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OFF-SIDE

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A VICTORY, VAST AND PERSONAL

When Shafali from Rohtak or Richa from Siliguri lifts a trophy, she forces families still unsure about a **daughter's freedom** to reconsider their answer.

Shafali Verma walked into the World Cup final as a late replacement for the injured Pratika Rawal and walked out a world champion, top-scoring in India's 52-run win.

For Indian sport, the ICC Women's ODI World Cup triumph is a landmark. For India, it could be a shift in the social current.

Shafali comes from Rohtak, a district with a sex ratio of 867 females per 1,000 males and a child sex ratio of 818 (Census 2011), among the lowest in the country. From a geography where girls are still outnumbered, a young woman now stands as a reference point for a generation that refuses to shrink.

Sangli, home to Smriti Mandhana, tells a similar story. Only 40.1 per cent of women are in the labour force, according to a report based on NFHS-5 and Census 2011, and 47.5 per cent are anaemic. Agriculture drives the district, and most women's work remains seasonal. In Darjeeling, Richa Ghosh's home district, 78.3 per cent of girls aged six and above have ever attended school; the figure falls to 72 per cent in Moga (Harmanpreet Kaur), 65.1 per cent in Chhatarpur (Kranti Goud), and 69.4 per cent in Agra, home to woman-of-the-tournament Deepti Sharma.

India's biggest sporting breakthroughs over the past decade have often come from such landscapes, places where opportunities are still rationed by gender. From Mirabai Chanu's weightlifting hall in Manipur to Lovlina Borgohain's shed in rural Assam, from Sakshi Malik's akhara in Rohtak to Preeti Pal's running track in Meerut, most of India's medals have been won by women from places that rarely made space for them.

Yet those stories, for all their inspiration, remained largely individual. A World Cup triumph in a team sport multiplies that effect fifteenfold. It means more towns, more schools, and more families can claim a share in the success, each player's journey adding a new pin to the map, making success feel local, relatable, and contagious.

Visibility, however, must be matched by value. The BCCI has announced Rs. 51 crore in prize money for the women's team, generous yet short of the Rs. 125 crore awarded to the men after their 2024 T20 World Cup win. Match-fee parity, introduced by Jay Shah as BCCI secretary, was a major step forward (Rs. 15 lakh for Tests, Rs. 6 lakh for ODIs, Rs. 3 lakh for T20Is), but annual contracts still tell a different story. The top male cricketers earn up to Rs. 7 crore a year; the top-tier women, Rs. 50 lakh.

Still, Shah's tenure did mark a structural shift, including the launch of the Women's Premier League, an expanded international calendar, and sustained institutional attention.

India ranks 131st on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index. Yet each triumph chips away at that imbalance. When Shafali from Rohtak or Richa from Siliguri lifts a trophy, she forces families still unsure about a daughter's freedom to reconsider their answer.

The onus now lies with governments, federations, and schools to turn this celebration into access, to ensure every district that cheered this win also builds the pathways to repeat it. If that happens, this World Cup will not just be a sporting victory but the beginning of an opportunity for every girl to play, compete, and claim her field.

TO THE WOMEN WHO TURNED THEIR DREAM INTO INDIA'S VICTORY.

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– FIFA President Gianni Infantino »

7

Seven-time champion Novak Djokovic, who has been out of action for three weeks, will compete in this year's ATP Finals in Turin, the president of the Italian Tennis Federation confirmed. After his defeat in the semifinals of the Shanghai Masters 1000 against Valentin Vacherot on October 11, the 38-year-old Djokovic skipped the Paris Masters.

12

The International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) announced the new bodyweight categories for the upcoming 2028 LA Olympics, which do not feature women's 49kg, the category in which Indian Mirabai Chanu won her silver medal at the Tokyo 2020 Games. The Los Angeles Games features an expanded weightlifting slate, with 12 events up from the 10 that were held in 2024.

MASTER OF PARIS

Jannik Sinner (right) won the Paris Masters for the first time by defeating Felix Auger-Aliassime 6-4, 7-6[4] as the four-time Grand Slam champion reclaimed his position atop the world rankings, replacing incumbent world number one Carlos Alcaraz of Spain who crashed out early in the tournament. The Italian first claimed the number one ranking in June last year and held it for 65 weeks until he lost the US Open title match to Alcaraz in September. AFP

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MAYHEM BY THE MINUTE

Inside the fights that made 2025 one of the UFC's **wildest** years yet.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

As we head into the final couple of months of 2025, here's a look at the best Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) bouts of the year so far.

Holloway vs Poirier 3 — UFC 318

The trilogy fight between Max Holloway and Dustin Poirier **(above)** at UFC 318 was everything fans had hoped for — and the perfect send-off for Poirier's final walk to the Octagon. Holloway started at a blistering pace, hurting Poirier early, but 'The Diamond', roared on by a home crowd, fought back with sharp counters.

The final three rounds became a battle of volume versus precision — Holloway's endless output against Poirier's power shots. The two traded until the final horn, with Holloway edging a unanimous decision (48-47, 49-46, 49-46) to retain the BMF title, becoming its first successful defender.

Dvalishvili vs Nurmagomedov — UFC 311

In a gruelling bantamweight title fight at UFC 311, Merab Dvalishvili handed Umar Nurmagomedov the first defeat of his professional career with a unanimous decision (48-47, 48-47, 49-46). Nurmagomedov started brightly, displaying sharp striking and strong takedown defence, even wobbling the champion. But Dvalishvili's relentless pace and pressure told in the later rounds.

'The Machine' broke through in the championship rounds (last two), setting a new record for the most takedowns (97) in UFC history and overwhelming his tiring opponent. It was a masterclass in cardio and persistence, firmly cementing Dvalishvili's place as champion.

Imavov vs Adesanya — UFC Fight Night

Yet another short fight finds its way into this list. Nassourdine Imavov delivered a career-defining performance against Israel Adesanya at UFC Fight Night 250 in Riyadh, securing a stunning TKO victory just 30 seconds into the second round.

The opening round was competitive, but Imavov looked patient and measured, landing a significant uppercut that served as a precursor. In the second, 'The Sniper' moved swiftly, using a decoy jab to set up a devastating overhand right that landed flush on the former champion's chin. Adesanya fell backwards, and Imavov quickly followed with ground strikes, forcing the referee to step in and end the fight. The dominant finish marked Imavov's fourth consecutive win.

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

KILLER BLOW

Ankalaev vs Pereira – UFC 320

Alex Pereira's stunning TKO win over Magomed Ankalaev at UFC 320 ended with 'Poatan' employing a barrage of strikes, including the 12-to-6 elbow.

This particular strike — a downward vertical motion of the elbow (as if moving from 12 to 6 o'clock) — was illegal under the Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts for over two decades, until last year.

The ban was controversially introduced due to the belief that this spiking motion delivered an unfairly concentrated impact, though it was often criticised as arbitrary, especially since virtually identical diagonal elbow strikes were always legal.

The long-standing ban was finally lifted in November 2024, making its use in Pereira's title defence entirely legal and highly impactful.

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THE BUBBLE THAT BIRTHED HISTORY

From Amol Muzumdar's defiant huddle cry to Harmanpreet Kaur's Kapil Dev-like catch, India's first Women's ODI World Cup crown was not a miracle but a culmination of scars confronted, systems rebuilt, and **faith restored.**

INDIA BOUNCED BACK FROM THREE CONSECUTIVE GROUP-STAGE DEFEATS TO LIFT THE TROPHY, BECOMING ONLY THE FOURTH TEAM TO WIN THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP AFTER AUSTRALIA, ENGLAND, AND NEW ZEALAND

WATCH OUR REVIEW OF THE WORLD CUP

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan
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"For the next seven hours, we cut out all the noise. We cut them out of our lives. We create our own bubble here. For seven hours, we step into it, and we finish that game! We write our own story. No more stories from outside. You will write your own stories. Let's create history."

Head coach Amol Muzumdar's rousing pre-game talk in the huddle set the tone for what would be an epochal triumph for the Indian women's cricket team.

It's been two years since the Mumbai domestic cricket veteran took charge of this women's senior team. Factionalism within the side, a revolving door of coaches, and a general apathy towards professionalism meant fiefdoms thrived in selection and team structure, unsurprisingly impacting success.

For Muzumdar, the mandate was simple. Professionalise the setup, bring in rigour in 'fitness and fielding', and bridge the gap between ambition and its realisation.

The build-up to the tournament was easily the best India has ever had. The Women in Blue played 38 ODIs in this World Cup cycle. In the last 12 months alone, India met Australia twice (once away and once at home), New Zealand, Ireland, and the West Indies at home, and Sri Lanka and South Africa in a tri-series on the island. Players benefited from increased support from the Centre of Excellence. Regular camps were held, one very close to the World Cup in Visakhapatnam, where India would play two key fixtures (against South Africa and Australia).

With more fixtures, an increased focus on fitness and power-hitting thanks to the blooming T20 arm in the women's game, and the competitive impact of the Women's Premier League trickling down to the domestic tier, India's scoring rate also saw a massive jump, with nine of its 13 scores of 300 or more (before the event got underway) coming in just the last two years, a conscious switch in the era of high-intent cricket.

India also blooded 17 players into the team since December 2023, under Muzumdar, with players ranging from Shreyanka Patil to Kranti Gaud. Only two of them were mainstream batters. Of the 17, Kranti, Shree Charani, and Arundhathi Reddy made it to the World Cup squad.

As the youngsters came in, the senior players also found themselves given more responsibility. Smriti Mandhana became an active part of the strategy team. Jemimah Rodrigues, too, played a role in keeping spirits high and setting a fitness standard the team could emulate.

After years of division and friction, a united front emerged, armed with a seamless chain of command. Surely, it was India's World Cup to lose. Particularly at home.

After a rollercoaster ride of a campaign that saw it stutter more than it should have, India made the summit clash for the third time in the tournament's history. It was the first time England or Australia would not feature in a Women's ODI World Cup final.

Come November 2, the Women in Blue would shut out the testing impatience of a rain delay, a tough opponent in the Proteas, and even a pulsating atmosphere in a packed D.Y. Patil Stadium at times, to finally close out an achingly longstanding piece of unfinished business — a conquest of the world.

India started with two victories, against Sri Lanka and Pakistan in Guwahati and Colombo, respectively. The results were as predicted, but the labour needed to secure them wasn't. Though India expected it would coast through against these 'weaker' sides, the host was handed multiple reality checks when its top and middle order faltered. India's lower order had to pick up the pieces of a shattered batting essay and make it competitive.

The issues were basic — a high dot-ball percentage, a tendency to cede control of momentum right after the PowerPlay, and a

Golden breakthrough: India head coach Amol Muzumdar praised his team's resilience and called the World Cup win a 'watershed moment' for women's cricket. PTI

struggle to rotate strike. With more prolific batting opponents waiting, coach Muzumdar looked visibly pensive even after India skittled Pakistan for 159 in a chase of 248.

Against the Proteas, India huffed and puffed again to manage 251. The top six couldn't find rhythm after the PowerPlay, with left-arm spin once again hurting the side. Like Inoka Ranaweera and Sadia Iqbal before, Chloe Tryon and Nonkululeko Mlaba proved tricky.

After a worrying 127 dots against Sri Lanka and 173 against Pakistan, India racked up 185 against South Africa. A lower-order rescue followed once more, built on the back of Richa Ghosh's 77-ball 94.

The bowlers set India up for assured victory. The first four Protean wickets fell for just 58 runs. However, India perhaps got prematurely comfortable about a win that was yet to be sealed, and Tryon and Nadine de Klerk extracted a hefty penalty. De Klerk was a woman possessed as she smacked a career-best unbeaten 84 off just 54 balls to put a seesawing fixture to rest in her side's favour. Gaud's inexperience showed, and even the seasoned Sneh Rana and Deepti weren't spared as the game slipped out of India's hands.

Soon, Australia came calling. Asked to bat first again, India needed to fight to counter an Australian order that nearly bats all the way through. Smriti found form with a stylish 66-ball 80, while Pratika Rawal stepped up as the aggregator. But Smriti's dismissal meant Pratika — a classically unrushed ODI player — paired with a slower Harleen Deol.

This wasn't a new problem. Even in the series in the run-up to the World Cup, Smriti and Pratika scored at over six runs an over, while Pratika and Harleen managed just over four. Their collective strike rates hovered in the 60s, not ideal against top teams with considerable firepower in the batting order. So much so, it was beneficial for opponents to keep this pair in the middle rather than dismissing them.

Against Australia, cameos from Harmanpreet Kaur, Jemimah, and Richa Ghosh, and a massive extras count helped India to 330, 20 runs short of where it was headed.

India's decision to stick with just five bowling options cost the side. Left-arm spinner Charani was the lone bright spot, showing immaculate control and aggression as she took three wickets for just 41 runs in a high-scoring match. Gaud was expensive, as was Sneh. India didn't field Renuka Singh, as it would mean going in a batter short.

Since Muzumdar took over in 2023, India has preferred the five-bowler set-up while encouraging the top order to find skills with the ball. That experiment saw Smriti roll her arm in a few fixtures across both white-ball formats. Pratika, a handy off-spinner, was not deployed. Harmanpreet, a handy wicket-taker, too, didn't take the plunge on a batting-friendly wicket as Australia registered the highest successful chase in women's ODIs. Persistent slip-ups in the field did not help the

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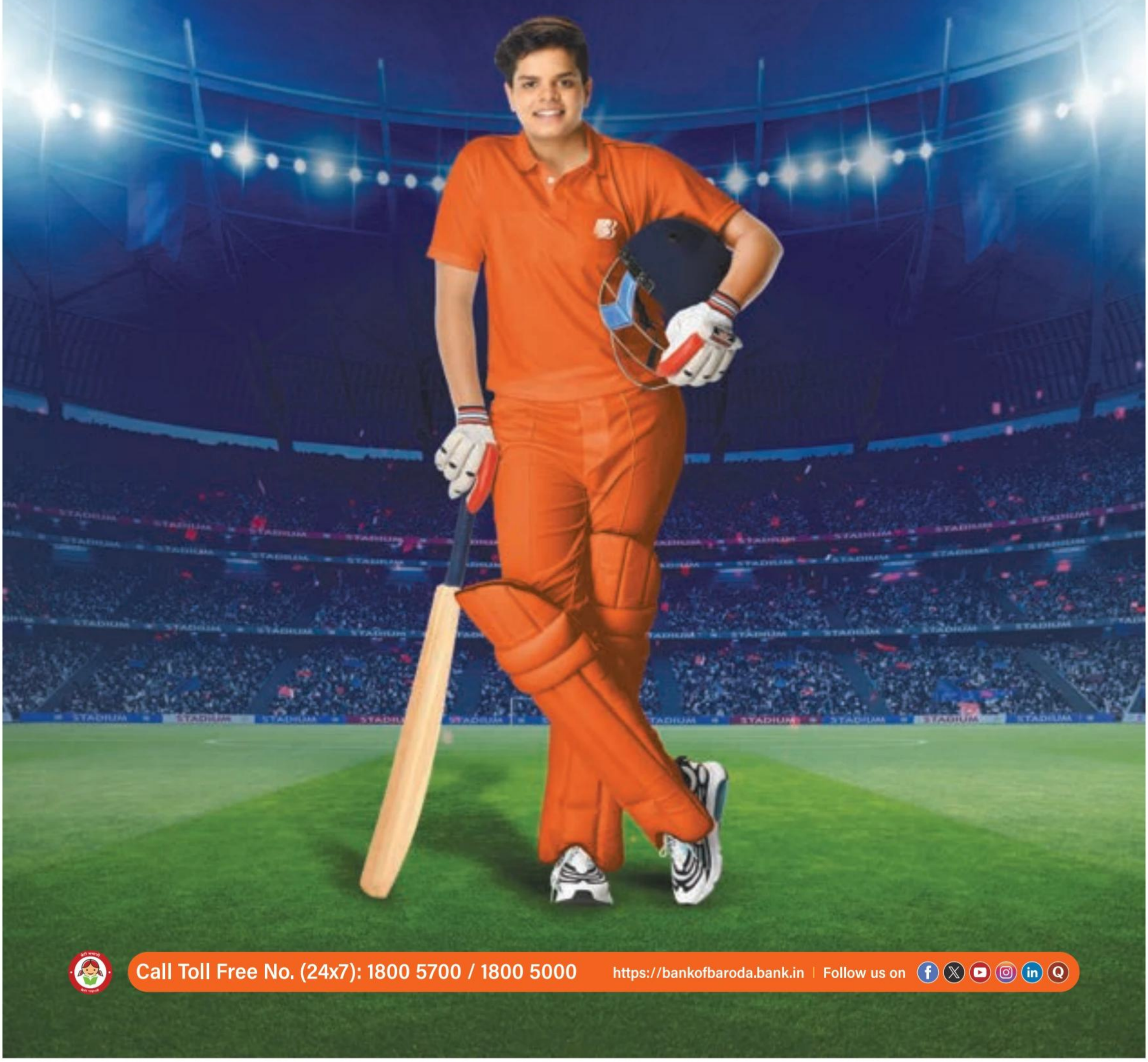

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home team's cause either.

India, which had so far looked unconvincing in parts, was unravelling. It headed to Indore, needing a win against England.

A day before Diwali, the Indian management dropped quite a bomb by dropping Jemimah, who had until then returned scores of 0, 32, 0, and 33, to accommodate Renuka. India picked form over skill set, as Jemimah's meticulous approach to grinding out runs would have solved India's scoring issues at number 3.

The Renuka punt didn't work, with England managing 289 courtesy of a brilliant 109 by Heather Knight.

Now a batter short, the Indian seniors needed to take responsibility, and they did. Powered by fifties from Smriti and Harmanpreet, India's equation was a doable 23 off 12. But a familiar crumble ensued, with India falling four runs short.

This made the next fixture against New Zealand a must-win clash.

India had a whole playlist of countless instances where the side looked solid in a game but botched the finish. The tear-stained faces of Mithali Raj, Jhulan Goswami, and even a young and inconsolable Shafali Verma from that 2020 T20 World Cup final in Melbourne made an appearance in this mash-up.

With the pressure building, India made its way to Navi Mumbai, the unofficial hub of women's cricket in the country.

India needed that, especially after the dressing down the side got from coach Muzumdar for making the same mistakes.

Smriti and Pratika exorcised their demons with a massive 212-run opening stand, which saw both openers register centuries. An explosive unbeaten 76 from Jemimah, who was promptly called back into the XI, helped the side to 340 in a rain-curtailed game.

India's bowling was far too good for the White Ferns, with Renuka and Kranti leading the pack with two wickets apiece. That 53-run win (DLS method) effectively sealed India's place in the top four.

The final league clash against Bangladesh, which was washed out, brought a devastating twist to India's campaign. Pratika slipped awkwardly on a wet outfield and sustained a hairline fracture to the ankle.

Around 290 kilometres away in Surat, Shafali Verma —who had been cast aside from the ODI setup for inconsistency a year ago — was in the middle of an imperious run in the Senior Women's T20 Trophy for Haryana. She didn't even make the reserves listed for the tournament, but the management went directly to her, hoping to tap into her ache for redemption.

"God has brought me here for a reason. I will do my best for the team," Shafali said.

South Africa had thrown the albatross called England off its neck in Guwahati and admitted to backing India to make the final.

In the semifinal, Phoebe Litchfield's masterclass propelled Australia to a formidable 338.

The heroes of a stiff chase had to be the messiah of 2017 — Harmanpreet — with Jemimah, who looked in fine touch. The pair put their heads down, scoring at six per over at least, with the Aussies getting impatient for a breakthrough. The nerves of it all saw Healy drop Jemimah on 82. India needed 131 runs in a little over 17 overs.

However, Harmanpreet, Deepti, and Richa fell in quick succession, and an old tendency to fall like ninepins threatened to resurface. Jemimah, meanwhile, rang in a century, her first in World Cups, but refused to celebrate. The job was not done.

Tahlia McGrath then dropped a straightforward chance to give Jemimah another lifeline on 106. India needed 54 from 41 balls. The final few overs felt like a final rather than a semifinal, with Jemimah and Amanjot finishing the job with nine balls to spare.

The images of that finish will be tattooed on the brains of anyone who watched the game. A sobbing Jemimah, her teammates piled in a mound over her. Harmanpreet roared loud enough for someone to hear it on the moon: India had beaten the best side in the world. Surely this was the year!

Jemimah bawled her way through multiple interviews, revealing her struggles with anxiety and the devastation of getting dropped midway through the tournament. She spoke about crying to her mother and close teammates every day and needing to do something for India to trust that she belonged on the biggest stage.

"We were talking about what we

True all-rounder: Deepti Sharma is the first player to do the double of 200-plus runs and 20-plus wickets in a World Cup, having scored 215 runs, including three fifties, and taken two four-plus wicket hauls.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

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could all do better in this World Cup, and all I said was that I wanted to be there till the end and finish the game."

Jemimah claimed Harleen's number three spot and made a fine case for why the position should be hers for the foreseeable future.

Eight games, three losses, and countless lessons later, India had found what was potentially its best eleven of the tournament. It was time now to go all the way.

A two-hour delay potentially ate into the anxious build-up for both India and South Africa. A maiden ICC crown awaited the winner of the contest. Laura Wolvaardt opted to chase.

Smriti and Shafali turned the clock back, but with an asterisk. The latter, as usual, played enforcer, but without the unnecessary risk-taking that had become associated with her. The pair blunted South Africa early on and put up a century stand. After losing Smriti, Shafali continued before falling 13 runs short of a famous ton. Deepti (58) and Richa (34), who was reportedly playing with far more serious damage to her finger than publicly known, carried India to 298. A steely Wolvaardt kept a boisterous 39,555-strong crowd quiet enough to hear a pin drop for large parts of the chase. An inspired decision by Harmanpreet saw Shafali being handed the ball.

With a lazy action and not much of an international record, she came out of the syllabus in South Africa's biggest test. The side didn't know whether to play it safe or attack. Shafali's first spell yielded two wickets and the big scalps of Sune Luus and Marizanne Kapp.

Wolvaardt's partnership with Annerie Dercksen critically raised the collective blood pressure of all those present. While Renuka and Deepti were managing to bowl on the stumps to Wolvaardt, giving her no room for her vintage stroke play, errant lines helped Dercksen smash a few sixes. Deepti — who finished the night with a fifer — removed the Proteas captain and Tryon in the 42nd over to put India on top. De Klerk had pulled off a miracle before, but that kind of lightning was not destined to strike the same adversary twice, with India sealing its maiden World title at the stroke of midnight, with Harmanpreet taking a very Kapil Dev-esque catch to finally wake the sleeping giant of world cricket. With the who's who of Indian cricket — including Sachin Tendulkar, Rohit Sharma, Diana Edulji, and others — watching along nervously, Harmanpreet realised a dream 52 years in the making.

