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CONTENTS

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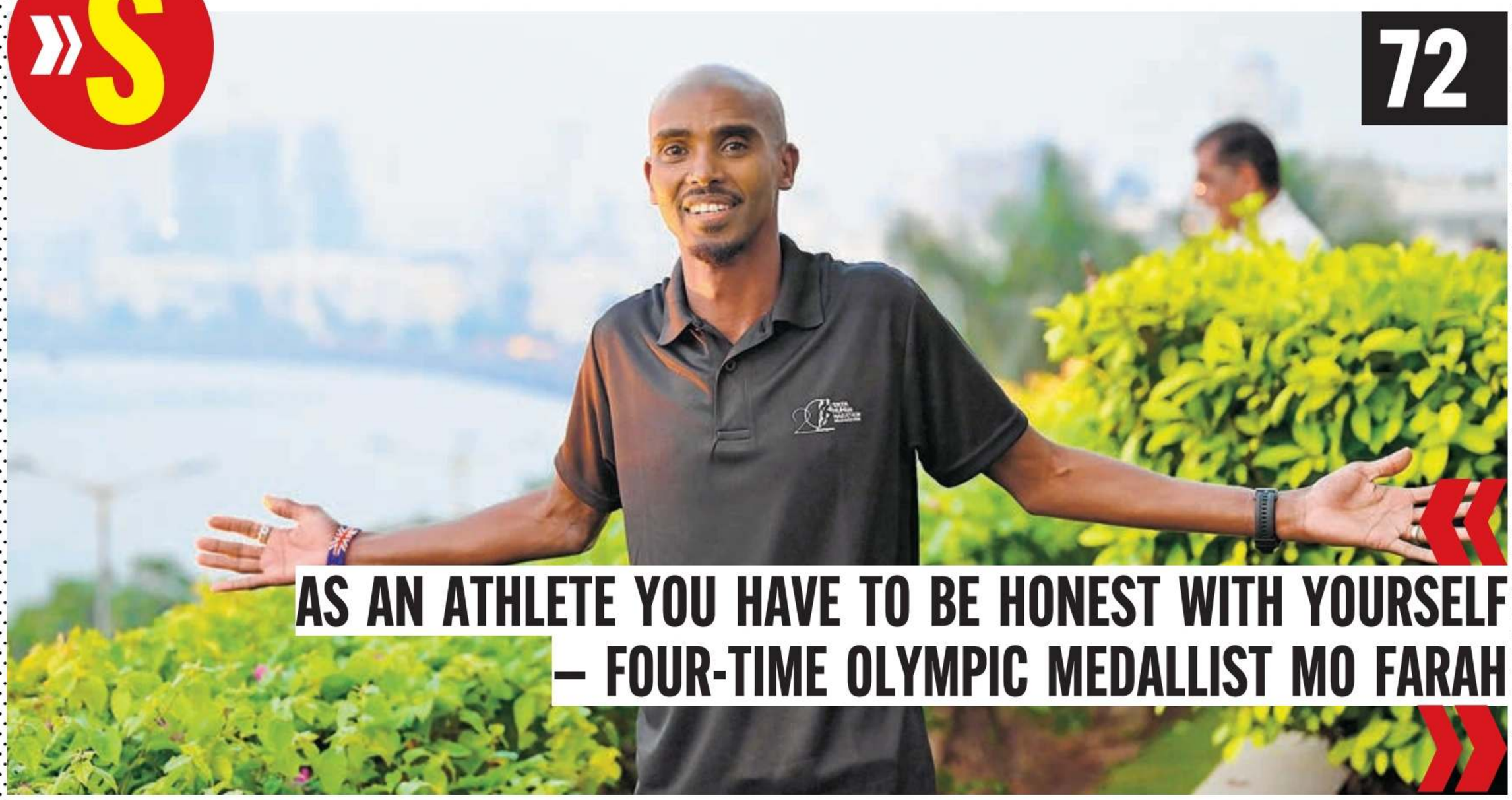

72

AS AN ATHLETE YOU HAVE TO BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF – FOUR-TIME OLYMPIC MEDALLIST MO FARAH

Cricket

26 **Vijay Hazare Trophy**
Runs galore and rising stars

32 **Women's Premier League**
A full-fledged home-and-away format

10
Cover Story
Jannik Sinner

The Italian overpowered Germany's Alexander Zverev in straight sets to defend his Australian Open crown

Cover: Jannik Sinner (AFP)

Read more...

36 **Women's Hockey India League**
A promising start

56 **Special Feature**
Hocky on thin ice in Ladakh

Poster: Madison Keys (Getty Images); Pages 43-50

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OFF-SIDE

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NATIONAL GAMES REDUCED TO A MERE WARM-UP EVENT

All athletes must start their season somewhere. But the goal, ideally, is to **build towards a peak,** usually for the World Championships, which, for multiple sports, take place in August or September.

The 38th National Games kicked off in Dehradun on January 28 with the usual pageantry — fireworks, speeches, Bollywood song and dance — all elements that make a sporting event feel less about sport and more like a grand Indian wedding. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in attendance, alongside Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Dhami, at the Maharana Pratap Sports College in Dehradun.

Over the years, the opening ceremonies of sporting events have become elaborate productions, with State governments spending fortunes to create an impressive spectacle for a few hours, perhaps hoping to distract us from the logistical hiccups that invariably follow.

Meanwhile, real athletes were having a very different experience. The Bengal kho kho and football teams endured 37 hours on a train without proper tickets, forced to sit and sleep on the floor. The basketball players fared little better — crammed three to a tiny room. In Haldwani, where the swimming events are set to take place, officials were still waiting for the Time, Scoring and Results equipment on the eve of competition.

The National Games, which had faded into obscurity, have found a new lease of life since the Tokyo Olympics, with three editions organised in the past four years. This year, events are spread across eight districts in Uttarakhand, stretching from the plains of Dehradun and Haldwani to the hills of Almora, Tehri, and Pithoragarh, even dipping into Haridwar — perhaps seeking spiritual reinforcement. Nearly 10,000 athletes are competing in 35 different sports, chasing 450 gold medals.

And yet, the National Games feel like an afterthought, drifting through the calendar with no clear rationale. Gujarat hosted them in September 2022, Goa in November 2023, and now Uttarakhand is having its turn in February. The Goa Games arrived so late in the year that hardly any notable athletes participated, with India's leading names enjoying a well-earned rest after a gruelling competition season.

This edition, too, arrives inconveniently in late winter, just as most athletes are getting their bearings for the year ahead.

For Indian track and field athletes, the outdoor season usually begins in late February or the first week of March. Internationally, there is an indoor circuit during winter, but it rarely features in the calendar of most Indian athletes — except for those with sponsorships that enable them to train overseas.

And it is not just track and field athletes who are being dragged into early action in Uttarakhand. The National Games will be the first competition of the season for India's wrestlers, women boxers, and archers as well.

Of course, all athletes must start their season somewhere. But the goal, ideally, is to build towards a peak, usually for the World Championships, which, for multiple sports, take place in August or September, during late summer in Europe.

Yet here we are, in Uttarakhand, at the tail end of winter, where temperatures have dropped to 8 or 9 degrees at some competition venues — perfect weather for wearing three layers but absolutely not for athletic performances.

Officially, these Games remain India's most prestigious domestic competition, but in practice, they have been reduced to a mere warm-up event.

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Running. Something about it just seems right. The wind in our face, the ache in our legs, and the inner voice urging us onward – all these elements contribute to its ethereal allure. For many, running is a way of life, while for countless others, each new year brings a renewed resolution to embrace it.

WHY IS RUNNING SO CAPTIVATING? There's no single answer, but it has always been associated with maintaining fitness, especially given that is remarkably accessible to everyone. Most people can run, the only difference is the pace at which one runs. You don't require a gym membership or a fancy equipment at home. All you need are a pair of shoes, a road and a desire.

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Major causes of these injuries include improper technique, inadequate footwear, overuse and overtraining without adequate rest, insufficient warm-up and cool-down, and ignoring pain.

How to optimize your running technique? We have shared some tips for you to run till infinity.

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Neymar returns to Santos after contract termination with Saudi club Al-Hilal

Neymar has agreed to return to Santos nearly 12 years after he left the Brazilian team, club president Marcelo Teixeira said.

The Brazilian striker confirmed earlier that his contract with Saudi Arabian club Al-Hilal had been terminated by mutual consent. He had an injury-marred spell at Al-Hilal, where he played only seven matches and scored once.

The 32-year-old Neymar won six titles with his boyhood club Santos, including a Copa Libertadores trophy in 2011. Santos is a beachfront city outside São Paulo.

Neymar, once hailed as one of the world's best players, spent much of his time in Saudi Arabia on the sidelines due to an ACL injury he picked playing for Brazil in October 2023.

São Paulo media reported that the former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain star is expected to return to Brazil this week and reintroduce himself to Santos fans within days.

AFP

« I live to give joy to my Sevilla and the Spanish fans and if it hadn't been for my hip I would have continued, that's for sure. That's why it was very difficult for me to say that this is the end of the season
– Retiring Spanish football legend Jesus Navas »

« He's in a different universe right now to anyone else; it's like he's prime Novak
– Alexander Zverev after losing to Jannik Sinner in the Australian Open final »

6.62s

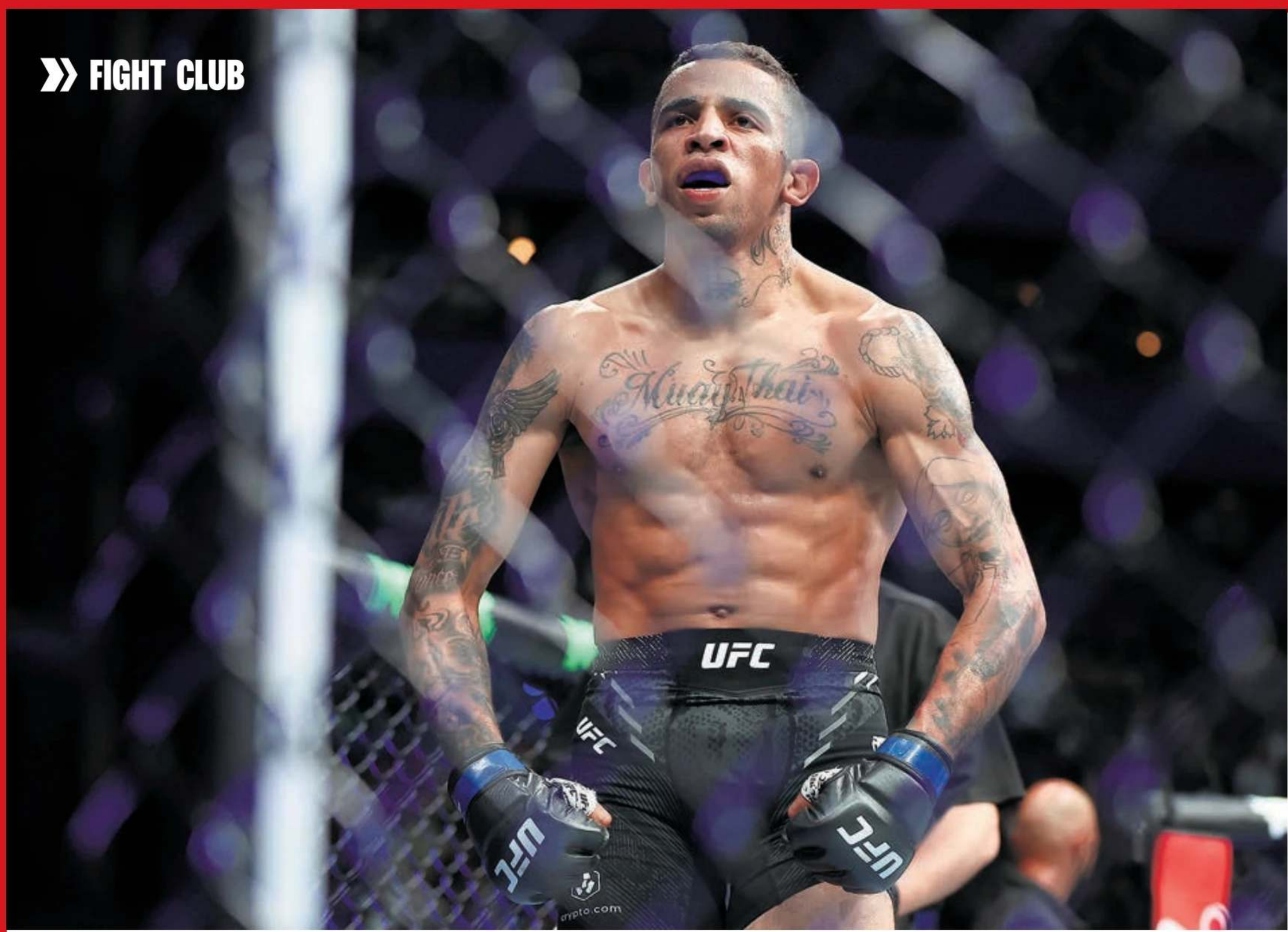
USA's Olympic 100m champion Noah Lyles launched his 2025 season with a 60m victory in 6.62 seconds at an indoor university meeting in Gainesville, Florida.
Lyles, who hadn't raced since winning gold in a scintillating 100m final and 200m bronze in Paris last year, cruised to victory — clocking 6.62 in both his heat and the final.
His opening time of the season put him a tick behind Olympic 100m runner-up Kishane Thompson of Jamaica, who clocked 6.56sec on Saturday in Kazakhstan in the first indoor 60m of his career.
The 2025 indoor athletics season will conclude with the World Championships in Nanjing on March 21-23.

60m

India's Tejas Shirse set a new national record in the men's 60m hurdles heats at the CMCM Luxembourg Indoor Meeting.
He clocked 7.65 seconds in the preliminaries, surpassing the previous national record of 7.70 seconds set by Siddhanth Thingalaya, and qualified for the final.
In the final, the 22-year-old equalled the national record and finished fifth overall, with Polish athlete Jakub Szymański taking first place with a time of 7.41 seconds.

CHAMPION STUFF

Denmark's Viktor Axelsen and An Se-young of South Korea, who won the men's and women's titles respectively in the India Open 2025 badminton tournament at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium in New Delhi. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR



NIGHTMARE VIBE

Carlos Prates, aka The Nightmare, made his UFC debut last February and has **not looked back since.**

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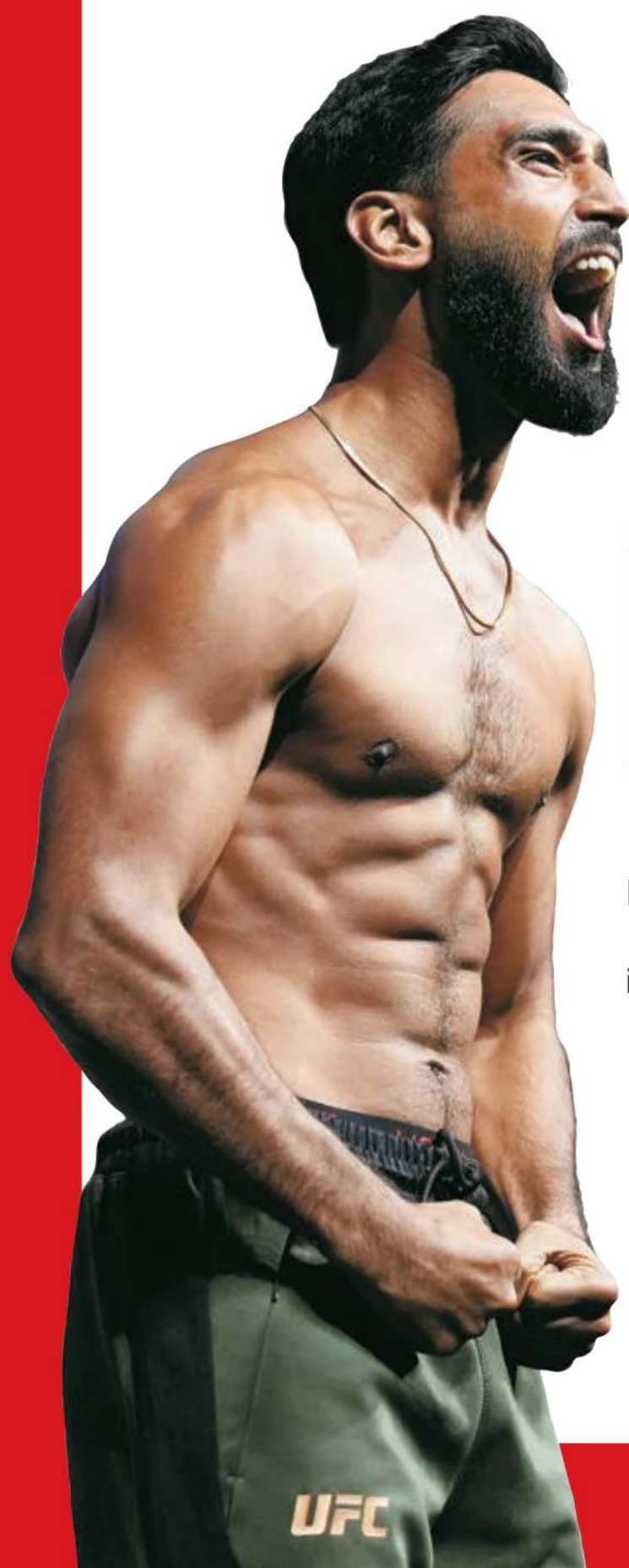


It takes courage and determination to make it into the Ultimate Fighting Championship, but it takes much more to sustain and succeed.

Numerous fighters make their UFC debuts every year, but only a few stand out from the rest. Brazil's Carlos Prates is one such fighter who made a name for himself in his first couple of fights.

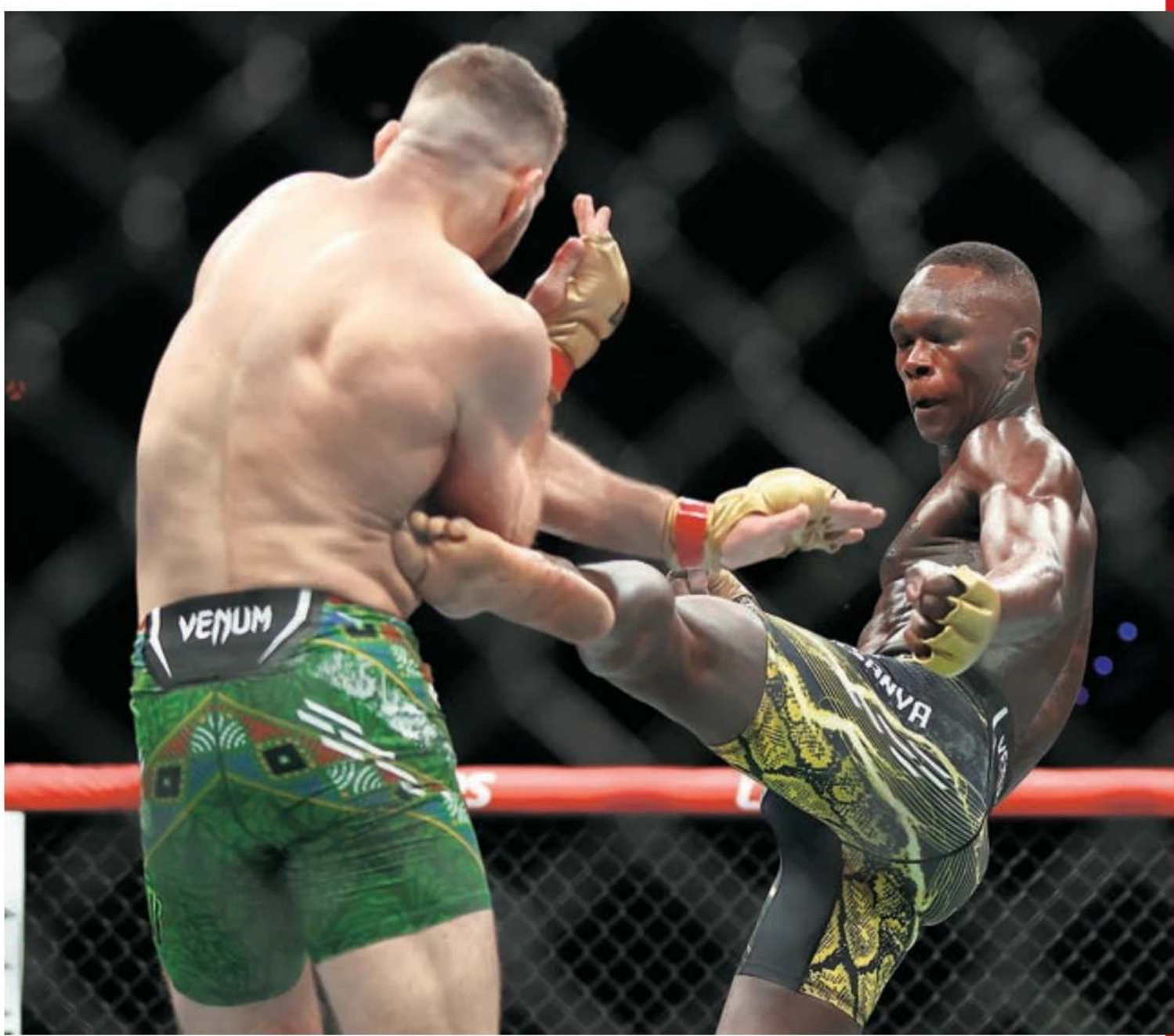
On the surface, one might assume Prates' inclusion in the UFC roster was due to his impressive performance at Dana White's Contender Series, where he scored a second-round knockout against Mitch Ramirez. But it's much more than that.

Prates made his professional MMA debut in 2012 and had over 20 fights under his belt before he decided to try his hand at the UFC. He went on to clinch the welterweight title at the Sao Paulo-based MMA promotion Standout Fighting Tournament in 2022.

Cut to February 2024: 'The Nightmare' made his UFC debut and did not look back. He adjusted seamlessly, earning a Performance of the Night bonus for his knockout of Trevin Giles.

He pocketed another bonus four months later, knocking out Charles Radtke in the first round. But he was just getting started. He closed out 2024 with back-to-back knockouts of

Remarkable start: Carlos Prates made his professional MMA debut way back in 2012 and had over 20 fights under his belt before he decided to give a shot at the UFC. Pics: GETTY IMAGES



Li Jingliang and Neil Magny, earning two more Performance of the Night bonuses and securing a spot in the welterweight Top 15.

Another fighter who looks destined for greatness is Fatima 'The Archangel' Kline of the USA. She suffered an agonising unanimous decision loss to veteran Jasmine Jasudavicius on debut. However, the loss cannot be a yardstick to gauge her abilities, as she accepted the fight on short notice.

Kline's 2025 started with a bang as she earned a second-round knockout win over Russia's Viktoriia Dudakova. The strawweights engaged in a scramble-heavy contest, with Dudakova often initiating. Still, Kline frequently worked to the top position, quickly focused on delivering damage, and eventually won via strikes.

Before her UFC entry, Kline boasted an impressive 6-0 professional record. This includes championship victories in the strawweight and flyweight divisions under the Cage Fury Fighting Championships banner, preceded by a streak of four consecutive wins in Invicta FC.

A highly regarded grappler and a training partner of prominent flyweight contender Erin Blanchfield, Kline possesses the potential to mirror her teammate's successful trajectory within the UFC.

Can Anshul find his second wind?

India's Anshul Jubli **(left)** will return to action in the UFC when he faces Quillan Salkilld of Australia in a lightweight bout at UFC 311.

Anshul will aim to bounce back from an underwhelming UFC debut and become the second Indian to secure a win in the UFC after Puja Tomar.

In his fight against the USA's Mike Breeden, Anshul began positively but quickly lost momentum in a matter of seconds. Displaying superior technique, he dominated the majority of the first two rounds. However, he started to lose focus when Breeden resorted to trash-talking at the start of the third round.

Although Anshul could counter Breeden's physical offence, he struggled mentally, losing focus midway through the final round. This led to him dropping his guard and ultimately being knocked out by Breeden. The 30-year-old later admitted that a lack of experience contributed to the loss. However, with more than a year of additional training and his problematic knee taken care of, the 'King of Lions' is determined to turn his fortunes around.

The secret behind Adesanya's success

Arch-rivals and former middleweight champions Robert Whittaker and Israel Adesanya **(above, right)** were recently seen sparring together. Whittaker posted pictures on his official Instagram account with the caption, "Rivals one day, friends the next." This training session comes ahead of Adesanya's main event bout against France's Nassourdine Imavov at UFC Fight Night on February 2.

The pictures highlight Adesanya's meticulous preparation. Both fighters were seen wearing shin guards and engaging in an intense exchange of leg kicks. The reason? Imavov, who has had 10 fights in the UFC and is ranked fifth compared to Adesanya's second, uses an unorthodox side stance with agile footwork and relies on leg kicks to tire out his opponents.

On a mission to reclaim his lost middleweight belt, Adesanya appears to have figured out the formula for success. However, his training session with Whittaker emphasises that longevity in any field demands continuous experimentation and adaptation.

