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RAVINDRA JADEJA

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Back-to-back titles for England

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Thrilling drama in Manchester

RAPID RISE

Divya Deshmukh's World Cup win reaffirms India's soaring stature in global chess

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OFF-SIDE

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ENDGAME WITH A HEARTLINE

In a game ruled by calculation, it was raw emotion, not strategy, that turned **Divya Deshmukh's** Chess World Cup victory into a shared memory.

Divya Deshmukh couldn't quite believe it. That this was happening with the whole world watching. A World Cup on the line, her opponent, the much-experienced Koneru Humpy, was moments away from defeat. And Divya, 19 and trembling, was suddenly on the cusp of history.

She had her hands on her face. Not in triumph, not yet. More like someone shielding herself from a truth she wasn't ready to accept.

When Humpy finally conceded, they shook hands. And then Divya's resolve snapped. She turned to her mother, sobbing into her arms.

We tell ourselves that sport is geometry and nerve; the clean line of a rook, the hundredth-of-a-second margin at the tape. But what keeps people in their seats, what makes a victory feel communal, is the human spillover. The feeling that leaks through.

Jana Novotna's outpouring had arrived with a loss. She had Steffi Graf 1–4 down in the final set at the 1993 Wimbledon final. Five games later, the trophy belonged to Graf, and Novotna was standing dazed on Centre Court. The tears came without ceremony. The Duchess of Kent took her in her arms, and the photograph made Novotna beloved in a way statistics never could. She came back and won the title in 1998, but it's that endearing image from earlier that fans remember her for.

Sport is not just the numbers and results, but the ragged, embarrassingly human truth that hides beneath them. It's a crying Lionel Messi finally lifting a major trophy for Argentina at the 2021 Copa America to exorcise the ghosts of decades past. Or Rohit Sharma's moment alone after ending India's ICC trophy drought at the 2024 T20 World Cup. Or Roger Federer crying for himself and his sport — not in defeat, but because he knew what it meant to leave it all behind.

Vulnerability is a magnet; it pulls us closer to our heroes. In that unguarded moment, their aura of invincibility fades, and what remains is real and human. That's when our heroes stop towering above us and start standing beside us.

We remember Novotna because she didn't hide her heartbreak. She let the world see what losing felt like. We will remember Divya because she let the win do the same. The outcomes were opposite, but the meaning was identical. The moves and margins belong to the experts; the emotion to everyone.

And on some days, if we're lucky, the two come together — the mind and the heart, the genius and the feeling.

And somewhere, someone who has never played a single rated game, who couldn't tell the difference between a Catalan and a Caro-Kann, feels a private jolt of recognition. While life and society encourage us to stay composed, sport allows us to drop the act.

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REUTERS

Fourth title for Pogacar

Tadej Pogacar secured his fourth Tour de France title with a commanding performance in the 2025 edition, capping it off by attempting to win the final stage — even though he didn't need to. The 26-year-old Slovenian had previously won the Tour in 2020, 2021, and 2024. Two-time champion Jonas Vingegaard finished second overall, 4 minutes and 24 seconds behind Pogacar, while Florian Lipowitz took third, trailing by 11 minutes.

« I had to come back for the insurance. They informed me this year that I'm on COBRA (Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act), so it's like, I got to get my benefits on." – Venus Williams jokingly said after winning her opening singles match at the DC Open, her first game in 16 months »

« We need to wait for the full Commonwealth Games programme to be released." – Gout Gout's manager James Templeton regarding the teenage sprinter's availability for next year's Commonwealth Games »

India's Anahat Singh clinched her maiden World Junior Squash Championships medal, a bronze, after losing 0-3 to Egypt's Nadien Elhammamy in the semifinals of the 2025 edition in New Cairo. Anahat became the first Indian woman to reach the semifinals since Dipika Pallikal in 2010, and would have been only the second Indian to reach the final in the women's individual category if she had beaten Elhammamy. Joshna Chinappa was the first, making the title match in 2005.

7826

Tejaswin Shankar broke his own national decathlon record after finishing fourth with 7826 points at the Wieslaw Czapiewski Memorial – a World Athletics Combined Events Tour Gold meeting – in Poland. His previous national mark — 7666 points — was set at the 2023 Asian Games, where he won the silver medal. Though Tejaswin broke the national record again, his tally still falls short of the World Athletics Championships qualifying mark of 8550 points.

WINNING WAYS

A relentless Scottie Scheffler sealed his first British Open triumph by four shots as he turned the final day of the tournament into a procession at Royal Portrush. The 29-year-old American world number one started out with a four-stroke lead and, apart from one blip, never looked like relinquishing his iron-like grip on the chasing pack. GETTY IMAGES

Punch perfect: Reinier de Ridder (right) won in commanding fashion against Robert Whittaker (left). GETTY IMAGES

THE KNIGHT SHIFT

Reinier de Ridder's latest victory has **thrust his name** into the middleweight title conversation.

Nigamanth P
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Reinier de Ridder cemented his status as a formidable force in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) middleweight division with a hard-fought split decision victory over former champion Robert Whittaker at UFC Fight Night in Abu Dhabi. In a gruelling contest that showcased both fighters' resilience, de Ridder outlasted Whittaker, landing significantly more total strikes (192 compared to 70) and securing two crucial takedowns.

Despite being dropped by an overhand right in the third round, 'The Dutch Knight' demonstrated remarkable recovery, weathering the storm and re-establishing control — ultimately swaying two judges to score the bout 48–47 in his favour.

This triumph marks de Ridder's fourth consecutive win in the UFC, taking his record to an impressive 4–0 since signing with the promotion in September 2024.

Prior to his UFC tenure, de Ridder had already etched his name in combat sports history as a dominant two-division champion in ONE Championship, simultaneously holding both the middleweight and light heavyweight titles.

His rapid ascent in the UFC includes submission victories over Gerald Meerschaert and Kevin Holland, as well as a TKO win against the highly rated Bo Nickal, highlighting his diverse skill set.

De Ridder's fighting style is deeply rooted in his black belt expertise in Judo and Brazilian jiu-jitsu. He is renowned for his relentless grappling, consistently seeking takedowns to impose his will and hunting for submissions via rear-naked choke, arm-triangle, or guillotine.

At first glance, his style might appear unconventional.

But de Ridder effectively utilises his considerable height and reach advantage, landing powerful knees and jabs to set up grappling entries. He is considered a strategic and adaptable fighter, capable of adjusting his approach mid-fight to exploit opponents' weaknesses and control the pace of the bout.

The victory over Whittaker has firmly thrust de Ridder into the middleweight title conversation. Currently ranked No. 13 in the division, he has openly expressed his ambition to challenge for the championship and has even called for a shot at the winner of the upcoming UFC 319 middleweight title fight between Dricus du Plessis and Khamzat Chimaev.

Another notable performance came from Shara Magomedov, also known as 'Shara Bullet'. The striking specialist secured a unanimous decision victory over Marc-Andre Barriault in a bloody and aggressive bout.

With an impressive professional record of 16–1, including 12 knockouts, Magomedov's stand-up-heavy fighting style continues to captivate fans. He was reportedly hospitalised with a broken nose following the intense fight.

Can Du Plessis do it again?

Du Plessis is set to defend his middleweight title for the third time against top contender Chimaev at UFC 319 on August 17. This highly anticipated main event will pit the reigning champion against one of the sport's fastest-rising stars.

Du Plessis claimed the middleweight belt after a gruelling split-decision victory over Sean Strickland. He has since successfully defended his title twice — first against the formidable Israel Adesanya and then in a rematch with Strickland at UFC 305 and UFC 312, respectively.

Conversely, Chimaev, also known as 'Borz', made his UFC debut in 2020 and swiftly established himself as a serious contender for the middleweight crown.

His impressive run of victories has demonstrated his diverse skill set and relentless fighting style, earning him this significant opportunity to challenge for the championship.

UFC 319 promises to be a pivotal event in the middleweight landscape, with both fighters looking to further cement their legacy. The outcome will undoubtedly have significant implications for the future of the division.

Challenger alert: Dricus du Plessis (in pic) is set to defend his middleweight crown in a much-anticipated showdown against Khamzat Chimaev. GETTY IMAGES

Adding to the stacked main card, Brazil's Carlos Prates is also set to return against Geoff Neal. Prates recently suffered a unanimous decision loss to Ian Machado Garry in April, which snapped an impressive 11-fight winning streak. He will be looking to rebound strongly and showcase his knockout prowess against Neal.

> « Du Plessis vs Chimaev will have significant implications for the future of the middleweight division »

NEW QUEEN ON THE BOARD

Divya Deshmukh beat Koneru Humpy in the final to win the **Women's Chess World Cup** and become India's 88th Grandmaster.

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Indian chess has never had it this good, showcasing its growing prowess with consistency and signalling that the best may still lie ahead.

After five-time World Champion Viswanathan Anand's glorious years, Indian chess is now witnessing success stories like never before. In the past year alone, the country swept gold at the Chess Olympiad, 18-year-old D. Gukesh triumphed at the Candidates Tournament and eventually became World Champion, and now, 19-year-old Divya Deshmukh has stunned the world with her conquest of the Women's World Cup.

The World Cup in Batumi, Georgia, featured a field of 107 players and intense knockout-format battles. The rules tested players' skills across multiple time formats. The elite field included nearly all top players except the reigning World Champion Ju Wenjun.

As it turned out, the final battle for glory was fought between compatriots K. Humpy and Divya. At 38, Humpy had experience that exceeded Divya's age, but

Crowning moment: Divya Deshmukh beat the odds to win the 2025 World Cup and become India's 88th Grandmaster.

ANNA SHTOURMAN/FIDE

Generational shift: A final that felt like a baton pass — from Humpy's legacy to Divya's rise. ANNA SHTOURMAN/FIDE

in the tournament's decisive phase, it was Divya's energy that proved more effective.

It was a fairytale finish for the girl from Nagpur, who prevailed 2.5-1.5 after the two classical-format games ended in draws. In the tiebreaks, the second rapid game proved decisive when Humpy faltered more than once in a tense endgame. She could not capitalise on Divya's late oversight and eventually blundered, handing her younger opponent a memorable title win.

For Divya, the World Cup was worth much more than the top prize of $50,000 (approximately ₹43.35 lakh). The victory brought with it the Grandmaster title — remarkable considering she arrived at the event without a single GM norm to her name.

Divya, who became only the fourth Indian woman to earn the Grandmaster title, took the country's tally to 88. By topping the field, she led a trio of qualifiers for the Candidates Tournament, which decides who will challenge the reigning World Champion from China.

After India secured two of the three Candidates spots, Tan Zhongyi beat Chinese teammate and favourite Lei Tingjie 1.5-0.5 by winning the second classical game.

For the first time, India outplayed so many strong Chinese challengers in a marquee individual event. Divya ousted the second and third seeds — Zhu Jiner and Tan Zhongyi — while Humpy eliminated top seed Lei Tingjie after clawing back from a 0-1 deficit to win 5-3 in a high-stakes semifinal.

Of the nine Indians who competed, four reached the

> « Humpy's experience exceeded Divya's age, but in the crunch, it was Divya's energy that proved more effective »

quarterfinals. By some twist of fate, each player who beat an Indian was eventually beaten by another Indian.

The celebrations began the moment Humpy joined Divya in the final, ensuring India would take the top two spots and secure a pair of Candidates berths.

In recent years, the spotlight has largely been on India's rise in men's chess. Now, it's time to acknowledge how Indian women have steadily seized their place at the global high table.

Last year, Humpy finished runner-up in the Candidates, while R. Vaishali placed a strong fourth. The women's team matched the men's gold-winning performance at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest. The year ended with Humpy reclaiming the World Rapid title and Vaishali claiming a surprise bronze in the World Blitz Championship. Divya's World Junior Girls title, though significant, flew under the radar.

But her triumph in Batumi dwarfs all her previous successes. Seeded 15th, Divya beat five higher-rated opponents—among them former World Champion Tan Zhongyi and 2022 World Rapid winner Zhu Jiner.

Add to that her victories over her idols-turned-teammates Humpy and Harika, and Divya's campaign acquires a whole new dimension.

Though Divya's World Cup win will understandably overshadow other performances, it's important to recognise what Humpy accomplished during her run.

As the highest non-Chinese seed, Humpy outperformed her fourth seeding by accounting for Lei Tingjie, the 2023 World Championship runner-up, in the semis. She had earlier defeated rising Chinese star Song Yuxin and 2008 World Champion Alexandra Kosteniuk, now representing Switzerland.

Elsewhere, Harika impressed by defeating seventh seed Kateryna Lagno, the 2018 World Championship runner-up and a former World Rapid Champion.

Another commendable performance came from 39th-seeded Vantika Agrawal, who knocked out 2012 World Champion Anna Ushenina on her way to the third round. All told, this World Cup will be remembered not just for Divya and Humpy's dominance but for the grit and resilience shown by the Indian contingent when it mattered most.

In short, it was Indian women's chess at its finest, and the best possible global showcase of its rising stature.

How the Indians fared

Divya Deshmukh (Seed 15 | Rating: 2463 in June 2025)
Champion
R1: Bye
R2: Beat 79-Kesaria Mgeladze (Georgia, 2226) — 1.5–0.5
R3: Beat 18-Teodora Injac (Serbia, 2457) — 1.5–0.5
Pre-QF: Beat 2-Zhu Jiner (China, 2547) — 2.5–1.5
QF: Beat 10-D. Harika (India, 2483) — 3–1
SF: Beat 3-Tan Zhongyi (China, 2546) — 1.5–0.5
Final: Beat 4-K. Humpy (India, 2543) — 2.5–1.5

Koneru Humpy (Seed 5 | Rating: 2543)
Runner-up
R1: Bye
R2: Beat 61-Afruza Khamdamova (Uzbekistan, 2326) — 1.5–0.5
R3: Beat 29-Klaudia Kulon (Poland, 2407) — 1.5–0.5
Pre-QF: Beat 13-Alexandra Kosteniuk (Switzerland, —) — 2.5–1.5
QF: Beat 28-Song Yuxin (China, 2410) — 1.5–0.5
SF: Beat 1-Lei Tingjie (China, 2552) — 5–3
Final: Lost to 15-Divya Deshmukh — 1.5–2.5

D. Harika (Seed 10 | Rating: 2483)
Quarterfinalist
R1: Bye
R2: Beat 55-P. V. Nandhidhaa (India, 2343) — 1.5–0.5
R3: Beat 23-Stavroula Tsolakidou (Greece, 2428) — 4–2
Pre-QF: Beat 7-Kateryna Lagno (Russia, 2515) — 3.5–2.5
QF: Lost to 15-Divya Deshmukh — 1–3

R. Vaishali (Seed 11 | Rating: 2481)
Quarterfinalist
R1: Bye
R2: Beat 54-Maili-Jade Quellet (Canada, 2350) — 2–0
R3: Beat 22-Carissa Yip (USA, 2431) — 4–2
Pre-QF: Beat 59-Meruert Kamalidenova (Kazakhstan, 2330) — 4.5–3.5
QF: Lost to 3-Tan Zhongyi (China, 2546) — 0.5–1.5

Other Indian Participants

Vantika Agarwal
— Reached Third Round

Padmini Rout
— Reached Second Round

P. V. Nandhidhaa
— Reached Second Round

K. Priyanka
— Reached Second Round

Kiran Manisha Mohanty
— Lost in First Round

TEAMWORK

UNITED BY THE BOARD

The **unique thrill** of team chess was on full display during MGD1's title win at the Rapid & Blitz Team Championships.

Celebration time: Members of Team MGD1 are in a joyous mood after clinching the title. The team finished with 21 points from 12 Rapid rounds to become the first Indian-sponsored side to win a title at the Team Championships.

RAFAL OLEKSIEWICZ/FIDE

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Chess may be one of the ultimate solo sports, but when played as a team game, everything changes. The loneliness is replaced by camaraderie, the pressure is shared, and every move is made with a common goal in mind.

At the 2025 World Rapid and Blitz Team Championships, Team MGD1 demonstrated how a team setup brings a different kind of vibe to chess tournaments.

Even though the participating teams featured players of multiple nationalities, MGD1 was, in many ways, quintessentially Indian. Of the nine players in total, seven were from the country — Arjun Erigaisi, Pentala Harikrishna, Atharva Tayade, Pranav Venkatesh, Leon Mendonca, Hariharan Raghavan, and non-playing captain Srinath Narayanan. The two overseas players were David Anton Guijarro from Spain and Stavroula Tsolakidou from Greece.

The team is the eponymous flagship of a Pune-based firm that scouts and manages chess talent from across the country. It has delivered several strong performances in recent years, finishing fourth in the 2023 Pro Chess League and securing bronze and silver in the Rapid and Blitz legs of the last two editions of the Team Championships.

Seeded sixth at the start of this year's edition, the team finished with 21 points from 12 Rapid rounds to become the first Indian-sponsored side to win a title at the tournament.

Making a point: "There's a lot more excitement and fun in team events like this, especially with faster formats," says Arjun Erigaisi. RAFAL OLEKSIEWICZ/FIDE

The sheer scale of the event — more than 50 teams played Rapid and Blitz over the course of five days — would have been enough to rattle anyone's nerves. But as with most teams, MGD1's players drew strength and calm from one another, building strong chemistry in no time.

"I think most of us being Indians helped," said Arjun. "Anton and Stavroula were also super friendly and nice. We tried to be in good spirits and have some fun together."

According to Arjun, this was one of the factors that made the tournament particularly enjoyable and refreshing. "There's a lot more excitement and fun in team events like this, especially with faster formats. Even if you lose, it's still exciting and intense to watch your teammates fight on after your own game is over."

"I had a really bad Day 2, but the team did a fantastic job of ensuring it didn't affect the overall result. Some of our wins on the final day, including mine, were quite crucial." A couple of them came in the final round against Malcolm's Mates, with Arjun defeating English GM Luke McShane and Pranav beating Ivan Saric from Croatia.

"I played a risky opening, and it was a complicated position. But I calculated well in the end," said Pranav, adding that Srinath's presence was critical. "In important rounds, we were well supported by him. He told us to give our best and just enjoy the game."

Having captained the team since the tournament's inaugural edition, Srinath knows a thing or two about the Indian players, which made the task of assigning boards relatively straightforward.

"Having Arjun on Board 1 was an obvious choice as he was the strongest player we had," said the captain. "Hari (Pentala), with his vast experience and incredibly solid game, rarely loses. He's accustomed to playing on Board 2, so that was a natural fit. Anton, with his solidity and experience, slotted perfectly on the next one, from where he offered a lot of flexibility."

For the lower boards — where the most decisive games occur — Srinath opted for the youthful aggression of Leon and Pranav.

But it was Atharva, playing on the recreational board, who stole the show with a sensational run of 11 straight wins. According to FIDE tournament rules, the 'recreational player' must be someone who has never achieved an ELO rating of over 2000 in any format, the aim of which is to promote grassroots talent on the world stage.

Arjun and MGD1's founders, Sreekar Channapragada and Manu Gurtu, agreed that the youngster's performance was the high point of the team's campaign. "He had an incredible score and we couldn't have won it without his brilliant performance," said Arjun.

Sreekar went further: "Being a good player and living up to that reputation are two different things. His temperament shows he's going to do well in life."

Atharva, meanwhile, found the team setting both enjoyable and

Superb show: Atharva Tayade, playing on the recreational board, stole the show with a sensational run of 11 straight wins. RAFAL OLEKSIEWICZ/FIDE

Bonding: MGD1's players built strong chemistry in no time. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

enriching. He said, "The environment was quite chill and light-hearted. I found it fascinating to learn about their lives and daily routines as chess players. It also made me realise the importance of fitness in the sport and that I'd be better off focusing more on it."

This title may be MGD1's biggest moment yet, but for Indian players, flourishing in such events is standard practice. In recent years, they've repeatedly shown that they can thrive just as successfully in team formats as they do in individual ones.

"Indian chess players are usually very motivated and work well together in team events," said Srinath. "Maybe the identity of being Indians gives them a strong sense of unity." This was evident in 2024, when the national team clinched historic gold medals in both the Open and Women's events at the Chess Olympiad — building on a strong showing the previous year, when both squads had secured silver at the Asian Games in Hangzhou.

Meanwhile, on the individual front, besides Divya Deshmukh's World Cup win, Gukesh's World Championship triumph over Ding Liren last year stands out as an epochal moment. Praggnanandhaa, too, recently won titles at the Grand Chess Tour Superbet Classic in Romania and the UzChess Cup in Tashkent.

While these achievements bode well for Indian chess, Sreekar points out that the sport still appeals to a niche audience. This is where, according to him, the Team Championships can make a difference.

"There's greater interdependence, which makes the game more human. That, in turn, makes it more exciting and accessible to a wider audience," he said.

Off the board: Divya Deshmukh of the Hexamind team shares a light moment with MGD1's Stavroula Tsolakidou during the tournament. RAFAL OLEKSIEWICZ/FIDE

WHEN OLD TRAFFORD REMEMBERED ITS LEGENDS – AND MISTOOK ONE TOO!

Legacy honoured: Old Trafford unveiled the Sir Clive Lloyd and Farokh Engineer Stand **(facing page, left)** ahead of the fourth England-India Test. Engineer played 46 Tests for India. SHAYAN ACHARYA

From mistaken celebrity sightings to real cricketing honours and absent appetites – our correspondent weighs in on the **curious scenes** at Old Trafford.

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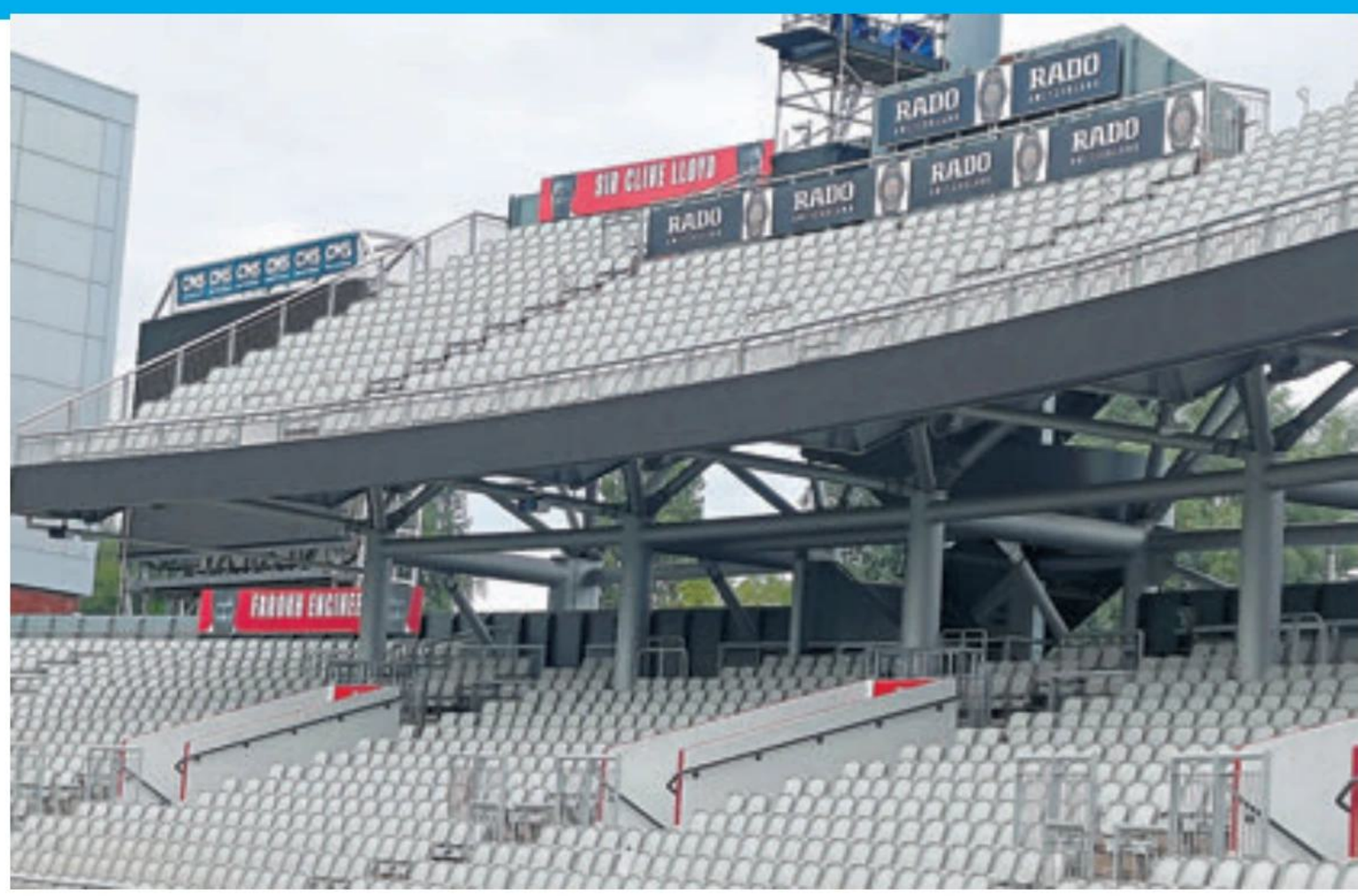
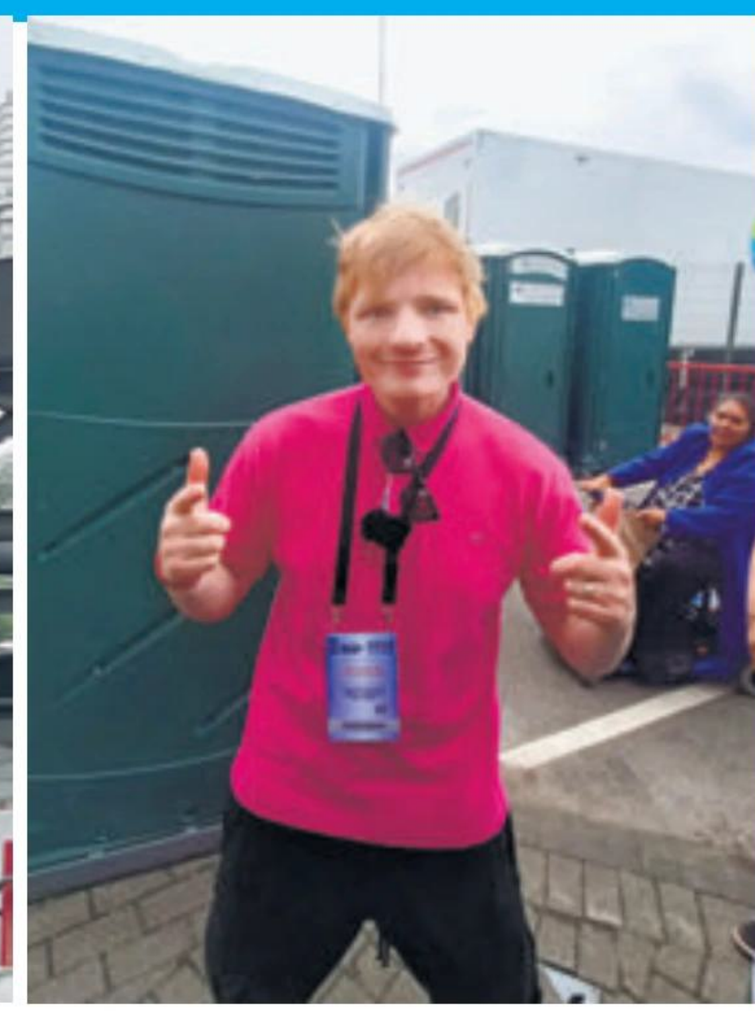
Farokh Engineer was enjoying his drink when the Diary caught up with him at the old pavilion at Old Trafford. It was a busy and emotional day for the former India wicketkeeper-batter as Lancashire honoured him and former West Indies captain Clive Lloyd by unveiling two stands named after them at the venue.

