consistent narrative, while for Muthoot, spending too much time on the ball left it second-best in most of its matches.

Ripple effect on Indian football

One of the first things that Punjab's coach did on the team bus after securing third place was to ask his boys to keep their feet on the ground and maintain consistency.

Though the matches in England

On the charge: Muthoot FA's Mohammed Enas in action against Everton. PREMIER LEAGUE FOR INDIA



Final standings



1. Stellenbosch FC
2. Tottenham Hotspur
3. Punjab FC
4. Aston Villa
5. Everton
6. Muthoot FA
7. Crystal Palace
8. East Bengal



were huge confidence boosters for them, some players will have greater roles in the coming months.

Two of them, Kipgen and Pramveer, will join the National Camp for the U-20 SAFF Championships, while two more, Karish Soram and Thoungamba Singh, will join the national camp for the U-17 edition of the tournament.

Kipgen, the star of India's victorious SAFF U-19 Championships last year, was Punjab's most reliable source of attack, scoring three goals and finishing the Next Gen Cup as India's highest goalscorer.

Usham, on the other hand, was omnipresent in the final third for his club during the tournament, netting the winner to complete the comeback against Everton.

As India enters the next edition of the U-17 and U-20 Championships as the defending champion, the international experience gained by these players could prove crucial for the national teams, both of which will play under new coaches — Ranjan Chaudhuri (U-20) and Ishfaq Ahmed (U-17).

Secondly, Punjab's success could

All smiles: Stellenbosch FC celebrates its title victory after staving off a strong challenge from Tottenham Hotspur and Punjab FC. PREMIER LEAGUE FOR INDIA

pave the way for a cultural shift in Indian football academies.

Under the guidance of its Director of Football, Nikolaos Topoliatis, Punjab has set up an academy in Mohali where players live, train, and play together, creating a camaraderie similar to that of Category 1 academies of Premier League sides like Aston Villa, Arsenal, and Crystal Palace.

Topoliatis, who was instrumental in building an astute youth infrastructure at Greek giant Olympiakos, has been with the Indian club since 2020 and has overseen youth development across the under-11, under-13, under-15, under-17 and reserve sides.

Stellenbosch completes redemption arc

Stellenbosch Football Club, the runner-up in the last edition of the tournament, ensured that another

English team did not best them this time around.

Having lost to Wolverhampton Wanderers 4-5 on penalties last year, the Stellies left nothing to chance, putting the game to bed in regulation time at the Loughborough University Stadium in Leicestershire.

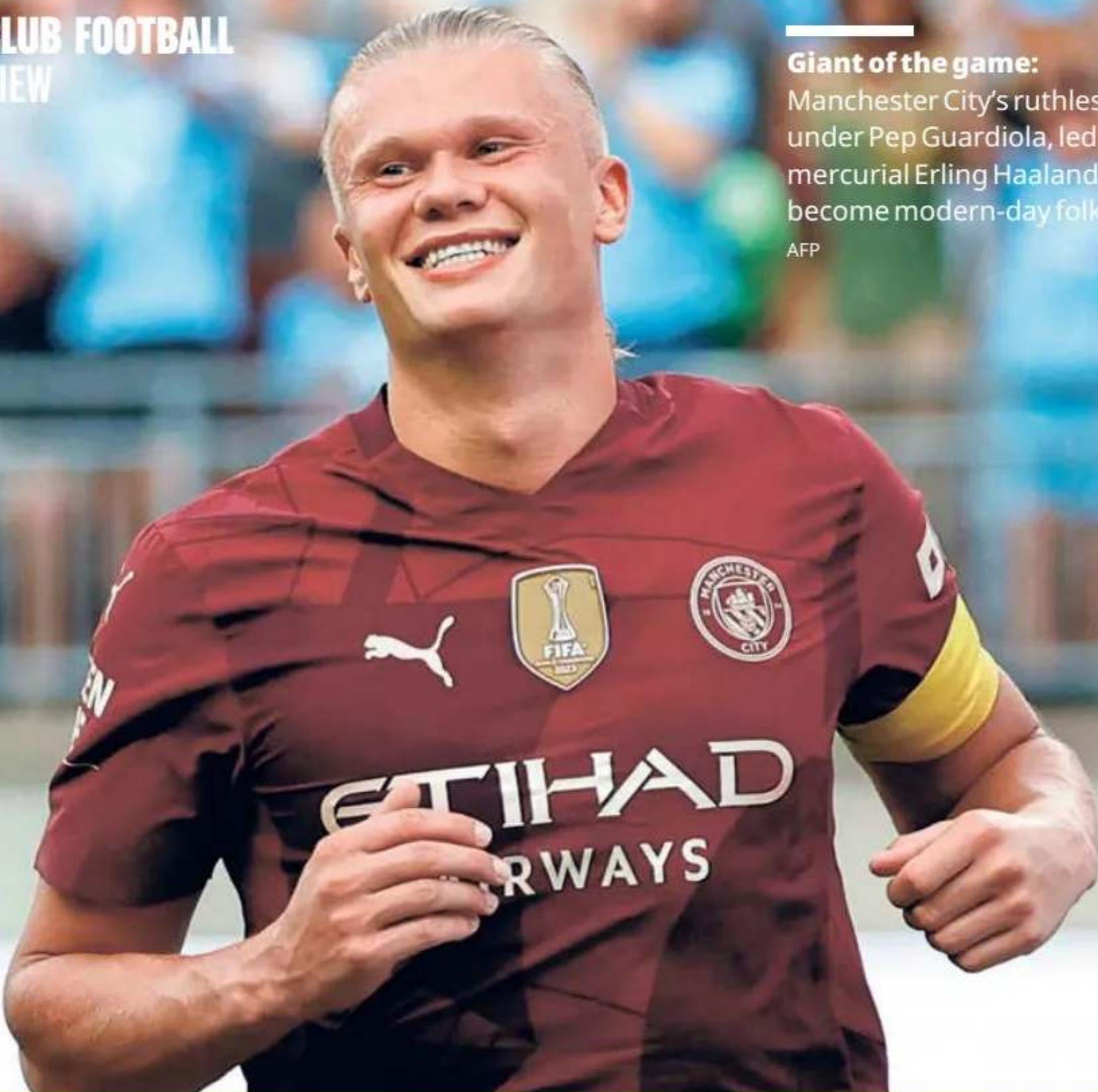
Captain Shaakir Ahmed netted the opening goal before the 20-minute mark, leaving Spurs goalkeeper Samuel Archer unmoved, and set up Kyle Bailey in the box just before halftime, prompting a huge cheer from a group of the club's fans in the United Kingdom.

There was also a lesson here for Indian clubs: consistency in youth development is key to long-term success.

This was Stellenbosch's third consecutive appearance in the tournament, and each time, it reached the final, winning the Midlands final in 2022 and the single knockout one this time.

Indian football might have seen a few silver linings in the successes of Stellenbosch and Punjab FC, but it is time to build on these achievements before it's too late.

» EUROPEAN CLUB FOOTBALL
SEASON PREVIEW



Giant of the game:
Manchester City's ruthlessness under Pep Guardiola, led by the mercurial Erling Haaland, has become modern-day folklore.
AFP

ALL SET FOR KICK-OFF!

From Manchester City's quest for a fifth consecutive Premier League title to Real Madrid's Galáctico-like makeover, there's **no dearth of subplots** in the upcoming European club season.

Aneesh Dey

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The European Championship is over, the Copa America is over, and pre-season is almost over. Soon, club football will return in full glory as teams across Europe begin their battle to reign supreme. Will Kylian Mbappé cement his legacy in the Royal White? Will Harry Kane finally win a trophy? The 2024-25 season has plenty to offer.

Premier League

Manchester City has reigned supreme in recent times, making history by winning the league four years in a row. The law of averages

suggests that Pep Guardiola's men should falter at some stage, given their undisputed dominance. However, City's ruthlessness under Guardiola has become modern-day folklore.

With the manager's contract ending in June 2025, there are rising questions about his future at the club. If the next season is to be his last, he will want to bow out on a high and win his seventh Premier League title with the Cityzens.

The team most likely to be hot on City's heels is Mikel Arteta's Arsenal. The Gunners have provided a stern challenge to City's title hopes for the last two seasons, only to falter at crucial stages, aiding City's ascendency.

Arteta's project has demanded patience, and the fans have seen the team reap the benefits, albeit in patches. The 2024-25 season will be a



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STORIES

'make-or-break' one for Arsenal. A modern football team is remembered for its silverware, and the only significant trophy Arteta can boast of is an FA Cup. The Gunners have already shown intent by signing Italian centre-back Riccardo Calafiori from Bologna.

Indulging in smart buys and creating a proper footballing structure — that is what INEOS promised when it took charge of Manchester United's football operations, acquiring a 25 per cent stake in the club. So far, lifelong United fan Jim Ratcliffe and his team have shown intent.

