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The 21-year-old Indian recently joined the elite 2800 club in Classical chess, a milestone reached by only 16 Grandmasters in history



The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's Trophy Games is a prestigious annual sports extravaganza that aims to celebrate athletic excellence and promote grassroots talent throughout the state. Established with the intention of encouraging young people to actively participate in sports, this event serves as a platform for showcasing a diverse range of sporting disciplines, including athletics, basketball, volleyball, and traditional sports unique to the region.

Under the inspirational guidance of the Honourable Chief Minister and under the visionary leadership of the Honourable Deputy Chief Minister, the scope of the Games and the prize pool have been broadened compared to the previous edition of the Games. Their combined vision and commitment have propelled the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's Trophy Games to be popularly called as the "Olympics of Tamil Nadu."

The 2023 edition of Chief Minister's Trophy Games saw a record turnout of 3.71 lakh participants. The Chief Minister's Trophy Games 2024 bettered its predecessor by recording a whooping 11.56 lakh participants at the district, regional and state levels. The state-level games, in particular, had nearly 33,000 participants and were held from 4th to 24th October 2024 at the four cities of Chennai, Coimbatore, Madurai and Trichy.

NEWLY ADDED DISCIPLINES:

SCHOOL:

- ◆ Handball
- ◆ Carrom
- ◆ Chess
- ◆ Fencing
- ◆ Judo
- ◆ Kho-Kho
- ◆ Boxing
- ◆ Track Cycling
- ◆ Gymnastics
- ◆ Squash

COLLEGE:

- ◆ Handball
- ◆ Carrom
- ◆ Chess
- ◆ Fencing
- ◆ Judo
- ◆ Boxing
- ◆ Track Cycling
- ◆ Gymnastics
- ◆ Squash

DIFFERENTLY-ABLED:

- ◆ Cerebral Palsy - Athletics & Football

GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES:

- ◆ Carrom

GENERAL PUBLIC:

- ◆ Football
- ◆ Carrom
- ◆ Silambam

The opening ceremony of the Chief Minister's Trophy Games 2024, held on October 4 at the iconic Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium in Chennai, was a vibrant and unforgettable celebration that set the tone for the 21-day sporting event. The ceremony brought together athletes, officials, and spectators in a display of unity and enthusiasm for sports.

The ceremony commenced with a grand procession, culminating in the lighting of the ceremonial cauldron—a powerful symbol of the spirit of competition and sportsmanship. The flame served as a reminder of the passion and dedication of the athletes who would compete over the coming days. Following the cauldron lighting, a colourful march past showcased the participating athletes as teams from the 38 districts paraded proudly, each group adorned in distinctive uniforms representing their regions.





Following the grand opening ceremony, the state-level games were conducted through 168 competitive events organised across 19 venues to identify a total of 2,538 medalists. The successful execution of this magnus opus sports event involved the participation of more than 3,000 referees, coaches, and support staff, along with the engagement of over 500 volunteers. Additionally, over 100 vehicles were employed for transportation, and more than

150 three-star hotels were utilised for accommodation.

Athletes were treated to exemplary hospitality, ensuring that their experiences remain remarkable both on and off the field. From nutritious meal provisions to comfortable accommodations and efficient transportation, every facet of their stay was meticulously planned to enable them to concentrate on their performance. The transportation arrangements for the athletes were intricately planned to ensure efficiency, comfort, and seamlessness. A dedicated fleet of MTC buses and minivans was allocated specifically for the transportation of athletes.

In a notable development, the Government of Tamil Nadu had in place an exclusive Game Management Software (GMS) for comprehensive management of the sporting events. This software facilitated various functions including registration, accreditation, scheduling, fixtures, live scoring, accommodation, catering, and transportation management, all consolidated within a centralised dashboard. Additionally, all matches were broadcast live via the social media platforms of the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu. This edition of the Chief Minister's Trophy Games also marked the inaugural inclusion of e-sports as a demonstration sport.



At the end of the fierce and intense 21-day event, Chennai emerged on top in the overall medal tally and clinched the Chief Minister's Trophy 2024. The trophy was presented to the winners by the honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in a spectacular closing ceremony held at the Jawaharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium.



The Chief Minister's Trophy Games 2024 have once again established a new standard for sporting events in Tamil Nadu, showcasing not only the exceptional capabilities of athletes but also the collective efforts of organisers, coaches, officials, and volunteers. Athletes displayed remarkable performances, breaking records and achieving personal bests, which not only added excitement to the events but also inspired future generations. As Tamil Nadu looks ahead, the momentum gained from this year's event will pave the way for greater achievements, inspiring more individuals to embrace sports and contributing to a vibrant athletic culture in the state.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO BUILD A LEGEND.

Legends are not just born, they are raised.
By every ally, every prayer and every
believer who willed them to succeed.

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Saturday, November 23, 2024

FOR THE FORTNIGHT NOVEMBER 10-23, 2024

Volume 47 Number 24 ISSN 0971 359x 94 Pages



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Arjun Erigaisi



Going from adversity to ubiquity

Cover: Arjun Erigaisi
(Michal Walusza / FIDE)

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Senior Multimedia Producer:
Sivasankar A

For Subscription:

Email: customercare@thehindu.co.in
No: 18001021878

For Advertisement

National Sales Head
Satish K Mendon
Satish.mendon@thehindu.co.in

Region

Delhi – Antesh Kumar Verma

+91 9818798519

Bengaluru – Gurunatha Reddy

+91 9845529981

Chennai – Siva Kumar M

+91 9841585969

Poster: Will Young (PTI); Pages 45-52

www.sportstar.thehindu.com
mail to: sportstar@thehindu.co.in

Published by Nirmala Lakshman, Kasturi Buildings, 859, 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600 002 and Printed by SDT Rao at Kala Jyothi Process Private Ltd, Plot no CFC-1&2, Survey No 18, E-City, SEZ & General Industrial Park, Raviryal & Srinagar (Village), Maheswaram(M), R.R.Dist, Telangana - 501359 on behalf of THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., Chennai-600 002.

Editor: Ayan Sengupta (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRP Act).
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Disclaimer: *Special Focus: Bihar's sports legacy and its mission Olympics*
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Ayon Sengupta

sportstar@thehindu.co.in



CAN AMORIM UNITE MAN UNITED?

While a decade of bad decisions, bad signings, underperformance and fractured spirit will require plenty of undoing at Old Trafford, sometimes **you really do need** just one man.

Can one man fix Manchester United? It's the question every fan mutters, somewhere between a desperate prayer and a weary joke. Old Trafford feels like a monument to past glories, drenched in a melancholic gloom that only a 13th-place team with a negative goal difference can conjure.

The recent 1-1 draw against Chelsea, United's fourth in this League campaign, left the club with just 12 points — its lowest tally after the first 10 matches since the 1986-87 season.

That season, however, was significant, as it saw the arrival of Alex Ferguson, an upcoming manager then with three Scottish and a European crown. Over the next 27 years, Ferguson's presence alone seemed to have rearranged the team's fortunes as United went on to win 13 Premier League and two Champions League titles.

Since he left in 2013, United has stumbled through nine managers (including interim managers), soon to be 10, like someone fumbling for a light switch in a dark room.

Team sport, of course, is meant to rely on the collective, on the way a group of players combine to achieve more than any individual might alone can.

But sometimes, it takes just one person to galvanise the lot of them — a man whose presence fills a stadium, whose character steers others toward success.

Someone who just doesn't just manage a

team but transforms it. It might be the charisma, the authority, or that mysterious knack for inspiring others to play like they've got something to prove.

Liverpool — United's fiercest rival, whom Ferguson was happy to "knock right off their perch" — found that spark with Jurgen Klopp in 2015. With his grizzly warmth and booming laughter, the fun and pleasure flowed through Klopp and onto the Anfield pitch. Four-and-a-half years into his reign, Liverpool was at the top again, champion of England after a 30-year drought. Its first championship since 1990 placed the German manager alongside other Anfield greats like Bill Shankly, Bob Paisley and Kenny Dalglish.

Ruben Amorim, five years younger than Ferguson was in 86-87 and nine to Klopp of 2015, comes with the promise of a future significantly brighter than the present for United fans. Amorim broke the FC Porto-Benfica duopoly to win Portugal's Primeira Liga twice during his four-year stay with Sporting CP. And he had drawn interest from both Liverpool and Manchester City as possible replacements for Klopp and Pep Guardiola, the two most iconoclastic managers of the era.

While a decade of bad decisions, bad signings, underperformance and fractured spirit will require plenty of undoing at Old Trafford, sometimes you really do need just one man. Not to fix everything, but to remind others that they could.



ORTHO-ONE'S MISSION FOR INJURY PREVENTION AND ATHLETE CARE THROUGH THE HALT SPORTS INJURIES

Dr. David V. Rajan

Arthroscopy Knee & Shoulder Surgery
Chairman & Managing Director

Ortho-One's Mission Through the Halt Sports Injuries (HSI) Initiative Ortho-One Orthopaedic Speciality Centre, a leader in orthopaedic sports medicine, is advancing its mission to prevent sports injuries through its 'Halt Sports Injuries' (HSI) movement. The initiative focuses on educating coaches, athletes, and the sporting community about injury prevention, conditioning, and enhanced performance. In an exclusive interview, Dr. David V. Rajan, Chairman and Managing Director of Ortho-One, shared his vision for the HSI initiative and the progress Ortho-One has made in bringing specialized sports medicine to India. Reflecting on his career Dr. Rajan said, "When I came to Coimbatore after studying and working in the UK in the mid-1980s, orthopaedic sports medicine was unheard of. Even in the UK, it was still in its early stages." Dr. Rajan highlighted the lack of awareness and pointed out that, "Sports medicine goes beyond fractures; it addresses acute injuries, repetitive stress injuries, and conditions like shoulder impingement from overuse. It also includes sports psychology, dietetics, strength training, and injury prevention."

BUILDING SPECIALIZED EXPERTISE

Dr. Rajan established Ortho-One in 2010, explaining, "We were determined to provide specialized care despite financial constraints and the challenges of acquiring resources and equipment that met international standards." Today, Ortho-One houses experts in various orthopaedic subspecialties, such as spine surgery, knee surgery, foot and ankle surgery, trauma and pediatric orthopaedics, creating a comprehensive team dedicated to athlete care and injury management.

An initial initiative by Dr Rajan was a landmark sports medicine event in Coimbatore in the early 1990s, inaugurated by tennis legend Vijay Amritraj, which helped set the stage for educating the sporting community through workshops and awareness programs. The most recent event was a conference on knee injuries, attended by over 100 delegates and renowned athletes like Olympic gold medalist Abhinav Bindra and football icon I.M. Vijayan.



HSI INITIATIVE AND COLLABORATION WITH ABTP

At the June 2024 symposium, Ortho-One launched the HSI initiative and announced its collaboration with the Abhinav Bindra Target Performance (ABTP) centre, further enhancing its capabilities in athlete treatment and injury prevention. "Through ABTP, we have access to advanced equipment like the Isokinetic, Isomove, and EMS, which allow us to optimize treatment for injury prevention and performance enhancement," Dr. Rajan explained.

The HSI initiative enables the Ortho-One team to attend sports tournaments, treating acute injuries and offering clinics to help athletes manage pain and improve performance.

FUTURE PLANS FOR HSI

Having recruited a sports medicine doctor and a sports scientist, Ortho-One also aims to extend outreach to smaller villages and towns, focusing on tournaments in communities where popular sports like kabaddi are deeply rooted. "With the support of ABTP, our vision is to make the HSI initiative a reality throughout the region," Dr. Rajan concluded with optimism, underscoring his commitment to enhancing athletic care and injury prevention for India's sporting community.

Halt Sports Injuries (HSI): An Ortho One Initiative which helps athletes prevent and avoid injuries by creating awareness through learning sessions and medical support at subsidized rates for deserving sports persons. (Note: Donations are tax exempt under 80(G) and CSR Income Tax act)

Email: sports.med@ortho-one.in | Contact no: 97905 51264 | www.ortho-one.in
657 & 658, Trichy Road, Singanallur, Coimbatore 641005

IT'S JONES VS MIOCIC TIME

The **highly anticipated fight** was initially set to headline UFC 295 nearly a year ago, but an injury sidelined Jones for the remainder of 2023.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

t is finally happening.

Current heavyweight champion Jon Jones (**below**) will make the first defence of his undisputed title against Stipe Miocic (**facing page, below**) at UFC 309 in New York on November 17.

The long-awaited fight was first scheduled to headline UFC 295 almost a year ago, but Jones suffered an injury that kept him out of action for the rest of 2023.

Jones made his switch from light heavyweight to heavyweight at UFC 285 against Ciryl Gane. He put on an

impressive show and earned a first-round win to become one of the few fighters to hold titles in multiple divisions.

On the other hand, the bout is Miocic's first since he lost the title in March 2021. The Ohio native holds the UFC record for most consecutive heavyweight title defences (three) and most finishes in UFC heavyweight title fights (four).

The 42-year-old will hope to become a three-time heavyweight champion when he enters the octagon later this month.

Meanwhile, the co-main event is set to be a five-round rematch between former lightweight champion Charles Oliveira and



Michael Chandler.

The bout comes three-and-a-half years after their championship fight in Houston at UFC 262 when Oliveira knocked out Chandler in a come-from-behind effort.

Oliveira went on to defend his belt once but is coming off two losses in his last three fights to reigning lightweight champion Islam Makhachev and Arman Tsarukyan.

Moreno moving in the right direction

Brandon Moreno put himself back in the win column with a unanimous win against Amir Albazi in the main event of UFC's return to Edmonton, Canada.

Right from the start, Moreno was a step ahead of Albazi, getting the better of the striking exchanges and forcing the adroit Iraqi to fight on his terms.

His swift jabs and sharp hooks kept Albazi off balance and out of rhythm, resulting in Moreno opening up a three-round lead

heading into the final few minutes of the fight.

The last two rounds saw a similar display from Moreno as he continued to strike his way through.

The scorecards were merely a formality, as Moreno had done enough to secure the victory.



After suffering consecutive split decision losses and a brief hiatus to reset, the wildly popular 'Assassin Baby' is once again moving in the right direction towards a title fight.

The five-round co-main event between Erin Blanchfield and Rose Namajunas played out as a tale of two halves.

In the first two rounds, the two-time strawweight champ Namajunas was all over Blanchfield, with great foot movement and sharp right jabs. However, as the fight progressed, Blanchfield turned the tables and clawed her way back to overpower her opponent.

Her constant pressing made Namajunas lose control.

Blanchfield continued to dominate and came out on top with a unanimous-decision win.

The heavyweight fight between Derrick Lewis and Jhonata Diniz was cancelled, adding

Of speed and skill: Brandon Moreno's swift jabs and sharp hooks kept Amir Albazi off balance and out of rhythm, resulting in Moreno opening up a three-round lead heading into the final few minutes. GETTY IMAGES

to a list of scrapped Lewis fights. UFC officials said the last-minute cancellation was due to Lewis suffering from a "non-weight-cut-related medical issue" that rendered him unable to compete.

"It was not a fight-related medical or a weight-cut-related medical issue. Everything happened quickly, and we didn't have enough answers at the time of the ceremonial weigh-ins yesterday (Saturday). He weighed in yesterday morning," said UFC executive Dave Shaw during the post-event press conference.

His opponent Diniz was rebooked to take on Marcin Tybura at UFC 309 later this month.



GETTY IMAGES

◀ Miocic holds the UFC record for most consecutive heavyweight title defences ▶

BIHAR'S SPORTS LEGACY AND ITS MISSION OLYMPICS

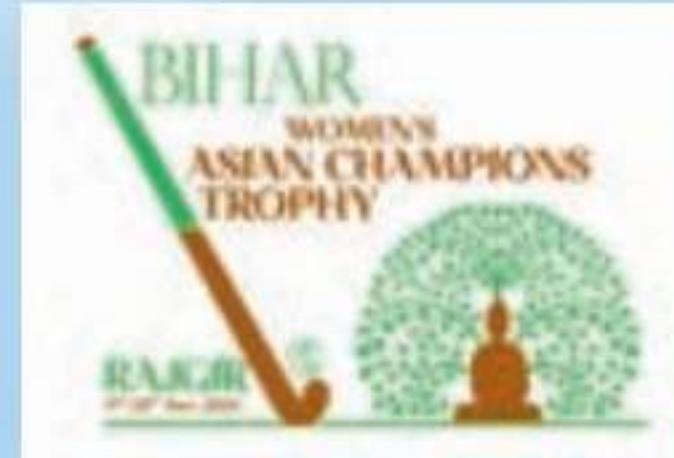
Bihar, a land historically renowned for its contributions to science, education, medicine, statecraft, and spirituality, holds an equally significant yet lesser-known place in India's sports history. Few are aware that the torch of the Olympic movement in India was first lit in Patna, Bihar, by the visionary JRD Tata and Moinul Haque. A key piece of evidence lies in the 1943 draft proceedings of the executive body of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA), which reveal that the IOA's first office was established and operated in Patna, making the city a pioneering centre for sports administration in the country.

Building on this legacy, the Government of Bihar, under the visionary leadership of the honourable Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, has set out to reclaim the state's historic prominence in sports. With a clear roadmap, the government aims to unlock the untapped potential of Bihar's youth and transform sports into a mass

movement across the state. In 2022, the Sports Development Authority of Bihar (SDAB), now known as the Bihar State Sports Authority (BSSA), was entrusted with the monumental task of identifying and nurturing talent in priority sports disciplines.

Recognising that existing sports development models across various Indian states may not be universally applicable, Bihar sought a distinct approach.

The State's Sports Policy was crafted with careful consideration of the anthropometric characteristics, gene pool, and inherent talents of Bihar's youth, aiming to create a tailored plan suited to the state's unique context. Although certain sports and regions within Bihar have already been identified as having significant potential, the government acknowledges the need for expertise and guidance from seasoned professionals in the field of sports to help craft a roadmap for achieving



success at the global level, particularly with a view towards the Olympics in 2028.

To this end, a two-day sports conclave titled "Chak De! Bihar – 2028" was held on 28th and 29th April 2022, bringing together national and international sports professionals. Experts in sports administration, talent scouting, sports infrastructure, sports sciences, and scientific coaching gathered to share their knowledge and experiences. The objective was to develop a robust, forward-looking sports policy for Bihar, one with long-term goals but a sharp focus on immediate action. This conclave marked the beginning of Bihar's journey towards revitalising its sports heritage. With strategic planning, it aspires to establish itself as a significant player in the global sports arena once again. 'Mission Olympics 2028' represents not only a goal for the state but a vision for the future of Indian sports: a vision to transform sports into a widespread movement and create a supportive ecosystem for the holistic development of sports and fitness in Bihar. The mission is to identify young talent early and provide them with long-term, sustainable training using cutting-edge sports infrastructure, sports sciences, and data analytics, enabling athletes to compete on the international stage.

Objectives

- ✓ To identify, nurture, and retain sporting talent across Bihar.
- ✓ To achieve excellence in national and international competitions.

✓ To organise competitions at various levels, ensuring athletes gain essential match experience.

✓ To develop world-class, eco-friendly, and cost-effective sports infrastructure, with the ultimate goal of establishing Bihar as a major sports hub.

Roadmap

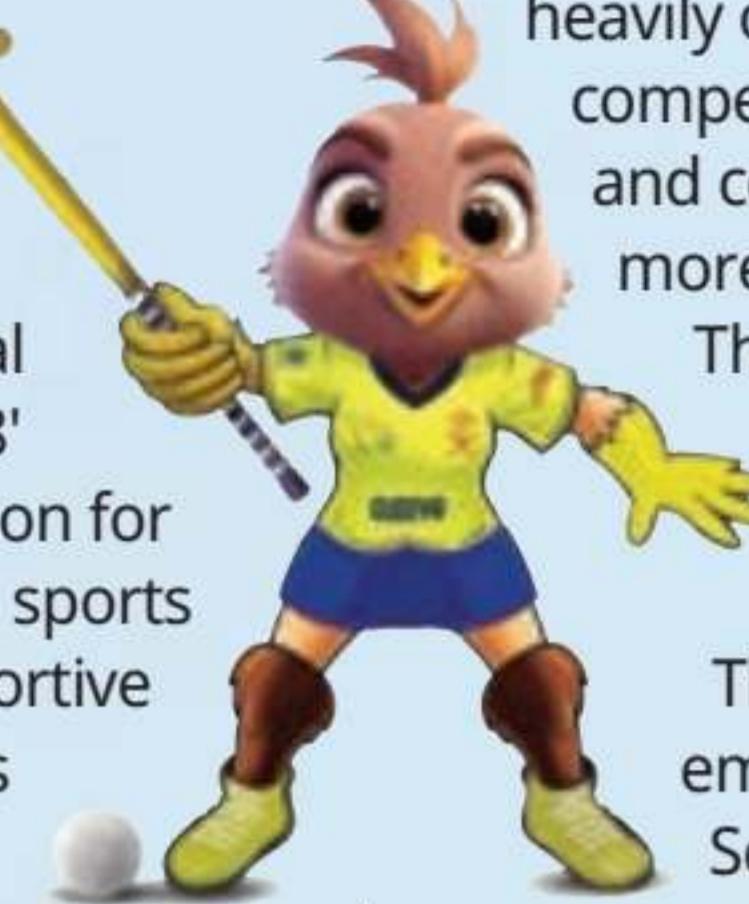
The proposed three-tier system to nurture talent involves: Feeder Centres (for school-aged children), Centres of Excellence (for college athletes), and High-Performance Academies (for professionals). The success depends heavily on providing athletes with adequate competition at various levels to enhance their skills and competitive edge. The more they compete, the more they develop competence and confidence.

There is a proposal to conduct 25-30 competitions annually, including rural sports, school games, and inter-district/inter-state tournaments.

The importance of sports sciences was emphasised repeatedly. Establishing a Sports Science Centre was deemed a fundamental requirement for scientific, injury-free training.

The roles of sports medicine, sports psychology, and sports nutrition were also emphasised as critical in shaping future Olympians. The involvement of parents is essential, particularly in encouraging girl children to participate in sports. One-to-one interactions with parents will be prioritised to help them understand the long-term benefits of sports for their children.