Engineer, who played County cricket for the club for nearly a decade and guided Lancashire to four Gillette Cup titles, became the first Indian player to have a stand named after him in England. Joined by his family and old friend Dilip Vengsarkar, also a former India captain, Engineer looked excited as he happily obliged spectators with selfies and autographs.

"This is not just my achievement, it is India's achievement," the octogenarian told the Diary.

Lloyd, who captained the West Indies to two World Cup wins, and Engineer both joined Lancashire in the 1960s, shortly after English Counties were allowed to sign overseas players. They had memorable stints with the club —





Faux fame: Not quite Ed, but close enough for a selfie swarm at Old Trafford. SHAYAN ACHARYA

Engineer played 175 matches in nine seasons, scoring 5,942 runs, while Lloyd scored 30 First-Class centuries during his 18-season spell.

As he looked at his picture near the gate, it was a walk down memory lane for Engineer. "We had the best one-day team at Lancashire, and Clive and I played together for years, so we have many fond memories. And it feels so good that the club has recognised our efforts," he said.

A twist in the tale

Ed Sheeran loves cricket. His social media handles are proof that he has attended several cricket fixtures across the globe. So, as he walked around Old Trafford during the lunch break on the final day of the fourth Test, he received endless requests for selfies and autographs. That's only natural for such a global icon.

But then, there was a twist in the tale.

As the requests grew, came a revelation: the man everyone thought was Ed Sheeran was actually his doppelgänger — Ty Jones, a 30-year-old social media 'influencer'.

"I'm used to such requests, and I quite enjoy them," Jones told the Diary as he went on signing autographs and posing for pictures with a group of Indian fans.

Jones lives in Urmston, Manchester, with his wife Amanda and daughter Cherry, and enjoys this 'celebrity life'. In fact, he has travelled around cities for gigs and, over the years, his social media following has increased significantly. "It's a strange thing because I often get treated like an actual celebrity. But then, the paycheque is definitely nowhere near as much," he said, adding with a smile: "So, it's like living a normal life with the status of being a celebrity. That's kind of a weird combination..."

This was Jones' first visit to a cricket stadium, and he was overwhelmed by the love and appreciation he received from spectators. "They all thought I was indeed the real Ed Sheeran, so they kept telling me how much they loved his music. That was such a lovely feeling," he said.

"While I enjoy this attention, I also tell people that I just look like him, but I'm not Ed. Even then, they click selfies and shower me with love. That's a huge blessing..."

Food for thought

One of the major perks of an overseas assignment is exploring global cuisine. Manchester, with its large South Asian diaspora, has some of the finest curry restaurants. Not long ago, when cricket teams from India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka came on long tours, some of these curry houses were the go-to spots for cricketers and support staff. Back then, of course, there were fewer dietary restrictions, and players enjoyed a good meal after a hard day's play.

But times have changed. While teams now have specific dietary preferences, several players also request customised food. That's perhaps why the curry restaurants didn't see any visits from current players. Some former cricketers and commentators, however, did visit the iconic Akbar's restaurant on Liverpool Street for some *'desi'* food.

A staff member at the restaurant told the Diary, "During the 2019 World Cup, the Afghanistan team visited us regularly, and so did other teams. But this time, even though fans turned up in large numbers, no players from the teams were here..."

The media fraternity, however, remained regulars at these curry restaurants — in need of their daily dose of *'desi'* food after spending the whole day at the media centre.

> « The 'Ed Sheeran' at Old Trafford was really Ty Jones, a 30-year-old social media influencer »

« A two-tier Test system could be the future »

MOEEN ALI

GETTY IMAGES

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Moeen Ali has witnessed England's cricketing metamorphosis up close. When he debuted in 2014, England clung to tradition.

Today, 'Bazball' has rewritten the script, with Ben Stokes' fearless leadership at its core. In this exclusive chat with *Sportstar*, the former all-rounder reflects on the game's evolution and pitches for a two-tier Test system to keep the format alive and fierce.

England cricket has evolved significantly with Bazball becoming the mantra. What's your assessment?

It's still changing, and they are still going through a process. Obviously, they don't call it Bazball. No one, except for the media, calls it Bazball. But yes, these guys are adapting better now than they were over the last year or so. There has been confidence and stability in the team over the years, and sticking to the players has really, really helped with that. They have just identified players who they know can play and do really well at the top level. And, they are just backing these guys. That's helping the players in a big series like this against India and Australia.

When you started your career, draws were still seen as a result. Now, results seem inevitable. How do you see this new template of Test cricket?

Test cricket has evolved big time. The draws are not good anymore, almost. Unless the teams kind of get to a situation where they can only draw or they have to draw, I just don't think it's the way teams are looking to play anymore. That, in itself, is a skill and an art.

But nowadays, cricket has changed a lot. It has evolved so much that scoring rates, for example, are quicker; batters are scoring much quicker than probably how they were previously. Not all of them, obviously, but most.

The wickets in England seem to have changed, with flat decks replacing the traditional juicy surfaces. Why do you think that's the case?

The weather has definitely been a factor. While India has been here, the weather has been amazing, which generally makes the wickets slower. That's not what England wants — they prefer bounce and pace. India's bowlers can handle those conditions, but England would still prefer wickets with bounce and pace. When the weather is good, pitches in the UK tend to slow down and flatten out. The Dukes ball has also played a role. Over the last couple of years, it's been quite different — softer and less likely to swing than before, when it stayed harder throughout the game.

What's changed as far as the Dukes ball is concerned?

It changed a couple of years ago. Even during the Ashes, the balls felt slightly different. They used to be heavier and darker, more of a purple-red colour, and definitely harder. That hardness suited both batters and bowlers, seamers and spinners alike.

Even here, although the wickets have spun and Washington (Sundar) took wickets at Lord's, the ball still feels lighter in a spinner's hand, whereas earlier it felt nicely heavy. A heavier ball, I feel, is actually better for spin.

How much of an impact have Ben Stokes and Brendon McCullum had on this team?

Stokes has played a massive role in the team. His impact on the way they play has been huge, better than when I was still playing. They've had many more wins in a shorter period. Both Stokes and McCullum have identified players who can score runs at this level and handle different types of bowling.

From the start, Stokesy knew exactly what he wanted as captain. Having played in sides that struggled over the years, he had a clear vision and stuck to it, backing himself and his method. He's especially good with younger players, giving them the freedom to play their natural game.

He's been a huge support for someone like (Shoaib) Bashir. Of course, Bashir is there on merit. He's a talented young spinner, but Stokesy's backing ensured he felt no pressure despite outside noise. As captain, he's been that kind of support to many players.

What makes Stokes successful as a leader?

He's a full-on leader. He leads from the front. That's one of his main characteristics. Whatever he wants from the team, he'll be doing it. If he wants them to be aggressive, he'll be the first one to do it. And if he wants them to play in a certain way, he'll be the first one to do so, and then everyone will follow it.

Everyone loves that about him within the changing room, including guys like Joe Root, who have been there probably longer than him. And even if you spoke to Jimmy Anderson, he'd say the same thing. It is love for his captaincy that makes him standout.

With players frequently facing each other in franchise leagues, are bilateral series becoming more predictable?

As a player, you're constantly looking to improve because the guys you share a franchise dressing room with for two or three years will know your weaknesses — both mental and technical. If you struggle with a certain shot, like the drive, they'll pick

Fearless leader: "Whatever he wants from the team, he'll be doing it first," Moeen Ali says of Ben Stokes. From setting the tone with aggression to embodying clarity in vision, Stokes has reshaped England's Test mindset with actions, not just words. GETTY IMAGES

up on it. That's why players are always working to get better.

When you're with a franchise, you give everything for that team. But once you're playing against each other, you're still trying to find ways to get each other out. What I really like about this series is seeing players like Harry Brook and Nitish Kumar Reddy, who know each other from franchises, still trying to unsettle each other. It's a healthy kind of aggression. Nothing over the top and it's been great for both the series and for Test cricket.

Test cricket is becoming faster with aggressive batting. Do you worry about the decline of batting craft?

Not just in red-ball, even in T20 cricket, where teams and players are knocking the ball around a bit even in not so difficult situations. So, that's kind of gone out the window.

Bit in a way, in Test cricket, it's great to see K.L. Rahul, who I think is one of the best players in the world. And I've always thought that about him. He's been amazing on this trip so far. You can still see he's playing that sort of classical Test match innings, which is amazing to see. And you still have players like that.

Then you have Ben Duckett, who just takes the bowling on and plays really nicely as well. So there's a skill involved. He's got quick in Test cricket. It's still a great skill. But there's still plenty of room for those KL Rahuls, that classy sort of Test innings. Rahul, as we know, has scored many runs in T20 cricket quickly as well. So, it's amazing that he can do all of that. But yeah, it's great to see different types of batting to manage at the end. I think those guys with really good techniques will be there for longer.

Since your retirement, England has struggled to find a spin-bowling all-rounder. Are all-rounders becoming redundant?

The game is going in such a way that I think you just need to be generally an all-rounder. And it does take a different type of mindset.

Throughout my years, even before I played for England, I always felt like I was an all-rounder in the development. And it has a different mindset to it, where I think if you're going to bat, you're trying to be the best in both, the best that you can be. And I think it's very difficult in this day and age, unless you're outstanding, to be just the lone spinner or just the batter. But especially as a spinner, this is where, obviously, with England, it's great to see Liam Dawson back in the side because he does bring a bit of batting as well. He has been doing really well over the years in County cricket. The all-rounders will still be good. I think more than spinning all-rounders, what a team like India definitely needs is a batting all-rounder, or a seam bowling all-rounder because that would make them a really strong force in any condition.

Someone like Ben Stokes is outstanding. He bowls his heart out and bats in the top six. That would be the ideal kind of player that a team would look for. Australia has probably got a few now, with someone like Cameron Green. So, there's some really, really good players coming through as

all-rounders. And, I think the all-rounders will always be around.

You have played under M. S. Dhoni, Virat Kohli (pic, below) and Stokes. Do you see similarities among them?

All of them are very clear about how they want to proceed — whether it's being spin-heavy, batting-heavy, or deciding the bowling combination. Take Virat, for example: he built a formidable attack with (Mohammed) Shami, (Jasprit) Bumrah, and (Mohammed) Siraj, supported by (Ravichandran) Ashwin and (Ravindra) Jadeja in Test cricket. He was a brilliant captain who could succeed in all conditions.

Dhoni, on the other hand, didn't always have the best fast bowlers but maximised the potential of his medium-pacers and spinners. He even managed to get the best out of average players, which is remarkable.

It's the same with Eoin Morgan and Stokes. They know exactly what they want, back their players, and stick to their vision, adapting as needed. In the process, they've grown as both players and captains.

What changes would you like in the World Test Championship format?

There could be potentially two tiers or two kinds of leagues where you have a top-two playing the final. And then there's a bit of a relegation and promotion kind of thing, maybe.

So it depends on who's playing, etc. I think that's probably the best way to do it. My top teams would be England, India, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. And the rest will have a tier-two system. The other teams can then advance to the league if they do well.

Having moved on from the game, what's next for you?

I would love to go into coaching and work with international teams or franchises. I think that's the path I'll be taking.

Player identification: Head coach Brendon McCullum and Ben Stokes have together identified players capable of handling different types of bowling, according to Moeen Ali. GETTY IMAGES

K. MURALI KUMAR

1st

Broken but not defeated: Attempting a reverse sweep off fast bowler Chris Woakes, Rishabh Pant broke his right toe and had to be stretchered off the field. He, however, came to bat the next day and scored 54, to get India's score to 358 in the first innings.

GETTY IMAGES

2nd

Relentless: Ben Stokes moved the ball both ways and had the Indian batters puzzled. The England captain was at his accurate best to complete his first five-wicket haul in eight years, his fifth overall in the red-ball format. PTI

FOR MORE IMAGES

3rd

Boundary hunters: Zak Crawley hit 13 fours and so did Ben Duckett, along with a six, as the opening duo stitched a 166-run partnership for the first wicket, going at more than five runs an over. PTI

4th

Next up — Tendulkar: Joe Root struck a composed 150 and jumped from fifth to second in the highest run-getters list in Tests, surpassing Rahul Dravid, Jacques Kallis, and Ricky Ponting. With 13,409 runs to his name, Root is now only behind Sachin Tendulkar's tally of 15,921 runs. AP

5th

A complete cricketer: After claiming a five-for with the ball, Ben Stokes, batting with cramps, struck 141 with the bat, becoming the fourth all-rounder from England to score a century and pick up a five-wicket haul in the same Test. The host put on 669 runs in reply to India's 358. GETTY IMAGES

6th

Never back down: Shubman Gill (103 off 238 balls) and K. L. Rahul (90 off 230 balls) laid the grounds of India's fightback with a 188-run stand, facing 421 deliveries on the fourth- and fifth-day pitch. The partnership began when India was two down inside five balls of the innings, trailing by 311 runs. PTI

7th

Grit and grace: Just when England thought it had an opening with wickets of Gill and Rahul, Washington Sundar and Ravindra Jadeja put on a 203-run unbeaten stand — third-highest in the fourth innings for India, for any wicket, in an away Test — to frustrate the opposition into a draw. GETTY IMAGES

8th

Declined: With 15 overs more to play, England captain Ben Stokes went to shake hands with Ravindra Jadeja and Washington Sundar only to be asked to play on by the Indians. The match continued as both batters reached their centuries before accepting a draw on their terms.

GETTY IMAGES

FOR MORE STORIES

THE EARLY OVERS ARE BITING — AND NUMBER 3s ARE BLEEDING

Data shows a **sharp decline** in returns during overs 11-20 — and number 3 batters are paying the heaviest price.

Aditya Padinjat
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How long is the new ball really new?

One of the earliest calls a batter must make in a Test innings is deciding when the "new ball" can safely be treated as old. Get it right, and it sets up the chance for a big score. Get it wrong, and wickets can tumble in a heap.

The arrival of the 11th over is often seen as a key early checkpoint — the point at which the worst is presumed to have passed. But the numbers suggest this comfort may be illusory.

In 2025, batters have averaged just 28.47 in overs 11–20, with a dismissal every 52.1 deliveries. Both figures are the second lowest recorded since 2010, behind only 2024. These aren't blips — they continue a post-2018 decline.

And the drop is most acute in this exact phase. Compared to other 10-over blocks in the first 40 overs of a Test innings, overs 11–20 have seen the sharpest fall in both average and balls per dismissal across the last three World Test Championship cycles.

What's changed?

A deeper look at the types of deliveries bowled offers clues. There's been a consistent decline in straight balls and a marked increase in both seam and swing movement during this phase. Batters in overs 11–20 now face more deliveries that do something — that test their judgment, technique, and trust in bounce.

Sticky wicket: Another chapter, another challenge. Karun Nair at the crossroads of India's ever-shifting No.3 puzzle. GETTY IMAGES

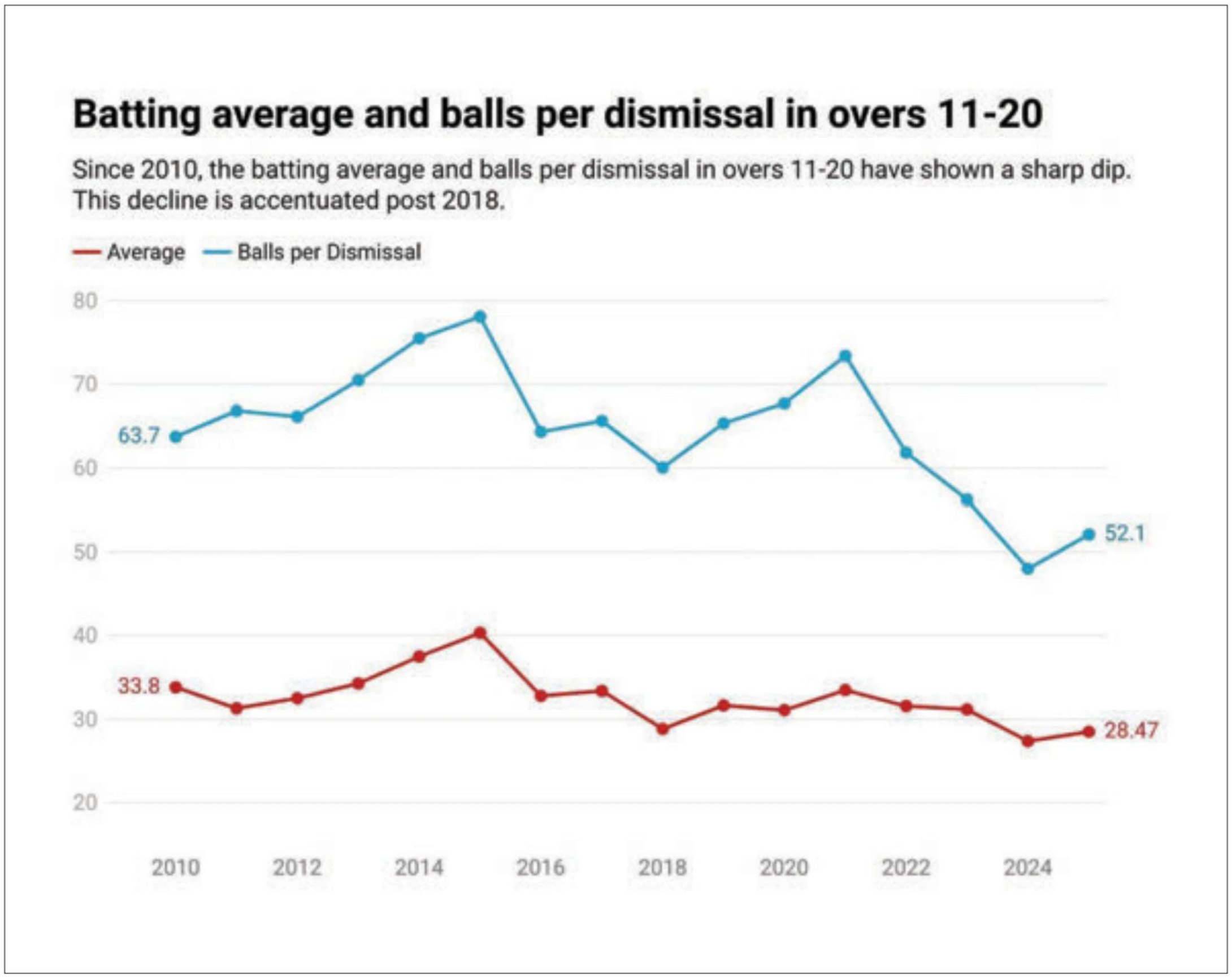
The result? A spike in false shots. In 2025, the false shot percentage in overs 11–20 stands at 19 per cent — the highest in the last 15 years. This is a phase of play that has become quietly hostile, even as batters may perceive they've "seen off" the new ball.

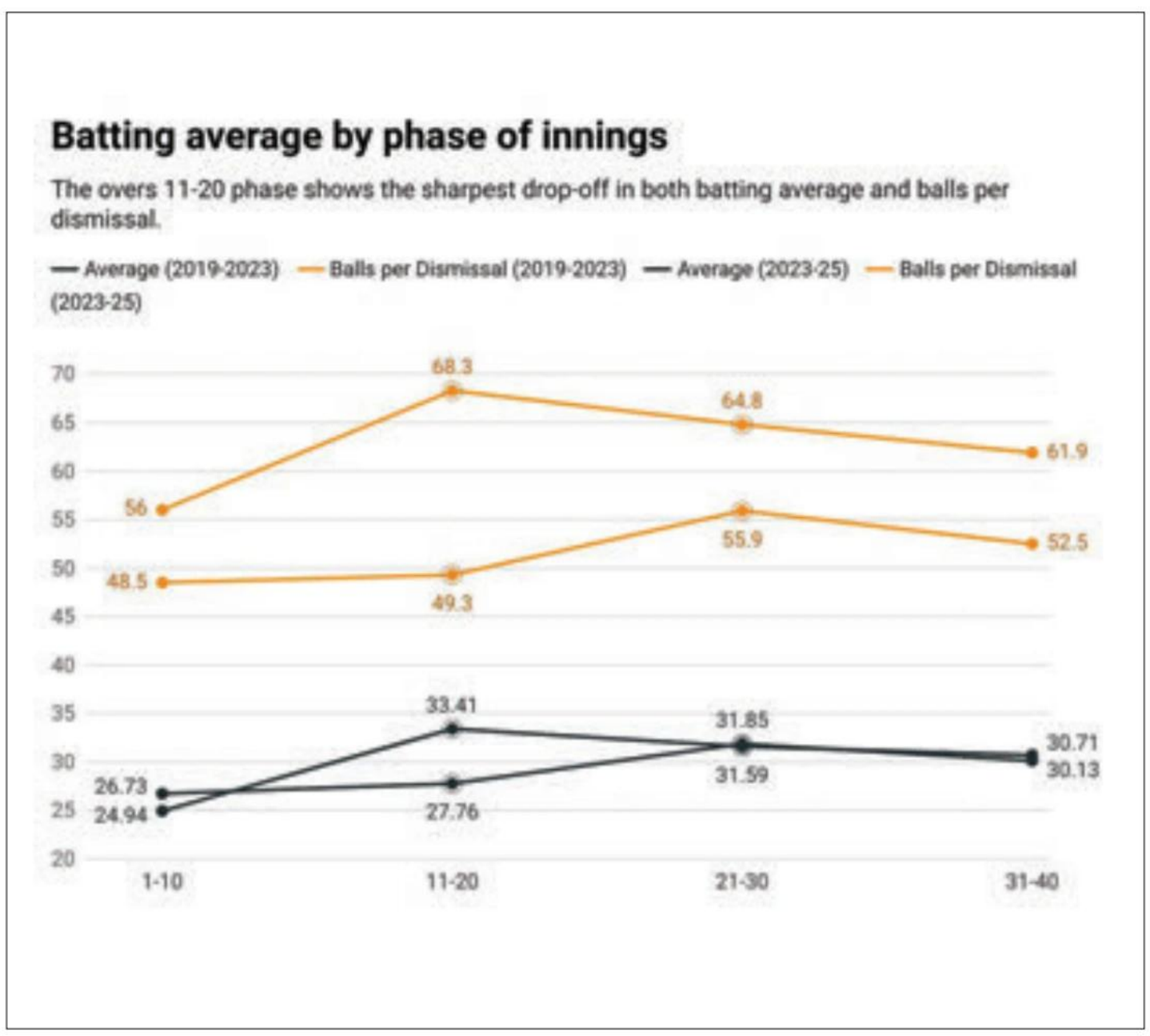
Who'd be a number 3?

