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SURYAKUMAR YADAV

BIG INTERVIEW

Rashid Khan on the art of T20 bowling

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Liverpool back on the perch

BOWLED OVER

IPL's batting blitz cools down as bowlers rewrite the script in 2025

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OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

IPL'S ADDICTION TO SURROGATE ADS IS UNDERMINING ITS FAMILY IMAGE

The IPL's **implicit endorsement** of liquor and tobacco brands normalises harmful behaviours, undermining years of public health efforts and significant financial investments.

Since it began in 2008, the Indian Premier League (IPL) has positioned itself as the nation's favourite family-friendly spectacle – a happy collusion of cricketing heroes and Bollywood glitter. Conveniently timed during India's annual academic break, it offered the youth, suddenly liberated from the tyranny of textbooks and tuition, something far more compelling than the melodramatic soap operas that usually dominate Indian drawing rooms for the rest of the year. Conversations with parents, mercifully, shifted from marriage proposals and board exams to M. S. Dhoni's helicopter shots and Virat Kohli's latest century.

But for all its family-friendly charm, television coverage of the IPL has slowly been overrun by surrogate advertising of liquor and tobacco brands. Pan masala ads masquerading as promotions of "mouth fresheners" are now a regular feature of every IPL broadcast. According to *TAM Sport*, a unit of TAM Media Research, which measures India's television audience, mouth fresheners accounted for 13 per cent of all IPL advertising in the first 40 matches of this season — more than anything else.

Ahead of the start of this year's tournament, the Director General of Health Services (DGHS) Prof. (Dr) Atul Goel, in a letter to the IPL chairman, had stated: "IPL should strictly implement the regulations banning all forms of tobacco/alcohol advertising, including surrogate advertisements, within the stadium premises where the games and related IPL events are held, as well as during telecast sessions on national television."

And the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), according to Agenda 9 of its Apex Council meeting, held a "discussion regarding sponsorship from tobacco and crypto brands" on March 22, the opening day of this year's IPL. However, the volume of mouth freshener commercials has increased from last year's share of 11 per cent.

Bollywood, of course, is also part of this problem. Superstars like Shah Rukh Khan, Ajay Devgn, and Salman Khan, flashing perfect teeth, peddle these brands. As adored public figures, their presence legitimises harmful habits among impressionable youth, packaging unhealthy products in glossy glamour and charm. Cricketers — retired and revered — have taken to the same business with the same selective amnesia, forgetful of the harm chewing pan masala can do to your insides.

The IPL, with its reach and influence, wields considerable power in shaping public attitudes. But when it implicitly endorses these brands, it normalises behaviours that public health campaigns spend crores and years trying to eliminate.

The financial incentives from these partnerships are substantial — pan masala brands, according to reports, had spent upwards of Rs. 350 crore during IPL 2024. And for a broadcaster trying to recover its Rs. 104-crore-a-match investment, the lure might be too significant to ignore.

But there must be other ways for the league to generate revenue without contradicting its values. It's disappointing to witness such a blatant commercial trade-off, one that risks tarnishing the IPL's reputation far more than any short-term gain can justify.

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WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT

« I wasn't comfortable in the dressing room, the other players looked at me differently."
– Jannik Sinner, who'd hit "rock bottom" at this year's Australian Open where he thought about "giving it all up", said ahead of his return from a three-month doping ban »

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Australia's two-time Grand Slam doubles champion Max Purcell has accepted an 18-month ban after breaching anti-doping rules, the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) said. Purcell admitted to a breach of rules relating to the use of a "prohibited method" after unknowingly receiving an IV infusion of vitamins above the allowed limit of 100 ml in a 12-hour period and entered into a provisional suspension in mid-December.

Purcell's suspension will end June 11, 2026, after taking into account time already served.
"This case has been going on for months, seriously affecting my quality of life," Purcell wrote on social media.

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Gregg Popovich stepped down as coach of the San Antonio Spurs, ending a three-decade run that saw him lead the team to five NBA championships, become the league's all-time wins leader and earn induction into the Basketball Hall of Fame.
"While my love and passion for the game remain, I've decided it's time to step away as head coach," Popovich said.
Mitch Johnson succeeds him while Popovich will remain as team president.

« Last year it was a very intense competition. I was so close but I was not able to make it. This year I was able to win and earn the LPGA title." – Mao Saigo said after becoming the first Japanese golfer to win the Chevron Championship »

RECORD VICTORY

China beat South Korea 3-1 in the Sudirman Cup final to capture a record-extending 14th title at the biennial mixed team competition in the Chinese city of Xiamen. This was China's fourth consecutive title after South Korea had won back in 2017. AP

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Belal's big night

Belal Muhammad had secured a statement unanimous decision win over Leon Edwards at UFC 304 last year to clinch the **welterweight title.** He now gears up to defend it for the first time.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

Montreal will play host to the Ultimate Fighting Championship's (UFC) most anticipated fight on May 11 as America's Belal Muhammad gears up to defend his title for the first time. Belal, who made his UFC debut back in 2016, had to wait for his shot at the welterweight title — eight years, to be precise.

And when the opportunity arose, he stepped up and seized it with both hands. True to his nickname 'Remember The Name', Belal secured a statement unanimous decision win over Leon Edwards at UFC 304 to clinch the belt. Like a fine wine, Belal has improved with age and has become a master strategist inside the cage, combining endurance with relentless pace.

He pairs this suffocating pressure with ever-improving striking technique to systematically break down and overwhelm his opponents. His fight record is indicative of his wait-and-strike approach — just six out of his 24 professional wins have come via finishes and the rest have been decisions. The strategy was evident in his bout against Edwards. With a total of nine takedowns and 68 significant strikes, Belal dominated his opponent for the majority of the fight and took home a convincing victory.

That win marked his sixth straight triumph, extending an impressive unbeaten streak that now spans 11 fights over the past five years.

Standing across from him will be Perth's Jack Della Maddalena, a fighter who is also riding a massive wave of momentum. Initially scheduled to face Edwards earlier this year, circumstances now pit him against Belal. Della enters this title opportunity on an incredible 17-fight winning streak in professional MMA.

Since joining the UFC roster after impressing on Dana White's Contender Series (DWCS) in 2021, he has had seven consecutive wins, including five finishes. Belal will likely deliver grappling exchanges with relentless pressure, while Della will rely on his knockout power and finishing instincts. For Della, a victory would make him only the third Australian fighter — after Robert Whittaker and Alexander Volkanovski — to capture UFC gold.

Intense: Belal Muhammad (top) and Leon Edwards during their welterweight title bout. GETTY IMAGES

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Calling the shots: Prasidh Krishna of Gujarat Titans has been one of the leading bowlers of IPL 2025. SPORTZPICS / IPL

BATTING SOARS, BUT BOWLERS KEEP THE ROOF ON

In IPL 2025, explosive batting has been met with a strategic bowling response. Discover how bowlers have found their groove, keeping run rates in check despite high expectations.

Dhruva Prasad
dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in

In the wake of a record-breaking 2024 season, where batters plundered runs at an unprecedented rate, the Indian Premier League (IPL) entered 2025 bracing for even more stratospheric standards. An ultra-aggressive brand of batting had become the norm, and the race for the league's first-ever 300-plus total was well and truly on — it felt like only a matter of time.

Expectedly, Sunrisers Hyderabad came frighteningly close to it in the second match of the season, ransacking 286 in a run-fest against Rajasthan Royals. However, 50 matches into the season, no team has breached the 250-run mark since, and Sunrisers are languishing towards the bottom of the standings.

There was a 6.34 per cent increase in scoring rates from 2023 to 2024, with the IPL ushering in the Impact Player era. However, that upward swing didn't sustain, and the bowlers found a way to remain relevant.

On the face of it, the overall run rate (9.41) in the ongoing season (after 50 matches) is just a shade lower than last year (9.56). Still, there seems to be a more judicious balance between bat and ball in 2025, perhaps because the runs are more evenly spread out. Eight of the tournament's 10 highest team totals were registered in 2024, while 2025 has a solitary entry on that list. The total number of sixes after 50 games has dropped from 903 in 2024 to 833 in 2025; the fours have reduced from 1553 to 1522, and while the tally of 50-plus individual scores is level at 111, this season has witnessed just four centuries after 50 games, compared to 11 in 2024.

The difference in run rates in the PowerPlay and middle overs (7 to 15) between 2024 and 2025 is negligible, but the scoring rate in the

Top 10 highest PowerPlay scores in IPL history

Score	Team	Opponent	Year
125/0	SRH	DC	2024
107/0	SRH	LSG	2024
105/0	KKR	RCB	2017
100/2	CSK	KXIP	2014
94/1	SRH	RR	2025
93/1	PBKS	KKR	2024
92/0	DC	MI	2024
92/1	RCB	GT	2024
90/1	KKR	LSG	2025
90/0	CSK	MI	2015

death overs (16 to 20) has witnessed a steeper dip, falling from 11.55 to 10.69. If a decline of 0.86 runs per over doesn't seem significant, consider this. After 50 matches in 2024, teams had plundered 60 runs or more in the last five overs on 38 occasions. In 2025, that number has plunged to just 15 in the corresponding period.

Consequently, the number of batters who excel during this crucial phase of the innings has dwindled. In 2024, 13 batters had scored more than 100 runs (minimum 50 balls faced) in the last five overs, while 10 boasted of a strike rate in excess of 175. Those numbers have dropped to eight and five, respectively, this season. The likes of Heinrich Klaasen, Rishabh Pant and Andre Russell have failed to replicate their ball-striking ability in 2025. While the indifferent form of some of the league's most explosive batters hasn't helped, the bowlers, aided by changes in playing conditions, have also stepped up and recalibrated their plans.

Full and straight at the death

With reverse-swing coming back into the scheme of things, partially owing to the lifting of the ban on applying saliva on the ball, the menace of the yorker has also returned. While it was the most potent weapon in the death overs last season, costing 8.95 runs an over and producing a wicket almost every 32 balls, its efficacy has drastically increased. In 2025, between overs 16 and 20, the yorker has conceded just 6.90 runs an over and averages a stunning 12.78 runs per wicket – the best for any length during this phase of the innings. Interestingly, in 2024, the yorker had the worst average (31.69) amongst all the other lengths bowled during this phase of the innings.

The bowlers have also executed the full deliveries — considered easy pickings for batters — with greater accuracy and efficiency. The run rate against full deliveries in the death overs has dropped from 14.45 in 2024 to 10.90 in 2025, while the average runs conceded per wicket has also fallen from 24 to 17.5.

Gujarat Titans' death-overs specialist batter Shahrukh Khan acknowledged the role of a drier ball and reverse-swing in stemming the flow of runs towards the back end of the innings.

"The ball has been changed after 15 overs... Reverse-swing comes into play, and when the ball is dry, it is not that easy for the batsmen to go after the bowlers. Death [overs] batting has not been that easy. You need to be really skilful to get the ball out of the rope. In the previous

Missing the mark: Abhishek Sharma and Travis Head have been far from their marauding best this season.
SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

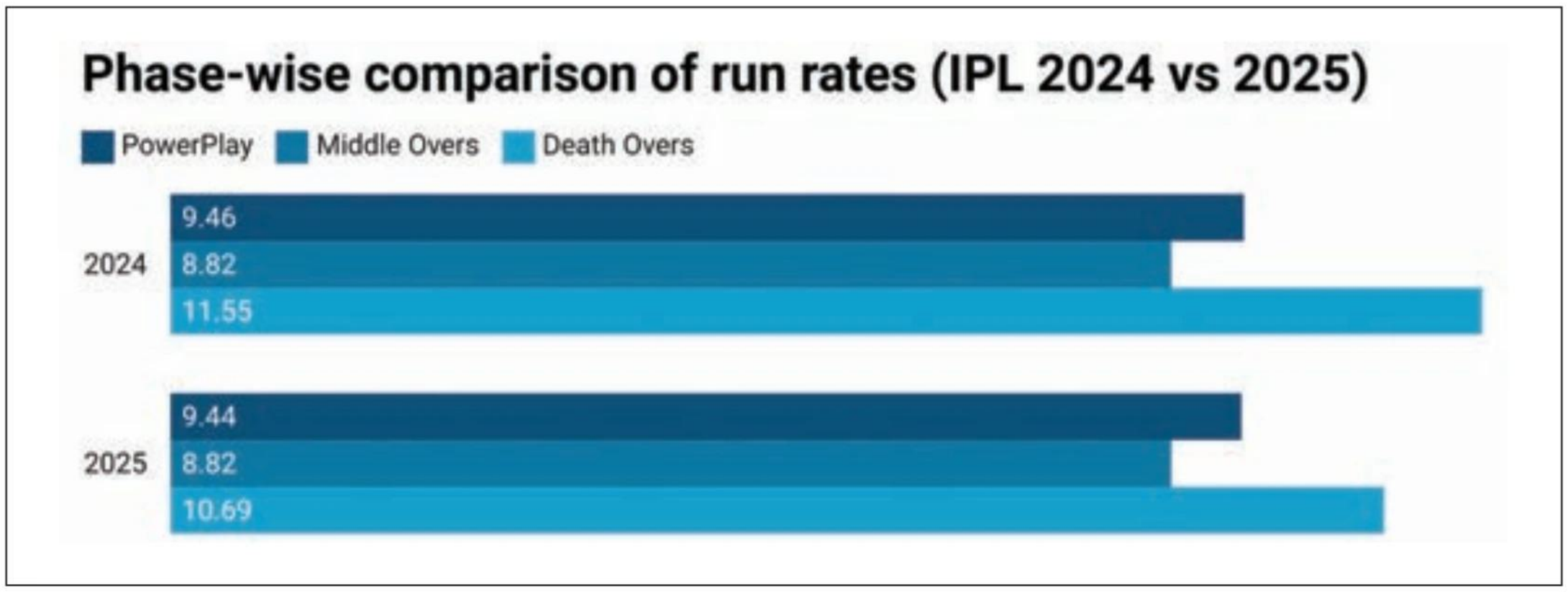
years, the ball got wet, and execution was a lot tougher," he said.

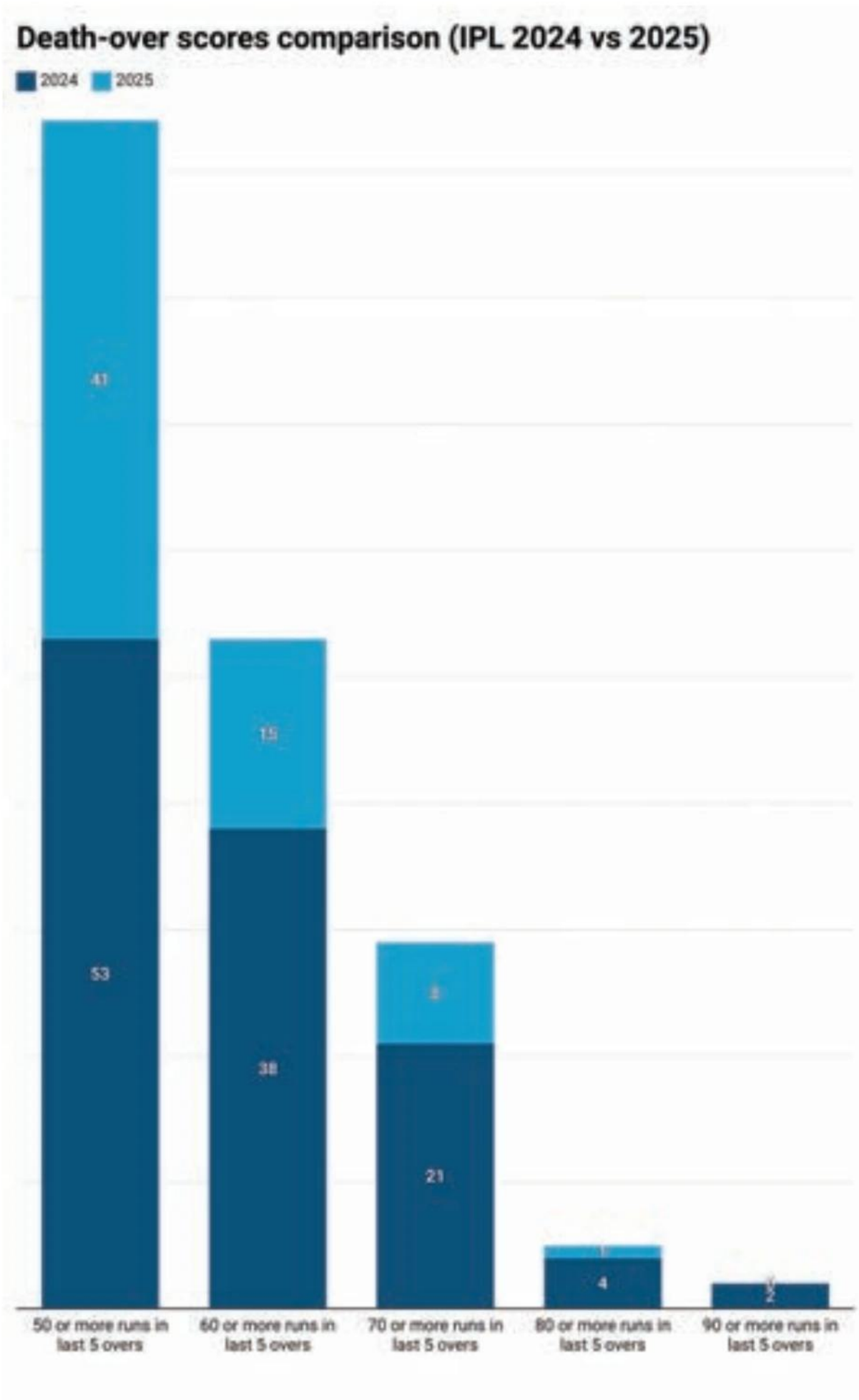
Bowling fuller and straighter has also proven to be more effective this season. Deliveries in line of the stumps went at 10.60 runs an over at the death in 2024, while in 2025 that number has dropped to 9.29. Straighter deliveries have also become a better wicket-taking preposition, with their average dropping from 22.73 runs per wicket in 2024 to 15.79 in 2025.

In a tailspin

The death overs have also seen the resurgence of spinners in 2025. They have been more frequently employed in the last five overs this season, and their effectiveness has doubled. Their wickets tally in overs 16 to 20 has swelled from 21 in 2024 to 46 in 2025, and their ability to contain has also increased considerably, with their economy rate dropping from 10.96 to 8.89 during this phase of the innings.

The spinners have made their presence felt particularly in the 16th over, when the batters are setting the launchpad for a death-overs charge. At this critical juncture, the spinners have picked 18 wickets this





season, compared to nine last year, at an economy rate of 8.33 and an average of 20.83.

Queering the pitch

In six of the 12 venues used so far in IPL 2025, the run rates have dropped in comparison to last season. Delhi's Arun Jaitley Stadium and Bengaluru's M. Chinnaswamy Stadium have seen the sharpest decline, with run rates dropping from 11.20 to 9.49 and 9.84 to 8.90, respectively. Meanwhile, among venues that have hosted at least four matches this season, Ahmedabad is the only one that has seen a noticeable jump in run rate — an increase of 0.83 runs an over.

The improved returns for spinners on traditionally batting-friendly surfaces have largely driven this turnaround. In Delhi, the spinners have conceded eight runs an over on average, compared to 10.28 last season, while their average has improved from 29.68 to 23.53. Similarly, in Bengaluru, the tweakers have an economy rate of 8.22 this year, compared to 8.98 in 2024, while their average has improved by more than 10 runs per wicket, dropping to 32.42 from 42.66.

The other venues that have witnessed a marginal dip in overall run rates are Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai (9.54 to 9.42), Kolkata's Eden Gardens (10.47 to 9.81), M.A. Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai (8.52 to 8.37), and ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium in Visakhapatnam (10.34 to 10.09).

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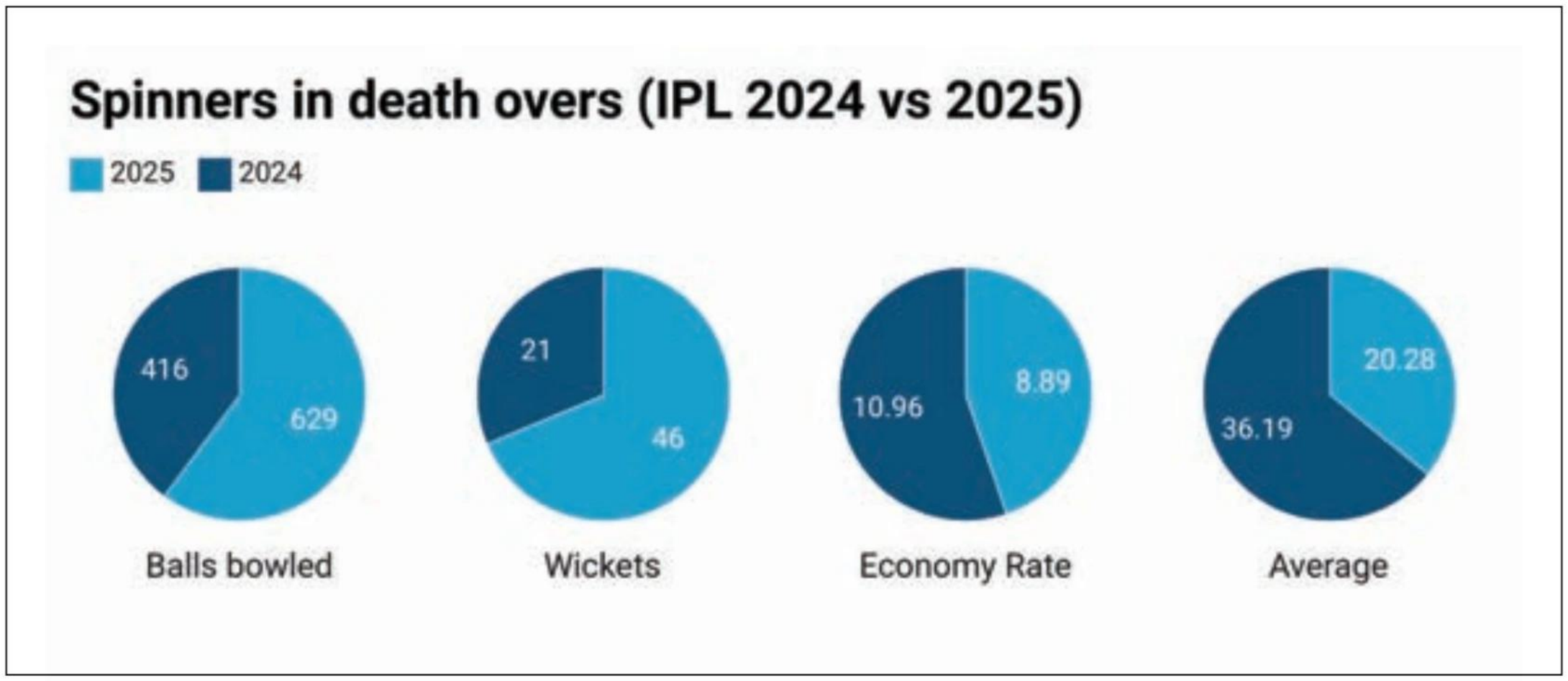


Beyond the PowerPlay

The inability of certain teams to adapt to conditions has also led to stagnating run rates this season. A case in point is Sunrisers Hyderabad, an outlier last season which turbocharged scoring rates with consistent onslaughts in the PowerPlay. It struck at a whopping 11.17 in the first six overs in 2024, followed by defending champion Kolkata Knight Riders (11.07) and Delhi Capitals (10.67). None of these teams have managed to replicate that ball-striking ability this season, with KKR and DC unable to find the right combination and the famed duo of Abhishek Sharma and Travis Head far from their marauding best.

SRH seamer Jaydev Unadkat attributed his side's falling stocks to tougher pitches and acknowledged that bowlers and their plans are constantly evolving.

"Last year, we scored 200-plus in four or five [six] matches, and that gave us a sense that we had set a standard. But that can't always be the norm. Other teams and batters are planning better now, and bowlers are also adapting and coming up with new strategies. Last year, swing was enough to make an impact, but this year, it's about using variations effectively. Also, the pitches are playing a big role. Last year we had a lot of flat pitches, whereas this time we've had more difficult ones," he said.