The recruitment of coaches was



Special Focus



The Honourable Chief Minister Shri Nitish Kumar meeting the Indian National Women's Hockey Team before the exhibition match during the inauguration of the Rajgir Stadium.

identified as an urgent requirement, with a recommendation to hire at least 300 coaches trained in various disciplines, including those with NIS diplomas. The need to engage sports consultants with decades of experience was also stressed to help in talent scouting, sports administration, and the overall management of sports. Additionally, maintaining a data bank for each athlete, documenting their age, anthropometric details, agility, endurance, and flexibility, will be crucial for future planning.

The plenary sessions underscored the crucial role of Physical Education Teachers (PETs) in schools. PETs need to be sensitised and trained not only to develop at least one sport in their schools but also to have a keen ability to identify inherent talent in children that can be nurtured for further development. Sports incentives and scholarships are critical for ensuring participation from children, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The absence of financial security is a significant barrier for parents, and without scholarships or other financial incentives, parents are less likely to encourage their children to pursue sports.

The collaboration between the state, associations, and federations is crucial for the selection, training, and retention of athletes. The state should provide financial

and logistical support to the associations to organise as many competitions as possible. Block-level competitions were also recommended to ensure grassroots participation, with the involvement of school PETs and Panchayat leaders. The principle of "Catch them young but don't kill them young" was discussed, stressing the need for the strategic nurturing of talent over the long term. Winning a few medals at the junior level should not be the final target; the focus should be on ensuring that talent is nurtured to reach high-performance levels for international competitions.

A talent scouting team with logistical and financial support will be constituted to explore remote parts of the state for hidden talent. Talent mapping will be undertaken to align sports with popular interests, natural talent, and geographical conditions. Matching the right child to the right sport will be essential, as pushing children into sports they have no interest or aptitude for is counterproductive. Each child will be given a minimum of six chances during selection trials to ensure a fair assessment.

A sports recruitment policy will be developed to offer employment opportunities and financial security to outstanding athletes and coaches, especially national and international medalists/participants. The establishment of High-Performance Centres and Centres of Excellence for prioritised sports is also a priority.

These centres will cater to athletes graduating from Eklavya Schools and entering higher levels of competition. Low-cost, all-weather, modern sports infrastructure will be developed across the state, starting with existing talent hubs, and schools at the block level will be adopted as feeder centres for specific sports. Close coordination with the Education and Health Departments is crucial. District Sports Officers (DSOs) and District Education Officers (DEOs) will work together to ensure the smooth implementation of sports activities in schools, making sports education a mandatory subject that cannot be replaced by extra academic classes.

Financial security through scholarships, cash incentives, and pensions will be offered to athletes and coaches, and felicitations such as "Khel Samman" will recognise those who have significantly contributed to sports development. Finally, the Training of Trainers (TOT) programmes will be conducted regularly, ensuring coaches and retired sports professionals undergo refresher courses to stay updated

The Honourable Chief Minister Shri Nitish Kumar flagging off the Trophy Tour.





A general view of the Rajgir Hockey Stadium. Right: Hockey stick being presented to the Honourable Chief Minister Shri Nitish Kumar.

on the latest skills, techniques, technology, and sports training methodologies.

Lab to Land

Over the past two years, Bihar has made significant strides in sports development, reflected in improved infrastructure, systematic talent identification, and enhanced support for athletes across various disciplines. Central to this transformation has been the active role of the Government of Bihar, which laid the groundwork for a structured and strategic approach to sports development. As the need for more specialised governance became evident, the Bihar State Sports Authority (BSSA) emerged as a fully independent sports governing body, leading the state's sports initiatives. This momentum did not stop there. A dedicated Department of Sports was subsequently established, backed by substantial financial support from the Government of Bihar. This strategic shift has not only expanded the scope of sports administration in the state but also reinforced Bihar's commitment to nurturing sporting talent and achieving excellence at all levels of competition.

Sports as a catalyst for social change

Bihar's focus on sports goes beyond competition — it is a vehicle for social transformation. Sports have the power to unite communities, break down social barriers, and instil values like discipline, teamwork, and perseverance. In a state where socio-economic disparities have long been a challenge, sports are being leveraged as a tool to empower marginalised communities and offer young people

opportunities for upward mobility. Through sports, Bihar is not only aspiring to make its mark on the global stage but is also fostering positive social change within its borders.

The 'Three Pillars' of sports development in Bihar

Bihar's approach to sports development rests on three key pillars: talent identification, talent nurturing, and talent retention, ensuring a holistic strategy to build and sustain athletic success.

Talent Identification: Bihar has implemented a comprehensive scouting system to identify young athletes from both rural and urban areas through initiatives like MASHAAL, Panchayat Sports Clubs, and league matches in sports like kabaddi and volleyball. The National Inter District Junior Athletics Meet (NIDJAM), hosted by Bihar in 2023, has also played a crucial role in district-level talent identification.

Talent Nurturing: To help athletes reach their full potential, the state is developing state-of-the-art training centres and academies, staffed by experienced coaches of national and international repute. Athletes are provided access to advanced training techniques, sports science, and nutrition programmes, along with opportunities to compete in national and international events, gaining critical competitive experience.

Talent Retention: Bihar is committed to offering long-term support to its athletes through programmes such as the "Medal Lao, Naukri Pao" scheme, which provides job placements for medal winners, scholarships, and substantial cash prizes. A supportive ecosystem is

The players of the Indian National Women's Hockey Team strike a happy pose at the stadium before the exhibition match. Right: The Honourable Chief Minister Shri Nitish Kumar unveiling the logo of ACT.





The Honourable Chief Minister Shri Nitish Kumar issues appointment letters to outstanding athletes under "Medal Lao, Naukri Pao" Scheme.

being built to address athletes' financial, health, and social needs, ensuring they remain connected to Bihar and motivated to represent their home state on the national and global stage.

Asian Women's Championship Trophy 2024: In 2024, the Government of Bihar will take centre stage as the title sponsor and co-host of the prestigious Women's Asian Champions Trophy, scheduled from November 11-20, 2024. This landmark event will be a defining moment for Bihar, highlighting its growing role in promoting and supporting international sports. The tournament will shine a spotlight on Bihar's expanding sporting infrastructure and its passion for hockey, while also providing a significant boost to the local economy through tourism and global attention. Hosting the Hockey Women's Asia Champions Trophy 2024 is not only a prestigious honour but also a unique opportunity for Bihar to showcase its world-class sports facilities, rich cultural heritage, and organisational expertise. The event will leave a lasting legacy, enhancing the state's reputation on the international stage and elevating women's hockey across Asia. Named "Hockey Ka Parv, Bihar Ka Garv," the tournament will feature the top six Asian teams — India, Malaysia, China, South Korea, Japan, and Indonesia — competing for the championship. This event is poised to inspire a new era of sports excellence in Bihar.

The logo for the Bihar Women's Asian Champions Trophy 2024 encapsulates the rich cultural, historical, and athletic legacy of Bihar, reflecting the state's overall progress and its commitment to sports. The design incorporates the Bodhi Tree, symbolising enlightenment and Bihar's spiritual significance, alongside a hockey stick and ball, representing the focus of the event. Additionally, it highlights Rajgir's sports heritage, with earthy tones of brown, orange, and green forming the colour palette, connecting the land's natural beauty with its vibrant sports culture. This logo unites Bihar's past and present, illustrating the state's dual identity as a centre for spiritual and sporting excellence while underscoring its dedication to women's empowerment through sports.

The tournament's official mascot, "Gudiya," is inspired



Bihar has implemented a comprehensive scouting system to identify young athletes from both rural and urban areas in sports like kabaddi and volleyball.

by the house sparrow, the state bird of Bihar. The sparrow, once ubiquitous but now endangered due to habitat loss, embodies resilience and strength, mirroring the perseverance and determination of the athletes competing in the event. By selecting the sparrow as the mascot, Bihar symbolically underscores the importance of preserving identity and culture while also celebrating the spirit of resilience shared by both the sparrow and the women who will compete in this tournament.

Sports Infrastructure: The construction of new stadiums, training facilities, and sports academies is a key component of Bihar's comprehensive plan to elevate its sports landscape. A significant milestone in this initiative was the inauguration of the Rajgir Sports Complex by Shri Nitish Kumar, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Bihar. This state-of-the-art facility, located in the picturesque town of Rajgir, represents a major advancement in the region's sports infrastructure, designed to provide training grounds for athletes and host regional and national-level events. The Rajgir Sports Complex is a vital part of Bihar's broader strategy to develop a thriving sports ecosystem, reflecting the government's dedication to nurturing talent and promoting youth participation in athletics. Spanning over 90 acres and divided into six blocks, the complex is meticulously designed to ensure that all necessary facilities for athletes and trainers are available within its campus. It includes provisions for 24 indoor and outdoor sports, such as cricket, football, hockey, volleyball, basketball, swimming, archery, cycling, table tennis, and sepak takraw, among others.

This initiative is poised to significantly boost sports development in Bihar, further cementing the state's commitment to fostering a culture of sports excellence. In addition to the above facilities, the state is also developing indoor sports complexes in all commissionerates: Magadh, Tirhut, Darbhanga, Bhagalpur, Munger, Purnia, and Saharsa.

These centres are designed not only to host national and international events but also to provide local athletes with access to world-class training facilities. All 38 districts now have Khel Bhawan catering to indoor games.

» WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT



« ...Anytime we come to the tournament, we want to win. That's the first goal. I'm trying to be focused on the first part. Then, if I'll be able to finish the year as number one, it'll be amazing and I'll be super happy.

— Aryna Sabalenka, ahead of WTA Finals in Saudi Arabia »



« Of course, I am thinking about this. I am trying at first to gain confidence about the elements I had last season. — Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva on resuming her competitive career after her four-year ban for failing a drug test ends in 2025 »

3

At just three years, eight months, and 19 days, Anish Sarkar (**left, in pic**) became the youngest-rated chess player in history. Born on January 26, 2021, Anish made his debut in competitive chess with the West



Bengal state Under-9 Open in October, securing an impressive 5.5 out of 8 points and finishing 24th overall, defeating two rated players — Arav Chatterjee and Ahilaan Baishya. He got an opportunity to play against India No. 1 and World No. 4 Grandmaster Arjun Erigaisi in a simultaneous exhibition match during the Bengal Rapid Rating Open. Just a week later, Anish tested his skills again in the West Bengal state Under-13 Open, where he met the requirement of facing five rated players, ultimately earning him an initial FIDE rating of 1555. In doing so, he surpassed the previous record set by Tejas Tiwari, who had become the youngest FIDE-rated player at five years.

WORLD RECORD



Ethiopia's Yomif Kejelcha broke the men's half marathon world record, finishing in 57 minutes and 30 seconds at the Medio Maraton de Valencia in Spain to shave one second off the previous mark set by Kenya's Jacop Kiplimo in Lisbon in 2021. Kejelcha, who holds the world indoor mile record, broke away from Kenyans Daniel Mateiko and Isaia Kipkoech to win the race in record time. REUTERS



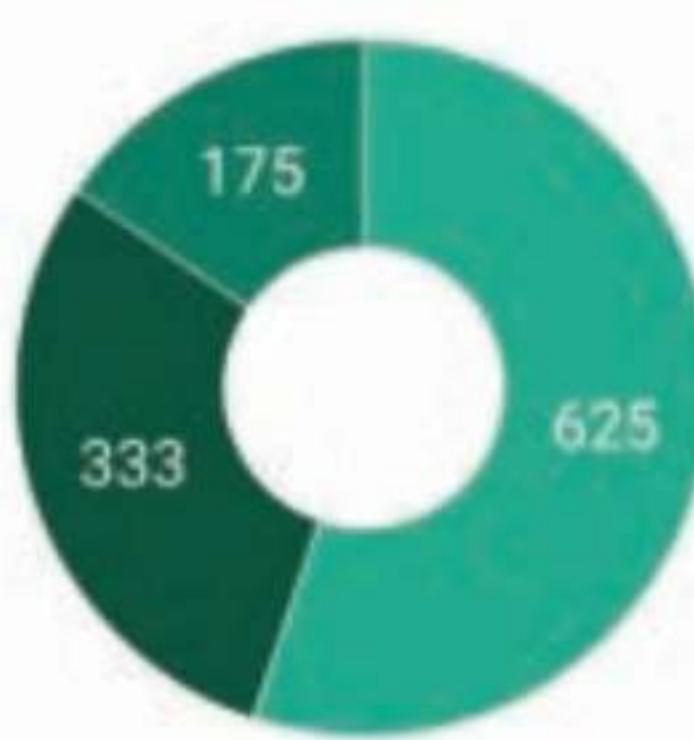
Arjun Erigaisi in Classical Chess

Win
Draw
Loss



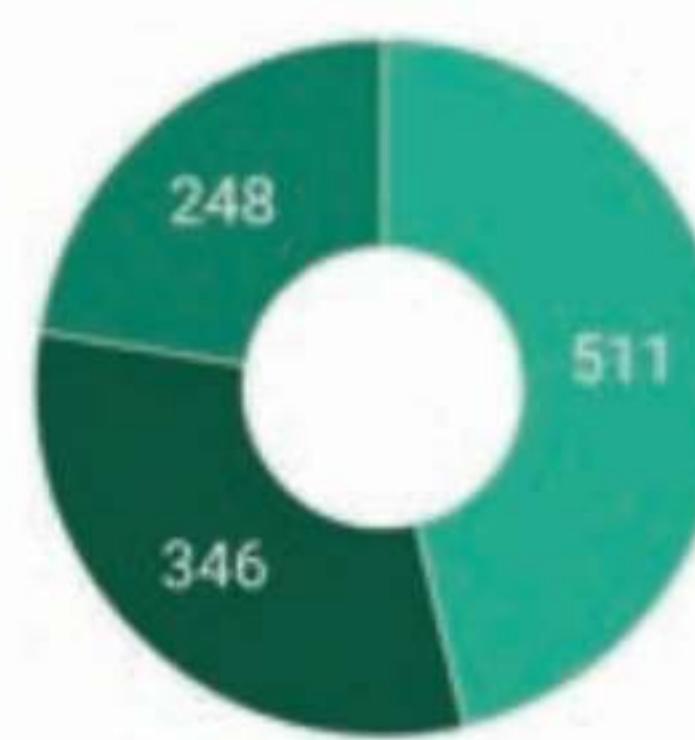
Overall

Total:
2,238



White

Total:
1,133



Black

Total:
1,105

FORMIDABLE ARJUN GOES FROM ADVERSITY TO UBIQUITY



Breathing rarefied air: Arjun Erigaisi made history at the European Chess Club Cup by breaking into the exclusive 2800 rating club in the live chess ratings, which update in real time. To date, only 16 players worldwide have reached this milestone. LENNART OOTES/FIDE

Earlier this month, Arjun Erigaisi joined the **elite 2800 club** in classical chess, a milestone reached by only 16 Grandmasters in history. However, the journey was not always this smooth.

Mayank
mayank.c@thehindu.co.in

Among the prominent military leaders of World War II, General George S. Patton Jr. stands out as a formidable figure. Famously known by the nickname 'Old Blood and Guts', Patton was celebrated for his unmatched vigour and ability to inspire American troops. His bold and aggressive tactics, particularly displayed through the sweeping advances of his Third Army across Europe at an unprecedented pace, were instrumental in securing several key Allied victories. His legacy endures as a symbol of courage and strategic success, marking him as one of history's most influential and daring commanders.

Arjun Erigaisi, the latest and youngest Indian to enter the prestigious 2800-rating club, mirrors Patton's battlefield tenacity in his on-the-board style. Often emotionless and unyielding, his relentless pursuit of victory and his ability to pressurise opponents reflect Patton's own uncompromising approach in driving his men to secure rapid gains.

In just one year, he has gained nearly 90 rating points, a leap that is rooted in his daring approach to each game. Five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand, who was the first Indian to cross the 2800-rating mark, describes this remarkable approach: "Arjun is trying this new approach of really raising the stakes in every game. He provokes a struggle, sometimes even accepting an inferior

position, essentially telling his opponent, 'Let's solve problems on the board, and I'm confident I'll do it better than you.' This high-risk, high-reward approach has been tried before, yet, as Anand explains, "When it goes wrong, it can go quite badly wrong. But Arjun has been testing boundaries of chess in almost every game."

While Arjun may not be the most talked-about Indian prodigy compared to R. Praggnanandhaa and D. Gukesh, who often shine in high-stakes tournaments, he has carved his own path. **For the man from Warangal, it's all about making a decision and pursuing it with full commitment — the grind, for him, never stops.**

Arjun is enjoying a breakout year, winning several major Open tournaments. He started with a victory at the Menorca Open in April and continued his streak with a dominant performance at the Stepan Avagyan Memorial 2024, clinching the title with a round to spare. Reflecting on his achievements in a conversation with *Sportstar*, Arjun shares, "This year has been going super well, I must say. Not just the

results, but also my number of losses was very limited — only three. I can clearly see that my quality of play has been quite good, and it's improving over time. I'm seeing a stronger version of myself."

His stellar year includes a second-place finish at the TePe Sigeman Chess Tournament and a joint-fifth spot at the Sharjah Masters Open. His incredible 10/11 performance on Board 3 earned him both individual and team gold for India at the Budapest Chess Olympiad. Capping it all off, he claimed the WR Chess Masters Cup 2024 in London, outplaying a world-class field that included Anand, Alireza Firouzja, Nodirbek Abdusattorov, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, Praggnanandhaa, and Vidit Gujrathi.

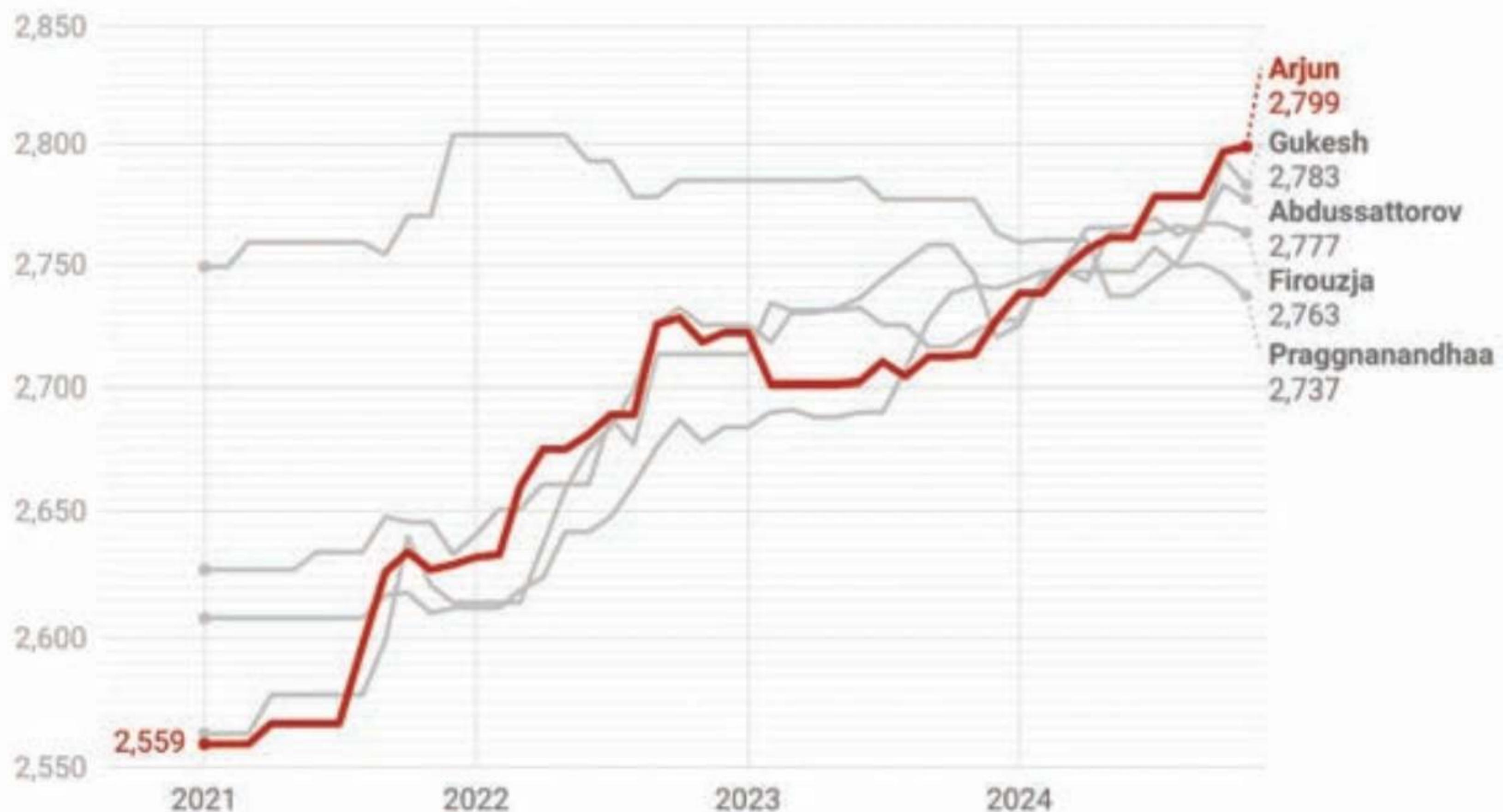
After coming close to breaking the elusive 2800-rating mark multiple times, Arjun finally achieved it during the European Chess Club Cup. In the fifth round, playing for Team Alkaloid, he defeated Russia's Dmitry Andreikin to become the 16th player in history to cross the threshold. Yet, the milestone itself took a back seat for Arjun. "When I crossed 2800, it felt

nice, but I was happier about beating a strong player. Once the tournament was over, I wasn't still in the 2800 club. Not that it made me upset or anything; it just feels nice to join a list with the greats like Anand sir, Magnus Carlsen, and others," he says.

Anand also echoes Arjun's sentiments on the rating. He says, "For me, this fixation on a number obscures the point. Had he stopped at 2799, would it be less impressive? What stands out is the journey. He started the year almost 80 points behind and climbed steadily with single-minded focus, navigating high-stakes tournaments with narrow margins for error. The way he did it is incredibly significant. For me, the way he's done it is more impressive, and yes, 2800 places him in a very small, elite group."

Arjun's success story has been anything but sudden. Ranked World No. 4, he endured several heart-wrenching setbacks in 2023, ultimately missing out on qualifying for the 2024 Candidates Tournament, a historic event featuring three Indians — Vidit, Gukesh, and Praggnanandhaa — marking the first

Arjun Erigaisi's rating progression





time India was represented on that stage since Anand. In last year's World Cup, Arjun faced a tough quarterfinal loss to compatriot Praggnanandhaa, and shortly after, he finished behind Gukesh in the Chennai Grandmasters. Despite these disappointments, each setback became a valuable, if clichéd, learning experience.

