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Women's World Cup

WORLD PARA ATHLETICS

Host India bags 22 medals

CHAMPION AMIDST CHAOS

The India-Pakistan Asia Cup final descended into commotion, leaving the champion trophyless and cricket diplomacy in tatters

From Ancient Roots to Next-Gen Moves

The Evolution of Kabaddi & its Attire

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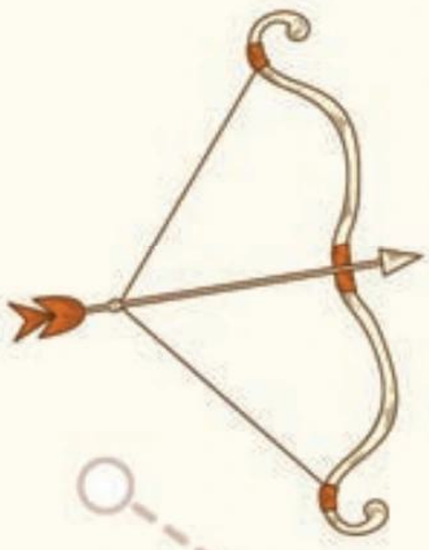

Vedic & Ancient Times

Kabaddi, celebrated as a game of spirit since the Mahabharata and Buddha era, was **originally played in loincloths or dhotis.**

1

1936 Berlin Olympics

For the first time, India's traditional sport enters the global stage with its Olympic debut, **marked by formalization and the adoption of simple cotton uniforms.**

2

1980–1990 Asian Games

3

The 1980 Asian Championship set the tone, and India's 1990 Gold in Beijing gave Kabaddi international legitimacy. **Standardized team uniforms with colours and numbers emerged then, though materials remained basic.**

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As the official kit partner of Dabang Delhi, TechnoSport redefines Kabaddi attire with next-gen activewear technology: UPF50+ sun protection, moisture-wicking fabric, 4-way stretch, and antibacterial comfort.

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2014 Pro Kabaddi League

PKL revolutionized the game, bringing Kabaddi to primetime TV. **Uniforms shifted to polyester and lycra athletic fits, and Kabaddi became India's second-most-watched league.**

TECHNOSPORT | #DeshkaActivewear

Information on the evolution of the Kabaddi attire is shared by, Joginder Narwal, Coach, Dabang Delhi KC

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HOST INDIA FINISHED WITH 22 MEDALS – SIX GOLD, NINE SILVER AND SEVEN BRONZE – AT THE PARA WORLDS

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OFF-SIDE

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THE FINE PRINT OF SPORT

In every game's **rulebook** lies a quiet theatre of absurdities — clauses that confuse, amuse, and occasionally decide history.

Sport showcases amazing feats, but often it is the footnotes — the arcane appendices of rulebooks — that steal the show. In cricket's 1981 underarm incident, Australian captain Greg Chappell asked his brother Trevor to roll the final ball, denying New Zealand the chance to hit a six. Legal at the time, it caused such outrage that the ICC soon banned underarm bowling.

At the 2025 Ryder Cup at Bethpage Black, Europe's Viktor Hovland withdrew from his singles match with a neck injury. The tournament's 'Envelope Rule' was invoked for just the third time since 1979. The rule allows each captain to secretly name one player who must sit out if an opponent falls ill or is injured. When Hovland withdrew, U.S. captain Keegan Bradley's sealed choice, Harris English, was benched, and the points were halved.

As Indians, we are still pained by Sachin Tendulkar's 1999 Adelaide LBW dismissal. Glenn McGrath's bouncer hit Tendulkar's shoulder as he ducked, yet umpire Daryl Harper raised his finger. Law 36.1.3 states: "the ball not having previously touched his/her bat, the striker intercepts the ball, either full-pitch or after pitching, with any part of his/her person." Any part being the operative phrase here, and McGrath, beneficiary of the law's largesse, later cheekily said: "Was it LBW? Should have been SBW – Shoulder Before Wicket."

The hat-fall rule in tennis is equally mischievous. It states that if a player's hat inadvertently falls off mid-rally, or a ball slips from a pocket, the point is replayed as it is deemed a "hindrance." The rule was invoked at the 2012 U.S. Open semifinals against Andy Murray when Tomas Berdych protested that he had been distracted by his opponent's cap blowing off. Though chair umpire Pascal Maria ruled play was complete when the cap came off, Murray agreed to replay the point.

This strict rule enforcement saw Serena Williams being penalised the previous year when she shouted, "Come on!" a split second early and lost a point for verbal hindrance in her final against Samantha Stosur. Needless to say, Serena did not greet the ruling with Murray's grace.

Chess, too, can be theatrical in its strictness. Magnus Carlsen was disqualified from the 2024 World Rapid & Blitz Championships for wearing jeans. FIDE's dress code deemed denim "unsuitable," and when Carlsen refused to change, he was fined USD 200 and told to sit out.

Sport's odd rules persist elsewhere as well. In American football, the fair catch free kick rule resurfaced in December 2024 when the Los Angeles Chargers scored one — the first successful attempt since 1976 — against the Denver Broncos. After a fair catch, a team may take an uncontested field goal from the spot.

These rules, tucked into the margins of sporting history, remind us how thin the line is between order and overreach. The beauty of sport lies not only in the backhands and buzzer-beaters, but in its quiet absurdities — forgotten clauses that often surface to confuse, amuse, and humble.

If sport mirrors life, these are its fine print — rarely read, occasionally enforced, but always capable of ruining a perfect day.

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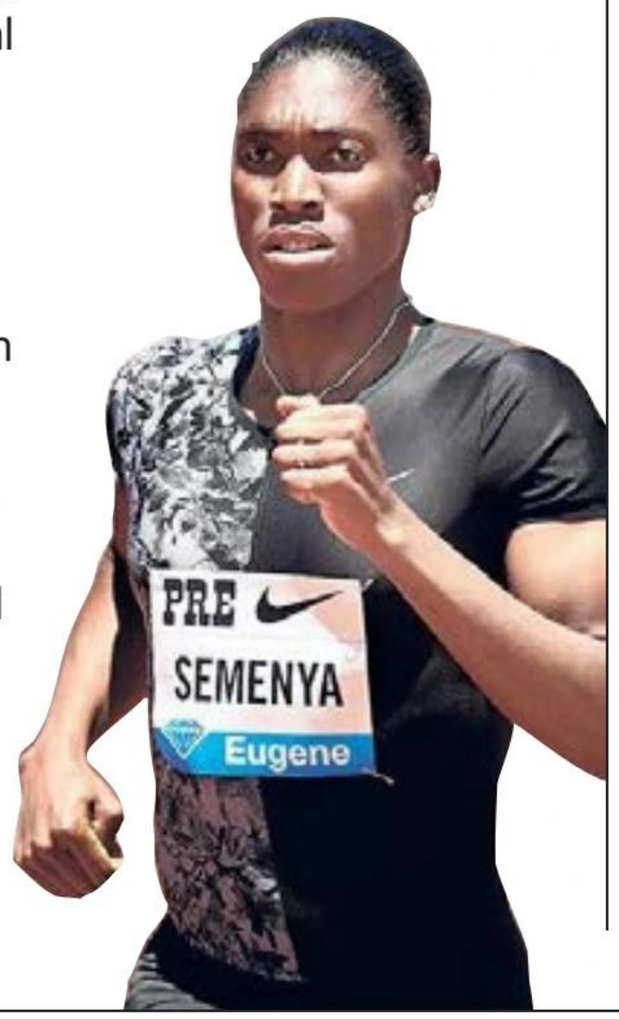
"I hate when it's the same. I know the tournament directors are going towards that direction." – Alexander Zverev, ranked third in the world behind Alcaraz and Sinner, accusing tennis authorities of favouring the top-ranked rivals in their choice of court surfaces

"I don't know yet how my career is going to look like in a couple of years. Maybe I will have to choose some tournaments and skip them, even though they are mandatory." – Six-time Grand Slam champion Iga Swiatek

7

Olympic champion runner Caster Semenya is ending a seven-year legal challenge against sex eligibility rules in track and field, her lawyers said, despite winning a ruling at the European Court of Human Rights in July that appeared to have reignited one of sports' most contentious cases. Patrick Bracher, a lawyer for Semenya, said in an email to The Associated Press that they wouldn't take her appeal back to the Swiss Supreme Court, which was an option and what many presumed to be Semenya's next step after the European rights court ruling.



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Former world No. 6 Gael Monfils, famed for his flair and athletic shot-making, has announced he will retire at the end of the 2026 tennis season. The 39-year-old Frenchman, who turned pro in 2004, has won 13 ATP titles and reached two Grand Slam semifinals — at Roland-Garros in 2008 and the US Open in 2016. In January, he became the oldest ATP champion in history by winning in Auckland at 38 years, 132 days, surpassing Roger Federer's record.

BACK-TO-BACK TITLES

Team Europe took the Ryder Cup back across the Atlantic Ocean, and left the Americans searching for answers in what is becoming a lopsided series. Luke Donald became the first European captain to win back-to-back in the Ryder Cup since Tony Jacklin in 1985 and 1987. He had 11 of the same 12 players who won big in Rome two years ago. AP

ASIA'S TITANS TAKE THE TABLE IN ODISHA

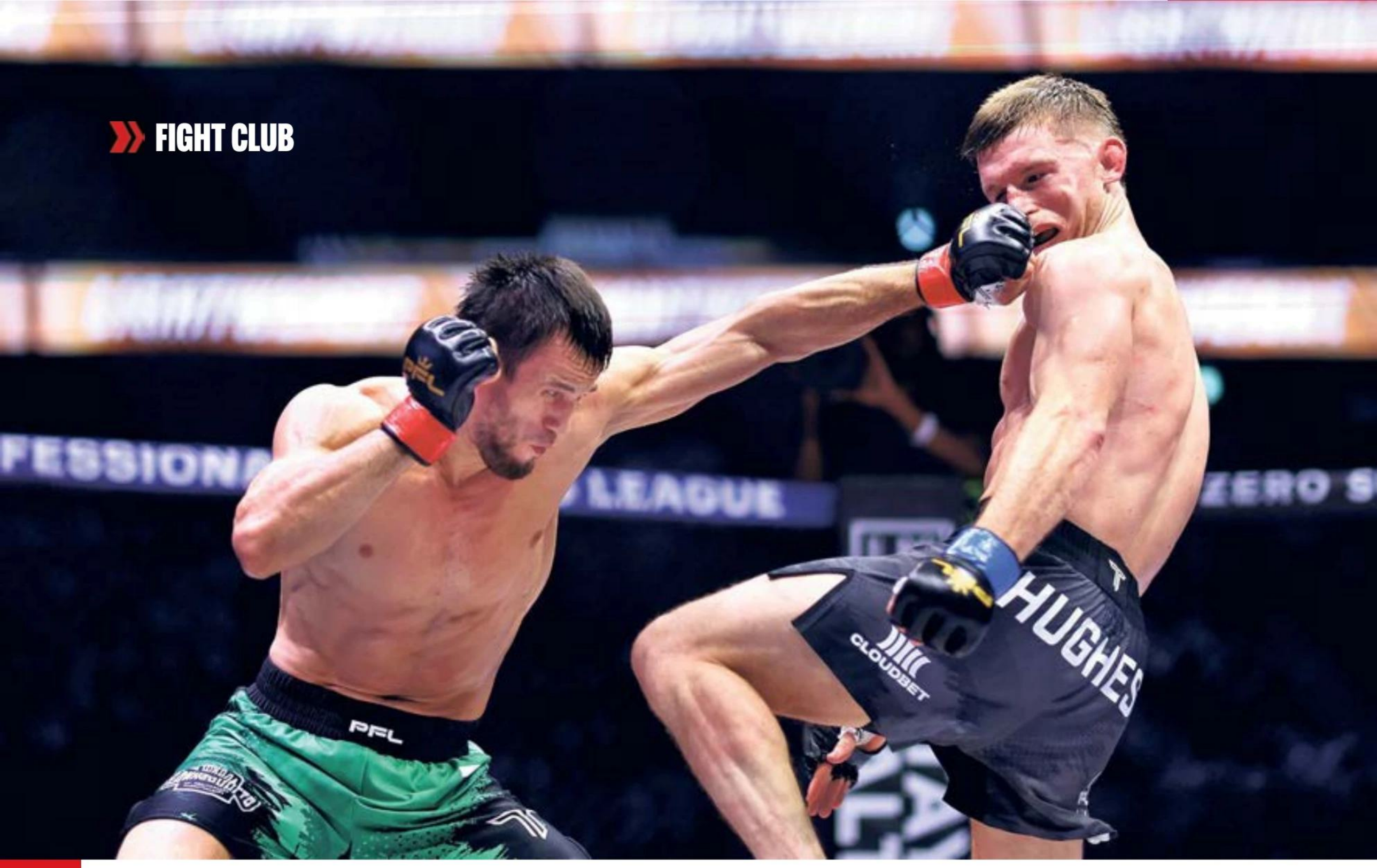
Odisha, traditionally celebrated for its rich tapestry of art, culture, and temples, is now emerging as India's premier sporting destination. The state is strategically investing in world-class infrastructure, athlete development, and hosting international events to transform into a global sporting hub.

Following the successful hosting of the World Athletics Continental Tour Bronze in August, Odisha is all set to have another landmark moment as it welcomes the 28th ITTF-ATTU Asian Table Tennis (Team) Championships 2025. The prestigious event will be held at the Kalinga Stadium from October 11 to 15. The championship, returning to India after 16 years, will bring together 22 nations, over 500 players and support staff, and top officials from the Asian Table Tennis Union (ATTU). Asian powerhouses China, Japan, and Korea will field their strong squads, while teams from Central, South-East, and West Asia compete for the 12 remaining continental qualification slots for the 2026 World Team Championships in London. India's men's and women's teams, having already secured qualification through last month's South Asian Regional Championships in Kathmandu, will witness intense competition for these coveted positions.

Adding prestige to the event, India's table tennis legend Padma Shri A. Sharath Kamal, a multiple Commonwealth, Asian Games medallist and Khel Ratna awardee, has been named Brand Ambassador. Sharath expressed his honor in promoting the championship, inspiring young athletes, and showcasing India's world-class sporting potential.

Highlighting Odisha's readiness, Sports Minister Shri Suryabanshi Suraj confirmed that world-class infrastructure, accommodation, hospitality, and security are in place. TTFI President Shri Kamlesh Mehta expressed confidence that Odisha would deliver a seamless championship, reinforcing the state's position as a premier global sporting destination. With the state also hosting the 40th National Junior Athletics Championships and the ITF Masters 100 Tennis Tournament, Odisha is demonstrating its unmatched capacity to stage multiple sports events simultaneously.

Hosting the 28th ITTF-ATTU Asian Table Tennis Championships in Bhubaneswar offers an opportunity to highlight both sporting excellence and organizational precision. Beyond demonstrating Odisha's passion for sports and world-class hospitality, the event serves as a platform to strengthen the state's sports ecosystem and inspire the next generation with the right kind of exposure. The tournament underscores Odisha's emergence as a prominent venue for international events, reflecting the state's dedication in nurturing talent, delivering world-class infrastructure, and fostering the growth of sports at every level.



Calculated dominance: Usman Nurmagomedov controls the pace from the opening bell, showcasing the suffocating precision that defines Dagestan's fighting lineage. GETTY IMAGES

Bloodline of pressure, blueprint of perfection

Usman Nurmagomedov's clinical control and Alex Pereira's brutal artistry showcase two ends of the fighting spectrum — the **method and the madness** behind MMA mastery.

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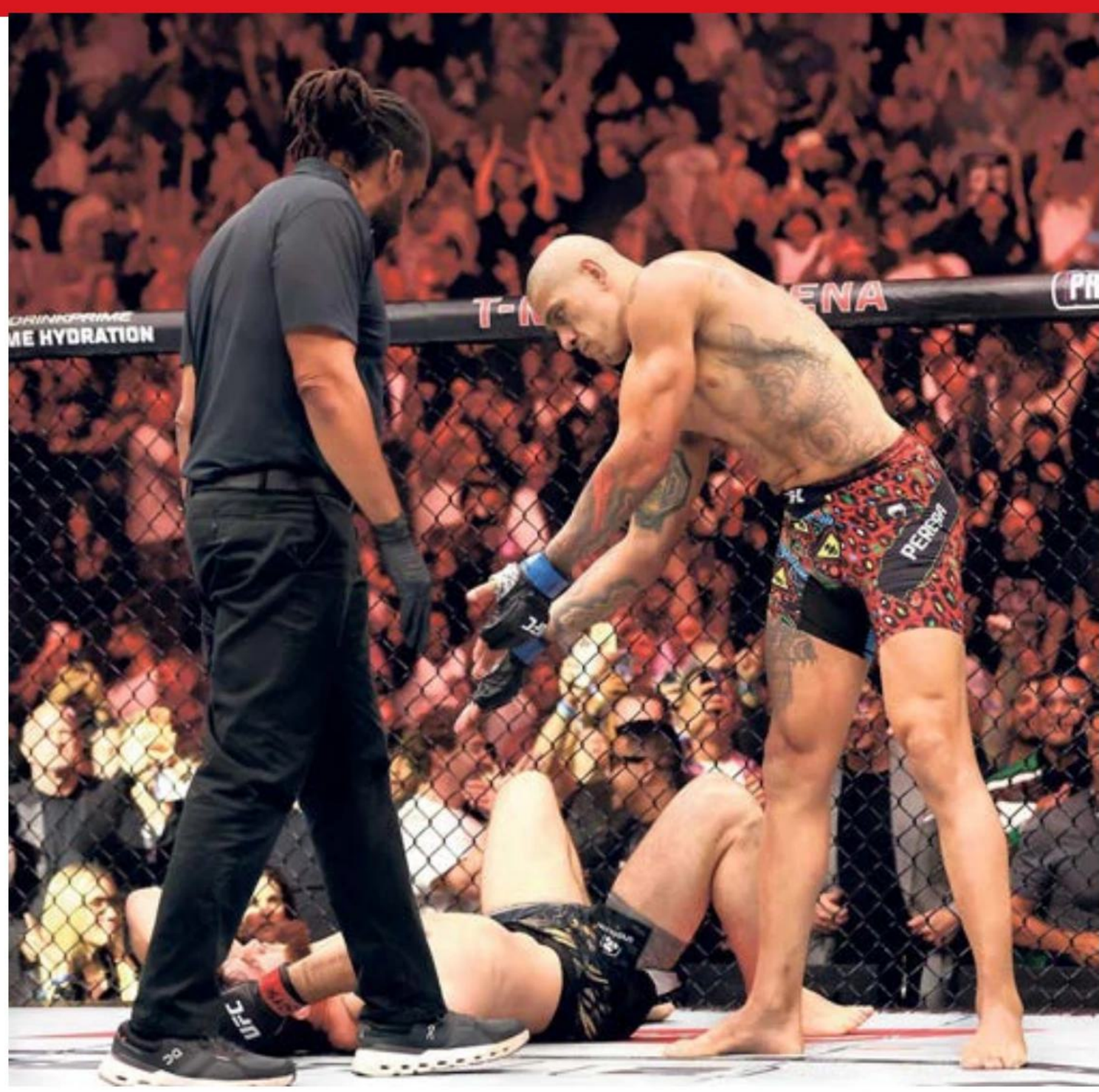
Usman Nurmagomedov officially stepped out of his cousin Khabib's shadow and into the limelight, delivering a masterful performance against Paul Hughes to claim the Professional Fighters League (PFL) Lightweight World Championship.

Under the tutelage of the late Abdulmanap Nurmagomedov and Khabib, himself a retired, undefeated lightweight champion, Usman has been turning heads since his Bellator debut in 2021.

His latest victory was less a contest and more a calculated dismantling of a seasoned opponent, reaffirming that he is a generational talent in his own right. From the opening bell, Usman dictated the tempo, applying the suffocating pressure that has become the hallmark of the Dagestani fighting style. Hughes landed a few sharp strikes in the stand-up exchanges, but Usman's



Brutal artistry: Alex "Poatan" Pereira of Brazil towers over Magomed Ankalaev after a thunderous opening-round assault in their light heavyweight title rematch at UFC 320 in Las Vegas. GETTY IMAGES

fluid stance switches and crisp counterstrikes seamlessly set up his grappling entries.

Once the fight went to the mat, the outcome was effectively sealed. Usman imposed relentless top control, repeatedly taking the back, threatening submissions, and nullifying Hughes' offence while steadily accumulating points through positional dominance.

The win underscored what many already believe: the Nurmagomedov dynasty remains the gold standard for control-based mixed martial arts.

At 27, Usman has already reached the summit of a major promotion. His championship campaign, capped by this dominant finals performance, suggests that he is only beginning to explore the limits of his frightening potential.

King, yet again

Alex "Poatan" Pereira reaffirmed his status as an MMA legend at UFC 320, stopping defending champion Magomed Ankalaev with a stunning first-round TKO (Technical Knockout) just one minute and 20 seconds into the fight. The win not only reclaimed the UFC Light Heavyweight Championship but also served as a brutally efficient statement from the Brazilian striker.

From the opening exchange, Pereira closed the distance with his trademark forward pressure. The decisive moment came when a thunderous overhand right crashed into Ankalaev's temple, leaving him reeling. In a desperate attempt to recover, Ankalaev shot for a takedown — a catastrophic decision against a striker of Pereira's calibre.

Pereira sprawled easily, kept the fight standing, and unleashed a barrage of hammer fists and elbows until the referee stepped in to halt the bout at the 1:20 mark.

The short, violent display earned "Poatan" his third UFC title, making him only the third fighter in history to capture the light heavyweight belt twice.

Did you know?

The fastest finish in UFC history came in just five seconds — a jaw-dropping knockout delivered by Jorge "Gamebred" Masvidal against the previously undefeated Olympian and former world champion Ben Askren.

The iconic moment unfolded at UFC 239 on July 6, 2019. Known for his relentless wrestling, Askren rushed forward for a takedown the instant the bell rang. Masvidal, anticipating the move with uncanny precision, sprinted across the Octagon and met him mid-cage with a flying knee that landed flush on Askren's head. The impact was instantaneous. Askren collapsed, unconscious, before he hit the canvas.

The five-second finish didn't just set a record — it redefined one. Masvidal shattered the 13-year-old mark (previously six seconds) and etched his name into UFC folklore. The knockout became one of the most replayed highlights in combat sports history, transforming Masvidal into a global superstar and serving as a vivid reminder that in the Octagon, a single, perfectly timed strike can change everything.

A REHEARSAL STAGED ON THE WRONG SET

INDIA'S NINTH ASIA CUP CROWN OFFERED DOMINANCE WITHOUT A TRUE TEST, WITH SLUGGISH UAE PITCHES AND FALTERING RIVALS PROVIDING LITTLE REHEARSAL FOR THE FLAT TRACKS AND STRONGER OPPOSITION AWAITING AT THE T20 WORLD CUP.

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The Asia Cup is not an end in itself. With the biennial continental event alternating between formats since 2016, it now serves as a dress rehearsal for teams to fine-tune their combinations ahead of a major International Cricket Council (ICC) event. For Suryakumar Yadav and Co., it was an opportunity to test a young side and its high-intent approach in the cauldron of a multi-team tournament ahead of India's T20 World Cup defence at home early next year.

A dry run is most effective when it closely mirrors the conditions of the event one is preparing for, and the Asia Cup in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was a far cry in that regard. The sluggish pitches and subcontinental teams that are struggling to adapt to an aggressive brand of batting didn't reflect the flat decks and sterner opposition the Men in Blue are likely to be confronted with at next year's showpiece.

India clinched a record-extending ninth Asia Cup title, edging Pakistan in a tense final in Dubai, and had to dig deep in its last three matches in the tournament. However, it was a test of character and temperament rather than of skill and strategy.

That it remained unbeaten through seven matches in the tournament despite being far from perfect in five of those reflected the gulf between India and the other teams, and the sub-standard quality of cricket overall.

Abhishek Sharma, the tournament's top scorer, with 314

runs at a strike rate of 200, transcended the bowling-friendly conditions to emerge as a cut above the rest. But the swashbuckling left-hander's brilliance was a double-edged sword in some ways, as it glossed over India's middle-order muddle.