Sticking with head coach Erik ten Hag, the club has appointed Omar Berrada and Dan Ashworth as Chief Executive of Football Operations and Sporting Director, respectively. With signings like Leny Yoro (18) and Joshua Zirkzee (23), United has begun its new philosophy of investing in future talents with a high growth ceiling.

It is tough to ascertain how Chelsea and Liverpool will fare in the coming season. Both will be under new managers — Enzo Maresca and Arne Slot, respectively. Slot has been successful in the Netherlands, winning the Eredivisie with Feyenoord, but that will not guarantee automatic success in

England — just ask Ten Hag. Chelsea, too, has gambled by appointing Maresca after relieving Mauricio Pochettino of his duties — a manager who has operated in the Premier League at a high level. Additionally, both teams have yet to properly dip their toes into the transfer market.

Leicester City, Ipswich Town, and Southampton will be the newly promoted teams in the Premier League. Leicester, champion in the 2015-16 season, and Southampton have been familiar faces in the Premier League over the years, in contrast to Ipswich, who makes a return after 22 years.

Under the able guidance of Kieran McKenna, Ipswich has grabbed headlines with its football but will hope its season does not turn out like Luton Town's, who failed to survive promotion.

La Liga

Mbappé to Real Madrid — undoubtedly one of the most dramatic transfer sagas in modern football, spanning over eight years — came to an end after the Frenchman signed a five-year deal with Los Blancos on a free transfer from Paris Saint-Germain.

If that wasn't a statement in itself, the defending champion will also have Brazilian wonder-kid Endrick in its ranks after the 18-year-old's move from Palmeiras.

Add present stars like Jude Bellingham and Vinícius Júnior into the mix, and it might seem that Madrid is destined to win it all.

However, look back to the early 2000s during the Galácticos era, and you'll realise that football is never black and white. Carlo Ancelotti will be responsible for making these players click as a unit and handling some big egos in the dressing room.

Seeing the Madrid storm in the transfer market, it's understandable that Barcelona fans might be nervous about the coming season. But all hope is not lost for the Catalans.

Despite being rocked by financial turbulence, the presence of Lamine Yamal will provide hope to the Barça faithful. Fresh from winning Euro 2024 and being adjudged 'Young Player of the Tournament,' there will be major expectations on him to help Barcelona mount a title challenge — probably more than what should be pinned on a 17-year-old.

But, with an able manager in Hansi Flick, all hope is not lost. It is difficult to see Atletico Madrid in the thick of things as far as a title charge is concerned. However, with Argentine striker Julián Álvarez joining from City, that will provide a major boost for Simeone and his men.

Valladolid, Leganés, and Espanyol will be the newly promoted teams in La Liga next season.

Bundesliga

Will Harry Kane finally win a major trophy? That is the burning question ahead of next season. Kane's title drought seemed over when he joined serial champion Bayern Munich last summer.

However, under Xabi Alonso, Bayer Leverkusen had a monumental season, staying undefeated for 51 games and ending Bayern's 11-year reign at the top. Now, it remains to be seen whether Alonso can carry on the momentum.

Bayern turned heads by appointing Vincent Kompany as head coach, given the fact that his CV as a coach does not boast any significant

Mbappé's exit from French top-flight football is a loss not only for PSG but for the league



GETTY IMAGES

Top transfers



achievements at the top level. But it would be a mistake to count him out based on the past, as many did after Alonso's appointment at Leverkusen. Making the unthinkable possible and scripting surprises is football's strongest forte, and that is what makes it the beautiful game.

It is difficult to be hopeful if you are a Borussia Dortmund fan, given the countless disappointments over the years that saw the club fail to win a major title.

Ahead of next season, with Leverkusen's dominance and Bayern's hunger to get back on top, Dortmund will need to exceed expectations to even think of a title challenge — and will have to do so without the services of loyal servant Marco Reus, who decided to leave the club after 12 years.

FC St. Pauli and Holstein Kiel will be the promoted teams in the Bundesliga next season.

Serie A

Some say Italian football is now what the Premier League used to be — unpredictable as to who will become champion.

After years of dominance by Juventus, Inter became the first to break its stronghold by grabbing the Scudetto in the 2020-21 season. Since then, Milan has returned into the fray, tasting success.

One cannot forget Napoli's fairytale season, which saw it win the title in the 2022-23 season after a long wait of 33 years since the era of Diego Maradona.

Last season, Inter, under the guidance of Simone Inzaghi, was the runaway champion, finishing 19 points above runner-up and rival Milan.

However, going by recent trends, Inter is unlikely to have such a dominant season again. It will face a stern challenge from Milan and Juventus, both of whom will have new head coaches in Paulo Fonseca and Thiago Motta, respectively.

Also, the incomings and outgoings during the transfer window will be a

Kylian Mbappé

PSG to Real Madrid — Free transfer

Julián Álvarez

Manchester City to Atletico Madrid — **£82m**

Dani Olmo (right)

RB Leipzig to Barcelona — **£46m** plus add-ons

Endrick

Palmeiras to Real Madrid — **£40m** plus add-ons

Riccardo Calafiori

Bologna to Arsenal — **£33.6m** plus add-ons

João Neves

Benfica to PSG — **£50m** plus add-ons

Matthijs de Ligt

Bayern Munich to Manchester United — **£42.9m**

determining factor in how the top teams fare next season, and a clearer picture will emerge once the window closes. Parma, Como, and Venezia will be the newly promoted clubs in Serie A next season.

Ligue 1

Mbappé's departure from French top-flight football is a loss not only for PSG but for the league, at least in terms of popularity and viewership. However, PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi has strongly maintained that his team will succeed without the star Frenchman, despite the seemingly sour relations after an unceremonious exit and monetary disputes, with Mbappé claiming he is still owed a fair share by the French champion.

Ligue 1 has mostly been a one-horse race over the years, and while PSG would want to remain the

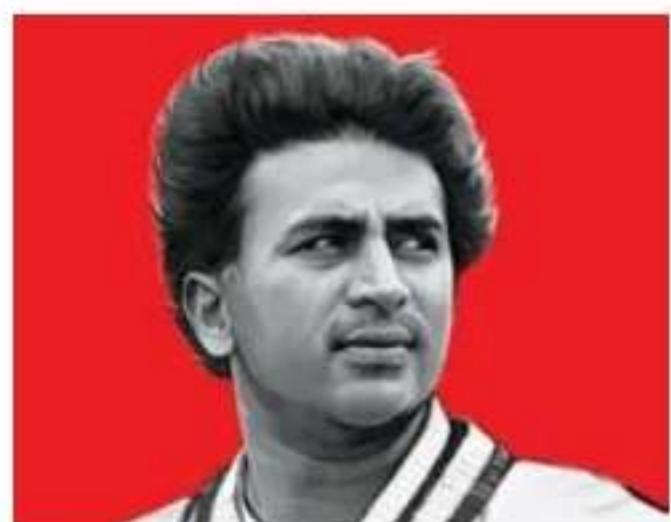


best team in France, it wouldn't be surprising if head coach Luis Enrique prioritises the UEFA Champions League — a crown that the club has yet to win and with the victory high on the agenda. To help make the UCL dream a reality, PSG has made a statement by signing Portuguese midfielder João Neves from Benfica.

This might pave the way for other clubs to mount a title challenge and repeat Lille's heroics from the 2020-21 season when it pipped PSG to the title.

Last season, runner-up Monaco looked in fine shape before eventually falling away and will look to launch a similar title challenge along with the likes of Brest, Lille, and perennial challenger Lyon.

AJ Auxerre, Angers SCO, and 10-time champion AS Saint-Étienne will be the newly promoted teams next season in Ligue 1.



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



FOR MORE
STORIES

MAKING EXCUSES IS WHERE INDIA WILL WIN GOLD MEDALS EVERY SINGLE TIME

In the debate that followed Prakash Padukone's frank assessment of Lakshya Sen's Olympic podium miss, the **majority tended** to side with the current would-be champion and not the past-proven world champion.

Firstly, full disclosure. In my humble opinion, and with the greatest respect to all other legends and champions from other sports, Prakash Padukone is the finest sportsperson that India has produced. It's not just his incredible skill with which he conquered the badminton world time and again, but also his demeanour on and off the court that makes him so special in my eyes. Don't forget he did it at a time when a point could be won only on your serve and not as it is now where it can be won on the opponent's serve. At a time when the Danes and Chinese were unbeatable, Prakash was sending them packing, barely conceding seven to 10 points and occasionally none at all.

He has always been reticent and publicity-shy, and he goes about his life with as much quiet as his famous dribble at the net. Therefore, his frank comments after the badminton disappointment came as a surprise to so many who have known him over the years to keep his counsel and not say much. It also stirred up a debate where the majority tried, as is the modern way, to take the side of a current would-be champion and not that of a past-proven world champion. Making excuses is where our country will win gold medals every

single time, so the debate around his assessment was more about that than looking without tinted glasses at what he said.

