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BET BIG, DREAM BIGGER

The 2025 season of the WPL was the most competitive one yet, with Mumbai Indians winning its second title in three seasons

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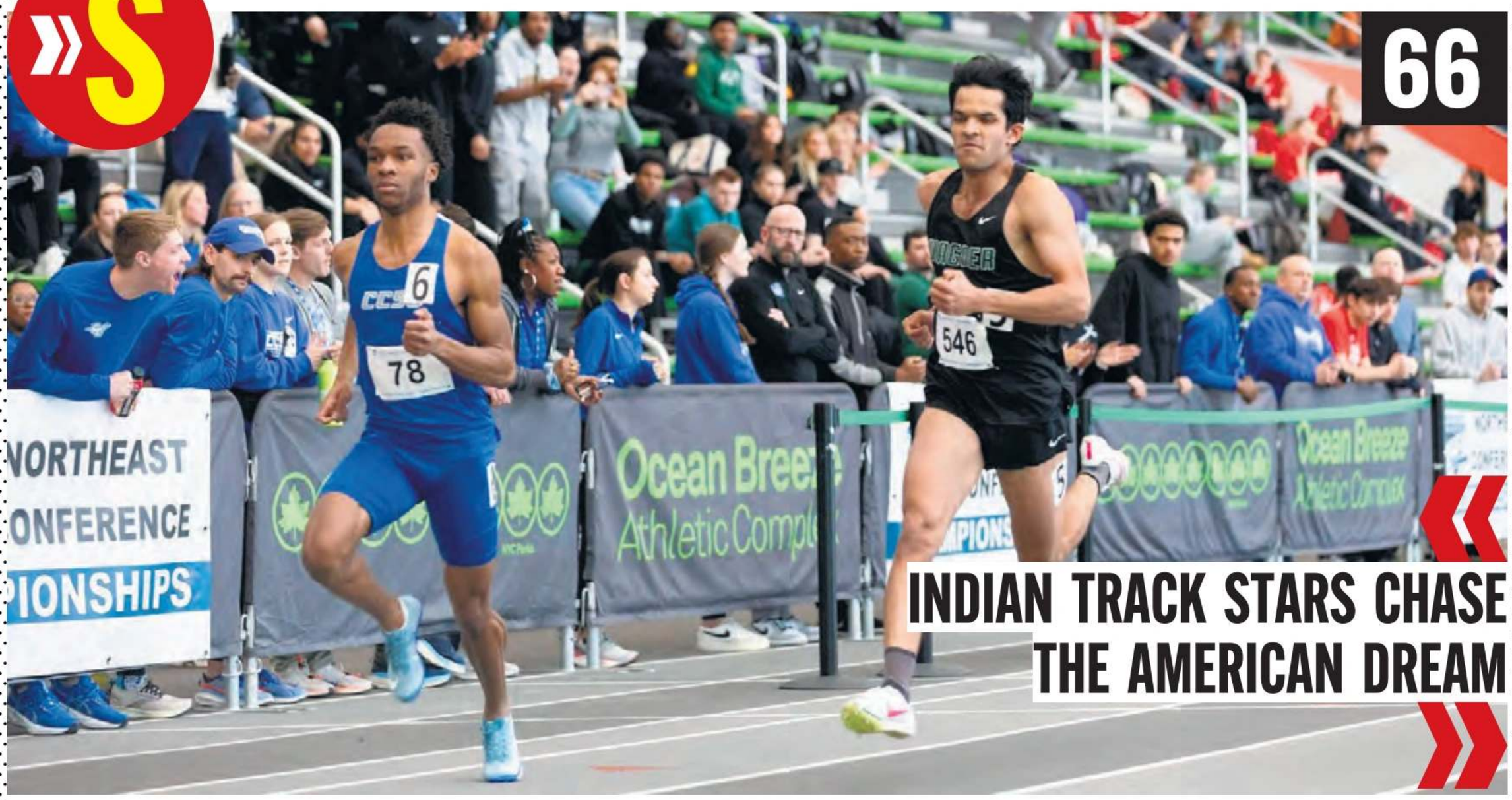

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OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

WILL COVENTRY'S LEADERSHIP SHAPE A MORE INCLUSIVE OLYMPIC FUTURE?

Coventry, now Zimbabwe's Sports Minister, leads an IOC facing **tough challenges** — DSD athletes, Russia's Olympic exile, and the LA 2028 Games under a Trump presidency.

In 2004, Kirsty Coventry swam her way to three Olympic medals in Athens, including a gold in the 200m backstroke. For Zimbabwe, it was a sporting revelation — before that, the country's only Olympic medal had come from the women's hockey team at the 'boycotted' Moscow Games in 1980.

About 20 years later, Coventry returned to Athens to win again. She was elected President of the International Olympic Committee, becoming the first woman and the first African to head the organisation in its 131-year existence. "Greece seems to be my lucky charm," she said.

Coventry won 49 of the 97 votes in the first round, comfortably ahead of her main rivals Juan Antonio Samaranch (28 votes) and Lord Sebastian Coe (8). Coe had radical ideas to change the functioning of the global body, but his dismal performance suggests that the members of the IOC voted for continuity. Coventry had the backing of the incumbent President, Thomas Bach, and the presence of 43 per cent women among the IOC members might have helped her cause, as Coe indicated.

But Coventry, now Zimbabwe's Sports Minister, takes over an IOC adrift in choppy waters. There is a cast of complicated issues — Differences of Sex Development (DSD) athletes, Russia's ongoing exile from the Olympic movement, and the Los Angeles 2028 Games set against the backdrop of a Donald Trump presidency.

Trump's administration has already tightened border security, and there is a list of red-flag nations, according to a *New York Times* report — Afghanistan, Cuba, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Venezuela, and Yemen — whose athletes might be blocked from competing altogether at the LA Olympics. Trump has also passed an executive order — Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports — which bars transgender athletes from competing in girls' and women's sports events. The US President has tasked the Director of Homeland Security to "deny any and all visa applications made by men attempting to fraudulently enter the United States while identifying themselves as women athletes to try and get into the Games."

The implications are bleak. Algerian boxer Imane Khelif, who took gold in the 66kg category in Paris, might not get a chance to defend her title in LA.

Lord Coe made his position clear in the election manifesto: firmly against the participation of transgender athletes. Coventry, however, has opted for cautious ambiguity, promising a task force "that's going to look at the transgender issue and the protection of the female category."

At 41, Coventry is the second-youngest IOC President, and she is at least going to be at the helm for another eight years. She can then seek another four-year term.

The focus will soon shift to picking the host for the 2036 Summer Olympics. India, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have expressed interest. The IOC, under Bach, moved from a traditional bidding process to a close collaborative partnership between the IOC and the potential host to ostensibly ensure sustainability and cost-effectiveness in the selection process.

With the IOC hosting its first gender-equal Games at Paris 2024, Coventry's election can only be seen as another step towards bringing more inclusivity to the world of sport. Currently, only four out of 36 International Sports Federations are led by women, and a mere 24 out of 206 National Olympic Committees have female presidents, including India, with former Olympian P. T. Usha at the helm.

Still, whether the bond between Coventry and Usha — two Olympians navigating a historically male terrain — can tip the scales in India's favour for 2036 remains to be seen.

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WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT

« I'm absolutely delighted for Kirsty. And we've got an athlete at the head of the organisation. That's a good thing.
– Sebastian Coe after losing the IOC presidential race to Kirsty Coventry »

35-km

Canadian Evan Dunfee broke the men's 35-kilometre race walk world record with a time of two hours, 21 minutes and 40 seconds in Dundice, Slovakia.
Dunfee, 34, shaved seven seconds off the record set by Japan's Masatora Kawano in October 2024, going solo from start to finish and beating his closest challenger German Christopher Linkee by three minutes behind. Dunfee was a bronze medallist at the 50km event in the 2019 World Championships and the 2020 Olympic Games.

81-77

India pulled off a coup, displaying spunk and excellent end-game skills to outwit Bahrain 81-77 in a thriller to qualify for the FIBA men's Asia Cup 2025.
India will now travel to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for the Continental tournament to be held from August 5 to 17.
Certainly not the favourite, India outplayed Iraq 97-77 and then Bahrain in the Qualifying tournament for the third-placed teams in Group-H. India led 39-38 against Bahrain at half time and then pulled away in the third, taking a 62-55 lead. It held its own in the fourth and final quarter to clinch a famous victory. The last time India beat Bahrain was in 2013.

« My objective is to be able to play my best tennis at the Grand Slams and the tournaments where I participate. My schedule is revised, so obviously I'm not chasing ranking points.
– Novak Djokovic on chasing the world number one ranking »

SOARING HIGH

Armand Duplantis won his third World Indoor Championship title with a a jump of 6.15m in the men's pole vault event in Nanjing. This was Mondo's seventh global title, but was made to work all the way by Emmanouil Karalis, who took silver with a new personal best of 6.05m. American Sam Kendricks rounded out the podium with a best of 5.90m. REUTERS

UFC heartbreak continues

Puja Tomar lost to Shauna Bannon in the UFC, **tapping out** after a strong start.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

It was yet another disappointment for Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) fans in India.

Last month, Anshul Jubli suffered a crushing first-round defeat against Quillan Salkilld at UFC 312. On March 22, his compatriot Puja Tomar was forced to tap out against Shauna Bannon at UFC Fight Night, compounding the heartbreak for Indian fans.

Expectations had soared as Indian supporters sought redemption after Anshul's devastating knockout, which came just 19 seconds into the fight. Both Puja and Bannon, newcomers to the promotion, had a point to prove. The Indian was making only her second UFC appearance, while the Irish fighter had one win and one loss to her name. Statistically, it was an evenly matched contest, although Bannon had a slight reach advantage of 0.15m. Puja, however, was expected to counter this with her superior ground-and-pound technique.

Yet, the fight followed a familiar script, reminiscent of Anshul's debut against Mike Breeden in 2023. Despite dominating the first two rounds, Anshul had been knocked out due to a lapse in concentration, leaving him vulnerable to Breeden's attack.

Puja started aggressively, keeping Bannon on the defensive. However, the Irish fighter fought back, using her reach effectively to score crucial points towards the end of the opening round.

Midway through the second round, Puja landed a devastating head kick that sent Bannon crashing to the mat. It appeared to be a turning point, as Puja quickly followed up with a flurry of right hooks. Bannon seemed defenceless, but with the referee allowing the fight to continue, she managed to recover, seize Puja's arm, and execute an armbar submission, forcing the Indian to tap out. The officiating came under scrutiny, much like in Anshul's bout against Salkilld. Many felt the fight should have been stopped when Bannon was knocked down, giving Puja a legitimate claim to victory.

Puja addressed the loss on *Instagram*, writing: "The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing. I will come back stronger and very soon." Her comment section was flooded with messages of support and criticism of the officiating.

GETTY IMAGES

ALL INDIA PUBLIC SECTOR HOCKEY TOURNAMENT 2024-25 HOSTED BY COAL INDIA LIMITED

Canara Bank Champions of AIPS Hockey Tournament 2025, Coal India Proves Best Host

Headquartered in Kolkata, the Maharatna company Coal India Limited (CIL), operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Coal, successfully organized the four-day All India Public Sector Hockey Tournament 2024-25 from March 17 to 20, 2025. The event was conducted under the aegis of the All India Public Sector Sports Control Board (AIPSSCB), aligned with the 'Khelo India' mission at SAI Astro Turf, Kolkata. The SAI provided its world-class Astro Turf for the mega tournament, while Hockey Bengal extended technical support to ensure seamless match execution.

The event was organized by the Coal India Sports Promotion Association (CISPA), which aims to integrate sports as an essential element of CIL's ethos. The tournament saw Union Bank of India (UBI) and Canara Bank emerge as the two finalists after four days of intense competition at the SAI, Netaji Subhash Eastern Centre, Kolkata. For the first time, Canara Bank clinched the championship title, while the host, Coal India Limited, won the hearts of players and hockey enthusiasts with its outstanding organizational efforts.

The four-day tournament was inaugurated by Shri P.M. Prasad, Chairman, Coal India Limited, who kicked off the event by scoring a ceremonial goal, met with cheers from dignitaries, players, and spectators alike.

In his inaugural speech, Shri P.M. Prasad remarked, "Sports unite beyond competition, fostering teamwork, discipline, and excellence. This hockey event, with the participation of PSUs, showcases not just skill and determination but also the spirit of camaraderie and sportsmanship." He further emphasized that the tournament provides an excellent platform for showcasing the true spirit of hockey.

A vibrant cultural program marked the inauguration, featuring a parade of all participating teams along with their managers and captains.The tournament trophy was unveiled by Shri P.M. Prasad, Dr. Vinay Ranjan, and other dignitaries in a grand ceremony.

The prestigious event was graced by several dignitaries, including :

- Dr. Vinay Ranjan, Director (P&IR), CIL & President, AIPSSCB
- Shri Mukesh Chowdhary, Director (Marketing), CIL
- Shri Achyut Ghatak, Director (Technical), CIL
- Shri Brajesh Kumar Tripathy, CVO, CIL
- Shri O.P. Dani, Treasurer, AIPSSCB
- Shri Ramesh Sachdeva, Consultant, AIPSSCB
- Shri Victor Anthony, Selector, AIPSSCB
- Shri Loknath Sahu, General Manager, UBI
- Executive Directors, General Managers, and HODs from CIL Headquarters

CIL, as the host, ensured top-tier playing conditions on the well-maintained Astro Turf provided by SAI while extending excellent hospitality to all participants. The tournament featured thrilling matches, exemplifying the spirit of teamwork and determination that defines both sports and the ethos of PSUs.

The grand finale between UBI and Canara Bank ended in a dramatic 3-3 tie, leading to a penalty shootout. Canara Bank from Bengaluru emerged victorious, defeating UBI from Mumbai 4-2 in the shootout after a nail-biting regulation-time draw.

The victorious Canara Bank team received the prestigious trophy from former Indian hockey captain and double Olympic bronze medalist, Shri P.R. Sreejesh, along with Dr. Vinay Ranjan, Director (P&IR), CIL & other dignitaries. Dr. Ranjan reiterated CIL's commitment to promoting sports, stating, "This successful edition of the hockey tournament stands as a testament to the commitment of PSUs in nurturing talent and upholding the legacy of Indian hockey."

Current Under-21 National Team Head Coach, Shri P.R. Sreejesh, applauded CIL's efforts in promoting hockey within PSUs and encouraged the company to continue supporting young talent in the sport.

The grand finale was marked by a spectacular display of skill and resilience, with the winning team lifting the prestigious trophy. The event concluded with a felicitation ceremony, where Padma Shri & Padma Bhusan Shri P. R. Sreejesh honored the winners and runners-up.

Shri Amitabh Kumar Singh, HOD (Welfare), CIL & General Secretary, CISPA, extended gratitude to the Organizing Committee for their tireless efforts, meticulous planning, and seamless execution of this prestigious tournament.

Smt. Barsha Naskar, Deputy Manager

(Welfare), CIL & Assistant Secretary, CISPA, who coordinated and conceptualized the event, expressed gratitude to match officials, referees, support staff, and volunteers whose dedication ensured the smooth conduct of the event.

The technical and organizational excellence demonstrated by CIL set a new benchmark in the history of this championship. Full credit for hosting the event successfully goes to the dedicated team of officials and workforce from CIL. The tournament not only highlighted the competitive spirit of PSU teams but also reaffirmed the commitment of public sector enterprises to promoting sports and fostering camaraderie among employees.

THREE YEARS OF WPL: A GAME-CHANGER OR JUST THE FIRST STEP?

The WPL has **grown** in competitiveness, visibility, and impact, but questions remain about its long-term sustainability and domestic player development.

Champion again: Mumbai Indians won the Women's Premier League for the second time with an eight-run victory over Delhi Capitals in the final.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

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

The Women's Premier League (WPL) was meant to be a fresh start for Indian women's cricket. While the BCCI took control of the women's game in 2006, the domestic structure remained inconsistent and was largely dominated by the Railways.

Despite its resilience on the international stage, the national team often faltered in high-pressure moments, exposing the gaps in the system. The lack of a structured pathway for young talent led to growing calls for a women's version of the IPL more than a decade ago.

That vision materialised in 2023 with the launch of the WPL, a five-team tournament designed to provide the much-needed platform for the country's emerging players.

Three seasons later, the first official cycle is complete — a phase where the BCCI sought to test its commercial viability, nurture talent, and build a sustainable future for women's cricket.

In just three years, the league has seen significant changes: a geographical expansion,

a shift from free entry to ticketed matches, and a noticeable rise in playing standards.

But has it lived up to expectations?

Bridging the gap

The 2025 WPL season was the most competitive yet, thanks in no small part to Gujarat Giants. After two wooden spoon finishes, the team finally found its spark midway through the season, storming into the playoffs with a string of dominant performances.

A new coaching staff, a change in captaincy, and a strategic focus on nurturing Indian talent played a big role in this turnaround. Across seasons two and three, the franchise invested in domestic players, tracking progress through camps and giving them opportunities.

This is the same team that, in its debut season, made headlines for all the wrong reasons — most notably, the puzzling decision to release Deandra Dottin before the tournament even began. But in 2025, Gujarat made a different kind of statement by backing an uncapped Indian player, Kashvee Gautam, despite her injury concerns. The pace-bowling all-rounder, once sidelined by a foot fracture, emerged as one of the team's standout performers.

"We've tried to strike a balance between preparing players for the pressures of the big stage while also keeping their heads pressure-free," Giants head coach Michael Klinger told *Sportstar*. "Cricket, domestic or otherwise, is largely result-oriented, and it's important to shield players from that pressure sometimes."

The Giants also made some bold selection calls. A senior Indian spinner — the team's former vice-captain, Sneh Rana — was left out of the XI due to poor form. South African batter Laura Wolvaardt lost her opening slot after three underwhelming outings, making way for the in-form Beth Mooney.

More importantly, Gujarat put faith in its Indian bowling unit. While overseas stars like Dottin, Mooney, Phoebe Litchfield, Danielle Gibson, and Ashleigh Gardner carried the batting, the bowling workload fell largely on Indian players. Kashvee, Priya Mishra, Meghna Singh, and Tanuja Kanwar and others bowled over 106 overs combined — nearly twice as many as the overseas players.

If Royal Challengers Bengaluru's 2024 title-winning run was magical, Gujarat's resurgence in 2025 was nothing less. But its campaign ended in heartbreak, falling to eventual champion Mumbai Indians in the Eliminator.

That match summed up some of the biggest talking points in the WPL:

Fielding remains a weak link – it put the team on the back foot before it had even batted.

Mumbai's international stars dominated – overseas firepower once again made the difference.

Handling pressure is still a challenge – when the stakes were highest, Gujarat faltered.

An object of envy

With Nat Sciver-Brunt, Hayley Matthews, and Amelia Kerr, Mumbai Indians had the dream trio of all-rounders — each hitting top form at different points in the season.

At the halfway mark, Mumbai's inconsistency had team owners on edge. If RCB had managed to break out of its struggles, the title race might have ended differently.

But when it mattered most, Sciver-Brunt turned unstoppable. After enduring heartbreak with England at the T20 World Cup and the Ashes, she delivered a season for the ages in Mumbai colours — 500 runs, 12 wickets, and an infuriating ability to just not get out. She became the first player to cross 1,000 WPL runs, leading Mumbai's charge to the title.

Yet, Mumbai's strength wasn't built on one player. Matthews and Kerr controlled the spin department, Shabnim Ismail brought sheer pace, and Harmanpreet Kaur thrived with the bat. The result? A near-unbeatable side.

What truly set it apart, though, was its one standout Indian talent — Emerging Player of the Season,

Amanjot Kaur.

During the Bengaluru leg, at a packed M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, Harmanpreet backed her in a crunch moment. "If you stay out there, you'll be able to do it easily," she told Amanjot. The young all-rounder responded with confidence: "I'll do it for you, don't worry." She delivered exactly as promised.

Amanjot's reliability gave Harmanpreet the freedom to attack. With the ball, she chipped in with five wickets across 17 overs at a respectable economy of 7.88. But her biggest impact came in the field — diving, stopping, and saving runs in crucial moments.

Harmanpreet credited the league's growing depth for the tight competition this season. "In the first season, I think we missed out on a lot of good cricketers. We are playing elite cricket, and the games are tough. This time, all franchises have

Clutch performer: England all-rounder Nat Sciver-Brunt was named Player of the Tournament.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

THE 2025 SEASON SAW 7,030 RUNS SCORED – WELL AHEAD OF THE 6,000-ODD FROM THE FIRST TWO EDITIONS. WICKETS WERE JUST AS FREQUENT, WITH 287 FALLING THIS YEAR – AT LEAST 15 MORE THAN PREVIOUS SEASONS

STATFILE

200+ totals in the WPL by season
2023: 4
2024: 0
2025: 5

picked good players, and that's why every game has been this tough. Barely a game or two has been one-sided. We've had so many matches go into the last over. I am happy the level of competition has increased, particularly with the domestic cricketers involved."

New era

The 2025 season saw 7,030 runs scored — well more than the 6,000-odd from the first two editions. Wickets were just as frequent, with 287 falling this year — at least 15 more than previous seasons.

But the WPL is no longer just a stepping stone to the national team. For many domestic players, it has become a standalone career goal.

Take Arundhati Reddy, for example. The financial security from the WPL allowed her to switch domestic teams, giving her better playing opportunities. For Shikha Pandey — whose absence from the Indian team remains unexplained — the league offers a stage to showcase her skill. She has become India's first true globe-trotting cricketer, playing in the WBBL, WCPL, and domestic leagues in Australia and New Zealand to keep her career alive.

Former India captain and broadcaster Mithali Raj believes the WPL has also reshaped the domestic cricket landscape.

"The mindset is changing. There is something to play for in the domestic, just not the championship itself. One thing I've realised is everyone loves being on TV, being recognised. Now, players know if they do well, they may be scouted or picked for trials and potentially be picked by a franchise. There's a lot more at stake. Even if you don't make the Indian team, there is an equally visible avenue for you to play and earn as well."

She also pointed out the growing confidence among Indian players, highlighting names like Niki Prasad, who thrived under pressure.

However, Mithali acknowledged that the WPL still relies heavily on overseas players — a challenge that will take time to overcome.

"For an overseas player or an international player, this is not the topmost level of the game. There are domestic uncapped players in the mix too, and for them to catch up to the standards of an elite athlete is going to take time. The dependency is there, no doubt, but definitely not as much as the first season. The league is young, it can only get better as we go on."

Out of the shadows

Seven days after MI lifted the trophy at the Brabourne Stadium, the women's central contracts were

Future star: Kashvee Gautam, the most expensive uncapped Indian player in WPL history, showcased her skills in her debut season, justifying the investment with glimpses of promise. SPORTZPICS

THE WPL IS NO LONGER JUST A STEPPING STONE TO THE NATIONAL TEAM. FOR MANY DOMESTIC PLAYERS, IT HAS BECOME A STANDALONE CAREER GOAL

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announced. A tentative list of venues for the Women's ODI World Cup — set to be hosted by India later this year — was also revealed. The absence of mainstream cricketing venues left everyone stunned. Visakhapatnam, Thiruvananthapuram, Guwahati, Indore, and Mullanpur have been selected as initial candidates to host the women's showpiece event.