In a batting lineup already disrupted after Shubman Gill's return to the format, which resulted in Sanju Samson's demotion, the team management's emphasis on flexibility added to the confusion.

Flexibility or confusion?

Samson was promoted to No. 3 against Oman due to a lack of crease time, batted at No. 5 three times in the tournament, but was inexplicably pushed down to No. 8, below Axar Patel, against Bangladesh. Suryakumar, who dropped himself to No. 11 against Oman to give his teammates batting practice, in hindsight needed time in the middle more than anyone after a woeful run of form, which saw the skipper eke out 72 runs in six innings at an average of 18.

The move to bump up Shivam Dube at No. 3 to counter Bangladesh's spinners didn't reap rewards, and Abhishek's departure in the 12th over in that game resulted in a spectacular slowdown, with only 56 runs coming in the remaining 53 balls.

Abhishek almost single-handedly carried India's batting on his young shoulders, until Tilak Varma and Dube stepped up in the final. Tilak, though, didn't bat at his preferred No. 3 spot even once, although he has two T20I hundreds in the past year in that position.

Depth vs specialists

Despite the musical chairs with the middle order, India was unscathed in the Asia Cup. However, the likes of England, Australia and South Africa may not offer room for similar experimentation at the T20 World

Top Run-Scorers

Abhishek Sharma (India) — 314 runs in 7 matches | SR: 200.00
Pathum Nissanka (Sri Lanka) — 261 runs in 6 matches | SR: 160.12
Sahibzada Farhan (Pakistan) — 217 runs in 7 matches | SR: 116.04
Tilak Varma (India) — 213 runs in 7 matches | SR: 131.48
Fakhar Zaman (Pakistan) — 181 runs in 7 matches | SR: 120.66

Purple patch: Abhishek finished as the Asia Cup's leading run-scorer, amassing 314 runs in seven innings, highlighted by three consecutive half-centuries before the final. AP

Middle-muddle: From No. 3 to No. 8, Samson's unsettled slots mirrored the confusion in India's batting order. AP

Cup. While flexibility is a fail-safe in times of crisis, it has its pitfalls when it becomes the norm.

There are still some openings in this T20I team. Gill had an underwhelming tournament with the bat, and Yashasvi Jaiswal will be breathing down his Test skipper's neck soon. Samson has appeared scratchy in the middle overs, and if his power-hitting ability is not optimally used in the PowerPlay, Jitesh Sharma, who warmed the bench throughout the competition, is a promising prospect as a lower-order finisher.

India's predilection for batting depth in recent years across formats has come at the cost of a specialist bowler. An all-rounder has been slotted in at No. 8 in 13 out of the 17 games where India's batting has been stretched that far since the start of 2024.

With the unimpeachable Jasprit Bumrah and the menacing spin duo of Kuldeep Yadav and Varun Chakaravarthy being automatic picks, India's highest wicket-taker in T20Is, Arshdeep Singh, had to sit out for five matches at the Asia Cup. The inclusion of Hardik Pandya, Dube and Axar in the top eight meant that India still had at least six viable bowling options, but that strategy is fraught with risk, particularly on flatter surfaces.

Hardik took on the mantle of the second seamer, while Dube stepped into his breach in the all-important final and even took the new ball. Dube, admittedly, has come a long way from just being a dibbly-dobbly slow-medium seam option. He bent his back more during the Asia Cup, consistently clocked in the mid-130s [kmph], and delivered two crucial performances with the ball against Pakistan, including in the summit clash.

Bumrah's burden

However, the punt on Dube's bowling could be hazardous against more attacking batting. Moreover, if India employs three of Bumrah's overs in the PowerPlay, like it did in four of the five matches he played in the Asia Cup, the absence of a second specialist seamer could hurt the team at the death. Hardik and Dube were India's most profligate bowlers in the last five overs during the Asia Cup, conceding 12 and 13.50 runs an over, respectively. In dewy conditions, the spinners are also risky options in the late overs. The team needs more flexibility and depth on the bowling front.

As the margin of error reduces on batting-friendly pitches back home,

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Out of runs: Suryakumar Yadav endured a lean Asia Cup with the bat, managing only 72 runs in seven innings despite an unbeaten 47 against Pakistan earlier in the competition. AFP

Spinning a web: Kuldeep Yadav has now claimed 36 wickets across ODI and T20 Asia Cups — the most by any bowler, surpassing Lasith Malinga's 33. Seventeen came in this edition's T20s, the joint-most in the tournament's history. AP

certain conditions and oppositions may warrant the inclusion of a second full-time seamer to accompany Bumrah. The team management shouldn't be averse to sacrificing batting depth in exchange for a more well-rounded and attacking bowling combination. For this team, a batter or an all-rounder at No. 8 has been more about mental assurance than substantive impact. Given India's strong batting, the No. 8 batter has faced fewer than three balls per innings on average since 2024.

An imperfect Indian team was still too good, and the mood music surrounding the tournament almost fatalistically veered towards determining 'Asia's second-best team'. It was a tag that was passed around over the course of three weeks, from Afghanistan to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, before a mercurial Pakistan reached the final.

They all attempted to shape themselves in the image of India's belligerence, with varying degrees of success. Pakistan often failed to maintain a bright start after 10 overs, and Bangladesh's batters took aggressive batting to an illogical extreme when they bungled a 136-run chase against Salman Agha's men. Sri Lanka's tryst with collapses continued, and Afghanistan lacked the resources to pursue high-risk cricket. For India, it was a stepping stone towards bigger honours.

Top Wicket-Takers

Kuldeep Yadav (India) — 17 wickets in 7 matches | Ave: 9.29

Shaheen Shah Afridi (Pakistan) — 10 wickets in 7 matches | Ave: 16.40

Junaid Siddique (UAE) — 9 wickets in 3 matches | Ave: 6.33

Mustafizur Rahman (Bangladesh) — 9 wickets in 6 matches | Ave: 19.00

Haris Rauf (Pakistan) — 9 wickets in 5 matches | Ave: 18.33

1st

Through the gate: Pakistan's Abrar Ahmed dismissed Sri Lanka all-rounder Wanindu Hasaranga, beating his attempted sweep. Hasaranga didn't take kindly to Abrar mimicking his wicket celebration and delivered a riposte of his own in the following innings. Pakistan had the last laugh, winning the match by five wickets. AFP

2nd

Sloppy hands: India was guilty of dropping five catches in its Super Fours game against Bangladesh, having also put down four chances in its previous encounter against Pakistan. However, it didn't prove too costly in the end, as the team defeated the Bangla Tigers by 41 runs. AP

Beguiled: Bangladesh's Tanzim Hasan Sakib was deceived by a slower delivery from Haris Rauf in the sides' do-or-die Super Fours clash. Despite restricting the opposition to a below-par 135 for eight, the Tigers fell short of the target. AFP

Majestic: India opener Abhishek Sharma holds the pose after lofting one down the ground against Sri Lanka. The left-hander notched up his third consecutive half-century of the Asia Cup, guiding India to 202 for five. AP

Neck and neck: Sri Lanka's Dasun Shanaka puts in a dive at the striker's end after completing two runs off the final ball of the innings to force a tie — and a Super Over — against India. The all-rounder smashed 22 off 11 balls, including a six and two fours. India eventually won the Super Over. AP

6th

Spin dominance: Left-arm spinner Kuldeep Yadav (4/30) and some reckless strokes triggered a collapse as Pakistan lost its last nine wickets for just 33 runs, folding for 146 with five balls remaining. AP

FOR MORE IMAGES

7th

Coming up clutch: Tilak Varma guided India to a tense five-wicket win over Pakistan in the Asia Cup 2025 final. The Hyderabad batter remained unbeaten on 69 off 53 balls after India had slipped to 20 for three in the third over. AFP

Imagined glory: India's captain Suryakumar Yadav lifts an imaginary trophy as his teammates celebrate a surreal Asia Cup triumph in Dubai — a victory without silverware but not without symbolism. AFP

In search of a trophy, and perhaps of cricket itself

The Asia Cup final between India and Pakistan **ended in confusion and conflict,** with the champion denied its trophy and cricket diplomacy taking another hit.

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The most common grouse against cricket levelled by those who are not besotted by its nuances and vagaries is the amount of time the sport takes up. Even its shortest variant lasts between three and a half to four hours. The chaos that roiled after the Asia Cup final between India and Pakistan in Dubai didn't help its case.

After much uncertainty and confusion, the victorious Indian team celebrated with an imaginary trophy in front of a handful of fans. Almost 90 minutes had elapsed between the last ball of the tournament and the Men in Blue's strut onto the podium. An entire football match could have been wedged in between. By the end of it all, even the journalists, who latch onto the slightest whiff of a sensational headline, were irritable. Their frustration spilled over into the post-match press conferences, which extended well beyond midnight.

An ill-tempered Pakistani journalist questioned skipper Suryakumar Yadav's 'poor behaviour' throughout the tournament. At the same time, his Indian counterpart grilled Salman Agha about his views on the deserving champion being denied

the trophy. The thread of solidarity that had bound the scribes over three weeks was frayed. One wondered whether things would ever be the same.

On either side of a pulsating finale, both captains had signalled the onset of unprecedented times.

"I have been playing cricket since 2007, when I played at the Under-16 level. I have never seen two teams not shaking hands," Agha had lamented about the Indian team's decision not to shake hands with their Pakistani counterparts ahead of the final.

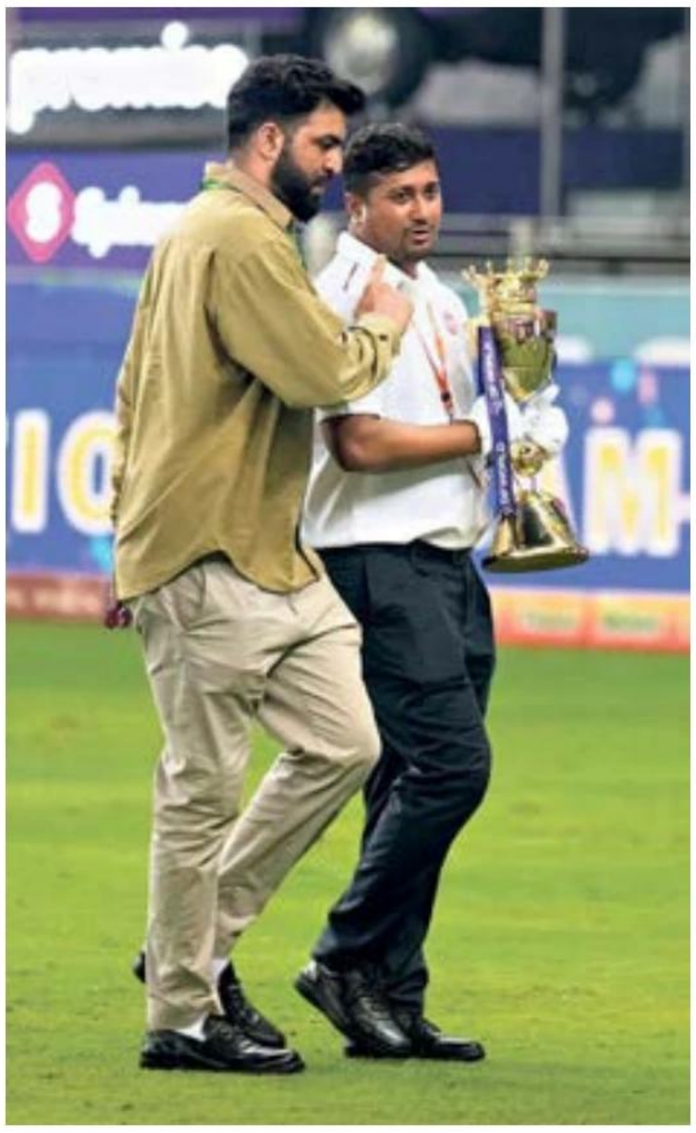
"This is one thing which I have never seen since I started playing and following cricket. That a champion team is denied a trophy, and a hard-earned one at that," Suryakumar quipped after his team refused to receive the silverware from Asian Cricket Council (ACC) president Mohsin Naqvi, who also serves as Pakistan's Interior Minister and chairman of the country's cricket board.

The myth of cricket diplomacy had sunk deeper into the quicksand of conflicts of interest and the competing claims of politics and sport. The on-field visuals after the final were equally jarring. The victorious Indians were made to wait and eventually denied what was rightfully theirs. The Pakistani players were locked up inside their dressing room for almost an hour and were greeted with raucous boos when they eventually trudged onto the field to grudgingly accept their runner-up medals. A vain Naqvi and other dignitaries cluelessly stood on the dais for half an hour. In between, the trophy was promptly whisked off the field. The scenes were so unedifying that the broadcaster, who had paid millions to grab the eyeballs of a billion viewers, thought it better to keep the camera singularly focused on a portion of an empty stand.

It is at times such as these when one questions the tangibility of sporting success. Was India any less of a champion side because it was prevented from laying hands on the trophy? Surely not. Suryakumar had referred to all 14 squad members and support staff as trophies. Had Pakistan found solace in not seeing its nemesis lift the prize? Agha's dejection indicated it hadn't. But was cricket the casualty in the ensuing melee between the neighbours? Perhaps, yes.

Waiting game: Pakistan's players stayed in the dressing room for nearly an hour before emerging to loud boos to collect their runner-up medals. AFP

The events that transpired, or those that didn't, after the summit clash were, in some ways, a microcosm of the protracted hostilities between the countries. Inconclusive deliberations, an abrupt provocation, a measured retaliation, and a period of uneasy calm, with no end in sight.



Pandemonium: Officials quietly cleared the podium as the winner's trophy was whisked away after India's triumph over Pakistan in the Asia Cup final, leaving the champion to celebrate an invisible prize amid confusion and delay. AP

The fate of the continental tournament, which feeds off the rivalry between the countries, was in a similar limbo. The status quo wasn't favourable to another India versus Pakistan skirmish on the cricket field. Scribes of a certain vintage from both countries recognised this reality as they reminisced about their tours across the border.

Their anecdotes were invariably punctuated by a sigh, "But things were different then." The younger crop leant in closely to lend a keen ear to whispers of a bygone era that may never return.

The dust was yet to settle, and the case of the missing trophy was still unresolved. But as that night's manic events wound to a close, a temporary truce was struck as a Pakistani taxi driver's earnest proclamation rent the air: "You know, most of my friends are Indians."

It had been an unusually long day, even by the standards of cricket, and this reporter could only offer an uncertain smile of acknowledgement. He would never know.

Marufa Akter: "It's me vs me, not me vs others"

At 20, Marufa Akter is turning heads with her speed and swing. Here's how Bangladesh's **pace prodigy** came to be.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan
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In the months leading up to the Women's ODI World Cup, co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka, Bangladesh pacer Marufa Akter could think of little else but her debut on the grand stage.

"I always thinking, when I'm sleeping, always I'm thinking, first match, I do better. Always, I am the match winner (sic)," she said after helping her side to a cherished win against Pakistan in the campaign opener in Colombo.

The joy of a job well done was written all over her face. The only pacer selected in a lineup packed with spinners — built to suit the

expectedly slow surface at the R. Premadasa Stadium — the 20-year-old proved that one can be enough when that one is Marufa: fast, strong, light on her feet, and capable of drawing out prodigious swing.

A fan of Australian great Mitchell Starc, Marufa has chosen a fitting role model. Her inswingers to right-handers left Pakistan gasping when she removed Omaima Sohail and the in-form Sidra Amin off successive deliveries, reducing them to ruins in the very first over. The effort drew praise from several leading voices in world cricket, including Sri Lankan legend Lasith Malinga, who posted a clip of her twin strikes with the words: "Pure skill, excellent control. So far, the best delivery in this tournament."

It brought back memories of another two-in-two she produced against Sri Lanka at the 2023 T20 World Cup in South Africa, when she dismissed Vishmi Gunaratna and Anushka Sanjeewani to jolt the chase. That came after removing Chamari Athapaththu in her previous over. She took all three wickets to fall that day, though Bangladesh still fell short.

A more emphatic demonstration of her talent came in Bangladesh's first-ever ODI win over India in 2023, when she returned figures of four for 29, dismissing Smriti Mandhana, Priya Punia, Amanjot Kaur, and Sneh Rana to seal a famous victory.

Smriti, ever generous in praise, said later: "It doesn't matter what her age is. The kind of effort she is putting in the field, just to watch her with the kind of fire she has in her to be a good cricketer, has been just amazing. Her ball skids a bit more than we expect from her release point. These sorts of wickets (low and slow in Dhaka) aren't helping her much. We'll have to see what she does in England and Australia."

Building power

Back then, Marufa was a wiry teenager who roared at every wicket and hurled herself at the ball in the field. The passion remains, but the foundation has strengthened — built on structured fitness and power training, and technical refinement. That shift came under the guidance of Bangladesh's former strength and conditioning coach Ian Durrant.

"Earlier, I used to bench press 25–30kg. Now I do around 42–44kg, and squats with 30–35kg have now gone up to 60kg," an excited Marufa said in a video shared by the Bangladesh Cricket Board.

She also studies strength in others, taking a particular liking to Pakistan's Diana Baig.

"Her arm is very strong. I love her swing; she can do inswing and outswing," Marufa said after their tussle in Colombo.

The young pacer made a strong early impression, finishing as Bangladesh's top wicket-taker at the 2023 U-19 T20 World Cup and putting in notable performances at the 2022 Asian Games. Captain Nigar Sultana Joty, who has watched her evolution from behind the stumps, has been among her keenest observers.

"Initially, she didn't think much about her bowling and other elements. I used to be the one helping her with her plans. She has matured since. She now thinks about her own bowling strategy and about her plans in the death, how she needs to attack a left-hander or a good slogger who can find the boundary," Joty told *Sportstar*.

Joty knows the difficulty of keeping that spark alive when everyone wants to refine you.

"We have not seen this sort of player in our country for a long time. She is unique and very special. She is a very hardworking player as well. Her action is different. In Bangladesh, we don't have a player like this who can bowl with the kind of speed she has and manage that kind of swing. She has worked with so many coaches in the past few years now, but the good thing is that they have all let her stay true to her game. They are only polishing what she already is."

From one field to another

There was a time when Marufa's current life seemed a distant dream. Around the pandemic, videos shared by cricketer-turned-coach Arifa Jahan Bithi — who runs Bangladesh's first and only academy for girls, the *Women's Dreamer Cricket Academy*

FOR MORE STORIES

For a simple farming family surviving on leased land, Marufa's rise has been life-changing. But what means most to her is the shift in her father's outlook.

Rooted rise: Once she tilled the fields alongside her father. Now Marufa ploughs through batting line-ups with pace and swing.
ARIFA JAHAN BITHI/FACEBOOK

Shared triumph: Arifa Jahan Bithi, who first spotted Marufa's spark in Rangpur, shares a proud smile with Bangladesh's rising pace star.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

in Rangpur — brought Marufa into national focus.

In one of them, wearing a yellow puffer jacket, Marufa and her father are seen ploughing their paddy field. By then she had already been scouted, but the pandemic halted training and funding, threatening to end her career even before it began. Though Arifa never formally trained her, she has remained a constant supporter and sounding board.

Arifa trains over 350 girls across various age groups and knows firsthand how rare a talent like Marufa is.

"Marufa has a background of working very hard in the fields since childhood. She is a good athlete, a natural athlete, and that amount of hard work is normal for people like her and has held her in good standing. Watching her remove those two batters in the first over gave me goosebumps. That kind of pace bowling I have not seen from a player from this nation," she told *Sportstar*.

For a simple farming family surviving on leased land, Marufa's rise has been life-changing. But what means most to her is the shift in her father's outlook. "My family was not very supportive because my father is a farmer, so he wanted me to get a normal job. But day by day, when I started doing well, my family started supporting me very much," she had said earlier, with Joty translating for her.

The league life

From being spotted by Mohammedan Sporting Club at a trial aged 15 and joining the *Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protishtan* to becoming the national team's pace spearhead, Marufa's journey has been as fulfilling to watch as it has been to live.

Once a shy teenager who poured all her energy into cricket, negotiating savings and societal expectations to make accommodations for her dream, she is now an assured, smiling competitor who needs no translator, delivers sharp one-liners, and relishes taking on the biggest names in the game.

When asked if she wanted to feature in leagues such as the Women's Premier League (WPL) or the Women's Big Bash League (WBBL), Marufa turned uncertainly to the media manager beside her, who steered clear of franchise talk.

Whether she's ready for that leap or not, those who have seen her bowl believe the step is only a matter of time.

"I think Marufa's talent should travel to the WPL and WBBL. There are very few players in this franchise circuit from Bangladesh. We've had Rumana Ahmed and Jahanara Alam feature abroad, but if more girls find opportunities, it will inspire the rest," Arifa said.

"How she started in this World Cup will and should attract franchises," Joty added. "This way, she will get more exposure in the sport. But right now, she should focus on the World Cup. She needs to take care of building strength physically and mentally. She's very young and has a unique action. She needs things to be done to be ready for cricket on that level."

For now, Marufa's mantra stays simple. "It's always me vs me and not me vs others," she said — a gentle warning to those yet to face her in the World Cup.

The cricketing world, for one, can't wait.

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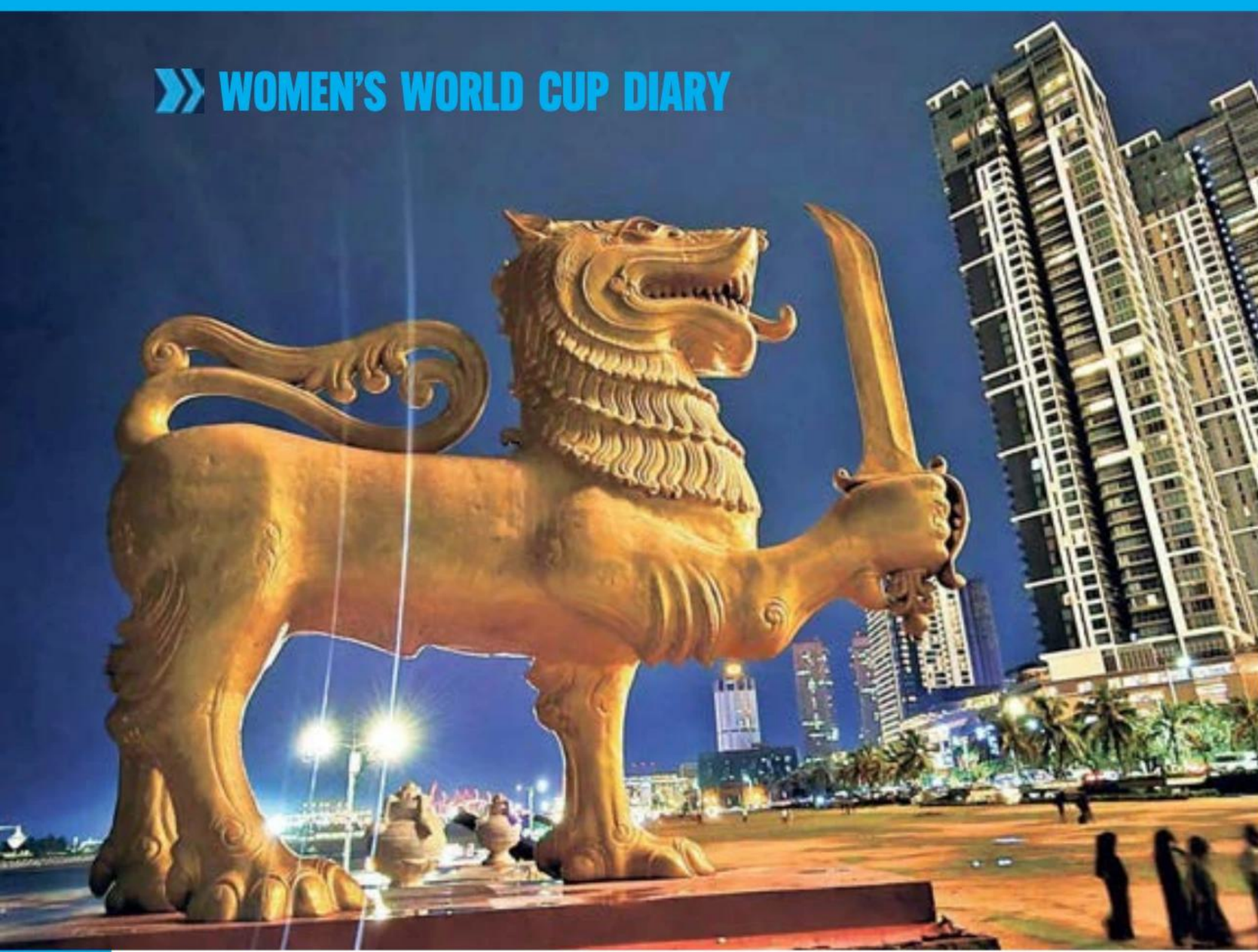

Much-needed break: A moment of calm by the sea — Galle Face after the rains, where the Diary traded deadlines for sea breeze and quiet reflection. LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

Stadium symphony: From Tamil beats to Sinhala hits, the stands swayed in unison as Colombo found its festive rhythm under the floodlights. LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

Between overs and oceans

On the road with cricket's **grand carnival** — our team brings you scenes from across the Women's World Cup.