Few Test positions invite as much scrutiny — or as little reward — as the number three. Ask Ollie Pope.

Since volunteering for the role under Ben Stokes despite minimal prior experience, Pope has become a lightning rod for criticism. His overall returns haven't been poor, but they haven't silenced doubts either.

He's not alone. The No. 3 spot has become a revolving door across teams. In 2025, the average for number 3 batters is 32.32, with a



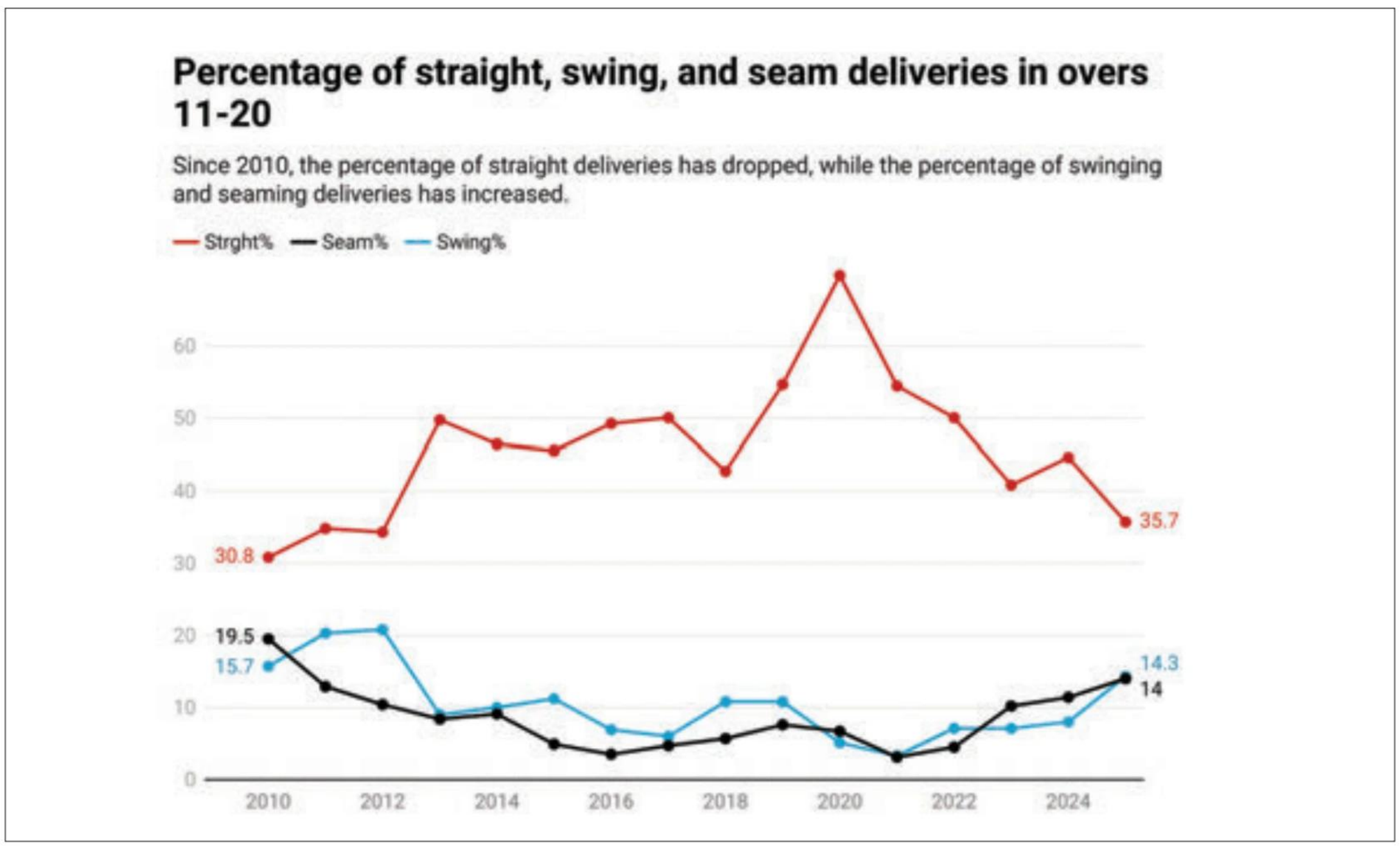


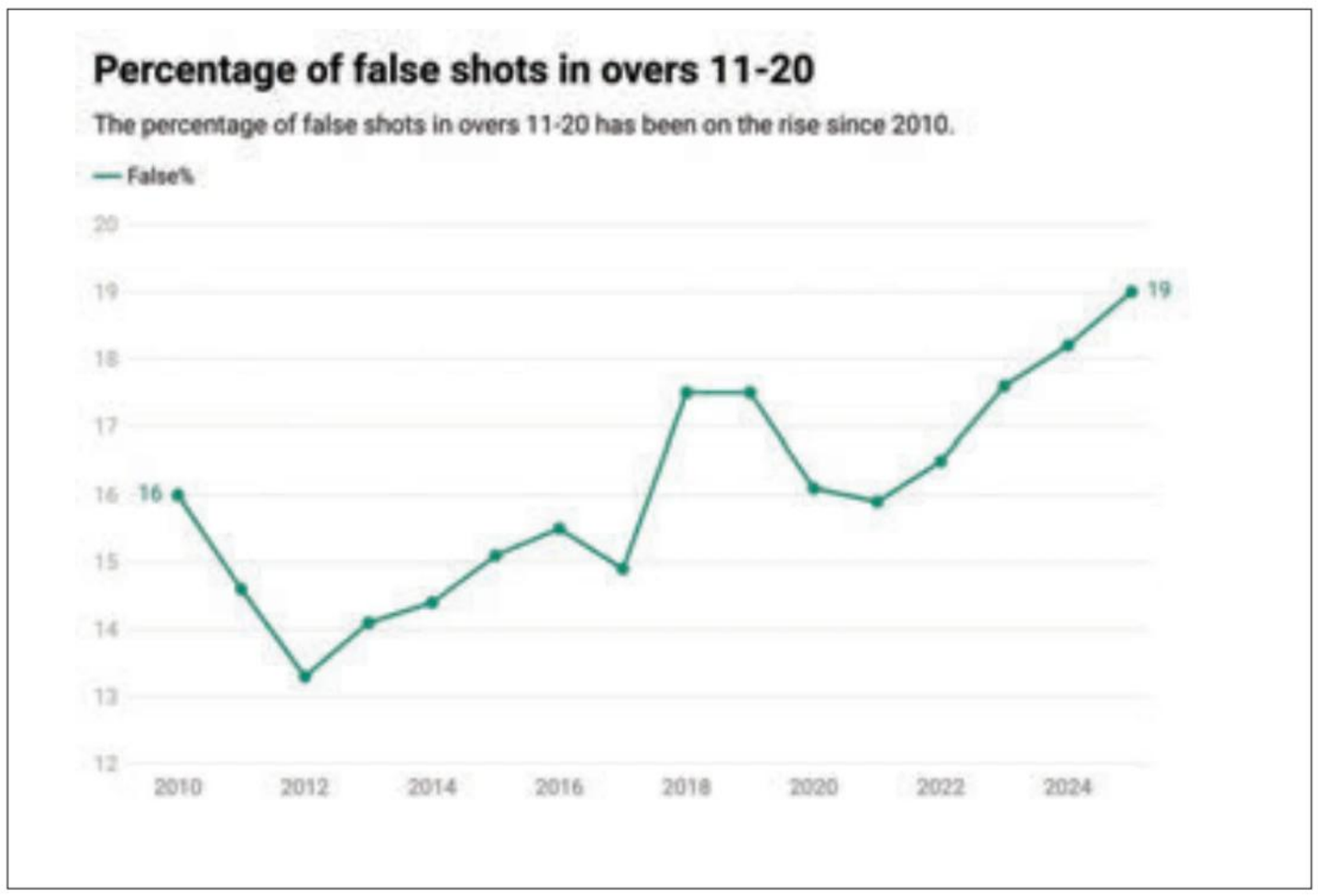
dismissal every 58.1 balls — the second lowest and the lowest, respectively, since 2010.

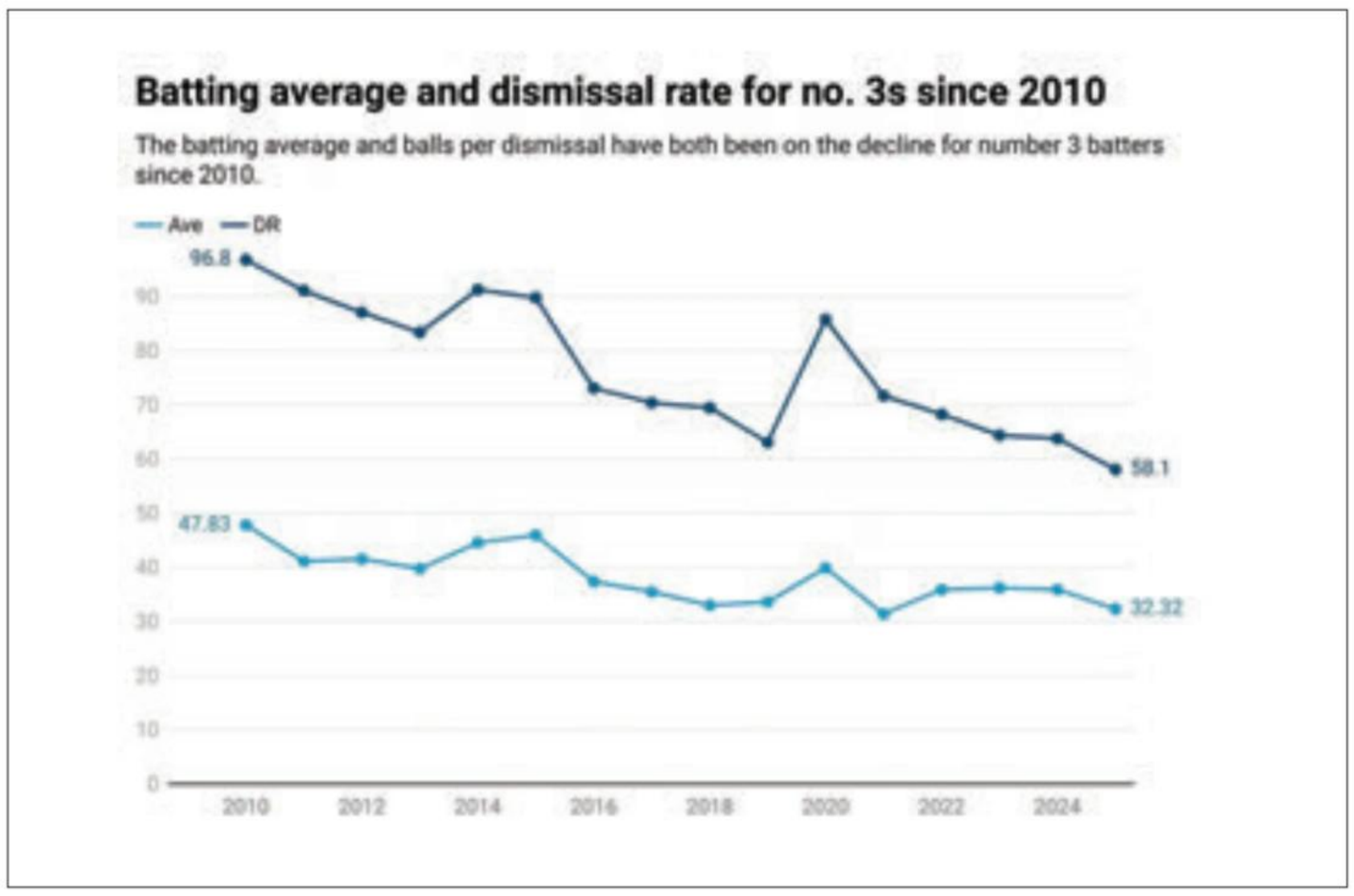
Filter out outliers — like Wiaan Mulder's unbeaten 367 vs Zimbabwe — and things look worse. Between the start of the calendar year and July 1, the average drops to 28.56, and the dismissal rate to 54.2.

And the churn shows. Of the 10 batters who played at least 10 innings at number 3 during the 2023–25 WTC, only three — Kane Williamson, Ollie Pope, and Dinesh Chandimal — held that role in their team's most recent Test. Four were shuffled to new positions (Shubman Gill, Shan Masood, Kusal Mendis, Najmul Hossain Shanto), and the remaining three (Marnus Labuschagne, Kirk McKenzie, Keacy Carty) dropped altogether.

Teams have tried everything: moving openers down, sending in pinch-hitters, recalling domestic







heavyweights, or just promoting whoever is next in line. That lack of clarity may reflect confusion about what number 3 even demands in modern Test cricket.

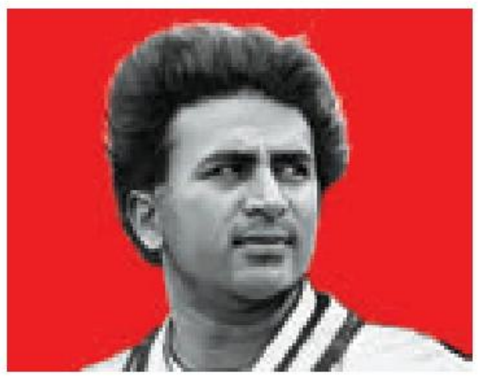
India, for instance, has used five different batters at No. 3 since the start of the 2024–25 Border-Gavaskar Trophy: Devdutt Padikkal, Shubman Gill, KL Rahul, B Sai Sudharsan, and Karun Nair. Of those, only Sudharsan has crossed the 50-mark, with a score of 61 in Manchester.

This instability is made worse by timing. Since 2019, the average dismissal rate for openers in WTC games is 64.3 balls — just shy of 11 overs. In the 2023–25 cycle, that's down to 54 balls (roughly 9 overs). Number 3s now often walk in during one of the toughest phases of the game — overs 11 to 20.

So, the modern number 3 faces a double bind: often inexperienced or out of position, and forced to begin the innings just as batting becomes more difficult.

Perhaps the real question isn't who wants to be number 3 — but who'd still dare to be one?

(Numbers accurate to July 12)



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

EVERYTHING CANNOT BE DONE ACCORDING TO WHAT THE ENGLAND TEAM WANTS

If I were the captain, I'd have told Washington Sundar and Ravindra Jadeja to **keep batting and play out the remaining overs,** tiring out the fielders even more.

Old Trafford, Manchester, has not been the happiest of venues for the Indian cricket team in the past. They have never won a Test match there. So, when the Indian team arrived to play the fourth Test after narrowly losing the third at Lord's, London, it was understandable that there was a sense of apprehension among Indian cricket lovers. The Manchester weather is often wet and cold, which doesn't suit the Indian players. Luckily, though, there was hardly any interruption across the five days of the match. The remarkable fightback shown by the Indians after conceding a mammoth lead of 311 to England speaks volumes about the team's determination and character, and now gives them a chance to level the series at The Oval in London.

Towards the end of the Test, a few grumpy English players were unhappy that the batters at the crease, Ravindra Jadeja and Washington Sundar, declined the offer to end the day's play when England captain Ben Stokes proposed it at the start of the final hour. Instead, they opted to bat on and complete their hundreds. The England players felt that, since there was no chance of a result, the Indians should have accepted the offer to conclude proceedings. They seemed to forget that two teams are playing out there, and if one decides to continue, the other simply has to accept it. They made sarcastic remarks about the batters, who were in their 80s, getting to their centuries off the bowling of a batter. What they overlooked was the hard work and resilience the batters had shown against frontline bowlers for over four hours to reach the 80s. If they wanted a hundred for their efforts, England should have denied them with proper bowlers rather than whining about them getting there against Harry Brook. A Test century isn't easy and doesn't come every match, so the batters were fully entitled to bat on and reach their personal landmarks — which they eventually did. If I were the captain, I'd have told them to keep batting and play out the remaining overs, tiring out the fielders even more — especially after the shenanigans by the English players once their offer was declined.

There's only a three-day break before the next Test. If England didn't want two more centuries recorded against them, they could have brought the quicks back on. The natural light was deteriorating, and the floodlights were on. Had Jofra Archer and Brydon Carse been given the ball, the umpires might have intervened and stopped play — so perhaps England missed a trick there.

At one of the media conferences after the defeat in the second Test in Birmingham, some

Important milestone: A century in Test cricket is not easy and doesn't come every Test match, says the author. PTI

England players, trying to be funny, asked why India set them a target of over 600. They even went so far as to say that India were scared they'd chase anything above 450. The fact is, when they were on a high from scoring piles of runs on flat tracks and fast outfields in Pakistan, they even boasted ahead of the India tour last year that they could chase down 600. Well, talk is cheap, and when given the chance to put their money where their mouth is by chasing over 600 in Birmingham, they ended up losing by 336 runs. Yes, they didn't even get to 300 while boasting of chasing over 600.

Shubman Gill is a young skipper and a fine gentleman, so after the draw in Manchester, he didn't ask why England batted on to score over 600 and take a lead of 311. Were they afraid that if the lead was just 250, India might score 500 and then bowl England out for less in the fourth innings? By batting on even after Stokes got his century, England perhaps didn't leave their bowlers enough time to bowl India out and win the match and with it, the series. Everything cannot be done according to what the England team wants. This is yet another example of that old syndrome: when we do it, it's right; when the opposition does the same, it's wrong.

Those days are long gone, and no one, least of all the Indian team, is going to simply accept it.

These little irritants aside, it has been a terrific series, and the cricket from both sides has been riveting. The fifth and final Test at The Oval will hopefully deliver another thriller to round off what has been one of the finest Test series, a pleasure and privilege to watch.

The England players felt that, since there was no chance of a result, the Indians should have accepted the offer to conclude proceedings. They seemed to forget that two teams are playing out there, and if one decides to continue, the other simply has to accept it.

WATCH THE EXPLAINER

LA 2028, and USA Cricket's existential challenges

A contractual dispute between ACE and USA Cricket threatens the board's Olympic certification, its **standing with the ICC,** and its authority over the very game it is meant to govern.

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In 2019, USA Cricket handed over the keys to its future.

American Cricket Enterprise Inc. (ACE), a private consortium co-founded by Sameer Mehta, Satyan Gajwani, Vijay Srinivasan, and Vineet Jain, secured exclusive 50-year rights to run elite T20 cricket in the United States of America. According to the Term Sheet signed between both parties, ACE promised to bankroll national teams, build six stadiums, and launch professional leagues that would make cricket America's next major sport.

On the field, that dream seems within reach. In 2024, the USA — an Associate Member of the ICC — co-hosted the ICC Men's T20 World Cup. The national team exceeded expectations by defeating Pakistan and advancing to the Super 8s. Recognising this achievement, USA Cricket was honoured with the ICC Associate Member Men's Team Performance of the Year award at the recently held ICC Annual Conference in Singapore.

But off the field, the story has been far less harmonious. With the Olympics approaching and cricket newly added to the Los Angeles 2028 Summer Olympics (LA28) slate, that vision is fracturing.

A year ago, the ICC placed USA Cricket "on notice", and following the recent AGM, the global governing body reiterated: "The organisation remains on notice (USAC). USAC is required to undertake comprehensive governance reforms, including but not limited to completing free and fair elections within a three-month period."

A contractual dispute between ACE and USA Cricket threatens the board's Olympic certification, its standing with the ICC, and its authority over the very game it is meant to govern.

In a breach notice issued on June 23 this year, USA Cricket stated that ACE had violated major contractual terms: delayed payments, missing infrastructure deadlines, governance interference, and international overreach. ACE, in turn, denied wrongdoing, claiming that USA Cricket had mischaracterised the Term Sheet and had failed to meet its own obligations.

Why this deal was always different

In most mature U.S. sports, national team governance is insulated from professional league control. Take basketball, for example. USA Basketball, a non-profit governing body, runs the Olympic programme, while the NBA's privately owned franchises manage the commercial league. The NBA does not own or fund USA Basketball; cooperation typically means player release and scheduling alignment, not a financial lifeline.

But USA Cricket's 2019 agreement flipped that script. ACE was granted sweeping control: full commercial rights, infrastructure responsibilities, and funding obligations for elite cricket — all in one bundled deal. In return, USA Cricket would receive a 5 per cent share of all cricket revenues and guaranteed minimum

Failed promises: A May 1, 2024 picture shows the Nassau County International Cricket Stadium under construction in Eisenhower Park in East Meadow, New York, ahead of the ICC T20 World Cup 2024. Six ICC-standard stadiums were supposed to have been ready in the country by 2024 (later extended by a year due to Covid-19), but only one (Grand Prairie, Texas) is complete. AFP

payments.

That dependency — rare in American sports — now sits at the heart of a governance crisis.

A billion-dollar deal under review

USA Cricket's June breach notice charged ACE with several failures. A close examination of the Term Sheet, ACE's July 8 rebuttal, and supporting legal documents reveals the following:

Alleged breaches

Stadium delivery failure: The contract required six ICC-standard stadiums by 2024 (later extended by a year due to Covid-19). Only one (Grand Prairie, Texas) is complete, and ACE has shifted the responsibility of building infrastructure to MLC franchises without USA Cricket's written consent. Section 24 of the Term Sheet states: "Except in the event of a transfer to an affiliate, the Agreement, including USA Cricket's exclusive license for Major and Minor Leagues, is transferable or assignable to another party only with the written consent of USA Cricket."

The Morrisville, Lauderhill, and Oakland stadiums are not owned or exclusively operated by ACE, and it has pushed the completion timelines to 2028, well outside the agreed timeline in the Term Sheet. The Term Sheet states in Section 5.1 that ACE must "make commercially reasonable efforts to ensure that the stadiums will be operational by no later than 2024" and that it must control "all stadium events and activities".

Revenue share dilution: The term sheet entitles USA Cricket to 5 per cent of all gross cricket-related revenues. ACE's plan to devolve local sponsorships and media deals to franchises (starting 2027) risks shrinking that pool — and with it, USA Cricket's share.

Unapproved expansion: ACE's push for a Toronto-based franchise and a strategic tie-up with New Zealand Cricket was initiated without USA Cricket's sign-off. The March 2025 ICC sanctioning standards require that when an event is staged in one federation's jurisdiction but played (in whole or part) in another's territory, both national bodies must sign off. USA Cricket says no such approval was sought for ACE's plans outside the U.S.

ACE's response to this is that the events have not occurred yet and that it will comply with ICC rules, if and when they do.

Player/staff salary shortfall: USA Cricket cited a $606,189 (player and staff payment for a period of July 1, 2024 to December 31, 2024) and a $647,603 (January 1, 2025 to June 23, 2025) payment lapse. ACE responded with records showing $1.43 million paid in 2024 to players, coaches, and staff eligible for U.S. national teams.

ACE calculated the payment made based on the MLC Draft salary paid by franchisees to U.S. domestic players according to Term 3.3: "... The amounts, structure and format of the contracts for the players, coaches and support staff will be the sole discretion of ACE, or the JV, as applicable" and 3.4 which states: "All contracts for professional players for

Victorious: MI New York celebrates after winning the Cognizant Major League Cricket season 3. SPORTZPICS / MLC

the Major League will include the ability for the players to represent the USA National teams, subject to the players' selection for such representation."

But USA Cricket has objected to ACE's position that "the entirety of a salary paid to an MLC player can or should be offset against ACE's obligations under the Term Sheet" and has accused ACE of "essentially using USA Cricket to fund its MLC player salaries".

Viewed from an Indian or IPL context, ACE's argument would essentially mean Indian Test captain Shubman Gill's annual BCCI central contract of Rs. 5 crore and his match fees should be offset against his Gujarat Titans IPL salary of Rs. 16.5 crore.

No High-Performance Centre?: Though promised by 2020, ACE maintains that the Grand Prairie venue currently serves that role. However, sources within USA Cricket say that the stadium does not meet the definition or minimum infrastructure standards of a fully operational High-Performance Centre, and that it was not developed in genuine consultation with USA Cricket, despite claims to the contrary.

No Minor League Cricket in 2025: The term sheet allows ACE to run Minor League Cricket but does not mandate it annually. So far, the League has seen four seasons since 2021. And while USA Cricket acknowledges that the Term Sheet includes the launch of MiLC, "it feels the spirit and intent of the agreement clearly require the sustainable and continuous operation of developmental competitions."

While there is no documentation available with this publication to support USA Cricket's claims that ACE meddled in athlete elections or team selection, USA Cricket insists that "the application of ACE's "good faith discretion" under the Term Sheet is being misused to influence national team selections, specifically by promoting the inclusion of MLC-contracted players who meet only the minimum ICC domicile criteria."

USA Cricket's own finances: A house built on sand

The financial squeeze behind the confrontation is visible on the balance sheet. USA Cricket ended 2023 with just $52,533 in cash against $615,110 in current liabilities. Receivables swelled to $505,689, and disclosures show $439,000 of that tied to ACE. When the governing body's short-term survival depends on collecting from the same private partner it accuses of breach, leverage runs one way. The audit also reports continuing negative operating cash flow, reinforcing how quickly funding gaps can become existential.

"...the organisation had a net asset deficiency, negative cash flows from operating activities, and total current liabilities exceeding total current assets. The ability... to continue as a going concern is dependent upon management's plan," the USA Cricket auditors noted.