FOR MORE STORIES

ZVEREV NO MATCH FOR SINNER 'THE TERMINATOR'

Jannik Sinner overpowered Alexander Zverev in a **clinical win,** while Madison Keys delivered a fearless performance to halt Aryna Sabalenka.

LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST

Paul Fein

On the court, Jannik Sinner is both the proverbial irresistible force and the immovable object. The 23-year-old Italian possesses the nerves and precision of a diamond cutter and the killer instinct of a hired assassin. Sinner boasts perfect technique and smart tactics that he implements brilliantly. His power is devastating, yet he knows when and how to temper it with finesse.

Off the court, Sinner is the epitome of diplomacy and empathy. He defuses controversy, praises everyone from tournament staff to tennis greats, and exudes confidence and humility with refreshing authenticity.

This *sui generis* athlete fittingly displayed all his skill

GETTY IMAGES

and character before a record-setting attendance of more than 1.2 million spectators during his clinical 6-3, 7-6 (4), 6-3 final triumph on the 120th birthday of the Australian Open.

Sinner broke (or equalled) several records himself, such as joining Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic (twice), Ivan Lendl, and John McEnroe in winning three consecutive Grand Slam titles on hard courts. He became the eighth man in the Open Era, which began in 1968, to win his first three or more Major title matches (following Jimmy Connors, Bjorn Borg, Stefan Edberg, Gustavo Kuerten, Federer, Stan Wawrinka, and Carlos Alcaraz). A paragon of high-level consistency, Sinner also faced no break points in the final of a Major, a feat achieved only by Federer at the 2003 Wimbledon and Rafael Nadal at the 2017 US Open.

Alexander (Sascha) Zverev enjoyed a deceptive 4-2 match edge over Sinner in their rivalry going into the 2025 AO final. Sinner began emerging as a superstar at the 2023 Davis Cup final, where he whipped Djokovic. Soon after, the Italian won his first Major at the Australian Open. In August 2024, the much-improved Sinner, then No. 1, beat Zverev in a close three-setter on the Cincinnati hard courts. When they met in this Melbourne final, Zverev's No. 2 ranking was misleading because the Paris Olympics — where Djokovic outplayed Alcaraz for the gold medal — unjustifiably awarded no ranking points.

The most pertinent statistic was Zverev's horrendous 1-12 career record against top-5 opponents at Grand Slam events. Tellingly, the 6'6" German caved in his two previous chances to win a Major. He blew a two-set advantage against Dominic Thiem in the 2020 US Open final and suffered the same bitter fate against Alcaraz in the 2024 Roland Garros final. Conversely, Sinner racked up 47 wins in his first 50 matches as world No. 1, equalling the record set by Borg and Connors.

Any hope Zverev had of capturing his first Major after years of frustration faded early in Sinner's decisive victory. Relaxed and confident, Sinner opened the final with an ace and easily held serve (at love), as he would throughout the match.

Zverev staved off two break points in the fifth game, but two games later, Sinner converted his sixth break point when Zverev erred on a backhand volley. "Despite awesome serving, Zverev still lost this game," noted *ESPN* analyst McEnroe. Not even getting 83 per cent of his rocket first serves in saved him from losing the first set, 6-3.

Exciting talent: Shelton, beaten by Sinner in the second semifinal, is a work in progress. GETTY IMAGES

The 15,000 spectators in Rod Laver Arena cheered Zverev on to get back into the match, even though he looked resigned much of the time. When Sinner erred on a drop shot to make the score 5-6, 30-all in the second set, the crowd roared. But Sinner won the next two points to quash the threat and force a tiebreaker.

Serving at 4-all, Zverev suffered the unkindest cut of all when Sinner's forehand clipped the top of the net and barely plopped over for a fluke net cord winner. On the next point, Zverev missed a backhand serve return and swiped his racket on the court in frustration. Sinner wrapped up the 7-4 tiebreaker with his trademark 1-2 punch — a wide serve followed by a forehand winner into the open court. Zverev smashed his racket during the changeover.

Zverev, like the fans, sensed there would be no miracle comeback for him, as there had been a year ago for Sinner against Daniil Medvedev. Sinner is a far better player now in every way. He has become a harder-hitting version of Djokovic, albeit slightly less athletic.

As Mark Petchey, the *Tennis Channel* analyst, said: "You feel like you hit an offensive shot to Sinner's backhand corner, and it comes back with interest on it." His mastery of the extreme open-stance two-hander — almost doing the splits while maintaining perfect balance — looks exactly like that of the hyper-flexible Djokovic.

Zverev failed to ignite the crowd with any positive body language, which, in turn, would have raised his energy level. An occasional chant of "Let's go, Sascha!" wasn't enough to lift his spirits or game in the third set. Sinner got the only service break he needed for 4-2. On championship point, Sinner showcased his versatility with a forehand drop shot followed by a backhand passing winner.

A shock exit for the GOAT

A final pitting Sinner against either Alcaraz, who captured the French Open and Wimbledon last year, or Djokovic would have been more entertaining and likely much closer. Unfortunately, seedings based solely on the flawed ATP rankings caused No. 7 Djokovic to face No. 3 Alcaraz prematurely in the quarterfinals. Djokovic prevailed 4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4, but it was a Pyrrhic victory as he tore his left hamstring muscle.

For the first time in their eight matches, the crowd pulled for the ageing (fading?) champion. Chants of "Nole! Nole!" reverberated around the stadium well past midnight. The exasperated Alcaraz did himself no favours when he mimicked the injured Djokovic with fake hobbling.

"Pretty much a normal Djokovic match, drama incorporated," said *ESPN* analyst Patrick McEnroe. "It felt like it was the final of a Slam. I wish it was," said *Tennis Channel's* Lindsay Davenport.

The sterling performance evoked memories of Djokovic's greatest career matches, prompting all-time great Martina Navratilova to comment, "Novak had great depth and precision. It's like he had the ball on a string. I've never seen Alcaraz

that frustrated before."

Djokovic, who had easily ousted young Czechs 24th-seeded Jiri Lehecka and 26th-seeded Tomas Machac before eliminating Alcaraz, certainly still had the game to do the same against Zverev if he weren't injured.

But his left thigh was wrapped in tape covered by white strapping, and he hadn't practised except for a few minutes before the intriguing semifinal. With Djokovic leading Zverev 4-3 in the first set, a concerned Patrick said, "He looks 75 per cent of his maximum."

Would that be anywhere near enough against Zverev? The plot thickened when Djokovic didn't run for Zverev's forehand winner that evened the score at 6-all. Was the canny 37-year-old saving energy for the tiebreaker or was he in too much pain to run?

At 3-4 in the tiebreaker, Djokovic smacked a 197 kph ace. Then came a beautiful backhand drop shot followed by a diabolical topspin lob winner over the towering Zverev for 5-4. A jubilant Djokovic fan raised a sign saying, "Keep calm and the GOAT is back."

Not so fast. Djokovic's backhand slice floated out for 5-5, and Zverev's bold forehand winner put him ahead 6-5. Djokovic dictated the next point and moved forward but surprisingly missed a routine forehand volley, conceding the tiebreaker 7-5.

Djokovic then stunned the crowd and Zverev when he immediately walked to the umpire and retired. "Game, set, and match, Zverev" — came the announcement. A small number of fans unfairly booed.

Zverev came to his defence in his on-court interview with Jim Courier: "Don't boo a player when he goes out with an injury. There's no guy I respect more than Novak... He's won this tournament 10 times... I played him in 2021 when he had an abdominal tear and he served 28 aces."

At his press conference, Djokovic elaborated: "I did everything I could to manage the muscle tear. Unfortunate ending, but I tried. It was getting worse and worse. I kept feeling more and more pain... Injury is the biggest enemy of a professional athlete."

Body over mind: A muscle tear forced Djokovic to retire in his semifinal against Zverev. GETTY IMAGES

In the other semifinal, Sinner faced 21st seed Ben Shelton, the high-energy American with a high-octane lefty serve. Sinner had held serve 96 per cent of the time in five prior matches. So, Shelton raised hopes for a huge upset when he broke serve in the opening game and 11th game to serve for the set at 6-5. Somewhat rattled, Sinner had to fend off two set points, forcing a tiebreaker.

Reckless forehand errors undid the American and Sinner seized the tiebreaker 7-2 and never looked back in his predictable 7-6 (2), 6-2, 6-2 victory. Shelton, coached by his father Bryan, a 1990s touring pro, is clearly a work in progress. His backhand is a glaring weakness, his forehand is erratic, and his shot selection is often low percentage. "To make the top 10, Shelton has to improve his return of serve," said former No. 1 Courier.

As for the superiority of Sinner, however, there is no doubt at all. You can take it first-hand from Zverev. "He's very, very similar to Novak when he was at his best," Zverev said. "They barely miss. They make you think you have to overhit all the time to have a chance in a rally against them. It's very, very difficult to win a point from the back of the court against them."

KEYS CHANGED HER SERVE FROM A PLATFORM STANCE TO A STEP-UP ONE, ENABLING HER TO ATTACK BETTER

Dream come true: The talented Madison Keys always dreamed of emulating the superstar sisters, Venus and Serena Williams. In her 46th Major appearance at the Australian Open this year, she won her first Grand Slam crown, beating defending champion Aryna Sabalenka, 6-3, 2-6, 7-5. GETTY IMAGES

KEYS DETHRONES SABALENKA TO WIN FIRST GRAND SLAM TITLE

When four-year-old Madison Keys first saw Venus Williams on TV, she was smitten with her dress. Her sports-loving parents told her she would have to play tennis to wear it. From then on, the talented American dreamed of emulating superstar sisters Venus and Serena.

In 2009, Keys became the seventh-youngest player to win a WTA main draw match at 14 years and 48 days, and the youngest since prodigy Martina Hingis in 1994. Soon after, she beat Serena in a World TeamTennis set, prompting Serena to describe her as "a future No. 1." In 2016, Keys became the first American to debut in the Top 10 since Serena had done so in 1999.

Ever closer to fulfilling her girlhood dream, she faced close friend Sloane Stephens in the biggest match of their lives for the coveted title at the 2017 US Open. The pressure paralysed Keys. Making 17 errors in the first seven games, she self-destructed in a 6-3, 6-0 tearful debacle.

Fast forward to this Australian Open. "I've obviously thought of that match endlessly for the past eight years," said Keys with a bittersweet laugh, after upsetting world No. 2 Iga Switek in a riveting 5-7, 6-1, 7-6 (8) semifinal. Keys said she learned important lessons from that traumatic loss and a 0-6, 7-6 (1), 7-6 (5) heartbreaker to Aryna Sabalenka after leading 6-0, 5-3 in the 2023 US Open semis. "I'm probably going to be uncomfortable 99 per cent of the time that I'm on the court, and that's OK, and I can still also play tennis through that."

Some critics predicted Keys would never fully control her explosive but erratic game or her often-fragile nerves. Others, like Chris Evert and Lindsay Davenport, believed it was just a matter of when, not if, she'd win a Grand Slam title. Keys trained at all-time great Evert's tennis academy in Florida from 2005 to 2011, and former No. 1 Davenport coached her in 2015 and 2017.

Bjorn Fratangelo dated Keys for seven years and became her

husband last November. A former junior star who beat Dominic Thiem in the 2011 French Open boys' final and later ranked No. 99 on the ATP Tour, Fratangelo advised Keys for several years before becoming her official coach 18 months ago. He put the critical final touches on her technique, tactics, and equipment.

"What I've tried to instil in her is that winning and losing is irrelevant, but how you lose and how you win matters," Fratangelo told *The Athletic*. "'Don't lose being passive, because it's not who you are. Let a counterpuncher lose being passive because that's what they do. You lose putting your foot on the gas pedal and that's OK. It's going to happen.'"

Under his guidance, Maddie — as her friends affectionately call her — changed her serve from a platform stance to a step-up one. That enabled Keys to land farther inside the baseline, putting her in a better position to attack with her booming forehand. Concomitantly, she lowered her service toss to keep her swing continuous, which increased her consistency. Keys switched from a Wilson racket to a lighter Yonex, which she can manoeuvre better, and to harness her power with added topspin, she changed her strings from half polyester and half gut to all poly.

Ironically, Keys found inspiration from Sabalenka. The world No. 1 enjoyed a 4-1 dominance in their rivalry, beating her all three times on hard courts and both times at Slam events. "The one thing I really wanted to try to be better at was not playing more passively in big points and just trying to emulate the way she trusts her game and the way she goes after it," she told *Eurosport*. "If you're able to do that and you miss and you lose, it's on your terms. I think her ability to always go for it, no matter what the score, is really impressive. She plays such fearless tennis. She has the ability to play so well that way. I think it's unique."

And for seven straight matches at a Major, Keys proved she could perform like that too. Even more impressive, the 22-1 pre-tournament longshot beat four top-10 opponents to equal an Open Era record. Only one victory came easy, though. In the opening rounds, Keys edged fellow American Ann Li 6-4, 7-5, and outlasted Romanian qualifier Elena-Gabriela Ruse 7-6 (1), 2-6, 7-5.

Not this time: Sabalenka, who was looking to win her third straight AO crown, gave it all in the final. GETTY IMAGES

Collins clashes with the crowd

Next came the No. 10 seed, Danielle Collins, who had been friends and pen pals with Keys since they were 10. Collins, the 2022 finalist at Melbourne, became annoyed by hecklers during her 7-6 (4), 4-6, 6-2 win over hometown favourite Destanee Aiava. Afterward, she sarcastically blew several kisses to them, one before touching her derriere — "Kiss my *ss!" in American parlance.

When Collins entered the court to play Keys, the fans booed the fiery American, and yet again when the trainer arrived mid-match to check her knee. Djokovic, who has often battled hecklers during his controversial career, supported Collins. "I loved her response. I loved it. Everything she said on the court, off the court.... I know exactly the feeling. So, I think she was funny, smart."

To the delight of the crowd, the popular Keys thumped Collins 6-4, 6-4. Afterward, *Tennis Channel* analyst Prakash Amritraj said, "I don't care who you are. That has to be tough to deal with."

In the fourth round, Keys encountered the placid but heavy-hitting sixth seed, Elena Rybakina, the 2022 Wimbledon champion and 2023 Australian Open runner-up to Sabalenka. The 6' Kazakh, under new coach Goran Ivanisevic, looked uninspired and slow as Keys prevailed 6-3, 1-6, 6-3.

Keys volleyed superbly, winning 23 of 26 net points to overcome 28th seed Elina Svitolina in a 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 quarterfinal test. Her improved serve technique paid off as her first serve

Power game: Even though No. 2 Swiatek sailed through the weakest quarter of the draw, giving up just 14 games, she couldn't match Keys' gutsy game in the semifinal. GETTY IMAGES

average rose this season to 109 mph, six mph more than in 2024, despite mixing in plenty of kick serves. Earlier, Svitolina matched her husband Gael Monfils, who upset No. 4 Taylor Fritz, by taking out No. 4 Jasmine Paolini 2-6, 6-4, 6-0.

Meanwhile, No. 2 Swiatek sailed through the weakest quarter of the draw, giving up just 14 games in five matches. Only Maria Sharapova (9), Monica Seles (12), and Steffi Graf (13) have allowed fewer games before the AO semis. Swiatek's most impressive win, though the 6-1, 6-2 score didn't reflect it, came against tough-as-nails American and No. 8 seed Emma Navarro.

The 23-year-old had battled through three-set wins over Peyton Stearns, Wang Xiyu, three-time Major finalist Ons Jabeur, and crafty No. 9 seed Daria Kasatkina. Following her victory over Jabeur, she had the best quip of the tournament: "I love three sets. I love tennis so much. I can't resist playing three sets."

In what *ESPN* analyst Mary Joe Fernandez called "the match of the tournament," Keys staved off a match point — down 6-5 in the deciding set — against Swiatek, and belted a forehand serve return that forced a backhand error from the Pole. Keys was so intently focused that she later said she didn't remember it — though Swiatek surely will. Two points later, the five-time Major champion blinked, double-faulting to set up a dramatic, 10-point match tiebreak.

Once again, Keys lived dangerously. She trailed by one or two points up to 8-7 for her opponent. Then she grabbed the last three points with an ace, unreturnable serve, and, ironically, an unforced error from Swiatek's forehand, her best shot, to seal a thrilling win. Relieved and happy, Keys bent down on her knees and cried.

"She pushed me when she needed to," said the dejected Swiatek, who has lost most often on hard courts to power hitters like Keys. She conceded Keys "was brave with her decisions" and "totally deserved to be in the final."

Sabalenka, going for a three-peat at the Australian Open and her fourth Major title, rampaged through the top half of the draw, except for a 6-2, 2-6, 6-3 quarterfinal win over solid-stroking Russian veteran and No. 27 seed Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova.

The eagerly anticipated contest between Sabalenka and No. 3 Coco Gauff never materialised. What happened? Gauff had entered the AO unbeaten at 9-0 this year and 22-2 since the end of the 2024 US Open. Almost inexplicably, her forehand and serve fell apart to the tune of 41 unforced errors and a disappointing 7-5, 6-4 defeat. Paula Badosa, who was ranked No. 2 in April 2022, has all the shots but, like Keys, sometimes got nervous on big points and occasions. Not this time. She blasted two aces in the last game to clinch the biggest win of her career.

Best of friends

In the semis, the Belarusian basher faced 11th seed Badosa. Best of friends, they often practise together, shop together, and make dancing videos together.

Sabalenka played as fiercely as the tiger tattooed on her forearm and stamped on her sneakers, devouring Badosa 6-4, 6-2, thanks to 32 winners, and just one double fault — her bugaboo until two years ago. After Sabalenka won the Brisbane tune-up event, Badosa told *ausopen.com*: "For me, what she improved the most is how she deals with emotions. She's a very emotional girl. That's why I empathise a lot with her. That's the big change she made in her game, also believing she can be the best, and she proved it."

Indeed, she had. Even though the Queen of Hard Courts was a solid betting favourite for the final, some observers, like Jessica Pegula, picked her compatriot. Fernandez recalled that after Keys beat Pegula in the Adelaide final two weeks earlier, Pegula said, "If she plays half as well as she played against me, she'll win the tournament."

Having Fratangelo in her corner under the liberalised coaching rule

— which, in my view, contravenes the traditional and valid tenet of self-reliance — unquestionably tilted the balance toward Keys. When asked what the hardest part of his coaching was, she said, "I have to admit he's right all the time."

When Keys won the toss, she smartly chose to receive. In the opening game, Sabalenka nervously double-faulted twice, Keys cracked two forehand winners, and quickly broke serve. Seconds after she was broken but still led 5-3, Keys got some quick advice from Fratangelo and broke Sabalenka, climaxing the 6-3 set with a backhand winner. The Belarusian roared back to take the second set 6-2.

The shot of the match came with Keys serving at 2-2, love-15. With a graceful leap reminiscent of Federer, she conjured a dazzling backhand volley angle that landed on the sideline and set up an easy forehand put-away. Had she erred, Keys would have trailed love-30.

Both players held their serve and nerve up to 6-5, when Keys unleashed a forehand winner. Now the ball was in Sabalenka's court to try to hold serve for 6-all. In the last game, she faltered, getting only one first serve in, while Keys pounded a backhand winner for love-30 and closed out the 6-3, 2-6, 7-5 upset with another forehand winner.

Momentous: Paula Badosa scored the biggest win of her career when she beat Coco Gauff in the quarterfinal.
GETTY IMAGES

Keys cried tears of joy. Distraught, Sabalenka threw her racket on the court, covered her head with a towel, and wept.

During the trophy presentations, the zany Sabalenka looked at her team and joked, "As always, that's your fault, guys. I really hate you." The crowd laughed. Praising her conqueror, she said, "You crushed this tonight, really well deserved."

Keys returned the compliment. "You're always so tough to beat."

Crediting her own team for her first Grand Slam crown in her 46th Major appearance, Keys said, "They believed in me when I didn't believe in myself."

Doubts and disputes

Late finishes

The men's event was rife with controversies. Matches ending well past midnight are bad for players, spectators, tournament staff, and the media. Learner Tien, a clever American teenager, outwitted fifth-seeded Medvedev 6-3, 7-6 (4), 6-7 (8), 1-6, 7-6 (7) in a five-set marathon that finished after 2 am. He then ate pizza at 4 am and didn't get to bed until 7 am.

'Let' it be

In the unfathomable and unprofessional absence of electronic service let machines, umpires called lets, infuriating players who insisted there weren't lets – and vice versa. To make matters worse, Navratilova amplified her foolish crusade to abolish the time-tested service let rule. Petchey, a voice of reason, rightly responded, "Why bring luck into a game of skill?"

A second look

Electronic line calling should also include replays to determine double bounces. In her victory over Navarro, Swiatek said, "I wasn't sure if it was a double bounce, or I hit it with my frame. It was hard to say because, like, I was full sprinting. I don't remember even seeing the contact point." Fair enough, but replays showed the ball had bounced twice. Veteran umpire Eva Asderaki shouldn't have allowed Swiatek to win the point.

Expert advice

In-match coaching expanded as coaches and other team members could advise and soothe players situated near their special pods at one end of the court. Taylor Fritz made a powerful case for self-reliance and against the new rule. "That's something that should be between the two players," argued Fritz. "Being able to make strategies, how you handle decision-making, coming up with these kinds of things under pressure, is just as important as hitting a serve or hitting a forehand. It would be insane if someone could come on the court for you and serve, right? So why can someone tell you what to do?"

Djoke's on the doubters

For online skeptics who absurdly claimed that Djokovic faked his hamstring injury during his matches against Alcaraz and Zverev, the Serb got the last word – and image. He published a photo of the injury on video with the zinger: "Thought I'd leave this out there for all the injury experts out there."

Mystery man: Varun Chakaravarthy rocked England's middle order, picking up three for 23, including the wickets of Harry Brook and Liam Livingstone in the same over. He later had the dangerous-looking Jos Buttler caught, as England managed only 132 in the first innings. R. V. MOORTHY

FOR MORE IMAGES

Fast and furious: Opener Abhishek Sharma came out all guns blazing as his 34-ball 79, including eight sixes and five fours, set up India's quickest chase against England in T20Is, with 43 balls to spare.

R. V. MOORTHY

Quick gun, Brydon: After smashing a rapid 17-ball 31 to push England's first innings total to 165, Carse put India in a spot of bother with his lively spell of three for 29. The timely dismissals of Suryakumar Yadav, Dhruv Jurel, and Washington Sundar opened up the game for England. GETTY IMAGES

Ice cool: As wickets fell regularly, Tilak Varma anchored the chase and kept India's hopes alive, finishing with an unbeaten 72 from 55 balls. The 22-year-old leapt in joy after hitting the winning runs – the only moment he showed emotion on the field. R. RAGU

***Surya*namaskar:** Tilak Varma's composed innings to successfully chase down a challenging 166-run target received widespread acclaim from the cricket fraternity, starting with captain Suryakumar Yadav. PTI

Trial by spin: Varun Chakravarthy wreaked havoc on the English batting line-up again, claiming 5-24 as England collapsed, losing eight wickets for 60 runs to set a target of 172. VIJAY SONEJI

Staying alive: England's bowlers, led by Jamie Overton's impressive 3-24, delivered a strong performance to secure a 26-run victory over India in Rajkot, keeping the T20 series alive. VIJAY SONEJI

AP

West Indies staged a remarkable comeback in the second Test to secure its first victory on Pakistani soil in 35 years, levelling the series 1-1 with a 120-run win. Chasing 178 with six wickets in hand, Pakistan was undone by West Indies spinners, spearheaded by Jomel Warrican. Warrican finished with match figures of 9 for 70 and a series haul of 19 wickets.

GETTY IMAGES

West Indies Women emerged victorious in their three-match ODI series against Bangladesh Women, clinching a 2-1 win after dominating the decider. In the deciding match, Karishma Ramharack's outstanding spell of 4 for 12 restricted Bangladesh to just 118, which the West Indies chased down comfortably with eight wickets to spare.

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Hobart Hurricanes clinched its maiden Big Bash League (BBL) title with a commanding seven-wicket victory over Sydney Thunder in the final. Thunder started strongly with a 97-run opening stand between captain David Warner and Jason Sangha, but Hurricanes' Riley Meredith and Nathan Ellis turned the tide, each claiming three wickets to restrict the target to 183. The Hurricanes raced to victory within 15 overs, thanks to Mitchell Owen's 39-ball 100, which equalled the record held by Craig Simmons for Perth Scorchers against Adelaide Strikers in 2014.

PTI

AFP

VIJAY SONEJI

Arshdeep Singh was crowned Men's T20I Cricketer of the Year 2024 after an outstanding year in which he claimed 36 wickets in 18 matches at an average of 15.31 and an economy rate of 7.49. With 97 career wickets, the 25-year-old is now India's highest wicket-taker in T20Is. Jasprit Bumrah was named Test Cricketer of the Year, having taken an extraordinary 71 wickets in the calendar year. The 31-year-old averaged just 14.92 per wicket and ended 2024 with a strike rate of 30.1. Smriti Mandhana was awarded Women's ODI Cricketer of the Year after amassing 747 runs in 13 innings at an average of 57.86 and a strike rate of 95.15. Her four ODI centuries in 2024 set a new benchmark in women's cricket.