Cricket-loving locals in Sri Lanka found themselves in a mild dilemma as the Women's World Cup made its debut on Lankan soil. With every match scheduled at Colombo's R. Premadasa Stadium, opinions were split — delight at seeing a 'major' venue added to the roster, unlike India's tier-2 picks, mixed with unease about how a 40,000-seater would look if the crowds stayed away.

"Dambulla or Pallekele are better venues for women's cricket. The Asia Cup, which Sri Lanka won last year, drew great crowds in Dambulla. But Colombo is the logistically convenient option for a multi-team event," said local reporters during the Pakistan–Bangladesh game, played before sparse stands.

Glitchy promotions weren't the Diary's only worry. A motherboard failure in its work laptop sparked panic on the eve of the India–Pakistan clash — a crisis conveniently averted when rain washed out play, offering time to hunt down a fix. The downpour also cooled Colombo enough for an evening escape to Galle Face, where a coffee-less cold coffee and a quick lesson in Dutch history proved unexpectedly restorative.

At the India–Pakistan game, experience depended on one's seat. While 'gesture-watch' animated the press box, the stands offered unfiltered joy — neutral fans dancing to Tamil, Hindi, and Sinhala tunes, joined by academy kids and expats. A mid-innings Emirates cabin-crew performance drew laughter and applause. For once, the noise around cricket was just that — noise, not controversy.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

Festive lights, heavy hearts

The emotions were mixed ahead of the World Cup's opening match in Guwahati. There was the excitement of hosting the biggest event in women's cricket, and the city was alive with Durga Puja celebrations. Yet, beneath the festive mood lay a

Net reward: Assam's Siddhartha Das with the gloves gifted by South Africa skipper Laura Wolvaardt — a keepsake from a memorable net session at Barsapara Stadium.

P. K. AJITH KUMAR

Revelry: Dancers whirl in rhythm at the Taal Garba Mahotsav in Indore, their synchronised steps capturing the city's festive pulse on a night when cricket met celebration.

SANKAR NARAYANAN E.H.

deep sense of mourning. Assam was grieving the tragic death of Zubeen Garg, who drowned while swimming in Singapore. One of the state's greatest cultural icons, Garg had become a household name across India with his hit song *Ya Ali* from the 2006 Bollywood film *Gangster*.

His smiling face looked down from billboards all over Guwahati, and his music echoed in the tributes paid at the World Cup's inaugural ceremony, held shortly before India's opening match against Sri Lanka. Among the performers was Shreya Ghoshal, whose voice carried a fitting note of remembrance.

***

Siddhartha Das was in for a surprise after finishing his net session at Guwahati's Barsapara Cricket Stadium, where he had been bowling to the South African batters. A member of the visiting support staff approached him and handed over a pair of batting gloves.

It was a gift from South Africa captain Laura Wolvaardt to Siddhartha, who had bowled some 50 deliveries to her as she prepared to face England's spinners. "I have enjoyed watching her on TV," said Siddhartha, a left-arm spinner and trainee at the Assam Cricket Association Academy. "She played a lot of cover drives and straight drives against me. And, of course, I am delighted that she has given me a pair of her gloves."

***

In the early days of the World Cup, a cab driver in Guwahati brought up India's opening match against Sri Lanka. "India would have been in big trouble but for Deepti Sharma's innings," said Sajeevan, a driver from Kerala, referring to the off-spinning all-rounder's rescue act with Amanjot Kaur that took India from a precarious 124 for six to what would become a match-winning total.

Listening to him brought to mind an interview with Smriti Mandhana in Jaipur about six years ago. The elegant opener had said, "Earlier, people would say that the off-spinner bowled well. Now they say Deepti Sharma bowled well."

P. K. Ajith Kumar

Garba night with a twist

A trip to Indore, set against the backdrop of Navratri, offered the perfect opportunity for the Diary to witness its first Garba celebration, and it proved a memorable one.

A hesitant enquiry by this reporter, on the eve of the Women's ODI World Cup match between Australia and New Zealand at the Holkar Stadium, was all it took for the venue manager and a few local journalists to make some calls and secure a ticket.

The destination was the *Taal Garba Mahotsav*, held at a school sports complex just across the street.

As the night wore on and the tempo of the synchronised steps quickened, the synergy and energy in the performance evoked amusement and wide-eyed wonder.

Madhya Pradesh's very own and Kolkata Knight Riders all-rounder Venkatesh Iyer making his way to the dais to give away the prizes was a delightful surprise that capped off the night for the Diary.

Sankar Narayanan E.H.

1st

Celebrating pioneers: In a tribute to the trailblazers of Indian women's cricket, the BCCI honoured all former India Women's captains since 1975 at the inaugural festivities of the ICC Women's ODI World Cup 2025 in Guwahati. RITU RAJ KONWAR

2nd

Vital runs: Amanjot Kaur plays a commanding shot against Sri Lanka in the tournament opener. The young all-rounder's composed half-century helped India recover from a mid-innings wobble to post 269 for eight in a rain-interrupted match. India eventually won by 59 runs via the DLS method. RITURAJ KONWAR

Packed with power: Ashleigh Gardner underlined Australia's batting depth with a superb 83-ball 115 against New Zealand. Despite a brief mid-innings wobble, the defending champion became the first team to cross 300 in the tournament, securing an 89-run victory. AP

Stellar start: Marufa Akter, Bangladesh's prodigious pacer, made a dream start by striking twice in the opening over. Her sharp in-swingers dismantled Pakistan's top order, restricting it to 129. Bangladesh cruised to a seven-wicket win. AP

Instant impact: Linsey Smith was the pick of the bowlers as England bundled South Africa out for just 69. She dismissed key batters Laura Wolvaardt, Tazmin Brits, and Marizanne Kapp, as England cruised to a 10-wicket victory. RITURAJ KONWAR

6th

Sharing the spoils: Australia captain Alyssa Healy and Sri Lanka skipper Chamari Athapaththu shook hands after their match was called off due to heavy rain in Colombo. GETTY IMAGES

7th

Precision: Kranti Goud was India's most economical bowler against Pakistan, finishing with figures of three for 20 in 10 overs. Striking at crucial moments with sharp swing and control, she kept the batters guessing as India sealed an 88-run victory. GETTY IMAGES

Timely knock: Devdutt Padikkal's 150 in the first four-day game earned him a senior team call-up for the series against the West Indies. PICS: TANUJ PANDEY/ UPCA

AUDITIONS AND ASSERTIONS

India A's **red-ball audition** in Lucknow saw Padikkal, Sudharsan and Jurel step up, as Rahul reminded of his class before a busy Test season.

Sahil Mathur
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Futures, vacancies, and subplots within the Indian Test squad were the main talking points when India A hosted Australia A for two four-day games in Lucknow. For some, like K. L. Rahul, Mohammed Siraj, Nitish Kumar Reddy, and Dhruv Jurel, the series was primarily about valuable game time. For others, it was an audition — a chance to stake a claim for the upcoming four home Tests against West Indies and South Africa.

Iyer's absence, Padikkal's gain

The biggest headline, however, was Shreyas Iyer's unavailability for red-ball cricket over the next six months due to recurring back issues. Named captain for the series, Iyer could have made a strong case for himself in the middle order. Instead, he lasted just 13 balls in the opening game before flying home.

"Having undergone back surgery in the UK and managed his recovery well, he has recently experienced recurring back spasms and stiffness while playing the longer format. He wishes to utilise this period to build endurance, body resilience, and work on his fitness," the BCCI explained.

Iyer's absence opened the door for Devdutt Padikkal, and the Karnataka left-hander stepped through with authority. His fluent 150 in the first match was more than just runs — it was a statement of temperament and patience. He mixed crisp cover drives with watchful leaves outside off stump and, most importantly, showed the patience to bat long. By the time the selectors announced India's squad for the West Indies Tests, Padikkal's name had been firmly cemented. "We feel Padikkal offers a little bit more [than Karun Nair] at this point," chief selector Ajit Agarkar said.

Discipline

If Padikkal made the breakthrough, Sai Sudharsan provided the confirmation. The Tamil Nadu southpaw topped the run charts with 248 and emerged as the most composed batter on either side. His game carries a stillness —

Cut short: Shreyas Iyer was named captain for the series, but lasted just 13 balls in the series due to his recurring back issues.

compact in defence when needed, fluid through the off side once set, and unflinching across long innings. Even as the pitch slowed in the second match, Sudharsan remained unruffled, reinforcing his credentials as a player built for the long term.

The defining act, however, belonged to Rahul. His unbeaten 176, his first FC century in India since December 2016, during the second game's mammoth chase of 412, was not about selection pressure but about rhythm and execution. Batting with trademark elegance, he combined patient defence with fluent strokeplay once set, guiding India A to the sixth-highest successful chase on Indian soil. For India's Test opener, it was the perfect tune-up for a busy home season, a reminder of how senior players marry responsibility with flair.

Long-term investment

While the batters dominated, the bowlers had their moments. Left-arm spinner Manav Suthar relied on flight and subtle dip rather than pace, taking eight wickets by luring batters into mistakes. Gurnoor Brar, tall and brisk, generated bounce and seam movement that troubled even aggressive Australian batters. Though inconsistent at times — especially when banging it in short to natural pull hitters — Brar showed enough to be seen as a talent worth investing in.

Dhruv Jurel wore two hats for India A: captain and middle-order batter. Tasked with leadership for the first time at senior level after Iyer's departure, he didn't look out of place, offering continuous suggestions and managing the field well. As a batter, he displayed versatility — attacking when needed, switching gears, and controlling the flow of play. His proactive knocks — 140 in the first match and 56 in the chase — reinforced the sense that Jurel could thrive as a specialist middle-order batter, not just as a wicketkeeper.

The series was equally vital for N. Jagadeesan after his call-up in England as a backup for the fifth Test. He justified his selection with elegance at the crease, striking well-timed drives and showing technique and temperament against both spin and pace, finishing with 138 runs across three innings. For Abhimanyu Easwaran, however, the series offered little change in fortune. He opened in the first match, scoring a tidy 44, but was once again sidelined in the second to make way for Rahul. Nitish, still easing back from a knee injury, had a quiet series. After missing the first game, he returned in the second but played a restrained role — bowling only nine overs across two innings and contributing 17 runs with the bat.

Valuable experience

For Australia A, the series was equally important — immediate and long-term. With an eye on The Ashes later this year at home, Sam Konstas **(pic, left)** and Nathan McSweeney showed why they remain contenders for opening slots.

Konstas impressed with an attacking 109 in the first match, followed by a measured 49 in the second, demonstrating his ability to construct innings under pressure. McSweeney was the standout for Australia A, scoring 74 and an unbeaten 85 in the second game, blending composure with timing in

Making inroads: Manav Suthar (left) claimed eight wickets in the second four-day game with his left-arm spin.

Steady and sparkling: India A found reassurance in K.L. Rahul, while Sudharsan sealed his promise as series top-scorer with 248 runs.

challenging conditions.

The series also offered a glimpse of Australia's next line of Test hopefuls. Head coach Tim Paine had emphasised it as preparation for the 2027 Test tour of India. Off-spinner Todd Murphy, wicketkeeper-batter Josh Philippe, and all-rounder Cooper Connolly showcased the skills and temperament to push for a return to the longer format. Philippe, in particular, adapted impressively to the tempo of red-ball cricket, compiling 212 runs with a blend of aggression and patience — evidence that he could yet evolve beyond his white-ball label.

The pitches added another layer of intrigue. The first match was high-scoring, rewarding stroke-making and attacking intent. The second slowed slightly but never became treacherous, testing batters to adjust rhythm and shot selection. Australian batters often attacked rather than defended, forcing India A's bowlers, who leaned too heavily on conventional "good areas," to rethink their plans. The relentless heat and humidity tested all players, with umbrellas and towels frequently rushed onto the field.

Challenging contests

In the bigger picture, the series served its purpose. India A found reassurance in Rahul, confirmation in Sudharsan and Jurel, and promise in Brar and Suthar. It also highlighted areas for growth, particularly the need for greater bowling intensity against fearless opponents. Australia A, despite leaving without a win, gained invaluable experience.

Philippe's growth, McSweeney's composure, and collective acclimatisation to Indian conditions will stand them in good stead for future subcontinental tours.

The 1–0 scoreline barely tells the story. Across two four-day games, India A and Australia A braved heat and humidity, trading moments of brilliance and flashes of vulnerability. What began as preparation became a proving ground for established stars, emerging talents, and anyone looking to stake a claim in the Tests to come.

Most runs

Player (Team)	M	Inn	Runs	Ave.	100s	50s	HS
B. Sai Sudharsan (India A)	2	3	248	82.66	1	2	100
Josh Philippe (Australia A)	2	3	212	106	1	1	123 not out
Dhruv Jurel (India A)	2	3	197	65.66	1	1	140

Most wickets

Player (Team)	M	Inn	Wkts	Ave.	Best figures
Gurnoor Brar (India A)	2	3	8	25.50	3/42
Manav Suthar (India A)	1	2	8	19.62	5/107
Corey Rocchiccioli (Australia A)	2	3	6	44.50	3/159

India A clinches ODI series

India A clinched the three-match unofficial ODI series 2-1 after Prabhsimran Singh's blazing 68-ball 102 powered a thrilling two-wicket win over Australia A in the decider in Kanpur. Earlier, centuries from Shreyas Iyer and Priyansh Arya had set up a commanding 171-run victory in the opening game, before Jack Edwards starred with bat and ball to guide Australia A to a nine-wicket win in a rain-hit second match. The finale, though, belonged to India A, which chased down 317 in style to seal the series.

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

WEST INDIES HAS TALENT BUT APPLICATION AND HARD WORK THAT TEST CRICKET DEMANDS SEEM JUST A TAD TOO MUCH FOR THEM

To see West Indies' **new-ball attack** in the first Test in Ahmedabad was a shock to those who have grown up seeing the ball whistle past the batters' noses at least two or three times in an over.

The ease with which India won the first Test match in Ahmedabad was no doubt wonderful to watch for Indian cricket fans, but at the same time, it was saddening to see the depths to which the West Indies, a once invincible team, had fallen.

There is not a cricket lover in the world who isn't disappointed by the performances of the West Indies Test teams over the last couple of decades or so. Go around the cricketing world, and even those former players who suffered at the hands of the great West Indies teams of the 1960s to early 2000s feel frustrated at the performances.

The West Indies players, even today, are the most loved and popular players on the cricketing circuit because of the flair they bring to the game and the zing they get with their teams off the field. Make no mistake, they have talent, but it seems like the application and hard work required in Test matches are just a tad too much for them. Is it simply a question of a format where there is less money but more effort compared to the white-ball formats, especially the T20 version, where there is more money but less effort?

To see their new-ball attack in the first Test in Ahmedabad was a shock to those who have grown up seeing the ball whistle past the batters' noses at least two or three times in an over. In Ahmedabad, apart from Jayden Seales, the other two were simply trundlers, who looked more like net bowlers than international ones. No disrespect intended to them, but to see the first bouncer being bowled after half a dozen overs had been bowled made one ask, 'Is this really the West Indies pace attack?' Yes, bowling bouncers is a big effort, and on a hot day, it can take a lot out of a bowler, but it is a surprise weapon to stop the batter from moving on to the front foot regularly. India's batters were not only on the front foot every ball but were also disdainfully walking down the pitch to the so-called quicks as if they were spinners. As said earlier, Test matches are a lot of hard work with not much reward, so why give it the extra effort?

Even in the batting, there was little effort to buckle down and fight it out. Only Justin Greaves, to some extent in both innings, and Alick Athanaze in the second, looked like they

In disarray: West Indies lost the first Test against India in Ahmedabad by an innings and 140 runs. PTI

wanted to grit it out. And it wasn't even a pitch like last year, where the ball turned from day one. There was some turn on day three, but nowhere near as threatening as when Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja made laughing stocks of some of the best batters in the game.

For a team that once boasted of the likes of the Three Ws, Rohan Kanhai, Seymour Nurse, Clive Lloyd, Gordon Greenidge and Desmond Haynes, to name just a few, there is simply nobody in this current team who looks like getting a million country miles close to them. Of course, I haven't forgotten the incomparable Garfield Sobers, Viv Richards and the 'Prince of Trinidad', Brian Lara. They are geniuses born once in a century and were way above normal human beings.

The West Indies players are game-changers and impact-makers in the T20 format and are in great demand in the T20 leagues all over the world, but they don't play in the Test format, and that's a pity. It is not a pleasant sight to see the serious face of the usually jovial Daren Sammy, the current coach of the team, as he grapples with the herculean task of getting his boys to stand up and fight it out. One of the most likeable and popular cricketers, who during his time as captain led the West Indies to two ICC T20 World Cup trophies, needs to bring that same zest and bounce-back ability to this West Indies Test side and make them competitive again, if not the destructive force of old.

If he can do that, not only will he bring a smile to the faces of the cricket-loving public in the Caribbean, but also to those all over the world for whom the West Indies were always the kings of the game.

For a team that once boasted of the likes of the Three Ws, Rohan Kanhai, Seymour Nurse, Clive Lloyd, Gordon Greenidge and Desmond Haynes, to name just a few, there is simply nobody in this current team who looks like getting a million country miles close to them.

1st

Spellbound: Mohammad Siraj ripped through West Indies with a fiery four-wicket burst, triggering a collapse to 162 all out on the opening day. THE HINDU

2nd

'Daddy' hundred: K.L. Rahul survived a scare on 57 before bringing up his first home century since 2016, celebrating with a tribute to his newborn daughter. VIJAY SONEJI

3rd

Duty call: In just his fifth Test, Dhruv Jurel carved out a maiden century and celebrated it with a striking gesture — raising his bat and moving it to his left — a heartfelt tribute to the Indian Army and his father who once wore its uniform. VIJAY SONEJI

4th

Elite all-rounders: Ravindra Jadeja has joined elite company by becoming only the fourth player to score a century and claim four or more wickets in the same Test on four occasions, a feat matched only by Garry Sobers and R. Ashwin, with Ian Botham leading the list on five. VIJAY SONEJI

5th

Crushing defeat: Alick Athanaze's 38 was the lone flicker in a feeble West Indies innings, as the visitor crumbled to an innings-and-140-run defeat. India seized a 1-0 lead in the two-match series, with the contest now shifting to Delhi. AP

STATSMAN
MOHANDAS MENON

Abhishek Sharma in elite list

AFP

2 The number of Indian batters to aggregate 300 or more runs in a bilateral T20I series/full tournament. Abhishek Sharma, in the recent Asia Cup, became the latest Indian to achieve this feat. He, however, fell five runs short of Virat Kohli's record tally of 319 runs during the 2014 T20 World Cup in Bangladesh.

Most runs by an Indian batter in a T20I tournament/series

Runs	Batter	Month, year	Tournament/Series	Played in	M	Inns	Ave.	S/R	HS	100/50	Series result
319	Virat Kohli	Mar-Apr 2014	T20WC	Ban	6	6	106.33	129.14	77	0/4	Lost in final
314	Abhishek Sharma	Sept 2025	Asia Cup	UAE	7	7	44.86	200.00	75	0/3	Won
296	Virat Kohli	Oct-Nov 2022	T20WC	Aus	6	6	98.67	136.40	82*	0/4	Lost in SF
280	Tilak Varma	Nov 2024	South Africa	SA	4	4	140.00	198.58	120*	2/0	Won
279	Abhishek Sharma	Jan-Feb 2025	England	Ind	5	5	55.80	219.68	135	1/1	Won

Most runs by a batter (from a Test playing nation) in a T20I tournament/series

Runs	Batter (for)	Month, year	Tournament/Series	Played in	M	Inns	Ave.	S/R	HS	100/50	Series result
331	Phil Salt (Eng)	Dec 2023	Bilateral	WI	5	5	82.75	185.95	119	2/0	Lost
319	Virat Kohli (Ind)	Mar-Apr 2014	T20WC	Ban	6	6	106.33	129.14	77	0/4	Lost in final
317	Tillakaratne Dilshan (SL)	June 2009	T20WC	Eng	7	7	52.83	144.74	96*	0/3	Lost in final
316	Mohd Rizwan (Pak)	Sep-Oct 2022	Bilateral	Pak	6	6	63.20	138.59	88*	0/4	Lost
314	Abhishek Sharma (Ind)	Sept 2025	Asia Cup	UAE	7	7	44.86	200.00	75	0/3	Won

Note: The overall record among T20I batters is held by Canada's Aaron Johnson (right-hand batter), who made 402 runs in 7 innings in the four-nation Desert Cup series in Oman in November 2022.

26 The number of bowlers to claim 100 or more wickets during their T20I career. In the recent Asia Cup tournament, India's Arshdeep Singh (on 19 September against Oman) and Bangladesh's Taskin Ahmed (on 25 September against Pakistan) became the latest to achieve this milestone in T20Is. The former became the first Indian, while the latter was the third Bangladeshi to do so. In doing so, in his 64th match, the Indian left-arm pacer became the fourth quickest to achieve this in T20I history. The three others before him are right-arm leg-spinners, which means Arshdeep is the fastest among pace bowlers and any left-armers to achieve this in T20I cricket. Arshdeep, meanwhile, joins two other players, Vinoo Mankad and Kapil Dev, to become the first Indian to claim 100 wickets in each of the international formats. The tables below have the details.

Quickest (i.e. in fewest matches) to reach 100 career wickets in T20 Internationals

M	Bowler (for)	Achieved on	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	E/R
53	Rashid Khan (Afg)	29 Oct 2021	1196	1235	101	12.23	11.84	6.20
54	Sandeep Lamichhane (Nep)	16 Jun 2024	1223	1268	100	12.68	12.23	6.22
63	W. Hasaranga (SL)	1 Sep 2019	1372	1552	101	15.37	13.58	6.79
64	Arshdeep Singh (Ind)	19 Sep 2025	1334	1849	100	18.49	13.34	8.32
66	Rizwan Butt (Bahrain)	12 Jul 2025	1443	1670	105	15.90	13.74	6.94

Note: Arshdeep Singh reached the milestone in 1171 days (3y-2m-13d) since his T20I debut on 7 Jul 2022. Only Bahrain's pace bowler Rizwan Butt took fewer days (972) to reach his landmark.

First Indian bowler to reach 100 wickets in each of the international format

Format	Bowler	Achieved on	Venue	Against	(Victim)	Age
Tests	Vinoo Mankad	15 Nov 1952	Mumbai (BS)	Pakistan	(Waqar Hasan)	35y-317d
ODIs	Kapil Dev	2 Feb 1986	Launceston	New Zealand	(Martin Snedden)	27y-27d
T20Is	Arshdeep Singh	19 Feb 2025	Abu Dhabi	Oman	(Vinayak Shukla)	26y-226d

17 } The number of wickets claimed by Kuldeep Yadav in the recently concluded Asia Cup. This is the joint-highest by any T20I bowler (from a Test-playing nation) in a bilateral series/tournament. He now shares this record with two others — Afghanistan's left-arm pacer Fazalhaq Farooqi and teammate Arshdeep Singh. However, Kuldeep, by doing so in fewer games than the other two, tops this list as shown in the tables below.