And what did he say? He said that the players today get all the backing and facilities from their Federations and the government too. Therefore, they should take responsibility for their performances too. It was a point well-made and well-articulated too, without pointing fingers at anybody. Yet as it invariably happens in our country, which again is a champion at reading between so-called lines and imagining unintended poisoned arrows, we were quick to jump on him and denounce his comments rather than take the time to digest them and then come out with our comparatively uninformed views. If a player is not going to take responsibility for his performance, then who is? So what wrong did he say? Some say the timing was wrong, but it's always better to say that when a player is searching for excuses and support rather than later. Yes, he could have said that privately in the changing room, but believe me, nothing has more impact on a player than a public rebuke. If he has the heart of a champion, then he will want to make the person who rebuked him eat his words. Otherwise, he will continue to flatter only to deceive.

2024

PARIS 2024

PARIS 2024

PARIS 2024



Right by your side: As Lakshya stood on the brink of an Olympic medal, Prakash Padukone and Vimal Kumar were courtside, witnessing the potential fulfillment of a dream shared by Lakshya and the entire Indian badminton community. RITURAJ KONWAR

By the way, Prakash himself took responsibility to up his game by travelling to Denmark and was there for a few years to train and practise with the Danish players, after which he became the world-beater that he was. So when he talks about taking responsibility, he knows what he is saying.

As far back as 2017/18, Prakash, who I unfortunately meet rarely, had told me about this kid, Lakshya Sen. He had taken him under his wing and was his guide and mentor. He would have watched Lakshya's progress step by step. As he came to the cusp of an Olympic medal, Prakash was by the courtside along with the hard-working and indefatigable Vimal Kumar to see the fulfilment of not just Lakshya's dream but also that of the entire community of Indian badminton lovers.

To then see a 20-17 and 7-0 lead being squandered off in the semifinal and then lose the bronze medal match after winning the first game comfortably must have been gut-wrenching indeed. He, Vimal Kumar, the BAI, and the government's TOPS had done everything possible, but when it came to the crunch, Lakshya was, in the famous words of the Indian cricket team captain, "*garden mein ghoomne wala*".

For those who watched both the semifinal and the bronze medal matches, it did appear that Lakshya had lost his trend of thought and concentration in the way he looked at his racquet as he sipped from his water bottle in between points or at the changeovers. I could be completely wrong, but on TV, it looked like a

blank expression, and that's usually a sign that the mind has wandered. Concentration and focus are things that no coach or trainer can ever teach. It can be developed over the years by the athlete by observing other champions and having an inner resolve, but there's no specific programme for it. Yes, mind trainers are around, but they can only do so much and not more. It's got to be within the athlete.

If there was one magnificent example of the mind conquering everything, it could be seen in how P. R. Sreejesh, our super duper hockey goalkeeper, guarded his post. It was best illustrated in the shootout against Great Britain, where he put his life on the line for his country.

He, of course, does it every game, but that was a make-or-break game against Great Britain. His determination, doggedness and never-say-die spirit rubbed off on his teammates as they played remarkable hockey to bring India a bronze medal. It was heartwarming and uplifting — the kind that makes the heart swell with pride.

India may not have won as many medals as was hoped before the Games began. But the medals and even fourth-placed finishes will hopefully start a sporting culture revolution that will bring more medals of all hues in future world competitions.

The facilities and the funds are all there now, from the Federations, the government, and private sponsors. The focus and resolve, though, have to be the athlete's responsibility, as the one and only Prakash Padukone says.

» PHOTOLINE
INDIA-SRI LANKA ONE-DAYERS



FOR MORE
IMAGES



1st

Triggering collapse: After scoring an unbeaten 67 in the first innings, Sri Lanka's Dunith Wellalage got India on the backfoot with his left-arm spin as he removed both openers—Rohit Sharma (58) and Shubman Gill (16)—in quick succession while defending a 231-run target. PTI



2nd

Forcing a tie: Despite a comfortable start to the chase, Sri Lankan spinners, led by Wanindu Hasaranga (3), Charith Asalanka (3) and Dunith Wellalage (2), brought the home team back into the game as India got bowled out for 230, ending the first ODI in a tie. PTI



3rd

Spinning a web: From being 97/1 in 13.3 overs to 147/6 in 23.1 overs in a 241-run chase, Indian batting lineup collapsed against the leg-spin of Jeffrey Vandersay (6/33) and never recovered as Sri Lanka won the match by 32 runs and took 1-0 lead in a three-match series. PTI



4th

Laying the groundwork: On yet another tricky Colombo pitch, Avishka Fernando set a strong base for Sri Lankan innings with his stroke-filled 96 off 102 balls in the third ODI. India, however, rolled things back post his dismissal, restricting the host to 248/7 in first innings. AP



5th

Ending a drought: Sri Lanka secured its first ODI bilateral series win against India after 27 years, winning the third game by 110 runs. The 21-year-old Dunith Wellalage was adjudged player of the series for his all-round show including a fifer in the final game that saw India bowled out for 138. PTI



6th

Triumphant: The Sri Lankan players with the trophy after winning the third and final one-day international against India. AFP

Donning multiple hats: Aunshuman Gaekwad played 40 Tests and 15 ODIs for India, later transitioning into roles as a national selector and eventually, the coach of the national team.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY



UNFLINCHING BATTER AND A TRUSTED FRIEND

Aunshuman Gaekwad was the friend **who never said no**, always there when needed. His presence was a precious gift to cherish.

Vijay Lokapally

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Aunshuman Gaekwad dedicated his life to cricket. His final days were a testament to his resilience. He faced the fiercest fast bowlers on the pitch and the most dreaded opponent off it — cancer. Despite the challenges, he

never backed down and bravely bowed out.

What set Gaekwad apart was his selflessness and reliability. He was a man of few critics, known for his honesty and caring nature. He was the friend who never said no, always there when needed. His presence was a precious gift to cherish.

Mohinder Amarnath and Kapil Dev were his closest friends in the cricket

fraternity. He adored Sunil Gavaskar and GR Vishwanath. Gaekwad remained in awe of Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, his first Test captain, and doted on Mohammad Azharuddin and Sachin Tendulkar. But he rarely talked about himself.

Pataudi was a "friendly terror." When asked to report to Pataudi in Calcutta (now Kolkata) for the Test against the West Indies in 1974,

Strong bond: Aunshuman Gaekwad had a special relationship with Sachin Tendulkar and Mohammad Azharuddin. He was a fan of their batting styles. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Gaekwad promptly presented himself to the captain. "I rang his doorbell and asked him what I should do." Pataudi's reply floored him: "Find out for yourself. No one told me when I made my debut." As Gaekwad discovered, it was a prank by Pataudi, who wanted the young cricketer from Baroda to back himself.

When Pataudi passed away in 2011, Gaekwad, who received the news late at night, took an early morning flight to reach Pataudi's home village to attend the final rites. His respect for the iconic cricketer was immense. Though he enjoyed smoking, Gaekwad never did so in Pataudi's presence. He belonged to the old school, where a captain, guru, or teacher was revered.

His name always rekindled memories of a dogged and fearless individual. Although he was not the most attractive batter to watch, he was the captain's first choice because of his ability to blunt an attack. He loved dropping the ball dead at his feet and checking the bowler's expressions. "It was my favourite pastime to convey to the bowler that his best effort to get me out was futile," he once told *Sportstar*.

One such gesture nearly proved fatal for him.

Sabina Park, 1976. The West Indies were on a vengeful trip to harm the Indians. "It was in the air. The West Indian aggression was not to be missed," Gaekwad recalled. One ball from Michael Holding hit him on the fingers, and he was in excruciating pain. Gaekwad angered the bowler with an inappropriate gesture with his finger. The next ball, bowled from around the stump, was dug short and fast. It struck him behind the ear, smashed his spectacles, and sent him to the hospital. "I thought my cricket and life were over."



Gaekwad fought back. His first six Tests were against the West Indies. Six months after the injury, he was back in his position as Gavaskar's opening partner against New Zealand in Bombay (now Mumbai). He featured in 40 Tests and was a gross underachiever for a batter with a first-class career that spanned 22 years.

His debut came in 1970 against a Maharashtra team that included Chandu Borde, Chetan Chauhan, and Hemant Kanitkar. In 1992, his farewell game against Gujarat took him to his beloved Moti Bagh Stadium in Baroda. At 40, he celebrated with knocks of 143 and 10, unbeaten on both occasions. He soon stepped into a new role as a national selector and did a fine job.

Some of my favorite memories with Gaekwad came during his stint as team coach. The Desert Storm episode in Sharjah in 1998 stands out. He told Tendulkar, "I want the trophy," and the maestro did not let him down with two back-to-back centuries. Tendulkar held Gaekwad in high esteem.