Bowlers have used the pitch more and relied on swing less in the PowerPlay this year. The number of full deliveries has reduced by over 40 per cent compared to 2024, while the short and back-of-a-length deliveries have increased by 11.13 per cent and 37.14 per cent, respectively.

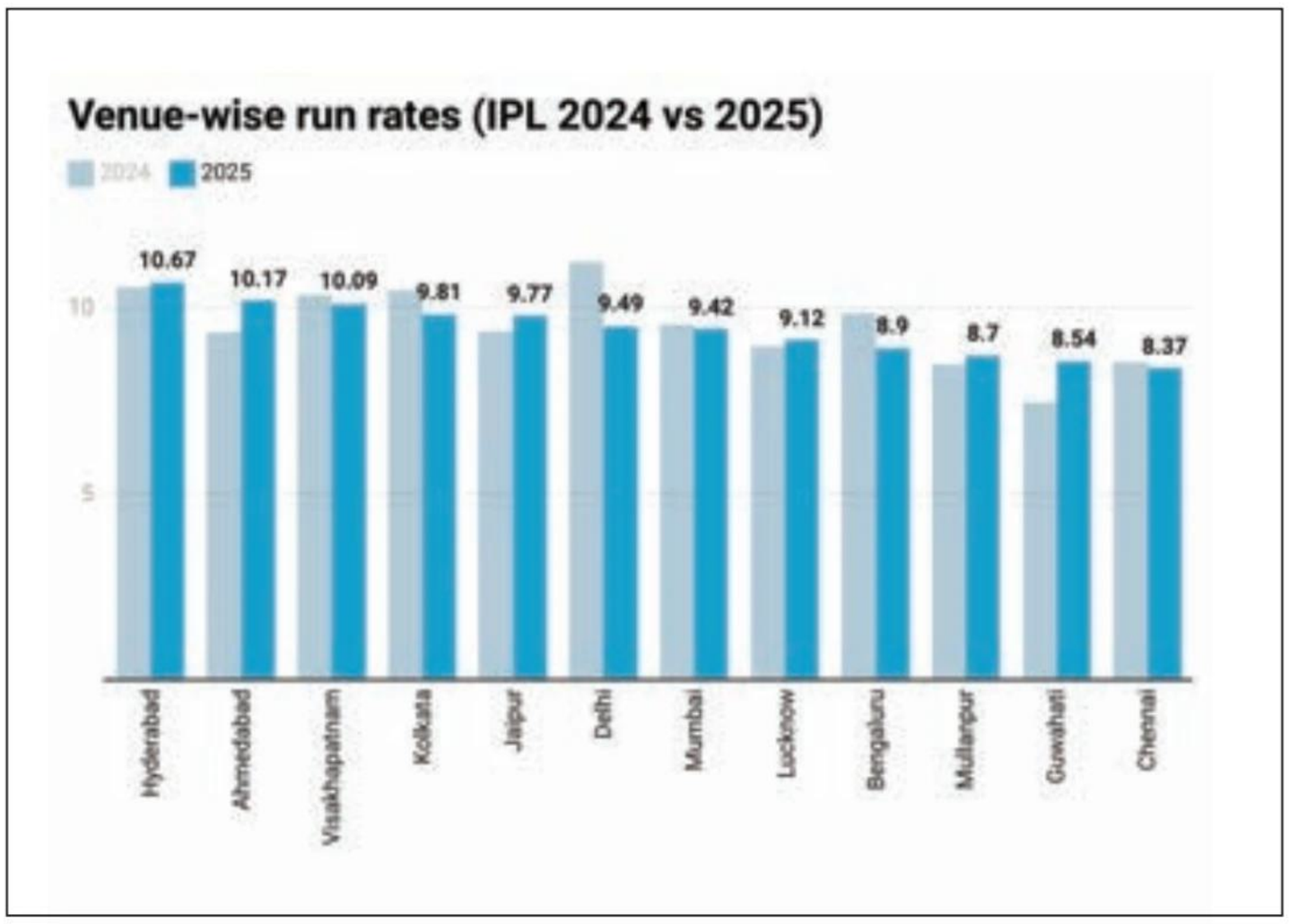
The PowerPlay run rates may have only dipped marginally between 2024 and 2025, from 9.46 to 9.44, but the bowlers have managed to avoid astronomical totals in the first six overs. Five of the top 10 PowerPlay scores in IPL history were set in 2024, while only two from 2025 have made it to that list so far.

Bowlers in the ascendancy?

In IPL 2024, the tournament's two most aggressive batting units — Sunrisers Hyderabad and Kolkata Knight Riders — had reached the final.

Despite IPL 2025 almost matching last season's scoring rates, the better bowling attacks are dominating this year. Mumbai Indians and Royal Challengers Bengaluru, the most economical sides after 50 matches, are first and second, respectively, in the standings.

And that has been the beauty of this season: while the batters flirt with unscaled heights, the bowlers keep them grounded.



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HOW THE YORKER IS REASSERTING ITS DOMINANCE IN IPL 2025

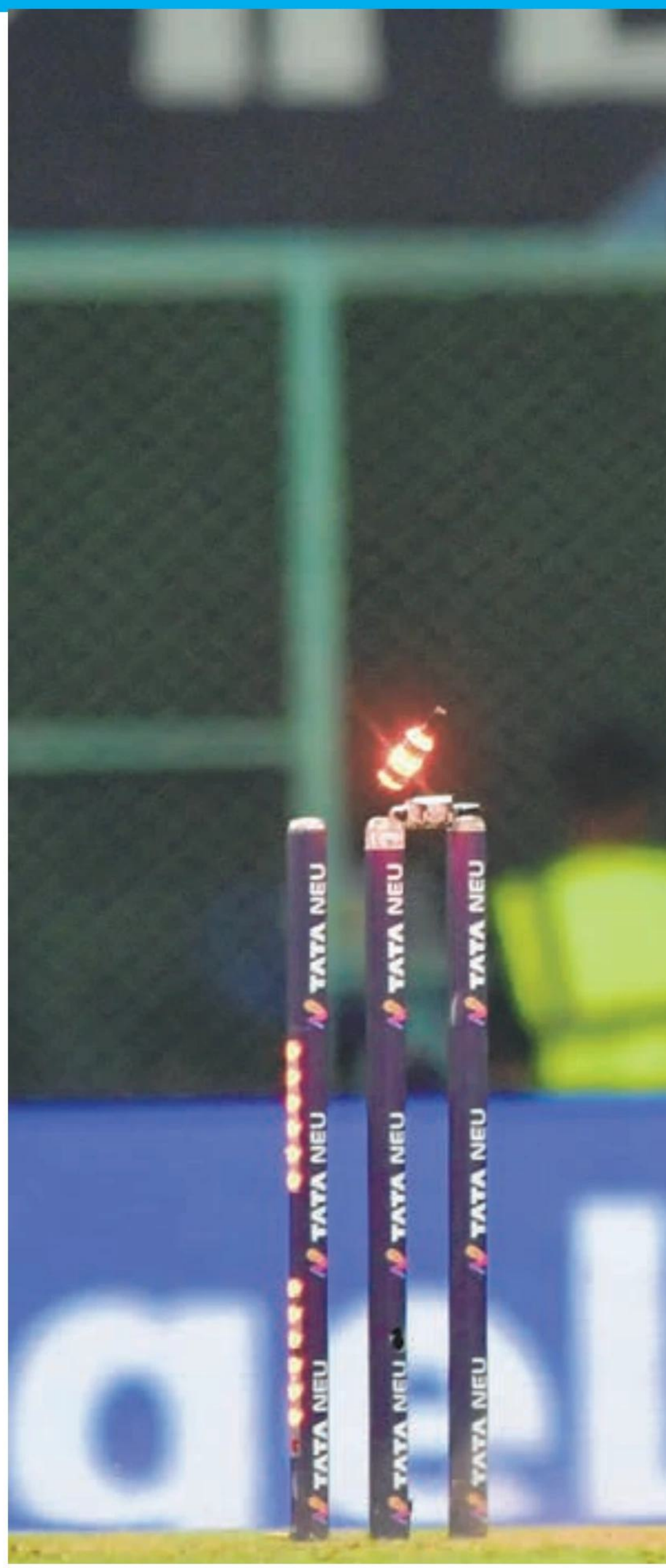
How **yorkers are redefining** IPL death bowling this year: better economy rates and fewer boundaries in the final overs.

Abhishek Saini
abhishek.s@thehindu.co.in

FOR MORE STORIES

At a time when rising run rates have forced bowlers to dig deep into their bag of tricks, the 2025 Indian Premier League has served a timely reminder: the yorker, when executed well, remains the most brutal weapon in a fast bowler's arsenal.

It's a high-stakes delivery. Miss the mark, and it turns into a slot ball or a full toss — both invitations to carnage. Delhi Capitals' Mitchell Starc learned this the hard way against Gujarat Titans. Jos Buttler pounced on wayward attempts, hitting five boundaries in a row and chasing down 204. Yet despite the margin for error, bowlers have trusted the yorker — and reaped the rewards.



Just three days before Buttler tore into him, Starc had nailed five out of six yorkers at the death against Rajasthan Royals, conceding just 10 runs to Dhruv Jurel and Shimron Hetmyer and dragging the match into a Super Over.

"If I can execute more often than not, it's going to be okay. You could play that (20th) over 10 times and get 10 different outcomes. A bit of luck goes a long way," Starc said after the match. "Fortunately, I executed well enough to

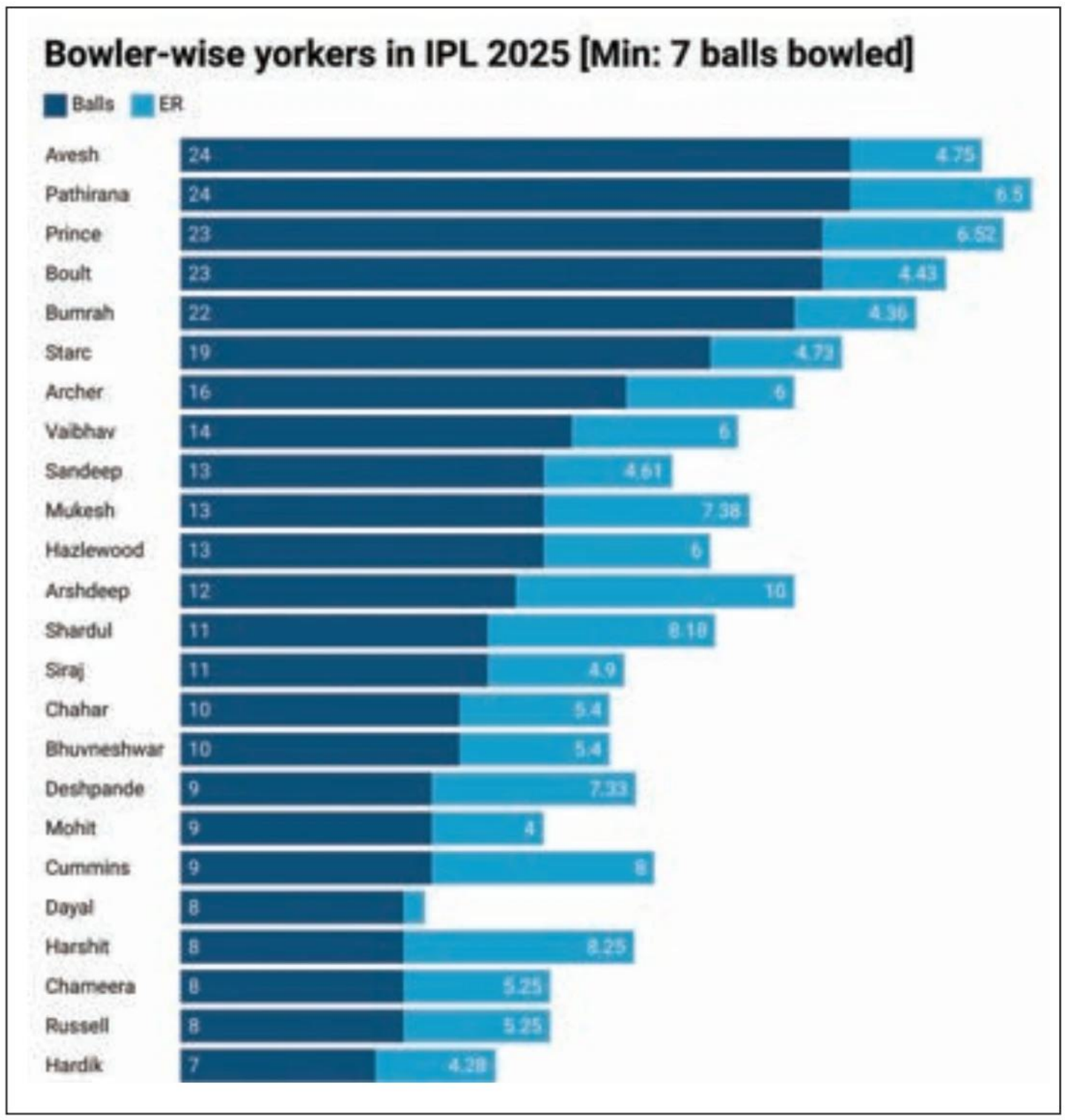
get us to a Super Over, and then, yes, we were on the right end of it."

Until the Mumbai Indians vs Rajasthan Royals match on May 1, bowlers had delivered 450 yorkers across 50 games. The frequency hasn't shifted much from previous seasons — but the impact certainly has.

In IPL 2024, bowlers claimed 28 wickets from 758 yorkers across 74 games. This season, they've already picked up 22, with 24 matches still to go. Batters have struck at just 81 against yorkers — the lowest IPL strike rate for this length since 2020.

Dot-ball percentage from yorkers has surged to 44.6, the highest ever. The boundary rate — 6.66% — is among the lowest on record,

In the blockhole: Lucknow Super Giants' Mitchell Marsh is bowled by Mukesh Kumar of Delhi Capitals.
SANDEEP SAXENA



Yorkers in IPL 2025 - By bowling line

Line	Inns	Conc	Balls	ER	Wks	Ave	SR	Dot%	Bnd%
outside off	68	97	142	4.09	4	24.25	35.50	52.80	5.63
off stump	46	52	75	4.16	8	6.50	9.30	42.60	2.66
middle stump	48	63	74	5.10	4	15.75	18.50	33.70	2.70
wide outside off	42	93	62	9.00	1	93.00	62.00	51.60	17.74
down leg	52	88	60	8.80	2	44.00	30.00	35.00	8.33
leg stump	35	43	46	5.60	3	14.33	15.30	41.30	6.52
wide down leg	4	3	1	18.00	0			0.00	0.00

bettered only in 2019 and 2020.

Avesh Khan leads the yorker charts. In 10 matches for Lucknow Super Giants, he's landed 24 yorkers and conceded just 19 runs.

Chennai Super Kings' Matheesha Pathirana has hit the same count but given away 26 runs. Both have claimed two wickets apiece from the delivery.

Avesh showcased textbook death bowling to defend nine runs off the final over against Rajasthan Royals.

Earlier this season, he'd been clobbered by Hardik Pandya for a six off a full toss with 22 needed from the final over. But he stuck to his guns, followed up with near-perfect block-hole deliveries, and LSG conceded just three runs off the last five balls to win by 12.

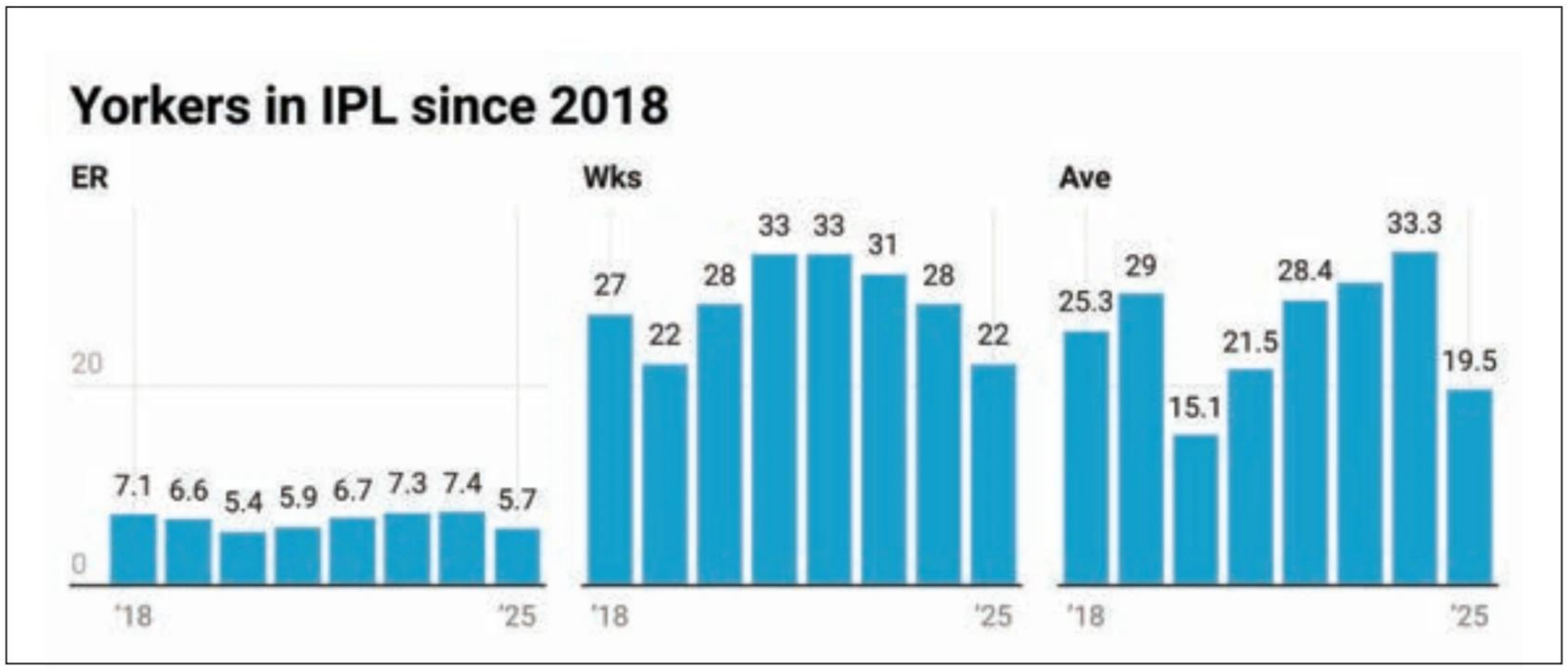
"I always think the yorker is my best ball," Avesh said after his match-winning spell. "I try to bowl it in any situation. In the IPL, it's important to back yourself. I focus on execution, and once I take the ball, I don't get tense. Whatever I decide to bowl, I commit to it fully."

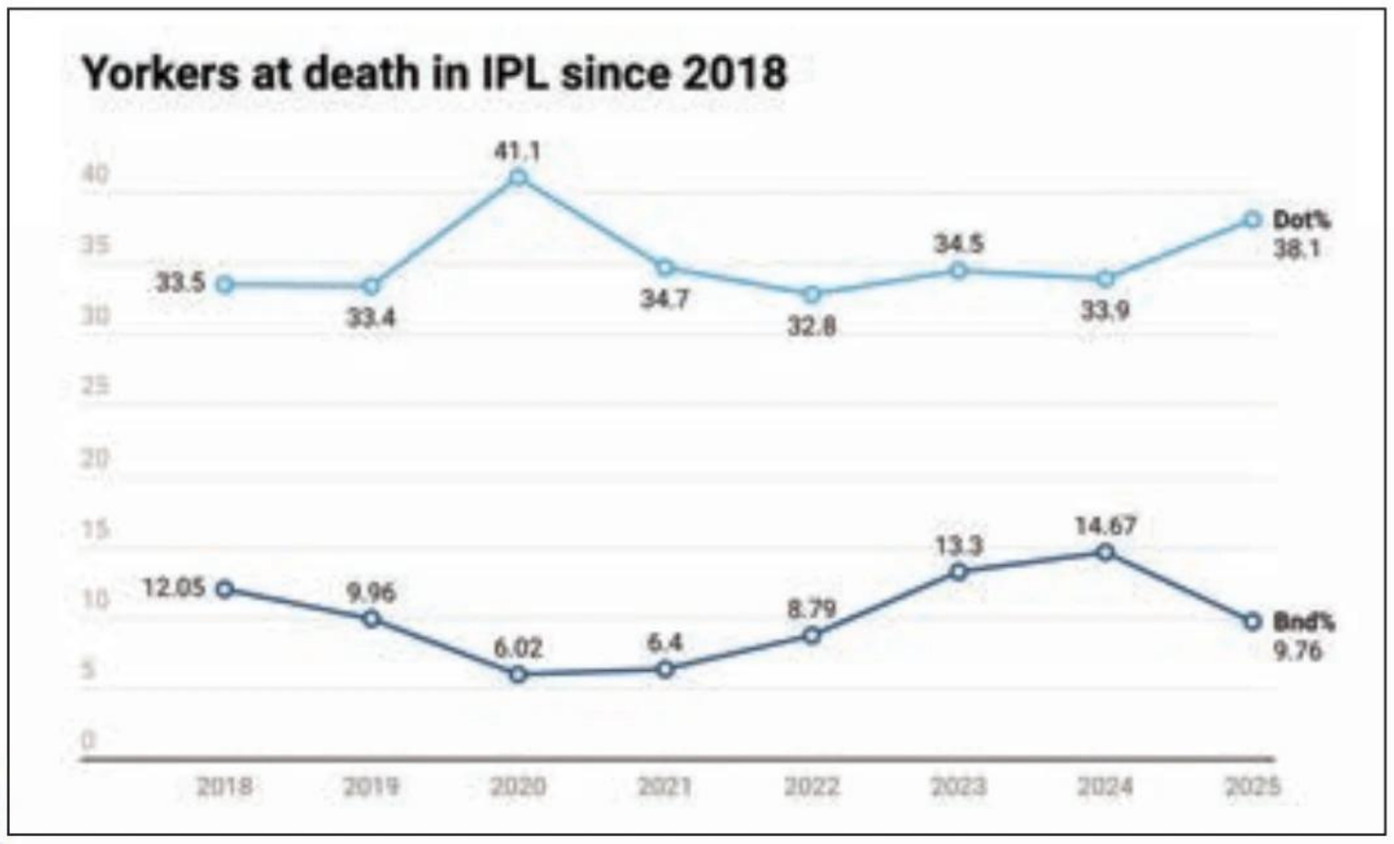
Crucially, yorkers have worked even at the death — overs 16 to 20 — when batters tend to unleash. This year, 15 wickets have fallen to yorkers in this phase, already matching last year's tally.

The economy rate has dipped from 8.15 to 6.79. Dot-ball rates (38.1% from 33.9%) have improved significantly and boundary rates (9.76% from 14.67%) have come down.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Josh Hazlewood and Bhuvneshwar Kumar applied a chokehold on Punjab Kings in New Chandigarh, conceding just 28 runs in the final four overs. Andre Russell and Vaibhav Arora did something similar against the same opposition, giving away 27 in the last three overs.

It would've been fewer had





SPORTZPICS / IPL

Vaibhav not dropped Shreyas Iyer off Russell.

What explains the resurgence? It's hard to pin down, but reverse swing — possibly aided by the discreet use of saliva — might be a factor. Pathirana has bowled 14 reverse-swinging yorkers this season — the most by any bowler — yielding one wicket. Starc, surprisingly, has delivered only three reverse-swinging yorkers so far, despite his reputation.

Whatever the reason, bowlers won't mind the help.

In a tournament often skewed in favour of batters — especially since the introduction of the Impact Player rule — the yorker's comeback is a welcome leveller.

« Avesh Khan's 24 yorkers in 10 games have cost just 19 runs for LSG »

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« With the changing nature of wickets, those days when you could bowl slower on turning tracks to deceive the batter are behind us »

RASHID KHAN

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Rashid Khan has been one of the star performers in the Indian Premier League (IPL) for eight years. But the early stages of the 2025 edition were tough for the Afghan spin ace.

Returning from a hamstring injury, he struggled in his first few outings for Gujarat Titans — conceding runs and lacking impact. As the tournament wore on, though, he found his rhythm. With seven wickets so far, he admits poor control over line and length cost him early on. In an exclusive chat with *Sportstar*, Rashid talks spin, the challenges of this season's pitches, and the road ahead.