Most wickets by a bowler (from a Test playing nation) in a T20I tournament/series

Wkts	Bowler (for)	Season	Tournament/Series	Played in	M	Ov	Runs	Ave.	E/R	Best	Series result
17	Kuldeep Yadav (Ind)	Sept 2025	Asia Cup	UAE	7	25.1	158	9.29	6.27	4-7	Won
17	Fazalhaq Farooqi (Afg)	June 2024	T20WC	USA/WI	8	25.2	160	9.41	6.31	5-9	Lost in SF
17	Arshdeep Singh (Ind)	June 2024	T20WC	USA/WI	8	30.0	215	12.64	7.16	4-9	Won
16	W. Hasaranga (SL)	Oct-Nov 2021	T20WC	Oman/UAE	8	30.0	156	9.75	5.20	3-9	DNQ for KO

Note: The overall record among T20I bowlers is held by Uganda's Alpesh Ramjani (left-arm slow), who claimed 25 wickets in 11 games in the four-nation East Africa Cup in Rwanda in August 2023.

Most wickets by an Indian bowler in a T20I tournament/series

Wkts	Bowler	Season	Tournament/Series	Played in	M	Ov	Runs	Ave.	E/R	Best	Series result
17	Kuldeep Yadav	Sept 2025	Asia Cup	UAE	7	25.1	158	9.29	6.27	4-7	Won
17	Arshdeep Singh	June 2024	T20WC	USA/WI	8	30.0	215	12.64	7.16	4-9	Won
15	Jasprit Bumrah	June 2024	T20WC	USA/WI	8	29.4	124	8.26	4.17	3-7	Won
14	Varun Chakravarthy	Jan-Feb 2025	England	Ind	5	18.0	138	9.85	7.66	5-24	Won

93 } India's nine-wicket victory against the UAE is its biggest in T20Is in terms of balls to spare. India's previous best victory came against Scotland in the 2021 T20 World Cup, when it won with 81 balls remaining while chasing the target of 86. India's win by balls to spare is also the second-biggest by an ICC member nation.

Winning T20I matches with more balls remaining

Balls remaining	Winning team (batting second)		Losing side (batting first)	Venue	Date
101	England (50/2 in 3.1 overs)	beat	Oman (47)	North Sound	13 Jun 2024
93	India (60/1 in 4.3 overs)	beat	UAE (57)	Dubai	10 Sep 2025
90	Sri Lanka (40/1 in 5 overs)	beat	Netherlands (39)	Chittagong Dvn	24 Mar 2024
88	New Zealand (41/1 in 5.2 overs)	beat	Uganda (40)	Tarouba	14 Jun 2024
87	Pakistan (61/0 in 5.3 overs)	beat	Zimbabwe (57)	Bulawayo	3 Dec 2024

9 } India's consecutive victories while chasing against Pakistan (the latest in the Asia Cup final). This is now the most for any side against a particular opponent in T20 internationals. The previous record was eight consecutive victories by Malaysia against Thailand in a target chase. The table below also shows that India is the only side to achieve this twice and is also the only top cricketing nation in the list. It also did it against Bangladesh, with seven consecutive wins in a chase.

Consecutive T20I victories for a side against an opponent in a chase

Wins	Winning Team	Losing Team	From	To	Overall H2H result
9	India	Pakistan	30 Sep 2012	+28 Sep 2025	13-3
8	Malaysia	Thailand	24 Jun 2019	+25 Apr 2025	8-0
7	India	Bangladesh	28 Mar 2014	+6 Oct 2024	17-1
7	Kenya	Rwanda	20 Nov 2022	+20 Oct 2024	9-0
7	Portugal	Gibraltar	26 Oct 2019	+7 May 2023	10-0

9 } The number of Asia Cup cricket titles won by India's men's side.

Men's Asia Cup cricket titles

Total	(ODIs + T20Is)	Team	ODI titles	T20 titles
9	(7 + 2)	India	1984, 1988, 1991, 1995, 2010, 2018, 2023	2016, 2025
6	(5 + 1)	Sri Lanka	1986, 1997, 2004, 2008, 2014	2022
2	(2 + 0)	Pakistan	2000, 2012	–

All records are correct and updated until 4 October 2025.

PTI

Vidharbha clinches Irani Cup

1 Vidarbha wrapped up a **commanding performance** on the final day, successfully defending a 361-run target

Yash Dhull's valiant 92 in the fourth innings briefly raised hopes of a Rest of India comeback, but Vidarbha held firm to clinch the 2025-26 Irani Cup — its third title since 2017-18. After controlling the contest for most of the match, Vidarbha wrapped up a commanding performance on the final day, successfully defending a 361-run target with Harsh Dubey spearheading the attack through a superb 4 for 73.

Brief scores: Vidarbha 342 & 232 beat Rest of India 214 & 267 (Yash Dhull 92, Manav Suthar 56*; Harsh Dubey 4-73, Aditya Thakare 2-27) by 93 runs

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

2

Former West Indies all-rounder Bernard Julien, a member of the side that lifted the inaugural World Cup in 1975, passed away in Northern Trinidad at the age of 75. A right-handed batter and lively seamer, Julien represented the West Indies in 24 Tests and 12 ODIs between 1973 and 1977, scoring two centuries and claiming 50 Test wickets. He played a pivotal role in the 1975 World Cup campaign, taking four wickets each against Sri Lanka and New Zealand to help his team reach the final, before contributing an unbeaten 26 in the title clash against Australia at Lord's.

V. RAJU

3

The Andhra Cricket Association (ACA) has announced that two sections of the ACA-VDCA Stadium in Visakhapatnam will be dedicated to iconic Indian women cricketers Mithali Raj and Ravi Kalpana on October 12, coinciding with the India–Australia ICC Women's Cricket World Cup fixture. As part of its ongoing initiative to honour women's contributions to the game, the ACA will name stands after Mithali and Kalpana.

AFP

4

Mitch Marsh led from the front as Australia sealed a 2-0 T20I series win over New Zealand, with the second match washed out. The skipper's maiden T20I hundred — an unbeaten 103 off 52 balls — powered his side to a thrilling three-wicket victory in the final game at Mount Maunganui, chasing down 156 almost single-handedly. Earlier, in the series opener at Tauranga's Bay Oval, Marsh had pummeled an injury-hit New Zealand with five sixes in a commanding chase of 182, setting the tone for Australia's dominant tour.

AFP

5

R. Ashwin will now play the entire Big Bash League season for Sydney Thunder, extending his stay after initially committing to a shorter stint. The move follows his withdrawal from the ILT20 auction, where he went unsold in the opening round and opted out of the rest, unwilling to lower his base price of $120,000. With the ILT20 off the table, the Big Bash — running from December 14 to January 25 — gains one of cricket's sharpest minds for its full duration, a timely boost for both Thunder and the league.

Shining through: Jammu & Kashmir's Auqib Nabi, the breakout pacer of the 2024–25 Ranji Trophy, claimed 44 wickets at a stunning average of 13.93 to script the team's first quarterfinal finish. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Another winter, another reckoning

As the **Ranji Trophy** returns, India's selectors look beneath the surface — for fast bowlers who can last, and a batting order that can hold.

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Over the last few years, Indian cricket has wrestled with a familiar debate: do Indian Premier League performances carry more weight than those in domestic cricket? While several players have earned national call-ups on the back of IPL success, the Ranji Trophy remains the true testing ground for those aspiring to play the longest format.

Since last season, the Board of Control for Cricket in India's (BCCI) directive that all players, unless on national duty, must feature in domestic tournaments has brought a sense of order. The sight of established internationals turning out in Ranji group matches has created a rare level playing field. As a former national selector once said, every domestic season presents a different challenge, and the selection priorities shift with the needs of the national team.

So, what should be the focus this time?

Former India pacer Subroto Banerjee, who was until recently a member of the national selection committee, believes the emphasis this season should be on identifying and building a pool of quality fast bowlers, and a few fast-bowling all-rounders, ready to step up when required.

Over the last few months, workload management has dominated conversations around India's pace attack. Jasprit Bumrah played only three of five Tests in England, while Mohammed Siraj bowled an extraordinary 185.3 overs — 1,113 deliveries — to finish as the series' leading wicket-taker with 23 wickets. That effort also reignited an

important question: is India's second line of Test pacers ready?

While Prasidh Krishna and Akash Deep have shown glimpses of promise, many believe the fast-bowling unit still lacks depth beyond Bumrah and Siraj. That makes this Ranji season especially crucial.

"Some of the players have done reasonably well in domestic cricket, but it is important that we identify them and judge them based on their talent and not compare them with someone else," says Banerjee. "It is impossible to find a like-for-like player for Bumrah or Siraj, but what should be focused on is whether a fast bowler has the skill one is looking for and whether he can adapt to the grind of red-ball cricket," adds the former quick.

The contenders

Among Indian pacers aged under 30, Akash has been the standout performer in First-Class cricket over the past three years. The 28-year-old tops the sub-group with 109 wickets at an average of 27.44 and has already featured in Tests. Earlier this year, he produced his most eye-catching international performance with a match-winning 10-wicket haul against England at Edgbaston.

The only other Indian pacer under 30 to take 100 or more First-Class wickets since 2022 is Vijaykumar Vyshak. The Karnataka quick impressed in the IPL with his death-overs discipline for Punjab Kings in 2025 and earned his maiden India call-up for the T20I series in South Africa, though he didn't get a game. His State-mate Vidwath Kaverappa, 25, continues to rise with 82 First-Class wickets at an average of 21.50.

Despite an underwhelming Test debut, Anshul Kamboj of Haryana remains one to watch. He first caught attention with a 10-wicket match haul against Kerala in 2024 and impressed again with a fiery 4/34 in the Irani Trophy for Rest of India, albeit in defeat.

Another promising name is Harshit Rana, already capped in all three formats. The 23-year-old's hit-the-deck aggression has clearly impressed the national management. But the standout pacer of the 2024-25 season was Auqib Nabi from Jammu & Kashmir, who topped the charts with 44 wickets at an astonishing 13.93, helping his team reach its first-ever quarterfinal. He continued that form in the Duleep Trophy, taking four wickets in four balls for North Zone.

Beyond these statistical leaders, selectors are also looking at bowlers who bring distinct physical attributes. Gurnoor Brar, standing 6'3", has been fast-tracked into the India A setup and recently impressed against Australia A with his bounce and movement.

The spin factor

While pacers may headline the conversation, several spinners could also draw attention. Mumbai's Tanush Kotian appears next in line behind Washington Sundar for the off-spinner's role, and his batting adds further value: he averages close to 45, often featuring in lower-order rescue acts for Mumbai and West Zone. Rajasthan's Manav Suthar, a left-arm spinner long on the selectors' radar, picked 39 wickets in 2022-23 and followed that with 17 the next season. This year, he made a mark with eight wickets in an unofficial Test against Australia A and added five wickets plus an unbeaten 56 for Rest of India in the Irani Cup.

Vidarbha's Harsh Dubey broke the record for most wickets in a single Ranji season last year — 69 at 16.98 — but India's spin department currently looks settled, meaning he and others may have to wait their turn.

The No. 3 conundrum

While India's Test lineup appears largely stable, uncertainty persists over who should occupy the No. 3

Left-arm revelation: Harsh Dubey's remarkable 69-wicket haul powered Vidarbha's Ranji run and marked him as one of India's brightest spin prospects. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Run machine: After an injury-hit year, Sarfaraz Khan returns to domestic cricket with a familiar goal — piling on runs for Mumbai. R. RAGU

slot. Karun Nair struggled to hold his place during the England series and was dropped for the home Tests against the West Indies, while B. Sai Sudharsan is yet to look convincing despite consistent backing from the management.

This season could therefore be pivotal for the likes of Devdutt Padikkal and Yash Rathod to build momentum and press their case. Another possibility is elevating Dhruv Jurel to No. 3 once Rishabh Pant returns. The Ranji season is equally crucial for Sarfaraz Khan, who missed much of last year through injury. Fit again, the prolific Mumbai batter will be keen to do what he does best — score heavily and relentlessly.

Of quick turnarounds

Like last year, the Ranji Trophy will be played in phases, a structure many players and coaches prefer as it allows time to recover and recalibrate.

As Indian fast bowler and Saurashtra skipper, Jaydev Unadkat, had said, "Mentally, this arrangement is better for a player as he knows this is how it is and can plan his workload accordingly."

Kerala coach Amay Khurasiya has also endorsed the phased format, especially for pacers. "They are all professional players and know their body well. So they know how to get ready," he said.

For multi-format players, though, the tight scheduling between the Ranji, Syed Mushtaq Ali and Vijay Hazare Trophies remains a challenge.

Movers and shifters

Transfers are nothing new in the Ranji circuit, but this year's window saw some big moves. Tripura made a splash by signing Hanuma Vihari, Vijay Shankar and Swapnil Singh, while Maharashtra roped in Prithvi Shaw from Mumbai and Jalaj Saxena from Kerala to bolster its lineup. For Shaw, it's a chance to reset after lean years; for Jalaj, it is a return to familiar surroundings.

Baroda surprised many by signing India wicketkeeper Jitesh Sharma from Vidarbha, which also saw Karun return to his home side Karnataka. On the other hand, veterans like Mandeep Singh, who represented Tripura last season, and Parvez Rasool from Jammu and Kashmir will not feature this year.

Even with experienced names such as Mohammed Shami, Ajinkya Rahane and Unadkat in action, the selectors' gaze is likely to remain fixed on emerging talent.

The foreign flavour

After years of domestic coaches dominating the system, two teams have added international expertise. Andhra has brought in New Zealand's former head coach Gary Stead, while Maharashtra reunited with Australian Shaun Williams, who guided the team to the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy in 2010.

Stead, who spent nearly eight years with New Zealand and has coached in Indian conditions before, will bring a fresh perspective. If either Stead or Williams finds success, it could nudge more State units toward experimenting with overseas coaches again.

Pitching it right

One of the BCCI's crucial instructions to State units this year has been to prepare livelier pitches. The hope is to move away from the spin-heavy surfaces that have dominated recent Ranji seasons. If curators succeed, this could be the most intriguing domestic campaign in years — testing not just India's next generation of pacers, but also the batters learning to survive and score on more demanding tracks.

Para stars: Switzerland's Elena Kratter (Women's T63 Long Jump silver) with Germany's Johannes Floors (Men's T64 100m silver) at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, New Delhi. REUTERS

Futuristic blades, vintage designs

The basic design of carbon-fibre blades has barely changed since the 1990s, but rising athleticism is **closing the gap** between para and able-bodied athletes, says former Paralympic champion Heinrich Popow.

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Heads turn when athletes in the T64 categories (for competitors with one or two leg amputations) step onto the track at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium during the Para World Championships. Their prosthetic blades – the iconic "J"-shaped carbon fibre limbs – gleam in dark black, looking less like body parts and more like high-tech equipment straight out of a science fiction film.

Despite their futuristic appearance, the design itself is decades old.

Four-time Paralympic champion Markus Rehm, popularly known as "the blade jumper," is running in New Delhi with an Ossur Flex-Foot Cheetah blade attached to his right leg, amputated below the knee after a wakeboarding accident at 14. Rehm, who holds the world record of 8.72m in the Men's T64 long jump, hopes to push that mark further.

The "Cheetah" was popularised in

Old tech: The basic design of carbon-fibre blades has remained largely unchanged since the 1990s, but improved athleticism is narrowing the gap with able-bodied athletes, says former Paralympic champion Heinrich Popow.

PICS: JONATHAN SELVARAJ

the 2010s by Paralympic 400m champion Oscar Pistorius, but its design has remained virtually unchanged since engineer Van Phillips created it in 1984.

And it is not the only vintage design still in use. "The current world records in the 100m, 200m and 400m (until last year) in the T64 category are held by Johannes Floors. He's using blades that were first introduced in 1992. That design is older than he is!" says Heinrich Popow, the 2012 London Paralympics 100m champion (T42 category, later merged into T63), who himself competed with Ottobock blades.

Now an equipment expert with Ottobock, Popow points out a paradox: while blades for elite athletes appear futuristic, everyday prosthetics are far more advanced. "For regular users, prosthetics have come a long way. You have microprocessors, exoskeletons, crazy stuff. For daily wear, you want all the support you can get – sensors, batteries, and AI algorithms to predict your gait. But sport is different. Sport is about overcoming weakness," he says.

For athletes, the options remain limited. One reason is mechanical. The J-shape is near perfect: it acts like a spring, absorbing and releasing energy with every stride – exactly what sprinting and jumping demand.

Another reason is regulatory. World Para Athletics (WPA) imposes strict limits. Each T64 athlete is given a Maximum Allowable Standing Height (MASH) during classification. If blades make them taller, they cannot compete. "You also can't just debut a new design," says Popow. "The WPA says any blades being used have to be in use for at least nine months."

It is not that manufacturers lack innovation, but that radical designs are restricted. "If it were allowed, you could absolutely create something far superior. But then you might need to put a motor or

> « It's not the technology that drives the human – it's the human that drives technology – Heinrich Popow »

extend the blade, which would make runners faster in a way that isn't fair. That would almost be like doping," says Andrea Cremer, technical manager at Ottobock. So the evolution is limited to tweaks – for instance, adjusting carbon fibre layers to suit heavier athletes – rather than breakthroughs.

Popow believes even the current tech is enough. "The blades are already carbon fibre. That's stronger than the human body. Right now, the technology may be from the 1990s, but even that is far ahead of what humans can achieve themselves," he says.

But, he adds, the gap is narrowing. "The technology has not changed much since my time. What has changed massively is the professionalism of para athletes. Since London 2012, the education of athletes, coaches and technicians has gone up dramatically."

That progress has sparked debates about whether para athletes are now competitive – or even superior – to their able-bodied peers.

Rehm's case is the most prominent. Alongside his Paralympic dominance, he won the German National Championships in 2014 and 2015, beating able-bodied rivals. But protests over a supposed advantage forced his exclusion from the 2015 World Championships team. Ironically, his personal best of 8.72m would have won gold at every able-bodied World Championships except 1991, when Mike Powell set the still-standing world record of 8.95m.

Popow, however, rejects comparisons. "How is it an advantage to lose your leg? Markus' disadvantages are far more than any advantage from wearing blades. But it doesn't make sense for para athletes to compete alongside athletes without disabilities. The mechanisms of force generation are completely different. You can't look at para sport through the same lens as regular sport."

He acknowledges why athletes want to be compared: it attracts fans used to the Olympics. But he argues this is short-sighted. "Para athletics is its own unique sport. The way to grow is to build up the sport itself."

And the performances continue to rise. "I started with the same blades athletes are using today. Back then, people wondered if someone could clear 5.50m in the long jump. Then it was 6m, then 6.50m. Now everyone is over 7.5m. And Markus is at 8.72m," says Popow. He believes a nine-metre leap is inevitable. "If someone jumps nine meters at the Paralympics, I promise you everyone will watch. I'm confident we'll see it before Los Angeles," he says.

And all of it, he insists, will be done with technology that has barely changed in 30 years. "It's like sitting in the same car as Max Verstappen. You won't become an F1 champion. It's not the technology that drives the human – it's the human that drives technology."

Sprint queen: Simran Sharma competing with her guide Umar Saifi in women's 200m T12 semifinals at World Para Athletics Championships in New Delhi. Simran was the most successful Indian athlete at this edition as she grabbed a gold in 100m T12 and a silver in 200m T12. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

INDIAN PARA STARS DAZZLE IN DELHI

Impressive Indian **results** keep focus away from off-field hiccups at Para Athletics World Championships.

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Coming into the 2025 Para Athletics World Championships in New Delhi, Simran Sharma was already a world champion — she had won gold in the T12 category (for partially sighted athletes) of the women's 200m at the 2024 Worlds in Kobe. Yet when she walked into the mixed zone at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium a few minutes after her latest victory, her smile revealed just how much this particular triumph meant to her.

"It's one thing to be a world champion. But it feels completely different when you win a gold medal at home and hear your national anthem being played in your own country. I'm getting goosebumps just talking about it," Simran told reporters after her 100m final on October 3.

India's national anthem was played a record-equalling six times

Redemption, at last: Shailesh Kumar won gold in men's high jump T63 event. For India, it was the first of its six gold medals while for Shailesh, it provided redemption after a heart-breaking fourth-place finish at Paris Paralympics.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

at the Nehru Stadium, matching the tally at the 2024 World Championships in Kobe. However, India exceeded Kobe's total medal count: the 73-member contingent won 22 medals — six gold, nine silver, and seven bronze — finishing 10th in the medal standings.

This was an improvement from the previous edition in 2024, when India won 17 medals (six gold, five silver, and six bronze). By comparison, India had secured nine medals in Dubai in 2019 and ten in Paris in 2023, indicating a clear upward trend. But maintaining the same number of gold medals as in Kobe is particularly impressive, given the stronger field in a non-Paralympic year.

But there was more to the Indian performance than just the medals won.

As Simran and her guide stormed to the finish line in the women's 100m, they clocked 11.95 seconds — a personal best and the first time she had ever run under 12 seconds. "All my life I've been chasing this time. I was finally able to get it at my home World Championships," said Simran, who also set an Asian record of 24.46s en route to a silver medal in the women's 200m T12.

Some credit for the quick time should go to the advanced Mondotrack surface installed at the JLN Stadium at a cost of around ₹25 crore, which included the warm-up track. However, the track alone cannot explain India's exceptional

India exceeded its total medal count from the previous edition in Kobe. The 73-member contingent won 22 medals – six gold, nine silver, and seven bronze – finishing 10th in the medal standings.

Double bonanza: Sandip Sanjay Sargar (right) clinched gold and Sandeep clinched silver in the men's javelin throw F44 event.
SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

performance. Indian athletes set three championship records and seven Asian records, with around 30 personal bests across the competition.

There was consistency to go alongside improvements too. Athletes who had medalled at last year's World Championships and Paralympic Games continued to perform at that high level.

Even when not at his best — having suffered a shoulder injury just before the start of the championships and aggravating it during warm-up — two-time Paralympic champion Sumit Antil won his third consecutive World Championship gold in the F64 category (for athletes with a leg prosthesis) of the men's javelin throw. Given the difference in pedigree between him and his nearest rival, Sumit still set a new Championship record of 71.37m, surpassing his own mark.

Preeti Pal, who had won two bronze medals at the 2024 Worlds in the women's 100m T35 and 200m T35 (for athletes with cerebral palsy or other coordination impairments), improved to silver and bronze in the same events. Nishad Kumar (men's high jump T47, for athletes who are amputees) upgraded his Paralympic silver to gold, defeating five-time champion Roderick Townsend Roberts while narrowly missing a new world record.

Defending world champions Deepthi Jeevanji (women's 400m T20, for athletes with an intellectual impairment) and Ekta Bhyan (women's club throw F51, for athletes with spinal injuries) also remained on the podium, winning silver in their respective events, as

> « Across 186 medal events, 35 world records were broken, and 104 championship records were set »

Too good: Switzerland's Catherine Debrunner swept all five golds in the T53 category. REUTERS

did Paralympic champions Dharambir (men's club throw F51) and Navdeep Singh (men's javelin throw F41, for short-statured athletes), who claimed silver in New Delhi.

It was not only established names who shone. Several fresh faces emerged as India's rising para athletes. One of the most surprising was Shailesh Kumar, who won India's first gold medal, stunning Paralympic champion and heavy favourite Ezra Frech in the men's high jump T63 (for athletes who are amputees) on the opening day.

While Antil and Navdeep were expected to do well in javelin, Sandip Sanjay Sargar — who had never won a medal at the world level — stormed to gold in the F44 category (for athletes with moderate lower-leg impairment) with a personal best of 62.82m.

Javelin proved to be an event where Indian athletes had an outsized impact: apart from Sumit

Soaring high: Navdeep Singh claimed silver in the men's javelin throw F41 event. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

and Sandip, Rinku Hooda won gold in the F46 class (upper limb deficiencies), securing three of India's six gold medals in the competition.

And when Paris Paralympic bronze medallist Hokato Sema fell short of the podium in the F57 category of the men's shot put, India found an able replacement in Soman Rana who took bronze in the same event in New Delhi.

