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OFF-SIDE

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DEEDS, NOT WORDS – NEED OF THE HOUR

Football and FIFA and its president **can't continue to feign** commitment to equality and women's rights. If football cannot offer sanctuary to its players, it's an accomplice in their betrayal.

It was a record-setting FIFA Women's World Cup in Australia-New Zealand, which saw the brave Spanish players overcome a dysfunctional relationship with coach Jorge Vilda and the related absence of many of their stars to beat England in the final and secure their first World title.

But their tale of triumph was tainted by the shadow of impropriety cast by Luis Rubiales, president of the Royal Spanish Football Federation. Rubiales's theatrics on the grand stage — a lewd crotch grab, an unwarranted kiss on the lips of Jenni Hermoso, and the fireman's lift of Athenea del Castillo — was a crude reminder of misogyny that continues to rule sports.

Despite the justifiable clamour for his removal — 81 women players have refused to play for Spain while he is in charge, and men's football superstars like Andres Iniesta and Hector Bellerin have also been vocal in their condemnation — and a 90-day ban by FIFA, pending investigations, he clings to his throne, refusing to retreat.

FIFA's promise of "Safe Sport" in 2021, a harbinger of change, has once again proved hollow.

Zambia, playing on the global stage for the first time, was coached by Bruce Mwape, who allegedly rubbed his hands over the chest of one of his players days before the team's historic win over Costa Rica. Though stained by long-standing allegations of sexual misconduct, Mwape is still in contention for a role with the men's national team.

Footage has also emerged of Vilda — 15 first-team Spanish players have refused to play under him since last year — inappropriately touching a female staff member moments after Olga Carmona scored the only goal of the final.

The resonance with past episodes is eerie. In 2018, Afghanistan's national team players had recounted harrowing abuses by their federation's president, who was subsequently banned for life.

Three years earlier, all 23 members of the Spanish national team had called for the ouster of the then manager Ignacio Quereda, later revealing, in a documentary 'Breaking the Silence', that the coach had overseen a culture of sexism, homophobia and bigotry during his 27-year reign.

Similar stories of misdemeanour have emerged from Haiti, Canada, Australia, Zimbabwe and India, reflecting a sinister underbelly that the sport refuses to acknowledge and rectify.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino asked women to "pick the right battles. Pick the right fights". But it is now FIFA's battle to overhaul a structure that for long has shielded this darkness. The consequences that Rubiales faces should not be tokenistic or a gentle rap on the knuckles, a mask to veil the systemic rot. The call is to take the fight across the global pitch and offer the sport, its women and children, robust mechanisms to report misconduct that will lead to swift, strict actions to eradicate this menace.

Incidentally, the Women's World Cup saw a 300 percent increase in prize money to USD 110 million, but the amount was still significantly lower when compared to USD 440 million for the men's 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Football, FIFA and its president can't continue to feign commitment to equality and women's rights. And if football cannot offer sanctuary to its players, it's an accomplice in their betrayal.

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SPORTS DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY OF TAMILNADU

THE CHIEF MINISTER'S TROPHY 2023
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THE SPORTS DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY OF TAMIL NADU IS THE OFFICIAL SPORTS ORGAN OF THE GOVERNMENT OF TAMIL NADU. ITS ROLE IS TO PROMOTE SPORTS AND PHYSICAL FITNESS THROUGHOUT THE STATE, UTILIZING RESOURCES DRAWN FROM GOVERNMENT, SPORTS ASSOCIATIONS, SPORTS MINDED PHILANTHROPISTS, INSTITUTIONS AND ANYONE COMMITTED TO SPORTS AND PHYSICAL FITNESS.

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CHIEF MINISTER'S TROPHY GAMES 2023:

CELEBRATING SPORTING EXCELLENCE IN TAMIL NADU

The magnificent extravaganza known as the Chief Minister's Trophy Games 2023 has spun a mesmerising tapestry of competitive fervour, elevated the domain of athletics and drove the proficiency of Tamil Nadu's sports fraternity. A royal grant of Rs. 50.86 crores, sanctioned by the Honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, has prepared the way for this historic sports event.

The Chief Minister's Trophy Games 2023, a shining example, not only sparked passionate involvement at the grassroots level, but also assumed the role of a critical talent hunting mechanism. A stunning 370,000 enthusiastic participants competed in the preliminary stages of the tournament at the district echelon. A following burst of enthusiasm revealed itself when over 27,000 skilled contestants converged at the state level, resulting in an awe-inspiring convergence. This massive athletic symposium, which includes a broad array of 15 unique sporting disciplines over five categories, exemplifies Tamil Nadu's persistent dedication to growing sports and revealing latent brilliance.

The first week of February in 2023 marked the start of the district-level athletic engagements, which fought bravely through the month of March, crafting a gripping story of physical skill that captivated viewers throughout every precinct. The emergence of 27,054 triumphant champions, whose mettle was forged in the crucible of district and regional duels, afforded them the pleasure of scaling to the magnificent platform of the Chief Minister's Trophy State Level Games, raised to the pinnacle of perfection. From 1 July to 25 July, the state-level odyssey unfolded over 17 diverse stadiums tucked inside the lively centre of Chennai, leaving behind a captivating image of unbridled athleticism.

TAMIL NADU'S VISION FOR

A SPORTING POWERHOUSE

The Tamil Nadu Government has demonstrated an unbroken dedication to developing athletic talent and has proved its commitment to improving sports and youth welfare. The Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu has made significant progress in identifying and developing the state's pool of sporting potential under the supervision of the Youth Welfare and Sports Development Department.

This Government's initiative towards showering generous praise and prizes on athletes is remarkable for amplifying the exceptional efforts of our sportspersons in national and global arenas.

GLOBAL SPORTS CITY:

Chennai is on a visionary mission to construct a Global Sports City, an ambitious constellation that includes world-class venues and cutting-edge facilities. This ambitious project, destined for the pantheon of sports greatness, envisions bringing Chennai to the world scene, serving as a furnace for famous global events.

Tamil Nadu unfurls its athletic tapestry, an opus filled with a beautifully kept history of sporting events, a forward-thinking dedication to developing fledgling talent, and a symphony of extraordinary infrastructure wealth. Tamil Nadu's echo will resonate beyond decades in this symposium of sports opulence, a compelling legacy of victory and tenacity.

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TAMIL NADU CHAMPIONS FOUNDATION:

The 'Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation' emerged from the visionary leadership of the Honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, committed to catalysing the advancement of athletic teams. This inspiring initiative aims to rekindle the embers of athletic grandeur in the state through fund-raising efforts, athlete empowerment programmes, infrastructure improvements, and the fostering of sportsmanship.

PARA SPORTS ARENAS:

The creation of pioneering Para-Sports Arenas across six District Sports Complexes in Tamil Nadu bears strong testimony to the state's in-line dedication to comprehensive sports. These cutting-edge facilities serve as a sacred ground, providing equal opportunity and vital assistance to differently abled athletes and steadfastly advocating diversity in sports. These arenas serve as lighthouses, blazing the road for para-athletes to zealously pursue their goals and excel in their chosen sports.

DISTRICT SPORTS COMPLEXES & DR KALAIGNAR SPORTS KITS:

The establishment of District Sports Complexes at Pudukottai, Tiruvarur, Nagapattinam, and Vellore as a memorial to Muthamizh Arignar Dr Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi exemplifies the Tamil Nadu Government's campaign to foster sports and honour visionary leaders.

As part of the initial phase, the administration intends to build mini-stadiums in 10 assembly constituencies, also supplementing this effort by renaming the existing 29 mini-stadiums in tribute to the former Chief Minister's steadfast support for sports. In commemoration of Dr Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi's centennial, the state has announced plans to distribute multipurpose sports kits to all 12,620 rural panchayats. This has demonstrated the state's commitment to taking sports to the grassroots level to even the remotest of villages.

HIGH CASH INCENTIVES FOR ATHLETES:

The prudent choice made by the honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu to applaud and honour the unwavering dedication and tenacity of sportsmen highlights the steadfast resolve of the Government. Since 26 June 2021, 1684, athletes who have excelled in a wide range of sports disciplines on the national and international levels have received significant financial incentives. The Tamil Nadu Government has awarded deserving sportspersons with a staggering sum of Rs. 49.15 crores in cash rewards, underlining its dedication to the advancement of sports in the state.

IN PURSUIT OF COACHING EXCELLENCE:

Diamond is just a piece of rock made of carbon until it is found and honed to its bewitching shine. Similarly, every great sportsperson was once a beginner who had a great coach to see the diamond in him/her. On that note, the honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu has given appointment orders to 76 coaches to find us 'diamonds' and hone them to their best shine. These experts, who are endowed with invaluable expertise, are a unique source of guidance to impart knowledge across a wide spectrum of sports disciplines. This tactical move demonstrates the dedication to offering elite coaching and mentoring, which is essential for bringing out the hidden skills of athletes and supporting the attainment of their fullest potential.

Furthermore, the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu's innovative outreach is observable in the involvement of three foreign coaches who are paragons of international standard mentorship. These foreign experts with their impeccable skill sets have already boosted the state's athletic adept as seen by the improved performance of Tamil Nadu's athletes in the international arena. The implementation of this unique programme is in line with the Government's goal of providing sportspersons with access to world-class training to springboard them onto the highest pedestals of success and glory.

UPGRADATION & ENHANCEMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURE:

The construction of 10 mini stadiums in various assembly constituencies was funded with Rs. 30.00 crores during the 2023–24 Budget session. The sanction of Rs. 9.90 crores for the installation of cutting-edge DMX LED lighting at the legendary Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Chennai is part of a concerted attempt to upgrade the sporting hotspots of the state's capital. Further, significant allocations of funds have been made across many other districts and sports academies in the state.

In a significant demonstration of their commitment to nurturing an optimal setting for athletes to excel, the Tamil Nadu Government has sanctioned Rs. 30 crores for the complete revamp of all District Sports Complexes.

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TAMIL NADU: PINNACLE DESTINATION FOR INTERNATIONAL SPORTING EVENTS

The Tamil Nadu government's consistent dedication to celebrating sports and nurturing diversity has resulted in a plethora of renowned athletic programmes. The state has left a distinctive stamp on the canvas of sports development, from hosting important international championships to pioneering advancements in para-sports development. The story of Tamil Nadu's athletic journey, characterised by persistent gratitude and unwavering resolution, bears witness to the government's pioneering and incisive approach to cultivating sporting supremacy. The state's persistent commitment survives as an example of tranquil teamwork involving many stakeholders, paving the way for a future in which the sphere of sports thrives, and players enjoy their well-deserved prominence. Tamil Nadu is a source of inspiration for the greater athletic universe by providing athletes with platforms that reflect global standards, promoting varied cooperation, and embracing an array of variety.

A RADIANT SHOWCASE: THE 44TH FIDE CHESS OLYMPIAD

The 44th FIDE Chess Olympiad, a spectacle of the strategic mastery of tactical talent that echos as a tribute to Tamil Nadu's ability to orchestrate world-class sporting extravaganzas. The government arranged and executed this magnificent event with incredible delicacy in a very short timeframe of five months, with a staggering allocation of Rs. 114 crores. The Olympiad, a joint effort of the Government of Tamil Nadu and FIDE, has gone down in history as a pivotal event for India. From 28 July to 10 August 2022, the international competition was held in the stunning surrounds of Mamallapuram, Chennai, and drew 1654 participants, including players, officials, and coaches from a startling 188 countries.

ELEVATING TENNIS EMINENCE: WTA CHENNAI OPEN 2022

The renowned WTA Chennai Open 2022 gave tennis a huge boost. This worldwide event, masterfully planned by the Tamil Nadu Tennis Association, unfurled its splendour on the courts of Chennai from 12 Sept to 18 Sept 2022, funded by an allocation of Rs. 5 crores. The event served as a poignant reinforcement of Tamil Nadu's status as a worldwide sports epicentre, shown by the state's unwavering dedication to cultivating a varied range of sports, complete with world-class facilities in which athletes could demonstrate their skills.

THE PHOENIX REKINDLED: SQUASH WORLD CUP

The Squash World Cup, which took place in Chennai in mid-June, reignited fierce athletic ardour. The tournament restored its enthusiasm within the fold of Tamil Nadu after a twelve-year sabbatical, demonstrating the state's persistent passion for hosting world-class international athletic events.

The Tamil Nadu government's investment of Rs. 2 crores underlined its commitment to developing squash and providing a worldwide platform for players from all over the world. The event was endowed with a compelling international ambience owing to the presence of 32 participants from eight different countries.

THE GRAND RETURN: MEN'S ASIAN HOCKEY CHAMPIONS TROPHY

The Champions Trophy made a return to Chennai after 16 long years with the last such event held way back in 2007. It is notable that the matches were played on the groundbreaking Poligras Paris GT, an eco-turf, which made its Indian debut before heading to the Paris Olympics. Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium underwent major renovation for the event and the main pavilion was named as "Kalaignar Centenary Pavilion".

The Champions Trophy concluded on a high in a nail-biting final where India orchestrated a comeback win by 4-3 over Malaysia after trailing by 1-3 at the half time. It is a fairytale match that the Chennai crowd will remember for ages to come.

WORLD SURF LEAGUE: INTERNATIONAL SURF OPEN

World Surf League QS 3000 event was held for the first time in India at Mammallapuram from 14th to 20th August, 2023. The Government of Tamil Nadu had wholeheartedly supported this endeavour by allocating a sum of Rs 2.68 crore to ensure the successful execution of the event. This maiden event witnessed the participation of 39 men and 14 women international surfers from 12 countries.

Among the participants were 15 Indians with 12 hailing from Tamil Nadu. The significance of the World Surfing League Qualifying Series 3000 lies in its potential to propel surfers to the prestigious Championship Tour. As participants win points, they increase their chances of qualifying for next year's Championship Tour event.

FORMULA 4 RACING

The Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT), in partnership with Racing Promotions Private Limited (RPPL), is going to conduct a night street circuit race in Chennai – the motorsports capital of India. The 3.5km layout, the longest street circuit in India, is located around the Island Grounds in the heart of the city. This will be the first ever street circuit in India and South Asia to host a night race, with the Chennai Formula Racing Circuit set to host the F4 Indian Championship and the Indian Racing League on December 9th and 10th 2023. The Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu will invest Rs. 42 crore to host this unique sporting event which will be a landmark for motorsports in India.

CYCLOTHON

A combined effort between the Tamil Nadu Government and HCL will unfold as a Cyclothon competition adorns Chennai on the auspicious day of 15 October, a clarion appeal for a healthy and eco-conscious way of living.

"Tamil Nadu has a rich tradition of producing professional athletes in multiple sports. Our vision is to position ourselves as a global destination for sports by shoring up infrastructure and bringing world-class sporting events to the state."

- UDHAYANIDHI STALIN
Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development

FOR MORE STORIES

India eyes Asian dominance as World Cup selection looms

Rohit Sharma's men don't **strut into the race of the Asian heavyweights** as overwhelming favourites this time around.

Dhruva Prasad
@DhruvaPrasad9

With the World Cup looming large, all roads will eventually lead back home for the Indian team. Its odyssey will lay at anchor on the Lankan shores for over two weeks as Rohit Sharma's men look to reclaim the continental title and then head home for the quadrennial global event, hopefully with a few more answers and a lot wiser.

But the Asian waters are choppy. The Men in Blue learned it the hard way at the T20 Asia Cup in the UAE in 2022, when, looking to test waters with less than two months left for the T20 World Cup in Australia, they fatally faltered against archrival Pakistan and eventual champion Sri Lanka and missed the final.

Chastened, India doesn't strut into the race of the Asian heavyweights as an overwhelming favourite this time around. Instead, it tiptoes into a tournament susceptible to quirks of fate as the lines between the haves and the have-nots blur increasingly.

However, a near-full-strength Indian squad, assembling for the first time in more than a year in the 50-over format, should inspire confidence. The return of Shreyas Iyer and KL Rahul (left) from injury lends clarity to India's middle-order muddle, while the sight of the inimitable Jasprit Bumrah bounding in again bodes well for its pace stocks.

But a squad on paper and the match fitness of its constituents are two different things. Iyer, slated as India's No. 4, last played international cricket in March, while Rahul, India's first-choice ODI wicketkeeper in the absence of Rishabh Pant, has a niggle that is unrelated to his original injury and could miss the first two or three games.

Rahul's predicament could be a double-edged sword. Ishan Kishan is the reserve wicketkeeper and doesn't quite fit the bill as Rahul's like-for-like replacement in the middle order, where he averages 21.2 in six innings. However, a bold management call could see him open the batting, which he showed was his calling with three back-to-back fifties in the Caribbean.

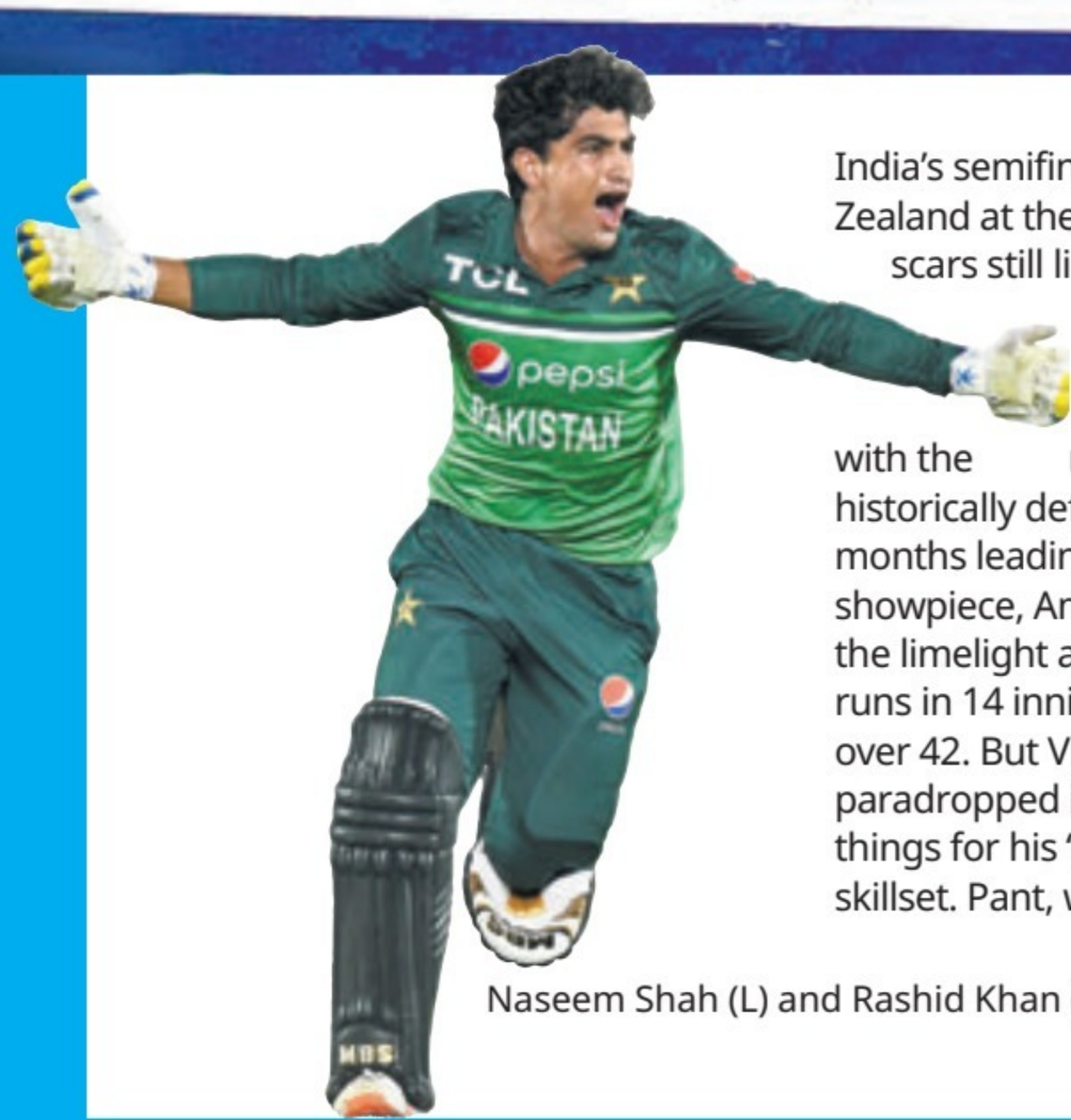
The lack of backup options for potential injuries in the middle order has put India's buildup to the World Cup under a cloud and dampened the confidence that would typically emanate whenever the Men in Blue hosted an ICC event. Four years after

GETTY IMAGES

A NEAR-FULL-STRENGTH INDIAN SQUAD, ASSEMBLING FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MORE THAN A YEAR IN THE 50-OVER FORMAT, SHOULD INSPIRE CONFIDENCE

"I am back": Jasprit Bumrah's back injury kept him out of cricket for nearly a year. But the pace spearhead made an impressive return in the T20Is against Ireland, where he led India in the absence of Rohit Sharma. Bumrah took four wickets in two games against Ireland. GETTY IMAGES

Jubilant scenes: India is the defending champion of the 50-over Asia Cup, having won a record seventh title in 2018. AP



Naseem Shah (L) and Rashid Khan (R). GETTY IMAGES

India's semifinal defeat against New Zealand at the 2019 World Cup, some scars still linger.

The debate around the No. 4 spot, which seems to have abated with the return of Iyer, has historically defied logic. In the 12 months leading up to the 2019 showpiece, Ambati Rayudu hogged the limelight at No. 4, scoring 464 runs in 14 innings while averaging over 42. But Vijay Shankar was paradropped into the scheme of things for his 'three-dimensional' skillset. Pant, who wasn't part of the initial 15-member squad, occupied that position more than anybody else during the tournament.

A similar tale raised eyebrows when India last hosted the World Cup in 2011. Rohit was India's most prolific No. 4 in the year preceding the tournament and averaged in excess of 50 in that position. He didn't find a spot in the squad, but luckily

INJURIES AND CONSTANT SHUFFLING HAVE MEANT THAT NINE BATTERS HAVE BEEN TRIED AT NO. 4 IN 21 MATCHES IN THE PAST YEAR, WITH IYER'S RUN OF EIGHT MATCHES BEING THE LONGEST

for India, Virat Kohli and Yuvraj Singh more than made up for his exclusion.

Rohit, the captain, and the selectors have broken the norm and backed India's most consistent No. 4 in the last 12 months—Iyer. However, the search for a backup has been erratic. India has tried five different batters at that position in its last six ODIs, straddling over a 1-2 series defeat to Australia at home and a 2-1 win in the Caribbean. The only half-centurion in these experiments, Sanju Samson, is a travelling reserve, while Suryakumar Yadav makes the cut with two consecutive golden ducks in the corresponding period or an overall average of 6 in the current World Cup cycle.

To be fair, the sample size is small. Injuries and constant shuffling have meant that nine batters have been tried at No. 4 in 21 matches in the past year, with Iyer's run of eight matches being the longest, followed by four for Kishan, who doesn't seem to be fit in the starting XI, barring injuries.