After an emotional embrace with Harmanpreet with the Indian flag enveloping both the senior pros, Smriti summed up India's motivations: "The last T20 World Cup was a difficult one for us to take. We had a clear focus on working on our fitness, working on each and every aspect. The way everyone just stuck in and played — in a World Cup like this, everyone was there for each other."

Historic triumphs can push post-mortems down the priority list, but this Indian team knows better than to not evaluate. It experimented till the end, with far too much risk involved in those punts not working.

This has undoubtedly been India's most prolific tournament with the bat, with an average of 41 runs per wicket and a scoring rate of over six runs an over. That said, strike rotation, scoring rates, and fielding need serious work.

There is also the big leadership question facing the Indian setup. Is it time to hand Smriti, the vice-captain, the reins of the team? Can the most united Indian setup finally ace a power transfer? Can mental health support finally become a permanent part of India's support cushion?

As world champion, efforts to polish how the women's setup looks in India will bring all these questions and more. But for now, the party won't stop, and rightly so. This Indian team is not the future of women's cricket. It is the present, and it is just getting started!

Clutch player: Jemimah Rodrigues — once dropped, now indispensable — anchored India's greatest chase with a masterclass in timing, temperament, and quiet defiance in the semifinal against Australia. GETTY IMAGES

JOY IN THE CITY OF DREAMS

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan
lavanya.ln@thehindu.co.in

People come to Mumbai to realise dreams, however audacious. Cricketers are no different. In 2011, M.S. Dhoni's men won the ODI World Cup before a roaring Wankhede Stadium, ending a 28-year wait for glory. For the women's team, the penance has been nearly twice as long. After faltering at the final hurdle thrice (2005, 2017, 2020) in ICC championships since the turn of the millennium, the Women in Blue needed a triumph to silence naysayers and their own dark doubts about their place in the sport. The opportunity presented itself on home soil.

Between October 19 and November 2, the belief of fair-weather fans, drawn to invest in the side by the hullabaloo of tournament cricket, wavered erratically. From immovable faith to misogynistic jokes, the Indian team's popularity swung through the volatile tunnels of social media and popular discourse.

But Navi Mumbai, a cherished city for the team by virtue of its increased bilateral fixtures and the Women's Premier League (WPL), doesn't believe in being flippant.

Roma, a jersey seller from Kolkata who hops on a train with her wares to every major cricketing fixture in the country, saw the economic upside of that faith.

"We typically print 500-1000 jerseys for every few games. I exhausted my stock before the semifinal," she told Sportstar hours before the final. She was among the few to bring an extra bag of 'Smriti' and 'Harman' jerseys. After a point, she had to tell eager fans, "Those are over, can I give you Virat's number 18 instead?"

Hundreds, if not thousands, of fans lined up outside the D.Y. Patil Stadium, hoping to find tickets to the game, while cops simply tapped the massive sold-out sign whenever someone requested entry. Passes for the final, priced at Rs. 150 initially, had skyrocketed to 30 times that number when India pushed Australia off the knockout cliff, and rose to as high as Rs. 25,000 for the cheapest seats.

Among those desperate for seats were Smita and her daughter Samiksha, who was incidentally celebrating her birthday. Smita played gully cricket in an era when the sport was culturally not so accommodating of women.

"Meri bachhi khelegi ab, Jemi jaise banegi (She will play and become like Jemimah Rodrigues)," she exclaimed about her academy-going child. The family had printed a flex of the Mumbai-born batting maverick, chanting for every player as they

A day to remember: Snapshots from a momentous finale of the ICC Women's ODI World Cup.

PICS: LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN & GETTY IMAGES

braved rain and nerves to partake in a memorable night for the nation.

Nearly 33 crore watched on the official streaming portal, JioHotstar, as India eventually lifted the coveted trophy. As many as 39,555 fans bore witness in person at the D.Y. Patil Stadium as several generations of women cricketers silently wept with joy. One could see how badly they wanted it in how tightly Mithali Raj and Jhulan Goswami hugged the cup and the players who included them in the festivities.

This Navi Mumbai crowd has seen many of the South Africans during the WPL and made sure to chant in their honour too. Skipper Laura Wolvaardt, whose century pushed Indian fans to the brink of a breakdown, was given a standing ovation when she reached the hundred, and again when she spoke after collecting her runner-up medal.

Beyond the field, Smriti Mandhana featured in almost every second advertisement, from personal care brand Rexona to the State Bank of India, throughout the World Cup. Several players have endorsement deals with major apparel brands like Nike, Adidas, and Puma. Jemimah's signing by Red Bull was announced days before the World Cup. Real estate player Omaxe revealed Harmanpreet as brand ambassador hours after the final. Several market analysis firms predict the monetary value of these players to rise by at least 20 per cent due to the visibility that comes with the World Cup win.

But Harmanpreet kept insisting on first living the moment in its entirety. Towards that end, she called all the female journalists present for a picture to celebrate "a moment for all women in the country".

The enduring image of the night, however, would be the imposing Indian captain, known for her unfiltered aggression, jumping into her father's arms, with him holding her like a five-year-old in tears. A nation's dreams had been realised, countless families' toils validated, and a bold new, lucrative future for a nation brimming with potential and promise had finally arrived.

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1st

Golden arm: Sri Lanka skipper Chamari Athapaththu celebrates after dismissing Bangladesh's Rabeya Khan. With nine needed off the final over, Athapaththu held her nerve, taking three wickets for just one run to seal a seven-run win for Sri Lanka at the D.Y. Patil Stadium in Navi Mumbai. EMMANUAL YOGINI

FOR MORE IMAGES

2nd

Forced 'Kapp'itulation: South Africa pacer Marizanne Kapp celebrates after dismissing Pakistan's Aliya Riaz. Earlier, Kapp's unbeaten 68 lifted the Proteas past 300, before she struck three times in the PowerPlay to set up a 150-run (DLS) win in Colombo. GETTY IMAGES

3rd

Mentality monsters: Ashleigh Gardner, joined by Annabel Sutherland (98), celebrates her unbeaten 104 against England, guiding Australia to a six-wicket win at the Holkar Stadium in Indore. The pair's 180-run partnership, after the Aussies slipped to 68 for four, took the seven-time champion past the finish line. R. V. MOORTHY

4th

Stay on: Smriti Mandhana (109) and Pratika Rawal (122) put on 212 runs for the opening wicket against New Zealand, the highest partnership for any wicket by India in Women's ODI World Cup history. The Women in Blue went on to win by 53 runs (DLS) and seal a semifinal spot. EMMANUAL YOGINI

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A damp squib: Pakistan captain Fatima Sana and Sri Lanka skipper Chamari Athapaththu shake hands after their final league match was washed out due to rain. It was the fifth game at the R. Premadasa Stadium in Colombo to be abandoned. GETTY IMAGES

In seventh heaven: Alana King celebrates during her record-breaking spell against South Africa. The Australian leg-spinner claimed 7 for 18 in seven overs, the best figures in Women's ODI World Cup history, to skittle the Proteas for 97. Aussies won the match by seven wickets. R. V. MOORTHY

So long: New Zealand captain Sophie Devine acknowledges her teammates and the England players after their league-stage match in Visakhapatnam, which England won by eight wickets. It was Devine's 159th and final ODI, following her announcement to retire from the format after this World Cup. K. R. DEEPAK

Direct hit: India's Radha Yadav celebrates after getting Bangladesh captain Nigar Sultana Joty run out at the non-striker's end. Radha also picked three wickets with the ball, but the match in Navi Mumbai was abandoned due to rain. EMMANUAL YOGINI

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9th

Hats off: South Africa skipper Laura Wolvaardt played a captain's knock (169 off 143 balls) against England in the semifinals, helping her side reach 319 for seven in 50 overs. RITU RAJ KONWAR

10th

Class apart: South Africa posted an imposing 319 before Marizanne Kapp gave the Proteas a dream start to their defence, striking twice in the opening over. Kapp's fiery spell culminated in a five-wicket haul that powered South Africa to a commanding 125-run win and a historic maiden berth in the final. RITU RAJ KONWAR

11th

Redemption arc: Dropped from India's 2022 World Cup squad, Jemimah Rodrigues scripted her redemption with an unbeaten 127, steering the Women in Blue past Australia and into their third ODI World Cup final. The 338-run chase, completed in 48.3 overs, was a record in women's ODIs. EMMANUAL YOGINI

12th

When the punt pays off: Shafali Verma, who earlier struck 87 off 78 balls to help India post 298 in the final, celebrates a wicket with captain Harmanpreet Kaur. The skipper's gamble paid off as Shafali dismissed a set Sune Luus and the experienced Marizanne Kapp in successive overs.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

13th

The winning moment: Harmanpreet Kaur celebrates after grabbing Nadine de Klerk's catch at extra cover — the moment that sealed India's first-ever Women's World Cup crown. The D.Y. Patil Stadium erupted as the Proteas' final wicket fell in Navi Mumbai.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

Meet the CHAMPIONS

Here's a closer look at the **history-making** Indian squad, with every player stepping up at key moments to fulfil a dream 52 years in the making.

Harmanpreet Kaur

Age: 36
From: Moga, Punjab

As a teenager, Harmanpreet began playing cricket with boys in her locality, showing a keen interest in the sport from an early age. In 2009, she made her ODI debut against Pakistan during the World Cup.

WC25: In her first ODI World Cup as captain, Harmanpreet has led from the front, rallying her side superbly. She stood out against England in a crucial league-stage fixture with a run-a-ball 70, albeit in a losing cause. Two matches later she came good again, scoring a vital 88-ball 89 in the semifinal against Australia, forging a key partnership with Jemimah Rodrigues. In the final, she took a bold punt on Shafali Verma with the ball – a move that paid off with two wickets. Fittingly, it was Harmanpreet who took the winning catch to seal India's historic title.

260 runs in 8 innings (HS: 89; Avg: 32.50; SR: 89.04)

> « This is the start. We wanted to break this barrier. And our next plan is to make this a habit. So many big occasions are coming, and we want to keep improving. This is not the end, just the beginning.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

EMMANUAL YOGINI

« Every World Cup we go in, there have been heartbreaks. We always believed that we had a bigger role in women's cricket. [Now] Just to read champions beside India's name, it still hasn't sunk in.

Smriti Mandhana

Age: 29

From: Sangli, Maharashtra

Smriti grew up inspired by her brother Shravan, who played for Maharashtra's Under-19 team. At 16, she made her international debut for India against Bangladesh.

WC25: Coming into the tournament on the back of a brilliant year with the bat, Smriti took a few games to find her rhythm. Her first half-century came against Australia in the group stage, and from there she didn't look back – registering scores of 88, 109, 34*, and 24. She finished as India's top run-scorer with 434 runs, breaking Mithali Raj's record of 409 runs (2017) for most runs by an Indian in a single World Cup edition.

434 runs in 9 innings (HS: 109; Avg: 54.25; SR: 99.08)

Shafali Verma

Age: 21

From: Rohtak, Haryana

A ten-year-old Shafali, with short hair, once replaced her brother in a boys' tournament – and went on to win the major individual awards there. A few years later, at 15, she became the youngest woman to make a T20I debut for India. She has since stamped her authority across formats and even captained India to the U-19 Women's T20 World Cup title in 2023.

WC25: After Pratika was ruled out of the tournament, big-hitting Shafali was recalled to the ODI squad after a year. While she failed to impress against Australia in the semifinal, she turned the tables in the final, being named Player of the Match for her 78-ball 87 and two match-turning wickets.

97 runs in 2 innings (HS: 87; Avg: 48.50; SR: 116.86);
2 wickets in 1 innings (BBI: 2/36; Avg: 18.00; Econ: 5.14)

EMMANUAL YOGINI

« When I saw him [Sachin Tendulkar in the stands], it gave me an incredible boost. I keep talking to him, he keeps giving me confidence. He is the master of cricket, and we keep getting inspired just looking at him.

« I always enjoy whichever department or situation I am in. As a stage, to perform as an all-rounder, it cannot be a more amazing feeling.

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Deepti Sharma

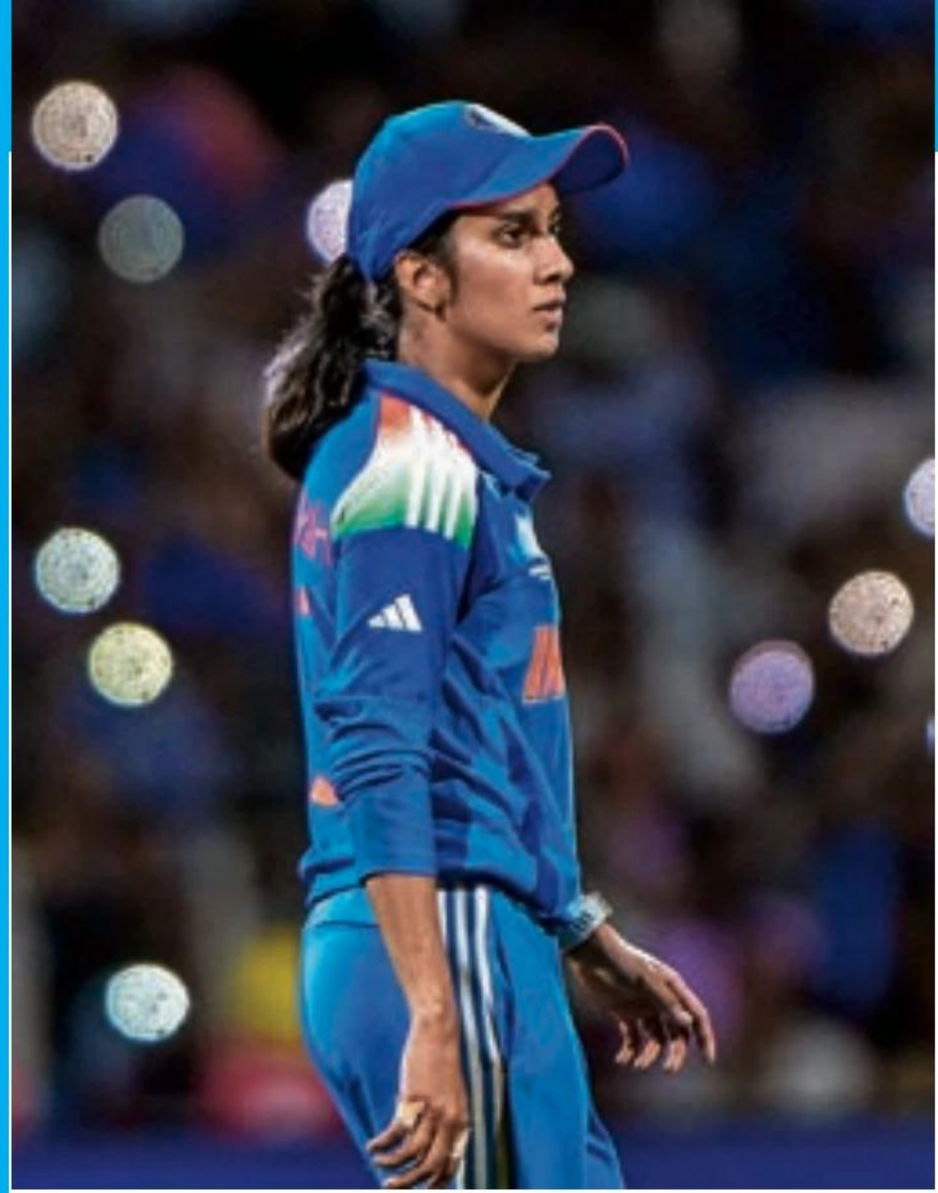
Age: 28

From: Agra, Uttar Pradesh

During one of her regular visits to watch her brother play, her nonchalant direct hit at the stumps caught the eye of former India international and then-chairperson of the women's selection panel, Hemlata Kala. That moment spurred Deepti to take up professional training, and she eventually made her India debut in 2014.

WC25: Deepti has consistently proved why she is India's premier all-rounder. She stepped up in the final too – scoring a composed half-century and taking a crucial five-wicket haul. Her all-round brilliance earned her the Player of the Tournament award (22 wickets and 215 runs).

215 runs in 7 innings (HS: 58; Avg: 30.71; SR: 90.33);
22 wickets in 9 innings (BBI: 5/39; Avg: 20.40; Econ: 5.52)



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Jemimah Rodrigues

Age: 25

From: Mumbai, Maharashtra

A Bandra girl from Bhandup, Jemimah spent her formative years practising her cover drive at the iconic Shivaji Park under her father's guidance. She rose up the ranks of domestic cricket, impressing in Mumbai's U-19 team and went on to debut for India in 2018.

WC25: After a tough start to her maiden ODI World Cup, Jemimah delivered a masterclass in the semifinal against Australia, scoring an unbeaten 127 that propelled India into the final. Earlier, she impressed with her first World Cup fifty against New Zealand.

292 runs in 7 innings (HS: 127; Avg: 58.40; SR: 101.03)

N. Shree Charani

Age: 21

From: Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh

Badminton occupied much of a six-year-old Shree Charani's time, but cricket remained a part of her daily routine. The COVID-19 pandemic gave her the opportunity to practise more. Her impressive performances for the Delhi Capitals in the Women's Premier League earned her a call-up to the national team earlier this year.

WC25: The young left-arm spinner has been a revelation for India. Shree Charani finished her maiden ODI World Cup campaign as India's second-highest wicket-taker with 14 scalps, with her best figures of three for 41 coming against Australia in the league stage.

14 wickets in 9 innings (BBI: 3/41; Avg: 27.64; Econ: 4.96)

EMMANUAL YOGINI

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Pratika Rawal

Age: 25

From: New Delhi

A psychology graduate and an excellent student who scored 92.5 per cent in her Class 12 CBSE exams, Pratika began playing cricket in fourth standard. She made her ODI debut late last year against the West Indies.

WC25: Pratika has been the steady rock at the top of India's batting order. Partnering Smriti Mandhana, she consistently forged solid partnerships in crucial games. She marked her maiden World Cup with a century against New Zealand before an untimely injury cut her campaign short. Nonetheless, her tally of 308 runs in six innings underlined a brilliant debut. Post-final, she was part of the celebrations – cheering from a wheelchair, a true image of resilience.

308 runs in 6 innings (HS: 122; Avg: 51.33; SR: 77.77)

« This flag on my shoulder means a lot, and being here with the team is just surreal. Injuries are part and parcel of the game. Very happy I was part of this team, this winning team.

Richa Ghosh

Age: 22

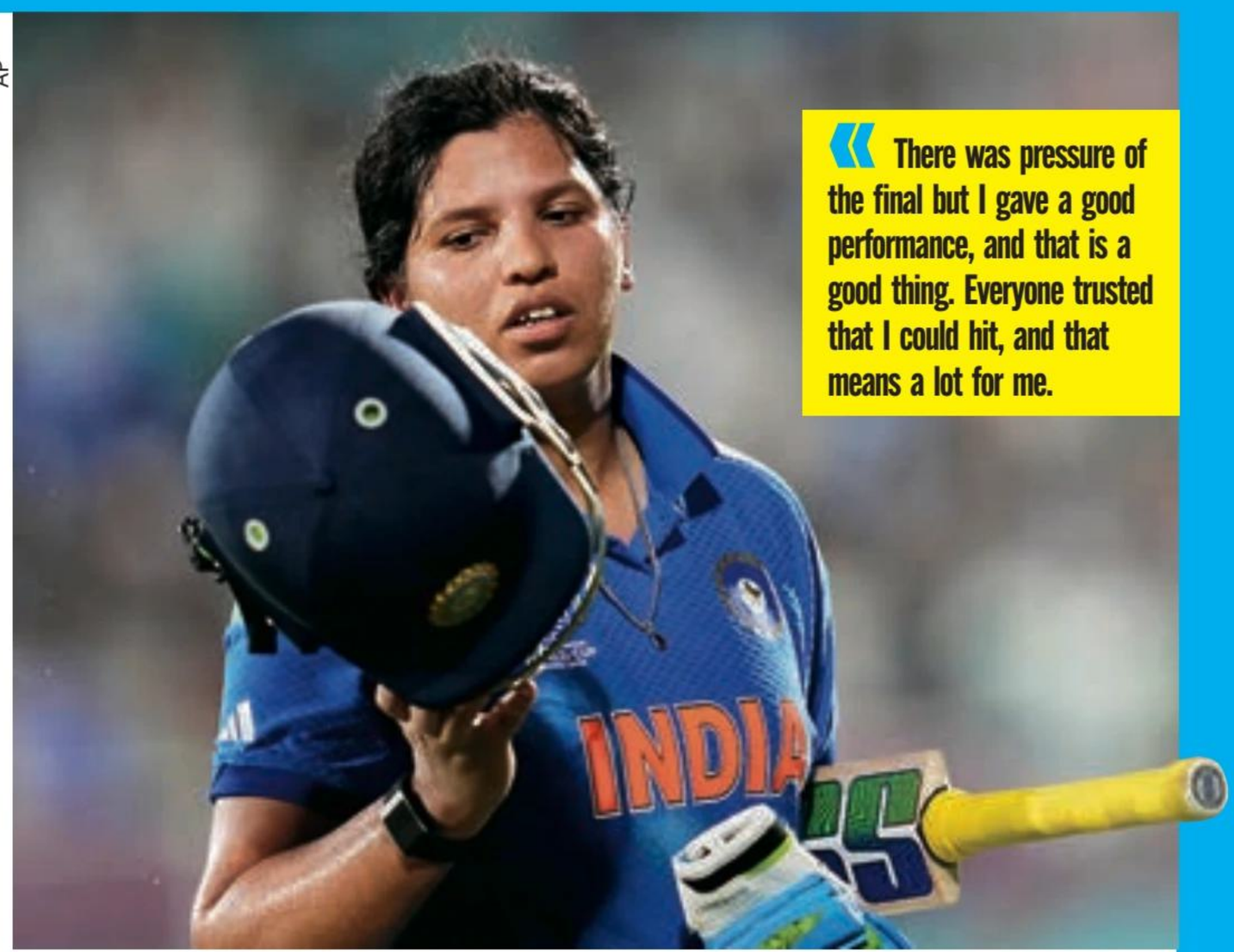
From: Siliguri, West Bengal

When she was barely five years old, Richa would go to watch her father play club cricket. That's where her journey began. Gradually, she made a name for herself in the Bengal State team and later made her international debut in 2020.

WC25: While her wicketkeeping hasn't been the best this tournament, Richa has delivered with the bat when required. The best example was her fiery 94 against South Africa in a league-stage fixture. Even in the final against the Proteas, she played a timely 24-ball 34 to help India reach a competitive total on a deteriorating pitch.

235 runs in 8 innings (HS: 94; Avg: 39.16; SR: 133.52)

AP



« There was pressure of the final but I gave a good performance, and that is a good thing. Everyone trusted that I could hit, and that means a lot for me.

PTI

EMMANUAL YOGINI

Sneh Rana

Age: 31

From: Dehradun, Uttarakhand

Despite hailing from Uttarakhand, Sneh began her domestic career with Punjab before making her international debut in 2014. After years of being in and out of the national set-up, and grappling with injuries and the personal loss of her father, the all-rounder made a strong return to the Indian team this year.