The note further stated that USA Cricket's ability to operate depends

on continued grants from the ICC and advances/contract revenue from ACE, precisely the entities whose payments and performance are now in dispute. In the same filing, USA Cricket disclosed that 48 per cent of its 2023 contributions came from the ICC and 12 per cent from ACE, underscoring how concentrated that lifeline is.

Conflict of interest concerns

Internal emails also reveal that Paraag Marathe, the USA Cricket Chairman between 2018 and 2022, held a consulting agreement with *Times Internet (UK)* — a key ACE backer and *Willow TV* (the only 24x7 live cricket channel in the USA and the official broadcaster for MLC) owner — while the term sheet was being finalised in 2019. He reportedly disclosed it only in late 2021.

The letter from the USA Cricket counsel states: "Under this agreement, Mr. Marathe is to provide general consulting services to *Times Internet (UK)* Limited related to (1) sponsorship opportunities in the mainstream U.S. sports advertising space, (2) growing *Times Internet (UK)* Limited's business, and (3) media rights and distribution opportunities for *Willow TV*. Although the financial terms of this agreement and the agreement with ACE are redacted, Mr. Marathe informs me that the financial payment from the *Times Internet (UK)* Limited agreement is approximately 5 per cent of the payments owed under the ACE agreement."

Marathe is no minor player in the U.S. sports world. He serves as President of 49ers Enterprises and Executive Vice President of Football Operations for the San Francisco 49ers, and chairs Leeds United in England.

In a communication between USA Cricket and its attorney, which this publication has seen, legal counsel warned in 2021 that while the arrangement might not technically breach USA Cricket policy, it created a strong perception problem and urged Marathe to recuse himself from decisions involving *Times Internet (UK)*.

In a legal advisory to USA Cricket, board counsel wrote: "Although I don't believe that the agreement causes Mr. Marathe to have a direct conflict of interest under USA Cricket's Conflict of Interest Policy, there is still a need under the policy to avoid the perception of, or potential for, a conflict.

"Therefore... my advice would be: Mr. Marathe should excuse himself from any formal or informal discussions related to the relationship between USA Cricket and *Times Internet (UK)* Limited and/or *Willow TV*, and should take no part in any discussion or vote... If there is any question or dispute... the CEO of USA Cricket should determine whether Mr. Marathe should be excused..."

The Term Sheet, drawn up when Marathe was Chairman of USA Cricket, vests ACE with extraordinary power:

Section 13 (Audit rights): USAC can audit ACE only once annually via a mutually agreed third party — a clause so restrictive that meaningful financial oversight becomes impractical.

Sections 3, 5, 24 (Infrastructure): ACE can assign infrastructure obligations to affiliates without new consent.

Sections 4-9 (League decisions): All commercial, format, and expansion decisions rest with ACE, not USAC.

Section 22 (Termination): ACE faces no penalty for withholding payments while disputes are unresolved. USAC's termination rights require long "cure" windows, delaying enforcement.

This arrangement flies in the face of standard U.S. sports governance, where the National Governing Body (NGB), for example, USA Basketball, maintains independence from league operators like the NBA. It is a level of authority rarely seen in U.S. sports partnerships. While this model helped fast-track professional cricket in the U.S., it also left USA Cricket heavily reliant on one private partner, with limited audit rights and few enforcement mechanisms if disputes arise.

That dependency has amplified the pressure on USA Cricket to strengthen its governance framework. Under the revised constitution, updated in line with USOPC guidelines, the board has expanded from 10 to 12 directors, with two additional seats allocated to player representatives — increasing their total to four.

The last elections were held in a staggered manner — independent directors in February 2024, player directors as far back as August 2022, and membership directors in July 2023.

As per the official USA Cricket website, the board currently has 10 seats, with three vacant. Both player directors — Nadia T. Gruny and Srini Salver — have terms that ended in 2024, while chairman Venu Pisike's term runs until December 31, 2025.

To be part of the Olympic system, USA Cricket must also meet the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) standards: independent governance, enforceable conflict of interest rules, financial transparency, and a board in which "athlete representatives will equal at least

Honoured: In 2024, the USA — an Associate Member of the ICC — co-hosted the ICC Men's T20 World Cup. The national team exceeded expectations by defeating Pakistan and advancing to the Super 8s. Recognising this achievement, USA Cricket was honoured with the ICC Associate Member Men's Team Performance of the Year award at the recently held ICC Annual Conference in Singapore. USA Cricket CEO Johnathan Atkeison (left) and Chairman Venu Pisike (right) receive the award from the ICC Chairman, Jay Shah. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

33.3 per cent of all NGB boards of directors, executive boards, and other governing boards."

Just before the ICC AGM, an *ESPNcricinfo* report suggested that the ICC had proposed a full resignation of the USA Cricket Board as part of the roadmap for Olympic certification. However, the majority of board members have declined to resign, stating that it was only one of the three options suggested by USOPC.

And earlier in March this year, three former directors — Patricia Whittaker, Kuljit Singh Nijjar, and Arjun Rao Gona — removed from the board in December 2024, joined current director Atul Rai in suing the organisation and six sitting directors individually, alleging wrongful termination, governance lapses, and retaliation.

Can USA Cricket still govern the sport? Without independent control, strong audit rights, or leverage over its own revenues, USA Cricket risks failing its core mandate. The consequences go beyond league disputes — the Board's very legitimacy, and its Olympic future, may hang in the balance.

Olympic stakes: USOPC certification risk

Cricket's inclusion at the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics gives this dispute regulatory teeth. In 2023, cricket was among five new sports approved for the LA28 programme by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), driven in part by the vast audience the game commands in the Indian subcontinent. As host, the United States is expected to field both men's and women's teams in a six-team medal competition.

The stakes were underscored in June 2024 when the U.S. co-hosted the men's T20 World Cup, staging matches across three venues — high-visibility proof of market potential ahead of LA28.

USA Cricket is an Associate Member of the ICC, not a Full Member — a status that comes with limited voting power and funding and that places a premium on demonstrating robust governance and development pathways to progress within the ICC system.

Simply put, the structure of USA Cricket's deal with ACE risks putting it in violation of several governance standards laid out by the USOPC, the ICC, and the Ted Stevens Act — the U.S. law that defines the framework for National Governing Boards (NGBs) and their relationship with the USOPC.

Autonomy undermined

Section 220522.5 of the Ted Stevens Act demands that an NGB "demonstrates that it is autonomous in the governance of its sport, except with respect to the oversight of the organisation, in that it — (A) independently decides and controls all matters central to governance; (B) does not delegate decision-making and control of matters central to governance; and (C) is free from outside restraint." But USA Cricket's core operations — funding, league structure, infrastructure, scheduling — are controlled by ACE as per the Term Sheet (Sections 3, 4, 5, 22). USA Cricket's own audited financials show dependency on ACE advances to stay afloat — a breach of both spirit and letter.

Code of conduct concerns

Under 8.4.1 (a) (vi, vii) of the USOPC Bylaws, an NGB must "adopt and enforce a code of conduct for its employees, members, board of directors, and officers, including clear conflicts of interest principles, and adopt and enforce ethics policies and procedures."

USA Cricket's legal counsel at that time acknowledged that then-chair Marathe had a concurrent consulting contract with *Times Internet (UK)*.

This perception risk, combined with USA Cricket's failure formally to disclose or publicly to recuse Marathe during the 2019 deal-making phase, violates the "enforceability" requirement of the USOPC.

Lack of financial transparency

The USOPC Bylaw 8.4.1 (b), which lays down "Financial Standards and Reporting Practices" as part of Certification Standards for National Governing Bodies, requires every

NGB to "(i) demonstrate financial operational capability to administer its sport; (ii) be financially and operationally transparent and accountable to its members and to the corporation [the USOPC]; (iii) adopt a budget and maintain accurate accounting records in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America (GAAP); (iv) submit its complete IRS Form 990 and audited financial statements, including management letter and budget, to the corporation annually; (v) post on its website its current bylaws and other organic documents, its IRS form 990 for the three most recent years, and its audited financial statements for the three most recent years; (vi) satisfy such other requirements as are set forth by the corporation."

The Term Sheet's Section 13 restricts USA Cricket's audit rights. It says USA Cricket must negotiate and agree upon a mutually acceptable auditor, with rights limited to one annual review. Any dispute triggers a costly arbitration mechanism, making full oversight impractical and opaque.

ICC's "No government (or other public or quasi-public body) interference" Rule

According to article 2.4, clause D of the ICC Memorandum & Articles of Association, each member must at all times "manage its affairs autonomously and ensure that there is no government (or other public or quasi-public body) interference in its governance, regulation and/or administration of Cricket in its Cricket Playing Country (including in operational matters, in the selection and management of teams, and in the appointment of coaches or support personnel)."

Given that ACE controls the MLC and Minor League structure, funds national team salaries and venues, owns revenue-generating rights, and can withhold payments based on its sole discretion, the ICC could classify ACE's position as private interference, potentially triggering a review or suspension, especially with Olympic certification on the line.

How cricket boards are structured globally

Most national cricket bodies operate as independent member associations or non-profit federations that administer domestic competitions, select national teams, and interface with the ICC.

While governments may provide funding, security, or stadium support, the ICC requires that boards "manage their affairs autonomously" and ensure "no government (or other public or quasi-public body) interference" in governance or administration.

Recent examples of ICC action

The ICC typically penalises boards for governance failures tied to government interference. USA Cricket's case is unusual, stemming from private overreach, but the principle of autonomy remains the same.

Sri Lanka (2023): Sri Lanka Cricket was suspended on November 10, 2023, for failing to "manage its affairs autonomously" and allowing government interference. The ICC lifted the ban in early 2024, saying it was satisfied SLC had restored compliance with membership obligations.

Zimbabwe (2019): ICC froze funding and barred the team after a government commission took control of Zimbabwe Cricket. It was reinstated once governance conditions were met.

Nepal (2016): The Cricket Association of Nepal was suspended following government involvement and disputed elections, and was readmitted on a conditional basis after reforms were effected and elections held in 2019.

These cases underline the risk for USA Cricket; while many countries are penalised for state interference, the U.S. challenge is almost the mirror opposite — private overreach concentrated in a long-term commercial partner. If autonomy is the test, the form of control should matter less to the ICC than the fact of it.

The ICC has begun taking steps to "reset" and overhaul the leadership and governance structures of USA Cricket, following concerns raised by the USOPC about whether USA Cricket meets the independence and athlete-representation standards required for Olympic recognition.

Response from ACE

Sportstar reached out to ACE with several questions related to the structural governance issues, including operational transparency in the USA Cricket-ACE partnership and conflict of interest. In response, ACE stated:

"The questions you have raised reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the Term Sheet and the relationship between USAC and ACE, and are both inaccurate and misleading. "We are unable to comment further, as the Term Sheet is confidential and both parties are bound by strict confidentiality obligations."

Is it conceivable that a sport is introduced in the Olympics without the host country fielding a team in the event? History's answer is intriguing. Cricket debuted, as a one-off, in the Paris Summer Olympics in 1900. Great Britain, represented by the Devon and Somerset Wanderers, a club side, and a team known as All Paris, comprising mostly British emigrants residing in France and possibly including a couple of French players, competed — and, unsurprisingly, Great Britain triumphed. The winning team was awarded silver medals and the loser bronze. The medals were later converted to gold and silver respectively.

As host, the US national team is guaranteed a place at the Games. But the real question is: when cricket takes the stage under the Olympic flame, who will be calling the shots — USA Cricket, or someone else nominated by the USOPC? The sporting world will be watching.

With inputs from Santadeep Dey & Dhruva Prasad

COMMITTED TO SEE THE PROCESS THROUGH

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The USA Cricket chairman explains why the board has **refused to step down** and outlines its concerns over alleged contractual breaches and compliance violations.

USA Cricket chairman Venu Pisike insists the board will meet a three-month deadline set by the International Cricket Council to hold elections and fill vacant positions — a crucial step to comply with United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) bylaws and retain ICC membership.

Even as the board grapples with a damaging standoff with commercial partner American Cricket Enterprises (ACE), Pisike remains committed to see the process through. In this interview, he explains why the board has refused to step down and outlines its concerns over alleged contractual breaches and compliance violations.

When were the last USA Cricket elections, and why are some positions still vacant?

We have three categories of directors. First, independent directors appointed by the board. Second, athlete (player) directors — national players elected by their peers. Third, directors elected by membership, which is my category; there are five of those seats. The terms of all five current elected directors, including mine, end at the close of this year; elections for all five will be held then.

Under the current constitution there should be four athlete directors, but we only have two because the constitution was amended recently to add two more seats — those additional elections are still pending.

The main delay was aligning with USOPC guidelines. Besides holding player elections we had to establish an Athlete Advisory Council (AAC) — drafting its charter, bylaws, election criteria, registration and eligibility rules. That back-and-forth with the USOPC took more than six to seven months.

The Nominations & Governance Committee (NGC) — one member appointed by USA Cricket, one by the ICC, and one by the player directors — also had a delay. The ICC seat was vacant; replacing an ineligible member took the ICC almost three months. While we waited, the elections were on hold.

When we were finally ready, further constitutional amendments were required by the final USOPC guidance which (in turn) required membership approval; those were approved in late May. Then the ICC Normalisation Committee announced a visit to the U.S., so we paused until we understood its direction.

Among the independent directors, one seat is vacant and another requires reappointment. The NGC has begun that process — it invites applications, interviews, vets and recommends candidates to the board. However, because athlete director elections remain pending, NGC is ready to make its recommendations immediately after the full board (with the new athlete directors) is in place.

What was the board's response to the ICC Normalisation Committee's directive asking the entire board to resign?

The majority declined to resign. Initially, I was prepared to step down because I had asked the ICC to intervene on the MLC contract. We

have achieved a lot in my tenure, but the contract remains unresolved and (that) keeps generating (new) issues. Installing an entirely new board without any history of the contract's complexity could mean it takes years to understand and address the problems — and by then it might be too late, given the influence MLC is trying to exert. I sought ICC guidance or intervention, but the ICC said it would not involve itself in internal U.S. commercial contracts. Most board members felt resigning would unjustly damage their reputations. They did not create these legacy issues and saw no reason to quit; many are elected or publicly accountable officials. So they are not prepared to resign at this time.

Do you believe the current ACE agreement breaches the Ted Stevens Act, USOPC or ICC governance principles?

We strongly believe the contract violates the Ted Stevens Act and ICC membership guidelines. At drafting, I don't think those considerations were properly addressed. It was treated as a short-form agreement, with a promised long-form to follow within three months; that never materialised, yet the short-form became binding. We have repeatedly told ACE this. The ICC also reviewed the contract and, in 2022, gave opinions indicating we needed to address certain sections (for example, treatment of ICC funding). The 2019 ICC general funding level was taken as a baseline; any increase above that allows ACE discretion over 90% of the incremental funds. That, in our view, is a direct violation of ICC membership criteria — no external party should control ICC funding.

Similarly, on player contracts: ACE has discretion over contract decisions and amounts, which could influence selections. We see that as another direct violation.

If those issues are not corrected, could USA Cricket face anti-trust exposure?

Yes. Anti-trust is serious in U.S. law. The contract grants ACE exclusivity over men's cricket under five hours in duration.

That level of exclusivity is, in our view, a significant anti-trust risk. Individuals have already said they feel undermined or ignored when seeking sanctioning for their tournaments. If this continues, someone could litigate against USA Cricket for entering a contract that allegedly violates anti-trust principles.

You alleged in a notice that ACE was effectively using USA Cricket to fund MLC player salaries by treating MLC draft salaries as national player contracts. Is that what is happening?

That is how they are articulating it. They say they will contract players who play MLC and those players will also be available for USA national teams — but there was no clear communication to the players. It effectively forces us to draw from that pool; if we select others, ACE will not pay.

The MLC player salaries are paid by franchises, not directly by ACE, correct?

Correct. The central contract framework is there, but the amounts are paid by the franchises. Because they are not coordinating with us — not consulting on which players get contracts or the amounts — we issued our own contracts. Franchises conduct their drafts independently each year; we only see who has what after they submit draft records.

Unpaid player dues have been cited at USD 606,189 for last year and USD 647,603 for this year. Are those figures accurate?

I'm not certain of the exact numbers, but those sound right.

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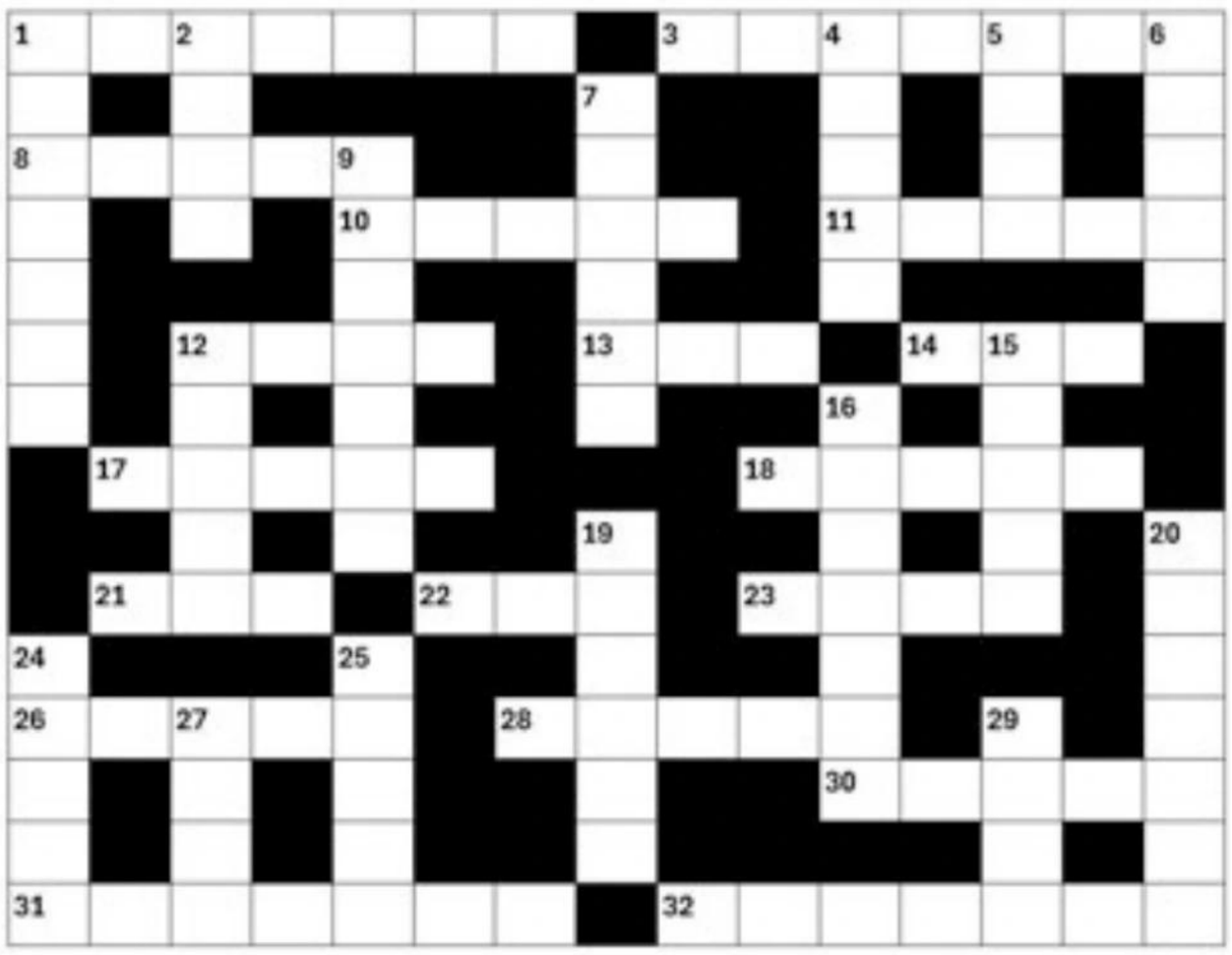

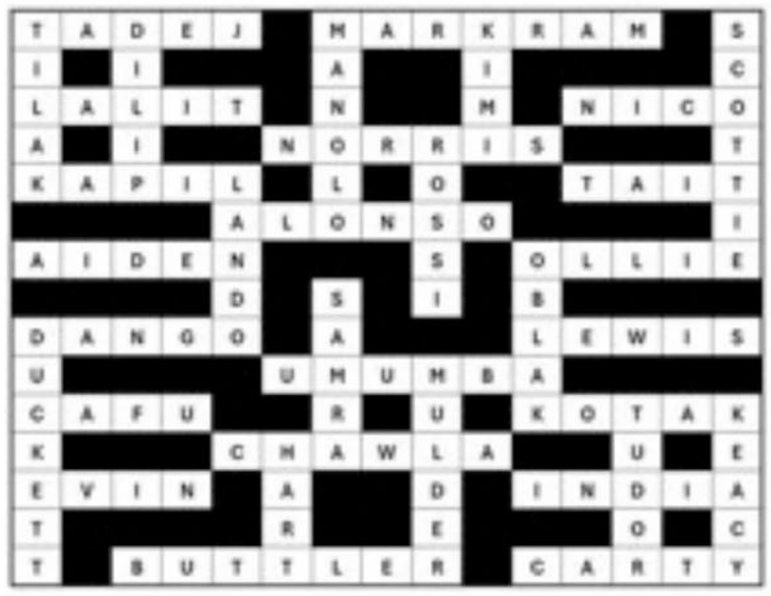

SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Identify this Dutch tennis player who won the mixed doubles title at Wimbledon 2025 partnering Katerina Siniakova. (7)

3 & Down 2 Which pace bowler was added to the Indian team in England for the first two Tests as an injury cover and later was released? (7,4)

8 Which bowler took most wickets in the ICC Champions Trophy tournament held in Feb-March 2025? (5)

10 Which former Indian international bowler has been chosen as the new bowling coach of Sunrisers Hyderabad team? (5)

11 Identify the surname of this legendary woman tennis player who holds the record of most consecutive (13) years of winning at least one major title. (5)

12 Which motorcycle racer from Spain is known widely by the nickname "Ant of Cervera"? (4)

13 Which former West Indian cricketer took a catch as a substitute in the 1983 World Cup final? (3)

14 Who is the current bowling coach of the England men's cricket team? (3)

17 Who scored a hat-trick for Celta Vigo in the La Liga encounter against Barcelona on April 19, 2025? (5)

18 Which legendary tennis player was dedicated with an on-court plaque at the French Open 2025 as part of his farewell? (5)

21 This opening batter from England had a relatively poor series with the bat in the first three Tests of the ongoing series versus India. (3)

22 Who won the women's singles title at Wimbledon 2025? (3)

23 Identify this former badminton doubles specialist from Indonesia who won a silver in men's doubles at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. (4)

26 Identify the surname of the Bangladesh opening batter who scored a hundred in the second Test against Zimbabwe in Chattogram in April 2025. (5)

28 Who was the captain of the West Indian Test team which lost 0-3 to Australia recently? (5)

30 Which Indian athlete won gold in the women's high jump event at the Asian Athletics Championship in May 2025 held in South Korea? (5)

31 Which Mumbai player has obtained NOC from MCA to play for Maharashtra for the 2025-26 domestic season? (7)

32 Which Indian won the bronze medal in vault event at the Women's Artistic Gymnastics Asian Championship held in South Korea in June 2025? (7)

DOWN

1 Which Sri Lankan woman cricketer took a five-wicket haul in the tri-series held in the island nation in May 2025? (7)

4 Who developed a slower delivery that he named the "Butterfly" or "Projapoti"? (5)

5 Which Scotland-born Canadian footballer played for Kerala Blasters, Atletico de Kolkata and Pune City in the ISL? (4)

6 Which South African-born former England player is now the head coach of the Afghanistan cricket team? (5)

7 Who drove Mercedes team to its first win in the current F1 season at the Canadian GP in June 2025? (6)

9 Identify the surname of the Indian athlete who won gold in the women's 100m event at the Asian Athletics Championship in May 2025 held in South Korea. (7)

12 Who is the head coach of the India U-23 men's football team? (5)

15 Which European country qualified for the 2026 T20 World Cup for the first time ever? (5)

16 Which Indian batter scored six fours in an over off Bob Willis at the Old Trafford Test held in 1982? (7)

19 Identify the first name of the batter who scored the most runs in the two-Test series in June 2025 between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. (6)

20 Identify the surname of the player who picked up the most wickets in the five-match women's T20I series held between England and India in June-July 2025. (7)

24 Which former Indian left-arm spinner passed away recently? (5)

25 Identify the surname of the player who won the player of the series award in the two-Test series in Jan-Feb 2025 between Sri Lanka and Australia. (5)

27 Who scored the first-ever under-50 balls hundred in T20Is? (4)

29 Which well-known Portuguese footballer was unfortunately killed in a car accident on July 3, 2025? (4)

Bumrah on top

13 } The number of occasions Jasprit Bumrah has claimed a five-wicket haul in Tests on foreign soil, which is now a new Indian record. His record-breaking performance came in the first innings of the Lord's Test, where he surpassed Kapil Dev's tally of 12 five-wicket hauls. Before Bumrah, Kapil held the record for over 36 years, thus making Bumrah's achievement a significant chapter in the history of Indian cricket. The second table below lists the Indian bowlers who, over the years, have held the record.