You had a tough start to the tournament. How did you deal with that phase, especially coming back from injury?

The pitches haven't been very helpful for spinners, but even then, I felt I was off with my line and length in the first few games. Earlier, when the surface offered a bit of turn, batters still struggled to find boundaries even if you missed your spot slightly. But that's not the case now. If you bowl a loose delivery, it almost always goes for four. This season, you have to be spot on with your areas. In those early matches, I gave away too many runs and didn't pick up many wickets because I wasn't landing the ball where I should have.

During that period, did you focus on any specific areas to get back into rhythm?

I knew I had to go back to basics — stick to the line and length I've trusted for the last nine or ten years and just back myself. As a cricketer, there are times when things don't go your way, but it's important not to overthink. The more cluttered your mind gets, the harder it becomes to find a way out.

I focused on staying clear about what I needed to do. With experience, you realise that even when you give 100 per cent, results might not follow immediately. Sometimes a full toss gets you a wicket. Other times, you bowl the perfect delivery and still get hit for four. That's the nature of the game — you have to accept it and keep moving forward.

With T20 cricket increasingly favouring batters, how does a spinner adapt to the format?

You don't need to overthink it. For a spinner, the key is to focus on length — consistently hitting that good-length area. When there's no help from the pitch, your options are limited. Seamers can go for slow bouncers or wide yorkers, but as a spinner, you can't rely on those. You have to back your strengths, stick to your plans, and execute them well.

Variations like the wrong'un or the flipper should be introduced gradually, once you're settled. You

Resurgent force: Rashid Khan rides out the slump — the T20 maestro is finding his spark again. SPORTZPICS / IPL

can't control how much a pitch will turn or behave, but what you can control is your preparation. If you train hard and stay ready for different scenarios, you won't feel out of place even on flat wickets.

If Rashid Khan the batter were facing Rashid Khan the bowler, how would you approach it?

(Laughs) Honestly, I'm not sure how I'd play myself! It really depends on the conditions. You have to assess the wicket and plan accordingly.

If there's some turn, then it becomes difficult for any batter — no matter who it is. When there's something in the surface, whether it's swing or spin, it's much harder for a batter to execute their plans.

But if the pitch is flat and there's no assistance, the batter knows the ball will come on nicely. So, if Rashid the batter is facing Rashid the bowler, he'll have to read the conditions, understand what the pitch is doing, and adjust his game.

Gujarat Titans seem more settled this season. What's been the approach behind the scenes?

We haven't changed much from last year. From day one, Ashish bhai (head coach Ashish Nehra) has kept things simple — and that's been the key. Our plans don't shift based on results. We stick to the process, and everyone is clear about their roles. That clarity has played a big part in our consistency.

We don't overanalyse. Our meetings last no more than 10 minutes, irrespective of the result. There's no panic. The focus is always on effort and execution — giving 200 per cent, regardless of the outcome. That mindset, set by Ashish bhai, has really helped us stay grounded and focused.

Would you say a clear understanding of roles has been key to the team's consistency?

Absolutely. There's no point in

dwelling on the past or focusing on what went wrong, as it can negatively affect your game. This straightforward, hands-on approach has worked well for us.

Rather than spending hours in meetings, we address issues individually on the field and act on them. That's the best time to discuss matters with the relevant coaches and fix mistakes. Everyone here has enough experience and knows how to approach the game with the right mindset.

How much do you rely on data versus instinct while bowling?

I'm not in favour of match-ups. Every day, the conditions are different, and that's why people talk about them.

But when you're on the field, you don't think about match-ups. There's no substitute for hitting the right areas — for me, that's the best match-up between a batter and a bowler.

Even if a bowler has dismissed a batter several times before, there's no guarantee of success the next time unless he consistently bowls in the right areas. If you focus too much on how a left-hander bowls to a right-hander, you'll be in a negative frame of mind and won't bowl at your best. So, rather than getting caught up in match-ups, just focus on the basics.

You bowl at a much quicker pace than traditional leg-spinners. Was that a conscious decision, or did it evolve naturally?

It's natural for me. My bowling action and run-up don't allow me to bowl slowly. With the changing nature of wickets, those days when you could bowl slower on turning tracks to deceive the batter are behind us. Nowadays, with batters constantly evolving their game, if you rely solely on slower deliveries, you're bound to get hit for boundaries.

You have to adapt your speed to the situation. On wickets where a target of 230-240 is easily achievable, slow balls become necessary. But otherwise, you need to stick to a quicker pace.

I've always bowled at a faster speed since my early days, and it's just developed over time.

The IPL is known for helping players refine their skills. What's one tactical insight you've gained from the league that changed your game?

The IPL has definitely transformed my game. Since my debut in 2017, it's been a game-changer. It's one of the best leagues in the world.

Performing here completely shifts your mindset and boosts your confidence, which is crucial. If you do well in the IPL, it can take you from zero to hero.

That's certainly been the case for me. Over the years, it has built my confidence and made me a better cricketer.

The IPL is one of the toughest leagues, constantly testing you, which is an invaluable learning experience for any bowler.

How do you see the role of spinners evolving in the next five years?

It's hard to predict exactly, as it all depends on whether the surface offers any support. When there's some assistance for the bowlers, it makes the game more interesting. Bowlers can then utilise their strengths — like the wrong'un or the flipper.

That's when the game becomes beautiful, as batters are also tested. On a sporting wicket, they need to think about how to handle different situations.

In the next five years, it could be a great contest between batters and spinners, but for that to happen, the wickets need to provide something for the bowlers.

IPL CAREER STATS

Matches Played:
131

Wickets Taken:
156

Best Bowling Match (BBM):
4/24

Bowling Average:
23.10

Economy Rate (Econ):
7.02

Strike Rate (SR):
19.75

4-Wicket Hauls:
2

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INSIDE K.L. RAHUL'S T20 REBUILD

A deeper look at how **Rahul's offside** retreat and straight-line focus have redefined his T20 game in IPL 2025 — and boosted his strike rate.

Anish Pathiyil and Pranay Rajiv
anish.p@thehindu.co.in,
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

In the rapidly evolving world of T20 cricket — where strike rates and boundary percentages have soared — K.L. Rahul (left facing) has often appeared a reluctant participant.

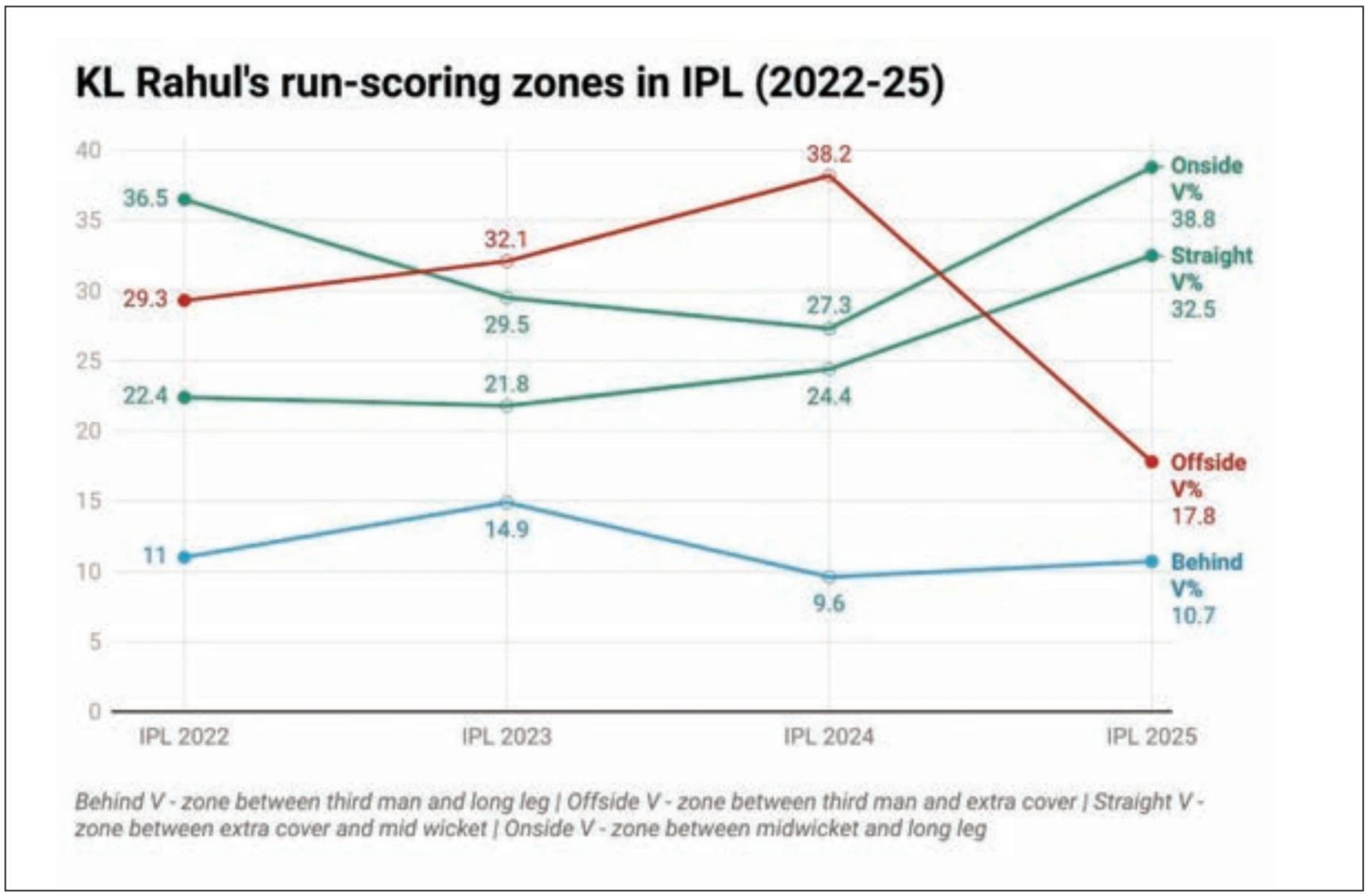
But in the ongoing Indian Premier League season, the Karnataka batter has found a way to break free from the mental shackles that previously held him back, thriving in a fresh middle-order role for Delhi Capitals (DC).

In 10 matches in IPL 2025, Rahul has amassed 381 runs at an average of 47.63 and a seven-year-high strike rate of 142.16. His resurgence is not merely the result of a positional tweak or mental switch — it reflects a fundamental shift in his batting approach.

A comparison of Rahul's run-scoring zones across the last four IPL seasons highlights the change. Formerly a predominantly offside player, he has reduced the proportion of runs scored in that region to just 17.8% this season. That's a sharp drop from 38.2% in the 'Offside V' — between third man and extra cover — in 2024.

DC's clash against Royal Challengers Bengaluru at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium showcased Rahul's remodelled game. Thrust into the PowerPlay after early wickets, the

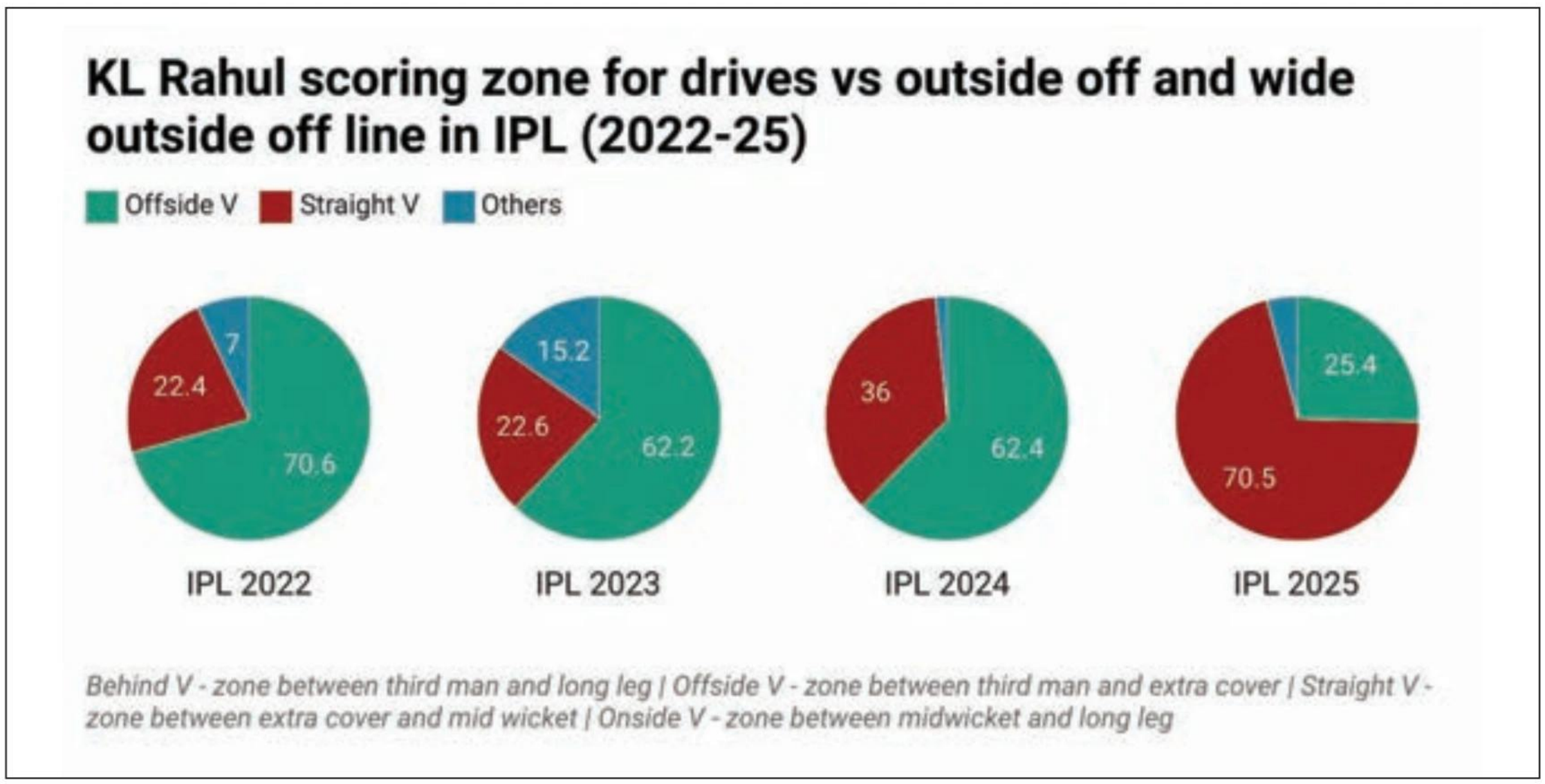
> « Rahul has scored 70.5% of his drive runs in the 'Straight V' – nearly twice last season's share from same zone »

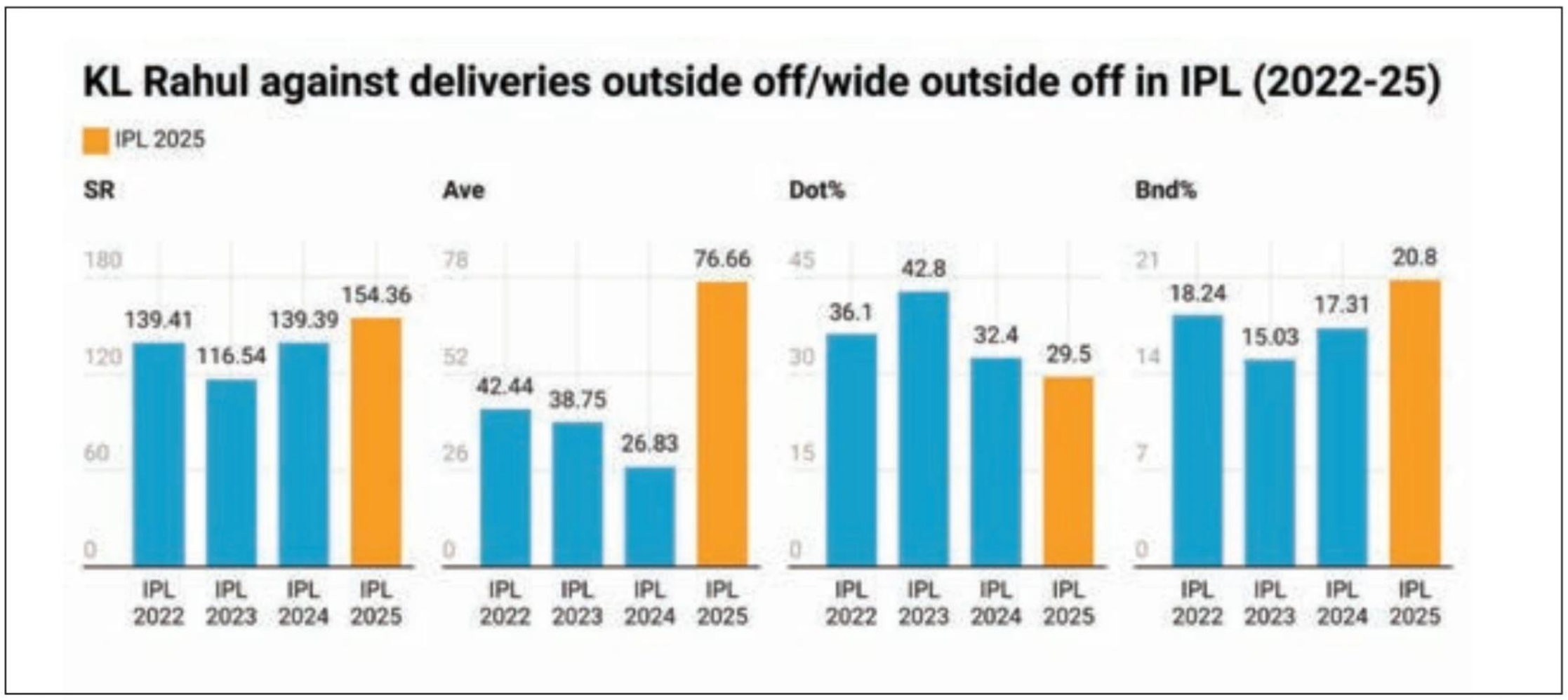


wicketkeeper-batter collected the bulk of his runs down the ground during the six-over phase. He continued to target the straight boundaries effectively during the middle overs, particularly against spin. His unbeaten 93 — 27 of which came in the 'Straight V' — helped his side chase the target with two overs to spare.

"Something I have always done with my preparation is try to adapt to different wickets. I experiment in practice and get out a couple of times, but it gives me a fair idea of the areas I can target — where I can take singles and hit sixes," Rahul said after his match-winning knock.

"I knew what my pockets were. If I wanted to hit a big six, I knew which pockets to target. And keeping gave me a feel for where other batters





were getting out and where they were hitting their sixes," he added.

Rahul's earlier stints at the top of the order with Punjab Kings and Lucknow Super Giants (LSG) were defined by a strong offside game, featuring elegant drives on deliveries outside off. In his three years with LSG, more than 60% of his drives came through the Offside V. But that method proved risky — eight of his 14 dismissals in IPL 2024 occurred in that same region.

Now operating primarily outside the PowerPlay, Rahul has retooled his game, shifting his driving focus between long-on and long-off. For DC this year, 70.5% of runs from drives have come in the 'Straight V' — nearly double the tally from the same zone last season. Correspondingly, his offside scoring has dropped to 25.4% from 62.4% in 2024.

Restricting a batter's scoring zones typically leads to a temporary dip in strike rate. Rahul, however, has bucked that trend. His IPL 2025 strike rate on deliveries outside off-stump is 154.36 — markedly higher than the previous three seasons, none of which saw him cross the 140 mark.

A major contributor to this improvement is his boundary percentage. In 2024, only 17.31% of his shots went to the fence; this season, that figure has risen to 20.8%. Rahul has also improved his running between the wickets — his dot ball percentage outside off has dropped from 32.4 to 29.5.

The most significant development, though, has been in Rahul's dismissals. In IPL 2025, he has been dismissed on the offside just once on deliveries outside off-stump. His average in that category has soared to 76.6, compared to a dismal 26.83 last year.

Since making his IPL debut in 2013, following two standout domestic seasons, Rahul has long carried the tag of being Indian cricket's "next big thing." But over the past 12 years, his T20 journey has been anything but straightforward. Despite 72 caps for India, Rahul the T20 batter has remained an enigma.

Multiple 600-run IPL seasons couldn't cement his place in the national side.

His last appearance in Indian colours came in the 2022 T20 World Cup semifinal loss to England. That India exile coincided with a strained stint at LSG. But more than two years after that night in Adelaide and following a reshuffle at the IPL mega auction, Rahul seems to have found himself again.

With DC locked in a playoff battle, Rahul's new-found middle-order clarity could be crucial as the franchise chases its first final since 2020. And with his contemporaries struggling in the shortest format, the door to the national team may not be closed just yet.

Rewiring strategy: Now operating primarily outside the PowerPlay, K.L. Rahul has retooled his game, shifting his driving focus between long-on and long-off.
VIJAY SONEJI

1st

The set up: Delhi Capitals cruised to a dominant eight-wicket win over Lucknow Super Giants, chasing down a target of 160 with 13 balls to spare. Mukesh Kumar set the tone for the victory, starring with the ball and returning impressive figures of four for 33. SANDEEP SAXENA

FOR MORE IMAGES

2nd

Thunder-boult: Trent Boult struck early to dismiss Travis Head and Abhishek Sharma for low scores, and later wrapped up with figures of four for 26 to restrict Sunrisers Hyderabad to 143 for eight. Mumbai Indians chased down the target with ease, reaching it with 26 balls to spare. K. V. S. GIRI

3rd

Home sweet home: Royal Challengers Bengaluru secured its first home win of the season at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, defeating Rajasthan Royals by 11 runs. Josh Hazlewood led the bowling effort with figures of four for 33 as RCB successfully defended a total of 206. K. MURALI KUMAR

4th

Multi-faceted: Kamindu Mendis delivered a standout all-round performance, including a spectacular catch to remove Dewald Brevis, as Sunrisers Hyderabad defeated Chennai Super Kings by eight wickets to stay in contention for a playoff spot.