"In the World Cup match with Pragg, if I hadn't been so attached to the result, I believe I had a good chance to win. I wouldn't have felt the pressure and could've played better. In the Chennai Grandmasters, I almost gave up hope of tying for first place. But I won the last two rounds and ended up tying, which taught me that my mental approach was working against me, so I consciously worked on this. I had done inner engineering meditation, which has helped me," he explains.

The shift in Arjun's approach has transformed his performances, enabling him to dictate terms in every tournament he enters. "It's not that I perform my best just because the stakes are high. In fact, it was the

opposite. I used to struggle under high-pressure situations. Maybe it had to do with my self-imposed pressure when I desperately wanted something. Now, I've let go of that pressure. Whether it's a high-stakes game or even when there's not much on the line, I still play with consistent high quality. That's been a huge help," he shares.

Arjun's strong foundation in chess has made him adept at shorter time controls as well. The 21-year-old — who received all his three IM norms and as many GM norms in a span of just eight months — admires the versatility of Frenchman Firouzja, whom he finds thrilling to watch, and sees shorter time formats as the future of chess. "Firouzja excels in all three formats, including Bullet. Ideally, every player wants to be skilled across formats, especially since high-stakes classical games can also end up in shorter time controls. Classical chess is still the priority, but with events like the Global Chess League and Championship Chess Tour, there's a shift in focus," he notes.

Gold rush: Arjun Erigaisi's incredible 10/11 performance on Board 3 earned him both individual and team gold for India at the Budapest Chess Olympiad.
MICHAL WALUSZA / FIDE

Today's confident and resilient Arjun can trace much of his growth back to a major setback eight years ago. In 2016, a 12-year-old Arjun, then a Candidate Master, travelled to Moscow to compete in the Aeroflot Open's challenger section, accompanied by his mother. On arrival, he requested the organisers to let him participate in the main event. The experience turned into a tough learning curve as he won only one game in nine rounds, losing close to 30 rating points.

"Losing 25 to 30 points in a tournament isn't unheard of, especially with a K-factor of 20. But scoring just one point in eight rounds is rare, especially since you usually face weaker opponents after initial losses. But that tournament was so strong that even at a 2300 rating, I was the lowest-seeded player. I lost



IN JUST ONE YEAR, ARJUN HAS GAINED NEARLY 90 RATING POINTS, A LEAP THAT IS ROOTED IN HIS DARING APPROACH

Standing out: While Arjun may not be the most talked-about Indian prodigy compared to R. Praggnanandhaa and D. Gukesh, who often shine in high-stakes tournaments, he has carved his own path. LENNART OOTES/FIDE

the first six rounds and still faced strong opposition," he says. "Of course, I was disappointed at the time, but afterwards, I viewed it as a chance to learn from my mistakes. My coach and I worked on the areas I struggled with, and that definitely helped.

Playing stronger opponents is always beneficial, no matter your level. Even at 2750, playing more games against top players like Magnus is valuable. In hindsight, it was actually a good decision to play there," he shares.

Arjun also sees his friend and compatriot Gukesh, who became the youngest World Championship challenger at 17, as a clear favourite against China's Ding Liren.

He says, "Gukesh did have a shaky event at the European Club Cup, and

I heard Magnus mention that this might give Ding some confidence. But I still think Gukesh is clearly the favourite. Ding seems low on confidence, and during the Olympiad, I noticed he wasn't physically well — something to do with his breathing — he seemed uncomfortable, and that was even after he had improved. I do feel sorry for him that he has to go through all these challenges and still has to play in such a prestigious match.

But this is sport, and regardless of the outcome, even if he wins or loses, I hope Ding recovers fully, both physically and mentally."

Beyond chess, Arjun is a Tollywood enthusiast and a fan of Junior NTR's work. When not honing his skills on the board, he enjoys playing table tennis. Family support has been a cornerstone of his journey, and he

credits them for being his constant strength. "My parents and my sister have always been supportive. My mother travelled with me often, making her support very visible, but my dad's hard work behind the scenes allowed me to pursue chess without worrying about finances, even when I had no sponsorship. My sister has always been there to motivate me," he shares.

"After the World Cup last year, moving on was really challenging, but my family's support made it possible. Without a strong support system, overcoming these sorts of setbacks can even take years," he says.

Much like General Patton's boldness, Arjun's style on the chessboard is cementing his reputation as one of the most formidable, if not the most colourful, players in modern chess.

» CHESS COLUMN

Three changed interferences on one square

By C.G.S.Narayanan

In this theme a changed Grimshaw (mutual interference between black bishop and black rook) is enhanced by yet another changed mate after an additional interference (by N or P) on the same square. The theme is not easy and there are hardly a dozen examples in existence. I give below three significant Indian contributions to this theme. The first one below is the lone example which presents the changes in a try and post-key setting.

T.S.Krishnamurthy and
C.G.S.Narayanan
2nd Prize, BCM 1970



Mate in two moves

Try: 1.Rxe7?(2.Be3)

1....Nf4 2.Bf6; 1...Rf4 2.Rd7

1....Bf4 2.Re4 but 1...Nc5!

Key 1.Qe6! (2.Be3)

1....Nf4 2.Qe5; 1...Rf4 2.Qd7

1....Bf4 2.Qe4; 1...Rxe2 2.Nxe2

The British judge Barry Barnes commented on the problem below: "This is a masterly example. The set mates are 1...Be6 2.Nc6; 1....Re6 2.Nf5. The third set interference 1...e6 2.Rxg4 cleverly prevents both of the above mates by guarding f5 and opening a line for Bbf8 to pin the WSb4. The key **1.Nxg4 (2.Rc4)**

guards e3 and e5 but loses third guard control of c4 and d5. Changed play including two battery mates. 1...Re6 2.Ne5 and 1...e6 2.Nxh6. The by play includes 1...Rc6 2.Nxc6; 1...Qxg8 2.Be5

C.G.S.Narayanan
I-2 ex aqueo BJM60 Ty 1997



Mate in two moves

The problem given below for solving has some unique features. Here BR is not used as one of the three pieces but instead uses B+P Grimshaw (better known as pickabish). There is complete dual avoidance in all the three variations both in set and post-key-exceptional!

K.Seetharaman
The Problemist 1977



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Self-pin as black defence':

Key 1.Bb3! (2.Nc4) 1...axb3 2.Qa1

1....Rxb6 2.c4; 1....Rxc3

2.Nc6; 1...Qxb6 2.Ra7

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



FOR MORE
STORIES

FUTILE SEARCH FOR RARE MOMENT OF CALM IN A SEASON OF FLUX

With only two home Tests scheduled in the next year – against the West Indies in October – it wouldn't be surprising if the current core of India's Test side has played its **last home game together** in the longest format.

Shayan Acharya, Dhruva Prasad and Pranay Rajiv
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in,
dhruva.prasad@thehindu.co.in,
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

India's storied legacy in Tests at home unravelled, layer by layer, over the course of a three-match series against New Zealand. A near-spotless record was systematically dismantled over three defeats, each inflicting a gaping wound that exposed a deeper malaise within the Indian Test setup and left a scar that would require an extensive post-mortem.

A misreading of the conditions in Bengaluru led to India conceding a Test at home to the Kiwis for the first time in 36 years, and meek surrenders on rank-turners in Pune and Mumbai saw Rohit Sharma's men snap an 18-series-long unbeaten streak and concede a clean



sweep in a three-match series at home for the first time, respectively.

If that wasn't enough, the 0-3 humiliation also left India gasping for air in the World Test Championship (WTC) standings. Heading into the series, India was sitting high and mighty atop the WTC points table. But the chastening series defeat nullified most of its advantage, forcing India into a must-win territory in the



upcoming five-match series in Australia in its bid to reach a third consecutive WTC final.

The Kiwi debacle, though, will perhaps inspire a refreshing context for the challenge ahead. For decades, Indian batters would head into a Test series in Australia under a cloud of apprehension, drowning in the potential uneasiness of handling the pacy, bouncy pitches Down Under. But, for a change, they

will perhaps look at the Border-Gavaskar series as a pleasant departure from the confines of home, which has turned from a fortress of steel to a coffin of suffocation.

Of late, Indian batters have sought to break free from their well-documented struggles against spin bowling with an attacking approach in the face of a dwindling trust in their ability and skill to

Stuck in a rut: Rohit Sharma faced a total of 133 balls across six innings, tallying a mere 91 runs, while middle-order mainstay Virat Kohli eked out 93 runs in six innings, facing 173 deliveries. AFP



Tough outing: This New Zealand series marked Ravichandran Ashwin's second-poorest Test outing at home, with a bowling average of 41.22 runs per wicket. EMMANUEL YOGINI

defend against the tweakers.

This tendency was on display against the Kiwis, with the Indians scoring at almost four runs an over (3.97) throughout the series and taking it a notch higher by going at 4.16 per over against the spinners. In contrast, New Zealand struck at a significantly more sedate 3.66 runs an over against the spinners.

India's aggression didn't yield dividends, however, as Mitchell Santner and Ajaz Patel picked up 28 wickets between them, and four Kiwi spinners accounted for 37 Indian scalps to precipitate the host's surrender.

India skipper Rohit, in admitting his own shortcomings in the series, also summed up the team's travails. "I need to spend more time to defend balls, which I haven't done in this series, and I accept that I haven't batted well in this series."

Throughout the series, it seemed that most Indian batters were in a tearing hurry to score runs, perhaps trying hard to follow the 'Bazball' model. And that plan clearly did not work in the home team's favour.

Rohit faced a total of 133 balls across six innings, tallying a mere 91 runs, while middle-order mainstay Virat Kohli eked out 93 runs in six innings, facing 173 deliveries.

Yashasvi Jaiswal (308 balls) was the only Indian batter who faced in excess of 300 balls, while Rishabh Pant (261 runs) was the lone Indian

ASHWIN AND JADEJA'S STRUGGLE WITH THE BALL WAS EXACERBATED BY CAPTAIN ROHIT'S OVERLY DEFENSIVE FIELD PLACEMENTS



India's home series wins since defeat to England in 2012

Opponent	Year	Margin of victory
Australia	2012/13	4-0
West Indies	2013/14	2-0
South Africa	2015/16	3-0
New Zealand	2016/17	3-0
England	2016/17	4-0
Bangladesh	2016/17	1-0 (one-off Test)
Australia	2016/17	2-1
Sri Lanka	2017/18	1-0
Afghanistan	2018	1-0 (one-off Test)
West Indies	2018/19	2-0
South Africa	2019/20	3-0
Bangladesh	2019/20	2-0
England	2020/21	3-1
New Zealand	2021/22	1-0
Sri Lanka	2021/22	2-0
Australia	2022/23	2-1
England	2023/24	4-1
Bangladesh	2024/25	2-0

to tally more than 200 runs in the series.

The left-handed duo succeeded, to some extent, in taking the attack to the opposition's spinners, with Pant almost pulling off a counter-attacking rescue act in Mumbai.

Though Shubman Gill, after missing the series opener, shone in patches and struck a resilient 90 in the third Test to help India draw parity in the first innings, his tentative front-foot defence against spin was an enduring trope that haunted India's top and middle-order batters.

Pitch-ing it wrong

As New Zealand's spinners dominated on rank turners in Pune and Mumbai, questions have emerged about whether India needs to reconsider its pitch

Flamboyant southpaw: Rishabh Pant's ongoing excellence and calmness under pressure also offered a bright spot in an otherwise challenging series. K. MURALIKUMAR

strategy at home. The answer could well be "yes."

Departing from its previous approach of preparing sporting surfaces — as seen during the series against England — the current team management, under head coach Gautam Gambhir, reverted to rank turners, banking on spinners Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja to deliver. However, the strategy backfired in both matches as India's spinners fell short of expectations, losing the advantage on home turf. Assistant coach Abhishek Nayar defended the approach, noting that the team



management does not dictate pitch preparation. Nonetheless, the plan visibly backfired, with Ashwin and Jadeja performing below par in Pune, a pivotal match in the series.

Interestingly, this New Zealand series marked Ashwin's second-poorest Test outing at

home, with a bowling average of 41.22 runs per wicket. His only worse home series was against England in 2012-13, when he averaged 52.64 runs per wicket—India's last home Test series loss.

India appeared ensnared by its

own spin trap, inviting criticism from former players, including Harbhajan Singh. Taking to social media, Harbhajan remarked, "Earlier generations' batsmen never played on these kinds of tracks. These tracks are prepared for 2-3 day Test matches. You don't need Murali



THE 0-3 HUMILIATION HAS ALSO LEFT INDIA GASPING FOR AIR IN THE WORLD TEST CHAMPIONSHIP (WTC) STANDINGS

[Muttiah Muralitharan], [Shane] Warne, or Saqi [Saqlain Mushtaq] on these pitches to get teams out. Anyone can get anyone out."

Following criticism a few years ago, the team management shifted its reliance to pacers and began using sporting wickets that

Rewarding comeback: Returning to the Test side after three years, off-spinner Washington Sundar shone in Pune, taking seven wickets in the first innings and four in the second.

K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

extended Tests into the fourth day. But under Gambhir, the strategy leaned toward spin and rank turners, and the results spun out of India's control.

Questionable selection calls

Opting for rank turners wasn't the only mistake; India also made questionable selection calls, often playing a bowler short.

In the first Test, played on a Bengaluru surface that clearly called

for a third pacer, India instead picked Kuldeep Yadav. The left-arm wrist-spinner ended up as the most expensive of India's bowlers, while New Zealand's pacers thrived from the start.

In Pune, where New Zealand's spinners led by Mitchell Santner wreaked havoc, India fielded two pacers, Jasprit Bumrah and Akash Deep. Akash bowled only six overs in the first innings and remained unused in the second. A similar situation played out in Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium, where India replaced the rested Bumrah with Mohammed Siraj. Like Akash in Pune, Siraj spent most of the game as a bystander as Rohit chose not to utilise him in the second innings.

Silver linings

Despite the disappointing series, a few positives stood out, notably Washington Sundar's emergence.

Returning to the Test side after three years, the off-spinner shone in Pune, taking seven wickets in the first innings and four in the second. Washington also contributed with the bat, providing India a hopeful glimpse of the future as it contemplates a post-Ashwin and Jadeja era. The 25-year-old had the highest batting average (44.5) among Indian players and the best bowling average (14.12) in the series. Pant's ongoing excellence and calmness under pressure also offered a bright spot in an otherwise challenging series.

While it's important to dissect India's shortcomings, New Zealand's achievement deserves praise. The Kiwis' success was even more remarkable given their recent struggles against Sri Lanka and their comparatively modest spin attack.

Poor field placements

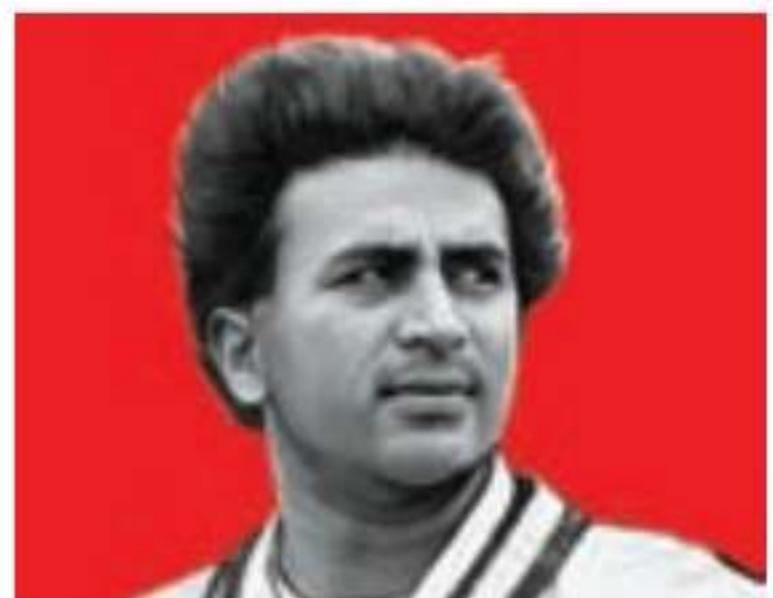
Ashwin and Jadeja's struggle with the ball was exacerbated by captain Rohit's overly defensive field placements. Both spinners often bowled with a long-on or long-off, giving New Zealand's batters easy opportunities to rotate the strike and relieve pressure. India's bowlers allowed a single or double on 23.79% of deliveries, meaning New Zealand's batters rarely had to seek boundaries, allowing them to build runs steadily.

India also lacked close-in fielders, with Sarfaraz Khan as the sole regular presence at short leg.

Looking ahead

With only two home Tests scheduled in the next year — against the West Indies in October — it wouldn't be surprising if the current core of India's Test side, including Kohli, Rohit, Jadeja, and Ashwin, has played its last home game together in the longest format.

This transition has been on the horizon for some time, but New Zealand's dominance has highlighted the challenges India faces in ensuring a smooth change of guard and maintaining its formidable home record.



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



FOR MORE
STORIES

WARM-UP MATCHES WOULD HAVE GIVEN FIRST-TIMERS TO AUSTRALIA BETTER CHANCE TO SUCCEED

Wouldn't the practice matches **benefit youngsters** like Yashasvi Jaiswal and Sarfaraz Khan, who are playing on Australian pitches for the first time, to get some runs under their belt and get a feel of what the pitches will be like?

Australia looks like a huge mountain to climb after the Indian team stumbled terribly on a speed bump called New Zealand. Nobody, not even the Kiwis themselves, would have thought of a clean sweep against India, and that too in India. It has happened thanks to the short-gain policy of preparing pitches for our spinners when just about everybody in the cricketing world agrees that we have the best new-ball bowler in the world across all formats. How about preparing a pitch for him? **With the balance that India has in its bowling attack, it's always a good idea to go in with a pitch that wears gradually rather than a pitch where the match finishes in about three days.**

Yes, the points for qualification for the World Test Championship Final are at stake, but why would you give the opposition team a chance where their spinners, who are not half as good as yours, look like giant killers and, in fact, turn out to be so too? Ever since the bouncer rule restricting fast bowlers to just two bouncers an over has come in, batters have started moving forward and forward, almost forgetting the use of the backfoot and the crease.

The short boundaries and big bats have meant even miscued shots are going for sixes.

Batters play with hard hands, as they do in white-ball cricket, which means when the ball turns or even seams off the pitch, the edges carry to the fielders in the slip cordon. More than technique, it is temperament that is the main problem. The real issue is the thinking where again the short boundaries and big bats mean that batters, after playing three or four dot balls, think they can change the momentum by going for a big shot.

It may work with the white ball, which doesn't swing, seam, or spin as much, but with the red ball, it's flirting with danger, especially if one has just come in to bat. Test cricket requires some patience, especially on pitches where the bowlers are getting some assistance, but not many modern batters believe in that. Then there's this new thinking that, 'come what may, we will play only at breakneck speed in a five-day game', and that means there is not much thought given to tiring the bowler out or waiting for conditions to improve.

That's why the Pujaras and the Rahanes have no place in the Indian team's plans. Pujara wore down the Australian attack, as did Rahane, and so the stroke-makers could take advantage of a tired attack and flog it and make up for a slow but watchful start. That kind of thinking is not



there. Now there's this business of belting the ball like England batters are doing and losing badly overseas.

Australia can be salvaged because the pitches there are beautiful to bat on after the first dozen overs or so, after which the ball hardly deviates off the surface. To do that, though, the team needs to play a bit more on those kinds of pitches. Instead, we are now told that the warm-up game before the first Test has been called off. Wouldn't it benefit youngsters like (Yashasvi) Jaiswal and Sarfaraz (Khan), who are playing on Australian pitches for the first time, to get some runs under their belt and get a feel of what the pitches will be like?

And if they get out early, they can still get into the nets and practice against the throwdown specialist or the net bowlers. For bowlers like Akash Deep and Harshit Rana too, it's essential to know the best length to bowl in Australia, as it's

Practice makes perfect: Sunil Gavaskar wants Team India to play some warm-up games, even if they are against State A teams like Queensland A and Victoria A. AP

different from India, and the best learning is in a proper match and not just net practice.

Let's just hope that good sense prevails, and even now, though it's too late, some warm-up games can be arranged, even if it's against the State A teams like Queensland A and Victoria A. These warm-up games will give the first-timers to Australia and the youngsters good practice and a better chance to succeed.

All Indian cricket fans are keeping our spirits high and our fingers crossed for Australia. Let's hope that the New Zealand series was just a bad dream and turns out to be a very good wake-up call.



With the balance that India has in its bowling attack, it's always a good idea to go in with a pitch that wears gradually rather than a pitch where the match finishes in about three days.



1st

Formidable: Rachin Ravindra maintained his strong form in India, scoring another half-century (65 off 105 balls) in the first innings. His fifty, alongside Devon Conway's 76, helped New Zealand reach 259 after choosing to bat first. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



2nd

Comeback man: Playing a Test match after three-and-a-half years, Washington Sundar registered his best figures, 7/59, in First-Class cricket — also his maiden five-for in Tests — as India skittled out New Zealand inside 80 overs on the first day. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



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3rd

Routed: Virat Kohli, stunned after missing a full-toss from Mitchell Santner to be dismissed for just 1 off 9 balls, became the face of yet another batting collapse for India in the Test series. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

4th

Wreaking havoc: Mitchell Santner had Indian batters at his mercy, claiming his maiden Test five-for — and only his second five-wicket haul in First-Class cricket — with figures of 7/53 to give New Zealand a 103-run lead. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH





5th

Leading the way: Captain and opener Tom Latham scored 86, stretching New Zealand's lead to 358 and setting India a daunting target of 359. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



6th

Jaisball: Yashasvi Jaiswal began the chase with a six off just the second ball of the innings. The 22-year-old counter-attacked during his 77 off 65 balls as the home team attempted to level the series, but he couldn't find partners at the other end, with India losing wickets at regular intervals. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



7th

Historic win: Mitchell Santner picked up 13 wickets in total as New Zealand took an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series, confirming its first-ever series win on Indian soil. The 113-run loss also meant India lost its first Test series at home in 12 years, an end of an 18-series long winning streak. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



1st

Royal show: Ravindra Jadeja in action during the third Test against New Zealand. The left-arm spinner picked up a five-wicket haul in each innings to complete his third career 10-wicket match haul. EMMANUAL YOGINI

2nd

Adoration: Fans flocked to capture a glimpse of Virat Kohli as he strode to the crease in the third Test against New Zealand. The anticipation was electric. But the former India skipper, under intense pressure, endured a nightmare outing, managing only five runs across both innings.