Now, Tilak Varma has been thrown into the mix for the Asia Cup, the left-hander's eleventh-hour inclusion coming on the back of a bevy of runs in his debut T20I series, against West Indies, but without any experience in international one-dayers.

Role clarity and continuity have been lacking, and it hasn't helped that India's mainstays have made intermittent ODI appearances in a year packed with 32 T20Is. Shubman Gill is the only player to have played at least 75 per cent of India's one-dayers in the past 12 months. Though the shortest format gaining currency and India's desperation to end its ICC title drought have played into the team featuring in an increasing number of T20Is, it is perhaps instructive that the Men in Blue played only eight, seven, and 16 T20Is in the 12 months leading up to the 2011, 2015, and 2016 World Cups, respectively.

In a more refreshing break from the past, bowling is India's strong suit ahead of the 2023 edition. Though Bumrah will return to ODIs after more than a year in the Asia Cup, Mohammed Siraj has surpassed expectations in his absence with 43 wickets in 23 matches at an economy rate of 4.62 since 2022 and pipped veteran Mohammad Shami in the pecking order.

Hardik Pandya's bowling fitness, Kuldeep Yadav's return to wicket-taking form, and Ravindra Jadeja's control of the ball and prowess with the bat hold promising signs.

The only perceivable chink in the lower order is the No. 8 slot, which could be juggled between Axar Patel and Shardul Thakur. Bowling

conditions aside, the claimant for the spot could be determined by how India's batting fares, with Axar being the obvious pick if India finds the need to cushion the tail. The uncertainty around India's batting has already short-changed the bowling department of a leg-spinner in Yuzvendra Chahal and deprived it of an off-spinner in Washington Sundar or R. Ashwin. The onus will thus be on India's top three, Rohit, Gill, and Kohli, to score big, but with the rider, it doesn't come at a premium because a bona fide finisher still eludes. The void left by MS Dhoni's departure largely persists, despite Hardik and Jadeja's attempts.

The Indians will be tested with a potent mix of high-quality pace and spin in conditions similar to those they expect back home for the World Cup.

Spicy pace attack: Pakistan's pace trio of Shaheen Afridi (in pic), Naseem Shah, and Haris Rauf will be a force to be reckoned with. GETTY IMAGES

THE VOID LEFT BY M. S. DHONI'S DEPARTURE LARGELY PERSISTS, DESPITE HARDIK AND JADEJA'S ATTEMPTS

Pakistan's pace trio of Shaheen Afridi, Naseem Shah, and Haris Rauf will be a force to be reckoned with, as will the spin duo of Rashid Khan and Mujeeb Ur Rahman. India's top-order has been vulnerable against both swing and spin at home, as was seen in the series defeat to Australia earlier this year, and it will need to make amends.

Sri Lanka can never be taken lightly at home, and a defeat against it is never an upset, despite its waning pedigree. Afghanistan, meanwhile, will hope to shed the tag of a perennial dark horse and party pooper. Its ODI fortunes may have just turned a corner with a historic 2-1 series win in Bangladesh.

The Tigers are mercurial but humbled India with a series defeat at home late last year. They are back under the leadership of Shakib Al Hasan in ODIs after six years and are itching to settle scores after conceding a couple of Asia Cup finals to India in the last three editions.

The outlier is Nepal, ranked 15th but with an appetite for a challenge, which was on display when it won 11 out of 12 games to advance to the World Cup Qualifier in Zimbabwe in June. India may be the defending champion of the 50-over Asia Cup, having won a record seventh title in 2018.

But with three potential rip-roaring contests against Pakistan on the cards, a home World Cup beckoning, and an Asian decade of sorts on the horizon in 2023, it will be far from a *fait accompli*.

1

PTI

The third and final T20 between Ireland and India was washed out, with the tourist winning the Malahide series 2-0. Jasprit Bumrah bagged two wickets in his first over of international cricket in 11 months as India beat Ireland in the rain-affected first Twenty20 international. A half-century from Ruturaj Gaikwad helped India to a 33-run victory in the second encounter.

2

AP

A 3-0 series sweep over Afghanistan helped Pakistan reach the No. 1 position in Men's ODI Team Rankings. Babar Azam's men are now ahead of Australia, with 2725 points and 118 rating points. "Whenever you achieve the No.1 spot, it gives you a lot of joy," Babar said after the final ODI. "This is the result of the entire team's effort. We've been here before, but unfortunately, we lost that position after losing a game. But we're back here by the grace of god."

3

REUTERS

Oval Invincibles staged a remarkable fightback to beat the Manchester Originals by 14 runs and win the men's Hundred at Lord's. Meanwhile, Southern Brave finally won the women's Hundred by beating Northern Superchargers in the final at Lord's. Brave lost to the Oval Invincibles in the previous two finals but got past the finish line this time, beating the Superchargers by 34 runs.

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

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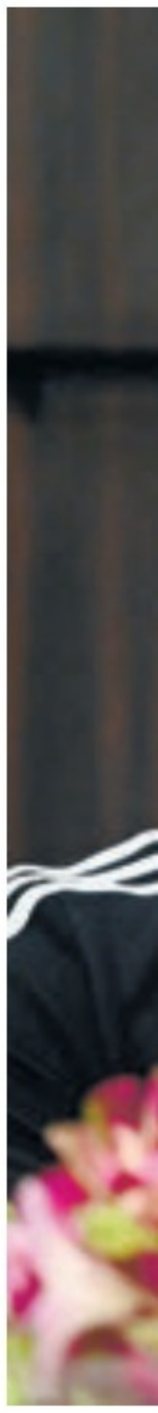


INDIAN CRICKET IS WAY TOO BIG NOW FOR ANY SELECTION HANKY-PANKY

The BCCI has **refreshingly shown** that it believes in the non-bias of former players by having two selectors from Mumbai and not going the zonal way.

We cricketers are extremely fortunate that our sport is liked by so many in the country. While that can mean that some of the top players will constantly be under scrutiny on and off the field, it also means that the game is being talked about, too. What the popularity of the sport also means is that the media, both print and electronic, is under pressure to constantly have something about the game or the Indian players in their mediums. So even if there is no India game being played, there has to be something or the other about Indian cricket or the players in that day's papers or TV. A lot of speculative stuff thus comes up with the ubiquitous reliable source being mentioned to protect the publication or channel if the item turns out to be incorrect.

The point is not about the authenticity of any news but the necessity of having something about the game and the Indian players pretty much every day. To accommodate that, even someone who has probably never picked up a bat in a sports shop is quoted for an opinion on the game. Due to our foreign complex and the need for overseas validation, even players who are unknown in their home country or convicted and banned for fixing are extensively quoted about Indian cricket and players.

Now that the ODI World Cup is barely a month away and there is curiosity all around as to what the Indian squad will be, this practice of getting anybody's view will be seen more and more. Mind you, if this were happening all over the world, with every country's team selection being discussed and debated by everybody, then it would be perfectly understandable. This is where the popularity of the game in India shines through. Nobody is concerned about what the composition of the different countries' squads is, except for the cricket followers and correspondents in their country. But here in India, we have people from all over the world being asked what the Indian squad should be, who should be opening the batting, who should bat at which number, or who should the spinners in the eleven be? By all means, debate this with fellow Indians, for it matters to them too, but why bring a foreigner into the

Eyes on the big prize: The new selection committee, led by Ajit Agarkar, will look to retain the core of the Asia Cup squad while picking the side for the 2023 ODI World Cup. R. V. MOORTHY

discussion? How is he concerned, and why should his opinion matter even if he is the most celebrated cricketer in the world? When are we going to get over this foreign complex? Why would a foreigner be interested in having the best Indian team — one that could beat his own country's team? Wouldn't there be an element of bias towards his country? We haven't learned from our most recent experience in 2019, when the foreign commentators for the IPL pretty much influenced the selection of a player so memorably called a 3D cricketer. Ironically, none of these experts are even asked in their countries what their country's squad should be, and here they are giving *gyaan* (preaching) on what the Indian team should be and who should be doing what.

Sure, it is understood that there has to be some item or other in the media about Indian cricket, but aren't there plenty of former Indian cricketers, especially those who have been part of teams that have played in the World Cups both in India and overseas? Or is that old suspicion of him being biased towards his state players still prevalent? When are we going to stop questioning the integrity of our former players?

The BCCI has refreshingly shown that it believes in the non-bias of former players by having two selectors from Mumbai and not going the zonal way. Hopefully, that will be the way forward. Indian cricket is way too big now for any selection hanky-panky to take place. Make no mistake, all former cricketers want this as well as future Indian teams to win everything, for there's no greater feeling than hearing the national anthem and the Indian team flag go up when the winners are on the podium.

Good luck, India. Go out and conquer not just Asia but the world too.

We haven't learned from our most recent experience in 2019, when the foreign commentators for the IPL pretty much influenced the selection of a player so memorably called a 3D cricketer.

A 100 for SKY

3 } The number of Indian batters to hit 100 or more sixes during their T20I career. In the third match of the series against the West Indies in Providence on 8 Aug 2023, Suryakumar Yadav emulated Rohit Sharma (182 sixes) and Virat Kohli (117 sixes) by registering his 100th six for India in this format. He also became the 14th player in T20I history to hit 100 or more sixes during a career.

Most frequent six hitters in T20Is (minimum 100 sixes)

Balls/6	Batter	For	6s	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	S/R
8.68	Evin Lewis	WI	111	53	52	1465	29.89	151.97
10.25	Suryakumar Yadav	Ind	104	53	50	1841	46.02	172.70
10.30	Colin Munro	NZ	107	65	62	1724	31.34	156.44
11.14	Chris Gayle	WI	124	79	75	1899	27.92	137.50
13.49	Glenn Maxwell	Aus	106	98	90	2159	28.40	150.97

Note: Evin Lewis took 42 innings to reach the 100th six of his career, while Chris Gayle and Suryakumar needed 49 innings to get theirs. Lewis needed just 789 balls to hit his 100th six, Colin Munro took 963 balls, and Suryakumar reached his 100th six in 1007 balls

Suryakumar Yadav. AFP

2 } The number of nations which have the distinction of playing in 200 or more T20I matches. India became the latest entrant to do so, against the West Indies in Tarouba on 3 August 2023. Pakistan (223) is the only other side to achieve this landmark in T20I cricket, on 25 Sep 2022, when the home side beat England in Karachi by three runs. India has, so far, played in 206 matches.

India's results in each of its landmark T20I matches

Match#	Opponent	Venue	Date	Result
1st	South Africa	Johannesburg	1 Dec 2006	Won by 6 wickets
50th	Australia	Mirpur	30 Mar 2014	Won by 73 runs
100th	Ireland	Dublin	27 Jun 2018	Won by 76 runs
150th	Namibia	Dubai	8 Nov 2021	Won by 9 wickets
200th	West Indies	Tarouba	3 Aug 2023	Lost by 4 runs

6 } The number of bowlers to claim their 50th wicket in 30 or less matches during their T20I career. India's left-arm wrist spinner (LAWS), Kuldeep Yadav, against the West Indies in Providence on 8 August 2023, became the latest to join a list of bowlers by doing so in the 30th match of his career. Among the Test-playing nations' bowlers, only Sri Lankan Ajantha Mendis (in 26 games) and Ireland's Mark Adair (28 matches) have reached the landmark in fewer games than Kuldeep.

Quickest to claim fifty wickets in a T20I career (in fewest games)

M	Bowler	For	Bowling style	Achieved on	Against	Venue	Result
22	Dhruv Maisuria	Botswana	RLB	29 May 2023	Eswatini	Benoni	Won
25	Syazrul Idrus	Malayasia	RM	30 Jul 2023	Myanmar	Kuala Lumpur	Won
26	Ajantha Mendis+	Sri Lanka	ROB	4 Oct 2012	Pakistan	Colombo RPS	Won
28	Mark Adair+	Ireland	RFM	20 Oct 2021	Sri Lanka	Abu Dhabi	Lost
29	Sandeep Lamichhane	Nepal	RLB	14 Feb 2022	Ireland	Al Amerat	Lost
30	Kuldeep Yadav+	India	LAWS	8 Aug 2023	West Indies	Providence	Won

+ player from a Test playing nation
Note: For the record, spinners Imran Tahir (South Africa) and Rashid Khan (Afghanistan) have achieved their landmarks in 31 games

Quickest to claim fifty wickets in a T20I career (in fewest games for India)

M	Bowler	Bowling style	Achieved on	Against	Venue	Result
30	Kuldeep Yadav	LAWS	8 Aug 2023	West Indies	Providence	Won
33	Arshdeep Singh	LFM	20 Aug 2023	Ireland	Dublin	Won
34	Yuzvendra Chahal	RLB	20 Nov 2019	Bangladesh	Nagpur	Won

177 } The batting strike-rate achieved by Tilak Varma during his innings of 39 in 22 balls in the Tarouba T20I match on 3 Aug 2023. This knock is now the fastest by an Indian debutant in T20I cricket. However, Suryakumar Yadav and Rinku Singh have achieved higher batting strike rates than Varma when they first batted in a T20I. They both did not get the opportunity to bat in their debut T20I match (see below).

Highest batting strike-rate by an Indian on T20I debut (min 25 runs)

S/R	Runs (balls)	Batter	Against	Venue	Date	M Inns	Result
177.27	39 (22)	**Tilak Varma**	West Indies	Tarouba	3 Aug 2023	2	Lost
175.00	56 (32)	**Ishan Kishan**	England	Ahmedabad	14 Mar 2021	2	Won
156.41	61 (39)	**Ajinkya Rahane**	England	Manchester	31 Aug 2011	1	Lost
147.61	31 (21)	**Rahul Dravid**	England	Manchester	31 Aug 2011	1	Lost
130.00	26 (20)	**Parthiv Patel**	West Indies	Port of Spain	4 Jun 2011	1	Won

S/R	Runs (balls)	Batter	Against	Venue	Date	M Inns	Result
183.87	57 (31)	**Suryakumar Yadav**	England	Ahmedabad	18 Mar 2021	1	Won
180.95	38 (21)	**Rinku Singh**	Ireland	Dublin	20 Aug 2023	1	Won

5 } The number of Indian batters to register an individual fifty in T20I cricket before the age of 22 years. In the T20I match in Providence on 6 August 2023, Tilak Varma became the second youngest Indian batter to register a fifty in T20I cricket. Later, during the series, his team-mate Yashasvi Jaiswal joined this elite group in Lauderhill on 12 August 2023. Jaiswal also became the youngest Indian opener to register a T20I fifty.

Youngest Indian batters to register a fifty in a T20I match

Age	Batter	Runs (balls)	Against	Venue	Date	M Inns	Result
20y-143d	**Rohit Sharma**	50* (40)	South Africa	Durban	20 Sep 2007	1	Won
20y-271d	**Tilak Varma**	51 (41)	West Indies	Providence	6 Aug 2023	1	Lost
21y-38d	**Rishabh Pant**	58 (38)	West Indies	Chennai	11 Nov 2018	2	Won
21y-227d	**Yashasvi Jaiswal**	84* (51)	West Indies	Lauderhill	12 Aug 2023	2	Won
21y-307d	**Robin Uthappa**	50 (39)	Pakistan	Durban	14 Sep 2007	1	Tie+

+ match won by India via a bowl out
Note: Not listed above is Rishabh Pant's unbeaten 65 in 42 balls against West Indies in Providence on 6 Aug 2019 at the age of 21y-306d.

Youngest Indian opening batters to register a fifty in a T20I match

Age	Batter	Runs (balls)	Against	Venue	Date	M Inns	Result
21y-227d	**Yashasvi Jaiswal**	84* (51)	West Indies	Lauderhill	12 Aug 2023	2	Won
22y-41d	**Rohit Sharma**	52* (45)	Ireland	Nottingham	10 Jun 2009	2	Won
22y-239d	**Ishan Kishan**	56 (32)	England	Ahmedabad	14 Mar 2021	2	Won

*Note: **Jaiswal faced the first ball of the innings*
*** Ishan Kishan was on debut*

4 } The number of occasions India could not chase a target of 150 or less in T20I cricket. The Tarouba match on 3 August 2023 was its latest unsuccessful attempt to better such a target set by its opponent.

Unsuccessful run chases by India while chasing targets of 150 or less

Opponent (winner)	Total	India's reply	India lost by	Venue	Date
New Zealand	126/7	**79/10**	47 runs	Nagpur	15 Mar 2016
South Africa	130/5	**118/8**	12 runs	Nottingham	16 Jun 2009
Zimbabwe	145/7	**135/9**	10 runs	Harare	19 Jul 2015
West Indies	149/6	**145/9**	4 runs	Tarouba	3 Aug 2023

Tilak Varma. AFP

All records are correct and updated until 26 Aug 2023

A colosseum awaiting its gladiator

If you are **planning to watch** a World Cup in Ahmedabad, here's all you need to know.

Shayan Acharya
@ShayanAcharya

Ahead of the 2023 ODI World Cup, the Narendra Modi Stadium is preparing to host high-profile games, including India vs Pakistan. Despite previously hosting IPL finals and bilateral fixtures, hosting an ICC event presents a different challenge.

The stadium has state-of-the-art facilities, modern dressing rooms, and plush hospitality areas. The Gujarat Cricket Association officials are working to address recommendations made by the ICC and the BCCI before handing over the venue to the tournament organizing committee on September 15. Although the stadium faced concerns over a wet outfield during the IPL final, the groundsmen have worked hard to ensure everything is in perfect shape for the upcoming World Cup.

GCA secretary Anil Patel says, "The association is working on every aspect to ensure things are in perfect shape..."

When Sportstar visited the venue in the second week of August, the square looked ready, with the

Venue: Narendra Modi Stadium | **City:** Ahmedabad

Matches: October 5 (England vs New Zealand) | October 14 (India vs Pakistan) | November 4 (England vs Australia) | November 10 (South Africa vs Afghanistan)

November 19: Final

groundsmen giving some 'finishing touches'.

If you are planning to watch a game at the Narendra Modi Stadium during the World Cup, here's all you need to know...

Capacity: On paper, the stadium has a capacity of 1,32,000. But to accommodate sight-screens on both ends and extend the dressing room arena while keeping the international protocols in mind, some seats remain out of bounds.

According to GCA officials, around 1,20,000 tickets are kept for fans and guests, with about 10–15 per cent earmarked for the BCCI, the ICC, and its affiliates. Nearly 1,00,000 tickets go on sale through the online platforms or over the counter. Several kiosks will be set up in the stadium premises leading up to the tournament where spectators can collect physical tickets.

The hospitality boxes: While fans can enjoy the proceedings from the stands, there is a seating capacity of 25 each in the 76 corporate boxes, which are usually reserved for guests and dignitaries.

On the third floor, there is a luxurious president's box, which is exclusively reserved for the guests of the BCCI, GCA, and ICC. It allows the spectators to watch the game from the centre wicket, and the state association promises top-notch hospitality. There are about 10–12 washrooms on the floor, with facilities for men, women, and the specially abled.

On the walls of the corporate box, there are pictures of Prime Minister Narednra Modi, who was earlier the president of the GCA; union home minister Amit Shah; and the current secretary, Jay Shah. There are also pictures featuring former BCCI chief and former India captain Sourav Ganguly and a few other cricketers.

Practice facilities: Apart from the regular practice arena, there are two grounds inside the premises, which will be used by teams for training purposes. Both the grounds have hosted domestic fixtures, and even during the IPL, the teams had their

Pics: VIJAY SONEJI

Eyes on target: The Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad is gearing up for the 2023 ODI World Cup, which gets underway from October 5. India will host Pakistan here on October 14, with the tournament opener and final also scheduled to be held at the same venue.

practice sessions here.

Pitches: It's a sand-based wicket. There are 11 strips; five are made of local black soil, while the other five are a combination of Mumbai red soil, Murrum yellow soil, and local black soil. The other one is made of 75 per cent Mumbai red soil and 25 per cent of Odisha black soil.

Since the tournament will be held in October and November, dew could be a factor, but the groundsmen are well equipped to counter the dew with moisture balancing and using anti-dew sprays on the outfield.

During the IPL, the venue had batting-friendly surfaces, and the ground staff indicated that it's going to be a similar situation in the World Cup as well. While the surface could favour the batters, with a bit of aid to the seamers, the projected score could hover around 280 and 290.

Drainage and outfield: The stadium has a sand-based outfield with a sub-soil drainage system. According to GCA secretary Anil Patel, "the pre-season renovation has been done soon after the IPL, and the groundsmen are working on the last leg before formally handing over the ground to the organising committee.

Entry points: There are four gates. While Gates No. 1 and 2 are for the general public, there are several walkways leading to the blocks. Even though Gate No. 1 is located on the main road, traffic is usually diverted on match days to ensure smooth entry to the stadium. However, the road approaching Gate No. 2, which is located next to the GCA Club House, is slightly narrow and may lead to congestion.

The Motera metro station is about 200 metres from Gate 2 and is within walking distance. But during the IPL final, with a packed crowd, entry into the stadium was chaotic from both the gates, and it took hours for the fans to finally get in.

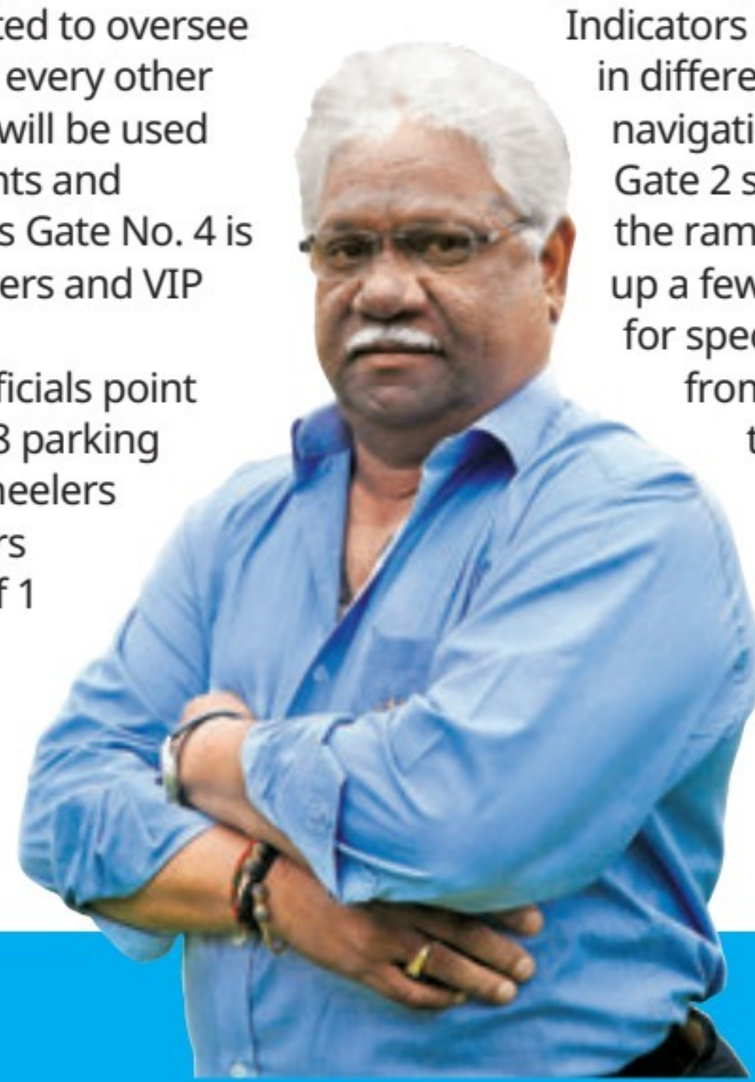
The GCA, however, hopes that things will be smoother with adequate security and more volunteers deputed to oversee the process. Like every other time, Gate No. 3 will be used for VIP movements and vendors, whereas Gate No. 4 is restricted to players and VIP dignitaries.