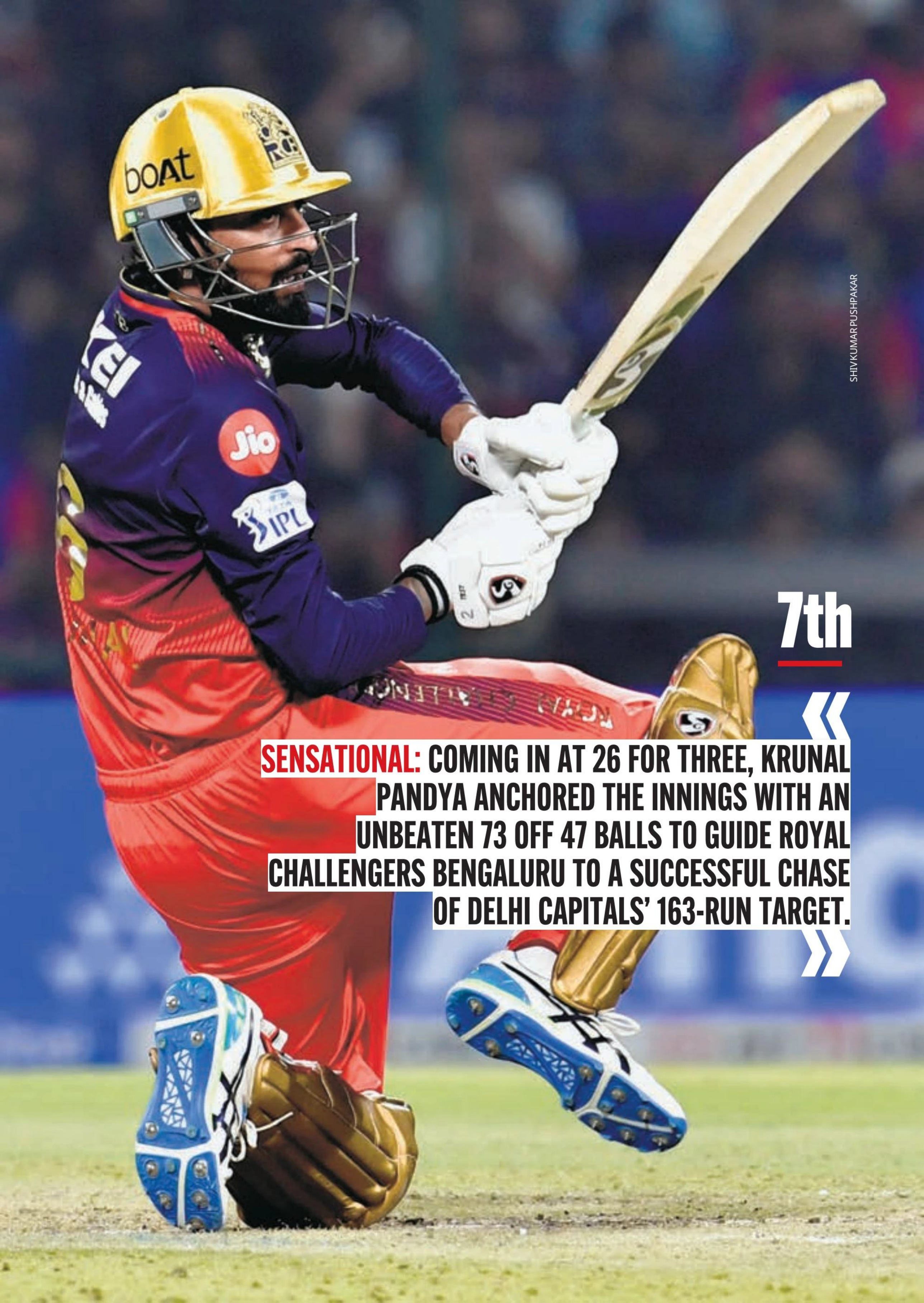
R. RAGU

5th

Settlers: Kolkata Knight Riders and Punjab Kings settled for a point each as rain had the final say at the Eden Gardens. Prabhsimran Singh scored 83 off 49 balls to take PBKS to 201 for four. KKR could only play one over before the groundstaff ran in to cover the ground. K. R. DEEPAK

6th

Another perfect day: Jasprit Bumrah was at his lethal best, claiming four for 22 to bowl out Lucknow Super Giants for 161 while defending a 216-run target. Apart from Bumrah, Trent Boult (three for 20), Ryan Rickelton (58), and Suryakumar (54) set up the two points for MI. EMMANUAL YOGINI



SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

7th

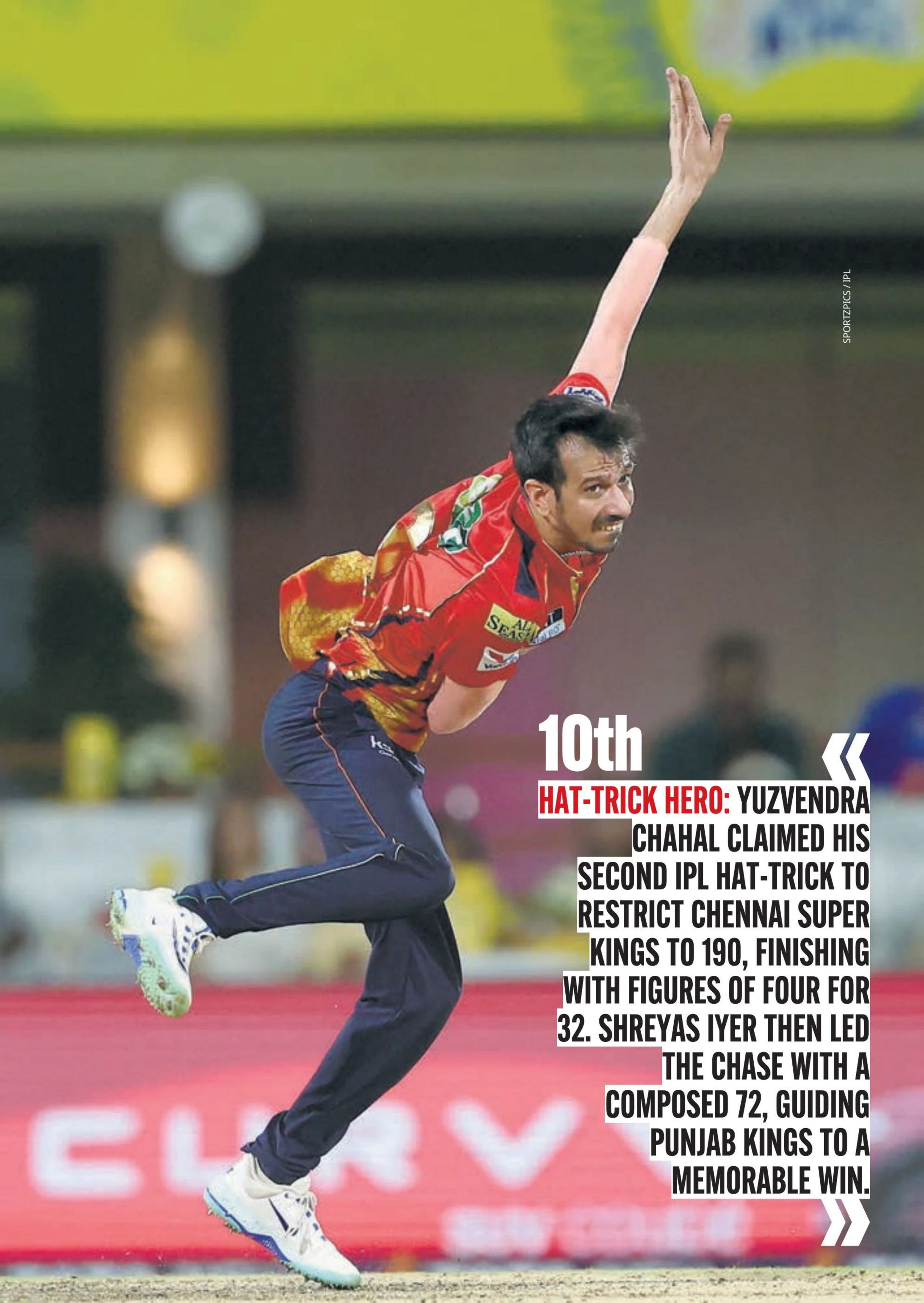
SENSATIONAL: COMING IN AT 26 FOR THREE, KRUNAL PANDYA ANCHORED THE INNINGS WITH AN UNBEATEN 73 OFF 47 BALLS TO GUIDE ROYAL CHALLENGERS BENGALURU TO A SUCCESSFUL CHASE OF DELHI CAPITALS' 163-RUN TARGET.

8th

Boy wonder: Fourteen-year-old Vaibhav Suryavanshi smashed the fastest IPL century by an Indian, reaching the milestone in just 35 balls. His blistering knock of 101 off 38 deliveries, featuring 11 sixes — the most by an Indian in the tournament — powered Rajasthan Royals to a successful chase of Gujarat Titans' 210-run target. R. V. MOORTHY

9th

Spinning web: Sunil Narine made an impact with both bat and ball, scoring 27 off 16 at the top of the order and later claiming three for 29, as Kolkata Knight Riders secured a crucial 14-run win over Delhi Capitals to keep its playoff hopes alive. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP



SPORTZPICS / IPL

10th

HAT-TRICK HERO: YUZVENDRA CHAHAL CLAIMED HIS SECOND IPL HAT-TRICK TO RESTRICT CHENNAI SUPER KINGS TO 190, FINISHING WITH FIGURES OF FOUR FOR 32. SHREYAS IYER THEN LED THE CHASE WITH A COMPOSED 72, GUIDING PUNJAB KINGS TO A MEMORABLE WIN.

11th

Ruthless: Ryan Rickelton powered Mumbai Indians with a blistering 61 off 38 balls, setting up a commanding total of 217 for two against Rajasthan Royals. The Trent Boult-led bowling attack then dismantled the Royals' batting line-up, bowling them out for just 117 to seal a dominant win.

R. V. MOORTHY

12th

Elegant: Shubman Gill struck a graceful 76 from 38 balls before Jos Buttler hit 64 in 37 deliveries to take Gujarat Titans to 224 for six. Prasidh Krishna's miserly spell of two for 19 made sure Sunrisers Hyderabad could only score 186 for six in response.

VIJAY SONEJI

K. MURALI KUMAR

13th

SUPERME POWER: ROMARIO SHEPHERD HELPED ROYAL CHALLENGERS BENGALURU SMASH 54 RUNS OFF THE FINAL TWO OVERS, INCLUDING A REMARKABLE 33 RUNS IN THE 19TH OVER. HIS 14-BALL FIFTY – THE JOINT-SECOND FASTEST IN IPL HISTORY – HELPED RCB POST A CHALLENGING TOTAL OF 213 FOR FIVE. CHENNAI SUPER KINGS PUSHED THE GAME TO THE FINAL BALL BUT FELL SHORT BY JUST TWO RUNS.

14th

Dre-molition man: Andre Russell smacked a 25-ball 57 — his first fifty of the season — to help Kolkata Knight Riders get 70 runs off the final five overs and reach 206 for four. RITU RAJ KONWAR

15th

Almost a miracle: Riyan Parag smacked 95 off 45 balls, a knock which included six consecutive sixes — five in one Moeen Ali over. However, Parag's lone battle couldn't take Rajasthan Royals home as the visitor fell short by one run in a last-ball thriller.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

16th

Into the night sky: Prabhsimran Singh hit seven sixes and six fours but fell short of a sensational century by nine runs. However, his 48-ball 91 was enough for Punjab Kings to register a 37-run win over Lucknow Super Giants. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

17th

Eliminated: Rain had the final say in the match between Sunrisers Hyderabad and Delhi Capitals, which was abandoned after the first innings due to a wet outfield. The no-result confirmed SRH as the third team to be officially eliminated from playoff contention. K. V. S. GIRI

Fan baiting: Interviewers often target angry CSK fans near Chepauk, pushing them to make extreme statements about the team's form. M. VEDHAN

A fitting mentor and a viral chase at Chepauk!

Our correspondents **capture the essence** of IPL cricket as it hurtles towards the business end — delivering thrilling action on the field and compelling stories off it.

On IPL match days, the outskirts of the Chepauk Stadium in Chennai resemble a hunting ground.

The prey? Unsuspecting cricket fans, mostly of the Chennai Super Kings variant.

The predators? Camera-wielding, mic-holding interviewers — representing YouTube pages, TV channels and cricket websites — scouring for viral content.

These interviewers prowl Chepauk's approach roads before and after every game, scavenging on the ire of a frustrated CSK fanbase, provoking them into outrageous comments — either in defence of their struggling team or lamenting its shortcomings.

The fans are baited by the interviewers with the prospect of a few seconds of fame, while also providing them with a window to vent their disappointments — an on-camera therapy session if you will.

Mentor mode: Kevin Pietersen is relishing his role in shaping Delhi Capitals' players into smarter, sharper cricketers. SPORTZPICS / IPL

Ahead of CSK's IPL 2025 match against Sunrisers Hyderabad, this Diary was one such scavenger, performing the exercise more out of professional obligation. The Diary isn't deranged enough to find excitement from trotting around in Chennai's sweltering heat, while running the potential risk of being rejected by random strangers.

And thus, the Diary was on its way, swallowing its inner apprehensions and plastering a fake smile on its face, asking melancholic CSK fans, "Would you rather have RCB or MI win the IPL title?" Ughh.

Pranay Rajiv

'A mentor like KP is all you need'

According to Kevin Pietersen, mentor of Delhi Capitals in this year's Indian Premier League (IPL), a two-month stint in franchise cricket is not enough time for a coach — no matter how highly rated — to make a meaningful impact on a player. However, Pietersen believes the work he is doing with Abishek Porel, a talented left-handed batter and wicketkeeper from Bengal, will benefit the 22-year-old in the medium to long term.

"I've been working on something with Porel," Pietersen said at a press conference in Delhi. "I told Abi: 'This won't work for you tomorrow. It might not even work next week. But if you keep at it over the next month, two months, three months, four months, I promise it'll help you become a more destructive batter.' The key is to lay the foundations now."

A video clip posted by Delhi Capitals on Instagram — captioned "a mentor like KP is all you need" — suggests the England great has been focusing on getting Porel to swing the bat in a straighter line. If the youngster evolves into a more destructive batter in the months ahead, that caption might prove prophetic.

Vivek Krishnan

Royal return

The last time Jackson Warne **(below)** visited Jaipur was 14 years ago, when he shared fond memories of the city's tradition and culture with his father — the late Shane Warne.

As he walked around the Sawai Mansingh Stadium now and watched a few matches from the Shane Warne Gallery, a special enclosure dedicated to his father, who was also Rajasthan Royals' first captain, nostalgia set in. The young Warne recalled the good old days. "I would have been 11 years old the last time I was here, so it's special to be back. It was also cool to see that the tickets had his name on them — they read 'Shane Warne Gallery'," Jackson said.

During his visit, Jackson had extended conversations with Royals' head coach Rahul Dravid, director of cricket Kumar Sangakkara, and several players. Wearing Rajasthan Royals colours, he cheered for the team and made an effort to connect with some of the cricketers.

Shayan Acharya

RAJASTHAN ROYALS

TEEN TYPHOON

Abhishek Saini
abhishek.s@thehindu.co.in

MATCHES
5
Runs
155
Average
31.00
Strike Rate
209.45

Stats as of May 4, 2025

Vaibhav Suryavanshi made a swashbuckling entry into the Indian Premier League record books with his 38-ball 101 against Gujarat Titans. At 14 years and 32 days, Suryavanshi became the youngest player to score a century in T20 cricket. The Rajasthan Royals batter reached the three-figure mark in just 35 deliveries, making it the second-fastest hundred in IPL history – only Chris Gayle has struck a quicker century (30 deliveries).

Suryavanshi's innings helped the Royals chase down a daunting target of 210 runs and banished the ghosts of their previous pursuits against Delhi Capitals, Lucknow Super Giants and Royal Challengers Bengaluru, where they had collapsed from comfortable positions.

Expectations were modest when Suryavanshi was picked by RR for Rs 1.10 crore at the mega auction. Then just 13 years old, he was the youngest in the pool, and few expected significant game time for the teenage prodigy.

He had shown glimpses of his brilliance during his 34-run knock on debut against LSG. But the century in only his third match was convention-defying, making a strong case that even a 14-year-old can carve a place for himself in T20 cricket's grandest stage. The southpaw plundered an in-form pace attack comprising Mohammed Siraj, Ishant Sharma and Prasidh Krishna. However, the highlight came against debutant Karim Janat, whom he clobbered for 30 runs in a single over. Tweakers Rashid Khan and Washington Sundar fared little better, conceding 29 runs from 13 deliveries against him.

Suryavanshi showcased his on-side range during the innings, scoring over 50 per cent of his runs between midwicket and fine leg. Nine of his 11 sixes came on the on-side. It took a searing yorker from Prasidh to dismiss him in the 12th over, but RR had already amassed 166 runs by then.

For a side languishing at the foot of the points table, Suryavanshi's emergence has been a rare silver lining in the Royals' season.

The teenager was quickly reminded of cricket's boom-and-bust nature with two single-digit scores following his hundred. He has a long road ahead, but knowing that his century will live on in IPL folklore should offer warmth through the journey.

R. V. MOORTHY

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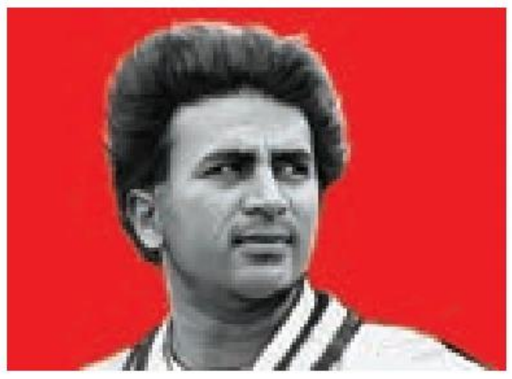


ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

IPL SHOULD LOOK AT REDUCING UNCAPPED PLAYER RETENTION FEE BELOW Rs. 4 CRORE

This season has shown that **players bought for crores** in the first cycle and now at a much reduced fee are showing better results.

Ever since the first year of the IPL, the auction of the players has been a life changer for plenty of players. While in the first couple of years there was a limit on what an uncapped Indian player could get, this was removed from the next year when it was found that an uncapped South African player had gone for a humongous amount. Naturally, questions were asked in the IPL Governing Council as to why uncapped Indian players should be restricted to a certain fee, while there was no such limit on the overseas uncapped players. The salary limit for the franchises was also increased, which emboldened them to bid unheard-of numbers for some players. That trend continues and with every increase in the salary cap for a franchise, we will continue to hear of some unknown players going for sums beyond reasonable understanding.

The usual answer to such jaw-dropping figures for uncapped players is that it's market forces at work. As the season progresses, it is realised that yes, it may be market forces at the time of the auction, but it also comes with a healthy dollop of dreamy foolishness that quickly turns into disappointment and then anger at the hapless player, who had entered the auction at the lowest base price and hadn't asked for the final amount but was simply fortunate to get it.

Yes, almost 10 times out of 10, it's simply good, old luck, grandparents' good deeds or some such omen that gets an uncapped player the crores he gets. The owners rely on their advisers, mostly computer nerds who have little idea of the game but have data at their fingertips and think that is the answer to a player's ability. The data they get is from the many local State leagues that have mushroomed in the country. The scores from these leagues are fed into the computer, and that becomes the basis of their bidding war for a player. Most of them have never actually seen the player play or what the opposition is like. Was it challenging? Was it competitive? Was it demanding is something that doesn't fit into the data at all. How big were the boundaries, how was the pitch and how were the weather conditions? This is another thing that doesn't fit into the data banks perhaps. What was the match situation when runs were scored or when wickets were taken, are things that are hardly taken into account. If there are any

Change in rule: BCCI revived a 2021 rule, letting CSK retain M.S. Dhoni as an "uncapped" player for Rs. 4 crore, since he hasn't played internationally since 2019. PTI

former players as scouts, then their word perhaps doesn't matter as much and, in any case, the scouts don't sit at the auction table, do they?

Most of the guys who suddenly become crorepatis are overwhelmed, firstly by their sudden good fortune and then by the nervousness of getting to rub shoulders with those they have admired and perhaps never even dreamt of meeting. They are often not even part of their State's squad of top 30 players. So now, to get into a group where there are great players in the game from different countries with different styles, approaches, and even different accents is never easy. In all these years, it is hard to recall an uncapped player bought for huge numbers who has justified his inclusion in the team. Maybe over the next couple of years, he may get a bit better with experience, but if he is playing in the same local league, then that chance of improvement doesn't get much better.

What does happen is that if in the next auction his price comes down, then the pressure of expectations also comes down and the player plays a lot better. This season has shown that players bought for crores in the first cycle and now at a much reduced fee are showing better results. It could well be the experience of just being with some of the greats of the game, but more often than not, it is the reduced expectations with the lower fee that has eased the burden and allowed them to try and replicate what they do in their local city league.

A whole lot of the players bought for huge amounts simply fade away as their hunger and drive are satiated. To the franchises, it perhaps doesn't matter as they may feel it's good riddance, but Indian cricket takes a bit of a beating at the loss of any player whether he has been successful or not.

To accommodate Mahendra Singh Dhoni, who became an uncapped player before the auction last year, the limit was raised to Rs 4 crore.

Maybe it is time to relook at that and reduce it further so that Indian cricket does not lose out on talent that seems to flounder its way with the pressure when auctioned for crores.

In all these years, it is hard to recall an uncapped player bought for huge numbers who has justified his inclusion in the team.

Big-hitting Rahul

Delhi Capitals' K. L. Rahul. VIJAY SONEJI

129 The number of innings K. L. Rahul needed to reach the 200th six of his IPL career spanning 138 matches. He became the 11th batter to hit 200 sixes. He achieved this during his cameo knock of 28 in 14 balls for Delhi Capitals against Gujarat Titans in Ahmedabad on 19 April 2025, thus making him the third quickest — in fewest innings, but the quickest by an Indian in the IPL. Only Chris Gayle (69 innings) and Andre Russell (97) have done it in fewer innings. Incidentally, Gayle is the first to hit 200 sixes in the IPL.

Batters to reach 200 sixes in 150 innings or less in the IPL

Inns	M	Batter	Balls	Balls/6	For	Venue	Date
69	69	Chris Gayle	1824	9.12	RCB v SRH	Bengaluru	13 Apr 2015
97	113	Andre Russell	1325	6.62	KKR v SRH	Kolkata	23 Mar 2024
129	138	K. L. Rahul	3647	18.24	DC v GT	Ahmedabad	19 Apr 2025
137	148	A. B. de Villiers	2818	13.88	RCB v MI	MumbaiWS	15 Apr 2019
148	148	David Warner	3887	19.34	SRH v CSK	Delhi	28 Apr 2021
150	167	Kieron Pollard	2056	10.23	MI v SRH	Chennai	17 Apr 2021

Note: the balls mentioned above are updated at the end of the batter's innings and not when he reached the milestone of 200 sixes.

130 The number of innings K. L. Rahul needed to aggregate 5000 runs in his IPL career. He is now the quickest in terms of fewest innings for any of the eight batters who have reached this landmark in IPL history. He did so during his unbeaten 57 for Delhi Capitals against LSG in Lucknow on 22 April 2025.

Quickest (in fewest innings) to reach 5000 career runs in IPL cricket (all the eight players are list below)

Inns	M	Batter	While playing for	Venue	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	HS	100/50
130	139	K. L. Rahul	DC v LSG	Lucknow	22 Apr 2025	5006	46.35	132*	4/40
135	135	David Warner	SRH v KKR	Abu Dhabi	18 Oct 2020	5037	43.05	126	4/46
157	165	Virat Kohli	RCB v MI	Bengaluru	28 Mar 2019	5000	38.17	113	4/34
161	175	A. B. de Villiers	RCB v DC	Ahmedabad	27 Apr 2021	5053	41.08	133*	3/40
168	169	Shikhar Dhawan	DC v PBKS	Dubai	20 Oct 2020	5044	35.03	106*	2/39
173	177	Suresh Raina	CSK v RCB	Chennai	23 Mar 2019	5004	34.27	100*	1/35
187	192	Rohit Sharma	MI v PBKS	Abu Dhabi	1 Oct 2020	5068	31.87	109*	1/38
208	236	M. S. Dhoni	CSK v LSG	Chennai	3 Apr 2023	5003	39.09	84*	0/24

148 The batting strike-rate of Suryakumar Yadav at the time of crossing the milestone of 4000 runs in his IPL career during his 54 for Mumbai Indians against LSG in Mumbai on 27 April 2025. He is now the third-best among the 17 players who have achieved this milestone in the IPL. Only Chris Gayle and A. B. de Villiers achieved better batting strike-rates when they reached 4000 IPL runs.

Batters with the fastest strike-rates to reach 4000 IPL runs

S/R	Batter	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	HS	Achieved on	While playing for	Venue
151.02	Chris Gayle	113	112	4073	41.56	175*	25 Mar 2019	PBKS v RR	Jaipur
151.01	A. B. de Villiers	143	131	4032	39.92	133*	28 Mar 2019	RCB v MI	Bengaluru
147.56	Suryakumar Yadav	160	145	4021	33.79	103*	27 Apr 2025	MI v LSG	MumbaiWS
142.14	David Warner	114	114	4014	40.55	126	17 May 2017	SRH v KKR	Bengaluru
138.91	Suresh Raina	144	140	4038	33.93	100*	19 May 2016	GL v KKR	Kanpur

14 } Vaibhav Suryavanshi's age when he registered the first 50+ score of his IPL career. On April 19, 2025, Suryavanshi became the youngest player to appear in an IPL match, debuting at just 14 years and 23 days for Rajasthan Royals against Lucknow Super Giants in Jaipur. He made an instant impression, hitting a six off the first ball he faced — bowled by Shardul Thakur — and finishing with a composed 23 off 20 balls.

Nine days later, on April 28, at the same venue, Suryavanshi made history again. He registered his maiden IPL fifty against Gujarat Titans — and didn't stop there. He converted it into a century, becoming the youngest player in T20 history to score both a fifty and a hundred. No one in IPL history had achieved both landmarks at a younger age.