EMMANUAL YOGINI





3rd

Safe hands: Daryl Mitchell dives to his left to complete the catch of Ravindra Jadeja during the first innings. The southpaw made 14 off 25 balls as the Indian lower-order collapsed following a 96-run fifth-wicket stand between Rishabh Pant and Shubman Gill. EMMANUAL YOGINI



4th

Beaten all ends up: New Zealand's Glenn Phillips is foisted by a carrom ball from Ravichandran Ashwin during the second innings. Phillips' attacking knock was cut short on 26 of 14 balls.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

5th

Counterattack:

Rishabh Pant executes a reverse sweep in Mumbai, showcasing his audacious flair. The southpaw notched up twin fifties, almost guiding India to victory from a precarious position in the fourth innings chase. His dismissal for a 57-ball 64 was the final nail in the coffin. EMMANUAL YOGINI





6th

Homecoming: Ajaz Patel clicks a picture with his family after winning the Player of the Match award in the third Test. The Mumbai-born spinner picked up 11 wickets in the match taking his career tally at the Wankhede Stadium to 25. PTI



7th

The Kiwi way: New Zealand players, led by captain Tom Latham, celebrate with the trophy after beating India 3-0 in the Test series. The Kiwis became the first-ever visiting team to whitewash India in a home series with three or more matches. PTI

Henry scalps 100

26} The number of Test matches Kiwi bowler Matt Henry required to reach his 100th Test wicket when he dismissed Kuldeep Yadav in the first Test in Bengaluru. In doing so, he became the joint second-quickest New Zealand bowler to reach this milestone. Henry is the 15th New Zealander overall to achieve this landmark and the 13th fast bowler from the country.

Quickest to reach 100 Test wickets for New Zealand

Test#	Bowler	Achieved on	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	Against	Venue	Result	100th victim
25	Richard Hadlee	17 Feb 1979	6042	3058	101	30.28	59.82	Pak	Napier	Drawn	Imran Khan
26	Neil Wagner	19 Nov 2016	5596	2981	102	29.23	54.86	Pak	Christchurch HO	Won	Babar Azam
26	Matt Henry	17 Oct 2024	6023	3094	100	30.94	60.23	Ind	Bengaluru	Won	Kuldeep Yadav
27	Bruce Taylor	16 Feb 1973	5366	2492	100	24.92	53.66	Pak	Auckland	Drawn	Intikhab Alam

Note: Four others (Danny Morrison, Daniel Vettori, Tim Southee, Trent Boult) achieved their landmarks in 29 Tests. The bowling figures above are at the end of the innings in which the bowler achieved the milestone.

8} The number of times teams have been dismissed for totals under 50 since 2000. India now holds the dubious distinction of appearing twice on this list: once in Adelaide in 2020 and again in Bengaluru in 2024. Additionally, India (46) and the West Indies (47) are the only home teams dismissed for less than 50 runs at home during this millennium. India's score of 46 in Bengaluru is recorded as the seventh-lowest total by a home team in the history of Test cricket. All the tables given below are self-explanatory.

Sub-50 totals this millennium in Test cricket

Total	Overs	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result	Inns
36+	21.2	India	Australia	Adelaide	19 Dec 2020	Lost by 8 wickets	3
38	15.4	Ireland	England	Lord's	26 Jul 2019	Lost by 143 runs	4
43	18.4	Bangladesh	West Indies	North Sound	4 Jul 2018	Lost by an inns & 219 runs	1
45	19.2	New Zealand	South Africa	Cape Town	2 Jan 2013	Lost by an inns & 27 runs	1
46	31.2	India	New Zealand	Bengaluru	17 Oct 2024	Lost by 8 wickets	1
47	25.3	West Indies	England	Kingston	14 Mar 2004	Lost by 10 wickets	3
47	18.0	Australia	South Africa	Cape Town	10 Nov 2011	Lost by 8 wickets	3
49	29.1	Pakistan	South Africa	Johannesburg	2 Feb 2013	Lost by 211 runs	2

+ Lost nine wickets — as one batter had to retire hurt.

Note: In Adelaide, Lord's and Cape Town the losing sides (India, Ireland & Australia) had taken the first innings lead. Australia's lead was a mammoth 188 runs, while Ireland's was 122.

Sub-50 totals by the home side in Test cricket

Total	Overs	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result	Inns
26	27.0	New Zealand	England	Auckland	28 Mar 1955	Lost by an inns & 20 runs	3
30	18.4+	South Africa	England	Port Elizabeth	14 Feb 1896	Lost by 288 runs	4
35	22.4+	South Africa	England	Cape Town	4 Apr 1899	Lost by 210 runs	4
42	37.3#	England	Australia	Sydney	14 Feb 1888	Lost by 126 runs	2
42	39.0	New Zealand	Australia	Wellington	29 Mar 1946	Lost by an inns & 103 runs	1
43	28.2#	South Africa	England	Cape Town	26 Mar 1889	Lost by an inns & 202 runs	3
46	31.2	India	New Zealand	Bengaluru	17 Oct 2024	Lost by 8 wickets	1
47	47.1#	South Africa	England	Cape Town	26 Mar 1889	Lost by an inns & 202 runs	3
47	25.3	West Indies	England	Kingston	14 Mar 2004	Lost by 10 wickets	3

+ five-ball over

four-ball over

South Africa at Cape Town was dismissed twice for sub-50 totals on the second day (26 March 1889)

India's lowest Test totals

Total	Overs	Against	Venue	Date	Result	Inns
36+	21.2	Australia	Adelaide	19 Dec 2020	Lost by 8 wickets	3
42+	17.0	England	Lord's	24 Jun 1974	Lost by an inns & 285 runs	3
46	31.2	New Zealand	Bengaluru	17 Oct 2024	Lost by 8 wickets	1

+ Lost nine wickets — at Lord's one batter (injured) did not bat and in Adelaide one batter had to retire hurt.

India's lowest Test totals at home

Total	Overs	Against	Venue	Date	Result	Inns
46	31.2	New Zealand	Bengaluru	17 Oct 2024	Lost by 8 wickets	1
75	30.5	West Indies	Delhi	25 Nov 1987	Lost by 5 wickets	1
76	20.0	South Africa	Ahmedabad	4 Apr 2008	Lost by inns & 90 runs	1

5 } The number of occasions when Test wicket-keepers missed a century by one run. Rishabh Pant recently joined the list in Bengaluru, becoming the second Indian keeper to do so after M. S. Dhoni.

Test wicket-keepers missing a three-figure score by one run

Runs	Dismissal	Wicket-keeper	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result	Inns	Bat#
99	LBW	Brendon McCullum	NZ	SL	Napier	5 Apr 2005	Drawn	1	7
99	Run out	M. S. Dhoni	Ind	Eng	Nagpur	15 Dec 2012	Drawn	2	6
99	LBW	Jonny Bairstow	Eng	SA	Manchester	5 Aug 2017	WON	1	7
99	Not out	Jonny Bairstow	Eng	Aus	Manchester	21 Jul 2023	Drawn	2	7
99	B bowled	Rishabh Pant	Ind	NZ	Bengaluru	19 Oct 2024	Lost	3	5

Note: M. S. Dhoni was also the captain

Most times – 90s scores by Test batters

90s	Batter (for)	Scores in the 90s	90 scores from	100+ career scores
10	Steve Waugh (Aus)	90, 91, 92, 98, 94*, 99*, 96, 96, 96, 90	1988 to 2001	32
10	Rahul Dravid (Ind)	95, 92, 92, 93, 91, 92, 91*, 98, 95, 93	1996 to 2008	36
10	Sachin Tendulkar (Ind)	96, 92, 97, 90, 92, 94, 91, 98, 91, 94	1994 to 2011	51
9	Michael Slater (Aus)	99, 92, 95, 91, 96, 96, 97, 91, 96	1993 to 2001	14
8	Alvin Kallicharran (WI)	91, 93, 98, 92*, 93, 97, 92, 98	1973 to 1979	12
8	Inzamam-ul-Haq (Pak)	95, 95, 96, 92*, 97, 99, 97, 92*	1995 to 2007	25
8	AB de Villiers (SA)	92, 98, 97, 95, 97, 99, 90, 91	2005 to 2014	22
7	Matthew Hayden (Aus)	97, 91, 96, 99, 90, 94, 92	2001 to 2006	30
7	Alastair Cook (Eng)	94, 95, 96, 94, 94, 95, 96	2009 to 2015	33
7	Rishabh Pant (Ind)	92, 92, 97, 91, 96, 93, 99	2019 to 2024	6

Most times – 90s scores by Test wicket-keepers

90s	Wicket-keeper (for)	Scores in the 90s	90 scores from	100+ career scores
7	Rishabh Pant (Ind)	92, 92, 97, 91, 96, 93, 99	2019 to 2024	6
5	M. S. Dhoni (Ind)	92, 92, 98, 90, 99	2007 to 2012	6
4	Alan Knott (Eng)	96*, 96, 90, 92	1969 to 1972	5
4	Rodney Marsh (Aus)	92*, 91, 97, 91	1971 to 1980	3
4	Quinton de Kock (SA)	91, 90, 95, 96	2017 to 2021	6

90s scores by Indian Test wicket-keepers

90s	Wicket-keeper	Scores in the 90s	90 scores from	100+ career scores
7	Rishabh Pant	92, 92, 97, 91, 96, 93, 99	2019 to 2024	6
5	M. S. Dhoni	92, 92, 98, 90, 99	2007 to 2012	6
1	Farokh Engineer	90	1965	2
1	Dinesh Karthik	93	2005	1
1	Dhruv Jurel	90	2024	0

All records are correct and updated until 20 Oct 2024.

Smoke on the water in Patna and Mumbai to Assam via Sri Lanka!

Our correspondents bring you the highlights and intriguing moments, both on and off the field, from the **third round** of Ranji Trophy fixtures.

Santadeep Dey and Vivek Krishnan

santadeep.dey@thehindu.co.in,
vivek.krishnan@thehindu.co.in

Bihar is a 'dry state'. Its only ground, which used to host international cricket, not so much.

The Moin-ul-Haq Stadium in Patna, home to the Bihar senior team in the Ranji Trophy 2024-25, recently rolled out the red carpet for 'Group C' rival Karnataka.

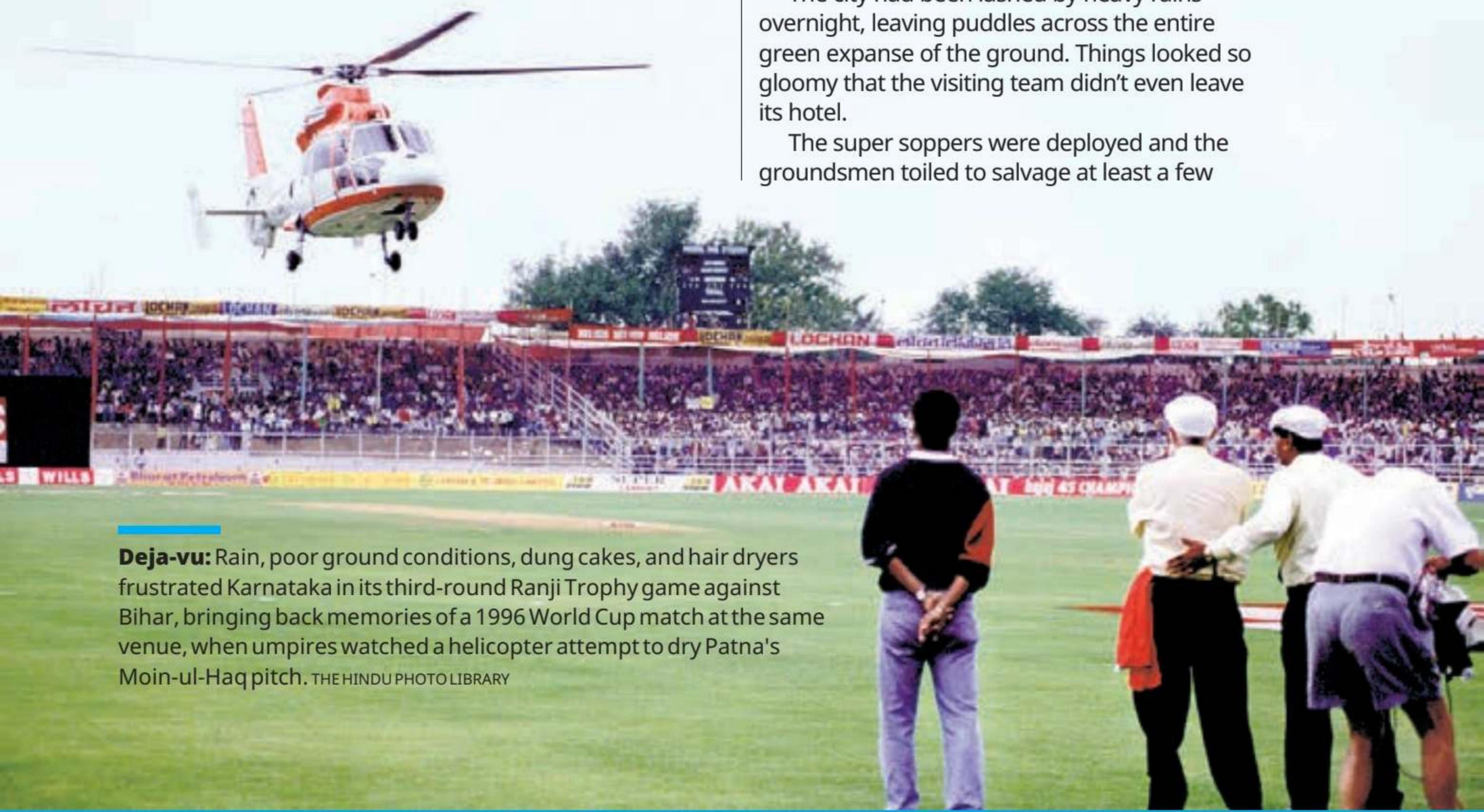
Following the previous edition of the tournament, which saw controversies over the

stadium's dilapidated state and infighting within the Bihar Cricket Association, maximum efforts have been made to whitewash the association's image this time around. Quite literally, as not a single square inch of the arena was left untouched by a fresh (three-day-old) coat of lime.

Nevertheless, Rajendra Arlekar, the Governor of the state, invited as the Chief Guest for the game, seemed a happy man. So, mission accomplished. Perhaps he wouldn't have been as pleased had he arrived on the second day of the round-three clash.

The city had been lashed by heavy rains overnight, leaving puddles across the entire green expanse of the ground. Things looked so gloomy that the visiting team didn't even leave its hotel.

The super soppers were deployed and the groundsmen toiled to salvage at least a few



Deja-vu: Rain, poor ground conditions, dung cakes, and hair dryers frustrated Karnataka in its third-round Ranji Trophy game against Bihar, bringing back memories of a 1996 World Cup match at the same venue, when umpires watched a helicopter attempt to dry Patna's Moin-ul-Haq pitch. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

overs. When no significant improvement was seen, blow-dryers were brought out. What followed next, however, had the photojournalist scrambling to change his lenses: right in the middle of the ground, dung cakes were being burned in a desperate attempt to dry a large, wet patch. Within hours, multiple fires dotted the turf, and, with them, logic went up in smoke.

Interestingly, this isn't the first time this venue has run into such challenges.

During the 1996 World Cup, Patna was awarded a league game between Kenya and Zimbabwe.

Then Chief Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav inaugurated the pavilion before the match. Unfortunately, steady rain set in, and the covers were promptly called for. Lalu decided to intervene, summoning the state helicopter to dry the playing area!

The plan, however, backfired massively when the chopper flew so low that it blew the cover off entirely, spilling the accumulated water onto the pitch. The game had to be postponed to the next day, and Kenya, which had the upper hand after taking three quick wickets, ended up losing on the rescheduled day. Patna has only hosted one men's international game since that incident.

Well-timed move

Among the 38 teams that endure the grind of the Ranji Trophy every season, there are many cricketers with intriguing backgrounds who quietly go about their work. One such cricketer is Sumit Ghadigaonkar, who notched up a superb century for Assam in the first innings and followed it up with a fifty in the second innings against Delhi in the national capital during the third round of matches.

At 32, Ghadigaonkar may not have a realistic shot at higher honours, but that doesn't diminish the sincerity with which he and many others represent their respective teams. Originally from Mumbai, he never managed to secure a spot on his home team.

Ghadigaonkar was playing club cricket in Mumbai's *maidans* and working for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) before a friend

encouraged him to try his luck in Sri Lanka. It was in Colombo in 2020 that he played his maiden First-Class game for Chilaw CC against Tamil Union. Sri Lanka allows two overseas professionals in each domestic team. "One of my friends was playing in Sri Lanka. He offered me an opportunity. So, I went there and played one season. It was a very nice experience," he says.

After a season, however, Ghadigaonkar had to return to India due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the 2023-24 season, he has been playing for Assam as a local player after being transferred to Guwahati with RBI. The move to Assam seems to have paid off, as he scored his first century in India's First-Class system last week.



Late entrant: Sumit Ghadigaonkar's entry into India's domestic system came as late as last season when he began playing for Assam as a local player.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR



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Is it time to do away with IPL mega auctions?

Many franchises feel that holding a mega auction every three years **disrupts momentum** and undermines long-term team-building efforts.

Shayan Acharya

shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

On a rainy July evening at the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) headquarters in Mumbai, the owners of the 10 Indian Premier League (IPL) franchises gathered for one of their longest meetings to date. As it drizzled outside, intense debates ensued over the retention policy for players going forward. While at least three franchises favoured scrapping the mega auction held every three years in favour of more player retention, others disagreed. By the end of the six-hour meeting, the exhausted expressions on the faces of the owners and BCCI office-bearers revealed the outcome: no consensus had been reached.

Following the meeting, the BCCI announced the retention rules for the next three-year cycle, starting from 2025. **Under these new guidelines, each team is allowed to retain six players from its previous squad, with a maximum of five capped internationals — Indian or overseas — and up to two uncapped Indian players.** However, the debates surrounding the policy continue.

While not many have come on record, a common sentiment is that the BCCI should finalise retention policies for future cycles as early as possible. "This time, we had to wait until the end of September to know the retention rules, which forced us to scramble," said a senior franchise official, adding, "If we get some more time, it makes life easier for everyone. That's something we need to consider going forward."

Many franchises feel that holding a mega auction every three years disrupts momentum and undermines long-term team-building efforts. "It takes a lot of time to build a squad, and it also takes significant time and investment for younger players to mature," said Sunrisers Hyderabad owner Kavya Maran. The franchise has invested in developing talents like Abhishek Sharma, who needed three years to become a consistent performer. Maran's sentiments resonated with other franchises, including defending champion Kolkata Knight Riders and inaugural season winner Rajasthan Royals, both of whom opted for full retention of six players.

Five teams — Chennai Super Kings, Gujarat Titans, Lucknow Super

Major overhaul: Kolkata Knight Riders and Delhi Capitals have released Shreyas Iyer and Rishabh Pant, respectively, ahead of this year's IPL mega auction. K.R. DEEPAK



Bidding time: Sunrisers Hyderabad has invested in developing talents like Abhishek Sharma, who needed three years to become a consistent performer. K. R. DEEPAK

Giants, Mumbai Indians, and Sunrisers Hyderabad — retained five players each. Meanwhile, Delhi Capitals, Royal Challengers Bengaluru, and Punjab Kings chose to retain four, three, and two players, respectively.

Entering the mega auction in Jeddah with Rs 110.5 crore, Punjab Kings holds the largest purse, allowing it the opportunity to

regroup and build a new team. However, it also poses challenges for franchises like Kolkata Knight Riders and Delhi Capitals, who risk losing stars like Shreyas Iyer and Rishabh Pant to the auction pool.

Delhi Capitals co-owner Parth Jindal expressed strong support for mega auctions during the meeting, arguing that they create a level playing field. "I was surprised there was a debate. Some argued there should be no mega auction at all, only smaller auctions, but I'm not in that camp," Jindal said. "I feel it evens the playing field and keeps the IPL competitive."

Punjab Kings co-owner Ness

Wadia agreed, asserting that regular auctions ultimately benefit all stakeholders. "It's the biggest league in the world, and we need to maintain high standards," Wadia said.

Reflecting this view, Punjab Kings retained only two uncapped players — Shashank Singh and Prabhsimran Singh — and will approach the auction with a fresh strategy under new head coach Ricky Ponting.

This year, the BCCI revised the retention rules to adjust for a purse of Rs 120 crore, a 20 per cent increase from last year. Retaining the first player costs a team Rs 18 crore, while the second and third players



cost Rs 14 crore and Rs 11 crore, respectively. Interestingly, if a team retains a fourth player, the cost reverts to Rs 18 crore, with Rs 14 crore for a fifth player. Each uncapped Indian player retained costs Rs 4 crore.

"Retention calls aren't easy," admitted a franchise insider with extensive experience in the process. "With multiple layers of purse

deduction, a lot of strategy is involved. It's not just about retaining a player; it's also about calculating whether you can bring him back through the auction. It's a lot of mathematics," the veteran strategist explained.