As the GCA officials point out, "there are 18 parking zones for two-wheelers and four-wheelers within a radius of 1 km. In case one finds parking at a further corner, the GCA plans to organise a shuttle service that would pick up the spectators and drop them off at the venue.' Accessibility and challenges: From the entrance to the stands, it is a long walk. And for big-ticket games like India vs. Pakistan, things could get challenging for the fans to find their way to the respective blocks and zones amid tight security.

But GCA seems to have found a way to address the issue. During the IPL, the association introduced a golf cart service for easy accessibility to the stands, and it will continue with that during the World Cup as well. There are special ramps for the differently-abled, and the GCA will tie up with the ticketing partner and appoint volunteers who will guide those spectators to their seats.

According to Patel, volunteers will also be deputed to make sure that the spectators have no problems locating their respective seat zones.

Indicators will also be put up in different areas for easy navigation. "Gate 1 and Gate 2 straightaway lead to the ramps, but we will put up a few additional signs for spectators coming from different parts of the world so that they find it easy to reach their respective zones," Patel says. "In case



anyone needs special attention, they need to inform us while booking the tickets, and we will depute special volunteers to take care of them. We did a similar thing during the IPL as well," he adds.

In case of emergency: There's round-the-clock ambulance service on the stadium premises. Ahead of the tournament, eight to 10 medical kiosks will be set up across the stadium for spectators. In case anyone needs medical attention, there will be a primary health centre at the Sports Complex for basic treatment. "We have a six-bed semi-hospital for fans and two-bed for the players and guests. During the IPL, someone suffered a heat stroke and needed medical attention. He was taken to the health centre before being shifted to the hospital," a GCA official says.

Dressing rooms: There are four dressing rooms, two on each side. The dressing rooms are spacious and feature pictures of India's 1983 World Cup and 2011 World Cup wins. There is a viewing gallery from which the players and the support staff can follow the proceedings before heading to the dugout.

There are three physio rooms on each side of the dressing rooms, along with two players arena on each side. There is also a spacious lunch room and briefing room for home and away teams. The dressing rooms are well maintained with state-of-the-art facilities, including a gym. However, it's a long walk from the dugout to the dressing room. Currently, one has to take 98 steps to reach the dressing room, and factoring in the time limit, the GCA plans to reduce the number of steps to make things easy for the players as they walk in or walk out of the ground.

Washrooms: There are 150 washrooms in the stadium, of which 130 are in use for spectators. It has facilities for both men and women, as well as for the differently abled. There are more than 80 lavatories as well. "There is proper signage for the differently-abled, and the facilities are upgraded to ensure that they don't have any problems," Patel says.

Water: There's a centralised Reverse Osmosis (RO) facility in the stadium. The BCCI plans to tie up with the official 'pouring partner' of the tournament to provide free drinking water for all the spectators.

Solar panel: The stadium incorporates renewable energy sources, water conservation methods, and waste management systems. So far, only the club house has solar panels, but in the future, the GCA is open to using solar panels in the entire stadium. LED lights are used throughout the premises.

Areas that need attention:

During its inspection recently, the ICC delegation sought an expanded media centre to accommodate media personnel travelling from across the globe. While currently the press box can accommodate about 150–200 people, the GCA is already getting an overflow area ready that can accommodate more people, following the ICC guidelines. According to Patel, efforts are on to ensure 'uninterrupted wi-fi service' for media personnel. There will also be a separate broadcasting lounge for the commentators and the television and digital crew.

The GCA also needs to set up more ticket counters to avoid rush hour. Ahead of the IPL final, there were long queues near the main gate for the physical collection of tickets, leading to inconvenience for the spectators.

They had to wait for hours braving extreme weather conditions, and keeping that in mind, the state association plans to set up more ticket kiosks to make things easy for the fans.

« We assure that we will provide the fans with a great experience, following all the guidelines of the ICC and the BCCI and make the tournament a grand success.

– Anil Patel (left), secretary, Gujarat Cricket Association »

Echoes of history

Home to some of India's most memorable wins, the mighty Eden Gardens is **undergoing a major facelift** for the pinnacle tournament.

Shayan Acharya
@ShayanAcharya

These days, Eden Gardens reeks of paint-thinners, wet cement, and sawdust. The iconic cricketing destination in Kolkata is undergoing a massive revamp ahead of the ODI World Cup. Amid the constant hammering and screeching of the drills as repairs are being taken up on a war footing, *Sportstar* takes a look at how the historic venue, which will host some big-ticket fixtures like the second semi-final, is shaping up.

As per the International Cricket Council's rule, the stadium needs to be handed over to the tournament organising committee on September 15.

If you are planning to watch a game at Eden Gardens, here's all you need to know:

Capacity: The stadium has a capacity of 65,500. Of these, 63,252 seats are for spectators, while the rest are within the hospitality box. Only 32,000 tickets are available for fans via *BookMyShow*. The

Venue: Eden Gardens | **City:** Kolkata

Matches: October 28 (Bangladesh vs The Netherlands) | October 31 (Pakistan vs Bangladesh) | November 5 (India vs South Africa) | November 11 (England vs Pakistan) | November 16 (Second semi-final)

remaining tickets are complimentary passes distributed among clubs, affiliated units, agencies, sponsors, life members, and former India internationals. Each of the 121 clubs — 37 first-division, 57 second division, 8 university, 18 district associations and 1 office club — affiliated with the state association is entitled to a quota of tickets for any international fixture.

"The clubs get their quota of tickets directly from the Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB), whereas the general public needs to book tickets through the *BookMyShow* app and then collect physical tickets from the box office," says CAB president, Snehasish Ganguly.

The association intends to collaborate with *BookMyShow* and establish 10-15 box office counters in various parts of the city and near the stadium to facilitate the collection of physical tickets.

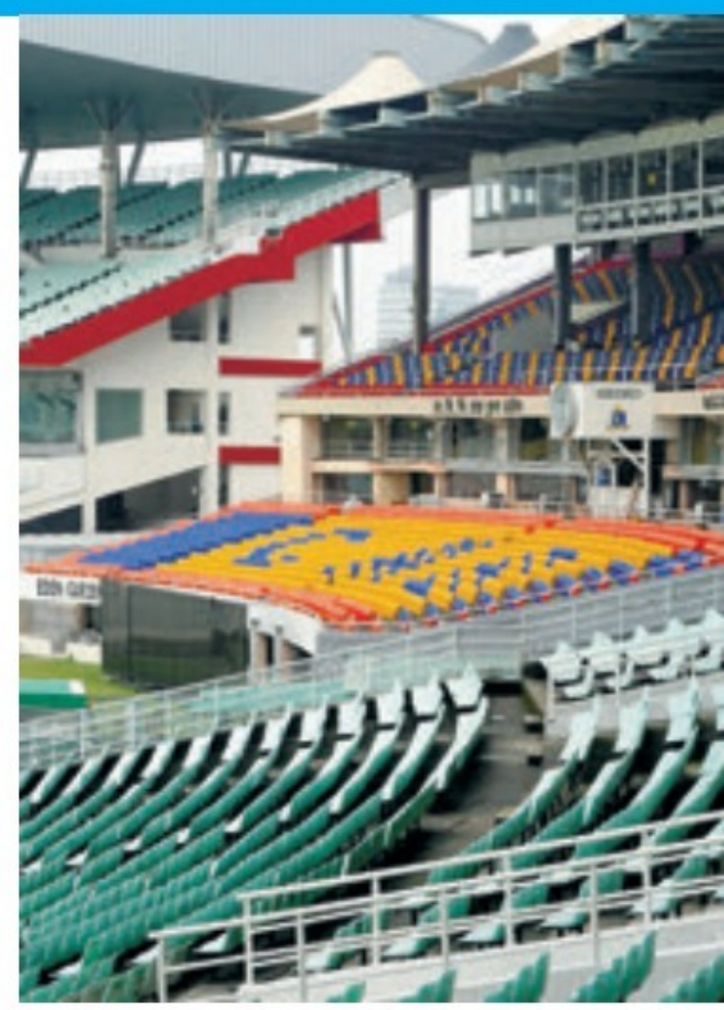
Hospitality boxes: There are 32 corporate hospitality boxes at the stadium, with 16 reserved for the state association and the rest for BCCI and ICC. Each corporate box can fit 25 people and has three dining areas and four restrooms. "Some of these boxes have been acquired by a few corporate groups on a 10-year contract with the CAB," says a state association official.

Additionally, there are six 16-seater boxes in the clubhouse for guests and dignitaries, each with two dining areas and two restrooms.

Practice facilities: Teams will use the Jadavpur University ground in Salt Lake, which is affiliated with the BCCI and has hosted several domestic fixtures, as a practice facility. In case of rain, they can train at the Pankaj Gupta Indoor facility in Eden Gardens.

"Usually, teams prefer training at the main

PICS: DEBASISH BHADURI



Big-ticket paradise: Matches at Eden Gardens have always been electrifying affairs, with several high-profile matches to be played here this WC. The last WC match here featured Zimbabwe and Kenya, which the former won by 161 runs.

ground, which has all the facilities. But in case any team plans to train at the Jadavpur University ground, we have ensured that they get top-quality facilities there as well," Ganguly says.

Pitches: Four out of the nine wickets made of black cotton soil will be used in the World Cup. Despite the likelihood of the dew factor in October and November, the CAB curator, Sujan Mukherjee, is confident of producing a sporting wicket during that period.

"It's not like only batters will dominate. We are trying to produce wickets that will help bowlers as well. On these surfaces, even bowlers can get some purchase if they put in the effort," says Mukherjee, who has been looking after the Eden surface for years.

The last ODI hosted by Eden Gardens this January resulted in a low-scoring affair, with India winning by four wickets against Sri Lanka. Kuldeep Yadav and Mohammed Siraj claimed three wickets each.

"For the World Cup, the idea is to prepare a sporting track so that games are not one-sided," Mukherjee adds.

Drainage and outfield: Before IPL 2023, the entire outfield was coated with sand to improve drainage at Eden Gardens, one of the few venues in India where the entire ground is covered during rains.

"Even if it rains, we can resume a game in quick time. No overs will be curtailed since the outfield dries up quickly," Ganguly says.

During World Cup match days, 90 groundsmen will be deputed to prepare the ground.

Entry points: There are 17 gates and 84 turnstiles at the venue. Gate No. 1 is reserved for players and match officials, while the Club House gate is for spectators with access to hospitality boxes. The remaining gates are for general admission.

The stadium is situated in the heart of the city and has excellent public transportation connections. The Esplanade Metro station is just a stone's throw away, and spectators can easily reach the ground by bus or ferry, as Chandpal Ghat (Babughat) is nearby. For those coming from Howrah, the stadium is only a 20-minute ferry ride away, with a general ticket costing Rs 10. On match days, the metro service is expected to run until late hours.

On match days, traffic will be diverted for security reasons. Spectators arriving by bus may need to walk about a kilometre from the Esplanade to the ground. CAB officials state that there are eight to nine spacious parking areas in and around the Maidan where spectators can park their vehicles. "We issue VIP car parking stickers ahead of every game to make sure those coming to watch a game don't face any issues while parking their cars," a CAB official says.

Accessibility and challenges: It's a long walk from the entrance to the stands. Fans may struggle to find their way to the correct blocks and zones.

However, CAB has found a solution by partnering with *BookMyShow* to appoint volunteers who will assist spectators in locating their respective seat zones. Additionally, indicators will be placed in various areas for easy navigation.

The association has allocated Block B for people with disabilities and will install temporary ramps for wheelchair access. "When fans book their tickets online, they need to inform us whether they would require assistance. Accordingly, we will depute our volunteers to guide them," says Ganguly. However, the spectators need to carry their wheelchairs.

In case of emergency: Round-the-clock ambulance service is available on the stadium premises. Medical kiosks will be set up prior to the tournament. The CAB has partnered with Woodlands Hospital to provide on-site medical services. "We will set up under-gallery medical rooms in the blocks where doctors will be available around the block.

There will be at least four to five super-specialty ambulances," the CAB president says.

Dressing rooms: There are separate dressing rooms for the home and away teams, each with a sauna, steam room, three lavatories, and a shower arena.

A lounge for players and coaches is located on the ground floor, and a state-of-the-art gym is available at the Pankaj Gupta Indoor facility.

Washrooms: In the stands, there are 51 washrooms: 10 for men and eight for women in the upper-tier of the B, C, K, and L blocks, and 18 for men and 15 for women under the gallery. Additionally, corporate boxes and the Club House have separate washrooms on each floor, with three to four lavatories in each. Although CAB officials claimed that there are separate toilets for differently-abled individuals, *Sportstar* did not find any such facilities. However, officials claimed that Block B, reserved for differently-abled spectators, will have several special toilets.

Water: There are 20 water stations and 155 water points across the venue for spectators to access free water. The BCCI will also partner with the tournament's official pouring partner to provide drinking water.

Sustainibility: Eden Gardens is located in the Maidan area, which falls under the Indian Army's jurisdiction. As a result, the stadium's lease must be extended every 15 years, making it difficult to make structural changes. While solar panels are not available, the stadium intends to be environmentally friendly by implementing waste management and sorting dry and wet waste into separate zones during tournaments.

Floodlights: The CAB has installed BVP680 with a DMX controller to replace the old floodlights. The four LED floodlights ensure that the lights will be back instantly in case of any issues.

What's new: The CAB plans to do landscaping on the walls with plants and paintings while repairs are ongoing in the concourse area. On match days, light and sound shows will take place during intervals. Additionally, laser shows will be projected onto the main gate, where pictures of legends from Bengal will be displayed along with live scoreboards. The media centre and press box have been refurbished to accommodate 150 people. Separate boxes are available for the television commentary panel in English and Hindi, as well as a specialised zone for All India Radio.

"The stadium's main electronic scoreboard will have a new look, while a second electronic scoreboard will also be installed," says Ganguly.

Areas that need attention

The Joginder Singh, Dhan Singh Thapa, Pankaj Roy, and BN Dutt Stands lack roofs, leaving spectators exposed to sunlight and cold winds from the Ganges during day-night games in October and November.

Although the renovated press box is equipped with modern facilities, accessing the fifth floor without the elevator on match days will be challenging. Also, there are no toilets on the floor, with the closest ones being located on the fourth floor in the media centre.

« "This is a big moment for us as Eden Gardens will be hosting the semifinal of an ODI World Cup for the first time since 1996. We are confident of putting on a good show and giving the spectators a chance to watch some exciting contests. The repair work is in full swing, and things will be ready within the deadline." – Snehasish Ganguly, president, CAB »

A forgettable experience with a Bollywood twist!

Karsan Ghavri

It was the first Prudential World Cup. Most of us had never played limited-overs cricket. India had played just two ODIs before the World Cup. There was no planning, no preparation, and no strategising as such. And it reflected in our performance.

S. Venkataraghavan was the captain; he wasn't sure about the kind of fields to be placed. It was evident in our first game, against England at Lord's. We conceded 334 runs in 60 overs.

Dennis Amiss, Mike Denness, Tony Greig, and Chris Old hammered us. And then, we did not know how to chase. Sunil Gavaskar and Aunshuman Gaekwad opened the innings.

Sunil was playing a 60-over game like a Test match, perfecting himself for the Test match to follow. He was going very, very slowly, and from the dressing room, our manager, Mr. Ramchand (G.S. Ramchand, former India captain), was screaming, shouting, sending messages out through the 12th man, asking Sunil to play aggressively and look to score runs. "Even if you hit it in the air and get out, it's fine."

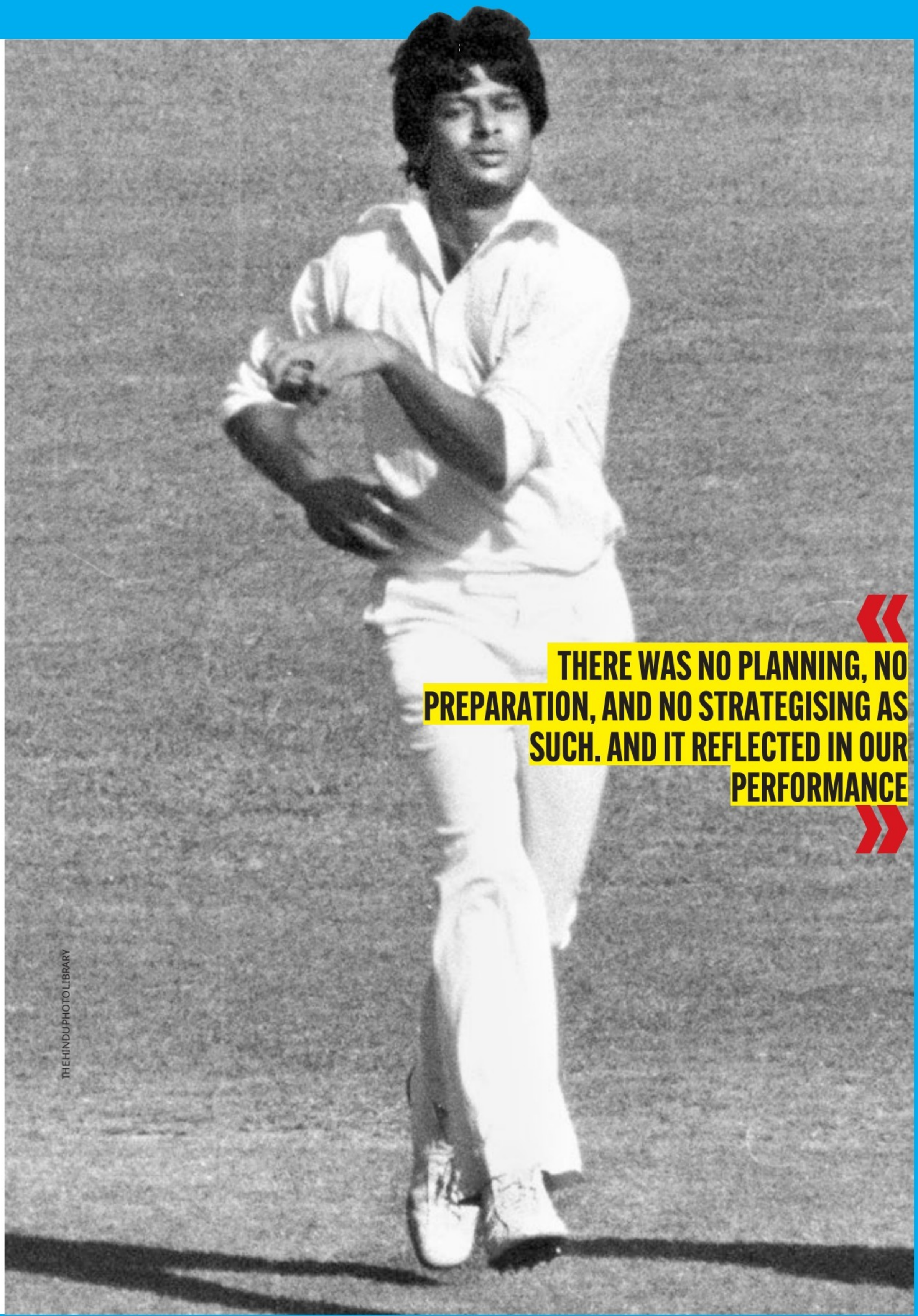
But Sunil was Sunil. He would not listen to anyone. He played out all 60 overs and remained unbeaten on 36. When he returned to the dressing room, he was questioned. All he said was that this target was just not chaseable, and he was practising against the fast bowlers for the Test series. Thankfully, we won against East Africa but came back without making an impact. The England game also saw me enter the record books for no reason. Since there was little coordination between the captain and me — Venkat would instruct me in Tamil or English, and all I could understand was Gujarati, let alone Hindi — I ended up bowling badly and conceded 83 runs in 11 overs.

Those were the worst bowling figures, and the record remained unbroken until Martin Snedden surpassed it in the 1983 World Cup by conceding over 100 runs. Although records are meant to be broken, I wished for mine to be broken as soon as possible. I am grateful to Martin for taking the burden off my shoulders. Although the tournament itself was not very eventful, I distinctly recall an incident that occurred before the competition began. We participated in a practice match at Finchley, a London-based club, where no media coverage was present. Throughout the day, there was only one spectator in attendance to watch the match.

Guess who it was: actor Jeetendra, who happened to be in London at the same time. He had a free day and watched the whole match.