GETTY IMAGES

Australia dominated the Women's Ashes series against England, securing a commanding 12-0 lead and setting the stage for a potential whitewash ahead of the one-off Test. In the three ODIs, all-rounder Ashleigh Gardner shone brightly, delivering a three-wicket haul and scoring an unbeaten 42 in the opening game, followed by a century in the final match to guide the visitor to a clean sweep. Defending a modest total of 181 in the second ODI — the lowest-ever successfully defended score in an Ashes ODI — Alana King excelled with figures of 4 for 25, supported by Kim Garth (3/37) and Gardner (1/23), sealing a 21-run victory. Opener Beth Mooney contributed two half-centuries, while Georgia Wareham claimed two three-wicket hauls during the three-match T20I series.

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Smriti in fine nick

30 The number of fifty-plus scores for Smriti Mandhana in her T20I career. Her 77 against the West Indies in Navi Mumbai on 19 Dec 2024 has placed her at the top of the list of women with the most fifty-plus scores in T20Is, ahead of Suzie Bates, who has 29 fifty-plus scores, including a hundred. Mandhana's 30 scores in the 50s (50-99) are also the most by any woman cricketer in T20Is.

Most 50+ scores by a batter in Women's T20 internationals

50+	(100+50)	Batter	For	M	Inns	Runs	HS	Ave.
30	(0+30)	Smriti Mandhana	Ind	148	142	3761	87	29.38
29	(1+28)	Suzie Bates	NZ	171	168	4584	124*	29.38
26	(2+24)	Beth Mooney	Aus	108	102	3121	117*	40.01
22	(1+21)	Sophie Devine	NZ	143	139	3391	105	28.25
22	(0+22)	Stafanie Taylor	WI	125	122	3426	90	35.31
21	(2+19)	Danni Wyatt-Hodge	Eng	169	148	3173	124	23.67

1 The number of batters in Women's T20Is to aggregate over 750 runs a calendar year. This distinction now goes to India's Smriti Mandhana, who had 763 runs against her name in 2024. Only three others have crossed 700 in a calendar year in Women's T20I cricket.

Most runs by a batter in a calendar year in Women's T20I cricket

Runs	Batter	For	M	Inns	Ave.	100/50	HS	Year
763	Smriti Mandhana	Ind	23	21	42.38	0/8	77	2024
720	Chamari Athapaththu	SL	21	21	40.00	2/4	119*	2024
711	Esha Oza	UAE	20	20	41.82	1/4	114*	2024
700	Hayley Matthews	WI	14	14	63.63	1/4	132	2023

India's Smriti Mandhana. PTI

18 The number of balls Richa Ghosh needed to reach her fifty against the West Indies in Navi Mumbai on 19 December 2024. This is the joint-fastest in women's T20Is as she joins Kiwi Sophie Devine and Aussie Phoebe Litchfield. For the record, the previous fastest fifty for India came in 23 balls from Smriti Mandhana, who ended with 61 in 32 balls against England in Birmingham on 6 August 2022.

Batters quickest (in fewest balls) to reach a fifty score in Women's T20I cricket

Balls for 50	Batter	(Runs in balls)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
18	Sophie Devine	(70 in 22 balls) +	NZ	Ind	Bengaluru	11 Jul 2015	Won
18	Phoebe Litchfield	(52* in 19 balls)	Aus	WI	North Sydney	2 Oct 2023	Lost
18	Richa Ghosh	(54 in 21 balls)	Ind	WI	Mumbai DYP	19 Dec 2024	Won
20	Nida Dar	(75 in 37 balls)	Pak	SA	Benoni	22 May 2019	Lost

+ in a run chase

14 The number of sixes hit in the final game of the series on 19 December 2024 in Navi Mumbai by India (7 sixes) and West Indies (7). This is the joint-second most in a Women's T20I and also the most to be recorded in any Women's T20I match on Indian soil.

Most sixes in a match in Women T20Is

Sixes	Team1 (Sixes)	Team2 (Sixes)	Venue	Date	Won by
15	South Africa (8)	India (7)	Potchefstroom	13 Feb 2018	India
14	West Indies (10)	South Africa (4)	Basseterre	5 May 2010	West Indies
14	Australia (9)	West Indies (5)	North Sydney	2 Oct 2023	West Indies
14	India (7)	West Indies (7)	Mumbai DYP	19 Dec 2024	India
13	England (9)	South Africa (4)	Taunton	20 Jun 2018	England

2 The number of occasions India Women made 200-plus in a T20 international match. Their recent effort of 217/4 against the West Indies in Navi Mumbai in their allotted 20 overs is their highest in this format. Their previous highest was 201/5 against UAE earlier this year in the Asia Cup tournament. Only on four other occasions has this total been exceeded by sides from top nations in women's cricket. The table below has the details. The total is also the highest by any team against West Indies in this format, bettering Australia's 212/6 at the North Sydney Oval in 2023. India's 217/4 is also the highest women's T20I total in India. The previous highest in India was Australia's 209/4 against England in a tri-nation series final at the Brabourne Stadium, Mumbai, on 31 March 2018.

Highest team totals for India in Women's T20Is

Total (overs)	Opp	Venue	Date	Result	Total (overs)	Opp
217/4 (20)	WI	Mumbai DYP	19 Dec 2024	Won	217/4 (20)	WI
201/5 (20)	UAE	Dambulla	21 Jul 2024	Won	201/5 (20)	UAE
198/4 (20)	Eng	Mumbai BS	25 Mar 2018	Lost	198/4 (20)	Eng
195/4 (20)	WI	Mumbai DYP	15 Dec 2024	Won	195/4 (20)	WI
194/5 (20)	NZ	Providence	9 Nov 2018	Won	194/5 (20)	NZ

Highest team totals in Women's T20Is (among top cricket nations)

Total (overs)	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result	Total (overs)	For
255/2 (20)	Ban	Mald	Pokhara	5 Dec 2019	Won	255/2 (20)	Ban
250/3 (20)	Eng	SA	Taunton	20 Jun 2018	Won	250/3 (20)	Eng
226/3 (20)	Aus	Eng	Chelmsford	26 Jul 2019	Won	226/3 (20)	Aus
226/2 (20)	Aus	SL	North Sydney	2 Oct 2019	Won	226/2 (20)	Aus
217/4 (20)	Aus	SL	North Sydney	29 Sep 2019	Won	217/4 (20)	Aus
217/4 (20)	Ind	WI	Mumbai DYP	19 Dec 2024	Won	217/4 (20)	Ind

Note: the highest total recorded in a Women's T20I match is 427/1 (20 overs) by Argentina against Chile in Buenos Aires on 13 Oct 2023.

435 The first instance of India Women breaching the 400-run mark in ODI cricket against any opponent. Their previous highest was 371/5 in the previous game against the same opponent, Ireland, and at the same venue.

Highest team totals for India in Women's ODIs

Total (overs)	Opp	Venue	Date	Result	Total (overs)	Opp
435/5 (50)	Ire	Rajkot	15 Jan 2025	Won	435/5 (50)	Ire
370/5 (50)	Ire	Rajkot	12 Jan 2025	Won	370/5 (50)	Ire
358/2 (50)	Ire	Potchefstroom	15 May 2017	Won	358/2 (50)	Ire
358/5 (50)	WI	Vadodara	24 Dec 2024	Won	358/5 (50)	WI
333/5 (50)	Eng	Canterbury	21 Sep 2022	Won	333/5 (50)	Eng

70 The number of balls Smriti Mandhana took to complete her century. This is now the fastest for India in Women's ODIs. Harmanpreet Kaur's 87-ball century against South Africa last year was the previous quickest. Incidentally, Mandhana (in Rajkot) and Harmanpreet (in Bengaluru) captained their sides. For the record, only two other skippers have made ODI centuries in lesser number of balls — Sri Lankan Chamari Athapaththu (in 60 balls) and England's Natalie Sciver-Brunt (in 66 balls).

Balls for 100	Batter	(Runs in balls)	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
70	Smriti Mandhana	(135 in 80 balls)	Ire	Rajkot	15 Jan 2025	Won
87	Harmanpreet Kaur	(103* in 88 balls)	SA	Bengaluru	19 Jun 2024	Won
90	Harmanpreet Kaur	(171* in 115 balls)	Aus	Derby	20 Jul 2017	Won
90	Jemimah Rodrigues	(102 in 91 balls)	Ire	Rajkot	12 Jan 2025	Won
98	Harleen Deol	(115 in 103 balls)	WI	Vadodara	24 Dec 2024	Won

4 The number of batters in ODI cricket history (including both men and women) who have aggregated 400-plus runs in the first six innings of their career. India's Pratika Rawal now has the second-highest aggregate in this elite list, although no one has made more runs than Rawal after their first six ODI games.

Most career runs after first six innings in men's and women's ODI cricket

Runs	Batter	For	M	Ave.	100/50	Achieved on
483	Janneman Malan	SA men	7	120.75	2/2	16 Jul 2021
444	Pratika Rawal	Ind women	6	74.00	1/3	15 Jan 2025
434	Charlotte Edwards	Eng women	7	86.80	2/1	16 Dec 1997
406	Inzamam-ul-Haq	Pak men	7	67.67	2/2	19 Jan 1992

All records are correct and updated until 24 January 2025.

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

MODERN BATTER DOESN'T SEEM TO TRUST HIS DEFENSIVE TECHNIQUE ANYMORE

There are more chances of a dismissal while looking to **play in a manner** that one is not used to, as was seen in the recent Sydney Test between India and Australia.

Jammu and Kashmir's splendid victory in three days over defending champions Mumbai shows how much the standard of cricket has improved in States that were earlier easy opposition for the stronger teams. Today, every team can include three outstation players, and many teams do that to strengthen their eleven. J&K has some incredibly talented players, especially in the fast bowling department, and it was their fast bowling that unsettled and tormented the Mumbai top order.

Only Shardul Thakur, batting down the order, showed the gumption and desire to stick it out. But for his batting in both innings, the Mumbai score would have been embarrassing for a side filled with four Indian Test players in their top five. What Thakur and Tanush Kotian showed with their big partnership is that with a proper mix of caution and aggression, runs could be scored on the surface. The J&K batters also showed the same attitude and thus overhauled the target quite comfortably.

The dismissal of Mumbai's Test batters once again brought to the fore the perils of the all-out aggressive mode of batting that is nowadays thought of as being central to run-making. It can work on flat pitches, but on pitches where the ball is doing something, there has to be a technique good enough to keep out the good delivery. More crucially, there has to be the temperament to accept that a bowler can bowl the occasional maiden over, and a few dot balls don't warrant a big risky shot in response.

The modern batter doesn't seem to trust his defensive technique, consumed as he is by the thrill of hitting sixes. Nothing wrong in hitting sixes. In fact, it is exciting indeed, but in the red-ball format, the bowler has a little more help from the ball than in the white-ball version, and the six can be a risky proposition. It makes sense to single out the bowler who could be a danger and play him out, then look to score off the lesser bowlers.

There's also a weird theory that on a dicey pitch, there will be a delivery with the batter's name on it, and so it is better to thrash about than spend time defending and trying to tire out the bowlers.

Way back in the West Indies, this thought was expressed by a couple of journalists that with the lethal pace quartet that the Windies had then, it was better to counter-attack than wait for the scoreable delivery. Mohinder Amarnath, Dilip Vengsarkar, and Ravi Shastri batted in their normal unhurried manner and scored heaps of runs on that trip.

There are more chances of a dismissal while looking to play in a manner that one is not used

Tough comeback: Rohit Sharma's return to the Ranji Trophy after nearly a decade didn't turn out as memorable as he might have hoped. PTI

to, as was seen in the recent Sydney Test [between India and Australia] when rushes of blood caused some silly-looking dismissals. A bit of common sense and patience, rather than a fatalistic approach, could have gotten another 50 runs, and that could well have been the difference to the result of the match and the series.

The BCCI and the coach's insistence on the Indian players playing in the Ranji Trophy meant that most of the players who were on the disastrous tour of Australia turned up for their State teams in the Ranji Trophy. Whether their hearts were in it or they did that only to ensure they were not stripped of their BCCI contracts, like Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer were, after missing out on the Ranji Trophy games last year, is known only to them. Rohit Sharma and Yashasvi Jaiswal's participation meant that Ayush Mhatre, who had got a couple of hundreds and some fifties, had to be left out of the Mumbai side. Hopefully, the youngster would have spent some time with both these players and picked their brains about adding to his batting ability.

It would be interesting to see if K.L. Rahul, Mohd. Siraj, and Virat Kohli, who didn't play in last week's round of Ranji Trophy matches, will play the next round. More interesting would be what action the BCCI takes if they don't play. Were they injured? Getting a medical certificate for an 'injury' is child's play, and if they are injured, did they go to the NCA for treatment and recovery, as Nitish Reddy was sent the moment he had that side strain? Isn't that the practice for the BCCI-contracted players, that as soon as there's an injury, they have to report to the NCA, and only after the BCCI experts there certify them as fit can they resume playing for India? For all we know, these players might have opted out of the earlier games for non-injury reasons. We shall soon find out.

It would be interesting to see if K.L. Rahul, Mohd. Siraj, and Virat Kohli, who didn't play in last week's round of Ranji Trophy matches, will play the next round. More interesting would be what action the BCCI takes if they don't play.

FOR MORE STORIES

RUNS GALORE AND RISING STARS

Karnataka's **youth-driven triumph** ended a five-year title drought in a high-scoring Vijay Hazare season, where the T20 influence grew, and some stalwarts bid farewell to the game.

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Investing in the future often entails a long wait, but the gestation period wasn't too long for Karnataka as the faith reposed in its band of youngsters paid quick dividends.

The likes of R. Smaran, K.V. Aneesh, K.L. Shrijith and Abhilash Shetty rallied around their veteran skipper Mayank Agarwal to help Karnataka lift a record-equalling fifth Vijay Hazare Trophy crown and end its five-year title drought across formats.

The 21-year-old left-handed batter Smaran, playing his first season at the senior level, showcased exemplary tenacity and skill at No. 4, riding Karnataka out of

choppy waters in the semifinal and final to emerge as a bright all-format prospect for the team.

His 76-run contribution in the semifinal against defending champion Haryana was crucial in what eventually turned out to be a facile 238-run chase for Karnataka, while his sparkling century in the final set the tone for a massive 348-run total in a high-scoring final against Vidarbha in Vadodara.

Smaran was joined by fellow southpaws in helping Karnataka tide over precarious situations. Fresh from India's Test tour of Australia, Devdutt Padikkal cracked a ton in the quarterfinal against Baroda and

Jubilant team: Karnataka triumphed over Vidarbha in a nail-biting thriller to claim the Vijay Hazare Trophy in Vadodara. THE HINDU

followed it up with a vital 86 in the semis. Meanwhile, after enduring a string of low scores, Shrijith struck 78 in a 160-run alliance with Smaran in the final to tip the scales in Karnataka's favour.

Mayank, the tournament's second highest accumulator with 651 runs, had set the league stage on fire, plundering four centuries and a fifty but could only eke out 38 runs in three innings in the knockouts, putting the onus on an inexperienced middle-order.

Karnataka's newly appointed No. 3, Aneesh, who also made his List A debut this season, impressed with three consecutive fifties and got off to good starts in the semis and final.

"[It] feels amazing to have won this after a while. It's just that we turned up and won those crucial moments. [A] lot of the youngsters stepped up. We are a team in transition — four guys from this team have made their debut, and a lot of them are just playing their second season," a relieved Mayank said after the final.

Karnataka's chief selector, J. Abhiram, viewed the title win as a vindication of the team management's decision to move on from the likes of Manish Pandey ahead of the season.

Winner: Karnataka
Runner-up: Vidarbha
Top run-scorer: Karun Nair (779 runs)
Top wicket-taker: Arshdeep Singh (20 wickets)

Rewarding campaign: R. Smaran shone brightly as the breakout star for Karnataka in the 2024-25 Vijay Hazare Trophy. THE HINDU

"I want to see where Karnataka is going to be in the next two to three years. There are a lot of talented boys, and this is the right time to give them a chance and groom them. All the youngsters have done exceedingly well, and you can see the results. There are still a lot of young guys in the Under-19 and U-23 levels, so the bench strength in Karnataka cricket is very good," he told Sportstar. "Smaran has impressed the most. We have seen him as a U-14 boy, and we really backed him.

He got close to 700 [829] runs last year [in U-23 Col. CK Nayudu Trophy], and I am glad that he has done very well. Aneesh, he has gotten out early in his 20s and 30s, but he has the talent to do well. Last year, he almost got close to 1000 [922] runs. We have a bunch of fast bowlers — Abhilash Shetty has done very well, and Vidyadhar [Patil] has done well. We have Hardik Raj. Karnataka cricket is in very good hands now," he added.

Karnataka had also moved on from its former skipper, Karun Nair, back in 2022, but the 33-year-old's career gained a second wind during Vidarbha's maiden run to the final of the 50-over competition. While shouldering captaincy duties in his second season with the side, Karun tallied a whopping 779 runs in nine matches while averaging 389.50.

However, as fate would have it, his stupendous run of five consecutive 50-plus scores — which included four centuries — ended in the final with a 31-ball 27 against his former side. That his team's defeat in the final coincided with his non-selection in India's squad for the upcoming ICC Champions Trophy was a reminder that fairytales are few and far between.

With the lines between one-day and T20 cricket blurring increasingly, the 2024-25 Vijay Hazare Trophy was the second-fastest scoring season in the tournament's history.

Runs were scored at an average of 5.20 per over, the 400-run barrier was breached four times, and leading the charge was Punjab — the 2023-24 champion of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, the domestic T20 tournament. With two totals in excess of 400 in the season, the Punjab line-up, led by openers Prabhsimran Singh and Abhishek Sharma, ransacked bowling attacks by scoring runs at an average of 6.77 runs an over.

Prabhsimran and Abhishek struck at 128.68 and 130.44 during the tournament, respectively, further pointing to the evolution of

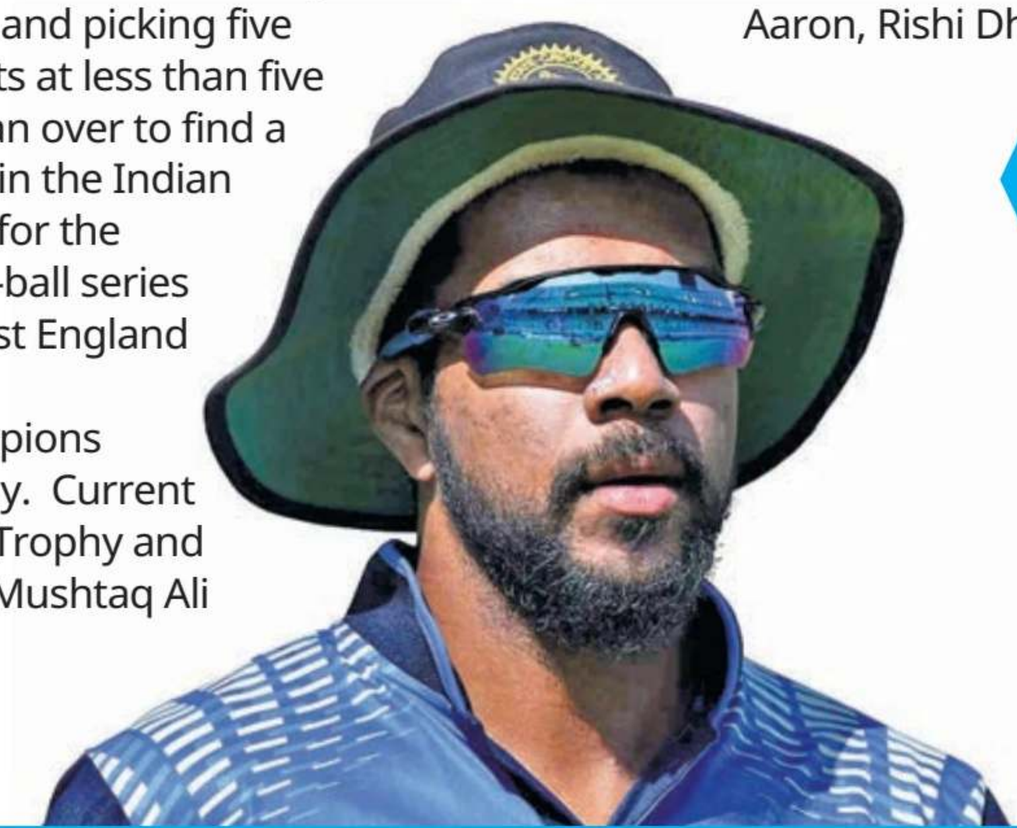
the format. Though Punjab crashed out in the quarterfinal, its left-arm seamer Arshdeep Singh used the tournament as a launchpad to earn a spot in Champions Trophy squad after emerging as the top wicket-taker, with 20 scalps in just seven games.

The tournament also served as preparation and a fitness test for India's recovering pace ace Mohammed Shami. The 34-year-old turned out for Bengal in its last three matches, bowling 26 overs and picking five wickets at less than five runs an over to find a place in the Indian team for the white-ball series against England and Champions Trophy. Current Ranji Trophy and Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy champion Mumbai's aspirations to complete a treble suffered a setback as the Shreyas Iyer-led side crashed out in the league stage.

However, the skipper enjoyed a good run, scoring 325 runs in five innings, while 17-year-old prodigy Ayush Mhatre turned heads, emerging as the team's top run-getter (458 runs).

Even as the tournament unearthed promising young talent, it also marked the end of Varun Aaron, Rishi Dhawan and Sheldon Jackson's storied careers. While Aaron called time on his playing career altogether, the latter two retired from domestic white-ball cricket and will head down the home stretch of their careers with the Ranji Trophy, which resumed after the frenzy of limited-overs cricket.

Purple patch: Karun Nair was on a dream run, finishing the Vijay Hazare Trophy with five hundreds and 772 runs. THE HINDU



« Varun Aaron, the former India fast bowler, has announced his retirement from all forms of cricket »

THE JADEJA JUGGERNAUT AND THE TRUE ALL-ROUNDER OF THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Our correspondents bring you all the **thrilling action,** both on and off the field, from round six of the 2024-25 Ranji Trophy season.

Ravindra Jadeja's reputation as a skilled left-arm spinner and batter is well-established. The 36-year-old India star showcased his brilliance again, taking 12 wickets and scoring a quickfire 38 on a turning track. His all-round heroics powered Saurashtra to a bonus-point victory over Delhi in just two days during the sixth round of the Ranji Trophy, which began on January 23 in Rajkot.

Flying under the radar in Saurashtra's emphatic win was Dharmendrasinh Jadeja, who contributed with five wickets. Among his victims in the first innings was the dangerous Rishabh Pant, who mistimed a sweep shot and was caught at deep square leg.

The spotlight, often eluding Dharmendrasinh, has been a recurring theme in his long-standing career. At 34, he has taken 380 wickets in 91 First-Class matches at an average of 26.77. Like many outstanding left-arm spinners before him — such as Rajinder Goel and Padmakar Shivalkar, who never got the chance to represent India — Dharmendrasinh has had to accept the harsh reality of being overlooked.

"It does cross my mind sometimes why I haven't

Empty stadium: Kerala fought for a crucial draw, nearly reaching the Ranji knockout phase for the first time in six years, but had little crowd support.
NIRMAL HARINDRAN

played for India despite performing so well. Over the last 5–6 years, I've taken 200 wickets, and Saurashtra has won the Ranji Trophy twice. But I must focus on my work and not dwell on it too much," said Dharmendrasinh. The two Jadejas have rarely played together due to Ravindra's India commitments. However, Saurashtra has been nearly invincible in the matches where they have joined forces.

"Whenever Jaddu bhai plays for Saurashtra, it's a great experience. You learn a lot from his bowling — how to build pressure, which field placements to use, and other nuances. I can't bowl as quickly through the air as him, but he understands what works for me and helps accordingly," Dharmendrasinh added.

Stadium that does it all

It is not uncommon for a place to be referred to by two names. The International Cricket Stadium in Thiruvananthapuram is no exception, alternatively known as the Greenfield or the Sports Hub. The name Greenfield seems more fitting, as the stadium is nestled in the heart of vast greenery. The term Sports Hub, on the other hand, feels more like what a corporate entity might call its table tennis room.

Nevertheless, Greenfield Stadium and I go way back — I did my schooling just a few kilometres from the stadium and recall watching its construction from a distance over a decade ago.

Thus, a visit to Greenfield to cover the Ranji Trophy match between Kerala and Madhya Pradesh felt like a professional homecoming.

Another thing to note about Greenfield is that it's a true all-rounder. In addition to world-class cricketing facilities, Greenfield boasts a fully functioning movie multiplex, making it probably the only cricket stadium in the world to guarantee blockbuster action even on days without a match.

The stadium also boasts a large convention centre, which hosted a dog show on the final day of the Ranji match. In fact, the event drew a crowd far larger than the one that watched Kerala fight for a priceless draw, nearly securing a spot in the Ranji knockout phase for the first time in six years. Sigh!