Youngest players to register a fifty-plus score in T20 cricket

Age	Batter	For	Against	Venue	Date	Bat#	Inns	Result
14y-32d	Vaibhav Suryavanshi (101)	Rajasthan Royals	Gujarat Titans	Jaipur	28 Apr 2025	2	2	W
15y-360d	Hassan Eisakhil (76)	Boost Defenders	Hindukush Stars	Kabul	23 Jul 2022	2	1	W
16y-37d	Mohd Asif Khan (50)	Speen Ghar Tigers	Amo Sharks	Kabul	8 Oct 2019	5	2	L
16y-56d	Louis Bruce (60)	Gibraltar	Malta	Albergaria	20 Aug 2021	2	1	L
16y-89d	Alusine Turay (78*)	Sierra Leone	Ghana	Benoni	17 Dec 2023	2	1	L

*Note: * Bruce was making his T20 debut*

Youngest to register a fifty-plus score in IPL cricket

Age	Batter	For	Against	Venue	Date	Bat#	Inns	Result
14y-32d	Vaibhav Suryavanshi (101)	Rajasthan Royals	Gujarat Titans	Jaipur	28 Apr 2025	2	2	W
17y-175d	Riyan Parag Das (50)	Rajasthan Royals	Delhi Capitals	Delhi	4 May 2019	6	1	L
18y-169d	Sanju Samson (63)	Rajasthan Royals	RCB	Jaipur	29 Apr 2013	3	2	W

Note: Samson was the wicket-keeper

Youngest to register a three-figure score in T20 cricket

Age	Batter	For	Against	Venue	Date	Bat#	Inns	Result
14y-32d	Vaibhav Suryavanshi (101)	Rajasthan Royals	Gujarat Titans	Jaipur	28 Apr 2025	2	2	W
18y-118d	Vijay Zol (109)	Maharashtra	Mumbai	Ahmedabad	21 Mar 2013	2	1	W
18y-179d	Parvez Hossain Emon (100*)	Fortune Barishal	Rajshahi	Mirpur	8 Dec 2020	3	2	W
18y-280d	Gustav Mckeon (109)	France	Switzerland	Vantaa	25 Jul 2022	1	1	L
19y-25d	Shaik Rasheed (100*)	Andhra	Arunachal Prad	Ranchi	19 Oct 2023	4	1	W

Note: Mckeon, two days later, made another 100 against Norway (101; at the age of 18y-282d).

Youngest to register a three-figure score in IPL cricket

Age	Batter	For	Against	Venue	Date	Bat#	Inns	Result
14y-32d	Vaibhav Suryavanshi (101)	Rajasthan Royals	Gujarat Titans	Jaipur	28 Apr 2025	2	2	W
19y-253d	Manish Pandey (114*)	RCB	Deccan Chargers	Centurion	21 May 2009	1	1	W
20y-218d	Rishabh Pant (128*)	Delhi Capitals	Sunrisers Hyd	Delhi	10 May 2018	4	1	L

Note: Pant was the wicket-keeper and was for Delhi Daredevils (now known as Delhi Capitals)

35 } The number of balls Vaibhav Suryavanshi took to reach his maiden IPL century. In the IPL, only Chris Gayle, who then played for RCB in 2013, did it in fewer balls (30). The teenager has now recorded the quickest IPL century by an Indian, surpassing Yusuf Pathan's effort in 37 balls for Rajasthan Royals against Mumbai Indians at the Brabourne Stadium, Mumbai on 13 March 2010. Meanwhile, Suryavanshi also became the sixth batter to register a T20 century in 35 balls or less on Indian soil, as seen in the list below.

Fastest (in fewest balls) to reach a T20 century on Indian soil

Balls to 100	Batter	Score	Balls	S/R	For	Against	Venue	Date	Bat#	Inns
28	Urvil Patel	113*	35	322.85	Gujarat	Tripura	Indore (EHS)	27 Nov 2024	2	2
28	Abhishek Sharma	106*	29	365.51	Punjab	Meghalaya	Rajkot (NS-C)	5 Dec 2024	2	2
30	Chris Gayle	175*	66	265.15	RCB	Pune Warriors	Bangalore	23 Apr 2013	1	1
32	Rishabh Pant	116*	38	305.26	Delhi	Himachal Pradesh	Delhi	14 Jan 2018	2	2
35	Rohit Sharma	118	43	274.41	India	Sri Lanka	Indore (HS)	22 Dec 2017	1	1
35	Vaibhav Suryavanshi	101	38	265.78	Rajasthan Royals	Gujarat Titans	Jaipur	28 Apr 2025	2	2

Note: Urvil Patel/Pant were the wicket-keepers, while Abhishek/Rohit Sharma were the captains

All records are correct and updated until 28 April 2025

AP

Lord's to host final of the ICC Women's T20 World Cup 2026

1 The Women's T20 World Cup 2026 will **begin on June 12.**

The International Cricket Council has named Lord's Cricket Ground as the venue for the final of the ICC Women's T20 World Cup 2026.
The title clash of the 10th edition of the tournament is scheduled for July 5.
The ICC also announced that Edgbaston, the Hampshire Bowl, Headingley, Old Trafford, The Oval and Bristol County Ground will host matches during the competition.
The Women's T20 World Cup 2026 will begin on June 12 and run for 24 days, featuring 33 matches before culminating in the final at Lord's.

Mehidy Hasan Miraz **(right)** struck a century and claimed five wickets — becoming only the third Bangladeshi player to do so after Shakib Al Hasan and Sohag Gazi — as the host crushed Zimbabwe by an innings and 106 runs to level the two-match Test series. After scoring 104 in the first innings, Mehidy took five for 32 to bowl Zimbabwe out for 111 on day three. In the first Test, Zimbabwe's Blessing Muzarabani claimed six for 72 and Brian Bennett notched up a half-century to seal a three-wicket win over Bangladesh. Mehidy had given Bangladesh hope of victory by picking up five wickets on day four, but Zimbabwe's batters held their nerve to secure their first Test win since 2021.

AFP

2

RITU RAJ KONWAR

3

Pakistan and Bangladesh are set to play a five-match T20I series in May and June as part of their build-up to the 2026 T20 World Cup. The first two matches will be held in Faisalabad, which is hosting international cricket for the first time since 2008, with the remaining three games scheduled for Lahore. The T20 World Cup will be hosted by India and Sri Lanka in February and March next year.

GETTY IMAGES

4

Ben Stokes is fit to return as England captain for its one-off Test against Zimbabwe later this month, having been named in a 13-man squad. The 33-year-old all-rounder has recovered from a hamstring injury sustained in New Zealand in December — his second hamstring tear in five months. Stokes is set to feature in England's opening Test of the home season. The four-day match, instead of the standard five-day format, will be held at Trent Bridge from May 22 to 25.

Sri Lanka will host Bangladesh for two Tests and three ODIs and T20Is each from mid-June. The ODI matches will be played as day/night games, while the T20Is will be held under lights. Bangladesh last toured Sri Lanka for a Test series in April 2021, when it lost one match and drew the other. Its last ODI series in Sri Lanka was in July 2019, which it lost 3–0. However, it won its last bilateral T20I series in the country 2–0 in 2018.

5

R. V. MOORTHY

6

Former New Zealand pacer Tim Southee is reportedly being considered by England for the fast-bowling consultant's role ahead of a home summer that includes a five-Test series against India. The 36-year-old is one of the contenders to replace James Anderson, who took up the role last year but is now unavailable due to commitments with Lancashire. Former New Zealand spinner Jeetan Patel remains part of England's coaching staff, serving as spin bowling coach under head coach Brendon McCullum.

Cricket Kenya is set to launch its franchise-based league, the CKT20, in September to revive the sport. The country had enjoyed notable success in the past, including a semifinal appearance in the 2003 ODI World Cup. The inaugural season of the league will be a 25-day tournament contested by six franchises, each allowed to sign at least five international players. However, only four overseas players may be included in the playing XI, with the remaining spots to be filled by local cricketers.

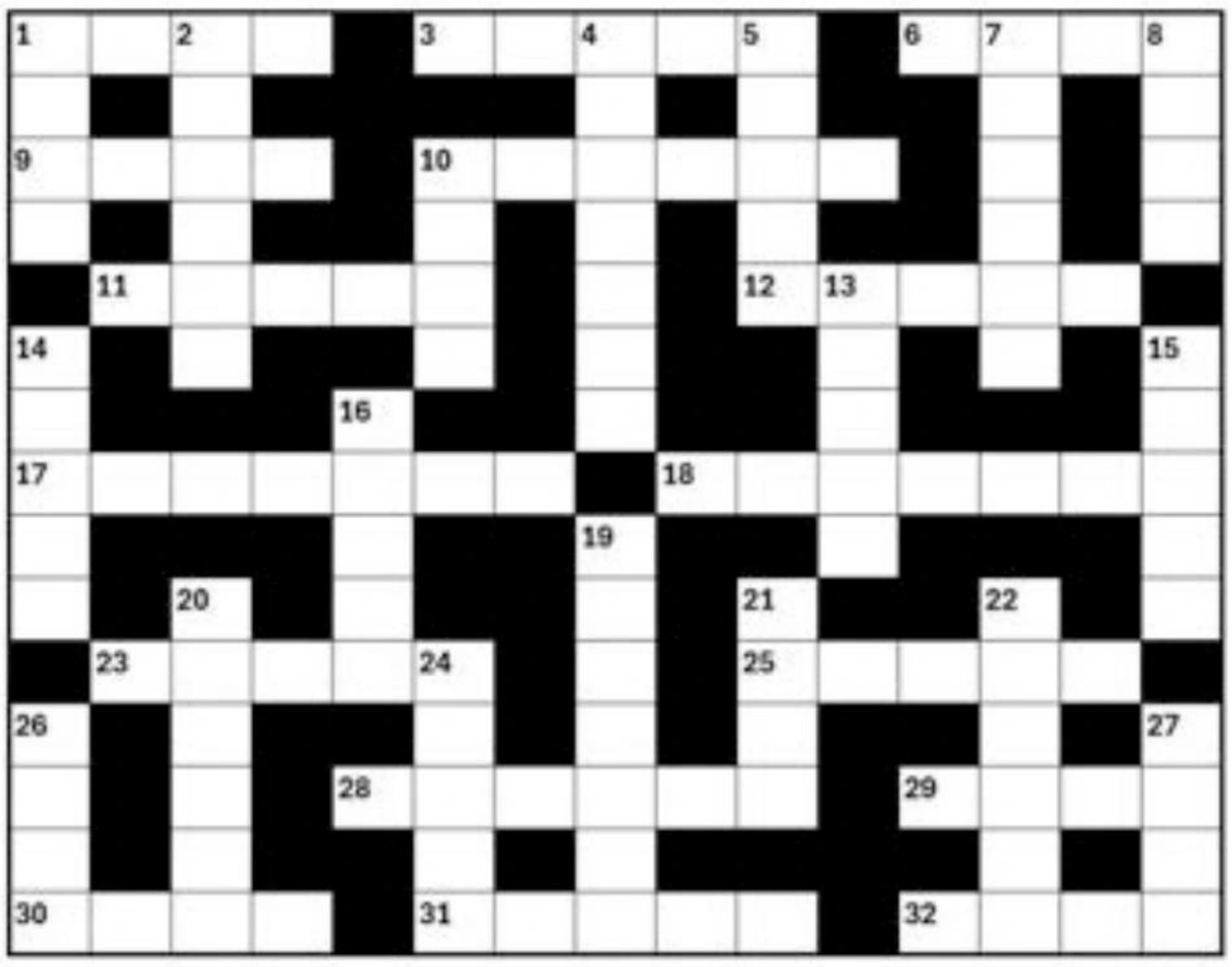
7

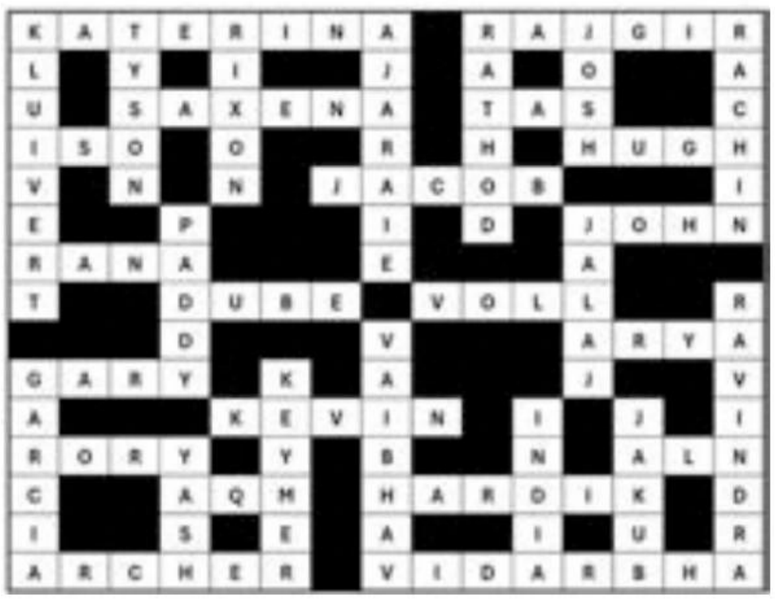
AFP

8

Zimbabwe has named a 15-member squad for the historic Test against England, the country's first red-ball match on English soil since 2003. The four-day fixture will see the return of star all-rounder Sikandar Raza **(in pic)**, who missed the recently concluded two-Test series against Bangladesh.
Three changes have been made to the squad that toured Bangladesh. The same squad will also face South Africa at Arundel from June 3–6, as the Proteas prepare for the World Test Championship final against Australia, scheduled to be held at Lord's later that month.

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who is the wicket-keeper opener for MI in IPL 2025? (4)

3 Who ended up with most dismissals in the 2025 edition of WPL? (5)

6 Who was declared La Liga's player of the month for March? (4)

9 Which Indian tennis player won the Dubai Tennis Doubles Championship on March 1, 2025, partnering Alexei Popyrin? (4)

10 Which wicket-keeper held on to four catches in the very first match of IPL 2025? (6)

11 Name the fast bowler who became the first to not only take a five-wicket haul but also bowl the first super over in IPL 2025? (5)

17 Who took four wickets for SRH in the IPL against CSK on April 25, 2025, and won the player of the match award, too? (7)

18 Who won her first singles title on clay at the WTA Charleston Open 2025? (7)

23 Name the outgoing fielding coach of the Indian cricket team. (5)

25 Which country won both the Davis Cup and the Billie Jean King Cup in 2024? (5)

28 Who won the player of the match award for RCB in its very first match and its 10th match as well of IPL 2025? (6)

29 Name GT's former player from Australia who is drafted as its assistant coach for IPL 2025. (4)

30 Who picked up five wickets in the women's Tri-series match held between India and South Africa in Colombo on April 29, 2025? (4)

31 Who won the women's singles title at the All-England Open badminton championships in March 2025? (5)

32 What is the surname of this New Zealand footballer who scored a hat-trick for Nottingham Forest in the premier league match versus Brighton on February 1, 2025? (4)

DOWN

1 What is the surname of the goalkeeper from Arsenal who has a record of 12 clean sheets in this season of Premier League till April 27, 2025? (4)

2 Which tennis doubles specialist spearheaded the campaign for India to help the team to qualify for the Billie Jean King Cup? (6)

4 Who scored two hat-tricks for Atalanta in Serie A competition this season? (7)

5 & Across 12 Who is the only player to score a hundred in the New Zealand vs Pakistan five-match T20 International series held recently? (5,5)

7 Who is CSK's bowling coach in IPL 2025? (6)

8 Which French driver represents the Haas-Ferrari team in this year's Formula 1? (4)

10 Identify the first name of this tennis player who won the men's singles title at the prestigious Indian Wells Open in March 2025? (4)

13 Who came as replacement for the injured CSK captain Ruturaj Gaikwad in IPL 2025? (5)

14 Who scored a hat-trick for Athletic Bilbao in the La Liga encounter vs Girona on February 8, 2025? (5)

15 Who won the player of the series award in the three-match ODI series between New Zealand and Pakistan recently? (5)

16 Who gave away 75 runs off his four overs (second worst bowling figures in IPL) — against PBKS on April 12, 2025? (5)

19 Which Indian city hosted the WTT Star Contender table tennis tournament for the first time in March 2025? (7)

20 Identify this French racing driver who represents the Alpine-Renault team in this year's Formula 1? (6)

21 Who scored most runs in the three-match ODI series between India and England held in February 2025? (4)

22 Which Spanish footballer is transferred temporarily from AC Milan to Galatasaray? (6)

24 Despite a previously signed contract until 2026, who left Red Bull Racing after the conclusion of the 2024 season? (5)

26 What is the surname of the goalkeeper from Nottingham Forest who holds the record of most clean sheets in this season of Premier League till April 27, 2025? (4)

27 Which Australian opener was involved in a 171-run partnership for the first wicket in the SRH vs PBKS match of the IPL held on April 12, 2025? (4)

R. K. NITHIN

OLD FACES, NEW RECORDS

Despite the **absence of some big stars,** the 28th edition of the Federation Cup more than served its purpose as Indian athletics' first major national-level competition of the 2025 season.

WATCH THE INTERVIEW WITH ANIMESH

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

Before he stepped out to compete at the 2025 Federation Cup in Kochi, Praveen Chithravel **(left)** wrote down something behind his numbered bib ahead of the start of the men's triple jump competition. Later, once he'd won gold while equalling his own national record of 17.37m, the 23-year-old revealed just what he had written:

'17.20m'

Chithravel had come in with high expectations and ended up exceeding them at the Maharaja Stadium in Kochi. That was true for most of the competitions as well.

Conditions in Kochi were oppressive. Entry standards instituted for the first time meant there were fewer participants than in previous years. Also, some of India's top athletes weren't competing — double Olympic medallist Neeraj Chopra was training in South Africa, steeplechase record holders Parul Chaudhary and Avinash Sable were in the USA, as was Gulveer Singh, who holds records in the 5,000m and 10,000m. Despite all this, the 28th edition of the Federation Cup more than served its purpose as Indian athletics' first major national-level competition of the 2025 season.

While Neeraj Chopra was training in South Africa, steeplechase record holders Parul Chaudhary and Avinash Sable were in the USA, as was Gulveer Singh, the record holder in 5,000m and 10,000m.

Fast track: Animesh Kujur (centre) won gold in the 200m event after setting a national record. R. K. NITHIN

Two national records were set — by Animesh Kujur in the men's 200m, and Dev Meena in the men's pole vault. Another, by Chithravel in triple jump, was equalled. New stars began to emerge, while some prospects who had been struggling began to find form.

Chithravel's effort of 17.37m — achieved on his third attempt — was easily the strongest performance at the Federation Cup. Although it's still early in the year, only two jumpers have leapt further than him this season. By virtue of this performance, he has already qualified for the World Championships in Tokyo.

With three jumps still in hand, Chithravel, in all likelihood, could have improved on the 17.37. "It

R. K. NITHIN

POLE VAULTER DEV MEENA IMPROVED ON HIS OWN NATIONAL RECORD OF 5.31M – SET AT LAST MONTH'S NATIONAL GAMES – WITH A CLEARANCE OF 5.35M IN KOCHI

would have been nice to have the record, but I'm thinking beyond it. I could have got the record here, but what's the point of risking an injury when there is a whole season ahead? I've made this jump (in 2023) before, but that year I was never able to come close to it. This year I want to be a lot more consistent," he said.

Apart from the World Championships, Chithravel also met the Athletics Federation of India's own qualifying standard for the Asian Championships this month. Having equalled his personal best, Chithravel, you might think, would be tempted to set a record as his goal, but, once again, he says 17.20m will be his target, which should guarantee him a podium finish. "Right now I want to be consistent. Anything above 17.20m would be good enough," he says.

A medal is also now on Kujur's mind. Having started training seriously only four years ago, he had been flirting with the Indian 200m record for a year now. But everything came together for him on the final day of the Federation Cup, as he clocked a new record: 20.40.

"The 200m is my race. When I run it, I'm confident no one else can win it," Kujur said after his victory. Thanks to his timing in Kochi, he now heads into the Asian Championships as a surprise favourite — not just for a podium finish, but potentially to become the first Indian ever to win the event. In the last quarter of a century, just one athlete has ever run a faster time than 20.40 at the Asian Championships.

Pole vaulter Dev improved on his own national record of 5.31m — set at last month's National Games —

On the mark: Shaili Singh's 6.64m long jump was a new meet record.
THULASI KAKKAT

with a clearance of 5.35m in Kochi. The fact that he made his clearance in his first attempt at that height, and by several inches, suggests that there are more records on the horizon. "I think I could have jumped 5.45m or even 5.50 without doing anything different," he told *Sportstar* after the competition.

However, unexpected rain shortly after his 5.35m clearance meant Dev chose not to risk slipping while attempting a higher jump. As a result, he missed the opportunity to qualify for the Asian Championships, with the AFI holding firm on the 5.51m qualification standard. Though he won't compete again until the National Inter-State Championships in August, Dev's steady progress suggests another record could well be on the horizon.

While Dev will have to wait to get a chance to show his ability, a fair number of athletes will get their chance very soon at the Asian Championships. Twinkle Chaudhary (2:00.71) clocked the fourth-fastest time by an Indian in the 800m, while 22-year-old Pooja from Haryana wasn't far behind with an impressive time of 2:02.89.

Tejaswin Shankar (7603) came within 63 points of his own national record of 7666 in the men's decathlon, set at the Asian Games in Hangzhou. It's a number Tejaswin says he could have crossed by 100 points if conditions had been more favourable — and he will get that chance in the far cooler climes of Gumi, South Korea, in a few weeks.

For some others, the Fed Cup was an important return to form. Perhaps no athlete would feel this as strongly as Shaili Singh. The 21-year-old was seen as the heir apparent to her coach, World bronze medallist Anju Bobby George, after making the second-best ever jump by an Indian (6.76m) in 2023.

Since then, though, Shaili has struggled, as injuries — first to her shoulder at the Asian Games and then subsequently to her take-off leg — took their toll. Despite her best efforts, she failed to qualify for the Paris Olympics.

2025, though, is a new start. Shaili seems to have found her feet with a jump of 6.64m in the women's long jump. The jump was a new meet record, erasing the 23-year-old mark of 6.59m set by Anju.

While Shaili appears to be on the right track, she will have company in Gumi. Asian Games silver medallist Ancy Sojan seemed to be struggling for much of the competition before clearing 6.46m in her penultimate jump. She then concluded with a monstrous jump that seemed well over the 6.70m mark — but for the unfortunate blemish of starting a millimetre beyond the take-off board. She'll get her chance soon enough — as will some of India's best athletes.

They might have started off impressively, but they know that the real test of the season begins now. That's certainly what Chithravel believes.

"Now the real challenge starts. It's not just important to have one or two big performances. We have to show that we can consistently stay at this level," he says.

WATCH THE INTERVIEW

50 METRES, THREE POSITIONS, ONE DESTINY

Sift Kaur Samra's shots are being heard around the globe, as the world record holder is back on the leaderboard. Will she be able to exorcise the ghosts of the past?

Santadeep Dey
santadeep.dey@thehindu.co.in

Sift Kaur Samra has the vibe of any other 23-year-old. A Bollywood buff, her heart beats for lo-fi music, distant horizons, and untold adventures.

She also swoons over puppies and swears by Italian platters at Chandigarh's Virgin Courtyard. Her carefree demeanour is the very antithesis of the mental image we have of champion shooters.

But at the shooting range, a quiet focus takes over. As her eyes lock onto the target 50 metres away, her fingers are steady, and breath measured. Not even a smile escapes her lips, even when her .22-calibre bullet hits 10.9.

For a marathon discipline like 50m rifle 3 positions (3P), you need to display extraordinary levels of core strength, zen-like concentration, and above all, mental fortitude. Sift checks all the boxes. It's almost as if she's found the Powerpuff Girls' Chemical X hidden away in an obscure corner of Professor Utonium's cabinet.

Sift set a world record at the 2023 Asian Games with a score of 469.6, surpassing Seonaid McIntosh's mark by 2.6 points.

Sift set a world record at the 2023 Asian Games with a score of 469.6, surpassing Seonaid McIntosh's mark by 2.6 points. The record may not stand the test of time like javelin legend Jan Železný's, who traced the arc of immortality with his throw of 98.48m almost 30 years ago, but Sift has already done her bit to reiterate that Indian shooting no longer merely takes part in marquee tournaments to make up the numbers.

In a country where world records in any sport are hard to come by, Sift's story is one that many relate to. A dreamy-eyed girl sets out to become a doctor. Fast forward to 2019, and she's traded the stethoscope for a rifle at the 50m range.