Most five-wicket hauls in overseas Tests by an Indian bowler

5-wkt hauls	Bowler	In Eng	In Aus	In SA	In WI	In NZ	In Pak	In SL	In Ban	At home	Total 5-wkts
13	Jasprit Bumrah	4	4	3	2	0	0	0	0	2	15
12	Kapil Dev	2	5	0	2	0	3	0	0	11	23
10	Anil Kumble	0	4	1	3	0	1	1	0	25	35
9	Ishant Sharma	2	0	0	3	3	0	1	0	2	11
8	Bhagwat Chandrasekhar	2	3	0	2	1	0	0	0	8	16
8	Zaheer Khan	1	1	0	0	4	0	0	2	3	11
8	R. Ashwin	0	0	0	4	0	0	3	1	29	37

Indian Test bowler with most five-wicket hauls on foreign soil — holding the record

5-wkt haul	Bowler	Bowling figures	Opp	Venue	Achieved on	Match result	Held record for
1st	Mohd Nissar	5/93	Eng	Lord's	25 Jun 1932	Lost	20y-9m-7d by Nissar
2nd	Mohd Nissar	5/120	Eng	The Oval	15 Aug 1936	Lost	
3rd	Vinoo Mankad	5/228	WI	Kingston+	1 Apr 1953	Drawn	1y-9m by Mankad
4th	Subhash Gupte	5/18	Pak	Dhaka	1 Jan 1955	Drawn	23y-2d by Gupte
5th	Subhash Gupte	5/133	Pak	Lahore (LG)	30 Jan 1955	Drawn	
6th	Subhash Gupte	5/63	Pak	Peshawar	13 Feb 1955	Drawn	
7th	Bhagwat Chandrasekhar	6/52#	Aus	Melbourne	3 Jan 1978	Won	11y-3m-16d by Chandrasekhar
8th	Bhagwat Chandrasekhar	5/136	Aus	Adelaide	29 Jan 1978	Lost	
9th	Kapil Dev	5/58	WI	Port of Spain	19 Apr 1989	Lost	36y-2m-22d by Kapil
10th	Kapil Dev	6/84	WI	Kingston	30 Apr 1989	Lost	
11th	Kapil Dev	5/97	Aus	Melbourne	28 Dec 1991	Lost	
12th	Kapil Dev	5/130	Aus	Adelaide	28 Jan 1992	Lost	
13th	Jasprit Bumrah	5/74	Eng	Lord's	11 Jul 2025	Lost	15* days by Bumrah

Notes: + In the same innings, at Kingston, Gupte (5/180) claimed his five-wicket haul for the third time, a few overs after Mankad took his five-wicket haul. # second innings (Chandrasekhar had identical figures in both innings).

9 } The number of batters to aggregate 3000-plus Test runs against one single opponent in Test cricket history. Joe Root's achievement in the Lord's Test is not just a personal milestone but a significant moment in Test cricket history. Root's feat is the first of its kind, as he is the first batter in Test cricket to go past 3000 runs against India. Australian Ricky Ponting, with 2555 runs, is second in the list. The table below lists the batters who have achieved the distinction of being the first to reach milestones in multiples of 500 runs against India in Test matches.

First batter to reach milestones in multiples of 500 runs against India

Milestone	Batter (for)	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	100/50	Achieved on	venue	Result	Age of batter
500	Walter Hammond (Eng)	5	7	548	89.67	2/1	20 Jul 1946	Manchester	Drawn	43y-31d
1000	Everton Weekes (WI)	7	9	1033	114.78	5/2	7 Feb 1953	Bridgetown	Won	27y-347d
1500	Rohan Kanhai (WI)	15	22	1511	71.95	4/6	6 Mar 1971	Port of Spain	Lost	35y-70d
2000	Clive Lloyd (WI)	25	39	2042	55.19	6/11	12 Nov 1983	Ahmedabad	Won	39y-73d
2500	Ricky Ponting Aus)	29	51	2555	54.36	8/12	27 Jan 2012	Adelaide	Won	37y-39d
3000	Joe Root (Eng)	33	60	3059	57.72	11/12	10 Jul 2025	Lord's	Won	34y-192

21 The number of innings Jamie Smith took to reach 1000 Test runs of his career (in the Lord's Test match) is the fewest by an English wicket-keeper in Test cricket. It is interesting to note that Smith is now the second quickest in terms of innings, for a Test wicket-keeper, with South African Quinton de Kock doing it in 20 innings in January 2017.

Fewest innings to reach 1000 Test runs for a wicketkeeper

Inn	M	Keeper-batter (for)	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	HS	100/50
20	13	Quinton de Kock (SA)	3 Jan 2017	1001	55.61	129*	3/7
21	13	Jamie Smith (Eng)	11 Jul 2025	1048	58.22	184*	2/6
22	13	Dinesh Chandimal (SL)	14 Aug 2015	1052	58.44	162*	4/5
22	13	Jonny Bairstow (Eng)	6 Aug 2016	1068	56.21	167*	3/3

5 The number of times India has failed to chase targets of less than 200 runs in the fourth innings of a Test match. For the record, India's overall record while chasing targets of 200 or less on 59 occasions is 46 wins, eight draws, and five losses, as shown in the table (right).

India failing to chase targets of less than 200 in a Test match (listed chronologically)

Target	India's 4th Inn total	Result – lost by	Opp	Venue	Date	Indian captain
120	81	38 runs	WI	Bridgetown	31 Mar 1997	S. Tendulkar
176	112	63 runs	SL	Galle	15 Aug 2015	V. Kohli
194	162	31 runs	Eng	Birmingham	4 Aug 2018	V. Kohli
147	121	25 runs	NZ	Mumbai WS	3 Nov 2024	R. Sharma
193	170	22 runs	Eng	Lord's	14 Jul 2025	S. Gill

211 The number of catches taken by Joe Root in his career. This is now the most by any Test fielder, going past the previous record of 210 catches held by India's Rahul Dravid. Root achieved this new record when he claimed the catch of Karun Nair on the second day of the Lord's Test match. The last English fielder before Root to hold this Test record was Colin Cowdrey, who led with 120 catches from 1968 to 1984.

Players who held the record of being the fielder with the most catches in Test history. And this how the record changed hands

Catches	Fielder	(Total cts)	For	Opp	Venue	Achieved on	Test#
3	Tom Emmett	(9)	Eng	Aus	Melbourne	17 Mar 1877	1
10	Harry Boyle	(10)	Aus	Eng	Manchester	11 Jul 1884	14
11	Alick Bannerman	(21)	Aus	Eng	The Oval	13 Aug 1884	16
12	Billy Barnes	(19)	Eng	Aus	Melbourne	5 Jan 1885	18
17	W. G. Grace	(38)	Eng	Aus	The Oval	14 Aug 1886	24
20	Arthur Shrewsbury	(29)	Eng	Aus	Sydney	28 Jan 1887	25
28	W. G. Grace	(38)	Eng	Aus	Melbourne	1 Jan 1892	35
40	Hugh Trumble	(45)	Aus	Eng	The Oval	12 Aug 1902	74
47	Wilfred Rhodes	(60)	Eng	SA	Johannesburg	2 Jan 1914	132
58	Frank Woolley	(63)	Eng	Aus	Manchester	26 Jul 1926	166
64	Walter Hammond	(110)	Eng	WI	Bridgetown	8 Jan 1935	238
112	Colin Cowdrey	(120)	Eng	Aus	Lord's	24 Jun 1968	638
122	Greg Chappell	(122)	Aus	Pak	Sydney	5 Jan 1984	974
123	Allan Border	(156)	Aus	SL	Hobart	17 Dec 1989	1133
157	Mark Taylor	(157)	Aus	Eng	Sydney	5 Jan 1999	1439
158	Mark Waugh	(181)	Aus	Eng	Lord's	22 Jul 2001	1552
184	Rahul Dravid	(210)	Ind	NZ	Wellington	6 Apr 2009	1918
211	Joe Root	(211*)	Eng	Ind	Lord's	11 Jul 2025	2594

4 The number of players who have the distinction of doing the all-rounder's double of 7000-plus runs and 600-plus wickets during their international career across formats (Tests/ODIs/T20Is). Ravindra Jadeja, in the second innings at Lord's, became the latest to join an elite group of top all-rounders in international cricket. The list below also shows that only Pollock and Jadeja have also 150-plus catches to their credit.

Players with 7000-plus runs and 600-plus wickets in their international cricket career (listed on the basis of the average difference)

Ave. diff	Player	For	Mts	Runs	Bat ave.	Wkts	Bowl ave.	Ct	Achieved on
5.38	Shakib Al Hasan	Ban	447	14730	33.86	712	28.48	120	17 Oct 2021
5.00	S. Pollock	SA/ICC/ Africa	423	7386	28.73	829	23.73	182	9 Jun 2007
4.08	R. Jadeja	Ind	362	7018	33.41	611	29.33	150	14 Jul 2025
-1.30	Kapil Dev	Ind	356	9031	27.53	687	28.83	135	28 Dec 1991

All records are correct and updated until 22 July 2025.

Postscript:

** Joe Root's century at Lord's is his 11th against India, thus emulating Aussie Steve Smith's tally. Gary Sobers (WI), Viv Richards (WI) and Ricky Ponting (Aus) follow them with eight Test centuries against India.*

** India, after three matches, has so far hit 37 sixes in this series, which is the most by a side in an AWAY series. The previous record of 32 sixes was held by the West Indies (in India in 1974/75 in five Tests) and New Zealand (vs Pakistan in UAE in 2014/15 in three Tests).*

POLISHED, NOT PERFECT

India's ODI ambitions look **sharper than ever** with a settled top-order and a strong fielding unit, but doubts still linger about what its perfect XI looks like.

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For years, India has been trying to perfect the formula to be one of the world's best cricketing sides. From one ODI World Cup cycle to the next, a new deficiency would emerge for the outfit to tackle.

For the longest time, India's fielding was its Achilles heel. A brittle tail would often derail the side's surge against tough opponents. Its pace reserves were seen as lean, its middle order unsettled.

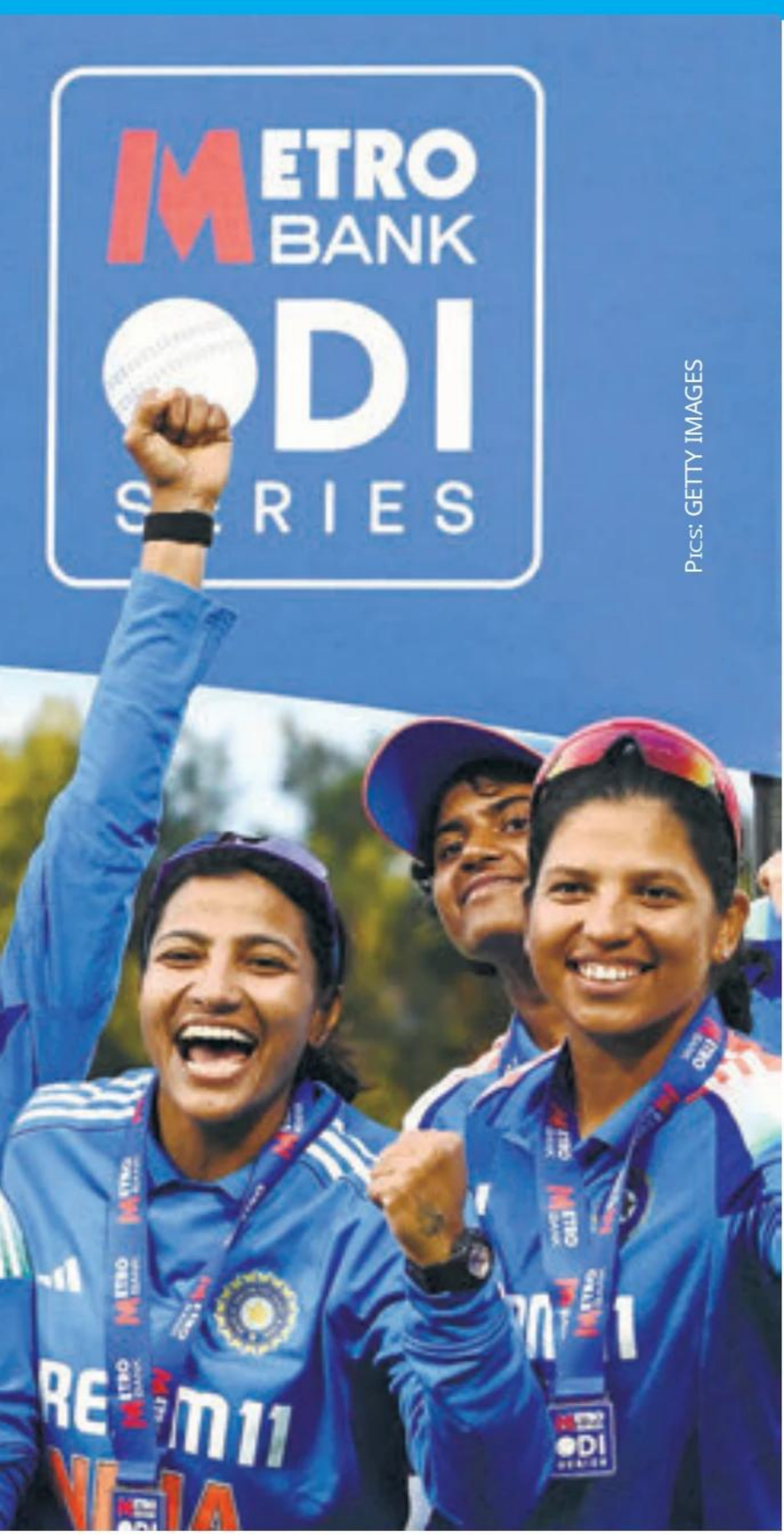
Against this backdrop, India's recent outing in England — which saw victories for the visitor in the five-match T20I series and three-match ODI series — proved to be a much-needed demulcent. India batted with intent, got plenty of validation for its work in grooming a larger bowling pool, and finally clicked as an imposing unit on the field.

That said, this side is just getting started — it would do well to remember.

Track record

The 50-over World Cup gets underway in India, with a spillover in Sri Lanka to accommodate Pakistan, in two months. After a dismal group-stage exit in the T20 showpiece in the UAE, the push to get things right for the One-Day version understandably intensified. On the face of it, India responded well with 14 wins in 20 ODIs.

But the matter of interest is those six losses.



Pics: GETTY IMAGES

A stuttering New Zealand put on quite the all-round show in the second of three ODIs in November 2024, with Sophie Devine leading the way with a half-century and three wickets. The Kiwis may have tamely surrendered the series to India in the next fixture, but that loss left India with an itch. Old ailments returned to haunt the side: a limp top order, poor fielding, and a bowling attack that crumbled under pressure.

India then headed to Australia, only to have its vulnerabilities laid bare. A merciless 0-3 hammering followed, including a performance that saw India bowled out for just 100 (in the first ODI). India's batting — barring a century from Smriti Mandhana and a fifty from Richa Ghosh in different games — largely failed.

While Saima Thakor and Arundhati Reddy — who stunned all with a career-best spell (four for 26 in the third ODI) — showed promise, it wasn't enough to stop a wounded Australian machine, fresh from the heartbreak of a T20 World Cup semifinal exit.

As unfashionable as it is to state, India's runs against West Indies — lone wolf Hayley Matthews' valiant resistance notwithstanding — and Ireland were expected to be comfortable. The Women in Blue utilised those two series to embark on a milestone-collecting spree, achieving record totals and massive wins.

They also laid the foundation for a promising new top-order pairing of Smriti and Pratika Rawal. Harleen Deol, with a century under her belt, made a case to claim the No.3 spot. Sneh Rana made a comeback to the ODI setup after 485 days and marked her return with a match-winning fifer against South Africa. Scribbled in the corner of every series review, though, was the question about a restless Shafali Verma warming the bench after being shunted out of the ODI setup for inconsistency since India's tour of Australia.

Sri Lanka challenged India in the tri-series, handing it its only loss of the tournament in the league stage.

Solid at the top: Smriti Mandhana's command early in the innings has helped India set up some big scores this year.

Mercurial: Shafali Verma's briskness, aggressive strokeplay, and blatant disregard for reputation are inimitable.

Bright spots: Pacer Kranti Goud (below) and left-arm spinner Shree Charani (facing page) were two big positives from India's tour of England.

Its bowlers hunted in packs as they restricted a determined India to 275 for nine. Once more, when batters took on the attack and struck at a fast pace, India, quite quickly, ran out of ideas.

The sixth loss came in a rain-curtailed, 29-overs-a-side game at Lord's against an England lineup sans Heather Knight. India's bowlers — who had dominated the English side through most of the five-match T20Is and in the first ODI — could only watch as the top order made quick work of a 144-run target. This came after Sophie Ecclestone rediscovered her mojo and galvanised England's spin clique.

Here too, India eventually won the series, and quite decisively. But the slips and stumbles along the way are not easy to dismiss.

Last-minute tweaks

A major issue for India was inconsistency at the top. The Shafali-Smriti combo was lethal when it clicked, but those days weren't nearly as frequent as India would have liked. This pair has given India 893 runs at an underwhelming average of 37.20 in 25 innings. Meanwhile, Pratika and Smriti have opened the innings just 14 times (all in 2025) and have scored 1086 runs at double the average — 77.57.

With Shafali, Smriti managed only two 100-plus stands, while with Pratika she produced four, including a massive 233-run partnership that helped India beat Ireland by 304 runs to seal its biggest win in the format.

That doesn't mean Shafali's tryst with the opening slot is a thing of the past. Her briskness, aggressive strokeplay, and blatant disregard for reputation are inimitable. Pratika is a classical player, striking at 87.43. Shafali's numbers aren't any better, but she has an extra gear that we've yet to see from Pratika.

Head coach Amol Muzumdar has virtually thrown the gauntlet by stating that Shafali will "definitely be in the mix" for India. Will the side choose proven stability over the possibility of flair?

One way to honour both may be to use Pratika at No.3, which loosens the mud under Harleen's feet. But that combination hasn't been tried out so far, and only one series — at home against Australia — remains before the World Cup to even consider experimenting.

Since South Africa toured India in 2024, Smriti's ODI trajectory has also shifted. In the 23 ODIs since, she has six hundreds and five fifties to her name. More significantly, she has frequently maintained a strike rate above 100 — not typical of her style in the format. Her command early in the innings has helped India set up some of the big scores it has posted in this period.

Skipper Harmanpreet's fluctuating fortunes with the bat have been inconvenient in the past and continue to be so today, especially when those around her have been arm-twisted to tweak their game.

The No.4 slot comes with crucial anchoring duties at a fairly brisk pace. The average run rate in women's ODIs has also, for the first time in history, crossed five runs per over this

Comparison of No.4 batters

Batter	Matches played	Runs scored	Average	Strike Rate	100/50
Harmanpreet Kaur (IND)	81	2611	42.80	77.54	6/11
Beth Mooney (AUS)	28	739	43.47	82.29	0/7
Nat Sciver-Brunt (ENG)	64	2773	55.46	99.74	8/15
Sune Luus (SA)	40	1204	43.47	82.29	0/7

year. The average first-innings total is 255.6, and the average winning total is 281.6. Harmanpreet herself, ahead of the England ODIs, stated that India wants to make 300-plus scores a habit. The side will be better placed to do so if she can settle early and unleash her naturally explosive style of scoring.

Marks of success

While India has more or less decided on its top six or seven batters, the bowling department continues to pose headaches — not all of them the good kind.

The side's most prolific quick, Renuka Singh Thakur, has missed a chunk of the season due to injury. Pooja Vastrakar has been out of action for even longer. Shreyanka Patil remains under medical observation at the BCCI's Centre for Excellence.

But in their absence, a crop of feisty youngsters has fearlessly gone about staking a claim for a World Cup spot. Pacer Kranti Goud and left-arm spinner Shree Charani were two big positives from India's tour of the British Isles. Charani took home the Player of the Series award in the T20I leg, while Kranti's six-wicket haul helped India rout England and seal the ODI series 2-1 in Durham.

Both fast learners and unfazed by the occasion or the veterans they face, Kranti and Charani will be closely watched during Australia's visit in a few weeks. Sneh wasn't rolling in wickets, but her unplayable overs, stingy economy rate, and handy batting make her an obvious pick. Amanjot Kaur has also impressed, taking on new-ball duties while providing quick runs when needed.

India has always fielded an impressive array of spinners. Deepti Sharma has emerged as a cut above the rest, finding a way to evolve and reinvent even as tweakers come and go around her. But that ever-changing pool has seen some solid talent.

Against England, Indian spinners took 25 of the 40 English wickets to fall in the T20I leg. Their English counterparts could only manage nine of the 23 Indian scalps claimed. The Sophie Ecclestone-led attack bounced back in the ODIs, balancing the scales and finding form. But India had the momentum, and an England side in transition — with a new leadership group — was no match.

But perhaps the biggest shot in the arm for this team has been its elevated quality in the field. India's core of young players now features athletes who aren't afraid to put their bodies on the line. There was a time when acrobatic brilliance from Harleen or Radha Yadav was the only means to feel hopeful about India's ability as a fielding unit. Holding on to tough catches and deploying direct hits have become the norm — a result of years of hard work and dedicated camps, like the one at the National Centre of Excellence before the side's British sojourn, paying rich dividends.

Muzumdar, when he took over, spoke of wanting his batters to pitch in with the ball. As part of that experiment, we got to see Smriti's own half pace-half spin action. Realistically though, Pratika is the only one doubling up to bowl regularly from the top six. When viewed against a side like Australia, which is stacked with two-skilled all-rounders, it might feel like India is a few cards short in the game.

Improved fielding: India's core of young players now features athletes who aren't afraid to put their bodies on the line.

India is in a far better place in terms of preparation for the ODI World Cup than it was for the T20 showpiece in Dubai last year, when the No.3 spot was undecided just days before the opening game. There have been A tours to Australia to test bench strength, and the Women's Premier League has proven to be a crucial breeding ground for selectors to broaden their national setup options.

Australia, with its reputation, ruthlessness, and rigour, will pose a tough challenge ahead of the World Cup and provide crucial final notes for the think tank. There's no reason 2025 shouldn't be India's year to be crowned champion.

But will it?

INDIA'S ODI RUN SINCE THE 2024 T20 WORLD CUP

2-1
vs New Zealand (home)
0-3
vs Australia (away)
3-0
vs West Indies (home)
3-0
vs Ireland (home)
2-1
vs England (away)
4-1
Won tri-series against Sri Lanka and South Africa (away)

WATCH THE VIDEO

Dickie Bird at 92: Letters, long walks and the love of cricket

From his 16th-century cottage to county matches in Scarborough, Bird's life remains rooted in **rhythm, cricket, and quiet purpose.**

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Some mornings feel unusually lazy and aimless for Dickie Bird.

There are days when he rises early, completes his exercises, and runs around the backyard garden. At other times, though, nothing feels quite right.

"I find no purpose in getting out of bed. There have been many such days," he says. "When I wake up and the first ray of the sun hits the curtains, I wonder if I even need to get up. What's the purpose?"

Eventually, the 92-year-old — who sometimes calls himself a 'young man' — does get up. He makes breakfast, steps out for a walk, or strolls to the front gate of his 16th-century cottage to check the letterbox.

I have been doing it since the age of 14... even now, I read the newspapers and keep clippings of all the interesting stories and whatever they write about me.

"Even now I get plenty of letters from all around the world," Bird says, as we sip our second round of 'full milk, no sugar' coffee at a plush hotel just a stone's throw from the sleepy Dodworth railway station.

Barnsley, where Bird was born and has lived all his life, is a half-hour's drive from here.

"Every time I come here, I drive myself. It's a nice little drive," he says, nodding toward his Jaguar—his long-time companion, made possible, he says, by "all those book sales." At one point, he considered hiring a chauffeur, but his doctors had other ideas.

"I told them, 'Are you sure I can continue driving?' and they said, 'You must...'"

So he did.

He doesn't use GPS; he knows most of the roads around Barnsley and Dodworth by heart. He isn't fond of smartphones either.

"I end up pressing random keys and dialling up wrong people," he

SHAYAN ACHARYA

says with a smile. "Random messages get delivered, and I can only make or receive calls. That's it for me. I wish I could throw this small, annoying thing..."

Instead, he prefers letters. Every morning, when he empties the mailbox, he carefully sorts through the correspondence and replies to each one.

"I reply to all of them. I read every letter and ensure that they receive my reply. That sort of keeps me busy..." he says.

A stroke in 2010 briefly disrupted his routine, but thanks to disciplined living and regular exercise, Bird lives without dietary restrictions. He still visits the Wetherby Whaler takeaway on Fridays for scampi and onion rings.

"I eat everything," he says, stirring his coffee and adding more milk.

As we speak, a few old friends drop by to say hello, and some younger faces recognise him too. Bird cherishes these moments, the kind of social interaction he missed deeply during the COVID-19 lockdown five summers ago.

The following day, he's set to travel to Scarborough to watch County matches involving his beloved Yorkshire. Whenever the club plays away, Bird tries to accompany them. It gives him a chance to watch cricket, yes, but also to reconnect with coaches, club members, and friends.