Gun player: Ravindra Jadeja's all-round heroics powered Saurashtra to a bonus-point victory over Delhi in just two days. VIJAY SONEJI

SAURASHTRA HAS BEEN NEARLY INVINCIBLE IN THE MATCHES WHERE THE TWO JADEJAS – RAVINDRA AND DHARMENDRASINH – HAVE JOINED FORCES

A red-letter day

As the cricketers from Jammu and Kashmir celebrated their historic victory over Mumbai, Indian cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar personally approached the team manager to extend his heartfelt congratulations on their remarkable triumph — a victory that marked their first over the domestic giants in more than a decade.

Tendulkar, who was training at the MCA-BKC club ahead of a tournament featuring former cricketers, was joined by former India international Irfan Pathan, who previously served as a mentor to the J&K side.

During his tenure, Pathan played a pivotal role in nurturing talents like Abdul Samad and Umran Malik, who have since risen to prominence at both domestic and international levels.

"To defeat a star-studded Ranji champion like Mumbai on their home turf is no small feat. Congratulations to the J&K team, coaching staff, and support staff for scripting history. The 'God of Cricket', Tendulkar, personally congratulated our manager," said JKCA administrator Brig. Anil Gupta.

Currently leading the points table, J&K will face Baroda in its final group-stage fixture next week.

All for Rohit

Large crowds had gathered at the MCA-BKC ground to catch a glimpse of India captain Rohit Sharma in action. Although Rohit endured a disappointing outing for Mumbai, fans passionately chanted "Mumbai chya Raja, Rohit Sharma" whenever they spotted him on the field. The cricketer graciously interacted with his supporters, signing autographs and taking selfies.

A fan even breached security in a bid to meet Rohit, sprinting onto the field to touch his feet. Before being escorted away by security personnel, the fan managed a brief conversation with the star cricketer.

Shayan Acharya, Pranay Rajiv and Vivek Krishnan

From metros to heartlands: WPL's growing reach signals bright future

WPL 2025 kicks off on **February 14,** with Gujarat Giants facing defending champion Royal Challengers Bengaluru at Vadodara's new Kotambi Stadium.

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The Women's Premier League (WPL) may still be in its early days, but within just two years of its inception in 2023, it has managed to carve a significant niche for itself. This success has encouraged the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) to expand the tournament beyond the traditional metropolises. This season's biggest highlight is undoubtedly its geographical expansion. Initially confined to Mumbai and later to Bengaluru and New Delhi in its second edition, the WPL has now added Vadodara and Lucknow to its roster. This marks a step towards adopting a full-fledged home-and-away format.

The expansion is a substantial boost for the tournament, allowing the five teams and stakeholders to broaden their reach and tap into unexplored territories. While cities like Mumbai and Bengaluru have long had an established fan base for women's cricket, the impressive turnout at Vadodara's newly built Kotambi Stadium during India women's ODIs against West Indies last December convinced the BCCI to choose it as a venue. Lucknow, the home base for the UP Warriorz, has also previously hosted women's international matches.

Arun Dhumal, chairman of the IPL Governing Council, explained that the decision to expand was aimed at strengthening fan engagement in the franchises' respective home markets.

"Of the five franchises, three — Mumbai Indians, Delhi Capitals, and Royal Challengers Bengaluru — had already hosted matches at home in previous editions. So, we wanted to create opportunities for the other two franchises — UP Warriorz and Gujarat Giants — to engage with their home audiences. That's why Vadodara and Lucknow were selected," Dhumal told *Sportstar*.

"Given the enormous fan engagement in Mumbai and Bengaluru, we decided to retain those venues as well. The tournament is still in its early stages, and the support it has garnered in these traditional cricket hubs is a tremendous boost for both the league and women's cricket," he added.

While Dhumal is confident about attracting strong turnouts at the two new venues, a post-tournament review will assess audience engagement. Based on this analysis, the feasibility of adopting a proper home-and-away format from next season will be considered.

"Logistics, available windows, and the best possible framework, all play a role in determining the next steps. While the aim is to expand the tournament nationwide and build a sustainable fan base, these factors need to be balanced," Dhumal said.

In the league's first two editions,

UP Warriorz (owned by Capri Global) and Gujarat Giants (owned by Adani Sportsline) didn't benefit from home-ground support. However, both franchises are eager to build dedicated local fan bases this time.

"The response to the WPL over the last two seasons has been phenomenal, and the league's expansion to new regions is truly heartening," said Sanjay Adesara, Chief Business Officer of Adani Sportsline.

The turnout at Kotambi Stadium during December's ODIs was an encouraging sign, with nearly 10,000 spectators attending each match. The Gujarat Giants is keen to capitalise on this momentum.

"With the Indian women's team having played international matches at the Kotambi Stadium, this is another significant step forward for women's cricket in India. We are thrilled by this opportunity," Adesara said.

UP Warriorz owner Jinisha Sharma echoed this sentiment, calling the expansion a vital step for the league and her franchise. "As a newer name in the sporting industry, it's crucial for us to grow the WPL and our franchise by taking this experience to multiple cities," she said.

"Mumbai and Bengaluru have been privileged with packed crowds over the years, and rightly so. As a franchise preparing to play at our home ground for the first time, we're incredibly excited," Sharma added.

To prepare for its home debut, UP Warriorz conducted groundwork in Lucknow and other cities in Uttar Pradesh last year. "We learned a lot from interacting with students, faculty, media, and others to understand what would resonate with local fans," Sharma explained.

"This month, we're organising a

Maiden win: Royal Challengers Bengaluru claimed its first Women's Premier League title with an eight-wicket victory over Delhi Capitals in the final in Delhi last year.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Players to watch out

RCB
Smriti Mandhana, Joshitha VJ

MI
Harmanpreet Kaur, G. Kamalini

Gujarat Giants
Deandra Dottin, Simran Shaikh

Delhi Capitals
Meg Lanning, Nandini Kashyap

UP Warriorz
Chamari Athapaththu, Saima Thakor

12-city tournament in UP, visiting multiple schools and hosting cricket camps. We'll identify talented girls from these camps, bring them to our pre-season training, and help them gain exposure," she added.

While these grassroots initiatives are crucial for a budding league, adapting to the new four-city caravan model presents its own challenges. Many teams had selected players at the auction assuming matches would remain confined to Mumbai and Bengaluru.

"The auctions were completed in December before the league's expansion to four cities was finalised. So, getting the right combination will be critical," said a franchise insider.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru, the defending champion, will once again play at home. Smriti Mandhana and her team face the challenge of meeting high expectations after retaining their core squad and making strategic additions during the mini-auction.

The team acquired leg-spinner Prema Rawat, Kerala pacer Joshitha VJ, and seasoned campaigner Renuka Singh Thakur to bolster its pace attack. The inclusion of Jagravi Pawar and Raghvi Bist adds further depth.

Meanwhile, Gujarat Giants will rely on its marquee overseas player Deandra Dottin, the most expensive international signing, and the

Curtain-raiser: The new Kotambi Stadium in Vadodara will host the WPL opener this year. VIJAY SONEJI

inspiring Simran Shaikh, a batter from Dharavi, Asia's largest slum. Dottin's experience and all-round abilities will be crucial for Gujarat Giants, which is looking to turn its fortunes around after two underwhelming seasons.

Delhi Capitals will hope for standout performances from Nandini Kashyap and the promising Niki Prasad, while UP Warriorz and Mumbai Indians aim to deliver quality cricket at their respective home grounds.

With the tournament moving beyond major cities and the fan base steadily growing, the WPL's expansion signals a new chapter for women's cricket in India.

Getting fans onboard: Arun Dhumal, IPL Governing Council chairman, said the WPL expansion aimed to boost fan engagement in franchises' home markets. R. V. MOORTHY

Victory at last: The Odisha Warriors won the inaugural Women's Hockey India League 2024-25 by defeating Soorma HC 2-1 in the final. SHASHI SHEKAR KASHYAP

A BOLD START WITH ROOM TO GROW

The inaugural Women's Hockey India League overcame challenges to deliver **thrilling matches** and strong fan engagement, marking a promising start.

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The inaugural edition of the Women's Hockey India League (HIL-W) can be best compared to that one terrifying ride at a theme park. You break out in a cold sweat and call out to all your gods the moment you are strapped in, but once it winds up, you're somehow left craving more.

The build-up to what is currently the only commercial hockey league for women across the globe wasn't particularly encouraging. Conducted under the auspices of Hockey India, the tournament saw several key pullouts by foreign players ahead of the season. With a total purse of Rs 2 crore per team and the highest base-price slab of Rs10 lakh, underbids at the auction were largely to blame for this.

Moreover, a legal issue led to the deferral of two additional teams — Hyderabad Toofans and a Mumbai-based franchise by BC Jindal Group — until the next season. Rumours suggested that another corporate group was on the verge of reneging on its promises just before the season, but the issue was addressed in time.

However, once the floodlights

came on at the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Astro Turf Hockey Stadium in the heart of Ranchi, the teething troubles were soon relegated to distant memories. Riveting end-to-end action over 13 matchdays culminated in Neha Goyal's Odisha Warriors lifting the glitzy trophy.

The pitch was a major talking point throughout the tournament, with India men's coach Craig Fulton, Team Gonasika captain Manpreet Singh, and Toofans' Gonzalo Peillat, among many others, claiming that the Ranchi turf was excessively 'bumpy,' which made trapping the ball difficult during penalty corners.

"The surface is pretty much new, so it will take some time to become more stable. At the moment, it is very bumpy, and there were mistakes in the receptions. Maybe in one to two years, it will be perfect," Peillat told *Sportstar*.

Looking back at the tournament, it seems that Hockey India's best decision was to forgo the revenue it would have generated from ticket sales by offering free entry for both the men's and women's competitions. The RSVPing process, although online, also ran smoothly.

Jharkhand, arguably home to some of the most knowledgeable hockey fans in the country after Odisha, responded enthusiastically to the offer, filling the stands in team jerseys even on weekdays. A special mention must go to the DJ, who did a fantastic job of hyping the mood with peppy Nagpuri (not to be confused with the city in Maharashtra) tracks. However, there were a few questionable song choices, with misogynistic lyrics being blasted through speakers while introducing the all-women lineups.

What further helped attract a capacity crowd was a largely successful advertising campaign. The message was widely propagated through newspapers, social media channels, and massive flex banners around the city. The decision to provide information in the local language also helped engage the audience.

Paid premium seating could have been introduced as a lucrative add-on, with perks such as a dinner buffet, the opportunity to interact with stars, and chances to win signed merchandise.

Franchises could also take a cue from the Indian Premier League (IPL) by organising meet-and-greet events in key city hubs, like Nucleus Mall on Circular Road or the Ranchi Market, just a stone's throw from where two of the four teams were based.

One recurring opinion among players and coaches alike was the challenge of coping with a cramped calendar. The round trip to Rourkela, where each team played once, only added to the woes.

"It has become very difficult for us. We wake up, hit the gym, have breakfast, attend a team meeting, warm up, and barely have time for lunch before heading to the stadium. In the midst of all that, there are

Future star: Sonam from JSW Soorma Hockey Club received the trophy and cheque for Upcoming Player of the Tournament. SHASHI SHEKAR KASHYAP

> « The recently concluded edition served as a dry run for the FIH Pro League, which kicks off on February 15 »

Standing out: Jyoti from JSW Soorma Hockey Club received the Hero Player of the Tournament cheque.
SHASHI SHEKAR KASHYAP

sponsored shoots and events, plus interactions with you guys (media), sometimes (laughs). Some of the foreign players were very pissed the other day," a Warriors player said off the record on the sidelines of the tournament.

JSW Soorma Hockey Club boss Jude Menezes remarked, "We travelled for two days to play one game in Rourkela. I understand the need to spread the game, but it remains a physical challenge. Travelling by bus took a lot out of our athletes. That's something I'd like to see changed."

When asked whether the HIL caravan needed to make more stops in different cities, India women's coach Harendra Singh said, "It's a huge ask. The broadcast team has to carry all its equipment. The budgetary aspect also needs to be considered. And the franchises move too, of course. It depends on whether you're aiming for sustainable, longer models like the IPL or the ISL (Indian Super League) or just a 4-5 year plan. Personally, the longer HIL runs, the more it benefits Indian hockey."

The HIL has arrived at an opportune moment — right as the Indian women's team is undergoing a steady but gradual transition. After an unprecedented fourth-place finish in Tokyo, India failed to secure a ticket to the Paris Olympics. The team found its lost spirit again when it won the Women's Asian Champions Trophy in Rajgir, Bihar.

Now, this competition is expected to help Harendra and newly-appointed captain Salima Tete identify and work around a core group of athletes in the lead-up to the 2028 Games in Los Angeles. It is understood that the Soorma pair of Sonam (the upcoming player of the tournament) and Jyoti (player of the tournament), along with Warriors' Annu, are the three young players who have impressed the selection committee the most, with discussions already underway.

Additionally, the recently concluded edition served as a dry run for the FIH Pro League, which kicks off on February 15, with India set to face Spain, Germany, England, and the mighty Netherlands in Bhubaneswar.

Later in June, it will take on China, Australia, Argentina, and Belgium. The Pro League will also serve as a qualifier for the 2026 Hockey World Cup.

The HIL-W's success may end up setting an example for other emerging franchise leagues to follow. There is considerable buzz regarding a business conglomerate showing interest in establishing a team based in Ranchi. The veracity of this claim, however, is yet to be confirmed.

R. V. MOORTHY

« **The longer HIL runs, the more it benefits Indian hockey** – Women's coach Harendra Singh »

Centre of attention: Yibbi Jansen of Odisha Warriors celebrates after scoring a goal during the Women's Hockey India League match between Delhi SG Pipers and Odisha Warriors in Ranchi. K. R. DEEPAK

THE DUTCH QUEEN CONQUERS RANCHI

Yibbi Jansen, FIH 2024 Player of the Year, has overcome challenges to win Olympic gold and **inspire future players** through her journey and standout performance in India's inaugural HIL-W.

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Dreams come easily to children. Back in the early 2000s, fringe millennials thought it would be cool to grow up and search for Aladdin's magic lamp. But it wouldn't have taken them long to realise that, more often than not, wishes don't get fulfilled.

Even the sensational Yibbi Jansen faced resistance when she told her family she wanted to pursue the sport, despite coming from Dutch hockey royalty.

Her father, Ronald, had won back-to-back Olympic gold medals in Atlanta 1996 and Sydney 2000, after winning bronze in Seoul 1988 with the Oranje. Ironically, it may have taken Yibbi longer to convince him than the national selectors.

Ronald wanted his daughter to take up football, like her two brothers. But she had made up her mind in 2012 while sitting beside the former goalkeeper in the stands of the Riverbank Arena in London,

GETTY IMAGES

Yibbi Jansen, instrumental in her team's gold medal defence at Paris 2024, was named FIH 2024 Player of the Year.

watching the Netherlands blow Great Britain away, winning by a 9-2 margin in the men's hockey Olympic semifinal. The atmosphere was electric, the thrill unmatched. Yibbi started missing it from the very moment she left the United Kingdom. Her mother eventually played the role of Good Samaritan, helping to get Ronald on board with the idea.

Thus began a long and arduous journey. By the age of 15, Yibbi had already debuted for HC Den Bosch in the Hoofdklasse Dames, the highest level of club hockey in the Netherlands.

And in her very first season, she won the club championship. However, she made a surprise switch to mid-table side Oranje-Rood the following season, feeling that she couldn't fully develop her skills at her previous club, which was filled with superstars.

Finally, on January 28, 2018, Yibbi earned her senior national cap. At that moment, she felt everything was falling into place. "When I was 18, I played for the Dutch team for the first time. In the first year, you love everything. You tend to enjoy everything," she told *Sportstar* on the sidelines of the inaugural edition of the Women's Hockey India League (HIL-W), where her services were acquired for a whopping Rs 29 lakh by Odisha Warriors. The bid made her the most expensive foreign player of HIL-W.

She began featuring consistently in the orange shirt thereafter. She played her first international tournament in China, where the Dutch team decimated the then Olympic gold medallist, Great Britain, 4-0 on its way to winning the Champions Trophy title. In 2019, she tasted success again, as the Dutch side won the first edition of the FIH Women's Pro League.

She found herself between a rock and a hard place when her form dipped in the following months. Despite making the initial 22-member squad for the Tokyo Olympics, which was announced in 2019, she couldn't board the flight to the pandemic-delayed Games in 2021.

"When the harder years came, I had a tough time merely getting selected for tournaments. I was not good enough at that time. They (the Netherlands) didn't drop me, but it was worse that I wasn't able to play despite being with them. That's not a nice feeling. So later, I just decided to drop myself and take some time off.

Making merry: Yibbi Jansen was the joint top-scorer of the Women's HIL, alongside JSW Soorma Hockey Club's Charlotte Englebert, with five goals.
SHASHI SHEKAR KASHYAP

I always thought: 'I'm gonna make it, but not for now'. I also got a mental coach whom I talked to from that moment. I think it helped me a lot. I still do it in both my bad and good times to keep up my stability," she said.

When Paris came knocking, Yibbi was prepared. Not only did the Dutch team end up winning the gold medal, but individually also, Yibbi bagged the golden stick for having sounded the boards nine times.

"You would always want to perform better than you did before. Last year, I really enjoyed playing in the Olympics because that was always my dream. And winning the gold medal has been the highlight of my career. As an athlete, I was so happy, and I enjoyed that, but now it's a new year and I have new goals. I want to perform well, and hopefully, it will be as good a year as the last one, or maybe better," the FIH 2024 Player of the Year said.

She has, undoubtedly, started the season with a bang. The Warriors, led by Neha Goyal, won a historic title in the first edition of the only commercial women's hockey league in the world. Yibbi added to her honour roll by becoming the joint top-scorer of the tournament, alongside JSW Soorma Hockey Club's Charlotte Englebert, with five goals.

Sharing her thoughts on the tournament, Yibbi said it had been a learning curve for her. "I have enjoyed the experience of playing with girls from across the globe. The games were intense and close. The HIL is a good platform to ensure the future of Indian hockey is bright, allowing its girls to play matches at the highest level. The style of Indian players is very different from the ones I play with in the Netherlands. They are very skilled. They want to eliminate a player, while we are used to easy passing. I've learned to be open to different styles now," she said.

She was, by a fair distance, the best drag-flicking exponent, having registered five of the 11 short corners that were converted in the entire tournament. At present, she is arguably also the best penalty corner specialist in the sport globally.

"I have changed a lot of things about my drag-flick since I started playing. I train the most with my drag-flick coach Toon Siepman (since her days at Oranje-Rood in 2016-17), and I practise four times a week

> « I like to watch other athletes as well, not just hockey players »

Like father, like daughter: Yibbi is the daughter of hockey legend Ronald Jansen, who won Olympic gold in 1996 and 2000, and bronze in 1988 with the Oranje. GETTY IMAGES

when I'm on the field. I train a lot on it. There are times when you have to make a small addition or change a few things, and then the quality of the drag-flick suddenly goes a bit down. But in the end, it's all about getting better at it," the 25-year-old said.

Does Ronald also play a part in fine-tuning her technique at the dinner table? "Sometimes. We have the usual dad-and-daughter talk. Most of the time, it's not about hockey because he has his own opinion, and I have mine. It can sometimes clash. But it's nice to talk to someone who has experienced it all. However, the times are very different... He played hockey some 25 years ago."

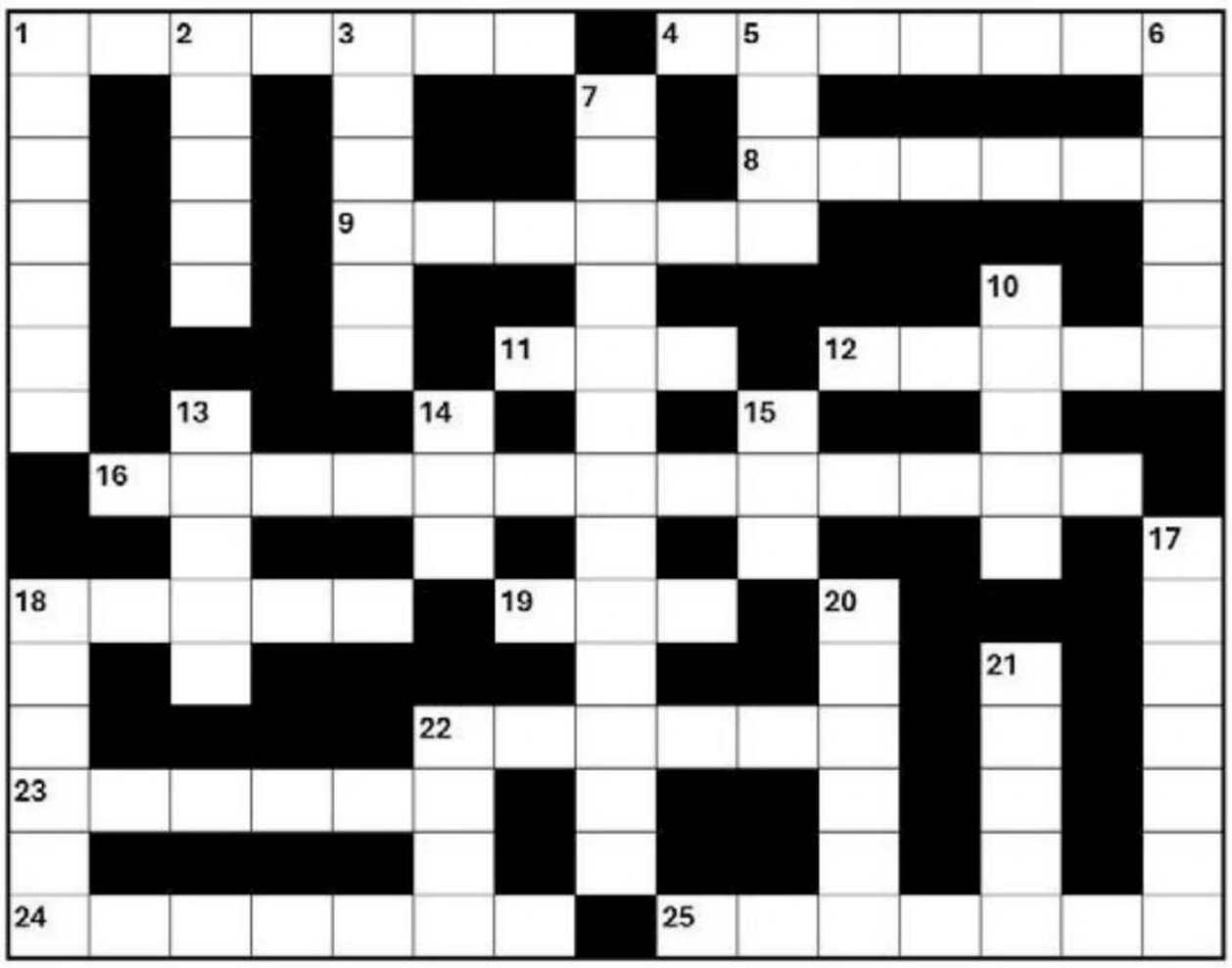
While Yibbi has traced her father's footsteps in her professional career, she understands that many little girls from even the most obscure corners of India would want to follow in her footsteps. She said, "First, I was just a young player looking up to other girls, and now I've come to the position where girls look up to me. But hopefully, I give them some of my experience and teach them some useful skills. I did, for example, do some drag-flicking with Annu (22-year-old India and Warriors forward). It's just nice that you can give them some tips. Hopefully, they get their sense of it and make the Indian team later."

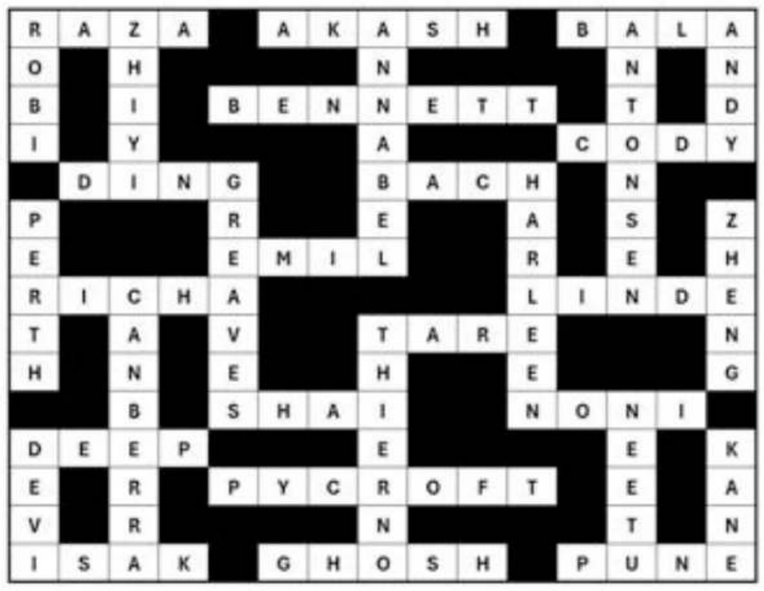
YIBBI JANSEN FACED RESISTANCE WHEN SHE TOLD HER FAMILY SHE WANTED TO PURSUE THE SPORT DESPITE COMING FROM DUTCH HOCKEY ROYALTY

Yibbi, meanwhile, draws inspiration from everyone around her. "I like to watch other athletes as well, not just hockey players. From football, I like (Lionel) Messi, for example, but every other person can inspire you. If you read a book or just watch someone performing day in and day out, every week, every game... it's just so inspiring."