Almost miraculously, it takes her only four years to set a world record. Naturally, she is seen smiling across four columns of all newspapers the next day. Endorsements roll in. She becomes an overnight sensation

Say cheers: Sift poses with her gold medal after her win at the Beunos Aires ISSF World Cup early this month.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Gold medal tally

China - 5 (11)
India - 4 (8)
USA - 2 (6)

with less than a year to go for the Paris Olympics.

A perfect protagonist. An inspiring narrative. But what's a good story without an equally good redemption arc?

Almost as spectacularly as she rose, Sift took a fall. Expectations were high ahead of the Summer Games. In fact, she was touted to outshine poster girl Manu Bhaker. "It is only in India that the Olympics is hyped up so much. There is publicity even before the competition. It was all very new for me. When people started talking while it was all building up to the day, a bit of nerves had crept in," Sift admits.

But, in the end, Sift finished 31st in a field of 32 to return empty-handed. She, her coach Deepali Deshpande, and even the odd fan scrolling through the online scoreboard were understandably stunned into silence.

Sift's mother Ramnik Kaur, who was seated in the stands, had the most unexpected reaction of all. "My mom poked fun, saying you came second but from the bottom. This was right after I had packed. She was just trying to make me laugh," Sift remembers.

The gravity of the situation, though, wasn't lost on Ramnik. Knowing that Sift loved to travel, she promptly packed bags to get her daughter to shift her attention away from what had just transpired.

"Nobody allowed me to stay alone during that period because they figured that wouldn't be the right thing to do," Sift says.

"My parents asked me to pack my stuff. My cousin had come down and we went on a mini one-day trip. My mother kept saying, 'It was just a bad day, let it go.' Yes, the Olympics comes once every four years, but for a professional athlete, it is just another tournament where, unfortunately, I didn't fare that well. It wasn't like I was going to stop shooting after that. I was sulking a bit, but only because I knew people were expecting a lot from me. The bad aftertaste lingered until I came to India."

Back home, Sift's father, Pawandeep Singh, took charge. "The day after I landed, Dad sent me to the range to prepare for 10m air rifle for the upcoming State competition. My father never gave me the liberty of having an idle mind so that I didn't end up overthinking. Some people said I should have rested. I do understand where they came from, but I feel it was also important to get it ingrained in my head that all was normal and nothing out of the ordinary had just happened."

But how does one shake off an Olympic disappointment? It would seem Sift would have had to spend days in quiet introspection. But the reality, as it turns out, was very different.

"I had heard a lot of stories in the past. When people came back without a medal, they took time to recover. But then I thought: 'What is the point of sitting and thinking about something I cannot go back and change?'"

GETTY IMAGES

SIFT SHOT 52.3 AND 51.2 IN THE FIRST TWO SERIES IN THE STANDING SEGMENT, WHICH PROPELLED HER TO THE VERY TOP OF THE LEADERBOARD

And sure enough, Sift left it all behind like a bad dream. At the very start of the season on February 3, she struck gold at the National Games. A week later, she topped two selection trials. Incidentally, her T2 qualification score of 595 would have seen her become the first to qualify for the final in Paris 2024.

Quite unsurprisingly, she was the Indian team's first pick for the season-opening ISSF World Cup in Argentina. The fact that Sift's first international event straight after the Olympics was being held at the Tiro Federal Argentino de Buenos Aires, a range that hadn't hosted a World Cup before, added further drama. No one knew what to expect.

The sighters done away with, Sift picked up where she left off in Delhi, even registering a perfect 100 in the second round of Kneeling. The qualification concluded without a hitch and Sift's 590 secured her pole position ahead of the final. The first signs of trouble bobbed up when nature decided to play spoilsport.

"In India, we start competitions by 8:30-9 am. Here we started at 2:30 pm. The temperature and weather conditions are very different [according to historical data on Weather Underground, in Buenos Aires it was 16.1 degrees Celsius at that point in time, while in New Delhi the lowest recorded temperature on the same day was 21.1 degrees]. When we started our match, it was already extremely windy and cold. In the final, since it was already approaching sunset, the wind direction was changing and even the intensity was variable."

Sift, clearly affected, couldn't land a single shot inside the 10-ring in her first series of five shots. Having led through the qualification, she had suddenly dropped to last. And there was a 2.5-point difference between her and then seventh-placed Wang Zifei. When Kneeling finished, everyone except Sift was well inside the 150s. Sift's score read 147.2.

A collective gasp ran through as Parisian flashbacks came back to the crowd. Sift, however, blessed with a mature head on young shoulders, didn't freeze.

"'I can't give up hope,' I thought. And one good thing about 3P is that even if one of your positions is ruined, you have two more to recover in. This wasn't the first time I was doing badly in Kneeling. It was very bad, yes, but nothing I had not been through."

In Prone, she fared comparatively better, but she was still at the bottom of the pile. The gap to seventh place, though, had come down to 0.2. "By the time we started Standing, it had started to go dark. I faced a lot of problems, but knew I had to shoot well here to recover my rankings," Sift says.

Standing has always been her favourite position, but earlier that day in the qualification, Sift had scored the lowest in it. But that didn't matter as Sift started Standing — also the elimination round — with a bang. She shot 52.3 and 51.2 in the first two series, which not only saw her dodge the axe but also propelled her to the very top of the leaderboard.

And once she had broken free from the pack, there was no looking back. She kept widening the gap at the top to eventually claim the gold medal with a score of 458.6. Germany's Anita Mangold won silver with 455.3. Interestingly, Sift had been a massive 7.2 points behind Anita after Kneeling!

She would later confess she had help. "I'd say it was God who helped me bridge the gap," she says.

Sift did fall short of the final spot in the subsequent Peru World Cup by one point, but she has a shot at becoming the first Indian woman to win the World Championship gold in November. "I will try my best is all I can say. It will be in Cairo, where it will be windy. I have been there. It will be at the end of the year, so there is a lot of time left. Before that, we will have the Asian Championship as well," Sift says, her brows furrowed and gaze unwavering.

And there it was — the very real image of the quintessential champion shooter.

« Sift shares her thoughts on the introduction of a 'Standing only' 50m 3 Positions final for the next Olympics

It will be a little bit interesting. I don't know many details, though, be it the number of shots we will be taking or the time we will be getting. Now, in Standing, we have 50 seconds for a single shot. But I think this will be good for the Indians because all our athletes have a very good [record in] 'Standing'. It is a favourable position for us. It is going to help us, but we never know, because now all the athletes – even foreigners – will also work on a single position. It is a new thing. We are excited to find out how challenging it will be.

We haven't discussed [the training regime] yet. The qualification will be the same, though. So, we will have to go through all three positions, and do well in all of them. Once the [detailed] rules come, only then will we be able to draw out a strategy on how to work on this new change »

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

« To improve my game, I have to play with people who are better than me rather than those I know I can beat »

ANAHAT SINGH

Nihit Sachdeva
nihit.s@thehindu.co.in

Anahat Singh caught the nation's attention in 2022 when she participated in the last Commonwealth Games in Birmingham as the youngest member of the Indian team. Since then, she has proved multiple times that she is a potential star in the making. The 17-year-old is now a two-time national champion and the country's top-ranked (World No. 62) female player in the sport.

Under the guidance of a coaching team comprising Gregory Gaultier (Former World No. 1), Stephane Galifi (Former World No. 40), and mentor Saurav Ghosal (Former World No. 10), along with support from JSW Sports, the Delhi girl has made tremendous progress at the senior level. And there is more to come.

Currently studying in Class 11, Anahat is part of the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (Development Group) and is arguably India's best medal hope when the sport makes its Olympic debut in Los Angeles in 2028.

In an exclusive chat with *Sportstar*, she reflects on the transition from the junior level to the senior circuit, qualifying for her maiden World Championships (May 9-17 in Chicago), balancing squash and academics, and the Olympic dream.

You played at the Commonwealth Games at the age of 14 in 2022 and, the following year, won two bronze medals at the Asian Games. How did those experiences, so early in your career, shape your journey in the sport?

Playing at such events is huge. Doing it at such a young age was possibly one of the best experiences and learning moments for me. By going there and spending time with seniors from all sports, not just squash, I understood what their daily routine is like.

Winning two medals at the Asian Games at any age would be a big deal, but getting them so early in my career is something I'll never forget. At that point, I thought I was playing quite well — but two years later, if I watch that video, I feel I was playing terribly. I've improved a lot since then, and one of the biggest reasons would be because of those two events.

In the last one and a half years, you began the transition from juniors to seniors. You played many PSA Challenger Tour events and did extremely well. What kind of changes did you make in terms of training, fitness, preparation and scheduling?

Earlier, I was playing both junior and senior events. I'm still playing juniors, but not on the Indian circuit — mostly just international tournaments. It's given me more time to focus on what's important, rather than just travelling all the time, from tournament to tournament.

It's not about playing events where I'm sure I would win and not really getting much practice. It's more about those that help improve my ranking, offer more practice, and experience as well.

Also, in terms of training, I have clearer goals now. I'm not just training aimlessly — I have tournaments to look forward to. I know who I'm going to play, and it's going to be a big competition for me.

The time I'm putting on court would honestly be a bit less because I've got school and travelling going on, but it's more focused. It's more about quality over quantity.

I've started working in the gym a lot more. I wasn't doing anything earlier, but now, slowly, I'm getting into it. I'm still not used to it — I get very tired and complain a lot, but I realise that at the end of the day, it's beneficial for me.

Also, I didn't have a constant coach when I was playing juniors until last year. Now, I have Grégory Gaultier, a

former World No. 1, on board. I used to train with Stéphane Galifi before, but now, having both of them and Saurav (Ghosal) together is an amazing mix. They all have such great experiences, and I'm really grateful to have them together. Saurav plans the tournaments I play, especially on the PSA circuit, because the points system can be a bit confusing.

Winning matches at the senior level also requires a lot of mental strength. Do you have a mental coach?

No, I don't. Thankfully, I don't really get stressed out before matches. Especially, when playing seniors, there's no pressure for me. It's more for the seniors who are playing me. That's one good thing. That's how I'm performing better right now because when I step onto the court, I don't really feel any pressure. It's more when I'm playing juniors because there's a certain expectation.

I'm gaining a lot of experience playing with all these players and when I go onto the court, it's not about winning, especially with people who are better than me or at the same level. It's about just playing my best and improving my game, no matter what the result is.

In 2024, you won nine titles on the PSA Challenger Tour and lost just one match. However, at the World Team Championships in December in Hong Kong, you had some really tough losses against Nele Coll (Belgium – Former World No. 4), Amanda Sobhy (USA – Current World No. 8), and Sarah-Jane Perry (England – World No. 23). What are your takeaways from that whole season?

Before 2024, I was playing PSA but not properly. I played whenever I had the time or if it was combined with a junior tournament.

The Olympics coming into the picture was a huge reason, but I also realised that if I wanted to improve my game, I had to play with people who are better than me rather than those I know I can beat.

My dad made me play a few tournaments in India and I started winning the smaller ones. I travelled for a few outside India as well. At my first international PSA (ACE Challenger Tour 12k in Kuala Lumpur), I lost in the quarters (to Akanksha Salunkhe). After that, I was a bit sad because it was my first international tournament and I hadn't really done well.

However, I then won a few more in India because we had some bigger tournaments here. My ranking went up, I broke into the Top 100 which took a lot of time, and I realised that I needed to start playing some of the bigger tournaments.

The transition was hard at first — just going from playing with people you know you're going to beat and have been playing for years, to

Early gains: "Winning two medals at the Asian Games at any age would be a big deal, but getting them so early in my career is something I'll never forget," says the 17-year-old Anahat.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Power and poise: Anahat (centre) teamed up with Sunayna Kuruvilla for the women's doubles event at the 2022 Commonwealth Games. GETTY IMAGES

playing people like those you mentioned at the World Team Championships who've been at the top for so many years. At the World Team Champs, I played Nele Coll. I had a really close match (1–3) with her. It was on the first day of the tournament, and for the next week, I was so exhausted.

That was a huge learning point. If I'm already so tired from just one match, there's a lot to work on. I wasn't really able to perform too well when I played with the other two girls, but after that, in the last few months, I've been working on staying consistent and being able to play at that level for a long period of time, rather than just playing one tough match and then being tired for the rest of the tournament.

What was your mindset heading into the World Championship Qualifiers (Asia) in Kuala Lumpur last month?

The week before that tournament, I was in Prague, training with my coach, Gregory. I told him that I wasn't playing too well. I wasn't feeling good inside the court. He said it was fine. I was playing with some of the top players. When you're playing with someone so much better than you, you feel you're not playing really well, but he said it would all come together in the tournament.

I was not very confident going into the tournament. I was expected to play Tanvi (Khanna) in the semis and Akanksha in the finals as per the draw, but they both ended up losing earlier. I had the whole situation planned out, but it turned out to be completely different.

It did give me a bit more confidence because (rather than) playing someone you're facing constantly and are very competitive with, it's better to play someone else who's international and you've not really played against a lot.

I was playing well in the first few matches. I won quite easily and the court also suited me. The final wasn't my best game. I was a bit stressed out because you know when you've reached so close to the finish line and you're like, "Am I going to make it or not?" But I'm glad I was able to make it through.

How do you prepare for your matches at the senior level? Does it involve data and video analysis?

I talk to my coach either on the morning of my match or the night before, but I also like to watch my opponent's match by myself and see what I can do from my perspective.

My coach explains her strong and weak points, but also, analysing yourself rather than someone else telling you is always better. So, the night before, I always like to watch my opponent's match. I might be playing differently that week compared to the week before. So, I don't really like to watch too much in advance. I don't do anything too fancy.

Earlier, the Olympics wasn't in the picture but now, the sport will make its Olympic debut at Los Angeles 2028. There is no guarantee whether it will feature in future editions. How did that change your approach towards the sport?

They had been trying to get squash into the Olympics for the last few years but it wasn't happening. I think the timing couldn't have been more perfect for me. It's going to be when I am 20 and hopefully, at that time, I'm at my peak.

The Olympics is the main aim for every athlete. The training has changed completely. We don't really know what the selection criteria is yet

Big strides: Anahat won the women's title at the recently concluded JSW Indian Open, while Egypt's Kareem El Torkey won the men's crown. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

because there's still quite some time left. We'll only know next year or in 2027, but it's probably going to be based on the rankings. Just to be safe, the top 20 should qualify and I'm 60 right now. I have a lot of work left to do.

It's also the main reason why I shifted from juniors to seniors because juniors isn't the aim in the long run — the Olympics is. The only way that's going to happen is if I'm top 20 in the world. Just playing these tournaments helps my ranking and helps me understand where my level is right now compared to all the seniors, and where I need to work so that I'm able to compete with them and get a medal as well in the next three years.

How have the tournaments at home helped you in your journey?

In March, there were two events — SRFI Indian Tour, Chennai, and JSW Indian Open, Mumbai. I was ranked around 80 prior to those tournaments and because I won both, I reached 60. I had my exams that ended a week before those two tournaments. If I had to play something internationally, it would have been really difficult and I would have still been stuck at 80.

Being in India made it so much easier to board a flight, travel and play a tournament where I'm familiar with the crowd. It's a huge advantage playing in your home country rather than somewhere outside because of all the travel and the jet lag.

It all pays off in the performance as well. Those two tournaments were really important for me. I wouldn't have qualified for the World Championship if I hadn't won those two. I wouldn't have gone to play in the qualifiers either.

What are the major events for you for the rest of the season?

I have the World Championship right now and then I have the British Open qualifying (May 27-29), which is the biggest tournament after the World Championship. If I do qualify, the main draw starts just two days later.

Then I'm playing the Asian Doubles Championships (June 23-27) in Malaysia, the Asian Junior Championships (July 1-5 in Korea), and the World Junior Championships (July 21-August 1 in Egypt) as well over the summer.

RAPID FIRE

Which app do you use the most on your phone?
Snapchat

Which movie did you watch recently?
Anyone But You

One favourite dish that you can sacrifice for the rest of your life in exchange for an Olympic medal?
Sushi

One squash player whose style you really like or want to emulate?
World No. 3 Hania El Hammamy (Egypt)

If not a squash player, which profession would you have picked for yourself?
Badminton

Which song is always there on your practice playlist?
Hall of Fame by The Script

MIST, METTLE AND MAGIC

Those who brave the journey to Menchukha will be rewarded with the sight of a **pristine valley** where time seems to slow down and nature takes centre stage.

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

Tucked away in the far reaches of Arunachal Pradesh, Menchukha is a valley where nature and community thrive side by side.

Known for its healing waters — 'Men' meaning medicinal, 'Chu' meaning water, and 'Kha' meaning ice — the landscape is alive with the energy of its river, snow-capped peaks, and pine-covered hills.

Reaching Menchukha is no easy task, with the border village a long drive away (more than 12 hours from the nearest airport).

The journey feels like an expedition in itself — under-construction routes, rain-affected roads, scattered cattle, and a thick veil of mist that sometimes seems to swallow the way ahead.

But those who brave the journey are rewarded with the sight of a pristine valley, untouched in many ways by modernity, where time seems to slow down and nature takes centre stage.

Beyond its breathtaking landscapes, Menchukha is witness to a surprisingly active lifestyle, which offers glimpses into its sporting culture.

Sporting spirit by the Siyom

Life by the Siyom River is active by instinct. Children are seen playing football on flat fields, a beloved sport across the North-East. Even soldiers stationed at high-altitude posts, 11,000ft above sea level, enjoy a game of cricket against the backdrop of the misty Himalayan peaks.

The Siyom, a tributary of the Brahmaputra, is central to many forms of activity other than farming and fishing. While primarily serving the needs of the settlements along its banks, its calm stretches and challenging rapids embrace river-based sports like kayaking and rafting.

Trekking trails cut across the valley too — some leading up to religious spots like Shekhar Bumji, a hilltop shrine dripping with what locals believe to be holy water.

The path to the iconic 'Menchukha' mound, where large white letters welcome visitors at the entrance, is a scenic walk that guides one to an insurmountable vantage point.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Upon reaching the sign at the top, the final reward is the view of the entire village and a beautiful sunrise peeking through — a spectacle even Chief Minister Pema Khandu was keen to witness.

Even on a windy, chilly morning, with cloud cover and a slight drizzle, the sprightly 45-year-old CM made the most of the early natural light.

A home for adventure racing

Against this backdrop, it felt natural when Menchukha recently hosted the National Adventure Racing Championship, a demanding team sport combining running, biking, kayaking, and navigation.

Drawing teams from across India and neighbouring countries for the nation's first high-altitude border adventure race, the sport found a home here. Endurance and exploration were already part of everyday life, and the race only made visible what the locals had practised for generations.

As visitors cycled through narrow paths, trekked forest trails, and paddled down the Siyom's rapids, the people of Menchukha gathered in support.

Even the state media from Itanagar flocked to the usually quiet town to capture the historic moment.

The buzz of the event amplified throughout the valley for a few days, celebrating Menchukha's beauty, culture, and untapped potential for border tourism and adventure sports. But it is not just select opportunities like these that the state relies on to expand its sporting culture. Traditionally celebrated for its indigenous sports like wrestling, bamboo polling, and animal sports, it is now making significant strides into mainstream athletics.

Arunachal is actively investing in sports infrastructure and athlete development to enhance its presence on the national stage. In April, it was announced that the Arunachal State Games will be held annually as part of the state's official sports calendar.

To further support this growing sports ecosystem, the government has approved the construction of new stadiums across various districts, including an international-standard facility with a seating capacity of 25,000 in Itanagar.

Balancing dreams and preservation

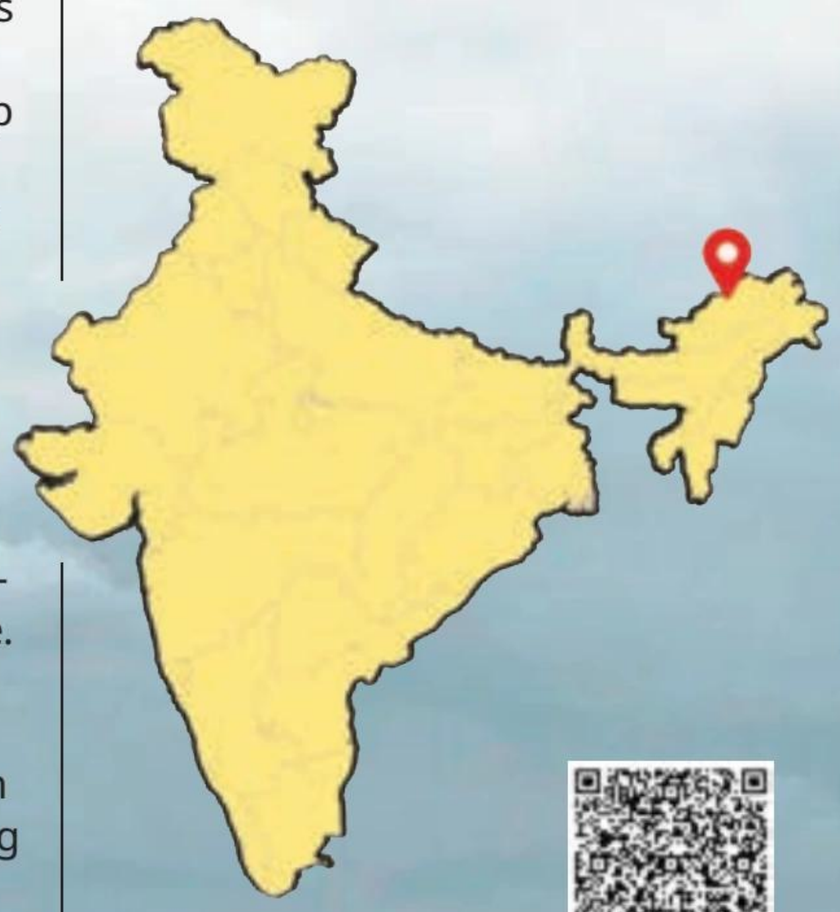
Yet, Menchukha and Arunachal remain mindful of change. Basic infrastructure is slowly being developed — a few small hydropower plants power homes, but mobile networks remain patchy and unpredictable.

As tourism interest grows, locals like Pema, a homestay owner, stress the need for thoughtful growth. There is plenty underway to develop the town, but as much as the locals love hosting people, they also want 'to protect what makes it special'.

As one resident puts it, "There is no intention of compromising too much nature for the sake of development."

In Menchukha, sport isn't something that needs organising — it rises naturally from the landscape. Far from the stadiums and spotlights, the region is quietly shaping a sporting culture rooted in nature, tradition, and joy, inculcating a spirit as endless and untamed as the river that runs through it.

Fight to the finish: Scenes from the National Adventure Racing Championship. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT
Below: A view of the Menchukha valley. KAVITA MENON



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IN SEARCH OF THE RIGHT VISION

The Super Cup remains a tournament **caught between identities** : too short to matter, too tired to inspire.

Joan Mathew Jacob
joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in

Moments after FC Goa went 3-0 up against Jamshedpur FC in the Super Cup 2025 final, a sky-shattering storm consumed the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar. It felt like the heavens had opened up in celebration — if not for the tournament, then at least for a team that had finally shrugged off its recent stumbles.

"The second goal killed the game, and then the storm almost killed us," joked head coach Manolo Marquez.

But nothing about FC Goa's campaign looked vulnerable. It was dominant, deliberate, and ultimately historic. The club became the first to win the Super Cup twice and, more significantly, earned a spot in the AFC Champions League Two (ACL2) 2025–26 season.

For Marquez, who ended his stint at FCG on a high, this was a fitting farewell. But the context around his success couldn't be ignored. The Super Cup, despite all its intent, still hasn't figured out what it wants to be.

Vital cogs: FC Goa's foreign contingent scored nine of its 11 goals. Borja (centre) and Iker led the way with four each, while Carl McHugh scored one. PICS: BISWARANJAN ROUT

No rhythm, no crowds, no traction

A plan to integrate the Super Cup into the regular ISL season was quietly shelved. "We thought it could be done in the FA Cup style," said AIFF Deputy Secretary M. Satyanarayan. "But it was difficult to schedule midweek games."

The fallback was far from ideal. The competition returned just two weeks after the ISL ended, squeezing 14 games into 13 days. Early kick-offs under Bhubaneswar's punishing sun only made things worse. Most stadium seats stayed empty.