WC25: Sneh has been an important all-round option, with the senior player using her experience whenever called upon. With the ball, she has taken key wickets and has been a handy contributor with the bat as well.

99 runs in 5 innings (HS: 33; Avg: 49.50; SR: 113.79);

7 wickets in 6 innings (BBI: 2/32; Avg: 45.42; Econ: 5.67);

Renuka Singh Thakur

Age: 29

From: Shimla, Himachal Pradesh

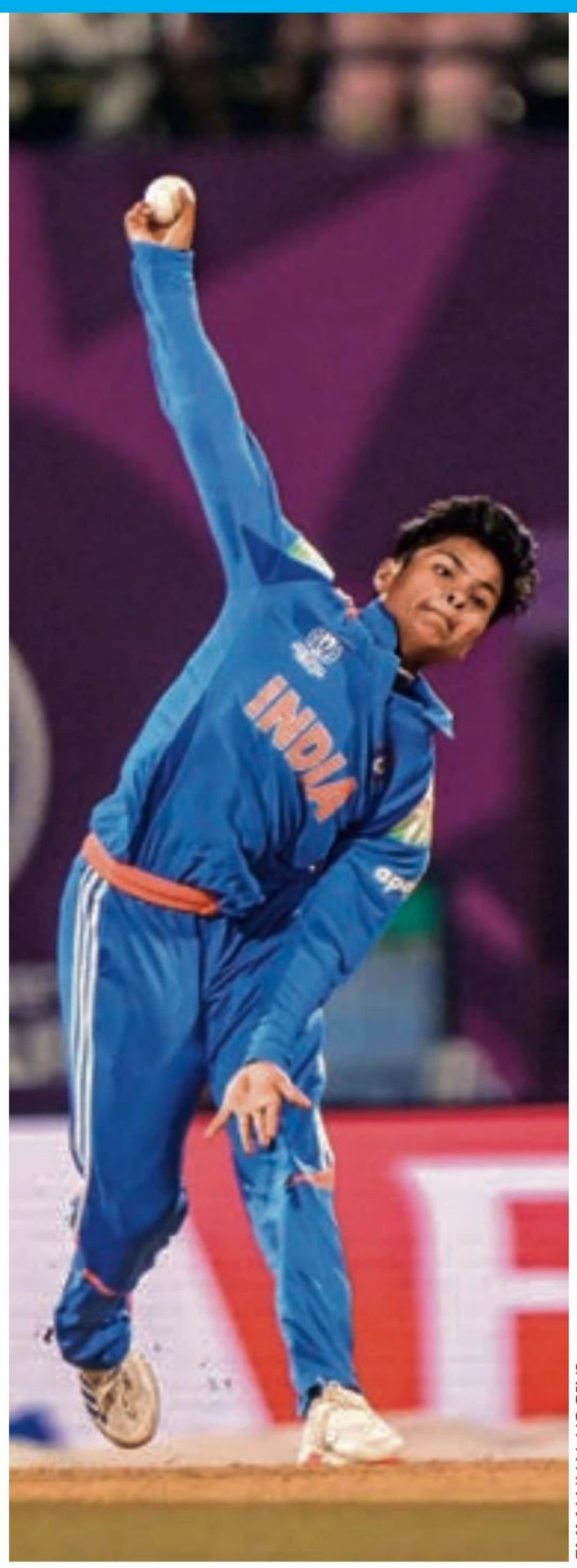
Renuka's father, Kehar Singh, was a passionate cricket fan, so much so that he named his son after Vinod Kambli. However, Kehar passed away when Renuka was three. She began playing with her brother and slowly moved up through the Himachal Pradesh age-level teams. She made her international debut in 2021 and was also part of India's 2022 ODI World Cup squad.

WC25: As India's strike bowler, Renuka didn't play every game in this tournament, but she showed her experience in the crucial match against New Zealand, where she picked up two wickets. Her tight bowling efforts extended into the final, conceding just 28 runs in eight overs.

3 wickets in 6 innings (BBI: 2/25; Avg: 60.33; Econ: 4.02)

RITU RAJ KONWAR

> This is just the start. We are going to dominate all over the world in every format.



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Amanjot Kaur

Age: 25

From: Mohali, Punjab

After alternating between Punjab and Chandigarh in domestic cricket, Amanjot made her India debut in early 2023. However, a back stress fracture next year ruled her out for six months. Following rehab, she returned to form in domestic cricket and earned a national recall after standout performances for Mumbai Indians in WPL 2025.

WC25: Often coming in to bat under pressure, she kept her composure and played some crucial knocks, particularly against Australia in the semifinal. With the ball too, she chipped in with six wickets in the tournament. Above all, she's been outstanding in the field, and took a brilliant catch to dismiss the dangerous Laura Wolvaardt in the final.

146 runs in 7 innings (HS: 57; Avg: 36.50; SR: 83.90); **6** wickets in 7 innings (BBI: 2/68; Avg: 45.66; Econ: 6.54)

Kranti Goud

Age: 22

From: Ghuwara, Madhya Pradesh

Until 2017, a young Kranti – who quit studies after Class 8 – would play local tournaments with boys. She later joined an academy in Chhatarpur, juggling training with travel from home as she began representing Madhya Pradesh in age-level tournaments. A four-wicket haul against Bengal in the Women's Senior One Day Trophy 2024 final and a strong maiden WPL season with UP Warriorz earned her a spot in the national team.

WC25: In Renuka's absence, Kranti handled the responsibility of being the lead pace bowler with maturity. The youngster from Madhya Pradesh finished her World Cup campaign with nine wickets.

9 wickets in 8 innings (BBI: 3/20; Avg: 40.11; Econ: 5.73)

Uma Chetry

Age: 23

From: Bokakhat, Assam

The youngest of five siblings, Uma started playing cricket with a plastic bat and ball bought at a Durga Puja pandal. From walking 10 km every day to the local ground in slippers to braving floods, Uma's perseverance paid off when she made her international debut in 2024.

WC25: The youngster from Assam was called up to the squad ahead of the tournament as an injury replacement for Yastika Bhatia. Against New Zealand, she got some time in the middle after Richa sustained an injury. Uma was also handed her ODI debut in India's final league-stage fixture against Bangladesh.

AFP

Harleen Deol

Age: 27

From: Chandigarh

Growing up in Punjab, Harleen honed her skills playing alongside boys before making her mark in domestic cricket even before her teens. She later represented Himachal Pradesh and made her India debut in 2019.

WC25: Usually batting at No. 3, Harleen anchored India's innings through the early games, scoring consistently in the 30s and 40s. She was left out of the playing XI for the knockouts..

169 runs in 5 innings (HS: 48; Avg: 33.80; SR: 75.11)

Arundhati Reddy

Age: 28

From: Hyderabad, Telangana

Picking up the sport in her teenage years, Arundhati rose through the Hyderabad domestic ranks before representing Railways and Kerala. She has been part of India's T20I setup since 2018, making her ODI debut only last year, and impressed in the WPL with the Delhi Capitals.

WC25: Although she didn't play a match for India in this tournament, Arundhati was a livewire in the field. She demonstrated her athleticism during the match against Bangladesh, taking a stunning catch at deep mid-wicket as a sub.

PTI

Radha Yadav

Age: 25

From: Mumbai, Maharashtra

Growing up in Mumbai's Kandivali, Radha often crossed paths with Jemimah Rodrigues in school tournaments and at age-level State teams. Radha made her international debut in 2018 before moving to play domestic cricket for Baroda.

WC25: While Radha wasn't a regular in India's playing XIs for most of the tournament, she showcased her athleticism as one of the side's best fielders. Against Bangladesh, she starred with the ball, taking three wickets in six overs.

4 wickets in 3 innings (BBI: 3/30; Avg: 35.25; Econ: 7.42)

Compiled by Rajdeep Saha

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A glimpse into the unsung world behind India's triumphant women's cricket team — the tireless minds and hands that shaped its rise from promise to glory.

Amol Muzumdar — Head coach & Batting coach

Muzumdar (sitting, fifth from left) was appointed head coach of the Indian women's cricket team in October 2023. The domestic stalwart represented Mumbai, Assam, and Andhra Pradesh during a prolific 21-year career, amassing over 11,000 First-Class runs — more than 9,000 of them in the Ranji Trophy.

Before taking charge of the senior women's side, Muzumdar served as batting coach for India's Under-19 and Under-23 teams, among several other developmental roles. When he took over, the Indian women's team was searching for stability and direction. Under his guidance, the Women in Blue have rediscovered both, winning 23 of the 38 matches since.

Aavishkar Salvi — Bowling coach

Salvi (sitting, right corner), a former India pacer, rose swiftly through the ranks — from a reserve seamer in Mumbai's setup to the side's pace spearhead, earning India A and senior national call-ups along the way. He finished with 169 First-Class wickets and four in as many One-Day Internationals, and also featured for Delhi Daredevils (now Delhi Capitals) in the IPL.

After coaching stints with Pondicherry and Punjab, Salvi was appointed bowling coach of the Indian women's team ahead of the 2024 South Africa series — a role he continued through the 2025 Women's ODI World Cup, where he helped instil discipline and precision in the attack. Kranti Goud's evolution as India's frontline pacer owes much to her extensive work under Salvi. His focus on seam control and consistency has amplified her natural swing and wicket-taking ability, often proving decisive in key spells.

Munish Bali — Fielding coach

Munish (sitting, left corner) has been part of the Indian women's senior setup since 2022, bringing with him extensive coaching experience across age-group and national levels. A former India Women Under-19 fielding coach, Bali has previously guided Punjab's U-15, U-16, U-17, and U-19 teams, shaping young talent across tiers. He was also the assistant coach of India's 2008 Under-19 World Cup-winning side and later worked with the senior women's team during the 2011 and 2012 seasons. India's fielding remains a work in progress, but

GETTY IMAGES

THE HANDS THAT

flashes of sharp ground work and incisive run-outs reflect the results of the rigorous training camps Bali oversees. Some of those gains were evident during the England series earlier this year.

A. I. Harrsha — S&C coach

Asshok Harrsha (last row, sixth from left) serves as a performance and Strength & Conditioning (S&C) coach at the BCCI's National Cricket Academy (NCA). A former cricketer who represented Hyderabad in First-Class cricket, Harrsha has been part of the NCA's high-performance ecosystem for over six years.

Aniruddha Deshpande — Performance Analyst

Aniruddha Deshpande (last row, third from right) serves as a Performance Analyst with the BCCI, working closely with the Indian women's cricket team and the Vidarbha Cricket Association. A former Vidarbha Under-19 cricketer, Deshpande brings a player's intuition and an analyst's precision to his role, blending technical insight with tactical depth to enhance team performance.

Harini Murali — Team Doctor

Dr. Harini (last row, third from left) served as the team doctor for the Indian women's cricket team during the 2025 Women's ODI World Cup. A seasoned sports medicine professional, she has also been associated with the Women's Premier League franchise Royal Challengers Bengaluru, working as both team doctor and manager across all three seasons

Rakhi V Darne — Head Physiotherapist

Rakhi (last row, second from left) has served as the head sports physiotherapist of the Indian women's hockey team since April 2023 and brings extensive multi-sport experience to her role. Before her current assignment, she worked with the Punjab Cricket Association and also served as a sports physiotherapist with the BCCI.

Akanksha Satyavanshi — Team Physiotherapist

Akanksha (last row, left corner) has been associated with the BCCI as a team physiotherapist for over five years and is currently part of the Indian women's cricket team's support staff. In 2023, she also served as the team physio for the Women's Premier League franchise Gujarat Giants, bringing a strong blend of clinical expertise and on-field experience to her role in maintaining player fitness and rehabilitation.

Dhananjay Kaushik — Head SSM

Dhananjay (last row, second from right), the lead physiotherapist at the BCCI Centre of Excellence, served as the Head of Sports Science and Medicine for the Indian women's cricket team at the 2025 Women's ODI World Cup. With over 18 years of experience across elite and Olympic-level sports, Kaushik brings a deep understanding of athlete management, recovery, and performance optimisation to India's high-performance setup.

Purva Kate (last row, right corner) and Mamta Shrisulla (middle row, fourth from right) served as Masseurs.

SHAPED HISTORY

A dream five decades in the making

Before the World Cup began, I had promised myself I won't attend any of India's matches. But this team's performances made me **break that promise.**

Jhulan Goswami

It is difficult to put my emotions into words. Since 1973, we have all been waiting for this moment. It took more than five decades, but I feel fortunate to have witnessed it in my lifetime.

When Harmanpreet [Kaur] took that catch, it took me back to 2022, when we narrowly missed a semifinal berth after losing to the same opponent, South Africa. I still remember how Harman caught Mignon du Preez at long-on that night, only for it to turn out that Deepti Sharma had overstepped. That no-ball hurt us deeply. Three years later, life came full circle for Harman, as her difficult catch sealed India's World Cup title.

After the 2022 World Cup, Harman and Smriti [Mandhana] walked up to me and promised they would do everything possible to win the next ODI World Cup. "We want to win it for you, Jhulu *di*," they said. On November 2, 2025, they kept their word.

This victory feels personal — not just for me, but for every player who came before this generation and laid the foundation. Those before us struggled immensely to stay afloat, and it was their passion and perseverance that allowed us to dream. This triumph belongs to them, too.

It was heartening to see the current players dedicate the trophy to the yesteryear cricketers, many of whom were present at the D.Y. Patil Stadium to soak in the moment.

Playing at home, India was always among the favourites, but the journey was far from smooth. After a string of defeats, the team faced criticism and even questions about Harman's captaincy. That was unfortunate, as such backlash in the middle of a tournament could have hurt the team's morale. But Harman absorbed it, led from the front, and silenced her critics.

Despite the odds, the team never lost faith. They knew they were on the right path. Throughout the tournament, they fought till the end, and in the end, their persistence paid off. Having seen Harman and Smriti since their early years, it gives me immense joy to see how far they have come.

Over time, they have built a strong and united team. Under their influence, fitness standards have improved, and the culture of professionalism has deepened. Their dedication has enriched the dressing room.

Amol Muzumdar also deserves special credit. He took charge when things were unsettled after several coaching changes and brought much-needed stability. He created a positive environment and took responsibility for both wins and losses. Amol, Harman, and Smriti worked together to shape a results-driven, confident side and that spirit sowed the seed for this success.

We came close twice before, in 2005 and 2017, but fell short. It would be unfair to compare eras, yet it is true that back then, we could not hold our nerve in the crucial moments. In 2017, we lost control in the final 10 overs. This group, though, handled pressure with remarkable composure and never stopped believing.

In our time, the challenges were different. Now, with the BCCI's full support, the women's game has grown stronger.

When Jay sir (Jay Shah) was secretary of the Board, he backed women's cricket wholeheartedly — from launching the Women's Premier League (WPL) to introducing parity in match fees. The results are now visible.

I genuinely believe the WPL has been a turning point for women's cricket in India. With this victory, the game will only grow. It will inspire young girls from smaller towns to dream bigger and strengthen the domestic structure further.

Before the World Cup began, I had promised myself I won't attend any of India's matches. But this team's performances made me break that promise, and I am glad I did. As Harman lifted the trophy, I couldn't hold back my tears. After years of toil, there were tears of joy.

As told to Shayan Acharya

GETTY IMAGES

We had to fight to keep the game afloat: Legends react

SHANTHA RANGASWAMY
India's first women's team captain and administrator

This is not the time to reflect on the lack of facilities during our time. This is the time to enjoy and bask in the glory of the team's success. This win is going to have a major impact on the game. Hypothetically speaking, if there are one lakh women cricketers in the country now, this World Cup win will ensure that number increases tenfold.

It will draw a lot of youth to cricket. The 1983 World Cup win put India on the world map of cricket. Likewise, this win will catapult India into becoming one of the leading women's cricket countries in the world, and the base will get widened.

That is the biggest contribution of Harmanpreet Kaur and her team. We had to fight to keep the game afloat, and now the number of players will increase exponentially. That's the biggest gain.

SUDHA SHAH
Former India captain, coach and administrator

When Harmanpreet Kaur took that final catch, I could not control my emotions. This was something all of us had dreamed of, and when the girls finally did it, it felt as if they were living our dreams.

It should have happened much earlier because we had been improving steadily, and the facilities and support structures are much better now. But better late than never. The best part is that millions of Indians watched the game on television and cheered for the players — that in itself is a huge achievement.

We reached the ODI World Cup final in 2005 but lost to Australia, and then, in 2017, it was another heartbreak. As a former player, it is deeply satisfying to see that all our hard work and sacrifices have not gone in vain. Just as the 1983 World Cup win transformed men's cricket, hopefully, this moment will mark a similar turning point for women's cricket. But now the girls must work even harder and continue on the same path.

DIANA EDULJI
Former India captain and administrator

It has been a long 50 years for us, and this victory has truly made my day. It has made my struggle over the last five decades, as a player, an administrator, and a mentor, worth it.

All our hard work has borne fruit with this trophy. We missed it narrowly in 2017, and that was the real turning point. I wouldn't call this a 1983 moment at all; I believe it was in 2017 that everyone started taking women's cricket seriously. The key factor then was that the matches were telecast live, and that visibility drew attention.

When I was a Committee of Administrators (CoA) member, I took several steps to ensure that women cricketers, both past and present, received their due. It wasn't easy, because the BCCI had never functioned with women's cricket in mind; it was always about men's cricket. The common refrain was that women's cricket didn't generate revenue. Even so, we introduced one-time benefits for players, ensured they travelled business class, and stayed in single rooms in five-star hotels. We treated them on par with the men.

Those were the steps we took, and I believe this World Cup win will have a profound impact on young cricketers.

Edulji picks up a wicket during India's maiden Test series.

NEETU DAVID
Former India captain and erstwhile chairperson, national selection committee

For the last five decades, we have been waiting for this moment. But Harmanpreet Kaur and Amol Muzumdar ensured that our dream came true, and winning a World Cup at home is special. A lot of credit goes to the BCCI, Jay Shah bhai, who went out of his way to support women's cricket and ensured that the girls got everything. Similarly, VVS Laxman ensured that at the CoE, the players were well guided and it's a collective effort that we fulfilled our dreams.

As a player, I have witnessed several so-near-yet-so-far moments, but I am glad to have played a role this time. This team was criticised a lot, but that did not affect the senior players as they took things in their stride, motivated the youngsters and got the best out of them. This certainly will be a defining moment for women's cricket in India.

India's moment of glory

Roll of honour

Year	Winner	Runner-up	Host	Winning captain	Teams
1973	England (1)	Australia (1)	England	Racheal Heyhoe Flint	7
1978	Australia (1)	England (1)	India	Margaret Jennings	4
1982	Australia (2)	England (2)	New Zealand	Sharon Tredrea (1)	5
1988	Australia (3)	England (3)	Australia	Sharon Tredrea (2)	5
1993	England (2)	New Zealand (1)	England	Karen Smithies	8
1997	Australia (4)	New Zealand (2)	India	Belinda Clark (1)	11
2000	New Zealand (1)	Australia (2)	New Zealand	Emily Drumm	8
2005	Australia (5)	India (1)	South Africa	Belinda Clark (2)	8
2009	England (3)	New Zealand (3)	Australia	Charlotte Edwards	8
2013	Australia (6)	West Indies (1)	India	Jodie Fields	8
2017	England (4)	India (2)	England/Wales	Heather Knight	8
2022	Australia (7)	England (4)	New Zealand	Meg Lanning	8
2025	India (1)	South Africa (1)	India/Sri Lanka	Harmanpreet Kaur	8

6 } The number of women batters to cross 5000 runs during their ODI career. Two batters became a part of this exclusive group during the just-concluded World Cup tournament. India's Smriti Mandhana was the first to reach on October 12, followed by South African Laura Wolvaardt on October 20. Interestingly, both these players are the fastest to reach this milestone — 112 and 117 innings respectively.

Quickest to reach 5000 career runs in Women's ODIs

Inns	M	Batter (For)	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	100/50	HS	Against	Venue	Score	Result
112	112	Smriti Mandhana (Ind)	12 Oct 2025	5022	47.38	13/33	136	Australia	Visakhapatnam	80	Lost
117	118	Laura Wolvaardt (SA)	29 Oct 2025	5121	50.21	10/38	184*	England	Guwahati	169	Won
129	133	Stafanie Taylor (WI)	14 Nov 2021	5062	45.20	7/36	171	Pakistan	Karachi	102*	Won
136	142	Suzie Bates (NZ)	26 Mar 2022	5866	41.02	12/28	168	Pakistan	Christchurch	126	Won
144	157	Mithali Raj (Ind)	6 Jul 2015	5029	48.83	5/37	114*	New Zealand	Bengaluru	81*	Won
156	167	Charlotte Edwards (Eng)	15 Feb 2013	5075	37.32	8/38	173*	New Zealand	Mumbai BS	106*	Won

Note: The career figures provided above are updated at the end of the innings in which the milestone was achieved.

0 } Number of women batters to aggregate 1000 ODI runs in a calendar year before 2025. Smriti Mandhana became the first (and only one) to achieve this in the history of women's international cricket during India's World Cup match against Australia in Visakhapatnam on 12 October 2025. No one else has achieved this in either Women's Tests or in Women's T20Is. England's Janette Brittin, with 531 Test runs in 1984, and Mandhana, with 763 T20I runs in 2024, hold the best aggregates in these formats.

Most runs in a calendar year in Women's ODIs

Runs	Batter	For	Year	M	Inns	NO	HS	Ave.	100	50
1362	Smriti Mandhana	(Ind)	2025	23	23	1	135	61.90	5	5
976	Pratika Rawal	(Ind)	2025	21	20	1	154	51.36	2	6
970	Belinda Clark	(Aus)	1997	16	14	2	229*	80.83	3	4
919	Laura Wolvaardt	(SA)	2025	18	18	1	169	54.05	3	4
882	Laura Wolvaardt	(SA)	2022	18	18	0	117	49.00	1	8
880	Debbie Hockley	(NZ)	1997	16	16	2	100*	62.85	2	6

Progressive list of highest run-getters in a calendar year in Women's ODIs

Runs	Batter	For	Year	M	Inns	NO	HS	Ave.	100	50
264	Enid Bakewell	(Eng)	1973	6	4	1	118	88.00	2	0
391	Janette Brittin	(Eng)	1982	12	12	2	138*	39.10	1	1
513	Debbie Hockley	(NZ)	1988	12	12	2	90*	51.30	0	5
970	Belinda Clark	(Aus)	1997	16	14	2	229*	80.83	3	4
1362	Smriti Mandhana	(Ind)	2025	23	23	1	135	61.90	5	5

23 } The number of innings Pratika Rawal needed to reach 1000 ODI runs, on 23 October 2025 during the World Cup match against New Zealand in Navi Mumbai. She equalled the record held by former Australian batter Lindsay Reeler. However, Rawal reached her milestone in fewer days since her debut — in just 305 days. She became the first woman ODI cricketer to reach 1000 runs in less than a year. The two tables below provide the details.