As told to Amol Karhadkar

FORMER INDIA BOWLER
FIRST WORLD CUP: 1975, ENGLAND



«THERE WAS NO PLANNING, NO PREPARATION, AND NO STRATEGISING AS SUCH. AND IT REFLECTED IN OUR PERFORMANCE»

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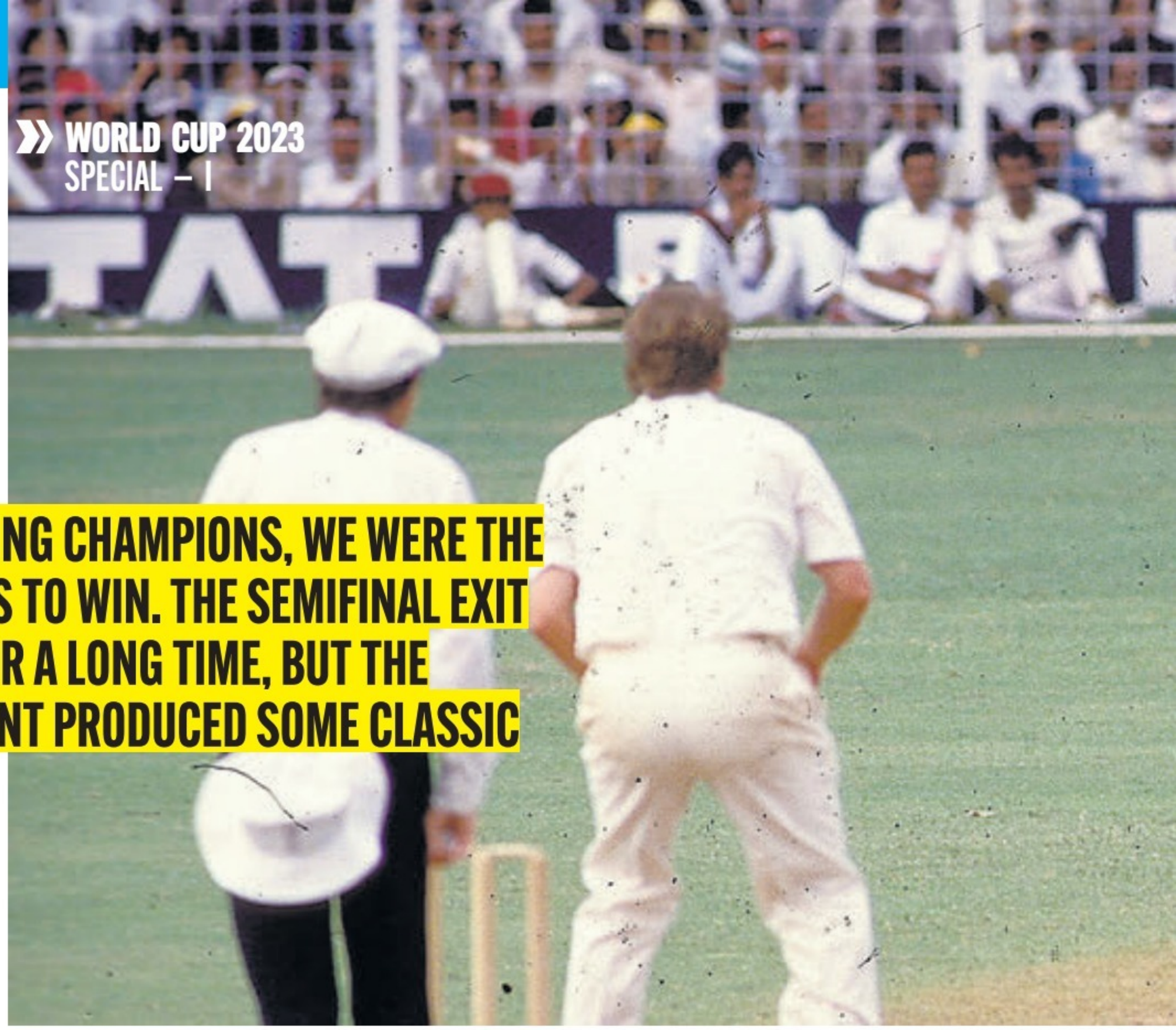


AS DEFENDING CHAMPIONS, WE WERE THE FAVOURITES TO WIN. THE SEMIFINAL EXIT HURT US FOR A LONG TIME, BUT THE TOURNAMENT PRODUCED SOME CLASSIC CRICKET

Disappointment, hope and indelible memories

Mohammad Azharuddin

The 1987 Reliance World Cup was special for several reasons. It was the first time the tournament was held outside of England and was co-hosted by two nations. It was a great privilege to be part of a team that was defending the world title, especially since I was only three years into my international cricket career.

We had to shift our preparatory camp from Udaipur to Delhi for better facilities. The camp at the iconic National Stadium, guided by stalwarts like Vasoo Paranjpe and Gurcharan Singh, was a memorable experience where we learned the importance of physical fitness.

I was thrilled to participate in my first World Cup. Our team, led by Kapil Dev and with the likes of Sunil Gavaskar and Dilip Vengsarkar, had a strong batting lineup, and despite

In vain: Mohammad Azharuddin's stroke-filled 74-ball 64 was the highlight of India's chase, but it couldn't save Kapil Dev's men from slipping to a 35-run defeat against England in the 1987 World Cup semifinal. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

starting with a one-run loss to Australia, we were confident in our ability to go the distance.

Beating New Zealand in the next match was a morale booster. Kapil scored an astonishing 72 not out off 58 balls, and Navjot Singh Sidhu added a superb 75. In the return match against Australia, I was happy to hit a half-century, but importantly, I saved my teeth from being smashed by a shot from Craig McDermott. He hit the ball hard back at me, and I just about managed to hold the catch. We won the match convincingly.

I enjoyed watching Gavaskar score his first and only ODI century against New Zealand in Nagpur. The target was 222 and he blazed his way to a hundred off 88 balls. As the non-striker, I had the best seat in the stadium and can relive every shot he played.

The win against New Zealand put us in the semifinals against England. We played our match a day after Pakistan lost the semifinal against Australia in Lahore. We suffered heartbreak in Mumbai, then Bombay, as Graham Gooch hit a century with some stunning sweep shots. We lost by 35 runs even as I played my best innings of the tournament (64). We were the favourite to win, and the semifinal exit hurt us for a long time.

The packed Eden Gardens saw Australia secure victory in the final against England, which lost by seven runs. The infamous reverse sweep by Mike Gatting triggered England's collapse from a strong position (135 for two, chasing 254 to win), with Australia showing impressive grit to win two tough contests in Lahore and Kolkata, then Calcutta. The tournament produced some classic cricket and will remain memorable for me.

As told to Vijay Lokapally

FORMER INDIA CAPTAIN, FIRST WORLD CUP: 1987, INDIA

Pakistan's nightmare in the Caribbean

Mohammad Hafeez

After spending three years playing for Pakistan in international cricket, I was eager to compete in an ICC tournament. Representing your country at the highest level is always thrilling, but performing in a World Cup boosts your confidence and inspires you to do even better. This platform is where the world takes note of your performance.

During our trip to the West Indies for my first ODI World Cup in 2007, my confidence was high. However, Pakistan failed to qualify for the knockout stage after losing to Ireland, which was an associate member nation at that time. But the sudden death of our coach, Bob Woolmer, was the most painful experience. It was mysterious and shocking, leaving us all devastated and scared because it wasn't clear what happened to Bob.

I remember the last time I met him in the elevator of our hotel in Kingston. We had just returned from the game against Ireland and were both going to our respective rooms. We discussed a few things. The next morning, we woke up to the devastating news of Bob's passing.

Although we didn't perform well and lost our coach in the 2007 World Cup, those tough times served as a catalyst for our comeback in the 2011 edition.

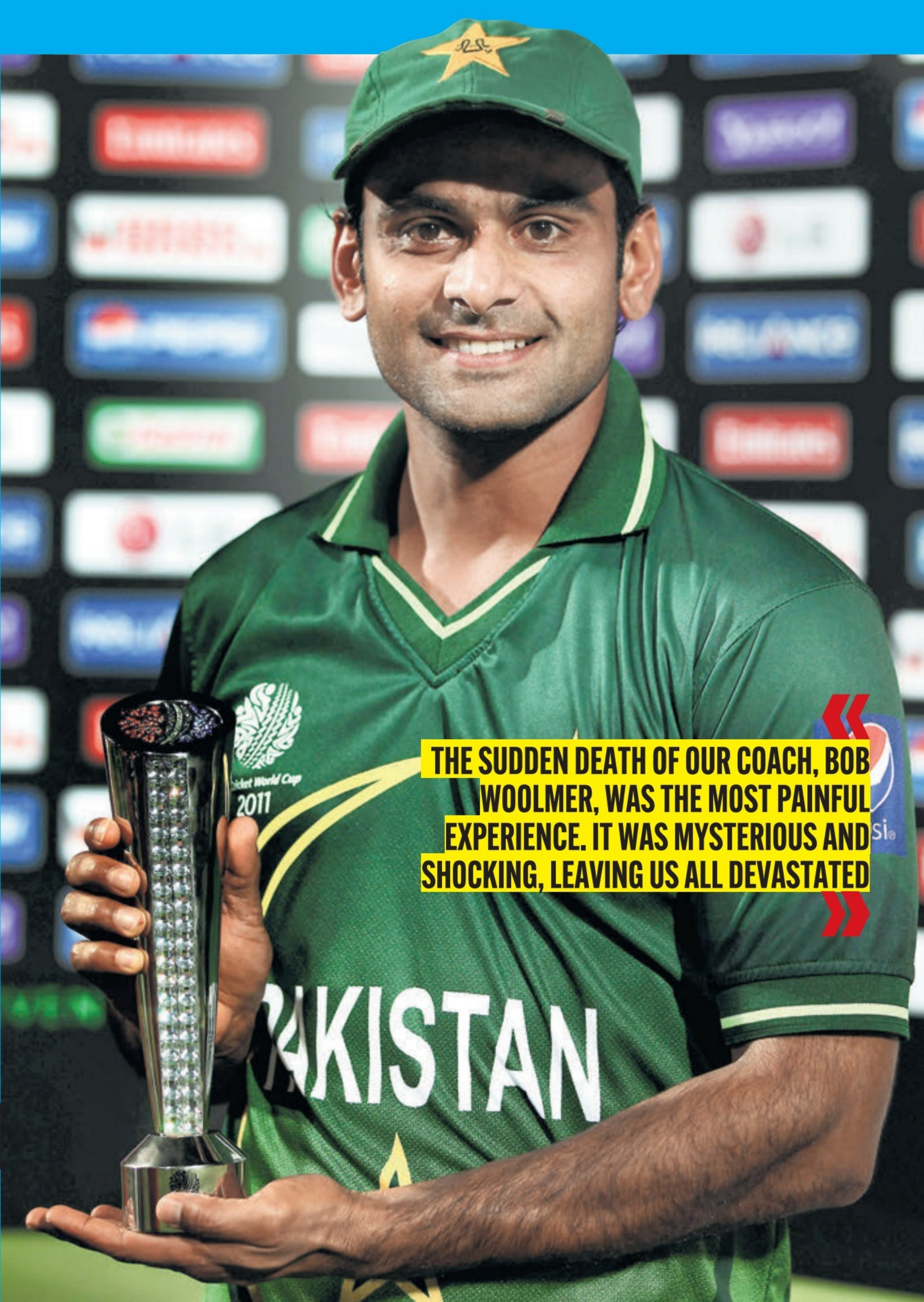
I learned from the disappointments of the 2007 edition and matured as a cricketer, allowing me to handle tricky situations and enhance my performance.

During the 2011 ODI World Cup, I scored 215 runs and took eight wickets. Although we lost the semifinal to India, the experience made me a stronger cricketer.

I have been playing competitive cricket worldwide since retiring from international cricket 18 months ago. Playing in the US Masters T10 League in Florida has made me realise that these tournaments not only keep you connected to the sport but also motivate you to stay fit and strong, which has been my mantra for success.

As told to Shayan Acharya

FORMER PAKISTAN CAPTAIN
FIRST ODI WORLD CUP: 2007, WEST INDIES



« THE SUDDEN DEATH OF OUR COACH, BOB WOOLMER, WAS THE MOST PAINFUL EXPERIENCE. IT WAS MYSTERIOUS AND SHOCKING, LEAVING US ALL DEVASTATED »

1975

Winner | West Indies

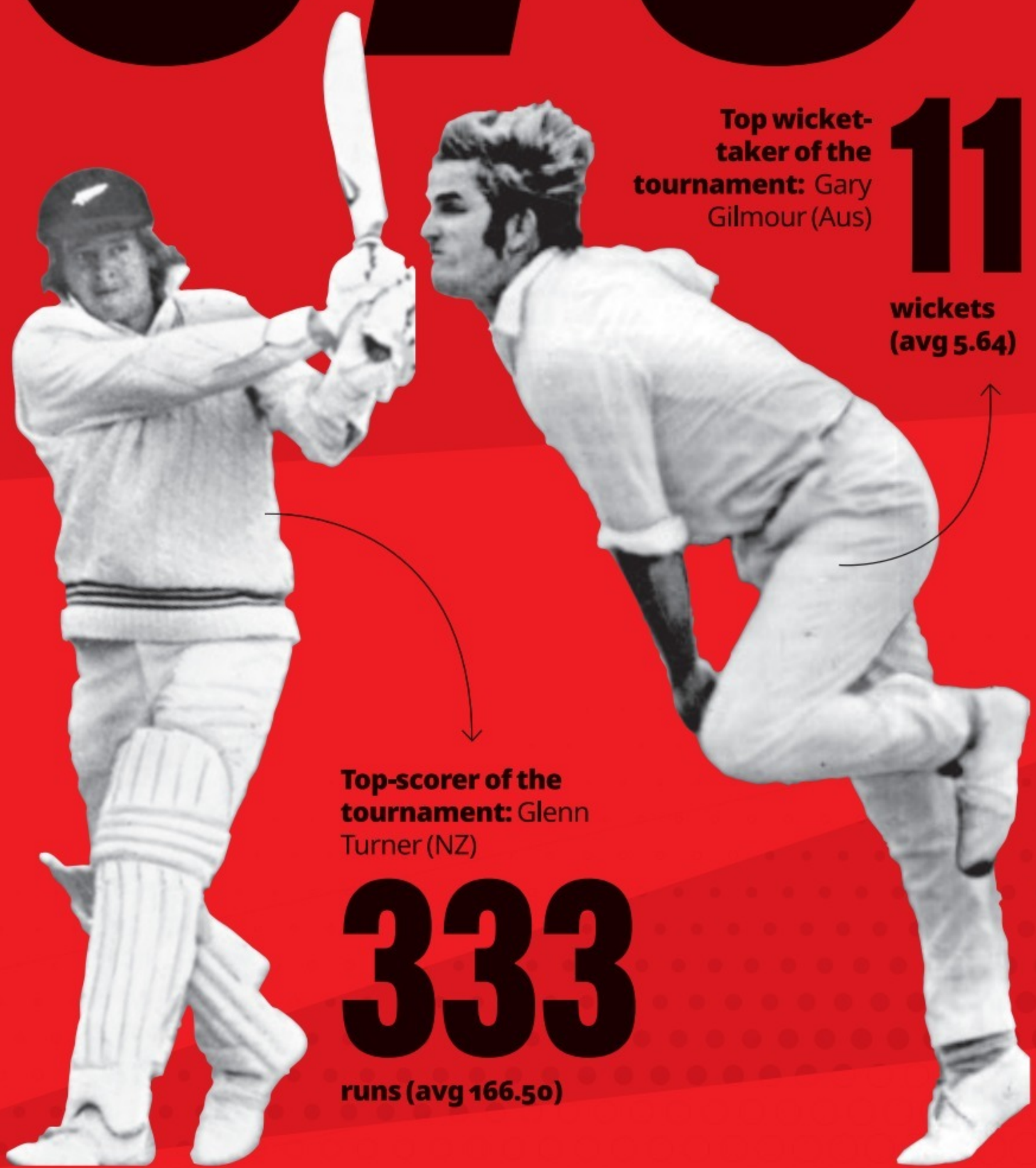
Runner-up | Australia

Number of teams

08

Number of matches played

15



Top-scorer of the tournament: Glenn Turner (NZ)

333

runs (avg 166.50)

Top wicket-taker of the tournament: Gary Gilmour (Aus)

11

wickets (avg 5.64)

1979

Winner | West Indies

Runner-up | England

Number of teams

08

Number of matches played

15

(including one match abandoned without a ball bowled)

Top wicket-taker of the tournament: Mike Hendrick (Eng)

10

wickets (avg 14.90)

Top-scorer of the tournament: Gordon Greenidge (WI)

253

runs (avg 84.33)

1983

Winner | India

Runner-up | West Indies

Top wicket-taker of the tournament: Roger Binny (Ind)

18 wickets (avg 18.66)

Number of teams

08

Top-scorer of the tournament: David Gower (Eng)

384 runs (avg 76.80)

Number of matches played

27

1987

Winner | Australia

Runner-up | England

Number of teams

08

Number of matches played

27

Top-scorer of the tournament: Graham Gooch (Eng)

471

runs (avg 58.87)

Top wicket-taker of the tournament: Craig McDermott (Aus)

18

wickets (avg 18.94)

1992

Winner | Pakistan

Runner-up | England

Number of teams

09

Number of matches played

39

Top wicket-taker of the tournament: Wasim Akram (Pak)

18 wickets (avg 18.77)

Top-scorer of the tournament: Martin Crowe (NZ)

456 runs (avg 64.00)

Player of the tournament: Martin Crowe (NZ)

1996

Winner | Sri Lanka

Runner-up | Australia

Player of the tournament: Sanath Jayasuriya (SL)

Number of teams

12

Number of matches played

37

(including two won by a walkover)

Top-scorer of the tournament: Sachin Tendulkar (Ind)

523

(avg 87.16)

Top wicket-taker of the tournament: Anil Kumble (Ind)

15

wickets (avg 18.73)

CRICKET RULES IN FOCUS

With the 2023 ODI World Cup fast approaching, here's the lowdown on the **important changes** to the ICC's playing conditions over the years.

V. S. Aravind and Lalith Kalidas
@arvjourno & @lal_kal

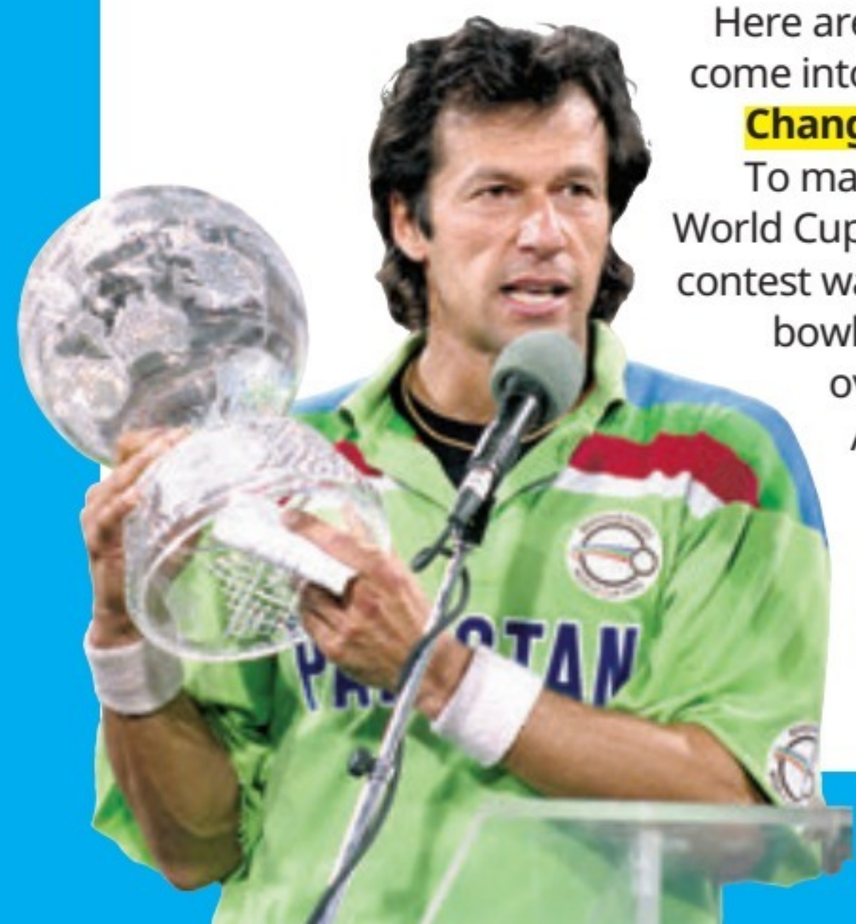
Cricket has evolved with the emergence of new trends like the Willow wielders and their 360-degree batting skills. The sport continues to attract a large audience regardless of the time of day, with fans often dancing in the aisles. The first-ever ODI match where a batter scored over 150 was during the 1975 World Cup. New Zealand skipper Glenn Turner smashed an unbeaten 171 off 201 balls against East Africa at Edgbaston, riding on 16 fours and two sixes.

It took eight years for a batter to surpass that landmark, with Kapil Dev's unbeaten 175 against Zimbabwe during the 1983 World Cup becoming a red-letter day in Indian cricket.

Here are some key rule changes that have come into effect over time.

Change in Overs

To make the game more appealing, the 1987 World Cup introduced major changes where the contest was reduced to 50 overs per side and bowlers were allowed a maximum of 10 overs instead of 12. Australia, led by Allan Border, defeated England by seven runs under the new rules, sparking celebrations at the Eden Gardens.



White balls and black screens

White-ball cricket with black sightscreens was introduced in 1979 by Kerry Packer. The first use of the white ball was in the Benson & Hedges 1992 World Cup, but coloured clothing and white balls were officially made a part of ODIs in 2001.

The Evolution

The late 1970s picture of Colin Croft bowling in coloured clothing gave a glimpse into how ODI cricket would eventually change. Packer secured high-profile cricketers from England, Australia, and South Africa for World Series Cricket using his wealth and power. Spin legend Shane Warne once said: "Everyone in the world of cricket owes Packer so much". The ODI revolution under Packer began with the 1992 World Cup, which saw the use of floodlights, white balls, and fielding restrictions. India won its first World Cup match against Pakistan, donning Navy Blue kits led by Mohammad Azharuddin. However, Pakistan reversed its fortunes and went on to beat England under the captaincy of Imran Khan to lift the trophy at the

Bizarre circumstances: The method of England's victory over New Zealand in the 2019 World Cup final will never be repeated after the boundary countback rule was abolished in ICC events. GETTY IMAGES

Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Concept of two new balls

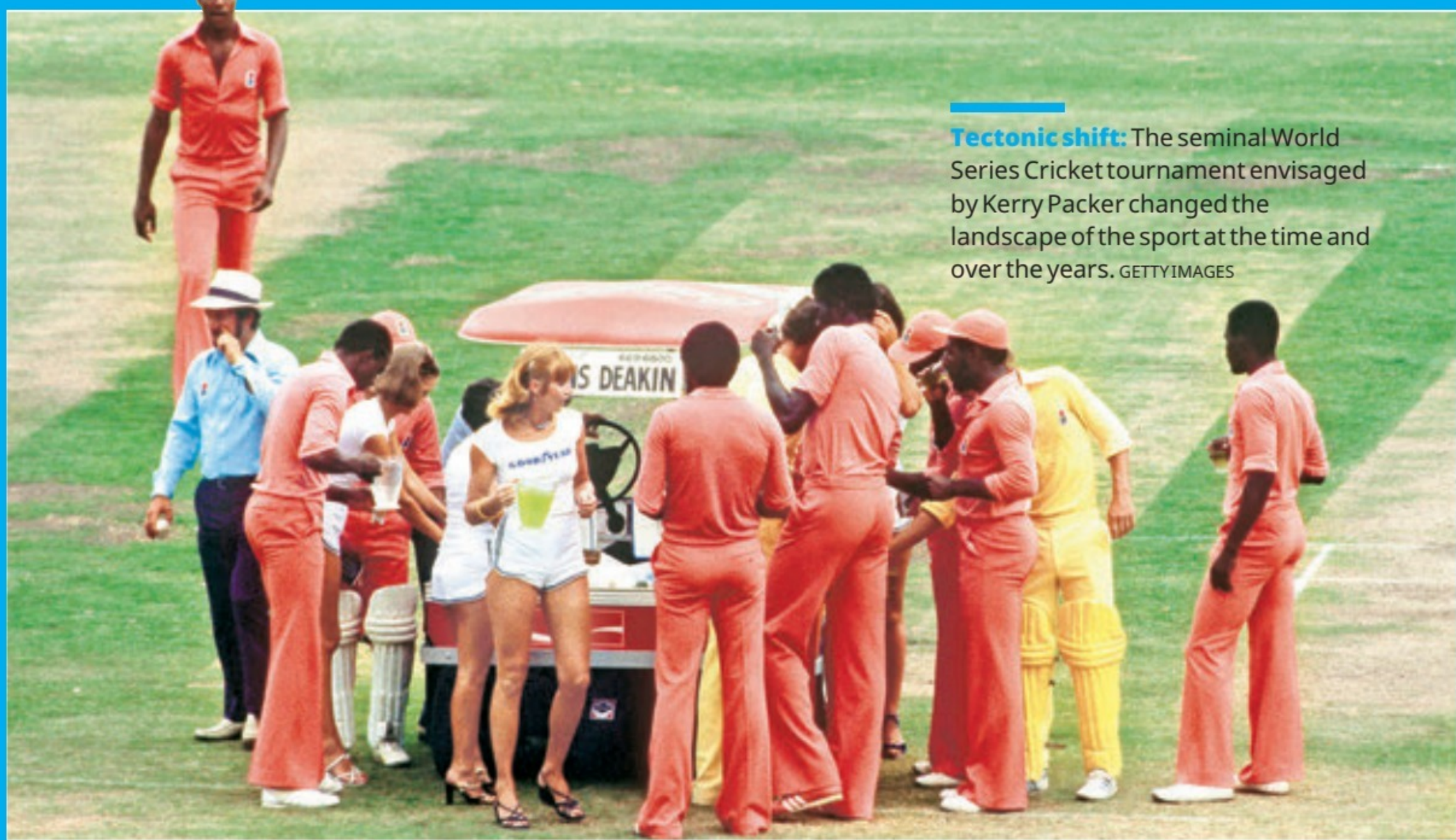
Since late 2011, two white balls have been used in a match, giving fast bowlers an advantage and spinners less success. This has led to batters achieving higher scores, with 350 becoming the new norm.