As Yibbi continues to tick off milestones one after another, there's little doubt as to where Aladdin's magic lamp resides right now.

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 & Down 10 Who is recently elected as the new president of Athletics Federation of India (AFI)? (7,5)

4 What is the team's name from Odisha in the Hockey India League? (7)

8 & Down 1 Who was named as the FIFA Best Women's Player in 2024? (6,7)

11 Identify this governing body of a world-level sport in India for which Devesh Srivastava is the president? (1,1,1)

12 Who is this legendary batsman who had made the highest individual innings score in a Test and any First-class match? (5)

16 Who became the youngest player to start in ISL's history on 26th December 2024 at the age of 17 years and 189 days? (8,5)

18 Who is the first Indian player to score a hundred in all three formats of international cricket? (5)

19 Which country won the recently-concluded United Cup tennis tournament? (1,1,1)

22 Who won the women's singles at the Syed Modi International badminton tournament in December 2024? (6)

23 Who became the youngest player to score 150+ runs in men's List A cricket during this season's Ranji Trophy in October 2024? (6)

24 What is the team's name from Hyderabad in the Hockey India League? (7)

25 Who stretched Novak Djokovic in the first round at the Australian Open 2025 by winning the first set? (7)

DOWN

2 Who won the women's title at the recently-conducted World rapid chess championship? (5)

3 Who took six wickets for India and won the player of the match award in the third women's ODI versus West Indies in Vadodara on December 27, 2024? (6)

5 Who scored a hat-trick for Manchester United in its 3-1 victory over Southampton on January 16, 2025? (4)

6 Who won the player of the final award in the recently-concluded Vijay Hazare Trophy? (6)

7 Who ended with most wickets in the Vijay Hazare Trophy 2024-25 season? (8,5)

13 Who led Zimbabwe in its recent two-Test series versus Afghanistan? (5)

14 This lucky loser reached the women's singles fourth round at the Australian Open recently (3)

15 & Across 9 This former Test cricketer from Andhra Pradesh also donned the role of the chief of the National Selection Committee from 2016 to 2020 (1,1,1 & 6)

17 Who, on January 6, 2025, picked a hat-trick in the second ODI held between New Zealand and Sri Lanka in Hamilton? (7)

18 Who, apart from the captain, scored a double hundred for Afghanistan in the recently-held first Test versus Zimbabwe in Bulawayo? (6)

20 Who was recently appointed as a mentor of the Afghanistan cricket team for the forthcoming Champions Trophy? (6)

21 Who was stranded at 9999 Test runs at the end of the recently-concluded Border-Gavaskar Trophy? (5)

22 Who top-scored for Zimbabwe with 154 in its first innings versus Afghanistan in the first Test in Bulawayo? (4)

PASHA GADEMAN AND THE PURSUIT OF THE NEXT 'SPORTING HIGH' IN HOCKEY

Currently the head coach of one of the semifinalists in HIL, **Hyderabad Toofans,** Pasha Gademan has previously worked with the German men's team during its triumphant campaign at the World Cup in 2023.

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"You could say I'm addicted to it [sports]. You start consuming it at a young age, more and more, and at some point, it's like you need it. Then, you're at the point where you can't live without it anymore," Pasha Gademan philosophically reflects when asked about what lies ahead for him.

For the Dutchman, it has been quite a journey — from Iran to India, where he is the head coach of Hyderabad Toofans, one of the semifinalists in the Hockey India League.

Along the way, he has experienced high points, such as the World Cup victory with Germany as an assistant coach, leading Rot-Weiss to Bundesliga championships, and coaching Canada at the Olympics — all by age 32. Gademan's pursuit of this passion began when he was six years old in Almere, the Netherlands, where his parents had immigrated.

Almere is the youngest city in the Netherlands, established in 1975 to alleviate overcrowding in nearby Amsterdam, with over 200,000 people living on land that was once covered by the waters of the IJsselmeer. The Almere Hockey Club was founded in 1979, three years after the first house was built in the city.

Gademan and his family had no previous connection to the sport but stumbled upon the club while searching for a football team for his brother. "We had no history with the sport at all, but we became

members. The sense of community within the club was so warm that it quickly became an integral part of our lives," he recalls in an interview with *Sportstar*.

Gademan had to wait 21 more years before witnessing his club play in the Hoofdklasse, the premier hockey league in the Netherlands. He experienced it firsthand as the captain, playing alongside his brother.

On June 10, 2017, at Almere's home ground, Gademan collapsed to the turf, hands on his head, after his team won a penalty shootout against Schaerweijde to retain its place in the division. That match, however, also marked Gademan's final game as a professional hockey player at the age of 27.

Eight months prior, outgoing coach Alex Verga had asked Gademan to take over the reins at Almere.

"It was a big decision because I loved playing, but I knew as a player, I had reached my limit," says Gademan, who played as a defender.

Like many young Europeans, Gademan spent hours devising tactics while playing Football Manager, a football-themed computer game. However, no simulation could prepare him for coaching in the top division of Dutch hockey. In the years leading up to his eventual retirement, Gademan had been coaching the Almere youth team, training future stars like Jonas de Geus, the Olympic 2024 gold

Making it big: At 32, Pasha Gademan has already achieved significant milestones, including a World Cup win with Germany as an assistant coach, Bundesliga titles with Rot-Weiss, and coaching Canada at the Olympics.
HOCKEY INDIA

New concept: "You are comparing very different elements with each other. We don't have anything like this where you just form a new team, buy some players and start" - Hyderabad Toofans coach Gademan on the Hockey India League. HOCKEY INDIA

medallist, and Terrance Pieters, the first player of colour to represent the Netherlands national team.

He credits Verga, the former Argentine international who had coached him throughout his playing career, as his biggest influence in hockey.

"The man is so passionate, always giving his heart and soul to the project. I really admired that; something about the way he did it inspired me and gave me strength in all aspects of my life," he says.

But most importantly, it was Gademan's love for hockey and creating a culture that shaped his journey. This began in Almere, where his "real journey" started at just three years old. His parents, both political activists who fought against the Islamist regime in Iran,

MY MOTHER IS NOW A PUBLIC FIGURE IN THE NETHERLANDS, BUT SHE WAS IMPRISONED FROM A YOUNG AGE IN IRAN FOR POLITICAL REASONS. IT WAS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT FOR OUR FAMILY – 'DIFFICULT' IS A SOFT WORD. IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO LIVE THERE

were forced to seek asylum in the Netherlands.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 led to the overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The new regime curbed the rights of the Iranian people, prompting Gademan's parents to campaign for freedom rights.

At the helm: Gademan (right) has played a pivotal role in guiding his team to consistent success in the 2024-25 Hockey India League.
HOCKEY INDIA

"There were significant challenges for us in the political climate back home. My mother is now a public figure in the Netherlands, but she was imprisoned from a young age in Iran for political reasons. It was extremely difficult for our family — 'difficult' is a soft word. It was impossible for us to live there," Gademan recalls.

He is deeply grateful for the opportunities provided by his parents and the Netherlands. "I've grown up in a free, Western world. As first-generation immigrants, my parents worked hard to study, learn, and provide us with a life of free will and choice in every aspect. I've been given that in a country that, despite its challenges, offers tremendous beauty and opportunity," he says.

When Verga offered him the role at Almere, Gademan saw it as an opportunity to evolve. He kept Almere in the Hoofdklasse for two consecutive seasons before moving on to become assistant coach to Andre Henning at Rot-Weiss in Cologne, Germany.

The duo later reversed roles with the Canada men's national team in 2020, before switching again in 2022 with the German national team, which went on to become World Champion and Olympic silver medallist.

Now, Gademan is seeking his next challenge with Toofans in the HIL, aiming to win a competition unlike anything he has experienced. "You are comparing very different elements. We don't have anything like this, where you just form a new team, buy some players, and get started," he says.

Gademan is cautious when it comes to stating his ambitions, yet he is eager to continue chasing the rush of working at the top level. "It's the nerves, the unknown, the tension... whatever it is, you become addicted to the thrill and the performance side of things. That's unfortunately what happens with sport — you're always searching for the next high. That's one of the reasons I'm here. This is about searching for the next high. This is living it and experiencing it," he concludes.

HOCKEY ON THIN ICE IN LADAKH

Professional ice hockey, supported by urban infrastructure, seems **set to flourish in Ladakh.** However, the region's climate, snowfall, and cold season face an increasingly uncertain future in the face of rapid climate change.

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On a frozen pond, 3,500 metres above sea level, children skate with wooden sticks in sub-zero temperatures.

Some clear the snow, while others test the ice with sharp skates, gliding past friends and moving the puck like a cherished companion, glued to their hockey sticks.

Winter has arrived in Ladakh – with temperatures remaining well below -5°C throughout the day and often plunging below -20°C at night. The Karzoo pond, which has weeds growing in it in the summer, transforms into a vibrant field for the fastest team sport in the world.

"This pond is synonymous with Ladakh's culture. Now, it has become even more significant because children receive coaching here in winter, with the Ladakh Winter Sports Club ensuring the sport progresses," says Namgyal Tundup, the first captain of India's ice hockey team, who grew up playing on this very pond.

However, this area, framed by the stunning snow-capped peaks and glaciers of the Himalayas, is among several cold zones enduring the brunt of climate change.

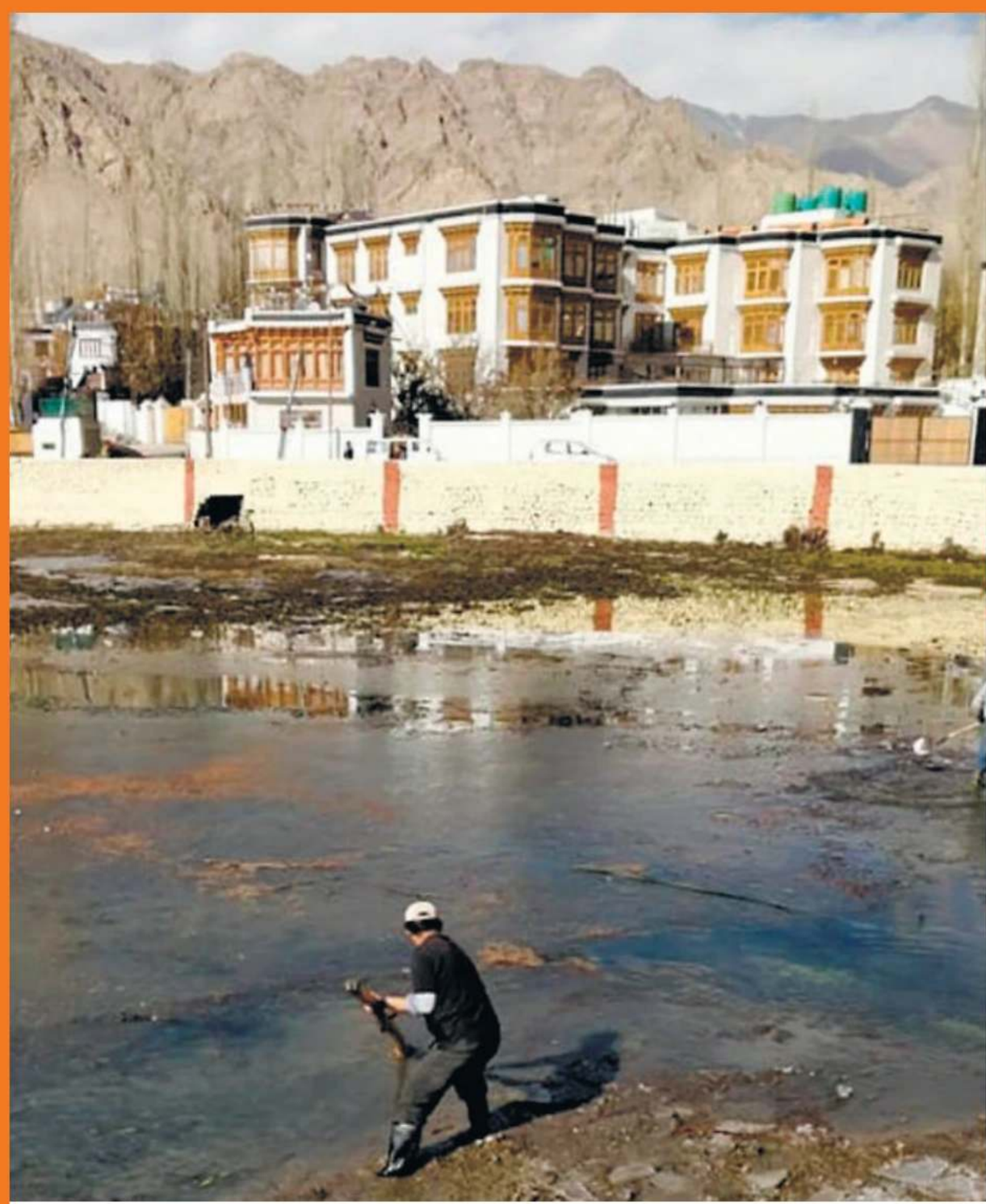
Karzoo is one of many ponds that have served as potential training grounds for ice hockey in Ladakh. Yet, the decline in their number, coupled with rapidly disappearing glaciers, has turned this arid desert into a battleground for the harshest consequences of global warming.

"There has been a definite impact. When we were children, ice would form everywhere. Now, even at Karzoo, I'll tell you, just a few years ago, the ice did not form as expected," Namgyal laments.

"Last year was warmer than usual, and in Kargil, there wasn't enough snow."

A recent study by Kashmir University's Geo-Informatics

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP



Options galore: Karzoo (above) and many other ponds have served as potential training grounds for ice hockey in Ladakh.

LADAKH WINTER SPORTS CLUB

Department revealed that the Zanskar range is losing thickness at a rate of 117 cm per year, followed by the Ladakh range at 46 cm per year.

A sport that once captivated children around Leh and Ladakh now faces the grim prospect of fewer and fewer opportunities to pass on its traditions to future generations.

"The season has shortened considerably from what I remember as a teenager when I started playing. From lasting up to three-and-a-half months, it has now reduced to just over two months. Things are changing rapidly," says Noor Jahan, a former goalkeeper of the Indian women's ice hockey team, who also hails from Ladakh.

A deeper impact

According to a study by Climate Dialogue, Ladakh's average temperature has risen by 3°C in the last four decades, affecting agriculture and livestock — both crucial to athletes' nutrition.

"Earlier, we couldn't grow brinjal or capsicum here. Now we can, which is a clear indication of global warming," Namgyal observes. "Previously, we had heavy snowfall and little rainfall. Now, the pattern has reversed, and I fear it will cause problems with the availability of drinking water in the future."

In 2023, Ladakh recorded 58.8 mm of rainfall, its highest in 14 years, with 19.1 mm falling in just two days – July 8 and 9 – against the usual 0.1 mm, a staggering 10,000 per cent increase. The region also registered a maximum temperature of 33.5°C last summer, three degrees higher than the previous year.

"Growing up in the mountains, so close to nature, you notice these changes very clearly. Climate change is very real," Noor adds. "We face

Nerve centre: Ladakh is currently the heartland of Indian ice hockey.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Hub of activity: In January, the Nawang Dorjay Stobdan Stadium ice rink hosted the second consecutive season of the Royal Enfield Ice Hockey League, attracting crowds with over 6,000 attendees at some matches. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

floods that we didn't in the past. Last summer was extremely hot – something we hadn't experienced before – and the winter started late."

The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment of 2019 warns that nearly two-thirds of the glaciers along the Hindu Kush and Himalaya ranges will vanish by 2100 at the current rate of carbon emissions. Even if emissions are drastically reduced to limit global warming to 1.5°C, glacier loss would still amount to 36 per cent.

A silver lining

For ice hockey, however, there is a glimmer of hope.

In February 2024, Lieutenant Governor Brigadier (Dr) BD Mishra (Retired) inaugurated the renovation and improvement of the Karzoo pond.

The Centre is also overseeing the construction of a rink at the Nawang Dorjay Stobdan Stadium, which, currently natural, will be converted into an artificial rink by 2026.

"The foundation stone was laid in 2007, but construction picked up speed after Ladakh became a union territory. Since over 97 per cent of the national team comes from Ladakh, this rink is crucial for players here to improve their game," Namgyal explains.

The venue has become a hub for competitive ice hockey in Ladakh, hosting the CEC Championship since 2020 and the Khelo India Winter Games (KIWG) ice hockey tournament since last year.

In January, the rink hosted the second consecutive season of the Royal Enfield Ice Hockey League, attracting capacity crowds, with over 6,000 attendees at some matches.

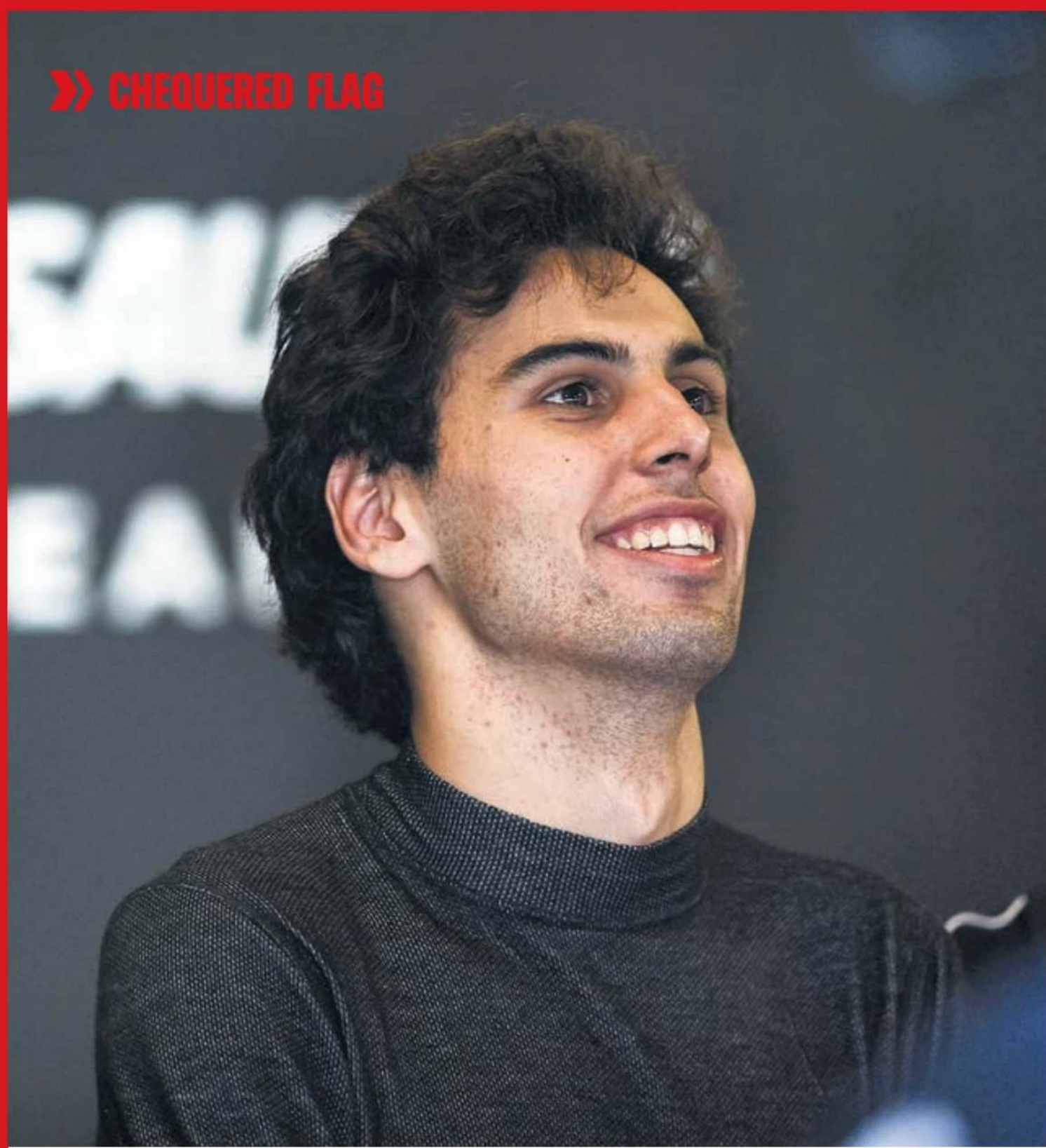
"This rink meets international standards (30 metres by 60 metres, according to the International Ice Hockey Federation). The roofing is nearly complete, and so is the seating," says PT Kunzang, vice-president of the Ice Hockey Association of Ladakh.

The 2025 edition of the KIWG is scheduled here in February, with plans to make the rink operational year-round.

"By March, the cooling plant will be installed, and by September or October, it will be generating artificial ice. Currently, we play only during winter, but once the plant is ready, our children will be able to play year-round," Kunzang adds.

Professional ice hockey, with urban infrastructure, seems poised to thrive in Ladakh. But the climate, snow, and cold season – integral to nurturing the next generation and creating an avenue for the sport to flourish in a largely warm country – face an uncertain future amidst a rapidly changing environment.

'Winter has come' still brings smiles to every Ladakhi. But how long will it stay?



READY TO ROLL

Three rookies are gearing up to take on world champions and competitive drivers, hoping to **secure their futures** in the pinnacle of single-seater racing.

Kavita Menon & Anish Pathiyil
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A new year has rolled in, bringing fresh opportunities, new challenges, and, more importantly, the promise of change. This holds true for the ever-dynamic world of Formula One, which churned out one of its most memorable seasons last time around.

With major rule changes set to take effect from 2026, F1 enters a pivotal high-stakes year that marks both a fresh start and a final shot for the 10 teams, which hope to capitalise on certainties before bracing for the unknown.

As another 24-race spectacle fast approaches, the line-up of 20 drivers will include plenty of familiar faces — some with teams they last raced with, and others behind the wheel of new ones.

This season will also witness the addition of six drivers from Formula Two, a crucial feeder series that has consistently shone the spotlight on young up-and-coming talent.

While half the lot have added one race to their belts, there are three who are gearing up to get off the mark. As they prepare to take on world champions and competitive drivers, these rookies hope that they can secure their futures in the pinnacle of single-seater racing.

Gabriel Bortoleto

Entering F1 following a less-fancied feeder series title win, Gabriel Bortoleto **(left)** has ensured that a considerable set of eyeballs will be fixated on him as he wades through his maiden season.

He was only the fourth driver in history to win the F3 and F2 titles in consecutive years. Looking at how his predecessors — Charles Leclerc, George Russell, and Oscar Piastri — have already etched their names in history as multiple race winners, Bortoleto will be hoping for a similar script.

His emergence has rekindled the spirit in his home country, Brazil, which has been yearning for a national star since Felipe Massa, who retired in 2017. The 20-year-old also sports an Ayrton Senna-inspired helmet, and need not look much further than the legendary three-time champion for inspiration.