Quickest to reach 1000 career runs in Women's ODIs (number of innings)

Inns	M	Batter (For)	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	100/50	HS	Age
23	23	Lindsay Reeler (Aus)	18 Dec 1988	1034	57.44	2/8	143*	27y-275d
23	23	Pratika Rawal (Ind)	23 Oct 2025	1110	50.45	2/7	154	25y-52d
25	25	Meg Lanning (Aus)	25 Aug 2013	1053	43.88	4/4	128	21y-153d
25	25	Nicole Bolton (Aus)	23 Nov 2016	1039	45.17	2/6	124	27y-311d
27	27	Belinda Clark (Aus)	7 Feb 1997	1081	45.04	1/7	131	26y-150d
27	28	Laura Wolvaardt (SA)	10 Feb 2018	1050	45.65	2/8	149	18y-290d

Wolvaardt is the youngest to reach this milestone at 18y-290d

Quickest to reach 1000 career runs in Women's ODIs (number of days)

Days	Y-M-D	Batter (For)	ODI debut	Achieved on	Against	Venue	Score	Result
305	10m-1d	Pratika Rawal (Ind)	22 Dec 2024	23 Oct 2025	NZ	New Mumbai	122	Won
734	2y-3d	Laura Wolvaardt (SA)	7 Feb 2016	10 Feb 2018	Ind	Potchefstroom	59	Won
749	2y-18d	Sarah Taylor (Eng)	14 Aug 2006	1 Sep 2008	Ind	Taunton	75*	Won
835	2y-3m-13d	Stafanie Taylor (WI)	24 Jun 2008	7 Oct 2010	Ire	Potchefstroom	72	Won
963	2y-7m-20d	Meg Lanning (Aus)	5 Jan 2011	25 Aug 2013	Eng	Hove	64	Lost

Note: In men's ODIs, only Pakistan's Yasir Hameed (242 days) took fewer days than Rawat to reach his 1000th ODI run in January 2004.

10 } The number of bowlers in Women's ODIs to claim 150 or more wickets. India's star all-rounder Deepti Sharma became the latest to join this special group during her World Cup game against England in Indore on 19 October 2025, when she claimed the wicket of Tammy Beaumont. In terms of matches, Deepti Sharma (117) is the fourth quickest after Australian Cathryn Fitzpatrick (91), South African Shabnin Ismail (105) and Aussie Ellyse Perry (109). However, she is the fastest in terms of days (3979 days) and also the youngest (28y-56d) among the 10 players with 150-plus ODI wickets.

Fastest to reach 150 wickets in Women's ODIs (number of days)

Days	Y-M-D	Bowler (For)	ODI debut	Achieved on	Against	Venue	Bowling	Result
3979	10y-10m-22d	Deepti Sharma (Ind)	28 Nov 2014	19 Oct 2025	Eng	Indore	4/51	Lost
4049	11y-1m	Jhulan Goswami (Ind)	6 Jan 2002	5 Feb 2013	SL	Mumbai BS	3/63	Lost
4391	126-8d	Cathryn Fitzpatrick (Aus)	24 Jul 1993	31 Jul 2005	Ire	Dublin	2/13	Won

Youngest to reach 150 wickets in Women's ODIs (number of days)

Age	Bowler (For)	ODI debut	Achieved on	Against	Venue	Bowling	Result
28y-56d	Deepti Sharma (Ind)	28 Nov 2014	19 Oct 2025	Eng	Indore	4/51	Lost
28y-312d	Ellyse Perry (Aus)	22 Jul 2007	11 Sep 2019	WI	North Sound	1/18	Won
29y-72d	Jhulan Goswami (Ind)	6 Jan 2002	5 Feb 2013	SL	Mumbai BS	3/63	Lost

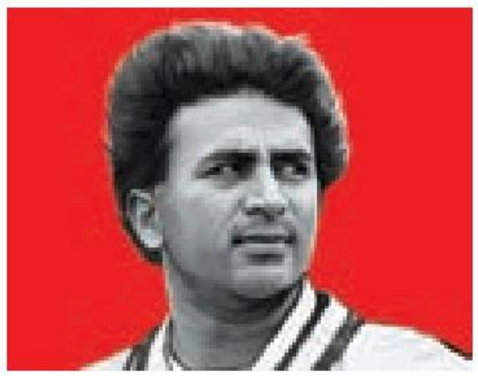
4 } The number of all-rounders to achieve the double of 200+ runs and 12+ wickets in a single edition of the Women's World Cup. India's Deepti Sharma and South Africa's Marizanne Kapp achieved this rare feat in the current edition of the Women's World Cup, having done so in previous editions of the tournament, too. However, Deepti's achievement in this year's tournament is unique, as she is now the only female player to aggregate 200-plus runs and take more than 15 wickets.

All-rounder's double of 200+ runs and 12+ wkts in a single edition of the Women's World Cup

Player (For)	(For)	Year	(venue)	M	Runs	Wkts	Title winner
Deepti Sharma	(Ind)	2025	(in Ind/SL)	9	215	22	India
Sharon Tredea	(Aus)	1982	(in NZ)	13	239	13	Australia
Carole Hodges	(Eng)	1988	(in Aus)	9	336	12	Australia
Deepti Sharma	(Ind)	2017	(in Eng)	9	216	12	England
Marizanne Kapp	(SA)	2022	(in NZ)	8	203	12	Australia
Marizanne Kapp	(SA)	2025	(in Ind/SL)	9	208	12	India

Sharon Tredea in 1982 and Deepti Sharma in 2025 are the only players listed above whose team won the WC title that year

All records are correct and updated until 2 November 2025.



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

WOMEN'S ODI WORLD CUP WIN HAS TO GO DOWN AS ONE OF THE BEST WINS IN HISTORY OF INDIAN CRICKET

Just like the 1983 win galvanised Indian cricket, this win will give **new wings** to women's cricket.

It was third time lucky for the Indian women as they kept their nerve to win the coveted ICC ODI World Cup. They had been in two finals before and had lost narrowly the last time to England at Lord's, where, for the first time in decades, the English supporters outnumbered the Indian supporters at the ground. The loss by nine runs was hard to take, as the Indians were cruising to a win till Harmanpreet Kaur, who was batting beautifully, got caught at deep square leg. After that, panic and indecision seemed to set in, resulting in a few run-outs and poor shot selection, which ultimately led to the loss.

This time, it was Harmanpreet who was the captain, and she sealed the win with a spectacular catch. This has to go down as one of the best wins in the history of Indian cricket — both in the men's and women's game. The determination shown by the women was incredible. If one may be permitted to say so, it is a *'khadoos attitude'* that Mumbai cricket is famous for. The coach, Amol Muzumdar, being from Mumbai, must have influenced it a great deal, for to bounce back the way they did after losing three close games is nothing short of remarkable.

The win once again emphasised, if ever it was needed, that sporting intelligence wins trophies, not fancy degrees from universities. It also proves that it will invariably be Indian coaches who get the best results since they know the players — their strengths, weaknesses, and temperament — and understand the nuances of Indian cricket better than any foreigner, however accomplished he or she may be.

There were some who tried to compare this win with the men's team winning the World Cup in 1983. The men had never progressed beyond the group stage in earlier editions, and so everything from the knockout stage onward was new to them, while the

Red-letter day: India beat South Africa by 52 runs to win the Women's ODI World Cup for the first time. EMMANUAL YOGINI

women already had a better record, having been in two finals before this magnificent triumph.

Just as the '83 win galvanised Indian cricket and gave it a voice that was heard around the world, this victory will make the countries that started women's cricket long before India did realise that their era of domination has been shaken.

The '83 win also encouraged parents of aspiring cricketers to let their children take up the game. The IPL took it to another level, of course, and that's why today's Indian men's team includes players not just from the metros but from across the country.

Similarly, this win will give new wings to women's cricket, bringing more girls into the game from the remotest parts of India. The WPL has already begun that process, as parents now see the sport as a genuine career option for their daughters and are more willing to support them.

This is a win to savour, a win to cherish, a win for the ages. Well done, Harmanpreet Kaur and the girls. You have made the country proud — may this be the first of many trophies to come to India.

This title win proves that it will invariably be Indian coaches who get the best results since they know the players – their strengths, weaknesses, and temperament – and understand the nuances of Indian cricket better than any foreigner, however accomplished he or she may be.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE TAIL

The 2025 Women's World Cup redrew cricket's hierarchies, as those who batted last **dictated** how far their teams went.

Kavita Menon
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For much of the Women's ODI World Cup 2025, the lower order was the story: rescuing innings, turning games, and redefining what it meant to bat at No. 8 to 11. But in the final, the top and middle-order batters held firm, leaving little for the tail to do as the contest was largely decided before they were needed.

Yet the deeper story of the tournament lay in a rare symmetry: India and South Africa, the two sides with the most productive lower-order hitters, reached the final and closed their campaigns with identical tallies — 279 runs from their last four batters.

It was as if the late-order architects themselves had mapped out the path to the title clash, proving that in modern women's

RICHA GHOSH WAS THE TOURNAMENT'S FASTEST SCORER AS WELL AS ITS HIGHEST SIX-HITTER, HAVING STRUCK 12 MAXIMUMS IN EIGHT GAMES

cricket, depth and resilience at the bottom could shape the destiny of a World Cup.

Australia's blueprint

The early signs of this lower-lineup revolution can be traced to Australia, a team long recognised for its batting depth.

"They bat so deep and we know the talent they've got," said Sophie Devine after New Zealand's loss to the Aussies in the opener. "You just can't take your foot off the throat because they bat all the way to 11."

The warning became a reality against Pakistan.

Australia, teetering at 76 for seven, saw No. 10 Alana King rewrite the script with an unbeaten 51, her highest-ever ODI score coming under intense pressure. Together with Beth Mooney, she stitched a record 106-run ninth-wicket partnership.

The tournament statistics underlined the trend. The four teams with the most productive lower orders reached the semifinals: India and South Africa led the way, followed by England (214) and Australia (173).

Depth that delivers

While Australia set the early tone, the tournament's defining showcase of lower-order batting came in the clash between India and South Africa, with the spotlight firmly on Richa Ghosh and Nadine de Klerk.

Richa, batting at No. 8, made an immediate impression with a highest score of 94, keeping her team competitive with stability and aggression when the top faltered.

De Klerk, walking in at No. 8, responded in style, demonstrating why she has become South Africa's go-to finisher. In seven innings, she scored 208 runs, striking at 131.64 and averaging 52.

"We've always known Nadine's very talented. It seems like this year, her batting is really clicking," said Marizanne Kapp after South Africa's comprehensive win over Pakistan in Colombo. De Klerk joined forces with the veteran to hammer 52 runs off 20 balls while racing to an individual score of 41 off just 16.

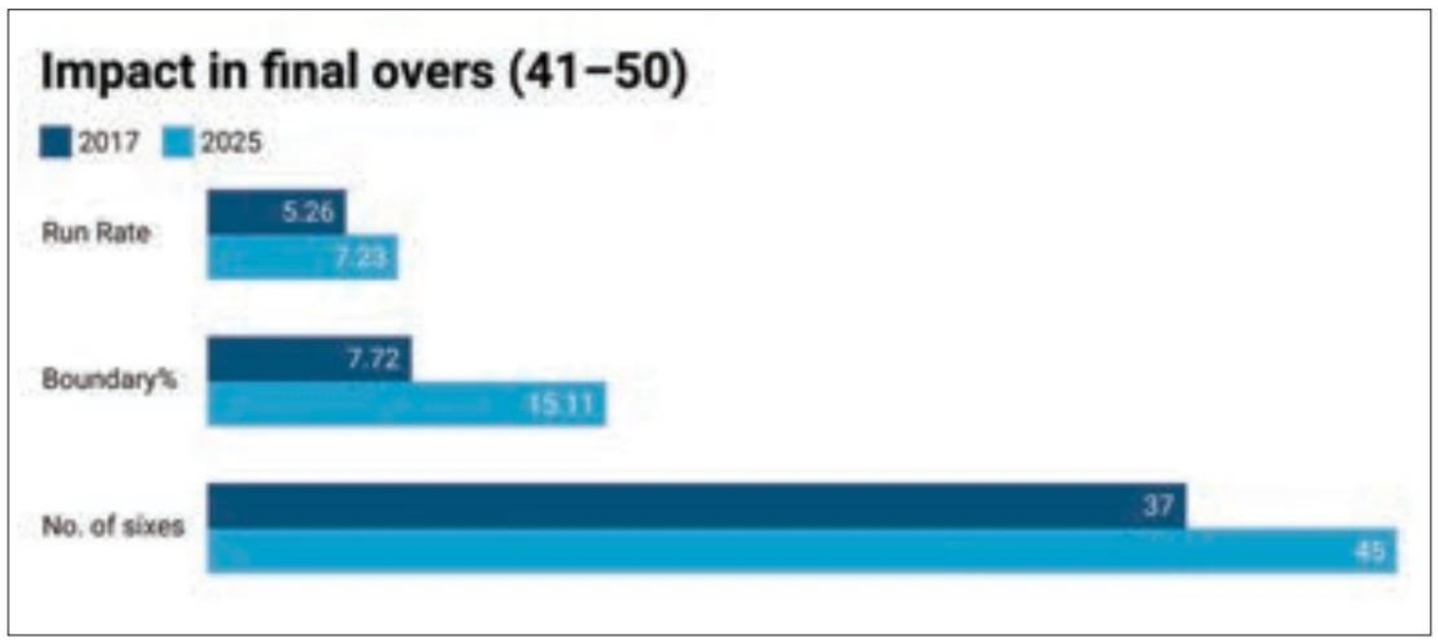
Depth defined: Richa Ghosh (facing page, left) and Nadine de Klerk embodied the rise of the lower order at the 2025 Women's World Cup, turning crisis into opportunity and redefining the finisher's role. EMMANUAL YOGINI & K. R. DEEPAK

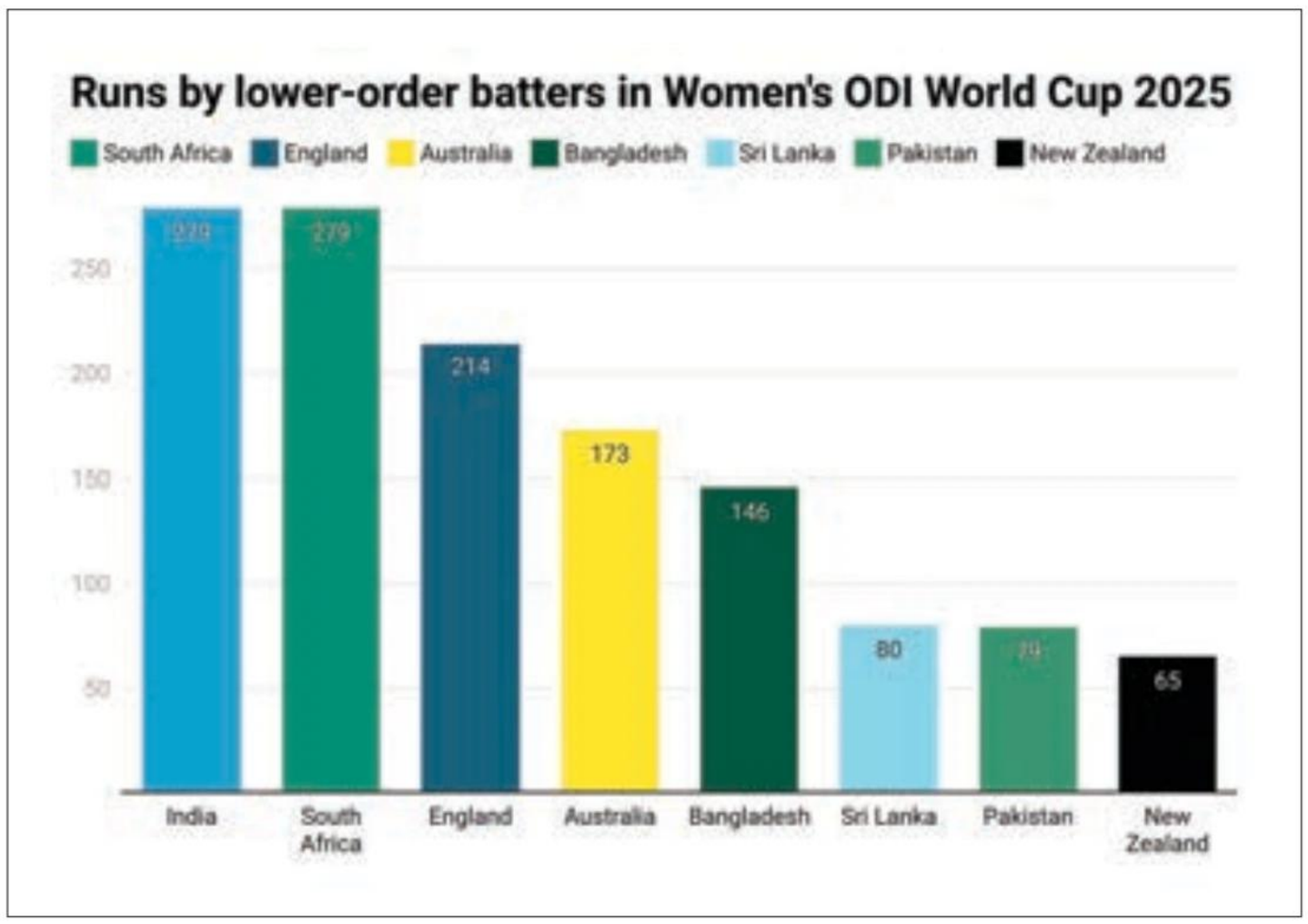
Statistical leaps at No. 8

The contrast between the finishers and those who merely survived was evident throughout the tournament. England's Charlie Dean, another regular at No. 8, scored 124 runs in six innings, but her strike rate of 67.39 and boundary percentage of 5.97 lagged far behind De Klerk's and Richa's.

Meanwhile, Richa was strategically shuffled around the order, held back to unleash her natural aggression in the closing overs. Even though she batted at No. 8 only twice during the tournament, she outscored Dean and trailed only De Klerk, compiling 129 runs at a strike rate of 132.98.

Naturally, the No. 8 position emerged as the pivotal spot for





late-order impact. Compared to 2017, averages increased from 17.68 to 24.34, and boundary percentages rose from 6.45 to 10.28, indicating both greater consistency and increased attacking intent. Between overs 41 and 50, the run rate also surged from 5.26 to 7.23, and the boundary percentage from 7.71 to 15.11, showcasing a growing ability to dictate momentum in the closing stages. Notably, of the record 133 sixes hit in the tournament, 45 came in the final 10 overs — just seven short of the 52 struck during the entire 2022 edition.

India's stronghold

This surge in late-order impact was perhaps most evident in India's campaign, with the team's strike rate touching 120 this year, compared to 94.52 in 2022. In the opener against Sri Lanka, Deepti Sharma and Amanjot Kaur stitched together a crucial 103-run partnership, with Amanjot contributing a match-saving 57 off 56 balls.

"You can't say India was in trouble. I was yet to bat," quipped Amanjot, who, along with Richa and Sneh Rana, embodied the calm self-belief that allowed the lower-order hitters to thrive.

Glimpses of Richa's special knock against South Africa in the league stage resurfaced in the final.

Walking in at No. 7, she imposed herself immediately, smashing a 24-ball 34 that included three fours and two sixes at a strike rate of 141.66.

Though the summit clash largely defied the trend of the lower order coming to the party, the rearguards of all the top teams were worth their weight in gold throughout the tournament and proved that the last line of defence could no longer be overlooked.

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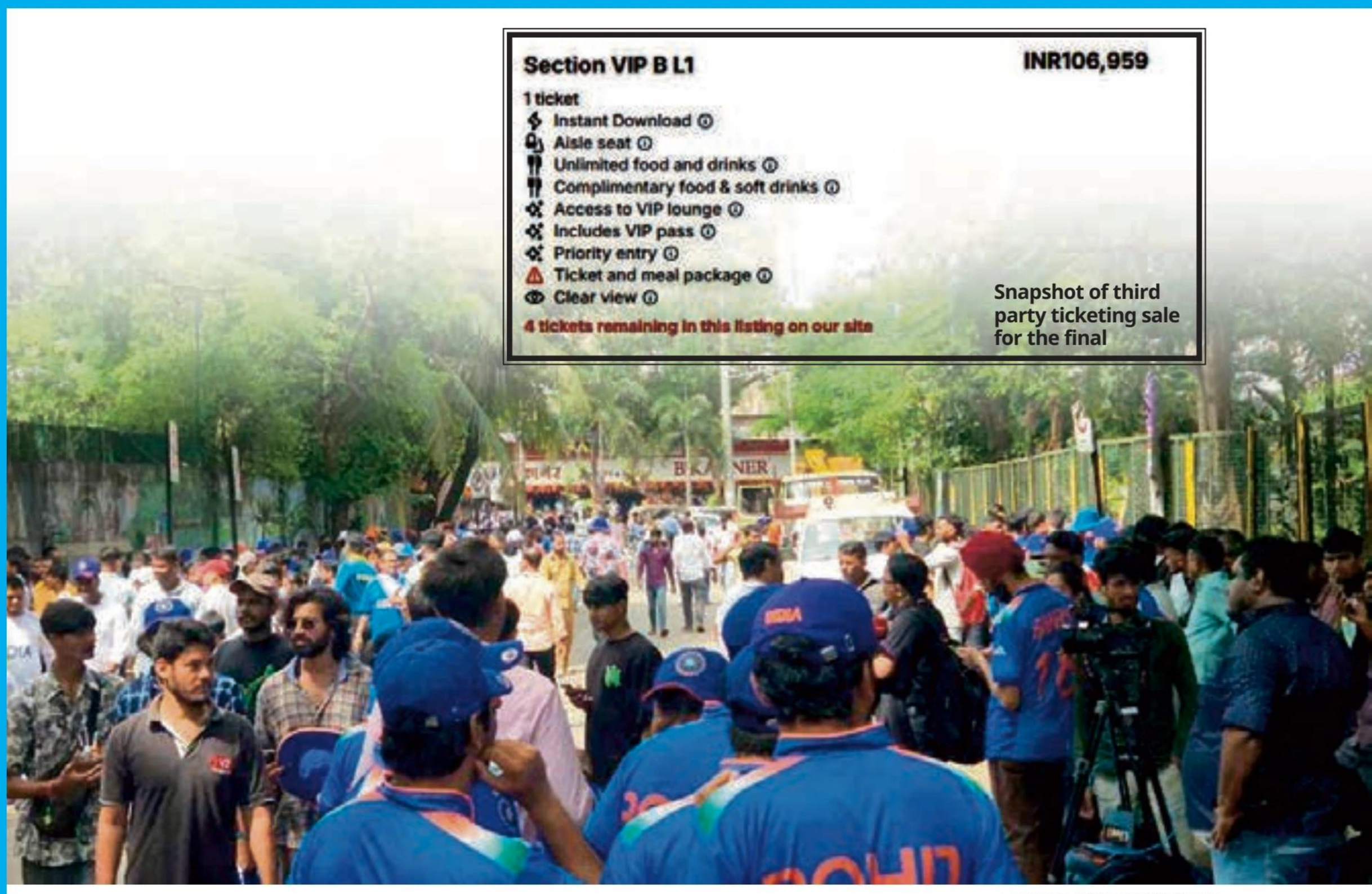


Snapshot of third party ticketing sale for the final

LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

BETWEEN FRENZY AND FULFILMENT: WHAT THE WORLD CUP SEMIFINALS REVEALED

Sportstar reporters bring vivid vignettes from the Women's ODI World Cup, capturing the crowds, colour and **changing face** of women's cricket.