PowerPlay: Rules and Impact

The PowerPlay rules in ODI cricket were introduced by the ICC in 2005, allowing two fielders outside the 30-yard circle until the 15th over. The rule change saw the two fielders outside the inner circle only till the end of 10 overs. The bowling team then has the option of choosing two five-overs each where an extra third fielder is allowed outside the 30-yard circle. In 2008, the batting PowerPlay was introduced, and in 2011, teams were mandated to use all the PowerPlay overs between the 16th and the 40th over. The full quota of 50 overs is divided into three quotas, with the first 10 overs named mandatory PowerPlay with a maximum of two fielders outside the 30-yard circle. This is followed by the second (11–40 overs), where a maximum of four fielders are allowed outside the inner circle, and then the final PowerPlay comes into effect from Overs 41–50, where five fielders can be stationed outside the 30-yard circle. The change in PowerPlay rules also saw teams posting huge totals, and currently, an ODI score of 500 isn't impossible. England, the 2019 World Cup champion, posted 498/4 in 50 overs against the Netherlands in 2022, providing an example of how the game's scoring has evolved.

Use of DRS

The Decision Review System (DRS) was first used in the 2011 ODI World Cup. Teams could challenge the on-field umpire's decision within 15 seconds by signalling a 'T' sign. India first used the DRS during its 2011



Tectonic shift: The seminal World Series Cricket tournament envisaged by Kerry Packer changed the landscape of the sport at the time and over the years. GETTY IMAGES

World Cup game against England, involving Ian Bell in a controversial decision. There was also a famous incident in the 2011 World Cup semi-final against Pakistan, where Sachin Tendulkar was given out lbw off the bowling of Saeed Ajmal. Tendulkar reviewed, and the Hawk-Eye projection showed the ball was missing leg. Ian Gould reversed his lbw decision, and Tendulkar went on to score a match-winning 85. Further, the ICC included the bails in the 'wicket zone' to provide an advantage to the bowlers when it came to LBWs, whereas only the area up to the bottom edge of the bails was considered earlier.

The DLS method

The Duckworth-Lewis-Stern method is a mathematical system used to calculate target scores and outcomes in rain-shortened matches. It was devised by English statisticians Frank Duckworth and Tony Lewis and was first used in 1997 during an ODI between Zimbabwe and England. This was after a controversy in the 1992 World Cup semi-final between England and South Africa, which saw South Africa being set an impossible revised target of 21 runs from one ball after rain halted play.

Substitutes in ODIs

In 2005, the ICC approved player replacements and a runner for injured batters. However, the rule was abolished and replaced with a concussion substitute for like-to-like replacements.

The Super Over

The ICC introduced the Super Over rule to determine a winner in case of a tie. However, after the controversial end to the 2019 World Cup, where, after both sides hit 15 in the super over (a one-over shootout), England won because it had scored more boundaries in the match, the ICC changed the rule. Now, any Super Over in a final will be repeated until a clear winner emerges.

Introduction of free hit

The introduction of T20 led to a new rule in 2007: the free-hit. Batsmen can swing their bats to maximum effect when the bowler bowls a no-ball, with the exception of run-out, obstruction, and hitting the ball twice.

Use of bouncers

The bouncer rule has seen a few changes over the years. Initially, only one bouncer per over was allowed, but in 1994, the ICC legalised two bouncers per over. However, this was changed again in 2001 to allow only one bouncer per over in ODIs, but in 2012, the ICC made amends and went back to allowing two bouncers per over.

A new batsman at the striker's end

If a batsman is caught out, the new batsman will take strike unless it's the end of the over. Previously, if the striker and partner ran once the ball went high, a new batsman would often end up at the non-striker's end. If the crossover happened before the ball was caught, the non-striker used to be at the striker's end.

In-match penalty for slow over rate

The fielding team will have to have an extra fielder inside the 30-yard circle for every over that starts after the scheduled end time of the innings.

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FAN-DOOM ON THE RISE AT THE WORLD CUP

After the ODI World Cup final on November 19, **most fans will regret** the lack of "I was there" moments since the tournament was not well planned.

Amol Karhadkar and Shayan Acharya
@karhacter & @ShayanAcharya

Ninad Indapurkar, a 29-year-old cricket enthusiast from Pune, had planned to watch at least one 2023 ODI World Cup game at the largest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad by setting aside a budget at the start of the year. However, with no schedule announced until June, the tax consultant had to abandon the plan, fearing it would exceed his budget.

In neighbouring Bangladesh, Tanvir Ahmed and 17 friends managed tickets for at least two of their league games, but only three have visas. Processing a Bangladeshi national's visa to India takes at least three months.

Both Indapurkar and Tanvir have the same grouse. "Had the World Cup schedule and ticketing been announced well in time, we would

HOTELS IN ALL 10 HOST CITIES ARE EITHER SOLD OUT OR INFLATING PRICES, MAKING IT DIFFICULT FOR CRICKET-LOVING FANS TO FIND AFFORDABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

Chaotic build-up: While the tickets for the much-hyped India vs Pakistan game on October 14 go on sale only on September 3, most hotels in Ahmedabad are already booked. VIJAY SONEJI

not have suffered."

The duo represents scores of cricket fans left in the lurch by poor planning from the International Cricket Council and the Board of Control for Cricket in India ahead of the Men's World Cup. For a sport like cricket, which, despite 100+ countries playing, is still considered predominantly a 10-country sport, a World Cup hosted in India presents an opportunity for cricket to attract fans and commercial partners from all over the world, including relatively unknown territories.

It seems both the ICC and BCCI missed a trick with the World Cup schedule. Unlike other major sporting events, such as the Olympics, the fixtures were only announced 100 days before the opening game on October 5, and with 57 days remaining, 20 per cent of the schedule was later revised, causing concern among cricket fans on social media over whether the biggest World Cup ever will also be the messiest one ever.

"It is an unprecedented situation. We don't know how to handle all these issues in such a short period," says Nazmul Hasan, head of business operations at Discovery Tours and Logistic, a Dhaka-based firm that is an ICC-affiliated official travel agent for the World Cup.

Previously, travel agents were given six months to plan ICC World Cup tours. Not this time, though. "Getting an Indian visa for Bangladeshi nationals is a long process. Right now, the wait time is at least three months, which means by then, the World Cup is over. So, unless you have an existing Indian visa, it's very difficult for the Bangladeshi fans to make it to the World Cup," says Hasan.

While the agency has approached the Indian High Commission in Dhaka with a formal request to expedite visas, for the few who have a visa, the cost of travelling to India has almost doubled. Thanks to the delay and change in the schedule and the ticketing process, the cost of a basic tour package per person has risen by at least 70 per cent from the initial 30,000 BDT (approximately Rs. 22,700).

"But even then, we are not sure whether we will be able to acquire visas for the fans. The hotel prices have gone haywire, and for an average cricket fan, it is a huge challenge to spend so much money, and because of such a messy situation, a lot of customers are even back-tracking their decisions," Hasan adds.

It has resulted in Tanvir, who has travelled across the globe to cheer for the Tigers, and his friends doubling up their budget. "Among the 18-member group, only three have Indian visas now, and the rest of us are waiting. We want to watch Bangladesh's first two games in Dharamsala, but it's not a smooth experience," Tanvir says.

"We initially planned to take a morning flight from Delhi to Dharamsala and watch the day-night game, but due to changes in the tournament schedule, our game will now start at 10.30 am, which means we will have to reach Dharamsala a day in advance, and now we are told most hotels are sold out."

Hotels in all 10 host cities are either sold out or inflating prices, making it difficult for cricket-loving fans to find affordable accommodations. While Indapurkar managed to book tickets for the New Zealand versus South Africa game in Pune instead of a match in Ahmedabad, others planning to attend are struggling.

While the tickets for the much-hyped India vs. Pakistan game on October 14 go on sale only on September 3, most hotels in the city are already booked. The average hotel tariffs in the city have shot up at least 20 times.

Narendra Somani, president of the Hotels and Restaurants Association of Gujarat, believes at least 30,000 fans are expected to travel to Ahmedabad for the marquee clash.

"The total number of rooms available in Ahmedabad is around 15,000. About 1,000 rooms are

> Previously, travel agents were given six months to plan ICC World Cup tours. Not this time, though.

booked by the BCCI and the ICC. Since the demand does not meet supply, the room rates have been high," Somani says.

"Right now, people have randomly blocked the rooms, but if they don't get tickets, obviously there will be cancellations. That could lead to some dip in prices."

Sportstar sent a questionnaire to the BCCI and the ICC about the mismanagement of the lead-up to the tournament, but neither responded.

While the organisers are busy taking the fans for granted, hospitality industry veterans have come up with innovative plans to cater to affluent fans.

Cutting Edge Events Private Limited, an ICC-accredited travel agency that has been organising cricket World Cup tours for two decades, has come up with the novel idea of a charter flight for the India-Pakistan game.

"We are the only company that has come up with this idea. We have booked two to three chartered flights and can accommodate about 600 to 700 people," says Mayank Khandwala, the owner.

"The flight will reach Ahmedabad on matchday morning, drop the guests off at the stadium, and return to Mumbai a few hours after the match gets over. That avoids the hassle of finding a hotel and all that. The cost of a charter plane, meals, local travel, and the priceless ticket? Approximately Rs 1.10 lakh each. "For such big tournaments, there will obviously be challenges, but we hope to have a good tournament," says Khandwala.

Come October 5, and all the hassles of the fans will be put to the backburner as a cricket-crazy nation with the largest population in the world will lap up to the World Cup. Moreover, the teams will barely face any problems, with a majority of state associations knowing the drill and their members devoted to cricket full-time.

But even after the final on November 19, most fans will regret the lack of "I was there" moments since the tournament was not well planned.

Major grouse: Bangladesh will play its first two matches in Dharamsala. But the unprecedented delay in announcing the World Cup schedule means its fans are left to grapple with the prospect of visa delays and inflated hotel rates. GETTY IMAGES

Shorter end of the stick: Travelling fans have been left in the lurch with the delays in the announcement of the World Cup schedule and ticket sales, leading to pandemonium. REUTERS

INDIAN CHESS IN 'AUGUST' COMPANY, BUT BEST YET TO COME

August has become a **memorable month** for Indian chess, just like it did several years ago.

Rakesh Rao
@sportyrakesh

It was August 1987 when Viswanathan Anand won the World Junior Chess title to mark India's arrival on the global stage. Before this, in August 1982, 15-year-old Dibyendu Barua caused ripples in the chess world by stunning then-World No. 3 Viktor Korchnoi in 57 moves in their fifth-round clash in the Lloyds Bank Masters Open in London.

It took another August, in 2022, to bring to the fore the collective strength of a growing chess nation. In the Chess Olympiad at Mamallapuram, near Chennai, India came close to winning the titles in the Open and the women's section before settling for a historic twin bronze medals.

Interestingly, before the start of the Olympiad, Magnus Carlsen predicted that the young India 2 would do better than India 1. And

Master of squares: R. Praggnanandhaa will now play in the Candidates tournament in 2024, where the winner will face China's Ding Liren in the next World Championship. At the age of 18, Praggnanandhaa was also the youngest Chess World Cup finalist ever to date. FIDE

INDIA'S R. PRAGGNANANDHAA HAS JUMPED NINE PLACES TO HOLD THE 20TH SPOT IN WORLD RANKINGS FOLLOWING HIS STUPENDOUS RUNNER-UP FINISH IN THE CHESS WORLD CUP. PRAGGNANANDHAA WILL FEATURE IN THE CANDIDATES TOURNAMENT IN 2024

that's precisely how it panned out.

The chess world took note of the performance of the India '2' team, for which young D. Gukesh won the first eight rounds, including the one against Fabiano Caruana, the spearhead of the top seed USA.

India upstaged the USA, and later, individual gold medals went to Gukesh and Nihal Sarin, silver to Arjun Erigaisi, and bronze to R. Praggnanandhaa.

R. Vaishali, the elder sibling of Praggnanandhaa, collected an individual bronze, as did Tania Sachdev. It was also the first time a sister-brother combination returned with Olympiad medals. For its overall performance in the Open and women's sections, India was awarded the Gaprindashvili Cup for the first time. Despite the amazing performance at home, the country's sports lovers did not give the event much attention.

Since then, a series of consistent performers have emerged at all levels. Many won international titles all over the world. As a result, six Indians are ranked between 8 and 31 in the world. The eighth-ranked Gukesh, who overtook Anand (ranked ninth) as the highest Indian on the latest world list published on September 1, is also the youngest to break the 2750-rating mark.

Praggnanandhaa has jumped nine places to hold the 20th spot following his stupendous showing in the Chess World Cup. Vidit Gujrathi (28th), Arjun (30th), P. Harikrishna (31st), Nihal (42nd), S. L. Narayanan (82nd), and Aravindh Chithambaram (92nd) are in the top 100. Indian chess has never had it this good. Though the progress on the women's side is not as encouraging, youngsters like R. Vaishali and Vantika Agarwal are promising to carry forward the legacy of K. Humpy and D. Harika.

Looking back, what has provided a sudden surge in the performance and growth of Indian chess is the work done by the youngsters during the COVID-19 break. With no over-the-board events and strict travel protocols, many Indians like Gukesh and Arjun worked tirelessly on their game.

A lot of lesser-rated players, too, made the most of the time on hand to sharpen their skills. No wonder, in the recent national championship in Pune, several players with sub-2000 ratings made life difficult for several Grandmasters and International Masters. It was a rude reminder for many higher-rated, seasoned players to regain their motivation and start working hard on their game or repeatedly face embarrassment.

NORWAY'S WORLD NO 1, MAGNUS CARLSEN, BEAT PRAGGNANANDHAA 2.5-1.5 AFTER PLAYING CAUTIOUSLY IN THE FIRST TWO GAMES OF THE CHESS WORLD CUP FINAL DUE TO FOOD POISONING

Elusive no more: Magnus Carlsen finally won the biennial World Cup by defeating India's 18-year-old R. Praggnanandhaa 2.5-1.5 in the final. Carlsen's first prize was $110,000 and Praggnanandhaa's $80,000. Carlsen also lavished praise on D. Gukesh (below), labelling his duel with the Indian chess star as his best faceoff of the 2023 Chess World Cup. FIDE

Gone are the days when Indian youngsters would feel intimidated by players with higher ratings or better results. The current lot, whether in international or domestic events, fears none. They are no longer looking to escape playing tougher rivals. They are looking for opportunities to scalp reputed players.

This fearless and confident approach of the young Indians has instilled the fear of losing in the minds of many higher-rated players. It is no longer good news to face an Indian player, despite holding rating superiority.

Youngsters catching attention is nothing new to Indian chess. From 2018–19, the creamy layer of Indian teenagers, represented by Praggnanandhaa and Nihal, has become more prominent, with many more joining the race. The new generation's ability to utilize computers, advanced engines, and megabases, coupled with coaching and exposure to international competitions, has sharpened their skills and boosted their confidence.

In August 2019, a specialised first-of-its-kind coaching camp for young chess players was held. Six handpicked youngsters, including Gukesh, Praggnanandhaa, P. Iniyan, Raunak Sadhwani, Leon Mendonca, and Prithu Gupta, had the opportunity to learn from former World Champion Vladimir Kramnik about certain chess-related aspects that were not accessible to their peers. Encouraged by the results of the first camp in Chens-sur-Leman,

Showing the way: Viswanathan Anand, a five-time world champion, is now guiding young grandmasters with insights and logistical support at the Westbridge Anand Chess Academy. Right: Tania Sachdev, Koneru Humpy, Dronavalli Harika and R. Vaishali during the Chess Olympiad. Youngsters like Vaishali and Vantika Agarwal are promising to carry forward the legacy of Humpy and Harika. GETTY IMAGES & B. VELANKANNI RAJ

France, Chennai-based Microsense followed it up with a second camp at home, with 2012 World Championship finalist Boris Gelfand joining Kramnik in January 2020.

After COVID-19, Gukesh and Arjun competed to reach the coveted 2700-mark, achieved by less than 40 players. They both accomplished this during the Olympiad. All this while, Praggnanandhaa did well in the mega-online rapid events, where he twice beat Carlsen. However, due to playing fewer classical games, Praggnanandhaa trailed Gukesh and Arjun. However, stagnancy hit Nihal's progress. He could not reproduce the success of the pre-COVID days and was duly overtaken by his younger peers. This talented teenager did make a statement in the Olympiad but has not been able to find a second wind.

Increasingly, the elite players of the world have praised the upcoming Indian youngsters, with Carlsen being the most vocal of them all. Carlsen stated in Baku, "Gukesh and Arjun are among the strongest players born after 2004. In addition, Praggnanandhaa has the potential to be a world champion. Gukesh is clearly the strongest in classical chess among the upcoming generation of players."

Praggnanandhaa's coach, R. B. Ramesh, is helping selected Norwegian juniors. Carlsen had raised the topic with Ramesh during the Olympiad, and the Indian coach agreed to share his knowledge.

This was also the background against which Carlsen got up from his chair midway through his match to congratulate Praggnanandhaa following his 2-0 victory in the tiebreaker against the mighty Nakamura.

"I congratulated Pragg and said, "Everyone wants to be like you. Those kids in Norway who train under Ramesh keep hearing the line, "Be like Pragg" from the Indian coach. So, I thought I would say the same to Pragg," revealed Carlsen in Baku.

The immense respect Carlsen has for these upcoming Indian players is well-earned. Anand, who mentors these players in the Westbridge Anand Chess Academy, says, "It is amazing that in the World Cup, where Gukesh overtook me to become the highest-rated Indian on the World List, the world is talking about Praggnanandhaa and his performance."

Organisers of elite events are increasingly inviting young Indian players, including a semi-retired Anand, as seen in the World Rapid Team Championship in Germany. This is the best time to be an Indian chess fan. Though Anand continues to be a top-10 player in the world and is happy to show his craft at select invitational events, the focus is firmly on the talent he has nurtured.

At the same time, all credit is due to coaches like Ramesh (Praggnanandhaa), Vishnu Prasanna (Gukesh), N. Srinath (Arjun, Nihal, and Divya), and many more who have worked hard to hone the skills of these talents and put them on course to reach their optimum potential.

August has become a memorable month for Indian chess this year, just like it did several years ago.

That being said, the best of Indian chess is yet to come.

BOATING FRENZY ON

Snake boats offered a nice, new edge in **battles for kings 400 years ago,** but now they send thousands on an emotional high every time the Nehru Trophy Boat Race comes around.

Stan Rayan
@StanByMe28

As a little boy in Kumarakom, Ajin Abraham frequently used to paddle through canals and backwaters. For folks in the Kuttanad area, and Kumarakom is a part of it, boating was a way of life.

A decade ago, children learned to paddle boats almost as soon as they began to walk. They used little boats to go to school, to play, and went in bigger vessels with their families.

"Boating is in our blood, and boat racing is always in our hearts. I took to boat racing at 18, and that was the time the Kumarakom Town Boat Club was winning the Nehru Trophy Boat Race (in Alappuzha) regularly," said the 29-year-old Abraham, a helmsman on the KTBC, which last won the Nehru Trophy in 2010, and a

A CALM LAKE

Colourful history: The Nehru Trophy, first held in 1952 to celebrate a visit from the nation's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is held over a 1.4-km stretch in the Punnamada Lake near Alappuzha. THULASI KAKKAT

chef by profession.

Times have changed. With development and broader roads, the canals in the Kuttanad area, especially Alappuzha, have become narrower. Children are now hooked on gaming on their mobile phones, while youngsters whizz around on bikes. Still, every year, thousands throng Alappuzha's Punnamada Lake on the second Saturday of August to watch and cheer the snake boats, known locally as chundan vallam, in the Nehru Trophy Boat Race and the strong men who paddle them.

"Ten or 15 years ago, people were so hooked on boat racing that even if you had a big international football match featuring stars like (Lionel) Messi and (Cristiano) Ronaldo in Alappuzha and the Nehru Trophy Boat Race on the same day, the crowds would all be at the boat race," says Sreenikumar, who was an oarsman in the Nehru Trophy some 30 years ago.

Began in a battle

Even now, the Nehru Trophy is so popular in the Kuttanad region that the boat clubs and the snake boats—almost all named after villages in the area—have their fan clubs in almost all the Gulf countries, with Malayalis coming down to watch and cheer their heroes.

It all began some 400 years ago with battles between kings of the erstwhile principalities, which are now part of Kerala's Alappuzha and Kottayam districts. Battles were then fought on the backwaters of Kuttanad, and once, after a heavy defeat, the king of Chempakasseri (near Ambalapuzha in Alappuzha District) realised that the reason for his defeats was his slow boats.

He invited the best architects in the area, and one of them built a long, sleek boat that could carry around 100 warriors. That did the trick, and the Chempakasseri was victorious after that.

Over time, that evolved into boat racing, which now sends people into a frenzy every time the Nehru Trophy comes around.

The Nehru Trophy Boat Race features sleek snake boats that can carry over 100 people and are nearly 100 feet long. The fast splash of oars, the idithalam —the 'drumming', which sets the paddling rhythm for the oarsmen— the clang of cymbals, the boat song, and the lovely action of the helmsmen all combine to make it a mesmerizing spectacle that attracts tourists from all over the world.

Excited Nehru jumps onto a boat

Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister, was so excited by a boat race in Alappuzha in 1952 that he jumped into the winning boat, Nadubhagam Chundan. Nehru then returned to Delhi and donated a silver trophy. It is unclear whether the trophy was intended for the winning boat, Nadubhagam Chundan. Now a replica of that trophy is given to the winners of the boat race every year.

