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2024 SPORTS CALENDAR

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THE BEST FRAMES FROM 2023

LOOKING AHEAD

WHAT THE NEW YEAR HOLDS FOR INDIAN SPORTS

SAT-CHI-NG FOR OLYMPIC GLORY

After a highly rewarding 2023, Indian badminton stars Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty have their sights trained on Paris

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OFF-SIDE

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NEED OF THE HOUR

Only a **quick adoption** of the 2017 Draft National Code for Good Governance in Sports, which for some unforeseen reason is yet to be implemented, can help clean up Indian sports.

The story of Indian sports has always been about overcoming odds, fighting against adversity and apathy, and proving wrong the naysayers and individuals in power.

The triumphs of our athletes at the Asian and Asian Para Games, along with other international events, can't hide the inconvenient truth that our stars are shining despite the system, not because of it. The National Sports Federations — a collection of fiefdoms presided over by politicians, bureaucrats, or their kins — continue to pull our athletes down. Their self-serving interests always take precedence over trivial matters like national interests.

In 2023, our achievements on the field were as impressive as the administrative fiascos off it. While our stars won gold, scored centuries, and broke barriers, our sports mandarins were busy turning their roles into a labyrinth of chaos.

The Indian wrestlers, winners of six of the country's 18 medals from the past four Olympics, were grappling far away from the mat. Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, the former president of the Wrestling Federation of India, managed to maintain his influence despite allegations of impropriety. Sanjay Singh, who sees Brij Bhushan as his "elder brother", won the WFI presidency, but, thankfully, the Union Sports Ministry was quick to suspend the newly elected body.

The defiant WFI, much like a persistent fly in a summer picnic, has called for the Nationals, and with the World Body threatening suspension for outside influence, the wrestlers are left without support in a crucial Olympic year.

Elsewhere, former India hockey captain and Haryana Sports Minister Sandeep Singh earned a booking from the Chandigarh Police for allegedly sexually harassing and criminally intimidating a junior athletics coach. A power struggle between India Taekwondo and the Taekwondo Federation of India, meanwhile, left the players with little training and time to acclimatise, resulting in a disastrous Asian Games campaign. The run of the men's cricket team in the home ODI World Cup, as well, was overshadowed by the ticket sales fiascos. Cricketers played in near-empty stadiums while fans clicked and refreshed frantically for non-existent tickets on an error-prone ticketing platform.

Sadly, 19-year-old Chirag Khandal, who secured a spot at the Hangzhou Asian Games, decided retirement was more appealing than continuing an exhausting battle with the Equestrian Federation of India. Wind surfer Katya Coelho, too, failed to participate at the continental event after her name was omitted at the last minute despite securing qualification.

The country's annual National Sports Awards also had its usual share of controversy as compound archer Jyothi Surekha moved Court for missing out on the Khel Ratna even after winning nine gold medals across multiple competitions.

In 2023, Indian sport continued to be a beacon of disorder and insanity and promises much the same in the coming year: our athletes fighting adversaries on and off the field.

The urgent professionalisation of the NSFs with an accountable, paid CEO running the day-to-day affairs is the need of the hour, with selection calls taken at every level by competent authorities in a transparent manner. The Ministry has tried its bit by organising parallel national meets in various sports under the Khelo umbrella and appointing ad-hoc committees to run errant NSFs. But only a quick adoption of the 2017 Draft National Code for Good Governance in Sports formulated by the likes of Abhinav Bindra, Prakash Padukone, Anju Bobby George, among others, which for some unforeseen reason is yet to be implemented, can help clean up Indian sports.

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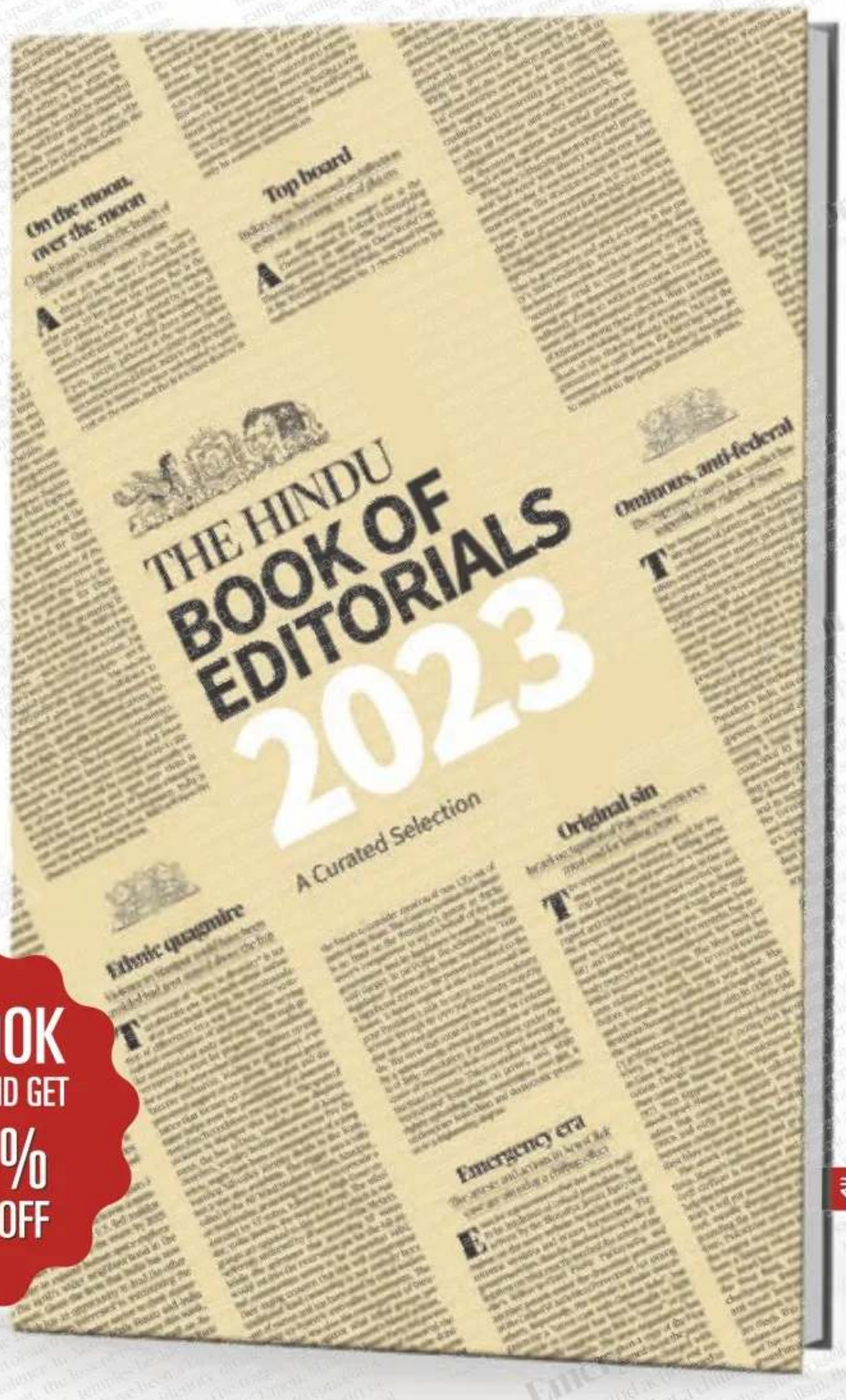
A SPECIAL PUBLICATION FROM THE HINDU GROUP

The Hindu Book of Editorials 2023

captures what made news in the year that just passed, with a selection of editorials that were published in the editorial pages of India's national newspaper.



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2023 | HIGHLIGHTS

WE LOOK AT SOME OF THE BIGGEST SPORTING MOMENTS OF THE YEAR GONE BY, IN WHICH MULTIPLE RECORDS TUMBLED AND HEROES, OLD AND NEW, STOOD TALL.

Australia won its sixth ICC ODI World Cup with a commanding performance against India in the final. Travis Head kept his cool to score a magnificent 137 to help the Aussies chase down India's total of 241.

K.R DEEPAK

Coco Gauff, 19, beat Aryna Sabalenka in three sets to win the U.S. Open, her first Grand Slam title. Earlier in the tournament, Gauff acknowledged that she hadn't anticipated performing at such a high level so soon after a first-round exit at Wimbledon.

GETTY IMAGES

Jannik Sinner (holding the trophy) helped Italy win its first Davis Cup title in 47 years. A dominant Sinner outclassed Australia's Alex de Minaur 6-3, 6-0 after Matteo Arnaldi had outlasted Alexei Popyrin in the first singles clash. "It has been an incredible feeling for all of us, obviously we are really happy," Sinner said. GETTY IMAGES

Jon Rahm won the first major of the year, fending off Brooks Koepka to bag the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club in April. "We all dream of things like this as players, and you try to visualise what it's going to be like and what it's going to feel like," Rahm said. "I never thought I was going to cry by winning a golf tournament, but I got very close on that 18th hole." AP

R. Praggnanandhaa became the first Indian after Viswanathan Anand to reach the final of the FIDE World Cup. In the summit clash in Baku, the teen sensation was beaten by Magnus Carlsen, who showed no mercy in a peerless performance to win his first World Cup. PTI

Major League Soccer (MLS) welcomed World Cup-winner **Lionel Messi** as he signed with Inter Miami on a free transfer from Paris Saint-Germain. The legend had an instant impact on not just the club's fortunes but also on the popularity of the league. AFP

Chennai Super Kings (CSK) won its fifth IPL title with a dramatic last-ball boundary by Ravindra Jadeja, beating defending champion Gujarat Titans in a cliffhanger of a final. M.S. Dhoni's men are now level with Mumbai Indians for the record of most IPL titles. VIJAY SONEJI

In June, **Rose Zhang** joined the L.P.G.A. and won her first event, the Mizuho Americas Open. Before joining the tour, she had long been the top-ranked amateur woman in the world. GETTY IMAGES

The **South African men's rugby team**, known as the Springboks, won a second consecutive Rugby World Cup title. Ireland and France entered the World Cup as favorites, but South Africa won it by beating New Zealand in a meeting of the sport's traditional champions. GETTY IMAGES

More than 92,000 fans watched a Nebraska vs Omaha college volleyball match at the **University of Nebraska**'s football stadium, setting a new record for the largest attendance at a women's sporting event globally. GETTY IMAGES

Novak Djokovic captured his record 10th Australian Open by defeating Stefanos Tsitsipas in the final. His dominant win drew him level with Rafael Nadal on a record 22 Slams, two clear of Roger Federer. He later surpassed Nadal by winning the French Open. GETTY IMAGES

Virat Kohli became the first batter to score 50 ODI hundreds, eclipsing the previous record of 49 set by his idol Sachin Tendulkar. Kohli broke the record in India's World Cup semifinal against New Zealand, helping the Men in Blue exact revenge for the 2019 semifinal loss. GETTY IMAGES

« Opponents respect us more now. Earlier, a match against us was like a 50-50 affair but now they feel like they have to [take us seriously] »

SATWIK-CHIRAG

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

With six individual titles, a rise to World No. 1, victory at the Asian Championships and the historic Asian Games gold medal, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty have had a near-perfect 2023. In a freewheeling discussion on *Sportstar Hangouts,* ahead of the 2024 season, Indian badminton's latest Khel Ratna winners discussed their no-fear temperament in finals, the joy of shutting down hostile crowds, secret of good communication as well as Chirag's penchant for orange bandanas and shirtless celebrations.

It's been a near perfect year. What do you think could have gone better?

Chirag: I think it's been a really good year. We played six individual finals and won five. Obviously, not the perfect year. A few misses but overall, we've ticked a lot of boxes. Like, winning the Asian Games gold (in men's doubles) and silver in the team event, becoming World No. 1, winning the Asian Championships and winning our first Super 1000 event.

Is there a difference in how your opponents treat you now? How do you deal with the increase in expectations?

Satwik: Opponents respect us more now. Earlier, a match against us was like a 50-50 affair but now they feel like they have to [take us seriously]. Everyone watches our matches and has some strategy [to deal with us]. We don't take it to our head so much. We know what to do and don't want to think so much about what is happening behind [the courts]. We just want to focus on what is there in our hands. There are a lot of expectations, and a lot of things going on. People watch us. Everyone wants us to win a lot of tournaments. If we lose in the first round, there is banter. They're like, "How can they lose in the first round?"

Sometimes I feel it is good to lose in the first round. We had big failures this year but then after that we had big tournaments too. Before the Asian Games, we lost at the China Open in the first round. We played a very okay game. I didn't think we played badly or something, but it wasn't to our level. We sat with our coach, talked with our psychologist, made a plan and then, we were on to the Asian Games with full fire. Then, again, we had Singapore and Thailand where we lost in the second or first round and right after that we won the Indonesia Open. So, a few losses here and there helped us stay on the right track.

What is your equation with crowds? There have been times where the crowd was against you, like when you were in China or Indonesia. Are you someone like Pat Cummins who said he enjoys the moment the crowd goes silent?

Chirag: Same. Exactly the same.

Satwik: We love playing against the crowd. Mostly when we are in Indonesia, they would be against us. When we were at the Indonesia Open and playing against an Indonesian pair, they would be booing us, and I said this is the time we had to prove ourselves. They will be commenting on our *Instagram* posts. That gives us a lot of motivation when someone is booing. They will be booing and inside I will be laughing. "*Tereko batata hu mai kya hu* (I'm going to tell you what I am)"

Now, people in the China Open actually cheered us. It's much more positive for us compared to before. When we come onto the court, we will get a loud cheer. But I still think if the crowd is against us, we play better. I don't want to be on the positive side of the crowd. They need to wake the animal inside me. Them booing me makes me not so relaxed; I'll want to play with fire.

"I THINK IF THE CROWD IS AGAINST US, WE PLAY BETTER. I DON'T WANT TO BE ON THE POSITIVE SIDE OF THE CROWD. THEY NEED TO WAKE THE ANIMAL INSIDE ME."
– SATWIKSAIRAJ

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Prior to 2023 you had a terrible record against some pairs. It was 0-8 against Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik. You have two wins now — including one at the Asian Games. What clicked?

Chirag: I think we got our first win in the Indonesia Open final. What changed was that we didn't really hold ourselves back. Earlier, when we used to play them, we were like — "Oh my God! If we don't play perfectly, they'll just come and tap it." Aaron has a really good spin serve. We used to be extra cautious when we were receiving it.

In that final, we were like — "Even if we make a mistake, it does not matter but we need to be the ones taking charge." We actually started 5-2 down, because we hit the first few service returns pretty much out of the court.

But we said it was okay. We need to take the shuttle high when he is doing that spin serve because then eventually, they'll have to lift it. The attitude changed completely from there on. Even in the Asian Games final, we did the same thing. We were the ones dictating the terms.

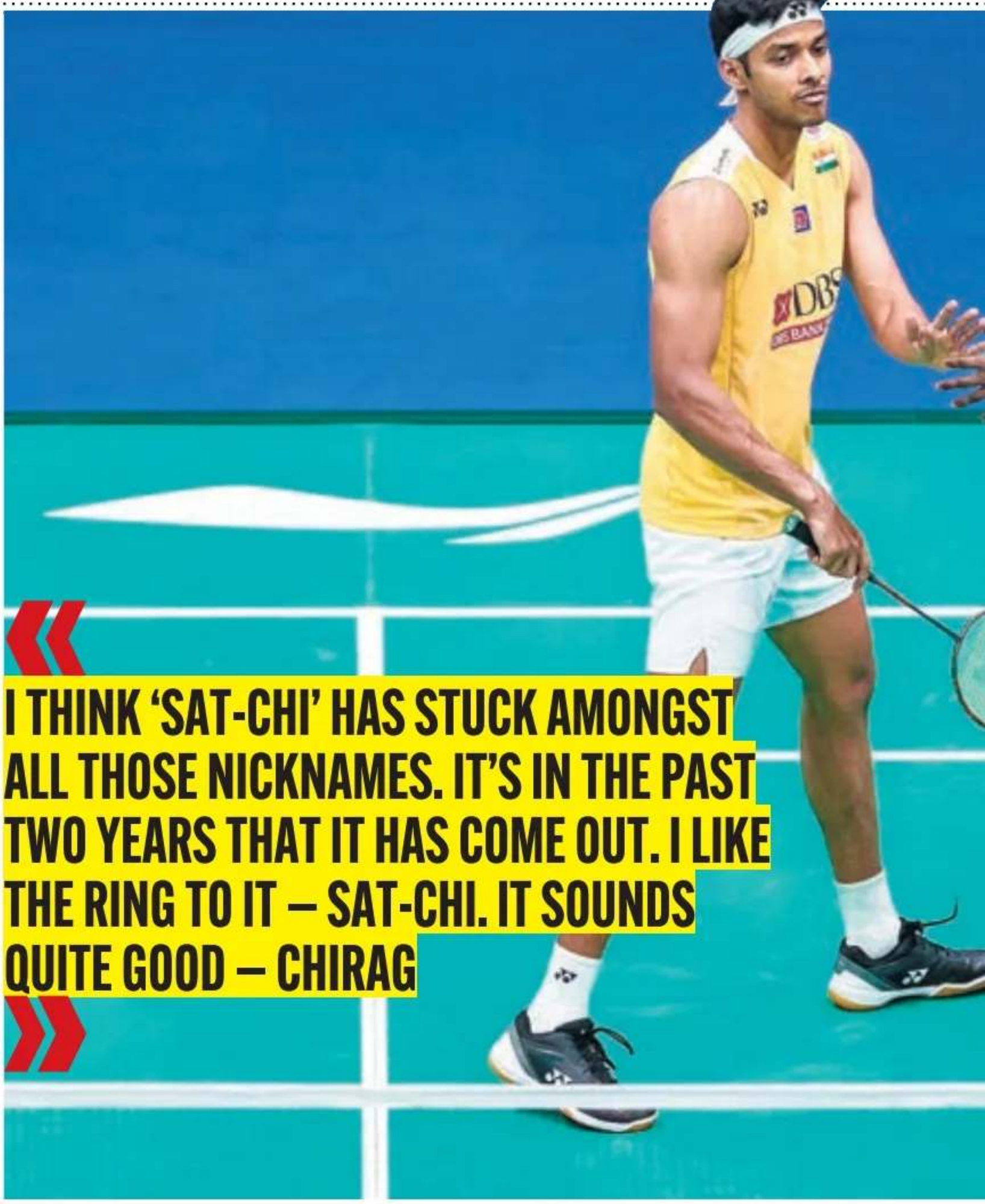
You guys have multiple nicknames — Twin Towers, Brothers of Destruction, Sat-Chi. Which ones do you prefer? Do you have any nicknames for each other?

Chirag: I think 'Sat-Chi' has stuck amongst all those nicknames. It's in the past two years that it has come out. I like the ring to it — Sat-Chi. It sounds quite good. Between each other, Satwik calls me 'Shetty bhai' and I call him 'Satwik'. I don't call a lot of people by their nicknames.

Chirag, you have become a bit of an icon with your choice of headbands. Why did you choose those colours?

Chirag: I have headbands in four or five colours. I don't choose them according to the match I'm playing. It can be any random colour but, in the quarterfinals, semifinals and final, I pretty much keep it the same — white, yellow or orange.

The orange one is what I mostly use in the final.



« I THINK 'SAT-CHI' HAS STUCK AMONGST ALL THOSE NICKNAMES. IT'S IN THE PAST TWO YEARS THAT IT HAS COME OUT. I LIKE THE RING TO IT — SAT-CHI. IT SOUNDS QUITE GOOD — CHIRAG »

What about you Satwik?

Satwik: I just cut my hair before tournaments. Otherwise, it comes over my eyes when I play. The length to which I keep my hair depends on how many tournaments I'm going to be away from home. I've tried wearing headbands before, but I didn't like it. It's not my style. There needs to be one stylish player on the court and that's Shetty *bhai*. I don't want to take his place. We have a few girl fans when we are playing, and they will call Shetty *bhai* — Chirag Chirag! Throw your T-shirt! And that is enough for me!

You guys also have very iconic celebrations after your wins. How did that start?

Chirag: It probably started after the Thomas Cup, where I removed my T-shirt and Satwik did his first dance. Neither of us planned it but it came about because of the environment and because of our teammates and stuff. After that it became something of a ritual. At the Korean Open we did the Gangnam Style celebration because we felt it would be quite good to do it in Korea.

What's the best reaction you got to these celebrations?

Chirag: I had the grandmother of one of my friends commenting under one of these posts saying you shouldn't remove your T-shirts. You win the match and it's OK that you are happy, but you don't remove your

Bond this way: "Our coach Tan (Kim Her) told us to go out, roam together, have a meal together and share a room together. These small things changed us. And we got to know more about each other as we travelled together," says Satwik. GETTY IMAGES

T-shirts. There are many other ways to celebrate. I've never met her in person, but it was pretty funny to have that comment on my post.

You guys have your own individual style. How did you get together as a group?

Satwik: We had coach Tan (Kim Her) who said we must be together. He told us to go out, roam together, have a meal together and share a room together. These small things changed us. And we got to know more about each other as we travelled together. From my side I opened up a little more when I started talking to him. When we started getting along, it helped us on the court as well. Initially i was a very Telugu person. I watched only Telugu movies, hung out only with other Telugu people. Ate almost only South Indian food. Shetty *bhai* is almost the opposite. He doesn't eat Indian food. He likes eating Korean or Japanese food. So, we learned to compromise. For one meal we would eat Indian food and for the next, we might go to his favourite kind of restaurant. It's like a marriage. We fight but sort it out. It's not like we have big fights but if we have small disagreements; we will sort it out there itself. It's become much better these days. We have now been together for nearly 7-8 years. We trust each other. We are like brothers now.

Chirag: Satwik's adapted a lot. He's started trying different cuisines. Earlier it was just Indian. Now he has Thai. Chinese of course. Anything with rice is good for him.

When you communicate, you seem like you have some signs to signal each other. What are they?

Satwik: That's to show where I'm going to serve. I'll usually make either 1-2 or 3. 1 means I'm hitting the T-Joint. 3 is in the corner. Thumbs up means I'm going to flick it back. It's been there for a very long time. There are other things that I'll communicate through speaking. For example, I might want to say that I'm going to be covering one side. So, I'll say 'Shetty *bhai main aage bhagunga*'. If our opponents aren't Indian, they won't understand.

Initially it was tough even for me to say these things (to Chirag) because I only spoke Telugu. Then [when I started playing with Chirag] this became a bit of a struggle because I would think how I should say this in Hindi. And by the time I realised how to say what I wanted; the rally would be over. When I got better then it became much easier.

You will have a difference in opinions. How do you sort it out, especially during a match?

Satwik: We never got that situation yet. If we are not on the same page, we have a third person — the coach sitting behind us — to act as a tiebreaker. We follow his strategy. We are on the same page when we both are on the same strategy. Now though, I know 100 per cent Shetty *bhai kidhar marega*. (where Chirag will hit). We stick to our strong points, which is to attack.

Shetty *bhai ka kaam hai ki mujhe opening dena hai* (Chirag's role is to give me openings). My job is to finish it. The next shuttle Chirag will catch. So that's plan A for us. But if that is not working and we become confused, then Mathias (Boe) will be back sitting, and he will tell us to do this or that.

When you started, doubles wasn't a big thing in India. Why did you choose to be a doubles player then?

Chirag: At that time, when we started out, there were hardly a lot of doubles players, and you didn't really get that amount of importance and respect in India. Firstly, badminton isn't that popular a sport in India compared to cricket. So, if you are a badminton player already, your popularity is low. If you are a doubles player, then compared to singles players your popularity is even lower.

If we wanted to make money, we wouldn't have been doubles players. We chose doubles because we genuinely liked playing doubles a lot more than singles. Now, things have definitely changed. The youngsters nowadays have that option where they can see themselves having a good career playing doubles.

Going into the Olympic season, have you and Matthias planned anything different?

Chirag: He wants us to win a medal and so do we, but there's still 7-8 months to go. We keep really short-term targets. We would completely start thinking about the Olympics just a month or two before it. That is the ultimate goal, but we have many tournaments leading up to it. We would like to do well in those tournaments and then start thinking about the Olympics.

You have been working with Matthias since before the last Olympics. What do you think is unique about the way you work with him?

Satwik: He has a more strategic mindset (compared to the other coaches we have worked with). He has played with all these players who are there in the circuit right now. He knows their weaknesses and what can be done to exploit them. He isn't someone who played 10-15 years ago and is now a coach. He himself was on the circuit only 3-4 years ago and knows what needs to be done. He doesn't have that physical game but is smart. On the other hand, we are very physically strong. We have the capacity to play those two-hour long matches. When he came here, he added that smartness to our game. We now have a game plan before we enter the court for different situations we might be in, and we try to stick to it. Our practice sessions focus more on the mental aspect than just the physical one. Our sessions are quite short — around 1 hour 10-20 minutes — but they have a lot more intensity.

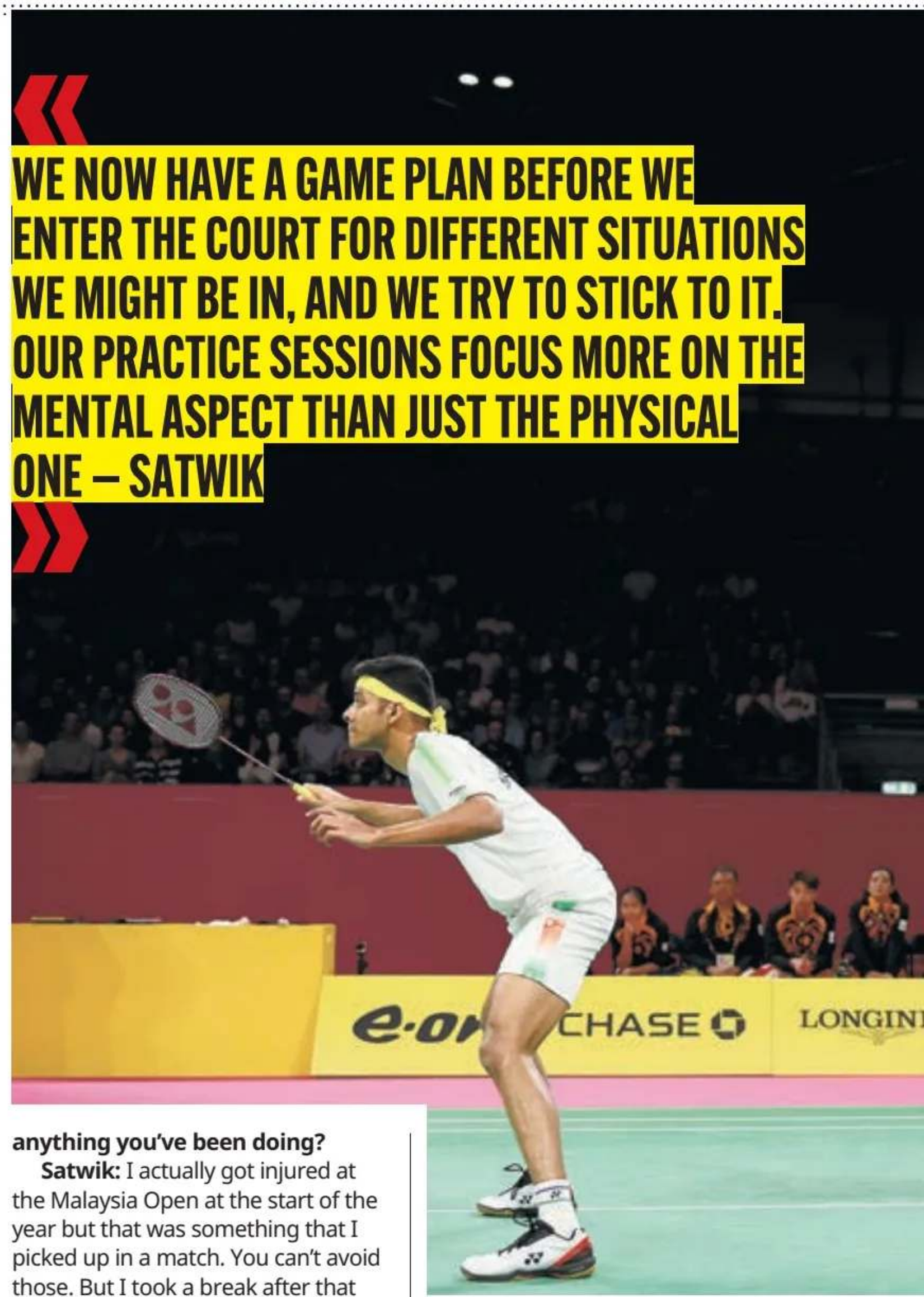
Unlike in the past, you have managed to stay relatively injury-free this year. Is there anything you've been doing?