As India pulled off a historic chase against Australia to storm into the Women's ODI World Cup final, another race began — for tickets. Priced at Rs. 150, passes were available a week earlier, but demand exploded only after India's semifinal win.

The ICC confirmed all stands would be open for the final, a rare move after limited access in earlier matches. The semifinal drew a crowd of over 35,000, underlining D.Y. Patil Stadium's growing reputation in women's cricket.

But within hours of India's win, the BookMyShow portal froze with a "Coming Soon" message. On resale sites such

as Viagogo, prices soared to Rs. 4,500 and later to Rs. 13,000. A VIP seat listed at Rs. 1,06,959 sold out quickly. By Saturday, *BookMyShow* changed its listing to "event closed," without ever reopening sales.

At the venue, fans pressed against the gates, hoping for a glimpse of Smriti Mandhana or Harmanpreet Kaur as India trained. The stadium authorities confirmed the match was sold out, while *BookMyShow* posted, "Due to the overwhelming response, tickets were sold out in no time." Even the players weren't spared ticket requests. "You know how it is for tickets (in India). Very happy that the pressure is there for cricket and tickets too!" Harmanpreet laughed.

A D.Y. Patil University student said, "People often comment about an inferiority in women's cricket, but no one wants to miss an 'I was there' moment if India wins." The chaos echoed the 2023 Men's World Cup fiasco, with similar black-market sales.

To ease fan travel, the local train "mega block" was even called off for the day, a rare gesture by city authorities. By afternoon, the D.Y. Patil stands were a sea of blue, as 39,555 fans watched Harmanpreet and her team cross the finish line in emphatic fashion.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

A DAY OF COLOUR FOR PUNE'S YOUNG FANS

Meanwhile, nearly 300 underprivileged children from Pune filled Level 1 of Block E with colour and rhythm during the India–Australia semifinal.

The group, aged between eight and 15, came through

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

an initiative by 68-year-old social worker and cricket enthusiast Shashank Wagh. They represented three institutions: Manavya (supporting HIV-affected children), Ishwarpuram Sanstha (for NorthEastern students), and Sumati Balwan School.

Before the match, the children toured Mumbai landmarks, including the Atal Setu, Gateway of India, and Marine Drive, before heading to Nerul to cheer for the Women in Blue. Carrying flags and dhols, they sang and danced to *"Jeetega India."*

"I always try to do something for underprivileged children. Seeing the joy on their faces is my reward," Wagh told *Sportstar*. "We arranged everything: travel, meals, snacks, and sightseeing. I'm thankful to my friends and the Exim Integrated Club for their support."

For these children, it wasn't just a match; it was a lifetime memory.

Amol Karhadkar

WHEN SCROLLS TURNED TO GAZES

South Africa lost the final but walked away having won plenty of hearts — none more than skipper Laura Wolvaardt, who amassed 571 runs, the most in a single

LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

edition of the tournament. In Navi Mumbai, an appreciative crowd rose to its feet when she brought up her second consecutive century in the final. Loud cheers followed her post-match speech too.

A few days earlier in Guwahati, where South Africa recorded a famous win in the first semifinal to knock England out of the competition, Wolvaardt's sublime form turned neutral fans into believers. Young volunteers from the anthem ceremony and spectators with no allegiance to either side could be seen on their phones, playing video games during the early slog overs. But in the final 10 overs of the Proteas innings, Wolvaardt shifted gears, finding boundaries at will. From the press box just behind them, journalists watched as gaming screens gave way to camera lenses; the same kids now recording her innings and searching for her story online.

Ever the analytical mind, Wolvaardt drew positives from the campaign. "Maybe I was being a bit too conservative or one-dimensional. To win games, you've got to be positive and aggressive. I explored a bit of that in this tournament."

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

AFP

Romario Shepherd became just the second West Indian bowler to pick up a T20I hat-trick during the third match of the series in Bangladesh. Half-centuries from Roston Chase and Ackeem Auguste helped the Windies romp home with more than three overs to spare and complete a 3-0 clean sweep.

REUTERS

Former New Zealand captain Kane Williamson announced his retirement from T20Is after the home series against England. The 35-year-old batter played 93 T20Is for his country since making his debut against Zimbabwe in 2011, captaining the side on 75 occasions.

AP

Afghanistan blanked Zimbabwe 3-0 in a T20I series in Harare. The 22-year-old pacer Abdollah Ahmadzai impressed with seven wickets in three matches. Openers Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ibrahim Zadran continued to do the heavy lifting with the bat, scoring 147 and 169 runs in the series, respectively.

AFP

Former Pakistan skipper Babar Azam surpassed Rohit Sharma (4231) to become the highest run-scorer in T20Is during the second match of the home series against South Africa. Babar was recalled for his first series in the shortest format in nearly a year after Fakhar Zaman was rested. After losing the first match in Rawalpindi, the host registered back-to-back wins to take the series 2-1.

AFP

Indian batter Shreyas Iyer has been discharged from a hospital in Sydney after receiving treatment for a blunt abdominal injury sustained while fielding during India's third ODI against Australia. Shreyas felt some discomfort after completing a diving catch to dismiss Alex Carey. He left the field to undergo further evaluation at a hospital. He was admitted to the ICU after his vitals dropped due to internal bleeding.

GETTY IMAGES

The Hundred cricket competitions will switch from a draft system to an IPL-like player auction from the 2026 season onwards. A salary cap and a collar (a minimum amount to spend) will be introduced as part of the changes. Squads will feature 16-18 players, out of which four can be overseas. Teams can make up to four pre-auction signings between November and January.

Water Buckets to World Records

Preetismita Bhoi's odyssey to the podiums

What are the odds of someone running 100 and 200m sprint events in their school, getting spotted by a coach who asks them if they would like to switch to weightlifting and then going on to write a tale of grit and glory in Odisha's weightlifting history? All of this seems possible today, if one takes a look at Odisha's weightlifter, Preetismita Bhoi.

Born in Odisha's Dhenkanal, 16-year-old Bhoi has been dominating headlines recently with a new World Record under her name in clean and jerk in the 44kg category in the 3rd Asian Youth Games, Bahrain, by lifting 92 kgs. She has emerged as the new weightlifting prodigy from India, setting new standards on her way to global podiums. However, her story has not always been filled with stories of victory but has traversed through several trysts, trials and tribulations.

Coming from humble beginnings, Bhoi lost her father at a tender age. She and her sister Bidusmita Bhoi (weightlifter and Commonwealth gold medalist) were raised by their mother, Jamuna.

When her coach Gopal Krushna Das found her 11-year-old self in tears for finishing second in sprinting, at her school's annual sports meet, he noticed her deep love for sports. While she had readily agreed to switch to weightlifting, her mother firmly refused. 'It took me six months to convince Preetismita's mother to let her become a weightlifter. She was concerned and feared for her child,' shares Das.

But the attempts to convince finally paid off when her mother asked her to fill water buckets and walk for 30 metres, at her coach's insistence. That marked the beginning of her weightlifting journey in 2019.

She began her training in 2020 at the District Indoor Stadium in Dhenkanal under coach Das. In 2022, she was inducted into the Odisha Weightlifting High Performance Centre (HPC) at the Dhenkanal Sub-Centre. Owing to her remarkable performances at national-level competitions, she transitioned to the National Centre of Excellence (NCOE), Patiala, in 2023.

After a series of hits and misses, the world took notice when Preetismita created a world record in clean & jerk in 40kg category, by lifting 76kg In the 2024 IWF World Youth Championships and scripted history as the first Indian to win a world title. She was awarded the prestigious PM Rashtriya Bal Puraskar by President Smt. Droupadi Murmu for this historic feat last year. Preetismita was inducted into the Target Olympics Podium Scheme (TOPS), earlier this year.

She has also won a gold medal in the Commonwealth Weightlifting Championships 2025 held in Ahmedabad. With weightlifting in her heart and weights in her arms, she wishes to win the elusive Olympic medal for India one day.

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

AMONG THE FAITHFUL AND THE FORGOTTEN, THE GAME CARRIES ON

Our reporters bring vignettes from across India's domestic season, moments that unfold **beyond the scoreboard.**

The evening air at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium crackled with excitement as play ended on the first day of the Ranji Trophy round-three fixture. Outside the Mumbai dressing room, a crowd waited for one man — Yashasvi Jaiswal.

He may have been wearing Mumbai colours, but in Jaipur, Jaiswal is still the local hero. Years of representing Rajasthan Royals have earned him that affection, and his return to the venue drew hundreds of fans. Even after his dismissal before lunch, they stayed on, hoping for a glimpse or selfie with their "*Yash bhaiya.*"

As daylight faded and security relaxed, the crowd thickened. When Jaiswal finally stepped out, phones flashed and chants erupted. He smiled and posed for a few pictures, but the growing frenzy forced Mumbai's management to change plans.

While Shardul Thakur and Ajinkya Rahane boarded the team bus to loud chants, Jaiswal quietly slipped away toward the RCA Academy end with bowling coach Dhawal Kulkarni and manager Bhushan Patil. But their escape hit a snag — the alternate gate was locked, the staff gone for the day.

Word spread fast. Fans sprinted from the main entrance, their footsteps echoing through the corridors. The trio rushed toward the north gate, only to find another mob waiting. Eventually, Jaiswal turned back towards the dressing room, where a car awaited. Local volunteers helped him reach it safely, and he managed a few more quick selfies before leaving.

SHAYAN ACHARYA

As his car rolled out into the Jaipur night, chants trailed behind: "*Humara bhai kaisa ho, Yash bhaiya jaisa ho.*"

Shayan Acharya

COMFORT OFF THE FIELD, CONCERN ON IT

You often find yourself thrust into unique environments and circumstances while covering domestic cricket in India. Some can be exasperating, like balancing your laptop and notebook while precariously sitting on the parapet of an under-construction building at the Sanosara Cricket Ground B in Rajkot. The quaint CAP Ground 2 in Puducherry, on the other hand, threw open the doors of a room in its residential quarters overlooking the ground. The two cozy single beds in the room were tantalising propositions for a post-prandial snooze, especially considering that no play was possible in three sessions over the last two days due to a persistent drizzle caused by the depression that had settled over the Bay of Bengal as cyclone Montha was building up.

These were welcome off-the-field home comforts for the Diary, who was born and raised in the Union Territory, but the host team didn't find it easy on the field. The elements had to conspire to save Pondicherry from an outright defeat after Hyderabad took a mammoth first-innings lead.

A common grouse amongst the locals here has been the conspicuous lack of homegrown talent, particularly in red-ball cricket; the XI against Hyderabad didn't feature a single local player. Ironically, the only player whose name hinted at a local identity, the debutant off-spinner Karan

DHRUVA PRASAD

Kannan, turned out to be from Hyderabad. The 'home comfort' of a local boy is perhaps what Pondicherry was missing.

Dhruva Prasad

WHERE PERSISTENCE FINDS ITS PERCH

Nothing tests the Diary's thrift quite like a Ranji Trophy contest. In stark contrast to the neatly arranged press boxes at international or IPL games, the sidelines at India's premier First-Class competition are often bereft of comfort.

Such was the scene at the PCA New Cricket Stadium. The Diary sat under the shade of a mango tree, separated from the ground by a seven-foot fence, reduced to a mere accessory, waiting for the Punjab–Kerala clash to unfold on the B ground.

But this earnest backdrop of First-Class cricket spares no one, as the Diary was reminded when social media threw up an image of R.P. Singh, then a Mumbai Indians scout, watching a game from the same spot a year earlier.

So the Diary embraced the challenge, scouring the vicinity and making do with whatever it could find — a chair, a power socket, a stable internet line, anything.

Roughly 50 metres from the ground, the roof of the maintenance staff's office emerged as a sanctuary, offering a clearer view and a better mobile signal. From the confines of this 8x8 structure, the Diary worked on through four long days, quietly reminded that persistence matters off the field as much as on it.

Abhishek Saini

A TOUCH OF MCC AMID DELHI HAZE

Among the few dozen spectators scattered across the Old Clubhouse stand at the Arun Jaitley Stadium on the fourth day of the Ranji Trophy round-two match between Delhi and Himachal Pradesh was a family of four from England. On a hazy Delhi morning, they stood out easily — tourists at a low-profile domestic fixture, far from the glamour of international cricket. As Delhi's bowlers toiled to break the partnership between Ankush Bains and Pukhraj Mann before lunch, a man in a blue T-shirt and denim shorts was explaining field positions to his wife and two children. When he mixed up "point" and "cover," a few nearby journalists joined in, sparking a friendly exchange that revealed an unexpected cricketing link.

The man, Alex Robins, was visiting from London. His grandfather, Walter Robins, represented England in 19 Tests between 1929 and 1937 and captained in three against New Zealand. "My grandfather played against Sir Don Bradman," Alex said with pride.

Though Alex's own cricketing experience ended with college matches, his uncle Charles played First-Class cricket for Middlesex, and his 13-year-old son Ranulph is now a leg-spinner hoping to continue the family legacy.

"This is my second visit to India. We have come to Delhi on a holiday. We also visited Jaipur and Agra. I'm a member of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) at Lord's," Alex said. "We found out that a match was taking place at the Kotla through the internet. We came just to enjoy some cricket."

For a quiet Ranji morning, it was an unexpected brush with cricketing heritage.

Vivek Krishnan

VIVEK KRISHNAN

Stat file

Most Runs

Sanat Sangwan (Delhi) - 568 runs (Avg. - 142.00)
Karun Nair (Karnataka) - 488 runs (Avg. - 162.66)
Aman Mokhade (Vidarbha) - 439 runs (Avg. - 146.33)

Most Wickets

Arjun Sharma (Services) - 26 wickets (Avg. - 10.11)
Nikhil Kashyap (Haryana) - 20 wickets (Avg. - 11.40)
Siddharth Desai (Gujarat) - 20 wickets (Avg. - 15.55)

After three rounds of matches

1st

Clutch: Aussie pacer Josh Hazlewood's probing opening spell helped his side restrict India to just 136/9 in a rain-hit series opener in Perth. AP

2nd

Bison charge: Home skipper Mitchell Marsh's early blitz with the bat powered Australia to a comfortable seven-wicket win in the first ODI. AFP

3rd

Deep in the pond: Virat Kohli was dismissed for two consecutive ODI ducks for the first time, after he was trapped in front by Xavier Bartlett in the second match in Adelaide. AFP

4th

Unruffled: Playing just his seventh ODI, Cooper Connolly marshalled his side successfully through a nervy chase, helping Australia clinch the series win in Adelaide. AP

5th

Scything spell: In the third ODI in Sydney, Harshit Rana rocked Australia's middle-order with a four-wicket burst as the home team was bowled out for 236. PTI

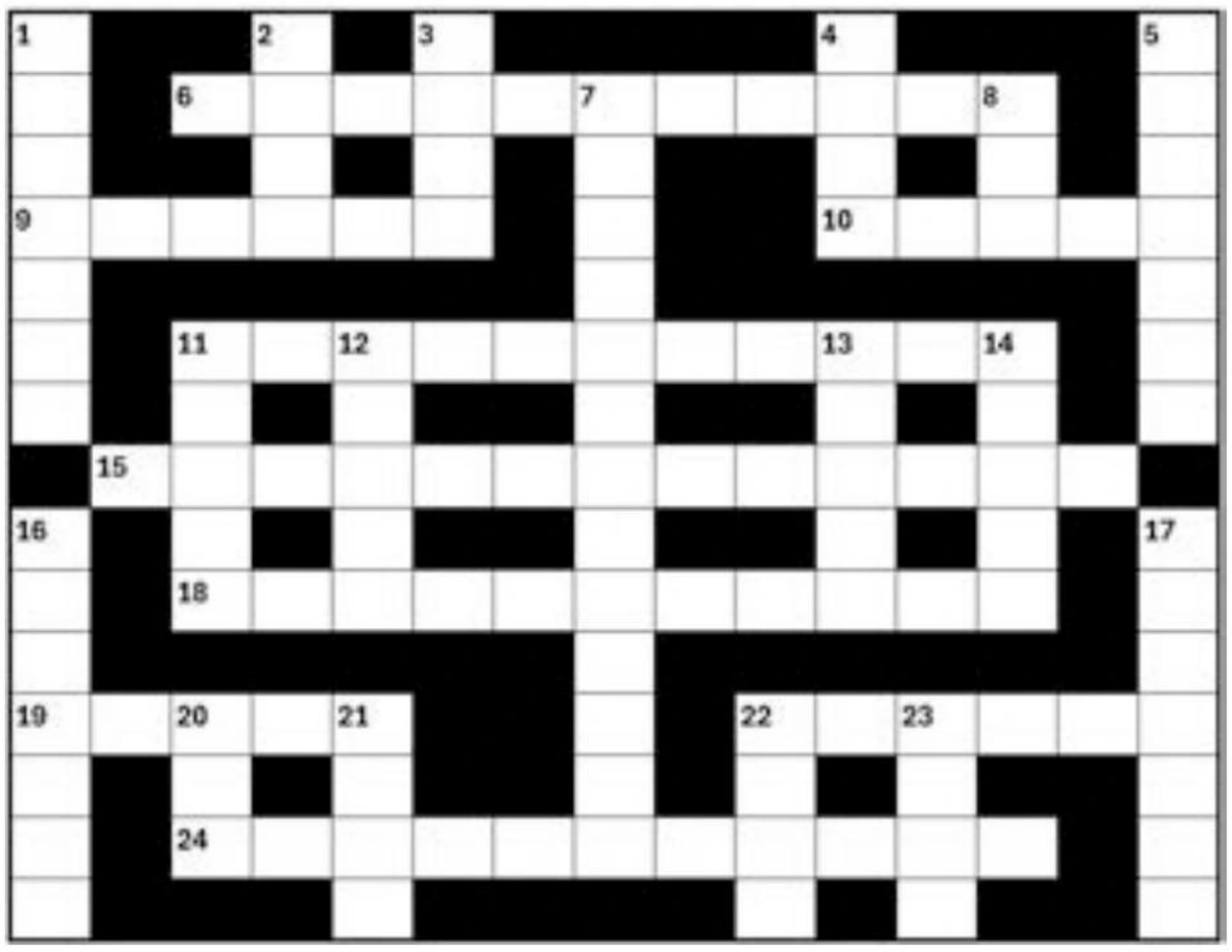
6th

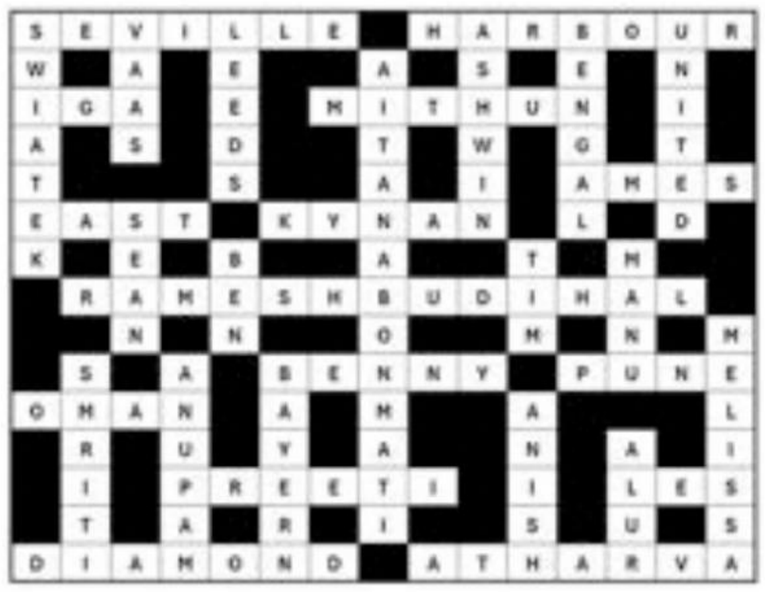
Superhit: Rohit Sharma silenced his critics with a masterful knock in Sydney — an unbeaten century, his 33rd in ODIs. PTI

7th

Throwback time: Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma turned back the clock with a vintage partnership to secure India a consolation win in Sydney. AFP

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

6 Identify the former Indian all-rounder, who passed away earlier this year, who had hit the winning runs in the famous Test win at The Oval in 1971. (4,4,3)

9 Identify the surname of the athlete who holds the World long jump record since 1991. (6)

10 Identify the first name of the cricketer who won the Man of the Final award in the recently concluded Asia Cup. (5)

11 Who recently lost his first match as captain in all three formats of the game? (7,4)

15 Who scored an unbeaten 84 off just 54 balls to help South Africa women's team to beat India in the World Cup match held in Visakhapatnam? (6,2,5)

18 Who, in July 2025, became the first Indian woman to qualify for the semifinal of the FIDE World Cup chess? (6,5)

19 Identify the first name of this sportsperson who won the Tour de France title in July 2025. (5)

22 Who won the Man of the Series award in the recently-held two-Test series between India and the West Indies? (6)

24 Which Indian missed a medal in the javelin event at the World Athletics Championships held in Tokyo in September 2025? (6,5)

DOWN

1 Who, in 2012, became the first Indian archer to reach the World No. 1 ranking? (7)

2 Identify the first name of this cricketer who won the Man of the Final award in the ICC Test Championship in June 2021. (4)

3 Identify the first name of this cricketer who took four wickets in the only match which had a result in the recently-concluded three-match T20I series between New Zealand and England. (4)

4 Who scored a whirlwind 85 off 56 balls in the match referred in Down-3 above? (4)

5 Which club based out of Cologne is promoted to Bundesliga for the current season? (1, 2, 4)

7 Which former World Cup-winning cricket all-rounder from the West Indies passed away on October 4, 2025? (7,6)

8 What is the professional association football league in India known as? (1,1,1)

11 FTB: Legendary American swimmer Mark Spitz's nickname is "Mark the _____"? (5)

12 What is the first name of the football club that is based out of Berlin, playing in Bundesliga? (5)

13 Identify the surname of this bowler who became the first-ever to take a hat-trick on ODI debut in 2014. (5)

14 Identify the first name of this West Indian cricketer of Portuguese descent who was part of the 1979 & 1983 World Cup squads. (5)

16 Who shared the highest opening partnership in women's World Cup with Smriti Mandhana in the crucial encounter versus New Zealand in Navi Mumbai on October 23, 2025? (7)

17 Who scored a hat-trick for Atletico Madrid in the La Liga encounter against Rayo Vallecano on September 24, 2025? (7)

20 What method is used to determine the revised overs or revised targets for weather interrupted ODIs or T20Is? (1,1,1)

21 Identify the first name of this Australian F1 driver who started the 2025 season as the second seat driver for Team Alpine only to be demoted to a reserve driver after six races. (4)

22 Identify the first name of this Portuguese footballer, who scored a hat-trick for PSG in the Ligue 1 match versus Toulouse on August 30, 2025. (4)

23 Identify the surname of the player who was the first Sri Lankan to score 1000 runs in Tests. (4)

Pant and Jurel, opposites that could complete each other

Rishabh Pant bats like a maverick but keeps classically. Dhruv Jurel's the reverse, a modern keeper with a traditional batting technique. **Can India's Test balance accommodate both?**

Sahil Mathur and Pranay Rajiv
sahil.mathur@thehindu.co.in,
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

FOR MORE STORIES

Few dilemmas in sport are as welcome as a problem of plenty.