In the early years, the oarsmen

Empowering women: The Nehru Trophy Boat Race Day has many smaller races and even a women's event before the big race. THULASI KAKKAT

spent a couple of days preparing for the 'race'. But now, most teams have a month-long camp and big budgets too. Preparations, too, have undergone a massive change. Let's have a look at how things happen at the Pallathuruthy Boat Club, which won this year's Nehru Trophy by a sleek margin to make it a happy four-in-a-row.

It's 7 a.m. at Pallathuruthy, a village in Alappuzha, and a rhythmic chant of prayers at the St. Thomas Church there. This is a part of the Kuttanad region, the rice bowl of Kerala. On one side, there are lush green fields as far as the eye can see, and on the other, the backwaters are packed with many houseboats that had come home to rest for the night and lazily get ready for another day.

On a ground nearby, around 100 men are busy doing their morning drills, and a little later, they get into the boat for one of their last runs before the big race.

Pros to power the boat

Times have changed — the oarsmen and budgets too.

In earlier years, fishermen and farmers filled the boats. However, in 2012, professional kayakers, canoeists, and dragon-boat racers from various regions, including Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, and Delhi, were invited to participate. This led to faster races but also caused issues when a winning team in 2016 consisted of almost 40 non-local men.

"After that, the organisers brought in a rule that only 25 per cent of the oarsmen should be from outside," said Abraham.

Pallathuruthy's professionals this year were mostly from the BSF, but there were a few civilians from Delhi too. "But it is not an easy task to remove the local paddlers to

Face of the race: Oarsmen of Kumarakom Town Boat Club (KTBC) with their 'Chambakkulam' snake boat during a practice session at Kumarakom. The snake boats have become an integral part of the boating culture. THULASI KAKKAT

accommodate the outsiders," said Vinod Pavithran, the Pallathuruthy Boat Club coach and a former kayaking international.

For the professionals, it's a nice annual trip to Kerala.

"It is a sort of two- to three-week holiday for us. But we don't get much time to go around this beautiful place; we train for some eight hours every day," said Abhishek, a kayaker from Bhopal's Sports Authority of India (SAI) centre. He was part of the Kumarakom Town team.

The well-trained professionals bring power to the team and are often flown in and offered higher pay, while local paddlers receive between Rs 1000 and Rs 1500 per day.

Big budget

"I think our team has the biggest budget; it will be more than Rs 1 crore. We have a 30-day camp; one day's food expenses alone come to Rs 45,000 (for about 120 in the team), and then we have to pay Rs 10,000 daily for the accommodation, said Pallathuruthy coach Pavithran, who had competed in the 1994 and 1998 Asian Games as a kayaker.

Much of the funding comes from the 'captain' – this year's champion, Pallathuruthy, had Alan and Aiden, a father-son duo, as captains—while sponsors, fans, and the locals also chip in. And there's the Kerala government's funding too.

Race strategy

What about race strategy in the event where the distance is slightly over 1000m?

"We divide the race into four parts; we go between 85 and 90 per cent in the first 250, then 85, then 85, and then 100 per cent in the final part," said Pavithran, whose Pallathuruthy beat KTBC to lift the Nehru Trophy, which is also a qualifying event for the Champions Boat League, a 12-event competition (open only to Kerala oarsmen) that is now in its third year.

That makes the Kerala boat race season a four-month affair. Incidentally, Pallathuruthy won the Nehru Trophy on four different boats in each of the last four years, with the Veeyapuram boat tasting its maiden triumph this year.

The Nehru Trophy Boat Race Day has many smaller races and even a women's event before the big race.

Proposal to make it an international affair

Rupinder Singh, a former junior national and varsity national cross-country champion who studied sports science at the United Kingdom's Loughborough University, is keen to make the Alappuzha boat race go international. He has written to the Nehru Trophy Boat Race Society (NTBRS) about his plan to invite university teams from Oxford and Cambridge.

"We have sent his proposal to the boat race society's executive committee, which is the decision-making body," said Sooraj Shaji, the secretary of the NTBRS.

Will the boat owners and locals accept it?

Only time will tell.

GLADIATOR THEN, CONQUEROR NOW: What's next for Neeraj Chopra?

Fast and furious: At 25, Chopra has completed one of the fastest speed runs of international athletics and is certainly the quickest in his event. AFP

Having won everything possible in his sport, the **golden boy of javelin** now looks for ways to sustain himself, as he eyes the fabled 90m mark.

Jonathan Selvaraj
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There's an apocryphal story supposedly by Plutarch (but more accurately by the writers of the character of Hans Gruber in the film *Die Hard*), that when Alexander (the Great) of Macedon saw the breadth of his domain, he wept, for there were no more worlds to conquer. Alexander was 25 years old when he smashed the Persian armies and ruled the largest empire then known to the Western world.

As he was handed the microphone to address the near forty thousand in the Nemzeti Atletikai Kozpont in Budapest on Sunday night, another 25-year-old world conqueror's voice appeared to crack. When he appears in the mixed zone for a short while, his tone is hoarse as he talks emotionally about how Indians should never give up and just believe in themselves.

Neeraj Chopra had just completed the last major victory an athlete can hope to have. Minutes before, the Indian had thrown his javelin a distance of 88.17m. No one else in the 12-strong finals group improved on that. Once this was confirmed, Chopra pressed his head to the ground as he celebrated besting the best of the field at the World Athletics Championships.

His resume reads like something out of an athlete's fever dream — Junior World Champion in 2016, Asian Champion in 2017, Commonwealth Games Champion in 2018, Asian Games Champion in 2019, Olympic Champion in 2021, Diamond League Winner in 2022 and now World Champion in 2023.

At 25, Chopra has completed one of the fastest speed runs of international athletics and is certainly the quickest in his event. Only two other javelin throwers — Jan Zelezny and Andreas Thorkildsen — have accomplished the triple of Olympic, Continental and World titles. Both were older too — Jan Zelezny was 28 when he won his first world title to go with his first Olympic gold while Finland's Andreas Thorkildsen was 27.

Chopra would later laugh off that break in his voice. It turns out there are a couple of reasons for it. He had of course screamed his lungs out each time he threw. There was also the fact that he got into an ice bath soon after, his first training session in Budapest. He could feel the strangeness in his throat soon after but Chopra says he didn't want to make a big deal out of it. "If qualification had gone badly, I didn't want people to think like 'look at this guy, he's already making excuses for failing'," he says.

It seems incredible that Chopra thinks people would assume he was looking for excuses. For a country unaccustomed to world domination in track and field, Chopra has made winning a habit over the last seven years of his international career.

When he thinks about what he has done, it seems incredibly astounding. "Every young athlete thinks they will win but I never had that clear vision of how I would do it. I remember what my thinking was in the World Juniors and what my feeling was. It has been a very long journey. When I started, my family had no background in sports. There have been a lot of ups and downs. I've had injuries and changes in coaches. When I see where I am now, it's so much fun," he says.

Yes, Chopra started with nothing. But now that he has achieved everything, what other worlds are there to conquer? When you have already conquered World athletics, how do you find freshness doing the same thing all over again? It is a strange feeling, he accepts. There was a raw desire that propelled the farmer's

« When I started, my family had no background in sports. There have been a lot of ups and downs. I've had injuries and changes in coaches. When I see where I am now, it's so much fun – Neeraj Chopra »

No slowing down: "I think now the main target is to play as long as possible and stay as fit as possible," Neeraj says. REUTERS

son from the village of Khandra near Panipat towards greatness. It's been sated now. "That same *bhook (hunger)* is not there now," he admits. But there are certainly other challenges that remain. "Throwers don't have a finish line," he smiles.

It's true that he has matched the achievements of his idol, Zelezny. But Zelezny continued to be an elite

HAVING ACCOMPLISHED EVERYTHING THERE IS IN HIS SPORT, CHOPRA WILL NOW JUST TRY TO ENJOY HIMSELF

athlete well into his late thirties. Chopra wants that for himself as well. "I think now the main target is to play as long as possible and stay as fit as possible," he says.

Longevity is important to him and not just because that's what Zelezny achieved. This World Championships, Neeraj says, was perhaps tougher than the Olympics he won a couple of years back. For one he wasn't a favourite back then. "Johannes Vetter (the 2017 World champion who has the second-best throw of all time) was the favourite. I had the Asian and Commonwealth Gold but that's nothing at the world level. I had no pressure because I wasn't expected to win. This time everyone expected me to win gold."

Not only was he expected to win gold, but Chopra also wasn't nearly as fit as he was back in Tokyo. He had come to Budapest having only competed in two competitions this season after hurting his groin in the first. In the Hungarian capital he barely threw in practice, to avoid twinging that problematic muscle. He was also nowhere close to being as fast as he is known to be. Before every throw, Chopra would stretch out into a lunge. He would gingerly feel out his inner thigh. "When you are coming back from an injury, you are always thinking about it," he would say.

Best of the best: Neeraj Chopra with silver medallist Arshad Nadeem of Pakistan and bronze medallist Jakub Vadlejch of the Czech Republic. REUTERS

Chopra has got a new resolution for his next competition. "The main thing is to understand my body again. Maybe I push myself a lot more in competition, sometimes more than I am capable of, I feel. That's why I get injured," he says.

Perhaps that doesn't change anytime soon, be it at the Worlds or at the Olympics. "I was feeling something in my groin today but I was thinking 'this moment comes every two years, even if it breaks, I have to put in my full effort'. I think I need to change that mentality. I want to stay injury-free but at the same time I have to find a way to push myself. I need to find out how to do that," he says.

There will have to be a compromise. Chopra thinks he might not need such an all-or-nothing approach in tournaments like a Diamond League. Having long made Indians used to seeing a world-vanquishing hero, Chopra says this might bring some unsavoury results. "In the Diamond League, I think I try too hard. Sometimes when I think I push myself too much, I feel like I'm getting a good performance, but the actual level stays the same," he says. By this, Chopra is of course talking about his chase for the 90m throw. Its importance has been tossed about a lot but Chopra, even after his win, admits it matters to him. "That 90m question has still to be answered. I'm very consistent but my performance is staying the same. I've felt this in a lot of competitions. I keep thinking I'll get 90m but it doesn't happen. I need to find a different way to push myself." he says. Chopra is confident he will get that mark eventually but for that he feels he needs to change the way he approaches his second run of world domination. He says he wants to have more fun this time around. "There are always people who tell me to enjoy the moment (of competition). But I've never been able to do that. I've always been someone who takes a lot of pressure. I always feel *chalo, tod fod macha do* (let's go and do some damage). And somewhere I think that's not letting me throw as much as I should," he says.

He explains by comparing the difference to how he performed in qualification where he threw a season's best 88.77m in his first attempt compared to the final where he got a best of 88.17. "If I speak of how I competed in qualification, I was mentally very relaxed. My technique was smooth, I was throwing at the right angle. That's the sort of body language I want in the final also. I want to know how I can get the feeling in the final," he says.

It's hard for a guy who has always pushed himself to the limit to try and put less of his body on the line. "I will of course try to do well in the Diamond League. But if I am trying something new, like finding ways to stay relaxed, that might help me. But I want to tell Indians — I know you expect that I always win but if I lose, I want you to forgive me, because that is also important. This is something new I need to try," he says.

Having accomplished everything there is in his sport, Chopra will now just try to enjoy himself. "At some level I've finished my journey. But I'm starting another one now. This time I hope I can enjoy it. When we speak of medals, I have everything. Now I want to see how to enjoy sport and make it casual," he says.

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Rockstar performance: The 27-year-old Kishore Jena, who had never even competed internationally before 2023, threw a new personal best and was fourth at one point. AP

> THIS IS AN INDIAN TEAM THAT WILL LEARN. WHILE THERE WERE DISAPPOINTMENTS NO DOUBT, AND MUCH TO IMPROVE UPON, THERE IS MUCH TO BUILD ON AS WELL

IN THE END IT DOES MATTER

The Indian contingent may have started slow but their **gritty finish** showed promise and stole hearts.

Jonathan Selvaraj
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If you were an Indian in Budapest's Nemzeti Atletikai Kozpont (National athletics Center) on 20th August, you would have got to marvel as the night sky above the stadium was lit up in a massive pyrotechnic display shot off over the Danube to mark St. Istvans day, which celebrates the foundation of the Hungarian nation and coincidentally timed alongside the start of the World Athletics Championships.

If you were in the stands seven days later there was no less of a firecracker finish on the track below. It was as sustained and spectacular as anything the previous Sunday. That blockbuster evening has to surely rank with some of the greatest hours in Indian athletics history as well. As a journalist from India, you got to understand a little bit of what reporters from the track and field powerhouses of USA and Jamaica must be

Keeping it steady: Parul Choudhary learned from Sable's botched race. There was no cleverness in trying to jostle for race leadership or overtake across lanes. AFP

happily enduring.

Powerhouse performances followed one after the other with almost no break. Neeraj Chopra underlined his claim as the greatest Indian athlete off all time as he completed his gauntlet with a World Championship gold — the one medal that had eluded him in his remarkable career thus far.

Even as you took that in, there were two other Indians who produced lionhearted performances of their own in the same event. Kishore Jena and DP Manu proved they belonged at this level, both finishing inside the top six. Jena in particular had shrugged off a late visa, the absence of his coach and the shudder of competing in his first World Championships with what has to rank possibly the most nerveless display by an Indian rookie. The 27-year-old, who had never even competed internationally before 2023, threw a new personal best and was fourth at one point ahead of Olympic silver medallist and world leader Jakub Vadlejch before eventually finishing 5th. "I think it was one of the best Indian performances. After he had so much difficulty getting here, he still did his personal best. What more can you ask of someone," Chopra would say, praising Jena whom he high-fived on the field as well.

Even as you held your breath with the unprecedented performance in the javelin throw, and even as Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem was making and missing his final attempt, which would confirm gold for Chopra, Parul Chaudhary was making top runners from African distance running giants Ethiopia gasp for theirs.

Choudhary, who came into the tournament with a personal best of 9.29.51 in the women's 3000m steeplechase, would finish the tournament nearly a quarter of a minute faster. One of the slowest, on paper, in her heats, a couple of days before, she would tear up that script finish ahead of former World Champion Emma Coburn. She had improved her personal best by over five seconds in that race and, by just making the final, had created history. But she wouldn't be done yet.

If she was one of the slowest in the heats, Choudhary was dead last amongst the finals qualifiers. Facing another mountain to climb, she sprinted all the way to the top. The sight of her accelerating past Ethiopia's runners in the last kilometer is one that will go down as amongst the all-time sporting highlight reels of Indian athletes. Choudhary would finish 11th, smash Lalita Babar's national record by four seconds and also qualify for the Paris Olympics with her new national

> « Kishore Jena and D. P. Manu proved they belonged at this level, both finishing inside the top six »

Speedsters: The Indian 4x400m relay team attained their best ever result at the Worlds with a fifth place finish.

GETTY IMAGES

record of 9.15.31.

This was already more sustained excellence inside an hour than many generations of Indians would have been used to over decades but there was even more as the Indian 4x400m relay team attained their best ever result at the Worlds with a 5th place finish. The squadron of Muhammad Anas Yahya, Muhammad Ajmal, Amoj Jacob and Ramesh Rajesh had already run the race of their life a day earlier when they clocked 2.59.05, to smash the Indian (previously 3.00.25) and Asian relay record (2.59.51) by nearly half a second to finish second in their heats. Not only had they beaten rivals from Great Britain, Japan, Jamaica, Botswana and Trinidad and Tobago, there was even a moment when final leg runner Rajesh showed the bravery and the gumption to take the lead from World Champions USA even if for a fraction of a second in the last lap.

The team seemed exhausted after that race, and some may have considered the result a bit of a fluke.

But the awesome foursome proved it was nothing like one, for, in the final, they would stop the clock at sub-3 minutes once again. Anything in the sub 3-minute range is world class. Amoj Jacob had boldly spoken about the team attempting a 2.58.00-minute run. A few years back, it would have been a prediction that would have been laughed off as foolishness.

But Amoj's prediction wasn't bluster. Ajmal had to leap over a fallen runner ahead of him and Rajesh had to run around another. Both instances caused both valuable microsecond delays and loss of forward momentum. On another day, 2.58.00 was certainly possible, and the team certainly has the legs for it.

The ridiculousness of the results on the final day that contributed the five of the six finalists for India over the course of the World Championships more than made up for the previous seven days which were liberally seasoned with similar sounding tales of Indians struggling to come to terms with the magnitude of the occasion.

If the Indian campaign had saved their fireworks for a spectacular finish, the early few days had been a series of damp squibs. What was particularly disappointing was the fact that the potential was almost certainly there. This had been one of the best prepared Indian teams at the World Championships. Athletes had competed abroad regularly, there were no obvious holes in

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Falling short: Sable's seventh place finish in his qualification round though was probably the least expected outcome. GETTY IMAGES

training and there wasn't any obvious warning signs that the players, unlike in previous years, had been peaking too soon.

Long jumper Jeswin Aldrin had the world's leading outdoor jump this season, while Murali Sreeshankar was jumping 8 meters almost as habit.

Praveen Chitravel had set the Indian national record while Abdulla Aboobacker and Eldhose Paul appeared to be peaking well. Avinash Sable, who trains alongside Parul Choudhary, was apparently running better that two-time Olympic medallist Paul Chelimo in training.

Aldrin would just about make it to the final of his event — a credible performance no doubt — but he wouldn't get the result he had hoped for. Sreeshankar struggled with a late start to his event — which saw him cool down a lot faster than he anticipated. The triple jumpers simply spooked. Sable's 7th place finish in his qualification round though (only the top 5 automatically went through) was probably the least expected outcome.

The training had been intense, his focus over the past year razor sharp. Yet when it mattered, he struggled to find a line and stick with it. When he should have pushed, he held back. Instead of chasing for a medal — a result he fully believed he could attain — Sable watched the finals from the stands.

It was a painful experience. What hurt even more was to see Abraham Kibiwot, the Kenyan he had nearly run down on the final stretch at the Commonwealth Games, take bronze. "Anything other than that would have hurt less," he would admit later.

That lesson, painful as it was, is an important one, not just for Sable but also Sreeshankar, Aldrin and the triple jumpers too. The World Championships is a big stage to falter at but several of them are grateful that it's come before the all-important Olympics.

Sable knows better than to hold himself back now. Expect him to shake off this result and crack his national record. Sreeshankar knows what to do when he has 15 jumpers taking off before him. Aldrin knows the feeling of competing over two days.

This is an Indian team that will learn. They were learning in the competition itself. Parul Choudhary learned from Sable's botched race. There was no cleverness in trying to jostle for race leadership or overtake across lanes. She picked a line early behind the leading group and stuck there like a lamprey until she crossed the line.

Even Neeraj, the man who seemingly knows how to perform where he needs to, found things to learn. After Sreeshankar told him about how difficult it was to stay warmed up after his qualification misfortune, Chopra adjusted his own pre-event training so that he was still fresh by the time he threw.

While there were disappointments no doubt, and much to improve upon, there is much to build on as well. The final result (1 medal and 6 finalists) of India's 28-member contingent at Budapest has to be looked at realistically. European powerhouses Germany and France have one silver between them despite sending 75 and 78 member strong contingents.

"When you compare this World Championships to 2022, there were many events in which we had finalists last time but didn't do so well this time (there was no finalist in the triple jump and women's javelin). But this time there are a lot of finalists in events where we didn't have them before (men's 400m relay and women's steeplechase). Things are getting better," Chopra would say.

Before his event he had advised the athletes who had lost to keep their heads high. "If you lose don't be dejected; go back and train and again. If you win don't celebrate too much. Go outside and train again," he would say.

Those are words that the team should take to heart. If you trust the process, they too can one day hope to star in the finish as Chopra did. He certainly believes so. "Keep working hard. We Indians can do great things." he would say after his gold medal.

SHUTTLING TO A NEW TUNE

H. S. Prannoy's **remarkable comeback** is one of the most endearing success stories in recent times, going from a fringe player to a strong medal contender in men's singles for India at Paris 2024.

V. V. Subrahmanyam

The long wait has finally ended! H.S. Prannoy, the indefatigable fighter on the badminton court, has served a warning note on one of the biggest stages in the world circuit—winning a bronze to join the select band of Indian shuttlers with World Championship medals. Kidambi Srikanth (silver), Lakshya Sen (bronze), B. Sai Praneeth (bronze), and Prakash Padukone (bronze) are the other World Championship medallists in men's singles.

At the age of 31, when most of his peers are reconsidering their commitment to the sport, Prannoy has demonstrated a level of consistency fuelled by great enthusiasm and hard work, enabling him to emerge from the shadows of more recognisable names in Indian badminton and carve out a niche for himself.

Prannoy has always been able to stun the best in the business on his day, but for some reason, he has never been consistent enough to merit critics' appreciation. However, things are changing quickly, especially with the Paris Olympics coming up next year. Prannoy's remarkable comeback is one of the most endearing success stories in recent times, going from a fringe player to a strong medal contender in men's singles for India at Paris 2024.

"In this moment, I'm not just representing myself; I'm representing every single person who believes in me. Never underestimate the power of perseverance. The journey continues," Prannoy tweeted after the 2023 World Championship bronze in Copenhagen (Denmark).

It's never easy for any athlete, no matter how talented, to watch the bigger or more familiar names take the spotlight. Motivation, or lack thereof, can be a major challenge. Prannoy's abundance of talent has been evident in recent months, culminating in his victory at the Malaysian Masters in June. His entourage, including travelling coach R.M.V. Guru Sai Dutt, a Commonwealth Youth Games gold medallist, and physio Sumansh, joined him at the perfect time.

"Honestly, we have rarely seen someone else put in the kind of effort Prannoy puts into training. For his age, he is just remarkable," Guru said sometime back.

"It was his never-say-die attitude and the intense urge to keep going that made Prannoy stand apart. His forehand is just too good."

Prannoy (31) and Guru (32), who are only a year apart in age, have played together frequently in training sessions. Prannoy is known for his strategic play, as demonstrated when he defeated Olympic and world champion Viktor Axelsen.

The biggest asset for the spirited Prannoy has been his tenacity to hold on even when the going gets tough.

"Well, honestly, before the Malaysian Masters, Prannoy looked short on confidence after the disappointment in the Sudirman Cup earlier. But, fortunately, being a workaholic with a never-say-die attitude, he could bounce back at the right time," Guru said.

Prannoy has been working hard to develop new strokes, which could surprise his opponents in upcoming tournaments, according to Guru.

"We are pleased to say that a couple of strokes we tried in the Worlds did work out. Though I will not be explaining in detail for obvious reasons, for each tournament, the effort will be there to provide that 'shock' to the opponent," Guru said from Copenhagen.

"To be honest, in the World

THE BIGGEST ASSET FOR THE SPIRITED PRANNOY HAS BEEN HIS TENACITY TO HOLD ON EVEN WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

Third time lucky: H. S. Prannoy finally succeeded in the world championships on his third attempt after falling in the quarterfinals twice before.