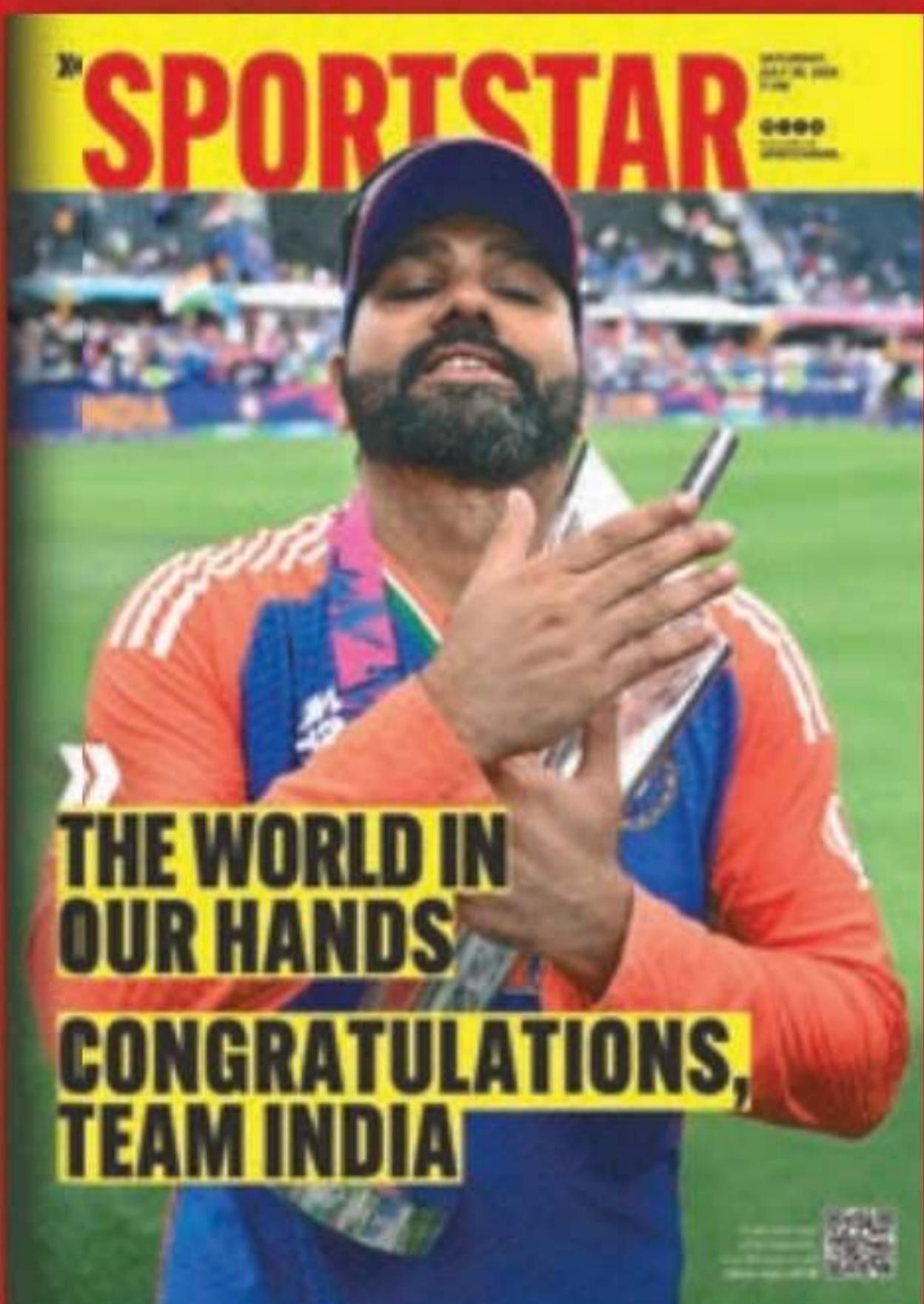
Past examples, such as the Delhi Capitals' experience with former captain Shreyas, underscore the importance of clear planning in

Levelling the playing field: Delhi Capitals co-owner Parth Jindal has expressed strong support for mega auctions. He feels it makes the IPL more competitive. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

retention and auctions. Until 2021, Shreyas captained Delhi Capitals, but the franchise eventually let him go ahead of the mega auction three years ago. The team struggled after his departure, which contributed to the dismissal of former head coach Ponting.

As industry experts reiterate, planning and clear vision are critical to retention and auction decisions. Over the IPL's 16-year history, franchises have tested various approaches, ultimately learning that no one strategy suits all. As Jindal emphasised, "To each his own."

« This year, the BCCI revised the retention rules to adjust for a purse of Rs 120 crore, a 20 per cent increase from last year »



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» WOMEN'S ODIs PHOTOLINE
INDIA-NEW ZEALAND



1st

Action-packed: Just four days after winning its maiden T20 World Cup crown, New Zealand flew from the heat of the United Arab Emirates to the humidity of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The three-match series against India was important for the White Ferns, with the side yet to seal its qualification for the ODI World Cup to be hosted by India in 2025. PTI



2nd

Redemption time: In the Indian camp, all eyes were on Harmanpreet Kaur, who had the faith of the team management to continue as captain of the side after a disappointing group stage exit in the T20 World Cup a few weeks ago. VIJAYSONEJI



3rd

Superb show: India made short work of the White Ferns, with debutants Tejal Hasabnis (above) and Saima Thakor (centre, below) starring with ball and bat, respectively, in a 59-run win for the host. It was a forgettable show with the bat for the Kiwis as they were bundled out for 168. VIJAY SONEJI



5th

On song: New Zealand's seasoned trio — Sophie Devine, Lea Tahuhu, and Suzie Bates — took charge as the White Ferns overpowered India in the second ODI, securing a 76-run victory. Captain Devine led from the front with both bat (79) and ball (3/27). VIJAY SONEJI



4th

6th

Holding fort: The White Ferns' unsteady batting lineup faltered in the series decider, as Deepti Sharma and Priya Mishra dominated with the ball. Brooke Halliday then anchored the innings, guiding New Zealand to a respectable total of 232. VIJAY SONEJI



7th

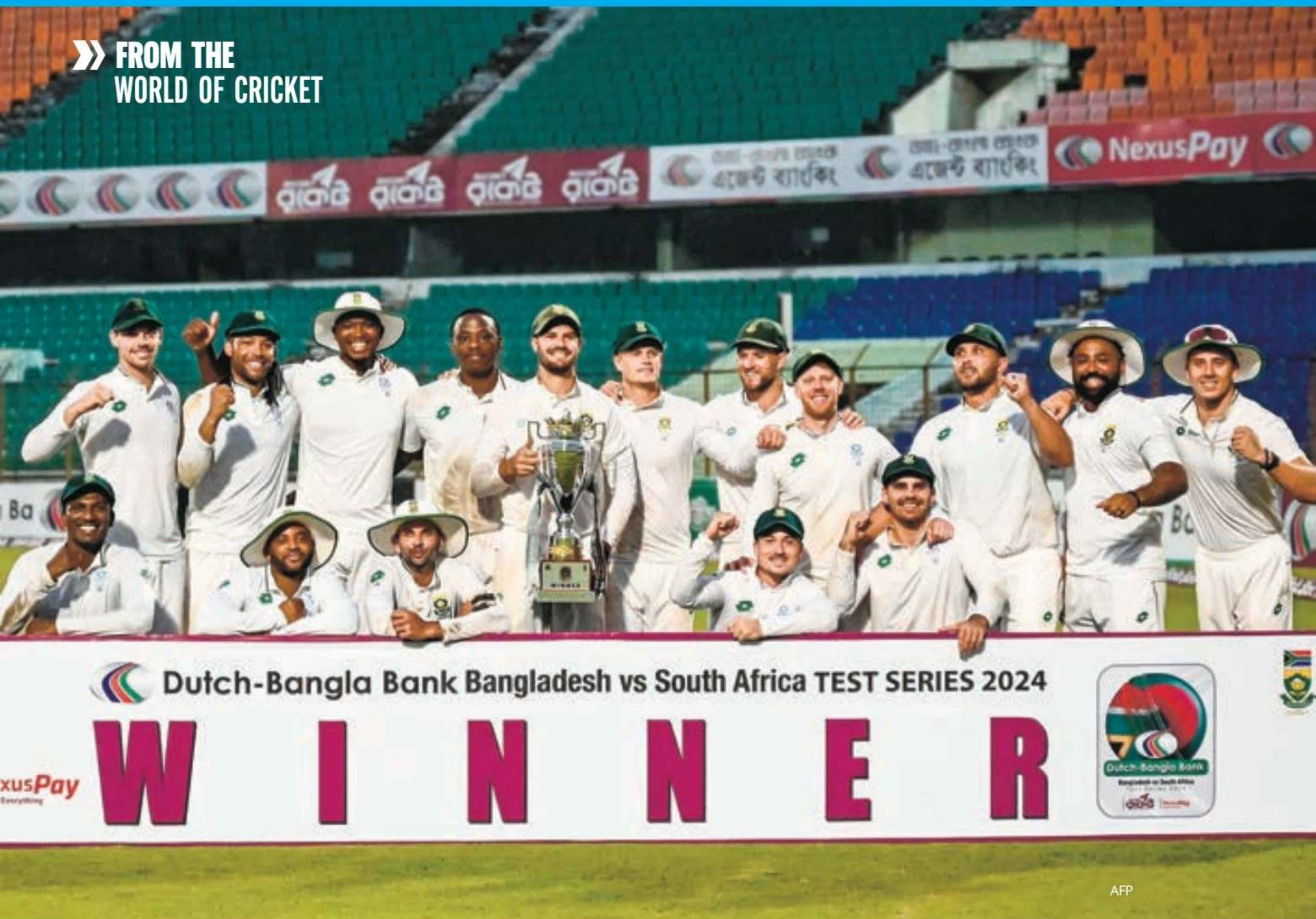
Cracking knock: Smriti Mandhana scored her third ODI ton of the year, supported by a handy fifty from skipper Harmanpreet, as the duo hacked down the target with over five overs to spare in the third and final ODI. VIJAY SONEJI

8th

Triumphant: Smriti revealed that the disappointment of a T20 World Cup campaign gone awry was weighing on the team's minds and described the 2-1 series win, which officially kicks off India's ODI World Cup preparations, as a major morale booster.

VIJAY SONEJI





Dutch-Bangla Bank Bangladesh vs South Africa TEST SERIES 2024

W I N N E R



AFP

South Africa clinches series against Bangladesh

1

The team claimed its first series win in the subcontinent **in a decade**, and its first series sweep in Asia since 2008.

South Africa swept Bangladesh 2-0 in a Test series to claim its first series win in the subcontinent in a decade, and its first series sweep in Asia since 2008.

The Proteas won the first Test by seven wickets, moving up to fourth in the World Test Championship (WTC) table before being

overtaken again by New Zealand. Kagiso Rabada excelled with the ball, taking nine wickets, while Kyle Verreyne was the lone centurion. In the second game, three South African batters scored centuries, helping their side post a formidable total of 575 (decl.). Bangladesh managed only 159 in

the first innings and was forced to follow on. Left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj took a five-wicket haul in the second innings as Bangladesh was bowled out for 143, handing South Africa an innings win and keeping its WTC final hopes alive.



2

Afghanistan A won its maiden ACC Emerging Teams Asia Cup title, defeating Sri Lanka A by seven wickets in the final. Sri Lanka A was restricted to 133, which Afghanistan A chased down comfortably. En route to the final, Afghanistan A overcame the unbeaten India, led by Tilak Varma, by 20 runs in the semifinal. The other finalist, Sri Lanka A, defeated defending champion Pakistan A by seven wickets. The tournament was played in the T20 format for the first time in its six-edition history and featured 'A' squads from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, with UAE, Oman, and Hong Kong China fielding their regular sides.

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3

Pakistan staged a comeback from one game down to defeat England 2-1 in a three-match Test series, marking its first series triumph at home since February 2021. After levelling the series in Multan on a turning wicket, Pakistan's spinners shone again in the decider in Rawalpindi. Noman Ali and Sajid Khan took nine of the 10 wickets in England's first innings, bowling it out for 267. Saud Shakeel's century guided Pakistan to 344, and the spin duo dismissed England for just 112 in the second innings, having claimed 39 wickets between them in the series. Pakistan then chased a modest target of 36 with nine wickets in hand.

AFP



4

Gary Kirsten stepped down as coach of Pakistan's ODI and T20I sides after just five months in the role. Appointed by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on a two-year contract in April 2024, Kirsten departed ahead of Pakistan's white-ball tour of Australia. Test coach Jason Gillespie took over for the tour.



5

Sri Lanka clinched a 2-1 win in a three-match ODI series against the West Indies. In the rain-hit opener, Sri Lanka comfortably chased a DLS-adjusted target of 232, with a 137-run stand between Charith Asalanka and debutant Nishan Madushka. The host sealed the series in the second game as Wanindu Hasaranga, Maheesh Theekshana, and Asitha Fernando restricted the visitor to 189, a target that Sri Lanka chased with five wickets to spare. The West Indies, however, secured a consolation win in the final match with Evin Lewis scoring a century on his return to ODI cricket.



6

Australian wicketkeeper-batter Matthew Wade announced his retirement from international cricket, concluding a 13-year career in which he played 36 Tests, 97 One-Day Internationals, and 92 T20Is. His last appearance was in the 2024 ICC Men's T20 World Cup. The 36-year-old will continue playing domestic cricket for Tasmania and will feature in the Big Bash League for the Hobart Hurricanes.

REUTERS

IT'S A NEW DAWN, BUT BE WARY OF QUICK FIXES

With the Asia Cup in 2025 and both the World Cup and Asian Games on the horizon in 2026, a triumphant ACT would ignite a **renewed sense** of confidence and momentum ahead of a busy season.

Uthra Ganesan

uthra.ganesan@thehindu.co.in

When Hockey India named a "restructured" squad for the upcoming Women's Asian Champions Trophy (ACT) last month, it was notable that the federation acknowledged more than superficial changes in the side.

It wasn't just about the presence or absence of familiar faces; it was a statement indicating that, practically speaking, this was more than just a routine team announcement. Missing out on the Paris Olympics had disrupted all carefully laid plans for Indian women's hockey. Any future success now required, as a first step, acknowledging that it couldn't be business as usual.

The biggest surprise has been the exclusion of veteran Vandana Katariya from the squad. The only Indian woman with more than 300 international caps, Vandana missed the Olympic qualifier due to injury. Her absence was felt not only in scoring by a talented but inexperienced attack but also in the overall experience of the team. This is perhaps the first time Vandana has been excluded without an official injury update.

With senior players like Monika and the talented Nikki Pradhan also absent, the core of the Indian team has



been completely overhauled. While this speaks to chief coach Harendra Singh's future plans, it also takes the team into unknown territory. Conversely, the return of former captain Sushila Chanu, possibly to offset Nikki's absence in the midfield, suggests that the ACT will be less about national pride and more a testing ground for combinations in preparation for future, larger assignments.

Last year, when the Indian women's hockey team stood atop the podium in Ranchi, raising the Asian Champions Trophy high after an unbeaten run, it renewed hope



New guard: This is India's first major event under Salima Tete's captaincy. Tete replaced Savita Punia as captain midway through the last FIH Pro League campaign. GETTY IMAGES

that the disappointment at the Asian Games was a blip. It hinted that the team was destined for greater things and that a third consecutive Olympic appearance, perhaps even an unprecedented medal, was within reach.

Two months later, Indian women's hockey was left picking up the pieces — of shattered dreams, broken trust, bad blood, and allegations of mismanagement — without a coach, a long-term plan, and several unanswered 'what ifs.' As the team steps into a new Olympic cycle, the 2024 ACT marks a series of firsts for Indian women's hockey and

FOR THE FIRST TIME, A MAJOR INTERNATIONAL HOCKEY EVENT HAS BEEN SCHEDULED IN BIHAR, A STATE NOT PARTICULARLY KNOWN FOR SPORTING PROWESS OR EXCELLENCE

serves as a weathervane for its likely direction over the next few years.

For the first time, a major international hockey event has been scheduled in Bihar, a state not

particularly known for its sporting prowess. In fact, apart from a team in the Pro Kabaddi League (Patna Pirates) and Aditya Verma, Indian Premier League (IPL) petitioner and



Unexpected twist: The biggest surprise has been the exclusion of veteran Vandana Katariya from the squad for the Women's Asian Champions Trophy. GETTY IMAGES

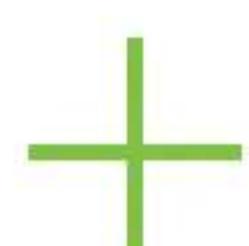
former Cricket Association of Bihar secretary, who helped reshape IPL's administrative structure, the state's sporting connections have been limited. This will be the first time Bihar hosts a truly international competition.

That the chosen venue is the ancient city of Rajgir — one of India's most widely-visited tourist sites and part of the famed Buddhist circuit, encompassing the famous Nalanda and Magadh regions — is intriguing. The International Sports Complex has been described as a

forward-looking, one-stop facility aimed at developing the state's sporting talent and infrastructure. For Indian hockey, which has a glorious men's past but an uncertain women's future, it's uniquely symbolic.

It's also a homecoming of sorts

for Harendra. From being mocked with "now Biharis will also play hockey" in his early days to being in charge of the national women's team as the sport reaches his hometown, the highly respected coach has come a long way, both professionally and personally.



It's a homecoming of sorts for Harendra Singh. From being mocked with "now Biharis will also play hockey" in his early days to being in charge of the national women's team as the sport reaches his hometown, the highly respected coach has come a long way.



Familiar role: Harendra Singh succeeded Janneke Schopman as the coach of the Indian women's hockey team earlier this year. Harendra had served at the same position in the past before being appointed as the United States men's team coach in 2021.

GETTY IMAGES

Although the team played an exhibition game last month for the turf inauguration, this will be his first official return.

Make no mistake, there will be the pressure of defending the title in front of an expectant home crowd. But much has changed over the past year, including the performances of other teams.

China, for one, proved its Asian Games win was no fluke, claiming a historic maiden silver at the Paris Olympics earlier this year.

While it enters as a continental champion, it comes with added confidence as an Olympic medallist. Although this time it will be a different and young team, with four debutants and head coach Alyson Annan is not expected to be on the bench.

Japan, another Asian team competing in Paris at India's expense, will arrive with temporary staff, a limited roster of experienced players and no coach Jude Menezes. Korea, meanwhile, brings an experienced lineup, aiming to return to its winning ways. Malaysia and Thailand complete the lineup.

With a curtailed Hockey India League following the ACT and the Pro League, the Indian team hopes to use this as a stepping stone toward its future goals.

With the Asia Cup in 2025, the World Cup, and the Asian Games in 2026, a successful ACT would mark the first step towards regaining confidence ahead of a busy season. But, as 2023 showed, a good start is only half the battle.



Women's ACT: November 11-20, 2024

The teams: India, China, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, Thailand.

Indian squad: Savita, Bichu Devi, Udita, Jyoti, Vaishnavi Phalke, Sushila Chanu, Ishika Chaudhary, Neha, Salima Tete, Sharmila Devi, Manisha Chauhan, Sunelita Toppo, Lalremsiami, Navneet Kaur, Preeti Dubey, Sangita Kumari, Deepika, Beauty Dungdung.

« I want to be remembered as a good person,
not just a good player »

FAZEL ATRACHALI

Saikat Chakraborty

saikat.chakraborty@thehindu.co.in

As Hyderabad prepared to illuminate its skyline with the festive glow of Diwali, Bengal Warriorz's captain, Fazel Atrachali, ignited a spark of his own. In a dazzling display of defensive prowess, the Iranian scripted history by becoming the first-ever player to amass 500 tackle points in the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL).

Affectionately known as 'the Sultan', he achieved this milestone during a nail-biting encounter against defending champion Puneri Paltan, which ended in a tie. His third tackle point of the match etched his name in the annals of PKL history. It took the left-corner defender ten seasons and 173 matches to conquer a summit no other had been able to climb.

"I never imagined that one day I would be the most successful defender in the PKL, let alone reaching this milestone. When I started playing kabaddi in my village, people told me I was not good enough and should pursue another sport. From that day to this, it's been 21 years," says the four-time Asian Games medallist to *Sportstar*.

In a sport that originated in ancient India, the Iranian has been one of the poster boys of its most prominent professional league for nearly a decade. However, his PKL journey hasn't been as uninterrupted

as his stats suggest.

"The first time I came to PKL, nobody believed in me. Ten years ago, I wanted one chance to play on the mat, and after a lot of hard work, many injuries, and time away from family, I had to be happy with the success. A big thank you to everybody who has helped me on this journey," says the two-time PKL winner.

Snapped up by the Kolkata-based franchise for Rs. 50 lakh, Fazel was tasked with shoring up the Bengal Warriorz's defensive line. The seasoned campaigner was also handed a bigger responsibility — the captain's armband.

Now in his fifth PKL franchise, the most successful captain in the league's history feels more at ease than ever with the Warriorz. United with old friend Maninder Singh and backed by experienced defender Nitesh Kumar, he's ready to lead his team to new heights.

"This is a dream," Fazel enthuses. "Having two such experienced players by my side allows me to play with freedom and aggression. I'm not burdened with constant tactical directives. Mani and Nitesh have that covered. I can focus on fulfilling my role on the mat."

A global vision

Despite the glamour and glitz of the PKL, Fazel is concerned about the

future of the sport outside India and Iran.

"The last Asian Games was like a village tournament; only India and Iran competed. Countries like South Korea, which used to be good, have stopped playing due to the lack of international tournaments," he says.

Fazel, who led Iran to its first-ever gold in the Asian Games when it defeated India in Jakarta-Palembang 2018, holds a pessimistic view on international tournaments.

When asked about the proposed 2025 Kabaddi World Cup, he said, "I've heard this 'next year' promise for nearly a decade now. I hear it but don't believe it."

As the sport continues to professionalise, Fazel aspires to elevate it to a global stage, including the Olympics. He believes that increasing international participation is crucial to achieving this goal. "We need more countries to compete," he says, highlighting the limited number of international tournaments since 2016.

Beyond the mat

A ferocious defender on the mat, the Iranian is a soft-spoken and friendly person off it. A role model for many young players, he's known for his tactical brilliance.

"Fazel has a unique perspective on the game. He's a fantastic tactician

AS THE SPORT CONTINUES TO PROFESSIONALISE, FAZEL ASPIRES TO ELEVATE IT TO A GLOBAL STAGE, INCLUDING THE OLYMPICS

and an even better person. He always treats us all equally. There is only one player in the world who has played four Asian Games," says Paltan skipper Aslam Inamdar, who played under Fazel in season nine.

Not only is he supportive of his teammates, but he also shares his experience with opposition players. He believes it's his responsibility to guide younger players.

"In PKL, we're constantly moving between teams. As a seasoned player, it's my duty to mentor the youngsters. It brings me joy to see them grow," he says.