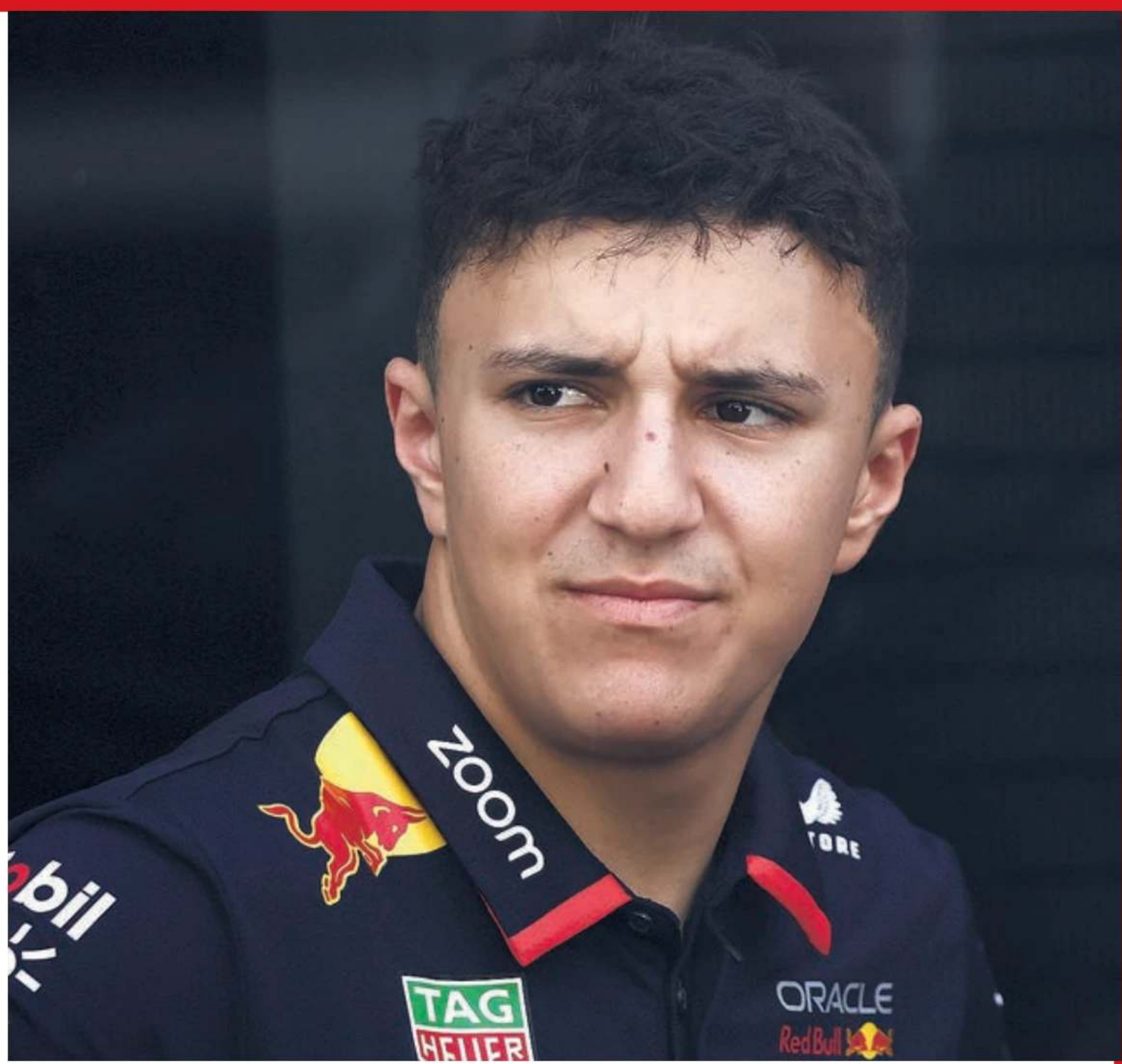
The Brazilian, though, will have his task cut out at Kick Sauber, the team that had the slowest car on the grid in 2024.

As it gears up for a transition into the Audi factory setup in 2026, the upcoming season could be seen as a one-off dead rubber as far as results are concerned.

The former McLaren junior was 'Mr. Consistent' during his time in F2 but will have an able rival in teammate Nico Hulkenberg, who has been one of the midfield superstars since returning to the sport.

Isack Hadjar

Red Bull's junior academy is one of



Up to the challenge: Bortoleto will have his task cut out at Kick Sauber, the team that had the slowest car on the grid in 2024. Pics: GETTY IMAGES

the most competitive setups in the world of motorsport, with an ever-increasing band of drivers and limited seats on offer due to the senior team's success. Isack Hajdar will be the 19th driver from the stable to be promoted to F1 when he partners Yuki Tsunoda at Racing Bulls.

The path has been trod upon by many race winners in the past, including Sebastian Vettel, Max Verstappen, and Daniel Ricciardo, although a vast majority of the promoted drivers have now faded into oblivion.

Hajdar's entry into the big leagues comes after a closely fought F2 season, where he stretched Bortoleto to the very end, eventually finishing as runner-up. Hadjar, who is of French-Algerian descent, will be hoping he can put pressure on Liam Lawson in the second Red Bull seat, which had seen continuous rotation before Sergio Perez's four-year-long stay.

La Petit Prost (The Young Prost), a term given to him by the French media, will hope to outperform his much more senior and consistent Japanese teammate. One thing is for sure: the Racing Bulls race engineers are in for some fiery radio exchanges in the upcoming season.

Kimi Antonelli

Kimi Antonelli **(right)** may be the youngest driver on the 2025 grid at 18, but his journey to the top tier attests to the fact that age is only a number. The Italian is one of the few drivers to have taken the shortcut route to F2, skipping the preceding F3 league and joining the likes of Verstappen, Carlos Sainz, and Lance Stroll. It was seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton's exit that triggered an earlier-than-planned move for Antonelli to Mercedes. Team principal Toto Wolff said on the *Armchair Expert* podcast with Dax Shepard, "I didn't want to miss out on him [Antonelli] like I did with Max [Verstappen] back in the day, [when] I didn't have a car [for him]; so that is all falling into place," said

Antonelli might have wanted his entrance to unfold differently, as it came on the back of a maiden F1 practice session that lasted only a disappointing 10 minutes. Taking eventual teammate George Russell's car out for a spin, his brief appearance showed some eye-catching pace before he lost control.

Finishing sixth in his first F2 season, he bagged two victories, three podiums, and four fastest laps but kept his head high amid tough competition. Although Mercedes does not have a track record for handing its car out to newbies, the Brackley-based team might have seen some unearthed potential raring to break through.

Among his first few tasks will be: making the most of a fluctuating Mercedes, keeping up with Russell, and not giving in to the pressure of filling the large shoes of Hamilton.

Raring to go: Hajdar hopes to outperform his much more senior and consistent Japanese teammate, Yuki Tsunoda.

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar presenting the Sportstar Lifetime Achievement Award to former decthlete Jai Prakash Singh during the Sports Conclave — Focus Bihar in Patna. R. V. MOORTHY

Mohd Reyan receives the Sportstar Young Achiever Award from the Bihar CM. R. V. MOORTHY

SPORTSTAR SPORTS CONCLAVE FOCUS BIHAR

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar honours Olympians, Paralympic stars

Nitish Kumar, the honourable Chief Minister of Bihar, felicitated athletes and para-athletes for their achievements and contributions to their respective disciplines at the Sportstar Sports Conclave — Focus Bihar held at Taj City Centre on January 25. The players felicitated included Paralympic silver medallist Deepa Malik, Olympic bronze medal-winning boxer Vijender Singh, double Olympic bronze medallist P. R. Sreejesh, double Paralympic medallist Sharad Kumar, six-time Winter Olympian Shiva Keshavan, and women's hockey team head coach Harendra Singh. The sporting stars were honoured with a shawl and a cased silver fish.

As per the Sportstar Conclave tradition, two special awards were bestowed on athletes from the State. Decathlete Jai Prakash Singh won the Unsung Champion award and teenage chess talent Md. Reyan bagged the Young Achiever honour. Both were awarded a cash prize of ₹ 50,000 each.

Deputy CM Samrat Choudhary lays out roadmap for sports development, says change in mindset key

Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Chaudhary highlighted the importance of a shift in mindset and moving away from the State's obsession with academics. R. V. MOORTHY

Bihar Sports Minister Surendra Mehta addressing the gathering during the Conclave. R. V. MOORTHY

The Honourable Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar, Samrat Choudhary, laid out the State government's vision for the development of sports during the Conclave.

The wheels of development were set in motion in January last year when Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar created a separate sports department. Until then, matters related to sports were handled by the art, culture and youth affairs department.

"Last January, we created a plan. Firstly, we decided to create a *khel gaon* in each of the nine divisions in the State that would cater to sports such as cricket, football and hockey.

"In many places, we have started the construction of stadiums. We hosted an international-level women's hockey tournament (Women's Asian Champions Trophy) in Rajgir.

"The whole world watched that tournament and it put the spotlight on the fact that Bihar can also host sports such as hockey," Choudhary said.

He also highlighted the importance of a shift in mindset and moving away from the State's obsession with academics.

The recognition of the sports academy in Rajgir — which hosted the Women's Asian Champions Trophy last year — as a university by the Government of India was also a significant step for the development of sports in the State.

Choudhary also lauded the State government's 'Medal *Lao Naukri Pao*' scheme, which involves the direct recruitment of outstanding athletes from Bihar in government jobs.

With Bihar set to host the Women's Kabaddi World Cup, Khelo India Games, Under-20 Rugby Sevens Asian Championship and the Men's Hockey Asia Cup this year, Choudhary believes the future of sport in the State is bright.

"Just like Bihar has moved forward in education, CM Nitish Kumar is committed to ensure the children of Bihar also excel in sports," Choudhary concluded.

The Bihar Sports Minister Surendra Mehta who spoke on the occasion said that under the leadership of CM Nitish Kumar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, sports was on the rise in the State.

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Bihar's 'Chanakya Neeti' in sports policy and the road to 2028 Los Angeles Olympics

Bihar is adopting *'Chanakya Neeti'* in its sports policy, Director General & CEO, Bihar State Sports Authority, Raveendran Sankaran, said during the Conclave. Talking about the 23 sporting disciplines that would be accommodated at the Rajgir Sports Complex, Raveendran said that the Bihar government would focus on sports in which other States weren't already at a very advanced stage.

"We have identified certain sports where, within the country, the competition is less, and the medal-winning capacity is more. We adopted rugby sevens, sepak takraw, fencing, cycling. Today, we are the champion of champions in rugby sevens in all categories," Raveendran said during the panel discussion titled 'Accelerating sport development in Bihar', moderated by *Sportstar* editor Ayon Sengupta.

Highlighting Bihar's success in these disciplines, Raveendran said that five girls and as many boys from the State have represented India at the Asian Rugby Championship. Two boys from the State have also represented India at the Sepak Takraw World Cup, while fencer Akash Kumar participated at the Asian Games.

Raveendran also delved on the game-swapping strategy adopted by the State, where athletes who couldn't excel in their disciplines were made to swap sports.

"We converted volleyball players into Sepak Takraw players. Athletes in fourth and fifth positions, and wrestlers who didn't win medals, they were converted into rugby players."

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, the Bihar government has provided athletes with substantial financial assistance and launched an extensive talent scouting programme named 'Mashal'.

"The State government has launched three levels of sports scholarship policies," B. Rajender, Additional Chief Secretary, Department of Sports, Government of Bihar, said. "The number one is Prerna — at the grassroots level. We are giving Rs. 3 lakh to each sportsperson between the ages of 12 and 18 and we are going to sponsor about 500 sportspersons a year. At the next level, we are going to give scholarships to 200 sportspersons between the ages of 12 and 24. Third category is 'Udaan' — the highest level. This includes the sportspersons that have reached the international level and won medals. We are providing Rs. 20 lakh per annum to 20 such sportspersons a year. This will encourage them, provide them with the ability to purchase equipment, invest in diet and cover travelling expenses."

Explaining the extent of the talent scouting programme, Raveendran added, "Recently, our Honourable Chief Minister has launched a massive talent scouting programme. We have named it 'Mashal'. Through this, in 30-40 thousand middle and high schools, we are conducting talent scouting programmes. This will cover almost 60 lakh students. We are doing it scientifically and in the top-priority games of Bihar State. As of now, in one month, we have collected almost 19,27,456 data. This programme will run for another month, so once we have all this data, we will be able to analyse which student will be capable for which game and we will start nurturing them. Those athletes will be brought under the Prerna scholarship scheme. This is how we are broad-basing the sports development programme."

Rajender also spoke about the Bihar government's sports recruitment policy 'Medal Lao Naukri Pao' and its evolution.

"This started in 2009. In the beginning, very few athletes were recruited. But now, in 2023, we refined the policy and modified the criteria. Last year, we appointed 71 sportspersons in different categories. Since inception, 358 athletes have benefitted."

The Bihar government has also invested extensively in sports infrastructure and Raveendran laid out the roadmap with regards to the Rajgir Sports Complex, situated in the city that hosted the Women's Asian Champions Trophy hockey tournament last year.

From left: Raveendran Sankaran, Director General & CEO, Bihar State Sports Authority, and B. Rajender, Additional Chief Secretary, Department of Sports, Government of Bihar, in conversation with Ayon Sengupta, Editor, Sportstar, during the Conclave. R. V. MOORTHY

"We are going to cater to 23 sports disciplines - both indoor and outdoor games. After the Asian Champions Trophy, we started coaching camps in hockey for our athletes. Before this, hockey players in Eklavya residential schools didn't have a turf, but now they do. We shifted all our 100 hockey players to Rajgir Sports Academy, and they are getting trained for the first time on a turf. Shortly, they will be mentored by an Olympian. Hockey India has come forward in helping us develop hockey in Bihar. We have started camps for wrestling, weightlifting, athletics, taekwondo, fencing and swimming. Now, slowly, we have started conducting camps in Rajgir Sports Academy. In the future, we will establish a sports science facility there. We will develop it into a high-performance centre for various sports disciplines. Asian Fencing Federation has approached us to come up with an Asian Fencing Academy here. If that happens, the best of Asia's fencers will be coming to Bihar and that will help develop my fencers."

However, Raveendran cautioned against investing in big infrastructure and said that the Bihar government was more in favour of constructing temporary structures.

"We are not in favour of erecting white elephants. We are planning to create only the field of play as per the requirement of the game. In every panchayat and bloc, we will develop the field of play according to the sport. My boys and girls get more space to play," he added.

Raveendran also said that the State government was actively addressing issues such as age fraud, doping and sexual harassment in sport.

"Three cases came to our knowledge and the girls gave it [complaint] in writing. We lodged cases against the three coaches and sent them behind bars."

Though Bihar hasn't yet medalled for India at the Olympic Games, Raveendran said that the wait would end by 2032 or 2036.

"Our mission was to send at least one athlete from Bihar to the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. But, in 2024 itself, we had athletes from Bihar — Shreyasi Singh (shooting) and Paralympian Shailesh Kumar. We have achieved the 2028 target in 2024 itself. In 2028, we will want to increase our count. In 2032 or 2036, Bihar's children will get a medal for India."

Good governance is non-negotiable, says Sumariwalla on LA 2028 preparation

Good governance is non-negotiable to bring out the best results at the LA 2028 Olympics and other international tournaments, opined Adille Sumariwalla, Vice President, World Athletics, during a panel discussion on 'Learnings from the Paris Games' as part of Sportstar's Focus Bihar Conclave 2025 held in Patna on Friday.

Sumariwalla called for more communication between the stakeholders and a focus on the entire 'ecosystem' behind an athlete rather than holding the federations accountable for all performances.

"I think you need to fix the ecosystem. Just focusing on the athlete and a single coach won't work. It is important to have even the technical officials at an international level," he said.

"The athlete is being given everything they want and they have to go there [Olympics] and perform. The athlete only looks at what he/she wants but he/she doesn't have the experience or the understanding of what is good in the overall ecosystem. Hence, we need to work together as one unit. The overall ecosystem should be strengthened at the national and state level," he said.

Commodore PK Garg, former CEO of the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), explained how research and interactions between the federation and athletes helps the flagship program."TOPS involves continuous research on how a select group of athletes can be developed. There is a synergised, multi-stakeholder approach, which helps TOPS fund each athlete based on their requirement. The Mission Olympic Cell has also been strengthened with the inclusion of sports science, which will improve athlete monitoring and make the scheme more accountable," he said.

Shiva Keshavan, the Deputy Chef-de-Mission for India during Paris 2024 and a former Winter Olympian, provided an internal view from the camp.

"For the first time, both the Chef-de-Mission, Gagan Narang, and the Deputy Chef-de-Mission were Olympians. The impact we could have at the Olympic Village itself, as people who have been through it, knowing what the requirements of the athletes are, we could bridge the gap," Keshavan said.

With the focus shifting towards LA 2028 and the 2036 Olympics, which India hopes to host, the panellists discussed points of improvement that could propel the country up the medal tally.

"We need to instil the culture of sports in our children. However big the infrastructure we create, if we are not able to connect that with the people then it won't be of use," said Putul Kumari, Senior Vice President, National Rifle Association of India. She elucidated the example of Haryana as a state that has managed to preserve the sports culture in legacy sports like wrestling, kabaddi and kho kho.

From left: Commodore P. K. Garg (Former CEO, Target Olympic Podium Scheme), Adille Sumariwalla (Vice President, World Athletics), Shiva Keshavan (Head, Scholarship & Olympic Sports Strategy, Reliance Foundation), and Putul Kumari (Sr. Vice President, National Rifle Association of India) during the Conclave. R. V. MOORTHY

Unlocking athlete potential through Sports Science and Data

During a panel discussion on 'Unlocking athlete potential through Sports Science and Data', Dr. G. Kishore, Principal and Regional Director-SAI, Lakshmibai National College of Physical Education, Thiruvananthapuram, stressed the importance of incorporating sports science at the grassroots level.

"At the top level, athletes under SAI, especially those under TOPS or the National Centre of Excellence, are being scientifically monitored and data analytics is being done. But, at the developmental level and the grassroots level, it hasn't percolated as desired," he said.

Harendra Singh, head coach of the Indian women's hockey team, also batted for the development of science and data in sports.

"After 28 years in the coaching circle, I can say that, if you impart science, you can achieve the target. It's not the skill only that is going to win you a medal. Sports science plays a vital role if you want to enhance performance and achieve a medal at the top level."

Dr. Kishore added that systems have to be implemented in the local tiers to familiarise athletes.

"It is difficult to convince the athletes who consider it an additional burden. [With data analytics] each athlete will develop inquisitiveness to know where he stands and he can himself progress," he said.

"Nowadays, around the world, they have athlete management systems with a repository of data. SAI has also established a National Sports Repository System (NSRS) and an Athlete Management System, where each athlete's performance can be monitored," he added.

Dr. Pralay Majumdar, Senior Advisor, Centre of Excellence in Sports Science and Analytics, IIT Madras, reckoned that more had to be done in the field of biomechanics.

"We need to do a lot of work to improve the system in sports biomechanics due to a lack of resources and a lack of understanding by coaches dealing with the techniques and tactics in individual sports."

From right: Dr. G. Kishore (Principal and Regional Director- SAI, Lakshmibai National College of Physical Education, Thiruvananthapuram), Dr. Pralay Majumdar (Sr. Advisor, Centre of Excellence in Sports Science and Analytics, IIT Madras) and Harendra Singh (Head Coach, Indian women's hockey team) during the Conclave. R. V. MOORTHY

Bihar championing the nation's e-sports revolution

Among Bihar's success in the sporting space is its championing of esports, with the State has also keen on hosting the first national games for esports.

While esports' legitimacy as a sport has often been questioned due to its lack of physical activity, NODWIN Gaming Co-Founder Akshat Rathee cleared the air. "Sports, as defined by the International Olympic Committee, is the pursuit of 'Citius, Altius, Fortius' (faster, higher, stronger). When you play a videogame on a smartphone, on a professional level, I am just faster than you. That is why it is a sport. I will kick the ball faster than you, I will shoot a bullet faster than you, I will jump faster than you, I will respond faster than you," he explained.

"Individual esports in India has a lot of money. Esports in India has more than 250 people who earn more than one lakh rupees a month. I think building the grassroots is a discovery problem and not a 'build' problem. The opportunities are now about States going ahead and taking leadership to its constituents," Rathee said during the panel discussion, moderated by Abhishek Issar, Co-Founder of Federation of Esports India.

Nishi Kant, Chief of Design & Product at JetSynthesys, outlined his vision for promoting the Indian narrative in the esports scene. "Real Cricket is a true indigenous made in India game. All the e-cricket players, who currently play Real Cricket, the next big stage for them is GEPL - Global E-Cricket Premier League, which is the largest esports platform for e-cricketers. We will love to host a GEPL leg here in Bihar with the support of Bihar government and find and scout the best e-cricketing talent and put them on a global stage," he said.

"Cricket is the biggest sport in India. I want to see the best e-cricketer from India, from Bihar, who can come up and play in the GEPL," he added.

From left: Abhishek Issar (founder, UNIV Sportatech & Co- founder, Federation of Esports India), Akshat Rathee (Co- founder NODWIN Gaming), and Nishi Kant (Chief, Design & Product at JetSynthesys) emphasise the growing popularity of e-sports in India. R. V. MOORTHY

Breaking barriers – tackling challenges in grassroots sports

Tackling challenges and breaking barriers at the grassroots were among the many issues on the agenda at the Sportstar Conclave — Focus Bihar.

"Less than five per cent of the population has access to sports infrastructure. The whole programme about trying to provide very good sports facilities and split them out across the country is really the core. If we are looking to tap the population dividend that we have, we need to reach out to the other 95 per cent as well," Anil Kumar, Managing Director of Great SportsTech, said.

"Schools being the hub of where most the kids are gathering, obviously, government schools should be entitled to an entirely government-funded sports infrastructure. Even for private schools, if you are able to subsidize 50 per cent of infrastructure cost, the school will also have skin in the game, and they will also invest," he added during the panel discussion moderated by Prasanth Shanthakumaran, Partner, KPMG India.

Rishikesh Joshi, Co-Founder and CEO of Sports For All, also highlighted the importance of leveraging India's huge demographic dividend.

"80 lakh school children play organised sport in the US. India's school population is 26 crore. If we did even five per cent of that at the school level, imagine how quickly we could catch up," he said.

Meanwhile, CEO and Founder of Khelo More, Jatin Paranjape, shed light on making sports infrastructure more accessible to India's urban population.

"The Indian gentry from the top 30 cities also needs to access some of the municipal corporation-owned sports complexes because that is when you will see the culture change. A lot more Indians will start playing sport. It is very important for Indians to think about sport in a freer way and to think about it as being something which needs to be included in their lives."

The panelists agreed that sport should be an integral part of our lives in India and there is a lot of potential that can be tapped at the school level. R. V. MOORTHY

Paralympic gold in 2016 changed the way women were perceived, says Deepa Malik

During a panel discussion titled 'Empowering the Game – Unleashing Women's Potential in Sports' at the Sportstar Focus Bihar Conclave, Rio Paralympics silver medallist Deepa Malik said that her momentous feat at the 2016 Games changed the way women were perceived in para sport.

"There has been a huge change in mindset. It took one medal at the Rio Paralympics to create that ripple effect, which gave belief," Malik, who clinched silver in the women's shot put F53 event, said. "I would thank the Honourable Prime Minister because once we won that medal, there was a lot of respect given to me and a lot of awards bestowed upon me. Post that medal in Rio, we not only had parents but also husbands coming with their wives, children bringing their mothers to come out and play in disability. We need to create more role models and that will encourage more and more women... 2016 had the first female medal, but with Tokyo and Paris, we have 14 more female Paralympic medals."

However, there are still barriers for women who want to play sport in the country, and communication and awareness remain key in removing those barriers.

"A lot of our athletes suffer from very low haemoglobin levels. You mix that up with heavy bleeding, and that is going to be catastrophic. The nutrition level of our athletes is a big problem. Grassroots athletes are also not aware of options such as period underwear.

"There are a lot of misconceptions around contraception. The athletes know very little about their bodies and are not able to have a confident conversation with their coaches. They don't know that period can have an impact on performance," Aditi Mutatkar, Program Head, Athlete and Women Initiatives at Simply Sport Foundation, said.

Mihira Khopkar, a sports nutritionist who works with Reliance Foundation Hospital, echoed Aditi's views.

"Out of the 500 athletes we surveyed, 70 per cent said they find themselves in a very uncomfortable spot to speak about menstruation to their male coaches. Without having these conversations, there is no way ahead. The onus is on the coaches to make the athletes more comfortable, for which the coaches, parents and support system need to be empowered and educated for them to have the comfort to talk about it. Communication continues to be a huge barrier," Mihira said.

From right: Deepa Malik (Paralympic Medallist), Aditi Mutatkar (Prog Head Athlete and Women Initiatives, Simply Sport Foundation), and Mihira Khopkar (Sports Nutritionist) in conversation with Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan during the Conclave. R. V. MOORTHY

Olympic stars Vijender, Sreejesh and Sharad shed light on their rise to the top

During a panel discussion titled 'Chasing a medal — The grit behind the glory' as part of the Sportstar Focus Bihar Conclave 2025, Olympians Vijender Singh, P. R. Sreejesh and Sharad Kumar shared their journeys to the podium and outlined the path ahead for Indian sport.

"We come from a bhaagad area in Haryana where there isn't a lot of water in the land. There aren't a lot of sports played there," boxing bronze medallist Vijender explained. "My role model was Hawa Singh who won both the Dronacharya and Arjuna Award. My grandfather used to box in the army so our biggest passion ended up being army and sport."

High jumper Sharad said that it was a case of the sport coming naturally to him rather than him going after it. "Sometimes when you chase something and you don't succeed, you end up drifting away from it. But if you go naturally, you keep going and eventually excel at it," said the two-time Paralympic gold medallist. "Watching somebody with a leg deformity participate in high jump was a different kick and I wanted people to enjoy that. My coach in Ukraine used to say, 'Sharad, others are athletes but you are an artist. Let all of them feel what is in high jump,'" he added.

Double Olympic medal-winning hockey legend Sreejesh spoke about the mental strength hockey goalkeepers need to possess to be in the zone despite being away from the action for long periods in the game.

"I don't know how to dribble a ball. I don't know how to run with the ball. I'm playing a different role to everybody else. Goalkeeping is a mind game," he said.

"After conceding a goal or making a save you have enough time to think. If you control yourself it is easy to perform. But, if you use that time to analyse yourself or do a post-mortem, then you will concede a goal," he explained.

In his new role as a coach of the junior team, Sreejesh shed light on the instructions he passes on to his players. "The first target is the Junior World Cup but I have asked them to think beyond that. The Olympics are coming in 2028 and 2032. That should be the dream," he said.