In winter, he turns his attention to football. A lifelong member of Barnsley Football Club, he attends matches there frequently. Having played both cricket and football in

Bird's eye view

* Officiated in 66 Tests and 69 One-Day Internationals
* Stood in his first match in 1970, with his Test debut coming against New Zealand at Leeds in 1973.
* In 1992, stood in Zimbabwe's inaugural Test, becoming the first umpire from the ICC panel to do so.
* Awarded the MBE in June 1986, as part of the Queen's Birthday Honours List.
* Co-authored several books, including *My Autobiography* with Keith Lodge, and the follow-up *White Cap* and *Bails* — both bestsellers.

IF I MISSED ANYTHING IN LIFE, IT'S GETTING MARRIED AND HAVING A LITTLE LAD, WHO WOULD HAVE PROBABLY ALSO PLAYED CRICKET

Emotional farewell: Dickie Bird wipes a tear as MCC and England players applaud him onto the Lord's turf for his final Test as umpire. GETTY IMAGES

Quiet authority: Umpire Dickie Bird keeps a close eye as Madan Lal steams in and Jeffrey Dujon looks on during the 1983 World Cup final at Lord's.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

his youth, Bird holds both sports close to his heart. But as he puts it, he is "married to cricket."

In his playing days, Bird shared a dressing room with Geoffrey Boycott at the Barnsley Cricket Club before signing a professional contract with Yorkshire at 19, earning a retainer of up to £650. In the off-season, he worked as a travelling salesman for a sports goods store.

Those memories cheer him up. But in more recent years, the silence at home has grown heavier. Many of his old friends have passed on.

"Time flies. I am beginning to feel my age now," he says.

"It's not easy to live on your own at this age, but I carry on the best I can. I never married, and got myself married to cricket. But if I missed anything in life is getting married and having a little lad, who would have probably also played cricket," he says in a jest.

That, he says, would have been tremendous, "but it wasn't to be."

He played 93 matches as a right-handed batter for Yorkshire and Leicestershire, but his true renown came from umpiring. Bird officiated in 66 Tests and 69 ODIs before retiring in 1996, during India's Test at Lord's, a match that marked the debuts of Sourav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid.

Beyond the field, he also served as president of Yorkshire County Cricket Club, using over £125,000 of his savings to build a new dressing room and gallery at Headingley.

"The old dressing room was in a poor shape, and teams weren't

Royal honour: Dickie Bird beams with his OBE, awarded by Prince Charles at Buckingham Palace for services to cricket and charity. GETTY IMAGES

willing to come and play there, so I decided to put my money and get the thing sorted. I did it," he says.

Today, that viewing gallery is known as the Sir Dickie Bird Players' Balcony. He makes it a point to attend every match played at Headingley, whether international or domestic. Earlier this year, during the opening match of the Anderson-Tendulkar Trophy, Bird was there daily — watching cricket, catching up with old friends like Sunil Gavaskar and Roger Binny.

Though his days around the game have slowed, his connection to cricket remains strong. At home, much of his time is devoted to the Dickie Bird Foundation, which supports underprivileged children. Large portions of his savings have been donated to fund medical care for those in need, distributed through local hospitals.

"I have been doing it for years, and that gives me immense joy," he says. Partway through our conversation, Bird reflects on his nickname.

"The nickname 'Dickie' was given to me at school. The Whites were 'Chalkie', all the Clarks were 'Nobby', and all the Birds were 'Dickie'," he says with a smile, adding that his friend Tommy Taylor, a former international footballer, became 'Tucker' and was referred to as Little Tommy Tucker.

From there, the memories come flooding in. He recalls the time he was invited to Buckingham Palace for lunch with the Queen.

"The Palace office called me to check if I could come and meet her, and I told the gentleman that I could walk all the way from Barnsley to London to meet the Queen," Bird says. "I got to spend the whole day, have lunch at Buckingham Palace, and it was a great experience..."

These moments still make him light up. Bird also maintains a personal archive of newspaper clippings.

"I have been doing it since the age of 14, and even now, I read the newspapers and keep clippings of all the interesting stories and whatever they write about me," he says. After a brief pause, he adds, "You must send me the clipping of the story when it gets published... I'll add them to my collection..."

Cricket books and daily newspapers help fill the hours. And now and then, Bird picks up the phone to call Boycott or a few other old mates for conversations about cricket and life in general.

Cricket once gave him wings. It still keeps him afloat.

And when he's alone at home, in his four-bedroom cottage overlooking the Pennines, life may feel quiet—even solitary. But he rises from the couch, takes a walk, jogs through the garden, and reads the cricket section in the paper. Suddenly, everything feels a little lighter. A little more like itself.

Life, again, is beautiful.

AFP

Bangladesh clinches T20I series win against Pakistan

1 Pakistan **suffered its first all-out** against Bangladesh when it was skittled out for just 110 in the first T20I.

Bangladesh secured its first-ever T20I series win against Pakistan, taking an unassailable 2-0 lead with an eight-run victory in the second game in Dhaka. The result followed a dominant seven-wicket win in the series opener, where Bangladesh's bowlers skittled Pakistan for just 110 — the visitor's first all-out against Bangladesh in T20Is — with Taskin Ahmed and Mustafizur Rahman sharing five wickets. Pakistan bounced back in the final match, posting 178 for 7 — a marked improvement from its earlier batting efforts — before bowling out Bangladesh for 104 to seal a 74-run consolation win.

AFP

2

Tim David blasted an unbeaten 102 off just 37 balls against West Indies, setting a new record for the fastest T20I century by an Australian.
Walking in at 61/3 in the sixth over of the third match, David unleashed a brutal assault—hammering 11 sixes and six fours—to power Australia to a chase of 215 with 23 balls to spare. The win gave Australia an unassailable 3-0 lead in the five-match series.
David's century surpassed the previous Australian record held by Josh Inglis, who scored a 43-ball ton against Scotland last year.
Australia carried that momentum through the final two games as well, completing a dominant 5-0 series sweep.

PTI

3

The men's T20 Asia Cup will be played from September 9 to 28 in the United Arab Emirates, with India and Pakistan likely to meet as many as three times during the tournament. The first confirmed clash between the two arch-rivals is scheduled for September 14 in Dubai. Mohsin Naqvi **(above)**, Chairperson of the Asian Cricket Council (ACC), confirmed the tournament window and venue via a social media post. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) will serve as the official host, with the event being staged at a neutral venue. The eight participating teams are split into two groups of four. Group A features India, Pakistan, UAE, and Oman, while Group B includes Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Hong Kong. Matches will be held across Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

GETTY IMAGES

4

India batter Veda Krishnamurthy has announced her retirement from international cricket, bringing the curtain down on a career that included 48 ODIs and 76 T20Is. She scored 829 runs in ODIs and 875 runs in T20Is. Veda last played for India in the final of the 2020 ICC Women's T20 World Cup. Her final ODI appearance came in 2018. "From a small-town girl with big dreams to wearing the India jersey with pride. Grateful for everything cricket gave me — the lessons, the people, the memories," she wrote on social media.

AFP

5

Two stunning catches in the final over from fast bowler Matt Henry's **(above)** bowling sealed a thrilling three-run win for New Zealand over South Africa in the tri-series final in Harare.
With South Africa needing a late surge, Michael Bracewell produced a moment of brilliance on the mid-wicket boundary, leaping to dismiss the dangerous Dewald Brevis for 31. Moments later, Daryl Mitchell followed up with a full-stretch, two-handed grab at long-on to remove George Linde. South Africa finished on 177/6, falling just short, as the Black Caps held their nerve to lift the title.

6

Lord's will host its first-ever women's Test next summer, alongside men's Tests against New Zealand and Pakistan. England's men start their summer at Lord's on June 4 with the first of three Tests against New Zealand, followed by a full white-ball series against India in July. A three-Test series against Pakistan and limited-overs matches against Sri Lanka round out the season. The only men's Test north of Nottingham will be against Pakistan at Headingley in August. Key fixtures will overlap with the 2026 Women's T20 World Cup, also being held in England. The second and third men's Tests, along with the first two India T20Is, coincide with the women's event. To prepare, England's women will play three ODIs and five T20Is against New Zealand, followed by three T20Is against India.

AFP

WINGS OF GLORY

Super Falcons staged a **stunning** comeback to claim its 10th Women's Africa Cup.

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While England women clinched top honours in Europe, Nigeria's Super Falcons **(above)** reclaimed its title as the queen of the African continent after securing a record-extending 10th Women's Africa Cup of Nations trophy. The team, however, was made to work hard by host Morocco in the final, which took a two-goal lead after captain Ghizlane Chebbak and winger Sanaa Mssoudy scored within the first 30 minutes.

Nigeria's comeback began when Esther Okoronkwo and Folashade Ijamilusi scored seven minutes apart, before Jennifer Echegini slotted in a dramatic 88th-minute winner.

Elsewhere in South America, the race for the Copa America Femenina entered its final stretch. Argentina, which had the best record in the group stage with four wins from four, crashed out in the semifinals after a penalty shootout loss to Colombia (the match ended goalless in regulation time). With the win, Colombia not only reached the final but also booked a spot at the LA 2028 Olympics. In the final, it will face either defending champion Brazil or Uruguay, who meet in the second semifinal.

Preparations underway for new season

Liverpool's intent to go for the full haul of trophies next season was clearly evident in its activity during the summer transfer window. The club has spent £269 million so far, bringing in the likes of Florian Wirtz, Hugo Ekitike, Jeremie Frimpong, and Milos Kerkez. In addition, the club has been heavily linked with Newcastle United's Alexander Isak, who is reportedly looking to move this summer.

However, the Premier League champion suffered a 4-2 defeat to AC Milan in their pre-season friendly at the Hong Kong Football Festival. Newcastle, meanwhile, travelled to Asia without Isak and fell to a 3-2 loss against Arsenal in their friendly. The match also gave Arsenal the opportunity to unveil Swedish striker Viktor Gyokeres as its newest player.

Manchester United, meanwhile, confirmed the signing of Bryan Mbeumo from Brentford, having earlier strengthened its attack with the

A new home: Marcus Rashford made a year-long loan move from Manchester United to FC Barcelona. GETTY IMAGES

signing of Matheus Cunha from Wolves. United began its pre-season with a 0-0 draw against newly promoted Leeds United before beating West Ham United 2-1 in the Premier League Summer Series.

Speaking of United, Marcus Rashford has followed Englishman Gary Lineker's footsteps by making a year-long loan move to FC Barcelona. Four days after the announcement, he made his debut for the club in its 3-1 win against Vissel Kobe.

Messi leads the charge

It took a gritty defensive performance from FC Cincinnati to end Lionel Messi's **(right)** record five-game streak with two or more goals in Major League Soccer and pull off a 3-0 win. Cincinnati managed to keep the Argentine maestro at bay, with Miami managing only two shots on target throughout the game. At the other end, a brace from Evander and a tidy finish from 20-year-old Gerardo Valenzuela helped their side clinch top spot in the Eastern Conference.

Messi bounced back quickly from the poor showing, producing two goals and two assists against New York Red Bulls in the following game.

The brace took Messi's tally to 18 goals in the league this season, tying him for the Golden Boot with Nashville SC's Sam Surridge.

However, he and Jordi Alba missed Miami's next match against Cincinnati due to a one-match ban handed out by the MLS.

The decision by the league, which, according to Inter Miami owner Jorge Mas, made Messi "extremely upset", followed the duo's absence from the MLS All-Star Game.

The gaps left by the two were evident as Miami failed to find a breakthrough against Cincinnati, playing out a 0-0 draw. The team currently sits fifth in the Eastern Conference standings with 42 points from 22 games — eight points behind leader Philadelphia Union, which has played three extra games.

(All results updated as of July 29)

FOR MORE STORIES

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ROAR OF THE PRIDE

Defending champion England beat Spain on penalties in a **thrilling encounter** that ended 1-1 after extra time.

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Chaos does not necessarily have to be a negative thing, some revel in it. The latest example is England manager Sarina Wiegman, who watched her team retain its European Championship crown after a penalty shootout win against world champion Spain.

"This has been the most chaotic tournament; from the first game there was chaos ... turns out we love football chaos!" a jubilant Wiegman said.

Mariona Caldentey and Alessia Russo of Spain and England, respectively, scored a goal apiece, with the teams heading to a shootout after battling it out for 120 minutes.

The Spaniards were wasteful when it mattered, managing just one goal from 24 attempts. Some would blame destiny but the practical approach would be to criticise the players' lack of clinical finishing.

The start of the shootout was dramatic, and the more superstitious among the Spain faithful might have seen it as a sign that their women's team would complete its trophy cabinet.

England's Beth Mead, who went up first, found the net with her initial attempt, but it was not a clean connection — she slipped while striking the ball, resulting in a double touch.

As per the revised IFAB rules on penalties involving double touches, Mead was required to

GETTY IMAGES

retake her effort, only to see her shot palmed away by Spain custodian Cata Coll.

The cheers from those clad in red were loud. Incidents like these, especially during a major final's shootout, can be a death knell for a team's mental resolve.

But Spain scripted its own downfall, failing to convert three spot-kicks on the trot, with Chloe Kelly **(facing page, below)** putting the final nail in the coffin.

From uncertainty to Sweet Caroline

England's EURO 2025 campaign was one of grit and determination and also a stroke of fortune, which saw it survive penalty shootouts in both the quarterfinal (against Sweden) and the final.

The tournament marked the rise of a new star in Hannah Hampton, who made two crucial saves in the final's shootout, showing a sharp presence between the sticks — a key contributor to the Lionesses' victorious run. Considering the pressure she was under, replacing a figure like Mary Earps, her performance was all the more impressive. At the end of it all, Hampton got the deserved 'Player of the Match' award in the final.

From England's gloomy pre-EURO build-up, with players like Millie Bright and Earps ruled out, to successfully defending its title and singing *Sweet Caroline* with the fans — as per tradition — there was a distinct 'feel-good factor' about Wiegman's winning team.

Taking by surprise

There wasn't much hype around Andrea Soncin's Italy side, which faced challenging circumstances even before the tournament began. Drawn into Group B alongside Spain, Belgium, and Portugal, expectations were low — but the Italians showed resolve, qualifying from the group as runner-up.

Opening with a 1-0 win over Belgium, it drew 1-1 with Portugal, and eventually suffered a 1-3 loss to Spain.

A quarterfinal clash with Norway was a tricky one, given the latter's power-packed attack featuring the likes of Caroline Graham Hansen and Ada Hegerberg.

Hegerberg did make Italian hearts skip a beat by opening the scoring, but a brace from Cristina Girelli — including a 90th-minute winner — sent Italy into the semifinals.

If the Norway fixture was tough, the semifinal matchup seemed an almost impossible hurdle for Soncin's side as it was going up against defending champion England. A story for the ages was almost written by Italy.

Barbara Bonansea's 33rd-minute goal nearly took Italy over the finish line and into the final, but its quest was undone by 'Young Player of the Tournament', Michelle Agyemang, who grabbed an equaliser in the sixth minute of second-half stoppage time to force extra time. Kelly would go on to convert a 119th-minute penalty to win it for England.

"This is something that hurts, but we have to be proud of what we've done. The fact that we didn't get to the final — and were just one minute away is encouragement," Soncin said after the semifinal loss.

Safe bet: England keeper Hannah Hampton was adjudged Player of the Match in the final. REUTERS

Never give up: Young Player of the Tournament, Michelle Agyemang (No. 17), scored a stoppage-time equaliser for England against Italy in the semifinal.
REUTERS

The ugly side of the beautiful game

Despite many initiatives to tackle racism in the sport, it remains rampant. The latest victim was England's Jess Carter, who revealed that she had been receiving racial abuse online since the start of the campaign.

The England women's team, which traditionally takes the knee before kick-off as a gesture against racism, announced ahead of its semifinal fixture against Italy that it would not do so — in solidarity with Carter.

The players said in a joint statement: "We stand with Jess and all Lionesses past and present who have suffered racism. Representing your country is the greatest honour. It is not right that while we are doing that, some of us are treated differently simply because of the colour of our skin. It's clear that we and football need to find another way to tackle racism. We've agreed as a squad to remain standing before kick-off on Tuesday."

UEFA also expressed its support, stating: "Abuse and discrimination should never be tolerated, whether in football or society, in person or online. We stand with Jess."

Record-breaking numbers

The popularity of women's football continues to rise — and EURO 2025 was a powerful testament to this. UEFA confirmed that this edition was the best-attended Women's European Championship ever, with 29 of 31 matches sold out and several attendance records broken.

Ahead of the final, a record 623,088 spectators had attended the tournament, surpassing the previous total attendance record of 574,875 from the 2022 edition in England.

There were also several individual match records, according to UEFA.

The Germany vs Denmark match in Basel drew 34,165 fans — the highest attendance for a group game not involving the host nation, and the most spectators ever for a women's football match in Switzerland.

Meanwhile, the 34,063-strong crowd for Switzerland's match

> « UEFA confirmed that this edition was the best-attended one ever, with 29 of 31 matches sold out and several attendance records broken »

ENGLAND

1

Full time: Alessia Russo 57'
Penalties: Alex Greenwood, Niamh Charles, Chloe Kelly

SPAIN

1

Full time: Mariona Caldentey 25'
Penalties: Patricia Guijarro

Contrasting emotions: Spain's Aitana Bonmati won the Player of the Tournament award. **Right:** The tournament saw record attendance this edition. AFP & GETTY IMAGES

against Norway set a new record for attendance at a Swiss women's national team game.

The tournament also saw considerable traction on digital platforms, with UEFA revealing that the Women's EURO platforms garnered 20.7 million engagements and over half a billion views across all posts — both significantly higher than the previous edition.

"If it wasn't clear before, it is undeniable now — women's football is unstoppable. This is more than just a tournament; it's a movement. The response from across Europe and beyond proves that women's football isn't just here to stay — it is setting the new standard," said Nadine Kessler, UEFA's head of women's football.

A family affair

Two brothers, one final — Sayyad and Aakib led from the front in a high-stakes contest.

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When the Railway Sports Promotion Board (RSPB) took on the Indian Navy hockey team in the final of the MCC-Murugappa Gold Cup in Chennai on June 20, a mini-battle ensued in the Rahim household. Cousins Sayyad Niyaz Rahim **(above, blue)** and Aakib Rahim Arif **(above, red)** captained their respective sides, RSPB and the Navy, in the summit clash of one of India's oldest hockey tournaments.

It was Sayyad who won the bragging rights under lights at the Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium, leading RSPB to its third straight title and sixth since 1996. The defending champion dominated proceedings in the final, overcoming the Navy team 3-1, with both captains scoring on the night.

This wasn't the first instance of the two brothers going head-to-head on the big stage. Aakib and his Navy side triumphed over Sayyad in the Nehru Cup semifinal in 2022, before the elder brother settled the scores in the same tournament last year.

Sayyad and Aakib were born in Nagpur to

Historic: Defending champion RSPB completed a hat-trick of titles.

PICS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

brothers Mumtazur Rahim and Arif Rahim, who both played football and hockey for the Maharashtra Police side. The Orange City is not particularly known for producing hockey talent, and the brothers had to look elsewhere to build a career in the sport.

"There is no infrastructure in Nagpur. There are no astroturfs or even grass turfs for us to play on. Whoever wants to play the game has to move outside," Sayyad told *Sportstar.*

After playing hockey through the junior levels in Nagpur, Sayyad joined the Sports Authority of India (SAI) Regional Centre in Mumbai from 2007 to 2010, which paved the way for him to join the Railways, where he has been playing since.

Sayyad's career path also opened the door for his younger brother, who promptly joined SAI Mumbai and found his way into the Navy, where he has spent more than eight years.

The two brothers have also come close to international call-ups, honing their skills at national team camps. Sayyad was part of the national probables before the COVID-19-induced break ahead of the Tokyo Olympics. Aakib, on the other hand, is fresh off participating in a 54-member National Coaching Camp under head coach Craig Fulton, held in Bengaluru in April.

"I got to learn a lot in that one week. I understood where my weaknesses are and what I should work on," Aakib said.

"The way we trained was entirely different. What we do on a day-to-day basis is enough for domestic hockey but not for the international level," he added.

Aakib was also part of the Hyderabad Toofans squad for the Hockey India League in 2024 and, despite not playing a single game, says he gained abundant knowledge from international stars Gonzalo Peillat (Germany) and Arthur de Sloover (Belgium).

Sayyad hopes his performances this season can help him secure a place in the franchise-based league, alongside Aakib and his fiancée, Priyanka Wankhede, who plays for the Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers.

"The HIL is an important tournament for the players. You have the money and the fame, but you are also being watched live by the Indian seniors and selectors. The auction will be in December. I hope someone shows interest," Sayyad said.

FINAL

INDIAN RAILWAYS

3

Shivam Anand 8', Pankaj Rawat 37', Sayyad Niyaz Rahim 57'

NAVY

1

Aakib Rahim Arif 15'

ALL EYES ON ESPORTS WORLD CUP

Nihal Sarin will be one of the two Indians in chess at the Esports World Cup, with the other being Arjun Erigaisi.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
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India's golden era in chess has already seen D.Gukesh and Divya Deshmukh become the World Champion and the World Cup winner respectively. The success has now extended into avenues of esports, with Nihal Sarin securing a spot in the finals of online chess at the Esports World Cup (EWC) 2025. He was one of only four players — and the sole Indian — to qualify for the global tournament through the Last Chance Qualifiers (LCQ), completing the 16-player roster for the EWC group stage, which begins on July 29 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The Indian grandmaster registered five wins, finishing with 5.5 points to secure a top-four spot in Group B and advance to the playoffs. In the knockouts, he pulled off a stunning comeback against Belarus' Denis Lazavik in the Round of 16, delivering a checkmate from a losing position to clinch a 1.5-0.5 victory.

He followed it up with a 1.5-0.5 win against Dutch star Anish Giri in the quarters. Sarin then sealed his qualification by defeating Russia's Andrey Esipenko 2.5-1.5 in the winners' bracket.

India now has two of its most promising chess players at the EWC: Sarin (representing S8UL) and Arjun Erigaisi, who qualified through the Champions Chess Tour (playing for Gen.G Esports).

"I'm incredibly happy to have qualified for the Esports World Cup 2025. The competition was intense, and the format tested every aspect of my game. I'm thankful to S8UL for believing in me and supporting me on this journey," Sarin said.

"I'm now looking forward to making the country proud on the main stage."

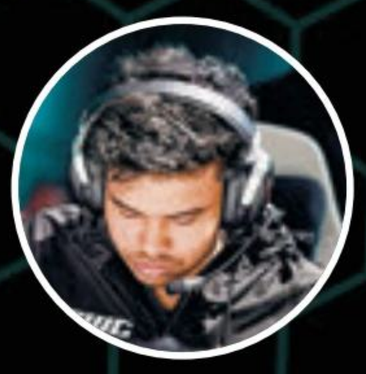
Sarin is currently ranked eighth in India and 37th in the world with a FIDE rating of 2692. He will join 15 of the world's top chess players, including Magnus Carlsen, Hikaru Nakamura, Fabiano Caruana, Nodirbek Abdusattorov and Alireza Firouzja at the EWC main event.

The tournament has a prize pool of a whopping USD 1.5 million (approx. ₹12.9 crore) and will follow a rapid 10+0 time control format.

BGMI RANKINGS

MOHIT "LEVI" KUMAVAT

A.G. PRANAV "DRAGONOP" KIRUTHIK



ARYAN "ARYAN" CHOUHAN

DHAIRYA "SYRAX" SOLANKI

TANISHK "ADMINO" SINGH

The group stage will have four groups of four players each, with the top two from each group advancing to the single-elimination playoffs. The Grand Final will be a best-of-three sets showdown.

HEARTBREAK FOR INDIA AT PUBG NATIONS CUP, AGAIN

Expectations were modest for India at the 2025 PUBG Nations Cup—a tournament equivalent to the World Cup for the PC version of PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG). In the 2023 edition, India's debut in the Nations Cup, they finished last.

This time, despite an improved performance in the Survival Stage—where the team, named Path of the Graveyard (comprising Kharku_47, Rupesh_, Ryzn07, Shaatbhai, and XiaoYannQvQ), finished above Japan and Spain—they failed to break into the top eight, missing the finals.

With a score of 39, the Indian team finished 14th out of 16 teams in the Survival Stage, resulting in an early exit.

Meanwhile, Delwyn, Himass, Sololzy, and TanVuu led Vietnam to victory, securing the country's first-ever Nations Cup title. Vietnam has

finished in the top four in its last four appearances and clinched the title with a score of 216 in the finals this time around.

South Korea, the defending champion, finished eighth with a score of 105.

In the PUBG Mobile World Cup (a separate tournament played on mobile devices), Team AxTMG from India is still in contention (at the time of writing).

DATES ANNOUNCED FOR FIFAE FINALS 2025 AND 2026

FIFAe, FIFA's digital football and esports platform, has confirmed the FIFAe Finals 2025 and 2026, scheduled for December 10-19, 2025, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The event will feature three titles:

Rocket League

eFootball (Mobile)

eFootball (Console)

In the inaugural FIFAe World Cup, Saudi Arabia won the Rocket League title, Indonesia claimed the eFootball (Console) championship, and Malaysia secured the eFootball (Mobile) trophy.