This selection made the venue experiment during the WPL seem futile. Imagine the atmosphere of an India vs Australia fixture with 30,000-odd fans shaking the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru. South Africa's 2024 tour of India highlighted Chennai's warm embrace of women's cricket, with crowds cheering both teams with equal passion. Why wouldn't India's best venues — weather permitting — be automatic choices for a world event?

The simultaneous scheduling of men's bilaterals and domestic matches may explain the decision. However, former players and coaches, speaking anonymously, argue that non-traditional venues need a starting point to evolve into major cricketing hubs like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata, and Bengaluru. India will host the tournament for the fourth time. In 1978, matches were played across Calcutta, Hyderabad, Jamshedpur, and Patna. The 1997 edition spanned 20 cities, while 2013 was limited to just Cuttack and Mumbai.

"We've played games in cities like Dhanbad (Jharkhand), and there was no issue of attendance. People sat on trees to watch us play. You might be surprised by how many turn up this time, especially with the World Cup tag attached," a former player told this publication.

Mithali emphasised how the WPL has given women's cricket a level of visibility it never had before.

"Premium women's cricket in the WPL now has a prime-time slot — 7:30 pm — which has become appointment viewing. It's not like afternoon games; there's one match per day to make it easy for both stadium audiences and home viewers. People want to watch the stars they're seeing on TV," she noted.

ICC chair Jay Shah tweeted early in the season that the first leg of the WPL saw a 150 per cent surge in TV ratings and 70 per cent growth in digital viewership compared to the previous season. If any proof was needed that the WPL is a product people want to return to, this is it.

Assembly line

With the first cycle of the league complete, the WPL has already had a significant impact. Several players have risen from the league's grind to the national side — Asha Sobhana, Shreyanka Patil, Saika Ishaque, Saima Thakor, and Sajeevan Sajana, to name a few. However, fitness and form have kept them from securing

Captain's knock: Harmanpreet Kaur led from the front with a crucial 66 off 44 balls in the WPL final, securing her second trophy as captain.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

permanent spots in the senior team. Among India's Grade A players, only Harmanpreet stood out in the WPL. She unleashed early aggression with the bat, leaving bowling attacks without answers.

Fielding remains a concern, but the 2025 edition showed it's not just an India-specific issue. Young Indian players are now far more fearless in their approach — chasing balls, diving, and stopping crucial runs. Sree Charani's sharp fielding in the final, catches by Jemimah Rodrigues and Niki for DC, and G. Kamalini's boundary saves for MI are all encouraging signs.

This season also introduced fresh talent. Niki, who led India to its second consecutive Under-19 T20 World Cup title weeks before the WPL, impressed with the bat. Kashvee showed immense potential and should be groomed as a like-for-like replacement for Pooja Vastrakar with her pace variations and batting utility. Bharti Fulmali's composed explosiveness nearly took the Giants to their first final.

"Building fast-bowling stock was an important early focus, and the WPL has identified multiple options (Kashvee, Kranti Goud, Saima) who can be developed for bigger roles in the national setup," Mithali added.

How the system nurtures these players will be critical, especially given India's inconsistent international planning.

Looking ahead to 2026, the league may expand to include additional teams and venues. With the caravan format tested, the BCCI is now evaluating the feasibility of a home-and-away format for the WPL. With a dedicated annual window and an international player pool that thrives in India's high-energy atmosphere, the league has a promising future.

However, the WPL remains a toddler learning to walk, especially compared to the well-established WBBL, which integrates seamlessly into Australia's domestic cricket framework.

With the terrible twos and threes behind, it's time to look forward to the WPL's fantastic fours and fives!

High spirits: While the home crowd undid the purpose of the 10 pm loudspeaker curfew with their thundering cheers, they also stood up in applause for a DC side that refused to give up. SPORTZPICS **Below:** A lady selling MI merchandise. EMMANUAL YOGINI

BRABOURNE BONHOMIE

The storied stadium in Mumbai, a relic of British India with its **timeless** Art Deco design and colonial club culture, was witness to Mumbai Indians' latest WPL triumph.

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

In the last three years of its existence, several things have changed about the Women's Premier League (WPL). New venues have been added, the skill gap between teams have drastically reduced, and fresh talent has waltzed through the gates of the tournament to make the big stage their own. But, at the same time, many elementary things have stayed the same, as observed by the Diary, fresh off what was easily the most competitive season of the league yet.

"Oh, (I) finally see familiar faces... *tumhi log aate ho* (it's you guys only who come)," Royal Challengers Bengaluru captain Smriti Mandhana said, looking at the women's cricket reporters in the press conference room in Mumbai. This after underwhelming representation from journalists in Vadodara and Lucknow.

In the four matches the Diary attended at the Brabourne Stadium in Mumbai, the venue didn't manage a full house until the final day. Given the home side, Mumbai Indians, played every single game, the empty seats did not keep up with the standards that the city's cricketing audience had set in the women's game. Locals spoke of how festivals like Holi and Ramadan potentially contributed to thinner crowds this time.

The cruel March humidity might have also played a part. Brabourne's open press box, while great for atmosphere, didn't give scribes the comfort of air conditioning or relief from sweat-drenched clothes on matchdays. The heat was so bad that a well-refrigerated bar of chocolate

LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

lost form in a matter of an hour, with the Diary resorting to the visual massacre of scooping up pieces with a spoon.

The 90-plus-year-old venue, a relic of British India with its timeless Art Deco design and colonial club culture, had its quirks.

While the press box was at the Churchgate End, the post-match media interactions would be held in the pavilion building. Reporters who needed to catch trains smartly tried to make their way back to the other end, given its proximity to Churchgate station, only to find that the gates had been locked. The Diary whipped out ambulance and police siren sounds in an attempt to attract the attention of the security personnel — who, we later discovered, were standing right outside — but in vain.

The final week of the WPL had high-profile names slotted in for the mid-innings shows, including global stars like Hanumankind and French Montana. The Diary — who swears by Punjabi music in good times and bad — also got a glimpse of the powerhouse that is Jasmine Sandlas. That these stars only performed for the Pavilion End took away some of the cheer for the mortals in the rest of the seats.

One of the most joyous parts of working at Brabourne **(above, left)** was the countless encounters with the friendly in-house cats. The Diary — away from her own dog and cat — had similar comforts at the office of *The Hindu*, where she was staying. The in-house patriarch, Lucky — a chonky indie fattened by the food and adoration provided by those working in the building — and his band of over a dozen cats helped the Diary unwind after a long day with some playtime.

The day of the final brought out Mumbai's maddest best **(below).** The roadways around the CCI were packed. Fans, mostly Mumbai Indians faithfuls, filled 14,700 of the 17,000-odd seats in the house. One could spot the odd CSK and RCB shirt too. MI set the template once more, with incredible installations at Churchgate railway station. There were hoardings of the players with their names written to help fans identify them. Alongside were statues of cricketers and women from all walks of life in MI jerseys. It was a raging hit, with countless people stopping for videos and photographs. As unbiased as the press pack tries to be, the Diary can confidently say that most had a prayer on their lips for Delhi Capitals skipper Meg Lanning. One of the best captains in the history of the sport, her luck with WPL finals was a cruel corrective activity by the forces of the universe. The evening would follow that same fateful script.

While fans grimaced when Delhi lost its openers — fearing the game was done right there — the team's batting order resisted, dragging the game to the very end but ultimately falling short by eight runs. While the home crowd undid the purpose of the 10 pm loudspeaker curfew with their thundering cheers, they also stood up in applause for a DC side that refused to give up.

The press contingent spent its dying minutes on WPL duty pondering the ifs and what-ifs. Will Lanning return next year? Will talismanic MI coach Charlotte Edwards **(above, right)** finally consider the top job with a struggling England national side? Will we see new teams next year?

One will have to make peace with the uncertainties and possibilities of this ellipsis, at least for now.

SPORTZPICS

THE QUIET PERFECTIONIST

Beth Mooney, Australia's quiet force, thrives on precision and composure. A proven match-winner, she **redefines consistency** in a game driven by power and flair.

SPORTZPICS

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

Australia keeper-batter Beth Mooney boasts an enviable trophy cabinet — four World titles, a Commonwealth Games gold, three Women's Big Bash League crowns, a Women's National Cricket League title, and two Belinda Clark Awards (given to Australia's best international woman cricketer), among other accolades.

But this success didn't come overnight. "Boring Beth" — as she playfully calls herself — spent much of her early career proving people wrong.

As an eight-year-old playing with boys, she was often stationed at fine leg, a position usually reserved for the weakest fielder. Over time, her skills earned recognition. Later, in the Australian setup, head coach Matthew Mott criticised her fitness levels. Today, she ranks among the squad's endurance leaders, alongside Ellyse Perry.

Her Women's Premier League journey was rocky at first — her debut season was derailed by injury, and her second ended in disappointment as captain, with Gujarat Giants finishing last in both editions. This year, freed from the pressures of leadership, Mooney played a key role in the team's remarkable turnaround, helping the Giants reach the Eliminator for the first time.

Straight talker

At the end of the 2024 WPL, Mooney made her stance on captaincy clear.

"No one really noticed it, but management looked at it a few months later and thought it was probably a bit honest," she told *Sportstar* on the sidelines of the tournament.

"When opportunities come to have that 'C' next to my name, I don't really jump at it too much. From my point of view, I am 31. I am not going to and don't have a desire to captain Australia. I think I am a bit of a quiet leader, away from the spotlight and making moves behind the scenes."

This season, the Giants handed the captaincy to her compatriot Ashleigh Gardner, and Mooney, as a senior player, supported her with field placements, bowling changes, and crucial runs. Mooney finished as the team's second-highest run-scorer, amassing 237 runs, including an unbeaten 96 against UP Warriorz.

"My focus was solely on getting as many runs on the board as a collective as possible. A 100 for me would have been nice. A 200 in that game would have been nice, but it didn't pan out."

The road less taken

Mooney's approach to batting contrasts sharply with the power-hitting trend dominating modern T20 cricket. Yet, both styles offer a Robert Frost-esque choice in the game's evolution.

"I think I'm flying the flag for strategy and placement in T20 cricket rather than boom and bust everywhere. And it's a tough battle to fight. There's a few people out there who probably think that I should be going a bit quicker earlier or hitting the ball harder earlier or whatever it might be, but sometimes the situation or the conditions just don't allow for that. Certainly, my mindset every time I walk out there is to try and get as many runs as I can as quickly as I can," she explains.

Her numbers back up that philosophy. In a format where anchors are often dismissed as outdated, Mooney remains the glue holding the innings together. Since making her Australia debut in 2016, Mooney has been the most consistent opener despite eight players being tested in the role. She has played 103 matches, scoring a leading 3,274 runs (as of March 21) at a strike rate of 125. She has also carried her bat the most for Australia in T20Is during this period, remaining unbeaten 26 times, with Australia winning 21 of those matches.

"I have to stick to what's worked for me, and that doesn't mean resting on my laurels. I am still evolving, and perhaps what that looks like for me is different from the Grace Harrises and Deandra Dottins of the world. I like the fact that when I walk out to bat, the opposition captain is thinking hard about how she is going to get me out."

Despite her steely exterior, Mooney has noticed a shift in how her batting is perceived. Younger players have started approaching her for advice — something she encourages with an emphasis on tactical awareness.

"Understanding the game and conditions better and knowing your strengths in those scenarios are key. For example, in India, the outfields are lightning quick, so for a boundary, you only need to hit it on either side of cover really hard or along the ground. It doesn't always have to be that big-risk six.

"When people get fixated on hitting sixes and trying to hit the ball

Numbers game

- **Three Australians came close to WPL's first-ever century:** Georgia Voll (99*), Beth Mooney (96*), and Ellyse Perry (90*).
- **Mooney's strike rate:** 121.55 vs pace, 139.13 vs spin.
- **Dot ball percentage:** 24.6% against spin, 38.6% against pace.
- **Faced more pace due to her top-order role.**

Precision over power: Beth Mooney's placement-driven approach keeps bowlers guessing. SANDEEP SAXENA

in the air, they lose their shape and perhaps try and hit it too hard and don't get as stable.

"Meg (Lanning) is a good example of someone who can take the game away from you without you really noticing because she plays classical cricket shots and focuses on placement rather than risks. So it gets hard to get her out.

"We have a good balance of both approaches in our line-up. We have a Dottin, Gardner, Bharti (Fulmali) and Simran (Shaikh). We have people like Phoebe (Litchfield) and me who are more placement-driven, and we might just all end up with the same strike rate, but we just do it a little differently."

Building a culture

Mooney is the last remaining link to the 'Mithali Raj-Rachael Haynes-Nooshin Al Khadeer' think tank that shaped Gujarat Giants in its early years. Now, alongside head coach Michael Klinger, she has been working to build a culture of confidence and transparency.

She credits this culture for GG's spirited chase in its final league game against Mumbai Indians — a match that, had it gone its way, could have propelled it into the final.

"He gave everyone the confidence to go. Just having a coach and support staff around gave the team that kind of belief that we could do it if we tried. Everyone walked out there feeling like it was their time to win the game for us."

Setting standards

On the field, Mooney holds her teammates to high standards.

"You've got to know when the right time to pull them up on stuff is and when you've got to pat them on the back. There's probably only been one occasion in this tournament where I've had to really rev them up on the field, and they seem to respond really well to that. You don't want to have to use it all the time because it loses its impact."

Yet, she remains a student of the game. A highly competitive Australian cricket ecosystem — and an ever-growing crop of young talents looking to take her spot — keeps her sharp.

"Everyone just wants to get better. Nobody slacks off. Everyone's really fit. They're in the gym, they're running, and they're training hard. No one's got a set spot in the team. It's easy to get better when the people around you are getting better as well."

Stillness in the chaos

For Mooney, maintaining composure is key. After Australia's 2022 ODI World Cup win, she found herself momentarily questioning her next steps.

"We'd won pretty much everything. What do we do now?" she recalls.

She has since learned to navigate these moments of uncertainty by staying grounded — a trait that has helped her deliver in high-pressure situations.

"To be honest, I just think being up and down would be exhausting. When there's a four or a six, everyone's up and cheering, but if there's a wicket, things get pretty

flat. So, I try not to waste my energy riding the emotions of cricket in a three-hour window. Staying neutral helps you perform your best and make good decisions."

That balance has made her one of the most consistent batters in T20Is, with India often bearing the brunt of her performances.

In a world that celebrates flamboyance, Mooney's steadiness has carved out its own place at the top of the rankings.

Like her former captain Meg Lanning, she too has battled the "madness of perfection". From university classes to shifts at Woolworths as a 'checkout chick' sand relentless training, her path has been anything but easy.

Mooney now has a century in all formats, completing the set at the MCG, where Australia won the 2020 T20 World Cup in front of a record crowd.

Her unbeaten 78 off 54 balls was overshadowed by Alyssa Healy's 79 off 39, but for Mooney, only the win and her contribution matter.

"I don't know if there's really a formula (to being good in all formats). I think it would be worth a lot of money if we could come up with one, that's for sure. I've been exposed to a lot of different situations and scenarios on the cricket field.

"I always go back to using that as data to show myself that I'm doing something right. Pressure is a privilege. What we face on the cricket field is nothing compared to the real problems people have outside it. It's really easy to get caught up in how big the game is when, in fact, it's just another 120 balls."

Guiding light: A pillar of Australia's golden era in women's cricket, Beth Mooney continues to set new standards. GETTY IMAGES

FOR MORE STORIES

« When I am batting with her, she won't just direct you to go after a certain bowler. So, she will keep giving ideas about how the ball is behaving, the areas that we can look to hit. So, they keep discussing these things. It is very helpful for us that we can also look at the game like that. So, you start looking at things a little differently – Harleen Deol on Mooney »

Nat Sciver-Brunt first to 1000 runs in WPL

1027 } The runs scored by Mumbai Indians' Nat Sciver-Brunt. This is the most by any batter in WPL history. She thus became the first batter to aggregate 1000 runs in this elite T20 tournament. The data below shows how the record for leading run-getter in WPL has changed hands over the past three years, since 2023.

The leading run-getters in WPL since 2023 at various stages

* First run was scored by Yastika Bhatia (MI) in New Mumbai (DYP Stadium) on 4 March 2023
* 47 runs by Hayley Matthews (MI) in ew Mumbai (DYP Stadium) on 4 March 2023
* 65 runs by Harmanpreet Kaur (MI) in New Mumbai (DYP Stadium) on 4 March 2023 (first score of fifty-plus in WPL)
* 84 runs by Shafali Verma (DC) vs RCB in Mumbai BS on 5 March 2023
* 124 runs by Hayley Matthews (MI) vs RCB in Mumbai BS on 6 March 2023
* 142 runs by Meg Lanning (DC) vs UPW in New Mumbai (DYP Stadium) on 7 March 2023
* 266 runs by Sophie Devine (RCB) vs GG in Mumbai BS on 18 March 2023
* 271 runs by Meg Lanning (DC) vs MI in New Mumbai (DYP Stadium) on 20 March 2023
* 295 runs by Tahlia McGrath (UPW) vs DC in Mumbai BS on 21 March 2023
* 310 runs by Meg Lanning (DC) vs UPW in Mumbai BS on 21 March 2023
* 382 runs by Harmanpreet Kaur (MI) vs DC in Bengaluru on 25 Feb 2024
* 427 runs by Meg Lanning (DC) vs UPW in Bengaluru on 26 Feb 2024
* 835 runs by Ellyse Perry (RCB) vs UPW in Bengaluru on 24 Feb 2025
* 845 runs by Meg Lanning (DC) vs MI in Bengaluru on 28 Feb 2025
* 895 runs by Ellyse Perry (RCB) vs DC in Bengaluru on 1 Mar 2025
* 939 runs by Meg Lanning (DC) vs GG in Lucknow on 7 Mar 2025
* 972 runs by Ellyse Perry (RCB) vs MI in Mumbai BS on 11 Mar 2025
* 997 runs by Nat Sciver-Brunt (MI) vs GG in Mumbai BS on 13 Mar 2025
* Final runs tally (at end of WPL 2025): 1027 runs by Sciver-Brunt (MI) vs DC in Mumbai BS on 15 Mar 2025

41 } The number of wickets claimed by Mumbai Indians' Hayley Matthews. This is the most by any bowler in WPL history. During the WPL eliminator game on 13 March 2025, she became the first bowler to claim 40 wickets in this women's T20 tournament. The data below shows how the record for leading wicket-taker in WPL has changed hands over the past three years, since 2023.

The leading wicket-takers in WPL since 2023 at various stages

* First wicket was claimed by Tanuja Kanwer (GG) vs MI in New Mumbai (DYP Stadium) on 4 March 2023
* Two wickets by Sneh Rana (GG) vs MI in New Mumbai (DYP Stadium) on 4 March 2023
* Three wickets by Saika Ishaque (MI) vs GG in New Mumbai (DYP Stadium) on 4 March 2023
* Five wickets by Tara Norris (DC) vs RCB in Mumbai BS on 5 March 2023
* Six wickets by Saika Ishaque (MI) vs RCB in Mumbai BS on 6 March 2023
* 13 wickets by Sophie Ecclestone (UPW) vs GG in Mumbai BS on 20 Mar 2023
* 17 wickets by Amelia Kerr (MI) vs DC in Bengaluru on 23 Feb 2024
* 23 wickets by Sophie Ecclestone (UPW) vs RCB in Bengaluru on 4 Mar 2024
* 37 wickets by Hayley Matthews (MI) vs RCB in Mumbai BS on 11 Mar 2025
* Final wickets tally (at end of WPL 2025): 41 wickets by Hayley Matthews (MI) vs DC in Mumbai BS on 15 Mar 2025

Mumbai Indians' Nat Sciver-Brunt.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

Mumbai Indians' Hayley Matthews.
EMMANUAL YOGINIU

225 } UP Warriorz's (UPW) total against RCB in Lucknow on 8 March 2025. This is now the highest team total in the history of Women's Premier League (WPL), bettering the previous highest of 223/2 by Delhi Capitals also against RCB at the Brabourne Stadium in Mumbai on 5 March 2023. Interestingly, this is the first time UPW has crossed 200-plus in its WPL history, going past its previous best of 181/7 against Gujarat Giants in Mumbai on 20 March 2023. With this effort, UPW becomes the fifth and last WPL side to breach the 200-plus total, with all the other four sides having done it twice. RCB now has the dubious record of conceding 200-plus total on four occasions, with Gujarat Giants conceding it thrice and UPW twice.

Highest totals in WPL cricket

Total	(ov)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result	Batting
225/5	(20)	UPW	RCB	Lucknow	8 Mar 2025	Won	1st
223/2	I20)	DC	RCB	Mumbai BS	5 Mar 2023	Won	1st
213/4	(20)	MI	GG	Mumbai BS	13 Mar 2025	Won	1st
213/10	(19.3)	RCB	UPW	Lucknow	8 Mar 2025	Lost	2nd
211/4	(20)	DC	UPW	New Mumbai DYP	7 Mar 2023	Won	1st

Note: *RCB's reply of 213 (listed above) to UPW's record total is now the highest by a side batting second in WPL bettering RCB's 202/4 (18.3 ov) against GG in Vadodara on 14 Feb 2025. Incidentally, RCB's total is now the highest in a successful run chase in WPL.*

2 } The number of occasions a combined aggregate of 400-plus runs by both sides have been achieved in a WPL match. This season, this was done twice, thus bettering the previous best of 391 runs in the WPL match between Gujarat Giants (201/7) and RCB (190/6) at the Brabourne Stadium, Mumbai, on 8 March 2023. Incidentally, the aggregate of 438 runs in Lucknow is the second-highest in all Women's T20s after the 490 runs between Argentina (417/1) and Chile (63) in Buenos Aires on 13 October 2023.

Highest match aggregates (combined totals by both sides) in WPL cricket

Total	Team1 (total)	Team2 (total)	Venue	Date	Won by
438/15	UPW (225/5)	RCB (213/10)	Lucknow	8 March 2025	UPW
403/9	GG (201/5)	RCB (202/4)	Vadodara	14 Feb 2025	RCB
391/13	GG (201/7)	RCB (190/6)	Mumbai BS	8 Mar 2023	GG
387/12	RCB (199/3)	MI (188/9)	Mumbai BS	11 Mar 2025	RCB
386/10	DC (223/2)	RCB (163/8)	Mumbai BS	5 Mar 2023	DC

4 } The number of occasions a batter in Women's T20 cricket has remained unbeaten one short of the three-figure score. While playing for UP Warriorz against RCB in Lucknow on 8 March 2025, Australian Georgia Voll became the first to do so in WPL history. It was the first instance by a batter in Women's T20 cricket on Indian soil. Georgia Voll's score is now the highest by any batter in WPL history. Her unbeaten knock is statistically superior to Sophie Devine's 99 for RCB against GG in Mumbai (BS) on 18 March 2023. The second table has the details.