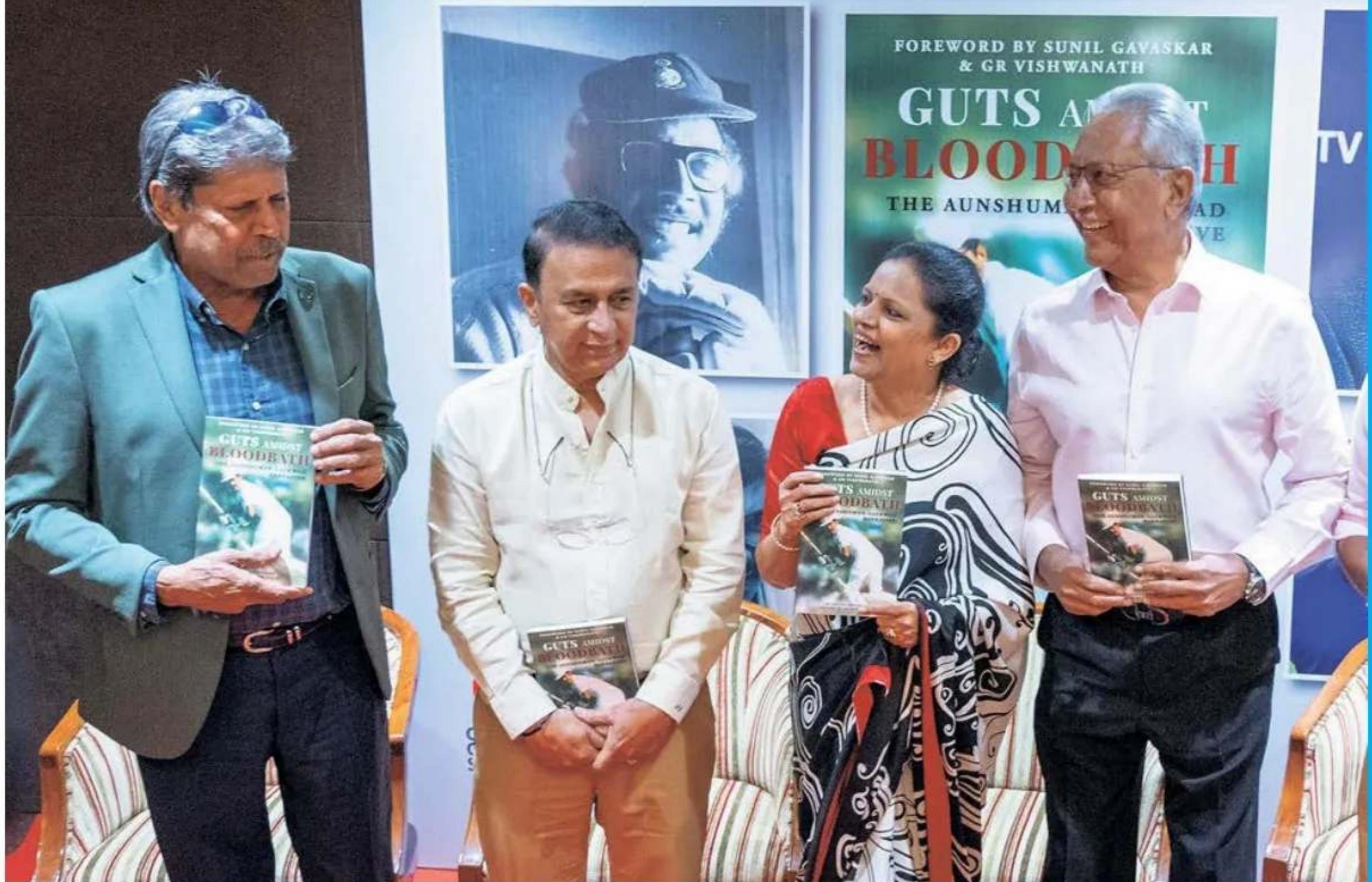
A year later, at the 1999 World Cup in England, Gaekwad confessed to facing the "biggest challenge" of his cricketing career — breaking the news of Tendulkar's father's demise.

Upon receiving the news, Gaekwad took Tendulkar's wife, Anjali, into confidence to convey the dreaded development. Tendulkar broke down in Gaekwad's arms before leaving for his father's cremation. But he returned to serve the team.

Gaekwad had a special relationship with Tendulkar and Azharuddin. He was a fan of their batting styles. Both added to Gaekwad's hobby of collecting wristwatches as a tribute to his guidance. "I don't wear them. They sit in my drawing room," Gaekwad revealed when I visited his home in Baroda.

Gaekwad's tastefully decorated residence reflects his persona. "It is all the work of [my wife] Jyoti," he insisted. "My job is to take care of the garden. All my vegetables are homegrown." He also proudly pointed to a peacock, which would strut into his kitchen every morning and leave after what Gaekwad called a "pitch inspection."

After serving as a player, selector, and coach for the Board, Gaekwad took up assignments with the Gujarat Cricket Association and later became a member of BCCI's Cricket Advisory Committee. However, he was dissatisfied with these roles and eventually found a way to share his



Friendship and memories: Former cricketers Kapil Dev and Sunil Gavaskar with Aunshuman Gaekwad and his wife at the launch of Gaekwad's book *Guts Amidst Bloodbath: The Aunshuman Gaekwad Narrative*. EMMANUAL YOGINI

views as a media expert. His honest analysis earned him respect in the industry.

My last two meetings with Gaekwad were in Mumbai — in May 2023, at his book launch at the Cricket Club of India, and two months later, at an event organised by my journalist friend Dwarkanath Sanzgiri to celebrate Tendulkar's 50th birthday.

A galaxy of cricketers turned up for his book launch. Kapil, Dilip Vengsarkar, Gavaskar, Roger Binny, Tendulkar, Zaheer Khan, Vishwanath, Karsan Ghavri, Abey Kuruvilla, Nayan Mongia, and Yajurvindra Singh lent their support to Gaekwad.

"He has given Indian cricket everything as a player, coach, administrator, selector — you name

it, and he has done it all. That he is not only liked by players from his time but also those who came after his time as a cricketer is a tribute to how well-liked Aunshu is," Gavaskar said. "He was my opening partner; we had some interesting times. Between the two of us, we never got each other run out. That's why we are on talking terms and can pull each other's legs."

Tendulkar recalled Gaekwad's preference for spicy food. "I remember during our 1998-99 tour to New Zealand, we went to a restaurant, and I said, 'Let's order pasta or chicken.' He said he does not like bland food at all. So Aunshu bhai asks the chef for the spiciest chilli sauce.

The chef says, 'Would you be able to handle it? It's extremely spicy.' He says, 'Make it as spicy as possible and get it.' The chef brought the sauce, which I tasted a little bit. It was so spicy that I could barely finish a quarter of a spoon with my entire meal. Aunshu bhai finished two bowls of the sauce. The chef couldn't believe it. That's when I realised it

wasn't just fiery bowling he could handle, but also the food."

Gaekwad appeared unwell in July. His tired look did not match his personality. Gaekwad was always a fit man, and only a routine check revealed the dreaded disease that was to consume him.

Gaekwad was advised to go to London for treatment but returned home disappointed. His long-time friend, Amarnath, visited Gaekwad and took it upon himself to raise funds for the treatment with help from Gavaskar, Sandeep Patil, and Kapil. Amarnath described Gaekwad as "a great batter, a dear friend, and a lovely human being."

Gaekwad experienced hurt from the cricketing community at various points. Still, his kind-hearted nature prevented him from holding any grudges, even against the man who nearly ended his life on the pitch. Gaekwad affectionately referred to Holding as "Mikey" and considered him a friend. That was Aunshuman Dattajirao Gaekwad — an unflinching batter and a trusted friend. He was 71.

Wellalage in elite list

0 } The number of spin bowlers to claim a five-wicket haul against India on multiple occasions before Dunith Wellalage's 5/27 in the final ODI match of the series in Premadasa on 7 August 2024. The left-arm spinner had previously claimed a five-wicket haul (5/40 also in Premadasa on 12 September 2023) against India. Overall, he now joins an elite group of six bowlers who have the distinction of claiming a five-wicket haul more than once against India. Australian pacer Brett Lee has done it on most occasions — four times.