The Indian Test team now faces that very problem, with two world-class wicketkeepers in its ranks: Rishabh Pant and Dhruv Jurel.

Pant's credentials as one of the finest wicketkeeper-batters in the world are beyond dispute, while Jurel has emerged as a more-than-capable understudy.

After a series of impressive performances, including a maiden Test hundred against West Indies, Jurel has forced a fresh question: can India fit both these gifted keeper-batters into one Test XI?

Since his debut in 2018, only Virat Kohli has scored more Test runs for India than Rishabh Pant (3427). The 28-year-old also has eight hundreds in the format, the most by an Indian wicketkeeper.

Former India wicketkeeper and broadcaster Saba Karim believes it is possible, given Jurel's rising stature with the bat.

"Jurel's recent form strengthens his case, but team balance also depends on giving opportunities to specialist batters waiting on the bench. Going purely by form, it's not an impossible combination," said Karim.

India's recent home Test series against West Indies offered a glimpse of how both Pant and Jurel could feature together. The team selection told two contrasting stories: one of opportunity unfulfilled, and another of a youngster quietly cementing his place.

Nitish Kumar Reddy, billed as a batting all-rounder, was barely used with the ball and didn't get enough time with the bat. Across four innings against West Indies, he bowled four of India's 290 overs and

R. RAGU

was not utilised even when the home team had to bowl close to 120 overs in the second Test in Delhi. In Ahmedabad, Jurel scored his hundred after walking in at No.5, while Reddy was left unused at No.8.

Since his debut against England in early 2024, Jurel has looked increasingly secure. Batting in the lower middle order, he displayed a mature balance between defence and attack. Earlier, he built his innings by alternating between the two. The West Indies series revealed another layer — the ability to rotate strike without taking undue risks. It showed how much he has evolved as a Test batter in just seven matches.

"He has become settled now. When a player knows he'll be in the squad, he plays with a free mind," Jurel's childhood coach Phool Chand told *Sportstar*.

Jurel now bats with calm assurance and range, capable of playing every shot in the book. His 125 in the Ahmedabad Test proved

Reflex mastery: "Pant's keeping relies heavily on reflexes and hand-eye coordination, which is why he remains highly effective." — Saba Karim. PTI

he could hold his place on batting merit alone. His versatility only enhances his value as a wicketkeeper with modern glovework and the ability to contribute as a sharp outfielder.

"It's refreshing to see how far wicketkeepers have evolved. Earlier, few of us worked on outfielding. Today's keepers train to be assets anywhere on the field, which is why they add value even when they're not behind the stumps," said Karim.

With the management keen on playing at least five bowlers at home, including two all-rounders in Ravindra Jadeja and Washington Sundar, Jurel's inclusion in place of Reddy should provide greater batting assurance without compromising wicket-taking ability. If India ever plays both Pant and Jurel together, the next question is obvious: who keeps wickets?

Pant's batting is rooted in the unorthodox. Jurel, by contrast, is textbook in his approach. Yet behind the stumps, the contrast flips. As Karim observed, Pant and Jurel represent two distinct eras of wicketkeeping.

"Jurel can be classified as a modern-day wicketkeeper, his setup, stances, movements, and footwork reflect today's approach. Pant, meanwhile, follows the older style, his stance and glovework are more in line with what we've seen from traditional keepers.

Karim notes that Jurel's technique minimises strain while keeping his body aligned with the line of the ball. "His footwork stays in sync with the pitch's variations, which allows him to react better to whatever comes behind the stumps. Pant's keeping relies heavily on reflexes and hand-eye coordination, which is why he remains highly effective."

According to Karim, two aspects stand out in Jurel's keeping: his upright stance and his collection technique.

"Jurel's stance and collection are his biggest strengths. He stays slightly more upright, even to spinners, keeping his head and alignment towards the ball. That helps him rise with the delivery, the most basic but crucial aspect of wicketkeeping."

Another subtle difference lies in their arm positioning while standing up to the stumps.

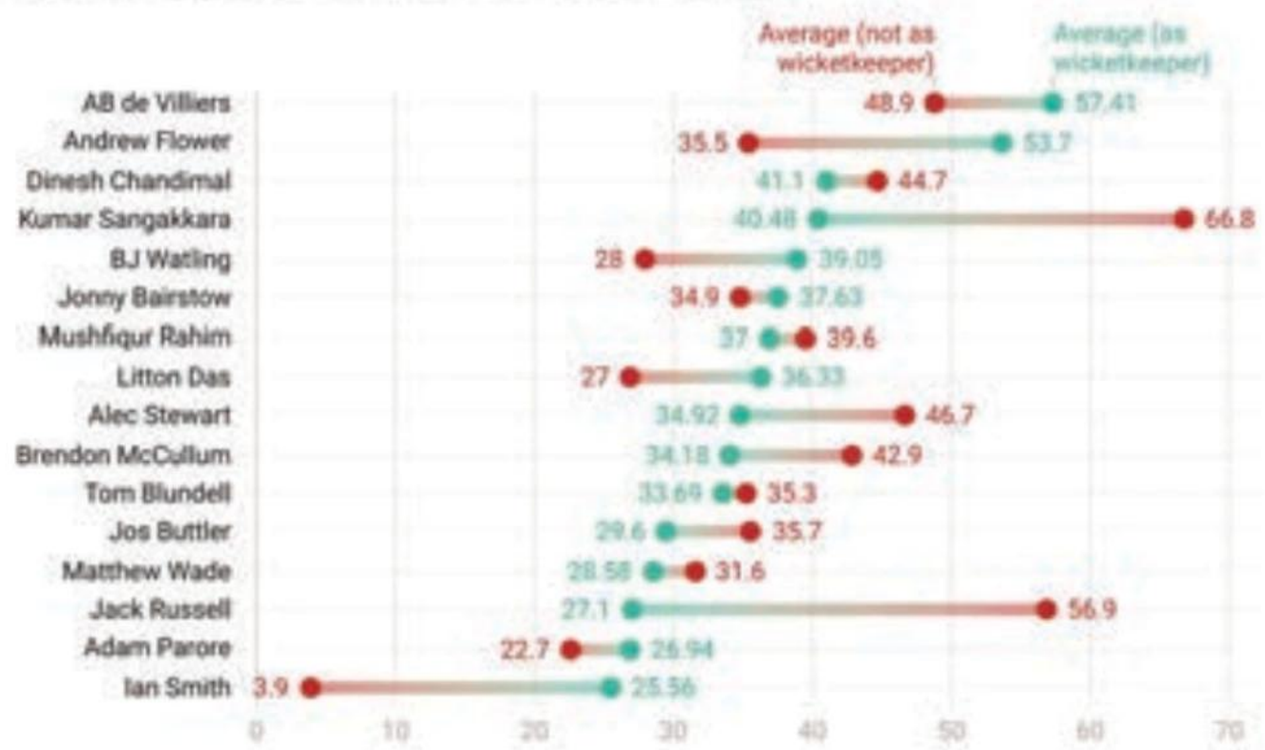
"When standing up to the stumps, Jurel keeps his arms slightly away from his knees, allowing free hand movement. Pant, however, positions his arms between his legs, which can

Upright precision: "Jurel's stance and collection are his biggest strengths. He stays slightly more upright, even to spinners, keeping his head and alignment towards the ball."
— Saba Karim. GETTY IMAGES

Dhruv Jurel innings builder by intent

Match	Innings number	Score	Total balls	Attacking intent	Defensive shots	Rotating shots	No Shot
vs England, Rajkot	1	46	104	39	50	2	13
vs England, Ranchi	1	90	149	66	75	3	5
vs England, Ranchi	2	39*	77	28	42	6	1
vs England, Dharamsala	1	15	24	10	11	3	0
vs Australia, Perth	1	11	20	5	10	0	5
vs Australia, Perth	2	1	6	0	3	3	0
vs England, The Oval	1	19	40	8	10	10	12
vs England, The Oval	2	34	46	15	22	7	2
vs West Indies, Ahmedabad	1	125	210	66	64	58	22
vs West Indies, Delhi	1	44	79	21	31	25	2
vs West Indies, Delhi	2	6*	6	0	2	4	0

Batting average difference of players with at least 20 Tests as wicketkeeper and 5 Tests as batter



restrict his reach and make him bring his hands forward to complete movements," Karim explained.

Even if Jurel appears the more technically refined keeper, India would hesitate to shift the gloves from Pant, given how it could affect the left-hander's batting rhythm.

Since his debut in 2018, only Virat Kohli has scored more Test runs for India than Pant (3427). The 28-year-old also has eight hundreds in the format, the most by an Indian wicketkeeper.

Logic suggests that removing the burden of wicketkeeping might free Pant to focus solely on batting. History, however, offers mixed evidence.

In men's Tests, 85 players have kept wicket in at least 20 matches, but only 16 of them have played five or more games as pure batters. The difference in their batting averages between keeping and non-keeping games is narrow: seven performed better as wicketkeepers, while nine improved without the gloves. The standouts among the former are South Africa's AB de Villiers and Zimbabwe's Andy Flower, the only two wicketkeepers to average over 50 with the bat in matches where they kept (with a 20-match cutoff). De Villiers averaged a strong 48.9 when he wasn't the keeper, while Flower's average dropped by nearly 20 runs once he gave up the gloves.

Australian analyst Jarrod Kimber, in his book *The Art of Batting*, argues that taking away one skill from a multi-faceted cricketer can dull his edge with the bat. Kimber's argument was referenced in discussions about the possibility of Pant playing purely as a batter.

While much of this remains hypothetical, Pant's Test career shows he thrives under pressure and often produces his best when challenging the game's norms.

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JUDE AWAKENING

The latest El Clasico had all the ingredients of **top-tier drama,** as Real Madrid's Jude Bellingham had the last word with the match-winning goal.

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The El Clásico, as usual, had all eyes on it on matchday 10 of La Liga, and the contest was set up deliciously given the league positions. A Real Madrid win would have extended its lead at the top of the table, while a Barcelona victory would have allowed the Catalans to leapfrog their arch-rival.

In the season's first El Clasico, at the Santiago Bernabeu, Madrid had the last laugh as it beat Barca 2-1 to consolidate its lead at the top. Kylian Mbappe opened the scoring in the 22nd minute but Barcelona quickly responded courtesy of Fermin Lopez's goal in the 38th minute. Just before half-time, Jude Bellingham **(facing page)** found the net to restore Madrid's lead, and that proved enough as Los Blancos held on for the win.

The night turned worse for Barcelona after midfielder Pedri saw red late in stoppage time. As with every Clasico, tensions ran high and both camps were involved in a post-match scuffle, which led to Andriy Lunin (who was not on the pitch) also being shown a red card.

Real Madrid kept its winning momentum intact, beating Valencia 4-0 the following week, with Mbappe grabbing a brace and Bellingham and Alvaro Carreras scoring one each.

Barcelona returned to winning ways too, beating Elche 3-1. Lamine Yamal got on the scoresheet after a lacklustre showing in the Clasico, with Ferran Torres and Marcus Rashford also scoring.

The other Madrid giant, Atletico, also enjoyed a good gameweek, beating Sevilla 3-0.

At the end of matchday 11, Real (30) is top, with Barcelona (25), Villarreal (23), and Atletico (22) in second, third, and fourth.

Premier League

There was finally some light at the end of the tunnel for Liverpool as it ended its four-game losing streak in the Premier League after clinching a 2-0 win against Aston Villa. It was also a memorable evening for Mohamed Salah, who celebrated a personal landmark, with the Egyptian scoring his 250th goal for the Reds.

Manchester United's three-game winning streak in the league came to an end after a 2-2 draw against Nottingham Forest. After taking a 1-0 lead through Casemiro's goal, Ruben Amorim's side conceded twice in as many minutes, but it avoided defeat after Amad Diallo scored a well-taken equaliser in the 81st minute.

Chelsea, which had suffered a shock 2-1 defeat against Sunderland, bounced back to winning ways in the London Derby against Tottenham Hotspur, with Joao Pedro scoring the only goal of the contest.

Erling Haaland continued his supreme goalscoring form, finding the net twice in Manchester City's 3-1 win against Bournemouth. With 13 goals, the Norwegian comfortably leads the Premier League Golden Boot race.

It was business as usual for Arsenal, which, with every passing week, looks like the team most likely to finish top and win its first league title since the 2003-04 season. Mikel Arteta's side kept its winning run alive with a 2-0 victory against Burnley.

It was the end of the road for Wolverhampton Wanderers manager Vitor Pereira, who was sacked after the club's 0-3 loss against Fulham. With 10 matches played, Wolves are yet to win a game, currently sitting bottom of the table with just two points. At the end of matchday 10, Arsenal tops the standings with 25 points. Manchester City (19) is second, followed by Liverpool (18) and Bournemouth (18) in third and fourth. Tottenham, Chelsea, Sunderland (yet to play its matchday 10 fixture at the time of writing), and Manchester United are fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth respectively, all on 17 points.

Serie A

Napoli asserted its authority as the reigning champion when it dispatched Italian giant Inter Milan 3-1 thanks to strikes from Kevin De Bruyne, Scott McTominay and André-Frank Zambo Anguissa. However, Antonio Conte's night was marred by a serious hamstring injury to De Bruyne, sustained while scoring the opening goal from the penalty spot. The Belgian has since

A tale of contasting fortunes: Mohamed Salah scored his 250th goal for Liverpool. **Below:** Kevin De Bruyne might sit out the rest of the year due to a hamstring injury sustained after taking a penalty against Inter Milan. REUTERS

undergone surgery and looks set to be sidelined for the rest of the year.

The injury did little to shake Napoli's form, as it beat Lecce in its next league game thanks to Anguissa's fourth strike of the campaign. Meanwhile, Inter almost dropped points again against Hellas Verona, but a stoppage-time own goal by Martin Frese proved to be the saving grace for the Nerazzurri.

Elsewhere, Juventus sacked manager Igor Tudor after the team's 1-0 defeat away to Lazio, extending its winless run to eight games. He was replaced by the seasoned Luciano Spalletti, who led the record-winner to a 3-1 win against Udinese in his first match in charge.

Napoli leads the pack after 10 games with 22 points, while Inter, AC Milan, and Roma follow closely, all tied on 21.

Ligue 1

Paris Saint-Germain extended its patchy league run, recording a convincing 3-0 win against Stade Brestois before being held to a 1-1 draw by FC Lorient. In their following game, the Parisians seemed to be heading towards another stalemate against OGC Nice but walked away with all three points after substitute Goncalo Ramos headed home from a corner in the closing moments of stoppage time.

Title challenger Olympique de Marseille failed to capitalise on PSG's rough patch, losing to RC Lens and drawing with Angers before edging AJ Auxerre 1-0. The Roberto De Zerbi-coached side sits second in the table with 22 points, level with Lens and two behind leader PSG.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich continued its dominance in the German top flight, beating Bayer Leverkusen 3-0.

Borussia Dortmund had to fight hard for three points, edging past Augsburg 1-0.

RB Leipzig had an easier outing, beating VfB Stuttgart 3-1.

At the end of matchday 9, Bayern (27) stays top. Leipzig (22) is second, with Dortmund (20) and Stuttgart (18) in third and fourth.

(All results updated as of November 3, 2025)

AFP

GOAL RUSH

Records tumbled as the Champions League delivered its most **explosive** week this season.

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A record 71 goals were scored across the 18 games, with 11 of those matches featuring at least four goals. Defending champion Paris Saint-Germain was the standout performer, registering a chaotic 7-2 win against Bayer Leverkusen in a tie that had five first-half goals, two red cards, and two penalties. Six different players got their names on the scoresheet, with French youngster Desire Doue bagging a brace, while his compatriot and Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele also scored on his return from a six-week injury lay-off.

Last season's semifinalist, Barcelona, also posted a five-goal victory, thumping Olympiakos 6-1. The Catalans capitalised on a second-half red card to blow away their opposition with four goals in 11 minutes, as Fermin Lopez grabbed his first career hat-trick, Marcus Rashford netted twice, and Lamine Yamal **(above)** converted from the spot. Rashford seems to have rediscovered his form and now has four goals and two assists in three Champions League games for Barcelona. Only Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe and Bayern Munich's Harry Kane have more (five). Just like Barcelona, Chelsea also took advantage of an early red card to beat Ajax 5-1.

The visitors' captain, Kenneth Taylor, was shown a straight red in the 17th minute for a dangerous tackle, which opened the floodgates for the Blues. Marc Guiu scored in the following minute, while Moises Caicedo, Estevao, Enzo Fernandez and Tyrique George also found the back of the net.

England captain Kane scored in his third consecutive Champions League game as Bayern beat Club Brugge 4-0. The game also witnessed a slice of history as 17-year-old Lennart Karl became the youngest German scorer in the competition, producing an excellent finish from outside the box just five minutes into the match on his first start in the tournament.

Arsenal's tie with Atletico Madrid was the most high-profile fixture of the week, with friction between the clubs starting even before kick-off.

Atletico's players were reportedly upset with the lack of hot water in the Emirates Stadium dressing room on the eve of the match, prompting them to end their training session early. However, the episode seemed to have taken the fire out of the Atletico players, as they slumped to a 4-0 defeat, managing only one shot on target. Brazilians Gabriel Magalhães and Gabriel Martinelli gave Arsenal a healthy lead before Viktor Gyokeres scored two goals in three minutes to end his nine-game goal drought for club and country.

Napoli suffered the only upset of the week, handed a 2-6 thrashing by Dutch champion PSV Eindhoven.

Meanwhile, Champions League regulars Real Madrid, Manchester City, Inter Milan, Liverpool, and Borussia Dortmund all produced convincing performances to take all three points from their games.

Azerbaijani club Qarabağ FK's loss against Athletic Club means that only five teams — PSG, Bayern, Inter, Arsenal, and Real Madrid — have perfect records after three matches. At the other end, Ajax and Benfica have endured a horrific start to their campaigns, with three losses each.

Strike force: Averaging 12.22 points per game, Bengaluru Torpedoes' Joel Benjamin (5) ended the campaign with an attacking success rate of 56.7 per cent. **Facing page:** David Lee (centre) celebrates with his team.

REDEMPTION SERVED HOT

After a string of near-misses, former Olympic medallist David Lee finally finds success in the Prime Volleyball League as Bengaluru Torpedoes **outgunned** Mumbai Meteors in the final.

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Former American volleyball player David Lee's time in the Prime Volleyball League is filled with stories of almost-glory.

During the inaugural season in 2022, he bowed out in the semifinals while playing for Calicut Heroes. In the following two seasons, the two-time Olympic medallist swapped the court for the sidelines, coaching the Bengaluru Torpedoes and guiding it to a final and a semifinal, only to meet the same cruel fate on both occasions.

So, this season, when Mumbai Meteors' Nikhil miscued his serve on Bengaluru's championship point, for Lee, it wasn't just a title, but a well-earned redemption.

Lee's men had played second fiddle to the Meteors for much of the tournament, even losing when the two sides met in the group stage. The Matt Van Wezel-coached Meteors dropped just one of their six group-stage matches.

To add to its feat, in their run to the final, the team lost only seven sets while winning 22. In contrast, the Torpedoes and season two champion Ahmedabad were the only other teams to register a positive set difference among the remaining nine competitors.

However, ahead of the final, Lee insisted that his side needed to be aggressive to break down his counterpart's cohesive unit.

"Our team has been fairly aggressive throughout the years — not just this season, but in the past as well. So, for us, it's just about coming out and winning the serve-and-pass game. If we serve aggressively, we can take control of the match," Lee said.

This approach worked quite well, helping the Torpedoes overwhelm their opponent in straight sets and clinch their maiden title.

Power game

Lee's combative approach was well complemented by his players, especially 22-year-old Joel Benjamin. The youngster, brought in from Chennai Blitz in the auction, led the attack with authority and topped the charts for most points scored, with 115 in nine matches.

Averaging 12.22 points per game, Benjamin ended the campaign with an attacking success rate of 56.7 per cent, earning the Best Attacker of the Season award. To sweeten the victory, he was also adjudged Most Valuable Player of the Season, becoming the fourth consecutive Indian to win the honour.

While Benjamin handled the offence, from behind the end line it was the experienced Sethu T. R. who troubled opponents with his serve. His league-leading 13 points earned him the Best Server label for the second season running.

Moreover, the Torpedoes were among the most effective users of the league's unique innovations — the Super Serve and Super Points. They amassed a combined 29 points

Pics: PRIME VOLLEYBALL LEAGUE

from the two novelties, behind only Goa Guardians (39) and Ahmedabad Defenders (33).

The other side of the net

With the two finalists dominating proceedings in the group stage, the remaining teams were left to scrap for the last two knockout spots. Ahmedabad handed the Meteors their only defeat of the phase to qualify third, while a four-way tie emerged for the final spot.

Eventually, the Guardians scraped through thanks to their superior set difference, leaving Delhi Toofans, Kochi Blue Spikers and Kolkata ThunderBolts to lick their wounds.

However, the steepest drop-off belonged to last edition's winner, Calicut Heroes, who finished bottom of the table. The team failed to cope after losing MVP Jerome Vinith to the Blitz in the auction and managed just one win in seven matches.

Meanwhile, Vinith — the joint-most expensive buy in the auction — put in a strong shift with 102 points, but his efforts went unrewarded as the Blitz finished eighth out of ten teams.

The path ahead

Having four different champions in as many seasons is enough to dispel any doubts about the league's competitiveness. Furthermore, the addition of new teams each year reflects growing interest in the sport and hints at a shift in the right direction.

But on the flip side, the fact that the three teams led by foreign coaches reached the knockouts raises questions about the standard of Indian coaching. In the final days of the tournament, Lee asserted that there is a lot of room for improvement.