GETTY IMAGES

Championship, we never thought of winning a bronze or a silver."

Guru said that during the championships, the focus was more on understanding conditions, opponents, and different strategies. "Importantly, Prannoy has figured out that the longer he keeps the opponent on the court, he is getting better," he added.

Guru was thrilled to see Prannoy handle the pressure against reigning world champion, Axelsen. "The way he stepped up for the occasion augurs well for Indian badminton," he said.

The coach attributed the semifinal loss to physical fatigue caused by playing three consecutive three-set matches, which slowed Prannoy down in the middle of the second game against World No. 3 Kunlavut Vitidsarn of Thailand.

"I am grateful to Gopi sir (Pullela Gopichand) for the kind of discussion he has been having with us and the freedom he is giving us to express ourselves. It is proving to be too good for Prannoy, too. The invaluable inputs from him played a major role, for sure," Guru said.

"This bronze is a huge thing for Indian badminton, particularly ahead of the Asian Games. Prannoy is determined to keep improving. He knows his body, the conditions, and the strategy better now," he added.

Prannoy started strong in his first Worlds semifinal, but Vitidsarn's fightback in the second game gave him control. Towards the end, Prannoy seemed fatigued as Vitidsarn easily manoeuvred him.

"When you are on the court, you feel you have done everything, but when you finish off, you feel you could have done more. Physically, I couldn't push through; the legs were not in great shape," World No. 6 Prannoy said after the semifinal loss.

"I was trying hard from inside, not letting go easily, but credit to him, he was putting in the shuttle continuously at a good speed and not making any easy errors at any point," he said.

"At the third game, I lost that first half; it was crucial. You can't be down 5-1. I have to really respect how my body takes such matches; it is not easy to play 70 minutes back-to-back for four days," Prannoy said.

But the best part is that Prannoy can well be the torchbearer of India's hopes in men's singles in the days to come.

15 DAYS OF MEDALS, PINS AND HOTPOTS

For the Diary, the World University Games in Chengdu, China, turned out to be the **perfect cultural medley.**

Netra V
@nets_v

India registered its highest-ever medal haul at the World University Games — 11 gold, five silver, and 10 bronze — courtesy of some strong performances in shooting and archery. Before this edition, India had won just 18 medals in total, making the Chengdu Games a historic feat.

The Diary's entry into Chengdu was nothing less than dramatic, with her luggage taken in by customs for further inspection. After a dreary Q&A session with the officers, the Diary finally exited the airport amid a warm welcome from volunteers and organisers.

Her room offered some contrasting views as the Diary surveyed the surroundings of her hotel.

Epic proportions: The opening ceremony left no stone unturned despite the strict protocols and extreme security arrangements. It was an impressive cultural spectacle filled with fireworks. PICS: NETRA V

While far ahead stood skyscrapers and buildings with complicated architecture, directly below her window she spotted old-school structures with red lanterns hanging on either side of the door, giving a sense of a festive atmosphere.

The city of Chengdu had been patiently waiting for two years to host the World University Games, with its 2021 plans foiled by COVID-19. The venues and necessary nitty-gritty had been kept ready for the past two years, awaiting the extravaganza that spanned from July 28 to August 8.

The opening ceremony left no stone unturned despite the strict protocols and extreme security arrangements. It was an impressive cultural spectacle filled with fireworks — featuring the mascot Rongbao, performances by several minority groups, Tejaswin Shankar and Manu Bhaker as India's flagbearers, the University Games torch being lit and at the end, the Chinese President Xi Jinping declaring the Games open.

As the University Games got going, so did the Diary's hustle to try and catch up with athletes and make it to the venues on time by hook or by crook, even if it meant taking the subway. Luckily for her, people with the accreditation card were given a free pass.

The limited Mandarin that the Diary had learned prior to the Games didn't prove to be very effective when speaking with the athletes and organisers. Thankfully, reaching out to Chinese athletes turned out to be easy, courtesy of the attaché, who was assigned to her by the organisers and was well-versed in the local language.

However, the Diary had to communicate with athletes of other East Asian countries, who neither had a translator nor were fluent in English. Luckily, her fascination for Korean and Japanese shows and a few *'Annyeonghaseyo'* and *'Konnichiwa'* came in handy in the situation. A familiar sound in all the venues that the Diary visited was the chant of *'Zhōngguó Jiāyóu'*, which translates to 'Come on, China!' Yet another usual sight was that of people exchanging pins, be it a small Rongbao pin or a pin of the venues.

While she may have missed Jyothi Yarraji's bronze medal and her national record-breaking performance in the 100m hurdles, the Diary was fortunate enough to see the predominately Chinese crowd singing the birthday song for Elavenil Valarivan, who turned 24 on the day she won silver with Divyansh Panwar in the 10m air rifle mixed team event.

'Ela', as they call her in Chengdu, also received a panda key chain as a birthday present from the Games organising committee.

The constant hustle across different venues took a toll on the Diary, a vegetarian who pretty much survived on fruits, French fries, bubble tea and pastries during the Games. While the familiar K-pop songs with a cheerleading squad dancing to it and a light show before most of the final events did brighten her up, it was the strong aroma of the hotpot that lifted her mood.

By the end of the Games, the introverted Diary had opened up page-by-page and was melancholy while leaving the friends she had made and the city she had grown to like. Nevertheless, as per the motto, the Chengdu Games did make 'dreams come true' for the student-athletes and, certainly, yours truly.

GETTY IMAGES

The city of Chengdu had been patiently waiting for two years to host the World University Games, with its 2021 plans foiled by COVID-19

» REIGNING IN THE RAIN

Max Verstappen was **relentless as ever** as he battled tough conditions at Zandvoort to win yet another race.

S. Dipak Ragav
@dipakragav

The Formula One bandwagon returned from a month-long summer break with the Dutch Grand Prix at Zandvoort. Based on what we saw during the first part of the season, there was no doubt that Max Verstappen would make it a memorable homecoming for the hordes of Dutch fans. And the reigning double-world champion did just that and comfortably won a record-equalling ninth consecutive Grand Prix ahead of Fernando Alonso in the Aston Martin. The Dutchman is now on the verge of beating Sebastian Vettel's feat set in 2013 with Red Bull for the most consecutive wins.

Even though the on-track action has been quite dull this year with Verstappen on a rampage — this was his 11th win from 13 races — the intermittent spells of rain made the Dutch Grand Prix one of the year's most exciting races.

The drivers had a real challenge as they had to deal with changeable conditions that oscillated between dry and wet through the course of 72 laps. It also meant that strategy played a key role as teams and drivers tried to get the right tyres on at the right moment.

Though Verstappen has made winning look so easy in the best car on the grid, it is important to acknowledge that he is operating on a different plane than his rivals..

If ever there was a race where the rivals could trip up the dominant car-driver combo of the season, it was in conditions like those seen in Zandvoort. However, the 25-year-old dominated proceedings without putting a foot wrong and showed why he is already one of the sport's all-time greats.

Perez still playing catch-up

While it is easy to say that anyone in the current Red Bull can win races and the title, Verstappen's performance relative to Sergio Perez in the same machinery shows how the driver still matters.

The gulf between the two drivers was again evident during the Dutch GP. Perez stopped on the first lap to take intermediate tyres (ideal for damp conditions) as rains lashed the circuit, while Verstappen stayed out longer on dry tyres on an increasingly wet track.

When the local favourite did stop to take inters on the next lap, he was 14 seconds behind Perez, who had jumped into the lead of the race, benefitting from an earlier stop to the right tyres. But Verstappen just took three laps to eat into that deficit and reclaimed the lead after switching back to dry tyres.

Perez meanwhile struggled to match his teammate's pace and went off the track when the rain returned towards the end of the race. He later picked up a five-second time penalty for speeding in the pitlane, which eventually cost him the podium as it allowed Alpine's Pierre Gasly to take third despite finishing fourth on the road.

Tough times for Ricciardo

Daniel Ricciardo made a sensational comeback to F1, replacing Nyck de Vries at AlphaTauri before the summer break. The Aussie was fired by McLaren last year and was a reserve driver for Red Bull this year until the opportunity to replace

On the rampage: Even though the on-track action has been quite dull this year with Verstappen (below) on the rampage — this was his 11th win from 13 races — the intermittent spells of rain made the Dutch Grand Prix one of the year's most exciting races. AP

AFP

If ever there was a race where the rivals could trip up the dominant car-driver combo of the season, it was in conditions like those seen in the Dutch GP

AFP

de Vries opened up. The move gave him a chance to prove that he is still a good driver and eventually find a way back into a full-time seat with a good team for 2024 or 2025.

However, the 34-year-old had a massive shunt on Friday during the second practice session and broke his left wrist.

In a cruel twist of fate, the crash happened as he tried to avoid his compatriot Oscar Piastri — the driver who replaced him at McLaren this year — who had crashed in the same corner.

Ricciardo will now miss the next one or two races at the minimum as he recovers from his injury following surgery.

This incident has now put a spoke in the wheels of his plans to use the rest of the 2023 season to burnish his damaged reputation.

Moto GP

The story on two wheels is not too dissimilar to F1 with reigning champion Francesco Bagnaia too running away in the title race.

The Italian rider produced a clinical performance at the Austrian GP winning both the Sprint and the main Grand Prix on Sunday at the Red Bull Ring from pole position.

With this win, the Ducati rider is 62 points ahead of Pramac rider Jorge Martin at the halfway stage of the championship. However, with ten races still left in the season, there is still a long way to go in the championship.

Last year, Bagnaia trailed Fabio Quartararo by 91 points at the halfway stage and went on a run of four consecutive wins to produce a remarkable turnaround on his way to a maiden MotoGP crown. However, with Ducati proving to be imperious, it would take something special from the rivals to knock the Italian rider off his perch.

SPAIN CONQUERS ALL, BUT CAN IT CONQUER ITS OWN DEMONS?

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan
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The recently concluded FIFA Women's World Cup cycle was one that was dichotomous in approach and consequence. On one hand, the marquee showpiece was expanded to 32 teams from 24, more money was pumped in, the prize money pot put on a few more millions, attendance figures swelled, and broadcaster interests piqued.

The flip side was darker than one would have liked. While eight heartwarming debutant stories unfolded, one of them —Zambia — battled sexual harassment allegations levelled at the coach.

Not much changed for Jamaica from the last edition to this one — with money to even make it to the quadrennial event coming from well-wishers rather than its own federation.

In the end, the crowning glory came with a halo not as bright as one would have expected. While Spain's raw adamance and skill saw it

INCREASE IN WWC PRIZE MONEY (LAST FIVE EDITIONS)

1797%

Apex achievement: Spain's players celebrate with the World Cup trophy after beating England 1-0 at Stadium Australia in Sydney. GETTY IMAGES

With the American power fading, there's no better time than now for European heavyweights like Spain to conquer its own demons, step up, and take control of the reins.

rightfully ascend the throne of global women's football, a near-year-long player mutiny and its very public quashing took some of the shine away.

Spain's win capped the nation's dominance in the women's game from the U17 and U20 to the senior levels. Jorge Vilda and his side's strategy was to do what they do best — rely on muscle memory.

The same passes, the same creation of chances in impossible situations, the same blistering pace, the same determination — nothing we saw from Spain was a surprise. This Armada was a well-oiled machine — one that Sarina Wiegman's plans could not deter.

England stuck to its guns too,

« Today, we went out on [the] pitch to send the message: we are here, we have grown as players, we are not the same team as years ago -- we can compete, fight for every ball and win, but we also know how to suffer. I'm so happy for everyone – Aitana Bonmati, Spain midfielder »

Different class: Spain's Alexia Putellas (below) topped her Ballon d'Or credentials with her first World Cup title while England goalkeeper Mary Earps (L) won the Golden Glove. AP

Final flourish: Sweden celebrates with their third place medals following their victory over Australia. GETTY IMAGES

endlessly strategising but in vain, until it had to give in to the dogged nature of the Spaniards and see the World Cup trophy slip away courtesy of a 0-1 loss in the summit clash. However, the bigger fight was unfolding off the field.

The La Roja look like they have a bottomless pit of talent — something the establishment was proud to bank on when 15 players took them on in a private plea asking to be kept out of the national team until conditions of function improved.

What followed was a sordid saga of attacks and responses. The Federation made details of the letter public and denounced those they said were trying to derail the team's progress.

The exact nature of the concerns raised was never made public, but what was out for all to see was the Federation's handling of the fiasco — a champion nation (crowned eventually) telling some of the biggest players of this generation to stay down and toe the line.

Federation president Luis Rubiales doubled down on his public support for Vilda, dismissed the concerns the players had and called for a focus on those who were still willing to fight for the nation.

"I don't know how you can ignore this," Desiree Ellis, South African head coach, had said after her team's heartening campaign. It's a line that has since applied to every single fault line that emerged in Spain's campaign and the World Cup at large. The work left to be done, especially by the powers that be, is exemplified by none other than the FIFA president himself. Days ahead of the final, Giannis Infantino left the world confused when he said, "We have to start treating men and women, or women and men, in the

« 1,977,824 fans attended 64 games this edition – beating the previous best of 1,353,506 in Canada in 2015 »

The Vilda issue

Reports said the players, many of whom were at Barcelona, accused Vilda of being "dictatorial" and did not approve of his training methods or tactics.

Other publications said he would insist on the players keeping their hotel doors open before midnight while on national duty so he could personally check that they were asleep on time. There were also claims that if the players went out, Vilda wanted to know where they were going, with whom and what they were buying.

Vilda also has influential roots. His father Ángel, is the head of the federation's women's department, was given the unequivocal backing of RFEF president Rubiales. Vilda is also the director of women's football in Spain.

same way. I say to all the women, that you have the power to change. Pick the right fights. You have the power to convince us, men, what we have to do and what we don't have to do."

The irony was lost on no one, with Sweden player Ada Hegerberg leading the reactions with a post on *X* — "Working on a little presentation to convince men. Who's in?"

While the chinks lay bare in the spotlight now, space must be made for the positives. Sweden's 'always the bridesmaid' jinx continued with the side finishing with bronze for the fouth time in the global tournament. Australia's surge to the semifinal has galvanised a nation, with the government pledging 200m USD to improve women's sporting infrastructure at the grassroots level to elevate the standard at the professional level. They need to look no further than the women's cricket team for proof of concept of a rock-solid foundation.

According to FIFA, 1,977,824 fans attended 64 games — beating the previous best attendance of 1,353,506 in Canada in 2015. Sydney proved to be the perfect cauldron for the culmination of this tournament — packing up with a capacity crowd of 75,784 in the final — the largest attendance in a single match in Women's World Cup history (Sydney's Stadium Australia was houseful four times in this tournament).

The true jackpot was the layers of talent coming through the lines for these teams. The world has been going gaga over Colombia's cancer survivor and star striker Linda Caicedo and Spain's super-sub Salma Paralluelo (left), who was adjudged FIFA Best Young Player, but the dividends don't end there. Golden Boot winner Hinata Miyazawa was a breath of fresh air in attack for Japan, helping the side beat Spain 4-0 in the group stage — the only team to defeat the eventual champion in this edition. The 2023 World Cup saw goalkeepers take centre stage.

GAP IN PRIZE MONEY BETWEEN MEN'S AND WOMEN'S EDITION

$330m

In 64 games, keepers won player of the match plaudits nine times. From Australia's Mackenzie Arnold and England's Mary Earps, who won the tournament Golden Glove (conceding only four goals), to World Cup-winning Spaniard Cata Coll, this tournament saw athletic efforts between the sticks from some of these women.

Elation and evaluation aside, what will the aftermath of the World Cup look like? There will be a lot of bandwagon-joining for sure, but what of folks like the Las 15?

What will it look like for teams like South Africa, Jamaica and Nigeria, whose financial tribulations might make the news if they need to crowdfund for the next edition of the World Cup? If nothing else, this edition held spectators and stakeholders alike by the shoulders and shook them to self-realisation.

Will action follow? Check back in four years.

1

Neymar to play in India for the first time

Indian Super League (ISL) club Mumbai City FC was drawn with Neymar's Al Hilal in the West Zone Group D of the AFC Champions League 2023-24. Iran's F.C. Nassaji Mazandaran and Uzbekistan's PFC Navbahor Namangan were the other teams in the group.

MCFC's draw with Al Hilal has added the possibility of Neymar coming to India to play for the first time.

The ISL club will start its ACL campaign against Mazandaran on September 18 at the Shree Shiv Chhatrapati Sports Complex in Pune, their home stadium for the Champions League this time.

It will then travel to Uzbekistan to play Navbahor (October 3) and then to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia to lock horns against Al Hilal (October 23). It will play the return leg against the same side, two weeks later in Pune on November 6 – a date that might see the Brazilian legend take the field in India.

2

East Bengal, Mohun Bagan on the rise

The Durand Cup 2023 saw the emergence of both the Kolkata-based clubs, East Bengal and Mohun Bagan, back to their prime in a tournament where both are the most successful teams (16 titles each). East Bengal, having won the Kolkata derby, finished as the group-topper and beat Gokula Kerala 2-1 to make its way into the final four. Mohun Bagan, on the other hand, beat ISL Shield Winner, Mumbai City FC, to set up a clash against FC Goa in the semifinal. This is the first time since 2019 that the two teams have made it to the semis and a win here might give either club the bragging rights for being the most successful team in the tournament.

3

No Sunil Chhetri in India's King's Cup squad

The Indian senior men's football team will face Iraq in the semi-final of the 49th King's Cup 2023.The match will take place at the 700th Anniversary Stadium in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on September 7. The final is scheduled on September 10. However, the Blue Tigers will travel without their captain, Sunil Chhetri. Head coach Igor Stimac had earlier revealed that Chhetri wanted to spend some time with his wife, with the two expecting a baby. It will be India's fourth participation in the King's Cup in Thailand, with the most recent one coming in 2019, where it went down to Curaçao in the semi-final before beating the host, Thailand, 1-0 for the bronze medal.

4

Hat-trick for Cristiano Ronaldo

Cristiano Ronaldo scored his first hat-trick for Al Nassr as he helped his side to a 5-0 demolition of Al Fateh in the Saudi Pro League. The Portuguese forward began with a header in the 38th minute from a cross delivered from the right flank.

Ronaldo made it two with a simple tap-in after some unselfish play by left-winger Abdulrahman Ghareeb. The Al Nassr captain completed the hat-trick with another easy finish, from a cut-back from Nawaf Boushal.

Hey Jude!
Jude Bellingham has had a dream start to his Real Madrid career as he scored for the third game running in La Liga, against Celta Vigo. The 20-year-old midfielder nodded in a close-range header, from a Joselu flick-on following a corner, late in the game to secure a win for his side. Bellingham, who scored 12 goals in 92 appearances for German side Borussia Dortmund, now has four goals in three games for the Los Blancos.

5

6

Hell is murky in Spain
Spain's maiden FIFA Women's World Cup win was soon drowned out in controversy after Spanish football federation head Luis Rubiales kissed midfielder Jenni Hermoso on the lips during the prize distribution ceremony. Rubiales initially brushed away criticism for his actions. But soon the pressure intensified, with prominent footballers and politicians pitching in support; Hermoso would later say that the kiss wasn't consensual. Rubiales stoked the fire further when he refused to step down and said he was 'socially assassinated'.

7

Messiah continues to perform for Inter Miami
Messi's Midas touch with Inter Miami continued as he helped the MLS side to the final of the US Open Cup after it beat FC Cincinnati in a penalty shootout. Messi made a telling contribution in the game, late in injury time, when he set up Leonardo Campana for the equaliser with a piercing cross from the left flank. The Argentine scored in the shootout, won by Miami 5-4 after extra-time ended 3-3. In the final next month against Houston Dynamo, Messi has a chance to secure a second trophy with his new side after the Leagues Cup.

8

Columbia women footballer's brother shot dead
The younger brother of Colombian Women's World Cup player Jorelyn Carabalí (in pic) was killed in the early hours of Monday in a nightclub shooting, local police in the city of Cali said. Carabalí was one of the key players for Colombia in the FIFA Women's World Cup, which ended its run in the tournament with a 2-1 loss to England in the quarterfinals. Local media reported that Carabalí's brother, 23, died after the shooting in the nightclub, where police said he worked as a DJ.

FOR MORE STORIES

» FOOTBALL MATCH OF THE FORTNIGHT

City marches on

The champions overcame the absence of De Bruyne to register their second win of the season.

Considering the ease with which it clinched the treble last season, Manchester City entered this Premier League season as the title favourite.

But unlike in the last few seasons, cracks were visible on the City megalith this time out. The impact of the departure of midfield mainstay Ilkay Gundogan and wing-wizard Riyad Mahrez was compounded by an injury to creator-in-chief Kevin De Bruyne in the first game of the season against Burnley, which was won 3-0.

So going into its second game of the league campaign, against Newcastle, which conceded the joint-least goals in the Premier League last season, many would have expected City to falter.

But Pep Guardiola's side proved that its success over the last few years was just as much of a product of structure and planning as much as individual skillset. In the absence of De Bruyne, Phil Foden took up the side's creative mantle.

The 23-year-old, often called the 'Stockport Iniesta', controlled the midfield with his delicate touches as he helped his side combat a Newcastle side built to frustrate.

The Magpies pressed with rage, with an intensity that would have ruffled most sides. But the Cityzens were calm with the ball and played through the pressure for the duration of the game.

The game's defining moment came in the 31st minute when new-signing Mateo Kovacic — who has eased into the Gundogan role — found Foden in the half-space at the right top corner of the box. The Englishman took the ball into his stride on the move, before sliding it onto the path of Julian Alvarez (below). The Argentine attacker took a touch and shot the ball into the left top corner, beyond a flailing Nick Pope in Newcastle's goal.

Eddie Howe's side harried and hurried, but was offered no rewards by a nearly error-free City side, as it was reduced to just one shot on target.

In fact, City's win margin was reduced to just a goal only due to the profligacy of the usually reliable Erling Haaland, who missed at least four half-chances to extend the lead.