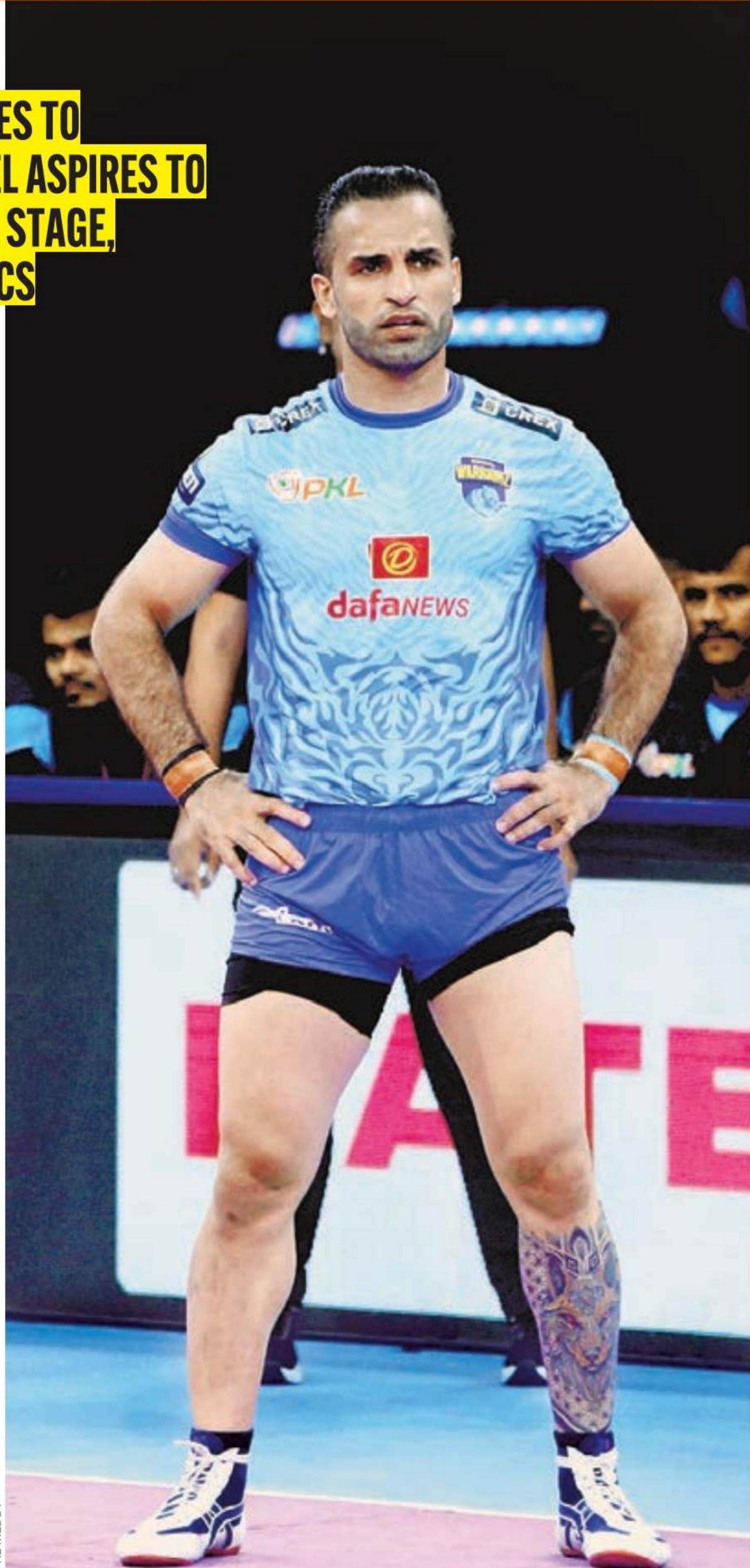
Youngsters Nitin Kumar and Sushil Kambrekar have been impressive for Warriorz this season. Fazel expressed his pleasure, saying, "I'm glad they're getting recognition. Bengal's young players are eager to learn and improve, and I'm learning from them too."

An ardent judo enthusiast, the defender possesses a warrior's spirit, defying critics who question his age and influence. "Every season, they think my time is done. Now, I'm 32 years old, I have 500 tackle points, and I'm still giving my best on the mat. That makes me really happy," Fazel says.

As his career winds down towards its last phase, the legendary defender is focused on his legacy. Beyond medals and stats, he values respect from his peers.

"I want to be remembered as a good person, not just a good player. Medals and stats are fleeting, but respect is lasting. I don't want to be known for a bad attitude. The sport is bigger than any one person," he concludes.

PKL MEDIA



MAX OVERCOMES PENALTY AND RAIN TO TIGHTEN CHAMPIONSHIP GRIP

The three-time World Champion pulled off one of the greatest races of his career, which now almost certainly guarantees him a **fourth successive crown.**

Kavita Menon

kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

There is always a possibility of the unthinkable happening during a Formula One race — an event or move capable of changing not just the result but the entire season. And, what unravelled during the double-header in Mexico and Brazil was nothing short of unbelievable.

The 2024 title fight, once deemed a done deal, became quite interesting in the last few races as Lando Norris and the resurgent McLaren team rediscovered long-lost form, aiming to snatch it from the grasp of a struggling Red Bull. But an attempt was all that could be made, as Max Verstappen showed that one race alone can swing the odds in his favour. He did so in remarkable fashion in São Paulo, charging from 17th place to win the rain-hit and incident-laden Brazilian Grand Prix.



VERSTAPPEN CHARGED FROM 17TH PLACE TO WIN THE RAIN-HIT AND INCIDENT-LADEN BRAZILIAN GRAND PRIX

More significant still was that he won with a lead of over 19 seconds over the car behind — the unheralded Alpine of Esteban Ocon. **The Dutchman couldn't have chosen a better time to emerge from a 10-race winless slump, though his fighting spirit was never in doubt.** Despite some risky moves and finding himself in the hot seat over his dipping form, the three-time World Champion pulled off one of the greatest races of his career, which now almost certainly guarantees him a fourth successive crown.

However, the scene before the Brazil race painted a slightly different picture. With a sprint race win and pole position, Norris had a 44-point deficit against Verstappen, who qualified only 12th and faced an additional five-place penalty, dropping him

down to 17th. All he needed to do was protect his lead, but little did he know that his miserable pole-to-win conversion (two wins from eight poles) would come back to haunt him.

The 24-year-old had the pace and team support throughout the weekend — his teammate Oscar Piastri was instructed to let Norris pass not once, but twice, including for the sprint race victory. Yet it was Brazil's weather that had the final say, making an event-packed, early-start Sunday one to forget for the discouraged Norris.

It was, however, memorable for defending champion Verstappen and for a certain Lewis Hamilton, who had the 'greatest honour of his career' driving the late Ayrton

Senna's McLaren MP4/5B from his title-winning 1990 campaign.

In the chaos that unfolded, one team arguably stood out from the rest — Alpine. Both its drivers, Ocon and third-placed Pierre Gasly, would never have imagined finishing on the podium, let alone together. With a mighty points haul, the French side took a huge stride in the Constructors' Championship, climbing from ninth (14 points) to sixth (49), keeping alive the midfield battle among the teams.

At the top of the table, however, a three-way battle is ongoing, with McLaren (593) leading but Ferrari (557) and Red Bull (544) within striking distance.

While both UK-based outfits mainly benefited in Brazil, Ferrari managed to stay in the fight thanks to its double podium finish in Mexico, where Carlos Sainz stole the show, though the drama between Norris and Verstappen headlined the race.

The Spaniard had made his

Ode to a legend: Lewis Hamilton drove the late Ayrton Senna's McLaren MP4/5B from his title-winning 1990 campaign. GETTY IMAGES





AP

intentions clear — that he would do whatever it takes to stand atop the podium this year before his Ferrari chapter ends. And he did so unchallenged, as the pole-sitter regained his lead in the opening laps and held it until the end. Verstappen, who momentarily stole the lead, lost it, and possibly the race, after a tussle with Norris.

Whether the FIA modified its rules after a controversial penalty in Austin remains to be seen. However, the stewards had certainly put their foot down this time in Mexico City,

penalising Verstappen with a double 10-second penalty (for causing a collision and staying ahead despite going off-track). Verstappen dropped to the bottom, climbing back to sixth but at the cost of wearing out his tyres too early. Leclerc again capitalised on the battle ahead but eventually settled for third behind Norris.

The sight of Ferrari flags flying high far from home at an iconic part of the Autódromo Hermanos Rodríguez circuit in Mexico City must have brought chills to the

Italian faithful (tifosi).

The podium, surrounded by thousands of fans singing loudly in Spanish, lit up as Sainz ascended with his winning car (**above**) and took to the top step in what could be his final yet most memorable win for Ferrari.

Though the back-to-back race weekends did not disappoint, Norris's ambitious title hope fading away in a race that shifted gears too many times will be a hard pill to swallow. Nevertheless, with three races left in the season, there could still be a twist in the tale.

MotoGP



Down to the wire

The title fight between Jorge Martín (**behind**) and Francesco Bagnaia (**front**) will head to the final round of the 2024 MotoGP season, as the latter defended his pole position to win in Malaysia. The two-time champion managed to keep Martín behind him despite several attempts, reducing the lead in the drivers' standings to 24 points.

Bagnaia showed he wasn't backing down from the battle as he dominated Friday's practice session and broke the pole position record at Sepang on Saturday. Heading into the weekend with a 17-point gap, the sprint race saw the Ducati driver lose the lead in the first lap and crash in the third, gifting Martín the win and a crucial 12 points.

But the Italian rider went into Sunday with unwavering confidence, vowing to go all out in the race. Despite a chaotic start and a reduced 19-lap event, the lead continuously swapped hands between the title rivals, but Bagnaia pulled away just enough to keep the battle alive. The season is set to conclude at Barcelona's Circuit de Catalunya-Barcelona, as the Valencia Grand Prix was cancelled due to catastrophic flooding in the region.



REUTERS



FLICK AND CO. FLIP CLASICO SCRIPT

Barcelona ended its run of four consecutive defeats to Real Madrid with a **4-0 trouncing** of the defending champion.

Joan Mathew Jacob
joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in

Defending champion Real Madrid entered El Clasico on a 42-game unbeaten run in the league, aiming to match Barcelona's record of 43 games.

However, on the day, Hansi Flick enforced a perfect high line that preyed on Madrid's pacy forwards like Vinicius Junior (**left**) and Kylian Mbappe, particularly the latter who was caught offside eight times. Robert Lewandowski started the proceedings at the other end with two quick goals, while Raphinha and Lamine Yamal added one each.

Clinical: Real Madrid had no answers to Barcelona's goalscorers, Raphinha, Robert Lewandowski and Lamine Yamal (centre three). REUTERS

Yamal became the youngest player ever to score in a Clasico, while Flick ended Barcelona's run of four consecutive Clasico defeats in all competitions. Flick also became the first Barcelona manager in 40 years to win on his debut in the tie at Santiago Bernabéu.

Barcelona reached 33 points from 12 games, stretching its lead to nine

Youngest male goalscorers in El Clasico

NAME	CLUB	AGE
Lamine Yamal	Barcelona	17 years, 105 days
Alfonso Navarro	Barcelona	17 years, 356 days
Ansu Fati	Barcelona	17 years, 359 days
Raul	Real Madrid	18 years, 95 days
Gavi	Barcelona	18 years, 163 days



AFP



AP

points at the top with a 3-1 victory over Espanyol the following weekend, while second-placed Madrid's game against Valencia was postponed due to flooding in the country.

Jose Maria Gimenez's early own goal against Real Betis handed Atletico Madrid its first loss of the season. However, Diego Simeone had a reason to celebrate the next matchday, as his son, Giuliano Simeone

(below), netted his first goal for the club, helping it beat Las Palmas 2-0 and move to third in the standings.

Villarreal, despite its match being postponed, remains fourth in the table, three points behind Real Madrid and two behind Atletico.

Premier League

Erling Haaland ended his three-game goalless drought in the league, scoring the winner against

Southampton, taking his tally to 11 goals this season.

The defending champion, however, suffered a shock 2-1 defeat to high-flying Bournemouth the following week. Goals from Antoine Semenyo and Evanilson snapped City's 32-game unbeaten league run, leaving it second with 23 points from 10 games.

Arsenal versus Liverpool, the most anticipated fixture of gameweek nine, ended in a thrilling 2-2 draw. Bukayo Saka's 50th Premier League goal gave Arsenal an early lead, which Virgil van Dijk cancelled out nine minutes later. Mikel Merino scored his first goal for Arsenal just before halftime, but an 81st-minute strike from Mohamed Salah (above left) ensured Liverpool took a point.

The following week, Arsenal fell further behind in the title race after Alexander Isak's header secured a 1-0 win for Newcastle United, leaving Mikel Arteta's side fifth, level on points with fourth-placed Chelsea.

Liverpool, meanwhile, came back



AFP



from a goal down to beat Brighton & Hove Albion 2-1, taking a two-point lead over Man City. Cody Gakpo equalised after Ferdi Kadioglu's opener, and Salah scored the winner, marking his 164th Premier League goal and placing him eighth on the league's all-time top scorers list.

Erik ten Hag's tenure as Manchester United manager ended following a stoppage-time penalty by West Ham United, which led to the Red Devils' fourth loss in nine games. The League Cup and FA Cup-winning manager left with a league loss percentage of 31.8 – the second-worst for a United manager since Sir Alex Ferguson's retirement in 2013.

The club now awaits new head coach Ruben Amorim, a former Sporting CP player and manager, who led the side to the Primeira Liga title last season. Interim manager Ruud van Nistelrooy oversaw United's clash against Chelsea, where Moises Caicedo's goal earned Chelsea a point after Bruno

Usual suspects: Erling Haaland scored the winner against Southampton to end his three-game goalless drought. REUTERS

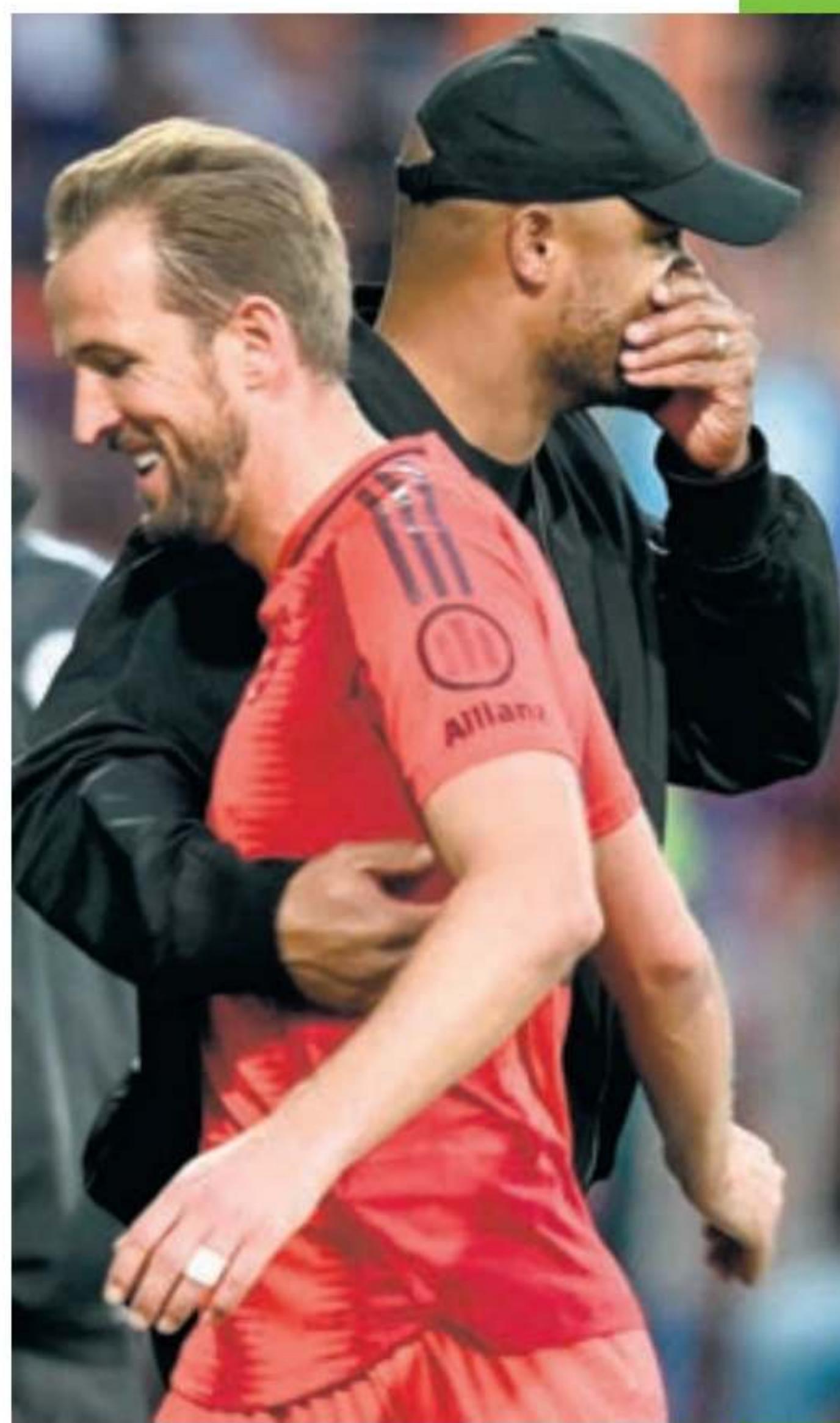
Right: Harry Kane with coach Vincent Kompany. AFP

Fernandes had scored a penalty, his first league goal of the season.

Nottingham Forest has emerged as a surprise in the top five, sitting third, a point ahead of Chelsea and Arsenal. The club's top scorer, Chris Wood, netted a brace in the 3-1 win against Leicester and scored again in the 3-0 victory against West Ham United, helping Forest continue its excellent start to the season.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich continued its rampage by beating winless VfL Bochum 5-0, with five different players on the scoresheet. The following week, Harry Kane netted twice as Bayern brushed aside Union Berlin 3-0, moving three points clear





at the top of the table.

Second-placed RB Leipzig's four-match win streak was halted by Borussia Dortmund, who completed a comeback victory to snap its own three-game losing streak. Goals from Maximilian Beier and Serhou Guirassy put Nuri Sahin's men fifth in the table, level on 16 points with fourth-placed Bayer Leverkusen.

Defending champion Leverkusen has drawn four of its last five games, including a 2-2 draw against Werder Bremen and a goalless stalemate with VfB Stuttgart in its latest

fixtures. Eintracht Frankfurt climbed to third with 17 points after a 1-1 draw with Union Berlin, followed by a 7-2 thrashing of Bochum. Egyptian forward Omar Marmoush made history as the first player in the club's history to score 10 goals in the first nine matchdays of a Bundesliga season, closely trailing Kane (11) in the Golden Boot race.

Serie A

Piotr Zielinski and Kenan Yildiz each scored a brace in a thrilling Derby d'Italia between Inter Milan

and Juventus. The match, which ended 4-4, marked the first time in Serie A history that five goals were scored in the first half between these two sides.

Lautaro Martinez scored in each of Inter's next two wins, over Empoli and Venezia, pushing his side to second place with 24 points from 11 games.

Juve, on the other hand, is the only unbeaten team in the league but sits fifth in the table after a 2-2 draw with Parma and a 2-0 win against Udinese.



FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SERIE A HISTORY FIVE GOALS WERE SCORED IN THE FIRST HALF BETWEEN INTER MILAN AND JUVENTUS

after a 1-0 win over Lens, courtesy of Ousmane Dembele's fourth-minute goal.

Mason Greenwood scored his seventh goal of the season as Marseille edged Nantes 2-1 to stay in contention for the title.

Monaco sits third in the standings, level on points with Marseille and two points ahead of fourth-placed LOSC Lille.

MLS

After securing the MLS Supporters' Shield, Inter Miami turned its focus to the best-of-three first-round playoff series against Atlanta United. In the first leg, Luis Suarez (**below**) scored in the second minute, with Atlanta's Saba Lobjanidze equalising before halftime. Lionel Messi then set up Jordi Alba's wonder strike in the second half, sealing a 2-1 win for Miami.

However, a stoppage-time strike from Xande Silva in the second leg helped Atlanta come back from a goal down to win 2-1, forcing a decisive third match.

REUTERS

First-half goals from Romelu Lukaku and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia helped Napoli win against AC Milan, retaining the top spot.

However, it failed to capitalise on the chance to extend its one-point lead after suffering a 3-0 defeat to third-placed Atalanta, with Ademola Lookman netting twice to hand Antonio Conte his second league loss of the season.

Ligue 1

The Le Classique between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Olympique

de Marseille ended in a one-sided victory for the defending champion, who scored three first-half goals.

20-year-old Joao Neves opened the scoring before Marseille's Amine Harit was sent off for a reckless challenge on Marquinhos in the 20th minute. Leonardo Balerdi's own goal and Bradley Barcola's strike secured PSG's sixth consecutive league win over its fierce rival.

The following week, Luis Enrique's side moved six points clear of second-placed Marseille



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STORIES

« When everyone asks me about Indian football, I tell them the ISL is the image of Indian football, but it's the last part of the chain »

MANOLO MARQUEZ

Aashin Prasad

aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

Five years ago, Manolo Marquez came to India from Barcelona during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic to take on the Indian Super League (ISL) challenge.

He recalls the 'chaos' at Mumbai airport back then, which shocked him, but after five successful seasons filled with more highs than lows, the Spaniard now feels at home.

In August, Marquez also embarked on the difficult task of coaching the senior national team following Igor Stimac's exit. He will juggle both his FC Goa and India team duties until the end of the 2024-25 season.

While talking to *Sportstar* about

his five years in India, he highlighted the quality of the ISL, the challenges of his dual role, and more.

This is your fifth season in the ISL. Is this season shaping up to be the most competitive yet?

Yes, in terms of excitement, because all teams are very equal. In my previous four seasons, some teams always won. Obviously, Mohun Bagan and Mumbai are the top two teams. But in terms of competitiveness, yes, it is. However, those who follow the game will find it hard to agree on the quality, which, I think, was better in previous seasons.

Why do you think the quality has dropped?

I feel that the foreigners were better in the previous seasons. When you train with better players, your level increases, and you improve a lot. You can also improve if the league is very competitive. I think the level of some coaches [this year] is very high, very good. On that note, you could say it's very competitive, but on the other hand, I think the quality of the foreigners could be better.

Did you ever imagine staying this long when you first came to Goa in 2020, entering a bio-bubble, and now becoming the national team manager?

Sometimes I joke about this because I remember my first flight from Barcelona, reaching Mumbai, and the chaos at the airport — it was



ISL

crazy. I told myself, "What are you doing here?"