Opponent bowlers claiming a five-wicket haul against India on multiple occasions

5-wkt hauls	Bowler	For	1st occasion	2nd occasion	3rd occasion	4th occasion
4	Brett Lee	Aus	5/27 – Adelaide 26 Jan 2000	5/38 – Kuala Lumpur 22 Sep 2006	5/27 – Brisbane 3 Feb 2008	5/58 – Sydney 24 Feb 2008
3	Aaqib Javed	Pak	7/37 – Sharjah 25 Jan 1991	5/19 – Sharjah 7 Apr 1995	5/61 – Chennai 21 May 1997	
3	Mustafizur	Ban	5/50 – Mirpur 18 Jan 2015	6/43 – Mirpur 21 Jun 2015	5/59 – Birmingham 2 Jul 2019	
2	Merv Dillon	WI	5/51 – Toronto 14 Sep 1999	5/52 – Port of Spain 2 Jun 2002		
2	Mitchell Starc	Aus	6/43 – Melbourne 18 Jan 2015	5/53 – Vizag 19 Mar 2023		
2	Dunith Wellalage	SL	5/40 – ColomboRPS 12 Sep 2023	5/27 – ColomboRPS 7 Aug 2024		

Note: The first ODI bowler to claim a five-wicket haul against India was Kiwi Richard Collinge (5/23 in Christchurch on 21 Feb 1976), while the first spinner to do so was West Indian Viv Richards (6/41 in Delhi on 23 Oct 1989).

13 } India's unbeaten ODI series run against Sri Lanka before it was brought to a grinding halt by the host nation in the recently concluded three-match series, where the Indians lost 0-2 in the Premadasa in Colombo. It has been 26 years, 11 months, 13 days, to be exact, since Sri Lanka won a bilateral series against India. The last time it won was the home series, which ended on 24 August 1997 by a 3-0 margin. Since then, India has won the previous 10 ODI bilateral series against Sri Lanka before this defeat.

Consecutive series without defeat between two sides in ODI matches

Series	For	Against	From	To	Series result
14+	Pakistan	Zimbabwe	2 Mar 1993	3 Nov 2020	Won 13, Shared 1
13+	India	West Indies	21 Jan 2007	1 Aug 2023	Won 13
13	India	Sri Lanka	22 Dec 1997	15 Jan 2023	Won 11, Shared 2

Note: +Unbeaten run; *Pakistan won its last 11 ODI series against Zimbabwe from October 1996 to November 2020; *India won its last 13 series against the West Indies

27 } The number of wickets claimed by Sri Lankan spin bowlers in the recently concluded ODI series at home against India. This is the most by spinners of any side in a bilateral men's ODI series of four or fewer matches. The previous highest was the 26 wickets by Bangladesh spinners against New Zealand and Zimbabwe; both were in four-match series at home from October to December 2010.

Most wickets by spinners for a side in a 3-4 match bilateral ODI series

Wkts	Bowling side	Opp	Venue	Month, Year	Series result
27	SL	Ind	SL	Aug 2024	SL won 2-0 (3)+
26	Ban	NZ	Ban	Oct 2010	Ban won 4-0 (4)
26	Ban	Zim	Ban	Dec 2010	Ban won 3-1 (4)
21	Pak	Ban	Ban	Dec 2011	Pak won 3-0 (3)
21	HKg	PNG	HKg	Nov 2016	HKg won 2-1 (3)

+ one match was a tie



Sri Lanka's Dunith Wellalage. AP

43} The number of wickets claimed by spin bowlers from both sides in the recently concluded ODI series between host Sri Lanka and India. It is now the most claimed by spinners in a bilateral men's ODI series of four or fewer matches.

4} The number of occasions Team India has gone through an entire calendar year without a single ODI victory.

4} The number of occasions India's top-order batters have been dismissed on ducks in consecutive innings. Sanju Samson recently faced this unfortunate situation in the T20I series in Sri Lanka.

Indian top-order batters dismissed without scoring in consecutive innings in T20Is

Batter	First Instance					Second Instance				
	Runs (balls)	Opp	Venue	Date	(Bat#)	Runs (balls)	Opp	Venue	Date	(Bat#)
Ambati Rayudu	0 (1)	SA	Dharamsala	2 Oct 2015	(6)	0 (2)	SA	Cuttack	5 Oct 2015	(5)
K. L. Rahul	0 (6)	Eng	Ahmedabad	14 Mar 2021	(1)	0 (4)	Eng	Ahmedabad	16 Mar 2021	(2)
Rohit Sharma	0 (2)	Afg	Mohali	11 Jan 2024	(2)	0 (1)	Afg	Indore	14 Jan 2024	(1)
Sanju Samson	0 (1)	SL	Pallekele	28 Jul 2024	(2)	0 (4)	SL	Pallekele	30 Jul 2024	(3)

** Rohit was captain; ** Samson was the wicketkeeper in the second game; Bat# indicates position in the batting order

6} The number of occasions Team India has been involved in a tie in T20 internationals, which is by far the most by any other side in T20I history. What's remarkable is that India has never lost a tie-breaker, whether it's a Shoot Out or Super Over. This means India has won five tie-breakers, excluding one game where no Super Over was possible due to rain in Napier in November 2022.

India's tied T20I games

#	Opponent	Venue	Date	Tie-breaker details
1	Pakistan	Durban	14 Sep 2007	Ind 3, Pak 0 (via a shoot out)
2	New Zealand	Hamilton	29 Jan 2020	NZ 17/0, Ind 20/0 (Won with 0 balls to spare)
3	New Zealand	Wellington	31 Jan 2020	NZ 13/1, Ind 16/1 (Won with 1 ball to spare)
4	New Zealand	Napier	22 Nov 2022	Match was tied (via DLS method)*
5	Afghanistan	Bengaluru	17 Jan 2024	Afg 16/1, Ind 16/0 (Tied Super Over)
				Ind 11/2, Afg 1/2 (2nd Super Over) won 10 runs
6	Sri Lanka	Pallekele	30 Jul 2024	SL 2/2, Ind 4/0 (won with 5 balls to spare)

* The Super Over did not take place due to rain; * In Bengaluru the initial Super Over was also tied and thus had to be taken again

239} The number of sixes hit by Rohit Sharma as a captain in international cricket. This tally is now the most hit by a captain across formats. Rohit surpassed the previous record held by England's Eoin Morgan with 233 sixes during his 58 in the first encounter of the ODI series in Premadasa on 2 August 2024.

Most career sixes by a batter as a captain in international cricket

6s	Tests	ODIs	T20Is	Batter	For	Inns	Inns/6	Balls	Balls/6
239	21	113	105	Rohit Sharma	Ind	136	0.57	4989	20.87
233	—	147	86	Eoin Morgan	Eng	180	0.77	5633	24.18
211	51	126	34	MS Dhoni	Ind	330	1.56	14583	69.11
171	37	123	11	Ricky Ponting	Aus	376	2.19	21280	124.44
170	59	82	29	Brendon McCullum	NZ	140	0.82	5325	31.32

All records are correct and updated until 10 Aug 2024



Graham Thorpe passes away

1

The Englishman, who amassed 2,380 runs in 82 one-day internationals, scored 6,744 runs in 100 Tests, **averaging 44.66** with 16 centuries.

Former England cricketer and coach Graham Thorpe died by suicide at the age of 55. Thorpe, who amassed 2,380 runs in 82 one-day internationals, scored 6,744 runs in 100 Tests, averaging

44.66 with 16 centuries. After retiring, Thorpe began coaching with New South Wales in Australia before returning to Surrey. By 2010, he was England's batting coach, contributing to the 2019

World Cup win. He left his assistant coach role in February 2022 after a 4-0 Ashes defeat in Australia.

(Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on Tele-MANAS 14416)

**2**

Sri Lankan left-arm spinner Praveen Jayawickrama faces ICC charges for breaching three counts of the anti-corruption code, involving corrupt approaches in international matches and the Lanka Premier League. Since his debut in April 2021, Jayawickrama has played five Tests, five ODIs, and five T20Is.

**3**

India will face a Prime Minister's XI in a two-day day-night match in Canberra during its year-end tour of Australia. Scheduled for November 30 at Manuka Oval, this match will take place between the first and second Tests of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy series. During its 2020-21 tour of Australia, India suffered an eight-wicket defeat in the Adelaide day-night Test, being bowled out for a record-low 36 in the second innings.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

4

Afghan cricketer Ihsanullah Janat has been handed a five-year ban for match-fixing. The Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) reported that Jannat violated the ICC's anti-corruption code during this year's Kabul Premier League (KPL). He scored 72 runs in four games for the Shamshad Eagles, who finished last with one win in five matches.

**5**

Tahlia McGrath's unbeaten fifty helped Australia Women A beat India Women A by seven wickets in the third and final T20 to complete a 3-0 series sweep. Grace Parsons and Tayla Vlaeminck's effort with the ball kept India down to 120 before McGrath led the chase. The host had won the first two matches by five runs and eight wickets, respectively.

**6**

Matthew Mott has stepped down as England's men's white-ball head coach. Appointed in 2022, he led England to a T20 World Cup victory in Australia, defeating Pakistan in the final. Assistant coach Marcus Trescothick will assume the role on an interim basis, starting with a multi-format series against Australia in September.