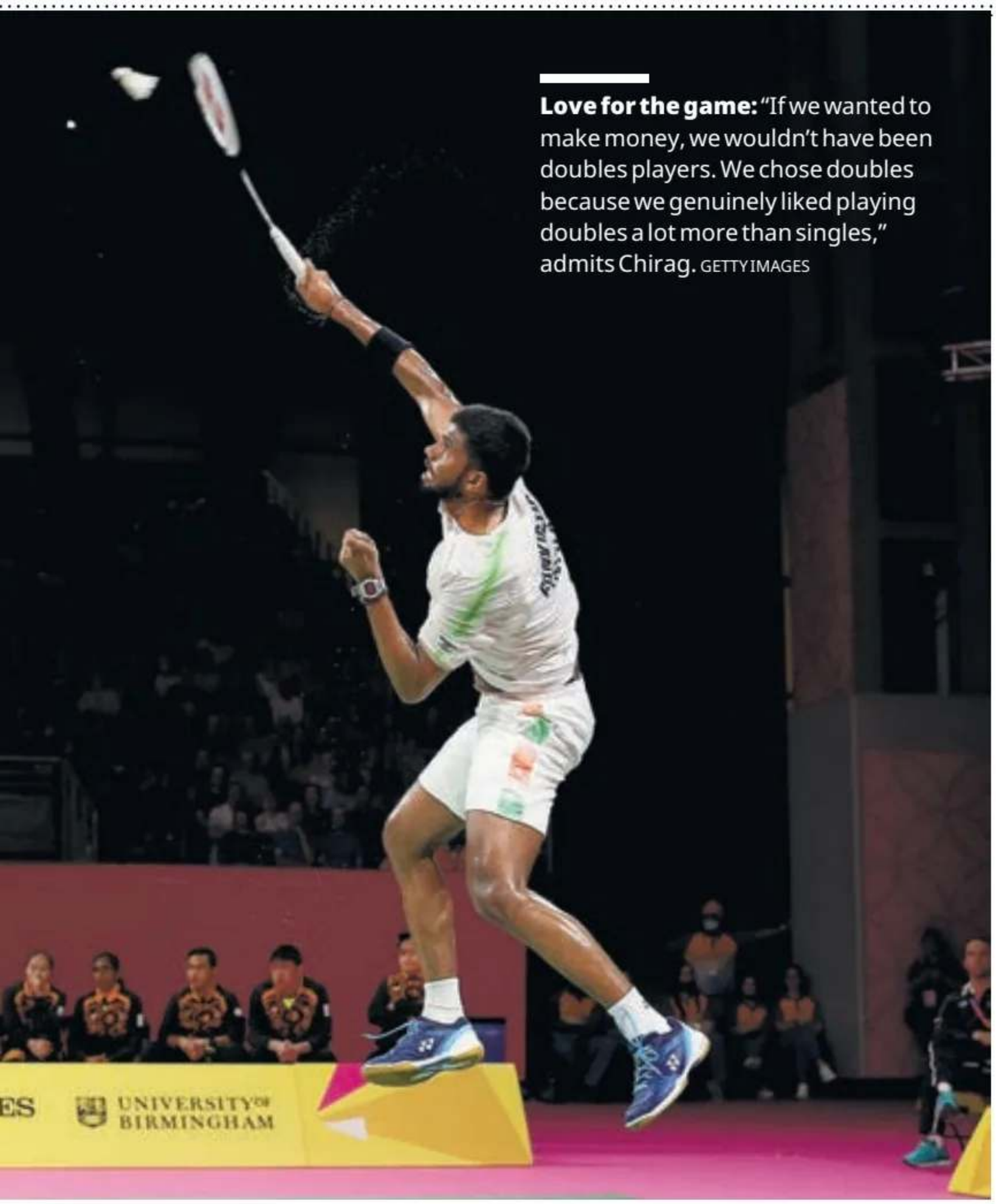
Satwik: I actually got injured at the Malaysia Open at the start of the year but that was something that I picked up in a match. You can't avoid those. But I took a break after that until the All England. From then on, I started observing my body and when it required me to take rest. We had a talk with our coach that when I start feeling like my body needs rest, then we are not playing any tournament. This year we didn't play so many tournaments. But when we entered the tournament, we were playing 100 per cent. Like, once you're fit, you're playing, otherwise you don't. So that has helped us.

In doubles you work as a team but what happens when one of you is injured. Is it frustrating for the other partner?

Chirag: You feel bad, but injuries are a part and parcel of the game. If you are putting yourselves through so much training and stress, the body is bound to get injured at some point. Obviously, you need to take care of it.

One needs to be supportive of their injured partner. If you are a singles player your fitness is your sole responsibility — it's your body, and if you get injured, you lose money, matches, or whatever. But in a doubles partnership, you need to think about your partner. It's like a





Love for the game: "If we wanted to make money, we wouldn't have been doubles players. We chose doubles because we genuinely liked playing doubles a lot more than singles," admits Chirag. GETTY IMAGES

marriage. There must be adjustments, and you need to back each other up when things are not working well for you.

You had a string of wins in tournament finals dating to 2019. Don't you get nervous, or do you just go to a different level? Was there a particular win in the final that changed things for you?

Chirag: We are always a little pumped up when we play in finals. Playing in big matches is what you aim for as a player. It would be a lie if someone said there is no pressure; it's up to you how you convert it into motivation. That pressure spurs you to do even better than in the previous couple of matches. Like Satwik said, the Thomas Cup final, where we won after being 17-20, was very crucial. To win it in that fashion, I think, gave us the confidence that we can play and win big finals. Not just win but win from any situation.

Do you follow the Indian doubles badminton scene? Do you talk to youngsters?

Satwik: We try to follow who is playing well. If he's making some wrong choices, we will try to correct him. Or if there are problems with partnerships. Sometimes, if someone is not playing well, their partner would want to change immediately and split up. So, we try to tell them to be patient and communicate with each other.

Do you take inspiration from other athletes?

Chirag: Rafael Nadal and Usain Bolt have always been my sporting heroes. I try to imbibe all of their good qualities as much as possible. They have that never-say-die attitude and intensity where they give 100 per cent on the court, but when they are off it, they'll be as chill as possible.

Satwik: I'm the complete opposite of him. I like Roger Federer and his calmness. And Dhoni, too, for the same reason — he is very calm in pressure situations. I also admire how passionate Virat Kohli is about his cricket. There is no rest day for him. He's very hungry every day, like he wants more, more, more, more and more. I wonder whether, as a human, he gets tired at least once. He plays with the same fire whether he's playing for a club, a small match or a major competition. He's consistent with his fitness as well. That's the quality of a top athlete.

Do you guys play any other sports to relax?

Satvik: I used to play before, but nowadays I try to avoid it. Once I got a very silly injury in my hand while playing beach volleyball. I was so embarrassed that I pretended I fell off a bike. I just don't want to let that happen again. I want to take care of my body. I also like to play basketball but not the high-impact kind. I prefer just throwing the ball into the basket, like Stephen Curry.

Chirag: Something similar happened to me in 2017. I was playing football with my friends when I tripped over the ball. I had a bad ankle sprain and since then I have not gone back to the football field. Also, we don't have the time to play any other sport right now. If we train for six days, we will be dead tired by Sunday. We just want to chill and not play any other sport and get our body even more tired.

Apart from the Olympics, what are your hopes from 2024

Chirag: To be happy, enjoy the process and be patient. When we do that, I think we play even better. Looking back at 2023, winning and standing on the podium did make us happy but the process leading up to it was even more special.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024 **BADMINTON**

CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM FOR PARIS BUT BLUEPRINT FOR BETTER FUTURE NEEDED

When it comes to champion-building, the year 2024 should serve as a **great reality-check** on where the sport is headed in the country.

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Ironic as it sounds, the performance dynamics of Indian badminton have changed dramatically in the past decade, but the quantum of joy gained by the lovers of the sport in the country is more or less the same. From the days of meagre Indian presence in singles and almost making a token appearance in doubles, the sport has moved to the other end of the scale. In 2023, there was very little to look forward to in the women's singles, the source of excitement for home-grown fans since 2006. Men's singles provided just a few moments to cheer, thanks to the never-say-die spirit of H. S. Prannoy.

While the lone men's doubles pair of Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy shone the brightest, the mixed doubles continued to lack a cutting edge, and the women's doubles remained a work in progress. As a result, the Indian badminton cupboard stood bare for everyone to see.

Before delving into the stagnant side of the game in India, let's rejoice in the moments that brought joy and pride to the badminton court. Chirag and Satwik's achievements, including becoming Asian champions, securing three titles from four Tour finals, and attaining the World No. 1 spot, were undeniably the highlights of the year.

Starting the year with a bronze in the Badminton Asia mixed team championship, the first success came at the Swiss Open. For the World Championship bronze medallists, the Asian title came in Dubai, and the duo changed gears to win its first BWF World Super 1000 title by claiming the Indonesian Open. The two went on to add the Korea Open title next. The only runner-up finish was in the China Masters, where they lost a close three-game encounter.

Lakshya Sen struggled with fitness issues, and the nose surgery added to the delay in the youngster producing his best. Prannoy made the Indian presence noticeable and finished the year as World No. 8. The most impressive aspect of Prannoy was that he stayed in the world top-10 after starting the year at 8.

On the Tour, consistency helped Prannoy defend the points earned in 2022. He won the Malaysia Masters and finished runner-up in the Australian Open. Semifinal appearances in the Indonesia Open, World Championship, and Asian Games— both worth a bronze medal — lent some more sheen to his report card. Being the quarterfinalists of the Malaysia Open, Asian Championship, Taipei Open, Japan Open, and China Open were the other reasonably good finishes.

For the record, 16th-ranked Lakshya triumphed in the not-so-strong Canadian Open. He reached the semifinals of the Thailand Open, US Open, and Japan

Marching forward: The never-say-die spirit of H. S. Prannoy elevated the profile of Indian badminton in 2023. PTI

Open. After reaching the pre-quarterfinals of the World Championship, he fell in the second round of five successive tournaments. Clearly, Lakshya has plenty to work on in 2024.

The year proved a forgettable one for K. Srikkanth, the former No. 1 currently occupying the 24th spot. His best performances were his quarter-final appearances at the Spain Masters, Malaysia Masters, Indonesia Open, and Australian Open. In most tournaments in 2023, he lost in the second round. These include competitions like the Syed Modi India International.

P.V. Sindhu, too, battled fitness issues for the better part of a forgettable year. Starting 2023 as World No. 7, she slipped to 17 before finishing at 11. Out of 17 tournament appearances, Sindhu lost in the opening round of seven of her first 13 outings this year. In 50 matches, she won 28 and lost 22.

Interestingly, even without winning a single title in 2023, Sindhu figured in Forbes' 20 Highest Paid Female Athletes for the Year. Not surprisingly, she was the only Indian on that list, with estimated earnings of $7.1 million. She struggled with a stress fracture suffered at the 2022 Commonwealth Games. After a five-match layoff, she made an unimpressive comeback. Due to poor results, she parted ways with Korean coach Park Tae-Sang and hired Malaysian Muhammad Hafiz Hashim, who later made way for Indonesian Agus Dwi Santoso.

Two-time Olympic medallist Sindhu, 28, is focused on getting it

Highlights of 2023

Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy became World No. 1 in men's doubles

Chirag-Satwik won the Asian title

H. S. Prannoy won the bronze medal in the World championship

Blinkers on: Two-time Olympic medallist Sindhu, 28, is focused on getting it right at the 2024 Paris Olympics. PTI

right at the 2024 Paris Olympics. She expects Santoso to turn her fortunes around at the Prakash Padukone Academy in Bengaluru.

For those curious about Saina Nehwal, the former World No. 1 was placed 30th on the ranking list at the start of 2023. She finished the year at a distant 97. She played a total of nine singles matches spread over six tournaments and managed to win only three first-round matches. In fact, when Saina was still active, with Sindhu too making giant strides, the two augmented India's strength in women's singles in premier competitions. During those days, India lacked a third player of substance. At present, finding even a second player with some decent playing strength appears to be a luxury, so dismal is the scenario for women's singles in the country.

PRESENT QUALITY OF THE CREAMY LAYER OF INDIA IN SINGLES, WOMEN'S DOUBLES, AND MIXED DOUBLES IS A CONCERN

The young women's doubles combination of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopi Chand started 2023 at 16 and finished at 19. In contrast, the vastly experienced doubles specialist Ashwini Ponnappa and her young partner Tanisha Crasto came together in May and had a ranking of 112 in the doubles rankings. If they ended the year at an impressive 24th, it was mainly due to the way they finished the season. They reached the final of three successive events at home after winning the Abu Dhabi Masters. They lost in the finals of the Syed Modi India International and Odisha Masters, but in between, they won the Guwahati Masters. As a result, two women's pairs will be vying for a qualifying spot in the Olympics. In reality, barring the exploits of Chirag and Satwik and hopes of a strong comeback from Sindhu, not much is expected from the younger crop in 2024. Prannoy and Lakshya will again be the ones to watch out for in men's singles. But the present quality of the creamy layer of India in singles, women's doubles, and mixed doubles continues to be a source of worry. When it comes to champion-building, the year 2024 should serve as a great reality-check on where the sport is headed in the country.

APARNA POPAT

Two-time Olympian, winner of four medals at Commonwealth Games and nine-time Senior National Champion

LET'S BE BULLISH ABOUT OUR OLYMPIC MEDAL ASPIRATIONS!

Looking ahead to 2024, the goal of becoming a **formidable force** in badminton seems achievable.

The evolution of Indian badminton has been both noteworthy and newsworthy over the years. This is reflected in the country's No. 6 position in the latest World Team Rankings. While individual rankings may often take precedence, this comprehensive team ranking takes into account performance across all five events and the three World Team Championships (Sudirman, Thomas, and Uber Cup). Despite a relatively weak performance in the women's singles event in 2023 and mixed doubles still developing, India's overall ranking confirms its growing status as a badminton powerhouse.

Looking ahead to 2024, the goal of becoming a formidable force in badminton seems achievable.

The aim is to build on the success of securing a medal in each of the last three Olympic Games by adopting an aggressive approach to clinch multiple medals, including a coveted gold, at the Paris Olympic Games. Additionally, the target includes securing more than four medals at the Paralympics, successfully defending the Thomas Cup, and also winning individual titles at the biggest World Tour events.

The BWF's Race to Paris Ranking List for Olympic Qualification, based on performances from May 1, 2023, to April 28, 2024, provides insights into potential participation at the Paris Olympics.

Leading the charge for India will be the unstoppable men's doubles duo Satwik Sairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, the Asian Games gold medallists and current world no. 2. With their track record, Olympic qualification is assured. With enough time to prepare for the Olympics, which will be held in the last week of July, using their proven approach of logical incrementalism, fusing strategy and implementation, and carrying the confidence of having beaten every other potential pairing at least once, they stand a realistic chance of claiming the ultimate prize, the Olympic gold.

In men's singles, the seasoned H.S. Prannoy, ranked world no. 8, adds an air of anticipation for another Olympic medal, having found top form at 31 and securing a historic bronze medal at the recent Asian Games. The quest for a second entry in this category hinges on Lakshya Sen or Kidambi Srikanth breaking into the top 16 rankings. For the women's singles, superstar P.V. Sindhu is expected to come back from her injury break refreshed, recalibrated, and believing that she has it in her to chase down her third Olympic medal.

The race for qualification in women's doubles is tightly contested between pairs Ashwini Ponnappa/Tanisha Crasto and Treesa Jolly/Gayatri Gopi Chand. The outcome remains uncertain, pending the final stretch of the qualification period. The Indian men's team will have to defend their Thomas Cup title this year. They won the tournament for the first time in 2022, beating strong opponents like 14-time champions Indonesia in the final.

However, the proximity of the event to the Olympics will pose a training challenge for top players, who might find it hard to peak at both of these events.

Apart from this, in 2024, it would be good to see emerging Indian talents come to the forefront.

Having established role models with colossal achievements, understandably, the youngsters have big boots to fill. However, they also now have a proven blueprint and support systems to back their belief and hard work, preparing them to navigate both a steep learning curve and achieve consistency in performance.

In conclusion, one would have to admit that in an Olympic year, it is hard to prioritise any other event, so let's be bullish on our Olympic medal aspirations, seeking the brilliant shine of gold, and look to continue the momentum through young talents and a set Indian coaching system to propel Indian badminton to new heights.

TIME TO SING THE REDEMPTION SONG

The shorter Olympic cycle due to **COVID** may contribute to the lingering memory of the Tokyo debacle. However, Indian shooters have a chance at redemption in Paris.

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In about six months, the curtain rises for the ultimate spectacle in France. The final act of Indian shooting's redemption arc, where 340 of the world's best descend onto Chateauroux for the final boss battle.

The COVID-induced shorter Olympic cycle may be a reason why the memories of the Tokyo debacle seem fresh like it happened only yesterday. While the takeaways from most sports were largely positive, the shooters were left red-faced. They had come back empty-handed, even though India was able to send 15 shooters, its largest-ever Olympic contingent, to the Japanese capital.

The following years were bittersweet. Amid multiple rule changes and coaching setup overhauls, among other developments, a few names disappeared from scorecards for various reasons. Saurabh Chaudhary, Abhishek Verma, Apurvi Chandela, and Rahi Sarnobat are not household names anymore. The likes of Esha Singh, Rudrankksh Balasaheb Patil, Sift Kaur Samra, Sarabjot Singh, Tilottama Sen, and Ashi Chouksey took over.

Shooters like Manu Bhaker and Divyansh Singh Panwar went into recovery mode, with the media hullabaloo having exacted a heavy toll. But the duo seems to have returned to the scheme of things just in time.

The Hangzhou high

If the Asian Games numbers are anything to go by, the shooters are in a much better place. However, one has to keep in mind that 11 of Hangzhou's 22 medals came from same-gender team events, a privilege the shooters won't have at the Summer Games. So, there will not be any room for complacency.

There was that singular moment of genius, though. One that would rank very high even if achievements across all sports in 2023 are taken into account. It was the individual world record set in Hangzhou by Sift. In an exhilarating finish to the women's 50m rifle 3 positions final, the 22-year-old notched up 469.6 after taking 15 shots each in the kneeling, prone, and standing positions. Her mark was a considerable upgrade — 2.6 points — over the previous world record held by British star Seonaid McIntosh. China's Qiongyue Zhang, the eventual silver medallist, finished 7.3 points behind!

Memorable moments

There were other performances as well that would be remembered for a long time to come. India started 2023 on a high, topping the medal charts at the Cairo World Cup in February. The country won seven medals (four gold and three bronze), with second-placed Hungary only managing three (two gold and one silver). Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar and Rudrankksh brought out their A-game.

The stakes rose when archrival China entered the fray at the Bhopal World Cup. It was the first time the city was playing host to an ISSF championship, having built a new final hall at the Madhya Pradesh State Shooting Academy.

Sarabjot (10m air pistol) may have won India's only gold medal of the competition, but Bhaker stole the spotlight when she struck bronze, her first ISSF World Cup medal in

almost two years.

Only days ahead of the World Championship, the newly-elected ISSF board changed the format of the finals, but that didn't deter Mehuli Ghosh from scoring 634.5 in the qualification round of the 10m air rifle — unimaginable a few years ago — and eventually winning the bronze medal. A Paris quota was the icing on the cake. Shiva Narwal and Esha Singh won the 10m mixed team gold to become the only Indian world champions in an Olympic category in 2023.

The final countdown

This year would be all about reeling in the remaining Olympic quota places. The National Rifle Association of India already has 17 quotas as of writing, a new record, with Vijayveer Sidhu being the latest to pocket the second 25m rapid-fire pistol slot alongside Anish Bhanwala in the recently concluded Rifle and Pistol Asian Championship in Jakarta. In trap and skeet, India has so far managed to win only two of the maximum eight possible Olympic quota places.

Incredible feat: Sift Kaur Samra won India's first individual gold medal at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, topping the women's 50m rifle 3 positions final with a new world record score of 469.6. A. M. FARUQUI

The country could very well fill up the vacant slots from two more competitions: the Asian Shotgun Championship in Kuwait between January 12–22 and April's final Olympic Qualification Championship in Rio (Rifle and Pistol) and Doha (Shotgun). While on paper, India can grab all 24 quotas, it will be a tall task.

Before the Paris 2024 entry deadline on July 8, the International Olympic Committee will also have allocated the final spots based on Universality Places and Qualification Ranking for the Olympic Games (QROG).

New selection policies

While quotas never belonged to the athlete except for those awarded through QROG, it used to all but confirm an Olympic ticket the last

Highlights of 2023

The country lapped up 22 medals, while breaking 18 records at the Hangzhou Asiad. The previous best showing was 14 medals at Doha 2006

Women

Sift Kaur Samra surpassed the individual world record in women's 50m rifle 3 positions at the Asian Games

Mehuli Ghosh shot 634.5 in 10m air rifle qualification at the World Championships. Won a bronze and an Olympic quota in the final

Esha Singh won four medals at the Asian Games. Ashi Chouksey bagged three

Men

Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar won four medals at the Asian Games

Mixed

Esha Singh and **Shiva Narwal** became the only reigning World Champions in an Olympic category

In good touch: Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar bagged silver in the men's rifle 3-position event in the Asian shooting championship in Jakarta, Indonesia, recently. AP

QUOTA WINNERS THUS FAR -
10m Air Rifle Men – Arjun Babuta, Rudrankksh Balasaheb Patil
50m 3P Men – Swapnil Suresh Kusale, Akhil Sheoran
10m Air Rifle Women – Mehuli Ghosh, Tilottama Sen
50m 3P Women – Sift Kaur Samra, Shriyanka Sadangi
10m Air Pistol Men – Sarabjot Singh, Varun Tomar
25m Rapid Fire Pistol Men – Anish Bhanwala, Vijayveer Sidhu
10m Air Pistol Women – Esha Singh
25m Pistol Women – Manu Bhaker, Rhythm Sangwan
Trap Women – Rajeshwari Kumari
Trap Men – Bhowneesh Mendiratta

time around owing to additional 'merit points' that came along with it. This year, however, new selection policies have brought its value down. The quota holders will now fight for a seat on the Paris flight with the top three national shooters (who have participated in a minimum of two ISSF championships) and 'deemed quota holders' during a series of domestic qualifying competitions starting in May in New Delhi and Bhopal.

'Deemed quota holders' are those who missed out on a place because the designated two spots in the respective athlete's discipline had already been accounted for.

The best three scores of a total of four trials will be considered for calculating a Final Average Score (FAS). As per the amended criteria, those who have earned the quotas in firearm events (50m rifle and 25m pistol) will get two bonus points added to their FAS, while airgun events (10m air rifle and air pistol) will grant you only one point.

Booking the ticket: Esha Singh won India's 15th Paris Olympics quota with a gold medal in the women's 10m Air Pistol final in the Asian Olympic Qualifier in Jakarta recently. S. MAHINSHA

WHILE ON PAPER, INDIA CAN GRAB ALL 24 QUOTAS, IT WILL BE A TALL TASK

ANJALI BHAGWAT

Former Olympian shooter and multiple World Cup medal winner

WINNING MINDSET OF INDIAN SHOOTERS WILL BE KEY IN PARIS

Our shooters' exploits in 2023 make me **hopeful** for the upcoming Paris Olympics.

An unfortunate show in the Rio and Tokyo Olympics saw major upheavals in the Indian shooting set-up.

The ripple effects are still being felt, with shooters like Abhishek Verma and Saurabh Chaudhary struggling to find a place among the country's top 10. Even Manu Bhaker and Divyansh Panwar took time to regain form. Rahi Sarnobat, the country's best hope in 25m pistol in Tokyo, had to take an extended injury break.

There was light, however, at the end of the tunnel. Although a few waved the sport goodbye, many dedicated the COVID downtime to specialised training. After the Olympics, every competition threw up new winners. Shooters like Tilottama Sen, Hriday Hazarika, Rhythm Sangwan, and Esha Singh emerged on the stage. Once again, the domestic field gave us a reason to smile. There were performances of note, not only from the rifle and pistol shooters but by the shotgun wielders as well.

Our shooters' exploits in 2023 make me hopeful for the upcoming Paris Olympics. There are a reasonable number of quotas already in hand. There are quite a few medals and records that we have bagged in World Cups and World Championships.

The shooters must now prepare for the new-format domestic Olympic trials, where the quota holders have a negligible advantage.

In events like air rifle men and women, only decimals separate the shooters. Thereby, with every passing competition, the standings, which will eventually determine the participation of these athletes in these trials, are getting affected. Some shooters who missed out on a quota have a higher ranking than quota winners. There are a few shooters who have a good conversion rate in the final, while others have been consistently notching up good qualification scores.

The competition is arguably the tightest in men's 10m air rifle between Rudrankksh Balasaheb Patil, Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar, Arjun Babuta, and Divyansh Singh Panwar.

The hovering uncertainty is putting additional pressure on shooters. Indeed, it must be a stressful period for them, but we have always wanted a challenging but world-class standard when it comes to our bench strength. At the same time, the federation is trying its level best to support the shooters wholeheartedly.

Although everything seems to be going well, in a sport like shooting, it is hard to predict results. And the Olympics is a different ball game altogether; it has that special aura. I believe one's stars need to align to be on the podium. Everything must fall into place on that day. After the disappointment of the past two Olympics, I would prefer to wait and watch before making a prediction.