Individual unbeaten scores of 99 in Women's T20 cricket

Balls	Batter	Batting	Inns	For	Opponent	Venue	Date	Result
53	Sophie Devine	#2	1	Adelaide Strikers	Hobart Hurricanes	Adelaide	8 Jan 2019	Tied+
58	Beth Mooney	#1	2	Perth Scorchers	Sydney Sixers	Perth (Lilac Hill)	5 Nov 2022	Won
74	Hayley Matthews	#1	1	West Indies	Australia	N Sydney	1 Oct 2023	Lost
56	Georgia Voll	#2	1	UP Warrioz	RCB	Lucknow	8 Mar 2025	Won

Note: *Also, Beth Mooney (99*) for Manchester Originals against Northern Superchargers in Manchester on 11 Aug 2024 (in the Hundred's Competition).*
+ won Super over

Highest individual scores in WPL cricket

Runs	(Balls)	S/R	Batter	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result	Batting	Inns
99*	(56)	176.79	Georgia Voll	UPW	RCB	Lucknow	8 Mar 2025	Won	#2	1
99	(36)	275.00	Sophie Devine	RCB	GG	Mumbai BS	18 Mar 2023	Won	#2	2
96*	(47)	204.26	Alyssa Healy	UPW	RCB	Mumbai BS	10 Mar 2023	Won	#2	2
96*	(59)	162.71	Beth Mooney	GG	UPW	Lucknow	3 Mar 2025	Won	#1	1
95*	(48)	197.92	Harmanpreet Kaur	MI	GG	Delhi	9 Mar 2024	Won	#4	2

UP Warriorz' Georgia Voll.
SANDEEP SAXENA

All records are correct and updated until 15 March 2025.

1st

Wrecker-in-chief: Krunal Pandya's three for 29, including the wickets of Ajinkya Rahane, Venkatesh Iyer, and Rinku Singh, set up Royal Challengers Bengaluru's win over Kolkata Knight Riders. KKR posted 174/8, which RCB chased down with 22 balls to spare. RITU RAJ KONWAR

FOR MORE IMAGES

2nd

Pocket dynamite: Ishan Kishan lit up the stage with a 45-ball century — the first of the season — as Sunrisers Hyderabad posted 286/6, the second-highest total in league history. Rajasthan Royals fought hard but fell short, managing 242/6 in response. K. V. S. GIRI

3rd

Blink and you miss: M.S. Dhoni executed a lightning-fast 0.12-second stumping to dismiss Suryakumar Yadav off Noor Ahmad, who took 4/18. Chennai Super Kings restricted Mumbai Indians to 155/9 and chased it down with five balls to spare. R. RAGU

4th

Impact Player: Delhi Capitals' Impact sub Ashutosh Sharma delivered in style, smashing 66 off 31 balls to secure a thrilling one-wicket win. Chasing 210, DC edged past Lucknow Super Giants in a last-over finish. K. R. DEEPAK

Five bold ideas that could shake up IPL!

T20 cricket is evolving fast! From **all-spin attacks** to playing without a wicketkeeper, here are five bold strategies that could redefine the IPL and push the game's limits.

Dhruva Prasad and Pranay Rajiv
dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

The IPL 2025 season is set for a shake-up with two major rule changes — bowlers can once again use saliva on the ball, and a second ball will be introduced after the 11th over of the second innings to tackle the dew factor.

While these tweaks aim to balance the game, here are five more potential strategic innovations that teams could follow to make the league even more thrilling.

All-spin attack

Earlier this year, Paarl Royals pushed the boundaries of T20 bowling strategies by becoming the first team to use only spinners for all 20 overs during an SA20 match against Pretoria Capitals.

The Royals deployed Bjorn Fortuin, Dunith Wellalage, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Nqabayomzi Peter and Joe Root as their sole bowling options, securing an 11-run victory.

Given how much more favourable Indian conditions are for spinners, it seems only a matter of time before an IPL team follows this blueprint.

Chepauk's historical preference for spinners makes Chennai Super Kings an ideal candidate to experiment with the all-spin ploy. CSK also has five top-quality spin options at its disposal – Ravindra Jadeja, R. Ashwin, Noor Ahmad, Rachin Ravindra and Shreyas Gopal – should it choose to go down that route.

SPORTZPICS

Flipping the batting order

It is not uncommon for cricket to borrow ideas from one format to another. A glance at the recently concluded Ranji Trophy final offers the IPL a potential tactical innovation.

After being inserted by Kerala on a pitch with a green tinge, Vidarbha flipped its batting order to shield its in-form top order from the new ball.

The strategy worked well, as Vidarbha posted 379 in the first innings and went on to claim the title by securing the first-innings lead.

This could be a viable game plan against teams with a formidable PowerPlay bowling attack. Mumbai Indians, with Jasprit Bumrah, Trent Boult, Deepak Chahar and Mujeeb Ur Rahman, are the most obvious example.

In such situations, teams could send in lower-order batters to attack from the outset, neutralising the opposition's advantage and allowing their best batters an

Impact Fielder: Anukul Roy has frequently served as a specialist substitute fielder for his IPL teams. SPORTZPICS

easier entry point.

Playing without a wicketkeeper in the final overs

In 2015, Worcestershire made an unprecedented move in a NatWest T20 Blast game against Northamptonshire.

Defending a 212-run target, Worcestershire had Moeen Ali bowl the 16th over without a wicketkeeper, positioning regular stumper Ben Cox at fly slip without his pads and gloves.

This strategy allows the team an additional outfielder, which could be decisive in a closely contested match. It could work particularly well for a team with a wicketkeeper proficient in the outfield. Among the IPL 2025 teams, Rajasthan Royals could be an ideal candidate to experiment with this approach, given Sanju Samson's **(pic, facing page)** fielding skills.

Specialist substitute fielder

Before his breakthrough in IPL 2023, Rinku Singh was primarily used as a specialist substitute fielder by Kolkata Knight Riders. Anukul Roy's IPL career has followed a similar trajectory.

A substitute fielder provides valuable relief to fast bowlers in hot and humid conditions. A specialist in this role, however, can also save crucial runs in the field.

Interestingly, Cricket Australia is considering introducing a rule in the Big Bash League allowing teams to select a specialist fielder, who would then be replaced by a designated hitter when the side bats. The provision is designed to conserve the batter's energy and maximise their power-hitting ability.

Starting with three overseas players

Rajasthan Royals successfully employed the strategy of fielding three overseas players on multiple occasions last season.

Against Delhi Capitals, it named only three — Jos Buttler, Shimron Hetmyer and Trent Boult — in its starting XI.

This gave it the flexibility to bring in pacer Nandre Burger when it bowled.

The move allowed Rajasthan to introduce Rovman Powell as an Impact Player in the event of a batting collapse, while also providing the cushion of a sixth bowling option if Powell was not required with the bat.

While most teams prefer to name four overseas players in their playing XIs, this strategy enables them to maximise the Impact Player provision and adjust their combination according to match situations.

Passion and hustle: Yellow fever takes over M.A. Chidambaram Stadium as CSK fans gear up for the IPL opener, while vendors cash in on the frenzy. NIGAMANTH P

IPL fever: A lifeline for some, a spectacle for all

Our correspondents capture the essence of IPL's opening week — thrilling action on the field and **captivating stories** beyond it.

Big bucks, big hits: Ishan Kishan, bought by Sunrisers Hyderabad for Rs.11.25 crore at the IPL 2025 mega auction, repaid the faith with a barnstorming century in his team's campaign opener. K. V. S. GIRI

Having attended numerous Indian Premier League (IPL) matches as a fan at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium, the Diary was now set for its maiden El Clasico — this time, as a journalist.

Arriving four hours before the toss, the Diary found itself immersed in a vibrant sea of yellow, soaking in the pre-game atmosphere of Chennai Super Kings' season opener against Mumbai Indians.

Since its experimental beginnings in 2008, the IPL has witnessed explosive growth in both popularity and revenue. However, its commercial impact stretches far beyond the tournament itself.

"Outside of selling jerseys and flags here, I do odd jobs, but I never have a steady income. The IPL and other international matches here are not just entertainment; they're a crucial source of income for people like me," explained Rakesh, one of the many hawkers surrounding the stadium.

Despite knowing that most in the crowd would be supporting the home side, Rakesh cleverly caters to away fans as well, selling first-copy jerseys, caps, and flags.

Like many other vendors, he embodies the adage "make hay while the sun shines," making the most of the three-month IPL season to secure his livelihood.

Nigamanth P

Maiden century

Ticket sales in India are always a tricky affair. India struggled when Coldplay came along, with the popular public sentiment being one of collective disappointment. The IPL is no different. When your team has a penchant for big scores, the desperation to secure entry means ticket demand skyrockets. The black market promptly responds.

On the eve of SRH's campaign opener against Rajasthan Royals, the local police nabbed a few people trying to make a quick buck by selling tickets at inflated rates. While the men in uniform were quick to dismiss it as a regular occurrence, the novelty for the TV cameras present — rushing to secure footage of the arrest to loop into the evening primetime news — wasn't lost on anyone.

The action was just as frenetic on the field. Rain predictions came true, except precipitation made way for pyrotechnics.

The stadium DJ, who had to rely on local tunes to pump up the crowd, soon got help from Travis Head and Ishan Kishan's fireworks with the bat. Kishan, a new SRH recruit, reciprocated the love from the fans, after the disappointments of 2024, with a maiden IPL ton and flying kisses to the stands. Can't do better than that for first impressions, right?

Anirudh Velamuri

PIC: PUNJAB KINGS

WATCH THE INTERVIEW

« Being an all-rounder should be encouraged, not sidelined »

MARCUS STOINIS

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Marcus Stoinis, one of the game's top all-rounders, isn't just known for his skills on the field — he's also unafraid to speak his mind. A month after announcing his retirement from ODI cricket, the 35-year-old has shifted his focus entirely to T20s. As a member of Punjab Kings in this IPL season, he is determined to help the franchise secure its first title.

Excited to reunite with Ricky Ponting and Shreyas Iyer, Stoinis also backs the BCCI's decision to introduce a second new ball in the second innings of night games, calling it a 'smart move.'

In a conversation with *Sportstar*, he reflects on stepping away from ODIs and shares his thoughts on why he isn't a fan of the IPL's Impact Player rule.

You were one of the major buys for Punjab Kings in the auction. As a new season begins, what are you looking forward to?

We are here to win. It's a new cycle, and there have been plenty of changes across the competition, with many teams reshuffling their squads.

This is a new franchise for me — although I was part of the team back in 2016 when it was known as Kings XI Punjab. It's a franchise that hasn't tasted success yet, but we believe we have a strong squad on paper. Our aim is to build something meaningful over the next three years and establish sustained success for the team.

You worked closely with Ponting and Shreyas at Delhi Capitals. Now that they are leading Punjab Kings, how much of an advantage is that for you?

It's definitely an advantage for me, but I also believe it's no coincidence — it's by design from the big guy, Rick (Ponting). He's a big fan of Shreyas and has worked closely with him for years.

We all spent time together at Delhi Capitals, and I was with Shreyas in my first IPL season as well. I've also worked with Rick for a long time in Australia.

The fact that many of us have shared that experience is a big plus for the team. But in a long tournament like the IPL, getting off to a strong start is crucial.

Your retirement from ODI cricket just before the Champions Trophy came as a surprise. Was it a hasty decision?

From the outside, it may have seemed last-minute, but it was something I had discussed with our Australian coach, Andrew McDonald, for a while. With the next ODI World Cup [in 2027] still some way off, I felt it was the right time for new players to step in.

A hamstring niggle during the SA20 may have sped up the decision, especially with the IPL following soon after. T20 cricket suits my skill set and aligns with how I want to manage my career for longevity.

I've spent years balancing T20s for Australia, the franchise circuit, and one-day cricket. At this stage, my focus is on playing as long as possible at the highest level — potentially into my 40s, like Faf du Plessis. That excites me.

Ultimately, the decision was about extending my career and playing in the best competitions, and it was made in collaboration with Andrew, as all my major decisions are.

With several senior players missing the Champions Trophy, do you think Australia lacked experience in crunch moments?

Of course, but the only way to gain experience is by being in those situations. It was an exciting opportunity for others to step up and handle the pressure.

While some players were certainly missed, that's the beauty of cricket. Look at India — young players are stepping up in every series, and different guys are making an impact in almost every game. That's how depth is built.

But am I ready to let that happen

IPL Factfile

Matches: 96
Runs: 1,866
Batting Average: 28.27
Strike Rate: 142.01
Highest Score: 124*
100s/50s: 1 / 9
Wickets: 43
Bowling Average: 29.63
Economy Rate: 9.52
Best Bowling: 4/15
Notable Seasons:
2020 (Delhi Capitals): 352 runs, SR 148.52, 3 fifties
2023 (Lucknow Super Giants): 408 runs, SR 150.00 (best season)

in T20 cricket? No. *(laughs)*

All the best to them in one-day cricket, though!

The use of saliva on the ball is allowed in this IPL. As an all-rounder, what's your take?

To be honest, in white-ball cricket, saliva doesn't make much of a difference when shining the ball.

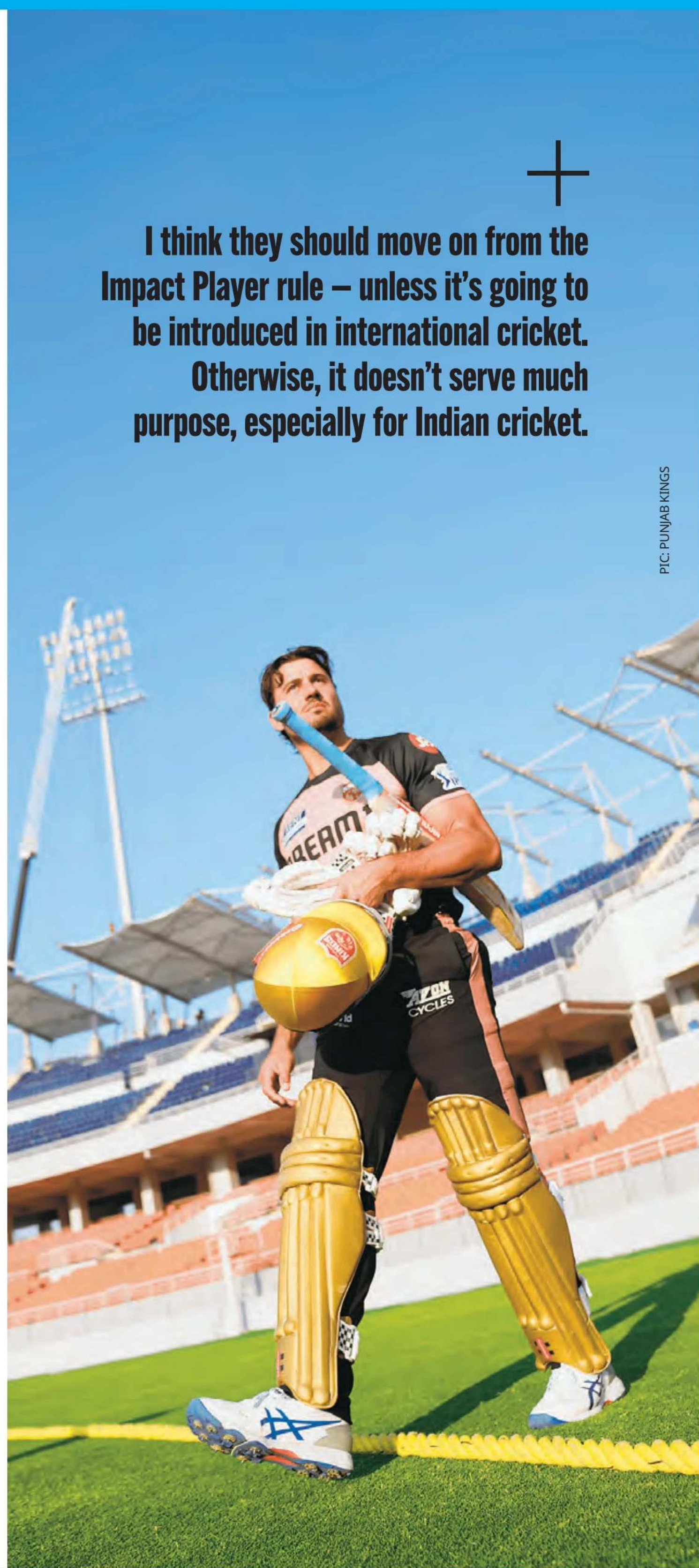
Should it return to international cricket? Personally, yes. We all understand why it was banned, but I think it's fine to bring it back.

Will it help bowlers? I'm not sure it will have much impact in white-ball cricket. But the new rule allowing a ball change in the second innings is a good move — it could balance the contest between batting first and second.

There's been debate about the Impact Player rule making all-rounders redundant. What's your view?

I think they should move on from it — unless it's going to be introduced in international cricket. Otherwise, it doesn't serve much purpose, especially for Indian cricket.

If the goal is to develop all-rounders for the international stage, they need exposure at the highest level, and the IPL is that platform. The rules should align with international cricket.



Teams that planned around all-rounders in the previous cycle were at a disadvantage when the rule was introduced midway. That wasn't ideal.

Being an all-rounder is one of the great challenges of T20 cricket. You're involved in all three aspects of the game, and that should be encouraged. Bowlers know they'll be targeted, but that's what makes the role exciting.

I would love to see the rule scrapped. I actually thought it would be this year — but clearly, it's not *(smiles).*

The Impact Player rule isn't used in international cricket or some franchise leagues. How challenging is it for an all-rounder to adapt in the IPL?

I don't overthink it. I prepare as if I'm going to bowl or bat, and when the opportunity comes—or doesn't—that's just part of professional sport.

That's what makes these competitions great. No complaints — you get ready, take responsibility whether things go well or not, and look to improve in the next game.

It's the same challenge everywhere. But of course, I'd love to know in advance and be thrown into the contest. That's what I enjoy most about cricket.

With 300-plus scores becoming a real possibility in T20 cricket, has the format tilted too much in favour of batters? Will the new ball-change rule help bowlers?

The decision to change the ball midway through the second innings is a great move. Dew plays a big role, and this should help level the contest, making teams less reliant on the toss.

High scores are exciting, but they also highlight the quality of bowlers. The best, like (Jasprit) Bumrah, stand out because they execute their skills consistently, even on good batting tracks.

Last season's IPL saw unusually high scores compared to other leagues. With the T20 World Cup in India approaching, we can expect another high-scoring tournament — which, for fans at home, makes for great entertainment.

Punjab Kings has gone 17 seasons without a title. What's the team's realistic target this year?

We've just come together, so those discussions will evolve. But with a new cycle, new coach, and new players—many of whom have worked together before—it feels like a fresh start. There's no baggage from past seasons. From the outside, history might be a talking point, but within the team, we see this as a new chapter.

GETTY IMAGES

With Rick and Shreyas leading, and a strong Australian contingent, we have the chance to build something special over the next three years. The first year of a cycle is always the most exciting—it sets the foundation for sustained success.

The squad has a good mix of youth and experience. As a senior player, what are your thoughts on the uncapped Indian players?

There's real talent in our squad, making selection a tough challenge. Right now, it feels like 18-20 players could make the XI, which is a great problem to have.

For the younger players, the message is simple — play freely and back yourselves. They're here for a reason, and this is their opportunity to shine.

The balance of youth and experience benefits everyone. The youngsters bring energy, while the experienced players provide guidance in pressure situations.

You've spoken highly of Ponting. Is he one of the toughest coaches you've worked with?

I've worked with Rick a lot, and I wouldn't call him a tough taskmaster, but he sets high standards. He values preparation, work ethic, and attitude. If you get those right, he's your biggest supporter.

One of his strengths is his approach to communication. He has a filter — before speaking, he considers whether his words will help you improve or lift your spirits. If they won't, he holds back. That makes him an excellent teacher and mentor.

Rick's infectious attitude and winning mindset align with mine. I love hard work, discipline, and playing to win, which is why we work so well together.

बिहार राज्य खेल प्राधिकरण
BSSA
BIHAR STATE SPORTS AUTHORITY

खेल विभाग

SPORTS IN BIHAR
A RISING POWERHOUSE

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar

Inaugrated the state's first Sports Acadamy and Sports University in Rajgir.

Bihar, known for its rich history, cultural heritage, and strong academic legacy, is now making waves in the world of sports. In recent years, the state has emerged as a growing hub for athletic excellence, thanks to a series of groundbreaking initiatives spearheaded by the Bihar government under Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. Investments in infrastructure, athlete support programs, and a focused sports policy have set Bihar on a trajectory toward national and international success.

A significant achievement for Bihar's athletes! Winning 12 medals, including a gold, after 25 years at the National Games is a testament to their hard work, dedication, and the state's growing sporting culture. The fact that all the medal winners are homegrown talents makes it even more commendable. This remarkable achievement is a testament to the state's evolving sports culture, driven by strategic planning, modern facilities, and an unwavering commitment to nurturing local talent. Bihar is no longer just participating in competitions—it is now winning, setting new records, and cementing its place in India's sporting landscape.

The Nitish government has made substantial investments in enhancing sports infrastructure across Bihar. A key initiative is the development of a state-of-the-art Sports Complex in Rajgir, spanning 90 acres with an investment of ₹750 crore. In addition to this world-class facility, the government is focused on strengthening grassroots sports by developing Panchayat clubs, local stadiums, and multi-purpose halls across the state. This initiative aims to make sports more accessible, provide athletes with a level playing field, and foster a strong foundation for emerging talent to excel at higher levels.

Building the Foundation: Bihar's Sports Development Strategy

With a vision to increase Bihar's National Games medal tally by 200% by 2030, the state government has laid out a comprehensive roadmap. This ambitious goal requires a multi-pronged approach that includes:

Grassroots Talent Identification: The state has launched talent scouting programs in schools, colleges, and rural areas, ensuring that no promising athlete goes unnoticed. And the state's philosophy of scouting is potential based and not purely performance based. "it's easy to spot loud talent, but difficult to find whispering talent that truly shines".

BIHAR IN NATIONAL GAMES 2025: 1 GOLD | 6 SILVER | 5 BRONZE

The International Sports Complex

To further its commitment to grassroots sports development, the Bihar State Sports Authority has launched the Mashaal Program—the world's largest grassroots talent identification initiative. This groundbreaking program aims to reach over 50 lakh athletes and 35,000+ schools across the state, ensuring that promising talent is identified at the earliest stages. A structured roadmap is being implemented to provide these athletes with a clear pathway for growth, enabling them to progress to state-level high-performance centres for advanced training and development.