GETTY IMAGES

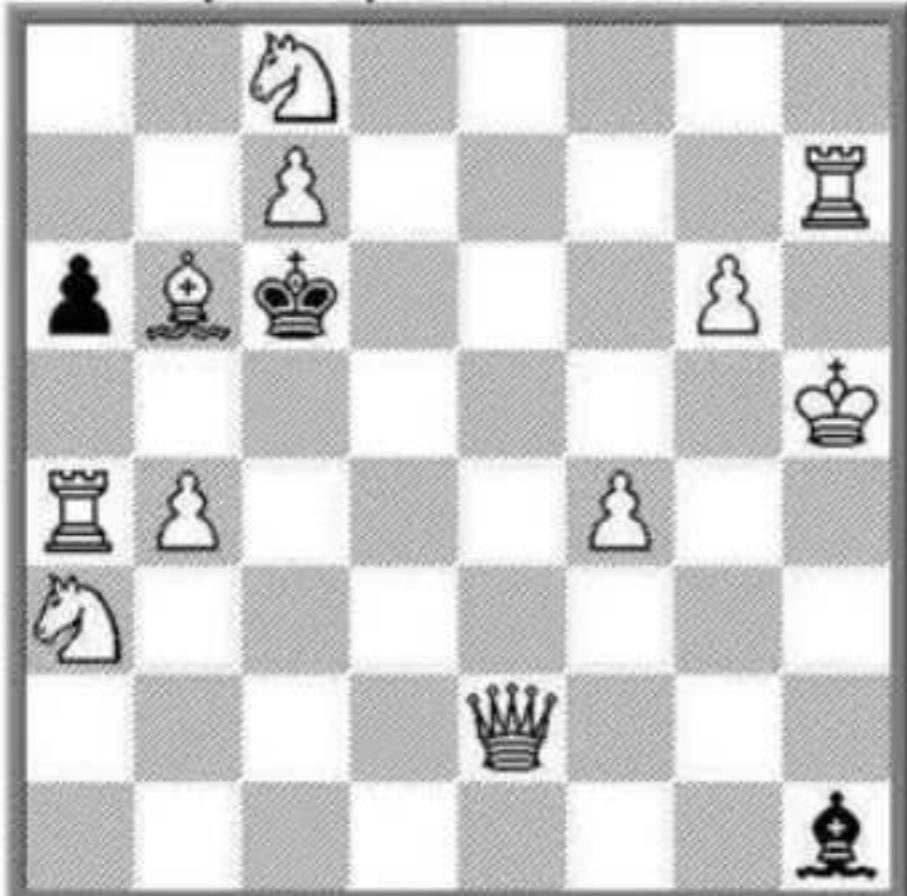
REUTERS

Try in two-movers

By C.G.S.Narayanan

TRY is a move that almost solves a problem, but is defeated by a single black defence, as opposed to the key which actually solves the problem. Variations after tries are called virtual plays which form an integral part of many thematic problems. Some problems employ several close tries by the same key-piece which add to the pleasure of solving. In problems with two or more phases (like zagoruyko) tries involve changed mates which make solving all the more difficult. In the problem below all the tries are by the key-piece WBb6 which commit a common error of coming in the way of his own queen five times.

C.G.S.Narayanan
5th place, 2 WCCT 1980



Mate in two moves

- Try 1.Ba7? Kb7! (2.Qxa6?)
- Try 1..Bc5? a5! ! (2.Qb5?)
- Try 1.Bd4? Kd5! (2.Qc4?)
- Try 1.Be3? Be4! (2.Qxe4?)
- Try 1.Bf2? Bg2! (2.Qxg2?)

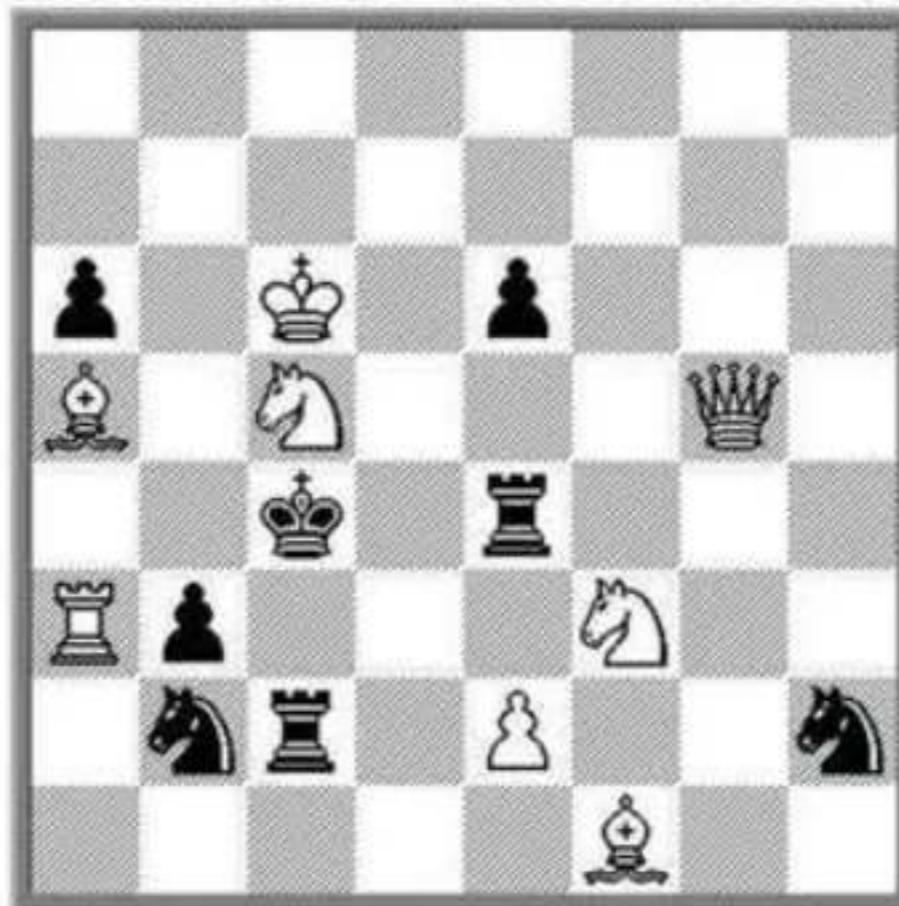
Key: 1.Bg1!! waiting

The white bishop has to choose his destination carefully. Note that after 1.Bc5? a5! (Not Kd5! 2.Ne7! - changed mate)

A try may lend plausibility to set play so

that the complete theme of a problem is brought home to the solver. Tries are employed in thematic compositions in more than one phase-set, try and key. Here is a zagoruyko with self-pins.

H.Hermanson, First prize
Bulletin Owrier des Echecs 1953



Mate in two moves

Set: 1...cRxe2 2.Qc1; 1..eRxe2 2.Qf4

Try: 1.Nxb3?(2.Qc5)1...cRxe2

2.bNd2; 1...eRxe2 2.Ne5 but 1...Na4!

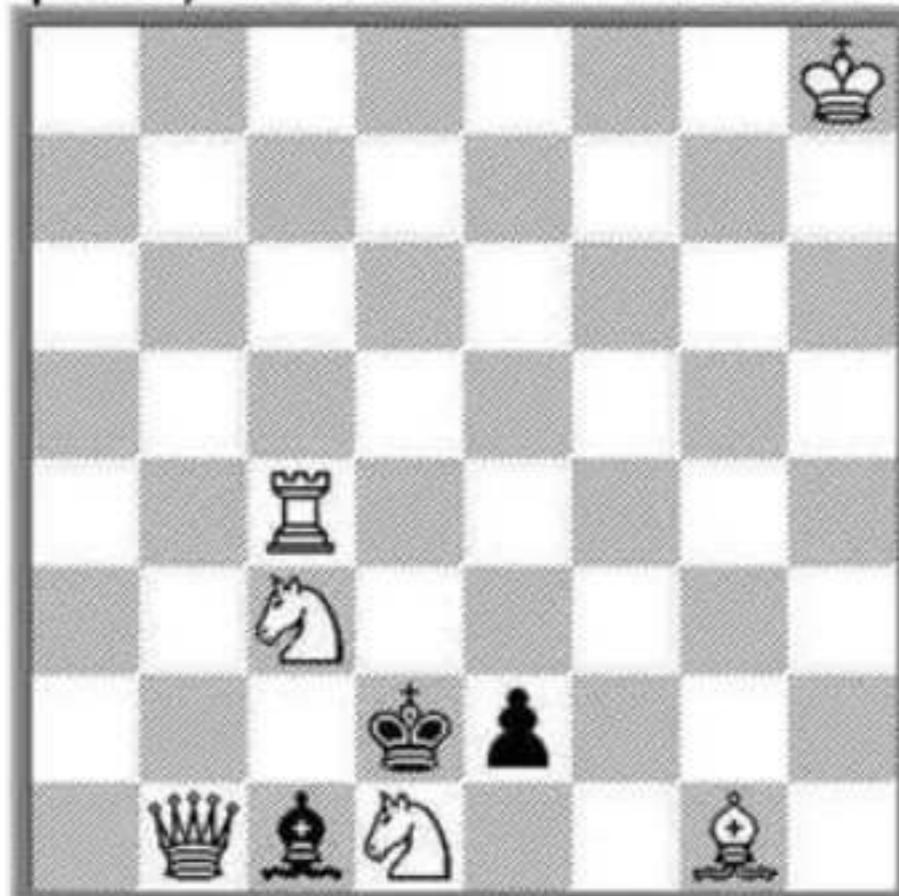
Key 1.Nd3! (2.Qc5)1...cRxe2 2.Nxb2

1....eRxe2 2.dNe5

In the problem for solving (given below) the Italian maestro presents changed mates in zagoruyko for the promotions of BPe2