However, I am so proud and confident about our team, which has more than 70 per cent shooters in their youth, having the advantage of good fitness and quick reflexes. They are intelligent, smart, aggressive, and have a positive attitude. They know how to win, and this winning mindset can work miracles in the Olympics. Let's cross our fingers and give our champions positive vibes to excel at the topmost platform in the world.

SEEKING PEAK SUCCESS ON THE OLYMPIC ROLLER COASTER

It's time for India's men's and women's hockey teams to **put the blinkers** on as Paris 2024 approaches.

Uthra Ganesan
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If roller-coaster were an adjective, Indian hockey would be the perfect example. If it were a verb, Indian hockey embodied it in all its glory. And if it were an object, Indian hockey would be the ultimate definition of it. Men, women, seniors, juniors, players, administrators — there are no outliers to unpredictability in Indian hockey, and 2023 was simply more of the same.

A year that started with the men's team being touted as one of the favourites for the World Cup in January, only to fail to reach even the quarterfinals at home, at the fortress called Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar, ended with a lone, narrow win against France in a five-nation tournament in Spain. But interspersed between the two were massive victories at the Asian Champions Trophy (ACT) at home, the biggest prize of the year, the Asian Games gold, and a ticket to the 2024 Paris Olympics.

It is the kind of unpredictability that Indian hockey teams have come to symbolise, results that make even their fiercest supporters wary of any predictions while hoping for the best at all times. A team that easily overwhelms Germany and Australia in the FIH Pro League, less than two months after the World Cup disaster, at the same venue with almost the same players. A team where captain Harmanpreet Singh can struggle to put stick to the ball throughout the World Cup and still end up as the top scorer in the Pro League. It is a team that's poetry in motion, flourishing when everything falls into place but can as easily slip into a cacophony of discordant notes.

The World Cup loss resulted in more than just a longer wait for a shot at the big prize; it claimed coach Graham Reid and his support staff, brought in Craig Fulton, and an overhaul of the style and system of coaching. It also resulted in Paddy Upton joining the team as its first-ever full-time, travelling mind trainer. While the jury is still out on his impact, it was a long-pending demand that finally got fulfilled.

The ACT in August was the smaller of the two titles the men won in 2023 but was arguably the tougher one. For starters, the conditions were far from ideal — an unusually hot and humid Chennai with less than 48 hours to recover from cool European climes and jetlag for their first game and stronger opponents. In contrast, the Asian Games were more about the pressure of what was at stake in a foreign land where the Indian teams were not exactly favourites. The fact that the players managed to overcome both sets of challenges speaks well of not just their ability to adjust but also their faith in Fulton's process. For the women, it was a less-than-fruitful year, but one that saw them end at sixth in the world, their best-ever return since the rankings were introduced. To finish above teams like England and New Zealand takes some doing, and even though the Asian Games bronze was not what the team would have hoped for, winning the Asian Champions Trophy just a month later, including a win against Asian Games Champion China, was the kind of boost it needed ahead of the all-important Olympic Qualifiers in January.

In Hangzhou too, the Indian women lost just one game, but that semifinal loss ended Paris hopes and put them on the longer route to the Olympics. It might leave the team with less time to prepare for the

Games, but, on the flip side, it also adds to the already impressive amount of exposure the team desperately needs to do well on the world stage. Add the fact that it will be back in the Pro League in the upcoming season, and exposure is one area the women cannot complain about.

In fact, the number of international matches the Indian teams played throughout 2023 was one of the biggest positives. For a long time, the lack of exposure has been cited as a reason for India's failure to break through on the world stage. In 2023, India played the maximum number of matches among all the top nations, both men and women — 36 for the men and 24 for the women — with an identical 66.67 per cent win percentage (24 for men and 16 for women).

The other common factor between the men's and women's teams is their clear superiority in the continent and contrasting struggles against teams from outside. If the men have repeatedly proven they are now miles ahead of the other Asian sides, the women, too, are among the best on the continent. But it is in Europe that their biggest challenge lies. The Indian women played against Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Australia in preparation for the Asian Games. But while they may have learned their lessons, they were unable to get victories. The five-nation event in December saw them lose to Spain, Germany, and Belgium, with a lone win against Ireland. The men too, while not completely outplayed, have been less than impressive; in the same tournament, India lost 7-2 to Belgium.

A bigger concern will be the inability of the junior teams, both men and women, to throw up too many challengers to the established names on the national team. The juniors both won the Asia Cup, but while the men finished fourth at the Junior World Cup for the second consecutive time, the women

Mercurial challengers: Harmanpreet Singh's Team India is poetry in motion, flourishing when everything falls into place but can as easily slip into a cacophony of discordant notes. PTI

Highlights of 2023

Men

Won the Asian Champions Trophy and the Asian Games

Finished **3rd** in **2022-23** Pro League

Finished **3rd** in world rankings

Hardik Singh named FIH Player of the Year

Women

Won the Asian Champions Trophy

Bronze at the Asian Games

Achieved highest-ever rank of **6th** position

Savita named FIH Goalkeeper of the Year

Junior men

Won Junior Asia Cup

4th at Sultan of Johor Cup

4th at Junior World Cup

Junior women

Won Junior Asia Cup

Glass half full: For the women's hockey team, 2023 was a less-than-fruitful year, but one that saw it end at sixth in the world, its best-ever return since the rankings were introduced. PTI

THE NEXT SIX MONTHS WILL BE ALL ABOUT WORKING TOWARDS THE BIGGEST PRIZE IN THE SPORT – THE OLYMPICS

finished ninth, clearly indicating a need to re-look at the development process of a feeder line. The next six months will be all about working towards the biggest prize in the sport — the Olympics. While the men have their spot sealed as they dream of ending up on the podium yet again, hopefully with a change of medal colour, the women will have to get past the qualifying block first before firming up any plans for the coming months. How things pan out in Ranchi will not just decide the team's schedule for the next few months but also its very core — the future of coach Janneke Schopman and quite a few of the senior players will depend on India ensuring a Paris ticket. It won't be easy, though.

While on paper, India is the second-highest-ranked side — only former champion Germany is ranked higher at fifth — teams like New Zealand, the USA, and Italy will be no pushovers. Last time, India barely managed to edge past the USA (with Schopman on the other side) in the qualifiers. Playing at home will be a huge advantage, but India will still need to give its best with a young team and the absence of several experienced players.

None of the challenges on the field are insurmountable, though, provided things remain in order. The recent bribery allegations in Hockey India, questions and pressure on team management, and a general air of gradually slipping into the dangerous bygone days will be the biggest concern for a sport that has, in recent times, been applauded for the best administrative practices. Any deviation from that will be the biggest blow for Indian hockey. Then again, it will be on par with its roller-coaster image.

M. M. SOMAYA
Former India hockey captain and 1980 Moscow Olympics gold medal winner

JUDICIOUS EXPOSURE TO KEY PLAYERS CRITICAL IN PARIS BUILD-UP

A podium finish in 2024 Olympics would need a **virtuoso performance.**

A whirlwind start and the 'Ultimate Showdown' promise to make 2024 an exciting one for hockey buffs.

In January, a tour of South Africa for the Indian men offers coach Craig Fulton a last opportunity to experiment with players, combinations, and tactics. Also in February, the FIH Pro League (FPL) commences, stretching to June. And in the twinkling of an eye in July–August, the showpiece event, the Paris Olympics, would be upon us. World No. 3-ranked India will have to pace themselves intelligently through this packed schedule to retain the coveted spot among the elite. Judicious exposure to key players and saving the best for Paris are critical.

A quick reality check outside of Asia shows where this year's action will be. Germany and Holland groomed young teams at the last World Cup and yet finished on the podium in positions one and three. An ageing Belgium remain a potent force. Great Britain, Spain, and even France are playing at a higher level. Australia have declined a bit in the world rankings but can never be counted out. So, away from Asia, the competition looks ominous. A podium finish in Paris would need a virtuoso performance.

India have some world-class players to pull it off. Harmanpreet Singh, Hardik Singh, Manpreet Singh, and P.R. Sreejesh comprise the quartet that gives solidity to the side. On the big days, you can rely on them to step up and be counted. Flair and creativity on the frontline are manifest every time Abhishek is on the ball. Lalit Upadhyay has similar abilities and can sidestep opponents to create openings. Amit Rohidas, Nilakanta Sharma, Shamsher Singh, and Sukhjit Singh run the hard yards in midfield. Overall, it is a balanced line-up. A sure-shot striker would make it a complete team. Mandeep Singh, Akashdeep Singh, Karthi Selvam, and Dilpreet Singh have been around for a while now, and their marksmanship will have to be a notch higher and more consistent. Inculcating the knack of delivering a knockout punch upfront and establishing an impervious left side of defence could be occupying a lot of Fulton's thinking time.

In January again, our women's team will be looking to book a berth for Paris. A recent win at the Asian Champions Trophy in Ranchi has infused confidence. Familiarity with the conditions in Ranchi would hopefully hold them in good stead at the Olympic Qualifier. Seeing off strong teams like Germany, New Zealand, Japan, and Chile and securing one of the three berths to Paris will be a priority for India.

Keeper Savita Punia has been a strong performer and an inspirational leader. A host of players have impressed. Salima Tete is the pick of the bunch with her loping stride and sublime stick skills. Battle-hardened Vandana Katariya and deceptive Neha have been sprightly. Nikki Pradhan and Monika Malik have brought a semblance of stability in defence. However, the midfielder's role in stitching together the moves and inducing cohesiveness would have to be more pronounced. Coach Janneke Schopman would have this top of mind as the team braces for the Olympic Qualifier. Qualification would considerably uplift morale, and then participation in the FPL would assume a special significance. It would become a preparatory run-up to the Paris Games.

Peak physical condition has been the hallmark of successful Indian men's and women's teams in recent years. The present teams would have to battle injuries and the galloping age of key players to attain the same levels that they were able to attain in Tokyo 2020.

Nurturing a feeder line of players through the junior squad is imperative. A breath of fresh air is the commencement of sub-junior competition at the national level in 2023. Contemporary training and exposure to international competition for these youngsters should ensure consistent results at the international level.

Finally, finding an annual window to conduct the Hockey India League would give flight to new careers and sow seeds for long-term success.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024 FOOTBALL

YET ANOTHER YEAR OF 'WHAT-IF' FOR INDIA

India men's team head coach Igor Stimac has **warned** that it would take another four years for his team, ranked 18th in Asia, to breach the top 10.

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Every new year brings a fresh wave of optimism, regardless of the field of life. The world of football is no exception, and in 2024, we hope to see a rare, multi-club title race in the Premier League that could challenge Manchester City's dominance. In Germany, Bayer Leverkusen could pull off the impossible by ending Bayern Munich's stronghold over the Bundesliga title, which has lasted for the last 11 years. Similarly, in Spain, we could witness a fairytale run by Girona, which could culminate in it winning La Liga and upsetting the elite trio.

Meanwhile, Indian football fans may have to temper their expectations as the men's national team participates in the Asian Cup in Qatar in January. The team is likely to endure a group-stage exit, and coach Igor Stimac has already conceded that the tournament will be used to gauge India's performance for the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifiers this year. If India progresses to the third round, it will face Asia's top-ranked teams.

With Asia's quota doubled to 8.5 slots for the expanded World Cup, the qualifiers present India with an outside chance to make the showpiece event. Stimac, however, has warned that it would take another four years for India, ranked 18th in Asia, to breach the top 10.

In 2023, Stimac and his team showed a lot of promise, especially during their 2-2 draw against higher-ranked Iraq in the King's Cup. However, Stimac has been facing several challenges off the pitch while trying to steer the team. Although he received approval from the Sports Ministry to participate in the Asian Games despite not qualifying on merit, he struggled to find players to join the team until just three days before they were scheduled to leave for Hangzhou. During the tournament, the team barely made it through to the knockout stages and eventually got knocked out by an all U-24 Saudi Arabian team. Additionally, Stimac's request for a longer training window before the Asian Cup was denied by the Indian Super League clubs. His proposed solution of including Players of Indian Origin (PIO) did not gain any traction either.

The upcoming Asian Cup is the perfect opportunity to showcase his four-year efforts. Despite facing challenging teams in the group stage, a victory over Syria could increase India's chances of securing a spot in the knockout stage, at least as a third-place finisher.

In the realm of international football, 2024 promises significant events such as the African Cup of Nations, Copa America, and the European Championships. For Mohamed Salah, the AFCON stands as a chance to dispel the memories of the 2017 and 2021 editions and clinch his maiden international honour. France's incredible depth of talent, England's attacking riches, and Spain's technical brilliance make them favourites for the EURO title.

Until recently, Lionel Messi's crowning moment with Argentina appeared elusive, but now he starts the year as the reigning Copa America, World Cup, and Ballon d'Or winner. Messi's move to Major League Soccer gave a big fillip to American soccer, and now the States'

new superstar will look to defend the Copa America on US soil.

Messi rejected a lucrative offer from Saudi Arabia, which became the new home for Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar Jr., Karim Benzema, Jordan Henderson, Ruben Neves, and Firmino. The influx began with Ronaldo's move in January last year, when he switched allegiance to Al Nassr for a reported salary of $213 million per year. In the following summer transfer window, Saudi clubs, which are bankrolled by the Public Investment Fund, splashed over a staggering $1 billion in transfer fees alone. They also managed to turn the players' heads with vast amounts of salaries for a nation, where taxes are exempt for anyone who spends over two years.

But the Premier League remains the king. Halfway through the English top division, a potential multi-team title race emerges, reminiscent of 2008–09. At the time of going to press, the top five — Liverpool, Arsenal, Manchester City, Aston Villa, and Tottenham — are closely packed, just five points apart.

Little hope, lot of fight: Indian football fans may have to temper their expectations as the men's national team participates in the Asian Cup in Qatar in January. GETTY IMAGES

The Premier League is getting richer and bigger every year, which was further reaffirmed by another Petro-dollar-fueled Manchester City's clean sweep in trophies across 2023 as the gulf further widens between the league and the rest of Europe. Real Madrid, Barcelona, and Juventus enjoyed a boost heading into the new year when their brainchild, the European Super League, received a lifeline after an E.U. Court of Justice's ruling threw out UEFA and FIFA's plans to blow the proposed league out of the water. But it remains to be seen how the league takes off if the English clubs with their array of top talent at their disposal stay away.

The summer of football peaked in Australia with the women's World Cup, shattering attendance and TV

Highlights of 2023

Manchester City won five trophies in the year 2023 — Premier League, FA Cup, UEFA Champions League, UEFA Super Cup, FIFA Club World Cup

Cristiano Ronaldo finished as the highest scorer with 54 goals

Barcelona won the La Liga for the first time since 2019

ATK Mohun Bagan was renamed as **Mohun Bagan Super Giant** at the end of the 2022-23 season, when it won the ISL trophy

The Premier League spent a **record-breaking** £2.36 billion on transfers in the 2022-23 summer transfer window

In choppy waters: Indian men's team head coach Igor Stimac has been facing several challenges off the pitch while trying to steer his side. REUTERS

records. More importantly, new challengers emerged, with the dominant USA bowing out early before Spain emerged as the first-time champion. But its crowning moment was overshadowed by Luis Rubiales' unprompted kiss to Jemi Hermoso, which triggered an international outcry as the sport continued to battle with sexism. The following weeks saw Rubiales being dismissed as the Spanish FA president, leading to his ouster from

« THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP IN AUSTRALIA SHATTERED ATTENDANCE AND TV RECORDS »

the game for three years by FIFA. Hermoso admitted that the incident took a huge toll on her, and the forward entered the new year by giving evidence to a judge investigating the incident at Spain's highest criminal court.

The four-time world champion USWNT has already made steps towards getting back to the top by appointing Emma Hayes as its new head coach. Hayes is coming to the end of a decade-long trophy-laden stint with Chelsea, where she would want to add the missing Champions League title before crossing the Atlantic.

King of the world: Until recently, Lionel Messi's crowning moment with Argentina appeared elusive, but now he starts the year as the reigning Copa America, World Cup, and Ballon d'Or winner. GETTY IMAGES

BHAICHUNG BHUTIA
Former India football captain

PERFECT OPPORTUNITY FOR INDIA TO ENHANCE CONTINENTAL RANKING AND REACH THE TOP 10

The national team has been doing quite well over the last three years. It **now needs** to start winning matches at bigger stages.

This year is going to be a crucial one for Indian football. The AFC Asian Cup in Qatar marks the beginning of the action, followed by the FIFA World Cup qualifiers. If India can perform well in the Asian Cup and successfully progress through the stages of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, it will augur well for Indian football's future.

I believe that with the World Cup qualification offering more spots to Asian countries, now is the perfect opportunity for India to enhance its continental ranking and reach the top 10 (currently ranked 18th in the continent). Achieving this target would not be very difficult, given the talent we possess.

It is a realistic goal to aim for, as it would increase our chances of qualifying for the main stage of the World Cup.

It is high time we knock on the door of qualification, and I am optimistic that we can make it happen by improving our performances.

It is not possible to finish in the top four or get into the decisive stage of the Asian Cup. But your performance in the tournament reflects where you stand in the continental assessment. All the top footballers in Asia play it, as it is considered the biggest competition on the continent.

Who next: It's high time Indian football starts searching for suitable replacements for Sunil Chhetri, says Bhaichung Bhutia. BISWARANJAN ROUT

If you finish in the top eight, there is a high chance of qualifying for the World Cup.

Ever since we reached the final stage of the Asian Cup for the first time after a long break in 2011, we have been qualifying for the continental competition quite regularly. It is a positive sign for Indian football.

After having done it for almost 14 years, it is time to take it to the next level and qualify for the round of 16 or the quarterfinals. It is very important to reach the knock-out stages.

The national team has been doing quite well over the last three years. It now needs to start winning matches at bigger stages.

Regarding the position of striker, I believe it's high time we start looking for players who have the potential to score consistently and demonstrate their worth to replace Sunil Chhetri. Since this could be his final Asian Cup appearance, we find ourselves in a situation where we must search for a replacement for Sunil. Therefore, we need strikers with the skills to perform consistently at crucial moments.

GLUT OF OPTIONS A HAPPY HEADACHE

Neeraj Chopra, the reigning Olympic champion and 2023 World Championships gold medalist, will **likely remain the standard** bearer of Indian athletics in Paris.

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The year 2023 was a remarkable one for Indian athletics. The country achieved its best-ever medal tally at the Asian Games and won its first-ever World Championship gold medal. However, the true measure of sports development will be seen during the 2024 Olympic season.

Although nine Indians have already met the qualification standards for the Paris Games, there's still some way to go to match the record of 23 who competed in Tokyo three years ago. But it's not unlikely that India will have a similar number eventually earn the right to compete at the Olympics. While more athletes are expected to match the qualification standards, others are likely to qualify based on rankings by the June 30 cut-off date.

Neeraj Chopra will likely remain the standard bearer of Indian athletics in Paris. The reigning Olympic champion qualified for the quadrennial games after creating history by winning gold at the 2023 World Championships. He will be one of the favourites to medal. While Neeraj might be India's best bet in the men's javelin throw competition, he's not the only one. India is theoretically permitted a maximum of three participants in each event at the Olympics (assuming they meet the qualification criteria of an 85.5m throw inside the qualification period). Two Indians — Neeraj and Kishore Kumar Jena — have already met these standards. Currently, there are three others— Rohit Yadav, DP Manu, and Shivpal Yadav — who are either close to the qualification standard or (as in the case of Shivpal) exceeded it in the past.

It is possible that Indian athletics may face a scenario where an athlete meets the strict Olympic qualification standard but still fails to secure a place on the national team. Adille Sumariwalla, the president of the Athletics Federation of India, has stated that if more than three Indian javelin throwers meet the qualifying criteria, then a process must be devised to select the other two participants, excluding Neeraj. This implies that even an athlete like Jena, who qualified for the Olympics with an impressive throw of 87.54m at the Asian Games, may have to further improve his personal best to ensure his spot at the Olympics.

Should Jena make it to the Paris Games, it would be a tremendous milestone in the 28-year-old's career, which only really took off in 2023 when he made his international debut. While it remains to be seen how he holds his nerve should he compete at the Olympics, there are other Indians who would have the experience of competing at the biggest stage in track and field athletics.

Avinash Sable has been a standout performer in India's individual track events over the past Olympic cycle. During his debut Olympics in Tokyo back in 2021, the now-29-year-old broke his national record in the men's 3000m steeplechase in the heats and broke it three more times in 2022, when he also achieved a historic silver medal-winning performance to break the Kenyan hegemony at the Commonwealth Games. Although he won gold and a silver medal at the Asian Games, 2023 has been a less-than-stellar year for Sable by his lofty standards. The biggest disappointment would be his crashing out in the heats of the Budapest World Championships.

Sable, though, admitted he ran a tactically poor race in Hungary and has vowed not to make that same mistake in Paris. Expect fireworks if

Leading the pack: In 2023, Neeraj Chopra became the first Indian to win a gold at the Worlds. GETTY IMAGES

he runs to his potential and leaves nothing behind on the track at the Stade de France.

Another star looking to make up for past letdowns will be Murali Sreeshankar. The long jumper had a tough time building up to the Tokyo Olympics and had to prove his fitness before he could compete in the Japanese capital. Although Sreeshankar has shown significant improvement in the last couple of years, clearing eight metres on seven of the 12 times he competed last year, including winning silver at the Asian Championships (8.37m) and Asian Games (8.19m), he still has a blemish in his record. At the Budapest World Championships, which was one of the highest-profile competitions of the last season, Sreeshankar produced his worst performance (7.74m) since the Tokyo Olympics (7.69m). As they head towards Paris, both Sreeshankar and Sable will be looking to eliminate this blotch on their otherwise spotless list of achievements.

Meanwhile, another set of India's top contenders will have their sights trained on the 2024 World Athletics Relays Championships in the

Highlights of 2023

Men

Neeraj Chopra became the first Indian to win a gold medal at the World Championships, winning gold in the javelin throw at the **2023** World Championships in Budapest

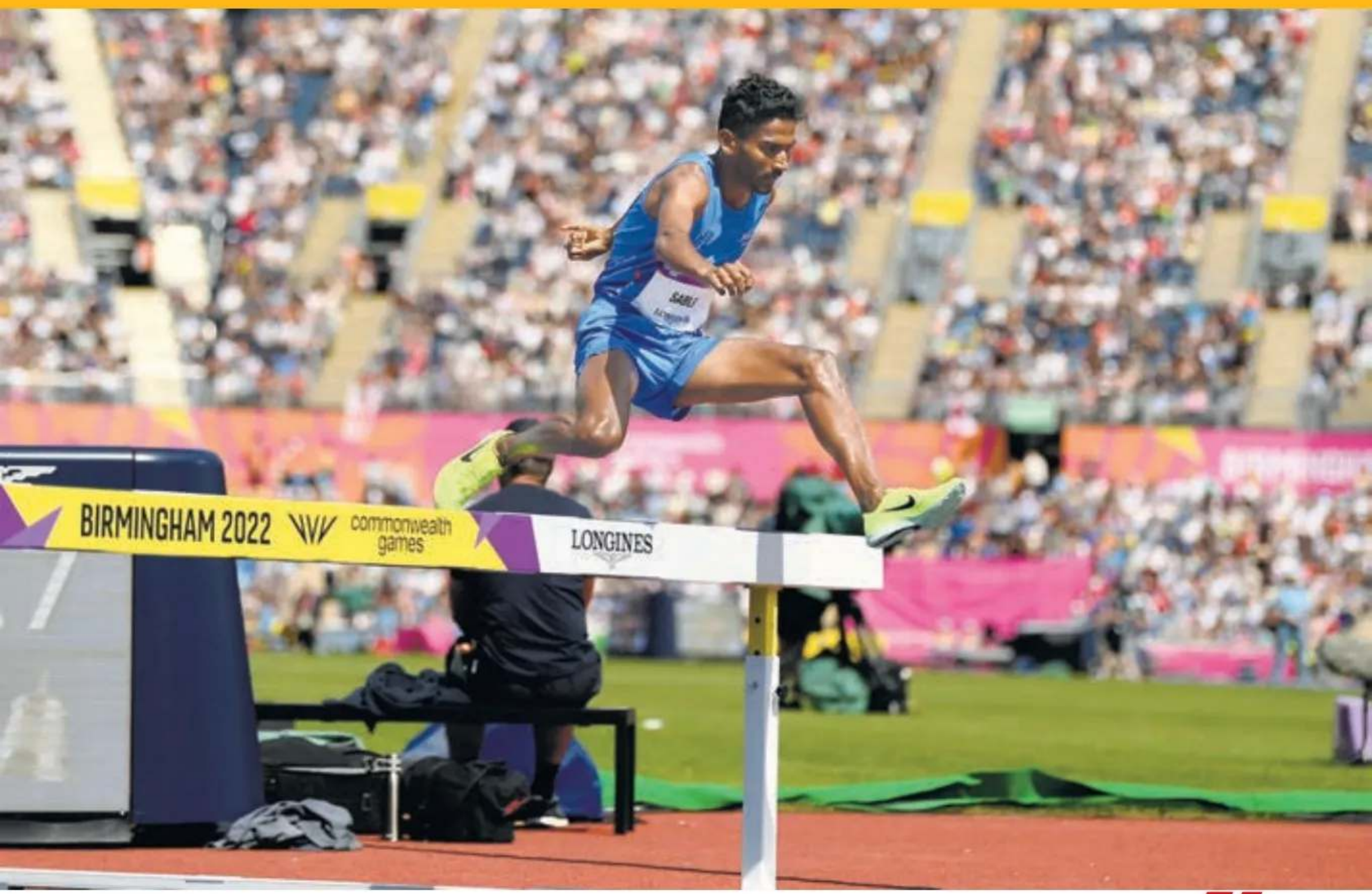
India qualified three athletes into the final of a World championships for the first time when Neeraj Chopra, Manu DP and Kishore Jena reached the finals of the men's javelin throw in Budapest

India achieved its best ever result on the track at the World Championships when the **4x400m** relay team finished fifth in the Budapest World Championships.

Neeraj Chopra and Kishore Jena completed a historic **1-2** finish in the men's javelin throw competition at the Asian games in Hangzhou

Women

Annu Rani became the first Indian to win gold in the women's javelin throw at the Asian Games beating among others China's Olympic champion Liu Shiying at Hangzhou



Standing out: Avinash Sable has been a standout performer in India's individual track events over the past Olympic cycle. GETTY IMAGES

INDIA'S TRACK AND FIELD SURGE MAKES THE MEN'S RELAY TEAM JUST ONE OF MANY CAPTIVATING EVENTS FOR FANS

Bahamas in May. India needs to finish in the top 14 teams at the World Relays to qualify directly for the Olympics. Although it could still qualify for Paris based on its rankings, it would probably want to book its tickets on the first attempt. The quartet of Muhammad Anas, Amoj Jacob, Muhammad Ajmal, and Rajesh Ramesh have broken the psychological barrier of three minutes (2:59.05) in the heats of the World Championships, where they almost managed to run down the mighty American team, and then once more in the final, where they finished a historic fifth. That result and a subsequent gold medal at the Asian Games would only have boosted their confidence to replicate their best run at Paris in half a year.