Infrastructure Development: The government is upgrading training centres, building world-class sports infrastructure at every commissionerate , Khel Bhawan at every district and providing state-of-the-art fitness facilities across Bihar. Infrastructure development continues to be a key priority, alongside the upgrading of existing facilities, to ensure athletes across Bihar have widespread access to quality sports infrastructure. This initiative aims to nurture homegrown talent, strengthen grassroots sports, and create a robust sporting ecosystem that enables athletes to excel at every level.

Financial Support & Incentives: Scholarships, stipends, and sponsorship programs are motivating young athletes to pursue sports professionally. The state has introduced several athlete-focused schemes, including "Medal Lao, Naukri Pao", providing government jobs to sports athletes and local competitions like Khel Mallyudh, where winners are awarded cash prizes. These initiatives provide financial support that athletes can utilize for training, skill enhancement, and overall development, reinforcing Bihar's commitment to nurturing sporting talent.

Sports Science & Nutrition: Athletes now have access to specialized training, physiotherapy, and nutrition plans to enhance performance and prevent injuries. The state is leveraging sports science and technology as key enablers to enhance its initiatives and support athletes at every level. By integrating advanced methodologies and sports technology, Bihar is ensuring that athletes receive both hard and soft support, fostering their holistic growth and maximizing their potential.

Competitive Exposure: Bihar is organizing state level leagues and national-level tournaments, offering athletes the experience needed to compete at higher levels with confidence. Additionally, by bringing international sporting events to the state, Bihar is not only strengthening its sports ecosystem but also enhancing infrastructure, upgrading coaching standards, and empowering athletes. These international events are strategically integrated with various sports development initiatives, ensuring a comprehensive upliftment of the state's sporting landscape.

Rajgir's International Sports Complex: A Game Changer

One of Bihar's flagship projects is the International Sports Complex in Rajgir, spanning 90 acres and developed at a cost of ₹750 crore. Modelled after the ancient Nalanda University, this greenfield complex features Indoor and outdoor stadiums covering 24 sports disciplines, including 14 outdoor and 10 indoor games an international cricket stadium that meets BCCI standards, set to host IPL and international matches from 2025 and State-of-the-art training facilities for emerging and elite athletes. This cutting-edge infrastructure is set to become a cornerstone of Bihar's sports revolution, providing athletes with world-class training opportunities right at home.

Aiming for Global Glory: Bihar's International Sports Vision

Bihar is now targeting success beyond national competitions, with a clear focus on excelling at the Commonwealth Games, Asian Games, and the Olympics. The state has implemented several high-performance initiatives, including:

International Coaching Exposure: Athletes are receiving training from globally renowned coaches, with opportunities for overseas training camps.

Scientific Training Methods: AI-based performance tracking, biomechanics analysis, and high-altitude training techniques are being introduced to give Bihar's athletes a competitive edge.

Public-Private Partnerships: Corporate sponsorships and private investments are ensuring sustained funding and top-tier training programs is on the cards.

Holistic Athlete Welfare Programs: Mental health support, career guidance, and medical assistance are now integral to athlete development.

Prioritizing Olympic Sports for Global Impact

To establish Bihar as a force in global sports, the government is focusing on individual Olympic disciplines where India has traditionally excelled, medal winning opportunities are more, and based on talent/ gene pool, such as:

Athletics,
Swimming,
Boxing,
Archery,
Shooting,
Fencing,
Weightlifting,
Cycling,
Wrestling

Specialized sports academies shall be dedicated to these disciplines in the near future to provide structured training under internationally reputed coaches.

Factfile

Rajgir's International Sports Complex

Size: **90 acres**
Investment: ₹ **750 crore**
Disciplines: **24** (14 outdoor & 10 indoor)
Capacity: **40,000**

Bihar Sports University: A Landmark Initiative

A major milestone in Bihar's sporting journey is the establishment of Bihar Sports University, now recognized by the UGC under Section 2(f) of the UGC Act, 1956. This university which is part of the International Sports Complex at Rajgir is set to revolutionize sports education and research in India.

Academic Programs & Career Opportunities

Starting from the 2025-26 academic year, Bihar Sports University will offer:

Undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in physical education, sports sciences, and sports coaching.

Diploma and certification programs to train future coaches, analysts, and sports scientists.
Scholarships for students from rural and economically weaker backgrounds.

This initiative ensures that Bihar's youth can build careers in sports beyond just being athletes—creating a pipeline of future coaches, physiotherapists, and administrators not just for the state, but for the entire country. By fostering local talent and expertise, Bihar is taking a significant step towards self-sufficiency in sports development, reducing its reliance on outsourced professionals such as qualified coaches, sports scientists, and other key personnel essential to a thriving sports ecosystem. Moving forward, this effort will not only enhance the state's sporting infrastructure but also contribute to the nation's overall growth in sports excellence.

Above: Additional Chief Secretary, Sports, Dr. B. Rajender, IAS interacting with players from Begusarai

Government Support: A Lifeline for Athletes

71

Athletes appointed in Governent jobs under ***Medal Lao, Naukri Pao*** scheme

Recognizing the financial challenges many athletes face, the Bihar government has rolled out game-changing policies:

- ***"Medal Lao, Naukri Pao" (Win a Medal, Get a Job) Scheme - 71 athletes have already secured government jobs through this initiative. Ensures financial stability and motivates young athletes to pursue sports as a career.***

- ***Sports Scholarships: Fuelling Future Champions - Emerging Athletes: ₹3 lakh per player per year. Elite Athletes - Up to ₹20 lakh annually for top performers at the national and international levels. Grassroots level Sports Scholarships - ₹5 lakh per athlete, benefiting over 123 sportspersons in the state.***

This structured support system removes financial barriers, allowing athletes to focus solely on training and competition.

Expanding Sports Infrastructure Across Bihar

Bihar is making massive investments in sports infrastructure at the grassroots level. Our flagship program is ploughing the fields today through MGNREGA to reap Olympians of tomorrow, developing the field of play in every block. The rest of Bihar's sports infrastructure plans are listed below.

- ***Khel Bhawan & Gymnasiums in Every District: 25 already completed.***

- ***International Standard Indoor Sports c omplexes in all divisional headquarters***

- ***Khel Clubs to promote community participation in sports.***

- ***Sports city in 100 acres at Punpun near Patna.***

Bihar's Global Sporting Events: Hosting the Best

Bihar has successfully positioned itself as a prime destination for major sporting events.

Historic Hosting of the Women's Asian Champions Trophy (2024) - The successful organization of this prestigious tournament earned Bihar international recognition, proving its capability to host world-class events.

Major Upcoming Sports Events in 2025 - Bihar is set to host the following national and international mega events, including:

- ***World Cup Women's Kabaddi (Rajgir, June 2025)***
- ***World Cup Sepaktakraw (Patliputra, March 2025)***
- ***Khelo India Youth & Para Games (May 2025)***
- ***Asian U20 Rugby Sevens Championship (Rajgir, August 2025)***
- ***Men's Asia Cup Hockey Tournament (Rajgir, August-September 2025)***

These events will boost Bihar's sports culture, attract global attention, and inspire local athletes.

Bihar's Sporting Icons: Leading the Way

Several athletes from Bihar have already made their mark on the international stage, inspiring future generations:

These emerging icons, hailing from various corners of the state, have showcased their exceptional talent and have become beacons of inspiration.

Top tier: Rugby Girls of Bihar felicitated by CM Nitish Kumar on their clinching silver in the recent National Games, Uttarakhand.

Below: Hon'ble Sports Minister Shri Surendra Mehta and ACS Sports Dr. B. Rajender, IAS, felicitating and encouraging a traditional Malyuddh athlete.

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS:

Emerging category:
Upto ₹3 lakh
Elite category:
Upto ₹20 lakh
Mid-level category:
Upto ₹5 lakh

Athlete	Discipline	Recent Achievements
Shailesh Kumar	Para Athletics	2024 Summer Paralympics at Paris Participation
Mahi Swetraj	Swimming	77th Senior National Swimming Championship - 3 Gold
Anshika Kumari	Archery	38th National Games - Silver
Mohammed Reyan	Chess	37th National Open Championship Gold
Akash Kumar	Fencing	38th National Games Silver and Bronze & 35th Senior Nationals Fencing Championships
Usman Sultan Ansari	Boxing	Senior National Boxing Championship - Bronze
Suhani Kumari	Cycling	National Track Championship 2024 - Silver & 68th SGFI Road Cycling (U-19) - Gold
Prahlad Kumar	Cycling	National Track Championship 2024 - Silver
Monika Sharma	Weightlifting	ASMITA Khelo India Women's Weightlifting League - Gold
Khushboo Kumari	Weightlifting	ASMITA Khelo India Women's Weightlifting League - Silver
Khushi Kumari	Weightlifting	Inter University Weightlifting Championship - Silver
Shalini Kumari	Weightlifting	ASMITA Khelo India Women's Weightlifting League - Gold
Chandan Kumar Singh	Lawn Bowl	38th National Games - Silver
Nishi Kumari	Heptathlon	39th National Junior Athletics Championship 2024 - Gold

The Road Ahead: Bihar's Vision for 2047

By 2047, Bihar aims to be India's leading sports state, producing Olympic champions, hosting international events, and setting new standards for sports governance.

The future of sports in Bihar is bright, with unwavering government support, a surge in young talent, and a growing culture of excellence. With every investment in infrastructure, training, and policy-making, Bihar is carving a path toward sporting greatness—one medal at a time. Bihar's sporting journey is just beginning, but its ambitions are sky-high. With sustained efforts, the state will continue to produce world-class athletes who will make India proud on the global stage. The best is yet to come!

One for the album: Archery star Anshika, after securing a spot in the Indian Senior Archery Team, being presented with a bow by Hon'ble Chief Minister Shri Nitish Kumar.

Below: Hon'ble Chief Minister Shri Nitish Kumar felicitating an athlete for securing a government job under the "Medal Lao, Naukri Pao" scheme

KEERTHANA SWAMINATHAN

Boon or bane?

Early success in sport can have a **long-lasting** impact on a young athlete's career.

In today's sporting world, athletes as young as 13 are thrust into the limelight, as seen with a 13-year-old cricketer securing a ₹1.10 crore IPL contract. This phenomenon spans across sports in India — from badminton to football — where young talent is celebrated and monetised early. While these opportunities can be life-changing, they bring enormous psychological consequences.

Early success often robs young athletes of a normal childhood. Media attention, constant comparisons, and public scrutiny become their new reality. Young athletes begin to fear losing their spot or fading into irrelevance. These pressures blur the line between personal identity and sporting success. Self-worth becomes dependent on performance, leaving little room for a healthy sense of self.

Moreover, sudden exposure to wealth brings its own challenges. Young athletes often lack financial literacy, and may experience shifts in peer dynamics, with feelings of envy or isolation. Furthermore, the pressure to 'justify' their financial worth places a psychological burden to deliver constant high performance. Their relationship with the sport becomes transactional leading to heightened anxiety and stress.

But this phenomenon is not without its positives. Young role models are now emerging across sports, inspiring countless children to dream big. Cricketers like Shafali Verma and Riyan Parag have shown what is possible at a young age, breaking barriers and encouraging their peers to set ambitious goals. International stars like Jude Bellingham in football and Coco Gauff in tennis prove that early starts can translate into sustainable success when nurtured appropriately.

That said, this cultural shift has drawbacks. Today, playing in the IPL or winning a world championship at the age of 13 or 14 may be achievable for some, but they can be counterproductive for others. Not every child will become a professional athlete. Sports should also be valued for fitness, fun, and overall development rather than just competition. By tying sports participation solely to success, we risk alienating children who may not excel competitively but would still benefit from playing. Ensuring that young athletes enjoy regular childhood activities is critical. Parents and coaches can foster this balance by setting aside dedicated time for hobbies, unstructured play, or social activities outside of sports.

In the whirlwind of fame and financial success, mental health is often sidelined. Many young athletes lack access to emotional regulation tools, coping strategies, or life skills to manage their unique challenges. The absence of sports psychologists or a support system leaves them vulnerable to stress, burnout, and long-term mental health struggles.

Parents play a crucial role in shaping how young athletes navigate fame and expectations. Instead of projecting unfulfilled dreams, parents must offer unconditional emotional support. Encouraging balance between sports, education, and social life ensures their child's holistic development.

Young athletes deserve more than just success — they deserve balance, growth, and well-being. It requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving parents, coaches, team management, and sports psychologists. By prioritising mental health, financial education, and a process-driven mindset, we can ensure that young talent thrives sustainably. The ultimate goal is to help young athletes build a foundation for long-term success while protecting their mental and emotional well-being. Only then can they enjoy the sport they love while achieving their true potential.

The author is a sports and exercise psychologist who graduated from Loughborough University.

FOR PARENTS

Dos:

Encourage balance between sports, education, and social activities.
Provide unconditional emotional support, irrespective of results.
Reinforce the idea that failure is part of growth.

Don'ts:

Project unfulfilled dreams or ambitions onto the child.
Tie the child's worth solely to performance or results.
Neglect signs of burnout or emotional distress.

FOR YOUNG ATHLETES

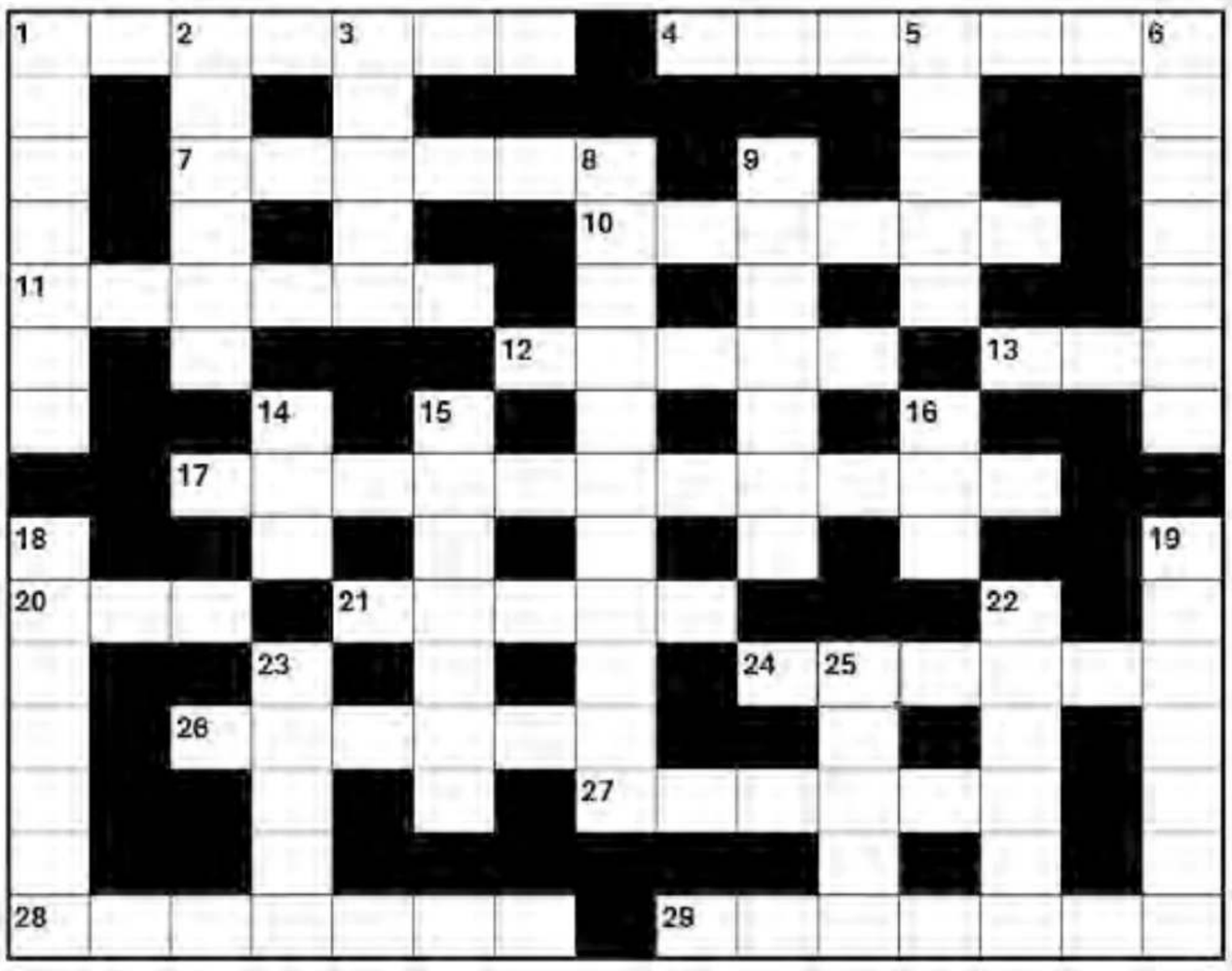
Dos:

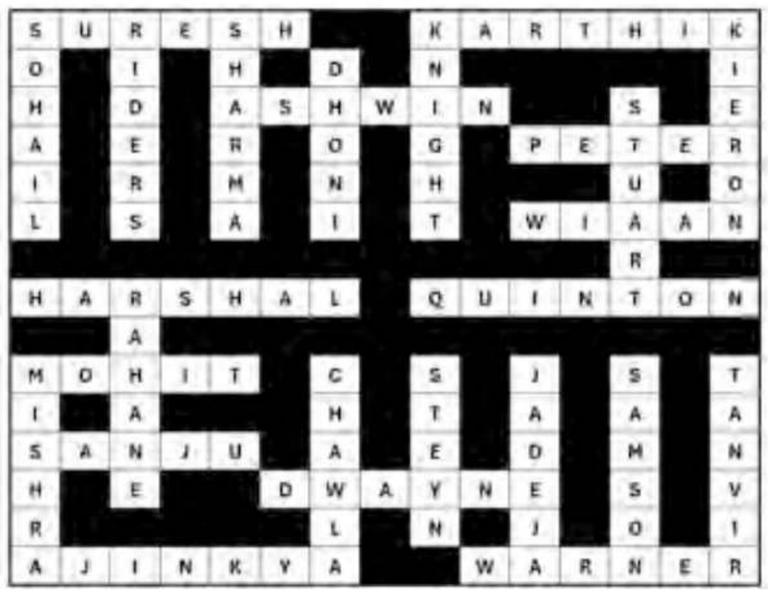
Focus on skill development and enjoying the sport.
Build a 'failure resume' to learn from past experiences.
Seek mentorship and guidance from experienced athletes.

Don'ts:

Let success create a bubble of infallibility.
Compare constantly with peers or succumb to envy.
Ignore opportunities for personal growth beyond sports.

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who won the women's singles title in this year's Australian Open? (7)

4 Which Indian opener featured in the ICC Test Team of the Year 2024? (7)

7 Who did a treble — pole, fastest lap and winning the F1 race — in the Australian GP on March 16, 2025? (6)

11 & 24 Who scored the most number of 50+ scores in the ICC Champions Trophy 2025? (6,6)

12 Who is the fielding coach of the Indian cricket team? (5)

13 What is the short form used for calculating runs required off the remaining overs for a team chasing in a limited overs cricket match? (1,1,1)

17 Which former World No. 1-ranked women's tennis player announced her retirement just before this year's Australian Open? (6,5)

20 What is the world-level rating for chess called? (3)

21 Who took five wickets for India in its group match versus New Zealand in the ICC Champions Trophy 2025? (5)

26 Who is appointed as the new coach of the IPL franchise, Delhi Capitals? (6)

27 Identify this all-rounder who moved from Vidarbha to Kerala and played a stellar role in this year's Ranji Trophy. (6)

28 Identify this Services player who, along with S. Vashisht, was involved in the highest partnership for any wicket in the Ranji Trophy 2024-25 season. (7)

29 Who was picked as captain of the ICC Test Team of the Year 2024? (7)

DOWN

1 Deepan Chakravarthy — India's 13th chess Grandmaster — hails from this South Indian city. (7)

2 Who scored 150+ runs in the first innings and 70+ runs in the second for Vidarbha in the Ranji final against Kerala? (6)

3 Kashinath Naik — the formative years coach of Neeraj Chopra — hails from this small city in India. (5)

5 Identify this country which is chosen as a joint-host of the football World Cup in 2030. (5)

6 Which French-born driver has been associated with the Ferrari Team since 2019? (7)

8 Which Indian woman hockey legend played her 300th international match recently? (6,5)

9 Who is appointed as the new captain of the IPL franchise, RCB? (7)

14 Which New Zealand bowler retired from international cricket after the Test series against England? (3)

15 Who was the ambassador of the Mumbai Marathon held in January 2025? (2, 5)

16 Who ended as the runner-up in the men's singles at the All-England badminton championship 2025? (3)

18 Who made his Test debut for Australia at the SCG in the fifth match against India? (7)

19 Who is appointed as the new captain of the IPL franchise, Punjab Kings? (7)

22 Who won the Asian snooker championships held in February 2025? (6)

23 & Across 10 Which Asian country has been chosen to host the FIFA World Cup in 2034? (5,6)

25 Who is India's first-ever U-20 World wrestling champion? (5)

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

WILL THE CURRENT COACH FOLLOW THE RAHUL DRAVID MODEL?

After India's T20 World Cup win, **Rahul Dravid shared his prize money equally** with his staff. With the Champions Trophy rewards announced, the current coach's stance remains unknown.

The 1983 team that won the World Cup got ₹1 lakh each for their efforts. There's quite a story about how that happened, and there are, as usual, many versions of it. This is mine.