O.Stocchi

2nd prize, Litalia Schahhistica 1958



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Zagorukko mutates':

Set: 1...dN any 2.Qxf4; 1...eN any 2.Qxf5 **Key 1.Qd8!** waiting 1...dN any 2.Qd4; 1...eN any 2.Qxd5; 1...Kxe5 2.Re6

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



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Anahat, Abhay clinch titles



Defending champion Anahat Singh overcame stiff resistance and recovered from the brink of defeat to beat Akanksha Salunkhe 11-9, 5-11, 6-11, 13-11, 11-8 in the women's final of the 80th HCL National Squash Championship at the Bombay Gymkhana. In the men's final, Abhay Singh beat defending champion and top seed Velavan Senthilkumar 12-10, 6-11, 11-4, 10-12, 11-4. Akhilesh Kumar beat Saurabh Kumar 11-4, 11-7, 8-11, 2-11, 12-10 to emerge champion in the pro-coach event that fetched a prize of Rs. 50,000. The runner-up got Rs. 30,000.

The prizes were presented by Mrs. Kiran Nadar, the trustee of the Shiv Nadar Foundation, and athlete Shaili Singh.

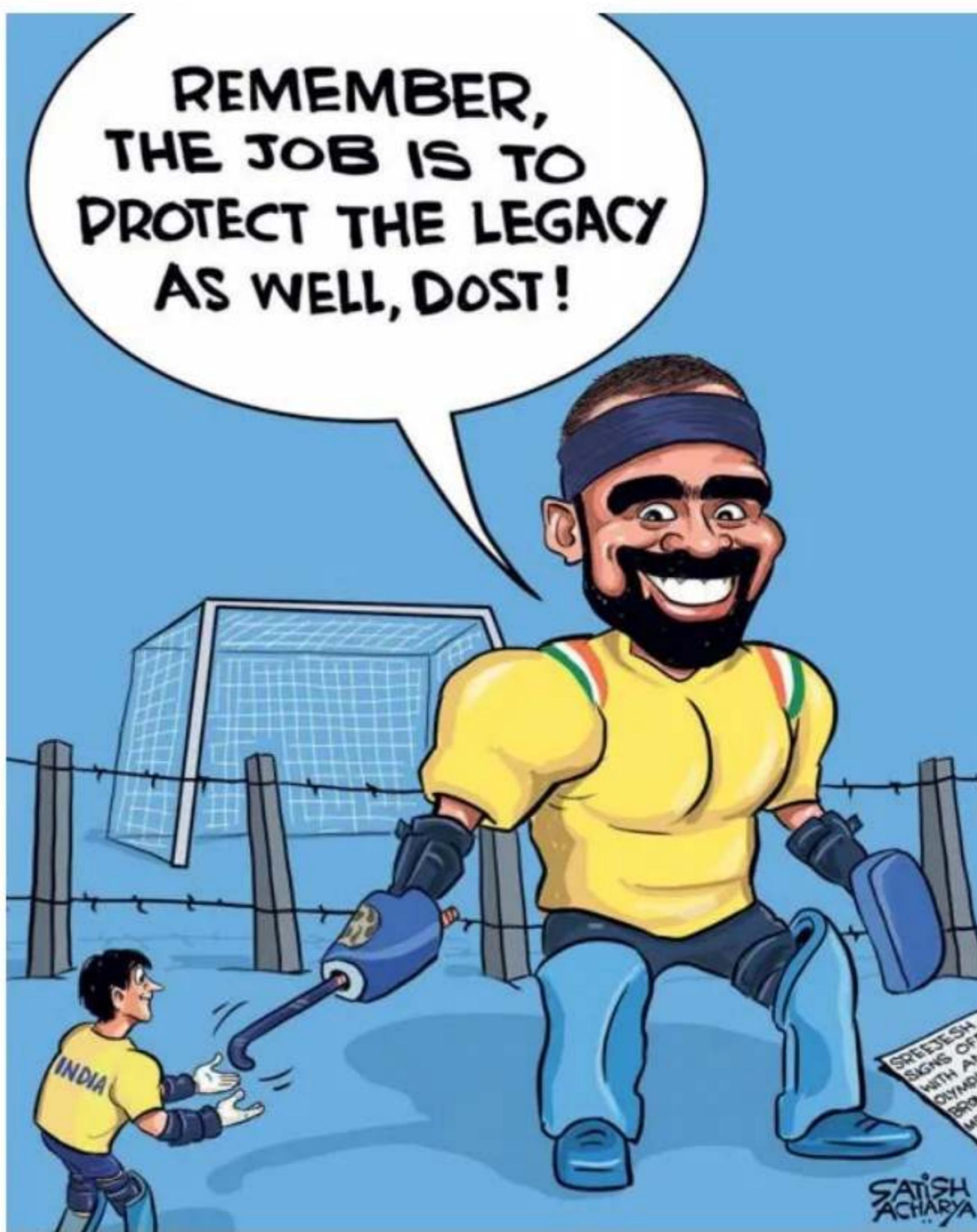
"We are setting a new benchmark with every tournament. This time with a record 670 participants, we are thrilled to see the growing popularity of squash," said Rajat Chandolia, the head of brand HCL.

"We congratulate the winners and thank HCL for their unwavering support in promoting squash. This partnership has been instrumental in fostering talent, encouraging inclusivity and taking Indian squash to new heights," said Cyrus Poncha, the secretary general of the Squash Racquets Federation of India (SRFI).

TEAM SPORTSTAR

» INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON



Winning ways: Darshan Veeraraghavan, who won the 34th MGC-Sportstar Open golf for the 10th time, receives the trophy from Ayon Sengupta, Editor, Sportstar, at the Madras Gymkhana Club in Chennai. P. Krishnan, golf captain (right), and Sanjay Shroff, president MGC (left), are also seen. R. RAGU



FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan



FOR MORE
STORIES

NAVIGATING THE BIG JOB EFFECTIVELY

While taking up a new coaching role, avoiding common mistakes ensures a smoother transition and a **positive impact** at the new place.

Whether you are a young S&C coach or a seasoned veteran, a high-performance coach, or an assistant, there are common mistakes to avoid when starting a new job:

1. Changing too much, too quickly

It's important to plan and prioritise any changes that need to be made. Introducing new processes and protocols should be done in a phased manner, aligned with the team's and players' needs while considering the philosophy of the management. People often struggle with rapid changes, so it's wise to be certain about when and how changes are implemented. Not everything needs to change overnight.

2. Always needing to be right

An old quote goes — 'Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit, but wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad'. Just because coaches know more than their athletes doesn't make them wise. Being right doesn't always mean they're being prudent. They don't have to win every argument or get their way all the time. There's a difference between being right and doing what's right. It's no fun being around a know-it-all coach.

3. Enforcing too many rules

While rules are necessary, too many can be counterproductive. Coaches might find themselves spending more time enforcing rules than actually coaching. Rules often come with punishments, and the more rules there are, the more punishments need to be enforced. It's crucial to be judicious in setting rules.

The best coaches lead with a combination of logic, wisdom, and empathy. They see the big picture and understand the current situation. For example, an athlete arriving late because they were smoking with friends is different from one who was delayed due to traffic on their way to the gym. The rules and punishments should account for these differences.

Coaches need to be thoughtful about the rules they set. While rules are necessary, the standards they reinforce and promote daily are more important. It's more crucial to focus on catching others doing good than on catching them breaking a long list of rules.

4. Lack of planning

Having only short-term vision is like being blind. Yes, there is a need to make every team as good as possible. Too many S&C coaches fall into the vicious cycle of taking shortcuts and scrambling to improve the team due to poor past decisions. They mortgage the future for the present, especially in less-than-ideal situations.

The best S&C coaches view planning like a chess game, thinking many steps ahead and seeing the whole board rather than focusing only on their next move in a myopic manner. Seeing the entire forest, not just one tree, is crucial.

Planning is the foundation for proper execution, with a deep understanding of core principles.

5. Favouring influential players

Some coaches focus too much on training captains or influential players, neglecting the development of future players and leaving other staff members out of the loop. This short-changes the current team's

leadership potential.