It's a testament to the meteoric progression of Indian track and field that even a team as accomplished as the men's relay team would only be one of the many events for sports fans to focus on.

The Olympics are likely to throw up even bigger stars. Although Jeswin Aldrin has yet to qualify for the Olympics, the Indian national record holder in the men's long jump will always be considered one of the dark horses of the event, capable of pulling off a massive leap at any point in time. Women's javelin thrower Annu Rani might have had a middling 2023 season but salvaged it with the third-ever best throw of her career (62.92m) to win gold at the Asian Games, beating, amongst others, the reigning Olympic champion. Annu hasn't yet qualified directly for the Olympics and might have to depend on her ranking to see her through.

She would back herself to recreate a moment of magic, as she did in Hangzhou last year, if she booked a place in her second Games at the age of 31.

ANJU BOBBY GEORGE

India's first World Championships medallist (long jump bronze, 2003 Paris Worlds), and Senior Vice-President of the Athletics Federation of India

ROAD TO PARIS LOOKS NICE AND BRIGHT

If both (the men's and women's) relay teams make the cut, then the number of athletes in Paris could be around 40.

After javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra's gold medal in the 2021 Tokyo Olympics and the 2023 World Championships in Budapest, expectations are high as India prepares for this year's Paris Olympics. And now, not just Neeraj but many others are doing well and have raised medal hopes. Our long jumpers are very close to a medal; they are doing well. If they continue doing that without fear, we can win a medal there. They have had enough experience in the last few years, and I think if they go all out, they are capable of medalling at the event.

And our three javelin throwers finished in the top six at the last Worlds, with Neeraj winning gold, so we are expecting something there. Winning two medals is possible in javelin; if one is on top, the other thrower will also get that fearless attitude. They will be supporting each other. Our 4x400m relay men also did exceptionally well at the World Championships, so if they go a little further, they can give a good fight there also.

It's not always a medal; if you are fighting for a medal and if you are in that range, that itself is a great thing for our country. Now, it's not like only one athlete is getting a medal. Every athlete is fighting for a medal, which is a positive sign.

Ranking route: the best road

The qualification standards in some events for Paris are very tough, so only the world-ranking route will help many of our athletes qualify. With this in mind, we have tried to ensure that the main events, the Federation Cup and Inter-State Nationals, do not clash with the Diamond League and other top-level competitions.

Making the cut: Parul Chaudhary breached the Paris Olympics qualifying standard in the women's 3000m steeplechase finals at the World Athletics Championships in 2023. AFP

If everything works out well, we may have the biggest number of athletes this time. If both (the men's and women's) relay teams make the cut, then the number of athletes in Paris could be around 40.

Doping concern

The road to Paris looks nice and bright, but doping continues to be a big worry.

Certainly, people are taking unwanted substances and performing well in domestic competitions but not doing well in international competitions. Athletes are missing dope tests because they are either not aware of them or are not too serious about the tests. If they need to change their training location or if they plan to be away for even a day, they must fill out a form. We must emphasise to them that this is a serious matter and that they need to be aware of the procedure. Missing tests is a big issue now.

It's everywhere, not just in athletics. But now that we are on the borderline, we cannot afford any more positive cases.

As told to Stan Rayan

BRIDGING THE GAP AND HOW!

The exceptional performances of **energetic and determined young chess players** have elevated India's reputation to unprecedented levels.

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In recent times, rarely has so much happened in one calendar year for India. With chess icon Viswanathan Anand passing the torch to the younger generation, 2023 brought an abundance of positive news. It stood out in how the global chess community perceives India. The exceptional performances of energetic and determined young players have elevated India's reputation to unprecedented levels.

Who could have imagined five Indians in the top-level Candidates tournaments, determining contenders for the next World title in both sections? It's noteworthy that this includes the first sister-brother duo participating in their respective Candidates events, held at the same venue.

Four Indians were in the quarterfinals — and no Russian — in the World Cup, and one of them challenged the eventual champion Magnus Carlsen in the final. Some truly sensational individual performances in what turned out to be the most followed chess event on Indian news channels. In short, the country woke up to chess. R. Praggnanandhaa became a household name — the first after Anand — and continues to be the new flag-bearer for the followers of the sport in India.

In terms of the rise on the world ranking list, another teenager, D. Gukesh, made the chess world sit up and take note. He briefly displaced Anand as the highest-rated Indian in any published world ranking list in 37 years after gate-crashing into the elite top 10.

Not just that. Gukesh went on to beat Anand twice in his debut on the Grand Chess Tour: in the SuperUnited Rapid and Blitz in Croatia. The year 2023 also saw Gukesh win the World Chess Armageddon Asia and Oceania title by beating former World Rapid Champion Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzbekistan) in the final.

The Grand Swiss event is considered the strongest Open event in the sport. To expect an Indian to win the Open section was not unreasonable. But the way Vidit Gujrathi and R. Vaishali made it an Indian sweep and booked their places for the Candidates was simply sensational.

By the time the year ended, Gukesh and K. Humpy had joined the trio by taking different routes. With the women's World No. 1 Hou Yifan not interested in playing the Candidates, Humpy made it based on being the next highest-rated non-qualifier on the world list. Gukesh, second to an already-qualified Fabiano Caruana on the FIDE Circuit points table, occupied the eighth and last spot.

As a result, when the Candidate tournaments are held in Toronto, Canada, in April, Praggnanandhaa, Vidit, and Gukesh will represent India in the Open section and Vaishali and Humpy in the women's section. This kind of presence in the Candidates has brought India more respect and recognition than what one witnessed after India claimed medals in both sections of the 2022 Chess Olympiad.

The presence of 11 Indians in the top 100 of the world ranking list was also unprecedented. Though by the end of 2023, Gukesh and Anand were elbowed out of the top-10 list, it was gratifying to see that every 11th player on the elite list was an Indian.

Anand (11), Praggnanandhaa (13), Vidit (14), Arjun Erigaisi (17), Gukesh (25), P. Harikrishna (33), S. L. Narayanan (42), Nihal Sarin (43), Aravindh Chithambaram (72), Raunak Sadhwani (83), and Abhimanyu Puranik (96) stood in this order.

Top of the world: R. Praggnanandhaa has become a household name and continues to be the new flag-bearer for followers of chess in India. R. RAVINDRAN

From this mix, Arjun and Narayanan came up with a series of impressive results without getting their due. Arjun was consistently upstaging higher-rated names from the world elite without winning the title. Narayanan grabbed the bronze in the super-strong Qatar Masters.

In fact, M. Karthikeyan stunned Carlsen in the Qatar Masters and became the only Indian after Anand to do so in a classical time format.

This made Hikaru Nakamura, Carlsen's long-time rival, tweet, "This is the future for him (Carlsen). The Indians are coming for him. It's going to be one Indian after another, after another, after another—all the disciples of Vishy."

In the blitz format, birthday boy Gukesh defeated Carlsen in Norway chess.

Among the women, Vaishali was the one that grabbed the most attention as the year drew to a close. After decades ruled by Humpy, followed by Harika, the rise of Vaishali to the elite top-15 gladdened the hearts of Indian chess followers. At present, Humpy (2nd), Harika (12th), and Vaishali (14th) stand in this order in the world ranking list.

Vaishali's status and stature were elevated after she won the Grand Swiss and qualified for Candidates. She went on to become only the third Indian woman to become a Grandmaster. After collecting her

Highlights of 2023

Praggnanandhaa finished runner-up to Magnus Carlsen in the World Cup; Four Indians reached the semifinals.

Five qualified for Candidates Tournaments.

Vidit Gujrati and R. Vaishali scripted an Indian sweep in Grand Swiss

Gukesh snapped Anand's 37-year old reign as the highest rated Indian in World list.

Emerging champion: R. Vaishali became India's 84th Grandmaster in 2023. She's only the third Indian woman to achieve the title. GETTY IMAGES

three mandatory GM norms from the 2019 Xtracon Open, the 2022 Fischer Memorial, and the 2023 Qatar Masters, she took her rating past the stipulated 2500 marks in the 2023 El Llobregat Open in December.

The last month of the year also saw Vaishali winning the prestigious Arjuna Award and her coach, noted trainer R. B. Ramesh, getting the Dronacharya Award. These awards were presented in January of 2024.

The year's last week brought India a silver medal in the World Rapid tournament, with former champion Humpy making a brilliant comeback and coming up with a strong finish.

With the addition of six more Grandmasters — M. Pranesh, N. R. Vignesh, Sayantan Das, V. Praneeth, Aditya Samant, and Vaishali — India's tally rose to 84.

Elsewhere, five-year-old Tejas Tiwari became the youngest-rated player in the world with a tally of 1149. This was just the kind of news that underlined India's claim to be the next superpower in the sport.

The cash-rich Global Chess League made its debut in Dubai, where some of the leading names, headed by Carlsen, showed up. Much like what the Indian Premier League (IPL) did for lesser-known Indian players, this league should bring a lot of confidence to those who get to be on the same team as some elite players.

Overall, there were plenty of gains right through the year that buried the disappointment of India returning with just two Asian Games silver medals from the team events. Looking forward, 2024 holds the promise of some memorable performances in the Candidates and beyond.

« DESPITE JUST TWO ASIAN GAMES SILVER MEDALS IN TEAM EVENTS, THERE WERE NUMEROUS GAINS THROUGHOUT 2023 »

Purple patch: Vidit Gujrathi had a dazzling run in 2023, during which he won the FIDE Grand Swiss tournament and also qualified for the 2024 Candidates event. FIDE

VISWANATHAN ANAND
Five-time World Chess Champion

EMERGENCE OF VAISHALI A KEY HIGHLIGHT OF 2023

Meanwhile, for the **first time since 1990,** India will have more than one player in the Candidates tournament.

India's male chess players made huge strides in 2023. First, let's compare the rating lists from January 2024 to January 2023. Almost every player under the age of 25 gained a lot of rating points in 2023. However, even more impressive were the records that were equalled or broken last year. For the first time since 1986, an Indian player was ranked higher than me on the rating list. In January 2024, four players are within 25 points of the Indian number one tag. For the first time since 1990, India has more than one player in the Candidates tournament. This record was equalled by three people: R. Praggnanandhaa, Vidit Gujrathi, and D. Gukesh. They will all attempt to win the Candidates in Toronto in April and play for the world title.

Praggnanandhaa started his winning streak in June by winning seven out of 10 games in the Tech Mahindra Global Chess League. He followed it up by winning the Budapest Hetenyi event. The highlight was his performance in the FIDE World Cup in Baku, where he eliminated World numbers 2 and 3, Hikaru Nakamura and Fabiano Caruana, and lost the final tiebreak to Magnus Carlsen. It earned him the right to play in the Candidates in 2024. He was also the best performer in the Düsseldorf World Rapid Team Championship in 2023. He ended the year with stable results in top tournaments and as India's number 2 with a rating of 2743. In his first attempt at the World Rapid and Blitz Championships held in Samarkand, he showed that he can compete in faster formats against the world's best chess players.

Vidit joined him by winning the FIDE Grand Swiss held in the Isle of Man in October. He had narrowly missed qualifying for the World Cup in Baku, had a career-high rating of 2742, and was India's number 3. He underlined his improvement in all aspects of the game by almost tying for first with Carlsen in the World Rapid Championship. One area of concern is clutch moments at the highest level, and he will have to improve in this area.

Gukesh became the first Indian to overtake me on the rating list since 1986 and had impressive performances in Duesseldorf, Norway, and the World Cup in Baku. The Candidates eluded him, and only a great effort in December at the Chennai Grand Masters 2023 got him the desired spot in the event through the FIDE Circuit, a spot given to the most consistent performer of the year. His persistence is notable when a person could have been forgiven for giving up.

Another milestone for Indian chess in 2023 was the emergence of R. Vaishali, Praggnanandhaa's sister, as the third Indian woman to achieve the open Grandmaster title, after Koneru Humpy and Dronavalli Harika. Vaishali, by winning the FIDE Grand Swiss in the Isle of Man, also qualified for the Women's Candidates Tournament. She will join seven other players, including Humpy, who will compete for a chance to face the defending women's world champion, Ju Wenjun of China, in April 2024.

Arjun Erigaisi and S. L. Narayanan both played at a high level and had chances to win the Qatar Masters. They will be motivated to continue to improve in 2024.

Among the women, Divya Deshmukh won the Rapid title and was joint third in the Blitz event in Tata Steel Chess in Kolkata. Velpula Sarayu emerged as one of the top female chess players in the country.

Finally, the Tech Mahindra Global Chess League marked the entry of India's innovative sporting leagues into chess. It was held in June in Dubai, with six franchises and most of the world's top players participating in the competition. The format, presentation, and venue were all adapted to broaden the visual appeal of chess for television. Chess fans are looking forward to the second edition this year.

Tries and white correction

By C.G.S.Narayanan

It is better to define try as a method of attack which draws the solver attention and obscures the real solution. In such a case the try must make an impression as good as the true solution. It is for this reason tries in white correction problems often arise by having the key piece somewhat obvious with deception centering around its disposition. The first problem below for study is an ideal white correction problem with logical tries.

Victor Melnichenko(Ukraine)
I prize,ICPS-India Cements 95-96

Mate in two moves

Ace British composer Barry.P.Barnes commented-"Four prominent set mates are changed by a fine key granting a flight a flight square f5.Logic drives WNe4 to f6 after the random move error of not providing for 1…exf5 which defeats the threatened 2.Qe4.The WN tries and key provide a fourth mate (one in the set play)after 1…exf5! with correction errors in part negation of set mates.This is class white (secondary) white correction problem which should be widely quoted.

Set:1….exf5/exd5/Bf4/Bc2 2.Bf6/Re6/Qf6/Qxh2 1.Nany?(2.Qe4) 1…exf5! 1.Nef6? exf5 2.Nf7 but 1..Bf4!(2.Qf6?) 1.Ng3? (2.Qe4) exf5 2.Rxf5 but 1…Bc2!(2.Qxh2?) **Key 1.Nhe6!** 1…exf5/exd5/Bf4/Bc2 2.Re6/Rxd5/Ng4/Md7.

In the second problem the key piece can be easily spotted as WNd3 and the logic behind the tries cannot be missed. The set mates after 1,,,fxe4 and Nxb5 are 2.Qxg5 and Bf4.Buit the pin of WQ by 1..f4 prevents the threat 2.Qd3.So WN starts avoiding this lethal pin.1.Nc5? fails to 1..fxe4 preventing 2.Qxg5.Try 1.Ne5? provides for 1..fxe4 with 2.Ng2 but fails to 1…Nxb5!(2.Bf4?) **Key 1.Nf4!** continues with errors of closing WB and WQ lines but provides new mates 2.Nfg2 and 2.Nd5.A highly original white correction try sequence.

V.Tinebra
Sakkelet 1996

Mate in two moves

Problem for solving below is white correction with reduced mates

C.G.S.Narayanan
The Hindu,Nov 1996

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'The queen correction':
1.N any? Nf6! 1.Nc3?Bxc4!(2.Re3?) 1.Nf4? gxf5!(2.Qe3?)**Key 1.Ne3!!**

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

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SPIRITED QUEST TO END MEDAL DROUGHT

Amidst the upswing in archery in the country, one wonders whether **Indian archers can finally achieve** the much-longed-for Olympic medal in Paris this year.

Y. B. Sarangi
sarangi.y@thehindu.co.in

Indian archery witnessed some historic moments in 2023, which may inspire the archers to push themselves in 2024 to achieve an elusive Olympic medal in Paris. The compound archers stamped their class at the elite level by securing three of the five gold medals at the World Championships in Berlin. It was a first for the country, which did not have a single world title in the sport. Seventeen-year-old Aditi Swami was the highlight, securing two world titles in women's archery: one in the team category alongside Jyothi Surekha Vennam and Parneet Kaur and another in the individual event.

Aditi's academy mate from Maharashtra, Ojas Deotale, secured the men's individual gold medal as India swept the individual compound titles in the World Championships.

Compound archers shone in the Hangzhou Asian Games by picking up seven medals, including five golds. Deotale, Abhishek Verma, and Prathamesh Jawkar had a fantastic year in which Deotale beat World No. 1 Mike Scholesser twice and claimed a World Cup stage gold, and the trio won the team gold medal.

World champion Deotale also clinched the individual gold, beating compatriot Verma, and the mixed team title with Jyothi. The women archers also gave dazzling performances, with the seasoned Jyothi bagging three gold medals, leading the world champion trio (including Aditi and Parneet) to the team title, besides claiming the individual crown and the mixed team gold. It was disheartening to see Jyothi being ignored for the Khel Ratna award despite her magnificent showing throughout the calendar.

India's superlative performance, which was much better than the two silver medals in Bangkok in 2018, trumped its previous best of four medals in 2014 and pushed the formidable South Korea — which won 11 medals, including four gold, this time and had been ruling the archery competitions since 1982 — to the second position in Hangzhou. Korea had a higher overall number of medals in the sport but had a lower gold medal count.

In the Asian Games, the recurve archers won medals in men's and women's team events after 13 years. It was a creditable effort because several top countries, including traditional powerhouse Korea, competed in the continental showpiece event.

The Indian archers' combined showing resulted in the best-ever return of nine medals.

After athletics and shooting, archery was the third-most medal-producing sport, and it helped India cross the milestone of 100 medals for the first time.

Italian coach Sergio Pagni's able guidance played a significant part in the Indian compound archers' superb showing, which included 12 medals in the World Cups. Meanwhile, the recurve archers also produced noticeable results, including five medals in World Cups. Even though the Indians could not qualify for the Olympics through the World Championships, they finished

within the top eight by making it to the quarterfinals in men's and women's team events. It may help them improve their world rankings and boost their chances of qualifying for Paris 2024.

Promising archer Dhiraj Bommadevara, who took an individual bronze and contributed to three team medals in the World Cups and the team silver in the Asian Games, fought back after his forgettable individual performance in Hangzhou to win India's first Olympic quota place in archery.

With the primary focus being Paris 2024, the Indian recurve archers will try their best to make the cut through the final qualifier in Antalya, Turkey, from June 14 to 17 this year.

Olympian Atanu Das has shown signs of returning to form (as he

On target: Ojas Deotale secured the men's individual gold medal as India swept the individual compound titles in the World Championships. PTI

was part of the men's team that got medals in the World Cups and a silver at the Asian Games with Dhiraj and Tushar Shelke), and with another Olympian Tarundeep Rai still shooting well, there is a healthy competition between the seasoned and up-and-coming archers. It augurs well for Indian archery.

Even though the Indian women, who shot a team bronze through Ankita Bhakat, Simranjeet Kaur, and Bhajan Kaur in Hangzhou after clinching a team bronze in the World Cup Stage-4 in Paris, have done decently, they need to be more consistent. The youngsters

Highlights of 2023

17-year-old compound archer Aditi Swami won two World titles, individual and women's team, and Ojas Deotale claimed the men's individual crown to make history at the World Championships.

Indian archers won 17 medals, including 12 by compound archers and five by recurve archers in the World Cups.

India had its best-ever showing in the Hangzhou Asian Games, winning nine medals, including five golds. Compound archers, led by V. Jyothi Surekha, contributed seven medals, while recurve archers landed two team medals.

B. Dhiraj earned an individual quota place for Paris 2024.

Leaving a mark: Seventeen-year-old Aditi Swami has been one of the breakout stars in Indian archery.
SANDEEP SAXENA

need to elevate their game and strengthen their team bonding. This is important as the experienced Deepika Kumari has not been part of the side of late, and there is no certainty of her comeback.

Ahead of the Olympics, the elite recurve athletes mean business. The archer couple of Atanu-Deepika and Dhiraj spent some time training separately in Korea in recent weeks to fine-tune their skills.

The archers have to go through the rigours of a series of complex selection trials spread over several months to prove themselves for the qualifiers and the Olympics.

Some archers getting nominated for World Archery (WA) awards is a proud moment for Indian archery and should inspire the recurve archers to perform even better in the Olympic year.

Sheetal Devi, who medalled in the World Para-Archery Championships and the Asian Games and was later nominated for the WA Awards, caught everyone's attention and brought more glory to the nation.

Sheetal was adjudged the Best Para Woman Athlete of the Year 2023. For their superb performances in 2023, Sheetal, Aditi, and Deotale were selected for the prestigious Arjuna Award.

The overall success of Indian archers is an outcome of a comprehensive approach, covering every aspect of the sport, adopted by the Archery Association of India (AAI).

THE OVERALL SUCCESS OF INDIAN ARCHERS IS THANKS TO THE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH OF ARCHERY ASSOCIATION OF INDIA (AAI)

Amidst the upswing in Indian archery in the year gone by, one wonders whether its archers can achieve the much-longed-for medal in Paris 2024 and bring an end to their also-ran tag in the Olympics for so many years. Winning an Olympic medal can also benefit the profile of archery in India. It can attract more corporate sponsorships and talented individuals to the sport, which has started flourishing by expanding infrastructure and competitions.

DOLA BANERJEE

Former Olympian archer and 2007 World Cup individual gold medal winner

CONSISTENCY KEY IN OLYMPIC YEAR

We must keep in mind that archers from other countries who have not yet qualified will be **highly motivated to win** quota places.

Our archers did well in 2023 and showed improvement. Even though our recurve archers could not qualify for the Olympics through the World Championships, our men's and women's teams had top-eight finishes. It would help our world rankings and might help in booking our tickets to Paris 2024. We also had a good outing in the Asian Games, with both men's and women's teams winning medals after so many years.

So far, we have only one quota place, with B. Dhiraj claiming an individual spot. In 2024, we will get a chance to qualify through the continental event. We will have our rigorous selection trials, starting in Kolkata in January, before moving on to Pune and Sonepat.

Overall, several youngsters have come up nicely. They have been scoring well and winning medals. The competitiveness has increased. Archers are coming from every state, and the government support has been good.

The number of competitions has increased manifold. But there needs to be a limit to it, as too many competitions are not ideal as well.

Our archers need to be consistent. Especially the women need to raise their performance by scoring better. We must keep in mind that archers from other countries who have not yet qualified will be highly motivated to win quota places. The women's team is a little short on experience as there is no senior archer to guide them in tough situations. You need to learn how to support each other.

Set the ball rolling: Dhiraj Bommadevara has opened India's Paris Olympic quota account in archery. GETTY IMAGES

Our compound archers have done exceptionally well. They have won gold medals in the World Championships and the Asian Games, which was unthinkable at one time. The Italian foreign coach, Sergio Pagni, has made a difference. We started compound archery very late in our country, but we have done well and are among the best in the world.

If we compare compound and recurve archery, the compound bow is much more mechanical, whereas the recurve bow is more manual. If one gets set with a compound bow, one can get good results in a short period. The recurve is much more technical, and the chances of mistakes creeping into one's game are very high.

The whole focus this year will be on qualifying for Paris 2024 and doing well in the Olympics. We have a Korean coach, Baek Woong Ki, and the recurve archers can tell how he is helping them build up for bigger challenges.

As told to Y.B. Sarangi.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024 **WRESTLING**

SOME SEE A BEACON OF HOPE, OTHERS A SMOKESCREEN

Unless the **issues with the WFI** are dealt with, any results at the Paris Olympics will only be papering over the underlying chaos.

Jonathan Selvaraj
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Indian wrestling had a disappointing season in 2023 and is looking to bounce back in the Olympic year. The sport had hoped to capitalise on the two medals won in Tokyo—a silver for Ravi Dahiya and a bronze for Bajrang Punia—but the preparations for the Paris Games have been far from ideal. Although there were some excellent performances on the mat last season, most of the news was unfortunately dominated by off-field controversies.

A significant undercurrent of athlete protests permeated the wrestling landscape throughout 2023. Esteemed wrestlers like four-time World medallist Bajrang, two-time World medallist Vinesh Phogat, and the sole Indian women's wrestling Olympic medallist Sakshi Malik took to the streets, levelling serious allegations of sexual misconduct against the then Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. The Ministry of Sports eventually suspended the federation, and despite a subsequent re-election in December, another ban followed shortly, leaving the sport in limbo.

The suspension of the federation has cast a shadow over Indian wrestling, halting national championships and disrupting the crucial talent pipeline. While athletes are still being sent for international competition, this is being done based on their performance in past years. The hope for the 2024 season hinges on the resumption of national sporting activities.

Despite the chaos in the Indian administration, Indian wrestlers have managed to achieve great results. Although there was no gold medal at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, unlike the 2018 edition in Indonesia, where Bajrang and Vinesh both finished on top of the podium, India had more success in the age group events compared to recent years. In August last year, India won four gold medals at the Junior World Championships. Antim Panghal, who became the first Indian woman to take gold at the Junior Worlds in the previous year, replicated her achievement in Amman, Jordan. At the U-23 World Championships that followed in October, Reetika Hooda became the first Indian woman to claim gold, winning the 76kg title.

Antim was not content with just performing well at the junior level. At the senior world championship held later that year, she won a bronze medal on her debut. At only 19, she became the youngest Indian woman and the second-youngest overall to win a medal at the World Championships. Antim could have potentially competed for the gold medal in Belgrade, as she was leading 4-3 before her opponent Vanesa Kaladzinskaya scored off an exposure with the final move of the match. Antim was devastated by the result, but the bronze medal not only secured an Olympic quota for India but also established her as one of the most promising young wrestlers in the country.

Antim's last-second turn of fortune could potentially cost her more than just a world medal of a brighter colour. While a world medallist in any other weight

Optimistic start: Aman Sehrawat became the first Indian wrestler to win a medal in 2024 as he bagged the top honour at the Zagreb Open. The Under-23 world champion beat China's Zou Wanhao for the title in the 57kg category. UNITED WORLD WRESTLING

category at a pre-Olympic World Championship might be considered the favourite to travel to the Games, Antim might not have as smooth a path to Paris.

According to the rules laid out by the (now suspended) WFI, only a gold or silver medallist at the World Championship can travel directly to the Olympic Games.

Antim now faces a selection trial to secure her spot, and with seasoned wrestler Vinesh also making a comeback after a year of absence due to knee surgery, the competition for an Olympic berth promises to be intense, adding a layer of complexity to India's wrestling preparations for Paris. Vinesh has returned to training. Although she is unlikely to be anywhere near her best, she has a wealth of experience and has beaten Antim on the two occasions they have wrestled previously. But Vinesh seems to have been bogged down by the demanding year-long protest. It's not just her; Sakshi, the 2016 Olympic hero, has already announced her retirement.

At the Asian Games, Bajrang lost in the semis and was beaten 10-0 in the bronze medal playoff. He appears to be a mere shadow of his former self, and there are doubts as to whether he will even make it past the selection trials for the Indians, let alone earn an Olympic quota in the two qualifying tournaments (the Asian Olympic qualification tournament in April and the World Qualification tournament in May).

It isn't just the protesting wrestlers who are struggling. Anshu Malik, who had a breakout season in 2021 when she qualified for the Olympics as a 19-year-old and then won silver in the women's 57kg category at the world championships, is going through a poor run of form. At the selection trials to pick the team for the 2023 World Championships, Anshu lost in the very first round.