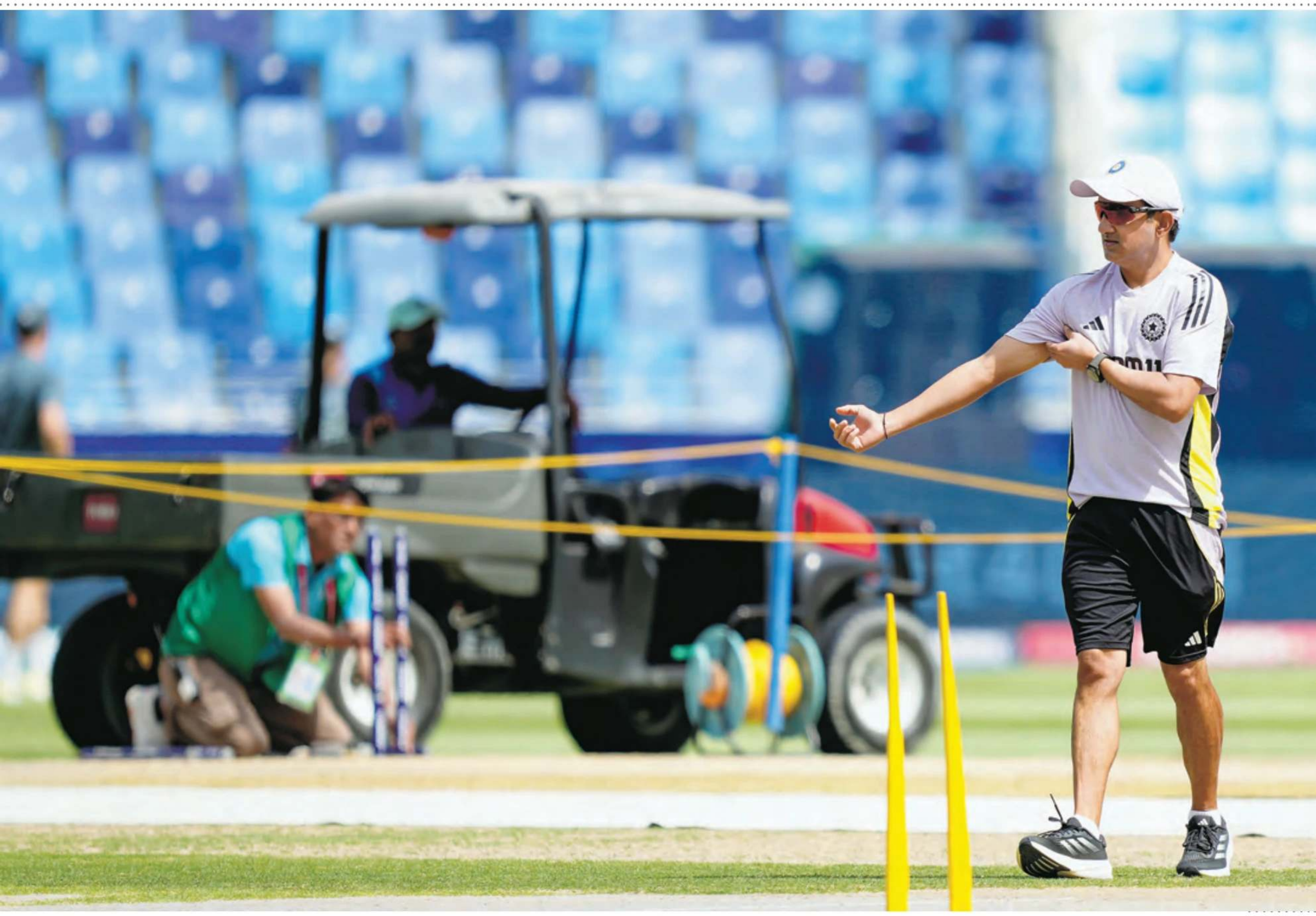
Our dressing room at Lord's was like a fish market, with barely room to move as we ran in, elated and screaming with joy after Mohinder Amarnath got the last wicket. Those who have seen the video of that match will have seen how crowded the balcony of the dressing room was as that last West Indies wicket fell. Inside, it was even more crowded as people, mainly Indians, whom most of us had never seen before, were clapping and patting players on the backs.

The BCCI president then was Shri NKP Salve, a minister in the Central Government cabinet then. He was one of the nicest persons one could ever hope to meet, ever ready to help the players. As it happened, there was just one bottle of champagne in the dressing room to celebrate the win, and the skipper, Kapil Dev, poured a generous dose into Shri Salve's glass and told him that he should announce a prize for the team members.

We were a squad of 14 players and a team manager. Shri Salve had a few BCCI dignitaries with him, and after consulting them, he announced Rs 25,000 for each member of the team. If memory serves me right, we were to get Rs 2,500 for that campaign, so basically, we were going to be given 10 times that amount as a reward for winning the World Cup. Obviously, we wanted a bit more, and to do that, we needed to ply Shri Salve with a bit more champagne. But there was only one bottle, the contents of which had been shared with just over 100 people in that changing room.

Another couple of bottles were procured, thanks to the generosity of one of the dressing room-crashing well-wishers, and Shri Salve's glass was replenished. Then the dressing room attendant came and said that the Lord's authorities had left a couple of crates of champagne in the West Indies changing room in anticipation of their win. So, Kapil and Madan Lal mustered some courage and went to the dressing room, where Clive Lloyd, morosely but generously, permitted them to spirit one crate to our dressing room.

Despite our best efforts to fill Shri Salve's glass with several cheers, he wouldn't commit more than he had announced. He was a practical man and knew the BCCI didn't have the money to give to the players. Then Raj Singh Dungarpur said he would request the one and only Lata (Mangeshkar) *didi* to have a concert for the team, and from the proceeds, each player would get Rs 1 lakh. The concert raised much more than Rs 15 lakh, and the



surplus was kept by the BCCI. But we didn't mind as we knew the financial situation of the BCCI at the time.

Now, after our boys won the Champions Trophy, the BCCI announced a whopping Rs 58 crore for the squad and the support staff and selection committee. In July last year, after the stirring victory in the ICC T20 World Cup, the BCCI announced Rs 125 crore for the squad, support staff, and selectors. This is truly fantastic, as the Board, which is now awash with funds, is showing its appreciation for the efforts put in by everybody and rewarding them generously. The BCCI is also letting the players keep the prize money that the ICC announced for the winners, which is also a good amount each.

Windfall: The BCCI announced a whopping Rs 58 crore for the squad, support staff, and selection committee after India's Champions Trophy win. PTI

After the ICC T20 World Cup win and the Board's announcement of the prize money, the then-coach Rahul Dravid, ever the team man, refused to accept more than his fellow members of the coaching staff and, in fact, shared it equally with his colleagues.

It's been a fortnight since the BCCI announced the Champions Trophy rewards, but we haven't heard anything from the current coach on whether he will also do a Dravid. Or is it that Dravid, in this instance, is not a good role model?

The BCCI, which is now awash with funds, is showing its appreciation for the efforts put in by everybody and rewarding them generously.

WATCH THE INTERVIEW

« Frequent regime changes in PCB have hurt Pakistan cricket badly »

SAEED AJMAL

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Until recently, Saeed Ajmal was Pakistan's spin-bowling coach. A few months ago, he was relieved of his duties. Now, he spends his time coaching local teams and working with Islamabad United in the Pakistan Super League.

Despite being out of the national setup, Ajmal closely follows Pakistan cricket and was disappointed with the team's performance in the Champions Trophy at home. However, he warns against knee-jerk reactions. He believes frequent leadership changes at the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) have hurt the team's progress. He is also unhappy with how the selectors have handled Babar Azam and Mohammad Rizwan ahead of the New Zealand series.

In a chat with *Sportstar*, Ajmal shares his views on Pakistan cricket and why the country struggles to produce quality spinners despite its rich history.

Pakistan hosted a global tournament after nearly 30 years but failed to reach the knockouts. What went wrong?

It was very disappointing for us. Of course, it was a matter of pride that Pakistan was hosting a global event after 30 years. Throughout my career, I didn't play any ICC event at home, despite making my debut against India in the 2008 Asia Cup.

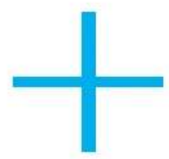
So, this time around, it was disappointing to see the Pakistan team out of the Champions Trophy in the first round. The team did not give a good performance. Adding to that, there was no final in Pakistan, despite us hosting. As a fan, as an ex-cricketer, as a Pakistani, I would have liked the final to be played at home. Just as Indian fans don't want their team to play outside India, we also wanted to watch India and Pakistan play at home.

I have always believed that sports should be kept out of politics. We are sportsmen. Sportsmen represent love and affection for each other. Off the field, we are friends. I know it was decided much in advance that India wouldn't travel to Pakistan, but we still regret not having all the matches at home. It would have been a lot of fun.

Despite home conditions, Pakistan went with just one spinner in the Champions Trophy. Does this reflect a lack of quality spinners?

Even teams like New Zealand and Australia played with three spinners, but I don't know if we misjudged the conditions or if our calculations were wrong. It was our home, and we could have played at any venue of our choice, but we misjudged the conditions and were caught in the middle. We neither produced a spin-friendly surface nor a pace-friendly strip, and we got caught there.

There were issues with our team selection. Why did we not play another spinner? Why did we not pick the right players? If you look at



The rise of league cricket has done a lot of harm to us. The players who are coming in want to play league cricket for four days, earn money, have fun, and move on.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

our cricket, we have definitely taken a step back. We have to accept that. Our pace bowling has become slower, and we are more comfortable playing in the shorter format. But all the big teams that are performing well have done so by playing the longer format, and once you do that, you can automatically shift across formats. We need to follow that model. We have to focus on the longer format to get better results.

The rise of league cricket has done a lot of harm to us. The players who are coming in want to play league cricket for four days, earn money, have fun, and move on. If we play with this attitude, we will run out of stars. Stars are made by playing Test cricket. If we promote our domestic cricket, we have a lot of spinners.

In the past, we gave several suggestions to the PCB that when the domestic season starts, they should prepare three types of wickets. Each team should be given two games on spin-friendly surfaces, one on fast strips, and one on a batting-friendly surface. By doing this, you will get to test your batters as well as the bowlers.

We have suggested several things to the PCB chairman. But the biggest setback has been the fact that over the last five to six years, the chairman has changed three to four times. And every time the chairman changes, it affects our cricket a lot. Whoever comes in brings in his own people, changes schedules, and that

has severely affected the team since there's no continuity.

Pakistan's coaching staff has seen frequent changes. How much has that affected team performance?

Certainly, it has had a big impact. Some coaches signed up on the condition of coming to Pakistan only during the matches, but this is not how coaching is done. A coach needs to be in Pakistan, be with the players, and plan things out — in terms of the pitches, the players — but if a coach isn't present, then obviously things won't work.

For instance, Jason Gillespie did push the team, but that wasn't enough. I think we need to mix and match. If we hire an overseas coach, then we need to ensure that the crux of the staff remains local to take care of things. Look at India — most of its support staff is local, barring a couple of them. We need to follow that system.

I was a spin-bowling coach a few months ago, but now I am not there. Someone is there today, and tomorrow he may be replaced with someone else, so this constant chopping and changing has been a huge problem.

Aaqib Javed has been involved with the team in various roles for a long time. Despite that, the team has struggled. Why?

In the ODI format, you have to play a little positively since it is longer than T20s. Saim Ayub was our opener, and his absence was a big blow. I don't know what they did with Imam-ul-Haq. He's a good player, who maintained a consistent average of 45 as an opener, so how can you keep him out as an opener? That's not all. First, you drop him, and then you call him back — that's not fair on the player because his confidence takes a beating. He constantly fears that he may be dropped again, so that was a major problem.

Then, we forced Babar Azam to become an opener. So, there are problems, and if you want to build a team for the future, you can't make 50 changes in a year. You have to minimise your changes and create a bench. You have to give time to the players, irrespective of their form. Look at the way India backed Virat Kohli. His bad patch continued for long, but no one forced him to quit, while Babar, one of Pakistan cricket's biggest stars, is going through a lull, and everyone is busy pulling him down.

You have only one star, and if you degrade him too, then how will your cricket survive? These are big issues. Our former cricketers should keep their mouths shut.

Pakistan dropped Babar and Rizwan from T20Is but retained them for ODIs. Does this selection policy make sense?

(Laughs) Mark my words, they will bring them back into the T20I team. If you want to send a clear message to Babar and Rizwan that they won't be considered going forward, that's one thing.

But you have dropped them from T20Is while keeping them for ODIs. So, what happens if they score runs in ODIs against New Zealand? You

GETTY IMAGES

YOU HAVE TO GIVE TIME TO THE PLAYERS, IRRESPECTIVE OF THEIR FORM. LOOK AT HOW INDIA BACKED VIRAT KOHLI. HIS BAD PATCH CONTINUED FOR LONG, BUT NO ONE FORCED HIM TO QUIT

Axed: Captain Mohammad Rizwan and Babar Azam were recently dropped from Pakistan's squad for the five-match T20 series in New Zealand. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

bring them back into the T20I squad?

Look, the way they were removed is wrong. Ideally, the selectors should sit down with Babar, discuss rest, and ensure he returns stronger.

Babar and Rizwan are great players. Their stats are as good as anyone's, but the only difference is that they don't bat aggressively — yet they still score runs. Our players have suddenly decided that everyone in international cricket plays aggressively. Come on, what aggression are we talking about? If they are your proven match-winners, you don't need aggression.

Even legends like Virat often pace their innings slowly before attacking — that's his style. We need to allow our players to play their natural game and ensure they are in the right mental space.

Inconsistent selection: Imam-ul-Haq, out of the Pakistan squad since December 2023, was recalled for the Champions Trophy but featured in only one match. AP

AFP

New Zealand secures series victory against Pakistan

1 The Kiwis **made it 3-1** after winning the fourth match in the five-match T20I series

New Zealand secured the five-match T20I series against Pakistan after winning the fourth fixture.

The Kiwis posted 220 for six, courtesy of Finn Allen's 20-ball fifty and major contributions from Tim Seifert and Michael Bracewell. The visitor was bundled out for 105, handing New Zealand a 115-run victory. The host, which fielded a depleted side, triumphed in the first two matches but stumbled in the third — Hasan Nawaz smashed the fastest T20I hundred for Pakistan to help chase down the 204 target with nine wickets and 24 balls remaining.

REUTERS

2

Bangladesh's veteran all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan has been cleared of a suspect action after a re-assessment. The England and Wales Cricket Board stated that the 38-year-old passed tests on his action at Loughborough University earlier this month. Shakib had been reported by the standing umpire while playing for Surrey against Somerset in September 2024.

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3

Heather Knight has stepped down as captain of the England women's cricket team after nearly nine years in charge. She led England in 199 matches since 2016, guiding the team to a home World Cup victory in 2017 and two other ICC tournament finals. Under her leadership, England won 134 matches, making her the second-most successful captain in the team's history.

GETTY IMAGES

4

Australia secured a 2-0 win in the three-match WT20I series against New Zealand —its first-ever series victory in the format on New Zealand soil. In the opener, New Zealand managed only 137 in 20 overs, which Australia chased down in 13.3 overs with eight wickets to spare. Beth Mooney top-scored with an unbeaten 75 off 42 balls. She replicated her effort in the second match, smashing 70 off 42 balls. Australia set a target of 205, and New Zealand was bowled out for 122, with Annabel Sutherland's four-wicket haul guiding the visitor to an 82-run win.

SANDEEP SAXENA

5

Former Bangladesh captain Tamim Iqbal was rushed to hospital after suffering a heart attack during a Dhaka Premier League (DPL) match in Savar. He was leading Mohammedan Sporting Club against Shinepukur Cricket Club at the BKSP ground when he felt chest pain. After receiving medical attention, he was taken to a nearby hospital for tests and underwent emergency angioplasty.

VIJAY SONEJI

6

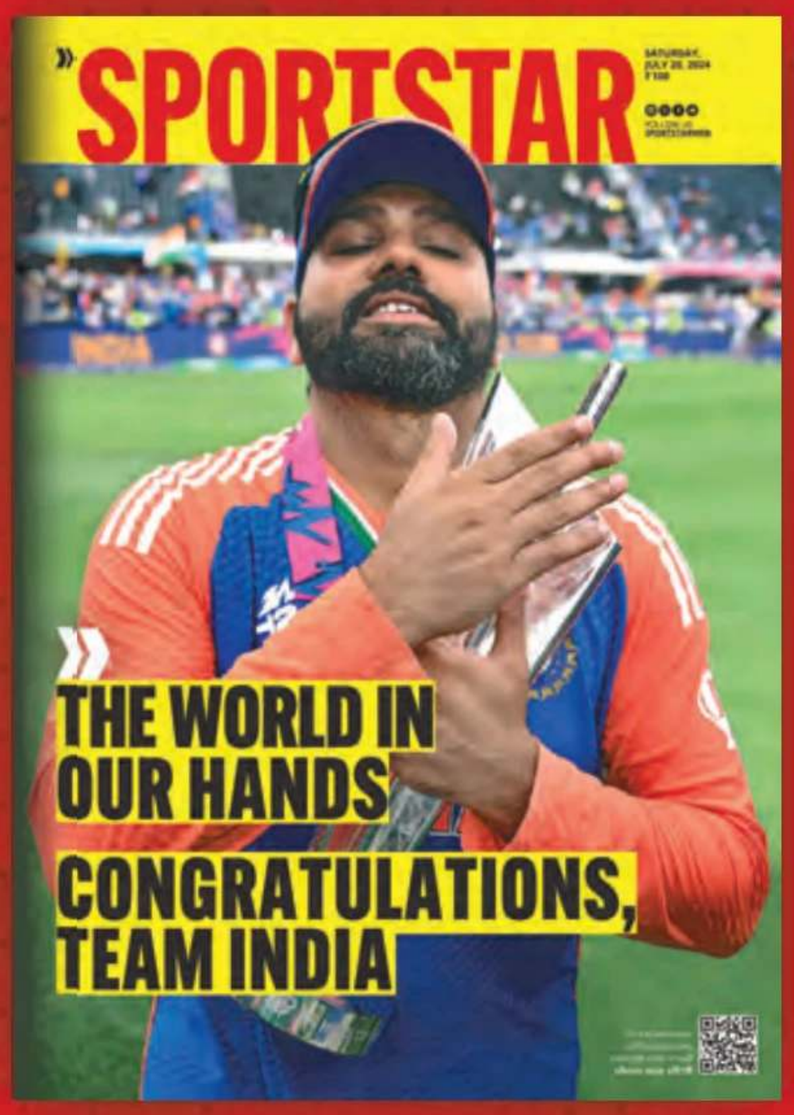
India women's team captain Harmanpreet Kaur and vice-captain Smriti Mandhana have been retained in Grade A of the Board of Control for Cricket in India's (BCCI) central contract list. All-rounder Deepti Sharma has also retained her Grade A status. Four players – Renuka Thakur, Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, and Richa Ghosh – have been placed in Grade B. Rajeshwari Gayakwad, whose last India appearance came in July 2024, has missed out on a contract this year. New additions to the central contract list include Uma Chetry, Arundhati Reddy, Titas Sadhu, and Shreyanka Patil, who have all been placed in Grade C.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

7

Veteran Bangladesh batter Mahmudullah has announced his retirement from international cricket. The 39-year-old played 239 ODIs, 50 Tests, and 141 T20Is in his 17-year career. He exits as Bangladesh's fourth-highest ODI run-getter with 5,689 runs at an average of 36.46, including four centuries – all in ICC tournaments.

THE HINDU GROUP



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Medal rush in Gulmarg

The picturesque Kongdoori slopes in Jammu & Kashmir hosting the second leg of the 2025 Khelo India Winter Games is one of the **many strides** that India has made towards becoming a prominent snow sports destination.

Saikat Chakraborty
saikat.chakraborty@thehindu.co.in

In the last decade or so, Indian sport has undergone a significant transformation due to heavy investment from the public and private sectors. However, this progress has yet to fully extend to winter sports. With approximately 3,000 kilometres (1,864 miles) of mountain ranges, India has always had the potential to be a leader in winter sports, but a lack of robust governance and established tradition has hindered its progress for years.

With the successful completion of the second leg of the Khelo India Winter Games (KIWG) 2025 on the picturesque Kongdoori slopes in Gulmarg, Jammu & Kashmir, it appears India is finally making strides towards becoming a prominent snow sports destination. More than 350 athletes from across the country participated in the second leg of the fifth edition of the KIWG from March 9-12. They competed in four snow disciplines: Alpine Skiing, Nordic Skiing, Ski Mountaineering (SkiMo), and Snowboarding; all of which are Olympic sports.

Riding a wave of awareness

Despite overcast skies, almost zero visibility, and avalanche warnings, participants and organisers persevered, ensuring the events continued on the foothills of the majestic Pir Panjal range. The collaborative event, organised by the Sports Authority of India (SAI) and the Jammu & Kashmir Sports Council, generated significant excitement throughout the valley, exhibited by the pervasive presence of promotional materials from Srinagar airport to the Gulmarg ski resort.

With increased participation in each edition, KIWG is successfully raising awareness of winter sports in the country. Even the tourists flocking to the famous hill station were captivated by the proceedings. Despite the increased attention, winter sports in general are still in a nascent stage in the country.

As of now, only 16 Indian athletes have participated in the Winter Olympics across 11 editions, and the nation still awaits its first podium finish.

Farhat Naik, the KIWG competition director for snowboarding and India's national snowboarding coach, believes financial support is the key for Indian athletes to achieve

SAIKAT CHAKRABORTY

international success.

"Unfortunately, both the government and private entities have still not fully understood the potential of winter sports," Farhat told *Sportstar* on the sidelines of KIWG 2025.

Only two Indian snowboarders, Zubair Ahmad Lone and Mehraj Ud Din Khan, competed in the FIS Freestyle Ski and Snowboard World Championships in St. Moritz, Switzerland this year (which started on March 18).

"Every snow sport, including snowboarding, is costly. Athletes need equipment, top training facilities, and exposure to international events, for which they need solid backing. Only Zubair and Mehraj secured sponsorship. You cannot produce elite athletes without investment," he added.

From 700 athletes in 2023 to over 900 in the latest KIWG, the event has expanded. This expansion aligns with increased international involvement, evidenced by FIS-supported European development camps and a record 59-athlete delegation at the 2025 Asian Winter Games in China. These developments contribute to India's ongoing preparations for the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan.

In the past, snow sports were exclusively operated by the Indian Army and were confined to the northern states. However, things are changing, according to Vineet Kumar, Deputy Director General, Sports Authority of India, Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports, Patiala.

"The growing popularity of winter sports, evidenced by participants from southern, central, eastern, and western states, not just the traditional northern regions, is a very encouraging sign for India. To capitalise on this momentum, we need to create artificial facilities for year-round athlete practice, which will further increase civilian participation and reduce the current reliance on the armed forces," he explained.

Navigating through challenges

One of the major stumbling blocks for winter sports in India is the lack of facilities. There are still only three key resorts: Manali in Himachal Pradesh; Gulmarg in Kashmir; and Auli in Uttarakhand, where the country's only International Ski and Snowboard Federation (FIS) approved ski slope is located.

There has also been a lack of National Sports Federation (NSF) accreditation for winter sports federations, which hinders the broader development of the sports.

Priti Thakur, who won gold in women's snowboarding slalom, highlighted the hardship faced by athletes while progressing from the national stage to the international level.

"To compete at the international level, I require financial support. Coming from a humble background, I lack access to the necessary equipment. Specifically, I need a hardboard for FIS races, which costs approximately ₹2.5 lakhs, as my current softboard is unsuitable," she said.

The changing weather patterns and the rising global temperature are making things even more complicated. The KIWG 2025 was scheduled for mid-February but had to be postponed due to a lack of snowfall at 2,700 metres above sea level in winter.

"Winter sports are inevitably dependent on weather. Yes, we need more facilities to grow winter sports in the country, especially amid the changing weather patterns. Maintaining natural slopes is also a difficult task," said Dr. Nadeem Ahmad Dar, one of the directors of SAI.

A new horizon

Amid the shortfalls, SkiMo — a recent addition to the Winter Olympics set to debut in Milan 2026 — is rapidly gaining popularity in India, largely due to its low infrastructure requirements.

"This is an ideal sport for India's Himalayan regions, offering vast potential for both athletic development and adventure tourism," opined Praveen Sood, the president of the National Ski Mountaineering Association of India.

Sood, a seasoned skier, also highlighted the broader vision for the sport. "SkiMo is an endurance sport and gives us (Indians) an opportunity to make it to the top.