Fatigue became a running theme. Teams sent depleted squads, rested key players, and played it safe. Mumbai City FC head coach Petr Kratky summed it up after their semifinal exit against JFC: "If you play every three days in this kind of climate, the players will get tired. We have had enough injuries already."

Moreover, the decision to restrict the tournament to a single venue over a short span deprived teams — especially lower division sides like Inter Kashi and Gokulam Kerala — of the opportunity to host matches and engage their local fanbases.

Such a model would not only boost ticket numbers but also make results like Kashi's one-off win in this tournament over ISL giant Bengaluru FC in the first round more memorable, highlighting the beauty and unpredictability of cup football.

However, according to Satyanarayan, Odisha was granted the rights to host the competition because of its intent to foster a football culture in the state. "We can't have every game in West Bengal and Kerala, where we know the crowds will come."

"In other states, you have to start somewhere," he explained.

Unlike the ISL (which allows four), the Super Cup allowed six foreigners per team on the pitch. Unsurprisingly, the two teams that went all-in — FCG and JFC — reached the final.

Uneven field, predictable finish

Unlike the ISL (which allows four), the Super Cup allowed six foreigners per team on the pitch. Unsurprisingly, the two teams that went all-in — FCG and JFC — reached the final.

The biggest surprise came from the ISL Shield and Cup champion Mohun Bagan Super Giant, which decided to relieve all of its overseas stars except one from the regular season and send a reserve squad for an "exposure trip", in the words of its stand-in coach Bastab Roy.

While the youngsters held their mettle against Kerala Blasters FC in the quarters, they were quickly

Boss talk: Khalid Jamil and Manolo Marquez, the coaches of Jamshedpur FC and FC Goa.

FC GOA HAD THE BETTER TACTICS – AND THE BETTER PLAYERS. MARQUEZ HAD BEEN CLEAR FROM THE START: HE WANTED THE TROPHY AND THE ACL2 SPOT. HE GOT BOTH.

brought back down to earth by FCG, which dispatched them 3-1 in the semifinal. Goa's foreign contingent scored nine of its 11 goals. Borja and Iker led the way with four each, while Carl McHugh scored one.

Jamshedpur FC, too, under Khalid Jamil, leaned heavily on its foreign core to make the final. All three of its goals came from overseas players, and the centre-back pairing of Stephen Eze and Lazar Cirkovic formed the spine of a resilient defence. But when it mattered most, FC Goa had the better tactics — and the better players. Marquez had been clear from the start: he wanted the trophy and the ACL2 spot. He got both.

In contrast, many clubs from both the ISL and I-League treated the tournament as an afterthought. With injuries mounting and motivation dipping, it became more about survival than silverware.

What should have been a knockout showpiece became a scheduling chore.

What's next? Even the winners aren't sure

Marquez, despite lifting the trophy, echoed a broader concern.

"I would like a competition with only Indian players," he said. "Obviously, with all the foreigners, the quality is there. But then the improvement of the Indian players is also there." That vision — a platform for Indian talent to thrive — might still be the Super Cup's best shot at relevance. Even for Marquez, who is transitioning to exclusively coaching the men's national team, such tournaments could be his primary output to identify and nurture talent.

Moreover, Indian club football has always had extended gaps between the seasons, compared to the majority of competitions around the world, which have a two-month break. In this regard, a planned and stretched-out cup competition could just be key to helping teams and players keep up their tempo without risking burnout.

With Satyanarayan ruling out the possibility of expanding the tournament to include teams from lower tiers like I-League 2 and 3, due to the huge gap in finance and calibre of the players, the future of the Super Cup is up in the air.

But for now, it remains a tournament caught between identities: too short to matter, too tired to inspire.

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REUTERS

TOP-DRAWER DRAMA

FOR MORE STORIES

Inter Milan and Barcelona produced an **instant classic,** battling to a thrilling draw in the first leg of their semifinal showdown.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

'Football, Bloody Hell!' — Sir Alex Ferguson's adrenaline-fuelled remark spoke volumes about the tensions surrounding UEFA Champions League (UCL) clashes. This was the final of 1999, between Manchester United and Bayern Munich.

Two decades later, the competition continues to give goosebumps. The first leg of the semifinal clash between Barcelona and Inter Milan, which previously had Pep Guardiola and Jose Mourinho as the poster boys of an iconic rivalry, turned out to be a blockbuster affair.

Inter scored within a minute, then doubled the lead before Barcelona pulled one back, going on to equalise within the first half. Inter retook the lead before Barca restored parity again at 3-3. At the final whistle, players and fans alike ran out of breath.

Only four semifinals in the European Cup/Champions League before this had seen three or more goals scored by each team.

Two players stole the spotlight in the match — one named after a Hollywood icon, Denzel Washington (Denzel Dumfries), and the other 'baptised' by Lionel Messi (Lamine Yamal).

Inter's Dumfries scored twice and assisted another, while Yamal **(above)** ran rings around the Inter defence, scoring once, creating two chances and taking six shots — one fewer than the entire Italian club.

With the goal, the 17-year-old Yamal became the youngest goalscorer in a UCL semifinal, breaking the record of Kylian Mbappe. Dumfries, meanwhile, became the first Dutch player to hit a brace in a UCL semifinal.

"Yamal is clearly a talent of the type born every 50 years. Talents like this I've never really seen before," Inter manager Simone Inzaghi said after the match.

In the other semifinal, Paris

Saint-Germain (PSG) edged out Arsenal through a goal from Ousmane Dembele. But it was Gianluigi Donnarumma who stood firm, making five saves — the most by a PSG goalkeeper in a UCL knockout game without conceding a goal since 2003–04. This was also the second time in his career that he made five or more saves and kept a clean sheet in a UCL game, the first being against Manchester City in 2021. With only a goal separating the Gunners and the French champion, and Barca and Inter level on aggregate, the return legs are poised to be blockbusters again — with PSG manager Luis Enrique likely eyeing a reunion against his former side, Barcelona, in Munich.

In the Europa League, Manchester United delivered a commanding 3-0 win in the first leg against 10-man Athletic Bilbao in Spain. Casemiro opened the scoring and captain Bruno Fernandes scored twice, including a penalty, helping the Red Devils keep one foot in what will be their third Europa League final in eight years. In the other semifinal, Tottenham Hotspur beat Bodo/Glimt 3-1 in the first leg, with Brennan Johnson, James Maddison and Dominic Solanke getting on the scoresheet for the English side.

Tottenham was one of the teams in the first all-English Europa League (then called UEFA Cup) final in 1972. If the winners of the first leg maintain their leads, a Spurs versus United final would be only the third such instance in the tournament's history.

In the Europa Conference League, United loanee Antony took centre stage, winning a battle against his former teammate David De Gea, who now plies his trade for Fiorentina. The Brazilian struck with his weaker right foot in the 64th minute in a 2-1 win, taking his goal contributions to 10 — as many as he managed in 72 matches for the Red Devils. "I have trained 1,000 times with Antony and he has never scored a goal with his right foot," De Gea said after the match. Chelsea, meanwhile, thrashed Djurgarden 4-1, inching closer to its first European final since 2021.

(All results are updated as of May 5, 2025)

Making a statement: Manchester United delivered a commanding 3-0 win in the first leg against Athletic Bilbao in Spain, with Casemiro (extreme right) scoring the first goal. AP

SCORELINE

Champions League
Barcelona **3-3** Inter Milan
Arsenal **0-1** Paris Saint-Germain

Europa League
Athletic Bilbao **0-3** Manchester United
Tottenham **3-1** Bodo/Glimt

Europa Conference League
Real Betis **2-1** Fiorentina
Djurgarden **1-4** Chelsea

REDS RULE THE ROOST

Liverpool **dominated** every department en route to its title, as Arne Slot became the first Dutch manager to win the Premier League.

Aneesh Dey
aneesh.dey@thehindu.co.in

It was a night when one Red got on equal footing with another. After Sir Alex Ferguson had 'knocked Liverpool off their perch' as he had promised, the Merseyside club finally won its 20th league title to equal Manchester United's tally after thrashing Tottenham Hotspur 5-1 at Anfield.

Arne Slot became the first Dutch manager to win the Premier League, and Virgil van Dijk became the first Dutch player to win the Premier League as captain.

Liverpool dominated every department en route to its title, with the most goals (80), most shots (591), most shots on target (216), most expected goals (75.5), most big chances created (136), and touches in the opposition's box (1,274). It has been at the top of the Premier League table for 206 days this season, 165 more than any other side.

However, the Reds could not follow their league-winning match on a positive note, losing 1-3 to Chelsea, which gave a guard of honour to Slot and his team.

Liverpool's rival Manchester United's woes in the league continued with a 3-4 loss against Brentford, with manager Ruben

Blip on the radar: Liverpool could not follow their league-winning match on a positive note, losing 1-3 to Chelsea. AP

Amorim prioritising the Europa League semifinal second-leg fixture against Athletic Club as he fielded the club's youngest-ever Premier League starting team.

Manchester City edged past Wolves 1-0, providing a huge boost towards its quest to clinch a Champions League spot for the next season.

Arsenal dropped further points with a 1-2 loss against Bournemouth. Newcastle played a 1-1 draw with Brighton.

At the end of Round 34, Liverpool stays top with 82 points, followed by Arsenal (67), Manchester City (64), and Newcastle (63) in second, third and fourth. Chelsea (63) stays fifth, while Manchester United (39) languishes in 15th.

La Liga

Table-topper Barcelona edged a 2-1 win against Mallorca, with Real Madrid beating Celta Vigo 3-2 to maintain pressure on its arch-rival.

It was another frustrating day at the office for Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid, which drew 0-0 with Alaves. Athletic faced Real Sociedad in the Basque derby, which ended in a goalless draw.

After Round 34, Barcelona (79) and Real Madrid (75) occupy the first and second positions in the table, followed by Atletico (67) and Athletic (61) in third and fourth. Villarreal (58), in fifth, also remains in a UCL spot.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich had the chance to win a record-extending 34th Bundesliga title with a win against RB Leipzig. However, a 90+4 minute equaliser by Yussuf Poulsen led to the match finishing in a 3-3 draw and delayed the Bavarians' title celebrations.

A day later, however, Vincent Kompany's men clinched the league without kicking a ball after Bayer Leverkusen drew 2-2 against SC Freiburg, which took Bayern's lead to an unassailable one with two games remaining. Football also saw the 'Harry Kane curse' lifted, as the English forward won his first major career title. Borussia Dortmund, which has underperformed this season by its standards, beat Wolfsburg 4-0.

Eintracht Frankfurt played a 1-1 draw with Mainz.

After Round 32, Bayern (76) tops the standings, with Leverkusen second (68). Frankfurt (56) and Freiburg (52) occupy the final two UCL spots in third and fourth.

Serie A

Inter, which was dealt a huge blow in its bid to defend the Scudetto after a 0-1 loss against Roma, followed it up with a win by the same margin against Verona. Napoli, which capitalised on Inter's defeat, maintained top spot with a narrow 1-0 win against Lecce.

Juventus drew 1-1 with Bologna, while Atalanta had a fantastic day at the office after a 4-0 win against Monza.

After Round 35, Napoli (77) is top, followed by Inter (74). Atalanta (68) is third, and Juventus (63) is fourth. Milan beat Venezia 2-0 but is ninth with 54 points, with a game in hand.

Ligue 1

PSG, having already secured the title in its usual dominating fashion, will not finish the season unbeaten after suffering its first Ligue 1 defeat — a 3-1 loss to Nice at the Parc des Princes.

This was followed by its first away loss, a 1-2 defeat to Strasbourg, with manager Luis Enrique fielding a second-string side to focus on the Champions League semifinal second leg against Arsenal.

After Round 32, PSG stays top with 78 points. Marseille (59) is second, with Monaco (58) in third.

(All results are updated as of May 5, 2025)

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ANFIELD ASCENDS AGAIN

Liverpool is back onto the top perch of English football by matching Manchester United's record for **most league titles** after a gap of 14 years.

Aashin Prasad
aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

Arne Slot's appointment to succeed Jurgen Klopp at Anfield as the Liverpool manager was met with widespread scepticism. Klopp's nine-and-a-half reign at Anfield was an emotionally charged roller-coaster ride, studded with success and electrifying football. In contrast, Slot's approach seemed understated.

Ten months into the job, one wouldn't recall any quotable one-liners from the Dutchman's press conferences or raging celebrations while punching the air, as his famous predecessor often did. But in just his maiden season, he has got the job done in a calm manner, without any fuss or drama.

Slot **(right)** has led Liverpool to its first league title in five seasons, lifting the Merseyside club back onto the top perch of English football by matching Manchester United's record for most league titles after a gap of 14 years.

Klopp, who stepped down last summer, left Slot with enough tools to work with. The German had refreshed the midfield — a key

AFP

component of successful Liverpool teams — and added more firepower up front. "I am coming to a club that Jurgen left in a good place," Slot acknowledged in his first interview with *liverpoolfc.com*.

This team had spent 12 weeks at the top of the table the previous season before crumbling in the second half to finish third. Slot, who had coached Feyenoord to Eredivisie success, was entrusted with implementing his methods and philosophy to help take Liverpool to the next level.

'Football-obsessed' was how Trent Alexander-Arnold described him. Several players also pointed out his attention to detail, which made a crucial difference.

Before he walked into the AXA Training Centre in Kirkby, Slot had already analysed Liverpool's matches from the previous season, including training sessions, to better understand his new players.

"Just before we started the season, he showed us why we didn't win the league the year before," said centre-back Ibrahima Konate. "[There were] some details; he said if we improve on those, we have a big chance to win the league."

But there were other matters too, beyond the Dutchman's control. In the transfer market, Liverpool failed to land a defensive midfielder, with injury-prone forward Federico Chiesa being the sole last-minute arrival.

There was also a massive cloud hanging over the futures of its three biggest players — Mohamed Salah, Virgil van Dijk and Alexander-Arnold — all in the final year of their contracts.

To address the defensive midfield issue, Slot moved Ryan Gravenberch — who had little experience playing as the lone No. 6 before this season — into the role. The Netherlands international has been ever-present in the midfield three, complementing Alexis Mac Allister and Dominik Szoboszlai.

Gravenberch has made the most interceptions among midfielders in the league, while Mac Allister ranks fourth for tackles. Szoboszlai provided the link between defence and attack,

BEST PLAYERS

Most Goals: M. Salah (28)
Most Assists: M. Salah (18)
Most Passes: V. Van Dijk (2260)
Most Tackles: A. Mac Allister (95)
Most Interceptions: R Gravenberch (53)

CLUB STATFILE

Goals: 80 (1st)
Shots: 582 (1st)
Shot-creating actions: 1049 (1st)
Possession: 57.8 (3rd)
Goals Against: 32 (2nd)
Shots on Target Against: 109 (2nd)
Cleansheets: 14 (1st)
Goals from counter-attack: 14 (1st)

AP & REUTERS

Job well done: Trent Alexander-Arnold and Virgil van Dijk played crucial roles this campaign. **Above right:** To address the defensive midfield issue, Slot moved Ryan Gravenberch to the No. 6 role. REUTERS

allowing Liverpool's feared front three to do the damage.

Slot didn't come in looking to dismantle Klopp's ingrained style. Instead, he made a few adjustments to refine the existing system.

Slot's Liverpool wasn't the aggressive counter-pressing side it was under Klopp. Its PPDA (passes allowed per defensive action) dropped to 10.2 (4th best) from 8.9 (2nd) last season. But it exerted more pressures per game, up to 12.56 (5th) from 10.31 (3rd).

The defensive metrics saw an uptick as well, with expected goals (xG) against it dropping to 0.85 (1st), and xG allowed per shot coming down to 0.09 (1st) this season. The proportion of shots allowed from inside its own penalty box has reduced to 61.18% (1st), from 66.4% (8th) last year.

Slot's men blew away teams at Anfield with the trio of Salah, Luis Diaz **(left)** and Cody Gakpo running riot.

While Liverpool had always boasted a strong record at home under Klopp, Slot was tasked with fixing the club's wavering away form to make it a credible title challenger.

In the previous two seasons, the Reds claimed just 57 points on the road out of a possible 114. In 16 away matches this season,

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Liverpool have secured 38 points from 48 — the kind of form that delivered its last league title in 2019–20, with two games to spare.

The defence did its job, keeping eight clean sheets in 16 away fixtures, but it was Salah's goalscoring form on the road that helped turn impending defeats into draws and draws into victories.

Liverpool's transformation into an efficient counter-attacking side has enabled Salah **(right)** to enjoy his best season in terms of output in a Reds shirt. His 46 goal contributions (28 goals and 18 assists) leave him one shy of the all-time Premier League record.

Liverpool was the second-best counter-attacking side in the league last season, averaging a fast break per game with the fourth-best conversion rate. This year, it has been more clinical on turnovers, ranking first for most counter-attacks (1.8 per game) with the best conversion rate in the division.

Of the 41 goals Liverpool scored away from home, Salah was involved in 27 (16 goals and 11 assists) — the most by any player in a single Premier League season. More than half of his goals and assists came away from Anfield. Winners at Wolves and Southampton, and the equaliser away to Arsenal, helped set the tone for Liverpool early in the title race. Liverpool moved to the top of the table after matchweek five and, apart from a single matchday in week nine, it didn't wobble.

Beyond his coaching philosophy, another key factor that tipped the job in Slot's favour was Feyenoord's impressive injury record under him. During his three years in Rotterdam, player availability stayed above 90%. This season, Liverpool's key players remained fit for most of the campaign.

Last season, 20 injured players combined for 218 games missed, while this season, that figure has dropped to just 96 matches with 15 different injured players.

His attention to detail also extends off the pitch, with initiatives including yoga, hydrotherapy sessions, and allowing players to sleep at home before home games instead of in hotels. "People who have more knowledge about this than me tell me that you always sleep better in your own bed than a hotel bed," he explained.

Among the players to have started the most games for the Reds in each position, only five missed a combined 24 games, with Van Dijk, Salah, Mac Allister, Andrew Robertson, Gravenberch and Díaz available for 34 gameweeks.

It has been a near-perfect first season for Slot. However, the disappointment of failing to translate Liverpool's early European dominance into knockout success may still sting — but that would have been sweetened by the news that both skipper Van Dijk and Salah have extended their stays at the club.

Having come in with little expectations, Slot, in his unassuming manner, has now raised the bar by making Liverpool the best team in England. But it's impossible to talk about Slot's success without acknowledging Klopp's legacy at the club. Slot himself was the first to pay tribute, serenading the German during the title-winning celebrations in front of the Kop.

Just as Klopp **(below)** was credited for making the club's fans believe once again, they now know it is in safe hands with Slot.

All stats updated till Matchweek 34.

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GETTY IMAGES

LAST LAUGH AT BGIS 2025

SaumRaj won BGIS 2025 as the in-game leader (IGL) for Team Versatlie, becoming the first IGL to win two BGIS titles. After three days of **intense gaming,** the team finished on top with 169 points and took home a prize money of INR 69 lakh.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

Success stories are always great, but those which come after a failure are greater. Saumya Raj (aka SaumRaj) lived one when he clinched the Battlegrounds Mobile India Series (BGIS) 2025, last month.

SaumRaj, a popular name in the BGMI circuit, had won BGIS 2021 with Skylightz Gaming but failed to repeat his magic in 2023, watching his former teammate Ammar "Destro" Khan clinch the title.

Cut to 2025 — SaumRaj won BGIS 2025 as the in-game leader (IGL) for Team Versatlie, becoming the first IGL to win two BGIS titles. After three days of intense gaming, the team finished on top with 169 points and took home a prize money of INR 69 lakh.

GodLike Esports (152 points) came second while Orangutan (143 points) finished third, earning prize money of INR 38 lakh (including INR 1 lakh for being the fan favourite) and INR 26 lakh, respectively.

BGIS 2025 Award Winners

- MVP – Jonathan (Godlike Esports) – INR 3,00,000
- Finals MVP – Jonathan (Godlike Esports) – INR 1,50,000
- Best IGL – SaumRaj (Team Versatile) – INR 2,00,000
- Emerging Star – Scaryyjod – INR 1,00,000
- Best Clutch Player – Spower – INR 1,00,000
- Fan Favourite Player – Jonathan (Godlike Esports) – INR 1,00,000
- Fan Favourite Team – Godlike Esports – INR 1,00,000

BGMI also announced the dates for its Pro Series, the Battlegrounds Mobile India Pro Series (BMPS), which will begin on May 22 and will have the same prize money as its last edition at INR 2 crore.

The last edition was hosted in Hyderabad, but this time, it will be organised in New Delhi.

BEST BGMI PLAYERS IN INDIA

RUDRA "SPOWER" BANSWANI

JONATHAN "JONATHAN" AMARAL

SAUMYA "SAUMRAJ" RAJ

TANISHK "ADMINO" SINGH

ANKIT "AK" SHUKLA

DANIAL, TEJAS MAKE HISTORY AT WAVES ESPORTS CHAMPIONSHIP 2025, CLINCH FIRST-EVER GOLD FOR INDIA

Danial "DaNiAL" Patel and Tejaskumar Hasmukhbhai Bhoi made India proud by winning the international legs of the inaugural WAVES Esports Championship (WESC) earlier this month.

DaNiAL and Tejas competed against five countries in two titles, eFootball and World Cricket Championship 3 (WCC3), respectively.

In eFootball, formerly known as Pro Evolution Soccer, competing against Malaysia, Thailand, and Laos, DaNiAL beat Laos's Southiphone Singthong 5-3 and Thailand's Nathawat Satake 2-1 to enter the final, where he pipped Mohamad Azrudin Bin Yaacob from Malaysia 2-0 to strike gold.

Tejas dominated the WCC3 finals, which were played in a round-robin format, against Sri Lanka's Mohamad Shaad Mohamad Uvaiz and Nepal's Rajat Budathoki. The Indian secured the title with a victory over Budathoki.

GTA 6 RELEASE DATE CONFIRMED

How long is too long? Gaming enthusiasts have been left hanging with this question for one of the most anticipated games in the last decade – Grand Theft Auto (GTA) 6.

Over 12 years after the release of the predecessor, Rockstar Games remained tight-lipped about the dates for GTA 6's release, while some reports indicated that it would be later this year.

All those speculations were put to bed by the developer when it announced that the game will release on May 26, 2026.

Did you know? British F1 racer Lando Norris founded an esports team named Quadrant, which primarily fields teams for Halo tournaments.

LEGENDS ASCEND SOUTH ASIA TO HAVE A PRIZE POOL OF INR 1 CRORE

League of Legends (LoL) developer Riot Games has announced the launch of Legends Ascend South Asia, which began on April 27 and will go on till August, creating an avenue for amateur players to get into competitive LoL.

The tournament is an open-for-all, online-only amateur competition for teams from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, and has a prize pool of INR 1 crore. Legends Ascend South Asia features three open qualifiers, followed by a round-robin league stage and double-elimination playoffs. The winning team will qualify for the League of Legends Championship Pacific (LCP) Wildcard Playoffs, where teams will battle for a place in the LCP promotion and relegation tournament.

WHO AM I?

I was the first Indian player to reach 7000 MMR in Dota 2. I captained a national team that won a bronze medal at the Commonwealth Esports Championship.

The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz: ***N0tail***

BUSINESS OF
ESPORTS

Fortnite returned to iOS store after nearly five years, following the resolution of a legal suit between Apple and Epic Games, the game's publisher. Fortnite, released in 2017, has reportedly generated a revenue of over USD 40 billion.

EASTER EGG
'LAN'

'LAN' stands for Local Area Network. Esports tournaments, which are held via LAN and not online, have all players located at a centralised arena and their systems are all hooked up to the same network.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

WATCH THE INTERVIEW

« We have a car that is better than we've ever had before »

JAMES VOWLES

Anish Pathiyil
anish.p@thehindu.co.in

The name Williams has been synonymous with Formula One for half a century. Founded by Sir Frank Williams in the late '70s, the Grove-based outfit dominated the sport for two decades, winning seven Drivers' and nine Constructors' titles before the turn of the millennium.

The British team has found the going tough over the last few years, finishing dead last in the standings four times between 2018 and 2022, collecting just 39 points over the duration.

Under the ownership of US-based Dorilton Capital, and with former Mercedes Motorsport Strategy Director James Vowles at the helm since 2023, Williams has made rapid strides. The constructor eclipsed its 2024 points tally within four races of the 2025 season and looks set to challenge for fifth in the standings for the first time since 2017.