And now, in my fifth season, I am the national team coach and also the coach of one of the biggest clubs in India. I've never spent five years in any country other than my own. It's [India is] like my second country. I think everyone treats me better than I deserve. I am very satisfied and will remember this experience all my life. I hope for more years here.

Speaking of the national team, is this the most challenging season for you? Obviously, the dual role brings the pressure of two jobs, but in terms of scrutiny, do you feel there are more eyes on you right now?

Everyone's opinion can be different. I think I need to be calmer and say simple things because I tend to talk a lot. But sometimes when you speak the truth or describe reality, people will say he cannot manage both jobs.

If Goa is working, [then they will say] he is not focusing on the national team, or if it's the opposite, or if I am struggling at both jobs. Ultimately, you have to focus on the present.

Obviously, I spend more time with my club, FC Goa. Practically, I don't miss many training sessions while with the national team. One thing that happens in national teams around the world is that they don't have much time for training. So, I can manage both jobs. You can never promise good results, but you can promise a lot of effort and professionalism.

I think I can handle it, but I am not stupid — it's not normal to share [two jobs]. [But] it's not the first time, and it won't be the last.

I can do it because of my knowledge of Indian football and Indian players. I don't know if it's good or bad, but it's there. After five seasons, I know all the players in the ISL and all the Indian players in the I-League.

Since it's an unusual situation, can you talk about any unique challenges you have faced in these



two months trying to juggle these two jobs?

I can tell you that I worked more than one job when I was young, and not just in football. In football, I remember training both the main team at one club and an Under-13 or Under-14 team. But it's not the same.

The publicity is very big because you're coaching both a national team and a club. If people talk about time, you do have enough time to

manage both jobs correctly. Whether the results are good or not, that's different.

You previously mentioned in an interview with Sportstar that you wanted a clear fixture plan months in advance before the new season begins. Now there is uncertainty over the Super Cup and the additional AFC slot on offer.

This is the main problem in India,



unfortunately. For me, it's very good in one way — my capacity to improvise is now incredible. But I think India needs to solve this problem. When you arrive in India, you need to know everything. For example, this year, there was uncertainty over when the I-League would start. But this shouldn't happen. You need to know everything beforehand because preparation is very important.

I remember my first year in 2020

— I was in quarantine in my room, and they said the ISL would start in two weeks. Then they said, "No, it starts in three weeks." It's not the same. The difference between two weeks and three weeks is the [duration in] pre-season. A single week of pre-season can be very important. If you have seven or 11 weeks, you can manage. But if you only have two or three weeks, the planning is completely different. I think India needs to take a step

Familiarity works: Even though it's not a common thing to share two coaching jobs, Marquez is confident because of his knowledge of Indian football and its players. ISL

forward because it's very important to know what will happen in the next [few months] in order to prepare for everything.

You have also spoken about Indian players being comfortable in India and not wanting to go abroad to play in other leagues. Have any players you've worked with approached you about pathways to get there?

I feel that this is more relevant to the next generation than the current one. Players aged 26-28 find it difficult to go abroad. There are very good young players in India between 17 and 21, which is a good age to go abroad because they have more opportunities to join academies rather than main teams. Some Indian players could play abroad. I don't know at which level, not in the top leagues, but they are indeed very comfortable here. Sometimes people get angry when I talk about this, but it's the reality.

Why are people angry about this?

They say, "You're always speaking about this." The salaries of Indian players are fantastic for them. If I were in their situation, I'd probably do the same. I'd stay here because it's home, with a good salary. Practically, I've secured my life, and that's okay. You could say it's a lack of ambition or just about the money, which is very important, but when the money is enough, I can try to go abroad. I can tell you, obviously, I won't tell you the names; some players in the national team and some at my clubs, FC Goa and Hyderabad FC before that, wanted to go abroad. But it's not easy. It's a pity because, when you play abroad and train with better players, your level improves. That's very good for you, for your future club, and for the national team. I don't like, for example, national teams that play



with 13 players because their father or grandfather was from there...

Do you mean the PIO (Persons of Indian Origin) system? Are you not in favour of it?

No, no, I am in favour. But is it the same rule for everyone? For some teams, it's applicable, but for others, it's not. This is a problem for each country, not FIFA's. I don't like playing against Syria, for example, which has players who have never been to Syria. But the rules are what they are.

I understand that if India, with a population of 1.6 billion, accepts dual nationality, the problems would be even more. But in football, that is part of the challenge. The difference will be greater if they don't accept this. If you want to play only with Indian players, you have to build from the grassroots, especially if you want to, at least, reach the same level as other countries. But it's not

an excuse or criticism; it's the reality.

With FC Goa, you have a particular way you want to play, with players you can recruit from both India and abroad. But with the national team, the pool is limited, with different profiles of players. So how do you adapt your style?

Sometimes, at FC Goa, we play 4-2-3-1, and in another club, it might be 4-4-2 or three centre-backs, like last time with the national team. You have to adapt based on the players that you have or if the opponent is better or worse than you. Finally, the important thing is that the players understand what you're explaining more than the system itself.

In the ISL, more or less all teams can beat each other. But in the international circuit, it's easier to beat teams ranked below your national team and very difficult to beat teams ranked higher because the gap is too much. But in football,

Straight talk: 'You can never promise good results, but you can promise a lot of effort and professionalism'—Marquez on the challenges of executing his dual role. FSDL

anything can happen, and the goal is to improve. When they chose me as the national coach, I knew perfectly well that the time for training sessions would not be a lot, but I think we showed in our last game in Vietnam that even with a few days, the improvement can be substantial.

Do you have any realistic goals in mind for the national team?

[It's] Difficult [to say]. I know everyone wants India to qualify for the World Cup, but I don't think that's the right thing to talk about at the moment. That's the last part of the chain. When everyone asks me about Indian football, I tell them the ISL is the image of Indian football, but it's the last part of the chain. You need to start at the grassroots and develop the national teams. There are very, very good players at U-17 and U-20 levels. I am from Spain, where football is a religion. The team that won the European Championship had the same coach (Luis de la Fuente), who won the Euros with the U-19 (2015) and U-21 sides (2019). He then won the senior title with 70–80 per cent of the same players who came through the youth squads.

It's not something you can snap your fingers at and say we now have a good group of Indian players who will qualify [for the World Cup]. We need to work from the grassroots, going through U-15, U-17 and U-19, and then arrive at the senior team.

The reality now is we have the current national team players, but it's more important to speak about those who will arrive in the future. I am very happy with the players who are here now, and their attitude is excellent in training.

But the future of Indian football lies in the teams to come, not the current national team.

(The interview was conducted on the eve of FC Goa's ISL home game against Mumbai City FC)

A TALE OF CONTRASTS BETWEEN RIVALS

East Bengal will be looking to **refurbish its image** in the international arena, while Mohun Bagan will have to focus on its domestic fixtures.

The fans of Mohun Bagan Super Giant and East Bengal FC have different reasons to celebrate their teams' successes this time. For two of the greatest rivals in Indian football, international assignments have unfolded in contrasting ways.

While East Bengal showed great form in reaching the quarterfinals of the AFC Challenge League, Mohun Bagan narrowly avoided heavy sanctions for refusing to play its AFC Champions League Two (ACL 2) match against Tractor FC of Iran.

As it stands, East Bengal will be looking to refurbish its image in the international arena, while Mohun Bagan will have to focus on its domestic fixtures, as the team has been excluded from ACL 2 for the ongoing season.

Mohun Bagan, the reigning Indian Super League champion, appeared to place the ACL 2 low on its list of priorities as it focused on team formation specifically aimed at the ISL requirements at the start of the season. India's top league still allows four foreigners on the field, with six permitted in the squad. However, with the AFC removing the cap on registering foreign players, teams participating in the ACL must make particular arrangements during the transfer season.

Mohun Bagan SG seemed to be caught in a bind about its international plans and appeared to prioritise its resources on defending its ISL title rather than committing funds to acquire expensive foreign players. The club makes one of the largest investments among ISL teams in preparing its squad for the

season, yet when it comes to continental competitions, it seems vastly inadequate compared to teams from West Asia, which are far ahead in spending. The dependence on foreigners is greater for Indian clubs, as domestic players have yet to reach the standards required to compete with teams from that region.

Many suggest that the unrest in Iran, exacerbated by its conflict with Israel, worked in Mohun Bagan's

Setting the agenda: Mohun Bagan Super Giant, the reigning ISL champion, appeared to place the AFC Champions League Two low on its list of priorities as it focused on team formation specifically aimed at the ISL requirements at the start of the season. FSDL





favour, allowing it to avoid a likely defeat at the hands of the vastly superior Tractor FC. Citing the volatile situation in Iran, it submitted a letter to the AFC, signed by its players who felt unsafe travelling to Tabriz, East Azerbaijan, the home of Tractor.

Having previously played a lacklustre goalless draw at home against arguably the weakest team in the group, Ravshan Kulob of Tajikistan, Mohun Bagan's intentions became apparent before the deteriorating geopolitical scenario in West Asia allowed it to abandon ship. In its decision, the AFC competition committee accepted Mohun Bagan's appeal as an "event of force majeure" and refrained from penalising the team. However, the AFC committee removed the team from the competition, citing ACL 2 regulations.

While Mohun Bagan opted out, the AFC Challenge League (a tier-three tournament below ACL 2) offered East Bengal a chance to redeem itself. Despite losing all six of its ISL matches, East Bengal

Silver lining: East Bengal earning a spot in the quarterfinals of the AFC Challenge League would have mitigated some of the disappointment of a poor start to the domestic season. ISL

FSDL



notched up two wins and a draw to emerge as the Group A league champion in the AFC Challenge League, thus earning a spot in the quarterfinals. This definitely helped East Bengal mitigate some of the disappointment of a poor start to the domestic season, which ultimately led to the early departure of its coach Carles Cuadrat, under whose guidance the team won the Super Cup to secure its place in the AFC tournament.

With the appointment of another Spaniard, Oscar Bruzon (**left**), to guide the team through the remainder of the season, East Bengal is hoping to turn things around by building on its recent performance in the AFC Challenge League.

Amitabha Das Sharma

Of chingri, dhak and goals

In the city's football circuit, the beautiful game welcomed Pujo in its own way. Despite heavy rain before the match and the sky frowning with grey clouds, thousands turned up for the game. "I have been supporting the

club since I was about nine. I watched the first match of Mohammedan Sporting at Yuva Bharati Krirangan, and my father was a club official.

"We won that match 5-0, and from that day, we have been die-hard Mohammedan fans," Shahadat Siddique said, holding the match tickets in his hand, waiting to get into the stadium.

Minutes before kick-off, the clouds parted as fans with flags and tifos marched from either end to the Salt Lake Stadium. Flares in Mohun Bagan colours filled the air with suspense, and the response echoed through a giant tifo on the southern stand: 'All my sons will be like me.'

When the match began, every kick became a heartbeat, every miss a heartbreak. By the end of 90 minutes, it was the *chingri* (prawns, one of the many symbols of Mohun Bagan) that had the last laugh over the Kolkata *biryani*.

Mohun Bagan scored three goals in 36 minutes and comfortably held onto that lead until the end, giving its fans enough reason to return home with roars of 'Joy Mohun Bagan!' from matadors, open cars, and packed buses bustling through the concrete jungle.

The win almost marked the beginning of Durga Puja in the city, and it was Mohun Bagan that earned the rights for the drumroll, with the *dhak*, goals, and more.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

Whose side are you on?

The landscape of sports journalism looks vastly different to when I started out. (Just kidding. I'm only seven years into the profession but wanted to use the phrase 'the landscape of sports journalism' in a sentence only because it sounds serious. And, I promise, I'm about to get to something important.)

Football reporting in India may not be the most glamorous job compared to cricket reporting.

Especially in Chennai, where the football culture is not as vibrant as in Kolkata or Kerala. Before the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, there were only two reporters, including



yours truly, in the press box covering the country's top division team, Chennaiyin FC. Bleak.

Post-pandemic, there's been a proliferation of new faces in the press box. For the last home game against FC Goa, in an encouraging show, nearly the entire row (still not a lot) seemed full.

Interestingly, my new, young colleagues are often also fans of the team. They cheer every pass and tackle, groan at poor passes, and leap off their seats to fist-pump for goals. Funnily enough, I found myself sandwiched between these hardened Chennaiyin-supporting reporters and an older reporter, who was on a personal call through the first half.

The conversation sounded eerily familiar. It seemed to centre around the topic of marriage. "You're right, if you're not married before 30, it's hard to find someone after that." Wait, was it my mum on the other end? Anyways, not now, please.

Chennaiyin was ceding control, and I needed to pay closer attention to whom Owen Coyle (**above**) was berating from the sidelines.

In the post-match press conference, the bias was no longer subtle. One of the questions posed to Coyle started with: "First of all, I want to thank you for extending your stay with Chennaiyin FC, and I hope you will see more silverware in the coming years."

This is not an isolated event. In earlier press conferences, "we" and

"us" became common when addressing the Chennaiyin gaffer. I am a football fan-turned-reporter too, but I have inherently taught myself to hide my bias while on duty. Only if you observe closely would you note which team's fortunes make my backside twitch or my feet shake nervously.

Back at the press conference, after Manolo Marquez completed his media duties, several journalists went up to take pictures with him, and the Spaniard happily obliged. A senior journalist next to me quipped, "If *** *** had seen this, he would yell, 'Bloody, we are journalists, man, not cheerleaders!'"

It's imperative to leave one's biases and fondness for favourites at the gates before entering the press box. But it's becoming increasingly hard to miss the partisanship that comes through one way or another. TV media pundits, too, often refer to their national team or favourite clubs as "we" or "us". Media outlets in England and Spain, two of the biggest footballing nations, have journalists who proudly wear their club's badges.

While it's up to readers to decide if it bothers them, I, for one, am happy to see more new faces in the press box. It doesn't feel lonely anymore. (Unless, of course, my colleagues come across this piece and take umbrage at my observations for some reason.)

Aashin Prasad

King of the engine room wins Ballon d'Or

On a night when Real Madrid chose to boycott the ceremony, Rodri's win carved a new path of **inspiration for midfielders.**

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
neeladri.b@thehindu.co.in

For the last 18 years, the Ballon d'Or has mainly gone to forwards, as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo battled for the top honours. Goals, hat-tricks, and assists became synonymous with the illustrious Golden Ball.

This year, yet another forward, Vinicius Junior, was tipped for the award, but the votes defied expectations as the Brazilian ultimately had to contend with second place.

Instead, Rodrigo Hernandez — known globally as Rodri — claimed the men's Ballon d'Or, becoming only the second defensive midfielder to win the trophy after Lothar Matthaus in 1990. The pernicious bias towards attacking players was finally broken.

Nine goals, 14 assists, and four major trophies for club and country in the 2023-24 season placed him at the top as the best player in the world.

As shouts in favour of Vinicius and hateful discontent for his loss echoed outside the venue in Paris,

Rodri, in his speech, instead focused on love.

"Today is a special day, not just for me but for my family. First of all, I have to thank a very special person, my girlfriend Laura [Iglesias]; today is our eighth anniversary. Without her, things would not be the same," he said.

Rodri underlined the legacy of Spanish midfielders who missed out on the trophy during the Messi-Ronaldo era.

"Today is not a victory for me; it is for Spanish football and for so many players who have not won it and have deserved it, like Iniesta, Xavi, Iker [Casillas], Sergio Busquets, and so many others. It is for Spanish football and the figure of the midfielder," Rodri said.

Tiki-taka, Spain's trademark style, was crafted in midfield, a tradition upheld by the likes of Xavi, Iniesta and Busquets, and passed to the next generation — the finest example being Manchester City's Rodri.

While there are other Spanish players who have adopted the philosophy of Xavi and Iniesta, such as Pedri and Gavi, Rodri's towering and physical presence became the key to ending Spain's decade-long trophy drought. Although coach Luis Enrique initially used him as a central defender, Rodri reached peak form as Spain's midfield pivot, succeeding Busquets after his retirement.

His presence brought balance to Spain's midfield, under head coach Luis de la Fuente, paving the path for Spain to secure its first major double — the UEFA Nations League and the 2024 European Championship — since its World Cup and Euro double in 2012.

Under Pep Guardiola, Manchester City formed a team of champions, culminating in a historic treble in the 2022–23 season. One of the most consistent players on that team was



History-maker



- First Manchester City player to win the Ballon d'Or
- Second defensive midfielder to ever win the trophy
- Second native Spaniard to win the Ballon d'Or
- Youngest recipient since Lionel Messi in 2015
- Third player from the Premier League to win the trophy



Perfect pivot: Rodri brought balance to Spain's midfield. Pics: AFP

Rodri.

"Rodri is the best midfielder in the world right now. He's unbelievable; he's really able to do everything," Guardiola recently said in a press conference. "Remember — what we've done, without him... it would've been difficult." Positioned ahead of the back four, Rodri acted as a pivot and a convergence point for attacks, with Ilkay Gundogan and Kevin De Bruyne waiting for his passes in the final third. After Gundogan's departure, Rodri also ventured into offensive positions, catching opponents off-guard since they rarely marked a defensive midfielder.

"I was a traditional midfielder, but I knew I needed to be better in the final third, so I worked on that. That's the modern holding midfield role; you have to be like a striker because you play in the front," Rodri said.

Last season, he set a Premier

League record for the most successful passes across the pitch, with over 2,000 passes in the opponent's half — another record.

In the UEFA Champions League last season, he employed line-breaking passes to counter opponents' pressing tactics, making 100 such passes in the group stages alone — the most by any player that season.

On a night when Real Madrid chose to boycott the ceremony, Rodri's win carved a new path of inspiration for midfielders — to play, strive, and ultimately find glory.

"I would like to tell you a story that led me here. When I was 17, I packed my suitcase to fulfil a dream. One day, I cried to my father, it's all over, I invested my life to get here and that was it," Rodri said.

"My father said, 'We came all the way here, let's keep going'. This is something that changed my mindset. I'm just a normal kid with values; I know what a hard worker is. Thank you very much."





WHAT THE NEW BIG TWO CAN LEARN FROM THE LEGENDARY BIG THREE



FOR MORE
STORIES

ACCORDING TO BORIS BECKER, SINNER AND ALCARAZ CAN BE DEFINED AS THE DJOKOVIC AND FEDERER OF THE FUTURE, BUT ONLY AFTER CONSIDERING 'PROPER PROPORTIONS'

Tennis' current sensations, Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner, have already **emulated** the initial era of the Federer rivalry by winning Grand Slams and becoming good friends.

Paul Fein

During Jannik Sinner's 7-6(4), 6-3 victory over 24-time major champion Novak Djokovic in the Shanghai Masters final, Carlos Alcaraz, seated next to Roger Federer, was seen listening intently to the latter's conversation with Juan Carlos Ferrero.

What could Alcaraz, coached by the astute Ferrero, have learned about technique, tactics, and other relevant topics from 20-time Major winner Federer, one of the smartest players in tennis history?

And how can Alcaraz use that knowledge against Sinner, Djokovic, and the best of the rest, including rookie sensation Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard, a 6'8" monster server?

This observer would love to know how Federer coped with and rebounded quickly from heartbreakingly defeating such as his record 24 losses after holding one or more match points. How the Swiss maestro controlled his penchant for crowd-pleasing but high-risk trick shots, particularly on critical points, and why he rarely suffered major injuries or lost his passion for practice and competition.

Just 11 days earlier, Alcaraz had defeated Sinner for the third straight time — a 6-7 (6), 6-4, 7-6 (3) thriller in the China Open final in Beijing. Meanwhile, the Shanghai Open final victory was Sinner's third consecutive against Djokovic.

Asked about the similarities between his game and Sinner's, The Djoker offered this serious, accurate appraisal. "All around, he has every shot in the game. He's improved his serve tremendously. I think that became a big weapon.

He's just very aggressive from the baseline; as soon as he's got a shorter ball, he's taking the initiative. Just very solid from forehand and backhand, doesn't make too many mistakes, and just tries to take away the time from the opponent.

"That's something that reminds me of myself throughout my career, that's what I've done for so many years consistently," said Djokovic. "Playing fast-paced tennis, taking away time from the opponent, suffocating the opponent, in a certain way. You want your opponent to always feel under pressure from your shots, from your speed, from your presence on the court. So, he's got that. This year he's been so consistent. It's really, really impressive."

The stats confirm Sinner's improved serving. On hard courts, where he captured his first two Grand Slam titles this season, he has held serve a superb 91 per cent of the time compared to 82 per cent in 2022 and 88 per cent in 2023. The hard-court parallel between Sinner,



Mirroring the legends: The budding rivalry and friendship between Alcaraz and Sinner draws a clear parallel to the early dynamics between Federer and Nadal. AP

albeit very early in his career, and Djokovic, the undisputed King of Hard Courts, is noteworthy. The Serb seized 14 of his record 24 Majors on hard courts, where he won an outstanding 87 per cent of his service games.

Stylistic comparisons

"We can define Sinner and Alcaraz as the Djokovic and Federer of the future, although we must keep the proper proportions," Boris Becker had told the Italian publication, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*.

"Roger and Nole have made history in this sport, as has Rafa Nadal. Alcaraz's style of play, in terms of beauty, is more similar to that of the Swiss, although his idol has always been Rafa."

"From a purely stylistic point of view, the Spaniard can be compared to Federer and the Italian to Djokovic. However, we now have another dilemma on the circuit. We need a 'Nadal' to complete the new Big Three and another player to follow the Fab Four."

In truth, men's tennis doesn't need a Fab Four. And it had one only from 2012 to 2016. That is when Andy Murray captured two Wimbledon titles, one US Open, and



two Olympic gold medals. For their entire 20-plus year careers, however, Andy's overall record wound up a distant fourth behind the Big Three, not to mention 1990s superstar and 14-Major winner Pete Sampras.

The speedy Murray also lacked a signature shot or feared weapon, which accounted for his losing eight of 11 Grand Slam finals.

The extraordinary heights the legendary Big Three and the new Big Two have reached will be difficult to

emulate. That said, more world-class players play 'like' the conventional stylists, Djokovic and Sinner. However, it takes phenomenal athleticism, versatility, and creativity to replicate Federer and Alcaraz, who successfully modelled his game after Federer, albeit with a two-handed backhand.