Sharad hoped the momentum of two back-to-back successful Summer Games campaigns fuels a desire in the youth to keep achieving.

" Loha garam hai. Ye mahaul hai poore desh mein (The iron is hot. That is the mood throughout the country). Let's make sports a habit. We should try and target every individual and convey that sports is basic for a good life," he concluded.

Sharad Kumar (left), P. R. Sreejesh and and Vijender Singh with moderator Vijay Lokapally. R. V. MOORTHY

« As an athlete, you have to be honest with yourself »

MO FARAH

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A young and lonely Mo Farah found a friend in athletics when he arrived in the United Kingdom at the age of nine, after being trafficked from Djibouti in East Africa.

It wasn't an easy journey, but with sheer dedication, he went on to achieve what few could even imagine — four Olympic gold medals, six World Championships, and multiple European Championship titles. He also achieved the rare feat of consecutive Olympic long-distance doubles — in London 2012 and Rio 2016.

Even after transitioning to marathons in 2017, the legendary athlete made his presence felt. He believes it's important for athletes to let go of failures, take things in their stride, and start afresh every time.

In conversation with *Sportstar* on the sidelines of the Mumbai Marathon, the global icon spoke at length on a range of topics, starting from his early days to how India can develop world-class athletes.

Thoughts on coming to Mumbai for the marathon...

It's really exciting to be here in India, especially in Mumbai as an ambassador for the Tata Mumbai Marathon. This is my first time in the city. I have a lot of friends who always talk about Mumbai.

But it's my first time actually seeing it in person — the people, the culture. It's unbelievable. I get a warm feeling from being here.

Do you follow Indian athletics closely?

Yes, you have so many athletes who are coming along and improving. You've got the world champion in javelin (Neeraj Chopra). There are a few guys in the 800m and 1500m.

The Indian record in the marathon is 2:12:00 (by Shivnath Singh), so there are athletes who are closing that gap. I believe India has great potential for its youth and programmes in place. I learned from the best, training with the Kenyans and Ethiopians. I've come across so many athletes who are willing to go that extra mile, which is a great attitude to have.

You spoke about Chopra. How does a country benefit when there's a role model to look up to?

It's really important for athletes to have a role model — someone they look up to who's been competing with the best, who's a world champion, an Olympic champion. He's a great role model for youth and younger athletes.

When you're young and questioning yourself about how to do it, you see them doing it every time and becoming the best in the world. That should answer all the questions and doubts you have. If they can do it, so can we.

What's the right age for an athlete to transition from the track to road races?

When we talk about 1500m, 5000m, and 10,000m, that's track and field. Then you've got the marathon, which is 42 kilometres (26.2 miles). Athletes tend to move to marathons as they approach the end of their track career, when they no longer have the same speed.

When I moved to marathons after the World Championships in 2017, was that the right time? Was it a good age to do it? Among other

Icon living: Having won four Olympic gold medals, six World Championships, and multiple European Championship titles, Mo Farah is one of the world's all-time great athletes.
GETTY IMAGES

Track athletes tend to move to marathons as they approach the end of their track career, when they no longer have the same speed.

No better choice: Mo was roped in as the International Event Ambassador for the 20th edition of the Tata Mumbai Marathon. EMMANUAL YOGINI

athletes, we see the Kenyans and Ethiopians transitioning earlier in their careers.

In the end, it all comes down to the athlete. If they feel they've achieved everything on the track and don't have much more speed, then there's nothing wrong with starting something new.

I think it depends on the age — not too early, I'd say. Probably after your 20s. Even in your 30s, you can go on. But with everything you do, you've got to understand it and be willing to work hard.

When you shifted to marathons in 2017, how challenging was the transition?

As an athlete, you have to be honest with yourself. Back then, I had done and achieved everything I could on the track. It was important to recognise that.

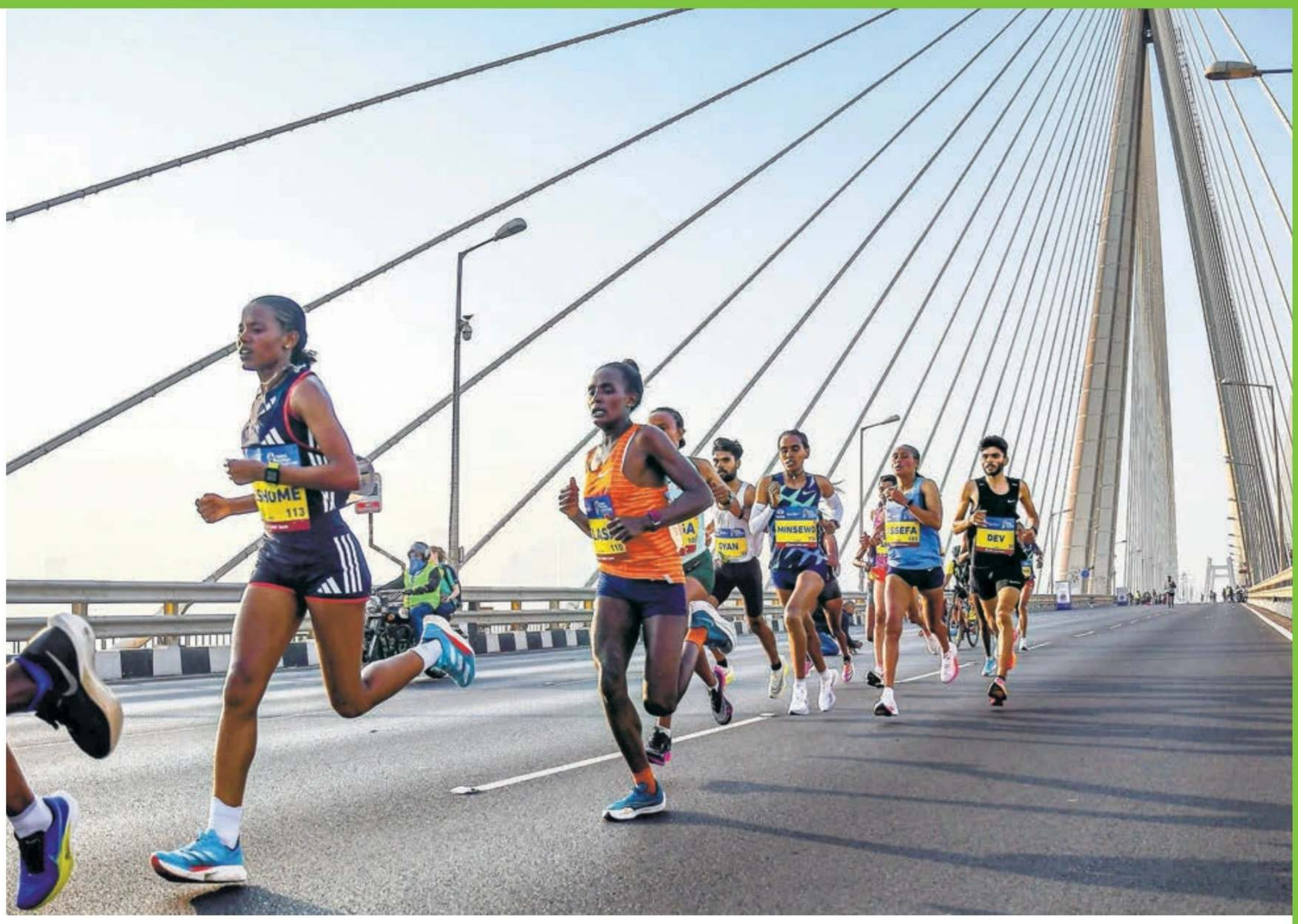
If you are not motivated, it's important for you to find something that you're still passionate and hungry for. By the time I participated in the World Championships in London in 2017, I had already made up my mind that it was going to be my last track and field race. After that, I would move on to marathons and see if I could be as successful as I was on the track.

Now that I've retired, I can openly talk about it. I thought I could have done more. But again, that's all I was capable of. When I made the transition, I was hungry and willing to work hard and start a new challenge. For an athlete, it's important to maintain that hunger and desire.

When an athlete as successful as you moves into a different territory, how does he handle failures?

As an athlete or even someone in a decent job, when you fail at something — whether it's a race, a job interview or becoming the CEO of a company — you would automatically think that you failed

Before I won the Olympics in London in 2012, I competed in Beijing in 2008 and didn't even make the final. I was devastated and felt like I had let so many people down.



On the move: Around 60,000 runners participated in the event. Berhane Tesfay of Eritrea won the men's title while Kenya's Joyce Chepkemoi Tele took the women's crown.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

and are not good enough. But those are only doubts that you have in yourself.

As an athlete, you win or lose, and that's part of the sport. Before I won the Olympics in London in 2012, I competed in Beijing in 2008 and didn't even make the final. I was devastated and felt like I had let so many people down. But I had to wait another four years to prove I was still good enough and capable of winning medals.

So, when you lose a race, it's important for you to understand the race, how you lost, what you could have done differently, whether you under-trained or over-trained. Perhaps could you have run at a bit more speed or tactically, did you get the race wrong? It's all learning. As an athlete, you never stop learning.

Mentally how did you handle that phase between the Beijing Games and the London Olympics?

For athletes, it's always been hard on mental health. Athletes are the No.1 faces of mental health challenges. In terms of mental health, now we can openly talk about it because we have the platform, and a lot of people are coming forward to talk about it as we recognise this is a problem.

But an athlete was traditionally seen as the hardest guy. You could never talk about it (mental health). Even when you doubted yourself, you had to show bravery in front of the camera, and that was part of the image.

But now, there's a space where we can talk about it. And for me, it's important for us to understand that they are all just human. We all face these challenges, and we can overcome them. When you are an athlete and things haven't gone well, it's important to understand and see what you could do to fix it.

You need to recognise that maybe the other guy has a bit more talent, or perhaps they've put in a bit more hard work, and that's why you could not make it against them. Sometimes, I've gone into races feeling like I should have won, but I didn't because the better man won on the day. That is the reality. For a champion athlete, it also takes a great deal of preparation.

An athlete makes a lot of sacrifices to achieve something and that means staying away from family, following a strict diet, living a regimented life, and, despite all that, managing pressure. How does one handle it?

That's part of being an athlete. If you want to be the best, you've got to question yourself, "How can I be the best? What can I do? What are my opponents doing?" For me, I had no choice. If I wanted to be the best,

this is what it took.

I have been away from my family for six months, busy in a training camp, and just grafting. There were times when I couldn't be at my kids' birthdays, and it was hard. But I knew it was worth it because this is an opportunity, and I was determined to make the most of it.

What was the toughest phase of your career?

In my athletics career, probably the toughest moment was not making the final at the Beijing Olympics. But then, the joy of winning in front of your home crowd (in London, 2012), with 75,000 people cheering for you, was incredible. No amount of money, nothing, could buy that feeling. It was this feeling that drove me every time I doubted myself.

You were sixth in the World Youth Championships and 10th in the World Juniors. What aided your transition to the senior level?

All the races helped me gain experience and deal with challenges. As a junior athlete, I was good enough. I went to the World Juniors and finished 10th, but for me, the biggest challenge was trying to break into the senior level. That was challenging because when you are a junior, you have the talent and you can get away with it. But when you become a senior, you almost have to have the talent and be willing to understand and train even harder.

At that point, a lot of it was really trying to learn from my opposition, learn from the best guys. I had the chance to live with Kenyan athletes, and I learned a lot from them, in terms of how they would just eat, sleep, and train.

And, I realised that if I wanted to be as good as them, this is what I needed to do.

Questions have been raised by athletes about the popularity of track athletics. What could be done to make the track more popular?

We need to make it exciting. We need a lot of great athletes to create and participate in exciting events. Considering the population of India,

MY STORY – HOW I ARRIVED IN A NEW COUNTRY, WAS TRAFFICKED INTO THE UK, AND ALL THE CHALLENGES I HAD TO OVERCOME – SHOULD SERVE AS AN EXAMPLE FOR MANY

there are so many people here. I would love to see them roll, get the talent, and organise events for them annually.

We are here to celebrate the Tata Mumbai Marathon, the 20th edition. If we go back 19 years ago, in the streets of Mumbai, you would have thought, "Oh, how are they going to do it?" But now, you look at it and you see the people coming out, the women taking part, and you're like, "Wow!"

That alone should answer everything, because we need to invest in the youth, and try to create events that happen regularly. That's the way forward for India too. India already has great athletes and plenty of events happening across the country, which I'm aware of, but we just have to keep supporting the youngsters. We need to inspire them, keep talking to them, and that really helps.

When I look at the Kenyans or someone like Paul Tergat or Haile Gebrselassie, I also feel inspired to be on the same journey as theirs. Even though you see them on TV, just remember, they took the same journey you are taking. They too had similar doubts that you are having, yet they got through it. That should motivate the youngsters.

You mentioned spending a lot of time with the Kenyan athletes. How was that experience?

It was an amazing experience, it's something that I had to do if I wanted to be the best. I was in the

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Historic: Mo celebrates his 10,000m win during the 2016 Rio Olympics.
GETTY IMAGES

Great Rift Valley in Kenya, in the middle of nowhere, with no electricity, no hot water, and then imagine being in London, where you have everything. You've got the streets, there are no electricity cuts, everything is available. But I was willing to accept that challenge in Kenya and adapt. I think as an athlete, sometimes you might not have the best facilities, but you've got to be willing to adapt and get on with it.

After an illustrious journey, what's keeping you busy these days?

I'm getting to spend a lot more time with my family, but I'm also doing things I could never do. When you are an athlete, you're in your lane, you can't get out of your line, but now, it's great to travel and spend time here in Mumbai as an ambassador for the Tata Mumbai Marathon. It's wonderful to share my story and motivate people.

I'm also doing charity work. I'm an ambassador for Save the Children, where I try to do a lot of work in terms of just being able to make a difference for children around the world, because I believe we can all help one another. I'm also an ambassador for Youth Sport Trust.

Your journey has been an inspiration for many. But why aren't more British Asians taking up athletics these days? What are they lacking?

There are a lot of athletes out there, and I think it's just about creating opportunities and making the most of them, without overcomplicating things.

I think my story — how I arrived in a new country, was trafficked into the UK, and all the challenges I had to face and overcome — should serve as an example for many, because we can overcome a lot of things if we have the will to stick to something, work hard, and keep going. We'll face hurdles along the way, whatever we do, but it's how we overcome them.

In the Premier League, Liverpool stays top with 53 points, holding a game in hand over second-placed Arsenal, which has 47.

BATTLE OF THE BLUES

Manchester City's home clash against Chelsea was **undoubtedly the biggest match** of week 23 in the Premier League.

Decisive: Manchester City's Phil Foden scored his team's third goal in the 87th minute to end any hopes of a Chelsea comeback. GETTY IMAGES

Aneesh Dey & Joan Mathew Jacob
aneesh.dey@thehindu.co.in,
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Manchester City's new centre-back, Abdukodir Khusanov, had a torrid start to his life in Manchester, making an early mistake that led to Chelsea's opening goal. In the third minute, Khusanov attempted to head the ball back to his keeper, Ederson, but barely made contact, allowing Jackson to pounce on the loose ball and square it to Noni Madueke, who slotted it into the open net.

Pep Guardiola's side found an equaliser in the 42nd minute through Josko Gvardiol, who lashed the ball into an open net after Chelsea keeper Robert Sanchez made the initial save off a Matheus Nunes shot.

Sanchez, who could do little to prevent the first goal, turned into his own worst enemy for City's second. In the 68th minute, in a horrendous lapse of judgement, he rushed to the edge of his box to clear the ball. Realising

AP

AP

his error too late, Sanchez attempted to recover, but Erling Haaland had already lobbed the ball over him to give City the lead.

Phil Foden scored City's third in the 87th minute to end any hopes of a Chelsea comeback.

Title-favourite Liverpool thumped Ipswich Town 4-1, with Cody Gakpo, Mohamed Salah and Dominik Szoboszlai all finding the net.

Mikel Arteta's Arsenal edged past Wolverhampton Wanderers courtesy of a solitary strike from Riccardo Calafiori in a match that saw red cards shown to Myles Lewis-Skelley and Joao Gomes.

Manchester United enjoyed a stroke of luck in its 1-0 win over Fulham, with Lisandro Martinez's deflected shot securing three points for Ruben Amorim's side.

High-flying Nottingham Forest, challenging for a Champions League spot next season, hit an obstacle against Bournemouth, which clinched a 5-0 win, including a hat-trick from Dango Ouattara.

It was a terrible gameweek for Tottenham Hotspur manager Ange Postecoglou, as his team succumbed to a 2-1 loss against Leicester City.

Liverpool stays top with 53 points, holding a game in hand over second-placed Arsenal, which has 47. Nottingham Forest and Manchester City occupy third and fourth with 44 and 41 points, respectively. Chelsea is sixth with 40, while Man United remains 12th with 29 points. Tottenham is languishing in 15th with 24 points.

La Liga

It was a memorable gameweek for Kylian Mbappe **(above)**, as the Frenchman netted his first hat-trick for Real Madrid in its 3-0 win over Valladolid. Opening the scoring in the 30th minute, the France captain added to his tally in the 57th minute and in the first minute of second-half stoppage time with a well-converted penalty.

While one half of Madrid celebrated, the other remained

Ruthless: Barcelona beat Valencia 7-1, with Frenkie De Jong (centre), who grabbed the opening goal, among the five scorers for the Catalans. AP

frustrated, as Atletico played out a 1-1 draw with Villarreal. Gerard Moreno gave Villarreal the lead from the spot in the 29th minute, while Samuel Lino equalised in the 58th minute to spare the blushes for Diego Simeone's men.

But the team that stole the show was undoubtedly Hansi Flick's Barcelona, which delivered 90 minutes of supreme attacking football to secure a 7-1 win over Valencia. The Catalans had five different scorers — Frenkie De Jong, Ferran Torres, Raphinha, Robert Lewandowski and Fermin Lopez, who bagged a brace. Valencia centre-back Cear Tarrega scored an own goal for Barcelona's seventh, while Hugo Duro was Los Che's solitary scorer.

Real Madrid remains top of the standings with 49 points, while city rival Atletico sits second with 45. Barcelona occupies third with 42 points, while Athletic Bilbao, which played out a goalless draw against Leganes, stays fourth with 40.

Serie A

Juventus' unbeaten league record this season was snapped by Napoli, who came from behind to snatch a 2-1 win. On-loan striker Randal Kolo Muani gave Juve the lead on his debut, but Andre Frank Zambo Anguissa levelled before veteran Romelu Lukaku **(facing page, left)** converted from the spot to hand Napoli all three points.

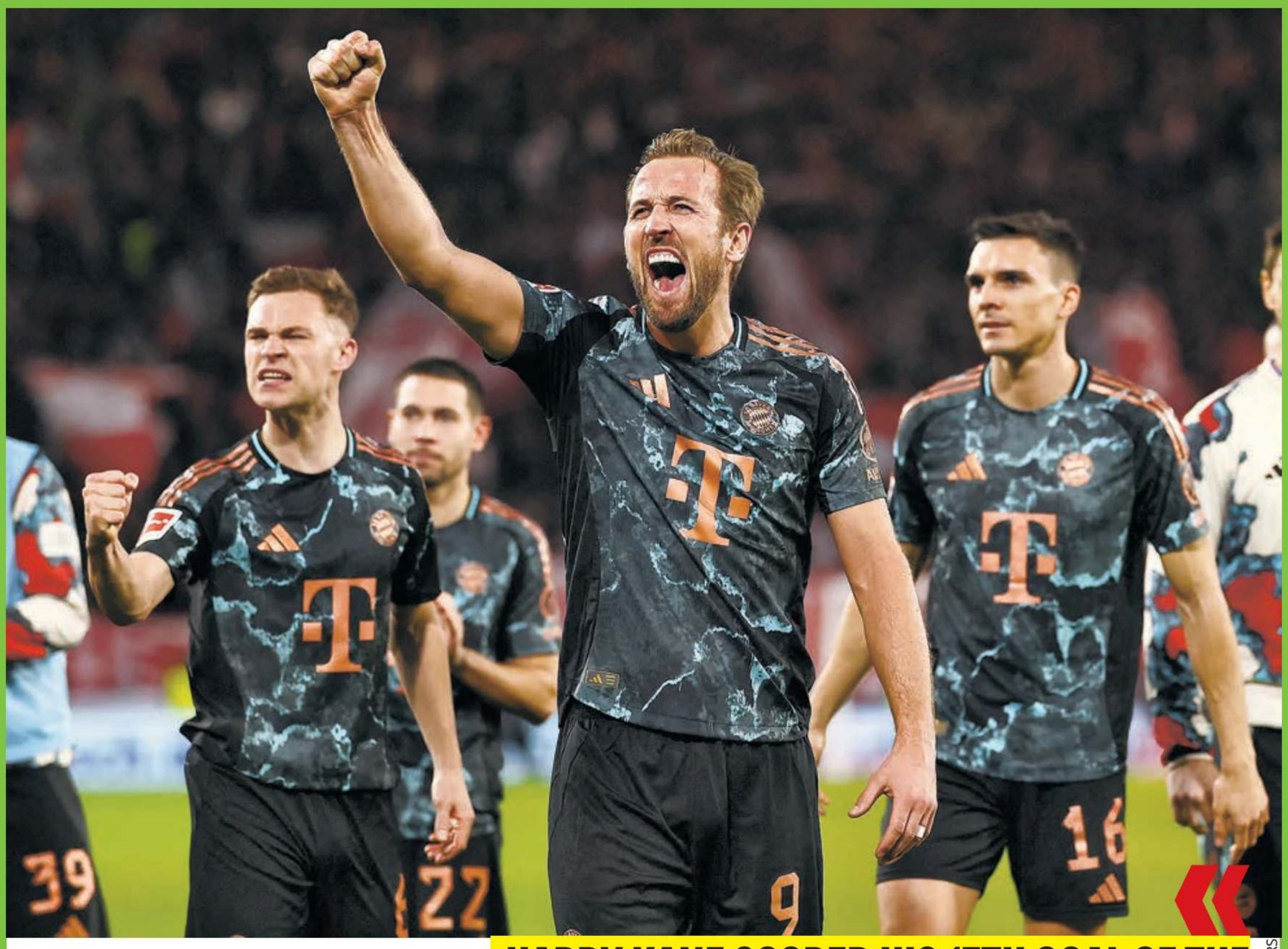
The result extended Napoli's league winning streak to seven and moved it to the top of the table with 53 points from 22 games, while Juventus remains fifth with 37.

Antonio Conte's Inter Milan remains a threat to Napoli's title charge, brushing aside Lecce 4-0. The win narrowed Napoli's lead to three points, with Inter having a game in hand.

League top scorer Mateo Retegui kept Atalanta in third and within touching distance of the top two after scoring twice in its 2-1 comeback win over Como.

AC Milan staged a dramatic fightback against struggling Parma to win 3-2. Christian Pulisic converted

> « Inter Milan remains a threat to Napoli's title charge, sitting three points behind with a game in hand »



REUTERS

HARRY KANE SCORED HIS 17TH GOAL OF THE CAMPAIGN IN BAYERN MUNICH'S 2-1 WIN OVER SC FREIBURG

a penalty, while Tijjani Reijnders and Samuel Chukwueze scored in stoppage time to lift the Italian Super Cup champion to seventh in the table, just outside the European spots.

Ligue 1

Paris Saint-Germain maintained its unbeaten league record, drawing 1-1 with Stade de Reims. New signing Khvicha Kvaratskhelia made an immediate impact, assisting Ousmane Dembele's goal, which was cancelled out nine minutes later by Keito Nakamura.

Olympique de Marseille failed to capitalise on PSG dropping points and fell to a 2-0 defeat against OGC Nice. Roberto De Zerbi's side is second with 37 points from 19 games, 10 behind leader PSG.

Nice, on the other hand, managed to climb into the top four with the win and sits one point behind AS Monaco, which beat Stade Rennais 3-2 to hold onto third place.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich shrugged off its shock midweek Champions League defeat to Feyenoord, beating SC Freiburg 2-1 for its fifth consecutive league win.

Harry Kane scored his 17th goal of the campaign, and defender Kim Min-jae nodded in the winner as the Bavarians took a healthy six-point lead at the top of the table.

Second-placed Bayer Leverkusen's title defence took a hit after squandering a two-goal lead against RB Leipzig. David Raum initiated the comeback late in the first half after Patrik Schick and Aleix Garcia had given Leverkusen the advantage.

The equaliser came through Leverkusen defender Edmond Tapsoba, who headed the ball into his own net to gift Leipzig a point.

Borussia Dortmund also wasted a two-goal lead and was held to a draw by Werder Bremen in its first game following the sacking of manager Nuri Sahin.

The result leaves the Black and Yellow reeling in 11th place, with 26 points from 19 games.

Eintracht Frankfurt, adjusting to life without top scorer Omar Marmoush, played out a 2-2 draw with Hoffenheim, maintaining third place with 37 points, 11 behind leader Bayern.

All standings are considered till January 27.

FSDL

Leader on the prowl

Under new head coach, Jose Molina, the Mariners remain at the **top of the standings,** with a league double over arch-rival East Bengal.