IMRAN NISSAR

Our mountains are situated at very high altitudes where you get less oxygen, so naturally, athletes develop more endurance practising here. When they go to other international tournaments, that extra stamina will be beneficial," he explained. The four-day tournament witnessed some remarkable individual performances, with several athletes securing multiple medals. Indian Army's Rajeshwar Singh (2 gold, 1 silver in ski mountaineering), ITBP's Kusum Rana (2 gold, 1 bronze in women's nordic skiing), and Siddharth Gadekar of Maharashtra (1 gold, 1 silver in ski mountaineering), among others.

While the Indian Army dominated the competition by clinching the overall top spot, its familiarity with local conditions proved to be a major contributing factor. However, its overall dominance extends beyond that. For decades, the Armed Forces have been instrumental in developing winter sports in India.

The evolving landscape

One of the most significant takeaways from this edition of the KIWG is the growing participation and success of states with limited natural topography for winter sports. Maharashtra's impressive medal haul (13 medals) and Tamil Nadu's (five medals) demonstrate the increasing accessibility and appeal of winter sports, transcending geographical limitations. Several athletes from non-winter sport disciplines have also joined the snow revolution in Gulmarg. Tenzin Dolma, the 40-year-old ultra-trail runner from Manali, bagged the gold in the ski mountaineering women's vertical event in only her first-ever KIWG appearance.

Urmila Pable of Maharashtra reached the podium in the women's snowboarding slalom event. The 21-year-old athlete from Navi Mumbai, a professional skateboarder who represented India in Olympic Qualification in 2023, won the bronze. Apart from them, several cross-country cyclists also took part in the four-day event.

While India is still waiting for an athlete to qualify for Milan 2026, its winter sports potential is gaining momentum.

During the closing ceremony, the Union Minister of Youth Affairs & Sports, Mansukh Mandaviya, announced plans to transform Gulmarg into a premier winter sports hub.

This vision can drive increased participation in winter sports and boost the development of mountain communities in India.

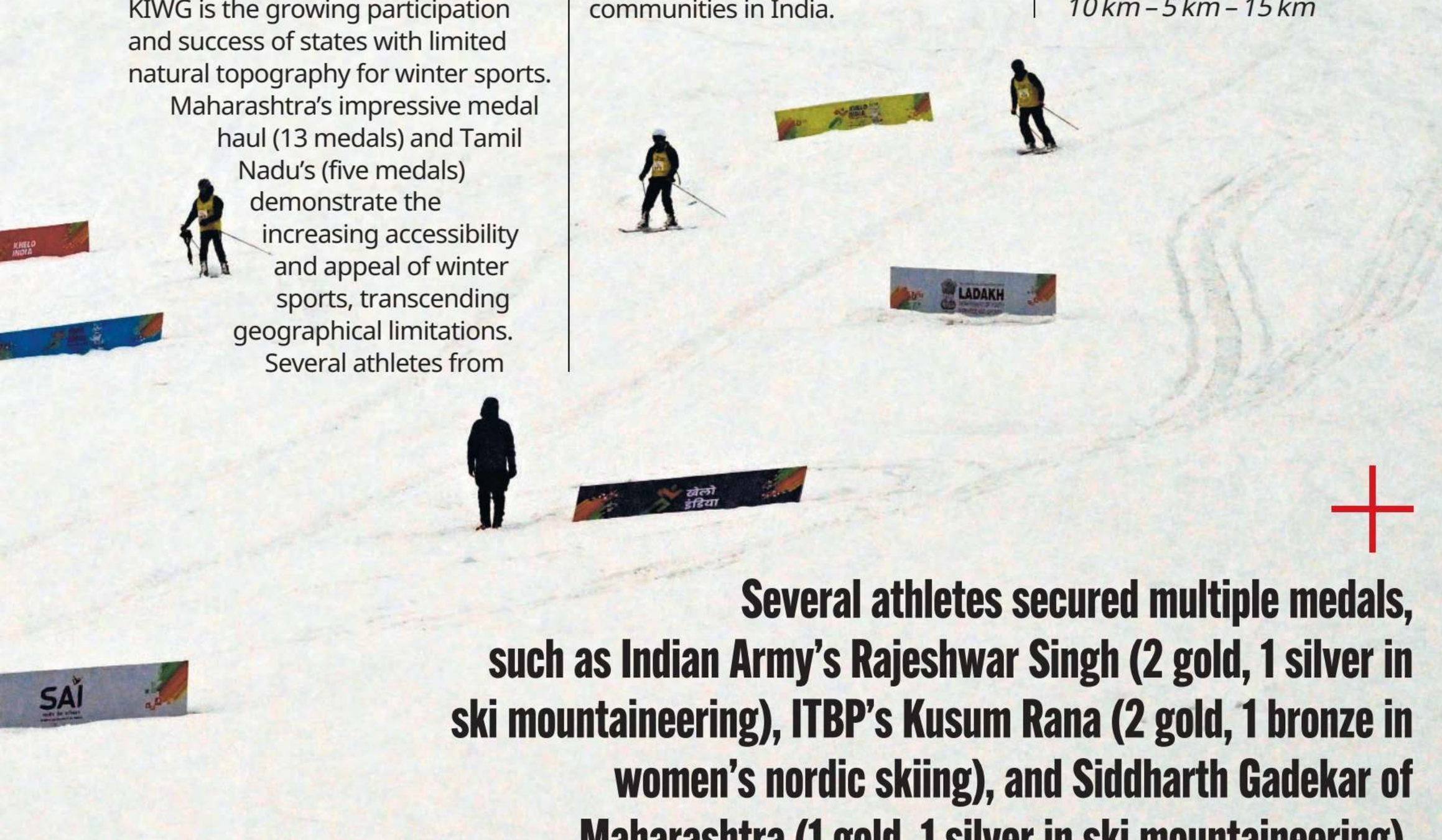
Know your sport

Ski Mountaineering
Climbing mountains either on skis or carrying them, depending on the steepness of the ascent, before descending on skis.
Vertical – Sprint – *Relay*

Snowboarding
Descending a snow-covered surface while standing on a snowboard, which is almost always attached to the feet.
Slalom – Giant Slalom

Alpine Skiing
Participants ski down a snow-covered mountain slope as quickly as possible.
Slalom – Giant Slalom

Nordic Skiing
The toe of the ski boot is fixed to the binding, allowing the heel to rise off the ski, unlike alpine skiing, where the boot is attached from toe to heel.
10 km – 5 km – 15 km



Several athletes secured multiple medals, such as Indian Army's Rajeshwar Singh (2 gold, 1 silver in ski mountaineering), ITBP's Kusum Rana (2 gold, 1 bronze in women's nordic skiing), and Siddharth Gadekar of Maharashtra (1 gold, 1 silver in ski mountaineering).

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING @ ESPORTS WORLD CUP 2025

Esports World Cup 2025 will take place in Riyadh with a prize pool **expected to rise** beyond that of last year, i.e. USD 60 million.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

S8UL made history when it became the first and only Indian esports team to be inducted into the club partner program of the Esports World Cup Foundation (EWCF) for the upcoming 2025 World Cup.

The team, made by the merger of teams Soul and 8Bit, has been a prominent side in the Battlegrounds Mobile India (BGMI) scene.

It won the BGMI Masters Series last year and also made waves in esports content generation, winning Esports Content Group of the Year three times in a row. It has now expanded into VALORANT and Call of Duty: Mobile (COD: M) S8UL was selected among the 40 sides for the program worth USD 20 million, with each side receiving up to USD 1 million to expand their brand and grow their global audience leading up to and throughout the World Cup 2025.

"Being selected as an EWCF Club Partner for the Esports World Cup 2025 is not just a monumental achievement for S8UL- it's a defining moment for Indian esports on the global stage," said Animesh 'Thug' Agarwal, co-founder and chief executive officer of S8UL.

"It's indeed a great opportunity- it gives our players, creators, and the entire org a chance to bring our content, talent, and passion to a worldwide audience."

The World Cup 2025 will take place in Riyadh between July 7 and August 24, with a prize pool expected to rise beyond that of last year, i.e. USD 60 million.

TOP 5 BGMI PLAYERS IN INDIA

SARANGAJYOTI "SARANG" DEKA

HARSH "SPRAYGOD" MALIK

ALDAN "VIPER" SHAIKH

TANJOT "NINJABOI" SINGH

MOHAMMED "HUNTERZ" KAIF KHAN

VALORANT CHALLENGERS SOUTH ASIA 2025 WITH INR 1.13 CR PRIZE POOL HAS KICKED OFF

Indian game producer NODWIN Gaming partnered with Riot Games for the VALORANT Challengers South Asia 2025, which began on March 4, with a prize pool of INR 1.13 crore and a new format.

The Challengers is split into three phases. Teams from Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and the Maldives competed through open qualifiers. The final winner will secure a spot at the VALORANT Champions Tour (VCT) Ascension Pacific 2025.

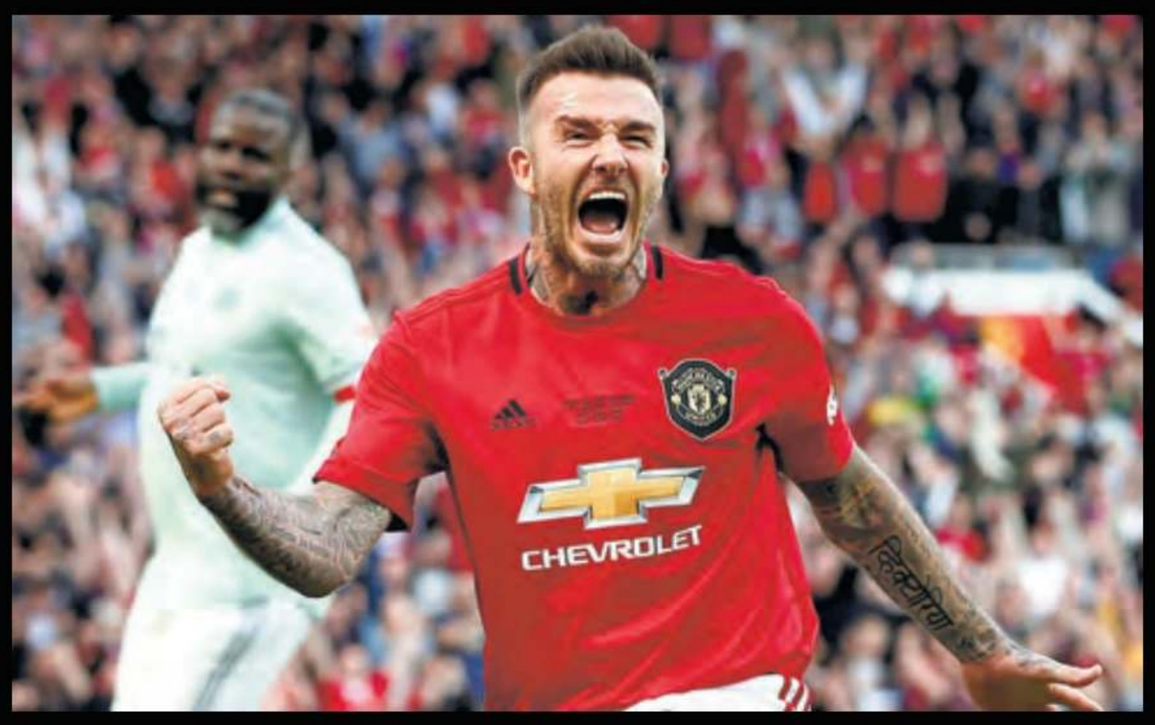
Competing against the 10 best-performing teams from other regional Challengers, the winner there will earn a spot in the VCT Pacific League.

LIGHTFURY CRICKET AAA GAME WITH ESPORTS ANNOUNCED

Electronic Arts's Cricket had once become a blockbuster in the game market in the early 2000s. And now game developer LightFury Games is looking to get into the Indian market with the same sport with a new game called 'E-Cricket'.

A teaser of the game was released at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) 2025 in San Francisco on March 18 and will be developed in collaboration with Amazon GameLift Stream (AGS).

One of the game's biggest USPs is the support of AGS. This will empower gamers to enjoy high-fidelity, low-latency experiences through just a browser, eliminating the need for a dedicated gaming setup.



Did you know? Manchester United legend **David Beckham** is a co-owner of Guild Esports, a talent development agency launched in 2020 for esports athletes.

IESF BROADENS BASE IN AFRICA

The International Esports Federation (IESF) inducted five new national federations in March 2025, expanding to 151 members. The new members are Botswana, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Tanzania.

These countries will participate in the IESF 2025 season, which features titles like Counter-Strike 2, Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, PUBG Mobile, and eFootball.

IESF General Secretary Boban Totovski said, "It reflects the continued expansion of esports and the dedication of national federations to providing opportunities for athletes and communities."

WHO AM I?

I began my gaming journey in 2016 by posting Mini Militia videos on YouTube. In 2019, I won the PUBG Mobile India Series and the PUBG Mobile Club Open - Spring Split: India. I co-own S8UL.

The answer will be revealed in the next issue

BUSINESS OF ESPORTS

FIFAe, the official esports ecosystem of FIFA, took a further step towards integrating content creation with gaming when it announced a talent hunt program for aspiring creators in early March.

EASTER EGG 'AFK'

AFK is an acronym for "away from keyboard", a phrase that is used to indicate that a player is not actively playing the game, either because they are away or they are just observing.

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

Indian track stars chase the American dream

An increasing number of track and field athletes from the country are participating in Division 1 of the NCAA, widely regarded as the **pinnacle** of college sports.

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

Pradeep Senthil Kumar admits he got a bit of a shock when he started his first year at the University of Nebraska. Born and raised in Chennai, the 21-year-old was barely prepared for the biting winter cold in the American Midwest.

"It rarely goes below 70°F here (approximately 20°C). It was really cold. When I came for the first time last winter, it was something like 21°F (-6°C), and it only got colder. I genuinely didn't know how to handle that. I was sick for a whole month," he says.

Switching between Fahrenheit and Celsius isn't the only Americanism Pradeep's getting used to. "It's actually very funny to me that I've started thinking of temperature in Fahrenheit. I've also started thinking in terms of pounds and yards instead of kilos and metres. It was really hard at the beginning. I just had my phone with me always to convert it," he tells *Sportstar*.

Pradeep's a lot more adept at these conversions and a lot more at home in Nebraska now. He's part of the University track team that competes in Division 1 of the NCAA (National College Athletics Association) — the highest level of collegiate sports in the USA.

In his first season (referred to as a junior year in the USA), Pradeep broke the Indian indoor national record twice — in the men's 600m and 800m, clocking times of 1:17.71 and 1:48.60, respectively.

He is incidentally not the only Indian to improve on the Indian national record this NCAA collegiate season. Competing for Wagner College, Arjanvir Singh clocked 22.26 seconds to improve on the Indian indoor record in the 200m. That result too came with its own unforeseen challenge. "When I checked with the Indian federation, I realised that for it to count as a national record, I needed to get a dope test conducted after the competition. I hadn't really thought about something like this before. It's something I'll keep in mind before the start of the next indoor season," he tells *Sportstar*. He should get that opportunity soon enough.

There have been a bunch of impressive results by other Indian athletes in the collegiate circuit. Madhvendra Shekhawat equalled the Indian indoor record in the 60m hurdles. Long jumper Lokesh Sathyanathan qualified for the NCAA Indoor Championships — the pinnacle of the indoor track season in the collegiate circuit. While Lokesh was the only Indian to compete at that stage, he's not expected to be the last. That's a good thing.

Gold standard

For years, the NCAA has remained the gold standard as far as college sports structures go. At last year's Paris Olympics, it produced more gold medallists (127) than the USA and China combined. The champions belong not just to the US — from French hero Leon Marchand to Julien

Alfred, the track trailblazer from St Lucia, athletes from 11 other countries benefited from the programme too. Beyond the medallists, there were NCAA representatives in the contingents of 125 countries.

Until very recently though, relatively few Indian track and field athletes made the journey from India to the collegiate circuit, particularly Division 1.

Tejaswin Shankar, who competed for Kansas State University between 2017 and 2021, says, "When I first competed for Kansas State back in 2018, I think there were only two Indian athletes who had competed at the Division 1 level of the NCAA before me — Mohinder Gill (who competed in the triple jump for California Polytechnic State University in the 1970s) and Vikas Gowda (who threw the discus for the University of North Carolina). As far as I knew, during my time with Kansas State, I was the only one from India competing in the USA."

Just two years after Shankar completed his degree, though, the number of Indian track and field athletes in the USA has grown significantly. At last count, some 17 track and field athletes from India are currently competing in Division 1 of the NCAA.

There have been Indians who have competed in the NCAA circuit on sports scholarships before. However, these were predominantly in sports like tennis and squash. For the most part, track and field athletes simply didn't make the attempt.

Players say a lack of knowledge on which path to take, uncertainty about managing the study-sport workload, and an unwillingness to step into an unknown world were behind many Indians not taking the NCAA route.

Systematic recruitment

"I honestly didn't even know that was an option," recalls Tejaswin, who says his own journey started rather serendipitously. "My goal for a long time was just to stay in Delhi. But one day I was meeting (future Olympic champion) Neeraj Chopra at a hotel room in Bangalore when Gary

Eyes on the West: Pradeep Senthil Kumar **(above)** and Arjanvir Singh **(below, right)** are two of the 17 track and field athletes from India who are currently competing in Division 1 of the NCAA (National College Athletics Association). While Pradeep is part of the University of Nebraska's track team, Arjanvir competes for Wagner College. Pics: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Vital experience: Tejaswin Shankar competed for Kansas State University between 2017 and 2021. He now helps Indian athletes manage their recruitment process, while directly coordinating with coaches in the USA. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Calvert, who was his coach at the time, suggested I try to go to the USA. He helped me out with emails and contacts, and that's how my journey started," he says.

Tejaswin's experiences of simply emailing prospective coaches are mirrored by some of the other Indians who have made their own path to the USA. Arjanvir is one of them. Growing up in New Delhi, he had reached a level of success in the Indian domestic system — making the final of the 400m at the U20 national championships in 2021.

Arjanvir says he had friends and family who had played collegiate tennis and squash in the USA and went to them for advice on how to apply himself. "I was privileged in a way because I had the knowledge of how something like this was possible. I have been preparing for this path ever since I was in class 10. I took their advice and started reaching out to coaches. I sent a bunch of emails in which I introduced myself, mentioned my current timing and that I wanted to study in the USA and run at the same time. It was like sending out resumes for an internship.

"I must have emailed about 200 coaches, of whom about 100 responded. About 50 got on a call with me and about 25 got on a second call. I actually had a few colleges to choose from, and out of those, I finally decided to go with Wagner because I had a cousin who had already played tennis over here," says Arjanvir.

While he had the advantage of knowing sportspeople who had made the journey before him, most

other track and field athletes in India don't come from that sort of background. And while someone like Arjanvir had been preparing for the NCAA admission process from the time he was in school, for most Indian athletes currently in the system, the idea of applying to a college in the USA came a lot further along in their career.

Pradeep is one of the latter. "I grew up in a home where I didn't have money to even buy a pair of shoes. I had no clue that something like the NCAA system even existed," says Pradeep, who was already running against senior athletes and won gold at the 2023 National Games before a coach put the thought of competing in the USA in his mind.

Unsure of how the application process worked, he approached someone who had a better understanding of things. For the past two years now, Tejaswin and his wife **Siddhi Hiray (right)**, herself a national-level athlete and a graduate of the University of Loughborough, have been working with Indian athletes in order to help them manage the recruitment process better — directly coordinating with coaches in the USA.

"The fact that I got a sports scholarship was a bit of a surprise to me. But when Siddhi met me, she had this idea where she felt we needed to give other kids the kind of opportunity that I got. Since the time we started, we have been able to send five kids on a full scholarship to the US," he says.

While Tejaswin and Siddhi are filling an important niche in the system, there's increasing interest for coaches in the USA to directly look out for talent in India. "International recruitment in track and field was a pretty big thing even 10 years ago, but we were predominantly looking at Europe and a little bit in Africa and the Caribbean. But over the last few years, it's been expanding dramatically. NCAA recruiting is really getting into Asia now, which would have been unheard of 10 years ago. I've felt for a long time that India was the next big resource for athletic

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Indian track and field athletes currently in the NCAA

Pradeep Senthilkumar
University of Nebraska

Arjanvir Singh
Wagner College

Sharvari Parulekar
University of Louisville

Selva Prabhu
Kansas State University

Madhvendra Singh
Eastern Washington University

Krishna Jayashankar
University of Nevada Las Vegas

Lokesh Sathyanathan
Tarleton State University

Nidhi Singh
Midwestern State University

Prithviraj Chougule
University of Mary

Poorna Raorane -
University of Memphis

Mimansa Dahiya
University of South Florida

Nirmit Dahiya
Texas A&M- Kingsville

Aishwarya Bharadwaj
Tarleton State University

Adithya Hari
University of Massachusetts

Pavana Nagaraj
San Diego State University

Akshana
Kennesaw State University

Ruthika Saravanan
Charleston Southern University

Stepping stone: Tejaswin says that competing in the NCAA is like a stepping stone for the Commonwealth Games, Asian Games, or even the Olympics. In his first indoor season, he got a chance to compete against Koitatoi Kidali from Kenya **(in pic, red)**, who competed at the Paris Olympics in the 800m. GETTY IMAGES

talent," says Bob Thurnhoffer, who initially attempted to recruit Lokesh Sathyanathan to the University of New Mexico and who recently recruited triple jumper Sharvari Parulekar to the University of Louisville.

Reluctant athletes

When competing at a high enough level, there's a good chance athletes will receive recruitment offers directly from colleges and coaches themselves.

Lokesh Sathyanathan says he got his first recruitment offer right after the Junior World Championships in Tampere, Finland, where he competed in the men's long jump. "At that time, a few coaches asked me if I was interested in coming here, getting a full ride and pursuing my studies and track as well," he says.

Lokesh had declined the offer back then.

It's something Tejaswin has seen happen on multiple occasions. "The biggest problem is that athletes in India are not confident enough to leave their comfort zone. Sometimes coaches don't want to let them leave. They think that they are doing well in India, so why should they go to another country? I have to explain that most Olympians and Olympic gold medallists come out of the NCAA system, so if that is a motivation, then perhaps they need to look at that option," he says.

"When we do get athletes to commit to the NCAA, they are in their early 20s. They might have benefitted more had they decided to go a couple of years earlier. If they have already started university in India, it becomes even more of a challenge because that removes some of their eligibility to compete in the NCAA (Collegiate athletes are permitted to compete for five years in the NCAA, but this goes down if they have attended university previously)," says Siddhi.

There are cultural misgivings as well. Tejaswin says a number of vegetarian athletes have concerns about whether they will be able to manage a change in diet. Others are unsure whether they will be able to manage their study workload or even whether they have the academic background to apply in the first place. The first concern, he says, is misplaced.

"I understand the question of vegetarianism because I've gone through it myself. But you have to understand that we are in a cosmopolitan world. Eventually, you have to get out there and see what all is available," he says.