Taking over from the Williams family, who nurtured the team for 43 years, is no easy task, but Vowles has managed to instil confidence into the struggling outfit in his role as Team Principal.

In an exclusive chat with *Sportstar* on the sidelines of the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, Vowles spoke at length about the team's progress, his data-driven approach, preparing the garage for the soon-to-arrive regulations, the future of the sport, and more.

Five races into 2025, Williams has gotten off to a fast start compared to the last four seasons. How's the mood in the garage?

Highly positive. I think we always have to remember where we've come from. It is a privilege and a pleasure to be racing with a car that can score points every weekend — and it is — with two world-class drivers. You'd be surprised how much that carries you through the tireless and sleepless nights.

You've spoken about the continuous improvement you looked to bring when you took on this role in 2023. Two years on, do you think you're on the right track?

Yeah, I think the direction of travel is a good one. This car isn't what we've put our focus on. We've just been fixing some foundational issues, putting in system software, infrastructure, culture, technology, people — and it's nice to see that the car is moving up and corresponds to that. We have a car that is better than we've ever had before. I think the real test is breaking away from the midfield, closer to the front.

You touched upon your two drivers, Alex Albon and Carlos Sainz. Both of them are very experienced in the top tier of

Tall order: Taking over from the Williams family, who nurtured the team for 43 years, is no easy task, but Vowles has managed to instil confidence into the struggling outfit in his role as Team Principal.

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

Track stars: Vowles with the two Williams drivers — Carlos Sainz (left) and Alex Albon (right).

racing. What is it like working with them?

It's a breath of fresh air. First of all, there's no politics. Neither one wants anything more than for the team to be successful, which means that every meeting we have is about the greater good. How do we make it better next year? What's our direction of travel? What can I do to help? It's great to see that dedication they're putting into the team.

Over the last decade or so, Williams has given so many drivers their first shot at F1. Was it a genuine choice to go with two experienced drivers?

It was very much a case of me wanting experienced drivers by my side. I love investing in young drivers — they absolutely have a future with Williams. But we also have to acknowledge that last year, our attrition was high, and it meant we couldn't move forward in the field. For a few years, we've got to take stock and start developing this team into championship material.

Does the tag of being F1's fourth most successful team weigh heavily on you? Is there added pressure?

I don't think anything will put more pressure on me than I put on myself. That's probably the right way to describe it. The reason I'm here is because of our history. It's an incredible history. I want this team to be successful with all my heart. I'll make it my career goal to do so. That's more pressure than our legacy.

Right from your time with Mercedes, you've been very data-driven. Does it help that both your drivers are of the same ilk?

There's a reason why I've surrounded myself with individuals who are built the same way I am. That goes for our drivers, our senior management and our leaders. Data has to be at the heart of what you're doing. Because if you have someone going in a different direction, you can deviate from what is good.

This is a slightly different year for development, considering the new regulations coming in next season. Will teams focus on circuit-specific development?

You're going to find an interesting debate taking place up and down the pit lane. And that debate probably is between now and June. Do we do more, do we do less? There'll be some teams like Ferrari who came out and said, "No! We have to fix this." Red Bull also said that not long ago. But for teams like ourselves, our future isn't racing for 8th, 9th or 7th. Our future is racing for championships. You'll see we're making sacrifices for the next few years to bring ourselves to where we need to be.

Cut to the chase: Sainz and Albon battle it out at the Saudi Arabian GP.

When the cost cap rule was brought in, you explained how Williams was behind the leaders in capital expenditure, leaving you short on machinery and software. Two years on, are you better placed?

Yes, I was able to get us USD 20 million more, but by the time we finished the meeting, I think it was all spent. The rules are changing in 2026. You can spend whatever you want on capital expenditure, but you have to pay for the depreciation in your annual operating cap.

The 20 million allowed us to do the short-term bits that were needed, and the remainder will be done in conjunction with those rules.

An interesting topic came up in the press conferences in Saudi Arabia, about the V8 and V10 engines being brought back. What is your take on it? Is that the direction F1 should take?

Let's race with the rules that we've spent three years and hundreds of millions of dollars developing. After we've been racing for some time, let's take an honest step back. Are we doing the right thing for the sport, for the world?

I love the sound of the old V10s and V8s, but we also have to be honest with ourselves. I think what we are asking for is, let's make sure we have a tone to the engine — a sound that has emotion to it.

Both drivers have mentioned a fundamental issue affecting performance, which is a characteristic of the Williams car in itself. How difficult is it to handle an issue related to the structure?

The important thing is an open, honest discussion about what the real problems are, to make sure that we are not taking them into future cars. It's a problem that has been here for many years.

Though we've made improvements between 2023–24 and 2024–25, it's nowhere near the level of the top three teams. We need a bigger change to improve it considerably — and that's what Carlos and Alex are bringing to the party.

F1 requires fast cars to win championships. But how important is the team behind it? How much does the backroom staff influence a team?

Everything is about people and culture. People create your systems, processes and communications. The fast car is just an output from a thousand people working well together. I am not the reason why this team will be successful. My job is just to bring the right people together. If you don't have a set of people pointing the right way, the team will not win a world championship. Every single person matters.

REUTERS

MIAMI MAGIC FOR McLAREN

With his latest win coming at the Miami Grand Prix, Oscar Piastri is starting to **assert** himself as McLaren's championship leader.

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

The Miami Grand Prix continues to be a special chapter in McLaren's story. In 2024, it was the site of Lando Norris' long-awaited maiden Formula One win, an important moment in the timeline that sparked a monumental journey for the eventual constructors' champion.

Fast-forward to 2025, McLaren arrived in Miami as the team to beat and lived up to that billing with wins in both the sprint and main race.

For 25-year-old Norris, it was a strong feeling of deja vu as a timely Safety Car helped the British driver retain his lead and cross the finish line for the sprint race win. The spell of good fortune passed on to Oscar Piastri **(left)** in the main event.

The Australian claimed his third Grand Prix win in a row on Sunday, further extending his lead in the drivers' championship and pulling away from Norris.

Early success for Antonelli

Just when there was a hint of monotony starting to develop in the results, Mercedes' Kimi Andrea Antonelli **(right)** decided to shake things up by becoming the youngest-ever pole-sitter in the sport's history.

With a mighty final lap in the sprint qualifying session on Friday, Antonelli, at 18 years and 250 days, eclipsed Sebastian Vettel's long-standing record (21 years and 72 days), a tag the four-time champion had secured in 2008 when Antonelli was only two.

The young Italian, who was brought in to take Lewis Hamilton's place at Mercedes, has undoubtedly been the most impressive of the six rookies this season. Apart from one non-scoring race in Bahrain, he has not finished lower than sixth.

That he was taking over from a seven-time champion meant a lot of early attention and expectations regarding why the team picked him, but the teenager was quick to prove himself.

Antonelli's skill and talent were on display right from round one, when he navigated a tricky wet race in Australia to take fourth and score the first points of his career. He also became the youngest driver to lead a race and set a fastest lap in Japan, which was just his third outing as an F1 driver. Add to this a qualifying session where he outpaced the quick McLaren duo, and a driver to look out for was guaranteed.

A spirited sprint

A rain delay and a couple of laps behind the Safety Car — which played a big role later in the 18-lap event — meant Antonelli had to wait longer to get the perfect start. Much to his dismay, his pole glory was short-lived as Piastri got the better of him into Turn 1. Soon after, it was the McLaren pair fighting it out for the top spot. But it first had to deal with an imminent issue — a potential race-altering pit stop.

Heavy showers hit the area prior, leaving the track requiring wet tyres. But the hot and humid conditions in Miami meant teams had to think of switching to slicks or risk losing pace and places.

Ferrari's Hamilton was one of the first front-runners to pit — a move that triggered a chain reaction of drivers diving into the pits. It paid off handsomely for the 40-year-old, who grabbed a podium place — another successful sprint result.

For Antonelli and Max Verstappen, a pit lane incident proved costly. Antonelli lost time, while Verstappen received a 10-second penalty. Meanwhile, Piastri was called in first by McLaren, while Norris followed in a later call that turned out to be a masterstroke.

A crash by Fernando Alonso brought out the Safety Car just as Norris exited the pits, allowing him to retain track position to relive his Miami glory and secure the sprint ahead of Piastri.

Norris may have kept his teammate at bay in the sprint and Verstappen managed to edge Piastri for pole ahead of the main race, but the championship leader left his very best for Sunday.

The Piastri show

There was a possibility of rain interruptions and even a suspension after another bout of heavy rain. However, bad weather was not going to play spoilsport this time.

The drivers' parade took place with life-size LEGO cars driven around the track. The pre-race fun soon gave way to a highly anticipated start under dry yet overcast skies.

Piastri couldn't replicate his first-corner effort but climbed from fourth to first with a couple of precise, calculated overtakes by lap 14. As has become routine for the Australian, a clean race helped him complete a hat-trick of wins and secure a fourth triumph in six races.

GETTY IMAGES

Norris recovered from a poor opening lap to claim second, giving McLaren a strong 1-2 finish — a turnaround from the same affair two years ago, when neither driver scored a point. "Two years ago, here in Miami, we were genuinely the slowest team — I think we got lapped twice," Piastri said at the post-race press conference, referring to when he and Norris finished 19th and 17th respectively.

"And to now have won the Grand Prix by over 35 seconds to third is an unbelievable result," he added, as third-placed George Russell crossed the line more than 37 seconds behind Piastri. The Mercedes driver's strategic gamble paid off after starting with a different tyre compound and even fending off Verstappen in the closing stages.

The pole-sitter curse continued as the Dutchman could only manage fourth, ahead of a standout performance by Williams' Alexander Albon in fifth. Behind them, Antonelli took sixth, while Ferrari endured a frustrating afternoon, bringing home just 10 points combined.

Plenty of positives

For McLaren, the major points haul has given it a whopping 105-point lead over Mercedes in second, only six rounds into the 24-race calendar. And a 16-point cushion over Norris is what Piastri now enjoys. With three race wins splitting the two, the younger driver is starting to assert himself as the team's championship leader.

Yet, if there's one thing Piastri knows well, it's that a late charge from Norris is never off the table — and he'll be ready for it when it comes.

The duel feast

By C.G.S.Narayanan

In chess problem jargon there are like sounding terms such as 'dual' and 'duel' with totally different conceptual meaning. Dual is considered a weakness in an orthodox direct mates where more than one mate follow a single black defence. Later in modern compositions 'dual separation' has become an integral part of many themes and considered an embellishment. **Duel** is fairly simple term meaning one-to-one move between two pieces of opposite colour. In the first two-mover below the British GM shows the tussle between BQ and WN which incidentally complete a wheel of tries and key in an elegant setting

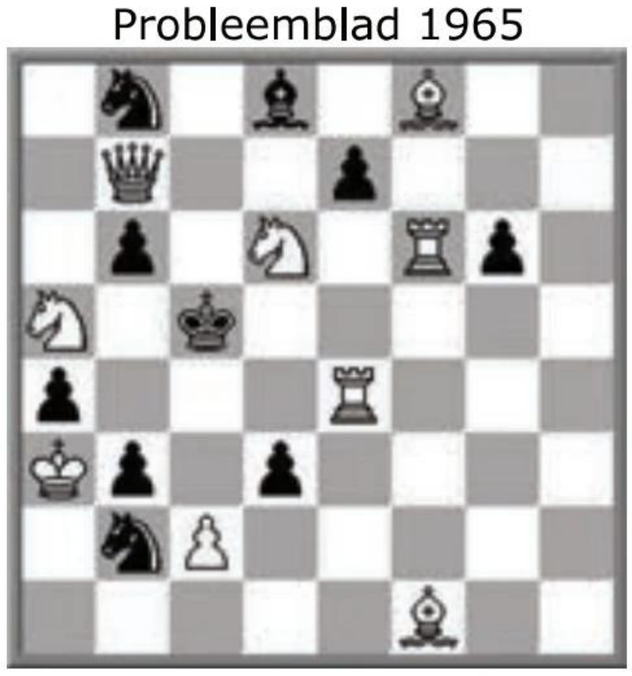
Comins Mansfield
I pr,BCPS Ring Ty 1958

Mate in two moves

Tries 1.Nf1? Qa2! 1.Nd1? Qc8! 1.Nc2? Qa1! 1.Nc4? Qa5! 1.Nd5? Qxe8! 1.Nf5? Qd8! 1.Nxg4? Qb8! **Key 1.Ng2!**
The seven tries along with the key complete WN wheel.

Duels have been almost as much studied in tries and refutations as in actual play.After Yugoslavian composer Hrvoje Bartalovic announced a theme in 'Problem' featuring intense duel there was a remarkable burst of composition especially by Serbian composers led by Dragan Stojnic and an article was published in 'tTe Problemist'.

A.C.Reeves
Probleemblad 1965



Mate in two moves

Loshinski pioneered in 1930 a full Albino-Pickaninny duet in the diract mate in three-mover. Albino involves four moves WPc2 in the tries and Plickaninny by BPe7 used for the refutations.
Try 1 cxb3 refuted by 1…e7xd6!
Try 1.c3? refuted by 1…exf6!
Try 1.c4? refuted by 1….e6!
Try 1. Cxd3? Refuted by 1…e5!
Key 1.Rb4! with threat 2.Ne4

Problem for solving below is duel between WK and pickaninny by BPc7

V.Bartolovic
Problem, 1970

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article Pick of British merediths : **Key 1.Ba2!**(2.Be6) The star variations are 1…Rxc3 2.Ng6;1….Rxc1 3.Ne6

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

Vaibhav Marathe emerges fastest

Goa's Vaibhav Marathe **(above, right)** claimed top honours at the Chikmagalur Gravel Fest 2025, the opening round of the JK Tyre FMSCI Indian National Autocross Championship (INAC) 2025. The event was held at Survey 85 on Sangnipura Road in Chikmagalur.

Representing JK Tyre, Marathe edged out a stiff challenge from teammate Syed Salman to win the INAC 1 Unrestricted Class with a timing of 02:57.876. Salman clocked 02:59.687 to finish second, while Aeman took third place with a timing of 03:01.786.

The Chikmagalur round also served as the qualifier for this year's INAC.

Salman bounced back later in the day to win the INAC 1 2000cc class, recording a time of 02:59.169. Chetan Shivram and Aeman followed him home in second and third, respectively.

In the INAC 2 1650cc category, Ashad Pasha secured first place, with Aeman and Salman rounding off the podium. Salman then dominated the INAC 2 1450cc and 1100cc classes, taking top spot in both.

The INAC 2 800cc class was won by Azveer.

In other results, Zeeshan Mohammed clinched the INAC 3 category, while Shameena CP topped the Women's class with a timing of 03:41.004.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

SPORTOON

1 Tickets for the Neeraj Chopra Classic 2025, a premier javelin throw event set to take place on May 24 at the Sree Kanteerava Stadium in Bengaluru, are now live.

Fans can book tickets via the District by Zomato website or app, with prices ranging from Rs 199 to Rs 44,999.

The event will begin at 6:30 PM IST, with gates opening at 5 PM IST. The meet will feature some of the world's top javelin throwers, headlined by Olympic champion Neeraj Chopra. Fellow Indians Kishore Jena, Sachin Yadav, Rohit Yadav and Sahil Silwal are also set to compete.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 Formidables will represent India at the upcoming Bridge World Championship in Denmark this August, having retained its team title at the 8th All India Shree Cement Bridge Championship.

The champion side — Rajeshwar Tewari, Sumit Mukherjee, Kaustabh Nandi, Sagnik Roy and Sayantan Kushari — convincingly beat Mavericks 159–97 in the final. They took home a winner's prize of Rs 1.2 lakh.

In the semifinals, Formidables overcame Team Monica Jajoo 102–70, while Mavericks edged past Rampage 79–65. Rampage later clinched third place.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

REPRESENTATIVE IMAGE

FOR MORE STORIES

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

What's the ideal IPL diet

With intense travel, late-night matches and pressure, **food becomes fuel,** supplements become strategy, and recovery is everything.

In the IPL, performances are judged by sixes and wickets. But behind every explosive moment is a strategy that starts with breakfast and ends with a probiotic before bed.

As a sports nutritionist who's worked with cricketers like Virat Kohli, Robin Uthappa and Shikhar Dhawan, I've seen how diet transforms a season. With intense travel, late-night matches and pressure, food becomes fuel, supplements become strategy, and recovery is everything.

This isn't generic advice. Every plan here is tailored using genetic tests, gut data, and blood markers — giving players exactly what their body needs.

Here's a detailed walk-through of a match day, practice day, travel day, and rest day nutrition plan — with Indian, continental, and athlete-friendly global food options.

Wake-Up Phase

Players often wake up late due to fatigue from the previous night's match. The day starts with jeera water, glutamine, and L-carnitine — a mix that supports the digestive system, boosts energy metabolism, and reduces inflammation.

Fasted light mobility drills improve insulin sensitivity and alertness.

Breakfast

The first solid meal provides sustained energy while keeping digestion easy.

Indian options:

- Onion uttapam with sambar
- Two dosas with coconut chutney
- Stuffed paneer paratha with curd

Continental options:

- Scrambled eggs on multigrain toast
- Greek yoghurt with muesli and berries
- Protein smoothie (banana, almond milk, oats, chia seeds)

Supplement: Omega-3 (fish oil) to reduce inflammation, especially if blood markers show elevated CRP or joint stress.

Main Meal

This is the key pre-match fuelling meal — low in fibre, rich in clean carbohydrates and moderate protein, designed for slow energy release.

Indian options:

✪ Jeera rice, dal tadka, sautéed carrots, cucumber

✪ Khichdi with green peas and paneer

✪ Idiyappam with mild vegetable stew

Continental options:

✪ Grilled chicken or tofu with mashed potatoes and steamed vegetables

✪ White rice with baked fish and courgette

✪ Rice noodles with tofu in ginger-soy broth

Caffeine: Only allowed if the player has been genetically tested for caffeine metabolism.

Pre-Match Meal

A light snack to top up energy stores without burdening the stomach.

✪ Vegetable sandwich on sourdough with a slice of cheese

✪ Peanut butter on toast with sliced banana

Hydration

Hydration and muscle preparation are critical. A combination of:

✪ Beetroot and watermelon juice with retained fibre

✪ Branched-chain amino acids (BCAA)

✪ Collagen peptides

This blend improves stamina, protects joints, and supports endurance. Players with certain COL5A1 gene variants benefit more from collagen due to weaker connective tissue. Protein selection (whey or plant-based) depends on food intolerance and gut reports.

During the Match

Maintaining hydration and glucose levels is key. Players sip:

✪ Lemon water with soaked chia seeds

✪ Custom-formulated sports drinks (not energy drinks)

✪ BCAA solution to support muscle retention

Innings Break

Refuelling is quick and efficient:

✪ Whey/plant protein shake

✪ One banana

✪ One tablespoon peanut butter

This combination restores blood sugar and primes the muscles for the second innings.

Post-Match Recovery

The 30-minute window after a match is crucial. Players can have:

✪ Whey/plant protein isolate (40g)

✪ Watermelon or pineapple slices for hydration and antioxidants

This supports muscle recovery and electrolyte balance.

Late Dinner

Dinner is kept light and easy on the stomach to aid overnight digestion.

Indian options:

✪ Jeera rice with mixed dal and sautéed carrots

✪ Tomato, spinach, or broccoli soup

✪ Steamed rice with bottle gourd sabzi and curd

Continental options:

✪ Sweet potato mash with steamed chicken

✪ Broccoli soup with toast

✪ Stir-fried vegetables with tofu

Night Recovery Routine

✪ Magnesium glycinate to support deep sleep

✪ Chamomile tea to wind down

✪ Probiotic to rebalance gut flora after physical exertion

Practice Day Routine

✪ Start with jeera water + glutamine + L-carnitine

✪ Fasted cardio or mobility drills (30 mins) to activate metabolism

Breakfast:

✪ Idli with sambar, poha

✪ Muesli with almond milk

Training Nutrition:

✪ During: Lemon water + sabja seeds + BCAA

✪ After: Whey/plant protein shake + 2 dates

Lunch:

✪ Brown rice or quinoa with dal/tofu curry and sautéed vegetables

✪ Grilled chicken with sweet potato mash

Evening Snack:

✪ Beetroot-watermelon juice with collagen and BCAA

Post-Training Recovery:

✪ Whey/plant protein shake + dried blueberries

Dinner:

✪ Light soup + salad + sautéed vegetables

✪ Sleep routine with magnesium glycinate + probiotic

Travel Day Routine

Morning mobility:

✪ Gentle walk or stretch to improve circulation

Hydration:

✪ Jeera water + spirulina

Breakfast:

✪ Oats with fruit or a smoothie

In-flight snacking:

✪ Soaked almonds, walnuts, prunes, protein bar

Post-arrival:

✪ Coconut water + lemon water + BCAA

Dinner:

✪ Brown rice + dal + steamed vegetables

✪ Magnesium before bed to help reset circadian rhythm

Off-Day Recovery Routine

Morning: Light yoga, swim, or a 30-minute walk

Breakfast: Oats + berries + nuts

Lunch: Grilled chicken or tofu with quinoa salad

Evening: Green or chamomile tea

Dinner: Soup + brown rice + dal

Night: Magnesium glycinate + probiotic

Why This Plan Works

Every recommendation is backed by science and tailored to the player:

✪ Genetic tests determine how fast players metabolise caffeine, fats, or collagen.

✪ Gut microbiome reports guide food choices that reduce bloating and improve nutrient absorption.

✪ Blood markers show nutrient deficiencies, inflammation levels, liver stress. No two players are alike. That's why this isn't about trendy diets — it's about data-driven performance. At the IPL level, players are already skilled and fit. The difference between good and great comes down to recovery, consistency, and mindset — all of which are influenced by nutrition.

Applause for opponents then, psych-wars now

Great players understand when they are **most effective** and plan accordingly, knowing they are, in effect, half their team.

Suresh Menon

Traditionally, and certainly in India, we expected our sportsmen and sportswomen to be polite, humble, unselfish, empathetic, and respectful of the opposition. When I was growing into adulthood, our champions were Prakash Padukone **(right)**, Gundappa Vishwanath, Bhagwat Chandrasekhar, Vijay Amritraj, and Ajit Pal Singh — all of whom embodied these values.

When they won, they applauded the opponent; when they lost, it was with a smile. We believed this was how athletes ought to be. Good behaviour was often rated above ruthless victories. It was considered better to lose with grace than win with rancour (and that's only a slight exaggeration).

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Recent research, however, suggests that being self-centred, ruthless, and manipulative may be the route to glory. Scientists at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) have concluded that "specific characteristics considered malevolent in social settings are highly relevant in performance sport."

Interestingly, according to the researchers, coaches who exhibit these traits tend to work against their athletes. The more self-centred a coach is — or the higher their level of narcissism — the less responsive they are to their athlete's needs. Success, then, seems to depend on a productive mix of personality traits.

The research focussed on the 'dark triad' of qualities — narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy — or, in practical terms, selfishness, strategic exploitation, and deceit.

I have often felt that in team games, you need a variety of characters to work together. As the great Mike Brearley wrote, "a cricket team works only by dint of differentiation." You need your best players to be selfish — in the sense of putting the team above everything else. Don Bradman, for instance, tended to look less than ordinary on wet tracks (those were days when wickets were not covered) and avoided batting on them as much as possible.

This kind of selfishness served the team. Great players understand when they are most effective and plan accordingly, knowing they are, in effect, half their team.

Ruthlessness, too, is often a hallmark of top players. In the years when Vijay Amritraj was one of India's nearly men — good enough to beat the best but consistently falling short in the Grand Slams — someone (I think it was Jimmy Connors) remarked that when you have an opponent down, you get even more aggressive to make sure he never gets up again. This was something Vijay was unable to do, and the prevailing cliché then was that Indian sportsmen lacked the killer instinct.

Do nice guys really finish last? If so, it ignores another truism — that you can be ruthless and selfish on the field but a "decent human being", as Leander Paes puts it, off it. I imagine Roger Federer is a good example of this, as are some of our more recent champions like Viswanathan Anand, Rahul Dravid, and P. V. Sindhu.

In competition, however, as the former world chess champion Mikhail Tal summed up almost poetically, "You must take your opponent into a deep dark forest where 2+2=5, and the path leading out is only wide enough for one."

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