Deepak Punia, who narrowly lost out in his bronze medal match in Tokyo, is also nowhere close to the form that saw him win gold at the junior worlds, followed by a silver at

Highlights of 2023

Men

Aman Sehrawat won gold in the men's **57kg** category at the **2023** Asian Championships

Women

Antim Panghal won bronze in the women's **53kg** category at the **2023** Wrestling World Championships in Belgrade

Juniors

Antim Panghal won gold in the women's **53kg** category at the **2023** Junior World championships in Amman, becoming the first Indian to win consecutive gold medals at the junior worlds

U-23

Reetika Hooda became the first Indian woman to win gold at the **U-23** World Championships when she finished top of the podium in the women's **76kg** category at the **U-23** Worlds in Tirana, Albania

Troubling times: In 2023, esteemed wrestlers like three-time World medallist Bajrang, two-time World medallist Vinesh Phogat, and the sole women's wrestling world champion Sakshi Malik took to the streets, levelling serious allegations of sexual misconduct against the then WFI president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh.
R. V. MOORTHY

WRESTLERS IN INDIA DEMANDED THE ARREST OF THE WFI CHIEF FOR ALLEGED SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF FEMALE WRESTLERS

the senior world championships in 2019. Ravi Dahiya, who won a silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics, is also uncertain for the Paris Games. Ravi was himself eliminated early in the selection trials for the World Championships and subsequently underwent knee surgery that kept him out of the Hangzhou Asian Games.

In Ravi's absence, the spot on the Indian roster in the 57kg category has been claimed by Aman Sehrawat, who trains alongside him at New Delhi's Chhatrasal stadium.

Aman won gold at last year's Asian Championships and only suffered a narrow loss in the semifinals of the Asian Games. Although Aman hasn't qualified for the Olympics after losing early at the World Championships in 2023, he will back himself to do so. This, of course, is premised on Aman beating Ravi at the selection trials that will be held early in 2024. In Aman's favour is the fact that he is in top form, winning the Zagreb ranking series, the first tournament in the international wrestling calendar for 2024. Ravi, though, has never lost to Aman and will believe he has it in him to add to his Olympic medal tally.

With a couple of world-class contenders still in the mix, Indian wrestling can return with a respectable performance in Paris. However, unless the issues with the federation are dealt with, any results will only be papering over the underlying chaos.

LALIT KUMAR
Dronacharya Award-winning wrestling coach

HOPING FOR AT LEAST TWO WRESTLING MEDALS FROM PARIS

The lack of national tournaments is **posing challenges** for junior wrestlers. The effective functioning of our federation is crucial this year.

As we go into an Olympic year, the focus for most people will indeed be the Paris Games. Although 2023 was a difficult year, I am confident that our players will not only qualify [for the Paris Games] but also do well. We can aim for two medals, and with a stroke of luck, even secure three.

The best chance for a medal will come from Antim Panghal in the women's 53kg category. It is a tough weight section, but Antim has always performed wherever she competed. She won a bronze in the Worlds in 2023. The World Championships before an Olympic year is always considered the toughest tournament, and Antim nearly made the finals. I was there in Belgrade, and I remember how upset she was after she lost the semifinals. I was telling her not to cry and that better things would come for her. I think this will be at the Olympics. The other weight I am confident about is the men's 57kg category. Right now, there are two wrestlers who both have a strong chance of going to the Olympics. Ravi (Dahiya) won the silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics and is now returning to the mat after a tough year. He underwent major knee surgery last year, which is a significant setback for any athlete. After taking some time to train in the USA, he is planning to participate in a local competition in the USA, followed by a small tournament in France. He has been out of competition for a while, so participating in more competitions will improve his performance. However, I believe his recovery is progressing well.

Breakout talent: India's Antim Panghal has taken the world of wrestling by storm in the last couple of years. VIJAY SONEJI

We also have another very strong wrestler in Aman Sehrawat. Aman was unlucky at the Asian Games last year. But he is in very good form. He needed to gain experience at the elite level, especially considering he's only 20 years old. Ravi and Aman are talented, and it's hard to say who will win when they compete with each other. It will be a tough match, for sure. It's one of those matches where the result depends on who has a better day. At the same time, I am a little less nervous than I would be because both are my students at Chhatrasal Stadium. I am happy because whoever goes to the Olympics will bring credit to the Academy.

We also shouldn't forget about Deepak Punia. He missed a bronze medal at the Tokyo Olympics by just a few seconds. It's something that has troubled him. I know how hard he is working. His weight is very tough at the world level, but I can see how motivated he is. I won't be surprised if he overcomes the mistake that hurt him so much in Tokyo.

While everyone is looking at the Olympics, I also hope something is done about conducting national tournaments. The junior players are suffering because they don't have anything to prepare for. I know the players will perform well at the Olympics, but I also hope that our federation can start functioning this year.

As told to Jonathan Selvaraj

INDIA'S FORTUNES TIED TO PARIS EXPLOITS

In a change of pace, the women have a **better chance** than their male counterparts in the Paris Olympic qualification.

Amol Karhadkar
amol.k@thehindu.co.in

September 30, 2023, marked a historic moment in the annals of Indian sports and world table tennis. It was the day two girls from interior West Bengal made history in table tennis, triumphing over the Chinese team on their turf during a major continental sports event.

Sutirtha Mukherjee and Ayhika Mukherjee stunned Chen Meng and Wang Yidi, the World No. 2 pair, in the women's doubles quarterfinal of the Hangzhou Asian Games. The win ensured a historic medal — the first all-women medal for Indian table tennis — at the Asian Games.

The victory instilled the belief that even the formidable Chinese team could be defeated on the grandest stage. For Indian table tennis, it reiterated that the two bronze medals in Jakarta in 2018, including the men's team and mixed doubles, were not isolated successes. It showed that Indian paddlers were ready to compete at a higher level, beyond Commonwealth achievements.

Although recent, this achievement, along with the unpredictable events of 2023, has become a part of history. The upcoming year remains a mystery, at least for now.

Despite securing podium finishes three times in the last two Asian Games, Indian table tennis still faces a challenge when it comes to the Olympics. Olympic qualification relies on making the most of the available spots.

In a change of pace, the women have a better chance than their male counterparts in Olympic qualification. Manika Batra, having taken over the baton from A. Sharath Kamal as India's torchbearer in global table tennis, is the sole confirmed Indian participant for the Paris Olympics.

Ranked 35 at the beginning of the year, Manika achieved the distinction of being the first Indian to win two matches at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. With a new personal coach in Aman Balgu, she aspires to reach at least the round of 16 in Paris. However, Manika acknowledges that the path ahead won't be without challenges.

Manika, who gave a tough fight to Wang Yidi before losing the singles quarterfinal 2-4 in Hangzhou, is aiming to break into the top-25 world rankings. She had achieved her career high of No. 31 in November 2023, but now needs to maintain consistency throughout the year to achieve her objective.

The Mukherjees, who had upstaged the World No. 1 Korean pair of Jeon Jihee and Shin Yubin to win a WTT Contender event in Tunis before the Asian Games miracle, will know that the road to Paris is the hardest, considering the doubles event will continue to have only 16 pairs. If they do not seal a place through the Olympic qualification event in March–April, the duo will have to rely on the World Rankings in early May to make the cut. If they make the cut, as they showed in Hangzhou and Tunis, they can definitely stun fancied opponents.

As for the men, the road to Paris will depend primarily on the World Championships in Busan in February.

Ranked No. 16 at the turn of the calendar, should they fail to make it to the round of 16, the men will have

to rely on the World Rankings in May to have an outside chance of qualification.

However, the team rankings are determined based on the individual player rankings. Harmeet Desai, ranked in the 60s, is India's highest-ranked paddler for now, having overtaken Sharath and G. Sathiyan. The Tamil Nadu duo slipped beyond the top 100 due to a prolonged break at the start of the year and a dip in form later on. They managed to climb back to the 90s but still need to improve their rankings to qualify for singles. Instead, if the team qualifies, it will result in three men's quotas, including two singles spots, being sealed. While the paddlers continue to hone their game, the onus will be on the Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI) to appoint full-time head coaches for both the men's and women's squads to provide the best possible support to the experienced players. Subhajit Saha, Sourav Chakravarty (men), and Mamata Prabhu (women) have done a commendable job whenever handed the responsibility to guide the teams in 2023. But with no proper contract and no control as a result, they had limitations when it came to working on a per-assignment basis.

The domestic circuit must also be streamlined further. After a tumultuous couple of years in the aftermath of the Tokyo debacle, dominated by a court-appointed Committee of Administrators, the

Mukherjee Mania: Ayhika Mukherjee and Sutirtha Mukherjee stunned China's world No 2 pair to win a historic women's doubles table tennis medal for India at the last Asian Games. PTI

Highlights of 2023

Women

Sutirtha Mukherjee & Ayhika Mukherjee win a historic women's doubles bronze in Asian Games.

Manika Batra reaches the singles quarterfinals of the Asian Games. No Indian player has reached this far.

Men

Harmeet Desai upsets World No. 12 Jang Woojin of Korea in WTT Lagos and then puts it across Korea's Lim Jongoon WTT Contender in Tunis.

Indian men's team won bronze in Asian men's championships in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

domestic age-group circuit — a bane for Indian sport — has to be handled more strictly to ensure those following the rules are not disheartened.

Despite the domestic issues, the success of Indian table tennis in 2024 will depend on the number of qualifiers for Paris. If any of them get even remotely close to being in medal contention, it will be nothing but icing on the cake!

TTFI NEEDS TO APPOINT FULL-TIME HEAD COACHES FOR MEN AND WOMEN TO PROVIDE THE BEST POSSIBLE SUPPORT

Making it count: Harmeet Desai, ranked in the 60s, is India's highest-ranked paddler for now, having overtaken Sharath Kamal and G. Sathiyan. A. M. FARUQUI

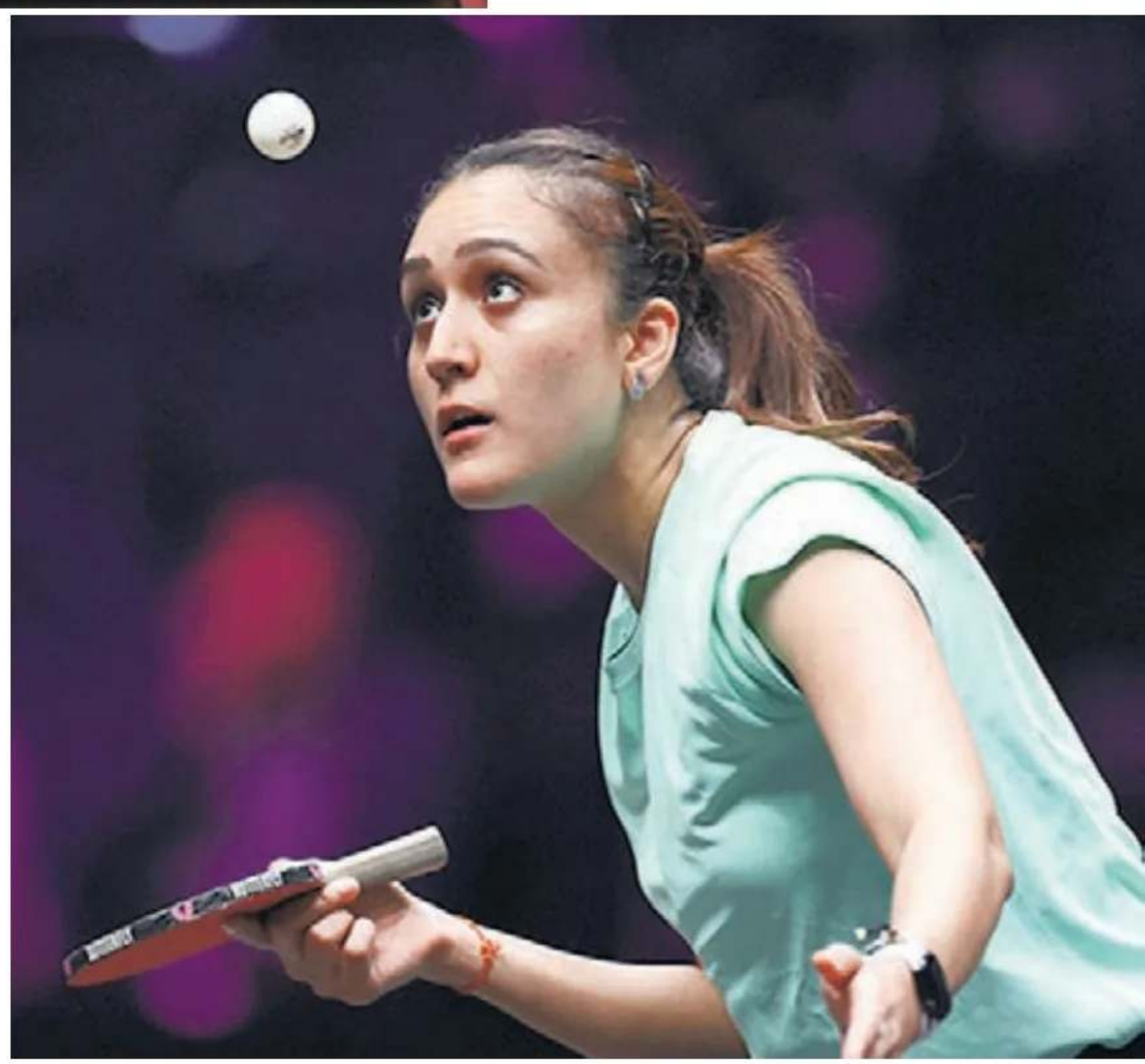
TTFI has successfully staged a full season of domestic tournaments.

But with the Annual General Meeting delayed, primarily due to the cold war between the warring factions and the international stars requesting the calendar be wound up before the New Year, the season ended up being hastily organised.

The TTFI should look at announcing the domestic events calendar well in advance this time, ensuring maximum participation of international stars in national ranking events.

It is also high time the TTFI expanded the domestic ranking system into a much more comprehensive one to motivate paddlers. For starters, a points system can be devised for every round — even qualifiers — at the national ranking tournaments so that every participant will find a mention in the national rankings list.

The age-fudging menace in the



Sustaining momentum: Manika Batra had achieved her career high ranking of No. 31 in November 2023, but now she needs to maintain consistency throughout 2024 if she wishes to break into the top 25. GETTY IMAGES

KAMLESH MEHTA
Eight-time National table tennis champion

HOPING FOR OPTIMAL PARTICIPATION AND IMPROVED RESULTS IN PARIS

From a fan perspective, the return of Ultimate Table Tennis, the franchise-based league, after the **pandemic-induced** hiatus was exciting.

It was a mixed bag, with more hits than misses in 2023. Since I am an eternal optimist, I would prefer to highlight the positives of Indian table tennis.

The toast of the year obviously goes to the Mukherjees — Sutirtha and Ayhika — for winning the bronze in women's doubles in Hangzhou. Ever since the duo started pairing regularly midway through the year, they have made the world sit up and take notice, and the Asian Games medal was a testimony to their ability.

Even in men's doubles, Manush Shah and Manav Thakkar narrowly missed out on a medal. And the same two pairs also made it to the quarterfinals of the Asian Championships, a first for India with two doubles pairs featuring in the top eight. I just hope that these youngsters continue to improve, and I won't be surprised if they continue to stun more fancied opponents in 2024.

Manika Batra continued to excel and even registered her career-high ranking in singles, but had an up-and-down year at times. She will have to do her best to rise higher in the rankings and keep the Indian flag flying high.

As for the men's section, it was heartening to see Harmeet Desai come out of the shadows of old warhorse A. Sharath Kamal and G. Sathiyan and emerge as India's highest-ranked paddler. That he regained the National Championship title after a long time must have come as a cherry on top!

Young turk: Yashaswini Ghorpade became the first junior to claim a singles title at a WTT Contender event.
K. MURALI KUMAR

From a fan perspective, the year also saw the return of Ultimate Table Tennis, the franchise-based league, after the pandemic-induced hiatus. More importantly, Goa hosting the first-ever WTT Star Contender event was perhaps the most significant milestone in Indian table tennis so far. It received a tremendous response from the fans across the globe, and the continual hosting of the event in the next few years will not only improve India's stature in world table tennis but also help in making the game even more popular with the masses. It was also gratifying to see para-athletes continuing to make merry on the big stage. Bhavina Patel again made the country proud, with Sandeep Dangi also winning a medal.

On the world youth circuit, multiple promising youngsters excelled at the international level, thus proving that the domestic structure is creating a platform for them to bring more laurels to the country. A special mention goes to Suhana Saini and Yashaswini Ghorpade, who topped the world youth ranking charts. Yashaswini also became the first junior to claim a singles title at a WTT Contender event.

I just hope that all these steps will result in India having optimum participation and improved results at Paris 2024.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024 **BOXING**

SEARCHING FOR THE PUNCHLINE IN PARIS

Indian boxers will get two chances, in World Qualification Tournaments 1 and 2, from February 29 to March 12 and May 23 to June 3, respectively, **to win quota places** for the Paris Olympics.

Y. B. Sarangi
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In a productive 2023 calendar, Indian women boxers, who secured four world titles, four Asian Games medals, and four Olympic quota places, fared better than their male counterparts and held promise in the Olympic year.

The women began in style, claiming four gold medals in the World Championships held in Delhi. Nikhat Zareen raised her profile by earning a second consecutive world crown, this time in the 50kg weight category, after her maiden title in 52kg in Istanbul in 2022. Tokyo Olympic bronze medallist Lovlina Borgohain reaffirmed her dominance in the heavier 75kg weight class by adding the World Championships gold to her Asian Championships crown.

Saweety Boora upgraded her silver medal from 2014 to complete a sensational performance from the host, while former world youth champion Nitu Ghangas pocketed her first World Championship gold medal in 48kg.

The Indian women showed their prowess once again, this time at the Asian Games, as they bagged a silver (Lovlina, 75 kg) and three bronze medals (Nikhat, 50 kg, Preeti Pawar, 54 kg, and Parveen Hooda, 57 kg). All four booked their tickets to the Paris Olympics as well.

Young Preeti impressed by registering some upset wins in the World Championships and followed it up with a medal in Hangzhou. Parveen, a 63kg bronze medallist in the 2022 World Championships, lost six kg to shine in a lighter weight.

Meanwhile, the Indian male boxers had a decent year. They won three bronze medals at the World Championships in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

The promising duo of Deepak Bhoria (51kg), who lived up to his reputation of being a giant killer, and the young Nishant Dev (71kg), who beat a Cuban boxer in a World Championship — a rare occurrence for an Indian boxer — produced some spectacular performances. The experienced and technically sound Mohammad Hussamuddin (57kg) finally made his presence felt at the highest level by climbing the podium.

But the Indian men's showing dipped in the Asian Games. Only Narender Berwal (+92kg) managed a bronze medal, while none could win an Olympic quota place.

Hussamuddin's left knee injury at the World Championships was a big setback. Indian boxing lovers would hope for his timely recovery from the surgery and his return to form ahead of the Olympics, as the seasoned boxer is capable of securing a ticket to Paris.

As the sole focus in 2024 will be on qualifying for the Olympics and doing well there, efforts will be made to earn two remaining quota places in the women's section and gather as many as possible in the men's section.

In the Tokyo Olympics, India sent nine entries, and the Boxing Federation of India (BFI) would like to see at least a matching number of entries this time and a better showing than just one bronze medal.

Meanwhile, the much-debated assessment system, introduced by high-performance director Bernard Dunne in place of the old selection trials to pick boxers for big events, was under the scanner, with several boxers moving court. It is another matter that they did not get any favourable verdicts.

The new system, under which the

boxers are assessed on several factors and put through an evaluation process over a few weeks, has given rise to a constant rivalry between some world-class boxers, including those who have switched to newer weights to stake their claim for the Olympics.

Amit Panghal, a former Worlds silver medallist, recently secured the gold medal at the National Championships, making a notable comeback. He aims to challenge Deepak in the 51kg category. In the 57kg category, Sachin Siwach poses a potential challenge for Hussamuddin, while the 71kg division may witness intriguing bouts between the talented national champion Akash Sangwan and Nishant. Established boxers like Shiva Thapa (63.5kg), a former Worlds medallist and two-time Olympian, and Sanjeet (92kg), a former Asian champion, also have the prospect of qualifying for the Paris Games.

The coaching staff is still sweating over the limited options in the 80kg weight class, which includes Olympian Ashish Kumar and national champion Lakshya Chahar. Chahar is currently nursing an injury.

It would be interesting to see if anyone can challenge Narender in +92kg, especially after Olympian Satish Kumar was beaten in the national championships in Shillong and Commonwealth Games silver medallist Sagar Ahlawat was knocked out (KO) in the final at the Meghalaya capital last month.

In the event of a KO or Referee Stops Contest (RSC), the ringside doctor is required to complete and sign a medical bout report. This report is then submitted to the Technical Delegate along with the

Racing against time: Mohammad Hussamuddin's (57kg) left knee injury at the World Championships was a big setback. Indian boxing lovers would hope for his timely recovery ahead of Paris 2024. IBA

Highlights of 2023

Indian women boxers had one of the finest performances in the World Championships, winning four gold medals. Nikhat Zareen **(50kg)** won a second successive gold, while Lovlina Borgohain **(75kg),** Saweety Boora **(81kg)** and Nitu Ghangas **(48kg)** claimed their maiden World titles

Indian women bagged four medals — Lovlina **(silver, 75kg),** Nikhat **(bronze, 50kg),** Preeti Pawar **(bronze, 54kg)** and Parveen Hooda **(bronze, 57kg)** — and secured as many Olympic quota places in the Hangzhou Asian Games

Indian men won three bronze medals in the World Championships. Deepak Bhoria **(51kg),** Mohammad Hussamuddin **(57kg)** and Nishant Dev **(71kg)** cornered glory

Narender Berwal (bronze, +92kg) was the lone Indian male to medal at the Asian Games

Setting the tone: Nikhat Zareen became the first Indian boxer to confirm a Paris 2024 Olympic quota by punching her way past Jordan's Hanan Nassar at the Hangzhou Asian Games last year. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

doctor's recommendations for the prescribed rest days and any necessary measures. Ahlawat has served his stipulated 30-day suspension and has returned to the camp.

In the women's section, the rivalry between Commonwealth Games bronze medallist Jaismine Lamboria and Olympian Simranjit Kaur (60 kg) has grown over the years. The contest between two former World youth champions — Arundhati Choudhary, who came down from 75kg, and Ankushita Boro — has become more intense in 66kg.

Indian boxers will get two chances, in World Qualification Tournaments 1 and 2, from February 29 to March 12 and May 23 to June 3, respectively, to win quota places for the Olympics.

The next six to eight months will see earnest preparations from the pugilists in search of rare Olympic glory.

As the qualification process is still ongoing, it's premature to predict the difficulty of Indian boxers securing a medal in the Paris Olympics.

The participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes in the remaining two qualifying events could impact the odds, especially in weight categories where they excelled in the last World Championships.

Despite limited competition and some rustiness, boxers from these nations achieved notable success in the men's and women's World championships, securing a total of six (Russia 6) and four (Russia 3, Belarus 1) medals, respectively.

While lesser-known Russians claimed bronze in lighter weights, Olympic silver medallist Muslim Gadzhimagomedov (who claimed his second World title in heavyweight) impressed in the heavier categories for men. In the women's event, Anastasiia Demurchian secured the light middleweight title, and Russians garnered more medals in heavier weights. If boxers from these two countries are allowed in the qualifiers, then it will be interesting to see how they fit into different Olympic weight classes and perform there.

IN TOKYO OLYMPICS, INDIA HAD NINE ENTRIES, AND BFI WOULD AIM FOR A SIMILAR NUMBER THIS TIME

In the backdrop of the turmoil in the International Boxing Association (IBA) due to its longstanding tussle with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) over various issues related to governance and eventual termination, the BFI, with the help of the Sports Authority of India (SAI), has continued its boxing activities unabated. Overall, Indian boxers are getting fine exposure, including multi-nation camps and customised training. They need to get rid of their shortcomings and lift their game to strike it rich in the qualifiers as well as at the Olympics. Three Olympic bronze medals — Vijender Singh and Mary Kom's historic podium finishes in 2008 and 2012, respectively, and Lovlina's medal in 2021 — should motivate the Indian boxers.

SARITA DEVI
Former boxing World Champion

BOXERS STIR PARIS HOPES WITH PROMISING SHOW

With the quality of women boxers we have, I am sure **we will do well** and can even win an Olympic gold.

The year 2023 was very good for the Indian boxers, especially the women. We have qualified in some weights and are yet to qualify in others. For those who have qualified, there must be some areas of improvement in the run-up to the Paris Olympics. Those who aspire to qualify must work harder with the primary focus of booking berths for Paris.

We began the year well by winning four world titles at home. Nikhat Zareen (50kg) has been in very good form, and Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) has also done well. Both have qualified for the Olympics, and the pressure of booking a quota place will not be there for them while preparing for Paris 2024. It is the same for Parveen Hooda (57kg) and Preeti Pawar (54kg).

Apart from rectifying their mistakes, qualified boxers must focus on their fitness, gaining strength, and hitting with more power. With the quality of women boxers we have, I am sure we will do well and can even win an Olympic gold.

The male boxers have performed reasonably well but haven't been as successful as the women. They need to put in more effort and strive to earn some quota places. They have won three bronze medals in the World Championships, indicating their potential to qualify for the Olympics. Mohammad Hussamuddin (57kg), with whom I have trained in the past, is a really good and experienced boxer, and if he can recover from his injury in time and get back to form, he is a bright prospect.

Clear path: Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) has performed admirably, securing an Olympic qualification and relieving the pressure of earning a quota place in the build-up to Paris 2024. R. V. MOORTHY

When you are injured, you need good support. I remember competing in the 2014 Commonwealth Games with a wrist injury. Thanks to a physio's assistance, I reached the 60kg final. Subsequently, with support from the Olympic Gold Quest, I returned to boxing after undergoing wrist surgery. So, Hussamuddin can also make a comeback. Other boxers, such as Deepak Bhoria (51kg) and Nishant Dev (71kg) can gain confidence from their Worlds medals while trying to qualify for Paris 2024. Other good boxers can do it too. Both boys and girls need extreme determination to achieve success. With government and corporate support, they should only focus on training and giving their best.

As told to Y.B. Sarangi

CHANGE OF GUARD ON THE CARDS

Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli may get their **final shot at World Cup glory** this June, with the T20 WC marking the start of a major transition in Indian cricket.

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Leave it to a senior statesman to remind us that Indian cricket can not only be a thing of beauty but also a thrill-a-minute heartbreak. Indian fans needed some relief from the team's oft-criticised inability to go harder and faster in the early exchanges during the PowerPlay, and that's exactly what captain Rohit Sharma offered as the curtains fell on 2023.

In October, at the ODI World Cup in India, there was the 36-year-old Rohit, bullying the opposition new-ball attacks with aggressive strokeplay and outsize swagger. Meanwhile, his teammate and bona fide great, Virat Kohli, hit a record 50th ODI century, surpassing his idol Sachin Tendulkar, who watched on in the crowd during India's World Cup semifinal win against New Zealand.