The fact that many Indian athletes tend to prioritise their sports at the expense of their academic advancement is potentially a bigger challenge. This isn't as much of an issue at the time of recruitment. Thurnhoffer says, "A lot of kids have the concern that they need to have a certain grade if they want to be recruited. But that's not always the case. Your SAT (Standard Aptitude Tests) scores aren't necessarily important. If you are an 8m long jumper or a 45-second 400m runner, a lot of coaches will be willing to overlook your SAT scores, even if you

have taken the test.

"Some of the Ivy League colleges might want you to at least sit for the SAT, but for other colleges, even just a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or a Duolingo English Test is good enough.

"But even if you aren't an Olympic-level athlete, there are options. If you are something like a 7.70m jumper or a girl who jumps 13.30m in the triple jump, there are a lot of mid-level NCAA Division 1 colleges that would be willing to give you a full scholarship."

While it's often been hard for Thurnhoffer to convince athletes in the past, he's seeing a change in the thought process. "*Instagram* has played a big role. When an athlete from India sees some of the best athletes in the world post about their college life and then go on to win medals at the Olympics, they think they can do this as well. There's a lot more awareness and with it a lot more interest," he says.

Even after they are admitted, there are challenges. "A lot of Indian athletes come from a culture where life is about eating, training, and sleeping. But that's not possible at the collegiate level. You are a student athlete and not just an athlete. You have to maintain your grade point at a certain level to be able to compete," says Tejaswin.

Heavy workload

This can be hard for some athletes who aren't used to the workload. "I'll have days when I would have been up since 5 am with a training session followed by seven hours of classes and then gym sessions in the evening. I'll be thinking at 9 pm that I can finally go to sleep when I'll remember I have an assignment due, and I'll be up till 2 am completing it," says Arjanvir, who is currently studying computer science.

The routine can be hectic, but the upside is obvious. "Currently, if I have no scholarship, it would cost me about $65,000 a year. I'd never have had the opportunity to go to college in the USA if I didn't have a scholarship," Arjanvir says.

While he's grateful for the chance to complete his degree, his primary goal is to improve enough as an athlete to eventually compete for India. This is the target for most athletes from India competing in the NCAA system.

"Everyone knows that competing in the NCAA is like a stepping stone for the Commonwealth Games, Asian Games, or even the Olympics. You get used to an incredibly high standard of competition. You are competing every other weekend. You have good and bad competitions, but you keep improving," says Tejaswin.

A number of athletes vouch for this. "In my first year of the indoor season, I got a chance to compete against (Kenya's) Koitatoi Kidali, who competed at the Paris Olympics in the 800m. I'd never have got the chance to compete against someone like that had I stayed in India. The kind of facilities and attention that each individual athlete gets is unheard of back in India. Your own standards and expectations get so high.

"You are part of a team of 70 or so people who are so dedicated to honing their craft and so passionate about the sport. Just being around that mindset — there isn't a word I can use to describe it. When you walk around campus, everyone knows that, okay, this is the track team.

"You know, you walk onto the track and there are 45 of you ready to go, ready to give it your all every morning. There's something about that mindset, it's just amazing. I love competing with people from all over the world," he says.

Pradeep, who was initially uncertain about applying for a scholarship overseas, now says he's advising other young Indian athletes to make the move. Tejaswin and Siddhi too have seen the interest spike. But while they are optimistic about more athletes looking to train and compete in the USA, they admit that it takes only a few bad incidents to spoil the overall picture.

A case in point is the story of **Parvej Khan (above)**, who earned a scholarship at the University of Florida where he earned a bit of a cult following in the middle-distance scene last year before being banned after a failed dope test in India. "Unfortunately, there is a real concern for a lot of coaches about the whole drug situation when they look to sign Indian athletes. When you have pictures of syringes in toilets going viral and after the whole Parvej situation, a lot of coaches are understandably a bit reluctant to deal with something like that," admits Thurnhoffer.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

But he hopes that such concerns will fade as more Indian athletes make news for the right reasons. Pradeep hopes he will be one of those. "When I think about where I started and where I'm at, it feels like such a great opportunity. I have to grab as much of it as possible. I miss my parents, but I don't think I'll be going home for vacation or anything. My goal is eventually to compete at the Los Angeles 2028 Games, and the NCAA will give me the best chance to do that. I just want to stay here and keep this fire alive as long as I can," says Pradeep.

GETTY IMAGES

Kirsty Coventry is new IOC President

"This is a powerful statement. It shows that we are **truly global,** that we have evolved into an organisation open to diversity, and that we will continue on this path over the next eight years," Coventry said.

Team Sportstar
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

Kirsty Coventry, elected as the 10th president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), became the first woman and the first African to hold the most powerful position in world sport. The 41-year-old from Zimbabwe was the sole female candidate among seven contenders in the months-long election.

She is also the youngest IOC president since co-founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin in the late 19th century.

A decorated swimmer, she holds seven of Zimbabwe's eight Olympic medals, including golds from the 2004 and 2008 Games.

Her election victory comes a year after the Paris 2024 Olympics achieved full gender parity, reinforcing the IOC's commitment to diversity and progress. Up until 1981, no women were members of the organisation. Coventry is only the second to run for its presidency.

Top position: Kirsty Coventry's victory comes a year after the Paris 2024 Olympics achieved full gender parity, reinforcing the IOC's commitment to diversity and progress. GETTY IMAGES

"This is a powerful statement. It shows that we are truly global, that we have evolved into an organisation open to diversity, and that we will continue on this path over the next eight years," she said.

In the election, runner-up Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr secured 28 votes, while France's David Lappartient and Japan's Morinari Watanabe each received four. Prince Feisal al Hussein of Jordan and Sweden's Johan Eliasch both won two votes.

Already a member of the IOC executive board and widely considered the preferred candidate of outgoing president Thomas Bach, Coventry's tenure will last at least eight years.

During her campaign, she pledged to modernise the IOC, promote sustainability, embrace technological advancements, and empower athletes. She also placed particular emphasis on protecting women's sport, supporting a blanket ban on transgender women competing in female Olympic events.

Coventry's sporting accomplishments

Olympic Games

Gold Medals:
- 2004 – 200m Backstroke
- 2008 – 200m Backstroke

Silver Medals:
- 2004 – 100m Backstroke
- 2008 – 200m Individual Medley, 400m Individual Medley, 100m Backstroke

Bronze Medal:
- 2004 – 200m Individual Medley
- Competed in 2000 and 2016

World Championships

Gold Medals:
- 2005 – 100m Backstroke, 200m Backstroke
- 2009 – 200m Backstroke

Silver Medals:
- 2005 – 200m Individual Medley, 400m Individual Medley
- 2007 – 200m Backstroke, 200m Individual Medley
- 2009 – 400m Individual Medley

World Cup

Silver Medal:
- 2010 – 200m Individual Medley

Bronze Medals:
- 2010 – 200m Backstroke, 200m Individual Medley

African Games — 2015

Gold Medals:
- 200m Backstroke
- 200m Individual Medley
- 100m Backstroke

Summary of Coventry's vision

Harness the Power of Sport

Prioritising athlete well-being, including mental health and post-career opportunities.

Expanding Olympic Solidarity programs to support underrepresented regions.

Increasing visibility for athletes and sports beyond the Games.

Emphasising innovation, including AI-driven engagement and Olympic E-Sports Games.

Maximise Collaboration and Engagement

Strengthening the role of International Federations (IFs) in Games planning.

Encouraging open dialogue with stakeholders for better decision-making.

Improving internal and external communication for greater transparency.

Strengthen Partnerships for Mutual Growth

Expanding digital platforms and AI-powered engagement tools.

Increasing accessibility to Olympic content across regions and platforms.

Exploring new revenue models while maintaining the Games' integrity.

Champion Sustainable Development

Promoting environmental responsibility in Olympic infrastructure and operations.

Advancing gender equity, inclusivity, and diversity.

Strengthening the Olympic Refugee Team initiative.

Advance Credibility and Trust

Enforcing zero tolerance for corruption, doping, and unethical behaviour.

Maintaining IOC neutrality amid geopolitical tensions.

Leveraging data-driven transparency measures to enhance governance.

Echoes of Kuala Lumpur: When Indian hockey ruled the world

India's **1975 Hockey World Cup** triumph in Kuala Lumpur was a historic victory, marked by resilience, key performances, and a dramatic semifinal. It was India's last major title on natural grass.

Vijay Lokapally
vijay.l@thehindu.co.in

For my generation, cricket was an addiction, but hockey was an emotion. I never played hockey, but I never missed an opportunity to watch. Cricketers were stars, and so were hockey players. Sports magazines featured hockey players on their covers, and fans collected their posters.

A generation of sports scribes who passed down stories of the national hockey team's feats — seven Olympic gold medals, six of them in succession — connected us with some of the greatest names in Indian sport.

The 1972 Olympics in Munich was a disappointment. A bronze medal did not truly reflect the team's strength. When the 1975 World Cup was announced, with Kuala Lumpur as the venue, one could only hope.

The team trained in Chandigarh. "The Punjab Government sponsored the camp," recalled goalkeeper Ashok Diwan. It was a concerted effort by the Punjab government and the Indian Hockey Federation (IHF) to assemble the best squad and win the trophy.

"There was a terrific bond among the players and support staff. We had (G.S.) Bodhi as the coach and Balbir Singh (Sr) as the manager. They knew the players inside out. They instilled tremendous confidence in us, and we were raring to go to Kuala Lumpur. It was a perfect team," said Diwan.

The then Punjab Chief Minister, Giani Zail Singh, who later became the President of India, took a personal interest in ensuring the team had the best facilities. Ashok Kumar, the star of the final when India beat Pakistan 2-1, remembered, "We were looked after very well."

Malaysia hosted the tournament's third edition after Spain (1971) and the Netherlands (1973). India won bronze in Spain and two years later, silver, losing to the Netherlands on penalty strokes. The assignment in Kuala Lumpur was significant for more than one reason. It was the last major tournament on natural grass as hockey authorities had decided to transition to artificial surfaces from the 1976 Olympics in Montreal.

"When we landed in Malaysia, there was no pressure, and that worked well for us," recalled defender Aslam Sher Khan. He would later play a decisive role in shaping India's fortunes in the final phase of the World Cup.

India began its campaign with a 2-1 win over England, with V.J. Philips scoring both goals. A 1-1 draw with Australia, with B.P. Govinda as the scorer, kept spirits high. Wins over Ghana (7-0) and West Germany (3-1) were expected, but a 1-2 loss to Argentina was not.

"We were combining well, and there was such optimism in the team ahead of the semifinal," said Ashok. However, the match almost derailed India's progress in the tournament.

According to Diwan, there was not a single voice supporting India. Almost 50,000 spectators cheered for Malaysia. It did not affect the Indian team, but there were some tense moments, with Malaysia playing better than its usual standard.

India led through a Shivaji Pawar goal but soon trailed 1-2. As desperation set in, the team launched a series of blistering attacks, but the equaliser remained elusive. Penalty corners did not help either. The Indian bench looked forlorn. Bodhi and Balbir were lost for words, as Malaysia seemed certain to win the semifinal. Twelve minutes before the final whistle, Balbir turned to Aslam and called him in to replace Michael Kindo.

Kindo was excellent at breaking

Golden moment: The 1975 title, under the leadership of Ajitpal Singh, remains India's only Hockey World Cup title to date.

PICS: THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

up attacks but not skilled in converting penalty corners. "That was the reason why Balbir *saab* chose me. He rubbed my cheeks and pleaded, '*Tu hee bacha sakta hai. Kuch kar de* (Do something. Only you can save us).' He had faith that I would rescue the team from elimination," said Aslam.

The game became rough and fast. India dominated the Malaysian half, but the equaliser remained out of reach. "I could not watch the game. All our hard work and preparation was slipping away. We played superior hockey but could not convert our chances. It was a difficult period for me," Balbir later said.

Four minutes from the end, Ashok earned India a penalty corner. The responsibility was now on Aslam. As he stepped up to take the shot, his life flashed before him — his father's Olympic gold in 1936, his struggles to secure a spot in the playing eleven. "Somehow, I could never gain the support of the authorities. This was my god-sent chance," said Aslam.

Moments later, Aslam intercepted a Malaysian move. "I liked the feel of the ball on my stick. I felt confident. And then came the penalty corner — hardly four minutes left. I realised it was my moment, created by destiny. I spotted a nervous Balbir ji from the corner of my eye and then geared up for the strike, the shot of my life. I kissed the *taveez* (amulet) my mother had given me and prepared to take the penalty corner," Aslam said.

It was a moment to cherish. Govinda pushed the ball, Ajitpal

The 1975 team:
Leslie Fernandez, Ashok Diwan, Surjit Singh, Michael Kindo, Aslam Sher Khan, Varinder Singh, Onkar Singh, Mohinder Singh, Ajitpal Singh, Ashok Kumar, B.P. Govinda, Harcharan Singh, Harjinder Singh, Victor Philips, Shivaji Pawar, and P.E. Kalaiah.
The team has lost Surjit, Kindo, Varinder, Mohinder, and Pawar.

Singh stopped it flawlessly, and Aslam's hockey stick swung in a perfect arc, sending the ball to the right of the Malaysian goalkeeper, who was caught on the wrong foot. A deathly silence gripped the stadium as India survived. In extra time, Harcharan Singh scored, and India reached the final.

Back home, we were glued to our radio sets. Ace commentator Jasdev Singh was on air, and we missed nothing. His words painted the scene for us. India trailed after an early goal, but Surjit Singh equalised, and Ashok netted the match-winner — his most precious contribution to Indian hockey. India's goals came in the second half. We had the new poster boys of Indian sport. Hockey was the game to watch. The team returned to a hero's welcome. As reported in *The Hindu*, "The high and low of Madras rubbed shoulders with one another in acclaiming the achievement of Ajitpal and his men in winning the World Cup at Kuala Lumpur. India's hockey heroes were taken in a procession from Anna Statue in Anna Salai (Mount Road) to Hotel Woodlands, where a reception was held for them."

Amidst the celebrations, the Indian team was charged duty fees at the airport for electronic goods they had received as gifts after their Kuala Lumpur triumph. It was an embarrassment, but timely intervention by IHF president M.A.M. Ramaswamy saved them. He brought it to the notice of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who ordered an immediate waiver. "The customs officials came to the hotel to reimburse the duty fees they had charged us," said Diwan.

Sadly, the euphoria of the 1975 World Cup faded in Montreal the following year when India returned home without an Olympic medal for the first time. The switch to artificial turf wiped out the glory attained on natural grass. "We are still chasing an international gold," lamented Aslam.

Leslie Fernandez

It feels great that we are still being honoured and felicitated by people across India.

At the same time, I feel sad that some of our 1975 World Cup-winning team members are no longer with us.

However, it is heartening that we have a World Cup group on WhatsApp where we stay in touch.

Nobody expected us to win the World Cup. There were no practice matches, and in the months leading up to the tournament, there was no proper national federation, as infighting was rife. The Indian Olympic Association was running the show at the time. Ramaswamy became the president of the Indian Hockey Federation during the World Cup.

The victory was undoubtedly sweet, and we were treated royally upon our return home. Our 1975 World Cup-winning team played exhibition matches against the 'Rest of India' in Delhi, Lucknow, Punjab, and Chennai.

Nothing can match the feeling of winning the World Cup and the manner in which people back home welcomed us.

As told to K. Keerthivasan

B. P. Govinda

In those days, people used to talk about the 1983 Cricket World Cup triumph of the Indian team, where Kapil Dev and Sunil Gavaskar were — and still are — household names.

Our 1975 Hockey World Cup victory is equally great, as no other hockey team from our country has won the Cup since.

I believe this is a huge achievement and highlights how tough it is to win the World Cup.

Now, it feels wonderful to be invited to various functions.

Recently, Hockey India honoured the 11 surviving members with cash awards. In 2024, the organising committee of the Surjit Singh Memorial Hockey Tournament also honoured all the team members of the 1975 World Cup with cash awards.

In fact, Surjit Singh was one of our teammates in the 1975 triumph. Unfortunately, he died in an accident.

Then, on April 19, the Chhattisgarh Government promised to honour us.

It is a happy feeling to realise that we are still recognised.

As told to K. Keerthivasan

AP

CHAMPION STUFF

International giants **scored big wins** as Japan clinched another World Cup qualification.

FOR MORE STORIES

Joan Mathew Jacob & Rajdeep Saha
joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in,
rajdeep.saha@thehindu.co.in

Club football halted for the international break for the final time this season as the stars took to the field donning their national colours. While some nations sought to progress in their respective Nations League campaigns, others focused on securing qualification for the World Cup next year.

Nations League reaches business end

Defending champion Spain held on to its nerves to edge past the Netherlands in a penalty shootout and advance to the final four of the UEFA Nations League.

After a high-octane first leg which ended 2-2 in Rotterdam, the reverse fixture matched and improved on the intensity, with the Dutch fighting back three times in the tie.

Mikel Oyarzabal's regulation-time brace and Lamine Yamal's **(above)** spectacular strike in extra time were cancelled out by the Dutch trio of Memphis Depay, Ian Maatsen and Xavi Simons, taking the match to penalties.

In the shootout, Yamal — who earlier became the youngest goalscorer in the tournament's history — was the only Spaniard to miss from the spot, while Noa Lang and Donyell Malen failed to convert for the Oranje, resulting in their exit from the competition.

Top shot: Portugal overcame an inspired Denmark to win 5-3 on aggregate, with Cristiano Ronaldo scoring his 136th goal for country. AFP

The Spaniards will face former champion France in the semis after it also kept its cool in a penalty shootout against an ageing Croatia side.

In-form Ousmane Dembele and Michael Olise scored in the second half for Les Bleus to nullify Croatia's two-goal advantage from the first leg and take it to sudden death.

French goalkeeper Mike Maignan produced two saves, and Dayot Upamecano converted the winning penalty under pressure to send France through.

At the other end of the bracket, inaugural season winners Portugal showed resilience to overcome an inspiring challenge from Denmark and beat them 5-3 on aggregate.

After losing the first leg 0-1, Portugal looked much improved in the second fixture, despite all-time top scorer Cristiano Ronaldo missing from the spot in the fourth minute. He made amends later in the game, scoring his 136th international goal before Francisco Trincao came off the bench to score a brace and seal a semifinal berth.

Portugal will face Germany in the final-four clash after the latter survived a late surge from Italy to secure a 5-4 victory on aggregate.

Coming into the second leg with a one-goal advantage, Germany took

« Thomas Tuchel made a positive start to his new role as England manager, as it beat Albania 2-0 in the FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers »

Iconic: Neymar has been out of international action since October 2023, mostly due to injuries. However, during Brazil's WC Qualifier against Colombia, fans made sure to show their love and support for him. AP

a healthy lead after Joshua Kimmich, Jamal Musiala and Tim Kleindienst scored in a span of 15 minutes in the first half.

However, it was not smooth sailing for the Germans, as Italy bounced back into the game courtesy of a Moise Kean brace. Giacomo Raspadori got a third for the Azzurri from the spot in the fifth minute of stoppage time, but it was too late as Germany held on to send Italy home.

The international break also saw Thomas Tuchel make a positive start to his new role as England manager, as his side defeated Albania 2-0 in the FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers. Myles Lewis-Skelly scored on his national team debut, while its all-time top scorer Harry Kane doubled the tally to kick-start England's qualifying campaign.

Argentina, Brazil deliver without their stars

At the time of writing, South American giants Argentina and Brazil are set to lock horns in a FIFA World Cup 2026 Qualifier. However, both sides will be without their North Stars. Injuries ruled out Lionel Messi and Neymar for both of their qualifiers scheduled in the March international window. Yet, their

Youngest goalscorers in UEFA Nations League history

Player	Nationality	Age	Opponent	Date
Lamine Yamal	Spain	17 years 253 days	Netherlands	23/03/2025
Gavi	Spain	17 years 304 days	Czechia	05/06/2022
Ansu Fati	Spain	17 years 311 days	Ukraine	06/09/2020
James Scanlon	Gibraltar	17 years 346 days	Liechtenstein	08/09/2024
Jeremy Doku	Belgium	18 years 104 days	Iceland	08/09/2020

Asian edge: Japan became the first side besides the host nations to qualify for the 2026 FIFA World Cup after a hard-fought 2-0 win over Bahrain. AFP

nations managed without them. Argentina edged Uruguay in a narrow 1-0 win with Thiago Almada scoring the decisive goal, while Brazil beat Colombia 2-1 thanks to goals from Raphinha and Vinicius Junior.

Neymar's career, both with club and country, has been extremely injury-marred. The Sao Paulo local had been out of international action since October 2023, mostly due to injuries. Since his debut for the Canarinha in 2010, Brazil has played 65 matches without him (either on the bench or not in the squad due to suspensions or injury). In those fixtures, the side has had a win record of 55 per cent (winning 36 matches).

As for Argentina, Messi too has been extremely important for the national team's triumphs in recent tournaments like the 2022 FIFA World Cup and multiple Copa America titles. However, the side has also fared quite well without him. Since his international debut in 2005, Argentina has played 68 matches without Messi. In those, the side has had a commendable win percentage of 60 (winning 41 matches). The numbers show that Brazil depends on Neymar's 'Joga Bonito' brand of football slightly more than Argentina does on Messi's sublime play. How things pan out in the near future, only time will tell.

Mauricio Pochettino had a CONCACAF Nations League campaign to forget as the USA succumbed to a shock 1-0 defeat against underdogs Panama in the semifinal.

Japan, New Zealand book their tickets

After a hard-fought 2-0 win over Bahrain in the third round of AFC qualifiers for next year's marquee event in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, Japan became the first side to qualify for the 2026 FIFA World Cup after the host nations.

This is the eighth consecutive time that the Asian side has qualified for the quadrennial tournament, reiterating the juggernaut that it is in the continent.

The Samurai Blue's best finish at the World Cup remains multiple Round of 16 appearances. The most recent one, in Qatar in 2022, showed that Japan can go toe-to-toe against European powerhouses after it beat the likes of Germany and Spain in the group stage.

While Japan confirmed its berth in next year's finals with a win in Saitama, almost 9,000 km away and a few days later in Auckland, the island country of New Caledonia harboured dreams of making it to the World Cup for the first time.

The side was holding favourite New Zealand 0-0 in the OFC qualifiers final until the 60th minute. Unfortunately for New Caledonia, 36-year-old Michael Boxall found the net a minute later — his first-ever international goal — to open the floodgates.

Two more goals later, New Zealand followed Japan and became the second team to book its ticket for next year's edition, which is set to have 48 teams.

Mexico wins big

Mauricio Pochettino had a CONCACAF Nations League campaign to forget as the USA succumbed to a shock 1-0 defeat against underdogs Panama in the semifinal.

Cecilio Waterman scored in the fourth minute of stoppage time to quash the Americans' hopes of winning their fourth consecutive title.