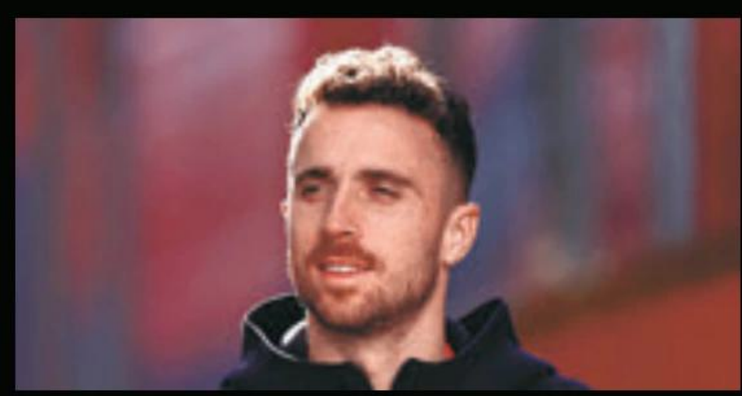
The 2025 FIFAe Finals will include an open qualification period, allowing more national teams to compete for a spot.

At the FIFAe World Cup:

16 national teams will compete in Rocket League.

12 national teams will compete in eFootball (Mobile & Console).

Did you know?



Former Liverpool forward, Diogo Jota who tragically passed away in an accident last month, was not only a brilliant footballer but also a prominent FIFAe player. He also owned the esports organisation LUNA Esports..

WHO AM I?

I made history as one of the first Indian Valorant players to compete in the VCT Pacific League, representing India in Seoul, South Korea. I recently joined Velocity Gaming in 2025 and won the VALORANT Challengers South Asia 2025: Grand Final. The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Vivek "Clutchgod" Horo

BUSINESS OF ESPORTS

Indian gaming giant NODWIN Gaming has partnered with Sony LIV to stream select matches from the Esports World Cup 2025 in India.

EASTER EGG 'FLAMING'

Flaming in esports refers to roasting or insulting opponents as a mind-game strategy to destabilise them or gain an advantage over their play. In short, its the esports equivalent of sledging in cricket.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

AFP

SOAK IN THE MOMENT

Oscar Piastri outmanoeuvred and outlasted Lando Norris in a race of **fine margins** that now define McLaren's season, and the championship battle.

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At Spa-Francorchamps, unpredictability is tradition. The inevitable rain around the Ardennes region in Belgium always adds a layer of risk and chaos to the 7km-long circuit — the longest track on the calendar — which rewards the brave and punishes hesitation.

The clouds had been looming for hours, and when the showers began, the start of the Belgian Grand Prix was pushed back for more than an hour. But in a weekend of shifting fortunes and grabbing at strands of opportunity, it was Oscar Piastri **(above)** who prevailed.

The 24-year-old made the boldest impression, outmanoeuvring and outlasting his teammate Lando Norris in a race of fine margins that now define McLaren's season, and the championship battle.

Making a move

The advantage swung back and forth between the McLaren drivers almost from one session to the next. The papaya pair split the poles — Piastri dominated the sprint qualifying, while Norris struck in the main race, edging his teammate by barely a tenth.

But pole position is often seen as a double-edged sword at Spa-Francorchamps, and they were both at the receiving end. It was last in 2021 that the front-runner was able to maintain his advantage, albeit in an uncharacteristic fashion — Max Verstappen won the two-lap affair, which awarded half points to drivers.

First in line for the harsh reward was Piastri, who lined up ahead of the Dutchman (a three-time Belgian GP winner in the Sprint). The looming threat for the Australian was not his teammate starting from third, but the Red Bull sandwiched in between.

One can always expect Verstappen to pull off a stunning overtake on the opening lap, and the events unfolded soon enough. Flat out through Eau Rouge and into the Kemmel Straight — the first few turns of the track — the reigning champion used the tow to soar past Piastri in remarkable, gutsy, Verstappen-like fashion.

From there, he remained in total control of the 15-lap affair to win his first sprint of the season. It was his 12th career sprint victory — more than all other sprint winners combined (9). Piastri finished second, Norris third, but the psychological edge had begun to shift.

Spray treatment: The race at Spa-Francorchamps began in classic fashion — a rain delay, five Safety Car laps, and a rolling start on Lap 6. REUTERS

Learning curve

Bouncing back from a disappointing result in the 100-lap shootout, Piastri was not at his usual best during qualifying. A rare inaccuracy by Piastri allowed Norris to grab pole, but a window of opportunity was now wide open.

Sunday began in classic Spa fashion — a rain delay, five Safety Car laps, and a rolling start on Lap 6. As the field cautiously peeled away, Piastri pounced, and quite bravely at that. He proved he can be a quick learner, mimicking Verstappen's overtake to perfection. Norris could only watch as his rival drifted away into the spray.

The rain stayed away thereon, and the track dried up soon enough. The one who triggered a wave of pit stops was Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton, whose revival drive powered his pit-stop-to-points finish. The tyre change was the right call — McLaren brought Piastri in first for mediums, and Norris a lap later for hards, betting on long-term gain.

Norris lost time with a slower pit stop but stayed close, managing his tyres and waiting for Piastri to pit again. But the medium tyres lasted longer than expected, and suddenly, the advantage was back with Piastri.

It became clear that McLaren's tyre split strategy would shape the final act of the race. Norris had to push, but Piastri had the track position and enough grip to defend it.

Right on time

By Lap 39, Norris had slashed the gap to under three seconds. Overtaking a teammate with equal machinery and high stakes is rarely straightforward. He had gotten all too familiar with playing catch-up, but might have left too much to do towards the end once again.

With two laps to go, Norris made a mistake, undoing the painstaking charge and sealing his fate. Piastri crossed the line over three seconds ahead to clinch his eighth career victory and extend his lead to 16 points. He reasserted himself in what is becoming the most compelling intra-team rivalry of the year.

Behind the battling McLarens, Ferrari's Charles Leclerc quietly executed one of his most assured drives of the season to take the final podium place. Yet another perfect qualifying lap helped him oust sprint winner Verstappen, who couldn't find a way past the Ferrari driver in the 44-lap event.

But when the top two crossed the line, Leclerc was nowhere near. The gap? Almost 20 seconds. The sight of the McLarens thriving up front is all too common by now, but what is becoming increasingly difficult to predict is how close the fight keeps getting.

Each weekend seems to tilt the scale in a different direction — and at Spa, it swayed back towards Piastri.

REUTERS

MotoGP

Marc Marquez has been the embodiment of pushing the limit this season.

Back-to-back race weekends saw Marquez emerge victorious in Germany and Czechia, en route to becoming the first Ducati rider to win five consecutive MotoGP races.

The Spaniard secured his ninth victory at Sachsenring, an event that was marked by multiple crashes, with only 10 out of 18 riders finishing. He staged a lights-to-flag victory while his brother, Alex Marquez, finished second despite a fractured hand, and Francesco Bagnaia came home third.

A week later at the Dutch TT in Assen, Marquez was off to a rough start. He recovered from two crashes in practice and overcame a poor qualifying to charge through the field. He finished clear of Aprilia's Marco Bezzecchi and his Ducati teammate Bagnaia, who was denied a fourth straight win here.

With a 120-point gap and 10 rounds remaining, catching Marquez will be next to impossible.

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

« We might not have a leg or a hand, but we're mentally very strong and capable of doing things able-bodied people can't »

BHAVINA PATEL

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It's been four years since Bhavina Patel made history in Tokyo, winning India's first-ever Paralympic medal in table tennis — a silver.

Since then, the Gujarat paddler has continued her rise, most recently clinching consecutive singles gold medals at international events in Chinese Taipei. In the second of those, she defeated South Korea's Moon Sung-hye, a five-time Paralympic medallist, in the final.

With more major tournaments on the horizon, Bhavina remains focused on sharpening her skills. But she feels the current para table tennis scene in India leaves much to be desired. In a conversation with *Sportstar,* the 38-year-old opened up about accessibility issues, her hope for a para version of the Ultimate Table Tennis (UTT) league, and her coaching aspirations for the future.

In what ways have things changed for you since that silver medal in 2021 at the Tokyo Paralympics?

I've seen how people's perceptions change after you win a major medal for your country. Distant relatives have suddenly remembered me. I've also stopped shying away from spending on equipment. We've got more social media coverage now. Even within my family, they trust me more.

Do you think that all these changes would have happened if you hadn't won the medal?

No, I don't think so. Before the medal, no one knew who Bhavina Patel was. People used to say things like "She's wasting her father's money" and "What's the point of doing all this?". But I had a burning desire to do something for the country.

What do you think about para athletes being constantly viewed from the lens of inspiration?

As long as people aren't aware of the level at which we play, the medals we've won, and how we've performed at the Paralympics, they'll think of us as *becharas* (helpless). Once they know, they salute.

They can never imagine wheelchair-bound people as athletes. Those who don't have someone like that in their family can never understand what disability is. Awareness campaigns should be run in the country, but I don't think we can change everyone's mindset — and that's okay. We don't want people's sympathy.

We might not have a leg or a hand, but we're mentally very strong and capable of doing things able-bodied people can't. Whenever we go abroad, there's a designated

Unforgettable moment: At the Tokyo 2021 Paralympics, Bhavina Patel made history as the first Indian table tennis player to win a Paralympic medal. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

road or lane which makes people using a wheelchair feel independent. There's even a system at traffic signals that helps us cross the road. Such things should be introduced in India too.

The government builds lifts and ramps in many buildings for accessibility, but these facilities are not maintained properly. Even the elderly and pregnant women need such requirements, not just us.

You couldn't recreate your Tokyo performance at the 2024 Paris Paralympics. What do you think went wrong?

I'm happy with my performance. I was playing China's Ying Zhou in the quarterfinals and gave my best. I don't have any regrets from that tournament. They [Chinese players] never let their strategy leak. Tactics, facilities — they have everything. It's their game; they're almost trained like robots.

Recently, you attended the opening ceremony of the UTT. Did you speak to the organisers about the possibility of a UTT for para table tennis players?

I spoke to Vita Dani ma'am about possibly starting a UTT for para table tennis players. It'll give them a platform to show the level of their game. It can also be a confidence booster.

After seeing your rise in the sport, are there others from your village who want to take up table tennis and follow your path?

There are many athletes coming up in Gujarat, but the stadiums either don't have a table or are too far away. I have tables at my home and try to call players over for training.

After I retire, I wish to give India an athlete who goes on to play at the Paralympics. I want to establish an academy to guide athletes from their early stages right up to the Paralympics.

And I'll do this free of cost because I don't want them to face the financial hurdles I had to overcome.

What more do you think can be done to help and improve para sports in India?

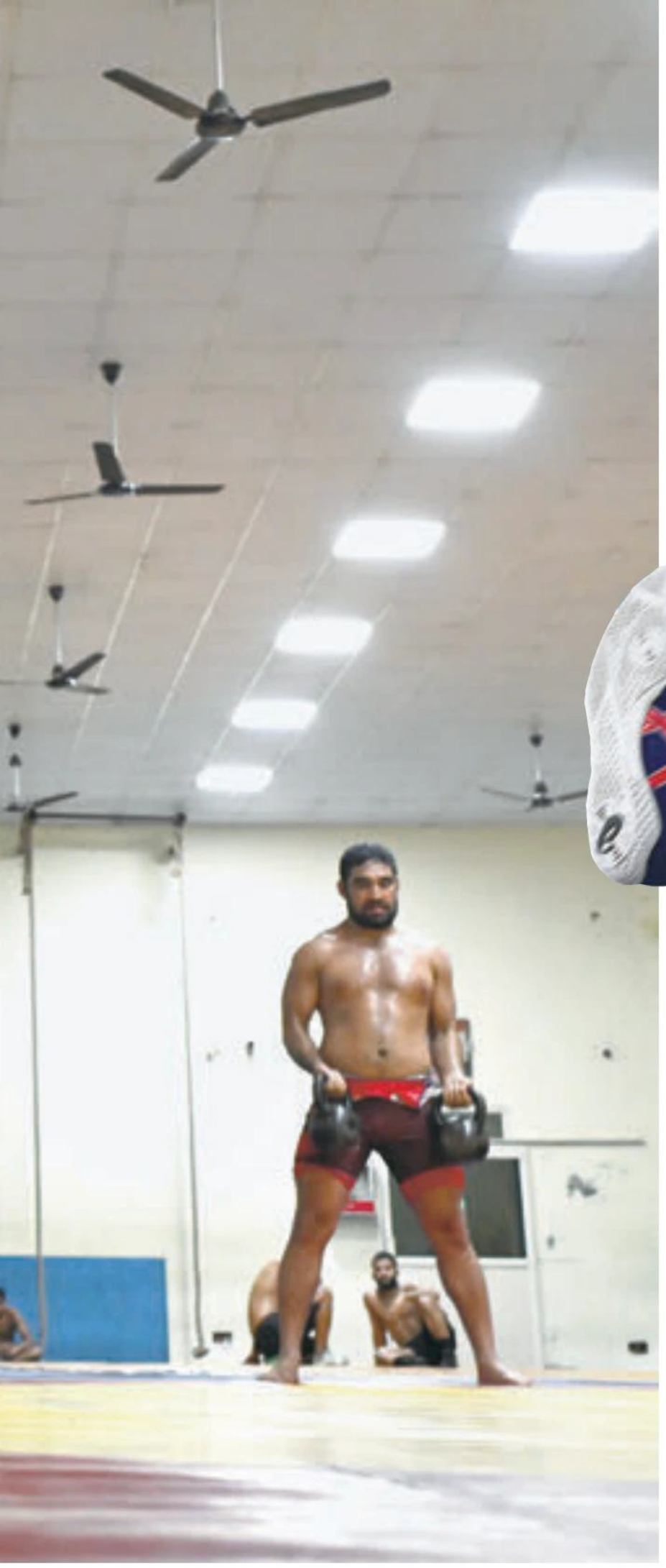
The government has provided a lot of support through schemes like TOPS, but I feel some of the funding that goes to already established athletes — who have their own sponsors — could go to beginners and grassroots athletes. That would help talent come up from the remotest areas, across all disciplines.

Making a mark: Asian Under-23 champion Sujeet Kalkal scored a breakthrough win, toppling established names to claim the 65kg freestyle gold at the recently-concluded Ranking Series wrestling event in Budapest. PICS: R. V. MOORTHY

» WRESTLING

SUJEET KALKAL AND THE ANATOMY OF A COMEBACK

The Indian wrestler breaks down the highs, lows and lessons of his journey — from missed chances to the **quiet rebuild** after missing the bus to Paris Olympics.



WATCH THE VIDEO

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Whenever Indian wrestler Sujeet Kalkal feels short of motivation, he pulls out his phone and looks at the wallpaper. The 22-year-old has had his share of wrestling highlights recently. In July, Sujeet won India's first gold medal of the year at the UWW (United World Wrestling) Ranking Series in Budapest, defeating Olympic bronze medallist Islam Dudaev of Albania, two-time Olympian Vazgen Tevanyan of Armenia, and four-time European medallist Ali Rahimzade of Azerbaijan in the men's 65kg division.

In a strong field, Sujeet scored 33 points while conceding just two across four matches — a result that marks him as a potential medal contender at the World Championships in September.

The picture on Sujeet's phone, however, isn't from Budapest. It's from Istanbul, taken during last year's World Wrestling Olympic Qualification Tournament, where he experienced one of the lowest moments of his career. Having won the selection trials in India, Sujeet had hoped to qualify for the Paris Games at the Asian Olympic Qualifiers in Jordan. But in a turn of misfortune, his connecting flight to Amman was delayed due to a record-breaking flood in Dubai.

At the World Qualifiers — a much tougher field — Sujeet made it to the semifinals, needing just one more win to book his Olympic ticket. But he fell short. He lost 6-1 to Mongolia's Tulga Tomor-Ochiryn, and then came agonisingly close against World Champion Zain Retherford of the USA, losing 2-2 on criteria. *(Sujeet lost because Retherford scored the final takedown)*

It's a picture of the match against Tulga that Sujeet glances at every time he picks up his phone. While most athletes might have been bitterly disappointed about missing out on making their Olympic debut, Sujeet sees things differently. "Although I lost, I consider these two defeats to be the most important matches for me. I might have qualified for the Olympics had I

somehow won, but I don't think I was mentally ready then. I learned so much from my two losses. The fact that I lost just 2-2 against a world champion gave me a lot of motivation. I realised how much more I had to work on," he says.

But that's not the only thing atypical about India's latest prospect in men's freestyle wrestling. He's a relatively late bloomer in the sport, only seriously pursuing it since the last five years. He once had dreams of being an engineer and routinely peppers his conversation with English.

Sujeet might have been expected to take to wrestling as a matter of tradition. He traces his roots to Imlota, a village in Haryana's Bhiwani district with a strong wrestling culture. His father, Dayanand, is a former national wrestling champion and even competed at the 2005 World Championships in the Greco-Roman category.

Sujeet, however, wasn't pushed into the sport. Although he started going to the village *akhara* with his father from the age of six, he, unlike many Indian wrestlers, was expected to give equal importance to his studies. Unable to focus solely on wrestling, Sujeet's career features no major success at the cadet (Under-17) or junior (U-19) levels.

"He scored over 90 per cent in his Class 12 Board Exams. Because he excelled in his studies, I didn't want to push him to wrestle the way he had to if he had to win at the age-group levels. *Kushti karwane aur sikhane me farak hai* (there's a kind of wrestling you do when you want to learn the sport, and a kind you do when you have to win). While Sujeet was in school, I just wanted him to

SUJEET WASN'T PUSHED INTO WRESTLING. ALTHOUGH HE STARTED GOING TO THE VILLAGE *AKHARA* WITH HIS FATHER FROM THE AGE OF SIX, HE, UNLIKE MANY INDIAN WRESTLERS, WAS EXPECTED TO GIVE EQUAL IMPORTANCE TO HIS STUDIES.

learn," says Dayanand.

It was only after Sujeet graduated from school that he decided to focus solely on becoming a wrestler. "I was in the non-medical stream and initially thought about preparing for the JEE (Joint Entrance Exam). I even gave a few mock tests. But after my Class 12 exams, my father said I had to choose which direction I wanted to go. I finally decided I wanted to be a wrestler. I loved the sport. When I was growing up, I'd watch videos of Sushil (Kumar) and Bajrang (Punia). I used to really enjoy those videos. I was good in studies, of course, but I felt I could do more for myself and the country as a wrestler," says Sujeet. He moved to Sonipat to train with coach Kuldeep Singh, who recalls the youngster standing out particularly because of his intelligence. "He didn't have any big results at the age-group levels for two reasons. One, of course, was because he was managing his studies alongside his sport. The second was that, unlike a lot of junior athletes, he never changed his age to get an unfair advantage. But his best quality was just how quickly he picked up things. He started training at our academy in 2021, and within four years, he's now one of the best wrestlers in India," says Kuldeep.

Atypical Indian wrestler

The unorthodox route Sujeet has taken in his career has influenced the kind of wrestler he is. "Most of the top Indian wrestlers have a game that is based on tiring out opponents. That's because the training that most of them have is designed to build up stamina. When I watch someone like Bajrang *pehelwan*, it's really exciting because he wrestles for all six minutes, and when he is competing, you always know that even if he is trailing in the score, he will break the opponent physically and then come back in the last few seconds of the match," says Sujeet. "It's fun to watch, but I can't wrestle that way. When I started wrestling, I was always drilled on technique. Even now I'm more of a technical wrestler," he says.

That's what coach Kuldeep identifies as Sujeet's strength too. "He's not going to tire out an opponent. But he's very sharp and explosive. He doesn't like to give away easy points, and if he can, he will try to finish off matches as early as possible," says Kuldeep.

Method wrestler: "I was always drilled on technique, that's the kind of wrestler I've become," says Sujeet.

Ever since making his senior national debut in 2022 — where he won silver — Sujeet has made a concerted push to claim the top spot in one of India's marquee weight categories. While he emerged as the national representative in 2024 after winning the selection trials, Sujeet admits that he still has some way to go before cementing his place in the Indian squad.

His loss at the Olympic Qualification Tournament only further motivated him. "That tournament gave me the confidence that I could compete at a very high level, but it also helped me to understand just where I have to improve. I used to do very little strength training before last year. I was mostly just doing mat practice. I've added a lot more strength training to my routine now. If I give myself about 70 out of 100 when it comes to my technique, I think I will give myself about 50 out of 100 when it comes to my strength.

"I went to train in Japan and Russia, and both of those gave me the opportunity to polish my technique," he says.

Double World goal

While he had hoped to push his case further at the Asian Championships at the start of the year, an unlucky injury to his right ankle in his second bout forced him to forfeit the remainder of the tournament. The injury, diagnosed as a ligament tear, took nearly two months to heal.

The Budapest Ranking Series marked his comeback. It was just one tournament, but the nature of his dominance suggests the injury is firmly behind him. It's also a timely boost as Sujeet gears up for the rest of the season.

"My goal for this season is to medal at both the Senior and U-23 World Championships (in September and October of this year). I know I have the capability of doing both," he says.

There's a long-term goal too. Although he doesn't specify the details, the Los Angeles 2028 poster in his room in Sonipat hints at it. Having fallen short of making it to Paris 2024, he's determined not to miss out again. "By the next Olympics I want to be confident that I am as ready and well prepared as I can be," he says.

WILL INDIA FIND ITS STRIDE IN THE LONG RUN?

India's growing appetite for triathlons and hybrid races signals a **shift in fitness** culture. But will the infrastructure and access catch up?

Santadeep Dey
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A powerful revolution is beginning to take shape across India's bustling metros and sprawling peri-urban locales, as an increasing number of fitness enthusiasts continue to submit to the punishing allure of racing banners like the Ironman and HYROX.

Of course, there is the good ol' marathon, the roughly 42.2-kilometre-long no-nonsense run that will never stop finding takers. But then again, a new breed of endurance athletes, fuelled by the hunger to redefine personal limits, are sprinting into a world where mental fortitude and brute strength are put to the test across disciplines.

The Ironman, an iconic triathlon, featuring a 3.9-km swim, 180.2-km bicycle ride, and a full-fledged marathon, and HYROX, a global

fitness race blending functional exercises and endurance sports, are no longer exclusive to elite Western athletes.

Although HYROX saw the light of day in Hamburg, Germany, in 2018, in India, it is about three months old. The first event took place in Mumbai in May this year. The second iteration, held on July 19 in New Delhi, brought together 2,600 fitness enthusiasts—an overwhelming 62 per cent increase in participation compared to the inaugural episode.

The Ironman also arrived on Indian shores in 2019, 41 years after the first edition in Hawaii. Held in Goa every year since then, barring 2020 and 2021 owing to COVID-19, it is organised in the 70.3 format. Also called the half-Ironman, the 70.3 gets its name due to the total miles one has to cover during said event: a 1.2-mile (1.9-km) swim, a 56-mile (90-km) bike ride, and a 13.1-mile (21.1-km) run. The 2024 chapter saw an uptick, with 1,200 participants getting flagged off compared to the previous year's 897 starters.

To be sure, these numbers are nowhere close to the attendance seen at the Mumbai Marathon, the largest of its kind and the only Gold-labelled World Athletics Road Race in India, but it's a start. One that Yoska, a technology-led health and wellness start-up that organises the Ironman and HYROX in India, can be proud of.

Neil D'Silvha, the event producer of HYROX India and the race director of Ironman 70.3 India, believes the growing popularity of these multi-discipline endurance races is attributable to the ever-increasing disposable income of the lower and upper-middle class in the country.

Wellness wave: India's fitness journey is entering a new phase — where endurance is no longer elite, and transformation goes beyond the mirror. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

He tells *Sportstar*, "The general trajectory of people getting into the mindset of being fit has been on the rise, and that is obviously due to the progress we have made as a country. India is earning enough money and has enough time on its hands to also focus on health, which was not the case a few years back. That has been the primary driver for participation in the marathon and now the Ironman and HYROX. For a very long time, a marathon was the only end goal of fitness-related activities. That suddenly changed when the Ironman came to India, and people found

something more challenging. HYROX now has given a very large population of gym-goers, who never had anything to look forward to in terms of fitness goals, a way to quantify how much they have progressed."