FOR MORE STORIES

The Indian Super League (ISL) has been dominated by two teams in the last two seasons, Mohun Bagan Super Giant and Mumbai City.

Both clubs have won the League Shield and the ISL Cup once each. However, their neck-to-neck competition took a rather anti-climactic turn at the beginning of 2025.

Under new head coach, Jose Molina, the Mariners **(above)** remain at the top of the standings, with a league double over arch-rival East Bengal. However, Petr Kratky's men, though in the top six, remain clear of challenging for the shield so far.

Meanwhile, Punjab, which started as an underdog and led the table for some time, has failed to win a game this year, while Jamshedpur, another underdog, has climbed to a potential knockout spot with seven more games to play.

Mohammedan Sporting, on the other hand, has remained in choppy waters, both on and off the field. The club has been embroiled in a severe financial crisis, with two key investors, BunkerHill Pvt. Ltd. and Shrachi Sports, unhappy about not getting the required shares of the club and have threatened to not put any further money into the club.

"We too, have not been issued any shares by the club despite repeated promises to do so," Shrachi said in a media release.

"BunkerHill, despite investing into the club for the last three years, has not been issued any

shares either and has now sent the said notice while putting on hold all further infusion of funds until shares are issued." The impasse has affected on-field performance, too, with some players not receiving salaries and thus reportedly boycotting training sessions. With just two wins in 17 games, the Black Panthers remain at the bottom of the table.

Surprises in IWL, I-League

In the second division, the I-League (men), Namdhari has taken centre stage, leading the standings after 10 games in just its second season in the league. Its striker, De has been one of its most lethal weapons, involved in eight of its 15 goals so far. On the other hand, Sreenidi Deccan, which finished as runner-up in the last two editions, has had a slump in form so far and remains fourth from bottom halfway into the season.

The Indian Women's League (IWL) started on January 10, and the usual suspects — Sethu FC, Gokulam Kerala (GKFC) and defending champion Odisha FC — remain in the top half.

But East Bengal has been the surprise element and leads the standings with a 100 per cent win record after three games.

Under gaffer Anthony Andrews, who led GKFC to consecutive IWL titles, the Mashal Girls have the best offensive and defensive record (7 goals scored, one conceded), so far.

In a season where the men's side of East Bengal has struggled for consistency, the women could make the red-and-gold flag proud in its third season in India's highest division of women's football.

All standings in ISL, I-League and IWL are considered till January 26.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee

Tifo wars

The two oldest rivals of Indian football are back in the fight — not on the field but on the fringes. The skirmish is actually in the stands of the Salt Lake Stadium, where both East Bengal and Mohun Bagan Super Giant fans are using huge tifos to convey their emotions and, at times, their frustrations.

With their team dominating the top spot for the last few weeks, Mohun Bagan fans have been working on various themes and record-breaking sizes to praise their players and cheer them on to glory.

On the other hand, East Bengal fans recently took a negative stance, seemingly venting their frustration at the team not being awarded a penalty during the derby in Guwahati (on January 11) when P.V. Vishnu's attempt struck Mohun Bagan midfielder Apuia's hand. Despite East Bengal's vehement appeals, the referee did not award a penalty.

The giant tifo **(above)** raised during the match against the Blasters depicted Mohun Bagan SG principal owner Sanjiv Goenka trying to influence the referee and asking him to ensure three points for his team. An obliging referee is shown asking

Star value: Bollywood actor Abhishek Bachchan, who co-owns Chennaiyin FC, attended his team's match against Mohun Bagan. FSDL

for the prize after denying the penalty.

This was the second instance this season where East Bengal fans have used tifos to portray referees in a poor light. Even the East Bengal top brass recently organised a media conference to express their displeasure with refereeing decisions, which they claim are denying their team vital points.

The Mohun Bagan SG management has officially complained to the Indian Super League management, requesting an investigation into the controversial issue and appropriate action.

Amitabha Das Sharma

The many firsts at Marina Arena

"Tickets *irukka*? (Do you have tickets?)"

This question was asked of the Diary by multiple children, many clad in Chennaiyin FC jerseys, as he navigated around the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in the city's Periamet neighbourhood to attend the match between Chennaiyin and Mohun Bagan. With an air of unshakeable confidence, the Diary replied, "*Venda*" (don't want) to the younglings. In hindsight, he realised his Tamil proficiency had ways to go, but he carried on regardless.

Although not his first time at the JLN media tribune, the Diary was nonetheless greeted by a pleasant breeze wafting in from the Bay of Bengal as he settled into a chair that offered a comprehensive view of the pitch.

The lemon break arrived quickly, prompting him to rush off to appease a rumbling stomach. In the scant 15 minutes available, he devoured as many *parottas* as possible, paired with a delectable chicken curry. A sandy-brown dog even appeared out of nowhere, eyeing the plate, but the canine had to leave disappointed.

Worried that he would miss a pivotal moment in the match after the interval, the Diary hurried back to his seat, clutching a bowl of gajar k*a halwa* (carrot pudding), but nothing noteworthy transpired. While monotony reigned on the pitch, the Diary did catch a glimpse of Abhishek Bachchan cheering Chennaiyin on in his *veshti.*

Down in the mixed zone, India international Pritam Kotal threw subtle shade at his former club, Kerala Blasters, while Scotsman Greg Stewart sipped on coconut water as a few reporters questioned him. These scenes did balance out the banal proceedings on the pitch.

While a colleague mentioned that players sipping from coconuts post-match is commonplace, it was one of the many firsts for the Diary at the Marina Arena.

Rajdeep Saha

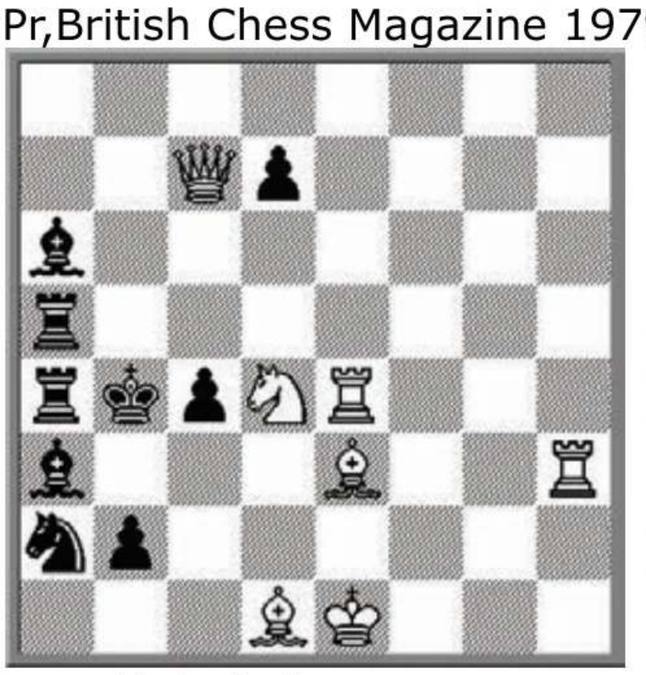
Correspondence in twoers

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Correspondence between white and black can be seen in many simple themes like half-in and Grimshaw and half-battery. British composer Colin Sydenham whose researches into correspondence led to articles in The Problemist and also the production of a number of very interesting problems(three of them from John Rice's 'Chess Wizardry the new ABC of chess problems' are presented in this article).In the first problem below there is a set cutting-point between the lines of a black rook and a black bishop on b5, with the resulting potential for mates on c4 and c5 after 1…Rb5 and 1..Bb5.However,in the diagram position no mates are available on these squares. The WNd4 stands initially on the cutting-point of two white lines, those of the Re4 and the Be3.The **key 1.Rb5!** switches the WN from the white cutting point to the black one and, by guarding the set flight c3,it threatens 2.Qc5 as well as 2.Qxc4.These mates are separately forced by 1…d6 and 1,,,d5.

C.P.Sydenham

1 Pr,British Chess Magazine 1979



Mate in two moves

Set: 1…Kc3 2.Bd2

Key 1.Nb5!(2.Qc5/Qxc4)

1…Rxb5 2.Rxc4;1…Bxb5 2.Bc5

1…Kxb5 2.Qb6

The rook-capture leads to rook mate and the bishop-capture leads to bishop mate. Another interesting line effect occurs when the black king captures b5.Two further black lines are opened to guard c5 and c4 so that WQ cannot mate on these squares and must play Qb6 instead.

In the second problem white has three tries by white knight which are parried by equivalent moves by the black knight.Try 1.Na4? (2.Qd4) 1.Nd1? Nh5! 1.Nxc4? Nxe6! **Key 1.Rxc4!**1…Ne8 2.Qxa8;1..Nh5 2.Qh1 1…Nxe6 2.Bc6;1…bxc4 2.Qa5

Comins Mansfield

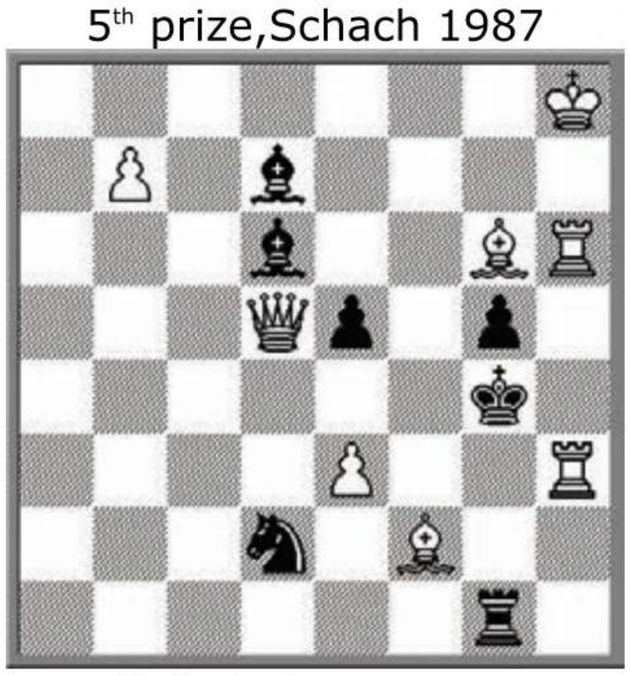
2 prize, The Observer 1961

Mate in two moves

Correspondence-diagonal/orthogonal can be seen in the problem for solving below where the two rooks moving the same number of squares in opposite direction.

M.Tribowski

5th prize,Schach 1987



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'half-pin in combination':**Key 1.Qg3!** (threat:2.Se3) Qg6;1...Sd3 2.Qg4;1...Re4 2.Rf8 1...Ke4 2.Sd6

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

Manush Shah, Diya Chitale crowned national TT champions

Manush Shah and Diya Chitale claimed the titles after defeating Payas Jain and top seed Sreeja Akula, respectively, in the singles finals of the 86th Senior National Table Tennis Championship, which concluded at the Pandit Dindayal Upadhyay Indoor Stadium in Surat.

Manush, the bespectacled southpaw from Vadodara, continued his dominant form to overcome Payas in five games during the best-of-seven final.

An hour earlier, Diya, from Mumbai, staged a remarkable comeback after trailing 2-0 against the favourite Sreeja — India's top-ranked international paddler — and won a thrilling women's final that became the longest match of the day. Diya's singles victory secured her a double crown, having already claimed the doubles title with her partner a day earlier.

Both Manush and Diya received Rs. 3.20 lakh each as prize money. However, it was the glittering trophy that thrilled them the most. Having previously been crowned sub-junior, junior, and youth national champions, both were overjoyed to finally claim the trophy they had coveted for a decade.

AMOL KARHADKAR

SPORTOON

STAN RAYAN

1 Nitin Kumar Sinha, the second seed from Kolkata, stunned top-seeded J. Vishnu Vardhan 6-3, 6-4 to claim the men's singles title at the Naushad Mather Memorial AITA National-ranking tennis tournament at the Regional Sports Centre in Kochi.

Meanwhile, Pune's top-seeded Pooja Ingale had a much easier time in the women's final, defeating third-seeded Laxmi Siri Dandu 6-4, 6-1.

KTA patrons Noordin Mather and Sunayini Naushad Mather presented the prizes.

2 Billiards stalwart Sourav Kothari produced two superb century breaks during the final as he defeated multiple world champion Pankaj Advani 4-2 to claim the title at the National Billiards & Snooker Championship in Indore.

Kothari, a former world billiards champion and currently ranked No. 2 in the International Billiards and Snooker Federation (IBSF), won 150-31, 30-154, 9-151, 150-25, 150-90, and 152-147 in a contest where Advani fought until the very end.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

Tapering towards high performance

A taper is a period in an **athlete's periodised programme** during which intensity, volume, and frequency are adjusted to stimulate performance gains.

All athletes train to compete. More importantly, they train to win at every opportunity. Why else would they dedicate hours of training each day simply to qualify or play second fiddle to someone else?

Whether the athletes' season consists of one competition or several, it is imperative that they deliver their best performances at the highest levels and emerge victorious. One way coaches and support staff can help ensure athletes are physically and mentally prepared is by implementing a 'taper phase', something that has not always been taken seriously due to ignorance or lack of knowledge. One of the major aspects of performance is the combination of tapering and recovery for peak performance at the right time.

A taper is a period in an athlete's periodised programme during which intensity, volume, and frequency are adjusted to stimulate performance gains. During a taper period, the goal should be to maintain high levels of game adaptation while minimising fatigue as competition approaches.

The average improvement for a trained athlete who is given appropriate tapering is zero to six per cent, depending on the sport and skill. Elite athletes, being closer to their 'performance ceiling', tend to experience slightly smaller percentage improvements (ranging from half a per cent to three per cent). The tapering phase of a periodised programme should begin two to three weeks before competition. Here are a few key essentials to consider when developing a competition taper:

Volume

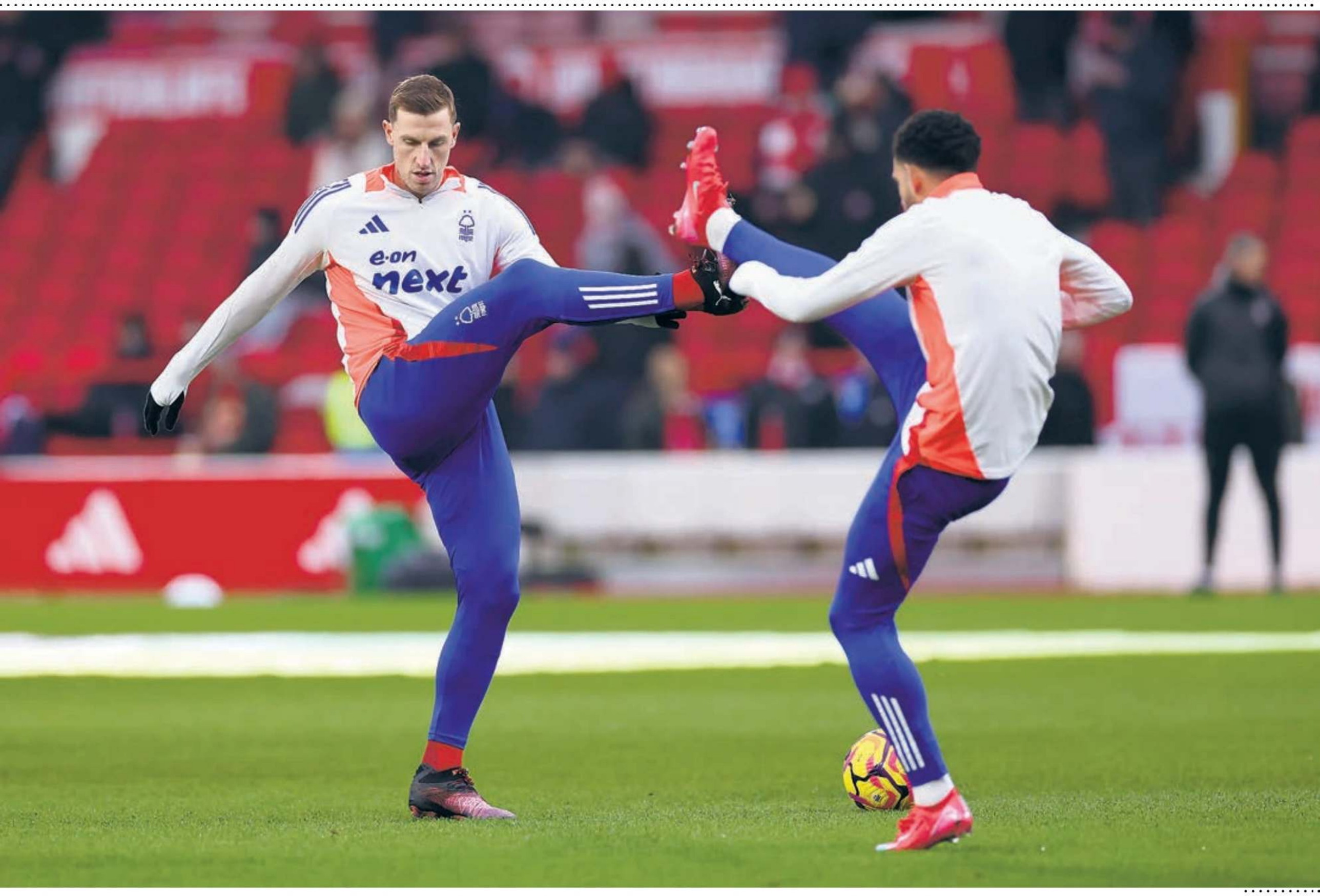
Volume refers to the amount of work done (sets, reps, distance, time, etc.). An expert on recovery and performance, Inigo Mujika, suggests a 40 to 60 per cent reduction in volume over two to three weeks. It is important to note that there should be an accumulation of volume throughout the training plan to allow for meaningful reductions. Failing to accumulate sufficient volume can result in decreased performance when tapering by the suggested 40-60 per cent. If you reduce volume too much from an already low volume of work, the training stimulus may be insufficient.

Intensity

Intensity refers to the percentage of effort in relation to the maximum rep. Over the course of a training cycle, intensity should gradually increase until the taper period. Maintaining stable intensity while reducing volume during the taper can help achieve the goal of minimising fatigue while preserving and enhancing strength and power.

Frequency

Frequency denotes how many training sessions an athlete performs within a set timeframe. During a competition-tapering phase, frequency, like intensity, should remain relatively consistent, provided the athlete can manage it (with a maximum reduction of 15-20 per cent if necessary). For example, elite



athletes often undertake 10 or more training sessions per week, while others may train six or more sessions weekly. Reducing frequency by a couple of sessions may be more suitable for elite athletes than for those already training at lower frequencies.

Training age

Training age refers to the accumulation of training time over an athlete's career and is also considered a component in this tapering equation. It does not mean that athletes with low training ages are necessarily young athletes.

The fundamental idea is that greater training age generally produces better athletes compared to those with lower training ages. Here, chronological age is irrelevant.

A useful analogy is to compare two identical hypercars: one operating at 90-100 per cent capacity and the other at 40-50 per cent capacity. The car with higher work capacity places greater stress on its components than the lower-capacity car, resulting in significantly different performance. The higher-capacity car also requires more maintenance, recovery, and fuel to sustain its performance. The same principle applies when comparing elite athletes to novice athletes.

Athletes in their 20s who have trained for only a few months have a lower training age than a 19-year-old who has been training consistently for two to three years, despite being older chronologically. Athletes with lower training ages are more likely to be further from their genetic potential.

Type of athlete

Each athlete responds differently to volume, intensity, and frequency adjustments. While the general guidelines are suitable for most athletes, outliers may require tailored modifications to their tapering plans. Coaches must adjust these components based on individual needs. When is an athlete best positioned to achieve peak performance? If tapering begins too early, the athlete may peak prematurely, leading to a decline in performance. Conversely, if tapering begins too late, the athlete may still be fatigued, which can negatively impact performance.

Coaches and athletes should carefully determine the optimal timing for tapering, taking into account volume, frequency, and intensity, to ensure peak performance at the right time. Since every athlete is unique, it is essential for both coach and athlete to identify the combination that works best for them.

The right balance: If tapering begins too early, the athlete may peak prematurely, leading to a decline in performance. Conversely, if tapering begins too late, the athlete may still be fatigued, which can negatively impact performance. GETTY IMAGES

How 'Sportswashing' took over football

The story of modern football, **Miguel Delaney** tells us in his book *States of Play*, is how it has been distorted by three forces: geopolitics, western hyper-capitalism, and a willing facilitation by the game's authorities.

Suresh Menon

Time was when sport was seen as soft power, like movies and cultural exchange programmes. Not any more. As Miguel Delaney tells us in *States of Play*, the most significant recent book on sports (or indeed politics) football is hard power. Its world is ruled by kings, Presidents and Prime Ministers. It is an extraordinary story taking in the power shift from Europe to the Middle East from men in suits and varying accents to men in traditional Arab dress. It takes us from the time when sporting dictators, with their greed and ego paved the way to political dictators who use the sport for their ends. The subtitle of the book says it well: *How Sportswashing Took Over Football.*

Money matters: When Argentina won the 2022 World Cup, Lionel Messi, from Paris Saint-Germain, now owned by Qatar, had a *bisht* draped on his shoulders by the Emir. The symbolism was inescapable. AP

If the past was about rich men making themselves powerful, and powerful men making themselves rich, the future stated baldly is the Saudi goal "to buy football itself." How did Qatar get the 2022 World Cup, or Saudi Arabia the 2034 edition? The Qatar World Cup was "held for the planet's wealthiest people and made possible by the poorest". The right wasn't won with petty bribes, but with trade agreements, arms deals and high politics.

The story of modern football, Delaney tells us, is how it has been distorted by three forces: geopolitics, western hyper-capitalism, and a willing facilitation by the game's authorities. "It sucks up money from everywhere and redistributes it as narrowly as possible." The transfer market has been likened to the coffee industry, where wealthy countries earn from processing the raw material (the talent) rather than actually producing it. Businessmen from the U.S., for example, own some 60 clubs in Europe.

In 2008, Manchester City became the first state-owned club when Abu Dhabi (technically, the Abu Dhabi United Group) bought it. When Argentina won the 2022 World Cup, Lionel Messi, from Paris Saint-Germain, now owned by Qatar, had a *bisht* draped on his shoulders by the Emir. The symbolism was inescapable.

Money has skewed the market. It has taken the unpredictability out of results since only a handful of clubs have the resources to win major tournaments.

Messi was paid a 32 million-dollar signing fee by Barcelona and another 32 million annually. It meant that he had priced himself out of the market. Only state-owned teams could even afford him. When AC Milan paid a record 15 million dollars for Gianluigi Lentini, Pope John Paul II had called it "an offence against the dignity of work." That was in 1992. What would he have said about Neymar's three-year 320 million dollar deal?

There is too the blurring of the personality with the role — Sepp Blatter, FIFA president, said he was essentially a head of state and hoped to win the Nobel Peace Prize — an ambition current president Gianni Infantino shares. No player can match that level of ego.

All this, and we haven't even touched upon the corruption. Delaney doesn't miss anything, not even the rile among Messi-Neymar-Mbappe at PSG. 'Sportswashing' is properly defined, as is football, once regarded as the simplest of games.

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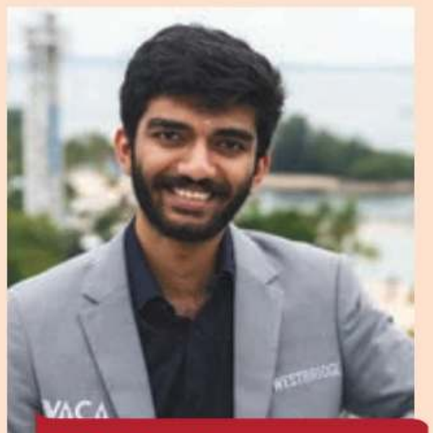

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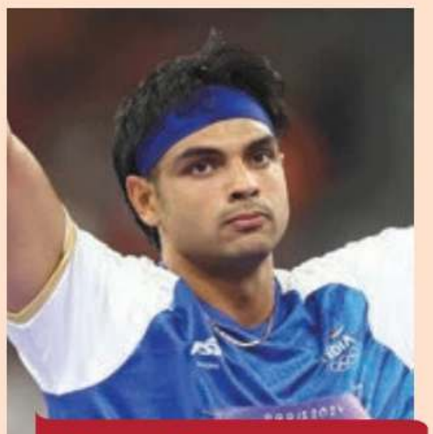
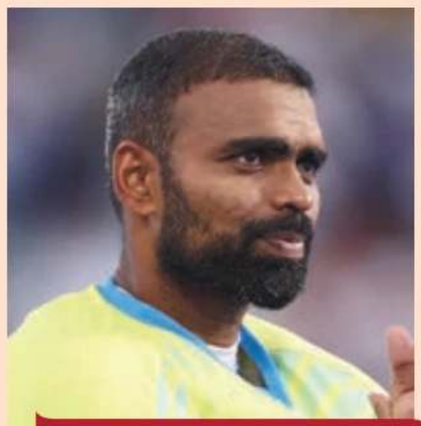


Neeraj Chopra
Athletics



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