It was not only Indian athletes who impressed. Across 186 medal events over nine days, 35 world records were broken, and 104 championship records were set. While this trend reflects the long-term improvements in participation, coaching, and technology in para sport, it has occurred without any reduction in the spread of medal-winning countries. Of the 100 countries competing in New Delhi, 45 won at least one gold medal, and 64 secured at least one podium finish.

Some of the sport's greats showed why they earned their reputation. Markus Rehm won his eighth individual gold at the Para Athletics World Championships, setting a championships record of 8.43m in the men's long jump T64.

Switzerland's Catherine Debrunner swept all five golds in the T53 category (for athletes with spinal cord injury who have the use of their arms but limited trunk mobility).

While the performances at the Games themselves lived up to expectations, there were blemishes off the field of play.

While India proved it could organise a world-level event, headlines in the final days highlighted issues such as stray dog bites and empty stadiums.

Great Britain's Hannah Cockroft, who won three gold medals in the women's T34, told reporters, "It was hard to believe" that the Indian public was behind the Games.

These are, of course, issues beyond the athletes' control. At the 2025 World Championships, they focused on what they could achieve.

"These Games have given us a lot of hope. They've shown what we are capable of. We will do even more in the years to come," Simran said after her events.

India's Gold medallists

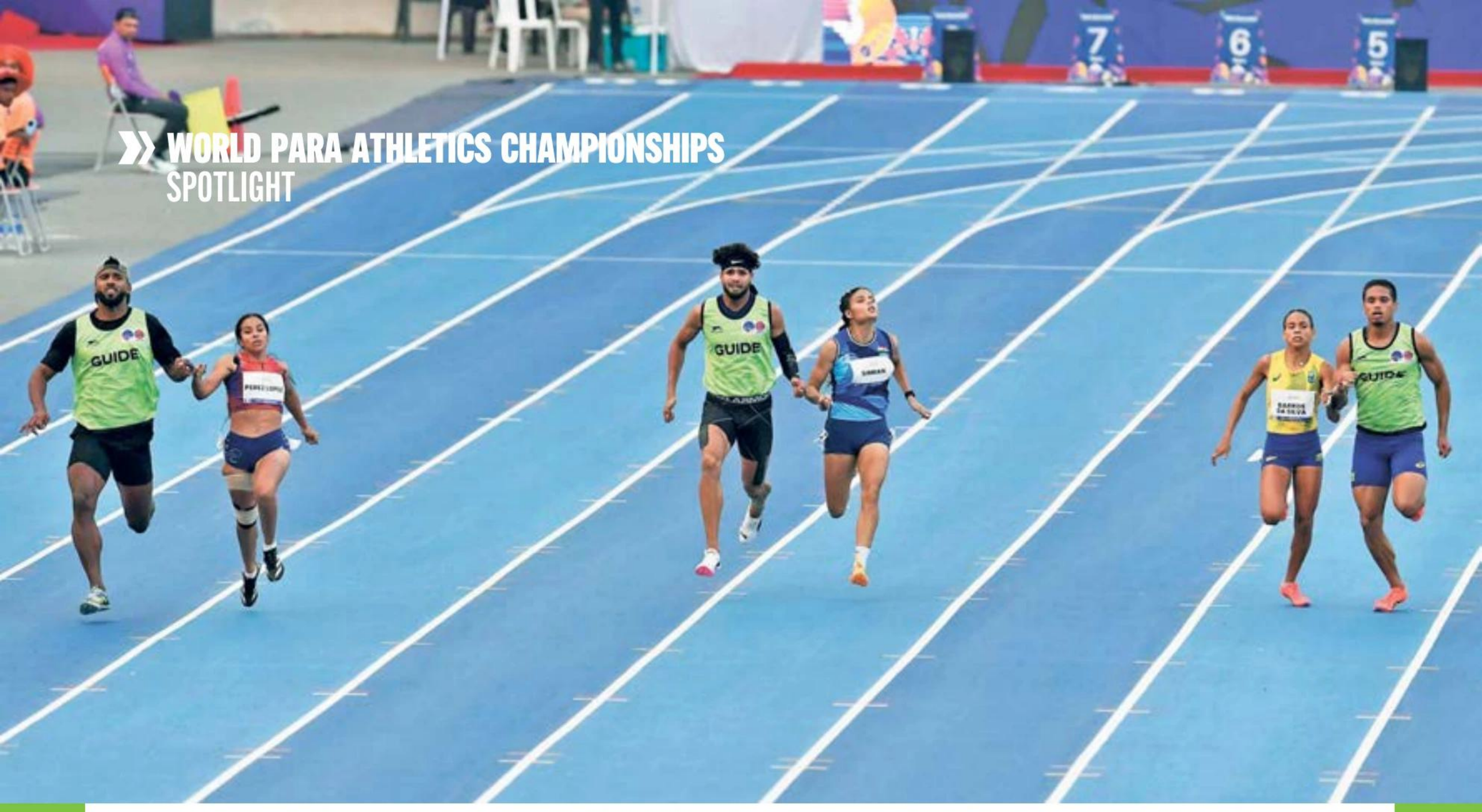
Name	Event + Category
Simran Sharma	Women's 100m T12
Nishad Kumar	Men's High Jump T47
Sumit Antil	Men's Javelin Throw F64
Sandip Sanjay Sargar	Men's Javelin Throw F44
Rinku Hooda	Men's Javelin Throw F46
Shailesh Kumar	Men's High Jump T63

Silver medallists

Name	Event + Category
Simran Sharma	Women's 200m T12
Preeti Pal	Women's 100m T35
Navdeep	Men's Javelin Throw F41
Ekta Bhyan	Women's Club Throw F51
Dharambir	Men's Club Throw F51
Sandeep	Men's Javelin Throw F44
Yogesh Kathuniya	Men's Discus Throw F56
Sundar Singh Gurjar	Men's Javelin Throw F46
Deepthi Jeevanji	Women's 400m T20

Bronze medallists

Name	Event + Category
Sandeep	Men's 200m T44
Soman Rana	Men's Shot Put F57
Praveen Kumar	Men's High Jump T64
Preeti Pal	Women's 200m T35
Pardeep Kumar	Men's Discus Throw F64
Atul Kaushik	Men's Discus Throw F57
Varun Singh Bhati	Men's High Jump T63



Shared rhythm: India's Simran Sharma and her guide Umar Saifi run in perfect harmony during the T12 women's 200m at the World Para Athletics Championships. Bound by a slender tether but powered by deep trust, the pair claimed Simran's second medal of the meet. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

When running becomes a lesson in faith

Two runners, one rhythm, and the delicate art of moving in step **when one must lead and the other must believe.**

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As she crossed the finish line of the women's 200m T12 race at the Para Athletics World Championships, Simran Sharma celebrated her second medal of the competition. Earlier, she had won gold in the 100m of the same category. Running right beside her was her guide, Umar Saifi.

Though they had crossed the line together, Saifi knew his job was done. He released the tether that bound him to Simran's hand, draped the Indian tricolour around her shoulders, and stepped back to let her soak in the moment. Simran held on to his arm as he guided her to the mixed zone, where reporters awaited. There, Saifi again stood quietly behind her while Simran — with a gold and a silver, the best haul by any Indian athlete at the Championships — faced the media.

It's always Simran who insists on bringing Saifi forward, eager to talk about their pairing.

Athletes in the T11 category (completely blind) and the T12 category (those whose visual field is restricted to about ten degrees or who can recognise a hand from less than two metres) routinely need a guide to run alongside them.

Simran and Saifi must be perfectly synchronised. They run in step, Saifi

Faith fulfilled: Peru's Neri Roxana Quispe crosses the finish line with her guide Aldo Milagro Huaman to win gold in the women's 1500m T11 at the World Para Athletics Championships — a victory built on years of faith, communication, and quiet perseverance. REUTERS

using subtle tugs and nudges to keep Simran within her lane. Any pulling or pushing would mean instant disqualification — as happened to the original winners in T12 women's 200m, Alejandra Pérez López and her guide Eubring Maza Caraballo of Venezuela.

For runners and their guides, trust is everything. The partnership goes beyond teamwork; it often feels closer to family.

Do jism, ek jaan (Two bodies, one life)

Runner: Simran Sharma

Guide: Umar Saifi

(India)

T12 women's 100m gold

T12 women's 200m silver

Simran: When people ask what it takes to form a guide and runner partnership, it's a very simple answer for me. Socho do jism, ek jaan (Think of it as two bodies having one life). A single person can't do anything. We are a team and have to work together. The goal isn't to be as fast as I can. It's about being fast together. It's important that both of us have the same mindset when it comes to sport.

We both have to train and prepare the same way. Just because Umar is my guide, it doesn't mean that this medal means less to him.

He's someone who supports me a lot. I ran six races at this World Championships. I was very tired in the morning of the 100m final. I couldn't even bend my back. I was crying in the call room. But Umar told me you just get through today and then you can sleep for the next four-five days.

He knows when I'm getting agitated and he calms me down. I also think he's very lucky for me because I've never won two medals at a World Championships before. Later this month Umar will be competing at the Under-23 National Championships and I'll go with him to cheer for him. More than a guide, I see Umar as my *chhota bhai* (younger brother).

Umar: I've never actually run as a

THE POINT OF BEING A GUIDE IS THAT YOU HAVE TO SHARE ALL THE EXPERIENCES, NOT JUST ON THE TRACK. YOU HAVE TO BE THERE THROUGH THE HARD TIMES IN TRAINING AND DAILY LIFE – ALDO HUAMAN

guide runner before. I started running with Simran just nine months ago. It's strange to have to run with someone else because I'm a national-level runner myself. Because both of us have our wrists attached with a tether, I had to change my position on the starting blocks and the way I positioned my hands. It was also strange because at the finish line you have to let your runner finish first. That's always challenging because my instinct is to go first. But that's the thing, you aren't running for yourself.

'Milagro is closer to me than my family'

Runner: Neri Roxana Quispe
Guide: Aldo Milagro Huaman
(Peru)
T11 women's 1500m gold

Neri: I think the secret of being a good guide is to communicate well. That's the number one thing. If there is no communication, it won't matter how fast I am. It's not easy to be a runner. I have been training for many years and when I was preparing for the World Championships I had to stay away from my family and my daughter. A guide is not just someone who runs along with you but someone who is closer to you than your family for those months that you prepare.

Aldo: The point of being a guide is that you have to share all the experiences, not just on the track. You have to be there through the hard times in training and daily life. It gives you that special connection that makes you feel as if you are part of the family. What unites us is our passion for running. It's important that we both share the same values — commitment, discipline, desire, and above all, tranquility. Neri has been competing for the last 10 years and she'd never won a medal before. We had to wait so many years to win her first gold medal. Long before this reward, the real joy for me was working with her through all those years.

"When we fled as refugees, we had to flee as one"

Runner: Guillaume Junior Atangana
Guide: Donard Nyamjua
(Refugee Paralympic Team)
T11 men's 400m gold

Guillaume: I've been running with Donard since 2019. We started out competing in Congo. After the Tokyo Olympics, we realised there was no real hope for us as athletes in Congo, so we made the decision to go to England together. It's one thing to run together on the track; it's something else to make the journey by road, foot, and then boat as refugees. It would have been impossible for me to do it by myself. What I like about Donard is that he listens to me. He takes my opinion. At first, because I didn't have my papers in England, there seemed to be no way that I could run again. But God has his plan, and we got our documentation that allowed us to run together just before the Paris Paralympics. We won a bronze medal there. I know it would not have been possible without him.

It's not easy to run with a guide

Bound resilience: Guillaume Junior Atangana of the Refugee Paralympic Team competes in the men's 400m T11 at the World Para Athletics Championships, running in tandem with his guide Donard Nyamjua — a partnership forged through resilience, trust, and a shared journey from exile to triumph. GETTY IMAGES

because he isn't a machine. You depend on another person. If either of you is injured, you can't train. But Donard is very special to me. I have no vision at all, which was caused by a bad reaction to medication, so Donard helps me not just on the track but in my day-to-day life. We are always together. We go shopping together. We chill and even go to the park together. I'm lucky I have him as my guide.

Donard: It never crossed my mind that I should head to England by myself. What would I do alone? The journey to England was a dangerous one. But Guillaume told me that we would go as one. There was no guarantee of success. Guillaume told me if the worst was to happen, neither of us would be to blame. But luckily we reached England safely.

In England too, our plan was always to run together. Of course, when we first arrived, there was no guarantee we would ever be able to compete again. Without any papers, we couldn't even find a place to train. That was hard because the most important thing for a guide and runner is to train constantly together.

We did what we could — jogging early in the morning in the parks. When I got work, Guillaume would either call to wake me up or knock on my door so that we could run before I left for my job.

We have gone through so much together that even now I prefer to spend my free time with him. There are times when we fight or get angry, but that happens with everyone. We know that we care for each other and will always run together. I think we are already one person because our spirit is already linked. That's what makes us run freely.

'To be a good guide you need to sacrifice yourself'

Runner: Nancy Koech Chelangat

Guide: Geoffrey Kiplangat (Kenya)

T11 women's 1500m silver

Geoffrey: I was a runner for the Kenyan team. In 2018, I won a bronze in the World Youth Championships in the 3000m steeplechase. But I decided to stop running for myself because I wanted to do something for my younger sister. She is six years younger than me. I wanted her to realise that there was a future for her as well.

A lot of my friends tried to discourage me, especially because I was still very young when I decided to become a guide runner and scale back my own training. They said, "You still have your career in front of you," but I had made my decision. Running as a guide is very different from running for yourself, especially in the longer distances. I'm much

taller than Nancy, which makes it difficult to match our stride frequency, but after many years together, we have learned to do this.

It's very important to coordinate because running as a guide is not just about running as fast as you can. You have to be their eyes, constantly aware of what's happening in the rest of the pack. You need to understand your runner and know whether she has energy or not. At the same time, you have to let her make the decisions. You are guiding someone else. You have to sacrifice your own ambitions to assist another person.

Nancy: I've been blind all my life. I never thought I would be a runner. Even though everyone where I come from runs, I didn't even know what it was. One day in 2015, my brother told me he would make me run. I was very scared at first because I was afraid of tripping and falling. But my brother told me he would guide me, and that made me take the chance. I don't think I would have started running if it wasn't for him. Thanks to him, I've found a path for my own life. I won a bronze in the 1500m at Tokyo Paralympics and gold in the 1500m at the 2023 Paris World Para Athletic Championships. I will continue running as long as my brother runs with me.

'Marcin helped me come out of severe depression'

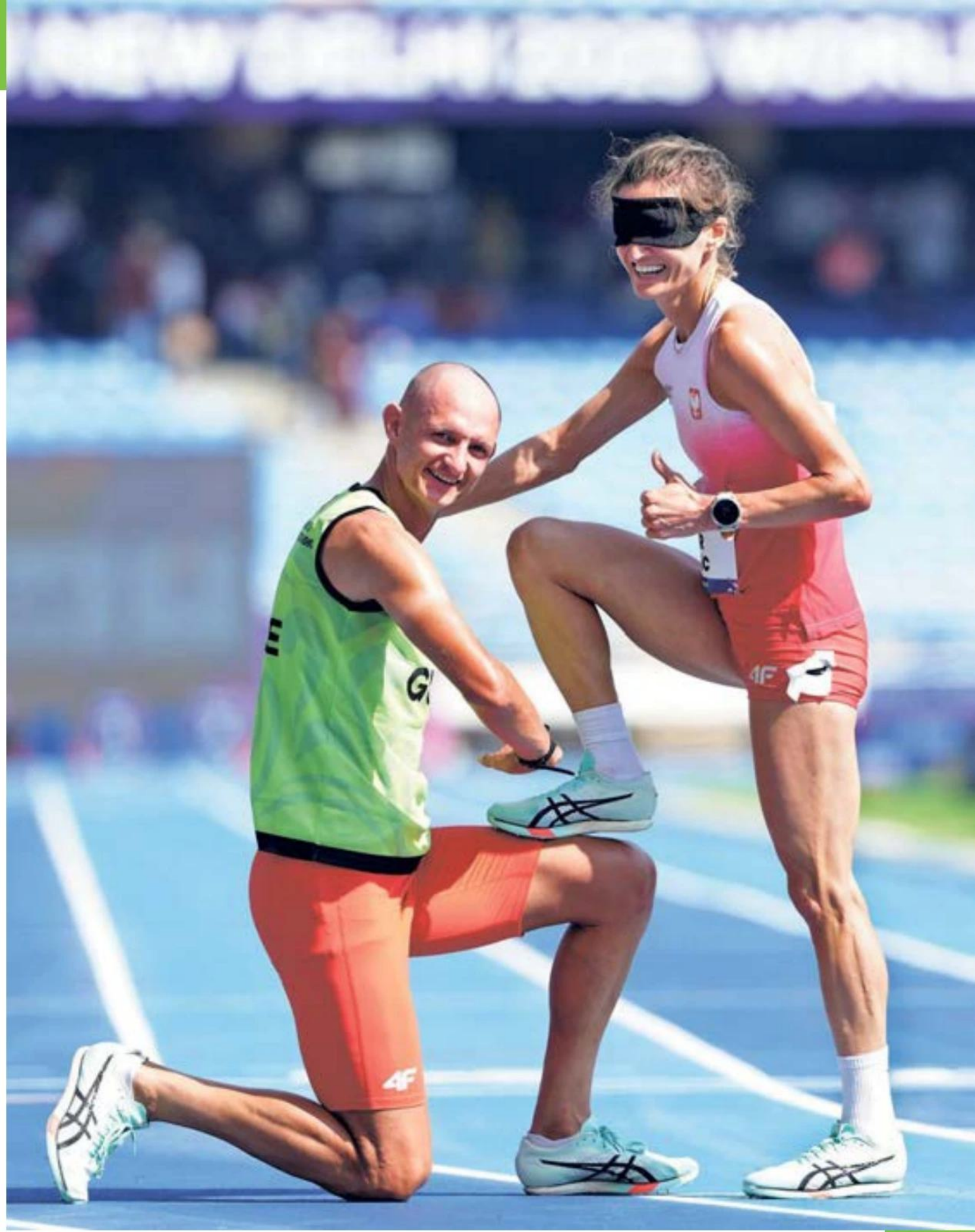
Runner: Joanna Mazur-Dziedzic
Guide: Marcin Kesy
(Poland)
T11 women's 1500m bronze

Joanna: I feel pure happiness when I run with Marcin. When you run with a guide for long, you come to depend on them deeply. It's not just about familiarity; it's about trust. I previously had another guide who was also my coach, and things didn't go so well with him. We stopped working together after the Olympics. It was devastating when it happened but it was also for the best. For the last few years, I had been sick with severe depression. Losing my first guide was emotionally very hard for me.

I started running as a way to deal with my emotions when I began going blind. It helped me overcome the constant feeling of fear. It encouraged me to grow more confident with my surroundings. When I lost my guide, it felt as if all those fears came rushing back.

It took Marcin to get me out of that depression. Six months after the Paralympics, I asked him if he would want to run with me. He agreed almost immediately. His best quality is that he understands me. I enjoy running with him. When I'm stressed, he can feel it. Before the World Championships, I was really nervous and he made jokes so that I would feel relaxed. At other times I cry and then he just listens. He just says, "I'm here with you. Don't be afraid. We are here together."

Marcin: I used to run road races when Joanna asked me to be her guide. I saw it as a challenge. There was no question of saying no to her. I noticed that she was not at peace, and my focus was to help her find it again. Running was what gave her confidence once, so I had to help her rediscover that. I'm there to help her only as much as she's willing to take. I can't be faster than her. When she's at the top of her speed, even a small touch can make her dizzy or cause her to fall. So I need to listen not just to my body but to hers. That is always a challenge because I have to make my ambition part of her ambition.



Shared joy: Poland's Joanna Mazur-Dziedzic shares a joyful moment with her guide, Marcin Kesy, after their race at the World Para Athletics Championships. GETTY IMAGES

'Neeraj can win another Olympic medal; Sachin should chase consistency, not 90m'

The **man who shaped** Neeraj Chopra's Olympic journey reflects on India's javelin rise, Sachin Yadav's growth, and the fine art of sustainable excellence.

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At his home in the small village of Oberschlettenbach, nestled in the mountains of southwest Germany, athletics isn't the top priority right now for 76-year-old javelin coach Klaus Bartonietz. These days, his attention is on his potato harvest. Having planted them in spring, he's now busy digging them up. "I was thinking I'd get 40 kilos, but I've got about 35 kilos. But it's hard work to get them all out of the ground," says the septuagenarian with a laugh.

In recent weeks, though, Klaus has been reaping another kind of harvest. He's just returned from Tokyo, where he coached Keshorn Walcott to his first World Championships gold medal. It was Klaus's second javelin world title, coming two years after he guided Neeraj Chopra to gold at the Budapest Worlds.

A second world title doesn't stir much excitement in Klaus. "Life goes on. Of course, I'm satisfied with the effort and the outcome. It's been effective," he says matter-of-factly.

For many, the sight of Klaus in the stands of Tokyo's Olympic Stadium — wearing a cap and T-shirt in the red and black of Trinidad and Tobago — came as a surprise. The German had ended his six-year stint with Neeraj last year, a period in which the Indian star became Olympic champion in Tokyo, World silver medallist in 2022 (Oregon), World champion in 2023 (Budapest), and Olympic silver medallist again in Paris in 2024.

Klaus had said one reason for stepping away was age. Neeraj, too, had moved on, beginning a new phase under world record holder Jan Zelezny.

Klaus admits he expected to spend his days tending to his garden when, late last year, he got a call from Walcott's manager. "He asked me if I would be willing to work as a consultant for Keshorn. Initially, we were only talking over the phone, and I gave him some advice — about once a week, then once every couple of weeks in winter. He was mostly in the Caribbean, so there wasn't any way to go there to train him. Then, at the end of April, it happened a couple of times. After that, he had a training camp in Portugal, and that's when we came together in May," he recalls.

Whatever they're doing, it's working. Walcott, who became the youngest Olympic men's javelin champion when he won gold in 2012, threw a season's best of 88.16m to

Guiding hand, golden arm: Klaus Bartonietz with Neeraj Chopra during a training session that shaped India's Olympic dream. K. R. DEEPAK

win his first world title, nine years after his last medal at a global event.

Klaus is quick to downplay his role. "I think we really overestimate the contribution of a coach! I can only guess why he wanted to work with me. He wasn't performing badly — he's been consistently over 85 metres, and he's thrown 90 as well. I think he was a little under the radar after 2021 despite those big throws. What I actually did was get him to train a little less. I wanted him to throw less and think more about what he needed to do as a javelin thrower," he says.

While Klaus expected Walcott to produce some big throws in Tokyo, he hadn't imagined gold. "I wasn't expecting that he would win gold. Of course not. I thought maybe he'd throw 86 or 87m in the best case, but I guess it's not very far from 87 to 88. I was expecting a good result, but I also know anything can happen. Still, it came as a surprise when he won," he says.

In a World Championships full of surprises, the javelin final was no exception. Walcott became one of the oldest to win the title. World leader Julian Weber failed to make the podium, America's relatively unknown Curtis Thompson did, and Olympic champion Arshad Nadeem finished 10th.

From an Indian perspective, there was both disappointment and promise. Defending champion Neeraj finished eighth — his first time outside the top two at a major event since 2018 — but the emergence of 25-year-old Sachin Yadav, who came within 40 centimetres of a podium finish on debut, offered reason for optimism.

Klaus has high praise for Sachin. "I wouldn't have been surprised if Sachin had won a medal. Half a metre more and he would have been on the podium. He was already over 86 metres and at that distance, 40 centimetres is nothing," he says.

At 6'5" and nearly 110 kilograms, Sachin combines size and strength with technique, says Klaus. "He's very tall. That's a great benefit, but he's also technically very sound. These guys are all strong, but it's not about how much you can lift or sprint.

Sachin's best points are that he's both powerful and technically good. He has a very stable front leg and great coordination," he adds.

"Sachin shouldn't chase 95m"

Klaus doesn't think Sachin's 86.27m throw in Tokyo will remain his Personal Best for long. "Do I think he can throw 90 metres? Of course he can. It's very possible," he says.