As the Men in Blue barged into the final, the fans wondered, with zealous optimism at times, if this was the year India ended the decade-long wait for an ICC trophy. In Rohit and Kohli, there were two men, aided by a skilled and buoyant XI, determined to bring to life that dream.

But we are limited creatures, despite our pretensions to the contrary. Even as an entire nation resisted the temptation to acknowledge the existence of a possibility that obediently contradicted their experiences of it, Pat Cummins and Australia gave a rude awakening, "silencing a big crowd," en route to a record sixth World Cup title by beating India in the final.

So, as the calendar flips to 2024, India's pursuit of elusive ICC silverware is back to square one. Rohit's men will have yet another crack in four months at the 2024 T20 World Cup, which will be jointly hosted by the USA and West Indies, with the final to be staged in Barbados on June 29.

The West Indies and USA earned automatic entry by being hosts, with the latter to play in the tournament for the first time. England, Pakistan, New Zealand, India, Australia, South Africa, the Netherlands, and Sri Lanka secured their places by finishing in the top eight of the T20 World Cup in 2022.

Afghanistan and Bangladesh, as the next best T20I teams in rankings, joined the roster, along with sides determined by regional qualifiers. Ireland and Scotland secured spots from the European section, while Papua New Guinea advanced from the East Asia-Pacific Qualifier. Canada, set for their tournament debut, earned a spot through the Americas Qualifier. Nepal and Oman emerged as Asian qualifiers, and Namibia and Uganda completed the lineup by succeeding in the African Qualifier.

It seems likely that both Rohit and Kohli will be part of the 2024 World Cup after the duo was named in the squad for the Afghanistan T20I series at home, ending their more than year-long absence from the shortest format.

This was also India's last T20I series before the T20 World Cup in June, and ergo, a final chance to let the likes of Rinku Singh and Tilak Varma make their cases. However, the inclusion of Rohit and Virat could likely result in there being no room for the aforementioned youngsters.

The fact that India has failed to discover any fortune in T20 World Cups could be blamed both on a lack of adaptability to a super-attacking

strategy in T20 cricket and an apparent obduracy of the think tank when it comes to certain selection calls, but the one-step-forward, two-steps-back dance in the shortest format has been a feature of Indian cricket for a while. That being said, Rohit and Kohli are perhaps batting as well as they have ever batted in ODI cricket, and hopefully, they will carry that form to the Caribbean islands should they make the cut eventually.

Meanwhile, India Women will also bid for their maiden T20 World Cup trophy when the 2024 edition takes place in Bangladesh in September and October. India has many new players and a new coach in Amol Muzumdar, and while the England and Australia series at home were ideal preparations, the results were anything but. India lost the T20 series to England 1-2 at home, its sixth successive series defeat against the Three Lions in the format.

A new hope: It seems likely that both Rohit and Kohli will be part of the 2024 World Cup after the duo was named in the squad for the Afghanistan T20I series at home, ending their more than year-long absence from the shortest format. K. R. DEEPAK

Harmanpreet's side was then humbled by Alyssa Healy's Australia by a similar margin in a three-match T20I series.

That said, the emergence of the Women's Premier League, the revival of the 'A' system, and a focus on the Under-19s have given the women's T20 game a much-needed fillip. The fact that uncapped Indians, Kashvee Gautam and Vrinda Dinesh, attracted bids of Rs 2 crore (Gujarat Giants) and Rs 1.3 crore (UP Warriorz), respectively, at the WPL auction in Mumbai is a testament to the burgeoning talent pool in Indian women's cricket and an evolving but

Highlights of 2023

Men

Reached the final of ODI World Cup, winning **10 matches** on the trot

Reached a second successive World Test Championship final

Won gold at Asian Games

Women

Made history with its first Test win over Australia

Won gold at Asian Games

Change is the name of the game: The emergence of the Women's Premier League, the revival of the 'A' system, and a focus on the Under-19s have given the women's T20 game a much-needed fillip. PTI

INDIA WOULD HOPE TO GO ALL THE WAY IN THE WORLD TEST CHAMPIONSHIP THIS TIME, HAVING LOST TWO BACK-TO-BACK FINALS

robust talent identification programme. All this augurs well for India in the T20 World Cup year, the last edition before cricket makes its Olympic debut at Los Angeles 2028.

Returning to the men's side, India would hope to go all the way in the World Test Championship this time, having lost two back-to-back finals. On both occasions, it was India's batting that succumbed to probing spells of fast bowling. The Test team is in flux, but a new selection panel gives Rohit a chance for a makeover. He needs a more assertive and proactive approach, both on and off the field. Rohit needs to make tough calls if need be.

A change of guard is imminent. Ajinkya Rahane, who was vice captain on the West Indies tour in 2023, was dropped for the South Africa and England (first two) Tests, while Cheteshwar Pujara, India's No. 3 for a long time, has not been picked in the squad since scoring only 14 and 27 in the World Test Championship final against Australia in June last year. If logic had the final say, India perhaps wouldn't turn back to the duo, signalling the end of an era in more ways than one.

But again, when has sport been completely rational? So, to say the fans have had a final glimpse of their batting heroes would still be premature. Theirs will be big shoes to fill, and it is not like the younger players have knocked the door down for batting numbers 3 and 5. But they do deserve a longer rope, keeping in mind the five Tests against England at home, followed by the five away Tests in Australia towards the end of 2024.

While captain Rohit and coach Rahul Dravid's tone pretty much conveys that the next few months may not be about set patterns but about trying out a few new players, it is becoming increasingly clear that 2024 will be the year a line is drawn in the sand. The time to put the wheels of change into motion is now.

HARBHAJAN SINGH
Former India off-spinner and twin World Cup winner

INDIA HAS THE TALENT TO PICK DIFFERENT TEAMS FOR ALL FORMATS

There is room for **seniors like Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma** in white-ball cricket. The transition should happen at some point, but I am not in a hurry to rush things.

Indian cricket has looked in very healthy shape for a long time. I know fans and critics point out that there is no ICC trophy to boast of, but India has been a strong team to give shivers to any opposition. The year 2023 was another step in that direction, and I do not doubt that 2024 will bring home the much-desired honour at the T20 World Cup in the West Indies and the USA.

India's campaign at the ICC ODI World Cup was sterling for me. How India dominated on the way to the final was heartwarming. It brought back memories of how the West Indies would crush their opponents in their prime. The sensational run by Rohit Sharma was in keeping with India's strength. A title win should have been a deserving end to the team's campaign.

I want this team to realise they have the talent to play differently. I want them to play fearless cricket consistently. They looked awesome in the league stages and changed their tactics when they faced a knockout situation.

The final of the 2023 ODI World Cup showed India's reluctance to take the bull by its horns. Once Rohit Sharma got out and Virat Kohli tried to steady the innings along with KL Rahul, there was a subdued response to the challenge. The intent was missing as boundaries dried up. That was not the best strategy against an opponent like Australia. The fear of losing had crept in early. It is not that you win every time you take the field, but you can't give up that early. Australia were in deep trouble early in their chase, but they hit back. And that is how champions respond. That is what I expect India to remember in all their campaigns this year and in the future. India must learn to take their chances and convert them into wins. They have to make things happen. The team has players to trust in tough situations. I want the players to feel secure. I want the team management to focus on the skill factor of the individuals and identify the players for the battles overseas.

I will pick Kohli, Rohit, and Cheteshwar Pujara for their outstanding records overseas. They are better overseas than at home. They were able to accomplish this due to their talent and support from the team management. I want the team to have a set of players who have the confidence of the coach and the captain. I don't think they have done justice to Ravindra Jadeja. He is a genuine all-rounder in every format and has to be treated differently. India has the talent to pick different teams for all formats. Some names can be common.

There is room for seniors like Kohli and Rohit in white-ball cricket. The transition should happen at some point, but I am not in a hurry to rush things. The 2024 T20 World Cup can be critical for these two stalwarts. I would also want a regular wicketkeeper and allow Rahul to concentrate on his batting. We have loads of talent in Shubman Gill and Rishabh Pant. I think Suryakumar Yadav is an amazingly innovative batsman. He has to be there to shape the winning campaigns. Indian cricket is in safe hands.

There has been talk of India being unable to counter the playing conditions in South Africa and England, but please see how the team has excelled in Australia. The pitches in South Africa were not ideal for Test cricket, and I will not judge the team because it failed to win the series. We should look to create challenging conditions at home to face opponents overseas, and the team should not just depend on the toss. It will help us win more matches overseas in the long term.

As told to Vijay Lokapally

FOR MORE IMAGES

1st

Relentless: Indian pacer Mohammed Siraj wreaked havoc with an incisive spell of new-ball bowling, ending with figures of 6/15 as South Africa crumbled to just 55 in the morning session of Day 1 at the Newlands. REUTERS

2nd

Stunning collapse: Just when India thought it was running away with the game, after getting to 153/4, the South African pacers struck back. The visiting side lost its last six wickets without adding a single run. AFP

3rd

A counter-attack for the ages: On a pitch where no other batter scored a fifty, South African opener Aiden Markram scored a splendid hundred in the second innings to offer his side a ray of hope. REUTERS

4th

Scything through South Africa: While Aiden Markram was on a scoring spree, India's pace spearhead, Jasprit Bumrah, chipped away from the opposite end. His 6/61 ultimately made the chase relatively comfortable for India. REUTERS

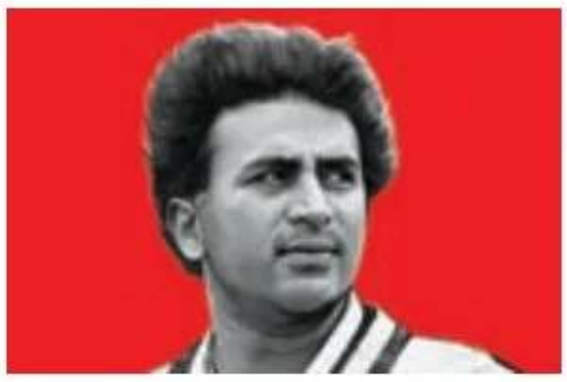
5th

Waltzing home: Choosing to blast their way on a challenging pitch, Indian batters reached the 79-run target in the 12th over. It was a disappointing end for South Africa captain Dean Elgar, for whom this was the 86th and final Test before retirement. PTI

6th

One of a kind: India's quickfire chase also ensured that the Test became the shortest completed one in cricket history, with the match lasting just 642 balls. The 1-1 series draw means India has still never won a Test series in South Africa.

REUTERS



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

RANJI TROPHY COULD'VE SERVED AS IDEAL PREP FOR SOME INDIAN BATTERS BEFORE ENGLAND TESTS

India's premier red-ball tournament gets diluted even further when not just the internationals but also the fringe players are involved in playing against a visiting A team.

The Indian team is playing three T20 Internationals against Afghanistan, and a week or so later, we will begin a five-match Test series against England. This sometimes makes one wonder how such schedules are drawn. Yes, there are commitments made about having tours between countries, and often, it means that there has to be a mix of the different formats of the game since so much of it is on a reciprocal basis. That's how there were three ODIs slotted into India's just-concluded tour of South Africa.

The ICC World Cup had concluded barely a fortnight earlier, so having a one-day series made little cricketing sense. That said, the ODIs get more people through the turnstiles than a Test match would, so instead of having a three-match Test series, we had a two-match Test series, which frustrated cricket lovers from both countries when the two-match series ended with both teams winning a Test each. Maybe even the broadcast rights holder wanted a limited-overs series, as those are easier to sell to advertisers than a Test match. Looking for a context for a particular format is clearly not a priority. The ultra-short format of the game doesn't really allow the batters to bat for long; it's not ideal preparation for a Test series. The bat speed for both formats is totally different, though, in the last couple of years, the English batters have been batting in Test matches as they do in a T20 game.

Would it have been better for some Indian batters to have played a couple of Ranji Trophy games to tune themselves for the Test series against England? Apart from KL Rahul, who scored one of the finest Test centuries seen in the first Test match in Centurion, and Virat Kohli, who batted well without quite getting to a century, the other Indian batters had a forgettable four innings in South Africa. We will, of course, see in the coming weeks whether they should have played the T20 internationals against Afghanistan or a Ranji Trophy game.

The Ranji Trophy gets diluted even further when not just the internationals but also the fringe players playing against a visiting A team. The Ranji performances are thus hardly an indication of its real quality since a lot of teams where the players are appearing for the internationals and the 'A' games have their 'B' teams. With some new entrants to the Ranji Trophy still finding their feet, the performances are quite lopsided and hardly an indication of how good the performers really are.

What the two T20Is have shown is that there are some talented youngsters just waiting for a chance. Bringing back Rohit Sharma and Kohli for the three-match series against Afghanistan made little sense, and the manner in which the skipper got out to the first ball he faced in the second game made one wonder if he is even interested in being out there. Having gotten run out for a duck in the first game, it was expected that Rohit would look to get some runs in the

'KL'assy knock: K. L. Rahul excelled with a remarkable century in the first Test in Centurion, while Virat Kohli showed good form. Other Indian batters struggled in South Africa. PTI

second. Instead, he played a forgettable shot to the first ball he faced and was back warming the cold bench in the changing room, watching two youngsters, Yashaswi Jaiswal and Shivam Dube, toy with the Afghanistan bowling attack. Dube's comeback to the T20 team tells you what giving confidence to a player can do. His hitting is something that Indian cricket lovers are aware of, but it was his bowling, where he was hitting the deck rather than floating the ball on a length, that was the eye-opener.

In his previous opportunities, he looked a bit lost, but this time around, he seems a lot more confident and is hitting the ball out of the ground regularly and easily. If he continues to perform well at the IPL, he gives himself a very good chance of being in the team for the T20 World Cup in June.

It's early days, of course, and one doesn't know when Ishan Kishan, who asked to be allowed to go home from South Africa, is going to make himself available again. Rahul Dravid, the coach of the team, has very clearly said that he has to play in the Ranji Trophy and show his form to be considered for selection. Dravid also very categorically and firmly debunked the rumours that Kishan was left out because of disciplinary reasons. Hopefully, that will set the matter to rest and not further sully a young man's name, which was done by some ill-founded speculation after his name was found missing in the Indian squad for the first two Test matches against England.

Players work very hard to play the game at whatever level, so it's incumbent on the media to get their facts right rather than speculate and spoil a young man's name. Kishan is a rare talent, and Indian cricket lovers should back him to come back to scoring and entertaining us sooner rather than later.

Bringing back Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli for the three-match T20I series against Afghanistan made little sense.

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Rahul joins elite list

4 The number of visiting wicket-keepers who registered three-figure scores in South Africa since the country's return to international cricket in 1992. K. L. Rahul has now become the latest entrant to join this elite group of wicket-keepers after his 101 in Centurion.

Three-figure scores by a visiting wicket-keeper in South Africa since 1992 (listed chronologically)

Runs	Keeper-Batter	For	Venue	Month, year	Result	Bat#	Match Inns
204*	A. Gilchrist	Aus	J'burg	Feb 2002	Won	7	1
138*	A. Gilchrist	Aus	Cape Town	Mar 2002	Won	7	2
150*	J. Bairstow	Eng	Cape Town	Jan 2016	Drawn	7	1
100*	R. Pant	Ind	Cape Town	Jan 2022	Lost	6	3
101	K. L. Rahul	Ind	Centurion	Dec 2023	Lost	6	1

5 The number of Test centuries K. L. Rahul has in SENA (South Africa, England, New Zealand, and Australia) countries since he debuted nine years ago on 26 Dec 2014 in the Boxing Day Melbourne Test match. He reached this tally during his fighting knock of 101 in Centurion. Only Virat Kohli has hit more (six) among Asian players in these countries. Meanwhile, K. L. Rahul has become the first visiting batter to register more than one Test century at the Centurion Park. The second table chronologically lists all his five Test centuries in SENA countries.

India's K. L. Rahul. AP

Most Test centuries for India in SENA countries since 26 December 2014

100s	Batter	Tests	Inns	Runs	Ave.	HS
6	Virat Kohli	28	54	2395	44.35	169
5	K. L. Rahul	21	40	1170	29.25	149
4	Cheteshwar Pujara	28	55	1810	34.15	193
4	Rishabh Pant	21	39	1426	39.61	159*
2	Ajinkya Rahane	27	52	1580	31.60	147
1	Ravindra Jadeja	14	23	665	33.25	104
1	Rohit Sharma	15	30	955	35.37	127

K. L. Rahul's five Test centuries in SENA countries (listed chronologically)

Runs	Against	Venue	Month, year	Result	Bat#
110	Australia	Sydney	Jan 2015	Drawn	2
149	England	The Oval	Sep 2018	Lost	1
129	England	Lord's	Aug 2021	Won	2
123	South Africa	Centurion	Dec 2021	Won	1
101	South Africa	Centurion	Dec 2023	Lost	6

Note: K. L. Rahul is yet to appear in any Tests in New Zealand

Note: Among other Asian players, Pakistan's Azhar Ali has three (in 41 innings), while Younis Khan (in 17 innings), Asad Shafiq (35), Sri Lankans Angelo Mathews (27) and Dimuth Karunaratne (40) have two centuries each in SENA countries.

55 The total by the South African batters after the Indian bowlers restricted them at Cape Town on the first day. This total is now the lowest by any opponent side against India. Also, by dismissing South Africa in just 23.2 overs, this is the fewest number of overs taken by Indian bowlers to dismiss any opponent. The two tables below have all the details.

Lowest totals by opponent teams against India in Tests

Total	Overs	Opponent	Venue	Month, year	Result for India
55/10	23.2	SA	Cape Town	Jan 2024	Won
62/10	28.1	NZ	Mumbai WS	Dec 2021	Won
79/10	33.1	SA	Nagpur	Nov 2015	Won
81/10	30.4	Eng	Ahmedabad	Feb 2021	Won
82/10	51.5	SL	Chandigarh	Nov 1990	Won

Fewest number of overs for Indians to dismiss an opponent in Tests

Overs	Opponent (Total)	Venue	Month, year	Result for India
23.2	SA (55/10)	Cape Town	Jan 2024	Won
25.1	SA (84/10)	Johannesburg	Dec 2006	Won
26.2	Eng (102/10)	Mumbai WS	Nov 1981	Won
26.4	Ban (124/10)	Chittagong	Dec 2004	Won
26.5	WI (100/10)	North Sound	Aug 2019	Won

6 The number of bowlers who claimed six or more wickets in the first session on the opening day of a Test match. India's Mohd Siraj (6/15) now has the second-best bowling figures in Test cricket history for a bowler in the first session on the opening day of a Test match. England's Stuart Broad (8/15) in the 2015 Ashes Test in Nottingham tops this select group. However, Siraj's figures are the best by any such bowler in an away Test match. Incidentally, left-arm spinner Maninder Singh is the only other Indian bowler to claim a five-wicket haul before lunch on the opening day, which he did against Pakistan in Bengaluru on 13 March 1987.

Bowlers with six or more wickets in the first session on the opening day of a Test match (listed chronologically)

Bowling	Bowler	For	Against (lunch score)	Venue	Achieved on	Result
11.3-3-39-6 +	**Tom Richardson**	Eng	Aus (53/10 in 22.3 overs)	Lord's	22 Jun 1896	Won
11-2-34-6 #	**Graham McKenzie**	Aus	Ind (59/6 in 21 overs)	Melbourne	30 Dec 1967	Won
9.3-5-15-8	**Stuart Broad**	Eng	Aus (60/10 in 18.3 overs)	Nottingham	6 Aug 2015	Won
10.4-3-32-6	**Trent Boult**	NZ	Eng (58/10 in 20.4 overs)	Auckland	$ 22 Mar 2018	Won
9-3-15-6	**Mohd Siraj**	Ind	SA (55/10 in 23.2 overs)	Cape Town	3 Jan 2024	Won

+ 5-ball overs # 8-ball overs; the rest 6-ball overs ; $The Auckland Test was a day-night match!

India's Mohammed Siraj . PTI

5 The number of Indian bowlers who have claimed a five-plus wicket haul while conceding less than 20 runs in Test cricket. The latest entrant is Mohd Siraj during his dream spell on the opening day of the Cape Town Test match. Among bowlers who have claimed six or more wickets, Siraj's figures are now the second-best and also the third-best by an Asian bowler. The second and third tables have the details.

Five-plus wicket hauls by Indian bowlers while conceding less than 20 runs in Test cricket

Wkts/Runs	Bowler	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
5/7	**Jasprit Bumrah**	West Indies	North Sound	Aug 2019	Won
6/12	**Venkatapathy Raju**	Sri Lanka	Chandigarh	Nov 1990	Won
5/13	**Harbhajan Singh**	West Indies	Kingston	July 2006	Won
6/15	**Mohd Siraj**	South Africa	Cape Town	Jan 2024	Won
5/18	**Subash Gupte**	Pakistan	Dacca	Jan 1955	Drawn

Six-plus wicket hauls by Indian bowlers while conceding fewest runs in Test cricket

Wkts/Runs	Bowler	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
6/12	**Venkatapathy Raju**	Sri Lanka	Chandigarh	Nov 1990	Won
6/15	**Mohd Siraj**	South Africa	Cape Town	Jan 2024	Won
6/21	**Javagal Srinath**	South Africa	Ahmedabad	Nov 1996	Won

Six-plus wicket hauls by Asian bowlers while conceding fewest runs in Test cricket

Wkts/Runs	Bowler	For	Opp	Venue	Month, Year	Result
6/11	**Shoaib Akhtar**	Pak	NZ	Lahore	May 2002	Won
6/12	**Venkatapathy Raju**	Ind	SL	Chandigarh	Nov 1990	Won
6/15	**Mohd Siraj**	Ind	SA	Cape Town	Jan 2024	Won
6/16	**Abdul Qadir**	Pak	WI	Faisalabad	Oct 1986	Won
6/18	**M. Muralitharan**	SL	Ban	Colombo RPS	Sep 2005	Won
6/21	**Khan Mohammad**	Pak	NZ	Dacca	Nov 1955	Drawn
6/21	**Javagal Srinath**	Ind	SA	Ahmedabad	Nov 1996	Won

642 The number of balls needed to achieve a result in the recent Cape Town Test match. This match is now the shortest-ever Test in history that produced a result.

Shortest Test match that had a result

Balls	Overs	Team1	Team2	Venue	Dates	Won by
642	107	**South Africa** (55 & 176)	**India** (153 & 80/3)	Cape Town	3-4 Jan 2024	Ind
656	109.2	**South Africa** (36 & 45)	**Australia** (153)	Melbourne	12-15 Feb 1932	Aus
672	112.0	**West Indies** (102 & 51/6d)	**England** (81/7d & 75/6)	Bridgetown	8-10 Jan 135	Eng
788	197+	**England** (172)	**Australia** (81 & 70)	Manchester	30-31 Aug 1888	Eng
792	198+	**Australia** (116 & 60)	**England** (53 & 62)	Lord's	16-17 Jul 1888	Aus

+ 4-ball overs

All records are correct and updated until 6 January 2024

AP

Hasaranga bamboozles Zimbabwe

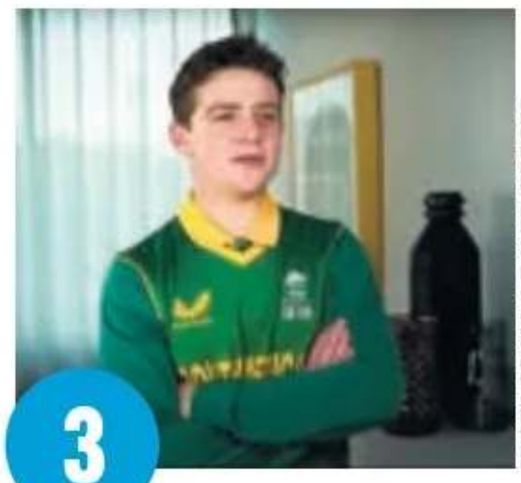
1 The spinner's **seven for 19** were the fifth-best bowling figures and second-best by a Sri Lankan, after Chaminda Vaas' eight for 19, in One-Day Internationals.

Wanindu Hasaranga spun a web around Zimbabwe with figures of seven for 19, registering the fifth-best bowling analysis, and second-best by a Sri Lankan, in One-Day Internationals. Zimbabwe folded for 96 before Sri Lankan skipper Kusal Mendis helped his team cruise to the target with eight wickets in hand and clinch the three-match series 2-0. Chaminda Vaas' eight for 19 against Zimbabwe in 2001 still stands the test of time for the best bowling figures in the format, followed by Shahid Afridi (7/12), Glenn McGrath (7/15), Rashid Khan (7/18), and now Hasaranga.

GETTY IMAGES

2

Australia batter Shaun Marsh announced his retirement from professional cricket at the age of 40 following a Big Bash League match between Melbourne Renegades and Sydney Thunder. The elegant left-hander ended his career with 2,265 runs in 38 Tests and 2,773 runs in 73 ODIs. He also turned out in 15 T20Is for Australia.



INSTAGRAM / DAVID TEEGER

3

Just a week before the ICC Under-19 World Cup got underway, Cricket South Africa removed David Teeger as captain of the national team amid concerns over his safety. CSA felt that Teeger, who had made comments in support of Israeli soldiers, could be the target of anti-war protestors during the tournament. Though Teeger will be a part of the squad, all-rounder Juan James has replaced him as skipper.

PTI

4

Karnataka batter Prakhar Chaturvedi etched his name in history by becoming the first player to score 400 in the final of the Cooch Behar Trophy (U-19), against Mumbai. Opening the innings for Karnataka in its chase of Mumbai's first innings score of 280, Chaturvedi remained unbeaten on 404 off 638 balls when the match was declared drawn, with Karnataka taking the first innings lead. Chaturvedi broke Yuvraj Singh's record of the highest score in a Cooch Behar Trophy final. Yuvraj scored 358 in the final against Bihar in 1999. Chaturvedi's 404 is the second-highest overall individual score in the Cooch Behar Trophy, behind Vijay Zol's unbeaten 451 for Maharashtra against Assam in 2011.

AFP

5

New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson suffered a third injury setback in less than a year when he was forced to retire hurt during the second T20I against Pakistan after feeling tightness in his right hamstring. Williamson, who has been ruled out of the rest of the series, was batting on 26 off 15 when he was forced to leave the field. New Zealand won the game by 21 runs. Williamson had scored 57 in the first T20I, which the Kiwis won by 46 runs. Williamson's saga of injuries began during the opening match of IPL 2023, when he suffered an ACL tear, and then missed four matches of the ODI World Cup after fracturing his thumb in the game against Bangladesh.

AFP

6

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has invited applications for a solitary position in the senior men's national selection committee. Though the notice put up on the board's website does not specify who it would replace from the current five-member committee, led by Ajit Agarkar, reports had earlier suggested that the axe could fall on Salil Ankola, since the BCCI does not want two selectors from the West Zone. Apart from Agarkar and Ankola, Subroto Banerjee, Shiv Sunder Das and S. Sharath are the other members of the panel, which surprisingly does not have a candidate from the North Zone.