The 1-0 win will be a warning bell for City's opponents, who would have been hoping for a slip-up from Guardiola's men, who are aiming for a record-breaking fourth consecutive Premier League title.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee & Pranay Rajiv

Number game

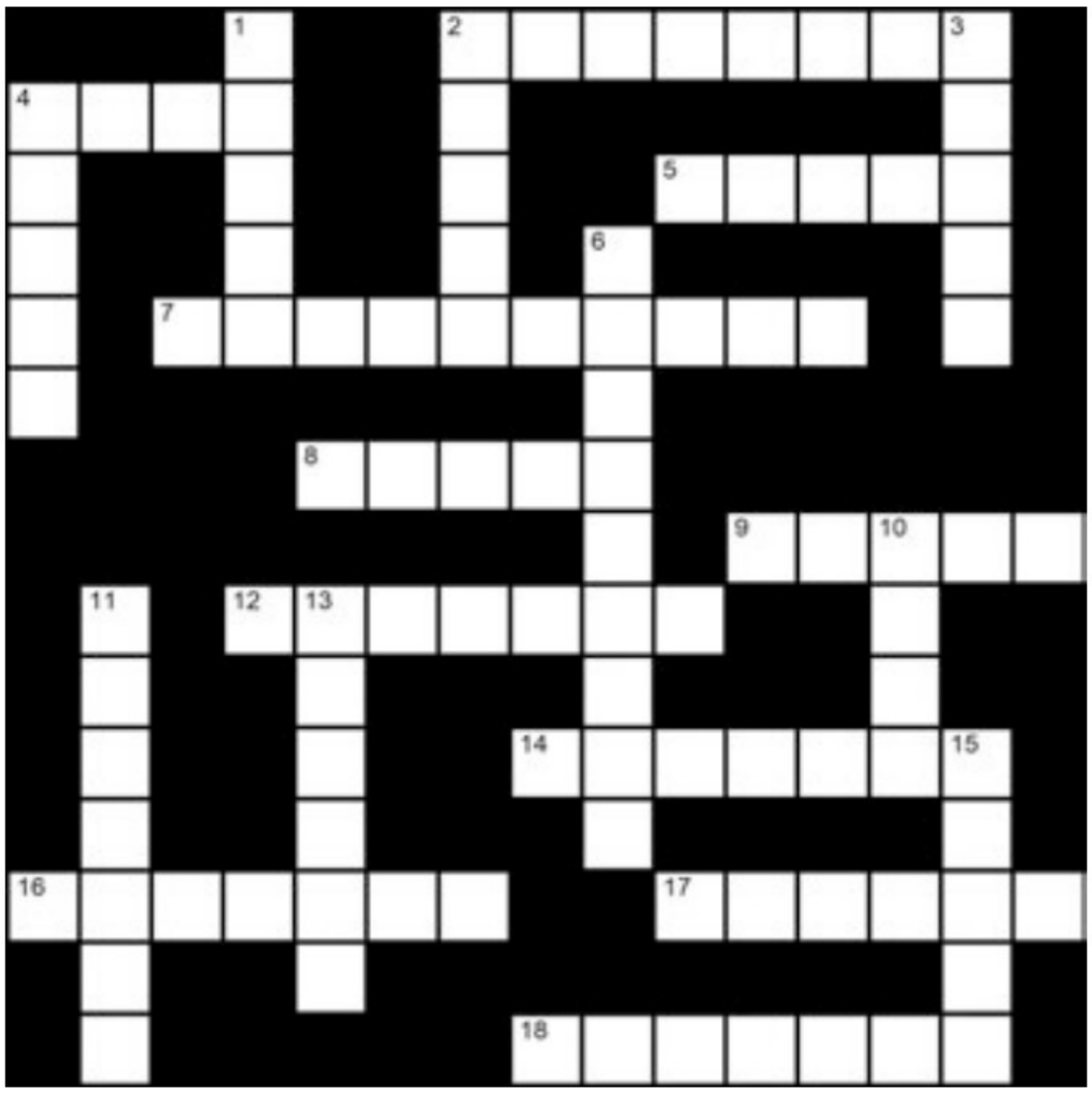
	City	Newcastle
Shots	14	7
Shots on target	4	1
Possession	59%	41%
Pass accuracy	89%	86%
Passes	684	477
Yellow cards	1	5

REUTERS

CITY VS NEWCASTLE

1-0

CROSSWORD
SRIRAM SRINIVASAN



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

2 India beat this team to win the recently-held Asian Champions Trophy hockey title. (8)

4 England, Real Madrid player ... Bellingham. (4)

5 Four Indians — Gukesh, Praggnanandhaa, Arjun, and this GM — reached the last eight of the recent FIDE World Cup. (5)

7 The new entrant to the Indian cricket team from Aligarh. (5,5)

8 The first name common to sportsmen Robinson, Pope, and Watkins. (5)

9 Thierry Sabine founded what's now called the ... Rally. (5)

12 Her goal won Spain the football World Cup. (7)

14 Current Olympic champion in high jump, Gianmarco ... (7)

16 First Dominican woman to win a athletics world title. (7)

17 This domestic football competition was first held in Shimla in 1888. (6)

18 Two-time Olympic gold medallist in shot put, Ryan ... (7)

DOWN

1 Spanish footballer Pedro Gonzalez Lopez is well known as ... (5)

2 ... Mani, first woman from Kerala to be chosen for the Indian cricket team. (5)

3 Vinesh's knee injury cleared the way for this wrestler's inclusion in the Asian Games squad. (5)

4 ... Musiala, Bayern Munich player nicknamed 'Bambi'. (5)

6 Scottish football club, well-known as Hibs. (9)

10 Scottish middle-distance runner Josh ... (4)

11 Spain is the second country to win men's and women's world titles in football. The first to do so was ... (7)

13 Boxing champ ... Baumgardner. (6)

15 He played the longest tennis match in 2010 opposite Mahut. (5)

Duels galore

By C.G.S.Narayanan

In chess problem jargon there are like sounding terms such as 'dual' and 'duel' with totally different conceptual meaning. Dual is a weakness in an orthodox direct mate problem where more than one mate follow a single black defence. Later on in modern compositions 'dual separation' has become an integral part of many themes and considered an embellishment. **Duel** is fairly simple term meaning one-to-one move **between two pieces of opposite colour.**The two-movers in this article present duels between white king, which discovers mate after defence, and each type of black piece.To start with we have a duel between the kings

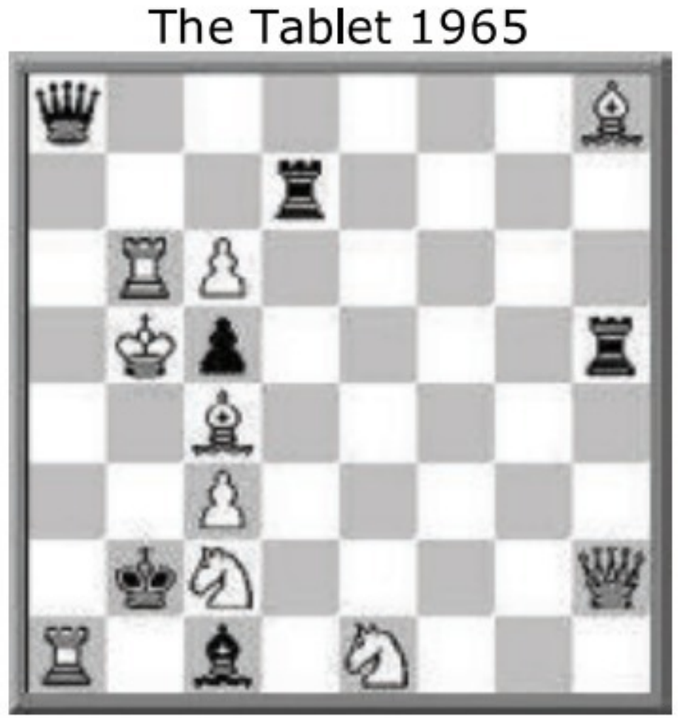
M.R.Vuckcevic (after A.C.White)
1st Hon.Memtion,Problem 1970

Mate in two moves

There are two set mates in the diagram
1…Ke4 2.Kd6 and 1….Kxf6 2.Kd5,
Key 1.Ne3+
1…Ke4 2.Kc5;1…Kxf6 2.Kd7
1….Ke6 2.Kc7;1…Kd4 2.Ra4
There are five king mates inclusive of two changed mates. Conventionally checking keys are forbidden but here it is a virtue as it achieves a rare task record. All the WK mates are by discovered checks.

The second is a duel between White king and black queen.**Key 1.Bd5** has many threats (2.Kc4,Kxc5 and Nd3) 1….Qxh8 2.Kc4;1…Qxa1 2.Kxc5 and 1….Qa4+,Qa5+,Qa6+ Qxc6+ 2.KxQ
The record is six mates by king achieved here.1…Rb7 2.Nd3 is not thematic

C.J.Morse
The Tablet 1965



Mate in two moves

The problems in this article are taken from C.J.Morse's humongous effort 'Chess problems:Tasks and records'. The problem for solvimg given below features duel between king and bishop composed in response to a challenge by Comins Mansfield to show four discovered checks by BB leading to distinct white king mates

J.K.Heydon
Good Companion 1920

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'The valve theme': Key **1.Ng7!**(2.Ne8)1…Nh6 2.Nxh5;1…Na6 2.Qxa1;1…d6 2.Qe6;1…d5 2.Qf1

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

Sethuraman bags National chess title

All it took was 14 moves in quick time for S. P. Sethuraman, against Mitrabha Guha, to get the draw needed to regain the National chess title after nine years.

Determined to win the title after blowing away a good chance last year, Sethuraman ended up with 9.5 points from 11 rounds to claim the winner's trophy and Rs. six lakh. Significantly, this ONGC officer collected 17 rating points which will help him reach 2608 in the next FIDE rating list on September 1.

"I really wanted to do well this time. My rating has come below 2600 and I'm happy to cross the mark again. I felt good about my preparation before coming here and I'm glad all the hard work paid off. I was never in any serious trouble and stayed in control in all my games. The best among my eight wins came on Friday, against Neelash Saha, after I found a nice way to finish," said the third seed who last won at Kottayam in 2014.

An undefeated Aronyak drew with former champion and top seed Abhijeet Gupta to emerge with the best tie-break score among the seven players tied at 8.5 points. The Railway player received Rs. 4 lakh and a trophy.

RAKESH RAO

SPORTOON

1 **Techouts Digi Champs emerged champion** in the second Dr. Akhilesh Vanam memorial Deccan Premier Carrom League championship with a 2-1 win over Fonixen Doctors in the final at Navyabharati Global High School in Nizamabad. Earlier in the semifinals, Techouts defeated PSLR Fortune Fighters 2-1 while Fonixen scored a 2-1 win over SSIM Legends. Srikanth Babu, VP Havells India Pvt Ltd, Sailesh Sampathy, VP and Deputy Chief Executive of Shiva Sivani Group of Institutions, Neeraj Sampathy, chairman of DPCL, K. Santhosh Kumar, chairman of sponsor Navyabharathi Global High School, gave away the prizes.

V. V. SUBRAHMANYAM

2 **The second season of the Grand Prix Badminton League (GPBL) has been put off indefinitely.** The decision was announced by Prashanth Reddy, League Commissioner and CEO of Bitsport Private Limited, the promoter of GPBL. The organisers' hands were forced after a slew of India's well-known players, including the fast-rising Mithun Manjunath and world championship medallist Sai Praneeth, pulled out of the event on the face of relentless pressure exerted by the Badminton Association of India (BAI), which deems the League as "unrecognised."

N. SUDARSHAN

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

DELIBERATE DECEPTION OR ACCIDENTAL ACTIONS?

Athletes must navigate the complex landscape of doping with responsible supplement usage to **uphold a fair and healthy** playing field.

GETTY IMAGES

As a serving member of the Olympic Committee Anti-Doping Council of India, I was invited by the Swimming Federation of India to deliver a lecture at the Sub-Junior and Junior National Swimming Championships held in Bhubaneswar.

The topic was — 'Nutrition & Responsible Use of Supplements'.

The timing of my lecture was particularly significant, as it coincided with a regrettable incident involving one of India's prominent athletes, Dutee Chand (above), who had been banned due to a failed blood test.

This emphasises on the critical need for increased knowledge dissemination and education among athletes regarding the complex landscape of doping, since such incidents can also be a result of unintentional consumption of substances due to lack of awareness rather than any wrongdoing on the athlete's end.

WADA's (World Anti Doping Agency) Principle of Strict Liability, says regardless of whether athletes used a substance on purpose or accidentally, athletes are fully accountable for any compounds identified in their body specimens.

So the onus lies on the athlete to self-educate and learn or work with professionals like nutritionists who can help and guide them in the right direction.

Ways of Unintentional Doping

Contaminated supplements: Supplements that have been contaminated with illegal drugs and are not frequently stated on labels, put athletes at danger of doping and can unintentionally result in positive tests and penalties.

THE ONUS LIES ON THE ATHLETE TO SELF-EDUCATE AND WORK WITH PROFESSIONALS WHO CAN HELP AND GUIDE THEM IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Contaminated food or drink: Consuming tainted food or drinks that contain illegal substances might result in unintentional doping and cause athletes to unwittingly fail tests. Lack of education & awareness: Athletes who lack a thorough awareness of anti-doping policies and forbidden drugs may unintentionally break the law, which emphasises the importance of proper education.

Exposure through environment: Athletes may come into touch with illegal substances unintentionally, such as chemicals or pollutants, resulting in accidental doping offences.

Prescription and over-the-counter medication: Athletes may inadvertently fail doping tests due to ill-informed usage of drugs that contain prohibited compounds, even if they are used for medical needs.

Herbal or traditional remedies: Due to hidden prohibited ingredients found in some items, using herbal or conventional medicines may result in unexpectedly positive tests.

Cross-contamination in training facilities: Shared training areas may subject athletes to prohibited materials found on other people's items or equipment, leading to unintended doping offenses.

Unlabelled or mislabelled supplements: Athletes may unintentionally violate the anti-doping rules by using supplements with improper labelling or ingredient lists.

How to select a right supplement?

Look for informed sport stamp on the label. A worldwide quality control program called Informed Sport certifies sports supplements, assuring that they are free of contaminants and illegal substances. Since the Informed Sport accreditation denotes thorough testing and quality control, athletes may put their faith in items bearing this label.

Prohibited substances in supplements

Hemp Seeds

Due to its propensity to contain traces of THC, a cannabinoid that is restricted in numerous sporting organizations' anti-doping laws, hemp seeds and oil might result in adverse doping tests. They may be present in CBD dietary supplements.

Amphetamines

Amphetamines are stimulants that improve performance; hence they can result in positive doping tests. Their usage is forbidden because it puts athletes' health at danger and gives them an unfair edge. These ingredients may be present in dietary supplements that promote weight reduction, increased energy, or improved attention.

Opiates

Opiates' capacity to reduce pain and maybe improve performance can result in positive doping tests. These ingredients can be found in a few analgesics and supplements for pain treatment.

Steroids

Due to their ability to artificially increase muscle development and performance, steroids might result in positive doping tests. These ingredients may be covered up in goods marketed as 'anabolic boosters' or muscle-building supplements.

Benzoylecgonine

Benzoylecgonine, a cocaine metabolite, can result in positive doping tests. Cocaine is not frequently found in dietary supplements, although it can be found in some items that are meant to help you lose weight or boost energy.

Dimethylhexanamine-Methylhexanamine

Dimethylhexanamine and Methylhexanamine (DMAA) are stimulants that might cause positive results on doping tests. These drugs were once present in various fat burners and pre-workout supplements, but they are now illegal.

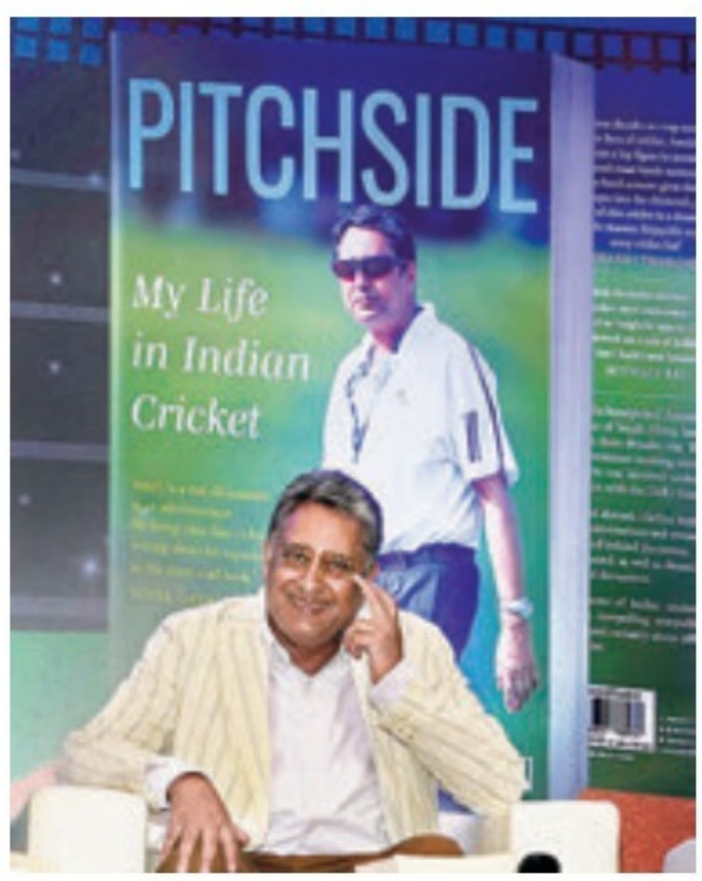
A close-to-the-action feel of Indian cricket

Amrit Mathur's book, *Pitchside: My Life in Indian Cricket,* has the **pleasing touch** of a writer comfortable with words.

Suresh Menon

In 2004, before the Indian cricket team's tour of Pakistan, Jagmohan Dalmiya, then President of the Board of Control for Cricket in India, received a call from "a senior (very senior)" minister of the government, asking him to call off the tour. Dalmiya respectful, told him firmly, "I am the President and the BCCI wants the cricket to go ahead. You are the government; if you don't want the tour, please go ahead and order its cancellation."

Since the Vajpayee government was in power, and the caller was not merely a minister, not even a senior minister but a 'very' senior minister, it is not difficult to work out who it was. The story is told in Amrit Mathur's *Pitchside: My Life in Indian Cricket*, which gives us a close-to-the-action feel of Indian cricket told by one of its leading actors as the manager of the national team, BCCI official, member of the World Cup committee, IPL manager and first-class umpire.



Interesting stuff: Amrit Mathur during the launch of his book. PTI

The journalist Mathur was a colleague at the 1992 World Cup in Australia where he was reporting for a news agency, and the book has the pleasing touch of a writer comfortable with words. The BCCI, he says, "is a shining example of diversity leading to unity." All squabbles end in unanimous decisions.

There are, too, vignettes of players. Like Sachin Tendulkar's comment ahead of a match in South Africa: "He observed the batsmen could run two to third man because the blades of grass were facing the other way and would slow the ball down."

Mathur kept a diary and wrote only of events where he was present. Thus there are no lectures here or '*gyan*' (one of his favourite Hindi words in a book which uses a lot of them). There is no real *'masala'* either, suggestive of a writer who knows how to keep secrets.

Yet, if it remains a readable effort it is as much because of the skill of the writer as the warmth with which he narrates the anecdotes. The chapter *IPL: The Road Ahead* brings together the two sides of Mathur, the journalist and the insider, and the result is sobering. Given the IPL's growing clout, he says, "it is possible that the league could snarl at, if not bite its parent." An early warning that private players might break away from the BCCI and establish their own league across the world.

It is surprising how amateurish our approach to the game once was. On the tour of South Africa (where Mathur was manager), players hadn't heard of some of their opponents. Earlier, the BCCI didn't know about television rights and was caught off guard when asked by Ali Bacher to name a price.

Mathur who often downplays his role in fixing things speaks with the gratitude of a man who thinks he was in the right place at the right time. "I see myself as a concussion sub," he says, "someone not supposed to play but unexpectedly pushed into the middle." Thoroughly charming.

THE HINDU GROUP

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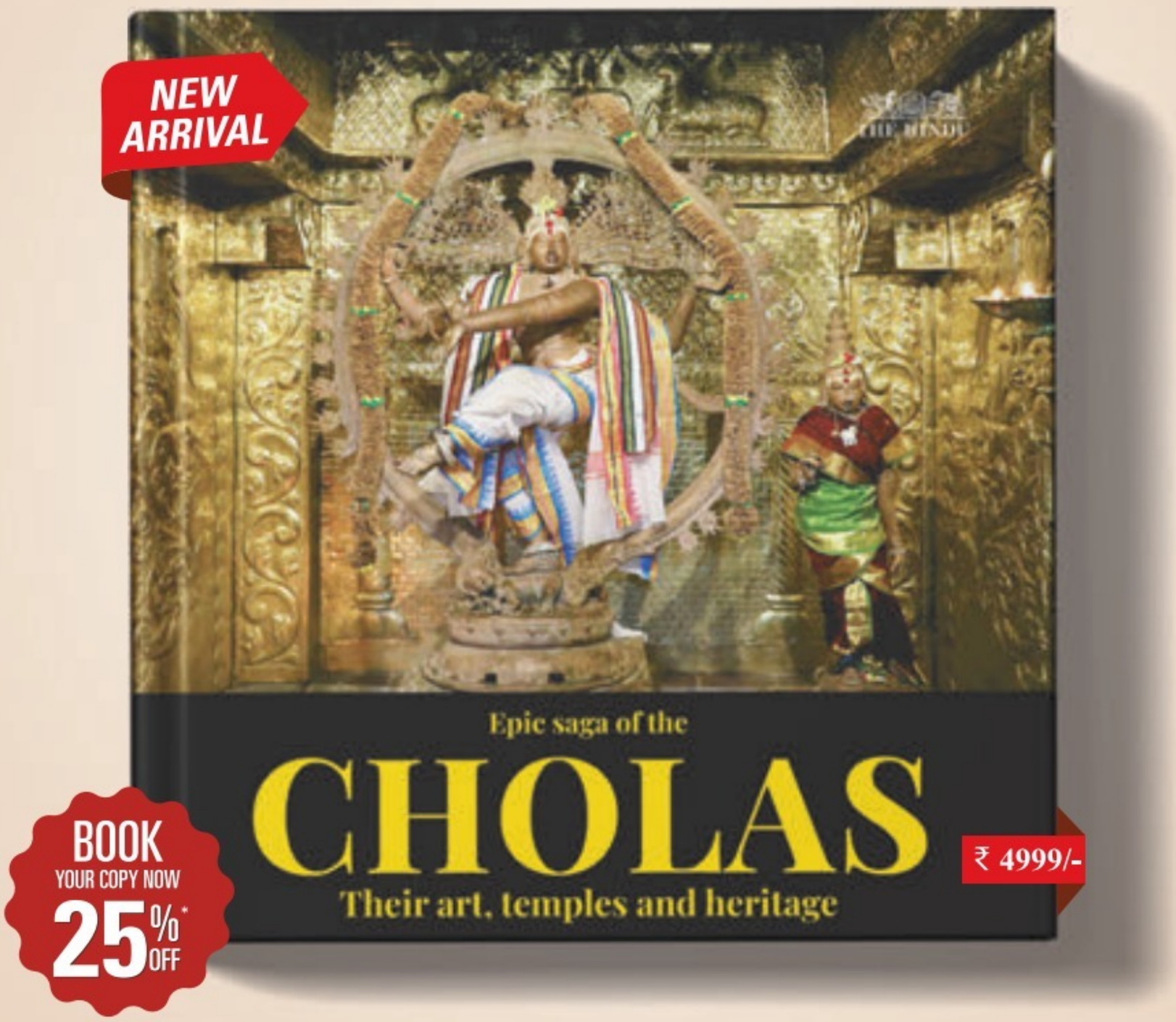
The grandeur and heritage of the Chola dynasty from the Tamil country, which has fascinated scholars and the layman alike, has been brought out in this coffee-table book by *The Hindu* when the spotlight has been turned on the Cholas.



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