But he cautions against obsession with distance. "I don't even think 95 metres is impossible for Sachin. But you need to be realistic. Neeraj threw 86m in 2016 and it took him nearly nine years to get to 90 in competition. Neeraj started young. He was 18 when he threw 86m. Sachin is around 24 or 25. And the road to 95m is very stony. It takes a lot out of you. (Johannes) Vetter threw 97m and paid the price with his body. That number can play with your head too," he says.

Instead, Klaus wants Sachin to stabilise his current level. "We should avoid all this talk of 90 metres. It should be about consistency. We had this young German (Max Dehning) who threw 90 but now he's at 75. All this hype about metres is useless. It's counterproductive. Sachin needs to stabilise at 85–86m, as Neeraj did around 88. If he can throw 85–86m anytime, he'll always be in contention for the Commonwealth Games and the Olympics," he says.

Neeraj can still win Olympic gold

Neeraj, Klaus believes, will remain in the mix for the Los Angeles Games. The Tokyo result was a setback, but Klaus admits the injury Neeraj suffered beforehand made things difficult. "I didn't speak much to him after the final. He looked very upset and disappointed, and it's hard to know what to say then. He's a good sportsperson. He congratulated Keshorn and said he'd do better. I think he had some health problems and couldn't train for two weeks. He was very good in qualification but couldn't repeat it the next day. Sometimes it's just luck," he says.

Could Neeraj have trained differently to avoid injury? Klaus refuses to speculate. "I don't know what the training program looks like, so I can't say he should have done something differently. Injuries are unpredictable. There's always a risk when you're training. Neeraj once aggravated his groin injury making a very easy throw. Once he fractured his finger doing hurdle jumps. If you don't want to get injured, stay home — and then you might fall down the stairs!" he laughs.

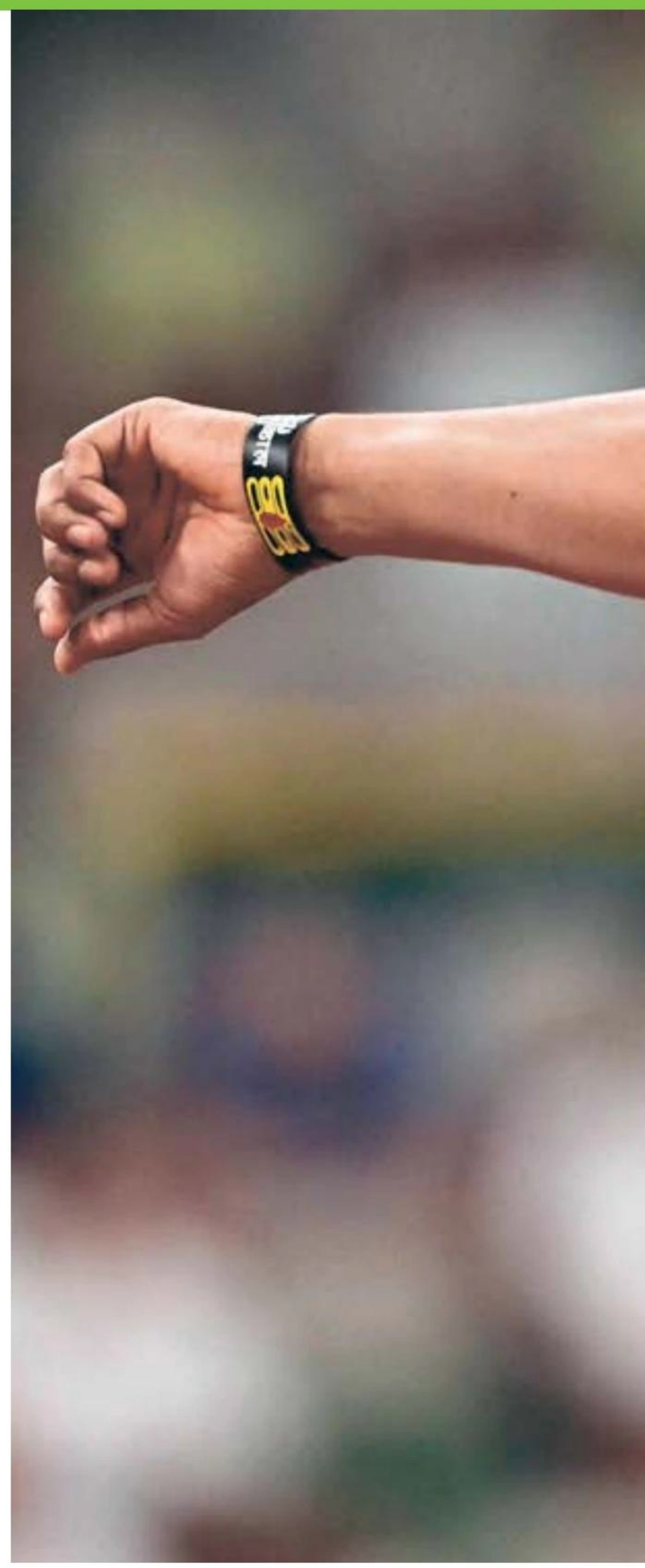
What Klaus hopes Neeraj can avoid, though, is the pressure. "There's so much pressure on him. I'd suggest to Indians: put less pressure on your athletes. Enjoy them and let them enjoy the competition. There's no point giving them advice from outside," he says. What also bothered him was the hype around the 90m barrier. "Everyone made it out to be a kind of club. That influences the public and reaches the athlete. Of course, at Worlds and Olympics, there's always pressure, but the extra noise doesn't help," he says.

Neeraj has handled that noise well for years, but this time things didn't fall into place. "He was surely one of the contenders for a medal. He was the World champion and Olympic silver medallist, but now he's the hunted," says Klaus.

Still, Klaus believes Neeraj has it in him to return to the podium. "He has the capacity to win another Olympic medal. Jan Zelezny did it three times, so he knows what it takes mentally. Neeraj's still young, 27 or 28. He aims high but isn't overconfident — that's important. He's dealt with injury before, and he's thrown 90 metres. He also has a very good physiotherapist in Ishan Marwaha, who's worked with him for years. That helps. I think he'll be in contention again," says Klaus.

There will be other challengers, of course. "Anderson (Peters) and Arshad (Nadeem) are about the same age as Neeraj. For the next three years, these three will be at the top. It's hard to say who will come out on top at the big events. You can do everything right and still have the bad luck that Weber had in Tokyo," he says.

Klaus is confident that Walcott, too, can stay in the mix despite being in his thirties. "I think Keshorn can



still be competitive at the Los Angeles Games. He's been doing this since he was 18 and stayed consistent. It's not just about age; it's about biological age, health, and the support team. Can he bring his body to the right condition at the right time? Weber, Peters, Neeraj, and Keshorn all have the brains to be champions. They can think about their training and reflect on what they're doing," he says.

Olympic gold still the favourite

Despite having worked with both, Klaus says he can't compare Neeraj and Walcott. "They have very different personalities and very

different development pathways," he says. Yet, both have won gold in the same stadium in Tokyo — Walcott the 2025 world title, Neeraj the Olympic one — and here Klaus does have a favourite.

"Winning the gold at the Tokyo Olympics is still my favourite medal. It's the greatest medal with the most impact on your life. It made a lot of people around me proud. I had a professor from Russia who was so excited that one of his students could coach someone to win a gold," says Klaus.

Would he ever work with Neeraj again? Despite his affection for the Indian, Klaus doesn't see that happening. "I don't want people to speculate why I wasn't working with Neeraj. It wasn't because I had better opportunities. I just felt I was getting too old for daily coaching. It was good to work with him. It kept me physically and mentally fit, but when you're close to 80, it gets tricky.

"I don't think I'll be in a position to start coaching Neeraj again. I love him, but the responsibility is too high! With Keshorn, it's just a bit of winter assistance that grew from there. I still feel I'm retired," he says with a smile.

Next year might see Klaus in Scotland with Walcott for the Commonwealth Games. But for now, his schedule is full. "I'll complete my potato harvest and prepare for sowing next year. I'm going to plant all kinds — golden, red, blue ones, some Swiss and German varieties from the 1930s. It's all organic. We'll see which grows better," he says.

Technical strength: "These guys are all strong, but it's not about how much you can lift or sprint. Sachin's best points are that he's both powerful and technically good" — Klaus Bartonietz.

AFP

THEATRE OF SPORT, CHENNAI STYLE

Sportstar correspondents capture the sights, sounds, and emotions from Chennai's Pro Kabaddi League leg — a city where fans cheer effort as much as victory, and every match **unfolds like theatre.**

Chennai has a unique contract with sport: give your all, and the city will give you its heart, win or lose.

We saw it when the crowd at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium applauded Pakistan's players after the 1999 Test win, acknowledging the quality of cricket above all rivalry. And we saw it again in 2023, when the fans welcomed Afghanistan's win over Pakistan with the same generosity of spirit.

That same affection has now extended into the kabaddi arena, as the city played host to the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) from September 29.

Even on nights when Tamil Thalaivas — the home team — wasn't on the roster, the SDAT Multipurpose Indoor Stadium was packed to capacity. Fans had to wait a couple of days to watch their side in action, and when the time came, they turned up in force.

Led by the experienced Arjun Deshwal, the Thalaivas took on U Mumba in the first game of the Chennai leg. Supporters began streaming in nearly two hours before the starting whistle, armed with banners, jerseys, and *parai* drums — a sound unmistakably Tamil, reverberating through the venue.

Of all the teams, the Thalaivas drew the loudest cheer. The energy was palpable from the moment they stepped on the mat. When Arjun went in for his first raid, the roar hit 119 dB **(facing page, below)** — Chennai had made its presence felt.

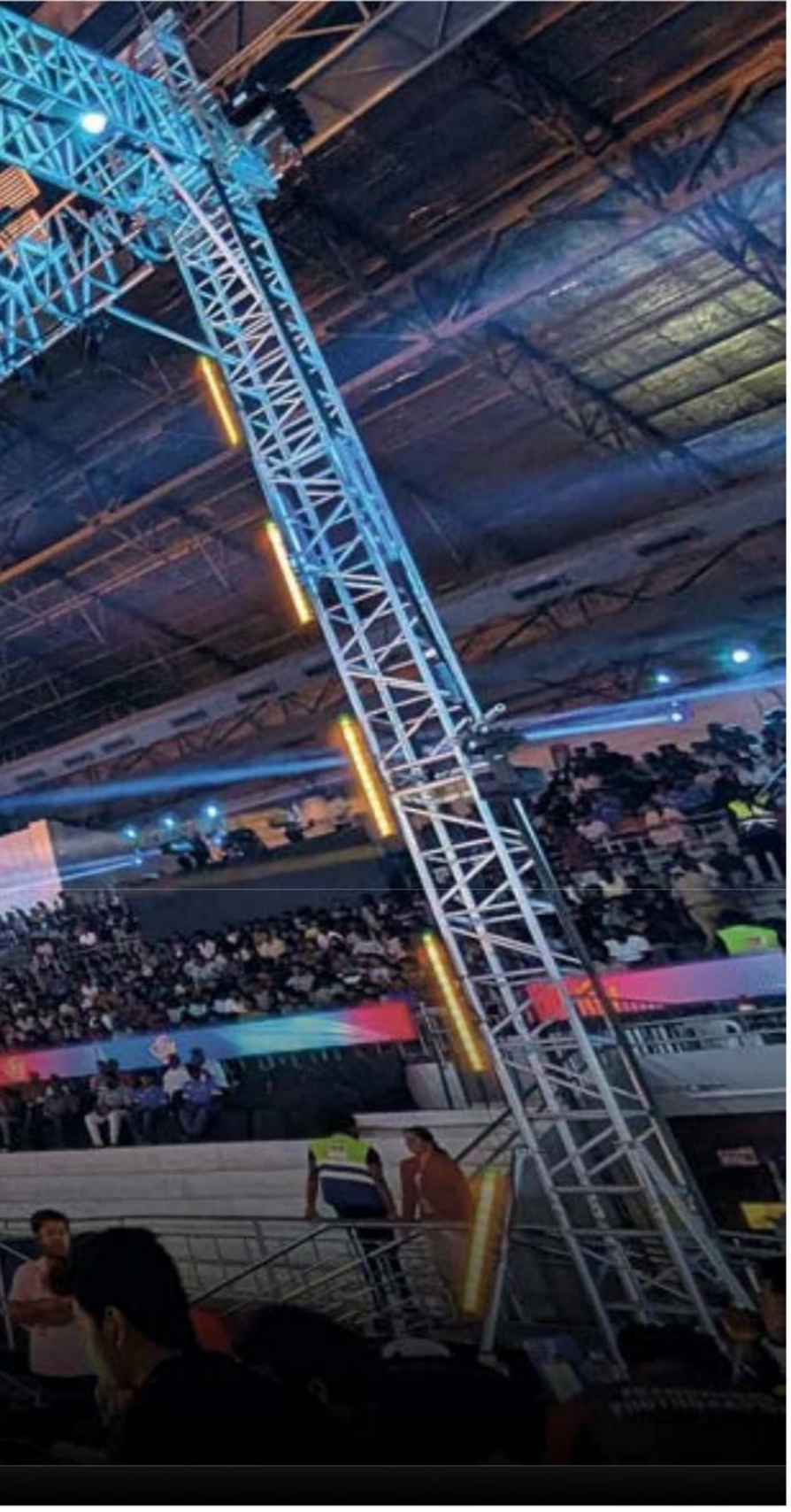
One fan slipped past security to rush onto the mat, attempting to touch Arjun's feet — a gesture that captured how personal this connection has become. The atmosphere wasn't merely supportive; it was electric.

Despite Arjun's efforts and the defenders' resilience, U Mumba proved too strong on the night, handing the Thalaivas a tough defeat. Yet, instead of silence or jeers, the capacity crowd rose as one, applauding their team long after the final whistle. It was the sort of ovation only Chennai seems capable of — a reminder that here, kabaddi has found a home.

Nigamanth P.

Where sport meets stagecraft

The first thing that strikes a visitor upon entering the SDAT Multipurpose Indoor Stadium in the late evening for a PKL match is the scale of the lighting rig. The mat itself is not



Full house: Even on nights when the Tamil Thalaivas weren't playing, the SDAT Indoor Stadium buzzed with energy, every seat taken. PICS: NIGAMANTH P

immediately visible, hidden behind a ring of blazing LED hoardings. What greets the eye instead is the sheer verticality of the lighting structure: rows of lamps aimed across the arena — most facing the mat, some trained on the crowd — all dazzlingly bright. For this reporter, kabaddi existed primarily as a television spectacle. But watching it live, however, revealed an entirely different theatre.

That sense of theatre begins the moment one walks in. The speakers pulse with up-tempo tracks, more Tamil songs on Thalaivas matchdays, to rouse the crowd. Once play begins, the music gives way to the sharp countdown of the raid clock or the echoing chant of "Do or Die," blaring from a line-array above, pressing down on the audience like atmospheric weight.

The lights play their part too. Each match opens with the captains' handshake — a brief truce highlighted by spotlights. Do-or-Die raids trigger flashing graphics across the LED panels, a reminder of the stakes. Together, the lighting and sound systems shape the entire experience, ensuring no one in the arena loses the thread: an essential element for a sport still expanding its audience.

It's easy to romanticise sport as something so gripping it needs no embellishment, that true competition speaks for itself. Perhaps that still holds at times. But if sport is theatre, then great athletes are its actors and it is the craft of lights, sound, and set design that transforms a good play into a memorable one.

The actors of PKL are of the highest calibre. Night after night, their athleticism, strength, and nerve produce gripping drama. Reflecting on that spectacle, it feels only right to acknowledge the unseen professionals — the sound and light engineers — who elevate high-quality sport into a fully immersive experience, both for those in the arena and those watching from afar.

Aditya Padinjat

Fine blend: Designing this complex was as much an exercise in vision as in precision. While the exterior presents a refined, contemporary look, it's the inside story that truly leaves an impression. VIJAY SONEJI

SPOTLIGHT

BLUEPRINT FOR GLORY

From **high-performance** swimming pools to column-free multi-sports arenas, the Veer Savarkar Sports Complex combines elite training, community spaces, and residential amenities under one roof.

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At the Veer Savarkar Sports Complex in Naranpura, Gujarat, a prevailing sense of spatial complexity greets you wherever you turn. It's what happens when you try to pack a great deal into too little area — something that's not immediately apparent. Yet, a closer look reveals a masterfully organised layout, thanks to a fluid design language and clever internal compartmentalisation.

Designing this complex was as much an exercise in vision as in precision. While the exterior presents a refined, contemporary look, it's the inside story that truly leaves an impression.

"The biggest challenge was to accommodate 17 sporting disciplines on just 20 acres of land," says Gujarat-based architect Sachin Gandhi, adding that his team drew from Olympic standards and Khelo India guidelines to ensure every facility met international benchmarks. Moreover, accessibility has also been ensured through the inclusion of ramps and dedicated elevators for para-athletes.

Sustainability was built into the project from day one. "We aimed for green building certification and have already received the Platinum rating," Gandhi shares. The four venues within the complex are wrapped in an additional skin that blocks direct sunlight, allowing only indirect light to filter through — reducing both energy consumption and glare. Solar panels on the terraces generating around 300 kilowatts further strengthen the eco-friendly nature of the complex.

Economy in design runs throughout the complex. The multi-sports arena, for instance, houses facilities for badminton, basketball, volleyball, and gymnastics under one roof. "We have accommodated 16 badminton courts on a single floor with seating for over 5,000 spectators," says Gandhi. "We wanted a column-free span of 150 by 80 metres, making the roof both a structural feature and an aesthetic statement."

A similar blend of form and function defines the Aquatics Stadium — the venue for the 2025 Asian Aquatics Championships,

hosted in India for the first time. With seating for more than 1,500 spectators, the stadium's main pool, built by Italian company Myrtha Pools, features a mobile bulkhead that can split it into two halves when needed. At first glance, it may seem like any other pool, but every element has been meticulously engineered for performance, we soon learn. Hakimuddin Habibulla, Managing Director for India and South Asia at Myrtha Pools India Pvt. Ltd., reveals the detailed thought process behind its construction.

Unlike traditional concrete pools, this facility uses pre-engineered, PVC-laminated stainless-steel panels. "At the bottom is a reinforced special PVC membrane installed on the floor. It's not glued or fixed but laid in place and held down by the water pressure. The membrane has a reinforced fibreglass mesh inside, so it's very strong," explains Hakim, as he is fondly called.

Even the placement of the water inlets was optimised through computational fluid dynamics. Positioned about 0.8 metres below the surface in two layers, they circulate water gently without creating turbulence. The result: smoother flow, minimal interference, and optimal stroke efficiency.

This difference has turned out to be significant. Olympian Sajan Prakash and national record-holder Rishabh Das describe this pool as faster than any other they've trained in. "We can really focus on our strokes and refine technical aspects here. The lane ropes are wider, and it's designed to control waves, so it's a huge advantage," says Sajan, adding that a pre-event month-long training camp at the same venue proved invaluable. With Myrtha supplying pools for major international competitions, they were able to train in conditions identical to those at the World Championships and the Olympics.

So where does the edge in performance truly come from?

Hakim points to the pool's depth. "The pool is two metres deep on both sides and slopes into a larger section that's three metres deep," he explains. "Deeper pools tend to have less rebound from the floor and contribute slightly to performance." Combined with world-class starting blocks, wave-absorbing lane lines, and four-sided overflow gutters, the design ensures every element enhances speed and consistency.

Versatility, too, is integral to the pool's design. The 1.5-metre mobile wall allows the 50-metre pool to be divided into two 25-metre sections for short-course events or simultaneous activities such as water polo and training. "Our pools don't use tiles at all — that's one of the biggest pain points we've eliminated," Hakim shares. "Everything is PVC-laminated stainless steel, factory-laminated for strength and durability. That makes it much easier to maintain. And with European standards for water quality, we ensure swimmers always train in safe, consistent conditions."

For India's top swimmers, this pool seems to have set a new benchmark. "I've been swimming for more than 20 years and have seen how facilities have evolved in the country. Having this kind of pool in India is a huge blessing for us," says Sajan, who finished the Asian Aquatics Championships with one silver and two bronze medals. It turned out to be India's most successful swimming and diving campaign yet, with 13 medals in total — seven of them won by Srihari Nataraj. Hakim, understandably, must be a happy man.

Swift affirmation: Sajan Prakash calls the pool at the Naranpura complex one of India's fastest — and his results at the Asian Aquatics Championships seem to agree.
ASIAN AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Inaugurated last month, the sports complex — built at a cost of ₹825 crore — is one of India's largest, seamlessly combining Olympic-standard training infrastructure with community spaces and residential amenities. Designed to host international events — from the recently concluded Commonwealth Weightlifting Championships to the upcoming 2029 World Police and Fire Games — it also stands ready to serve as a potential venue for the 2030 Commonwealth Games and the 2036 Olympics, should India secure its bids.

The writer was at the venue on an invitation from Gujarat Sports Infrastructure Development Company Limited (GSID).

FROM THE WORLD OF FOOTBALL

FIGHT AND FLAIR

Estevao Willian's **late heroics** helped Chelsea topple Liverpool, while Kylian Mbappe registered a Champions League hat-trick.

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FOR MORE STORIES

The World Champions vs the Champion of England — that was the showpiece fixture in the latest matchday of the Premier League. Both Chelsea and Liverpool entered the fixture after losing their last league games, against Brighton and Hove Albion and Crystal Palace, respectively. It was a hard one to call and had all the ingredients of a brilliant contest.

At home, Chelsea had slightly more reason to believe, and in the end, Stamford Bridge rejoiced. The Blues edged a 2-1 win against the Reds, and the fact that it was 18-year-old Estevao Willian who scored a 90+5-minute winner made the occasion all the more special for Chelsea and its faithful.

Moises Caicedo had already brought down the roof at Stamford Bridge with a screamer from outside the box when he opened the scoring in the 14th minute. With Chelsea dominating the overall stats, it looked like the Blues would get a narrow win at home, but Cody Gakpo levelled the scores with an opportunistic strike set up by Alexander Isak.

With scores level at the 90th minute, all signs pointed towards a draw, but in the fifth minute of added time, Marc Cucurella made a darting run down the left flank and squared the ball to Estevao at the far post. The cross took Liverpool goalkeeper Giorgi Mamardashvili out of the equation, and the Brazilian slid in to slot the ball home to clinch three points for his team.

Another big piece of news out of English top-flight football was Crystal Palace's 19-game unbeaten run coming to an end after it lost 1-2 against Everton. With the score level at the 90th-minute mark, it seemed like Oliver Glasner's men would keep their unbeaten run

Young and hungry: 18-year-old Estevao Willian (facing page, second from right) made it count with a last-gasp winner against Liverpool. REUTERS

alive, but Jack Grealish left it late as he found the net in the third minute of added time as the Hill Dickinson Stadium broke into rapture. To honour Grealish's late contribution, Everton changed its bio on the social media platform *X*, which reads (at the time of writing), 'Grealish for England.'

Manchester United returned to winning ways as it beat newly promoted Sunderland with goals from Mason Mount and Benjamin Sesko. It was also a debut for Belgian keeper Senne Lammens, who looked confident between the sticks and finished with a clean sheet — the Red Devils' first this season.

The North London clubs had a good week, with Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur clinching wins against West Ham and Leeds United, respectively. However, it was not all pleasant for the Gunners, who saw their captain, Martin Odegaard, get subbed off in the first half after sustaining an injury.

Erling Haaland's goal was enough for Manchester City to edge past Brentford 1-0, but Pep Guardiola will be worried after Rodri had to come off due to an injury, with the Spanish coach hoping it would not be another lengthy period off the pitch for the midfielder. At the end of matchday 7, Arsenal tops the table with 16 points. Liverpool remains second with 15 points after dropping points, while Tottenham and Bournemouth remain third and fourth with 14 points. Manchester City is fifth with 13 points, Chelsea seventh with 11, and Manchester United (which climbed to the top half of the table) eighth with 10 points.