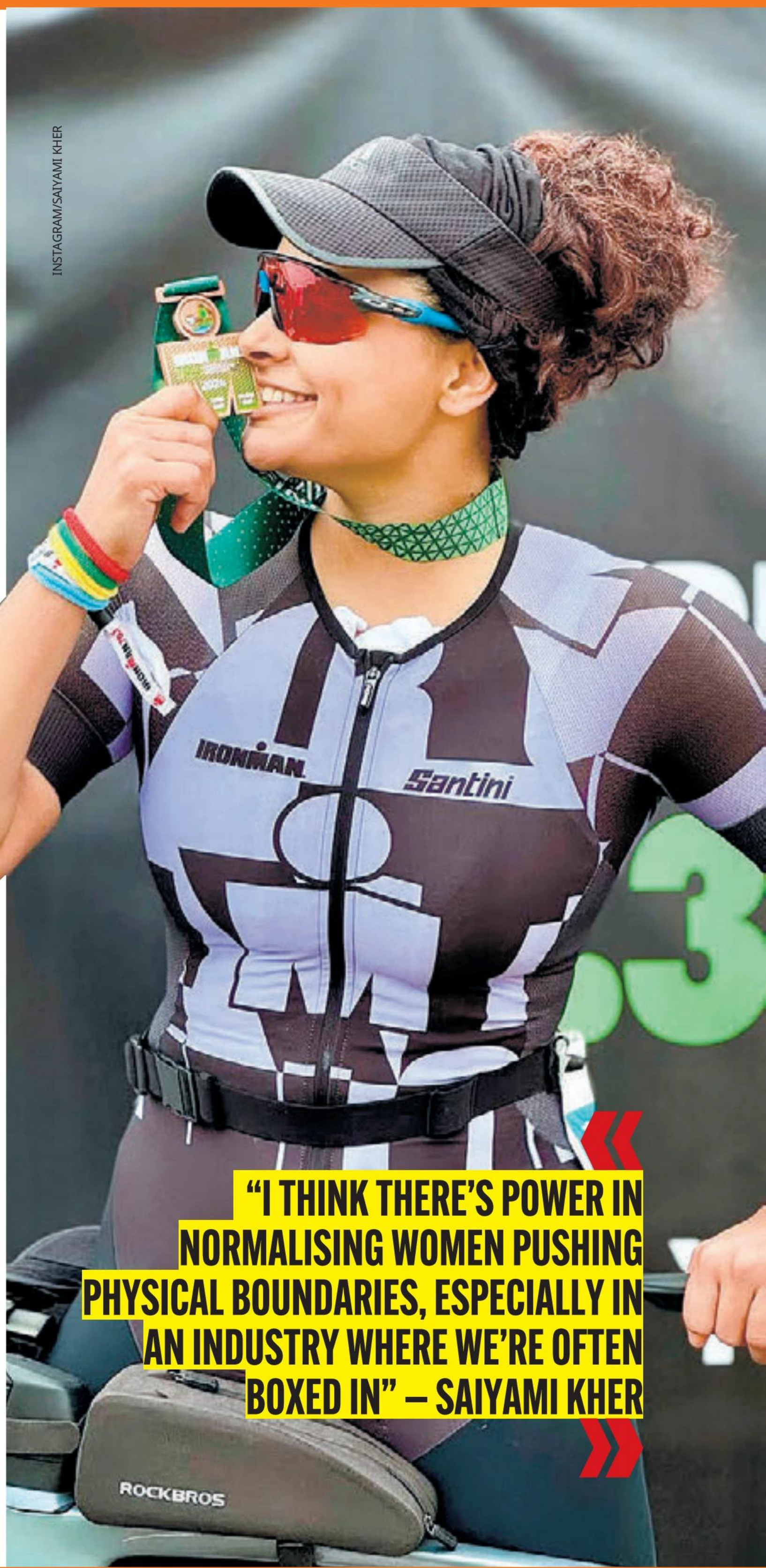
The HYROX will return to Mumbai in September, while Bengaluru will get its own race in April next year.

On an individual level, the reasons behind taking up these gruelling races are myriad. Neil, who has himself participated in four 70.3s and represented the country at the 70.3 World Championship, started running to leave a gloomy past far behind. "I have had quite rough teenage years when I got into drugs. I had to go to rehab at the very young age of 17. But I managed to pull myself out when I started running back in 2015. I just quit everything overnight," he says.

Prema Rajaram, a media professional from Kolkata who doubles up as a Reebok Running Squad coach, has been running since 2015. But it was only in 2024 that Prema realised what running actually meant for her in the face of a personal tragedy. "It's helped me heal after I lost my family last year. My mother, sister, and pet dog... three deaths in two months really took a toll. That's when fitness and running helped," she says.

Prema **(facing page, right below),** who has been a podium finisher at the Sohra Cherrapunji marathon and also completed a 100-km ultramarathon, plans to take on the triathlon in the coming years after improving her swim timings. She says it is encouraging to see women starting to take care of their health. "After years of giving time to their families and taking care of their children and the household, they are now giving themselves time to get hooked on running and fitness," she says.

What Prema says aligns with the general trend. *GeeksonFeet*, having analysed the Mumbai Marathon's attendance sheets of 2024 and 2025,



INSTAGRAM/SAIYAMI KHER

"I THINK THERE'S POWER IN NORMALISING WOMEN PUSHING PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES, ESPECIALLY IN AN INDUSTRY WHERE WE'RE OFTEN BOXED IN" – SAIYAMI KHER

reported growing inclusivity in the runners' community. The number of female finishers increased significantly in 2024, bettering the pre-COVID record of 690 in 2020 by 16.67 per cent. In 2025, the number stood at 962, which meant a further 19.5 per cent improvement over the previous year.

"I think there's power in normalising women pushing physical boundaries, especially in an industry where we're often boxed in," says Saiyami Kher, Bollywood actress, marathoner, Iron(wo)man, and cricket pundit.

She, in fact, is the only known Hindi cinema female actor to have taken part in not one but two 70.3s and two marathons! Kher explains how she managed to squeeze in rigorous training routines into a cramped schedule: "It's really tough (to balance work and training). I won't sugar-coat that. My shoots can go on for 12–14 hours, and finding time to train after that feels impossible sometimes. But you find a rhythm. You learn to prioritise, wake up early, train during breaks, use hotel gyms, cycle indoors... It also teaches you discipline and time management in the best way possible. And when you really want to do something, you make time." While Kher hopes to run a full Ironman soon, there are some who have been there and done that.

Raghul Sankaranarayanan, India's fastest Ironman, became the first from the country to qualify through rankings for the World Championships in 2022. Also a certified triathlon coach and bike-fitter, Raghul has participated in 11 full Ironmans.

While he is happy to see so many people take a step towards a healthier lifestyle, he believes certain aspects of the triathlon may deter future sign-ups.

"Triathlon is very expensive, mainly because of cycling. The expense keeps multiplying; it never stops. The cycle alone ranges anywhere from INR 1-10 lakh, some priced even higher. Then you would have to keep upgrading the accessories if you want to remain in contention. Running is also not cheap these days. Training shoes, around INR 10,000–12,000, last 600–1000 kilometres. The racing shoes, equipped with carbon plates, come at INR 17,000–30,000. But these wear away easily." Besides expenditure, accessibility is also a concern. "The number of swimming pools and, in turn, quality swimmers is very less in India. Then, there is a dearth of quality cycling roads. It often gets dangerous," Raghul says.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

INSTAGRAM /PREMA RAJARAM

Malvika Iyer **(pic, above)**, a 30-year-old half-Ironman runner from Ghatkopar, Mumbai, admits endurance racing can be expensive, but says being smart and efficient helps keep costs down.

She says, "The cost of registration, travel, and specialised equipment, can make it feel a bit inaccessible to the average athlete. It depends on how smart you are in planning everything; need to sacrifice a few things here and there. You don't have to really spend a lot on travelling and high-end gear. I didn't. It's really nice to see this sport is becoming more accessible for people like me - amateur athletes. The financial barriers still exist. We need to acknowledge that. However, I will still say your mindset is your biggest asset. With consistency, discipline, and some creative thinking, it is possible to take that first step without emptying your pockets."

Infrastructural hindrances are also why India hasn't been able to host a full-blooded Ironman yet. Neil says, "In Goa, we use the road leading to the airport to host the 70.3. The National Highway 66 shuts down for the race, and the traffic is rerouted through the service road on race day. If we organise a full-distance race, by afternoon, the road will get choked. So, that's not really an option."

However, he assured that Yoska is currently in talks with multiple parties to have a full-distance Ironman in another Indian city soon. Not just that, there are plans to host an Olympic triathlon (1.5-km swim, 40-km bike ride, and 10-km run) too under the Ironman banner.

The once-niche disciplines of hybrid racing and long-distance triathlons are gradually becoming the holy grail for those seeking transformation beyond aesthetics, and India is rising to the challenge one burpee and one kilometre at a time.

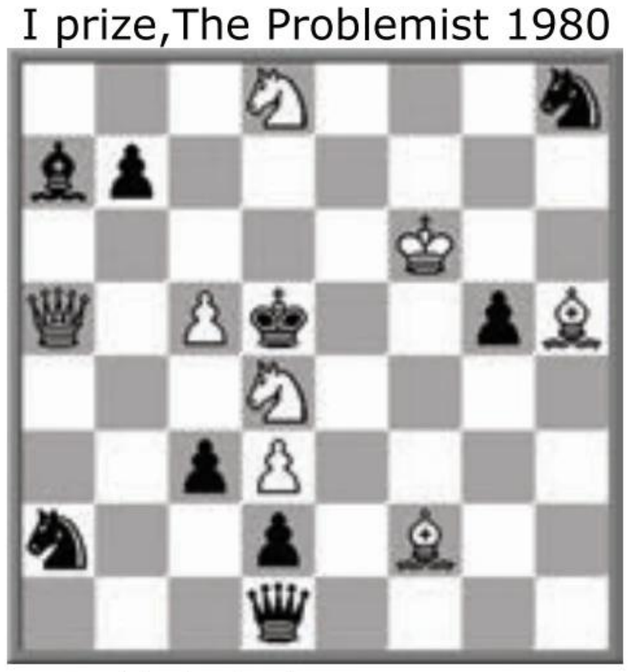
On thematic blends

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Two-movers which display combination of two or more modern themes are aplenty but seldom a modern theme finds company of a classical theme in this genre.When a white piece interferes with a black line piece either actively or passively it contributes to 'Arguelles theme'.In the problem below for study white knight interferes with black queen in the tries to set up diagonal threats by white but these fail as the shut off black queen moves the other way to defeat the threats.These defences which refute the threatened mates after tries actually appear as defences and the same threats reappear as mates-the paradoxical 'Dombrovskis theme

E.Salazar

I prize,The Problemist 1980



Mate in two moves

Try 1.Nc2? (2.Qxa2) A) 1…aN any 2.Nb4 !But 1….Qg4! (a)

Try 1.Ne2?(2.Bf3 (B) but 1…Qa4!!(b)

Key 1.Nxb7! (2.Qd8/Qg4 (a)/Qa4 (b)2.Qxa2 (A)/Bf3 (B)

The long range threats and fine defences together with economical construction make this a splendid problem-a combine of two themes-a modern and a classical. In Arguelles here it is white which interferes with black queen.

In the second twoer below the Russian trio shows a synthesis of Hannelius and Dombrovskis in three phase zagoruyko with changed mates. This is excellent construction.

Pavel Murashev, Anatoly Siesarenko and Alexander Feoktistov

I place,9th WCCT 2012-13

Mate in two moves

Try 1.Qb6?(2.d3 **A**)1…fxe3 2.Qxe3 1…Rd4 2.Qxd4 but 1…Nxd5! **a**

Try 1.Ng4? 2.d3 **A**

1…Nxd5 2.Qb1;1…Rd4 2.Rxd4 but 1…fxe3 **a**; 1.Qb7?2.Bf5 **B**

1…Nxd5 2.Qxd5 but 1…fxe3 **a**

Try 1.Qg8? (2.Bf5 **B**)1….fxe3 2.Qg4 but 1…Nxd5! **B**

1.d7! (2.Qxf4)1…fxe3 2.d3 **A**

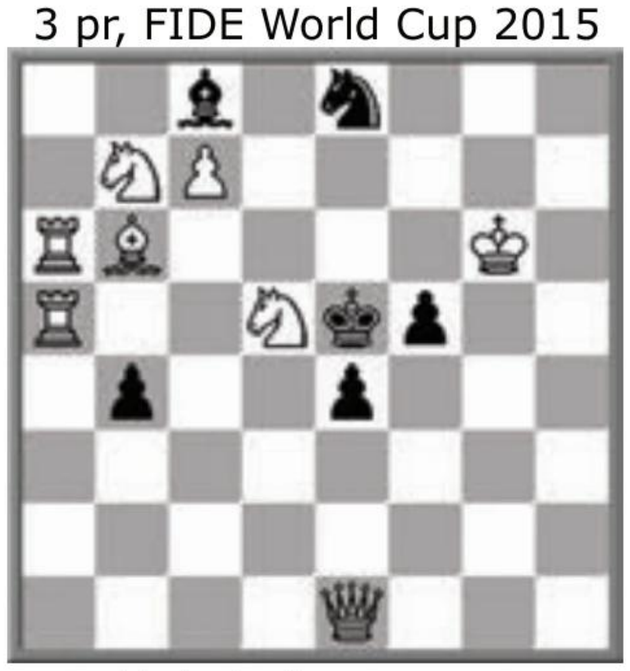
1…Nxd5 2.Bf5**B** 1…Ne2 2.Qb1

1…Rd4 2.Rxd4

Problem for solving given below combines Le Grand, Barnes and Rudenko themes

A Siesarenko

3 pr, FIDE World Cup 2015



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article'White batteries':**Key 1.Ne6!**

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

PGTI president Kapil Dev keen to "raise the bar"

President of the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI), Kapil Dev, expressed his delight at being able to elevate the overall vibrancy of the sport through an expanded calendar and total prize money of Rs. 33 crore, while unveiling the schedule for the second half of the season at the Delhi Golf Club.

The upcoming stretch features a packed lineup, beginning with the Rs. 1 crore Coal India Open in Ahmedabad on August 3.

Three events for the NextGen category will be held in Patna, Lucknow, and Bhubaneswar, with Rs. 20 lakh on offer at each.

PGTI Chief Executive Officer Amandeep Johl highlighted that the DP World India Championship — a USD 4 million event scheduled at the iconic Delhi Golf Club from October 16 to 19 — would alone offer nearly Rs. 35 crore in prize money.

Kapil underlined the importance of improving player livelihoods, noting the typically short career span of about 15 years in professional golf. "From next year, we want to have events with a minimum prize money of two crore rupees," he said, reaffirming his intent to "raise the bar" for Indian golf and bring it closer in stature to cricket.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

SPORTOON

The second Women's Kabaddi World Cup, scheduled to be held in Hyderabad from August 3 to 10 at the Gachibowli Indoor Stadium, has been indefinitely postponed. This marks the second rescheduling of the event, which was originally set to take place in Bihar in June.

In a letter to the International Kabaddi Federation (IKF), seen by *Sportstar*, the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India (AKFI) stated that the decision was made due to the "non-timely submissions of team contingent administrative details," which created issues in "obtaining clearances from the concerned Ministries." The AKFI also clarified that it would not accept any changes to the existing list of participating countries, stating that it would "derail the administrative process for timely clearances."

The 14 participating nations include Argentina, Bangladesh, Chinese Taipei, Germany, the Netherlands, Iran, Japan, Kenya, Nepal, Thailand, Uganda, Zanzibar, Poland, and India.

According to multiple sources, the tournament is now expected to be held in Hyderabad after the conclusion of the Pro Kabaddi League, which begins in Vizag on August 29.

ANIRUDH VELAMURI

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Why every sport needs its own meal plan

For elite performers, nutrition is not just about wellness but also about **fuelling, recovering, and repeating.**

A sprinter doesn't eat like a marathon runner. A cricketer's diet won't suit a wrestler. And a swimmer's pre-race meal is vastly different from that of a gymnast. Why? Because sports nutrition is never one-size-fits-all. It's a detailed science that adapts to the unique demands of each sport.

Over the years, working with athletes from different disciplines — from Olympic wrestlers to international cricketers, swimmers to badminton champs — one thing has become crystal clear to me. Eating 'healthy' is not the same as eating 'right'. For elite performers, nutrition is not just about wellness. It's about fuelling, recovering, and repeating. Sometimes all in one day.

Every sport places a different kind of stress on the body. Some demand explosive power. Others require long-lasting endurance. Some need agility and precision. Each of these needs calls for a tailored approach to food.

Let's explore how nutrition varies based on the sport.

Brutal harmony: Sports like gymnastics demand strength, control, and aesthetic appearance. Gymnasts often maintain low body fat and high flexibility, making nutrient density critical. GETTY IMAGES

Swimming: carbohydrate-driven engines

Swimmers often train twice a day, starting as early as 5 am. Their energy output is massive, and their recovery windows are short. For them, carbohydrates aren't optional — they're essential.

A swimmer's diet includes 50–60 per cent carbs, moderate protein for recovery, and good fats for hormonal health. A pre-swim meal could be oats with fruit or a banana smoothie; post-session recovery might be chocolate milk or peanut butter toast with a protein shake.

Tip: I won't give a swimmer a keto-style diet — it would tank their energy. Instead, I load them with smart carbs to keep them fuelled.

Badminton: light, lean, and fast

Agility, speed, and razor-sharp reflexes define badminton. Players need to stay quick on their feet and alert in the mind — without being bogged down by heavy meals.

Their diets feature high-quality proteins, moderate carbs, and hydration. Meals might include egg-white omelettes, chicken with quinoa, or yoghurt with berries. Small, frequent meals keep energy levels up without excess bulk.

Tip: I won't give a badminton player a pasta-heavy lunch before a match. Instead, I opt for a protein-rich salad or smoothie to keep them light and fast.

Combat Sports: power within limit

Wrestlers, boxers, and MMA fighters need explosive strength — but also have to make weight. Their diets must carefully walk the line between power and precision. We manage sodium, carbs, and hydration in the days before weigh-ins.

Protein maintains muscle mass, while healthy fats add satiety during calorie cuts. After weigh-in, they follow a well-rehearsed rehydration and fuelling protocol.

Tip: I won't hand a fighter a giant burger post-weigh-in. Instead, it's a calculated mix — rice, eggs, electrolytes — tested and timed to perfection.

Cricket: endurance meets focus — and format

Cricket is unique because its demands change dramatically by format.

Test players need sustained energy and mental focus over long sessions. Their diets centre on complex carbs like sweet potato and brown rice, Omega-3-rich fats for recovery, and strategic snacking — almonds, bananas, or energy bars between overs.

T20 players, on the other hand, need explosive bursts of power and razor-sharp reflexes. Their meals lean lighter: quick-digesting carbs, lean proteins, and fluids to prevent cramping or sluggishness.

Tip: I won't feed a T20 player a heavy *dal-chawal* an hour before the game. But for a Test player? That same meal might be perfect for lunch between sessions.

Endurance Sports: long-distance fuelling

Marathon runners, cyclists, and triathletes operate on prolonged exertion. Their bodies burn through glycogen stores, so carb-loading before events is essential.

In-race fuelling includes gels, salt tablets, and electrolyte drinks. Recovery is all about restoring carb-protein balance, ideally within 30 minutes post-race.

On low-intensity training days, fats help train the body to burn more efficiently.

Tip: I won't give a marathon runner a high-fat breakfast on race day. Instead, it's toast, bananas, and honey for fast energy, no gastric surprises.

Gymnastics and Aesthetic Sports: strength in grace

Sports like gymnastics, figure skating, and dance demand strength, control, and aesthetic appearance. Gymnasts often maintain low body fat and high flexibility, making nutrient density critical.

Meals are small but frequent — lean proteins, colourful vegetables, fruits, nuts, and Omega-3s. Bone health is a priority, with calcium and Vitamin D supplementation common.

Tip: I won't suggest intermittent fasting to a gymnast — it risks under-fuelling. Instead, I plan precise, portioned meals that support strength without adding bulk.

Motorsports: the mental game

Formula 1 drivers, rally racers, and karting athletes face extreme physical and mental demands. They can lose kilos in a race due to heat and stress.

Nutrition focuses on hydration, core stability, and sustained focus. Anti-inflammatory foods, moderate caffeine, and electrolyte-rich meals help maintain sharpness.

Tip: I won't give a racer a heavy curry-rice meal before a race. A light chicken wrap or protein smoothie keeps their gut calm and their brain sharp.

Beyond the plate: long-term wellness

Even within the same sport, nutrition needs can vary dramatically.

A volleyball attacker needs more explosive fuel than a setter. A goalkeeper's needs differ from a striker's. Personalisation matters.

Nutrition also shifts by season: bulking in off-season, refining in pre-season, maintaining during competition.

Recovery diets focus on protein, collagen, and anti-inflammatory foods. But performance nutrition doesn't stop at the plate anymore.

Today's athletes think beyond the medal. Gut health, sleep, mental wellness, and hormonal balance are now part of the nutrition strategy.

We are also entering the era of precision nutrition, where genetic reports, microbiome tests, and blood biomarkers guide personalised plans that evolve with the athlete.

Among all the emerging tools and trends, one area consistently proves foundational: gut health. It influences everything from immunity to recovery, energy levels to mental clarity.

And one tip I give all athletes, regardless of sport, is this: start personalising your gut training.

A well-trained gut doesn't just digest better — it lets your muscles shine.

The power of nostalgia

Nostalgia is a bridge. It reminds us **why we fell in love with sport** in the first place. Not for the spreadsheets and strike-rates, but for the sense that anything was possible.

Suresh Menon

When the public celebration of RCB's victory began, and before disaster struck, I remembered an occasion when I was among those who had lined up to cheer an Indian champion. This was when Prakash Padukone returned with the All-England badminton trophy **(in pic)**. A couple of us students stood outside a newspaper office on Bengaluru's M. G. Road, hoping that a photographer's camera might accidentally get our faces into next day's papers. We would have gone anyway, we worshipped Prakash.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Sport, like music, is memory's favourite accomplice. But it has a built-in obsolescence. Players retire. Stadiums change names. The game you grew up with gets new rules, new formats, new millionaires. And yet, something endures. Nostalgia.

My earliest memory of cricket is listening to radio commentary with my parents. I remember the commentator, V. M. Chakrapani, whom I met years later as a journalist. We didn't watch the matches, we listened to them.

There is something deeply democratic about nostalgia in sport. The 1983 World Cup belongs as much to a retired bank clerk in India as it does to Kapil Dev. Just as a young boy hitting 'sixes' over the neighbour's wall can still vibrate with the imagined possibility that he could have been India's answer to Clive Lloyd. Nostalgia makes champions of us all. The goal scored in a school match was as vital, in the mind, as Maradona's in 1986.

And yet nostalgia can deceive. It makes us believe the past was pure, untouched by greed or error. That every contest was noble, every rivalry gentlemanly. It allows us to forgive our heroes, and forget their flaws. We speak of P. T. Usha's near-miss in 1984 as if she were a mythological figure whose tragedy ennobled a nation. Which, in a sense, she was — and did. There is a shared rhythm. Nostalgia calls for a recaller and a listener (or reader) — you have to interact with someone.

The danger, of course, is that it can freeze you. You say things like "No one came close to _ " (fill in the blank with any name from Hazare, Gavaskar, Tendulkar, Dravid, or as future nostalgists might say, "Gill, Pant....." Every generation believes its glories are unmatched. Even unmatchable. Often more fights break out over the skill of past champions than current ones. But nostalgia need not be a wall against the present. It is a bridge. It reminds us why we fell in love with sport in the first place. Not for the spreadsheets and strike-rates, but for the sense that anything was possible. That a boy from a small town could become Kapil Dev. That a girl running barefoot on a dusty field could become Mary Kom.

Nostalgia connects us to younger versions of ourselves. The boy who believed that form was temporary and class permanent. That defeat was never the end of a story. That tomorrow is another day. As the years rolled by, Prakash became a friend, and the newspaper office I stood outside offered me my first job.

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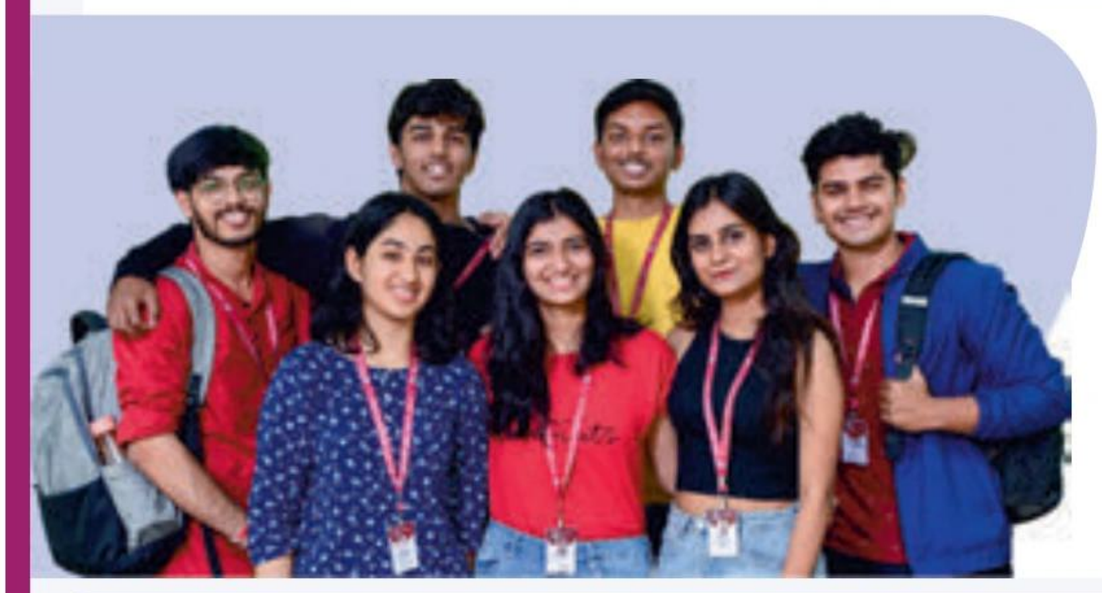

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