This leaves Nadal, whose lefty game was based on the best forehand — on clay, anyway, due to its ferocious topspin and

All-rounder: Djokovic's complete game flourished on every surface: 14 major titles on hard courts, seven on grass, and three on clay, plus an Olympic gold medal on clay. GETTY IMAGES



Two of a kind: It takes phenomenal athleticism, versatility, and creativity to replicate Federer and Alcaraz, who successfully modelled his game after Federer, albeit with a two-handed backhand. REUTERS

consistency—in tennis history, extremely high-percentage shot selection, and an intimidating, never-say-die competitiveness. Sooner or later, these assets broke down opponents' strokes, bodies, and spirits.

In my view, Rafa's unique playing style will prove the hardest to emulate and master, particularly given that only about 10 per cent of world-class players are typically left-handed.

Greatest ever achievement

A British newspaper that regularly offers readers polls, recently asked: "What is the greatest achievement in the history of men's tennis?" The options were:

- ★ Rafael Nadal winning the French Open 14 times
- ★ Bjorn Borg's 49-match winning streak
- ★ Roger Federer's 237 consecutive weeks as world No.1
- ★ Novak Djokovic winning 24

Grand Slams

★ Rod Laver winning all four Grand Slams in the same year

This analyst picks Djokovic's achievement for two reasons. First, total career Major titles on all surfaces matter much more than total career Major titles on any one surface — which is Nadal's astounding achievement. And the splendid Serb's all-time men's record matters much more than any winning streak. (Would you rather

« The greatest achievement' is distinctly different from the 'most unbreakable record'



Not far from the best: The hard-court parallel between Sinner, albeit very early in his career, and Djokovic, the undisputed King of Hard Courts, is noteworthy. AFP

win five straight Wimbledon titles as Borg did, or six total Wimbledon titles non-consecutively? The answer should be easy.)

Second, Djokovic's complete game flourished on every surface: 14 Major titles on hard courts, seven on grass, and three on clay, plus an Olympic gold medal on clay.

However, 'the greatest achievement' is distinctly different from the 'most unbreakable record'. For example, it is hard to conceive of any man surpassing Laver by capturing two calendar-year Grand Slams, and even more inconceivable if you count his 1962 Grand Slam during the Amateur Era (a feat diminished because pro champions Pancho Gonzalez, Ken Rosewall, and Lew Hoad were not eligible).

NADAL'S 14-TIME CONQUEST OF ROLAND GARROS MAY BE THE MOST UNBREAKABLE CAREER RECORD OF GREAT CONSEQUENCE

If we change the question to 'What is the most unbreakable career record of great consequence?'—disqualifying Jimmy Connors' five US Open titles on three different surfaces — my pick is Nadal's unfathomable conquest of Roland Garros 14 times.

The modest Spaniard said he never thought he was "special", but the sports world disagreed. His coronation as The King of Clay is an understatement considering that his closest contender, Bjorn Borg, amassed six French crowns, fewer

than half of Nadal's haul.

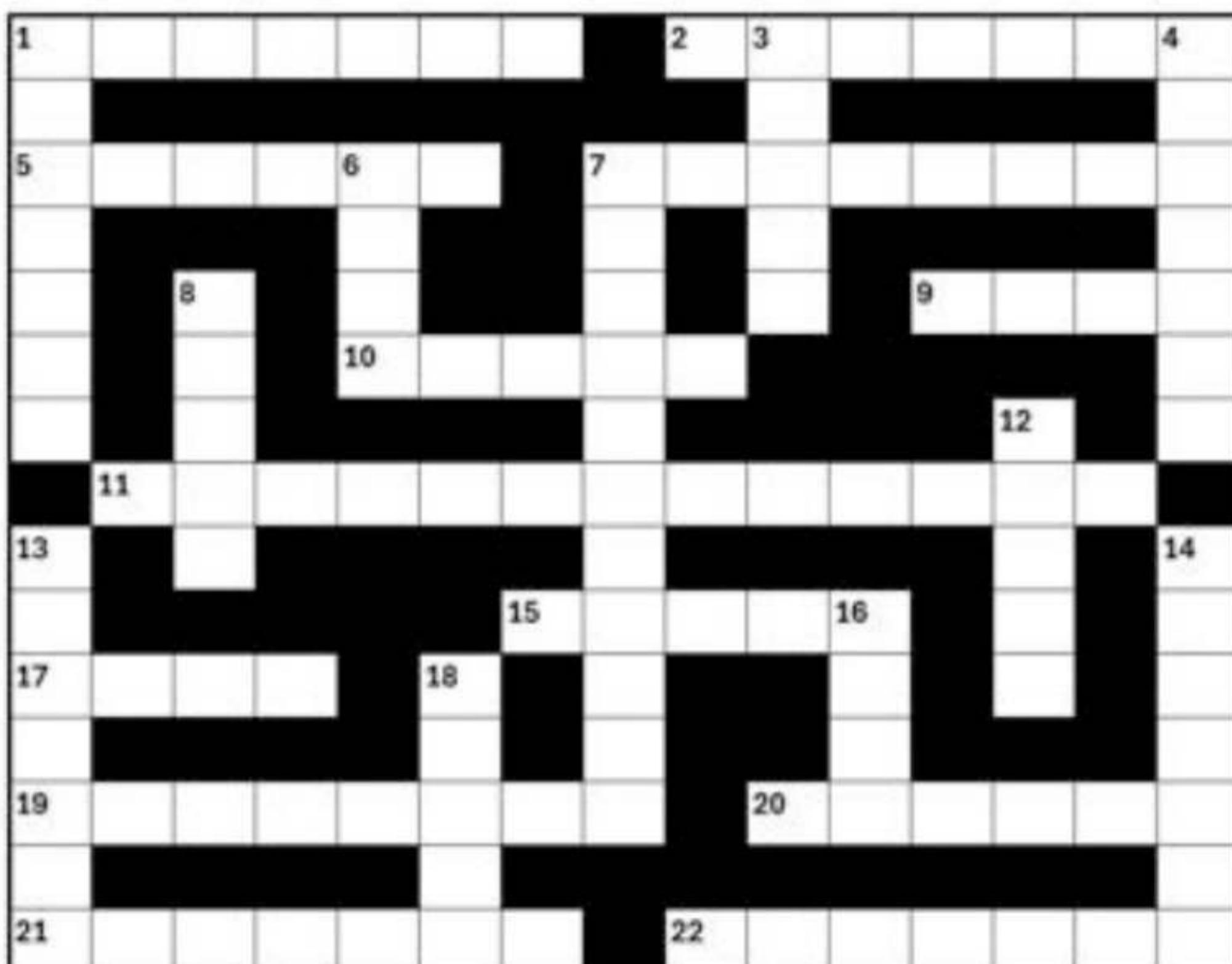
Lastly, this sportswriter wondered if Federer, who enjoyed a 24-year pro career, discussed with Ferrero the keys to his long and brilliant career. If he did, rest assured Alcaraz won't share that top-secret information with arch-rival Sinner.

To their credit, the new Big Two have already emulated the initial era of the Fedal rivalry by winning Grand Slams and becoming good friends.

Now that's a feat to celebrate.

» CROSSWORD

N. SOORYA PRAKASH



ACROSS

- 1** He not only took his first five-wicket haul in Tests but also his maiden 10-wicket haul and won the Player of the Match award, too, in the second Test held in Pune. (7)
- 2** Who became the top goal-scorer in the history of Indian Super League football recently? (7)
- 5** Which city hosted two Test matches-in-a-row recently? (6)
- 7** Who scored a hat-trick for Real Madrid in its stunning comeback victory over Borussia Dortmund in a third round Champions League Football encounter? (8)
- 9** Who scored a hat-trick for the promoted side Espanyol against Alaves in their La Liga match? (4)
- 11** Who is the only Indian archer to win a medal (silver medal at that) in the World Cup held in Mexico recently? (7,6)
- 15** Name the cup for which the men's tennis teams from Europe and World vie for? (5)
- 17** Identify this former England captain and opening batsman

who was inducted in to the ICC Hall of Fame recently? (4)

20 Which former Sri Lankan captain scored his 16th Test century in the second Test versus New Zealand in September 2024? (6)

21 & Down 13 Identify this Monegasque racing driver who won the USA Formula 1 GP held recently? (7,7)

22 Which rookie Kiwi fast bowler took seven wickets in the first Test versus India in Bengaluru? (7)

DOWN

1 Who is appointed as the new head coach of the Bangladesh cricket team? (7)

3 Which Kiwi fast bowler took a five-wicket haul in the first innings versus India in Bengaluru? (5)

4 _____ Town club is one of the three teams to have been promoted to the ongoing English Premier League Football season. (7)

6 Name the governing body of the



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

Futsal and Beach Soccer in India? (1,1,1,1)

7 Who is the only Indian woman umpire to have officiated in the Women's T20 World Cup held recently? (6,5)

8 This well-known umpire from Pakistan, who was in the ICC International Elite Panel, announced his retirement. (5)

12 & Across 19 This Indian recently breached the 2800 ELO rating. (5,8)

14 Who recently went past India's Virender Sehwag to be placed sixth on the all-time list of most sixes in Test cricket? (7)

16 Which legendary Indian hockey player announced her retirement recently? (4)

18 & Across 10 The current winner of the Women's T20 World Cup is also known as? (5,5)



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

C.B. Benson, Reena Manohar win Kochi Spice Coast Marathon



Local runners C.B. Benson and Reena Manohar won the men's and women's titles, respectively, in the Ageas Federal Life Insurance Kochi Spice Coast Marathon at the Marine Drive.

Benson (**receiving the award from Sachin Tendulkar**), who had finished second in the two previous editions, comfortably tackled the men's 42.2km in 3:00.42s on a cool, overcast morning, while Reena won the women's marathon in 4:50.06s.

"I am delighted to see so many running enthusiasts turn up so early in the morning. It's even more heartening to see so many women and elderly in the mix," said cricket great Tendulkar, the brand ambassador of Ageas Federal Life Insurance, during the awards function.

The marathon, organised by Soles of Kochi, attracted over 8,000 runners in its different formats. Several NGOs and corporates fielded teams, and Kochi Police had 126 runners, including 50 women.

Meanwhile, K.M. Sajith won the half-marathon for the third successive time, while A.K. Rama took the women's title.

STAN RAYAN

» INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON



SATISH
ACTHARYA

1 India Seniors signed off with a silver medal as it went down 165-258 to USA in the final of the 16th World Bridge Olympiad in Buenos Aires. The Indian team comprised Kamal Mukherjee, Vibhas Todi, Badal Das, Pranab Bardhan, Arun Bapat, Ravi Goenka and Girish Bijoor, who is the non-playing captain. Meanwhile, in two pairs events held alongside the final, the young Indian duo of Sanjit Dey and Binod Shaw excelled, finishing as the top performers in both events and ending their maiden international competition on a high note.

2 The 39th edition of the National Junior Athletics Championships will be held at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar from December 7 to 11. The event was supposed to be held from October 25 to 29 before being postponed due to the threat of cyclone in Odisha. The Athletics Federation of India (AFI) confirmed this, stating that safety and preparedness were top priorities in deciding to change the dates. With the rescheduling finalised, preparations are underway to make this a successful gathering of the nation's athletic talent at the junior level.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

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Ramji Srinivasan



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TOP CAREERS IN EXERCISE SCIENCE

The field of exercise science is **constantly evolving**, with new specialisations and exciting trends emerging all the time.

We all dream of being part of a sports organisation, team, or association, or working in some way to support a sports team. Involvement in sports offers many benefits, both obvious and hidden, as we embark on this journey with hope and passion. For example, do you dream of trading a desk job for the training field, analysing athletes' movements and muscle physiology? If yes, you might be on the path of exercise science.

Explore a world of possibilities as you dive into this field, breaking through the walls of your gym. There are many possible career options in the field of sports science, with paths that remain less explored in the Indian context.

Moving away from traditional career options, you could make a significant impact in the sports ecosystem and help elevate the country's presence on the global stage. Let's dive into our top list and discover where your passion intersects with the science of movement.

The Sculptor of Future Champions: Strength and Conditioning Coach

Strength and conditioning coaches go beyond basic bicep curls, crafting custom-made programmes that reveal hidden power and sculpt physiques for peak performance. Their ability lies in decrypting the science of muscle and movement, comprehending and transferring complex biomechanics into quantifiable results. Imagine witnessing athletes smash their personal best after months of tailored training — from grassroots to the glory of the Olympics.

The Performance Whisperer: Sports Psychologist

Still in its early stages in India, sports psychology is evolving steadily. The mind is an underappreciated muscle, yet it holds the key to unlocking an athlete's full potential. Enter sports psychologists, the performance whisperers who decode the intricate mind-body

connection. They help athletes build mental toughness, conquer performance anxiety, and turn pressure into motivation. Imagine the thrill of seeing athletes, once plagued by self-doubt, deliver the performance of their life — that's the art of the sports psychologist at its finest.

The Body Mechanic: Kinesiologist/Biomechanist

Biomechanists and kinesiologists are the detectives of human motion, studying the intricate dance of muscles and bones. These scientific sleuths analyse gait patterns, pinpoint strengths and weaknesses, and create personalised data-driven insights to unlock untapped potential.

The Data Crunchers: Exercise Physiologist

Numbers are their domain, the body their canvas, and data their brush. Exercise physiologists delve into the fascinating world of data, uncovering secrets within heart rates, oxygen levels, and metabolic responses. They conduct research, interpret complex results, and turn scientific findings into actionable insights for athletes and sports professionals.

The Seed Planter: Physical Education Teacher

Physical education teachers are more than PT drills and dodgeball

The magic in movement: If you dream of trading a desk job for the training field, analysing athletes' movements and muscle physiology, then a career in exercise science might be the right path for you. GETTY IMAGES



games. They are seed planters, cultivating a love for sports, fostering teamwork, and instilling values of diligence and sportsmanship from an early age. Imagine the pride of seeing a student, once tentative and gawky, grow into a top-class athlete — that's the legacy of the PE teacher.

The Fitness Draftsperson: Personal Trainer

The PT sculpts bodies and lives, crafting personalised roadmaps to fitness for both individuals and groups. They're the ultimate motivators, allies, and fountains of knowledge, guiding clients through every step of their fitness journey, whether from home or in the gym. Imagine watching a once-intimidated client achieve a weight goal they never thought possible. That's the magic of the fitness architect, transforming bodies and lives before your very eyes.

The Wanderer: Outdoor Specialist

Outdoor specialists trade gym walls for the open air, embracing nature through hiking, kayaking, trail running, and rock climbing. They

interweave movement and mindfulness in stunning landscapes, helping individuals reconnect with nature and discover the power of mind-body synchronisation. Picture a client's face as they summit a peak they never thought possible — that's the achievement of the outdoor specialist.

The Sustenance Skipper: Sports Dietitian

For sports dietitians, food is more than just fuel — it's the performance sauce, the recovery booster, the secret weapon of champions. Sports dietitians are culinary experts, crafting personalised meal plans that align with individual goals and training demands. They decode the science of nutrition, translating complex dietary needs into delicious menus. Athletes breaking records after fuelling their body correctly is proof of their expertise.

The Injury Detective and Mender: Physio

They're the custodians of the body, the frontline defence against injury and source of healing. Physios are

the unsung heroes, preventing, treating, and rehabilitating athletes at all levels. They are the calm before the storm, guiding athletes back to peak performance. Seeing a player return to form after a devastating injury? That's the triumph of this injury detective and healer. Their commitment is woven into every comeback story. From helping weekend warriors recover from a pulled muscle to guiding Olympians back to peak form, their work impacts the entire spectrum of movement.

The Future Forecaster: Sports Scientist

Sports scientists are the innovators pushing the boundaries of human performance, the engineers who are shaping the future of sports. Through cutting-edge research, they explore the relationship between physiology, psychology, and technology, while developing innovative training methods, analysing performance data, and decoding their findings into quantifiable improvements for athletes.

Defending a creation

Whatever the squawks about representational art, it is **natural to believe** a portrait should look like its model. When it doesn't, or when it looks like some other person, the criticism is understandable.

Suresh Menon

Emanuel Jorge da Silva Santos. It's not a name easily recognised by sports fans. Santos is from Madeira, a small volcanic island near Africa. It is the birthplace of Cristiano Ronaldo, and now the penny ought to drop. Santos is the sculptor whose bust of Ronaldo has been called the most laughed-at sculpture in the world. It was unveiled at the Cristiano Ronaldo Airport in Madeira in 2017.

Social media went into overdrive. "It looks like his face was bended like Beckham!" said comedian Corden. This is what Ronaldo would look like if he had a stroke, said another comedian, adding, "This is the spitting image of Ronaldo. That's why so many people have spit on it."

Whatever the squawks about representational art, it is natural to believe a portrait should look like its model. When it doesn't, or when it looks like some other person, the criticism is understandable.

Santos defended his creation with the words, "Even Jesus did not please everyone." Later he said, "I liked the result and was really proud of it. And if I had to do it again, I would make everything exactly the same."

Andy Murray in Shanghai, Diego Maradona in Kolkata, Mohamed Salah in Egypt, David Beckham in Los Angeles, Sourav Ganguly in Kolkata, and Sachin Tendulkar in Bihar have all been honoured — if that's the word — in materials ranging from bronze and marble to fibreglass. All one can see about these statues is that even Jesus did not please everyone!



Sparking a debate: Cristiano Ronaldo's statue at the International Airport in Madeira. Though many didn't like it, Emanuel Jorge da Silva Santos, the sculptor, said, "I liked the result and was really proud of it. And if I had to do it again, I would make everything exactly the same." GETTY IMAGES

The latest to join the list of unsatisfactory statues is that of the NBA star Dwyane Wade.

"Man who the hell is this??? The Miami Heat did Dwyane Wade filthy with this statue," said a social media post. Those willing to be more charitable said the statue looked like the actor Laurence Fishburne.

Wade himself said at the unveiling, "Who is that guy?" It might have been a way of saying how far he had come in life to merit a statue. Or it might have been an unsubtle way of telling the audience the statue was underwhelming.

There are, of course, more examples of outstanding sculptures than of the who-the-hell-is-this variety.

Michael Jordan's leap (Chicago), Don Bradman's cover drive (MCG Museum), George Headley's hook shot (Jamaica) are some of the finest. Jordan's (called 'The Spirit'), created by the sculptor couple Julie and Omri Amrany in 1994, is possibly the most famous of them all.

The Santos (or have you already forgotten the name?) story has a footnote. A year later, he was commissioned by the sports website *Bleacher Report* to make a second bust of Ronaldo, and thus given a chance at redemption.

Sadly, as a writer pointed out, they are both bad sculptures, "The first one is ludicrous, the second one is bland."

Santos might be the most famous sculptor in the world thanks to the modern phenomenon of social media censorship. If Ronaldo's wide smile when he unveiled the original is any indication, however, he was happy with it then. And that matters.

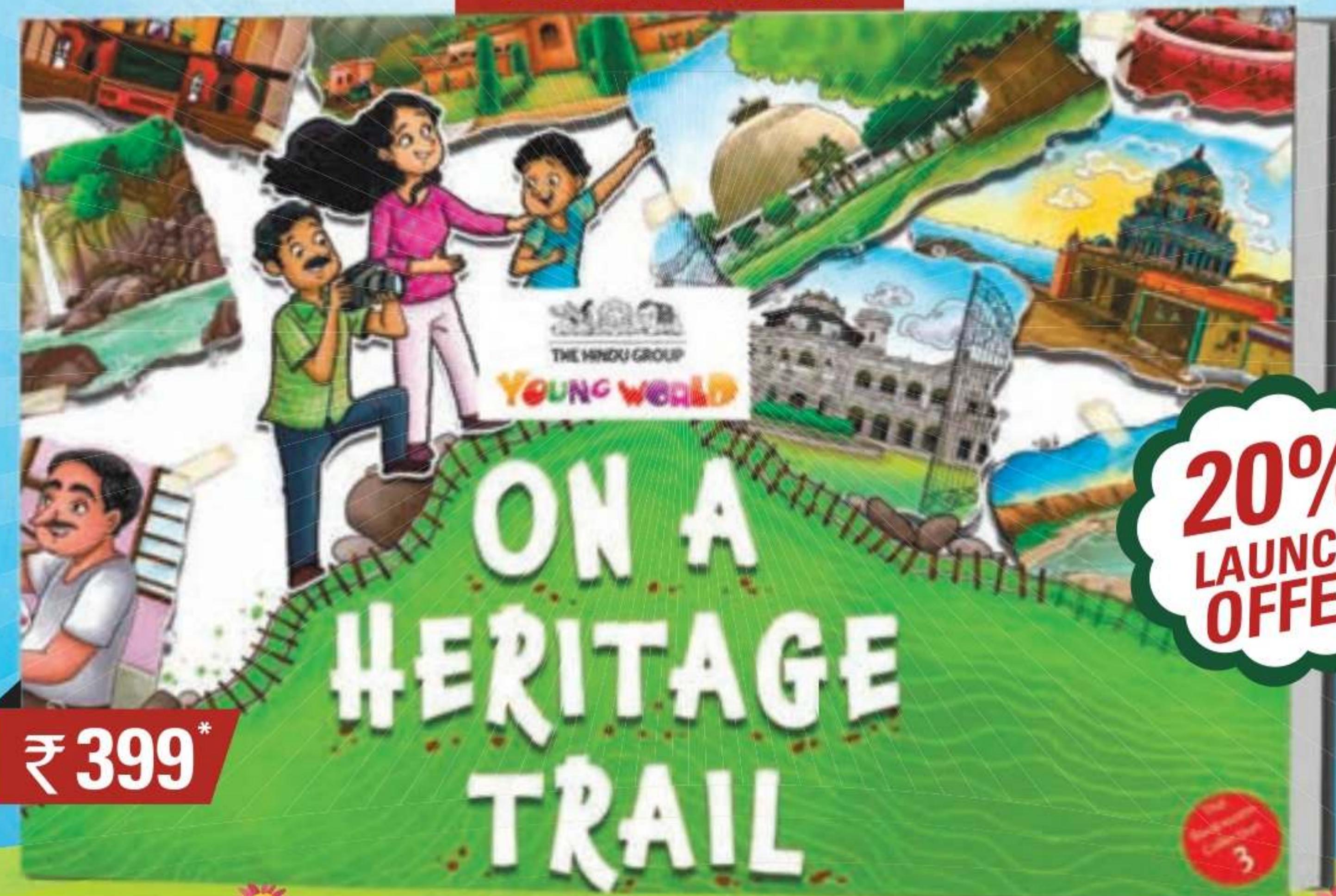
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