Clinical shot: Everton's Jack Grealish left it late as he found the net in the third minute of added time, ending Crystal Palace's 19-game unbeaten run. REUTERS

La Liga

Barcelona started its La Liga clash against Sevilla under pressure to get a win and climb back to the top of the standings. However, in a shock result, Hansi Flick's men succumbed to a 1-4 loss against Sevilla, which gave its fans at the Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan Stadium plenty of reasons to celebrate.

Alexis Sanchez opened the scoring for the home team with a penalty in the 13th minute, with Isaac Romero doubling the lead in the 36th minute. Marcus Rashford pulled one back with a stunning volley just before half-time, but the Catalans could not capitalise as they conceded two more in the second half, with Jose Angel Carmona and Akor Adams finding the net to guide their team to a comprehensive victory.

While Barcelona suffered a torrid week, it was a happy one for its arch-rival, Real Madrid, as Xabi Alonso's men beat 10-man Villarreal 3-1. Vinicius Junior scored a brace, and Kylian Mbappe maintained his brilliant form by scoring his team's third to take his season tally to nine goals.

For the other Madrid giant, Atletico, it was another frustrating week as it played out a 1-1 draw against Celta Vigo. To make matters worse, Clement Lenglet saw a red card in the 40th minute, and the opponent took advantage of the

Mr Dependable: Bayern Munich's Harry Kane continued his fine form with a goal against Eintracht Frankfurt. REUTERS

extra man as Iago Aspas grabbed the equaliser in the 68th minute. Atletico was gifted the lead when Carl Starfelt put the ball into his own net in the sixth minute. The Basque clubs had contrasting fortunes as Athletic Bilbao clinched a 2-1 win against Mallorca, while Real Sociedad lost 0-1 to Rayo Vallecano. Meanwhille, Real Betis beat Espanyol 2-1.

At the end of matchday 8, Real Madrid tops the standings with 21 points. Barcelona is second with 19. Villarreal and Betis are third and fourth with 16 and 15 points, respectively. Atletico is fifth with 13 points.

Bundesliga

Defending champion Bayern Munich cruised past Eintracht Frankfurt 3-0 courtesy of a brace by Luis Diaz and a strike by Harry Kane. The Englishman became the first player in history to score 11 goals in the first six games of a Bundesliga season — a stark reflection of how prolific the striker has been this season.

Bayer Leverkusen beat Union Berlin 2-0, while Borussia Dortmund played out a 1-1 draw against RB Leipzig. VfB Stuttgart maintained its good form, beating Heidenheim 1-0.

At the end of matchday 6, Bayern tops the table with 18 points. Dortmund is second with 14 points. Leipzig and Stuttgart are third and fourth with 13 and 12, respectively.

Serie A

AC Milan made its intentions clear to challenge for the Italian title by overcoming defending champion Napoli, despite playing the majority of the second half with 10 men. Christian Pulisic was the star man for the Red and Blacks, assisting Alexis Saelemaekers in the third minute before finding the back of the net himself after the half-hour mark. Kevin De Bruyne halved the deficit from the spot in the second period after Pervis Estupinan was sent off, but Milan battled on to secure the statement win.

However, Pulisic had a night to forget in the following game against Juventus, where he missed a penalty as Milan fumbled the chance to go top of the league going into the international break, after being held to a goalless draw.

Napoli, on the other hand, assumed the top spot after beating Genoa, thanks to goals from Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa and in-form Rasmus Hojlund. It is tied on points (15) with AS Roma, while Milan slipped to third with 13. Its city rival Inter, meanwhile, notched wins against Cagliari and Cremonese to sit fourth with 12 points.

Ligue 1

After a perfect start to the campaign, injury-plagued Paris Saint-Germain dropped five points

On target: Kylian Mbappe scored a blistering hattrick against FC Kairat. AFP

out of a possible nine as its title defence turned into a sterner test. Olympique de Marseille, led by manager Roberto De Zerbi, was gifted a win by the Parisians after captain Marquinhos fumbled the ball into his own net five minutes into their clash.

While it managed a 2-0 win against Auxerre, in its following game, PSG was troubled by Kylian Mbappe's brother, Ethan, who helped LOSC Lille hold the French giant to a 1-1 draw. After Nuno Mendes gave the visitor the lead, Ethan, a former PSG player himself, came off the bench with eight minutes remaining and fired the ball into the bottom left corner, with his brother watching from the stands. Marseille, meanwhile, kept its winning run alive, beating RC Strasbourg and FC Metz, climbing to second in the standings with 15 points, one behind leader PSG.

Additionally, Ansu Fati seems to be settling in nicely with AS Monaco, scoring in three straight league games, including a brace in his side's 2-2 draw against OGC Nice. He leads the league's goalscoring charts with five, level with Strasbourg's Joaquin Panichelli.

UEFA Champions League

We are only two matchdays into the latest edition of the top tier of European football, and the surprise results and upsets are already in full flow. Perhaps the biggest of them all was Liverpool's. The Reds, coming off a successful season and an equally good transfer window, succumbed to a 1-0 defeat against Turkish champion Galatasaray. Dominik Szoboszlai gave away an early penalty, which was coolly converted by masked marksman Victor Osimhen, condemning Arne Slot's side to a forgettable night in Istanbul.

But the blockbuster clash of the matchday was between heavy-hitters Paris Saint-Germain and FC Barcelona. Despite fielding a depleted side against the Spanish giant, the Parisians proved why they are the defending champions, eking out a 2-1 victory and marking a third successive away triumph against the Catalans.

The visitor was put on the back foot after Marcus Rashford found Ferran Torres in front of goal after beating PSG's offside trap. However, PSG levelled things up before half-time thanks to a blistering run from Nuno Mendes, who set up a goal for 19-year-old Senny Mayulu. The game transformed into a gripping affair after that, with both sides wasting chances to take the lead. However, it was PSG substitute Goncalo Ramos who had the final say, firing in from close range in the 90th minute.

Meanwhile, Barca's arch-rival Real Madrid had contrasting fortunes on its trip to Almaty — the easternmost city ever to host a game in the competition. Kylian Mbappe kept up his fiery start to the season with a hat-trick, while Eduardo Camavinga and Brahim Diaz piled on the misery on debutant and Kazakhstani champion FC Kairat.

Atletico Madrid also made light work of Eintracht Frankfurt, winning 5-1 in a game that saw Antoine Griezmann net his 200th goal for the club. German giants Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund notched up big wins against Pafos and Athletic Bilbao to maintain their unbeaten start to the campaign.

English clubs Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur dropped precious points after being held to 2-2 draws by AS Monaco and Bodo/Glimt, respectively, while Chelsea managed to edge Benfica 1-0 at home in a game which marked former manager Jose Mourinho's return to Stamford Bridge. Its London rival Arsenal banked on Gabriel Martinelli and Bukayo Saka's strikes to take all three points against Olympiacos.

Only six clubs — among them Bayern, Real, PSG, Inter Milan and Arsenal — have had a perfect start to the new season in Europe, with Azerbaijani club Qarabağ FK the unexpected entrant in the list.

Results updated as of October 6

MARC OF A LEGEND

In one of the sport's **greatest comeback** stories, Marc Marquez delivered a commanding performance to seal his seventh world title.

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To the outside world, the sight of Marc Marquez winning his seventh MotoGP world championship title seemed destined this season. The Spaniard had dominated proceedings in his Ducati — 11 race wins, 15 podiums, multiple records shattered, and a commanding lead, growing every race weekend.

All that stood between Marc and another historic crown was a simple equation: finish just three points ahead of his younger brother, Alex Marquez, at the Motul Grand Prix in Japan. When Marc crossed the line in second place, safely ahead of Alex, the moment carried an emotional punch that he could not hold back.

The 2025 champion wept as he circled the track. Rivals slowed to congratulate him. Alex, who had parked ahead, celebrated as if it were his own triumph, while the Ducati team swarmed its ace. Marc buried his head in his hands before letting out a scream of pure relief and joy.

He had finally reclaimed the crown he last wore in 2019 — a journey marked by more than 100 crashes and four surgeries that nearly ended his career.

Marc's first six world championships came in spectacular fashion. He won his first in 2013 at just 20 years old, making him the youngest premier-class champion in history. Between 2013 and 2019, he accumulated six titles, and his fearless style made him a global phenomenon.

The hunger to win was overpowering, but it came at a staggering cost. In 2020, a season shortened and restricted due to the pandemic, Marc suffered an intense crash, resulting in a broken humerus.

Class of his own: The Spaniard had finally reclaimed the crown he last wore in 2019 — a journey marked by more than 100 crashes and four surgeries that nearly ended his career. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

Despite the severity of the injury, he rushed his post-surgery comeback too soon and aggravated it. He missed the entire 2020 season and, in the next three years, continued to battle injuries. It was a four-year period of pain, surgeries, setbacks, rehabilitation, and, compounding it all, uncertainty.

But the fire within burned as brightly as ever. Switching to the Ducati Gresini team in 2024, Marc began rediscovering the joy of riding. The Italian outfit soon knew he was destined to move to the factory team the following season — and he delivered on that promise, albeit with the fastest bike on the track.

What followed in Indonesia, however, dampened the mood in the Ducati garage. After a difficult qualifying session, a race incident left Marc with a fractured collarbone. "Not the best way to celebrate the championship, but this is racing," he later wrote, summing up the bittersweet turn of events.

His triumph, though, has already been immortalised. He claimed his place on the MotoGP trophy, the iconic 'Tower of Champions'. Seven pieces of silverware now bear his name, yet for Marc, the 2025 one is 'more than a number'.

Down to the wire

22 points now separate the two McLaren drivers after George Russell cruised to a comfortable victory at the Singapore Grand Prix.

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The Singapore Grand Prix is always a heated affair around Marina Bay. The infamous street circuit has produced several thrilling races in recent years, and many expected the 2025 edition to be no different. However, there was more drama within the teams than the action on track.

The 62-lap Singapore GP is one of the toughest races on the calendar. But it ran largely incident-free with no Safety Cars, and all 20 drivers finishing the race for the first time in the event's history.

George Russell built on a stellar qualifying performance to deliver a controlled, error-free race, claiming his second win of the season. The Mercedes driver, often trailing the frontrunners this year, ensured that neither the McLaren drivers nor Max Verstappen could challenge his dominance in the race.

Defending champion Verstappen, yet to conquer the Singaporean challenge, secured second place, fending off a late charge from Lando Norris. The British driver finished ahead of his teammate and rival, Oscar Piastri, a result that cemented McLaren's defence of their constructors' title. For now, the team could celebrate the points haul, but beneath the surface, tensions will be at an all-time high. The papaya pair's brewing rivalry has long been a source of intrigue, but it has increasingly threatened to spill beyond the confines of friendly competition. The latest incident at the race start was a stark reminder.

Piastri and Norris, starting third and fourth respectively, made contact just a few moments in. Norris managed to edge ahead, leaving the Australian visibly frustrated on the radio. It was the opening salvo in an extended period of discontent in his cockpit. The team's decision to review it afterwards only compounded the frustration — "That's not fair. I'm sorry, that's not fair."

After a disappointing weekend in Azerbaijan, Piastri was eager to reclaim lost ground. However, the shaky start and a compromised pit stop significantly dented his chances of extending his lead. McLaren's far-fetched commitment to give both an equal shot has backfired often this season.

For Norris, it was a clear statement of intent that he was ready to take the fight deeper. Last year, he had triumphed at this very circuit, a victory that boosted his confidence and strengthened his belief in pursuing a long-shot title ambition. While Verstappen remained too far ahead for Norris to mount a serious challenge, the situation is more promising now.

A 22-point gap separates the two McLaren drivers. Piastri still holds the lead, but Norris's recent form has kept him well within striking distance. With six races remaining, the numbers suggest that five are still mathematically in contention, yet it is clear the championship is increasingly shaping into a two-way battle — at most three — with all eyes on the McLarens.

Strong hold: Mercedes' George Russell built on a stellar qualifying performance to deliver a controlled, error-free race, claiming his second win of the season. AFP

FOR MORE STORIES

THE DANCE OF CHAMPIONS

In tennis, **timing** can be the difference between merely hitting the ball and truly commanding the court. Paul Fein shares tips on how to get it right.

Paul Fein

Whether an athlete blocks a shot in basketball, lands a counterpunch in boxing, or hits a pitch in baseball, he needs excellent timing. In fact, this fundamental skill is critical in almost every sport. And none more so than in tennis, where every shot requires contacting a moving ball with precision while almost always on the run, except when serving. Precise timing generates power, ensures accuracy, and increases consistency.

World-class tennis players make timing the most difficult shots look easy. In addition to their superb athleticism, elite coaching, and intensive practice, they understand the keys to great timing. Let's review the basics as well as the fine points of tennis timing. Then you can evaluate your timing and identify areas where you can improve.

Adjust your timing to the existing conditions

Note the weather conditions: The speed and direction of the wind, the temperature, the humidity, and precipitation (if any). Determine how each of these variables affects your timing and adjust your timing accordingly. Given that the narrowness of a singles court is 27 feet (8.23 metres) compared to several other sports — especially the expansive, diamond-shaped baseball field — a shot contacted too early or late can easily land outside the singles sideline in the doubles alley for an error.

Wind poses the most common and vexing timing challenge. Note the speed, direction,

Maestro moves: Roger Federer was renowned for turning his head on groundstrokes as the ball came within a yard of his contact point so that his eyes stayed focused on the ball through the contact point. He also kept his head still, further aiding his sighting. As a result, the 20-time Major champion timed the ball exceedingly well and could adjust quickly to any abrupt or unpredictable late changes in the flight of the ball. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

In addition to their superb athleticism, elite coaching, and intensive practice, world-class tennis players understand the keys to great timing.

and consistency of the wind. When the wind is with your opponent, shorten the backswing on your groundstrokes and make your volleys even more compact. Otherwise, a late swing often results in an error, because your margin of error is much smaller on very windy days.

Conversely, press your advantage when the wind is at your back. You have more time to attack with topspin groundstrokes; you can overpower one-handed backhands; and your kick serves will bounce higher, and your slice serves will swerve wider. But beware of your opponent's weak, underspin, mishit, or fluke shots that land in the forecourt and are held up or buffeted by the wind. These oncoming balls can prove tricky if you misjudge and then mistime them.

Finally, lateral winds, especially gusts, can blow a ball out of your reach or in too close to your torso. They force you to realign your position quickly to try to contact the ball in the 'strike zone'. Just as important, lateral winds require you to shorten your backswing and hit 'through the ball' as much as possible to control the shot. To that end, respect the percentages and go for less power and placement to reduce your errors.

Note the speed, levelness, and uniformity of the surface: All other things being equal, the faster the surface, the less time you have to run and hit the ball. A tilted surface changes the angle of incidence of the bounce. And a heavily used clay court, a worn-down grass court, and a cracked hard court will produce uneven and unpredictable bounces that can disrupt your timing. The solution is to move your feet more than normal. Take small steps with a wide stance (each foot moving a small distance from its previous position) to adjust for strange bounces and to maintain a stable platform to support your shot. Note the speed of the ball and estimate how much the balls slow down and bounce lower — either by losing compression, becoming fluffy, or getting cold or wet — during the match. Make sure to modulate your swing so you keep the correct contact point, rather than hit the ball in front of it.

Let your senses guide your timing

Watch the ball intently and as long as possible: Roger Federer was renowned for turning his head on groundstrokes as the ball came within a yard of his contact point so that his eyes stayed focused on the ball through the contact point. He also kept his head still, further aiding his sighting. As a result, the 20-time Major champion timed the ball exceedingly well and could adjust quickly to any abrupt or unpredictable late changes in the flight of the ball. Similarly, the best servers like Serena Williams and Carlos Alcaraz keep their heads up as long as possible to watch the ball for as long as they can.

Listen to the sound of your opponent's shot: Evaluate the solidity of it to help determine its speed and spin. Then adjust your timing accordingly. Your vigilant, experienced eyes can often tell when your opponent's shot is contacted outside the 'sweet spot' and thus will produce less power and perhaps an unpredictable spin.

Know where you're positioned on the court when you hit the ball: In my 2021 instruction book, *The Fein Points of Tennis*, I wrote about the 'sixth sense': "When hitting shots on the run, world-class competitors have a sixth sense that tells them exactly where they're positioned. In sharp contrast, recreational players lack this court awareness and, as a result, often hit the wrong shot or err."

This positional awareness applies to returning short shots, deep shots, angle shots, and most importantly, wide shots. When your opponent forces you to hit the ball from outside the singles sideline (or even beyond the doubles sideline) for a passing shot or a go-for-broke down-the-line winner, strike the ball earlier, thus more in front of your usual contact point to keep your shot in the court. Rafael Nadal, the legendary King of Clay, exemplified perfect forehand timing in these two sprinting scenarios.

Understand how stroke technique affects timing

Note the ideal contact point for each stroke: For example, the contact point for a one-handed backhand is about six inches farther in front and thus comes earlier than for a two-handed backhand. Also, the contact point for the Western forehand is farther in front of the body than the semi-Western forehand; and the contact point for the semi-Western forehand is farther in front than that of the Eastern forehand. The contact point for crosscourt forehands and backhands is more in front and thus comes earlier than for their down-the-line

counterparts. The timing for power volleys differs greatly from that of drop volleys. Power volleys are struck with your hitting arm fully extended and far in front of your body. Conversely, drop volleys are contacted with your hitting arm bent — with a much looser grip (softer hands) and a more bevelled racket face — as the ball comes beside your body. The location of the contact point also varies with its height. High contact points are farther away from the torso than low contact points are.

Adjust the length of the backswing based on how much time you have: Andre Agassi's impeccable timing was honed between the ages of three and 13 by hitting an estimated million balls a year that were fired at him at up to 110 miles per hour by the ball machines that his father used in their Las Vegas backyard. "All you really need to succeed at tennis is fast eye-hand coordination," Emmanuel 'Mike' Agassi said in the 1993 biography, *AGASSI*. Indeed, Andre's short groundstroke backswing and extremely short serve return backswing evolved as a survival mechanism.

As a result, Agassi rarely contacted the ball early or late. The eight-time Major champion once averred that the correct contact point was the most important aspect of winning tennis. In today's speedier game, the shorter the backswing, the better, provided you generate power primarily with the legs, hips, torso, and shoulders. Outstanding younger players execute forehands without the head of the racket ever passing behind the plane of the front of their bodies. And this is almost the case for backhands.

Study the spin of the ball and determine how the topspin, underspin, or sidespin of your opponent's shot affects your timing: Extreme spins can bedevil even the most talented and experienced players. For example, every opponent, except perhaps Novak Djokovic, had trouble timing Nadal's ferocious, topspin lefty crosscourt forehands. These diabolical shots bounced fast, high, and away from opponents. Andy Roddick likened their relentless lethality to 'Chinese water torture'. Late in his career, Federer switched to a larger (97-sq.-in.) racket head with a bigger 'sweet spot' to hit the ball more solidly and reduce off-centre mishits.

Mystery man: Every opponent, except perhaps Novak Djokovic, had trouble timing Nadal's ferocious, topspin lefty crosscourt forehands.

While Federer couldn't counteract Nadal's topspin forehand on clay, teenager Steffi Graf overcame a different 'spin' challenge against another sinistral superstar, Martina Navratilova **(facing page)**, on grass. Navratilova's slice serve had stymied Graf, pulling her one-handed backhand wide in the ad court and setting up the American's incomparable volley. Graf, an intense perfectionist, figured out the low, swerving trajectory of Navratilova's serve in the 1988 Wimbledon final, broke it eight times, and dethroned her 5-7, 6-2, 6-1. Study the flight of the ball and experiment with different court positions and spins of your own so you can effectively counter extreme spins. This technical and timing challenge requires countless hours of practice until the required adjustments become habitual.

Racket head speed can rescue you: To handle oncoming balls that arrive faster than you've anticipated or that you initially misjudge, accelerate your racket head speed while keeping your swing as smooth and coordinated as possible. In emergencies, use your wrist on your forehand to 'flick' the shot like a wristy squash shot.

However, you can significantly alleviate this problem in the first place by early, efficient preparation. Knowledgeable tennis coaches and teaching professionals inculcate the 'Hit-Turn'. With this method, students turn immediately after their opponent contacts the ball and then

Smooth operator: Rigorous training, starting at an early age, has enabled top sliders like Novak Djokovic to move confidently and effortlessly.

move towards the ball in this position. Most shots require a hitting position. This position accomplishes two things: first, it allows the player to hit powerful shots or to shorten their stroke to deal with fast balls. Second, it immediately completes much of the racket's path, leaving the player with more time to deal with the oncoming shot. Players can pause in the hitting position or simply slow down before completing the stroke. If a player is late getting into — or passing through — the hitting position, their only option may be to speed up their stroke, which makes errors more likely.

Improve your footwork to improve your timing

A properly timed and correctly executed split step is essential for excellent ball timing, stresses BJ Miller, a biomechanics expert on the split step in tennis: "The split step is the first move in executing a shot," said Miller. "Often characterised as a single, instantaneous move, it actually has parts: the take-off, the flight, the touchdown, and the knee flex after touchdown. "The split step has four purposes: 1) It allows players to come into balance. 2) It results in a flexing of the knees to produce a forceful first move to the ball. 3) It results in storage of elastic energy in the player's legs to make the first move to the ball even more forceful. 4) It allows a player to make their first move towards the oncoming ball as soon as the player detects the ball's direction, roughly 0.2 seconds.

"The height of the split step should be approximately three inches," continued Miller. "Much higher split steps take too much time. The knees should be flexed at least 70° — the angle of the front of the lower leg to the front of the thigh — just before landing to get the maximum push-off for the first move to the oncoming ball. Upon landing, the knees should flex somewhat more so the total knee flex is at least 70°. The landing should occur at the instant of the opponent's ball contact. The direction of the oncoming ball can be detected in roughly 0.2 seconds which is, fortuitously, roughly the duration of the after-landing knee flex. Therefore, the first move to the ball can be initiated roughly 0.2 seconds after the opponent hits it."

Arrive with a well-timed, controlled slide: Rigorous training, starting at an early age, has enabled today's top sliders to move confidently and effortlessly. From Bjorn Borg and Guillermo Vilas in the 1970s to Nadal and Alcaraz this century, clay-court champions have mastered the art of sliding. As these maestros slide and glide towards the oncoming ball, their movement then links with and helps initiate their body's kinetic chain, which unleashes

energy for their groundstrokes.

Rick Macci, who coached superstars Serena and Venus Williams during their formative years, defines sliding as "a controlled mechanism to slow you down to establish better balance before hitting the ball." No matter how athletic and agile you are, you need specific skills to slide correctly. "When you run laterally for a forehand, you slide with your right foot, and your left [back] foot serves as a rudder or braking action," explains Macci. "The speed of the ball and the distance you have to cover dictate the timing of the slide. Like a baseball runner sliding into second or third base, if you misjudge the distance and start your slide too early, you'll arrive late. Conversely, if you start your slide too late, you'll arrive off balance, and that jarring ending will disrupt and ruin the timing of your shot."

Strive for the early and optimal position of your body relative to the ball: Hitting the ball in the 'strike zone' with excellent balance allows for timing the ball much easier. Dr. Mark Kovacs — a sports technology expert and physiologist who directed the Sport Science, Strength & Conditioning and Coaching Education departments for the USTA during 2008–11 — stresses footwork timing as a key to timing the oncoming ball. "When you're timing the footwork, you're trying to get your body in the right position and optimise your load parameters so you can release your energy most effectively," Kovacs said.

"If you don't time the rhythm aspect of what you're doing correctly, then you're going to be out of sync and you're not going to load effectively. So, you definitely want to utilise the oncoming ball to set your feet, rotate your hips, load effectively, and then transfer your energy in the simplest, most efficient way possible."

The ability to improvise is critical: "When some players are off balance or slightly out of the optimal position, they are so 'cookie-cutter' or inflexible that they cannot improvise to time the ball correctly," notes Macci. "An effective footwork remedy is to think of tennis as a dance, and you prance to get into a flow. Tennis movement on many shots is like a rhythmic dance. So stay light on your feet and coordinate your feet with the ball. Arthur Ashe said foot-eye coordination is more important than hand-eye coordination in tennis. I recommend a rhythmical 'drop hit' drill. Take the ball, drop it, and, as it bounces up, hit it about hip height. Say '1-2, 1-2, dah, dah' silently or out loud. This basic drill will reprogramme your muscle memory."