1st

Devastating display: In her maiden senior match against Australia, Titas Sadhu delivered a stellar bowling performance during the first T20I. The 19-year-old pacer's career-best figures of 4/17 played a pivotal role in guiding India to a convincing nine-wicket victory. EMMANUAL YOGINI

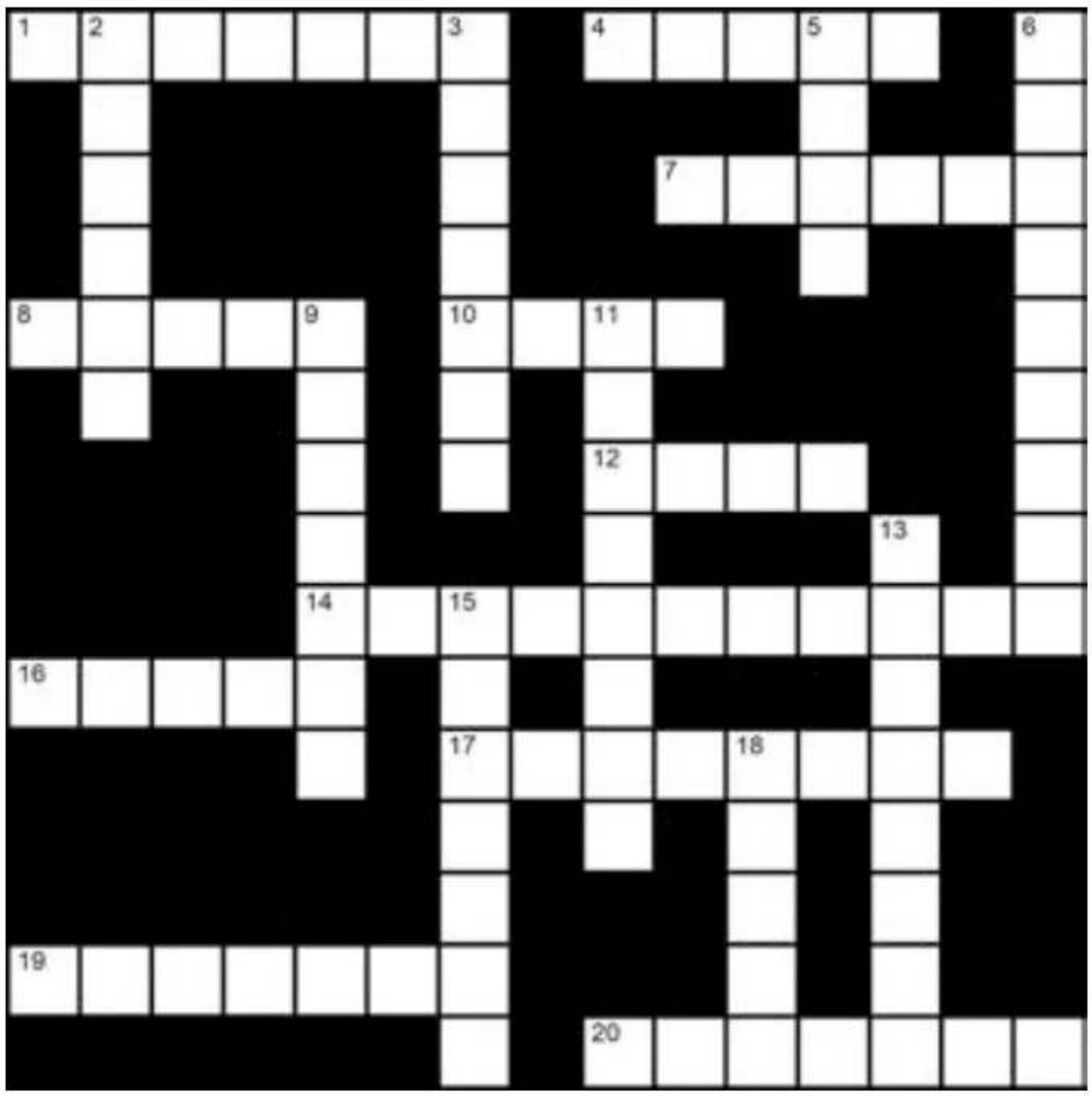
2nd

Landmark appearance: Ellyse Perry celebrated her 300th international appearance — first Australian woman to do so — by top-scoring for her side in a nervy chase as the Aussies levelled the series. PTI

3rd

Dominance continues: India's quest for a historic home series win in women's T20Is against Australia was dashed in the decider. The visiting side secured a seven-wicket victory with half-centuries from openers Alyssa Healy and Beth Mooney. PTI

CROSSWORD
SRIRAM SRINIVASAN



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 NBA team from Boston. (7)

4 Yash Dhull was sacked as captain of this Ranji team recently. (5)

7 Dorival Junior is its new head coach. (6)

8 ... Nelson, captain of the Indian women's hockey team that clinched the Gold at the 1982 Asian Games. (5)

10 Australian tennis player ... de Minaur. (4)

12 ... Sehrawat, the Indian wrestler who won gold at the Zagreb Open recently. (4)

14 He was nicknamed 'der Kaiser.' (11)

16 Sauber will race as the ... F1 team for the next two seasons. (5)

17 English defender from Tottenham going to Bayern Munich now. (4,4)

19 The PKL team Steelers are from here. (7)

20 Country that Erki Nool, winner of the decathlon gold at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, comes from. (7)

DOWN

2 The Italian football club whose home is the Carlo Castellani Stadium. (6)

3 Most decorated Chinese swimmer who won't be able to qualify for the Paris Olympics due to a doping ban. (3,4)

5 Guenther Steiner was recently dropped as the team principal of ... F1. (4)

6 ... Cricket Stadium, which will make its IPL debut this year as the Punjab Kings' home. (9)

9 Australian all-rounder ... Jane Sutherland. (7)

11 Indian shooter from TN, ... Valarivan. (8)

13 Current women's World Chess Champion. (2,6)

15 In Ultimate Kho Kho, the Quick Guns are from here. (7)

18 Diogo ..., Portuguese footballer who plays for Manchester United. (5)

» INDIAN FOOTBALL

AN UPHILL BATTLE

With a loss to Jamshedpur FC, Kerala Blasters' woes in the **Kalinga Super Cup** keep mounting.

Target in sight: Jamshedpur FC's Manzorro in action against Kerala Blasters FC in their Kalinga Super Cup clash. BISWARANJAN ROUT

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FOR MORE STORIES

With the cream of the Indian players away —13 players from both Mohun Bagan Super Giant and Mumbai City FC — in Doha for the Asian Cup, Kerala Blasters had a great opportunity to land its first-ever silverware.

But the ISL table-topper seems to have squandered it after a narrow loss to Jamshedpur FC in the Kalinga Super Cup.

With only the group topper group progressing to the semifinals, the Blasters, who are missing two players themselves, will need a miracle to leapfrog Jamshedpur, to make the last four. The competition winner will also be awarded a play-off spot in the 2024-25 AFC Champions League 2 — the second-tier AFC club competition.

The remaining groups promise an exciting finish as the leading ISL teams compete for a place in the final four. Group A features the Kolkata Derby between East Bengal and Mohun Bagan. However, the four I-League entrants — Gokulam Kerala, Sreenidi Deccan, Shillong Lajong, and Inter Kashi — have not performed well in the tournament so far.

Indian Women's League

The IWL received a huge boost with star Bangladesh striker and captain Sabina Khatun signing up for Kickstart FC this month. This marks Sabina's second stint in the IWL after the title-winning campaign with Sethu FC in 2018-19.

Kickstart will be hoping that the 30-year-old can have a similar impact with the club trailing behind league-topper Odisha FC by two points after four matches. The January 24 face-off between the two teams will now be an anticipated clash between these two teams.

East Bengal has also strengthened its squad in the winter transfer window with the addition of Bangladesh forward Sanjida Akhter.

Goals galore: Toni Kroos and Antoine Griezmann battle it out in the semifinal, arguably Real Madrid's best game of the tournament. GETTY IMAGES

Madrid mayhem

Real Madrid beats rival Atletico Madrid in an eight-goal thriller to reach the Spanish Super Cup final.

REAL MADRID

5

Antonio Rüdiger 20′
Ferland Mendy 29′
Dani Carvajal 85′
Joselu 116′
Brahim Díaz 120+2′

ATLETICO MADRID

3

Mario Hermoso 6′
Antoine Griezmann 37′
Antonio Rudiger 78′ (OG)

Real Madrid might have beaten arch-rival Barcelona to lift the Spanish Super Cup for the 13th time, but it arguably played its best match of the tournament against city rival Atletico Madrid in the semifinal.

Atletico struck first blood in the sixth minute from a corner. Antoine Griezmann's inch-perfect delivery found an unmarked Mario Hermoso, who headed the ball inside the net.

But the lead did not last long as Real equalised in the 20th minute. Luka Modric whipped in a curling delivery inside the Atletico box from a corner, as Antonio Rudiger towered above everyone to rattle the net.

Alvaro Morata and Rodrygo had chances to give a lead to their respective teams but failed and lacked the necessary composure to find the net.

The breakthrough came again in the 29th minute — this time from an unlikely source in Ferland Mendy, who found the net after over two years. With a flowing team move, Ancelotti's men flocked to Atletico's final third to put pressure on them. Jude Bellingham spread the ball to Dani Carvajal on the right, whose cross into the box was poked into the net by Mendy with a deft touch.

The game turned out to be a delight for neutrals as Atletico found the equaliser this time through Antoine Griezmann, who received Rodrigo De Paul's pass near the box. Chopping back inside, he drilled a right-footed shot in the bottom-left corner, past a diving Kepa Arrizabalaga.

With the scoreline at 2-2, the second-half was poised for drama, and the match did not disappoint as Rudiger scored an own goal in the 78th time to the delight of Atletico, which thought it had one hand on the trophy.

However, Real Madrid continued its tradition of scoring late equalisers against its city rivals as Carvajal scored in the 85th minute to equalise. While Bellingham's initial shot was cleared off the line, the Atletico backline wasn't proactive in clearing the danger, which allowed Carvajal to rifle the loose ball into the top corner.

With the match entering extra-time, it seemed like the semifinal would be decided on penalties, but substitute Joselu had other ideas as he found the net in the 116th minute for a Los Blancos lead.

Brahim Diaz then wasted no time in adding another. With Atletico desperate to score the equaliser, Jan Oblak was asked to move up and join the attack — a decision, which backfired as Diego Simeone's men were caught out in possession, allowing Diaz to make it 5-3.

1

AP

De Bruyne show helps City beat Newcastle

Kevin De Bruyne helped Manchester City earn a come-from-behind win over Newcastle United, in his first Premier League appearance since opening day.

City was pegged back by two quick goals from Alexander Isak and Anthony Gordon following Bernardo Silva's opener. De Bruyne scored the equaliser, coming on as a second-half substitute before setting up Oscar Bobb for a stoppage-time winner.

2

AFP

Giroud special helps Milan ease past Roma

Olivier Giroud contributed with a headed goal and a back-heel assist as AC Milan beat rivals AS Roma 3-1 at the San Siro to keep in touch with the Serie A leaders.

Yacine Adli opened the scoring for Milan before Giroud doubled the lead. Leandro Paredes converted a penalty for Roma in the second half but a Theo Hernandez strike ensured the win.

3

AP

Mbappe shines as PSG goes clear at top

A goal and assist from Kylian Mbappe helped Paris Saint-Germain beat 10-man Lens 2-0 to open up an eight-point gap at the top of the Ligue 1 standings. Bradley Barcola opened the scoring for PSG following a Lens penalty miss. Jonathan Gradit was sent off at the stroke of half-time before Mbappe sealed the points with an 89th-minute goal.

4

REUTERS

Middlesbrough shocks Chelsea

Hayden Hackney's first-half goal proved the difference as Championship side Middlesbrough beat Chelsea at home in the first leg of the Carabao Cup semifinals. Michael Carrick's side will need a draw at Stamford Bridge later in the month to secure a final berth. Liverpool beat Fulham at home in the first leg of the other semifinal.

5

AP

Real Madrid gets its revenge

Real Madrid avenged its defeat in the Spanish Super Cup final against Barcelona a year ago, winning the bragging rights against its El Clasico rivals in Riyadh.

A first-half hat-trick by Vinicius Jr and a second-half strike by Rodrygo sealed a 4-1 win for the Los Blancos with Robert Lewandowski getting a goal back for the Blaugrana.

6

GETTY IMAGES

Jadon Sancho returns to Dortmund

Manchester United winger Jadon Sancho joined Borussia Dortmund on loan for the rest of the season after being frozen out at the club following his spat with manager Erik Ten Hag.

Sancho previously had four years at Dortmund, scoring 50 goals in 137 competitive games. The 23-year-old marked his return with an assist for Marco Reus against Darmstadt in the Bundesliga.

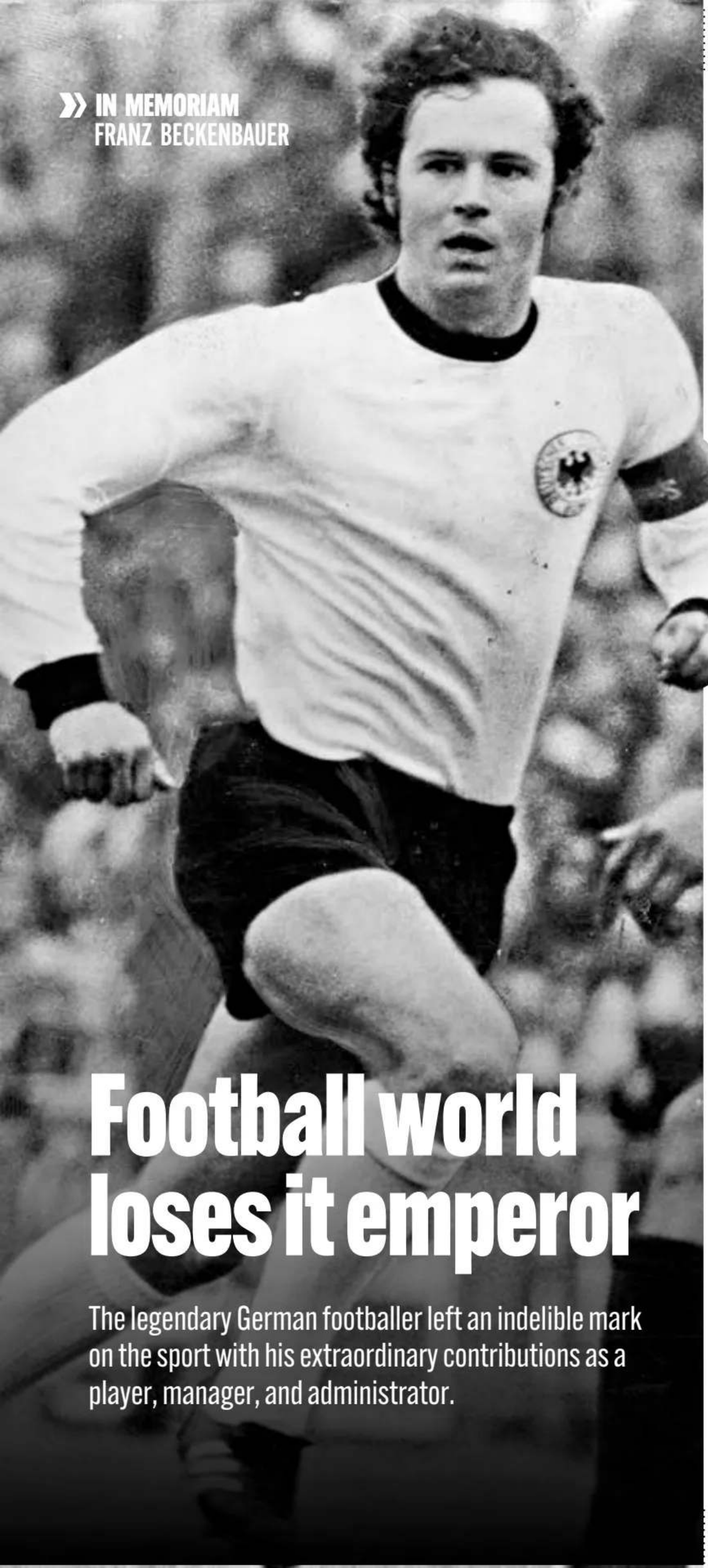
7

REUTERS

Salah rescues Egypt

Egypt needed a 97th-minute penalty from Mohamed Salah to help rescue a 2-2 draw against Mozambique in the Group B African Cup of Nations clash in Abidjan. Mostafa Mohamed had put Egypt in front following a dominant start but Mozambique hit right back, scoring twice in three minutes through Witi and substitute Clesio Bauque before the late equaliser.

Aneesh Dey & Anish Pathiyil



Football world loses it emperor

The legendary German footballer left an indelible mark on the sport with his extraordinary contributions as a player, manager, and administrator.

Amitabha Das Sharma
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Franz Beckenbauer, who was hailed as one of the game's greatest exponents, bid his fans and idolaters the final goodbye at the age of 78 on Sunday, January 7.

A statement from the Beckenbauer family conveyed the news that one of the biggest icons of world football had passed away in his sleep in the German town of Salzburg.

Famously known by the sobriquet 'Der Kaiser', which he earned for his charisma and dominance on the field in his favourite club Bayern Munich, Beckenbauer made a permanent place among immortal heroes in the sport with extraordinary performances for his country and the clubs he represented. This is reflected in his achievements, which have very few equivalents in the sport.

The fact that he is one of the only three men to have won the World Cup both as a player and manager speaks of the immense influence he had in enhancing the glory of the 'Beautiful Game'. The other two names in this elite club are Brazil's Mario Zagao and Frenchman Didier Deschamps.

"As a player, he brought a sense of effortlessness, elegance, and magic to the pitch. Franz Beckenbauer brought the glamour. Even after his playing career, he left an indelible mark on FC Bayern and football, and his legacy cannot be measured in titles," Bayern Munich president Herbert Hainer's tribute aptly sums

Technical genius: Beckenbauer's class reflected in his wonderful understanding of the game and his great skills as a player. He could elegantly control the ball and initiate effective attacks while finding the chinks in the opposition's game plan.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Legendary stature: The fact that Beckenbauer is one of the only three men to have won the World Cup both as a player and manager speaks of the immense influence he had in enhancing the glory of the 'Beautiful Game'. AP

AT THE CLUB LEVEL, BECKENBAUER'S PRESENCE INFLUENCED BAYERN MUNICH TO WIN A HAT-TRICK OF EUROPEAN CUPS BETWEEN 1974 TO 1976

up the stature of Der Kaiser in football.

The German football aficionados remember him in superlatives, as he collected 104 caps for West Germany and captained the team to World Cup glory in 1974.

He repeated his great achievement as a manager in 1990 in Rome, where West Germany, led by Lothar Matthaus, beat Argentina to lift the crown.

At the club level, Beckenbauer's presence influenced Bayern Munich to win a hat-trick of European Cups between 1974 and 1976. This happened after the Bavarians won three league championships in a row from 1972 to 1974.

The assortment of laurels in his trophy cabinet is an indication of his supreme talent, which provided the stimulus to his teammates and wards to bring out the best in terms of performance.

"Franz Beckenbauer rewrote the history of German football and left a lasting mark on it. He was my captain at FC Bayern, my coach with the national team, and our president at Bayern — and in all these roles, he was not only successful but unique. As a person, he impressed with his great respect for all people, because everyone was equal in Franz's eyes," said another German great, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, while reminiscing about the greatest footballer his country has produced.

Born in Giesing, a district in Munich, in September 1945, Beckenbauer came to personify versatility on the football field. The fans of Bayern hailed him as an emperor on the pitch as Beckenbauer experimented with different playing positions before settling down as a libero or sweeper, the position that he perfected to a level of supreme accomplishment.

Beckenbauer's class reflected in his wonderful understanding of the game and his great skills as a player. He could elegantly control the ball and initiate effective attacks while finding the chinks in the opposition's game plan. Despite playing primarily as a defender, Beckenbauer's influence on the teams that he represented was dominant and masterful. These outstanding attributes as a player saw him win the Ballon d'Or twice, in 1972 and 1974.

Having achieved so much as a player and then as a coach, Beckenbauer soon moved into administration, where he encountered some controversies arising from allegations of financial irregularities. Der Kaiser faced a 90-day ban imposed by the FIFA Ethics Committee, which also fined him 7,000 Swiss Franc for failing to cooperate with an inquiry related to corruption dealing with the allocation of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups to Russia and Qatar. But these incidents were soon forgotten as millions of football lovers preferred to remember Beckenbauer as one of the greatest masters of the game that ever lived.

The annual Sportstar Aces Awards is back to honour a number of incredible performances across the spectrum of sports. Here are the Popular Choice categories. The voting lines are open till January 31.
Visit https://sportstar.thehindu.com/aces-awards/popular-awards/

SCAN TO VOTE

SPORTSTAR ACES 2024 INDIA TRIUMPHS #Aces2024

SPORTSTAR OF THE YEAR (MALE)

Neeraj Chopra

Age: 25

Discipline: Javelin throw

Neeraj Chopra, world No. 1 in men's javelin throw, began the year by winning Diamond League events in Doha [88.67m] and Lausanne [87.66], before becoming the first Indian to win a gold medal at the World Athletics Championships with an 88.17m throw. He then defended his Asian Games gold with a season-best throw of 88.88m in Hangzhou. He was also one of the five finalists for the Men's World Athlete of the Year Award in 2023. HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Virat Kohli

Age: 35

Discipline: Cricket

Virat Kohli had a dream World Cup outing with an all-time-high tournament aggregate of 765 runs, including nine 50-plus scores in 11 innings and three hundreds. During the course of the World Cup, he also notched up a record 50th ODI ton, the most by any player in this format, going past Sachin Tendulkar's tally of 49. Earlier, during the ODI Asia Cup in Sri Lanka, his unbeaten 233-run partnership with K. L. Rahul for the third wicket was the highest for any wicket in the tournament's history. In March, Kohli also hit his first Test century since 2019 on day four of the last Border-Gavaskar Trophy Test match in Ahmedabad. ICC VIA GETTY IMAGES

Satwiksairaj Rankireddy-Chirag Shetty

Age: 23

Discipline: Badminton

Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty won India's first ever badminton gold medal at the Asian Games in Hangzhou. Earlier in the year, the two became the first Indian doubles pair to win a gold medal at the Badminton Asia Championship, the country's first gold medal at the tournament in close to six decades. The duo also won its first title in the 2023 Swiss Open, beating the Chinese pair of Ren Xiangyu and Tan Qiang in the final. India's rising profile in badminton was reaffirmed when Satwik and Chirag rose to number 1 in the BWF Men's Doubles Rankings in October. GETTY IMAGES

R. Praggnanandhaa

Age: 18

Discipline: Chess

At the age of 18, R. Praggnanandhaa became the youngest Chess World Cup finalist ever to date. He lost to Magnus Carlsen in the final. The teenager will now play in the Candidates tournament in 2024. He is the third youngest player after Bobby Fischer and Carlsen to qualify for the Candidates tournament. The youngster had also won the Asian Games team silver and registered a peak rating of 2740-plus. He added yet another feather to his cap by defeating 2800-rated Grandmaster Ding Liren for the first time in a classical game at the Tata Steel Chess Masters. AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sumit Antil

Age: 25

Discipline: Javelin throw (Men's F64)

Sumit Antil is the world record holder in men's javelin (F64). In October, the reigning Paralympics champion, Antil, clinched the gold medal at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games javelin throw F64 event with a world record effort of 73.29m. The 25-year-old broke his own previous world record of 70.83m, which he had achieved, while winning gold at the World Para Athletics Championships in Paris earlier this year. AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

SPORTSTAR OF THE YEAR (FEMALE)

Lovlina Borgohain

Age: 26

Discipline: Boxing

The bronze medallist at the Tokyo Olympics was crowned the World Champion in the women's 75kg category, becoming only the second Indian women's boxer, after Mary Kom, to medal at the Olympics and the Worlds. Lovlina, who shifted from 69kg (in which she won the Olympic bronze) to 75kg, pipped two-time Commonwealth Games medallist Caitlin Parker 5-2 through bout review to pocket her maiden World title, helping India get level with its most successful campaign in the Worlds. At the Asian Games, she won silver, losing to Li Qian in the final, securing her spot in the Paris 2024 Olympics. HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Esha Singh

Age: 18

Discipline: Shooting

Esha, along with Shiva Narwal, topped the 10m air pistol mixed team field at the World Shooting Championships to become the only gold medallist in an Olympic category. She also clinched gold in the 25m pistol women's team event at the Championships. In Hangzhou, Esha won two gold and two silver medals, including an individual gold and silver, helping India to its best-ever campaign in shooting in the tournament. HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Parul Chaudhary

Age: 28

Discipline: 3000m, 3000m Steeplechase, 5000m

Parul Chaudhary ended 2023 with three national records — women's 3000m (8:57.19), 3000m steeplechase (9:15.31), and 5000m (15:10.35) — and an Asian Games silver and gold medal in the women's 3000m steeplechase and 5000m, respectively. She also had an impressive World Championships, where she registered a personal best in the 3000m steeplechase to qualify for the final. She then proceeded to smash Lalita Babar's national record in the final, where she finished 11th to qualify for the Paris Olympics. AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sheetal Devi

Age: 16

Discipline: Para Archery (Compound Open)

Born with Phocomelia, a disorder causing under-developed limbs, Sheetal Devi is the world's first armless woman archer (Open Compound). Ranked World No. 3 as of October 2023, she captured everyone's attention with her steely-eyed attitude in para-archery. This year, she became the world record holder in the women's doubles event at the Para Worlds, while at the World Archery Para Championships, she clinched a silver medal, making her the first female armless archer to do so. The Asian Para Games saw Sheetal's exceptional performance with three medals, including two gold and one silver. Notably, she became the first woman to secure two gold medals at the tournament, further solidifying her position as a trailblazer in the sport. HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Jyothi Surekha Vennam

Age: 27

Discipline: Compound Archery

India's golden girl in compound archery, Jyothi, bagged six medals (across stages) in the Archery World Cup, including four gold and two bronze medals. Her form remained unabated at the World Championships, where she won gold with the women's team and bronze in the individual event. At the Asian Games, she completed a treble of gold medals in women's individual, mixed team, and women's team, helping India to its best-ever showing in compound archery at the Asiad. AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

NATIONAL TEAM OF THE YEAR

India men's cricket team

Discipline: Cricket

India began the year by retaining the Border-Gavaskar Trophy with a 2-1 series win at home. Along the way, Rohit Sharma's men also qualified for a second successive World Test Championship final, which they eventually lost to Australia. They started the 2023-25 WTC cycle with a 1-0 series win in the West Indies before winning the Asia Cup for a record-extending eighth title. The Men in Blue then went on an inspiring 10-match winning streak in the ODI World Cup before falling short in the final against Australia.

India men's kabaddi team

Discipline: Kabaddi

India beat Iran in a controversial final to reclaim the Asian Games gold after five years and clinch a record-extending eighth title. Earlier, the Indian men's kabaddi team beat Iran 42-32 in a high-voltage final to defend its Asian Championships title. It was India's eighth title in the continental championships.