"From the very first year I was here as a player, I was always pushing to bring some international perspective — different minds to help the game develop. And I think year after year, you've seen these foreign coaches come in and really have a big impact on the players and on the league," Lee noted.

"I feel Indian coaches need to start integrating more closely with the foreign coaches to really help expedite the learning curve," he added. And while the PVL provides a valuable platform to identify talent, nurturing them stands as the bigger hurdle. Meteors head coach Van Wezel, who specialises in player development, highlighted the need for a structured national programme.

"I think the clubs or the franchises did a really good job with creating this (league). But that's step one. The rest of the year, there needs to be a really good national team programme," he explained.

With the Asian Games coming up next year, India will have to get its act together soon if it hopes to secure its first volleyball medal since 1986. For now, the PVL is sustainable enough to generate fervour for the sport in the country. But what follows will be crucial in determining how far Indian volleyball can truly go.

Honour board

Most Valuable Player: Joel Benjamin (Bengaluru Torpedoes)
Emerging Player of the Season: Om Lad Vasant (Mumbai Meteors)
Best Attacker of the Season: Joel Benjamin
Best Server of the Season: Sethu TR (Bengaluru Torpedoes)
Best Setter of the Season: Om Lad Vasant
Best Libero of the Season: P Prabagaran (Ahmedabad Defenders)
Best Blocker of the Season: Prince (Goa Guardians)
Best Coach of the Season: David Lee (Bengaluru Torpedoes)

Star performers

Top scorers
- Joel Benjamin (Bengaluru Torpedoes) — 115 points
- Shubham Chaudhary (Mumbai Meteors) —109 points
- Jerome Vinith C (Chennai Blitz) — 102 points

Top blockers
- Prince (Goa Guardians) — 20 points
- Petter Alstad Østvik (Mumbai Meteors) — 17 points
- Shikhar Singh (Hyderabad Black Hawks) — 14 block points

Home roar, Delhi glory: Dabang Delhi lifted its second PKL crown after outlasting Puneri Paltan 31-28 in a gripping finale at the Thyagaraj Indoor Stadium. PKL MEDIA

In a league of inches, Dabang Delhi measured best

Season 12 of the Pro Kabaddi League turned every raid into a referendum on **nerve and nuance,** with Dabang Delhi mastering both.

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The 12th season of the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) will not only be remembered for its thrilling finale but also for the sheer parity and competitive intensity that defined the entire campaign. When the curtains finally fell at the Thyagaraj Indoor Stadium in New Delhi, it was the home side, Dabang Delhi, that stood victorious, clinching its second PKL title with a hard-fought 31-28 victory over the consistent powerhouse Puneri Paltan. Delhi became the first home team since U Mumba in Season 2 to lift the trophy in front of its supporters.

New structure

The season was defined by a critical structural change that injected more pressure into every fixture. The league adopted an expanded format featuring 108 matches and a revamped playoff system that allowed the top eight teams to contend for the title via Play-Ins.

Crucially, the tie-breaker rule, previously reserved for knockout matches, was introduced to the league stage, eliminating draws and ensuring that every contest produced a definitive result.

This shift amplified the competition, turning the points table into a perpetually shifting maze. Puneri and Delhi emerged as twin leaders, finishing with identical points. The rest of the table descended into chaos, with the final week deciding even the sixth, seventh, and eighth spots. This parity meant teams could not rely on mid-table safety; every raid, every tackle, and every point difference became critical to survival.

This was a season where tactical depth trumped individual star power. The league was so tightly contested that the two finalists needed tie-breakers to decide the winner in all three meetings before the title-decider.

Crowned conqueror

Dabang Delhi's path to the championship was nothing short of a masterclass in collective effort and defensive steel. While captain Ashu Malik was the consistent raiding anchor throughout the league, his true value lay in his leadership and composure during high-pressure moments.

The defensive backbone was anchored by veteran Fazel Atrachali, the 'Sultan from Iran,' who solidified his legacy as the most successful foreign player in PKL history by clinching his third title and recording his ninth consecutive season with 50-plus tackle points. It was Fazel's crucial, final-minute ankle hold on the red-hot Aditya Shinde that secured the three-point cushion and the championship.

The title also marked a historic milestone for coach Joginder Narwal, who became the first man since Manpreet Singh to win the PKL title as both a player (Season 8 captain) and a head coach.

Paltan's heartbreak and resilience

For Puneri Paltan, Season 12 was a narrative of near-perfection tragically interrupted. Led by the dynamic Aslam Inamdar and coached by former India captain Ajay Thakur, Paltan finished atop the league table, showcasing a squad depth and balance built for sustained excellence. Its journey to a third final appearance in four seasons reflected a culture that has consistently prioritised building a team rather than chasing star power.

Only three of the 12 teams failed to make a mark this season. Bengal Warriorz and Gujarat Giants endured forgettable campaigns. Both franchises spent over 40 per cent of their purse on single players during the auction, attempting to build teams around them. Yet even ace performers like Devank Dalal and Mohammadreza Chiyaneh Shadloui could not do it all. Poor decision-making from team management and the inability to foster balance resulted in another disappointing season for both sides.

Sultan reigns again: Fazel Atrachali, the Iranian wall, capped his ninth straight 50-tackle season by clinching the PKL crown with a game-changing ankle hold in the final. PKL MEDIA

Individual brilliance and season's best

The season also showcased several standout individual performances. Patna Pirates' raider Ayan Lohchab amassed 316 raid points, becoming only the fifth player in PKL history to breach the 300-point mark in a single season. Devank continued his fine form, finishing second in the raid charts with 271 points.

Several breakout performers emerged as well. Paltan's Aditya dazzled with his quick feet, while Bengaluru Bulls' Alireza Mirzaian displayed remarkable tenacity and skill to cement his place as the next

> « This season's PKL was so competitive that Delhi and Pune needed tie-breakers to settle all three clashes before the final »

Patna powerhouse: With 316 raid points and nerves of steel, Ayan Lohchab became the heartbeat of Patna's resurgence in Season 12.
PKL MEDIA

big name in Iranian kabaddi. It wasn't just the youngsters who shone; experienced campaigners like Bharat Hooda and Vijay Malik also stood out.

Moments of magic

Season 12 also produced moments of sheer brilliance, such as Bulls' Shubham Bitke's historic seven-point raid against Patna Pirates. Even teams that missed the knockout stage in previous seasons, like Telugu Titans, experienced moments of redemption by ending their long playoff drought.

Controversies that shook the mat

Despite the on-mat heroics, the season was also marred by controversies. The biggest shock came when Tamil Thalaivas sent home its star player, Pawan Sehrawat, after just three matches for an undisclosed breach of team rules. The Indian national team captain later took to social media, claiming that a member of the management was "calling all the shots." Later in the season, coach Sanjeev Balyan and captain Arjun Deshwal echoed similar concerns in a press conference. The Thalaivas managed only six wins from 18 league matches and failed to reach the knockouts.

Similarly, captain Ankush Rathee's sudden exit from the Bengaluru Bulls sparked speculation about internal conflicts.

But the deepest frustration centred on refereeing decisions throughout the season. The peak of this discontent came during the Dabang Delhi versus Haryana Steelers clash, where a disputed time-stoppage ruling allegedly denied Haryana a final raid, resulting in a narrow 38-37 loss. The frustration was evident as Steelers players, in an unprecedented gesture, refused to shake hands with their Delhi counterparts after the final whistle.

PKL Season 12 was suffocating in its intensity, fulfilling the promise of the new format. As the league enters its teenage years, a new era of the ancient sport is dawning. With athletes getting increasingly professional, it is high time for the teams and the league to follow suit.

Roll of fame

Most Raid Points:
Ayan Lohchab — 316 in 22 matches (Patna Pirates)

Most Tackle Points:
Navdeep — 73 in 21 matches (Patna Pirates)

Most Super 10s:
Ayan Lohchab — 16 in 22 matches (Patna Pirates)

Most High 5s:
Jaideep Dahiya — 7 in 19 matches (Haryana Steelers)

Most Super Raids:
Ayan Lohchab — 9 in 22 matches (Patna Pirates)

Most Super Tackles:
Jaideep Dahiya — 13 in 19 matches (Haryana Steelers)

Most Do-or-die Raid Points:
Ayan Lohchab — 39 in 22 matches (Patna Pirates)

Award winners

Most Valuable Player (MVP) of the season:
Fazel Atrachali (Dabang Delhi)

Raider of the season:
Ayan Lohchab (Patna Pirates)

Defender of the season:
Navdeep (Patna Pirates)

New Young Player (NYP) of the season:
Deepak Sankar (Bengaluru Bulls)

FUTURE OF OLYMPIC ESPORTS GAMES HITS A ROADBLOCK

The IOC confirmed that after a series of review meetings with the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee and the Esports World Cup Foundation, the two sides "mutually agreed to **end their cooperation** on the Olympic Esports Games."

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The future of Olympic Esports Games hit another roadblock after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee (SOPC) parted ways on the initiative. It marks the end of a year-long partnership that could have led to the first global esports event under the Olympic banner.

The IOC confirmed that after a series of review meetings with the SOPC and the Esports World Cup Foundation, the two sides "mutually agreed to end their cooperation on the Olympic Esports Games."

Both parties, however, reiterated their intent to continue pursuing separate esports ambitions.

'The IOC will now develop a new approach to the Olympic Esports Games, taking feedback from its 'Pause and Reflect' process into account," the committee said in a statement. 'This will allow the Games to better align with the long-term ambitions of the Olympic Movement and ensure wider participation across countries."

The move indicates a significant pivot for IOC in its plans to integrate esports within the Olympic framework. The earlier partnership with Saudi Arabia was seen as a move to utilise the Kingdom's rapid growth in gaming infrastructure and global esports tournaments, which saw it host consecutive Esports World Cups.

But an end to the alliance will now have the IOC rework its structure of the Olympic Esports Games, which could potentially lead to decentralising its organisation to bring in more countries into the scheme of things in the esports ecosystem.

BMIC 2025: TRUE RIPPERS IMPRESS; KRAFTON INTRODUCES 2026 ROADMAP

Indian Gaming team, True Rippers, emerged as the runner-up while South Korea's TEAM DRX was crowned champion at the BattleGrounds Mobile India International Cup (BMIC) 2025 — a crucial international LAN event held in New Delhi.

The champion bagged INR 30 lakh, along with a direct qualification to the Global Championship 2025, while the runner-up got INR 15 lakh, a the second runner-up — CAG Osaka — took home INR 10 lakh.

Among individual performers, DRXHYUNBIN was adjudged the MVP, getting a prize money of INR 2.5 lakh, while DRXQxzzz won the IGL (In-game leader) title and a cash prize of INR 1.25 lakh. M4xHERo won INR 1 lakh for being the best clutch player.

The event – BMIC — saw KRAFTON, the publisher of BattleGrounds Mobile India, reveal its 2026 Esports Roadmap that included expanded versions of its key esports events in India: BGIS, BMPS, BMSD, and BMIC.

These events will take place in various cities, while Mumbai will host the inaugural edition of KRAFTON India Awards next year. These awards aim to identify and empower India's burgeoning gaming talent.

Hard lessons

India's young players gained **valuable experience** at the Chennai WTA 250, where Indonesia's Janice Tjen lifted the title after a week of rain, resilience and promise.

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Valiant effort: Shrivalli Bhamidipaty lost 7-5, 7-6(2) to Australian Kimberly Birrell in the round of 16. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Watching a Tour-level tennis event in their own backyard was an annual tradition for the people of Chennai from 1997 to 2017.

Tales of the generational duel between Spaniards Carlos Moya and Rafael Nadal in 2008, or Stan Wawrinka wielding a cricket bat to hit a few balls into the crowd after his fourth title in 2016, are retold with pride and nostalgia. A women's tournament has rekindled hopes of reviving that tradition this decade.

Three years after the inaugural edition in 2022, when a capacity crowd at the SDAT Stadium witnessed Czech teenager Linda Fruhvirtova win her maiden Tour-level title, the WTA 250 event returned to the city last week. It coincided with the centenary year of the Tamil Nadu Tennis Association (TNTA).

The initial entry list featured French Open semifinalist Lois Boisson, former Wimbledon semifinalist Tatjana Maria, and quarterfinalist Lulu Sun, but their withdrawals due to injuries and scheduling conflicts meant that the final draw of 32 had Turkiye's Zeynep Sonmez (World No. 73) as the top seed. Paris Olympics silver medallist Donna Vekic (World No. 78) — who had endured a rough season — was the only high-profile name remaining.

Scope for improvement

India's top two players, Sahaja Yamalapalli (World No. 344) and Shrivalli Bhamidipaty (World No. 434), along with promising junior Maaya Rajeshwaran Revathi, were awarded wildcards. Later, Vaishnavi Adkar, another Indian, entered the main draw as a lucky loser. All four players made their Tour-level debuts.

The luck of the draw meant that 23-year-old Shrivalli and 16-year-old Maaya had to face each other in the opening round, ensuring a local player's presence in the second round. The teenager from Coimbatore was visibly nervous and could not reproduce the level she had displayed during her stunning run to the WTA 125 Mumbai Open semifinals in February as a qualifier. Shrivalli won the contest 6-1, 6-4 to set up a meeting with seventh-seeded Australian Kimberly Birrell (World No. 117). On her 25th birthday, Sahaja battled for two hours to register a 6-4, 6-2 win over Indonesian lucky loser Priska Nugroho. Her reward was a second-round clash with Vekic, the third-seeded Croatian, who had defeated 20-year-old Vaishnavi 6-1, 6-2. Both Shrivalli and Sahaja fought valiantly in their round-of-16 defeats against experienced opponents ranked far above them. While Sahaja went down 6-2, 6-2 to Vekic, Shrivalli lost 7-5, 7-6(2) to Birrell.

Nirupama Sanjeev, the first Indian woman to win a Grand Slam match in the Open Era, had the perfect view of proceedings as a commentator during the tournament. She offered encouraging words and valuable advice for the current lot.

"They are able to match these top players ball for ball. I just want them to think about adding some variety to their game as well. These players are

really good at their game and for us, competing ball for ball at their game may not be the right thing to do. We need to have a little bit more variety — more slices and coming up to the net a little more," she said.

Hosting more tournaments at home can also help Indian players improve their rankings, as it gives them the advantage of being familiar with local conditions and removes the financial burden of travelling abroad.

Tough conditions

The playing conditions during the tournament weren't as brutal as the peak Chennai summer, but after spending two days in their hotel rooms due to rain, several players struggled with the heat and humidity. The first round witnessed three retirements due to illness, while Vekic had to have blood samples taken and her vitals checked after feeling dizzy during her match against Vaishnavi.

Later, Chinese Taipei's Joanna Garland suffered from cramps and breathing issues during her 6-7(2), 6-3, 7-5 loss to Birrell in the semifinal, which was also the longest match of the event at three hours and 24 minutes. The 27-year-old Australian, who had eliminated Vekic in the previous round, came from 0-5 down in the decider and saved four match points to reach her second Tour-level final, following her runner-up finish at last year's Japan Open.

In the other semifinal, fourth-seeded Indonesian Janice Tjen **(above)** survived a tough challenge from talented Thai player Lanlana Tararudee, winning 7-6(6), 7-6(5). Like Birrell, Tjen progressed to her second Tour-level final (she was runner-up at the Sao Paulo Open in September).

Tjen beat Birrell 6-4, 6-3 in two hours in front of around 1,000 spectators at the SDAT Stadium — the highest turnout of the week — becoming the first Indonesian champion at this level since Angelique Widjaja's 2002 triumph in Pattaya City.

Tjen, whose game is heavily influenced by former World No. 1 Ash Barty, uses a lot of backhand slices and drop shots alongside a potent forehand. She also won the doubles title with compatriot Aldila Sutjiadi, as the second seeds defeated the top-seeded Australian-Romanian duo of Storm Hunter and Monica Niculescu 7-5, 6-4.

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

It has been an outstanding season for the 23-year-old Tjen. She has clinched six ITF titles, one WTA 125 trophy and now a Tour-level title, and also became the first Indonesian woman in more than two decades to win a Grand Slam match during the U.S. Open. At the start of the year, she was outside the Top 400 in the WTA Rankings. On Monday, she achieved a new career high of World No. 53.

Tournament's future

The tournament returned to Chennai this year after TNTA President Vijay Amritraj coordinated with Octagon — the sports agency holding the three-year licence for the event — to relocate it from Mexico. However, the only available slot was last week, clashing with two other WTA 250s in Hong Kong and Jiangxi.

According to next year's calendar, the event is scheduled to be held in Chennai again from November 2-8, the final week of the 2026 season before the WTA Finals in Riyadh. A call on whether it will remain in Chennai will be taken soon. "We will make a decision regarding the tournament's future by the end of this year and take WTA's approval," Alastair Garland, managing director of the tennis division of Octagon, told *Sportstar.*

Honour board

Singles

Winner: Janice Tjen (Indonesia)
Ranking points: 250
Prize money: INR 31.58 lakh

Runner-up: Kimberly Birrell (Australia)
Ranking points: 163
Prize money: INR 18.69 lakh

Best result by Indians: Shrivalli Bhamidipaty, Sahaja Yamalapalli (Round of 16)
Ranking points: 30
Prize money: INR 3.62 lakh

Doubles

Winner: Janice Tjen (Indonesia) and Aldila Sutjiadi (Indonesia)
Ranking points: 250
Prize money: INR 11.48 lakh

Runner-up: Storm Hunter (Australia) and Monica Niculescu (Romania)
Ranking points: 163
Prize money: INR 6.46 lakh

Best result by Indians: Rutuja Bhosale and Riya Bhatia (semifinalists)
Ranking points: 98
Prize money: INR 3.71 lakh

REUTERS

MASTERCLASS IN MEXICO

Lando Norris executed a **perfect** race, surging to the top of the drivers' standings for the first time since April this year.

Anish Pathiyil
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"Beautiful weekend."

These were Lando Norris's first words after romping to a win at the Mexican Grand Prix at the Autodromo Hermanos Rodriguez in Mexico City. The 25 points earned propelled the Briton to the top of the Drivers' Championship for the first time since the Bahrain Grand Prix in April.

It was a flawless race for the 25-year-old, who caught the chequered flag over thirty seconds ahead of Charles Leclerc in second place. The margin was substantial in qualifying too, the papaya car finishing two and a half tenths ahead of the Monegasque's Ferrari.

After trailing his junior teammate Oscar Piastri for most of the season, Norris's uptick in form has coincided with the Australian's run of four races without a podium. In Mexico, Piastri started eighth, qualifying six tenths behind his teammate in equal machinery. On a track where cooling packages play a crucial role due to the high altitude and lighter air, Piastri struggled to showcase the car's true pace, only managing a fifth-place finish, forcing him to concede bragging rights in the championship.

Max Verstappen, the third protagonist in the title race, had an eventful outing. The reigning World Champion was forced to steer off track and cut across the grass in

the first corner after finding himself among four cars who entered Turn 1 abreast with each other.

Lap six saw another trip across the turf after the Dutchman made contact with Lewis Hamilton. A tyre lock-up forced the latter to eventually concede position before he too cut across the tarmac. The advantage earned came at a cost, though, as the seven-time champion was slapped with a 10-second penalty, which relegated him to eighth after a season-best third-place start.

The melee helped Haas's Oliver Bearman scythe through the pack. A combination of Hamilton's penalty, Piastri's lack of pace, and the two Mercedes' overheating issues helped the 20-year-old end up fourth — his career-best finish in F1. Esteban Ocon's ninth place helped the American outfit earn a double-points finish for the fifth time this year, keeping its fight for sixth in the Teams' Championship well and truly alive.

Verstappen made a late attempt to wrest second place from Leclerc on the penultimate lap of the race but was thwarted after Carlos Sainz's stall at the side of the track triggered the deployment of the Virtual Safety Car. The Williams driver had parked his car close to the marshal posts to aid quick retrieval, but the VSC neutralised the racing and Verstappen's hopes of cutting the points deficit.

Four races remain this season. One point separates the top two in the Drivers' Championship and also second and third in the Constructors' standings. Just as Verstappen seemed to have the momentum, Norris displayed a glimpse of why McLaren is still the best car on the grid. The fast-paced, undulating Sao Paulo track is up next for the F1 bandwagon. The flowing track promises a lot of overtaking action through the race, and Red Bull will know that tuning the car for one-lap superiority might not cut it for its star driver's championship hopes.

Back in form: Just as Max Verstappen seemed to have the momentum, Lando Norris displayed a glimpse of why McLaren is still the best car (in pic) on the grid. With four races remaining this season, only one point separates the top two in the Drivers' Championship. REUTERS

MotoGP

It was a bittersweet weekend for the Marquez family during the Malaysian Grand Prix. Marc, the 2025 World Champion, missed out on participation following surgery on his broken shoulder, adding to his spate of injuries since his last championship win in 2019.

In his absence, younger brother Alex **(right)** brought home the smiles, securing second place in the Sprint Race to seal the runner-up spot in the riders' standings. It is the first time in MotoGP history that a pair of brothers have finished first and second in the championship.

Gresini Ducati rider Alex celebrated the achievement with a commanding win in the main race in Sepang, his third win of the calendar year. Double World Champion Francesco Bagnaia enjoyed a silver lining in a largely frustrating season with a Sprint victory, but his joy was cut short on Sunday when mechanical issues forced him to miss out on a place on the podium.

Pedro Acosta finished second in the race, his fourth podium for the KTM factory team this season. Former World Champion Joan Mir of Honda rounded out the podium with his second top-three finish in four races.

REUTERS

PTI

Anime tattoos, 60-hour gaming marathons, and Olympic gold — the fascinating world of Mete Gazoz

The 26-year-old Turkish archer who once battled a severe stutter now **lets his arrows do the talking** on the world stage.

Jonathan Selvaraj
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It's fair to say Mete Gazoz enjoyed his first visit to India earlier this month. He was in the country to participate in the Archery Premier League, a 10-day, team-based competition, but still found time to visit historic monuments, browse malls, and sample local cuisine. Mete did well in the League, too. His team, the Rajputana Royals, went on to win the inaugural season. Long before he lifted the trophy, though, fans at New Delhi's Yamuna Sports Complex were already getting the 26-year-old to perform his trademark victory celebration.

You'd think Mete would tire of it, especially when fans asked him to do it right after training, but he indulged them every time, theatrically raising his right hand before clenching it in front of his face. Mete says he's used to the unusual request.

While Yusuf Dikec's nonchalant pistol-shooting pose became a viral sensation at the Paris Olympics, Mete was the original Turkish precision athlete to have a viral Olympic moment.

Mete's gesture was iconic on its own, but it was the fact that he pulled it off moments after winning men's singles gold, Turkey's first Olympic gold in archery, that made him a breakout star back home.