A team will have only a handful of fit players, leaving many others unprepared to perform at their best. This creates a situation that is both dangerous for the future and can cause issues within the current team. This approach is common among many coaches and often leads to their downfall.

All teams face issues, problems, and drama, though good teams may experience less of it. The more unbiased training all players receive, the better equipped they are to perform at their best during critical moments or important tournaments.

6. Not learning with an open mind

Coaches want their players to be coachable, but often set a poor example of what that looks like. All team members need to be coachable, including the coach. Being too arrogant with limited knowledge can lead to self-destruction.

They might think they're smarter than their athletes, but that doesn't mean they're doing things the right way or are where they need to be. The best leaders are lifelong learners. Paying attention to and learning from others' good and bad decisions helps them grow. Listening to their players can provide insights they might otherwise miss. A humble mindset is imperative for learning.

7. Misunderstanding the situation's needs

Coaches are hired for a reason, but that doesn't mean they have all the answers. They should be astute, good listeners, and understand the situation, environment, players, and people. Just because they were successful elsewhere doesn't mean they fully understand the current work situation. Preconceived notions can lead nowhere. Adapting to the situation and needs without manipulating players, coaches, or management is the mark of a thoroughbred professional.

One of the biggest mistakes in a new workplace is assuming that what worked elsewhere will always work again. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. What they think they know about a team or its athletes may be



Inspirational: Xabi

Alonso had an immediate impact on Bayer Leverkusen's fortunes after leading the club to its first Bundesliga title in his first outing as its head coach last season. AFP

completely inaccurate. They may need to adjust their strategies and plans as new information comes to light.

8. Currying favour

Building relationships with key people, not just in the coaching profession but within the ecosystem, is important for growth. However, building relationships with no strings attached and adding value to others without expecting something in return is a noble ideal, more common in stories than in reality.

Once the team dynamics among decision-makers and influencers are understood, the coin can be moved surreptitiously to curry favour and become a key figure within the team. This can trigger a chain reaction that ultimately affects the team's performance in the long run, leading to a serious appetite for destruction.

9. Worrying about the next job

The best time is where they're currently coaching. This doesn't mean they won't progress in their profession, but they must remember that their current job is their most

important responsibility for future opportunities.

Sure, they'd love to make more money, earn a promotion, or coach in a better situation or team, but when they focus on those things, they miss out on much of what their current job offers. The tendency to short-change their athletes and give less than their best might creep in.

The best way to prepare for a future job is to excel in the current one by making their athletes and fellow coaches better. When they genuinely add value to those around them, they create the best prospects for future opportunities.

10. Not learning from others' mistakes

The late American humorist Sam Levenson said, "Learn from the mistakes of others. Life is too short to make them all yourself." Even the best coaches make mistakes, but if they approach a new job with their eyes wide open, mouths shut when required, and are well-prepared, they'll have a better chance to succeed.

Defying all odds

Of the six Afghan athletes in the Paris Olympics, the **ruling Taliban recognises** only the three men.

Suresh Menon

Kimia Yousofi is not a name that has ready recall. The Afghan sprinter did not break any records at the Olympics. After her 100 metre heats she held up these words on paper: 'Education', 'Sport', 'Our Rights'. Of the six Afghan athletes in Paris, the ruling Taliban recognises only the three men.

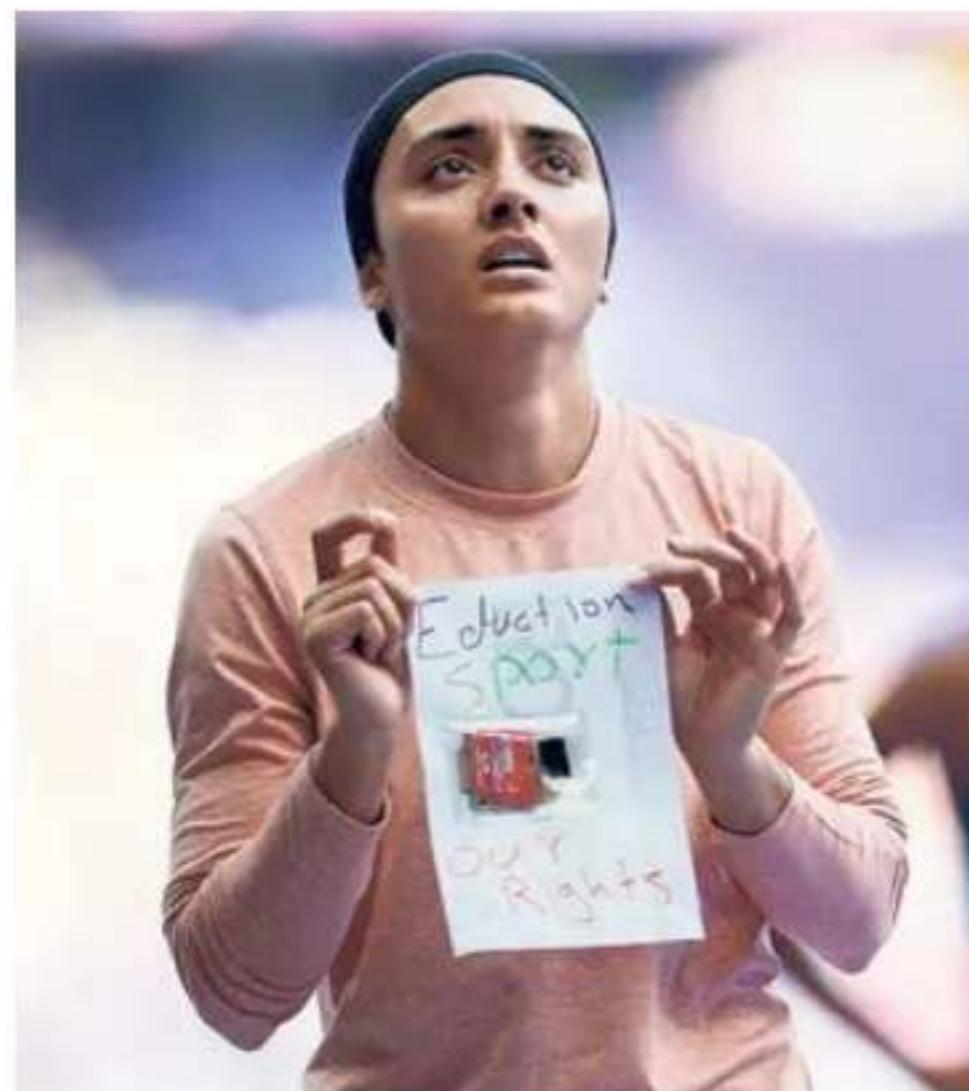
Yousofi, 28, lives in exile in Australia. Women in Afghanistan, she said, "are not considered human." That she finished two seconds behind the winner is inconsequential. That she participated at all places the medal-winning triumphalism at the Olympics in perspective.

What price a gold medal when your very existence has been threatened daily? What joy being an international when you know governing bodies in sport are willing to let countries perpetuate the injustices in return for votes?

The story of Afghanistan's women who dare to play a sport — the opposition is not just from the Taliban or society but from dear ones in the family who can be cruel too — is narrated in Khalida Popal's *My Beautiful Sisters*, the story of the country's football team. Popal organised the team from scratch, got herself into the administration, organised tours and protected the players.

It is, by extension, the story of a patriarchal society where violence against women, mental, physical and sexual, is commonplace. And where, as Popal says, anyone can be "arrested, raped or shot", sometimes all three on the flimsiest excuse.

Popal and her family fled to Peshawar when she was



Powerful statement: After her 100-metre heats in the Paris Olympics, Kimia Yousofi of Afghanistan held up these words on paper: 'Education', 'Sport', 'Our Rights'.

REUTERS

a schoolgirl, and then returned. The story of the men's cricket team virtually created there is one of sport's more romantic and inspiring.

The story of the women, by contrast, is heartrending and tragic. Two potential national players committed suicide when the pressures on family and the abuses became intolerable. "If she couldn't control how she lived," Popal writes of one of them, "she could control how she died."

As the team developed, Popal, its public face was shot at, had her car rammed into, and was forced to seek refuge in Europe where, she says, she was treated like a package that was sent to the wrong address.

When the U.S. pulled out and the Taliban returned, Popal set up an NGO, Girl Power, and helped her footballing colleagues get out of

Afghanistan. The story is compelling and if it lacks too many specific details that is understandable. Those at risk need to be protected.

Popal managed to get at least 500 sportswomen out of Afghanistan and find them new lives, many in Australia. Popal managed to get *The Guardian* interested in the story of predatory sexual behaviour by the chief of the Football Federation. But the FIFA has not done enough for women's football in Afghanistan.

"Football governance is a brotherhood, controlled and run by men looking to maintain and extend their power, profile and personal wealth," writes Popal, rationalising why Afghanistan's Football Federation has been allowed to carry on unchecked.

It must be depressing to realise that the world outside, the so-called civilised one, operates like an autocracy too.



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