India men's hockey team

Discipline: Hockey

The Indian men's hockey team clinched the gold medal at the Asian Games, triumphing over Japan in a thrilling final, and earned direct qualification for the Paris Olympics. Adding to its glory, the team claimed the Asian Champions Trophy 2023 title for an unprecedented fourth time. In a historic feat, it also defeated Australia in the FIH Pro League, marking the first such victory in a major competition since 1996. The team continued its winning streak by beating Pakistan in the final of the Asian 5s World Cup qualifiers, earning both the title and a spot in the upcoming FIH Hockey 5s World Cup in 2024. Additionally, it secured a bronze in the 100th Anniversary Spanish Hockey Federation tournament, further solidifying its prowess on the international stage.

India women's U19 team

Discipline: Cricket

Under Shafali Verma's captaincy, India's U-19 side went on to win the World Cup becoming the first women's team — across categories — to win an ICC title. In the past, the senior team had reached the finals a few times, but all those campaigns had ended in heartbreaks. But this time around, with a spirited young team putting up a brave fight, the girls made the country proud. Later in the year, it also won the U-23 Emerging Asia Cup title.

India women's archery team

Discipline: Compound Archery

Making history on multiple fronts, the trio of Jyothi Surekha Vennam, Aditi Swami, and Parneet Kaur secured India's maiden gold medal at the World Archery Championships. Their stellar performance continued as they triumphed at the Asian Games, clinching the gold in the women's team event by defeating Chinese Taipei in a thrilling final. Not stopping there, the same formidable trio added another feather to the cap by claiming gold in the women's team event at the World Cup Stage 4 in Paris.

CLUB / STATE TEAM OF THE YEAR

Saurashtra

Discipline: Cricket

It was an incredible season for Saurashtra as it won two titles, first the Vijay Hazare Trophy, followed by the Ranji Trophy. Under the leadership of Jaydev Unadkat and Arpit Vasavada, the side dominated the others despite the absence of its star batter Cheteshwar Pujara. This was Saurashtra's second Ranji Trophy title win in three years.

Chennai Super Kings

Discipline: Cricket

The M.S. Dhoni-led Chennai Super Kings (CSK) won the Indian Premier League (IPL) for the fifth time, becoming the joint-most successful team in the league. CSK players impressed for national teams as well, with Ruturaj Gaikwad leading India to a gold medal at the Asian Games and Ravindra Jadeja playing a crucial role with bat and ball in India's inspiring journey in the ICC ODI World Cup 2023.

Mohun Bagan Super Giant

Discipline: Football

Mohun Bagan Super Giant, then ATK Mohun Bagan, held its nerves in a tightly contested Indian Super League final to beat Bengaluru FC 4-3 on penalties and lift its maiden title. It then won its 17th Durand Cup trophy after a 1-0 win over arch-rival East Bengal in the final of the 2023 edition. The team's success extended beyond national competitions as it overcame formidable opponents, including ISL 2021-22 champion Hyderabad FC and Abahani Dhaka from Bangladesh, to qualify for the AFC Cup. Individual excellence was also on display, with Mohun Bagan Super Giant's goalkeeper, Vishal Kaith, earning the prestigious Golden Glove award for being the best goalkeeper in the ISL, last season. Further contributing to its stellar season, forward Dimitri Petratos emerged as the jointhighest goalscorer, highlighting the prowess on both ends of the pitch.

Gokulam Kerala Women

Discipline: Football

Gokulam Kerala Women's football team has firmly established itself as the most successful women's side, exemplified by securing a hat-trick of Indian Women's League titles, including the 2023 season. Gokulam Kerala also displayed resilience, finishing as runner-up in the fiercely competitive 2022-23 Kerala Women's League. The team's success is not limited to the club level, as its players made substantial contributions at the national level too. Indumathi Kathiresan played a crucial role in Tamil Nadu's victory in the Senior Nationals after a five-year gap. Additionally, players like Ashalata Devi and Dangmei Grace made significant impacts with the national team, further emphasising Gokulam Kerala's influence in the broader football context.

Ahmedabad Defenders

Discipline: Volleyball

Ahmedabad Defenders emerged as champion in the Prime Volleyball League 2023. This impressive turnaround solidified its status as the joint-most successful team in the league. Notably, the team's influence extended beyond the league as three of its players, including captain Muthusamy Appavu, made a significant impact representing Team India at the Asian Games.

MOMENT OF THE YEAR

Chhetri and a customary gesture

Indian men's football team captain, Sunil Chhetri, secured victory with a decisive goal during the Intercontinental Cup match against Vanuatu. To share the joyous news of impending parenthood, he celebrated in front of his wife, the ball tucked warmly within his jersey — a customary gesture in football worldwide to announce such delightful moments to the fans.

Kohli on Mt. 50

Virat Kohli moved clear of former teammate and India great Sachin Tendulkar with a record-breaking 50th one-day international century in the first ODI World Cup semifinal against New Zealand at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai, the home ground of Tendulkar. Kohli reached the landmark in trademark fashion, completing a brisk two despite battling cramps. Once the milestone was reached, Kohli leapt and then bowed down to Tendulkar, his childhood hero, and the maestro heartily applauded from the stands. Kohli's coronation was now complete. GETTY IMAGES

Neeraj nahi tho Jena hai na!

When Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem pulled out on the eve of the Asian Games javelin throw final due to injury, Neeraj Chopra's path to Asian Games gold seemed guaranteed. But when the controversy surrounding Neeraj's first throw overshadowed the competition, Kishore Kumar Jena stepped up by recording his personal best throw of 86.77 m, momentarily propelling himself to first place. Neeraj immediately embraced his countryman to celebrate his achievement. The Olympic champion eventually secured gold and Jena a well-deserved silver. 'Maza aa gaya ek dusre ko push kar rahe the [It was fun pushing each other],' Neeraj said later. In that embrace, one saw a snapshot of the Indian javelin's future. If Neeraj ever has an off day, Jena has got you covered! GETTY IMAGES

Determination, Sheetal's forte

Armless archer Sheetal Devi made headlines in October when she shot her way to three medals at the Asian Para Games. The 16-year-old, who hails from Kishtwar, Jammu and Kashmir, was born with phocomelia, a disorder causing underdeveloped limbs. Without arms, she learned to use a bow and arrow using her feet and started training full-time in archery only two years ago. Videos of her mounting the bow and using her right foot and mouth to steady the equipment before shooting perfect 10s went viral. From celebrities to the political brass, praise flooded in for the resilience and talent of the young girl, who eventually went on to finish the year as the No. 1 archer in open compound. GETTY IMAGES

Controversy, and a sigh of relief for Jyothi Yarraji

Jyothi Yarraji secured the silver medal in the women's 100m hurdles at the Hangzhou Asian Games amidst a backdrop of intense controversy and drama. Initially disqualified for a false start, Yarraji was subsequently allowed to take part pending a thorough post-race review.

The official exoneration was declared approximately half an hour after the conclusion of the race. Notably, the decision not only vindicated Yarraji but also elevated her from the bronze to the silver position. This adjustment stemmed from the disqualification of the Chinese athlete, who initially claimed the second-place finish, a status that was ultimately not reinstated. It was Yarraji's fourth fastest run of the year and the eighth time she ran under 13 seconds in 2023. GETTY IMAGES

BISWARANJAN ROUT

Sharath, Sathiyan star attractions at WTT Star Contender Goa 2024

Achanta Sharath Kamal and Sathiyan Gnanasekaran, alongside 35 other Indian paddlers, will compete in the singles qualifiers at the WTT Star Contender Goa 2024 to achieve the highest-ever Indian participation in a WTT event.

The second edition of the event will be played at the Peddem Indoor Stadium in Mapusa, Goa from January 23 to 28.

Nine Indians, including the highest world-ranked Indian paddler Manika Batra and Harmeet Desai, secured direct entry into the main draw. The inclusion of 32 new names in the qualifying list brings India's total participation to 41 across categories. This surpasses the previous highest of 40 participants in the inaugural edition of the tournament.

The 2023 World Championships doubles bronze medallist Cho Dae-seong, 17-year-old Oh Junsung from Korea and Hungarian paddler Bence Majoros are among the international stars to be in action in the qualifying rounds which will offer eight singles and four doubles main draw spots.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

SPORTOON

Honoured: Former badminton champion Manjusha Kanwar receives the Dhyan Chand Award for Lifetime Achievement from President Droupadi Murmu during the National Sports Awards at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, in New Delhi, on January 9. PTI

MADNESS ON THE MARINA

Gujarat Giants brings a **touch of innovation** to its PKL training regimen in Chennai, opting for endurance sessions and horse rides at the Marina Beach.

With the athletics track at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium getting a long overdue makeover and a hectic travel schedule that saw the competitors change venues every week, PKL sides had to get creative when planning team training sessions.

Gujarat Giants decided to soak in some local flavour, holding a few endurance and running sessions at the iconic Marina Beach. One would expect fitness and skill sessions on sand to be the most challenging part of the day, but not for the Giants. The team struggled to train in peace in the middle of one of the busiest spots in the city. Onlookers kept coming up to them, some for photographs, others running alongside them.

"We love our fans and we are where we are because of those who watch and support us. However, sometimes, we just want to train," Giants captain and Iranian kabaddi legend Fazel Atrachali said with a chuckle.

It wasn't all work and no play for the side. The Iranians got to ride horses at the beach, while the side also got some time to cool off with a swim in the sea.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

Contrasting emotions

The Chennai leg of Pro Kabaddi League Season 10 was a tale of two emotions: the bittersweet sting of the Thalaivas' winless streak and the

Day of adventure: Gujarat Giants conducted a few endurance and running sessions at the iconic Marina Beach, where captain and Iranian legend Fazel Atrachali rode a horse as well. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

unwavering love for the city's local lads. The stands erupted not just for the Thalaivas, but for every Tamil Nadu player weaving magic on the mat. Sudhakar M's lightning-fast raids for Patna Pirates and Abinesh Nadarajan's rock-solid defence for Puneri Paltan ignited a fire in the hearts of local fans, underlining the state's rich kabaddi heritage.

In a clash of home state heroes, the spotlight initially blazed brightest on Sudhakar, his every touch met with an eruption of cheers.

Yet, when the final whistle blew, it was Abinesh, who stood bathed in the warm glow of victory, his 'high-five' (when a defender gets five tackle points) galvanising supporters across team loyalties.

Saikat Chakraborty

Student vs teacher

Star raider Pawan Sehrawat and veteran kabaddi coach Randhir Sehrawat enjoyed a relationship as close as that of father and son while at Bengaluru Bulls together. Consequently, fans were heartbroken when Pawan opted to enter the auction ahead of season nine, leaving a franchise he won the PKL title with and his renowned 'Guru'.

Chennai witnessed the teacher going up against the student for the very first time when Pawan's Telugu Titans took on the Bulls.

Pawan stepped onto the mat with a burning desire to conquer his former team. The Indian captain even boldly declared, "I know Randhir sir's tactics, and it will be an exciting battle."

The action on the mat lived up to the clarion calls off it. Pawan's herculean efforts were on full display. He even scored a Super 10 (13 points). However, the Bulls had the better team effort. The side pipped the Titans in both departments in the first half, a gap the Titans could not bridge despite a better showing in the second half. In a dramatic twist, Pawan's motivation clashed with reality as the apprentice admitted defeat, by a narrow two-point margin.

Mayank

Local flavour: In a clash of home state heroes, the spotlight initially blazed brightest on Sudhakar (with blue elbow band), his every touch met with an eruption of cheers. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Bittersweet: Telugu Titans' Pawan Sehrawat (left) faced his former franchise, Bengaluru Bulls, helmed by Randhir Sehrawat (right), with whom the star raider shares a close bond. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Food for meditation and performance: Are we missing the link in today's fast food life?

Since gut health heavily influences athletes' performance and mental resilience, **nutrition plays a crucial role** in shaping their cognitive function, emotional state, and overall success.

As I counsel athletes on nutrition's impact on performance, it's evident to me on a daily basis that athletes' behaviour and discipline are significantly driven by their mental health. Healthy mental well-being requires focus on both the mind and the breath, the ability to recognise the calming of thoughts and flip the switch to mental grit.

So, when athletes come to me with whispers of anxiety, stress, or concerns about their mental well-being, I ask myself — 'are we failing to feed the athlete correctly?' Given that athletes must push both their physical and mental limits to achieve peak performance, significant attention must be diverted to training regimen, nutrition, and recovery. It becomes imperative to explore the intricate connection between diet, the gut microbiome (comprising all microorganisms in the digestive system), and mental well-being, especially in relation to anxiety.

The gut microbiome is a complex ecosystem of trillions of microorganisms present in the digestive tract, playing a crucial role in the connection between the brain and the gut. The gut-brain axis, a bidirectional communication system between the gut and the central nervous system, is increasingly being recognised as a key player in this intricate relationship. Anxiety can become a silent adversary to the rigours of competition, training, and performance expectations, affecting an athlete's mental well-being and, consequently, their capacity for optimal performance.

Recent studies indicate that the composition of the gut microbiome can impact the production of neurotransmitters like serotonin and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), essential in mood regulation and anxiety management.

In simple terms, your gut can calm you down if it's fed the right raw material. Fed the wrong kind of food, it may leave you less protected against mental stress.

Impact of Gut Microbiome on Athletic Performance

The diversity of the gut microbiome's composition could influence an athlete's energy metabolism, the recovery rate, and their susceptibility to injuries.

Athletes subject their bodies to intense physical stress on a regular basis, leading to inflammation and muscle damage. Some studies suggest that maintaining a balanced and diverse gut microbiome may play a role in regulating inflammation, potentially expediting the recovery process and lowering the risk of injuries from overtraining.

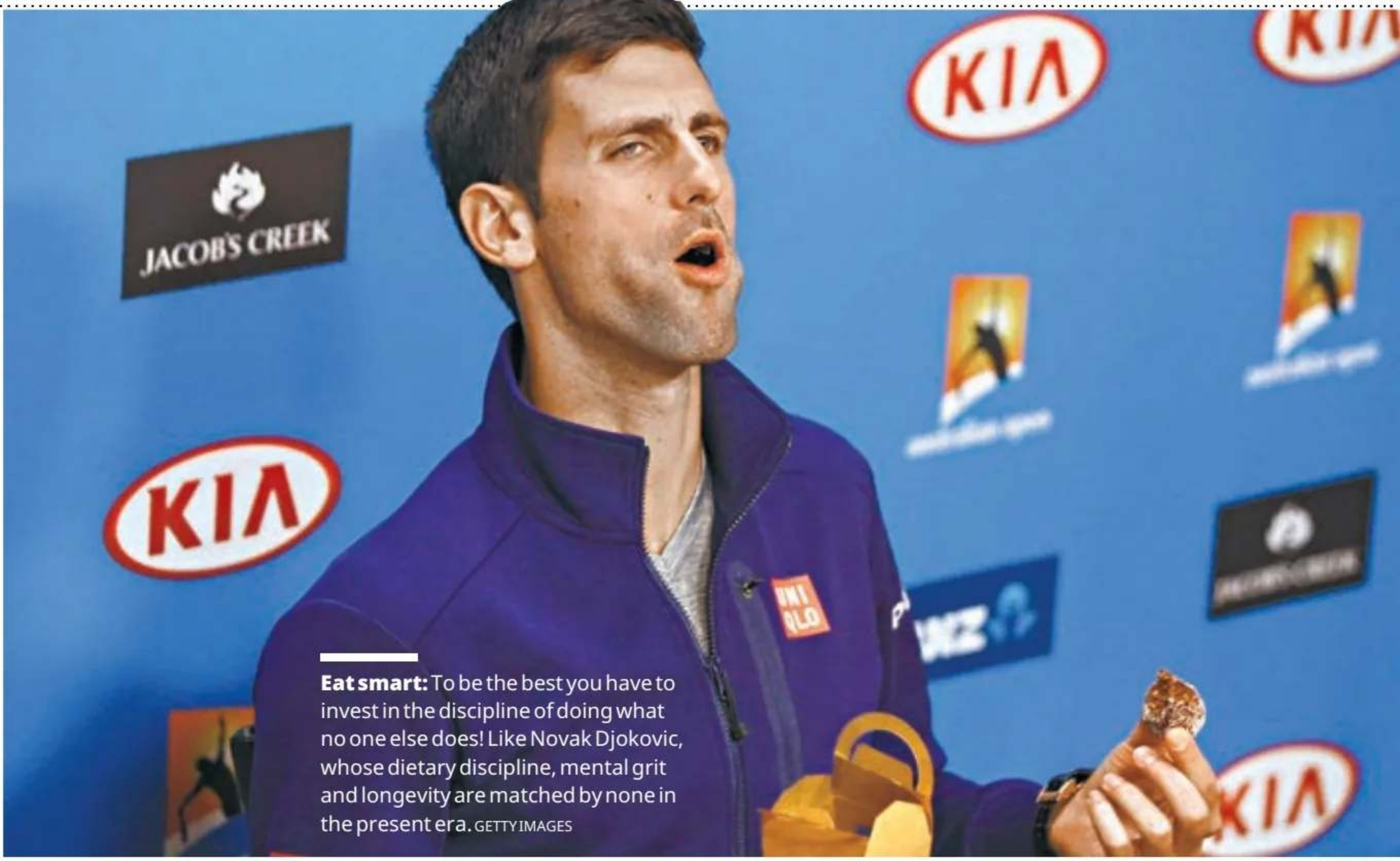
Efficient nutrient absorption is paramount for athletes aiming to optimise their performance. The gut microbiome helps in breaking down and absorbing nutrients, including vitamins and minerals essential for muscle function, bone health, and overall well-being.

A healthy gut microbiome is closely linked to a robust immune system. For athletes, preserving immune function is essential to prevent illness and avoid disruptions to their training schedules. Research suggests that a well-balanced gut microbiome may contribute to a more resilient immune system.

Herbal Allies for Soothing Anxiety:

Tulsi (Holy Basil): Tulsi is a revered herb in India with adaptogenic properties and is known for its calming effects on the nervous system. You can consume tulsi tea or add fresh tulsi leaves to your diet.

Ashwagandha: Ashwagandha is



Eat smart: To be the best you have to invest in the discipline of doing what no one else does! Like Novak Djokovic, whose dietary discipline, mental grit and longevity are matched by none in the present era. GETTY IMAGES

another adaptogenic herb that is believed to help the body manage stress. It can be consumed in powdered form, as a supplement, or added to warm milk.

Chamomile: Chamomile tea is popular for its calming properties. It can help relax the muscles and soothe the mind. Enjoying a cup of chamomile tea before bedtime may promote better sleep.

Lavender: Lavender is known for its soothing aroma. You can use lavender essential oil in a diffuser, add a few drops to a bath, or even apply it to your pillow to help induce relaxation.

Amla (Indian gooseberry): Rich in Vitamin C, amla is known for its antioxidant properties and may help the body to cope with stress. Consuming it in various forms, such as fresh fruit or juice, can be beneficial.

Peppermint: Peppermint is not only refreshing but may also have calming effects on the digestive system, indirectly contributing to a sense of relaxation. Peppermint tea is a commonly favoured option.

Cardamom: Cardamom is a spice that is not only aromatic but may also have mild sedative properties. Adding it to your tea or incorporating it into cooking can be a delightful way to enjoy its benefits.

Nutrient-Rich Foods for Enhanced Mental Health in Athletes:

Omega-3 Fatty Acids: Found in fatty fish, chia seeds, flaxseeds, and walnuts, Omega-3 supports brain cell structure, reduces inflammation, and contributes to mental resilience.

Complex Carbohydrates: Whole grains, sweet potatoes, and legumes provide sustained glucose release, fueling both physical activities and stable blood sugar levels crucial for mood and focus.

Lean Proteins: Chicken, turkey, tofu, and fish supply essential amino acids vital for the production of neurotransmitters, influencing mood and supporting mental well-being during training and recovery.

Colourful Fruits and Vegetables: Organic berries, leafy greens, and citrus fruits offer antioxidants that combat oxidative stress, promoting cognitive function and overall mental well-being in athletes.

Probiotics and Fermented Foods: Found in homemade curd, kefir, fermented veggies and night-old dosa batter, probiotics foster a healthy gut microbiome, potentially impacting mood regulation and providing an extra layer of mental resilience.

Nuts and Seeds: These tiny powerhouses, like almonds, sunflower seeds, and pumpkin seeds, provide healthy fats and magnesium, supporting optimal brain function and aiding stress management in athletes.

Dark Chocolate: These delightful treats, designed to enhance brain function, have a high cocoa content that provides flavonoids, potentially improving blood flow.

This can enhance cognitive function, offering athletes a mood-elevating treat. Opt for chocolate with 70 percent cocoa content or higher!

A whingeing and moaning media in sport

For a generation brought up on the IPL and the unipolar world of cricket, it might be difficult to understand the gratuitous criticism from the **English media** in Sunil Gavaskar's playing days.

Suresh Menon

"In about three weeks' time, another Test series starts with a country that has the biggest whingeing and moaning media in sport. Anything that doesn't suit their team will be criticised, and allegations will fly thick and fast," wrote Sunil Gavaskar, and it got me thinking about my tribe.

For a generation brought up on the IPL and the unipolar world of cricket, it might be difficult to understand the gratuitous criticism from the English media in Gavaskar's playing days. During one match, a prominent writer ignored the cricket to discuss the state of the toilets. Indian pitches, Indian umpires, Indian food, Indian crowds, Indian communication systems, Indian hotel rooms, and Indian transport all came in for severe criticism. Some deservingly, others as part of the package.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Since then, many things on that list have become superior to what's available for Indian teams abroad.

Here's E. M. Wellings on England's 1963–64 tour: "An additional hazard in India is the risk of stomach trouble. (England) arranged for their team to take tinned food from England for use where European cooking is not understood." Indians on tour, however, didn't carry tinned Indian food to centres where Indian food wasn't understood and often suffered as a consequence.

Now we read that the current England team is bringing with them their own chef. This, when chicken tikka masala is Britain's national dish!

Till about four decades ago, India was not the ideal tour. Some of it was owing to the conditions, some to the manner in which the visitors conducted themselves.

On the 1992-93 tour, an Indian player told me about England's skipper Graham Gooch and Mike Gatting **(in pic)** tucking into prawns in a Chennai restaurant. Gooch missed the Test the next day, and Gatting (not known for undereating) had to leave the field often. England decided not to take disciplinary action, according to Wisden, which said that England lost to 11 men and a plate of prawns. Perhaps "a few plates" would have been closer to the truth.

Do other countries think of the Indian media as whingeing and moaning, jingoistic, or as another weapon in the armoury of their sports teams? Do fans in our own country expect the media to be nationalistic?

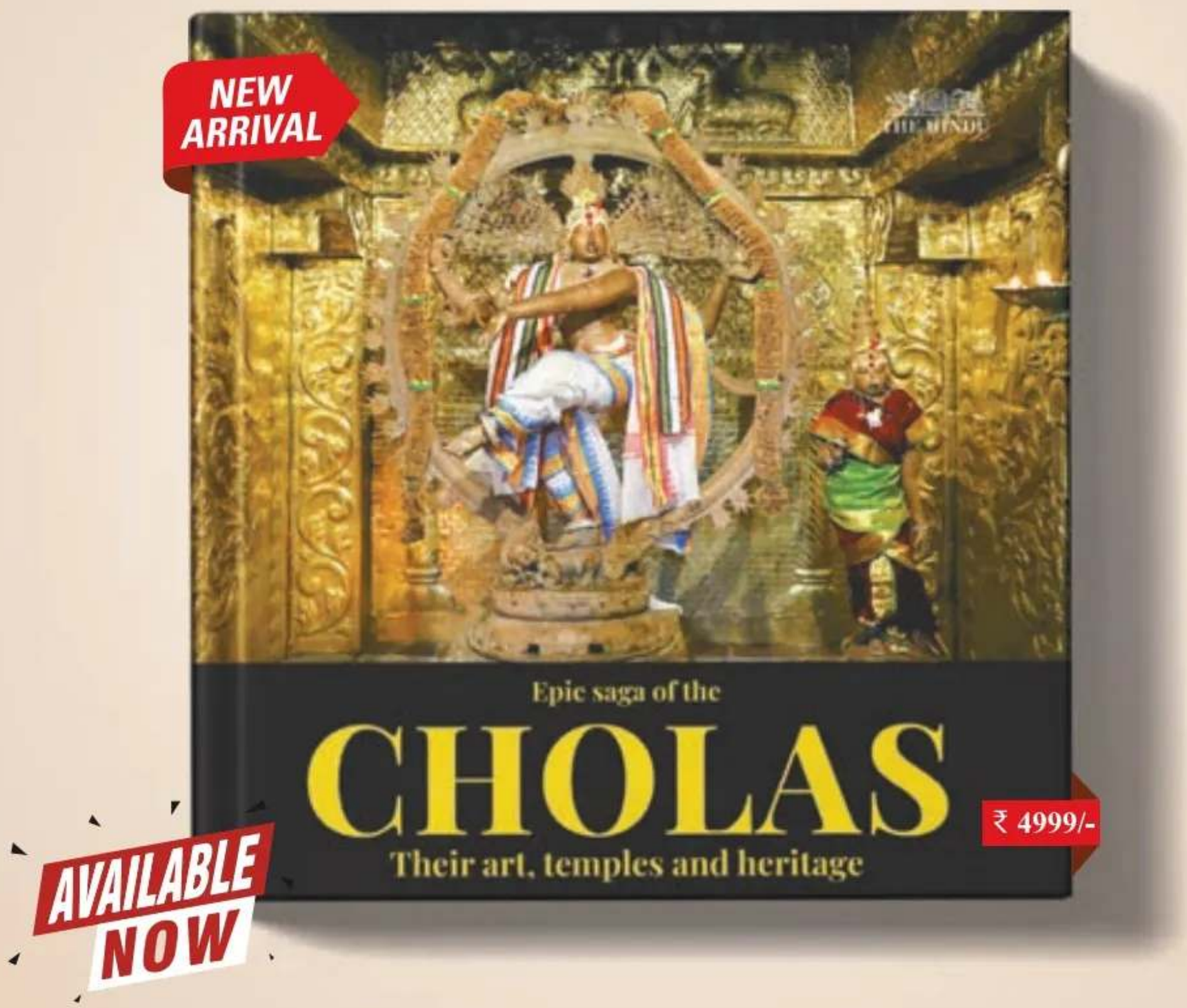
I get trolled when I criticise Virat Kohli. Occasionally, an old column I have written (different time, different context) begins to circulate on social media again, and I am trolled afresh. Years ago, when I suggested that Sachin Tendulkar should play fewer one-day games in order to extend his Test career, the magazine it appeared in gave the headline 'Endulkar', and my relations with the cricketer were frosty for a while.

In fact, Gavaskar himself, who was extremely warm and kind to me on my first international tour in the 1980s, was upset when I wrote something critical about him. On Gundappa Viswanath's 70th birthday, bygones were finally left where they should be. That whole episode is nicely captured by Ram Guha in his book *The Commonwealth of Cricket*.

THE HINDU GROUP

A SPECIAL PUBLICATION FROM THE HINDU GROUP

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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