Fluid mechanics: According to coach Rick Macci: "An effective footwork remedy is to think of tennis as a dance, and you prance to get into a flow. Tennis movement on many shots is like a rhythmic dance. So stay light on your feet and coordinate your feet with the ball."

SALE OF AN AMERICAN DREAM?

The **purchase of EA** added another feather to the cap of the Saudis, who have, over the last few years, become the world's biggest player in video games and esports.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
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Journalism, primarily the written press, owes a debt to the Gutenberg press, a machine that transformed how information is consumed.

In the context of video games and later eSports, Electronic Arts (EA) comes the closest to it.

Founded in 1982 by former Apple employee Trip Hawkins, the California-based company became a household name among video game enthusiasts.

Be it adventure (Need for Speed, Harry Potter series), sports (EA Cricket, FIFA, NBA, and NFL), or simulations (The Sims, Battlefield), Electronic Arts had something for everyone; "EA Sports, it's in the game" almost became an anthem.

In September 2025, however, this American dream of gaming was sold for USD 55 billion, the biggest-ever leveraged private payout, to a consortium of Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), Silver Lake, and Affinity Partners.

SAUDI ARABIA - A GAMING MEGALODON

The purchase added another feather to the cap of the Saudis, who have, over the last few years, become the world's biggest player in video games and esports.

In March 2023, PIF's subsidiary, Savvy Games, purchased Scopely Inc., the maker of Monopoly, for USD 4.9 billion. Two years later, it acquired the gaming division of Niantic—the company that runs and manages Pokémon Go—for USD 3.5 billion.

It is also a stakeholder (7.54 per cent) in Japanese gaming giant Nintendo, the company that made Mario.

The acquisition of EA tops them all, first for the value involved, and second for the size of its player base. Its football title, now called EA FC, has sold 325 million copies since the first release in 1993, The Sims, over 200 million copies, and Need For Speed, over 150 million.

In the esports scene, Saudi Arabia has organised two consecutive editions of the Esports World Cups—in 2024 and 2025—and is expected to host the 2027 Olympic Esports Games.

EXPECTED DECLINE AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

EA, unlike its legacy of offline games, ventured into online gaming management and microtransactions in the last decade, a move that had the countereffect of growth through eroding labour practices amid increasing consumer demands.

It was voted the worst company in the USA twice, in 2012 and 2013, and laid off close to 2000 employees in the last three years: a clear indicator of its falling revenues and reputation.

An offer of a whopping USD 55 billion in such a scenario might have been its best way out of the quagmire. But there's a caveat to this—acquisitions are always tricky, and few would know it better than EA.

EA acquired Pandemic Studios—the developer of the shooting game Star Wars: Battlefront—in 2005 and shut it down two years later.

Similar was the tale with Bullfrog Productions—which sold four million copies of its first Populous series, was acquired in 1995, and shut down in 2001—and Westwood Studios—a real-time strategy game developer with 30 million sales of its Command & Conquer series—which was bought by EA in 1998 and announced defunct five years later.

With new owners, EA will now hope history doesn't come back to bite it: becoming a relic in the form of gaming's Gutenberg press instead of leading the market in new robes.

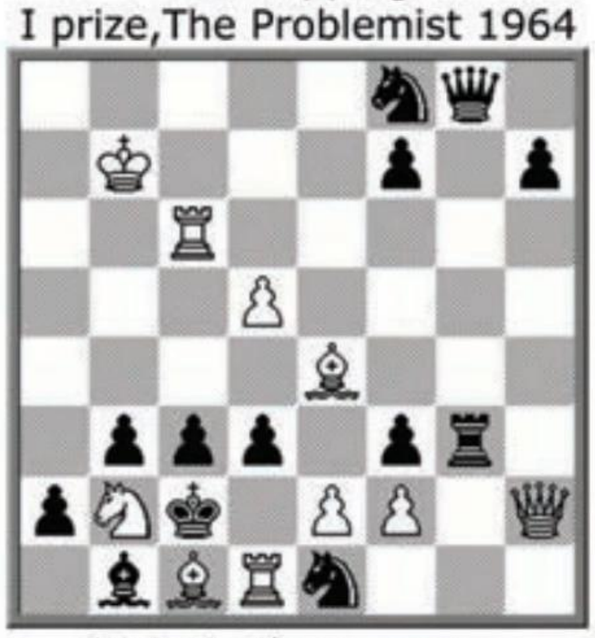
Anti-Bristol corrections

C.G.S.Narayanan

In black correction problems the random moves of a black piece carries general error. Gradual correction moves of the same piece carry the removal effect raising the play to a higher degree.

In quaternary black correction three-movers composed in early 60s the bent line of BQ was invariably used by many composers with black knight as the pivotal correction piece. It was British composer Peter Copping who came up with new concept of Anti-Bristol black correction moves, where a line piece progressively restricts the moves of another like-moving black piece of higher order while it continues to correct the errors. I am presenting a couple of his text-book masterpieces which were published in 'The Problemist'.

P.F.Copping
I prize,The Problemist 1964

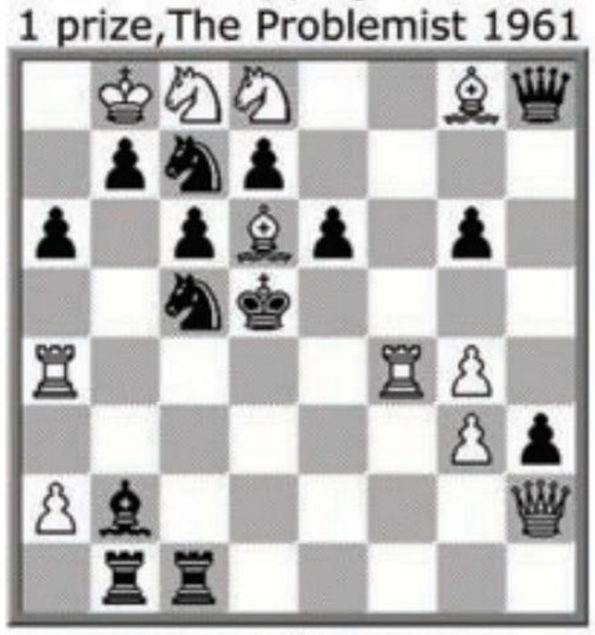


Mate in three moves

1.exf3! (2.fxg3+Ng2 3.Bxd3/Qxg2) 1...R any 2.Qe5(3.Q/Rxc3);1...Rg5 2.Qf4(3.Qd2);2...Nxf3 3.Bxd3;1...Rg6 2.Rxe1 (3.Bxd3)2.Qe5? 2.Qf4? Rxc6!(2.Qg6?);1...Rg7 1.Qc7(2.Rxc3) 2.Q else f6/f5+(2...Qg7,Qh8?)

The anti-Bristol moves of BR and the white second move continuations are exceptional (including Rg7) in this quaternary correction

P.F.Copping
1 prize,The Problemist 1961



Mate in three moves

Key 1.Qe2! (2.Qf3+ Ne4 3.QxN 1...Qc3 2.Nxb7 (3.Ne7/3.Nb6) 2...Kxc7? Qa5+! 2.Nf7? e5!2...Nxb7 3.Qe4;1..Qd4 2.Kxc7(3.Ne7 3.Nb6)2.Nxb7?Nxb7!2.Nf7? e5! 1...Qe5 2.Nf7(3.Ne7 3.Nb6) 2.Nxb7? Nxb7!2.Kxc7? Qxd6+

Here in a peculiar way BQ restricts BB access to f6 opening BRb1line.Clever differentiation of whites second moves.The problem for solving given below was inspired by the above examples.The defence Bxd2 appears to lead to an apparent dual but fortunately avoided by BQ but how?

C.G.S.Narayanan
2 prize,Strategems 1998

Mate in three moves

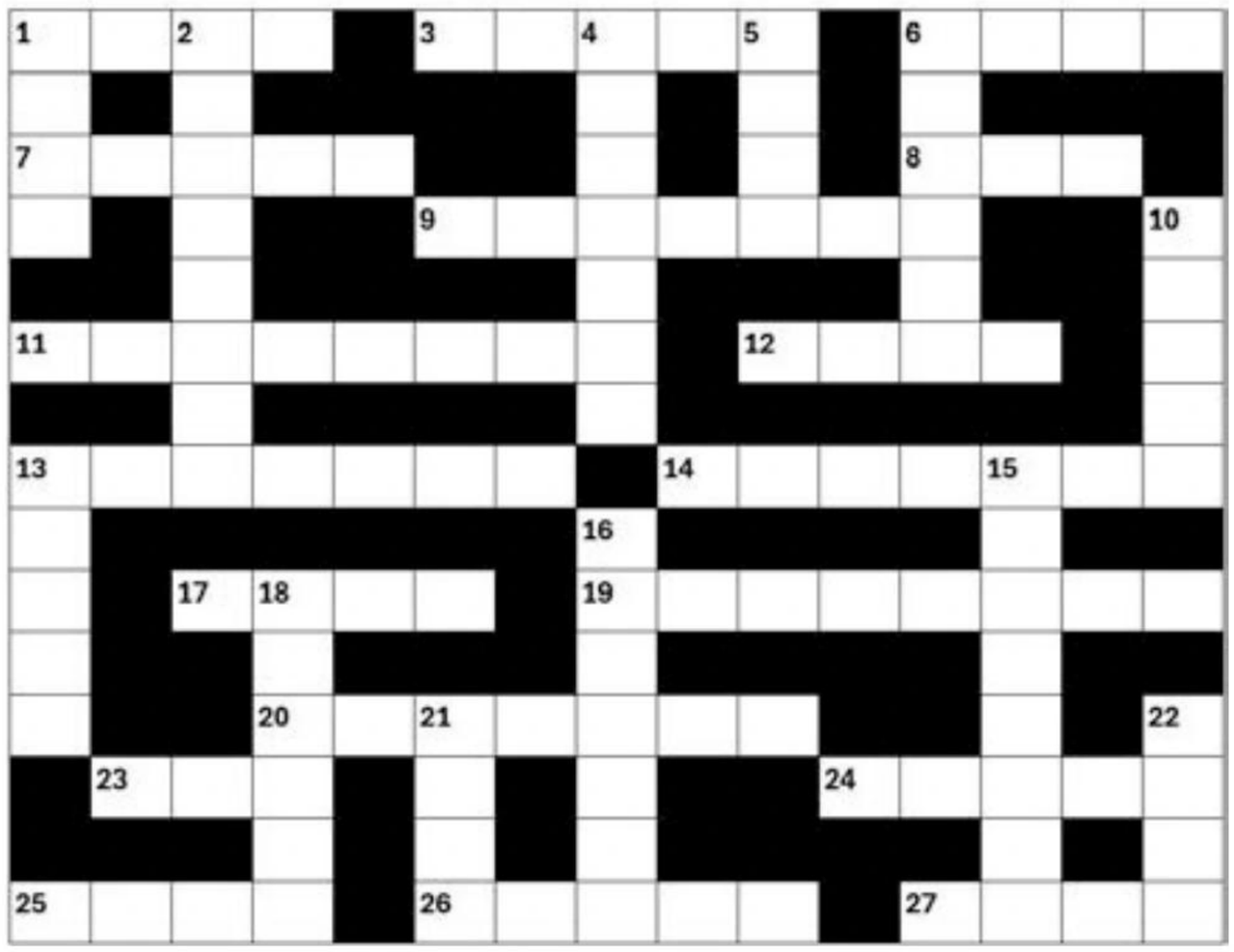
Solution to problem for solving in the article 'White battery destruction':

Key:1.Qg3!threat(:2.Nxg6 +Kxd5 3.Ne7)1...e6xd5 2.Nd3 + Ke6 3.Sc5
1...Rxf4 2.Qxf4 +Kxd5 3.Rc5

1.Qg3 ! (threat:2.Ng6+ Kd5 3.Ne7;
1...e6xd5 2.Sf3 +Ke6 3.Sc5 #
1...Rxf4 2.Qxf4 +Kd5 3.Rc6-c5 #

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

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 & Down 13 Who won the 200m gold at the World Athletics Championship held in Tokyo in September 2025? (4,5)

3 Identify the first name of this British World No. 1-ranked doubles player who won the men's doubles crown at Wimbledon 2025. (5)

6 Who set the new record for a non-wicketkeeper to hold on to most catches in his career during the recent Test series between England and India? (4)

7 & Down 18 Who holds the world record for the highest score for a maiden hundred in ODIs? (5,6)

8 & 20 Which former Australian cricket legend who passed away recently was part of the two tied Test matches that have happened so far in cricket history? (3,7)

11 Which city hosted the opening ceremony of the 38th National Games of India? (8)

12 & 24 Who won the player of the final and player of the series awards in the T20I tri-series held in Zimbabwe in July 2025? (4,5)

13 Which Indian badminton player lost in the final of the prestigious Hong Kong Open held in September 2025? (7)

14 Which senior football club in Valencia got promoted to La Liga for the 2025-26 season? (7)

17 Identify the first name of this footballer who not only holds the world record for the most clean sheets in internationals but also holds the record for most appearances in UEFA Champions League by a goalkeeper. (4)

19 What is the surname of this cricketer who is the only pacer to have bowled more than 40,000 deliveries in Test cricket? (8)

23 Identify the first name of this cricketer who became only the third bowler to pick up 150+ wickets in T20Is in July 2025. (3)

25 Which country lost in the final of the Central Asian Football Association (CAFA) Cup on September 8, 2025? (4)

26 Identify the surname of the cricketer who holds the world record for scoring more double centuries as a Test captain. (5)

27 Identify the surname of the cricketer who became the first player to score five centuries in-a-row at a single venue. (4)

DOWN

2 & 1 Who won the player of the tournament award in the recently-held men's Asia Cup hockey? (8,4)

4 & Across 9 Who won the Ballon d'Or award for men recently for 2025? (7,7)

5 Identify the surname of the player who won the best young player award in the FIFA Club World Cup held in June-July 2025. (4)

6 Identify the first name of the player who won the best goalkeeper award in the FIFA Club World Cup held in June-July 2025. (6)

10 Identify the surname of the player who scored a hat-trick for Union Berlin in the Bundesliga encounter on Sept. 21, 2025. (5)

15 Who is the only player to score a hundred in the men's Asia Cup cricket tournament held in UAE in September 2025? (8)

16 Who became the third Indian to be elected as Chairman of the International Cricket Council in December 2024? (3,4)

21 Identify the first name of this player who became the first player to score 50+ runs in T20Is for two different countries. (4)

22 What is the name of the river in Northeast England which is also part of a famous Derby name for the Premier League matches held between Sunderland and Newcastle United teams? (4)

Manish, Vaishnavi corner glory

Manish Sureshkumar and Vaishnavi Adkar stamped their authority at the Fenesta National Tennis Championship, emerging as men's and women's champions respectively at the DLTA Complex.

Manish overpowered qualifier Keerthivassan Suresh 6-4, 6-2 in a lively contest where both players traded fierce groundstrokes despite fatigue from their gruelling runs to the final. "I am very happy to win this second National title. Coming into the tournament, I had no expectations. This title gives me the confidence to step into international events and play better," said Manish, who received a winner's cheque of ₹3,00,000. Keerthivassan's spirited showing won him admiration — and ₹2,00,000 as runner-up.

In the women's final, Vaishnavi eased past Maharashtra teammate Akanksha 6-1, 6-2, shrugging off two service breaks to clinch the title. The prize money was equal for both categories, reaffirming Fenesta's commitment to parity.

Other results: Under-18 boys: Tavish Pahwa bt Hruthik Katakam 7-6(2), 1-0 (retired). **Under-18 girls:** Harshini Nagaraj bt Snigdha Kanta 6-1, 2-6, 6-4.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

SPORTOON

The seventh season of the Tennis Premier League (TPL) will be held from December 9 to 14 at the Gujarat University Tennis Stadium in Ahmedabad.

Headlining the event will be two-time Grand Slam champion Rohan Bopanna, alongside a strong international contingent led by World No. 29 Luciano Darderi (Italy), World No. 38 Corentin Moutet (France), and World No. 39 Alexandre Muller (France).

The franchise-based league will feature eight teams — GS Delhi Aces, SG Pipers Bengaluru, Gurgaon Grand Slammers, Chennai Smashers, Yash Mumbai Eagles, Hyderabad Strikers, Gujarat Panthers, and Rajasthan Rangers.

Bopanna will turn out for SG Pipers Bengaluru, while Darderi joins Rajasthan Rangers and Moutet captains Gurgaon Grand Slammers. Muller and Arthur Rinderknech will represent Gujarat Panthers and Hyderabad Strikers, respectively. Other notable names include Bosnia and Herzegovina's Damir Dzhumhur (former World No. 23, current No. 67) leading Yash Mumbai Eagles, Argentina's Tomas Martin Etcheverry (World No. 58) for GS Delhi Aces, and rising Czech talent Dalibor Svrcina (World No. 91) with the Chennai Smashers.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

The genetic edge

From injury prevention to talent identification, sports genomics is **reshaping** high-performance systems around the world.

"Genes do not determine champions, but they can help create them."

In modern sport, victory is often decided by margins too small for the naked eye to detect. A hundredth of a second at the finish line, a fingertip deflection in the last minute, or a single lapse in concentration can alter the course of a match or a career. Behind these moments lie years of training, discipline, and increasingly, the influence of science. Sports science has become an indispensable part of elite competition, driving innovations in training, nutrition, recovery, and injury prevention. Among the most intriguing developments in this space is sports genomics, a field that studies how an athlete's genetic make-up influences their performance capabilities, adaptability to training, recovery patterns, and vulnerability to injury.

Sports genomics works by identifying genetic markers that affect traits such as muscle fibre composition, aerobic potential, bone density, inflammatory response, and nutrient metabolism. These insights are not guesses but the result of years of research linking specific genetic variations to physical attributes. For example, the ACTN3 gene is often associated with the presence of fast-twitch muscle fibres, giving certain athletes a natural advantage in explosive power sports. Other genetic indicators influence endurance capacity, injury susceptibility, and recovery speed. By decoding these factors, sports scientists can design training, nutrition, and recovery programmes that align with each athlete's biological profile.

What was once limited to academic studies has now reached the training grounds of the world's top sporting nations. The United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and China have integrated sports genomics into their high-performance systems. In Australia, the Australian Institute of Sport has used genomic testing to optimise swimmer recovery strategies and fine-tune the endurance training of long-distance runners. UK Sport has explored genetic profiling for cycling, rowing, and track athletes, using it to individualise strength programmes and prevent overtraining. In China, genomic analysis has been part of Olympic preparation in rowing and middle-distance running, helping athletes peak during major competitions while minimising injury risk. In the United States, professional leagues such as the NFL and NBA have worked with sports scientists to assess genetic predispositions to certain injuries, adapting player conditioning programmes to reduce time lost to injury.

In India, this technology is still largely untapped. The country's sporting achievements have grown in recent years, with notable success in cricket, badminton, wrestling, boxing, and athletics. Yet India continues to struggle with a high incidence of preventable injuries, inconsistent performance peaks, and a lack of structured systems for early talent identification. Many promising careers have been interrupted, or in some cases ended, by injuries that might have been avoided with better monitoring and targeted training. The adoption of sports genomics could change this dynamic by providing precise, actionable information on each athlete's unique strengths and vulnerabilities.

However, sports genomics is not

A necessary shift: Many promising careers have been interrupted, or in some cases ended, by injuries that might have been avoided with better monitoring and targeted training. The adoption of sports genomics could change this dynamic by providing precise, actionable information on each athlete's unique strengths and vulnerabilities. GETTY IMAGES

without its challenges. It cannot guarantee that a genetically gifted athlete will succeed, nor can it predict exact outcomes. Training quality, mental resilience, access to facilities, and competitive experience all remain vital components of success. There are also ethical considerations. Genetic data is sensitive information, and its misuse could lead to discrimination or breaches of privacy. It is essential that any sports genomics programme in India is built on strict ethical guidelines, ensuring that data is stored securely, used only for the athlete's benefit, and never employed to exclude athletes based on genetic traits alone. Transparency and athlete consent must be at the core of any implementation.

For India to benefit from sports genomics, a clear and phased roadmap is required. The first step is awareness. Many coaches, administrators, and even sports scientists in the country are unfamiliar with the capabilities and limitations of genomics. Education programmes, seminars, and pilot projects could help bridge this knowledge gap. The second step is capacity building. India must invest in training sports scientists, physiologists, and nutritionists to interpret and apply genetic data effectively. This would require partnerships between government agencies, national sports federations, private academies, and universities.

The financial cost of adopting sports genomics is modest compared to the price of preventable injuries or ineffective training investments. A single season-ending injury to a key player can cost teams and sponsors crores in lost opportunities. By contrast, the expense of genomic profiling is relatively low and provides benefits that can extend across an athlete's entire career. For sponsors and sports organisations, the value lies not only in protecting investments but also in improving performance outcomes and career longevity.

The athletes themselves stand to gain the most. With a detailed understanding of their own bodies, they can take greater control over their training and recovery. They can understand why certain methods are recommended and how these align with their natural strengths. This clarity can build trust between athlete and coach, increase motivation, and create a stronger commitment to long-term goals.

If India adopts sports genomics decisively, it could reshape the country's sporting landscape within a decade. Athletes would face fewer interruptions from injuries, peak performance would be better timed for major events, and career spans could be extended. The science is ready, the evidence is growing, and global examples are abundant. What remains is the will to embrace this innovation and adapt it to the Indian context.

Changing with the tides

Waiting for a system to become perfect is **futile.** After all, the early cars and first computers and original watches aren't the ones we use today.

Suresh Menon

I no longer use a typewriter to write my columns or anything else. We no longer travel in bullock carts (what Gandhi called 'OxFord' in the movie named after him), or curse when the weather means we can't read the time off the sun-dial.

We move on, replacing the old and cumbersome, perhaps even inaccurate systems with the new and convenient, and above all more accurate ones. In cricket, India clung to their anti-DRS stand for long (possibly because a couple of senior players were seen to be out when they acted as if they weren't). But they finally gave in.

Technical support: Hawkeye electronic line calling cameras in use during Wimbledon 2025. GETTY IMAGES

Australian Open tennis in 2021, the U.S. Open in 2022 and Wimbledon this year all adopted the Electronic Line Calling (ELC) system with two important consequences. One, linesmen were no longer needed, and two, calls were accepted as being mostly accurate. There was a third consequence too — the sight of three people staring at a spot on court on live television was gone. The image had rare slapstick value.

Now the French Open authorities say that the slapstick will continue for another year. Line judges will keep their jobs next year to "show off the excellence of French umpiring." The ELC, like all such systems is not always a hundred per cent right; there is a small margin of error. But players are beginning to trust it more than the often tired and sometimes older line judges.

Technology explains how tennis balls compress when they land. The marks they leave on clay, for instance, do not tell the full story of the impact. Human judges cannot always work that out in a split second. The maths is too complicated for that. The ELC does not allow the pressure situation of a match to get to it, leading to wrong calls. Livelihoods often depend on a linesman getting a call right.

All electronic systems have teething troubles. Equipment malfunction can scupper the best plans. There exist integration problems too. At Wimbledon, during the Taylor Fritz quarterfinal, a ball boy, still on court when the service action began, prevented the ELC from recognising the start of a point. Sometimes a call is too soft for anyone to hear.

Fritz's opponent in that quarterfinal, Karen Khachanov said the reliance on machines was "scary". British players Jack Draper and Emma Raducanu have also raised concerns. Iga Swiatek had some misgivings but is largely in favour. Many of the errors have been traced to human shortcomings, like inadvertently deactivating the system.

It is the lack of the human touch that worries nay-sayers the most. In football, the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system sees a conversation between the on-field referee and the assistant off it. Cricket's DRS has the 'umpire's call'. Tennis's ELC has no higher court of appeal.

The ELC or a superior version will finally be accepted everywhere. That is the nature of these things. Waiting for a system to become perfect is futile. After all, the early cars and first computers and original watches aren't the ones we use today.

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