Things went from bad to worse for Pochettino as his side lost 1-2 against Canada in the third-place match, sparking concerns about the team's quality ahead of the FIFA World Cup next year.

Despite the famous win, Panama's dream of lifting the title came to an end after it fell to a 1-2 loss against Mexico in the final.

Veteran Raul Jimenez scored in the eighth minute and converted from the spot in stoppage time to lead Mexico to CONCACAF glory **(above)**.

(All results are updated as of March 24)

CHHETRI & CO. AWAIT THE HAMZA CHALLENGE

India recalling Sunil Chhetri and Bangladesh including Hamza Choudhury in its squad has greatly helped **rekindle** the dying embers of the footballing rivalry between the two neighbouring nations.

Football fever gripped Shillong, the quaint capital of Meghalaya, with the prospect of an intense contest between old rivals India and Bangladesh.

Dubbed the South-Asian football derby, the Group C league fixture of the final round qualifiers for the Asian Cup 2027 seems to have relived the antagonism the two teams have shared for more than four decades. It has also greatly helped rekindle the dying embers of the rivalry between the two neighbouring nations.

With a berth in the final stage of the premier continental competition at stake, both teams have tried to put their best foot forward and secure an early advantage. Bangladesh strengthened its squad with the inclusion of Leicester City player Hamza Choudhury **(left)**, who recently got a nod from FIFA to alter his international allegiance. The 27-year-old defensive midfielder from Loughborough, England, obtained a Bangladeshi passport in

2024 to play for the country. India, on the other hand, recalled its talismanic forward Sunil Chhetri **(right)** from international retirement.

Every contest seeks an equilibrium, which has happened with the arrival of Hamza, who has been likened to Argentine superstar Lionel Messi by Bangladesh national team captain Jamal Bhuyan.

"Hamza is a Premier League player. He is our Messi. Everyone in our team welcomes and respects him," Jamal was quoted as saying in a recent interaction with the media.

This was the first time the senior men's national football team will play a competitive match in the refurbished Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, which has been refitted with a natural turf that meets international standards.

A large contingent of Bangladeshi media has made its way to the scenic venue through the international border in Sylhet (which it shares with Meghalaya), eager to witness the contest between Chhetri and Hamza.

Indian head coach Manolo Marquez, said, "I think he (Hamza) is a very good player. He was playing in the Premier League, now he is playing in the (EFL) Championship (with Sheffield United), and that team is likely to be promoted. I think it is not only good for Bangladesh but also for Asian football that players like him can play in the national team."

Sandesh Jhingan, the mainstay of India's defence, felt that Chhetri remains a threat for any team. "He has scored 95 goals, so you always expect him to score. We are just happy to have him back. He is a threat to every team because of the quality he has."

Sandesh kept the Indian striker ahead in the Sunil vs Hamza contest.

Amitabha Das Shama

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

SOLID START FOR MCLAREN

Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri bag **top honours** in the first two races, as Lewis Hamilton 'sprints' a surprise.

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

Two consecutive, action-packed race weekends were the perfect way to start the new and highly awaited Formula One season.

Australia and China had the prized opportunity to reveal what's in store for the 2025 calendar, ending a nearly three-month-long wait.

Among the 20 names that lined up on the Albert Park grid were a few new ones, and the Australian Grand Prix provided the perfect stage for a stellar introduction. The paddock went back Down Under for the curtain-raiser, and Melbourne welcomed them with plenty of showers.

It was one of the greatest tests of strategy and skill. With the weather and rain proving difficult to predict, teams and drivers had to nail tough calls, tyres, and timings to be the best of the rest. And it was Lando Norris who prevailed, giving McLaren a boost to its title defence campaign.

Off the mark

The domination from defending champion McLaren was one that most expected, considering the high it ended on last year and strong performances in pre-season testing. The fact that McLaren had the same driver duo from last season meant that good communication — the key to cracking tough races — was ever-present.

Norris, last year's runner-up, ensured mistakes of the past would not haunt him, acing the strategy calls and a difficult drive to claim the first win of the year. The 57-lap encounter had crashes and Safety Cars galore, but the Briton battled through, even keeping a charging Max Verstappen behind, a bonus to a hard-fought victory.

It was only towards the closing stages that the championship holder Verstappen caught up to his rival. Up until lap 44, McLaren looked on course for a 1-2 finish, with the hometown favourite Oscar Piastri closely following his teammate. But once the rain set in, the hearts of the Australian faithful sank as he spun and tumbled down the order.

Flawless: The defending constructors champion got off to a flying start with a double-podium finish in Australia and China.

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

While Piastri recovered to ninth, with incredible reversing to fish himself out of the grass, it allowed the likes of Mercedes' George Russell to claim the final step of the podium. Crossing the line behind him was his teammate Andrea Kimi Antonelli, the Silver Arrows' replacement for Lewis Hamilton.

He finished a solid fourth in his debut weekend, ahead of the seven-time champion himself. Hamilton, who made the switch to Ferrari, found the going tough, crossing the line in a disappointing 10th, while his teammate Charles Leclerc settled for eighth.

It was also anticlimactic for the debutant lot, with four of the six not finishing the race — most lost control and went off the track, with Oliver Bearman of Haas being the only other rookie to cross the finish line (14th).

Those who conquered the Australian challenge headed to China with plenty of confidence, but for the ones returning to the drawing board, the luxury of time evaded them. The Shanghai Circuit was raring to go.

Redemption arc

There were barely five days between the two races, but the paddock was constantly buzzing, more so because of new FIA directives and freight delays. However, the excitement and expectations of a sprint weekend eventually overshadowed it all.

With only one practice session to iron out the creases, the weekend once again looked like it belonged to McLaren. Norris and Piastri, who were among the top three during Friday's FP1, were contenders for claiming pole for the first sprint of the season. But the short race format saw the young duo come undone by a resurgent Hamilton **(right)** in red.

The 40-year-old claimed a first-ever sprint victory for himself and Ferrari, capitalising on his maiden pole with the Italian side and taking the chequered flag after a long wait. He pulled away from second-placed Piastri and silenced those who were vocal about Hamilton's supposed struggles settling into a new team.

Meanwhile, Piastri's improved finish meant his side headed into qualifying with positivity and points. And the 23-year-old wasn't done just yet. He smashed the lap record to seal his spot in the front of the grid for the first time in his career. Piastri was now given the task of converting his pole to a win, and he did just that.

The Chinese Grand Prix witnessed the Australian execute a difficult one-stop strategy, leading his teammate to the podium for a McLaren 1-2. Norris, who was error-prone throughout the weekend, capitalised at the start and fought the gird and his car — as he developed a brake issue — to hold on to second place.

Piastri's defensive effort was required only at the start, to fend off Russell, who had a productive, point-scoring outing. The Mercedes driver made it back-to-back podiums with another third-place finish, with Verstappen coming fourth.

Dream team: McLaren having the same driver duo from last season meant that good communication was ever-present.

What looked like a disheartening fifth and sixth for the Ferrari team turned into a disappointing disqualification from the main race. A car weight breach for Leclerc and excessive skid wear for sprint-winner Hamilton capped a forgettable performance. Haas and Williams benefitted as both pairs were bumped up and scored crucial points.

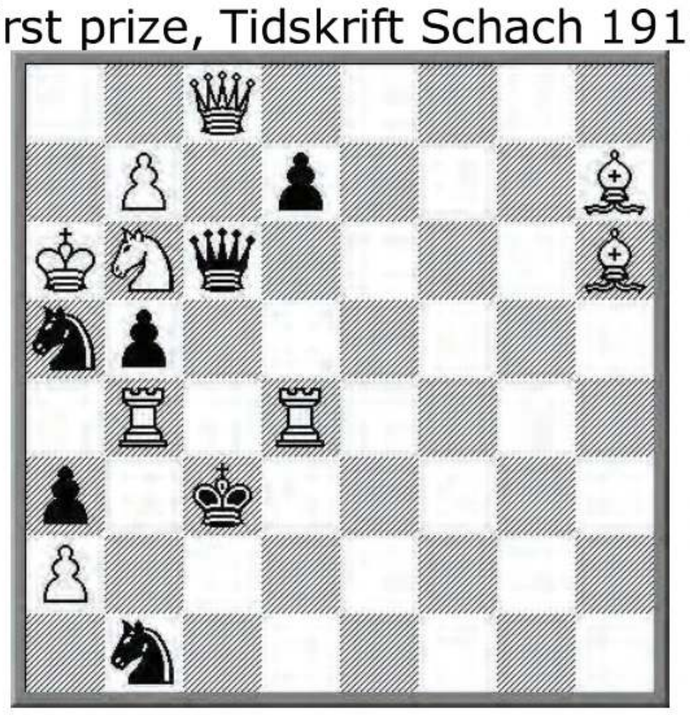
There were plenty of on-track and off-track activities for the paddock to ponder before they arrive in Japan for the third round. Suzuka, a popular track in Asia that draws large passionate crowds, has moved up the calendar and promises to be another eventful affair.

The Gamage unpin

By C.G.S.Narayanan

In Good Companion days many a theme has been named after the composer who invented it.Gamage unpin is one such theme named after the great American composer Frederick Gamage. The premise of Gamage is simple but yet ingenious. In the initial setting a black piece is pinned. One or more defences interfere with this piece which in turn is unpinned by the mating piece.The black pinned piece is invariably a black queen, black rook or a black bishop. Two such interferences are normally shown though Gamage has shown even three. The first diagram below is the oldest Gamage composed and is widely known.

Frederick Gamage
First prize, Tidskrift Schach 1911

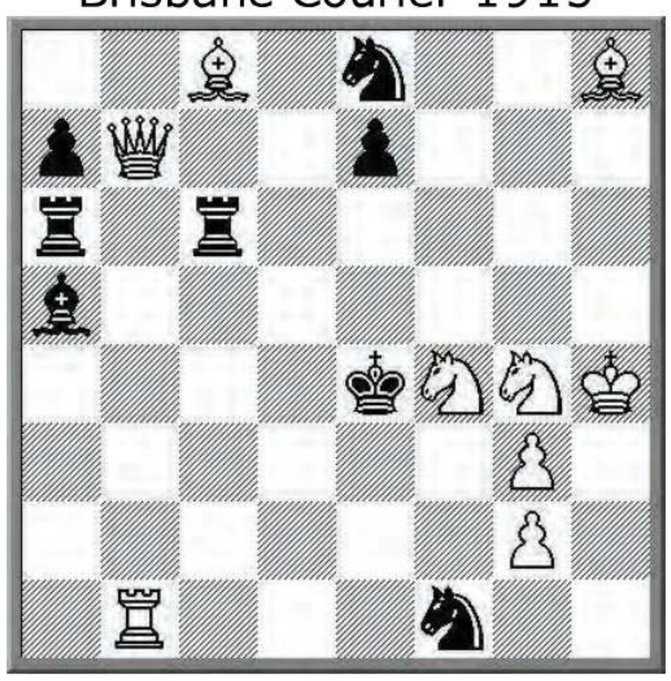


Mate in two moves

In the set position Nd2 is met by 2.Bxd2.White does not have a threatening move and so moves **1.Rh4** and waits! The two thematic variations are 1…d6 2.Qh8 and 1..d5 2.Qh3.In both cases black queen is unpinned on the mating move but interfered with by its own pawn.

The other interesting variation is 1…Nd2 2.Bg7 with changed mate from the set. Mike Prcic, American composer wrote in his book on Gamage " We know that this problem is not about set play and tries but it is interesting to note that the two tries 1.Bg7? and 1.Rg4? are defeated by 1…d6! and 1…d5!, the very same moves which produced the interferences in this revolutionary masterpiece".

F.Gamage
Brisbane Courier 1915

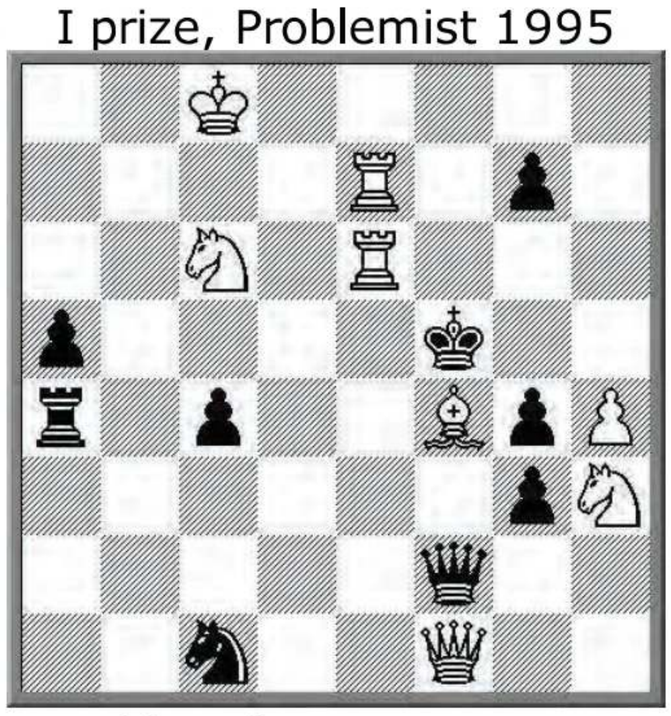


Mate in two moves

After the **key 1.Rc1!** threat 2.Rc4 there are three Gamage unpins 1…Bc3 2.Qb1;1….Nd6 2.Qxe7 and 1…e6 (cutting off the guard for f5) 2.Qh7. 1…Bb6 2.Qxc6

The problem below for solving shows bicolour Gamage in thematic tries

M.Kovacevic
I prize, Problemist 1995



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in 'Remembering Barnes': Try 1.Qa3? (2.Nd6)Nc4/Qf8 2.Qd3/Rxg4 Bc5! Try 1.Qxf6? Bc5/Qf8 2.Qxe5/Qxg6 Nc4! Try 1.Qxb6? Nd4/Bc5 Qf8!
Key:1.Qe6!(2.Nd6)Nd4/Bc5/Qf8 2.Rxd4/Qxe5/Qxg6.

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

R. RAVINDRAN

Anahat Singh, Veer Chotrani clinch titles

Anahat Singh clinched her 10th PSA title and Veer Chotrani his first in India at the SRFI Indian Tour Squash Championship — a PSA Challenger event — at the Indian Squash and Triathlon Academy (ISTA) in Chennai.

In a repeat of the Western India Open final in Mumbai last December, Anahat prevailed over compatriot and top seed Akanksha Salunkhe 11-6, 8-11, 11-8, 11-5 in the women's final. Akanksha may take heart from the fact that she managed to take a game off Anahat, having lost in straight games in their previous final.

Anahat won seven consecutive points to secure the third game 11-8, having been 4-8 down. In the men's final, second seed Chotrani, who had rallied after losing the first game, won eight points in a row to clinch the third game 11-6 from 3-6 down. He defeated Frenchman Melvil Scianimanico 3-11, 12-10, 11-6, 11-7.

"I'm very happy. I didn't expect it because this glass court (centre court at ISTA) and I have a bad relationship. I have never performed well on this glass court, but I think that's gone from my head now. It's always nice to win at home," said Chotrani, who secured his sixth PSA title overall.

S. PRASANNA VENKATESAN

SPORTOON

1 Prashant More and L. Keerthana won the men's and women's titles at the 52nd National Carrom Championship at the Harkishan Singh Surjeet Bhawan in New Delhi.

Former world champion Prashant proved too strong for Sandeep Dive, racing to a 25-9, 10-25, 25-2 victory.

Keerthana, from Tamil Nadu, defeated World Cup champion M. Khazima of the Petroleum Sports Promotion Board (PSPB) in thrilling fashion in the women's final, with a score of 16-20, 25-2, 14-12.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 Mohun Bagan defeated East Bengal 3-1 in the final to claim the Calcutta Premier Hockey League crown at the Dumurjala Hockey Ground in Howrah.

The traditional rivals set up the Kolkata derby title clash after securing the top two places on the points table.

Bagan earned prize money of Rs 3 lakh, while the runner-up, East Bengal, received Rs 2 lakh.

The highest scorer of the league, Abharan Sudev of Bagan, and the best player, Atul Deep of East Bengal, were awarded Rs 10,000 each.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

SEEKING THE RIGHT MENTORSHIP IN SPORTS

The impact of a great mentor can be one of the most powerful and **transformative** influences in one's career.

"The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image but giving them the opportunity to create themselves." — Steven Spielberg

What is it about mentorship that makes many so obsessive and at the same time doubtful?

Well, to start, I have been fortunate enough to be mentored by many high-quality professionals and well-wishing mentors at multiple stages of my career.

It is a culmination of their guidance, combined with our hard work and intelligence, that has brought me to where I am today.

As an emerging professional who took a 'non-traditional' path in both education and work, I am grateful for all the irreplaceable experiences given to me and, in some instances, shared with my peers.

These experiences have shaped my perspective. I have a distinctive outlook on why one should seek mentorship early in their professional career.

An alliance of individuals

The meaning of mentorship found in academic literature goes beyond a standard Merriam-Webster definition. According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; Policy and Global Affairs; Board on Higher Education and Workforce, mentorship can be defined as:

"A professional, working alliance in which individuals work together over time to support the personal and professional growth, development, and success of the relational partners through the provision of career and psychosocial support."

But why do we need mentorship? The right mentor provides access to a trusted advisor who can offer proper guidance and support.

Mentors can assist in three major areas that can accelerate your career growth: professional, personal, and network development.

They can be your friend, philosopher, and guide, helping you embark on a well-structured and professional path. However, there are also negative aspects, which will be highlighted later.

Professional development

Mentors are invaluable sources of experience and knowledge. Whether you're learning a hands-on skill or trying to understand a complicated topic, having a mentor to guide you is beneficial.

This direct feedback boosts confidence and enhances your professional development. Many mentors are walking encyclopaedias in their field, and the insights they provide can be crucial game-changers in one's career.

Personal upskilling

A combination of social skills, interpersonal abilities, character traits, and professional outlooks is essential for success in any career. Some of these attributes are inherent, while others — such as leadership, adaptability, effective communication, teamwork, and collaboration — can be nurtured under the right mentor's guidance.

Networking done right

Building a strong network is essential for a successful career. A mentor's network can help you expand your own domain of connections and references.

This is particularly valuable in niche

The perfect guide: Toni, Rafael Nadal's uncle and coach, instilled in the champion a strong work ethic and discipline from childhood. GETTY IMAGES

fields, where access is often restricted by tight professional circles. A mentor's introduction can open doors, but sustaining these connections requires trust and strong work ethics.

The flip side

Now that we have seen the positives, let's consider the negatives.

Internships can be valuable, but they also come with drawbacks. Here are some common challenges:

Low or no pay: Many internships are unpaid or offer very little compensation, which can be frustrating if you're putting in significant effort (even if mutually agreed on a pro bono basis).

Limited learning opportunities: Many internships involve repetitive tasks, admin work, or simple data entry, offering minimal career growth or experience.

High competition: Securing a good internship can be tough due to high demand, making it stressful to land a meaningful position.

Unclear job role: In India, interns often face vague responsibilities or a lack of guidance, leading to an unproductive experience.

Time commitment: Internships can be demanding, making it difficult to balance with studies, personal life, or part-time jobs.

No full-time job guarantee: Even with excellent performance, there's no certainty of a full-time job offer at the end of an internship.

Potential exploitation: Some companies use interns as cheap labour without offering proper training or growth opportunities, which can demotivate aspiring professionals.

Relocation costs: Internships in other cities or countries may require significant personal investment in travel, accommodation, and daily expenses, often without financial support.

Paying for internships: Recently, there has been increasing exploitation of interns, with mentors charging large sums under the pretext of providing knowledge and experience, which needs to be seriously scrutinised by interns and organisations.

Mentor creating a false aura about themselves: In the current scenario, some interns are misled by mentors who create a false narrative about their expertise or rarity in the field of sports science. This makes interns feel obliged or overly grateful to be interning under these misleading professionals.

Identifying the right one: Choosing your mentor or the company is the most critical part. Wrong choice of mentor can be counterproductive to your professional growth.

It's time to get started soon

A good mentor can be a source of support, a trusted advisor, and potentially a lifelong friend. The impact of a great mentor can be one of the most powerful and transformative influences in your career — so seek one out!

How the mighty fall

Despite the number of successful sportspeople who have ended up broke, it is not a subject discussed freely. Not many stars have a **financial safety net** post-career.

Suresh Menon

The great Frankie Dettori, one of the most successful (3000-plus winners) and colourful jockeys has filed for bankruptcy, saying "I am saddened and embarrassed by this outcome and would advise others to take a stronger rein over their financial matters." Despite the number of successful sportspeople who have ended up broke, it is not a subject discussed freely. Not many stars have a financial safety net post-career.

Mike Tyson, who made over 400 million dollars filed for bankruptcy in 2005. Golfer John Daly gambled away some $57 million (he didn't declare bankruptcy, though). Olympic figure skater Dorothy Hamill ('America's Sweetheart') turned pro and earned millions. She declared bankruptcy in 1996.

Troubled times: The great Frankie Dettori, one of the most successful (3000-plus winners) and colourful jockeys has filed for bankruptcy, saying "I am saddened and embarrassed by this outcome and would advise others to take a stronger rein over their financial matters." AP

Others in that depressing list include Tour de France champion and Olympic hero Sir Bradley Wiggins and Boris Becker. Some went broke without declaring bankruptcy, like heavyweight champion Leon Spinks. Some made a small amount back, like Tyson.

Research by XPro, a charity for ex-players, suggests that three out of five Premier League players — who earn an average of £30,000 per week — declare bankruptcy within five years of retirement. According to the *Sports Illustrated*, 78 percent of NFL players face serious financial hardships after retirement, 16 percent of them going bankrupt.

There are good reasons for this. Lack of education is one. Once the millions come in, so do conmen and smooth-talking operators keen to separate an athlete from his money. 'Advisers' are treated by many athletes the way they treat coaches — as people with greater knowledge whose advice is unselfish and sound. Athletes carry self-belief as a major weapon crucial to reaching the top. Often they can't understand how such a character trait does not convert into successful investments.

Careers in sport are short, even shorter at the highest level. The average premier league footballer might make more money in a week (or day) than some salaried people make in a year (or a lifetime), but lifestyles change, fantasy buys suddenly become necessities, and invariably there is a coterie of friends and relatives only too glad to help the athlete shed some of his wealth. Then there are divorces to deal with.

Not all athletes tread this path, obviously. Michael Jordan built up a billion-dollar company as did Magic Johnson, and more recently Serena Williams. Magic Johnson credits his success to investing in capable people rather than to the "wisdom" of family members and old friends.

"Bankruptcy is a major decision and its consequences will affect me for many years," said Dettori, a name familiar even to those who don't follow racing. The sheer exuberance he brought to his job, his manner of leaping off a horse and his ready smile set him apart. So too did his drugs bust and the fact that he survived his plane going up in flames (killing the pilot).

The highlight of his career came at Ascot in 1996 when he saddled all seven winners on a single race card. In the end, however, sadness — for both the star and his fans.

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