"My life really changed after that gold medal," he tells *Sportstar*. "For a few months, it was crazy. It's a bit easier now, but if I ever wear the national-team T-shirt, people are going to be looking at me or asking to take my picture. It's not the worst thing. But it's made me a bit more discreet. I tend to walk a little faster so people can't catch up to me, and if I'm at a restaurant, I can quickly figure out who recognises me, so I'll sit facing away from them," he says.

Mete has found a way not to be burdened by the expectations that come with success. He's learned to channel the pressure that accompanies Olympic glory into composure and focus on the range.

Old promise

For a long time, the pose was thought to be inspired by his love of anime. Gazoz has multiple tattoos of characters from One Piece, but the real story is much simpler.

"I made my international debut for the senior Turkey team when I was 14. At that time, one of my teammates and I decided that if either of us ever won a world title, we'd do this pose. It was just something silly we decided together. When I first won a World Cup title (the 2018 World Cup Final), I decided to fulfil that promise. A lot of people think I'm paying tribute to something

I want to win an Olympic team gold and the mixed-team gold. I haven't won those yet. I don't think I'm very far from it. It's all a matter of one arrow.

Composed brilliance: Mete Gazoz greets fans after his team's bronze-winning run at the Paris Olympics, the world champion balancing elite performance with a quiet ease that belies the spotlight.
GETTY IMAGES

in anime, but there's only a very simple story behind it," he says.

Simple as it is, that origin story says something about Mete: even at 14, coming from a country with little Olympic archery pedigree, he already believed he would be a world champion someday.

"I think my best quality is my confidence. I don't know why, but I've always had it. When people ask me whether I was afraid of playing the Koreans or competing at the highest level, it's always strange to me because I never had any fear about these things," he says.

Supreme confidence

That confidence, perhaps, stems from more than his time on the range. While archery came easily to him, Mete has lived with a painful stammer that makes communication difficult, as his body sometimes spasms involuntarily.

"It's a strange thing, my stammer," he says. "It's like when I think a lot and want to speak really fast, my brain can't keep up. It's sometimes really difficult for me to speak. I don't like public speaking for this reason. When I was young, my family took me to a lot of doctors and speech therapists. Finally, I gave up because I decided, 'I'm fine the way I am. I'm happy with this. I don't care what other kids say.' I've never been one to care what people think. Even as a child, I was independent. My thinking was always: I don't care what you think about me. My theory has always been that if someone can't wait for me to complete my sentence, then I don't have time for them either," he says.

Mete says his stammer was less of a problem than his last name. "In Turkey, Gazoz (Uludağ Gazoz) is actually a very famous fizzy drink. It literally means gassy. As a kid, everyone made fun of my name more than anything!" he says.

The one place where Mete, born and raised in Istanbul's Sarıyer neighbourhood, truly felt at home was the archery range. "I think the range was my real home. My father was an archer and later a coach, and my mother also used to shoot. All my earliest memories are about archery. I grew up going to competitions and knew all the archers long before I

> « What I like most about archery is that there's no real chance for cheating »

became a serious one. I've always loved archery, shooting, watching, and just being around people when they were shooting. That was my home," he says.

Archery, he adds, simply made sense. "What I like most about archery is that there's no real chance for cheating. Outside of the smallest local events, it's very clear what you've shot. I felt it's the fairest sport in the world, and because of that, most archers are very easy to get along with," he says.

While it was perhaps inevitable that Mete would become an archer, he tried several other sports. "I played all sorts of sports. I was actually a pretty good pistol shooter. I still shoot for fun. After the Tokyo Olympics, I shot a round of 572 in practice, which isn't far off Olympic qualification. Maybe if I'd chosen to be an air-pistol shooter, it might have been me rather than Dikec at the Olympics! But I always knew I was going to be an archer," he says.

Early rise

Mete, who began competing in archery at seven, was taking part in senior events by 12, made his first national team at 14, won individual silver at the European Championships at 16, and competed in his first Olympics, at Rio de Janeiro, a few months later, where he lost in the round of 32 to eventual fourth-place finisher Sjef van den Berg of the Netherlands.

All the while, he was refining his technique. At 1.82 m tall, Mete's long arms limit the draw weight he can handle. The higher the draw weight, the faster (and theoretically more accurate) the arrow. He currently uses a 53-pound bow, lighter than the 55 used by India's Dhiraj Bommadevara and far less than the 58 of London Olympic champion Mauro Nespoli. Though his lighter draw means he can take slightly longer to line up, he's actually one of the fastest shooters at the world level.

His breakthrough came at the 2018 World Cup Final in Berlin, where he beat future Korean Olympic champion Lee Woo Seok, a performance that earned him his first of three World Archery Player of the Year awards.

That result made him a top contender for Tokyo 2020, a responsibility Mete handled superbly. Since then, he has remained consistent at major events, winning individual golds at the 2023 World Championships and 2024 European Championships, followed by a team bronze in Paris, each celebrated with his trademark pose.

Gaming marathoner

A life devoted to archery has meant some compromises. "I realised early that I couldn't go to school like other children because I'd usually be training or competing. So I mostly studied at home and went to school only for exams. I was a smart kid, and I sometimes wish I'd studied engineering or something, but even that was because I wanted to understand the technology behind the bow," he says.

Though archery is his first passion, Mete has others too. His love for anime began when, as a bored 14-year-old at a national camp, he needed something to watch. "I'm a fan of a lot of different shows. I'm currently a fan of *One Piece*, but before that, I was into *Demon Slayer, Baki, Seven Deadly Sins, and Fairy Tail.* I think I've watched 20 episodes in one go at times," he says.

But his second-greatest passion might be video games. "Sometimes when archery gets too much, I relax by playing video games, but then I end up getting obsessed. There have been times when, if I don't have practice that day, I'll play for 14 or 15 hours and get maybe three hours of sleep. My record was staying up 60 hours straight playing League of Legends. My excuse was that it was during the COVID pandemic when we weren't sure the Tokyo Olympics would happen. People later joked that my secret for winning gold was staying up three days gaming. The truth is, once I realised the Olympics were back on, I focused again on archery," he says.

For now, Mete remains focused on his sport. For all the medals he has won, he isn't done yet. "There are still a lot of medals I want. I want to win an Olympic team gold and the mixed-team gold.

I haven't won those yet. I don't think I'm very far from it. It's all a matter of one arrow," he says. And when that moment comes, he'll bring out his trademark celebration again. "That won't change. I'll always do that," he says.

Rising force: Turkiye's archery trio (L-R) Abdullah Yildirmis, Berkim Tumer and Mete Gazoz celebrate their team bronze at Paris 2024, their smiles reflecting a nation's quiet ascent in the sport. GETTY IMAGES

India's sporting economy finds its stride

From kabaddi to cricket, India's sports economy is booming. Worth USD 19 billion today, it's **being reshaped** by leagues, OTT platforms, private investment and policy reform — and could double by 2030.

Prasanth Shanthakumaran

A decade ago, the business of sport in India was synonymous with cricket. Today, that's no longer true.

From kabaddi and hockey to kho-kho, volleyball and table tennis leagues, sport in India has evolved into a fast-growing, multi-billion-dollar ecosystem. According to *Sportlight: The Business of Sports in India 2025*, a report by KPMG in collaboration with *Sportstar,* the country's sports economy now stands at USD 19 billion and is projected to double to USD 40 billion by 2030, growing at 12–14 per cent each year.

What was once driven by fandom is now fuelled by finance, policy and technology. The rise of new leagues, digital broadcasting, private investment and state-led infrastructure has redefined the way sport is played, consumed and monetised in India.

Leagues lead the charge

Franchise-based leagues have become the heartbeat of India's sports economy. The Indian Premier League (IPL) remains its crown jewel, valued at USD 18 billion, but the ecosystem is diversifying fast. The Pro Kabaddi League, Indian Super League and newer formats such as Prime Volleyball League and Pro Panja are building loyal audiences and sustainable commercial models.

The Women's Premier League (WPL) has been another breakthrough. Its media rights, sold for Rs. 951 crore (2023–27), show how women's sport is finally being treated as a serious business opportunity, not just an inclusion agenda. The Indian women's team's compelling performance in the Women's World Cup further demonstrates how the league structure is helping the game evolve to the next level.

Media revolution

Behind this surge is India's sports media boom. The IPL's USD 6.2 billion broadcast deal (2023–27) ranks among the most valuable in the world, surpassing some European football leagues on a per-match basis. More importantly, the way Indians watch sport has changed. OTT platforms such as JioHotstar, SonyLIV and FanCode have turned viewing into a digital, mobile-first experience. The IPL 2025 season alone reached over 650 million viewers, proving that India is now one of the biggest sports-viewing markets on the planet.

Technology, manufacturing and esports

Innovation is the new playing field. The sports technology sector, valued at USD 1.6 billion, spans everything from data analytics and AI-based performance tools to wearable devices and OTT platforms. Indian start-ups in this space raised USD 180 million in venture funding last year, signalling investor confidence in sport as a scalable digital business.

At the same time, the sports goods and manufacturing industry, worth USD 6.7 billion and projected to reach USD 10 billion by 2030, continues to thrive. Cities such as Jalandhar and Meerut remain global supply hubs, exporting USD 470–500 million worth of equipment each year.

And then there's esports. Officially recognised by the government in 2022, India's gaming market has expanded to USD 340 million, with over 20 million active players. Competitive gaming, fantasy platforms and live streaming are drawing brands and broadcasters

Rewriting the rule book: The rise of new leagues like Pro Panja, digital broadcasting and private investment has redefined the way sport is played, consumed and monetised in India.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

into a whole new segment of sport.

Building the base

No ecosystem can grow without facilities. The Sportlight report estimates India's sports infrastructure market at USD 2.7 billion, covering stadiums, academies, training centres and turf facilities. States such as Odisha, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu have led the way with multi-sport hubs and High-Performance centres. With India set to host the Commonwealth Games in 2030, investment in infrastructure will grow further, and this will be consolidated if India wins the mandate for the Olympics in 2036. Private investment is also accelerating through schools, universities and real-estate developments. Public–private partnerships are giving rise to new models of sports infrastructure, while Khelo India continues to drive grassroots participation.

Grassroots to greatness

India's talent pipeline is maturing. More than 1,000 Khelo India Centres and over 100 SAI facilities train around 20,000 athletes every year. Sports education, a USD 300-million sector, is expanding through new universities in Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Bihar, producing qualified professionals in coaching, management and sports science.

The athlete economy, valued at USD 800 million, reflects how Indian sportspersons are becoming brands in their own right. From endorsement deals to entrepreneurial ventures, athletes are now economic players, not just competitors.

Private capital steps in

Sport is increasingly attracting private equity and venture capital. In FY25 alone, over USD 180 million was invested in sports technology, analytics and league ventures. Investors are drawn to sectors with recurring digital revenues such as fantasy gaming, data analytics, fan engagement and women's sport.

Corporates are equally active. CSR spending reached Rs. 590 crore in 2024. The shift from short-term branding to long-term partnerships marks a maturing market where brands seek purpose and community impact alongside visibility.

Policy push and governance reform

Government involvement remains pivotal. Combined spending by Central and State departments stands at around USD 1.7 billion.

Odisha continues to be a national model with Rs. 4,124 crore committed to sports infrastructure, followed by Bihar (Rs. 568 crore) and Gujarat (Rs. 606 crore). Reforms are also reshaping the institutional landscape. The establishment of a National Sports Board and Sports Tribunal (2025) aims to strengthen governance, transparency and athlete rights across more than 60 National Sports Federations.

Global capability centres, events and tourism

Sport in India is spilling out of arenas and into allied industries. The Global Capability Centres (GCCs) segment, worth about USD 200 million, is positioning India as a global hub for sports analytics, broadcast operations and creative services.

Meanwhile, sports events and tourism, together valued at over USD 4 billion, are driving local economies through marathons, adventure races and international tournaments. Sport has become both a lifestyle and a livelihood, influencing travel, retail and entertainment.

Road ahead

Sportlight 2025 identifies several priorities for the decade ahead: expanding infrastructure beyond metros, professionalising sports education, improving governance consistency and diversifying investment beyond cricket.

If these priorities are met, India could unlock the full potential of a USD 40-billion sports economy by 2030 — creating jobs, nurturing inclusion and strengthening its global sporting identity.

What makes this transformation remarkable is not just the scale of investment but the shift in mindset. Sport in India is no longer a side act; it's an industry that is dynamic, data-driven and determined to deliver both passion and performance.

The author is Partner and Head of Sports sector, KPMG India

Double Mate Correction

By C.G.S.Narayanan

The World Chess Composition Tournament is a long-established team event enabling composers from all over the world to compete at international level with new chess problems and studies on set themes. Inspiring themes and joint work have been the highlights of each WCCT. Eleven such tournaments have been held to date, with enthusiastic worldwide participation. The Two-move theme for of 12th WCCT proposed by Serbia runs thus:. Double Mate Correction (DMC) is a new thematic combination, involving changed mates (at least 3x1) and changed defenses (at least 3x1) in set-play, try (or tries), and solution The added condition is that the solution and the thematic try should start by moves of different white pieces

Semen Veselunchek
I prize, Nauka suplistvo 1971-72

Mate in two moves

set play: 1...f4 **2.Rh5**
1...g3/gxf3 2.Qe7; 1...Kf4 2.Rxg4
Try 1.Ng6? zz 1...f4 2.Rc5; 1...g3 **2.Rh5** but: 1...gxf3!
Key 1.Bxg4! zz 1...f4 2.Qe7 1...fxg4 **2.Rh5;** 1...Kf4 2.Qxf5 1..Kxh4 2.Qh5
Study this nine-piece example.The set mate Rh5 is brought back in the try after the defence g3 and the mate after the defence 1,,,f4 is changed in the try and key.

Marjan Kovacevic
First prize,'64' 2024

Mate in two moves
set play: 1...Nd3 **2.Rc4** 1...Ra5 2.Bxa5 Try 1.Bd6? (2.Rd5) 1...Sd3 2.Qe4 1...Ra5 **2.Rc4** 1...c1=Q/c1=R 2.Rb5 but: 1...Bb5!
Key 1.Qd6! (2.Ra5) 1...Nd3 2.Qd4# 1...Bb5 2**.Rc4** 1...c1=Q/c1=R 2.Nc6
The transferred mates Rh5 and Rc4 are given in bold letters in both the problems
In the problem for solving given below spot the transferred mates and the changed mates

A Casa
1st-2nd Prize,StrateGems 2024

Mate in two moves
Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Half-pin in three movers':
Key 1.N×f4! [2.Ne6+ Q×e6 3.K×b7] 1…Q×f4 2.Qf7 [3.R×d5,Q×d5] N×d2/Q×f7 3.Q×g7/K×b7 1…N×f4 2.Qh3 [3.Qe3] N×h3/N×d2 3.K×b7/Q×d3#

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

Ilamparthi is India's 90th Grandmaster

Chennai's A.R. Ilamparthi (16) became India's 90th Grandmaster, securing his final GM norm at the Bijeljina tournament in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Reacting to his feat, his father Ravikumar said that he felt elated for his son, especially after Ilamparthi failed to achieve the final norm over six tournaments since April this year. "He missed by a whisker in all those tournaments!" he added.

Ravikumar said Ilamparthi could have become a GM earlier had he been able to participate in a lot more tournaments. "I have a younger son, who has epilepsy. So, I wasn't able to accompany Ilamparthi all the time. Till last year, either his coach (GM Shyam Sundar) or I used to accompany him to tournaments abroad. I used to cook for him. Now, he's able to travel on his own. I've taught him how to manage on his own," he said.

Ravikumar mentioned that he spoke with Ilamparthi over the phone. "He said he wants to break the 2600 Elo mark and then become a super GM!"

Ilamparthi achieved his first GM norm at the Ha Noi tournament in Vietnam in December 2023. He scored his second GM norm at the Singapore International Open in 2024, and crossed the 2500 Elo mark at the 2024-25 Rilton Cup.

S. PRASANNA VENKATESAN

SPORTOON

1 The second edition of Kashmir Marathon was flagged off by Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah as 1500 athletes from across the country and abroad took part in the event.
Bollywood actor Suniel Shetty was also present at the flagging off event while Abdullah ran a half marathon like he did last year. Several politicians including Nasir Aslam Wani, advisor to the chief minister, and MLA Zadibal Tanvir Sadiq participated in the event. Inspector General of Police, Kashmir Zone, V. K. Birdi was also among those who took part.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 Arihant KS of Tamil Nadu and qualifier Anika Dubey of Maharashtra emerged the Under-19 boys' and girls' champions respectively in the sub-junior & junior National squash championships, which concluded at the Indian Squash Academy in Chennai. Top seed Arihant, who displayed dominant form through the competition, beat second seed Yusha Nafees (UP) 11-8, 12-10, 10-12, 11-5.
Anika, a two-time U-15 national champion, who skipped the U-17 category to compete in the U-19s, beat statemate Akanksha Gupta 11-5, 11-8, 11-8 in the final.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

Making the calendar fit the athlete

Why it's time to challenge the rigidity of traditional periodisation models, and design training models that **adapts** to the athlete, not the calendar.

"Stay committed to your decisions but stay flexible in your approach." — Tony Robbins

Human adaptation does not follow calendar schedules drawn up according to someone's research somewhere. Individual recovery capability varies dramatically between athletes, depending on numerous variables. Individual physiology determines readiness, not a pedantic weekly planner. The periodised model is merely a tool — it cannot be followed verbatim for all athletes.

Bespoke training blocks, designed in tandem with multiple variables, yield the best results. Here's something that might make every sports science graduate slightly uncomfortable when it comes to periodisation. The traditional periodisation model we've been teaching for decades can, and perhaps should, be enhanced or modified.

This process is driven by individual strength and conditioning (S&C) coaches responding to the needs of the moment, rather than following an obstinate path. It is especially relevant for RTP (Return to Play) athletes and those recovering from injury, where progression in specialised fitness components must align closely with skill and sport. Microcycles, mesocycles and macrocycles form the foundation of periodisation. They have been an excellent framework for decades but are they foolproof? Can they be manipulated? That's the big question.

No dates, please

Many believe that all athletes, regardless of variables such as age, genetics, training age, available facilities, dietary discipline, recovery ability, stress levels, or lifestyle history, will somehow adapt to training loads neatly within a week, ready for progression immediately.

This is, frankly, pious claptrap.

Some athletes may adapt to a training block within seven days; others might need 10 to 15. A 16-year-old and a 24-year-old do not operate on the same biological timeline simply because they're both available for training immediately. An athlete juggling school and exams, or any other stress, cannot recover at the same rate as one whose life is stable and stress-free.

Yet athletes are forced into arbitrary time compartments. Inevitably, some will plateau or break down while others thrive.

Not in the same boat: An athlete juggling school and exams, or any other stress, cannot recover at the same rate as one whose life is stable and stress-free. GETTY IMAGES

A different approach

Bold coaches follow the adaptation mode. They might design 14-day microcycles, 30-day mesocycles, or 15-session blocks, however long it takes, to create the physiological changes they're seeking.

This is particularly important for players recovering from serious injury or in rehabilitation.

I've worked with coaches who build progression on actual adaptation markers — skill and technique attributes, RPE (Rate of Perceived Exertion), training outcomes, recovery indicators — rather than dates on a calendar. When their athletes are ready biologically, they progress. When they're not, they don't, at any cost.

A strength and conditioning coach from a professional multi-sport setup once told me: "I stopped losing athletes to overtraining injuries when I stopped caring about fitting training into weeks and started caring about fitting training into their individual recovery windows." The results, he said, were consistently positive.

Fit the athlete to a bespoke, individual process, not the timeline designed for someone else. Every athlete responds differently to the same stimulus.

Our job isn't to make athletes fit into our periodisation model. Rather, it's to make our model fit around the athlete's capacity to adapt and recover.

A professional should ask: "Is this athlete truly ready for progression, or am I advancing them just because my calendar says I should. Am I ticking the right boxes for the wrong reasons?" The honest answer might change everything about how training and progression can be planned.

Practical protocols

1. Adaptation evaluation:

Before progressing to the next training cycle, evaluate three key markers in each athlete — skill or technique quality under fatigue, energy levels during warm-up, and enthusiasm for training — rather than automatically advancing because 14 days have passed.

2. Tractable sequence tryout:

Design your next training block as a 21-day cycle instead of the traditional seven-day week, and observe whether athletes demonstrate better adaptation and fewer breakdown indicators.

3. Individual recovery interfaces:

Track your top two or three athletes' actual recovery patterns over a 3-4–week period. Note when they genuinely seem ready to progress versus when the calendar says they should, and fine-tune future planning accordingly.

Undying optimism

In his book titled *There's Always This Year: On Basketball and Ascension,* the author Hanif Abdurraqib uses basketball (the book is structured like an NBA game, with four sections or 'quarters') as a **mesh through which to view life,** both his own and those of his community and some of its stars.

Suresh Menon

How often has a sports fan said, "There's always next year," consoling and sympathising with another who supports the team which failed to win the title yet again? It speaks to the undying optimism of the fan, and the reason for it. Hope springs eternal — think of the RCB fan who had to wait so long for his team to deliver.

So it was intriguing to see a book titled *There's Always This Year: On Basketball and Ascension.* It is about the sport, and being about sport it is also about lots more. The author Hanif Abdurraqib uses basketball (the book is structured like an NBA game, with four sections or 'quarters') as a mesh through which to view life, both his own and those of his community and some of its stars like Michael Jordan.

AP

It is part memoir, part cultural and political commentary, part biography, the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

Here is Abdurraqib on Lebron James **(in pic)**: "I have sat at the feet of poets who told me that there is power in withholding. In not offering the parts of yourself that people are most eager to see. In the high school career of LeBron James, there was access to his dominance, but not always access to whatever struggles he might have been pushing through. And it proved hard for people to stay fascinated with dominance, especially if they were on the losing side of it, especially in consideration of who was doing the dominating."

Abdurraqib and James were born and raised in Ohio a year apart; the sportsman's ascent is contrasted with the author's less dramatic rise as a recipient of the Macarthur 'genius' grant and one of the leading cultural commentators. Growing up, Abdurraqib was sent to prison for petty theft, while at the same age James ("the best high school basketball player in America") was driving to school in expensive cars. Basketball lifted one man from the disadvantages of colour and class while poetry and writing was the other's redemption.

When James left Cleveland Cavaliers, they lost 63 games. Abdurraqib tells us gently, "There was pleasure in watching this aimless disaster of a team. Veteran castoffs who had been given up on, young players who seemed, mostly, bewildered by the pace and intensity of the games, forced to play minutes because someone had to, after all. At a certain point, it seemed anyone who could run up and down the court would do."

The strength of the book lies in its digression as it moves from movies and songs to people and places. The author pulls the threads together like an artist seemingly playing around with colours, and suddenly an identifiable picture emerges.

The basketball is both incidental and central to the story. I loved the description of the floater: "The most romantic shot in the game when done right, guided toward the rim with a heave and a wish, like saying goodbye to a person you never wanted to leave."

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